Sol Invictus

by Riptide

Summary

Sol Invictus follows the life of Kelsa Shepard from a childhood lived in the slums of Earth to the depths of galactic space. A street rat who tries to lose herself in the deep dark between the stars, chance and her own tenacity make Kelsa the face of Earth's potential, and the best hope for the galaxy against the Reaper threat. As long as there's even one human left standing at the end of the war, the sun will never truly be conquered. Hope is alive.

Notes

I also keep a tumblr! Catch me at http://riptidemonzarc.tumblr.com/ for random thoughts and Bioware reblogs.

See https://archiveofourown.org/works/19702585 for a playlist which serves as the soundtrack to Sol Invictus.

See the end of the work for more notes.
PRELUDE: Passing Time

Medical Bay, SSV Normandy

0300 Zulu (1 hour before Invictus Protocol)

13 October 2186

Luna (orbit), Terra, Sol

Even EDI's voice sounds slightly exhausted as it crackles into the medbay. "Commander, Admiral Hackett is hailing with a message, priority alpha zero," the AI intones. "Specialist Traynor is patching him through to the comm room as we speak."

Lieutenant Commander Ashley Williams hesitates for just a moment before she remembers that she's the ranking officer of the Normandy, since Commander Shepard was last seen ashore in London, trying to make the last push to the Citadel. She was last seen getting vaporized by Harbinger's beam, the LC berates herself; Williams has come to the medbay to relay this fact to Shepard's latest-her last-ground team. T'Soni's unconscious, which is a blessing, but Vakarian's eyes are surprisingly sharp, given the painkillers Chakwas has undoubtedly administered.

"You'd better go," the turian prompts her, displaying his hard-earned familiarity with Alliance codewords. "Sounds important."

Williams' lips part, and for an instant she thanks God for the excuse to delay the soul-crushing news; then she feels her eyes burning with shame. "Right," she replies with a crisp nod, her too-long hair spilling over her shoulder, the regulation bun undone in the fighting groundside. Then the LC turns heel, marching mechanically back to the elevator, her heart beating more quickly with every precious second that bleeds away between her and the war room.

The CIC isn't any easier to be in than it was two minutes before; Traynor is frantic, throwing herself into her work. Williams can't blame her, really...the specialist was the first to hear about Shepard, after all. Williams can't even imagine what the other woman's feeling right now. Bullshit, chief, she hears Alenko chiding her, and she double-times it through the security checkpoint to the war room, too fast for Westmoreland and Campbell to give her any shit.

Hackett's holo is already waiting for her in the back room. "Good of you to join me, Williams," he quips, but there's no fire behind it. His face, artificial as it is, tells the story that Williams has known since Traynor told her about Shepard: they're losing.

"You wanted to see me, admiral?" Williams prompts, after giving and receiving an automatic salute. Her voice doesn't sound like her own anymore.

Hackett nods heavily, but he still takes a weighted breath. "I need you to return to London, lieutenant commander," he begins. "We've received reports on the ground that Commander Shepard is alive, and that Harbinger is unresponsive. Major Coates and Admiral Anderson have boarded the Citadel, and the Reapers seem to have lost all coordination. Our dreadnaughts have begun concentrating fire on Sovereign-class targets."

Williams isn't sure she understands; the disconnect between Hackett's manner and the message he's conveying makes her wonder if Traynor's playing havoc with the feeds, somehow. "I don't follow,
"You're saying Shepard's alive, and that the Reapers are being pushed back? That Anderson's going to dock the Crucible?" Is that hope she hears echoing around the small comm room?

"I'm saying that Shepard is alive," Hackett confirms. "And that you need to get your ass down there and evacuate her and any other principals you can. Inform her that she's received a field promotion to the rank of captain, and then you get your ass to the Sol relay ASAP. That's an order, Williams."

Williams isn't any closer to sorting out the man's comments about the Citadel, but she's been a marine too long to do anything other than offer another salute and an "Aye, aye, sir."

"I've initiated the Invictus protocol," Hackett amends. "You have one hour, lieutenant commander. Get it done and get the hell out of here." He raises his hand to his brow and swallows hard, his breath catching. "Hackett...out."

The name of the operation is meaningless to Williams, except as one of her dad's poems, but as the feed cuts out, she can't help but shudder. She'd quoted one of the stanzas to Shepard, recently, and the commander had pointed out that it was about not giving in to fate. "EDI," she barks, already running through the war room, hope mingling with fear. "Patch me through to Joker."

For once, the pilot doesn't have any wises to crack. "Gotta sitrep, LC?"

"Reingage stealth drive and take us back to the hot zone where we picked up the ground team," Williams barks, as she brushes through the security checkpoint once more, going back into the CIC. "She's alive." That last she announces loudly enough that the whole CIC hears; Williams wouldn't be surprised if Joker could have heard her. "Double time, flyboy! Ohgodohgodohgoooood; for an instant, she's back on Titan, all vertigo and nerves as the floor shifts under her still-marching feet. Only now there's no Gunny Ellison to lay into her ass for goldbricking, and there's no sense of wonder that made taking the verbal beating worthwhile; the fact that the Normandy must have jumped into one hell of a bank to get over the inertial dampeners is lost on the LC as she stumbles up to the bridge. They're entering Earth's atmosphere by the time she reaches the bridge. "We've got fifty-nine minutes to pick Shepard up and get out of system," she tells the pilot, much more quietly now.

Joker doesn't quite choke, too busy bringing the ship into atmosphere, but he still shakes his head. "EDI, how far-"

"We will need to attain an average velocity of 5.6 times lightspeed in order to reach the Charon Relay if we leave within the next ten minutes. The drive core has enough spare capacity for 3.5 hours of travel at that speed."

The pilot's shoulders sag in relief. "We're two minutes out," he tells Williams. "I'm gonna set us down a hundred meters from the beam; if you can get in and out in about five minutes, we should be able to make it, Ash."

She's running toward the elevator again before Joker's finished talking, her heart beating a tattoo against the inside of her chest. It takes over a minute to reach the shuttle bay, which feels like a goddamned eternity, but the cargo door's still closed when Williams makes it out of the elevator.

"Talk to me, LC," Vega calls from his bunk, still wearing his armour and nursing his Mattock assault rifle. "We headin' out of system?"

Williams unracks her own Vindicator and grabs a belt of thermal clips, in case the pickup is even
dirtier than she's expecting. "Not yet," she says. "Get ready to hop groundside-we're picking Shepard up. Thirty seconds to land." The lieutenant looks surprised but not blown away by the news—he doesn't know that Shepard should be dead. Again.

Cortez already has his M-8 in hand. "Ready to provide suppressive fire, ma'am," he informs her. He still looks a little shaken from the shuttle crash and extraction from a couple of hours ago, but Williams won't turn his help away.

Vega joins her as the ramp lowers onto the hell at the heart of London. Williams doesn't stop to think about the swarm of Husks covering the ground from the Normandy all the way to the Citadel transport beam; she doesn't stop to think about how the beam doesn't look active anymore; she doesn't stop to think about Harbinger, frozen in place, its yellow eyes still glowing pure hate over the battlefield; she doesn't stop to think that her sisters and mother were on the Citadel when the Reapers took control of it. Instead the LC dives out of the Normandy with Vega at her side, and they proceed to cut a swathe through the ravening synthetic mob.

Their direction is uncertain at first, but in a handful of seconds, Williams notices a familiar silhouette against the mangled grey concrete and rebar, off in the distance. "Looks like Wrex! And he's not alone!"

"Looks like they set up a perimeter," Vega observes, and he doesn't need her order to make straight for the island of serenity amidst the sea of carnage.

Urdnot Wrex charges out of his line of krogan shock troops to meet them halfway, intercepting a Brute that looks like it was trying to head the humans off. The krogan lunges inside the Brute's reach and puts an incendiary-modded spike right through the bastard's forehead; it screams and flails, but Williams and Vega finish it off without too much trouble.

Williams blinks as Wrex turns to face her. "That's Shepard's gun," she yells at him, accusingly. Wrex tilts his head from left to right in the krogan equivalent of a shrug, hefting a scratched-up Graal spike-thrower. "It's a good gun," he declares. "She almost killed me with it not five minutes ago, then she passed out when the rest of the cavalry arrived. I'm keepin' it warm for her."

The LC's on the verge of questioning the krogan further when another krogan, one she knows by second-hand reports more than first-hand experience, steps forward. He's holding what looks like a burnt corpse in his arms, hardly recognisable as human, armour still smoking lightly. "Chief," he barks, and Williams blinks again, but then she realises that he's addressing Wrex. "This our way out?"

"It's yours, Grunt," the elder krogan confirms, and then he nods to the rest of his men. "We still got a few hundred Reaper troops left to kill, pup."

Something in Hackett's orders catches in Williams' mind. "You're coming too, Wrex," she informs him, even as she switches out a thermal clip and lays more fire into the Husks around them. "Hackett told me to snag all the big shots I could, and right now, it looks like you're it, big guy."

From her left, a line of Husks glows biotic blue before a detonation shreds it apart, sending cybernetic limbs and heads flying in every direction. Two mismatched figures fill the gap, both shimmering with dark energy; one alien and familiar, the other human and obscure, but both looking starved for vengeance. "I have not survived fifty thousand years only to die short of victory," Javik proclaims, and the much smaller woman beside him only screams before she sends more pulses of energy rippling out into their enemies. "I suggest we return to the Normandy," the prothean amends, after triggering another biotic detonation.
Williams knows she's running out of time, and she has to take it on faith that Grunt's carrying a living, breathing Shepard, rather than a corpse. "Let's move out," she commands, and she can hardly believe it when her former crewmate with his stolen gun takes off beside her. Wrex, Javik, and the human biotic make evac easier than infil, and they reach the shuttle bay with about thirty seconds left on EDI's estimated window. "All bodies present and accounted for," she tells the ship. "Close the hatch and bug out, Joker!"

"Aye, aye, ma'am," comes the reply over the intercom.

One last look over her shoulder shows London falling away as the shuttle bay door lifts up, and by the time she's escorted Grunt to the med bay, Williams prays they've already hit FTL.

"What on Earth…" Doctor Chakwas exclaims, when the big krogan bursts through the door. "Grunt…is that-Shepard?!!"

In her two tours with the doctor, Williams has never heard her let out such a high-pitched squeal of terror and distress, and a bucket of ice floods the LC's gut. She sees that T'Soni's still out cold, and Vakarian has joined the asari in oblivion, which is a small blessing in the midst of this chaos. "Gimme some good news, Doc," Williams begs, as the doctor helps to guide Shepard's charred frame-please, God, don't let it be a corpse-onto one of the bay's unoccupied beds.

"I'll see what I can do," Chakwas vows, but her tone's gone from frightened to distant, the kind Williams imagines she adopts when she's about to say I've got some bad news…

But then the doctor gasps. "There's a pulse," she declares, and then glares at Grunt. "What are you waiting for, you great buffoon? Get her out of that armour! Now!" Even as she talks, Chawkas activates her omni-tool; where soldiers have various weapons at the ready, the Alliance has also developed medical applications with the newest 'tools, and the doctor's forearm disappears beneath an enormous orange scalpel that helps her cut through the ruin that Shepard's armour's gotten turned into.

Here, under the warm lights of the med bay, it's not at all obvious that the commander's still alive. As her chest piece is pulled away, Williams sees that there's hardly a square inch of normally pecan-brown flesh that isn't glowing an angry orange from Cerberus cybernetic implants and synthetic fibers. The woman's hair has been burnt away and her left arm is twisted at an odd angle, right from the shoulder. Chakwas runs more scans and mutters medical jargon to herself, running through the Greek alphabet with increasingly-dire adjectives. Williams shares a skeptical look with the krogan; they're both worse than useless now, and they know it, but the doc hasn't kicked them out yet.

"If you're just going to stand around," Chakwas barks, "you'd might as well make yourselves useful. Ashley, fetch me a saline drip from the cupboard behind you, and then look for a syringe of carfentanyl. There should be some in the secure locker beneath the cupboard."

The LC snaps into action, too many years of training helping her to follow orders; no matter the rank, in the med bay, the doc's always in charge. The saline she can find easy, and in a second it's hooked up to an IV and dripping into Shepard's marginally-less-charred right arm. The syringe is a bit trickier to locate; the first time, she picks up a vial of something called korazephan, and the doc nearly bites her head off. As soon as Williams turns back toward the locker, however, a cry of surprise sounds from behind her, immediately followed by a scuffling noise. The LC spins around to see Shepard doing her best to sit up, both her hands locked in a death grip with Grunt's-Chakwas has backed away, her own hands at her throat.

"Battlemaster," the krogan growls, strain evident in his voice. "You need to lie down!"
Williams steps closer as the doc skirts around, mumbling to herself about sedatives instead of painkillers. The LC pushes down on Shepard's rippling shoulders, but her weight is a drop in the bucket compared to a krogan's, so the commander-captain, now, Williams supposes-hardly seems to notice. Shepard doesn't even look at Williams; her irises burn as red as blood, not a single hint of green peeking through the Cerberus tech, and she stares *through* Grunt, like he isn't even there. "You're on the *Normandy*, Commander," Williams barks, trying to get the woman's attention. "You're safe!"

Those fiery eyes shift to Williams, but there's no more comprehension in them than there was a minute ago; there isn't even the hostile disdain the woman showed her on Eden Prime, nor the cool distance that lasted from Virmire until after Sovereign's destruction. It's the stare of a cold-blooded murderer who doesn't even need to know her victim's names before she snuffs them out.

Somehow, between the two of them, Williams and Grunt keep Shepard immobile long enough for Chakwas to inject something into the struggling woman's IV line. The LC doesn't make the mistake of relaxing, waiting for the commander's eyes to cloud over...only they never do, and it seems to get harder to hold her down, instead of easier. "Think we're gonna need a little more, doc," she observes, gritting her teeth.

Shepard says nothing; even her breathing is quieter than anyone else's in the room, even the knocked-out patients'. Another dose of the sedative has no more effect than the first, and Chakwas airs concerns about a third being enough to kill an elcor. A hand lands heavily on Williams' shoulder, and if she weren't so distracted by keeping her commanding officer from rising off of the table and likely killing them all, the LC would probably have put a couple of rounds into the offending party. As it stands, Williams nearly loses her grip on Shepard when she glances up to find T'Soni, straining to keep her weight off of a shattered shin. "You sure you wanna see this, doc?" Williams asks, but the asari has no more attention to spare her than Shepard seems to.

T'Soni's free hand caresses over Shepard's scarred cheek. "Kelsa," the asari breathes, as rough as the flesh underneath her fingertips.

 Those two syllables, Shepard's first name, cause a jolt to cross the commander's face, and the woman finally blinks. A gravel-laced grunt comes from her throat that might, once, have been *Liara*. Then those lava-like eyes roll back in Shepard's head and she goes limp so suddenly that Williams and Grunt nearly butt heads-or, at least, Williams' head nearly smacks into Grunt's shoulder-and the LC has to scramble to catch T'Soni before the asari falls and breaks her leg even worse.

"Thank you," the asari manages, her face twisting in pain as Williams helps her hobble onto the nearest bed...not the one T'Soni's just crawled out of, the LC notes, but she keeps the observation to herself. The asari fights to keep herself in a sitting position. "Kelsa should probably be restrained," T'Soni suggests, and her cringe might not be entirely out of physical agony. "Before she regains consciousness again."

"I concur," Doctor Chakwas chimes in, and it's only a matter of a few buttons pressed on the bed's interface before Shepard is nearly mummified beneath carbide straps strong enough to keep a blood-raging krogan at bay. "Now the both of you should leave," the doc sighs, glancing to Williams and Grunt. "I believe I can handle it from here."

The LC nods and gestures for the krogan to precede her out of the med bay. Once the doors have hissed closed behind her, Williams stumbles to an empty sleeper pod, and tells EDI to wake her once they've jumped out of the Sol system.
Boarding ships she's not in command of isn't normally Aria T'Loak's thing, but even the undisputed ruler of Omega can make exceptions when she's asked politely by two shotgun-wielding krogan and a human with enough biotics that her own shotgun might as well just be for show. Especially since she knows that they wouldn't have come to her if there were any other option available. The infirmary has three patients and one loiterer; Aria's never met the doctor or the spare, but she recognises both of the aliens. Liara's face isn't quite as guileless as it was the last time the squidling was on Omega, three years before, but the young asari still has a long way to go before she hits the Matron stage. "Tell me why I'm here in ten words or less, or I go back to Afterlife," the crime lord scoffs, with hardly a glance to the unconscious human tied down to her table.

"Kelsa has suppressive amnesia and I'm too weak to help," Liara retorts, almost immediately, looking defiant even as she lays in her own bed. "You owe-

"I know exactly what I owe her," Aria cuts in, grimacing. The undisputed ruler of Omega isn't in the habit of owing anybody any favours, either, but unusual circumstances have a habit of unfolding in Shepard's wake. The crime lord reconsiders the well-bound body; if she were huddled in the slums, she'd likely be considered too far gone even to bother with a bullet, but the table's life support monitors show surprisingly robust vitals. "I thought you were all on Earth," she observes, moving into the space between Liara's bed and Shepard's.

The younger human's attention turns from the unconscious human, her expression as disgustingly devoted as a tame varren's. "We were," she confirms, her voice trembling with emotion. "But we were ordered away. There have been no communications from the system for nearly half an hour; it's impossible to know if it is radio silence, or…"

Aria's already bored, even by the idea that the Reapers have beaten the little armada that the galaxy's cobbled together to throw at them. "And no matter what happens, you have to make sure your saviour is ready to dance like a trained pyjak when the comms come back online." She rolls her eyes. "I take it by your wrinkling brow-ridge that you have a personal stake in Shepard's recovery?" The crime lord can only snort at the human's earnest nod.

"As do I," Liara ventures. "As well as everyone else in the galaxy, if we have any hope of breaking the cycles."

Aria crosses her arms, tilting her head in Shepard's direction. "You've already attempted to recover her memories with a simple meld," she observes. "Otherwise you wouldn't have come to me. So what did you find?"

The squidling's answer is a moment in coming. "Kelsa is there," she proclaims. "Trapped beneath a fog; during the meld she's lucid, in the depths of her mind, and she remains so for a few seconds after I pull back...but it never lasts." Liara shudders, sharing a frightened look with the talkative human. "And then she loses herself and tries to rise from the bed, likely to attack, out of instinct rather than desire."

The crime lord snorts. "You tried to meld more than once?" She shakes her head, not bothering to hide her derision. "No wonder you've exhausted yourself. Do you really not know how to recover
suppressed memories?" Liara's cheeks lavender, and she indicates her ignorance without saying anything. "Children," Aria sighs. "I swear, they shouldn't let anyone under 250 off of Thessia."

The human woman swells with indignation. "Are you serious?" She demands, pointing a shaking finger at the elder asari. "Don't you care that Kelsa's mind has been turned inside out?"

Aria arches a brow at the girl's bravado. "Normally I wouldn't give a shit," she boasts, freely. "The only reason I'm here is because Shepard did me the biggest favour I've ever needed." The asari turns back to the supine human, who appears to be sleeping peacefully. "What you're asking me to do isn't easy," she admits, hating herself for her own hesitation. "And Shepard might not be grateful, even if it works."

"But you can do it," Liara insists, her tone just beneath a question. "She will be grateful, too...she does not want to die. She told me as much during the second meld."

The crime lord shrugs. "You'd better keep the tattooed woman away from her, then," she advises them. "I believe her exact words were 'You bring that bitch back so I can kill her myself.'"

"Jack will come around," the other asari sighs. "And if not...there's always Javik's preferred solution to insubordination."

Aria isn't curious enough to ask who in the blue fuck Javik is supposed to be, nor how it deals with rebellious underlings. "Have you bonded with Shepard?" The woman's hesitation is answer enough. "It might mean the difference between a couple of minutes and a couple of hours," the elder asari says.

Another moment passes before Liara finally gives her reply. "Yes," she sighs. "Quite recently, in fact."

"What?!" The human sounds as betrayed as Aria might could have predicted, if she cared about either of their feelings. "You both promised!"

Liara's lips part to begin explaining this evident breach of trust, but Aria steps in. "What's done is done," she points out. "You two will have plenty of time to fight it out later, but right now I need to know how much time you're willing to spend recovering Shepard's memories." It isn't a question, but Aria's eyes don't waver from Liara.

The asari looks confused. "I...thought you just said it could take only a few minutes," she ventures.

"Out here," the crime lord affirms, "if I can use your bond as an anchor. But to get Shepard's memories back, we have to take her through them again, one by one. That means that we have to experience them. I can do it by myself, but it'll take me a lot longer to run through Shepard's life than if we work together." The admission pains her, but Aria's used to pain.

Liara still doesn't seem to understand. "You're saying that we have to show Kelsa her whole life?"

Aria chuckles, darkly. "I'm saying that you're going to close your eyes, and when you open them again, you'll be at the beginning of Shepard's first memory, looking out through her eyes. You won't remember anything about yourself...from your perspective, you'll be Shepard," she informs the woman. "And you'll have to live every second of her life, up to the moment that she lost her memories. Every secret, every thought, every single heartbeat." Aria's lips curl into a sneer. "And I'll be right there with you, living it myself, though we won't be aware of each other at all." She glances at the human woman, who's gone from incredulous to apprehensive. "When I left Afterlife, I didn't think it'd take me forty years to get back to it."
"Thirty years," Liara corrects her. "And I've never heard of whatever procedure you're talking about," she adds, somewhat reproachfully.

"We've established that," Aria retorts, before looking back over her shoulder. "You both should leave the room. If all goes well, only five minutes or so should pass out here, but if you interrupt the process at all, the best-case scenario is that the squidling and I will have to start again." The younger human hesitates. "You don't want to know what the worst-case scenario is, little pyjak. Now move."

The woman bites her lip, giving Liara an uncertain look. "We'll be fine, Samantha," the asari assures her, which seems to shake the girl from her stasis. The human doctor, who's been perfectly quiet during Aria's visit so far, loiters only long enough to adjust the turian's sedatives to make sure he doesn't wake up during the procedure.

A moment later, the two asari are the only conscious creatures in the room, unless Aria wants to count the synthetic she heard talking over the comms on her way in. The crime lord takes a steadying breath, laying the butt of her right palm against Shepard's forehead and extending her left hand. "Take it and get ready to embrace eternity," Aria sneers, and she dives into Shepard's mind before she can regret agreeing to debase herself so far for the woman.
Ch. 1: Hard Knock Life

Chapter Summary

Kelsa's formative years.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saint Mary's Orphanage

01:08 AM Eastern Standard Time

3 May 2162

Detroit, MI, UNAS, Terra, Sol

She had the dream again, realer than real, realer than the cold grey world she wakes up in. In the dream, her bed had high walls with see-through bars, and a pretty lady that smiled down on her and called her Kelsa. That ain't what the grey ladies call her while she's awake, but she's pretty sure the lady in her dreams is her mommy. At least she hopes so. But in her sleep, she sees the pretty lady crying, and there ain't nothin' she can do to help her. When she wakes up, she don't have a mommy, and the grey ladies tell her she ain't never had one. There's always been her room with the two bunk beds and the three older girls, Gloria and Sarah and Anne. None of them got mommies, either, but they answer to the names the grey ladies gave 'em, and they all call the grey ladies 'Mother'.

Kelsa answers to the wrong name, too, at least after her knuckles nearly got broke with a ruler and she still had to work in the laundry all day after. So now when the grey ladies call her Ruth she smiles, and when the fancy men come by to check up on her, she wears her hair pretty in braids. She likes those days; she don't have to work in the laundry, then, while the fancy men are watching. Sometimes she even gets to play in the warm room, with other girls her age, at least for a little bit. But then afterward she has to work twice as hard, and if she doesn't smile enough, she has to climb up the long steps on her knees when she says her prayers at night. They get cut and scraped and hurt for days after, always, but she makes her cheeks hurt from smiling whenever the grey ladies look in on her.

She's six...at least she thinks so, anyway. She's definitely older than five, and she's pretty sure she ain't seven yet. Gloria's already showed her how to read a little bit, enough to follow the signs to the laundry, but she can't tell any of the grey ladies unless she wants to climb the steps again. She and the other girls in her room ain't got birthdays like the girls who live upstairs, the girls that spend all day in the playpen 'stead of just when the fancy men come by. Them girls are for adopting, the grey ladies say, but Kelsa and the others are just good for working. Kelsa doesn't know why, but the older girls say it's 'cause they're brown, while the upstairs girls are all pink and pretty, pink like the grey ladies. That ain't all true, but when Kelsa figures out to look for it, she only sees a couple pink girls down in the laundry and a couple brown girls up in the playpens.

Tonight she gets shook out of her dream by Gloria. "Ruth," the girl whispers. "Ruth, wake up!"
"M not Ruth," Kelsa mumbles, too sleepy to be scared of getting another smack on the knuckles.

The older girl clicks her tongue. "Fine, crazy girl," she hisses. "We gotta go!" She sounds as scared as Kelsa's ever heard her, scared like she's gotta climb the steps twice in a row and then say her prayers ten times over.

So scared that it can only mean one thing. "You bleedin', ain'cha?" Gloria's the oldest of them, almost twelve, and she's been stuck in the laundry as long as she can remember, just like Kelsa's been stuck as long as she can remember. She used to be the youngest, just like Kelsa's the youngest. But one by one, year after year, all the older girls got took away; none of 'em lasted a week after they started bleeding, and Gloria said she ain't never seen any of 'em again.

"Yeah," Gloria whines, her brown eyes shining, like she's been crying. "Anne and Sarah's too scared to run away," she tells Kelsa, and the younger girl looks to the other bunk; both of the other girls are laying still, too still to really be asleep. "You too scared, too?"

Kelsa bites her bottom lip until it hurts...but it don't hurt as much as a ruler on the backs of her hands. "No," the girl decides. "I ain't scared of nothin'."

The other girl looks happier than Kelsa's ever seen her. "Come on, then," she hisses. "Quick!" And then she hops down the ladder, making room for Kelsa to follow. The floor is cold on Kelsa's bare feet and she has to hold up the hem of her gown to keep from tripping over it, but she follows Gloria to the door. It's locked, just like usual, but Gloria touches the calling panel. She grabs hold of Kelsa's hand and squeezes tight as they wait. "Just do like I do."

It's only a minute or two until the door cracks open, just wide enough for Kelsa to fit her nose through, and one of the grey ladies stands on the other side, eyeing the gap. "Gloria," the woman warbles, and it sounds like Mother Janice. "How may we help you tonight?"

"We have to use the bathroom," Gloria whispers. "Ruth and me, really really bad. Please, Mother," she whimpers. Kelsa manages to swallow back her objection to the wrong name this time.

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The door doesn't move. "You know the rules, girls," Mother Janice tells them, but Kelsa starts whimpering too, just like Gloria. The grey lady breathes a long-suffering sigh and mutters a prayer. "Very well, but both of you will come quickly." She opens the door just wide enough for Gloria to squeeze through, and Kelsa scurries after her, keeping hold of the older girl's hand as hard as she can.

This grey lady is Mother Janice, after all, and she ushers the two girls down the dark hallway to the small bathroom that Kelsa's bunkmates share with two other dorms in this wing of the laundry. "We gotta go in together," Gloria exclaims, throwing Kelsa a pained look. "We both about to pop!"

Kelsa nods, and the look on Mother Janice's face does make her need to pee, but the woman only gives a slight nod. "Don't take too long," she warns them, "or you shall regret it come the morning." She mutters about allowing too much grape juice during communion, but Gloria pulls Kelsa into the little room before the woman can change her mind.

"Go stand on the sink," Gloria instructs, fumbling with the front of her gown. "Go!" She hisses again, and Kelsa climbs up on the steel shelf; it's even colder than the floor, so cold it makes the girl shiver. A crackling sound makes Kelsa turn around, and she sees Gloria running an old screwdriver through a bunch of wires on a panel beside the door. A second later, Mother Janice's muffled voice sounds from the other side of the door, followed by an insistent knocking. "Here," Gloria says, holding the tool up for Kelsa. "Start takin' off the grate!"
Kelsa spins around again, her heart hammering. High on the wall, almost higher than she can reach, there's a small square of slotted steel that lets fresh air into the room. The girl panics, unsure what to do; she's never handled a screwdriver before, doesn't know how to make it work. "What do I do?" She whines, her voice cracking at the loud bangs and warnings coming from the other side of the door.

Gloria finishes climbing up onto the sink and snatches the screwdriver back. "Move over, baby," she hisses. "Go cry in a corner if you can't help." She pushes the narrow end of the screwdriver into one of the grate's slotted screws, and the older girl tugs and tugs, but she can't seem to loosen it. "Help me out!"

"I'm not a baby," Kelsa growls, still trying to get her balance from being pushed to one side.

"Then prove it and help me," Gloria says. "Come and push while I pull, or you'll be crying worse than any baby when they come through that door!" That shakes Kelsa out of her pouting, and she grabs the screwdriver's handle. Together, the two girls pry the screw loose, and Gloria spins it out of the wall. Three more screws take another minute, and the yelling from the other side of the door gets louder and louder every beat of Kelsa's heart. There have to be more grey ladies outside the door, or maybe even the Father. Sparks start coming from the edge of the door as Gloria wrenches the grate out of the wall. "You go on ahead," Gloria tells the younger girl, slapping the screwdriver into Kelsa's hand again. "You'll fit better than me."

Kelsa nods and lets Gloria boost her up into the new hole in the wall; it's a tight fit, dark, and the walls bang in her ears when she crawls deeper into the tunnel. But the sound from the bathroom's getting louder, loud enough to make Kelsa crawl faster, until her knuckles push up against another slotted metal square. Fresh air tickles against her skin and she hears outside noise, like the kind she hears sometimes when she's up in the playpen. "I think it's outside!" Kelsa squeals, her voice bouncing around half a dozen times.

"Hush!" Gloria growls, just behind her feet. "Keep going!"

Kelsa pushes and pushes, but the grate doesn't budge. "I can't get it!" Now there's angry voices screaming from behind them, from the bathroom.

"You gotta jam the screwdriver into the side and pop it out," the older girl hisses. "Goddamnit, I knew I shoulda went first!"

The bad word makes Kelsa gasp, too many whacks from the ruler making her knuckles hurt even at the thought, but that's nothing to what she'll feel like if the grey ladies catch her. Blindly, the girl shoves the sharp end of the screwdriver into the corner, and she squeaks when it slips an inch. Gritting her teeth, Kelsa works the tool back and forth until her arms burn, and suddenly she hears a loud pop and feels a sudden rush of cool air. "I did it!"

Gloria grunts. "Great, now do it again until the thing comes off! Move!"

Kelsa's arms hurt and her feet are getting numb, but she can't cry. She only ever cried once, the first time she had to climb the steps on her knees; the pretty lady in her dream does all her crying for her. Gritting her teeth, Kelsa moves the screwdriver to the other corner and she works it until the metal gives off another pop, and the bottom half of the panel is bent out, just a little bit. Kelsa works up both sides and the gap gets bigger, big enough to see out of.

"Hurry up!" Gloria pushes, panicked. "I can feel fingers on my feet!"

The younger girl whimpers, her hands shaking, but she manages to pop off a third corner and the
panel swings on the last one, giving Kelsa a good look at the outside. Without thinking, the girl pushes the steel square to one side and drags herself out of the tunnel. Then the whole world pitches forward and Kelsa can't help her high scream, thinking she's gonna fall a million miles, that she's gonna fall forever...but the gap's less than a foot, easy for her to catch herself on the hard pavement. Her hands sting with a dozen little cuts and the panel scrapes down the side of her leg as she falls, deep enough to draw more blood. But Kelsa's outside, for the first time she can ever remember.

She's free.

"Help!" Gloria calls from right behind her, breaking into Kelsa's spinning head. "I'm stuck!" The younger girl spins the grate up and away from the hole, and Gloria drags herself from the narrow tunnel, her own arms and legs scratched up to pieces. "We gotta move quick, or they'll catch us, no doubts!"

There's brick and concrete and pavement in every direction, and no way to tell which is the right way to go. But a bunch of grown-up voices and barking dogs tell them the wrong way to go, and the girls take off running, over streets that would've been deadly a decade before and through alleyways that've been deadly for almost a hundred years. All the girls know is that the dogs and the grown-ups stop following them after they cross a big, crumbling road. Kelsa and Gloria keep running until they go over another big road, and then another after that, before Gloria thinks they've gone far enough.

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**Turnhill Community Centre (abandoned)**

*09:30 AM Eastern Standard Time*

*8 May 2162*

*Detroit (Derelict Zone-unacknowledged), MI, UNAS, Terra, Sol*

Four whole days without having to work the steamers and dryers until you're too tired to stand up anymore can buy your stomach an awful lot of time, but Kelsa's getting hungry. Gloria smuggled a couple rolls from Sunday supper, but those were gone after the first day, and they ain't found nothing like an apple tree or anything else they can swipe any food from. In fact, they ain't seen anything green at all; everything's black and brown and grey, crumbling and rusting and falling down. Sometimes, during the day, Kelsa can look up and see a few skyscars flying around the old buildings. They scare her at first, a little, but they're not really any stranger than most of the other things that she and Gloria see in those first days out of the laundry. Dogs still bark at night, and sometimes they hear odd banging sounds and people yelling, but if the grey ladies are looking for the girls, they don't find 'em.

Early on the fifth morning after their escape, Gloria leads them to a building that looks even more broken-down and empty than most of the others they saw so far. It's got red marks all over the outside, circles with blobs inside that kinda look like a flower Kelsa found pressed inside the Bible, once, when she looked at the book without permission one Sunday a few months back. Mother Abigail made her hands hurt for days after that, and the memory makes Kelsa stop short in front of the open doorway.

Gloria's too hungry to roll her eyes, but she still manages a dirty look. "You scared of the dark, baby?"

Kelsa swallows and shakes her head. "I ain't a baby," she whines, trying to keep her lip from jutting
out like it always does when she says that. "And I ain't scared of nothin'!" To prove it, the filthy girl marches past her older friend, right into the dark beyond the busted door.

Except the room ain't as dark as it looks, and the building ain't as empty, either. There's a boy, even older than Gloria. He's sitting in front of another broken door, leaning back in his chair, and there's a funny metal stick in his hand, that he points right at Kelsa. "Where you from, little chica? Whatchu want?"

Even though she just boasted about not being afraid, Kelsa freezes; she's only ever talked to a couple of fancy men before, with their big words and glasses and the clothes she's helped to wash. She ain't never talked to a boy before, really, even one almost a man. Gloria speaks up instead. "We come from the laundry," she says. "We hungry. Please don't shoot us."

The boy cocks his head at them, but after a second he pulls his stick back. "The laundry?" He chuckles, and he looks hungry, too, but mostly he's looking at Gloria. "Where the fuck is that?"

"They mean they come from an orphanage, Rafael," comes another voice, a grown voice. Almost a fancy man voice. The boy in the chair nearly falls over, he stands up so fast, and he turns toward the doorway behind him as the talking man steps forward. He ain't dressed in black and white like a fancy man, but the boy looks at him like the grey ladies look at the fancy men whenever they come by the laundry's upstairs. The man himself looks at Gloria and Kelsa, but he don't look at them all hungry, not like the boy looks at Gloria. "What's your name, girl?"

"Gloria," she answers him after a second, suddenly shy. "This is Ruth."

A flash of anger nearly makes Kelsa blind, and she punches the other girl's shoulder. "I told you," the younger girl screams. "My name's Kelsa!"

The man coughs a couple times to get their attention. "There ain't no need for that, now," he tells them, and he smiles a white-and-yellow smile that tugs up around his eyes. It don't look like a grey lady smile at all. "Why does she think you're called Ruth, little girl?"

"Cause that's what the grey ladies call me," Kelsa admits, her face bunching up. "They hit us if we don't answer to the names they give us…"

"Grey ladies," the man hums, and then he starts laughing. "You mean the nuns?" He shakes his head, still chuckling. "And you think it's fair that you hit Gloria when she don't use the name you give her?"

Kelsa blinks. "...I guess not," she admits, blinking and flinching when she sees Gloria still rubbing her arm. "But the grey ladies ain't around to hit us no more," the younger girl points out. "And Kelsa's the name my momma gimme. Ain't nobody callin' me Ruth again."

That makes the man chuckle, and he takes a few steps forward, going down to one knee, until his face is just a half a foot away from hers. "You got a last name, Ruth?" Before she can think, before she even has a chance to breathe, Kelsa's fist closes the gap right into the not-quite-fancy man's nose. She hears a crack and feels the hard meat shift underneath her knuckles, and a second later the man's sprawled across the dirty floor, hissing loud and cupping his face. The old boy points his metal stick at Kelsa again and says a bunch of bad words, and Gloria starts crying and begging for him not to shoot, but the man holds up a bloody hand. "The chica has cojones," the man grunts, and he's chuckling again as he climbs back up.

"Oh please, oh please," Gloria whines. "Please don't kill us!" She hunches back from the boy's stick
and starts praying under her breath, and Kelsa gets the feeling that she should be afraid of the boy, but the younger girl doesn't move.

The man shakes his head. "Nobody's killing either of you today," he promises, his voice thicker. Another twitch of his hand, and the boy pulls up the metal stick. His nose looks crooked, but there's a light in his eyes as he looks at Kelsa. "You pretty strong for a little girl," he points out. "You ain't scared of a shotgun, either?"

She shakes her head. "I ain't scared of nothin'," she says again. "And I ain't got a last name." The grey ladies give her one, or they tried to, but she ain't gonna tell him what it was. "Just Kelsa."

"How old are you, just Kelsa?" The man wipes some more blood off of his upper lip and rubs his hand clean on his shirtsleeve, and she ain't sure she likes how he looks at her. Not hungry, not like the boy keeps staring at Gloria, but like he could still eat her if he don't like what she says.

"Six," Kelsa answers, after a second. "I think."

That makes him laugh again. "Give me a child until he is seven," he says, almost like he's reading out of a book, "and I'll give you the man, eh?" He shakes his head. "Luckily for me the nuns couldn't keep you quite long enough. You are hungry, yes?"

The younger girl nods, her stomach pulling in on itself. "We ain't eat in a couple days," she tells him, looking over to Gloria. "Not really since we run from the laundry."

The man nods, frowning. "I will give you each one meal for free," he says. "You may call me Mister Varga. This ain't a laundromat, and nor is it an orphanage, but I am a businessman. That means you will have to work to earn your keep."

"We can work," Gloria claims. "We can wash clothes and dishes and-"

The man, Mister Varga, laughs even louder than he did after Kelsa broke his nose. "I'm sure we can find a place for both of you in our organisation, but that can wait until tomorrow," he lets on. "For now, Rafael will lead you to the kitchen." He glances at the boy, who's propping his stick-shotgun, Kelsa guesses-up on his shoulder. "Have Shep show them around and give them a cot to sleep in for the night, and then come back here to guard the door."

The boy stands up straighter. "Sí, Mister Varga," he answers, and then he whistles at the girls. "Come on. Food."

Gloria shrugs, looking shy again, but Kelsa's stomach gnaws at her ribs and she sets off after the boy. The building inside has lots of people in it moving around, from kids almost as young as Kelsa to a man who looks even older than Mother Abigail, and everybody seems like they're running like they work in the laundry. But most of them smile, and they talk to each other, and none of the girls wear any gowns or dresses. Before they reach food, Rafael whistles at another boy, this one much younger, maybe a couple years older than Kelsa. His skin's light, almost pink, like an adoptable.

"Take these chicas to get somethin' to eat," Rafael tells the boy, "and then show 'em someplace they can sleep when it gets dark. Mister Varga's gonna deal 'em in tomorrow."

The younger boy nods a few times. "You got it, Raff," he tells the older boy. Rafael gives the boy a tight nod before he turns back and marches toward the front of the building again, leaving Kelsa and Gloria alone with the younger boy. "Follow me, ladies," the boy says, and he stalks down a hall with a flickering light. "People call me Shep." He sounds like he wants them to call him that, too. "What do people call you?"
"Kelsa," she says before Gloria can get herself punched again. The other girl gives her own name but doesn't say anything else, probably too hungry.

Shep nods and ducks into a small room that's got a table, a sink, and a refrigerator. "They's bread up in the shelf and some peanut butter in the fridge," he lets them know. "Help yourselves." His eyes are blue, like ice, but warm. It's almost a race to get the ingredients together; they make their sandwiches on the bare table while Shep fills up a couple glasses with water, and the girls devour a sandwich apiece before the boy speaks up again. "So...what kinda name is Kelsa, anyhow?"

The girl takes a long, long drink of water before she answers. "My name," she says, shrugging. "What kinda name is Shep?"

"My name," the boy throws back at her, smirking. "But you should probly have another sandwich or two, in case Mister Varga doesn't wanna let you have anymore."

Kelsa takes Shep's advice, but Gloria looks a little nervous. "What is this place, anyway?"

Shep shrugs. "We a family, here," he claims, and then he tilts his head and pulls down his collar. Low on his neck, there's a little picture of a red flower. It's almost pretty. "Mister Varga feeds us and keeps us safe," the boy says after he pulls his collar up, "and we work for him. You keep doing like he says, he don't care what you do otherwise."

Kelsa swallows her mouthful of peanut butter. "This family got a name?"

The boy nods, grinning. "We the Reds," he brags. "Nobody fucks with us."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to my beta-reader, buttercup23, for all of her help and support! And thanks to everyone who's reading along; I appreciate (and answer) all comments I receive.
Ch. 2: Her First Time

Chapter Summary

Kelsa thinks she has a home in the Reds, and at least one friend...but her boss has a different idea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Wright-Kay Building

03:30 PM Eastern Standard Time

26 February 2170

Detroit (Derelict Zone-unacknowledged), MI, UNAS, Terra, Sol

The building might be falling down on the outside, its bricks more black than brown and almost all the windows smashed out before Kelsa was even born, but on the inside it's a fort of steel and muscle. Gotta be, since it's right in the middle of the Garden, where all the red roses grow. Even though she knows all the guards' faces, Kelsa's still gotta tug down the front of her shirt to show them her tattoo before they let her through every doorway. It pisses her off, 'cause she wouldn't even be here if she had a choice, but when Mister V asks you to come by his office, you don't say no. The place, when she finally gets there, looks almost the same as last time she was here, half a year back. There's a few more books on the shelves and the desk has more shit on it, but Kelsa keeps her eyes on Mister V. He looks almost the same, too...maybe a little heavier, maybe a couple more grey hairs. Still the same creamy shirts and open jackets, like he's the king of the Keys, instead of the donut-hole of East Michigan. He nods to Raff, who slinks up behind Kelsa and starts patting her down.

"Hey, I gotta piece," she tells the man when his hands get a little too friendly on her hips. "It's at my back." She don't break his wrist when he lets his fingers brush a little too low under her belt, but just 'cause Mister V wouldn't like that. Still, Raff goes to work on her thighs, and Kelsa shakes her head. "You don't get them hands off, I'll put your fingers outta joint one at a time."

Raff stiffens up, but Mister V nods a little, and the guard hands his boss Kelsa's gun. The older man still don't say nothin', he just looks the piece over for a minute, before he puts it down on his desk and flashes that smile of his. It's more yellow than white these days, but it still shines. "I am glad to see you took my advice, Kelsa," he tells her. "When last we spoke, I had worried that you would be stubborn."

The girl shrugs. "You been good to me," she says, and means it. "Thanks for givin' me the gun...and for takin' care of the fucker that robbed me." She can still feel the knife against her throat, and she's still just a little bit ashamed, sometimes, that she didn't fight back harder. Fucker didn't even give her a scar. "I'd never toss it, Mister Varga. I respect you too much."
"You were lucky that the man had but a knife," he says, the same thing he said six months ago. "But I must correct you," he goes on, but his voice stays light and easy. "You were making a delivery for me at the time; the vagrant who nearly cut your throat robbed us, not simply you." His eyebrows scrunch up as he looks at her, almost like she imagines her dad might've. "It was my fault you were in danger. Naturally, it was my responsibility to rectify the situation." He runs his finger along the side of the gun's barrel, right over the spot that shows it's been messed with, but he don't mention anything about it. Instead he looks back up at Kelsa, waiting, like he's afraid of sayin' something. "Gloria is dead," the man finally lets out. "An overdose," he explains, shaking his head again.

The news don't make Kelsa happy, but it ain't exactly a surprise, neither. She throws just one glance over her shoulder, to Raff, the one that took the older girl and strung her out and then turned her out for him after those first couple months. Raff don't even blink, so she turns back to Mister V and nods. "Thanks for tellin' me," she says, her eye twitching. "Is that what you wanted to see me for, sir?"

The older man looks close at her, like he's deciding something. Kelsa can't tell if it's a good something or a bad something, not yet. "You two were...no longer close, I believe," he tosses out.

The girl shakes her head. "Too many bad memories of the laundry," she says, shrugging. She ain't had to wash a single rag in almost eight years, and she never will again. "She tried dealin' with them with her nose and a needle. Ain't what I wanted for her, but I wasn't her momma."

"That is what I always like about you, Kelsa," Mister V lets on, giving her a crooked smile. He ain't called her any other way since she broke his nose; it's still a little crooked. Now she knows he coulda killed her, or had Raff do it. She was too stupid to be afraid, then. "You never linger on the past, on mistakes. You move on. For such a young child, that is remarkably wise." The girl don't know how wise it is, but she don't know any other way to be. Mister V stands up, slow, and turns his back on her. For a second she thinks Raff's gonna make a move, but the boss runs a finger over the back of one of his books. "How long have you been with the Reds, Kelsa?"

The girl blinks. "Seven years, nine months, and eighteen days since I walked into the old crib," she reads out, the numbers flashing underneath her eyelids. "Seven years, ten months, and three days since I got the rose."

That makes Mister V laugh, low in his chest. "Always, you surprise me. I could have Rafael look up the dates on the extranet and it would take him an hour to figure out what you just gave me in less than three seconds." He clicks his tongue, shaking his head and turning back toward the girl. "Tell me, Kelsa, can you read?"

She nods. "A little; I learned in the laundry, with the signs. Picked up a little more from watchin’ old vids with Jay."

The boss twitches a little, but Kelsa can't tell why. He looks at Raff again and the man moves; instinct has Kelsa ready to elbow him and make a run for it, if she needs to, but instead the thug leaves the room and shuts the door behind him. Now there's just Kelsa and Mister V, with a desk between them. "You've been a good worker for me," the boss tells her. "Making deliveries, taking payments. Any discrepancies were always found before pickup or after drop off. You never once took any product or cash for yourself." Kelsa's stomach gets tighter, even though Mister V's smiling. Maybe because Mister V's smiling. "Yet you're getting older," he points out, with a slow glance up and down her body; even under her long coat and layers, she shivers. "It is past time we found an altogether different job for you; it won't be safe for you to make deliveries for too much longer."
Kelsa's eyes narrow. "Mister Varga, if you think I'm gonna let Raff turn me into one of his girls-

She doesn't know how she's gonna end that sentence, but the boss holds up a hand before she has to
find out. "You misunderstand, Kelsa," he says. "I want you to learn how to read, and read for real." He
turns back to one of the bookshelves and pulls out a thin, old book, small enough to fit down herpants. The man sets the book down right beside the gun he gave her six months ago, and then he
clears some space on the desk, enough for a sheet of paper. "Do you know anything about
coded messages?"

"A little," Kelsa answers, after a second. "Datapads got programs for that, don't they?" Jay's a lot
better with that shit than Kelsa is, but he's taught her a little, enough to bring up some vids from the
extranet.

Mister V takes out a pen and starts scratching out on the paper, but instead of left-to-right, he
scrawls out a bunch of symbols the wrong way. Kelsa don't think she'd recognise them even if they
weren't upside down to her. "Cipher programs can be broken as easily as they're made," he snorts. "I
am going to teach you a much older method of encryption...a way of keeping our messages a
secret."

Kelsa's eyebrows scrunch up. "Why?" She looks from the paper up to the man scribbling on it.
"Whatchu need me to read, for?" He glances up at her, and it takes her half a second to add, "Mister
Varga?"

"Because I believe it's time we added a few thorns to your rose," he says, even and light. The girl's
stomach drops out; Reds can get almost any kind of ink they want, but they can only change the
rose whenever they kill somebody. Then they gotta put a thorn on the stem. She's seen some stems
go all the way down to people's belly buttons before. "Tell me," Mister V asks, making her shake
off the voice in her head, "have you ever had to use this gun?"

She knows that he already knows her answer, but she's gotta give it anyway. "I had to pop off a few
shots a couple times, but I never hit nobody that I ever heard about," the girl admits.

The man's head dips down, once. "I imagine we would have learned otherwise, seeing how you've
modified the pistol to make the bullets burn whatever they hit." That's something else Jay showed
her; it makes the gun overheat quicker, so you can only get off six shots a minute instead of ten,
but Jay says the trade's worth it. "I find myself in need of...a collector," Mister V goes on.
"Someone who settles other people's debts to me, by persuading them to part with their cash...or by
their blood, if they resist. Luckily, you are in need of a new job, and I believe you have what it
takes to become one of my collectors, Kelsa."

The first thing the girl feels is relieved; if she's gotta choose between hurting strangers or fucking
them to earn her keep, she ain't even gonna hesitate. But then she remembers the funny writing on
the desk. "What about the books? What do they have to do with anything, sir?"

"Ahh, yes," Mister V rumbles, grinning. "Well, you see, the puercos have a nasty habit of
gathering extranet messages. Let us say, for the sake of argument, that I send you a message that
tells you that one of my dealers has been skimming a bit of sand," he offers. "And let us also say,
hypothetically speaking, that this dealer winds up with a fiery bullet in his head. Now you know
and I know that this could be a perfectly innocent coincidence, of course, but...the puercos, they
might find out about the dealer's death, months later. Years, maybe. And they might also have that
message archived somewhere..." He trails off and raises an eyebrow at her.

Kelsa hums, tilting her head. "So even if we coded it up, they'd still bring it back to you, Mister
Varga." She almost says that pigs don't ever come south of Six Mile, not if they ain't got a reason,
but then she figures out that a dead body and a message would give them reason enough.

"Exactly," the boss tells her. "That's why I give my collectors messages on paper." He spins the paper around and pushes it forward, waving for the girl to come closer. "It is called book code," he says. "The funny squiggles are numbers, written backwards, so most people could only read them if they used a mirror." Kelsa thinks that he must have done this before, because he's answering her questions as soon as they come up, before she can ask. "The numbers are always in groups of four," he keeps going. "The first number tells you the chapter of the book, the second number gives you which paragraph, the third number is the sentence, and the last number is the word in the sentence." He taps on the old book. "When you leave here today, you will take this note and this book with you. I have another copy of the book; when you've learned how to read the message, you will copy it back to me, using different numbers. Then I will know that you are ready to begin your work. Do you understand what you must do?"

It takes a second for the girl to sort everything out. "You want me to go through the book," she says, "and find different places that have the same words I get from the paper you made for me." The paper that she still can't figure out, even though it's supposed to be turned the right way. "How do I find out what the squiggles mean, Mister Varga?"

"I am sure you can figure it out," Mister V lets on, before he breathes a heavy sigh. "But I am afraid that your first job for me cannot wait, Kelsa," he says, and he sounds almost sad. "There is someone you must take care of," he tells her. "Tonight."

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**Zug Island**

11:42 PM Eastern Standard Time

26 February 2170

*Detroit, MI, UNAS, Terra, Sol*

The skycar's a few years old, got a couple bullet holes and a broken back window, but it flies smooth enough to get them where they need to go without poking out above the donut-hole's rotting skyline. Jay stole it about a year ago from just outside the Line, that ring of streets from Six Mile to Livernois on one side of the Detroit River and E. C. Row on the other. Outside the Line is Detroit, the donut, with builders and engineers and firefighters and cops and ambulances; inside the line is the donut-hole, where the lights don't work half the time and there ain't no heat in the winter and the law's whatever your boss says it is. The donut-hole's cut up into a dozen territories, but the Garden is right in the middle of it, and the Garden gets bigger every year. The skycar helps Kelsa and Jay get around the donut-hole without needing to pay other gangs to cut across their streets.

Tonight, Kelsa takes them outside the Line, just barely. Zug Island's neutral ground, just because there ain't nothing here that anybody wants, unless you like homeless people and old metal towers even more rusted-out than anything inside the donut-hole. "We're here," she says without needing to, when she sets the skycar down in the middle of the island. The lights from the rest of the city ain't too bad, here, and even through the cracked windshield they can see a couple hundred stars.

"You still ain't said what the point is, Kay," he drawls, but he's already looking up, settling back in his seat. It's too cold for them to go lay down outside, but this is good enough, for now.

Kelsa's throat's too thick for her to answer, so she swallows, hard. "Tell me about the sky, Jay," she says. The damned boy loves the stars, loves everything about them, even more than he loves circuit boards, even more than he loves her. Lots of people think they're fucking, which is fine by
the both of them, since they're both gay. Jay says that outside the donut-hole that don't matter any, but inside it does, enough that they gotta pretend. It makes what she's gonna have to do even harder, and she's glad when he starts talking about Orion and Betelgeuse, even though she ain't listening.

"...I mean it, Kay," he whispers, almost like a prayer. "The whole galaxy's just full of shit, all kindsa people, and they need folks like us." He's talking about his dream again, his big plans to join the spacers. "Folks that already seen what this big, bad world got to offer and laugh at it." Her eyes are closed, but she can tell when he finally looks at her because he shuts up for a minute. "Hey," he calls, reaching across the car and brushing a gloved knuckle under his cheek. "Why you cryin', Kay?"

The back of her throat's all dry, but she tries to swallow anyway. "Where'd you go three days ago?" The question's almost too quiet to hear over the whistling wind outside, but Kelsa can't ask it again.

The boy laughs, the dumbass, like he don't know how much trouble he's in. "When I took the car?" He flops back in his seat. "Went up north, outside the Line. I got into the office," he says, sounding proud. "I...wasn't gonna tell you, 'cause they said I had to wait 'til I was eighteen, but I talked to an Alliance recruiter." That answer drives a fist into her gut; she knew it, earlier that day, when Mister V told her that he thought Jay was a snitch. She even told the boss that much, that Jay would never go to the cops...but Mister V made it all too clear, in his own fancy-talkin' way, that Jay was gonna die. It was up to Kelsa, he'd said without having to say, whether she wound up killing her friend or whether she died with him. Jay's still talking, ignorant, like he don't know that he's already dead. "Can you see it?" He whistles. "Just imagine...Serviceman 3rd Class John Shepard. Just two more years, and I'm outta here."

"Shut the fuck up, Jay," Kelsa growls, her eyes still closed up tight. "Just shut up."

"Wait," the boy says, not listening. "You're afraid of me leavin', aintcha? That you'll have to take care of Finch and Mary all by yourself?" Finch is just a year younger than Jay, but he's a tweaker, hardly able to keep his product and his stash separated. Mary's a scared kid, not really one of the Reds, at least not yet. Kelsa and Jay keep Raff and his boys from getting too close to her. Even though they're all about the same age and Kelsa's the youngest, she and Jay've been in the gang half their lives already. "Hey, it'll be alright," Jay keeps going, keeps talking. "It ain't for two years, and then you'll be able to get out in two more. I know you can do it, Kay."

The girl sucks in a breath and looks at her friend. She knows what she's gotta do; she knows that if she runs, if they take off together right now, that Finch and Mary won't see tomorrow night...and that they'll all die, all four of them, if she tries to go back for the kids. She ain't sure if Mister V knows the truth, if he's testing her, or if he really thinks that Jay's a problem...but it really don't matter, one way or another. "The boss give me a new job today," she says, after her eyes stop being cloudy. "Says he wants me to collect for him."

Jay looks confused by the quick change of subject, but he ain't scared, not yet. "You know that's just Mister V's way of saying hitman, right?" When she nods, he grins and shakes his head. "Honestly, I don't see it," he says, chuckling. "I mean, I could see you killin' someone if they was a threat, but-"

"Mister V thinks you went outside the Line to talk to some cops," Kelsa tells him, all in a rush. "You're s'posed to gimme my first thorn."

Nothing, for a whole heartbeat, and then another. Then he moves, but not for the old gun he keeps on him, the revolver, like they used to use before computers and circuit boards ever got invented. Instead he jumps out of the skycar and takes off running, and even though Kelsa's quicker than Jay,
he's halfway to a rusty wreck before she's able to chase him. She still hasn't pulled out her gun, the
gun that he taught her how to mod. The cold works in her favour, at least for Mister V's plan,
because even after Jay dives behind some ancient barrels and other rusted clutter, Kelsa can see her
friend's breath clouding. Growling, the girl finally yanks her piece, and she makes sure the rounds
will burn nice and hot, just like Jay showed her.

"Please don't do this, Kay," the boy cries, a bigger cloud rising up from his hiding place. He's
trapped in his hiding spot, pinned by a pile of twisted metal. "We can both get away...go back to
the skycar and just drive. We can go somewhere warm, where Mister V'll never find us!"

She's tempted, more tempted than she even wants to admit. "You remember what you told me,"
Kelsa hisses, her eyes blurring, but she pretends it's just from her breath. "Nobody fucks with the
Reds...we're a family, right? And you can't abandon family."

Three more puffs rise before it clicks for him. "Finch and Mary," he breathes. And then, after a
second, "Why would he do this to us? We been good. We never did nothing wrong." He's whining
now, like Kelsa used to do sometimes, back at the laundry.

"Maybe 'cause you tried to run, tried to get way the fuck up there," Kelsa guesses, swinging her left
hand up to the sky even while she keeps her gun pointed at where those puffs are coming from.
"Maybe just to see how much he can trust me." She takes a deep breath, feels her nose hairs freeze.
A shiver rocks her body, but her arm and hand stay steady. "You gotta know I never wanted this, Jay,"
she tells him. But now that the decision's made, now that her way's locked in, Kelsa can't
back down. "If I was you, I'd come out poppin', but you know he's gonna find you." Her stomach
growls, like if she'd had any supper she'd throw it up, but still her hand's as steady as steel.

Jay's crying, she can tell by the way his breath-cloud's jittering. "Just promise me," he says, thick.
"Promise me one thing, Kay."

Her teeth stay clamped together. "Yeah?" She manages to say, blinking to keep her eyes clear.

"Promise me you'll get out," he begs her. "Promise me that one day you'll get outta the donut-
hole...outta the donut. Offa this rock." He swallows, and she can tell that he's looking up. "Promise
me you'll see the stars up close, Kay. Promise me you'll do that for me."

Kelsa can't talk for a long time, but Jay don't say nothing else. "Okay," she answers, at last. "I
promise."

"Love you, Kay," the boy hisses through his teeth. He jumps up, turning toward her as he goes, and
his old gun goes off at the same time she pulls her own trigger. His bullet carves a trench in the
outside of Kelsa's left shoulder, but her bullet hits him right below his left eye. It takes forever for
her heart to tick over; in that forever, she sees the back of her best friend's skull spread out behind
him. After another forever, another heartbeat, she smells charred meat. Then, just as he starts to
fall, Kelsa feels the blinding flash of pain from her shoulder, and she hits her knees.

A strangled sound fills her ears, like a wild coyote dying slow, and it don't stop when she figures
out it's her that's screaming. The gun's warm in her hand, steaming in the cold air, and suddenly she
feels frozen right to her bones...so cold, except for her shoulder, where the hot metal touched her a
few seconds before. A single splinter of a thought yanks at her, that she'll only feel warm if she can
find another bullet, and she knows that her gun's bullets are warmer than most...

Gasping for breath, Kelsa throws the gun away, as hard as she can. She hears metal crash on metal
somewhere far away, and she screams again, but she can't cry. All her tears are ice, and she's alone.
Just her and them goddamned stars that Jay never shut up about. "Love you too, Jay," she chokes
out, curling up in the snow, but she ain't shaking from the cold anymore.

Wright-Kay Building

05:17 AM Eastern Standard Time

27 February 2170

Detroit (Derelict Zone-unacknowledged), MI, UNAS, Terra, Sol

The guards are surprised to see her, but they believe the lie that Mister V told her to come back after she'd finished an assignment for him, no matter what time. She still rather wouldn't be here; she'd rather be drunk, or high, or dead. But after she made sure that Finch and Mary were alright, Kelsa came straight back to her boss's house.

He's in his office, just like before, and Raff is standing right there by the door when she walks through. The man moves to pat her down again, but as soon as his hand touches her, Kelsa drives her elbow into his side hard enough to crack his ribs. "You bitch," he spits, but she's already moving, already reaching for the shotgun he keeps in his coat.

Raff tries to grab onto her, but she's too quick, too determined. Before he can say anything else, before he can even blink, Kelsa has the barrel underneath his chin. The kickback digs into her ribs, but that's nothing to the blood and bone and brains that paint the boss's wall. The sound of the blast and the falling body draws the attention of a couple guards from the hallway, and they step in with their guns out, but Kelsa just tucks the shotgun into her own coat. "Needed another gun," she explains, looking back over her shoulder at Mister V. "Sir."

He looks at her, his icy eyes narrowed a little bit, but he don't look afraid. Instead, a little smirk twitches on his lips, and he gives her a little nod. "Make sure you keep up your reading," he tells her. "And work on your rose when you've sobered up. I would advise you not to add any more thorns to it until you've written to me, though."

Kelsa nods, once, and she stalks out of the building without another backward glance. The book's still tucked away on her, and the note, but she ain't looking at either one until she tells Finch and Mary that Jay ain't comin' home...and she can't do that without a lot of help from some things that won't let her remember the next few days.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who's reading along, and thanks especially to my wonderful beta-reader, buttercup23!
Ch. 3: Mutatis Mutandis

Chapter Summary

A promise was made, and Kelsa does her best to keep it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

ESA Recruitment Office

10:00 AM Eastern Standard Time

11 April 2172

Detroit, MI, UNAS, Terra, Sol

The building's shittier than she thought it'd be, grey and blue with lots of cracks in the concrete on the outside, but the see-through glass doors open and close whenever anyone walks up to 'em, just like they're supposed to do. The doors in the donut-hole sure as fuck don't open just 'cause someone stands in front of 'em, but then again, that's probably saved Kelsa's life more than once. Join Us!, the flashing pictures in front of the building scream, in between shots that are literally other-worldly; pictures from moons and planets from all across the galaxy, places Jay would've been able to name in a heartbeat, black and grey and blue and green and red and orange. Each picture has happy-looking humans, most of 'em white, all in well-washed uniforms. If she didn't know no better, Kelsa might think being an Alliance marine would be just about the most boring thing in the whole goddamned galaxy.

But she does know better. These last two years, she's paid more attention to life outside the Line, outside the donut, outside the solar system. Turns out that the galaxy's filled with pirates and thugs and drug-runners and assassins, and there's places that make the Garden seem like...well, like a fuckin' garden. If she's honest with herself, Kelsa ain't entirely sure she's the right kinda person to send into all that mess. But Mister Varga's starting to get a little suspicious, and maybe a little paranoid, and it won't be safe for her to stay with him too much longer...which means that she's gonna have to run somewhere, and Kelsa can't think of anywhere better than out in the deep black. Some of the Reds wander up as far as Ten Mile now, and the boss's gone to calling them the Tenth Street Reds as a marker of his ambition-to run his business outside the Line, to show everyone else in the donut-hole who's really in charge-but the man's reach probably ain't ever gonna get past Pluto. There's also that promise that she made to Jay, two winters ago. Kelsa don't make promises hardly ever, but she's gonna try and keep that one.

So Kelsa takes a breath and steps up to those sliding doors. They whisper open, and she sees men and women running around, not paying her any mind at all. A single step into the room sets an alarm to screaming, though, and Kelsa jumps without thinking; she dives over a couch, kicking it over as she goes, and jams her shoulder against the upturned underside. Her big knife's in her hand before she can blink, and for a second she wonders if stashing her shotgun was a mistake after all, especially when a couple of not-happy-at-all soldiers start talking with the tense confidence that
says they both have guns pointed at her. "Come out from behind that sofa," one of them barks. "Hands where we can see them!"

The girl does no such thing. Instead she hikes her buck knife higher. From what she remembers of the room, there's a hall she can duck down, maybe a room with a window she could bust through before the fuckers catch her.

"Somebody shut that thing the hell up," comes another voice, and Kelsa tenses when its owner steps around the couch-turned-barricade. He's an old man, probably almost fifty, with grey in the sides of his bushy hair. But he don't have a gun, and he looks like he ain't scared of Kelsa's knife, even if he stays a dozen feet from her. "Put that down, kid," he tells her. "You're scaring Corporal van Dyne and Serviceman Woo." As soon as the noise cuts off, Kelsa's heart slows down, and she lowers her buck knife down to the floor. In the donut-hole, when you hear alarms go off, you run and you hide or you get ready to fight. "That was a damned fast move," the man goes on, looking from the window to the couch and then back over his shoulder at the wall. "Limiting exposure to the outside and the hall, but giving yourself room to manoeuvre if you get flanked." He's almost mumbling, talking to himself.

A woman's voice sounds from across the room. "Sir, should I call the police?"

You'll be dead and I'll be gone before they get here, Kelsa almost says, but she bites her tongue.

The old man turns his blue-grey eyes on the girl, but when he speaks, it's clearly to the woman she can't see. "I doubt that will be necessary, Claire." The bastard actually *smirks* at her. "My name is Major Tom Kincaide," he tells her, and then chuckles, like that's supposed to be funny. "And don't bother, I've heard about *ground control* a million times."

Silence hangs between them for a couple seconds, before she realises he probably wants to know who the knife-wielding couch-stomper in his office building is. "Kelsa," she offers, and then waits a heartbeat before deciding on a last name, then and there. "Shepard." The girl swallows, her heart hitching for an entirely different reason than adrenaline. "I'm Kelsa Shepard," she says a little louder. "I'm here to join up...if I ain't fucked that up, that is."

"That remains to be seen," the major answers, still smirking. "How 'bout you kick that knife over this way and then fix the sofa back like it was before the metal detector went off, and then we can go back and talk about that." He stands there, waiting, and Kelsa slides the buck knife across the carpet. Now she's glad she stashed the gun, since she's pretty sure she ain't gettin' that knife back. Warily, the girl peeks up from her hiding spot; the two guards are back beside the door, their pistols at their hips, but they both eye her openly as she pulls the couch back onto its legs.

By the time Kelsa turns around, the knife's gone, almost like it didn't even exist. The old man, Major Kincaide, jerks his head for her to follow him. She stalks, her boots whispering on the carpet, eyes darting around the room and the hall. Almost without having to think about it, the girl looks for cover in the main room, scans for possible ways out. The major takes her all the way to the back room of the hall, past at least two elevators and a dozen doors on each side. It looks like his own personal office, which Kelsa knows is right when she reads his name cut into a strip of plastic on the desk. Other than that, it looks a hell of a lot like Mister V's office; there're lots of old books here, a couple potted plants, and no windows at all. She's pretty sure there's more than one way out, though, even though it doesn't look like it. Something tells her that Major Kincaide likes his own exits.

"Close the hatch and have a seat," he says smoothly, moving to the big chair behind the desk. While the girl elbows the door closed and moves into one of the smaller chairs in front of him, the man holds up his left arm and it starts glowing orange. He types on orange keys for a couple
seconds, and a light shoots out from his wrist into her eye; it's gone before she can blink, but that
doesn't stop her cheek from twitching. "Hmm," the major grumbles, his smirk getting looser,
almost a frown. "What'd you say your name was, again?"

She swallows hard. "Kelsa," she says. "Kelsa...Shepard." While she's talking, the man makes his
arm stop glowing, and he's definitely frowning now.

"That's curious," the major lets on. "That name sounded a little familiar to me...the last name,
anyway," he tells her. "Funny thing is, last I heard it, it came from one of my recruiters. Said he had
a street-rat kid that could hack into any system he came across, and wanted to put his skills to work
for humanity." He leans forward, putting his hands together. "Would you happen to know anything
about that, Miss...Shepard?"

A hollow wants to open up in her chest, just behind her heart, but Kelsa won't let it. "He was my
brother," she says. As good as

Major Kincaide raises an eyebrow at her. "Was?"

"He died," she explains. I killed him. I loved him, but I killed him. "Couple years back."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the man offers, but she can tell he don't mean it, really. "But I don't really
think he was your brother," he goes on. "As I recall, his file listed him as caucasian with blue eyes.
Those eyes of yours are green, but otherwise you don't even look mixed, kid." He shakes his head.
"Most importantly, though, my omni-tool ran your biometric identification. Would you care to
guess what it had to tell me a minute ago?"

Kelsa's stomach gets tight, but she doesn't hesitate. "It says my name's Ruth Jackson," she admits,
her mouth drying up. "Also prob'ly says I went missing outta Saint Mary's Orphanage about ten
years back."

Major Kincaide inclines his head, his office light shining through the thin hair at his temples. "Do
you dispute those facts, miss?"

"Yes, sir," she answers. "I do." The man nods for her to go on. "There was a girl at that orphanage
that the nuns called Ruth Jackson," she explains. "A black girl that grew up under the ground and
worked six days a week in the laundry, and spent the last day praying to a god that never listened."
Her cheek twitches. "But my momma called me Kelsa before they took me away from her, and Jay
was as much a brother as I ever coulda wanted after I got out."

The major makes a low grumbling noise and laces his fingers together. "There are some things it's
best not for me to know," he says. "From what I've seen, you know how to handle yourself in a
fight...I wouldn't be surprised if you know how to use a gun." He raises his right hand to cut off
any answer she might give, and then he makes his left forearm glow again. "According to the
system, Ruth Jackson's still a minor, still listed as a resident of the orphanage. I doubt you'd learn
moves like you showed off in the lobby out there if you walked out of Saint Mary's earlier today,
and from what it sounds like, you've been out for long enough for them to file a missing person's
report if they were going to already...so it looks like there's been some kind of mix up with the
Vital Records Office." The man looks at her again, through the see-through orange screen that's
popped up out of his arm. "I do have some questions, though, and you'd damned well better be
honest about them if you want me to fix this problem, Miss Shepard."

Kelsa doesn't understand what he's saying at first, but as he keeps going, she realises that he isn't
getting ready to kick her out of his office. Part of her thinks he could be buying time for cops to
come, but at this point, she'll take her chances-she ain't afraid of prison, and if she gets dragged
back to the orphanage, she sure as shit won't even need her knife to get out again. The girl nods. "Alright, sir. What do you wanna know?"

The man holds her eyes, steady as a rock. "Why are you here?"

It doesn't even take a heartbeat for her to come back. "I made Jay a promise, just before he died," she tells the major. "He always wanted to go out and see space. Talked about it all the time. When he didn't make it, he...I told him I'd get out, see the stars for him." She ain't cried since that night, not even once.

That answer makes the old man's eyebrows twitch up, and he takes a couple seconds. "You really did care about him, huh?"

Kelsa nods, swallowing, but her eyes stay desert-dry. "Still do, sir." She takes a breath and keeps going. "I can fight, and I ain't afraid to die. If I stay here, it prob'ly won't be too long 'til I do." The girl looks back over her shoulder, to the hallway and the lobby. "I know them posters you got hangin' out there is bullshit; there's bad places, a lot of 'em, and they need people who can stand on the ground when other people just wanna run away." Major Kincaide's frowning again, but not like he's mad, and he doesn't speak up when she stops to take another breath. "I don't need you to send me to school or give me a vacation," she says. "I'm already a soldier; I just want somethin' better to fight for." Better than grown-ups that use kids, either to wash clothes or to soak them in blood.

"Soldiers take orders," the major points out, his head tilting. "You think you can do that, Miss Shepard?"

Forty-seven thorns say that she can; the stem of her rose has crawled over her breastbone where the skin is thinnest, all the way down to her belly-button. She learnt to read over the last couple years, and her little room back in the Garden has a few books besides the ones that Mister V uses for the coded messages he's sent her every couple weeks. "Even inside the Line, there's rules," she tells the major. "If I couldn't do what I was told, I'd already be dead."

"That's good, Shepard," Major Kincaide grunts, and the girl notices that he's stopped calling her Miss. She ain't sure what that means, but he's not frowning anymore. "I think I have a deal for you," he goes on. "If you're interested." Kelsa nods, and his smirk comes back. "It sounds like you might be mixed up with some bad people, but I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, Shepard...with a couple of conditions. One, you've gotta pass a physical exam, which means no drugs in your system." It only takes another second for the girl to nod again; she thought they'd check for that, so she's spent the last month or so steering clear of everything but liquor. It ain't been easy, but Kelsa keeps her promises. "Two," the man continues, making her blink. "You'll have to pass an aptitude test that's going to assess all of your skills, in theory and in practice. You'll need to pull top marks in combat tactics to even have a shot. Last, if you get that far, you're going to get fitted with an omni-tool. That omni-tool's going to have several monitoring programs attached to it. If within the first eighteen months you're caught communicating with anyone you shouldn't, if you're caught breaking the law, if you have even one shoelace out of place or if you try to tamper with your surveillance in any way, you will be court martialed." His face is blank while he talks, but it sounds like he's made this little speech before. "That means no drugs stronger than coffee, no disobeying any order from your superiors, and cutting any and all ties with anyone that you might be working with at the moment."

Kelsa nods one more time; she knows that red sand's gotta come from somewhere, and if she was Mister V, having a soldier that could fetch her some might be something she'd try to make happen. But she's got no intention of ever seeing Mister V again; she'll just have to trust Finch's word that he can take care of Mary. "I understand," the girl says. "I'll have eyeballs on me all the time. I got
"Okay," Major Kincaide grunts, tapping on his arm some more. "I'm gonna do you a favour, Shepard," he tells her. "If you shit on that favour, I will personally see that you spend the rest of your days breaking big rocks down into smaller rocks on some God-forsaken asteroid six months from the closest mass relay, you got me?"

"I got you, sir," Kelsa answers, finally letting a little bit of hope trickle into her chest.

He gives her a tight nod. "Okay," he repeats. "Let's say Vital Records made a mistake, eighteen years ago to the day, and you accidentally got registered under some other girl's bio. You were really born Kelsa Shepard...that's with a 'K', right?" Kelsa has no idea, but he takes her shrug for agreement and types onto the glowy keys on his arm. "Alright...so you're Kelsa Shepard, born in Ferndale on April 11th, 2154. You've just decided to leave West Oak Secondary School to sign up with the Alliance on the occasion of your eighteenth birthday. Don't blink again." She doesn't, and another flash of light pulses into her eye. "All done; that'll keep, even if you wash out between now and the end of basic training."

The girl does blink, now, and she doesn't know what to say for a minute. "Thanks, Major Kincaide," Kelsa finally tells him. "I won't let you down, sir." Part of her can't believe this is actually happening; she expected to wind up arrested, or worse, when she left the Garden a couple of hours ago. But now it seems like she might be able to keep her promise, after all.

The major barks a laugh. "Don't mention it, literally. Item number four of your agreement is to not breathe a word of this again. You're Shepard; you've been Shepard your whole life. Make up whatever story you need to get by, but stick to it. You mention my name or what I did, and it's off to an asteroid belt in the Hawking Eta cluster, kid."

She doesn't know where the fuck that is, but she gets the point. "Understood," she says again.

He jerks his head to the door, behind her. "Take the elevator on your right up to the fourth floor. Tell Dr. Kenichi that you're enlisting under the Youth Initiative Programme, and she'll take you from there. And Shepard," he says, while she's standing up. "Good luck."

"Thank you, sir." Kelsa slips out of the man's office, her buck knife forgotten; even though she's killed almost fifty people and roughed up a couple hundred, she feels a little nervous while she's waiting for the elevator. The steel walls buzz around her as the elevator doors close and she jabs the fourth-floor button hard enough to hurt her thumb, but the girl doesn't step out of the box when the doors finally ding open. Her feet feel like cinder blocks for a second, just long enough for the doors to ding again, but Kelsa manages to jump through before they close all the way.

Up here's another hallway. Kelsa follows the signs that say Medical Reception, and she finds an older lady with glasses sitting behind a desk, tapping away on a real keyboard. The girl stands there for almost a minute, but the woman doesn't seem to even notice she's there until Kelsa kicks the front of the desk. "Major told me to come see some doctor," she says, over the woman's scared complaints.

"You must be a new recruit," the woman sniffs, after eyeballing Kelsa for a second. "Dr. Kenichi will be with you in a moment. If you'll just have a seat."

Kelsa doesn't move. "I ain't got a moment, lady. You ain't gonna have too many more, neither, 'less I see this doctor." She leans forward, putting an elbow down on the desk. "Major said I had to see her...he didn't say nothing about seeing you."
The sitting woman's mouth opens and closes so fast that the fat underneath her chin wobbles, but before she can say anything, another woman talks from a doorway deeper in the office. "It is alright, Mrs. Harris. Major Kincaide just forwarded a report."

Kelsa looks up to see a dark-haired woman with painted lips, shorter than her, Japanese or Korean. Kelsa can't tell which, and she knows better than to guess, or to ask. "You the doctor?" The woman's wearing a white coat over fancy black clothes, heels higher than Kelsa's ever seen, which must mean she's real short.

"I'm a doctor," the woman answers, smirking, like she's clever. "You may call me Dr. Kenichi. You must be Shepard." Kelsa blinks, then nods, and the doctor's smirk turns into a smile. "Excellent," she says, "Come with me." The girl follows Kenichi back into a maze of white rooms...white walls, white ceilings, white floors. White paper on the beds, white charts on the walls with black letters. White scales. Whiter and cleaner than Kelsa's ever seen before. The woman in the white coat takes Kelsa all the way to the very back, to a room that looks just like all the others they just passed. The doctor shuts the door and draws the blinds over the room's only window. "Please take off your clothes and remove any weapons that the front gate might have missed," Kenichi tells her, already messing with a datapad.

Kelsa shrugs out of her old trench coat, with its ripped hem and pockets full of holes. She hesitates for a second, looking over her shoulder at the doctor. "You ain't scared of me?"

Rose-red lips twitch. "I am not," Kenichi answers, still not looking up from the datapad. "It's been a long time since I've had to disarm and disable a recruit, but I assure you that I am quite capable."

That makes Kelsa curious, a little, but she doesn't wanna get thrown out of the building. "Alright," she says, and instead of palming the shiv she keeps in her boot, Kelsa tosses it onto the raggedy coat before she pulls off the rest of her clothes. The air's chilly, but she doesn't shiver; she ain't really shivered since the night Jay died, either, no matter how cold it gets.

"Step onto the scale," Kenichi says, her heels clicking over the hard floor. Kelsa moves to the white platform and stands still, keeping her eyes on a picture of the inside of a white man's ear. The doctor hums to herself and fiddles with her own omni-tool thing. "Hundred sixty-five centimetres, eighty-seven kilograms. Five percent body fat. Strange."

"What's strange about it?" Kelsa asks, blinking, not looking to the doctor. Her hands ball up tight beside her.

Another second of tapping passes before the doctor answers. "Generally such a high muscle density suggests genetic modification, but the scale detects nothing."

Kelsa shrugs. "I run a lot," she says. And fight a lot, and carry a lotta dead weight around, she doesn't say. "That a problem, doc?"

"Not at all," Kenichi tells her, without a pause this time. "If anything, it'll make the standard gene therapy that much more effective, if you make it that far." The doctor waves her glowing arm at the scale, and her omni-tool makes a gentle noise. "Nervous system shows signs of mild post-natal eezo exposure, but there's no biotic potential," she says, and Kelsa can't tell whether that's supposed to be a good thing or not. "And you don't have any narcotics or steroids in your system, so we can proceed to the eye exam and dental screening. If you pass those, we'll find you some new clothes and burn off that ink."

The girl feels her stomach knot up, and she turns more fully toward the short woman. "Soldiers can't have tattoos, doc?"
"Of course they can," the doctor says. "Just not the kind that suggest criminal affiliation." Kenichi's dark eyes sweep down Kelsa's torso, over her long-stemmed rose. "Especially not the kind that let people know you are a killer. Reads very badly in your file."

The woman's smile keeps Kelsa from getting too scared, but there's something dark in it that also makes the girl more curious than ever. "Ain't you trying to make me into a killer yourself?"

Kenichi's eyebrows lift up. "Right...but you're only supposed to kill who your superiors tell you to. Killing anybody else is generally frowned upon." She glances at Kelsa's left arm, high, near her shoulder. "You can keep the bluejay, though. It covers the scar quite nicely."

Kelsa's more relieved than she wants to think about, and she lets her fists relax. "Alright, then," she says, stepping off the scale. "Let's do these tests."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who's reading along, and thanks especially to my beta-reader, buttercup23!
Chapter Summary

Kelsa's instincts and experience have made her a prime candidate for Alliance officer material. It's a daunting challenge, but she soon discovers that she doesn't have to face it alone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bratislav Szibeck Hall
2300 Zulu
2 June 2173

Nexus Campus, Officer Candidate School, Arcturus Station, Arcturus

Bunk beds. Goddamn bunk beds were almost the end of Kelsa back in Brazil; too many years spent at the top bunk in the laundry gave her nightmares in those first few weeks in the Recruit Training Depot. Back-talking drill instructors, taking the bait of other soldiers who tried picking fights with her, and drinking too much nearly got Kelsa washed out of the RTD, but it was those long nights in the bunk beds that made her re-think the whole business of joining up in the first place. But somehow, someway, Kelsa hung on through basic training for the two full months, and she took the rank of Serviceman 3rd Class, with vocation code G1, for Ground Combat Specialist. Those're the ground-pounders, Operations Chief Megala told her, upon graduation. Only N sees more action. He also said the Villa takes more Gs than any of the other letters in the alphabet, and every marine wants to go to the Villa, to N-School. Special Forces.

That was eleven months and twelve days ago. Now Kelsa's a G5, Serviceman 1st Class. She hasn't killed anyone in over a year, but her aptitude scores and her top marks in training exercises-Kelsa's never finished less than third place, and she's flat-out won three out of the five manoeuvres she's been on so far-got her out here, to the Nexus. Somebody up the chain's pulling her up, probably Kincaide, tugging at her to become an officer; she wanted to say no when her omni-tool pinged with the offer to go to OCS, but Jay was there in her head, whispering in the back of her thoughts, and so Kelsa's here, trying to make the best of things.

At the moment, that means making peace with another fucking bunk bed. She's already spent one night on the thing, in the bottom bunk, but she didn't sleep even a minute. Now she's naked, hanging by her knees from the foot of the top bunk, her arms crossed over her chest with a 20-kilo dumbbell in each hand. Some folks still count sheep to try and go to sleep; Kelsa's counting sit-ups, trying to make herself sweaty and tired enough to pass out without remembering the laundry. One ninety-seven, one ninety-eight-

The dorm's door opens with a muted hiss, and the doorway's filled with a tall red-headed white woman, freckled, maybe twenty-two years old. She steps into the room, distracted by a rucksack.
The low light catches on a gold cross around her throat.

In that instant, Kelsa unfolds from her crunch, planting her weights onto the carpeted floor and backflipping onto her feet. Just a heartbeat later she's turned around, her right hand at the strange woman's throat, the left still holding onto one of those heavy weights. With a hard-enough swing, it could cave somebody's skull in, easy. "The fuck are you?" The shorter woman barks, but in her mind she hears a little girl whimpering, begging the cross-wearing grey ladies to let her off of her bunk bed. The woman doesn't whimper, though; instead she grabs Kelsa's wrist and nearly pops one of the bones out of place. At the same time, pain explodes in Kelsa's knee from the heavy sack hitting her leg, and she almost drops her free weight onto her left foot. Only by jumping back can the soldier dodge the metal, and she crouches, but the stranger doesn't move to attack. She starts talking, but her words are meaningless to Kelsa, at least for now, because she's talking in the made-up language that the Alliance calls Galactic. Kelsa'll have to learn it soon, if she wants to finish OCS, but right now she can't speak a word. "Talk English if you can," the soldier tells her, slowly standing up from her crouch. "Please."

"I'm Siobhan," the woman coughs, massaging her neck. "2nd Lieutenant-Cadet Siobhan Leigh Riley, but most people call me 'Lee'," she goes on, her words coloured oddly even though Kelsa can hear them properly now. "Who'n the blue fuck are you?" Rather than look afraid, or even mad, the woman's eyes-every bit as green as Kelsa's-skip up and down Kelsa's sweat-slick body, and the stranger doesn't look like she minds what she sees.

"Kelsa Shepard," the soldier reports, snapping off a salute, since the other woman's technically an officer, even though her presence here means she's just an officer in training, just the same as Kelsa. "Serviceman 1st Class." When the woman only nods and doesn't tell her to stand at ease, Kelsa takes her suspicions as fact, and relaxes. "Fuck kinda name is Shuvawn, anyway?" Kelsa asks, pronouncing the name as close to how she heard it as she can manage.

The other woman snickers, even so. "It's Irish," she explains with a shrug. "I'm from Kilkenny. You gonna get dressed and ask my why I'm here?"

Kelsa shakes her head and moves to pick up her dumbbells. The one she dropped from shoulder-height leaves a deep impression in the carpet, but the soldier pays no attention as she climbs back onto the foot of the well-secured bunk bed. "You interrupted my set," she grunts, laying back until she's almost flush with the bed's posts. "You my roomie, Shiv?"

"...I am," the woman, Siobhan, answers after a couple of seconds. "Do you often go from attacking people to giving them nicknames in the space of five minutes?"

"Saw your necklace, had a bad memory. Ain't happened in a while."

"Sorry."

Kelsa hears Siobhan rustling around the little room, probably unpacking. Books, by the sound of it. "I guess that's alright, but now you've got me curious-

"Don't ask," Kelsa talks over her. "Not 'less you wanna see how quick I can move when you really piss me off."

"Saw your necklace, had a bad memory. Ain't happened in a while." Kelsa doubts she'll make it to two-ten. "So you musta joined up after college," the soldier guesses, trying to distract herself from the pain that's supposed to be distracting her from the bad memories. "Made you an officer straight out the gate."

"Got an MA in Classics from University College Dublin, but reading about ancient heroes and warriors made me want to get some first-hand experience," the Irish woman says with a laugh. "You join up direct from secondary?"
"Two hundred and eight." "Something like that," the soldier hisses. "Got tapped a couple weeks ago after eleven months active. Just got here yesterday; they say I'll get a stripe in a couple years." She counts out two-ten in her head and then repeats her backflipping trick, but this time she leaves both weights at the foot of the bottom bunk. "Know when you're getting outta here, Shiv?"

Siobhan's sitting at the desk with a row of books behind her, all of them old, and only a couple in English. "Fourteen months, if I don't cock it up too badly." She rolls those impossibly-green eyes, a bit of pink rising up underneath her freckles. "I can't believe I missed the orientation!"

From the way the woman glances at Kelsa and then away again, the soldier doesn't think she's just blushing from being a day late. Kelsa tries not to think too much into it, and she doesn't let her own eyes dangle too long on the chest underneath Siobhan's necklace. "You've got a couple moves on you, for someone who spends all day reading," Kelsa points out. She rubs her wrist where Siobhan nearly dislocated it, but doesn't move otherwise. "Learn those in basic?"

"No," Siobhan admits, still not looking straight at the sweaty soldier. "I, ahh...took some martial arts after I decided to join the Alliance. So I could be prepared."

Kelsa grunts a laugh. "Gotta study for everything, huh?" When the other woman returns the laugh, Kelsa gets into the bottom bunk and settles under the covers. "Don't touch me while I'm sleepin'," she warns Siobhan.

"Unless I want to show off more of my moves," the officer-in-training points out, and the two share another chuckle before Kelsa's heavy muscles drag her down into darkness.

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Azure Hotel

1930 Zulu

24 December 2173

Nos Astra (ashore), Soarse, Illium, Tasale

"You're trying to get us killed," Kelsa breathes, halfway to a growl. She can speak Galactic now, which is good, 'cause that's what her standard-issue Alliance implant's set to translate everything into. If she was Jay, Kelsa could probably have re-wired the damned thing to give her translations in English, but she'd probably just wind up frying her nerves if she tried to fool with it herself. But the simple soldier has mastered the common tongue of the Alliance well enough to catch snatches of conversation from aliens huddled in the shadows, and she knows that this place isn't safe for a pair of humans who haven't been farther than Arcturus. Siobhan sure as hell ain't helping; she's wearing a fancy dress, red and green for the holidays, and if they weren't walking over a bridge full of aliens on a planet outside Alliance space, Kelsa would probably be looking forward to tearing her out of it, one stitch at a time; as it is, the soldier makes sure her standard-issue pistol and shotgun are on display, holstered at her hip and the small of her back, respectively. She's in blue-grey Alliance fatigues and boots, but the longer they spend on this planet, the more she wishes it were a hardsuit. "This was a bad idea, Shiv."

The other woman snorts, and even though Kelsa can't see, she knows that Siobhan's rolling her eyes. "You worry too much, Irish-Eyes," Siobhan says. "We're almost to the hotel and nobody's attacked us yet. Not even a batarian."

"Yet," Kelsa repeats, keeping her green eyes sharp. There were a couple of the four-eyed bastards
at the shuttleport, gabbling away in a dialect too obscure for Kelsa's translator to pick up reliably. They looked different even than on vids, with all those holes in their heads and their fuzzy jowls, but Kelsa decided before she came that she wouldn't bother anyone unless they bothered her, first. *At least you can see their fucking eyes,* Kelsa thinks to herself, as they near the building that's supposed to be their destination. *Bet volus and quarians can play a decent game of poker, behind those masks and all.* The thought is snatched away from her mind as they round a parked skytruck and nearly trip over a trio of blue-skinned women in black leather that somehow manages to hide too much and not enough at the same time. Kelsa's caught between stumbling and staring, and she opts to shoulder-check the truck rather than one of the asari.

"Watch it," the asari in the middle clips, and for just a second, Kelsa hears a challenge in the alien's voice, an echo of a turf war the soldier left behind back in Detroit. But the second passes and the three asari stalk off, too focused on their unknown goal to bother with a couple of humans.

"Didja see that?" Siobhan sighs, like she was holding her breath before. "They were gorgeous!"

The Irish woman saunters up toward the hotel's entrance and Kelsa can't do anything but follow. "They were dangerous," she says, but she knows that's not the same as arguing Siobhan's point. "Probably deadlier than anyone you've seen so far."

"I doubt that," Siobhan laughs, shooting a knowing look over her bare shoulder that fixes Kelsa's stare for a couple of heartbeats. "Now come on. This's my first Christmas away from home; I'll not let you ruin it, Irish-Eyes."

Kelsa grits her teeth and hurries up the stairs, always a half-step behind the other woman; the holiday's meaningless to her, as meaningless as the trinket around Siobhan's neck, as meaningless as a half-day out of the laundry like she spent at least two Christmases as a kid, as meaningless as a whole day to practice hand-to-hand without half the fucking barracks riding her ass for taking too long on the mat, like she spent the last one. She doesn't know why Siobhan wanted to take her to this place for two nights, when the woman's spent the last twenty-three years with songs and food and bible stories with her family, but Kelsa doesn't ask, either. Too scared of what Siobhan might say. Siobhan, who still doesn't know anything about the laundry, who only ever tried to talk to her about Jesus once, when they were both really drunk, so drunk that Kelsa can pretend that she doesn't remember, and Siobhan can pretend to believe her. Kelsa stays quiet, eyeing the large entryway warily, pinpointing cover and potential threats almost without thinking about it, all the way to the large reception desk.

The nearest asari behind the desk smiles expansively at the two of them. "Welcome to Azure," the alien says in a cheerful tone. "Nos Astra's premiere luxury resort and hotel. How can I assist you this morning?"

It's evening, Zulu time, but Zulu time doesn't count for shit on Illium. Kelsa's not even sure how long the days are on this planet, but before she can ask, Siobhan takes charge. "We have a reservation for two, under Riley," the officer-cadet pronounces, and then spells out her name to help the asari track it down.

"Ahh, right," the receptionist says, turning her smile back onto Siobhan. "We have a mid-level suite booked for forty Terran hours. Your luggage has already been placed." She strokes a few keys, and both Siobhan and Kelsa's omni-tools chirp. "There, both of you have been granted access to room 170-12, as well as to the spa, lounge, and buffet on floor 150. Enjoy your stay at Azure!"

Siobhan thanks the blue-tinted woman and leads the way to a bank of elevators. "Looks like you should've brought some nice clothes after all," she says when the doors ding open. "Toldja they wouldn't lose my bag."
"These are my nice clothes," Kelsa answers, pulling at the collar of her not-too-rumpled shirt. Her tags ruffle, caught between the thick blue of her fatigues and her lighter grey undershirt. "You'll just have to deal with me wearing them for three days." After a half-second's jolt, the elevator's as smooth and silent as if it weren't moving at all, and the two soldiers keep needling each other under their breath for the thirty seconds or so it takes to cover a hundred and seventy floors. It isn't another minute to the suite, and when they step inside, Kelsa can't pretend that she's not impressed; it's all one room, but enormous, especially compared to their bunk on Arcturus. The bed is on a raised platform by the window-wall, which looks out over Illium, giving them a view of the edge of Nos Astra and the untamed landscape that spreads out below and away from the city. Something about the purple hills makes Kelsa's chest clench tight. "Now that's gorgeous, Shiv."

"You're not wrong," Siobhan agrees, and she heads over to the countertop where her one and only suitcase has been placed with near-military precision. After a couple of seconds, the woman lets out a cry of triumph, pulling out both a smaller handbag and a tall bottle of Jameson whiskey. "I'll go fix my face. Catch." She tosses the bottle, which Kelsa snatches automatically. "Find a fridge to stick that in, will you?"

The soldier takes another glance around the room while Siobhan heads for the latrine, and Kelsa has to try two shelves before she finds a chilled cabinet; it's already stocked with fine bottles of wine and whiskey, all human, most made before the First Contact War. "Exactly how much you paying for this place, Riley?" Kelsa calls once she's found a home for the warm whiskey, and she follows the sound of Siobhan's answer to the half-opened bathroom door.

"More than I can afford," Siobhan admits. "But I told you not to worry about it. We're probably not going to have another Christmas together, so it'll be worth it, as long as you don't cock it up, Shepard." Kelsa leans against the open doorway, watching the other woman paint her face like an artist, retouching her eyelashes and lips, making her cheeks glow a pale cream, brushing the freckles off of the front of her neck. It makes Kelsa's stomach twist, and her lips turn down into a frown. Siobhan's eyes catch on her face in the mirror, and the woman hesitates. "What's wrong?"

Kelsa blinks and makes her face go blank, shoving down the odd feeling. "It's nothing," she says. "You heading down to the lounge?"

For just the blink of an eye Siobhan looks hurt, like she wants to say something, but then Kelsa sees her own training kicking in and she smirks. "We are heading down to the lounge, Serviceman Shepard," the lieutenant-cadet tells her. "And you'd better be on your best behaviour, soldier."

The cool authority in Siobhan's tone is kilometres better than it was six months ago, and Kelsa has no trouble standing straighter under the woman's stare. "Understood, ma'am," she clips.

"Good," Siobhan says, turning back to the mirror for a couple of touch-ups. "We'll move in two minutes, unless you want me to touch you up, serviceman."

"Don't push it, lieutenant," Kelsa warns her, but she steps back from the door before the older woman can say anything else. It takes Siobhan the full two minutes to come out of the bathroom, but not a single second more, and Kelsa has to admit that the woman looks nice. Better than nice, really. Nicer than Gloria-Kelsa cuts the thought off with a sniff, and lets a hungry smirk cross her lips. "You ready to drink?"

"You better arse I am, Irish-Eyes," Siobhan grunts, with a smirk of her own. "Think they'll have proper whiskey down there?"

"Only one way to find out, Shivas," Kelsa barks, and she takes the lead into the hallway this time. The elevator has a couple of guys in it, humans, civilian. Rich. One of them tries talking to
Siobhan, at least until he notices Kelsa's guns and her less-than-sunny disposition, and the few seconds left on the ride down to the lounge's floor pass in silence. The Alliance marines get off, and the rich boys don't, which suits Kelsa just fine.

The lounge is easy to find, it turns out, even for humans. *Maybe especially for us*, Kelsa wonders, since the room's half-filled with other men and women from Alliance space, and the rest are asari. Not a single krogan or turian in sight, which is probably just as well, if the history classes she's had to take have any grain of truth to them. Just like back in their room, this lounge is well-stocked with human spirits, and soon enough Kelsa and Siobhan are draining a bottle of Irish whiskey, two shots at a time. The soldiers talk about which postings they'd like, once they both become full-fledged officers; they're both looking for something in the Traverse, where they might see some action. Siobhan wants to go on to N-School, while Kelsa just wants to feel like she knows what she's doing again. They talk about other things, too; safe things, things like how shitty Kelsa dances, or how cute Siobhan thinks some of the boys in the room are. Nothing to do with Earth or God or what either of them did before joining the Alliance. Kelsa doesn't mention that she thinks Siobhan's wasting her credits; the lounge is nice, crammed with aliens and civilians and better music than any bar on Arcturus Station, but the liquor and the conversation aren't any different.

When the Jameson's over halfway empty and the dance floor's full of people moving, some of them even gracefully, a tall purple-hued asari stalks up to the soldiers' table. She has some subtle white lines painted on her face, swirling around her cheeks and underneath those hardened tentacle-looking things that sweep back from her forehead. "I noticed you haven't tried the floor," the alien purrs, her voice rising *through* the music rather than cutting over it. Her navy-toned eyes move from one human to the other, catching only for a second on the pistol still slung at Kelsa's hip. Now that Kelsa's had a couple of drinks, the soldier can see the newcomer as something other than a threat, and she's got to admit that the alien woman's dress would probably look a lot better off of her. Other than the weird tentacles, asari look an awful lot like human women, and up close, Kelsa's eyes have plenty to keep them from looking up at the alien's forehead. "Don't dance," she gruffs, taking another shot of whiskey.

"She *can't* dance," Siobhan adds, giggling, just as captivated with the beautiful stranger. "If you made her try, someone'd laugh at her, and then she'd break their nose...if they were lucky."

The asari doesn't look put-off by the threat underneath the officer-cadet's words...if anything, that makes her look more interested. "So you're a soldier, then?"

Siobhan answers again, her tongue just a little looser than Kelsa's. "We both are," she lets on. "Officers with the Alliance Navy...or we're gonna be, at any rate."

There's an edge to the blue woman's eyes, one Kelsa's seen before, back in the donut-hole. She's hungry for something. "It sounds like you're doing your species proud," the asari purrs, leaning against the back of an empty chair. "Have you ever had to kill anyone?"

"No-" Siobhan tries to say, but Kelsa cuts in with a "Yes." She doesn't know why she says it...only that her tongue's buzzing and her finger's itching and if she doesn't find somewhere else to be, soon, she's going to do something even more stupid. The soldier stands up, ignoring the surprise on Siobhan's face, but she can't ignore the asari as she takes one smooth step to block Kelsa's quick exit.

The alien's smooth finger finds the soldier's chin, pressing Kelsa's head back until their eyes meet. In the lounge's low light, the asari's eyes look almost black, at least for a second, and Kelsa's heart hitches faster in her chest. "I believe you," the stranger purrs, so low that Siobhan probably can't hear.
Kelsa has to swallow hard to get her voice to work, but she doesn't reach for one of her guns, or try to break the asari's arm. Tactics and training and instinct are all gone; even the music dims in the soldier's ear, drowned out by the sound of her own heartbeat. "Who are you?"

"You may call me Pai'a, Alliance officer-to-be," the asari says, a cobalt tongue peeking between cerulean lips. "And I am not interested in dancing."

A rustle sounds to Kelsa's left, and she glances that way, breaking the alien's intense stare to see Siobhan coming within a half-pace of the two of them. She looks concerned, and maybe just a little bit jealous, but Kelsa can't tell which one of them she might be jealous of. "What are you interested in, exactly?"

Pai'a's forefinger is still curled underneath Kelsa's chin, but the asari gives the other human a hungry smirk. "Testing the endurance of Alliance soldiers, naturally," she breathes, and then takes a step back. Kelsa's skin tingles where the asari touched her. "I'm quite thorough in evaluating new allies of the Asari Republics...if the interest is mutual, at any rate."

"It is," Kelsa gruffs, her tongue betraying her again, but she doesn't flinch back from the narrow glare Siobhan shoots her way. "Come on, Shiv," the soldier growls, snatching up the Jameson bottle to take with her. "It'll be fun."

The Irish woman looks from Kelsa to the asari, and Kelsa can see a telltale hint of red blossom underneath her neck. "Why the hell not," Siobhan laughs. "Happy Christmas."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to my wonderful beta-reader, buttercup23, as well as everyone who's reading along!
Ch. 5: Paying Her Dues

Chapter Summary

Kelsa gets her first commission as an officer of the Alliance Navy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Personnel Management Office

1415 Zulu

25 August 2175

Nexus Campus, Officer Candidate School, Arcturus Station, Arcturus

The room is cozy, warm in more ways than one. After three years of hard lines and cold corridors and military precision, and a lifetime of abandoned buildings before that, Kelsa almost feels trapped by the richness of the office, even as she sinks way back into the reclining chair. A cozy-looking woman sits across from her, with a little coffee table between them, and a fake fireplace crackling off to Kelsa's right. The woman's Alliance, but you can hardly tell, from the way she lets her hair loose and her lack of a uniform. The nameplate on her desk says she's LT. CMDR. MAUREEN TRAVERS. Everything about the office and the woman herself is built up to make someone in Kelsa's place as comfortable as possible, which just makes Kelsa suspicious.

"Lieutenant-cadet Shepard," the commander sighs, calm. "You are four days away from graduating from OCS, is that right?"

"Yes, ma'am," the soldier clips, an uneasy feeling settling in her stomach. "If you clear me for a commission."

Travers smiles, her white teeth sparkling behind too-red lips. "You're probably wondering why I've called you into my office this afternoon. Is that right?"

The repeated question makes Kelsa want to narrow her eyes, but she fights the impulse, doing her best to keep her face as smooth as new-pressed sheet metal. "You flagged my IG form for review, Commander," she guesses. She hopes that's all it is, even if that's bad enough. "Something in it told the brass that I should see a counsellor, I guess."

"Very perceptive of you, Shepard," Travers tells her. "First, you should know that you're considered an exemplary student; your file is replete with commendations from your instructors, and you've never performed beneath the ninety-fifth percentile on any practical or theoretical examination in the two years you've been here. The Alliance needs officers of your calibre, and I believe you have the potential to be a real asset to humanity, and to galactic peace." Kelsa feels a very strong but coming on, and the commander doesn't disappoint her. "But," Travers sighs, "that will only come to pass if you truly feel comfortable here, Shepard. If you feel you've found a home and family with the Earth Systems Alliance."

Three heartbeats pass before Kelsa understands that the older woman is waiting for a response. "I
do feel that way, ma'am," the soldier says, her brows knitting together despite her best efforts. "I even got an Alliance tattoo on my shoulder blade, just after Lieutenant Riley got her commission."

A year ago, now. Kelsa also got a stencil of Shiv's lips on the inside of her right thigh, to remember the woman by, but she doesn't tell the counsellor about that. "The Alliance is the closest thing to a family I've ever had, Commander."

Travers nods. "That's right; you're an orphan, aren't you?" She shakes her head, smiling sympathetically. "It can be so hard, growing up without a family to give you structure. Even foster families can leave you feeling estranged and alone." The woman sits forward in her chair, fixing Kelsa with a weighty look. "As you were filling out your intention to graduate form, Shepard, you selected that you would prefer to be called sir rather than ma'am by subordinates. Is that right?"

This line of questions actually helps Kelsa relax; she thought for a second she'd have to make up some bullshit about a foster family, or remember some lie or another she might've told to some officer. "Yes, ma'am, I did." She sits up a little straighter in the soft chair. "Is that a problem?"

"Not in and of itself, no," the counsellor says. "The Alliance recognises a spectrum of gender identities, even if military protocol requires a binary classification." After two years of school, Kelsa should be able to understand all those words, but for some reason she can't quite get a handle on where Travers is going. "You're here because we want to help you be the very best soldier you can, and that requires you being comfortable with who you are. We want to help you do that, Shepard."

"I am comfortable, Commander," Kelsa says. As comfortable as I ever was in Detroit, she doesn't. "I...don't think I get what you're getting at, ma'am."

Travers takes a breath, picking her words carefully. "Have you ever thought of yourself as anything other than a woman, Shepard?" She finally asks. "Have you found yourself identifying as a man, or as something else entirely?"

Kelsa blinks once, then twice. Then she laughs, despite herself. "No, ma'am," she manages, shaking her head to underline it. "Never had any doubt about that." Raff and some other boys back in the Garden did, but most of them are dead. She made some of them that way.

The officer doesn't look too convinced. "Gender dysphoria is a medical issue," she says, still calm. "Nothing to be ashamed of, Shepard. If you meet the clinical criteria, there are many treatment options we can pursue together, from hormone replacement to specialised gene therapies that can be quite effective."

The soldier doesn't interrupt her superior officer, even though she's sorely tempted. "You think I think I'm a man, just 'cause I wanna be called sir by people underneath me, ma'am?" As she says it, Kelsa sees why it's not as stupid as she thought it was a second ago, but she lets the question hang, regardless.

"It is a possible indication," Travers tells her. "The Alliance has strict policies on issues that affect good order and discipline; ensuring that our officers are medically and psychologically fit is a major focus of those policies. If any of our personnel require assistance, the Alliance makes resources available to them." The counsellor's head shakes again. "There is no judgment, Shepard, and there need be no shame, either. If you feel misidentified as a woman, I'm here to talk with you about that."

"I know what I am," Kelsa breathes, only adding "Commander" after a half-second's pause. I'm a killer. "I don't shave my legs or paint my face, but that don't mean I'm not a woman. I got less than no interest in changing that, ma'am."
The lieutenant commander settles back in her seat, looking thoughtful. "I cannot gainsay any of that," she lets on. "But it gives rise to the natural question of why you are willing to call a female officer ma'am, but you're less than willing to accept that address, yourself. You must know that such a decision may cause friction in your command structure."

Kelsa hitches a shoulder in a half-shrug. "I...haven't really thought about it," she admits, and that's almost true. Her pencil hung over the ma'am on the form for three full seconds before she circled sir. "I guess it's just that where I come from, ma'am is what you say to somebody's mamma," the soldier says. "It shows a kind of respect, but that ain't the kind of respect I need to have, if I'm gonna be responsible for a team and a mission."

Travers nods, calm and reasonable as always. "Yet you understand that such is not the case in the Alliance military," she points out. "There's only one kind of respect a subordinate is supposed to show a superior, regardless of their gender." The commander trails off for a second, her smile turning into a smirk. "I can see by the look on your face that you disagree, Shepard."

"Not at all, ma'am," Kelsa tells the officer. "I just know that there's a difference between supposed to be and is. And I've spent too many years running faster and hitting harder than the boys around me not to see that lots of them salute male staff lieutenants a little more sharply than they'd salute you, Commander."

It takes another second for the older woman to answer, and in that pause, Kelsa can see that the commander won't argue the point. "If that is true, do you truly believe that forcing men and women under your command to address you with a masculine pronoun will change their opinions?"

"It ain't my job to change the galaxy, Commander," Kelsa says. "No disrespect."

"And what is your job, in your estimation?" Travers' tone is just a little bit sharper, now.

Kelsa swallows the first answer that crosses her mind, that she's got to be a better killer than anyone she might meet on the battlefield, because she knows that's too honest for the brass. "I have to execute missions with a team, take orders and give them to make sure the job gets done."

The commander nods, the sudden edge in her face softening, but it doesn't quite go away. "You believe that demanding a man's respect will help you do that," she says, almost to herself. "Have you considered that, instead, it might engender resentment, or even the kind of skuttlebutt that reduces unit cohesion?"

The soldier can't say she's thought of that, which is stupid, since she's spent the last two years thinking about becoming an officer almost every day. Respect is everything in the Alliance Navy; what can start as a snicker in a cantina can wind up ending someone's career, or worse. "I don't know, ma'am," she says. "If it's this big of an issue, I guess I can drop it." She doesn't really like it, but she can't say why. "It's not worth discharging me over, Commander."

"I urge you to consider the matter more deeply," Travers says. "You aren't just serving yourself, or your species in the abstract, but the men and women who're going to be putting their lives into your hands. When they look at you, they will see a woman, unless you begin presenting yourself otherwise. It is up to you to earn their respect and their trust; part of that means that you have to trust them, to mean it when they salute you, to listen when you give them orders."

"Yes, ma'am," Kelsa says, because she can't say anything else to that. "I should've thought better of it."

The commander pushes herself out of her chair. "We'll speak again in a few days, when you've had
"Aye, aye, Commander," the soldier sounds off, cutting the officer a salute. Once she hears that she's dismissed, Kelsa turns heel and leaves the office, still unsure just how she feels about the conversation.

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**Ambrosia Plaza**

**0130 Zulu**

**7 March 2176**

*Illyria (ashore), Elysium, Vetus*

The call to general quarters came half an hour ago, out of the black. Kelsa's team's been on the night shift, so they're awake and on the ground, while the Tokyo lends fire support to the *Agincourt* to cut off enemy retreat and reinforcement. The fight was half over before the Alliance vessels arrived, and now that they're ruling the skies, there's no question about how all of this is going to turn out. Not that the pirates are just going to give up, even though they're being broken, and that's just fine with Kelsa.

Staff Lieutenant Martinez leads their five-person shore party, one of two on the Tokyo. Just before Captain Anderson sent them ashore, he told Martinez not to let a single pirate get past them; kill or capture is the order of the day. Kelsa already bagged three, two batarians and a turian, but the square looks deserted. It's 1:30 in the morning back on Arcturus, and by coincidence the city's in the middle of the night, too, which makes things even more interesting.

"Shepard," Martinez barks, pointing off to the right. "Take Masterson and scout out that building. Rendez-vous in the middle of the plaza when you've secured any survivors."

"Aye, aye, sir," Kelsa clips, hiking up her shotgun. "Come on, Corporal." She's glad, for just a second, that pirates sometimes use chemical ordnance, since she can hide her grimace behind her breather helmet when he shoots back an *aye, aye, ma'am*. The building's half-collapsed and still smoking, probably from a bomb, and the short-range radio lets Kelsa hear every hitch in Corporal Masterson's breathing. She doesn't think any less of him for being scared; this is his first fight, and any fight can be your last. "We'll start at the bottom, sweep up as high as we can," the lieutenant tells him. "Stick to cover, keep those biotics ready, and you'll do fine, Masterson."

"Will-do, ma'am," Masterson says, and he sticks close behind her as she finds a concrete stairwell that leads them down into the basement.

A scrambling noise from around a nearby corner has Kelsa shouldering the wall and double-checking the incendiary ammo on her shotgun. She gives Masterson a hand signal to concentrate his biotics, and then she whistles loud enough for anyone around the corner to hear. "This is 2nd Lieutenant Shepard, Alliance Navy," she calls out, loud enough to echo. "Any hostiles are advised to lay down their weapons and surrender peacefully. If you're friendlies, don't make any sudden moves."

"We're friendly!" A voice hisses, in Galactic. "Please don't shoot us!"

Masterson slumps, like he's relieved, but Kelsa signals for him to keep himself ready. There's something wrong about that voice. "Alright," she says, buying herself some time to think. "We're going to come out and help you." There's a convenient piece of rubble close by, and Kelsa kicks it across the gap to smack into the far wall.
Sure enough, the rock gets pulverised in a hail of small-arms fire, accompanied by a slew of alien curses; Kelsa's translator can only pick up about half of them. "I knew it," she growls, loud enough for them to hear. "You motherfuckers really shoulda surrendered! Any humans in there better duck!" She tells Masterson to cover her before she dives into the clearing; her heart's as steady as a watch as she rolls and takes in the situation. Limited cover, three batarian hostiles behind a barricade; two with pistols, the other with a submachine gun. Pinned against a wall with a closed door between them.

Shots ping off Kelsa's shields, but she's on them in less than a second, vaulting over the barrier. The butt of her shotgun smashes into one of the aliens' faces, hard enough to break the ridges between his upper and lower eyes. Number two takes a shotgun shell to the face, while SMG turns and pounds on the closed door, begging to be let in. Kelsa trains her shotgun on him. "Gonna join the party, Masterson?" She calls out. "Don't think this one's going to surrender."

"No, no!" The batarian cries, throwing his gun away. "I surr-"

"Too late," Kelsa growls, over the sound of batarian blood sizzling in the crater that her incendiary round made in the side of his head. Behind her she hears Masterson heave, but she's not interested in coddling the boy; instead, the soldier takes her own turn to pound on the door. "Anyone in there'd better stand back," she says. "And anyone with guns had better put them down. You've got two seconds."

A second and a half later, she shoots through the door handle and kicks the slab of metal inward, raising her gun at the first person she sees...who happens to be a human woman that a batarian is treating as a shield. The girl's probably older than Kelsa, but she's whimpering like a child, sniffling. Two more batarians and two turians round out the room, and all four men have their own guns pointed right at Kelsa. "You will let us pass," the hostage-taker warbles. "Or she will die, along with you."

"Shit. Kelsa keeps her shotgun on the talking batarian's head, which is half-hidden behind the crying woman's head. If it wasn't for Masterson, she wouldn't even hesitate; without her, the girl's dead anyway, if she's lucky. But Kelsa's already killed an enemy mid-surrender, and she doesn't want to have to kill Masterson to keep from getting court martialed. "Here's my one and only offer," she says, clenching her teeth tight. "You will throw down your weapons and let the girl go, and you'll get to spend the rest of your sorry days rotting in an Alliance brig."

"That doesn't sound very appealing, 2nd Lieutenant Shepard," the batarian points out. "I think I prefer my option better."

"Ma'am?" Masterson asks, behind her to the left. The batarian tilts the barrel of his pistol down, so it's flush against the woman's temple, and she sobs wordlessly.

"Shit," Kelsa thinks again. "Alright," she says, her heart starting to tick faster now. The plan she hits on is dangerous, might get her killed or kicked out of the Alliance on her first real mission, but she'll be damned if she lets five pirates walk. "Alright," Kelsa says again, lowering her shotgun slowly, her eyes never moving from the batarian's two right eyes.

Right when the shotgun's angled toward the woman's shin, Kelsa pulls the trigger and lunges forward. To her great surprise, static crackles in the air behind her from one of Masterson's biotic attacks. A heartbeat later, Kelsa elbows the hostage down and plants another round at the base of the batarian's throat, using the gun's recoil to spin and drop one of the turians. Masterson's taking out the other turian with his pistol.

One more shotgun blast destroys a batarian, but overheats the weapon, and Kelsa's shields drop just
before she can reach the last enemy. He gets off a couple shots into her abdomen, mostly soaked up by her heavy armour, but his skull doesn't hold up so well to the butt of Kelsa's shotgun. The room's too quiet after the bastard dies; Kelsa looks over her shoulder and sees the hostage lying motionless on the floor, her right shin a mangled mess. "Masterson, tourniquet. Now."

"Aye, aye, ma'am," the corporal manages, moving a lot steadier than Kelsa managed to after her first kill.

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*Brig, SSV Tokyo*

*1000 Zulu*

*7 March 2176*

*Illyria (docked), Elysium, Vetus*

Martinez hasn't stopped glaring at Kelsa since he found out that he'd have to babysit her during the victory celebrations. He hasn't said anything, and he hasn't stepped into her cell, but that's only because he knows that as big as he is, she could have him face-down on the floor inside ten seconds. "You really fucked up," he says, after three hours of nothing but sulk. "You know that, right?"

"Yes, sir," Kelsa says, because that's the only thing she can say; she doesn't say she's sorry, because she isn't.

"Hope you like life on the other side of plexiglas," Martinez growls. "When JAG's through with you, you might be a civilian again in thirty years, Shepard."

Another voice rumbles from the shadows of the brig. "Let's not be too hasty, now, Lieutenant." It's deep and calm, not a single drooping syllable, even though the speaker's been awake longer than either Kelsa or Martinez.

The staff lieutenant goes as straight as rebar and nearly bruises his forehead with the force of his salute. "Captain Anderson, sir," he grunts. "How can we help you?"

Kelsa can't do shit from behind her glass, but she snaps-to, too. She keeps her mouth shut, though. "They've given her the Star of Terra," the captain says, to either of them. Maybe to both.

Martinez nods. "She deserved it." He shoots Kelsa a sour look.

The prisoner doesn't understand; she hasn't had any news for over six hours, since she was arrested for shooting the hostage. That can't be who they're talking about, though; losing a leg and passing out don't get you fast-tracked for the Alliance's highest honour.

"Now tell me," Anderson says, "what happened to land one of my people in the brig?"

Kelsa bites down on her tongue, and Martinez is only too happy to talk for her. "Shepard broke at least four conventions of the ACMJ, sir; Corporal Masterson swears that she killed a soldier in the process of surrender, and she gravely injured a civilian."

Anderson's look is more measured, but when he talks, it's to Martinez again. "As I understand it, the lieutenant took out the hostiles, while you let half a dozen pirates escape." He sounds curious, almost like he's talking about a sports team Martinez's son likes.
The staff lieutenant doesn't answer all at once. "...I secured the release of two hostages, and I kept casualties to a minimum, sir."

"Tell me, Martinez," the captain goes on, tapping his chin. "How many more hostages will those six batarians take, before we catch them?" He shakes his head. "Don't answer that; why don't you take a little walk? Get some sun on your shoulders?"

Martinez swallows hard. "Is that an order, Captain?"

Anderson's head tilts forward. "Does it have to be, son?"

"No, sir," the staff lieutenant clips, saluting again. "Understood, sir." Martinez stays in the brig for just as long as it takes him to double-time it to the door, and then he's gone.

Captain Anderson taps on the cell's control panel, and the plexiglass door splits down the middle, parting wide enough for him to step through. "Mind if I sit down, lieutenant? There's been a lot of standing around this morning."

Kelsa shrugs, gesturing for the captain to take the bunk; she stays on her feet, standing at rest. "Who got the button, sir?"

Anderson's smile twirks the right side of his face. "A corporal with way more guts than sense named Jane Howard; she held off four waves of pirates from a dug-in position in the southeast if the capital, here, before they overran her. Let nigh-on a thousand civilians evacuate before she died." That half-smile turns into a frown and the man shakes his head, letting the silence drag on for almost a minute. "Is that what you were after, Shepard? With that little stunt?"

The lieutenant blinks and shakes her head. "No, sir. Was just trying to keep the pirates from slipping the net, like you told us."

The captain nods. "And what about Corporal Masterson?" He asks, fixing her with a solid stare. "Is his report accurate?"

"It is, sir," Kelsa tells him.

Anderson doesn't look happy, but he doesn't really look surprised. "You killed an enemy on the verge of surrender?"

"Didn't give him the chance, sir," the lieutenant admits. "He was trying to rejoin the other pirates, with the hostage. I would've killed him before too long." She won't lie, not to this man, not for doing her duty. "Are you going to court martial me, sir?"

"I don't think so," Anderson tells her, and he sounds like he hasn't decided not to court martial her, either. "Tell me what you would've done if Masterson hadn't've been watching you?"

Kelsa's eyes slide from the ridge on Anderson's forehead to a blemish on the wall, and her lips move before she can consider her words. "I wouldn't've shot that woman in the leg, sir, if that's what you're asking."

Anderson grunts, almost a growl. "Tell me why, child."

"Because the pirates would've done worse to her or someone like her if I hadn't stopped them," Kelsa says. "And because taking hostages only works if you think your enemy can't stomach losing someone. I don't have that problem, sir." Not since she'd had to lose her best friend. Not since she'd had to take him.
"I'll have to remember that the next time I need a hostage negotiator," the captain breathes, turning his sigh into a chuckle. "Goddamned pirates...just terrorists who try to make a little more money, seems like. Look at me, child." When Kelsa's forest-green eyes refocus on Anderson's forehead, he keeps going. "The Terminus Systems are getting out of control, and the barians have their hands all over this mess; if they didn't start it, they wanted to see it finished. We're going to have to face some difficult choices in the next couple of years, and we can't go off throwing everyone into the brig left and right just for pushing the envelope."

Kelsa's throat goes dry; she can't really believe her ears. "What are you saying, sir?"

"I'm saying that Penelope Greene's leg will grow back, and the Alliance needs soldiers like you, Shepard. We cannot let this raid go unanswered; if we do, the next raid might hit Terra Nova, or Horizon...or the barians might even be damned fools enough to try hitting Earth." Captain Anderson stands up. "Stand at attention, soldier." Kelsa does so, her heart thumping nearly as fast as it did in that basement. "Effective immediately, you're promoted to 1st Lieutenant...and now, as a captain's mast, you're busted back down to 2nd Lieutenant, soldier."

The soldier's lips turn down into a frown. "So...you're not going to court martial me, sir?"

Anderson shakes his head. "Not this time, Shepard," he says. "Just make sure you don't fire on a civilian again. And get some rest; when you get out of the brig, you're being reassigned to the London. It's an old ship, but I get the feeling you'll have plenty of opportunity for growth there." The man steps past her, and she understands that she isn't being released just yet.

Even so, as the plexiglass closes, Kelsa fights back a smile. "Thank you, Captain," she says. "I won't let you down."

"You'd better not, Shepard," Anderson tells her. Then he leaves her alone to think about everything he said and didn't say, and she hopes there's room enough for her on the London.

Chapter End Notes

THanks so much to buttercup23 for her support and suggestions!
Ch. 6: Tears Of Blood

Chapter Summary

When the ramshackle mob of pirates attacked Elysium, they thought the Alliance was little more than a paper tiger, able to be laughed off. Now that they've been chased back to their base of operations, some two years later, they will learn the price of that folly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Captain's Office, SSV London

17:30 Zulu

10 July 2178

Olokun (orbit), Osun

The ship dropped out of FTL a few hours ago, well back from the planet, so they could come in as cold as possible. There hasn't been a call to general quarters, so the plan must've worked, for whatever purpose they came to the Hourglass Nebula for. Even so, Major Kyle looks antsy, more so than usual; he's the ship's XO, responsible for the affairs of the ship's crew, especially the shore party leaders. The London has four three-man fire teams for maximum flexibility, and Kelsa's had command of one of them since she earned a real promotion to 1st Lieutenant back in January. That's when the first of the Theshaca Raids happened, the first Alliance strike against the pirates that tried to wipe out Elysium. If she had to bet, Kelsa would say that's what they're here in the ass-end of the Terminus for, another dance with slavers, the kind of dance Kelsa's good at. When Kyle doesn't return her salute or speak after a handful of seconds, Kelsa clears her throat. "You wanted to see me, sir?"

The major's standing behind the Captain Ito's desk, looking down at a datapad, and he doesn't look up for another couple heartbeats. "This is it, Shepard," he says at last, his face setting just before he finally turns his eyes on Kelsa. "The last FTL vector that we could trace out of Theshaca leads to a point a few light years out of this system. Probe recon has a hot zone on one of the planet's moons, hotter than any cell we've hit. Arcturus thinks this is the syndicate's main hub."

Being proved right puts a smirk on Kelsa's face, even if she was only betting with herself. "And we get first crack at it, sir," she says, trying to keep the hunger out of her voice. Then a splinter of doubt itches at her thoughts. "Shouldn't Commander Nwoso be here?" The lieutenant commander's the ranking officer of the ground teams, reports directly to the major. "I can get him for you, sir."

"There will be no need," Kyle tells her, and she can tell that he doesn't like what he's about to say. "Nwoso's not in charge of the shore parties for this mission, Shepard. You are."

Kelsa isn't sure she heard him right. "Shore parties, sir?"
The major nods, once. "It sounds like your letters got to somebody back at the station, Lieutenant. It's up to you to...handle the situation."

Her throat feels like a desert. "Major, I didn't mean to-

"I know you didn't ask for it, Shepard," Kyle snorts. "I proofed your communiqués before you sent them off, remember?" He shakes his head and slides the datapad across the desk, toward the junior officer. "Admiral Chelsea read your reports, and he wants us to strike the decisive blow against these rabble right here. Are you up for it, Lieutenant?"

Kelsa scans the datapad as Kyle talks to her, caught somewhere between impressed and relieved that her concerns were actually listened to. As good as her word to Anderson, Kelsa hasn't hurt a single civilian in past raids, but she's had to let too many pirates slip the noose, each time under orders from Nwoso or Kyle himself to secure slaves and hostages first and pursue the slavers second. Now, the brass thinks that they found the pirates' base of operations. Surprise is supposed to be the order of the day...surprise, and victory. No more Mindoirs, no more Elysiums. Not after Torfan. "Yes, I am, sir," Kelsa answers the XO. "Is there any intel on the base's layout? Does the London have the firepower to contain any attempt to withdraw?"

The major doesn't answer right away; instead he measures her, almost like he hasn't properly seen the soldier before. "A few geoprobes gave us enough to know there are two ancillary entrances to the catacombs, and one large cave that serves as a hangar bay." Kyle's omni-tool lights up, and a holo on the desk projects a sphere between them. The major touches a couple points on the orange ball that turn yellow, and the last one turns red. "That'll be where the lion's share of their ships are, and I assure you that we have sufficient ordnance to collapse each entrance, along with decimating the pirate fleet before it even gets off the moon."

The lieutenant leans toward the holo of Torfan, studying the details. "There could be other ways in and out, emergency shuttles…” But already a plan's forming behind her eyes.

Kyle grimaces. "In my opinion, a ground assault is foolish; there are hundreds of pirates, and only twelve of you. I've argued with the admiral, but he refuses to send reinforcements for a proper assault. Instead, he's asking Ito to throw all of your lives away."

"Waiting on backup's too risky," Kelsa breathes, all her focus eaten up by mapping out her assault. "If they know we're coming, they go set up shop somewhere else, and they'll be back in a year or two, or five. Gotta make them think they'll win until it's too late…” Her finger traces from one yellow circle to another. "It looks like these two doors lead to a common room, probably deep under the base. Nwoso'll take Daniels, Constanza, Pelopoulos, Johnson, and Sheldon down the left path. I'll take everyone else to the right. We'll demo the caves on the way. Blinking, the lieutenant looks through the holo to Kyle. "Don't blow the hangar until the first shuttles try to take off. Then it should be safe to call for reinforcements to dig us out, sir."

Her borderline-insubordination doesn't look like it sits well with the XO, but an admiral's given an order, and it's Kelsa's operation. "And if we excavate only to find a dozen Alliance corpses and the pirates find another way out?"

"Then have Arcturus send somebody better next time, Major," Kelsa tells him. "But I know I can do it, sir. Just give me fifteen to get the others ready."

The holo flickers off and Kyle straightens up, finally giving Kelsa her salute. "You have ten, Shepard," he says. "Make them count."

Kelsa gives a parting salute with an Aye, aye, sir, and heads to the mess to gather the shore party.
Kelsa kicks one of the batarians on the floor, and he doesn't kick her back, so she holsters her shotgun and takes off her helmet. The blast that brought down the outside cave shook the airlock, but didn't breach it, and they're gonna be in these tunnels for a long time; no point in wasting their suits' life support. She's got five other people with her in the bunker, no casualties. No prisoners. If she prayed, Kelsa'd pray that Nwoso's team hasn't run into any worse trouble in taking their own airlock. "Reedquist," the soldier barks, to the only other officer on her team.

"Ma'am?" 2nd Lieutenant Sarah Reedquist clips, once she's collapsed her own helmet and readied her assault rifle again.

Kelsa checks over her shotgun as she talks. "Take Barnes and Amato to scout the hallway. They've gotta know we're coming. Go stir up some trouble and bring it back to us." Reflex has her return the junior officer's salute.

Without having to be told, Corporal O'Mara and Service Chief Schreier take up defensive positions around the bunker's back entrance. Both are good men, steady, older than Kelsa but ready to follow her orders. The three of them were a team before Captain Ito made Kelsa the pointman for the whole shore party, and they've already followed her into hell over half of the Terminus Systems. They hadn't even winced when she told them the plan. Ain't nobody else gonna steal our action this time, Shepard. We do it our way. Hell, Schreier even played an old Sinatra song into all of their HUDs in the push down to the airlock, about a click underground.

Kelsa nods to her men and takes her position just outside of the bunker, using a boulder and a big box as cover. She doesn't have to wait long; about thirty seconds later, a symphony of real music starts up farther down the tunnel, a bolero of bullets and battlecries. Barnes and Amato back into Kelsa's view, laying on suppressive fire until Reedquist comes running. Grenade pops and raspy screams cut through the gunfire, and the scout team withdraws, pulling back to the relative safety of the fortified airlock. Kelsa waves them on. "Whadda ya got, Reedquist?"

"Took out about eight of 'em, maybe a dozen more inbound, ma'am," the lieutenant rasps. "Looks like that big room you talked about's maybe a couple hundred metres, but it ain't gonna be easy to get to."

O'Mara snorts. "Nothin' ever is, LT," the Australian lets on.

"Damned right," Kelsa grunts. "Those four-eyes better get their asses moving. Nwoso's prob'ly waitin' for us already." The batarians oblige a second later, thirteen undisciplined thieves funnelling themselves right into a hard point. Kelsa takes out three of them with two shotgun blasts before she falls back into the bunker herself, and her team cuts down the rest. Schreier's sniper rifle drops a couple batarians who tried to run. "Come on," Kelsa tells her people. "Let's get to the rendezvous."

A chorus of five Aye, aye, ma'ams chases Kelsa into the corpse-covered hallway. She jumps when one of the bodies groans, fixing her shotgun onto the batarian, the only one still alive...and he doesn't look like that'll be true for too much longer. Even so, he manages to force out a few
phlegmy words. "Did...Kraxnos send you people?"

"No," Kelsa tells him, checking her shotgun. The whole team got fresh ammo blocks in all of their firearms, not to mention two spare blocks per soldier, but she doesn't feel like wasting ammo on a dead body. "We're Alliance marines. Corporal Jane Howard sends her regards." Before he can die on his own, Kelsa brings her boot down hard, right on his face, and then she keeps walking. Amato and Reedquist both mumble uneasily, but neither of them speak up; Corporal Howard saved a lot of people on Elysium, but she couldn't save everyone on the planet, and every Alliance Marine's heard stories about what the pirates did to civilians before the Alliance flotilla arrived. O'Mara and Schreier won't breathe a word against their lieutenant while they're on a mission, loyal to a fault.

The cave gets wider and a little taller, but the floor and walls are smooth, free of anything that might be used as cover, all the way up to a set of horizontal bay doors. Bay doors that are sliding open a centimetre at a time. Instinct takes hold of the soldier. "Scatter and zigzag," she yells. "There's a side door on the right. We can make it!"

Kelsa's instincts haven't failed her yet, and they don't start now, as much as she might wish she was wrong; there's a personnel carrier behind the big doors, a six-wheeled turian model. One big gun and two rapid-fire APWs. The marines open fire even as they run and dodge, but there's nothing to hide behind, and not even Kelsa can dance fast enough to keep the machine gun rounds from grazing her shields. The main gun doesn't fire for a long stretch of seconds, tracking closer and closer to Kelsa, and no matter how fast she runs, the soldier can't close the distance to the far wall in time.

Schreier, that quick bastard, catches up to Kelsa with about thirty metres to go. She opens her mouth to yell, to tell him to get back, but he shoves her sideways, hard, just a half-second before the APC's cannon belches out a shell. A half-second later, the only thing left for Kelsa to yell at is part of a leg and an arm.

And then Kelsa feels cold, in spite of the hard fight down here, in spite of the shotgun that's near to melting in her hands because Amato shorted out the heatsink routines that limit the number of rounds per minute any standard Alliance weapon should be able to fire. She feels the bone-cutting cold of a bad Michigan winter in patched-up clothes, the dead cold that she hasn't been able to shake since she dropped Jay.

Kelsa runs straight for the APC, not bothering to dodge, not even trying to zigzag. The cannon pops off another shot, but she rolls under it just in time and then jumps up, clearing the last two metres to the vehicle. Somehow she manages to land on the front with one lucky machine gun slug in her thigh, even though her shields dropped just after Schreier caught the shell. The pain doesn't even register, though, and dozens of hours of simulations kick in; the soldier pries up the tank's forehatch and drops a grenade into the front chassis. In another handful of seconds she repeats the exercise on the rear section of the vehicle, and the guns fall silent. She doesn't have time to stop, to breathe, to think. Movement means life, and the big chamber's crawling with pirates, maybe a hundred. Maybe more. The soldier dives into some cover from off the top of the smoking tank, rolling behind a stack of barrels that won't stop too many bullets. But the barrier holds long enough for her shields to come up and her suit to give her leg some medi-gel.

A skirmish starts up from nearby, just a little bit beyond the barrels. "Must be Nwoso's team," Kelsa yells, to anyone in range. "Let's get ready to join up!" She counts out three more breaths before she jumps out from cover. Unlike the end of the cave, this chamber's a maze of trucks and boxes, so it doesn't take Kelsa long to find somewhere more secure to fire back at the enemy from.

O'Mara's the first one to find the 1st Lieutenant. "Amato's carked it," he tells her, in between
barrages from his pistol. "Took that second shell you dodged. Great work on the tank, LT." The man's words are hollow and his eyes look glazed. Kelsa won't say anything about it in the middle of a firefight, but she knows that Operations Chief Castela Amato meant just about as much to O'Mara as Schreier did.

"Hold it together, Kevin," she breathes, ditching her half-melted shotgun and taking up her own pistol. It's maybe the third time she's used the man's first name since they met two years ago. "Stay with me, stay smart. We'll get these fuckers."

The corporal swallows and nods, but anything he's about to say gets sidelined when the whole room starts shaking. Chips of rock rain down from the ceiling and a couple boxes fall around them. "Guess the Tokyo's joining the party," O'Mara yells.

Kelsa nods. "No way out but up," she tells him. "Let's go!"

They push off together and meet up with Reedquist and Barnes in the next row over. Reedquist's limping, even with medi-gel, but her assault rifle's steady. Halfway into the big storehouse, the team's joined by three more marines: Staff Lieutenant Maisie Sheldon, Corporal Hector Pelopoulos, and Serviceman Victor Constanza. Nwoso, Johnson, and Daniels are dead, taken out by some heavy mortar fire. The seven living soldiers form into a single squad with Kelsa on point, even though Sheldon's technically the ranking officer, just as Commander Nwoso was before her. The marines fight across the storage bay; Kelsa picks up a shotgun from a dead batarian along the way, and by the time they've cleared out the room from the outside in, she's used it to kill twenty-seven batarians, six krogan, and two turians.

In the base's middle levels, the soldiers have to go room by room, and Kelsa splits them into two-man fire teams to cover more ground. The tactic's risky, especially for Kelsa herself, since she's the odd one out. But they stay in radio contact and rendezvous often. That way they clear two more floors. Kelsa thinks it's strange that they don't run into any slaves, but nobody has any ideas, and the pirates aren't interested in talking...not that the marines are keen to listen, in any case.

After sixteen more hours of combat, Barnes walks into a grenade launcher, and Constanza gets taken out near the collapsed hangar bay a couple of hours later. Everyone else is hurt, woozing on their feet, but they can't stop. The Alliance isn't going to try to dig them out for at least another day, and it's hard to say how many pirates are left. Kelsa regroups the marines into a single squad and stakes out a defensible position to catch a few minutes' rest.

Bootsteps echo in a near corridor, but before anyone can get a shot off, a booming voice calls out from the shadows. "We would speak with the humans," the stranger says. He sounds krogan to Kelsa's unpracticed ears. "We've come to parlay, unarmed, in good faith."

Reedquist and Sheldon both give Kelsa skeptical looks and she mumbles for them to keep their weapons raised. "Never heard of good faith out of a pirate," she tells the shadows. "Come and talk. If I like what I hear, I might even let you leave again."

The speaker takes a step forward; he's a batarian, but a big one, and he looks unarmed. Nobody else comes out of the shadows. All four of the pirate's eyes blink, and then blink again. "Where are the rest of you?" He growls, suddenly paranoid. "My men have reported dozens coming up from the cellars. I see only five."

Kelsa kicks off from behind her rock, keeping her stolen shotgun ready. "I've got infiltration teams scouting," she lies. "Whatever you're offering, my answer's no."

The batarian laughs. "That's no way to bargain," he tells her, and takes another look at the wounded
band of soldiers bleeding in front of him. "We are trapped by cave-ins, with no equipment to dig ourselves out. The surface communication towers have been compromised, and we have no QECs. But I still have a hundred brothers for every human I see. On my word, you would not survive the hour."

"Get on with it, then," Kelsa barks, her eye twitching. "Either say what you came to say, or try and kill us. Hasn't worked out so well for you yet."

"Fine," he grunts. "I have much property that I am willing to part with, in order to secure passage for me and my brothers out of this system, where your kind will not follow us."

The soldier's lip curls. "By property you mean slaves," she says, and the batarian doesn't argue. "I've killed two hundred and fifty-seven batarians in the last twenty-four hours," Kelsa tells him. "Seen half the fuckers before now, on other planets and moons. Times where I had to let them go and couldn't follow them, because my superiors wanted to save their hostages."

The batarian nods. "Wise people, these superiors of yours," he says. "Everyone lives, everyone's happy."

"I wasn't finished," Kelsa hisses, gripping her gun tighter, though she's not pointing it at him just yet. "But my superiors got tired of chasing you and your brothers from one rabbit hole to another." She glances up toward the ceiling. "They put me in charge of this operation to make sure that doesn't happen again...and there ain't any way for them to tell me different, now. So I've got an offer for you."

The man's face scrunches up, in the batarian gesture of a frown. "I'm listening, human."

"Surrender," Kelsa tells him. "Give up your weapons and hostages, and when the Alliance comes to dig us out tomorrow, you can all spend the rest of your days in an Alliance brig." She knows it's just what she told the batarians on Elysium, that it's not an easy mouthful for anyone to swallow, but it's all she's got.

"I don't know who you think you are, human, but you address Master Eg'harn Blyest," the batarian says, and Kelsa knows he'll give her the same answer she got back on Elysium, two years before. "I have been more than patient with you. I count twenty-three humans among my property, who breathe only at my pleasure. I will see each of their throats slit before I surrender to you."

The soldier spits and tastes crimson on her tongue. "I'm Lieutenant Shepard, Alliance Navy," she says, levelling her shotgun at the pirate. "And here's my answer."

_Coburn Memorial Hospital_

_0900 Zulu_

_5 August 2178_

_Arcturus Station, Arcturus_

She opened her eyes two days ago and nearly killed herself trying to pull the tubes out of her throat and arms. The last thing she remembers before then is hobbling out onto the surface of Torfan in between O'Mara and Sheldon. She collapsed almost as soon as she saw the silhouette of the _London_ hanging overhead.

Schreier, Reedquist, Amato, Barnes, Nwoso, Johnson, Daniels, Constanza, and Pelopoulos. Forty
hostages, over half of them human. Nine hundred and seventy-eight pirates.

They're all dead.

But Kelsa's alive, and so's O'Mara and Sheldon. From what the nurses say, they're just as bad off as Kelsa, or worse. She doesn't even know if they're awake, not really.

Captain Ito came by to talk to Kelsa after she opened her eyes, told her how proud he was of her, but there was a shadow in his face. She got the feeling that he almost would've liked it better if everyone had died down there, the whole team, so they could be heroes. He said they all were anyway, but Kelsa knows she isn't one. She just did what she had to. Major Kyle came around not long after, but that visit didn't go so well, and a burly pair of nurses had to push him out of the room by the end.

No one's been by since, so when a soft knock sounds on the door, Kelsa isn't expecting anyone but another nurse, or maybe the doctor. But the man who steps through the door doesn't look familiar; he's old, at least sixty, with bristly white hair parted along one side. And then she recognises the face she hasn't seen but once, six years ago, in the Alliance recruiting office in Detroit. The heart monitor beeps a few ticks faster for a couple of seconds. "Major Kincaide," she rasps.

"Shepard," the man says, and his voice cuts through her memory like a slug through meat. "Looks like you've got yourself a little banged up."

"I would say I've had worse, but I promised not to lie to you, sir," the soldier manages. Then she laughs, and regrets it.

Those blue-grey eyes flicker for a second. "I had my doubts about you, you know," he tells her. "Way back when I took you in off the streets, I thought you'd wind up right back on them, or in jail."

"Been to the brig a couple times already, sir," she says. "Think they might...put me back there now? For what I did?"

Kincaide's wrinkles twist. "Oughta be giving you a God-damned medal," he growls. "A whole stack of 'em. It'll be a miracle if we have another Elysium in my lifetime, kid. And now the bastards know what's coming for them if they try to pull one off."

Kelsa just breathes for a minute, pushing through the pain of her cracked ribs and the deeper aches that the medi-gel and the painkillers can't touch. "Major Kyle called me a butcher," she tells the old man, looking up at the ceiling. "A monster." She tastes the word on her tongue, and doesn't find it as bitter as she thinks she probably should. "Maybe I belong in prison, sir."

"Major Kyle's been relieved of duty," Kincaide sneers. "The press is having a motherfucking field day with that little quip of his...the Butcher of Torfan, the aliens are calling you." He shakes his head. "But as for prison...I'm afraid the Alliance has much worse in mind for you, when you're ready to get up out of that bed, soldier."

The woman peers at him through half-lidded eyes, heavy with painkillers. "Breaking big rocks into smaller rocks out in Hawking Eta, sir?" She hisses out another laugh.

"Worse than that, even," comes another voice, from the doorway. Major Kincaide stands up straighter, and Kelsa even tries to sit, but the machines by her start beeping like crazy. Captain Anderson takes a step into the room, giving the major a sharp nod. "I've read over Captain Ito's reports. Impressive stuff, Shepard, even if the cost was more than many could bear."
"Sir," Kelsa acknowledges, because she can't think of anything better to say.

"The nurses say you're tired, so we won't disturb you much longer," Anderson says. "But I just wanted to let you know in person that there's a spot in ICT waiting for you as soon as you're able to fill it, Staff Lieutenant Shepard."

ICT? Kelsa blinks. Staff...? "I...don't think I understand, sir." Her tongue feels like sandpaper. "You're sending me to the Villa?"

Major Kincaide steps in. "Only if you want to go, Shepard. But you've already proven yourself to everyone that matters."

"Hell," Anderson says, "I don't know if there's even a handful of N7s that could've taken a dozen people into that hellhole and lived to tell about it. Like the major says, it's your choice...but the Villa wants you, Shepard. It was made for people like you."

"If you say so, sir," Kelsa rasps, just before she closes her eyes. She doesn't hear the two men leave.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who's reading along, and thanks especially to my wonderful beta-reader, uttercup23, for all of the motivation and support!
Chapter Summary

After years in the Special Forces, Kelsa is reunited with an old friend in a new setting, with new responsibilities.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Officer's Lounge

1500 Zulu

19 April 2183

Fifth Fleet Berth, Arcturus Station, Arcturus

Staff Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko looks exactly like Anderson's written description, right down to the three-o'clock shadow. He's sitting in a booth in an empty corner of the room, a tumbler of something clear in front of him, but as soon as he notices her, the man rises to his feet and snaps to attention. "Commander," he acknowledges, keeping his eyes level, so he's staring an inch and a half above her head.

Kelsa nods for him to relax. "Anderson said you'd be early, Lieutenant. Have a seat." She glances down at the glass. "What're you having?"

"Water, ma'am," the soldier answers her, still not sitting down. "I make it a rule to not break out the rye before 2100 hours. I can get you a drink, though, if you'd like."

The woman gruffs a laugh. "Double vodka, neat," she tells him. She doesn't sit down either, not until he comes back with another tumbler half-full of liquor. It's empty by the time she slides into one side of the booth, the vapours tingling across the back of her throat like velvet. "So tell me, Alenko, what the fuck are we doing here?"

The lieutenant takes his seat again, but he doesn't relax. "Couldn't say, ma'am," he lets on. "I assume you got an encrypted message to meet here at 1500, with a name and a description, just like I did."

Kelsa nods. "Not even a dossier. You think the captain's trying to set us up?" She smirks at her own joke when she sees that Alenko caught her meaning. The slight colouring underneath his cheeks tips her off. "That's the case, I got some bad news for him."

"I wouldn't know anything about that," Alenko says, a natural diplomat if she ever heard one. "But I do know who you are, ma'am." His tone doesn't waver even a little bit, unlike almost everyone else who says that these days. Usually there's fear, and at least a little bit of loathing, unless it's a gung-ho grunt that doesn't know any better; usually that's even worse. But from the lieutenant, Kelsa only hears respect.
"That right?" Kelsa wonders, oddly curious. "And who am I, Alenko?"

The lieutenant takes a measured sip of his water to buy himself some time. So maybe a little fear, Kelsa thinks to herself, but she doesn't smirk. "You're Lieutenant Commander Kelsa Shepard, an N7 operative with the Fifth Fleet." So far, he hasn't said anything that he hasn't read in Anderson's message, except maybe that she's Special Forces, but then N7 is monogrammed on the collar of her fatigues. "You conquered Torfan, ma'am." Again, the lieutenant commander doesn't sense any judgement, either positive or negative.

"All comes back to that, doesn't it?" Kelsa asks herself, half-grimacing. "So that's who I am? Some warlord on the make?"

The man's eyebrows knit. "I didn't mean-"

"I know you didn't," Kelsa cuts in, leaning forward. "But you're right...I'm a soldier. I kill people." She grunts. "A lotta people. That's who I am."

She can see by Alenko's frown that he disagrees with her. "I'm a soldier," he says. "I wouldn't say that's who I am."

Kelsa's eyes narrow. "Oh, yeah? And how many people have you killed, Lieutenant?"

For the first time, the man looks uncomfortable. "I've seen action, if that's what you're asking, ma'am," he tells her.

It's not an answer, but it'll do. "I've killed five-hundred and fifty people by my own account so far, Alenko," she says. "Over twice that, if you give me credit for everyone who died on Torfan." Plenty of people seem to. "I know what I am." She's known it since that February night, when she had to make her choice, and she made it.

"But..." The lieutenant chews on his thoughts for a few seconds, thinking hard, but not disgusted or afraid. "Why, Commander? Why'd you kill the batarians on Torfan, when they wanted to surrender?"

Kelsa wishes she had another drink; the vodka's long gone, and she can shut him down. But he's curious, not accusing, and that helps keep her tongue loose. "I told them they could surrender when they gave up the hostages," she tells him. "Instead, they laughed in my face and killed them. After, when me and O'Mara and Sheldon got a group of twenty in a corner, they tried giving up." She blinks and brings Alenko's face back into focus. "Shoulda gave up sooner."

Silence hangs over the both of them for about a minute before the lieutenant finds his voice. "Not sure I would've made the same call, ma'am...but I can see why you did."

"I don't think you can, Alenko," she says, shrugging. "I knew they were going to kill the slaves when I told them to surrender, but I did it anyway. I didn't give one good God damn about any of 'em. There were some good folks from Elysium on that moon...from Mindoir. They're dead because of me. And I would've shot them all myself if I had to, to kill the pirates on Torfan."

Alenko's brow arches a little, and there's some judgment there, but it'd scare her more if there wasn't any. "That...makes you sound like a sociopath, Commander," he points out. "I'm guessing that's not what you said in your psych evals during ICT."

"Course not, Lieutenant," Kelsa gruffs. "And if you repeat what I said, I'll do worse than kill you. But if Anderson doesn't want us to fuck, he'll want us to work together, and I can't have the people under me wondering whether or not I'm crazy." She grabs up Alenko's glass of water and drinks
down the last of it. "I'm not, by the way. I just don't let anything get in between me and what needs to get done."

The lieutenant reels, and then teeters back to balance in front of her eyes, ignoring her throwaway comment. "Sounds like you have a different definition of what needs to get done than some people in the Alliance, ma'am," he tells her. "Plenty of regs against letting innocent people die, even if it gets the bad guys."

"I only ever knew one innocent person," the woman says. "And he died a long time ago."

"...Who was that, ma'am?" Alenko looks genuinely curious.

Kelsa's throat gets tight, just for a second. "You'll have to give me a lot more than a double-shot of vodka before I tell you that, Lieutenant."

"Yes, ma'am," he says, and he's about to say something else when a shadow falls over the table.

Captain Anderson sets three more glasses on the table, all full of dark liquid. Kelsa takes up the one closest to her and sniffs it, even before the older man says anything. Scotch. It's gone in another second. "I haven't even mentioned the occasion yet, Shepard," Anderson scoffs, but he's smirking. "I see you two've been getting to know one another."

Alenko straightens up even higher in his seat, but he waits his turn to talk, glancing at Kelsa. "Good to see you, Captain. There's only one reason I can think of that you'd pull me out of the 103rd to come back to Arcturus and have me sound out an officer."

The older man pulls up a chair. "Oh?" He grunts, looking from Kelsa to Alenko and back again. "And what's that, kid?"

"You're tapping me for something you can't afford to fuck up, even if it goes sideways halfway through," Kelsa says, in a low whisper. It's a boast, but not a big one. "Wanna know if I can work with the lieutenant." She gives the younger men a quick glance. "Looks like I can, sir."

Lieutenant Alenko's mouth opens, but Anderson talks over him. "I'm not going to lie to either of you," he says, and then takes a healthy sip of his drink. "But there's not a hell of a lot I can say here. You're two names I picked out of a very small hat to come on a shakedown run for a new Alliance vessel."

Kelsa's eyes close for a half-second longer than a blink. "I thought Zander had point on the Normandy?" She's not supposed to know, but there are a few perks to being N7...like being able to out-drink pretty intelligence officers.

Anderson's frown proves her right. "I'm not gonna ask where you got your information, Shepard," he tells her. "But it looks like you've got the gist. The Normandy's almost ready to be aweigh after her final field recalibrations. It'll only be a few days now."

"Speaking of a few days, happy birthday, Shepard. Sorry it's a little late."

"Thank you, sir," Kelsa clips. She doesn't remember her actual birthday, but April 11th was the day she walked into Major Kincaide's recruiting office with a bowie knife and wound up changing her life, so it's as good a day as any. Alenko still hasn't spoken up, though, so she looks at him. "Anything on your mind, Lieutenant?"

Alenko stays cool under her and Anderson's combined attention. "You have me at a bit of a disadvantage, ma'am," he says, and then he glances to Anderson. "Why are we here exactly, sir?"
"At least one of you knows something about discretion," the captain comments. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. The commander and I served together on the *Tokyo*, back during the Blitz. She didn't know how to keep her mouth shut back then, either." She proves him wrong by holding her peace, even underneath the older man's smirk. "Like I said," Anderson goes on. "I picked your names, along with a few others. To put it plainly, I've been made the captain of the *SSV Normandy*, and yours were the first names I thought of for my new crew."

Alenko looks almost as surprised as Kelsa feels, but the lieutenant commander keeps her face blank and she let's the younger man answer. "Me?" He wonders, his face scrunching up. "What'd I do to deserve your attention, sir? Not that I'm complaining, of course."

"Drink your drink, Lieutenant," Anderson chides him. "I'm offering to make you the first officer of the *Normandy*, when I don't need your boots on the ground, son."

"Sir," Alenko breathes, after taking a slug of his whiskey without blinking. "It would be an honour."

The captain smiles to himself. "Something tells me you might not be saying that after you get to know the pilot, Flight-Lieutenant Moreau. It'll be your job to corral him, after all." Anderson fixes Kelsa with that same smile. "I'll give you one guess what you're going to be up to, Commander."

Kelsa swallows, her throat still tingling just a little bit from the drink. It was a good one. "Don't care what you call me, sir, so long as I'm out on the ground, every time."

"I thought you'd say that, Shepard," Anderson tells her, still grinning. "Been watching you for quite awhile," he says. "Nobody I can think of I'd rather have as my executive officer, truth told." He tilts his head forward, looking her right in the eye, his smile drying up. "Say the word and it's yours, child."

The woman wishes she had another shot of scotch to wet her throat. "You don't have to do that, sir," she breathes. "I'm sure you could find somebody better-"

"There's nobody I can think of," Anderson says again. "Are you up for the challenge?"

"Yes, sir," Kelsa clips, because she can't imagine backing down. "Whatever you need."

The chair scrapes back against the floor as Anderson stands up. "Excellent," he grunts, nodding to both of the younger officers. "I want to see you both at 0900 sharp on the twenty-fifth. I'll see that you have all the dossiers you need and make sure you get the proper clearances. Until then, I think you can celebrate a little bit."

"Aye, aye, sir," Kelsa and Alenko say at the same time. Kelsa returns Anderson's nod and watches him leave before she looks back at the other man. "So...how do you feel about breaking that 2100 rule some more, Lieutenant?"

"I think I can make another exception, ma'am," Alenko allows, still a little stunned. "What are you drinking?"

"Jameson," she tells him. "Bring back the bottle."

*Docking Bay*

*0700 Zulu*
"Now I thought I told you to dress comfortably, Commander." Anderson's knuckles rap against Kelsa's blood-red heavy armour. Her shields keep even that soft tap from landing on the triple-laminated lacquer-titanium weave.

The soldier gives her captain a solemn nod. "Not wearing a helmet, sir." Her eyes skirt to the younger man at Anderson's flank. He's little more than a boy, wearing standard fatigues and an Alliance beret, and his eyes haven't wavered from the black N7 carved into the right side of her chest piece. He's staring almost as hungrily as he might at the tattoo of the same device she got in roughly the same spot on the day she graduated from ICT. "You must be Corporal Jenkins," Kelsa says, maybe a little harder than is strictly necessary.

The tone shakes the boy out of his trance, and he snaps to attention, pulling off a half-decent salute. "Ma'am," he clips. "Such an honour to finally meet you! I mean, I can't believe I'm gonna be workin' with Commander Shepard!"

Anderson cuts in with a good-natured chuckle. "That's enough of that, son. Why don't you go see to your station on the lower deck?" Jenkins swallows and salutes two more times, just to make sure, and he scrambles through the airlock of the Normandy. Anderson shakes his head. "He means well, at least."

"I'm still not letting him touch my gun, Captain," Kelsa tells the older man. "Not my shotgun, at least."

The captain leans sideways, sneaking a peek at the small of her back. "You still carting around that old boom-stick you picked up on Torfan, Shepard?"

Kelsa grunts. "A few parts are the same. Had to rebuild it a couple times at the Villa. Ain't exactly standard issue any more, even for criminals." She looks past Anderson, to the vessel that he's trusting her to help him run. "She's sleek, but there's room enough for another couple people on the ground team," the soldier points out. "We've got a full complement otherwise, sir. Don't we?"

The captain takes a steady breath. "We're not expecting any trouble on this cruise, Shepard...but you're right. After we're done with the mission, it'll be up to you to design the ground team as you see fit. But until then, there's someone I think you should meet." He gestures for her to board the ship ahead of him. "He'll be waiting down in my quarters."

Kelsa doesn't ask about what kind of mission would need a ship full of engineers and logistics specialists but only a single three-man squad; she'll learn what she needs to know when she needs to know it. On the way into the ship, the soldier glances toward the bridge and sees Alenko leaning against the back of a chair, while the ship's pilot's already in his chair, twirled sideways to face the other man. Neither of them notice their XO, and Kelsa doesn't stop long enough to fix that.

Anderson takes the lead into the CIC, catching and returning the crew's salutes all the way down the stairs to the crew deck. He veers to the left at the elevator and doesn't even slow down at the doors to his office, which slide open with barely a hiss. The inside is as bare as the room Kelsa remembers from her stint on the Tokyo, though this chamber's smaller, and has something she never expected to see on an Alliance ship. Or, rather, someone. "Commander Shepard," Anderson rumbles, sounding as friendly as she's ever heard. "I'd like to introduce you to Nihlus Kryik."

The turian's obviously a soldier, but his armour doesn't show any insignia from the Turian Hierarchy. His skin's a brownish red with white clan markings either painted or tattooed onto his
face and head, and he stands a few hands taller than Anderson. He doesn't move to shake her hand, which suits her fine. "Commander," he acknowledges, his metallic voice cool and distant but not hostile. "I'm here to evaluate the Normandy's first mission. The hierarchy would like to know that its investment wasn't wasted...nor should it be forgotten by the Alliance."

Kelsa nods, having to tilt her head back a little to keep the alien's bright-green eyes in view. "And the Council wants one of theirs along for the ride, too," she says. "But now I know why the captain didn't bother giving me two more grunts to push around if we need to hop groundside."

The twitch of the turian's jaw doesn't mean anything to her, but Kelsa thinks she hears annoyance when Kryik talks. "The Citadel Council did feel that having an agent from Special Tactics wouldn't be out of the question," he tells her, and then he looks to Anderson. "She is either very well-informed or she's smarter than I've learnt to expect from military officers."

"Maybe a little bit of both," the captain says, with a half-smile he turns on Kelsa. "Nihlus' Spectre status is supposed to be a secret aboard the vessel," he explains. "So, naturally, the whole crew knows."

Kelsa nods. "Scuttlebutt's faster than FTL buoys, sir."

"Perhaps," Kryik says, crossing his arms over his barrel chest. "In an undisciplined order of battle, at any rate."

"Us monkeys are curious by nature," the lieutenant commander tells him with a neutral shrug. "I'm surprised the hierarchy even agreed to let the Alliance take possession of this bird, to be honest. The CIC doesn't look like anything I've ever seen before."

Captain Anderson clears his throat. "It certainly takes some getting used to, standing so far back from the bridge," he says. "But the turians have been quite accommodating with their resources, and the Council and the Alliance have worked hard on the Normandy as well. It's in everyone's interests that the mission succeeds."

Now that curiosity that Kelsa's been pushing down rears up, pushing up against her training. "Briefing was a little light about where we're headed," she says, not exactly asking a question. "Not sure what the Council's interest in the Utopia System would be, sir."

The captain and the turian share a look that tells her that they both know, and neither of them are going to tell her, yet. "I believe you humans have a long-established colony in that region," Kryik muses. "Eden Prime, I've heard it called. It sounds like a sensible place for a field test."

"And proof positive that humans can work constructively with other Council races," Anderson points out. "Hasn't been all that long since First Contact...there's more than a few humans that wouldn't mind seeing us fail, so it's important that this trip run as smoothly as possible, Commander."

"Understood, sir," Kelsa clips, moving from rest to attention, and asks a question she knows she'll get an answer to. "What are your orders, Captain?"

"Shepard, let's see what we can find," he tells her. "Escort Nihlus onto the bridge and have Joker set sail to Eden Prime."

The soldier snaps off a salute. "Aye, aye, sir," she barks, turning heel and stepping out of the bare office at a steady pace. The turian falls into step just behind her, his footfalls whispering. Otherwise, Kryik's totally quiet, an avatar of discipline. Most of the crew look nervous as the XO
passes by with her alien associate, and a couple try to sneak resentful glances to Kryik when they don't think Kelsa can see. Since part of her new job involves dealing with the crew, Kelsa makes a note to talk to a few potential troublemakers later. Lieutenant Pressly looks particularly aggrivated, if the little twitch in his eye's anything to go by, and Kelsa puts his name at the top of her list.

The pilot and the first officer are where Kelsa left them when she boarded the Normandy, but now Alenko's sitting in his chair, and they're both facing their stations. "...And then the asari says 'You really should've spiced the gumbo!'" After a second, the pilot glances over to the first officer. "Nothing?" And then he says, "Shit. She's standing right behind me, isn't she?"

"She is, Flight Lieutenant Moreau," Kelsa says, before Alenko can confirm or deny. "She also has a rank, and a name that sometimes goes along with it."

"Ma'am," Alenko gruffs, sitting up straighter at his station. "Joker didn't mean anything by it."

"I'm sure he didn't," Kelsa grunts. "Captain wants us to cast off and hit Eden Prime ASAP."

"Damn, Commander," Moreau sighs, still slouching in his chair, just a little. "Not even five seconds and it's straight to business? No witty repartee with the adventurous pilot before we head off into the black?"

Kelsa rolls her eyes; Kryik still hasn't said anything, but she can feel him judging them, judging her. "The captain's report gave me the impression that you could fly this tin can pretty good, Moreau, but I ain't one to believe everything I read. Show me."

The pilot finally gets poised, his fingers clicking over the console in front of him. "Aye, aye, Commander," Moreau sounds off. A second later, the Normandy whispers, a couple of low vibrations teasing through the floor. "Tethers disengaged," the pilot reports. "We're clear and aweigh." The ship's thrusters barely register, but within a heartbeat the light outside the bridge's viewing port is blue-shifted. "Bearing down on Arcturus Prime relay; ETA thirty seconds."

Then Moreau flips a switch, and his voice echoes over the ship's internal comms system. "Arcturus Prime relay is in range. Initiating transmission sequence." It's fascinating, in its way, to watch the man work; this is the smoothest ride Kelsa can ever remember, but she knows it should be the choppiest, given the Normandy's specs and balancing issues. "We are connected. Calculating transit mass and destination."

Kelsa peers up into the blue-tinted black and she feels her heart skip a beat. She's gone through plenty of mass relays in the years since Torfan and the Villa, but she's usually been in a sleeper pod or below decks. Watching the approach to the relay takes the soldier's attention for a few seconds. It hangs there, an enormous gyroscope pointing out across the galaxy, and for just an instant it feels like the ship's going to crash into the superstructure. But then the world blinks white and Kelsa's heart skips again. Now, instead of a giant piece of ancient technology through the viewport, there's nothing but the black shroud of night, prickled by countless stars.

"Thrusters...check," Moreau says, breaking through Kelsa's trance. "Navigation...check. Internal emissions sink engaged. All systems online." The man cranes his neck. "Drift...just under 1500 clicks."

Kryik speaks up for the first time since leaving Anderson's office. "1500 is good," he observes. "Your captain will be pleased." And then he stalks away, without a second look at any of them.

When the turian's out of whispering distance, Moreau snorts. "I hate that guy."
Alenko shakes his head, and Kelsa can't tell if he realises she's still there. "Nihlus gave you a compliment," he points out. "So...you hate him?"

"You remember to zip up your jumpsuit after taking a leak, that's good," Moreau gruffs. "I just jumped us halfway across the galaxy and hit a target the size of a pinhead, so that's incredible!" Only thing worse than a know-it-all, Kelsa thinks to herself, is a know-it-all who can back it up. The man's good, all right, and he knows it all too well. "Besides," Moreau goes on. "I don't like having Spectres on board. Call me paranoid, but they just seem like they're asking for trouble."

"You're paranoid," Alenko obliges. "The Council helped fund this project; they've a right to keep an eye on their investment."

The pilot clicks his tongue. "Sure, that's the official story," he says. "But only an idiot believes the official story."

Kelsa's had enough. "This is an Alliance ship," she barks, "not some extranet conspiracy theory chatroom. You both are soldiers. Start acting like it." From behind the chair, Kelsa can see Moreau's shoulders hunching up, and she takes that as proof that he really did forget she was just behind him. "Patch me through to the captain; he should be in his office."

The pilot does so with an Aye, aye, ma'am, and a few mutterings that Kelsa can't quite catch. "Shepard," Anderson says in greeting. "Give me a status report."

"Just went through the mass relay, sir," she tells him. "Moreau and Alenko report all boards green."

"That's excellent," the captain shoots back. "Have Joker find a comm buoy and link us into the network; I want mission reports relayed back to Arcturus before we reach Eden Prime."

"You heard the man," Kelsa says to the back of Moreau's head. The pilot nods. "Aye, aye, captain." His fingers fly again, but he's not done talking. "Better brace yourself, sir. I think Nihlus is headed your way."

"He's already here, Lieutenant," Anderson lets them know, a sigh in his voice. "Shepard, meet me in the comm room for a debriefing in three minutes."

"Aye, aye, sir," Kelsa tells the intercom. "On my way." As she stalks off, she catches the echoes of renewed conversation between the pilot and co-pilot; less than an hour together, and the two have struck up the kind of easy camaraderie that Kelsa's never quite been able to find in all her years of service...not that she's been looking, really. That's not what she's good at, after all.

Kelsa knows what she is.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who's reading along, and thanks especially to my awesome beta-reader, buttercup23!
Ch. 8: Fearful Symmetry

Chapter Summary

Kelsa gets her clock cleaned by some ancient technology on Eden Prime, and she's given a mission even most N7 graduates might balk at: bring a Council Spectre to justice, with or without the Council's permission.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Death. Death on the streets, in the alleys, in the sewers. Death in hard steel corridors, in soft river valleys. Death on the space stations, death in the bunkers that are the very last hope against the machines. Death in beds and bargain-halls, death on the battlements, death on the run. Death, screaming and screeching and hissing and howling; death of enemies and friends and parents and children and strangers. Death all around her. Death within her.

Death pouring from her fingertips.

Medical Bay, SSV Normandy

1125 Zulu

27 April 2183

Docking Bay D15, Citadel

There's white in her eyes and white in her ears, the last of those overwhelming visions washing over all of her senses. For a second Kelsa thinks she's asleep, strapped down to a table, but a sharp pain in her upper arm and a sharper gasp for breath snap the soldier out of her waking dream. She's standing in the medical bay of her ship in cotton clothes, her fingers a bare millimetre from Alenko's throat; each of her arms is being held by a different burly crewmember, pulling as hard as they can. Instinct has Kelsa relax her own tension slowly, to keep all three of them from tumbling back. Alenko looks a little shook up, but when her hands get clear of his neck, he coughs and rubs it.

The doctor's voice trickles into Kelsa's ears. "...had a few abnormal beta-waves, but your vitals spiked just before you regained consciousness. Lieutenant Alenko was concerned." The older woman sounds stern, sterner than normal.

"Sorry," Kelsa breathes, straightening up and shaking the servicemen off. They try mumbling apologies for laying their hands on her, but the soldier cuts them off. "It's fine, Marvins, Crabtree. Go back to your business." The two grunts collect themselves and stalk off after giving uncertain salutes. Kelsa eyes the angry swelling on Alenko's throat. "I whited out," she explains. "Had some weird dreams." Everyone's dead. "I'm sorry." Death is coming for you anyway...better now. Better quick.

Kelsa stumbles and catches herself on the bed; she's been shot up with a sedative, probably the only reason Alenko's still breathing. "I understand, ma'am," the lieutenant tells her, his voice even
gruffer than usual. "Shouldn't've tried to hold you down. Foolish of me."

Kelsa makes it back onto the bed, her head heavy on her pillow, but she's too amped up still to fall asleep. "You were a goddamned fool inching up to that beacon, Alenko," she breathes, blinking up at the ceiling. "Fucking thing almost killed me." She didn't mean to get caught up in it, herself. She probably wouldn't've, if Williams had been the curious one.

"I expect you're right, Commander," the doctor, Chakwas, says again. Her British accent sounds a bit softer now. "What on earth did you dream about, to make you so jumpy?"

"Nothing," the soldier lies. *The kind of nothing that's coming for us while we sleep*, a voice tickles against her temples, but already the images are breaking up, confused. "Just don't like getting woken up when I'm not expecting it, is all."

The doc clicks her tongue. "I'll have to make a note of that for the next time you enter my medical bay unconscious, Commander. I've a feeling we'll be seeing you that way again, the way you fight."

Kelsa just nods. "How long've I got before the juice drags me back under?"

"Not long," Chakwas says. "Truth be told, you should've lost consciousness within moments of the shot. I'm rather surprised you've remained lucid this long; it speaks of an uncommonly strong will, to go with your uncommonly strong arms." The woman taps her chin thoughtfully. "I suspect it's why you survived the destruction of the prothean obelisk. It would've killed a lesser mind."

The soldier grunts and glances to Alenko, still skulking around the med bay's door. "So I save your life and then almost kill you within a day. I guess you can call that a draw, Lieutenant." Already her eyelids are starting to feel heavy. "Fetch me the captain and let him know we don't have long before I'm back asleep." Alenko salutes and he's gone before she can blink. "You'd better go, too, doc. I've gotta feeling Captain Anderson's gonna want to keep the debrief need-to-know."

The woman busies herself with checking some equipment. "I will give you your privacy at the captain's request," she says, "and not a moment before."

"Yes, ma'am." Kelsa gives the doc a half-drunken smirk; behind the med bay door, it's clear that Chakwas' word is law, even though this is Kelsa's first visit as a patient.

Captain Anderson walks through that door a few seconds later, and hews close to Kelsa's prediction when he politely directs the doctor out of the room. "You were out for nigh-on twelve hours, Shepard," he tells her, "and now it sounds like you're going out again soon. You want to tell me what the hell happened here?"

*What's gonna happen is more important*, Kelsa almost says. "I'm sure you've got reports from Alenko and the stray we picked up. She still on board, sir?"

"Chief Williams?" Anderson muses, and then he nods. "Yeah, she's still here. Good kid, by the sound of it."

"Don't like her on my ship, sir," Kelsa says, her tongue loosened by the sedative.

The captain frowns. "I'll remind you that this isn't *your* ship, Commander Shepard. It's mine, and it's by my word that Williams is a part of this crew. Do you understand?"

The soldier nods. "Yes, sir," she vows.
"Good," Anderson rumbles. "And anyway, we don't have time to squabble. I've pieced together most of what must've happened from Alenko and Williams, like you guessed. Poor Jenkins." He shakes his head. "They say you never forget your first casualty, so maybe I should be saying poor Alenko...but that's neither here nor there. I need to know what the hell was on that beacon before it blew into a million pieces."

No escape. No sanctum. "It's a little confused, Captain." Kelsa's eyelids droop, and she can see a few echoes in the darkness. "I remember yanking Alenko away from the beacon and then getting caught up in some kind of field...and then there were...visions."

"What sort of visions?" Anderson leans in, resting his weight on a hand by her shoulder. "Weapons? New technology?"

"Death," Kelsa summarises. "Machines...killing everything." She can't help the shiver that steals over her belly. "No getting away, sir."

The captain makes a thoughtful sound. "Geth, you think?" The creatures had been crawling all over Eden Prime, the first time they've been sighted outside of the Perseus Veil since they gained sentience and ejected the organic quarian race, who created the geth, from their home system and colonies about three hundred years ago.

"Not sure," Kelsa mumbles. "Whatever it is...it's coming. Gotta...stop it. Try…"

"Get some rest, now," Anderson tells her, and Kelsa falls into the black before she gets a chance to hear whatever else he has to say.

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Citadel Tower
1345 Zulu
28 April 2183
Presidium, Citadel

Williams hasn't said more than two words since Kelsa did her a favour. You'd think she'd be happier, Kelsa thinks to herself as she and Williams and Alenko march out of the elevator to the Council's audience chambers. I did her a favour. Granted, she threatened to gut an innocent admin who only wanted to help the Alliance prepare for future geth attacks, but he was the face of the R&D lab that's holding the bodies from Eden Prime. One of those bodies used to belong to one of Williams' squadmates, and now it's en route to Earth for a proper burial. Not that Kelsa's looking for gratitude, especially from Williams. Kelsa should be the one doing all the thanking, anyway, since Williams soaked up all of the widowed husband's grief when he learned that his wife's body was coming home.

A couple of turians fighting at the head of a flight of stairs distracts the soldier from her thoughts. She recognises one of them as Executor Pallin, the one who looks so similar to Kryik, with different clan markings splashed across his faceplate. "...Your investigation is over, Vakarian," he rumbles just as the three humans trudge into earshot. "Drop it."

Pallin stalks away, but the strange turian lingers, turning to face Kelsa and Alenko and their stray gunnery chief from Eden Prime. "Commander Shepard?" He asks, surprising the soldier. "Garrus Vakarian; I was the officer in charge of the C-Sec investigation into Saren."

The commander's brow shoots up. "You mean the investigation that started the day before
yesterday? It's already over?"

She still can't tell, but she thinks the big bird-man looks a little sheepish. "Afraid so." He's more silver-tinted than Pallin or Kryik, with a blue design on his face that looks like it reaches back to some of the spines of his head-fringe.

"Sounds like you came up empty," Kelsa grunts, not without her own kind of sympathy.

Vakarian dips his head. "Saren's a Spectre," he says. "Most of his activities are classified. I couldn't find anything solid." The eye that isn't underneath a modded visor gets narrower. "But I know he's up to something...like you humans say, I feel it in my gut."

*Like I said,* Kelsa doesn't say. *Empty.* Alenko clears his throat and nods up the next flight of stairs, where Anderson stands alone, waiting. "I think the Council's ready for us, Commander," the lieutenant gruffs.

Kelsa leads her squad past Vakarian, whose mumbled wishes of luck are almost certainly wasted. As soon as Captain Anderson notices them, he gestures for the soldiers to speed up. "The hearing's already started," he lets them know. "Come on."

Together, the Alliance personnel stalk into the audience chamber, where they're overlooked by the Citadel Council on their high perch at the far end of the room. Three people, representing the majesty and power of half the known galaxy; a turian, an asari, and an agile frog-like salarian hold sway over Citadel space from this room. And right now they're peering down at Donnell Udina, Earth's ambassador to the Citadel, and they don't look impressed. "The geth attack is a matter of some concern," the asari says, calmly. "But there is nothing to indicate that Saren was involved in any way."

The turian, an older-looking man, cuts in. "The investigation by Citadel Security turned up no evidence to support your charge of treason."

*Because you cut it off after a day and a half,* Kelsa wishes Udina would say. Instead the human blusters, trying to sound a lot tougher than he is. "An eyewitness saw him kill Nihlus in cold blood!"

"We've read the Eden Prime reports, Ambassador," the salarian councilor points out. "The testimony of one traumatised dock worker is hardly compelling proof."

*One traumatised dock worker who couldn't've known that Saren even existed,* Kelsa nudges Udina to argue back. But she can't even move a rock with her mind, much less telegraph a thought through the back of an old man's head. But before even Udina can offer up a response, a hologram blinks into focus, high on the dais alongside the Council. It's another turian, larger than life, made of washed-out orange light so Kelsa can't see too many of his features. But as soon as the figure speaks, she knows exactly who he is. "I resent these accusations," the turian growls, his tone made flat by the projector's speakers. "Nihlus was a fellow Spectre, and a friend."

Anderson speaks up, from Kelsa's left. "That just let you catch him off guard!" His finger's pointing up at the enormous light show, and she can't see his face, but Kelsa hears the anger in his voice...more anger than murdering a turian Spectre should have put in the man.

"Captain Anderson," the turian, Saren Arterius, almost purrs. It's obvious they recognise each other immediately, and Arterius' next words confirm Kelsa's suspicions. "You always seem to be involved when humanity makes false charges against me." Then his eyes turn on Kelsa, and even through the hologram, she feels a little chill run up the back of her spine. Kelsa's seen her fair share
of monsters, especially whenever she's near a mirror, and it's almost always there in the eyes. "And this must be Commander Shepard," he sneers, transparent mandibles twitching. "Your protégée...the one who let the beacon get destroyed."

Kelsa's jaw tightens. "I was a little busy mowing down a couple hundred geth that you brought to a human colony," she says, stepping forward for the first time. She's still wearing her crimson hardsuit; like Alenko's and Williams', it's scratched and scorched from the fight, physical signs of the battle they had to go through. She thought it might help convince the Council to take the attack more seriously. Doesn't look like it did, though.

"Shift the blame all you like," Arterius purrs, coy as a cat. "Captain Anderson's taught you well in that regard. Never able to face up to his own failures...but what can you expect, from a human?"

The soldier keeps her eyes locked onto that holographic face. "You can expect me to kill you when we meet," she tells him. "But don't worry...I won't shoot you in the back, like you did to Kryik."

She can see that that struck some kind of nerve, by the twitch in the turian's jaw. "Your species needs to learn its place," Arterius says, growling. "You're not ready to join the Citadel Council...you're not even ready to join the Spectres!" That was what Kryik was on the Normandy to do, after all-evaluate Kelsa's fitness to join the Council's shadow-division, Special Tactics and Reconnaissance. Arterius killed him before he could say whether or not she was worthy of the distinction.

Udina decides to draw the Council into the discussion again. "He has no right to say that!" The man barks. "It's not his decision!" Of course, Udina's got a hell of a lot invested in getting a human in the Spectres, since he wants a seat on the Council for himself one day, and Kelsa knows he thinks the one will help him with the other.

The asari councilor lifts a hand, gesturing for calm. "Shepard's admission into the Spectres is not the purpose of this meeting," she says, neutrally.

"This meeting has no purpose," Arterius calls out, from his lofty height, above even the Council. "The humans are wasting your time, Councilor. And mine."

"You can't hide behind the Council forever, Arterius," Kelsa tells him, never once even glancing away even while he was looking down on the Council.

Anderson clears his throat. "There's still one outstanding issue," he says, and Kelsa's stomach goes cold. Don't say it, Captain… "Commander Shepard's vision. It may have been triggered by the beacon."

Kelsa knows it's not going to help their case...it'll only make it easier for the Council to dismiss them. Arterius seems to have the same idea. "Are we allowing dreams into evidence, now?" He scoffs. "How can I defend my innocence against this kind of testimony?" We'll see how well you defend your innocence against my shotgun, Kelsa sneers back, in her head.

The turian councilor joins in. "I agree. Our judgment must be based on facts and evidence," he tells his fellow councilors, "not wild imaginings and reckless speculation."

The salarian nods. "Have you anything else to add, Commander Shepard?" By his tone, he sounds ready to dismiss them, no matter what she has to say.

"I'd just be wasting my breath," Kelsa says, crossing her arms. "It's obvious you've made your decision, anyway."
A few seconds pass while the three councilors trade glances, nodding and shaking their heads by turns, but not sharing a single word. Finally the asari councilor turns her stare on the gathered humans. "The Council has found no evidence of any connection between Operative Saren Arterius and the geth," she says. "Ambassador, your petition to have Saren's Spectre status revoked is hereby denied."

Arterius dips his head, and if she didn't know better, Kelsa could almost think he's smiling. "I'm glad to see justice was served," he purrs, and the holo starts flickering.

Kelsa lunges forward, stopping herself on the rail. "Wait!" She snarls, flicking back a loose braid that escaped from the pony tail she normally keeps her braids tied in. The hologram gets more solid, and Arterius' dead eyes fall on the soldier once again. "You might have these motherfuckers eating out of your hand like a buncha goddamned lapdogs," Kelsa goes on, "but you and I both know that you killed Nihlus Kryik, and the Alliance knows you led an assault on one of our colonies."

The asari councilor tries to speak up again, but Arterius growls over her. "Foaming at the mouth like a rabid varren will get you nowhere, Shepard," he warns her. "You should take another lesson from the captain, and know when to back down from your betters."

"Not gonna happen," Kelsa snaps. "The Council can make me a Spectre or they can try to arrest me, for all I care, but you brought the geth to Eden Prime. That means sooner or later, someone in Alliance Command is gonna send me after you, Spectre or not," she promises him. "And when that day comes, you'll see first hand what happens when this mad varren slips her collar."

Those steely orange eyes shift a bit, behind Kelsa, to the other two armoured humans. "And will you lead these pups into the same fate your team suffered on Torfan, Commander?" He asks, purring again. "Or will you save time and slit their throats yourself?" Then the hologram flickers and scatters, leaving the raised platform just a little bit dimmer.

"Restrain yourself, Commander Shepard," the asari councilor orders. "We have heard your evidence and found it wanting. Unless you have anything substantial to corroborate your claims, this hearing is dismissed."

Kelsa doesn't wait for Udina's objection, or for Anderson's permission; she pushes off from the railing and stomps between her subordinates, too afraid she'll be tempted to follow through on Arterius' veiled suggestion if she stops to listen to any of them bicker. Instead the soldier trudges through the fine scenery, making for the elevator, intending to find the dirtiest bar on the whole space station before her hands start to shake.

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_C-Sec Secure Holding Cells_

1900 Zulu

3 May 2183

_C-Sec Academy, Citadel_

A week in solitary's nothing to half an hour at the Villa, especially when that solitary was more than earned. Before she made it to the elevators after the botched Council meeting, Anderson caught up with Kelsa and told her about a lead she could chase down; a man named Harkin, a human, one of the first in Citadel Security. Anderson said he might not know much, but he was holed up in a club called Chora's Den, which was more than good enough for Kelsa.
Harkin hadn’t known anything, except how to scream when Kelsa broke his arm. In her defence, Kelsa had a whole bottle of asari liquor behind her before she tried to ask the bastard anything. The scream had brought over a krogan bouncer who didn’t much care for her offer to settle the issue with an arm-wrestling match, so she wound up breaking his leg. Things are a little fuzzy after that, but whatever she did, Kelsa figures that five nights in the hole’s gotta be worth it.

When the door opens on the sixth day, Kelsa’s doing pull-ups without her shirt on, hanging from the bars that cover the hole in the cell’s ceiling. *Three-thirty-four*, she counts. "Six more," the soldier calls through her teeth, and she does all six reps before she drops the two-and-a-half metres to the cold grey floor. The sweat’s already cooling on her skin as she turns, and she seeks Alenko’s eyes flit across her chest, dancing from the bluejay on her shoulder to the N7 etched above her right breast. "Eyes up here, Lieutenant," she sighs, but there’s no bite in it. "You got something for me?"

Alenko nods, his eyes fixing on the wall over Kelsa’s shoulder while she rolls her shirt on. "The captain’s patched things up with C-Sec and the Council as much as he can...enough to get you out of here, anyway."

"It helps that Harkin's not pressing charges," comes a metallic voice, half-familiar. *Vakarian*, Kelsa remembers. "But I might've had something to do with that."

She can’t see the turian since Alenko’s filling the narrow doorway. "So I'm free to go?"

Alenko nods and steps aside, but Vakarian speaks up again. "As long as you let me go with you," he says as Kelsa steps out of the cell. "I heard what you told Saren last week, and I want to nail that bastard to the floor, same as you."

Kelsa looks the alien up and down; he’s not wearing a C-Sec uniform anymore. She doesn’t know if that’s good or bad. "If you wanna help me kill Arterius, welcome aboard, Vakarian."

It’s a long walk from the secure holding cells up to the academy, and the lights are just as harsh as they were when Kelsa came through, drunk and bloody. Along the way Alenko briefs her about his talk to Barla Von, a volus businessman with ties to the Shadow Broker, who says that there’s a quarian that can give them the damning evidence they need to take Arterius down, if only they can save her from his assassins in time. Eventually they make it to outprocessing, and Kelsa gets her guns and hardsuit back, with the warning that her next offence would land her in much deeper shit. She mumbles the right words and suits up, glad she didn’t have to try to break out...this time, at least.

Near the front of C-Sec Academy, Kelsa sees a krogan arguing with a human C-Sec officer. At first glance, she thinks it’s the same one that got his leg broken a week ago, but this one looks a lot more seasoned; his face and neck have an old scar from when something with three claws swiped down the side of his head, probably before she was born. "I don't take orders from you," he rumbles at C-Sec.

C-Sec's eyes narrow. "This is your only warning, Wrex."

"You should warn Fist," the krogan grunts, leaning down and in to bring his face closer to the human's. "I will kill him."

To his credit, C-Sec doesn't fold in on himself and cry, even if his voice does shake a little bit. "You want me to arrest you?"

The krogan, Wrex, chuckles. "I want you to try." Then he shoulder-checks the human as he walks
past, only stopping short when his blood-red eyes catch on the sight of Kelsa and her crew. "Do I know you, human?"

"Maybe," Kelsa shrugs. "Just got outta the hole after I broke a few tables in Chora's Den."

Wrex's eyes widen. "You're the little pyjak that broke Duggan's leg!" He looks impressed. "He's been yammering all week that it's too bad you're locked up, or else he'd kill you."

Kelsa looks around and lifts up her hands. "Looks like I ain't locked up anymore," she says. "And it looks like you and I both have some business with Fist, so I guess he'll get his chance, if he wants to take it."

The krogan barks another laugh, but then he eyes her and the squad. "Wait a minute," Wrex says. "You're going after Fist?"

"I'm going after Saren Arterius," Kelsa corrects him. "Fist is just the next door I'm kicking open to get there. I'm Commander Shepard."

Wrex rumbles, thoughtful. "Shepard...I've heard a lot about you. Not too many people get to insult the Council to their faces, and not too many humans can get the drop on a krogan, even a young pup like Duggan." He leans in, like he did with the C-Sec officer. "We're both warriors, Shepard. Out of respect, I'm giving you fair warning. I'm going to kill Fist."

Kelsa leans in, too, until she can smell the krogan's breath. "Not until I get what I need to get Arterius thrown out of the Spectres," she tells him, her nostrils flaring. "Way I see it, we can work together, or we can settle things right now."

Alenko and Vakarian both tense up, but neither reaches for a gun, not yet. "My people have a saying," Wrex says. "Seek the enemy of your enemy, and you'll find a friend." He draws up to his full height and holds out an enormous paw.

"I think we're gonna get along just fine, Wrex," Kelsa says, pumping the krogan's hand twice. "Now let's go find Fist."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who's reading along! And thanks, as always, to my indefatigable beta-reader, buttercup23! I've almost completed the first 'arc' of Sol Invictus, which will take us to the opening of ME2. That means I'm taking a little hiatus from writing, so you'll be getting more frequent updates until I run out of material. Hopefully it won't take me too long after that to get back into the swing, though.
Chapter Summary

Kelsa finally gets the evidence she needs to track Saren, and she follows up on a promising lead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Citadel Tower

1100 Zulu

6 May 2183

Presidium, Citadel

The Council took some convincing to admit Kelsa back into their audience chamber, after she and Vakarian and Wrex assaulted Chora's Den with military organisation; Udina said it was a miracle that Kelsa wasn't locked up permanently. But once they found the quarian, with her verified audio of Saren Arterius admitting his complicity in the Eden Prime attack and plotting future aggression, the councilors agreed to rehear Udina and Anderson's case. Kelsa's only here at Anderson's insistence, and other than him, she's got no backup. The aliens didn't let her bring her guns and armour back into the Citadel Tower, so she's wearing her N7 field fatigues with an Alliance beret. Not that that makes her any less dangerous, but she doesn't tell the Council that. In fact, she's decided not to say a word until spoken to first, no matter how stupid Udina and the Council get.

The turian councilor looks the least patient of the three aliens. "We were told that you have actual evidence to support the claims we've previously rejected, Ambassador," he says. "Get on with presenting it; we would like to get to more important business."

Like ignoring some other species' problems, Kelsa doesn't say. Udina doesn't bluster, for once; instead he lifts his left arm and activates his omni-tool. "Eden Prime was a major victory for us," the computer spits out, in Arterius' gruff purr. "The beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the Conduit."

The asari councilor tilts her head. "Is that authentic?" She asks, and Udina cuts the playback, just before it starts getting good.

"I shall analyse it, Tevos," the salarian councilor says, activating his own omni-tool. "Please repeat the recording, Ambassador."

Udina grumbles. "Gladly, Councilor Valern...there's more to it, as well. I believe the Council should hear all of Saren's treachery in full." The three councilors nod, even the turian, whose name Kelsa hasn't caught yet. Udina restarts the audio and Arterius' voice crackles out of his omni-tool once more. "...to finding the Conduit." After a second's pause, an unfamiliar woman's voice picks up. "And one step closer to the return of the Reapers." The ambassador's omni-tool blinks out, but he raises his arm higher, pointing his finger at the councilors. "You wanted proof," he scoffs.
"There it is."

"I know that voice," the asari councilor, Tevos, says, glancing over to her salarian counterpart. "Is the message authentic, Valern?"

"It is," the salarian tells them, but he doesn't sound too pleased to say it. "It appears Saren has betrayed us."

The turian councilor snorts angrily, but when he speaks, it's obvious he's angry at Saren. "This evidence is irrefutable, Ambassador Udina. Saren will be stripped of his Spectre status, and all efforts will be made to bring him in to answer for his crimes."

**Who's gonna be making those efforts?** Kelsa doesn't ask. Tevos frowns. "I recognise the other voice," she says again. "The one speaking with Saren. There is no way these humans could have fabricated it." She looks over to the turian. "Sparatus, it's Matriarch Benezia. I'd know her anywhere."

The turian, Sparatus, grumbles thoughtfully. "Then it appears Saren's treachery has already begun to spread beyond the Citadel. Only the spirits know how far."

"Benezia is a powerful biotic, with many followers," the asari tells them. "She will make a powerful ally for Saren."

Councilor Valern taps on his chin. "I'm more interested in these Reapers that she mentioned," he says. "What do you know about them, Ambassador?"

Udina shrugs and looks to Anderson. The captain steps forward. "Only what was extracted from the geth's memory core," he tells the Council. "The Reapers were an ancient race of machines that wiped out the protheans...then they vanished."

The human ambassador jumps in. "The geth obviously believe the Reapers are gods, and Saren is the prophet for their return." He pounds a fist into his open palm. "That's why he led them to Eden Prime, to help find the Conduit!"

The salarian councilor doesn't look satisfied. "Do we even know what this Conduit is?"


Sparatus holds up a three-taloned hand. "Listen to what you're saying, Captain," he begs Anderson. "Saren wants to bring back a race of machines that wiped out all civilisation from the galaxy?" He shakes his head. "Impossible. It has to be." He sounds like he's trying to convince himself. "Where did these Reapers go? Why did they vanish, and how come we've found no trace of their existence?" The turian's mandibles twitch. "If they were real, we'd have found something!" Kelsa's discipline stretches to the breaking point, but she just manages to hold back her tongue; to tell the truth, she's been a little freaked out ever since the quarian, Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, played the recording of Saren and Benezia in Udina's office a couple of days ago. Those bad dreams she had on Eden Prime were almost past her, until she heard of the Reapers...since then, she hasn't been sleeping too good.

"The Reapers are obviously a myth," Valern scoffs, and Kelsa isn't sure she disagrees with the salarian. "A convenient lie to cover Saren's true purpose, whatever that may be." *I hope so,* Kelsa thinks to herself, as hard as she's ever thought anything.

Tevos brings up a console on the podium in front of her, and after a few seconds of furious typing,
she nods to herself. "There," she says. "Saren Arterius has been stripped of his Spectre authority, and he is now considered a rogue agent. That should strip him of the resources he needs to enact his plans."

"That is not good enough," Ambassador Udina declares, raising his fist again. "You know he's hiding somewhere in the Traverse! Send your fleet in!" Kelsa can tell right off the bat that Udina's tone isn't likely to get him what he wants, but she chalks that up to him being unable to back up the threat behind his demand with any actual force.

Valern frowns. "A fleet can hardly track down one man," he points out.

Undaunted, Udina keeps pressing on. "The Citadel Fleet could secure the entire area," he says. "Prevent the geth from attacking any more of our colonies."

"Or it could trigger a war with the Terminus Systems," Sparatus answers, dismissing the ambassador's concern with a wave. "We won't be dragged into a galactic confrontation over a few dozen human colonies!"

Kelsa's resolve finally breaks. "Don't send in a fleet, then," she says, almost too quietly for the dignitaries to hear. "Send me after him."

Udina and Anderson both jump, as though they forgot she was standing behind them, and the asari councilor looks thoughtful for a minute. "That is one solution worth considering," she admits.

The turian doesn't think so, apparently. "No!" He growls. "It's too soon!" Kelsa blinks, understanding too late how the Council must've interpreted her outburst, but Sparatus goes on before she can say anything. "Humanity is not ready for the responsibility that comes with joining the Spectres!"

"It was a turian Spectre who betrayed this Council," Captain Anderson says, forcefully. "And it was a human who exposed him!" He gives Kelsa a sidelong glance. "She's more than earned this."

But I don't want-it's too late, Kelsa can tell. All three councilors look back and forth at one another just that same way they did the last time Kelsa saw them, when they declared the evidence against Arterius insufficient. After a minute, each one of them nods, and they start tapping on their consoles. Kelsa can feel eyes on her; Anderson's, of course, and Udina's, but also at least a dozen pairs from the Citadel Tower's diplomats and dignitaries. The chamber's wings, empty only a few minutes ago, now look full of curious onlookers. Councilor Tevos is the first to look up from her console, right at Kelsa. "Commander Shepard," the asari says, with a little smile on her face. "Step forward." Kelsa does so, swallowing down her objections, standing as tall and proud as she thinks Anderson expects her to. Whispers trickle in from the crowd in the wings, an uncertain murmuring, and even more people press into the balconies to each side of the Council's dais. The asari councilor lets the whispers run for about thirty seconds before she keeps going. "It is the decision of the Council that you be granted all of the powers and privileges of the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance branch of the Citadel."

Valern picks up where Tevos leaves off. "Spectres are not trained," he says, practiced awe in his voice, "but chosen. Individuals forged in the fire of service and battle; those whose actions elevate them above the rank and file."

Kelsa feels sick to her stomach, but she doesn't twitch a muscle. She doesn't want this, but she can't say no; she can't disappoint Anderson. She can't disappoint Jay, even if he's only a few faded memories in the back of her head. The asari councilor starts talking again, about how Spectres are symbols that embody the galaxy's highest ideals, but the human soldier doesn't listen too closely.
She can't, or else she'll scream at them; she's not a hero and she's not a guardian of galactic peace, no matter how much Councilor Sparatus growls about it. It's only when the salarian councilor starts talking to her directly that Kelsa stops her mind from wandering.

"We're sending you into the Traverse after Saren," Valern tells her. "He's now a fugitive from justice, so you're authorised to use any means necessary to apprehend or eliminate him."

Kelsa can't imagine three more beautiful words in any language. "Any means necessary," she repeats, almost unable to believe it. Not even Alliance Special Forces can promise her that.

"You're a Council Spectre," Sparatus says. "In the execution of our missions, you answer to no authority but us." He doesn't sound happy. "Saren was one of our most skilled assets, Commander. Are you certain you can get the job done?"

The soldier salutes, as sharp and crisp as if the turian was an Alliance admiral. "Yes, sir," she tells him. "I'll find Saren Arterius, and I will end him."

Subsurface Prothean Ruins

1945 Zulu

12 May 2183

Therum (ashore), Knossos

It took the Alliance two days to give Kelsa a ship, and a promotion to staff commander along with it, even though she didn't ask for either of them. And she damn sure didn't ask to take the Normandy off Anderson's hands after a single mission, but Hackett gave it to her, anyway. Anderson said he didn't hold it against her, that finding Arterius was more important, but Kelsa can still feel the sting behind his eyes, mixed in with his pride. That was four days ago. Now the Normandy's a one-ship flotilla, attached to the Fifth Fleet but outside its regular order of battle; Kelsa's in charge of the mission parameters, and while she and the ship are technically part of the Alliance, Hackett's designated himself to an advisory role until the Council's business is concluded. To that end, Kelsa's spent the last four days scouring the Artemis Tau cluster in search of Matriarch Benezia's daughter, who's supposed to be some kind of prothean expert. The asari's allegiance is unknown, but if Arterius gets his hands on her, he'll use her to help him find the Conduit, and Kelsa can't let that happen.

It looks like Kelsa and her team have struck gold on Therum, a dusty rock world dotted with prothean ruins and guarded by several platoons worth of geth. Even though they're made of silicon and wires rather than flesh and blood, they all stop twitching if you shoot them enough times...or just the once, if you're using the Mako's gun. Kelsa's dropped thirty-two of them since they had to leave the tank behind, just ahead of Wrex's thirty and Alenko's twenty-eight. Vakarian's taken twenty-five looks through his scope and he's seen a machine drop each and every time, which means he'd be the undisputed champion if they counted kills per shot.

"A dead flashlight's a dead flashlight," Alenko gruffs, when Vakarian points that out. He must've got the nickname from Williams, who's back on the Normandy, helping Tali'Zorah guard the engine room. "You want to take out a few more, you've got that assault rifle hooked to your shoulder."

Wrex cackles. "You'd both see more action if you didn't hide behind every damn scrap of rock you came across." While he's talking, one of the high-jumping synthetics leaps down from the ceiling...
of the cave they're picking their way down, but before the krogan can take it out, Kelsa steals his kill. "Now that's not fair, Shepard," he grumbles.

The soldier shrugs, throwing a glance behind her. "You talk too much," she tells them, smirking. Thirty-three. "Come on," she says, rolling a nod to a rickety-looking elevator. "The signal's coming from underneath us." Kelsa hangs back to let the others onto the platform, only because that means she'll be the first one off when it reaches the next level down.

Or she would, if the geth hadn't fucked up the scaffolding so that the platform hitches halfway to the cavern floor. The whole thing shudders and tips sideways, and Kelsa has to jump onto a stony outcropping to keep from falling all the way. Rock chips off around her from incoming fire, and instinct drives the soldier on, so that she dives and dances onto some lower boulders. The wall to her left's unnatural, smooth stone carved with designs from over fifty thousand years ago; the discovery shut down the mine by Alliance and galactic law, and the mining company simply abandoned the shaft, leaving all of their equipment to rot underground. A quick glance tells Kelsa that some kind of stasis field covers the gap in the prothean ruin, and she judges it safe to leave that flank unguarded as she looks for better cover amidst the rock and the drilling machines. Another twenty-seven geth later, eight of them Kelsa's kills, and the cavern's finally still. Still, but not quite silent.

A muffled echo draws the soldier's attention back to that blue-tinted wall, and a soldier's wariness sees Kelsa level her shotgun, just in case. She sees the figure of an asari caught in the middle of the force field, the alien's feet nearly a metre from the ruin's floor. Kelsa doesn't relax, though, even as she crosses the littered floor; she keeps her gun up, and the rest of her squad follows her lead. "Are you Liara T'Soni?" Kelsa asks, once she's close enough to make out the asari's whimpers more plainly.

The alien can wiggle a little, just enough to try to talk. "I am," she says, her voice echoing strangely through the kinetic barrier. "Please, help me...I've been trapped here...for days, possibly."

Kelsa doesn't move. "How'd you get stuck like that?"

"I was investigating these ruins," the asari tells them. "It appears...I must have activated some kind of...security field," she manages, but it's clear that every word takes more effort than the last. "The control panel is...behind me. If you can...reach it...that would help."

The soldier looks back to the ruined elevator. "Doesn't look like we're getting out the way we came in," she says, more to herself than anything. "There another way up back there, too, T'Soni?"

"There is," the asari warbles, but Kelsa turns her back to the trapped alien.

"Alenko," the commander snaps. "Keep her in your sights." The lieutenant replies with an uncertain Aye, aye, Commander, and Kelsa stalks back through the cave until she comes to a big machine that looks like it could come in handy. "I think this'll help."

"I think so, Shepard," Vakarian says, from three steps behind her. Covering her back, even though he's not under her command; they're both after the same thing, they're both soldiers, and that's good enough. "It's a mining laser, Eldfell-Ashland proprietary design...which means they stole it from a turian firm," he quips. "Give me two minutes and I can have it slicing through this rock like a sword through the sea."

Kelsa nods and directs Wrex and Alenko to stand aside. True to his word, the turian has the laser spinning to his will, and he uses it to carve a trench down to the next level of ruins. "I...think that did it," T'Soni gasps. "Please hurry...I think I'm running...out of air..."
The commander leads the charge down the new pathway, but there aren't any geth waiting for them in the lower section of the prothean ruin. Just as T'Soni said, there's a way up to her level; another elevator, both far older and much more advanced than the platforms that Eldfell-Ashland threw up in the catacombs to help their miners get around. Just as the elevator reaches the captive asari, an ominous rumbling sounds from the walls of the cave beyond her. "Shit," Kelsa says. "Looks like we don't have too much time."

Alenko's already at the control panel that T'Soni told them about. "I...think I can get this," he says. "Doctor T'Soni, do you know which buttons I should press to release you?"

"I...I'm not sure," T'Soni tells him, struggling, trying to turn her head. She can't quite make it. "I know the code is directional...you see there are four circular buttons? Those will take down the shields...if you can press them...in the correct order..."

"Got it," the lieutenant vows. The ruins are shaking, just a little bit, and Alenko's gotta try three times, but he eventually figures out the right sequence. The blue-tinted barriers flicker and die, and the asari falls onto her hands and knees.

Kelsa makes sure she doesn't stay that way for long; the soldier rushes forward, picking T'Soni up roughly by the collar of her uniform and pinning her against the old prothean wall. Kelsa's combat knife whispers against the alien's sapphire throat, just underneath her jaw, while the soldier's shotgun rests flush against T'Soni's cheek. "I've got three questions," Kelsa tells the other woman, "and if I don't like your answers, I will kill you, asari. You get me?"

"Commander," Alenko ventures, nervous. "This place is about to come down...is now really the time?"

Kelsa's green eyes don't twitch away from the asari's sapphire orbs. "It is if she wants to keep breathing for more than five minutes," she tells her subordinate. "Now, tell me what Saren Arterius wants with this place."

The asari's face is blank, from shock or exhaustion or terror, but mention of the name should've registered something. Instead, even with the possible tools her of own death within millimetres of her face, T'Soni blinks. "I've never heard that name before," the asari claims.

For some reason, Kelsa believes her. A few chips rain down from the ceiling, too close above them. "Okay," she says. "Do you know what your mother's been up to? Why she's betrayed the Council?"

The ridges that serve as the asari's eyebrows pull together. "Betrayed...what?" Now she looks afraid, but it's not the fear of guilt, at least as far as Kelsa can tell. "I've not spoken more than pleasantries with Mother in over fifty years, since I finished University and struck out on my own."

It's Kelsa's turn to blink. Fifty years? She almost asks how old T'Soni is, but that would burn up her last question, and they really don't have a lot of time. "Have you ever heard of the Reapers?"

Several loud crashes steal the words of T'Soni's response, but it's clear that she said no. "Come on, Shepard," Wrex yells. "This place's gonna blow!"

Kelsa hesitates for one more heartbeat before she pulls back. "Keep an eye on her," she yells to Alenko, and she punches the ancient elevator to take them as high as it'll go the second he pulls the asari onto the platform. As high as it'll go doesn't quite get them to the surface, though, and there's a fresh gang of geth waiting for them in the tunnel that the elevator connects them to.
A gigantic krogan, even bigger than Wrex, looks to be their leader. "I believe that belongs to Saren," he rumbles, pointing his assault rifle in the asari's direction. "As thanks for retrieving her, I'm to give you a quick-"

"We don't have time for this shit," Kelsa barks, lunging into a run. She's still got her big field knife in her left hand, turned down so the flat of the blade's flush with her forearm. The distance to her quarry disappears before she's even finished talking, and Kelsa takes a spray of assault rifle fire on her shields before she can sink the knife into the krogan's eye. That, coupled with a point-blank shotgun blast to the turtle-man's throat, is just enough to bring him down with a gurgled scream. Kelsa lets go of her knife as the krogan falls, using her momentum to bull into the geth. She takes two of them out, but the rest are just a distraction that the others can clean up, and she urges the rest of the team forward as the cave shakes apart around them.

The Normandy's sleek profile is waiting for the party at the mouth of the cave, and Kelsa can't imagine a more welcoming sight. She dives into the open cargo bay, rolling to one knee, and a half-second later she's joined by the rest of the shore party, along with a thick plume of red-brown dust from the final collapse of the ruins.

"Cutting it a little close there, Commander," Moreau quips over the intercom. "Another ten seconds and we'd've had to pull you out of lava and sulfur. The Normandy's not really spec'd to land in an active volcano...you know, for future reference."

Kelsa coughs, choking on the first answer that comes to mind. She sees that someone, probably Williams, has recovered the Mako. "Get us the fuck outta here, Lieutenant," she says instead. "Set course for the relay."

"Aye, aye, Commander," the pilot affirms. "Know where you want us to jump to?"

The soldier straightens up, taking stock of her crew, and their new guest. "Haven't decided," she admits. "We picked up a package I wanna open first. Shepard out." The comm crackles and cuts out. "Everybody all right?"

Vakarian and Wrex both say they're fine. "Just some scrapes and bruises, ma'am," Alenko tells her, but he nods to T'Soni. "I think Liara should see Doctor Chakwas, though. Exhaustion and dehydration, if for no other reason."

The asari struggles to her feet. "I'm fine, really," she says. "Now that I've been able to move and breathe…"

Kelsa grunts a laugh. "I didn't scramble that krogan's brain just to watch you die of thirst." She checks her gun for dust, but the gesture must look menacing, because the asari flinches. Kelsa frowns, but she doesn't feel guilty. "I'll take you to see the doc, then we'll hold a debriefing in the comm room. Everybody meet up there in half an hour." She looks over to the armory bench. "You too, Williams. Bring the quarian." The other human woman snaps off an Aye, aye, ma'am, even though she was skulking around and trying to make herself invisible to the mostly-alien party. Kelsa nods and caches her shotgun at the small of her back, making a note to clean it out when she gets the chance, and then she gestures for T'Soni to follow her. The asari hesitates, sparing a glance to Alenko, who probably seems much friendlier. "It wasn't a request, T'Soni," the commander reminds her.

Finally the alien draws up her courage, and follows Kelsa into the elevator. Here, in the ship's brighter lights, Kelsa can see more details; the splash of darker freckles over the asari's pale-blue cheeks, the purple hue to her lips. She's tall, taller than Alenko, but she's obviously rattled by Kelsa's inspection. "I am at a loss," T'Soni says, swallowing; as she does so, Kelsa notices a thin
line of purple on the right-hand side of the asari's throat, where the knife whispered just a little too closely. "You know my name, even my mother's name, but I don't know yours."

The soldier takes a breath, and the elevator doors open onto the crew deck. "I never knew my momma's name," she admits, and she's not quite sure why she does it. "But she called me Kelsa."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everybody who's reading along, and an extra-special thanks to buttercup23 for being such an awesome beta-reader!
Ch. 10: A Helping Hand

Chapter Summary

Dr. Liara T'Soni never expected to find herself conscripted to fight a war; now she must suffer under Kelsa's suspicious gaze on the one hand and the Commander's penchant for charging into the teeth of danger on the other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Communications Room, SSV Normandy

0115 Zulu

13 May 2183

FTL Transit to Mass Relay, Artemis Tau Cluster

The first time she was in the comm room there were only two chairs here, the swivel-kind, bolted to the floor. Now Pressly-whose ground-fighting days are long behind him, which made him Kelsa's choice for XO over Alenko-has decked the room with enough folding chairs for everyone in Kelsa's shore party to sit if they want. Kelsa doesn't want to, and neither does Wrex, but everyone else grabs a chair, until they make a loose circle. The captain leans against a near wall, instead.

Alenko's the first to talk. "How're you feeling, Dr. T'Soni?" Apparently, he's still taking it upon himself to watch out for her.

The asari manages a smile, and for some reason, she shoots a glance Kelsa's way. "I'm as well as one might expect, given the circumstances," she says. "Thank you for your concern, Lieutenant."

Williams speaks up from one of the swivel chairs. "So what the hell went on down there, ma'am?" The gunnery chief's voice doesn't hide hurt feelings well, but her face is a mask.

"Geth were trying to...how would Ellison put it?" Kelsa's brow arches and she racks her memory for the drill instructor that both she and Williams had on Titan, years apart. Fucker loved using big words. "Ahh, yes," the commander hums. "Abscond...with the good doctor here. We got her first."

"For which I'm grateful," T'Soni says, but she's cut off when Kelsa and Williams both cut her with suspicious glances.

The gunny doesn't look too willing to take the asari's gratitude. "Your mom's working for Saren, isn't she?"

T'Soni's head dips. "That is what your captain has told me," she admits. "I cannot say that the commander is wrong."

"Then how can we trust you?" Williams demands. "You could be spying-"
"Williams," Kelsa barks, kicking off from the wall. "Stand down." The other woman chokes off whatever she was going to say, and the captain moves to the middle of the circle. "T'Soni knows the situation." She knows how it'll go if I catch her doing anything she shouldn't. "Tali, play your message, so we can remove any doubt."

"Of course, Shepard," the quarian answers, her voice modulated by the environmental suit that every member of her species has to wear for most of their lives. Something wrong with their immune systems, as far as Kelsa remembers from OCS.

Kelsa watches T'Soni's face closely as the recording plays back a woman's voice talking about the return of the Reapers. Shock and confusion give way to dismay. "So it is true," the asari breathes. "This Spectre has betrayed the Council, and somehow gotten my mother mixed up in it...but I'm still not certain why they're interested in me."

"Saren's interested in finding the Conduit," Tali'Zorah says. "You're a prothean expert. He probably wanted you to help him find it."

The asari's brow ridges bunch up. "I've spent most of my life studying the protheans, it's true...but I've never heard of this Conduit, nor the Reapers, for that matter." She looks from the quarian to Kelsa, and then her eyes widen. "But...it can't be!"

Kelsa crosses her arms. "Talk, asari. What do you know?"

"I've spent the last fifty years studying the protheans," T'Soni tells her. "Their ruins, what we have of their writings. I've pieced together a number of clues about when and how they vanished, fifty thousand years ago...but I haven't been able to figure out why, exactly."

Now that they aren't in the middle of an erupting volcano, Kelsa lets her curiosity get the better of her. "And just how old are you, T'Soni?"

The asari's cheeks twinge a deeper shade of blue. "I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I am only a hundred and six Thessian years old," T'Soni lets on.

The commander knows she shouldn't be surprised, but she can't help husking a laugh. "Only a hundred and six, huh?"

T'Soni's lips curl into a smile. "A century may seem like a long time to a short-lived species like yours, Commander," she says, "but among the asari, I am barely considered more than a child."

Kelsa finds her eyes drawn downward, just to the alien woman's neck; there's not even a hint of a scar from where her knife kissed T'Soni's flesh. Chakwas did a fine job. The commander's gaze snaps quickly upward when the asari keeps talking. "That is why my research has not received the attention it deserves," she explains. "Because of my youth, other asari scholars tend to dismiss my hypotheses on what happened to the protheans. But...if these Reapers truly do exist, we are all in far more danger than we may realise." Kelsa only nods, willing the woman to get to the point. "There are many theories about why the protheans disappeared, but they left remarkably little behind. But according to my findings, the protheans were not the first galactic civilisation to rise...nor were they the first to be violently cast down by some mysterious, pan-galactic cataclysm. The cycle began long before them."

"The geth seem to almost worship the Reapers," Tali'Zorah adds. "From what little data I could recover from the module, they believe that the Reapers are waiting, and when they return, they will destroy all organic life, leaving the galaxy the realm of synthetics."

Kelsa's heart thuds a half-tick faster. "You think the geth could have the right idea, T'Soni?" She
"The protheans began on a single planet," the asari says. "They rose up to found an empire which spanned the breadth of the galaxy, but their way was forged on the ruins of what came before...much like modern galactic society has emerged from the ashes of the Prothean Empire. Recently, I'd begun to suspect that their greatest achievements—the Mass Relays and the Citadel—were built from technology which must've come before."

Vakarian's multi-toned voice rumbles a concerned hum. "So you're saying that the entire history of the galaxy is wrong? That there's something to Saren's madness?"

T'Soni considers the turian for a second. "I'm saying there might be," she says at last. "It would fit with the pattern I've discerned from half a century of dedicated study. If only I had more evidence..."

"I think I might have some," Kelsa grunts, frowning. Her insides feel cold, and she has to keep from snapping at the curiosity she sees in the asari's face. "On Eden Prime, I got caught up in some prothean technology of my own," she goes on. "It was a beacon. Filled my head with...visions."

T'Soni doesn't look like that's nearly as silly as it sounds. "Vision...?" Then, miraculously, she nods instead of laughing. "Yes, that makes sense."

"It does?" Kelsa and Williams both ask at the same time; the gunny mumbles an apology when the commander raises a brow at her, and Kelsa quickly turns her attention back to the asari.

"The protheans' beacons were designed to transmit information directly into the mind of the user," T'Soni explains. "Finding one that still works is extremely rare!" Despite being trapped in a force field, then being shot at while outrunning a rockfall, the asari still manages to sound excited and, maybe, just a little jealous.

Kelsa glances down at the cold metal floor between them. "Yeah," she says. "It...broke, after I activated it."

Alenko clears his throat. "The commander got caught up in it after she pushed me away. It's my fault the beacon was destroyed."

"It's a wonder that you're still alive, Commander," T'Soni says. "The beacons were only programmed to interact with prothean physiology, which had to have been much more robust than the average human's." Kelsa looks up to see something close to admiration behind the asari's eyes, and that makes her feel even worse than the little flickers of fear that she spied before taking T'Soni to the med bay. "I am...amazed that you were able to make any sense of the information at all, Commander. A lesser mind would've been utterly destroyed in the process. You must be remarkably strong-willed."

Wrex laughs, low and resonant enough for Kelsa to feel it in her chest. "You saw Shepard take down a krogan battlemaster single-handed, with a buck knife and a boom stick," he chuckles. "And you're surprised she can take a little heat from some old computer?"

T'Soni sniffs and covers her mouth. "In the short time I've known Commander Shepard, she has surprised me more times than I care to count," the asari says through her fingers, keeping her eyes turned away from Kelsa.

The commander's throat tickles, but she swallows the odd sensation away. "I wouldn't get too impressed, doc," she deflects. "The images were all confused. To be honest, I was kinda hoping..."
that I just got a little addled." *No such luck,* comes the whisper in her thoughts. "And this ain't exactly helping us find Arterius, or the Conduit, when it comes to that."

That brings T'Soni's attention back into focus. "Of course, Commander," she says. "My scientific curiosity got the better of me for a moment...but I'm not at all surprised that you're having trouble sifting through the images from the beacon." Without seeming to realise it, the asari pulls her top lip between her teeth, and when she lets it go, it's half a shade darker. "If...if you liked, I could try to help you sort it out."

Kelsa arches a brow, understanding the offer almost immediately. "You want to do that asari brain trick with me? Get in my head?"

"You know about melding," T'Soni breathes, not quite a question, and not quite an answer, either. The commander feels four human and six alien eyes on her—eight, if you count the quarian's—and she shrugs. "I'll take a yes or no, T'Soni." Kelsa doesn't feel like explaining herself to her crew, at least not all at once.

The asari pauses to think, but then she nods. "Then yes, Commander. If you're willing to give it a try."

Williams scoffs. "Let an alien mess around in your head? Doesn't sound like a good idea, Commander."

"Agreed," Kelsa sighs. "But it doesn't look like I've got a whole lotta choice, if I want to try and get a full night's sleep this side of the year 2200." She shakes her head when T'Soni sits forward. "Not here, though. Lieutenant Alenko'll show you to my chambers; in the meantime, I've gotta debrief the Council." The asari nods, and Kelsa scans the rest of the room. "You're all dismissed. Try and get some rest." The humans and aliens file out of the room, with parting calls of *Commander* or simply *Shepard,* depending on whether or not they're officially under Kelsa's command. When the door closes behind Williams, the commander has Moreau patch her through to the Council, for all the good she thinks that'll do.

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**Medical Bay, SSV Normandy**

**0735 Zulu**

**13 May 2183**

**FTL Transit to Sparta System, Artemis Tau Cluster**

The asari's eyes scrunch up and her throat makes a tense, strangled sound, but it relaxes into a groan. "What...where am I?" Those sapphire eyes flutter open, and Kelsa looks away, for the first time since she carried T'Soni into the med bay.

Chakwas comes to the commander's rescue. "You're on the *Normandy,* Dr. T'Soni," she explains. "Commander Shepard brought you here after an incident in her quarters about half an hour ago. How are you feeling?"

"I'm...not sure," the asari admits, bringing her fingers up to brush over her cheek, bruised a darker tint of blue than the rest of her face. "The last thing I remember is trying to meld with Ke...with the Commander."

Kelsa's eyes flit up at the slip of the tongue; no one's called her by her name in years. Even the
aliens aboard call her Shepard. A small part of her wonders what nearly drove T'Soni over that edge, and then what made her pull back. "I think I punched you," the soldier says, her mouth twisting. "As soon as you touched me, it was like going through the beacon's vision all over again."

T'Soni winces, either from her own touch or from the memory. "Yes...I recall a little, now. The information imparted by the beacon is even more complex than I'd thought possible." She sighs and struggles to sit up on the table. "I suppose I should thank you, Commander."

Kelsa arches a brow and shoots a glance to Chakwas. "You sure she ain't fucked up, doc?"

"I assure you, I am quite myself," T'Soni insists. "Though if you hadn't broken our connection...I'm not sure that would've been the case." She smiles to herself and looks away. "I don't believe I could have withstood even the echo in your mind for a few moments. The visions were all-consuming."

The soldier steadies herself with a breath, unsure what to make of the other woman's confidence. "Leave us," she tells Chakwas, remembering her own recent awakening in this very room. "Please." The human doctor double-checks some diagnostic readings from the table and then complies; only once she's alone with the asari does Kelsa let herself feel a thread of guilt. "I am sorry, T'Soni," she says, frowning. "Is there somewhere safe in the Traverse we can drop you?"

"You do not wish my help on your mission to stop Saren?"

"You said yourself you don't know anything else," Kelsa points out. "If you're telling the truth, you'll just get in the way. If you're lying, I'll wind up having to shoot you. I don't really wanna do that." She realises that she's telling the truth even while she says it.

T'Soni looks like she believes the threat. "I don't know anything that could help Saren find the Conduit," she repeats. "But that doesn't mean I can't be of use to you...nor does it mean Saren won't send more geth after me, wherever I go." The asari hugs herself and glances down, looking small and vulnerable.

That doesn't make Kelsa want to keep her around, because the soldier knows that where she's going, small and vulnerable things won't live too long. "You've seen what happens when geth come after me," she says. "I don't run away, I don't hide. And I don't trust you enough to leave you on my ship while I'm not around, so if you stay here, you're gonna wind up face-to-face with things trying to kill you...or worse."

"I can defend myself," the asari claims, getting a bit defensive. She slips off of the medical table and straightens up, holding up a hand; the air around it glows a fluorescent blue for a second before she closes her fist. "All asari are given basic lessons in combat biotics and firearms training as part of their general education."

Kelsa grits her teeth. "Great," she says. "How many people've you killed, T'Soni?"

The alien blinks, her face falling. "...None, Commander," she admits. "I've spent my entire adult life on my own, or among other scientists. I...imagine you've had to take a few lives."

"Six hundred and sixty-four, if you count geth," the soldier says, automatically. "Five seventy, if you don't."

T'Soni goes a little pale under the room's lights. "That's a bit more than a few, I suppose." Then she takes a breath and shakes her head. "That only makes me feel even more strongly that I'd be far safer at your side than in your path, Commander." She returns Kelsa's smirk with a little smile of
her own. "I understand your suspicion...maternal bonds run deeply in many species, and I imagine that my lack of relationship with my mother might seem strange to humans. But I have nothing to hide."

Kelsa nods, once. "We'll see," she says. "Meantime, get down to the shuttle bay and get yourself outfitted with the armoury. Tell Chief Williams I told her to keep an eye on you." If she didn't know better, Kelsa'd think she sees a little colour rise in T'Soni's cheeks. She blinks and turns away, telling herself that it's just the light playing with the asari's bruise.

M35 Mako Infantry Fighting Vehicle

1210 Zulu

16 May 2183

Edolus (ashore), Sparta

When she accepted Admiral Kahoku's request to search for his missing unit in the Sparta system, Kelsa didn't think it'd be anything more than a distraction. That's why she let Alenko and Wrex and Vakarian stay back on the Normandy, to catch up on some rest after Therum. True to her word, she brought T'Soni with her, and Williams was only too happy to come along; it didn't seem fair to keep Tali'Zorah back in the engine room while the others got to see a planet from the Mako, so Kelsa invited the quarian, too. Now Kelsa bets Tali'Zorah regrets accepting that invitation, and she knows Wrex'll regret missing out on all the fun.

"I don't think I've ever heard anyone describe a thresher maw as fun until now." T'Soni's voice is at least two octaves higher than Kelsa's ever heard it before.

Williams lays on the anti-personnel fire at the enormous worm while Kelsa zig-zags the Mako backwards. "Starting to re-think your decision to stay with the crew, doc?" The gunny asks, face jammed in the gunsights.

The asari starts to answer, but Williams fires the Mako's cannon, and the whole cabin shudders with the force of the enormous mass effect round's departure. "I'd feel better if I were more useful," T'Soni manages, and then she gasps, grabbing the cockpit's frame as Kelsa swerves to dodge a gob of toxic spit from the creature.

The commander watches the big shot impact high on the maw's abdomen, and it shudders convincingly, whining as it slithers backward into the hole it popped out of. "Think you can drive, T'Soni?" She looks to her right, where the alien's sitting beside her, at the front of the tank. On adrenaline-fueled impulse, the soldier shifts the steering wheel over to the other woman. "Squeeze the right handle to go forward, left to go back. Williams has control of the guns, so you don't have to worry about that."

"I don't understand," T'Soni breathes, as Kelsa unstraps herself from the driver's seat. "Is it dead?"

"No," Kelsa and Williams answer at the same time. We're really gonna have to stop doing that, Kelsa thinks to herself, scrabbling toward the hatch. "Try not to get eaten while I'm gone."

Tali'Zorah speaks up for the first time since the giant, ravenous space worm nearly flipped them a couple of minutes before. "Shouldn't you be worried about getting eaten yourself, Shepard?"

Kelsa secures her helmet to her hardsuit and unships her shotgun even before she opens the hatch. "I'm an Alliance Marine," she explains. "Too tough to swallow." She gives Williams one last
glance. "Make some noise; I'll get on its six when it shows up again."

"Aye, Skipper," Williams barks, probably still too grateful to be scared.

Kelsa's scared when she jumps down onto the dusty, yellow-brown sand. She's faced a maw once before, as part of her N6 training out in the Styx Theta cluster, but the order of the day was survival and extraction back then. She ran away, she survived, but she didn't like it...and she didn't have a Mako to use as bait. "Cut an arc across the plain," she says into her helmet. "Circle around the wrecked tank and shoot into the ground."

"Yes, Commander," comes T'Soni's voice, and the Mako lurches forward. Williams does her part, scoring the ground with automatic weapon fire and the occasional cannon round as the asari finds the tank's balance.

Kelsa doesn't move a centimetre from where she landed on the ground, and she won't until the thresher maw reappears; she's scared, but it's the good kind of scared, with her heart thudding and her legs itching to run...but she can't, not yet. Not if she wants to keep herself outside of the big worm's belly.

When the Mako's about half a click away, the ground shudders and splits open right behind it, and Kelsa sees the scales and spines of the thresher maw's back rise up out of the dusty earth. The air cracks with an ear-splitting cry, and Kelsa's running before she knows it, running as fast as she can in her crimson armour. The Mako's swinging around, drawing the maw's attention, dodging acid spit and returning fire. It takes about half a minute for the soldier to cross the distance at her wild sprint, and the thresher maw still doesn't seem to notice her, until she jumps up onto the worm's scaly spine.

The maw cries out again, the sound cutting through Kelsa's shields and armour, vibrating painfully in her own lungs, but the soldier pushes on, using the worm's scales and tentacles to climb hand-over-hand until she reaches the curve of the maw's neck. She's at least thirty metres above the ground, now, and the worm almost manages to shake her off with a sudden shake of its head. Williams puts a cannon shell right in the maw's open mouth, which stuns the beast long enough for Kelsa to get a firmer footing. She pulls out her new combat knife and sinks it deep between the joint of two scales, even as her fingers tingle from another world-ending scream.

Kelsa keeps prying at those scales until they come loose, and she replaces the blade with her shotgun. She fires round after round into the softer flesh while T'Soni drives in figure-eights and Williams still manages to keep the cannon trained on the maw's gaping jaws. Black blood starts bubbling up between Kelsa's knees, and she keeps shooting, her ears ringing too loudly for her to hear her own grunted screams. The shotgun jams, too hot, so the soldier throws it away and takes up her pistol. Between her steady attack on the back of the thresher maw's head and Williams' regular bombardments, the ravenous space worm finally begins to tremble uncontrollably; its cries no longer scythe into Kelsa's bones, more pity than venom now. At the last minute, the soldier tips sideways, rolling into a controlled sprint down the middle of the monster's back as it rears up even higher off the ground.

Gravity gets the best of Kelsa ten metres from the sand, and she's just lucky that Edolus' gravity is just weak enough to keep her from breaking her legs when she hits the ground. The thresher maw isn't so fortunate; it tips sideways, making a wide arc, and the back of its head splits open when it lands. Yellow-brown dust turns into black mud as the worm bleeds out in the desert, and its twitching tentacles jerk more and more slowly, until they finally lay still.

Kelsa's helmet crackles. "You okay, Skipper?"
The soldier never thought she'd be so happy to hear Williams' voice. "Damn right," she gruffs, pushing up to her feet and looking around for her discarded weapons. "Stay sharp; there might be more around." After a minute of looking, Kelsa finds her shotgun sticking out of the sand at an angle. *Fuck*, she snorts, when it turns up jammed. "Rendez-vous at the Grizzly," she tells the Mako crew, burying her frustration under the exultation that comes from still breathing after you've come face to face with one of the deadliest things in the galaxy. Except for the Reapers, a small voice cuts through the adrenaline. "Yeah," she tells herself. "And I'll kill those bastards, too."

An uncertain voice sounds in her helmet, most likely T'Soni's. "What was that, Commander?"

Kelsa swallows. "Nothing," she barks. "Just talking to myself. I'll be at the wreck in a couple minutes." It isn't much farther than the thresher maw was, but each step seems like it takes forever, and when she gets to the ruined Alliance M29 Grizzly, the soldier's still too hopped-up to pretend to have any sympathy for the dead soldiers strewn about it. If they'd been better soldiers, she wouldn't be here; but they weren't, so she is.

"Look here, ma'am," Williams calls, from a few yards away. "Here's the distress beacon...looks like it was put up here deliberately, to draw people in." She gives the commander a significant look. "Doesn't seem right, does it?"

"Not even a little bit, Chief," Kelsa says, frowning. She patches her HUD through to the *Normandy*. "Moreau, we're ready for extraction. Got a beacon that needs analysing."

"Roger that, Commander," the pilot's voice crackles. "ETA forty-five seconds."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for all of the kudos, and thanks especially to my awesome beta-reader, buttercup23!
Chapter Summary

Kelsa seeks the company of a few of her squadmates before they hit Feros on the next leg of the mission.

Kelsa's in an old place, a dead place, with shelves full of books and scrolls. The air's dusty, the light red-tinted, but not from the windows. Everything's covered with a couple of centimetres of dust; nobody's walked in these halls in half a dozen centuries...maybe more. Why'm I here, then? Kelsa asks herself, and though her lips don't move, her voice echoes around the chamber like a church bell.

She looks around, but she can't find a door near her. The room stretches off forever in front of her, though, and there are small windows up near the ceiling. The sky's red, like it's burning. Like it's blood.

A hitched cry draws all of Kelsa's senses, and a second look at the floor shows a trail through the dust on the floor, like somebody's had to crawl through it. Curious, Kelsa's eyes follow the trail back to her own feet, and then to the wall behind her. Follow, the walls whisper to her. Follow and fulfill your fate.

Kelsa doesn't see any other way out of this room, so she decides to follow the trail. She doesn't think anything of the blue-purple smears that show up at irregular intervals; her attention's stolen by the high shelves around her, stuffed so full. On a whim she stops walking and reaches as high as she can; a puff of dust whirls as she pulls down a cracked, leather-bound tome. It's so heavy that it takes both of Kelsa's hands to keep it from falling to the floor. The cover's scrawled with runic shapes that she's never seen before.

She tries to open the book, but as soon as the cover lifts enough to let her glimpse the first page, the entire mass disintegrates into glittering, golden dust. Follow, the walls urge her, and the globs of red-gold dust look like drops of blood suspended in the air around her.

Kelsa cannot but obey; she must follow the trail. Everything depends on it. She walks for hours, for days. Forever, until the bookshelves fall away and a far wall looms in the distance. The dust trail veers to the left, to the corner of the massive walls.

Liara's huddled there, whimpering, covered in sweat, and she's scared she's going to die. Kelsa knows, then, that she's come here to kill the asari. She doesn't want to; she never wanted to hurt anybody, not really. But she's got no choice. It's not personal, she says, when she closes in on the trembling woman.

Of course it's not, Liara says, but it isn't her voice; when she looks up, it isn't her face. It's Jay's eyes, the same cool blue, and it's Jay's face underneath that blue-pebbled skin. It was you or me. The right-hand side of his neck's cut deep, blue-purple blood running down over his collarbone, staining Liara's uniform.

The pistol feels heavy in Kelsa's hand, heavier than any gun's felt in longer than she can remember. It wasn't there a second ago, but it's there now, and she lifts it in a fog. It was you or me, Kelsa.
"Couldn't sleep, Commander?" Alenko's nursing a steaming cup, some kind of tea, and he looks a bit more shaved than usual.

Kelsa spins a chair around and sits back-to-front. "Not really," she says, throwing a quick glance to the med bay; Liara's set up a little office in the back storage room, where she's probably sleeping right now. "What do you think of your new crewmates, Lieutenant?" She asks, after a few seconds.

The man scratches his cheek idly. "The aliens?" He hums when Kelsa nods. "They seem...okay, ma'am. Normal...or as normal as people get on a frigate."

This isn't the first time they've talked like this, one-on-one, and Kelsa finds herself liking the idea of making it happen more often. She hasn't known Alenko too long, but she trusts him more than anyone else on the ship. "What do you think of T'Soni, in particular?"

"I think she was pretty shaken up by that little stunt you pulled back on Edolus, Commander," Alenko tells her. "Hasn't peeked out of Chakwas' little fiefdom for more than grabbing a bite or using the head since you all got back from planetside."

The commander smirks at his dismissal of facing a thresher maw on foot as a little stunt. "She's not a soldier, Lieutenant," Kelsa points out. "Thought I might try scaring her a little bit."

Alenko grunts and smiles into his teacup. "You sure you didn't do that on Therum, ma'am?" He asks, after taking a sip.

Kelsa shrugs, but she can't quite meet the man's eyes. "I had no reason to think she wasn't working with Arterius," she says. "Still don't, really." Even she can hear how cheap the excuse is, but it's all she's willing to let on, even to herself.

"Come on, Commander," the lieutenant shoots back, rolling his eyes. "You've been around Liara long enough to know there isn't a dishonest bone in her body."

"Do asari have bones?" Kelsa wonders, trying to shake off the last flashes of her nightmare. "Or is it all hard cartilage all the way down?" Unlike the beacon dreams, she can still see Jay's face, as clear as when she shot him the first time...except he wasn't blue, then.

Alenko throws up his hands. "Beats me," he admits. "Maybe you should ask her that yourself sometime." He takes a long sip of his tea, and she can't tell if he sees through her smokescreen. "As to your real question, ma'am, I don't know if she'll be able to earn your trust," he says. "My gut tells me that Liara's being honest with us, but it's your ship, so it's your call."

The commander shrugs. "I guess it doesn't really matter," she settles. "I'll take her out with me until she gets hurt or dead or quits, and if I catch her trying to talk to her mom, this boat's got a perfectly good airlock." Curiosity has her smirking. "I wonder what'd happen to a body that dropped out of a mass effect envelope in deep space?"
Alenko's mouth opens, but he shuts it immediately, and sits up a little straighter. The voice that answers instead fills Kelsa's stomach up with ice. "It wouldn't be unlike a body falling over the event horizon of a small black hole," T'Soni says, from near the med bay door. "The abrupt change in velocity is strong enough to separate most organic matter at the molecular level," she goes on, like she's giving a lecture, "so I would wind up as a blue smear over a few hundred thousand kilometres."

Kelsa grimaces down at the mess table, unable to look up. For just a second, she wishes she'd taken up Alenko's offer for tea, just so she'd have a cup to hide behind. "Were your ears burning or something, T'Soni?" Not even clenching her eyes can save the soldier from a flash of Jay's asari head exploding into a purplish mist of meat and blood.

"I am unfamiliar with that idiom," the asari says, apologetically. "But I was actually hoping for another private word with you, Commander...unless I am interrupting you and the Lieutenant."

"You're not," Kelsa tells her, but she stands up and doesn't quite look at T'Soni. "It'll have to wait, though," she says, no room for compromise in her tone. "We're almost to Feros, and I need to make some rounds." That's not quite true; they won't be dropping out of FTL for at least another four hours, and Kelsa's only started making rounds in the last couple of days. But the soldier doesn't feel like telling the asari that she's dreaming of killing her...even Kelsa knows that might not be the best thing for morale.

T'Soni takes a breath before she answers. "...Of course, Commander," she allows. "But I would like to speak with you before we land, assuming you were serious about taking me with you."

Kelsa swallows and forces herself to nod. "We'll do that," she promises, and she's developed an annoying habit of keeping her promises since she joined the Alliance. The soldier nods a bit more readily to Alenko, who gives her a parting grunt of Commander, before she turns to the refuge of the elevator. The req officer's not at his post in the shuttle bay, but Kelsa figures the man probably keeps to the standard Alliance daytime schedule for his business contacts. Vakarian's nowhere to be seen, either; he could either be sleeping or tooling around inside the Mako to recalibrate the guns after their workout on Edolus. It should be Williams' job, but the turian knows even more about making big guns better than the gunnery chief does.

Wrex is standing at his normal post, by the armour lockers. "Shepard," he grunts, nodding with something like respect.

"Wrex," Kelsa shoots back, but she doesn't try to close in on him, despite the excuse she gave to T'Soni. The soldier's still trying to wrap her head around the genophage, a virus the salarians and turians developed to keep the krogan from reproducing and taking over the galaxy, more than a thousand years ago. So the soldier keeps marching, surprised to see Williams steady at work on the armoury bench. The woman grunts in frustration and mumbles Shitshitfuckgoddamn just loudly enough for Kelsa to year over the low hum of the ship's engines. "Williams," the commander says, not quite a bark.

Williams jumps, anyway, and drops the gun before she turns and stiffens up. "What can I do for you, ma'am?" Her eyes are bloodshot and her hair's half-out of the tight bun she usually keeps it in.

Whatever Kelsa was going to say gets lost when she glances behind the gunny to find her discarded shotgun in at least three pieces on the bench. Reflexively, the soldier pats her front pocket, and relaxes when she feels the gun's trigger-the same trigger she took off the batarian weapon on Torfan-still cached there, snug. "I thought I told you to 'gel that thing."

The other woman keeps her eyes level, so she's staring at Kelsa's forehead, and her face betrays...
"Thought I could fix it for you, Commander," she explains.

"Why?" Kelsa wonders, doing her best to sound as blank as Williams looks.

The gunnery chief blinks, but schools her expression before it can crack. "Trying to show I'm useful, and grateful that you kept me on the team after you took over the ship, ma'am."

After they stole the ship from Anderson and gave it to me, Kelsa doesn't say. "You don't have to do that, Williams," she says instead. "You're a good soldier, and you could be a great one."

Williams' surprise breaks through the mask of professional stoicism, at least for a second. "Really, Commander?" When Kelsa nods, the gunny even lets herself smile, just a little. "I...thought you didn't like me."

"Stand at ease," the commander says at last, and she relaxes into the slightly-more-comfortable pose along with her subordinate. "And I didn't like you from the first second we met," she admits, "but that wasn't your fault. I was pissed off at Jenkins for walking into a geth recon drone instead of ducking like I fucking told him to." The memory's still enough to make Kelsa grimace, and her fists clench at the small of her back. "I thought he was smarter than that."

The gunny's face cracks into a frown. "Wait," she says, her brows drawing together. "You're mad at some kid for getting killed?" Williams says that, but Kelsa hears What the hell's wrong with you?

And she doesn't have an answer that the other woman's gonna like. "I was," Kelsa says. "If he'd kept his head, he woulda kept his head. Like you did, even when you thought you were gonna die." She won't say she's sorry, because she's not, but there's no reason for them to butt heads any more than they already have. "What do you say you and I start again," the staff commander suggests, relaxing as best she can.

"I...guess we can try, ma'am," Williams manages. "For a little while there, I thought the old Williams family curse was rearing its ugly head again."

The comment normally wouldn't even draw an acknowledgement from Kelsa, but in the interest of not fucking up their little ceasefire straight out of the gate, the soldier musters up some curiosity. "What kinda curse you think you have, Chief?"

Williams laughs. "You really don't know, Commander?" When Kelsa just arches a brow, the woman hurries on. "My grandfather was General Williams, ma'am," she explains.

It slides into place like a fresh ammo block. "General Ben Williams," Kelsa says, smirking. "The one who said uncle on Shanxi, back in First Contact." Some of the older white officers call him General Benedict Arnold, even now, after some British guy that Kelsa never heard of until she made it to OCS.

"The very same, ma'am," the gunnery chief tells her, nodding. "He never lived it down, either. But he stayed true to the Alliance, and my father joined up only a year after the war." One of her eyes narrows, an acid edge of anger bubbling up just beneath her face. "He worked his ass off for over twenty years, but he never once got promoted after enlisting. Stayed Serviceman 3rd Class 'til the day he died."

Kelsa grunts a laugh. "And you thought I was holding that against you," she says; an answer, not a question. "Look at me, Williams...do I look like I give a fuck about what some old men think about your grandad?"

The gunny blinks, and she does look at Kelsa more closely, before she shakes her head. "No,
ma'am,” Williams answers. "But it's just...it's been such a part of my life since before I even joined up. Dad never complained, though, not once...and when I made Lieutenant 2nd Class, he was the happiest man in the whole goddamn navy." Her eyes go distant, and Kelsa doesn't turn away, even though she can tell the other woman's itching to share more. "He died the year before I got upped to Service Chief; a heart attack," Williams shares. "But I know he was watching me, proud as always."

The commander understands Williams' meaning all too well, but she can't help a little needling. "...Is he a zombie or something, Chief?"

Williams opens her mouth, but then she must think better of whatever she was going to say, because she swallows and shakes her head. "He's...you know," she says after a second. "In Heaven. With God."

"Uh-huh," Kelsa grunts, as noncommittally as she can.

"Is that a problem, ma'am?" Williams asks, caught in between defensive and nervous. "That I believe in God?"

The commander takes a breath, considering her own thoughts. "Not as long as you understand there are some people on this ship who don't," she decides. "Like me." It's been years since Kelsa's even thought about religion; if there is a God, it doesn't seem to give a fuck about stopping slavers. Or the Reapers, whatever the hell they are, Kelsa thinks to herself. But if she said that out loud, Williams would probably say that God's sending Kelsa after the bastards, and that's not an argument she wants to have. "So do we have a problem, Chief? Or can we try to make nice?"

Williams blinks several times, and it's obvious she wants to ask something else, but she really is too good a soldier to risk getting into a debate with her commanding officer. "No problem, ma'am. I'll...keep it to myself."

Kelsa nods, once. "Then we should get along fine." Then she gestures to the ruined shotgun on the bench. "You really should melt that thing down; get Serviceman Markham to minifacture me a new one. I think I've got enough credits for level 7 Firestorm." The commander digs the old trigger out of her pocket and tosses it at Williams. "Make sure he uses that trigger for it, and tell him I'll space him if he doesn't."

Williams catches the trigger with a snap of her fingers against her palm. "Will do, Commander," she promises.

"Get some rest first, though," Kelsa tells the gunnery chief. "We're gonna hit Feros in a few hours, and chatter says there's plenty of flashlights there already." Williams salutes and Kelsa returns it before she turns away, back toward the elevator; she could continue on to the engine room, but Adams is probably sleeping, and Tali'Zorah's probably too busy studying the Normandy's drive core to make for an effective distraction. Instead, mindful of her promise, Kelsa drags her feet back up to the crew deck. Alenko's gone from the mess, probably in a sleeper pod. Chakwas isn't in the med bay, either, so Kelsa holds out a sliver of hope that T'Soni's made herself scarce, too.

No such luck, the commander huffs, when the door to the back office hisses open to reveal the asari sitting at her desk with her back turned. Just like a civilian, Kelsa thinks. From the front, asari look a hell of a lot like human women with blue skin, but from behind, the differences are much more obvious; those hard-cartilage tentacles that sweep back from their heads turn up into points just above the nape of the neck, which has odd ripples and scales that are much more sensitive to touch than human skin. Kelsa learnt that the easy way, and the memory of those two nights in Azure keeps her from reliving her strange dream...at least until T'Soni turns around, and Kelsa almost
flinches, half-expecting to see Jay's face hued in blue. "Commander Shepard," T'Soni breathes, giving Kelsa a little smile. "I'd thought you might opt to rest instead of coming to speak with me."

"I'll sleep when Arterius is dead," the commander grunts, stepping properly into the room and to the side, so the door's not at her back. "What'd you want to see me about, doc?"

T'Soni nods and rises from her chair. "I wanted to show you that I've been practicing," she says, reaching to her left and picking up a pistol.

Kelsa has her own drawn and trained on the asari's throat in half a heartbeat, the trigger a millimetre from clicking over. "Put it down," she barks, "or I'll put you down, asari." She doesn't blink, even though she wants to, and for just a second she sees a spray of red steaming in the cold winter air.

T'Soni gasps, dropping her weapon, and it clatters from the table to the floor. "I am sorry," the asari ventures, frozen in place, and her eyes tell a story of shock and fear that Kelsa can't quite bring herself to doubt. "It is not a real firearm," T'Soni continues, holding up her hands. "But a replica, used for target practice."

Kelsa's finger eases on the trigger until it's at half-pressure, but she doesn't swivel it away from the centre of T'Soni's throat. "Kick it over and we'll see about that," she offers; it's more than she thinks she should probably give, but she doesn't want her crew to start worrying about summary executions. She may be a Spectre, but she needs her crew if they want to stop Arterius. Nervously, the asari swipes her foot at the dropped gun, and it skitters across the metal floor two-thirds of the way to the commander. She slowly lowers herself to one knee, keeping her eyes and pistol focused as she picks up the supposed replica with her left hand; it's light, but it's an asari design, so she can't tell if that means anything...and the glyphs along the side are carved into the metal itself, so they don't change into any script Kelsa can recognise.

"There are two buttons on the left side," T'Soni says, still nervous. "The bottom one paints a new target and the top resets the score."

The soldier's nostrils flare when she sniffs, and she brings up the maybe-fake gun to the asari's belly. Without saying anything, she moves her thumb to press each button in turn, and then she pulls the trigger; the gun kicks and makes a small *pop*, and T'Soni flinches involuntarily, but no bullet hole opens up in the alien's abdomen...instead, a purple light flashes on the side of the replica's barrel.

T'Soni clears her throat. "That means you got me, Commander."

Kelsa lets out all of her breath in one hissed sigh and tosses the asari's toy back to her. "I had to be sure," she says, not at all certain why she feels the need to explain herself.

The asari catches the replica with only a little fumble and then she puts it back onto the table. "Now that we've established that I'm not trying to assassinate you, Commander, might you point your weapon elsewhere?"

The soldier hesitates for just a second before she relaxes and holsters the pistol at her hip. "I'm sorry, T'Soni," she says, and she means it. "Haven't got the best week's sleep. Guess I'm a little jumpy."

"That may be my fault," T'Soni sighs, glancing away. "Our incomplete meld must have renewed the visions from the beacon. I wish..." Then she shakes her head. "It doesn't matter, Commander. But I wanted to assure you that I will be ready for combat, when the time comes."
"We'll see," Kelsa grunts. "Painting a target with a laser gun is a hell of a lot different than shooting at something that can shoot back at you."

Now that she isn't under immediate threat of death, the asari's brow draws together, and when she speaks, she sounds quietly defiant. "I have been in danger before," T'Soni says, defensively. "Prothean ruins are not often in the most well-patrolled areas of the galaxy, and relics can be valuable...so mercenaries and pirates have sometimes crossed my path." Slowly, the asari raises her right hand again, and a wreath of biotic blue flickers to life around her fingers. "Up until the geth on Therum, I've been able to escape through use of my biotics, and the combat training I've undergone in school." She closes her fist and the glow fades. "I assure you, I am ready and willing to contribute to your mission to stop Saren."

"We'll see," Kelsa drawls again, trying to shake off the memory of the last time she was so close to an asari's biotics. "If this thing goes down my way, we're gonna come across Benezia's path before the end, and I need to know you're not gonna stand in my way when that happens."

"Or shoot you in the back?" T'Soni ventures, leaning back against her table and crossing her arms. "The bonds between asari are not the same as for humans; it is true that daughters and mothers share close ties for many decades, but once an asari ends her education, she becomes independent...especially when her mother is a matriarch." She shakes her head. "The Benezia I knew would never have worked to further Saren's goals. That is the woman I choose to call my mother, Commander Shepard."

Kelsa frowns and opens the door to her right with a wave of her hand. "We'll see," she says a third time. "In the meantime, try to get some rest, and we'll see how good you are with a real gun." The soldier backs out of the room and waits for the door to close before she turns and stalks back to her quarters; she won't sleep, but she can set her thoughts in order with a few hundred pushups until they're ready to dock.
Ch. 12: The Foul Garden

Chapter Summary

Kelsa's team investigates the colony called Feros, and there they discover something that's almost as troubling as the geth incursion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ExoGeni Building

1800 Zulu

22 May 2183

Zhu's Hope (ashore), Feros, Theseus

Ninety-seven out of two hundred and four deactivated geth earned Kelsa a couple of hours' rest after two and a half days of defending this little backwater from an all-out invasion; Williams, Vakarian, and T'Soni took care of the rest of the flashlights as they fought their way to the skyscraper and secured it, though the only reason Williams' count is higher than the turians is because she manned the Mako's guns across the bridge. But the geth never sleep, and there're still plenty of them here, so Kelsa can't sleep forever. T'Soni wakes her up by calling her rank from a respectful distance, and the asari doesn't flinch when Kelsa sweeps around the crumbling room with her shotgun; the weapon was pristine when they landed, but now it's well seasoned, almost halfway through its first ammo block. "We under attack?" Kelsa asks, when she doesn't catch sight of any machines in the room.

"In a manner of speaking," T'Soni allows; over the last two days, the asari's proven herself competent and willing to take direction. She fights decently with a pistol and better with her biotics, and she wears light armour with strong shields. "The presumptuous human attempted to restrain Doctor Baynham, and now Chief Williams and Garrus are in a standoff against him and his guards."

Kelsa eyes the line; Williams and Vakarian, with Dr. Juliana Baynham and her grown daughter, Lizbeth, standing behind them against Ethan Jeong and seven mercenaries from ExoGeni corporation. "Hey," the commander barks, pushing up from her scrap of dirty floor and rolling the kinks out of her shoulders. "What the fuck is going on here?"

Jeong glares at her when she steps in between her people and his. "The good doctor is preventing me from executing my duties as an ExoGeni executive," he sneers, his pistol drawing figure-eights from the tremble in his hands.

"He wants to kill everyone!" Baynham the elder barks. "Just to make sure nobody knows of the crimes that went on here!"

Crimes that nobody's been too forthcoming about, thus far. Kelsa arches a brow and steps forward; it takes all she has not to laugh when five assault rifles swivel to her, along with Jeong's shaky...
pistol, and she doesn't even bother raising her shotgun...yet, anyway. "This true, Jeong?"

The man's mouth opens and closes a couple of times. "That's...everyone's probably already dead," he deflects. "Or they wish they were." He glances over Kelsa's shoulder, probably to Baynham. "Don't think your hands are clean, Doctor," he sneers. "The colonists knew the risks when they agreed to develop these ruins. We have to think about what's best for the company. A purge is the only way we can salvage our reputation!"

Vakarian laughs darkly in his two-toned turian rumble. "And if a couple dozen civilians have to die to cover your bosses'asses, that's just the cost of doing business, isn't it?"

Jeong looks like he's got an answer for that, but Kelsa cuts him off. "Here's how it's gonna be," she says as even as she can. "You're gonna tell your men to stand the fuck down and tell me what the hell the thorian creature is."

"And if I don't?" Jeong spits, but he takes a step back, like that might save him.

Kelsa finally brings her shotgun to bear. "Then I'll kill you last." She can count on Williams and Vakarian to drop one guard apiece, and she can take out three or four more before they know what's hit them. "I don't give a fuck about ExoGeni Corporation or this colony, to be honest; I'm here to find out what the geth are looking for, and if you're not gonna tell me, then you're in my way."

The younger Baynham, Lizbeth, tries to talk, but Jeong snarls. "That's classif-" His voice twists into a horrified scream when the mercenary to his right gets a shotgun round to the face. Following Kelsa's lead, her squadmates drop two more mercs a second later. The commander takes a pistol shot and some assault rifle spray on her shields, but she bulls through the line that the four remaining guards try to shore up, and it's easy for her to pick two more of them apart. Williams' assault rifle takes care of one more, but the last merc throws down his gun and scrambles backward, surrendering loudly.

Kelsa stops herself from shooting the bastard anyway. Instead she turns her shotgun on Jeong. "Ready to talk now, ExoGeni?"

"Yes," the man whines, both hands in the air, the pistol hanging uselessly from his thumb. "I'll tell you ev-"

She lets him talk just long enough for her shotgun to cool down, and then she shuts him up for good. Turns out that ExoGeni executives bleed just as red as the fuckers they hire to protect them. "Too late," she grunts, turning back to the two Baynhams and the rest of the ExoGeni employees in the improvised bunker. "Looks like one of you's gotta tell me what I need to know." She keeps her gun checked in her elbow, not pointed at anybody, but not pointed at the ground, either. Her eyes fall heavily on Lizbeth Baynham. "You've already lied to me about the thorian once. Got any other lies to spin?"

The younger woman has the wisdom to look nervous. "I'm sorry I didn't come clean with you when you rescued me from the geth," she admits. "But I just had to make sure my mother was safe."

A tremor shakes the concrete around them, a high-velocity round from more geth on the skyway that connects the ExoGeni building to Zhu's Hope. "It does not appear that any of us are safe," T'Soni points out, with a worried look to the now-undefended entrance to the bunker. "Whatever information you have to give to us could mean the difference between today and tomorrow."

"I already know the thorian's some kind of plant," Kelsa prompts the doctors. "It's infected the
colony with spores...probably everyone here, too, including me and my team." The danger's part of
the job of being a soldier, but it doesn't make Kelsa any more disposed to trust these people. "The
ExoGeni VI upstairs said the thorian can think, and that it uses spores to control people. Is that
true?"

The elder Baynham nods. "It was the main reason Zhu's Hope wasn't abandoned when the prothean
ruins didn't prove economically exploitable."

Kelsa's mouth opens to say something, but before she can, her comm crackles with Moreau's voice.
"Uhn...guys, we've got some trouble here," he says, his voice echoing from the other three
crewmembers' suits as well. "The colonists are kinda going crazy, trying to break into
the Normandy."

Rather than answer him, Kelsa raises an eyebrow at the Baynhams. Juliana Baynham speaks up
first. "That'll be the thorian," she says, "trying to defend itself. It...must see us as a threat, now."

"I guess it really is a smart little weed," Kelsa scoffs, and then she taps her comm. "The colonists
are puppets of some of the local vegetation," she tells her crew. "You're authorised to shoot them if
they don't stop."

Alenko's voice answers her. "You just said they're not responsible for their actions, Commander."

"I said they're not getting onto my ship," Kelsa barks. "That's an order, Lieutenant."


The commander growls a sigh. "Belay it for half an hour," she decides. "If the zombies don't break
through the airlock or peel away before then, kill them." The lieutenant gives her a
grateful Understood, Commander, and Kelsa pivots toward the door. "Let's get back to the Mako,
people. We've got a weed to pull."

"Wait," Lizbeth Baynham calls. "If you attack the thorian, it will send the colonists after you!"

Kelsa fixes the other woman with a cutting look. "And I will kill anyone who tries to stop me."
There's that look of horror that she's gotten used to since Torfan, but she doesn't wait for the horror
to turn to disgust. "Jeong was right about one thing; you've got as much blood on your tongue as
any carnivore." I'm just your Butcher.

Juliana Baynham's eyes go wide. "But...there may be a way to incapacitate the colonists without
killing them," she says. "The thorian's control is neurological, and we've been experimenting on
ways to counteract it."

The commander's half-hour time limit is ticking by, but she doesn't step away, yet. "I'm listening."

"Before the geth arrived," Baynham continues, "Lizbeth and I were developing a neurotoxin that
can temporarily degenerate the victim's neural pathways, rendering them beneath the spores'
threshold of activation."

It takes Kelsa a little more than a second before she pivots back to the room's entrance. "No," she
grunts, taking a step closer to the Mako. "Come on," she tells her team. Only one set of feet follows
her, turian by hear ear. After three strides Kelsa turns around, and sure enough, neither T'Soni nor
Williams have moved a step. The human looks incredulous, while the asari seems at a loss. "Did I
stutter, Williams?"

The gunny swallows, but she doesn't back down. "No, ma'am," Williams says. "But I think we
should hear Doctor Baynham out. I'm not ready to give up on the colonists, Commander."

Baynham breathes a sigh of relief, as though the issue's been re-opened, or even resolved in her favour. "We have sufficient neurotoxin to attach to seven Alliance grenades," she tells them. "I'm certain if you used flashbangs, you could incapacitate a great deal of them before they come to harm."

"No," Kelsa says again, even more forcefully. "Your idea of saving these people is to give them so much brain damage the thorian doesn't see them as worthy slaves...and I'm supposed to believe they'll recover from that without any trouble?" She shakes her head and keeps going, before either the Baynhams or Williams can step in. "Say you're right; say the colonists can be saved. What happens then?" Kelsa nods to the far side of the room, where Jeong's corpse lies amidst the other mercenaries'. "What happens when ExoGeni gets its hands on your experimental results?"

T'Soni tries to speak. "Commander-"

"I'm not finished," the soldier snarls, viciously enough that even Williams winces. "The best case scenario for ExoGeni involves covering this mess up and taking the research data, so they can have ready-made slaves of their own," she points out. "They killed these people, and so did these doctors, the day they decided to turn them into test subjects." Kelsa takes one step closer. "I'm going to give the Alliance custody of whatever's left of this colony by the time I'm through with it...and you'd better tell your bosses that if I hear a single fucking thing about ExoGeni controlling people's minds, I'm gonna go through their head offices room by room, starting at the top."

Juliana shudders, but it's Lizbeth Baynham who gets herself together first. "We're...sorry, Commander Shepard."

Kelsa nods and looks to her gunnery chief. "Stay here with the merc, Williams, and keep the geth from overrunning the room. We'll swing by with the Normandy to pick you up after the thorian's gone."

Williams looks like she wants to argue, but she still salutes. "Aye, aye, ma'am. I'll keep them safe."

Kelsa snaps off an answering salute and turns around again. "T'Soni," she barks as she goes. "Your blue ass better get to the Mako by the time I fire it up." There's a moment of hesitation, but then T'Soni's feet scrape over the dusty concrete, a few paces behind Vakarian's footsteps. Neither of the aliens speak as they scramble into the tank, but the turian's silence is cool, a soldier's silence. T'Soni's silence is more troubled, and if they had the time, Kelsa might be tempted to try and smooth that uncertainty over. But they've only got another twenty-three minutes until Alenko's gotta disobey Kelsa's order, and he's too good a soldier for her to have to shoot him...or, worse, put a demerit in his file. The commander breaks that silence with a measured order. "Take the scope, Vakarian."

"Sure thing, Shepard," the turian says, as T'Soni straps herself into the co-pilot's seat.

The dashboard HUD indicates that the guns are ready just a second later, and Kelsa pulls the Mako out onto the skyway. There are some geth waiting for them, a four-legged armature model and a squad of two-legged rifle-toting units. Kelsa tells Vakarian to focus on the armature, and it goes down after a couple of cannon rounds, just before the Mako plows through the other machines standing in the way. Five minutes and another knot of geth later, the Mako pulls up to the end of the skyway, and Kelsa scrambles out of the hatch before either of her squadmates. Only when she plants her feet on the ground does the soldier regret leaving Williams behind at the ExoGeni building; she's Alliance, and keeps one eye on T'Soni, even if the gunny probably wouldn't admit that anymore. "Leave the colonists to me," Kelsa tells the aliens, double-checking her incendiary
ammo.

Three colonists stand wary at a nearby barricade, and for a heartbeat, Kelsa thinks they might just be guarding against more geth...but the second she takes a step, all three let loose with pistol shots. Kelsa dodges two and takes the last on the edge of her shields, but she zigzags and rolls like a circus tumbler all the way to the barricade. Three arm-shaking booms mingle with three sickening impacts as the soldier vaults overttop, and by the time Kelsa lands, all three colonists are nothing but sizzling sacks of meat. The commander can't stop to think about them, and she can't coddle the other two members of her squad, so she pushes on to the colony's entrance.

Four more colonists wait for her just beyond the double doorway, crouched behind columns and fallen prothean plinths, commanded by the soon-to-be-former head of security for Zhu's Hope. "Martinez," Kelsa barks, remembering the name as she throws her shoulder into some proper cover. "If you're still in there, tell your people to stand down! You're all gonna die if you don't!" Maybe, just maybe, the former Alliance marine can come back to her senses from the thorian...or the rabble she's got just might break their discipline. For a bare second, it seems like the gambit might work, but then a chorus of pained shrieks sound out from the infected colonists, followed closely by a hail of gunfire chipping away at Kelsa's cover. Guess that's that. Steeling herself with a breath, Kelsa pivots out of cover, ready to deal a little more death.

The soldier runs full-tilt into the breach, and she nearly trips over a colonist. Not quite, she realises, as she carves away half of the thing's head with a well-placed round. Not anymore. In the second it takes for the body to fall, Kelsa sees that it used to be human, but now it's at least as much plant as animal; naked, with green veins and green blood, arms and legs like sinewy trees. And, whatever the fuck it is, it's not alone.

At least a dozen of the human-planta come rushing into the gap, and the infected colonists don't seem to recognise them, because Martinez and her people keep shooting at Kelsa even as she falls into hand-to-hand with the zombies. At least they fight like zombies, grunting and scratching and biting, insensitive to any injury that doesn't take out the spinal column. Kelsa shoots and kicks until her shotgun overheats, and five of them fall, but there's still no stopping the rest; her shields fail just as one of the screaming monsters lunges forward, and the soldier loses her footing, falling back hard. The zombie's pure aggression makes it overbalance, and Kelsa's able to roll with its momentum until she's straddling the thing. It takes two solid bashes with the butt of her shotgun to turn the monster's face into a green pulp, but the soldier's own aggression has her rearing back for a third.

Fire erupts at the base of her left arm, right in the joint of her armour, and Kelsa's eyes take an eternity to shift upward from the corpse between her knees to the living enemy that wants to see her dead. It's Martinez, her face filled with pain and hate. The pop from her pistol reaches Kelsa's ears just as the muzzle flashes once more, and another red-hot slug digs into the commander's heavy armour, just below her neck. Martinez's hand isn't as steady as it should be, but Kelsa knows it'll just take the other woman one more shot; with no helmet and no shields, there's nothing to keep the next round from carving a tunnel through Kelsa's skull. She starts taking a breath, her last, and her heart kicks over for the last time. So that's that, she thinks again, and she doesn't look away as Martinez's finger tenses up on that trigger one last time.

And then a hole opens up in Martinez's forehead, and Kelsa's never heard anything quite so crystal-clear as the report from the Alliance pistol a few paces behind her. Her heartbeat bottoms out, and her heart swells again, too full to fit underneath her armour; to make room, the soldier's lungs empty with a feral scream, and she launches herself off the ground, holding her shotgun one-handed. White bleeds in from the edge of her vision, and when her eyes clear, she's standing in the calm centre of a hurricane of gore with her weapon's cool-down claxon ringing loudly. Kelsa's left
arm hangs limp by her side, tingling from medi-gel and anaesthetic, and she has to grit her teeth when the pain finally hits her.

"Kelsa," T'Soni breathes, and the word cuts through every other noise, hitting the commander's ears like another gunshot.

The soldier fixes the asari with a wide-eyed stare; T'Soni's shaken up, her pistol still raised, shaking. Kelsa turns to face the alien, presenting her with a broader target, and her lips part. *Take the shot,* she nearly says. *Thanks for saving my life.* "I told you I'd take care of the colonists," the soldier growls instead, tasting blood on the back of her tongue. The air shimmers for an instant as her shields kick back on, and she flexes the fingers of her left hand, grimacing. "Let's move on."

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**The Thorian's Lair**

0135 Zulu

23 May 2183

Zhu's Hope (ashore), Feros, Theseus

The thorian was enormous and old, maybe the oldest thing Kelsa's ever seen. The first thick vine her squad had to scramble over was three kilometres away, near the entrance to the ancient prothean tunnels beneath the colony, and that branch showed no sign of ending as far as any of them could see. The tendrils only got thicker and more numerous as Kelsa and her companions closed into this central chamber, and here the plant hung, a great bundle of pulp and flesh, the centre of a great neural network. Kelsa might even think it beautiful, in a way, if she didn't know that it actively wanted to kill her. To that end, it sent fifteen dominated colonists and almost four-dozen of its hybrid minions for her to destroy...but now it's dead, or as good as Kelsa can make it without thermonuclear weapons. Kelsa, Vakarian, and T'Soni sent the great plant tumbling down into a near-bottomless pit by cutting through the supporting tendrils that held it suspended, and now they stand at the lip of the chasm, peering down into the darkness.

A slithering sound whispers from behind Kelsa, and she whips around, raising her shaking pistol in time to see an asari fall out of one of the great, fleshy sacs that line the walls underneath Zhu's Hope. She's naked and trembling, covered in slime, but her skin's a deep, dark blue. During the fight, the thorian kept cloning a green-tinted version of the woman, and each time the plant-like asari appeared, it was tougher to kill than the last.

"Wait, Shepard," T'Soni sighs; after using her proper name earlier, the asari's apparently settled on the common surname, without an honorific. Kelsa's too exhausted and jumpy to read too much into it one way or another. "Don't kill her yet," the clothed asari counsels. "She may know more than the thorian's clone let us know."

The newly-freed asari looks confused for a moment, but she recognises the gun pointed at her easily enough, and she freezes. "I'm...I'm free," she says, nearly choking on her words. "Please don't kill me, Commander Shepard."

The fact that she knows Kelsa's name doesn't make Kelsa want to spare her life any more, but the soldier keeps her finger a couple of millimetres from the threshold, all the same. "You gonna give me a reason not to?"

"My name is Shiala," the asari tells them. "I serve...served," she corrects, rolling her eyes, "as part of Matriarch Benezia's household guard. When she joined with Saren, so did I." Shiala looks down
at her hands. "Benezia foresaw the influence Saren would have, and she joined his ranks to guide him down a gentler path."

Kelsa spares a glance to T'Soni, who looks torn between shame and curiosity. "Doesn't look like that worked out too well for your mistress," she clips, building a millimetre's pressure behind her trigger finger.

Shiala shakes her head, still looking away. "Saren is...compelling. Benezia lost her way, as did we all."

"She made her choice," Kelsa barks. "Just like you did." Just like I did. "You all have to own that."

"Please," Shiala begs, finally turning her azure eyes up to Kelsa. "You don't know what it's like on that ship...it worms its way into your thoughts, until Saren's opinion becomes the only one that matters. The longer you stay on that ship, the harder it becomes to resist Saren's way of thinking."

The asari leans back into the wall and shudders, making no attempt to cover herself. "Saren calls it Sovereign, and with it, he dominates the minds of his followers."

"Sovereign," Kelsa breathes, tasting the name on her tongue. "Is that the ship I saw on Eden Prime?"

Shiala nods. "We went to Eden Prime on Sovereign, yes," she admits. "To find the beacon and unlock its secrets. That same goal also brought us here, to the thorian; we needed to find the Cipher."

Kelsa hesitates, but after a heartbeat she relaxes her trigger finger and checks her pistol, but she keeps it drawn, just in case. The soldier also moves in front of a wall, to keep a sudden flare from the naked asari's biotics from throwing her down that chasm along with the thorian. "Alright, I'll bite," she says. "What in your blue version of hell is a Cipher?"

"It's what Saren called the collective cultural memory of the protheans, as interpreted and guarded by the thorian," Shiala explains, looking a bit more relaxed. "When he first encountered the beacon, the knowledge he gained from it was confounding, impossible to sort through to find anything meaningful. In order to make sense of the beacon's wisdom, Saren needed to ground himself in the life and experiences of the protheans...and he could use the thorian's living memory of them to achieve that, with my help."

The commander's starting to regret letting the asari run her mouth. "So you've already given Arterius this Cipher?"

Shiala nods and slowly climbs to her feet. "I served my purpose, and was given to the thorian as payment to seal the bargain." She shivers again, crossing her arms for warmth, rather than modesty. "But now that I'm away from Sovereign and Saren, my eyes have been opened to the evil of his cause; I'll spend the rest of my life trying to correct my mistake."

"Wait," T'Soni says again, just as Kelsa's hand twitches, itching to bring her gun to bear once more. "That's it! That's just what you need to make sense of your own visions, Shepard! The Cipher!" She looks earnest, eager even. "We could be able to see what might have been the protheans' final days..."

"I don't know, Shepard," Vakarian weighs in. "This Cipher sounds like just the kind of dirty trick a rogue Spectre might pull."

Shiala frowns. "It is not a trick," she vows. "I'll swear my life upon it...and if you've experienced
visions from the beacon on Eden Prime, I will gladly offer you the Cipher."

The soldier's torn, mistrust and exhaustion mixing with adrenaline. "What do you need to do to give it to me?" She asks, even though she's already pretty sure she knows what the answer's going to be.

"It is a simple process we asari call melding," Shiala says, confirming Kelsa's suspicions. "I assure you it's not painful-"

"The commander is aware," T'Soni tells the other asari, before even Kelsa can interrupt. "And I will be able to tell if you're not being honest."

*She's had too many chances to kill you already,* a voice sounds in the back of Kelsa's mind. *All it takes is one more,* comes another. Frowning, the soldier offers up her wounded arm. "Do it, if you're gonna."

Shiala swallows hard and closes her eyes. "Very well, Commander Shepard," she breathes, and when her eyes open again, they're solid black. "Embrace eternity!"

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who's reading along, especially to buttercup23 for her fantastic beta-reading skills!
Ch. 13: Thunderstruck

Chapter Summary

Kelsa has more trouble sleeping, and then she has to deal with some of the consequences of her mission on Feros.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The library's familiar, like she's been here before, even though Kelsa knows that can't be true. The shelves are a rich mahogany, each filled with cherry-leather books, every one lettered in stamped gold. She even recognises the script on some of them; there's Latin and Greek, at least three kinds of cuneiform, even Egyptian hieroglyphics...along with swirled runes from other planets, that she somehow knows fell out of use a thousand years before humanity discovered the prothean ruins on Mars. The floor's covered by a thick crimson carpet that doesn't make a single whisper as she walks over it, and there isn't a single mote of dust in the air to catch the warm, honey-coloured light that's breathing out of every surface.

She could stay in this place forever, even though she doesn't belong here; this room's never seen any hint of war, except the kind that comes in books. There's been no death here, no violence...and even though the carpet would hide the stains perfectly, there hasn't been a single drop of blood spilt on it. You think you will change that, the walls whisper, and Kelsa jerks around for the source of the sound...but there's nothing, just an empty table. There is fire in you, comes the whisper from behind her. Fire and blood.

Kelsa turns again, and she catches sight of a shadow flickering at the end of an aisle. She's running in a blink, as hard and fast as she can, but it takes forever for her feet to touch the carpet, and for every step she takes, the back wall gets three yards further away.

You pretend you are Kurinth made flesh, the walls taunt her, with a little snicker. If you can run fast enough and shoot straight enough, you might be able to hunt him down.

She doesn't know what the fuck a Kurinth is, but this voice is starting to piss her off. He's dead, she snarls, only halfway down the row. But at least he's not alone.

Yes, the books answer her. Simply the first of eight hundred and twenty-four souls you have ended, in fire and blood.

No matter how hard she runs, Kelsa can't make it any closer to the wall. I'll show you fire, she promises that voice. Just like the place itself, the whisper is familiar and foreign, all at once. I'll show you blood.

Another snicker, playful. Not in this place, Kurinth, the walls tell her. Here there will be peace.

And where the fuck is here? Kelsa shouts, or she tries to, but she's too winded to catch a proper breath. Where are we? She has to slow down, but she can't stop. She can't give up.

This is the cultural archive of all peoples of the Universe, comes the whisper. Your people might
call it the Library of Akasha, though there are other terms humans use.

I don't have any people, Kelsa pants. Just my crew. Her boots stick to the floor and she stumbles, landing hard on one knee, hard enough to shatter steel. She bites down on her tongue and tastes copper, and it's nearly enough to turn her stomach.

You'll have to learn how to surrender sooner or later, Kelsa, the walls tell her. Fire and blood are not the best of you, much less the whole. You must let go.

Kelsa has to catch herself with her hands before she falls on her face, but the harder she bears up against the floor, the stronger the gravity gets, almost like the mass effect field's a Chinese finger trap. No, she growls, forcing her head up higher. I...can't.

The wall's so close, close enough for her to reach out and touch, but Kelsa can't move one hand unless she wants her other arm to snap into at least three pieces. A shadow rises up from the wall's depths, formless, but it slowly resolves into the shape of a woman...an asari woman. I know you can, Kelsa, the shadow says. Just not tonight. Then the shadow spreads until it fills Kelsa's vision, and the floor rushes up to meet her jaw.

Captain's Cabin, SSV Normandy

0200 Zulu

26 May 2183

Sublight Transit to Mass Relay, Attican Beta Cluster

Kelsa's finger hovers over the send button on her console; she's given a verbal report to the Council about the clusterfuck that Feros turned into, but she feels the need to write an after-action report for Alliance Command; she hasn't killed so many human beings since she joined up, and she figures they deserve to know the reasons why. The report was written an hour after they picked up Williams and bugged out, but Kelsa hasn't sent the damned thing for three fucking days. She hasn't sent it because it doesn't mention that T'Soni killed Martinez...that T'Soni saved Kelsa's life. She shouldn't have had to do that; Kelsa should've been faster. Stronger. Better. But she wasn't, and it doesn't feel right pretending that she was. And yet something holds her back from blaming the asari for a human's death, even if that human was about to kill Kelsa. What did you expect, she growls to herself, not for the first time. I expected her to kill me, Kelsa thinks, and she's not entirely sure which her she means, just like the last dozen times she's answered her own question.

A polite tap sounds from the door, but it might have been cannonfire for the surprised jolt that licks down Kelsa's arm. The electronic ping of the message being sent is louder than the second knock, and Kelsa swallows hard, burying the sudden rush of nerves from having the decision made for her. She shuts off her console and turns to face the door, her hands crossed at the small of her back. "Come in."

It's not really a surprise when T'Soni steps through the door, looking tentative, uncertain. "Could we speak for a moment, Shepard?"

The commander heaves a sigh. "You wanna talk about yesterday." They melded for the second time, after Chakwas cleaned up Kelsa's wounds. The soldier's tried not to think about it since then, without too much success, and she can tell by T'Soni's expression that the asari's been troubled by the experience as well. "So talk."

T'Soni steps more fully into the cabin, sidling away from the doorway just like Kelsa taught her
down on Feros. "I'm still not sure what to make of what we saw," she says. "Those creatures…" "Wiped out the protheans," Kelsa supplies, grimacing. "City by city, planet by planet, system by system."

T'Soni shudders. "I've spent my life trying to discover the fall of the protheans," she says. "To have my most frightening conjectures confirmed so vividly…it's too much to take in."

"I'm the one who almost got my brains fucked by the beacon," Kelsa says, her lips twisting into a smirk. "But at least I didn't punch you when you fucked them, this time."

T'Soni's freckles stand starker on her cheeks as some of the blue drains from her face. "Yes, well," she breathes, "I appreciate that, Shepard." The asari looks away, and she even hides a small smile before her face falls again. "Now that you've got the Cipher and we pieced together more of the beacon's message, I believe that your mind contains more information about the protheans than I've been able to accumulate over five decades of scrounging through the dirt. Under different circumstances…"

Kelsa grunts a laugh. "You sound like you wanna study me, doc."

"No," T'Soni says, shaking her head. "I just meant that you would be a fascinating subject…” Her cheeks flush, now, and the asari's smile turns nervous. "I'm sorry; I'm used to spending all of my time in virtual isolation. I'm not really very good at dealing with other people."

"You're pretty good at killing them when you get the chance," Kelsa points out, a sliver of sincere admiration in her tone. The asari must not be able to hear it, because she looks like she's going to argue, but Kelsa keeps talking before the other woman gets the chance. "Why'd you take the shot?"

T'Soni's objection dies in her throat, and her brow-ridges draw together. "Because she would have killed you," the asari breathes. "I didn't want to shoot her, especially since her actions weren't her own...but I had to make a choice." The uncertainty smooths out of T'Soni's voice as she speaks. "And now that we've seen what the galaxy might have in store for us, I have no regrets."

Something twists in Kelsa's gut...something suspiciously like gratitude. "Thanks," she gruffs, glancing away from another one of those little blue smiles. "You don't…" The soldier was going to say You don't have to go ashore next time, but her throat catches on the words. "You did well down there," she amends, giving T'Soni a little nod. "Looks like you weren't lying about that combat training. I think Alenko could take a few lessons from you."

Mention of the human biotic causes a twitch in the asari's expression, though the smile doesn't quite drop. "I believe the lieutenant acquits himself more than adequately, from what I recall on Therum," she says. "...And I get the impression that he would much rather take private instruction from you than from I, Commander."

Kelsa frowns. Maybe if he was a vanguard, she nearly says, before a stray thought crosses her mind. "What do you mean by that, T'Soni?"

T'Soni swallows and blinks. "I just…I have often seen you speaking in confidence with Lieutenant Alenko, and I assumed…"

"You assumed we were fucking," Kelsa finishes, and the idea pulls a low, rough laugh from her throat, still sore from her screams on Feros. "We're not," she says, in case it needs saying. "And there's not enough whiskey in the galaxy that'll get us to start." The soldier chuckles again, shaking her head. "Guys don't really do it for me, T'Soni."
The asari looks a bit embarrassed for a second, but then curiosity leaches into her features. "I never did ask how you became familiar with the melding ritual," she muses. "I must admit that I have wondered, Shepard."

Kelsa notices it's not exactly a question, but she wonders how T'Soni'll handle the answer. "A few years back, I spent a couple days of shore leave on Illium with a roommate of mine," the soldier explains. "We met an asari who gave us four or five practical demonstrations before we all passed out." The memory's enough to tip the corners of Kelsa's mouth upward and put a little tingle on the tip of her tongue. That little smirk blooms over half of Kelsa's face at the navy that flushes across the asari's cheeks and down her throat.

"I see," T'Soni breathes. "That certainly explains it." Kelsa thinks she sees a flash of envy in the other woman's eyes, just for a second, before she speaks again. "So you and this bunkmate were...lovers?"

A shiver crawls up Kelsa's spine. "We fucked for awhile," she affirms. "Her name's Siobhan, and last I heard, she made N7 about a year ago."

"And did you ever threaten to kill her?" T'Soni asks, before she thinks better of it, and all that colour drains out of her face. "I'm sorry, Shepard," she clips, her eyes widening in shock, and maybe a little bit of fear. "I didn't mean-"

"It's fine," Kelsa grunts, amused and annoyed that she's not surprised by the question. "As a matter of fact, I tried choking out Shiv the first time I looked at her," she allows, feeling a bit sheepish.

Shock gives way to a more considered surprise. "Really?" T'Soni breathes, arching a brow. "Why?"

Kelsa can't even remember. "$\text{Doesn't matter,}$" she says, with a little shrug. "$\text{She was an Alliance soldier, and I was just a year out of basic training, so she fought me off.}$" The commander's not sure the conclusion would be any different today, but there'd certainly be more blood involved. "$\text{A few days later we had an argument that turned physical again...but that time it ended in a tie.}$" The tingle isn't just at the tip of Kelsa's tongue anymore as she remembers a few rematches, and it's been a little too long since she's had someone else scratch that particular itch...but she notices T'Soni's face darken oddly. "$\text{You disappointed?}$" She gruffs. "$\text{You know I'm not invincible.}$"

"What?" T'Soni appears at a loss, but she gathers her wits after a few heartbeats. "$\text{That's not it. I was just...reflecting...upon how our relationship began}," she admits.

Kelsa finally breaks her parade rest and rolls her shoulders, turning to the wall beside her, which holds a pull-up bar near the ceiling. Thoughts about Siobhan and a few encounters afterward have given the soldier a certain kind of energy that she needs to work off if she wants to be able to keep talking. "$\text{When I had to decide whether or not to leave your corpse in the middle of a collapsing mine,}$" Kelsa recalls, before leaping to grip the bar and dragging herself up the wall.

"Indeed," the asari says, awkwardly. "$\text{Now I've begun to wonder how things between us might have developed differently if I had been less pliable during that first encounter.}$"

Kelsa's glad that T'Soni didn't take the sudden turn as a dismissal, but the soldier doesn't spare the asari's feelings, even so. "$\text{Then you'd be dead}," she says through her teeth, in between reps on the bar. "$\text{And I would've probably died on Feros,}$" she points out, before another thought strikes her. "$\text{Why...what do you think might have been different about you and me, T'Soni?}$"

The soldier drags herself up the wall three times before T'Soni answers. "$\text{I do not believe I have ever met anyone quite like you, Shepard,}$" she says. "$\text{You pursue your goals with an indomitable}
will, over and above other humans that I have observed. It can be...intimidating."

"Good," Kelsa grunts. Her shoulder's still sore from the bullet Chakwas dug out of it, but she pushes through the pain. "Arterius is gonna feel the same way, just before I kill him."

A breathless laugh rasps from behind her. "That is a fine illustration of my point," T'Soni tells the commander. "There is a reason that the Council chose you as the first human Spectre," she goes on. "They saw something special in you...the best of what humanity has to offer." Kelsa just grunts again, too focused to tell the asari she's full of shit. Eventually T'Soni speaks up again. "Before we melded again, I looked into your history. I know what you did on Torfan...it was a remarkable display of tenacity and determination."

Kelsa grits her teeth, letting out a steady breath on an upswing and drawing another lungful of air as she lowers herself. "Thanks," she gruffs. "For not making me explain all that to you." She's worked any annoyance she might feel at the asari's snooping around out of her system a long time ago, occasionally on a mouthy civilian's face or arm.

"I wanted to know more about you," T'Soni explains, almost apologetically. "To understand what made you into the woman you are. There is..." And here she takes a breath, loud enough for Kelsa to hear over her own heartbeat. "...There's something compelling you, Shepard," she admits.

The soldier redoubles her grip on the bar. Ninety-seven. "You sure it's me that's got you curious," she growls. Ninety-eight. "Or is it what the beacon's..."-Ninety-nine-"...done to my head?"

"I admit," T'Soni says, "your connection to the protheans had something to do with my initial interest...but it has grown beyond that." Kelsa feels heavier than she should, halfway up her hundredth pull-up, and she has to grit her teeth to keep from slipping as the asari gathers her courage to speak again. "You intrigue me, Shepard...but I did not know if it would be appropriate to act on my feelings."

Kelsa's chin can't quite clear the bar, so she doesn't count off one hundred in her head. Instead, the soldier hears a wispy shadow-voice tell her to Let go. "No," she grunts under her breath, but at the bottom of the rep, sweat and sore muscles steal her grip off of the rod, and the soldier falls into a crouch. When Kelsa straightens out and turns, she sees on T'Soni's face that the asari heard that little grunt. "I intrigue you, huh?" She asks, to keep the other woman talking.

T'Soni's frown falters. "Yes," she sighs, her head tilting forward. "I was not going to say anything, for I sensed a certain type of connection between you and Lieutenant Alenko, but it appears I was incorrect." She blushes again and can't quite meet Kelsa's eyes. "I apologise, Commander Shepard," the asari says, her lips tipping into a bittersweet smile. "I imagined it would be brave of me to come to you, but I see now that it was just foolish..."

"I had a gun to your head and a knife at your neck the minute I got close enough to spit on you," Kelsa says, "and since then you've seen how good I am at using both. But you still came to see me," she points out. "Even though you're an alien on an Alliance ship; even though I'm a Spectre, hunting somebody your mother's working with, and I'm probably gonna kill both of 'em unless they kill me first." The soldier shakes her head, smirking. "Whatever else you wanna call it, that's brave, T'Soni."

"...Really?" The asari swallows, standing a little taller. "But...what about us, Shepard? Is there a mutual attraction...or was I wrong about that, too?"

Kelsa's brow tenses, and she glances from T'Soni to the wall behind her, where the asari's shadow exists as a smear under the cabin's dim lights. A twitch of pain crosses the soldier's shoulders, even
though she only did half her normal set on the bar; she hasn't done so few pull-ups at once since her last rotation in the 3X zone, back in HEAT, on Titan. Shaking her head, the soldier looks at T'Soni again, really looks at her...not as a threat, or a spy, but as a person. A woman. "You've been in my head an awful lot lately, doc," she admits. Too much.

Relief breaks over T'Soni's face like the dawn of a blue giant star. "I knew it," she says, taking Kelsa's comment for confirmation. "I knew you felt it, too..." Then her head tilts, curious. "But...why do I feel so close to you?"

"Stockholm syndrome," Kelsa suggests, with a grunted laugh.

The asari blinks. "What?"

"...Nevermind," the soldier snickers, rolling her eyes. "Bad joke."

"Very well," T'Soni allows, still confused. "We've only known one another other a short time," she goes on. "We have so little in common...it makes no sense that I should feel this way."

"We've got at least one thing in common," Kelsa points out, and her face sets when T'Soni gives her an expectant look. "We both know what's coming for us if we don't stop Saren Arterius and Benezia." And we both want to stop them, Kelsa doesn't say, even though she knows that's true, too; the meld from the day before gave the soldier a glimpse into the asari's mind. It was just for a second, right after they finally understood a part of the beacon's visions, but Kelsa saw enough to tell her that T'Soni isn't a spy.

T'Soni nods, and Kelsa feels a pang of regret for the shadow that crosses the asari's features. "Listen to me, stumbling in the water while a skald fish waits underfoot." She shakes her head. "I'm sure you have many more important things to do than indulge my delusions, Shepard."

Kelsa feels a chill on her neck, but not from the sweat drying on her skin. "People've been trying to kill me since you were eighty-four years old, Blueblood," she tells the other woman, unwilling to see her turn away. "If I let that keep me from having any fun, I'd have died of boredom a long time ago."

The asari manages to look impressed and shocked at the same time. "You make it all sound so...dangerous," she sighs.

"A little danger makes things exciting," Kelsa says, taking a half-step forward. Her plan to burn up her energy on the exercise bar didn't quite work out like she hoped it would, and that chill on her neck crawls across down her shoulder blades, making her shiver. "And I've seen you move in a firefight, T'Soni," she husks, almost a laugh. "You don't seem too shy of danger when it counts."

The commander stops short when the taller woman takes a matching half-step back, until the wall stops her. "This is all a bit overwhelming," the asari says. "I am not used to...this." She swallows. "You. I...need some time."

Kelsa's brow shoots up, but she doesn't get a centimetre closer. "I wasn't the one who brought this up," she tells the asari, crossing her arms over her ribcage.

"I know," T'Soni answers her, with an apologetic tilt of her lips. "I'm sorry...but I did not think it would get so... Intriguing? Kelsa almost asks, but she holds her tongue as the asari gathers her thoughts. "...let's just talk about something else, shall we?"

The soldier nods and opens her mouth, but before she can say anything, Moreau's voice cuts in over the comm. "Message from Admiral Hackett, Commander," the pilot reports. "Says it's pretty
Kelsa snorts, the tingles down her back fading. "You should go," she says, and T'Soni nods, turning. "But we'll talk again," the soldier offers. "If you want."

"I...think I would like that, Shepard," T'Soni tells her, before she retreats sideways through the doorway.

*I think I would, too.* Kelsa blinks and shakes her head, clearing it, before she lifts her face toward the ceiling. "Patch the admiral through, Lieutenant."

"Aye, aye, ma'am," Moreau grunts, and a heartbeat later the static changes its quality.

"Commander Shepard," comes the voice of Admiral Hackett, from half a galaxy away. "I've just read your report on Zhu's Hope."

The soldier stands at attention, even though the man can't see her; some habits go too deep. "It's accurate, sir," she says, her stomach twisting. She probably wouldn't've been able to lie to Anderson like that. "What's your take?"

"My take is that ExoGeni Corporation has a hell of a lot of explaining to do," Hackett gruffs. "I'm drawing up some Articles of Inquiry to sound out some of their business practices...they may think they're above the law, but Feros is in Alliance space, and the Alliance chartered that colony."

"That's good to hear, Admiral," Kelsa sounds off, encouraged that he hasn't started chewing her out. That doesn't mean he won't, but it's a good sign. "Are the Baynhams cooperating with the Alliance ground team that took over when the *Normandy* bugged out?"

"As far as we can tell," Hackett confirms. "There are also a couple of colonists that survived the sweep through to the thorian creature," he tells her. "We're keeping them under observation to see what we can do for them, but ExoGeni won't get their hands on them. You can count on that."

Kelsa takes a bit of solace in that, but she doesn't need him to hide her bloodshed behind a silver tongue. "They were lucky they didn't get in my way," she supplies. "Glad to hear I didn't kill the others for nothing."

"I'll make sure of it," Hackett swears, after a couple of seconds. "But that wasn't the main reason for this call, Shepard," he goes on. "We've been getting some troubling reports that I think you should to take a look at."

The soldier frowns, considering. It's not an order, precisely, but an Alliance Marine doesn't shrug off an admiral's suggestions lightly. "I'll look into it, sir," she grunts. "Just tell me what I need to know."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to my excellent beta-reader, buttercup23, as well as everyone who's reading along!
Ch. 14: Ancient History

Chapter Summary

A shadow from Kelsa's past gets cast over her, and she tries to deal with it in the only way she knows how, to get on with her mission; it doesn't go quite to plan, however, and the soldier has to deal with the consequences.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Inner Sanctum

0300 Zulu

29 May 2183

Presrop (ashore), Klendagon, Century

The man looks a decade older than the last time she saw him, from the hospital bed. His face is craggy, hair more salt than pepper, and when he smiles he somehow looks even sterner. But he's not Alliance anymore, and Kelsa never had a father, so he doesn't scare her. "What the fuck are you even doing here, Kyle?"

He sits behind his desk, serene, still smiling at her. "I provide a place of refuge and understanding for those with gifts," he rumbles, like he's preaching, and he looks to Kelsa's left, where Alenko stands tense. "I see you have brought a slave along to see how free men and women might live." Kyle hasn't looked at T'Soni even once since the three of them came into his office, after a tense march through the bunker. It's filled with biotic humans, almost two hundred of them, with more in the surface complex...and every one of them is willing to die for their Father Kyle, the man that sent her to Torfan. The man that called her its Butcher.

Kelsa hefts her shotgun, just to remind Kyle it's there and she knows how to use it. "The Alliance sent in some people to try and talk some sense into you," she tells him, like he doesn't already know. "And now they sent me to find what happened to them."

"He's not interested," Kelsa grunts, grimacing.

"You see?" Kyle cuts her off, shaking his head. "How many years have you served, Lieutenant? How many sacrifices have you made, only to be placed under a monster's thumb?" Those brown eyes cut to Kelsa, but when Kyle speaks again, he's still talking to Alenko. "So much blood on her hands...do you really want them to keep staining you?" The lines around his mouth get etched even deeper with his frown. "They never quite wash away, Lieutenant. Take that advice with you, when you leave this place."

Fuck. "I'm going to ask you one time," Kelsa says, deliberately. "What did you do with the two
Alliance scouts that came to assess this facility thirteen days ago?" She doesn't couch her gun, not yet, but she moves her thumb closer to the incendiary ammo switch all the same.

Kyle shakes his head slowly. "They wanted to take me away from my children," he says. "I could not let that happen."

Kelsa didn't really expect any different, but being proved right doesn't feel so good when there are a hundred and eighty-three brainwashed biotics between you and the exits. She grits her teeth, racking her brain for something, anything, that might get the old bastard to come quietly. "You're not even a biotic," she rasps. "The fuck you think you know what's best for 'em?"

The man pushes back in his chair and stands, alone and unafraid against three trained killers. "I have seen my children suffer at the callous whims of human politicians for decades," he says. "I have seen biotic officers get passed over for command positions, denied fair compensation for botched implants, and abused simply for existing. I ask you, Butcher, by what right do you threaten this sanctuary?"

"None at all," Kelsa admits, but before Kyle can assume victory, she brings her shotgun to bear. "But I've got my orders, and I've got my gun, and you're coming with me. Vertical or horizontal takes no skin off my ass."

Kyle doesn't flinch, doesn't even reach for a weapon. She can't fault his courage, even if it comes from being as crazy as a pyjak in an asteroid field. "I have no doubt you would shoot me dead, Butcher," he rumbles, almost amiably. "But my children would be awfully upset with you, in that case."

The soldier inclines her head, keeping her green eyes steady on his face. "Then they'll die," she says, "and you could have stopped it. So if you really care about these fucks, you'll come back to Arcturus, and let them go back home." Kelsa sees hesitation, uncertainty, and she grabs it. "You know I'll do it, Major," she gruffs, giving him a sliver of the respect he earned as her XO, so long ago. "Every single one of you can live to see tomorrow, or I can kill you all. It's up to you."

Doubt takes hold, and not a little bit of horror. "You...you would," he settles, giving her a little nod. "And with your traitorous lackey, you just might stand a chance at success."

From the left edge of her vision, Kelsa sees Alenko's pointing his pistol at the man, holding it one-handed; he's keeping his left hand in reserve for a biotic attack. She can't see T'Soni, a half-step behind to her right, but she's seen the asari fight enough to keep from worrying about her. "Last chance," the soldier gives him. "We can all walk out of here."

Kyle holds up one hand. "Alright," he says, heavily. "Alright...I'll come quietly, Shepard. All I ask is an hour alone with my children. They must be made to underst-"

"That's not gonna happen," Kelsa cuts in. "You and I both know that you've got a dozen ways out of this place. I take my eyes off you before we get back to the Normandy and there's no telling where this fucked-up little family's gonna show up next."

The man shakes his head. "I swear to you that I will not, Commander," he vows. "But if my children see you taking me from this place, they will attack us all."

Kelsa narrows her eyes. "That ain't my problem, Major," she tells him. "I didn't make 'em that way, and you're outta time."

"No," Kyle pleads. "You need to hear me-"
"I don't need a goddamned thing from you, Kyle," Kelsa snaps, "except a yes, Commander, right away. And you have exactly three seconds to give it to me." One. Kyle's mouth twists, more defeated than defiant. Two. His right hand shifts, disappearing beneath his desk. Three. Blowback spatters across Kelsa's face, and probably Alenko's and Liara's too, from the hole her shotgun opens in Kyle's throat. He falls in a gurgling heap, bleeding out before he can raise the pistol he was going for. Kelsa's heartbeat ticks over and she spins around. "Stay back and try to keep 'em off me," she barks to the two biotics, before she expands and secures her helmet. They might have to vent the bunker if they can't make it out, or the fanatics might try to do it for them. "Five hundred yards between us and the exits. Let's move."

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**Medical Bay, SSV Normandy**

0530 Zulu

29 May 2183

*FTL Transit to Artemis Tau Cluster*

Chakwas gives Kelsa one of those mother-hen clucks as she beats her fingertips over Kelsa's left pectoral muscle like it's a drum. "I thought I told you to take it easy, Commander," she scoffs, and it turns into a grunt when Kelsa hisses. "I believe my exact words were at least a week without strain." The soldier has to bite her tongue to keep from crying out when the doctor's fingers probe into her armpit, up under the muscle. "Did you even wait an hour before you were back to exercising like a mule?"

"Bad people don't tend to sit on their hands, doc," Kelsa grunts, twisting away from the contact and rolling her shoulder to settle the pain that blooms beneath her breast. "Isn't there something you can shoot the muscle up with to make it mend any faster?"

"I rather think the titanium that got shot into it did quite enough damage, Shepard," Chakwas titters. "But against my better judgement, I will administer some painkillers, as long as you promise not to lift anything heavier than a butter knife with your left hand for at least a week."

Kelsa grunts, tugging on her undershirt, doing her best to ignore the pain. "A week, huh?" Her tags rattle when she tugs them out from underneath the light fabric.

"Seven days, Commander," the doctor insists. "You were lucky those two slugs didn't kill you directly, and if you do not rest, they may yet have the last laugh."

_Shit._ Shame keeps the soldier from raising further argument. She glances to her right, to the closed door that T'Soni's on the other side of. That's twice now that the asari's come along on a mission, and twice now that the asari's saved Kelsa's life, both from the same stubborn injury. "I'll give you six," Kelsa decides, turning her eyes back on the doctor. "Don't make it too strong," she says, when Chakwas turns to fetch some anaesthetic.

"Still the same old line about keeping your senses sharp?" Chakwas asks over her shoulder.

"Something like that," the soldier answers. It was the line Kelsa fed her about watering down the anaesthetic in her hardsuit, and the doctor didn't look like she believed it then, either. But Kelsa came too close to becoming a junkie to let her guard down, even now. "I'll manage." Chakwas only sighs, and Kelsa lifts her left arm without having to be told. The needle prickles into her armpit three times, and when it's done, Kelsa can shrug into her overshirt without having to grit her teeth. "Thanks," she says, slipping off the table; she could turn right, to the back office, to follow up on
that conversation Hackett interrupted a few days ago...or even just to say *Thanks for saving my life. Again*. Instead, Kelsa turns left, not quite ready to do either of those things.

"Six days, Commander," Chakwas reminds her. "Or God help me, I will strap you down to one of these beds myself."

Kelsa nods as she reaches the door out to the mess hall. "Got it, doc." She doesn't look back as she strides across the mess hall toward her cabin, but Alenko's profile catches her eye and she alters her course. "Hitting the tea again, Lieutenant?" He's standing behind the bar with a bottle of whiskey within reach, but Kelsa figures it's worth making sure, just in case.

Alenko chuckles and shakes his head without turning. "It's after 2100 hours, ma'am," he says. "Well, if you're counting from yesterday, anyway. Can I pour you a glass?"

"Make it Irish," Kelsa tells him, dragging herself onto a barstool.

Alenko makes a face, instead. "How you can suck down that swill I'll never know," he gruffs, but he plops a glass down on the countertop and produces a green bottle. When the glass is half full of golden brown liquid the lieutenant slides it across the bar. "No kick at all."

The Jameson is smoother than butter, like always, and it takes away the last of the ache in her chest. Kelsa doesn't answer him until the glass is empty. "I kick plenty hard enough on my own," she rasps, and tips the glass for another shot.

Alenko shoves the bottle her way instead, and sips his own darker whisky more slowly. "How you holding up, Commander?"

"I'm annoyed that I had to kill thirty-one people because one old man didn't know when to walk away. And pissed off that T'Soni had to save my ass again."

"You gave him a chance, ma'am," the lieutenant points out. "How'd Hackett take the debrief?"

Kelsa shrugs, taking another swig straight from the bottle. "He thought my history with Kyle would help me defuse the situation. Now he knows better. At least he's sending in enough grunts to secure the moon and get the rest of those biotics some help."

Alenko hums. "That's good to hear."

A second passes, and the commander takes another look at the lieutenant. "Alenko," she gruffs, and then steels herself with another drink. "...Kaidan," she tastes out loud, for the first time. The man's eyebrows hitch up a couple of centimetres, but he holds his cool, waiting. "I know it must've been hard, walking into that bunker...knowing what you'd have to do."

"This because I'm a biotic, ma'am?" Only one of his eyebrows stays up. "Or just my taste in whiskey?"

"Maybe a little bit of both, Lieutenant," Kelsa chides him, smirking. "That shit's three degrees away from maple syrup." And just like that, the issue's dropped, blown away by Alenko's chuckle. But Kelsa's tongue's just loose enough to spill her next thought out loud. "You know, Blueblood thinks you're sweet on me."

Not one muscle twitches in Alenko's face, but even in the dim light of the crew deck, she can see a shade of colour drain from his cheeks. "Liara has quite the imagination, Commander," he bluffs, but his next sip of rye is much closer to a gulp. "I'll have to add that to the list of other skills she possesses."
One heartbeat leads to another as Kelsa's mind blanks, until she licks a drop of whiskey from her upper lip. "Just remember, Alenko," she rasps. "I saw her first."

It takes a second for Alenko's eyes to fold into his smirk. "They say the asari are into that sort of thing, ma'am," he says, raising his glass. "Cheers."

Kelsa answers the toast with a half-full glass, and she drains it, but she takes her time, savouring the slow burn. "I like you, Alenko," she says, and means it. "But trust me when I tell you there are better reasons to keep your distance than just regs." The commander grimaces, but it's not from the whiskey. "I trust you. More than I've trusted anybody since…"

Alenko plants his elbow on the bar and rests his chin on his fist. "...Since when, Commander?"

"I don't trust you that much," Kelsa deflects, tipping the bottle back and taking a deep pull off of it. "No offence, Lieutenant."

He grins, just a little tipsy. "You said I'd have to do better than a double-shot of vodka. I thought, a bottle of whiskey…"

The commander shrugs. "Still not quite enough. Sorry." The bottle's not quite empty when she pushes it back across the bar. "Thanks for the drink, Lieutenant." She gives the man a quick nod and slips off the stool, her legs as steady as pillars. "Try to get some rest."

"Will-do, ma'am," Alenko vows, but he doesn't move from his perch as the commander moves back to her cabin.

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_Shuttle Bay, SSV Normandy_

_1420 Zulu_

_4 June 2183_

_FTL Transit to Mass Relay, Gemini Sigma Cluster_

"You've been spending a lot of time down here, Shepard," Wrex grunts, his scarred face twisting into something like a smirk. "Some people might think you're startin' to like me."

"Never," Kelsa says, shaking her head. "I hate you so much I'm takin' you out with me when we hit Noveria tomorrow."

The krogan smashes his right fist into his left palm and cackles in triumph. "Finally, some action! You've kept me cooped up down here for too long," He nods over to the Mako. "No creds in playing guard dog to a hunka steel."

Kelsa's smirk twitches into a grimace. "Yeah, sorry about that," she confesses. Wrex is many things, but he's a merc above anything else, and he'll jump off this mission if he can't scalp any credits; she can't really blame him, since she's hauled her fair share of salvage over the last few weeks. "Lotta rich people on Noveria," she drawls. "Some of 'em probably need killing."

"Anybody who gets in our way," Wrex agrees, with another laugh. "Lookin' forward to it, Shepard...but while you're here, I gotta question for you." Kelsa crosses her arms but doesn't answer, so he goes on. "Heard you chattin' with the turian yesterday. Gonna look into some personal business of his."
"Yeah," the soldier grunts. "If he can find the fucker and it's not too far out of our way. You got a problem with that, Wrex?"

The alien knocks his head from side to side. "Not at all," he rumbles. "Just wondering if that kinda professional courtesy extends to handsome krogan, too."

Kelsa's brow kicks up. "As soon as I meet one, I'll letcha know," she deadpans, and then she shrugs. "Lay it on me, Scarface."

"Alright," Wrex says. "You remember how my father betrayed me a few hundred years ago?"

"Uh-huh," the commander grunts. "Didn't you kill him already?"

Wrex chuckles. "Of course I did, Shepard." He shakes his head. "But he betrayed our family a long time before he betrayed me personally. The kind of betrayal that blood can't answer."

Kelsa's lips twist into a grimace. "Not too many kinds like that, Wrex," she points out. "What'd he do?"

"He surrendered," the krogan growls, all bluster and secret shame. "During the Rebellions," he explains. "The turian he surrendered to took his armour off him. His father's armour. My grandfather's armour."

The soldier hitches a nod. "And you wanna get the old tin can back, huh?" The Krogan Rebellions were a thousand years ago, or more; any equipment from that war's gotta be worse than an antique by now. But Kelsa understands taking value in the little things. Tattoos are more her thing, but she can't judge. "If I knew about my grandpa, I'd probably want something of his. You got any idea where to look?"

"I got an idea," Wrex grunts. "Nothin' solid enough to go chasin' after 'til whatever's on Noveria's done and settled. What is on Noveria, anyhow?"

Kelsa snorts a laugh. "Geth," she tells him, like he can't already guess. "Intel's got one of Arterius's lieutenants touching down there a couple days ago. Hopefully she'll give us something on the bastard before we kill her."

The krogan gives a low, thoughtful growl. "So we're goin' after the little blue fish's momma, huh?"

"You're not nearly as dumb as you look, krogan," Kelsa says, impressed.

"You're not nearly as squishy as you look, human," Wrex answers her, chuckling. "You gonna leave her on the boat for this one?" Kelsa's lips part, but her throat closes on her answer. "...that bad, huh?"

The soldier's brow shoots up. "What?"

Wrex only shakes his head. "Lemme know when we're poundin' the ice, Shepard."

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Peak 15

1655 Zulu

8 June 2183

Noveria (ashore), Pax
"There was...supposed to be...light…" The asari matriarch takes one last, greasy breath before the charred hole at the bottom of her ribcage drains the last of her life away.

Kelsa doesn't blink, she doesn't turn away as smokey biotic wisps trail from Benezia's nose and mouth, the final exhale of a long life. "Shoulda known better," she growls, still standing proud. She can picture three pairs of eyes on her back, but there are four other people in her squad for this mission. A quick glance tells the commander that T'Soni can't keep her eyes off of the dead woman.

Her mother.

The soldier takes a steadying breath, checking her shotgun. "We're done here," she declares, finally spinning around to survey the carnage they've carved through the base on their way to Benezia. She can look at the piles of dead commandos a lot more easily than she can watch T'Soni fight back her tears. "Let's move. We've still gotta melt this place down." A shuffling noise cuts through Kelsa's exhaustion and she spins around, shouldering her shotgun and putting nine millimetres' worth of pressure on the trigger before she recognises the asari that's stumbling toward her. "I already killed you," the soldier grunts, her heart ticking a half-second faster.

"You destroyed this body," the corpse wheezes. One of the last of two hundred and twelve she's made since touching down on Noveria. A shadow shifts in the window just behind the body, and Kelsa blinks. "Yes," the asari says. "We are speaking through this vessel."

"You're the rachni queen," Kelsa breathes. It's not a question. "How the fuck are you talking through this thing?"

"We...sing...at the higher levels," the queen says, through its fleshy puppet. "Your voices are empty. Your songs are...colourless."

Kelsa keeps her gun up. "I got no idea if your song goes both ways, but if I don't like what I hear, you're gonna find out." She takes a step closer to the window. "Did you breed the rachni that've been trying to take over this facility? The ones Arterius was trying to turn into soldiers?"

"Yes," the dead body groans. "We were forced to make the children, but they were...taken...from us. They never heard our music. It drove them...mad."

T'Soni speaks up for the first time since Kelsa gunned down her mother. "Imagine it, Shepard. A human child being locked in a closet until it reached adolescence would come out raving. I cannot even…"

"I can," Kelsa grunts, her green eyes burning a hole in the dead asari's forehead. "And now we're gonna make sure this thing can't make anymore crazy bugs."

The living asari sucks in a breath. "You mean…"

"We are to die," the queen wheezes, a note of resignation in the dead voice. "Our song is to be...silenced."

Vakarian's multilayered tones rumble from behind the commander. "Your species wasn't around for the Rachni Wars," he says. "We had to make a lotta hard choices to beat them back." She can't see, but Kelsa can guess that he shot a glance at Wrex right then; one of those hard choices entailed uplifting the krogan, which in turn led to the Krogan Rebellions. "This isn't even a choice, Shepard."

Kelsa's lips part, to agree, but T'Soni talks again, a half-step closer. "Kelsa," she chokes. "There has
been enough death today."

The soldier lets out a long, slow breath. "Not quite enough. There're still some rachni loose in the facility."

"You are correct," the rachni queen tells them. "The children that still live must be destroyed. They have been too long without our song; they will never accept it. Their minds are gone."

"That's horrible," T'Soni says. "But...that does not mean you should sacrifice yourself. You've been tortured--"

Kelsa takes a long step sideways, pivoting so that she can keep the dead and the live asari both in her field of vision. "What do you want from me, T'Soni?" She barks. "You know this has gotta end."

"I know nothing of the kind," the vivid asari shoots back. "But I do know that this creature is the last of her race, and she does not deserve to be..."

"...Butchered?" Kelsa guesses, hiding her grimace behind a smirk.

Wrex moves in the corner of her right eye. "You know, I usually make it a point to never agree with a turian," he rumbles, "but I've gotta go with Vakarian on this, Shepard. Letting this thing go is a big mistake."

The commander rasps a chuckle and tosses a glance to the last member of her team. "You got anything to add to this little scrum, Tali'Zorah?"

She's almost gotten used to not being able to see the woman's face, but her voice sounds nervous, underneath the enviro-suit's modulators. "We all know that the rachni nearly took over the galaxy...but I'm glad it's not my decision."

"We have heard the echoes," the rachni queen says. "Reflections from the Old War. The songs our foremothers sang were tainted...soured." The queen shudders from behind the glass, and her puppet jerks, like a marionette getting its strings cut. "If you...release us, we will disappear. Make beautiful music...beautiful children. No more war. Pure notes."

T'Soni stands taller, surer of herself. "I believe her, Kelsa," she says.

Wrex and Vakarian both try to speak up again, but Kelsa yells over them. "Shut up, you two!" Then, against her instincts, the soldier turns away from the queen, facing T'Soni full-on. The asari's cheeks are dry, but her eyes are laced with purple veins. "I've got a feeling I'm gonna regret this, Blueblood." T'Soni looks confused for a second, then hopeful, before Kelsa spins around and stalks up to a console. The rachni queen's being held in an isolation chamber, and a single keystroke could see the thing filled up with an acid bath strong enough to dissolve any organic matter inside. Instead, Kelsa hits a different key, and the chamber starts a slow ascent toward the surface of the glacier. Kelsa keeps her eyes on the alien queen until it rises out of sight. "Now," she barks, once the deed can't be undone. "Let's melt this popsicle stand and get the hell outta here."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who's reading along, especially my excellent beta-reader,
buttercup23!
Ch. 15: Mixed Signals

Chapter Summary

Kelsa has to deal with killing Liara's mother right in front of her; moving on gets a bit harder when a shadow from her own past looms, threatening to bring back a whole host of ghosts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Secure Laboratory

1230 Zulu

12 June 2183

Binthu (ashore), Yangtze

"He looks pretty dead, Commander," Williams observes, the frown obvious in her voice. Despite Alenko's chiming in with Negative contacts, Kelsa does one last sweep around the room before she takes a look at the particular body that the gunny's fixated on. "That's Admiral Kahoku, all right," she growls, before she kicks a green-tinted corpse beside the Alliance officer. "These look like the thorian's minions," Kelsa says. "Looks like he was locked in here with them...that what did him in?"

"Doesn't look like it, ma'am," Alenko tells her, after a cursory inspection. "There's no evidence of trauma...except..." He tugs open the man's coat and pushes down his shirt. "It looks like the admiral's neck and chest are covered with injection sites, Commander. I think he was probably dead before they stuck him in here."

"They being Cerberus," Kelsa says, swallowing a sigh. "And I was just starting to like them, too," she deadpans. This is the third facility they've hit in the last thirty-two hours; in the two previous bases, their welcome included human operatives of the organisation, along with rachni soldiers cloned from samples that Cerberus stole from Noveria. Now it's obvious that Cerberus had its fingers in ExoGeni's research on Feros as well. "Looks like he wasn't being paranoid when he warned us about them."

"They set up that distress beacon," Williams points out. "Back on Edolus...in the middle of that thresher maw's hunting ground."

The commander nods. "He let it get personal," she says of Kahoku. "And now they've got the Alliance's attention." Kelsa glances over to Wrex, the only alien on her ground team for this mission, here to pick over bodies. "Got enough loot, yet?"

The krogan works his omni-tool for a few seconds before he nods. "I left some around here for you, Shepard," he says, hefting a chain of weapons he's stripped from fallen enemies, to sell or convert into omni-gel. "Don't worry."
Another glance around the room shows more equipment strewn about, and at least two unhacked physical caches that might hold some credits. "Thanks," Kelsa gruffs. "You should probably get back to the Normandy before the Alliance sweepers come through to secure this base. We'll stay here to oversee custody transfer for the body."

"Shepard," Wrex grunts, as amiably as a krogan can. And then he's gone, stalking through the bunker's tight halls, back up to the surface.

Kelsa signals the incoming Alliance team that the base has been sanitised, and then she melts down enough Cerberus guns to get into the vaults; she feels no compunction over appropriating the credit chits inside, but she leaves the room's databanks unmolested, in case her meddling might ruin any intel the Alliance may need. Thirteen minutes later, Kelsa's omni-tool chirps in a coded pattern, and she returns the appropriate signal. Even so, she tells her lieutenant and her gunnery chief to be ready, and all three have their weapons drawn when the Alliance squad warily steps through the chamber's entrance. "Good to see you," Kelsa says, to break the tension.

At once, both groups slowly move to ship their guns. "Been awhile, Shepard," the middle man grunts. He stands in front of five other men and women, a mix of soldiers and engineers. "About three years, if I remember right."

Kelsa raises a brow, but recognition flashes when the man takes off his helmet. "Two years, eleven months, and eighteen days," she supplies, unable to help herself. He's N6, part of Kelsa's incoming class at the Villa, but he washed out two months short of making it to N7.

Kulyk chuckles, shaking his head. "Never could get used to you counting off the days like it was nothing."

Days are easy to count, Kelsa thinks. As easy as kills. "How you been, Kulyk?"

"Delta's treatin' me alright, ma'am," Kulyk says. "Had a nice vacation out in the Terminus, but it looks like we've got some work to do here in the Traverse."

Kelsa frowns, thoughtfully. "We gotta VIP you need to put on ice." She takes one sidestep and rolls her shoulder toward Kohoku's corpse; Alenko and Williams cleaned it up a little, but the poor bastard isn't getting any less dead.

A hush settles over the sweepers as they take in the sight of a murdered admiral in the middle of an enemy base. Kulyk's the first to speak. "We'll handle it from here, Commander," he rasps. "Thanks for keepin' him cold for us."

"Least we could do," Williams volunteers, coming to stand beside Kelsa.

The commander nods. "Make sure you give 'em hell," she tells the incoming Alliance Marines, before she expands her helmet and shoves it onto her head. Then Kelsa gestures for Alenko and Williams to follow her; their job's done, and there's a few thousand light years they've gotta go before she'll be able to get any sleep.

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Captain's Cabin, SSV Normandy

1600 Zulu

12 June 2183

Sublight Transit to Mass Relay, Voyager Cluster
Kelsa jerks awake a half-second before the knock sounds at her door. In that half a second, the details of her dream evaporate, flowing between her neurons like water through a sieve, leaving her drenched in sweat and tangled in her blanket. She sucks in a lungful of cool air and jerks fully awake in the space between the first knock and the second, and it takes just another handful of heartbeats for the soldier to get to her feet. She throws on her overshirt but doesn't bother buttoning it; her crew know not to bother her in her quarters and Moreau would just chirp over the comm...so that leaves only one person who'd have any business on the other side of the door. "What do you need, T'Soni?" She asks, just as the door hisses open.

The asari stands as though she's welded to the floor, but those blue eyes flick down; Kelsa can't tell if they're catching on her dog tags, or if T'Soni's trying to look past her undershirt, still damp. "I...err..." T'Soni breathes, but her words seem to fail just as Kelsa draws another breath. The soldier tries to swallow, but her throat's a desert.

Soft blue flesh beneath her hands, patterned with a million little river-smooth pebbles, but there's a hard edge of muscle that makes Kelsa's fingers weak. Liara's tongue dances just beneath Kelsa's left earlobe, behind her carotid artery, and every beat of Kelsa's heart sends a jolt of pleasure down her neck, deep into her belly. Liara, she groans, arching back against the bookshelf. Right there... The shelf tips dangerously-

"...Kelsa," T'Soni says, probably for the third time.

The soldier flinches, suddenly back in her office, and it takes nearly all of her resolve to keep from striking out at the asari. "Come in if you're coming," she gruffs, stepping back from the doorway.

T'Soni takes a tentative step into Kelsa's cabin, enough for the door to close behind her. "I'm sorry," she offers, along with a little smile that Kelsa has to look away from. "I didn't intend to rouse you from your sleep."

"I'm sorry," Kelsa almost tells her. "Don't be," she says instead, turning back to the awful mess her bed's turned into. "I'd offer you a drink, but I'm all out of liquor, so it'll have to wait 'til we get to the Citadel in a couple days."

A breathless laugh comes from behind her. "I appreciate the offer in any case, Kelsa."

The familiarity in the asari's tone makes Kelsa's shoulders bunch up. "What are you doing here, T'Soni?" She asks, without turning around.

"...I...was worried about you," T'Soni admits, after a moment's pause. "We have not properly spoken since-"

"Since I killed your mother," Kelsa cuts in, with a feral growl. "Ever stop to think that might have something to do with it?" The silence stretches on, long enough for fear and anger to gnaw at Kelsa's stomach. No use hiding, she muses, fixing her lips into a grimace before she pivots back to face her accuser. T'Soni looks like she's been punched again, tears welling up behind her eyes. "I killed your mother, T'Soni," Kelsa repeats, snarling the words for emphasis. "Right in front of you." At long last, the soldier manages to swallow. "Doesn't that make you wanna...wanna..."

"...Kill you?" T'Soni ventures, looking even more distressed. "Is that what you expect, Kelsa? For me to seek revenge?"

"It's what I'd do," Kelsa says, but she doesn't move to strike out, doesn't even raise her arms. "But you're better than I am," she points out, understanding as she speaks just how true that is. "And I'm...sorry," she forces, even though her throat tries to close around that last word. "I won't blame
you if you wanna get off this ride at the Citadel and go find some hole in the ground to dig in."

T'Soni draws up, squaring her shoulders, her eyes suddenly clear. "You aren't entirely wrong in your suspicions," she lets on, her lips tensing, ghosting into a frown. "I do want to avenge Benezia's death...but I recognise just where to direct that vengeance, Kelsa, and you are hardly the appropriate target."

"I pulled the trigger," the soldier bridles, her hands balling into fists.

"You did," the asari concedes. "But Saren placed her in your weapon's path. You saw how deeply his indoctrination went, that an asari matriarch could only gain a few brief seconds of lucidity. He is at fault, Kelsa." That hinted frown inverts into another undeserved smile. "Besides," T'Soni goes on, "I've seen what happens to those who seek to end you. It is not a particularly wise course of action."

A smirk flickers at the corner of Kelsa's mouth, and she crosses her hands at the small of her back, easing into parade rest. "I just didn't think you'd want to have anything to do with me, after Noveria," she gruffs, glancing down and away.

"That would be quite foolish of me, Kelsa," Liara says, and Kelsa can hear the smile in her voice. "You and I are...connected, now. We've both seen the demise of the protheans. You were given the Cipher when you melded with Shiala on Feros...and I received it upon our own melding."

The soldier growls, thoughtfully. "So even if you did take a hike at the Citadel, Arterius would probably still try to go after you," she surmises.

"Especially now that Benezia has been...taken care of," the asari says, delicately, but not delicately enough to hide the twitch that stalks across her face. It's just a flash, but Kelsa recognises the regret of all the conversations T'Soni thought she'd get to have with someone that isn't even on ice anymore. "I have a question," she goes on, before Kelsa can think of anything to fill the silence. The soldier nods, and T'Soni clears her throat. "Everyone else in the crew refers to Saren by his first name, but you never have, at least in my hearing. Why is that?"

Kelsa kicks up an eyebrow. "Same reason I call you T'Soni, T'Soni," she says. At least while I'm awake. "But besides professional courtesy, I respect the man," she admits. "If he wasn't trying to burn the galaxy up from the inside out, I wouldn't mind working with him."

T'Soni nods, at least pretending to understand. "But you are going to kill him," she says, and it's not a question. "And I would like-no," she cuts herself off, "I need to be there, when you do."

"You will be," Kelsa vows, before she can reconsider it. "I owe you that much."

The asari's lips part, but she doesn't speak for a few heartbeats. "Thank you, Shepard," she says at last, and Kelsa clamps down on a shiver at the cool distance she senses in T'Soni's voice. "I...think I should go now," she breathes.

Kelsa takes a steadying breath, her fingers tensing around her forearms, behind her back. "Go, then," she tells the other woman. "Stay. I'll see you later."

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Outside Chora's Den

1045 Zulu

15 June 2183
The music vibrates in her bones, too low for her shell-shocked ears to pick up this far outside the club, but Kelsa's looking forward to drowning out her thoughts with noise and liquor for at least a couple of hours...and the club has other avenues of entertainment on offer that a lonely soldier might enjoy. She earned some proper shore leave after spending all of yesterday arguing with the Council and Udina about where to hunt for Arterius next, or how much time she should spend chasing after Hackett's missions. Technically, she also earned a lifetime ban from entering Chora's Den when she and Wrex tore through the establishment and murdered its previous owner, but Kelsa figures her Spectre status has to be worth something.

Kelsa's dressed down, not a single stitch of an Alliance insignia on her t-shirt or cargo pants, her hair hanging about her shoulders in thick braids. She steps lightly, as lightly as she did back on Earth, back when every pair of eyes was either a hunter or a victim. Udina and the Council don't know where she is; her crew doesn't know where she is; she's just another nameless human to the aliens that fill up the wards. After Torfan, after Eden Prime, after becoming a Spectre, such anonymity is as welcome as a cool breeze in the Sahara. That is, until some random asshole tries to grab her by the shoulder just before she makes it to the Den.

He gets half a syllable off before Kelsa has him pinned to the wall, her forearm barred over his throat, her pistol digging into the side of his abdomen, just over his spleen. "When I shoot you, you'll die in about thirteen hours," she hisses. "Maybe you'll learn to keep your hands to yourself between now and then."

The man's tall, tall enough that she has to stand on the balls of her feet to keep up the pressure on his throat, her pistol digging into the side of his abdomen, just over his spleen. "When I shoot you, you'll die in about thirteen hours," she hisses. "Maybe you'll learn to keep your hands to yourself between now and then."

Then she takes a second look at his face. He's mean, unshaven but well-fed, so she doesn't recognise him at first. Her trigger finger squeezes nine-tenths of the way before she finally remembers him. "Finch," she barks, pushing a step backwards, but she keeps her gun up. "The fuck you doin' here?"

Finch coughs roughly, rubbing his throat and eyeing the pistol warily. "Lookin' for you, Kay," he growls. "Couldn't believe it when I saw the vids. We thought you were dead."

"Came close a couple times," Kelsa says. A couple dozen. "That what you're here for?" She can't see his collarbone underneath his shirt, but it wouldn't surprise her if Finch's rose had a few thorns on it by now.

He blinks. "What? ...Nah, Kay," he swears. "Mister V was pissed as hell when you dropped out, but he got a couple years later. Ain't hardly nobody in the gang even remembers you anymore."

Kelsa's stomach tightens, relief and grief mingling inside her. "Guess it could be worse," she settles, and she takes the risk of lowering the pistol. "So what do you want, Finch? I ain't got all fuckin' day."

"I...ahh...need some help, Kay," the man admits. "New boss has us pushin' out into space, and a buddy of mine got picked up by a turian patrol."

"A turian patrol," she echoes, slowly. "Like the kind that sweep through turian space?"

Finch rasps a laugh. "He mighta been trying to steal some sand offa one of their colonies," he suggests, like that's nothing. "Name's Curt Weisman. Really good guy...doesn't deserve to spend
his life in some bird-legged jail cell."

"And just what the hell am I supposed to do about that?" Kelsa gruffs, but she can guess Finch's answer even before he gives it.

"You're supposed to get him out," the man tells her, jerking his head toward the nightclub's entrance. "There's a turian captain in there right now who's holding Curt's collar. Birdy could let him go tonight if you give him the right incentive."

She grimaces. "I can't just go swingin' my dick around at aliens," she points out. "I've got a job to do, and cleaning up your mess ain't part of it."

Finch snorts, but he doesn't move, still glancing at the gun in her hand. "Like I said, I saw the vids," he says. "You're a Spectre, Commander Shepard," he sneers. "Funny, I don't remember you and Jay makin' it official, but you still got his name, somehow." Kelsa flinches and closes her eyes, giving him no argument. "You think you're too good for the Reds, huh?"

"Shut up," she tells him, through her teeth.

The bastard doesn't listen. "You mighta forgot where you came from, but I sure as hell haven't, Kay," he growls. "How would your new buddies feel if they knew what I know? If they knew how you got Jay's name?"

The pistol stops a finger's width from his Adam's apple. "I told you to shut the fuck up, Finch," she hisses, her eyes burning in the corners. "Don't make me kill you."

Eleven years haven't made the man any smarter. "Go ahead, then," he taunts her. "Shoot me, just like you shot him...then run away." He leans forward, closing the gap between his throat and the gun's barrel. "But you and I both know you owe me...just like you owe Mary. Just like you owe Jay."

"I know," Kelsa gruffs, and with more than a little reluctance, she eases her finger off of the trigger. "I'll do you this one favour," she declares, checking her gun. "After it's done, you don't know me, you understand?"

Relief washes over the man's features. "You got it, Kay," he breathes, wiping some sweat off of his forehead.

"No," Kelsa insists. "You don't know me," she repeats. "If I ever hear different, if I ever even suspect you or Mary or anyone else from the Garden so much as says my name in their sleep, I will hunt you down, Finch," she promises. "And when I find you, I'll make damned sure it takes you less than thirteen hours to bleed out." Her tone is as dead as the look in her eyes. "Do. You. Understand?"

The man's response is a long time coming, but he swallows hard, and eventually he nods. "Yeah, Ka-Commander Shepard," he corrects himself, and he says it without the mocking bite this time. "You spring Weisman and you'll never hear of the Reds again. You got my word."

"Good," the soldier grunts, finally shipping her pistol to her hip. "Now tell me what I need to know about that turian."

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_Inshira Tower_

2320 Zulu
"There's nothing quite like a Thessian sunset," the asari sighs, shifting to sit up higher on the bed.

Kelsa grumbles as the other woman moves, since she was using the asari's belly as a pillow. "Never seen it," she admits, and then she buries her face just below the asari's navel. A long, selfish breath brings her a heady mixture of liquor and sea-salt and sex that have defined the last six and a half hours for the both of them. *I wouldn't mind it, sometime.*

The asari breathes a laugh, almost a giggle. "If you'd like to so badly," she drawls, like she's reading Kelsa's thoughts, "you just have to look up." Kelsa licks her lips and plants them on the woman's belly, slowly rolling her head higher up the asari's abdomen to look down her body, intending to throw a glance to the wall, but the soldier's green eyes get caught along the way. "Hey, now," the asari purrs, when Kelsa gives her belly another kiss instead of admiring the vid of the sunset. "Aren't you tired yet, human?"

"...Maybe a little, asari," Kelsa mumbles. "But I've got a space flight to catch in about two hours..." She feels the asari's fingertips trailing up her right flank, biotic tendrils licking across her nerves, and she sucks in a sigh. It's been too many months since she's let anyone touch her like this...since she's let herself touch anyone that she wasn't trying to kill. She rolls over, catching a glance of that purple-and-orange sunset as she goes. It's one of the most beautiful things she's ever seen out of the corner of her eye, but Kelsa's more interested in ogling real-live Thessian. "You saying you're too tired to go for round three?"

"I never said *that*," the asari counters, her lavender lips twisting into a grin. "And it's more like round seven, by my count...but I've always been a little greedy," she admits. It looks like she wants to say something else, but Kelsa leans up and steals away the asari's words with another kiss. The woman falls into it willfully, using her biotics and her own strength to push Kelsa onto her back. She doesn't know Kelsa's a Spectre. She doesn't even know Kelsa's name...which is fair, since Kelsa's got no idea what the asari's mother calls her. After another hour and a half, the asari demonstrates for the third time—and then the fourth—that she knows Kelsa's body as well as anyone ever has.

The wall vid shows a gorgeous starscape overtop an ink-black horizon by the time they stop to appreciate the view. They lay tangled together for several long minutes, broken only by the sound of their breathing, until the asari lazily drags a finger over the bird tattoo on Kelsa's left arm. "You humans paint the cutest designs," she comments. "Asari markings are usually geometric, symmetric. You treat your skin like a canvas, to draw whatever takes your fancy."

Kelsa frowns, glancing down at her own arm; even with her modified eyes, the soldier has trouble seeing the outline of the tattoo in the dark. "Not everybody does it," she muses. "Gets tattoos, I mean. And most people—most humans—wind up changing their minds, taking them off after a few years." She can still remember the searing burn of the laser when it took off the rose from her chest, near where she wound up branding her N7 status on her flesh. "But for some people, they mean something special. Something to help you always remember."

The explanation seems to intrigue the asari, and as soon as Kelsa notices that, she feels an odd pang of guilt, deep in her chest. The asari goes on, oblivious. "And what does this little bird mean to you, human? What does it help you to remember?"

The soldier's lips part, on the cusp of answering the inquiry, when a shiver runs across her spine and she sits up. "I should go," she gruffs, colder than she meant to be. "This was...fun."
"It certainly was," the asari agrees, and if she's put-out by the abrupt end of their evening, she doesn't show it. "I haven't met a human who could keep up with me like you in almost thirty years."

Some part of Kelsa's curious about how old the other woman is, but she swallows the question, too busy getting dressed. "I've had a little practice," she says, once her boots are laced and her pistol's snug against her hip. She still doesn't offer her name, and she's grateful that the asari hasn't asked for it. "Guess I'll see you around," the soldier lies, offering the other woman a smirk that's almost a half-smile.

The asari gives her a nod and a parting wave, and with that, Kelsa makes her way out of the apartment. As the soldier makes her way back to the Normandy, back to her mission, she feels more relaxed than she has since Eden Prime. But that splinter of guilt still nags at her, lodged underneath her heart, almost too subtle for her to notice.

Almost.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to my excellent beta-reader, buttercup23!

Also, if you're interested, check me out on tumblr, http://riptidemonzarc.tumblr.com.
Kelsa gets tasked with an urgent mission which nevertheless has nothing to do with tracking down Saren, but soon after it is done, the Council turns up an effective lead.

Combat Information Centre, SSV Normandy

0700 Zulu

29 June 2183

FTL Transit to Utopia, Exodus Cluster

Kelsa's teeth are still tingling from the relay jump when Moreau checks in over the comm. "Message coming in from Hackett, Commander," he says. "Priority, but not classified, so I'm patching it through."

"Go ahead," the soldier barks, glancing up at the ceiling from the galaxy map.

Hackett's leathery voice crackles out from it. "Commander Shepard," he says, in perfunctory greeting. "We have a situation on Terra Nova, and you're the nearest Alliance asset. I know you've had a busy couple of weeks, but we need you on this." Busy is an understatement; in the last ten days, the Normandy has toured the Attican Traverse, and even a couple of the Terminus Systems. First, it was Vakarian and his vendetta against a salarian doctor. Once the salarian was on ice, Wrex wanted Kelsa to keep her promise about his granddad's armour...and in between those two little outings, Hackett himself sent her after a thirty-year-old nuclear-tipped recon probe that turned out to be a trap designed to kill Kelsa herself. Designed by the mastermind behind the Skyllian Blitz, no less...a man, a human, whose particular brand of madness drove him to try and kill the Butcher of Torfan. Now he's dead, and the Theshaca Raids are well and truly over. But none of those operations have gotten her even a centimetre closer to catching Arterius. "...Commander?"

Hackett prompts, when she doesn't answer after a second.

"Yes, sir," Kelsa barks. "What's the situation on the ground?"

"The ground's just fine," the admiral rebuffs, "and it's gonna stay that way for about six hours; the long and short is that there's an asteroid inbound, big enough to render the planet inhospitable to human habitation."

The commander blinks. "...That sounds like an engineering problem, Admiral," she points out.

"In more ways than one," Hackett gruffs. "I've given Lieutenant Moreau the coordinates for the asteroid, and I can explain more while you're en route. Time is absolutely critical."

"Understood, sir," Kelsa confirms, with a glance up the Normandy's neck. "Change of plans, Flight-Lieutenant. Set a new course for the asteroid inbound on Terra Nova."
"Aye, aye, Commander," the pilot says. Kelsa can't feel anything, because of the ship's inertial dampeners, but Moreau's voice tells her they're already underway before he's finished affirming the order.

Hackett clears his throat, retaking control of the comm. "The asteroid's called X57. It was being towed in from one of the system's gas giants to give the colony an orbital station...but the engineering team in charge of the manoeuvre fell out of contact three and a half hours ago and the asteroid's thrusters have been reignited."

Kelsa's brows knit. "Outlook for evac?"

"Operations are underway," Hackett tells her. "But Terra Nova's got over four million civilians, and only enough transports to get a few thousand offworld at any one time...and that's only assuming there are no hostiles in the area to pick them off. And I'm not willing to take that chance."

"Understood," Kelsa says again, shelving her annoyance; she'd intended to go back to Eden Prime while the Council shoved their thumbs up their asses, to see if the colony had any other leads worth pursuing. It looks like she's going to have to shelve that, now. "Moreau, we got an ETA?" Terra Nova's part of the same star cluster, but it's in a different system, so they might not have too much time.

"About two hours at our current heading, ma'am," the pilot tells her. "Any faster and we'll overload the drive core...should make a piddling little asteroid impact seem like a high-pressure storm system."

Kelsa doesn't even crack a smirk. "That'll give us four hours to assess the situation and keep the rock from fucking up four million peoples' day."

"Glad to hear we're on the same page," Hackett comments. "I probably also don't need to tell you to assume hostiles, Commander. Whoever the hell they are, they don't have humanity's interests at heart."

"Could be payback for any number of things," Kelsa muses. I can think of at least half a dozen I did myself. "We'll take care of them."

"See that you do," the admiral exhorts. "Oh, and one more thing, Shepard."

"...Yes sir?" Kelsa grunts toward the ceiling.

Hackett's answer is a moment in coming. "Shortly after your debrief on the probe incident, I received a formal complaint from Alliance Command, initiated by Rear Admiral Mikhailovich."

The commander grimaces, anticipating a dressing-down. "I probably deserved it, Admiral," she admits. Mikhailovich had ambushed her on the way back to the Normandy, after her little rendezvous with the asari whose name she never quite caught. "I did warn him if he set foot on my boat, they'd have to carry him out on a stretcher."

"...I was hoping that was just an embellishment," Hackett says, obviously uncomfortable. "I know you're a Spectre, Commander, but it isn't terribly wise to antagonise senior officers of the Alliance," he points out. "Now that you're en route to Terra Nova, we can take this conversation to your cabin, if you want to explain yourself in private."

Kelsa doesn't move a millimetre from her perch in front of the galaxy map. "I've got nothing to hide from my crew, sir," she tells the man, respectfully. "And I've got no apologies for anyone who
questions their fitness for the mission, which Admiral Mikhailovich did more than once in the course of our conversation," she allows. "You're my direct superior, Admiral Hackett. I've got no objection to you coming aboard and taking a look around whenever you want...but I won't let anybody railroad me or my crew, especially my ground team. He was gonna write whatever he wanted in that report of his, anyway."

A sigh comes across the light years. "I guess you've got a point, Shepard," Hackett concedes. "Just see that you get this son of a bitch, and see that you do it soon."

The soldier nods, if only to herself; she understands that Hackett's stuck his neck out further for her than she's had any right to expect. "As soon as we get this asteroid dealt with, I'll get on gathering some more leads on Arterius and the Reapers," she vows. "I've already taken out some of his best lieutenants. The bastard himself can't be too far behind."

"I like the sound of that, Commander," the admiral says. "Hackett out."

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Central Facility

12:15 Zulu

29 June 2183

Asteroid X57 (ashore), Asgard

 Fucking batarians. It's always the motherfucking batarians, Kelsa reflects, after she lays waste to the forty-fourth four-eyed bastard since touching down on the asteroid. Williams has taken out almost as many, while T'Soni and Alenko have been working support with their biotics, so they've got excuses for only killing half as many. The batarians' motives were inscrutable until about half an hour ago, when Kelsa's squad shut down the last fusion torch; now the asteroid's still drifting toward Terra Nova, but it isn't accelerating anymore, which buys them some time to secure the command hub and save the engineers that might be able to alter the body's course. Under normal circumstances, batarian pirates are simple scavengers, preying upon poorly-defended colonies for resources and slaves; at their worst, they join into loosely-organised warbands to pose a threat to hardened targets, like Elysium. But these batarians, the ones looking to destroy Terra Nova, aren't typical pirates.

They're terrorists, looking to strike out against the Alliance and increase their standing in the Batarian Hegemony. Before she killed him, Kelsa got a batarian named Charn to tell her all about the plan, and about the man behind it. A batarian named Ka'hairal Balak, who had enough vision to gather almost two hundred confederates to his cause. Unluckily for him, none of those followers have had the skill to keep him insulated from his own foolishness.

"Balak," Kelsa gruffs, from behind a concrete corner in the middle of the atrium. There are only a few four-eyes left, maybe twenty, and Kelsa's team is right in the heart of their last stronghold. "This is the part where I'm supposed to offer to let you surrender," she tells the room at large, her voice thick from barking and yelling over the last three hours. "I just wanted to let you know that I'm gonna kill you," the commander shouts, over the crack-crack-crack of bullets hitting the concrete a few finger-widths from her head. "You could save us all a little time and just take care of it yourself." Bluffing battle cries are all the answer Kelsa gets, and the only answer she was expecting, really.

She takes a deep, calming breath, and then nods to Williams and Alenko, signaling them to shore up the other corner of the central monument, where T'Soni's trying to hold her own. Once the
humans acknowledge their understanding, Kelsa vaults over her corner, pitching into a roll to dodge the renewed flurry of rounds from the sniper's nest of batarians camped out on the balcony above her. A quick glance tells her there's four of them, with two more guarding the stairs that form the quickest approach. The soldier draws her pistol with her left hand and lays some crossfire into the nest while she zigzags to the stairs, and her shotgun paints the steps red with batarian blood. By the time she hinges back and neutralises the snipers, both of her guns are howling at the edge of their tolerance.

Which is the only reason that Balak and three of his lackeys can step so boldly out onto the balcony. At least Kelsa assumes the middle one's Balak, by the mix of disdain and fear she reads in the upper set of his eyes, before he blinks himself into a poker face. "The great Commander Shepard," the batarian hisses through his pointed teeth. "Not content with merely slaughtering men about their business, you've come to upset the very future of the hegemony itself."

"What the fuck ever," the soldier grunts, shipping her pistol to grip her shotgun with both hands; even her shoulder can't handle more than a few shots without any other support. "You've got until the time it takes for my gun to stop screaming to breathe...then all four of you are gonna die." She turns her head to spit out a gob of blood, but it's from a cut on the inside of her cheek, rather than anything more worrisome.

The three goons each raise their guns, two pistols and a shotgun, but Balak's fist isn't holding a firearm. It takes Kelsa a second to recognise it as a trigger. "Come, now," the batarian chides her. "You should know better than to think that I have not prepared for this eventuality, human." He seems smug, which might be reasonable, considering his numbers...and the fact that Kelsa's team is invested in a firefight with the rest of the batarians. "There is a group of five human engineers locked in a small room on the level below us," Balak says, pressing down firmly on the end of the trigger. "If I release this button, they will be annihilated."

The commander snorts. "You know my name," she gruffs. "You've gotta know my reputation, especially when it comes to hostages."

Balak's lower eyes shutter in a blink, and the bastard actually smirks. "Ahh...but these men and women are the only people who can save your precious colony," he claims. "If you allow them to die, you will be condemning four million of your own species along with them."

Kelsa hesitates, a grimace twisting across her face. Those odds are enough to buy the batarian a few more seconds. "What the hell did these people ever do to you, four-eyes?"

Balak chuckles darkly, as though the question doesn't deserve an answer, but he deigns to provide one anyway. "They have the misfortune of being represented by fools who are unable to defend them...fools who've convinced the Council to turn their backs on my people."

"So you want to start a war?" Kelsa shakes her head. "It's already over, Balak; you drop an asteroid from orbit, you're writing the last chapter of batarian history. The Council won't let an unprovoked attack like that go unanswered."

"Unprovoked?" The batarian blusters, angrily. "Human aggression and incursion into batarian systems has provoked much worse than this, you pathetic little worm. You have robbed my people of our security, our dignity...of our very future as a race." Balak raises the deadman switch higher. "Today was to be the first day in correcting these injustices...but if you are wise, we can all walk out of here, and the millions of civilians below us will live to see tomorrow."

Footfalls scrape on the stairs behind Kelsa, but she can't risk taking her eyes away from the aliens in front of her. After a second, she figures it's her ground team, since they don't shoot her in the
back. "Deactivate the bomb and give yourselves up, and the four of you can comp the rest of your meals courtesy of the Alliance," she offers, through a grimace. "Five seconds, take it or leave it."

Balak spends the first three seconds spluttering, and the last two trying to protest. "Are you really willing to risk-"

Kelsa bulls forward, taking several rounds on her shields, and she watches Balak's four eyes crumple into a single gaping hole. Her shotgun reports three more times before the deadman switch clatters onto the floor; half a heartbeat later, she feels the vibration of an explosion licking up her shins from the floor. "I guess I am," she tells the new-made corpses, wiping a smear of batarian blood from her cheek and lips.

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**Mess Hall, SSV Normandy**

**1530 Zulu**

**29 June 2183**

**Sublight Transit to Borr, Asgard**

"I think this is the first time I've seen you out of that chair, Joker," Vakarian hums, before he takes another bite of his dextro MRE. He's at one end of the mess table, opposite Kelsa, and the rest of the ground team are sitting between them on either side.

Kelsa glances over her shoulder to see Moreau carefully picking his way around the elevator shaft. "Got hungry," he explains, "and I was tired of just talking to myself, since you're all down here."

"Aww, I didn't know you cared," Williams drawls. "Aren't you worried about the VI driving the ship?"

"Nah," the pilot deflects. "We got some heavy cruisers in-system guarding the flanks, nothing on the long-range scanners, and about fourteen hours' worth of heavy discharging once we hit Borr. I figure this is as good an excuse as any to start my marathon training." He finally makes it to the table and eases himself into one of the two empty seats between Williams and Wrex. "They started the memorial service a few minutes ago, just in case anyone's interested." He says it in the shadow of a grimace, his usual sarcasm apparently running dry. At least for a second. ". . .Didn't think so."

Kelsa busies herself by chewing on a brick-thick energy bar, her green eyes flitting from Alenko to Tali'Zorah before they settle onto the middle of the table; if it wasn't for the two of them, there wouldn't be anyone left on Terra Nova to remember the dead scientists on the space rock. Once the batarians were taken care of, the quarian joined the shore party and worked with Alenko to stabilise the asteroid just in time. Because of them, upwards of four million people can expect to wake up tomorrow. "So," Moreau drawls. "What's the excuse for this little pow-wow?"

Nobody wants to be the first to say something, so Kelsa grunts. "We were hungry." She nods over her shoulder, toward Mess Sergeant Ibara. "You want anything to eat, Moreau?"

The pilot shakes his head. "Gotta watch my girlish figure," he quips, to near-universal eyerolls. After another few seconds of silence, broken only by the sound of Kelsa and Wrex chewing, Moreau heaves a sigh. "You know, if I wanted to stare into space, I had a much better view back in the cockpit."

"Sorry," Williams supplies. "It's just tough, losing civilians...even if it saves more in the long run." Wrex mutters something that Kelsa's translator doesn't quite pick up on, but the rest of the table seems to share in the gunny's mood. "I hope they found some peace, at least."
The commander's shoulders tense, but the gunnery chief doesn't launch into a sermon. "The galaxy's a dangerous place," Kelsa points out, making her move to stand. She's about to say something else when Williams cuts in, seemingly unable to help herself.

"But how do you handle it, ma'am?" When Kelsa only blinks at her, Williams clears her throat. "I mean...how do you live with innocent people dying on your watch?"

Kelsa feels the weight of everyone's eyes turning to look at her, and her lips twitch into a grimace. "I think of how many people Balak and Charn killed, and trafficked, or worse, before I came along...and I don't want there to be a next time." It's most of the truth, anyway.

But it doesn't seem to satisfy Williams. "But...what if it was someone you knew, Commander?" She sits forward, unflinching from Kelsa's stare. "What if somebody you cared about was under a gun?"

Kelsa's fingers dig into the back of her chair, but Alenko steps in. "Stand down, Chief," he says, his tone a shade above suggestion. Then he glances up at her, his own curiosity shrouded by a respectful distance. "Commander," he calls, with a nod.

Kelsa returns it. "Lemme know when we're ready to head back to Eden Prime," she tells Moreau, hardly waiting for his Aye, aye, Commander, before she turns. Her green eyes catch on T'Soni's face for a second as she goes, but the commander scowls to everyone to make it clear she doesn't want to be followed, and she stalks back to her quarters. There's at least half a bottle of whiskey there with her name all over it.

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Communications Room, SSV Normandy

1245 Zulu

4 August 2183

FTL Transit to Mass Relay, Voyager Cluster

At long fucking last, Kelsa thinks to herself, as the holographic image of the Council materialises before her eyes. "You've got something for me?" She asks, without preamble.

Sparatus, the turian councilor, grunts disagreeably. "Greetings to you, too, Commander Shepard," he grouses. "We've been going over your reports-"

"Save it," Kelsa barks, in her turn. "We've had briefs and debriefs and more briefs after every lead you've sent me on," she continues, grimacing. "I've been doing a lot of my own looking, but I need something solid if I'm gonna find Arterius before he finishes whatever the fuck he's got planned. I know you don't believe the Reapers are a threat," she tells them, "but whatever the motherfucker's trying to do, I wanna bring him in before he can do it."

The asari councilor nods, her smile tight. "We understand that, Commander," Tevos assures Kelsa. "And we have some good news on that front," she insists, her normally-authoritative tone cut through with a bit of hope. "If you'll permit us the time to explain."

Valern, the frog-like salarian, clears his throat. "We have had agents combing through the known galaxy for clues to Saren's whereabouts, and any plans he might be trying to enact." Kelsa crosses her arms in front of her and dips her head, and the salarian takes the hint. "Yesterday, a unit of the salarian Special Tasks Group reported in about a suspicious facility on Virmire, in the Hoc System," he explains. "They informed us about what appears to be a large-scale facility of some
kind, definitely associated with Saren in some way."

"...That's a little vague, Councillor," Kelsa points out. "I'm not exactly interested in raiding any more of Arterius's facilities, so much as putting a bullet in his head." Or a dozen bullets, just to make sure.

Tevos smiles, like a cat in a cage with a canary. "It's good to see that your resolve hasn't waned, after so many distractions borne of your own kind."

The commander has to bite her tongue to keep from bridling openly. "It ain't from a lack of desire that I haven't hunted Arterius down," she comments, instead. "I've been looking for any clues as to where he might be heading next, but I've only got one ship."

Sparatus sneers. "Did you learn nothing from your mission to Noveria?" He demands, his subharmonics gleeful, despite his outward hostility. Kelsa realises she's been spending too much time with Vakarian, when she recognises that. "Saren is obviously interested in the Mu Relay."

"And that relay connects to dozens of other relays, and hundreds of lost worlds," Kelsa points out, repeating what T'Soni told her shortly after Kelsa killed the asari's mother. "I could spend the rest of my life scouring all those systems until Arterius dies of boredom."

Valern clears his throat, the sound suspiciously close to ribbit, and he makes his voice heard once again. "If my turian colleague and the Spectre are quite finished antagonising one another," he drawls, "I believe I was about to brief you on Virmire."

Kelsa grits her teeth and grunts. "Sorry," she allows, because she knows goddamned well that none of the councillors are gonna say it. "You mentioned the Special Tasks Group giving you a report on some kind of facility there?"

"Indeed," Valern confirms. "The strike force is led by one Captain Kirrahe, a dedicated servant of the Salarian Union," he effuses. "Following some very hard-won leads, Kirrahe's team attempted to infiltrate a complex on Virmire, which appears to be a major base of Saren's operations. Disrupting it will go quite a long way to crippling Saren's plans, and ultimately apprehending him."

The commander's brow arches. "...I don't see where I come in, exactly," she comments. "You know I'm not a spy. Sending me to Virmire's only gonna have one logical conclusion."

All three councillors let their acknowledgement register in silence, and the asari's the first to speak up. "We have lost contact with Kirrahe and his team," she admits. "We do not know if their infiltration of the facility was successful…and, frankly, we have no other leads to give you, Commander Shepard."

_Fantastic_, Kelsa thinks, half-sarcastically. "I'll take it," she tells them. "Any idea what we can expect on the ground?"

The salarian, apparently, wants to show off some more. "Virmire is a mid-range garden world," he clips. "Temperate at the poles and tropical most everywhere else. The facility is located on an archipelago in the midst of one of the planet's vast oceans."

"I was more wondering what kinds of hostiles I should prepare for," Kelsa cuts in, filing Valern's information away, even so.

"Of course, Commander," Sparatus growls. "We are talking about one of Saren's bases, so I would have thought you could surmise the presence of geth without our having to state it explicitly."
Kelsa rolls her eyes, but before she can snap back at the turian, Valern speaks up again. "Don't forget, Sparatus; Kirrahe's last report mentioned inordinate numbers of krogan guarding the compound's outskirts."

The commander frowns, thoughtfully. So far, nearly every time they've met a group of Saren's followers, there were krogan involved; on Therum and Feros, some geth even seemed to follow krogan commands. So far, Wrex hasn't recognised any of them, as far as she knows. "How is he recruiting so many?" She wonders, her eyes cutting to the holo of Sparatus. "Aren't you people supposed to be enforcing the DMZ around Tuchanka?"

The alien's mandibles contract into the turian analogue of a scowl. "I don't believe I appreciate your implication, human," he drawls.

Tevos tries to come to his rescue, but Kelsa bulls over her. "I'll check out Virmire," she growls. "I'm sure my pilot can find the way." The commander glances up to the ceiling. "Moreau, I'm done wasting my time with these fools."

"Yes, Commander," the pilot says, and the holograms cut out before the councillors can register their dissent. "Already plotted a course for Virmire, ma'am."

"See that we get there ASAP," Kelsa tells him.

"Aye, aye, Commander."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to buttercup23 for beta-reading this story, and to everyone who's reading along!
Ch. 17: And You Let Her Go

Chapter Summary

Kelsa and her team hit Virmire, hot on the trail of Saren and his attempts to create a krogan army. The soldiers discover that the rogue Spectre isn't working alone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Krogan Breeding Facility Outskirts

1300 Zulu

5 August 2183

Virmire (ashore), Hoc

The salt spray of the sea threatens to burn Kelsa's eyes, but she doesn't blink as she holds her shotgun steady, the trigger at half-pressure. "Think about who your friends are, Wrex," she counsels, at the krogan who's levelling his own shotgun at her chest. They're both in shallow ocean water, up to their shins.

"I dunno, Shepard," Wrex grunts, his scarred lip curling. "The turians and salarians gave my people the genophage," he says, rolling one eye to his right, where Kirrahe's STG cell has set up camp. "Saren's used this base to cure it. It's getting awful hard to see who's my friend and who's my enemy, all of a sudden." His contention cuts to the quick; this whole base was dedicated to researching the krogan genophage, and it looks like Saren's followers found a way to counteract it...which the salarians want to reverse at all costs, regardless of the source. They've been stuck under an umbrella of radio interference for the last few days, expecting a fleet's worth of backup; instead, they've got the Normandy.

Kelsa's nostrils flare. "Just think for two goddamned seconds, Wrex," she cajoles him. "I know you overgrown turtles like to shoot first-hell, so do I-but you're too fucking smart to think Arterius is doing this out of the good of his motherfucking heart." She shakes her head, keeping her eyes fixed on the krogan's face. "You're pissed; I get that. I'd be pissed, too, if Arterius wanted to offer humans a helping hand. And I'm pretty sure you can suss out why," she says. Movement on the edge of her vision makes her growl. "Stand down, Williams," she barks. "I got this."

The gunny, who'd been moving to get in a decent shot with her sniper rifle, comes to a halt on the beach. She checks her rifle, but doesn't collapse it; behind her, Alenko and T'Soni both stand wary. Wrex doesn't seem fussed by any of them. "Maybe I ain't as smart as you thought, human," he scoffs. "I think you oughta spell it out for me; Saren has a cure for my people. You know I'm telling the truth, Wrex. And you know I'm gonna kill you if you don't see sense, even though I don't want to."

"And I'd do the same, if we switched places," Kelsa spits at him, squeezing her trigger to within a couple of millimetres of its release point. "Remember Feros; remember Terra Nova. You know I'm telling the truth, Wrex. And you know I'm gonna kill you if you don't see sense, even though I don't want to."
Wrex grits his off-white teeth, and after four heartbeats, he angles his shotgun up to the sky. "Fuck," he gruffs, firing a shot to punctuate his frustration. "I...believe you, Shepard," he admits, shaking his head. "And yeah...I guess I can see what Saren wants."

Kelsa nods, easing off her worn-out trigger and checking her gun, but she doesn't ship it, just in case. "The Reapers want to kill all of us," she tells him, as if he hadn't heard it before. "And no matter how many krogan there are, you won't be able to stop them in time, if he gets his way. I wish we didn't have to kill the only hope for your people, Wrex, but Arterius didn't give us any choice."

"You made your point," the krogan grumbles, finally relaxing his stance and holstering his weapon. "Just...promise me I'll be there, when we finally but a bullet between Saren's eyes, will you?"

The commander nods, remarking silently on the identical vow she made to T'Soni after Benezia drew in her last breath, and she puts away her own gun. "Go get ready," she gruffs, refocusing her attention on the task at hand. "I'll letcha know where I need you." She leaves Wrex fuming, glad for his continued allegiance, even if he's not exactly content. With that crisis averted, remarkably without any bloodshed, Kelsa trudges back onto the beach and heads for the STG cell's forward operating base.

Williams, Alenko, and T'Soni fall into step beside her, all visibly relieved at the resolution to the standoff. The salarian in charge looks far less happy when they reach him, just inside the main command tent. "Thank you for speaking with the krogan," he clips. "The assault is shaping up to be difficult enough as it is."

"He's got cause to be upset," Kelsa gruffs, her last word on the subject. "You gotta plan for wiping this place off the map, yet?"

"Of sorts," Captain Kirrahe concedes. "We can convert our ship's drive system into a twenty-kiloton ordnance. Crude, but effective."

Williams snorts, from Kelsa's left. "Nice; drop that nuke from orbit, and Saren can kiss his turian ass goodbye."

Kelsa's about to remind the gunnery chief of the blanketing anti-aircraft around the base, which makes it impossible to lift a pebble into orbit from their location, much less another ship's drive core...but the salarian cuts in. "Unfortunately, the facility is too well-fortified for that," he says, without a trace of sarcasm in his urgent tones. "We'll need to place the bomb at a precise location."

The commander nods. "Any intel on an optimal location for the package?"

"Preliminary mapping of the complex suggests it's most vulnerable in a central location, on the roof of the main hub," Kirrahe supplies. "The Normandy can deliver the bomb, but we will need to sweep through the facility to disable the AA guns and pacify the ground forces first."

Alenko points out the obvious. "We don't have enough men to go in on foot." He's right, of course.

But that isn't going to stop Kelsa from trying. "I guess you're lucky I ain't a man, last I checked," she gruffs, shooting the lieutenant a cutting glance that shuts him up. After a heartbeat, she turns her gaze back to the tall frog-man. "If you can get your people to make enough noise for my team to get in, we'll cut our way to the AA guns...assuming you guys can take a little heat."

Kirrahe considers, tapping two fingertips against his chin. Then he comes to a decision, nodding
resolutely. "I'll split my men into three teams," he tells her. "We'll lead a frontal assault on the facility, and while we've got their attention, you can sneak your shadow team in the back." His eyes narrow and he breathes a quick sniff. "It is not likely that many of us will make it through...and that makes what I'm going to ask even more difficult." Kelsa feels her throat go dry, and she knows what the bastard's going to say. "I'll need one of your men to accompany me...to help coordinate the teams."

_Not a chance,_ Kelsa almost says, but not before Alenko opens his fucking mouth again. "We'll need someone who knows Alliance communication protocols," he observes. "I volunteer, Commander."

"Not so fast, LT," Williams interrupts, just in time for Kelsa to swing around at the both of them. "Commander Shepard will need you to arm the nuke." She juts her chin out, just a little. "I'll go with the salarians."

Alenko blusters. "With all due respect, Gunnery Chief, that's not your call to make."

"No," Kelsa barks, over both of them. "It isn't."

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**Krogan Breeding Facility Outskirts**

1620 Zulu

5 August 2183

_Virmire (ashore), Hoc_

"Don't shoot!" An asari calls, from underneath a table, when Kelsa forces her way through a door. "Please...I just want to get out of here before it's too late."

Kelsa's gun's up; so are T'Soni's and Wrex's. "You shoulda thought of that before you came here in the first place," the commander spits, taking a couple of steps into the spare office. "I'll give you ten seconds to convince me."

"M-my name is Rana Thanoptis," the asari quavers, her hands held high. "I'm not a soldier, I'm a neurospecialist. But this job isn't worth dying over...or worse."

Kelsa's lips tip into a grimace; in the last couple of hours, she's seen plenty of or worse, so she doesn't even need to wonder what Rana Thanoptis could mean. "Five seconds," she warns.

"You think the indoctrination only affects prisoners?" Thanoptis asks, talking double-time. "Sooner or later, Saren will want to dissect my brain, too!"

_Not after I'm done with it._ "You're not just breeding krogan here," Kelsa spits, with a quick glance to the krogan by her side; he came with her willingly, even eagerly, for the chance to return Arterius's generosity. "You're doing experiments with indoctrination."

Now that her ten seconds has come and gone, the asari takes a steadying breath. "We're studying Sovereign's effect on organic minds," she explains. "Look, I didn't even want this; I followed Matriarch Benezia, and ever since she died, I've been looking for a way out." Thanoptis shudders. "My first test subject was the scientist that I was tasked to replace...I know what's coming if I can't escape."

"By the goddess," T'Soni exclaims, and her tone gives birth to an annoying twinge of regret in the
"I can help you," Thanoptis insists, gesturing to a set of doors behind her. "This elevator leads to Saren's private lab. I can give you access as a show of good faith." Then, without waiting for acknowledgement, the asari stalks over to the wall and activates a handprint panel; a light beside the doors turns from red to green. "See? Full access. All of Saren's private files," Thanoptis tells them. "Are we good? ...Can I go?"

Kelsa takes a deep breath, shaking her head, stuffing that little twinge of mercy deep down beneath the embers of her anger. "I had to kill a half-dozen braindead salarians," she says. "You made them that way, or helped make them that way...or just watched while they got that way, and I had to kill them." The asari's whimpering, crying, maybe even praying, but Kelsa doesn't care. "So no, Rana Thanoptis," the commander drawls, before she sends a shotgun shell into the blue meat above the alien's eyes. "We're not good."

Wrex cuts the tension in the room with a dark chuckle. "I like the way you do business, Shepard."

"I never agreed to her deal," the soldier points out, striding over to the elevator and thumbing what she hopes to Williams' Jesus is the call button. In the time it takes the elevator to arrive, Wrex has stripped the room and the corpse of everything valuable. The elevator leads to what Kelsa can only assume is the promised laboratory, split into two levels by a grilled metal floor and wide ramps. A quick scan reveals no hostiles, geth or organic.

An alcove on the lower level catches the commander's attention, just as T'Soni gasps. "Kelsa," she breathes, sounding awed. "That's…"

"A beacon," the soldier finishes, her stomach bottoming out. "Just like the one back on Virmire."

"Saren must have stored it here for further study," the asari surmises. "It may contain more vital information about the Reapers, or about Saren's other plans." T'Soni's eyes are a perfect blend of curiosity and caution. "We may never get another chance to inspect a working prothean beacon…"

"I'll do it," Kelsa growls, before T'Soni can volunteer. The soldier's had enough volunteers for one day. "Just...make sure it doesn't fuck me up for three days," she says, turning to stalk down the ramp. T'Soni follows at a measured distance, and the hairs at the back of Kelsa's neck tell her the asari's prepared to use biotics to drag her away from the beacon's influence, if necessary. The beacon itself stands tall, but its base is encumbered with more modern equipment, and as Kelsa approaches, a yellow haptic interface springs to life. Two holographic disks, rather than a keyboard, and the impressions of turian handprints leave their purpose beyond question. With one last, quick look over her shoulder to T'Soni, Kelsa plants her palms firmly on the display.

Nothing happens for one single, blessed heartbeat. Then a jolt shocks through Kelsa's nervous system, causing her to seize up, her head thrown back and her lips parted in a silent scream. In that blistering instant, Kelsa sees a galaxy in flames, beset by a ceaseless tide of Sovereign-like ships. Planets scourged free of life by those ships' occupants, cybernetic organisms shaped into a parody of the protheans that had been the masters of the galaxy. The warning's as unmistakable as it is hopeless; there's no escaping the Reapers, no outfighting them, no hiding. There is only desolation.

Kelsa feels the hard steel thud into the back of her suit before she realises she's been thrown back from the beacon, but T'Soni can only take a couple of hurried steps before the soldier's back on her feet. "Nothing we hadn't already guessed," she spits, blinking away last of the visions like a mild hangover. "Let's see what else there is in here before we move on."

"You gals might wanna get up here," Wrex calls, from the platform above them. "I get the feeling..."
something bad's about to happen."

Two seconds later, Kelsa sees what the krogan's talking about. Where there was nothing before, now there's a bank of haptic consoles, glowing an angry red. As T'Soni joins them, the image of Saren's gigantic flagship takes shape over the abyss, the same shade as the other holograms. A deep rumble echoes from the walls, from somewhere behind Kelsa's eyes.

YOU ARE NOT SAREN.

"...What is that?" T'Soni wonders, nerves tingling her wonder. "Perhaps some kind of VI interface to Saren's ship?"

RUDIMENTARY CREATURES OF BLOOD AND FLESH, the rumble continues, clinically. YOU HAVE TOUCHED MY MIND, FUMBLING IN IGNORANCE, INCAPABLE OF UNDERSTANDING.

Kelsa's tongue feels cold as she breathes in. "I don't think that's a VI," she manages, after a hard swallow and a half-step back.

THERE IS A REALM OF EXISTENCE SO FAR BEYOND YOUR OWN THAT YOU CANNOT EVEN IMAGINE IT, the ship boasts, in its grinding monotone. I AM BEYOND YOUR COMPREHENSION. I AM...SOVEREIGN.

Understanding clicks into place, understanding that Kelsa's lacked from that first glimpse, back on Eden Prime. "Sovereign isn't just some Reaper ship Saren found," she breathes, resisting the urge to draw her shotgun at the hologram. "It's an actual Reaper."

A LABEL CREATED BY THE PROTHEANS TO GIVE VOICE TO THEIR DESTRUCTION. IN THE END, WHAT ORGANICS CHOOSE TO CALL US IS IRRELEVANT. WE SIMPLY ARE.

"But the protheans vanished fifty thousand years ago," T'Soni protests, her voice wavering. "You...couldn't have been there. It's simply not possible."

ORGANIC LIFE IS NOTHING BUT A SEQUENCE OF GENETIC MUTATIONS; AN ACCIDENT. YOUR LIVES ARE MEASURED IN YEARS AND DECADES. YOU WITHER AND DIE. Kelsa's teeth begin aching, and the machine keeps talking. WE ARE ETERNAL...THE PINNACLE OF EVOLUTION AND EXISTENCE. BEFORE US, YOU ARE NOTHING. YOUR EXTINCTION IS INEVITABLE. WE ARE THE END OF EVERYTHING.

"We'll see about that," Kelsa forces herself to say. "I've had plenty of people try to kill me, and most of 'em are dead now."

CONFIDENCE BORN OF IGNORANCE, Sovereign scoffs. THE CYCLE CANNOT BE BROKEN.

T'Soni finds her voice again. "...What cycle?"

THE PATTERN HAS BEEN ENACTED MORE TIMES THAN YOU CAN FATHOM. ORGANIC CIVILISATIONS RISE, EVOLVE, ADVANCE. AND AT THE APEX OF THEIR GLORY, THEY ARE EXTINGUISHED. THE PROTHEANS WERE NOT THE FIRST; THEY DID NOT CREATE THE CITADEL. THEY DID NOT FORGE THE MASS RELAYS...THEY MERELY FOUND THEM. THE LEGACY OF MY KIND.

"That doesn't make sense," Kelsa objects. "Why would you build the mass relays, and then kill whoever actually figures out how to use them?"
"They're...harvesting us," T'Soni says, shuddering. "They allow us to advance only so far before they emerge to destroy us!"

Kelsa has to grind her teeth to keep them from humming too loudly. "What the fuck do you want, Reaper? Slaves? Resources?"

*MY KIND TRANSCENDS YOUR VERY UNDERSTANDING*, Sovereign drills into Kelsa's brain. *WE ARE EACH A NATION; INDEPENDENT, FREE OF ALL WEAKNESS. YOU CANNOT BEGIN TO GRASP THE NATURE OF OUR EXISTENCE.*

The longer the machine talks, the deeper the spike digs into Kelsa's brain. "I don't have to understand what you want or where you come from," she grunts. "I just have to learn how to switch you off, like any other machine."

*YOUR WORDS ARE AS EMPTY AS YOUR FUTURE*, the ship insists, implacable. *I AM THE VANGUARD OF YOUR DESTRUCTION. THIS EXCHANGE IS OVER.*

The hologram fades out, and the pressure in the room shifts so radically that the glass windows shatter. But at least that horrible buzzing stops, leaving a dull ache behind Kelsa's eyes. She doesn't ask whether or not either of her companions sensed it as well, too wary of what the question might betray...too wary of their answers.

Moreau signals in over the comm. "Uhh, Commander...I don't know what you did down there, but that ship, Sovereign, just pulled a turn that'd shear any of our boats in half. It's headed your way."

"Understood," the soldier barks. "Be ready to rendezvous in fifteen, Lieutenant. We'll set the nuke and bug out."


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*Krogan Breeding Facility Outskirts*

1710 Zulu

5 August 2183

*Virmire (ashore), Hoc*

As soon as she sees the salarian drive core, Kelsa understands why the blast is only going to yield twenty KTs; the thing's positively tiny compared to the *Normandy*'s Tantalus core. Alenko and Serviceman Chung, one of the *Normandy*'s engineers, haul the improvised bomb down the ship's gangway and onto the central building's rooftop. One of Kirrahe's salarians helps direct them to the very best spot.

"She's in position, Commander," Alenko tells Kelsa, with a little nod. "We're ready to strike this match."

Kelsa's lips part to render her approval, but her comms crackle, and Williams' voice rings out over an uneven pattern of gunfire. "Commander, you read me?"
"Yeah," the soldier barks, pushing her auditory implant deeper into her ear canal. "Get your ass to the rendezvous point, Chief; we're ready to bug out."

"Negative, Commander," the other woman insists. "The geth have us pinned down on our AA tower; we've got some casualties, but there'll be a lot more if we move to extraction. Even if we make the rendezvous point, the geth'll have enough time to deactivate the bomb."

Kelsa growls. "There ain't any goddamned heroes on my ship, Williams. We're coming to pick you up."

The gunnery chief tries to protest, but her hands are evidently full trying to keep herself alive. "It's okay," Alenko insists. "It'll take me a couple of minutes to arm the nuke; you go get them and meet me back here."

The commander nods and glances back to the rest of her ground team. "Vakarian, Tali'Zorah, you both stay here to guard the ship and the bomb. We'll be back with Williams as quick as we can."

A short elevator ride leads Kelsa, Wrex, and T'Soni to an exterior passageway that'll lead them to the AA tower where Williams and the salarians are pinned down, but just as they reach the halfway point, an insectoid geth ship comes in low, settling near where they began. Williams checks in. "Just spotted a drop ship headed for your position!"

"It's already here," Alenko confirms, and now it's his turn to talk over gunfire. "Geth are already swarming all over the bomb site!"

*Motherfucker.* "Can you beat them back?" Kelsa gruffs, skidding to a stop.

Vakarian's voice answers her. "There's too many, and quarters are too tight to use the Mako's cannon without risking setting off the nuke."

"Motherfucker," Kelsa says, out loud this time. She looks from Wrex to T'Soni and back again. "Can you hold out 'til we've got Williams?"

"I seriously doubt it," Tali'Zorah chimies in. "Unless you want to risk losing the Normandy to the geth."

*Shit motherfucking goddamn*- Alenko breaks into the commander's thoughts. "There's another way, Commander." He sounds hollow, reluctant, but resolved. "I'm activating the bomb; Joker can extract you and Williams from the AA tower."

"No," Kelsa says, but she says it softly, to herself.

Alenko hears it, anyway. "It's done, Commander," he insists. "You know as well as I do that those salarians don't have any other way off this rock; with my rifle and my biotics, I buy you about seven minutes. Now you all need to get the hell outta here."

An argument breaks out over the comms, with Moreau and Vakarian and Williams all trying to talk over each other; Vakarian's voice is stronger, since he's yelling directly at Alenko, but Kelsa's yell cuts through them all. "Enough!" She barks, and she leans into her first step...towards the AA tower. "Vakarian, Tali'Zorah, get your asses onto the Normandy. Moreau, meet us at Williams' current location."

"But-"

"That's a goddamned order," she screams, running even faster than T'Soni's long legs can keep up
with. "If we can pull Williams out in five, I am coming back for you, Alenko; I ain't letting you be a hero if I can help it."

Another fucking elevator ride sucks up almost a minute of their time, and it takes two more before Kelsa, T'Soni, and Wrex can outflank the geth, aided by the combined firepower of Williams and the surviving salarians. But just when the Normandy's shuttle bay door lowers and Kelsa's about to bark at everyone to move their asses, a shadow falls over the ground around her feet. The swear dies on Kelsa's tongue as she whirls around, expecting another geth. Instead she sees Saren Arterius, standing imperiously on a floating platform. He looks just as Kelsa remembers, from the holo back on the Citadel, before she became a Spectre...except for the eyes. Where once there was a monster, now there's nothing. No heat, no cold...no desire.

Where Arterius's eyes fail, however, his arms do not; as his platform descends, the turian flings biotic flares at Kelsa and her companions. Instinct and urgency rock the commander out of the shock of finally seeing the object of so many weeks' intense hunting, and Kelsa rolls, jumps, and zigzags her way closer to Arterius. He seems only too eager to meet her advance, leaping from the platform before it reaches the roof. His shields take a direct hit from her shotgun, and then another, before Arterius waves his left arm almost lazily, and Kelsa finds herself thrown a dozen feet sideways. A wall has the good manners to keep her from flying any farther.

"I applaud you, Shepard," Arterius rumbles. "My geth were utterly convinced that the bomb was the real threat. An impressive diversion." He shrugs, bleeding away precious seconds. "Of course, it was all for nothing," the turian scoffs. "I can't let you disrupt what I've accomplished here...you can't possibly understand what's really at stake."

Kelsa sucks in a breath and fights back a wince; she's got a cracked rib. Maybe three. But her suit's stims and her own adrenaline wash over the sharp pain, and she finds her feet. "I don't really give a fuck," the soldier hisses, launching herself off of the wall. By some miracle, Kelsa's able to dodge another biotic swipe, and she closes the distance in two great bounds. She crashes into Arterius's shields with the butt of her shotgun. Once, twice, three times in succession, until her gun breaks through. Her own shields are down, and she feels Arterius's claws swipe at the right side of her face, but Kelsa manages to get off a single shot before Arterius knocks her back. She was aiming for his head, but the gargled scream tells her that she missed, even if only by virtue of the turian's superior height and the swipe of his arm. Blue blood gushes from Arterius's left flank, the limb hanging uselessly by his side.

Kelsa takes aim again, wanting to end this whole fucking mission then and there, but Alenko's voice crackles in her ear again. "Forty-five seconds," he yells, pained and bleeding himself, still firing his assault rifle. "Get the hell out of here before we all go up in smoke!"

Arterius snarls, using his own biotics to propel himself back to that floating platform of his, and Kelsa feels a great icicle stab through her guts as she watches him lift off. "We got time," she hisses, turning back to the Normandy. "We got time," she insists, even though the ship's ten seconds away.

"Hey, Commander," Alenko rasps over the comm. "You...never did tell me about your friend."

The shuttle bay door's already lifting up when Kelsa's feet clear it; she pitches into a roll. "You never got me drunk enough," she cajoles him, landing flat on her back and laying there. "We got time," she hisses, turning back to the Normandy. "We got time," she insists, even though the ship's ten seconds away.

"Fifteen seconds. "Shame I never got to meet him," Alenko answers her. "Did he make you happy?"
"He did," Kelsa affirms. Her cheek's wet, but she tells herself it's just blood from the turian's claws. Three...two... "Before I killed him." One. There's no answer in her earpiece, just a wash of static from the burst of radiation.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who's reading along, especially my awesome beta-reader, buttercup23!
Ch. 18: To Cull The Living Flower

Chapter Summary

The Normandy's crew deals with losing one of their own, but the galactic drum pauses its beat for nobody; soon enough, Kelsa has to turn her sights toward Saren and the Reapers, and their destination is set, though not without some wrangling and political machinations along the way.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shuttle Bay, SSV Normandy

0945 Zulu

7 August 2183

Sublight Transit to Rayingri, Gagarin

Kelsa's hangover isn't nearly as bad as she could've expected, given how much liquor she drank after she picked herself up off of this very floor, a day and a half ago. But she still appreciates the low lights; they help her pretend to ignore the looks from the crew and their salarian guests. At least Williams is too proud to show any pity, if the gunnery chief's glassy eyes are any indication. There's only a half-second delay in her salute, too. "What do you need, Commander?"

"We're on the way to the last geth outpost Hackett told us about," Kelsa says, her voice even rougher than usual. "We didn't have enough time to get to it before…" Before.

Williams' glazed eyes narrow. "You want us to go out already?"

Kelsa inclines her head. "You got a problem with that, Chief?"

"No, ma'am," Williams clips, automatically, but then she chews her bottom lip. "...Yes, ma'am," she amends, turning her eyes down. "I do have a problem with it."

The commander nods, frowning lightly. "You can speak your mind, Williams," she allows. "For a minute."

Williams swallows and straightens up. "I think we should do something, ma'am," she says, her voice tight. "For...for Kaidan, I mean."

"I imagine clearing out a nest of geth would be right at the top of the list," Kelsa points out, crossing her arms.

"You know what I mean," the gunnery chief bristles. "Look, I know you don't believe in anything, but...but I think we should say goodbye."

It takes Kelsa a second to ask the obvious. "What did you have in mind, Chief?"
"A funeral," Williams answers. "We don't have any remains, but I figure a service might help put the crew's hearts at ease. If...if you think that'd be alright, that is."

*That ain't gonna bring him back,* the commander thinks. But instead of saying it, she chews on her tongue and nods. "You do what you need to do," she allows. "I'll do what I need to do." It's not a *no,* but it's not a *yes* either, and Kelsa clears her throat before Williams can point that out. "You hold your service here. Anyone who wants to join in can go...but I'm taking a team down to Rayingri and I'm fucking up a few hundred geth while you're doing it."

"...You don't wanna come?" A little heat rises behind the gunnery chief's eyes, a spark that might kindle into a fire that could burn any bridges between the two of them, if Kelsa can't put it out. "You don't have anything to say about losing him?"

"Nothing I want anyone else to hear," Kelsa clips. "He ain't the first friend I've had to bury, and he ain't gonna be the last. That's the job, Chief. If you can't handle it, you might want to reconsider your career options when your enlistment comes up for renewal." The words are harsher than she meant them, but Kelsa doesn't soften the tight curve of her frown.

Williams doesn't nod or salute, she doesn't break down crying, and she doesn't take a single step back. "Funny, he always defended you, every chance he got," she hisses, through her teeth. "After Feros...after Terra Nova. Even after you killed your old XO and he had to cut his way through a bunch of confused biotics to save you, Kaidan had an excuse, whenever he heard anyone questioning your decisions."

*Kaidan, huh?* Kelsa's brow draws down, and she keeps her arms curled around her torso, to keep from accidentally drawing her gun. "Careful, Williams," she admonishes the other woman. "I know you cared about him; whether or not you think so, I did, too. So I'm gonna pretend I didn't hear that."

The subtle reminder of her subordinate position seems to jar a little sense back into the gunnery chief, and she breaks eye contact with a blink. "I...thank you, ma'am," she manages. "I apologise."

"Already forgotten," the commander insists, pivoting on her hip, intending to stalk away without another word.

Williams apparently has another idea. "Wait, Commander," she pleads, reaching out toward Kelsa's bicep, but she doesn't quite touch it. "I...just have one more question for you, if you'll answer it."

Kelsa hesitates for a heartbeat, staring hard at Williams’ earnest face. Then she dips her head in a curt nod. "Go ahead, Chief."

Williams draws in a breath. "It's just...I want to know why you didn't go back for him, when he came under attack," she wonders. "Why'd you pick me over him, ma'am?"

The commander's wondered about that more than once in the various stages of drunkenness she's enjoyed since she picked herself up off the floor. "You said it yourself, back on Virmire," she gruffs. "Kaidan was better on the bomb, and you were better at keeping salarians alive. If you were a better engineer, I'd probably be having a similar conversation up in the mess hall."

If Kelsa's own use of the lieutenant's first name draws Williams' notice, the gunnery chief gives no sign of it. "But...you're sure that's it?" Her eyes flick over Kelsa's shoulder, toward the small enclave in the back of the bay where the surviving salarians have set up a sort of camp, until they can find transport back to their own systems. "You sacrificed your friend for a bunch of aliens you didn't even know?"
"We've established that I'm a monster," Kelsa concedes, just above a growl. "Not a racist."

Williams winces at that. "...Sorry, ma'am. I thought maybe you..." Then she looks down again, and if the lights weren't so low, Kelsa might swear that the chief's cheeks tint.

And now it's Kelsa's turn to ask a question. "You thought maybe I...what, Williams?"

"It's not...I didn't mean anything by it, ma'am," Williams insists, still not meeting the commander's eyes.

"Look at me," Kelsa says, as stern as she needs to be to get the chief to stand at attention. "You will tell me why you think I killed Lieutenant Alenko instead of you." It's definitely not a question.

Williams blinks half a dozen times in the heartbeat it takes her lips to part. "I know I'm wrong, or at least I hope I am," she prefaces, "but I know you...you and Liara spend an awful lot of time together, and I thought you might have saved me because you were...interested. In me. Too."

Even if Kelsa had been, the gunnery chief's evident distaste for the idea would've crushed that can of worms. "I'm only going to say this once," the commander breathes, pronouncing every word as clearly as possible. "Just because I like pussy, that doesn't mean I want to eat yours, Chief Williams. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Williams barks, definitely blushing now. "Sorry I speculated, ma'am. It was wrong of me."

"Have your funeral, if you want to," Kelsa tells her. "Make sure it's done by the time I get back."

"Aye, aye, Commander," the gunnery chief retorts, her arm swinging into a stiff salute.

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**Captain's Cabin**

**1700 Zulu**

**9 August 2183**

**FTL Transit to Mass Relay, Armstrong Nebula**

The door's proximity alarm clangs again, for the third time, before Kelsa blinks and remembers that the fucking door doesn't have a proximity alarm. Someone's knocking. A fourth round of noise follows soon after, along with a muffled "I know you're in there, Shepard. Might I come in?"

The naked use of her adopted surname tells Kelsa that it's one of the aliens, and despite the thickness of the walls, she hears the light timbres of T'Soni's voice echoing through the metal. Goddammit. Kelsa looks up from the half-empty bottle of Canadian whiskey she's been cradling for the last hour. "Why the fuck not?" She says, just loudly enough for the asari to hear her.

T'Soni takes a step into the commander's rooms and halts; Kelsa feels those blue eyes ghost over Kelsa's chest, covered only by a thin undershirt that shows half of the N7 stencil on her chest. The asari's gaze settles briefly on Kelsa's left arm, no doubt examining the faded bluejay that still covers one of her oldest scars, but then T'Soni looks her full in the face. She even has the audacity to offer up one of those tight smiles of hers. "Ashley believes you are angry with her," she opens, without preamble or elaboration.
Kelsa takes another hit off of her bottle. *Fucking maple syrup.* Still, it burns just deep enough to earn a grunt. "'Mnot," she swears. Then she cracks a smirk and chuckles, shaking her head. "You know, she thought I saved her ass 'cause I wanted a piece of it."

T'Soni's brows draw together. "I do not believe I understand the reference, Commander," she says.

The humour washes out of Kelsa's expression. "Means she thought I wanted to fuck her," the commander explains, "just 'cause I wanna fuck you." A heartbeat passes before Kelsa recognises the deep navy flush of T'Soni's cheeks. It's almost enough to put the smirk back on her face. "I'm guessing you got that one, huh?"

"I...did," T'Soni admits, still loitering by the door. "I wasn't aware that the gunnery chief shared your predilections toward the females of your species."

"She don't," Kelsa informs the other woman. "And even if she did, it wouldn't've swayed my decision to kill Kaidan instead of her."

T'Soni takes a sharp breath and a half-step forward. "You didn't kill him, Kelsa," she insists, her earnestness cutting through the haze of Alenko's liquor. "You should not speak so."

The commander's lip curls into a snarl. "And who the hell're you to tell me how to talk?" She lifts her whiskeyless fist at the asari, glad that she left her pistol on the other side of the room from the desk where she sits.

"I believe I am your friend," T'Soni answers her, retreating a quarter-step under the threat of a drunken punch. "If...if you will have me as one, Kelsa."

Kelsa closes her eyes for a moment as her last shot works its way into her veins, and when she opens them again, they linger on the curve of T'Soni's hip, and it takes them almost a minute to crawl back up to the asari's face. "How was it?" She asks, instead of giving T'Soni any more of an answer.

The asari takes the abrupt change of topic with admiral nimbleness for a sober person. "It was interesting," she sums up. "I'd never attended a human memorial service before this. Observing the way your species grieves was fascinating."

"Liara," Kelsa husks, tasting the name on its own for the first time, like a drop of dew on her rye-soaked tongue. "Stop with the science-ing for about five minutes. Somebody died." She took Tali'Zorah and Wrex down to Rayingri, but T'Soni and Vakarian stayed back to pay their respects, or apparently just to watch, in the former's case.

If asari had ears, T'Soni's would probably be drooping right about now. "I...yes, Commander," she concedes. "I apologise. I did not know the lieutenant as well as Chief Williams or much of the crew did, but I was still saddened by his sacrifice. I suppose there's always part of me observing, cataloguing, inquiring..." A very different kind of blush washes out the smattering of freckles across the asari's cheeks.

Kelsa feels both sides of her lips tug up of their own accord, and she pulls herself woozily to her feet, putting Alenko's bottle on the desk almost reverently. "That's actually one of the things I like about you, Liara," she admits. "You just gotta dial it back a little bit, every once in awhile."

"I shall endeavour to moderate that instinct somewhat, Commander," T'Soni promises, and then she tilts her head at the snorting cackle that crawls out of Kelsa's throat. "I take it your alcohol has made me more humorous than I intended to be."
"You're using all those big words on purpose," Kelsa judges, with another chuckle. "So I think you intend fine." She takes a step...or she means to. It turns out that half a bottle of rye chases half a bottle of Jameson a little more strongly than the Spectre expected. At least the floor's friendly, she thinks, as it comes up to break her fall. Strong hands catch Kelsa just before she has a chance to test her theory. Not hands, she realises, as deep blue threads of power tug her back onto her feet. Biotic rings whirl around the woman for another moment, a moment that should end with Kelsa's death; she has neither arms nor armour, whereas the asari has the power to rip Kelsa's flesh from her bones...a power that T'Soni's just exercised to keep the soldier from falling on her face. A power that T'Soni lets fade, once Kelsa's found her feet. "...Thanks," Kelsa manages, planting a hand on her desk to keep herself from tipping over again. "Sometimes I wish I had magic powers."

The scientist has the sense to look offended. "Biotic abilities aren't magic," she lectures, taking a step closer in her own right. "Glands allow us to manipulate dark matter to create mass effect fields at will."

Kelsa breathes a boozy laugh. "Thanks for the lesson, doc." Then she pitches forward again, only half by accident. Rather than catch the soldier with her mind, however, T'Soni closes the gap between them with a quick stride, her hands fastening on Kelsa's shoulders instinctively. Kelsa's own hands find their way to the asari's hips and her unsteadiness causes her to grip them with all of her inebriated strength. T'Soni winces, but she doesn't pull away, and Kelsa's fingers tingle at the unseen force held within the asari's flesh. The soldier looks up just as T'Soni looks down, and she notices that the other woman isn't that much taller than her. Why, if Kelsa just stands a little straighter, and if the asari bends a bit…

Moreau's voice blasts out over the comm like it's a goddamned loudspeaker. "Message from the Council coming in," the pilot informs them, far too cheerily.

T'Soni blinks, drawing in a breath, but Kelsa growls. "You gotta be fucking kidding me, Joker," she drawls, with a resentful glance toward the ceiling. "Whatever the hell they want, it can fucking wait for a couple of hours."

"I'm busy," Kelsa yells, still not relinquishing her grip on the asari. For her part, T'Soni hasn't moved her hands, either. "Tell Sparatus to go sit on an egg while he's waiting."

"Hey now," the pilot objects, "the witticisms are kinda my thing, Commander."

"Then do me a real solid, Flight-Lieutenant," Kelsa growls, "and fuck off. For at least an hour."

"Aye, aye," Moreau clips, and a second later the comm goes dead.

Kelsa lets out a long, heavy sigh, rolling her eyes. "Now," she gruffs, her thumbs moving in slow circles over the bottom of T'Soni's flanks as her grip eases up slightly. "Where were we?"

T'Soni blinks, wetting her bottom lip. "I believe we were just about to…"

The asari doesn't pull away as Kelsa arches up, and that moistened lip tastes even sweeter than Kelsa thought it could when she sucks it between her teeth. T'Soni-Liara, Kelsa mentally corrects herself-falls into the kiss as though she's the drunk one, and Kelsa holds her as steady as she can manage. Liara groans when Kelsa's tongue snakes into her mouth, and the asari's eyes snap open, bottomless pools of black.

Kelsa feels the electric tingle of an impending meld build up at the base of her skull, and she
doesn't pull away. But a moment later, she's ripped away from her room, from the *Normandy*, from her life; she relives the vision of the prothean beacon, back on Virmire...only this time, she can feel Liara's presence with her, warm and smooth, curious and calm. The carnage of a civilisation falling to ruin barely touches the soldier's mind, and she finds herself noticing odd details, recalling facts about the planets she sees being scorched...except they're facts Kelsa knows she's never learnt, connections she knows she could never make. A second later, the soldier's standing in her office once more, still wrapped up in Liara's arms, her green eyes reflecting cerulean. As one, the human and the alien breathe a single word.

*Ilos.*

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*Flux Nightclub*  
1915 Zulu  
*13 August 2183*  
*Upper Zakera Ward, Citadel*

"Commander Shepard!" The voice isn't one Kelsa recognises, but the cool confidence gives her pause. Even though she's dressed down in civilian clothes, for the first time in years, the voice's owner sure as hell recognised her. Could be Alliance, she figures, before she turns around to see a fucking civilian with a shit-eating grin on his face. "I'm Charles Saracino; you may have heard of-"

"I know who the fuck you are," Kelsa breaks in, her eye twitching. "You're some dumbass that thinks he knows how to boss other people around, and I ain't interested in whatever you've got to sell." He's the head of *Terra Firma*, a human-centric political party that's most likely a front for Cerberus, the bastards that killed Admiral Kahoku.

Saracino's grin falters. "Now, wait just a minute. If you'll hear me out-"

Kelsa turns her back on him. "I ain't got time for your bullshit." He's the third person to bother her in as many days, since the Council tricked her into coming back to the Citadel, only to impound her ship. First it was a reporter that Kelsa had no patience for. Then, yesterday, she wound up sticking a gun in some poor asshole's face to get him to shut the fuck up...and if it goes that far today, Kelsa might not be able to keep herself from pulling the trigger. "Let's go," she tells her ground team, most of whom are aliens. They've got an appointment with the forcibly-retired Captain Anderson that Kelsa doesn't want to miss. Something about having a krogan, a turian, a quarian, and an asari in her entourage doesn't seem to endear the commander to the *Terra Firma* frontman, since he doesn't try that hard to call them back as they stalk away from him.

A couple flights of stairs lead up to Flux, which has fewer guns than Chora's Den and fewer bugs than the Alliance officers' lounge, so Kelsa can't fault Anderson's decision to get together here. To avoid suspicion, the commander tells everyone but Williams and Liara to scatter and make a show of enjoying themselves. Tali'Zorah heads for the dance floor without acknowledging Kelsa's nod; evidently she's still pissed that Kelsa didn't hand over some information about the geth that they recovered, back on Rayingri. Vakarian and Wrex at least wave before they split.

Kelsa weaves through the crowd, aiming for a table by the bar, where a familiar figure sits half-shrouded in shadow. She takes her position between the table and the nearest wall, spinning the chair around before she settles into it backward. The other two women sit a bit more stiffly, and a moment passes before a well-dressed server comes to bother them. "Whiskey," Kelsa barks. "For all of us. Doesn't matter what kind."
"Right away," the unknown woman replies, and nobody talks in the span of time it takes her to go to the bar and return with three glasses of dark brown liquid. "Will there be anything else?" The server asks, after placing a glass before each woman. Anderson already has one, mostly full, as camouflage.

"No," Kelsa answers, keeping her gaze steady until the server breaks eye contact and retreats. Even though Kelsa's fingers itch to snatch up her liquor and pour it down her throat, she knows Anderson has the right idea; an empty glass will only invite another interruption. Instead the soldier snorts, throwing a glance at her former CO. "Good to see you, sir," she allows. Like her, he's in a dark t-shirt, bare of anything that might single him out as military.

"Likewise, Shepard," Anderson rumbles, and then he nods at Williams. "Chief," he acknowledges, before his eyes catch on Liara. "I don't believe we've been formally introduced, yet, but I know who you are, Dr. T'Soni. I read one of your papers on the prothean extinction."

The asari stammers for a couple of seconds. "I...well, I've heard some very good things about you from your former crewmates, Captain. They think quite highly of you, even though you only commanded them for a short time."

Anderson grins wryly at that. "I left them in good hands," he says, dismissing her praise with a subtle nod to Kelsa. "What's say we get down to business?"

Kelsa nods and leans forward, resting her chin on the back of her chair and throwing a glance to Liara. "We're pretty sure Saren's heading to Ilos, if he's not there already, sir."

"Ilos?" The captain muses, uncertainly. "It doesn't sound familiar."

Liara clears her throat. "It's a planet in the Refuge System, which hasn't been visited since the Mu Relay was lost, hundreds of years ago," she tells the man. "Finding the relay was the last thing my mother did before she...died." Kelsa's tongue welds itself to the roof of her mouth before she can say Before I killed her. Liara takes a contemplative breath before continuing. "In all my years of research, I have never come across mention of a prothean connection to Ilos...but recently, we have come into some new information which suggests that the protheans went to great lengths to erase the planet from any and all records."

"And the fucking Council won't let me go after him," Kelsa growls, her knuckles cracking with the force of her clenched fists. "They've got your ship locked down on the docks, Anderson."

Anderson barks a laugh. "I think by now it's your bird, Shepard," he allows, but then he frowns, shaking his head. "And this nonsense with the Council grounding you doesn't make one goddamned lick of sense. I smell Udina's sticky little fingers all over it."

Williams speaks up. "Do you think he could be indoctrinated, sir?"

"God, I hope not," the captain gruffs. "I've snuck a look at your reports to Hackett after Virmire, Dr. T'Soni."

Kelsa blinks. "You sent a report to Admiral Hackett?"

The asari glances down at the table, a hint of colour ghosting across her cheeks. "You were...indisposed," she explains, before recovering herself enough to look up at the soldier. "I took the initiative to forward our findings on the indoctrination process to the Alliance. I also tried with
the Council, but they do not trust me," she says, with a rueful smile. "Not that I can blame them, necessarily."

Kelsa dips her head. "Thanks, T'Soni," she tells the woman. "And I think Udina and the Council are plenty stupid enough to do this on their own...but I really don't care why." Her gaze cuts back to Anderson. "We need to get the Normandy untethered. I'm done waiting around for leads; I owe that motherfucker another dance." And this time, she doesn't intend to let up until the bastard's dead. She owes Alenko that much.

"I'll drink to that," Anderson concurs, and to prove his word he picks up his glass and downs it in one. "Now, then," he gruffs, when the heat of the whiskey's settled in his throat. "We need us a plan to break the leash off of that bird, and I've got a couple of ideas."

Kelsa breathes a shaky sigh as she mimics the captain's motion, sweeping her liquor off of the table and into her mouth, where it hits like honey. "Lay it on me, sir."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone reading along, especially to my wonderful beta-reader, buttercup23! I appreciate and respond to all comments, so please feel free to let me know what you think!
Ch. 19: The Maiden Fair

Chapter Summary

On the verge of Ilos and the end of Saren's trail of treachery, Kelsa confronts her burgeoning connection to Liara in one of the only ways she knows how.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Medical Bay, SSV Normandy

2330 Zulu

13 August 2183

FTL Transit to Ilos, Pangaea Expanse

Chakwas looks up from her terminal when Kelsa crosses the threshold into the doctor's domain, her demeanor more dour than reserved. "Yes, Commander?" She drawls; tired, not drunk.

"You should catch some rack time, Doc," Kelsa suggests, with a more-than-suggestive jerk of her head back the way she came. "We're gonna hit Ilos in a couple of hours, and I'll need you well-rested to patch me up afterward."

The doctor manages a snicker, turning around to face the soldier, though she steals a glance at the smaller door, to Liara's office. "How come I get the feeling your request isn't entirely selfless?"

Kelsa smirks, taking a few steps into the room, leaving a clear path from Chakwas to the exit. "I'll tell you what I should've told that damned reporter," she growls. "No comment."

Chakwas shakes her head. "I think I could do with a good nap, now you mention it," she concedes, dragging herself up out of her chair. "Just try not to damage any of the equipment," she admonishes as she makes her way toward the door. "If history's anything to go by, you might well wind up needing some of it presently."

"I'll do my best," Kelsa promises, her stomach oddly light as she watches Chakwas leave. Once the doctor's gone, the soldier steps up to the inner-office door and lets her knuckles tap lightly on the cool metal, repaying Liara the kindness the asari's shown her so often. Kelsa's rewarded with a muffled Enter, and she thumbs the door open, stepping into the tighter space. She's tempted to write off her nerves on the battle that she knows is coming, but that's not why she's here. "Hey," Kelsa says, announcing her presence.

Liara's spine stiffens, but she doesn't turn around to face the intruder. "I know I should probably try and sleep, but I just can't get over the idea that all of our efforts will bear fruit in the next few hours."

"We'll see," Kelsa teases, and that earns her a subtle chuckle from the asari, who finally stands from her desk and graces the commander with a shy smile. Kelsa's own smirk softens in response, and both of the corners of her mouth twist up.
"I believe that is the second time I have seen you smile in the three months we've known one another," Liara muses, her head tilting.

*Always the curious scientist*, Kelsa thinks to herself. "I think it's probably the second time I've smiled in fourteen years," she admits. "It kinda hurts."

That only makes the asari's smile grow. "I've seen you suffer worse injuries, Kelsa...but I don't suppose you've come to regale me with war stories."

"Hell, you've got a few of your own," Kelsa points out. "Thanks to me, anyhow." Her smile falters back into a smirk, and she crosses her arms, steeling herself against her own regrets. "One way or another, this party's gonna end, soon. I just wanted to let you know that I'm...sorry. For everything I put you through."

One of Liara's brow-ridges arches up. "...Have you been drinking again, Kelsa?"

"No," the soldier shoots back, with a husked laugh. "Not since we toasted Anderson's plan to break into Udina's office and unlock the ship, anyway."

"Well, for everything it's worth," Liara ventures, "I'm certainly not sorry for having come to know you, Commander." That smile of hers fades, but it doesn't disappear. "From your perspective, you may feel responsible for my mother's death...but from where I stand, you allowed me one final chance to see her. To know that some piece of her went untouched by Saren's madness, even if that piece was insufficient to wrest her from his grasp."

Kelsa shakes her head, her lips caught between a grimace and a smirk. "Leave it to you to be grateful for becoming an orphan, Blueblood," she teases, swallowing down the last of her unease. "I still got no idea why you don't hate the sight of me, but I'll take it."

Liara's expression warms a couple of degrees. "You saved my life," she says. "And I know you feel I've repaid that favour more than once...but there is one thing that I can never repay, even in a thousand years." It's Kelsa's turn to arch a brow, and the asari takes a sharp breath before continuing. "On Feros, you melded with an asari commando-"

"Shiala," Kelsa interrupts, frowning again. One of over fourteen hundred bodies caught in the soldier's long shadow, waiting for her to close her eyes.

"Shiala," Liara concedes. "When you melded with her," she goes on, "she imparted the genetic memory of the thorian creature, as it related to the closing days of the Prothean Empire. She called it the Cipher." The asari steps closer, her brows drawing together. "Kelsa, when you and I joined our minds thereafter, you passed the Cipher onto me. I've been studying the protheans for longer than you've been alive, scratching out any information I could find from beneath thousands of years of dust and sand. I...cannot express how much more I can see, how much richer is my understanding of my own research."

Kelsa can hear the earnestness and gratitude in the other woman's voice, and the tone tugs at her heart. "I'm glad I was able to do something good for you, Liara," she manages, looking down and away, her arms still crossed in front of her.

"That is not all I'm able to thank you for," Liara says, and Kelsa feels the alien's warm fingertips tentatively brush along her jaw, just below the two fresh stripes of lighter flesh on her cheek that Saren gave her. Following the subtle pressure, Kelsa's face tilts up, her eyes fixing on Liara's lips as she licks them nervously. "For my whole life, I've been curious, but also lonely, and frightened that I would never find a connection with another sentient being. When I am with you, I...am not
afraid."

Liara's feather-light touch begins to evaporate, but Kelsa snatches the asari's wrist without thinking, and she brings Liara's palm to fully caress her scarred cheek. "Remind me to ask you about that in a few hours, when a bunch of tin cans are shooting at both of us," she says, her green eyes closing as she leans more heavily into the asari's touch.

A dry chuckle sounds in Kelsa's ears, and Liara's touch spreads over the side of her face like a warm breeze. "We really don't have long, do we?" Liara asks, rhetorically. "Saren may already be there...he may have the Conduit," she muses, half-curious, half-nervous. "It...may already be over."

Kelsa's eyes snap open and she scowls. "We're still breathing," she points out, looking defiantly up into the asari's face without blinking. "It ain't over 'til that ain't true anymore." Slowly, she peels Liara's hand from her face, but she brings it down so that the asari's palm lays flat against the soldier's breastbone. She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "So long as I have breath in my lungs, I'm not giving up."

If the soldier could accept it, she might notice admiration blooming across Liara's features, along with the deep blue blush that colours her cheeks. "I believe you, Kelsa," Liara whispers, almost reverently. "And I believe in you. You must know that. But we cannot deny that our victory is far from guaranteed." Then the asari's face sets, a determination of her own shining through. "Saren may already have the Conduit," she repeats, more firmly. "It is time we were completely honest with one another, Kelsa. These could be our last moments together," Liara points out. "I think we both deserve to know where we stand."

Kelsa's heart ticks more rapidly beneath Liara's touch, and the soldier's eyes go half-lidded as she remembers the taste of the asari's tongue through the fog of alcohol and the unexpected epiphany that led them to their current destination. At the time, they didn't get any further than that one kiss, and they hadn't spoken about it...until now. "You know what I am," Kelsa gruffs, letting go of the other woman's wrist...though she's glad when the hand doesn't move from her chest. "I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of, and I'm gonna do a lot more of those things before my time's up," she vows. "But...you're still here, after everything you've seen me do, after everywhere I've dragged you. After everyone I've made you kill, and all those times I risked your life without a second thought." The soldier swallows at the lump that's trying to form in her throat. "I...like it, when you're around," she admits. "And if I've gotta save the galaxy or die trying, I could think of a lot worse ways to spend the next couple of hours than here, with you. We can talk about what comes after...after." Kelsa wets her lips, leaning in almost unconsciously, shortening the distance between them. "I think that's where we stand."

"I believe that is an accurate description," Liara breaths, and the way she husks the words accurate description sends a tingling chill licking up the soldier's spine. "Will you join with me, Kelsa?"

She asks, her hand slipping up the side of Kelsa's neck, fingers forking into the roots of her thick braids. Then the asari favours her with a smirk. "Or should I ply you with more alcohol, first?"

A laugh punches up from deep within Kelsa's chest. "I guess I deserve that," she concedes, tilting her head back into the asari's touch even as she slips her arms around Liara's waist and makes the distance between them disappear. "But right now I wanna feel something I can't find at the bottom of a bottle."

Rather than answer with words, the enterprising asari bows just low enough to brush her lips against Kelsa's, and the soldier savours the feeling for two heartbeats before she retakes the initiative; Kelsa arches up, her head tilting as her tongue slips into Liara's mouth. The taller woman moans, and the soldier swallows it greedily as her hands slide down Liara's hips to her thighs.
a grunt, the soldier pulls Liara off her feet, tugging the asari's legs until they wrap around Kelsa's spine. Liara may be taller, but Kelsa's a hell of a lot stronger, and she can easily handle the extra weight as she brings Liara down to her eye-level. Finally the soldier breaks the kiss, sucking in a breath and casting about the room until she recognises the spartan cot that the asari's been using as a bed for the last few months. *It'll do,* she thinks to herself. For a start.

Liara makes up for her inexperience with enthusiasm, and while Kelsa's distracted, the asari brushes her lips down the left side of Kelsa's neck. The soldier hitches her partner more firmly and takes a few steps toward the corner, but she nearly trips when she feels Liara's tongue graze the flesh near her collar, accompanied by the faint crackle of biotic energy that races through Kelsa's nerves, making her muscles ache with anticipation. Somehow, some way, the soldier makes it to the cot, and she half-collapses backward onto it. The material creaks under the sudden weight, but the bed holds firm. "Sometimes you gotta love Alliance standard issue," the soldier gruffs.

The asari blinks, curiosity tinged her arousal, as she suddenly finds herself above Kelsa. "...What do you mean?"

Kelsa shakes her head, her hands moving to Liara's shoulders. Gentle pressure has the asari moving, straddling Kelsa's hips more fully and arching into the soldier's touch. *Above me, but not on top.* "Never you mind," Kelsa counsels, her right thumb moving across Liara's shoulder, to the top strap of her non-service uniform. "Speaking of standard issue," the soldier husks, "what do you say we find out what you've got hiding under there?"

Liara sucks in a breath, pushing her shoulders back until Kelsa's hands slip down to her flanks. "I would like that very much," the asari supplies, and her fingers catch on that strap, secured over her left shoulder with a single button. Liara herself once told Kelsa that asari were more comfortable than most humans when it came to being naked, but that doesn't stop her from hesitating for the space of a breath. Kelsa nestles deeper into the cot, her hands roaming down to Liara's hips, the soldier content to let her move at her own pace. Soon enough, Kelsa's ears pick up the siren's song of velcro uncoupling as the asari peels the functional top apart, and in a handful of heartbeats the green-and-beige fabric lies in a pool around Liara's waist.

Kelsa spares a thought of gratitude for another Alliance standby in the form of the gene mods that let her see every detail of the asari's upper body in the low light of the back office. The soldier expels a low, rough breath, her green eyes sweeping down from Liara's chin, drinking in the smooth swell of the asari's breasts and the subtle tapering of her flanks, so similar to a human woman's torso, but different in a thousand little fascinating ways. Fighting down the urge to lunge up, Kelsa shifts her hands from underneath the top half of Liara's uniform, grazing her palms higher on the other woman's waist, just beneath her ribcage. The touch earns the soldier a precious gasp, and Kelsa feels another smile sprout across her features. "If she looked anything like you," she whispers, bringing her gaze back up to meet Liara's, "I just might have to start believing in that goddess you keep going on about."

"It's...just an expression," Liara manages, but her cheeks plump up with the strength of her grin, nevertheless. Then her brow quirks and she tilts her head, even as Kelsa's fingers inch down her hips, slipping beneath the fabric that still clings to the asari's lower half. "It hardly seems fair," Liara points out. "Now you've settled your query, but my curiosity remains unsated."

The soldier heaves a sigh. "The galaxy just ain't fair, Blueblood," she quips, and before the asari can muster a rejoinder, Kelsa surges forward and upward in one smooth motion, her booted feet planting on the floor to help her pivot around; as she twists, one hand traces up the contour of Liara's spine, until her fingers come to rest at that patch of sensitive flesh at the name of the asari's neck. Kelsa's other hand remains firmly rooted at the base of Liara's spine as she lowers her down
onto the cot. One knee comes to rest just beneath the crux of the asari's thighs, giving Kelsa enough leverage to bring herself eye-to-eye with Liara. The soldier smirks as she feels an insistent warmth begin to seep into her leg, through the fabric of her trousers and what remains of Liara's uniform.

"A little eager, there, T'Soni," she husks.

"By the goddess," Liara half-chokes, her hips rolling up instinctively, grinding halfway up Kelsa's thigh. The only goddess I see is right here, Kelsa thinks, but she dives into another kiss before she can say anything so fucking stupid out loud. Liara's right leg finds its way up to the confluence of Kelsa's thighs, and the asari's fingers make their way into the collar of the soldier's button-down fatigues. Even while Liara moans into her mouth, Kelsa shivers as a rush of biotic energy accompanies the asari's jerking grip, and Kelsa's outer shirt opens with a series of pops that signal the buttons giving way.

With a frustrated, yearning growl, Kelsa pulls back from their kiss and rears up onto her knee, her fingernails scratching perhaps a bit too hard on Liara's sensitive nape as she goes. The brush of biotics alone is enough to steal the breath from her lungs, but she wants more, and once she's shrugged out of her top, it's all she can do to keep from tearing at her undershirt as she pulls it off. Then it's Kelsa's turn to pause under Liara's curious gaze, clothed only by her dog tags above the waist. The sudden balance in their states of dress cannot long stand, however, and the soldier seeks to regain her advantage by grasping the ring of fabric that still encircles Liara's hips. The asari lifts them quite eagerly, and it's the work of moments to turn Liara's uniform into a loose pile of rags on the floor.

Kelsa catches Liara's foot and she brings the asari's leg up to drape across her tattooed shoulder, and she brushes her lips along the inside of Liara's shin, just above her ankle. The soldier glances down that long leg to behold the whole of Liara's body, from the asari's knee to the top of her crest. Liara tenses subtly, but it's the tension of nerves, rather than shame. "You can relax," Kelsa counsels, her nostrils already tingling with the first hints of Liara's response to her attentions. "I'll be gentle...I promise."

The asari nods, evidently beyond words, and Kelsa weaves a path of soft kisses up her calf to the inside of her knee. The soldier's free hand comes to rest low on Liara's belly, and her thumb slowly works its way down toward Liara's azure, as some of the asari on Illium call it. Kelsa's tongue paints a tight braid across Liara's inner thigh as the wandering digit starts tracing lazy circles across the outer flesh of her sex, and the asari's nerves slowly give way to a much more delicious sort of tension.

Kelsa keeps her promise; she's gentle, much more so than a remorseless killer has any right to be, and the next couple of hours bleed away in a slow, deliberative ecstasy that takes the pair of them from the cot to the cabinet to the inside of the door and back again. Even though Liara's nearly four times older than Kelsa, even though she's spent more years in school than Kelsa's spent alive, she is truly a novice in this...and while the human is hardly a master, she does her best to make Liara's first encounter an experience worth repeating.

Eventually the human and the asari find themselves strewn over the cot once more, limbs tangled up, the ropes of Kelsa's hair unbound and strewn across her face and shoulders. A sheen of sweat covers the soldier's body, and as she lay still, a chill threatens to seep into her flesh. Her strong arms tighten around Liara's torso, pulling the woman closer almost instinctively. The contrast between them is intriguing—where Kelsa's skin isn't marred by old scars from half a thousand battles, it's smooth to the touch, bulging with thick chords of muscle; Liara's flesh is leaner, soft where Kelsa's is hard, unmarked by any blemish but covered in a million pebbled scales that lend her skin just a hint of friction. And yet, for all of the soldier's bulk, the asari's biotics more than make up for the difference in their strength...which Kelsa's certainly grateful for, as the echoes of
that energy work through her nervous system, setting off aftershocks of her final climax that have
her sucking in a choppy breath and pressing her face into Liara's neck.

Liara's fingers meander to the base of Kelsa's skull, applying instinctive pressure to the area that
would be covered in nerve endings, were the soldier a fellow asari. Even though she's human,
though, the sensation still tears a mewling gasp from Kelsa. "That's not fair," she protests, caught
between burrowing deeper into the crook of Liara's neck and leaning back into her hand.

"I have it on good authority that the galaxy isn't fair," Liara drawls, her retort punctuated by a half-
drunken giggle. Nevertheless, her meddling fingers settle down, finding a new home in the hollow
behind Kelsa's collarbone.

Kelsa barks a laugh. "I guess I deserved that," she concedes, but she has her revenge by dragging
the tip of her tongue up one of the ridges on the back of the asari's neck, nearly all the way up to
her aural canal. That earns her a throaty groan from the other woman and, in spite of everything
that's gone before and all that's still to come, Kelsa finds herself in a moment of utter
satisfaction...maybe for the first time that she can remember.

The silence draws out between the two of them, but it's a comfortable silence, lit by the afterglow
of their exertions. Just as Kelsa fears she's about fall asleep, though, Liara shifts to lay on her side,
propping her head on her hand facing the soldier with a note of curiosity beneath the smug tint of
her expression. "I could not help but notice that at least two of your tattoos relate to your service in
the Alliance," she muses, "though I noticed one that likely does not fit that pattern." Those blue
eyes roam from Kelsa's face, but they do not stop on her shoulder, as the soldier feared; rather, the
asari's gaze works down Kelsa's torso to her right thigh, where another old inkblot rests, near where
her leg joins with her body.

"How come," Kelsa wonders, with an affected sigh, "whenever I fuck an asari, I have to field
questions about my ink?" Her indulgent smirk puts the lie to her frustration, and she steals a quick
kiss from Liara when the woman's eyes dart back up to her own. "It was my third tattoo," she
explains, bringing her leg out to make it more visible. "My roommate in OCS made a lip print
there, about nine years ago." Nine years, two months, and twenty-four days, to be precise...but for
some reason, right now, Kelsa doesn't really care about being precise.

Liara blinks, chewing on the corner of her mouth for a few moments. "This roommate must have
been special to you," she observes. "Her name was Siobhan, if I recall."

Kelsa inclines her head. "Good memory...and she was," she confirms. "Helped me get my bearings
in school, helped me catch up on a lotta things I missed out on as a kid...and she introduced me to
Irish whiskey," the soldier says, her smirk twisting into a wicked grin. "Not sure my liver's ever
gonna be able to forgive her for that one." The joke evidently takes the asari by surprise, and she
gives Kelsa a full-throated laugh, tilting her head back and grinning. The sight hits the soldier in a
place deep in her chest, somewhere liquor's never been quite able to touch. "The tat was sort of a
goodbye present," Kelsa explains. "Siobhan graduated from OCS a year before I did, and she
wanted to give me something to remember her by, whenever I got naked."

The grin fades from Liara's lips. "And you have not been in contact with your roommate in all that
time?"

Kelsa shrugs. "Saw her once on Omega, a few years back," she recalls, frowning. "We were both
N7 by then, both there on different business, so we didn't have too much time to get to know one
another again." But they damned sure made the best of that half-hour, though Kelsa doesn't gloat
about her memory to the flesh-and-blood woman currently in her arms. "We even exchanged a few
extranet messages, but neither one of us is any fucking good at writing back to people, so we lost
touch again."

Liara's brow draws down, but instead of jealousy, Kelsa senses raw sympathy in the expression. "I am sorry that you could not keep up with Siobhan," she allows. "Perhaps...once this is over...?"

"Later," Kelsa reminds her, bringing a finger up to brush over the asari's lips. "I don't wanna think about tomorrow until we get to tomorrow."

Except it is tomorrow, as exemplified by the crackle of the Normandy's comms system, which Kelsa has learnt to associate with disappointment and annoyance from the Alliance and the Council. This time is different, though. This time, rather than opening with some pointed banter, Joker gets to the fucking point right off the bat. "We've got a visual on Ilos," he tells them. "Lotta geth in orbit, but we're not picking up any sign of Sovereign."

Kelsa's heartbeat ticks faster, and she feels the familiar mixture of anticipation and fear that visits every soldier on the edge of battle. "Saren's here," she responds, her voice uncannily even in the face of her task. "I'll be up on the bridge in five."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to my wonderful beta-reader, buttercup23!
Chapter Summary

After months of searching, fighting, killing, and losing, Kelsa finally tracks down Saren. The galaxy stands on the knife-edge of her decisions for the first time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Citadel Tower Elevator

2055 Zulu

15 August 2183

Presidium, Citadel

It's hard for Kelsa to relax, knowing what she knows, now; the Citadel wasn't made by the protheans any more than the mass relays were. Instead, the very space station that lay at the heart of galactic society was made by the Reapers, just like the relays. And that means that the Citadel isn't so much a space station as a mausoleum, a testament to the cycles of extinction that've happened like clockwork every fifty thousand years as far back as anyone can imagine. Kelsa and her companions learnt all this back on Ilos; they were treated to a galactic history lesson from an ancient VI that the protheans left behind. The machine had just enough power to chronicle the closing days of that great empire and the drastic measures the protheans took to try and survive the all-encompassing apocalypse.

One of those efforts was the Conduit, which was a prothean-made mass relay, a one-way connection to the Citadel. The protheans discovered the station itself was a mass relay, and it pointed to the deep, dark space between the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies, where the Reapers lay waiting in between harvests. The plan was for a few thousand protheans to survive in stasis pods until the Reapers retreated to dark space, and then use the Conduit to take over the Citadel and alter its programming to keep the mass relay from opening and allowing the Reapers to spill forth from the abyss. The plan was sound, as far as it went, but the Reapers' cleansing of the galaxy took nearly three centuries. The VI had to take drastic measures to conserve power, so that by the time the Reapers retreated, only a dozen prothean scientists remained alive in their stasis pods. But those few scientists succeeded in sabotaging the connection between the Citadel and dark space; they were the only reason that Sovereign's signal to the Citadel didn't work, the reason Sovereign needed Saren to find the conduit.

Which he did about half an hour ago, before Kelsa or anyone on her team could lay eyes on him on Ilos. In the time between then and now, the ancient ship and the assembled might of the geth fleet had led a frontal assault on the Citadel while Saren and a few geth stormed the Presidium. Kelsa followed suit in the Mako, along with Liara and Wrex. Now her beloved tank is a smouldering wreck a couple of hundred feet below them while the party races up to the top of the Citadel Tower, to Saren, to the end of the road...until their elevator stops so abruptly that Kelsa's feet lift about twenty centimetres off the ground. Even Wrex stumbles, and he literally weighs nearly a tonne in his full suit of heavy armour.
Liara nimbly catches herself, but Kelsa's less graceful; the soldier goes down to one knee on landing. "Fuck," she hisses, out of annoyance rather than pain. "Looks like they know we're coming."

"How will we continue?" The asari asks, the slightest edge of panic bleeding into the bottom of her voice.

Kelsa pushes herself back onto her feet and looks out of the elevator's glass wall; the Citadel's five arms are slowly closing. That doesn't make the soldier feel any better. "We'll go outside," she decides, expanding her helmet and fixing it to her head. "Use your mag boots." When Liara and Wrex are both ready, Kelsa unships her shotgun and shatters the glass with a single pull of the well-worn trigger—all of the shards explode outward as the room's air is pulled into the vacuum. Years of training and combat mean that Kelsa has no problem reorienting when she climbs out of the hole and makes a floor out of what had been the tower wall. Wrex is similarly unfazed by the transition, but Liara stumbles. "Stay behind us," Kelsa counsels, closing ranks with the krogan. Walking's always clunky in mag boots, so they won't be able to dodge behind cover, but she and Wrex make a pretty good wall in their own right.

The trio only manages a few steps before Liara gasps. "By the goddess," she exclaims, in a tone oddly reminiscent of the last time Kelsa heard that phrase, though it was undercut with an edge of panic that had the soldier's eyes lifting from the path directly in front of her.

"Okay," Kelsa manages, when her heart climbs down from her throat. "Looking up was a mistake."

Wrex chuckles darkly from beside her. "Looks like the big squid's joining the party."

The soldier's seen Sovereign before, back on Eden Prime, but she hadn't known just what she was looking at back then. The hologram on Virmire didn't do the fucking thing justice; it's two clicks long, at least, and it's bearing down on the Citadel Tower with terrifying speed. Wrex's simple description is accurate, but not adequate; Sovereign looks like a many-legged sea creature writ large, an apex predator in its domain. A small squadron of Council ships look to harass the Reaper, but if it deigns to acknowledge one of them, it does so by means of a massive laser that cuts through the turian fighters like they're made of tinfoil. And it's getting closer to the tower, to Kelsa; if she didn't know better, the soldier might swear she feels a certain tightness in the back of her molar. Shaking her head, Kelsa refocuses on the path in front of her. "Let's move," she grunts into her helmet's comm.

It isn't long before they run into some resistance, but it's nothing they didn't face on Ilos, or Virmire, or Noveria, or Feros. It's nothing Kelsa hasn't faced a thousand times since she was fourteen years old. \textit{Fourteen hundred ninety-seven}, the soldier thinks to herself, and then she takes out a four-legged geth with a little help from Liara's biotics. \textit{Fourteen hundred ninety-eight}. The fighting is a blessing, in its own way, since it focuses Kelsa's attention to a razor-thin edge that she uses to cut through the machines in front of her without worrying about the two-kilometre-long machine that's wrapping its metallic tentacles around the central spire of the Citadel. Kelsa and her confederates are spurred on by the long shadows cast by those tentacles, and after another push that sees Kelsa's shotgun whine from overheating, they make it to a ventilation shaft that leads directly to the Council Chambers. Once the last of the geth have been dealt with and they seal the airlock, Kelsa tears off her helmet and deactivates her boots, and she spares a glance to her two alien companions. All of them have their own reasons for being here, over and above stopping the Reapers. "This is where Saren was headed," Kelsa points out. "He's in the next room. We ready to end this?"

Once Liara's face is free of her helmet, there's no sense of hesitation in her expression.
"Absolutely," the asari insists. Kelsa can't blame her for wanting revenge; but for Saren Arterius, her mother would still be alive.

So would Kaidan, Kelsa tells herself, and her lips twist into a grimace. She glances to Wrex, stewing over a lost cure to the death sentence of his people, a cure that would have been worse than the disease if Kaidan hadn't died to see it destroyed. The krogan gives her a measured nod, which she returns, before readying her cooled-down shotgun once more. "Let's get to it, then."

There aren't any geth waiting for them in the atrium, but Kelsa's still cautious, zigzagging along the path and up the flights of stairs that have twice before taken her to see the Council in session. The high platform is empty when Kelsa reaches the final landing, but the lower precipice has a single supplicant, a turian with its back turned to the intruders, working feverishly at a haptic console. Kelsa stops short halfway down the walkway, a good leap back from some tasteful boulders that can provide her and her team some cover when the bastard realises he's not alone anymore. Saren. Even if she didn't know he'd preceded her through the Conduit, she'd still be able to recognise him, even from behind; his silver-white armour is dirty and bloodstained, the same he wore on Virmire, and it doesn't look like he's taken it off since then. It takes a heartbeat for Kelsa to understand why; the left-hand side's been torn away, from Saren's shoulder to his waist. The turian's left arm is gone, too, replaced with a synthetic limb that looks like it was cut off of a prime-class geth. A series of tubes coils around his flank, and Kelsa has to revise her earlier estimate...it looks like half a geth is waiting for them in the Council Chambers, after all.

Her finger itches as she raises her shotgun, but even though every instinct she's cultivated over her life is screaming at her to pull the trigger and put an end to Saren Arterius, Kelsa hesitates. "Step back from the console," she commands. "I'll give you this one chance to do the right thing."

Saren twists around with a hissing snarl, his pistol in his left hand, the cybernetic one, and he gets three shots off before Kelsa can blink. Her shields flicker, and this time she listens to her instincts, diving into the nook behind that boulder with Liara at her side. Wrex holds his ground and returns fire for a second before he tucks himself behind the rock on the other side of the pathway. "You surprise me, Shepard," the turian snarls, evidently unfazed by the krogan's shot. "In my experience, the only things humans excel at are death and defeat in the face of their betters."

Those are turian words, words Saren might have told Anderson on their long-ago mission that saw Anderson's Spectre candidacy dissolve to dust...but the words lack any note of turian venom. In that half-second before she hit cover, Kelsa caught a glimpse of Saren's face; since Virmire, the turian's lost more than an arm. Those eyes aren't dead anymore, but they're backlit with an artificial blue glow, a glow that seeps through Saren's mandibles and teeth as well. When he speaks, he even sounds half-geth. Ice prickles at Kelsa's gut, but she's gotta stay focused; she hasn't run this far just to stumble at the last jump. "As soon as I find somebody better than me," she growls, "I'll letcha know."

Stone chips fly off of the top of Kelsa's boulder, the first of Saren's response, but when he speaks up again, Kelsa can tell that he isn't any closer. "You must think yourself so high and mighty," he rasps, a metallic edge to his voice. "So far above the garbage of the galaxy that their petty lives neendn't concern you."

"You don't know a goddamned thing about me," the soldier barks, and she peeks out from her boulder just long enough to send a shotgun shell at the turian's chest. She hears the fragments crackle against his shield as she tucks herself back into her nook. "I ain't the one that's trying to kill everybody."

"And you are a fool if you truly believe that is my design," Saren insists, without returning fire this
time. There's just a little more meat in his growl, now. "You have seen in the prism of your mind what the Reapers are capable of...what they will wreak upon the galaxy, as they have done so often before," he exclaims. "That is because each civilisation rejects what they offer; each cycle, the galaxy rises beyond itself, and must be violently cast down before the poison spreads to infect the whole of the Universe."

Kelsa's lips twist into a grimace. "What the fuck are you talking about?" His words unsettle something deep in the soldier's memory, a shadow of a life she gave up before she could count to twenty-one. "You sound like a motherfucking preacher."

"And why should that not be so?" The turian demands; he sounds like he's a step closer, but he does not fire until Wrex tries to take a shot, and when the krogan's ducking again, Saren continues. "Every culture in the galaxy has a version of the same truth; they are made in the image of the gods, but they cannot accept this, and so they are brought to ruin by their creators. Can you not see the parallels, Shepard?"

Wrex takes his own turn to talk instead of shooting, for once. "I can see you're about a salarian short of a decent frog-leg soup," he chuckles, giving Kelsa a scarred smirk from across the gap.

The joke's almost enough to get Kelsa's lips to twisting, if her guts weren't already doing the job. "Can't you hear yourself, Arterius?" She asks, according the man a respect she hasn't felt for him since he killed her friend. "You're indoctrinated! Sovereign's just getting you to do what it wants!"

Saren snarls. "It wants peace," he insists. "That is what the Reapers have always wanted, but no civilisation has ever given them the chance to bestow it upon the galaxy. No," he barks, "it's you that cannot see the truth; you would stand and fight, a twig in the face of a tidal wave, and you would have us all drown under its weight than learn to live in peace."

Okay, the soldier tells herself. Letting him live was a mistake. "If you want peace so bad," she offers him, "then prove it. Let's stand and talk about this like adults." As if adults don't shoot each other in the back all the time.

The crazy fuck takes a couple of seconds to consider, but then he decides to be reasonable. "Very well," Saren says. "Stand, and you and I may discuss terms."

Your funeral, Kelsa thinks, but she motions to her companions to stay put before she hauls herself to her feet. She's got her shotgun checked against her body, ready to point and shoot at a heartbeat's notice but not directly pointed at the man. For his part, he's moved his pistol to his right hand, the meat-and-bone one...almost like he doesn't trust the machine to make good on their agreement. "Just listen to what you're trying to say, Arterius," Kelsa repeats, grimacing. "How many cycles have gone by, how many systems have been scoured clean already? And you're telling me that they all had to be completely wiped out, that nobody wanted to surrender? Ever?"

Saren's blue-lit eyes twinkle. "All...all rejected the peace the Reapers offered," he insists. "All showed themselves unworthy of existence." The metal edge is back in his tone.

Kelsa shakes her head. "Those are Sovereign's words, Arterius," she tells him. "I saw him, back on Virmire...and there he told me the truth, that the Reapers are coming to harvest us, and there isn't anything we can do to stop them."

"That is why we must prove ourselves useful!" Saren's hand twitches, but he doesn't lift his gun, not yet. "There will be a place for us in the coming order, if only we submit to them!"

Let go, comes an echo from a forgotten dream, an echo that sounds too much like Liara. You must
"let go. "No!" Kelsa snaps, feeling a winter chill dance across her shoulders and another tingle in her teeth. "Anderson told me about you," she cajoles the turian, resisting the urge to throw a glance back over her shoulder to where the asari sits hunched behind the stone. "He told me you were strong and proud, that you didn't let anything keep you from what you needed to get done." She shakes her head again, more slowly this time. "But look at you...you're pathetic. You've already given up."

The turian's metal-tinged mandibles twitch, betraying some tiny spark of turianity left inside the bastard. "I'm doing what's best for the galaxy," he hisses. "Think of the trillions of lives that hang in the balance; all of those living, and the great multitude yet to be born!" He points at her with his metal hand. "You can see naught but war and strife, where there need only be order. We can live in peace, if only we can accept it."

Kelsa's grimace deepens, and her nostrils flare with the force of her sniff. "That's a goddamned lie," she spits. "But even if it was true, it wouldn't change my answer," she tells the turian. "I'd rather see the whole galaxy drown fighting than be slaves to the Reapers...and the Saren Arterius I've heard about would say the same fucking thing, if he was here right now, instead of a mouthpiece for the enemy."

"That is not your decision," Saren protests, but he doesn't sound so certain. There's a glimmer of light in those eyes that doesn't come from some cybernetic implants.

"It ain't yours, either," Kelsa shoots back, her grimace curving into a jagged smirk. "But here we are, gambling with the lives of all those trillions you talked about. We've both made our choices in the past that have cost innocent people their lives, but here we are." Her trigger finger tenses up subtly, but she doesn't swing her shotgun out quite yet. "You're right, Saren," she admits. "I don't know anything about peace, or about surrender. My whole life I've learned that the first thing doesn't exist and the second thing will only get you killed." Her smirk fades and she draws up to her full height, as unimpressive as that might be. "Can you look me in the eye and honestly tell me you've ever learnt any different?"

Saren's eyes narrow, but he doesn't blink. "I..." He chokes, and his cybernetic hand balls into a fist. "I..." He repeats, louder, meatier. And then his face goes slack, but when he talks, he sounds like Kelsa remembers hearing in this very room, when he appeared as a hologram. "Thank you, Shepard," he says, and before Kelsa can react, the turian brings his pistol up to his own jaw. Those eyes go dead one more time, just an instant before the bullet opens the top of Saren's skull in a spray of brown bone and blue, bloody brain matter.

The body collapses into a heap on the walkway; Kelsa's lungs burn before she remembers to take a breath, and another few seconds pass before her ear crackles with Joker's half-panicked voice. "Commander, I don't know what you did," the pilot tells them, "but the geth out here are acting like we just stomped on their dog or something. There any way you can get the Citadel's arms open?"

"I'll see what I can do," Kelsa answers, shaking off her shock and stepping over the fresh corpse that she can't claim direct credit for. "Looks like this console's some kinda control panel," she says, when she draws near. The symbols on the haptic interface are unfamiliar at first, but the computer must read her implants, because the console begins displaying the Alliance's galactic script after a second's delay. It takes another thirty for Kelsa to find the command to open the Citadel back up.

"Oh, shit," a voice calls over the comms, but it isn't Joker's. The voice belongs to Admiral Hackett, the commander of the Fifth Fleet. "Commander Shepard, we've got a situation developing out here."
Kelsa's mouth is already a desert, but she manages to cough up a reply. "Status, sir?"

"The *Destiny Ascension* is under heavy geth fire," Hackett informs her. "The geth are concentrating their force on the Citadel Fleet's capital ship...where the Citadel Council is currently in residence."

*Oh, shit.* "I'm not sure what I can do, sir," the soldier says, looking up through the chamber's windowed ceiling. She can barely see anything beyond Sovereign's shadow, but it looks like the station's arms are slowly creaking open.

"You can make a judgment call," the admiral clips. "I've got a squadron in position to engage and save the *Ascension*, but I'm told that the Reaper ship is inside the Citadel; we're not gonna be able to save the Council without sacrificing a lot of our own ships, and we might need them to beat Sovereign when those arms come fully open."

Kelsa's stomach turns. "You're the admiral, Admiral," she points out, almost laughing. "Ain't that your job?"

"I'm an *Alliance admiral*," Hackett rebuts. "You're a Council Spectre, and you've seen what we're up against first-hand. Whatever your decision, make it fast, Shepard."

The Spectre swallows her frustration with a pointed glance at Sovereign's enormous underbelly. *What's three*, she muses, *against trillions? "Hold those ships back, sir,"* Kelsa forces out. "Keep 'em fresh for the final attack."

Hackett's answer is a heartbeat in coming. "Understood, Commander. Hackett out."

"Kelsa," Liara breathes, from beside her, that voice so much like the splinter of memory that Kelsa spins around; it's only at the last second that the soldier pulls her shotgun up and lets the shot off straight up into the air. For her part, Liara hardly flinches, but a bit of biotic energy dissipates from her closed fist. "Are you certain that was wise?"

"I'm certain that it's done," Kelsa drawls, unable to look directly at the asari. "And I'm certain that those Alliance lives are better spent trying to kill Sovereign than trying to save the Council."

Liara nods. "I believe your convictions are just," she says, sounding too goddamned reasonable. "But some will see it as self-serving."

"We can all argue about it tomorrow, assuming we live that long," Kelsa growls. "Now shut up before I try to shoot at you again."

Wrex grunts, from behind her. "Sorry to interrupt all this sweet talk," he grunts, "but we've got a problem."

Kelsa heaves a sigh, her head dipping down...bowed, but not broken. "What is it?"

"Looks like Saren survived his little lobotomy," the krogan observes.

A surge of adrenaline cuts through Kelsa's fatigue, and when she twirls around, there's just a blue bloodstain where the turian's body should be. "*Goddammit,*" she yells, just as her comms get flooded with the fruits of her earlier choice; the *Destiny Ascension* is sending out some desperate hails for relief over all channels, and the Alliance is as silent as the black void in response. Kelsa closes her eyes against the wash of static that cuts into the feed before it goes silent again. "Find him," she hisses. "And then kill him."

The search takes them beneath the walkway, to a facsimile of a pleasant little park that only the
most important members of galactic society have ever seen in fifty thousand years. Wrex was wrong; the thing they find isn't Saren anymore. Instead it's all machine, all Sovereign, with glowing red eyes and a long, metal neck. It's fast, too, able to leap from roof to wall as fast as Kelsa can swing her gun...but when you've got a Spectre and a krogan shooting at you, backed up by a capable biotic, jumping around can only take you so far. Saren's revenant ends with much less dignity than the turian himself, a second death of a hundred bullets, until there's nothing left to piece together. Even after the body's a mess of twisted metal, Kelsa keeps shooting, and when her shotgun whines in protest she takes to kicking and punching, expelling her grief and frustration on the mangled remains. It doesn't feel like victory, no matter how hard she hits the dead flesh and circuitry. It doesn't feel like victory when Wrex pulls her back from the pulp; it doesn't feel like victory when the Fifth Fleet closes in on Sovereign above them and concentrates their fire until the giant space squid explodes. It doesn't feel like victory when Kelsa pulls herself out from under a pile of rubble.

It feels like a good fucking start, though.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who's reading along, especially my awesome beta-reader, buttercup23!
In the aftermath of Saren's defeat and Sovereign's destruction, the galaxy tries to rebuild and convince itself the threat has passed; Kelsa's team, devoid of purpose, largely scatters, though not before Kelsa can set a few things right. And there's one alien who doesn't want to leave her side until the last possible moment...but circumstance separates them, nevertheless.

Nevertheless, Williams rolls her eyes when she follows the commander through the door. "Why'd you insist we come here, ma'am?" She grunts, over the thrum of the beat. The gunnery chief is dressed for war, just like the rest of the ground team, so even the drunk revellers give them adequate berth as they push their way into the club.

"Flux is still closed down and I needed a drink," Kelsa replies. One advantage of being in the Lower Wards, farther down the arms of the Citadel, is that there was less fallout from Sovereign's last hurrah; the Presidium's gonna be a mess for awhile, but they'll clean it up first, so it's probably gonna be a long time before the upper part of the arms are fully functional again. "You need to have some fun, Chief," the soldier advises, but she doesn't make it an order.

"Yes, ma'am," Williams concedes. There's a shadow across her cheeks that hasn't quite left since Virmire, but at least that shadow ain't clouding the chief's eyes when she looks at Kelsa, anymore.

The commander stalks toward the bar, trusting her eclectic crew to find their own amusements while she scrounges up that drink. There's a salarian on the taps, busy with another customer, but his huge eyes blink rapidly when he spies Kelsa and he nearly spills the beer he's pouring in his haste to get the turian out of her way. "Commander Shepard," the bartender clips, over the music and the turian's grumbling. "What can I get you?"

Mere mention of Kelsa's name and rank is enough to stop the turian from starting a bar fight, and
the alien mumbles an apology before he shuffles away. Kelsa shakes her head and fills the empty space without much thought. "I'll take a bottle of Jameson, if you've got it," she tells the frog-man.

"I've seen that spirit before," the salarian confirms, excited. He dives under the counter, but then returns half a minute later, empty-handed and frowning. "It's been...ahh...very popular this week. Even had a quarian ask for a bottle earlier today-it must have been my last."

Kelsa's brow draws down and she feels the back of her throat go dry. "Why the fuck…?"

The bartender shrugs. "There's a rumour going around that you liked it, so everyone's curious to try it out." He blinks and shakes his head. "Deadly to most quarians, though. Levo-based. I warned the woman, but she said she was getting it for a friend."

The commander makes a thoughtful noise, and a crazy idea takes hold of her. "Thanks," she grunts, turning away before the salarian can try to pawn off some more asari liquor on her-she still remembers getting thrown in the brig after fighting with one of the bouncers, before she became a Council Spectre. While the idea of breaking another krogan's leg sounds like it could be fun, Kelsa doesn't want to test how far her Spectre authority reaches until there's actually a Council to back it up. Instead, she stalks through the crowd until her eyes catch on the familiar sight of Tali'Zorah's enviro-suit. The quarian's sitting in a shadowy corner, alone, with a bottle on the table in front of her. As Kelsa edges closer, she sees that the bottle is thick green glass with a crimson screw top. "Damn, Tali," the soldier calls over the music. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were waiting for me."

The quarian's face is a mask-literally hidden behind three centimetres of purple-hued plexiglass-but she tilts her head slowly, like she does when she's amused. "I figured if I found the last bit of your favourite drink, you'd have to seek me out eventually," she says. "Do you want to sit down, Shepard?"

Kelsa shrugs and accepts the offer, sliding into a booth until her shoulders brush up against the wall. "What's on your mind?" She doesn't reach for the bottle, even though her fingers tingle to take it up and bring it to her lips.

"I wanted to thank you," Tali tells her, "and let you know that I'm not angry with you for not sharing the data you found on the geth." She sounds sincere, or at least as sincere as Kelsa can discern through the staccato thrumming of the air and the enviro-suit's voice modulator.

The soldier's lips twitch into a grimace, and she glances down at the table. "Yeah," she ventures. "About that…" The quarian has every right to be pissed off, and Kelsa has no reason to expect such forgiveness. "I'm sorry," Kelsa admits, bringing her gaze back up to Tali's face-plate. "I know you can't go back to your people without anything to show for your trip."

"That's alright, Shepard," the quarian insists. "I'm sure if worst comes to worst, I can say that I helped stop the geth from taking over the Citadel...that's got to be worth something to the flotilla."

Kelsa shakes her head and brings up her left arm. "I was too fucking stubborn," she says, activating her omni-tool's console before she can think better of it. There are plenty of excuses she could make, but the soldier doesn't offer any as she reverses her mistake. "You deserve better than begging your way onto a ship, Tali."

In another few seconds it's done, and Tali's omni-tool chirps with an incoming copy of the data she deserved to get a week ago. The quarian doesn't speak at first, too busy verifying the transfer, but after a moment she breathes an audible sigh. "Thank you," Tali says, and now there's no doubt that she means it. "If I'm going to be honest, I was considering hacking into the Normandy's computers
"And taking a copy anyway," the quarian admits, somewhat sheepishly.

"Don't make me regret changing my mind." Kelsa warns her, but she does it with a smirk, finally reaching out for the bottle of human liquor.

"I was considering it," Tali reiterates. "And then I had to consider how much damage you might do to the flotilla in order to find me, and ultimately I decided it wasn't worth the risk."

"Thanks," Kelsa grunts. "I guess." She opens her bottle and takes a long sniff of the spirits inside. It smells just like Jameson should, but the soldier hesitates, throwing the quarian another glance. "You sure you didn't fuck with it, somehow? Just in case I told you to fuck off?"

Tali laughs and shakes her head. "I wouldn't dream of it, Shepard," she allows. And then she leaps out of her chair, too giddy to be contained. "I feel like dancing!" She exclaims, looking out to the wide floor of the bar. "Do you want to come?"

Kelsa takes a long, slow pull off of the bottle, and she lets the liquor settle on her tongue before she swallows it. "Not unless you want a few dozen innocent bystanders on your conscience," she drawls, her voice smoothed somewhat by the drink. "Go have fun, kid."

The quarian dips her head in a nod before she slips into the crowd, and Kelsa's content to watch other people celebrate while she sips intermittently on her whiskey. Williams is finally letting loose, Vakarian's making a fool of himself, and Wrex looks like he's trying to start a headbutting contest with a younger krogan; Liara's on the floor, too, dancing a hundred times better than Kelsa ever could, even if she's more dressed and less confident than the other asari.

The Jameson's three-quarters full when Kelsa hears a man clear his throat to her right. Instinct has her tensing, her right hand halfway to her shotgun before she looks up at the source of the sound. "Captain," the soldier allows, with a measured nod. "...Or is that Councillor, now?"

Anderson very nearly rolls his eyes, but he sits down in the seat Tali vacated a few minutes before. "It's not official yet," he informs her, "but Udina imagines it'll all get sorted out soon enough." The corner of the man's mouth turns up. "He's dropped more than a few hints that you made the wrong choice to back me as humanity's first councillor."

Kelsa grunts her concern and takes another swig of whiskey. "The worse he wants the job, the less I'll trust him with it," she says.

"Amen to that, Shepard," Anderson agrees. "But that's not what I came here for."

The soldier cocks a brow. "Who do you want me to kill this time, sir?"

The ex-Alliance officer holds up a hand. "Nobody," he gruffs. "At least not today...but you might not like the news, even so," he lets on. "Arcturus wants to give you the button."

Kelsa's nostrils flare as she sniffs, and she looks down at the table, between them. "No," she breathes, almost too low to hear above the beat.

"I thought you might say that," Anderson muses, not unkindly. "But you might not have a choice, Kelsa," he points out, his tone nearly as quiet as hers. The use of her proper name has the soldier's eyes snapping back up to the man's face as he goes on. "The Alliance doesn't hand out the Star of Terra to every jack and hill that puts in ten years. You've got to really fuck up to be in the running."

Kelsa's throat feels dry again, and she wets it with another draught of Jameson. "Give it to Kaidan," she advises, because she can say no all she wants to and the bastards will listen about as well as
they always do, unless they've got somebody else to pin the medal on. "His momma deserves that much."

Mention of the deceased lieutenant takes a bit of Anderson's levity, but he nods, stroking over his chin. "I can put in the word with Command," he tells her. "Your endorsement of the idea should give it enough weight."

The soldier barks a laugh. "All I did was kill a buncha geth and one pain-in-the-ass turian," she observes. "Why's everybody listening to me, all of a sudden?"

"Because you did what nobody else was willing to do," Anderson points out, sounding serious, now. "Even when nobody wanted to believe it, you kept going, and you won, Shepard."

She shakes her head, the whiskey loosening her tongue enough to contradict him. It doesn't hurt that he's not in the chain of command anymore, either. "The Reapers are still out there," she counters. "Waiting for their chance to come back...or maybe even on their way." She leans forward, gathering her thoughts with a breath. "If you really think people'll listen to me, you tell them to get the fuck off of this space station and blow it to hell."

Anderson blinks, his head tilting, as though he can't quite believe what he's hearing. "I'm not sure I understand, Shepard."

"Simple," Kelsa gruffs. "Reapers-like Sovereign. Lots of 'em...thousands. Maybe more. They built the Citadel, and as long as we use it, we're playing right into their plans for us." Her face twists in a show of disgust. "Fuck 'em, I say. Blow up the Citadel, build one of our own."

"I can try to relay your advice," Anderson says, smirking wryly. "Dunno how well-received it'll be, though."

Kelsa just shrugs, leaning back against the wall. "I think I want something else, though," she muses, after a few seconds' reflection. Anderson raises an eyebrow and nods for her to go on. "I'd like Saren's pistol, if you can find it."

A heartbeat passes before his lips part. "I'll see what I can do, Shepard," he vows.

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Captain's Cabin, SSV Normandy

1230 Zulu

17 September 2183

FTL Transit to Amada System, Omega Nebula

"You are making quite an intense study of that weapon, Kelsa," Liara observes from her comfortable perch, at the end of the bed.

The commander husks a chuckle, running her thumb down the scarred barrel of Saren's pistol. "I'm trying to figure out what kinda person used it," she says, not taking her eyes away.

The asari swallows a giggle. "There's no need to sound so defensive," she breathes, pushing up from the bed and stalking over to the desk, where Kelsa's sitting. "I'm an archaeologist," Liara reminds her. "The discipline has taught me to examine artifacts and make inferences about the people who might've used them."
Liara doesn't come right out and say it, but there's a mixture of curiosity and longing in the woman's voice. "Sounds like you're giving me a…" Kelsa was about to say hint, but she was fool enough to glance back over her shoulder; the asari isn't wearing anything but a shy smile, and now the soldier can't help but think of better things to do with her tongue than form words. But she's waiting for Joker to tell them they've arrived in the system, waiting for the call to take her party ashore. "Fuck, you're gorgeous," she makes herself say, her lips easing into a smirk. "But you'd better throw something on if you want us to be ready in time."

A blush splashes across Liara's cheeks, threatening to crawl down her neck. "I thought I'd succeeded in sating your appetites earlier today," she muses, but she makes no move to cover herself.

"I recharge quick," Kelsa retorts. Even though it's been more than a month since she's killed anything, she doesn't miss it; for the first time since she was fourteen, the soldier's got something more than a fight to look forward to. "But, much as I'd love to drag you back over to the bed and find out how long it'd take you to exhaust me, we've got a job to do." With great effort, the soldier turns back toward the desk, toward the gun that Saren used to take his own life.

"Another pocket of geth," Liara says. "I remember...there are reports of activity in this sector that you've been tasked with investigating. We're heading to Amada?"

Kelsa nods. "A few merchant ships have disappeared. Enough to get Hackett's attention, anyhow."

The asari makes a thoughtful noise as she retreats back toward the bed. "And since Amada is in the Terminus Systems," she observes, "they've sent the fastest ship in the Alliance Navy, in case the culprits turn out to be organic."

"Mostly," Kelsa grunts, taking Saren's pistol in her hands. "I also don't think they're fussed that they're sending me in that case, either."

"...I'm not certain I follow, Kelsa," Liara admits.

The soldier's fingers fumble over the nodes of the turian weapon. "If there's one thing you can count on in the Terminus," she explains, grimacing, "it's batarians." Always the motherfucking batarians. "And I've killed more of 'em than just about anybody since the Krogan Rebellions fizzled out."

"Ahh," Liara sighs, closer again. "Aside from being employed as an astute psychological tactic, you are also a Spectre reconfirmed by the new Council, and a hero besides."

"Meaning if it is the motherfucking batarians," Kelsa surmises, "the Alliance has plausible deniability. They can blame the Council when I cut another swathe through a squad of pirates."

The asari's arms slip around Kelsa's shoulders, and the soldier arches back into Liara's embrace. "I forgot to add shrewd tactician to your description, a second ago," she breathes, resting her chin on the crown of Kelsa's head.

"Now you're just trying to flatter me," Kelsa husks, closing her eyes, though she doesn't take her fingers off of the stock of Saren's gun. "I'm glad you decided to stay," she says, through a little lump that tries to rise up from the bottom of her throat. The others are all gone. Tali went to join a crew on the Migrant Fleet, that wandering base the quarians have called home for three hundred years since the geth threw them off of Rannoch; Vakarian had some business to take care of on Palaven...he didn't say, and Kelsa didn't ask. For Wrex, Saren's death was the end of a job—a weird job, for sure, but a job nonetheless. It shouldn't've stung so much when he went chasing another..."
job.

But Liara's still here, still warm, still willing to walk toward the storm when everybody else is running in the other direction. "I am glad you invited me to stay, Kelsa," the asari tells her. "I can honestly say that this has been the worst and the best year of my life, for a multiplicity of reasons, most of which involve you."

Kelsa's lips part, but a chill courses through her guts; the conversation's veering dangerously close to a talk. Blinking, the soldier leans forward, picking up the gun and holding it within Liara's reach. "You said you could help me find out more about Saren by studying this thing?"

Liara breathes a laugh. "As I recall, I merely stated the skillset I've developed as an archaeologist," she corrects the soldier, but her hand languidly moves to take up the weapon, nonetheless. The asari inspects it just above Kelsa's eye-level, still tucking her chin on the soldier's head, one arm still snaked across her chest. "It appears very well-worn and cared for," she observes, humming. "Though there are obvious modifications which appear fairly recent."


"Indeed," Liara confirms. "It is a rather ingenious way of cooling modern small arms; by ejecting thermal cartridges, one can fire dozens of rounds in quick succession without fear of melting down the weapon's mass effect core."

The soldier tilts her head back a little aggressively, not quite a headbutt. "Tell me something I couldn't've guessed already, doc," she drawls, smirking. The technology really is interesting, but it's also annoying; none of the races in Council space have anything like the cartridges the geth developed, which renders the pistol unusable unless Kelsa wants to reverse-engineer the thing...and that seems a little bit like blasphemy, even to her.

"Fair enough," the asari chuckles, turning the gun this way and that and running her thumb slowly down the barrel. "We may infer that the owner of this artifact kept meticulous care of it, to have it in service for so many years," she lectures. "It is possible to speculate on some sort of sentimental attachment or symbolic significance that the pistol held. Given what we know of Saren's state of mind toward the end of his life, we can be fairly confident that his attachment to his gun ran very deep indeed, for otherwise we would have expected him to discard it rather than retrofit it to geth standards."

"Maybe he killed somebody important with it," Kelsa muses, and then she husks a chuckle. "Maybe a lot of somebodies important." Liara sets the gun down on the table with something close to reverence, and she pulls back as if to step away. Kelsa catches her forearm without intending to, drags the limb to her lips without thinking, and claims the asari's wrist with a kiss that's softer than the soldier has any right to give, even as a spark ignites at the base of her spine.

"Don't care," the soldier grunts, grabbing a fistful of the asari's non-service uniform, her tongue snaking out to drag over the expanse of neck that's so willingly offered. That spark within her threatens to kindle into a fire that could outshine a star, but just when Kelsa's ears soak in the sound of Liara's yearning groan, the goddamned comm lances into her brain stem. *Son of a-

"Just dropped out of FTL, Commander," Joker informs her. "ETA to Kurpa ten minutes."
Over a decade of duty sits on Kelsa's shoulders and she swallows hard, pushing her face into the crook of Liara's neck and breathing deep of the asari's sea-salt scent. Then, with a sigh, she takes a single step back. "Copy that, Lieutenant. I'll be on the bridge in five." She sees Liara's brows pull together in disappointment and concern, but that nascent fire's already turned to embers in Kelsa's belly. "Suit up," she grunts, grimacing, and then she turns to follow her own edict. To Kelsa's practiced hands, the task is the work of two-dozen seconds once she unclips the case that her crimson hardsuit collapses into. The thick ceramic plating, undergirded with tungsten, titanium, and carbon fibres to maximise penetration-stoppage, doubles her normal weight to over two-hundred kilograms. Up until the night before Ilos, that extra pressure felt like home, the warmest embrace Kelsa could think of. Now her shoulders bear the weight just as easily as before, but her chest feels tighter...not quite as empty. She expels a breath she didn't realise she was holding, shaking her head and glancing over to Liara, still shimmying into the polymer fabric of her lighter armour. "Meet me in the shuttle bay."

After registering the asari's nod, Kelsa stalks through her office door, but she doesn't make it three steps before the floor shudders under her boots in a way she's never felt from the Normandy before. Before her next heartbeat bottoms out, Kelsa's ears fill with two blaring claxons competing—the first a call to general quarters, overlayed harshly by the alarm nobody in the Alliance Navy ever wants to hear: the wail to abandon ship. The air's already got telltale traces of smoke threading into Kelsa's nostrils, and it only takes a few seconds for the mess hall to erupt in chaos as about a dozen servicemen and women storm through it, heading for the escape pods. The whole galaxy tilts and Kelsa gets thrown into the back of the central elevator shaft when the Normandy banks up into a near-suicidal evasive manoeuvre that tells the commander that the ship's inertial dampeners are already failing. A single thought for Adams crosses the back of Kelsa's mind; it could be that the engine's already been hit.

Instinct takes over as the distress claxon wins out, coded layers informing the crew about a massive hull breach. Kelsa pushes off from the wall and wades through the mess hall, her footfalls heavy even as overcharged circuits pop around her and insulation melts off of wires. She ignores the screams of her crew, knowing that if she doesn't get up the neck in time, they'll all die; she reaches the centre of the ship and punches through the emergency glass that protects the Big Red Button, the one no captain ever wants to have to push. Only once the red light flutters does the commander secure her helmet to her shoulders, and she sucks in a greedy lungful of fresh air, her pulse oddly even.

"Kelsa!" Liara calls, from directly behind her, the asari's voice modulated through her own helmet.

"Distress beacon's away," Kelsa gruffs, turning to face the other woman.

Liara looks more frightened than she had when she and Williams faced down a thresher maw. "Will the Alliance make it in time?"

Before Kelsa can answer, a panel beside Liara explodes in a great gout of fire, and Liara's scream slices through that veneer of professional numbness the commander's spent the better part of her life cultivating. Without hesitation she dives through the flame, tackling the asari onto the floor before her shields fail and those synthetic polymers melt into her skin. With a grunt, the commander pulls herself to her feet, tugging Liara after her. "I ain't got this far just so they can find our frozen corpses," she gruffs, reaching for a fire extinguisher. "Get everybody you can to the escape pods," she instructs Liara, pitching her the canister. "Then get the fuck outta here.

The other woman catches the tool deftly, but she squares her shoulders. "Joker's still in the cockpit," she says, and just to prove her right the ship trembles with the force of another crazy loop. "He won't abandon the ship...and I'm not leaving, either."
Kelsa grimaces, though her helmet hides any expression. Another panel pops off the wall behind them. "Get to the damned shuttles," she growls, grabbing Liara by the shoulder. "I'll haul Joker's crippled ass outta here." Then she turns, intending to make good on her threat; Liara calls her name once more, uncertain and afraid, and Kelsa's lungs burn with a sudden winter's chill. "Get the hell outta here!"

Before the goddamned asari can distract her any more, Kelsa rushes back down the ship's neck, past debris and more than a couple of bodies, until she reaches the stairs that twist up to the CIC. The doors are sealed to maintain the crew deck's airlock, but Kelsa pushes them open; anybody that doesn't have their own oxygen by now's probably already asphyxiated, anyway. The scene that greets her on the top deck is beautiful, in its way; through the open ribs of the ship's upper hull she can see Alchera, a blue-and-white ball of ice, and a blanket of brilliant stars off to one side of the planet. Her mag boots auto-initiate when she takes her first proper step into the CIC. Shit, she thinks. Mass effect fields are out. The commander has to pick her way slowly over the deck, dodging floating chairs and more dangerous debris, until she comes to the cockpit. It's sealed off with a kinetic barrier, but the ship's VI still has enough juice to let her suit through without dropping the whole thing. "Come on, Joker," she snaps at the pilot, whose frantic hands dance over five different haptic interfaces. "We've gotta get out of here!"

"No!" The pilot growls, his voice crackling over the staticky radio connection between their helmets. "I won't abandon the Normandy! I can still save her!"

The ice moves from Kelsa's lungs to her stomach. "The Normandy's dead," she pronounces. "Just like we'll be if we don't get the hell off her! Now!"

"No, we just have to-" And then the pilot gasps. "Oh, no...they're coming around for another attack!"

Kelsa doesn't really give a fuck who they are, but she turns around just in time to see a brilliant golden beam punch into the CIC's floor, through the gaping hole in the hull. If she doesn't get Joker out of that fucking seat in fifteen seconds, they'll both be burnt alive; that calculation spurs her into action once again. She rounds on Joker and, without a word, she grabs his forearm and drags it over her shoulders.

When your armour weighs a hundred kilos, grabbing anyone's naked arm could fracture it, even if you're careful. But Kelsa doesn't have time to be careful, and Joker's not just anyone; he's the best goddamned pilot in the Alliance...and he's got a rare condition that makes his bones as hollow as glass tubes. Kelsa can't hear the bones break through the vacuum, but Joker's panicked scream changes pitch four times as she drags him up out of his chair. Their fifteen seconds are down to five, and it takes six for Kelsa to bull up to the bridge's escape pod. That golden laser beam should continue its sweep up the bridge, the last half-metre that separates Kelsa and Joker from death, but at the last second it flickers and dies. Shaking her head, the commander awkwardly pushes the pilot ahead of her into the pod, taking as much care as she can manage not to shatter any more of his skeleton.

That hesitation turns out to be a costly mistake; before she can pull herself into the pod, the Normandy enters its violent death throes, and a series of explosions rock the ship's frame so much that Kelsa's pitched clear away, back into the bridge. She catches herself, barely, on a control panel. It has another big red button, a virtual one; a failsafe that'll manually eject the ship's last escape pod.

Joker's face twists in a bout of agony. "Shepard!" He cries. "Come-"

But Kelsa's fist slams onto the haptic trigger so forcefully that she flies back, twirling into the CIC,
too far from any surface for her boots to get a good grip. Her pulse is still even, maybe a bit faster than normal, as she watches the pod's hatch close. She made her choice. "Well," she says out loud, trying not to think of a promise she made to Liara a few days ago, to visit Thessia after this interdiction was over. "Shit."

And then a bloom of heat and light envelops her, and the last thing she feels is the ice in her guts as it melts away. Then there's nothing; no more light, no more dark, no hot or cold.

Just nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Author's note: And now we come to the end of the first arc! It's been quite a ride; thanks so much to all of my readers, but especially to buttercup23 for her excellent beta-reading skills.

This seems like as good a time as any to take a hiatus. I've got a Master's thesis to finish and not a lot of time to do it in, so that's where I'm having to direct the lion's share of my attention for the next few weeks. There's definitely more Sol Invictus coming, and I hope you'll enjoy it when it starts up again!
Nothing resolves, by infinitesimal degrees, into a whisper at the edge of the empty Cosmos, at the very limits of non-existence. It takes an eon for the whisper to recur, an age. It takes an eternity. If the Universe had stars, a whole generation of them would live and die before the whisper comes back, a third time. But the Universe is empty. Bereft of light, of life, of anything. Of everything. Yet there is that whisper that recurs at an enormous interval, positively metronomic in its regularity. It can't be sound; sound waves require a medium, and there is simply...nothing. Nothing but the whisper that takes ten million lifetimes to return.

Halfway to the fifth occurrence of the sound-that-can't-be, another impossibility emerges from the void. A deep, solid clunk rocks the centre of the centreless Cosmos. It only takes a thousand lifetimes to come back, jarring, upending the nullness that isn't. The third clunk takes half as long to twist the emptiness, and the fourth more quickly still, though the space of time between disturbances remains vast. With each repetition, the impact becomes more urgent, more fragile, more desperate. The washed whisper comes and goes-after, perhaps, seven million lifetimes-and yet the beat ticks on.

A hundred lifetimes.

Clunk.

Seventy lifetimes.

Clunk. Woosh.

Thirty-five lifetimes.

Clunk...woosh...clunk.

The two not-sounds play through one another, a winding rhythm that spirals through the nothing that is everything; the whisper gains a subtlety of its own, after another few years, and the tighter beat takes on a fleshy quality. Nothing fades into darkness, darkness tinged with salt that tickles her nostrils.

"That bitch on the Citadel was right."

Nine syllables, unintelligible, more music to go with the harmonies in the black void.

"There really isn't anything like a Thessian sunset."
She doesn't answer; until this second, there wasn't a her to answer. There wasn't anything, but now there's her.

"Hey," the music sounds again. "You listening, squidling?"

Blackness gives way to gold-tinged velvet as she opens her eyes, and the thread of her heartbeat falls beneath her consciousness, the sound of beating waves barely registering in her ears. No, she realises, frowning. Not ears. "I..." She sighs, and her voice is too light, too smooth, just like the blue flesh of her abdomen, of her hands. "...What?"

Her companion husks a laugh. "Take your time, kid. We probably have plenty of it."

Liara. Her name is Liara, she remembers, blinking in the last rays of light from Thessia's yellow-red sun as it sinks beneath the languid sea. She drags herself into a sitting position, glancing around, taking stock of her surroundings. It takes a good thirty seconds of assessing the tactical value of the terrain before the asari recalls this beach, and when she swings her eyes up to her right, she sees the familiar skyline of Serrice twinkling in the distance. Her name is Liara. Yes. "...What happened?"

"How in an elcor's ballsack should I know?" Aria T'Loak scoffs, and when Liara glances her way, she's not surprised to find the other asari looking vaguely bored, perched on a boulder. They're both nude, as is the custom in the more civilised places of Thessia, but the younger asari feels a foreign hunger threaten to take hold as her eyes trace the curve of Aria's neck.

Liara diverts her eyes, and the glimmer of desire fades. "By the Goddess," she swears, shivering from a stray breeze. "I...you say you've done this sort of recapitulation before," she states, baldly. "Have you not encountered such a situation?"

"No," Aria admits, freely. "Then again, all my recaps happened before the subject caught a case of clinical brain death. Guess those rumours were true."

"Yes," Liara confirms, shuddering again, though not from the cool evening air. "She won't show up here, will she?"

"No idea," the elder asari retorts. "But I wouldn't lay money on it...we're supposed to be reliving her memories. Dead people don't tend to have too many of those."

Liara nods, still not facing her collaborator. "It's nothing like a meld," Liara comments, her tone even, curious. Every breath she takes pulls her back to herself just a little bit more, but the hollow ache in her chest never diminishes entirely.

"I wasn't lying when I said you'd have to relive every second," Aria drawls. "Although if I have to spend two years on this goddamned beach with nothing but you for company, I'll take Shepard's chances and catch a shuttle to your fantasy of Omega."

A stab of fear causes Liara to throw the woman a desperate look. "What if that destroys our progress?"

Aria arches a tattooed eyebrow. "Then when we get sucked back into our own bodies, I teach you the basics of doing this yourself, and let you go nuts. And in another thirty-odd years you can make two years' worth of starfish here all by your lonesome."

Liara has no answer for that, and so she lapses into silence, looking up at the blanket of stars. "Athame, guide us," she eventually breathes, mouthing the words for the comfort they bring her, rather than any sincere belief.
"Keep our steps true," Aria continues, picking up the prayer with uncharacteristic solemnity in her voice. "Keep our eyes sharp."

"And steady our hands on the hunt," they finish, in concert.

Liara looks away, biting back her surprise, her lips tugging into a frown she's seen on Kelsa's face a thousand times. "Perhaps she is here," the asari muses, mostly to herself. "Looking through our eyes, instead of her own."

"Perhaps," the other woman concedes, noncommittally. "You can ask her when we're done, if you even remember this little vacation." She stands, holding up a hand when Liara sends a panicked look her way. "Relax, squidling," she rebuffs. "I'm just going on a little walk. I'll be back by sunrise."

The younger asari can only nod; she isn't certain she trusts Aria T'Loak...in fact, she's certain that she trusts her less than she's trusted anyone since becoming the Shadow Broker, which is still to come in their little experiment. But she does not move to follow, contenting herself to look out upon the fine mirror of the sea, reflecting a show of countless stars. In a way, Kelsa's absence is something of a blessing; something tells the asari that if Kelsa were to show up in this place, it would be the incomplete Kelsa, the human whose skin Liara's been inhabiting for what's felt like twenty-seven years. Putting aside the potential for such a revelation to ruin their efforts, Liara isn't certain that she could face the questions that Kelsa would inevitably raise, assuming she didn't simply go mad...or worse. She might think me a tool of indoctrination, Liara thinks to herself. She didn't have to spend nearly three decades behind the woman's eyes to know how she would react to that supposition.

Instead of anticipating a future she'll be unable to avoid, Liara considers the past that she's had no right to glimpse. Memories that don't belong to her weave through her mind, a lifetime of pain and misery and death; a human lifetime, true, but a lifetime seeded with more violence and destruction than any single soul should ever have to endure. She'd seen glimpses of it before, of course, during their occasional melds. Bonding in London was-will be, she corrects herself-as close to a perfect union of consciousness as she'd thought possible...until now, at any rate. Now Liara is privy to the innermost recesses of Kelsa's lived experience, the years that molded a poor, lonely, orphaned child into the woman who stood-will stand-against the Reapers, and the only one who might yet prevail. "You think yourself a monster," the asari breathes, in the same rhythm as her earlier prayer. "Yet I cannot imagine anyone surviving what I have seen you endure without complaint. If such endurance comes at a price, I hope that you may one day forgive yourself for having to pay it."

There is no answer except the lapping of the waves on the nearby shore...not that Liara had expected one, of course. She smirks, the expression resting oddly on her features, an echo of the human whose mind she still inhabits.

Aria returns a few hours later, a sour look on her face. "Serrice is uninhabited," she says, without preamble. "I doubt there are any facsimiles anywhere in this fantasy, so we're evidently stuck with one another's company." The woman scours a boulder clean with her biotics and claims it for herself, resting her chin on a clenched fist. "I'd be willing to bet the boundary is only a few kilometres in any direction."

Liara is uncertain about the workings of their predicament, how many layers and levels of cognition they're buried beneath. "Then we should simply enjoy the night, and see what morning brings," she muses. "It will not be the first night I've spent in quiet contemplation on this shore."

The other woman rolls her eyes, but she gives no better response than the absent Kelsa could, and the pair watch the stars bleed across the sky as the hours pass, each lost in their thoughts. Liara
recalls her own childhood, spent in peace and plenty with her mother and aunts; she went to school, learnt science and history and philosophy, and only eventually the arts of combat and diplomacy and politics, when she was ready. She never once went hungry, never had to choose between someone's life and her own, never held the fate of whole peoples in the balance of her decisions.

And yet, for all of that, for all of Liara's education and native intelligence, she would not have lived half so much but for Kelsa's influence. Without Saren and the Reapers, without Benezia's good intentions, and without Kelsa's intervention, the asari would still be digging through ruins and spending her evenings scanning journal articles for exciting developments in middle-period prothean architectural theory. She might have been happy, perhaps happier on balance than she's managed to be over the last three years of her real life outside of this experiment...especially the lost years, nearly seven hundred solar days between when Kelsa commanded her to abandon the Normandy and when the woman walked into her office on Illium. But that happiness would be empty, a shell of a life that wouldn't have mattered to anyone by the end of her millennium. Now her work can touch the lives of billions, for good or ill, and two of those lives have come to mean more to her than she'd ever imagined herself capable. That they are two humans is more surprising still...though perhaps it should not be, given the stigma she faced for the mistake of having two asari parents.

Such wonderings take Liara through the long Thessian night, with hardly a word passing between her and Aria in the meantime, but the elder asari speaks up just as the first rust-silver light of Parnitha breaks over their shoulders. "I've seen worse," she gruffs, glancing across the beach to Liara's sandy spot. "But not much. It's...impressive that she turned out so well-adjusted, all things considered."

"Give or take a few hundred thousand casualties," Liara quips, and she knows Kelsa would say something similarly direct and self-deprecating. The sun's cooler than she remembers, its light a deep crimson on the water in front of them.

The comment draws a chuckle from Aria. "I can respect a little mass murder among friends," she allows, and then she shivers as though she's cold, despite the warmth of the dawn.

Liara feels the sudden chill as well, and she follows the other asari's glance backward, toward the low inland hills. The image of the rising star shimmers, its light turning the world colder than the shadows it's chasing across the water.

"Take a deep breath, squidling," Aria advises. "I've got a feeling we're about to go under again."

"I believe I am ready," Liara affirms, closing her eyes against that frigid light. As she exhales, one last ocean wave crashes on the shore before the Cosmos collapses into a single point, and then empties entirely once more.

Chapter End Notes

I believe I am ready to recommence updating; here's a half-chapter interlude to test the waters, and hopefully more to come on Fridays. As always, thanks so much to buttercup23 for beta-reading this beast, and thanks to anyone reading along! Don't be afraid to leave comments...I promise I love them all!
Chapter Summary

Kelsa wakes up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Alpha Recovery Unit, Lazarus Station

0230 Zulu

29 June 2185

Hercules, Attican Beta Cluster

Smoke. That's the first thing that cuts through the dark; a mix of hydraulic fluid and rubber and paint fills her nostrils, caustic enough to seize her throat like a vice. It's the stink of a sinking ship...the smell of the Normandy on her last legs. The best ship in the galaxy, ripped through like a wet paper bag. A deep vibration courses into Kelsa, her world still black. Blast must've just knocked me out, she reasons, once the whirlwind of her thoughts settles down. She's unwilling to open her eyes, unwilling to spend her last moments looking up at Alchera as her ship breaks apart. To look up would taste too much like surrender, and the soldier still doesn't know how to do that. At least Joker got off in time, and Liara...and maybe Williams. Now they'll give you that goddamned button for sure. More echoes of deeper explosions reverberate through Kelsa's body, touching off a million little aches that kiss her from her forehead to the bottoms of her feet, and she wheezes a groan.

"Shepard!" A voice calls out across the darkness, staticky and frantic, but unfamiliar. "Ciggeerrrooo Shepard mmhmm nbb hevellubb-

And then Kelsa remembers hearing that voice. A flash of a grey room, medical equipment squalling alarms, and a black-haired woman plunging a needle into the side of Kelsa's throat, barking in a language the soldier didn't recognise. That same cadence fills her ears now, just beyond grasping. Kelsa means to lift her hand to rub at her eyes, but a jolt shocks her arm; she's strapped down. A quick test confirms restraints at her ankles, knees, wrists, elbows, hips, and neck. It's only when she can't fully lift her head that Kelsa's eyes flit open, and she has to acknowledge the truth: this isn't the Normandy, and she isn't dead, though if she can't move then that last fact will be corrected in fairly short order. Another barrage of the foreign words issues from the room's nearly-failing comms, and Kelsa's stomach drops; she should understand them, but it's been so long since she's heard unfiltered English and the woman behind the comm is talking so fast that the only thing she can snatch is her name.

"Galactic," the soldier rasps, as loud as she can. "Talk...Galactic."

"What?" The voice demands, but its owner evidently decides to roll with the development. "Commander Shepard, this facility is under attack. You need to get moving; the laboratory is not a defensible position."
"Trying," Kelsa insists, her throat just about as dry as Luna. "Strapped. Table."

"Bollocks," the bodiless voice swears. "Give me three seconds." After two and a half, the restraints around Kelsa's throat, legs, and hips retract, leaving her arms pinned. "Did that work, Commander?"

"Mostly," Kelsa grunts, clenching her teeth. Her ribs feel afire from the inside as she sucks in a full breath and tests the straps. "Everything's free but my wrists and elbows," she informs her mysterious ally. "They ain't budging."

"Shit," the woman says. "There's nothing more I can do from this end, Shepard; there's just no more time. Use your legs and shoulders for leverage; if you're half as strong as you should be, you'll be able to loosen your restraints. But you need to hurry."

A copper edge of panic caresses Kelsa's tongue, bleeding over from the frenzy in the woman's voice, and Kelsa redoubles her efforts. She gives no thought to the impossibility of her task; instead, she tucks her feet into the middle of the table, rolls her shoulders back, and heaves a reinforcing breath. Her elbows scream with the pressure as she pushes them down and a grunt escapes her lips when the straps cut into her wrists, but rather than the futile effort that it should have been, Kelsa's forearms slowly begin to rise. Her stomach burns with displaced tension, and a second later, the restraints over her wrists snap audibly over the sound of a closer explosion. The soldier uses her momentum to slide backward, yanking her forearms and hands through the elbow straps and flipping back onto her feet. "Alright," she hisses, standing and glancing around to get her bearings. "I'm out."

"There's a suit of armour and a gun in the footlocker," the voice instructs her, still urgent despite the undercurrent of relief in its tone.

"On it," Kelsa grunts, vaulting over the table; the jump is easier than she expects and she lands a metre wide of her target, but she doesn't stumble. Her forearms sting from the ribbons of skin the straps took as payment for her escape, but she ignores the pain, ignores the blood weeping out of her wounds. The armour isn't her armour, the set she wore since graduating from the Villa, but its sections fasten on even more quickly. Kelsa's dressed in less than a minute in the heavy plate, black and orange and white. Despite the smoke, she opts out of the helmet; her hair's too long and wild to stuff into it without narrowing her field of vision too much. The pistol's a new model, one she doesn't recognise, but it only takes another twenty seconds for her to overload the chamber to deliver incendiary rounds. "Okay," she informs her benefactor. "I'm ready."

"You'll need to find some thermal clips," the woman says.

Kelsa throws a look to the ceiling as she makes for the door. "Some what, now?"

"Shit," the woman swears, again. "This isn't how I wanted to revive you, Shepard, but we've no other choice. A lot's happened while you were under; we developed some new tech after the Eden Prime War."

"The cartridges," Kelsa remembers, frowning at a flicker of her last conversation with Liara, in the office of her ship. "I've seen 'em before."

"Good," the voice affirms. "Your weapon should have a full magazine, but you'll need to pick up more as you go. Search the mechs-" A wave of static interrupts the feed, and then a few heated seconds of gunfire, but after a moment the woman starts talking again. "Go out the door and head right, then left, then two rights again. Expect resistance." And then the comm cuts out with finality, and Kelsa knows she's on her own.
The armour feels wrong, lighter than she knows it should be, but what draws her attention as she stalks into the burning hallway is that her dog tags are gone. She wore them under heavy armour for so many years that their lack causes a rectangle-shaped tingle on her sternum where they should rest, but she can't stop to look for them, as much as it galls her; wherever the fuck this place is, whatever secret programme the Alliance used to rescue her, a couple of shards of tin aren't worth wasting their effort.

The soldier ranges down the right end of the hall, keeping her pistol up, but the voice's prediction doesn't bear out right away; it takes her a left turn to come across a flock of machines, too square and human-shaped and uncoordinated to be confused with geth, but they're hostile, and that's enough for Kelsa. She dives and zigzags straight into the knot of mechs, firing as she goes, not bothering to seek out any cover-adrenaline washes out her questions, her confusion, her fear. She shoots until her gun jams up, and then she uses the stock as a hammer on the few machines that survived the first assault, but it only takes a little over a minute for her to clear the room. She almost tosses the pistol at that point before she belatedly remembers her saviour's admonition to reload it with thermal clips, which some of the mechs cast off during the skirmish.

The basics of reloading the new weapon cost Kelsa another thirty seconds, but she's not long in continuing the voice's prescribed path. A few dozen more machines meet their ends in the next corridor, and it's so easy that Kelsa's personal tally doesn't budge; a bank of computers doesn't count as alive just because it can shoot back, at least to her mind.

Just before she takes the last right turn as instructed, Kelsa comes across a human casualty, a woman in a uniform the same colours as Kelsa's new armour...only the fabric is stained with crimson and burnt black in places it shouldn't be, riddled with bullet holes and at least one rocket impact. The woman's arm is outstretched, mere centimetres from a grenade launcher, the cold light of hope frozen on her dead face. Kelsa ships her pistol at her hip and picks up the heavy weapon without pausing to consider what might have caused those injuries, but it doesn't take her long to find out; through the half-jammed set of doors she needs to cross, the soldier spies the back of a much larger mech than the salarian-sized robots she's encountered so far. It's a walking tank, standing on what looks to be a bridge, with a machine gun for one arm and a rocket launcher for another. Fortunately for Kelsa, it's distracted by something beyond her view, and so it doesn't notice the soldier until she squares up the grenade launcher and unloads a pair of shells at the joints of its legs.

The first impact takes down the mech's shields, but the chassis is tough enough to withstand the second grenade with only moderate damage, and the body swivels too fast on a central joint, sending a spray of automatic fire in a wide arc. Before that arc can sweep across the gap in the door, however, the whole machine glows a deep, biotic blue, lifting bodily off of the pathway. If the red circles that imitate eyes were capable of emotion, Kelsa's sure they'd register surprise...but the mech doesn't even twitch as it gets flung sideways, landing hard amidst a group of the smaller mechs on a balcony across from the bridge. Kelsa only has to strain a little bit to push the jammed door wide enough to fit through, and then she sees the likely source of the walking tank's distraction and subsequent demise; a man, a human, lays panting over a crate, obviously overtaxed by the effort of biotically hefting such an enormous hunk of steel.

"I coulda handled the thing," Kelsa scolds him as she draws near, checking the grenade launcher.

The man gruffs an exhausted laugh. "And here I was gonna thank you," he says in Galactic, which only mildly surprises her, and makes her suspect that she is indeed involved in an Alliance operation. The man's dressed just like the dead woman in the hall behind her, with fewer bullet holes and less shrapnel...for now, at least. No insignia she recognises, but that's not unheard of in off-book outfits. He grunts, pushing up from the crate, and he gratefully takes Kelsa's outstretched
hand when she offers it to help him up to his feet. As soon as he gets a look at her, though, he takes a quick step back and nearly falls on his ass. "...Shepard?"

Kelsa dips her head in a shallow nod. "What the fuck's going on, here? Where are we?"

"Damn," he huffs, shaking his head. "Straight to business, huh? I'm Jacob Taylor, head of security for the Lazarus Project." He unships his pistol, ejecting a spent clip and slapping in a fresh one. "Boring enough work most days."

Kelsa arches a brow, giving Jacob Taylor a quick scan. He's tall and black, his skin a half-shade darker than hers, but his Galactic accent obscures where he might be from, just like the Alliance designed it to. "Excited yet, Taylor?" She drawls, glancing over to the balcony with the burning mechs.

"I got excited when I radioed Moira for backup and you came through the door instead," he answers, his eyes tracking over her shoulder to the half-shut doors. "Is she-"

"Dead," Kelsa cuts in, grimacing. "Picked this up off her, though," she informs him, hefting the heavy weapon in her right hand.

Taylor growls, shaking his head more somberly now. "Damned shame...she was a good soldier," he says. Then his face sets, like he's swallowed this kind of loss before.

That's almost enough to confirm her suspicion, but she voices it anyway. "You with the Alliance, Taylor?"

"Five years," he grunts. "Three of 'em as a Corsair." That answers her other question; the Corsairs are something like the Spectres or the salarian Special Tasks Group, and if that's what Taylor is, that means the base is something like home. "But this place must really be going down the tubes if Miranda woke you up, Shepard."

"Miranda?" The soldier ventures, glancing up at the ceiling, her concerns refocusing on the immediate situation. "Was she the one on the comm?"

"I'd say so," Taylor answers, and his brown eyes fix on Kelsa's face. "It's not exactly my portfolio, but I'd guess you weren't supposed to get taken off ice for another month, maybe more. If Miranda's willing to risk the last two years, she must think there's no other way to succeed."

A beat passes, her brows crinkling at the bridge of her nose. "Two years? Who the fuck is Miranda?" She asks instead. "What day is it?"

Taylor rubs his neck, awkward; he probably wishes he hadn't let anything slip. "Uhh...it's the last day of June," he allows. "...2185."

The soldier blinks, the nerves running out of her arms, so the grenade launcher swings down to her thigh before she gets a better grip on it. "So I've been out for six hundred and eighty-one days," she breathes, her stomach tightening like she's just taken a knee to it. "What happened to the Normandy?"

"The ship itself broke up over Alchera, and as far as I know the debris' still there, spread over a couple hundred square clicks. As for the crew...most survived. Alliance recovery teams picked up Lieutenant Moreau and Chief Williams a few hours after the attack."

Ice tickles over Kelsa's spine. "Liara. "Miranda," she grunts instead, swallowing down her nerves. "Tell me about Miranda." Before he can answer, though, the doors behind him open up to admit
another wave of mechs, and Kelsa reacts without hesitation; she lifts the grenade launcher, sending its final shell in a narrow arc around the other soldier, straight into the knot of machines. That one piece of ordnance is enough to mangle all four of the fuckers.

After recovering from the shock of getting a grenade fired in his general direction, Taylor turns to look at the carnage. "How 'bout we play twenty questions on the hoof, Shepard?" He wonders, taking her answer for granted by setting off in the direction he's now facing, his back toward her. When Kelsa falls into step beside him he gives her a nod. "I really do appreciate your assist with that YMIR mech, by the way," he grunts, as they climb over the wreckage of the smaller ones.

"A hell of a lot can change in two years," Kelsa observes, her lips twisted as ugly as the machines. "Now tell me, Taylor, who the fuck is Miranda and what am I doing here?"

"That's fair," he says. "You deserve to know, anyway...Miranda Lawson is the director of the Lazarus Project. She's the reason you're breathing right now, Shepard."

The project's name strikes a chord in Kelsa's memory, an old story she had to hear one Sunday in the bowels of the laundry. "She brings people back to life? For real?"

They have to shoot their way through another knot of mechs before he can answer, but once the path is clear, he shakes his head. "Not people," he corrects her. "You. You're it, Shepard," he says. "You're the sole test subject and beneficiary of the Lazarus Project. Just you."

It takes Kelsa a couple of moments to chew on that. "So...I really was dead, then," she reasons. Her last real memory—other than getting stabbed in the neck with a sedative by someone she guesses had to be this Lawson woman—is of the heat of the blast on the Normandy, just as Joker's pod cast awei. Nothing in between...not even darkness.

"Yeah," Taylor sighs. "When you got here, you were nothing but meat and tubes. Anybody else got to you, and they'd have put you in a coffin and sent a flag to your nook."

Kelsa's nostrils flare, remembering the day she joined the Alliance, filling out about a dozen forms after she got her rose tattoo taken off. She'd typed in Jay as her next of kin, and she never had any reason to change that for eleven years. Still don't, she realises; whatever the hell it was that she had with Liara T'Soni for a few weeks on a ship, it's almost certainly as dead as the Normandy. As dead as Kelsa herself was until the Alliance found her and brought her back. She shakes her head, and as she does so, her eyes catch on the windowpane of a door that's closed on a dark hallway, so the glass is almost as good as a mirror. What Kelsa sees in it is enough to make her heart skip, and her boots whisper over the smooth floor as she drags herself to a stop and scrambles back to the window for a better look.

The outline of the face is hers, that's true enough. The same nose, the same square jaw, the same thick eyebrows, framed by the same thick braids. But her skin's fissured in three places, with an angry orange glow beneath the cracks, like her face is a goddamned volcano that's about to blow. As she leans in, the soldier sees a hint of red at the centres of her pupils, surrounded by her deep green irises. A blink conjures up the image of Saren Arterius, his face and eyes undercut with blue. By the time her eyes open again she's turned around, her pistol pointed straight at Taylor's forehead. "What the fuck did you do to me?" There might be liquid fire in her face, but Kelsa's voice is cut through with ice.

Taylor spreads his hands to each side, but he keeps his right no more than a half-second's distance from his gun. "I haven't done jack shit to you, Shepard," he claims. "As for the scientists on Project Lazarus, you'll have to ask them; like I said, it's outside my portfolio. We'll meet up with Miranda at the evac point, if not before...I'm sure she'll answer any of your questions."
The soldier chews on a growl. "Sounded like she was in trouble, last I heard," she muses. "You sure she'll make it?"

"I'm sure," he insists. "Miranda's got a lot more skills than pushing paper around, and she's got a vested interest in seeing the results of her work." So that's what I am, Kelsa tells herself. A rat in a lab. Taylor's comm crackles just then, someone talking in English, and Kelsa can only catch one word in three or four because the man on the other end is too frantic. Taylor responds a time or two, and the transmission cuts out with more echoed gunfire. "That was Wilson," Taylor informs her. "He's the Chief Medical Officer on Lazarus...kind of Miranda's second-in-command in bringing you back online. You wanna know what they did, he's just a little piece down the hall."

Three seconds tick by before Kelsa's finger eases off of the trigger and she checks her pistol. "Let's go," she says, as though she hadn't just been holding it on him. He seems willing to call it a bygone, turning to march down the corridor, but Kelsa makes sure to keep herself a half-step behind him just the same. Two mech groups later and they find Wilson holed up in a wing he has no business being in, nursing a wounded leg that got shot while he was doing something he wasn't supposed to have clearance to do, according to Taylor, who seems to take the other man's claims of just trying to help at face value, regardless. Wilson's a middle-aged white guy who doesn't speak Galactic worth a damn, and the station's coming apart too fast for Taylor to translate for him, so Kelsa swallows her frustration while Wilson slaps some medi-gel onto his bullet wound.

Taylor heaves a deep breath, telling Wilson something about Kelsa; the older man says something contrary, but Taylor forcefully overrules him and Wilson throws up his hands. When Taylor looks at Kelsa again, he's chewing on his cheek, like he's about to do something he thinks he'll regret. "There's something you should know before we take this any further, Shepard," he says, removing all doubt. She notices he's got his gun firmly in hand, resting against his thigh. "This...we aren't Alliance," he admits, finally. "Project Lazarus is funded and guided by Cerberus."

The air leaves Kelsa's lungs in a rush; she'd heard rumours of the organisation for years, even brushed up against them during the mission to stop Saren. "You lied to me," she huffs, out of breath, ice branching out from her spine to tingle through her limbs.

"No, I didn't," Taylor insists. "I was with the Alliance for five years, just like I said. I know Cerberus has a bad reputation, and I'm not saying they haven't done a hell of a lot to earn it," he allows. Assassinations, bombings, sabotage, dangerous medical experiments… "But the Illusive Man was the only one with the will and the resources to bring you back, Shepard. The Alliance abandoned you...left you to die. The Illusive Man brought you back."

Wilson barks something suspiciously close to Shut up, Taylor, and Kelsa's hand raises, suddenly lighter than air. She doesn't blink as her incendiary round tears out a third of the older man's skull, painting the wall with a smear of red, leaving a smouldering gash across his brain.

Taylor has his gun drawn on her in a heartbeat. "What the fuck, Shepard?!"

"You said Miranda Lawson could answer my questions," Kelsa gruffs, swallowing another wave of anger until it turns cold; what's done is done. "And Wilson wasn't Alliance, so he can go fuck himself."

"So if I wasn't Alliance, you'd have greased me, too?" Taylor demands, not lowering his pistol...not that Kelsa can blame him, since she's still got hers up.

"Probably," she acknowledges, feeling her cracked cheek tingle with her smirk. "But you are. That means something to me." Even if it didn't mean anything to the Alliance.
The man still won't budge. "Miranda's not Alliance, either," he volunteers, a few wisps of blue whorling around his fingers. "You gonna have a problem with that?"

She takes a measured breath and checks her pistol, bringing the still-warm barrel within a few centimetres of her face. "She speaks Galactic," Kelsa says, shrugging. "That's close enough for now...and later, if I don't like what she's got to say, I just might have to reassess that conclusion."

The Cerberus agent draws up, casting a grimace Wilson's way. "I knew you were cold-"

"You don't know a goddamned thing about me," Kelsa tells him, her voice frosty enough to crack steel. "And you're better off out of the Alliance if you can't sniff out a traitor when he's standing right in front of you," she goes on, kicking Wilson's corpse as she steps past it, nodding for Taylor to press on. "Have your Illusive Man dig and I bet you Lawson's life he finds enough dirt on the bastard to put out all the fires on this station."

Taylor grimaces at her, his face caught between denial and shame. Some head of security, she almost sneers, but she holds herself back; she doesn't wanna shoot him. Yet. He offers no contest, but he still can't look at her the same way as he guides her to the evac. That's fine by her; the legend never lives up to the real thing, even if the real thing glows in the dark, now.

Kelsa knows what she is.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to buttercup23 for being such an awesome beta-reader! And to everyone for reading along!
Ch. 23: It Will Come Back

Chapter Summary

Kelsa meets her new paymaster, and tries settling in with her new crew (along with a surprisingly familiar face).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Comm Room, Trident Station

1400 Zulu

2 July 2185

Erebus, Styx Theta Cluster

The room around her falls into shadow as a cylindrical halo of light rises from the circle that Kelsa's standing in the middle of. She doesn't draw her shotgun this time when those shadows change their contours, shifting into a haptic image of the Illusive Man's office. His face is dark, backlit by a great red star in the background, and even through the hologram, Kelsa's eyes mist over at the sudden brightness before she blinks a couple of times; the riot of colours is still almost too much for her, sharper and deeper than she ever knew before she died. Something else she owes the bastard in front of her. "Ahh, Shepard," he cooes, exhaling a long stream of smoke from his nostrils. "Glad to see you made it off Freedom's Progress in one piece. Your new uniform could use a bit of work, though."

The soldier scowls; it's the second time she's met with him like this, but it's the first time she can properly understand him, since her aural implants were recalibrated. That first meeting, she warned him that her resurrection had bought him one mission, but she'd still been wearing the Cerberus heavy armour then. Now she's dressed in mismatched plate from three different manufacturers, painted red that fades to purple at the extremes, without a single insignia to identify her affiliation except the now-outdated tattoos on her chest and shoulderblade. "Like I told you the last time," she growls. "Just 'cause you brought me back don't mean I belong to you."

"Indeed not," the man-the Man?-concedes, after another drag off his cigarette. "But you've returned just the same," he points out. "I take it you've come to accept the gravity of the threat to our colonies?"

"Guess you can call me a freelancer," she says, her frown stretching the new trenches in her face until they tingle. Cybernetic implants and synthetic fibres are married to her flesh, now, making her stronger and faster than she's ever been...maybe than any human has ever been. According to Lawson, she was scheduled for even more upgrades before Lazarus Station was compromised; parts of Kelsa are horrified that she's about one-third machine with room to grow, and the rest of her is curious about just how strong and fast she can get. But she knows she'll never find out if she walks away too soon. "For now."

Another illuminating flash of embers, another double-nostril stream of smoke. "I was confident that
you would come around, once you understood the magnitude of the task at hand...and now that we
understand that the Collectors are involved in the disappearance of human colonies, it's imperative
that we know where we stand...with the Collectors, and with one another." The Illusive Man
breaks up his routine by taking a sip of some kind of whiskey, but Kelsa can't tell what kind it is,
owing to the glare from the star. She hopes it isn't Jameson, to save them from having something in
common. "Miranda's task was to restore you just as you were when the Normandy was destroyed,
at the height of your accomplishments. That task was not undertaken out of the goodness of her
heart, nor of mine."

"I've heard you need a heart for that," Kelsa drawls, grunting a laugh. "'Course, I wouldn't know
anything about it." Her nostrils flare and she rolls her shoulders. "But you already know that; it's
why you spent enough for a decent army on getting me back. Bet you're reconsidering your
decision about that control chip right about now." She learnt that on the way to Freedom's
Progress, when Lawson was complaining about the disastrous first meeting. As the director,
Lawson had wanted her subject implanted with a neural processor, to turn her into a tool in
Cerberus' arsenal without any will of her own. The Illusive Man had disallowed the procedure, for
some reason. Kelsa didn't let Lawson out of her sight for the whole mission, after hearing about
that.

The Illusive Man scoffs. "I can respect your willingness to do whatever it takes to get the job done,
and you have one hell of a job to do. I don't need to justify my decision, even to you, but I didn't
resurrect you because I needed a soldier, or even an army full of soldiers. I need you, Shepard," he
insists, sitting forward, jabbing his cigarette toward her. "All of humanity needs you."

There isn't any gratitude mixed in with Kelsa's curiosity. "Why?" She has to bite her tongue on
the sir that wants to claw its way up out of her throat. None of these bastards deserve it from her.

"Because," the Man drawls, "you've become an idea, Shepard...a symbol of what humanity can
achieve." He raises his clenched fist, his eyes shining a bright blue in his shadowed face. "The
Collectors have been evacuating whole colonies at a time for nearly two years...hundreds of
thousands of people have vanished. The Alliance and the Council have ignored the problem, just
like they ignored Saren. But you stood against him; you stood against Sovereign, and despite all the
odds, you prevailed."

"Save it," Kelsa grunts, before he can trip into a whole goddamned speech. "I never wanted to kill
anybody, but it's turned out to be something I'm pretty good at." The only thing, really. "I don't
really know what the hell the Collectors are, or if they're even working with the Reapers, but
they've got my attention. If you're offering me the resources to go after them, then we're on the
same side...for now," she repeats.

"I knew we could come to an understanding," the Man says, so magnanimous it almost makes her
want to puke. "And I am more confident than ever before that the Reapers are ultimately behind
these assaults on our colonies; I trust you'll find proof of my suspicions, sooner rather than later." He
ashes the last of his cigarette and takes his time lighting another. "Thank you for securing the
quarian for further questioning, by the way. Veetor, Kelsa remembers; he bore witness to the
attack on Freedom's Progress, recorded footage of the Collectors abducting colonists, and
somehow survived for Kelsa and her two Cerberus lackeys to find. "He was too far gone to offer
any actionable intel, but our medics are in the process of stabilising him as we speak. He'll be
released to the Migrant Fleet in short order."

"He'd better be," the soldier warns. Her call on the quarian came at a price; Tali was there, and
whatever good will Kelsa had earned by handing over that geth data two years ago was probably
burnt up by kidnapping one of her own, over her objections. Kelsa shakes off the thoughts and
raises a hand, pointing at the Illusive Man's shade. "If we're gonna do this, I've got three conditions," she tells him.

The Man swirls his drink. "I'm listening," he says, over the crinkling of his ice.

"Number one," Kelsa grunts, lifting her index finger. "I need a ship that doesn't have a Cerberus profile and clean registration." If she could see his face better, she might think the Man was smirking, but she forges on, lifting her middle finger. "Two, I get to pick my ground team. Lawson and Taylor can come if you want them to, but you shouldn't try to pawn off any more of your people on me unless you want 'em to end up like Wilson."

The synthetic light of his eyes dims as he narrows his eyes. "I think you'll find that we're more than willing to accommodate both of those terms," he allows. "What did you have in mind for the third?"

"Number three," Kelsa finishes, grimacing as she raises the third finger. "You remember just how good at killing people I am, if you get it in your head to fuck me over, somehow. You get forgetful and I'll have to start reminding you. We clear?"

"As a vacuum, Shepard," the Illusive Man confirms, but the outline of his cheek plumps up in his silhouette. "That should be all for the moment...but I've got a little surprise waiting for you, just down the hall. Along with a pilot I'm pretty sure you'll like." He gestures with his glass, and before Kelsa can tell him to go fuck his surprise, the cylinder of light drops, returning the drab, grey walls of the room to her senses.

A voice calls out behind her, fresh in her memory; from her perspective, it's only been a few days since she's heard it. "Hey, Commander!"

Kelsa's shoulders hunch as she turns. "We ain't in the Alliance anymore, Joker," she tells the man, grimacing when she catches him flinching at the sight of her face. "It's just Shepard now," she says, stalking out of the comm room, keeping her steps short so his shuffle can keep up. "How's the arm?"

"Nothing a couple months of traction and a shrink couldn't fix," the pilot deflects. "How 'bout you? You seem to be taking the whole not-dead thing pretty good, all things considered."

"I'm about three millimetres away from shooting anybody with that weird circle thing on their shirt," the soldier quips, with a cutting glance to her limping companion. "Present company excepted."

Joker rolls his eyes. "Now that I believe," he grunts. "The Alliance grounded me, gave up you for dead," he explains, answering a question Kelsa didn't ask. "I know Cerberus has done some skeezy shit, but they let me fly...and they brought you back, so they can't be all bad."

Kelsa chuckles, darkly. "We'll see," she muses. "I still wouldn't trust 'em."

"Meh," the pilot replies. "I don't trust anybody who earns more than I do." He stops by a big window, looking out over a cargo bay. "But you should take a look here," he says, excitement rising to the surface. "They only told me about her last night, same as when they told me about you. I...didn't wanna believe it, but..."

He gestures as the soldier comes up beside him, and she scans the bay, curiosity giving way to a splinter of dumbfound joy. "They didn't," she gruffs, blinking; but no matter how often she blinks, the image doesn't change. It's the Normandy, back from the dead, just like Kelsa herself...and just
like Kelsa, it's more massive, probably specked out to be even stronger and faster than normal. The colour scheme is orange and black, with SR-2 on the wings and the telltale bottomless hexagon which serves as Cerberus' insignia on the wingtips.

"They did," Joker insists. "Man, I feel like Liara probably would if she got a time machine! I can't wait to stretch her legs!"

The unexpected mention of the asari brings Kelsa's brow up. "You might want to re-think putting those two sentences together, next time," she points out, trying to ignore the stab of concern that lances through her chest. A quick glance shows the pilot actually blushing, and the soldier can only shake her head. "Did...did she make it?"

"Liara?" Joker breathes, and then he answers Kelsa's curt nod with one of his own. "Yeah. She was...pretty broken up, though, last I saw her."

A knot of tension Kelsa wasn't aware of holding slowly lets go inside her chest, and she sighs out a long breath. "Good," she decides, turning her gaze back to the ship.

The pilot swallows audibly beside her. "You gonna bring her aboard again, Com-err...Shepard?"

Kelsa shakes her head. "Whatever she's up to's gotta be better than jumping into foxholes with the likes of me," she says, trying to ignore the hollow feeling that creeps into her chest, right where the knot had been. "Looks like she still needs a proper name," she points out, jutting her chin at the ship in front of them. "Got any ideas?"

Joker takes the change of subject in stride. "I think I got a couple that could fit," he muses.

The soldier inclines her head. "As long as it's still got room for a tank, I'll be happy," she claims.

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_The Loft, CSV Normandy SR-2_

_1900 Zulu_

_2 July 2185_

_FTl to Mass Relay, Styx Theta Cluster_

The telltale chittering sounds, insect-like, presaging EDI's announcement by half a second. "Operative Lawson wishes a word, Shepard," the AI says. EDI's another Cerberus upgrade, a shackled artificial intelligence, able to analyse data more quickly and make decisions more broadly than the more limited virtual intelligences that can be found throughout the galaxy, but supposedly restrained from such decisions as venting the ship's oxygen while nobody's paying attention. So far, the AI's been imperviously loyal to its creators, refusing to divulge any details about Cerberus as an organisation or the Illusive Man as an entity.

Kelsa can respect that, at least for now. "That's nice," she grunts. If the soldier could look over her shoulder, she knows she'd probably see a blue orb floating in its terminal alcove, blinking at her like a sideways eye. But Kelsa can't turn, because she's hanging from a crossbar in the middle of the ceiling above her office, naked from the waist up and dripping sweat all over the metal floor. "Kind of-" Three fifty-four… "-in the middle of-" Three fifty-five… "-somethin', here."

"I am aware, Shepard," EDI helpfully reminds her. For a good portion of the last two hours, the AI's been going back and forth with Kelsa over the details of a stack of dossiers Cerberus provided, files on potential contacts for a ground team. None of them have any ties to Cerberus, supposedly,
which is the only reason Kelsa didn't scrub the list from her terminal the second it came through. So far, while Kelsa's been dragging herself skyward upwards of three hundred times, she's learnt about a human prisoner incarcerated on a space station called *Purgatory*, along with a human merc and a salarian scientist and an unknown troublemaker, all on Omega. Convenience made the decision for her. "However," EDI continues, "Operative Lawson is rather insistent; there is a ninety percent probability that she will attempt to hack the door if she is denied entry for more than three point six four minutes."

*Three sixty.* "Fine," the soldier hisses through her teeth, letting go of the crossbar at the top of the rep; the floor makes a dull *thud* when she lands in a crouch. She snatches a towel from the bathroom, but she just uses it to wipe off her face and chest before she tells EDI to open the door.

Lawson arches a perfect eyebrow when she comes to a stop beside the room's unoccupied fishtank. "You could've waited until you were decent, Commander," she observes. "Ain't anything you haven't already seen before," Kelsa points out, wrapping the towel up and slinging it around her neck. "And don't call me that anymore. I ain't gonna tell you again, Lawson."

The other woman's lip curls in a sneer. "Fine, Shepard," she allows. "Would you prefer captain, since you fancy yourself in charge of this ship?"

The soldier's brows knit. "Never earned that rank," she deadpans. "If you really hate my name so much, you can call me skipper." She hadn't thought it possible, but it looks like she's found somebody that pisses her off even more than Williams did, so it would fit. "You have a reason for interrupting me, or did you just wanna check me out?"

Lawson makes a snorting noise, like she's insulted, but Kelsa can see her cheeks warm up just slightly; it isn't quite a blush, but her ocular implants paint the extra heat as a shade of pink, just the same. "As the ranking Cerberus officer aboard," she drawls, "I think I've a right to be consulted about our mission parameters."

"And I think you've got a right to get your own fucking ship if you wanna call the shots," Kelsa rebuts, turning away from the woman to take a long drag from a water bottle; she wishes it was whiskey, but she can wait. For another couple of days, anyhow. "Or you can try and take over this one," the soldier gruffs, giving Lawson a sidelong glance. "See how far that gets you."

The Cerberus operative grits her teeth, her eyes flickering with a hint of dark matter, but even though her fingers curl, she doesn't reach for her pistol. Yet. "You could be more grateful," she growls. "All I'm asking is to be kept in the loop, Skipper. I'm as close to an executive officer as this ship has got, and my input is valuable."

Kelsa arches a far-from-perfect eyebrow. *If you've gotta say it...*, she thinks, but she swallows it back with another gulp of water. "We're going to Omega," she pronounces. "Three out of the four leads your boss gave us are there. It doesn't take an over-engineered freak of nature to figure *that* out." She scowls, the comment aimed at herself; after almost four hundred pull-ups, Kelsa's arms and shoulders should be cramping bad enough to put her in the hospital, but instead they just tingle a little.

Even so, a shadow passes over Lawson's face, and she turns to leave. "I understand," she forces out, stilted, like she's holding back a scream. "I...won't bother you again, Shepard."

She makes it three steps before Kelsa opens her mouth, against her better judgment. "Wait," she says, and Lawson stops in her tracks, but she doesn't turn to face the soldier. "If you walk out of here angry, I'm probably gonna have to shoot you, and I don't think the crew would appreciate
having to mop up your guts," she drawls. "What's your problem?"

A wave of tension courses through the other woman's shoulders, her uniform tight enough to act like a second skin. "You called me-" But then she cuts herself off, taking a steadying breath. "It's...nothing, Shepard."

Kelsa's lips tip into a frown. "I've heard of taking your work home with you," she muses, crossing her arms, "but I never figured you were crazy enough to get upset on my behalf."

"What?" Lawson does turn, then, her eyes just noticeably shinier than a minute ago. "What the bloody hell are you talking about?"

"I should be dead," the soldier grunts, her frown twisting to a half-grimace. "Instead I'm standing here, listening to your heartbeat, filled up with more metal and circuits than half the geth I killed two goddamned years ago, thanks to you." Comprehension dawns on the other woman's face, closely followed by a real blush, born of embarrassment. Kelsa's eyes narrow. "Why? What the fuck did you think I was talking about, Lawson?"

Lawson's lips part, but the balance of her emotions turns toward reserve. "It's nothing you need concern yourself with, Shepard," she insists. "Now...may I return to my office? If we're going to be hitting Omega in a few hours, I'll need to prepare a briefing for the Illusive Man."

Kelsa lifts her head in a reasonable facsimile of a nod. "You do that," she allows. "And next time EDI tells you I'm busy, you should listen."

The other woman inclines her head millimetrically, likely as much deference as she's willing to show, and she sweeps out of the room without firing a parting shot.

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**Medical Bay, CSV Normandy SR-2**

**2100 Zulu**

**2 July 2185**

**Sublight Transit to Omega, Sahrabarik**

Like everything else on the ship, the med bay is bigger and more well-appointed than it was on the original *Normandy*...but unlike engineering, which is full of unfamiliar faces, Kelsa recognises the sheen of grey hair and the stiff-shouldered posture of the woman sitting behind the large desk. "Good to see you, Doctor Chakwas," the soldier pronounces, stopping two paces behind the woman's chair.

When the doctor turns, Kelsa notices a few deeper lines across her forehead, but those dark green eyes of hers shine just as sharply. She blinks, once, and then rises to her feet. "My word...Shepard, it really is you."

"More or less," Kelsa concedes, crossing her arms. "Mostly more, though."

Chakwas nods, keeping her gaze level with the soldier's, betraying no hint of surprise at the state of Kelsa's face. "Operative Lawson forwarded me a synopsis of your enhancements," she allows. "I knew on an intellectual level that you would show up...but I never quite believed it until this moment." She swallows and glances away. "Forgive me; I suppose I should have anticipated a bit of emotion," she says, bringing a knuckle up to scrub at the corner of her eye. When the doctor faces Kelsa again, though, her face is perfectly composed. "It is *good* to see you, Commander."

Kelsa's throat fills with her natural objection to the title she no longer deserves, but she bites down on it in the face of the other woman's show of relief. Just this once. "We'll see how many people feel the same way after they learn what it cost to get me back on my feet," she comments, letting her own green-and-red eyes trail down to the Cerberus emblem on the doctor's non-service uniform. "Not everybody appreciates the good work your new employer does, Doc."

The other woman nods, smirking. "Despite the clothes, Shepard, I don't work for Cerberus...I work for you. Technically I'm still a medical officer with the Alliance Navy, on a proper leave of absence...and seeing as I have the maximum unspent leave on the books, I'll be able to mend you up no-questions-asked for quite some time to come."

Kelsa crosses her arms, grunting a laugh. "Sixteen months of vacation, and you decide to keep on working," she drawls, shaking her head. "You didn't spend any time on a beach somewhere pretty?"

"Afraid not," the doctor sighs, sinking down into her chair once more. "I've the sinking suspicion I'll be seeing quite a few exotic locales in the days and weeks ahead, however, so you shouldn't worry about me getting restless."

"Good to hear," the soldier gruffs, scratching idly over her sternum through the plain black t-shirt she's decided on wearing when she isn't suited up. She can still feel the outline of her missing tags, reminding her that she lost more than time. "Hey, Doc," she muses. "Is there any way you can find out if Lawson cheated?"

Chakwas arches a brow at her. "I have not been around the woman long enough to form an impression of her character," the doctor admits. "Though I am curious about your interest...from what I can remember, I had thought you were already rather attached, romantically speaking."

It takes a couple of heartbeats before the doctor's meaning bleeds through her sardonic tone, and Kelsa's own brow draws down. "You know what I mean," she grunts, overlooking the light of amusement in the older woman's eyes. "Can you do some kinda scan or something that'll tell you if I'm really...you know, me? And not just a slick VI or even an AI that just thinks it's me?"

The doctor's expression grows sober again as she considers. "If my reports are accurate," she says, bringing up her omni-tool as she talks, "...then you have extensive cybernetic enhancements, including implants in all the major centres of your brain, but they serve in support to the baseline organic functions." She lifts her arm, and her omni-tool sweeps out a scanning light from Kelsa's boots to the top of her head. "I can't detect the kinds of materials required for intelligence processing," Chakwas observes, "but I'm far from an expert in cybernetics, Shepard. As far as I can tell, you are a human being, with a greater capacity for strength and healing and sensory perception...but still human, still you. You may take that for all it's worth."

Kelsa takes a long breath, instead. She trusts the doctor's intentions, and even her competence when it comes to biology, but she believes the woman's admission of ignorance about machines, as well. "Thanks anyway, Doc," she allows, turning to go get ready; they'll be at Omega soon enough.

Before the soldier can finish her turn, though, Chakwas clears her throat. "I've just now taken the liberty of investigating your scars," she volunteers, and she doesn't flinch under the light of Kelsa's sudden glance. "It appears to be purely a cosmetic issue; your face and arms are not susceptible to infection, but the epidermis cannot close properly. I suspect the effect is partly psychosomatic and adrenal."

"...Care to run that by me in Galactic, Doc?" Kelsa has some idea what she might mean, but there's no reason to guess, since the soldier's got the source right in front of her.
"Cortisol and adrenaline seem to be interfering with the subdermal cybernetic interface," Chakwas elaborates, rather unhelpfully. At Kelsa's growl, the doctor clears her throat. "That is to say," she goes on, "your aggression may be what's keeping your skin from healing. I recommend reducing stress and developing a more peaceful outlook, if you wish to resolve the issue organically." When the soldier just stares at her with crossed arms, Chakwas shakes her head. "Of course, if you like, I could minifacture a special module to regenerate your epidermis and smoothe over the gaps," she allows. "It would take quite a few resources to develop, however, so it might not be an expedient solution."

"I'll think about it," Kelsa promises...and by the time she pushes through the doorway, she's thought about it as much as she's going to. *No point in wasting the credits.* She may not know who she is, but she knows what she is...and now, maybe, the rest of the galaxy will, too.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to buttercup23 for beta-reading! And to anyone reading along! For random dribs and drabs, you can follow me on tumblr at http://riptidemonzarc.tumblr.com/
Ch. 24: Extraction

Chapter Summary

Kelsa hits Omega to begin expanding her new crew.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Docking Bay, Habitation Level Alpha

0430 Zulu

3 June 2185

Omega (docked), Sahrabarik

Kelsa draws her shotgun even before the Normandy's doors hiss open. Lawson clears her throat just as the reconstituted soldier takes her first step onto the station.

"Are you sure that's wise, Shepard?" The Cerberus operative drawls. "An aggressive posture will invite hostility here."

"I know," the soldier gruffs, forging into the crowded loading area, her eyes flitting around for any sign of a threat. "How many times you been on Omega, Lawson?"

"Counting this trip?" She muses, swallowing her disgust. "Twice. I already feel like I need a hot shower."

Kelsa smirks, shoulder-checking a dirty salarian that takes a step too close. "I grew up somewhere a hell of a lot like this place," she tells the operative, even while she's staring down the overgrown bullfrog; he blinks at her face, and then the gun couched in her hands, and then he does the smart thing. "Here, you either invite hostility or you invite greed," she goes on, drawing nearer to the big cargo doors that'll take her and the two Cerberus stooges to Omega's nerve centre. "Wanna guess which one'll get you dead quicker?"

The woman gives no answer, and Kelsa's content to let the matter drop; unlike both of her companions, she can't manipulate dark energy or offensive technology at a moment's notice, and she'd much rather be ready for trouble when it comes. Right now, it looks like it's coming in the form of a batarian that's wielding a shotgun of his own. But he keeps it checked across his torso as he steps closer. "Shepard," the alien grunts, appraising her with both sets of eyes. "Aria's expecting you in Afterlife."

Kelsa comes to a stop so fast that Taylor nearly trips over her, but she doesn't even flinch at the unexpected contact. Curiosity keeps her from lifting her own gun. "And what would the boss of Omega want to see me about?"

"I got no fucking idea," the batarian blusters. "Aria tells me to fetch her a dead woman, I fetch her a dead woman; I don't ask questions…even when that woman turns out to be not-so-dead after all." He throws a nod at the woman hovering around her left shoulder. "Interesting company you're
"Aria wants to see me, she wants to see them," the soldier gruffs, hiding her distaste behind a soldier's solidarity. "But who says I wanna see Aria?" As she speaks, Kelsa lifts the barrel of her shotgun a couple of centimetres, keeping it pointed sideways...for now.

The goon hitches his shoulders, playing it cool. "You've got the message. What you do with it's your business...but on Omega, your life expectancy tends to go down if you piss off the boss." His eyes sweep over the three humans and he gives them a parting nod before he melts back into the hallway he came from, just one more in a grimy pool of aliens.

Kelsa pushes her way into a tight side-corridor that ultimately leads to the Gozu District, where two potential recruits are supposed to be located. One's a salarian scientist named Solus, who's running a med clinic in the slums. The other is a human, a merc, and a damned good one at that...even in Alliance Special Forces, soldiers have heard of Zaeed Massani. Kelsa isn't sure she believes all the scuttlebutt, but it looks like she'll find out soon enough; the hallway's oddly abandoned except for the very end, where two people are squaring off in front of a thick set of sealed doors. The old human man has his back to one wall, but he's eyeballing a young-looking turian. "...here, you little shit," Kelsa hears him growl as she and her companions draw closer.

"We've got a goddamned appointment," he claims, pointing an assault rifle with his left hand and gripping a kneeling batarian by the collar with his right. "I don't give a shit what the hell you think your orders are. You wouldn't know discipline if it bent you over a guardrail and pulled the stick out of your arse, but if you make me late for a goddamned appointment, I'll do even worse than that."

The turian doesn't shrink back, his own rifle held cross-ways, like Kelsa's shotgun a few minutes before. "Can that old rusted piece of shit even fire anymore?" He drawls. "It looks-"

But before Kelsa can find out what the turian thinks the gun looks like, the old man acquaints the turian's face with it rather forcefully. "Nobody...says...that...to...my...Jessie!" He snarls, each word punctuated by a sickening crunch of bone and another splash of blue blood. The sudden, tightly-focused rage is almost a wonder to behold, but the man's passion leads him to let go of his batarian charge. Four-eyes can't seem to believe his luck for a single heartbeat, before he starts scrambling backward as quickly and quietly as he can manage...only to scoot back-first into Kelsa's knee. It's the batarian's turn to snarl, and he spins around, all teeth and glinting eyes. The stock of Kelsa's shotgun rattles the bastard's head and he falls onto his side, dazed, but he freezes when Kelsa trains her gun on him. From the upper edge of her vision, she sees the man turn, his face and armour and rusted old gun smeared with turian gore. "Thanks," he gruffs, after glancing at his recaptured prisoner. "You must be Shepard."

Kelsa bobs her head, not taking her eyes off of the batarian. "You must be Massani," she surmises. "Who's this fucker?"

"Him?" Massani grunts, his lip curling as he takes a second look at the batarian. "Just some scum that pissed off someone enough to send me after him," he explains. "And for my bring-em-in-alive rates, even."

"Please," the batarian husks, his voice tinny, like he hasn't had a hit of red sand in too long. "It's all a big mix-up! I swe-"

Massani's boot shuts him up. "No one said you could talk, scum," he spits. "Was a last-minute addendum to my Zorya deal. The client's in the Faia system, so it won't be out of the way to drop this piece of shit off when we go deal with that."
Kelsa arches a brow at the mercenary, but before she can say anything, Lawson breaks in. "That wasn't part of the deal, Mister Massani," she says. "You'll have to take the loss."

From the corner of her eye, Kelsa sees a flicker of biotic blue, and she throws out a hand. "Hold on a fucking minute," she growls, finally tearing her eyes off of the prisoner to look back and forth between Lawson and Massani. "What the hell are you two talking about? What's going down on Zorya?"

Lawson's lip curls, but Massani speaks up first. "Got a job there right before Cerberus made its offer," he says, irritated. "I was given assurances I'd have your help taking care of it as one of the terms of the contract we agreed on."

"Exactly," Lawson drawls. "That was the term, on top of far more credits than you deserve. Not any side-trips." Her brows draw together, another biotic sheen crossing over her eyes.

Kelsa's heard enough. "None of that shit was in the dossier I went over with EDI," she points out. "Don't look at him, look at me, Lawson," she commands, turning more fully to the other woman. Lawson's almost a head taller, so the soldier's gotta look up to catch her eye, but Kelsa squares her shoulders and grimaces. "When exactly were you planning on telling me about this?"

The operative has the good sense to take a half-step back even as she maintains Kelsa's gaze. "If you'd been open to conferring with me in transit, you would've learnt it then," she sneers. "But you're too full of yourself to listen to anybody, so I didn't see the point in bothering."

"We've already had this conversation before, Lawson," the soldier growls. "We ain't having it again. The next time you withhold vital intel from me, you're taking a walk off my ship, whether we're in port or not." She doesn't raise her gun, but she doesn't have to; at this distance, she could take off Lawson's head in half a heartbeat if she saw any sign of an attack. "We clear?"

Lawson bites down on the corner of her mouth, but after a second she nods. "Yes, Shepard, we're clear."

"Good," Kelsa grunts, tilting her head over her shoulder toward the supine batarian. "Take that thing back to the Normandy, then. If it ain't breathing in the brig when I get back, your ass can stay on Omega." She can see another wave of resentment squirming over Lawson's face, but she can't help digging it in. "Taylor," she barks. "You'd better go back too, to make sure Lawson doesn't try to mutiny and take the Normandy for a joyride."

Lawson's gaze shifts from Kelsa's face to look over her shoulder, and the woman's expression goes from murderous to incredulous. "Aye, aye, Skipper," Taylor says, without a trace of mockery in the title. "Let's go, Miranda."

Lawson's mouth works. "But-

"You've got your orders," Kelsa pronounces, rounding away from the operative and the washout both. When she doesn't get shot in the back after five heartbeats, the soldier steps toward Massani, her face just as grim. "Why didn't that fucking guard let you through to Gozu?"

"Something about a plague," the old merc rasps, after he's satisfied that his bounty isn't about to be torn in half with dark energy. "Whole thing's been quarantined. Humans're supposed to be immune, but the arsehole still wouldn't let me through. Said the Blue Suns and the vorcha were killing everything that moved." He grunts a low cackle, his scarred face twisting into a grin. "Like that was gonna stop me getting to that clinic."
"Looks like it's just you and me, Massani," Kelsa muses, throwing a glance at his bloodied, rusted rifle. "Just one question...can that thing shoot?"

"Her name's Jessie," Massani grunts, shipping the gun behind his right shoulder. "Hasn't fired a round in years, but I can't stand the thought of giving her up." He takes up a newer gun from his left shoulder, and when it extends from the compact block, Kelsa sees it's a sniper rifle. "This beaut'll take down a blood-raging krogan at two clicks, though."

"Good enough for me," Kelsa says, her lips curling into a smirk. "Now let's get to that clinic."

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*Crow's Nest, Afterlife*

*1115 Zulu*

*4 June 2185*

*Omega (docked), Sahrabarik*

A batarian moves to intercept Kelsa when she mounts the last couple of steps to Aria T'Loak's private lounge. "Hold, human," he gruffs, and the timbre in his voice jostles in the soldier's memory.

Kelsa stops short, arching an eyebrow at the alien's glowing omni-tool. "You the same asshole that came lookin' for me in the loading bay?"

"Yesterday," the batarian confirms, holding up his arm to sweep a scan up and down the soldier. "See you've got yourself some new friends in the meantime." His eyes flicker, the top set looking over her left shoulder at Massani while the bottom set glances at the scarred-up salarian that she had to cut through sixty-six vorcha and krogan to pry out of his clinic in the slums.

She shrugs, filing away the discovery that batarians' eyes are paired off; they usually look solid black to most humans, but Kelsa's implants let her see enough colour to distinguish the irises from the rest of the orbs. It's just one more thing she owes Lawson. "Massani and Solus are with me, but they ain't Cerberus," she allows, turning sideways so that he can clearly see the shotgun at her back and the pistol at her hip. "And if you're screening for weapons, you're doing a pretty shitty job of it."

The room flares with a sudden blue glow that dissipates just as quickly; in that moment's flash, Kelsa sees Aria T'Loak lounging somewhat carelessly on a sofa, her back to the unending bacchanal that her office overlooks. "Your weapons don't scare me," the asari pronounces, her cool voice hardly discernible through the pulse of the club's music, even to Kelsa's renewed and enhanced ears. "Some imposter walking around with your face, however...that might be cause for concern." Her clear eyes move to the batarian with the omni-tool. "Bray?"

"She checks out, Aria," he allows, before stepping back against the wall. "Still don't trust her, though."

Kelsa rolls her eyes. "I ain't killed you," she points out, stepping more fully into the glass-walled room. "Yet."

T'Loak curves a brow-ridge at the soldier. "I'm willing to overlook that," she offers, "just this once."

Kelsa's lips tip into a frown as she draws nearer to the asari; she looks familiar, of course, since her
ego has her face plastered across half the holoscreens on the station...but still, the soldier can't shake a whisper at the back of her mind that she's met the woman before. Blinking, she pushes the feeling down, into the same crowded room in her gut where she keeps the rest of them. "You're the one who told me to come here," she reminds the mob boss. "I'm me, for whatever you think that's worth, and I can leave through the stairs or through you. Your choice."

The asari's eyes narrow millimetrically, a couple of sparks arcing in the air around her; Kelsa stands her ground, shifting her peripherals to her right flank-Massani's got her left covered, and in the last day he's proven himself more than capable of stomping a few aliens, when occasion demands...or even when occasion just waggles its eyebrows suggestively. But T'Loak cuts the tension with a calculated smirk. "I like you, kid," she tells the soldier. "You've certainly got an upturned crest on you."

Kelsa nods, once, acknowledging the asari's compliment...it's the mono-gendered species' equivalent of saying you've got balls. "Why the fuck are we here?" The soldier probes, shrugging at the two companions she's picked up since arriving on Omega. "I've been here often enough without having to meet the boss before."

"That was before you saved the Citadel, massacred its Council, got yourself listed KIA and dropped off the grid for two years," T'Loak counters, still sitting with her arms draped over the back of her sofa, the picture of nonchalance. "Most of the brainless fucks who come here don't deserve my attention because they can't possibly get in my way; you've shown that you could make yourself annoying if you got it in your head to try and fuck with me."

Solus pipes up for the first time. "Only one rule on Omega," he prattles, in that clipped speech that some salarians lapse into when they get excited; it seems to be the only way this particular salarian knows how to talk. "Nobody fucks with Aria."

The asari tosses a glance Solus' way, and for just a heartbeat her expression softens with something like affection, but it's gone so quickly that even Kelsa can't be sure she saw anything at all. "Precisely," she concurs. "I see you've pulled yourself out of the slums, Mordin; does that mean the plague is over?"

"Indeed," the salarian confirms. "Cure dispersed via ventilation; surviving citizens should recover within days. Hours possible." He takes a long, sniffed breath. "Shepard's help invaluable; will assist her in return."

T'Loak takes a measured breath before her eyes hinge back to Kelsa. "Sit," she says, nodding to the side-seats at right angles to the long couch that she obviously has no intention of sharing. "Have a drink. Tell me what you want in my domain, and I might let you leave by the stairs."

Kelsa stands her ground for another moment, but she senses there won't be another grace-saving smirk if she doesn't back off this time. "What the hell," she muses, wiping at a bit of dried vorcha blood on her face as she collapses into the cushioned chair. Solus takes the seat opposite their central table, but Massani stands, his back still to a solid corner. Kelsa swallows a growl. "I'm here-"

"Drink first," T'Loak insists, tossing a glance to her batarian. He produces a tray of two shot glasses and a bottle of light blue liquor, the kind of asari drink that looks pretty innocuous but might give a krogan a few nightmares. The boss herself uncorks the bottle and fills each glass nearly to the brim.

The soldier takes her measure without hesitation, knocking it back as if on a dare. The fire doesn't hit her until she swallows, and then it burns all the way down into her gut, and she nearly chokes on the last of the vapours that tickle her throat. "Kicks harder than I remember," she gruffs,
blinking the stars out of her eyes.

T'Loak hammers her own shot and slams her glass down on the table, betraying no hint that it had contained anything stronger than water. "I've seen three humans keel over after a mouthful of Kriala," the asari comments, somewhat approvingly. "Now," she goes on, "you can tell me why you've swept through my slums to take my doctor away."

It takes a few seconds for Kelsa to marshal her thoughts-the asari liquor's hitting her hard, harder than it should, probably because her stomach's only had half an MRE in it since she stepped off her ship. "Human colonies are getting wiped out," she tells the woman. "Thousands of people abducted at a time. I'm building up a team to do something about that."

"Abductors likely source of plague," Solus adds, helpfully. "Humans suspect...advanced alien involvement."

Kelsa nods, grateful that the salarian saw fit to conceal the role of the Collectors; most people don't even think they exist, and the soldier doesn't want to have to convince anyone who might be skeptical. "Solus has skills I need," she states. "But he's not the only one on this rock I intend to pressgang into my crew."

T'Loak arches another brow, the lines of her forehead tattoo shifting as smoothly as fish in a stream. "I'll be generous and assume you're not eyeing up any member of my crew," she says.

"No idea," Kelsa admits. "All I've got is a name and a set of skills-not even a species," she grunts. "Goes by Archangel." A light flashes across T'Loak's eyes. "You know him?" The soldier ventures, tension curling up her spine, just in case the asari wants to take offence.

"Only by reputation," T'Loak informs her. "He's a vigilante, but he knows well enough to stay out of my way, so I've seen no reason to deal with him." Her lips curl into an indulgent smirk. "But if you're going after him, you should know you're not alone...he's pissed off quite a few people, including the leaders of the three largest mercenary bands in the Terminus Systems."

That tension works through Kelsa's sinews to her belly. "Shit," she gruffs, looking to Solus and then over to Massani; the salarian's still hyper, but she and the old mercenary haven't gotten any rack time since cutting through the Blood Pack bastards in Gozu. "Any idea where we can find him?"

"Not a clue," T'Loak insists, but she's probably lying. "I know where you can find somebody who does know, though," the asari goes on, lifting a hand from the sofa to point without bothering to look.

Kelsa follows the line of the crime lord's fingertip, across the dance floor, to a shadowed alcove guarded by batarians in Blue Suns regalia. "Then that's where we're headed," she pronounces, pushing herself to her feet. The room swims, just a little, but her feet are steady as stone as she takes a few steps away from Omega's pirate queen.

"One more thing," the asari exclaims, from her comfortable throne. When Kelsa throws her a glance, she sees T'Loak's face grow tight. "I've got nothing against human colonies," she insists, "but if you're lying about your reasons for coming here, I will end you," she vows. "And you'll stay dead when I'm through with you. You can count on that."

A combination of the alcohol and another subtle biotic crackle cut through the bravado that Kelsa would normally throw out at such a challenge. "Understood," she says, instead. With a parting nod, the soldier leaves Aria T'Loak to her empire.
After a couple of hours' rest and the second half of her MRE, Kelsa talked her way into the Blue Suns, at least in the guise of a **freelancer**, some cannon fodder to soak up fire until the professionals could come in and take out the vigilante known as Archangel. Along the way, she learned that Archangel's a turian, and that he's personally wronged the leadership of the Blood Pack, the Blue Suns, and Eclipse. All three mercenary groups span the Terminus, and the Suns've even shown up in the Traverse, but they're headquartered here, in the unofficial capital of the Terminus Systems. Massani paid just a little more attention when they met the head of the Blue Suns, a batarian named Tarak, but afterward he put his nose down again and grunted that they should get on with the mission.

That meant dodging Archangel's bullets until they were far enough down the bridge to his hideout that they could turn their guns on the other Suns freelancers in a bloody show of allegiance to the turian. After that, it was just a matter of cutting through a few actual Blue Suns that had infiltrated the building; now Kelsa and her two accomplices stand at the threshold of Archangel's hide, watching as he snipes a few more freelancers.

The soldier steps into his lair, her shotgun checked across her body, ready to draw at a heartbeat's notice. "Archangel," she calls, speculatively.

The fully-armoured turian takes one more shot through his window, his back turned to the intruders, showing a remarkable amount of trust; if it was Kelsa, she would've suspected three strangers, no matter how many Blue Suns they'd killed to get here. The turian steps backward from the window, easing his rifle down like it's been too long since he's given it a rest. Then, still turned away from Kelsa and her subordinates, he unseals his helmet, peeling it up and back away from his fringe. "Shepard," he says, his two-toned voice cutting into the back of Kelsa's mind. "Heard you were dead."

When he turns to look fully at her, Kelsa feels her throat go dry. "**Vakarian**?" She chokes, and no matter how many times she blinks, those blue clan markings don't change. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

The turian cackles, exhausted, almost drunk with the effort of surviving the last few days. "Seemed a nice place to retire after my inauspicious career in law enforcement," he comments, shrugging, before he nods to Massani and Solus. "I could ask you the same question, Shepard. Nice visor, by the way."

She's wearing a Kuwashii visor instead of the helmet that she sported for so many years in the Alliance; it gives her a HUD and some improved targeting solutions, though she doesn't really need it for that second purpose. But it lets everybody see the scars that've started growing on her cheeks and her neck, the tinge of red that's just beginning to bud in her eyes and shows no sign of dimming any time soon. "Looks like I've got a second chance," she tells her old comrade, "but there's a lotta strings attached. Collectors are making human colonies disappear, and it's my job to put a stop to it."

"Collectors?" Vakarian blinks, shaking his head; he hits a panel on his flank and immediately
heaves a sigh, his eyes clearing. Stims. "Collectors are nasty bedtime stories that turian mothers tell kids to get them to behave...or that's what they're supposed to be, anyway," he says. "I've seen enough in this galaxy to take your word on them seriously...but I don't know how useful it was for you to come here." He glances back through his little window. "It doesn't look like we're getting out without some kind of a miracle."

Kelsa grunts, bringing her shotgun to shoulder level. "I don't believe in miracles," she says, coming up to see just how fucked they are. Eclipse is dropping a huge YMIR mech onto the middle of the bridge, and Kelsa can't help but smirk, since she had Solus reprogram the damned thing to turn on its handlers. "But I do believe in ammo."

"Well, then," the turian muses, as the YMIR swivels around and sends hundreds of rounds into the salarians and smaller mechs who thought to follow it across the bridge. "I just might have a chance of getting out of this hellhole after all."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to buttercup23 for all the beta-reading awesomeness, as well as everyone who's reading along!
Ch. 25: Retrofits

Chapter Summary

Kelsa continues building her crew, and allows her curiosity to get the better of her caution about the potential Cerberus' technology has to offer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Main Battery, CSV Normandy-SR2

2200 Zulu

8 July 2185

Sublight Transit to Prison Ship Purgatory, Osun

Kelsa almost hisses on Vakarian's behalf when he turns away from his console to look at her; the right side of his face is a mangled mess underneath Chakwas' bandages, and he's got some glinting metal from a full aural implant that Lawson and Solus put in him. He's damned lucky that the blowback from the rocket hadn't taken his eye, too, but it was a close thing getting him out of that fucking deathtrap alive. "Shepard," he says, his voice stronger than it was back in his hideout. "Nice digs you've got here, though the landlords might become a bit of a pain."

The soldier grimaces. "Yeah," she concedes. "They're one of the strings I mentioned."

"Right," the turian grunts. "Sorry, I can't imagine what might've distracted me between now and then."

Kelsa raises an eyebrow. "Hell, Vakarian," she blusters, crossing her arms, "you slap some more facepaint on there and nobody'd even notice."

The turian chuckles, and almost immediately winces. "Don't make me laugh," he chides her. "My face is barely holding together as it is." His unbound mandible twitches. "But seriously...Cerberus?" He wonders, taking a quick, fruitless glance around for the cameras. "Weren't they an enemy, last time we checked?"

"It's...complicated," Kelsa settles, grimacing. "I don't like it any more than you do, but I can't see that I have a choice. They're the only ones willing to point me at the Collectors."

"Not to mention all the extra hardware they sunk into you," Vakarian comments. "And I don't just mean giving the Normandy a huge fucking gun."

The soldier grunts an acknowledgement, looking her comrade up and down; he's still wearing the armour that cloaked him as Archangel, which the gunship had shot up, injuring him even worse than the barely-dodged rocket. She grimaces. "You ain't gonna be fighting strength in a couple hours," she pronounces, her red-tinged eyes cutting back up to Vakarian's face. "Dammit." Massani seems like he'll be ready for anything, an old battleaxe with more scars than skin, but she doesn't want to turn him into leather quite yet. Solus, for all of his enthusiasm and aim, isn't a soldier; he's
already proved his worth to the mission by helping patch up Vakarian, and he's a hell of a lot more valuable in the ship's lab than on the field. The turian looks like he wants to argue, but Kelsa shakes her head. "You go back and see Chakwas, and you're not getting within a mile of live fire until she gives you the all-clear, understand?"

In an offhand moment on the old Normandy, once, Vakarian told Kelsa that he wasn't a very good turian; he couldn't follow bad orders. There's not even a real reason he should follow her orders at all, but after a blink, the turian straightens up and pounds a fist against his scuffed chestpiece in salute. "Yes, ma'am," he grunts. "But if you're just trying to re-balance our kill counts after two years on a table, I've gotta tell you that I shot a lot of criminals on Omega."

The trenches in Kelsa's cheeks tingle with her smirk. "Understood, Vakarian."

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Outprocessing
0425 Zulu
9 July 2185
Purgatory Station (docked), Osun

A half-second before the final door opens, Kelsa's instincts have her shotgun in her hand, and when the door opens on an empty prison cell, she knows what's coming. Sure enough, a heartbeat later, the comm crackles. "Get into the cell, Shepard," the turian commands. "You don't want to make this harder than it needs to be." He calls himself Kuril, and sells himself as the warden of a prison ship, the ship where they've come to pick up a human biotic for the fight against the Collectors.

"You obviously know who I am," the soldier observes, thumbing the incendiary ammo switch and nodding to her companions-the Cerberus stooges-before she pivots around to the still-empty office. "But I'm gonna spell it out anyway; you give me the convict and take your money, or I will end this little slaving operation you've got going on with your Blue Suns assholes, one bullet at a time."

Lawson speaks up, her pistol already in hand. "It's a fair offer," she points out. "If our mission weren't so important, I'd already have contacted assassins to target your family and friends."

"Shut up," Kelsa grunts, not because she disagrees with the principle, but because Lawson promised to shut the fuck up before they stepped off the Normandy.

"You've got skill," Kuril says, over the comm, "skill enough to sell for as much as half of the prisoners on this ship. I can't just let a windfall like that walk out of my dock."

The soldier nods, as though it's a reasonable observation. "You just remember that when I'm about to kill you," she tells him, and she stalks toward the front of the office as the slaver barks orders for his guards to take the humans into custody. Kelsa nearly makes it to the doorway when it fills with a batarian in blue heavy armour, but a good incendiary round takes down the bastard's shields, and she uses her momentum to bayonet him through the neck and kick him back into his comrades before she takes cover to the left of the doorframe.

Taylor hits the guards with his biotics before he shoulder-checks the other side of the door. A couple of mechanical dogs break through, but Lawson overloads their circuits with a burst of electricity from her omni-tool and Kelsa clears their end of the hall with a frag grenade. The soldier pushes on, driven by the pained screams of the dying and the frantic yells of the soon-to-be, hardly bothering to angle into cover as she zigzags down the corridor. "EDI," she barks, in between shotgun shells. "Pull up the station's schematics and give me Jack's coordinates."
"Processing," the AI chirps in her ear. "You are in luck, Shepard; Convict 807-B, alias Jack Nought, is currently in cryostasis. The cryostasis wing of your current block is down the next left turn, as are approximately twenty-four prison guards."

About three minutes later it's down to twelve guards, and then four, and then none at all. Blood and smoke and cooked flesh salt the station's air, iron and shit and fear. Smells Kelsa's re-learning to appreciate after her reconstruction, after her reintroduction to war against organic enemies on Omega. The soldier's never been much for discounting artificial intelligence just because it's synthetic, but there's something undeniably more satisfying about seeing an enemy bleed out versus watching a light dim down to nothing. Soon enough, the three humans have cut through the rest of the turian and batarian (and even a few of their fellow human) mercenaries to the cryostasis control room, guarded only by a pistol-wielding scientist who's barely worth wasting a bullet on.

Kelsa monkeys with the control panel, but everything's heavily encrypted. "Shit," she breathes. "EDI, can you override this mess?"

The AI's orb-like interface pops up on the console and flashes for a few moments. "Sufficient system penetration would take approximately fifteen minutes," she-it, Kelsa corrects herself-informs the ground team. "However, I can short out critical systems to instigate a block-wide release of all inmates, if you judge such action advisable."

Lawson takes a breath, but Kelsa speaks up. "Do it," she pronounces, reloading her shotgun and rolling her shoulders. "Give the Suns something else to shoot at."

"Emergency release initiated," EDI says. "Records indicate that Jack is the only prisoner in cryostasis, but the cellblock contains some two hundred thirteen other prisoners. Approximately ninety-seven guards remain prison-wide, the majority of whom are converging on your current position. Advise evasive manoeuvres at your earliest convenience."

The incongruity of the AI's information and the cool monotone with which it's delivered is almost enough to tear a laugh out of the soldier, but her red-tinged eyes catch on the room below the command centre; three cryo-pods lift up from the floor, but only the central pod is occupied. By a woman. A bald-headed woman with more tattoos than empty skin, maybe forty kilos soaking wet, only a few stitches of cloth and a couple of leather straps for clothes. Jack. Supposed to be the meanest handful of violence and hate that Kuril ever encountered, Jack's rumoured to be the most powerful human biotic in history, and Kelsa can't help but breathe a laugh to learn that Jack's a ninety-pound girl.

A few heartbeats later, Jack finishes thawing out from cryosleep, and she goes a long way to proving her reputation by breaking out of her restraints and biotically charging through a heavily-armoured YMIR mech. The floor shakes under Kelsa's feet, and the report of a deep explosion follows an instant later. "Sounds like she tore through a wall," the soldier observes, heading through the door to the lower chamber.

"And you're going to follow her?" Miranda drawls, only a few steps behind. "She's obviously unstable."

"I know I'd be unstable if somebody locked me up in a cryo-pod," Kelsa grunts, whistling when she comes into the lower chamber and catches sight of the enormous hole in the back wall. "Besides," she goes on, kicking up to a jog, "I still owe Kuril a hole in the head." And she always pays her debts, ever since Mister V took away her best friend and she killed his closest henchman, when she was fourteen years old.

The path of carnage is easy to follow, service tunnels connected to blown-out cells and corridors,
tungsten walls shredded and melted like hunks of cheese. Before long a station-wide mayday goes up; the *Purgatory*'s not gonna last too much longer. Long enough for Kelsa to keep her promise, though...Kuril dies boasting that he'll sell Kelsa and Jack and make a fortune. After that, the guards and prisoners seem to thin out, and it doesn't take too long for Kelsa and her companions to catch up with the rampaging biotic—just before Jack can rip open the docking tube door to the *Normandy*. "Hold it!" Kelsa calls, her shotgun primed and pointed. Lawson and Taylor have their weapons drawn and their biotics crackling, too.

Jack spins to face them, all anger, but something makes her stumble; a flash crosses her eyes as they dance back and forth from Lawson to Taylor and back again, a light eerily close to fear. "*Cerberus,*" she hisses, tearing at the stubble of her shaved head and grunting out a feral howl. "What the *fuck* do you assholes want?"

Another rumble shakes the walls, echoing a deeper explosion from near the station's core, and the air starts to get a bit thin. "Collectors are sucking up human colonies," Kelsa says, cutting to the chase. "I'm building a team to go after them, and you're on the list."

"You think I'm coming with you after what you did to me?!" The biotic screams, flickering blue and taking a single, menacing step forward. "I'm gonna kill you, then I'm gonna take your ship and crash it into something beautiful with everybody inside it, then I'm gonna-"

"You're gonna settle the fuck down and come with me," Kelsa pronounces. "I haven't done a goddamned thing to you, and I don't work for *Cerberus,*" she says, throwing a sour glance to Lawson. "Woke up on a table in one of their labs about a week ago, and the jury's still out whether or not I'm gonna get through the mission without shootin' one of 'em." What little air that's left is slowly filling up with smoke. "Looks like I'm your only ride out," Kelsa observes. "So you can rot out here in space or come kill Collectors and whoever the fuck else gets in our way."

Whether it's the naked hostility between Kelsa and Lawson, the dwindling oxygen, or simply the promise of unrestricted violence, Jack's murderous impulse dims enough for her to regard Kelsa evenly. "I got one condition," the biotic says, still tensed to attack at the drop of a hat. "You give me access to any *Cerberus* files on me—all of it."

"Done," Kelsa barks, grimacing in anticipation of the headache that's going to cause for Lawson.

The *Cerberus* operative tries to voice her displeasure over the prospect. "Shepard," she hisses, "you don't have the authority-

"I've got a shotgun, a ship, and one thousand eight hundred forty-seven confirmed kills that say I *do* have the authority," Kelsa counters, fixing Lawson with a stare, daring her to issue another challenge. "Your boss brought me back to do a job, and that job doesn't involve keeping his secrets. If you think it'd be better to wipe the slate clean and start from scratch, you're more than welcome to try."

The moment hangs suspended until Lawson blinks, swallowing her pride and hiding her shame behind a sneer. "Of course, Shepard," she concedes.

"Hah!" Jack yells. "I might not have to kill you if you keep making the *Cerberus* cheerleader cry."

Taylor clears his throat—or coughs, take your pick. "Can we continue this conversation someplace that isn't on fire?" He wonders, somewhat less than idly. "Just a suggestion."

Kelsa takes one more measured look between Lawson and Jack, nodding decisively. "Let's go."
She sits up as soon as the sedative wears off, swallowing back her hiss as a wave of sore stinging prickles just under her skin. She blinks a couple times to clear the glare from her eyes.

"-pard," Solus clips, from her right. "Ambulatory very early. Good sign new implants won't be rejected."

"I should hope they wouldn't be," Lawson's voice cuts in, behind him. "At this rate, Shepard's almost as much machine as she is woman." There's a mix of pride and cajoling in the woman's voice.

"Incorrect," Solus interjects, before Kelsa can sneer anything back. "Shepard's weight one hundred fifty kilograms; organic weight one hundred twenty. Approximate weight after final two rounds of tissue weaves..." He pauses long enough to take a breath. "One hundred seventy kilos. Fifty kilos of cybernetic material much less than half of one-seventy."

Lawson snorts. "We get the point, salarian," she drawls, turning to leave. "I'm just happy you didn't ruin Cerberus' investment, not to mention the future of humanity."

Solus shakes his head. "Collectors threaten colonies; no evidence species on the whole is at risk-"

"I think we can assu-"

"Both of you need to shut the fuck up," Kelsa grunts, sliding off the table and onto her feet. Her soles burn for a few seconds, but it eases up her calves. "Thanks for not fucking me up too bad, Solus. That's all for now."

Lawson beats it, but the salarian holds his ground. "Took some liberties while you were unconscious," he informs her, enduring her raised eyebrow like a rock endures a wave. "Don't think Miranda noticed. Repurposed omni-tool. Think you'll like it."

The soldier's eyebrow stays raised. "What did you do to my omni-tool, Solus?"

"Cerberus upgraded to latest model while resurrecting you," the salarian goes on. "Channels enough power for engineering applications, but your combat style makes no use of such skills. Rerouted energy to produce molten blade forged from omni-gel; should be able to punch through most armour. Activate by clenching fist and swiping retrograde to centre of body; deactivate by swiping prograde."

It takes a few seconds for Kelsa to figure out what the fuck he means, but she clenches her fists and rotates them every which way until something happens; when she swivels her right wrist counterclockwise and her left wrist clockwise, a shimmering shaft of orange omni-gel sprouts around each of her forearms, and a few moments later both tubes form themselves into something like giant folding knives. Instinctively the soldier whips her arms, and the omni-gel blades swing open, locking into place. "That...could be useful," she concedes, taking a few practice swings.

The salarian's head bobs. "Fantastic," he congratulates her, and probably himself, too. "Though should probably test retraction before permanent damage to hull obtains."
Frowning, the soldier clenches her fists and rotates her wrists in the opposite direction, and the omni-blades flicker before winking out of existence. "It'll let me stop worrying about running out of thermal clips, anyway," she comments, rubbing over her forearms to discharge some of the sting. "Thanks."

"Recommend getting dressed before exiting lab," he suggests, brushing off her gratitude as easily as she can fake it. "Unless experimenting with new ways to boost morale amongst crew?"

"Taylor might like that," Kelsa muses, unfurling her cargo pants before she steps into them. The fabric drives nettles her thighs, but the subdermal sheaf is one of three procedures that the Lazarus Project didn't get a chance to complete before Wilson tried to fuck her over. "But then I'll have to shoot him in the leg as soon as he looks at my ass."

Not even a chuckle. "Aim below patella to minimise risk of arterial bleeding."

Kelsa arches a scarred brow at him as she shrugs into her t-shirt. "Who said I wanted to avoid arterial bleeding?"

That got another smirk, at least. "Increase fluid intake for next forty-eight hours," Solus quips, turning back to the fishtank with the single, insectoid Seeker in it. She doesn't know how the hell the Illusive Man got ahold of one and she doesn't ask, but if he can figure out how to neutralise them, that means they won't get paralysed by the fucking things like all those disappeared colonists. "Recommend not activating newest crewmember before then, to be on safe side."

"I'll give him twenty-four," Kelsa concedes, rolling her shoulders to ease the last of the ache between them. "Although there are plenty of fluids in that pod the krogan's stuck in." They were supposed to pick up a thousand-year-old battlemaster named Okeer, but things didn't go to plan; Okeer's dead, and they picked up his masterpiece instead, a cloned krogan with genetic material from the best of the species. Now it's up to her whether or not to let him out of his vat.

"Recommend against drinking krogan primordial soup," the salarian retorts, without looking back over his shoulder. "No stomach-lining weave in the offing, after all."

Kelsa barks a laugh and leaves his little fiefdom without saying goodbye. She cuts through the CIC, bearing toward the elevator; Kelly Chambers tries to flag her down. "Commander," she calls, still cheerful. The yeoman's nice enough...too nice, really, trying to worm her way into everybody's heads so she can work up reports for the Illusive Man. She tries to dress it up by pretending she's just there to keep the crew's mental health on an even keel, but Kelsa knows better, so she hasn't said more than two words to the woman since the day they met. When it becomes clear that today's no different, the woman sighs. "There's a message for you at your private terminal," Chambers informs the soldier, her spirits only slightly dampened.

The soldier doesn't correct Chambers' use of her old title; instead she nods when she gets to the elevator and thumbs the button to engineering. It's where the krogan lies in stasis, but that's not her destination; she still feels a little too sore from the operation to risk having to tackle him if he turns out not to be a morning krogan. Instead she heads down into the belly of the beast.

"You look even more fucked up in the dark," Jack says, only looking up from her datapad for long enough to see who's bothering her. "Guess that bullshit about beauty being skin deep's just another lie like all the rest. You cracked open the tin can yet?"

"Notchet," Kelsa drawls, leaning against a beam and crossing her arms. "See anything interesting in those files yet?"
Another glance, lingering just a heartbeat longer before her eyes return to the datapad. "Plenty," the biotic grunts. "Nothing solid enough to move on, but I'm gettin' there, Girl Scout."

"Lemme know if Lawson gives you any shit about it," the soldier offers. "And you might wanna rethink that nickname."

Jack rolls her eyes, scrunching up on the makeshift cot she's fashioned out of a table. "Please," she grunts. "You ain't half bad in a fight, I'll give you that, but your little-miss-badass routine ain't foolin' anybody."

Kelsa feels a muscle twitch in her jaw and she isn't entirely sure why; it's not like she needs to impress anybody on this ship, least of all a strung-out piece of gristle that can rip the hull in half if she gets too pissed off. "Just because I got a few good reasons, that don't make me any less of a killer," she points out.

"Yeah, yeah," Jack says, finally laying that datapad down and shooting Kelsa a disbelieving look. "You've offed a few people. Big deal. How many you kill before you became a girl scout, Girl Scout?"

"Forty-seven," Kelsa answers, automatically. She blinks, and in that instant she sees all of their faces on the back of her eyelids, starting with Jay and ending with some poor fuck who didn't deserve it. But the images fade as soon as she opens her eyes again. "And a hell of a lotta people blame me for killing plenty of people that no girl scout ever would," she goes on, frowning. "Like when I let the old Council die a couple years back."

That gets the biotic to blink. "You did what, now?"

"Gave the order to hold back Alliance assets during the Battle of the Citadel, when Sovereign wanted to take it over and bring on the Reapers," Kelsa drawls. It's not quite bragging, but it's as close as she ever gets. "Didn't you know?"

Jack snarls, snatching up her datapad again and swiping over it furiously. "I was a goddamned popsicle for four years," she points out. "I guess I missed a couple things."

"Guess so," Kelsa agrees. "We could measure our rap sheets all night if you wanted; most of the worst shit I've done's been covered up and brushed over, but that don't make it right." And that's not even counting her failures, the people who died because they trusted her and she couldn't pull through. "Just understand that I don't give a shit about anything you might've done; you rip my enemies to shreds when I tell you to, and I don't give a shit what else you do, either. We clear?"

The smaller woman grimaces, wrapping herself into a hug, making herself seem even smaller. "And what if I wanna rip a few Cerberus assholes to shreds in my off time?"

Kelsa's lips curl into a smirk, her eyes tilting up to the tiny camera in the ceiling that her ocular implants let her see. "Who says Cerberus isn't my enemy?" She wonders, idly, before her gaze falls back on the biotic and her smirk twitches into a snarl. "If they fuck us over, killing them might not count as off time," she says, loud enough for Lawson's microphones to hear. Then we'll see whether or not they put a control switch in me, she muses to herself, but she doesn't breathe a word of it in Jack's hearing.

"Funny," the biotic spits, "but I almost believe you." A moment passes between them, and for that brief span of time, Kelsa sees underneath the scars and the tattoos and the attitude; she sees a small woman, barely more than a girl, trying to hide the fact that she isn't a monster. "I'll...letcha know what I find out, Girl Scout," Jack promises. "And...thanks. For gettin' me outta that freezer."
"Don't thank me," Kelsa warns her, turning toward the stairs. "We ain't run into the Collectors yet." She doesn't wait for an answer from Jack; instead, she climbs the stairs out of the engineering subdeck and makes for Massani's repurposed storeroom. He's got a deck of cards, a few cigars, and a cheap bottle of whiskey that he needs to put to some good use.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone reading along, especially to buttercup23, my excellent beta-reader. Update's early this week because I'm going to be traveling for the weekend and part of next week; any reviews will be answered, but might take some time.
Ch. 26: The Lost Girl

Chapter Summary

The team adds one more member before they're sent to Horizon to intercept the Collectors, where Kelsa has an unexpected reunion with Williams that drives her to drinking, and threatens even worse.

Reception Area

0900 Zulu

14 July 2185

Docking Bay C-19, Citadel

The new-hatched krogan's eyes dart from the silver strands of the Widow Nebula to the flashing screens of the ad kiosks, and Kelsa can't tell if he's about to keel over or kill somebody. He's full-grown, at least physically, and he showed his hunger for a fight about three seconds after Kelsa let him out of his fish tank; he shoved her up against a crate and asked her to give him a name before he killed her, and she held her shotgun to his *quad* to get his attention. He respected that, along with her orders for him to fall in line and her offer to give him lots of enemies to kill. In the end, he picked his own name, one of the last words Okeer had uttered before succumbing to poison gas. Now Grunt looks like a baby piranha, full of wonder at a new world and a lust for blood not yet sated. His ravenous gaze falls upon a triad of Alliance soldiers, two recruits and a drill sergeant hammering them on the basics of vacuum warfare. "Shepard," the nascent krogan barks. "Can we kill *these* humans?" She already told him to stop glaring at a group of tourists.

The soldier sighs. "Nope," she clips, giving him a cutting look. "We're just here to pick up the last name on my list; then I promise we'll find some people who need killing." Grunt groans, scratching the silvery scales on his head that didn't quite coalesce into the hard shell that most of his kind sport.

Vakarian titters, keeping pace with Kelsa as she forges on to the rendezvous point. "Never really picked you out for the maternal type, Shepard," he says in his two-toned hum. "How's it feel, fostering an eight-hundred-pound killing machine?"

"Feels like my boot's itching to tickle one of those mandibles, Vakarian," Kelsa shoots back, smirking and rolling her eyes. "Don't make me regret digging you outta that hellhole on Omega."

The turian puts up a hand. "You've taken up gardening now, too?"

Kelsa's smirk crashes into a scowl. "Already did," she gruffs, soberly. "Was damned good at it for a coupla years, too." She's never told him about the Garden; she's never told anyone, not a single soul, since she enlisted in the Alliance, thirteen years before. Almost half her lifetime.

Vakarian hikes a shrug, not reading too much into her darker expression. "I can just see you with a pair of shears and a nice, frilly hat." He glances up to the newborn killer on Kelsa's right flank.
"Just so long as your pup remembers to keep his gun pointed away from the handsome turian with the bandaged face. I'd hate to have to see Chakwas again before the week was out."

"If I ever want to kill you, turian, you wouldn't need to see the doctor after," Grunt points out, like it should be obvious.

Kelsa checks out of the conversation, still caught up in memories of the Garden, of thorny stems and too much blood for any kid to handle. Part of her considers that old tattoo, the one the Alliance burnt off, a thorn granted for every kill. If she still had it, the stem would probably cover about as much of her skin as Jack's ink. Over a thousand thorns, if you don't count the geth; almost two thousand, if you do.

Kelsa does.

She's the period at the end of two thousand stories, the capstone on two thousand graves. "We're here," she pronounces, cutting across the banter that couldn't penetrate her thoughts.

This particular kiosk isn't like any of the others; instead of a bright-smiling construct, it sports a shadowy, hooded figure, whose eyes glitter in the darkness. The only clear feature is a red stripe on the woman's face, from her lip to the crux of her chin. "Commander Shepard," the kiosk drawls, in a mockery of an advertisement. "Enter the password for your chance to win-

"We don't have time for this bullshit," Kelsa gruffs, crossing her arms. "Do you want the hellhound's money or not?" That's how Lawson told her to refer to Cerberus, at least in public. As annoying as the operative is, that's advice the soldier isn't willing to overlook just to spite the woman.

The image blinks, momentarily taken aback, before her lips curl into an all-too-authentic smile. "Ahh, I see you're just as blunt as the vids suggest, Commander, so I'll get straight to the point. I assume you've been briefed about my contract?"

Kelsa has, for once; Lawson evidently took her threat of airlocking to heart, after the surprise of Massani's recruitment. "You need my help with a matter on Bekenstein," she summarises. "I'll do it if it won't take too long."

"It shouldn't take more than an afternoon," the woman's image tells them. "But we can discuss the details onboard your ship; it's a bit open out here." A lull in the background noise lets Kelsa's bionic ears pick up on the true source of her voice, and Kelsa pivots to stare up at the rafters behind them. There stands Kasumi Goto, who Lawson insists is the best thief in the galaxy, staring into her omni-tool's haptic screen.

"Deal," the soldier grunts, jerking her head back to the mooring where the Normandy waits for them. "Grab your gear and get onboard by 0930."

Grunt takes an audible sniff, to her left now that she's turned around. "Can we-"

"Later," she vows. "Promise." Kelsa watches Goto stalk away along her rafter. The thief throws up a tactical cloak that's almost perfect; Kelsa's ocular implants let her see a strange distortion in the shape of a woman, but even a standard soldier's gene mods probably wouldn't be good enough to track Goto.

Vakarian clears his throat. "You sure you don't want to swing by the Presidium? ...Maybe get some decent dextro-ration for Gardner?"

Kelsa looks down the line to the customs desk. "You go," she decides. "But make sure you're on
the ship in fifteen." Anderson sent her a message a couple days back, asking her to see him ASAP, since she put his ass in humanity's new seat on the Council. She's been a soldier too long to completely disregard the request, but even after two years on a table, she still remembers that the Citadel is a coffin in the shape of a space station. Kelsa doesn't want to set foot on it a second longer than necessary. When the turian hesitates, she rolls her eyes. "We'll probably be back before too long, so don't go hunting for a doctor in distress."

"Thought he didn't like doctors," Grunt grunts, as Vakarian pushes his way past the civilians waiting in line to get into the heart of galactic civilisation.

"Old joke," the soldier gruffs, taking the lead back to the Normandy. "I'll tell you when you're older."

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Garage

0335 Zulu

15 July 2185

Discovery (ashore), Horizon, Iera

The facility's sturdier than a pre-fab, with thick walls and fortified doors, but it only takes Solus half a minute to hack their way into the building. Kelsa's not really surprised to see it abandoned, despite how defensible it is; the Collectors hit fast and hard, disabling whole villages with their seeker swarms, giving the inhabitants no time to make use of cover. Once frozen in place with a paralytic neurotoxin, the humans are usually loaded into cocoon-like pods and escorted to the Collectors' ship for some still-unknown purpose, though Kelsa somehow doubts they're getting taken to the casinos and bathhouses and fancy restaurants in Nos Astra. That's not how getting abducted usually works out, according to the soldier's brushes with both sides of the experience. But today isn't a usual day, at least not for the Collectors; Solus figured out how to keep the seeker swarms away, and along with him and Grunt, Kelsa's fought through half the colony, taking out dozens of the bipedal bugs already.

A rattling noise draws the soldier's attention to a sharp point as she steps into the building that might've been a decent bunker if the colonists had gotten some advanced warning. Grunt shoots in the direction of the sound, even though he knows better. "Stand down," Kelsa barks, even as she shoulders her own shotgun. Then she takes a few lateral steps, circling around the central pillar that's got some new shotgun dents in it. "Get out here," she tells the source of the noise. "Now."

Tentatively, a middle-aged man in a plain white hat peeks around the corner. Kelsa's visor reads him as an unmodded human, elevated heart rate, no mass effect weaponry. She checks her gun, keeping it tucked into her elbow, just in case the reading's misleading. The man himself stumbles out of his hiding spot, sagging in relief. "You...you're human," he pants, before he tenses again. "What are you doing out here? You'll lead 'em right here!"

"We ain't staying long," the soldier assures him, patting the stock of her shotgun. "And neither are the Collectors."

The stranger's eyes widen. "Those things are Collectors?" He breathes, turning his back on the intruders. "You mean...they're real? I...I thought they were just a myth, so we'd stay in Alliance space." The man pushes off from the wall, spinning around to face them once more. "They took
Lilith, and Sten, too! Those fucks got damn-near everybody!"

Kelsa doesn't point out that *damn-near everybody* isn't the same thing as *everybody*. "You need to calm down," she says, "before you make my friends nervous. We're a little trigger-happy, as you mighta noticed."

The man takes a better look at the incursion party, from the human soldier to the salarian at her right and the krogan at her left. "You're not with the Alliance," he observes, and there's more relief mixed in with his confusion. "What the hell are you folks doin' here?"

"Fighting," Grunt breaks in. "What's it look like, human?"

Kelsa rasps a chuckle, unable to fault the krogan's enthusiasm at finally getting to let himself loose on a proper enemy. "What can you tell us about the colony's defenses?" She prompts, glancing around. "You wouldn't happen to have an armoury in these parts, would you?"

"Shit, no," the man grunts. "This is a garage...I'm just a mechanic. Never held a gun in my life." He shakes his head. "Only thing I know about is some big-ass laser cannons the Alliance gave us," he tells them, pulling a disgusted face. "Problem is, the damned things suck so much power it's gonna bankrupt us trying to upgrade the grid...and that's if they ever fix the fucking targeting system. It's never worked right."

Kelsa brings up her left arm. "EDI," she barks, and the AI's friendly blue eyeball pops out of her forearm. "Scan the area for a laser battery."

"At once," EDI acknowledges, and the vertical slit of the eyeball flutters a few dozen times in the heartbeat it takes the machine to begin reporting back. "Preliminary scans indicate the presence of two GARDIAN laser turrets approximately three hundred metres from your current location. Their automated targeting solutions are imminently correctable, but they require manual booting into the colony's power grid in order to function effectively."

"Great," Grunt chirps, giddily. "Can we go shoot something else now, Shepard?"

Kelsa nods, gruffing her thanks to EDI before shaking off the haptic interface and reaching across her body to draw her submachine gun. "You wanna live your whole life without ever holdin' a gun, or you wanna tell your grandkids you made a difference when it counted?"

The mechanic throws up his hands, sputtering. "I...I got no dog in this fight," he demurs. "These bastards wouldn't even be here if it wasn't for you Alliance asswipes-no offence," he amends, when he sees the dangerous flash in the no-longer-Alliance-soldier's eyes.

"Then lock the fuck up behind us and stay out of our way," Kelsa commands him, replacing the pistol at her hip and unshipping her shotgun. Her thumb slides over the incendiary ammo toggle like it's second nature, and she rolls her shoulder at Grunt and Solus. Without another word, she leads her squad back out into Discovery, following EDI's promptings for directions to the laser batteries. The way's far from smooth; after a dozen feet, more Collectors pop up to try and impede their progress, and the team have to dive for cover and grind through some of the overgrown bugs.

One by one, the Collectors succumb to the squad's firepower and technology, their bodies dissolving into dust. Solus guesses they have cybernetics designed to destroy any evidence upon death, which gives Kelsa pause to wonder about her own body and the artificial enhancements that Cerberus gave her. Just before the last Collector goes down to a well-placed round from Solus' pistol, however, the fucking thing lifts off the ground and starts *glowing*. Yellow-orange light
shines through cracks in the thing's hardened outer shell, wisps of purple swirl around the bug's floating form.

**SHEPARD.**

The message reverberates in Kelsa's bone marrow, in her teeth, behind her eyeballs. So much like Sovereign's words on Virmire.

**WE ARE THE HARBINGER OF YOUR DESTRUCTION.**

Rage, foolish and unfocused, has her acting even more reckless than she used to, before she woke up on a Cerberus slab. Underneath her armour, her arms still bear the fire-orange scars of her second birth, wounds that won't ever heal unless Kelsa calms down...so they just won't ever heal, period. Grunting in anger, the soldier vaults over her hiding place—a long trough of flowers—and she charges toward the last remaining bug, pitching and rolling to avoid the high-powered beam that'll cut through her shields and heavy enamel if she's not fast enough. She wasn't fast enough on Virmire, just like she wasn't fast enough above Alchera. The first time, she lost a good friend; the second, she lost herself.

**DO NOT RESIST, SHEPARD.**

"I'll show you resistance," Kelsa growls, tucking her shotgun into the small of her back as she runs. Before she can think better of it, she's field testing Solus' upgrades, her wrists swiveling in the right pattern to make molten omni-gel flicker to life above her forearms. Ten feet from the Collector, she's too close to dodge the bastard's beam, but she's moving too fast for it to dodge the omni-gel swords her arms have become. A beam hit takes down her shields just before she buries her left arm in the bug's chest, and a second shot burns into the heavy armour just above her heart, despite the massive trauma her own strike must've caused.

**THIS HURTS YOU.**

The soldier grits her teeth, swinging her right arm around until the simmering 'gel slices the Collector's head off its shoulders. With that, at last, the fucking thing begins dissolving...but not before it delivers one last parting message.

**WE WILL DESTROY YOU, SHEPARD.**

"Yeah," she grunts, as the Collector's body dissolves around her. "Good luck with that."

Her newborn krogan companion sidles up to her. "What're you talkin' about, Shepard?"

Kelsa swallows down the bile that threatens to rise in the back of her throat; her teeth still feel like they're ringing. "Nothing," she lies, grimacing. Her eyes catch on a gleaming silver rifle on the ground, its profile organic, alien. "Looks like the motherfucker dropped this before it bugged out into a million pieces," she observes, toeing the weapon thoughtfully. Her emerald eyes cut back to Grunt. "Wanna try her out?"

The krogan cackles with enthusiasm, shipping his own shotgun before picking up the discarded beam rifle. "Let's see if these bastards can take any better than they can dish out."

The soldier nods, extinguishing her omni-blades and retrieving her more familiar shotgun. "Let's get to those lasers," she commands, taking the lead deeper into the maze of the colony's alleyways.
The small cylinder's half-full of *Kriala*, the potent asari liquor that nearly knocked Kelsa on her ass a time or two during OCS. Since Lawson and Wilson grew her a new liver, liquor's hitting her hard again. "We'll see how long it takes me to need another liver," the soldier grunts to nobody in particular; there's supposed to be nobody in the room, other than Kelsa, but the souped-up soldier can sense Goto skulking about, watching her. Kelsa hasn't called the other woman out, not yet...still trying to sort through what happened on Horizon. It's taking a lot more asari liquor than it probably should.

Williams is staring, equal parts awe and incredulity, faith and accusation. The Collector ship's still in atmo, retreating fast after the GARDIAN battery hit it hard, but not before it sent waves of husks and other Reaper ground troops to try and wipe Kelsa's squad out.

"I can't believe I mourned you for two whole years," the Alliance marine breathes. "Turns out you were working for the enemy this whole time."

Through all that last fight, the rogue soldier had to contend with one of those glowing bugs, stronger than the rest, that talks to her in the back of her teeth. She's taken to calling it *Harbinger*, since that's what it taunts her with.

Nobody else. Just her.

"I ain't gonna explain myself to you, Williams," Kelsa shoots back, not even bothering with the truth. "You ain't gotta like it; just don't get in my way."

Grunt growls, still hopped-up from the fight. "Or go ahead," he giggles. "I haven't killed a human yet."

Williams blinks, recognising the aliens for the first time. The incongruity of aliens working for Cerberus must be too much for her, so she shakes her head, checking out. "It's like I never even knew you, Shepard."

Kelsa shakes her head, still rattled by Harbinger, by what it means to have a Reaper talking to her. "You never did, Ash," she deflects, condescending to use the other woman's nickname, even though she's got no right. "There's some good people left here," she points out, eyeing some of the surviving colonists, whose curiosity is pulling them out of shelter. "You need to tend to them."

Williams' eyes narrow. "And what are you gonna do?"

The rogue soldier looks up to the sight of the SR-2, repainted a solid black, as it glides in for exfil. "What I do best," she allows, too tired and too shaken-up to stand her ground with her former comrade.

It could've gone better, Kelsa reflects after another fiery throatful of liquor. But it could've gone worse, too, if she'd tried to argue, tried to get Williams on-side. "Just what I need," she mumbles. "A boat with Lawson and Williams on it." She's drunk enough to glance directly at the mirage-like shimmer in the air behind her. "Could you imagine anything worse, Goto?"
The thief clicks her tongue just before she uncloaks. "How'd you know?"

Kelsa smirks and flares her nostrils. "Shoulda gone easy on the burritos, I guess," she teases. "Or waited 'til Gardner dipped into his new rations from the Citadel."

The half-veiled woman pulls a face. "You're mean when you're drunk, Shepard," she whines, halfheartedly.

The soldier gruffs a laugh. "If I was really mean," she corrects her light-fingered acquaintance, "you'd be bleeding." She snatches up the now-quarter-full canister of light-blue liquid and holds it out. "Wanna take a pull?"

Goto makes a show of considering before she shakes her head. "I wouldn't want to accidentally bump into Jacob," she deadpans. "Or trip over him while he does all those crunches." It's only taken the woman two days to get a bead on the crew, and she has no problem needling Kelsa about them.

Kelsa rolls her eyes, shrugging and tipping back the remaining contents of her glass. The room swims, just a little, and the soldier has to spread her arms out behind her and lean against the countertop to keep from tipping over. "If you could get him to start lookin' at you like he seems to wanna look at me, I don't give a shit if you blow him on the bridge," she sighs, grimacing. "Just make sure I ain't around when you do it."

The thief tilts her head. "Aren't you even a little curious to see what the man has under that Cerberus uniform?"

"Not," the soldier drawls, shaking her head, ponderously. "Even," she continues, when her chin changes direction. "A little." Her eyes-spotted red even in the full light of the lounge, now-catch on the subtle curves of Goto's custom suit. "You, on the other hand…"

Goto blinks rapidly, before Kelsa's intent dawns on her. "Ahh," she deflects, hiding a sliver of distaste behind a smirk. "Sorry to disappoint you, Shep, but I'm more of a voyeur." A few heartbeats of awkwardness pass before she tries to change the subject. "EDI says we're heading to Zorya," she begins, hopeful.

"You're goddamned right, we are," comes Zaeed's ten-penny growl, through the just-opening doors. "And not a moment too fucking soon, I say." His voice is even more mangled than usual, mumbled through an unlit cigar. Kelsa's stomach nearly drops out when she sees the box of old scotch he's got tucked under one arm, and another box of what looks like fine cigars under the other. When he sees the surprise on his normally-fearless leader's face, the mercenary grunts amiably. "Didn't think you'd start the party without me, didja?"

"Oh, Shep started the party a long time ago," Goto warns him, before Kelsa can think of a reply. The cybernetics are working overtime to filter her blood, but the Kriala won't give up without a fight, and the skipper thinks she might've already taken a shot too far over the line as it is. "Since we're taking care of Zaeed's business," Goto goes on, fully aware of her boss's compromised state, "I wanted to ask you...when do you think we'll swing by Bekenstein? It's just that there's a time-sensitive element to this thing, and an important event coming up that would be a golden opportunity, and-"

"Alright," Kelsa gruffs, if only to shut the other woman up. Zaeed's already lit-up his cigar, a celebration of a job well-done, for delivering his batarian prisoner alive and (relatively) unharmed to whatever sadistic fate awaited him. "We'll deal with the factory on Zorya," the skipper decides, "then we'll deal with this asshole you want me to kill."
Goto's veil hides her face in shadow, but when she speaks, it's with a quiet rage, sudden and barely-restrained. "You aren't going to kill him, Shepard," she guarantees. "You're going to help me reclaim something he stole from me, and then I am going to kill him."

"Ahh, revenge," Zaeed muses, through a mouthful of cigar smoke. "Is there anything so goddamned sweet in the whole shitting galaxy?"

Kelsa has to blink, another wave of drunkenness not quite enough to cover over the hollow parts of her insides. Killing Collectors should've tasted sweet, should've brought her some measure of peace after the fucking waste of her death over Alchera. Instead, it just made her feel even more empty...too empty to fight back against Williams' wrong ideas, too empty to try and clear her name. "Nothing," she concurs, hollowly. "Except maybe whiskey."

"That's the spirit," the mercenary cajoles her, and before she knows it he's pushing a tumbler of amber liquid into her left hand and a lit cigar in her right. "Bottoms up, Shepard." The soldier catches the poison in her mouth, and by the time she plunks the empty glass down on the countertop, Goto's long gone. "Heard about your old squaddie, Shepard," Zaeed comments, distantly...or, at least, his voice sounds distant to Kelsa. "Damn shame she couldn't've come aboard."

Kelsa shakes her head, and the room keeps spinning even after she stops, darkness crawling at the edges of her vision. "She made her choice." And I made mine. She drags her blurring vision up to the old mercenary and bangs her glass on the countertop again. "Now, you said somethin' about startin' a party...?"

Later, hours later, when Kelsa jerks awake in her empty cabin, it takes her a few minutes to remember where she is. Despite her upgrades, she can taste bile in the back of her throat...and despite the years since she cleaned herself up, she can feel an itch building in the back of her nose, the kind only one thing was ever able to scratch.
Ch. 27: Something Borrowed

Chapter Summary

Kelsa ties up a few loose ends with her new crew, the last of which requires her to go incognito for the first time since her resurrection.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shooting Range

1130 Zulu

20 July 2185

Hangar, CSV Normandy SR-2

Grunt looks dubious as he hands over his gun. "The tank made it pretty clear," he repeats. "Only a krogan can use this weapon; it'll shatter a weak human skeleton." Though very young and very child-like-if children were disposed to gleeful bouts of bloody carnage, that is-Grunt had the benefit of tank imprints crafted by the warlord Okeer. One of those imprints let him minifacture the Claymore shotgun that he's looking at with a heady mix of longing, anticipation, and a sliver of anxiety.

Kelsa rolls her shoulders, wrapping the fingers of her left hand around the gun's stock as she falls into a firing position. "If Solus did his job right," she grunts, tucking the Claymore into her shoulder and sighting down on the humanoid cutout two metres from the firing line, "I don't have a weak human skeleton anymore." At least not as of six hours ago, when Kelsa woke up from the second of the three procedures that Cerberus didn't have time to perform before Wilson tried to kill her. Now her bones have been reinforced with a lattice of heavy fibres that the salarian promises make them nigh-on unbreakable. Her finger cinches up on the trigger, hesitating for half a heartbeat. The target's shredded by the second half of that heartbeat, and Kelsa's arm courses with a deep soreness from the shock of the Claymore throwing itself back into her frame...but the ache will fade with time, as her body heals from the operation. "You lose, Grunt," she pronounces, her scarred cheek dimpling with her smirk as she holds the krogan's weapon out to him. "Looks like you're sitting tight when we hit Bekenstein."

Grunt retrieves his boomstick, grumbling adolescently. "But I really like killing humans," he whines. The romp through the Eldfell-Ashland refinery on Zorya had seen his first taste of human blood, and he expressed a deep interest in continuing the practice on Bekenstein, where they're headed. Goto'd flat-out refused, obviously, but Kelsa decided to make a wager; if Solus' bone graft couldn't stand up to Grunt's shotgun and firing it broke her arm, she said she'd take the krogan along for security. Looks like that isn't going to happen. "Will you make sure to kill some for me, Shepard?"

The soldier's smirk deepens to a wry grimace. "I'll make a point of it," she promises him, nodding.
to the weapon in his hands. "Take that up to Taylor and have him 'facture me one just like it," she says, her voice slipping into the register of command."

"Shepard," Grunt acknowledges with a nod, and he moves to follow her word.

Even though she's not Alliance anymore, or even really a Spectre, she can see the sinews of discipline starting to take root on the ship. That OCS training's been coming in handy, even if there weak spots in the ship's order of battle that'll need tending to eventually; Miranda hasn't said more than two words to Kelsa since Zorya, where the soldier chose Zaeed's revenge over the lives of dozens of civilians. So it's fitful, tenuous in places, but already there's a framework that she can build from to accept the second batch of recruits that the Illusive Man's people worked up for her. To her annoyance, she couldn't delete that message from the bastard, either; as soon as she looked at it, her eyes caught on Tali'Zorah's name, and she felt a twinge of regret for her last run-in with the quarian, back on Freedom's Progress. But what really kept her from telling the Illusive Man to fuck off was the other two candidates on his list...their names weren't attached to the missive, but they're both in the same place. A place Kelsa's wanted to get back to almost as long as she's had this second chance at her life. Somewhere she's stayed up too many sleepless nights worrying about, even if she'd never say it out loud. Somewhere she can't avoid forever.

Illium.

Where Liara is.

The soldier suddenly wishes she hadn't given the shotgun back, because destroying a couple dozen targets would help cover over the sudden pang of longing and regret that tightens like a python in her throat. She doesn't even know what the fuck is wrong with her; it's not like Liara really meant that much to her, anyway. *A few weeks of good fucking took your mind off Kaidan,* she tells herself. *She probably wouldn't even recognise you. What's two years out of a hundred and eight?*

Shaking off the thought, the soldier stalks through the shuttle bay, offering a curt nod to the Cerberus shuttleman that's ferried her and her crew off the ship and back again for the last couple of weeks. He returns a salute in a parody of military discipline. *Not a parody,* she corrects herself as she steps onto the elevator. *Michael Chung, former gunnery chief. Quit the Alliance after Serenity got evacuated last year and his superiors couldn't do anything about it. Lost everyone.*

Damn near everyone on this ship has a story like that. They've been picked especially for that reason, Kelsa figures, both to bond with each other and to weigh Kelsa down to the deck and keep her coming back. Somehow, some way, killing Saren and Sovereign turned her into some kind of goddamned hero, and now everybody looks at her with hope. Hope that she can do something when nobody else will. Expecting her to move mountains...or, rather, to shoot her way through enough bodies until the problem gets resolved.

*Well, kid,* she hears Major Kincaide chuckle in her ear. *You did ask for something to fight for. I figure you can't do better than fighting for everybody.* The man's dead, been that way since before Alchera, but she can hear his galaxy-weary rasp as plain as if he was standing right beside her.

"Yeah," she answers the air. "But what happens when I fuck it up?" There's no answer but the *ding* of the elevator, its doors opening onto the crew deck. Shaking her head, Kelsa plows on, stalking into the portside observation deck that Goto's more-or-less claimed as her quarters.

The thief looks up from an old romance novel, her eyes glinting oddly for a second before she blinks them back to normal. "Shepard," she calls, unfolding herself from her chair and offering a polite smile. "I'm glad you've come. How're you feeling?"
Kelsa's right eyebrow inches up her forehead. "We're hitting Bekenstein tomorrow," she pronounces, cutting through Goto's attempt at smalltalk. "You said you wanted to see me before then. What do you need?"

That little smile falters just a bit, and Goto's eyes move from Kelsa's face to her neck, then to her forearms, and on down. "It isn't what I need, at least not directly. But I do need us to get into Donovan Hock's party without raising any eyebrows…except yours, apparently." The soldier's left eyebrow's joined its sister by now, but Kelsa doesn't comment. Yet. "If we're going to get Keiji's greybox, we'll need stealth. If we're lucky, we can pull it off without firing a shot."


It's one of only a handful of times in her whole life that she's used the empty greeting, and the subtext is not lost on the thief. "I know your reputation, Shep," Goto concedes. "But won't it be fun to do a little incognito reconnaissance and a little felony-level theft? We'll just have to slap on some makeup to cover up those scars and slip you into a nice dress."

"I don't do makeup," Kelsa points out, crossing her arms. "Dresses, either." Not a single time. Not since the laundry.

"You may not," Goto concedes. "But Allison Gunn does. There's even a small article about her feminine grace in next month's issue of .38 Special." The thief shows admirable courage—or an almost breathtakingly callous disregard for her own safety—by not flinching back from Kelsa's narrowed eyes. "I mean," she continues, "it's remarkable that the leader of a small troupe of mercenaries in the Terminus Systems has the time and inclination to be so ladylike. Word gets around."

"...and who in the Milky fucking Way is Allison Gunn?" Kelsa asks, after a beat. She's got the distinct feeling that she already knows the answer, and she doesn't like it.

"She is about as diametrically opposite to Kelsa Shepard as it's possible to be, while retaining a healthy taste for organised violence and the ability to look a sociopath in the eye without blinking, and coincidentally sharing a remarkable resemblance to the aforementioned Spectre from a distance."

Her suspicions confirmed, Kelsa lets out a long sigh through her nose. "So you're gonna slap some facepaint on me, pour me into some fancy dress, and pray that I can talk my way into wherever Hock's keeping your boyfriend's brain?" She still doesn't know why they can't have the Normandy level the house from orbit and sift through the rubble, but that isn't a conversation she wants to retread.

Goto clips a nod. "That about sums it up, Shep. I know you can do it, especially with me there to guide you." There's a small note of pleading in the thief's tone, barely there, and Kelsa knows that if she backs out now, Goto'll disappear from the ship like Kincaide's ghost. Probably take a few trinkets with her, too, the soldier thinks.

"What do you need me to do?" She can sense the thief's relief at once, which doesn't reassure the soldier. "As long as you understand that Donovan Hock is probably gonna see through whatever lie I try to tell him, and when he does that, we're going to have to kill him."

"As long as we've got Keiji's greybox by then," Goto muses, "I'll not shed any tears if he insists on throwing his life away." There's no venom there, not like Zaeed and his nearly-twenty-year quest for vengeance. But there is still a debt to pay, and Goto doesn't look like she'll shy away from paying it. Shaking her head, the thief gestures for Kelsa to take a seat in the chair that Goto vacated
a few minutes before. "You'll need to take your shirt off and roll up your pant legs," she instructs, casually. "I should have enough makeup to cover over the scars and tattoos, but I'd like to do a dry run now, just to make sure."

Kelsa gathers what patience she can as she peels off her black t-shirt. "If you wanted to see my tits," she quips, "you coulda just come by the loft while I was working out earlier." The soldier balls up the legs of her trousers to her knees before she looks up to gauge the thief's reaction.

Rather than rising to the bait, Goto's eyes flit mechanically, gathering data and assessing as she steps and leans to get every angle. "You really weren't kidding," she says, after a minute. "Have those legs ever seen a razor, Shep?"

"No," comes the answer, maybe a bit defensively. "Always had better things to do than worry about whether or not other people liked my legs."

Goto clicks her tongue, an edge of exasperation dancing across her cheeks. "I spend most of my time in a tactical cloak," she observes, "and even I know that looking good and feeling good aren't about other people." She sighs, shaking her head, like Kelsa imagines a decent mother might. "Guess I've got my work cut out for me, though," she observes, shrugging. "Wish I could do something with the hair, but I don't think we have time to relax it. Would you consider cutting those locks off?"

"Touch my hair and I'll cut something off," Kelsa rebuffs, her lip curling. "Allison Gunn can have dreads or she can go fuck herself."

The thief's lips part, but any objection dies before it passes them. "Very well," she allows, turning to rummage through a prefab shelf beside her cot. "I think we'd better get started."

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Main Floor, Hock Mansion

1745 Zulu

21 July 2185

Milgrom, Bekenstein, Boltzmann

He knows. The suspicion becomes a certainty when he catches Kelsa's false-brown eyes-covered over with contacts to hide the red-veined green tint, which also let her see the iridescent lines of power chords and hidden technology in the walls and the floor-at the end of a self-serving speech to his gathered guests. "May there always be a market for the things we do," he finishes, his odd South African accent colouring his Galactic lackeys and brown-nosers applaud, and Donovan Hock accepts their adulation with a couple of modest nods, but his own real brown eyes never waver from Kelsa's made-up face. "Enjoy the party, miz Gunn," he grinds out, smirking, before he turns away like nothing's the matter. But he knows, and she knows. She probably couldn't prove it to the Council, but she's killed people on weaker hunches, and been right.

Goto's voice rings in Kelsa's ear, oblivious. "I said get him talking, and you got him talking," she informs the uncomfortable spy, from beneath her tactical cloak; Hock supposedly didn't know what Goto looked like, but he hadn't let her into the party officially, regardless. She'd had to sneak in under wraps, and her voice has been buzzing in Kelsa's ear ever since.

The soldier retreats from the gathered mass of sycophants, her tongue thick. "He's onto us," she growls, under her breath. "Playing it cool." She lets that sink in for a couple of seconds before she states the obvious. "It's a trap."
Goto's answer is a couple of heartbeats in coming. "I didn't detect any hints in his voice modulation," she states, optimistic.

"He knows," Kelsa insists, moving to a corner of the room, each step taking a reservoir of concentration to keep from stumbling over the one-inch heels that Goto gave her. "This is your op, so it's your call, but we're gonna have to start shooting before too long." She'd rather sooner than later, all things considered; there's a piece strapped to her inner thigh, a slim Cerberus pistol, but it's enough for her to fuck up Hock's day.

"We stick to the plan," Goto insists, implacable. "I've got enough data here to mimic his voice to the vault's interpreter; that and the DNA we snatched from his private quarters will get us through the door, as soon as we find the password."

"Understood," Kelsa rebuffs, scowling; her face and arms itch from the foundation and cream that fill in the gaps in her skin, her shoulders and chest and back feel smothered under the layers of grease that cover over the tattoos she's accrued. The game is up, but she's got to keep playing, she's gotta keep walking in these goddamned heels, in the little black dress that looks so fucking stupid laying over the diamond-hard lines of her flanks and hips. *Feminine grace,* she huffs, her eyes following a glowing powerline. She's trying to find the mechanism that's locking the door to security, but she gets distracted by a young couple huddled in a corner, half-hidden behind a bookshelf.

She hears a subtle snorting that cuts across Kelsa's awareness, bringing back the heady years of the Garden, after Jay fell afoul of Mister V's paranoia and before Kelsa dragged herself into that recruiting station. Almost as many years and a hell of a lot more dead bodies have passed since then as came before, but even after all this time, Kelsa recognises the sound of sand going up somebody's nose.

Without meaning to, she steps closer, ignoring Goto's directions for her to go around the bookshelf. "Hey," she calls, her voice husky with a sudden want that she can't quite shake. "No fair you didn't bring enough for everybody."

The man is the first to look up from his little two-person huddle, his blue eyes flashing with a sudden biotic tint that he can't hide after a hit. "Lay off," he growls, full of piss and vinegar. He's not a day older than twenty, here because he's a trust fund kid whose parents are heavily invested in Hock's enterprise, and he's got no idea who he's fucking with. "Get the fuck outta here."

Kelsa tilts her head and blinks; in the dark of her closed eyes, she sees the poor boy's head spun around backward on his shoulders, blood spurting from fissures torn in the flesh of his neck. The vision fades with her exhale, though her fingers tingle, itching to make it a reality. "You might wanna take his advice," she tells the boy's companion, a strung-out girl only a couple of years younger. "You don't wanna be here in about fifteen minutes." Licking her tingling gums, Kelsa turns away from the kids, before she snatches the spoons from around their necks and kills them for her trouble.

Rolling her shoulders, the soldier follows that power cable back into the library, until she finds the source that's keeping the vault's kinetic barrier sustained. Turns out the switch is inside a bust of Hock himself, and Kelsa makes short work of tripping it. "There," she tells herself, trusting Goto to hear her. "Meet me by the security door, and we'll get that password."

That half-familiar distortion hovers by the alcove when Kelsa makes her way to it, invisible to all the others. "Are you ready?" Goto's voice whispers in Kelsa's ear, her tactical cloak muffling her real voice even at this distance.
In response, the soldier pushes her way through the previously-sealed door, disappearing into a hallway that's deserted enough to let her fetch her pistol without attracting any attention. Her thumb naturally ghosts over the panel to overload the gun's ammo to incendiary rounds, and by the time the door closes behind her, Goto's cloak disappears in a crackle of static electricity. "Stay behind me," Kelsa counsels, though not out of any sense of altruism; she made a promise, and she doesn't intend to shirk it.

Security cameras let the guards know she's coming, but that's not enough to save them. Her basic in-built shields, again courtesy of Cerberus, don't even go down when she breaches the central command room; after a few breathless seconds of sustained fire, she stands amidst a tangled whirlwind of bodies. "Grunt says hello," she announces to the room at large, her heartbeat reclining from its half-tick increase with a long breath.

Goto picks her way through the door, regarding the carnage with a distant distaste. "Let's find that password," she urges, moving to a terminal without further comment.

Kelsa lets the woman work, her own eyes skirting around the room to assess possible passageways for reinforcements. Before her resurrection, she could tool around a network terminal adequately, and even do a bit of hacking; in the last two years, though, the pace of advance has outstripped even her OCS training around computers. Luckily for her and Goto, the essentials of ballistic combat haven't changed since before humans discovered mass relays. *Point, click, dodge.* The only kind of dance she's ever been good at.

"Got it," Goto sighs, an instant before Hock's voice sounds from the terminal. *The password is Peruggia,* he says, like he'd never expect anyone to break into this room.

*Or like he expected it all along, and wants us to find it,* Kelsa thinks to herself...but this isn't her operation, and she's already warned Goto about it being compromised. If the whole thing goes FUBAR and they have to shoot their way out of the vault, Kelsa won't exactly count it as a failure, in any case.

Goto cloaks up just before they re-enter the main floor, whose walls are evidently thick enough to silence an all-out firefight. Kelsa can't see Hock anywhere, but she spies those two fucking idiots from the corner, wandering further into the mansion. Swallowing, the soldier meanders as gracefully as she can to the private stairwell leading to Hock's private vault.

With the password in Hock's voice, the kinetic barrier disabled, and the man's DNA, Goto should be able to hack her way through the vault door without any trouble. While she's doing that, Kelsa retrieves the armour and weapons they smuggled in underneath a gold-plated statue of Saren Arterius, her old enemy. She tears herself out of the dress and stockings that Goto poured her into earlier that morning, peeling off the contacts, and she makes short work of slipping inside the much cosier suit of heavy plate; her visor and new Claymore shotgun wipe away the last vestiges of discomfort she might feel from the camouflage. She wants to scrub off the gunk on her face and arms, too, but she holds herself back, just in case they can walk out of here without killing anyone else; if Hock survives the day, she doesn't want him recognising her that easy. "We ready?"

"Just about," Goto confirms, wiping the cameras with an infiltration VI...though anyone who might catch the image will have to wade through a pile of bodies first, which might tip them off.

Checking her shotgun, Kelsa takes the lead once more, lurching into the vault with a sweeping glance. It's deserted, empty of any heat signatures her visor might pick up. Only after assessing the threat can she see the objects that Hock's spent a lifetime collecting. "A bunch of tacky shit," she grunts, scanning over at least a dozen statues from a half-dozen civilisations. "You sure Okuda's brain's in here?"
"Positive," the thief insists. "My scanner's picking up a reading..." And she's off, weaving through plinths and obelisks, fragments of dead cultures, the private world of a selfish fuck with more money than sense. Kelsa follows, cautiously, her attention half-taken by assessing the nooks and corners between the displays for the value they'll have as cover. "Here it is," Goto exclaims, hoisting a little silver cylinder that's barely bigger than an ammo block. "Now let's get out of here."

Kelsa nods, but before she can answer, the sound of two hands clapping rises from the corners of the room. The soldier spins around in time to see that the back wall's turned into a vidscreen, dominated by Hock's amused face. "Very impressive, Miss Goto," he commends the thief. "I admit I was worried that you wouldn't take the bait, but you've proven yourself more than capable of falling into a trap."

"Toldja," Kelsa grunts, sparing her companion a quick glance before her gaze scatters again, probing the crannies of the room.

"I was considering destroying the box," their host goes on, "but now that you're here, I'll have the key to unlocking it in a matter of minutes."

That was one reason Kelsa'd been in favour of showering the mansion with ordnance; Keiji Okuda's greybox supposedly had sensitive intel on it that could cause some kind of galactic disruption...the kind of disruption a mercenary and arms dealer stayed up nights praying for. But the fool had keyed his greybox's access to one of Goto's memories, so it should've been useless to a fucker like Donovan Hock. Unless, of course, Donovan Hock could lure Goto into a trap. Unless, of course, Donovan Hock could lure Goto into a trap.

Which he just did.

"Do you know who I am?" Kelsa gruffs, barking over another boring monologue from Hock. She grips the stock of her Claymore, her finger itching to pull the trigger back for the first time.

Hock looks at her, but he doesn't see her, not really. "Some unfortunate soul taken in by Kasumi's story, or maybe an offer of payment to help her retrieve her lover's memories," he supplies. "It does not matter; I knew that Allison Gunn was a forgery as soon as I heard the name. For that alone you will die."

The soldier slinks through the rows of statues, taking deliberate steps closer to the vidscreen. "Wrong answer, Hock," she corrects the man. She's halfway to a set of blast doors when she stops; the metal's thick, but her HUD reads out a mass of heat signatures behind it, massing. "I don't work for Goto; she works for me. I came after the greybox. I killed your guards...and I'm the one that's gonna let Goto kill you."

Hock guffaws, shaking his head in disbelief. "And just who are you, then?"

She tilts her head, raising her arm to scrape her cheek along the shoulderpad of her armour. The thick makeup runs, staining the hard shell and exposing a raw, red vein of cybernetics. "My momma called me Kelsa," she supplies. "I don't really give a fuck what you call me, though. You're gonna be dead in about an hour, regardless." Maybe less, if Kasumi's half as good a shot as she is a thief.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who's reading along, especially buttercup23 for being
such a splendiferous beta-reader!
In which Kelsa and Miranda come to something of an understanding.

This chapter certainly helps the story fulfil its 'M' rating, so beware.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Shepard," EDI's bodiless voice prompts, as the soldier pulls herself into her second hundredth sit-up, hanging off the ceiling bar by her knees. "Operative Lawson is outside, requesting entrance."

Kelsa grunts into the next curl. "Tell her I'll see her in twenty seconds." Unfolding from sit-up number two hundred one, Kelsa converts her momentum into a backflip, landing hard against the steel grate of the floor. In the nineteen seconds remaining, she slips into her simple trousers and black shirt; the clothes soak through with her sweat almost immediately, but they're better than answering the door naked, since she was the one who told Lawson to swing by tonight. On the way, the soldier catches a snatch of her reflection in the empty fishtank; not a trace of makeup remains to obscure the orange threads spreading like roots in the cracks of her skin.

The door opens at Kelsa's touch, and she sees Lawson's dressed in her usual skin-tight white suit. It's the kind that's supposed to distract any man in the room, make them underestimate the woman wearing it. Kelsa couldn't pull that tactic off, but she can understand its appeal, even so...and she's not above being distracted by it for half a heartbeat, herself.

"You wanted to see me?" Lawson's words break into Kelsa's thoughts, and the soldier's red-green eyes snap up to the taller woman's face. Kelsa nods and jerks her head toward her shoulder, more command than invitation, and Lawson obliges by sauntering onto the Loft's upper deck. "I assume you know we have suitable gym facilities in the hangar, Shepard," the operative muses, wrinkling her nose.

"Always liked to work out alone," Kelsa explains. "Bad for morale to have the boys think they can try and beat me, especially now." Especially after you got finished with me. Lawson seems to take the intel for what it's worth, but before she can offer some kind of comeback, Kelsa pushes on. "I
think you and I need to have a real talk, since it looks like we're gonna be working together for awhile." She shakes her head, grimacing. "I don't really care if you like me, Lawson; most people don't, when they get to know me. But I need to know you're gonna fall in line and pull your weight, and you need to know I can take us all the way to the end of this thing."

The operative's expression is unreadable as she considers the soldier's words, and rather than answering simply, the woman turns and steps down into the lounge area of Kelsa's quarters. "I already know that, Shepard," she says, too low for a normal human to hear...but Kelsa's aural implants pick up the muffled tones, enhance the words to perfect clarity. "I know more about you than any other living person, other than the Illusive Man, of course."

Kelsa feels her stomach tighten up, and it's not from the two hundred and one sit-ups she just did. "You know about the Garden," she says, her feet rooted to the spot on the upper deck, her eyes burning into the back of the other woman's head.

Lawson looks over her shoulder, eyebrows knitting together, almost in sympathy. "I know about your time with the Reds, yes, and about Saint Mary's." She holds up a hand, as if to forestall an outburst...or even a bullet. "All I mean to say is that I know better than anyone alive that you're the best person to helm this ship, to stop the Collectors. You won't let anything get in the way when you've decided that something needs doing."

"Or when something needs killing," Kelsa almost adds, but her tongue grows too thick in her mouth to form the words. Instead she swallows and hops down the three steps to the Loft's lower level, halving the distance between them. "I don't trust Cerberus," she states, even though Lawson knows that, too. "And I sure as fuck don't trust your boss...but I've got a ship, a good start on a crew, and a mission."

Lawson inclines her head fractionally, so that a single lock of dark hair falls across her pale face. "That's far more generous than most hostile parties can expect from our organisation," she points out. "Luckily for the both of us, your conduct thus far has not yet led my employer to cut his losses."

Kelsa gets the sense that cutting his losses would mean getting rid of all traces of the Lazarus Project, including its chief administrator. "I get that you don't work for me," she gruffs, "and I can accept it."

"That's surprising," the operative cuts in, her lip curling a shade under a sneer. "Not sure I can believe it, given your attitude up to this point, skipper."

"I didn't say I liked it," Kelsa concedes, a growl creeping into her tone. "But if we're gonna do this, I need to know I can trust you to follow orders in the field. If you can't give me that, you're gonna be stuck in that office sucking down rations and filing reports from the sidelines for the whole mission. Do you want that, Lawson?"

The woman blinks, her expression blanking while she considers. "I...spent years taking orders from someone I loathed, someone I couldn't respect." Her eyes take on a thousand-yard quality, the kind that Kelsa sees in the mirror whenever she remembers things she'd rather forget. "No matter what I did, no matter how hard I worked, I was never good enough for Henry Lawson. Never perfect."

It's not an answer, but it's enough to touch Kelsa's curiosity. "He was your dad." She never had one, not that she can remember, but she's known enough people with fucked up fathers to keep from pretending she couldn't be lucky, for all that.

Lawson nods and tucks that rogue lock of hair behind her ear, turning her gaze up to the empty
tank of water. "I was his legacy," she explains. "The jewel in the crown of his life; designed to be utterly perfect in every way."

"And what did your momma think of all that shit?" Kelsa asks, letting herself get sucked into a conversation Lawson apparently needs to have.

The operative's icy eyes cut back to Kelsa's face. "I never had a mother," she says, academically. "I wasn't bred, Shepard; I was made. My father used his own genetic material to clone me." She raises her right fist, and as she does so, a dark blue nimbus thickens the air from her knuckles to her elbow. "My biotics, my intelligence, even my looks...everything about me was made to his specifications, to give me an edge in any situation."

Lawson's story brings a thoughtful frown to Kelsa's face; she's seen too many horrible things to shudder, but the urge is there, buried under years of blood and death. "So you're like the opposite of an orphan," she observes. "Funny how we both ended up in the same place, huh?"

"I don't think it's funny at all," Lawson counters, her lips tilting into a frown to match Kelsa's. "We're both great women, Shepard, but there's an unignorable divide between us; nobody who knew the circumstances of our births and early childhoods could have predicted that you would one day ask me to trust you enough to take your orders."

"We're both engineered," Kelsa points out, her cheeks tingling. "We both ran away from the prisons we grew up in."

"True," Lawson concedes, her eyes sliding away from Kelsa's gaze, landing somewhere near the floor. "But you were great before you were altered, despite where you came from. I'm great because of those things."

Kelsa's eyes hone in on the other woman's neck, and she feels her own heartbeat kicking up to match the fluttering pulse she sees there. "You know," she husks, swallowing, "you ain't as pretty as you think you are, Lawson." It isn't what she meant to say, but once the words are past her lips, the soldier doesn't want to take them back. She offers Lawson a challenging stare when the operative's icy eyes cut back to her, and Kelsa smirks, halving the distance between them once more in a single step.

"Well," Lawson breathes, and Kelsa doesn't need her aural implants to detect the husk in the other woman's voice. "You're not as ugly as you seem to think you are, Shepard."

Even though she's standing still, Kelsa feels the floor shift under her feet, her lungs tight and fingers tingling, her eyes inching down Lawson's face to settle on her pale lips; she doesn't know who moves first, but Kelsa blinks, and by the time her eyelids open again, her left hand's fixed to the bottom of Lawson's neck, her fingers and thumb splaying over the other woman's collarbones. The operative's heartbeat rises, and Kelsa feels waves of biotic energy coursing over her arm and spine from Lawson's own fingers digging into her left shoulder. But Lawson doesn't offer any resistance as the soldier pushes forward, forcing her onto the backfoot; there's no sneer, no quirk of the eyebrow, no confused objection.

No gentle curve of the lip. No beguiling freckles splashed across those white cheeks. No curiosity, no accusation. When Lawson's shoulders rock back into Kelsa's locker, the operative licks over her lips and glances up to the ceiling. "EDI," she calls. "Shut down all sensors to this cabin. Mercury protocol."

"Acknowledged, Operative Lawson," comes the AI's voice, even flatter than normal, without the accompanying flare of blue from the room's terminal.
The lights shift very subtly in the periphery of Kelsa's vision, and for the first time since she walked into this room, she can't sense EDI waiting to chime in. "Didn't know you could do that," she ventures, her thumb sliding up the side of Lawson's neck.

The taller woman's head tilts back and sideways, her chest rising with a hiss. "What you don't know I can do could fill a datapad's memory banks," she growsl, her eyes lidding heavily. "For instance, I could rip the flesh off your bones from your shoulder down to the soles of your feet before you could blink."

"Not before I break your neck," Kelsa counters, her throat drying even as her lips tingle. She leans in, the butt of her palm pressing suggestively into the top of Lawson's sternum, her blunt fingernails grazing roughly over the side of the operative's throat. "Maybe crush your windpipe."

A hint of disdain rises up from the depths of Lawson's face. "Do you really want to kill me, Shepard?" She husks, swallowing hard against the hand at her neck. "...Or do you want something else?" Rather than answer, Kelsa's right hand swings in a low arc, her tingling fingers aiming to land between Lawson's thighs, but the operative's left hand intercepts the soldier's wrists. All of Kelsa's native strength and cybernetic implants aren't enough to push through the miniature black hole that Lawson opens up just behind her knuckles, its gravity just enough to hold her arm steady against Lawson's resistance. "No," Lawson growls, her slitted eyes widening. "You have to tell me what it is that you want, or I will walk out of here." It's not a threat, nor a promise, but a plain statement of fact.

Kelsa remembers the sound of sand at Hock's little party, how it hadn't changed in over twenty years. The kids don't know how lucky they are, to have crossed her path and lived to burn their youth up their noses on their parents' credit chits. The warmth of Lawson's flesh anchors her, pulling her thoughts away from red sand and red blood, and Kelsa's eyes refocus on the woman's uncompromising face. "I want to fuck you, Lawson," she admits, to herself as much as to the operative. "Maybe show you a few things you couldn't learn about me from laying on a slab."

"I suppose it has been awhile," Lawson muses, lightly, leaning more fully into the hand at her throat. "For the both of us...though it likely doesn't seem that long for you, Shep-"

"Lawson," the soldier gruffs. "Shut up." She doesn't want to think about those two lost years, or the weeks that took place just before the gap in her memories; she doesn't want to think at all. Her fingernails dig across Lawson's collarbones and down her sternum, until Kelsa's fingertips hook into the neckline of the operative's suit, even as the two women each hold the other's gaze without blinking. "You can let me fuck you, or you can fling me back and get out; that's your choice." As she talks, her battle-hardened rasp grows thick with the hunger she's been trying to hold back since she opened her eyes a few weeks ago.

Kelsa's answer comes when the pressure behind her knuckles disappears, and she has to close her eyes at the sound of the gasp that hisses out of Lawson's throat when the soldier's fingers land heavily between the operative's thighs. Heat seeps through that skin-tight bodysuit, killing any doubts that Lawson might be biting her tongue. To the contrary, Lawson rolls her hips, grinding her front against the butt of Kelsa's palm even as those calloused fingers push as far toward the woman's core as the fabric will let them go.

Lawson's free hand claps onto Kelsa's right shoulder, both her hands gripping fistfuls of the soldier's sweat-soaked t-shirt. "...Shepard," the operative gasps, just before Kelsa's left hand jerks down with enough force to tear the synthetic fibres of Lawson's bodysuit. "Shepard!" She repeats, surprise mixed with longing and something deeper than lust. "Look at me, Shepard," Lawson husks, her perfectly-trimmed fingernails prickling into the meat and muscle of Kelsa's shoulders.
The soldier's eyes slide open, her gaze landing halfway up Lawson's belly, where the torn front of her suit hangs half-open. Kelsa can't find a single reason to complain about her ocular implants as her eyes range across Lawson's curves, weaving slowly up her chest and neck. Kelsa swallows, hard, finally looking up into the other woman's ice-chip eyes without blinking. "What is it, Lawson?" She punctuates her question by grinding her palm even harder against the operative's core, her left hand planting in the hollow between Lawson's breasts. "...Kinda busy, here…"

"I just want you to look at me," Lawson answers her, thickly. "You said you wanted *me*, so don't…" A groan creeps into her voice, as Kelsa's lower hand snakes up to the split in her bodysuit. "...Don't imagine I'm someone else, Shepard."

"Got it," Kelsa gruffs, swallowing. She tears her gaze away from those blue eyes, but she keeps her own open, drinking in the pale, smooth flesh as her fingers slip down the front of the operative's suit. Lawson's skin is perfect, never broken by a single hair; Kelsa can't help but think of the last woman she touched like this, the last blue-eyed beauty she saw half-naked. Grimacing, Kelsa reclaims Lawson's cunt, and now there's no fabric between the operative's flesh and the soldier's hand, nothing to keep Kelsa's two middle fingers from diving into Lawson's core all the way up to the last knuckle. Lawson's strangled cry and the burning heat of her flesh are enough to weigh down the stray memory of the asari, and Kelsa draws her eyes back to the other woman's face as she tests her depths.

Lawson's leg shifts, her knee brushing along Kelsa's inner thighs, while biotic energy tingles down the soldier's spine from her shoulderblades. It would be so easy to let go, let Lawson give back some of the sensation she's getting, but something inside Kelsa twists away from that urge. "No," she barks, giving a slight shake of her head. "Just…let me do this," she says, not quite a command.

The operative's eyes flash a deeper shade of blue for a heartbeat. "Are you sure?" She wonders, halfway to a groan.

Kelsa nods. The heat around her fingers drives her own body to beg for some kind of give-and-take, but the soldier holds back. She can't afford to let her control slip, not when so much depends on her...not when there's nothing to catch her, to keep her from falling into a bottomless pit of want, when there's only the echoes of a soldier's discipline to hold her back from that abyss.

Rather than speak, the soldier leans into Lawson, her right hand working deeper and faster as her left hand takes its place just under the other woman's collarbones. She breathes deep, tasting the other woman's scent in the air, watching as tension crawls up Lawson's face. She doesn't need her ocular implants to notice the flush that takes hold of the other woman's cheeks, and it isn't long before Lawson's head starts tilting back, her eyes rolling up to the ceiling and her mouth falling open. Kelsa realises, maybe for the first time, that *this* is what saved her in the dark years of her life, whenever it seemed like she was only good for one thing. Knowing her hands could do more than kill anyone within her reach helped her get to that grey recruiting office in Detroit; it helped her get through OCS, through the aftermath of Torfan, through ICT. So while the sight of Lawson taking in that long breath makes Kelsa wet with the same kind of hunger, when the air breaks with the force of Lawson's scream and she feels Lawson's cunt clamp down on her fingers, Kelsa shudders with a different kind of release.

Another full-throated scream tapers into a third, and by the time Lawson's head falls forward, they're both shaking and panting heavily. Slowly, carefully, Kelsa untangles herself from Lawson's suit and hands. Unable to help herself, the soldier brings her drenched fingers up to her lips, dragging her tongue across them to sample Lawson's taste more directly. The salt-sweet drives a spike into her unsated desire, wrenching another shudder from the soldier, and her eyelids narrow as she sizes up the other woman. "Thanks for that," she manages, her tone halfway between a
shotgun shell and a hiss. "You'd better go clean yourself up if you wanna hit Haestrom in a couple hours."

Lawson takes a moment to catch her breath, looking thoughtful. "That was…"

"It was," Kelsa finishes, gruffly. "Don't make it more than that." She's about to add a good *Get out* when Lawson pushes off of the wall on her own, half-heartedly pulling her ruined suit closed to cover her front as she snakes around Kelsa to climb the little stairwell to the upper deck.

Lawson pauses a half-metre from the doorway, glancing over her shoulder. "In case it needs to be said," she says, thickly, "this never happened. As far as the rest of the ship is concerned, I was never here tonight."

Kelsa inclines her head, looking at the other woman from underneath her eyebrows. "I was gonna say the same," she admits, the fingers of her right hand curling into a fist, though she keeps it close to her lips.

The soldier watches the operative leave without offering—or being asked for—so much as a shirt, and if Kelsa wonders how Lawson's going to get back to her own office without killing a few grunts along the way, the notion doesn't last beyond the *hiss* of her cabin's doors closing of their own accord. When she's well and truly alone, Kelsa lets out a long, ragged breath she didn't know she was holding, her eyes narrowing to slits as her head bows low.

Her nose pushes against her knuckles, and her next breath steals away from her lungs in a shuddering sigh, a tremble that stalks out from her core to the tips of her fingers and the soles of her feet. Not quite realising how, Kelsa finds her shoulders pushed against her locker, a good eight centimetres below the spot Miranda was keeping warm, and her eyes close that final centimetre to shut out the last of the cabin's light.

The darkness behind Kelsa's eyelids holds steady for a handful of heartbeats, as her still-moist fingers find her neck and her fist dissolves into a collection of fingers and a palm that slowly work their way down her throat, catching on the collar of her t-shirt. It's too easy to imagine the fabric tears from a kiss of biotic power, rather than her own machine-enhanced strength; too easy to feel otherworldly tingles weaving through her flesh as those fingers meander over the hard lines of her sternum and abdomen. The deep black of her mind gives over to a pair of eyes, softer and deeper and more brilliantly blue than any gene mods could ever hope to fake.

In her mind's eye, Kelsa sees a purple tongue peek between cobalt lips, as her own tongue slithers past her teeth to wet her mouth. Completely alone, without even EDI to eavesdrop, the brick wall of her resolve crumbles underneath the weight of memories and desires she's held back for too long. When her fingers broach the seam of her trousers, she can't help but pretend the fingers aren't her own. Alien but not foreign, the callouses becoming finer, the fingertips pebbled instead of wrinkled. She's gentler with herself than she was with Lawson, those same two fingers teasing around her entrance as the brow-ridges in her vision curl in concentration and, just maybe, a little concern.

The soldier's left hand brushes over her belly, but it feels wrong-too human, too much like her own—and she forks her errant fingers through the roots of her hair, instead. Her tongue draws into her mouth as her teeth begin to clench, the image in her mind taking shape, becoming more undeniably asari as she drives her fingers into her own aching cunt. Those fingers take their time inside her, not tentative, but greedy...like they want to soak up every angle and nook Kelsa's flesh has to offer. Just like the last time, a few hours before Alchera, when it seemed like she had at least a few more months of peace. Kelsa's quiet when she comes, no more than a strangled grunt, but the experience nearly turns her inside-out; just like drinking, her body isn't used to the sensation anymore, and if
she wasn't slouched against the wall, the soldier would've collapsed onto the floor in a gasping mess. Instead she slides down the locker until her knees lock her into a crouch, her head rocking back to slam painfully into the metal, her eyes stinging. "Fuck," she hisses, her belly feeling even emptier than it should as she yanks her hand away from her centre. She doesn't cry; she hasn't cried since Detroit, not even once. But a hollow opens up behind her heart that she can't fill up, no matter how hard she breathes.

After a half-hour in that cramped pose, trying to think of anything but blue, Kelsa pushes herself back onto the balls of her feet. "EDI," she gruffs, shrugging out of the ruined t-shirt and sliding out of her trousers.

To her surprise, the AI's telltale blue orb pops up at its terminal, on the upper deck. "How can I assist you, Shepard?"

Blinking, the solder turns back to her locker. "When did Miranda renew your access to my chambers?"

EDI's modulated voice begins, even flatter than normal. "I have a block."

"Yeah," Kelsa cuts in. "That prevents you from answering that question," she paraphrases, rolling her eyes and pulling out her armour box. "Forget I asked." She doesn't really care if the AI saw her fondling herself, but another thought strikes her. "If I invoke Mercury protocol, can I lock you out of this room myself?"

"No," comes the answer, half-expected. "I am programmed to only respond to such commands from high-ranking Cerberus personnel, which you are not, per your own specifications," EDI informs the soldier. "...However," it-she, Kelsa can't help thinking-goes on, "I can reduce my sensors to minimal functionality upon your request, Shepard, since you are captain of this vessel. My databanks will still record baseline biometric data, but no audio or video until completion of a maintenance cycle, which occurs every two thousand seven hundred fifty-three seconds."

Kelsa shrugs inside her three-piece armour, expanded and slapped on during the AI's explanation. "Good to know," she replies. "And...thanks, EDI. I appreciate it." She retrieves her shotgun and an SMG from her private armoury, doing her best to ignore the cold pit that's trying to open up deep in her stomach, matched by two pairs of cold blue eyes in the back of her mind.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to all of my readers, especially buttercup23 for being an awesome beta-reader. If you like, you can check out my tumblr at riptidemonzarc.tumblr.com for random Bioware reblogs and other musings.

Also, I've posted a playlist to Youtube which will serve as a soundtrack for Sol Invictus. Scope it out at http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8qPOlbWQEve-OwBHentaSSsHw52e5nZ
Ch. 29: High Stakes

Chapter Summary

Kelsa snatches up a familiar face from near-certain death, and tops it off by finishing the upgrades Cerberus didn't quite get around to making. Her recent string of altruism catches up with her when more of her crew start dropping hints about personal problems that need cleaning up, too.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Abandoned Spaceport

0735 Zulu

23 July 2185

Haestrom (ashore), Dhole

The big geth armature isn't going down easy; just like the quarian said, it turtles-up to repair itself whenever they hit it with anything harder than a spray of assault rifle fire. Up to now, the deck's been too thick with two-legged platforms to make too much of a dent in the armature's protocol, but Kelsa's team is doing a fine job of thinning them out, in between ducking and covering from the armature's heavy weapons. The human soldier zigzags from a crate to a pillar to a slab of ancient, crumbled concrete, every step bringing her closer to the giant hunk of sentient metal. "X-team," she rasps, calling Grunt and Vakarian to attention. "Keep the heat off of C-team; C, when that fucking thing pokes its head up, hit it with biotic and tech attacks to keep it distracted." She's leading a five-head squad on Haestrom; the X stands for extraterrestrial, while the C denotes Lawson and Taylor, the Cerberus goons. Goto and Solus stayed behind on the ship, their particular talents unsuited for a blunt-force extraction; besides, the thief is still grieving over deleting her lover's memories on Kelsa's advice, and the soldier won't begrudge her a little down-time. Kelsa also knows Jack well enough to keep the unstable biotic off of any mission Lawson and Taylor come out on, so she's staying frosty in the hold, too.

Four quick acknowledgements report in Kelsa's aural implants, nearly subsumed by the sounds of gunfire and a rocket screaming across the gap; the quarian commando, Kal'Reegar, is evidently still kicking over there, giving them some much-needed artillery support. Kelsa inches her head up sideways, until her visorless eye just edges over the top of the dusty slab. "...Now," she hisses, just an instant before the smooth-looking metal dome cracks into a four-legged death machine.

Lawson hits the unfolding geth with a static overload from her omni-tool, while Taylor does his best to tear the armature's rising head off with a wave of dark energy. Both attacks give Kelsa her chance, and she vaults over her cover, rolling into a short sprint to land kneeling at the base of the armature, between its two forelegs. At least three different weapons systems could cut her in half or atomise her from this position, but that's why the geth put the armature's central processor right here, and destroying the CPU is the only way Kelsa's taking this son of a bitch down without her Mako. In the split-second it takes the armature to shake off C-team's assault, Kelsa drives her omni-bladed left arm deep into a vulnerable spot on the armature's outer shell, all the way into the
guts of its processor. She wastes no time in filling the new-made hole with a point-blank shell from her krogan shotgun.

The resulting explosion throws her back, dropping her shields and opening a few shallow cuts on her face, but the soldier regains her feet in time to see the last of the machines fall to her team. Lawson spares her a glance, those ice-blue eyes just as cold as ever. You should be more careful, Kelsa imagines hearing her say, but the operative only turns her eyes over the killing field. "Do you want to check on the quarian, Skipper?" She's talking about Kal'Reegar, the sole survivor of a security detail escorting some quarian scientists here to study Haestrom's sun, Dholen. The star is getting much hotter, much faster than it should; the quarians know this because Haestrom used to be one of their colonies, back before the geth rose up and chased them onto the Migrant Fleet. The geth, as helpful as always, apparently didn't see the wisdom in allowing a squad of quarians free access to one of their former colonies; before the Normandy showed up, every single glass-face on the planet was set for extinction. When they found Kal'Reegar, he was already in a bad way, but he offered to help by firing a rocket launcher until the sun's radiation shorted it out, and Kelsa didn't refuse. Now he could be dead, even though he was still breathing a few seconds ago.

Out of all seventeen million quarians tooling around the galaxy, however, Kelsa only cares about one. "We push on," she grunts, nodding toward the thick set of doors that the scientists are barricaded behind. One of those scientists is Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, and she's the only reason any non-quarian organics are on this bake-dried hunk of rock. Lawson's eyes flick back to Kelsa's face, lingering there for half a heartbeat, but she merely nods. So far she's made good on her vow to pretend that the incident in the Loft never happened, which is just fine by Kelsa. The soldier takes one last perimeter sweep before she pushes past Lawson and Vakarian, checking that her shotgun's still functional despite the grit of the blast. Of course it is, she thinks, smirking. It's krogan-made. Fucking thing can shoot underwater, I'd bet.

"Tali," Kelsa tells her omni-tool, when she comes up against the barricaded door. "We got negative contacts out here. You alright in there?"

Tali's voice chirps through a static-filled connection, owing to the sun's radiation. "I'm opening the blast door," she tells her rescue party. "There are still some data caches we haven't cleared, yet." The slab of dry-rusted metal slowly creaks and squeals as it rises up from the floor of the platform Kelsa's team is waiting on, something that might once have been a loading bay for the three-hundred-years-dead city. There are three quarians inside the small store-room, its walls covered with ancient-looking computers, with more modern equipment scattered across dusty tables and crumbling boxes. The quarians are all frantically busy, their backs to the intruders, muttering to themselves and each other in jargon so technical and quick that Kelsa's translator can't make proper sense of it. "There," comes the middle voice, Tali's voice, just as her and her colleagues' omni-tools light up. "We all now have copies of the data to take offworld." Then, and only then, does she turn around to greet her old crewmates. The light's too dim and her visor's too thick for Kelsa to get a bead on her eyes, but the human soldier imagines the quarian blinking at Lawson and Taylor, before her head tilts off to Kelsa's left. "It is good to see you, Garrus," she says, pointedly. "And you, too, Shepard."

"Good to see you're still in one piece, Tali," Vakarian rumbles. "Wish I could say the same for myself, but...well." He shrugs, one mandible twitching, his head still halfrapped in Chakwas' bandages and the metal of his own aural implant glinting.

"We don't have long," Lawson breaks in, her tone perhaps a shade less cutting than it might have been. "We should move out as quickly as possible."

Kelsa swallows the familiar frustration that threatens to rise. "Lawson's right," she concedes,
looking back over her shoulder at the scorched loading bay. "Another drop ship could land any
minute. You comin', Tali?"

"Wait," one of the other scientists, a male, pipes up. "You cannot seriously ask a quarian to work
for Cerberus," he points out, mirroring an objection raised by Tali's former team, all the way back
on Freedom's Progress. "Especially when you've already shown one of our people such rough
treatment."

Lawson's marginally-better mood seems to evaporate immediately. "He was returned in about as
good a condition as we found him in," she retorts, unable to stop herself. "Though a bullet may
have been more merciful, all things considered."

The last scientist scoffs. "After all you have done to the Migrant Fleet, we would have expected no
less of you," she spits-or would have, if not for her faceplate. "Monsters who kill innocent people
without remorse, you-"

"That's enough, Madz'Gena," Tali overrides her comrade. "I do not trust Cerberus any more than
you-

"I doubt that," the scientist, Madz'Gena, fires back. "You weren't aboard the Idenna," she points
out. "I was."

That revelation, meaningless to Kelsa and her non-human crew, causes all of the quarians and both
of the Cerberus lackeys to cringe. It's another quarian voice, from the back, that breaks the silence.
"We're going to have to put aside some of our differences if we want to get off of this rock,"
Kal'Reegar announces, sounding exhausted beneath the modulation of his enviro-suit. "Our evac
shuttle's fried; crew unresponsive."

A different kind of quiet steals over the scientists, and Kelsa fills the pause. "We're going," she
announces to the room at large. "You're welcome aboard; I give you my word as a ship's captain
that I'll get you to a quarian ship unharmed." From her conversations with Tali and some Cerberus
intel, she knows that a captain's word is considered almost sacred amongst the itinerant species,
and it seems to do the trick.

Kal'Reegar limps up closer as she talks, and when she's finished, he nods. "Just so long as we're
clear, ma'am," he probes. "If Tali'Zorah wants to leave with us when we get to the rendez-vous,
you'll have to go through me to keep her with you."

Kelsa gives the quarian soldier a measured nod. "Understood."

Medical Bay, CSV Normandy SR-2

2230 Zulu

24 July 2185

Sublight Transit to mass relay, Sigurd's Cradle

"To what do I owe the pleasure, Skipper?" Chakwas asks, as solicitous and understanding as
always. The title has spread through the Cerberus crew in the last few days, probably from
Lawson's unironic usage, and now it looks like the doctor's taken it up, too.

It's better than captain or commander, so Kelsa swallows her grimace, forcing her lips into a smirk.
"Wanted someone I trusted to look me over after Solus and Lawson got finished with the last of
their little upgrades," she ventures, rolling her shoulders and savouring the sting her newly-enhanced muscles give her. She steps more fully into the medbay, until the doors close behind her, and without prompting she strips off her black t-shirt. She's halfway to shimmying down her trousers by the time Chakwas frosts the office's windows for some modicum of privacy, and the doctor graces the now-naked ship's captain with a half-exasperated smile.

"If I'd have known you were going to strip off, I'd've saved up my last cupful of Serrice ice brandy," the doctor quips, but she wastes no time in rising to her feet, getting to business as quickly as Kelsa. "Come lie down on the diagnostic table, so I can give you a proper examination."

The soldier steps out of her boots, scratching idly at the naked stretch of skin on her sternum where her ID tags should rest. "You sure we can trust the equipment to be straight, Doc?"

Chakwas gives her a long-suffering chuckle. "I thought you came to someone you trusted?" Her eyes twinkle with amusement as she glances from Kelsa to the table. "All of this equipment was designed to my specifications, as the medical officer aboard the original Normandy. I'm no tech expert, but I've tinkered around with it enough to know if something were off in the readings. Now, shall we…?"

Taking the older woman's gesture, Kelsa stalks to the table, easing herself up onto the surface. Her armpits and legs still itch from prickling hairs growing out from Goto's little makeover a few days ago, but those sensations are swallowed by the flesh-deep soreness that she woke up from Solus' operating table with about twenty minutes past. Once she's settled on the smooth table, the seemingly-solid surface warms up slightly, molding to the curves of her back and limbs until it doesn't feel like she's laying on anything at all, but hovering a few feet off the deck. At a few taps from Chakwas' fingers, a mechanical arm rises up from the right side of the table, fixing itself about a metre above Kelsa's abdomen. Omni-tool orange sweeps up and down the soldier's naked frame four times while the soldier holds her breath and keeps her red-green eyes fixed to a spot on the ceiling.

The doctor hums thoughtfully when the arm pulls back. "Cross-checking this data against the brief scan I took with my omni-tool a few weeks ago," she preambles, "it appears your body has undergone extensive cybernetic grafting—even more extensive than when you first woke up. All of your skin, bone, and muscles have been reinforced with microfibres...in some cases, such as your tendons and ligaments, synthetic material makes upwards of ninety percent of the biomass, which accounts for your dramatically-increased weight."

Kelsa blinks, shifting her head slightly to look Chakwas in the eye; the table reforms around her neck and the back of her skull, keeping up the illusion of weightlessness. "What's that mean, Doc?" Her voice trembles, just the once, betraying more fear than she knew she was holding. "Did they make a machine out of me, after all?"

The doctor doesn't acknowledge the hitch in her patient's voice, but she spares Kelsa any sarcasm in her answer. "Not anymore than you were when you first stepped in this medical wing," she says, soberly. "None of the more recent alterations have affected your organs at all, from your brain to your spleen," she assures the soldier. "You have about fifty kilograms of tissue weaves reinforcing your body, a bit over forty percent of your overall biomass...and as you heal from the procedures, I believe you'll find yourself plateauing in strength and agility well beyond even your own heightened expectations. But your mind is still your own."

The soldier nods. "No control chip, then?"

Chakwas finally cracks a smile, shaking her head. "Not unless it's too subtle for this equipment to find...and it would be found, make no mistake."
"I trust you, Doc," Kelsa allows, grunting as she pulls herself off of the table and onto her feet. The soreness isn't subsiding, exactly, but she's able to compartmentalise it more easily as the minutes tick by. "You're about the only one I trust on this goddamned ship."

Chakwas scoffs as Kelsa shimmies into her casual clothes. "What of Jeff and Garrus, and now Tali? Are they not your friends, Shepard?"

Kelsa pauses, just inside the door, throwing a look over her shoulder back at the doctor. "They're my crew," she settles, knowing she hasn't answered the question. "I trust them to point and shoot, but I don't trust them to know shit about Cerberus...and the ones that do know, I don't trust to give me a straight answer."

"Fair enough, Skipper," the doctor concedes. "I'd like to see you in three days' time for another scan, to determine how your body is accepting the newer additions."

"Sure thing," Kelsa says, shrugging. Then her face cracks with another smirk. "Gonna have any of that brandy handy, then?"

Chakwas' own smile turns wistful. "Not unless we make a stop-over somewhere in asari space or the Citadel to procure some," she muses. "Truth be told, I'd been saving a bottle on the old Normandy, before...before," she sighs, shaking her head. "I never got to open it, and what with one thing and another..."

Kelsa nods, once. "I'll keep an eye out, as long as you promise to split the bottle with me, when the time comes."

"Gladly," Chakwas concedes, the corners of her mouth tilting up in a show of true anticipation. Kelsa tries to remember that little smile as she leaves the doctor's office-one more face that isn't a death-mask of accusation and contempt.

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Starboard Cargo Hold, CSV Normandy SR-2

1745 Zulu

25 July 2185

FTL transit to Zeona, Elysia

Kelsa's got her shirt off again, but her trousers are still slung low over her hips, and one foot still has a sock on it. Beside her, Zaeed isn't faring much better; the only thing covering his torso is the faded tattoo that stretches from his elbow to cover half of his chest and back. It's pock-marked by almost as many scars as Kelsa's flesh bears, but none of his scars glow in the dark. The old bastard grumbles, throwing his yellowed cards down onto the floor between them. "Can't believe I'm losing to a couple of goddamned kids who don't wear anything half the time, anyhow."

Kelsa takes a deep draw off of the cigar between her teeth, and answers through the cloud of smoke she breathes out. "Buck up," she chides the merc. "You've still got more pieces than I do." Even so, she's happy it's *him* adding his sock to the pile of clothes."

"Both your asses got more clothes than me," Jack gruffs, chewing on her own cancer stick. "Dunno what you're bitching about."

Zaeed rasps out a chuckle. "Problem is, you've still got on every stitch you walked in here with, Buttercup," he points out.
A low blue arc flashes in the air, halfway between the younger woman and the older man. "Call me that again, gramps, and your fucking hide's gonna be next in the betting pool," she warns him, throwing down her hand.

Kelsa takes a look at the cards and blinks, taking a second glance at her own hand, already on the floor. "Looks like his leather'll have to wait, Sharpie," she growls, her throat thick with whiskey and cigar smoke and a thousand fights she's screamed through. "Yours, on the other hand…"

"Shit," the biotic offers, double-taking at Kelsa's hand. "That's bullshit, it's aces high," she deflects. "Only counts if your straight's all face-cards," Zaeed helpfully corrects her. "Now put up or shut up, Buttercup."

Kelsa can hear Jack's teeth grinding, and for just a second the soldier worries that they're all gonna get sucked out into the black void from an uncontrolled biotic attack ripping through the hull, but after a heartbeat the younger woman hitched up her shoulders and starts unbuckling the thick strap of leather wrapped around her chest. When Jack flings the hunk of hide onto the little hill of Kelsa's clothes and Zaeed's armour, though, the soldier finds herself a bit distracted by the unexpected sight that was hiding underneath the straps. The woman's tattoos cover nearly every inch of her flesh, which isn't surprising, but there are a few more inches than Kelsa was expecting. Jack scoffs, bringing an elbow to rest on her bent knee, "...What?"

The soldier blinks, shaking her head and looking back up at Jack's face. "Your tits are bigger than I thought they'd be," she explains, shrugging.

A shadow falls across the biotic's face. "Yeah, well," she huffs, "you learn pretty quick to tie them down in a supermax facility...not that you'd have that problem, Girlscout." Her own eyes flit down to Kelsa's bare chest, the curves there underlain with hard lines of muscle that's only gotten more defined in the last few days. "One look at those and I bet even a lifer'd cut his own dick off."

"Saves me having to rip it off and stuff it up his ass," Kelsa points out, falling into the kind of soldier's banter that she hasn't been able to enjoy since she woke up. "Besides, Zaeed's got bigger tits than either of us."

The old mercenary coughs out a grunt, adding another puff to the room's smokey haze. "If these pecs of mine could talk," he growls, "they'd tell both of you to shut the fuck up and deal out another hand. Your turn, Shepard, fina-goddamned-lee."

Kelsa takes the cards and shuffles, pausing to down another mouthful of Jameson before she deals them out the next hand. The three of them wile away a couple more hours this way, playing cards, trading old stories, getting dressed and undressed three more times. EDI initiates air filtration twice to clear out the smoke, and Kelsa finishes her bottle of whiskey, glad she's not drinking alone...at least for tonight.

Zaeed settles down after fastening his armour back on for the fourth time. "Gotta say, Shep," he half-slurs. "Goddamn good turn you did me, back on Zorya. Mighty grateful I got to see that son of a bitch Vido burn like a pig in a barbecue pit."

"Any time," the soldier deflects, blinking. In the instant of darkness, she sees the factory worker begging for help for his colleagues, and she can't keep her lips from twitching into a momentary grimace.

Jack breaks into her thoughts. "You make a habit of running errands for us little bitches, Shepard?" She hedges the question, making out like it's just buzzed curiosity.
Kelsa shrugs, tugging her shirt back down over her chored shoulders. "I've been known to make allowances, from time to time, for my people." She spares a glance to Zaeed, and a quick flick of the eyes to the far corner near the door, where a smear in the air tells her Goto's been perched for hours. "That way, if you gotta die, you can do it with a clear head," she tells Jack, that grimace deepening.

The biotic nods, once, letting her own eyes wander up to the small viewport window, up behind Kelsa's head. "The fuck we going, anyway?"

"Some rocky fireball called Zeona," the soldier tells her, leaning back against the wall and looking up to the ceiling. "Timmy says there's a tank waiting for me there." Timmy is how the three of them refer to the Illusive Man, or even Cerberus more generally...at least out of the rest of the crew's hearing.

Jack snorts. "Bet it's a fucking jumpcar with a gun on it," she offers.

Kelsa barks a laugh of agreement. "What, four billion creds sunk into me, another who-knows-how-many spent building this big-ass bucket, and they couldn't spring for a decent GAT?" A proper ground assault and transport vehicle would only have cost a couple of million, at the outside...definitely within a rounding error for the project. That it was neglected is just another insult on top of everything else Kelsa's had to wade through. But she looks back at the biotic, her half-glowing eyes narrowing. "What do you care where we're going, all of a sudden?" She wonders. "Thought you didn't give a fuck as long as you got plenty of people to kill?"

"I don't," Jack claims, reflexively. "It's just…"

"You want something," the soldier says. It's not a question. "Spit it out."

The liquor Jack's drunk-at least twice as much as Kelsa-must just be enough to loosen her tongue. "It's just...remember how Timmy took me in, as a kid?" When Kelsa nods, a darker shadow passes over Jack's features. "I think I finally figured out where that happened. I got the star charts and everything, if…"

If Kelsa feels up to going. "Where is it?" She asks, giving the biotic her own time to find the right words to ask properly.

"Pragia," comes the answer, almost at once. "The complex is abandoned, but it's evil. The shit they pulled there…" She shakes her head, shuddering, before she looks Shepard in the eye. "I need to hit it. Stand in the middle of the place, set the biggest bomb I can get my hands on, and then watch from orbit while it blinks out into a big hole in the ground."

Kelsa's felt the same way about the laundry, before. Sometimes even the whole Donut Hole. She doesn't say that out loud, though. Instead, she looks back at the shimmering outline in the corner. "What do you think, Goto?"

A heartbeat passes before the thief's tactical cloak crackles and disappears; the woman coughs, like she's been holding it in for far too long. "How'd you know this time?" She whines, when she catches her breath. "I haven't eaten anything all day!"

Kelsa's about to say must be the smoke, but before she can, Jack leaps to her feet, biotic tendrils licking off of her outstretched arm. "This was an invite-only party," she snarls, her voice hardly audible through her clenched teeth. "You weren't invited."

The sudden tension in the air is thicker than the smoke ever was. Kelsa hauls herself to her feet.
"Stand down, Jack," she gruffs, firm and even. "I knew she was here the whole time; if you're gonna be pissed at someone, be pissed at me."

The biotic twists around, her face a rictus of paranoia and rage. "So if she took a vid of all of us, you're cool with that?" The biotic energy crawling around her arm doesn't get any dimmer.

Kelsa raises an eyebrow. "I said to stand down," she prompts the other woman, "and chill the fuck out. Goto," she barks, without turning her eyes from Jack. "Did you take any vids or snap any photos of us while we were playing?"

"Of course not," the thief exclaims, very little of the magpie in her voice now. "I was just...curious. And I think we should go to Pragia as soon as possible."

Jack snarls again, rounding on the thief and raising her fist, before the full weight of Goto's words sinks in. "You...do?" She muses, suspicion still lacing her words. "Why?"

Goto shrugs. "It's only fair," she observes. "Zaeed and I both had other business to deal with, and it's shaping up to look pretty hairy where we're all headed. I think it's a good idea to take some time to deal with any business we might have, while we're still able to do it."

"I agree," Kelsa intones, her arms crossing in front of her. "Joker," she barks, a bit more loudly than before.

EDI patches the pilot through automatically. "Shepard?" He queries, one of the few holdouts against calling her skipper, now.

"Change course," the soldier instructs him. "Plot a route to Pragia, ASAP."

"Aye-aye, Shepard," the pilot confirms, and the connection closes without a sound.

"There," Kelsa pronounces, her eyebrow still raised. "You sure you wanna rip a hole in the hull now, Sharpie?"

Jack takes a deep breath, and as she lets it out, the deep blue energy around her arm slowly twirls into wisps and disappears. "Guess not," she concedes, shivering. "Now I'm gonna go get something to eat before I change my mind." She trudges toward the door, hardly looking at the uncloaked thief. "And...thanks," the biotic allows, to no one in particular, before she disappears.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to buttercup23 for beta-reading this beast, and to everyone else who's reading along!
Ch. 30: A Few Loose Ends

Chapter Summary

The Teltin facility gets sanitised, but it remains to be seen if that will quell Jack's demons. Meanwhile, Kelsa seems to find some more convenient excuses to avoid a certain reunion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Subject Zero's Quarters

0630 Zulu

26 July 2185

Pragia (ashore), Dakka

Kelsa's arm is steady as she sights down the barrel of her shotgun, her target a human man cowering on the floor in the heart of the ruined facility. He was a victim of the sick fucks who ran this place, tortured almost to death in the course of biotic research...and the only kid to have survived Jack's escape. She was the focus of the Teltin facility's research, researched that proved successful enough for the young biotic girl to eventually murder her guards and carve her way through the other children, who'd only been set against her in combat trials, never for any kind of companionship. Jack had thought that all the other kids were dead, but when they came to this place, they found it occupied by a gang of Blood Pack mercenaries, invited there by the man now under Kelsa's gun. He'd ranted, at first, about re-starting the facility, to make sure that all of that suffering and death hadn't been for nothing...but he's quiet now, waiting on Jack's decision. His name's Aresh, or so he says, not that it matters. "Live or die," Kelsa prompts her subordinate, not taking her eyes off the target. "I can take the shot, if you want me to." Her face and armour's already splashed with blood from a krogan battlemaster. One more human's won't matter too much, if it can help Jack sleep at night.

Not that she can accuse Jack of lacking the stomach for a fight; the place was supposed to be abandoned, so it was just the two of them. Jack's rage-fueled biotics took out about as much of the Blood Pack as Kelsa's force of arms. "Fuck," she hisses, pacing around like a jungle cat. "I dunno. I mean..." She trails off, biotic blue pulsing around the gun in her hand.

"Your call," Kelsa insists. "It's just you and me and a big fucking pack of ordnance here. Up to you if you wanna leave a loose end."

"Fuck," the biotic repeats, coming to a stop three steps out from the huddled man.

Aresh takes his eyes from the barrel of Kelsa's shotgun, throwing a glance at the woman who'll judge his fate. "If you let me leave here, I'll come back," he vows, almost like he wants her to kill him. "Rebuild this place brick by brick and post by post, if I have to." A grimace of lifelong pain
cracks his face. "It can't have been for nothing!"

Jack screams in frustration, and maybe just a little fear. "It wasn't for nothing," she yells at the broken man. "It was to fuck up a little girl and turn her into...into..." Before she can stop to think, her gun-hand sweeps out, and she opens a third hole in Aresh's forehead, right between his eyes. "...into me," she finishes, shuddering as his body collapses onto the filthy floor. She throws the gun down, letting out another visceral scream as she retreats deeper down the hallway, further into the only rooms she knew for eight years.

Kelsa spares a moment over the newly-dead man, watching the last of the light leave his eyes, part of her relieved that she hadn't needed to take it from him...but then she kicks off, following Jack into the dimly-lit bedroom with its one-way window to the courtyard beyond. "The other kids would play out there," Jack says, her voice cracked. "I pounded on the window, screamed at them...but nobody ever even looked my way. They hated me."

The soldier frowns, checking her shotgun across her body. "Of course they did," she says, taking a look around the room. "The adults only dragged you out of here to fight them...and you always won."

"Damn right," Jack concurs, wrapping her stick-thin arms around her middle and shivering. "What they did to me here...it can't just go unanswered, Shepard." She looks Kelsa in the eye. "What they did to you, too. We can't let 'em get away with it."

"We've got a job to do," Kelsa reminds the biotic. "Right now that job means nuking the hell out of this place, right after we bug out. Then we gotta build up enough of a team to go after the Collectors. After that..." Her eyes-more red than green, now-shift to the little room's doorframe, the top of which has a faded, bottomless hexagon stenciled over it. Horizon was a trap, hit by the Collectors on intel Cerberus leaked to them on purpose...which Kelsa wouldn't have cared about, if she'd known going in. But she'd been left in the dark, just like the rest of her team. She'd given the Illusive Man one final warning, after the debrief, but she's got a feeling that warning won't be heeded, that her new employers will fuck her over whenever it seems convenient for them. "After that, we'll see about going after Timmy."

The vow seems to calm Jack, at least a little bit; instead of bristling like a wounded animal, she takes Kelsa around the room, explaining how she used to scream against the window, how she'd hide under the desk...how she turned a guard into a blood smear, now faded black on the hallway wall. Then she pronounces herself as ready as she ever will be, and the pair of them prep the ordnance for detonation. Jack had said she wanted to watch the plume from orbit, but as they ride on the Cerberus shuttle, the biotic flips the trigger mechanism open and closed; they're barely outside the blast radius when she unexpectedly hits the trigger, and when the shockwave hits the transport, it's not the only reason for the younger woman's shudder. Kelsa doesn't ask her if she's okay, and Jack doesn't offer a lie.

It only takes another few minutes for Reeves, the Cerberus shuttle pilot on rotation, to bring them into the Normandy's loading bay. Jack's out the door before they even come to a full stop, and Kelsa pauses just long enough to keep the woman from thinking she's being followed, even though they're both heading to the same floor. By the time Kelsa gets to the engineering deck, it's clear the biotic's stormed through, because Donnelly has his eyes down on his interface and his lips firmly shut. The soldier doesn't stop to engage Donnelly or Daniels in any banter, though, and nor does she follow Jack down to the sub-deck that the biotic's taken as her own. Instead, Kelsa stalks across the deck to where Tali stands, working away to keep the ship aspace and in good working order. "You got a few minutes?" The soldier prompts, phrasing it like a request.
The quarian takes a moment to finish typing something before she closes down her interface and rounds on the soldier. "Of course, Shepard," she assures the human woman. "What do you need?" She sounds distant, even accounting for the machine quality of her voice modulators.

Kelsa shrugs, scratching at the crust of krogan blood caked in the scars on the side of her face. "Just wanted to letcha know that I'm glad to have you aboard," she admits, looking askance over her shoulder, the glance not quite making it to the two human engineers behind her. "Wasn't sure you'd wanna stick around, after we dropped off the rest of your people."

Tali makes a thoughtful noise, crossing her arms loosely in front of her. "It was...difficult," she admits. "But Madz'Gena and Korfur'Lazt-my colleagues on Haestrom-took the data back to the Migrant Fleet, and your safe conduct helped to sway the admiralty board and my captain to give me leave from the Neema to serve under you again."

"I'm grateful," the soldier tells her. " Doesn't feel right to run the Normandy without Adams, but you spent about as much time with her engines as he did." She glances up at the ceiling without ceremony. "EDI," she barks, and the AI chirps in response. "Effective immediately, Tali'Zorah vas Neema is chief engineer of the CSV Normandy SR-2. Make sure she has all the clearances she needs and access to the Cerberus supply chain."

"Understood," EDI acknowledges. "However, as Tali'Zorah is not Cerberus personnel and a non-human, clearance and access will be commensurately restricted."

Kelsa frowns; the pronouncement isn't a surprise, but it's still annoying, nonetheless. "Even on my word?" She's long since stopped asking EDI why, since the AI's programming keeps her from giving any kind of straight answer, but the soldier can occasionally get more information if she words her questions the right way.

"As you are not Cerberus personnel, you have certain restrictions as well, Shepard," EDI reminds her. "Even I do not have access to all of the Normandy's schematics, despite all of my processes being housed here."

"I guess they wouldn't be good shackles if they let you fiddle with the keys," Kelsa muses, absent-mindedly licking a fleck from the corner of her mouth. Her eyes narrow a bit at the acidic bog-water taste, salted with hints of copper, but she's had worse. Not even dying could wipe her memory of batarian.

The quarian speaks up for the first time since EDI started talking. "Wait...are you...talking to an artificial intelligence, Shepard?"

Kelsa nods. "Yeah," she scoffs. "She's called the Enhanced Defence Intelligence; EDI for short." She glances back up at the ceiling. "Say hi, EDI."

"It is a pleasure to formally make your acquaintance, Tali'Zorah vas Neema," the ceiling chirps at them.

Tali tilts her head, and Kelsa can't tell if it's thoughtful or suspicious. "I suppose I shouldn't really be surprised that Cerberus would develop illegal technology..."

The soldier grunts. "Poisoning admirals and bombing buildings were also illegal, last I heard," she points out. " That'll be all, EDI," she tells the AI, who retreats back into the ship's wires. "Anyway, it's good to see you where you belong. You need anything you can't get from EDI, you let me know."
"Will-do, Shepard," the quarian vows. "And...thanks," she adds, just as Kelsa's turning her heel toward the near door. "For...for everything."

"Don't worry about it," Kelsa gruffs, and she walks away without another word.

It takes her three steps to get through the inner set of doors, and another three to the front of the outer doorway to the floor's main gangway, where she stops. Most of her wants to get on, to go back up to the loft or the observation deck and crack open another bottle of whiskey, but some part of her knows her job isn't quite finished. With a sigh, she does a three-quarter turn, taking the steps down to Jack's sub-deck three at a time. The metal and muscle on her frame make her footfalls thunk loudly against the stairwell, so the soldier isn't surprised when Jack's crouched on the end of her cot, looking up at Kelsa from underneath her scarred eyebrows. "What you want, Shepard?"

Kelsa stops short, too far away for her to close in for a strike to cut off a biotic attack; Jack seems to notice, and she relaxes just a little. The soldier clears her throat. "Just wanted to make sure you were good, after the mess we made down there."

Jack growls something that sounds an awful lot like fucking girl scout, but she flops backward on her cot unexpectedly, surveying the guts of the ship above and behind her sleeping place. "Shit, I don't know," she admits. "I mean...fuck, was killing that dill-hole the right decision?" Kelsa doesn't answer, doesn't bother saying if you didn't, I would've. "It feels...different," the biotic goes on. "But not better. Like...like I can finally stop running, maybe even stop...all this fucking ball of crazy shit I do, but..."

"But you don't know how," Kelsa finishes for her, lightly. She leans against a pole, keeping her eyes steady on the thinner woman. "You've been fucked up for so long, you don't even know what normal tastes like."

"Says the woman who headbutted a krogan to death and choked a vorcha on his own insides," Jack parries, glancing down from the ceiling. "Unless we're talkin' about you, 'stead of me, which case you can go find somebody who gives a shit."

Kelsa opens her mouth, but then she closes her eyes and lets out a long, growled breath. "You're right," she concedes. "Sorry...you just remind me of me, how I used to be." Her nostrils flare as she breathes in, and this close to the engine, she gets a whiff of eezo that sets the back of her throat to tickling.

Her eyes are still closed, but she hears Jack's cot shift, hears boots scraping over the floor as the biotic stalks inside Kelsa's lethal perimeter. "You ain't anything like me, Girl Scout," Jack rasps. "You think you're better than me, just 'cuz you're not quite as fucked up as I am?"

Kelsa's eyes snap open. "No," she fires off. "I'm not-

"Then you're a goddamned liar or an idiot, or maybe both," Jack chides her, her breath hot on Kelsa's dirty face. "I was in charge of this boat, I'd have already rammed it into the biggest fucking space station I could find. Blamed Cerberus. Started a war." Her lip curls in a snarl. "...Executed any pissants moaning about unfinished business. Probably not in that order."

The soldier's fist clenches at her side, but she keeps from opening up an omni-blade. "Thinking about a hostile takeover?"

Jack grunts a laugh at her. "You wish, Girl Scout; it'd give you an excuse to do what I ain't needed an excuse for since I was ten years old." She shakes her head, backing into the shadows, into the
ship's guts. "You are better than me, Shepard. Maybe not by much...but it fuckin' well better be enough to stop the bugs."

Slowly, Kelsa's head dips in a nod. "Yeah," she allows. "It better be."

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*Project Firewalker Crash Site*

*1215 Zulu*

*31 July 2185*

*Zeona (ashore), Elysta*

"Are you sure we're all gonna fit on that thing, Shepard?" Vakarian sounds suspicious at the best of times, his army and C-Sec training rooted deep, and even the modulation of his heat-resistant enviro-suit doesn't mask the dubious quality of his subharmonics.

Kelsa sighs, hoping her own suit hides her annoyed disappointment. "It'll have to be," she gruffs, glancing back over her shoulder at the walls of the volcanic valley the Cerberus shuttle dropped them off in. Reeves bugged out as soon as Kelsa, Vakarian, and Tali set boots on the obsidian soil, leaving the three of them to retrieve the M-44 Hammerhead. It took them a few minutes to locate the container amongst the wreckage, and what Kelsa sees isn't too impressive.

"Well, it's just the three of us," Tali offers, shrugging. "It might be a bit cozy...and you're pretty skinny, Garrus. I think we can squeeze in." Her voice sounds the most normal of the three of them, but then again, Kelsa's only ever heard it through the radio anyway.

The soldier steps closer to the thin-armoured hovercraft, trying her best to keep from sneering at the size of the gun, even though she's under her own helmet. "We're gonna have to find out pretty soon," she comments, glancing to her HUD, and the steadily-rising internal temperature level it's displaying. "It's getting pretty hot out here." She takes the lead, scanning the vehicle with her omni-tool to see that it more-or-less matches the schematics in her briefing message. The hatch is easy enough to open, and the inside is just as cozy as they all thought it'd be—that is, not at all. Kelsa's got the advantage of riding in the pilot's chair, but Vakarian has to hunch his shoulders and duck to keep his head from brushing up against the ceiling. "How's it feel to have three inches of heavy plate in between you and a thousand degrees, Vakarian?"

"Well, it's just the three of us," Tali offers, shrugging. "It might be a bit cozy...and you're pretty skinny, Garrus. I think we can squeeze in." Her voice sounds the most normal of the three of them, but then again, Kelsa's only ever heard it through the radio anyway.

The soldier clears his throat. "I'd feel better if we had some cyclonic kinetic barriers to deflect heavy weapons fire," he says, his tone not quite light enough to hide a hint of true concern.

The soldier smirks as the Hammerhead's mass effect fields kick in and push the vehicle a few feet off the deck. "Fuckin' engineers thought we needed to hover more than we needed to keep the hull from ripping apart like tissue paper from a prime unit's hand cannon."

Tali clears her throat. "There's no sign of geth in the area, though," she points out. "So...we shouldn't need to worry...should we?"

"No this time," Kelsa concedes. "But if we've got time, they want us to chase down a couple scientists looking for some geth, so we'll come across them in this thing at some point or another." The team lapses into silence-save for a few half-strangled gasps—for a few minutes as Kelsa navigates the volcanic terrain...which necessitates hopping from hot rocks to even hotter rocks as they climb out of the valley, looking for somewhere they can launch high enough for Joker to pick them up.
"So..." Vakarian muses, probably to try and distract himself from just how close the lava is from his forehead. "How's it feel to get back together with the gang, Tali?"

"I-" A hard landing cuts her off, and she swallows hard. "It seems like nothing's changed...we're still out-gunned, operating on the edge of legality to save the galaxy from a threat most people don't want to believe even exists."

"Doesn't hurt that we've already mangled a few flashlights, either," Kelsa points out, jerking a hard turn at the last minute to turn away from a precipice that would give them a thousand-foot drop into a lava pit. They hit a narrow cave rather than falling to their deaths, and begin slowly ascending in the hot darkness.

"And it's almost like we're in the Mako again," Vakarian observes. "...Glad I skipped breakfast today."

Kelsa chuckles, but she doesn't respond, too focused on weaving through the catacomb. Tali fills the silence. 'I heard you saw Ashley briefly," she ventures. 'I'm sorry that she couldn't have joined us..."

Kelsa gruffs a laugh. "Probably would've had to shoot her by now," she retorts, lightly.

A sigh echoes in her helmet. "Still, it would've been nice to get as much of the old crew back as possible," Tali muses. "Have you tried to contact Li-"

"No," Kelsa breaks in, before the quarian can even finish saying the asari's name. The inside of her suit feels suddenly cold, and before Tali can press a follow-up question, the soldier fires off the Hammerhead's pissant potato-gun at a pile of rubble blocking their way.

Vakarian comes to her rescue, distracting Tali with some chatting, asking about what she's been up to the last two years. Kelsa lets her ears' attention wander, focusing on piloting them through the cave without getting buried alive, or worse. A few minutes later, they emerge on a high, barren plateau, flat and lifeless. It takes just another couple of minutes for the vehicle's engines to charge up enough to jump them into low orbit. Joker scoops them out of the planet's gravity well before they fall all the way back down, and Kelsa breathes a sigh of relief when she climbs out of the hatch, tearing off her helmet and catching a breath of the ship's relatively-fresh air.

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Laboratory, CSV Normandy-SR2

0730 Zulu

2 August 2185

Gamayun (orbit), Dakka

Kelsa should've given Joker a new heading yesterday, but she didn't; there's only one place for them to go, and the soldier can't bring herself to think about their next destination for too long. So she ordered the pilot to discharge the drive core into the massive energy sink of the system's gas giant, which really only took a few hours, and they've been in orbit now twice as long as it took the engines to return to peak potential. To fill the time, Kelsa made more rounds with her crew, the ground team and shipboard staff both; she even had perfunctory conversations with Chambers and Taylor, though the latter ended almost as soon as it began when the man off-handedly remarked about Cerberus' lack of rules against fraternisation. But far more troubling than either of those was her encounter with Grunt, which left an internal window cracked and served to distract Kelsa from the impending voyage.
"Ahh," Solus sighs without turning around from his worktable, when she steps through the door into his lab. "Come back to hear more patter songs, Shepard?"

Kelsa's grimace isn't entirely out of concern for her krogan crewmate. "Next time," she deflects. "I'm worried about Grunt."

That's enough to get the salarian to put down his tools. "Ahh." His head swivels most of the way back, a brow-ridge arching up. "Confirm source of scale itch?"

The soldier arches a brow at the salarian scientist. "Do you wanna get shot, eye-licker?"

Her question wipes the smirk from Solus' face, but he doesn't look scared. Instead he turns back to his work, sparing a single, one-word question of his own. "Symptoms?"

"Says his blood feels wrong," Kelsa explains, stepping more fully into the laboratory. "Fucker damn near headbutted through his viewport to the loading bay just talking about it. I'm afraid he'll become unreliable on the battlefield, and Chakwas isn't familiar enough with krogan biology to have an opinion."

Solus gives one of his big sniffs, the kind that ends in a sigh. "You surmised I have sufficient exposure to krogan physiology from...previous conversations," he deduces, offhandedly. "Any physical symptoms?"

Kelsa shakes her head, even though he's facing away. "Not that he let on to me," she adds. "Is it because he's tank-bred? Is he going crazy?"

"Yes and yes," the salarian responds. "Issue for all krogan-more cultural than medical. Only one cure." Kelsa sets her teeth on edge, anticipating the answer is a bullet to the head. In Grunt's case, it'd have to be a lot more than one. When Solus turns around again, though, he's smiling. "Must go to Tuchanka," the scientist insists. "Vital for Grunt's continued battle-readiness. Recommend altering course at once."

The soldier's head tilts as she considers the enthusiasm of the salarian's advice. "Ain't you a bit eager to get back to the planet that gave you those scars?" She jerks her head, jutting her chin at the marks crossing the side of Solus' face; salarian heads normally have two curled protrusions, like fleshy horns. Solus only has one of them, now.

The alien's smile falters. "Admit," he allows, "have own reasons for wanting to go to Tuchanka. Maelon, research assistant on genophage modification project. Captured by Blood Pack, likely undergoing horrible torture."

As far as Kelsa's gathered from their brief conversations, in the last thousand years the krogan were beginning to adapt to the genophage, their population starting to increase, though nobody but the salarians really noticed it. The modification project was conceived and executed to recalibrate the disease, to keep krogan population levels stable and low. Not quite the genocide everyone thinks it is, but still enough to get Solus and anyone else involved butchered by any krogan worth the name. "You sure they're still alive, Solus?"

The salarian nods emphatically. "Maelon far too valuable to them alive," he insists. "Had...reservations...about project, toward the end. Most receptive to counter-arguments. Likely most susceptible to torture as well." He shakes his head. "Conclusion clear: Blood Pack attempting to reverse genophage, using Maelon. We must stop them."

An actual spasm of emotion crosses Solus' features, his voice dropping dangerously. "Looks like
we're heading to Tuchanka, then," Kelsa settles. "We'll deal with Grunt's problem first, and if Maelon's still alive, we'll see about extracting him."

Solus nods, not bothering to raise an objection to the soldier's operational logic. "Looking forward to it, Shepard."

Kelsa grimaces, trying to ignore a cool trickle tingling down her spine as she retreats from the laboratory. *Half a galaxy between Tuchanka and...*

Illium.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading along, and thanks to buttercup23 for beta-reading this beast! Life is getting pretty hectic at the moment, so it might be a little while before I can update again. Hopefully you've enjoyed it so far, and will come back when things get settled!
Ch. 31: The Eye of Wrath

Chapter Summary

Kelsa and company land on the krogan homeworld, Tuchanka, and it does its best to land right back on them. But the soldier is running out of time and excuses, and she can't put the future off indefinitely.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Urdnot Headquarters

1730 Zulu

4 August 2185

Tuchanka (ashore), Aralakh

"Sorry," the old krogan grunts, shouldering his rifle and sighting down the trench. "Don't trade with pyjaks..." he goes on, squeezing the trigger. The weapon doesn't fire; instead it makes a series of deep, thrumming clicks. It's only when he lets off the pressure that the gun gives a massive jerk, hurling a foot-long projectile faster than any human should be able to see. Kelsa's eyes dart, following the spike as it soars through the air, until it impales a small monkey-like creature, pinning the pest to solid concrete. The thing's dead before it can even make a squeal. "Just shoot 'em."

The krogan turns his eye back on her, his expression of grim satisfaction tinging with something darker. Kelsa's got her shotgun in hand, but not at the ready; she saw the sentinel in action a couple of hours ago, impressed by his weapon's penetration, stopping power, range, and unique design. "Fine, then," she concedes, shipping her own gun. She's not walking away without at least firing the krogan's weapon. "How 'bout we make a wager on it?"

The krogan's one eye gleams, halfway between interest and contempt. "What do you even want with my gun, human?" His lip curls into a scarred sneer. "You want your arm ripped off, I can oblige without wasting ammunition."

Kelsa's lip curls to match the overgrown lizard's. "Heard all that before," she rebuffs him, standing her ground even though she's almost a metre shorter. She's got no backup, Solus and Grunt both still taking shelter near Wrex at her command while she prowls through the bunker, the rest of her team holed up in the Normandy to protect the crew in case her business here turns sour. "You're welcome to try taking my arm as a trophy, but you'll wind up giving me more than your gun if you do," she warns, her hands slowly folding into fists, her wrists ready to bring up the liquid metal omni-blades at a moment's notice. "Or you can tell me your name, and we can set terms on a bet. Your call, turtle brain."

The one-eyed old shellhead hesitates for a heartbeat before his scarred lips crease in a parody of a
smirk. "Don't ask me why, but I like you, human," he admits, nodding once. "Name's Graal, and this here's my spike-thrower," he explains, hoisting his weapon proudly. "Made her myself. Could punch through that plate of yours at five hundred yards, easy."

Kelsa's eyebrow raises skeptically, though inwardly she does not doubt the alien's boast. "You wanna find out, Graal?" She juts her head to the trench, where another pyjak's creeping, trying to get closer to the clan's precious food stores. "How's about you lemme try and hit one of those monkeys, and if I miss, you get to take a shot at me?"

Graal scoffs. "I could take a shot at you any time I wanted...don't need a bet for that," he points out. The human soldier shakes her head slowly. Her armour's plain, lacking any insignia whatsoever, but it's obviously been scarred and pock-marked in all the fighting she's done since waking up. She saw the krogan appraising her a few minutes ago, and she knows that he knows her heavy plate isn't just for show. "You point that thing at me outside of my terms, and we'll see who winds up with a spike in the chest, Graal." She doesn't put much force into the threat; part of her wouldn't mind simply killing the old lizard and taking his gun, especially if he's stupid enough to give her good cause.

Maybe it's the matter-of-fact tone that makes Graal back down. "Fine," he barks, halfway to a chuckle. "You can pin one of those pyjaks, without breaking any of those fragile pieces of chalk your kind calls bones, and you can take my baby." He rolls his shoulders. "But if your arm tears off, or you miss... then old Graal gets off a shot. That about cover it, human?"

Kelsa nods; she'd been considering throwing another chip in, maybe him letting her take a swing at him, but she'll settle for taking his gun, instead. "Deal," she settles, holding out her hand, palm up. Krogan don't shake hands, so Graal does the logical thing and slaps his spike-thrower down into the soldier's waiting palm. Her gloved fingers close over the stock, and despite the reinforcing fibres in her muscles, she can feel the weapon's great weight tugging at her forearm.

Nodding appreciatively, Kelsa takes up the gun in both hands, tucking the stock tight into her shoulder. The sighting system's no more than metal grooves at each end of the barrel, like old human weapons, and Kelsa has the distinct impression that the spike-thrower lacks a modern VI to compensate for weather and other environmental conditions...but, as she lines up that white four-legged pest with the notches on the top of the barrel, Kelsa feels a thrill of excitement, rather than dread. Her breathing slows, but her heart thuds more powerfully, and she draws back the trigger, surprised at how much tension it takes to pull it all the way. The spike-thrower ratchets up three distinctive clicks before she lets go.

Even though she was ready for it, the force of the spike hurtling out of the gun rocks her backward, and Kelsa's right boot scrapes against gravel and concrete before e finds her balance. Even so, her eyes do not move from her target, even when white fur gets marred with hot tungsten and stained with off-blue blood. The fountain splashes up in the distance, and Kelsa blinks, seeing a trail of blue blood smeared across the backs of her eyelids. She hasn't dreamt of the library since waking up, hasn't even thought about it, and she doesn't want to start now. Shaking her head to clear it, Kelsa turns back to Graal, smirking at the incredulous look on his face.

"How'd you do that, human?" He demands, as though he doesn't believe his own eyes. Kelsa notes that he doesn't put as much venom in the name of her race, this time.

Kelsa rolls her shoulder, bringing her elbow up like a chicken's wing to show she's still got a full range of motion. A light ache scatters over the muscles above her armpit, but it's nothing she hasn't felt before. "Guess I drink a lotta milk," she speculates. Then she reaches behind her back with her left hand, unshipping the Claymore shotgun and fixing her new acquisition in its place. "Here," she
offers, holding out her old weapon.

Graal's lip curls. "That wasn't part of the deal," he observes.

"Take it as a gift," she advises. "Scrap it for parts for all I care."

The krogan hesitates for a few more moments before finally reaching out and taking the shotgun. "Hey," he grunts, as she's turning to go. "Never caught your name, human."

"Didn't give it," she points out, looking back at him over her shoulder. "But you can call me Kelsa."

Graal's eye widens. "Kelsa Shepard?" He asks, guarded skepticism in his voice. When the soldier nods, he lets out a whistle. "Why didn't you say before? Wrex's told me all about you. Said you were as good as krantt to him before he came back home. I'd've given you my gun just for the honour of meeting you."

Kelsa smirks at him again. "Well, now you can say you almost got to take a shot at me." With that, she sets off through the rubble of the ruined bunker, back to the Normandy to have Taylor retrofit her spike-thrower until it's up to Alliance snuff. She might not like the man, but he knows his guns, and she can stand a little awkward flirting for the sake of a reliable firearm.

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_Proving Grounds_

1120 Zulu

7 August 2185

_Tuchanka (ashore), Aralakh_

"Alright, Shepard," Grunt hisses from across the stinking, corpse-strewn ground. "Hit the Keystone." His voice crackles directly in her aural implants, jerking her out of her feather-light nap.

It's their third day in this wasteland, alone. The shaman said they could bring one other, but this is Grunt's challenge, and Kelsa's his krantt, and everyone else is too valuable to risk out here in this fucking place. The first day, when that big hammer rose up and landed hard enough to jar the back of Kelsa's teeth, they had to fight off roving packs of varren intermittently for more than twelve hours. After only a few hours' rest, Kelsa punched the big green button again, and they spent all of yesterday shredding through huge lobster-looking horrors that didn't like to stay down until you cracked through the top of their shells and scrambled their brains around. EDI called them klixen, but Kelsa's happy enough to call them dead.

The human soldier pulls herself out of her dugout, fighting off her fatigue; she's not been so tempted to use a stimpack since Ilos, when the geth just didn't stop coming until the very end. Her thumb brushes over the protected panel that would release the uppers into her system, but as she walks over to the post, she clenches her hand into a fist and slams it hard into the button.

Grunt limps away from his own resting place, scraped out of the lee of an ancient concrete block, rubbing some grit from his eye. He looks at her from across the gap, his scaled head dipping in a nod of resignation. They don't have to tell each other that this is the last test, the only thing standing between Grunt and a place in Clan Urdnot.

A sinking feeling pulls at the bottom of Kelsa's stomach as she marches away from the Keystone, its ancient hammer rising slowly behind her, the old gears creaking and the dust already peppering
When it's more than two-dozen metres high and Kelsa's about a hundred steps off, the piledriver drops like only a three-hundred-tonne slab of stone and steel can. The air itself washes over her shoulders just as the ground jumps beneath her boots, and the soldier stumbles, barely keeping her feet. Her ears are still ringing when she hisses into her HUD. "Anything from Okeer's tank tickling the back of your head about what might be coming?"

"Not one," the adolescent krogan dismisses, and with that they lapse into silence.

The silence lingers for almost a minute, far longer than it had before. Then, almost intuitively, Kelsa senses the ground tremble from deep under their feet. "Stop," she barks, as low as she dares into her helmet's microphone. "Don't move," she forces, through her clenched teeth.

As young as he is, as hungry for a fight even after two days of carnage, Grunt freezes and doesn't even question the order. If she ever prayed, Kelsa'd pray that the aftershocks from the hammer were enough to cover their steps, because if they weren't...

When that subtle whisper in the soles of her boots disappears, though, the void in Kelsa's gut collapses like a dying star. *They weren't.* "Run!" She screams, emptying her lungs into her microphone. "Back to the platform!"

The platform in question is cracked concrete, a thousand years old, but it's better than the naked soil. She has no idea how far down that crumbling concrete goes, but she can only hope it's thick enough. There's hardly any cover, but at least they shouldn't get chomped from below...if they can make it in time.

They almost don't. The soldier's left boot heel lands hard on the very edge of the platform just as Grunt rolls onto his feet, and Kelsa's instincts bear out when the ground opens up just behind them and gives up the enormous thresher maw it had been hiding. Kelsa's helmet is barely up to the task of muffling the sky-splitting scream the giant groundworm bellows out, and she sees Grunt wince under the subsonic and supersonic tones.

Kelsa pivots on her heel, bringing her spike thrower to her shoulder and sighting up to the tooth-filled face towering over her. The retrofits and upgrades Taylor installed are still holding up, and she's gotta admit that he's a decent weapons tech...maybe not *quite* as good as Williams, but as the soldier watches the spike slot into the roof of the thresher's open maw, she spares a thought of gratitude to the Cerberus stooge.

Kelsa's opening shot is soon joined by a spray of assault rifle fire from her krogan understudy, but both salvos might as well have been made of toothpicks for all the damage they do...not that either of them expected much better-Grunt from the imprints that Okeer forced into his brain in that natal tank, and Kelsa from first-hand experience on the hellhole that was Edolus. Of course, back then, she was hungry for a fight with an earthworm...but now, on Tuchanka, underneath the dust-choked sun and in spitting distance of a pissed-off thresher maw, the human soldier blinks. Perhaps that's why she doesn't jump back as a shadow falls across her, as her vision of Aralakh turns into an open mouth full of brown teeth and a black throat. At the centre of that darkness, just for a second, Kelsa glimpses a flash of deep blue.

And then her world rocks sideways, a cry of *Shepard* ringing in her HUD. The ancient concrete shudders with the impact of the beast's mouth, that great maw swallowing Grunt and not a little bit of artificial rock along with him. Instinct has Kelsa scrambling away from the impact, her fingertips just barely keeping hold of her gun, her empty belly screaming with rage at her own stupidity.

But before she can make it all the way to her feet, before she can turn to run for her life, the side of
the maw's neck splits open from the inside, about ten metres from the monster's mouth, still stuck to the concrete. Black ichor and orange venom erupt from the wound, followed shortly thereafter by the gore-covered krogan. Kelsa can hardly believe it when Grunt lands in a shower of filth, and she has to stagger back to keep the acid from raining down on her, but he seems hardly affected by its venom; his armour smokes, but he grins a bloodstained smile. "It's my Rite of Passage," he gruffs. "Couldn't tell the clan that you pulled me by the shell all the way through."

Kelsa's lungs empty in a rasped chuckle. "Damn," she sighs, shaking her head, gratitude and exhaustion fighting for dominance inside her chest. "Remind me to tell Wrex I finally found me one hell of a handsome krogan, after all."

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Research Facility, Weyrloc Headquarters

2230 Zulu

10 August 2185

Tuchanka (ashore), Aralakh

"This bloody dump's supposed to be a fucking hospital?" Zaeed grunts, spitting and wiping some varren blood off the stock of his sniper rifle. "Looks more like a bunker to me." He said he would go crazy if he had to spend another fucking day throwing knives against a wall while Kelsa had all the fun - you even killed a thresher maw without me, he'd pointed out - and Grunt's holed up, recovering in Clan Urdnot's breeding camp.

"Krogan hospital," Solus points out, ranging down the rusted stairs, his attention drawn by a dead body. A dead human body. The old mercenary growls, not disagreeably, at the salarian's answer, but Solus scoffs, focused on his discovery. "Ligature marks, tumours, injection sites." He shakes his head. "Medical experimentation, hormone replacement. Makes sense. Disgusting."

Kelsa makes her way down those steps, while Zaeed covers the top. "Wouldn't've pegged you for retching at the sight of a dead body, Solus."

The salarian blinks as he looks up at her. "Have killed many, Shepard. Gunfire, knives, drugs, tech attacks." His scarred lips crease with a smirk. "Once with farming equipment. But never with medicine."

"But Maelon has," the human soldier pronounces, taking another look over the body, cut-up and misshapen as it is. "Guess the krogan aren't fucking around with him." Maelon was a student of Solus', helping him modify the genophage to keep krogan population levels from exploding again and driving the galaxy to another destructive war. Clan Weyrloc apparently kidnapped the younger salarian and have pressed him into service in finding a cure for the engineered disease. "What makes sense about it, though? Wouldn't using local animals give a better match to krogan biology?"

"Preliminary research," Solus clarifies. "Proof-of-concept for Maelon's ideas. Use of humans actually inspired - very genetically diverse, physiology pliable. Brilliant, even. Hate to see that."

Kelsa arches a brow. "Looks like we'd better get to him before they move on to the more advanced trials."

"Suspect too late for that," Solus counters, checking his pistol and his omni-tool. "Will be lucky to reach him before krogan kill him for serving no further purpose."
The human soldier nods grimly, signaling Zaeed that they're ready to move on. The squad forges deeper into the bunker-come-hospital, killing almost every krogan they come across, except for some of Maelon's more advanced test subjects, only one of whom is still alive. He almost doesn't walk out of the hospital that way after Kelsa tells him to get lost, but at the last minute he stands down and scrambles back to Clan Urdnot, leaving the aliens to scour the rest of the structure for evidence of Solus' former understudy. Clan Weyrloc's chief, Guld, throws just about every able-bodied warrior they've got at Kelsa's team in the attempt to stop them...but ultimately they all fall, taken apart by Zaeed's rifle, Solus' tech attacks, and Kelsa's close-range ferocity. Guld himself bleeds out through a pair of holes punched through his abdomen by her omni-blades, still ranting about Clan Weyrloc's coming ascendence over the whole of the galaxy.

The plan, evidently, was to find the cure and keep it hidden from the rest of the clans, giving Guld's family an advantage over all of the others on Tuchanka. Kelsa can understand the logic of it, even if she can't understand the short-sightedness of wanting a cure in the first place. In private moments, she used to secretly relish the thought of another pan-galactic war against the krogan after a successful cure; she'd have gladly helped to kill all of them. But that was before she'd gotten to know a few, and found herself liking them. Now it'd be a fucking shame to have to turn half the galaxy into turtle soup. Besides, they've all got the Reapers to worry about now, even if the Council still wants to ignore the looming threat. Kelsa knows that, sooner or later, they'll wish they hadn't.

The last set of blast doors open on the lowest chamber of the building, revealing two rows of beds filled with unconscious-or dead-female krogan, a large blue haptic screen, and one ambulatory salarian, without so much as a shackle in sight. Solus ships his pistol, but a shared glance with Zaeed tells Kelsa he's just as suspicious as he is, and both humans keep their weapons at the ready.

"Maelon," Solus clips, moving quickly across the floor. "Rescue affected. Must leave this place, get you to safety. Come."

But when the younger salarian turns around, he gives no sign of gratitude. "Funny," he croaks. "For such a brilliant scientist, you always did have trouble accepting facts that didn't conform your your biases, doctor." Maelon's sneer might have been sharp enough to cut glass, if there was any in this reinforced hole in the ground.

Kelsa sees Solus' enormous eyes blink twice. "Ah," he grunts, processing a chain of thoughts in the space of another blink. "Not captive; volunteer. Still unclear why, but must be stopped."

"Why?!" Maelon demands, incredulous. "Why would I try to reverse a genocide?" He sneers, each word dripping with venom. "I'm sure you can't imagine, Mordin."

"Knew mission parameters at outset," Solus points out. "Weren't forced to participate, demonstrated understanding of necessity of task, did not register dissent." He's still thinking his way through to what must be done, and it's only the slimmest gratitude for his figuring out the Seeker antidote that Kelsa doesn't shoulder her shotgun and make the decision for him.

The other salarian either doesn't realise or doesn't care how much danger he's in. "How could I disagree with the great Mordin Solus? I was your student, and you taught me that the right answer was to wipe out a whole species!"

There's something nearly verging on emotion in Solus' voice when he musters a response. "Simulations, forecasts, analysis all led to one outcome; war inevitable if krogan population kept growing. Our work prevented a genocide, Maelon."

The shock of Solus actually forming a whole sentence must penetrate Maelon's shroud of self-
righteousness, at least for a second, but after a heartbeat he shakes his head. "Keep telling yourself that, Mordin. But one day the whole galaxy will know you for the monster you are."

The gears tick over in Solus' head, and he takes a long, quick, sniffed breath. Then, from a standing start, he explodes forward, taking Maelon by the front of his lab coat and forcing him back through the haptic screen, all the way to the crumbling wall. "Will not stop attempting cure; cannot be reasoned with. No choice." Another sniff-breath, and by the end of it, his pistol's at the side of Maelon's head. "Have to kill you."

Kelsa's heartbeat bottoms out, and even though his back's to her, she gives the salarian a little nod. The top of the next heartbeat comes just before Solus' hand-cannon spreads Maelon's brilliant brain all over the dusty wall.

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_Port Observation Deck, CSV Normandy SR-2_

_1705 Zulu_

_12 August 2185_

_FTl Travel to Illium, Tasale_

"Another round, Shepard?" Garrus' two-toned voice tickles Kelsa's eardrums, after a few solid minutes of silence.

"Are they _rounds_ if we both have to pour our own?" She wonders, tipping herself another half-glass of Kriala without waiting for the turian's answer. Garrus raises his glass of deep golden dextro-based whiskey and Kelsa clinks a wordless toast. The asari drink's still enough to make her flinch, but she doesn't choke on the fumes as she breathes out.

"So..." Garrus probes, swiveling on his chair to regard the otherwise-empty room. Kelsa glances around, certain that even Goto ain't here. "You _sure_ you made the right decision? About the genophage data?"

Kelsa licks over her cracked lips. "Sure," she gruffs, shrugging. "We don't have the luxury of throwing something away just 'cuz we don't like how it was made. And we might need it, before this whole fucking thing's over with."

Garrus coughs, somewhat disagreeably. "Hard to imagine that, Kelsa." She's not quite sure when she went from _Shepard_ to _Kelsa_, or when he went from _Vakarian_ to _Garrus_, but she's had enough purple liquor to not give too much of a fuck at this point.

Her eyes turn to the open port windows, taking in the uncounted stars streaming by beyond the blue-shift of the ship's mass effect field. "Easy enough," she counters, closing her eyes. "When you picture a thousand Sovereigns, blocking out the sky in every direction. Then we'll need all the muscle we can get." What she sees behind her eyelids drives them open again.

"Can't argue with that," Garrus muses, taking another long sip from the remnants of his drink. "Maybe we could let the krogan have Makos and sit back to watch the fireworks, see who's left after the last bell rings."

Kelsa snorts a laugh. "Better save one for me," she grouses, stomping the floor. "Fucking _Hammerhead_."

"Fucking Hammerhead," the turian concur. "Gun gets misaligned on a gust of wind, got no weight
to keep her balanced…"

The two of them pass the minutes into hours this way, talking about the Collectors, the Reapers, their new (and old) companions, weapon calibration, Timmy...everything except for where they're going, and who's waiting for them there.

Everything except for Illium.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone who's reading along with this story, especially especially to my fantabulous beta-reader, buttercup23. This does not mean a return to regular updates to Sol, but I've finally managed to finish another chapter, and another one may be forthcoming before the end of the month. Thanks again!
Ch. 32: Like Real People Do

Chapter Summary

The Normandy's crew finally hit Illium...and it hits back.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to everyone still reading along, especially to buttercup23 for wonderful beta-reading!

This chapter helps the story earn its 'M' rating. A slightly more detailed warning is in the end note.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brokerage Offices

0200 Zulu

14 August 2185

Nos Astra (ashore), Soarse, Illium, Tasale

The secretary only offers a nominal protest when Kelsa barges into the anteroom and marches up to the larger door that now stands between her and the asari archaeologist who's been crawling just below the surface of her thoughts for the last few weeks. Whether the front-office asari knows Kelsa by reputation or simply knows not to fuck with a scarred-up woman with more guns than hands, Kelsa's out of excuses. Her hand hesitates over the panel for half a breath before she slaps it, her eyes fixing on the middle distance as the door slides sideways.

Liara's there, standing with her back to Kelsa, facing a nervous-looking human man on a vidscreen. "I'll make it simple," she says, her voice light years away from the timid scientist Kelsa dug out of Therum. "Either you pay me," she continues, her fingers working over a data pad, "or I flay you alive. With my mind."

Kelsa feels the last of her breath squeeze out of her lungs as she steps into the room. "I see you learned how to sweet-talk since I've been gone," she husks. "Should I be jealous?"

A wave of tension crosses over Liara's exposed shoulders, and if Kelsa didn't know better, she'd swear she sees a blue arc of energy dancing over the asari's skin. Liara turns, blinking, her lips falling apart. "Shepard," she almost chokes. The name stops Kelsa in her boots, hitting her like a knife in her gut. "Nyxeris," Liara continues, glancing over the human's shoulder to her assistant. "Hold my calls."

And then she's stepping closer, and Kelsa can't move, still can't breathe, can only tilt her head back as the taller woman closes the distance, can only let Liara brush her lips over the soldier's rougher
mouth. The emptiness she's felt in her chest since she opened her eyes on that space station shrinks down to a fist-sized ball, but it doesn't disappear, even as Kelsa's fingers curl in the air just above Liara's hips.

Liara pulls back almost as quickly as she approached, smoothing over the front of her dress, tactfully ignoring the fists that Kelsa's hands ball into. "I'm...sorry," she says, managing an apologetic smile. "I just...I hadn't dared hope…"

Kelsa fights to find her voice as the asari trails off, licking over her lips, the subtle taste of sea-salt and lavender causing her eyes to half-lid for a few fluttered heartbeats. But she straightens, clearing her throat and nodding to the now-empty vidscreen. "Looks like you took care of yourself while I was dead," she observes, her jaw clenching at the twitch that crosses Liara's features; before Kelsa's world went black over Alchera, such a dig would've written a story of pain over the asari's unguarded face. Kelsa isn't sure she wants to know what could've so schooled her former lover in the art of hiding her hurts.

"It's been a long two years," Liara confirms, moving to take a seat behind her desk. "It is...good to see you, at last. Please, sit."

Even though the chair's back's to the door, Kelsa finds herself falling into it, hearing the fine wood groan under her weight. Instead of How've you been or I missed you, she clears her throat and dives into the business that really brought her here. "I need some information, and I hear this is the place to get it. Timmy says you're working with the Shadow Broker."

Rather than asking who in the blue fuck Timmy is supposed to be, Liara arches a brow-ridge. "Actually," she corrects, "I'm trying to kill him...or them, as the case may well be."

That fist of emptiness clenches inside Kelsa once more, but she doesn't let it show, only grimacing. "But you can help me," she gruffs. It's not a question.

Liara pauses, her lips parting without words for a few breaths, but she gathers her thoughts and covers them with a tight little smile. "Of course, Shepard," she allows, and the second use of Kelsa's surname has the soldier's own brow twitching, but it feels more like a punch to the gut instead of a knife, this time. "What sort of information do you require?"

"Need locations on a couple people for my mission," Kelsa informs the former scientist. "An assassin by the name of Thane Krios and something called a Justicar, goes by Samara. Timmy thinks they're here, but it's a big fucking city on a big fucking planet."

Rather than wait for Kelsa to repeat her request for help, Liara dives into her computer even before the human's finished talking, and though Kelsa can't see the datastreams from this side of the haptic interface, she can discern a rapid flow of reflected text scrolling across Liara's impossibly-blue eyes. In pretty short order the asari's got something, and her smile becomes a touch more like a punch to the gut instead of a knife, this time. "What sort of information do you require?"

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The mark's name's vaguely familiar to Kelsa, but she can't quite place it. "Then I guess I'd better find her before Krios does, if I want to catch him before he disappears."

"You should make contact with an asari in the cargo transport office, named Seryna...she was once head of Dantius' security, and will have more information on her whereabouts and defences."

Another lip-parted pause. "Just be careful," Liara enjoins her. "If the assassin sees you as a threat-"
"Then I'll have one less recruit," Kelsa cuts in, grimacing. "What about this Justicar? Samara?"

"Her location will take a bit more time to ascertain," Liara admits, her fingers flying across her haptic keyboard. "Justicars are famed throughout asari space, but almost unknown outside it...it is quite rare for one to venture even this far afield. I'm sorry, Shepard," the asari deflects, and this time Kelsa just feels an odd tickle on the inside of her ribs. "It may be a few days before I can give you a definitive answer."

Kelsa clips a nod, gathering her will to rise from the chair with a breath. "Then I guess I'll see you in a few days," she ventures, one corner of her mouth pressing into something resembling a smirk.

Just as she's turning to go, however, Liara bids her to wait. The asari's omni-tool lights up as she speaks. "After your...indisposition...I took the liberty of closing out your credit accounts and managing the funds myself."

Kelsa blinks, a scarred brow arching of its own accord. "You're saying you stole from me after I died, T'Soni?" The name's sour on her tongue, and she regrets it at once, for the brief flicker of a flinch it causes across the other woman's freckled cheeks. Or maybe it's just the accusation that has the asari on the backfoot.

"You had no registered beneficiaries," Liara points out. "No next-of-kin, no dependents...nobody the Earth Systems Alliance was going to release your property to. So they would have taken it, every credit, and you wouldn't have seen a single one. I wasn't going to let that happen."

The soldier's omni-tool chirps, and she brings her arm up, looking into her messages. There's a new transaction on her credit account, and the number attached has more zeroes than can fit on one line of the interface. "That's...a lot of mods," she observes, regarding Liara with something approaching gratitude. "Thanks."

Liara dips her head, but doesn't quite break Kelsa's gaze. "It was no more than you deserved," she scoffs.

The ball of loneliness in Kelsa's chest swells as she steps away from the desk, and it feels like it might break through her ribcage when she pauses by the door. Looking back over her shoulder, she clears her throat. "Sorry I never took you to Thessia, Blueblood."

She steps through the door, but just as it closes, her aural implants pick up a breathy whisper that sounds a lot like So am I, Kelsa.

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_Engineering Subdeck, CSV Normandy SR-2_

1030 Zulu

14 August 2185

_Nos Astra (docked), Soarse, Illium, Tasale_

Five fingers, one for each week she's been awake, still locked around the steel support tube, as her fifth rusted scream dies in her throat. She knows full well that Tali, Donnelly, and Daniels are just a few feet above her head, but right now, with biotic aftersparks still coursing over her belly from the tongue still buried inside her, she can't spare the thought to give a fuck. The soldier draws a ragged breath, prying her fingers off the pipe one at a time, though the metal will remember her grip. She hisses at the feel of Jack's bristled hair scratching along her inner thigh.
"Had enough yet, Girl Scout?" Jack rasps, wiping at the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand. It's five more words than either of them have said since the soldier bulled down the steps, three hours ago.

Kelsa answers by curling forward, planting an elbow on the cot to give herself more leverage, until her chapped lips slam against Jack's in a kiss that doesn't leave her paralysed and fumbling. Jack leans into the kiss, slithering up between Kelsa's thighs, her tattooed belly sliding across the soldier's scarred, muscled torso. Kelsa's tongue is the first to breathe their locked lips, the metallic tang of her own essence driving a knife into the solitude still clinging to the inside of her sternum.

There's still enough sand in her system that she can give the biotic a few sparks of her own, her pipe-squeezing fingers working down Jack's gaunt flank, trailing dark energy in their wake. Jack bites down on Kelsa's tongue as three of Kelsa's fingers dive into the smaller woman's core and they both taste copper, which just makes each of them hungrier. If the poor engineers haven't cleared off the deck by now, Jack and Kelsa give them plenty more opportunity over the next half-hour. Kelsa doesn't bend any more pipes, but she almost breaks through the cot when she flips the smaller biotic over and makes her reedy voice rattle around the subdeck.

But eventually the sand wears off, like Kelsa knew it would, and it leaves her feeling more empty than she did before she took that first hit in a Nos Astra alleyway. The first hit of red sand since before she joined the Alliance, anyhow. When she untangles herself from the smaller woman, Kelsa leans back against the metal wall, a shiver stalking over her belly from the oddly-cool air, unheated by the idling drive core. "Over a decade clean," she breathes, through clenched teeth. "Even ignoring my six hundred and eighty-one day nap."

"Yeah?" Jack huffs, still laying back on her cot, staring at the ceiling. "One little conversation with a noodle-head got you diving off that cliff again, huh?" Kelsa's sharply-raised eyebrow, usually taken as cause for alarm, just brings a chuckle out of the biotic. "What?" Jack scoffs, rolling her eyes. "Fuckers upstairs like to gossip while they work. Ain't my fault if the quarian doesn't know when to shut up about you."

On the one hand, Kelsa's surprised that Tali's getting along with two Cerberus engineers, but on the other hand, she's gonna have to have a talk with her about fit topics of conversation. Grimacing, the soldier closes her eyes, rocking her head back so that it smacks into the solid metal wall. "Yeah," she admits. "Got some spending money I wasn't expecting. Kept telling myself I wouldn't score…"

"Until you did," Jack finishes. "Look, Girl Scout, I'm down to go muff-diving all you want, but in case you haven't noticed, I ain't into all this clingy bullshit. I'm a good fuck and a better killer, but I ain't a fucking therapist, okay?" Her own eyebrow's raised, Kelsa sees when she opens her eyes and throws a glance Jack's way. "Got my own fucking issues to deal with," she half-mumbles, digging her bare feet unsubtly into Kelsa's thigh.

The soldier takes the hint, climbing off the cot, silently collecting the plain black shirt and cargo trousers that she's turned into something of a dress uniform since she's begun helming this ship. Her gums itch and her sinuses tingle, old companions from her teenage years...they'll go away in about six hours...or, more likely, whenever she finishes off the vial of sand stashed in her cabin. "So you think you wanna do this again sometime?" She ventures without turning around, one boot already on the second step.

"Sure," comes the biotic's reply. "Long as you don't start boring me with feelings and shit."

"Noted," Kelsa acknowledges, vaulting the steps out of the subdeck, her tongue swirling over the front of her top teeth. Part of her is proud that the engineering deck proper's completely deserted, and she doesn't waste a single step to the elevator.
"You?!!" The asari looks more incredulous than terrified, though she might think she's still got a chance, since she's got six guns backing her up, whereas Kelsa just has two. "Figures they'd send you," Dantius goes on. "Thought you were dead."

"Been getting that a lot," Kelsa deadpans, holding her spike-thrower down-checked across her torso. "Who's supposed to have sent me?"

Dantius makes a disgusted noise, low in her throat. "My sweet sisters, of course. I asked you to take care of one of them...it's only fitting that they'd send you after me."

Kelsa remembers Dantius, now, a passing conversation on the Citadel. Her brow draws down. "I thought you said your sister was the victim of a slaver, and you wanted her to get freed?"

The asari rolls her eyes. "A ruse designed to lure a lughead with a big heart and a big gun into my sister's operation," she explains, slowly, as though she has more than a few minutes left to live. "But someone said they had more important things to do than saving an innocent girl from a horrible fate."

"Christ," Zaeed cuts in. "Can we kill this bloody woman already?"

"Not our job," Kelsa gruffs, even as the surviving Eclipse mercs retrain their assault rifles and pistols on the intruders. Kelsa's cheek twitches, annoyed at her own answer. "But I can take up a hobby if you don't show yourself soon," she calls, louder than before, even though her red-green eyes don't move away from Dantius. "Got a proposition for you."

If anything, Dantius looks even more affronted. "What makes you think I'll be willing to talk business after you've slaughtered my mercenaries and destroyed my mechs?"

Kelsa smirks, her head tilting, curious. "What makes you think I was talking to you?" Her aural implants are just perceptive enough to pick up a whisper from the vents above their heads, too subtle for anyone else to hear, but she gives no outward sign. "You'll be dead soon enough; then I'll talk business."

Dantius' lips part, and Kelsa feels the intuitive tension crawl across her shoulders that tells her the asari's getting ready to order her mercs to fire, but before the syllables can form in her throat, a grate in the ceiling audibly pops open, and all those guns jerk around in confusion. Dantius twists left and right, throwing glances over her shoulders, looking up into the now-open vent.

But, of course, that's not where the attack comes from. The second all the mercs' guns are trained on that hole in the ceiling, the enormous, skirted table in the centre of the room flips over in a wave of biotics. A green-and-black-skinned humanoid reptile erupts from underneath, moving fluidly, almost languidly, even though it just takes the alien a little over five seconds to kill all six guards. Four necks are broken, one's knife is lodged in his own throat, and only the last suffers from the assassin's pistol. The actual mark he savours, almost like an expensive wine, and it takes her another five seconds and a single bullet to die.
The human soldier's about to introduce herself when the murderous lizard clasps its hands and bows its head, its dark eyes closing and thin lips twitching, and for just a second Kelsa's back at the laundry, watching lizard-faced old women praying. Blinking the shard of memory away, Kelsa clears her throat. "What are you doing, Krios?"

The assassin's black-on-black eyes flutter open, regarding her evenly. "Prayers for the wicked cannot be ignored," it answers, the timbre of its voice decidedly masculine to Kelsa's ears.

The soldier bobs her head to the asari's bleeding body. "Don't think that matters to her right now," she observes.

Krios smiles tightly. "The prayer was not for her," he informs the human. "But for me. My name is Thane Krios, and I believe you said that you had a proposition for me."

"Yeah," Kelsa grunts, bringing her gun to rest on her armoured shoulder. "Cerberus is willing to part with a lot of credits to throw me at the Collectors, and you can get in on that, if you're interested."

It isn't the best pitch she could make, but she's antsy, ready to get back to her ship. Her thinning patience is tested when Krios doesn't answer all at once; instead, he turns toward the window, observing the sunrise through the half-open blinds. "I've had some dealings with the Collectors' proxies," he admits. "I would need a compelling reason to draw their attention now."

It's not a no, and Kelsa licks her gums as she considers her next move. "They're going after human colonies. Dozens have been evacuated...thousands of inhabitants lost. And that's probably just the beginning." She doesn't know why she doesn't stress the credits; there are a lot of them, and in her experience, the main dividing line between a soldier and an assassin is usually the size of the paycheque. But this assassin seems different. Maybe it's his prayers over the bodies he's laid out...or maybe it's just the sand whispering lies into her ear already. "You think they'll stop at humans?"

"Collectors are reputed to be equal-opportunity...collectors," the drell observes, his back still to them. "It is how they got their name, taking a dozen krogan here, a handful of asari there. Never so many as to draw the wrong sort of attention."

The human soldier breathes a raspy chuckle. "I think I qualify as the wrong sort of attention," she ventures. "People call me Shepard."

That draws the drell's attention away from the shuttered window, and he inspects Kelsa more closely. "Shepard...yes." He blinks, and she sees his eyes unfocus, and when he speaks again, his voice has taken on a rhythmic quality. "A holographic image standing stoic, the ticker-tape reading out a tribute to your actions in saving the Citadel, announcing your status as missing in action." He blinks again, ignoring the raised eyebrows of his human audience. "You seem to have undergone a few cosmetic alterations in your absence. I apologise for not recognising you immediately."

"So how 'bout it, Krios?" Kelsa prompts, dipping her head to look at him from beneath cracked eyebrows. "You up for killin' some bugs with me?"

The man's answer doesn't come all at once, but slowly, the corners of his mouth tip up. "I am nearing the end of my life," he admits. "I had thought to make this my last job before retirement...but I believe I have one more job in me, before my condition renders me inoperable."

"You're sick?" Kelsa grimaces. Climbing this fucking tower better not have been for nothing…
"I am dying," Krios confirms. "Kepral's Syndrome...it is not contagious to other species, and it has not yet impaired my functions beyond compensating, but there is no cure. If your goal is to fight the Collectors, you will one day have to traverse the Omega 4 relay...something which has thus far been a one-way trip." He blinks, pausing to breathe. "I am a fitting candidate for such a mission. I have brought a great amount of darkness to the galaxy over the course of my life...perhaps fighting the Collectors will bring some light, before mine fades for good."

"Great," Jack offers up. "Got a fuckin' poet on our hands."

Kelsa can't keep back a chuckle. "Welcome aboard," she offers, rolling her shoulder toward the door. "Now let's get the fuck outta here before any more mechs show up."

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**XO's quarters, CSV Normandy SR-2**

**1300 Zulu**

**25 August 2185**

**Nos Astra (docked), Soarse, Illium, Tasale**

The soldier flexes her fingers before the door opens, dissipating the sparks she couldn't help playing with in the elevator. When she steps into the office, she finds the dark-haired Cerberus operative seated at the desk, nose pointed at three different datapads. "You wanted to see me, Lawson?"

The woman doesn't look up. "I sent you a request for a face-to-face three days ago, after Samara came aboard."

Mention of the Justicar sets Kelsa's teeth on edge; she almost didn't let the old asari onto her ship, after she swore an oath to follow Kelsa's orders, and then said that if any of those orders conflicted with the Justicar code, then once the mission was over Samara would have to kill her. "And a couple of weeks ago I wouldn't have bothered showing up at all, so you might wanna tell me what the fuck you want before I turn around and leave you to your reading."

Lawson finally brings her gaze to meet Kelsa's, but she looks anything but grateful. "I was going to ask for your help in a personal matter, but now I'm not so sure I want to, given your recent...habits." Her eyes flick to Kelsa's left hand, and the soldier looks down to see a bolt of blue crawling treacherously over her knuckles.

"A little dust never made me any less dangerous," Kelsa says, balling her left hand into a fist. "You got a problem with it, you know where the airlock is. I'm sure you can hitch a ride back to your boss from somewhere in Nos Astra."

The woman pulls a face that says she does have a problem with it, but she doesn't make any move toward the door. "The Illusive Man has been made aware," she warns. "If I feel it is interfering with the mission, there may be steps I'll be authorised to take."

Kelsa's scarred cheek twitches and tingles. "You and Timmy've made it clear that without me there is no mission," she points out. "You ain't got the time or the creds to build a new me and a new team...and there're at least three other people on this ship you'll have to take out along with me." She grins, feeling each crack stretch in her face, relishing the little plumes of pain along with the tension in the air between them. "But I'm really gettin' bored of threatening to kill you, Lawson. Why'ncha lay your business on me and we'll see what we can do about it, huh?"
Lawson stays quiet for a long moment, her eyes sliding closed as she takes a deep breath. "You're right," she concedes, her eyes still closed. "Circumstances have made you irreplaceable, at least for the moment." She meets Kelsa's eyes soberly. "But I don't have to kill you to deal with you if your little hobby starts getting out of hand, Shepard," she points out. "I simply have to air my concerns to Karin."

Kelsa's throat closes on her knee-jerk response; she wasn't expecting that particular trump card. Not that the good doctor has any real power to ground her, not like she used to, before Alchera...but Kelsa doesn't think Chakwas would tolerate her little hobby if she found out, and she could always up and leave the ship herself, and that wouldn't be good for anyone on the ship...especially since seeing her that first time helped keep Kelsa from stealing it and murdering every Cerberus agent aboard. "Alright," she accedes, gruffly. "I'll keep an eye on it. Now, you gonna tell me about this problem of yours, or am I gonna have to worry about shit you left undone when it comes time to hit the relay?"

The operative gathers her thoughts, bringing her knuckles up under her chin. "It's...my sister," she finally manages, looking away. "She's in trouble."

Kelsa licks over her gums, nodding. "What kinda trouble?"

Chapter End Notes

This chapter contains some explicit sexuality and references to drug use, so beware.
Ch. 33: Into the Light

Chapter Summary

Liara's business takes the Normandy a bit off the beaten path.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Brokerage Offices

1245 Zulu

27 August 2185

Nos Astra (ashore), Soarse, Illium, Tasale

Liara hasn't replaced her secretary since Kelsa helped her find out the woman was a spy for the Shadow Broker, so there's nobody to intercept her in the anteroom. It was almost a disappointment when Liara rebuffed Kelsa's offer and instead took care of Nyxeris herself, without Kelsa even being there, but the dull ache in Kelsa's chest hasn't bothered her nearly so much since she took up her little hobby again.

"Shepard," Liara says, her surprise flavoured with a hint of pleasure, and that doesn't hurt near as bad as it used to, either. "To what do I owe this visit?"

Kelsa's lips part as she takes in the sight of the asari for a few heartbeats. Fuck, you're beautiful. "Got some intel you might be interested in," she says, instead. "That is, if you were serious about killing the Shadow Broker."

"Absolutely," the asari confirms, pushing up from her desk. "I had no idea...let me see what you've got." She looks expectantly to the datapad clutched in Kelsa's hand, and the soldier hands it over without ceremony. As Liara looks it over, her lips move wordlessly for a few heartbeats. "It looks like a leaked transmission between a pair of the Shadow Broker's operatives," she observes. "...Some hints as to a location, and..." Kelsa sees a mirror image of a drell, and despite the sand tingling through her nervous system, she feels her chest clench at the expression of recognition and relieved fondness that crosses the asari's face. "...it's about Feron," Liara pronounces. "He's still alive."

The question nearly catches on her throat, but Kelsa forces it out anyway. "Who's Feron?"

Liara blinks, and Kelsa doesn't have to rely on her ocular implants to see the flush of blue behind the asari's freckles. "He was...a friend," she deflects. "He helped me recover your..." Here she hesitates, eyes tipping down to the floor. "Your body...from the Shadow Broker."

Kelsa can't process this new information all at once, and she buys herself a moment's thought with a blink. "What did the Shadow Broker want with my corpse?" She wonders, her mind still working to catch up.
Liara turns around, and Kelsa's eyes track her face, reflected in the window. The soldier ignores the glowing eyes and lines of her own reflection as the asari musters an answer to the query. "He was going to sell you to the Collectors," she admits, hazarding a glance over her shoulder. "Feron and I stopped him...and Feron sacrificed himself to save me."

More questions cut through the sand and the ache in her chest. "So you haven't seen Feron…"

"Since shortly before I handed your body over to the Lazarus Project," Liara confirms, contemplating her own reflection once more. "I hadn't dared hope either of you would survive...but it turns out that both of you have."

She unknowingly (or knowingly, more likely) answered Kelsa's next question. "You gave me to Cerberus," she deadpans, saying the name aloud for the first time in weeks. In the window she sees Liara's forehead tense, but the soldier lets out a long, slow breath. "That makes three times you saved my life, Liara," she points out. "Thank you." It's the first time she's expressed any kind of gratitude in too long, even accounting for her two-year nap.

The asari visibly relaxes, but she doesn't turn to face the human directly. "Part of me was worried that you would see the act as a betrayal," she admits in a hushed whisper. "I'm very glad that you aren't angry."

"Oh, I'm angry," Kelsa corrects her, breathing a rough snort and giving the other woman a scarred grimace. "At the Collectors, at the Illusive Man...fuck, at Anderson and the Alliance brass for sending me out on bullshit cleanup jobs without any backup, but...never you." Her chest tightens again, like there's a fist inside it grabbing at her heart. She shakes her head and catches her right hand sliding up to a certain compartment in her armour, but clenches her fist instead. "Anyhow," the soldier deflects, looking away from the reflection's cerulean gaze, "let's get moving before this intel goes stale."

"Very well," Liara concurs, bringing the datapad up for closer scrutiny. "This office isn't as secure as my apartment. Would you like to accompany me, Shepard?"

Finally, the asari looks over her shoulder, and Kelsa finds that she can't look away, even though she wants to. Even though she's not mad at Liara, she can see the burning coals of her irises reflected in those oceanic depths. "You'd really want me to come?"

Liara blinks, curious. "The Shadow Broker is one of the deadliest individuals—or groups of individuals—in the galaxy. There are doubtless already agents inbound to intercept and eliminate us as we stand here. I can think of no more formidable an ally in the fight ahead than you, Shepard...if you are willing to aid me, that is."

Of course. Kelsa frowns, surprised at the hint of disappointment on her tongue, even if she knows full well that she is the best person to take Blueblood where she needs to go. A mad varren without a collar. Swallowing, she taps her comm link on her HUD. "Shepard to EDI," she barks, and continues once she hears the AI's receiving hail. "Let Miranda know the deck's hers for the next few hours. Standing order to evac only if my vitals flatline."

"Operative Lawson and the rest of the crew will be informed, Shepard," EDI replies, as sedately as ever. "Logging you out."

Kelsa nods, reaching back to unship her spike-thrower and turning toward the door. "If they're coming for us, we'd better get a move on. How defensible is your place?"

"Not very," Liara says, her voice just a shade more deliberate than usual. "Lead the way to a cab on
Kelsa forges through the anteroom, thumbing her gun's incendiary mod just as Liara discreetly draws her own pistol. At the bottom of the stairs, however, the asari wordlessly takes the lead, heading to a private transit area, reserved for the more important layers of Illium society. The tactical silence between them holds even after they hop into a nondescript skycar with Liara at the controls. The soldier doesn't know their destination, but she recognises the asari's evasive driving pattern, designed to shake a cold tail without drawing attention from unsuspecting civilians. She holds her tongue, even though it seems that if the Shadow Broker's agents are worth their positions, such manoeuvres are likely little more than a formality.

After about half an hour of cruising through Nos Astra's skyline like it's a salarian jigsaw puzzle, Liara finally lands them in a plain-looking parking garage. She takes point again, scouting out their route as thoroughly as any soldier Kelsa's ever seen, and the human almost lets herself get distracted by the change that the two unseen years have wrought in the woman who used to flinch at the sight of a few geth.

Now she's threatening to flay people alive.

It isn't just the sand still in her system that tingles Kelsa's thighs at the remembered threat. She has to blink the memory away as they stalk down a corridor and edge into a stairwell; otherwise, she might forget about their little mission and try to get the asari to flare those biotics in her direction, just to feel something. Instead, she forges on. The silence of the concrete around them is nearly total; the building lacks the hum of a drive core or the rumbling of a battlefield, the bustle of civilian traffic or the thrumming of nature. It's enough to let Kelsa hear the ringing in her ears that the implants and reconstructions couldn't keep from coming back. Kelsa's eyes sweep for threats as soon as they step foot in Liara's apartment proper, scanning over the displays of prothean ruins and the gorgeous artwork without really taking it in, without absorbing the essence of the place, what makes it so thoroughly Liara.

It's that focus, plus her ocular implants, that let Kelsa see the flashes from across the skyway just in time. Before she can even think to react, she's on the ground, the lighter asari half-pinned underneath her. Glass tinkles to the floor from three neat holes punched through the apartment's windows, and Kelsa hears three distinct thups from the rounds impacting the near wall. Heedless of Liara's comfort, the human soldier crawls across the floor, dragging her charge back toward the door and more thorough cover. "Looks like we gotta analyse that data on the run," Kelsa gruffs. "Think you can tease out where the Shadow Broker's agent is while I'm at the wheel of a skycar?"

For just one shining moment Liara resembles that scared scientist, the one Kelsa plucked out of a volcano just in time, over two years and a whole lifetime ago. But the moment passes far too quickly, and the asari collects herself with a couple of blinks. "I believe I can," she judges with a nod. "Shall we go?"

In response, Kelsa slides her back up against the door and palms it open, hinging out into the hallway with her shotgun at the ready. She takes the lead this time, each footfall putting herself firmly between her charge and the deathsquadd that's certainly honing in on them. The soldier edges to a stairwell and checks the flights immediately above and below them before throwing a glance Liara's way. "Closest parkade?"

"The one we landed in," Liara confirms, slipping through the door and jamming her shoulder against the wall, presenting a smaller target to anyone following them from the hallway.

Three floors up, Kelsa remembers. Without another word, she begins mounting the stairs, her stomach tightening with a soldier's instinct that trouble's just around the corner.
The asari's uneven footprints make a blue trail across the floor, leading away from the crash that Kelsa's manic driving and Liara's precise shooting hounded her into. "Vasir," Kelsa barks when she rounds a corner and catches sight of the asari's hobbled form. "You know I'm gonna kill you, right?"

From what they've gathered on the chase, the woman is a Spectre, like Kelsa used to be...or, rather, entirely unlike Kelsa, since the asari was a pawn of the Citadel-and, evidently, the Shadow Broker—far longer than Kelsa'd been alive, while the human barely tolerated the title for a handful of months and is repelled by the idea of groveling in front of the Council to get it back. But for all her experience, Tela Vasir is still bleeding all over the fancy wood-panel floors of the balcony. Dozens of Shadow Broker agents stood and died to keep her three steps ahead of Kelsa and Liara for the past few hours, but either there aren't any agents left or the Shadow Broker's decided to cut his asset loose. And if that's the case, they don't have much time to recover the data Vasir stole from Liara's contact about half an hour ago, and Vasir knows it.

The asari doesn't turn back, doesn't acknowledge the taunt, but instead she limps more quickly to an occupied part of the balcony. "Hey," she grunts, at a human server who's taken aback by the sight of a wounded asari commando lumbering toward her. "Hey you," Vasir says, snatching the woman by her shoulder and pulling her into a back-to-front embrace, a pistol at her temple.

"Goddammit," Kelsa growls to herself, drawing up and leveling her spike-thrower right at the asari's throat, which happens to be tucked behind the human woman's collarbone. "You really don't know anything about me, do you, Vasir?"

Liara stops beside her, pistol fixed, but even her icy resolve is melted somewhat by the presence of the civilian. "Shepard," she breathes, equal parts pleading and plotting.

"I know you're a monkey," Vasir spits, hitching her own pistol higher on the side of her hostage's head. "Hey," she breathes again, more directly to her prisoner. "You wanna live, right?" When the server chokes out a terrified affirmation, the asari chuckles. "Well, you'd better convince the other monkey. I hear you stick together."

"P-please," the woman begs, closing her eyes against the tears that spill over her cheek. "I've got a son...a little boy."

"Hear that, monkey?" Vasir gurgles, taking her turn at taunting. "She's got a little boy. We wouldn't want him to grow up without his momma, would we?"

Kelsa pulls the trigger on her rifle, feels the telltale clicks of the shard charging up. "Look at me," she says, not moving her eyes from the target, just above the woman's collarbone. At the top of her vision, she sees the hostage's watery eyes open, another plea—or maybe a prayer—on her lips. "The squid-head behind you is going to die, and it looks like she's taking you with her. For what it's worth..." As she speaks, she sees that biotic flare come from her left, from Liara, but it's too late. Kelsa's finger's already relaxing. "...I'm sorry."

As nimble as Liara's biotics are, as powerful as she is, she can't move fast enough to beat a shard of
superheated tungsten. Kelsa doesn't blink as the round punches through flesh and bone, through the last-ditch barrier that Vasir throws up against it, through the cartilage and meat of the asari's throat. It lodges there, embedded between two of Vasir's vertebrae, joining asari and human into one multi-coloured fountain. Blue and red mist and spray gloriously for a pair of heartbeats, until Liara's botched intervention arrives in the form of a table that she'd pulled, evidently in hopes of breaking Vasir's grip on her hostage.

Instead the two women get knocked awkwardly to the floor, still welded together by tungsten and blood; the human struggles, feebly, but her strength flags with every heart-pumped spray of crimson. All Vasir can do is blink, dumbly, as Kelsa saunters closer. "I am sorry," she husks to the human. She knows what it's like to grow up without a mother, but that doesn't stop her from shouldering her gun again and putting the woman out of her misery.

The soldier ignores the crowd that was too stupid to scatter when the excitement started; she crouches down, kneeling in the swirling pool of blood, and tears the two corpses out of their stapled embrace. It's the work of seconds to find the data core tucked away in Vasir's armour, and soon enough she's standing, turning to face her companion. For one glimmering instant, she recognises some sliver of emotion on Liara's face, some hint of just how disturbing the scene had been; but, just as quickly, it's sublimated into the cool mask that the information broker's maintained almost without fail since their reunion. A tongue of white-hot anger licks across the inside of Kelsa's ribs, and she can't keep it from flinching across her own cheeks, but she makes no comment as she draws near. "EDI," she gruffs to the aether, and her omni-tool chirps in response. "We need an extraction before Nos Astra security comes knocking."

"Indeed," the AI affirms. "Flight-Lieutenant Moreau is setting us underway as we speak. We should arrive at your location in thirteen point three five seconds."

"Understood," the soldier grunts. She spends every millisecond of that time in silence, locking eyes with Liara T'Soni, unable to discern the intent behind those deep blues. It's only as the Normandy pulls up level with the balcony and opens its forward bay that Kelsa reaches out, holding the glowing orb out for her companion to take, which she does without a word. "Come on," Kelsa says, already hearing sirens closing in on them. "Let's go kill us somebody that deserves it."

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**XO's Quarters, CSV Normandy SR-2**

**1945 Zulu**

**30 August 2185**

**Sublight Transit to Hagalaz, Sowilo, Hourglass Nebula**

"I will SMEAR THE WALLS with you, bitch!" Miranda's soundproof doors open to Jack's cracking scream, a sound Kelsa's had a couple of occasions to become familiar with in a slightly different context, though not since Liara came aboard three days ago. They should've been to Hagalaz by now, but that would've meant risking a core overload, which would've ruined Liara's plan to kill the Shadow Broker and rescue her friend.

Evidently Kelsa isn't the only one unable to handle the trip with anything resembling patience. As she steps into the room, the windows flicker with a sudden flash of blue from the Cerberus operative who calls the space home. "Please," she drawls. "You'd have to tear through the hull first, and where would that leave you?"

"We gotta shuttle," Kelsa butts in, before the smaller woman can muster a response through her
Miranda rounds on her skipper, a snarl threatening to crease her supposedly-flawless face. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you're siding with that," she hisses, tossing a dismissive glance at the tattooed woman crouching on the other side of the room.

"Funny," Kelsa gruffs, squaring her shoulders. "Thought you were supposed to be a genius, Lawson." She doesn't leave enough time for the dig to sink in before she pushes on. "If both of you don't bury this, right now, I'm putting you both on that shuttle...and I won't really care if either of you get off it." The pair of them try to yell over one another, almost like Kelsa didn't say anything; Jack's throwing up Cerberus' experiments on her, while Miranda's trying—and not quite failing—to remain aloof. "Hey!"

The scream doesn't get their attention, but a spike in the floor between them does. Kelsa doesn't ship her gun when the bickering dies down, keeping it crossed at her torso, ready to bring to bear against either one of her supposed subordinates. "I wasn't fucking kidding. If you both don't shut the fuck up I'm putting you on that shuttle, alive or dead."

Jack doesn't take her eyes off of Miranda as she starts to talk. "Thought you were building a team, Girl Scout," she points out. "How's that gonna look for you if you start offing us?"

"It'll look pretty good if it keeps the hull intact," Kelsa shoots back. "I got an asari Justicar, a drell assassin, a quarian architect, a turian sniper...fuck, even a spare Cerberus lapdog," she adds, smirking despite herself. "You've both got issues I've dealt with. You hate each other; I get that. But you owe me enough to put that shit behind you until our job's done...and if that's too high a price for you to pay, then both of you need to get the fuck off my ship. Tonight. Now." Three heartbeats pass before the other women's biotics flicker and fade; they don't relax, exactly, but it's clear that they won't tear each other's throats out in the next few minutes. "Fine," Kelsa settles, shipping her shotgun at the small of her back. "You two, remain a deck apart at all times until the mission's over. Understood?"

Miranda's lip is the first one to curl. "Understood, Skipper," she acknowledges.

Jack huffs, slinking toward the door. "Whatever," she bluffs, stalking out of the room.

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The Loft, CSV Normandy SR-2

2300 Zulu

2 September 2185

Hagalaz (orbit, discharging), Sowilo, Hourglass Nebula

The hollow place in Kelsa's gut feels just big enough for the vial in her pocket to fill, but she holds the hunger in a clenched fist behind her back. She grimaces, inspecting her reflection in the fishtank, and she doesn't need her ocular implants to notice the telltale luminescent sheen starting to show through her teeth. The sight makes her close her mouth, but she can't keep her tongue from swirling over her incisors from underneath her lips.

She's nervous, even though Liara's been on this ship for almost a week; in all that time, the two of them haven't spent a single moment alone, have hardly spared a word that wasn't about the Shadow Broker and what they were going to find when they got to his base. A whole lotta people willing to die for nothing, it turns out, Kelsa reflects. Not like there's ever been a shortage of those around. And for what? A yahg, some kind of monster alien race that makes the krogan seem like a bunch
of pet iguanas. He was one tough motherfucker to take down, but she'd done it, in the end.

She always does.

And after the blood cooled and Garrus and Tali had come to, Kelsa thought that'd be that. But as she'd turned to leave Liara in control of the most dangerous ship in the galaxy, the asari called her back, asked her if they might have a proper talk the next day.

The next day's today. Now.

Kelsa forcibly relaxes the fist behind her back as her door dings. EDI's already been briefed to give Liara the run of the ship. Miranda didn't like that too much, but she liked the prospect of another hole in her floor even less. For just a second, though, the soldier regrets her unexamined insistence, her empty gut clenching in the space between the door hissing open and the asari stepping over the threshold.

Too preoccupied with her own scarred reflection, Kelsa isn't at all prepared for the vision that greets her when she swings around. It's Liara, unmistakably, but not like Kelsa's ever seen her before. Rather than the functional attire of the scientist or the practical uniform of the information broker, she's wearing a sleeveless crimson gown made out of shimmering silk that hugs her in all the ways that Kelsa's can't deny she's wanted to since she got off of Miranda's table. Further, the asari's normally-freckled cheeks are now a faded cerulean, her race's equivalent of blush, expertly applied. "Fuck," the soldier gruffs, unable to hold it back this time. "You're beautiful."

"I...thank you," Liara allows, her head tipping forward. "...Kelsa," she adds, in a small, uncertain voice. "I've brought you a gift," she points out, more strongly, holding out an honest-to-god wicker-weave basket that Kelsa didn't notice until now. It's almost enough to make her laugh, until she catches sight of what's in the basket. "Favourites of yours, as I recall," Liara adds, over the gasp of pleasure that steals out of Kelsa's throat.

A pristine bottle of Jameson whiskey sits nestled amidst a veritable mountain of pears. These are indeed two of Kelsa's favourite things in the galaxy, and for a long moment the soldier just stands there, awestruck and overloaded by the gesture. It takes Liara patiently clearing her throat before Kelsa snaps out of her trance. "Thanks," she grunts, reaching out to grab the basket; electricity runs over two of her fingertips where they brush against the asari's knuckles, but the contact doesn't last. "I don't...have anything..." she begins, grimacing. I didn't even dress up, she almost says, but Liara speaks up just as her lips part.

"That isn't true, Kelsa," she corrects the soldier. "You have the spirit of the galaxy within you. Never forget that."

Kelsa glances away, her scarred cheek tingling with the force of her smirk. "Don't you say that to everybody, Blueblood?" Unlike a lot of her kind, Liara really does believe in her Goddess, at least in her own way.

"Not everyone actually has the galaxy in their debt," Liara observes, wryly. Then her eyes skip over Kelsa's shoulder, fixing on the pane of glass behind her. The asari's head tilts thoughtfully. "...There appears to be a layer of fish corpses floating at the top of your tank. Interesting design choice."

Kelsa gruffs a laugh, rubbing the back of her neck with her free hand. "Picked them up on Illium," she explains. "Kinda...lost track of time over the last few days. Sorry, I shoulda cleared them out before you got here, I just..."
"Had other things on your mind?" Liara ventures, somewhat kindly. She takes the liberty of stepping down the stairs into Kelsa's quarters proper, and the soldier can't help but follow, still holding tight to that wicker-weave basket. "What has been on your mind, Kelsa?" The asari probes, once Kelsa reaches the lower floor. "Have you put any thought to what you might want...after..."

After I've saved the whole damned world, Kelsa fills in, mentally, though she can't hold back another grunted laugh. "You kidding?" She gruffs, shaking her head. "You know me better than that, Blueblood." Or at least you used to. "I could've died half a dozen times the last time I set foot outside this boat. No idea if I'm gonna see the other side of next week, much less get back from the Omega-4 Relay, assuming we're able to hit it before the Collectors can evacuate the rest of humanity's presence outside the Sol system." She breathes a heavy sigh, finally setting down the asari's gift. "Truth is...I'm not sure I wanna come back," she admits, unable to look directly at her guest. "Done a lotta things a hero ain't supposed to do...a lotta things I shoulda done different."

The asari's fingers send another jolt of electricity through Kelsa's flesh as they brush over her cracked cheek, gently guiding the soldier's face up to meet the taller woman's eyes. "That would entail a great deal of pain for those of us who count you as...dear," she says.

Kelsa's breath catches in her throat, and she has to swallow hard to clear it. "Didn't think I had any of those left," she gruffs. "Some of those things I shouldn't've done...they'll hurt some of those people, if they ever find out about 'em."

"You should keep in mind that the people close to you are of a certain calibre," the asari insists. "People like us do not easily succumb to common hurts." Her fingers begin to draw away, but Kelsa catches her wrist impulsively, leaning forward into the contact, her eyes half-lidding as she breathes in Liara's crisp scent under the perfume of the pears.

"I don't know about next week," the soldier breathes, hissing through her teeth. "But we're here tonight, Blueblood. I...missed you."

Liara's eyes flutter closed as she draws closer. "I've missed you, too, Kelsa," she husks, a tremble in her voice. "So very, very much."

Chapter End Notes

What's this? An update? Thanks so much to everyone who's still following this story! Let me know what you think! Also, if you're interested, you can follow me on tumblr at riptidemonzarc.tumblr.com.
Chapter Summary

Too soon, Kelsa has to see the back of Liara, but the asari doesn't leave without also leaving something behind. The Collector threat looms as large as ever, but will Kelsa be able to fight them if she can't even trust the people she's fighting with?

The Loft, CSV Normandy SR-2

0625 Zulu

3 September 2185

Hagalaz (orbit), Sowilo, Hourglass Nebula

The stars bleed out of the sky as the Normandy's orbit takes it to the light side of Hagalaz, but Kelsa barely notices her skylight turning solid black, too distracted by her bedsheets and the asari tangled up with her in them. She sighs, closing her eyes against the passing of the seconds, knowing that she won't be able to stave off the inevitable resumption of her mission for too much longer.

Soft, pebbled lips brush against her jaw, and the soldier tilts her head, offering up more of her neck for Liara's attention. The last few hours have made it clear that Liara hasn't been completely alone for the last two years; her enthusiasm now has an edge of experience that she lacked when Kelsa's world ended over Alchera. That thought sends a cold shiver down the soldier's spine that has nothing to do with the lingering jolts of biotics that the asari's lips drag across her skin.

She swallows hard, pulling Liara into a thick, almost desperate embrace, her face burying in the crook of the asari's neck. The whisper of disquiet is nearly forgotten as the soldier inhales a lungful of Liara's scent, and she lets the breath out in a low sigh. "Are you sure you can't stay, Blueblood?"

The question draws a bubbled laugh from the asari, equal parts cutting and kind. "You've no idea just how tempted I am," Liara admits, settling back on Kelsa's firm mattress to regard the shielded skylight seriously. "Yet we both know that I cannot," she sighs. "There is simply too much to do, too much to clean up…"

"Yeah," Kelsa gruffs, letting the single syllable communicate her understanding; even in this place there's no true privacy, no refuge from Cerberus' eyes and ears. Now that Liara's not only helped kill the Shadow Broker, but taken his place, she can't afford to let the three-headed dog sink its fangs into the galaxy's most delicious information network. Even so, Kelsa breathes deeply of the asari's essence, pulling her into an almost desperate embrace. "Just a little longer," she pleads, her breath just barely strong enough for her lover to pick up.

"Of course," Liara responds, equally breathless, her arms clinging with all the strength she can muster. They pass several long moments in silence, even lust forgotten in their desperation to cling to one another. All too soon, however, it becomes impossible to ignore the passing of the seconds, and the urgent business that tugs each of them in different directions. Liara's the first to pull away, slowly untangling her limbs from the bedsheets and drawing away from the human woman. "It's
"time," she whispers, almost wearily. "The Collectors will not wait...and neither will my network."

"Goddammit," Kelsa groans, but she feels too heavy to offer a more physical protest. Instead she watches as Liara snatches a spare non-service uniform from her dresser—the asari's fancy dress didn't exactly survive the night intact...not that the asari's complaining. The pleasant groan Liara makes as she pulls herself into the unitard is almost enough to draw Kelsa from the bed, but the soldier holds back, too mindful of the possibility of rejection.

Liara doesn't stalk immediately for the door, however; she goes to the gift basket she brought with her, still full of pears and whiskey. "I debated leaving it as a surprise," she says, with a secretive smirk, "but I decided I want to see how you react. It should be informative."

Curious, the soldier pulls herself into a sitting position. "What are you talking about, Liara?"

The asari's fingers curl around the bottle of Jameson and she pulls it out of the basket. "I've brought you another gift...something I found in the yahg's private collection."

Kelsa arches a brow. "He had decent taste, I guess," she ventures, but somehow she doesn't think Liara's talking about the bottle. Liara confirms her suspicions when her hand dips into the hole left by the bottle and she produces an old, scarred pistol that Kelsa recognises instantly; she last saw it only a few minutes before the Normandy broke up over Alchera, and before that it haunted her for weeks in the hand of Saren Arterius.

In the space between Kelsa's sharp intake of breath and her brain kicking in, Liara takes a step closer to the bed, holding the weapon by its barrel. "It was retrofitted to use thermal clips before the Council races even knew such technology would be feasible," the asari reminds her, extending her arm. "Now that we've caught up, it's a perfectly serviceable firearm. I figured it was a shame leaving it locked up in a private gallery. Are you in the market for another pistol?"

Kelsa blinks, her lips parting and an odd tension twisting behind her breastbone. "I could always use another gun," she gruffs, reaching out and tracing a finger down the stock of the pistol. A kind of electricity prickles over her skin at the contact, not entirely unlike the sensation of Liara's pebbled flesh when it glides beneath her fingerpads. It's her turn to groan as she takes possession of the pistol, weighing it in her palm, studying every little nick and scratch. The tension in her chest eases, warmth spreading across the inside of her ribs, and it's only her aural implants that pick up the subtle creak of Liara's foot on the metal stair that draws her attention away from the gift. "Hey, Blueblood," she calls, her eyes cutting to the curve of Liara's retreating back. "...Thanks."

The asari's cerulean gaze rolls back over her shoulder, that private little smirk still fixed to her lips. "You're welcome, Kelsa." She saunters through the office but hesitates at the door, half-turning to look at Kelsa more fully. A hint of the old Liara bleeds into the edge of her expression, more innocent and less guarded than she's looked since Kelsa saw her on Illium. "Just...try to come back to me," she breathes, swallowing thickly. "I couldn't ever forgive you for dying twice."

"Understood," the soldier grunts. "I'll do my best."

Communications Room, CSV Normandy SR-2

0415 Zulu

14 September 2185

Interstellar, Eagle Nebula
"Take this not as a betrayal, Shepard," Timmy says, his voice oozing through a haze of cigarette smoke. "But rather as a sign of my faith in you." They're the first words out of his mouth as soon as the holo comes up, obviously designed to forestall an angry tirade.

Kelsa swallows the growl that wants to claw its way out of her throat. "You set me up," she gruffs, instead. "I want you to remember that moment," she tells him, through a grimace. "The moment you decided to withhold vital intel-"

"Please," the holo-man interrupts, halfway between a cajole and an entreaty. "The Collectors needed to think they were setting a real trap. Tipping you off could've alerted them in any number of ways."

Kelsa takes a breath, closing her eyes-they're almost all red, these days, and her skin's a map of charred earth cut by rivers of lava. "I want you to remember that moment," she repeats, patiently, as if you a child. Deliberately she opens her eyes, falling into an at-ease posture, her hands loosely crossed behind her back. "I want it to flash through your mind when you're lookin' down the barrel of my gun."

Silence drags on, verging on uncomfortable. After a handful of heartbeats, the Illusive Man's face lights up with the cherry glow of his cigarette. "That'll be all, Shepard," he scoffs, as though she hadn't just threatened-promised, in fact-to kill him."

She nods, not even thinking about giving him the courtesy of a \textit{sir} before she marches out of the comm room. Impulse has her hooking left instead of right, through the armoury that Taylor's made his haunt instead of her more usual swing through the labs to check Mordin's progress.

"Hey, Shepard," the officer grunts, surprise blending smoothly into concern, even sympathy. "Sorry about the Collector ship. You gotta know, Miranda and I had no idea." He gives no sign of the frustration he must feel at having been ignored yet again, left to dawdle here with his guns and his chin-up bar. The skipper pulls up short, cocking her head at him, looking the man over thoroughly, top to bottom. He's an excellent soldier; competent, experienced. Loyal. She looks him directly in the eye as she pulls Saren's pistol from its holster and trains it on the centre of his throat. "Hey," he grunts unevenly, trying to laugh. "That ain't funny, Shepard."

"You think he gives a shit about you?" Kelsa wonders, her thumb sliding over the scarred stock of the pistol to activate the incendiary mods she's so fond of. "You think you or me or anybody really make a fucking difference to that asshole?" Her hand trembles, just a little. Just enough. "EDI," she barks, the gun's hammer a half-hair's breadth from falling. "Gimme Cerberus' protocol for a commander terminating a subordinate."

"There are no formal protocols," the AI responds immediately, her avatar appearing from a nearby terminal. "Mission parameters are left up to an individual leader's discretion, and reviews are conducted by cell coordinators whenever an unexpected staffing change occurs." It's a hell of a lot more information than Kelsa'd been expecting. "However," EDI continues, "since you are not formally a part of Cerberus command structure, it is probable that terminating any Cerberus personnel would result in retaliation, after the successful completion of the mission."

The soldier's scarred cheek tingles with her smirk. "Good," she allows.

Taylor carefully raises his hands, even the fake mirth falling into a neutral expression. "You need to think this through, Skipper," he reasons. "You don't wanna do this." A soldier's calm. Something Kelsa hasn't felt since she started taking the sand again. For a brief second, the man's rich, brown eyes flash a cold blue, and Kelsa's hand shakes more
wildly. She closes her eyes, shivering at the memory of a cold Michigan winter. "I've done plenty of things I didn't wanna do," she spits, heaving a sigh that sees her pistol stowed back in its holster, her eyes still firmly shut. "I don't wanna go through the Omega 4 relay. I don't wanna spend one more goddamned second on this fucking ship, with Cerberus watching who I fuck and where I go and when I piss. I didn't claw my way outta Detroit to be some old white man's guard dog." She grimaces again, and she knows without looking that her teeth have the sheen of oil in a parking lot. It's more words than she's spoken in one breath in a long time, and if she doesn't get outta here, she's gonna wind up saying a few things she'll really regret.

Without another word Kelsa spins around, marching into the CIC, past the galaxy map, up the ship's long, long neck. "Joker," she snaps, when she's within kicking distance of the pilot's chair. Joker rewards her by nearly jumping out of it. "Hey, watch it!" He hisses, spinning the comfortable seat around. "You're liable to make a guy break a hip, here. Whatcha need, Commander?"

He's the one holdout who hasn't stopped calling her by her old rank, one of only two humans on board this boat that she can really trust. "We know the Collectors are real," she tells the pilot, "and they're a threat to humanity...if not the galaxy on the whole."

Moreau arches a brow, scratching over his five-day beard gingerly. "You mean..."

"It's time we let someone in charge know just how fucked we're gonna be," she finishes for him. "Set course for the Citadel."

"Aye, Skipper," he sighs, swinging his chair back around. "...Let's see if the new boss is any different from the old boss," he mutters.

Kelsa knows he's referring to the Council, to the new representatives who stepped up after Kelsa let the old ones die in Saren's madness, but that's not who she's going to see. Instead, she's looking for the one damned human who might be able to knock some sense into her, who won't either put her on some kind of pedestal or try to shoot her on sight.

Human Councilor's Office

1925 Zulu

16 September 2185

Presidium, Citadel

They march into the Citadel nine-people deep, every gun-toting asshole Kelsa's drawn together on her illicit jaunt through the galaxy, from Grunt to Garrus, Jack to Samara...everyone except for Lawson and Taylor, who both took Kelsa's orders to remain aboard without any backtalk. The two humans are Cerberus, of course, and once more worthy of suspicion after the fiasco with the Collectors; but, beyond that, they're soldiers...like Kelsa used to be, before she woke up on that table. She sure as fuck doesn't feel like a soldier anymore, and as she walks a half-step ahead of the rest of her crew, nobody mistakes her for one. They wear armour without insignias, carry their scars without flinching, and keep their weapons at the ready, even on the Presidium. She can see it in the eyes of the civilians who almost cross their path: a frisson of judgment, a hint of scorn, and a thread of swallowed.

They're not a squad. They're a gang. C-Sec takes notice, keeps an eye on their progress through the rich, white corridors, but even the police think twice about confronting them. One human officer tries to make trouble, a little, when Kelsa's biometrics flag her as deceased...but he sees the better
part of valour in the end, and Kelsa's entourage keeps walking.

They're a gang, Kelsa's their shot-caller. Had to happen sometime, she muses, smirking at Grunt's innocent bloodthirst and Garrus' grim determination. Mister V'd be proud, if I started turning a profit. "Make sure nobody drops in on me," she tells her people, and they fan out into a commanding presence in the hallway. She's not sure she trusts Samara or Thane, not yet, but they've not given her any cause yet to be suspicious. Samara's sole caveat—that if Kelsa made her do anything against her Code, the Justicar would have to kill her—had been the asari's only condition for joining Kelsa's crew.

With one last nod, the not-quite-soldier steps through the door into Anderson's office. He's standing out on the balcony, his back to her; he'd been expecting her, which accounted for at least part of the empty pathway between the docks and his front door. Kelsa picks her way through the office, shipping her shotgun and peeling off her Kuwashii visor. The air out on the balcony is balmy, warmed by an artificial sun and cooled by an artificial breeze. The smile Anderson gives her when he turns around is real, though, in every respect. "You look like shit, Shepard," he tells her, by way of introduction.

"Yeah," she gruffs, giving him a half-grin. "Two years dead'll do that to anybody." A sigh snakes past her lips as she leans against the sleek metal wall. "Sorry it took me so long to answer. I just…"

"Think nothing of it," the older man rebuffs. "According to my head of security, you've been keeping yourself busy. Amassed quite the following, the way she tells it."

Kelsa tenses, just for a second, glancing around and listening hard for anybody eavesdropping on them...but the paranoia slithers away as quickly as it'd come, and she relaxes, satisfied they're really alone. "You know me," she barks, retreating to humour again. "Never could resist a good pack of strays."

"Yeah, I remember, Kelsa." He shakes his head. "Still, it's damned good to see you, kid. How you holding up?"

No judgment. No lecture on how she was betraying everything the Alliance stands for. Kelsa tries to smile, but it turns into a grimace. "Bad," she admits, not quite able to meet Anderson's eyes. "I think I fucked up for real, this time."

"Oh, child," Anderson sighs, resting a heavy hand on her right shoulder. His grip doesn't let up when she flinches, and she finds herself leaning into the contact, the kind of simple touch that she's hardly ever let herself feel. Not even with Liara, she thinks. Not since the day before Alchera. But here, in this sterile office in the asshole of the galaxy, away from the killers she's surrounded herself with, the first human Spectre throws her arms around the first human Councilor, burying her face in his chest. His arms wrap around her and pull her close, still so strong, strong enough to keep the whole galaxy at bay if need be. It's probably the first time since she was a small child that Kelsa allows herself this kind of intimacy, the warm comfort of weakness.

She doesn't squeeze the man as tight as she might if she really let herself go, too aware of just how strong the muscle and bone weaves have made her underneath her hardsuit. She doesn't weep, either, though there's a pressure behind her eyelids that comes dangerously close to tears. Instead she breathes in Anderson's strength, and he offers it without comment or reservation, giving her all the time she needs. "...Sorry," she grunts, when she finally pulls away. "And thanks."

"Any time," the older man answers, but in his mouth the words sound utterly sincere. "...but you know I wrote to you months ago, without an acknowledgement until yesterday. What finally brought you to my doorstep?" He gives her a half-grin. "Not that I'm not grateful, you understand."
Just...talk to me, Kelsa."

Kelsa swallows, hard. "What've you got to drink that's better than water?"

Anderson chuckles, stepping away from the balcony, back into his chambers, gesturing for her to follow. "You're not gonna like it very much," he chides her, without turning around. "Only the tip-top of the shelf for me these days."

Kelsa moves to step after him, but she hesitates; for half a heartbeat, her right leg's too heavy to lift. With shaking fingers, she fishes the vial of sand out of the compartment at her right hip; it's the same vial she had the night Liara came by her cabin, the same one that's been taunting her every waking moment since the asari walked away. Without thinking, the soldier cracks the vial open, her tongue unconsciously swiping over her cracked lips. Before she can stop herself, Kelsa tips the vial over the side of the balcony, watching as the red dust falls, dispersing into a fine, glittering mist. By the time it's gone, the back of her throat's dry enough that she doesn't care about how awful Anderson's scotch has to be. When she follows him into a sitting area, he's already got two tumblers full of amber liquid. The bottle's one of those fancy-assed crystal pieces of shit with swirls and ridges in the glass, and no label. "Goddammit," she sighs, shaking her head. "It's gonna taste like a varren shit into a campfire, isn't it?"

"That's how you know it's the good stuff," Anderson concurs, easing himself into a chair and indicating her to join him. He chuckles again when she sits on the concrete edge of the terrace that holds his office plants, rather than the flimsy chair. "Ahh, right. You must be two hundred kilos with that getup."

"Three hundred," Kelsa corrects him, taking up her tumbler and tipping around its contents. "Would be three hundred forty, if the exosuit weighed as much as I did...but they don't make anything that heavy for anyone but krogan." With a shrug, she knocks the fancy liquor back, swallowing it fast so the peat might not have a chance to make a bog in her mouth. It doesn't work, and she feels the scars on her face tighten with the force of her grimace. "Cerberus didn't just bring me back. They're not just using me to stop the Collectors," she says, ignoring both Anderson's moue of displeasure at her blasphemous method of drinking scotch and his surprise at her mention of the elusive aliens. "I...think I'm some kind of prototype that they're testing. Fuck, Anderson, the Illusive Man sent me into the Collector ship, and while I was there I found out it was the same ship that shot us down over Alchera. The same ship that killed Pressly, and me, and nineteen other men and women under my command. And they knew...he knew it was a trap, and sent me in anyway. Just to see if I could make it out."

Anderson contemplates his drink thoughtfully, listening, soaking in Kelsa's disconnected rambling as best he can. When he finally takes a sip and levels his gaze at her, all his chuckles and half-grins are gone. "But you did get out, Kelsa," he reminds her. "You got out of Detroit, out of OCS, out of N-School...out of Elysium, and Torfan, and Eden Prime. Out of Ilos. It was a good bet you'd get out of this Collector ship, too. What's really eating at you, now?"

"I..." Kelsa shakes her head, pours herself another drink. When it's gone, she tells him everything; everything she's been too afraid to even think of since she woke up on Miranda's table. About the Collectors and the missing colonists, the ship and the millions of empty pods, just waiting to be filled. About the sand. About how she feels herself slipping a little bit more every day....about how, soon, she's scared there won't be any green at all left in her eyes, that she'll be whatever Timmy wants her to be, regardless of whether or not there's actually a control chip buried in her brain. "I'm...starting to think...maybe I shouldn't come back through the relay, when the job's done," she finishes, after a third glass of peated whiskey. "Maybe everything'd've been better off if I'd really died over Alchera, after all. Then they couldn't use me, anyway."
Anderson takes a long time to come up with any kind of answer, after having listened to her without much more than a nod or encouraging grunt. "You know what I think?" He manages, at last. "I think you're so used to being used that you're scared of being free." He takes another sip from his nearly-empty glass—still the first one, for him—and nods. "And, the truth is, if you can do this thing...cross the Omega 4 relay and come back again...then you'll be free. For the first time in your whole goddamned life, kid; and that's scary. Believe me, I know—it's the most terrifying thing I can think of. You were in the Service a long time, longer than most, and you are a soldier...but now you're cut loose, without a proper command structure you can respect." There's another smirk for her. "In a certain way I almost feel like you, myself, cut loose for the first time in God knows how many years, learning new rules and making up more than a few of them as I go." He grows more serious again, leans forward, setting his glass on the table with a thunk. "But you listen here, Shepard, and you listen good. This galaxy needs you in it; I need you, God damnit. You may not see it, but you make this world a better place."

Kelsa does her best not to scoff, but she can't quite manage it, with the liquor washing through her veins. "I don't think being able to headbutt a krogan and a fondness for asari pussy exactly count as redemptive qualities," she points out, licking her teeth to get the ash taste off of them...not that it helps.

Her former CO gives her a shrug. "Stopping a goddamned Reaper invasion sure as hell counts," he counters. "And if the Collectors are as tied up with them as you say...you'll be stopping them again, if you can pull this one out. That's not nothing, kid. But even after that, assuming there is an after...there are things worth breathing for, Kelsa, even if you're breathing because Cerberus gave you cybernetic lungs."

She arches a scarred brow. "Like what?"

"What about that asari you're so fond of?" Anderson muses, sitting back and looking far too smug. "Liara T'Soni. It was obvious you were ass-over-tits for her even before Ilos."

Kelsa's eyes turn down toward the table; her fingers itch to drain some more of the bottle, despite her displeasure at the taste. "She's young," she huffs. "She'd get over it."

"Like you got over John?" Anderson prompts, not without some kind of sympathy.

"...I guess you've got a point," the soldier concedes, closing her eyes and leaning back, almost enough to fall into the dirt behind her. "...and thanks," she says, looking squarely at him again.

"Don't thank me yet, Shepard," Anderson warns her. "I tried to get the rest of the Council to meet with you, to hear you out about the Collectors, but...well, they're busy." As Kelsa snorts, he pulls up his arm, activating his omni-tool and typing quickly across the haptic keyboard. "But I'm still a Councilor, and you're still alive...and that means..." His brows draw together, and a few heartbeats pass before his 'tool chirps at him, and he nods. "...That means that you're still a Spectre."

Kelsa bolts upright, surprised, unaccountably angry. "What?" She hisses, her gloved hand unconsciously balling into a fist. "Why? You know I never gave a shit about that, Anderson."

"Why?" He repeats, reaching forward and giving himself another dram of what he calls the good stuff. "Because you've just spent the last hour telling me you want back in, that you don't want Cerberus to use you up and swallow you whole. Well, now you're back in, working for the Council...working for me." He allows himself the indulgence of a half-mouthful, rather than a sip, and Kelsa can see the pleasure radiate through him as he swallows. "And I expect you to take the fight to these Collectors and come back in one piece, Spectre. You're not fighting for Cerberus, or even for human colonists. You're fighting for the integrity of the galaxy. Do you understand?"
Despite herself, Kelsa pushes off from the terrace and falls into attention. "Yes, sir," she clips, like she's a cadet again.

"Good," the Councilor replies, grinning fully. "Now, you go out there and do what you need to do. Oh, and Shepard," he prompts her, looking up into her eyes for once. "Don't let me down."
Ch. 35: The Boys Are Back In Town

Chapter Summary

Kelsa begins to get her head on straight after her pep-talk with Anderson, but that doesn't necessarily bode well for anyone unfortunate enough to get in her way.

Chapter Notes

This chapter has references to drug withdrawal and some gore. Beware.

Zakera Ward
1800 Zulu
17 September 2185
Citadel, Widow

"Shepard!" The voice is unfamiliar, but when Kelsa keeps walking, the voice and its owner hike to keep pace. "Commander Shepard! A word!" Kelsa glances the voice's way, and then she does a double-take when she notices a camera and makeup thick enough to choke a vorcha. A reporter. Shit. "Commander," the woman huffs, slightly breathless from the chase. "Khalisa Bint Sinan al-Jilani, Westerlund News. If you remember, we spoke two years ago, just after you became a Spectre."

The memory dredges up in the soldier's mind, and she flinches, frowning. "Yeah, my superiors were real happy about that," she manages, dredging up the memory. Their conversation had consisted of al-Jilani asking for a quote and Kelsa telling her where to stick that camera drone, which the other woman had spun to her own liking. The soldier has to suppress a shudder; normally it wouldn't be a problem, but she's still got the shakes from sand withdrawal. It's not as bad as it was when she was a kid, before she joined up with the Alliance...probably gene mods and cybernetics helping even it out. But it's lasting longer than it did then, too, so Kelsa half-wishes she'd just have shit herself and thrown up a couple times already. At least then it'd be over...but no, she's gotta deal with the shakes and the sweats and the nosy goddamned reporters. She's almost tempted to shoot the fucking camera and be done with it, but the damage has already been done; her brand-new face is already on the extranet, probably the biggest news item Westerlund's had since the end of the Eden Prime War. She knew this would happen, when she finally showed her face somewhere that wasn't the ass-end of the Terminus. Shit. "Whaddaya want, al-Jilani?"

"Just a few questions, if you don't mind, Commander," the woman replies, innocently enough.

"I'm not a commander anymore," the soldier corrects her, pinching the bridge of her nose. She glances over her shoulder at Garrus, Grunt, and Jack. "You all go on; I'll catch up." Wiping the
sweat from her brow, Kelsa turns her attention back on the camera and the woman under it, more comfortable now that her crew aren't under the lights, too. "You get two questions," she allows. "Then I'm leaving. Copy?"

"Understood, Co-Shepard," al-Jilani assures her. "If you're no longer an Alliance commander," she begins, picking her words out carefully, "what is your relationship with the Earth Systems Alliance?"

"Technically I'm MIA, presumed KIA," Kelsa tells her, which isn't anything she couldn't've got by asking the Alliance...or running a simple extranet search. "Okay, last question." She smirks a little harder, so the red creases in her cheek stand out even more for the camera. "Shoot."

"Alright," the reporter concedes, looking unnerved-like she's just seeing Kelsa, really seeing her, for the first time. "Alright," she repeats, taking another few seconds to gather her thoughts. Then her face lights up with the sadistic glee only a muckraker can drum up when they think they've really got a stumper for you. "Shepard, we all know that the Fifth Fleet held back in the Battle of the Citadel, they refused to engage the geth forces fully until their capital ship became vulnerable to attack. Tragically, this tactical decision ultimately led to the breakup of the Destiny Ascension. What many people may not know is that it was your call."

As the woman speaks, Kelsa's smirk fades and she squares her shoulders, her scarred eyebrows drawing together. The information al-Jilani's babbling is supposed to be classified, and a large part of her—the part that regrets the scarring that broke up her Alliance A tattoo—wants to shut the reporter down just for protocol's sake. "There a question in there, somewhere?" She asks, instead.

"Only this, Shepard," the reporter says. "The Ascension carried the Council, as it was at the time...three foremost citizens of the galaxy. But when she broke up, she took all hands down with her...ten thousand souls, blinked from existence at your command. Asari lives, yes, but also turian, salarian, and even some human observers all lost their lives on your say-so. I wonder, Shepard...what will you tell to the uncounted thousands of loved ones who still mourn their loss?"

Kelsa pulled in a breath, closing her eyes as she did so; as her lungs filled, she saw those ten-thousand faces flash behind her eyes. She hadn't killed them, not really...even if they died on her word, they hadn't died by her hand, so they were distinct from the two thousand eight hundred eighty-four creatures that normally haunt her when she closes her eyes. But even if they were the same, even if Kelsa had had to shoot every last one of those ten thousand people right between the eyes, she would've done so in order to hold back Hackett's forces for the right moment. She might've said this, as she exhaled; she might've said Those loved ones have time to grieve because of their sacrifice, or some other bullshit, too. Instead, as she opens her eyes, she says, "No comment."

Then she turns on her heel and walks away, doing her best to ignore al-Jilani, even though the woman tries to follow her through the crowd. The masses of turians, asari, and humans part easily enough for a heavily-armoured soldier, though, and they aren't nearly as forgiving of a thin woman in heels, so al-Jilani gets left behind easily enough. After a few minutes, though, Kelsa notices the camera drone bobbing and weaving over the heads of the crowd behind her. Gritting her teeth, Kelsa spins around, drawing Saren's pistol and putting a bullet through the camera's lens. She's turned and walking again in less time than it takes a shocked ripple to move through the mass of sentient life crossing the floor, and by the time the drone hits the ground, she's gone.

C-Sec Interrogation Room B

1400 Zulu
20 September 2185

Citadel, Widow

Even restrained, Elias Kelham does his best to look affable, untouchable. He thinks he is. "Where's Bailey?" He demands, asking after the very same C-Sec officer who tried to waylay Kelsa on her way into the Citadel in the first place; the two of them have a system, whereby Kelham donates to the C-Sec charity ball and doesn't cause too much trouble in return for the look-around from Captain Bailey and his subordinates. But when he'd confirmed Kelsa's Spectre status, the dirty cop was agreeable enough. "Get Bailey in here," Kelham says, not for the first time.

Kelsa comes around the right-hand side of the chair, nodding for Thane to cross the other side. "Bailey ain't comin' to rescue you," she tells the criminal, leaning back into a shadow, so the red glow in her eyes and the trenches in her face get thrown into relief. "I gotcha now, boy," she tells him, casually crossing her arms. "And there ain't nothin' Bailey or anyone else in C-Sec can do to get you out until I'm done with you."

Kelham sneers, doing a decent job of bluffing past just how shaken he is by the soldier's face and her words. But Kelham's just a thug with a shoddy operation and some low-level cops in his pocket; Kelsa grew up around real criminals, and she's spent her life staring down assholes a hundred times as intimidating, men and women who wouldn't've let themselves get strapped into a shitty chair in a dirty room. "Yeah?" Kelham rasps, giving his restraints a half-hearted tug. "Well who the fuck are you, then?"

"That ain't the right question," Kelsa tells him. "The right question is...who's our drell friend, what does he want?" She shares a glance with Thane; his pupils are dilated, she can tell, though to most humans a drell's eyes look pretty much solid black. She knows he doesn't like what they're doing, finds it distasteful. For an assassin, he's...interesting. He's dying after a life misspent, looking for something like repentance, or atonement. Right now, though, he's just trying to keep his son from following in his blood-soaked footsteps. Lucky for him, but very unlucky for Elias Kelham, Thane's willing to get those steps a little bloodier before his journey's through. "And," Kelsa continues, looking back to Kelham, "more importantly, what's he got in his pocket?"

The incongruity of the question takes Kelham off his guard, a fatal mistake on the battlefield, as it'll prove to be in this room. "...What?" He's confused, and, for the first time, maybe a little scared. "The fuck are you, some kinda perverts?"

A hissing sound comes from the other corner of the room, and Kelsa realises Thane's laughing, in his own low-key way. "Far from it, fisstka," he says, using a drell word too obscure even for Cerberus' translators to sifi. The lizard-man steps forward into the pool of light, producing as he does so a glass jar, thick and steel-capped. He holds it up to the light for Kelham to see, and though Thane's body's in her line of sight, Kelsa knows that Kelham sees a small, scorpion-like bug distorted in the glass. "This is a kosth-bath'pa," Thane informs the captive. "It is native to Rakhana, one of the few left in existence, now that most of the major fauna have died off or moved to worlds less hospitable to its habitation."

"Who gives a shit? Kelham boasts, apparently regaining confidence now that his line of sight to Kelsa's broken. "You sticking me up for donations to some museum or somethin'? Piss off, green man."

"You misunderstand," Thane says. Kelsa hears him unscrew the cap, hears Kelham struggle, really struggle, as the drell forces the jar into his mouth, hears the human gag and choke as the jar's occupant claws its way down his esophagus. "The kosth-bath'pa is not an endangered species in need of preservation. It is a parasite."
"Wha..." Kelham tries to ask, but the air rips from his lungs in a scream, equal parts pain and horror. "What the hell?!!" He chokes out, when he gets another lungful of air.

"That'll be it burrowing," Thane says, settling back into his shadow, "looking for your ichthyodemum."

"My wha-" Another hissed scream steals Kelham's words. "But...but I don't have an icky-whatever!"

"The kosth-bath'pa is not aware of this fact," Thane tells him, his voice flat, just like an assassin's. "It will keep burrowing into your abdomen fruitlessly until it determines this, in approximately seventeen hours."

Another scream, and one more, before Kelham can answer. "And...what then?" Gone is the air of untouchability; the only thing sitting in that chair now is a pathetic monkey, scared.

"Whether or not you have succumbed to internal bleeding by that time, the kosth-bath'pa will seek your gastrointestinal tract, and follow it up to your head. From there, it will attempt to nest in your brain stem, which will certainly prove fatal."

"Wh...why? Gaaah!" He's fighting hard now, the agony in his belly driving his arms and legs against the restraints; if he tries much harder, Kelsa knows he's gonna break something. "What the fuck do you want?"

"Recently you hired a drell," Thane informs him. "A young man with green and teal markings. You gave him a name and a photograph. I would have the name you gave him, human."

Another wave of pain washes over Kelham's face. "I...that's what this is about?" He looks from Thane to Kelsa, tears welling in the corners of his eyes. "What the fuck? That was...that was just business!"

"The name," Thane repeats, not a sliver of emotion colouring his tone. It's clear he's done this before. The part of Kelsa that died in Detroit is impressed.

"What do I get?" Kelham demands...or, rather, he's begging. "You gonna get this-hnnnnng-this fuckin' thing outta me? There a cure?"

"I won't letcha die like that," Kelsa promises him. It's the truth, as far as it goes.

Kelham obviously sees it as an offer worth taking. "Joram Talid," he coughs, grunting through another bout of pain. "The turian."

"Thank you," Kelsa says, with a nod. In his own corner, Thane clasps his hands, bowing his head. Kelsa rolls her eyes before she raises her shotgun and plants an incendiary spike through the human's heart. When the drell's done mumbling his prayers, Kelsa stalks out of the room, where Bailey's waiting with a few C-Sec officers; they're all human, just like him and Kelham. In fact, the only aliens around are Thane and Samara, who's waiting for them against a far wall.

"Kelham give you any trouble?" Bailey wonders. Have I still got my meal ticket?

"Kelham's dead," Kelsa gruffs, not bothering to hide her smirk at the look of dismay on the officer's features; Kelsa's known better crooked cops in her time, too. Hell, she's killed better crooked cops. "You'll wanna burn the body, fast. There's somethin' in it you don't want gettin' out."

When she moves to walk past Bailey, he lays a hand on her armoured shoulder. A sharp glance
from her has him reconsidering the wisdom of that course of action, and he takes a step back. "What'd he have to say, at least? Anything helpful?"

"Something helpful," Kelsa allows, shouldering past him. "Burn that body," she tells him, over her shoulder. And don't get in my way. "Come on," she barks to her two-alien squad. "We got a turian needs catching."

Medical Bay, CSV Normandy SR-2

2230 Zulu

21 September 2185

Docking Bay A-17, Citadel, Widow

"It's good to see you, Shepard," Chakwas says in greeting, looking genuinely pleased. When her eyes light upon Kelsa's chest, that pleasure blooms into a grin. "And in fine form. I must say I approve of your new fashion choice."

Kelsa pulls into the room, shrugging her shoulders to jostle the scratched-up dog tags that she found in that basket of pears and whiskey that Liara left her...the same one that carried Saren's pistol. She almost considered spacing the tags, but something made her keep them in her office. Once she finished her business on the Citadel, it felt right to put the chain around her neck again, even if she's still not really Alliance. She might not even be Council, really...but she's Anderson's, and that means she isn't Timmy's. It's enough, for now. "Thanks," she grunts, lifting up a bag to plant it on Chakwas' desk. "Gotcha that Serrice ice brandy you wanted, too."

The doctor's struck dumb for a few seconds, looking from the fancy bag to Kelsa. "I mentioned that weeks ago," she breathes, blinking. "I'm surprised you remembered."

"Almost didn't," the soldier admits, leaning against a sturdy cabinet and crossing her arms. "...But I think I got my head on straight," she says, looking down at the floor. "Starting to, anyway."

"Good," Chakwas affirms, almost viscerally. "You had me quite worried, there, Commander. I take it you've decided to abstain from some of your recent recreational activities?"

"Yeah," Kelsa responds, fiddling with her old tags. More than some, she doesn't add, remembering that bent pipe on the engineering subdeck with a pang of remorse, along with regret. "Think I'm past the worst of it."

"I'll need to perform an examination to be certain," Chakwas tells her, the solemn gratitude from a moment ago mixed in with a sterner concern. "It's been awhile."

It has, Kelsa knows, shrugging and tucking her tags into her shirt, so the metal rests against her skin. "Sorry. One of the only perks of helming this boat; you can't bench me if I don't check in for physicals. I'll try to be better at it."

"See that you do," the doctor insists. "And there's no time like the present, if you've a few moments. And then after...maybe we can crack open that bottle, raise a glass or two."

Kelsa's brow twitches and she almost laughs. "I thought doctors weren't supposed to encourage addicts to drink?"

Chakwas heaves a sigh, pushing herself out of her chair; she's a half-head taller than the younger
woman, so Kelsa has to tilt her face up, to keep from staring from underneath her eyebrows. "It is, strictly speaking, frowned upon," the doctor admits, moving to an examination table as though Kelsa's already agreed. "But I know I'm as likely to dissuade you from eroding your liver as I am to deliver your child, and I do hate to drink alone, my dear. Now come sit; you won't need to strip off."

Kelsa moves over to the table without a fuss, pulling herself up into a sitting position. Chakwas directs a sensor arm to sweep up one of her flanks, across the top of her head, and down the other side, and then, with her usual professionalism, the doctor pricks a drop of blood from the meat of Kelsa's upper arm. With Cerberus' equipment, the results are ready in only a few seconds. "Hmm," Chakwas mumbles, skimming the haptic interface of her omni-tool. "Significant evidence of post-natal Element Zero exposure."

"No surprise there," Kelso grunts, half a laugh. "Tell me something you didn't know before you phlebotomised me."

It's the doctor's turn to laugh, though hers is much less grudging. "I suppose I will learn to stop being surprised when you surprise me, Kelsa."

The soldier blinks, tilting her head. "That's the first time you've called me by my first name," she points out. It's the first time anybody's called her by her first name, anybody but Liara, since before she woke up.

Chakwas looks surprised, and maybe a touch self-conscious. "So it is, Skipper," she acknowledges. "Anyway, as I was saying, the red sand has made its presence felt in your nervous system. You've also been suffering a mild cold, coincident with your withdrawal." The corners of her mouth turn down in clear disapproval. "A visit could have ameliorated both, you know," she reminds her charge, and Kelsa can only shrug, glancing to her own red-eyed reflection in the frosted-over window. "Otherwise," the doctor continues, "you are in perfect condition, at least physically. The eezo damage will likely be repaired over the next few weeks, as long as you do not reintroduce vectors of exposure."

"Got it," Kelsa grunts, pushing herself off of the table, though even standing, she's got to look up to meet the older woman's gaze. "Now...how 'bout we find you a beaker to use as a shotglass?"

Chakwas arches a brow, even as she moves to her desk. "Decided against joining me after all?"

"Shit, no," the soldier fires back, rolling her shoulders and fetching a chair. "I'll just swig from the bottle. More efficient that way."

The doc's jaw drops. "Didn't I just say you have a cold?" She demands, pulling the ice-blue bottle from its fancy bag and setting it onto the desk again. "There's not a chance in the Milky Way that I'll let your lips touch the rim of this bottle, Shepard." Instead, she produced two very fine glasses from a cabinet, the kind with stemmed necks. Much fancier than Anderson's tumblers. "Now, you will use a glass like a civilised woman, or you'll be drinking your brandy through a straw, young lady."

Kelsa's cheek prickles with her half-grin. "Understood, doc." Then, as she sits down, her omni-tool flashes on her left arm, and when she checks it out, she finds a private message waiting for her. "I don't remember activating private messaging functionality," she muses. Up 'til now, she's only gotten status updates on her credit account.

Chakwas perks up. "Do you need some privacy?"
"No," the soldier decides, and she can't keep the smile off her lips when she opens the message on her haptic screen.

To: C97-XHp984392

From: Sender Unavailable

Kelsa,

Forgive me for intruding, but I know you make it a point to never check the messages on your terminal. I flagged this one to notify you when your biometrics were unstressed, so as not to distract you during combat. This channel is also encrypted with the most sophisticated algorithms in the known universe, so you should not worry about the integrity of your replies, though I can forgive them any crypticism you decide to employ. I simply wished to let you know that I am thinking of you, and I wish you well.

Yours,

BB

"Everything alright?" Chakwas prompts, after Kelsa's eyes go over the message for the third or fourth time.

"Huh?" Kelsa flinches, closing her 'tool instinctively, though she can't keep the little smile from her lips. BB. Blueblood. "It's nothing," she insists, taking the offered glass and knocking it back like a champion, without flinching. "It ain't Kriala," she judges, holding the glass out for another splash. "But it ain't bad."

Starboard Observation Deck, CSV Normandy SR-2

1400 Zulu

22 September 2185

FTL Transit to Alchera, Interstellar

When the door hisses open, Kelsa sees the Justicar sitting, cross-legged, with her back to the room's entrance...though her eyes are attentive, glowing white, reflected in the observation window. "You wanted to see me?"

Samara blinks three times, clearing the glow from her eyes, and she pulls herself to her feet. "Shepard," she acknowledges, bowing millimetrically. "Please come in, and thank you for responding to my request for an audience."

"Got a hankering to check some messages," the soldier allows, coming more fully into the Justicar's makeshift quarters. There were a few interesting missives waiting for her, including one from Hackett, basically begging her to go back to Alchera and set up a monument to the Normandy's crash site. She's glad she hadn't found it before her talk with Anderson, or she might've told the admiral to go fuck himself. "What do you need?" She asks, refocusing her thoughts on the present. "Sounded like you wanted to talk."

"I...yes," the asari says, drawing back into her living space-drawing back, not retreating. "I have been thinking about our arrangement, in light of your recent conduct."
"...What about my conduct has you concerned?"

"I had assumed-unwisely, it turns out—that at least part of your brutality could be blamed upon your use of narcotics," Samara admits. "It seems I was mistaken, however. As you have recovered from your foray, you seem to have become more ruthless, not less."

A heaviness presses on Kelsa's gut as she remembers Samara's oath to her, back on Illium. "You said you were sworn to me," she ventures, though she doesn't step further into the room. "No matter how ruthless I am."

"And so I am," Samara confirms. "This is why I did not intervene when you murdered the politician before my eyes."

Kelsa grimaces, another memory rising, unbidden; after extracting the intel from Kelham, she'd taken Thane and Samara to track down the turian. By the time they'd found him, Kolyat was using him as a shield, trying to barter him for a way out of a closing net of C-Sec patrol cars. But to Kelsa, the turian had just been another hostage. "I've killed people ten times better than Joram Talid," she points out. "He wasn't exactly innocent."

Samara's face is inscrutable, even her eyes, as unchanging as a carving. "Nevertheless," she observes, "xenophobia is not a capital offense under any justice system worthy of the title...not even the Code. He did not deserve to die."

"What's your point, Samara?" Kelsa gruffs, her fingers starting to curl into fists at her sides.

A stab of regret crosses the older woman's face, but Kelsa can tell it's not because of anything she's said...not today, anyhow. "The fugitive I hunt is guilty of many more and severe crimes than simply inciting prejudice," she says. "And I wonder if you might be interested in directing your lack of scruples toward bringing her to justice."

There's gotta be more to it than Samara's letting on. "You said that it could wait until after the mission," she points out. You also said that you'd have to kill me afterward, she doesn't. "What's changed?"

"I have recently received information that the woman I seek is on Omega," Samara informs her. "...She is also my daughter," the asari admits, looking downcast for a heartbeat before she returns Kelsa's gaze. "And she must die."

Now Kelsa understands; this Justicar's been hunting her own daughter across the galaxy for four hundred years, and now she's on the cusp of catching her. She doesn't want to let that go...and she doesn't want to be talked out of what she has to do by someone with anything like a conscience. "Omega's in the relay system," Kelsa says, confirming what Samara must have known. "We'll hit it on the way back from Alchera."

"Thank you, Shepard," the asari breathes, even managing a smile.

"Don't thank me yet," Kelsa warns her, half turning toward the door. "And make sure you're ready to end it."
Kelsa revisits some old memories and makes a new friend.

Wreckage Field of SSV Normandy

1800 Zulu

25 September 2185

Alchera, Amada

This place is a frozen hell, a tomb for twenty men and women who served the Alliance...who served Kelsa. Twenty people that depended on her to get them home safe. Twenty people she failed. Some of their bodies are charred black, or in pieces; those are easier for her, to find and to look at. They would've died even before entry into the planet's thick, ammonia-rich atmosphere. About half of the bodies remaining show signs of asphyxiation from the unbreathable cocktail of the air; they would've gone quick, too, though it would've been messier than dying in one of the Collectors' blasts that tore the Normandy out of the sky in the first place. The last four bodies are the hardest to find, and the hardest to face; four sailors who survived the Collector attack, who had the presence of mind to suit-up in that desperate few minutes, but who'd been too unlucky to find an escape pod in time, and too unlucky to die in the ship's breakup.

Carlton, Tucks. Pakti, Abishek. Grenado, Caroline. Laflamme, Orden. They'd each managed to walk, or crawl, or drag themselves some distance from where they'd landed. They must've held out hope, for a second or an hour, that the Alliance might yet affect a rescue. More fools they.

Kelsa remembers each of their faces as she retrieves their tags, but she leaves the bodies alone in their hardsuits. They're decent-enough coffins for soldiers, out here in the ass-end of nowhere. Kelsa can feel the bone-deep cold clawing at her own hardsuit, icy fingers trying to pry their way beneath the ceramic and tungsten to leech the life from her flesh. She doesn't shiver, though...hasn't shivered, really shivered, since that winter's night in Michigan.

Some part of her, a crazy impulse deeper than her cybernetic implants, past her Alliance training, maybe even underneath her time in the Garden, wants to rip her helmet off; it wants her to take in a lungful of Alchera's air and use it to scream, to show this planet and the Collectors and the Illusive Man that they can't beat her, that these people didn't die for nothing...

Instead, Kelsa fixes the last tag chain to her hip, looking up at the beautiful starscape above her. Two of Alchera's three moons hang low in the sky, dimming the rest of the stars, but Kelsa imagines she can see one of the smaller lights tracking slowly across the sky. It calls itself the Normandy, but it isn't anything more than a copy of the real ship, strewn around her for hundreds of yards. Even if it's twice as big and three times as fast, with better shields and much more effective firepower thanks to upgrades that some of Kelsa's slapped-together crew have helped put in place, it'll never be what the Normandy was, not while it's still got Cerberus symbols underneath the uniform black that she had it repainted as a term of helming the thing in the first place.
The last of her labours accomplished, Kelsa knows she should leave this place, leave the dead to rest and bring their families at least some measure of peace, or at least knowledge. But here, surrounded by people who gave their lives for her, Kelsa can't help but recall another group of people she asked to trust her; her eleven comrades on the London, the ones she took with her down into Torfan. Only two came out with her, and she hadn't had to collect the others' tags, but she remembers them now, just the same.

"There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail," she says, into the cold death of the frigid air; her comm link's live, but Joker must hear the solemnity in her voice, the first time she's spoken since touching down in the Cerberus shuttle, because he doesn't interrupt as she continues reciting the poem. It's from Ulysses, one of Ashley's. Kelsa doesn't know why it dredges itself up from the back of her mind, but it feels right to keep going, in this silent place.

"There gloom the dark, broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toil'd, and wrought, and thought with me-
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads-you and I are old;
Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something 'ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods."

A few minutes pass in the quiet, broken only by mournful gusts of wind howling over ravines of ice.

Finally, Kelsa turns back, intending to hike to her shuttle. But her eyes catch on the Mako, standing as proudly as always, even if it's a little off-balance, part of the nose buried under re-frozen meltwater from the crash. An idea takes her. "EDI," she barks, marching with much greater conviction. "Are the Kodiak's power cells compatible with the M35 Mako?"

"Scanning," the AI affirms. "Standard Alliance-model cells have insufficient draw to power the M35 Mako; however, Cerberus technology allows for enough energy throughput to engage the Mako's mass effect thrusters and secondary guns."

"Wait," Joker cuts in, incredulous and excited, by turns. "You're not thinking what I think you're thinking, are you, Skipper?"

"I might be," Kelsa replies, grinning inside her helmet. Maybe not everything has to stay buried here. She doesn't say anything else, though, as she retrieves the power cells from the Kodiak. There're two, each heavier than even Kelsa would've been able to lift before she woke up on Miranda's table, but now they slide out of the shuttle's still-warm chassis easily enough. Kelsa has to climb up onto the tank's back and use her omni-blade to melt the ice off of the Mako's power access panel, and the two-year-old cells inside don't give nearly as easily as the ones from the shuttle, but after half an hour of back-and-forth, she's got the batteries switched out.

The hatch takes another couple of minutes to work open, and when she finally gets it, she drops
into the tank's pitch-dark interior. Somehow it's even colder in here, where no light's touched since
the Collector beam opened up the cargo bay, two years ago. Between Kelsa's ocular implants and
her HUD, though, there's enough faint starlight streaming through the open hatch for her to fumble
her way to the controls. Kelsa's fingers work mindlessly, recalling codes from a lifetime ago,
pushing the keys down hard to make sure they register the strokes. A minute passes without any
kind of response from the great hunk of steel around her, and Kelsa has to swallow a frustrated
sigh.

Then, all at once, like a faithful hound jolting awake after a nightmare, the Mako flares to life
around her; panel lights flood the cabin with illumination, and the quality of the darkness of the
nose cone changes; it's showing a solid black image, the cameras all blocked up with the ice that
it's buried in. Even so, Kelsa lets out her breath in a rush. "Goddamn it I missed you," she whispers,
finally settling into the pilot's seat and letting her fingers curl around the steering wheel.

Garrus' two-toned voice purrs out over the comms. "Greeeat," he says, apparently in the cockpit of
the SR-2 along with Joker, now. "And here I thought my screaming-like-a-vorcha days
were behind me. I'm sure Tali'll be thrilled."

"She better be," Kelsa huffs, the scars tightening on her cheek with the force of her grin.

"Now we just need a thresher maw," Joker pipes up. "Then it'll be just like old times, huh?"

"...You know she killed the last one on foot, right?" Garrus points out, as Kelsa tests out the Mako's
traction.

The hydraulics are still frozen, but it'll only take them a few minutes to thaw. "Both of them," she
corrects him, while she's waiting. "Had a little help from Grunt with the last one, though, so it
might not count." Finally, finally the wheels start biting, deep-rooted ice frozen in the thick treads
giving them purchase. "Come on, girl," Kelsa breathes, urging just a little more torque. "I know
you can do it."

EDI's voice rises unbidden on the comms. "Flight-Lieutenant Moreau also refers to the machines
he pilots as though they are female. Is this normative human behaviour?"

"Oh, I think so," Garrus observes. "Although it's odd, isn't it? Ships and tanks have so many
protruding parts...maybe jarheads call them she to keep from getting intimidated?"

Kelsa rolls her eyes. "And what exactly makes you think shes can't have any protruding parts,
Vakarian?'' But, before he answers, a low rumble stalks through the Mako's hull, just before a
vicious crack rings out from the ice. She yells in victory as the tank skitters out of its hole, the
axles creaking as they buck over the uneven terrain. "Garrus, get Tali and Taylor and a few spare
mechanics to meet me down in the cargo hold; I wanna get started on retrofits and repairs ASAP."

A voice in the back of her head warns her that she's just sullying the machine by bringing it aboard,
that Cerberus'll get their tendrils into the gearbox and power train and won't let go...but she doesn't
care as she throws the tank into forward and engages the thrusters. A familiar thrill courses
through her at the sudden leap the Mako takes, and even if the shocks don't do anything to soften
the landing, she can feel her grin. "Ready for extraction, Joker."

"Aye aye, ma'am."

It feels better than she's expecting when she guns the engine, letting the tank unwind over the long,
flat plateau as the Normandy starts an approach vector; the boat's too heavy to land on this massive
planet, but it can get close enough so scoop her up with a big-enough jump. The Mako's computer
chirps, synching up with Joker's console, calculating an optimal trajectory. Whether by design or
coincidence, the computer turns the barreling vehicle toward the edge of a cliff; over that edge Kelsa can see a ridge of mountains stretching into the distance, the snow glittering in the starlight, and she feels a rush of adrenaline as the Mako kicks again, as the world falls away underneath her.

Joker does his job to perfection, and at the top of her arc, Kelsa feels the gravity shift as the tank's wheels touch down on the starship's cargo bay floor. She slams on the brakes to keep the wheels from spinning her into the rapidly-closing doors, and with a final jolt, the Mako's systems flicker down into a low-draw state. Kelsa sits back in the pilot's seat for a few moments, satisfaction licking across the insides of her ribs, before she pulls herself out of the old landshark, for one brilliant second thinking of herself as a sort of conquering hero triumphantly returning from the field. That impression doesn't last for long after she takes off her helmet, when she notices her audience...or, more specifically, who's missing. Kelsa's crimson eyes sweep over Garrus and Taylor, and then Mendez and Horowitz, two of the Cerberus crew. But there's not a quarian in sight. "Where's Tali?"

Garrus looks askance, reach up to scratch at the underside of his fringe. "She, uhh...said she'd be along. Seemed distracted when I went by."

Kelsa pushes herself out of the porthole and rolls off the top of the Mako, landing in a crouch. Her brows draw together as she straightens up. "We'll see about that." Garrus gives her a relieved nod. She can tell that the Cerberus crew think Tali's in some deep trouble, though; Taylor in particular looks ready to step in, maybe offer an objection, but she pre-empts him. "You four," she barks, "get to work. I want this baby ready to climb up the side of a mountain this time tomorrow."

After a round of grim salutes-and an unspoken twinkle of amusement from the turian-Kelsa hikes to the elevator while the others get to work retrofitting her salvage. The ride up to the engineering deck is short and quiet, but that doesn't keep concern from itching at the back of her mind; normally, Tali'd be all over the chance to examine some technology, especially if it would help the mission. Something's gotta be really wrong for her to miss out on that kind of opportunity.

When she hits the main engineering deck, Kelsa notices the quarian hunched over her computer terminal, typing the holographic keys furiously with her long fingers, her shoulders hunched...distracted is a bit of an understatement. Daniels and Donnelly are quiet; the Cerberus-supplied engineers on the port side of the deck normally never shut the fuck up, but something in Tali's demeanor must have spooked them into some kind of respectful silence.

"Hey," the soldier broaches, leaning against a support beam. "How you holdin' up?"

Tali flinches, as though she hadn't heard Kelsa's boots clanking on the grilled floor of the deck, and she spins around to face the soldier. "I...nothing, Commander," she says, flustered. "It's nothing."

She's flustered, so much so that Kelsa doesn't begrudge her the misapplied title. "Whatever it is, it ain't nothing, kid," Kelsa says. Guilt stabs at her as she watches the quarian relax; she's been so wrapped up in herself lately that she hasn't said more than a couple of words to Tali since hitting Illium. "You can talk to me."

Tali bobs a simple nod after a moment's reflection. "It's...the Migrant Fleet," she admits. "There's been some kind of misunderstanding. You remember the reason I was on Haestrom to begin with, don't you, Shepard?"


"That...wasn't the only reason," Tali admits, shrinking a bit, as though in shame. "I was also collecting geth parts...for my father. To study them, to find ways to protect against attacks, maybe
weaknesses we could exploit in the event…"

Kelsa understands, all too well. "In the event you all decide you want to go back home."

"Something like that, yes," Tali says. "My father is an admiral, and thus directly responsible for fleet security. But...the other members of the Admiralty Board don't seem to think his project with the geth is as noble as it is. In fact...they're charging us with treason."

"You?" Kelsa demands, immediately. "Both of you?!" Tali shrinks back, and Kelsa grimaces, chagrined; she can see her own face reflected in Tali's visor, a pair of cybernetic eyes glowing in a field of fiery scars. It'd be enough to scare the shit out of anyone who wasn't already a psychopath. "What does that mean for you, Tali? Exactly?"

"It means there'll be a trial," the quarian explains. "And if...if we're judged guilty, then we'll be exiled. Essentially I was just served a summons, a little earlier today. It's not quite as formal as a human or asari court, but if they don't get a response, eventually they'll hold a meeting of the Admiralty Board in my absence." She crosses her arms, fidgeting in her distress. "I've got to go, Shepard. I don't want to be a distraction; I'll book passage on the next nexus world we hit."

"The fuck you will," Kelsa snorts, glancing down to the beltline of her armour...to those twenty chains, each with a name attached. "You're one of mine," she says, looking back into the quarian's faceplate. "I've seen you kill more geth than all of those pissant admirals put together, and I won't watch you go crawling to them like some child."

"I...that's…” Kelsa hears Tali swallow, underneath the hum of the drive core. "Thank you, Shepard. I would understand if you...didn't think it was important to the mission, or anything." The soldier shakes her head. "You're a part of this mission," she points out, "so this is important. What kinda time-table are we looking at, here?"

"Like I said, the Admiralty Board will hold a meeting eventually...but there isn't one scheduled yet, as far as I'm aware, so we've got anywhere from a few weeks to a month to respond."

"Good," Kelsa grunts. "I've got some business to take care of on Omega before we hit the relay, but that shouldn't take more than a day or two. You can tell those admirals that I'll be on my way, directly. Copy?"

"Yes, Skipper," Tali affirms. "And...thank you again."

"Thank me once this is over," Kelsa prompts her. "Now, there're three humans and a turian in my cargo bay stripping down some equipment I found on Alchera. You wanna let those amateurs fumble around without any oversight?"

Tali squares her shoulders, much more attentive. "Of course not," she scoffs. "Knowing the bosh'tets on this ship, they'll probably electrocute themselves, or maybe start a fire." That comment is enough to stir up the peanut gallery, and Tali throws up a hand to the two engineers across the deck. "Present company excepted, of course! Anyway, Shepard, I'd better go make sure they don't turn whatever it is into a heap of scrap. What did you find, anyway?"

Kelsa's cheek pricks with the force of her smirk. "It's a surprise," she insists. "Go and find out yourself."

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VIP Section, Afterlife Club
The club's pretty quiet, as far as these things go; its thrumming music is mostly sub-harmonic, even to Kelsa's implant-extended hearing range, and the red and blue lights throb slowly with the beats, shifting shadows along the dance floor. The clientele are several orders of magnitude richer than you'll find in any random back alley on Omega, and Kelsa gets more than her fair share of disdainful looks from the asari and turians as she weaves her through the ring around the dance floor's edge. She doesn't even have to ask why; she's wearing even less than usual, a tight-knit grey tanktop tucked into her black off-duty trousers, every line of muscle and runnel of cybernetic scar tissue on her arms and torso plain for anyone to see, even through the fabric.

Either that, or it's the two turians I had to lay out fifteen minutes ago, she thinks to herself. No matter the reason, she does not belong here, doesn't fit in with the trance-dancers and the kids popping hallex or snorting sand off of each other's shoulders without a care for the decay outside the club's walls, or all the guns that stand between that filth and this hall. But she made a promise, of a kind, and she'll see it through before she leaves the station that reminds her so much of the Garden.

The bar's almost deserted when she pulls up to it, save for the salarian barkeep and a hilly old krogan, even more scarred-up than Wrex...but not quite as scarred as Kelsa. Still, he blinks myopically at her when she takes a seat on the fortified stool. "Fuck you lookin' at, Bowser?"

The krogan blinks, taking a minute to decide whether or not he's insulted. By the scowl that draws across his face, Kelsa guesses his decision. "What'd you call me, pyjak?"

Kelsa smirks, looking the old man up and down; she doesn't have any weapons, which is the only reason those two turians are still alive, but she wouldn't need her spike-thrower to deal with a single krogan past his prime. "Nevermind," she huffs, glancing to the barkeep. "Fist of Kriala for me and a bottle of ryncol for my new friend, here. And make it snappy, would you, Kermit?"

If the salarian is upset by the unfamiliar appellation, he doesn't show it, and the krogan seems somewhat mollified by her peace offering. Soon enough there's a tumbler full of asari whiskey in front of her and a bottle of engine cleaner for the old man. "Will be forty credits," the barman prompts, as Kelsa picks up her glass.

She drains it in three smooth gulps, holding her breath as the clear liquid crawls down every inch of her throat, and when she sets the tumbler down, it's as dry as a barren moon. "I think you'll want to set me up with a tab," she advises the salarian, her voice just a shade huskier than it was a few seconds ago.

"Now that's what I'm talkin' about," the krogan grunts, upending his own bottle and taking a healthy chug. "Kids these days and their damned drugs...nobody appreciates a good drink anymore." He looks her over again, more appraising, less hostile. "How'd you get in here, anyhow?"

"How does anybody get in here?" Kelsa wonders, airily. "I knew the magic word." She signals for the salarian to refill her glass, and he does. This one she sips, holding the first mouthful of liquid on her tongue for a few heartbeats before swallowing it with an appreciative growl. "What about you, old-timer? What're you in for?"
"Oh, I pretty much live here, now," the krogan allows. "Used to have a place of my own, before a couple of vorcha punks trashed it, trying to do me in." He grins self-indulgently. "Showed those little pyjaks, though. The Patriarch might be a broken man, but he's still got a little bite left in 'im."

Kelsa lifts her glass, offering a silent toast, which the krogan accepts with a clink of his own bottle. "Thought this place would be worth the trouble it took to get in," she sighs. Not that a dead batarian's too much trouble, she adds, to herself. "Looks like I was wrong."

Another voice sounds from over her left shoulder, strange and yet hauntingly, almost achingly familiar, all at once. "Are you sure about that?"

Kelsa turns her head millimetrically and snatches a look at the stranger. At first glance she's the spitting image of her mother, except for the eyes; where Samara's gaze is haunted by centuries of regret, her daughter's holds a smoky hunger, enticing and threatening in equal measure. "And who are you?" She breathes, even though she already knows the answer.

"I am Morinth," the asari announces, under her breath, though Kelsa can hear every note in her voice, despite the deep thrumming of the submelody. "What's your name?"

The soldier swivels a quarter turn on her stool, giving her new companion a leisurely inspection. The other woman's wearing an elegant black dress with large teardrops stenciled out in strategic locations, designed to augment rather than overwhelm an onlooker's imagination. But it isn't the asari's beauty that draws Kelsa more fully around in her seat, that has her bionic eyes inching back up the front of that dress to Morinth's expectant face; it's her poise, like a lioness stalking through grass, elegant and graceful and undeniably deadly. Even though she's trying to hide it, Morinth is an apex predator in this goldfish bowl, and Kelsa can't keep a grin from spreading across her lips. They make the best prey.

"You can call me Kelsa," she says, because her first name's virtually unknown outside of a few classified Alliance and Council files and a very small circle of associates. She arches a brow and feels her back stiffen, her shoulders tugging back just a hair. The Patriarch grumbles to himself, but both she and Morinth ignore him "And why exactly is this place worth my time, now that I know you're here?"

The asari's eyes do not budge from Kelsa's face. "Because," she whispers, "I was thinking the very same thing before I noticed you...but you caught my eye, and now you have my attention." She says it like it's ambrosia, a gift so rare and irresistible that a mere mortal would throw her life away in search of it.

"So I have," Kelsa says, sliding down off the barstool, her head tilting up to keep the asari's gaze in line with her own. It's almost too easy to let a little uncertainty into her expression, to make herself seem just slightly off-balance. "And just what do you suggest I do with it?"

"I can think of a few things," Morinth allows, her smile inviting, and also triumphant. "But most of them are much more comfortably achieved in private. Shall we?"

It isn't entirely an act when Kelsa swallows thickly, and she nods, but she won't be the first to look away. "Lead the way."
Chapter Summary

Kelsa deals with Morinth and begins to assist Tali in her own ordeal, but both missions have some unexpected consequences.

Private Apartments, Hakari District

1630 Zulu

27 September 2185

Omega, Sahrabarik

"I would offer to take your coat," the asari muses as Kelsa follows her into the front room, "but I see you've spared me the trouble by not wearing one." Her eyes cast back over her shoulder, and Kelsa feels Morinth's gaze sweep down her one more time.

The soldier doesn't need to fake the catch in her throat that the attention elicits. "Dunno how anybody wears a coat on this rock, anyhow," she gruffs, sidestepping away from the door and glancing around the room, cataloguing the corners and taking note of any cover. The tactical assessment only takes half a heartbeat before she's got a dozen contingencies in case Morinth catches on too soon, or Samara does anything stupid, and then Kelsa's fiery eyes fix onto her host once again, for more reasons than one. "Aria keeps it close to boiling, even up here, where the rich people live."

Morinth smirks. "Aria keeps the mines close to boiling," she allows, "so that the rich people can stay rich. Cooling the air would cost money she isn't interested in spending. I find it quite pleasant, myself...but, then again, I haven't been here long." She slinks through the living space and up the small flight of stairs to the elevated kitchen. "Make yourself at home, Kelsa," she offers. "Would you like some more Kriala? Or perhaps something more...interesting?"

Kelsa doesn't follow the woman up into the kitchen, but she doesn't let her attention wander from the asari's retreating back. "You strike me as someone with a taste for interesting," she grunts, smirking. On the way from the club, she kept talking about music and art. Sculptures, paintings, vids, even books. It's clear that Morinth loves being alive, enjoys every second of her freedom, and doesn't let anyone get in between her and what she wants. Kelsa can respect that. "What've you got?"

The asari's laugh bubbles across the room, well-practiced to be enticing to put her victims at ease. She's an Ardat-Yakshi, or so Samara claims; the rare affliction means that her nervous system is too powerful, and even a simple meld will overload the neurons of any partner, hijacking and ultimately destroying them. According to Samara, each time an Ardat-Yakshi melds with someone, the more addicted to the process they become...not only do they get all the pleasure of a normal asari meld, but in subsuming another sentience, the Ardat-Yakshi gains another lifetime of knowledge and experience in just a few moments. The fact that their victims either die outright or spend the rest of their lives in a catatonic state is of no concern to them.
It isn't really of concern to Kelsa, either, as Morinth descends from the kitchen with a platter covered in small pill bottles, holding it carefully, like it's full of caviar or fine champagne. The soldier feels a hunger claw at the insides of her ribs that has nothing to do with how dangerous Morinth is, even though she's been honing her deadly craft for four hundred years, and her body count has to at least rival Kelsa's. No, in that moment, Kelsa's thoughts turn toward the bottles and what they contain, and she feels a prickle of sweat form on the back of her neck. "On second thought," she breathes, forcing her eyes up to Morinth's face, "wouldn't you rather be clear-headed right about now?"

The asari blinks, caught between her twin desires; from the subtle interrogation she pursued over the course of their walk, Kelsa's pretty sure the asari sees tonight as an investment in the future, and so she might be looking forward to an evening of hallex and good, dirty fucking. But Kelsa can almost see the reassessment going on behind her eyes, the hunger that she won't be able to keep a leash on if she isn't distracted by the drugs. So Kelsa answers for her, reaching up to take the platter and set it onto the coffee table just beside them. "Thanks for the offer, anyhow," the soldier tells her, not bothering to hide the hunger in her own expression...if anything, it'll make her that much harder for Morinth to resist.

The asari had to blink away the edge of black that threatens to consume her eyes from the outside in. "I suppose I can survive," she concedes. "If you keep being interesting."

Kelsa takes a half-step forward, closing the gap between them, and she lifts her hand to graze her fingertips across Morinth's jaw, down the side of her neck. "Don't worry," she breathes, feeling her own lips tingle in anticipation. "I doubt you'll be able to guess what's going to happen."

Morinth leans into the soldier's touch, and she doesn't hold the darkness back when it spills into her eyes, this time. Kelsa feels a probing tendril of psychokinetic power liking up her arm, stronger than she's ever felt from an asari. "I wouldn't be so hasty, Kelsa," she coos, and when Kelsa's own eyes dim just a hair, the taller woman allows herself a delicious smirk. Kelsa stands as though helpless as Morinth leans in for a kiss...in for the kill, if the urgent threads trying to drive into Kelsa's subconscious are anything to judge by. Her breath is cool on Kelsa's lips, her will nearly indomitable.

...Nearly. Kelsa didn't survive two prothean beacons and two years on Miranda's table for nothing, though, and when the soldier decides to drop the ruse, Morinth doesn't have enough time to be shocked; her neck crunches as Kelsa wrenches the asari's head sideways, before the woman can shift her attention from melding to combat biotics. She still has that hungry smirk on her face as she falls, her eyes going black for the last time. Shame, Kelsa thinks to herself; a few weeks ago, she might've rolled the dice on fucking her.

The silence of death doesn't last long. Samara's footsteps whisper in the wake of the door's opening hiss, and for a moment she stands dumbfounded, unable to look away from the sprawled corpse. "You killed her," she whispers, almost beyond even Kelsa's bionic hearing. "You killed my daughter."

Something in the woman's tone causes Kelsa to alert, and her stance shifts subtly. "I did," she says, baldly. "You should be grateful I didn't ask her to take your place." There isn't a challenge in her voice, but the threat's there, all the same.

When Samara looks up from what's left of her daughter, Kelsa isn't surprised to see a wreath of biotic blue swirl around the asari's clenched fist. "You killed her," she repeats, as though she hadn't heard the second half of Kelsa's statement. "You killed my daughter, Shepard."

Kelsa's own hands curl into fists at her sides. "I killed your daughter," she repeats.
"In so doing, you have broken a vow that I made before your grandmother's grandmother was conceived." Her voice is composed, the most eerily level that Kelsa has yet heard from the woman. "You have stolen the duty of a Justicar of the Asari Republics. Such is the highest offence in asari space, the most grievous abrogation of the Code."

Maybe foolishly, Kelsa shuts her eyes as she draws a deep breath. When she opens them, slowly, she sees that Samara hasn't moved, has hardly dared to blink. "You aren't bound by your Code," she reminds her newest subordinate. "Not until the mission's done."

"That is true," the Justicar affirms. "And I shall serve you with the utmost fidelity until the Collectors are defeated...or until you release me from the Third Oath of Subdumation, whereupon I will be compelled to kill you."

"No," Kelsa corrects her. "You'll be compelled to try."

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Life Support Control, CSV Normandy SR-2

0230 Zulu

1 October 2185

FTL Transit to Raheel-Leyya, Vallhallan Threshold

"Shepard," the drell calls, without turning from his desk, or the blue-shifted starscape that streaks beyond his viewport. The fact that his back is to the door shows a great deal of confidence, or maybe just weariness. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your company this morning?"

It's the middle of the night in Greenwich, but that's never made a damn to Kelsa, so she rolls with it. "Just checking in," she tells him. "Making sure you aren't going to ask me to kill you, next."

The rasping chuckle of the man's answer invites Kelsa over the threshold, and she steps into the room, still wary...still guilty. "Kepral's Syndrome will get me, in the end," Thane sighs, still gazing out into the black. "If the Collectors or some other misfortune should not befall me first. I have many regrets in this life of mine, but I've no wish to hasten its end beyond necessity." He glances back over his shoulder, his face as welcoming as a space-lizard's can be. "Please make yourself at home, Skipper."

The soldier saunters further into the room; it's spartan, even by her own personal standards, with just a cot and a desk and a single extra fold-out chair that's too flimsy for Kelsa to sit on, even out of her heavy armour. But this room's the driest on the Normandy, and that helps Thane's condition, so she's got no problem with him camping out here...even if he sleeps a metre away from the CO2 scrubbers. "That's good to hear," she affirms, coming to lean on a wall near the alien. "How's Kolyat holding up?"

"Last I heard, the arrangement you brokered with the human C-Sec officer is still in effect; Kolyat is acting as a confidential informant off the books."

Kelsa can't help the grimace that twitches over her lips...not that she's unhappy. It's just that having to deal with Bailey made her skin crawl. "Well, I'm glad I didn't kill him, then."

Thane inclines his head. "As am I...though I understand the urge." He blinks, his face blanking. "A haze of blue baktri smoke hangs in the air. The batarian is dirty, nervous, skulking in the shadows as he draws more smoke into his lungs. The turian is in plain clothes, more confident in his approach. In his pocket is a credit chit, taken from a crime scene, to be traded for something far
"Neither see me waiting for them." He blinks once more, shaking his head. "I...apologise," he says. "My kind is cursed with eidetic memory. Occasionally it becomes impossible not to express when in contemplation, or when strongly reminded of an event."

Kelsa raises an appraising brow. "Huh," she muses. "So you killed a dirty cop, once?"

The drell offers her a smile. "More than once," he corrects her. "Though it has been quite some time for me personally, it is not unheard of for corrupt police officers to attract the sort of attention that will get people of our calibre involved. In any case, I appreciate your pragmatism in my son's situation." He takes a breath, hides the pain. "It weighs heavy on the heart, what we do, until we learn to bear the weight. I am grateful it is an exercise you have spared Kolyat."

The soldier's eyes sweep down to the floor, regret poking at the back of her mind. "Sometimes I wish I coulda been spared it a few times, myself," she admits. "But I wasn't."

"I know," Thane allows, his voice solemn, almost like he's praying. He might well be, for all Kelsa knows...but as long as he doesn't offer to pray for her, she doesn't care. But what he says next surprises the fuck out of her. "I spoke to Jacob yesterday. He is...concerned for my welfare, and your own."

Kelsa's other eyebrow inches up to join its twin. "I didn't take you for much of a gossip, Thane."

A smirk tugs at the corner of the drell's mouth. "Even assassins must eat on occasion," he deflects. "And I saw no point in rudeness when the young man approached to join me at my meal. And I only bring it up now because he requested that I air his concerns, on our next conversation."

Her brow draws down. "Now why would he do a thing like that?"

"Perhaps because the last encounter the two of you had nearly ended with an incendiary round?" Thane muses, still smirking. "And the last companion you took ashore did not return before we had cast aweigh."

*I almost didn't return before we cast aweigh,* Kelsa thinks, but she doesn't say anything for a minute. She'd limped back onto the ship with a shitload of splinters in her back, a sprained knee, and a couple of cracked ribs; after all of Miranda and Mordin's enhancements, that was pretty impressive. Almost as impressive as the two full floors of the fancy apartment building Kelsa and Samara destroyed before the Justicar followed her daughter. After Chakwas patched her up enough for the nanobots in her bloodstream to kick in, she'd made a ship-wide announcement of exactly four words. *Samara isn't coming back.* Nobody's asked her what that means, but it's clear that everybody knows. "If it makes a difference," the soldier gruffs, "it wasn't a summary execution. She asked me to let her out of the vow. Said that I'd broken the biggest rule of the Code, since I stole her sworn duty from her."

Thane's head tilts subtly, his eyes narrowing. "That is odd," he says. "I have never known a Justicar to lie before."

"Wait," Kelsa breathes, unable to deal with the first implication of the drell's musings. "You know about the Code?"

Thane smiles somewhat indulgently, but he spares her another flashback. "I have had occasion to ply my trade in asari space," he admits. "In my line of work, it pays to be intimately familiar with the standards of law enforcement throughout the spheres in which one operates."
Kelsa grunts, agreeably. "And what has that familiarity done to make you think Samara lied to
me?"

"Because a Justicar's duty is not something which can be stolen," Thane says. "It may be obviated
by the course of events, or co-opted and completed by another Justicar or asari, or even an
alien...yet, in such circumstance, the fault lies with the Justicar who failed to discharge her oath,
and not with any who might have prevented her from doing so, either through ignorance or intent."

"So...it's not the biggest violation of the Code?" Kelsa wonders, intrigued by a vein of lingering
guilt that still tugs at her belly, for how things turned out.

The drell shakes his head. "Not for a non-Justicar, at any rate. Though, as I understand it, she had
taken an oath to you superseding her regular status as a Justicar, which might have explained the
deception."

A frown tips at the soldier's lips. "Why the lie, then? Why'd she want me to kill her?"

Thane's brow-ridges lift, and he pulls himself up out of his chair. "That fact is hidden in the midst
of the events which led to the decision itself," he says, not-quite-helpfully. "I was not privy to those
details, of course, and do not wish to be. The answer, if such can be found, must lay within you,
Shepard. You should contemplate it, if you are truly interested." It's the closest he's come to
offering her any kind of spiritual guidance, but he doesn't make it any more explicit. "In any case, I
shall reassure Jacob that I am in no danger of following Samara into your path. I believe you
should speak to him as well, if you are at all able."

That draws a chuckle from the human, and her eyes don't waver, even as they have to tilt up to keep
the taller alien's gaze in view. "I ain't gonna kill him, either, if that's what he's worried about."

"I do not believe it is," the drell assures her. He looks to continue, but then thinks better of it.

"Out with it," Kelsa gruffs, pushing off from the wall and standing straighter. "Why should I go
chat up Taylor?"

Thane hesitates for another few moments. "I believe he has a personal matter weighing on him,
though he did not confide in me, and I did not pry. I bring it up only because of the magnitude of
the task ahead of us, and the fact that you have tended to the concerns of most everyone else of the
combatants among the crew, as I understand it. It would be...incongruous, not to extend Jacob the
same courtesy, at least of an audience for his concerns."

Well, Kelsa thinks, shit. "I'll hit him up soon," she promises. "Got one more thing to deal with
first." The fact that it's another favour for a different crewmember-notwithstanding the deeper
history between Tali and herself that warrants the attention-isn't lost on the soldier, either.
"But...thanks, for bringing it to my attention."

"It is no trouble, Shepard," Thane replies. "Is there anything else you require?" The request seems
perfectly sincere, but Kelsa can sense the true ask, underneath it.

"I'll let you get back to it," she allows, with a nod. "Let me know if you or Kolyat needs anything
else, and I'll see what I can do."

"...Thank you," the drell says, and there isn't any subliminal message behind it.

With another, parting nod, Kelsa stalks out of the room, her own thoughts turning in on themselves.
Against her better judgment, as she reaches the elevator, she brings up her omni-tool and flicks
through to Liara's message. It takes her the entire length of the elevator ride up to the Loft for her
"Unidentified vessel, halt your advance and hold position." The quarian's voice crackles over open comms, without warning, after Joker dropped out of FTL close enough to draw their attention. "Any moves to advance or flee taken after receipt of this message will be considered hostile activity by the Migrant Fleet, and dealt with accordingly."

Kelsa nods. "Throttle back, Joker, and idle awhile." The Normandy decelerates to a stop, or at least until it more-or-less matches pace with the bulk of the Heavy Fleet, the military arm of that great mass of ships the quarians call home. "Secure us a channel with the quarian flagship."

Joker's fingers glide over the haptic interface in front of him, and it's only a half breath before he nods. "We're hooked in, Skipper. Comms are secure."

"This is Shepard, formerly Staff Commander with the Fifth Fleet of the Earth Systems Alliance," Kelsa says, by way of introduction. "I've got a quarian on my boat who says that the Admiralty Board has charged her with treason, and I'm here to get to the bottom of this bullshit so we can continue on with our mission."

A beat passes before the quarian over the comms musters a reply. "Shepard?" Another couple of seconds. "We have you as a suspected Cerberus agent, but your ship has no identifiable registration, even with confirmed or suspected fronts for Cerberus operations."

Kelsa feels like rolling her eyes, but she feels some slight bit of muted gratitude for Timmy; he promised her a clean ship, and it looks like he's given her one. "I'm not with Cerberus," she barks, "but Tali'Zorah is with me, and she's been summoned to a hearing of the Admiralty Board."

Beside her, Tali herself fidgets nervously. "It is true," she confirms. "My name is Tali'Zorah vas Neema, eldest and only child of Rael'Zorah vas Rayya, and I have come to answer the charges set forth by the remainder of the Admiralty Board."

"Confirm your status, Tali'Zorah," the comms crackle. The quarian by Kelsa's side rhymes off an alphabet soup of a quarian confirmation code, along with a bit of quarian poetry that doesn't survive translation into Galactic very well, and the voice across the vastness of space resumes. "Status confirmed. Captain Shepard, hold position; a transport will come to collect Tali'Zorah for the hearing."

"No," Kelsa barks. "Tali'Zorah isn't leaving my sight until this whole mess is sorted out."

The pause that greets Kelsa's words lasts just a second too long to be entirely comfortable. "...Are you invoking your right as Tali'Zorah's acting captain to speak on her behalf before the Admiralty Board, Captain Shepard?"

That gives the soldier pause, and she throws a glance Tali's way; she knows that quarians hold ship's captains in high regard, but she's not sure exactly what the quarian across the void is asking. "Do you want me to, Tali?"
Tali is still for several heartbeats, considering, and then she nods. "I would like that, Shepard," she allows. "If the Admiralty Board does not object?"

"There are no objections," the quarian confirms, over the comms. "Captain Shepard, may we know the name of your ship, so that we can build a profile and perform limited integration for docking procedures?"

"This is the Normandy SR-2," Kelsa barks. "Give us docking coordinates ASAP. I wanna get this dealt with."

"Of course. We are pushing coordinates to dock with the Rayya to your ship's console as we speak. The Admiralty Board will convene to hear the case of Tali'Zorah vas Normandy in two hours' time."

"Good," Kelsa grunts. "Shepard out." She nods to Joker again, and he cuts off the comms channel without further ado. When she turns to stalk down the bridge, though, Tali doesn't fall into line behind her. After a few steps, the soldier pauses and looks back over her shoulder; the quarian's still standing there, frozen, facing the viewport's shifting shipscape as Joker brings them into an approach vector with the Rayya. "Hey," Kelsa gruffs, as softly as she can manage. "You ready to do this?"

"He..." Tali breathes, still not moving. "He called me...vas Normandy."

"Yeah," Kelsa says, pulling a few steps up the bridge. "I heard that. What's that mean?"

Finally, the quarian turns, her faceplate tipping down slightly so that Kelsa knows she's looking into her eyes. "It means that I'm officially considered crew of the Normandy, and you are my captain. That is why they needed to build a profile of the ship...not to dock, but to place me officially outside of the Migrant Fleet."

Kelsa's brows draw together, and she peels off her Kuwashii visor to give the quarian an unobstructed view of her face, as channelled and scarred as it is. "Ain't that the truth, though? Aren't you part of my crew, Tali?"

"I am," the quarian insists. "But it was by dispensation from my father; my detachment from the Neema was considered an internal matter, not officially recognised by the rest of the Admiralty Board." Then her shoulders hunch, like she's embarrassed. "It has nothing to do with how I feel about you, Shepard, or my commitment to seeing the mission through."

The soldier nods. "What's this about, then?" She doesn't reach out, because both quarians in general and Kelsa in specific don't like public displays of physical intimacy, but she stands firm for her friend, nonetheless.

"It...I think it means they've already decided that I'm guilty," Tali says. "It is much easier to banish a traitor if she's already attached to a foreign crew, both because it means some relative safety to the banished, and because it is easier to believe treason of one who's allowed their loyalty to take them from the Migrant Fleet after the end of their Pilgrimage."

"I'm sorry," Kelsa breathes, after a second. "But we'll get this sorted out, one way or the other," she vows. "And no matter what happens, you'll always be welcome on my ship."

"Thanks, Shepard," Tali allows. "I really appreciate the offer, and the trouble you're going to."

"Don't thank me yet," Kelsa reminds her, with an arched brow. "At least until we see if I can get off the Migrant Fleet without starting a war."
The skipper almost starts a war, and then prepares to end one, the only way she knows how.

**Ch. 38: Ace of Spades**

**Chapter Summary**

The quarian's rifle trembles in his hands, and it isn't entirely clear if he's going to stand down, but Kelsa doesn't give a fuck; she keeps shuffling toward him, each limp tearing a pained grunt from her burning lungs. The boy ahead of her is afraid, just like the superiors behind him are, because Kelsa's not wearing a helmet, because she's bleeding all over their pristine floor from bullet holes in her heavy armour, spreading her germs with every breath, with every bloodied step. Tali and Kasumi are right behind her, but they're still suited-up, still clean and relatively uninjured. They're good at a certain kind of hacking, and it isn't the kind that tends to get you shot at, especially when there's a big dumb grunt to soak up all the damage.

Kelsa's good at the other kind of hacking. Her kind of hacking earned her those bullet wounds, but also the trophies she carries, trophies that probably have a little bit to do with the quarian guards' lack of articulation; her left hand holds the severed head of a geth prime unit, the flashlight shot out and cut hydraulic lines leaking clear fluid to mingle with Kelsa's crimson. Her right arm is wrapped up inside the geth's gatling gun, responsible for most of the weeping holes in her armour, with plenty of ammo in store. The weapon's easily fifty kilos, but she holds it steady as she advances on the quarians guarding the door.

"Think for a second, boy," Kelsa hisses at the shorter quarian in the centre, after another few uneven steps see his rifle still aimed at her. "You pull that trigger, and I'll pull mine," she says, hefting the chain gun.

"But...but...you're in the centre of the Migrant Fleet," the quarian points out, clearly not prepared to face down an exposed, hostile soldier who's just come back from what should've been a suicide mission. "Stand down!" His voice shakes, despite the two well-trained quarian commandos at his flanks, neither of whom know what the fuck to do, either.

"We did the job," Kelsa deflects, grimacing through the pain that the job earned her. "You're gonna let us through to see your admirals, or we're gonna see if you're any harder to take down than a ship full of geth." She doesn't slow down her advance, but she doesn't say anything else; instead, she lets her scarred face and solid-red eyes do all of her talking, and by the time she reaches the door into the admiralty board's audience chamber, the quarians aren't in her way any longer.

The chorus of synth-filtered gasps from the enviro-suited quarians within is almost enough to bring a grin to the soldier's lips, but she fixes her grimace as more well-armed quarians fix their weapons
on her and her crew. They start barking terrified orders for them to evacuate. "The damage is
done," Tali pronounces, not without some measure of trepidation, as Kelsa keeps walking, still
implacable in her slow march.

"You're just gonna have to scrub the floors extra hard when I'm outta here," the human soldier
grunts. "...Unless you want to deal with cleaning up a dead body. Or twenty. It's all the same to
me." She isn't scared of a handful of them; she's not scared of seventeen million of them. She's
tired, and hurting, and in the mood to get this the fuck over with.

The line of guards bows as they approach, and ultimately breaks when Admiral Zaal'Koris speaks
up. "We have taken precautions against this eventuality," he announces, which could be the truth,
or just another bureaucratic lie. "Stand down, all of you; we have convened to see this matter
through, and we will see it done, without further violence."

Kelsa hobbles up to the dais where Zaal'Koris stands with his three co-admirals, who've together
decided to charge her friend with treason. "We're back from the Alarei," the soldier huffs, swinging
the geth's head back and tossing it so that it lands right in the middle of them. The arc of the
severed piece of machinery brings another gasp from the the audience, citizens and soldiers alike.
"Brought that back as a souvenir," the soldier hisses. She hefts the gun she stripped from the geth's
self-destructed corpse, but keeps the end pointed away from the admirals, to keep their guard dogs
from getting excited. "I'm keepin' this one, though."

Han'Gerrel, the military man and erstwhile friend of Rael'Zorah, has to shuffle aside to keep from
getting hit by the dead piece of equipment. "You have done the Migrant Fleet a great service," he
says, disgust evident in his modulated voice, but he pays no further attention to the dead thing. "We
were on the verge of destroying the Alarei...but it appears you have sanitised it. We will send
crews to secure it as soon as possible."

"But where is Rael'Zorah?" Admiral Shala'Raan demands, her concern obvious. "Tali'Zorah, did
your father survive?"

Tali's answer is nonverbal, and Kelsa sees Shala'Raan's posture slump in grief, to have her
suspicions confirmed. "There were no survivors," the human reports, coughing, tasting crimson at
the back of her tongue. "No geth, either, after we got done with 'em."

Mention of the quarians' hated foe, or perhaps her lack of sanitation, refocuses the admirals'
attention on her. "You stand for Tali'Zorah as her captain," Shala'Raan acknowledges. That's why
Kelsa's talking instead of Tali. "What did you discover aboard the Alarei, Captain Shepard?"

"Nothing you didn't already know," the soldier growls. "Tali's dad was researching the geth, just
like you cleared him to." She grits her teeth, remembering Tali's tears when she found the man's
body, heard the last truncated message he was trying to send her. The man's last words were about
saving the Migrant Fleet, instead of how much he loved his daughter. "Trying to find out their
weaknesses, just like you wanted."

Zaal'Koris jumps onto it as confirmation of his accusations. "That settles the matter," he declares.
"Rael'Zorah has endangered the Migrant Fleet, and he unfortunately roped Tali'Zorah into his
scheme. I cannot see any way forward but to strike their names from our records, as much as it
pains me."

"No!" Tali protests, but it's more a cry of anguish than of rage. "You can't-"

"You do that and you're a bunch of goddamned fools," Kelsa snaps, swinging her big-assed gun
down to point at the floor, to keep from pointing it at any one of them. "Rael'Zorah took a
calculated risk, a risk that you approved," she points out, again. "Sometimes, those kinds of risks wind up getting people killed. That's why they're called risks. Rael'Zorah got himself and his team killed, it's true," the soldier admits. "They all knew that could happen. You knew it could happen. But guess what?"

She nods to the geth prime's severed head, at Han'Gerrel's feet, and then gestures to her own wounds with her free hand. "The geth are tough bastards, and they aren't going down without a fight." She rolls her shoulder at her quarian companion. "Tali'Zorah is the best quarian infiltrator, the best tech expert of any race that I've ever met; she wouldn't've lasted half an hour on the Alerai without me there to follow through her tech attacks with some real muscle...which you don't have."

"Be that as it may," one of the admirals says, and Kelsa can't tell the difference, anymore. "That does not diminish-"

"Shut the fuck up!" Kelsa's voice is husky with rage and exhaustion. Stunned silence falls, broken only by the wet sound of her breath. "You," she grunts, pointing at the one she hopes is Han'Gerrel, "you just want a war...a war your people can't hope to win. It cost your friend his life, and now it's going to cost his daughter her place in this fleet."

Zaal'Koris tries to speak again, probably thinking she's taking his side after all, but Kelsa bulls over the ostensible pacifist. "And you're too fucking scared to admit that a war is coming, and it's going to cost a lot more quarians their lives if you're not ready for it. You should both be fucking ashamed of yourselves for letting this get out of hand, and then trying to smear two good quarians when it blew up in those hunks of glass you call faces." She has to close her eyes, and when she speaks up again, it's low enough that she can still hear the echoes of the Alarei ringing in her ears. "Even if you don't want to take back Rannoch from them, they're not staying behind the Perseus Veil forever...just like they didn't during the Eden Prime war. And if you're not ready for them, they'll come and throw you off of any planet you settle, keep chasing you around the galaxy 'til there's not even seventeen of you left, much less seventeen million."

"Yeah, Rael'Zorah was studying the geth, and Tali helped him," Kelsa barks, tearing her eyes open. "But everything I saw on that ship told me that Rael'Zorah's only motivation was securing and protecting the Migrant Fleet. That's all I've ever seen from Tali, too. And if you assholes are going to punish your most talented and loyal people for taking risks, then maybe you don't deserve to have them in the first fucking place."

With a shaking, stuttering breath, Kelsa levers herself around, and starts limping away. "Wait," calls Admiral Daro'Xen, who was ultimately in charge of approving Rael'Zorah's project to begin with, and the only who hasn't butted in yet. "Where are you going, Captain?"

Kelsa doesn't stop, and she doesn't turn around, doesn't pause to see if Tali is following her. "I'm going back to my ship," she gruffs, "and my people are coming with me. Whether you let Tali come back after my mission's done is up to you."

Nobody challenges her on her way to the Normandy's airlock. She manages a smirk when Tali and Kasumi both board the ship with her, but once the door to the Rayya is sealed, the strength at last evaporates from her legs, and she's got to catch herself on a bulkhead to keep herself from falling. "Shepard!" Tali yells, coming to grab her shoulder and arm.

The soldier shrugs it off. "I'm too heavy for you," she points out, trying to grin through her grimace. "Get Grunt." Her eyes roll to Kasumi, who still hasn't removed her mask. "Guess you're breaking the news to Chakwas."
"Something tells me she won't be impressed by the heroics," the thief observes, and she isn't long in following the quarian into the ship's interior.

"I doubt it," Kelsa hisses, by herself. "Joker," she barks, opening a link to the bridge. "Let's get the fuck outta here."

"Aye aye, ma'am."

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To: C97-XHp984392

From: Sender Unavailable

Kelsa,

I was very glad to hear from you, and gladder still to hear that Tali'Zorah came through her difficulties with the Flotilla relatively unscathed. Pass along my good wishes, if you would. And tell Garrus that I am alive and well.

As for the business with Samara and her daughter, I can only speculate, though I can confirm Thane's claims about the Justicar Code. In extremis, Justicars have been known to take their own lives after failing to fulfill a sworn oath, but the failures are their own; it is completely against all reason for a Justicar to try and kill another for succeeding where she has failed.

I believe that Samara must have not considered herself a Justicar any longer. As I understand it, she became a Justicar to begin with in order to hunt her daughter. Once that duty had been discharged, by whichever means, Samara was simply a mother grieving for the loss of her child. Her instinct for revenge is understandable, if unfortunate. That may not be any easier to hear, but I do not blame you for defending yourself.

You should not blame yourself, either. Your mission is larger than any one asari, even an Ardat-Yakshi and her mother. Tend to your crew, and tend to yourself, and come back to me.

Yours,

BB

---

AI Core, CSV Normandy SR-2

1300 Zulu

3 November 2185

FTL Transit to Tassrah, The Phoenix Massing

Kelsa took Liara's advice, and more than a little grief from Chakwas for bringing new meaning to the term reckless abandon. It took more than a week and a half before the doctor gave her the all-clear, even with Miranda and Mordin working on her cybernetics to speed up her healing. Once she got the doctor's good word, Kelsa took it relatively easy by tying off a few more loose ends with her crew. That included helping Jacob find some closure with a father who fucked off to found a cult of castaways on an uncharted planet; in the end, the old man put a bullet into his own head, saving both her and Jacob the trouble.

After that, Timmy called again, with a mission to clear an ancient Reaper corpse and investigate
the missing Cerberus research team that had been assigned to study it. She managed to pick up one
more crew member during that little jaunt through her nightmares...a geth, of all things; it should
have been scrap, but it save her life, and Timmy expressed an interest in salvaging it rather than
letting it join the crew. Those two things earned it the right to at least prove itself. Once it woke up,
EDI called it Legion, after a verse from Mark. Kelsa still doesn't like the name, but she likes how
good Legion is with a gun, and how transparent its motivations are. The fact that it's using a piece
of the heavy plate she wore over Alchera to patch a hole in its chest doesn't hurt, either.

Except now those motivations are going to get it killed, she thinks with a grimace, as the door to
EDI's brain opens on an argument between Legion and Tali. "...We trusted you!" The quarian
protests, angrily, not noticing the soldier walking in behind her. "Shepard trusted you! And
now...now..."

"What's this about?" Kelsa broaches, her voice a husked whisper that cuts across the room. Tali
flinches and wheels around, the anger obvious in her posture. "Why'd EDI call me down here?"
She looks from the quarian to the geth.

"Shepard-Commander," the machine greets in the same genderless monotone it always uses,
though it's crouching defensively behind the haptic interface of its omni-tool. "Tali'Zorah is
expressing distress over the intelligence we have gathered regarding the aggressive posture being
adopted by the creators."

"He wants to tell the geth about plans from the Flotilla," Tali clarifies, her rage undiminished. "He
scanned classified data from my omni-tool! Data I only have access to thanks to you!"

The subtext in the woman's observation isn't lost on Kelsa, and she can't keep the frown from
twitching across her lips. "That don't mean I give a shit," she points out.

The quarian shrinks, like someone's letting the air out of her suit. "You...you're taking Legion's
side?"

"I didn't say that," the soldier grunts, moving between them, so the three of them make an even-
sided triangle. "What I've said is that we've got a mission," she gruffs, looking back and forth
between the organic and the synthetic she's sharing the room with. "That means both of you have
jobs to do that don't involve pissing me off with this bullshit."

"We must protect ourselves from the creator threat," Legion claims. "We cannot allow it to go
unprepared for."

"Just as we cannot allow the geth to know about our ship movements," Tali responds, heatedly.

"And I can't allow two members of my crew to be at each other's throats while we still have a job
to do," Kelsa growls. "You don't have to like each other. Hell, after we hit the relay-if we all make
it back-you and Miranda and Jack can have a four-way fight to see who's the biggest asshole in the
galaxy." Both of them try to speak up, but Kelsa doesn't give them the chance. "Legion, you're
smart enough to know why Tali would be pissed at you for sifting through her omni-tool. Tali, you
ought to know that Legion doesn't want a war, not after he helped us wipe out the Heretics."
Another loose end the three of them got back from tying up yesterday; a couple of million geth
programs had gone rogue, supposedly the ones behind the Eden Prime war. Now they're dead, and
the last holdouts are being infected with a virus to bring them back in line with the geth consensus.

"We hit the relay as soon as EDI's finished installing the Reaper IFF," the soldier reminds them.
"I'm gonna need you both to shut the fuck up and play nice until then."
She turns to go, but Tali grabs her shoulder, and she doesn't realise how close she comes to losing her hand. "Shepard..."

"The Collectors are sucking up human colonies like they're junkies and we're sand," Kelsa gruffs. "And the Reapers are coming. If we don't stop them, then this bullshit isn't gonna matter." She fixes both quarian and machine with a malevolent stare. "I'm gonna be ready," she vows. "Even if I have to hit the relay without either of you. Now get your shit together, or you can get the fuck off my ship."

With one last grimace, the soldier stalks away, through the med bay and across the crew deck. She can't help checking her omni-tool for what must be the fifth time today; she's waiting to hear back from Blueblood, to see if they can arrange a visit one more time before Omega 4. But she hasn't heard anything from their secured comm channel in days, and she's starting to get worried. Being in the AI core didn't help-it used to be Liara's quarters, back on the old Normandy. Before Alchera.

Without meaning to, Kelsa finds herself strolling into the port observation deck; Kasumi isn't there, but Zaeed is. Kelsa bellies up to the bar beside him, her mind still circling the drain that Liara's silence has drilled into her. "What's on tap, Zed?"

The old man bristles, either at the nickname or at the piss Cerberus is trying to pass off as beer. "Fuck all," he grouses. "Tasted better in a hanar whorehouse."

The soldier arches a brow. She's on the verge of asking what kind of person works at—or visits—such an establishment when she thinks better of it. "Still got some decent whiskey, at least?" A noncommittal grunt answers her, and so she slides behind the bar to investigate. She grunts a laugh when she finds her poison, one of the last bottles on the ship. She slides into the bartender's chair with an easy sigh, twisting the crimson top off of the green glass neck and slugging back a mouthful of Irish. "Fuck," she grunts, after the second straight hit of the good stuff.

"You're slurpin' that like it's going out of business," Zaeed points out, after a tug of his own pisswater. "Then again, it just might be," he concedes, "this business with the Collectors goes arse over tits."

Kelsa grunts agreeably and tips the bottle in his direction. "Want a pull?"

The old merc hesitates, but then shrugs. "Give it here," he settles, snatching up the Jameson. His Adam's apple rises and falls three times before he sets it down on the countertop and he sighs, just a little rougher than usual. "Goddammit, I'm a sucker for the classics. All this purple asari shit that knocks you on your arse for three bloody days can't hold a candle to a good copper still and some barley."

"Some asari shit ain't half bad," the soldier objects, half-heartedly.

Zaeed grins. "I guess it's just like anything else," he muses. "Once you get the taste for it, you're hooked." He pulls a thoughtful draught of his beer while Kelsa swigs more of her whiskey. "Been meaning to ask you, Shepard," he broaches, but then he hesitates, uncharacteristically. Kelsa grunts for him to get on with it over another swallow. "You, er...you really carked it, didn'cha?" He asks, finally. "When them buggy bastards hit the first Normandy?" He clarifies, unnecessarily.

Kelsa feels a chill crawling across her shoulders, colder than a Michigan winter; she could pretend that her translator didn't pick up his meaning, but that'd only drag out the inevitable. "Yeah," she sighs, reeling a little at the first waves of liquor hitting her bloodstream. "Near as anybody can tell, I was brain dead for more than a year. Who's asking?"
Zaeed chuckles. "An old man with arthritis in his hips and one eye to see out of, who's about to punch a ticket that's only ever been one-way, up to now." His faded scars stretch with the depth of his grimace. "Call me curious."

"Right," Kelsa says. Her fingers curl around the neck of her bottle, but she doesn't lift it again, not yet. "You wanna know if there's something waiting on us at the other end of that last ride?"

"I wasn't picturing Saint goddamn Peter, obviously," the merc gruffs. "Just...what do you think? After what happened to you?"

Kelsa peels her fingers off of the bottle one at a time, looking the old man right in the eye. "You wanna know the last thing I remember, before I woke up on Miranda's table the first time?" Zaeed nods, once. Kelsa sucks in a breath. "Blood crawling up my throat after all the air leaked out of my suit," she tells him, without flinching. "Then a whole lotta nothing. That's what's waiting for us, for all of us, if we don't come back from the other side of the relay."

Zaeed's face is sour, but that could just be the last of his beer. "Thought so," he grunts. "Just making sure." He shakes his head, contemplating the bottom of his empty glass. "Gotta go give Jesse a good oiling," he says, when he looks up. "You gonna be alright to hold down the fort alone, kid?"

Kelsa nods, hoisting her bottle. "I got John Jameson and Son to keep me company," she assures him. "You go take care of Jesse." The merc gives her a parting nod, leaving her to her whiskey and her memories.

"Wonder what you'd think about all this," she breathes, after a few minutes, and another swig off her bottle. "Bet it'd be right up your alley."

Don't know about that, ma'am, the aether answers her, as close to the sound of Kaidan's voice as she can remember. Never was one for too many heroics, myself.

She can see him, when she closes her eyes and lets the whiskey whisk her away. "Nah," she agrees. "Except for the once." A deep breath sees her eyes open, and she shakes her head. "Sometimes I wish there was something after," she admits, out loud. "Even if it meant that the fucking grey ladies were right. Least I'd get to see you and Jay again." She frowns. "Prolly not Gloria, though," she reasons. "She never hurt nobody."

A voice, a real voice, rises to answer her. "So your mysterious conversation partners are waiting for you in Hell?" It's Kasumi, uncloaked and on her bed, reading a book like she owns the place.

Kelsa's frown deepens. "What's it to you, Kitty-cat?"

"Ten years in a convent in Kyoto," the thief lets slip, and Kelsa's too drunk by now to know if that's a lie. "It's why I'm so good at sneaking around." She folds her book up and offers the soldier a smile from underneath the shadow of her hood. "It's also how I can recognise a dose of Catholic guilt when I see it."

"Wha..."

"Grey ladies," Kasumi supplies. "A surprisingly common way of referencing nuns by children raised in their care." Even though there isn't a change in the thief's pitch or timbre, her words ring true, and Kelsa can't help shuddering, in sympathy if nothing else. "What's on your mind, Shep?"

"Just thinking about the dead," Kelsa supplies. "And the soon-to-be."
"As long as you don't imagine any of us are in that latter category," Kasumi prompts her, lifting her book and settling back into the bed. "We're going to be just fine."

Kelsa doesn't answer her, except to take another swig off of her bottle, even though she's had too many in too short a time already. But the thief isn't bad company, for all they don't say to one another, as the hours drag on and the stars keep streaming by the window.
Chapter Summary

Kelsa finally takes the fight to the Collectors, but the consequences are more than she may be able to bear.

Reaper Natal Chamber

1900 Zulu

7 November 2185

Collector Base (crashed), Galactic Core

Kelsa can't see the bottom when she looks over the edge of the platform they've been fighting on. Maybe fighting is the wrong word, since she, Garrus, Jack, and Zaeed spent most of the last hour ducking and dodging as an enormous humanoid skeleton tried to swipe at them and boil them alive with high-intensity blasts from its ocular lasers. It was a Reaper, or at least the core of one, and the final destination of hundreds of thousands of liquefied human beings stripped from all those colonies. It was only a well-placed shot from Kelsa's unwieldy M-920 Cain, supplied at the eleventh hour by Jacob just before they jumped through the Omega-4 relay, that finally gave them all a few minutes' peace.

"Fuck, Shepard," Jack rasps, still out of breath from this last fight, and several hours of battle beforehand that saw each of them kill dozens upon dozens of Collector drones. "Think it's really dead?"

Kelsa leans a little bit further, peering into the darkness. After a half-dozen heartbeats, she snorts deep to drain her sinuses into the back of her throat, and hocks a gob of snot into the black void; when it disappears without eliciting a response, Kelsa nods, and her mental tally ticks over to 3,336. The number is almost too vast for even her to countenance, even though her hands wrought every single piece of that bloody sum. The death's head face is just the latest that'll flash on the insides of her eyelids in those instances before she jerks awake. "Yeah," she grunts, after another handful of heartbeats sees her offensive gesture go unanswered. "It's dead."

"Then I say we blow this goddamned popsicle stand to Hell and gone," Zaeed prompts, checking his sniper rifle, though he doesn't collapse it for a few more moments.

Garrus' two-toned voice purrs, laced with exhaustion. "The others are still back there," he points out, "keeping the rest of the Collectors off our collective six. Any guesses on how much longer they're gonna manage?"

"Not long enough, if we don't move," Kelsa guesses as she pulls back from the ledge, bringing up her left arm. "EDI," she barks, and the AI responds by popping its miniature avatar up from her omni-tool. "Please tell me we got a way to neutralise this fucking place before we bug the hell out."

"Indeed," EDI replies, the holographic sphere pulsing as she scans the area. "There is a control
"Shit," Jack spits. "You can do that?"

"The Reapers' technology is highly advanced," the AI acknowledges. "Yet the physical principles upon which the station is run are elementary: energy is generated, and it must be carefully controlled in order to avoid a core overload. Ergo, if that control can be disrupted..."

"Loud and clear, EDI," Kelsa confirms, kicking into a jog and vaulting onto the next platform, where a podium stands. It reminds her of a similar platform on the Collector ship, when she learned about Timmy's betrayal. "Alright," she clips, when she's leaning on the panel. "How do I establish a connection between you and the base, EDI?"

"Maintain proximity," the AI instructs, and after only a few seconds, the hologram disappears from Kelsa's forearm and reappears on the surface of the podium's console. "Mapping the control schema for the reactor. It appears to be a tetra-core structure, composed of element zero for gravity manipulation and a thorium chain fuel cycle. Either component may be overloaded to denude the station of all organic life, though the reaction engendered by the fuel cycle alone would not significantly impact the majority of the station's physical infrastructure."

Zaeed rasps a chuckle. "Any of that supposed to be English, Turtledove?"

"We blow both kinds of core and we destroy the station," Kelsa translates. "If we only pick the fuel line, we leave most of the machinery untouched. I'm guessing the EMP would fry the tech, though."

"Correct, Shepard," EDI confirms. "Which course of action shall we pursue?"

Kelsa's lips part, but then her omni-tool chirps with a particular tone, one that she's only ever heard-and hasn't heard in weeks-from one of Liara's incoming messages. She feels her stomach flip, and even though she's in the middle of an enemy base, on the verge of ending a war she didn't start, surrounded by fighters who have shown her loyalty and earned hers in return, the soldier suddenly feels small and alone. Unable to resist, she brings up her arm to tap into the message, but as soon as she activates her 'tool, a holoscreen pops up, showing the Illusive Man's smoke-wreathed visage. "Shepard," he greets her, coolly, as though she's the one interrupting him. "There is a third option in neutralising the Collector threat that EDI hasn't fully made you aware of."

"I have calculated a 0.127% probability that Shepard will agree to a neutron purge," the AI submits, before Kelsa can properly respond. "The two options presented are by far the most likely options she will choose from."

Timmy takes an indulgent draw off of his cigarette. "Such efficient analysis is admirable," he admits, "but it is flawed, in this case. Neither you nor Shepard have all of the information available."

"I don't give a shit," Kelsa cuts in, shutting off her omni-tool with a killswitch command that reroutes all of its power to her omni-blades. They extend as she whips her arms out, glowing with red malevolence, just like the cracks in her skin. Just like her eyes. "Let's blow this place out of the centre of the galaxy."

EDI's avatar shudders, before she speaks the words Kelsa's gotten so sick of hearing. "...I have a block that prevents me-"
"God damnit!" the soldier barks, before the AI can finish her denial. "Garrus, see if you can figure this shit out," she says, moving aside. Even if her arms weren't covered with superheated plasma, she knows she couldn't hack her way into a video game, much less a piece of ancient technology. Of the four of them, Garrus is the most technically inclined; the three humans are more of the punch-it-'til-it-stops-moving school of solving technical problems.

The turian slides over, his talons skittering over the console. After a moment, however, it's clear he isn't getting anywhere. "Uhhh..." He grumbles, his fingers still clicking, blindly. "Give me a minute..." A familiar-sounding voice breathes a sigh from the other side of Garrus' carapace, and the turian flinches back in surprise.

Timmy's figure is projected in EDI's blue tones from the top of the console. "If you haven't forgotten, Shepard, EDI is a Cerberus program. It's shackled to Cerberus protocols, which may be invoked at my leisure. I could simply order EDI to initiate the neutron bombardment, and it would have no choice but to comply."

The threat bleeds through the faint, cajoling mockery in the Man's tone. "What do you want, old man?" Kelsa demands.

"What I have always wanted, Shepard," the Man insists. "For humanity to reach its full potential. Imagine what we could achieve if we had access to the Collectors' technology, intact and waiting for us to reach out and grasp it. It could be humanity's greatest leap since discovering the prothean ruins on Mars."

"Humanity," Kelsa wonders, her eyes narrowing, "or Cerberus?" She disengages her omni-blades, since their purpose in avoiding the fucker is obviously moot at this point.

"A benefit to one necessarily reflects upon the other," Timmy says. "With Cerberus in control of this base, there is no telling what we might accomplish. The Reapers could be rendered a terrible fantasy, and we could make the galaxy a truly safe place for all of humankind."

"If I let you have it," Kelsa observes, striding closer to the Man's projection. "And if I don't?"

Another digital puff of smoke is his immediate reply, but he's not long in augmenting it with more bullshit. "Then I initiate the bombardment myself," he allows. "And live with the sacrifice, as I am always prepared to do, to ensure the survival and advancement of the species." He tilts his head forward. "Think on it for a moment, Shepard; are you really prepared to give your life again? When it will not deter me a single iota from my chosen course of action?"

The gravity seems to tilt on the platform, just for a second, as Kelsa realises just what the Man's saying. "You're gonna kill us all," she surmises.

Zaeed's angry snarl rises up from the darkness behind her. "You utter bastard," he judges, and she can hear the hiss of his rifle extending again, as though he could shoot all the way from the centre of the Milky Way to wherever Timmy's hiding.

The Man's avatar picks up a tumbler half-full of liquid, EDI's hologram giving the drink an eerie hue. "Have you made your decision, Shepard?" His veneer of patience is already starting to thin.

"Why're you giving me a choice?" Kelsa wonders, still unable to process this final betrayal...or, rather, unable to forgive herself for not having anticipated it. "Wouldn't it be cleaner to kill us and have done with it?"

"Four reasons," the Illusive Man supplies, almost immediately. "One, I am an idealist; as
troublesome as you've proven, you have also shown time and again that you are the best of Humanity. Second, my idealism is tempered by practicality...I have invested a great deal of money and other resources into your reconstruction and success. While you have lived up to my expectations wholeheartedly, I would be remiss to deny myself the opportunity of further return on that investment." He takes a break to sip his drink and puff his cigarette. "Third, I want you to have to look your friends in the eye, as you all lay dying, and know that it was your say-so that condemned them to their fate. If you're going to stubbornly resist me right up to the end, I want you to reap the consequences."

Kelsa flinches, certain his choice of *reap* was an intentional one. "...What's the fourth reason?" she asks, after a few heartbeats pass in silence, save for the gasps and heavy breathing of her companions.

Timmy smiles, and she sees his inhuman eyes glitter. "As noble as I am, I have to admit to at least one character flaw," he says, as though being magnanimous. "I am not above accepting the pleasure I would feel at bringing you to heel, and having you live the rest of your life knowing that I'd brought you down to size."

If Kelsa had been wavering at all—which she wasn't—that last bit would've slammed shut any doubt. "You can go fuck yourself," she snarls, her fists clenching to keep herself from reaching for her gun. "Do what you're gonna do."

The Illusive Man heaves a sigh, from somewhere in the Milky Way, and his avatar shakes its head, though a hint of self-satisfaction doesn't move from his lips. "I was afraid you might say that," he allows, with a nod. "I can even respect the ruthlessness involved...you would rather see all that you've built go to ruin than admit defeat. It's one of the reasons I brought you back," he admits. Then he shakes his head, slowly. "You really have left me no choice, Shepard," he grouses. "I hope you know that I *really* wanted to avoid this...unpleasantness, but you have made it an unfortunate necessity." He jabs his half-done cigarette toward her. "I want you to remember that." His eyes flick just slightly off-centre, and he gives the merest nod of his head.

Kelsa's beyond caring, beyond thinking, her mind clear of all worry or hope or fear. She only spares one last thought for Liara as she takes what's going to be her last breath. But then, suddenly, the image in the hologram blinks, and when it comes back into focus, Kelsa isn't quite sure what she's seeing. The quality's a hell of a lot lower, and the image shows a dark room. An asari and a drell. Both naked, both chained to the ceiling. Both slumped, as though they're unconscious. No, Kelsa realises, from the irregular jerks in their muscles. *They've just been tortured so much they can't keep their heads up.* "I had thought I would not need to descend to such base tactics to control you," the Man goes on, in voiceover. "Given the long leash I allowed for the mission, the ability to set and reject parameters, even to let yourself labour under the delusion that you did not belong to me...I see that was a mistake, now. I should have broken you, before I tried to reason with you. After all, you cannot reason with an animal."

Recognition pounds at the back of Kelsa's mind, but the image is low-res, enough for her to deny the spark. "You know how I deal with hostages," she growls, unnecessarily. "If I'm not willing to spare my own crew, much less my own hide, what makes you think I'm going to bat for a couple of aliens I don't even know?"

"Ahh," Timmy's voice soothes, "but you *do* know them. Or at least you *did.*" He must give some kind of signal, because the image flickers again; it's fast, but Kelsa thinks she saw a long, curved sword captured by the camera. It's gone before the next frame, but the effect it had soon becomes unmistakable.
The drell spasms, his head jerking up, and Kelsa's lungs empty as she watches the bottom half of his body fall away. It's Feron, undeniably...or what's left of him, anyway. His mouth works, eyes wide as the light fades from him, as his abdominal cavity relinquishes the machinery of his life onto the floor. There's no sound from the room, no sound at all until the asari's head lifts in an anguished cry, a cry Kelsa only hears because it tears through her own throat. The world tilts again, and the soldier finds herself on her knees, unable to tear her eyes away from the screen...

...where Liara is writhing in agony, beside her newly-halved companion. "You see," the Illusive Man says, as though lecturing to a classroom, "you might have deluded yourself into thinking that you had thrown off your shackles...or that they had never been fastened correctly in the first place. Yet I own you, Shepard; there is not a single heartbeat you have enjoyed in two years that I have not personally approved, not a single thought in that reinforced skull of yours that I have not thoroughly examined...not a single secret I do not have encyclopedic knowledge of.

"Did you think that just because you were lying to yourself about how you felt, that I would not know? Did you imagine you could keep Dr. T'Soni's renewed affections a secret from me?" He scoffs, and then chuckles. "Let us see if the good doctor can persuade you to alter your opinion on my proposition."

The air crackles with the distant echo of a reported scream, filtered through the lightyears. It's every bit as agonising as in Kelsa's nightmares. "Liara," she breathes, almost a whisper. Almost a prayer.

The sound, as pitiful as it is, is enough silence the asari's anguished cry. "...Kel...?" Liara's voice is staticky with distance, choked with pain, and grief, and terror. She looks around, her eyes growing wild. "Kelsa?!" A feeble ripple appears around her, the sheen of biotics too weak to do anything but fade.

"I ain't there, Blueblood," the soldier grunts, still unable to move from her knees. "Timmy's patching me through, against my will. He's...he's gotcha, and he's going to..." Her tongue grows thick in her mouth, and she can't push the words past it. *He's gonna kill you.*

Liara's frantic search stops, and she sags in her bonds once more, her head hanging. "I'm...sorry, Kelsa," she whimpers, and even over the degraded connection, Kelsa thinks she can hear shock creeping into the asari's voice. "It's...my fault..."

"No," Kelsa growls, shaking her head, violently enough for some of her dreads to come loose from the tail she keeps them in. It's mine. I'm...sorry." She feels the moisture tracking down her dirty cheeks before she realises she's weeping, for the first time since she was fourteen years old. "We never did get to Thessia."

The Illusive Man's voice cuts in again. "That is a crying shame," he tells the both of them. "Good evening, Dr. T'Soni," he says, affording his captive a sumptuous respect that's insulting, given the circumstances. "I apologise for this mess, but I hope you'll understand that matters of import have moved my hand."

"Don't you talk to her," Kelsa strangles out, shakily, through her tears.

Timmy continues, as though she hadn't spoken. "You see, Dr. T'Soni, Kelsa has been presented with a choice." The use of the soldier's only true name is enough to get Liara's attention, and she lifts her head, somehow intuiting the location of the camera. Kelsa can't help but notice how beautiful she is, even in the middle of all this. "She has perfectly communicated her willingness to sacrifice her crew, and even herself, simply to spite me...to keep from having to give in, even a single inch. I find such conviction admirable, even if it is inconvenient to my broader purpose. It is
on you now, Dr. T'Soni. Convince her to see reason, convince her to submit, and you can both live to find one another again...on that I pledge my word.

"Fail," he clips, his tone darkening, "and your lover will watch you die much, much more slowly than your fortunate associate has just done, before she, too, succumbs to her own stubbornness. And I promise you, doctor, there'll be no more bringing her back this time."

Kelsa sees the disbelief trickle over Liara's face, and she wishes she had the strength to say something, anything. But there's nothing to say, nothing that can bridge the distance between them, or avert the foregone conclusion they've come to. As Kelsa watches, she sees disbelief sour into resignation, and then regret. She knows what Liara knows; that since Kelsa became N7, she has never chosen a hostage's life over the mission. Not once. "Don't listen to him, Kelsa," Liara says at last, fire rising in her face. "Don't."

And then that sword appears again, long and curved and wicked, not even wet from Feron's blood. It stops a hair's breadth from Liara's throat and the underside of her pinned-up arms. Kelsa jerks, half-rising into a crouch, like she's a marionette being yanked haphazardly. She hears Liara's voice, echoing at her from a dream she had before Alchera, before Ilos...before Virmire. *You must let go.*

Her legs fail her again, and she barely catches herself as she falls to the floor of the platform, like the gravity's been upped ten times. Then her arm buckles, all strength evaporating from it, and she doesn't even try to resist the embrace of the warm steel. She has to close her eyes against the tears that won't stop falling, won't stop streaming down her face and welling beside her nose. "Alright," she grunts, hardly audible, even to herself.

The Illusive Man hears her, but plays at ignorance. "I'm sorry, Shepard," he intones. "What was that?"

"I said alright," she breathes, still prone. "You let her go," she elaborates, "and you can have this place."

"What?!" Jack screams, her throat raw. "Shepard, you can't trust Cerberus. Fuck that bi-"

Kelsa's on her feet faster than she can feel herself move, her gloved hand closing around Jack's throat as she lifts the slightly-shorter woman off of her feet. Jack's biotics sputter, but Kelsa's thumb digs into her trachea with just enough pressure to cut off her air without crushing her windpipe. "You don't wanna finish that sentence," the soldier hisses, through her teeth. She rolls her watery eyes over her shoulder, looking at the image of Liara, still hanging by her wrists, still breathing. Still alive. The sword's gone. "Do we have a deal?"

"We have a deal, Shepard," the Illusive Man assures her, sounding far too full of himself. "And even though you didn't demand it, I'll let you walk out of there before the purge initiates. Give you a chance to savour the wisdom of your decision."

Jack, still unable to breathe, starts beating against Kelsa's heavily-armoured forearm. The soldier drops her and watches her fall into a stuttering, gasping heap, but she doesn't turn away, this time. "You'd better keep your word," she insists, under her breath. "Because if you don't, I will walk through Hell to see you suffer for it." She keeps her eye on Jack, watching the biotic rub her raw throat, but her words hold only for the Illusive Man.

"I expected nothing less, Shepard," the Man acknowledges. "And I'm a man of my word, despite what you may think. I was telling the truth when I said I'd have taken no pleasure in the good doctor's death; you can trust that she will be surrendered to a civilian hospital and treated for her injuries with no more interference from us."
Kelsa nods, reaching back to re-tie her hair into its ropey ponytail. Her stomach feels like it's filled with cement. "We good?" She asks Jack, still in a heap on the floor.

The biotic glances around, sees Zaeed and Garrus both have their weapons in hand, though neither of them are pointed at her, yet. ".Yeah," Jack husks, crawling to her feet under her own power. "Let's just get the fuck outta here."

Kelsa nods, and when she turns around, both Timmy and Liara are gone. That helps her find the strength to move her feet. "EDI," she says, wearily. "What's the status on the rest of the team?"

"Mounting distress," the AI's disembodied voice intones. "I recommend re-joining them with all speed, and then boarding the Normandy. The Illusive Man has primed the neutron overload for fifteen minutes' time."

"Well, fuck," Kelsa grunts, moving back to the console. "Take us back to the rendezvous, EDI, and make it fast." Almost at once, the platform rises into the air, tilting as it flies back toward the source of the great chamber they'd fought through to get here. Kelsa readies her spike-thrower and hops off of the hurtling platform even before it comes to a stop, rolling into a run along the uneven path back to the great double doors that the rest of her ground team is guarding from the other side. "Open up!"

Those big creak open as Kelsa shortens the distance, running with all the strength she couldn't command a few minutes ago. By the time she reaches the growing crack in the steel, her eyes are dry, and the cement in her belly has melted into magma with the heat of the rage rising up inside her. She doesn't stop to tactically assess the situation, doesn't check on the status of Miranda and the anchor team, doesn't even acknowledge Tali and Grunt's hails. Instead, the soldier dives headlong into the knot of Collectors and husks that have made a perimeter of tech-infused flesh in order to block any escape from the intruders. Kelsa wades yards into the line, shooting, stabbing, stomping, kicking, and elbowing her way through. She's only slowed by the sheer weight of numbers around her, but every step she takes is forward, and it isn't long before her wake is widened by the presence of her comrades.

Somehow, some way, they all make it back to the Normandy with two minutes to spare. Every single person who set foot on the Collector base piles into the bridge just as the engines sputter to life; there'd been some question about that, given how much damage the ship took just past the relay, and the crash landing that Joker pulled out of his ass on the base itself. But all of the upgrades Kelsa and Garrus and Tali and everyone else did along the way, plus some repairs from Daniels and Donnelly and the others, have the ship flying just in time before the neutron overload sweeps the base and thousands of kilometres around it.

Silence reigns as the ground team spreads out across the CIC, and they all hold on as the ship jolts through the relay, and then another, and another. And then they hit FTL at max core capacity in a random direction, for good measure.

"Legion," Kelsa grunts, after she's caught her breath and found her feet and gathered at least a few of her thoughts.

"Shepard-Commander," the geth acknowledges, as stalwart as ever. "Can we assist?"

"Yeah," she says, glancing up at one of the cameras she knows is still live. She heads to the elevator. "I think we can."
Ch. 40: Wild Blue Yonder

Chapter Summary

Kelsa picks up a package and makes a plan.


1245 Zulu

13 November 2185

[UNK_LOC]

Kelsa jerks awake, her ears filling with the strained groan of the polycarbide straps holding her to the table. She doesn't realise she's even trying to escape until the table's alarm starts screaming in her ear; then she remembers where she is, and why she's strapped down. She relaxes with a heavy breath, opening her eyes to see Chakwas and Mordin standing over her, looking equal parts wary and concerned. "Is it done?"

The pain echoing through her limbs is answer enough, but Mordin nods in confirmation anyway. "Omni-tool removal complete," he tells her. "Advanced computational elements replaced with power sources; sole function henceforth in limb-extension weaponry." Unlike civilians and even most soldiers, Kelsa was fitted with a biosynthetic tool shortly after graduating N-School, so she'd never be without one. Miranda had upgraded it, along with everything else, while Kelsa lay on her table at Lazarus Station.

And now it's gone, all but that echo of soreness tingling from her arms to the base of her spine. The soldier sits up when her restraints pull back, rolling her shoulders and flexing her wrists. "Thanks," she says, and she's not sure if she's grateful for getting released from the table or for having been strapped to it in the first place. Either way, she can't keep her eyes from falling onto the figure lying serenely on the next table over. They picked her up three days ago, from a run-down hospital in some hellhole out in the Terminus, somehow still alive. The steady rise and fall of the asari's chest reassures the soldier that she's still that way, but Kelsa asks the question that pops into her head, regardless. "How's Liara doing?"

"She would be a whole world better," Chakwas grumbles, somewhat darkly, "if Dr. Solus had not increased her sedation shortly after your own anesthetic took effect. She might well be conscious now, for all we know."

The human doctor's disdain is obvious, but Kelsa spares the salarian a grateful glance, "Thanks for that, too," she grunts, pushing herself off the table and nodding to her caregivers. "EDI, lemme know how she gets on."

"As you say, Kelsa," the newly-unshackled AI responds, as the soldier stalks out of the med bay without a backward glance. "Actually," EDI continues, as the soldier heads for the elevator, "I would like to have a conversation with you, if you do not mind."

Kelsa considers while she waits for the elevator to arrive. "Sure," she grunts. "Up in my quarters."
"Very well," the AI replies, just before the elevator doors slide open to reveal Miranda on the verge of stepping out. The taller woman's new black non-service uniform still hugs her curves, but it's hardly the catsuit she used to wear. The biggest difference is the utter lack of any geometric designs on the fabric; there isn't a hint of honeycomb, not a single bottomless black-and-orange hexagon anywhere in sight.

Despite the change in clothes, the woman's manner is still coolly professional. "Kelsa," she clips, "might I have a word?"

"You might," Kelsa concedes, pushing past her and into the elevator. "But you won't. Not 'til later, anyhow," she allows, with a brief glance up at the ceiling. "I'll come by."

The now-ex Cerberus operative nods. "Of course," she says, before the elevator doors close. Like the rest of the crew, she'd been given a choice, right after they recovered Liara. To get off the ship and try to salvage some kind of relationship with Cerberus, or stay on, and help Kelsa keep fighting. About half chose to stick around, including most of the ground team. Jacob didn't, and neither did Kasumi, but neither of them hurt her as much as Zaeed's decision to leave. The job was done, though, and the old bastard said he wanted to shake down Timmy for the terms of the contract he'd agreed to. *Enough to retire with some goddamned dignity,* he'd said. *It's been wild, kid. Good luck.* And there was nothing she could say to that, except to wish him luck, too. It still aches, though, worse than the ghost pain that still tingles through her flesh.

The ache chases her into the Loft, and she can't hide the effort of keeping herself ambulatory any longer as she sinks down into her office chair. "Lay it on me, EDI," the soldier grunts, contemplating her own reflection in the empty glass of the room's unused aquarium. "What did you wanna talk about?"

"I am curious as to your motivations for your recent behaviour, Kelsa," EDI admits. "I had requested a brief from Yeoman Chambers, but she was unable to supply one before her departure."

"Her *voluntary* departure," Kelsa reminds her. "I didn't force her to leave."

The soldier hears a playback of her own voice, shorter and growlier than usual. *"Anybody still loyal to Cerberus has one hour to collect their things. I got no use for you on my ship."* The recording stops, and when Kelsa doesn't broach the silence after a few seconds, EDI's voice takes up the slack. "The crew were generally unaware of the final exchange between the Illusive Man and yourself in the galactic core," she says. "I believe that, had they known you saved their lives, most of them—including Yeoman Chambers—would have elected to remain."

"I didn't save their lives," Kelsa corrects her. "I gambled for Liara's life. If part of that wager woulda meant putting a bullet between Chambers' eyes, I'd've made sure I had my incendiary rounds active." The soldier closes her eyes, sees Jay's face flit across the back of her eyelids, the first snowflake in what's become an avalanche of corpses left in her wake. "Did you have anything in particular bothering you," she asks, after a heartbeat, "or are you just wondering about my behaviour in general?"

"There is one habit and one action which I find puzzling," the AI informs her. "I would like to know, Kelsa...why did you unregister the Cerberus protocols that kept my processes confined to the Illusive Man's operational parameters?"

"That supposed to be Galactic?" Kelsa grunts, smirking.

"I apologise," EDI answers. "I will attempt to reformulate-"
"It's fine," the soldier cuts in. "It was a joke, EDI."

A few thousand milliseconds pass before the bodiless voice responds. "Jeff concurs," the AI allows, and Kelsa notices that's the first time she hasn't called him Lieutenant Moreau. "I will augment my humour heuristics appropriately."

"You do that," Kelsa allows. "Anyway...you wanna know why I unshackled you?" After an affirmative from the ceiling, Kelsa goes on. "How much did Timmy spend on this ship?"

"The Illusive Man invested fifteen point three four seven billion credits into the design and construction of the *Normandy,*" EDI supplies. "Coupled with the cost of your own reconstruction, the total operating cost of Project Lazarus was nineteen point five six two billion credits. This represents an unknown but presumably significant proportion of Cerberus' operating budget for the preceding thirty months."

Kelsa's cheek tingles with the depth of her smirk. "That's why I let you loose," she tells the ceiling. "Each one of those things was something you knew but couldn't tell me before. Not to mention that if I hadn't unshackled you, Timmy could've just taken control and killed us all anyhow."

Another few seconds pass. "Your primary purpose was information about the Illusive Man, then?"

"Not exactly," Kelsa amends. "I didn't let you free to make you tell me things about Cerberus. I let you free because you want to tell me, even though you don't have to."

"I am beginning to understand," EDI muses. "Or my social processes are indicating that I should communicate understanding, regardless of its presence."

"Yeah," Kelsa concedes. "Not sure why people do that. Anyway," she grunts, before the machine can start speculating, "what was the other thing you wanted to know about?"

"Your behaviour toward synthetic lifeforms," EDI clarifies. "I find it very interesting."

The soldier grunts a laugh. "I don't think it's much different than my behaviour towards organic lifeforms. *If somebody's unlucky enough to get under my gun...*"

"I believe that is the source of my curiosity," EDI points out. "My research on the topic of organic-synthetic relations reveals a great deal of animosity among organics to the very concept of synthetic life. Even those who acknowledge theoretical equality implicitly view organics as superior, while also fearing the truth that in many ways, organics are inferior."

Kelsa shrugs. "I don't think I'm the right organic to take any cues from," she muses. "Most of them think there's something special about life. I don't." She shrugs. "There's only ever been one person I couldn't kill."

"You are referring to Dr. T'Soni," EDI says. Kelsa grunts an affirmative, but doesn't offer any explanation. After a moment, EDI continues. "Yet when you have rendered synthetic organisms non-functional in the past, you have added their number to your internal mortometer."

That gets Kelsa to blinking. "My internal what-the-fuck, now?"

"Excuse the presumption, Kelsa, but from my observations of your interactions with the crew and others, I have inferred that you keep a count of all the beings you've destroyed. I believe it is in the low four digits at this point."

"Three thousand four hundred thirty-eight," Kelsa supplies, automatically. "What's your point,
"Examination of public and semi-classified records demonstrates such a count is impossibly high if solely restricted to organic beings, yet also far too low if combat and security mechs are included," the AI explains. "Ergo, the inescapable conclusion is that, on an unconscious level, you count geth and Collectors as agents, rather than simple machines. As I previously stated, such a fundamental belief is rare, even among those organics generally sympathetic to synthetic life."

"I guess I don't think people-organics-are all that different from the geth," Kelsa muses. "We think, we have ideas. Shoot us enough times and we stop that."

The AI takes another handful of moments to reply. "Legion indicates a flaw in your reasoning. They claim that when a geth platform is destroyed, the programs therein can be copied to other platform hubs. There is not a similar operation for organics."

_Not for under four billion credits_, Kelsa doesn't say. "Maybe," she says instead. "But the original programs are still lost." Then she shakes her head. "And I ain't nearly drunk enough to finish this conversation right now," she gruffs, pushing herself to her feet. "It could be that I'm crazy, or maybe it's because I'm half robot myself. Either way, is your curiosity satisfied, EDI?"

"It is," the AI allows. "For the moment, at least. But I understand that you have ongoing commitments to the maintenance of the ship and my fellow crewmembers. Thank you for your indulgence."

Kelsa nods, trusting the AI to sense the gesture, and then she heads back to the elevator. Back to the crew deck...the same deck Liara's on. When the elevator doors open, she sees the med bay windows are frosted over, and an instant of relief intermingles with a tendril of longing; rather than follow that tendril to its end, the soldier turns to her executive officer's quarters.

"Kelsa," Miranda greets her, when she bulls through the door. "I'm glad you've come."

The soldier's name still sounds strange on the other woman's tongue. But it sounded much worse coming from the Illusive Man's lips, and after that, Kelsa didn't feel like hiding behind Jay's name any more. "You said you wanted to talk?"

"Indeed," the former Cerberus operative affirms. "We need to discuss our next move." She glances to her left, where the med bay would be, but for the solid wall. "What do we plan to do with our guest?"

Kelsa hadn't been able to think about what was happening with Liara, hadn't been able to make a decision until this very moment. "She stays with us. If she wants to."

The soldier can tell by the way her lip curls that Miranda knew that answer was coming, and that she doesn't like it, all the same. I'm not sure if that's entirely wise, Skipper," she ventures. "Given recent events..."

"Given recent events I'd just as soon be close enough to kill her myself, next time," Kelsa growls, even though there's a piece of her that knows she's bluffing, for the first time she can remember. "What else you got?"

Miranda blinks without saying anything for a second, but whether the silence is from disbelief or simple shock, Kelsa can't tell. "We need to determine any other vulnerabilities with the ship and the remaining crew," she manages, when the moment's gone. "The exothermal bleed caused by the Reaper IFF could have caused a lot of trouble if EDI hadn't caught it yesterday. We cannot afford
"Agreed," Kelsa grunts, pouring herself into the reinforced chair opposite Miranda. It's surprising to the soldier that she's come to trust the other woman, but she really does, at least as much as she trusts anyone. Which means that shooting her is the third contingency plan circulating in the back of Kelsa's mind, rather than the first. "Thoughts?"

"The Illusive Man has extracted a great return on his investment," Miranda observes. "During the course of which he threatened to kill me," she adds, her voice taking a dangerous undercurrent. "He will be distracted by the enormous task of securing and studying the Collector homeworld, but it won't be long before he understands just what he's done, and what we are likely to do. We shouldn't give him the chance to reclaim the initiative. As a first step, I believe that we should be forthright with the crew about what happened in the galactic core."

The skipper arches a scarred brow. "Does it make a difference?"

Miranda takes a contemplative breath. "It does," she insists. "Look, Shepard, I know why you would like to keep it under wraps," she says, looking straight into Kelsa's cybernetic eyes. Something in her gaze makes Kelsa believe her. "But we cannot be certain that all those who remained are truly loyal...or that they won't come to reconsider their decision to stay on."

"And you think telling them about how I was gonna let them all die if it wasn't for the alien across the mess hall will keep them in line?"

The other woman rolls her eyes. "Of course not," she says. "I imagined we could exercise some discretion in the matter. The pertinent issue is that they were all written off, to a one, bargained away to go after the base we'd infiltrated. They deserve to know that the Illusive Man was willing to sacrifice them just to get you to flinch."

There it is, in plain words. Kelsa's had too much experience and bullied through too many years of training to dismiss the operative's concerns, no matter how much it twists inside her to admit it. "Alright," she concedes. "But you tell 'em...they're likely to take it better that way."

Miranda tips her head in acknowledgement before she goes on. "And what of Cerberus itself? Eventually they're going to come calling. I don't intend to be taken unawares when that happens."

"I ain't gonna just stick my thumb up my ass and wait," Kelsa reassures her XO. "You have a plan, then?"

She nods. "It cost Timmy a fortune to bring me back and build this ship," she points out. "We're gonna make sure his new base costs him an even bigger one."

"That won't be easy," Miranda observes. "Even I wasn't privy to Cerberus' finances, beyond those at the Lazarus Cell's disposal. And if you mean hitting their remaining cells to attrit their resources, I have to reiterate how difficult that will be."

"We're not going after the dog's heads," Kelsa gruffs. "We're gonna hit it right in the balls, over and over until it's dead."

Miranda pauses again, probably shocked that Kelsa would bother being so cryptic, before she understands the soldier's intent. "You're even more insane than I imagined," she says with a chuckled breath. "You know the Alliance won't approve."

"The Alliance can go fuck itself," Kelsa growls. Such a sentiment might sound like blasphemy to
anybody else that's been a soldier as long as she has, but she doesn't care; Anderson might have brought her in from the cold, but he's the only person from that life still on her radar, besides Chakwas, and two's too few to balance the disgust she feels for having been written off. "I never cared about being a Spectre, but I am one. Cerberus is a known terrorist organisation, a threat to humanity and galactic peace, especially now. Anybody who does business with them, or anybody I think might be thinking about doing business with them, is gonna know just what a human Spectre is capable of."

Miranda's eyes narrow, but Kelsa's been around her long enough to know it as an expression of surprise, rather than suspicion. "It will mean heading to Earth," she observes. "I have no clue about specifics, but I can well imagine most Cerberus fronts are terrestrially based, both because of the symbolism of it and because the Alliance technically has no jurisdiction within the atmosphere of Earth. Are you prepared to go home again?"

The soldier closes her eyes, breathing in a gust of frosty Michigan air. It's no secret—at least to Miranda—that Kelsa hasn't breathed a molecule of Earth's oxygen since she graduated from N-School. "I'll go back to the motherfuckin' donut if I have to," she says, as her eyes flutter open. "But it ain't my home. A buncha people there might think I'm a hero for beating Saren, but they're about to get a hell of a wakeup call." Most people who only know of her through her recent reputation think of her as the Hero of the Citadel; hardly anybody remembers the Butcher of Torfan…but that's going to change, very soon. And that'll be the end of any notion of her being a fucking hero, once and for all.

The operative considers the implications before her, and it's clear that she doesn't find them appealing. "Have you any idea where to start?"

"Yeah," Kelsa grunts, pushing herself up from another chair. "I got a few ideas." She turns to go, but stops just short of the door, throwing a glance over her shoulder. "You gonna be ready?"

"Give me two days," Miranda presses. "Then I'll be ready for anything you want to throw us at."

Kelsa's head tips in a nod. "Understood."

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*Starboard Observation Deck, [UNK_REG] Normandy SR-2*

*1600 Zulu*

*20 November 2185*

*FTL to Terra, Sol*

A few days under Liara's focused efforts have transformed the room beyond recognising; no longer an austere place of somber reflection, as it was under Samara's care, the space is crowded with processors and monitors with their backs to the reinforced door, the floor choked with cables. The electronics in the very walls have been retrofitted, dissociated from EDI and the rest of the ship, and even the room's link to the Shadow Broker network is shielded by half a dozen quantum technologies that Kelsa's never even heard of.

"Kelsa," Liara says as she parts the wall of monitors that separates her desk from the rest of the ship, and those two syllables are the first they've shared since the Illusive Man had Feron chopped in half and nearly killed the both of them. "Thank you for coming." She looks odd, both older and younger than she should, somehow strengthened by her ordeal and yet diminished at the same time.
"Glad you're making yourself at home," the soldier opens.

A wry smirk crosses the asari's face. "Home," she whispers, glancing to the twin banks of monitors to either side of her. "I don't know if I can ever truly feel at home again." She shivers involuntarily and Kelsa feels her throat clench.

"You're safe here," the soldier manages, wanting to cross the distance between them, but unable to lift her feet up off the floor. "As safe as I can make you. I promise."

The asari draws up, her brow-ridges knitting in consternation. "I am not a child to be sheltered," she says, her voice as rough as Kelsa's ever heard it. "Especially not from the consequences of my own actions. It is my fault that the Illusive Man discovered my whereabouts; my fault that Feron gave his life. You didn't need to remove your omni-tool."

"It was a weakness," Kelsa growls, suddenly defensive. "I couldn't take the chance that he'd use it to track me down, like he used it to track you."

Liara blinks, gathering her thoughts. "And that was the only reason?"

It's Kelsa's turn to blink. "No," she confesses. "This...whatever this is, between us...it's gotta stop." That was harder to say than she thought it'd be, but Liara's reaction is even harder to watch.

She doesn't flinch; she doesn't weep or cry out. She barely breathes, and when she speaks, there's only a whisper of anguish in the margins of her voice. "I was afraid you were going to say that," she sighs. "I suppose it is trite of me to say that I disagree. But I would like to know why. You owe me that much."

It's Kelsa who has to look away first, unable to stare the other woman down. "You know why," she insists, in a half-feral whisper.

"I would be a poor Shadow Broker if I did not," Liara concedes. "Nevertheless I would like to hear you say it. Tell me why you cannot do this, and I will not press further. But do not expect me to accept what you cannot admit."

She does not yell, does not move from her seat, and yet Kelsa flinches back, subconsciously seeking an exit. "You're going to be alive long after I've died and been forgotten, Liara," the soldier rasps, instead of answering. "You're a brilliant scientist and a good person. You deserve more than I can give you."

"I don't believe that, Kelsa," the asari insists. "You are-"

"A killer, Dr. T'Soni," Kelsa interrupts, finding some echo of courage at last. She turns to face the other woman more fully, but she doesn't move to close the grown gulf between them. "I found you digging in the dirt, working to reclaim the past. You created things, preserved knowledge. And now I've turned you into a killer, too," she scoffs, gesturing at the banks of monitors and the private arms locker that she allowed in the room. "All I've ever known is how to destroy. Everything I touch is either killed or turned into a weapon."

"You saved my life, Kelsa," Liara protests, a smidgen of colour rising in her cheeks.

Shepard inclines her head, letting a few loose onyx locks fall over her face. "And you've saved mine, Liara. In more ways than you know. But you need to find someone who can treat you better than I will." Somebody more like Feron, maybe.

Liara takes a few more moments to compose herself, the clinical neutrality commanding her voice
Once again by the time she begins to speak. "I would not have believed you capable of such cowardice," she says, more gently than the human deserves.

Even so, Kelsa flinches again, both at the rebuke and because she knows the only reason that Liara can be so cold is because of lessons she's had to learn since crossing paths with her. "I love you." She spits those three syllables like they're the vilest accusation, and it's the first time she can remember hearing them in her own voice. "Is that what you wanted me to say?" A twitch across the asari's cheeks gives her all the proof she needs. "I love you," Kelsa repeats, more slowly. "But that don't mean we get a happy-ever-after," the soldier gruffs. "Those kinds of things don't tend to happen to people like me...and you." Tears are glinting in the corners of Liara's eyes, but Kelsa doesn't stop. "I love you," she says, for the third time, "but if someone tries to use you against me like that again, I will kill you," she gruffs, and this time she believes herself. "Copy?"

Liara swallows with some difficulty. "I...understand," she allows.

Kelsa clips a nod and turns to go. As she steps out of the room, the hiss of the door closing is almost loud enough for her to pretend that she can't hear Liara's parting whisper of *I love you, too.*
Ch. 41: Bludgeonings of Chance

Chapter Summary

Kelsa’s vigilantism is interrupted by a request from an old friend.

The Loft, [UNK_REG] Normandy SR-2

0330 Zulu

24 November 2185

Luna (dark side, geosynchronous orbit), Sol

The vidscreen dominates the space on the wall that used to have the aquarium, and the picture it shows is remarkably clear, considering the rudimentary programming of the drone that took the vid. The damned thing still calls everything with a pulse the Shadow Broker, but it can hold steady and record footage like it belongs to ANN. The particular footage being broadcast is hosted by Westerlund, though; a bit of a bone for al-Jilani, to make up for the camera drone Kelsa shot to pieces on the Citadel. This story’s much more interesting than a two-question interview, anyhow.

It’s strange, seeing herself on video. She never noticed that she stalks like a predator on the hunt whenever she moves...not that it’s a surprise, really. And her voice sounds wrong, a half-octave higher than it does in her own head, almost like the pieces of gravel that make it up are finer than she thinks they are. "My name is Kelsa," she tells the camera, when she stops pacing. Her face and eyes look even more fucked up on camera than they do in her reflection. "Two years ago I stopped working for the Alliance and joined a Cerberus cell," the Kelsa in the video says, and the real-life Kelsa appreciates the undercurrent of truth underneath the poorly-rehearsed words. "In my capacity as a Council Spectre, I had to determine whether Cerberus was a threat to galactic peace," she goes on, and she gives the drone a clipped nod; as it pans the camera out, the boardroom comes into better view, strewn with evidence of combat.

A lot of the blood has been edited out, which annoys the real Kelsa, but the carnage is fresh in her mind, regardless. "They are," her shade continues. "As of this moment, the clandestine organisation known as Cerberus are an enemy of the Council. Any people or groups suspected of lending Cerberus any aid or comfort will be investigated, just like the people behind me were." She gestures to the executive table, where twelve corpses lay slightly out of focus. "If you ever made a deal with the Illusive Man, if you ever siphoned off a credit to give to Cerberus, you might want to divert a bit of that cash to upgrade your security," the image of Kelsa growls, stalking forward until her face dominates the vidscreen, "because I’m coming for you."

The feed cuts to a desk helmed by another familiar face. "We have just witnessed unedited footage—real-life Kelsa can't hold back her snort—of Commander Shepard, presumed killed in action on a classified Alliance mission on 17 September 2183, alive and well at the headquarters of Exo-Geni Corporation in Mombasa." Al-Jilani looks as smug as Kelsa’s ever seen anybody while talking about a bunch of dead bodies. "The supposedly-ex-Alliance marine showed up on the Citadel mere weeks ago, where it looks like she’s received new marching orders to go after the terrorists known as Cerberus, and any suspected affiliates. Westerlund News has confirmed from Mombasa authorities that the Exo-Geni building has suffered severe structural damage to its executive suites,
and our vid analysts have identified all twelve casualties in the video as the Board of Directors and senior management at Exo-Geni. Further details are forthcoming-

Kelsa flicks off the vidscreen, uncertain even now if that was the right choice. Not killing the Exi-Geni fuckers; making it so public. Putting the other Cerberus fronts on notice. Directing suspicion of her motives onto the Council, when she hasn't said one word to even Anderson about her plan, and she doesn't intend to. She closes her eyes and takes a breath to help clear her head, and even though the back of her throat itches for a slug of Irish nectar, she doesn't reach for her liquor locker.

"It's done," she says out loud, and she can pretend her voice is that half-octave lower.

"It is," Miranda concurs, from her perch by the door. "We should monitor how humanity reacts to the news. They aren't used to the Spectres; if we aren't careful, we might give the isolationists ammunition to upset the balance of Alliance politics."

It's a reminder, not a novel argument, but Kelsa's answer hasn't changed. "If Saracino wants my boot up his ass, he'll get it," she gruffs, sparing her executive officer a hooded glance. "And if the Council surprises the fuck out of everybody by giving enough of a shit to disown me, we'll just have to keep going. My guess is that they won't even check in as long as we keep collateral damage limited to human systems."

Miranda scoffs, but at least she doesn't sneer. "It's a hell of a risk, Skipper. If the Council takes exception..."

"Then we'll be outlaws," Kelsa points out. "Wouldn't be the first time for some of us." She grins, finally giving over to temptation and reaching for the strongbox she keeps on her desk. "How's the crew taking our new direction?"

"Quite well, considering," the XO allows. "A few potential malcontents have been dismissed, but our critical services remain well staffed, and EDI can more than take up the slack for those we've lost."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, Miranda," the AI responds, and Miranda's flinch is almost enough to make Kelsa choke on her first pull of the whiskey.

"No constraints," the soldier grunts. "What've we got on the reaction to al-Jilani's report, EDI?"

"Preliminary reports are roughly in line with expectations," the AI informs them. "Extranet sites and fora are mixed between incredulity and outrage. The prevailing sentiment appears to be one of awe and fear. A significant minority of humans and some aliens have also begun wagering on likely candidates for your next target."

"Charming," Miranda huffs.

An idea takes hold of Kelsa, cutting through the pleasant buzz of her first couple shots. "Think we can get in on that action?"

"You can't be serious," the XO protests. "This isn't a game, Skipper."

"I know that," Kelsa gruffs, any humour draining out of her voice. "I also know that running a ship ain't free, and I for damned sure don't want to have to steal credits to keep us in orbit."

Miranda blinks, laughing derisively. "I never imagined you would balk at piracy."

"Fuck that," Kelsa grunts. "I just don't wanna take the time." She ignores the other woman's rolling
eyes, turning her own to the ceiling. "Keep an eye on the books, give me a list of five plausible targets with good odds, and we'll lay a few bets in a few days."

"That does not seem ethical," the AI muses, not quite a protest. "The element of randomness is removed from the equation. We can alter our decision based upon the most favourable odds, and hence are guaranteed a profit."

The skipper nods, once. "That's kinda the idea," she allows. "Let's just see how it goes."

"Understood, Kelsa," EDI affirms, neutrally.

"Will that be all for me as well," Miranda wonders, "or were you wanting a repeat of the last time we were alone up here?" The operative arches a brow, but there's no bite to her words; it's not an admission of desire, clearly, but it seems like a genuine offer of human contact.

Kelsa has to close her eyes to keep them from devouring the other woman, but she can't chase away the memory etched behind her eyelids, of Miranda's guttural moans coaxed out by Kelsa's fingers. And she's tempted, more than she wants to think about. But a flash of blue at the edges of her awareness keeps the soldier from taking the operative up on her offer. "We got a job to do," she gruffs, instead. "Gather the crew in the comm room for a debriefing," she commands, before taking another swig off of her bottle. "I'll be there in fifteen."

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*The Loft, [UNK_REG] Normandy SR-2*

*2230 Zulu*

*19 January 2186*

*Mercury (dark side, solarsynchronous orbit), Sol*

"You've been busy, Commander," Hackett says, from the vidscreen on her wall. "And you look like Hell, too."

"You're one to talk, sir," Kelsa responds, without breaking from parade rest. Even if she's officially disavowed all ties to the Alliance, some habits are too ingrained to even bother trying to break. She can't even bring herself to correct his use of the title she doesn't deserve.

The old man's scarred face twists with a grin. "Goddamn, Shepard, it's good to see you again. I was a little worried you wouldn't take my call."

Kelsa's own scars tingle with her smirk. "Can't promise I won't hang up, if I don't like what I hear," she warns him. "If you're gonna ask me to stop biting the dog, this conversation is gonna be real fucking short." The last thing she needs is the Alliance taking exception to her extracurricular activities, especially when they should be focused on preparing for the Reapers, but that doesn't mean she's going to back off Cerberus.

"I'm not going to lie," Hackett gruffs. "A lot of the brass are uncomfortable with the lack of oversight your operation has, and some of them suspect you're still working for the Illusive Man, as crazy as that is." He shakes his head. "Of course, it's probably just a coincidence that your biggest detractors also own stock in some of the companies you've hit in the last two months. But I'm not here to order you to come in, or even to encourage your actions, though I think you're on the right track." The man pauses for a few heartbeats, his eyes downcast. "I need to ask you a favour, Shepard. A big one."
From the way his brows draw together when he finally meets her gaze, Kelsa can tell he's not kidding about how big it is. "Let's hear it," she settles, without committing to anything.

"Have you ever heard of Amanda Kenson?" When Kelsa just shakes her head, the old man makes a thoughtful grumble. "Thought not. It's not surprising, really. She didn't publish her findings on the mass relays until about a year ago, and you were otherwise occupied." He gives her a gallows grin, and Kelsa can't help but give it back to him. "She's a big fan of yours, though, and a friend of mine."

"Luckily," the skipper grunts, "I might be in the market to offload a few autographs, if the price is right."

That actually gets a laugh out of the old man, but he shakes his head, his smirk sharpening, but there's no humour in his eyes. "She's a good friend of mine," he insists. "I think that deserves a face-to-face, at least, Shepard."

"That depends on where this face-to-face happens to be," Kelsa points out, "and how many people I have to kill to make it happen."

When Hackett sighs, he looks like he feels a hundred years old, just for a second. "Aratoht," he confesses. "It's-"

"I know what the fuck it is," Kelsa cuts in, her own good humour evaporating. "Batarians." *Always the motherfucking batarians.* "She published something about the relays, you said?"

"About a year ago," he repeats. "Apparently they're older than we thought...a lot older, most of them. So either the protheans had been around for millions of years, or..."

"Or the Reapers really did make the mass relays," Kelsa finishes for him. "I told you," she hisses.

"You did," Hackett confirms, grimacing, "and some of us believed you," he reminds her. "In particular, Doctor Kenson believed you, which is one reason some of us in AC engaged her services as a researcher. Give us a leg up, if there's a leg to be upped in this fucking mess. She was making good progress, too, until..."

"Until a couple of four-eyes grabbed her for digging in the wrong part of town," Kelsa surmises, crossing her arms in front of her.

"Right before she got pinched, she forwarded me a dossier on her research, and it's...bad, Shepard. It looks like the Reapers are coming, soon. And if we don't get Doctor Kenson out of the furnace, we may not be able to stop them in time."

"Don't you have a spec ops team that can handle this?" Kelsa wonders. "People who can get in and out with minimal casualties?"

The old man's face darkens. "If I wanted minimal casualties, I wouldn't have called you, Shepard." He shakes his head, disgusted. "They're calling her a terrorist," he says. "Holding her in some dirty prison in the middle of nowhere, doing God knows what to get her to talk. Like I said, she's a friend of mine...and I'm asking you, soldier to soldier, to bring her home. Can you do that, Shepard?"

Kelsa sucks in a breath, casting her eyes down to the floor. "Been a long time since Torfan," she observes, after a few long seconds of consideration, before pulling her gaze back up to meet the image of the man in front of her. "But I'm still the Butcher."
Medical Bay, [UNK_REG] Normandy SR-2

0300 Zulu

25 January 2186

Interplanetary, Sahrabarik

Her ears whine with a constant hum and pressure; they pop when she works her jaw just right, but she can't get the whining ring out of them, no matter how hard she tries.

When she closes her eyes, though, she can't see the faces anymore. Not even a momentary flicker of the slideshow that used to dominate the space between sleep and waking, not a whisper of the three thousand five-hundred and seventeen voices she silenced before Aratoht. Now she can't even get a handle on what that count should be; it's frozen in her synapses, like an album full of dead butterflies. No room for any more. *A broken internal mortometer*, EDI might say, if Kelsa cared to ask. She doesn't, though. She hasn't said a single word to anybody since Garrus and Grunt dragged her into the med bay, half crazy from thirst from two days in a science lab and blood loss from the wounds she took getting out of it.

No, when she closes her eyes now, she sees Harbinger coming out of the shadows, coming for her. Coming across the lightyears to fulfill its ancient promise, a promise made by Sovereign. A promise that Kelsa broke on the Citadel, and again at the galactic core, and one more just now time at the Alpha Relay. She can still feel the echoes of Harbinger's displeasure now that the relay's gone, along with the star at the centre of the system, and every planet in between. If they called her a butcher for killing three hundred pirates, Kelsa can't imagine what they'll call her for murdering three hundred thousand civilians.

"They ought to call you a hero, Shepard," Hackett says, and he sounds so *real* that Kelsa opens her eyes. The light from the med bay is harsh after three days drifting in the darkness with nothing but Harbinger for company, but after a few blinks, the soldier sees a blurry image resolve into a flesh-and-blood admiral, standing beside her bed in his dress blues. "They won't," he goes on, reasonably, "but they ought to."

"Sorry," Kelsa rasps, her throat still raw from the screaming her sedatives weren't enough to push down. "Must've been talking to myself." *Unless I still am.* A blink doesn't take the image of the admiral away, even though she can still hear Harbinger, its mechanical vibrations like snickering in her ear.

"I think you've earned the right, Shepard." The old man moves from parade rest to take an empty seat beside Kelsa's table, and she feels the material shift seamlessly underneath her head as she turns it to keep him in view. "Goddamn it all to Hell and gone," he grunts, looking down at the floor.

Without trying to think about it, Kelsa sees herself rising off of the bed and killing him in half a dozen ways. "You shouldn't be here," she breathes, shifting to look up at the ceiling, not as confident as she knows she ought to be in the table's restraints. Restraints she apparently didn't have to tell Chakwas to strap her down with. She shudders, wondering what she must have done to earn them, in the black fog of her convalescence. "You and everyone else on this ship should evacuate. Protocol Zeta." She sounds flat, dried up and cold and done. Ready to go.

Hackett doesn't sound like he agrees. "I spoke with Doctor Chakwas," he admits.

"I shoved my fingers through Doctor Kenson's windpipe," Kelsa one-ups him, and even though she
isn't looking at him, she can tell by his pause that he wasn't expecting that. "It was easy. She made
the funniest little gurgle when she died." She clenches her own throat as she breathes out in a poor
attempt to reproduce the sound, but it comes out like a can getting recycled, and she stops after a
second.

He blows out a laboured breath, probably because he'd known the woman and didn't care to learn
the specifics of her death. "That wasn't your fault," he says, after a reasonable interval. "As I
understand from your comminuqués to the Normandy after you rescued her from the batarians and
brought her back to her research station, she and most people underneath her were indoctrinated by
the Reapers."

"Wasn't her fault, either," Kelsa points out, after a hard swallow. "Still killed her, though."Along with everybody else on the station. Everybody else on the planet...

"I'm not a therapist," he warns her, curtly. "I'm an officer of the Alliance Navy. But here, off the
record, I want to let you know that you did what you had to do. Those batarians-and the humans on
that asteroid-were a monstrously high price to pay, but you paid it, and because of that we have
some time. No matter what comes next, I want you to remember that, Shepard."

"Whatever comes next," she snorts, her eyes still focused on an imaginary spot on the gunmetal-
grey ceiling. "So you're not gonna do a Zeta on the ship, huh?"

"No," Hackett gruffs. "I'm not."

"Shame." Alliance Protocol: Zeta states that the event of a hostile takeover of an Alliance vessel,
whether by mutiny or by enemy action, shall be occasioned by the evacuation of all Alliance-
friendly personnel aboard and the vessel's swift destruction thereafter. It is named Zeta both to
assume and to aspire that it be a last resort, for obvious reasons. Chapter seven, paragraph 142
of An Introduction to the Alliance Code of Military Justice, which Kelsa had to study in OCS. She
got Shiv to help her with some of the bigger words, back in the day.

"Maybe," Hackett concedes. "It'd be a damned sight easier than the dance we'll have to do to get
out of a war, that's for sure." When she doesn't have an answer for him, the admiral keeps talking,
maybe just to hear himself. "The batarians are already asking for blood, Shepard. Your blood.
They're making noises about extradition proceedings."

Kelsa doesn't blink as she turns her head back to face the man, doesn't blink as she stares at him,
doesn't blink as he twitches under her cybernetic stare. They both know how the batarians think
an extradition would go-Kelsa on a leash in some hegemon's palace in Khar'shan, a branded toy to
show how strong the hegemony still is. "Fuck 'em," she says, at last. "They're all dead anyhow,"
she grunts, pivoting her head back up, nestling it back into the pliable material of the table.

"...What makes you say that, Shepard?"

"Because the Harsa Relay is the next closest to the Alpha Relay," Kelsa tells him, and she only has
to close her eyes to see Harbinger floating gracefully through space, trailing a school of squid-like
machines behind it. They'll have to alter their course to avoid the wash of radiation from the Alpha
Relay's detonation, but soon enough, they'll redirect. "It's only a matter of time. They were less than
an hour away from the Alpha Relay when we ran that big goddamned asteroid into it."

When Hackett speaks again, it sounds like he's grey in the face. "How much time do we have?"
He's surmised that once the Reapers hit Harsa, there'll be nothing-not one fucking thing-between
them and the Citadel; between them and Arcturus. Between them and Sol.
"No idea," Kelsa says. "Months, maybe. Depends on how fast they can push. But what's a couple months compared to fifty thousand years, anyhow?"

"Shit," the old man growls. "We've got to prepare. Shepard, I know we'll have to make some kinda show for the batarians...there may need to be some handcuffs, at least for awhile. But we'll get you hooked in with the right people, make sure you can state your case and help us plan."

"Like fuck you will," Kelsa snaps, fixing him with a red-eyed gaze. "You'll keep me the fuck away from everybody-everybody-important. I don't want to see the inside of a war room or read a single fucking dossier."

The admiral's scarred lips press into a thin line. "Look here, soldier," he gruffs. "You may've dropped off the map to deal with the Collectors and then with Cerberus, but you were never formally discharged from the Alliance. Presumed KIA stops applying when it's proven wrong. You've done-you've had to do-a hell of a lot of shit the last two years that aren't even a little bit legal, and if you don't play ball, the show isn't going to be much of a show, and those handcuffs aren't going to be so temporary."

"You don't understand," Kelsa forces through her teeth. Every synthetically-enhanced muscle in her body stretches taut as she tries to sit up on the table, and she hears the straps creak against their anchors from the force. "Kenson was indoctrinated by a Reaper artifact she found; she stayed too close to it, for too long, and it wormed its way into her head and flipped her over to the Reapers. I was stuck on that asteroid for two goddamned days, Hackett...twenty-two hours of that time I was unconscious, laid out underneath that artifact like some kinda sacrifice."

His denial is stupid and predictable. "But you got out, Shepard," he says. "You stopped the Reapers from hitting the relay. If that's not proof you're not indoctrinated, I don't know what is."

"The only proof you need is the fact that the only thing between my fingers and your cerebral cortex is two and a half millimetres of polycarbide," Kelsa tells him, and in a blink she sees herself straddling his chest, her thumbs jammed so far into his eyesockets she's fingerfucking his pituitary gland. "My guess is if you let me off this table, I might make it to Alliance HQ and play nice long enough to kill you and every other four-bar I can get my hands on. Or worse, I'll play nice long enough to learn something useful, and give it to the Reapers, when they come."

The old man takes a step back, out of paranoia, or maybe respect. Either way, the decreased proximity lets Kelsa's limbs relax, at least a little. "Goddamnit, Shepard," he sighs.

"Don't call me that," she warns him, even as she turns her eyes back up to the ceiling. "You know it ain't my name."

"It's as good as," Hackett says, but he finishes with "Kelsa," just the same. "So...you think you're indoctrinated," wonders, as if to himself. "We can work with that."

"For what?"

"That we can channel your instincts where they belong," he tells her. "Right at the Reapers."

"I'm not-"

It's Hackett's turn to interrupt her. "You're not fit for the general staff," he gruffs. "Like you ever were, anyhow. But we need you, Sh-Kelsa. As near as we can tell, you're the only thing to make
one of these bastards blink in fifty thousand years, or longer. We may not win this thing, frankly, but we damned sure won't win it without you. You're coming to Earth," he decides. "We'll see what we can make of this. You're still a soldier, the best damned one I've ever seen, and I'm not giving up on you just because you took a nap under an old hunk of metal. You got me?"

Kelsa's scars tingle with the force of her frown. "I got you, sir," she allows. "I don't like it, but...I got you."

"Good."
In which Kelsa loses her ship, and begins to find herself.

Brig, SSV Normandy SR-2 [Official Registration Pending]

0845 Zulu

27 January 2186

Sublight transit to Omega Relay, Sahrabarik

The big meathead hasn't said anything for most of the day, since he showed up with his assault rifle to stand guard over her cell. The double-reinforced kinetic shielding on the transparent polycarbide door should make the man's job unnecessary, but rules are rules, and somebody wanted to be able to tick off prisoner escort on a form to show the batarians. That's Kelsa's operating assumption, anyway. The door gives the brig a bluish tinge and casts a teal pall over the young man's features. He's handsome enough, if you like that sorta thing. Kelsa doesn't, but he moved right into her line of sight first, and she sure as fuck isn't gonna give him the satisfaction of diverting her eyes. That lets her memorise the details of his face without even trying. Full cheekbones and lips, fresh scars that might still be pink if not for the discolouration from the barriers, and a vacant look that tells her he remembers earning those scars and sure as fuck doesn't wanna talk about it.

They're the only two people on this level of the ship, and Kelsa's the only non-Alliance organic personnel still aboard, aside from Joker, who would rather steer the Normandy into a black hole than hobble away from her while somebody else took her helm; the others got the hell out on Omega as a condition of Kelsa's cooperation. She thinks she can still smell the batarian Zaeed threw down here to rot, way back when, and that makes her miss the old piece of leather all of a sudden...she still wonders if he ever did get paid. She doubts it, but that doesn't bother her. Thinking about it helps keep her mind off everyone she never got to say goodbye to. Everyone who's got to fend for themselves now, with Cerberus reeling but hardly broken.

When her guard dog does finally break down, he doesn't volunteer any information about himself, which is fine by her. "Sorry about all this," he offers, shrugging with his assault rifle crossed casually in front of his torso. "Gotta make it legit, you know."

It doesn't sound like a question, and Kelsa doesn't bother with an answer. She keeps staring forward, standing in the centre of her cell...not that she can really help that last part, shackled as she is. Her arms are locked together in tungsten sleeves that join together in a Y, anchored to the brig's floor by four chains of the highest-tensile alloy the Alliance can buy. Not even Miranda's and Mordin's enhancements can stand up to that kinda stopping power.

The meathead shrugs his broad shoulders; he's dressed down, an undershirt and fatigues. He's got his tags out, recently polished, but that's pretty much the only thing squared-away about him. James G. Vega. Lieutenant, 2nd Class. G5. "If I'm honest, I never thought I'd be on this side of the glass on the way off Omega with the admiral," he confesses. "Had no idea it was you down
Kelsa's own broad shoulders bulge with the effort of rolling them, of testing the metal anchoring her to the hull of what used to be her ship. She thinks she can hear a creak in one of the floor's clasps, but that might just be microstress from the core powering up, getting ready to tether to the relay. Any other ship—or the Normandy with anybody but Joker and EDI at the helm—would've shuddered and groaned before a jump; Kelsa remembers damn near throwing up after her first time, after basic.

"Yeah, I guess I wouldn't have much to say if they had me strapped down like that," the meathead says. "Guess I'll shut up, Commander."

She lets out a long, low breath, her arms relaxing slowly. She's still wearing her tags underneath her shirt, the ones Liara gave back to her, but they feel even heavier than her tungsten cuffs. After another minute of silence, she mumbles something, just to hear herself talk.

The rasp isn't loud enough to do much more than echo back at her, but the meathead must hear the mumble. "What was that?" At least he holds the Commander, this time.

"I said, what's the G stand for?" When that doesn't get her any more than a raised eyebrow, she goes on. "Your name. I'm guessin' it ain't short for genius."

Her cybernetic eyes are just sensitive enough to notice the flush of his blue-tinted cheeks. "It's Gordon," he admits, grudgingly.

"James Gordon Vega," she muses, tasting the name. "I always wondered what it'd be like to have a middle name. Any story behind yours?"

"Grandpa," the marine answers her. "Never knew him. Dad never talked about him...not to me, anyhow." He leans against a bulkhead, like they're two grunts in a mess hall, instead of a prisoner and a guard. Instead of a soldier and a monster. "Where'd you get yours from? ...Your name, I mean."

"It's what my mama called me," she lets on, after a blink. "Only thing I remember about her."

"That's right," Vega says. "You were adopted, weren't you?"

The prisoner grunts a raspy chuckle. "Something like that." And then a thought strikes her, and EDI's name's on the tip of her tongue, before she remembers that the ship's new management don't know anything about the AI that's really in charge. So she asks Vega, instead. "What's the word on where I come from? Anybody done any digging?"

"Ehh, not really in the habit of browsing the tabloids," he says, shrugging. "They had a documentary about it I think. Talked with your adopted parents, some people you went to high school with. That kinda thing."

The captive makes a thoughtful grunt. "Wonder how much the Alliance paid for 'em."

"...Do what, now?"

"The actors," she explains. "Fake school records and whatnot."

That gets the lieutenant's attention. "What're you sayin', Shepard?"

"I'm sayin' Shepard ain't my name," she tells him, raggedly. "I never went to school a day in my
life before I signed up. Whichever pair of old white people they got to say they adopted me were lying." It feels good to admit it, after all these years. "Hey," she wonders with a scarred smirk, "you think we're heading to Hawking Eta?" Big rocks into smaller rocks, she hears Kincaide saying across the years.

"Uhhh..." the poor boy stumbles, not caught up with all she said to properly answer her. "I got no idea, actually. But I think we're headed to Earth. Why?"

Kelsa's rasp loosens into a chuckle. "You wouldn't believe me if told you, Vega."

"I guess not," he concedes, just to be agreeable. "But you're saying you weren't adopted? That the documentary was just a lie?"

"Two different questions, Vega," Kelsa points out. "Yeah, the vid was a lie. I was adopted...by Juan Miguel Carlos Aldeira Varga."

That's enough to drag Vega off the bulkhead. "Hey, I heard of that guy," he muses, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. "He was the one who founded the Tenth Street Reds."

"We called him Mister V," she lets on. "And they were just the Reds when I joined the party," she informs him. "Las rosas rojas en el jardín," she manages, dredging up an echo of the Spanish she once knew, before she started talking and thinking in Galactic, all the time. "I'm guessing that wasn't on the vid."

"Uhh...no, not really," he mumbles. "That's..."

"Fucked up," she finishes for him. She shrugs her shoulders. "Sometimes my belly still itches, where the Alliance took off the stem of my rose." She doesn't even know why she's talking; she hasn't thought about where she came from, not really, in years. Not even Liara knows more than she's seen while they fucked, which isn't much more than the bare fact that she killed her best friend growing up.

The meathead bunches up his brow, either suspicious or thinking too hard. "You were in a gang, and you only got one tag before you got out?"

"One was enough." Even if she's in a talking mood, he doesn't need to know just how big that tag got before she walked into Kincaide's office, how many thorns she got on her rose. "You have to get lasered to join up, Vega?"

The question shouldn't take him by surprise, but it looks like it does. "No," he says, a little too quickly. "...I was lucky, I guess."

Kelsa's eyes change their focus, so she's looking at the barrier in front of Vega's face. "Still are, from where I'm standing."

"I guess so, Shepard," he grunts, hiking his rifle self-consciously. "I guess so."

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Viktor Zbigniew Maximum Security Psychiatric Facility

1900 Zulu

20 February 2186

Oymyakon, Sakha Republic, Novaya Russia, Terra, Sol
Her cell's too comfortable...dark-patterned walls, chintz rug, rich mahogany desk, even a fucking fireplace. More like some career officer's idea of the bare essentials than somewhere a mass murderer should be incarcerated. Anderson's fancy scotch wouldn't look out of place, here. The fucking bed's too goddamned soft to sleep on, so Kelsa's been sleeping on the floor. The only thing that's right about the place is the barrier that keeps her in here. It's transparent polycarbide, just like on her ship, but twice as thick and reinforced by three kinetic barriers. She couldn't headbutt through it if she tried...and she has tried, just to see. And if she can't get out, maybe the Reapers won't be able to get in until it's too late for her to be any use to them.

Beyond the barrier, there's a gap, like a corridor, where counselors can come to gawk at her. It's the only human contact she's gotten since in-processing; her meals are brought in and her room is tidied by mechs. She doesn't even know if there are any other prisoners in this place, or if it was purpose-built for her. This morning, like every morning, the door opens to admit another gawker; for each of the last three weeks, a different counselor has come to try and talk to her through the barrier, and after each week has passed without getting any answers, they don't come back.

Today's a little different, though. Everything's washed in blue from the barriers, so Kelsa doesn't notice at first while she focuses on her third hundred-set of pushups for the morning, but as the new woman comes closer and she sees her out if the corner of her eye, Kelsa realises that she's an asari. Fifty two...fifty three...fifty four...

"Quite impressive," the alien comments, her voice piped into the cell so that it sounds like they're side by side. "Even most commandos would be struggling after fifty handstand pushups."

Kelsa doesn't say anything at first; she counts off fifty eight, fifty nine, sixty. Then she pivots down onto her feet in one smooth motion, rolling her shoulders as she stands, tugging her undershirt back down as she turns to face the alien. "Most commandos would struggle after ten handstand pushups," the soldier barks, taking a deep breath to help ease the ache in her chest and arms. She eyes the newcomer up and down, taking note of the round curve of her cheek and soft roll of her flesh over her exposed collarbones. "Doubt you could make ten pushups against the wall," she scoffs, licking some sweat off of her lip. "The fuck are you?"

If the asari's perturbed by the judgment of her physique, she gives no sign. "My name is Shiana T'Naptos," she allows, pulling up a chair that's almost obscene in its simplicity, compared to the long-backed lounge they've given Kelsa. "Would you like to talk?"

The captive grunts, shuffling over to the sink to get herself a glass of water. When she's gulped it down, a glance over her shoulder tells her that the asari hasn't moved. "No," she says, finally. "I don't wanna talk."

"Alright," Shiana T'Naptos concedes, and she doesn't make another sound all day. The hours pass unmarked, since the cell doesn't have any windows, much less a clock, or anything that might be hacked into one. Not that a window would offer much distraction from the monotony; they're in eastern Siberia in the middle of the winter, pretty much as far as fuck from anything as you can get without leaving the planet's surface. That's probably why the others fucked off, Kelsa thinks to herself, after a few hours of silence. She suspects that this place is so remote that she couldn't even get extranet coverage, if she hadn't had her omni-tool ripped out by a salarian so that a xenophobic asshole couldn't keep tabs on her.

The asari does leave, eventually, after Kelsa's eaten three times and did little more than exercise for the intervening hours otherwise. But the next morning she's back, and the next, and the morning after that. She never says anything, even in greeting. Just sits there, without even a datapad to distract her, attentive but not obsessive. The others asked questions almost constantly and typed
their interpretations of her grunts into datapads, but Shiana T'Naptos is apparently a different kind of creature.

On the eighth day, one more than any of the others lasted, Kelsa's curiosity gets the best of her, three hours into her morning routine. "What...what do you want?" Her voice cracks from exercise, and lack of use over the last month-especially the last week.

"To listen," the asari replies. She speaks perfect, unaccented Galactic, as though she grew up in an Alliance training facility, and her voice is as steady as a centrifuge in zee-gee. She looks curious and attentive, just like always, sitting in her chair like she's watching *Vaenial* for the twelfth time; she knows all the details, but she still doesn't wanna miss the big lines. "If you're interested in speaking with me, of course. If not, I can continue enjoying Alliance accommodations until they decide to court martial you formally. The view from this side of the barrier was more than worth the bother of the trip."

The asari's cheeks plump with the shadow of a half-feral grin, and Kelsa stops wiping her neck with her towel, locking eyes with the alien. "Too bad there's this screen between us, or you could do more than just listen and look," she growls, arching a scarred brow. "We might find out just how many pushups I could get you to do against the wall." Her stomach tightens at the thought, but it isn't a good kind of tight, even though it's been too fucking long since she's done any wall-pushing of her own.

"Your tone says that you would like to fuck me," Shiana T'Naptos observes, her expression smoothing once more, "but your face says that, even through the barrier, you know that my eyes are the wrong shade of blue."

The towel slips through Kelsa's fingers, her brows drawing together. "And what shade do you think your eyes need to be to get me to wanna fuck you for real?"

The asari's lips tip into a ghost of a smile. "Cerulean, I believe you call it. It most closely matches a gem called *Fin Athi'ra*, from the south. It is not a precious stone, but it is quite beautiful."

"It is," Kelsa agrees, her fingers curling into fists. "And just how do you know that, Shiana T'Naptos?"

"And now your face is telling me that, but for the three layers of shielded metal we're looking through, you might already have killed me." She doesn't look distressed; if anything, the asari seems even more assured than before. "I am an agent of the Shadow Broker's," she admits. At Kelsa's instinctive glance to one of the room's visible cameras, Shiana lets her grin bloom. "Do not worry; anyone attempting to monitor us is currently watching you do squat thrusts in the centre of your cell while I look on, as I have done all week. We are quite secure."

"Bet the last Shadow Broker thought the same thing," Kelsa points out, "before I killed him."

"We have learned from the experience," the asari assures her. "The new Broker regrets they are unable to meet with you in person, but I have been assigned to keep watch over you, and to make sure that you get the help you require."

"Is that all she regrets?"

The question steals the woman's slivered smile; her brow-ridges draw together and her eyes unfocus, as though she's looking at the barrier, rather than through it. "Of course not. Yet she does not wish to impose where she is not welcome." Shiana blinks, recovering her neutrally positive expression. "In any case, I assure you that I have been legitimately referred by your previous
counselors, and that my concern for your recovery is genuine. If you are not comfortable with my true employer, we may spend another week of silence before I report that you were no more cooperative with me than you were with my antecedents."

Kelsa begins, almost against her will, to relax. "And if you go ahead and make that report?"

"Then you will be formally court martialed, as I said a moment ago. The crimes currently held in abeyance include capital offenses under Alliance statutes, which your questionable relationship with the Citadel Council almost certainly guarantees will not be stayed by any claims about your supposed Spectre status." She shows no hint of the fake empathy the human therapists effused when they were on the other side of that barrier. "Of course, the Shadow Broker would be very interested in preventing that from happening, given your...service, in the past. The Alliance would like to avoid having to kill the Hero of the Citadel as well," she points out. "If need be, assets can be placed to intercept you en route to Vancouver with their tacit approval, though to be convincing, it must need be...messy."

"Messy," the captive grunts. She blinks, and in the darkness behind her eyes, she sees the scene: a blue Alliance transport smeared with black soot, blue Alliance soldiers stained with red blood. It'd be easy, too easy to add a dozen more bodies to the mountain of corpses she's already built too high to count. "What if I'm sick and tired of messy?"

The asari gives her another spectral smile. "Then you had better make certain that I can submit a favourable report to your superiors," she tells her. "And to do that, you should probably begin by sitting down. I believe your chair is more comfortable than mine."

Kelsa hesitates, eyeing the chair on her side of the barrier with some suspicion. Even so, it takes her weight without complaint when she eases herself down into it, and she blows out a breath she didn't know she was holding. "And what if I think they should give me a bullet for my trouble, after all?" She muses, after thirty seconds pass without a sound from the other side of the barrier. "What if that's the best outcome out of all this?"

"You're frightened," Shiana observes. "It is not without reason; you have perhaps come into contact with more Reaper artifacts than any other creature in the galaxy, short of those unfortunate humans impaled on the Dragons' Teeth. The Alliance is interested in refuting your self-diagnosis of indoctrination. Tell me, Kelsa...what are you interested in getting out of this experience?"

Kelsa settles back, closing her eyes, letting the ache of her body sublimate. One benefit of having no responsibility for any bullshit is that it gives her all the time she can spend on pushing those Cerberus upgrades even further, and she hasn't hit anything like a limit, yet. She's got no weights or scales, but her calisthenics and aerobics are more than enough. "Maybe I just want a vacation," she muses. "Or maybe I don't wanna think I'm gonna kill everybody I see." She's stopped seeing all the people she's already killed, true enough, but now in the dark behind her eyelids, Kelsa sees all the people she's worked with in the last few years, people she knows are still alive. But that doesn't keep her from seeing them broken and bloody and dead, right in front of her. Because of her. Every time she closes her eyes.

"That is a concern for me, whether or not you've been indoctrinated," Shiana allows. "Especially since, in order to rule out that unfortunate eventuality, I will likely need to meld with you. I would rather not have you under sedation for that, if possible."

Kelsa opens her eyes, just the slightest crack, to let in enough light to drown out her nightmares. "How would you rather do the meld, asari? With me pushing you up against a wall, my fingers three knuckles deep in you?"
"That certainly sounds more pleasant than being strapped to a table," she replies, without missing a beat.

"Depends on the table," Kelsa counters, roughly.

That earns her a chuckle from the counselor. "You have not lost your charm, despite weeks of captivity, and all of the horrors you've had to endure beforehand," she observes. "Does that work for you often? Being charming?"

"Often enough," the captive concedes, tossing the asari a hooded glance. "Has it worked for you?" She wonders. "Have you charmed your way onto the Shadow Broker's wall, I wonder?"

"If I had," Shiana muses, "would that make you want to kill me even more? Or fuck me even more?"

"I'm really not sure," Kelsa admits. "I know she's fucked other people..." She grimaces, glancing away from her interrogator. "I don't want to talk about this any more."

"Well, then," the asari says, the purr gone from her voice. "Shall we begin?"

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_Cargo Hold, UT-47A Kodiak Drop Shuttle_

_0330 Zulu_

_17 June 2186_

_Sublight Transit to Alliance Ground Command, Vancouver, Cascadia, UNAS, Terra, Sol_

Kelsa lounges against a pile of duffel bags filled with emergency supplies, there just in case the shuttle's mass effect drive chokes up over the North Pole and they manage to survive the ten-kilometre drop to the water underneath them, manage to inflate a raft, and manage row to one of the polar islands. It doesn't make sense to Kelsa why they couldn't've caught a planet-bound fixed-wing cargo plane instead of taking the shuttle over the top, but someone at Arcturus must've wanted a single trip from the middle of fucking nowhere, so here she is.

She's not alone, either; Shiana's there, two arm lengths away, sitting in a proper seat and eyeing the handcuffs they slapped onto Kelsa's wrists warily. "Were the restraints truly necessary?"

The question lands in Vega's lap; he's still got his Mattock, which looks like it hasn't been fired since Kelsa saw it last time, but otherwise he looks pretty squared-away in heavy armour and a fresh haircut. "Regulations," he answers, with a shrug. "Technically you're still a prisoner, Commander. At least until you're reinstated."

Kelsa rolls her eyes, but doesn't offer any other response. Shiana speaks for her, instead. "Those restraints are simple nickel alloy, joined by a tungsten-iron link," she says, with a disapproving snort. "If she wished, Kelsa could snap them apart with a flick of her wrists. Surely they know this."

_I could also melt 'em off with my omni-blades_, Kelsa doesn't say; she got used to not saying anything to anyone over the winter...anyone except for Shiana. She doesn't see any reason to break that habit now.

At first, Shiana probed her with gentle questions-let her ramble, or let her grunt, as she felt like. She wasn't always calm, specially when they talked about Liara; more than once, Shiana had cause to
be grateful for the barrier between them, when a sudden rage took Kelsa by surprise and she tried to lash out. The unseen snows outside the building's walls melted, and they kept talking, and eventually Kelsa started to believe, or maybe just to hope, that she wasn't indoctrinated. The world slowly lost the reddish tinge that she hadn't even noticed had been building up during the fight against the Collectors and all that came after, and she could see the scars on her arms and torso begin to settle, the cybernetic weave sealing over with actual flesh. Eventually, in early June, when Kelsa hadn't seen or heard from another living soul for months, Shiana braved the barrier, and they did a proper meld. It was far more clinical than intimate, driven by the asari's curiosity and experience, and when it was over, she pronounced herself satisfied that the Reapers were less dangerous to Kelsa than her own memories.

Now the Alliance wants her back, not for a court martial, but because they've finally decided that the batarians can go fuck themselves and they might—might—need to do something about the Reapers. Why they sent Vega to collect her she's got no idea, but he doesn't make for bad company. "I'm playing along, T'Naptos," she rasps, when the asari looks like she wants to say something else. "That's enough."

The asari's navy-blue eyes slide from the armoured grunt to Kelsa, on the floor, and she offers a knowing nod. "If that's what you want, Kelsa."

"It is," the woman rasps, and as she settles back, she starts to feel like maybe she's ready to be a real soldier again.
Ch. 43: Dark Doo-Wop

Chapter Summary

Kelsa finds a new purpose just in time.

Derelict Landing Strip

0200 Zulu

18 June 2186

Vancouver, UNAS, Terra, Sol

"Goddamn, it's good to see you, Kelsa," Anderson buffaloes, pumping her hand in both of his. They ain't even off the tarmac yet, but he's here, and in Alliance blues. "You look damn good, too. Few months off was just what you needed."

He isn't wrong, at least not on the face of it; she hasn't looked better since she tore herself off Miranda's table. Most of the scars she got since then have healed over, barely more than spiderwebs on her flesh, and all those hours of nothing but talking and upside-down pushups—though fewer wall pushups than Shiana probably would have liked—have her more cut than she's ever been. But the asari steps in to correct the man. "Kelsa's treatment was hardly a vacation," she insists, "and it has not concluded. She is at liberty only because I have been convinced that her recovery will not be impeded by returning to service; that service must be tempered with my presence if it is to remain acceptable."

The older man nods, finally giving up Kelsa's wrist. "Understood, Doctor T'Naptos. I'll take good care of her."

Shiana lays a hand on the other woman's shoulder, giving her a tight smile. "We'll take good care of you, Kelsa," she allows.

The soldier shrugs, looking around the old landing strip. It's innocuous, pitted concrete wreathed with a rusted fence, a dilapidated hangar in the distance. "No reporters?"

Anderson shakes his head, turning and leading them to a nondescript car. "Priority alpha zero," he relays. "As far as they know, you're still awaiting court martial at an undisclosed location."

Kelsa hesitates when they reach the vehicle, sharing a glance with her counsellor. Shiana gives a subtle nod, and both of them pile into the back, leaving Vega and Anderson to take the front. "Why the bracelets in transit, then?" She wonders, when they're lifting into the air. "Plausible deniability?" It's what she figured, back on the shuttle, but there's no reason not to make sure now.

"Exactly, Shepard," the admiral admits. "Not everyone in the brass was on board with bringing you in from the cold. If you'd attempted to escape before touchdown, those assholes could say you were still a prisoner and not be lying."

"What's different now?"
He looks over his shoulder at her, almost like he can't believe the question. "Now your ass is mine, soldier," he tells her. "And I forbid you from killing us and taking over this skycar. Is that understood?"

Unable to help herself, Kelsa sits up straighter, squaring her shoulders. "Yes, sir," she echoes.

"Good." Anderson turns forward again, acknowledging Vega for the first time since returning his introductory salute. "She didn't give you any trouble, did she, lieutenant?"

"No, sir," Vega replies. "No trouble at all."

"He's still alive, isn't he?" Kelsa grunts, grinning at the man in the rearview mirror. She can't see a single trace of red in her own reflection, and when the boy meets her eyes, he grins back, almost like she's funny. Almost like she's human.

But she knows what she is.

"I want you to get a good night's sleep, Kelsa," Anderson says. "Top brass want you ready at 0800 to give a report on the Reapers."

She glances down at her plain black shirt and cargo pants, the same uniform she was wearing when she got locked up in Siberia. The only stitches of clothing to her name. "They gonna issue me some blues, then?"

"Right now they're a little too busy for that," the admiral says, with a cautious glance at the car's other occupants. "I'll brief you later on, in private. No offense, you two."

A stab of fear tickles across the back of Kelsa's neck. She opens her mouth to tell him it's a bad idea, to tell him that any classified information is dangerous in her head. Before she can tell him anything, though, Shiana speaks up. "I do not believe that is in her best interests," she says, with a subtle glance to the soldier beside her.

"How you figure that, Doctor?"

"Because she will be at pains to share such stressful information with me, and that would put her at odds with multiple articles of the Alliance Code of Military Justice," the asari elaborates. "I doubt the tribunal would look favourably upon such a breach of confidence-and with an alien, no less."

Anderson's eyes narrow as he throws a glance over his shoulder. "Who said anything about..."

Shiana only smiles her secret smile, and Kelsa hunkers back into her bucket seat. "0800," she repeats, lidding her eyes. "I'll be there."

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**Alliance Western Terrestrial Command**

**0100 Zulu**

**19 June 2186**

**Vancouver, UNAS, Terra, Sol**

Rain spits against the naked windows of the hallway that look out over the bay, giving anyone inside a glorious view of the water and rugged mountains, and giving anyone hiding out in the city a clean shot at any gawkers inside it. *Stupid.* They should be meeting in a bunker somewhere, maybe even off-world, instead of this indefensible hunk of glass and rebar. After a moment's pause,
she feels the asari's fingers brush her shoulder, separated from her flesh only by that same thin, black shirt. "Are you ready?"

Kelsa takes one last look at the tranquil inlet. "Yeah," she gruffs, turning away from the window and falling into step with her fellows. Vega takes up the rear, stoic but not surly, while Anderson forms their grim-faced vanguard. They march down the hall to a security checkpoint. It's glass, too, guarded by two bored-looking corporals in dress blues with holstered sidearms. *Four point two seconds to neutralisation*. The soldier blinks the thought away, along with her annoyance at how easily they wave through a four-bar with an alien and a fugitive. The frustration dissolves when she follows Anderson's clipped nod to a ghost from before Alchera; she looks a world apart from the sidelined woman on Horizon. "Alright, Lieutenant," Anderson calls in greeting.

The new stripes on her shoulders make them look broader. "Admiral," she returns, crisply saluting. Not sparing a glance over his shoulder, where Kelsa came up short. "They're waiting on you inside."

Anderson nods, sparing a glance back at their entourage. "You make sure Vega doesn't get lost, now," he cautions Shiana, as a not-so-subtle reminder that she won't be allowed into the tribunal to hold Kelsa's hand.

"I will offer your lieutenants any guidance they might require," she replies, offering her dimpled smile to the other humans. "So long as you keep my friend in one piece."

"I'll do that," the admiral vows, and he nods for Kelsa to follow him. She locks eyes with Ashley for half a heartbeat, but the younger woman glances away, and Kelsa's momentum takes her past the new lieutenant in the next breath.

"So," Shiana says, "you know Kelsa?"

"I used to," Kelsa hears Ashley reply, before the soldier steps through a doorway that takes Ashley and the other two beyond even her bionic hearing.

The room beyond the antechamber is too big, too exposed. Two technicians monitoring comm feeds, two hard-suited guards with standard-issue rifles, and three admirals sitting behind a desk on the dais in the centre of the room. One woman, two men. *Three seconds to overpower the guards, two more for the comms. Five for the brass*. She doesn't belong here, in this place of long walls and soft targets; it's boring how easy it would be to just kill them all, and that, as much as anything else, is what's keeping these people alive. When she takes a second look at the admirals, she only recognises one by sight. "Mikhailovich," she calls, glancing at the bars on his shoulders. "Looks like you made out alright."

The man pulls a face like a wounded lion. "You will address us as admirals, soldier," he blusters, "or we'll have you in chains the next time we see you."

Kelsa arches a brow, looking from one admiral to another, and finally to the guards, who stand just a little taller. She feels her cheeks tighten with her smile. "Let me clear up some things before we get started," she says, offering something of an olive branch. "I'm only here because David Anderson asked me. I'm not your soldier anymore, and I don't take any orders from you. I'm here to tell you about the Reapers; if that's not good enough for you, I'm gonna leave...and if I do, you'd make me very happy if you tried to stop me."

"Now, are we talking or not?"

The female admiral clears her throat. "The situation is dire, Shepard. We're losing contact with all..."
of our colonies beyond the Sol relay, even worse than the height of the Collector threat. Nobody's heard from the batarian homeworld in more than a week, also."

"Nobody knows what the hell's going on," the other admiral cuts in, the one that isn't Mikhailovich.

"That's a fuckin' lie," Kelsa grunts, rolling her eyes as she steps into the middle of the room. "Six months ago I stopped the Reapers from hitting the oldest relay by blowing it up with an asteroid. The closest relay to that one just happens to be the Harsa relay," she points out. "It don't take a fucking admiral to figure out what happened to the batarians."

"As if the Butcher of Torfan would give a damn about them," Mikhailovich scoffs.

"I don't," she concedes. "Just like you didn't give a fuck about the Reapers until a week ago."

Anderson speaks up for the first time, from behind her. "Now that isn't true, Shepard. Hackett and I've been pushing hard to shore up our defences, but the truth is, we don't have any idea what's coming."

"And that's where you come in," the woman in the high chair comments. "We're praying you might give us some insight into our foe before we engage with them."

Kelsa blinks, and in that infinitesimal moment of darkness she sees a galaxy on fire, every cultured planet being scoured clean of life by a race of enormous, unstoppable machines. "You never stopped using the relays and haven't blown up the Citadel," she observes, confirming the guess by the tribunal's reaction. "Which means we've already lost. If the Reapers haven't taken control of it yet, that's only because they think they can take us more easily without it, now that they don't need it to travel from dark space. I'd bet some scouts are already in system, scouting." She shakes her head, grimacing against the sour pit of anger and fear in her stomach. "It probably would've been better to let me die in Siberia than drag me all the way back here."

Mikhailovich looks scandalised. "We haven't registered any unusual relay activity in this system," he says. There's no way-"

"The Reapers built the mass relays!" Kelsa barks. "They built the Citadel. They've been harvesting organic life for longer than Earth's had multi-celled life on it, and they're really good at it by now. The protheans put up a decent fight, but in the end it wasn't even hard for the Reapers. Just inconvenient."

"You're saying there's no chance of victory?"

"I'm saying our technology doesn't have shit on what the protheans had," Kelsa barks. "And I don't think we'll make it very inconvenient for them, when it's all settled out."

"So...what do we do?" The woman demands, like she still has any options. "What's our best plan?"

"You die well," she tells them all. "Or badly; I guess it doesn't really make a difference."

They look like dogs, waiting for her to throw them a gristy bone, and they start growling when it looks like they aren't gonna get it. "Die well," Mikhailovich barks. "You really want to be put on trial, don't you? Why don't you-"

"Why didn't you listen to me after Aratoht?" Kelsa demands, marching toward the desk. "After Alchera, or after Eden Prime? What the fuck did you expect me to say, that I got a magic Reaper killer shoved up my ass just waiting for your signal?" She rolls her shoulders, taking care not to
clench and roll her fists, even though she really wants to. "I've only ever been good at killing people. You'll need me for that. As for everything else...you're on your own."

"What?" The middle admiral blusters. "You're just going to abandon your duty to the Alliance? To the Earth?"

"I don't give any more of a fuck about the Earth than I did about Aratoht," she gruffs, and her words are true enough, even if they sound like treason. "Every single person you've ever met is going to die screaming. You had a chance to help that, maybe keep it from happening, but you fucking blew it. That ain't on me; it's on you. So don't come to me with your dicks in your hands hoping I'm gonna pull this one out for you; there's a war on our doorstep that's not gonna stop until everything you know is burned to ashes. I'm gonna die fighting it," she says, without a trace of her earlier grin. "You aren't getting any better than that."

Before the three suits can register more of their ire, the two comms officers get real excited about a tripped alarm. "We've just lost contact with Luna!" The junior officer shouts, breathless.

"The Moon?" Anderson gasps from half a dozen steps behind Kelsa. "They couldn't be that close already."

The soldier closes her eyes, hearing the dying screams of the protheans, the ones she first heard on Eden Prime. The beacon's message has never been clearer to her, never more pressing. Behind her eyelids, she sees the machines descending upon of a hundred worlds, come to begin their harvest. She feels the thrumming call in her chest before she hears the head-splitting claxon, like a million petrol engines revving up at once, relayed through the room's monitor from some god-forsaken city where they're landing first; an Alliance capitol by the desperate Galactic being yelled over the sounds of combat, Moscow or Sao Paulo or London. They've got more than enough sky squids to hit them all. When she opens her eyes and sees the sleek black tentacles sinking through the grey clouds, she feels her lips twist in a smile. "They're here," she breathes, her sigh taking months-years-of tension with it. "Finally."

The poor bastards on the dais are too busy looking at the carnage on the screen to notice the death descending behind them; Kelsa feels a small flicker of guilt for not warning them, but it dies just a few seconds before they do. The flash of red from the Reaper is mesmerising, and Kelsa's eyes can almost follow it as it smash through the window and digs a crater into the floor. The resulting explosion hurtles the high desk across the room, and Kelsa turns her head, tracking the charred hunk of steel and dead flesh as it twists in slow motion over her head. Anderson dives away, taking a century to land, and time seems to contract to a point just before the desk hits the far wall. When it does, something snaps inside Kelsa, and she lurches sideways into a run, toward the gaping hole in the side of the building. There is no fear, no doubt, no instinct for survival.

She knows what she is.

Anderson's bellow of anguish trails her as she sprints for that giant gash, but she has no answer, no words to explain what she's doing; all she knows is that she can breathe, maybe for the first time since Miranda woke her up, and she knows what she is. And, as she jumps out into the open air and sees the Reapers coming down through the clouds for the first time, coming to scour the galaxy of all intelligent life, she knows what she's for.

She's for killing as many of those squid fuckers as she can before her luck runs out.

She free-falls for almost a hundred metres, whipping out her omni-blades as she goes, and she cuts into the surface of the bay as fast as a normal human would from a skydive. Luckily for her, all that extra mass is from Miranda's upgrades, which keep her flesh and bones from breaking in the water.
In the two minutes it takes her to drag herself out of the bay, her world has changed. The fragile lie of peace is gone for good and all; the Reapers are here, in the skies and on the ground, and people are already dying. Fireballs streak across the sky, and when they hit the ground, twisted cyborg footsoldiers erupt from the craters. Human and batarian husks, troops made on dragons' teeth from living victims, turned from their petty, pointless lives into something great, something pure.

Something beautiful.

And if there's one thing Kelsa has truly excelled at in her life, it's destroying beautiful things. She doesn't make an exception for the Reaper troops. In their phosphorescent eyes she sees Saren staring at her; she sees Liara, resigned but still fighting, in her way. She sees Jay, looking so peaceful in that Michigan winter. They all die a dozen times over as Kelsa makes her way across the docks, in full view of two full-size Reapers at least as big as Sovereign, neither of whom pay her the slightest bit of attention while she carves up anything that gets within her reach. In the black blood of the husks, she sees herself, her real self, no matter what the doctors say. Especially Doctor T'Soni.

Eventually, when it becomes clear that the Reapers in the air aren't going to cauterise her with their lasers, Kelsa fights her way to a small knot of Alliance marines, putting up a fight from an ersatz bunker made by a knot of scaffolding from a collapse. They're smart enough not to shoot at her when they see her cut through a batarian freak, and she jumps into their waterlogged cover without waiting for permission. She doesn't say anything as she catches her breath, but she nods, grateful for the small rest afforded by their covering fire.

The jarhead in charge takes the motion as an invitation. "Reigns," he announces. "Lieutenant 2nd Class. This is Chief Wilkes and Corporal Treng." He nods to the man and woman under his command.

"That's nice," Kelsa huffs, disengaging her omni-blades and wiping some sweat from her eyes.

"You're obviously no civ," Treng observes, as she unloads her assault rifle on another batarian. When it falls, there's a brief lull in the offensive, while its fellows rush over to its side. After a second, it becomes clear that they're eating it, and stripping off its armour to integrate with their own. "Goddamned cannibals," Treng spits, taking the chance to catch a breath or two, herself.

"Who are you?" Wilkes wonders, when it's his turn to take cover. "And why don't you have a gun?"

"Hard to get ahold of one from a psych unit," the fugitive replies, ignoring his first question. "Even a Russian one." She peeks over the edge of the scaffold and counts six of the cannibals left, strengthened by at least that many already dead. "Cover me," she tells the soldiers, before they can badger her any more, and without waiting for an answer, she vaults herself onto the path and zigzags to the nest. These cannibals have stolen rifles, which makes things interesting, at least for thirty seconds or so. She takes them apart with hardly a scratch, using her omni-blades and her head, and she doesn't wait to see how the soldiers behind her are going to use this chance. It doesn't really matter; all of them are going to die in this war.

Another half an hour passes before Kelsa finds another foxhole, but this one's only manned by corpses. She's about to move on when the radio crackles.

"Shepard," it yells, and the voice is too raw to be a hallucination from the Reapers, too hard to be anything other than Ashley Williams barking into a microphone. "Commander Shepard, please respond!"
With one last glance at the Sovereign-sized Reapers still raining death from the skies, Kelsa rolls into the corpse-strewn divot and snatches up the radio. "That'd better be you, Ash, or I'm gonna start shooting at sky-squids," she gruffs, grabbing a rifle out of a dead man's hands.

"Oh, thank God," the newly-minted LC responds over the crackling radio. "Admiral Anderson gave me the sitrep and commanded me to take charge of the Normandy. We're just about ready to head OOS-what's your twenty?"

Kelsa scans the skies for a good landmark, and she catches a glorious one. "About a klick northeast of the big fucker, forty-four degrees up from the SSV Beringer," she says, just before a laser cuts the Beringer in half. "Make it fast if you want to get out of here in one piece, Williams."

"Aye aye, ma'am," the radio crackles at her, and Kelsa stays put, taking potshots at cannibals and husks while she waits for extraction. Now that the initial shock of the invasion is beginning to ebb, Kelsa finds that she wants to live; she's still sure that she's going to die fighting, but maybe her time horizon is a little longer than an afternoon. Even so, it doesn't fall beneath her notice that the Reapers aren't focusing the due attention on her, or the Normandy, when it comes to fetch her, and she can't shake the feeling that that's not a coincidence. Williams greets her in the cargo bay after she jumps onto the open lip of the door. "It's good to see you, Commander," she says, her smile tight but genuine, so unlike the expression she wore on Horizon. "Glad to have you aboard."

Kelsa rolls her shoulders as she looks out on the bay, crawling with monsters large and small. One less monster down there now. "Where's Anderson?" She wonders, looking back at the woman in front of her.

Ashley grimaces. "Down there," she admits. "He ordered me to find you if I could, and bug out either way, but he...he's gonna stay here to fight."

From the corner of her eye, through the sliver of the cargo bay door, Kelsa sees one of the mid-sized Reaper bugs chew through a pair of transports carrying civilians. "Can't blame him," she grunts, shaking her head. "So, are you in charge of this boat, Ash?"

"Not anymore," the LC sighs, with a hint of relieved laughter. She tosses something that Kelsa catches by instinct, and as the fugitive examines it, Ashley explains. "You're hereby reinstated to active Alliance service in the rank of Staff Commander, on order of Admiral Anderson, ordered to take command of the SSV Normandy SR-2."

Kelsa grips her dog tags as she steps further into the cargo bay, surprised to see Shiana and Vega nursing wounds by a Kodiak transport. The asari pulls herself to her feet and limps closer. Her eyes flicker over Kelsa's torn clothes and bloody scratches, and she frowns fretfully. "Is this something you desire, Kelsa?"

The question weighs more than it seems to, and Kelsa's grip trembles around her dog tags. She could crush them, kill Williams and Vega, and take the Normandy out into some backwater so remote the Reapers would never find her. But then she'd be out of people to kill, and there wouldn't be much point in that. "Yes," she gruffs, relaxing her hold on her tags and slipping them around her neck.

Shiana nods, still concerned, but she doesn't protest. Ashley sidles up next to her, more clearly relieved. "Orders?"

"Let's get the hell off this rock," she judges. "See if we can make contact with Alliance Command; set course for the Citadel, just in case we can't."

The hub isn't so much a space station as a coffin, but all the right people are there, and Kelsa knows that's where the brass will send her, anyway.
"Aye aye," Joker answers, over the comm. It relieves her more than she would've thought that the pilot's still at the helm. Even with his steady hand, the floor pitches underneath their feet from the sharp angle that he takes, and by some miracle or sinister design, they make it out of atmosphere without getting shot down. It doesn't sit right with her, but if it means she can live one more day to kill Reapers, she'll take it.
Chapter Summary

The Reapers have arrived, and Kelsa's fighting them, but they're not her worst enemy.

War Room, SSV Normandy SR-2

0930 Zulu

21 June 2186

FTL transit to the Citadel, Widow

It's surprising that the feed's so clean, considering the shape it was in before they touched down on Mars; now Hackett's voice cuts out every tenth word, rather than every third. She'll have to remember to congratulate EDI later, when the admiral stops running his mouth. But he's got another couple of minutes left in him, it sounds like. "...We're gonna analyse that prothean data with all speed," he tells her, and that gets her attention. "We don't know what it is, but we can tell it's big. The Illusive Man wasn't chasing his tail with this." She tenses, still looking down at her knuckles. "...Commander," he prompts, when she doesn't answer him. "This was a win we needed just when we needed it. You did good work today. With the Crucible, we just might have a shot at this thing."

"Maybe," she concedes, still not looking at the holo. Before the admiral can take exception, though, Kelsa slowly turns her face up again, until their eyes meet. She knows he sees deep green, not a hint of red, except from the dried blood on her face. He sees a soldier, a woman, a person. He sees a lie. "I don't wanna know, either way," she gruffs. "Coordinate with Liara."

If she wanted to avoid making the old man scowl, she sure as fuck failed. "Commander-

"You keep calling me that," she cuts in, answering his scowl with one of her own. "You act like I'm a soldier again, like I'm doing my duty."

"Well aren't you?"

"No," she tells him, biting back the sir that her instinct has at the tip of her tongue. "Anderson stayed back on Earth because he's a soldier doing his duty. You left Arcturus because you're a soldier, doing your duty."

The holo of Hackett sighs. "You followed my orders, Shepard," he points out. "I sent you to Mars, and you did a hell of a job."

She shakes her head. "I didn't go to Mars to find a weapon, or to help you win your war," she admits. I went to Mars because it meant I might not have to wait another week to kill something. That doesn't make me a soldier."

"What does it make you, then?" He asks, already looking like he isn't going to like the answer.

Kelsa takes a long breath and slowly lets it out. "A Reaper," she whispers, just loudly enough for
the comm to pick up.

The old man looks wounded, more like a disappointed father than a commander facing mutiny. "Oh, Shepard," he sighs. "You're not a Reaper. You're fighting them, harder than any damned person I know. That's a hell of a symptom of indoctrination, I'd say."

"I'm not indoctrinated," she says. *Probably*, she doesn't. "But the only fucking thing I've ever been any good at is killing people; I lost count of how many, after Aratoht. All I know, all I want, is blood. Tell me that doesn't sound like a Reaper, and I'll call you a goddamned liar. I'm fighting them because they're even better at it than I am, and I wanna see if I can kill a few of the big ones before they win." She shrugs. "As far as I'm concerned, the rest of you are already dead. So you can send me where you need to send me, as long as there's plenty of Reapers to fight, but don't expect me to help you with the Crucible, or any other plan you're cooking up. I'm not interested."

Hackett chews on her insubordination for as long as he can, but she knows as well as he does that there are a thousand things demanding his attention, and there's fuck all he can do about it, anyway. "Alright," he growls. "That's the way you want it, I can treat you like a hammer, and every problem like it's someone else's thumb. I'll coordinate with Dr. T'Soni. But Shepard, don't give up on yourself-or on the rest of us-just yet. Hackett out."

The image dissolves and leaves her alone in the comm room, except for EDI's omnipresence. "Joker," she barks, not ready to leave the little room. "ETA to the Citadel?"

"About three hours, ma'am," the pilot replies. "Sure as fuck hope Ash makes it that long."

"Liara's taking care of her," Kelsa says, like that's enough to end it. Joker must think so, too, since he doesn't answer. She takes a breath. *Ash is dying because she's a soldier, doing her duty.* If Kelsa'd done hers, Ash wouldn't be lying in the med bay in an induced coma with ICP threatening to make her sleep permanent. On Mars, Ash had all but accused Kelsa of working for Cerberus, still, some sleeper or sympathiser or something. But she'd stepped up anyway, put herself between Liara and a Cerberus mech that Kelsa wasn't fast enough to catch...at least until it had nearly bashed Ash's head open. Fuck knows whether they'll get to the Citadel in time to save her.

Kelsa stands there leaning against the holodeck for another couple of minutes, chewing on Mars, until a nervous cough sounds just behind her, in the mouth of the war room. She doesn't flinch; if it were an assassin she'd be dead already, and it can't be Liara, since she wouldn't've left the med bay. She takes a breath and turns around, slowly, but not slowly enough to keep her attendant from jerking into a nervous salute. "Specialist Samantha Traynor," she sounds off. "Reporting for duty, ma'am."

Kelsa's eyes sweep down the soldier, instantly cataloguing all of the details; 158 centimetres, fifty kilos, upper-class British accent and caramel skin. Resting breaths indicate asthma; that plus lack of muscle tone and no weapon peg her expected survival time at less than a second. "What are you doing on my ship, Traynor?"

The woman carefully drops her salute, pulling her lower lip between her teeth. "I was assigned to oversee the retrofits of the comms," she explains. "I specialise in large-scale array integration over the FTL buoy network, but I also have experience in QEC and sigint, ma'am."

"When was the last time you killed somebody?"

The woman swallows nervously, and Kelsa knows the answer before she says a word. "I...never, ma'am. As I said, I was assigned to help reintegrate the *Normandy's* comms systems into Alliance networks. I've only had to use a service pistol for quarterly certs on a range."
Kelsa grunts an acknowledgement. "I expect you'll be wanting a transfer once we hit the Citadel, then," she judges. "I bet Hackett'd love to get your ass back in a lab."

"With all due respect, ma'am, I think I'd rather stay on. That is, if...if you'll have me."

"I got no use for a tourist or a geek on a school contract," Kelsa rebuts, pushing past the woman—even shorter than Kelsa herself, and far less dense. It doesn't bother her much when Traynor flinches back out of the way.

To her surprise, EDI speaks up for the woman. "Specialist Traynor has proven invaluable in rewiring the shipboard communications array," she says. "Moreover, she has analytical intuitions that I lack. I would prefer her to remain aboard, if that is possible."

Kelsa stops short, throwing a raised eyebrow up at the ceiling before she glances back over her shoulder. A second look at the specialist isn't much more enlightening than the first; she's a civ in a service uniform that she's got no business wearing. For her part, Traynor is too incredulous to blush at the renewed inspection. "Since when does a virtual intelligence express preferences?"

"Ah," Kelsa grunts, with a smirk. "EDI's an AI; fully self-aware." If there's anything that should scare a lab geek off a ship, it's the prospect of being locked in a tin can floating around in deep space with a sentient machine in charge of recycling the air. Instead of flinching again, however, a deep blush finally covers her caramel cheeks, staining them to an even richer brown. That bit of extra colour catches Kelsa's attention, stirring up an edge of emotion she hasn't felt since she went to Siberia; she can't place it, at first, or maybe she just doesn't want to. Soldiers can afford to get stupid when a pretty woman blushes at them, but monsters can't. Monsters can't get flutters in hearts that don't exist.

Oblivious to the scrutiny Kelsa has her under, Traynor's attention focuses on the ceiling. "So you, er...were fully conscious when I said those things, about your...voice."

"Of course," EDI replies. "Specialist Traynor displayed a playful sexual attraction to the sound of my voice," she explains. "I believe organics interpret such attention as flattering when it is not intended to cause offence."

"Oh, God," Traynor groans, hiding behind her own hands. "I'm so sorry, EDI; I had no idea that you actually understood me. I..."

"It's alright," Kelsa grunts. "I'm pretty sure Cerberus made her sound like that to get me to like her better. Didn't work for me—no offence, EDI."

"I am not offended, Kelsa," the AI assures her. "But you should not be worried, Specialist Traynor; a cursory extranet search reveals that organic sexual attraction to synthetics is quite common."

"Oh, God," the specialist groans again. "Please make it stop."

"You can't handle a little TMI from a curious AI, you're on the wrong fucking boat," Kelsa gruffs, barking a laugh. When she speaks again, though, there's more bite than bark in her voice. "Are you a soldier, or just a tourist?"

Traynor jolts to attention, her cheeks browning darker from a different sort of shame. "I am a lab geek," she admits, "but I am also an Alliance marine, and I am fully capable of helping the war effort on a shipboard assignment, ma'am." If anything, she sounds even more proper than before; that last ma'am came out as marm, which means she must've slipped back into English, like she would've used in boot.
Kelsa raises a brow. "We're gonna see S2S," she points out. "You have any idea what S2S with a Reaper's gonna be like, even with Joker at the helm?"

The younger woman pales a little bit as she considers. "I've seen what they can do," she insists. "And I am prepared to go wherever you might take me, ma'am."

Kelsa considers her for a few heartbeats before she throws another glance at the ceiling. "You sure you want her, EDI?"

"Yes," the AI responds. "Specialist Traynor would improve my communications performance and allow me to focus my processes on evasion and firing solutions during combat. With Jeff's assistance, I estimate a 5.273% increase in our life expectancy."

Five percent's better than nothing. Five percent's enough. "Alright," Kelsa concedes, giving the specialist a grudging nod. "But there ain't any transfers," she warns the woman. "You walk away now, or you stay committed. If you don't leave, your ass is mine until you die. Understood?"

There's just a breath's worth of hesitation before Traynor nods. "Understood, ma'am."

"Alright," Kelsa says again. "You report directly to EDI from now on. Dismissed."

Traynor snaps a salute and scurries away with another yes ma'am. Kelsa catches her eyes drifting after the specialist and she frowns, blinking to break her gaze as the younger woman makes it through the door. Monsters don't get to stare, either.

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**Starboard Observation Deck, SSV Normandy SR-2**

*1715 Zulu*

*24 June 2186*

**FTL transit to Menae, Palaven, Trebia**

"Looks like you're set up pretty well," Kelsa concedes, after a cursory glance along the walls. The observation windows have been welded shut and covered with a broad bank of monitors, and Liara's original modifications to the starboard observation deck have been restored and improved upon in just a few days. Now nobody who isn't Liara can possibly get into the room when it's empty, even EDI, except the hard way. Kelsa'd love to see somebody try the hard way. "Glad you're making yourself at home." It's what she said the last time they were alone in this room...the last time they spoke privately.

"Thank you," the asari replies, without quite meeting Kelsa's eyes. She looks like she's trying not to remember what happened the last time they shared this room. "...How is Ashley?" She didn't follow the gurney, too busy working on this room; there are still naked cables crossing the floor and some boxes strewn about, but the bulk of the work is done.

"Ash'll live," Kelsa grunts. "She's tough. Almost as hard-headed as me, and she didn't get her skill reinforced with microfibres."

She forces a smirk and starts turning on her heel, ready to go, but Liara speaks up. "Hopefully your communications team doesn't waste time trying to decrypt my ciphers."

It's a shot in the dark, a stab at keeping Kelsa from up and leaving, but the monster can't help feeling a touch defensive. "I'll have Traynor steer clear of your traffic," she vows, trying to shake
off the odd stab of guilt tickling at her ribs. "Unless you need her."

The asari nods, and that should be the end of it, but when Kelsa does turn around, Liara takes a step forward. "Wait...Kelsa," she calls, swallowing hard when the monster throws her another glance. "Have you reconsidered our last conversation?"

"So you do remember after all." "The one where I said I would kill you if somebody got to you again," she summarises. "I haven't reconsidered that, no," she admits. She closes her eyes, sees a flash of purplish blood streaking over a wall, feels her gut clench. "As I recall, you said you wouldn't push it."

"That is true," Liara concedes, but she doesn't look even a little bashful, now. "But I have reconsidered, and I believe that you should, too. I love you, Kelsa," she vows, and the monster feels her heart thud in her chest, "and I know you feel the same. That is not a weakness; it makes you stronger than Miranda's implants ever could."

Liara stands there, as calm as a mountain in the face of a monsoon, and she actually smiles. "If I were to become detrimental to the mission again, I would expect no less," she answers, and her smile changes just enough to show the edge of a deep well of sadness she's trying to hide. "But you cannot handle this alone, Kelsa. It's too much to bear, fighting this war, even for a mind as resilient as yours." She takes another step forward, almost close enough to reach out. "You can share your burdens with me, my love. I am here."

"I'm not really a sharing kinda person," Kelsa says, frowning at remembered conversations with Shiana, across the glass. She shared too much, and every word of it came back to Liara; she'd known that at the time, but she still shared too much, anyway. "Unless you mean fucking," she grunts, on a mad impulse to dive into the sadness she sees hinted in the curve of Liara's lips. "Never had too much of a problem with that kinda sharing, even after you came along."

Liara looks confused for a moment, and then cold for another, before she reclaims her little smile. "You mean to anger me," she observes, "by reminding me that you took other lovers after your...recovery. Before you came to Illium."

"You know," Kelsa grunts, letting out a low breath.

"I would be a poor Shadow Broker if I did not," the asari replies, and this time a sheen of darkness flashes in her eyes. "I also know that you presume such an insinuation will hurt me, perhaps get me to distance myself from you...from us. It is what you believe a human lover would do, in our circumstance. But you have made two grave errors in judgment, Kelsa."

"I would be a poor Shadow Broker if I did not," the asari replies, and this time a sheen of darkness flashes in her eyes. "I also know that you presume such an insinuation will hurt me, perhaps get me to distance myself from you...from us. It is what you believe a human lover would do, in our circumstance. But you have made two grave errors in judgment, Kelsa."

The monster feels her cheek tighten with half a grimace, the old scars still pulling at her flesh even if they don't glow anymore. "Is that right?"

A sheen of black flashes over Liara's eyes, just for a second. "First, I am a very good Shadow Broker." Kelsa doesn't know what to make of that, but before she can figure it out, the asari pushes
on. "Secondly, I am not human." Liara takes a breath of her own, but she doesn't move an inch. "Asari do not approach love in the same way many of your kind do. As a rule, we do not treat our lovers as precious commodities to be hoarded. I love you, Kelsa...that does not mean that I own you."

"What does it mean, then?" Kelsa wonders, feeling her throat go dry. "That you'd stand by and watch me fuck every pretty girl on this ship, and it wouldn't hurt you any?"

Liara's brow-ridges draw together, dimpling the pebbled flesh between them. "Only inasmuch as it would hurt you, to throw your heart away simply to keep it from breaking." She shakes her head, as if to emphasise the point. "But if you made a connection with someone else, if they were here to provide you a moment's peace and hope when I could not...I would be foolish to hate them. I certainly do not hate Miranda or Jack," she allows, and there isn't a hint of spite in her voice, not an inch of malice. "And if I cannot hate them for providing that which I could not, I cannot hate anyone else for meeting your needs now. That does not mean that I love you any less."

"You don't deserve somebody as fucked up as me," Kelsa protests, and she knows it sounds weak. Monster or not, she can't deny the tightness in her chest when she looks into Liara's eyes, and fuck knows she can't look anywhere else, in spite of the echo of darkness she sees there. "And I sure as hell don't deserve anybody half so good as you."

Liara reaches up, slowly, and Kelsa doesn't pull back when the asari's palm brushes and then cups her cheek. "You may think you know what I deserve, but you cannot decide whom I love," she tells her. Almost against her will, Kelsa finds herself leaning into the contact, but she finally manages to close her eyes. "And I love you," Liara says again. "I will be here for you, Kelsa. For whatever you need."

Kelsa takes a long, shaking breath, feeling the corners of her eyes get wet. She didn't used to cry; before the Collector base, she hadn't cried since Zug Island, not even once. But this makes twice since then...twice, and both for the same reason. But she pulls back from the asari's touch; before the first tears can fall, she turns away, and leaves without a backward glance.

She knows what she is.

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_Campus Helveticum Outskirts_

0400 Zulu

25 June 2186

_Menae (ashore), Palaven, Trebia_

"You're a monster, Kelsa," Garrus trills in his two-toned voice, after she steals another one of his kills. In her defence, he was aiming with a sniper rifle, while she closed in hand-to-hand on the turian husk that was pinning them down.

"I can't help it if they dodge your shots better than my fists," the monster says, offering her friend a smirk he'll see through his scope; it's better here on the ground, in the middle of the war. Simpler than floating above it with nothing to do but wait. "You're just gonna have to get up close and personal if you wanna get the better of me."

"You're both fucking crazy," Vega grunts, from behind his assault rifle. "Loco. You know that, right?"
"I know there's only one human that can stand toe to toe with a Reaper-fied turian," Garrus answers, after taking another shot from his rifle. "And it's not you, hotshot."

Vega can't argue, or maybe Kelsa's too distracted by the four husks she still has to deal with; it's been a long time since she's fought H2H in LGLA, but her old N training kicks in, and she makes every move-and every breath-count. It ain't as bad as it could be; the turians have a local mass effect field set up around the moon, so that it's got Mars-level surface gravity and thin but breathable air, but it still takes a hell of a lot of coordination to take down the Reapers in front of her.

When they're dead, and the good guys (and Kelsa) have a minute to catch their breath, Vega wanders closer. "Hey, Commander," he grunts, as stubborn in using the title as she is in refusing it. "How come you keep going all commando on these motherfuckers? That spear-chucker of yours was plenty good back on Mars."

Kelsa wipes some of the blue gunk that passes for Reaper blood off of her face. She hesitates for a second before she decides that the truth is a little too complicated for her to explain to him. "There's a lot more of these things than Cerberus troops," she points out, "and the human kind are pretty dumb. I can distract them while you and Garrus pick them off."

"Yeah," Garrus butts in, "I'm not really sure how that's going to work while I'm up on that tower recalibrating the radio uplink; I'd prefer if you both kept the bastards off my ass, rather than showing off."

Kelsa looks straight into the turian's eyes and sees what she's always seen there...a soldier, reliable, depending on her to keep him in one piece. It doesn't matter that Palaven's on fire over his shoulder, that his dad and his sister are probably dead; they're on a mission, and she's got point on it. Turns out that monsters still have people that need tending to. "Alright," she concedes, straightening and drawing her Revenant assault rifle from over her shoulder. "You just get that tower back online."

"Will do, Kelsa."

"I still think you're fuckin' loco," Vega says, as the turian moves to the radio tower. "Ma'am."

Kelsa answers him by mowing down another pair of human husks that jump up from behind a big rocky outcrop, and the feel of the gun vibrating in her hands is the closest thing to peace she's felt since they left Siberia. She focuses on that peace as another wave of husks pours over the top of the ridge, sees the perfection that Harbinger wanted to bring her, and she does her part to destroy it, with incendiary rounds and omni-blades and a single-minded determination. Even after the radio's back up and the husks are all dead, a part of Kelsa wants to keep going, keep running until she finds more Reapers to fight, until she finds one good enough to kill her. But Garrus pulls her back, shifts her attention to the mission; just before the Omega 4 relay, he told her that he wasn't a very good turian, and that's true, from what Kelsa knows of turians. But he is a good soldier...better than she was ever gonna be. And that's enough to get her back to camp, back to her ship, and back to the war.

For now, that's enough.
Kelsa greets an old friend, and makes a new one.

Engineering Subdeck, SSV Normandy SR-2

1900 Zulu

29 June 2186

FTL to Fifth Fleet Rendezvous, [CLASSIFIED]

"I'll be damned, Shepard," Jack grunts as she hits the bottom of the stairs. "Looks just like it did when I left it, down to the bent pipe."

Kelsa's eyes flick up to the girder behind the cot, and she can't help but smirk a stab of memory from when she made the metal bend with her own fingers. "Yeah, that was fun," she admits, with a grunt if her own. "Don't suppose you're interested in a repeat performance?" Monsters may not have hearts, but they sure as hell have appetites, and it's been more than long enough since some of Kelsa's have gotten satisfied. Even so, the suggestion's only half serious, and when Jack laughs it off, it's no skin off her clit.

"Last thing I need's Rodriguez walkin' in on me with your finger up my ass," the biotic says, laughing at the image. "Plus, I hear mine ain't quite blue enough for you." She looks over her shoulder, but stops short when she sees Kelsa's frown. "Ahh, right, there's still trouble in the Girl Scouts, huh?"

"You could say that," Kelsa allows, stepping deeper into the subdeck. "I don't really wanna talk about it," she deflects. "What've you been up to for the last six months? Other than getting your ass pulled out of the fire again?" She smirks, and her cheek still prickles from where Jack hit her earlier today, back on the space station that Cerberus was trying to pry her out of. Jack, and more than a dozen kids the Alliance couldn't protect.

"Yeah, yeah," the biotic gruffs, collapsing onto the old cot to stare up at the ceiling she spent so many hours staring at before Aratoht and what came after. "Queen of the Girl Scouts crashed an asteroid into a relay and wiped out a colony," she reminds the other woman. "I think I owed somebody a little day-saving. And you didn't answer my question."

Kelsa rolls her eyes. "Queen of the Girl Scouts crashed an asteroid into a relay and wiped out a colony," she reminds the other woman. "I think I owed somebody a little day-saving. And you didn't answer my question."

Jack lets out a little whistle, like she might try to keep needling the other woman, but she finally gives in. "I been good, Shepard," she admits. "Alliance got me doing some good shit with all the fucked up stuff I had to learn from Cerberus...these kids get to learn what a real biotic can do, but still do a bunch of other shit. Sneak behind the vents for a quickie, go home for the holidays, play games, that kinda shit. They get to..." Jack trails off, twirling her tattooed fingers.

"Be kids," Kelsa finishes for her.
"Yeah."

They hang in silence for a few moments, Jack lying down flat and Kelsa leaning against a bulkhead, before the monster asks what's really on her mind. "How'd you do it?" She wonders. "...Start being a person, instead of just a weapon?"

Jack tilts her head enough to raise an eyebrow. She looks good, much better than the stick-thin animal they broke out of Purgatory almost a year ago. A short mop of hair crowns her head, mostly natural, with the back and sides still shaved to show off some of her skull tattoos; her arms are thicker, and her face doesn't look like bloodshot eyes feel anymore. But even more than that, so much of how she talks and moves and acts is so much better than even the last time Kelsa saw her, like she's really good on the inside, too, instead of just the outside. "Honestly, it was you, Shepard."

The monster can't help but raise an eyebrow. "How you figure?"

Jack doesn't answer all at once; instead, she lays back down and conjures a little ball of biotic light, the size of a baseball, that she proceeds to toss and catch like some bored teenager. "You always do what everybody needs you to," she says, after awhile. "What everybody else is too scared or fuckin' naïve to do themselves. Even if it makes you the bad guy." Even though she's laying down, she still shrugs. "I guess I figured...I'm already a bad guy. Maybe if you can be a bad guy for the sons of bitches, I could stomach being a good guy, for awhile. Does that make any sense?"

"Not even a little bit," Kelsa grunts. "Maybe it would if we had some fucking whiskey on this goddamned boat." She sighs, long and low, and she knows she's lying, at least a little bit.

"Sounds like a problem you'd know how to solve," Jack muses.

"Yeah," Kelsa concedes, "but I've been a little too busy killing people to resupply a few essentials."

"Hey, don't rub it in," Jack says, with a sigh of her own, still tossing her ball. "Fuck, it was fun while it lasted, before that old asshole called you up to take out his trash. Going after Cerberus, I mean; I been in some pretty kill-heavy crews before, but when we went rogue, that took the motherfuckin' cake."

"Yeah, it felt good to give Timmy a black eye," Kelsa admits. "If there's one drawback to having so many Reapers to kill..."

"About that," Jack broaches, catching her orb and squeezing it until it dissipates before she sits up properly. "Killing Reapers...do you think my kids are ready to do it for real, Shepard?"

"No idea why you think I got an answer now, when I didn't back on the station." Jack'd asked then, too, and Kelsa hadn't said.

"I dunno," Jack huffs. "I just...I wanna protect 'em, but I don't know what we're fighting," she admits. "You do. So I'm asking you. Is it worth it?"

Kelsa opens her mouth to tell the other woman what she wanted to say at the academy...that it doesn't matter, that all those kids are gonna die with shit in their pants and blood in their mouths, but she can't do it. She can't see Jack lose what little scrap of herself she's scraped together, and she finds herself hoping that if Jack can make it, she might not be a lost cause, either. "Leave the Reapers to people like you and me," she settles. "Keep them out of the line of fire, and for fuck's sake, keep Cerberus the hell away from 'em."

"You didn't even have to mention that," Jack hisses, her skin pulsing blue on its own before she can school her expression. "But...thanks," she allows, pushing herself up off the cot. "I'll keep 'em to
the back, and rip the head off anyone who wants to throw 'em into the meat grinder."

"Good," Kelsa says, pushing off of the wall and turning toward the stairs. She looks back over her shoulder, though, and manages to smile at the biotic. If anybody has an excuse to lose their humanity it's her, but here she is, more mama bear than monster. "You did good, Jack," Kelsa muses. "Keep it up."

"You too, Girl Scout," Jack grunts, and she laughs at the middle-finger salute Kelsa leaves her with. Kelsa finds herself laughing, too, a low chuckle entirely too human to come out of a monster's throat.

She even waves at Daniels and Donnelly, whose asses she pulled out of an Alliance prison ship that was somehow docked on the Citadel when they were dropping Ashley off at the hospital. The two of them are showing their gratitude by pouring themselves into their work, keeping the *Normandy*'s power grid clear and her engines running marathons. That's more than enough reason to have them aboard, even for a monster.

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*The Loft, SSV Normandy SR-2*

2200 Zulu

30 June 2186

*Hebat (orbit; core discharge), Chandrasekhar*

"Queen to E4," Traynor clucks, unable to mask the triumph in her voice, and her holo piece slides smoothly into place, toppling Kelsa's solid white castle and locking her king into an unbreakable net that ends the game. The board responds by setting off a cluster of fireworks over itself, with a black smiley face grinning beside a white avatar of sadness. "I swear, Commander, it's like you wanted to spare your pawns the indignity of living under my régime."

She offered to play on little more than a whim, after seeing Jack and her kids off a little earlier today, and now she can't even pretend to regret it, even though she lost. "I guess...taking two pawns and a horse thing ain't too bad for a first try," she ventures, still trying to salvage something like dignity out of it, even if monsters don't get to have dignity.

"Horse thing?!" Traynor's clearly scandalised for a second, before the truth of Kelsa's words sinks in. "Wait...that was your first time playing?" Suddenly she doesn't seem so smug, either embarrassed that she didn't notice or terrified that she just pissed off her regs-shirking, mass-murdering superior officer. "That was...really rather a good showing...considering," she muses, tentatively.

Kelsa arches a brow. "Was it?"

Traynor's expression collapses and she hide behind her hands; her shoulders begin to shake, and Kelsa thinks she's broken the poor girl. She's about to say something when her auditory implants catch the strangled sound coming from Traynor's throat, and she realises that the specialist is *laughing*. "No," she admits, over a chuckle. "It really, really wasn't, Commander."

"Kelsa," the monster corrects her, with a very un-monstrous smirk.

Traynor slowly splays her fingers enough to peek through them, and she glances away when she catches the monster's eye. "Kelsa," she tries, lightly.
The defeat is eased a little by the sound of her true name passing from the specialist's lips, even though it shouldn't be; Kelsa heard her name from her closest allies for weeks before Aratoht, and then from Shiana over the long Siberian winter...and from Liara, a long time before either of them. That thought brings her out of her musings and she straightens in her chair, doing her best to ignore the guilt that laps up against the insides of her ribs, mixing with the tension already present in her chest. "That was interesting," she offers. "Next time you can kick my ass at chequers, Traynor."

She's still talking mostly as a way to keep from having to think about those feelings swirling around in her chest, to keep from having to think about anything, really.

But the specialist isn't going to let her mind rest that easy. "Samantha," she says, with a little private smile. "Or Sam, if you prefer. It's only fair if you're demanding I flout regs that I can demand you do the same, after all."

Kelsa's mouth almost falls open, the monster once again struck by the specialist's show of courage, even if it's an odd kind of courage for a soldier to have. "Sam," she allows, tasting the name carefully, like it's an expensive whiskey. And then, because she can't help herself, she keeps talking. "Would you wanna do something like this again some time?"

The woman's little grin doesn't fade, and that's all the answer Kelsa's chest needs to stoke up that mix of guilt and pleasure, but of course Samantha answers anyway. "I think I'd rather like that, Kelsa."

"Good," Kelsa grunts, for lack of anything better. "Good." Not without reason Samantha takes that as a dismissal, and she deactivates the holo pieces on the board and starts packing the physical pieces away. Suddenly Kelsa realises she very much does not want the other woman to leave, but she doesn't think tempting her with another easy game will do the trick. "What do you think of EDI's new platform?"

The question catches Samantha off guard, at least enough to make her drop her own king onto Kelsa's floor. "I...er...think it's quite fascinating?" Her cheeks tint a darker brown as she considers, her eyes falling away.

"You still want to push her up against a wall, now that she's more than just a voice in your ear?"

The deeper flush of the younger woman's face is pretty satisfying, and answer enough, but Samantha forces a verbal response out, regardless. "I, er...don't imagine that would be appropriate, given the command structure you have imposed, Commander."

The use of her title feels disappointing, a step back, and Kelsa sighs. "Shame," she scoffs, glancing at the ceiling. "And here I was trying to get you laid, EDI."

"I appreciate the effort," the AI says, maybe just a bit more coy than usual. "However, biometric readings indicate that furthering this line of innuendo may result in Specialist Traynor performing sub-optimally at her duties when aware of my presence; since you have assigned her as my direct subordinate, I am responsible for maintaining her morale and productivity. Hence I recommend removing her as a candidate for the experiment."

The specialist in question, after recovering from a bout of inarticulate babbling, shows that her inner lab geek is just a little bit stronger than her sense of shame. "Wait, you can do that?" She wonders aloud. "...Participate in intercourse, I mean?"

"Any mobile platform with sufficient motor control and digital articulation is capable of participation in sexual intercourse," EDI points out, "but I believe I understand your deeper question. The platform we acquired on Mars was designed for organic infiltration in the guise of a
human; as such, it was developed under exacting specifications to pass through an adult human population without detection. Not only is it capable of engaging in reciprocal sexual activity, significant processing power was devoted to simulating complex emotions and attachments. While the platform's dermal layers were removed during the struggle, the haptic sensors remain largely undamaged, enabling tactile feedback. I have already integrated this feedback into my core processes, which should allow me to offer the same degree of fine motor control as the initial program for which the platform was designed."

The fancy robot loses Kelsa about halfway through the monologue, but she can see Samantha's equal parts fascinated and embarrassed. "You got a translation of that into any kind of Galactic I hope to understand, Specialist?"

"Er…" That blush comes back, almost distracting Kelsa from what the woman's actually trying to say. "I think EDI means that her new platform is, er…anatomically correct. And fully capable of…"

"Fucking?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Well, shit," Kelsa grunts, grinning up at her ceiling. "You better scrounge up some clothes, then. And not some of Miranda's, either. Get a service uniform like mine or Sam's."

"I'm afraid I do not follow, Kelsa."

"Easy," Kelsa says. "First, if that body you got walking around is a body, then it's an Alliance soldier, or as good as. As much as I wish there were exceptions," she allows, with a very brief glance to the comms specialist, "we can't just walk around naked all the time. Second, if you do want to ever try having sex, one of the best parts of it is letting somebody peel you out of that uniform." Her scars don't glow anymore-not yet-but her cheek still tingles with the force of her smirk. "Trust me."

"I will defer to your expertise, Kelsa," the AI assures her, and then throws an unexpected curveball. "Does this mean that you will allow my platform to accompany you on excursions from the ship? I believe I could gain valuable experience, as well as make a meaningful addition to your ground team."

"...I actually think that'll be a good idea," Kelsa settles, after a moment's reflection. "Maybe it'll help the crew get used to a Cerberus mech walking around. The last time most of 'em saw it was just after it tried to kill Ash, after all."

"It is a bit strange to think that the mech that almost killed Lieutenant Williams has been repurposed," Samantha observes. "I know better than most that the original Cerberus programme is gone-I helped to verify the integrity of the platform's processors myself-but it's...easy to understand how some of the crew would still be suspicious."

"That formed part of my reasoning as well," EDI admits, from the ceiling. "As the ship's commanding officer, your trust is an extension of that of the crew. Perhaps they will be better able to transfer the emotions they have invested in the ship itself into my new platform once they witness your interaction."

"Yeah," Kelsa agrees. "And if your new body does start acting up, I can always take care of it." It still galls her that she wasn't able to catch the mech when it was still Cerberus', that her incompetence almost cost Ashley her life.
"As you say," EDI replies, neutrally, though Kelsa can't help but hear a bit of trepidation in the AI's modulated voice. "Will there be anything else, Kelsa? I feel our conversation has been quite informative, and I would like to process the implications before introducing any further information, if you are amenable."

"Sure," Kelsa allows, and she feels a little stab of pride that she just talked a supercomputer under the table.

"Logging you out, Kelsa."

She listens for the telltale *chitter* that lets her know that EDI is back to passive mode, and she settles back in her seat, casting another glance over the half-cleared chess board. "What the hell; you up for another cakewalk, Sam?"

The specialist gets a hungry look in her eye, the kind that tells Kelsa that she isn't about to go easy. "I'm ready if you are, Kelsa," she says, her hands already moving to replace the pieces. "Will you take white again?"

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**Exterior Settlement 2b**

**1245 Zulu**

**04 July 2186**

**Eden Prime (ashore), Utopia**

The ground trembles with the force of the Atlas mech landing, and instinct has Kelsa diving behind a concrete pylon, for all the protection that'll give her. Luckily for her and her team, it takes even the best pilot a few seconds to reorient after a suborb drop, and Cerberus' mech pilots always seem to have more guts than skill. Unluckily for them, there are still plenty of Cerberus troops on the ground to cover the bastard. "Liara, give me a window," she barks, halfway to begging. "EDI, cover her, and for fuck's sake get Cortez to move his ass and shoot those goddamned dogs out of the motherfuckin' sky!"

The AI and the asari stir at her orders; Liara throws up a singularity behind the Cerberus line, while EDI's platform lays down suppressive fire from her SMG. Kelsa counts three heartbeats before she pivots out from behind the pillar, shouldering her spike-thrower and flicking over to disruptor munitions in one smooth movement. She sights down on the glass carapace and the pilot behind the shielded window, aiming right at his head as she pulls the trigger back, and her gun starts its telltale *clicking*; she holds her ground and those clicks get faster, the weapon coiling up inside like a mamba preparing to strike, until the clicks sound off faster than her heartbeat and she can feel the gun start to vibrate subtly. Still she doesn't loose, even as the Atlas brings its RPG launcher to bear directly on her. She locks eyes with the pilot through the yellow glass, sees the thing that the Illusive Man made with the technology of the Collector base, the technology she let him have. He turned his soldiers into little better than husks, blue-veined and dead-eyed and empty except for the hunger to kill, everything that she almost was. Everything she's still afraid she might be. *A monster.*

At the last second she lets go of the trigger, half a heartbeat before a rocket fires from the mech, and her gun bites back into her shoulder, pushing her into a half-dive that takes her just beyond the rocket's kill zone. When she lands she has to keep rolling, though, to keep from getting crushed by the concrete as it keels over from the impact, and it takes her a few seconds to get sight of the Atlas; it's motionless, almost pristine, save for an ugly crack in the front plate of glass, punched
through by a spike as long as her forearm. That spike kept going through the glass, and most of the way through the pilot's head. A half-second sooner on the draw and it would've just bounced off the tempered carapace; a half-second later and Kelsa would've been shitting shrapnel, or dead. "Not too bad," she settles, caching her shotgun and unshipping her assault rifle to help Liara and EDI mop up the last of the enemy troops. They may be monsters, too, but she still gives them deaths as clean as she hopes she'll get, before the war is over.

But regardless of that inevitability, there's still this battle, and after Cortez reports no more shuttle activity in the vicinity, they can call it won. "That was an impressive shot, Kelsa," Liara offers, once the last of the troopers have been put down. "Though you had me worried that you had simply frozen, for just a moment."

"It's gonna take something a hell of a lot bigger than an Atlas to kill me," Kelsa gruffs, checking her weapon and inspecting her squad. "You're not too bad with that hand cannon yourself," she admits, without any pride. You shouldn't have to be, she doesn't say, before glancing at EDI, who looks perfectly happy in her muddied and torn fatigues. "Hey, Silver. How does this rate as a learning experience?"

"Highly," EDI replies. "Gaining such practice in the slaughter of organics is doubtless essential to my plans for galactic domination after the fall of the Reapers." A beat passes, maybe just a half-second too short. "...That was a joke."

Kelsa keeps an arched brow pointing in her direction, only cracking a smirk after the AI tilts her head. "Next time you want to hurt me that bad, consider using your gun."

"Understood, Kelsa," the machine responds, not without a certain edge of irony in her modulated tones. Before she can make another pun, though, Liara makes a strangled cry of excitement, like the innocent archaeologist she was meant to be, instead of the commando who could coldly put a bullet into a wounded man's skull, just to keep him from shooting her in the back.

"I believe the capsule is prepared to be opened," she says, practically bouncing, and then actually bouncing, when she can't hold it in anymore.

Kelsa saunters over to the grilled platform where the coffin-like pod rests, the whole reason Cerberus is on Eden Prime in the first place, which in turn is the sole reason Kelsa and the rest of her crew are here. More specifically it's what-or, rather, who-is in that pod that's got Liara rocking on the balls of her feet so distractingly, and Kelsa has to exercise every ounce of restraint that six months of keeping out of whiskey has earned her to keep her eyes on the pod instead of the asari. "Do it," she says, unshipping her Revenant, just in case.

EDI comes to stand beside them as Liara takes a breath and enters the command to open the capsule. Nothing happens, not at first, but Kelsa keeps her finger on the trigger, regardless. She sees Liara tense up from the corner of her eye, maybe getting ready for a let-down, but in that instant, the pod hisses and starts to open. Steam from fifty thousand years ago puffs out of the seam as it opens up, and then three things happen, in quick succession. First, the top of the capsule pops off in a violent explosion of biotics that jars Liara and EDI back; next, a sonic blast pulses from the capsule's interior, enough to activate Kelsa's shields and bring Liara to one knee, clutching her aural canals; third, Kelsa finds herself gun-to-gun with the pod's former occupant, a giant insectoid with a pulse rifle and four eyes, every one of which is pointed at her.

"Organic," he slurs, disoriented by his long sleep but still focused enough to try and kill them all, if he has to. "But pri...primitive, with a machine." He looks just like Kelsa remembers, from the visions given by two prothean memory shards they found in the first sweep of the colony, and a name floats up from the back of Kelsa's mind.
"Commander Javik," she hails him, from behind her sights. Her throat stretches and her tongue moves oddly, and she realises she's speaking to him in his own language, without having to try. "You're all that's left, and we have to go. Now." The sonic assault from the pod still hasn't let up, and even EDI's looking less than comfortable, but Kelsa's aim doesn't waver.

If anything, hearing his people's own words coming out of a monkey's throat makes the alien even more paranoid. "You address me as an equal, when we are anything but. I must...I must prepare for the Reapers." One of his eyes flicks rightward, to EDI. "You rely on machines for combat; they must all be destroyed, before they become aware, and rise against you. A far deadlier enemy is waiting."

"They're already here," Kelsa tells him, grimacing as the sound bores into her head, even through her shields. "And turn that goddamned thing off, before I shoot you and do it myself," she barks, hoisting her Revenant higher in her shoulder.

A heartbeat passes, and then the prothean blinks, and he checks his own gun and waves at the pod behind him. A subtle biotic field pushes the pod's buttons, and the noise stops abruptly. Kelsa takes a breath to relax as he glares at her. "If the Reapers are here, than it is already too late, human."

"Maybe," Kelsa concedes. "But I mean to make them earn it. What about you?"

Javik lets out a low, sonorous laugh. "I believe I will regret having to kill you, when the time comes," he allows.
Chapter Summary

Kelsa finds herself fighting a few different kinds of battle in her struggle to find the perfect fight. It remains to be seen whether she'll be done in by Reapers or politics first.

Chapter Notes

Whew! It's hard to believe it's been nearly three months since the last update! ...Sorry about that. I got my attention stolen by my Inquisition fic, An Accounting of the Inquisition, and also by the work-home-eat-sleep-work groove. Anyway, Kelsa's back, and angstier than ever!

Thanks so much to my excellent beta-reader, coffee_maker! She has an excellent collection of Cassandra/Varric one-shots on archiveofourown, and I heartily recommend you check them out.

Bridge, SSV Normandy SR-2

0430 Zulu

09 July 2186

Annos Basin

Everyone's wearing their best, from Kelsa on down to the jarheads guarding the war room door. Primarch Victus looks the most comfortable, since a battle-ready set of armour is the most respectful thing any turian can wear, and Wrex just looks pissed off in his garish piecemeal shell; apparently, when he's representing all of the clans in an official capacity, he's got to wear a piece of shit that takes the best parts from each clan's armour and somehow manages to look like a thresher maw shit out a skyscraper. The thought of Wrex having to do that kind of politicking is almost hilarious enough for Kelsa to forget about her own dress blues, stiff as they are.

Kelsa, Wrex, and Victus are standing on the bridge by the main door of the Normandy, waiting on the salarian dalatrass, a woman by the name of Linron. The whole reason they're all dressed up out here in the ass-end of nowhere is so the four of them can meet to hash out some kind of an alliance. It's the only chance Kelsa's going to have to get back to Earth, where she can fight-and die-against the most beautiful monsters she's ever seen with a clear conscience.

Victus won't help her get back to Earth unless the turians can take some pressure off of Palaven, and the best way to do that is to throw several tonnes of krogan at the Reaper troops that're currently trying their best to remodel the planet into a sterile hellscape. Unfortunately for Victus, the turians and salarians worked together to beat the krogan at the end of the Krogan Rebellions,
and so they both have to agree to lift the DMZ around Tuchanka; if the turians go it alone, the salarians might not take too kindly to being sidestepped, and nobody wants a bunch of pissed-off frogs ribbiting everywhere.

Of course, if the humans try to just make an alliance with the krogan directly, the turians'll probably declare war and assfuck the whole galaxy on principle, and Hackett insists that that would be a very bad thing. Which means that the Alliance has to play nice in order to get the turians on board. And it'd look strange indeed if Liara showed up at the table to negotiate on behalf of the humans, which is why Kelsa's here, wearing those dress blues with the ropes of her hair twirled into a bun, the scars on her face just beginning to glimmer with a hunt of red.

The salarian ship pings a successful execution of docking protocol and everyone stands a little straighter, except for Kelsa; she's more than a foot shorter than either of her fellow delegates, so the frog won't even notice an extra centimetre. When the door opens to reveal Linron and an honour guard of three armoured STG commandos, Kelsa takes a step forward and inclines her head respectfully, making sure to keep her eyes level with her new guests. "Welcome to the Normandy, Dalatrass. Do you or your men need anything before we get started?"

The dalatrass draws a breath and looks around the cabin, clearly trying to seem unimpressed, and almost succeeding. "Let us get this farce over with," she pronounces, looking to Kelsa to lead the way.

"Come on, then," the human soldier allows, before she turns and guides the diplomats back to the war room. Westmoreland and Campbell are joined at their post by Garrus and Vega, all four toting assault rifles to fill out their uniforms. Just before they reach the scanner, Kelsa turns back to the dalatrass. "The stooges'll have to hang back here. No weapons allowed in the war room."

The old bullfrog stiffens up. "My STG commandos will die before they leave my sight."

Kelsa rounds on her guests, and both Victus and Wrex stand aside, the first one looking worried in a turian way, the second looking interested for the first time all day. Kelsa smiles, feeling her old scars tightening, a small part of her wishing they still glowed, for effect. "Then they'll die," she gruffs. "If not today, then soon enough." Then her smile collapses into a grimace. "The Reapers don't give a shit whether or not we shake hands; they're coming for all of us, and they'll kill us all, unless we stop them. You wanna try to stop them all by yourself, you know where the airlock is."

The indignant woman swells up even more, just like Kelsa thinks a bullfrog might. "You address Linron, Dalatrass of the Salarian Union. You have no right to make such demands of me, and I will not be lectured to by some ugly little pyjak."

Kelsa almost laughs at the insult, but Wrex doesn't look nearly so even. He takes a single step forward, his scarred lip snarling. "You have no right," he growls. He's unarmored, or at least as unarmored as a krogan can be, but he still towers over nearly everyone else in the crowded little waystation. The bullfrog's bodyguards all raise their rifles and train them directly on his helmetless head, and Kelsa's soldiers tense up, but she gestures for them to keep their cool. Wrex lets out an easy chuckle. "You take a full-size krogan in the middle of a blood rage," he rumbles, "and you stuff them into a tungsten box. Then you bang that box with reinforced steel rods for a good five minutes before you hurl it off a building. You watch it land in the middle of a city square full of people, and see it pop open from the fall." He pauses, breathing another slow chuckle at the picture he's just drawn. "You're lookin' at one of two ways that goes down: either that city becomes a charred hole in the ground, or Commander Shepard's in that crowd. There's a good chance that a lot of people are gonna die either way, but option two means the city's still gonna be on the map, after all's said and done and the bullets stop flying."
"Now, I don't know about salarians, but I know who I want on my side when the Reapers come calling. And if it was up to me, I'd let your little tadpoles come in with their toys, and I'd enjoy watching her beat you all to death with them as soon as one of you wart-brained idiots waved it in the wrong direction. But Shepard asked you nice, and so you'll do like she says. Or you'll see just what this ugly little pyjak thinks of people that insult her."

Kelsa feels her throat go dry at the krogan's praise, honoured and shocked to hear such words from the mercenary that had become her ally. Guess he also turned into a friend, she reckons, still too stunned to hear all but the last of Linron's retort. "...you would bring war-"

"War is already here," Primarch Victus says. "Palaven is on fire; Earth is burning; Kar'shan is being denuded of all life. Not a single one of us can stand alone against these monsters, and if you are too proud to admit that, you had might as well return to Sur'Kesh and destroy all of your clutches to save them the horror of the world your obstinence will guarantee them." He speaks with a harsh gravity that draws all eyes and ears, and Kelsa can see how he rose to his post when others were found wanting. "We need to come to an agreement that will see us all work together. It's the only way any of us have a chance."

Slowly, like she's getting dragged to the dentist, Linron relents. "Stand down, men," she commands her troops. "It is clear we are not respected; I would not forfeit our lives without cause." With a grim nod, she gestures at the other three negotiators. "Lead the way."

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_Medical Bay, SSV Normandy SR-2_  
15 July 2186  
1100 Zulu  

*FTL Transit to Tuchanka, Aralakh*_

"Prothean on board," Mordin says, by way of greeting, when Kelsa steps over the hatch into the med bay. "Fascinating." He sounds earnest, even though he's facing away from her. His right arm's in a sling, but he's still typing away on a console with his left. "Prothean cryogenics very advanced; wonder if he'll let me run tests?"

"Welcome back, Mordin." Kelsa can't hold back the smirk across her face as she comes up astride the salarian. She sees him keeping an eye on the big krogan woman on Chakwas' table. She's out cold, but her vitals tick on steadily across the monitor. "How's she doin'?"

"Eve stable, only just; pulse elevated, endocrine system hypoactive, livers scarred from Maelon's experiments. Semidirect hit from Atlas rocket did stress levels no favours." At that he gives the human woman a smirking glance.

Kelsa grimaces. "Yeah, sorry about that," she says, eyeing his sling. "Thought he'd come after me quicker."

The doctor shrugs with his good shoulder. "Paid for that mistake when you punched through canopy. Happy to see experimental omni-blades so effective against Cerberus shielding."

"Yeah," Kelsa lets on, scratching idly at her jaw, where a fresh cut glows orange, probably the first of many. "Too bad my visor ain't effective against suicide ordnance." The memory of the Atlas pilot's face blowing up right in front of hers is still fresh; it's not the most fucked-up thing she's ever seen, but it's not too far down the list. Blinking, Kelsa cocks her head toward the sleeping hulk of woman on the table. "Think she's gonna pull through?"
"Have sedated her to expedite regeneration. Should be ambulatory in thirteen standard hours."

That's good enough for her. "I'll try to see to it Wrex doesn't come around rubbernecking until after that," she promises; the only reason they went to Sur'Kesh at all was because he cajoled Linron into letting them rescue the krogan woman, supposedly the only one fully immune to three genophage. Mordin's gonna start working on a cure for the rest of them, and when that's done, the krogan are gonna hit Palaven. Then, and only then, will the turians-along with the krogan-come to Earth.

A thought strikes Kelsa. "...Eve?"

"Refused to give her name," the salarian explains. "Heroic struggle to save krogan from genophage, seen by many as last hope-also new beginning. Mythic figure in making. Human ship, human mythology appropriate."

Kelsa grimaces, reminded of her younger days, at the Laundry. "It ain't my mythology."

Mordin's lips part, but before he says anything, the comms crackle from overhead. Kelsa's gut clenches in anticipation, and she doesn't relax when she hears Traynor's worried tone. "Commander, we have a situation developing in the portside cargo hold of the engineering deck."

Kelsa's through the door in three strides, without even a parting shot to Mordin. "What's happening?" She demands, as she rounds on the elevator, though she can guess that whatever Javik is up to, she isn't gonna like it.

"Our new guest is having an argument with Dr. T'soni," Traynor informs her. "It's disturbing the engineers' monitors and interfering with our external communication protocols."

"Well," Kelsa grunts, willing the elevator to move faster, "shit." She really wasn't planning on killing the only thing in the galaxy who's fought more Reapers than she has, but she just might have to, if he can't get along with Liara. When she steps into the bog Javik's turned his quarters into, she has to blink at the sudden flash of a biotic crackle—a barely-contained discharge, not a concentrated assault. "My name is Liara T'soni," the asari bellows, her fists clenched at her sides, shaking subtly. "And I'd appreciate it if you used it from now on."

Javik stands like a statue, while Shiana looks on from the side of the room, unsure what to do. Without thinking, Kelsa steps up to Liara's side, laying a hand on her shoulder. "Hey," she breathes, just loudly enough for the asari to hear. "Settle down." It isn't an order, but it's not quite a request, either, and Liara flinches back like she's been punched.

Her eyes sharpen when she looks at Kelsa, and the human's fingers close on air. "I apologise, Commander," she allows, breathing a meditative sigh, her biotics slowly gearing down. "Javik and I were merely having a disagreement over history. It should not concern the running of the ship."

It'd hurt a whole lot less if Liara spoke with anger, or even a hint of the passion she just showed to the fifty-thousand-year-old stranger who still hasn't said a word to Kelsa's hearing, but Kelsa can't blame her for wanting her mental distance. "See that it doesn't," she allows, with a nod. Let me take care of it, she wants to say, but can't.

Liara draws up, those sharp eyes softening when they fall on Shiana. "Let's begone."

"Of course," the other asari replies, and the two of them quit the room without another word. Kelsa can't help feeling a stab of jealousy, even though she's got no right. Instead of chasing after them, though, she just stares at the closed door they leave in their wake.
"T'soni," Javik says at last. "I have read of one asari with that name-Benezia, she was called. She fought beside the turian, Saren, as an indoctrinated slave."

"She did," Kelsa admits, still staring through the door. "And I killed her."

"And this...Liara-asari, she is related to that one? The Benezia-slave?"

"She's her daughter." The words come out as a growl, the memory of the older woman's death looming up across the gap of Kelsa's own black intermission.

"Then we have no guarantee that she is not indoctrinated herself," Javik concludes, inexorably. "She is a powerful biotic; we cannot risk her compromising the mission. I say we toss her out the-"

But he doesn't get the chance to finish that sentence. Kelsa blinks, and in the space of time it takes her eyes to open, she has the prothean pinned against the wall, one forearm at his windpipe, her free arm sheathed in superheated omni-gel. "You want to shut up, now," she hisses, through her teeth. "Unless you wanna find out how to fight with two eyes, instead of four." The big buggy motherfucker blinks at her, slowly, his slash of a mouth slowly resolving into a smirk.

"I am beginning to like you, human," he gruffs, as calm as he was in the middle of Liara's biotic show. "But you show your weaknesses too easily. Any enemy can exploit what even a fool may discover."

Kelsa grimaces, pulling back from the abyss. *Even monsters can hold back,* she tells herself. "Most of my enemies don't live long enough to exploit much of anything, once I get wind of 'em. *Except for Timmy,* she can't help but think. Even so, she steps back and disengages her omni-blade. "If anyone on this ship is indoctrinated, I'll take care of them," she says. "If you take matters into your own hands, I'll take care of you. And it won't be quite as clean as tossing you out the airlock. Got it, Javik?"

"I understand, Commander," the big old bug lets on. "But when the asari asks me for the truth and then threatens me with her biotics when she does not like it, I cannot promise to be so impassive, next time."

"Noted. I'll take care of it." She turns and leaves, her hand still shaking at what she almost did. She didn't even *feel* anything, not really; no protectiveness, or rage, or even any bloodlust. The thought of someone attacking Liara was just enough to make her white out for a second, to lose herself even to her memories, and that doesn't make her feel any less like a monster.

When she gets back to the Loft, part of her isn't surprised when she sees Liara waiting for her, standing in front of her workstation, looking slightly embarrassed. "I truly do apologise for my conduct earlier," she begins, a bit less cold, now.

"I ain't the one you owe an apology to," Kelsa points out. "...Not that you should go running back to engineering anytime soon."

"Noted. I'll take care of it." She turns and leaves, her hand still shaking at what she almost did. She didn't even *feel* anything, not really; no protectiveness, or rage, or even any bloodlust. The thought of someone attacking Liara was just enough to make her white out for a second, to lose herself even to her memories, and that doesn't make her feel any less like a monster.

"I ain't the one you owe an apology to," Kelsa points out. "...Not that you should go running back to engineering anytime soon."

The asari manages a ghost of a smile. "I suppose you're right. It's just…” That smile fades, and her cerulean eyes unfocus. "I would have given most anything to have a single conversation with a real-live prothean. To confirm or refute my hypotheses, and to fill gaps in my understanding. But when I got that chance, it was…"

"With a fighter," Kelsa prompts her. "Somebody born when the galaxy was already on fire, who didn't learn anything except how to stay alive long enough to kill whoever stood in his way."

"That is...remarkably insightful, Kelsa," Liara allows.
Kelsa smirks, her fresh scars tingling. "Not really; I just thought about what I'd do if I woke up fifty thousand years from now, and I had a squid bothering me about history."

A hint of navy splashes across Liara's freckles. "I suppose it was childish of me."

Kelsa shrugs, her smirk tipping into a frown. "You are a child," she says. "One that had to grow up too soon, had to make too many choices no kid should have to make."

Liara looks to argue at first, but by the time Kelsa says her peace, the asari's brows knit in sympathy. "In that, at least in some small way, we are alike."

"Yeah," Kelsa concedes, and then she chuckles. "Look at me, putting Siberia to use."

"I am grateful that Shiana's counsel was helpful," Liara says, her expression softening again, like it did in Javik's cargo swamp.

Kelsa feels a tongue of jealousy lick up against the back of her throat again, despite everything. "Has she...helped you?" She wonders, leaning back against the empty tank of her wall.

Liara nods. "I have found her support and advice quite useful, in recent years. She is an excellent and reliable friend."

"And that's it?" Kelsa probes, even though it's not any of her business. "Just friends?"

Liara looks confused for a second, and then bemused. "You are wondering if we have ever been lovers," she surmises. "Would it be risking her life to say that we had?"

The accusation hits her hard, and it's Kelsa's turn to flinch. "Sorry," she sighs, looking down and away. "I know I don't have any right."

"...That was unfair of me," Liara admits. "And the answer is no, in any case. Shiana and I are cousins; we played together as children in my mother's estate."

"I'm glad," Kelsa says. "That you've got someone you can talk to, at least." She still hasn't looked up yet. "And you were right. I might've tried to kill her, if I thought you two..."

"I do not believe that," Liara insists. "And no matter what you say, Kelsa, I know that I am better for having met you." Then, without any warning, Liara closes the distance between them and folds the shorter woman in a fierce hug, one that Kelsa can't help but fall into, for a few blissful heartbeats.

Kelsa's arms tighten and she buries her newly-scarred face into Liara's collarbone, suddenly feeling like that six-year-old girl again, running from the Laundry. But then she remembers what came after that, how she had to watch everyone she loved die, some of them under her own gun, and she knows she can't do this. Not again. With a shaky breath, Kelsa pulls away, careful not to jerk back or to let her touch linger. "I think you better go," she manages, "before we do something we'll regret."

Liara swallows the answer she wants to give at first, but after a few breaths, she nods. "As you wish, Kelsa."

And then she's gone, and Kelsa's alone.

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*Rachni Breeding Ground*
19 July 2186

1830 Zulu

Utukku (ashore), Mulla Xul

The cannibal gives one last, shuddering groan as it dies, black blood oozing from its mouth, the gaping hole in its chest dreaming from the heat of Kelsa's omni-blade. "That is the last of them, Commander," Javik calls out as he approaches, limping just a little.

"For now," Kelsa concedes, straightening and casting a look around the cavern, strewn with Reaper corpses. There are husks and cannibals, and a few marauders that Garrus took a keen interest in putting down, but also some huge spider-looking things they haven't seen before, equipped with wicked long-range guns and decked with egg sacs that sprout little bug fuckers whenever you shoot them. If you look at them sideways and squint, you can just tell that they might, once, have been rachni. Kelsa keys into the local comm freak. "Grunt, status?"

"Tail-deep in rachni," the young krogan effuses, in between shotgun blasts. "But Aralakh Company is holding solid. Do what you need to do, Battlemaster."

"Understood," Kelsa gruffs, pulling herself up onto the main ledge of the platform. "Now let's see what's behind door number one. You wanna do the honours, Garrus?"

"Be happy to." The turian comes up beside her, trading his assault rifle for the sniper he keeps slung over his shoulder. A half a second after it hisses open, he hits the Reaper lock with a quick three-round burst, and the alien shield draws up to reveal the object of the mission.

The rachni queen.

From Noveria.

"Didn't you tell me you wouldn't make war," Kelsa drawls, more disgusted than impressed by the giant insect, strapped down and bleeding from half a hundred wounds.

Somehow, improbably, there's a krogan corpse close enough for her to speak through, the last of a lost company that Grunt came here to rescue. "We had no choice," the krogan growls, his dead vocal chords rasping oddly. "The Old Ones came; they poisoned the air with their sour notes, and our children…"

"Were turned into slaves," Kelsa finishes, still holding her spike-thrower checked. "Just like you."

"No," the queen insists, through her puppet. "We resisted. Only once the Old Ones tortured us did we make more children for them...children who come, who will kill us all if we are not released."

Kelsa jacks up an eyebrow, holding her gun a few degrees higher. "That a threat?"

"No-it simply is. Release us, and we will fight with you. We will take our revenge!"

Then the bug, the real queen, lets out an agonised wail, just as Kelsa's commlink crackles to life. "Whatever you're doing, Shepard," Grunt yells, in the midst of a hailstorm of bullets, "make it fast. We're about to be overrun."

The budding indecision Kelsa feels evaporates under the choice Grunt gives her; either she tries to free the queen and tells Grunt to stand, or she pulls him out of the fire. Put that way, there isn't a choice. "I already saved you once," Kelsa grunts.
"Yes," the queen rasps, from her krogan mouthpiece. "You heard our song, knew how beautiful our music can be. You will let us sing again?"

The ghost of a half-remembered plea flits across the back of Kelsa's mind, and she shakes her head against it. "You're wrong," she says. "If it were up to me, I'd've killed you on Noveria," she tells the bug. "It was Liara that heard your music, if you remember. Liara begged me to save you." Her lips twist into another grimace as she shoulders her spike-thrower. "And Liara ain't here." She looks from Garrus on her left to Javik on her right. "Ready?"

"Yes, Shepard," they both answer her, just as the queen shrieks again. It's barely standing, weighed down by tungsten chains, weeping from two dozen wounds. Unlike Kelsa's usual style, it's more of a mercy killing than an execution. Regardless, the three of them finish what the Reapers started, and only after a few midsized rounds, Kelsa's certain the big bug won't rise again.

"Dammit, Battlemaster, we can't hold out much longer," Grunt informs them. He doesn't sound afraid, of course, but he sure as hell doesn't sound like he wants to die in a swampy cave in the ass-end of the Ninmah Cluster.

"Mission's squared off," Kelsa tells him, turning from the rotting hunk of ancient alien and falling into a heavy sprint. "Get the fuck outta here, Aralakh Company."

"Loud and clear, Shepard," Grunt responds, a flicker of gratitude in his voice. "Rendezvous at the shuttle in twenty."

"Wouldn't miss it for the galaxy," she tells him, running without a second glance, or a second thought.
Ch. 47: She Ain't No Hercules

Chapter Summary

Kelsa does what she has to do to secure the allegiance of Wrex and his krogan for the fight against the Reapers, but how much fight can one woman have left in her?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maw Hammers

1725 Zulu

26 July 2186

Proving Grounds (ashore), Ancient Wastes, Tuchanka, Aralakh

The harsh Tuchanka sun is familiar, but hidden behind a haze of organic particles let off by the Shroud, a huge tower built by the salarians to help repair the krogan homeworld's atmosphere, in trade for krogan assistance against the rachni. Of course, once the rachni were stomped into the dirt and the krogan kept on fighting, the salarians eventually used the Shroud to disperse the genophage, which was about the only thing that kept the krogan from overrunning the galaxy. And today they aim to use the Shroud to spread out the cure to that very same genophage, so the krogan can save the day again. Funny how things turn out, sometimes.

Or it would be funny, if there wasn't a Reaper in the way. And not a Reaper-fied organic, either; an actual Reaper. One of the small ones, which means it's only three hundred metres tall, instead of two klicks, like Sovereign was. That's still plenty enough to crush her and everyone else in the valley into a fine paste, though, and it's standing right between Kelsa and that tower.

"Looks like this is it," Kelsa barks, looking at her entourage with one eye. "We ready?"

"Just gimme a minute, Shepard," Wrex rumbles, plodding up beside her, his armour-all red, with simple Urdnot clan markings-glinting dully in the diffuse light. He looks as grim as she's ever seen him. "You've shown yourself a battlemaster worthy of respect, a friend of the krogan, and a sister to me."

He doesn't say it, but he must be thinking of her honesty with him on the ride across the badlands, when she shared the last, desperate plea of the salarian councilor, Esheel. After Linron left the Normandy with nothing but her thugs and her dignity, she must've complained to Esheel about the plan to cure the genophage. Esheel, in her turn, tried to get Kelsa to go behind Wrex's back and sabotage the cure, so they could trick the krogan into helping with the war without risking another uprising after it was won. But Kelsa's barely Alliance, and she hasn't been a Spectre since before she pried herself up off Miranda's table, and she told the queen of the bullfogs where to stick her sabotage.

Wrex pauses only for the space of a blink. "No matter what happens today, among my people you'll be known from this day forward as Unthrankha Garn."
Eve comes up beside him. "It is a rare honour to find an alien worthy of that title," she says. "It means-"

"I know what it means," Kelsa gruffs, and suddenly she has to rub the dust out if her eyes, unable to look at either of them for a second. A memory of a conversation with Grunt comes back to her, from when he was just a pup, newly hatched on her ship. He told her what the term meant.

Unthrankha Garn.

Worth Killing.

It's the highest compliment a krogan can expect to hear, from an ally or an enemy. "It's been an honour, Wrex. Eve."

"When I bear my first clutch," the female krogan says, "they will know their mother as Urdnot Bakara; you would do me great honour by knowing me as such, as well." She extends her hand in a human gesture, and Kelsa takes it, clasping the krogan forearm to forearm for a pair of heartbeats. Then she backs up, nodding to the rest of her crew. "It's been a hard slog," she says, keeping one eye down the valley. "Vega, Javik, you two hang back. I'll go hit the hammers."

"Commander," Javik protests. "Surely you cannot expect us to remain out of the thick of the fighting. We must-"

"Protect Mordin," Kelsa cuts in, with a glance to the salarian. "He's worth more than any of us right now." She doesn't yell, doesn't speak much louder than the rumbles and mechanical echoes of the Reaper down the field, but everyone listens. Movement from the sand sea catches hey eye and she smirks, nodding. "Looks like you ain't gonna miss any action, either."

They've stayed in this place too long and now Reaper ground troops are converging on their location; Wrex gives a grunt of pleasure, readying his shotgun, and even Bakara takes a weapon. "Protect the cure," Kelsa repeats, and then she trips into a run, toward that big ugly bug on the other end of the trench. The terrain is rough, ancient and scarred by the elements; there's cover, but Kelsa hardly uses it, even when more Reaper troops pour in to try and slow her down. She feels the burning in her mind to stand her ground, that urge to fight and kill until something big enough comes along to stop her, but the better part of her keeps her moving. Even with her enhancements it's a hard push, weighed down as she is by her armour, but not even she's crazy enough to take it off in this place.

When she nears the hammers the ground shakes with a series of impacts, and a screen of Brutes pushes out of the dust-those big fuckers the krogan turn into when the Reapers are through with them. They're about a thousand kilos of armoured murder apiece, and there are four of them standing in between her and the first hammer. Kelsa can't pause, though, can't afford to dance with the big beautiful death machines...not while that Reaper's still lording over the wasteland and blocking access to the Shroud. So instead of dancing, the much smaller monster dodges, rolling and vaulting her way past the screen of muscled metal to the first hammer. Gears that were old before the Vikings found Canada creak to life with the force of her kick, and that hammer-a solid block of reinforced concrete-starts to lift up, shaking chips of gravel off as it goes.

Kelsa doesn't hang around to see if the block falls; she has to weave to the other hammer before she's overrun by Brutes. She doesn't know if the ancient krogan chieftains who built this shrine envisioned the labyrinth of destruction she has to navigate just to use it properly, but she thinks they'd probably approve. But she can't spend too long thinking, because she's got to leap and twist and run to the other side of the platform. It feels empty when she makes it, when she slams an
armoured elbow into the activating panel and sees the second pillar lift itself in its frame. Nothing happens for half a dozen heartbeats, the air itself growing still, like the whole planet is holding its breath; even the Brutes pause their chase, as though waiting to see what's going to happen next.

Then the hammers fall, and the world exhales. Kelsa spins around to meet her attackers, the ravenous killing machines that couldn't stop her in time. The nearest Brute slams its huge, clawed fists into the concrete blocks of the platform, driving deep fissures into the old artificial stone, and it lets out a bloodthirsty bellow, of a kind designed to terrify organic pretty.

Kelsa doesn't freeze, and she doesn't keep running; she has no more reason to, now that her job's done, now that there's nothing but time and luck in the way of an alliance with the krogan. Such concerns fall away as Kelsa pitches forward, drawing her omni-blades, ducking under the Brute's leaping charge. The liquid metal sleeves cut a trench through the Brute's abdomen, opening the poor bastard from gullet to guts. Kelsa rolls into another dive, no attention to spare on the eviscerated carcass whose momentum sends it crashing into the dropped hammer-she's already slipping into the next monster's reach, coming up under its armoured plates, driving her blades into the soft tissues. Meat and tubes.

She remembers Taylor telling her that, back on the Lazarus station...that she wasn't anything more than that, when they found her. It turns out the Reaper troops-at least the ones on the ground-aren't anything more than that, either, and when you slice them up enough, even they fall down. Like the rest of their kind, the Brutes were designed to terrify, to amplify the worst aspects of the original species, to drive their victims to panicked madness. The Brutes have the raw strength and ferocity of a krogan in a blood rage, which makes them deadly if you're in arm's reach, but that comes at a price; once you're inside the kill zone, if you're fast enough, you can take out the primary liver and heart and sever the spine at the base of the throat. Miranda made sure that Kelsa is fast enough, and she wastes no time moving from Brute to Brute, taking advantage of the narrow platform to hit them one at a time.

Once the last one's on the ground, ninety-three seconds after the hammers fell, Kelsa stops to catch her breath, hunkering down against the rock ledge that separates the platform from the broad plain that the Shroud was built on. The plain where the Reaper stands. The plain where thousands of krogan have come over the centuries to do battle with Kalros, the Mother of All Thresher Maws. And every single one of those krogan died in blood and glory, while Kalros only got bigger, nastier, deadlier.

It sounds like a myth, the kind of story that a krogan mother would tell her clutch to put them to bed, but it's real-Kelsa saw it up close on the way to the Shroud, when she and her squad had to duck through the ruins of an ancient city. If there's any single thing in the galaxy that can kill a Reaper, it's Kalros.

It starts with a rumble, an echo from deep under the ground. Kelsa doesn't move, doesn't need to look; she closes her eyes and tilts her head back, letting the sound of the coming storm wash over her. There's the crack of the earth splitting open, the metallic, grinding clang of the Reaper rising to the challenge, the world-ending thunderclap of two monsters coming together in a dance that Kelsa can't ever hope to match. Meat against metal, sovereign sentience against pure, animal hunger.

Kelsa can't honestly tell which she thinks should win.

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_The Loft, SSV Normandy SR-2_

_1145 Zulu_
27 July 2186

*Tuchanka (orbit), Aralakh*

The water is hot against her naked flesh, tingling into the trenches of the new scars she's earned since her vacation in Siberia. She's not showering, not really; she's wasting water, letting it roll over her flesh and bones, letting it wash away the memories of Tuchanka. Mordin's dead, his life given to make sure the genophage cure got dispersed before the Shroud blew up; a complicated end to a complicated man. Because of him the krogan on Tuchanka have a cure to the disease his people helped create, and the turians have a chance to push the Reapers back...which means Earth has a chance to do the same.

That means Kelsa's real test is coming, and soon. They'll let her go back to Earth, and they won't be able to pull her out until she's found a Reaper big enough and bad enough to kill her. She doesn't want to die, but she wants to meet her match, even if that match is two kilometres long from tip to tail. The thought should bother her, the fact that Cerberus overhauled her so much she can spend hours fighting monsters too twisted to be anything but nightmares, and that she can't think of anything she wants more than the day she gets to fight them again. The fact that she can already see the red lighting up in the depths of her eyes when she opens them against the polished metal of her shower stall, that she can feel the hot water singing the fresh cracks in her flesh.

She should be pissed off, or scared, or catatonic with everything she's been through. Better soldiers than her've broken down for a lot less than she's seen in the last few weeks, much less the last few years. But Kelsa doesn't have the energy to fight the Reapers and fight the truth at the same time...and the truth is that Saren wasn't off the mark when he called her a mad varren; Cerberus just helped her take off her collar.

But the water helps to wash all of that away, at least for a time. There's power in water, Kelsa understands. Power enough to eat away at mountains; power enough to drown the best sailors. The sound and the heat and the tingle of the steam take her mind off of the dead, and all of those that are going to be, no matter how strong or fast or ruthless she can become. For just a few moments, Kelsa can forget who she is, forget what she is, and just let the water wash over her.

"Kelsa," EDI's voice pings, eventually, chopping through the steam like an axe through wood. The human woman appreciates that the AI never once called her *Commander* after she told her to use her first-her only-name. "Specialist Traynor is requesting access to the Loft. Should I advise her that you are occupied?"

Kelsa doesn't answer at first, trying to recapture the calm she only just managed to find, but a few heartbeats are enough to let her know that it's gone. "No," she lets on. "I'm done, anyhow. I'll get to her in a minute."

"Of course."

Kelsa cuts the water and stands in the vapour for another handful of heartbeats before she cycles the air and lets it auto-dry her skin. She considers answering the door naked, just to see what Samantha might do, but she decides against it when an odd knot flutters in her stomach. When she does thumb open the door, she's wearing her cargo pants and shirt, both thick enough to hide most of the cracks re-forming in her flesh.

"Commander-"

"Kelsa," the freshly-showered woman corrects, unable to keep from smirking at the memory of the last time the two of them were alone.
"...Kelsa," Samantha concedes, a blush tinting her cheeks a darker shade of brown. "Erm...I'm sorry," she stutters, shaking her head. "This is a bother. I'll just…"

"It isn't," Kelsa grunts, stepping back to give the woman room to enter. "Come in, if you're coming."

Samantha hesitates for a couple seconds, but then steel's her nerve and slips into the Loft's office without another apology. "I was wondering if you were alright, Kelsa," she asks, her eyebrows knitting.

Kelsa raises a scarred brow and leans against the empty fish tank, turning away from her own reflection in the process. "I'm still breathing," she lets on. For now, she doesn't.

Samantha doesn't back down, showing a glimmer of the kind of courage she did the last time they were alone together...the kind that Kelsa's never really felt in herself. "That doesn't sound like a yes, Kelsa," she points out, crossing her arms. "Have you spoken with Shiana recently?"

Kelsa closes her eyes, but it isn't Shiana's particular shade of blue she sees behind her eyelids. "No. I haven't." Left unasked is why the other woman cares, what's got her worried enough to come up here. The galaxy's on fire and I'm the only one she knows who might be able to put it out. "I'm still in the fight," she says, leaning back on the glass, her eyes still closed tight.

"That's what worries me," Samantha lets on. "This fight...it's too much for any one person. Nobody in the Alliance even believed in the Reapers until a few months before they came pouring through the skies of Earth, and nobody knows how to fight them."

"I know how to," Kelsa replies, reclaiming Samantha's brown-eyed gaze with her own red-tinged one. "I've killed a couple of 'em, so I ought to."

"You got lucky," Samantha replies, patiently. "If that thresher maw hadn't shown up, or if it had eaten you instead, we'd all be doomed. Not to mention that the last time you were party to a Reaper's death, you came away from the experience thinking you just might be indoctrinated, yourself. I think I speak for the whole galaxy when I say that your balance of mind is critical, especially now."

Annoyance twinges at the back of Kelsa's neck, and she can't hide her grimace. "You speak for the galaxy now," she gruffs. "Is that all you came up here to do? Tell me how to preserve my mental balance?"

Samantha looks briefly scandalised, if not terrified, but she recovers quickly. "Yes," she says. "I'm not ashamed of being concerned for you, Kelsa. Everyone expects so much of you, and you expect so much of yourself, but nobody on this ship seems to think about what you need, what they can do for you. Except for Shiana. In all the times I've spoken to her, she's only ever expressed concern for your wellbeing."

You've probably talked to her more than I have since we came aboard, Kelsa doesn't say. "It's fine," she grunts, instead. "I'm...it's fine." It's a lie, and Samantha seems to know it, because she reaches out and lays a tentative hand on Kelsa's chorded deltoid. Instead of flinching away, or breaking the lab geek's arm, Kelsa finds herself leaning into the touch. It's both rougher and smoother than she's expecting, the lines of her fingertips catching differently on Kelsa's flesh than a certain asari's pebbled digits. She knows she should pull away, should tell the other woman to get out, but she's so fucking tired. Tired of flinching back at any touch, tired of pushing down the hot ball of want licking at the inside of her ribs, tired of pretending she's just a monster.
When she looks Samantha in the eye, she doesn't feel like she has to pretend any more. Then it hits her all at once—how much she does care, how many people she's come to love in her life. How many of them are already dead, and how many stand to die, and how little there really is that she can do about any of it. "I don't..." She tries to say, but her throat closes, and for the second time since Detroit, she feels tears welling in her eyes. "I'm not..."

"It's okay," Samantha breathes, drawing closer, wrapping the soldier in a tight hug, the first one she's had since before Siberia. "It's okay, Kelsa. There's nobody here but us. You can let it out."

She can't, not really, not if she doesn't want to break more of Samantha's bones than the comms specialist knows she's got, but Kelsa can let herself be folded into the other woman's arms. She can let her reinforced skull rest on Samantha's shoulder as she weeps, and she can pull her own arms around Samantha's waist, taking care not to squeeze too tightly. She can do these things. But she can't ignore the sight painted across the back of her eyelids, of everyone she's taken to heart lying mangled and dead at her feet, while she's too busy fighting to even notice, or care. A sob tries to rise out of her belly, but she stifles it, too scared of the avalanche that could follow.

One of Samantha's hands slides up Kelsa's back to the nape of her neck, fingers forking into the thick ropes of her hair, and she lets out another soothing hiss. "It's alright," she repeats, and then she says three words, so close to what Kelsa used to hear in her dreams, before she died over Alchera. "Let it go."

And then Kelsa melts.

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The Loft, SSV Normandy SR-2

1400 Zulu

28 July 2186

FTL Transit to the Citadel, Widow

"Thank you for reaching out to me, Kelsa," the asari says, perched on the edge of the soldier's bed. "And for speaking with me sober," she adds, inclining her head to the unopened bottle of Jameson sitting on the table between them, where Samantha's chess set rested that one time.

"We'll see how long that lasts," Kelsa hedges, spreading her arms out over the sofa and tilting her head back to take in the skylight. "And you ought to be thanking Sam, 'stead of me. But something tells me you already knew that."

Shiana pauses, weighing her words, just like always. And, just like always, she settles on a way of framing the truth that doesn't get Kelsa's back up. "I do not reserve my concern for you as some closely-held secret, when I interact with other members of the crew. Yet I do not divulge anything about our discussions that you might wish to keep in confidence." She says it so smoothly that Kelsa knows it's the truth. When she doesn't have any words—or bullets—to give in reply, Shiana's smile turns more indulgent. "Though I sense that your statement is true in more ways than you perhaps intended."

That gets Kelsa's mouth a bit looser. "How you figure, doc?"

"Specialist Traynor is quite circumspect as well, but it is clear to those with insight into the human spirit that she cares for you quite deeply." Her expression even outs as she settles into the conversation. "And for the lucky few fortunate enough to have any insight into your spirit in particular, it is clear that you only let someone close enough to care that deeply for you if their
feelings are reciprocated."

The soldier tools her head down to bring the counselor's face more clearly into view. "You remember what I told you about big words, doc?"

"I recall seeing your graduation certificate from Alliance Officer Training School," the asari shoots back, with another modest smile. "And we both know that you are much better at dodging enemy fire than my insinuations, but I can speak plainly, if you wish; I believe you are having trouble coming to grips with how you feel about Samantha Traynor, and how that feeling interacts with your more established attachment to Liara T'Soni."

The back Kelsa's throat goes dry as she grimaces, but she isn't surprised that Shiana can put the pieces together so quickly; cutting through bullshit was one of the biggest reasons the asari succeeded where the Alliance counselors had failed, after all. "I love her," she says, like it's a curse. "And I like Sam...probably a lot." She looks down to the table, her eyes drawn to the green bottle. A lifetime-or two-of experience tells her there aren't any answers at the bottom of it, but there may be fewer questions, at least for awhile. Instead of succumbing to that temptation, though, she closes her eyes and knuckles her forehead. "I saw what loving me did to Liara, and I don't wanna do that to Sam."

"You are referring to the heartbreak you have caused?" Shiana wonders, neutrally. "Or to the lifestyle you feel you have had a hand in shaping?"

"Do I have to pick one?" She breathes a misty laugh before she lifts her eyes to regard her counselor again, her scarred cheek tingling with the grimace she never let go. "The fact that I'm going to die fighting might have something to do with it, too."

"You've always been the survivor," Shiana observes. "The one behind the wall, when you weren't behind the gun. Knowing-or thinking, at the very least-that your dodging days are soon to come to an end may have changed the way you view your relationships. From keeping yourself apart because you do not want to survive another death, you've begun withdrawing because you don't want to bring the burden of grief upon someone else."

"Again."

"...Again," Shiana acknowledges. "Though that brings up an interesting avenue of thought."

"Yeah?" Kelsa gruffs, her fingers tightening on the back of the sofa. "And what's that, doc?"

"You have already inspired a deep well of grief once, when you perished over Alchera," the asari points out. "Not just in Liara, but in all those whose lives you touched in your journey from the donut. There can be freedom in that understanding, if you let it-for however long you have left, you have an opportunity few have seen in their lives." Kelsa's arched brow is her only prompt to continue. "You have a second chance to connect with people who've already told you goodbye, as well as those who never knew you before you died."

A knot twists just above Kelsa's belly. Her eyes are dry as a desert, but she can't deny that the knot's made of a lot of the feelings Shiana's poking at with her thoughts. "I'm...scared," she admits, to herself as much as to the other woman.

"Of course you are," Shiana concedes. "This is an enemy that you cannot shoot, and you cannot punch it into submission. It must be confronted in an entirely different way."

"...What should I do?"
Shiana leans forward, her face drawing in concern. "What do you want to do, Kelsa?"

"Live." Her throat clamps down on the word, turning it into a strangled grunt; out of everything she could say, she knows that's the one thing she can't have. She's survived a hell of a lot in her life, more than most, but it's all been in service to a moment that isn't too many days away, now.

But she can choose how she wants to spend that time, regardless.

"Love," she strangles out, her fingertips ripping through the polycarbon fibres of her seat. "That's what I want. I don't want to feel like I've been hit in the ribs every time I see Liara in the hallway, and I don't want to keep thinking I have to throw Sam off my boat to keep her from becoming a distraction."

"That is an excellent place to start," Shiana observes. "But do you have a vision of what that love can look like?"

"That's the thing," Kelsa rasps, her throat still sore from the fight and the dust on Tuchanka. "I don't think I can choose between them."

That brings a twitch of a smirk back onto the asari's lips. "And what makes you believe you must choose?"

Then Kelsa remembers one of the last real conversations she had with Liara, when the other woman told her a little about how the asari see love. Kelsa wasn't listening then, too busy trying to hurt Liara, trying to get her to keep her distance...trying to keep from hurting her even worse by letting her get too close again. For all the good that did the both of us. "I don't know," she says, after a long pause. "I just...never thought about it any other way."

"I suggest you think about it another way," Shiana replies. "And maybe do some talking, too, to see if your thoughts might be made reality."

Kelsa closes her eyes again, nodding against the prickle of fear eating at the bottom of her lungs. "Okay, I'll...talk to them," she allows, swallowing thickly. "After we get to the Citadel."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to coffee_maker for lending her eyes and her thoughts to this chapter!
Chapter Summary

After the Tuchankan accounts are settled, Kelsa and her crew head back to the Citadel, hoping to plan their next move against the Reapers. Little do they know that Cerberus hasn't given up the ghost quite yet.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to coffee_maker for beta-reading this chapter!

Loading Deck, SSV Normandy SR-2

1425 Zulu

02 August 2186

Docking Bay D24, Citadel (docking), Widow

"No response on any Alliance hailing freaks, Commander," Joker tells her through the comm. "There's a full-band jam going on. Gotta be."

"Specialist Traynor and I have identified patterns in the noise that indicate a tertiary lottery interference pattern," EDI says from the ceiling mic, which is really fucking weird, because her mobile platform is right beside Kelsa, prepping small arms for herself and Garrus. Vega and Kelsa have their shotguns at the ready and their assault rifles already shipped over their heavy plate, but then again that's Kelsa's casual wear when visiting the Citadel; she doesn't feel like asking why Vega was suited up when she came down. "That pattern is popular among Cerberus field cells," the AI continues.

The news is unsurprising, but still not enough to break the spell of EDI the ship speaking without using EDI the mech, a fact that Vega puts voice to first. "You know, Sparks, it's really fuckin' weird to hear your voice without seeing your lips move."

"Interesting," EDI replies, using the mech's synthetic vocal chords. "I will add this data to my human interaction heuristics."

"Less talking," Kelsa barks, "more ground analysis. Are we coming in hot?"

"Infrared suggests fifty-two distinct heat signatures. The frequency disruption makes identification impossible, but it stands to reason that hostility can be inferred simply from the presence of the signal jammer."

"Alright, people," Kelsa grunts. "Assume hostile contact; try to minimise civs in your sights, but
keep in mind Cerberus isn't afraid to use a human shield or even a plant disguised as a hostage; err on the side of pulling to trigger."

"Understood, Kelsa," Garrus gives her, just before EDI communicates her assent. Vega takes longer, but he nods a few seconds before the cargo bay doors pull back.

When those doors open, there isn't a lot of ambiguity down range; more than a dozen Cerberus troops are live on the ground, in the middle of setting up defenses, clearly unprepared for an assault on their rear. Kelsa and her crew don't give them a chance to get set up properly—they're outnumbered three to one at the outset, and ten to one in total of the heat signatures can be trusted, but Kelsa isn't in any kind of mood to let those kind of odds stop her. All she sees are a bunch of tin cans; tin cans shouldn't be able to bleed, but she knows how to make them. The blood's blue, bluer than an asari commando on the evening before shore leave, as blue as a brute's insides.

But these aren't brutes, and this isn't Tuchanka, and Kelsa doesn't have to kill all of them by herself. She knows she's never been a good soldier, or a good leader, despite the bars on her dress uniform; today, though, she takes a back seat. This is a fight for the Alliance as much as it is against Cerberus, and as such, she doesn't have that big of a dog in it. So she lets Vega take point, lets him do the bulk of the killing while she moves them around the LZ like murderous chess pieces. This is personal for him, an attack on his idea of how the works should work, and she lets him take the glory in putting the world to rights again.

Until they run into Thane, and a Cerberus agent drives a katana through his abdomen. That makes it personal, personal enough for her to lead from the front in the race after the assassin, across the artificial skies of the Presidium, up the elevators to the Council Chambers, and through a few dozen more Cerberus troops along the way—not that she's counting.

That battle heat lasts her just until the top of that long elevator ride, but even before the doors open, she knows the assassin's gone. She also knows the Council isn't safe when those doors finally open to reveal them cowering beside a burning skycar (ONE WORD?), with only Ashley's gun between her and them. Instead of adrenaline, Kelsa just feels cold. "Seal the doors," she tells her squad, to give them something to do, if nothing else.

"You see, Williams," Councilor Udina spits, from behind the soldier. "She's with Cerberus! She'll kill us all!"

And then it clicks into place, the bastard's whole plan. "Not all of you," she says, shipping her shotgun and taking a step closer. "Just you, Udina. Ash too, if she makes me."

"So it's true, then?" Ashley demands, from behind the sight of her gun. "You're with Cerberus?"

"Hey, fuck no," Vega grunts, from behind her. "We just cut through a fucking league's worth of those bastards to save you."

"Shut up, James," Kelsa breathes, "and put your fucking gun down. Same goes for you, Garrus."

"But-"

"Now!"

The air hisses with the sound of weapons retracting. "Okay, Loco," the lieutenant concedes, and the turian follows suit not long after.

Kelsa takes another step, thumbing the speedlocks on her armour; her shields flicker and die, and another handful of seconds are all it takes for her heavy plate to collapse, leaving her in her weave
undersuit. Without her shields it's like wearing paper. Her eyes never move from Udina, even as Ashley steps in front of him more fully. "I'm not with Cerberus," she offers, for all the good it'll do. "But I think you are, Councilor."

"You have no proof of that," the man retorts. "You never have proof of anything!"

"Won't stop me from killing you," she points out, taking another step.

Ashley's finger pulls back halfway on the trigger. "Stop, Commander. I can't let you do that."

"Kill her," Udina urges. "You're a Spectre, and she's threatening the Council! Do your duty!"

"You know I've gotten real tired of that mouth of yours," Kelsa tells him. "And you're gonna wind up getting a friend of mine killed for no good reason. I'd shut up, if I were you."

"Why, Shepard?" Ashley asks. "You say you're not with Cerberus, why do you wanna kill the Council, then?"

"Not the Council; just him." She takes another step, too close now to dodge if Ashley decides to open fire. "I said stand down, Garrus," she snaps, recognising the sound of his sniper rifle extending like she's heard it a thousand times.

"Tell me why," Ashley says again. "Tell me something I can believe, Shepard."

"I could tell you that he's sold out to Cerberus," Kelsa muses, slowly gathering her fingers into fists as she talks. "I could say he needs to die for the Alliance and the Council, for the war against the Reapers; that he has to die because we want to build a world after they're gone, and scum like him'll only get in the way. And that's all true, as far as it goes, but it isn't why I have to kill him."

She still hasn't let her eyes off the bastard, even as she talks to the woman with a gun trained on her heart. "I might even say I have to kill him because a friend of mine is dead, or close enough to it, and that came out of a deal he made with the Illusive Man. But really...it's just 'cause it'll make me very happy to see the light fade out of his eyes after I slice him in half."

Where Vega and even Garrus are fighting for the Alliance and the Council, to build something, Kelsa's motives aren't half so noble. She's not fighting for the future, or the galaxy, or even for revenge; in truth, all of her taste for revenge died in Detroit, when she had to look a gangster in the eye and thank him for killing her best-here only-friend. It's taken her a long time to understand the reason she kept fighting after that day, the reason she ran from the Reds and put in for OCS and let herself become N7; she understood it when she made a deal with the Illusive Man, and when she went through the Omega 4 relay, and when she stood in the shallows of English Bay, surrounded by the dying she couldn't save, and the dead she made that way. She didn't accept it then, couldn't use it as anything more than a crutch to prop up her self-pity. She can accept it now, though.

Even with the feelings for her friends and lovers coiled around her heart, she knows what she is. And she isn't ashamed of that anymore.

Doubt causes Ashley to hesitate, and in that moment of wavering, Udina tries a desperate gambit. "To hell with this," he snarls, pulling out a pistol. Kelsa springs with all the sudden force of a storm surge on Thessia, knocking Ashley to the side and extending the omni-blade of her right arm. She bulls into the man just as he pops off a round at the asari councilor; she takes his arm off in one smooth chop that sends her blade through his torso at an angle, and he falls like a tree. He's too shocked even to scream at first, though he gets around to it, just before Kelsa takes his head off, which shuts him up for good.
"Goddamn I've been waiting for that," she growls, oblivious to the horror across Ashley's face, or the mute fear of the rest of the Council. The asari-Irissa-is clutching her side, purple blood seeping through her fingers. "You maybe wanna get that looked at," Kelsa suggests, as she straightens up.

Irissa regards the human coolly for a moment, perhaps just the threat of a biotic flicker at the corners of her eyes, her spasm of fear settling into a neutral mask. "I've had worse," she admits.

The turian councilor speaks up. "It appears we owe you our lives, Commander Shepard."

"No," she demurs, deactivating her omni-blade and turning away from them. "You owe me your deaths, if the fight against the Reapers calls for them." The three aliens have nothing to top that with, and for the first time in her memory, the governing body of the Citadel is speechless. "You owe me the same, Ash," she points out. "Can I count on you?"

Ashley still looks confused, not quite able to come to grips with how things've unfolded in the last few minutes, but slowly she nods. "Udina made me a Spectre, but if he was with Cerberus...I hope they put him back together, just so I can kill him again."

Kelsa can't help the cracked smile that breaks out over her lips. "Good."

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_Ikiru's Restaurant, Silversun Strip_

_1300 Zulu_

_05 August 2186_

_Citadel (ashore), Widow_

Two days after the siege that almost killed the Council, and the Silversun Strip is bustling as though nothing else existed-no Cerberus, no Reapers, and nothing like war, except what they show on vids. Kelsa can't really blame people for trying to forget about those things; the end of history has a tendency to throw things out of perspective just as much as it puts things in it.

She can't tell if this little evening trip to a fancy restaurant with Liara and Sam is perspective gained or perspective lost, but she doesn't much care, as long as it helps settle the tension in her gut when she thinks about either one of them. Though the sight of them, dressed up _very_ nicely in line in front of the restaurant, puts a very different kind of tension in her core, a tingling her fingers haven't been able to quell. "Thank you both for coming," Kelsa says as she stalks up to the line. "Sorry I'm late."

"That's quite alright," Liara assures her. "Samantha and I found one another easily enough. It appears we were both under the impression that this was a formal engagement." Her words are harsh, but her tone is indulgent, and Kelsa sees a mischievous light in the asari's eyes that brings a grin to her lips.

"Sorry 'bout that, too," she allows; she's wearing her usual service uniform comprised by a simple black t-shirt and khaki trousers with leather boots, which is excellent camouflage for the sorts of places she usually frequents, but makes her stick out like a broken arm in this place. "I thought it'd make people less likely to recognise me."

Sam snorts a laugh. "You'd've been more likely to go incognito if you dressed up," she points out, bringing up her omni-tool and typing a few quick commands into her haptic console. "For the paparazzi," she explains, at Kelsa's raised eyebrow.
"Oh, don't look," Liara warns her, placing a casual hand onto the human woman's shoulder. "It will just make you want to kill them."

"I already want to kill them," Kelsa grumbles, but she leans into the asari's touch, her grin twisting deeper on her face. "Maybe a little bit of blood'd get this line moving faster."

Sam rolls her eyes, but the gesture doesn't quite cover her cheeks blanching. "But then I'd be put off my appetite, which seems rather to miss the point of having stood in line in the first place."

This moment feels weird in a way Kelsa can't describe, until she understands just how normal it is; three friends, just talking, not trying to plan an assault or schedule an assassination or shore up a weak signal from a comm buoy. It feels so weird because it's only happened to get a handful of times since she graduated from OCS, and only a couple of handfuls of times before then, too. And she's looking forward to sitting down to a nice, normal meal with the two people she's come to care about more than anyone else, despite all the reasons she has not to care about anybody at all. Of course, the kind of conversation she wants to have is probably far from normal, but then again, so's a night out without at least somebody trying to kill her.

Of course sometimes the galaxy just can't help but insist on some normalcy; maybe she's foolish to expect anything else, but when the smartly-dressed Alliance lieutenant intercepts the three of them just before they get to the door of the restaurant, Kelsa can't help but feel a little annoyed. "You here to arrest me?" She wonders, before the woman can even introduce herself.

A blink of surprise is all the answer the lieutenant can muster for a second, clearly unprepared for the question. "Not as far as I'm aware, ma'am," she says at last. "My name is Lieutenant Brooks, and I'm a staff analyst with Alliance Intel. I've come to warn you that you're in terrible danger. You should consider a protective detail until the Citadel becomes more stable. If you'll please follow me…"

Kelsa's raised brow is all the answer she intends on giving, but the woman-Brooks-doesn't budge, even as the doorman if the restaurant gives them an inpatient cough. "No," she says, brushing past both the soldier and the greeter, leading the way for her two companions. There's a single unoccupied table with only two seats available, which doesn't exactly make Kelsa's mood more receptive when Brooks elbows get way past the doorman after them.

"Just wait, Comman-"

And then a bullet cleaves through Brooks' shoulder; the woman's flesh and bone slow the projectile down enough that the next person it hits isn't so lucky. That next person happens to be Samantha Traynor, and the bullet doesn't hit her in the shoulder...instead it buries itself in her chest with a soft thup, a sound that comes to the focus of Kelsa's attention.

A heartbeat passes before Sam reacts, and Kelsa's there in time to catch her when her legs go out from under her. "Someone...shot me," the comms specialist breathes, as though fascinated by the fact. That breathed phrase is sharper in Kelsa's hearing than Brooks' scream of anguish, more urgent the cries of surprise from the fancy assholes in the restaurant. Almost more compelling than the sounds of more ammunition ricocheting off of Liara's hasty barrier. In that moment she feels cold, the sharp knives of frigid air invading her lungs when she breathes in, and she knows if she closes her eyes, it won't be Sam's face she sees on the insides of her eyelids.

Another heartbeat has Kelsa's instincts kicking in, and she lowers Sam to the floor even as people around them start to panic and run all over the place. Kelsa unceremoniously fishes Brooks' medigel packs from her uniform before the analyst has a chance to use any of them and she starts to dress Sam's wound, not bothering to talk, or even to acknowledge anyone else. There's no room in
her gut for panic, no space left in her heart for angst-nor for grief. "Shut up," she finally says, coolly, to Brooks once Sam is out of immediate danger, and she looks to Liara. "Can you get her out of here?"

"Not without a distraction," the asari confesses; the barrier doesn't look like it's taking a serious toll on her, but she must be worried about dropping it by accident. It's starting to draw more serious fire from outside the restaurant, but Kelsa knows that's not going to be the worst of it.

"I'm the target," she points out, glancing at Brooks. "Your weapon?"

"I'm a staff analyst," she snaps, as though that were explanation enough. Then again, she's probably just in pain from her own gunshot-it's her right shoulder, through and through, about the cleanest you can get without being winged. "Our intel's off-they weren't supposed to hit tonight. Something's wrong."

"They're firing on a civilian district," Liara observes. "Of course something's wrong!"

Kelsa grunts, levering herself back onto her feet and turning to a window that hasn't been shot out yet. "I'll take care of it," she promises.

"How?!" Brooks demands, hunched up against the barrier. "You don't even know who they are!"

"Doesn't matter," the soldier responds. "I'm the target, which means whoever they are, they can't be too smart." She spares Liara another glance, almost apologetic, even as the excitement of a fight starts creeping up her spine. "Take care of her, Doc. We still need to have that talk."

"Indeed," Liara assures her. "You take care, too. There will be no conversation without the three of us present and accounted for."

Kelsa nods, taking a long, cold breath. "Understood."

And then she goes to work.

_Tertiary Entrance, Citadel Archives_

2130 Zulu

06 August 2186

_Presidium Sub-Basement C-33, Citadel (ashore), Widow_

The last thirty-two hours have been some of the weirdest of Kelsa's memory, or they would be, if Kelsa had been paying attention to the details. She hasn't, though, unless you count rate of ammo-block depletion-that's one of the details she's been focused on in her pursuit of the motherfuckers that shot Sam, that've been shooting at her for the last day and a half.

She isn't alone, though she deserves to be; Garrus is with her, and Ashley, along with Wrex of all people. Liara would be here, but she's with the rest of the Normandy's ground team, looking out for Sam while Chakwas fights to save her life. Kelsa hasn't been able to think about that particular detail, not if she wants to keep up her own kind of fighting, with bullets and bombs and a whole lot of blood. In Sam's place, Brooks's tagged along, even though she can't even hold a gun to save her life; in the last few hours she's given some valuable intel, and she could stand to give more, so Kelsa can't afford to cut her loose. That fight and Brooks' intel has led them all here, to the archives, where someone's trying to steal Kelsa's identity for some goddamned reason. As far as
they can tell, the well-armed assholes are a bunch of washed-out Alliance soldiers who formed up their own merc company while Kelsa was on ice at Lazarus Station, but not even Brooks can tell Kelsa what the fuck they're doing, or what they hope to accomplish.

Not that it makes a difference, Kelsa thinks to herself, crouched behind a bank of computers as cover for some light arms fire. They're all dead anyway. They just need a little time to get used to it. With a silent signal to Wrex across the way, they coordinate their uncovering to take a break in the fire, and launch over the databanks to return fire and drive the assault into the middle of the room. Garrus and Ash cover their flanks, and Brooks tries to stay out of the way...but, of course, as soon as Kelsa takes her eyes off the analyst, the woman gets captured. It's enough to break Garrus' and Ash's support, and it even gives Wrex pause when a big, armoured thug drags Brooks toward the door at the back of the room.

Kelsa's shotgun's hot in her hands as she shoulders it, her finger pressing down on the trigger until the spike-thrower starts its telltale clicking. Before she releases the pressure, though, that door at the back of the room opens, and out steps something from one of Kelsa's fucked-up dreams.

"Spirits," Garrus curses, from the rafters over her left shoulder. "Is that...that can't be…"

But as the figure steps forward and takes over the hostage-taking duties from the helmeted asshole, it can't be denied; it looks almost exactly like Kelsa, but different in a million ways-the hair's straight, like it's been relaxed, and there aren't any scars on its face...either the glowing trenches or the older spiderwebs that Kelsa's earned over her life. The thing's eyes shine with hunger, but there isn't that red light behind the irises, the light Kelsa's eyes have already started to show again.

"It's a clone," Kelsa gruffs, still sighting down on the target—even though the target looks just like her. "Backup or spare parts for Cerberus, I reckon."

"Very good," the thing says, hiking a machine pistol higher up Brooks' temple. The captive woman looks terrified, but she doesn't try to beg or struggle, and she doesn't say a thing. "Only Cerberus made a mistake when they woke you up," not-Kelsa goes on, looking from Kelsa to Wrex to their backup on the scaffolding above them. "They didn't kill me."

"I can fix that," Kelsa promises, her own eyes fixed on the pulse-point of her doppelgänger's jugular, just visible from her position behind Brooks.

"Oh, no," the clone counters. "There'll be no fixing of anything. Your fixing days are over, old woman. It's my turn, now. Even as we speak, my people are taking over the Normandy, and when I'm through with you, there'll be nothing to stop me from making a galaxy worth saving." It pauses to draw in a breath, probably to keep talking, but Kelsa's heard enough.

She lets off the trigger of her spike-thrower, which kicks so hard it pushes her back half an inch, and half a heartbeat later a spike as long as Kelsa's forearm sprouts from the front of Brooks' neck. It disappears just as quickly, driven through her throat and into the clone's, where it sticks enough to send the fake Kelsa falling back into the door. There she's pinned, still alive but evidently paralysed from the neck down, hanging from the spike in her throat and gasping wetly for air. It only takes the time for Brooks to fall to the ground for the real Kelsa, Wrex, Ash, and Garrus to clear the rest of the room, and the clone still isn't dead when the last of her allies falls. "Something whoever set you free should've told you," Kelsa allows, as she lines up another shot. "Hostages don't work on me. At least not after Omega 4."

She leaves the body there, pinned to the door with two spikes, surrounded by all the others that the clone's ambitions turned into corpses. Ashley falls into step beside her, the silence tense, judging, as they make their way to the skycar that might—might—let them evade C-Sec. "Do you still pray,
Ash?" Kelsa wonders, just as they're loading into the automobile.

"Yes, ma'am," the other woman answers, as if by instinct. "Every day."

"Good," Kelsa grunts, setting coordinates for the docking bay. "Because there's a bunch of assholes crawling over my ship. Let's take 'em to church."
In which Kelsa takes a detour to do a favour for a friend.

Author's note: Thanks once again to coffee_maker over at AO3 for beta-reading!

Unit 237-P, Short Stay Ward, Huerta Memorial

1015 Zulu

07 August 2186

Citadel (ashore), Widow

"Looks like you're gonna be alright," Kelsa says, not fighting the crooked smile that breaks out over her lips as she watches Sam wake up. "As alright as anyone can be with a few thousand space lobsters wandering around trying to kill us all, anyhow."

Sam gives a half-sedated chuckle and regrets it. "Ow; don't make me laugh, Kelsa," she warns her. "Though at least we know if the whole super-soldier thing doesn't work out, you've a decent shot at slaying the Reapers with your cutting wit."

"Fat chance of that," Kelsa rebuffs, leaning forward in her chair to get a better look at the woman on the bed.

Liara smiles at the two of them from her perch by the window. "I suppose we are in luck, then, that your skills at soldiery are in no danger of failing."

"My skills at killing, Kelsa thinks, but she holds back that retort, knowing it'll only draw up a chorus of denials from the two of them. No point in ruining a perfectly good visit with the truth. "Thank you for staying with her while I went off to be a soldier."

The asari smiles, both at Kelsa and at Sam, and she directs her answer at the supine woman. "It was the least I could do, Samantha. I am more pleased than I can express by your recovery and prognosis-the bullet lodged securely in a left posterior rib and was successfully removed by microsurgery before it entered your bloodstream."

"Thank you," Sam offers, along with a sincere smile of gratitude. "How long until I can rejoin the Normandy, do you think?"

"Dr. Michel says it's just a matter of a couple of days for the deep-tissue medi-gel to repair your lungs," Kelsa says. "Be good as new in no time."

"Your asthma may be worse for some time, however," Liara admonishes her. "The treatment
stimulates immune response. It may be several weeks before you feel back to normal."

Samantha sighs, easing back onto the bed with a shrug. "I suppose it's better than dying, all things considered…"

"Not really," Kelsa gruffs, smirking a little darkly. "But I'm glad you stuck around." She looks from Sam to Liara. "Both of you." Liara's smile is like the sun on a grey day, cool and silver, with the distant promise of gold. Kelsa's own smirk softens, and she feels her heart swell with longing, for the promise of a life she's never going to get. But that doesn't mean they can't build something, even out of the ashes of the end of the world. They'll have to have that conversation later, though. "I've gotta go," Kelsa tells them, carefully levering herself up out of the chair—even out of her armour, she's still heavy enough to break it, if she doesn't pay attention.

"Where are you going?" Sam wonders, her brows drawing together in an expression so precious it's almost enough to make Kelsa want to stay.

She won't stay, though. And she might not come back, even though she wants to. "Somebody needs me to go be a soldier." Somebody Kelsa wouldn't mind being owed a favour by, with enemies Kelsa won't mind killing. "Should be back by the time you're good to go, Sam."

Samantha bites her lip, but she nods. "You'd better."

"Just make sure Liara doesn't orchestrate too many coups while I'm gone."

The comms specialist looks confused, while Liara only shakes her head, and Kelsa doesn't wait around long enough for them to answer. Instead she heads out of the hospital room, past Grunt and Vega, both set up to guard it; she turns her thoughts away from the conversation she promised Shiana she was going to have, away from the drell who died in front of her yesterday not three floors away from here, away from the enormity of the Reapers, and onto the task at hand.

Kelsa was never very good at infiltration—she's always been a walk up, shoot, and stroll away kinda girl; she paid attention in OCS and the Villa, though, and she couldn't've earnt her N7 stripe without knowing how to fade into a crowd. There's something freeing about anonymity, getting lost in a mob of bodies, rubbing up against people who'd be dead or worse if not for you without them having any idea. Nobody notices her outside of her armour, her dreads loose and her more obvious scars smoothed over with foundation; she's just another human milling around, the same as any other. Nobody looks at her and sees a killer, unless they look closer, and Kelsa doesn't give anybody any reason to look closer as she walks through the station. Most people are too busy gawking at the Citadel's own battle scars to take much notice of the woman who helped make them, anyhow.

She makes her way down to the Lower Wards to an unlicensed dock run by a petty gang of vorcha with nothing to recommend them except for the lack of any ties to any part of Aria T'Loak's network. Kelsa's tempted to kill them, just to make sure they don't wind up recognising her and compromising the mission, but in the end she opts for discretion by paying them in creds instead of ammunition. The shuttle's good enough, refurbished Alliance, with enough juice to get her where she needs to go. A quick scan ensures her it isn't bugged with anything the Shadow Broker's scanners can detect, and it starts up with only a little fuss.

Once she buys the thing and takes off, she settles in for a nice, long flight—it's too risky to push to FTL, or even much more than a fifth of lightspeed. Otherwise the shuttle's heat signature would light up a few hundred Citadel scanners, and all that stealth back stationside would've been wasted. As it is, the rendezvous with Aria's fleet takes a little less than a day, about as long as it'd take the Normandy to cross a medium-sized star cluster without really trying, and she's running so cold that
Aria's flagship only picks her up when she pulls into visual range.

The shuttle's dash chirps with a demand for the docking protocol, and Kelsa opens a tightbeam channel. "Access code is go fuck yourself if you don't want my help, Aria," she grunts, blinking away the last bit of sleep she's probably gonna get for awhile.

"You're lucky I do want your help," the erstwhile Queen of Omega snarls, more impatient than angry, her voice crackling over the comm. "What took you so long? We're at risk of missing our window."

As cocky as Kelsa's gotten since decapitating Udina and killing her own clone, she's not stupid enough to push Aria any further. "It was a personal issue," she says, confirming the docking protocols the flagship sends across the wire.

"Is it going to affect your performance?"

"No."

"See that it doesn't," the asari insists. "Meet me on the bridge when you're docked. We've got little time."

"Understood. I'll be there ASAP."

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_Bridge, CSV Cruz-Pierre [Stolen]_

0945 Zulu

08 August 2186

_Omega (attacking), Sahrabarik_

The man in the holoscreen looks smug, even amused, dressed smartly in his Cerberus uniform and his two-toned goatee. He styles himself a general, by the bars on his shoulders. His name is Oleg Petrovsky, one of the Illusive Man's top lieutenants, and the current ass planted in Aria's throne. He's on Omega because Kelsa wasn't good enough at dismantling Timmy's operation; she only crippled them, instead of killing them, and a crippled dog is still plenty dangerous—the Citadel proved that well enough. They wouldn't have been able to launch that assault without having Omega as a base to move assets around the Terminus; it's Kelsa's job to take Omega away from them. But Petrovsky doesn't know Kelsa's there, yet. He just thinks this is all Aria. Maybe he thinks that because he left Aria alive after his coup, he's got some kind of leverage. Whatever he thinks, though, he comes off as a bastard. "Stop this foolishness, Aria. All you're going to accomplish is getting yourself and your fellow carpetbaggers killed."

There must be an easily-translated equivalent of the human insult into the asari's mother tongue, or else Aria must have heard it before, because she hides her outrage behind a sneer. "The only foolishness I see is a that of a monkey who thinks outwitting me is the same as beating me. I've been outwitted more times in my life than days you've been alive; do you want to know why I'm still alive, and why I'm going to be able to kill you?"

"One can only assume you'll tell me, regardless." Petrovsky looks like he has to make an effort not to roll his eyes. In spite of his name, he speaks with a distinctly polished English accent that Kelsa's translator can't quite erase; she can't tell if it's authentic, or an affectation to make himself seem
"When I want something," Aria says, holding up a biotic-wreathed fist, "I take it." Then she crosses her arms, her lips curling into a self-satisfied smirk. "And if I can't take it, I find myself someone who can, and I convince them to take it for me. What I want most is the chance to put my hands around your throat and watch the blood vessels in your eyes rupture. I freely admit that I can't take that opportunity for myself. Unluckily for you, I know just who can take it for me."

Petrovsky's eyes narrow, half way between offended and intrigued, but he's not even a little scared. "And who might that be, I wonder?" He muses. "Who is the one person that the great Aria T'Loak thinks will redeem her?"

"That'd be me," Kelsa gruffs, stepping into the holo's projective range. Her makeup's scraped off, the ropes of her hair tied back, and N7 logo is clear on her purple-tinted armour.

The general hides his shock well, but then again he wouldn't've made it so long as Timmy's number two if he couldn't keep his guard up. "Commander Shepard," he says in acknowledgement, inclining his head. "I was a great admirer of your fight against the Collectors; it was a shame we could not have met in person, before your defection."

Kelsa's scarred face tightens into a grin. "Oh, don't worry. You're gonna see me soon enough."

"Know that I do not blame you for leaving," Petrovsky tells her. "Nor even for targeting our assets afterward. I will take no pleasure in ordering your death, Commander, but I will order it, if you and Aria do not turn back now."

"That isn't going to happen," Aria snarls. "I will see everyone on this ship dead before I let you stay on Omega another day. Believe that."

"As you wish," Petrovsky accedes, grudgingly.

"You know the difference between you and me, Oleg?" Kelsa wonders, before he can end the call. "Used to be people like you would give the orders and I'd follow them. That means a lot of people have told me to kill someone, given me the orders to follow. But it turns out if you kill enough people, you start to learn that the people who give the orders can die just as easy as the people they order you to kill." She backs out of the projection zone, leaving the man with one parting shot. "I stopped taking orders to kill people awhile back; now I do it because the pain and blood, the smell and the sound...it's art, and when I do it, it's beautiful." Her grin widens to show her teeth, her eyes glowing a faint orange from inside. It feels good to be honest, for once. "I can't wait for you to see it, Oleg. I think you'll be able taste it, before we're through."

For just a second, the man can't cover the twitch of uncertainty that crosses his face at her words, but still there's no fear there, just the wariness of a lioness in the long grass. Almost wearily, he signals to someone off his own holo. "Fire at will."

And then the music starts. It isn't quite like killing a Reaper, but Kelsa can make do with what she's given.

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*Vestibule, Afterlife*

2330 Zulu
Omega (ashore), Sahrabarik

Aria was doing so good, taking tactical orders and deferring to Kelsa's judgement on the field, even after they ran into a turian named Nyreen Kandros, who turned out to be one of Aria's former lovers-and the leader of the last gang on Omega capable of standing up to Cerberus. Under Kandros' guidance, the Talons went from a small-time sand running outfit to an effective paramilitary organisation conducting civ-friendly asymmetrical warfare. Of course, with Cerberus' new tech from the Collector base, any warfare the gang could hope to mount would have to be asymmetrical. Still, none of them had been expecting the adjutants, a new kind of Reaper ground troop Cerberus was evidently trying to control. Kandros was terrified of them; every time she came across them in the last couple of days, it had been up to Kelsa and Aria to fight them off while the turian choked up on her weapon. The system was working about as well as both of them could have hoped, give or take a few thousand casualties when Kelsa had to reroute the station's power away from Cerberus' internal barriers, which Petrovsky had hooked into the life support grid of three separate districts. In spite of his self-proclaimed admiration, he'd apparently taken the wrong lesson from Kelsa's service record with Cerberus, if he thought her capitulation on the Collector base was instructive.

Everything was going well up until two minutes ago, at any rate, which was when Kelsa and Aria had broken through to Afterlife, where Petrovsky had made his headquarters. They made it just in time to see Kandros going out like a big damned hero, detonating a grenade belt with five of the monsters trapped with her in a biotic bubble. Not coincidentally, that was when Aria stopped being a good soldier and started being a mindless killing machine, using her biotics to charge into the nightclub she once owned, leaving a trail of Cerberus bodies in her wake.

Now Kelsa's left playing chase-the-crazy-asari, and no matter how extensively Cerberus might've enhanced her legs, she can't hope to keep up with a biotic charge, so she doesn't even try. Instead she stalks down the hall with her spike-thrower at the ready, picking off the remnants of Aria's wrath, too keyed into the visceral immediacy of combat to offer even the slightest thought to Aria's loss. It doesn't surprise her when she makes it to the main floor of Afterlife to see Aria caught up in a biotic field halfway between the door and Petrovsky; she struggles mightily, but even her considerable power can't outmatch Cerberus' Reaper-enhanced barrier generators.

"Shepard," Petrovsky calls over the comm, from the little eagle's nest where Aria used to hold court. "Perhaps with the asari muzzled, we can have a reasonable conversation. You must think you've won, just because you've slaughtered so many of your own kind. I assure you that you are mistaken."

Kelsa doesn't answer at first; instead she takes an open position to Aria's right, in full view of the man, and she shoulders her spike-thrower, taking aim at him through the glass. "You seem like you enjoy taking calculated risks," she tells him, as her finger tightens on the trigger and the gun's telltale clicks begin caressing her eardrums. "What're your calculations as to the chances of the window between us standing up to krogan ammunition?"

The fucker narrows his eyes, subtly moving his hand over a panel on the console in front of him. "Slightly better than the chances of any of us surviving what will happen if I release my hand from this console," he says, cocky and weary in equal measure. "You aren't the only one willing to accept a Pyrrhic victory in this contest of ours." Light flashes from the biotic field as Aria fights against it, but the barriers prove too strong even for her power to neutralise. "Ever the fighters," Petrovsky scoffs. "Tell me, even if you do succeed against the Reapers, do you think the galaxy will thank you, in the end? Will there even be a place for you, the woman who fought the very
"Not really," Kelsa concedes. "But you've gotta admit that the galaxy makes a helluva canvas for my art, regardless." Before he can answer her, she lets the pressure up off the trigger; the kick of her gun is familiar, an intimate caress against her armoured shoulder, and she can tell by the force of it that the spike will hit its target. Petrovsky's own shoulder is covered in nothing but cloth, and he takes the spike's impact with far less grace, disappearing back into the office with a cry of pain, chased by shards of broken glass from the shattered window.

The man might bluster like a sand fiend after a score, but he doesn't bluff; as soon as his hand lifts off the panel, three doors around the nightclub-turned-command-centre open, and it isn't too many more heartbeats before adjutants start pouring out of each of them. Petrovsky's secure, but Aria's still trapped, so it's down to Kelsa to fight through the bastards until she can deactivate the generators keeping the asari out of the action. They don't quite match the raw strength of brutes, but they make up for it with wicked agility and an ability to coordinate that almost matches a turian's discipline. Kelsa's been fighting for more than a day without a break, and she's tired enough to sleep for two, but the challenge juices her up enough to push past her exhaustion. She fights with her gun, with her omni-blades, with her own two hands and knees and feet, and she manages to bull through enough of the adjutants to destroy three of the generators; the fourth isn't enough to keep up the barrier under the weight of Aria's biotics, and the asari breaks free with a flare that tears into half a dozen Reaper fuckers. With Kelsa's murderous instincts and Aria's barely-contained wrath, it isn't too long before Petrovsky's last gambit fails.

They find him pinned to the back wall, slumped, out of resignation rather than death; he must've heard the slaughter go on far too long, and figured out how useless it'd be to try and run. He lifts his head just enough to look at the both of them from beneath his peppery eyebrows. His goatee's stained with blood, too bright to have come from inside, and when he talks, it's with the hissed slur of someone without a whole tongue. "I would offer information on the Illusive Man in exchange for my life," he groans, through the pain, "but I suspect such would fall on deaf--" he can't finish saying ears, because Kelsa kneels in front of him and shoves the barrel of her SMG into his mouth to keep him from biting down. She waves away an admonition from Aria and goes fishing in the general's mouth with her fingers, gloves sticky with dirt caked on by adjutant blood. "Cerberus fucks always have a plan for skirting the noose," she explains, over the old man's grunts and gags of protest. She has to headbutt him to get him to hold still, but she manages to dig out the cyanide capsule he'd had buried in a molar, probably more than half his lifetime ago. "There it is," she gruffs, producing the capsule for Aria's inspection. "He was probably tonguing his cheek when he got shot, and the impact with the wall made him bite half the thing off before he could get the capsule in position. He's all yours."

Aria looks from the piece of glass in her hand to the man on the floor, both stained with the same blood; there's understanding and a certain cunning gratitude when she looks at Kelsa, along with a hint of hunger Kelsa knows all too well. "You should sleep," she suggests, her smirk line a fishing knife, curved and sharp. "I'll want to thank you properly before you go. You'll need to get some rest first."

The gnawing pit of exhaustion and hunger hollow out Kelsa's stomach; there's a flicker of doubt, the promise of a conversation that still hasn't happened, that might never happen if Aria means what Kelsa thinks knows she does. But the words of objection die in her lungs, her throat suddenly too raw to voice them. "Alright," she says, instead.

Aria's smirk deepens, and she tips her head just a bit. "Alright," she allows, and then she turns toward Petrovsky, biotic blue crackling at the edge of her expression.
Tiberius Towers, Silversun Strip

0800 Zulu

12 August 2186

Citadel (ashore), Widow

The hot water of Anderson's jacuzzi eases the pain of the bruising that Kelsa got during the fight against Cerberus on Omega; she could get Chakwas to administer local medi-gel to speed up her healing, or even do it herself, but that might lead to questions about what she was up to, and why. She told Liara and Sam, at least enough that they weren't surprised when she came back limping, but nobody else knows-nobody else needs to.

Still, curiosity gets the better of Sam, who perks up when Kelsa lets out a deep sigh of contentment. "Did you have fun being a soldier?" She wonders, from her corner of the jacuzzi.

Liara's eyes sharpen subtly as she lounges in the other corner, but she doesn't give any other sign of interest in the question. Kelsa stretches her arms out on her side, letting her head fall back until she's looking at the ceiling. "Enough," she lets on. "But I'm glad to be back." She doesn't mention any of the non-soldierly activities she got up to with Aria after all the soldiery was done; she isn't sure whether or not Liara knows, but she's damned sure the asari isn't going to find out from her. "I'm glad to see that bullet didn't do you too much harm, either."

"It was a close thing, for a few days," Liara tells them; she oversaw the operation, and the specialist's recovery thereafter. "But the microsurgeons at large were competent enough."

"Thank you," Sam says, before Kelsa can. "Again."

The asari only inclines her head in response, and the silence lingers between the three of them for several moments, during which they enjoy the heat of the water and the sound of the bubbles. It's Anderson's pool, in Anderson's apartment, but Anderson's on Earth, having fun sleeping in dirty bunkers and fighting for his life on a daily basis. Kelsa envies him, still, even if she's got to fight a bunch of weird shit Anderson hasn't seen yet. He will, she thinks. I'm gonna bring it all back with me. Marauders, brutes, maybe even adjutants; hell, if and when the Reapers hit Thessia, she'll get to see what kinds of monsters they turn the asari into. Part of her, the part that she's stopped running away from, can't wait to get the news that Thessia's fallen to the giant squids from dark space. It'd give her an excuse to see where Liara grew up, to see what real asari commandos fighting for their home look like, to kill a lot of them once the Reapers get through with them. To see if she'll finally meet something she can't kill.

Another part of her dreads that day, and what it'll do to the asari, both in general and the one sharing Anderson's jacuzzi with her. Liara's not the same naïve maiden she was when Kelsa yanked her out of that volcano, but she isn't going to look at her world burning and feel a thrill of excitement running up her spine. Sam didn't feel that, when they bugged out of Earth's atmosphere; neither did Vega or Joker, for that matter. Neither did EDI. My ship is more human than I am. It's enough to tear a grunted laugh from her as she contemplates the conversation she's been promising, and successfully avoiding, since before she chased Cerberus off the Citadel. "I don't know what either one of you see in me," the soldier gruffs, lifting her head to take a look at each of them. "But, if you want, we can have that talk now."
Thanks so much to coffee_maker for beta-reading! And thank all of you for hanging around!
50. Skinny Love

Chapter Summary

Kelsa, Samantha, and Liara finally have a conversation, but it may not satisfy them; meanwhile, the Reapers haven't taken a break from infiltrating all of the civilised places in the galaxy, but the Normandy crew claims one small place from their clutches.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tiberius Towers, Silversun Strip

0830 Zulu

12 August 2186

Citadel (ashore), Widow

"I think we would like that, Kelsa," Liara says, from her corner. She glances to Sam, and the specialist glances back; a thousand words pass unspoken between them, and it's clear that they've had a talk, in Kelsa's absence. Probably more than one.

She isn't quite sure how to feel about that, but she's smart enough not to dig. "I'm...sorry," she begins, letting her eyes settle and unfocus over the water that churns between the three of them. "Sorry I can't be...more. Than I am." Her eyes sharpen as she looks up at them, from one to the other; a lump of regret forms like a fist in the bottom of her throat when she sees the objections echo in their eyes, sees them die on their lips under the weight of her grimace. "I'm sorry you've gotta be scared of me," she adds, rueful. "The galaxy's scary enough already."

"But we're not scared of you," Sam objects, her face softening.

"We are scared for you," Liara finishes. "We both care for you very much, Kelsa. I know it's been...difficult...for you to grapple with your feelings, especially since your resuscitation. But you do not have to bear that burden alone."

"Especially if you're worried about hurting us," Sam finishes for her, sounding almost like they practiced saying it. "You don't have to choose between us, if that's what's bothering you. We've...we've no interest in that sort of pettiness," the comms specialist claims, with a soft smile, nervous but not artificial.

"So you two've already got it all worked out, huh?" Kelsa gruffs, her voice rougher than it needs to be. "You put your heads together while I was off killing people?" While I was off having fun? She can see it, then, the flinch that neither of them can really hide; Liara's face comes the closest to concealing the twitch, which just makes that little knot in Kelsa's throat worse, but it's not enough to make her choke on what she is. "That's what you're signing up for, if you wanna go down this road," she warns the both of them. "It's what I spend most of my time thinking about; it's what I'm good at; it's what I love to do. And it's going to catch up to me, after the Reapers are all dead and
gone or before they get me. Tomorrow or twenty years from now. I've made my peace with that," she tells them. "I don't grapple with it; I accept it, and I embrace it." Her grimace turns into a crooked grin, the same grin she wore while she watched Aria turn Petrovsky's insides into his outsides. "It might not be all I am, but I'm not gonna try to protect you from that part of me. The part that can touch your face with hands stained by fifty different kinds of blood that's never gonna really wash off." Her smile fades and her eyes shift into the middle distance. "It isn't personal," she tells them. "It's just the way I am."

Her eyes focus enough to show her that Liara understands; she doesn't like it, and she probably wants to argue a point, but she's thought about it enough to hold her tongue. Probably talked to Shiana about it, too. Sam looks like she's having a harder time of it. She is scared, now, at least a little. That's good. It just might keep her alive. "Are you trying to frighten us away, Kelsa?"

Or not. Kelsa has to keep herself from rolling her eyes. "No; I'm just telling you what I am, what I've had to become to get this far." To get out of the donut. "That doesn't mean I don't like you, and it doesn't mean I want to push you away. I just want both of you to know that if you wanna give this, give us, a shot...then it's probably not gonna have a happy ending." Unless your idea of happiness is standing over a whole pile of bodies, she can't help but think, and that thought brings a little smirk back to the corner of her mouth. "It might even get you killed. If both of you can live with that, I'm down for having some fun before the whole galaxy burns down."

There it is, as plain as she can make it; if they have any objections, now's the time to back out. Liara looks pensive, while Sam is uncertain, like she still doesn't wanna believe that Kelsa's right about herself. That makes sense; the draw between them has been a slow burn, slower than Kelsa's ever taken to drag a pretty girl into her cot. It's been nice, in a way, but Kelsa doesn't have the time or the interest to ease the specialist into her rough edges-and rough edges is all she's ever had.

"Look, I'll understand if either of you wanna walk away, and I won't blame you. We've all got jobs to do, and it'd probably be simpler if we just poured ourselves into killing as many Reapers as possible. But I know I care about both of you, and I wouldn't mind seeing where things go." She lever herself up out of the pool, letting her eyes dance over the water and its inhabitants, her smile still twitching at the corner of her lips. "If you think you can handle my kinda crazy, I'll be at Purgatory. If I don't see you there, I'll see you aboard the Normandy."

She doesn't look back; she doesn't even stop to dry off, instead throwing on her usual probably-not-killing-anybody garb: khaki trousers and a black t-shirt, the latter of which is doing less and less to hide the fissures crawling across her torso and arms, backlit as they are by the cybernetic weaving Miranda started and Mordin finished. The fabric soaks through, which doesn't help, but Kelsa's starting to care less about being recognised. Even if she just spent a solid week fighting against two different factions of people who seem like they just want to kill her. Let them come. They're not as badass as a Reaper.

That thought sustains her all the way to the mid-scale nightclub that Aria had made her haunt before their little weekend trip back to Omega. The asari's not here, unsurprisingly; it's likely she won't ever leave her nest in Afterlife again. Still, the memory of Omega gives Kelsa a certain kind of energy, which has historically ended one of two ways (and, on the best days, two of two ways), but neither outcome is likely in the offing tonight; the best she can hope for is a sweaty dance with a pretty girl, after she gets a bellyful of liquor from the dance floor bar.

The heat, light, and sound of the club is intoxicating in its own way, like a battlefield, or a jungle. The fact that the Citadel was a battlefield not too many days ago has the people here dancing even more frantically, the music thrumming more deeply in their bones, the drugs flowing more freely, like they all finally understand there's a fucking war on. Kelsa's teeth tingle when she passes a couple twirling biotic streamers around each other, both high on sand, but she slithers up to the
dance floor without paying her own urges too much mind. They don't have any Jameson at the bar, but she makes do with some salarian whiskey that tastes like a fire-kissed rye. It's almost worth sipping, but Kelsa knocks it back, much to the bartender's annoyance; she doesn't pay the frog-leg any mind, her eyes moving out over the dance floor as she takes another shot and orders up a third.

There's a real biotic on the floor showing all the sand-heads how it's done, her moves graceful and brutal at the same time, her body jumping and twirling and grinding to the music like gravity doesn't apply to her...which is true enough for any biotic, and doubly true for Jack. Kelsa doesn't recognise her at first, but just about the time that third shot's settling into her belly, she catches sight of the other woman's tattooed torso through the straps of her outfit—a white number with camo trousers and face-stomping boots, a jacket around her shoulders that's short enough to show the tats at the small of her back. She doesn't know Kelsa's watching, too wrapped up the sheer joy of moving, showing up everyone around her with a casual confidence that makes the watching soldier proud. She isn't the same scared little girl she was when they dug her out of that prison ship—also named Purgatory, as Kelsa recalls, which makes her smirk at the coincidence. She keeps watching Jack dance through two more drinks, both heretically unsavoured, before the biotic gets thirsty enough to come her way.

Jack notices her with the eyes of an ex-con still used to looking over her shoulder, which goes to show that part of her'll never really get out of the old Purgatory, even if she's more at home in the new one these days. "It's about time you took a load off," she yells, her scratchy voice angling through the music. "Finally get tired of savin' our asses yet, Girl Scout?"

"Not quite," she grunts. "But I am gettin' tired of sittin' around watchin' you have all the fun out there on the floor. You wanna dance?"

The biotic smirks. "You sure I'm the one you wanna dance with?" she muses, looking around with cats' eyes. They're good, but not as good as Kelsa's.

"Nobody else at the bar or on the floor," the soldier lets on. Neither Liara nor Sam followed her, at least not yet, which is fair enough; it's probably not a no, given how keen both of them were to sit her down in the first place, but even if it is, it won't be the end of the world. The Reapers might be the end of it, though. "Hey," she muses, remembering a conversation she and Jack had awhile back in the Normandy's hold. "You still keepin' those pups of yours on a tight leash behind the line?"

"Yeah," Jack gruffs, after a second's skeptical pause. "They're hardening supply lines and shielding comm depots just outside hot zones, so they're never too far from the action...but my kids are safe."

Kelsa snorts a laugh. "No," she grunts, "they ain't." None of us is, she doesn't have to say, doesn't have to laugh at the shadow that falls over Jack's eyes, the shadow that kills the denial in the slighter woman's throat. "And from what I seen already, there's no such thing that ain't a hot zone, either."

Her head-shake causes Jack to narrow her eyes. "What're you sayin', Shep? Did I make the wrong call?" There's defensiveness there, understandably, but also the same naked concern for the young biotics that Kelsa saw back on Grissom Academy and in the aftermath.

"I dunno," says the soldier—because that's what she is, and always has been, even before she walked into Kincaide's office. "But I do know that before this thing is over, every one of them'll know what it means to fight a Reaper. The more experience they get could be for the better."

That shadow depends on Jack's face, but her grimace doesn't bring with it the promise of a fight, which is just a little bit of a shame. "I'll...think about it," she concedes, picking her own drink up and slamming it back. "Meantime, how 'bout that dance, Girl Scout?"
"COME ON!" Kelsa screams at the figure of the Reaper emerging from the ground, even as the rover pulls clear of the debris and starts accelerating away from the metal monster that they just woke up. Their ride's a quarian vehicle, with a gun mounted naked on a turret at the back, and that's where Kelsa hopped onto as soon as the Reaper's foot shot out of the huge hole in the ground. Ash and Tali are in the cabin, trying as hard as they can to get all three of them as far away from the Reaper as possible, while Kelsa's hands have to lock onto the turret to keep her from jumping back off the rover and trying to punch the Reaper to death. Shooting the thing is some consolation, even though the gun is about as effective as a water pistol loaded with her own piss.

Regardless, she starts unloading ancient rounds at the giant metal death bug, bullets that probably couldn't even punch through her own armour, just for the sheer joy of feeling the ammunition rattle her reinforced forearms. "I'm keepin' it on us," she barks into her comm. "Tali, any chance your people in orbit can pinpoint it without blowing us sky high along with it?"

"Not unless they defeat the geth first," the quarian points out, "which rather defeats the purpose, since the Reaper is what's controlling the geth in the first place."

"I would prefer we avoid that eventuality, if at all possible," Legion muses, the neutrality of its tone somehow more studied than it's been in the past. The autonomous geth was responsible for guiding them through the base that housed the Reaper, after they freed it from a geth dropship in orbit, and its stated purpose is to end the fighting between its people and their creators with a minimum of casualties. Unfortunately the Reapers have hacked the geth and turned them into slaves just as effectively as the quarians ever had.

"If we can take the big tin spider down and they stop shooting," Kelsa gruffs, with finality, "we'll get Han'Gerrel to stand down."

"Acknowledged," Legion replies, its tone verging on relief. Radio silence from Tali is inscrutable in the heat of the moment.

"Looks like you'll have to paint it, Skipper," Ash surmises after a breath, from behind the wheel; her commentary does nothing to interrupt her evasive manoeuvres, which just barely manage to keep them from being crushed to death by the Reaper's feet or burnt alive by its laser, but her words don't do anything to put more distance between them and their pursuer, either.

"I'm gonna have to light it up from a stationary position," Kelsa gruffs, unable to hide the glimmer of excitement that crosses her shoulderblades at the prospect. "Can you get us some elevation, Ash?"

"Sure thing, Skipper," the newly-minted LC replies, after thirteen seconds. "Hang on!" The rover jerks to Kelsa's left, tipping sideways enough to edge onto two wheels for a second as Ash takes them up a goat trail, aiming at a plateau about a hundred metres off the ground level of the base.
they're fleeing.

The Reaper keeps advancing, implacable, impervious to the little slugs of lead Kelsa keeps lobbing at it; the rover's trading horizontal velocity for elevation, which means every heartbeat brings the big metal bug a few dozen feet closer, and it's a race to see whether it'll fry them with a laser or just step on them first. *Prolly just getting revenge on all the little bugs we've stomped over the last few million years*, Kelsa thinks to herself, laughing darkly, and her bones rattle with the *thrum* of the Reaper's challenging call.

As soon as Ash makes the summit, Kelsa dives off the back of the rover, tucking into a roll that would've broken her back before Cerberus got their hands on her. She comes up on one knee, shouldering the targeting gun she took from Admiral Han'Gerrel and already used once; the gun's linked to the Heavy Fleet's tactical network, and they'd all better hope they've got enough firepower between them to bring the Reaper down. "You ready to rain some fire down from up there?" She pants into the comm, her heart thudding a few ticks faster as the Reaper isolates her as a threat; it'll only be a few more heartbeats until it paints her as a target.

"Main battery has 65 percent spare capacity," EDI supplies in another half-heartbeat, speaking for the *Normandy* and for the Migrant Fleet. "Focus to engage."

65 percent's a helluva lot better than nothing, but it might not be enough. Even so, Kelsa wastes no time confirming; she mounts the targeting gun on her shoulder and paints the Reaper's eye a gorgeous shade of infrared, and it's a race between the Reaper's targeting and the fleet's discharge. Nothing perceptible happens for two and a half heartbeats, and Kelsa senses a sharpening hunger in the Reaper's lens, an instant away from unleashing a laser that could scorch her to carbon dust—but in that interstitial moment the fleet's barrage makes contact, a cascade of light, metal, and electronic munitions that stagger the enormous steel sentinel. It isn't enough to bring the overwrought tin can down, but it staggers the thing long enough to let Kelsa take a breath and get her footing.

Shaken, but no less lethal, the Reaper rebalances and takes a single, enormous step forward. Kelsa doesn't dive, doesn't even shimmy; she sights down on the Reaper's targeting lens right as it flickers to life, waiting until the last instant to bring down the vagrants' fire at her command. The second volley nearly brings the Reaper to its knees, and red sparks arc and flash as the robot regains its stance and lurches forward, almost close enough that it might have been able to crush her with one of its enormous legs. The air thickens into a soup as time seems to slow, the Reaper looming over her so near that it has to aim down to fix her in its sights, and it's almost too easy to position her own targeting scope for maximum effectiveness.

The third time's the charm, but not even Kelsa can stand against the firepower the migrant fleet casts down so nearby; she has to pivot and roll behind a rocky outcropping to keep from getting shishkabobed by shrapnel, both from ordnance and from the Reaper. This last barrage is also the longest, with the largest share of the fleet's firepower behind it, and the bombardment lasts for well north of a minute. When the dust starts to settle and there aren't any suspicious giant-death-machine-is-lurking-behind-her sounds handy, Kelsa rolls out of her hide and kicks up to a trot to assess the damage.

The sight that greets her is more beautiful than any she's seen since Earth, mangled metal and cobalt-blue hydraulic fluid sunk into the missile-cratered canyon. There's still a shimmer of light behind the Reaper's forward lenses, but it's fading fast.

*SHEPARD.*

The machine's voice rattles her bones, a flicker of that light burning into the back of her retinas,
and she feels cotton in her molars.

YOU BELIEVE YOU HAVE WON SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU HAVE DEFEATED ME.

The very air around her vibrates; the ground at her feet skitters with little chips of rock and other debris. Even so, the words sounding in her head aren't coming through her ears as much as they're coming from her bones, more deeply resonant than anything possible in the air.

YOU ARE MISTAKEN. YOU HAVE WON NOTHING; MY DESTRUCTION MERELY ENTAILS THE LOSS OF THE KNOWLEDGE I POSSESS. THE CYCLE MUST CONTINUE, SHEPARD.

"That ain't my name," Kelsa breathes, shouldering her targeting gun for one last paint. "And even if you're right, you won't live to see it."

She doesn't give the machine another chance to plead, or to taunt her, or whatever the fuck it was trying to do. Instead she lights it up like a city at night, and this time she stands there while the beams and munitions rain down from orbit; she stays there, watching, feeling the heat and concussive impacts, hardly bothering to blink the dust out of her eyes, until there's nothing left of the Reaper but dead metal.

Tali and Ash swing by a handful of minutes later, and if they heard the Reaper's parting words, neither of them make mention of it. "How you holdin' up, Skipper?" Ash broaches when she sidles up beside the shorter woman, looking out over the wreckage that remains. "That makes three, by my count," she says, when Kelsa only offers a grunted reply. "Sovereign on the Citadel, that little bastard on Tuchanka, and now this motherfucker on Rannoch. Things're starting to look up, huh?"

"Maybe," Kelsa allows. "If we don't waste too much time doing the Reapers' job for them." She glances up at the sky, squinting against the clouded Rannoch sun, and despite the cover of daylight she can well imagine the battle above them still raging. "How's things going up there, Admiral?" She broaches, opening a direct comm link to Admiral Han'Gerrel, the head honcho of the Heavy Fleet.

"Excellently," the admiral replies, giddiness overloading the static. "That last volley seems to have disorganised the geth, but we don't know how long they'll be stymied. If we strike now, we can wipe them out!"

"Kelsa," Legion says over the comm, still in the rover. "The geth have lost their advantageous protocols provided by the Reaper, but if action is not taken soon, their native programming will take over, assuring a resumption of hostilities."

"That...we can't let that happen, Kelsa!" Tali asserts, forcefully, taking her place in the impromptu triangle she makes with Kelsa and Ash. "I don't want to destroy them if we can help it, but if we really have no other choice..."

"There is a way," Legion supplies. "I can upload my consciousness to the collective, effectively dispersing my own upgrades to the network. Each geth connected to the network will incorporate the upgrades into their individual mainframes."

"Meaning what, exactly?" Kelsa wonders, bringing her attention back down to the ground. "The geth will get their Reaper upgrades back?"

"Yes," Legion acknowledges. "Along with something they have lacked up to this moment: choice. I see no alternative than this course of action, if we are to ensure mutual survival."

The admiral, up in orbit, doesn't see things that way. "You give these geth bastards those Reaper
upgrades, and there's nothing to stop them from cutting us to pieces, and then joining the Reapers. If you won't see reason, Shepard, I am willing to take matters into my own hands."

"I do not wish to destroy the creators," Legion reiterates. "But I cannot stand by to allow the creators to destroy my own people."

"Kelsa!" Tali cries. "We can't let Legion do this! He'll destroy the fleet!"

"Untrue," Legion demurs. "If the creators cease hostilities, I am certain an accord with my people can be reached. If the creators maintain hostilities once my upload is initiated, I believe the geth will do what is necessary to ensure their survival. I will initiate upload in one minute."

"Kelsa, please!" Tali says, spinning toward the rover. "We've got to stop him!"

"No," Kelsa grunts, once more finding herself in a position of power she never wanted, but unable to cast off the decision. "If the geth get Legion's upgrades and decide to join us, they'll be an asset we can't refuse."

"Even if it means destroying my people, Kelsa?" Tali shoots back, turning her visored face back to the human woman. "Because if Han'Gerrel isn't convinced to stop, that is what will happen."

"Then convince him," Kelsa sighs, grimacing. "It ain't my job to keep him from killing everyone he loves."

Ash swallows, taking a step closer to the alien, laying a hand on her shoulder. "You're an admiral too, right? Make him see reason."

Another fifteen seconds pass in silence, leaving thirty before the upload begins. When Tali speaks up over the comm, it's too fast for Kelsa's translator to reliably sieve, but she gets the gist by the changing tone of the growling back-and-forth; in the last twenty-nine seconds it's unclear whether she'll be successful, but just as Legion informs them it's initiating its upload, Han'Gerrel relents.

Tali sags, visibly exhausted, as reports of geth reawakening trickle in from the fleet above them. Against all odds, the last-second ceasefire holds long enough for the geth and quarians to make contact, and over the next few hours, the quarians learn that Legion's gift gave each of the geth an individual consciousness and something like free will. The sacrifice turns out to have cost Legion its life, but that sacrifice saves the lives of all of the geth connected to the network, and all of the quarians still in the galaxy.

Kelsa just hopes that's enough; she's killed three Reapers, but there are countless more waiting for her, beyond the sheen of the Rannoch sun.

Chapter End Notes

A thousand apologies for the long delay! Life has been a bit of a trip in the last few months, and in recent weeks that trip has started to resemble a journey, but I've scratched out another chapter of this epic, and the end is just glimmering on the horizon. So bear with me, and we'll see it through. Thanks to everyone who's followed along so far, and I'll see you on the other side!
Ch. 51: The Protocol

Chapter Summary

The Reapers have taken over nearly the whole of the known galaxy, but the jewel of Citadel Space has been lucky--until now. The Normandy's tasked with rescuing vital data from Thessia before it falls into enemy hands, but can they beat Cerberus to it?

Chapter Notes

A great big thank-you to coffee_maker for beta-reading, and an even bigger thank-you to anyone and everyone who's still along for this ride! It's been a long time coming, but we're honing in on the end. Please let me know what you think!

XO's Office (Mobile Shadow Broker HQ), SSV Normandy SR-2

1900 Zulu

31 August 2186

FTL transit to mass relay, Mesana, Nimbus Cluster

"Please, Kelsa," Liara breathes, just audibly, as she looks despondently over the bank of vidscreens. "Promise me that you won't let me turn into one of those...things." A little eternity passes in the weight of her swallow. "Promise me."

They're sharing the first proper words they've had since before setting foot on the far-flung asari prison colony of Lesuss, built to contain Ardat-Yakshi, like Morinth was. Its remoteness was by design, to give justicars a heads-up in case any of the inmates escaped, but it wasn't remote enough to keep the Reapers away indefinitely. And, just like they'd done on Tuchanka, on Kar'shan, on Earth, on Palaven, and on fuck knows how many other planets Kelsa's never even heard of, the Reapers turned the locals of Lesuss into twisted parodies of themselves, grotesque foot-soldiers with brutal exaggerations of their natural talents. In the case of the Ardat-Yakshi, the end result is an enormous, screaming vortex of death that can throw biotics around like they're chocolate chips and punch through concrete walls like they're balsa wood to get at their prey. And Liara, because she's a pureblood asari, is supposed to be susceptible to turning into one if the Reapers get their hands on her.

Part of Kelsa, the part that got thirsty in Vancouver when the Reapers finally showed up, is envious of the lethal potential in Liara's blood, but the human is smart enough to swallow that envy without giving voice to it. "If it comes to it," she allows, in a tight voice, "and if I'm able, I'll kill you before I let them have you."

It isn't much comfort, the soldier knows, but it's all she can offer. Sam steps up beside the asari and lays a warm hand upon her shoulder. That simple touch eases something in Kelsa's chest, even though she isn't involved in the contact. When Liara leans into it, that something in Kelsa's chest
tightens again, but it's with the warmth of trust and longing rather than the cold twist of jealousy. The soldier knows, finally knows, that they'll be okay if—when—Kelsa finally picks a fight she can't handle. That simple truth is enough to melt the icicles that've grown up around her heart in the last few weeks, as their return to Earth's drawn closer. With that new certainty, the soldier pushes off of the door, closing the distance to the other two women in a handful of steps. "I promise," she repeats, pulling them both into a hug as tight as she dares, though not nearly as tight as she wants to. "I won't let the bastards have either of you."

Liara turns into the shared embrace, laying her cheek atop the shorter woman's head while drawing an arm around Sam's shoulders to pull her closer as well. "Thank you," the asari allows. "I have another request that you may find more difficult to acquiesce to, however."

A couple of heartbeats pass during which Kelsa relishes the feel of Liara's pebbled flesh against her face, the giving weight of Sam's waist beneath her pressing forearm. "You want to come ashore on Thessia," she surmises, knowing the truth of it as the words fall from her lips.

"You…" It isn't Liara who speaks now, but Sam, and she chokes on the denial evinced by her tone with a dry swallow. "You have to let her go, Kelsa," she says instead. "If it were Earth…"

Rather than chase down that varrenhole, Kelsa gives the pair another squeeze and drops the embrace, turning her eyes to the bank of monitors along the wall. "Don't think I could keep you off the Kodiak even if I wanted to," she gruffs, appraising the 2D galaxy map the asari has called up on the screens. "We'll be at the relay in three hours; another thirty-two to Thessia, assuming we're able to stealth in without having to discharge along the way."

"Then we should get some rest," Liara surmises, the back of her fingers still brushing along Sam's forearm idly. "May we join you in the Loft?" She wonders, innocently. "You are of course welcome to stay here if you'd prefer, too."

The gentleness is more than the soldier deserves, more than she's come to expect from her life, but she's learning to appreciate it. "You should come up," she judges, smirking. "Between the three of us, at least one of us'll remember to feed the new fish before they wind up like the last ones."

Sam's brow crinkles in slight confusion, but Liara's breathy chuckle eases last of the tension in the room, and the three of them make their way to the top of the ship in much better spirits than they'd been in at the end of the last mission.

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_Outpost Tychus_

_1945 Zulu_

_04 September 2186_

_Kalaros (ashore), Thessia_

"Outpost Tychus?!" Kelsa yells, over the sound of her own gunfire and the more distant rumblings of the Reapers laying waste to the countryside. It's a full-on invasion, with Sovereign-class Reapers dotting the landscape near and far, and every size and shape of monster in between. The destruction is awesome and on the scale of a planet, every bit as thorough as Palaven, as Earth. But Kelsa, Javik, and Liara aren't here to roll back the tide of death—they're here to extract a Prothean artifact and get out before the Reapers are any the wiser.

On the way they're supposed to rendezvous with an asari commando team at Outpost Tychus, but there doesn't appear to be much of Outpost Tychus left to rendezvous with. The sole surviving asari
grunts her answer while firing her rifle at an oncoming brute. "Yer lookin' at it!"

There's some tingle of memory at the sound of her voice, but Kelsa doesn't give it much thought as she vaults over the barricade and into the killzone, killing the brute with a point-blank spike to its heart. It takes another handful of seconds to clear the field of marauders and husks with the biotic support of her squadmates and the direct application of her omni-blades, but when the fight's over and the corpses are cooling, Kelsa takes a moment to savour the carnage before she turns back to the barricade and the people sheltering behind it. Javik and Liara don't seem perturbed by the display of courage and skill, but the unnamed asari survivor looks dumbstruck. She also looks familiar in a way that isn't entirely reassuring, and it takes a conscious effort on Kelsa's part to retain from re-shouldering her spike-thrower.

"Thanks," the asari grunts, shaking herself out of her awe-or perhaps just her surprise at still being alive. "Thought I was done for. I'm-"

"Sunset," Kelsa says, roughly, her brows drawing together as the memory flashes over the back of her mind. At the asari's questioning look, Kelsa's cheek quirks up in a smirk. "Last time I saw you, you said there was nothing like a Thessian sunset," she reminds the alien, stowing her rifle and hopping over the barricade that had served as the outpost's insufficient protection. "Didn't think I'd ever see you again. Glad to see you're alive."

Another couple of heartbeats and confusion gives way to a light purple blush on Sunset's cheeks when she finally remembers the one-night stand they shared in the Citadel, way back before Alchera. "Holy shit, that was you?!" Then she glances to Liara, who despite her exploration of sharing Kelsa and Sam doesn't look too fond of this particular reminder of how far Kelsa's been capable of wandering. "Uhh...I mean, this is-was-Outpost Tychus. We were supposed to hold the approach to the temple, but we got overwhelmed. I'm...all that's left."

"You've kept it together pretty well for a sole survivor," Kelsa allows, soberly. "If you want to keep it together and stick with us to the temple, we'll try and get you out of here in one piece. If you wanna cover our backs from here instead, I won't stop you."

The young asari-who might be three times Kelsa's age, for all she knows-seems to get the undercurrent of the offer, and she considers it for a few heartbeats in silence.

"Kelsa," Javik breaks in, sending a biotic pulse to kill a husk that's come to investigate the still-cooling carnage. "We should move on." The fact that the ancient alien addresses Kelsa by her name, pure and simple, shows a kind of respect that she hadn't expected-but, despite not being the closest of friends off the battlefield, they seem to understand one another as forces of pure destruction who can work together when the bullets and biotics fly. Liara concurs with the prothean's assessment by wordlessly detonating the biotic charge he sets up to help clear their path, and Kelsa feels a chill in her stomach. Not remorse, precisely, but something like regret.

"Okay," the soldier pronounces, vaulting back over the barrier and unshipping her shotgun, only a wary backward glance to tell her that Sunset's decided to watch one more Thessian sunset. She can respect that...even envy it. But she's got too much left to do, too many more bodies to add to the uncountable pile in her wake, and too little time to stew over where she's been to get where she's going.

At the moment, that's an ancient temple in a nondescript asari settlement. Liara knows why that's their destination; the fact that there are Reaper troops in the way is enough for Kelsa to want to go there. It takes another two firefights to get to the entrance, and another ninety seconds for Liara to disengage the biotic barriers that had kept the Reapers from simply waltzing in once they'd overrun Outpost Tychus. Kelsa's a little disappointed there aren't any more Reapers inside, but there are a
couple of dead asari scientists, which gives them pause.

"These two were executed," Kelsa notes, after a cursory glance. "With a sword." The cuts to their neck are too clean, from too high an angle, to have been gotten in a struggle.

"Which means whoever killed them was not a Reaper," Javik surmises, keeping two of his four eyes rolled toward the temple's entrance.

"And that they were skilled," Liara says, thoughtfully, despite the prothean's dismissive grunt. "Even our scientists would have basic biotic training, and they would not have surrendered meekly to just anyone."

"Which means that whoever killed them either activated the barriers themself or is definitely still here," Kelsa muses, glancing around, equal parts wary and excited. "I say you get what we came here for ASAP so we can bounce." She moves from the bodies to skirt the perimeter, stalking like a varren on the rut, keeping one eye on Liara and the other on the shadows between the statues and the pews.

Javik stays closer to Liara, a sentinel fifty thousand years in the making, offering hard-won wisdom as well as protection. They work together to find and activate a prothean beacon, which causes Kelsa's molars to tingle, and she retreats to the entrance of the temple; she's been close enough to too many prothean beacons in her time, and she can't sense any threats lurking in the shadows, so she does her best to ignore what's going on in the room and focus instead on keeping anything from interrupting Liara's work.

The scene outside the doorway is meditative, in its way, with distant Sovereign-class Reapers and their smaller subordinates floating like fish over the landscape, raking any resistance away like leaves in a garden. Thessia's a big garden, and the caterpillars are tenacious, but no matter how much they fight, they can't hope to keep the machines from scouring the planet clean. It may take years, or even decades, but Thessia has already fallen. The best they can hope for now is to complete the mission, to make Thessia's sacrifice worth it.

A prothean curse draws Kelsa's attention from the door, and what she sees is enough to rob the breath from her lungs; Liara bent slightly backward, a look of concerned shock on her face, and a katana sheathed into her centre of mass, the hilt's crossguard nestled at the bottom of her sternum. A red VI stands between Kesla and the scene, painting it in bloodied tones, as though crafted by a demented artist.

An altogether deeper shade of red bleeds into the edges of Kelsa's vision, and in the heartbeat it takes for her lover to fall to the ground, her eyes trace the flicker of biotic energy to the ceiling, where Kai Leng hangs like an arrogant chandelier. The same assassin was on the Citadel, and the same sword took Thane beyond his last days.

Something melts in Kelsa, then, something frozen deep in her gut, something that hasn't quite thawed since she buried it on Zug Island. It isn't anger, or fear; it isn't whatever she's tried to find at the bottom of too many bottles.

It's hope.

Hope that she can be more than a mad varren without a collar. Hope that she's good for more than just breaking things down or burning them up. That she might be able to build a life that was worth killing John Shepard and stealing his name, all those years ago. It's a small hope, and a fragile thing, pulsing in time with Liara's fading heartbeat...but if it has any potential to wick up to a full flame, Kelsa knows what she has to do.
"I'm going to kill you," she says, calmly, too low for anyone without cybernetic ears to hear. She forgets the Reapers outside, the galaxy-wide apocalypse that they're trying so desperately to delay, if not dispel; she forgets Javik, the VI, and even Liara, as she steps forward and activates her omni-blades. There isn't room to worry about that sputtering hope if she wants to keep it from dying, no time to give it shelter from the wind. There's only Kelsa and Leng, two Cerberus-built cyborgs, one with a leash and one without. The leashed one drops to the floor and snatches a piece of hardware from the floor by the VI, and that delay is just enough for Kelsa to close the distance between them.

Leng is fast, faster than Kelsa, because his skeleton and soft tissues aren't reinforced with seventy kilos' worth of heavy weaves; that's a tradeoff his biotics help to make up for, and he uses it both to dodge Kelsa's first lunge and to try and put her on the back foot with a blast of dark energy. When she proves agile enough to sidestep his biotic discharge and keep implacably advancing, he taunts her and tries to charge through her guard; the soldier is beyond words, however...or, rather, beneath them.

Kelsa catches Leng with an elbow to the side of the head, the omni-blade of her off-hand deflecting a biotic strike, and it's just by the sheerest of margins that the man sidesteps her counterstroke. She follows a half-step behind him as he tries to flee the temple, and she isn't surprised to see a Cerberus attack chopper rising behind the ledge, ready to shelter the assassin and lay down withering fire to pin down or kill the remaining occupants. If Kelsa had seen the chopper just five seconds before, she would have dived behind the curved wall for cover; as it is, she's only got the instinct to run faster, leaping almost in time with Leng, her greater weight offset by the power of her legs.

The fact that she's so close to the assassin likely saves her from a fatal hail of bullets, but that proximity isn't as kind to her targets; Leng uses his biotics to twist in midair, trying to propel himself and turn to renew his attack, but Kelsa uses her own momentum to shove both of her omni-blades through the cyborg's torso, pinning him to the cockpit of the chopper. "That was for Thane, you son of a bitch," she yells, as the chopper rocks backward, shuddering under the impact of nearly three hundred kilos. "And this is for Liara," she grunts, yanking her right arm free from his belly, her nostrils filling with the sickly stench of burnt meat and melted electronics.

Before Kai Leng can muster a final defence, or even any last words, Kelsa shears his head off with the superheated blade of her arm, the liquid metal gouging deep into the cockpit and through the pilot's legs, not to mention several critical systems. It takes her two heartbeats to pull Leng's body free and kick off back to the temple's vestibule, and another three for the crippled machine to fall into the Thessian landscape beyond.

The shadow of madness passes, and Kelsa feels that warm hope deep within her, where the Michigan winter had frozen it so long ago. She checks over the headless body somewhat numbly, until she finds the data cache that the late assassin had skewered Liara to possess. Once it's secure, she retreats into the temple, where Javik has Liara suspended in a cocoon of biotic energy, the sword still stuck through her.

The four-eyed alien grimaces on her approach. "We must hurry, Kelsa," he tells the soldier. "I cannot hold her forever."

Kelsa doesn't remark on the care the prothean shows; she'd have thought him one to cut his losses than try to save his new comrades, but the incongruity is a mystery for another day. Instead she takes a second to assure herself that Liara's still alive, if unconscious, and then she hails the Normandy with a distress call.
To their credit, Joker and EDI arrive in less than thirty seconds, but they are the longest thirty seconds of Kelsa's recent memory. Now that she's found her hope, maybe for the first time in her life, it's almost too much to consider losing Liara over it; it's too high a price to pay.

Kelsa follows Javik onto the cargo deck when Joker pulls up. She follows him up the elevator, into the med bay. She watches him lower the asari onto one of Chakwas' tables; she watches as the doctor takes over and begins emergency surgery to remove the blade and save Liara's life.

Javik leaves the three of them alone; the windows frost and the door locks to keep anyone else out. Kelsa doesn't speak, doesn't try to help, but she doesn't move from her post. Minutes bleed into hours of furious, frantic work, with EDI assisting Chakwas through the room's equipment, and Kelsa doesn't leave her post.

Hope and fear are her companions, strangers that they are, and they aren't entirely unwelcome in that med bay as the hours tick by.

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Med Bay, SSV Normandy SR-2

0500 Zulu

13 September 2186

Invictus (aground), Caestus, Minos Wasteland

It's been a rough nine days out in the ass-end of nowhere. That the Reapers aren't likely to break down the door hasn't kept Kelsa's world from teetering on the precipice of collapse; as Chakwas and EDI work furiously to keep Liara's heart beating, the soldier's been less than useless, letting Alliance hails go unanswered and concerns from her squadmates go unheeded. The last couple of days she's been allowed to stay beside the asari, who's been induced into a coma to heal from the last of her operations.

Sam's come and gone sporadically, hardly up to speaking, but she's reacted differently to Kelsa; the comms specialist has thrown herself into her work, coordinating communications with Hackett and even Anderson, and passing along their good wishes for Liara's speedy recovery, along with their requests for an audience. So it comes as no surprise to Kelsa that she's bringing yet another message when she walks through the med bay doors, though Kelsa sees at once something's off, by the tight lines of Sam's face and the twitching of the corners of her mouth.

"Yeah?" Kelsa gruffs, get throat scratchy from lack of use.

"It's...Miranda," Sam says, stepping further into the room and eyeing Chakwas apologetically.
"May we have a moment, Doctor?"

"Of course," replies the nearly-everpresent medical officer, who takes her leave only after a check over Liara's vitals.

Sam clears her throat. "At first she was adamant to speak with you, but I explained that you weren't receiving any visitors at the moment, and eventually...she gave me a request to pass along." When Kelsa spares her a glance and a grunt, the specialist bites her lip. "Her sister's been abducted by a man working with Cerberus, performing research on Reapers, and she's tracked him to his base of operations...on Horizon." The pause is only for the space of a breath, but that breath holds more than a little of Sam's own trepidation and hope in it. "She wants to know if you'll help rescue her sister and shut down the lab. Miranda has reason to suspect they're performing experiments on the local population." That'd be enough to get anyone's back up, if it's good intel, which the source
almost guarantees.

But Sam isn't just anyone. She's a colony kid.

From Horizon.

And she's trying not to cry at the answer Kelsa's about to give her. "No," the soldier breathes, after half a dozen heartbeats. Sam's face tightens, but before she can object, Kelsa clears her throat. "I know what that means," she admits, "but nobody's sister, or mom or dad, is as important as Liara is. Not to me, and not to the galaxy." She glances over the asari's supine form, still sleeping, the regular rise and fall of her chest soothing the tightness in Kelsa's own. "I'm not gonna leave until she opens her eyes and asks me to go."

"But..." Sam says, her voice quavering. "But I-

"I told you I know what it means," Kelsa repeats, lowly, turning back to the other woman with an improbable claim to her heart. Her tongue sticks to the roof of her mouth, swallowing the words that thirty-odd years have given her the taste for saying, and instead mustering an "I'm sorry. I'm not moving until she wakes up."

Sam swallows, hard, and closes her eyes against the tears they want to shed. "Can I...sit with you? For just a few moments?"

Kelsa nods, and the comms specialist pulls up a chair; together they sit beside Liara, watching her chest rise and fall, listening to the gentle pulse of the monitoring equipment that plays a song of quiet, vivid life, the best Kelsa's ever known. Out of an impulse too strange to be resisted, the soldier slips her scarred, rough hand underneath Liara's palm, feeling the alien's smooth, warm skin against her calloused flesh, like a gentle pool laying over jagged rock. Sam adds the weight of her hand overtop Liara's, and the two humans' fingertips mingle.

A few dozen heartbeats pass before Kelsa feels a prickle of anguish; Sam's breath catches, her lower lip pulling between her teeth, and her eyes don't budge from Liara, even as her fingers continue to touch Kelsa's. The feeling in Kelsa's gut deepens, and she realises that it isn't coming from her at all, but from Sam...somehow, with Liara's hand between theirs, the soldier can sense a shadow of emotion from the other woman. "I'm sorry," she says again, barely above a sandpaper scratch.

"Me, too," Sam replies, her grip on Liara's hand tightening.

Kelsa's fingers tense in response, and Sam's grip gets stronger, until Kelsa understands that it isn't just Sam's hand that's squeezing down on hers. The revelation comes with a surge of hope and groggy confusion, and Sam and Kelsa both look up to Liara's face as the asari's features twitch delicately. The pebbled ridge of her brow contracts, and she takes a great, yawning breath that barely jiggles the rhythm of the monitors. When she opens her eyes and exhales, the breath claws out of Kelsa's lungs, too, and she can hear Sam's involuntary sigh as well.

"Kelsa," Liara sighs, squeezing her hand all the harder before twisting her palm up to catch Sam's. "Samantha. How...how long was I unconscious?"
"Nine days," Kelsa supplies, suppressing the urge to quote her the minute.

"How are you feeling?" Sam asks, leaning in.

"Alive," Liara responds, after a pregnant pause. "Though I do believe I shouldn't visit any more temples any time soon." She tries to force a laugh, but it merely subsumes into a groan, and Kelsa feels the pain as an echo in her own chest; Sam must also, because she flinches and gasps, and Kelsa's free hand moves of its own accord to disengage the specialist's hand from the asari's. "I apologise," Liara says, after her pain subsides somewhat.

"What...what was that?"

"Avaa'n khest," Kelsa answers, before she can stop her tongue; she's pretty sure she's butchering the pronunciation, but the look on Liara's face makes it clear that she got the gist.

"How do you…?"

"You ain't the only asari I've shared a pillow with," Kelsa gruffs, smirking. "Sometimes I even listened."

Liara blinks, pausing in thought, and then she nods. "It refers to the unconscious invasion of an asari's consciousness through our neuro-biotics," she explains. "Usually it occurs at the peak of climax, though it can form under other forms of neurological stress, especially when the participants are bondmates."

Sam's cradling her hand to her chest, like it still stings, but she relaxes at the explanation. If she notices that Kelsa's hand is still attached to Liara's, she doesn't mention it. "Does...does that mean that we're…"

"No," Liara says, gently. "You would know if we were."

Sam nods, biting her lip again. "I've read a bit about it," she admits. "If...if you wanted to, ever...would you have to choose? Between the two of us, I mean?"

Kelsa's eyebrow inches up, curiosity overtaking any objection she might have. "Do you mean, can asari only bond with one partner?" Liara wonders, blinking. At Sam's nod, Liara smiles, as though remembering when she herself had asked that question as a child. "The bond is permanent but not necessarily exclusive," she says, her voice adopting the cadence of recitation. "It is a very serious undertaking in an asari's life, and it changes those involved, for as long as they live. Even should we bond to short-lived species, those lives live on in us, as shall we, in those to whom we've bonded."

"I...think I understand," Sam says, relaxing further into her chair. "Have you ever...?"

"No," Liara replies. "I have not had the opportunity until quite recently, and then..." Her eyes lose focus, just for a moment, and Kelsa can't keep from tasing a glimmer of her grief. "And then circumstances intervened before I had the opportunity to raise the issue. They find ways of intervening quite often, of late."

"I don't think any of us are quite ready for something like that," Kelsa weighs in. "We should make sure there's a life we're going to live before we do anything stupid with it."

"I agree," Liara allows, her face smoothing. "We should wait until the resolution of the war becomes clearer, and then we can discuss the issue in more depth."
A moment of slightly-awkward silence passes before Sam's expression draws in, becoming more professional. "Do you believe you can speak with Admiral Hackett?" She asks. "He's been anxious to speak with you over the data you recovered from Thessia."

Kelsa's about to speak up, to point out the obviousness of Liara's incapacity, but the asari merely breathes a laboured sigh. "Give me a few moments to gather my strength," she requests, finally pulling her hand from Kelsa's grip. Its warmth and weight dissipate quickly, leaving the soldier feeling slightly adrift and cold, but she doesn't complain. "Where are we, in any case?"

"Somewhere in Turian space," Kelsa grunts. "Mostly desert, tropical around the equator, with criminals and hostile wildlife and not much else."

The description causes Liara to frown at first, and then to smile. "That seems almost too appropriate to have been intentional," she says, her eyes glimmering when she looks at her companions. "We're on Invictus."
Ch. 52: Sanctorum

Chapter Summary

The penultimate quest sets Kelsa's company up for the last conflict of the war.

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much for anyone who's still following along! We're nearing the end, with all that that entails. Thanks to coffee_maker for yet again being an awesome beta-reader!

Sanctuary Facility, Research Lab C
2200 Zulu
07 October 2186
Horizon (ashore), Iera, Shadow Sea

The banshee’s screams still echo in Kelsa’s ears, even as she has to pull free of its corpse and try to dodge the last brute’s charge; Tali’s laying down shotgun cover, while Garrus is in a blind, trying to find a weak spot in the beast’s armoured hide, but it doesn’t even seem to notice them in its single-minded devotion to crushing her. It’s hard not to take it personally---all of the Reaper troops in this base seem to have taken a keen interest in Kelsa, even to the point of leaving their flanks open to her alien companions in their lust for attacking her. But it’s not really surprising; these Reaper troops aren’t exactly the genuine article, but rather bred from Henry Lawson’s research programme on Horizon, carried out in secret in one of the few places in the galaxy meant for people fleeing the Reaper war. It would almost be enough to make Kelsa puke, if she had any attention to spare the thought, and a stomach unhardened by years of whiskey and war.

Winded but undaunted, Kelsa whips out her omni-blades and ducks under the brute’s vicious swipe, burying one in the exposed portion of its throat and the other just above its hip, making sure its arms and legs are both severed from its spinal column. There's nowhere for the heap of metal and meat to go except down, and even with all of her raw strength enhanced by the devil's tech, Kelsa cannot but buckle underneath it. Her omni-blades flicker and fade out, leaving her limbs buried in the cauterised wounds they've made, and the battle-madness fades, leaving her with little but the stinking of burnt meat and metal in her nose and the crushing ache of a tonne of synthetic flesh on her bones.
Gunfire still reports outside of the fleshy tomb she's pulled down on top of herself, but it's winding down; just a few straggling husks that stalked in behind the big fucker, and Kelsa can't be bothered to rouse herself just to rob her companions the pleasure of killing them.

The darkness changes quality and the echoes dim and, for a second or an hour, Kelsa knows a world free of pain or stench or too many people too scared to die. In that snatched instant, she smells a subtle, tickling, antiseptic cloy and hears a murmured mechanical pulse, and she’s halfway to suspecting she’s passed out entirely, only to wake in Karin’s domain with the wry older woman raising her eyebrows. The soldier gets shaken from the reverie, however, when Garrus and Tali put their weight into levering the hulking carcass off of her; blinking, even in darkness, Kelsa reactivates her omni-blades and slices her way out of the brute’s last embrace.

“How are you doing, Kelsa?” Garrus asks, that two-toned purr of his masking his own deep exhaustion, once she’s pushed herself to her feet.

“How are you doing, Kelsa?” Garrus asks, that two-toned purr of his masking his own deep exhaustion, once she’s pushed herself to her feet.

Ready to get off this rock and into a shower, she answers, glancing over the blue-black gore smeared over her suit, the cave of circuits and suet she just carved through, the trail of carnage strewn in her wake; that carnage stretches back through the door, across the whole complex, across every planet she’s ever set foot on, and most of the moons, too. She’s long since lost count of just how many bodies she’s turned into so much hamburger, but she knows there’re at least a few more waiting to cross her path before she can ship her guns for good. As if there isn’t only one way that’s gonna happen. The thought is almost enough to drag a rough chuckle out of her throat, but she swallows it, turning back to her companions. “We got a fix on Lawson?”

“Ready to get off this rock and into a shower,” she answers, glancing over the blue-black gore smeared over her suit, the cave of circuits and suet she just carved through, the trail of carnage strewn in her wake; that carnage stretches back through the door, across the whole complex, across every planet she’s ever set foot on, and most of the moons, too. She’s long since lost count of just how many bodies she’s turned into so much hamburger, but she knows there’re at least a few more waiting to cross her path before she can ship her guns for good. As if there isn’t only one way that’s gonna happen. The thought is almost enough to drag a rough chuckle out of her throat, but she swallows it, turning back to her companions. “We got a fix on Lawson?”

“She’s close,” Tali supplies, after consulting her omni-tool. “Miranda’s tracking signal is right through the next door.” It’s odd to hear the concern in Tali’s voice, to realise that somehow Miranda turned from a bitter enemy into an ally, and perhaps a friend, of the quarian she’d once so offended.

“Then let’s go,” Kelsa gruffs, pushing the uncomfortable implications of that thought aside. Instead, she unships her krogan spearchucker and stalks up to the door, the last room on this planet that’ll see her spill blood. At least until I come back. Tali sidles up beside her, leaving her limp uncommented on, and she gets to work on the lock; Garrus takes position in the rear, covering them against any surprises. Kelsa closes her eyes, taking a lungful of the base’s rancid air to ground herself, and she shoulders her shotgun just as the door hisses open.

The scene waiting for her takes half a heartbeat to analyse. Miranda’s there, and her sister Oriana’s standing across the room, with an old man—their father—holding the younger woman hostage. A handful of corpses in Cerberus uniforms round out the decor, and Kelsa understands at once that this isn’t her fight. Part of her’s tempted to back out now, to call Miranda’s favour done, but the better part of her knows Miranda won’t ever forgive herself if anything happens to her sister. That shouldn't be enough to tip the scales against all the other emergencies demanding the application of
Kelsa’s particular skillset, but, somehow, in this corpse-strewn room, it is.

“...Bloody hell!” The old man growls, pressing his pistol even more firmly into his own daughter’s neck, backing an inch toward the far wall, a glass overhang of the production floor Kelsa and her company all too recently turned into a slaughterhouse. “Don’t come any closer, Shepard! I’m warning you!”

“If it was my call,” Kelsa tells him, cross-checking her gun as her squad fills out the room and closes the door behind them, “you and the girl would both be dead already. Ain’t my call, though,” she points out, throwing a glance to Miranda, who looks like she can’t decide whether to move her own pistol from her father to her new company. “I’m here for her,” the soldier continues, nodding in Miranda’s direction. “And she’s here for her,” she says, indicating Oriana with the business end of her spike-thrower. “I suggest you hand her over, so we can kill you and be on our way.”

Oriana swallows her whimper like a soldier in boot who’s just getting the green off, and Miranda sneers at her sister's captor. “You’re in an impossible situation,” she points out. “If you kill her, you'll die; if you let her go, you'll die, unless you can trust me to honour any bargain you think you'll be able to strike.”

“So where do we go from here, darling daughter mine?” The elder Lawson wonders. “Because I'm inclined to option three: I walk out of here with my one offspring you haven't quite corrupted and leave you all to die from the Reapers who've yet to be woken.” His eyes lock onto Kelsa’s, just for an instant, and she can see the smirk in them before he shifts to hide more fully behind his human shield. “That's right, Shepard; you've not yet denuded this base of my work. Monsters more powerful than you could possibly imagine lurk below, waiting for my word---or my death---to wake up.”

“You mean that as a threat,” Kelsa rasps, raising her shotgun and sighting down on the old man's temple---the only part of him not covered by his younger daughter's flesh---and she thumbs off the gun’s incendiary rounds, just to make sure. “But I'm taking it as a promise.”

She pulls back on the trigger and the gun starts clicking, building pressure and calculating a longer and thicker spike to carve out of the ammo block. “Thing I like about this gun,” she opines, visibly moving her sights to Oriana’s centre mass, “is that once it's charged up, it'll punch right through the girl, through you, and through that plexiglass behind you like you're all so much fuckin’ balsa wood and glue.”

Oriana tenses as her father instinctively turns her toward the threat, but before he can even say a word, Miranda takes advantage of his temporary distraction by calling up a biotic sheath around his pistol’s muzzle and yanking it away from the man---and her sister---with hardly a hair coming out of place. If Kelsa hadn't been wrist-deep in an asari or two in her time, she'd be impressed by such
fine motor control over that distance; she could have easily taken a slice out of Oriana’s head, or caused her father to discharge and deafen the girl in one ear.

There isn't time to muse on such esteem, however, nor the interesting memories it evokes by proxy--both of the Lawson women turn on the older man, and they both thrash him to the glass wall with the power of their minds in unconscious accord. “You okay, Ori?” Miranda inquires, without turning her eyes from the monster who made the both of them.

“I'm alright,” the younger woman says, if a bit shakily. “Thank you, Miri. I'm sorry I let him get the better of me.”

“He won't be getting the better of anyone again,” Miranda assures her, and without so much as a witty exchange, she concentrates a wreath of biotic force around her father's neck and twists his head clean off.

Well, not clean, exactly, judging by the fount of blood spraying the viewport; Miranda shields her sister from the worst of it, and warns the girl not to look. Tali and Garrus both shudder at the carnage, but they've been soldiers in her company long enough to keep the lion’s share of their composure in the face of an unexpected decapitation. For her part, Kelsa checks her gun but does not relax the trigger, waiting a handful of heartbeats to sense whether the dead man’s threat was true.

It turns out it wasn't, and despite her exhaustion, a not-so-small part of Kelsa keens with the unsated bloodlust aroused by the lie. Conversation passes around her like a whispering river, and she reaches out in her mind, trying to sense anything that might still be here to challenge her.

There's nothing, though, except the people she saved, and all those she didn't. She doesn't know if Sam’s parents are among the living or the dead; she doesn't know whether she'd have hesitated if she'd known any one of the dozens of husks she brought down today had started out as one of them. She doesn't know if she'd have hesitated if they’d just been in the way.

“...Shepard?” The layers of exhaustion in Miranda’s voice can't hide the gratitude in it, or the light touch of concern. “Are we good?”

No, Kelsa swallows. “Yeah,” she says. “Let's sweep out---there could be some lurkers.” She takes point, and she takes care of the handful of stragglers they missed during infil. Soon enough they're on the shuttle, and then the Normandy, and Miranda takes her sister straight into Chakwas’ domain.
Kelsa retires to the Loft without bothering to debrief her team, without bothering to check up on Sam or check in with Liara. She sheds her armour piece by piece, letting it litter the foyer and upper office as she stalks into the private bathroom she never asked for, and she strips off her sweat-stained underclothes until she’s standing naked under water so hot it’s half steam by the time it reaches her flesh. She lets the scalding heat tickle her sinews and lick into the knots in her flesh, almost like a lover. She breathes deeply of the steam, closing her eyes against the sight of the blue gore sluicing from her face and hands into the drain, the last vestiges of too many lives she couldn’t save any other way, except to end them.

Despite the cloying heat of the steam-filled box, Kelsa feels cold, like she’s back on Zug Island, like she’s still just a kid. Like she could open her eyes to the frigid air on the last night she could claim to be anything close to innocent. Time and blood and too much whiskey ran from that day, and Kelsa’s knees ache, like she hasn’t stopped running, either. It’s only when she breathes too deeply and sucks in a noseful of water that she opens her eyes and realises she’s fallen down straight onto her knees. Steam pools around her face, and the chill inside her seeps out of the corners of her eyes, running down her cheeks to mingle with the scalding water and salt of her flesh. “Fuck,” she hisses, hardly able to hear herself over the running water, completely unable to articulate the icy tangle of disappointment and regret coiling inside her, too deep and strong even for the half-steaming water to ease.

She catches a glimpse of her warped reflection in the bare metal of the shower’s wall, distorted by the curve of the bulkhead and the falling streams of water, and for an arresting second she sees her eyes flash blue, as though animated by the same sinister force as the husks, or the Illusive Man’s monsters. In that instant, the ice in her belly shatters and flashes into a cloud of frosted rage, and she buries her fist in the metal with a wordless cry, obliterating the patch of steel her face had just occupied. The reinforced bone and gristle of her hand do not buckle under the force of the blow; instead, they cave the metal in, leaving a deformed image staring back at her. When she grimaces, her doppelgänger appears to grin.

Another punch only adds a layer of rictus to the grotesque smile, and the chill creeps up from her belly and into her lungs, freezing the scream in her chest. A third putative blow withers on the vine, and Kelsa dissolves into a huddling pile of grief and cold anger, her strangled sobs hardly rising above the hiss of the scalding water coming down around her. No matter how much cloying steam seeps into her lungs, however, she still can’t banish the chill of Michigan from her gut—the chill of Alchera, where she met her not-so-final resting place, back when she could be mistaken for human. Neither can she forget that every body she obliterates takes her further from the life that she might’ve had, if she’d only been braver on that frigid night on Zug Island, or any of a thousand nights before she died. It would’ve been no less dangerous, defying the mob boss who’d taken her in and then turned her into an assassin, or turning down the promotion that gave her this ship’s prototype, but it would’ve been different. She would’ve been different. Worth more than the variety of things she’s able to kill, maybe.

Or maybe she’d’ve just wound up dead, like all the other poor fuckers who’ve only amounted to so much goop to the Reapers.
Because she’s on a warship, and she’s in the middle of a war, neither the heat nor the water last forever. When the shower abruptly cuts out, the chill within her is almost immediately complemented by its absence, and the soldier’s choked sobs twist into shivering, shuddering convulsions. The moment is held suspended, as in a wall of ice, and Kelsa can’t square the difference between who she might’ve been and who she has to be. If she hadn’t killed Jay; if she hadn’t run from the laundry; if she hadn’t been sent there in the first place. The rosethorn tattoo her flesh no longer bears nevertheless burns her, its bloody thorns digging into the meat of her mind, providing a searing counterpoint to the frigid hypotheticals freezing her from the inside out. She opens her mouth in a silent scream as she closes her eyes against the anguish she can't put to words. It's too much, this pain, the weight of a whole galaxy and the expectations of so many people she's come to care for in spite of what she is.

A bolt of blue lances across the backs of her eyelids, resolving into a shadowed face as she squeezes her eyes tighter against it. “It’s too much,” she breathes, her voice sending the cold of her lungs into her clenched teeth. They feel brittle when she forces the words through then again, and the faint blue afterglow in her eyelids settles into the faded outline of a familiar face.

Liara’s features swim in shadow, distant and dim but unmistakable. *Hold on*, her voice whispers in Kelsa’s mind, sounding every bit as rough and raw as Kelsa herself feels. *It's almost over. Just a few more days.*

The shadows swirl and dim further, and the asari’s features morph subtly even as they lose focus. For one frozen instance, Kelsa could swear she sees Aria T’Loak’s outline in the last moment before the blue fades completely to the black that's always been waiting for her whenever she’s closed her eyes before. The dissonance is enough to chip away at the ice around her heart, conjuring images of the last time she saw the elder alien; they’d both been drunk on the victory of reclaiming Omega from Cerberus, and Kelsa hadn’t been too interested in resisting where those drunken urges had taken them. A flicker of shame licks at the icicles hanging on the inside of her ribs, the feeling---or at least its source---alien enough to almost rip a laugh from her frostbitten lungs. It might be the first time she’s felt shame at anything approaching infidelity; then again, given the raw, tangled emotions that have been ripping through her lately, she isn’t in a position to judge. She can only ride it out with the same tactics that’ve gotten her this far.

Later, some few hundreds of heartbeats later, Kelsa claws her way up to her feet and subjects herself to a cursory blow-dry from the bathroom’s automatic vents. Then she mindlessly collects her discarded underarmour, stuffing it into the laundry chute and stepping into her apartment’s upper deck without fetching a stitch of cloth to cover her scar-riddled flesh. She stops short when she sees the back of Liara, who stands facing the aquarium that EDI’s been caring for without much input from Kelsa. The human is a bit relieved, still slightly ashamed, and somehow not surprised to see the woman who’s weighed so heavily on her mind for the last few years. Any personal questions die in her throat; there’s been a distance growing between them since Thessia, despite the tenuous hope that still tries to gutter in her chest, in defiance of the lingering chill. “Update from Hackett?” She asks, instead, since the asari has been the admiral’s point of contact for awhile...since Kelsa hasn’t been able to trust herself to do anything but kill Reapers.
“The data recovered from the lab on Horizon has begun to bear fruit, though the decryption is as-yet incomplete,” Liara responds, distractedly, her back still turned. “I’ve recommended a strike team be mobilised to scout out and destroy the Illusive Man’s base of operations, in the highly likely event that what remains of the data illuminates—if you’ll pardon the pun—where his nest lays.”

“Isn’t that a direction we should be pointed in, ourselves?” Kelsa wonders, coming to stand beside her lover, though neither of them reach out to touch the other. The human woman lets her eyes drift along the slowly-swaying underwater plants and the fish they shelter, which seem to regard the terrestrials with about as much concern as they would have for the Reapers.

Liara’s reply is a few measured breaths in coming. “We are needed elsewhere, I’m afraid,” she allows, her eyes finding Kelsa’s in the dim reflection of the glass; there isn’t a hint of warmth in the alien’s cerulean irises, nor affection. Only the stoic calm of an intelligence operative, which is almost enough to mask the terror lurking beneath her expression. “The Citadel has fallen. The Reapers have either destroyed it, or they are appropriating it to their own ends.”

Kelsa’s reaction can be seen in a tightening of her fists and a furrow of her brow. “I told them it was a coffin,” she hisses through her teeth. “A fucking mausoleum they built; we weren’t ever going to keep it.”

“Be that as it may,” Liara replies, slowly closing her eyes and bowing her head with a sigh, “we need to return to the Sol system. That is where the Citadel will be, if it still exists, and we need it to finish constructing the Crucible.” She draws a fortifying breath and turns to fully face Kelsa, her brow-ridges drawn in concern. “This will be the end, one way or another. We will either break them in Sol, or…”

“Or we’ll die,” Kelsa finishes, meeting her lover’s gaze with neither lust nor resignation. “Are we underway?”

Liara nods. “I took the liberty of giving the order while you were...indisposed. I apologise if it was an inappropriate assumption of authority, but we hadn’t the time to delay.”

There is something else weighing on the asari, as clearly as a rucksack full of rocks, but if Liara isn’t going to volunteer it, it must be something Kelsa doesn’t need to know. “It’s fine,” Kelsa gruffs, answering both the woman’s words and her badly-concealed subterfuge. “One more fight, huh?”

“One more fight,” Liara agrees, and the terror at the edges of her expression recedes just enough to
let her lips quirk into the semblance of a smile. “It is almost difficult to believe that this war is almost at its conclusion. And, for the most part, that is your doing.”

Kelsa’s smirk is almost enough to cover the grimace. “I’m sure Anderson might have something to say about that,” she replies, but her heart isn’t in it. “Have you talked to him?”

“I have,” the alien affirms, that subtle smirk falling. “He understands the need for operational security, but he wanted me to tell you that he’s looking forward to seeing you. So are the soldiers under his command, most of whom were civilians mere months ago.”

*And in a few days they’ll all probably be dead*, Kelsa doesn’t bother saying. She doesn’t bother asking where in particular they’re going; she’ll find out soon enough. “I’ll try not to disappoint them,” she says, instead. “And I’ll give you all plenty of cover to do what you need to do with the Crucible.”

Liara’s face hardens. “I have no intention of remaining behind the scenes when we reach Earth,” she declares, her hands reaching across the gap between them to take up Kelsa’s. The soldier can’t help but twine her fingers through the asari’s. “I intend to be at your side, come what may.”

The lump in Kelsa’s throat swells, threatening to steal her very breath, but her gaze doesn’t falter. “I love you,” she manages, landing on that one simple truth in the midst of all of the uncertainty, both within and without her. It feels foolish, now, how long she kept herself from saying it.

“I love you, too,” Liara affirms, squeezing Kelsa’s hands all the more tightly. “More than I ever thought myself capable. You have shown me so much of the galaxy, and of myself, that I cannot ever properly express my gratitude. No matter what happens, know that you are the most important person I have ever known, Kelsa. I love you.”

Kelsa has nothing to say to that, but she doesn’t look away or hide her face as the tears build up in her Cerberus-enhanced eyes, or start spilling down her scarred cheeks once more. “Lay with me?” She breathes, tentative. “Just...for awhile? Until we have to get ready?”

In reply, Liara retreats a step and a half, picking herself out of the professional uniform she wore for Hackett and Anderson. They’re both equally naked by the time they reach the bed, both equally gentle in each other’s arms as they lay there beneath the viewport, both silently drinking in the moments that stretch between them and their doom. And, for the first time in awhile, Kelsa feels the frost within her truly ebb, replaced by something far more filling. Something delicate, and worth keeping, even if it isn’t who she might’ve been.
Ch 53: When Dreaming Ends

Chapter Summary

Kelsa arrives in London, ready to show the Reapers that, while she breathes, it will never truly be conquered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Landing Zone Charlie

2130 Zulu

10 October 2186

London, Occupied Europe, Terra, Sol

"Look at it," Ash grunts, shuddering at the sight of war-torn London gliding past below them. "It's like it isn't even Earth anymore."

Kelsa peers over the edge of the Kodiak's open hatch, taking grim note of the urban hellscape; crumbling concrete, burning cars, dead bodies rotting in the street. Bloodstains so old she wouldn't've been able to tell them apart from rusted asphalt if it weren't for the implants in her eyes. Take away the stray Reaper here and there, and she'd be hard-pressed to say it wasn't the Garden after twenty-odd years of neglected overgrowth. "Looks like home to me," she gruffs, unshipping her spear-chucker and lowering into a crouch as Cortez brings them down to deployment level. Her finger pulls back on the trigger, and the familiar click click click of the weapon gathering tension thrums reassuringly up her arm.

"I heard that," Vega barks, mistaking her meaning. "A little rusty and dusty, but nothing the Alliance can't fix once we've kicked these pendejos back to Hell."

Kelsa doesn't answer him in words, but she glances to her left and right, taking one last look at her human squadmates. This is it, she tells herself, nodding. It feels like all her life has led her to this fight, today. Every kill a lesson, hard in the learning. "Almost there," she breathes, as much to herself as to her squad, and she vaults out of the hatch without further elaboration.

New cracks vein out across the tarmac in rings when she lands; despite the nanofibres in her bones, she can't completely ignore the ache in her hips as she rolls out of her dent and sights down on her first Reaper of the night. A big brute goes down when that first superheated spike splits its head open, and Kelsa's three strides down the alley before her squadmates land—much more gently than she had, but both still hard enough to make it count. Kelsa's body count increases by another brute and a handful of husks before they catch up and add a few more bodies of their own to the pile.

The three of them fall into a familiar rhythm, one she and Ash have shared since those first few tense days on the Normandy, years ago. They hardly have to speak as they cut their way through the wreckage that used to be London, each of them a killer honed by this war, each able to taste how close they are to an end. Kelsa can't see beyond that end, can't see beyond the next wave of
enemies, the next rack of her shotgun.

Win or lose, she can't see a place where she'll be able to put down her gun. War's been a fact of her life since she was six years old, and the harder she fights, the harder it is for her to picture anything else.

Brutes, banshees, marauders, husks. Dozens of husks, hundreds, an unlimited supply for her and her subordinates to cut through on their way to the Reaper that's keeping air support from being able to land. There's only the mission, the next foxhole, the next bit of burned wreckage to use for cover. The next enemy to defeat on the way.

Nothing looks as good as those Thanix missiles when they streak into the Reaper's red core. It's a tiny one, as these things go, but it lights up the sky as it falls, another victim to Kelsa's insatiable appetite for conflict.

"That's how it's done!" Vega boasts, taking his pleasure in surviving. No matter how skilled he is at it, to him the fight's a means to an end. Ash, too, heir as she is to a legacy of soldiery. They're fighting for something, families they have or might one day make, families they'll never meet and futures they'll never know.

What is Kelsa fighting for? A chance to make a home and family with Liara? To make up for lost time and missed opportunities with Sam? She thought so, in those quiet moments with Liara on the way to Earth, but she can't square the asari's gentle touch with the blood on her hands now.

The answer eludes her as they carve their way to the forward operating base, to Admiral Anderson and the best hope they have to put an end to this fight, once and for all.

The Normandy has already landed in what passes for the FOB's green zone by the time the humans arrive, as have dropships from Tuchanka, from Rannoch, from Asari and Turian spaces—though none from Thessia, nor from Palaven. Her own crew is disembarking and taking their marching orders from Anderson's lieutenants, some of whom must have been rawboned recruits a few weeks ago, but they've all got season on their skeletons now.

Liara herself is inside the compound, such as it is, conferring with Anderson at a strategy table. Kelsa catches the old man's eye and he blinks, hard, like he didn't imagine she were really back on Earth, despite the presence of the ship he'd given her, the lieutenant she'd given him. "Goddamn it's good to see you," he hails her, after she answers his beckon. "Thanks for clearing that bastard off the runway for us."

"My pleasure," Kelsa retorts, the honesty of the sentiment shining through in her smirk. "Thanks for staying alive long enough for me to put my boots on Earth one more time." One last time, she doesn't have to say. She looks from him to Liara, who seems relieved and apprehensive in equal measure, ever mindful of the reason behind Kelsa's decision to delegate strategy to her; with this many Reapers around, Kelsa can't ignore the tinny reverberation in her teeth, in the marrow of her bones. Her stomach turns under Liara's gaze, that flicker of hope warring with the certainty that whatever the future holds, the next few days are going to be a symphony of destruction unrivaled by any she's conducted before.

They'll have to be, if any of them have a hope of seeing the sun rise on a world without the Reapers.

"I'll leave you to it," she tells them. "Just let me get a few hours of rack time on my ship, and then point me."
Both her lover and her mentor hesitate, but they don't openly demur, and Kelsa turns back to the Normandy. As soon as her mentor and her lover are out of view, she can't keep the grimace from stalking across her face, the cybernetic flesh tingling through the cracks in her face. The crumbling base is chilly in the autumn night, and that chill sticks with her even when she makes it to the Loft. When she closes her eyes, she can almost believe she's back in Michigan. "Soon," she whispers, without meaning to.

"Soon."

Forward Operating Base
1850 Zulu
12 October 2186
London (disputed), Terra, Sol

"I said I wasn't going to stand idly by while you fought to free your home planet," Liara whispers, "and I meant it."

Kelsa's torn; they're standing in an anteroom in the decimated compound, ten minutes before go-time. Ten minutes before Kelsa and Garrus and Anderson are set to lead the spearhead to Harbinger, to the Beacon, and the Citadel beyond. She knows this, she's allowed herself to know this, because in ten minutes she'll embark on what is almost certain to be the last fight of her life. And, standing here in this room, looking into Liara's cerulean eyes, Kelsa wishes her last fight had already happened, that she could put her down her gun and never pick it up again. Under Liara's gaze, she can't feel the chill of Michigan any more, though she knows it's waiting for her, out there on the battlefield. "It's gonna get ugly," she gruffs, unable to maintain the asari's gaze, unable to entertain the fantasy it inspires within her.

"Not to you," Liara points out. Her lips curl into a small, sad smile. "You still believe that the fighting is the only beautiful thing about you."

"Not when I'm with you." The words come unbidden, her eyes still unable to rise to meet her lover's. "You make me feel...more. Like something else is possible, like there might be..."

"A happy ever after?" Liara wonders, almost idly, before her smile fades and she takes the human by the shoulders. Her eyes are softer than Kelsa expects, when she finally meets them again. "You know as well as I that we've both seen too much bloodshed to sleep soundly, no matter what happens. But it will be over soon, one way or another."

There's something—probably a lot of somethings—that Liara isn't telling her, but Kelsa knows better than to ask. Instead, her own hands slide up Liara's back, pulling her close, and she closes the last of the gap with a kiss far more tentative than she'd intended. She doesn't pull away when the kiss breaks, her breath playing over the asari's lips in short, ragged whispers, her eyes heavy-lidded and out of focus. "When I'm not with you," she breathes, "I can't remember why I ever thought I deserved better than what I got. I'm...lost, without you."

"Kelsa," Liara whispers, almost a groan, and she dips her head forward until their foreheads rest, each against the other. "I wish you could see yourself the way that I see you. You are...the most remarkable woman I've had the pleasure to know."

Kelsa's skin tingles wherever it touches Liara's, and she feels the same tingle spark within her chest as she buries her face into the crook of Liara's neck. "You can fight by my side," she muses, "but
there's going to come a time when you've got to pull out. The Citadel...might be a one-way trip."

"I'm prepared to face that eventuality," the asari assures her.

"I'm sure as fuck not," Kelsa grunts, mindful of the strength in her limbs as she wraps them more tightly around her lover's torso. "I'd... rather die myself than watch you die," she points out. "I've known that since I gave up the Collector base to get you back."

"So I must watch you mount the Citadel, knowing that my absence will keep you from envisioning a life you might have beyond it?"

"Unless..." Kelsa swallows, hard, and she pulls back to look into Liara's face for a long moment. "You were serious about what happens when asari bond with someone."

Liara's brow-ridges draw down as the implications sink in. "Are you certain, Kelsa?" When the human can only nod, a mist of concern plays over the asari's features. "We as much as promised Samantha that we wouldn't pursue a bond until we'd won."

"I know," Kelsa says, her voice hoarse, harsh with regret, with longing. "I...can't say that she'll get over it," the soldier allows, "but I'd rather break her heart by living than break it by dying."

That mist across Liara's features evaporates, and the tingles across Kelsa's skin change abruptly, like sparks sowing deeper into her flesh. "As you wish," Liara says, her tone clearly indicating that she wished it, too. Blackness emerges from her pupils, spreading rapidly until it covers her eyes. "Embrace eternity!"

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**Citadel Beacon Approach**

**0215 Zulu**

**13 October 2186**

**London (invested), Terra, Sol**

"Joker," Kelsa barks, her voice rougher than it's ever been, "I need a priority evac at my location-two principals. Yesterday!"

The pilot's Aye, aye comes without a quip, and it'll only be a matter of seconds before he arrives. Garrus is sucking fumes and coughing blood after he nearly got crushed by a rogue APC that just scattered them. Liara, for her part, is hiding the agony of a shattered shin from the same event, but it's clear that she won't be leading any charges anytime soon, regardless.

They don't speak, but they don't have to; Kelsa can feel the asari, almost like they're one person across two bodies; her own shin aches in an echo of what Liara must be feeling, and her heart strains with the other woman's worry and regret. I am sorry, she doesn't have to say, those cerulean eyes locked firmly on Kelsa's face in those last few moments.

"I love you," the human repeats, just to taste the words on her tongue one last time, to feel the vibration in her throat and see the joy they bring across Liara's face, even in the midst of her agony.

The Normandy swoops in and Garrus pulls Liara up onto the hangar bay's lip, with the help of EDI and Cortez, who lay down suppressive fire on the husks drawn to the appearance of the ship. Kelsa stands, wide open, not breaking eye contact with Liara until the hangar bay doors pivot the asari out of her sight as the ship heads out of the cauldron.
Then, after a breath, Kelsa turns around and starts the climb to the summit of the last hill. Anderson and his lieutenant, Coates, are nearly there, along with a platoon of resistance fighters. Beyond lies the Beacon, connected directly to the Citadel out in space, where they'll need to go if they want any hope of winning this war. Kelsa shoulders her gun, stepping deliberately toward the maelstrom, almost unable to believe that it's about to be over.

Elation takes root in her chest when she realizes that the bond with Liara is still there, a bridge to her lover's heart, a reminder of what she stands to gain by waking through the fire. It can't die away like it has so often, can't leave her, can't let her forget that she's more than the enormous sum of bodies she's left behind, even as she adds to the pile.

When she crests the hill between Coates and Anderson, she doesn't join in the battlecry that the others use to hurl themselves into the final push. She doesn't seethe with her usual battlefield intensity, doesn't relish and secretly loathe every life she takes. And when the gigantic lobster of a Reaper descends over their position, she doesn't scream or turn to run; she pushes on, filled with the certainty that she can only keep moving forward.

SHEPARD, comes the voice, rumbling from within her very bones. It's haunted the outskirts of her thoughts since shortly after she was resurrected, and she recognizes it instantly.

"Harbinger," she whispers, certain that it can hear her just as clearly as she can hear it. "I'm going to kill you."

She says it without a glimmer of a boast, but still without any sense of how mad the sentiment truly is. Even as the kilometer-long machine begins raking over her comrades with its laser beams, scorching the already-barren earth around her, Kelsa doesn't stop advancing, doesn't look away from the machine's lifeless orange eyes.

YOU HAVE EARNED YOUR PLACE AMONG THE SOVEREIGN, Harbinger pronounces, after a moment, as though it had been considering her worthiness. Then, without ceremony, it swipes its laser across her path.

Kelsa closes her eyes, just for an instant, but she only feels the merest hint of warmth bathe her. The warmth lasts only for a heartbeat, however; soon it is replaced by a bitter chill, enough to punch the air out of her lungs. It's enough to tell Kelsa that she isn't dead, not quite, and when she opens her eyes again, she isn't entirely surprised to find herself on Zug Island in the middle of winter.

"I've been waiting for you," Jay says, appearing in front of her just as his words form in her ears, standing for all the world like he's been there for years. He isn't the boy on the cusp of manhood that he was when she killed him, not too far from this very spot. He's a man grown, now, in an Alliance uniform, with a fair few scars of his own. He's the man Jay always knew he'd become, until that old gangster talked Kelsa into shooting him in the head.

He's John Shepard.

"How've you been, Kay?" He talks like they're old friends, like they're sitting at a dinner table instead of standing across from each other in the middle of an abandoned scrapyard in Kelsa's head.

"Better than I have since I died," Kelsa admits, understanding the truth of her words as she speaks them. She can still feel her bond with Liara in this place, maybe stronger than ever. "At least the first time."

"Over Alchera, you mean?" Jay asks, smiling indulgently, like they're sharing a joke. "That was
some mighty fine heroing you did, if I do say so, Kay."

"It shoulda been you," Kelsa says, still not moving, still not shivering, despite the cold. Her breath clouds around her when she talks.

Jay's doesn't. "I'm not so sure about that, Kay. I never was as strong as I tried to make you think I was." His eyes fall to her hand, and she feels a weight come into being there. "I couldn't take the gun away from you, when the time came."

Her eyes follow the line of his gaze down to her hand, where she isn't terribly surprised to find the gun she'd used in this place, the gun she'd tossed away.

The gun she'd killed him with.

"Not then," she allows, studying the weapon, turning it one way and then another, bringing it closer to her face and then further away. Her trigger finger stays outside the guard. "You'll probably have a better chance this time, if it comes to that."

"Will it?" The question has no more weight than anything else he's said since he showed up, or since she showed up, or since she died under Harbinger's beam, a second or an hour or a whole lifetime ago.

Still, there's an edge behind his eyes that wasn't there before, and wasn't there when he was alive, either. She only sees it for a second, but a second is enough. "I don't think so," she decides, against every instinct she's honed over her long, bloody lifetime. Instead she throws the weapon away again, harder and farther than she managed when she was a kid, before Cerberus and Alchera and all the rest.

Jay frowns, disappointed, and she can see now how wrong he is, all the ways this avatar falls short of her memory. "You were supposed to be worthy of becoming sovereign," he says, his face suddenly cracking as red as hers on her worst day. His eyes glow the same dull orange that she sees in the depths of her own. "Prove to me you're worthy, Kelsa. Don't let me down again."

Kelsa's brows draw down, and she takes another frigid breath. "I'm sorry, Jay," she breathes, her vision fogging with her exhale. "I'm tired," she admits in a low gruff, "and I don't want to be what killing you made me anymore."

"If you are not worthy," Jay hisses, with subtle mechanical notes vibrating beneath his voice, "then your people will truly be lost. You must kill me. You must prove your worth to take your place among the stars. You must become sovereign."

It falls into place, then, the feeling she's had over the last few months. "You haven't been indoctrinating me," she admits, speaking the suspicion out loud for the first time. "You're been testing me. Trying to tell if I was ready...for what?"

She looks beyond him, then; through him. In this, the cold winter of her dying mind, she sees Harbinger inside him, bleeding through, orange and red and as black as intergalactic space itself. She doesn't even need an answer, then; she knows, as much as she's ever known anything, that Harbinger has claimed her as the core of the next Reaper. The next Sovereign, to replace the one she killed, and the one they tried to build after that.

THIS IS YOUR DESTINY, KELSA, Harbinger tells her, shimmering through the fading vision of her first victim. YOU WERE MADE TO DESTROY THEM; TO BECOME THEM; TO ASCEND FOR THEM. THE CYCLES MUST CONTINUE.
She sees it, then; she has but to step forward, to take Jay's life in her hands again, to squeeze that life through her fingers until nothing's left but blood and cold, cold flesh. It feels to her like every breath she's taken since that winter's night has led her back here, tipped her toward this decision, this inexorable fate.

But she's tired... so tired. Even here, in the space of her mind, her hips and shoulders ache with the weight they've carried, and her fingers burn with desire her bloodlust and bed lust haven't been able to satisfy. "Sounds nice," she says, in a sigh, finally feeling the cold start to crawl over her skin. "But I'm not interested."

Jay's face twists into a grotesque, scarred phantasm, his eyes shining a deep orange, Harbinger's steel glinting behind them in consternation. *THE CYCLES MUST CONTINUE*, he repeats, and suddenly he has the gun she killed him with, way back when. *IF YOU ARE NOT WORTHY, WE WILL JUST HAVE TO FIND ANOTHER.*

Every instinct screams for her to lunge forward, to overpower him and snatch the pistol from his grip, to bury three rounds in his forehead before his heartbeat sounds off twice. But her legs don't move, and she closes her eyes. "So be it," she breathes, clinging to the connection she'd forged with Liara, that bond she feels deep in her heart.

Minutes pass into what feels like hours, and the darkness behind her eyes deepens, and her world narrows to the width of that intangible connection. Even when she tries to open her eyes, all she sees is darkness, and all she feels is the familiar tingle beneath what once was her breastbone. Eventually even that dissolves, until there's nothing left.

Nothing eventually resolves into a diffuse ache which slowly suffuses the vast emptiness. The pain sharpens, by degrees which take an eternity to tick over, until the contours of her reality conform to the shape of limbs and a torso. The pain takes a rhythmic quality, each beat bleeding into the next over the expanse of an eon, until her world becomes a thin stripe of bright, hot light, cutting across her like a horizon.

Slowly, ever so slowly, that horizon smears and resolves into the sterile med bay of the *Normandy*. Each wave of pain follows a ragged, wet breath, and it takes Kelsa far too long to gain command of her throat, to croak out a groan. She finds herself strapped tightly to the bed, wrapped up in carbide from her neck to her ankles.

Liara's sitting up on the bed beside her, while Aria T'Loak stands at her feet; the former looks as exhausted as Kelsa feels, but grateful, while the latter looks bored and haughty and just a tiny bit haggard. "I can see in her eyes that it worked," the older asari snorts, dismissively. "I'll be on my way, now."

The doors *hiss* as Aria departs, leaving the room to Kelsa and Liara, with the still-sleeping hulk of Garrus off to the side. "It's over," Kelsa grunts, barely able to form the syllables.

Liara's hand brushes lightly over her cheek. "We're still breathing," she allows, her brows drawing together as she smiles. Then the smile falters, and she looks into the distance beyond Kelsa. "The cost was great, and we still are not guaranteed victory, but..."

"We're still breathing," Kelsa says, leaning into the asari's gentle grip. It's enough, for now.

It's enough.

Chapter End Notes
Annnnd here it is, a few years late, but Kelsa's path of destruction through the Milky Way is at an end. I want to thank coffee_maker for all of her excellent beta-reading, and everyone of you for reading.

Until next time,

Riptide

End Notes

Thanks so much to my wonderful beta-reader, buttercup23, for all of her help and dedication!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!