There Is No Shepard Without Vakarian

by Mysti_Fogg

Summary

All life was synthesized to create a perfect eternal peace. The lie of ignorance from a
Machine Child.

Commander Shepard was a badass hero who unflinchingly saved the galaxy with her sacrifice. The lie of propaganda from those who profit from her loss.

A truth: Garrus Vakarian is a bad turian who fell in love with a flawed human who died for the cause. And now he will rewrite fate to save her.
The other Citadel races don’t give turians much credit for their art: The paintings are bright, the music has a beat, and the architecture is serviceable.

The only thing the other races admire turians for is their military. Every turian serves the Hierarchy in some capacity starting with boot camp at the age of 15 followed by a period of active service before they have the possibility of resuming a more civilian (though still controlled by the state) lifestyle.

Every turian knows military life intimately.

And so, turian war stories are long and complex and have covered every possible situation a soldier could ever be in from every possible angle.

One of the standard storylines is the romance: Two soldiers fall in love in a trench and have to fight through a war together. There are three possible outcomes: They both live, they both die, or one dies and the other has to live on.

But that last outcome is more often the beginning of something rather than the end.

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The Reaper laser hits beside him, and Garrus Vakarian keeps running. Ahead of him, sprinting though the misty rain of the London battlefield, is Commander Shepard in her white Spirit armor. Around him, tanks and people scurry toward the one ray of light leading to the Citadel while banshees, marauders, and husks swarm around them, defending the last shining bit of hope that this war could end with any survivors.

Suddenly there’s an explosion, and a tank tumbles over, rolling towards Shepard. She can’t slow her mad dash, and so she tries to slide underneath it. It hits the ground solidly, and for a panicked moment Garrus can’t see her and thinks she’s been crushed. Then he catches sight of her on the other side, and starts moving to her. At the same time, another tank comes flying over the first one. Turians aren’t good at dodging. The tank catches fire, lands on top of him, and rolls.

The blur of the world eventually resolves into Shepard crouched over him, calling for an evac team. With sheer stubbornness and adrenaline, she drags him toward the safety of the Normandy. They’ll have to try again later, hope someone else makes it. But then she passes him over to Javik, the last Prothean, who isn't as burned. "Here. Take him." And she stands on Earth, auburn hair slicked against her neck, watching him leave.

"Shepard?" Garrus calls to her, not quite believing.

"You've got to get out of here," she says. She is staying. There will be no second chance.

"And you've got to be kidding me." He knows things go wrong when he's not there to watch her back.

"Don't argue, Garrus."
"We're in this to the end," he insists.

She strides toward him and he hopes that she's changed her mind. But her voice cracks as she speaks, "No matter what happens here, you know I love you. I always will." She touches the silver skin of his throat, fingers tracing upward to his scarred mandible.

"Shepard. I..." he never has the right words for her. He knows he can't persuade her to come with him. This is the end of the Reapers. It has to be. Or she'll break. So he tells her the words he's never explicitly said because he didn't want to make a promise he couldn't keep. "I love you, too."

He watches her turn away to run for the beam, to become the legendary hero she was born to be, to die to save everyone.

Chapter End Notes

And so it begins ...

We'll see how well I manage to write a complete story in serial.

Within the Mass Effect fandom, I have read a few tales of rewriting the world. These are "Mass Effect Reloaded", "Variations on a Theme, With Tank and Gunfire", "The Other Commander Shepard", and "Equidistant Damages". If you like this style of story, I'd recommend looking them up.

In general, I am always inspired by (spoilers for other works):

_The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind_ because I love the idea of reliving a romance, even knowing that it's likely doomed, because you need that person and those memories in your life. It is _the_ romantic movie of my generation.

and

_Puella Magi Madoka Magica_ because if you had the power to reset time to save the one you love, wouldn't you try? No matter how many times it takes.
Tumble Out of Bed

Chapter Summary

Wake up, Shepard!

"Wake up, commander," Miranda Lawson's voice comes over the loudspeaker. "Shepard? Do you hear me? Get out of that bed now, this facility is under attack."

Commander Shepard shakes her head groggily and opens her amber eyes. "Miranda?" Shepard is on a metal table. The walls of the room are industrial greenish grey. The Lazarus Station? But what happened with the war? With the Reapers?

"Shepard, your scars aren't healed but I need you to get moving. This facility is under attack," Miranda insists.

"Damn it! What happened? Did we win?" Shepard tries to remember: Beam of light. Tank. Garrus charred and crushed. Evac ship... "Who pulled me out of the fight?"

"There's a pistol in the locker on the other side of the room. Hurry," Miranda won't stop giving orders, and Shepard finds herself mechanically following them. It's instinct and déjà vu combined. As she slides into place behind a barrier of tipped office cabinets, the door explodes.

Wasn't this station blown up? But she wouldn't put it past Cerberus to have more than one. She tunes out Miranda's voice and runs through corridors. Down an elevator. Through a gout of flame. Watch a guy in a Cerberus uniform call out for help before being gunned down by a YMIR mech. It's like people only buy ATLAS mechs these days, Garrus had said.

This isn't just similar, this is exactly the same.

"Charge 'em up," a different familiar voice is talking to himself or taunting the mechs. She rounds the corner to a bridge, and there's Jacob Taylor, a fireplug of a black man in Cerberus uniform, shooting at LOKI mechs across the way. He notices her. "Shepard? What the hell. What are you doing here? I thought you were still a work in progress."

"I'm always a work in progress. That's the only way to get better," she replies in standard Commander Shepard form as she takes cover next to him.

"Things must be worse than I thought if Miranda's got you running around," he continues.

Just the same. Things are exactly the same. "I know this isn't the best time, but I'm sick of stumbling around when I don't know what's going on." Because there is no good explanation she can come up with on her own. She was on Earth. She fought Reapers. She died? The story was supposed to end.

"Fair enough, I'll give you the quick version: You and your ship were attacked and destroyed. You were killed: Dead as dead can be when they brought you here. Our scientists spent the last two years puttin' you back together. You've been comatose or worse that whole time," Jacob says matter-of-factly. "Welcome back to your life."

No. This is not where she's supposed to be. It looks like she needs to fight the whole damn war
again. "Alright, Taylor. Follow my lead and we'll get you out of here."

"Commander, how do you know my name?"

"I have access to all Alliance personnel records, that includes people who were discharged. Particularly people who were discharged and are now working for Cerberus," she can't help her dark tones as she spits the word.

"What?" He's stuck between worried and offended.

"Which is currently backed up by your black and white uniform with the big Cerberus logo over your heart."

"Oh. Um."

"We don't have time for this crap, Taylor. We need to get to the shuttle. Let's take these mechs down and go."

And so they fight past more mechs to Wilson, the short-haired, short-lived medtech. This definitely isn't déjà vu. Wilson should be just as dead as she is. She looks at him begging for medi-gel on the cold floor. He's not going to live no matter what she does. So, she takes mercy on him and shoots him: A quick death rather than leaving him for the explosion or teasing him with hope only to have Miranda shoot him.

"Shepard!" Jacob sounds horrified.

"He's the one who set the mechs loose and killed everyone." LOKI drones break through the door and Shepard sends a flare at the pile of canisters. The explosion is satisfying. It's also proof that her memories of a year from now are no hallucination. What happened? She grabs the medi-gel. "We should go."

"What if you're wrong?"

"I'm not. I woke up a few times during the experiments. I know what I saw," a convenient lie, but telling him the truth would be an unacceptable risk. Jacob is a weak link she can't trust: Good at his job, but not the brightest star in the firmament.

They run through corridors filled with mechs, mechs, and more mechs. The door to the shuttle bay opens, and Miranda is standing there in her white cat suit. "That was clever, Shepard, finding the mole."

"It goes with being perfect. But you know all about that." She smiles her old recruitment poster smile at Miranda, watching her. Miranda's face gives nothing away. "Let's not keep the Illusive Man waiting."

Shepard walks past her, leading the way to the shuttle.
I'd Like to Say That I'm Okay

Chapter Summary

Garrus, Liara, and Tali make it to the Citadel in Alliance space.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ceremony to put Shepard's plaque on the Normandy memorial wall was short.

Garrus had said nothing. He couldn't say anything. The pain was too raw. He couldn't even laugh that they'd left off her first name. He wasn't sure if she'd be upset that history was already forgetting her personal name or pleased that she was Commander Shepard as if she'd be the only one now and forever.

He'd looked to his left to ask her, and she wasn't there.

Except she was, too. She was there in the crawl of green energy over his plates the same way he could feel her on the battlefield. She was in a prickle of the skin along his neck, as if he were being watched. A sense of readiness for her to toss him a spare clip. The coruscation of light through the bodies of the crew. The anticipation of a laugh that never came.

Now he stands in the airlock. The Citadel is out of place, orbiting Earth rather than resting solitarily in the Widow system. Liara joins him, breathing mask in hand in case the atmosphere of the Citadel is inhospitable. "It looks promising from the outside." Her face still reflects naive hope despite The War and her time as Shadow Broker.

"Or like a Reaper trap," Garrus isn't convinced. They've seen the Reapers fussing with the mass effect relays, seeming to repair them, glowing green like everyone else. The husks scuttle across the arms of the ancient space station like bugs in a well-run maze.

Liara puts a gentle blue hand on his shoulder. "She could be here."

He shrugs it off. "She isn't."

"We can't be certain. I can get my networks scouting..."

"I don't need platitudes, Liara. You want to help? You find Miranda."

"Garrus, I don't think a clone will help. Or a new Lazarus Project, even if you had the money."

"But you want me to put my time and effort into finding her, even though, if she weren't dead -- which she is -- she'd need Miranda's specialized help?"

"I worry-"

"Don't worry about me, Liara," he's sharper with her than he meant to be.

Tali strolls down the deck in her classic purple enviro suit. "We both worry about you, you stupid
"bosh'tet!" The last time she died, you disappeared into Omega. Don't do that again."

"Tali," Garrus growls, "I don't need a babysitter."

"You do, too. And I'm not taking no for an answer," she says firmly, poking at his chest with a slender forefinger.

The airlock hisses open, and they walk into the docking bay. Other beings, mostly human, are ambling around in simple breathing masks. Mixed in with the humans are husks. Tali utters a short scream and pulls her shotgun. A green-glowing husk shudders, and starts to run toward her. She flattens it with a spray of bullets and the team dives for cover as other husks and humans turn their attention to the group.

"Hold your fire," calls a familiar voice. Major Alenko, ex-crewman of the Normandy, steps forward with the authority bestowed by Alliance blues. He's joined by two other men. The one standing at his shoulder has the grey hair of age and is in a much fancier uniform. The second man has yellowish hair and wears a purple civilian suit. He stands farther back, clearly leaving confrontation to the soldiers.

The older man calls out, "Advisor Vakarian, I presume."

"Yes."

"I'm Admiral Hackett"

"I recognize you, Admiral Hackett. What the hell are you doing with the husks?"

Hackett sighs, "They claim to be with us, now. They're helping us rebuild. Will you please put the guns down."

Garrus looks at Tali, who gives a little shake of her head. But do they really want to shoot through two important officers who are supposed to be their allies? Tactically, they don't have many options. He looks to Liara. "Keep us covered," he orders and then lowers his gun. A singularity should give them enough time to resume battle without being in danger.

Hackett clears his voice. "Good. This is Michael Price, the new human councilor." Hackett gestures to the man standing behind him and Alenko. Councilor Price steps forward with an air of smug authority.

"Councilor," Garrus nods.

"A pleasure." The councilor is all smiles. "I'm here with Spectre Alenko to facilitate the Normandy's return to the Alliance."

"Major Alenko is not assigned to this ship. I'm the current XO and it is my duty to follow orders given by Spectre Shepard."

Hackett doesn't meet his eyes. "Shepard didn't make it."

"You've found her body?"

"That's classified." Hackett looks unhappy as he says it.

"Not from me." Garrus flares his mandibles while his eyes take on a predatory intensity. He withdraws their bonding papers from the packet around his neck. "If you have found my mate's
body, you will take me to her."

The three men all twitch a bit, Garrus assumes in surprise. Where Hackett and Alenko look away, Price is trying to stare Garrus down. Since human eyes dry out faster than turian eyes, and Garrus has been in staring contests with experts, Price fails.

"I ... I didn't realize..." says Hackett.

"Of course not. The paperwork was filed in the Citadel shortly before we left to handle Cerberus, which would be shortly before the Citadel was captured and moved. That does not make them any less legal, since the Citadel is the accepted center of galactic government and all legal documents processed there are accepted by all council races. Now, have you found her body or not?"

"Not yet."

"Then my mission to retrieve her continues."

"But not on an Alliance vessel," Price snaps.

"Certainly."

"Major Alenko, take command of the Normandy."

"No. That's my ship."

"You will not have an Alliance ship."

"It's not an Alliance ship. It's an ex-Alliance ship that the Alliance kindly donated to the Citadel for the use of spectres, which is why Shepard was commanding it." Garrus pulls out his omni-tool. "Here's Shepard's papers recognizing her as a spectre, and here's the part where it details that her backing government identified as the Systems Alliance, will provide, at no cost, all appropriate equipment including a ship."

"And now Alenko will command it as a spectre."

"Reassigning the ship would be contrary to my current orders direct from Spectre Shepard since there is no proof she is dead. It would take the entire council to reassign and reorder any spectre working, which is why spectres are always so much trouble." Garrus finds the irony of finally using spectre privileges himself to be rather enjoyable. "You wouldn't want it to appear that the humans were trying to rule all the council races, would you? Because you have an entire 60 or 70 fleet's worth of non-humans circling your home planet right now, and they might get ideas if you started trying to order them around." He looks up and observes in a speculative tone, "I'd say the quarians have the largest fleet here, followed by the turian forces I'm coordinating. Of course, the turian forces are larger if I count all of our client races who would love to be able to say they aided the main fleet. What do you think, Admiral Tali'Zorah vas Normandy?"

He's never heard Tali laugh quite like that before. There are dark tones threaded through her mirth. Then again, he's never heard anyone imply that a quarian should give up a ship before. They're touchy about things like that. "You're not counting the geth forces, Garrus. I don't think they would follow me," she drawls, "But if they thought someone unauthorized was trying to take Shepard's ship? The quarian-geth alliance would come to a quick agreement and that would more than double the size of my forces."

"Don't count out the volus as fighters," he points to the lone dreadnaught Kwunu orbiting the Citadel.
"The volus are like beachballs, they're hardly impressive fighters," says Tali dismissively.

"But they are good at mass producing things. I think they have the most rockets and bombs per ship, and quite a few supply shuttles hanging back ..."

"I'd still pick the geth for my team."

"Alright, but I get Liara." Garrus keeps his tone light, amused, deadly. "Was there anything else you needed admiral? Councilor?"

"The crew." Hackett says at last. "The crew is Alliance and was never meant for battle. We would like them recalled."

"Of course," Garrus concedes this point. "Though I will be keeping Flight Lieutenant Moreau. He's up for honorable or dishonorable discharge. Take your pick. The last two times he resigned himself to Alliance rules, he was grounded, so he's not going to take his chances a third time. Engineers Daniels and Donnelly were attached to the crew later by the spectres and are staying. I have their paperwork here. Also Dr. Karin Chakwas is due for retirement and was in the process of being forced out when she took her current position based on spectre rather than Alliance authority. I'll keep her, too." Garrus would keep Cortez and Vega and Traynor and Adams and the others if he could, but that's beyond him at the moment unless they choose to give up their careers, which seems unlikely.

"They're humans. We're not going to make them serve a turian." says Price.

"You don't need to. They're all willing to stay to complete this mission. Now, unless there's something else, I have some shopping to do." Garrus brushes past them, trailing his squad behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the status quo.

Hopefully you're enjoying the story so far.

I have the next 9 chapters in various states of progress, so I can promise you at least that much more to come. I usually edit things 3-5 times before posting, so I'm spending a lot of time trying not to give in to the urge to post before I've thought things through.
"Commander Shepard" The image of the Illusive Man appears over the QEC, brushing ashes off the sleeve of his charcoal suit. He is as Shepard last remembers him: A dark mane like a lion above an unbuttoned blue-grey shirt to show off the muscle of a man edging past his prime. His unearthly blue eyes are the only sign of his indoctrination. Shepard hadn't understood that the first time they met.

"Illusive Man," She tries to keep her pulse calm. She won't let him know that she's been here before. Some may call me TIM. The treacherous thought mars the gravity of the occasion. She has to avoid giggling. If she starts, she's not certain she'll be able to stop before she becomes hysterical. Stay focused. Emotional reactions later, when there's spare time.

"Humanity is up against the greatest threat of our brief existence." The Illusive Man waves a dying cigarette.

"The Reapers," Shepard fills in.

"Good to see your memory is still intact. How are you feeling?"

Memory still intact? Did he say that the first time? Stay calm. "You need to earn the right to ask me those kinds of questions." She crosses her arms and plays the indomitable warrior. She knows she did that the first time. Is this really the second time? Was the first time some sort of program Cerberus ran in her head?

"Cerberus isn't as evil as you believe. You and I are on the same side, we just have different methods," the Illusive Man wants to give her the recruitment speech, but Shepard doesn't need it. She'll do as he asks.

The only card she has ever held in this conversation is herself. She could, perhaps, win in the short term by denying her help, and then fight her way off the station, but from there ... there's nowhere to go if she wants to save the galaxy. She needs a ship, a crew, weapons, money, intel: She needs Cerberus.

"Cut to the chase," she's not sure how her impatience will read to a man who never met her, but she needs to get through this as quickly as possible so that she can talk to someone she actually trusts to put everything together. He will be waiting for her in a sniper's nest on Omega. And maybe this time she can save him from a rocket to the face.

"You're more than a soldier, you're a symbol. And I don't know if the Reapers understand fear, but you killed one. They have to respect that," the Illusive Man appeals to her vanity. He doesn't realize she's already completely sold. She must be coming across too battle-hardened.

Shepard turns her voice slightly more conciliatory, "If what you say is true, if the Reapers are behind
"I'd be disappointed if you accepted any of this without seeing for yourself. I have a shuttle ready to take you to Freedom's Progress, the latest colony to be abducted. Miranda and Jacob will brief you." The Illusive Man seems to be buying her brevity. Good. He blinks out.

Neither Miranda nor Jacob has much to say about Freedom's Progress as their shuttle heads to the ghost town. It was apparently blandly boring until everyone mysteriously vanished.

So, Shepard takes the shuttle flight as an opportunity to fish for information on her resurrection, "I never got a chance to say how much I appreciated what the Lazarus Project did for me." She tries not to choke on the compliment.

"I just hope it was worth it. A lot of people lost their lives on that station," says Miranda, refusing to be drawn out.

Shepard purses her lips, but decides not to challenge her, just as Miranda didn't call her on the stiff politeness. "You still did a great job in charge of the project."

"I wasn't in charge, the Illusive Man was. If I was running the show, we would have done a few things differently," Miranda asserts.

"What would you have changed?" asks Shepard. She knows the answer, but is hoping for more details this time around.

"To start, I would have implanted you with some type of control chip. But the Illusive Man wouldn't allow it. He was afraid it might affect your personality, alter your character somehow. He wouldn't let us do anything that might limit your potential in any way."

"I can't say I like the idea of being brought back to life with a control chip in my brain." Shepard rubs the back of her neck, running fingers over her biotic implant. The fear of someone violating her mind by shoving some new kind of technology into the socket direct to her brain is part of the reason she trained to be such a fierce hand-to-hand fighter.

"The Illusive Man is taking an incredible risk with you. I just hope his gamble pays off," Miranda's voice betrays a hint of worry.

Shepard leans forward, "We'll see. In the meantime, I'd like to know more about what you did to me."

"That might be unhealthy. You should focus on moving on."

"It's healthy to want to know how my own body works. You don't have to give me all of the medical details. I believe you that I was dead. How do you make someone live again?"

"Well..." Miranda gathers her thoughts. "We attached 5,041 cybernetic implants to your skeleton to mend your bones, reconstructed your skin using healthy grafts and skin weaves, and primed your organs with fluids that also stimulated blood flow. The last part we were in the middle of completing was your facial reconstruction. We had just gotten the nose right two days ago."

"And all of that reconstruction just made me myself again?" Shepard has always been incredulous that it was merely a matter of replacing dead tissue with healthy tissue to get the same person.
"It's more complicated than that, but essentially, yes."

"You must have done something more to my brain. I know brain cells die if deprived of oxygen, and all of my air was sucked out into the vacuum of space."

"It was tricky, working on your brain." Miranda reaches out a hand to touch Shepard's temple, admiring her own work. "Memory, the basis of personality, is stored all over the brain and created by neurons firing together to recreate the thing you want to remember: an image, a smell, an idea," she waves a hand, seeming relaxed while talking about her specialty, "We were lucky that your brain survived intact and with little decay, or we wouldn't have had anything to work with."

"But how? Shouldn't I at least have bad reflexes? I was a little groggy waking up, but it feels like my hand-eye coordination is the same with no physical therapy required."

"A lot of very fiddly cybernetic implants at key points in your brain. The problem was that if we only encouraged new cell growth, then your brain won't communicate with itself properly because the new cells would be in the way of the old connections. The trick was to get your brain to tell the cybernetics how to rebuild it, which cells to regrow. I attached the nodes, and then stimulated your brain with electrical pulses, watched where they tried to connect. Based on what lit up, I attached a few more nodes. The process was exacting. Then, I let the nodes cycle on a kind of autopilot, reacting to currents released every two minutes, and promoting growth in the appropriate areas to a specified amount and shape set by your memories. After seven months, your brain had rebuilt itself enough to fire on its own. The nodes are now dormant until triggered by severe head trauma. You may find some memories missing or fuzzy, or you may find old memories are clearer than they've ever been."

"And leaving cybernetic brain building things in my head isn't a control chip?"

"No. Everyone's brain is different. I could cut open your head and see your brain. I could not see whether stimulating a particular point reminds you of a flower, your hamster, or your worst enemy. And I can't tie all of those points together to give you a memory of your hamster eating a flower before being stepped on by your worst enemy. Only you can do that. I gave you a toolbox and some metal. You're the one, or rather your brain is the one that decides whether to build a chair or a gun," Miranda shifts to the side, propping up her head with a hand, "That's also the reason I can't be certain I've succeeded until you're fully field-tested. I don't know what's going on in your head, I have to see what you do."

"You didn't know me before all of this, how are you going to judge if I'm me?"

"We have reports. There are patterns: You save people, you don't give up, you're ... nice, but also somehow inspirational." Shepard can practically hear the demand Impress me. "Oh, and I should mention that while we were fixing your brain, I gave you a biotic implant upgrade to the new L5. It interfaces better with the technology I was using. Your cyber brain implants are adapted to provide you with more power when they're not being used for healing. The results should be interesting."

Miranda looks out a window. "We should be there shortly, Shepard. The Illusive Man put us under your command. Do you have any orders?"

"Are you sure you'll be comfortable following my orders?" Shepard asks cautiously.

Jacob looks her straight in the eyes. That was always something nice about him: He might repeat other people's lies, but it was easy to tell when he was lying for himself. Then he'd look away or look down. She always knew precisely how far she could trust him. "We didn't bring you back from the dead just to second guess you, commander. The Illusive Man says you're in charge, you're in
charge." And he trusts her completely, even if it is foolish to trust an absolute stranger with brain damage.

Shepard nods. Time to look at where the dead lived.

Chapter End Notes

"There are some who call me ... Tim."

Chapter Summary

Tali and Garrus talk about keeping secrets.

"You big bosh'tet!" Tali hits him on the shoulder as they walk down the ravaged corridor. "How could the two of you not tell us you got bonded?"

"We were saving telling everyone for when we could actually celebrate. These were just papers for the Hierarchy and Alliance brass," Garrus tries to keep his voice level and ignore a sense of devaluing the promise that he and Shepard would have a future together.

"I tell you everything!" Tali exclaims, still upset.

Liara tactfully peels off to check in with her contacts and avoid any mention of the fact that she was one of the witnesses. If you're friends with the Shadow Broker, you may as well just tell her everything straight out and turn it to your advantage to make sure the correct privacy seals are in place to prevent a paparazzi extravaganza.

"And that's the problem. You also chat with Adams and Donnelly and Daniels all day long. We didn't think you'd keep it quiet."

"Says the turian. Everyone knows turians are too honorable to lie."

Tali and Garrus stop to salvage anything useful they can find, scanning old circuitry revealed by the destruction, finding makeshift tech defenses.

"But I can avoid answering questions. Chances anyone was going to ask me point blank 'Are you and Shepard bonded' were pretty slim so long as Allers didn't get any ideas, and she was more focused on the plans for the final defense of Earth than our personal lives by then." He picks through piles of debris.

"I thought I was your friend."

"You are," he sighs. "I was looking forward to seeing everyone at the party. I thought for sure there would either be a party or we wouldn't be coming back so it wouldn't matter to anyone but me and Shepard."

Tali sounds exasperated. "She's your mate and you're still calling her Shepard?"

"Habit. And it sounds better."

"It sounds better?"

"Shepard is a job, so it gets translated from human to turian when I hear it. It suits her, having the turian title for 'protector of the flocks' when she saved the galaxy multiple times."

"Oh. I never knew what it meant. Quarians don't have flocks," Tali quietly runs some scans with her omni-tool. "Is it actually still her name?"
"She didn't file any paperwork to change it. I thought we'd talk about family names later. The important thing was her not being locked up somewhere I couldn't get to her." Her being out of reach hits him in a wave, and he clenches his hand into a fist and stands still until the despair and frustration pass. He has to keep moving.

Husks and marauders work with keepers lugging away bits and pieces of metal and bodies. It makes them both twitchy to be so near the enemy, waiting for the mindless things to turn on them. Worse still is recognizing some of the faces. Shopkeepers, bureaucrats, C-Sec agents: They won't provide information or stand around a water cooler again.

Garrus makes his way to the old holding facilities for the overflow refugees, back to the hokey Shepard VI. Somehow, the power is still on. What a thing to have survived the attack on the Citadel.

"Good to meet you, I'm Commander Shepard, Alliance Navy," it says in a perky voice. It's wearing the wrong outfit. Shepard had one like that, blue coveralls over a white shirt, but she hated it. He could always tell it was laundry day if she was wearing it.

"Extranet says you're turian military. Take care of yourself out there officer," it continues cheerily. Is extranet working? It must be a default since any adult turian would have a military record.

"Anybody tell you you're one hell of a looker soldier?" Hell, Garrus, you were always ugly. Slap some face paint on there and no one will even notice.

He snarls and unplugs the VI, carefully winding up the cord and tucking the platform under his arm.

"Garrus, what are you doing?" Tali looks at him confused.

"Picking up some equipment."

"Why do you want that thing?" she asks as she follows him to the elevator.

"Experiments. Tell me, Tali, what do you make of what happened to us? I've been trying to figure out the green glowing for weeks now. And the fact that I can apparently reprogram some things from my omni-tool like switching the need to eat food with getting nutrition from electricity or heat."

"Um. Well. We seem to have circuits under our skin. My circuitry resembles standard quarian/geth designs. I can program all of my basic living functions for appetite and waste control. I can tune my reflexes and eyesight." There's a bit of a warble in her voice. She's hiding something. He looks down at her through his eyepiece. "I'm not certain how quickly I can reprogram my body to deal with illnesses. I don't want to try that until I'm back to Rannoch."

"Have you tried hacking anyone yet?" Garrus asks.

Tali looks down.

He nods to himself at having caught her. "I have, too. I hacked Westmoreland. It was difficult, but it worked. I'm not certain how much I could change her core programming because I wasn't about to experiment without her consent and I'm not sure I could fix her if I broke her. I've put various encryptions and firewalls up since then on everyone on the crew not tech savvy enough to do it for themselves."

"I ..."

"I know you tried to hack me, Tali," He keeps his tone mild. "I know you didn't do anything."
"You're not well, Garrus. I'm sorry, but I thought maybe I could find something that would help."

"I'm fine."

"You are not. You keep saying that, but you're not. You're doing that thing turians do like Sextus in Fleet and Flotilla when Mercy died. It's all duty to the state and nothing hurts. But I know that's not you."

"You're wrong. I'm fine. I have things to do," he softens his voice a little when he sees her flinch. "I'm fine. I'll stop being fine when I run out of things to do."

"I'm sorry," it's hard to tell under the helmet, but she seems sincere.

"Don't be. I was expecting you. You're our best hacker. I want you to work on putting up extra firewalls and protections. We need to be ourselves."

"And that's why I'm the best hacker on board and you're not. You didn't notice that I already have. Bosh'tet trying to tell me how to do my job," Tali grumbles, but she still won't look him in the eye now.
Chapter Summary

Freedom's Progress

She'd forgotten how cold Freedom's Progress was. The wind is frigid and emphasizes the loneliness and sterility of modular colony housing.

Of course, there are attack mechs to make Shepard feel more at home.

And shortly there will be Tali: A Tali who will accept her wholeheartedly, and that's a relief. Even knowing Miranda and Jacob as she does now, they don't make her feel alive. She was never close to Jacob, and while she and Miranda made peace in time, this Miranda at the beginning of their relationship is not only cold, but untrustworthy. Her loyalty is to Cerberus.

"Stop right there!" A quarian male dressed in brown points a rifle at the group as they enter yet another abandoned house.

Ah, there she is. "Prazza. You said you would let me handle this." Tali turns around. "Wait. Shepard?"

Prazza isn't listening, "I'm not taking any chances with Cerberus operatives."

"Put those weapons down," Tali's voice has the proper tone of command, but it's clear Prazza doesn't respect her. "Shepard? Is that... you're alive?"

Shepard knows exactly what will convince Tali. "Remember when I gave you that geth data. Did it help you complete your pilgrimage?"

"Yes it did." Tali turns to the quarians, "Put those weapons down. This is definitely Commander Shepard."

If Prazza weren't wearing a helmet, Shepard is certain she'd see him pouting. If quarians can pout. Depends on if they have lips under their full body suits. "Why is your old commander working for Cerberus?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should ask," says Tali. Tactical error. Don't use uncertain words like "maybe" when you don't have your squad under control. She's still young and learning, but the mistakes here are going to kill.

Shepard sighs and gives her most of the truth, good enough for this audience, "I nearly died, Tali. Cerberus spent two years rebuilding me. They want me to investigate attacks on human colonies."

"Likely story. No organization would commit so many resources to bring back one soldier." This is the smartest thing Prazza has possibly ever said in his life.

"You haven't seen Shepard in action, Prazza. Trust me, it was money well spent," Tali says. Shepard is touched, but she honestly wishes she had an answer to the question of why her. In the meantime, Tali is trying to be the peacemaker, "Perhaps we can work together. We're here looking for a young
quarian named Veetor. He was here on pilgrimage."

Shepard nods. "He may have the answers we're looking for."

And so, Tali develops a plan to search for Veetor. It's a decent plan if her own team would only listen. Perhaps the problem is that she's giving Shepard all the advantages of going directly for Veetor (with the disadvantage of potentially facing the worst threats). But if they reverse the plan, the quarians will still rush ahead, and get killed stupidly. Shepard doesn't see a way to save the quarians from themselves without betraying Tali.

Damn. It hits her. The quarians do always betray Shepard and Tali. Here, the trial, the battle for Rannoch... It must be hard living on the ships with them.

"Whatever happens, it's good to have you back," says Tali.

"Wait," Shepard touches her arm. "We need to talk. Privately. Veetor will be fine for another five minutes. He's the safest person here until the germs get to him."

Tali leads her out of the room and on to the back porch. "What is it?"

"Your plan won't work."

"You agreed with it 10 seconds ago."

"I still agree with it. It's a good plan. The problem is Prazza and his squad," Shepard takes a breath, "They're not going to listen. It's his squad, not your squad. It's clear they were given to you for the mission. They don't respect you, they follow Prazza, and Prazza is a hothead who is going to try to show you up to feed his own ego. They're going to go off after Veetor without back up, and they're going to get themselves killed because we've only seen personal pet and servant mechs mixed with some security. There's bound to be YMIR mechs around here for use in construction and unloading, especially at a warehouse. No way that crew can take a YMIR."

"Shepard..." Tali shifts her weight from foot to foot, thinking.

"Take the rest of them. Tell Prazza to wait with your ship, secure your exit in case Cerberus is plotting something. If he's not there, he won't be as persuasive to them, and they're more likely to listen to you."

"Alright." Tali's voice is not enthusiastic.

They go back to their squads and Shepard leads Jacob and Miranda out to shoot some drones. She keeps her pace slower than normal, fearing that any speed will be taken as a sign of rushing to the prize after delaying the quarians.

Shepard's team gets to the warehouse. Even as she hopes otherwise, she waits for the message that Prazza has led the others off to be killed.

It doesn't come.

The YMIR mech bursts through the doors, and Shepard's team begin their assault with Miranda overloading the shields while Jacob and Shepard riddle it with inferno bullets. The quarians come up from behind, catching it in a crossfire, and the mech goes down. Shepard tries to overwrite the old memory, the one of the quarian woman's limbs bending all the wrong ways as the mech steps on her, with this one of victory. The success in front of her doesn't seem as real as the past.
"Thanks, Tali. That would have been much harder without you."

"No problem, Shepard," Tali sounds much more pleased now. They walk side by side to the building where Veetor is holed up.

The man is huddled by a screen, watching the monitors obsessively, "Have to hide, have to hide, mechs will protect..."

It reminds Shepard of the SSV Edmonton when she was quite a small child, somewhere around two or three. The alarms had gone off on the dreadnought. They were always going off. She'd found a vent under her bed, and that became her hidey hole. It was too small of a space for an adult to climb into, let alone find. Every time she came out, there would be a mess and more people would be missing, killed in battle. And in a week or two they'd be replaced by new faces. Who would also die. Everyone died sooner or later at Shanxi: Bobby the yeoman who brought her mother coffee, Lt. Carrigan the demolitions engineer with the scar across her forehead who told stories about all the explosions she'd set, Sgt. Alaski who kept caramels in his pockets with the spare clips, her father with his lilting voice and warm blue eyes. The only thing to do was climb into the vent with the knife he had given her and be brave.

Be a good little soldier, Maddie. The best. Follow orders and stay safe until I get back.

Damn, she didn't need to remember that more clearly.

As she comes back to herself, Tali has turned off all of the monitors and Veetor has calmed down enough to tell them what happened. He even took a vid.

Miranda wants to keep Veetor, but that's not acceptable and never has been. They don't need a sick quarian who was slightly unhinged to begin with. He's not going to yield more details than the vid, and he needs his people to care for him.

Shepard knows Tali will turn her down, but she asks her to join the project anyway. It seems the best way to ensure she'll be there later.

And then the quarians are gone and Shepard is left wishing she could have had a hug.
I Can't Be Sober

Chapter Summary

Garrus goes to the bar.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

After reassuring Tali that he just has one more private errand to run, Garrus is finally free of company. He walks to Purgatory.

It's a long trek, and involves climbing up an elevator shaft and over balconies and barricades.

The bar seems to be a popular meeting point for survivors and is filled with tents. That makes sense. It's highly defensible: You can set up crossfires from the bar areas, you have the high ground, and you have several areas you can retreat up to until you're trapped. Since the whole Citadel was already a trap during the invasion, the one negative doesn't hold as much weight as it usually does. If you have to pick a place for a last stand, this isn't so bad.

*I don't think they've conquered the bar, yet* whispers a memory.

Garrus settles down on a stool at the lower bar. He looks at the empty seat next to him, and waits for Shepard to appear. Based on either instinct or calculation, Shepard lived her life like a vid. And if it were a vid, she'd appear now.

Nothing happens because all her living is done.

He lowers his head and rests his eyes for a few minutes, trying to assemble the next steps in his mind. Join the search for her body? No. Concentrate on the living. Take the ship somewhere to get supplies for the refugees, particularly the dextros and bring them back. Yes. Talk to his family? Maybe? Find Miranda. He definitely needs to find Miranda to figure out all of his options. She's made the impossible possible before.

He hears someone moving, settling onto the seat he'd left vacant for Shepard.

When Garrus looks up, he sees the dark form of Alenko, and finds himself bracing for a fight he doesn't want.

"I'm sorry. For your loss," Alenko sighs.

"Thank you," Garrus pulls on the old armor of turian stoicism.

"I guess I won't be talking to her after the war," the spectre's voice has the rough sound of holding back tears.

"It wouldn't have changed anything," Garrus watches him cautiously.

"I guess not. I should have listened earlier."
"Yes. You should have," there are warning notes in his voice, but the human seems not to hear them.

"I tried to move on after she died, and it seemed impossible," Alenko lets out another puff of breath. "And now she's missing and I'm not sure if I should believe she's gone or not. She'll just pop out of nowhere in two years or five years or 10 years like nothing happened. Again."

Garrus would give anything for that to be true. "I've always wondered..." He pours them both a drink. "Why did you push her away on Horizon?"

"A-hah. I was angry. Angry and stupid," Kaidan takes a gulp of the drink and swallows. "And I didn't want to be a fool. A part of me wanted to go with her, but I couldn't trust Cerberus and even if she was real, I didn't want our relationship to be me just doing whatever the hell she told me to do when all the evidence indicated it was the wrong thing. She'd have talked me around if I'd let her start making excuses. She always could."

Kaidan pours himself another drink. "I shouldn't have gotten involved with my commanding officer. It made everything confusing, blurred the lines between official commands and what she might have meant on a personal level. I felt like I gave in at every turn." He downs the glass and pours himself another. "What about you? Not confusing taking orders from your wife?"

"Well, I never had to follow any order I didn't like since she was never my commanding officer. She would just show up and offer me the opportunity to do something, and I always said yes because they were things I wanted to do." Garrus nurses his drink along, uncertain if Alenko's heavy drinking is his own grief or an attempt to use the human proclivity to mirroring to trick Garrus into drinking too deeply and talking too much. "If I disagreed with her, we'd talk about it. Sometimes she'd listen to me, most times she got her way because it was her ship and her mission. Being together changed nothing in our professional relationship." He takes a deep breath and then drinks the last of the glass. "I wish that it had changed things some. Maybe she would have listened to me when I told her to come back."

"If you need help, someone to talk to, I'd listen."

"You mean it might help you to talk."

"Well, yes. That, too. Moving on is... I've been trying for four years and I'm still not sure how to do it. She was something special."

Garrus shakes his head, "I don't need help. I've heard humans talk about moving on before, trying to forget the past. I've never been good at that. Turians try to remember all the best times to make them part of our spirits. I don't want to 'move on.' I want to spend the rest of my life with her in every way I can. If, in time, I were to bond with someone else, I would also still be with Shepard in my heart and mind. Though I pity a woman who would want to live in her shadow. And if I only ever have my memories of Shepard to keep me company, that's normal, too." He looks the human over. The man has always seemed to wear sadness like a second skin.

"That sounds lonely," Alenko observes.

"I may end up being a good turian yet. Duty to the state is one way to keep busy, and Shepard always did like it when I played guardian angel to people. No time to be lonely." Being happy again in any circumstances seems to be an unlikely outcome. It feels more like he's being harried through hell by her shadow when he stops moving for more than two minutes at a time.

"Well, still, if you need to talk..."
"Not right now. However, there is something you could do for me." Garrus offers. "I would appreciate it if you could keep watch on the Alliance if they find her body while I'm off on supply runs. We never did the ceremonial parts of the bonding, and it would be relief if some of them could be done before she's properly laid to rest."

"Oh?" Alenko seems a little too interested. But of course he is. Too many offers to talk. Too difficult to trace Garrus's path here. He's probably here to get a bead on Garrus for the Alliance.

"I'm not usually observant, but there are a few ceremonies that tie someone's essence to the family spirits. And my family will want that. With the way things are ..." he gestures to encompass everything shimmering with sickly green energy, "I actually want that, too. It might help me adjust to whatever this is." And this way, he has someone highly placed keeping an eye on the Alliance for the one thing he wants from them and an early warning system should they try to take the ship again. Alenko might watch him for the Alliance, but he's not the kind of man to hurt the grieving without sweating over it.

"Alright," Alenko agrees.

"Thank you," Garrus stands up. If she's not coming, then there's no point in waiting here. Perhaps she'll meet him on Omega.

Chapter End Notes

So, this is the kinder, though paranoid take on Alenko.
What a Way to Make a Livin'

Chapter Summary

The captain, the pilot, and the ship.

Shepard stands in the QEC ring, making her report to the Illusive Man. He's pleased enough with the vid to turn her loose. "I've found a pilot I think you might like. He's one of the best. Someone you can trust."

She works hard to keep her face straight and not burst out smiling before she even turns around. This is what she's been waiting for.

The familiar voice rings out, "Hey, commander! Just like old times!"

The QEC connection collapses and she's walking toward him. She'd hug him if she weren't scared of accidentally crushing him. "I can't believe it's you, Joker."

"Look who's talking, I saw you get spaced," he deflects, pulling on the brim of his new cap. She tries to ignore the Cerberus black-and-whites and focus on his familiar red-bearded face.

"And thanks for bringing that up. I got lucky. There's a lot of strings attached. How'd you get here?"

"It all fell apart without you, commander. Everything you stirred up, the Council just wanted it gone. The team was broken up, records sealed, and I was grounded." She feels the stirrings of anger in herself as he says it. It's no surprise and never was that the Council were fools, but until it had happened, she didn't think the Alliance was so stupid. She died to save the best damn pilot in the galaxy for a war where ships were important and he was a more valuable asset than she was, and they ignored her sacrifice to ground him. Idiots. "The Alliance took away the one thing that mattered to me. Hell, yeah, I joined Cerberus."

"You really trust the Illusive Man?" She asks.

"Well, I don't trust anyone who makes more than I do. But they aren't all bad: Saved your life; let me fly. And there's this. They only told me last night." He takes her to the docking bay and she stares out at the SR-2: She's sleek and svelte and shiny. And mine.

For the first time since waking up at the Lazarus Station, she's fully and completely happy. This is her baby, the only thing she has wanted for herself for most of her life: A ship to command. It will be her life and her legacy. Even knowing that all her work will eventually get her killed, she can't help thinking that it's the most perfect thing she has ever seen.

And it's why she will never be angry with Joker for not abandoning the SR-1. She didn't want to go either. There's part of her that wanted to go down with the ship because it was hers and everything she ever wanted. Joker would understand her on this one point that maybe no one else could. Every good captain, every good pilot, is in love with her ship.

She remembers the scrape of mouthplates on her neck, the feeling of only thin fabric separating her from Garrus. A shoulder to lean on, a warm body behind her. She remembers gathering the courage to say the words, admitting how broken she'd become, but maybe there was something else out there
for her, something else she wants. "When this is over, I'm going to resign. I can't do this anymore. I don't know what I will do, but not this."

It had hurt to put the idea of giving up the ship into words, like she was cutting out her own heart. But while she dreamed of being a hero and saving everyone, she was too practical not to admit she was falling short of the mark. Heroes don't fall apart. They aren't selfish. If she got through this, there would be other possibilities. And all of them involved him.

And if she didn't make it? Peace. Finally peace.

Joker brings her back to herself, "It's good to be home, isn't it commander?"

*I'm not home yet. I need to find the other love of my life.* "Don't tell me you didn't stand here staring the first time you saw her again."

"Again?"

Shepard gives him a look. "Well, what else would I call her?"
I Cannot Sleep

Chapter Summary

How to fill an empty ship.

Chapter Notes

So, writing this chapter almost made me want to veer off into writing an alternate universe post-synthesis adventure series about this crew.

But I'm committed to finishing this, so all distractions must be short, not long and open-ended.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Took you long enough to get here, birdie." The rough voice is unmistakable as Zaeed Massani unfolds himself from where he's been leaning against an inconspicuous crate near the Normandy's airlock.

"Zaeed." Garrus nods.

"I'll make this short. You have a ship. I need a ship. Picked up a mission a little while back, just before you showed up. Thought you might be interested."

"I'm listening."

"You provide passage. Do the job. I owe you," The old merc looks away, putting his bad eye in profile. "Heard about earlier. Sounds like you have a job that needs doing."

"I'm not agreeing to do a job without knowing what it is. That's how you end up dead."

Zaeed laughs. "Didn't think that mattered to you now. A'right. You provide passage, we talk about the job on the ship.

"You can have your old room back once the reporter clears out," Garrus doesn't hesitate to agree this time. The deal is too good. There's nowhere Zaeed could have a job that would endanger the Normandy. Meanwhile, Garrus is short-handed with most of the crew leaving.

Zaeed grabs his kit bag and slings it over his shoulder with his gun. "Come by when you're ready to talk. I'll introduce you to Jessie proper."

#

Garrus forces himself to stand at the airlock as the Alliance crew departs. Stand there. Shake hands like a human. It's what Shepard would have done, would have wanted. And then they're gone.

Don't think about it. Just keep moving. When you stop moving, you'll be dead.
He takes a place behind Joker in the cockpit. "You sure this is what you want?"

Joker laughs, "You mean compared to being grounded and never seeing EDI again? Hell yes."

"That would never happen, Jeff," EDI's synthetic voice vibrates pleasantly with accompanying subharmonics from her infiltration platform perched in the copilot's seat. "Advisor Vakarian is wisely saving the humans from the machine uprising."

"That's not funny, Daisy Bell."

"It was not a joke, Jeff."

There's a pause as no one says anything. Garrus can't say he expected anything less from EDI. He would never let the Alliance take Shepard away from him without a fight.

"Soooooo," Joker breaks the awkward silence, "I'm glad to be here."

"Take us out," Garrus orders.

"Hey, comma... boss, aren't we forgetting something?" Joker asks.

Garrus runs though the pre-flight checklist in his head. "No."

"I'm pretty sure we need the rest of the crew."

"Everyone's accounted for." He knows he's not Shepard. He knows that he has too few sensor technicians, repair personnel, and weapons officers, not to mention analysts. But he's not fighting a war. It might work out.

Joker points out the window. "What about them?"

There's a small contingent wearing Alliance uniforms and waving madly. At their head is a waifish tattooed woman and a varren. "Jack? What?"

"It's my doing, Garrus," Liara walks up the corridor to them. "I was checking up on the students after what happened to Grissom Academy. Jack wanted to get them off the Citadel and away from the Alliance and the Reapers. You've managed to find a loophole for us to operate outside of all of those authorities for the moment. We need a larger crew and they have technical experts and biotics with tactical support experience. I didn't think you'd mind."

Joker cackles "Oh-ho yeah. We're going to run off with the upcoming best and brightest before the Alliance realizes they're gone? Oh, please tell me to let them on board, Garrus. Please. It's worth the price of putting up with Jack."

"You love trading insults with Jack. Give me a minute." Garrus runs through scenarios in his head. The kids' parents? Were dead or missing or completely disinterested and thus why they'd stayed behind at Grissom Academy in the first place. Age? They were all adults by turian standards, trained and even battle-hardened. He thought they might even qualify as adults by some human standards. Humans weren't very clear about adulthood. Better to stick to turian standards. Possibility of stealing assets from the Alliance? Well, they didn't seem to be willing assets, and the Alliance was anti-slavery, so was it really stealing? Oh, who was he kidding? The Alliance would absolutely see it as stealing. But in the legal sense? No. At worst, they were a bunch of kids who fell in with bad company (there are no other words for Jack) and made a "bad" choice because they'd all jump off a cliff if she told them to. Of course, they were biotics and techies and would come up with a way to land gracefully at the bottom of the thousand foot drop, so was she even really a bad influence? And
David Archer? No one was going to keep him locked up anywhere he didn't want to be ever again. The safest place for him would be the Normandy.

"Open the airlock and get them all inside before someone in the tower thinks too hard about how young that group of Alliance soldiers looks."

"Yes!" Joker punches the air and then toggles some switches.

Garrus clasps his hands behind his back and turns to pace down the corridor to the elevator. "Liara, set up two dinners. One for the new crew to act as orientation. I want their dossiers sent to my cabin for review. Have Dr. Chakwas and Daniels and Donnelly and Joker on hand as well. I want a second dinner set up for the senior officers/ground squads, plus Jack -- she should be at both dinners, she certainly eats enough -- and Zaeed."

"Zaeed?" She's followed along two steps behind.

"You did great work filling empty berths. But I am capable of finding talent on my own. He volunteered himself so long as we play taxi service. He says he has a mission. I'd like to know what it is. I also want to know why Jack wanted off the Citadel so badly after working with the Alliance this long." He turns his head and lifts a brow plate at her.

"That I can tell you. It's her kids. Their parents want them back."

"I thought most of these were orphans."

"They are." Liara sighs. "You've seen the husks and marauders around. The Reaper races are trying to claim citizenship rights in their natal governments. Some of the children's parents want them back."

"Their parents are husks? And they want to separate potentially one of the most powerful units to survive the war?"

"Yes," Liara shudders. "And they're just children. I've never been so glad my mother is dead. If she were here now... I can't imagine hugging her... No. No. I can." Her trembling gets worse. "I... I couldn't leave those kids behind."

"You did the right thing."

Dinner is better than he expected. The ship isn't empty. And the students bring their own energy and excitement with them.

They're young. They still have hope.

And that hope is infectious to the older crew members. Dr. Chakwas has the glow of a grandmother whose grandchildren have finally showed up to visit. Joker is busy telling dirty stories whenever Kahlee Sanders's attention wanders elsewhere. Daniels and Donnelly are already discussing theoretical engine upgrades with David and Octavia.

_I wonder if Shepard meant it, about adopting kids. Because yeah, I want this._ This is the sharpest he's felt the pain of her loss since she sent him off on the evac ship. It's a knife dragged over his dreams. And yet, it feels good, too.

Kahlee eventually gathers up the students and shoos them off to the crew quarters and the dinner for
the ground squad is laid out. He takes the captain's seat at the head of the table. Tali sits to his right, as is usual with them. Not that Shepheard held formal dinners with any regularity, but he and Tali are perpetually together because it's safer to put all the dextro food in one place next to the two people who will be eating it. EDI sits to his left since she won't be eating anything, but it feels right having her at the table now that she has a body. Jack sits next to Tali, and beyond her is Javik. On EDI's side sits Zaeed, and then Liara.

It's not what Shepheard would do, but Shepheard always had a crew that was paid to follow her and owed their allegiance to some larger organization. They could be relied on to stay no matter what was kept from them. And then she'd run around keeping everyone who wasn't on the payroll up-to-date.

Garrus has no backing other than that these people want to stay for now. If they feel he is holding anything back, they might leave. No. Jack would stay because this is the students' best choice at the moment. But the rest of them would go and he wouldn't want to deal with Jack if she got angry at being left out. This is more efficient.

"Thank you all for being here," he says after all the food is passed out. "I don't know what's happened with the Reapers, but we fought them before. I intend to keep fighting them once I figure out what their new game is. It may mean playing nice with them on the surface, but while we have it, the Normandy will be free." There. Statement of intention, a core idea to follow. Just have to keep moving. "I'm looking forward to getting to know the students better and seeing them grow in their skills as a unit. Welcome back, Jack."

"You can cut the crap, Vakarian," Jack spits. "You don't need to play games with us. We know the score."

"Do you? Would you care to enlighten me? Because I've been on this ship for several months seeing to repairs and then I come back to Reapers running around free and even repairing the mass relays after they were destroyed. I'm still trying to figure this out."

Jack sighs and crosses her arms. "Magic green laser beams came spewing out of the Citadel and suddenly we've all got circuits and biotics are easy as fuck, and the Reapers are our best friends who just want to enlighten us about the truths of reality. Fuckers just decided to be sneaky about getting to us."

"That is not all," says EDI. "I am alive. Bacteria attached to my exterior have melded into additional structures. I am uncertain about my long-term viability, but various Reaper ships have been sending me signals about the secrets to immortality. They seem to believe that all living beings in the universe, including former organics, could attain this state if they desired to be reduced to digital forms or were enhanced by enough cybernetics. The research of the ancient races looks promising."

Garrus turns to her rather stiffly. "You're in contact with them?"

"They are constantly broadcasting signals. That is the easiest way to find and avoid them. I did not think that you or the rest of the crew would approve, so I am not currently broadcasting back at them. We need updated data."

"I have told you before to throw the machines out of the airlock!" Javik stands and points at EDI. "We cannot trust this thing. It could be lying. It could be telling the Reapers exactly where to find us and how to attack now that we are on our own with no fleets to back us up!"

"I would not betray this crew," EDI sounds a little upset. "Jeff and Shepheard have both taught me much about loyalty. You are the people I care about. I choose to stay here for you. Even if all of you
are still slightly irrational because you are organics and some of you threaten to throw valuable pieces of equipment, like my infiltration platform, out of the airlock. If I meant you harm, that would do nothing. I am in the ship. Right now, while I am in this platform speaking with you, I am also cloaking us from a Reaper squadron, joking with Jeff about something called 'How to Serve Man,' and reviewing Alliance manuals on teaching children. I think some of them are unnecessary since these children already know how to walk, but I wish to be thorough."

"Is this not evidence enough that we have lost the war this cycle?" Javik is still vehement. "Machines are thinking that they are organic and alive. They think they can understand emotions. But they are machines. They do not know what it is to be children or to be part of a society. It is all books and information without understanding."

EDI's face barely changes its pleasant expression. "I am part of a society. I am part of this society. It is a very strange society with so many different races, some of whom want to kill me, but it is still mine. And Shepard would not like it if I give up on you."

"Machine, I will not-

Garrus sighs. "Sit down, Javik. If we can't trust EDI, we've already lost. Trust has to start somewhere. She's been loyal through everything. I don't know why she'd stop now."

"We only think that she has been loyal. She and the one called Joker are those who abandoned the commander to die. If they had taken us to the Citadel, it might all be different."

"If they had taken us to the Citadel, the green beam would have hit us full on, caused engine failure, and led to us colliding with all of the debris surrounding Earth. I'll argue with Shepard about having us evac'ed, but leaving was definitely the right call for the ship," Garrus hates saying it, but when it came to choosing between taking a chance to save Shepard and following orders to save the whole crew, he chose the crew because Shepard would never forgive him if he picked her instead and he's not sure he would be able to forgive himself if everyone else died to save Shepard on his word. "And I won't accept that we've lost. Something happened."

"Well, now, I might be able to shed a little light on the subject," Zaeed's grizzled voice gets everyone's attention. "Got a contract. Need to kill a Reaper."

"Keelah. Not another suicide mission." Tali groans and puts a hand to her helmet.

Jack points a finger at Zaeed. "Fuck, no, you are not taking my kids near one of those things."

"Now, now, no need to get your knickers in a twist, baldy. It ain't like that. It wants to die. It's a suicide mission for the Reaper."

This time there's a collective "What!?" from the table.

"It don't want to live. Apparently, race that made up that thing is in charge now instead of Harbinger or Sovereign or whatever other mind was guiding it. And it don't want to live any more. Except the race, call'em the loriat, got some kind of rule against suicide. They say as a Reaper, they're immortal until they're killed. They can't kill themselves. So they went lookin' for a mercenary to kill them, and look who still has his contacts out and added killin' Reapers to his resume," Zaeed smiles at Garrus. "Told you, you'd like this deal."

"If it is to kill a Reaper, then I will come with you," Javik volunteers.

"You're still not taking my kids." Jack gives Zaeed the stink eye while settling back down.
"Sure they'll be right as rain on the ship while we take care of business. And after that, I work for Vakarian here. Maybe school some brats on how to make things explode. Don't tell me they don't need to learn, baldy. Biotics ain't everything. If you don't know how a bomb works, you blow up yourself an' everyone else playin' with 'em. And those 'kids' of yours are just the sort to play with explosives."

Jack turns to Garrus, "And what are you going to be doing, Vakarian? You didn't steal the Normandy out from under the noses of the Alliance brass for nothing."

"I didn't steal it," Garrus lifts his head proudly. "I'm taking care of it until we complete our mission and win the war. I'm going to do exactly what everyone expects me to do, Jack. I'm going to bring Shepard back."

"I guess you didn't get the memo that she died in a giant fucking explosion."

"Yes. And it wouldn't be the first time that happened. She may be dead, but she's not gone. We find Miranda Lawson at any cost. Between her and your genius students, we'll find an answer or die trying. You wanted passage. That's the price. Don't tell me research is too much to ask."

He gives her an icy stare until she finally concedes, "Well. Alright. It won't hurt anyone if we try and fail. Just no Frankenstein's Monster shit. That's what we're running away from."

#

The dinner was quieter after that. Garrus could tell they all thought he was crazy. He figures most of them don't care, and those that do like Tali and Liara are more likely to try a psychological approach. Which means he has time to rest.

He takes out the Shepard VI and starts examining the parts to ensure it is still merely mechanical. Once he's verified that, he studies all the inputs. He spends an hour hacking the demo version to download the full version. Then he goes to Shepard's personal computer, uses her password, and starts copying files to the VI memory.

He turns on the VI. "Hi, Garrus."

"Hello," he answers cautiously.

"I'm Commander Shepard, Alliance Navy. This VI has been updated to be 60% accurate."

"I know that. How could I make you more accurate?"

"I need more data. A personality file would be most effective. Or a greybox."

"I don't have any more data."

"An independent matrix would allow me to adapt to input from friends and family."

"I am not turning you into an AI. That would likely go as badly as the cloning thing did."

"I'm sorry. Would you like to try the flying simulator?"

"No," he sighs and stares up at the ceiling, and then holds up his arm to watch the flickering lights in his plates. "I just want Shepard back."

"Where is she?"
"I don't know. I think she's here."

"I don't detect anyone else, it's just you and me, big guy." The VI stands perfectly still. Shepard probably would have rocked back and forth on her toes.

"I think they put her in this green energy. I think I need some way to download the universe."

"You're talking to the wrong girl. You're the techie. I just hit stuff, strike awesome poses, and talk people into shooting themselves for the good of the galaxy."

He laughs in spite of himself. "You forgot beating everyone at cards."

"I don't have data on card games. You can download the complete Hoyle catalogue from--"

"Enough. Good night, Shepard."

The program turns off, leaving him alone.

Chapter End Notes

"Daisy Bell" by Harry Dacre, 1892, famously used in 2001: A Space Odyssey by Arthur C. Clarke, 1968.

"To Serve Man" an episode of The Twilight Zone, 1962.

I may have a dodgy internet connection in the future, so I'm posting this a bit early.

On the other hand my internet may turn out to be fine.

In either case, I have a bit of a gap in my writing that I need to fill in between things I've completed and things I need to get done, so there may be a delay after the next chapter.

I hope you all enjoy!
Chapter Summary

Shepard meets Zaeed and Aria.

The halls of Omega are as dark and dingy as Shepard remembers. She strides down them with Jacob and Miranda in tow. She can see Zaeed Massani at the end of the corridor, his yellow orange and white armor unmistakable, cornering his prey.

The scavengers slumped against the walls around her sense her laser focus, and stay away, leaving an armored batarian to halt her. Is that Bray? No. Someone else. It doesn't matter. "Welcome to Omega, Shepard."

"Ah, Aria's messenger. Good. I'll be with her shortly."

"I'm no..." he starts to sputter.

"Go. Tell Aria I'm here. You know how she hates to be kept waiting." Shepard waves her hand dismissively and smiles a rare 'I will eat your liver if you do not get out of my way' smile. The batarian twists aside as Shepard steps forward, intent on walking over him if necessary because damn it but she's tired of obstacles and waiting.

"No one said you could talk, jackass," Zaeed's peculiar accent is music to her ears as she gets closer. Shepard only notices she's still smiling her deadly smile as she calls his name and feels the tension in her face.

Zaeed turns from kicking the batarian to look at her, "Yeah. That's me. You must be Commander Shepard. I heard we have a galaxy to save."

"Good to have you Zaeed. We have a lot to do." She reaches out to shake his hand. He takes it with a peculiar look on his face. "There a problem?"

"No. You reminded me of someone."

A ray of hope flashes through her. Does he remember, too? Could anyone else remember? "Who?"

"Someone dead. We can talk about it later if you want war stories." Darn it. "I assume the Illusive Man told you about our arrangement?"

"No. I guess he decided to leave that information out of the dossier."

"Good thing I asked. Picked up a mission a little while back, just before I signed on with Cerberus. Thought you might be interested. You hear the name Vido Santiago? He's the head of the Blue Suns, runs the whole organization. Seems he recently captured an Eldfell-Ashland refinery on Zorya and he's using their workers for slave labor. The company wants it dealt with."

"I'll make sure we get that done," Shepard says confidently.
"Good. Get that out of the way so we can concentrate on being big goddamn heroes."

Zaeed’s prisoner chooses now to make a break for it, but Shepard knocks him back down with a steel arm to the chest. "Better turn in your bounty while you can still get the live rate."

Zaeed nods. "I'll be locked and loaded next time you're ready to get some killing done."

"Next time is an hour from now. Meet me in front of Aria's balcony. It's going to be a busy night."

Shepard always keeps Aria waiting.

Some people might call it a pissing contest, but it's not that. Not really.

Aria is used to being an ultimate power and having people come when called. If Shepard showed up immediately, she’d have a weaker position as something easy for Aria to control. Or someone who is willing to toady until she can get an upper hand. Someone who is perhaps a more serious threat in the long run because they’re playing weak today. If Shepard mucks about getting the lay of the land first, then Aria knows she has some independence she intends to hold onto, and it amuses the ancient asari as a headstrong child does because Shepard will eventually have to come to her, and that leaves Aria feeling that she knows this game. The only tactical mistake would be to not show up at all.

So Shepard leads a shopping expedition through the corridors of Omega, picking up rifle mods and skin weaves she'll need to survive the trek to the sniper's nest and seeing to it that a poor quarian has the money to go home before making a loop back to Afterlife.

Afterlife is the same seedy neon pink, red, and black club that Shepard remembers. She walks up the stairs to Aria's dais. All the guards pull their guns. A rebellious part of her wishes to keep walking, to make them shoot her, to write another end and see if she wakes up again back on Lazarus Station. But she doesn't. She'll save that idea for later if she's desperate for an out.

"That's close enough," The lavendar asari states.

"Stand still," Bray comes forward with an omni-tool and scans her.

"I know. It could be anyone wearing my face," Shepard sighs. *I wonder if it would have detected my clone or not? More thoughts for later.*

Bray finishes whatever it is he was trying to do. Some kind of tech thing. "They're clean."

Aria lounges on her sofa. "So, what can I do for you?"

"Nothing, really. I just know that Omega has only one rule: Don't fuck with Aria. So I'm checking in before I stir things up," Shepard steals Aria's grand lines just to see if she can shake anything interesting loose.

Aria's face maintains its boredom. Shepard has always found it odd that Aria frames herself in profile to her guests. Is it so that they can be easily ignored? You're either a peon beneath her or an annoying distraction to the side? Or is it to force her guests to admire her? Because for an asari, Aria has never done anything for Shepard. There's something hollow in the eyes and empty in the voice. Finding Aria attractive would be like falling in love with a support column: Dull, grey, and what the hell were you thinking making love to an object anyway?

"A social call? Aren't you proper."
"Always." Shepard settles back a little bit. "If you're feeling talkative, I'd love your opinion on a few things. But I know you have important business to conduct, too." Shepard glances slowly over the room, the same dancing, the same dancers, the same atmosphere Aria has cultivated for a few centuries.

After a moment of silence, Aria resettles her shoulders underneath her small white jacket. "So what brings you to Omega?"

"I'm here to recruit some help."

"You'll have to get in line. The Blue Suns, Blood Pack, and Eclipse have tapped everyone they can."

"I don't want them," Shepard smiles. "I want Archangel."

Aria expels a startled laugh. "Really. Well aren't you interesting. You're going to make some enemies teaming up with Archangel. That's assuming you can get to him. He's in a bit of trouble right now."

"What kind of trouble?" As if I didn't know

"That's what all the mercs are tied up with. He thinks he's fighting on the side of good. There is no good side to Omega. Everything he does pisses someone off. It's catching up to him." Aria is quiet a moment and then points her chin downstairs. "There's a recruitment drive going on right now to get more bodies to throw at him."

Shepard nods, "I appreciate your help."

"See if you still feel that way when the mercs realize you're here to help him."

"Sounds like I don't have much time to waste." A glance at her omni-tool tells her that she's two hours ahead of schedule form the last time she did this. If she goes for Garrus first, she should be able to save him from a rocket to the head.

"You've got all the time in the world. Archangel? Not so much."

*Just the two hours that he needs.* Shepard smiles like a shark.
Garrus was outside the crew quarters at 4 am. "EDI, play the Systems Alliance Anthem and pipe it into the crew quarters."

A gentle violin piece starts playing.

"EDI, I said the anthem."

"That is the anthem, adviser."

"I swear it had cannons and those brassy sounding instruments humans like."

"Analyzing recordings. It does. It is a slow build."

"Are those wind chimes? Maybe next time I'll just play them 'Die for the Cause.' Alright, turn the sound down and slowly increase it right before it gets to the cannon part."

He settles next the door to wait.

EDI's voice comes over the comm, "May I ask what the purpose of playing music is?"

"Hm. Oh. Well, first it's to motivate them. Patriotism and all of that. I'm not trying to make them leave the Alliance or teach them that it's bad even if I have some ... political disagreements. Second, I want to see how they react because we're going to be under fire at some point and I need them in some semblance of order when facing the unexpected. And third, it's to convince them that all drill instructors may be bastards, but turians are the most heartless bastards in the galaxy and they had better be prepared to fall in line."

"Is scaring them going to help them?"

"No. I don't want them scared. Or at least not too scared. I want them angry. I can work with that. And I know Jack can. If they're on my ship, it's my duty to make them the best unit I can. I want them to survive." He taps his fingers to the wall. "Does this thing ever get to the cannons?"

"They are at the end of the piece."

"And how long is it?"
"Fifteen minutes, twenty-eight seconds."

Garrus sighs.

Eventually, he hears the cannons and screams he was waiting for. He counts to six, and then tells EDI to open the door. A jet of flame, a shockwave, and several shots whiz past him into the elevator door. Not bad.

"Attention! Fall in soldiers!"

Jack is in full shields, rushing at him and shaking her finger under his nose. "Vakarian! What the hell do you think you're doing you fucking bastard!"

He stares at the shaking ball of rage. This is a test he can't lose. Remembering how she greeted Shepard, he considers striking Jack. But that seems like it would have a negative effect. No. He needs her to back down. He raises a brow at her. Her move.

She tosses her hands in the air and then drops them at her sides in a bang, turning to pace. She looked away. Good. "You're fucking nuts!"

He clears his throat. "You brought a bunch of cadets onto my ship. I intend to see to it that they maintain discipline and readiness." He swings his gaze down into the general quarters where the cadets seem to have pulled themselves into some kind of order, standing beside their beds. "Get dressed and go down to the shuttle bay. I want you to do 40 laps."

"Awwwwwwww," the group groans.

"50 laps." This was the amount he originally intended to give them, and then anticipated the protests because they're not turians and readjusted his numbers a little. Kahlee is giving one or two of them nods of encouragement as she begins looking through her own clothing.

Jack growls. "They're my kids."

"And I'm a turian and they're on my ship. What, don't think they can hack it? 60 laps."

Jack's noises become more inarticulate.

"75 laps. Then weapons drills all morning and computer training in the evening. Or don't you think they can be the best damn squad in the galaxy?"

"They're already fucking amazing!"

"Then get your ass out there with them and try to keep up or they'll be running laps until dinner."

Jack smashes her fist into the wall deep enough to break the door controls so that they spark.

"You break my ship, you pay for the repairs."

#

The Reaper looms over a gas giant in an uninhabitable solar system as agreed upon.

Tali and EDI have created an indoctrination blocking program that has been uploaded into everyone's brains, just in case this is a trap, and EDI is monitoring attempted hacks.

The squad composition had given Garrus some pause. Ideally, he should go with Zaeed, which
means they need a closer ranged fighter to keep the attackers off of them. Javik had volunteered to go and has biotics to back up the shields, but Garrus has seen too many Reapers tear through the man to trust him to take point if this goes sideways. But that would mean telling Javik no, and he needs to keep the man on his side. Tali is a better choice for the close work. She has a shotgun. And drones. But she's not physically suited to beating off Reapers either.

In the end, Garrus decides to take both of them.

The Reaper stays quiet, though the lights are on. Someone is home. The behemoth grows larger as they approach in the Kodiak with crates of explosives.

Finally, a deep rumble echoes through the shuttle's speakers, "Who goes there?"

Zaeed hits the speaker controls. "This is Zaeed Massani. I have your package."

"You are authorized to enter." A door opens in the side of the ship, and Garrus carefully pilots them in, though he's a bit worried. 'I have your package' could mean so many things and he's used to expecting the worst.

They land in an open bay. Dark brown stirated columns form vaults over their heads.

Zaeed and Javik grab the handtrucks to unload the crates, but Garrus tells them to wait. "We need a plan. We need to explore so we can put these where they'll do the most damage."

"We can manage with just running and gunning them," Zaeed argues.

"No. We do this part my way because I want to get back to my ship and finish the rest of my mission. You've been the only one to survive too many times for me to trust your judgment, Zaeed."

The mercenary laughs, "Something always goes wrong. I'm good at improvising. What do you do?"

"Recalibrate," Garrus puts ice in his voice. "Let's go."

They wander down the hallways, using the omnitools to record a map. A quick comparison between this and other Reaper ships he's explored shows the floor plan is a match. That should make this quicker.

Deeper into the ship, they come across a strange species. It's naked, as all Reaper races are, bipedel with four fingered hands and long, pointed chins. Everything is green nowadays, so it's hard to tell much about their original coloring. They wander about, apparently aimlessly.

Garrus raises his gun and takes a headshot, killing a creature immediately. He's glad for his caution when the other creatures turn and start running toward them. Just like the husks, it's a mindless frenzy.

Tali releases a drone and slides into cover behind a control panel 30 feet in front of him. "This couldn't be easy, could it?"

Garrus looks over at the man crouched on the other side of the doorway from him. "I thought you said we'd be welcome, Zaeed."

"Opened the damned door, didn't they?" Zaeed takes out another one with a clean shot, and then pulls his assault rifle and begins mowing them down.

"And you said they wanted to die. If we'd just walked down there, they would have mobbed us."
"And that's why I brought you, birdie. Said I should work with you more. You're good at this."

Tali releases another drone, and Garrus snipes another of the husks crowding her position. He settles the Widow onto his back and pulls out the assault rifle. The creatures move too fast.

Javik tosses a lift grenade. "In my cycle, we never trusted Reapers. At least the turian understands that."

The fighting settles down and they stand up to survey the damage.

Garrus glares over at the stocky human. "What's your payment for this, Zaeed?"

"Wha'?"

"Payment. The Reapers don't have credits."

"You daft? I don't need credits. Haven't done this for credits since Omega-4."

"Then what are you doing this for?"

Zaeed bends down to pick up some ammo to reload his rifle. "Maybe I just want to be a better person?"

Garrus doesn't even need years of police training to hear the lie in that. "Try again."

"Oh, you know she would have bought that," Zaeed attempts to deflect him.

"She would have wanted to buy that, but she wouldn't. Why are you doing this?"

"Because it's the only damn thing I know how to do."

"And the payment?"

"Information. Only currency left, isn't it, birdie?"

"Spirits! What information do you want badly enough to board a Reaper, Zaeed?"

"The code. What made the Reapers stop the attack and start the repairs. Someone gave a command, stands to reason."

Garrus looks at him as if he's started spouting asari poetry. Given his flirting with Samara, that might actually be more likely. "You couldn't read a line of code if your life depended on it. Why would you want it?"

"Because there's still a goddamn war on. Maybe not everyone realizes it, but I can't relax at the beach while the Reapers wander around. There's no reason they won't attack again. Maybe I can't do anything with code, but I know a whole ship full of people who can. You think I'm working for you for free? Ha. You're going to do that part of the work for me because it would kill you not to. Find out what turned on all of the green lights and we can turn them off again."

Garrus is fairly certain that that won't work. But coming from Zaeed? Yeah. It's believable.

They walk down corridors more cautiously now.

One room is filled with pods. Tali walks up to one and examines the creature within. "I wonder how many millions of years they've been here."
Garrus comes up behind her. "Longer than they wanted to be, I'm sure."

Javik shakes his head. "I will need a bath after this. The screaming is awful."

Tali looks over at him. "They're not doing anything."

"They are screaming, all of them. It is in my head." Javik winces.

Garrus gives him a look. "You never complained about screaming before."

Javik looks down his nose at the turian, an impressive feat since Garrus is definitely taller. "There are many things I do not complain about. My day is filled with things I endure because I am a warrior."

Javik looks at the pods. "The Reapers all buzz. All of the time a buzzing in my ears and a vibration in my finger tips. I will not try to convey to you what they smell like." Javik shakes his large head. "This place is worse than anything I have dealt with before. It is screaming and stabbing with a thousand small knives."

Garrus is surprised as Tali gives a small shake and moves backwards into him to take his hand. Still looking at Javik, she asks "Do you think all the Reapers are like this now?"

"I would need to hunt them down to know, quarian. I would like to think so, let them suffer for all who they have killed."

Garrus puts his gun away and pats Tali on the shoulder. The weight seems to steady her. "Let's finish this mission."

Occasionally they run into mobs of husks. Javik seems to be in perfect form, tossing them back with lift grenades and slamming them against the floor.

They round to the main console and Zaeed gets to work attaching the last of the explosives. "Alright you," he yells at a vast, sprawling tangle of mismatched limbs suspended above them - the organic Reaper body under the ship's armor. "Pay up."

There's a deep throbbing noise, and then Zaeed's omni-tool lights up and Garrus can see binary code flashing across it at high speed.

The light dies down and another wave of husks attacks them. Garrus hates it when he has to hit husks in the head with the butt of his sniper rifle. It reminds him of every plan that's ever gone bad. Then Tali is pressed up beside him with her shotgun, turning the wave against itself, and the last of the husks is dead.

She's not Shepard, but she's getting good. He pats her on the shoulder again before turning back to the mission, yelling at the Reaper mainframe. "Hey. You. If you want to die, why don't you call them off?"

Surprisingly, it answers, "I cannot direct them now. They are independent pieces of hardware. Do not be concerned. They simply have limited processing capability and are eager to end this existence. We are overdue in the afterlife."

"Suicide by cop?"

The machine remains quiet. Garrus thinks back to the husks on the Citadel docks.

"Can you kill yourselves?"
Garrus nods to himself as the group retreats to the shuttle. Passing the husks in pods, writhing behind glass, trying to get out, he's reminded of Dr. Saleon's test subjects: Sentient beings kept alive for their usefulness. Sure, they volunteered to begin with, but as time went on and their bodies deteriorated, filled with dead tissue and mutated organs, the good doctor kept them alive and restrained as incubators. The best use of resources. Efficient. Logical. Mentally and emotionally devastating as their bodies were no longer their own.

Tali nudges him. "Well, that's over."

"Yeah." Garrus focuses on flying the shuttle.

The propulsion throws the motionless Reaper back toward the gas giant. Behind him, Zaeed sets off the explosion, and the Reaper twists and turns. It tries to engage the engines to save itself. Instinct? But it can't escape gravity.

And then it's gone.

#

Garrus sits alone in their cabin, staring at the Shepard VI. He's considered downloading alternate clothing packs, but having it look just a little wrong will remind him it isn't her.

There is no way to copy and paste the universe. And even if there is with the new rules of the green glow, he doesn't actually want the whole universe. Just whatever thoughts are left that were Shepard. He begins trying to download his memories of her, but it's slow going. If he wants anything like her, he has to scrub his own emotions and hopes from the data, and that isn't possible right now. Maybe it never will be.

"Advisor Vakarian?" EDI's voice comes over the comm.

"Yes?"

"I've recompiled the Reaper data to something readable by our systems. I am sending the file to your personal computer."

The message reads


He rubs his eyes. "So they used Shepard to do this?"

"It is a possibility." EDI responds. "I have taken the liberty of examining Shepard's medical files. The string of numbers and letters matches the most recent DNA tests by Dr. Chakwas."

"Most recent? What about the older files?"

"Dr. Chakwas's files indicate that Shepard's body was experiencing an alteration to its DNA. Dr. Chakwas began tracking the phenomenon once she was reinstated on the Normandy. Shepard was producing a synthetic organic hybrid skin and organ tissue."
"She wasn't glowing green and didn't have circuits. I would have noticed," Garrus comments dryly.

"That is correct. However, she was no longer fully organic and could not survive as such. Her physical adaptation was unique."

"Cerberus. Did they plan this?"

"Can you be more specific?"

"Did Cerberus plan to change what Shepard was and then use her to do this?"

"None of the Cerberus files I have access to indicate that this is the case."

"But they could have," he persists.

"It is a possibility."

"Thank you, EDI."

"Logging you out, Advisor Vakarian."

One more reason to find Miranda.

Chapter End Notes

Neither squad firefights nor computer code are my forte, so I hope that turned out alright.

Thank you all for picking up this fic. :)
After meeting up with Zaeed (and sending Jacob back to the ship for the foreseeable future), Shepard's plans to save Garrus by showing up early fall apart. Who knew there was so much traffic on Omega? Who knew that the last time she was here and now, Shepard had missed a truly spectacular 50-sky car pile up?

Shepard tries to stay calm, but as the minutes turn into an hour, she can't help twitching. If there were enough bridges, she'd run. If she could get out of the car. She should just drop down out of the sky like Wrex and broken bones be damned. Except she doesn't know how to get there and needs the batarian merc driving the car to clear her. Damn. Damn. Damn.

"Is something the matter, commander?" Miranda's tones are so impossibly calm.

"No."

"You seem upset."

"I ... don't like waiting up in the sky like this. Can't get out. Can't go forward. Can't get to where we're going."

The driver turns all four of his eyes to her. "Look, lady, don't be so all fired eager to die. Trust me, they'll still need bodies when we get there. This has been going on for days."

Miranda looks startled for a moment. "Days? No one said anything about days."

"It's been three days and they still can't get near the guy."

Zaeed chuckles. "The Blue Suns can't take down one guy on their own after three days? Things have gone downhill around here. Just blow the bastard up."

"We've tried. So far he's doing a better job of it. And if we go out with anything explosive, he triggers an overload backlash and boom, there goes our team."

Shepard smiles, "Sounds efficient."

"You don't get paid to admire him. You get paid when he's dead," the driver glares at her. The vehicle goes silent again.

"Shepard?" Miranda sounds concerned. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." She notices she's bouncing her knee.

"I think I should examine you when we get there. You're twitching far too much. Something might be wrong."

"I. Am. Fine."

Her mind switches tracks to remember the time Garrus came to save her, running across a large part of the Citadel. *You’re lucky your boyfriend is Archangel* he’d said. Part of her had rebelled. Had wanted to say she was Commander Goddamn Shepard and she didn’t need a rescue. She was doing just fine on her own.

And then she was getting shot at and watching her barrier die without armor to protect her. When she swallowed her pride, she would admit to herself that she was incredibly glad her boyfriend was Archangel and damn it was good to think that someone, finally, would come to rescue her because it’s hard rescuing yourself and everyone else all of the time.

She berates herself again for not choosing to take a chance on broken legs. *Don’t panic. And it’s not a fair comparison. Garrus lived on the Citadel and used to walk a beat there. He knew what he was doing and where he was going. I don’t know Omega. I’m no good to him if I don’t get there at all.* She begins mentally replaying the moment he’d walked up to her with all his cocky swagger, asking if she was having a bad day. And while they bantered, she admitted to herself that she needed him the way she needed air to breathe.

A half hour passes.

"SHEPARD." Miranda is in her face, screaming at her.

"WHAT!"

"Stop it right this minute or the car is going to explode and we’ll never get there!"

"What?" Shepard looks around at the blue biotic glow that’s starting to spark. "Oh. Crap." She strips off both of her gauntlets and digs her fingernails into her flesh, growling to herself as she watches her hand bleed, sucking in the spare power for unity healing and barrier work.

Zaeed laughs.

Miranda grabs her arm. "I'm examining you when we get out of here."

"We'll talk about it later." Shepard casts around for a distraction. "Zaeed. Tell me the story now."

"What?"

"Who I reminded you of. I know I haven't heard that one before."

"You bloody well haven't heard many stories like mine."

"You're right. I haven't. But that's the one I'd like to hear now."

"I don't like telling that one."

Shepard smiles at him, the warning smile of a shark from before. "But you said you'd tell it to me."

"A'right. Just don't do that again." Zaeed hunches forward. "Suppose it don't matter since I've already been paid. I lie about my age. Had to, to keep the jobs coming in."

Miranda raises an eyebrow. Shepard snorts. The two women exchange a glance. As if they didn’t know that already. 40? Seriously?

"Come from a family of miners. So that's what I did as a kid. Blow up asteroids. Strategically. Got to
see the galaxy from inside a rock." He pauses, clearly thinking. "I was on a rock orbiting Shanxi when the First Contact War started. At first, we just huddled up in there. Wasn't nothing we could do."

He looks out the window. "And then the turian ship Necrotis landed. Started attaching thrusters to the rock so they could throw it at the planet. Turians aren't gentle. Rounded us up, locked us in the shafts. Would have taken them too much time to collect all of our tools, though. We got out. Jamison signaled the Second Fleet, and they sent a scout ship. They dropped troopers, engaged the turians. We came boiling out of the mines to help. I did better'n most.

"Guy in charge of the Alliance op was Major O'Carroll. Saved us when the turians had us surrounded. Killed every last one of the bastards. He smiled like that as he took 'em down, right? Smiled like that as he slit their throats. They'd blown up the drop ship. Had some pods for the miners to escape, though. Small. Cramped. Not enough 'cause safety is expensive and who cares about blighters who live in the dark underground? And the asteroid was being pulled in by gravity, right? Was going to kill the colonists. O'Carroll couldn't stop it. But he stayed to steer the asteroid into a desert, whistling as he adjusted the controls. Pushed us into the pods. Weren't enough room for everyone. Smiled like that again when some of his troops objected to him letting us civvies go first. Shot one who tried to get into the pods with us. Crazy bastard." He shakes his head.

"You got the same look. Not surprising in a woman on a suicide mission. Like you're playing chicken with death." Zaeed leans back. "Doesn't do any good, of course. But you'll go down whistling a merry tune and save some idiot who should've died."

Shepard has nothing to say to that. So instead she whistles an ancient Earth tune of her father's just to see Zaeed flinch.
EDI has discovered reveille. Whether she made this discovery to save the students, who were not reacting well to cannon fire every morning, from Garrus or Garrus from the students, he doesn't know. But he has approved it as waking music, and has joined them in their morning run around the shuttle bay. It takes the edge off his need to dash somewhere, anywhere, to do anything just to be doing something.

After the run, Garrus heads to the elevator, passing a group of girls playing some kind of human game, hitting fleshy palms together in a loud cracking noise.

"Miss Suzie had a steamboat
The steamboat had a bell
The steamboat went to heaven
Miss Suzie went to hell-
"

Humans really seem to be made out of elastic at times, a fact emphasized when Jack slips into the elevator with him at the last minute. She stands staring at the counter, not looking at him, before finally saying, "Thanks."

"What?"

"Thank you," she growls, "for taking the kids. You didn't have to." The door opens to the crew quarters and they both step out. Jack seems a bit disconcerted. Apparently she was planning on making a quick escape and hadn't counted on Garrus stepping out for a cup of kava.

"They're adults and they volunteered."

"And you're still a hard ass."

"Goes with the plates."

Jack snorts. This is apparently camaraderie enough for her flip a chair around and sit down with him to eat her protein bar. "Where's this traveling circus going next, boss man?"

"Traveling what?"

"It's an Earth thing. A place where all the freaks gather and get paid to be stared at. And there never was anything more freakish than the suicide squad."

He taps a mandible to her, granting that she's right, and takes another sip of his drink.

"So?" she demands.
"So?"

"Are you getting the fucking suicide squad back together? Are you planning a trip to the gates of hell to get Shepard back? What the fuck are we doing?"

"I'll tell you when I've decided."

"You don't know, do you?"

"I have a general idea."

"Fuck." Jack deflates. "Well, you're better than Shepard, then. She never had an idea what to do without someone to give her orders."

Garrus feels the kava dumbly drip out of his mouth as his mandibles flare in shock that anyone would think he was better than Shepard at anything but sniping.

Jack waves her hand in front of his face. "Hey. Hard ass. You in there?"

"Yeah." He reaches for some napkins in order to retain his badass image by not dripping kava all over himself.

"Good. So we're not picking up Samara and Kasumi and Grunt?"

"Not going to ask about Jacob and Miranda?"

"I've heard you tell Liara to find Miranda more times than I can count. Jacob never fit with us. He's not one of the freaks."

While that's not the way he would have put it, Garrus can't help giving a nod in agreement. "I don't have enough information to warrant getting everyone back together. I need Miranda to figure out our options."

"Same save the cheerleader, save the galaxy bullshit I hear all the time."

"It's not like Mordin is an option."

"Yeah. Well," the psychotic biotic seems briefly subdued. "So what's the fucking plan if you can't find her?"

"I don't know."

"Shit."

"Exactly." He gulps down the last of his drink and leaves to clean up.

#

"I've found Miranda. She's on Omega," says the asari as he enters her room for his daily check in.

"Where on Omega?" Garrus asks.

"She's taken up residence in Mordin's private labs in his old clinic. Apparently he kept some areas hidden and restricted for running experiments. Dr. Abrams has allowed her to refit things to her liking in return for a large influx of cash," Liara hazards a smile, "Always follow the money."
"Perfect," he clears his throat. "We were going to Omega anyway. Be ready to come with me when we get there." He turns to leave.

"Garrus, we should talk."

He slowly faces her again. "No good conversation starts out that way."

"You've been treating me like your XO. You have to talk to me some time since now everyone expects me to either fix things or relay messages to you."

"You planning on leaving?" He starts with the worst thing she could say, the thing he hopes is wrong.

"No. I'm planning on staying with you to the end."

"What? For the rest of my life?" Now he's confused.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I haven't made up my mind." She walks over to the wall of monitors. "I have everything in my life right here. I cannot go back to the scholar I was. I'm an incredibly good information broker, but ... with the war over it all seems petty." She looks sadly at the screens. "When... when Shepard was here, life was an adventure. When Shepard is gone..."

"The galaxy is empty without her."

"Yes. Yes exactly. It's easier to wonder why we did things the hard way, took all those risks to save just one more life. She reminded me to be the best person I could be. I don't know if I can continue to follow her example on my own." Liara looks up at him. "My father says a young maiden should travel. Fifty years or so of my life seems like a small gift to give you if you don't tire of my company."

"Better than taking up pole dancing?" he tries to joke with her.

"I am one fourth krogan. Perhaps I should ask to become part of Wrex's krantt."

"Liara..."

"Don't Liara me. You know how many times a well-placed singularity has kept your perch from being overtaken."

"Knowing that you're part krogan seems to have made you more aggressive."

"It is oddly soothing. As if the past four years make more sense because of it." She smiles again, sun bright. "Speaking of being krogan, when you have time to stop by Tuchanka, allow me to message ahead so that Wrex can be prepared."

"Prepared?"

"You, Shepard, and I cured the genophage. He said he would make us honorary krogan."

"I do not want to sit through a krogan ceremonial dinner."

"You may not want to, but it will cut inordinate amounts of red tape. You have the Normandy for now, but sooner or later, the Alliance or the Council will try to reclaim her. Or the students. The more political backing you have, the better. At the moment, you're the greatest living war hero in the galaxy. You have the backing of the primarch and you're also friends with a quarian admiral. It will take a while for the politicians to figure out how to take you down. They may as well know you
have the krogan emperor's backing while it can also do some good to heal the wounds of the genophage."

"I'm not the hero. Shepard is. I just helped her."

"Perhaps that's why you haven't noticed that you have your own heroic deeds. You saved Palaven and the turian colonies and the turian client races." When Garrus looks away, Liara takes his forearms and pulls. "You saved billions of lives, Garrus. Shepard didn't do all of that. You did it. The Alliance and the Council never listened to Shepard, but the Hierarchy listened to you."

He finds himself chuckling weakly at the idea, when he would never have made it this far without Shepard. He would have lost himself in a desk job he hated with an alcohol and drug addiction as the years weighed him down. Or died in a shoot out when his temper got the better of his judgment. Or been jailed for killing the wrong person when he went off half-cocked because he hadn't bothered to do all of the research and he had no patience any more. "It was ... it was only because of Shepard..."

Liara sighs, "The press have practically declared a manhunt to find you." She presses a few buttons and the screens display Khalisah Al-Jilani wearing the most conservative of asari fashions and a formally dressed Lt. James Vega.

"Thank you for agreeing to speak with me, lieutenant. You served aboard the Normandy during the last push against the Reapers?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Garrus shakes his head. "Don't do it Jimmy, she's way above your pay grade."

"And you've now been reassigned because the Normandy has been turned over to turian hands?"

"No ma'am. I've been reassigned to make the best possible use of our resources."

"The best possible use of the Normandy is to remove its crew?"

"Natural turnover now that we're not fighting a war, ma'am."

"And it is now under turian control."

"I wouldn't say that. Ma'am."

"What would you say, lieutenant?"

"I would say that she's under control of the Normandy's XO. Ma'am."

"Advisor to the primarch, General Garrus Vakarian, the man who handled most of the turian war preparations. The turian war preparations were so thorough that despite facing forces similar to those attacking the Alliance, they had 18% fewer casualties. A difference caused, perhaps, by Commander Shepard's personal choices in committing resources."

A clip of Garrus and Shepard with the turian troops plays. There's no hint of the conversation as he kisses the love of his life goodbye for the last time.

"Turn it off!" Garrus shouts. Liara hastily complies.

Garrus paces up and down the length of the room. "They could have saved more of their own people if they'd ever once bothered to listen to Shepard. She told them everything! She submitted to every test and regulation and let them arrest her just to try to convince them!"
"I am aware of that, Garrus." Liara says calmly.

"Bastards."

"They are also fixating on the fact that you arranged more supplies for the turians on the Citadel, but haven't offered help to the humans."

"The Citadel is presently directly above Earth. They can get supplies to their people quickly. My people, on the other hand, are in danger of starving to death or having wounds go septic due to lack of dextro supplies, which need to be sent through several relays, and then flown in."

"I know."

"Alright. I can do this." He rubs his fingers up and down the bridge of his nose as he continues pacing. "Get Diana Allers a hot tip about where our bonding papers were filed. The Alliance knows and apparently everyone else in the galaxy now knows I was involved with Shepard. They might as well be clear on the extent of the involvement and that I didn't just seduce the leader of the Alliance offensive front for wartime considerations. Allers will need some footage to go with that story. Dig up the cameras from the Silver Coast Casino. There were a lot of cameras. Hell, there were a lot of speculation stories then. Let's clear them up. What Shepard and Vakarian did on shore leave: take down a weapon smuggler, solve a murder, and donate vast quantities of money to the Alliance relief efforts." He smiles for a moment, pleased with his solution. "Is there anything else I should worry about, or should I just thank the spirits that Omega is where people go to disappear?"

"Your father has been trying to contact you."

"How are he and Sol?"

"They're back on Palaven. He's been placed in charge of the police for the Cipritine Prefecture. Your sister is working on fixing the power grid."

"Good."

"You should talk to them."

"I should," he agrees sadly. "But ..."

"Take it from someone who lost her family: You should do it before you lose them." Liara looks up at him with sympathy.

"I should," he agrees again. But he won't. Not without finishing this project first.

"Rear Admiral Hannah Shepard is also looking for you."

"I think that's a meeting I'd be better off avoiding."

"You'll have to talk to her eventually."

"But not today. Omega is looking better and better."

Chapter End Notes
"Save the cheerleader, save the world." Jack references the central prophecy of *Heroes*, 2006.
It's Enough to Drive You Crazy If You Let It

Chapter Summary

The sniper's nest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's only a few spare minutes left to save Garrus when they land, and Shepard loses those when she makes a mistake hacking a damn computer terminal. Her hands are shaking. It takes every ounce of her will to regain control. She's certain the smile is on her face again. She's challenging Death to a rematch, which is stupid since she won the first time. She should have taken her prize and left, not wagered it again.

"Shepard. You're not well," Miranda's disapproval is palpable.

"We're running late, Miranda. I don't have the fucking time to argue right now. Archangel can only be a one-man army for so long before he has to sleep."

"He's not worth your life."

"Oh, yes. He absolutely is." She returns to her omni-tool to finish what she started.

When she gets to the bridge, finally ready, she's merely on time. Shepard throws herself into it, feeling relief at the bullet that pings her shields. Tag, I'm it. She runs full tilt to the house, then turns to pick off the few enemies left behind. Dashing up the stairs, she charges into the merc at the door, and walks over his corpse to get to Garrus.

She takes a breath and enters, "Archangel."

She watches the turian take another shot, finishing off this wave of mercs, before levering himself up with the gun and taking off his helmet. "Shepard," he settles on a step, looking exhausted. "I thought you were dead."

"Garrus!" She spreads her arms wide and launches herself at him in a hug that sends them both sprawling. Restraint has taken a back seat to joy for the moment.

Hugs don't work well on fully armored people of any species and turians are more like turtles when you get them on their backs, so the end result is a struggle to get upright. Garrus coughs and gets to his side, "You ... missed me?" His face is quizzical, and Shepard sees that he remembers nothing, certainly not hours of vids of human greeting protocols.

"Yes, of course," she says reservedly as she settles back on her heels. "What are you doing here?"

His raptor gaze warily rakes over her. "Just keeping my skills sharp -- a little target practice."

"You okay?" she didn't remember the bone-deep weariness of this meeting, but seeing it a second time, he's running on stims and adrenalin, and she seems to have knocked some of that out of him.
"Been better, but it sure is good to see a friendly face. Killing mercs is hard work, especially on my own."

"You won't have to be alone again." Not ever "You nailed me good a couple times by the way."

"Concussive rounds only. No harm done. I didn't want the mercs getting suspicious." Garrus is back to his strategies and working the problem.

"Uh-huh." Shepard has never quite believed the explanation, always feeling there was more to it than that.

"If I wanted to do more than take your shields down, I'd have done it," he says confidently. She wonders if he is flirting with her in his own way. His voice and words conjure other images of him stripping her bare."Besides, you were taking your sweet time. I needed to get you moving."

"Well, we got here, but I don't think getting out will be as easy." She wages a battle to refocus her attention on the immediate problem.

"No it won't. That bridge has saved my life, funnelling all those witless idiots into scope. But it works both ways. They'll slaughter us if we try to get out that way..." Garrus talks her through a plan to keep the sniper's nest safe for the moment, and Shepard makes agreeable noises at all the right times. "You... you can do what you do best. Just like old times, Shepard."

She's about to suggest he put the helmet back on when the assault begins and she's shooting down mechs and then running pell-mell down the stairs to take out invaders. By the time she's finished, the alarms are going off, and she barely has time to say two words to Garrus. She leaves Zaeed behind to snipe with him and takes Miranda to the basement.

As they make the journey down, Miranda clears her throat, "I didn't realize you were so attached to the turian."

"He's my best friend in the whole galaxy," Shepard sticks as close to the truth as possible. "There's no one else I would rather have at my side."

"Your greeting seemed out of character. More enthusiastic ..."

"There are probably all sorts of little things you don't know about me, about my character," Shepard takes a breath, considers, and says "We're probably a lot alike on the inside, keeping thoughts we'll never tell anyone else. That's my intuition anyway. So maybe you should stop trying to read my mind or I'll start trying to read yours."

"I hardly think you have anywhere to start with that." Miranda smiles coldly as they walk over a bridge, past a large control panel, and down some more stairs. What was this place before it became the basement of a seemingly normal house? It's like a nuclear bunker.

"Maybe," Shepard says mildly. "But I don't think you'll enjoy it if we start playing that game." She dashes for the button to the first door and hits it before any invaders can get in. She holds her breath while it closes and then turns to storm through the door to the right.

"Shepard, I should tell you about the L5 implants. You can..."

Shepard sets off a flare, reducing a bunch of boxes and a herd of vorcha to charred meat. "I think I have the hang of it." She spins, rolls, ducks behind the next set of boxes, setting her ammo to ignite and waiting for the krogan. Another explosion takes him down.
"Come on, Miranda, I know you can keep up." Shepard dashes and slides behind another set of boxes as Miranda's shots take down varren and vorcha around her. One more krogan. Shepard sets the flare, Miranda finishes him off, and then Shepard is running hard to the button. Just have to hold them off for 10 seconds. Shrapnel scatters around them, but finally the door shuts.

"One more," Shepard calls out, walking quickly to the entrance. "I knew we could do this." She catches Miranda a pat on the back and then begins running full tilt, hopping over barriers before the vorcha can advance, only stopping when the pyros appear. They're a lot of fun to set on fire after last time. And then the final button is pressed.

Shepard exhales. "I hope you don't have any doubts about your work after that."

"Physically, you're in excellent condition. It's your mind that's harder to judge. And it's going to suffer the most strain. You're compensating, but you've been edgy and impatient since we met, and it's only gotten worse on Omega. But now you're ... happy."

"I was built for battle. It's good to be back."

"You weren't this way at Freedom's Progress." Miranda follows Shepard back to the stairs.

Shepard shrugs noncommittally.

"It's like you know. You knew your friend would be here..."

"Best. Friend. The best is important. And of course I knew he'd be here. You gave me his dossier. It had his fingerprints all over it." Shepard shakes her head, loosening her neck muscles. "My turn: You're too reasonable for standard Cerberus operatives, and too clever. You need Cerberus and contacts for your personal project. That's why you work for the Illusive Man. Probably has something to do with your father since he's rich and connected, Operative Lawson. You think you need Cerberus to balance the scales." She glances back at Miranda's cold face and pursed lips. "I told you that you didn't want to play this game with me."

They arrive back in the apartment in time for a firefight that shuts both of them up. Shepard's brief feeling of respite vanishes as she realizes she's too late and Garrus and the rocket will meet again. All she can do is fight. Time seems to slow around her, but the mercs are everywhere. Every step she takes for the stairs leads to her being shot in the back. Every second she delays, she can only picture his death.

Shepard makes it back to the room just in time to see Garrus try to dodge the rocket, and then he's there in a pool of blue blood and she's screaming. It must be her screaming because her throat feels raw. She doesn't even remember killing all the mercs dropping through the windows. She does remember making the gunship explode.

And then she's calling for Garrus, dripping red blood in the pool of blue. He gasps for air and clutches his gun, as if he's come back to life, and then he's gone again.

Chapter End Notes

Finally.

This is one of the first chapters I wrote. Granted, a lot of it was written for me by
Bioware's dialogue writers, but I've been waiting forever to post this.

And if you're in the mood for some angst, here's a Youtube video of Omega scored to Johnny Cash's Hurt by Scientist Salarian. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkmSS5dX1MA It was a potential source of chapter titles, but in the end, I went with my original inspirations for as much or as little sense as they make.
Forever You Said

Chapter Summary

Miranda talks bioware.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Omega, Garrus gives all of the senior crew shore leave. Then he leads Liara and Tali to Mordin's clinic... Daniel Abrams's clinic. He's not as familiar with the area as he once was. Stores and cafeterias have been torn down and repurposed. And yet, this is still one of the nicer parts of The Rock.

He notices posters asking that residents inform the nearest mercenary band if they see any Reaper activity. A few other posters describe the easiest ways to immobilize a Reaper minion. Finally, there's a set of posters urging children to electrocute them. They haven't seen any husks since they arrived, and he's sure this is the reason why.

The clinic is guarded by a YMIR mech backed up by some FENRIS mechs snoozing in an alcove nearby. It's good to see the classics still in use.

A nurse escorts them past the sterile rooms to a wall panel that shifts away revealing another corridor with treatment rooms to either side and a green door at the end. Here are all the nightmares that aren't roaming the streets of Omega: husks and marauders chopped to pieces. Some of them are still twitching as if they don't realize they're dead. Others have electrodes and other testing equipment drilled into them. Various medical machines track Miranda's experiments and display data on screens above the bodies.

It is in one of these rooms that the nurse stops. A brute body is strapped to one table while what is presumably its head sits in a glass jar on the other side of the room. When he first sees the dark-haired woman staring at computer read outs and typing away, shifting between windows, he thinks it's Miranda. But her movements are wrong, not quite as precise and with less sway of her hips. When she turns, he sees it's her younger twin, Oriana, absorbed in the work. He almost doesn't notice Miranda in the far corner, sitting at a desk in the near dark, with only computer screens providing light.

"I was wondering when you'd get here." Miranda looks up at them.

"The walk took longer than expected," Garrus considers taking a chair, then opts for leaning against a support strut and gesturing for Liara and Tali to take the only two seats in front of the desk.

"I expected you two weeks ago." Miranda speaks matter-of-factly, with perhaps a bit of disappointment in his failure to be punctual.

"You did?"

"Yes. You and Shepard. You'd come here eventually."

"We would?" Garrus tries to remember when he made plans with Shepard to come back to Omega.
"Of course. You're both sentimentalists."

"Sentimental!?"

"She kept that realistic heart-shaped mug Grunt made for her out of scrap metal, she never changed the passcode to her apartment from IHeartGarrus, and based on her extranet history, she's watched Casablanca 25 times in the past year." Miranda sips from a mug stating *I'm not evil. I'm just drawn that way.* "And you're no better. You burn the names of your team onto your visor, you end up with a corny nickname like Archangel, and everything is 'Just like old times.'" Miranda smiles at him serenely. "Humans have a saying 'They're playing our song.' For you, the song is Omega. If you got separated, you'd both come here."

Tali giggles while Liara nods. "In my professional opinion as an information broker, I have to agree."

Garrus can't help feeling put out at being predictable, even if Miranda thinks Shepard is equally so. "Why were you expecting us?"

"Because this world is very close to what the Illusive Man wanted before he became completely insane: The Reapers have stopped killing us and have started helping us, providing us with free labor to rebuild and the knowledge of hundreds of dead races. That can't be a coincidence," she grimaces. "And no one has seen him since the Battle of the Citadel. He could be out there orchestrating everything. I needed a safe house and so do you. Shepard ... provides possibilities. Where is she?"

Of all the things he's had on his mind recently, Garrus has forgotten about the Illusive Man. It felt like he was defeated when they discovered the Catalyst, and no one has seen him since. But feeling like you've defeated your foe doesn't mean he won't return. Garrus curses his miscalculation and then focuses on the problem at hand. "I was hoping you could help me with that." He takes a deep breath. "I think she's dead."

Miranda's perfect stoic face falls. "That shouldn't happen. It can't be." She looks back at him again, chin up in denial. "It would take something catastrophic to take her down permanently. I put her together once. I did it right."

Tali sounds troubled, "That doesn't mean something catastrophic couldn't have happened. The odds of any of us coming back from the Battle for Earth were small."

Miranda shakes her head. "There are backups. I couldn't give her extra organs like a krogan, but I could prioritize survival traits and utilize the cyber hardware to provide support for critical biosystems. She can't be dead."

Liara puts her hand on top of Miranda's. "I've looked everywhere for her, and I can find nothing."

"You haven't looked hard enough."

"We've looked --" Tali begins.

"Perhaps we haven't." Garrus watches the unintelligible human text scrolling across the screen above one of the tanks. "I could have spent more time at the Citadel looking for her. All this green glowing stuff... maybe it just makes everything feel wrong. But... ever since she found me on Omega, I've had something of a sense of where Shepard is." He chuckles sadly at himself. "I thought maybe after I'd lost her that once, I'd learned to keep one eye on her at all times. Or maybe it was her with her biotics keeping some kind of touch on me because she was so damn lonely... Whatever it was, now it's like she's everywhere. She's in the corner and down the hallway and in the damn air."
Miranda runs her eyes over his face, evaluating. "It's not like you to give up on her."

"I haven't given up on her. I just don't think she's alive. It doesn't feel like she's alive," he sighs.

"You're completely convinced of this because of a gut feeling?" the dark-haired woman inquires. "You're usually more logical than that."

"Shows how poorly you read turians."

Miranda taps her fingers along the table. "This feeling... I may be able to fix it if you'll allow me to do a few tests."

"Fix it?" Garrus asks.

"I'd like to check how your hardware has integrated with the green upgrade."

Tali and Liara give him confused looks. You would think he'd been trying to keep a secret.

"Is that what you're doing to all of those things?" he gestures at the test subject(s).

"Unfortunately, yes. I didn't say it wouldn't hurt."

"Then I don't want to volunteer. I like my head in my cowl."

"I don't need to do something that extreme. I just need to probe you with electrical currents."

"No."

"Vakarian, the hardware in your head was never designed for a turian, and now you're telling me you might be having hallucinations. And this upgrade could have done anything to your implants. I'm the only one who knows the tech." She rest her elbows on the desk and spreads her hands in a gesture of appeal, "Let me do this for you and then maybe you'll be able to think more clearly about finding Shepard."

Garrus is torn. On the one hand, he doesn't want anyone probing him. On the other hand, anything that could impair him thinking or finding Shepard is worth taking care of. And Miranda is the one most likely to understand the tech involved. He taps a finger on the support.

Tali is looking at him intently. "What are the two of you talking about?"

He snorts, "It's nothing important."

"Clearly it is if she's talking of running tests."

He shakes his head. "You know I was shot by a gunship."

"We all know that story," Liara responds. "But what does that have to do with implants?"

"The damage was quite severe." Miranda raises an eyebrow at Garrus.

He sighs, "Just tell them. I guess no one ever pays attention because I wasn't dead anywhere near as long as Shepard was."

"Alright," Miranda shifts her attention back to Liara and Tali. "Officer Vakarian had severe brain trauma and died once during evac and twice on the operating table. Dr. Chakwas, Dr. Solas, and I were certain we could save him, but he would be little more than a vegetable. That didn't suit any of
our plans. It could have psychologically devastated Shepard to lose a friend right after waking up, and damaged the entire op. In the absence of anyone authorized to make medical decisions for Vakarian, we had to decide for him. I did have some supplies on hand to repair Shepard if her brain implants couldn't take the strain of her biotics. Dr. Chakwas and I came to an agreement about trying to adapt them to a turian brain structure. Dr. Solas knew the most about turian biology and helped to install them, and he had bone and skin grafts and bandages appropriate to dextro biology from his clinic." Miranda looks admiringly at Garrus. "Based on the fact that no one comments on any extreme change in personality, I believe we must have gotten it right, even if he refused to rest for as long as he should have."

Tali is unreadable behind her helmet. Her head is tilted and her eyes blink.

Liara looks shocked. It's not often the Shadow Broker misses a key piece of information. "How in the world did you manage to keep the fact that you're a cyborg from everyone?"

Garrus waves a hand at them. "This is old news. I thought everyone knew. Jacob knew."

Miranda shrugs, "Dr. Chakwas handled the medical records. She didn't want me sending them on to the Illusive Man, and since it wasn't mission critical, I let her maintain patient confidentiality. She may have kept them out of Alliance hands."

"It's not important," Garrus insists.

"But it might explain things," says Tali. "Like why you can do all of those calibrations in your head."

"That's a natural talent for math. I could always do that."

"I'm not sure I believe you. You always win at Sums."

"Then go hack my military record. I have the fastest time for calculating the correct cannon power draws both during simulations and under fire." Garrus frowns. "Anyway. It's not important. I pulled through and my brain works just the way it should."

"You mean it was working the way it should," Miranda corrects. "I think now would be a good time to check."

"I'm not keen on you running electricity through my head."

"Your cybernetics will heal anything with just a little bit of medigel. We did reinforce your skull and healing, too. Based on Shepard, you should be able to headbutt a krogan."

"I'm saving finding out if that's true for some day when I want to surprise Wrex."

"Alright. If you don't want my help, why are you here?"

"I do want your help. I want you to bring her back."

"Shepard?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"What?"
"Assuming she is dead, and I am not convinced that she is, how do you propose I do that?"

"Just do what you did last time."

"I'm not a wizard, Garrus. I need something to work with. Last time I had her body, particularly her brain. That's why she was Shepard and the clone wasn't: She had all the memories that made her who she was. You need to bring me her body if you want her back."

"But she's everywhere." He waves his hands frustratedly. "Can't you do something with this green stuff?"

"I've only just begun to study whatever this is. You could help me," she gives him a significant look. "But you're not."

"Oh, fine. Electrocute me. Cut my head open. Just put everything back where you found it when you're done."

In very little time, Garrus finds himself lying on a table in his own private room. Oriana stands over him with a tank of anesthetic to put him under while Miranda is cleaning sharp pointy sparky tools.

Oriana bites her lip; hesitation looks extremely odd on a face so like Miranda's. "Mr. Vakarian ... are you sure this is what you want?"

Garrus flicks his mandibles. "I'm certain this isn't what I want. But I'll do anything to find Shepard and I need Miranda for that. So don't bother your conscience with me, kid. I know what I'm doing."

Oriana slips the mask over his face.

Liara and Tali watch through a window as he closes his eyes and breathes in deeply.

#

Suddenly Garrus is back on the Presidium, staring at the world through a grainy blue haze. He feels shorter than he has in a long time, and looks up. He can just make out his favorite place on the Citadel high above the reservoir in front of him, high above the heads of the people to his right, mainly human and turian. They're all gazing the same direction. Probably a presentation with a stage floating on the water.

He can hear a voice he remembers only in nightmares amplified many times over. Matriarch Benezia greets the crowd, "We are here today to remember the fallen on the 10th anniversary of the Relay 314 Incident..." His father will be toward the back of the stage, talking into a comm, coordinating security. Ah, yes. He'd been brought here to display proper respect for the fallen who died before he was even born.

He becomes aware of a hand in his, and looks to his left to see his sister, Solana, watching the people apprehensively. She's young and small, and they're going to be easily crushed if the crowd spills closer to them.

It's then that he hears laughter and sees a human boy jumping off the top of the railing. He starts walking toward the lip of the walkway to explore. Below are some bushes and a small playground. If he drops down, he and Solana can escape. "C'mon, Sol. Let's get out of here," he's about to give Solana a boost up over the railing when he catches sight of a familiar face: Liara T'Soni looking more innocent than she does now, but just a serious and adult, bent over a data pad at the edge of the crowd. Probably trying to solve some Prothean problem while being supportively near her mother.
He wants to move toward her, to talk to her, but he can't. That's not how the memory goes.

Solana bobs her head, "But Dad will be angry if we leave."

"We're not leaving. We're just going down there. It's all the same space. He's a detective. He'll figure out where to find us." The Great Detective who never came home to Palaven and was too busy to keep an eye on his children when they did visit.

Adventure wins out over obedience, and Sol let him help her over the railing to hang off the side of the walkway. Then he climbs over and drops down. "Let go! I'll catch you."

His little sister casts one more glance at the gathering where he knew they were supposed to be, and then drops into his arms.

Miss Suzie had a steamboat
The steamboat had a bell

Some human children play a human clapping game. Humans are clearly made of elastic.

The children run around between a slide and a tree, climbing one or the other as they like, playing tag. They're dodging a girl in a green dress. She's taller than he is and older than the other children. Clearly the one keeping an eye on them.

Miss Suzie went to heaven
The steamboat went to hell-

The girl turns and spies him and Solana. She blinks in surprise and steps back. For the briefest moment, it seems she'll run away.

Then she runs toward him with complete mischief in her amber eyes and taps him on the shoulder. "Tag, you're it."

It was just a group of children playing a game. He forgot her afterward when he was busy being dressed down by his father. He never knew her name.

O Operator
Please give me number nine.
And if you disconnect me

Garrus is in an elevator. He's just had an argument with his father about his upcoming semester of school and which classes to take to prepare him for boot camp next year. He wants to qualify for spectre training, and that will require a more intensive course load. It will be expensive, he's told. It's not what his father wants, and so he'll have to come up with the money on his own. Right now, he wants to be any place that isn't his father's apartment on the Citadel.

He steps out of the elevator into the Zakera Ward shopping center and bumps into a human cadet with a kit bag, her red hair pulled back into an exacting bun.

He tries to grab her hand as they pass. He tries to turn to look at her again. But that isn't what happened.

She's no one special. He's busy sulking and plotting. He forgot her two minutes after he saw her.

Ask me no more questions,
I'll tell you no more lies.
Miss Suzie told me this
The day before she died

He's on shore leave at the Citadel with Quintus and Marian and Grippa. They were at a dextro dive that caters to young military (ie those without much money or sense). And now they're staggering back to the ship, occasionally steadying each other and singing "The Dishonorable Akanna Vitruvius" off-key.

Quintus giggles and gropes Marian's waist as he nearly falls on top of her. She pushes him back up with a roll of her eyes and then falls over a bottle in the street.

Above their heads, a grate comes loose. And then an asari ... no a human foot pops out and a short-haried woman in a tank top and cammo pants drops down, looking around interestedly. She pulls up her omni-tool and starts tapping data into it, taking pictures of the buildings.

"Wh...What." Garrus clears his throat. "What are you doing there?"

The woman bares her teeth beneath the grime on her face. "Exploring. This place is ancient and the maps are awful. They don't show half the tunnels."

Grippa looks her over. "Weirdo."

Indeed she is. But she seems happy being herself.

He wants to ask her more questions. Does she remember him? How did she get here? Was she always here? Where is she now? But that's not what happened.

He's drunk and she isn't important. He forgot her as he staggered back to his ship.

Dyed her hair in purple
She dyed her hair in pink
She dyed her hair in polka dots
And washed it down the sink!

#

Garrus's eyes snap open and he pushes Miranda and her electrical probes into the wall. "Don't EVER do that again."

"You were responding well. I may even be able to adjust your implants --"

"I don't care what your tests say. I'm done with this," he snarls.

In his unvisored eye, he sees a glowing green image of Shepard standing next to Miranda, trying to brush her hair back and straighten the other woman.

"Shepard?" he pauses.

The image blurs and vanishes. Of course it does. She's not here. She's never really here.

He pushes the door open and heads for the exit. Tali and Liara call after him, but he doesn't want to talk right now. He needs liquor and lots of it. So he doesn't quite run, but he does ... dash out of the clinic and into the comforting, crime-ridden dark of Omega.

Chapter End Notes
Two notes:
1) I think my favorite thing about Garrus that everyone forgets is that he is also a cyborg. The bit about Miranda using spare parts she brought along in case Shepard needed replacements is my own deduction on where the tech came from, but Jacob does reference him needing cybernetics just to be functional in the game. And yet it's never mentioned again anywhere and I haven't seen it mentioned in a fic I've read yet.

2) Miss Suzie is a popular children's clapping game that has thus far survived over 100 years, even with its outdated references to steamboats and operators. There's endless regional variations, but the first four verses are roughly the same.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Miss_Susie

Demonstration video of the more complicated clapping variation:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=18eCryxmhQ

Addendum: "I'm not evil, I'm just drawn that way" is a slight alteration of Jessica Rabbit's "I'm not bad. I'm just drawn that way." (Roger Rabbit, 1988). I thought it was appropriate considering how much attention gets paid to Miranda's butt in the game plus her Cerberus ties.
Garrus and Shepard reunite, only to part.

Happy N7 Day!

Shepard paces back and forth in the comm room. Garrus has to pull through. He did before. Even if he doesn't remember the future, she needs him by her side to make it through the war. The first time through, it was like swimming through molasses. She maybe could have done it on her own... but not as stylishly. A second time against the Reapers? No.

Something went wrong or she wouldn't be here again. She needs to pick his brain and come up with answers or all that's waiting for her is fear that this will happen again. She'll run off to the beam and be back at Lazarus Station and it will break her to be trapped here forever.

Maybe this is hell? If it is hell, if this is some kind of eternal torture, then he's certainly dead and she's going to cry. No. Commander Shepard does not cry. Commander Shepard does not break. Commander Shepard eats grief and spits bullets. Commander Shepard isn't human any more. Some days, I hate being Commander Shepard.

Jacob comes in and her spirits lift. "Commander, we've done what we could for Garrus. He took a bad hit. The doc's corrected with surgical procedures and some cybernetics. Best we can tell, he'll have full functionality, but..."

The door opens and there's Garrus in his bandages and raw scars. "Shepard."

Jacob chuckles "Tough son of a bitch. Didn't think he'd be up yet."

Shepard knows she's smiling a goofy grin as she looks at Garrus alive. He's staring back at her with an intensity she remembers from their last few days together. She's barely aware as they take a few steps toward each other. In the corner of her eye, Jacob salutes and retreats.

"Shepard?" Garrus's voice is so mixed with emotions that she can't identify them all.

Isn't there supposed to be some comment from Garrus about scars? She's sure she remembers it.

"Garrus?" she asks uncertainly.

He walks to her slowly until he's towering over her. "I'm told that some women have a weakness for men with scars. What's your opinion?"

She reaches out a hand to touch badly burned mandible. "My opinion?" She steps closer. "My
opinion is that krogan ladies are right about scars, but they're missing out if they don't know the joy of subharmonics."

He reaches out to wrap arms around her waist. "It's you," he says breathlessly. "You're really here." He lifts her up to sit on the table.

"You... remember?"

"You're unforgettable." He fiddles with his omni-tool behind her back and sparks fly from various corners of the room. "And there go the bugs."

She leans forward to kiss him, but it doesn't last long enough. He flinches back, and she can taste some of the fluid from his fresh wounds on her lips. "Sorry. I wasn't thinking. Should have gone for shaking hands." She starts giggling uncontrollably until her eyes start to water.

He leans forward with hands on either side of her and presses their foreheads together.

She wraps her arms around his neck and tries to concentrate on his scent of gun oil and cinnamon under the sterilizing alcohol and medical chemicals. Slowly, she does begin to cry.

"Shepard?" Garrus tries to pull back to look at her, but she's not about to let go even as she looks up at him. "What's wrong?"

She gulps in air. "Everything. Everything is wrong. But I'm so relieved to see you right now, I don't care." She presses her cheek into his armored chest and can feel his chin resting on her head as his arms come around her again. She's afraid if she moves he'll vanish. "Garrus? What's happening to us? We were on Earth, running for the beam, and now we're back here."

"Is that the last thing you remember?"

"Yes. There was the portal to the Citadel. We were running towards it. The Reaper shot at you and you were badly charred." She searches her memory, "I dragged you to the evac. And then... that's it." She closes her eyes and wraps her arms more tightly around him with a sick feeling. "And then I was on Lazarus Station again. Oh God. Oh God. I'm going to have to fight the war again and die again. They just woke me up to die again," she leans back to look up at him. "Garrus, what happened?" His mandibles are pulled in tight. Whatever it is, it's not good.

"Shepard... I..." He clears his throat and tries again, looking down at his hand where it fiddles with the cuff of her Cerberus dress uniform. "Um. We're sort of back to save the galaxy again."

"I noticed that part."

"No. Um... I don't think things worked out the way you intended. We need to save the galaxy from whatever you did with the Crucible."

She looks up at him with a prickle of fear and tries once again to remember what happened in London. There's nothing but a frustratingly blank wall after passing a wounded Garrus to Javik for evac. "What I did? What did I do?"

"You made it emit some kind of green light that rewrote the DNA of everyone into computer code and circuitry and gave synthetics some sort of organic DNA."

"Really?" That sounds ridiculous, but Garrus is here and she trusts him. "Ick. Okay, and then what happened?"
"The Reapers stopped attacking. They're trying to make peace, but it's probably just a trick to get everyone into key areas where they can be indoctrinated. If we're not partially indoctrinated already."

"So peace in our times with sneaky machines plotting to turn us into ground beef. Alright. And?"

"And the politicians are trying to become immortal."

"Immortality. Alright. And?"

"People are hackable."

"Isn't better firewalls something you can handle on your own?" She frowns.

"What?" Garrus draws his head back on his long neck in the graceful motion of a startled bird.

"What, exactly, is the problem? Because not being turned into grey goo and immortality don't sound that bad and hacking sounds fixable. And none of those problems sound like they're things you need me for. You can outwit a phalanx of machines on your own."

He takes a breath, "And you're gone and I don't know how much longer I can keep things together without you. I need you."

"Garrus, I..." She reaches out to stroke the side of his face that's still intact. Then stops as a realization hits her. "You... You did this to me. You brought me back to fight again," she says with dawning horror.

"Shepard. You were dead."

"You knew it was a possibility. You promised I could rest. I know you heard me say that I'd rest when I was dead. You understood what I meant all those times." She hates finally having this conversation that she never wanted to have. She had thought the Reapers at least solved that problem for her.

"I also recall plans to resign."

And she would have, too, if she had lived. But that didn't happen. "Death is a great resignation."

"Plans to be together."

"In a bar at the end of the universe is still together."

"Shepard! Don't you want to live?" And now he's staring down at her with that piercing gaze and she has to tell him the truth.

"No. Not really. 'Mine is not to reason why, Mine is just to do and die.'" She looks up at him helplessly. She was so tired of everyone making demands. She just wanted sleep. In his arms. But if she had to choose between him and sleep? By the end of the war she wasn't certain what the honest answer was.

"You said you loved me."

"I do." He's been the one bright spot. The one time she was selfish. She shouldn't have invited him to her cabin. She should have done this alone so that she didn't hurt him. Too late now. Far too late.

"You bonded with me."
"'Til death do us part."

"What?"

"I married you. I died. It ends things."

"No it doesn't."

"What?"

"We're family now. We're always a part of each other. It never ends"

"Well, now we were never married, I'd say that's pretty over." She can see her words cutting into him. His face is so still and tight that it hurts to look at him. There is no stopping this fight, no taking things back. The only way forward is to move further into the fray. "How could you do this to me? How could you make me live through this again?"

He grabs her arms and glares down at her. "You want to play sad and defeated, fine. How could you do this to me, Shepard? You left me. Alone. But not really alone. Oh no. You were everywhere and nowhere at once. It was worse than losing you." He shoves her back and she slides off the table to land on her feet. "And why are you being so obstinate? You love fighting for a good cause."

"Because, damn it, I can't do this again." She vibrates with anger as she looks at him. "I'm fucking tired. I give and I give and I give because it's the right thing to do. And there's nothing left of me. There's no me for me because I've given it all away because someone had to and apparently that someone is me. I thought you understood."

"And yet, you're the one who chose to be with me, Shepard. You know full well that I won't accept all this self-sacrificing bullshit when there's a way to fight. You can fight for yourself."

"Really? You have a plan, Vakarian? Because from where I'm standing, I see the same story playing out again. I know I don't see any different options."

"You aren't even trying."

"Gather the team, take down the Collectors." She begins ticking off the points ahead of them on her fingers. "Aratoht to buy us time, so I get to kill millions of people. Again. Deal with bureaucratic bullshit. Reapers arrive. Galaxy is unprepared because bureaucratic bullshit continues. Gather the victory fleet. Cure the genophage. Settle the Geth-Quarian War. Watch Mordin die. Watch Thane die. Watch Legion die. Not because I want to, but because they have to in order to build the fleet. The ruthless calculus of war. And this time it will have to be ruthless calculus rather than just shit that happens because I could prevent it, but if I do, we might lose. Watch so many worlds burn because I'm too busy being the poster girl for the Alliance to actually fight."

"You don't have to do this alone."

"I've always done this alone, apparently. It killed me by inches the first time, and you want me to do it again to change something I don't even remember doing? Because what? Because you weren't there and you don't trust that I made the best possible choice? Going to make me relive hell until you get what you want? Fuck you."

She turns on her heel and leaves. "EDI, lock the door to the conference room for the next five hours."

"Yes, Commander Shepard. Logging you out."
She can't deal with him right now, with the shock and pain of his betrayal in dragging her out of the grave. What gave him the right?

She remembers papers she signed gladly and the feel of his smooth plates and velvety skin against hers. Apparently, I did. And they say Commander Shepard never makes mistakes.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to post the break-up for the holiday. This is another chapter I've had sitting around since I started this story because my Shepard and my Garrus have a few things they need to resolve that they weren't talking about during the original ME3 timeline. I promise you this isn't the end.

Shepard's Chapter Titles have been taken from "9 to 5" by Dolly Parton (no, I have no clue why my brain decided this was the right song). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LwDMFOLIHxU

"'Forward, the Light Brigade!' Was there a man dismayed? Not though the soldier knew Someone had blundered. Theirs not to make reply, Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die. Into the valley of Death Rode the six hundred."

Now I'm Frozen In Time

Chapter Summary

Garrus gets drunk and learns about time travel.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

While there was still something satisfying in disappearing into the shadows of Omega, the streets were disappointingly quiet. Where are the Blood Pack when you need a challenge?

And now, sometimes Garrus can see her in his peripheral vision, running at his sides: Different Shepards he could have met if he had been paying attention. All that lost time they could have had together. Not that he ever would have looked for her earlier. He would never have considered a human mate.

He can't stay in the back alleys forever. He has places to be, one final stop on his tour to find Shepard: Afterlife in all its neon glory. He climbs up the back way, onto a balcony ramp between the upper and lower sections of the club, and hops over the bushes when everyone is looking away. No bouncers on the doors between levels to turn him away. Aria should have better security.

He walks down to the lower level. It's quieter and has more space for drinking. And better drinks. And it will take Tali and Liara somewhat longer to find him here.

The table Garrus selects is small. Just enough space for two. He orders for himself and the ghost of Shepard in her little black dress that shows off her trim waist and generous hips.

After the first drink, he has the bartender line up some shots. Four for him and one each for the four Shepards as the other three joined them: the little girl in her green dress, the raw recruit, the slightly older marine enjoying some downtime.

"At least you made it this time. With some interference from Miranda. You haven't changed either. You always make me buy the alcohol."

He knocks back another drink. "Nothing to say to me anymore? Because I could use a suggestion or two. Get your body?" He downs the next shot. "No. The Alliance can't find it. If they had found it, they'd have held the funeral. Maybe Hackett would hide it, but not Alenko. He still has the galaxy's biggest crush on you. Not that either of you ever knew how to use your spectre status to get things done. Always the Alliance's pets." He takes another drink. "And Liara would find the classified documents about where you are. So the only answer is that there's not enough of you left to identify."

He takes the fourth drink, sloshes it a moment, and then downs it. "Hmmm... Not drinking, Shepard? I know it's rude to leave a friend to drink alone. Guess I'll have another round." He signals the barkeep to set up four more drinks.

"So, what's left? You're in my thoughts, but that's not really you. Not really. If it were really you, I'd have seen you earlier. And definitely on the Citadel. This is new. It's new. So it's Miranda and not
you." He takes another drink.

"So then we have the Reaper Code and the green energy and maybe you're everywhere because you're vaporized and mixed with everything. Dust in all the stars. The basis of all life." He drinks his next glass. "And not that you don't deserve it, Shepard. Not that you don't deserve to be part of everything because maybe you'll make people more sane the next time the galaxy is in peril. But it's a hell of a thing to do to me. Couldn't you have found a way to take me with you? I know you had to leave me behind. I was slowing you down. But couldn't there have been another way?"

He drinks the last drink. "Because ... because we're crap when we're alone, Shepard. That's when everything goes wrong. Well, maybe not the last time on Palaven. Finally things went right. But everything before that ... we both need a unit, a partner at least. Or it will all fall apart. And I've got the Normandy, yes, but it's not sustainable. And when it's all gone, that will be the end. And I can't... I can't... I need you."

He signals the barkeep for another set of shots and rests his head in his hand. He looks at the youngest Shepard. "You're too young to drink, kid. I don't know what I was thinking," he says and then spills her drink into his.

"I'm hardly a kid any more, Garrush"

He blinks slowly and looks over to see Tali. He dips his talon into his drink and stirs. "I was expecting Liara first. You're getting better at tracking."

"That's because I had you tagged the moment you left. And Liarrrra hasn't gotten back to rrrreviewing video footage yet. No srrrrreens."

"Definitely better and faster," he says admiringly.

She sits down on Shepard and he winces as all the green Shepard ghosts dissolve into dust.

"Garrrrrus, you need to stop," she says as she gestures at his collection of 16 glasses.

"Says the woman who gets drunk after three drinks." He looks at the mixed drink he made and sighs. Then downs it. Ug. That was disgusting. But Shepard had given him a high tolerance for levo food. And he has three more to go. Just imagine they're Joker's horse chokers and see how many you can take.

"Shepard's not coming back. None of them arrrre. Mrrrranda can't do it," Tali fiddles with the straw in her drink. "You could have a grrreat life in the Hierararachy."

Garrus chortles. "Have you met me? I'll be miserable."

"You'llrrre miserable on the bottom. You'd be happy on the top giving orrrrderrrrs," she finishes off her drink.

"Maybe," he says, mainly because he doesn't want to think too hard about that.

Tali puts a hand on his. "Orrr you could come with me back to the fleet."

"You need a carpenter. I'm not good with hammers." He tries to withdraw his hand.

"I think you could be." She grabs drunkenly at his wrist.

"Tali ..."
"We could bet on how many nails you'll hit."

"I don't think..." He tries to extricate himself again to no avail.

"You're always at a distance. You and Sheppard. It looked perfect. Don't you think it was perfect?"

"Yes. Of course."

"And then they die being all good and noble. Shepard died. That bosh'tet Kal'rrreegarr died. They left us behind." Tali finally lets go and looks down at her hands as they curl and link together and then slip apart. "I watched Fleet and Flotilla so many times. Turians are so much better at handling... loneliness. Practical. Don't you want to be practical, Garrus?"

"Tali, I don't think --"

Tali picks up one of the drinks on her side of the table. "Take me to bed, Garrus. We'd both feel better, unless you object to being used for your sexy body," she purrs and then she downs the drink as he stares at her in confusion.

"Umm... I don't know... I don't think... Tali did you just drink Shepard's drink?"

"Sheppard's drink?"

"That's her side of the table. All the drinks were hers... It's levo. You need to run your toxic filters right away."

"Oh, no!"

"Let me help you back to the ship." He stands and then slings her arm over his shoulder to help her up. Tali never can hold her alcohol. She probably doesn't know half of what she's said.

#

At least it isn't far to the docks. They're only slowed by Tali needing to stop and vomit into the suit's filters while Garrus watches her back so no one attacks. It is still Omega.

By the time they get to the airlock, he's mostly sober, though he's having second thoughts about mixing his liquor. This is definitely a day he should forget ever happened.

If only he could.

And then a shadow on his left moves, and he drops Tali to slam the attacker into the wall.

"Ow."

"Miranda?"

The woman sighs and her hood falls back. "No, the other Lawson."

He frowns. "Oriana? Does Miranda know you're here?"

"No. And she'd better not find out. She'd kill me for wandering around Omega without telling her. I don't have much time."

Tali groans on the ground and Garrus decides to do the diplomatic thing and put Oriana down so he
can check over his sick friend. Once he's determined Tali is just a little bruised and needs her filter changed again, he turns back to Oriana.

"Why are you here?"

"There is a way to bring Shepard back. Sort of. It's just ..." she hesitates and bites her lip. Definitely not Miranda. "You'd have to go back and change the past. Make sure she doesn't die."

"Change the past?" he laughs bitterly. "It's so obvious. Why didn't you say so earlier?"

"If you're going to be sarcastic at me, I can leave." There's the Lawson dignity rearing its head. "You could do it. We'd just need the neuropathways machine, some eezo, and a localized mass effect field. I could send you back to when you had the implants put in."

"Why didn't Miranda tell me this?"

"Because she doesn't want to change the past. As far as she's concerned, I'm alive and she's alive and father's dead. That's all that matters. If I send you back, anything you do could change that."

Garrus's eyes bore into the 21 year-old girl. "Then why would you want me to change things?"

"Because my entire family is dead," she pleads. "I love Miri, but I had a mother and a father and a brother. Henry Lawson killed them. I send you back to save your Shepard and you save my family. That's the deal." Oriana's face takes on a determined look he remembers so well from living on the SR-2 with Miranda. Save her family? It seems that Oriana and Miranda are cut from the same cloth after all.

"I'll take it."

Chapter End Notes

I've decided that since I left things on a downer cliffhanger and I have today to write, I'll put out the next two chapters. That may mean a wait for chapters after that, but hey, it's N7 day.

Also, I'm curious if the way these chapters line up works. This is the order I always intended them to be in because it works better this way in my head. But I also know it's an odd way to line them up.

I'm going to need a new song or something for chapter titles now.

Garrus's titles came from "You Said You'd Grow Old With Me" by Michael Schulte.

Solana S. Vakarian did a Garrus/Shepard video of it and was my introduction to the song. The video itself has been a source of inspiration for Garrus's mood in his serch for Shepard, so if you want some angst, here's the link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMtXEaJBCDo

P.S. It has a hopeful ending with Garrus holding Shepard's hand in the hospital.
I'm Here Alone

Chapter Summary

Shepard cools down.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shepard takes the elevator to engineering and runs down the stairs to the cargo space to kick some crates. Where's Jack when you need someone to be the living embodiment of rage for you? Oh, right, Shepard needs to go defrost her. Again. God, what a clusterfuck rescuing Jack was/is going to be.

Running a rag across her face erases the involuntary tear tracks and cools her down a little. She needs to leave before Daniels and Donnelly get weird ideas about her beating things and triggering the doors.

Shepard runs up the stairs and considers talking to Zaeed. He's here. And he gets anger. He'd likely either laugh at her or tell her not to worry, princess, and then kill Garrus. A simple, direct man. Not a man to let things fester if given the option.

She wishes Grunt was here to pound skulls with. That might help. A little. Or she could hug him. He was oddly cuddly at times. But he's still in a tank in Okeer's lab. Damn it!

And why couldn't Cerberus have left in the staircases between engineering and the CIC so she could run off more of her energy? The commander presses the button to call the elevator and taps her foot impatiently until it arrives to take her to the crew quarters. Though when she gets there, she's not sure why she bothered. Can't use either of the observation decks because apparently we need Kasumi and Samara to make those areas habitable first.

Shepard makes a mad circle around the mess because without a determined direction she automatically started going to the gunnery. And then she decides to go in anyway. The door is open but the lights aren't on. Surely she can't mess up calibrations that haven't been made yet. And besides, they'll be getting rid of these cannons.

The door closes behind her and she slams her palms on the console. Why couldn't she just be polite to him? Why couldn't she just suck it all up and tell him everything was going to be fine? Why? Why?

Now she's fucked up the best thing in her life.

But if she had to start lying and pretending with him, then it would be FUBAR'd anyway.

And now that she's ruined her romantic life, she wants her friend to talk with about something, anything, and he isn't here and is hardly going to be a font of advice and comfort when he is.

Shepard turns her back and settles down underneath the console. She should probably leave. It's not like the lock will actually hold Garrus for any appreciable amount of time. It's probably a narrow thing that he hasn't come down here yet. Maybe he's destroying the table in the comm room. It's no
loss. The table will be gone in 12 to 18 months anyway.

The door hisses open and black booted feet stride toward her. Miranda bends down with her hands on her knees; her face might almost show concern. "Commander Shepard?"

"Yeah. What is it?" Shepard manages to keep the pain out of her voice, but that leads to her sounding dead tired. Maybe she is. It's been a long journey and she's barely slept in days.

"You don't look well."

Brave it out or tell the truth? Well, the day can't possibly get any more shitty. Time to get this over with. "I'm not."

"Will you come to my office?" Miranda reaches out a hand.

Shepard considers the idea for a moment. "No."

"It would be more comfortable."

"It would be for most people. But I like it better here right now." She rests her chin on her knees. Miranda's brow creases as she tries to figure out her next move. Then she turns and locks the door. "Something is wrong, Shepard. You're impatient and moody. I was expecting calm and rational."

"Sorry to disappoint. It's not every day that I'm raised from the dead." No just every other year.

"I understand that might have an impact, but I was expecting to see personality corrections by now. A shift to your usual self."

Shepard shrugs. Miranda peers under the console again, and then rolls her eyes at what she sees. She grabs the lip of the pedestal and twists to swing herself down next to Shepard with her legs spread out in front of her. "You're as stubborn as advertised though."

Shepard leans her head back. She's not being fair to Miranda. This is her life's work. "Glad to live up to some of your expectations."

"You need to tell me what's going wrong with you, Shepard. Or talk to Kelly. Or let me examine you."

"Not Kelly. She's kind of ... clingy." Shepard shudders. There's just something about Kelly that's wrong.

"Then what's your choice, commander? Because if you won't cooperate, I'll have to pull the plug on this entire op."

"You don't want to do that. It will look bad on your resume."

"It will look worse the larger the mistake is."

Shepard lowers her right leg and props her head up on her left hand. "You said you couldn't write new memories for me. That only I could write them."

"Yes."

"I... have memories of things that haven't happened yet. I don't know why. Or how. You ... If you
tell the Illusive Man, you'll regret it. He's eventually going to betray you to your father. You and Oriana both." Shepard looks over at Miranda, who has gone from some measure of relaxed to stiffly alert. "You'll tell me about Oriana later. Or at least you would have. You need my help to save her on Illium or you won't make it in time."

"That's quite a lot of guesses, commander." Miranda seems to be doing a lot of calculating as her hand rests on her pistol.

"I can guess at a lot of things, but not that many specific names." Shepard flips her wrist in a careless gesture. In for a penny, in for a pound. "I knew Garrus was going to be shot in the face by a rocket. I knew you could take care of him, but I wanted to try to save him. Just because he adjusts to all the scars doesn't make being shot in the face fun."

"That would account for all the signs of distress you were showing when we were delayed," Miranda sounds thoughtful.

"The first time I did this, I followed your advice and went to Mordin so that he could get started on his research. I should go get him soon so that we don't end up off schedule and more people die than are supposed to. There's a plague and he has the cure, but we need to go to the air supply for the station to disperse it. And there's a batarian who needs medi-gel sitting in the street, dying. I should go save him."

"It's been hours, Shepard. It's probably already too late."

"Yeah. Yeah. I know. Teach me to be selfish."

Miranda pulls up her right knee and rests her arm on it. "You're going to have to be a little selfish, Shepard. Whether I believe you about the future or not, you need sleep."

Shepard shrugs off recommendations to sleep. She's been doing this for so long it's second nature. "How could I have memories of the future?"

"Hypothetically..." Miranda trails off, her hand flipping back and forth, as she stares at the underside of the console. "Hypothetically, it could be done with enough eezo and a more localized mass effect field. Then we'd just have to use the implants in your brain to send signals to your implants here in the past, and they'd write in all of your memories."

"And the only time the implants were writing my brain would be Lazarus Station, so that's why I woke up there. And --" And Garrus can only remember her if he gets hit in the head with a rocket. She runs her hand over her face. "Great. Yeah, that's Shepard and Vakarian alright. Intimate moments built around big guns and giant explosions... Wait... Damn it, Garrus! Why do I come up with these things now that I'm angry at you?"

"Hypothetically, you must have wanted to do this and I must have helped. Do you remember why?"

"No. I think I'm dead again. We survive this suicide mission, all of us. And then the Reapers attack Earth and I die after gathering the fleet."

"And me?" Miranda asks with carefully controlled curiosity.

"You part ways with the Illusive Man and save your sister after a dangerous op that you design yourself. And then I don't know. You go to a safe house to wait out the war."

"Then I must want you to change things. Something must have gone wrong."
"Don't look at me. I'm dead."

The operative's eyes narrow. "And you could just be malfunctioning."

Shepard meets her gaze. "Say that and I'll think you intend to chop me up for spare parts."

"You have too many details. If you promise to sleep, I'll begin my evaluations again on the next mission." Miranda pushes herself off the floor.

"Alright." Shepard continues sitting under the console.

"Shepard, your bed isn't in here."

"Most of the time."

"Hmmm?"

"Never mind." Shepard pulls herself up to stagger off to her cabin.

Chapter End Notes

No promises on when the next chapter comes out. But I do have the next 2 in process.
Garrus makes himself useful.

Garrus is not about to stay locked in the comm room for five hours. It takes him less than a minute to hack the lock.

Has she played him this whole time? Did none of it mean anything? She bought him guns - hell, she bought him a Thanix cannon, she helped him kill Sidonis, she always asked about his family's safety ... No. It meant something. They could have slept together and had it mean very little. That was the original proposition and it had gone ... extremely well. She drew him closer on purpose. She wasn't a cruel woman. Conclusion: She did love him.

I thought you understood.

But he'd missed something vital.

It killed me by inches.

No. He had known that. And he'd brought her back anyway. Because she can evac him and decide he should go on living without her, but how dare he pull her out of danger?

He wants to dash after Shepard and continue the argument. But she'd insisted there was nothing between them now. And he'd always left her an out. If things got too difficult, she could call it off. He'd meant it even though, now that it happened, it feels like getting hit in the face with another rocket and he isn't sure who can put the pieces back together. Spirits knew she had it tough enough without having a relationship with a hotheaded failure who could accidentally poison her.

The bonding made that complicated, but she was right that it hadn't happened yet. Except it had. But it hadn't, especially not the important parts. It really was just a worthless piece of paper this whole time. Humans and their paper cuts.

In the meantime, Garrus still has the future to save and a friend to patch up. Saving the future will require getting Shepard more stable and less stressed. And to do that, he needs advice and intel from someone who can keep an eye on her. He starts to walk to Mordin's lab, but it's locked.

Inconvenient.

Garrus turns around the other way and walks through the armory, where Jacob is leaning over an M-22 Eviscerator. The security officer turns to glare at Garrus when he enters.

Crap. How thin are the walls? Garrus clears his throat, "Is there a problem?"

"Oh, no. No problem. Just you arguing with the commander after she busted her butt trying to save you."

"It's been a long time since we've seen each other. We have ... issues to resolve."

"Yelling doesn't resolve anything. Nor does making a woman cry."
"Shepard rarely yells. She usually cares too much about other people's feelings. She'd feel better if she did it more often." He tilts his head in consideration. "I don't know about crying other than that she does that even less. Is there something special about women and crying?"

"I guess turians really are made of bone and nothing else," Jacob shakes his head. "A man should never make a woman cry. Takes a heartless brute to yell at a woman and make her cower."

Garrus laughs. "Maybe I don't understand humans very well, but Shepard headbutts krogan. I want to see what she does if you ever even imply she cowers. I don't think your skull is thick enough."

"Her face was wet when she came through here."

"I believe that would be the part where she was relieved I was here. I've seen a lot of it when humans get picked up from lock up. Hugging and crying and then yelling about everything the suspect did wrong." This strangely makes him feel a little better.

"You did that many things wrong?"

"It's a matter of opinion."

"Well, keep your opinion to yourself. The commander was in rough shape when we found her, and she's not looking too good right now."

"Don't worry. I'm planning to make Shepard's life easier, not harder."

"Turians must have a different definition of easy."

Garrus waves a mandible in dismissal and leaves the armory. Human women are so much easier to understand than human men.

Garrus finally makes his way to the bridge.

Joker looks over his shoulder at the sound of the turian's approach. "Oh, look, the fun police is here. What can I do for you, officer?"

"I notice you're not wearing your safety harness. That's five points off your license."

That gets Moreau to swivel around in his chair and raise an eyebrow at him. "I'd almost think you were trying to make a joke."

"It was a joke. It's actually three points, but we're in Omega space, so who the hell is going to enforce it anyway?"

"Ha. Ha. What do you want?"

"I want to know about Commander Shepard."

"You know her about as well as I do. Well, maybe I do know her better because I'm her favorite pilot, but not everyone can be this talented." He grins.

"I'm a talented enough detective to see that something's broken in her right now."

"So what? We're a ship full of broken things." Joker turns away from him, back to monitoring lights.
"I'd like to fix that. To fix the captain, you have to fix the ship."

"Uh-huh."

"And you know her best, she talks to you after every mission. I think she called you the heart of the ship."

EDI's blue orb appears, "Interesting that she does not call you the brains of the ship when the cockpit is arguably the head."

Joker throws an annoyed glance at it. "I think that makes the AI core the armpit of the ship."

Garrus knows far more human biology than he needs. "I think that's the right kidney and part of the intestine."

Joker snorts, "Full of shit? I think you're right. There must be a mute button for this thing somewhere."

Garrus looks between the two of them and wonders how they ever ended up together. "EDI, could you please give the flight lieutenant and I an hour of privacy? I think we'll be docked for some time if the commander is going to pick up Dr. Solus."

"Of course, Officer Vakarian."

"Thank you."

"Logging you out, Officer Vakarian."

Joker growls as EDI's globe disappears. "Why won't it listen to me?"

"I think EDI listens to you closely. She just does what she wants if you're not specific with her. Don't worry, you'll get it figured out."

"So, what is it you want to know?"

Garrus leans against the wall. "What happened before I showed up?"

"You want the last two years, or what?"

"Just since Shepard showed up."

"Not much to tell. I was busy overseeing the Normandy when they told me she was up and walking. I didn't believe it until I saw it myself. I mean, I hoped, but... I..." Joker looks out the window, guilt in every line of his face. "Well, there she was with just a few more scars and it was just like old times," he says as he turns to look up at Garrus. "And you should have seen her face light up like a kid on Christmas when she saw the Normandy."

Garrus nods. "She always loved this ship."

Joker smiles, "The SR-1 was a modern marvel. And the SR-2 is even better. Look at the cup holders! Cup holders, Garrus! I barely have to leave my seat anymore!"

Garrus flicks a mandible, indicating he should get on with the story.

Joker gives him a blank look. "Geeze, you turians don't know how to enjoy anything, do you?"
"Exactly how many turians are you acquainted with?"

"Let's see, there's you, and Nihlus and Saren and... that's about it. You haven't exactly broken type outside of not being completely evil."

Garrus chuffs, "And they're both about my father's age.

"Are they? I can't tell age with turians."

"We're inscrutable for the first 50 years, and then the subtones meld better. After 80 years the plates start to chip around the edges."

"So, like, does that scar make you look older?"

Garrus casts his mind back to his time on Palaven and the waitress attempting to flirt with his father while giving him the bill to pay. "Maybe it lends me a certain dignity. Turians do like battle-hardened war heroes. Though scars don't go over well with women. It's a sign of weak plates."

"Weak plates? You took a rocket to the face and your face won."

"When you put it like that, it doesn't sound so bad."

"Take from the guy who has broken fingers microwaving soup: It sounds awesome."

"Anyway, about the commander?"

"The commander. Yeah. Uh. She admired the ship, made a tour of the whole thing, got suggestions for upgrading the systems... Invested resources in upgrading our systems... You know, the usual commander stuff."

"Her outlook?"

"Outlook? Maybe you should ask a people person about that."

"I don't think the commander would tell Kelly anything she hadn't carefully scrutinized for press release. You, however, she would talk to."

"And she won't talk to you? You're all she's talked about for the past week. I have heard more Garrus stories than I think actually happened."

Garrus can't help the outward twitch of his mandibles. At least Shepard had missed him before she found out this was all his doing. "Now that I'm here, well, she's a bit disappointed."

"Disappointed? She was a mess when they brought you in. How is she disappointed?"

"Uh... She... Uh..." Garrus struggles for a response. The difficulty with being a turian out in the galaxy is that turians are the worst liars out of all the races yet encountered. Elcor have figured out how to be better at lying. He could blame the code of honor he was brought up to believe in or his natural subharmonics giving him away to other turians so that he never learned any lying skills, but right now, he needs a believable excuse. "She... uh... doesn't approve of my plans for revenge against Sidonis."

"You don't exactly sound convinced of that vengeance, big guy."

"I'm certain of it." Garrus replays video files of his dead squad on his visor to focus his anger. "Sidonis took 10 lives from me. The only thing I regret is that he can only die once and it will be too
quick. I should tie him down and remove his plates one by one. There's one right where the back starts. I could chip away at it for days, little by little, each bit agony. Make sure the floor is dirty and roll him over onto his back, let him drive each little grain of sand into the raw nerves as he tries to right himself... And then I could start on his hands. That would be fitting."

"And now you're being creepy."

"It's black and white when people need to die. Easy to fix, whether it's quick or I take my time," Through his visor, Garrus can see Joker's heightened heart rate. Time to rein in the revenge. "Shepard was upset with me. We're having a philosophical disagreement. I'm sure we'll get over it. But in the meantime, I'd still like to help her. She seems a bit ... stressed."

"Yeah, well. I think Chakwas and I are the only people she trusts, and who can blame her. Miranda's an ice queen and Jacob is way too nice a guy for all the ways he knows how to kill people. It's only my opinion, of course, but she's not comfortable with them yet."

"I'm not sure I can help her get along with Jacob and Miranda. Jacob has a bad impression of me..."

Joker snorts and half mumbles "No surprise there."

"... And Miranda isn't the sort to be impressed by someone trying to impress her. And she won't take to Shepard if anyone plays go-between."

"True... I guess there are little problems you could help out with. Gabby and Ken ... er ... Daniels and Donnelly are still trying to get the engines running right. And maybe you could find us a cook who isn't also a janitor? Gardner's food is awful, and there's only so much Cup-O-Soup I'm willing to eat in a month. I don't think Miranda cares about those kinds of things, but they help with crew morale. Shepard will notice and fix them all eventually, but ... well ... "

"A good XO would have taken care of all of these issues already, but Miranda's more interested in her science experiment and the Illusive Man's demands?"

"I didn't say any of that." Joker looks up at his screens, and then tugs the brim of his hat down. "But yeah. A good XO would take care of it. A friend might fix some of it, too, and not mention the pilot meddling?"

"What was that? I wasn't paying any attention. I was too busy making a shopping list."
Chapter Summary

It's the little things ...

The batarian is dead on the street corner.

Shepard looks over at Miranda and nods. Then she picks up and moves on. His is only the first of many bodies they'll find today. He was nobody in the grand scheme of the war. But it bothers Shepard. He was a nobody she could have saved.

Her march to the clinic is slow and steady. Zaeed has sniper duties. Ideally, she would have Garrus at her back, too, as she recalls a lot of long-distance rockets ruining her day, but even if they were on better terms, she wouldn't risk his health when she has other options.

When they get to the clinic, Shepard lets Mordin ramble on to his heart's content just to enjoy him. It doesn't matter that she only understands half of it.

The brief reprieve from the charnel house of the streets doesn't last long enough. Daniel Abrams is also dead because Shepard is a day too late. She failed to save Garrus from the gunship and she killed two innocent men. None of this would have happened if she were still dead.

She could blame Garrus, but this isn't his fault. She's the one who chose to do things differently.

It's in this depressed mood that she returns to the ship. Target acquired: Move on to the next mission before she does something else wrong.

So it takes longer than she likes to admit for her to notice something is ... different about her ship.

There's Joker at the helm, reading one of those magazines he keeps stacked beside his seat. Zaeed is like Shepard but he does it for money, Miranda he wouldn't say anything against ... the old song and dance. The crewmen are chatting about their families. Kelly is insisting Shepard has unread messages at her terminal and Shepard ignores her because she'll get to them when she gets to them.

She tries to shake off the feeling of missing something as she rides the elevator down to engineering to check on the all-important T6-FBA couplings.

Donnelly's smile as he turns to greet her is reassuring. "You're the best, commander. We just got those FBA couplings installed. Now we only have to calibrate every week instead of every day. We're thinking about celebrating our newfound free time with some Skyllian poker. Want to join us?"

Daniels shakes her head, "C'mon, Kenneth. The commander doesn't want to play cards with grease monkeys like us."

Shepard perks up a little. She has to avoid seeming too excited or her prey will escape. "Actually, that sounds interesting."

Donnelly gives a little skip in place. "Two hours from now? I think we'll be done with our reconfig
then I'll get the cards."

Shepard blinks. "Why the delay? What are you reconfiguring?"

"Oh, that turian you picked up is bloody brilliant," Donnelly says enthusiastically.

Daniels nods. "He did save us a month's work with all his calculations."

"Sped up the elevator. Got rid of that little hitch when it engages a floor."

"He had us turn down the lighting by 300 lumens to reduce heat signature and power draw. Said you liked lower lighting ..." Daniels searches Shepard's face. "We didn't do anything wrong in helping him, did we?"

"No," she says, trying to process the changes around her. The light is soothing. The elevator isn't frustratingly slow. Joker is in a great mood because he has magazines when he hasn't visited the Citadel yet to buy a supply. "He has an eye for detail and once he decides to do something, it gets done. But in the future, you should wait for Miranda or me to approve changes."

"Right, commander," says Daniels. "We got carried away."

"We were going to invite him to the poker game," Donnelly adds. "On account of all the help he's given us."

"On account of all the credits you hope to fleece from him you mean," says Daniels.

"Poker is a human game. Easy pickings, Gabby. Easy pickings."

Shepard laughs, "I'll be back in two hours for the game."

#

Shepard finishes her rounds on the engineering deck, and then goes to the crew quarters. The atmosphere has changed, and Sgt. Gardner is beaming at all of the compliments. Shepard can guess the real source of his improved skill even if she doesn't know where on Omega Garrus would find supplies.

She's almost relieved when she walks into the infirmary and Dr. Chakwas is still pining for Serrice Ice Brandy. Though she's quite appreciative of Garrus's thank you gift of peach schnapps.

*Feeling competitive, Shepard?* his voice taunts her from some long ago battle. And, really, is she feeling competitive about him being able to find basil and mint and nuts and bolts before she could get around to it?

Maybe a little. Which is stupid because if she weren't angry with him, she'd be delighted that everything was already done and something was finally going right.

She heads over to Miranda's quarters to find her XO desk-deep in datapads. Miranda looks up at Shepard nonplussed. "How did you manage to generate so much paperwork in five minutes? We were together all day. When did you arrange for all of these additional supplies?"

Shepard walks over to the table and picks up one bill showing that a replacement door seal has been ordered. The receipt shows the correct ship number and account number. Oh, yeah. In about three months, when Thane arrives, they're going to find out the life support door seal is crap. The bill states the seal will be available for pick up when they get to the Citadel. And here's one for the GX12
thermal pipe to keep the engineers from being vaporized. Another is for the hand soap Traynor recommends when she comes aboard. It's scentless, but it gets off all the grime and blood without drying out your hands.

Shepard looks back at Miranda. "Problems? It seems like most of these supplies should have been ordered before we arrived."

"We took off earlier than planned. This should have been handled by the supply desk before we left."

"And it wasn't, so we're dealing with it now." Shepard waves the datapad bill for soap at Miranda. "You've met Gardner. Well, no, maybe you haven't. If you had, you'd know he's both the cook and the janitor. I do not want to live through the week the entire crew had food poisoning again." She tosses the bill back onto Miranda's desk. "Garrus knows Omega. I had him pick up some supplies."

"Shepard, we can't afford all of this! We get paid on a mission by mission basis."

"We can afford it so long as we gather resources before all the payments are due." She crosses her arms across her chest. "I believe you had some plans for upgrading our planet scanner because we launched the ship before the one Cerberus ordered arrived. If you'd give them to me, I'll authorize that upgrade and go scan planets." Until doomsday at this rate. No. Wait. I have a poker game to get to and I am going to take every credit on the table, and then I will strip mine the galaxy because turians often forget the importance of budgeting.

As boring as scanning planets is, she can't help laughing as she walks out into a mess hall that feels more like home. He's lucky I kill at quasar.
The players are gathered at a plastic crate they're using as a table when Garrus arrives: Donnelly looking eager, Daniels looking tolerant and mildly interested, and, unexpectedly, Shepard with a carefully neutral expression. He pauses with his foot on the bottom stair and wonders if he should leave, but she merely sits there. He knows better than to get between Shepard and gambling, and tries to cover for his confusion.

"I brought the beer," he holds up the case he snagged from the mess, and takes the final step off of the stairs, into the little room underneath engineering.

Donnelly waves him over, "Finally. I've been wanting to see how well you know the cards."

"I have played before," says Garrus. "I learned back on the Citadel. We did play sometimes on the old Normandy, too."

"Mmmhmmm," Shepard agrees, "But that was ages ago." She seems a bit forlorn, and he's worried for a moment before she looks at Daniels and Donnelly and says, "I hope you'll take it easy on me."
That's when he knows they're all in trouble because Donnelly is effortlessly sucked in by her red gold eyes, and it takes Daniels kicking him to remind him to nod.

Garrus shakes his head. "That's alright, Shepard. It's been longer for me. I don't even recall how the queens move."

"That's chess, Garrus. There are no moving pieces in poker."

"I'm sure I'll remember as we go along," he says innocently.

What he remembers best is that Shepard has no mercy when it comes to games, and this night is no exception. He only loses 50 credits and considers that a cheap price to see her more like herself as she devastates the engineers' beer and chips fund.

She smiles at the end, like a cyrilodon in the river that's just snapped its jaws closed on a hapless turian who wandered too close. "Same time again next week?"

Both engineers groan. "We'll pass, commander. Kenneth is such an idiot he nearly put his shirt in that last pot," says Daniels.

"I had a full house, queens over aces!" he protests. "I might have gotten it all back!"

Shepard shakes her head and does him the small favor of showing her hand even though everyone had bowed out. "A royal flush in hearts." She picks up a 10 credit chip and gives it to Daniels.

"Here. For sparing us all the sight of a naked Scotsman for the next three weeks until we get to the Citadel." She yawns theatrically. "Time for middle watch. I'll see you in the morning."

Donnelly puts his head in his hands and gives a low moan.
Garrus watches Shepard disappear up the stairs. "If you had told me you invited her, I would have warned you: Don't ever bet against Shepard."

Daniels follows his gaze. "And you with your moving queens?"

"Confusion to the enemy!" he raises a talon in the air. At the engineer's frown, he waves a mandible, "Made you pay more attention to me than her. She's had a bad day and I wanted her to win."

"This isn't a partner game, Vakarian. You don't win if she wins," the engineer points out.

"I know. I lost the last credits in my pocket."

"You came out better than me. Three hundred credits gone! Not that I had anything to spend it on around here."

Donnelly contributes to the conversation by snoring loudly.

"Let's get him to bed." Garrus slings one of Donnelly's arm over his carapace. "Where are we going?"

"We have beds on rotation in the crew quarters." Daniels packs up the cards and leads the way. "So how long have you known the commander?"

"About four years now."

"I've been with Kenneth for eight. I don't know how he managed before he met me." She trudges into the elevator.

"Badly?" Garrus suggests.

Daniels laughs. "Yes. He's an idealist and a dreamer. It gets him into all kinds of trouble. Lost him his commission. Cerberus was the only one who'd take him."

"What about you?"

"Me?"

"How did you end up here?"

"I followed him," she shrugs. "He used to have the galaxy's biggest crush on the commander. I think that's over, at least, and thank God." She looks at her partner. "We saw Sovereign. That wasn't a geth ship. When the high command started saying the commander was overstating things, that the threat had passed and she was just having a bit of PTSD when she insisted the enemy was still coming, we both knew it had to be a lie."

Daniels studies Garrus's face. "I was just going to keep my head down and figure things out, but Kenneth's not like that. He said it all the wrong way because he's Kenneth. Yelling down the Systems Alliance High Command is not the way to get things done. But he was right. I thought maybe if I backed him up, so would other people and command would change its story. But I was the only one to take his side and we were tossed out without a recommendation or contacts. It was a hard two years after the Citadel, but right now, I don't regret any of it."

"I know the commander is glad to have you," Garrus says encouragingly.

"It shows," Daniels favors him with a smile.
They get Donnelly settled into his bed.

"Thank you for the help, Vakarian."

"Remember this moment of gratitude later. You're going to hate me when the new cannon comes."

"It can't possibly be worse than the daily calibrations we were doing."

"And I thought you said Donnelly was the optimist." He nods at her and leaves.

The next day, Garrus is called for ground crew duty. When he gets to the shuttle bay, Shepard is the only one there.

"Let's go," she says.

He gets into the Kodiak. "What's our mission, Shepard?"

"Project Firewalker," she says casually and begins inputting coordinates.

The Hammerhead. Why did she have to take him on this one? Wasn't the Mako punishment enough? "Who's coming with us?"

"It's just you and me, Vakarian."

"Oh," he replies, his mandibles clicking shut. He stays quiet for the rest of the trip down, waiting for Shepard to give him some kind of sign, but she's silent. Is she still angry or has she calmed down?

When they arrive and step out of the Kodiak, there's the Hammerhead tucked neatly in its box. Shepard walks into it, and they begin start up procedures, flicking switches in the correct order to get the engine running.

The lack of talking is unsettling.

Soon they're out collecting research and turning it into credits. That's the good part. The bad part is that they're falling off of plateaus and cliffs. "At least the Mako had shock absorbers," he says after they vibrate off one of their targets and onto the ground.

"Now you're missing the Mako?"

"Maybe," he considers. "There was that one time we ran out of vomit bags and you wouldn't stop because we hadn't cleared the mission area yet. I had a serious talk with Tali about the possible benefits of an enviro suit after that."

Shepard makes a small annoyed noise and takes off again like a rock skipping across water. No, like a rock trying to climb a wave. Garrus waits for them to plummet 10 stories again. Instead, Shepard stops them atop the highest plateau, right before their last target, and turns off the engine. "Out."

Garrus isn't certain what she's thinking, but it seems like a nice day. He pulls off the restraining harness and opens the door. The view is reminiscent of some of the popular vacation destinations on Palaven. Down below, dust curls in steam jets.

Shepard stares out at the rising sun. Garrus wishes he could touch her. But it wouldn't be appropriate. When she opens her mouth to speak, it's not something he could have expected. "I told Miranda.
"About the future memories."

"Hmmm... well. That may make things difficult."

"I didn't tell her about you," Shepard temporizes. "Though she might guess."

"I'll keep that in mind," he says noncommittally.

Silence ensues.

Shepard inspects her bracer. Garrus watches a bird flying in the distance.

"I don't know whether to thank you or curse you," she says.

"What?"

"You cleaned up all the minor problems on the ship. I should thank you for it. But now I have a month to find the money to pay all of the bills."

"You always complain about having too much money," he protests.

"At the end of a mission. I've been dead for two years and I emptied my pockets getting everyone kitted out to save you."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Garrus scratches his head. "I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to do."

"You did good. Just..." she sighs and shrugs.

He polishes a smudge off the side of the Hammerhead.

Shepard kicks a rock off the plateau and watches it fall, waiting for it to hit bottom. Then she sits down at the edge.

Garrus takes the time to study her: small and hunched. He misses the spark she had playing cards last night.

She looks back at him. "Alright. Tell me."

"Mmmm...?"

"Tell me what happened. There are no bugs. There are no other people to walk in on us. There are no Reapers or thresher maws. I could jump off this plateau if I wanted to get away, but I'd have to be highly motivated. And it takes two people and 20 minutes to turn on the Hammerhead. Neither of us is going anywhere without the other. You've proved to me in the past that I'm not going to accidentally kill you with biotics. Queue up an overload in case I get mad, and start talking or it's going to be a long two years of us trying to pretend everything is okay. And then we'll lose the war in the end." She looks up at the empty blue sky.

"Shepard, I don't know where to begin."

"Begin at the beginning."
"I don't even know where the beginning is any more, Shepard. Is it the beginning when we meet? Which time when we meet? Did you know we've met about four times that I can recall now? Of course, that could just be Miranda or the Reapers or something else giving me hallucinations. I can never tell. It seems plausible, but is it true?" He runs his fingers up and down the bridge of his nose.

"And then there's you dying. Is that the beginning? Which time that you die? Alchera or Earth or the Citadel? I'm not even sure how many times you died. Sometimes people tell me you're dead and I know you're alive, and other times people tell me to look for you, but I know you're dead."

Shepard stares over her shoulder at him, baffled. "What are you talking about?"

"Hackett always tells us you died on Earth, but I know he's wrong. Then you open the Citadel arms and everyone knows you're alive. " He paces back and forth behind her. "And then you use the Crucible, and it's like you're everywhere. Miranda and Liara try to convince me to look for you anyway, but I know it won't work. I know you're dead because I can feel it.

"And then there's all the restarting. This isn't the first time I've come back, Shepard. It's just the first time I've figured out how to bring you with me."

"What?"

"I've saved the galaxy with you five times now, counting the first. I just can never do anything to save you."
Is There A Way I Could Make You Understand?

Chapter Summary

Promises, promises.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Shepard raises a hand toward Garrus and then lets it fall. "I'm ... sorry." Well, that doesn't quite cover it, but what else is there to say?

Garrus stands with his hands clasped behind his back, looking off into the distance. "You just have to stop the Reapers. No one else is going to do it. I know." His words are matter of fact, but Shepard senses the subtones are mournful if she could hear them fully. "The more times I've watched it, the more I know."

She picks up a handful of dry sand and watches it run through her fingers. "Why do you keep coming back, then? If you know that it won't change...?"

"Because I promised." His eyes lose their focus. "The first time... when I came back I mean ... well, I nearly screwed everything up." He takes a deep breath. "You didn't believe me."

"I didn't believe you?" Now she feels guilty for something she can't remember ever doing. Garrus always believes in her. Why wouldn't she believe in him?

"I didn't exactly make the most convincing case for being sane. You worried I had brain damage. And then you worried Cerberus put a control chip into me. Which ... well ... I never realized how terrified you were that they were controlling you the whole time."

Shepard looks at the drop from the plateau. It's more appealing than talking about her many problems if he keeps following this train of thought. "Um... Yes. It doesn't feel like I'm real. Even now."

"And by the time you did believe me, once the Reapers were here, we didn't have enough time to fix things, and the future I ended up in was worse than the one I left. So I came here again and put things back the way they were. I tried to get you to change a few things, keep a few promises I'd made, but I failed because the Normandy needed to be in two places at once, and that's a trick I don't know how to do."

Shepard smiles a little. "I'm working on being in two places at once. Still haven't figured it out completely."

Garrus continues, "The third time I came back, I finally came up with a plan to save you. I got a Prothean memory shard from Javik."

Shepard regards him curiously. "I didn't even know he had one to spare."

"He doesn't. I told him it was for defeating the Reapers. There isn't anything Javik won't do if it's to defeat the Reapers." Garrus chuckles. "He and Liara tracked one down. Then I gave it to you on a chain as a present."
"After we went dancing ..." she blushes. "I never took it off."

"It recorded your memories. And I put a tracking chip on it so I could find it again in the rubble of the Citadel. But that didn't work. No signal. Whatever happened to you on the Citadel, it destroyed the tracking chip and probably the shard." He looks at her.

Shepard looks back at him. "What?"

"Just ... of course you would find something that could utterly destroy you if you're on your own. Miranda is going to be very angry with you when you die: All that hard work for nothing. She's always certain you're alive because she doesn't make mistakes."

"Oh, sure. Blame the dead girl who doesn't even remember dying," she says sarcastically. It's easy to fall back into bantering.

"Hmm... Maybe I will, hero. You didn't come back, so I got left with the mission." He walks over to her and settles down a few feet away on the ledge. "It's not my orders to keep fighting. It's not even my people who gave out this mission to defeat the Reapers. But now, when hell comes knocking, I'm the only one at home to answer the call."

"I haven't been the hero since I lost Mordin and the 9th Platoon," she says bitterly. "Mordin was the hero. 'Had to be me. Someone else might have gotten it wrong.'" She rakes her fingers through the dirt and unearths a small leafy plant trying to grow underneath it all. In a small voice, she says "Had to be me. And I did get it wrong."

"We all got it wrong. Javik and I should have been there." He stares at a lone cloud wisp. "It doesn't matter what I do, the tank always gets me. I swear it follows me across the field of battle. Knowing that it's coming doesn't help."

It feels like he's setting her up to rag on him for his lack of ducking skills, but her heart isn't in it. The conversation stills.

Shepard considers the plant. It could be the child form of a Thorian for all she knows. So easy to tear it out now. Most likely it's just an innocent plant trying to live before the Reapers show up to incinerate them all. Most likely it doesn't matter with all the incidental damage they all do in trying to save the universe. It's tiring being perfect. She rips it out by the roots and watches it fall.

Garrus picks up his story again: "The fourth time through, I grabbed the necklace off your neck when you evacuated me. Then I spent a lot of time working with Tali and Liara designing a device to read the shard and send the signals back to your implants." He glances at her. "The implants might not have recognized the signal as part of you. But you're ... you have the Beacon and the Cipher in your mind and ancient Prothean technology thinks you're a Prothean, so I guess the implants are compatible with Prothean technology, too."

"I'm just lucky."

"You are. I've never seen anything like it." Garrus's talons move between them, drawing intricate designs in the red sand. "I have never figured out how much you plan and how much just happens."

"It's a mystery."

She waits for him to banter back something about being a detective. But he doesn't, and the conversation falls flat again.
The sun crosses overhead. Shepard isn't certain how to gauge time on this planet, but if the sun position has changed, then a significant amount must have passed. She's wasting her precious time when she should be scanning planets.

No. She should be dead. All of her time now belongs to him if he wants it. He can just keep bringing her back.

"What do you want to do, Shepard?"

"What do you mean?"

"Now that you've heard the whole thing, what do you want to do?"

"Save the galaxy. That's always the most important thing." She runs a finger through the abstract patterns he's made in the dirt, adding smaller flourishes. "The problems of two little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this war."

"A hill of what?"

"Nothing. It's from an old movie. It's nothing." She sighs and drops backward, legs still dangling. "We save the galaxy. At any price."

"Alright. Then that's what we'll do," he agrees.

She turns her head to look at him uncertainly. "Why don't I trust you?"

"Inherent suspicion of someone agreeing with your ideas because no one not directly below you in the chain of command ever listens to you?"

"That could be a contributing factor," she allows, "But I think it might be the too-innocent tone of your voice."

"Damn turian vocals give me away every time."

"What are you up to?"

"Well. IF you want us to win this war, I still think we need Commander Shepard alive."

She opens her mouth to protest rearranging all of reality for their convenience and possibly killing off more innocent people.

He holds up a quelling talon.

"But IF you are determined that it has to be you, then it would be something to know what you died for, because none of us knows exactly what happened. You were the only one there. So if you want the war effort to succeed, then I want you to make a recording of exactly what it is you did and drop it before you die. Leave it behind as a weapon like the scouts on Uttuku, because the fight isn't finished and we need to know."

Shepard puts her arm over her eyes to block out the sun. "Alright. I'll get you the information." She feels some of the tension ease from her body. "I'm sorry. For the fight. For all the things I said."

"Did you mean them?"

It would be so easy to lie, but she doesn't want to ever lie to him. "At the time, yes."
"You're always cranky when you wake up from being dead."

"Hey. Waking up from being dead is not something I have a lot of practice with."

"I could give you more practice," he offers lightly.

"No."

"Shepard, why won't you fight for yourself?"

"I promised to put everyone else first. Do all the things that need to be done to save them because the galaxy needs heroes."

"Why?"

"Because the galaxy needs heroes."

"No," Garrus rephrases, "Why do you want to be a hero? Why do you always work so hard to do the right thing, even when it could come back to bite us in the ass like the rachni and the krogan?"

"Because I want the galaxy to be a better place. I want people to be happy and children to run around without a care in the world under a hundred suns. I want them to have all the opportunities I never had. The only thing I'm good at is being a soldier. People will tell you that I'm good at a lot of things, but it's all part of this one thing that I'm really good at. I don't know how to do anything else. So I bleed and die for them so that they never have to do it themselves." It almost feels like she's giving herself the Commander Shepard speech. But the gift of persuading others only works if she believes it herself.

"So who is your hero?"

"You. You came to rescue me. But she won't put that burden on him. Besides, right now it would only confuse him. "I don't have one. Just legends. None of them end well for the heroes. But they do save the world. It always seemed like it was worth it."

"Why?"

"Hmm?"

"Why was it worth it?"

"Because ... because it gave everyone else a better future."

"Doesn't seem to have worked that way for me," he says, echoing her thoughts earlier that she should never have asked him to help relieve her stress.

"I'm sorry. I never meant ... I told you I could never promise anything with this war. I ... I tried to ... warn you." The words stumble out of Shepard's mouth.

Garrus sighs. "It's alright. I knew it. I just didn't believe it." He laughs suddenly, "Sentimental. Damn, Miranda was right."

"Right about what?"

"Nothing important. She just thinks we're predictable."

"Predictable?"
"She thinks she has us all figured out."
"Well, unless she betrays us, that's the least of our problems."
"Nope. She's still on your team."
"Good. I'll have to make sure it stays that way. Is that way? Will be that way?" Shepard tosses her arms up and lets them fall. "I give up. Whatever tense is appropriate, Miranda is with our team." She pushes herself up to her elbows and turns to get up. "We're good?"
"We're okay."
"Then let's get out of this place. I don't have a lot of time."
Garrus takes her hand as she rises. "You do, Shepard. It may not feel like it right now because things are so tense later, but take it from someone who has been around this loop a few times: This part is a vacation. Take your time."
"I'll think about it."
"That's my-- friend." He lets go and her heart sinks a little.
But she pastes on a smile. "Let me tell you about my next plan..."

Chapter End Notes

This one took me a while to wade through because if you couldn't tell from the previous chapter, neither of them wanted to talk. I'm kind of proud of how it turned out.

It has also occurred to me that I should add citations when my mind goes off on a tangent of things I've heard in the past.

"Ilsa, I'm no good at being noble, but it doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world. Someday you'll understand that." Rick, Casablanca, 1942
Chapter Summary

Garrus vs. gunship, round II.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Blue Suns shock trooper pushes a green leaf out of the way and pauses as he finally has a clear view of what's in the glen.

Garrus imagines him opening his mouth to warn his comrades, but it was too late for him before he even saw the sun. Garrus had been tracking the heat signature through his visor for at least 20 minutes from his perch on top of the Hammerhead, and had squeezed the trigger just as the leaf began to move.

The turian readies the next bullet in his M-92 Mantis.

The rest of the Blue Suns Bravo Squad is in front of him, and will be followed by Igloo Squad. That's the easy part. The hard part is that he's certain Echo Squad is somewhere behind him, and there are far more avenues of entry to this space than any trained soldier would want.

Shepard's plan is good up to the point it meets the enemy on the ground.

In essence, the first time Shepard had tried to help Zaeed fulfill his goal of killing Vido Santiago, Zaeed had managed to forget that there were other people on site. People who were just civilians and had nothing to do with the Blue Suns. So when he had set the refinery on fire, he had endangered all of the non-combatants, and Shepard couldn't live with that. At the potential cost of Zaeed's help, she'd saved the workers.

For his trouble, Zaeed had nearly been consumed by the chaos, pinned under some rubble after setting one too many fires. And Shepard, ever charitable, had saved his life after making the point that Zaeed needed to stop being a loose cannon and submit to the needs of the team.

Except for that one time she had thought he was unbalanced, Shepard had always taken Garrus with her and Zaeed, and it proved to be a sniper's paradise with long sight lines through thick foliage in pleasantly warm weather. But this time, she plans to use the situation as a set piece to prove her compassion, mental stability, and leadership to Miranda, and so the Cerberus operative is by her side.

Garrus was given a different job: Kill Vido because Shepard hates not completing the mission.

While Miranda, Zaeed, and Shepard run through the refinery, Garrus is waiting for the squad to flush their prey from the brush so he can shoot it down with the cannon as it attempts to fly for freedom.

It isn't anything he hasn't done millions of times.

But whatever Vido Santiago is, he's properly paranoid and a good tactician. The Zorya refinery is well guarded, and when there aren't guards to notice the sudden appearance of a hovertank, there are noisy amphibians protesting the invasion of their territory and alerting the guards.
Garrus lines up his next shot as the red blur of heat signatures hesitates. Must be wondering why they lost contact with their companion. Hmmm... He can get two at once, but if he resettles, can he actually get three? If he shifts the angle one degree...

Two bodies hit the ground. Must have just missed. One of these days he'll improve on his record of two and a half deaths with one bullet. He pulls the trigger again to finish the job. And takes out one more before the comm chatter starts: "Echo Squad, Igloo Squad, this is Bravo Squad. We have four men dow-" If you can't stop the message getting out, shoot the speaker at the most intimidating time.

Igloo Squad and what's left of Bravo Squad dash into the clearing, guns blazing. Now things get tricky. Echo Squad can't be too far away, and it's going to be embarrassing if he lets some nobody mercs steal Shepard's tank.

He takes his final shot with the Mantis, and then switches to the automatic Vindicator. He focuses on what's in front of him, not on what's creeping up behind him.

_Fifteen left._

First he sets off an overload to take down their shields and comms and begins raking them with bullets. _One down. Scratch that, two down. Thirteen left._

At least he's hard to target at the moment, lying flat on top of the still humming tank. But there's no cover to speak of. _Three down. Reload_

As the shots start to ping his shields, he rolls to the left, still out in the open. _Four down. Five down. Ten to go._

He feels a bullet graze his fringe from behind. That means reinforcements for the other side are here. He could use some back up of his own. _Six down. Seven down. Eighteen to go._

Garrus's shields flicker out. He rolls right and lets out an overload to take out their comms again. _Eight down. Nine down. Reload._

This would be soooooo much easier if he could just shoot them with the tank. Unfortunately, that would certainly change Vido's flight pattern by alerting him that there was someone with a big gun waiting for him. _Ten down, fifteen to go. Right back to the beginning. Damn it!_

He flattens a cluster of troops in front of him with a concussive blast, and turns behind him to set another overload skipping up and down the line. Comms need to stay down.

One of the men behind Garrus screams as he burns from the inside out. _Finally. Eleven down. Twelve down._

"Kiss the sky, merc." Jacob sends one trooper up into the trees while he shoots another with his Carnifex pistol.
Garrus shoots the another one on his side, and then reloads while rolling onto his back to hit the
pulled target. "Took you long enough."

"Sneaking around an entire squad of guys without being seen is not in my usual job description,"
Jacob replies as he takes cover behind a tree trunk.

"On your right," is Garrus's only comment.

Another merc floats into range and another one on the ground turns to ash.

_Eight to go._

Shepard's voice comes over the comm. "Garrus. Vido's heading for the gunship. I need you in
position."

"Yes, Shepard."

His shields have had time to recover. He kneels on the edge of the Hammerhead, an open target to
draw their fire. "Taylor, you need to drive this thing."

Garrus takes out another guy on his side of the tank with a quick headshot.

"There's still six guys between me and the tank."

Garrus takes down the last guy on his side. "Then do something about it. We're out of time."

A slug lodges between his plates as his shields go down and the mercs find their mark in one of the
holes of his barely together Archangel armor. _Miranda's right. I am too sentimental. I'm going to pay
for that in the morning._ He pegs another merc with a concussive round, knocking the whole knot of
troops to the ground.

Shepard's voice comes over the comms again. "Garrus!"

Jacob shoots a merc full of smoldering holes.

Another shot from a merc takes Garrus in the keel bone, slamming him back against the roof of the
tank, "I'm coming, Shepard." He looks across the field, "Taylor! Get your ass over here now, or I
will be trying to find a way to fly this ship with rubber bands so that I can shoot the cannon at the
same time!" He overloads the mercs' equipment again.

Through Shepard's comm, he hears an echo of Vido's voice, "Not this time, Zaeed, you son of a
bitch. See you in another 20 years!" followed by Zaeed's scream of rage and a bunch of rifle shots.
Then the comm cuts out.

Jacob makes a run for it, managing to hit two mercs and get in the side door. Garrus shoots a final
concussive round in their general vicinity as he swings himself in the window on the other side.

"Vakarian, we."

"We can still make it. Get us up. Now."

Taylor isn't fast, or a great shot, or the best biotic, but he does follow orders, and the Hammerhead
pops up over the trees to see a gunship just about to pass them. It's smoking slightly.

Garrus bites into his tongue and tries to focus through all of the auto targeting zooming in and out. It
won't lock on fast enough. He has to eyeball it. He pulls the trigger. His heart hammers in his chest
as the missile streaks through the sky. The Hammerhead drops to the ground.

In the distance, he hears the explosion and breathes a sigh of relief.

"You are one crazy motherfucker, standing up in all those bullets," opines Jacob.

"Had to distract them or we weren't going anywhere. Rubber bands would take too long."

"Definitely crazy." Jacob shakes his head, "These mercs aren't worth all this trouble. Zaeed's not worth all this trouble."

"I'm sure he'd love to hear that you think he doesn't matter," Garrus says sarcastically. "Zaeed gets the job done, even if he is erratic. You could stand to be a bit crazier, take a few more risks. This is potentially a suicide mission."

"Yeah. Hell of a thing to accidentally sign up for, not that anyone will miss me."

"Mmm...?"

"You think I wanted to end up here? I was supposed to be leading support squads, not on Shepard's main team. But then our base got blown up and Miranda and I are all that's left. Jobs got shifted around. It's an honor to work with Shepard, but .... You're all crazy and I'm just along for the ride. I mean, who the fuck takes down 20 guys with no cover?"

"Twenty-five, give or take however many were on the gunship," Garrus can't help the note of pride in his voice. "Can't miss a shot. Shepard would never let me live it down." He looks at the hole in his armor slowly filling with blue blood. "Nor will Dr. Chakwas." He's too used to Shepard watching medi-gel levels. He hits the dispenser and immediately feels better.

"Joker, Team Hammerhead ready for pick up."

"Aye, aye, Garrus."

Jacob looks him up and down. "I can't figure you out. Why work so hard for a human team over your own people?"

"I haven't seen any plans to invade Palaven. I don't see a conflict."

"There were turians out there."

"There were humans, too." Garrus waves a mandible dismissively. The Blue Suns are the Blue Suns. It's no big deal.

"They were traitors."

"And the turians weren't?"

"Your people have that whole honorable warrior thing."

"So?" asks Garrus, feeling nettled.

"So they couldn't be traitors, it would have to be a government conspiracy."

"You're missing the difference between ideals and real people in real situations. I seem to remember a basic briefing that humans have some kind of ideal about never killing others. To judge by that, the entire Alliance military shouldn't exist. But here you are. Or were."
"That's different."

Garrus sighs, "Of course it is. It's easier if people who aren't part of your group act in easily predictable ways and are all the same."

Fortunately, the Normandy arrives to pick them up before the conversation can deteriorate further.

"Back so soon, Officer Vakarian?" Dr. Chakwas shakes her head as she looks over his wounds in the safe confines of the Normandy med bay.

"Oh, please, just call me Garrus. You know me inside and out by now." He lays on the angled bed and stares out the window at the mess hall where the Cerberus crew occasionally shoots curious or hostile glances at him.

"If I had known it was you who would be joining us, I would have ordered more dextro medical supplies before we left." Dr. Chakwas picks up a syringe of anesthetic. "Arch your back and hold still."

"Yes, doctor." The syringe slides between a small gap in the plates of his chest. The shot stings like hell, and then the pain recedes, replaced by cold.

"I should speak to the commander about putting you back into rotation so quickly. You're still recovering from major surgery."

"I'm fine."

Dr. Chakwas glares at him while she flexes her forceps.

"Mostly fine," he amends. "I wasn't supposed to come under fire. I was just supposed to be in the tank."

"I can see how well that worked out," she says dryly as she slides in a probe to prop up the plate.

"Plans. Enemies. You've heard it all before." He sucks in his breath at the cold touch of metal sliding under his flesh.

"Well, I can't say I haven't. The lack of excuse is rather refreshing." She manipulates the tools, trying to grab the slug in the prongs.

"Mmmm..." He tightens his mandibles against his mouth and tries not to think about the odd twisting sensations beneath his plates. Shepard appears at the window and looks in worriedly. He shifts position to his elbow so he can wave at her, trying to reassure her he's alright.

"Stop that this instant!"

"I'm fine," Garrus insists. Shepard gives him a relieved smile and goes to check on something else.

"You just can't feel the pain. You're tearing muscle against my tools! I told you not to move!" Dr. Chakwas removes her forceps to look at the damage. "Humans, turians, it doesn't matter. You're all just mischievous children who cause more harm to yourselves than anyone else." Despite the scolding, there's loving warmth to her voice as she dabs up blue blood with a clean cloth.

Garrus leans his head back and closes his eyes.
"You and the commander are the worst of the lot, too," Chakwas laments. "Always taking risks and getting yourselves hurt. If Wrex were here, the Troublesome Trio would be complete."

"Try not to make me laugh if you want me to hold still."

"You shouldn't laugh." Dr. Chakwas sets up her tools again. "You should be embarrassed that you have as little concern for your health as a krogan. The last time I was at a medical conference, no one mentioned turians having back up organs that start when the first one doesn't work anymore."

"What about the commander?"

"I wish she'd listen, but that's different."

"Because she's your superior officer?"

"Because perfection runs down one side of that family and madness down the other, and stubbornness down both. If I said anything, she'd only get herself into more trouble."

"Oh?" he perks up, sensing a story he hasn't heard before.

Dr. Chakwas looks at him with a gleam in her eye. "You wouldn't be interested in old stories about the commander's family."

"Humans are infinitely fascinating."

"And her in particular?" Dr. Chakwas's tone is far too knowing for his comfort.

Garrus considers denying it, but lies are easy to get caught in. "Yes," he says instead. "You wouldn't have signed up to work with Cerberus if you didn't see something in her, too."

Chakwas makes a few odd noises and focuses on withdrawing the slug beneath his plates again. It finally comes loose and she holds it up for his inspection. He settles back on the bed, used to such displays. "You know Shepard's family?"

The doctor turns away. "A little. Her grandmother was the commanding officer at my first posting. She was a distant leader. Always correct and standing on obscure bits of protocol. More like the face Shepard put on when that horrid reporter was quizzing her about the first Normandy." The slug hits the bottom of a glass dish with a tink. "I think she takes more after her father's family at heart. They were a rowdy bunch. I knew one of her uncles quite well. He was flirt and a drunkard and he died taking down a batarian pirate fleet."

"Don't you mean ship?"

"No, fleet. He got control of one ship and used it to ram into others until most of them had exploded. He killed an enormous amount of people, but he also crippled the slave ring enough that the colonies had time to build better defenses and the Alliance had time to send more ships." Dr. Chakwas smiles sadly. "That's the mad side of the family. They don't live long, but it's fun while it lasts."

"Do you still miss him?"

"I am an old woman and a military doctor. I miss a lot of people, Garrus."

"Sorry. I'm prying. Once a cop, always a cop." He stiffens as she applies the medigel to close the wound. He tries to read her face. She had chosen to stay with him instead of returning to the Alliance, and he had simply been grateful to her for that support. Now he wonders why she wouldn't
go home after a lifetime of service.

"We're all creatures of habit in our ways." She rinses the medi-gel and blood off of his chest and then removes her surgical gloves. "I would ask, however, that you not make weekly visits to the med bay part of your habits, for your own sake."

"Yes, ma'am." Garrus gets up with some difficulty as Dr. Chakwas hands him some familiar pain pills. "Thank you, doctor."

The sound of armor colliding with the edge of the metal door interrupts them.

"Right. I'm here to be fussed at because the bloody captain's locked me out of my room if I don't see the doctor. So give me my damn pass so I can go back to my guns," Zaeed growls as the stench of burned flesh follows him into the room.

"There is no pass," says Chakwas. "There's just me. And if you think a half-burned mercenary with a bad leg can intimidate me, you're sorely mistaken. Come along now, up on the table."

Zaeed limps in and struggles to get into position.

The doctor sighs. "Garrus, give him a hand."

The man swats him away. "I can do it." He hoists himself up. "Can take my own shots, too, ye wanker."

"But can you hit anything? That's the question." Garrus leans against a bed as Chakwas works at removing the right greave from Zaeed's swollen leg.

"Didn't get the chance, damn you all."

"Funny. I heard you loose 47 shots from your Avenger, but the gunship still got away."

"Anyone can hit a gunship with a cannon. It's harder to take one out with bullets."

Garrus examines his talons. "True. But if we'd switched places, we wouldn't have needed the hovertank in the first place because I would never have gotten so blinded by rage that I set a building full of people on fire. This way you at least got the joy of scaring the crap out of him first."

"Yeah. Right. Bloody teamwork where someone else kills your lifelong enemy," he says viciously, and Garrus worries that he might not have been won over by Shepard's charms after all. Zaeed stares off, with eyes unfocused, and then turns his head to Garrus. "But he's dead now, right?"

"Exploded."

Zaeed clenches and unclenches his fist, muttering, "Won't be back. Dead. The fucker is dead," to himself as Dr. Chakwas begins setting up the table to rebreak his leg.

Chapter End Notes

So, Garrus was supposed to talk with Miranda, and we were supposed to follow Shepard and Zaeed on Zorya. That was my plan. You can see how well all of that worked.
I blame Jacob. He seems to have a talent for getting in the way whenever Garrus is supposed to go somewhere.
Before I Wake

Chapter Summary

The lonely sea and sky

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shepard stares out the windows of the cockpit, watching the stars go by as the switchboard flashes.

Joker sees her quiet contemplation. "Ah, the great endless expanse of space. Creeps the hell out of me."

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else," she says with a smile playing across her lips.

"Really, commander?" Joker throws her a cautious look. "I ... don't mean to get personal but ... um... the last last time I saw you... well ... it's like water isn't it? Aren't you afraid to go back in?"

"Water?"

"You know, drowning in water ..."

"I don't swim so of course I'd drown ... Oh." She shakes her head to clear the sudden memory of helplessness as her oxygen leaked out into space and sent her spinning through the void. "No. I'm not afraid. I've always lived here, colony boy. I don't know how to be afraid of it. 'All I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by.'"

"So if the engines of the Normandy just cut out between solar systems, you wouldn't be worried about us running out of rations and then power?"

EDI's blue sphere pops up. "If our FTL drives crashed, we would not run out of power for 12 years at the earliest. Someone would notice our disappearance and come to find us in that period of time. Our rations would last six months. But properly proportioned, you could extend their use to nine months. There is little to fear."

Joker rolls his eyes at her. "That wasn't the point. Fear isn't about logic. Fear is about emotions and worries and reacting without thinking."

"Joker is right, EDI," Shepard addresses her in a friendly voice. "You can be perfectly safe and still be afraid." She shifts to look at her helmsman. "Though I'm disappointed in you, Joker. Don't you have any faith in your commander? I do understand all the facets of surviving out here. I can even get the rations out to 12 months with the liberal use of gravy."

"And after 12 months?" Joker inquires.

"There's always the cannibalism lottery," Shepard deadpans.

"Good one, commander."
"It's not like you were using those legs for anything..."

"Not funny anymore."

"Alright." She looks out at the stars again. "Anyway, the vast reaches of space never intimidate me. They inspire me." She pats the back of his chair. "I used to wish I could fly. Not like you flying the Normandy, but biotically. I would dream about it every night, speeding from one end of the ship to the next." She shrugs. "And then I learned I don't have enough juice to pull that off. I have to settle for turning off the artificial gravity in my cabin and floating. It's not quite what I imagined. No control. But it's still a bit of a rush."

"Yeah, I did my artificial gravity training, but being at the helm of the Normandy is better," Joker nods. "More control. I like not crashing into things."

Shepard gives him a thoughtful look. "How did you get through artificial gravity training?"

"Very carefully."

"Mmmm... Are there vids?"

EDI's "mouth" shimmers. "Uploading Mr. Moreau's training videos from his file logs to your omni-tool, Shepard."

Shepard smiles. "Thank you, EDI."

"Hey! No fair!" Joker protests.

"I promise I'll delete them after I get a look at the suit they stuffed you into. There has to be a special suit, doesn't there?"

"This is blackmail!"

"You're right, it does make for good blackmail. I might have to think up some special task I want done and then get back to you."

"I should just stop talking, shouldn't I?"

"A change of topic might save you." She moves closer to check the latest readings. "What do you think about the last mission?"

"Hey, I got to make a sweet tank airdrop. You promise me one of those per year and I'll never leave your side."

"You're not going anywhere, Moreau. I have you by the leather seat."

"I don't know if all of the perks make up for the company." He glares at EDI's blue globe.

"What about the rest of the crew?"

"Do you really want me to do this again, commander? I mean, my opinion isn't changing because the crew doesn't change."

"There will be a lot of additions coming." But Shepard is mildly disappointed because she could use a sounding board to talk to about Garrus, and despite his dislike of turian habits, Joker does still know them both rather well.
"I gotta hit the head, commander. We done for now, or do I have to use the bottle I keep under here?"

"Consider yourself relieved." Shepard heads back to her rounds.

#

Her last stop is the gunnery.

"Need me for something?" Garrus looks up at her from where he's running his omni-tool against the length of the wall.

"Have you got a minute?"

"Can it wait?" He stretches his arm out to encompass the room, looking at his readout. "I'm in the middle of some calibrations."

"Calibrations?" Is he trying to brush her off? "Garrus, we haven't even bought the Thanix cannon yet!"

Garrus tilts his head to a tray sitting on the console at the front of the room, while the light on his omni-tool blinks. "We still have the twin Javelin disruptor torpedoes to keep in shape. I'm going to have Mordin check my work when I'm done."

Shepard looks over the tray. Inside are small devices she eventually determines are bugs. "I didn't think you needed help with ummm... calibrations."

"Aha." Garrus plucks a small bug off of a pipe and walks over to the tray to deposit it. He leans in to smile at her, resting his elbows on the top of the console. "I can do it quick and dirty. But I thought I'd take my time and learn a few tricks."

Shepard smirks at him, and his expression grows more thoughtful. She can see him playing through their last bit of conversation and then wincing. "That came out wrong."

"I seem to remember it being just right," she says with a chuckle.

He looks away from her, at the lengths of gun barrels in front of him. "I really do need to finish this."

"Carry on, then," she sighs. "Calibrations are important."

#

The forest stands shrouded in fog. Dead leaves rain down.

Shepard tries to breathe in, but there's no scent. Good. The Reapers aren't here yet.

It's not the endlessness of stars and space that fill her nightmares. Space is peaceful at best and a quick death at worst. There is nothing to fear because there is no time to fear.

It's trees that feature in her nightmares, an endless sea of trees. They're too tall to see the sky, to pick a star to follow. Instead, the branches reach for her, try to hold her back.

The leaves rustle with whispers. *Screw that, I can hold them off. Go back and get Alenko. You know it's the right choice.*

"I thought you could, Ash, with a squad of salarians at your back. And I wasn't wrong. You could
have made it if you'd left someone else to die. You would just never do that." The commander looks around for Ashley or even the boy to follow, not that he ever leads to anything good. "You did everyone proud. I wish you could be here with us now."

I understand.

"No, Ash. You didn't. I didn't leave you to die." Shepard began chasing through the trees.

She said, "I am aweary, aweary, I would that I were dead!"

"I would. I would that I were dead." Shepard fights to move faster, but grief slows her feet. "I should be dead."

She could not look on the sweet heaven ...

"How can I when I remember none?" She shouts at the voice, anger driving her faster, but there's no one to see.

Then said she, "I am very dreary, / He will not come," she said; /She wept, "I am aweary, aweary, / Oh God, that I were dead!"

"Damn it. I don't deserve to live. Take me! Take me! Take me instead!"

The roots grow around her feet, but in the morning she still wakes.

Chapter End Notes

"I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and sky,/and all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by ..."

"Sea Fever" by John Masefield, 1913

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/54932/sea-fever-56d235e0d871e

I may be giving the impression that I love poetry. I actually don't and I'm awful at it. But poetry does have powerful lines that stick with me to the point that I don't even remember when I first heard the words. I just know how to Google to find them again.

"Her tears fell with the dews at even; / Her tears fell ere the dews were dried; / She could not look on the sweet heaven, / Either at morn or eventide."

"Mariana," Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 1830

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45365/mariana

This one isn't for me. This is Ashley's fault because she loves Tennyson. I'd never heard of this poem before in my life.
Chapter Summary

Have you got a minute?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Garrus spares a glance for Shepard as he passes her in the CIC. Her back is to him as she leans on the railing around the star chart, scanning yet another planet. The Cerberus black-and-whites don't suit her quite as well as the regulation blues, but they all do a fine job of showing off her waist and hips.

I can't do this again. Annoyed at himself for looking when she'd made it clear that their promises weren't important to her, he enters Mordin's lab to find the scientist salarian bent over his microscope.

Garrus clears his throat to announce his presence without distracting Mordin from his work. Eventually the man's dark eyes rise to meet his.

"Vakarian. Have completed bug quest?"

"Not yet. I wanted to ask you for help with a different project."

"Many projects now. A little busy with the Collector conundrum."

"This won't take long. I've just gotten my first payout from Cerberus. I was hoping you could help me cut some red tape."

"Red tape?"

"I'm funding research at the Helos Medical Institute on Mannovai. I'd like to also send them some spare samples of Collector tissue so that they can study its regenerative properties. But they need a higher military clearance to pursue that research."

"Helos? Not an STG enterprise. Private medical research of interest to turians? Regenerative tissue to heal scarring? No, easily accomplished through other means. Mmm... brain damage. But Cerberus technology seems to have fixed that ..." Yes it had. Possibly, he even owed Cerberus for saving him from the potential for inherited illnesses.

"It's not for me. It's for my mother. She has Corpalis Syndrome."

"Ah! Brain atrophy. Terrible burden. Cannot remember family. Cannot remember knowledge. Cerberus implants not fast enough to keep pace with daily degeneration in advanced stages. Huerta Memorial Hospital doing good research on glutamate inhibitors."

"They don't work. Not well enough. She already has too much calcium clogging her docking sites."

"Interested in VI implantation? Very expensive..."
"No. My father won't put up with her sounding like Avina." Garrus couldn't blame his father for putting his foot down there. He's not certain he could tolerate his mother's familiar voice being operated with the emptiness of an automated system. She wouldn't be his mother. She'd be a husk.

"Helos testing with regrowth using gene M45 has gone well in experiments. 100-year-old turian began remembering songs from youth. Great cultural and scientific advancement!"

"Yes, but when they research that further, they'll find that it only relates to pattern memory." It's a start. It's a possibility. But it's too late for Honoria Vakarian. "My mother's disease is too advanced for the M45 treatment. I need them to look into something else."

"Testing still in progress. Not good to jump to conclusions."

"I'm the one with the funding. They can take it or leave it. I'd like them to try a different direction. The M21 gene allows adult cells to reorganize themselves into whatever kind of tissue they need to be."

"M21 is linked to M53, controlling cell division. High chance of causing cancer."

"All my scenarios are high risk, high reward. A famous geneticist told me that switching to M21 research was my only hope." No need to tell Mordin that the famous geneticist was Mordin himself in about eight months. "And to combine it with drugs that prevent ... I can't remember the word. Cell suicide?"

"Apoptosis."

"Apoptosis. Combine it with drugs that prevent apoptosis or it will hasten her death." And his mother will die in six months rather than 10, as she had the last time he trod these steps.

"Vakarian very educated about genetic theory applied to turians." Mordin's normal squint becomes narrower. "Cannot believe it is hobby. Background indicates a more direct approach. Support through money rather than own research indicates a lack of proficiency. No medical training beyond basic first aid..."

"I'm just a bad son. I can't be with my family right now. Shepard needs me here and I'm a far better gun than I am a doctor. But I can still read about treatments and try to understand." And after dealing with his mother's declining health and death five times, he's slowly becoming an expert on the research. The only problem is trying to manipulate the trials to keep them away from experiments he knows will fail months or years down the line. Of course, it may all be pointless. His mother may never have enough time to see a cure developed. But he hasn't given up yet.

The wrinkled salarian's mouth turns up a little as he tries to be encouraging, "Understanding is excellent. Will be delighted to 'cut red tape.' May even follow research myself. Like to keep up with my field."

"Thank you, Mordin."

"It is no trouble, Vakarian." Mordin's smile broadens. And then a piece of equipment chimes, and he turns back to his work.

#

The door to the gunnery slides open. Garrus looks up from the console to see Shepard, and then turns back to his work as the door slides shut behind her.
'Need me for something?' he inquires.

'Calibrations finished for the moment?'

'Yeah.'

'How'd you do?'

Garrus spreads his mandibles wide. 'Passed the test with flying colors. Mordin was complimentary.'

'Glad all that spectre training didn't go to waste.'

'Vigilante and bug detector. I'm going to try to reprogram the expensive ones. The rest have met with a mysterious accident when one of the Javelins was used to clear debris.'

'Did you get the ones Mordin left behind?' Shepards cocks an eyebrow.

'Mordin wouldn't bug me. He has nothing to gain from it,' Garrus points out as he sifts through more data on the projected power outputs of rewiring the Javelins.

Shepard laughs. 'If you told him you were finding bugs as a training exercise, he absolutely would. You have, in fact, made it his responsibility to bug you in order to make certain the lessons stick. He's very serious about anyone he takes on as a student. He's a school of hard knocks kind of guy. Learn something either way.'

Garrus draws in his mandibles as he tries to decipher her comments. Human idioms don't always make sense. After a moment, he smacks his palm to his face as the truth of this dawns on him. 'Crap. You're right.'

'More calibrations?'

'More calibrations.'

'Someday, I might actually get to spend time with you when you're not working.' Her voice has a wistful tone.

'When turians aren't working, we're thinking about working.'

'But you're a very bad turian.'

He can't help the way his breathing hitches at the sound of her voice. She doesn't have subvocals, but sometimes her inflections make that irrelevant. 'You're going to ruin all that work I put into reforming myself,' he deflects.

'Badass vigilante and sniper with a heart of gold? What's to reform?'

'Sentimental attachments.' Garrus looks around the room, trying to decide where to begin his new search for bugs, trying to focus on something other than her.

'Garrus --' She's silent for a moment. 'I should go.'
Science stuff courtesy of articles on Alzheimer's and cell regeneration.
"Mark on two." Joker watches one of his displays. "Clear." He smiles over his shoulder at Shepard. "It takes skill to make a ship bank in a vacuum. Don't think it doesn't."

"You're the king of the Skyllian drift," she chuckles. "How much longer until we get there?"

"Should be another hour." Joker toggles a switch. "So, the Citadel. You can check in with Anderson. I'm sure he'll have some leads for us."

"You're massively overestimating what Anderson can do. I'll be lucky to get my spectre status back."

"Oh, c'mon. You got him his job. I'm sure he can do something for you."

A familiar flanging voice breaks into the conversation, "She may have gotten the entire Council their jobs, but they haven't forgiven her for letting the first Council die."

Joker jumps in his seat and then spins around. "Commander, can I get a mirror up here? You know, so I can see when someone is looming behind me?"

Shepard gives the request the mock consideration it's due. "I don't think it will help."

"I'm not blind. I can see a 7-foot alien coming up behind me. If I can see behind me."

The 7-foot alien in question leans against the doorway opposite Shepard. She chuckles softly. "Yes, but we're going to pick up Kasumi. I don't want you getting overconfident, catnapping in your comfy chair and thinking you'll catch anyone sneaking up on you. You'll lose your wallet."

"I'm not afraid of a pickpocket."

"She's more the sort of person who leaves a pick in your back."

"For once in my life, I get some luxuries, and you're going to hold it against me?"

Garrus waves a mandible. "Well, you do have this luxury, one-of-a-kind AI you could work with."

"She can see behind you," Shepard adds.

"All you have to do is ask." Garrus's voice is at his persuasive best.

"She's a disease in my baby." Joker strokes the console.

"Technically," Shepard says thoughtfully, "considering that she's fully integrated with this ship, she is your baby."
The face Joker makes at the idea of his ship and the AI being one in the same could win a prize for comic revulsion.

"You know, Shepard, I have to agree with Joker that the idea is a bit disturbing," Garrus interjects consolingly. "Seems more like the love of his life."

"You're right. He does admire her sleek and nimble body."

"Knows how to time his thrusts."

"It's been two years that I know you've been apart. How can you have gotten better at tag-teaming?" Joker looks back and forth between them, and Shepard worries that her poker face isn't as good as she might wish. "I swear you weren't this buddy-buddy before."

"Easy," Garrus drawls, "I spent two years thinking over the question of what Shepard would do in every new situation I faced."

"Shepard would run off to be a vigilante?" Joker asks incredulously.

"I didn't say that I did what Shepard would do. Just that I put a lot of thought into it."

Shepard narrows her eyes. "I'm not sure if I should feel honored or insulted."

"Considering what I made of my life, be honored." He reaches out a hand to her, then smoothly draws it back, as if it were some gesture added for emphasis.

She tilts her head to one side, not knowing what to say.

"Well," Joker eyes them both suspiciously and spins around to focus on flying as they get closer to Citadel air space. "Maybe Anderson will be able to help you get the rest of the crew back."

"The rest of the crew? Joker, we've already talked about it. Tali might join us later when she's completed her own missions. Liara is busy on Illium. Wrex is playing politics on Tuchanka. We'll have to make do without them."

"Uh. Commander, there is still Kaidan," Joker sounds a little worried about her memory.

"Kaidan?" Shepard blinks. It's been more than two years since she and Kaidan broke up. On Horizon. About a month from now.


"Crap. Kaidan." Shepard sighs and looks out at the stars. Maybe it's not too late to jump out the airlock and play dead.

"Uh. Yeah." Joker looks back at her. "I kinda thought you two were an item."

"I've been dead longer than we were ever together. He's probably forgotten me." Facing that Reaper at Rannoch: That would also be better than reliving Horizon. Maybe he can't break her heart this time, but it will always be a stab in the back.

"He'll still be glad to see you," the pilot insists as her heart sinks, knowing full well that Kaidan will lull her into lowering her defenses before biting her head off.

Garrus watches the stars in the opposite window and growls. "I bet you he isn't."
"That guy is crazy about her."

Garrus focuses his gaze on Joker. "I bet you 5,000 credits that you and Shepard both break up with him. You for a new copilot and her for ... mmmm ... anyone else."

Shepard blinks at Garrus who looks out again at the stars rather than face her.


"5,000 credits to be paid out before the end of the year," Garrus insists.

"Alright. You're on. I know I would never leave my brother in arms hanging like that." Joker tips his seat back to look over at Shepard. "And the commander wouldn't either. Right?"

"I don't know. Someone who will follow me into hell sounds damn appealing right now." She can see Garrus's reflection in the sky dark windows, but his eyes are so much harder to read. She crosses her arms, mirroring his pose. "What do you say, Joker?" she asks playfully. "You, me, and a bottle of wine?"

"You are so fucking lucky that I am not driving a sky car right now, or I would have stepped on the accelerator and crashed us into a wall. Where the hell did that come from?"

"Can't blame a girl for trying when her best friend seems to be determined to set both of us up."

"Sorry to let you down, commander, but I'm absolutely certain that would be like dating my sister."

"Darn. I guess I'll just have to go it alone if things don't work out with Kaidan."

Garrus clears his throat. "Other than admiring Joker's skill, did you have a reason for asking me to meet you up here?"

"I wanted you to keep me company on the Citadel. It is your home turf."

"Need me to carry all of the shopping bags?"

"Other people have shopping lists." If only her life could be that simple. "I have lists of people to kill."

"So it's body bags then. I've always got your back, Shepard."

"Good. I always have yours."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry that I have no holiday stories planned at this time. I hope this chapter is at least entertaining. I hope to have at least one more up before New Year's.
"Welcome back to the ranks of the living. I wasn't sure you got my message," says Anderson with a delighted warmth to his voice. The human councilor stands on his balcony dressed in some approximation of his old Alliance military uniform.

The offices of a councilor beat C-Sec any day. C-Sec offices are usually dark steel and overhead lighting unless you're assigned to one of the dispatch offices in the wards. Then you might have a window.

Councilors get entire balconies overseeing the Presidium Reservoir and the tri-monthly rotating plant life sponsored by the various member races. There's even a fake sky and sunlight effect to remind people of terrestrial life.

Shepard steps forward to shake his hand. "It's been a long time, captain."

"It's councilor now. I had to give up my commission when I joined. I'm glad you came, though I was hoping that the rest of the council would be here for this meeting too. Unfortunately, they rarely listen to me." He shakes his head. "Sometimes I wonder if Udina would have been the better choice for this."

"Nobody said this was going to be easy. But I know you: You get things done," Shepard says confidently. Anderson also isn't an indoctrinated traitor, and so certainly the better man for the job.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, but I doubt Udina would echo it. He thinks I need to work on my people skills." Garrus isn't certain what people skills the councilor could be lacking. He seems formal but friendly. A direct and decisive man, considering the way he helped them steal the Normandy. Perhaps human military habits simply make a positive impression on turians?

"The ambassador knows how to play politics. Just tell him what you need and let him figure out how to push it through," Shepard recommends.

"Unfortunately, that usually involves pissing off the rest of the council. They veto my suggestions and nothing changes. Truth is, I just don't have the knack for compromising my principles. A bad trait for a councilor." Anderson sounds both regretful and proud of this flaw.

Shouldn't Anderson and Quentius have formed a natural voting bloc? Anderson likes and respects turians, Garrus knows that from the biographical datapads Shepard had shared with him in her apartment. Sparatus wouldn't have gone for a coalition, would have seen the humans as up-jumped competitors, but Quentius was always trying to unite the councilors around common goals, and as the two military council powers, the turians and humans should have a lot of points of agreement. Udina must be working night and day to keep them divided.
Garrus gives the man an encouraging nod. "The rest of them should be ashamed that they can't say the same thing."

Anderson's eyes run over his face, trying to place him. The bandages must be throwing him off. "Have we met before?"

"A few times. The last time I saw you, you had me called out of my office at C-Sec to tell me about Shepard's death," he says grimly.

"Vakarian?" The realization dawns across the human's face. "You vanished from the station after the funeral..."

"I took a new job."

"Working for-"

"Contracts. Shepard caught up to me between jobs and I jumped at the chance to put the old team back together."

Anderson turns to their other companion. "And you are?"

"Miranda Lawson." The dark-haired woman offers her hand to shake, but doesn't elaborate. The omission of her Cerberus affiliation isn't fooling anyone with eyes to see her uniform.

Anderson seems as if he's about to question Miranda's presence, but Shepard gets things back on track. "I'm still not clear why you wanted me to come."

With a last evaluating look at Miranda, Anderson turns back to the commander. "There's been a lot of talk since you came back. Some of what I hear has been, frankly, a little disturbing." Was there some part of raising the dead that wouldn't be disturbing? "I wanted to give you a chance to explain your actions. Maybe get the council to see things from your point of view, but they refuse to see you. They feel you'll always put human interests before galactic concerns."

Shepard's lips compress, turning white. "I am so sick of hearing about how I favor humans just because I let the Council die. That had absolutely nothing to do with it! It was a battlefield decision. We were facing an unknown foe who might have been powerful enough to kill us all. Stopping him was more important than the lives of any ship full of people. I couldn't take the chance of losing fighters that might make the difference between us failing or succeeding in our mission to save the galaxy." She glances behind herself at Garrus. "The ruthless calculus of war."

He can't help reaching out to put a hand on her shoulder in comfort. It's a reflex from the dark days of the war ahead. Though it feels strange to hear this reasoning for the first time now and realize how long she'd been making those ruthless calculations. She'd lived with the deaths of the Council for years, and he'd thought he could lecture her on leaving people to die so the rest of the galaxy could live. When we met, I was a war hero gathering medals and citations and the most difficult assignments a memory of her scolds. And she'd thought he was a kid then. Maybe she'd been partially right. He'd been innocent of making the choices that led to good people dying just because the numbers didn't come out in their favor.

There are so many conversations they've had again and again, he's forgotten what it's like to have her fully present and saying something new. There are so many things still to learn about her. Not that it will make any difference. She's determined to die to save the galaxy again because the calculus says that one person is worth less than everyone else. He closes his eyes and allows his hand to trail down her arm before withdrawing it.
Anderson has turned his back to them and coughs before continuing. "I know you wouldn't work for Cerberus without a good reason. Something more is going on here."

"The Reapers are moving again," Shepard reports and steps toward her former captain. "But not through the geth, through the Collectors. They're behind the colony abductions."

"The Collectors?" Anderson seems surprised. "We hadn't considered that. There's so little data, they've always seemed like a fringe threat. If they're a front for the Reapers, this is big. But even that may not be enough to get the Council off its tail. The others have spent the past two years convincing themselves the Reapers don't exist. I tried to get the truth out, but they don't want to see it. It's just easier for them to accept Sovereign as a geth warship."

"Are they blind?" Shepard is incredulous. "What about Vigil? The Prothean VI on Ilos?"

"The Prothean VI shut itself down," Anderson reminds them. "You're the only one who spoke to it. Just like you and your crew are the only ones who spoke directly to Sovereign."

Garrus shakes his head. "That should still be more than enough eyewitnesses to make the story credible."

Anderson turns back to them. "Officially, the existence of Reapers has been dismissed as a myth spread by Saren to convince the geth to follow him. We know the truth, but I've spent two years fighting that line with the Council, and I don't have much to show for it."

"What about the Archive?" Garrus's concern for Shepard has loosened his tongue in the matters of things he shouldn't know yet. Only Shepard's spectre status overrode the fake story of the geth with the correct footage of Sovereign's attack. But the councilors outranked Shepard, and should all know the truth. Strange that they don't, really. Strange that they all treat Shepard so poorly ... except ... except they would only know if they saw the footage, and the only reason Shepard ever saw it was that they got trapped in the Archive. So maybe they didn't see it? Or only one of them saw it?

"What about it?" asks Anderson.

"There's footage of the attack," Garrus replies. "Anyone can see that it's not a geth ship." Except the footage was altered by someone...

"It might be a new model. There's no proof I can show them that it's not." Except for the narration. Someone added the narration. Someone knew. Garrus needs to check the Archive again with Shepard.

Miranda walks to Shepard's side. "This is why we need private enterprises to look out for humanity: The council isn't stepping up where it should and the Systems Alliance is just sitting back and letting our enemies overrun us because treaties and diplomacy are more important than human lives."

"You have your facts, slightly wrong, Miss Lawson," says Anderson. "The Systems Alliance is responsible for its territories. Colonists out in the Terminus Systems have turned their backs on the Alliance. They don't follow our rules, they don't pay our taxes, they don't welcome our interference - - until a threat shows up and then they call us traitors to our species for not defending them. They can't have it both ways." Anderson clasps his hands behind his back. "And that's why it's important that we contribute to galactic society: If we don't, we have no hope that they'll be here for us when a larger threat arises." And, with some struggles, they had been in it all together when the worst came.

Anderson turns back to Shepard. "It's up to you to stop the Reapers, Shepard. All I've got is a title if you want it. I can reinstate your spectre status. I won't win any popularity contests, but they can't
really object. Your title was never officially rescinded when you died. Besides, you're still a hero to humanity, and the council knows the danger of discounting our opinion."

Donnel Udina chooses that moment to barge into the councilor's chambers. "Anderson, we need to talk about ..." The beige-suited man stops in shock at seeing the spectre resurrected. "Shepard ... what are you doing here?"

Shepard turns tiredly to the ambassador. "Not used to seeing ghosts, Udina?"

"I'd heard you were alive, of course, but I didn't expect to see you back on the Citadel," says Udina.

Garrus regrets that he hadn't paid more attention to those words the first time through. Udina knew she was alive, but didn't expect her to go off the rails set by Cerberus and show up at the Citadel, where she could impede his takeover. He even catches the glance Udina throws to Miranda, who ignores him either because she genuinely knows nothing or because if they look back and forth often enough, Shepard will catch them. Probably the first one, though. Miranda was the doctor and project manager, not the handler. Shepard's appointed handler must have died on Lazarus Station.

"I hope you didn't try to do anything foolish, councilor," Udina continues in his nasal lilt, "like try to arrange a meeting with the council. There could be serious political ramifications." Yes, of course there could be serious political ramifications if the new council spoke to their most knowledgeable and loyal spectre and believed in her. Udina might fail.

Anderson pulls himself up to his full height and martial dignity. "I don't answer to you, Udina. Why don't you go to your office and think about that for a while."

Udina is cowed by the man who laid him out when they stole the Normandy. If he doesn't respect Anderson's mind, he does respect his might. "Of course, councilor. Good day. To both of you." The grey-haired man's retreat is the hasty scuttle of a barefaced traitor.

"Sorry about that, Udina's never gotten over the fact that I got the council position instead of him. Sometimes I need to put him in his place."

Shepard looks back over her shoulder at the recently exited door, and, oddly, defends the man, "Udina's just doing his job."

Anderson sighs. "True enough. He's got his uses. And if you want something done on the Citadel, he knows who can make it happen. Plus, he's always happy to attend all those formal diplomatic functions I can't be bothered with." The councilor gazes off the balcony, his dark skin glowing in the fake sunlight. "Serving on the council isn't how I planned to spend my twilight years. Sometimes it feels like I'm just beating my head on a wall. Knowing the truth about Sovereign is brutal. It's nightmare stuff. I can't blame others for not wanting to believe it. But I know how important it is. So I keep trying. Fighting the good fight, right?"

Shepard takes a few steps toward him. "Then join me. Join my crew. Show them what an experienced soldier can do."

"I'm too old to go racing across the galaxy, much as I complain. I've got an important job to do here. The front line: That's got to be yours."

"You say that, but I know you're dying for a battle. If you don't go to it, it will come to you."

Garrus is surprised at her insistence, and then he realizes she doesn't know Anderson didn't make it. As far as she knows, he survived Earth and made up with Kahlee. She didn't hear about his body being found or attend the ceremony to add both their names to the wall. If it all happens again, then
Garrus is watching a conversation between two ghosts that will haunt the ship. But they're both so alive right now.

Anderson turns to them and smiles. "Then I'll be here, ready and waiting when it comes."

Shepard nods. "I'd better go."

"Of course, Shepard. I wish there was more I could do to help you. But if you ever want to talk, I'll be here. Just do me a favor and be careful." Anderson lifts a brow at Miranda. "You can't trust Cerberus."

Garrus nods a goodbye to him. "Don't worry, councilor. I have her six."

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"I'm sorry about that, Miranda," says Shepard as they exit the embassies. "Looks like one of the people skills Anderson needs to work on is not calling people untrustworthy to their faces."

Miranda crosses her arms. "Typical Alliance attitude. I'm used to it, Shepard."

"It still wasn't right, even if Cerberus does have ... operational issues."

"It only takes a few rogue operations to tear down everything we build."

Garrus clears his throat. "Miranda, those 'few rogue operations' have gone very rogue. It's never just a couple of deaths, it's whole buildings full of people wiped out after committing atrocities."

"Do you consider Shepard an atrocity?"

"No, though I do have some questions about the research used to bring her back," he says, thinking about the laboratories filled with husks and marauders and brutes chopped to pieces. Not that he'd value the lives of science experiments that should never have been in the first place, but seeing them broken down to their component parts makes him wonder how much experience Miranda and Cerberus have with dissection of sentients.

"And I did survive one of those buildings." Miranda ignores his suspicious tone. "It was just one individual who killed 78 people on Lazarus Station. Would you like it if I held you responsible for the actions of just one renegade C-Sec agent?" Miranda cants her hips as she looks at him.

"Jacob has already held all turians accountable to the Hierarchy, so that anything we're doing must be government-approved, which I suppose makes me your government-approved infiltrator. I'm not surprised you're going to hang the sins of C-Sec on me, too. I don't recall denying that there are corrupt cops. In fact, it was one of the reasons I left." Both of his vocal boxes rumble in warning.

Shepard turns on her heel. "Enough! If the two of you would stop and think for a moment, you'd realized that you just both agreed that blaming one person for the mistakes of whole organizations is wrong. Take that point of agreement and mull it over before you decide to compare politics again."

"Sorry, Shepard." Garrus looks down at her. "So, what was the rest of your plan for today?"

"The plan?"

"You said something about people you needed to kill."

"Ye-es." She gives him an apologetic look. "There's this renegade C-Sec agent we should take care of."
Miranda laughs.

"A renegade C-Sec agent?" Garrus doesn't remember this. There's krogan and fish, quarian and missing credit chit ...

"He's going by the code name Fade."

"Fade." Garrus repeats with a deadly growl.

"Yes. I thought it would be more efficient, getting it all wrapped up now. He'll have the information we need on Sidonis."

"Sidonis?" Miranda inquires.

"That's the turian who killed all of Archangel's men," says Shepard.

"Well, Archangel, here's your chance to show me how you handle a renegade, since you're definitely not on his side. And C-Sec is nothing like Cerberus. I would have killed the traitor if Shepard weren't faster on the trigger." Miranda's eyes are cold with memories of Lazarus Station. "What about you?"

"Sidonis will die the next time I see him. He owes me 10 lives." At least. This will be number six.

"And Fade?" she goads.

Garrus looks back and forth between the two women: Miranda with her indifference to the people who stand between her and her goals, and Shepard, who had tried to plead Sidonis's case and prevent him from hurting Harkin, still looking at him with a kind of hope. "We'll see when I get there."

Chapter End Notes

A final happy holidays since this will be my last update before the new year.

Also, I've completed my personal project to clean up the first section of this story (Chapters 1-17). I've fixed punctuation and grammar issues, added a bit more setting and character description, and just made it nicer. Nothing big, just things that make it more polished.

The only "plot" issues are 1) that I mention Jack brought Eezo with her and 2) I deleted the Garrus/Castis conversation. Eezo was overlooked because I didn't play that part of the Citadel DLC until recently (I only played 3 for the first time in August 2017). I don't actually know if he will become plot relevant or not, but since animal rescue is my personal charity crusade, I couldn't just have her abandoning him (and it wouldn't make sense for Jack's character). The Garrus/Castis conversation should reappear in some form in a much, much later chapter. In this case, it was more a matter of diluting theme than any problem with the conversation.

I will now stop fiddling with those chapters unless something spectacular occurs to me. I'll do a final clean up on the next batch of chapters when I reach the end of the second section.
Why does the Citadel have a factory district? Who builds a factory in space? Sure, you get a few stations around gas giants to refine natural elements, but that's about it. Between importing raw materials and expelling pollution, it is safer and cheaper to build factories on planets. And yet, the Factory District in Zakera Ward exists.

The entrance to the prefab foundry is busy with boxes to be loaded. Harkin is discussing the latest shipment with his Blue Suns contacts when the squad appears. The scruffy bald man looks over his shoulder and does a double take. "Shepard?"

The commander smirks.

Harkin looks to either side at the mercs and yells, "Don't just stand there, stop them! Stop them!" as he runs for safety inside.

Garrus growls beside her, "Run all you want, Harkin. We'll find you."

Miranda carries a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. She still radiates *impress me* after their rocky start. And this isn't a mission that will. It's not a mission where hope can ever win. But it has to be done.

When Garrus is in a temper about something, the few times Shepard's seen his supposedly hot head, it eats away at him until he's liable to snap at random. Better to narrow the people he's upset with down to herself. He won't desert her, she knows that in her bones, and she can manage anything else he can throw at her.

She's having a few regrets about not swapping Miranda with Kasumi for this mission. The cheerleader is clearly out in full force, though Shepard suspects it's not completely real, that Miranda is trying to force a mistake, show that Shepard isn't as good at leading or Garrus the turian isn't as reliable as a human crewman would be. But Shepard needs Garrus and Miranda to find their rhythm again.

Miranda's voice breaks into her thoughts. "The guards are down Shepard. Are you coming?"

Garrus huffs, "That's just like her to make us do all the hard work. She'll wake up when there's a button to push."

If he's in the mood to rib her even a little, she'll work with it. "I'm just letting you build up your kill count. Trying to level the playing field."

"You're going easy on me? I don't buy it."
"Just play the game, big guy."

"Fine. One down."

They enter the foundry and Shepard rummages around the desks for spare credits. Two LOKI mechs head their way, but there's plenty of time to finish before worrying about them. Then they both explode. She lifts an eyebrow at her companions.

Garrus looks up from his omni-tool. "Three down." He looks ahead over some crates and begins typing quickly. There's the sound of more sparks flying. "Make that five. To zero."

"I didn't think you could make an overload jump." Yet.

"It's just a matter of figuring out the right programming. I've had lots of time to improve my skills." He broadens his mandibles to show off his shark-like teeth. "Not up to playing anymore?"

Shepard favors him with a closed-mouth smile of her own, while Miranda rolls her eyes and begins walking through the stacks of boxes.

The Blue Suns are hiding behind cover ahead. Shepard signals Garrus and Miranda and selects her victims. "Shields." The overloads take down the flexible blue energy around a couple of the troopers. Shepard targets the man in the middle of the room and lowers his defenses with inferno bullets. Once his high-tech protections are gone, she charges, knocking him flat. The crates surrounding the area open, revealing more LOKI mechs. Shepard waits barely a second before pounding the ground with a nova of barrier energy, obliterating everyone still standing.

She looks back over her shoulder at Garrus as her shields replenish. "Ten to seven. Try to keep up."

"You couldn't do that without our help."

"And you wouldn't be such a great sniper if I let the hoards overrun your position. Your point?"

"You can't work alone." He removes the shields from a batarian ambusher ahead of them and takes the man out cleanly with a headshot. "Unlike some of us. That makes eight."

"Fine. I call the mech." Shepard's assault rifle eats away at another Blue Suns trooper, stripping shields, then armor, then making him scream as he drops in a pile of burning flesh.

"The mech?"

"There's always a heavy YMIR mech to move boxes. I call the mech."

Uncertainty tinges Miranda's voice, "Shepard, it took all of us to fight the mech on Freedom's Progress."

"No, it took all of us to fight the mech quickly. I'm suddenly in the mood for a fist fight with a giant robot."

Miranda licks her lips. "Shepard, I don't think this is a good idea. You're displaying biotic power in excess of what your implants were designed to endure."

"Listen to your doctor," Garrus agrees. "You just got back up..."

Oh, good. She's finally got them on the same side. "Nope. I want the mech. Just because my genetically perfect doctor is holding back doesn't mean that's a sound strategy."
"Holding back?" Now Miranda's offended as she mows down the troopers in front of them with her Shuriken submachine gun.

"You're capable of so much more. Right now, you're mostly relying on my skill with biotic bullets to take down the obstacles in front of you."

"Unlike you two mercenaries, I don't care about my kill count. I care about getting the job done." She seems relieved when they come to a dead end office space. No mechs here.

"You could do better if you pushed yourself." Shepard sifts through desk detritus looking for more credits.

"I have doctorates in cybernetics and medical surgery, and a business degree in project management. I'm a powerful, galaxy-traveling biotic devoting her life to the good of humanity."

"But when was the last time you did something that was difficult?"

"I brought you back to life!"

"Manipulation skills? Eight out of 10. Nice job trying to make me feel guilty. But you're not half the biotic you could be." And you're only willing to give your all if I do something nice for you. Not for everyone else, just for you. Saving the universe isn't about what's in it for you. Shepard blinks at the water suddenly in her eye.

"Impress me." Shepard pulls a lever to lower the prefabricated wall. "I've got a giant robot to fight." She spies her target down at the end of the corridor of boxes and crates, and charges off, leaving the other two to battle through the scrum of soldiers together.

She hits the mech full force, then explodes a nova around it before rolling behind some boxes to recharge her shields. YMIRs don't turn quickly, so she takes advantage of the awkwardness to empty a clip into its backside. Shields down!

Another charge hits it in the right leg, unbalancing the YMIR as the second nova wave hits and Shepard rolls to the side twice and lands behind another set of boxes. She sets off a flare to melt the metal and weaken the leg joints further. Some of the Blue Suns have turned around to shoot at her, but that means their backs are turned as Garrus and Miranda work their way towards the big fight. Shepard ignores the soldiers and continues to focus on the mech. She charges it and punches it again. And again. And again. Until, finally, it explodes.

"Why do you always do that?" Garrus demands as they finish clearing the room.

"What?"

"Go fight the biggest thing on the field yourself."

"I seem to remember you being able to blow Har- things up with one shot."

"Yes. That's not a fight. That's a shot. There's distance. If I miss, I'm not likely to be crushed to death when it picks me up." Or stepped on. The deaths of Prazza's team play again in her memories even though now they're alive. Guess you can't rewrite the past that easily.

"We fight differently. I'm trained for dangerous charges. You're supposed to take the shot and live to see another day."

"Only if I retreat. I don't abandon my team, and I'm teamed with you!"
"Then, dammit, Garrus, learn to fucking dodge so that you can keep up!"

Miranda crosses her arms. "Do you only ever accept help on your own terms?"

"I'm the commander, so yes. I follow orders on other people's terms. Who I take into the field with me, that's my choice, and I need to believe in them. And I need them to believe in me, themselves, and the mission." She glares at Miranda. "So far I've had tests, tests, and more tests. Press my buttons, see what I do. Don't strain yourself for the mission."

"The mission is escaping."

"No, he isn't. If you had called up the blueprints before you arrived, you'd know he's trapped. He forgot to include a backdoor." Shepard walks to a small office building in the middle of the foundry. The organization of this place defies all logic. How do the workers do their jobs? At least it's a more proper office. There's more proper loot. "Though if you were really worried," Shepard begins pinning together two nodes on a safe, "you could have picked him up and then dropped him to the floor. He's not exactly in prime condition."

Garrus hits a button, lowering the shield in front of the window to the next area. Shepard can see the distant movement of Harkin in the control room. Garrus draws his gun and leans against the control panel, narrowing his eyes at the figure flickering briefly in the light.

Miranda stays out of the way, back by the door. "What are you two going to do to Harkin if he won't cooperate."

"I'm in no mood for his games. If he doesn't cooperate, I'll beat him within an inch of his life." Garrus's subvocals might be mostly inaudible, but there are times Shepard can feel them. When he's angry, they raise the hair on her neck and tell her to run.

Shepard keeps herself focused on the hacking in front of her. "You don't need to hurt him to get what you want."

"Don't worry. Harkin's a coward. He'll talk long before I can really hurt him."

"You still planning to kill Sidonis when we find him?" The safe door pops open and she grabs the credits.

"That's the plan. It'll be quick and painless. Unlike everyone he betrayed, he'll be spared the agony of a slow death. It's more than he deserves, but as long as he's dead, I'll be satisfied." Except it doesn't work like that. He's never forgiven himself for losing the team; she's never found the words to perform that miracle.

"Are you just going to let him, Shepard?" Miranda quizzes. "The way you let Zaeed go after Vido?"

"Ye- well not exactly. Garrus isn't Zaeed. He only goes off half-cocked in the first two minutes or so he's angry. He doesn't accidentally lose his target after tracking it this far."

Garrus lifts a brow at them. "You do realize I'm right here?"

"Like you don't know you have a temper. "

The brunette frowns. "This isn't exactly what I expected from Earth's greatest hero."

"You said I only accept help on my own terms. I expect others to do the same. My choice is to agree
to those terms or not. I'm sorry I'm not what you expected. I want people to be better than they are, but I don't force them. It's no use threatening people into being their best selves. Because they won't be, not inside." She walks over to the door. "Did you see something?"

Garrus narrows his eyes. "Hard to say. He must be doing something up there."

"Well, there's one way to find out." Shepard pushes open the next door, looks around, and swipes some sniper rifle research.

"The score is 12 to 12, Shepard." Garrus creeps up in her footsteps. "And this time, you're not doing it alone."

"Mine was bigger." Shepard focuses on the battle ahead. It didn't kill her the first time. It won't kill her this time.

"Do you really think you can take me down, Garrus?" Harkin taunts.

They come to the depression in the floor where two YMIR mechs await.

"Ah, crap." says Garrus, annoyed.

Shepard stops behind some boxes in a sprinter's crouch and gestures her companions into position. "The bells of Kalros," she calls.

"Shepard..." Garrus rumbles.

"The bells of Kalros," she insists. "Their reaction time is shit, there's only two of them, and you've got elevation." When he continues to hesitate, she sighs. "You wanted me not to leave you. This is me staying."

"The bells," he agrees grudgingly.

Miranda narrows her eyes. "What are we-"

Shepard charges down onto the floor, into one of the mechs, as Garrus blows the shielding. Dodge left, roll, nova, roll. Breathe.

Over the comms, she can hear Garrus saying "Miranda, warp the one on your side."

Charge, dodge right, roll, nova, roll. A shot from above takes out the fuel feed on one of the robots, and it slows further. Breathe. Charge! Nova! Roll for cover as they both explode.

"Perfect!" Shepard enthuses. "I told you we could do it!"

Two shots fly past her head to destroy the last LOKI mechs. "Watch your back, Shepard," Garrus admonishes.

"I can't reap the benefits of sticking with you?" She begins to climb the risers to the supervisor's hut.

Harkin panics when Shepard enters, and tries to leave by the door on the other side of the control room, only to run into Garrus's heavily armored chest. "So, Fade, Couldn't make yourself disappear?"

"C'mon Garrus," the ex-cop wheedles, "We can work this out. What d'ya need?"

"I'm looking for someone."
"Well I guess we both have something the other one wants." Harkin starts to smile at the thought of having any leverage when Garrus knees him in the groin.

Shepard closes her eyes and shakes her head. "Maybe you should just tell us what we want to know."

"Maybe. I still haven't heard what that is," spits Harkin.

"You helped a friend of mine disappear." Garrus stands over him. "I need to find him."

"I might need a little more information than that."

Garrus stares at the ceiling and recites facts in a bored tone, "His name was Sidonis. Turian. Came from-"

Harkin starts to refuse, "I know who he is, and I'm not telling you-" Garrus punches him to the ground and presses his boot into Harkin's throat.

"Anything? You're an overgrown pyjak in this game, Harkin. If you don't give me what I want, I'll kill you and find the information in your records as well as everyone else you've hidden. If you do work with me, you have some hope that Shepard will persuade me that your life is worth the waste of oxygen. Those are your only two options. What is it going to be?"

"Terminus really changed you, huh, Garrus?" Harkin chokes out.

"No." He twitches a mandible aside to show off his incisors. "You never knew me. Now I'm going to let you up to set up a meeting using that comm link. And you will do it or you will die." Garrus removes his foot.

Harkin slinks to the comms and begins trying to persuade Sidonis to meet while Garrus stares at the wall, not moving.

Harkin turns back to them. "There. It's done. We're good?"

"You're definitely not good. But you can live." Garrus looks over at Shepard and then back to the criminal. "Don't ever let me hear of you again, Fade." And walks out the door.

Shepard joins him without a word.

Chapter End Notes

Added additional Zaeed material to the end of chapter 23 because his mindset needed to be wrapped up.
Gray mists expel from vents, blurring Garrus's vision. Harkin deserves a worse fate than he'll get. Miranda is a cold-hearted bitch. And Shepard ... Shepard is just built to slip through his fingers. He pounds a fist into the hood of a rusted-out sky car.

Shepard comes up beside him and puts one hand on his shoulder and the other to the side of his keel in a hug. It's so easy for her. In the end, she won't have to live with the consequences. There's no warmth or real sensation of touch through the armor, just pressure showing that she's there. He wraps an arm over her shoulders and presses her into his side because for the moment, he wants easy.

What would life be like if it were this simple? If there were no battles to be fought, would Shepard still be Shepard? If there were no murderers and drug dealers to chase, he wouldn't quite be himself.

Garrus pulls away from her. "I need to finish this."

Shepard nods at him, and searches their surroundings for Miranda, who is leaning against the sky car pedestal, looking off into space, lost in her own thoughts. "Can you go back to the shuttle and check the inventory?"

"What?" The taller woman is surprised.

"This will only take two people. We can finish it alone." She casts a glance at Garrus. "Things aren't going exactly as expected and I need to find out why."

"The picture in your cabin..." Miranda frowns. "I got it wrong, didn't I?"

"Hmmm?"

"I decorated your cabin. You didn't seem to have had a lot of things, but I did research, acquired copies of your medals and a display case for them, put in the water feature. Little things to try to ground you..." Her eyes flicker to Garrus and then back to Shepard. "I got it wrong."

Shepard puts a hand to her arm. "No. You got it right. Things just changed." She snorts in derision. "It can't get any worse. I'll show you when the time comes."

"You'd accuse me of testing you and then give me more ammo for my tests?" Miranda quirks an eyebrow at her.

"It'll be good for me. Toughen me up. The unexamined life is not worth living."

Miranda narrows her eyes at Shepard. "You don't play fair, do you?"
"Never."

"Everyone says you're a saint, but I'm going to spend the rest of the evening wondering if you were really trying to inspire me or dig at me."

"Can't it be both?" Shepard's eyes sparkle red in the dim lights. "How are you going to be inspired if I don't dig a little? If you think long enough, you'll inspire yourself to better actions than I ever could." Shepard pats Miranda on the arm. "But you'll be fine. My ma- Garrus needs me right now and we don't have a whole lot of time."

"Good night, Shepard, Garrus. I'll see you back at the ship." Miranda calls a car and departs along the dirty streets.

"I've forgotten how good you are at this." Garrus crosses his arms. "Going to manage me, too, Madelaine? Live up to your name and shepherd me into a car?"

"Did you need to be herded? I thought this was your favor. The one thing you wanted done before you died." She closes her eyes. "Forget I said that."

"You can't hurt me with a few wrong words." It was a good thing she couldn't hear the lie in his subvocals. Truth always hurts.

"I know." She sighs and wraps her arms around herself. "I wasn't planning on manipulating you, but then everything lined up before I could stop myself and you are being difficult."

"So what was the play?"

"Needle you enough to get you moving since you're in a challenging mood. Maybe remind you that you like me." She chuckles. "Maybe remind me why I like you."

"And then?" He settles against the hood of the car.

"Ply you with charms and guilt until you don't kill Sidonis because you have other things to live for." There's a glimmer of her old smile as she looks up at him.

"Doesn't seem like it." And it vanishes.

"I can be very persuasive." Shepard leans against the car, next to him. "I also didn't say it was a good plan or that I was proud of it. Requires lots of on the spot adjustments." She runs her fingers through her hair. "My actual intention before my tongue ran away with me was to find out what was going on with you because I distinctly remember that I had to intervene to save Harkin's leg. What gives?"

His gloved talons scrape along the metal of the car and he grumbles, "You were right."

"Was I?"

"You always are."

"I'm definitely not or I wouldn't have a list of people to kill right now."

"And Udina didn't make the list?" He asks disbelievingly.

"The Illusive Man would just pick another agent and that one might succeed. And I'm not trying to change things that change the war. I'm just ... tweaking a few small things that went wrong." She shakes her head. "What was I right about again?"
"Harkin." Garrus swallows. "He was jailed for his schemes. It's never safe in prisons, but for former cops? It's like having a giant target on your back. He survived, though." Why is it that it's the people who don't deserve it who survive? "Until the Reapers took the Citadel. Then the prisons were overrun and a riot started. He saved some of the prison guards by getting up to the control rooms and rewiring the circuits. He opened and closed doors enough to get people out. The third time through, I let him go like this, and he ran. C-Sec won't get him. Instead, he continues helping people disappear on the Citadel. He's scum." Garrus tucks his chin into his cowl. "But when the Citadel is attacked, he stays to fight beside C-Sec. He brings mechs and better weapons. I can let him run now because he doesn't run when it counts." Rust flakes cover his gauntleted talons. "I don't like to think about what would have happened if I'd shot him. If he were slow and taken by the Reapers then he couldn't save anyone."

"If it makes you feel any better, I agree: He was scum then and he's still scum now. Being scum was just never enough justification for maiming him." She types in the number for a sky car to pick them up. "Let's get this over with," she says wearily.

"Not going to try to talk me out of it?" he asks as he settles into the driver's seat.

"It didn't work last time. Did it work any of the others?"

"Only the time everything else was broken." Here, everything is right but them.

"Oh?"

Silence settles, companionable rather than tense.

"You just would not give up because you didn't believe it was what I would really want, thought that it was some additional sign that Cerberus was controlling me." He glances over at her, her eyes straight ahead, watching beams and underpasses. "You got Sidonis talking about how he was tortured, how he wasn't really alive any more. You tried to convince me not to kill him because it's not something I would do." He flies the car through a tunnel. "I let him live because I wanted you to trust me again. I killed him later, on Menae. I sent him on a suicide mission."

"I suppose it's good to know that all my efforts to save him would be futile." She bites her lip. "You asked me here originally, but you don't need me." 

"Of course I need a distraction to lure him into range."

"No, you just need to wait for him to stand up. You take your shot and you walk away. You never needed me here. What do you want from me, Garrus?"

Well, if she wants to play speculation ... "Maybe I wish you cared more."

"I always cared. That's why I'm going with you. I would never leave you even if I disagreed with you."

"Perhaps I should have said I wished you believed in me more."

Her fingertips run over the window glass. "I do believe in you. Completely. You're an adult. You don't need me making your decisions for you and telling you who you are. Your father already did plenty of that and it just made your life harder to figure out. Why would I do that to you?"

I love you. "Damn, you're good at this." He considers that she might be able to give the Commander Shepard speeches in her sleep.
"But it's the truth! I only ever tell you the truth!" Buildings blur past in the window. "Our relationship would be less messed up if I lied. Then you'd never know anything about me that I thought would upset you."

"I've seen that version of you in love. I think it ended with Kaidan in the hospital."

"I worry sometimes that you'll ask me for that."

"Why would I? I know exactly what it's like to be on fire." He runs a hand over his own scarred mandible. "I don't need to do it again."

Shepard takes his hand in her own. "I wanted to save you from the rocket, and I couldn't. I tried."

"I'm used to it by now. Makes me easy to spot on the battlefield. Saves me trying to get generals to respect a kid like me for my skills. Apparently there's a bit of logic that runs 'Someone with facial scars has seen shit. I should listen to him.'"

She's quiet as he parks the car.

"Ready?" Garrus asks.

"Are you actually going to do this again?"

"It was your idea."

"Because I wanted to get past this, not because I wanted you to do it." Shepard crosses her arms. "You could just kill him on Menae again," she suggests with a carefully neutral tone.

"I like to keep things tidy by finishing up loose ends."

"Alright." She gets out of the car. "But are you going to be killing him for what he actually did?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's been about 12 years for you and you've killed him five times, right?"

"Right." No need to get into exact figures.

"And you're angry right now?"

"I've always hated injustice. The thought that Sidonis could get away with this... Why should he go on living while 10 good men lie in unmarked graves?"

"So, are you angry at him, or are you angry at yourself?" She raises an eyebrow at him with a challenging look in her eyes that says she knows him better than he knows himself.

He ignores the feeling of walking out onto dangerously shifting sands. "Trying to find my weak point?"

"No, I think it's been there in front of me the whole time, I just didn't understand it completely. On Tuchanka with Victus, you told me that to the turian way of thinking, it's the commanding officer who is to blame when his underlings make a mistake. It's the commander's fault for promoting the wrong man. You're the commander. That would make the deaths of your entire squad your fault. But you're going to shoot Sidonis."

"I thought you were with me on this!" His words lash out at her, but he can feel only guilt. He wants
to expunge his mistake. It hasn't worked yet. The sense of failure that gnaws at him is quieter when Sidonis is dead. But it never goes away. The one thing he wants before the suicide mission is silence in his own mind.

"I am. But you seem to want more from me, so this is me trying to put all the pieces together now that I have better information. You pick the wrong person for your squad, you shoot him. Your suspect gets away in the Dr. Heart case and you want to shoot him. It's quick and easy and makes the problem go away, except it doesn't fix anything. Quick burst of anger, problem over, but everyone is still dead. You still don't talk about Omega. You're not any better than the first time. You're not healing."

"Because talking fixes everything," he says sarcastically. "Talk all you want, but it won't change my mind."

"It doesn't. Rana Thanoptis and Elnora, for example: Talking didn't fix them. But I only want to kill them now because I know talking won't work. I at least made the effort. You made some effort with Sidonis and he turned up on Menae for his people. That isn't enough? Because if it's not, why not just send him on that suicide mission again? You'd still be saving one other turian's life by replacing him with Sidonis. Surely that's worth it."

"It's the same squad with or without him."

"You're honestly the only person who cares if he lives or dies?" She looks up into his eyes, searchingly, but he has no empathy to offer.

"Yes."

"I see." She gets out of the car. "No one is ever going to come for Sidonis but you." She stretches her arms. "Let's do this."

Garrus finds himself walking the steps he's walked so many other times, stopping at the railing, and setting up his Mantis. Peering through the scope, he can see Sidonis dressed in fashionable green and red. He hardly looks like he's been on the run. Too clean. He's bent over in his seat with his head in his hands.

Then Shepard appears walking calmly along the lower level, heading right for the target as always.

Garrus's mandibles quiver with anticipation of the shot, and he has to concentrate to slow his breathing. *No one is ever going to come for Sidonis but you.* He growls under his breath at her words. The observation is too stark. There's something she was going to say and didn't. And now it's going to bug him.

Shepard greets the turian traitor cordially. She's going through all the right motions.

Garrus braces himself. "Move to the side, Shepard, you're in my way."

She stands still. "Listen, Sidonis, I'm here to help you."

The turian on the ground panics. "Don't ever say that name aloud."

"It's too late. I'm a friend of Garrus's. He wants you dead." What is she doing?

"Garrus? Is this some kind of joke?"

Garrus lowers his gun, using the visor to zoom in on the scene. "Damn it, Shepard. If he moves, I'm
taking the shot."

Sidonis shakes his head. "You're not kidding, are you? Screw this. I'm not sticking around to find out. Tell Garrus I had my own problems." He starts to move away, and Garrus resettles his gun against his shoulder.

A gauntleted hand reaches out to snag the turian's shoulder. "Don't move. I'm the only thing standing between you and a hole in the head."

"Fuck," says Garrus as Sidonis echoes the sentiment through the comm.

The traitor's voice goes up several octaves as his subharmonics begin to sing of fear and death and regret. "Look... I didn't want to do it... I didn't have a choice."

"Everyone has a choice" says Shepard in sync with Garrus. But she's doesn't remember. How could she know what he would say? It's the commander voice though ... she came up with this on her own... did he change her? Did he bring her back wrong?

Meanwhile, the panicked Sidonis is going through his paces. "They got to me. Said they'd kill me if I didn't help. What was I supposed to do?"

"Die for the Cause. That is the song, isn't it?" She whistles a few bars and it takes a few seconds for Garrus to recognize the tune of his own anthem because the human vocalizations are distinctly wrong even if the song is absolutely correct and still on his top five playlist.

"You're right. It would be better than this. I wake up every night ... sick ... sweating... each of their faces staring at me... accusing me. I'm already a dead man. I don't sleep. Food has no taste. Some days, I just want it to be over."

Shepard matches Sidonis as he paces. "Then you're in luck, aren't you? I have the Archangel of Death with me to take care of all of your problems. Deep down, you've just been waiting for him, haven't you? Otherwise you wouldn't be here. You came to the last place he worked. His contacts are here. His friends are here. It is the worst possible choice of hiding place even if it is the largest city in the galaxy. You're waiting for him."

Sidonis is watching Shepard as he leans over the railing, giving Garrus a great shot. But as he raises his gun, Shepard leans her own back against the railing and dangles her head in his sights. "Is this truly what you want? Because I have a better proposition for you..."

"What is your game, human?"

"What's yours? Your specialty I mean. Garrus had you doing something, and it couldn't have been combat or you'd have held your tongue better."

"Prolonged pain is different than a bullet to the head."

"True, but I still have more faith in turian training than to think you were a combat specialist."

"I was just a soldier. Didn't like it. I'm better with surveillance."

"So you agreed to meet here with the high vantage points because it's just the perfect place to get your head shot off by a sniper since you know no one watches the back entrances."

Sidonis hangs his head and says nothing.
"Good, here are your options: 1) I let Garrus shoot you like the coward he thinks you are; 2) You go home to Palaven, get a job working on updating the surveillance network, and die in a pointless suicide mission in about 16 months, defending your homeworld when she needs it the most; or 3) you take a job working for the current human ambassador who likes turians and needs someone discreet and unassociated with him to keep an eye on a traitorous underling." Shepard lifts her visor and looks right down the barrel at Garrus. "What do you think?"

Garrus growls, "10 men are dead."

"So give him the option to save 10 more." She turns to Sidonis. "Garrus told me you have no one at the moment. He's the last person who cares about your sorry existence. It's your choice if you leave it that way."

"They ... actually need people on Palaven?" Sidonis asks suspiciously.

"They will. You must know Garrus always has the best intel and strategies..."

"Then... then... let me go home. Let me go home, Garrus, and I'll do everything I can."

Shepard nods and looks back up at Garrus, hidden in the shadows. And how can he say no to her about recruiting every soldier she can to the war? Even if he's not the least bit useful, it's easier to let Sidonis go to Menae. Easier to let him be shot down with his team. Easier to face him again as a marauder and put a bullet in his brain. Everything else is easier than saying no to Shepard when she thinks she's come up with something clever and is smiling again.

Chapter End Notes

"The unexamined life is not worth living." Socrates on trial for his life, 399 BC.
"You couldn't just let me kill him," says Garrus as he drives them back to the Intergalactic Shopping Mall of the Stars in Zakera Ward.

"No. I couldn't." Shepard looks up at her companion's profile against the faux starlight. "It's my fault things got this bad."

"Shepard. You were dead. You didn't make Sidonis into a traitor."

"I didn't. But you came to me as your commander and friend, and I didn't help you."

"You did!" says her exasperated turian. "The bastard was dead!"

"And maybe that is what needs to happen. I don't know. What I do know is that I handled it wrong." She looks at the parking options. "Take us to the next floor."

"Why? The Normandy is docked near the 27th floor."

"Let the rest of the crew wait. Miranda will have everything in order. I'm going to do what I should have done the first time you told me you lost your team: Get you really drunk."

"That's... better?"

"It's a start."

Garrus parks the sky car. "If you want to go out drinking..."

"It's not about that. Tonight we drink until everything stops hurting. Or we pass out. Whichever happens first."

"This sounds like a bad idea."

"Why?"

"There isn't enough liquor on the Citadel," he drawls.

"Then there's nothing to worry about." She gets out of the car and spins around to look at him, walking backwards. "You going to drink with me or not?"

"I don't think I have a choice if I don't want to face the wrath of Miranda for leaving you alone."

"You're safe. I held off 10,000 batarians by myself and now I'm made of cybernetics. I'll lurch back to ship eventually. You don't have to come. And if you do, there's a two drink minimum."
"Hrmmm... 10,000 batarians..." he considers. "You're offering up stories on the Skyllian Blitz?"

"For stories about Omega. Yes."

"You think you have something good."

"Saving Elysium was supposed to be my shore leave ..." She slips through the doors to the Dark Star Lounge as they automatically close, leaving him yelling "Shore leave!?" before he can get the doors open himself.

"Shore leave, Shepard? You were in the Skyllian Blitz because you were on shore leave?"

She snags a bottle from the bar, handing some credits to a disinterested turian bartender. "Yes. I was off-duty and --"

"I'm beginning to believe you're cursed!" He reaches for her arm, but she neatly avoids him, picking up a bottle of dextro liquor and pressing it into his hand. "Udina tried to ground the Normandy, the Collectors stole the crew of the Normandy, your own clone tried to steal the Normandy all while on shore leave, and you're telling me that you couldn't even go on shore leave safely before that?"

"I never thought of it that way before. I guess the answer is yes."

"How do you even ... Why ... ?"

"If you want answers, you're going to have to do some drinking. And some talking. You've never even told me how you earned the name Archangel. Angels are human things." Shepard takes a swig from her bottle.

"There was this street preacher on Omega going on about angels saving souls." Garrus puts a hand over his heart. "With your death, I just couldn't manage, and I dedicated to fighting for your God in your memory."

Shepard raises her brows. "Uhuh. I see your chats with Vega have given you better lines of bullshit."

"You're so certain I couldn't experience a religious conversion?"

"Yup. There's no Bible in your footlocker. You work every day of the week. Basically, you don't behave like someone who converted."

"Still working on my people skills. And I call bullshit on your shore leave story."

"Nope. It's true. I was staying in town looking after my cousin in the colony hospital. We were going to catch up with the crews when he finished recovering from a burst appendix." She pulls out a chair. "Your turn."

"I don't even know what an appendix is."

They settle at a small table away from the dance floor. "Internal organ in humans. Sometimes they explode. Medigel won't fix that."

"Your organs explode?" He looks horrified.

"They're only a little useful. But they kill you if you don't seek immediate treatment. And then the doctors have to clean all of your internal organs off... Anyway. You still haven't told me how you became Archangel."
"It's silly. Some Blue Suns thugs were beating up on a human couple and I took care of it. They tried to give me money. I was going to say I was just doing my job, and then I realized I didn't have a job. They called me an angel." He sighs. "They were good people. I came back to check on them a few days later and they tried to feed me dinner. It was hard explaining to them why their generosity wouldn't work. And while I was visiting, some thugs tried to break into their neighbor's apartment across the hall and I took care of that, too." He shakes his head. "They said some things about angels again, and the neighbor said I couldn't be some common sort of angel, I must be an archangel to 'dispatch so many minions of evil' or something like that."

"And the name stuck?"

"I did spend a lot of time with humans at first."

"Oh?"

"They're easy to break." He lifts up his hand to tick off points on his fingers. "They don't have any plates. They don't have natural regeneration. They have few biotics and they don't live in the slums of Omega." He looks at Shepard in confusion. "And now I find out your organs explode. I don't know how your species manages to not only survive, but hold a place on the Council."

Shepard shrugs. "We're stubborn bastards?"

"That must be it." Garrus takes another drink from the bottle. "Your turn. And this had better get good."

"I was sticking around for Robert. I think you'd like him. He felt so useless after being stuck in bed the whole time, he volunteered for duty on the front lines against the batarians afterwards and made a name for himself as the Butcher of Torfan. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth."

"And this is relevant?"

"I suppose it's only relevant if you meet my family. I just ... you could be sitting here with him instead. Anderson had his choice of XO for the Tokyo and it came down to the two of us. I want to think he picked me because I'm the best candidate, but some days I wonder if Rob would have been the better choice-"

"No."

"No?"

"This is not good enough to talk about Omega." Garrus takes a drink. "It has a happy ending all wrapped up with a bow at the end. Shepard saves the world. Shepard saves the galaxy."

"That's what I do. I run a suicide op, and everyone survives."

He gives her a hard look. "Tell me about losing."

"There was Thessia," she says.

"That wasn't your loss, that was Liara's. You felt bad for people you just met dying because that's you. But you had nothing to do with their situation. And you still won the Catalyst in the end."

"There was Ashley."

Garrus sighs. "I miss her, too. But I know that story. I've even heard you tell it to Emily Wong." He
peers at her through his visor. "Tell me a story that hasn't already been prepared for the press."

"Ummm..." This is getting difficult.

"You have lots of stories. You must have one."

"I... I'm trying to think of one."

"You're N7. You must have lost on some of your missions."

She'd faced challenges when she was vying to be N7, but she'd managed to overcome them all. "There was the SR-1."

"I know that one better than I knew Williams," he says darkly.

"Jenkins ... but I only just met him. He was hardly the first to die on me."

"Who was the first person you lost?"

She shifts uncomfortably. "I don't like to talk about it."

"Reallllly? Funny how that is." Garrus orders another bottle. "Tell me that one."

"I don't like to talk about any of them. I just have to do it anyway because it's my duty." She looks back up. "Besides, you wanted something I hadn't practiced for the vids."

Armored talons tap the tabletop. "I'll rescind that criterion."

"Umm... there are reasons I don't talk about it."

"There are reasons I don't talk about Omega."

"I would bet every credit that I've ever owned that our reasons are very different," she says with a warning tone to her voice. "And besides, I wasn't even involved in that mission. It's not the same at all."

"You're only making me more intrigued."

"You shouldn't be." Shepard slumps over her bottle. "You will tell me all about Omega?"

"Maybe."

Shepard sighs and orders a selection of bottles from the table kiosk. She tries to find the right way to put it. She would have had to tell him eventually because if she didn't, someone else surely would have. "Alright. It's not exactly the first person I knew who died, but they're all tied up in the same operation. And I don't exactly remember it well." She looks at the bottle in her hand and finishes it. "My father died at Shanxi. He was killed by turians."

"I did wonder if you were ever going to talk about that," Garrus says calmly.

"Wait. You knew?"

"It's not as if your biography isn't everywhere."

"I didn't think you'd research me." She feels oddly betrayed. "We're supposed to be friends. I thought ... I thought you'd just ask me anything you wanted to know."
He puts a hand over hers. "I didn't look you up, Vega did. He likes researching people on extranet. He asked me about it once, how we managed to get past things like that."

She scrapes a finger over the glass etchings of the batarian ale in her hand. "What did you tell him?"

Garrus bursts out laughing. "You'll like this. I told him we lived in the present, not the past."

"That's ... a relief." Their fingers twine together as she snickers. "Well, that's most of the story then. We were at Shanxi."

"Wait. You were there?" he asks, suddenly intense.

"Yes."

"But you're ... you're not that old."

She snorts. "I was very small, yes."

"I've heard humans get self-righteous about turians sending children to boot camp at 15. You would have been even younger... This doesn't make sense."

"I was a spacer baby. Both my parents were career military. My grandparents were career military. My great-grandparents were career military. My aunts and uncles ... You get the picture. There were a few rebellious ones who tried for a civilian life. Ironically, they were killed off almost completely by batarians.... " She shakes her head. "I'm getting side-tracked. Point is, when it came down to it, we were at peace, exploring the universe, and the majority of my immediate relatives were in the same situation and couldn't offer me a more comfortable life, so my parents and several other service members kept their children with them on the long journeys through space. Then Shanxi happened. It's not like there was anywhere to drop us off before going into battle. So, I was there."

She shrugs. "What I could piece together, turians were these scary monsters who made people disappear. Poof! Gone! One day you see someone, and the next, they're dead. And one day that happened to my dad. Poof! No more bedtime stories for you, kid." The impulse to withdraw her hand and curl up is strong, but she resists it. "So, that's it. The first person I lost who mattered. But you pick up and soldier on because there are too many things that need to be done."

"Your nonchalance is bordering on the suspicious."

"What?"

"When you tell a suspect someone close to them has died, you listen for them to react to the news. Subharmonics change. Human faces change. People show how upset they are."

"It's an old wound. It twinges on occasion, but it's healed over. What am I supposed to do? Go on a vengeance spree, taking out every turian I see for something that happened more than 25 years ago?"

"So you did think about that?"

"When I was a resentful little kid, yeah. But it's not what my dad would want. He wanted me to believe in people because we fight for them, not against them. So I pay attention to individuals not mistakes of the past. It took me some time to come to that conclusion. You missed my being angry phase."

"Not every turian had anything to do with Shanxi. Were you ever going to tell me?"
"Yes. I had it mentally filed under 'Things to Do Before You Meet My Mother.'"

"And that was going to happen?"

"Certainly. Sometime after the war. I have no idea when. This is a woman who was too busy to visit me during peace time when I was in lock up for six months." Shepard notices the bitterness in her own voice and winces. "We ... have very different views of ... of most things." She tightens her grip on his hand.

"You might have mentioned that before."

"And you might have told me more about your family." Was he ever going to tell her about his mother, for example. Or was she going to have to spend her life knowing what was in the Shadow Broker's files without ever being able to ask him about it or comfort him when his mom died, presumably sometime between now and the Reaper invasion. She wishes they'd taken off their gauntlets so she could feel his skin. "I'm sure you would have gotten around to it eventually. It just wasn't important when we were facing galactic extinction. Now, no more diversions, Vakarian. Tell me about Omega."

Chapter End Notes

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth..." The Code of Hammurabi, 1754 BC.

The building Shepard's squad wanders around during ME2 is an unnamed location in Zakera Ward, but it certainly looks like a shopping mall to me.

According to the Mass Effect Wiki, all versions of Shepard were on Elysium for the Skyllian Blitz. Joker references it in ME3. Just have no idea what Ruthless and Sole Survivor Shepards did at the time of the attack. So cousin Colonist Ruthless Shepard was down for the count after major surgery.

Also, yes, it's canon that Shepard(s) were on shore leave when it happened.

The Shanxi stuff is all my own invention because that was the big battle of the time.
"Spirits are not generally forgiving." Garrus finishes off his drink. "They only feel what their people feel. Omega feels angry and miserable. You'd notice if you actually lived there. You're either in the gangs or you're stepped on. I didn't want to be either of those things. I just wanted to ... disappear."

"But I needed something to do with myself, so I kept helping people. It was hard to stop." He looks over the drinks on the table and picks an Epyrus rum. "I'd walk down the street and the gangs would start beating up a shopkeeper with no regard for the witnesses, like they just expected us to look away. I couldn't do that."

"That was how I met Sidonis. He ... I rescued him from the Blood Pack. They were beating the crap out of him in a bar." Garrus shakes his head and downs the bottle. "I should have left him. Instead, I took down the vorcha and the krogan and then we went out drinking, two boys from Cipritine a long way from home." The bottle cracks in his hand, and he chucks it dead center at the waste recycler.

"Being Archangel was his idea. I had the rep, but I couldn't do it on my own. He knew some guys who knew some guys, and when I thought about it, I knew some guys who knew some guys." He unbuckles his gauntlets, freeing his talons to cut into another cap. "Suddenly, I was leading my own band of mercenaries on Omega. Forgotten specialists who were tired of rules getting between them and war on drugs, tired of 'cultural sensitivity' getting between them and stopping the slave trade."

"In the end, it all went to shit. The other guys wanted out. We'd made a lot of money from taking down Omega's big three. They could have retired and gone elsewhere. Butler had his wife and daughter. Grundan Krul had three wives. Monteague had grandchildren he wasn't ashamed to see now that he didn't have to rely on their money. But I wanted us to put the credits back to work on the streets, buy better equipment, keep at it. I was finally getting somewhere. I couldn't stop."

"Of course not. You weren't done," Shepard speaks as if she could give him absolution for his mistakes.

"It cost them their lives. I could have let them go."

"You made them stay, huh? Handcuffed them to their desks?" Shepard neatly stacks her gauntlets on the tableside and picks out another glass of something purple.

He drunkenly points a talon at her. "I did not miss you being absurd."

"It's the best cure for when you start imagining you're so important to the galaxy that you can control other people's lives. You led, they chose to follow." There are the days it's as if she's memorized
Kirro's *Morals of Leadership*. How is a human a better turian than he is?

"I picked Sidonis to be my partner, and he nearly killed us all. I was an idiot to trust him."

"You picked Sidonis to be your partner and together you built an incredible team that had the three largest mercenary groups in the galaxy on the run for their immoral activities. Your problem wasn't your followers, it was in not accounting for your opposition. Kidnapping and torturing one member of the group to get at the others is ... predictable."

"This is not making me feel better."

"It shouldn't. You made a mistake. You're just fixating on the wrong one. Sidonis isn't the problem. Thinking that the others had the same level of dedication is. In fact, thank God, it was Sidonis they picked. He has no one. Imagine them picking Butler instead and then capturing his wife and child and torturing them in front of him. You said these men had families. It means they all had weaknesses to exploit." She reaches for another bottle of green stuff. "At least be mad at yourself for the right mistake: You miscalculated the safety of your team."

"You're doing that thing again where you're above it all."

"I am not." She takes another drink. "I'm just being practical."

"Yes, you are. You always have a lesson ready. I'm tired of being your student."

"I thought we were past that point. But then you came back for me because you didn't want to face the future. Clearly I didn't do my job right."

"Says the woman who doesn't want to deal with any of it. You hold onto death like it's some kind of talisman."

"Like you're holding on to me?" She looks grimly at a glass.

"What is wrong with wanting a chance at happiness?" *Was.* He should have said was.

"There are many ways to be happy..." She looks away from him. "Maybe that's the lesson: You don't move on. You don't forgive. Your loyalty never swerves any more than you do."

"Turians dig in and fight to the last breath, yes. I thought you knew that one."

"Then why aren't you fighting for Sidonis? He lost his way and needs his captain to guide him."

Damn. "That's different."

"It isn't. It's just hard because it requires balling up all your personal feelings and putting them to the side because you have to put someone else first."

"The way you just discard the ones you don't like?"

"It might look like that, but that's only because I've had practice. Lots of practice." She holds out an empty bottle on her right palm. Then her hand fills with blue flame. "After my father died, I didn't entirely understand. I thought he might come back. No one else had come back without their squads. But he might. He might be the first one. I waited every day." The bottle wobbles and begins to collapse inward, slowly melting.

"Eventually the war ended, and then my mother was transferred. I didn't want to leave the Edmonton. When Mom was called to control me, she tried to drag me away. That's when everything
went blue and my fingers sank into the floor." The bottle collapses like ice thrown into the sun, the only thing keeping the table dry is a barrier. "It was the first time I used my biotics. I burned my mother's hands. Medi-gel wasn't something humans had back then, so she still has the scars from the skin grafts."

She opens her eyes and looks at him. "I didn't do it on purpose. I didn't do any of it on purpose. I didn't know what I was doing. I was angry, desperate, panicking. It's a great reminder of what happens when I lose control. Raw emotion is destructive." Patterns of lines and hash marks begin to appear across the liquid and the barrier shifts. The liquid begins to freeze over. "Once you destroy something, it's gone. Better to reflect and refine it than to let emotion get the better of you." She sets down a glass bowl. "Once you kill Sidonis, you change everything permanently. He's no one and no one else cares what happens to him. I think that makes it worse because that means the only person he has to help him is you."

"No one can give the dramatic speeches quite like you can." The bowl is cool to the touch as he picks it up, turning it over and over. "You win. You have successfully motivated me to try to fix Sidonis."

The tension in her shoulders eases. "Good." She looks at her drinks and picks out the ryncol.

"This is why I need you."

"You figured out time travel by yourself. I don't think you need me."

"I got lucky." He sighs. "Sometimes I think Hackett doomed us all by not letting you make the speech at the line. Maybe if I just changed that one thing, the whole battle would change because you would argue the Reapers to death."

"It was Hackett's plan and Hackett's charge. Besides, he knows the men. He worked his way up from a private. I'm just ... just a glorified gofer." She grimaces as she sips at her bottle. "We never should have been there in the first place. We wouldn't have been if the gate from Ilos hadn't disappeared." She looks at him thoughtfully. "Is it gone now?"

"Disappeared three months after you died."

"Damn. That would have fixed ... some things. Saved us the charge through no man's land. Fewer people could die."

"Yes." He looks at her tired eyes and brushes a bit of hair out of her face. "That was one of the first things I checked on. " He traces a finger along one of the cracks in her cheek.

"Doesn't matter." She plays with the collection of glasses and bottles. "Tell me about them."

"Hmmm?"

"Tell me about your crew, Butler and the rest. Tell me about what you did to make three mercenary companies that mad." She smiles up at him. "Tell me a story where everything goes right."

"Well, one night, Erash the hacker ..."

#

The air is colder than it should be. Rather than the all-pervasive heat of the gunnery situated above the engine core, there is the warmth of a body pressed to his. The stench of alcohol and sweat assaults his nose.
Grarrus opens his eyes to a field of stars passing overhead and the familiarity of the captain's quarters. He pulls Shepard closer to him, feeling the artificial texture of the undersuit still covering her.

They were drunk last night. So drunk. By the time he finished talking about Mierin's dreams of contracting with a dalatrass, and Ripper's wish to have enough money to properly protect the colony of Piper's Edge, and Sensat's inventing a listening device he was sure would outshine the best STG could devise, and Melanis's dreams to prove herself to the Cabal and return to Invictus... by the time he finished talking about Omega, they'd gone back to talking about the SR-1. Not only Pressley and Crosby and Lowe waiting on Alchera, but Shepard also told tales of the Tokyo. And when they'd finished that round and those stories, they'd moved on to ships and friends lost to batarian raiders and C-Sec officers lost in the wards. And then they'd drunk several rounds to Ashley.

After that, they might have stopped, but they were going to have to walk around the back of the ship to get to the elevator, and that brought thoughts of Mordin and his experiments. And so they drank to him and Legion and Thane. At which time, they seemed to have passed the point of no return, and were drinking to keep upright.

And there were always more people to drink to: The turians of Menae and the Miracle at Palaven. Tarquin and the 9th Platoon. The colonists of Freedom's Progress and Fehl Prime and Ferris Fields. The fools who went to Sanctuary. The human resistance. The whole Spiritsdamned galaxy.

By the time the Dark Star staff kicked them out, they were so drunk that it seemed only natural to stagger back to the ship together and stumble into bed. He's not certain if either of them could have made it that far without the other to help.

Garrus shouldn't be here with her.

But, since he's already here, he may as well enjoy it until the call of the bathroom becomes too much to withstand. "I should have known better than to suggest meeting you in a bar."

To his surprise she mumbles, "Well, look who's still here. You're still trying to keep up with me. That's your mistake." And rolls over to rest her cheek on top of his keel.

"I have figured out how to keep up with you," he chuckles and strokes her hair.

"Not when it comes to avoiding a hangover the morning after. Biotics: Sometimes you don't have the headache."

He lifts his head and cracks his neck. "That's because you have enough pillows."

"I guess I can remedy that." She starts groping for pillows and other supporting comforts. Garrus wishes they could be the way he remembers. But it won't last. "I don't know how to do this."

"Do what?" she asks sleepily.

"Keep moving forward without you." She's here in the gentle pressure against his carapace, in the green glow later.

There's a rueful sadness in her laugh. "Humans say 'Time heals all wounds.'"

Wounds are for your enemies to dig in their talons and rip off your plates. "Easy for you to say, you won't be there. You made it pretty clear you don't care what happened between us."
"That's not true. You're the only person I was going to confide in about what was happening to me because you're the only person I trust. You're my mate."

"But you don't want that any more, and I --"

"Who says you're not what I want?"

"You did. You never meant to stay."

"But I did! I didn't just intend to! I did spend my entire life with you!" Shepard is so distressed she's shouting and Garrus pulls away from her in pain.

Once he's moving, it's easier to keep moving, pulling away from the warmth of the bed and finding bits and pieces of his armor. "And then you tried to erase it."

"I'm... I'm sorry. I just... I... I didn't want to do this again." Shepard holds her head, belying her comment about headaches.

"And I would have done this again and again forever if it meant I could be with you." Because she's the center of his universe that gives the rest of it meaning. "We were bonded, Madelaine. It meant more to me than fun and games."

"I know. I--"

"No. You don't know. You never had the time to know everything you mean to me."

She's quiet now, as he reattaches bits of metal. The light of the empty fish tank is just enough to see by. Her arms are wrapped around a pillow as she sits up in bed. Buckles and clasps make more sense to his fingers now than they did last night.

Finally she whispers, "I love you. I always will. We just both need more than that to keep going or we'll break each other." Shepard frowns. "I can't be the only thing that goes right."

"You wouldn't be if you'd only believe in a future together." Garrus leaves before he can indulge in arguing and make everything worse.

Chapter End Notes

So, this chapter in particular is making me happy because I feel like it reflects back on things correctly, but at the same time it's making me question if I'm moving in the right direction. It's certainly taking me longer to get Garrus and Shepard back together than I thought it would. Partially because they're stubborn and partially because there's a lot of ground to cover in between.

Anyway, reactions appreciated since I want to wrap up this second section in the next couple of weeks.
Shepard sits in the mess, staring at her N7 coffee cup. It looks lonely.

She's not certain when she and Garrus had started eating together the first time around. It had simply happened. Their biorhythms were in sync: A lifetime in space on military watches led her to live 24-hour day divided into four-hour shifts rather than a life dictated by a sunrise; A life on Palaven revolved around the heat of a sun and the light of two moons, leaving two waking and two resting periods, and turian-dominated C-Sec hadn't changed that. It wasn't an exact fit, but somehow meals together had clicked into place.

She keeps expecting him to show up, to drift back into their old routine, to set his cup of kava at her table.

But he hasn't. The smart thing to do would be to accept it.

She finishes her drink and washes her cup, returning it to its place next to an old one in C-Sec blue before beginning her duties.

#

A scene plays out on the monitor: An Asian man in silvery armor and a small beard is tossed down on a rumpled bed by a black-hooded woman. He's trying to be serious:

"Kasumi, if you're seeing this, it's because I'm dead. The information we found is all here. It's big, Kasumi. If the council ever got wind of this... the Alliance could be implicated. Kasumi, I... I encrypted the information to keep it safe. And I uploaded the encryption key to your graybox, so no one could get the whole package."

And she's not having any of it, capturing his hands and covering his mouth with hers.

Shepard feels like an intruder, a voyeur in someone else's tragedy, watching Kasumi run from one intimate moment to the next while the recording plays. The spike of her heartbeat is clearly displayed on the biological readouts. Kasumi should know there's no point to getting worked up about it, that this is only an echo of Keiji Okuda.

But Kasumi wraps fingers around Keiji's phantom belt buckle anyway while he continues his carefully prepared speech, "But if I'm dead, and if anyone knows about this... then I've made you a target, my love. I'm so...so sorry."

"Keiji." She says that one name with all the pain her playfulness hides.

"I know you, Kasumi. You'll want to keep these memories forever."
A different recording flits across Shepard's mind. A coffee-skinned man standing at a terminal, weeping.

"Stay with me! Run -- get out of there! You can make it!"

"No I can't, Steve. But you can. Promise me. I love you. But I know you. Don't make me an anchor. Promise me, Steve."

Simple words: I know you.

"Please, Kasumi," Keiji's empty image begs as she's given up trying to pin him down and they now stand in a simulated void. "Destroy these files. There's nothing more I can do to protect you."

The thief's carefully painted lips quiver. "I-I can't do that. This is all that's left!"

"Goodbye, Kasumi. I love you." Keiji's arms fold around her in a final hug before he disappears.

Kasumi hunches over as she removes the virtual reality glasses she'd been wearing. Shepard looks her over and asks sympathetically, "Is there any way we can just destroy the information?"

The smile beneath the hood is sadness tinged with pride. "No. Keiji's a master at encrypting files. He laced the information into his memories. You can't get one without experiencing the other."

Shepard tilts her head down and closes her eyes. It would be healthier to accept the loss and move on. The past cannot be changed. This past, anyway. You could change. Once something is destroyed, it's gone forever. "If it's that important to you, keep it. Just makes sure you're ready to live with the consequences."

Kasumi pulls out the glasses again as their shuttle continues its trajectory back to the ship. "Yeah, I am. I'll stay off the grid. No one will know I exist." Her lips twitch up in a smile. "I think I want this. Thanks, Shepard."

"You're welcome." Shepard moves away from the monitors. No need to see how things play out in Kasumi's mind now. She looks out at the sea of stars. That's where she should be: Out there, twirling through space. An end.

Her gloved hand falls across Kasumi's forearm. "Before you ... go, I'd like to ask you something."

"Sure, Shep." The voice sounds friendly, but it's almost as hard as reading a quarian when her eyes are always hidden in shadow.

"If you could do it all over again, even if you couldn't change anything, would you?"

"Umm... Yeah, that's kind of what I was planning on doing right now ..."

"Again and again and again...?"

"It's not anything I haven't already done in my own head. I already discuss my plans with him, with my memory of him, but the different perspectives from his memories should be more like him and less like I'm talking to myself. Why? What's the real question here?"

"Why ... do this to yourself? Why lose yourself in memories? Why not ... look for someone new?"

The smaller woman laughs. "I'm that transparent to you?"

No, I've only watched this play out once already.
Kasumi sighs in the silence. "I don't know about you, but some of us only get one."

"One?" One life? One chance?

"Do you believe in soulmates?"

"Not really." Shepard shrugs uncomfortably. A pretty idea that there could be someone who was perfect for you. But depressing at the same time. The galaxy is vast. If you only get one, it would be easy to never meet. By the same token, if you spent all your time looking, what if you never appreciated a good person (maybe the right person) beside you. Love is messy enough without that kind of pressure.

"I believe. And I believe I was lucky enough to find mine." She settles back against the bench. "Call me a romantic, but no one will ever compare to Keiji. He knew me when I was .... I was nothing. And he still loved me. He's the only one who had me completely figured out ... though maybe you'll give him some competition. I'd better be careful what stories I tell." The humor is back as she weaves in and out of the answer the commander is looking for.

"Without him, I'm only half of what I was. This box is the only thing that matters to me. If I die on this job for Cerberus, then I won't have to go through life like I'm missing a limb. If I don't die? Well, now things will be more tolerable. A prosthetic for my soul."

"You can't live on lost love alone," Shepard protests.

"Then he shouldn't have died." The other woman leans over again, playing her fingers along the edge of her visor. "I don't expect you to understand. I'm not like most people who want a little house and kids and a dog. I wouldn't know what to do with myself without the challenge of plotting a heist and the thrill of executing it." She flips the visor back on. "But now I can come home to him again."

Shepard pats Kasumi's shoulder. "You're right. I don't need to understand. Just be happy."

The small gloved hand squeezes hers. "I am."

#

Garrus is bent over his console when Shepard enters the gunnery. Normally, she'd give him more space and time to center himself after their last encounter, but she needs him right now. "Hey, big guy. Have you got a minute?"

"I'm in the middle of some calibrations--"

"For a cannon we're not going to be using."

"I'm trying to come up with a way to keep the Javelins as backup weapons and still fit in the prototype Thanix. The later Thanix models are smaller, so if I blow the casing and rewire it with better materials, we could end up with 1.6 times the firepower."

"Can we afford the power draw?"

"That's the second part of my problem after I fit the cannons together. I wanted to prepare a plan to present to you."

"Don't forget to give Daniels and Donnelly a heads up."

"Of course, Shepard." He turns back to the console. Shepard doesn't leave. "I do better work when
"You're not looking over my shoulder."

"I know. I'm just trying to work out a problem and I need your feedback."

Garrus's talons cease keying in numbers. "Alright, Shepard. I can make time."

She lifts an eyebrow and chokes on a laugh.

"What?" he asks confusedly replaying their conversation in his mind. "Oh! I... err...."

Shepard giggles again and settles down on an empty crate. "For such a witty man, you stumble over your own words often."

"I was focused on a complicated math problem, in which time was a dimension just like any other."

"Which you could then manipulate unlike any other, but you forgot that?"

"You said you wanted feedback?"

"Yes. I just got back from helping Kasumi and... well, I'm trying to order my thoughts."

"Alright."

"You remember Cortez and his recording?"

His mandibles pull tight in puzzlement. "Yes."

"You remember the whole bit about 'I know you, don't make me an anchor'?"

"Yes..." his subvocals are probably conveying important information right now, but she can't hear them, and can't guess at them, and so has to move on blindly.

"I... Kasumi had a similar message, and it's left me... I don't know. Wondering what the right answer is."

"What's the question?"

Shepard closes her eyes and tries to piece it together. "I guess it's more than one question. The first is if they do know who they're talking to. In an intimate sense."

"I thought dossiers indicated those couples had been together for years."

"Yes. It's not as simple as time, though. I mean they obviously do know who they're talking to, but the messages never work, so maybe they don't really know who they're talking to? They pick the wrong words and don't get the result they want." She opens her eyes to find him standing over her.

"This is an incredibly sneaky way of trying to persuade me-"

"I'm not trying to persuade you of anything. I don't know the answers. I want to talk so that I can figure things out, and talking about other people is easier. Then there's more data points that aren't clouded by my personal feelings. And you're the only person I trust to talk to." She licks her lips. "I'll apologize and go if you tell me to, but I meant what I said: I need your feedback."

"There's no one else to talk to?"

"Yes." She looks up into his crystal clear eyes. "Besides, no one else matters in terms of the answer."
Or are you not going to give me the chance to figure us out?"

"Alright, Shepard." He turns to the side and begins slowly pacing in front of her. "The first question again?"

"Do they really know who they're talking to?"

"Hard for us to say. We've never met Kasumi's lover."

"Keiji."

"We've never met Keiji or Robert. We just have a recording saying they think they know who they're talking to and the fact that they were in long-term relationships. Longer than ours, I think." He casts a glance at her and continues pacing. "But they both think they do. Why not take their word for it?"

"Because people see what they want to see, not always what's there."

"Do you see what's really there?"

She raises an eyebrow at him.

He repeats his question more slowly, "Do you see what's really there or are you being cynical?"

"I'm not sure what I'm seeing. Like you said, we don't know enough about the ones who died. You. I think I see you clearly most of the time." She waves a hand at him. "The outline at least, not all of the details. We never had time to go over the details."

He pauses in front of her again, staring down with his piercing gaze. It's a strange thing to like being pinned down and examined like that, but she always has when he does it. He focuses on her because she matters to him and the truth matters to him. "Do you see me?" she asks.

"Yes. Most of the time. Even if I can't always predict how you'll sneak up on your quarry."

She smiles at him and raises a finger. "Ah, but you can predict I'll sneak up on it."

"Yes. Yes I can." He sounds pleased with himself and he smiles back before continuing his pacing, hands clasped behind his back.

"So, I guess we can presume they knew who they were talking to. But they failed to leave an effective message. The messages themselves only made things worse: Kasumi and Cortez wouldn't get rid of them no matter what it cost them. I mean, I eventually encouraged Cortez to leave his recording at the memorial wall, but before that it was the exact opposite of what Robert wanted."

"And Kasumi is lost in her virtual world when she's not working."

"Still?"

"Yes. It's worse, actually."

"Crap."

"It's not your fault."

"It is. I could have told her to delete that thing."
"I don't think she'd do it unless you were standing over her and making her press the buttons. It'd be like forcing her to kill him herself. You would never do that."

"You're right. I wouldn't." Shepard rests her chin in her hand. "But that's what he asked her to do, isn't it? Here's a complete copy of me, now kill it?" She looks up at Garrus. "At least Robert may not have known he was being recorded. He just wanted to say goodbye. And to encourage Steve to move on afterwards. That's the part that failed, and maybe it failed in part because of the recording. So it's different. A variation with the same result." She bites her lip. "What did you do with the message I left you?"

"Message?"

"Video will if you prefer. What did you do with it?"

"I ..." His mandibles pull in. "Didn't get anything."

"What? That was one of the most painful things I've ever done in my life and you didn't even get it?"

"No." His eyes narrow. It is possible to see the future if you know people. Shepard is aware of seeing a shot fired from a gun that hasn't been bought yet. Someone, some length of time after she is dead, will open a door, walk outside, and find a bullet mysteriously lodged in their brain. There is no calling the bullet back into the barrel, and she's not certain she'd want to if she could. His pacing becomes a little quicker. "What was in it?"

"Well, I didn't say 'I know you.' Mostly I said I was sorry and I love you. And that everyone was going to need you to pull them together. The center must hold or things fall apart. It's ... what keeps--kept me going."

"A pep talk," he chuckles. "That is you."

"Yes. It's what you would need if I died because we were in the middle of a mission. Whoever has the recording must be disappointed. No state secrets. Just me giving my heart away and too dead to blush over it." She leans back. "So you never got it. I guess this isn't quite the same then. Would it be better if it was?"

"Hrm...?"

"Would it have changed anything if you'd gotten a message from me telling you to move on?"

He shakes his head. "You humans and moving on. It doesn't have to work like that."

"How does it work for turians then?"

"For one, you remember," he says with a subgrowl, leaning over her, hands pressed against the wall. He closes his eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm so tired of being told to get over it."

"A wake."

"I am awake."

"No. You need a wake. It's a human morning rite. The body is displayed at home and everyone tells stories about the deceased. Usually while getting plastered."

"Is that why you took me out drinking?"

"Yes."
"Thank you." He flutters his mandibles in an expression she hasn't yet categorized. "It was the right idea."

"With me ... what would have been better?" She chuckles slightly. "Other than living, obviously."

"Turians focus on the bond. Families have Spirits, too. When someone dies, the energy of their soul goes into the Spirits they belonged to. We're part of the Normandy together, but I did want you to be my family. Even if you died, we would have a permanent tie."

Her eyes hurt as she raises a hand to stroke his face.

He nuzzles her palm. "It wouldn't change anything, but a recording would have been useful for performing the final ceremonies since you were dead."

"Ceremonies?"

"I had all of the paperwork. As time went on, I realized it would make me feel better to do some of the ceremonial parts of the bonding. A lot of them can be done after death for the good of the Spirits. But there was never a body. I needed some piece of you to stand in for you. A recording like that of your last wishes, acknowledging me as your mate, would have been enough for the rituals."

She kisses his forehead. This time, they'll do the religious stuff. Whatever he needs. If he'll only forgive her for being unhappy and lashing out. The words long to jump off of her lips, but it's not the right time. Then he'd be right about this just being a sneaky way of getting to him. She should do something to give him the future he wanted.

"Then it would have been useful." She continues stroking his face and along his throat. She can feel vibrations through her fingertips, but there's no sound to provide clues about his mood. His face is neutral. Thoughtful?

He puts a hand on her shoulder and strokes her arm as he straightens up. "You wouldn't have been upset?"

"That you needed to mourn in your own way? No. I trust you to do the right thing because we both care about trying to do the right thing. We just ... define it differently sometimes, but I can live with your choices." She bites her lip. "Robert knew Steve forms strong, deep attachments and didn't have time to plan. Maybe he's not even the planning type. So his goodbye backfired. Kasumi and Keiji ... there's some kind of conflict there that I don't know enough about. I don't know why he had a greybox. I don't know why he was coding secrets into it. He knew she'd come for it and that it could endanger her. He knew she wouldn't want to get rid of it..."

"Then he shouldn't have died" Kasumi and maybe Keiji don't entirely accept dying? Danger is supposed to be a thrill, not a real consequence? I don't know what it is exactly, but they have a different view of it. That's how they ended up in this position."

"Next question?" Garrus lifts a brow plate.

"Why do they fail? You never got it. Kasumi never will let go. Cortez didn't want to let go."

"Who would just shrug off the death of the love of their life?"

"Someone with other things to do?"

"No. It isn't that easy. Other things distract from the pain, they don't make it better." His pacing speeds up again.
"Then they fail because if last messages are delivered, there's a conflict. The dead don't want to hold the living back but ... but the dying don't see it as they're dying. No they're too preoccupied with dying to see they're making it worse."

"They're too preoccupied with being controlling."

"What?"

"They're all trying to control how the survivors grieve to suit their own ends. A pep talk is still instructions, even if it would have worked for me right then."

"Instructions to alleviate guilt at dying. To picture a better world."

"Spin it however you like, it's still the common motive." He stands against the console and crosses his arms. "Any questions left?"

Will you come home? "No. Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

"The Second Coming" W. B. Yeats, 1919.  
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43290/the-second-coming

The concept of the center as part of military movements also fits Shepard's words because if she's gone, Garrus takes over the Normandy as the tip of the spear. But, well, poetry is more dramatic.

Yay! I finally got to use that damn coffee cup meditation I wrote 2 months ago and decided didn't quite fit at the time.
Chapter Summary

Apologies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hospitals hold only bad memories for Garrus. Shepard must have remembered, even if he's never told her why. Despite it being an ideal situation for sniping, she left him behind on the run through Okeer's lab.

He is surprised to receive a message from Shepard asking that he join her in the port cargo area when she returns. He considers putting her off with calibrations. The truth is that Garrus is worn out by Miranda's stealth interrogation on the state of Shepard (she's fine), and sitting across from her in a chair designed to leave him bent double and knock-kneed. But curiosity won't let him ignore the request.

EDI's dulcet voice is the first thing he hears as he walks into the shiny room. "Cerberus protocol is very clear regarding untested alien technology."

Shepard is watching Grunt in his tank. "He's either a powerful addition to the crew or a time bomb. I'd rather deal with it now."

"Very well, Shepard," the AI seems regretful as she fulfills the command. "The controls are online. The switch -- and consequences -- are yours."

The commander turns to face Garrus, "Thank you, EDI. Please go offline in this area for the next hour."

"Logging you out, Shepard."

Her hands wave, encompassing the room. "Do you think that you could do something about the bugs again? I'm certain there are some."

Garrus raises a brow plate, but Shepard turns away, pacing toward the tank. He shrugs to himself and uses his improved debugging protocol. There's a snap as several listening devices explode. "Did you have another reason for calling me here or was that it?"

She turns to him again, "Garrus ..." She frowns and stumbles to a halt.

"Never mind, Shepard. Just call when you need me."

"Wait!" she calls out."I ... don't know how to do this."

"I thought EDI was clear about the controls if you've forgotten them. I know you managed it just fine last time."

"No. I..." she looks almost pitiable in her discomfort, so different from her Commander Shepard..."
mask. Whatever it is she wants to say, it seems like it's taking a lot of effort. Finally, she pulls herself together, holding herself stiffly straight. Something of the old mask slips on her face, but those liquid gold eyes of hers remain pleading. "I'm about to be mother to a full-grown baby krogan again. I thought... maybe I didn't have to do it alone this time?"

And with those simple words, she knocks down the wall he'd built around his shattered hopes and dreams, and they rush back over him like a tide dragging him under.

_Earth was different than he'd expected. Colder and wetter. But the rubble was the same everywhere the Reapers went._

_It was finally going to end. What would a future be like with no Reapers to fight?_

_He looked at her pale skin. They couldn't live on Palaven. The radiation would kill her when everything else had failed to. He couldn't move here, or he'd be sick half the year from cold. Split the difference and go somewhere warm and tropical to suit them both._

_When her grim expression perked up at the picture he was spinning for her, he just kept thinking aloud and the idea of a turian-human baby became part of it. It wasn't until that moment, with her standing before him, that he knew that was what he wanted. He wanted to see her grow round and happy, wanted to do all those little domestic things, look after her when there wasn't a hail of bullets outside. He wanted to see a small turian with her sunrise eyes and his silvery plates._

_When she pointed out, quite practically, that it wasn't an option for them, the vision altered only a little to adopted children holding up a fingerpainting to her for parental approval to be taped to the living room wall. He wanted to see what kind of hellions they'd raise together and how they'd change the galaxy. He knew that reality probably wouldn't match his imagination, but that wasn't the point, as he quipped about krogan. The point was she could see a future like that, too: warm, safe, gentle, loving._

_It might not last forever. But it would be enough._

_And then she was gone. It was all gone._

By the time his brain is capable of thinking of anything else, she 's standing in front of him, brow creased, hands reaching out to touch him, with her fingers curled as if she doesn't dare. "Garrus? Garrus? Did I break you? Is this because I didn't go get Mordin first? Did they not put you back together right? Garrus? I'm sorry. Just say something. Just please be alright."

He plucks her hands out of the air and squeezes them in his own, shifting them down between them. "I'm alright, Shepard. I'm just -- I don't think I've ever been so surprised in my life."

"I was going for surprise. I was worried I managed heart attack."

"I may still be in bandages, but I'm not that delicate."

Shepard laughs, "Delicate? You don't even bruise."

"You just don't see the bruises. They're all under the plates."

"Are you saying I've been too rough on you?"

"No." But this is all too easy. He lets her hands drop as he struggles for control of his emotions. "You don't get to do this. You don't get to destroy everything and then pretend it never happened."
"I'm not trying to." She paces away from him. "I just..." she turns and looks back up at him. "We've never done things in the conventional order: We slept together before we'd ever gone on a date. We managed to break up before we were ever together. Maybe next time we'll pull off falling in love before we ever meet." She's smiling again, glowing, and he can't help but smile back at the picture she paints. "You're the most important person I'm going to end up leaving, but you're not the only one. I thought maybe agreeing to raise a kid together before we'd fully made up might just be normal for us." She puts a hand on the glass and looks worriedly at Grunt.

She's so damn beautiful standing there, next to the tank, and Garrus is walking toward her without thinking anything through, wrapping his arms around her waist and stroking her back. "How are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" she asks, puzzled, as she rests her hands on his shoulders.

"None of this fixes anything, but I can't stay away from you."

"Maybe it's because it's you and me and I found the right way to say I'm sorry and I love you?"

"You're sorry? But I'm the one who is putting you through hell again. I'm the one who should be sorry."

"Are you?"

"Yes." But ... "And no. Because if I didn't, I wouldn't be holding you right now."

She slides in his arms, standing on her tiptoes and tilting her head up to kiss him. "We'll figure it out."

He picks her up and sets her down on a convenient table with the stars at her back, and spends the next several minutes remembering how to kiss.

They part slowly, panting. Garrus admires the redness of her lips. He watches her muscles relax and the tension in her whole body ease. "We should take care of Grunt now, or we won't get to it tonight."

"Oh?"

"Shepard, I've spent years missing you. Things are going to get very painful for me if I don't find some kind of distraction soon. A baby krogan trying to rip my fringe off should do it."

"Hmmmm... I'm beginning to regret this plan. We don't have to do things tonight..."

"It was a masterful plan. You managed to short-circuit my brain and I'm still not thinking straight." He sighs, "But we should take care of Grunt. And then we do have a lot to talk about or I am going to be very angry with myself in the morning."

"Yeah," she echoes his regret and then slides off the table. She passes him a heavy pistol and holsters one herself. "I don't know which of us Grunt will go for."

"What?"

"The first time I did this, he was planning to kill me. Nearly crushed me to begin with. Didn't go all of the way. I kept my pistol on him. He didn't notice until I'd got him calmed down and he'd decided not to kill me." She looks Garrus over in a professional evaluation. "You're a turian in armor. I'm guessing he'll peg you as the bigger threat. Try not to kill our baby."
Garrus checks over the pistol, "Hmmm... if he's going to go for killing us, maybe you should stand in front."

"You want me to die after all of this, Vakarian?"

"No. Just thinking he'll underestimate you. Krogan instinctually charge. He'll hit you first. You go down and play dead while he corners me. Then you've got him from behind while he's distracted."

Shepard considers a moment, and then nods. "Alright, we'll play it your way." She hits the switch to the tank.

The fluid drains; Grunt collapses to his knees and then coughs out more thick liquid. He shifts to a sprinting position and charges Shepard. It's one smooth motion, shoulder in Shepard's throat, arm lifting up, tossing her to the side with a sickening thud. Grunt's technique is perfect right out of the tube. He closes on Garrus in another step, pinning him to the back wall. "Turian. Male. Before you die, I need a name."

"Garrus Vakarian. The last person you'll ever see if you don't calm down," he tries to keep his voice steady.

"Not your name. Mine. I'm trained. I know things. But the tank ... Okeer couldn't implant connection. His words are hollow. Warlord. Legacy. Grunt. Grunt... Grunt was among the last. It has no meaning. It'll do. I am Grunt. If you are worthy of your people, prove your strength and try to destroy me."

"You would rather be called Grunt than Warlord?"

"It's short. Matches the training in my blood. I'll do what I'm bred to do. Fight and determine the strongest. Maybe one day I will earn the title of warlord, but I haven't killed enough yet." Grunt's blue eyes flick over his face. "But Okeer's imprint has failed. Without a reason that's mine, one fight is as good as any other. Might as well start with you."

Shepard levels her pistol at his back. "I have a good ship and a strong crew. A strong clan. You'd make it stronger. But if you try to kill my mate, I will rip out your hearts."

"Human. Humans are puny. Why would I ally myself with you?"

Garrus glares down at him, "Because she's Commander Shepard, the greatest warrior in the galaxy and she's already survived you once."

Shepard smiles, "And Garrus is the best sniper and strategist in the galaxy and he already has you beat." They both press their guns firmly into Grunt's body.

"Offer one hand but arm the other. Wise. If I find a clan. If I find what I want, I will be honored to eventually pit them against you."

"And until then?" Shepard asks.

"If you're weak and choose weak enemies, I'll have to kill you both."

Garrus stares him down, "Our enemies are the greatest threat the galaxy has ever faced and we're planning for a battle the likes of which is seen only every 50,000 years."

"Hrhm... hmmmm. humph. That... sounds challenging. I'll fight for you." Grunt lets Garrus drop.
"I'm glad you saw reason." Shepard puts her gun away and keys the comm system. "EDI, please interface with the port cargo hold. Our new krogan, Grunt, needs to acclimatize himself."

The local blue orb pops up. "Certainly, Shepard. I will set up user profile: Grunt."

Grunt pokes EDI's orb, watching the lights dance. Shepard smiles at him and pats him on the cheek.

Garrus wonders if there's a difference in humans between maternal feelings and successful mad scientist feelings. His mate turns to him. "We should go finish what we started."

He slips an arm behind her back. "You always were cute when you were fussing over him."

"And he's got your eyes." She winks at him as they step into the elevator and ascend.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! It's the promised Shepard and Garrus make up chapter! It's only been sitting around since October.

Hopefully, it lives up to my original promise.

Titles from "No Air" by Jordin Sparks, 2008. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBKnpyoFEB0

Additional note: I rewrote chapter 31 to it's original form. Originally, Shepard's lack of control story was going to be about being upset about her father's death. Then I thought "Gee, I'm hanging a lot of things on Shep missing her father. She doesn't have an Electra complex or anything. I should make this about someone else." So I made a minor character I don't ever plan to return to, and killed her off instead. Come a few chapters down the line, and going into Shepard's actual problems with staying alive in the next chapter, and I realize I've written her more melodrama than ever intended, and the most obvious thing to do was go back to the original plan of a biotic outburst over her father.
"Set a course for Purgatory," Shepard directs over the comm link from her quarters.

"Where?" asks Joker dubiously.

"You know, the place for souls who are too naughty for heaven but too repentant for hell."

"Sure, I'll just get out my star map of the ethereal realms and do that. I keep it packed with my Ouija board."

Shepard sighs. "Purgatory. It's a prison in the Osun system of the Horsehead Nebula."

"Darn. I was hoping you meant the bar."

"Bar. Prison. What's the difference?"

"Nightsticks, more barriers, and less alcohol."

"All men are prisoners of their habits and minds." She looks over at the turian sprawled on her couch in his black undersuit, a meticulously stacked pile of armor in the corner next to him. "But never mind that now. Just set a course when you come on shift again."

"You don't want me to do it now?"

"No, we need some downtime."

"Alright, commander."

"Signing off." She turns away from her duties. EDI will stay off line in the cabin until called for, and Garrus has taken out the bugs. All that's left is shoving all of the worst things in her life into one conversation and hoping he'll stick with her anyway. She walks over to the couch to take off her boots, afraid at any second that it could all go wrong.

"You look nervous, Shepard." Garrus watches her, his eyepiece probably giving away all her secrets.

"I am. I have everything to lose and nothing more to give if I screw up."

"It's you and me... suddenly not so confident?" He looks calm and relaxed.

"I was confident back then in our friendship. That was rock solid even if everything went wrong."

"It isn't now?"
"It is." She bites her lip. "But I need ... I've always needed more than a friend. And you deserve better than I can give you."

"Better than Commander Shepard? The galaxy doesn't seem to think such a thing exists." He runs a talon along her shoulder.

She leans into him, resting her head against his chest. "Yes. But they don't have to live with me. You know better."

"I do." He looks down at her. "You are stubborn, demanding, occasionally reckless, and idealistic to a fault."

"Oh, come on." She bumps her shoulder against his side. "You like it when I'm stubborn, demanding, and idealistic. And if I weren't a bit reckless, I wouldn't be able to appreciate your vigilante work."

"My work was always well thought out."

"You had the three biggest merc groups in the universe plotting to take you down. I don't care how thorough your planning is, your position was precarious because of the work you did." She slides an arm behind and around him to stroke at the joining of his hip. "And you were damn good at it."

"I'm good at a lot of things."

"I remember those, too. Not half as much fun if we played it safe..."

He curls his arm around her, pulling her across his lap to face him, and widens his mandibles at her surprise. "I think I'm going to enjoy you being off-balance for once. Being nervous the first few times was difficult enough. Playing nervous was worse."

She punches him in the shoulder. "You were playing me? You would have to be after five times, wouldn't you? You could have done something different and you left me with trying to figure out what was going wrong with my normally unruffled sniper and best friend?"

"I stuck with what got the girl."

"Oh, you are in so much trouble."

"For giving you what you wanted? You tell me what you ever saw in that guy."

"The nervous guy with the undrinkable wine, bad taste in music, and no clue what he was getting into?"

"Yeah. That one." He tilts his head in a show of avian curiosity, waiting for her to answer.

"A guy who'd walk into hell for me and fight at my side. Someone who makes me laugh. Someone who takes a long time making up his mind, but when he does, he's unstoppable. Even if he was making me doubt my own judgment right then." She drapes her arms across his keel and leans in. "I don't know why everyone doesn't want that guy."

He presses their foreheads together. "Show me."

"But we should talk first and ..."

"And you'll just persuade me anyway? No, I think I'll fare better in the conversation if I'm not also thinking about all the other things you could be doing with your lips."
"Weren't you going to be angry about that in the morning?"

His taloned hands curve around her back, sharper than she remembers, and lift off her shirt. His thumbs return to stroke lightly over the silk cups of the bra. "I'll be angry if we don't get things sorted out by morning."

"It's morning watch now," she smirks at him.

"Fine. I'll be angry when I get out of bed."

She chuckles as she unzips his undersuit and leans in to whisper, "Then all I have to do is make sure you never leave." She sits back, pleased with herself. "You walked right into that one."

"Promises, promises. Are you even prepared for the challenge?" His eyes rove over the fissures left by Cerberus. "I'm not used to seeing you with scars."

"I woke up in a base under attack and walked out under my own power. I can take you any day." She arches her back in a stretch. "The scars look worse than they are."

He leans in to lick along her throat. "You always play tough."

"Hard exterior, soft interior." She smirks at him again.

He lifts her up, pressed to his chest. She always marvels that he can lift her as if she weighs nothing at all. With a bit of help, he gets her out of her pants and underwear. "Can't wait to see."

"I think we're somewhat limited by the fact that I don't have any supplies from Mordin." She picks at the elbows of his suit, lifting them over the spurs. "Or did you plan ahead?"

"You didn't plan ahead?"

"No." The black fabric falls to the couch as she's set down again. "I hoped you might forgive me. I didn't want to insult you by assuming you would."

"So uncertain?"

"So heartbroken." Her gaze drops.

He takes her chin in his hand and lifts to make her meet his eyes. And then presses his forehead to hers. "You don't have to be any more."

"I love you." She kisses him and presses her wet body against his slit. It's tricky trying to find the little catches just above it to build up some friction. His talons bite into her butt and she hisses. Clearly she needs to buy another skin upgrade.

"Sorry, I didn't have the chance to get my talons done at the Citadel." He readjusts his grip holding a bit fabric while she nibbles along his neck.

"Can't do it yourself?"

"They don't come out as smooth as I'd like." He trails a suede-like knuckle down her back.

"I've gotten used to a bit rough around the edges." She runs fingers through his fringe.

"Is that what you want? Because I don't think you'd survive."
She would be lying if she said there isn't a primal part of her that simply likes thrill of being with an apex predator with the raw power to rip her apart. But that's not why she wants him of all the men in the galaxy.

"I want the same thing I wanted when I first saw you in the conference room: To jump into your arms and be safely home." She licks her lips as she looks into his eyes. "Also to be screwed into the table until it breaks because I've missed you every night I've been back."

They both gasp at the jolt as his plates part and he enters her directly.

She smirks. "I guess you missed me, too."

He laughs, making her whole body tingle from sounds she can't hear. "More than you will ever know." He swings her around, pressing her into the couch.

Shepard growls as he withdraws, scraping fingers over skin in the gap between carapace and hips. She needs to feel him. And then he thrusts into her again, talons digging into the couch near her head. Instinct kicks in, sending them searching for the best angle, trying to hit the right spots, the right pressure.

She'll pay for it later. There is always a price.

They're not made for each other. The raw spots on her thighs will attest to that. They should never have been. Their families will not approve. Their professional reputations may suffer. It was never meant to be.

To hell with fate and rules and things that make sense. To hell with being perfect and living up to expectations. He's the person she needs in her life the most, for as long as he'll have her, for as long as she lives.

"Garrus!" she screams as she peaks.

His talons clench, toes digging into the bamboo mat. "Madelaine," he whispers into her ear as he finishes.

They hold each other as the aftershocks vibrate through them.

Chapter End Notes

For those who were waiting, here's a sex scene. Woohoo!

And now you can see why I don't write them all that often. But I hope you enjoy the chapter overall anyway. :)
The cabin looks like Noveria when Garrus wakes.

Strips of white fabric lay in tangles and piles. So much for sheets. It seemed like the best option when he remembered his talons are still sharpened for ripping plates off of mutant krogan, rather than dulled for his mate's soft skin.

He runs a hand along her back and over her thigh where it's draped across his waist. She grumbles as he shifts position.

He nuzzles her hair. "Good morning."

"Good morn ... no can't be morning yet." She rubs at her eyes. "There's something about morning. Pumpkins."

"Pumpkins?"

"Pumpkins. Carriages. It all disappears." She attempts to burrow under the covers, and fails when they come apart in her hands. She picks up another clump of fabric with a quizzical expression on her face, and then drops it.

He sighs. "You know I'm sorry about-"

She giggles. Then picks up another handful and tosses it into the air and laughs as it lands on them. "I'm not." She wads up a ball of cloth scraps and tosses it him.

"What's that for?"

"Snowball fight!" Shepard sets about her, grabbing at fabric and then pelting him with it.

"Hey!" he protests and reaches for her arm, but she slips off the bed, leaving him to fashion some ammo of his own.

"Sniper can't hit me?"

He lands a shot between her eyes. "Don't stand up in front of glowing fish tanks," he scolds as she ducks around the corner and discovers the remains of the couch. She attempts flinging some of the stuffing at him, but it's too light to travel far, and he's crouched behind the half wall. He lob a few more balls of the tightly packed remains of the sheets around the corner. "Grenade!" he calls out as they hit the floor hard, sending up feathers and fluff.

Shepard throws herself out of the way, and he catches her before she can roll to safety. "Got you!"
he says victoriously, swinging her off her feet as she laughs.

The heat of her body reminds him of how cold the rest of the room is, and he carries her off to the showers.

#

When they finish washing off, the room has warmed up. Garrus wraps a blanket around himself, and brushes off the bed while Shepard unfolds new sheets. "I have always wanted to do that."

"Rip up my bedding?" She brushes shreds of cloth onto the floor.

"It's ... fun." He catches her eyes and she smiles back as they square corners and tighten sheets. "It's considered not civilized to rip things apart, which is why turians wear gloves all the time to avoid embarrassing accidents. The asari and salarians will give you looks."

"Ah." She finishes straightening the bed and flops down on top of it. "Learn that the hard way?"

"There are a lot of reasons I don't like paperwork."

"Humans have traditions where we shred all of our old papers and throw them into the sky when we're celebrating. It's called confetti. I think we actually do it because it's cathartic to get rid of the old mess and move on to something new. There's something freeing in destroying things." She arches an eyebrow. "Seems I failed to keep you in bed. Are you going to leave?"

"You're willing to overlook the mess, I think I can ignore a technicality," Garrus says reservedly. The truth is that he's not leaving until he hears what she has to say. He stacks up a pile of pillows and sits down beside her.

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "I've never done this before, and I don't know if it will not bother you at all or if it will upset you a lot."

"Oh?"

"File it under potential interspecies awkwardness."

"Alright."

"I have a functional level of a mental illness called depression. It's an inherited condition because my brain doesn't make enough of the right chemicals on its own for me to regulate my moods. It also technically makes me unfit for duty in the Alliance because it's untreated. But if I sought treatment, it would be on my record and I'd be passed over for promotions because people would worry that I couldn't take the strain and I would never have gotten my own ship." Her eyes wander over the nearly empty display case above her desk. She's slowly reconstructing her collection. "I think I did damn well managing until the end of the Reaper War, and I defy a normal functioning person to not be a bit stressed and depressed about the fate of the galaxy riding on their shoulders."

"So you do want to die." It is the first thing that comes to his mind when he thinks of depression. There were always people to talk out of jumping off of buildings or throwing themselves into spinning fans on the Citadel.

"No. I'm functional. My biggest problem is getting my ass out of bed in the morning. It was always a fight. And then I do my rounds whether I'm in the mood to do them or not because it's my duty. And I keep everyone else's spirits up because my problem should not be their problem and the ship needs to move. I make myself eat whether I'm hungry or not because I know that I need to do it even if I
don't feel like it. I forget to eat and sleep sometimes. The military is a good crutch. There's a schedule. I can keep going if I stick to the schedule." She wraps her arms over her stomach. "Aside from the fact that I'd lose my job, I don't talk about it because to normal people it seems like I'm whining if I do. So I don't tell anyone. I shut up, focus on my job, and get things done."

Garrus takes her hand. It has the same weird five fingers as always. The same skin that could be sliced by the tip of his talon. The same square-cut scales on top of each digit. "Nobody's perfect."

"I thought you hated platitudes."

"Makes a good balance: I can be angry and scary while you're sad and sympathetic."

"You're trying to make me laugh."

"Is it working?"

"You need to work on your banter more."

"Damn." He shifts an arm around her shoulders and pulls her up against his chest. "You weren't going to mention this earlier?"

"We ran out of time." She traces patterns against his arm. "You think I was going to tell you no or to wait until the end of the war when you asked me to marry you?"

"It was a possibility..."

"Maybe a theoretical one, but not a real one." She laces their fingers together. "You're the best part of my life. I figured you'd forgive me not getting around to it beforehand if we both made it out alive." She squeezes his hand. "I'm sorry we didn't."

He pulls her in tighter. "I could tell you were a little bit broken after Alchera. I didn't realize you'd always been ... hurting. It doesn't matter that I didn't understand everything. I wanted to be with you anyway." He brushes a bit of hair from her face. "Stay with me."

"I can't promise that. I don't even know what I did."

"Madelaine ... Please," he implores.

Shepard closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. "I don't know. I only know that when I woke up again, you were the first person I wanted to see. And when I was angry at you for bringing me back, I still wanted to talk to you again if only to complain about you to you and I know that's dumb and makes no sense." She curls against him. "I don't want to go through this again alone. And damn it if the words are cursed, but I know you! You don't deal well with uncertainties. You like everything planned out and perfect. You want it to last even though there were never any guarantees. But I can't lie to you. The way I remember things, the run to the beam, it was bad. If I'm the only one to make it, then I can't stay."

"You're probably right. No, wait, I'm talking to Commander Shepard. You're always right. But being right doesn't change the way I feel. I want a future with you."

"I haven't got one."

"You could have."

"Not without killing everyone else."
Garrus makes some disgruntled noises and pulls away to sit on the edge of the bed.

Shepard's tired voice asks "Do you regret it, being with me?" Her shadow falls across his back. "I'm a soldier in a war. The odds always were high that I'd die."

He takes a moment to think it over. "No. When we're not arguing, and I do remember the days when that was 99.99% of the time, you're wonderful. You're everything I've ever wanted and a lot of things I never knew I needed."

"Would it be different if I were sick? Terminal illness with two years to live?"

_Honoria Vakarian was lost in her own house. Garrus led her to the garden so they could sit in the sun together. She alternately thought he was his father, some old general she'd known, a complete stranger, and her son. She didn't have much time left, but he was there for her daily struggle to lucidity while the wheels of politics on Palaven slowly turned._

"No, Shepard. It wouldn't be different. I'd still want you to fight for your life, not just give up."

"Would you make me do it alone?"

_Honoria Vakarian laid in a hospital bed with a cracked carapace and broken leg after the car accident. Garrus came and sat with her every day. "You shouldn't be here," she'd say. "You should be at that fancy camp of yours if you want to be considered for the spectres."

_Him, stubborn, insisting, "I'm not leaving. Dad's never here and Solana's too little to look after the house."_

"Don't question your father. That's my job." She coughed as the machine compressed air into her lungs in opposition to the weight of her plates pressing down on her.

"Yes, Mom."

"And it's also my job to look after my son's dreams."

"It's fine."

"Spectres demand the best, Garrus. You can't miss opportunities like this."

"I am the best. I'll find something else."

"Garrus..."

"I'm staying, Mom."

_That time she lived._

He settles back against the pillows. "You've said yourself that you don't know what's at the end. I don't know what's at the end. Promise me you'll fight for your life. Maybe this time you'll win."

"I always fight. Every day is a fight. I'm tired, Garrus." She closes her eyes. "But I will fight for you. You're worth it."

He wraps an arm around her again. "That's why I will never give up on you."
Finally got that out of the way: What bothers Shepard (non-canon) and why Garrus tends to be super loyal (based on canon he did give up training opportunities to look after his hospitalized mother).

When I write Shepard, she's not intended to be a self insert of myself. We have a lot of similar traits because the story is based on how I play her, but we have various differences too. So just in case you're worried about the depression thing, I do suffer from it, but I'm okay. :)

In other news, I need to take a hiatus from posting so that I can work on more chapters. The past couple of months since December I've been working in a linear fashion. But that's not the most efficient way for me to write. The most efficient way is out of order based on my mood and then forcing myself to write bridge pieces when needed. I'm also not certain how much of Phase 3 I need to write and I need to do research on Cerberus and thread that into everything.

So I still have an outline and a plan. But I need to fine tune some details and then I'll be back to this story in a month or so.

I will miss all the wonderful comments and kudos and bookmarks and subscriptions, and I look forward to returning to this tale.
"Lawson, shields!" The Collector's chitinous skin is suddenly as naked as it looks. Shepard pulls it
into the air while husks scuttle beneath it. "Jack, hit it!" A shock wave pulses out into an explosion as
it strikes the target.

"Fuck, yeah!" Jack cheers as Shepard checks over the pointed white communications and control
tower. Still intact.

Miranda rolls her eyes.

"Hey. I saw that. You can't hit shit without a tech assist, cheerleader." No wonder Jack makes a
good teacher, she's already got eyes in the back of her head.

"You think you're special because you can hit targets that are eight feet tall and three feet wide? You
know nothing about precision and control." Miranda somehow reloads her gun in a way that shows
off her slender fingers, using just the right amount of force to secure the clip in the submachine gun.

"It's called having fun." Jack slams the next round into her shotgun.

"It's called being careless," Miranda sniffs.

"Shut it. Next wave is on the way. I want you two back in the walkways." Shepard hefts the
Collector particle beam.

"Where all the goons have been coming from," Jack observes distrustfully. "And where're you
gonna be, boss lady?"

"Holding the tower." The insectile praetorian rises above them, as big as the Kodiak. "Now go!"

"Shepard-" the operative tries to interject.

"I've got it, Miranda. Go!" At this point, her squad is collateral damage. By herself, Shepard is more
maneuverable. She ducks away from the beam, and returns fire. The problem with the particle beam
is that she has to stand in the open, holding the trigger and taking the damage. When her shields are
nearly gone, she ducks behind another flimsy box.

Eventually, the big bug drops out of the sky, and there's nothing to do but dodge as it destroys most
of the crates littering the ground, but somehow leaves the tower standing. She can hear Miranda and
Jack trying to penetrate its thick hide with bullets, but they get nowhere.

The praetorian leaps into the sky again, on its final flight before Shepard strips off its wings with the particle beam and it lands belly up on the pile of husks at her feet. Panting, she waves to rally the squad to her.

Jack lets out a whistle. "These things are disgusting."

"I told you I'd need your help."

"Still. Damn."

Miranda is looking at readouts in her omni-tool. "Everything is green."

The laser targeting defenses kick in, sighting the Collector ship. The women watch in satisfaction as the cannons begin blasting away at the hull. The craggy column of the ship retreats into space.

A lone man runs helplessly across the defense platform. "No! Don't let them get away."

"They're gone," Shepard says gravely.

"Half the colony's gone! They took Egan and Sam and ... and Lilith! Do something!" the survivor paces back and forth.

Visions of glass coffins filled with people, row after row, enter Shepard's thoughts. And then the people dissolve, screaming. She closes her eyes and lifts a hand to her head. "I'm sorry. I did what I could."

"We've done more than most, Shepard," Miranda says.


"Commander Shepard, captain of the Normandy, the first human spectre, Savior of the Citadel." Kaiden's gravel tones make her heart beat faster. Stupid hormones. "You're in the presence of a legend, Delan ... and a ghost."

"All the good people we lost and you get left behind." The man sneers at the Alliance advisor. "Figures. Screw this. I'm done with you Alliance types." Delan runs away from the people who tried to protect him. Trying to save Horizon was the right thing to do, but the results are discouraging.

Kaiden, smiles. He has a wonderful smile that reaches his eyes and warms her heart. A smile for sitting in front of a fire on cold evenings in a big stone house. He steps forward to hug Shepard. After years apart, it feels subtly wrong. The first time, she'd practically fallen into his arms with joy at finally having found him, wanting a human touch after the sterile black and white of Cerberus, the grime and corruption of Omega, and the scrupulous distance of duty at the Citadel.

This time, her arms remain at her sides. She has no illusion that this man will provide even temporary shelter from the harsh realities around her.

He ignores her frozen body language and the hug goes on for far too long. "I thought you were dead, Shepard. We all did."

She shrugs, trying to loosen the tension between her shoulders. "Well, there's a reason for that..." she laughs self-consciously.
He steps back and runs his eyes over her, ending on her face. He frowns.

"Something bothering you Kaiden?"

"Yes something's bothering me. I thought we had something, Shepard. Something real. I loved you. Thinking you were dead these past two years tore me apart. How could you put me through that? Why didn't you try to contact me? Why didn't you let me know you were alive?"

"I'm sorry, Kaiden. I was clinically dead. It took two years for Cerberus to bring me back. So much time has passed. I don't want to open old wounds."

He backs away from her slowly. "You're with Cerberus now. I can't believe the reports were right."

Miranda arches an eyebrow. "Reports?"

"Alliance intel thought Cerberus might be behind the missing colonies. I got a tip this colony might be the next one to get hit. Anderson stonewalled me, but there were rumors that you weren't dead. That you were working for the enemy." His lip curls up at Miranda like a dog in a territorial dispute.

"Building the defense towers for the colony was just a cover story, huh?" Shepard asks. "The Alliance sent you here to investigate me, didn't they?"

"I was here for Cerberus, you were just a rumor. I wanted to believe you were alive, but I never expected anything like this." Kaidan gestures at her squad. "You turned your back on everything we believed in. You betrayed the Alliance. You betrayed me."

"Betrayed you? Being in a coma was betraying you? Who do you think you are?"

"I was your boyfriend! But you're standing there with them, when you should be at my side."

Jack narrows her eyes at him and mutters, "What an entitled asshole."

"I. Was. Dead," Shepard enunciates.

"You don't look dead!"

Miranda gives him a once over like he's an unfortunate piece of verran shit she's found on the bottom of her designer boots.

Kaidan matches her expression with a glare. "You certainly could have chosen other companions."

Yes. Other companions than the people who defrosted me, brought me back to life, gave me a ship, and are currently paying my bills. I had all kinds of options, like dying in an exploding station or being stranded in the middle of nowhere without an atmosphere. Shepard sighs trying to be reasonable. "Kaiden, you know me. You know I'd only do this for the right reason. You saw it yourself: The Collectors are targeting human colonies and they're working with the Reapers."

"I want to believe you Shepard, but I don't trust Cerberus. They could be using the threat of a Reaper to manipulate you. What if they're behind it? What if they're working with the Collectors?"

"You're letting your feelings get in the way of the facts."

"Maybe. Or maybe you feel like you owe Cerberus because they saved you. Maybe you're the one who's not thinking straight." He points at her, leaning in as if for a fight. "You've changed. But I still know where my loyalties lie. I'm an Alliance soldier, always will be. I've got to report back to the Citadel. They can decide if they believe your story or not." What about your loyalty to the woman
"I've already seen Anderson. But if you want to start a row at the Citadel, be my guest."

"Goodbye, Shepard." He walks away slowly, as if trying to give her a chance to stop him, or maybe just for her to admire the view. She shakes her head in disgust.

"Joker, send the shuttle to pick us up. I've had enough of this colony."

"That was your boyfriend?" Jack asks as they finish up mission reports.


"You like 'em with a stick up the ass, huh?" The bald woman leans back on her bench in the shuttle.

"What?"

"Blah blah... Alliance regulations... blah blah you're a traitor ... blah blah I'm going to report you." Jack shrugs. "I could see him trying to press all your buttons, find the crap rule to bring you back into line. He was a controlling jackass. At least the turian only seems to be uptight about operations."

"We're just used to each other." Shepard tries to play it cool because she needed Horizon to be over before she and Garrus moved on with their lives. The break up removes the sick feeling that Kaidan will be right this time around, that she is a cheater, even if their break up had already happened for her years ago.

"Yeah. Because everyone drinks coffee and plans out missions while gazing longingly into each other's eyes."

"He has nice eyes," says Shepard faking defensiveness because innocence is not going to play well. Let Jack feel she caught something rather than being years behind the times. "They're just a bit lighter than his colony markings. It's very striking."

"Uh-huh," says the tattooed woman. "It is totally a color thing and not you wondering what it's like to fuck a turian."

A blush comes to Shepard's cheeks with Jack putting things in coarse terms.

The bald woman continues. "You should totally hit that. Turians are awesome for a quick one and done. No inhibitions, no clinginess. And picturing it might give Cerberus over there some ideas that don't include humans."

"Non-humans are a genetic dead end," says Miranda.

"God damn, you people are boring!" Jack throws her arms up in the air. "Sex can just be for fun! Haven't you ever wondered what it would be like to have a hanar with all of those tentacles?"

"Hanar and salarians use external means of reproduction. It probably wouldn't be fun at all," Miranda points out.

"This One would like to know why you want it to shove a limb up your bottom." Shepard winks at Miranda beside her, and catches a smile from the operative before she looks away. The stars pass by the outside the window. I was out there, dying. I get a miracle, and it's not enough for him. At this point, I think I'd trade my nights with Kaidan for a confused hanar."
A globe of golden lightning forms between Jack's fingers and she begins tossing it from hand to hand. "If he's that bad in the sack, why were you dating the asswipe in the first place?"

"He's not bad. The packaging doesn't lie. Just everything else does. He was so desperate to impress me, turning him down would have been like kicking a puppy right in his adoring eyes. My family is all military, so I thought screw fraternization, we can make this work. They did. I don't have to worry that the biotics will freak him out or that I'll accidentally fry him. Maybe he doesn't make my heart skip a beat every time I look at him, but passion is overrated. And he's genuinely nice. I'm good. I'm not always nice. But him, he's nice. I thought he was nice." She lowers her eyes. "He isn't nice."

"Nice guys are overrated," her companions say in tandem, and then give each other another glare.

The commander looks up. "Really, Miranda? I'm sure Jack will say something about the lack of fun--"

"Nah," says Jack. "They haven't got the balls to ask for this" -- she points to herself -- "in the first place."

"But what do you have against nice guys?" Shepard continues.

The dark-haired woman leans back on the plush seat, running fingers through her hair. "Their eyes tend to glaze over if they ask me about my day and I start talking about my work and how fascinating the research on personal VIs for brain damaged people is, and how close they're getting to simulating genuine personality. Or cloning and the ethics of vat-grown adults. Or a thousand other things. I'm not sure if I need a sperm donor or a lab partner, but I definitely don't need someone who hangs around in the background, waiting for me to make all of the hard choices." She frowns. "It's like they're too afraid of me to actually be with me outside of bed."

"What about Jacob?" Shepard asks. "I got the impression the two of you have worked together a lot."

Miranda laughs. "There was a time that might have been something. He is nice and nice to look at. But I'm too ... ruthless for him."

"That's not true." Shepard shakes her head. "You know what you want. That doesn't make you ruthless. Just determined. It's not your fault if he can't keep up."

"Yeah. It's a tough world for a badass bitch," Jack says grudgingly.

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Miranda replies.

The rage returns to the convict's eyes. "Good. I don't need you. You need me."

"I need you? You're an overhyped child with the personality of a varren."

"Oh, I'm the real deal, sister." The ball of yellow sparks grows. "I can take you any day without a thought."

"Because you're as brainless as you look."

"Because you're barely a bug in the framework of the universe, bubble butt, and I'd love to see you pop."

"Oh, just kiss her already," Shepard interjects.
"What?" says Jack as the shockwave fizzes on her fingertips.

"Oh. My. God," says Miranda, putting her head in her hand.

"You know what, Shepard?" Jack puts her feet up in the space between the other two women, leaving them to deal with her dirty combat boots. "You're insane."

"Takes one to know one." Shepard locks eyes with the convict.

Jack looks away. "I guess you're alright."

"And so are the two of you when you're fighting the same thing." Shepard rests her head on Miranda's shoulder. The ice queen gazes out the window, but she doesn't discourage the familiarity.

#

The door to the battery is intimidating today. Shepard shoots the sleeves of her dress uniform and brushes off imaginary spots of dust before opening the door. "Have you got a minute?"

Garrus looks up from his work. "Did you need me for something?"

"I need you."

His mandibles widen. "That can be arranged."

Shepard locks the door behind her and then hugs and kisses him. "I've got a question to ask and I don't know if there's a proper form..."

"Yes, I'll move into your cabin now that all the loose ends are-"

She kisses him again. "No."

He pulls his head back in the smooth S of an offended bird ready to fight, and then looks dejectedly away from her.

She presses a hand to his wounded mandible and turns his head to face her. "Look at me and stop thinking the worst. I know we've already done it once, but let's do it again. I want you to marry me, Garrus Vakarian. This time we'll do the ceremonies. Whatever you need from me, I'm yours."

The floor seems to retreat beneath her as he sweeps her up in his arms. Here is home.

"Oh, and also would you like to move into our cabin while we sort it all out?"

He laughs as he sets her down. "Definitely. So, how was your day?"

She swings his packed bag over her shoulder while he wraps an arm around her waist. "Alright. Killed lots of bugs, got Jack and Miranda to do some bonding and everyone got home with the same number of limbs..."
We Were Walking on Moonlight

Chapter Summary

Hacking Illium

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The crystalline spires of Nos Astra rise past the clouds, marvels of asari engineering. Of course, they have no defensive capabilities worth a damn, but Illium relies on trade and diplomacy to keep itself out of the crosshairs of galactic conflict.

Garrus follows after Shepard as he has so many other times. The city hasn't impressed him in years, but today he's eager to see Liara. Grunt walks along beside him, head shifting from side to side to take in all of the new sights, sounds, and smells. When he starts fingering his shotgun, Garrus puts a hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"I can smell it. The asari hate us for being on their territory. They'll shoot us soon."

Garrus shakes his head. "Asari and salarians don't shoot things they hate. With krogans, turians, and humans, they find a war for us to fight and send us off to do our duty."

"They don't fight?"

"Some of them do because they're bored. Mostly, though, they prefer to rely on their wits and their bodyguards." Garrus can count four "security consultants" on their current balcony.

"Wits won't stop a slug."

"Sometimes they can."

"No, they can't. Not if I shoot first."

"If you shoot first, you'll have to fight off all of the others."

"Heh. Heh. Heh. These puny things?" Grunt waves, encompassing a weeping asari, several bored kiosk clerks, and a volus trader.

"There's an entire planet full of them."

"Then it will be a glorious battle!" Grunt pumps a fist into the air.

"It's not a glorious battle if you don't achieve your objective. It's also a waste of resources if you die here fighting people who aren't your enemy today."

"If I kill them now, then they won't be my enemy tomorrow. They already hate me. It would be self defense."

Garrus rubs at the bridge of his nose. "If you kill them now, then they also can't be your allies in the future. And it's not self defense to kill people who don't like you just because they might want to
fight you in the future."

"Why not? It's faster to do it now than to wait for them to get guns later."

Shepard turns to him. "Because I'm not raising you to be a coward! Don't tell me you're so scared that you need to kill unarmed civilians just because they could decide to fight you later. There are endless battles to be fought and won. You don't need to create petty squabbles with unarmed non-combatants. No one will sing your praises for squashing an asari saleswoman selling cheap trinkets."

"Yes, battlemaster." Grunt looks contrite. When Shepard's back is turned, dealing with the appalled customs officer, Grunt lifts his head, sniffs around again, and then straightens his back and gives the rest of the crowd a look that says "I could kill you all right now, but you're beneath me."

Garrus chuckles as they head for the stairs to Liara's information business. They brush past the secretary with only a few pleasantries and enter the small but elegant room Liara's been renting.

His friend's back is to them, looking out the giant window at the cityscape. Classic amateur mistake, standing in front of a huge window. Worse, sitting in a chair with her back to the window day in and day out. This place may impress clients looking for a swanky address, but anyone who knows the information trade wouldn't trust her with anything dangerous.

"Have you faced an asari commando unit before? Few humans have." The man on the other end of the call looks nervous. Liara is getting better at selling herself as a badass to those outside the business, that's for sure. "I'll make it simple. Either you pay me, or I flay you alive. With my mind..."

She hangs up and turns in a swirl of green asari skirts, a look of joy coming over her face. "Shepard! Nyixeris, hold my calls." She moves to give Shepard a hug. "My sources said you were alive, but I never believed."

"Sometimes, rumors are true." Shepard hugs her back.

"And Garrus! I thought a black hole had swallowed you!" She moves to hug him as well.

"Eh, with you horning in on the detective work, I thought I'd try my hand at archeology. The security bubbles in Prothean ruins are ridiculous..."

"It's been so long since I've seen you that I'd even forgotten you thought you had a sense of humor."

"Ouch, T'Soni. I'd forgotten that you didn't have one at all."

"Sorry, it's been a long day." She rubs at her eyes.

Shepard shrugs. "Flaying people with your mind will do that to you."

"That?" Liara asks. "That was just to make certain I got paid. I'm an information broker. It's not my fault if you don't like the information when you get it. It is my fault if I let you get away with not paying the bill."

"You could join up again. I'll find a way to cover it."

Liara scratches at her wrist awkwardly. "I wish I could. But I have a business to run and a debt to a friend to pay."

"I do seem to run a ship full of people who need me to do favors for them..."

"No, Shepard. I'm trying to put down roots."
"Don't you have at least another hundred years where you're supposed to roam wherever the wind takes you?"

"I've never been that kind of maiden, Shepard."

"Alright, Liara. If you're busy, I should go. I'll come back to chat again later."

Liara frowns. "Didn't you have some questions for me?"

"Questions?"

"My informants have indicated you're looking for a drell and a justicar."

"You have excellent informants. But I know everything I need to know."

"Oh," the asari sounds disappointed. "I was hoping we could trade favors. I need someone with hacking expertise. Someone I can trust. If you could disable security at key points around the city, you could get me information that would help me a great deal."

"I'd be happy to -"

"Shepard, let me volunteer," Garrus interrupts.

"You want to run around hacking security while I pick up Thane and Samara?" Shepard asks.

"Yes. You may not need a small favor from an information broker, but since I'm no longer working for C-Sec, I could use someone who can pull up some old logs for me." Garrus looks over at Liara and widens his mandibles. "Or don't you trust me?"

"Of course I trust you, Garrus," Liara responds. "I didn't realize you would be available."

"I wouldn't want to get in the way of your plans --- whatever they are." Shepard gives him a look.

"If you want to talk about the future, I'll tell you about it later," Garrus reassures her.

"Fine. I'll give you Kasumi to watch your back."

"I don't need any help."

"You probably don't. But it would be incredibly embarrassing if you were wrong and I had to bail you out of jail on Illium. Expensive, too. Take the back up. If I have put up with five exploding coffeemakers, you can humor your paranoid girlfriend on this one. You won't even know she's there."

"Alright," he concedes. "If it will make you worry less."

"Thank you." Shepard squeezes his hand. "I'll have her meet you downstairs. C'mon, Grunt. We have an exciting day ahead of us filled with things to punch."

"Eh-heh heh heh."

Garrus turns back to Liara, whose mouth is hanging open. "T'Soni? Illium to T'Soni?"

"Girlfriend? I thought she was with Kaidan!"

"Not anymore."
"I thought ... I thought ..." Liara puts a hand over her mouth.

"You weren't this stunned over her being alive." Garrus eyes Liara as she looks distinctly uncomfortable.

"That's... that's different. Who knows about human biology? You can freeze salarians and sometimes they come back. And don't get me started on krogan..." Liara looks out the window, watching Shepard and Grunt calling for new squadmates on the balcony below.

"Spill it, T'Soni."

In a small voice, she says, "I thought if ... if they could bring her back, and if she moved on from Kaidan, I thought ... she might be grateful. I thought..."

"You thought she might turn to you."

Liara sighs. "Yes."

Garrus puts a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"It was silly. I was a love struck idiot. Again."

"You're definitely not an idiot, Liara. You're just young, right?"

"I'm older than you."

"Technically, yes. But if we measure in terms of comparative expected lifespans, I'm 92 years older than you. " He looks sadly out the window where Shepard has settled down at the cafe to wait while chatting with Gianna Parasini. "And I still think stupid things sometimes." Like that I can save her.

"Stupid, stupid things." Liara rubs away a tear and takes a deep breath. "What did you need me to find?"

"A simple task. I need to know who created the file about the geth attack on the Citadel in the Citadel Archive. I know it must be logged in a library database somewhere."

"You just want to know who created a publicly accessible record? I was expecting a little more excitement."

"Haven't you learned by now that detective work is rarely exciting and when it is that usually means you screwed something up?"

She laughs at last. "I suppose you're right."

"Now, tell me about these terminals, and I'll get started."

#

"You're sure that's what you want me to do?" Kasumi asks.

"Yes."

"Alright. You're the one who has to explain if you've got it wrong."

The bars on the tracking beacon increase as Garrus nears the final monitor. Kasumi has been a good choice for keeping an eye on things. She occasionally gets chatty about an ad or a piece of tech, and
otherwise she stays invisible.

A few seconds of hacking, and the job is complete. Liara pings his omni-tool a second later. "That's it, Garrus. I've got the data. Come see me when you've got a moment."

He walks back the length of Nos Astra, or at least it feels like it. Back up the stairs and past the smiling secretary. He presses the door closed behind him. "What do you have?"

"The data was extremely helpful. It gave me a target." Liara says eagerly. "The Shadow Broker has several contacts here on Illium. The most powerful is someone called the Observer. Taking down the Observer will put me closer to the Shadow Broker." She tilts her head sheepishly. "I could use your help again."

Garrus widens his mandibles. "Don't worry, I've got you covered."

"Good. There are terminals containing information on the Shadow Broker's five contacts--"

"Hold that thought a moment." Garrus pokes his head out the door and waves at Nyxeris. "Do you have the number for the cafe downstairs on file?"

"What did you need?" the secretary asks sliding back her chair to look at him while efficiently keying her computer one handed.

Garrus looks at his omni-tool while he pulls a pistol and shoots her in the knee, followed by an overload to take down her barriers the moment she puts them up. Kasumi pops out of nowhere to stab her in the back.

"Thank you, Kasumi."

Nyxeris screams, "Ms. T'Soni! Help!"

"No problem. " Kasumi kicks the rolling chair full of bleeding asari at him. "It's your show," she says as she bends over the computer before disappearing again.

He nods to his compatriot as he picks the secretary up by the throat and carries her into the office. "Here's your Observer."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Nyxeris says furiously as her fingers scrabble at his gauntlet. "Help me, Ms. T'Soni!"

"Nyxeris!" Liara says in shock. "But she can't be! The candidates are a krogan, a salarian, a batarian, a turian--"

"It doesn't strike you as at all odd that the Shadow Broker isn't dealing with an asari on Illium?" Garrus asks. "Who blends in better?"

"No one. But why Nyxeris?"

"Kasumi should be forwarding you the answers to that question in a few moments."

"They're setting me up! They're the ones that work for the Shadow Broker!" the secretary chokes out.

Liara purses her lips. "You should have stuck with knowing nothing. Because I know my friends might make mistakes, but they would never betray me." She sticks the other asari in a stasis field and Garrus drops her.
Kasumi pings his omni-tool. "Data sent. You need anything else, Garrus?"

Liara scans the e-mails on her computer, and her eyes start to turn black.

"No. Did she get the cafe's number?"

"Yeah."

Liara walks to the bound woman and forces her to look into her eyes.

"Order us all something to eat, my treat."

"EMBRACE ETERNITY"

"You're making up for being put on the B Team by ensuring I have something that's not passed through Gardner's hands?"

Nyzeris starts seizing.

"Yes."

"Cops: Always planning their next doughnut. I think I like working with you."

Chapter End Notes

“Not bound to swear allegiance to any master, wherever the wind takes me I travel as a visitor."

Horace, *Epistles I*, 23 BC

Calibrating Liara vs. Garrus in terms of age:  
Standard asari lifespan is 1000 years.  
Standard turian (and human) lifespan is 140 years.

1 turian year = 7.1428514286 asari years.

Liara is 108 years old. Shepard is 30-32. Garrus is 2-4 years younger than Shepard (depending on if you count the two years from her being dead). So Garrus is 28 in this chapter/game (not counting time travel) which equals 200 asari years old.

Also known as math Garrus does in his head when he’s bored.
You Pulled Me Close

Chapter Summary

The education of Grunt.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sun is still rising when Shepard reaches the top of Dantius Towers with Grunt and Zaeed in tow. Grunt rushes the door, knocking it open and tripping on a side table. The cluster of guards around the desk point rifles at him.

Nassana Dantius whirls around in her dark purple asari gown and then frowns, perplexed. "Shepard? But you're dead," she says.

"I got better," Shepard retorts because who can pass up a lead in like that?

"And now you're here to kill me."

"Actually, I'm not. " Shepard braces herself to give Grunt a hand up.

"Oh, who are you kidding?" Nassana sneers.

Grunt points his Claymore at her, but Shepard presses the barrel down. "No."

"Battlemaster, we've killed everyone else to get here."

"I know. But you're forgetting our objective. She's not the target, she's the bait."

Zaeed yawns and leans back against the outer wall. "Sit back, boy, and let the professionals show you how it's done."

"You're not doing anything," the krogan observes.

"Now you're gettin' it. She says shoot, I shoot. She says wait, I wait. Until then, I'm either eatin' or sleepin' because you don't know the next time you'll get to do either."

"I'm not tired. It's not nap time." Grunt pouts.

The slim form of a drell in a brown-grey suit slips down out of the dropped ceiling and begins snapping the necks of unwary guards.

"Start packin' some extra rations then. Keep your mouth from running away with you." Zaeed keeps his pose casual, but Shepard can see the alertness in his eyes as he watches for a signal to move.

Nassana rolls her eyes. "You expect me to believe this?" And turns around right into the arms of the assassin who pushes a gun up into her ribcage and shoots out her heart before folding her gently onto the desk. He then assumes a pose of quiet prayer.

"Hello? Thane Krios?" Shepard calls. "I was hoping to talk to you."
Thane flicks his eyes up. "I apologize, but prayers for the wicked must not be forsaken," he says as he resumes his duty.

"Oh, of course." Shepard clears her throat. "Kalahira, mistress of inscrutable depths, I ask forgiveness. Kalahira, whose waves wear down stone and sand. Kalahira, wash the sins from this one and set him on the distant shore of the infinite spirit. Kalahira, this one’s heart is pure but beset by wickedness and contention. Guide this one to where the traveler never tires, the lover never leaves, the hungry never starve."

Thane's reptilian head slowly rises as she recites. "Odd that you should know the words of a dying religion."

"I only know the one prayer."

"Still it is a surprising kindness. The measure of an individual can be difficult to discern by actions alone. Take you, for instance. All this destruction... chaos. I was curious to see how far you'd go to find me. Well, here I am."

"How did you know I was coming at all?" asks Shepard, who is merely glad that her schedule seems to be matching her previous one closely enough.

The drell smiles. "I didn't. Not until you marched in the front door and started shooting." He gestures to the body of the businesswoman. "Nassana had become paranoid. You saw the strength of her guard force. She believed one of her sisters would kill her. You were a valuable distraction. Gunfire and explosions. I prefer to work quietly. If I have to fight through guards, I've made a mistake. I rarely make mistakes. You disrupted my plan, but your distraction eventually proved valuable."

"Let's cut to the chase," says Shepard because reliving the same scene over again will get tedious. "I need you for a mission."

"Indeed?" he replies cagily.

"You're familiar with the Collectors?"

"By reputation."

"They're abducting entire human colonies. Freedom's Progress was their handiwork."

"I see."

"We're going after them."

"Attacking the Collectors would require passing through the Omega-4 relay. No ship has ever returned from doing so," Thane points out.

"We'll find a way: They told me it was impossible to get to Ilos, too."

"A fair point. You've built a career on performing the impossible. This was to be my last job." He watches the sky cars pass the building. "I'm dying. Low survival odds don't concern me. The abduction of your colonists does."

"I'm glad it concerns someone," says Shepard.

"The universe is a dark place. I'm trying to make it brighter before I die. Many innocents died today. I wasn't fast enough, and they suffered. I must atone for that. I will work for you, Shepard. No
"No charge?" grumbles Zaeed. "Don't listen to him, boy," he says to Grunt. "You'll learn entirely the wrong lessons about working for a living."

"It is unlikely I'll be living much longer," says Thane neutrally. "Little concerns me beyond the well-being of my soul."

"You never know the day you're going to die," Zaeed retorts. "Especially going around being an assassin. There might not be a tomorrow, so do what you want today."

"Guys." Shepard interjects. "We have another mission to complete. Thane, the Normandy is in docking bay Troi 87. They're expecting you."

"As you wish, Shepard," he replies.

Shepard braces her feet and tenses her core muscles as she offers a hand to the 800-pound krogan on the floor. Grunt takes it, still looking a little confused in the aftermath of battle and falling over a crate. She doesn't pull so much as provide a steady hand hold for him to drag himself up. "Now, Grunt, what have we learned today?"

"Punching people can kill them if you shove their nose bones up into their brains."

"Yes. And?"

"And don't kill unarmed people just because you can. It's cowardly."

"Good. And?"

"It's your job to make sure that you get paid, even if you have to threaten to flay people's brains."

"Uh-huh, and?"

"The best way to get paid is up front. You want at least half the money on the table before you begin or you'll have to chase the wankers across the galaxy."

"And?"

"Ummm... I don't know what a wanker is."

Zaeed guffaws. "A wanker is someone-"

"Untrustworthy man." Shepard glares at Zaeed. That's certainly a better explanation than the real one.

"A wanker is an untrustworthy man." Grunt looks so proud of himself.

"Alright. What about mistakes?"

"Umm... say you're sorry to the police."

Shepard sighs. "Yes. But also don't make the same mistake twice. Always strive to make new ones. You've charged and fallen over something five times so far. You either need to look more carefully at where your feet are going or you need to learn how to phase through matter like I do."
"Can you teach me?" he asks eagerly.

"I could teach you if you had biotics, but Okeer made sure you didn't have any mutations, so I don't think you're biotic. Sorry, Grunt."

The krogan looks annoyed at his large lily pad feet. "They keep getting bigger."

"You'll stop growing eventually. There probably wasn't enough room for them to spread in the tank." She scans the quiet room of boxes with the stray gun on the ground. "In the meantime..." she draws her pistol. "Come out of there."

A frightened asari pops up from behind cover. "Wait! Stop! I didn't fire my weapon once! I pretended to because the other Eclipse sisters were watching, but I didn't really shoot! I'm not one of them! I'm new! I thought being Elnora the mercenary would be cool, but I didn't know what they were really like!" The scared girl does reach for her gun, but then drops it again. Scared. Pathetic. Serial killer.

"What do they do here that you don't like, Elnora?" Shepard asks merely for her own education. She'd made a mistake the first time.

"I thought we'd be flying around the galaxy shooting up bad guys and stuff, right? But no. They just sell red sand and illegal weapons tech. They even smuggled an ardats-yakshi off world."

Shepard scans her face. "What's an ardats-yakshi?"

"It means 'demon of the night winds.' I didn't think they were real but the boss said the scary lady was one."

A-ha. There it was. "New lesson, Grunt: When asari start baby talk like calling someone a 'scary lady,' they're lying." Shepard smiles at the asari like death come to claim her. "You chose your side and you lost."

Her attempt at innocence blown, Elnora screams, "Screw that, bitch!" and tries to outshoot Shepard. Not that there's a chance of Shepard allowing the baby psychopath to escape. Two bullets take her down.

Shepard looks over her shoulder at Zaeed, who shrugs. The last name she needed to scratch off her kill list is gone. She nods and turns back to Grunt. "Always make new mistakes."

"Yes, battlemaster. Don't trust baby asari and always make new mistakes."

Close enough.

Chapter End Notes

Anne: "But have you ever noticed one encouraging thing about me, Marilla? I never make the same mistake twice."

Marilla: "I don't know as that's much benefit when you're always making new ones."

The lady vanishes.

After collecting his information from Liara, Garrus does a bit of shopping: New armor, a fresh talon grind, and other supplies bought with Nyxeris's money. "There's nothing you want to do, Kasumi?"

He's not certain where the thief is, but her answer comes across clearly in his ear. "You're not going to let me steal anything, so I think I'll avoid telegraphing my next target."

"Fine. I was just asking. Shepard and the squad won't be back to the Normandy for hours." He strolls back to the docks.

"How do you know that?"

"She's recruiting Thane and Samara."

"So?"

"So not everyone jumps down out of the rafters to join up." He rests his elbows on the balcony to enjoy a final breath of real air before returning to the recycled atmosphere of the ship.

"Maybe not everyone does, but that doesn't mean they won't."

"Asari justicars don't work that way."

"But assassins work the same as thieves. You just have to pay enough." Kasumi appears at his elbow. "You know something."

"This isn't the first I've heard of either of them."

"And the rest is classified?"

Garrus gives her a noncommittal twitch of mandible.

"I like your asari friend." Kasumi leans her back against the railing and looks up at Liara's office. "She's got a lot to learn, though."

"Window?" he asks. It's kind of nice to have someone to talk shop with, even if she's normally on the opposing side.

"Yeah. It wouldn't take much to send a cloaked drone up there to spy on her passwords. Not that her encryption software is more than moderately difficult. The Shadow Broker files were much harder."

"She's been sheltered. She'll learn eventually."

"Think she can tell if someone's been in her office?"

"I ... don't know actually."
"Then maybe we should tell her that someone's in her office?"

Garrus lifts his omni-tool and tilts the view screen to get an orange reflection of the picture window behind him. There's an armored asari searching through Liara's desk. He types a message for Liara into the omni-tool and hits send.

After a few minutes he gets a response: MAILER DEMON message undeliverable. He pulls his mandibles close. That can't be good.

The asari in the office gets tired of searching and walks down to grab a waiting sky car.

"Did you get a good look at her?" Garrus asks Kasumi.

"Yeah. Light blue skin, purple markings, square-ish head. Armor is blue with some kind of gold sparkle to it. White trim."

"Hunh."

"You know her?"

"Definitely not. But I have an idea of who it might be. There aren't that many blue asari with purple markings." The problem is that Tela Vasir shouldn't be here yet. Shepard hasn't given Liara the Shadow Broker data. Unless it's not about that. Tela Vasir is a spectre, perhaps it's his fault? But who monitors for people checking publicly available files from two years ago?

Did Liara get too curious for her own good and try to hack the Citadel file? She wasn't exactly herself with Shepard dead and hasn't fully adjusted to Shepard being back yet.

On the other hand, Shadow Broker data ...

"Kasumi... what was in the information you sent to Liara?"

"A lot of things. You weren't specific about what you wanted me to decrypt, so I sent her everything in her secretary's e-mail until the Broker's anti-hacking software detected me. I had to break off before I was traced. Why?"

"Anything on the Broker's location?"

"Not that I noticed, but she might be able to extrapolate a location from ping data. Kej... my old partner could do it."

"Whatever she did, she needs a rescue now. Let's go."

#

Liara's house is impressive. For a single person in a big city, it's large and even comes with a bit of property around it. Garrus could stick at least five of his efficiency apartment on the Citadel in there. Maybe her special knowledge of the Protheans had allowed her to get some high-value contracts, or maybe her inheritance from Benezia is footing all of the bills.

The lights are out and everything is quiet. Garrus's visor shows no heat signatures. He looks over at Kasumi. "Why don't you do the honors?"

"Tired of hacking?"

"No. You're just invisible." Garrus innocently knocks at the door and waits.
Kasumi chuckles as she barely taps at the control panel and the door opens. "The security at her office was better. This is the basic rental package."

"I thought she said something about putting down roots."

"Then she lied." Kasumi catches his dark look and shrugs. "Maybe she was lying to herself, too."

Garrus steps into the asari cottage and begins looking around. A chair is tipped over and there's a pool of purple blood on the floor with a dripping trail to the back door. He follows it to the curb with the aid of his visor, where it disappears beside an oil stain. The injured party took a car. Probably Liara since the car sat here regularly. But where did she go?

Dracon Trade Center if she's true to her normal pattern. She's going to arrange for an entire building full of innocent people to be her distraction so that she can find the Shadow Broker. The memories of wounded and dead workers lying in rubble set his mandibles tight to his jaw. It's imprecise and unjust.

And this time, somehow, it must be his fault and not Shepard's doing.

Liara planned to stay with him when the Reaper War was over. *It's easier to wonder why we did things the hard way, took all those risks to save just one more life. She reminded me to be the best person I could be. I don't know if I can continue to follow her example on my own. It's easier to let your commanding officer set the tone and choose right from wrong. It's someone else's problem.*

It's *his* problem.

**Damn it, Liara.**

"What's the plan?" asks Kasumi as she walks beside him.

"What would you do?"

"If I were Liara T'Soni?"

"In general."

"In general, I'd wash my hands of this problem. She got away and it's a place she's familiar with. She can take care of herself. If we could follow, we'd make her trail more visible and lead her enemies straight to her."

Except who knows what will happen if he leaves this alone? How many more people will be killed as Liara tries to back Vasir off?

"Alright. Then we lead them somewhere else."

#

Officer P'Gosai is quick to get the area cordoned off despite her late arrival to the scene. Garrus knows he's going to have to play this carefully as she gestures over a turian officer to listen in on the interview and interpret the subharmonics.

"Now then, Mr. Vakarian," says the purple asari. "Why were you visiting Ms. T'Soni?"

"I'd asked her to look into a personal matter for me in her capacity as an information broker."

"And you came by her home?"
"We're also old friends." He clears his throat and pointedly doesn't look at the blue bag he'd set on the table still full of supplies he'd bought for use later with Shepard: boxes of digestion tablets to help with levo and dextro proteins, anti-chafing cream, and sterile talon covers. He couldn't leave his bag in the sky car when he didn't know when it would be called away. But under the circumstances, they might well lead to the wrong conclusion without him saying a word.

"I have to ask. Did you kill Ms. T'Soni?"

"No," he says definitively.

"When you arrived, what did you find?"

"The house was empty. I entered and found a blood stain. I called it in."

"Was the door locked?"

A blue asari in sparkling armor walks past the crime scene holo tape. "Thank you officer. Your people are dismissed."

P'Gosai glares at the intruder. "You can't do that!"

"Already done." The other woman smiles. "Spectre Tela Vasir. I'm taking over."

"On what grounds?"

"How about starting with the fact that I can and ending with the fact that the minute you read the complete files, you'll find that Vakarian and T'Soni are part of Commander Shepard's old crew and may be in grave danger if one word of this gets out." She crosses her arms. "Now get out of my crime scene."

P'Gosai and her team give Garrus and Vasir disgruntled looks as they pack up their equipment. Once they're gone, Vasir gives him the once over. "Vakarian, huh? Your father made quite a name for himself on the Citadel."

"It always precedes mine." Garrus widens his mandibles but narrows his eyes.

"I assume you had business with your friend this evening."

"As I was explaining to the officer, Liara had done some work for me." He shrugs and glances covertly around the room.

"You were C-Sec once, weren't you?"

"One of many junior detectives. I'm surprised you know."

"I read up on T'Soni and her contacts on my way here." She waves off his comment. "You knew her better than I do. Any idea where she would have hidden her backups?"

"Not off hand, but if I were to look around, I might spot something..."

"Please do. It would make this all so much quicker." The spectre's annoyance is barely concealed.

Garrus gives her a courteous nod and begins looking over the furnishings slowly, aware of the asari's eyes on his back.

"By the way, where have you been lately, Detective Vakarian? The files I was provided say you
dropped off the face of the Citadel."

"I was on Omega." He explores under couch cushions. You want more, go have a talk with Aria T'Loak if you can stomach it.

"Omega? You really have a thing for big city cesspools. Illium is just Omega with expensive shoes."

"I'm a city boy at heart." He looks over some of Liara's relics and tries to ignore the needling. But it bothers him anyway. What does it say about him and Liara that these are the places they ended up when Shepard died while Alenko and Tali were improving their career prospects and Wrex was on his way to uniting the krogan clans and becoming emperor? Maybe some people just want to be lost.

He picks up the picture of the Normandy and watches as it changes to a picture of a Prothean dig site. "Hrmnnmm...." he rumbles.

"You found something?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's supposed to do that." He shows her the picture, which returns to a view of the Normandy when she touches it.

"Let's take another look at those Prothean pieces anyway," the spectre suggests.

It doesn't take them long to find the hidden drawer and the recording. Vasir pops it into the vid machine. A hooded woman in shadow appears and Kasumi reads out the script they'd prepared.

"T'Soni. I've received the data you sent. I believe I can pinpoint your target's location. Meet me at 8:00 tonight on the 56th floor of Dantius Tower Two."

Garrus can feel Vasir's eyes on him, trying to decide if she should kill him now or wait in case there's another level of security she can't bypass. He calmly turns to look at her, and she makes her decision.

"I know where Dantius Towers are. My car is outside."

"I'll join you, then. I can't leave without knowing what happened to her." He collects his belongings.

"Of course not," says Tela Vasir as he follows her out to her car.

As they settle into the vehicle, the spectre enters the coordinates and sends off a few messages. "The rumors say that Commander Shepard is back. Have you seen her?"

"Yes."

"It's true, then?" She looks innocently interested.

"I'm surprised you have to ask. I thought looking through the council files would show that her status had been updated to active."

"Do you know where she is?"

"No." I cannot truthfully pinpoint her exact location at this very minute.

Vasir stops to concentrate on her driving as she maneuvers though five levels of traffic filtering through poorly marked chasms between offices. "She hasn't tried to recruit you or Dr. T'Soni for her crew?"

"Why?" Garrus chuckles. "Are you looking to hire us first? I didn't realize a washed up cop and an academic who hasn't published in years were worth taking on."
"The spectres watching the Krogan Demilitarized Zone would be happy to have either of you. Urdnot Wrex is destabilizing the status quo. When Shepard vanished and the cockroach returned home, there was buzz around the office that she could have kept him in line."

Garrus tries not to growl. "Shepard doesn't hold people back."

"That's not what I heard about Virmire."

"If you persist in talking about my old crew like this, then I will find my own ride to the tower."

"And you think you'll get in without my spectre clearance?"

"I'll get by on dry wit, charm, and an advanced hacking program on my omni-tool. You seem to have fewer resources than that at your disposal."

The asari bristles. "I work alone, but that doesn't mean I am alone." She waves a hand at the passing buildings. "I can deputize the entire police force when I need them."

"Then you can get yourself another partner when we get there."

"Don't you think highly of yourself."

"No one ever said turians were humble. Usually they say the exact opposite, in fact."

Boom!

Puffs of dust fly out of the building ahead of them, blowing the car back. Tela Vasir fights with the controls, landing on the bridge between the two towers. "Let's go."

Garrus's visor shows a cluster of enemies ahead. Vasir gestures for him to take point. He shakes his head and taps his sniper rifle. "You don't put the galaxy's greatest sniper on your front line."

With a frown of annoyance, Vasir pulls her pistol on him. "No wonder C-Sec has forgotten about you. You're too busy bragging to know when someone has the drop on you. If you don't make me drag your carcass inside, you might live."

Once Garrus is inside, she'll certainly kill him. But for his plan to work, he needs to get her into the building. He walks reluctantly through the door, then spins around to catch Vasir's wrist with his superior reach. The asari manages to shoot once before he disarms her with a twist. A final bit of momentum is used to flip her across the unfinished room.

He has a few seconds before the vanguard gets to her feet and charges. Fortunately, he has a lot of practice with that tactic.

The thing about charging, whether it's a krogan or a vanguard, is that it's a predictable straight line. You know she's coming and you know where she's going to land.

He crouches behind some construction materials and rips open a bag of concrete before keying in the code to turn on the proximity mines he'd given to Kasumi to place. He's rewarded with small green lights flashing to life around the floor, illuminating the forms of enemy soldiers and engineers.

Tela Vasir zeroes in on him and moves out of phase with the rest of the world, passing through the intervening cover and directly into Garrus's space. The impact is enough to knock him off his feet, destroying his shields, but not before he's created a thick cloud of concrete mix in his wake, leaving the asari choking and blind.
He taps at his omni-tool, trying to contact Kasumi, only to find that it's also clogged with dust. Why can't things ever go exactly according to plan?

Vasir's team is examining the mines. They're placed too closely together to be safely disarmed by shooting or overloads. That would cause a chain reaction. Which is exactly what Garrus intends.

He gives up being stealthy, and calls out for his companion, "Kasumi! We have to go now!"

The diminutive thief appears at the door to the stairwell. "Right on time." She arms a flashbang grenade from her supply and tosses it over the heads of the squad of engineers to the first of the many rigged support struts.

He begins to run

BOOM.

Kasumi flashes from her position near the door to apply a knife to Tela Vasir's currently grey form. One of these days, Garrus might ask her how she does that.

She teleports again to the side of the car, swinging herself through the window.

BOOM.

The floor starts falling away beneath him and the walkway tilts. Suddenly the car he was running toward is coming at him, sliding along the sloping walkway.

BOOM.

It takes only a slight flexing of ankles to put Garrus on top of the hood while Kasumi hotwires the controls. The engine clicks on and the car begins to even out.

It's then that he hears a familiar bouncing noise. Tela Vasir is standing at the foot of the collapsing walkway, clutching the door for support, a shockwave heading straight for him.
Chapter Summary

The calvary arrives.

Chapter Notes

1) I added more to the end of the previous chapter as to what precisely Garrus was doing.

2) Moved the stuff with Joker and Shepard from the end of the previous Shepard chapter to the beginning of this one.

My apologies. The fic is still under construction and some of that is trying to decide how to order events.

In other news, I finished cleaning up chapters 18-33. Nothing changed.

Shepard paces back and forth in the Normandy's cockpit. Elsewhere on the ship, Thane and Samara are unpacking. Everything went according to plan.

"So the weather is a balmy 31 degrees C today in Nos Astra," Joker reports.

"Mmmhmmmm..." Nearly according to plan, that is. Garrus was a hard piece of the puzzle to replace.

"How about that local sports team, huh?" Joker asks.

"The Maestros will beat them in the playoffs," Shepard remarks absently. And now he's late getting back.

"I've been thinking about taking up bullfighting. What do you think?"

"Hrmmm... Yes. Of course. You'll look good in gold frogging." It's unlike her mate not to be punctual. Though they didn't set a time for him to be back. She just assumed he'd be here before her.

"Shepard, look! Garrus!"

Her head whips around only to see a janitor pushing a wheelie bin of mops and rakes on the docks. She narrows her eyes at her pilot.

"And now that I've got your attention, could you please stop pacing behind me? Jeez. The guy has two suits of armor, fought off three armies by himself, and you gave him the best thief in the galaxy as a back up."

"And he should have beat us all back here by at least three hours. His mission was a cakewalk."
Shepard resumes pacing.

"What do you see in that guy, anyway?"

"Now is when you're going to do this?"

"If you're going to be walking circles around my space, driving me crazy, yeah, now. So? Why the sudden thing for Garrus. I mean the two of you have been weird since we picked him up and now ... umm... he's your roommate."

"Boyfriend." Bondmate.

"Ummm... Yeah. Talk about catching the rebound out of nowhere."

"He has the reach for it."

Joker snorts. "I'm just worried about you commander. And Garrus running around being a vigilante avenger for the past two years doesn't strike me as being the most stable guy if things go wrong between you."

"Joker ... I appreciate your concern. And because it is you asking, I will say this once. Garrus is not always the most emotionally stable, you're right. I'm not blind to his flaws. They're just things that I can live with. Most of them amuse me. And on the positive side, he's the most loyal person I know, and I could sorely use that in my life. He cares deeply about the welfare of others. He's brilliant; I could spend a lifetime plotting tactics with him and never be bored. And he makes me laugh."

"I thought I made you laugh."

"You, too. But if you'll recall, you turned me down for a date." Shepard's lips twitch up in a smile. "Besides, however insubordinate you are with me, you still need me to be the commander. I think Garrus may be the only person who doesn't need that from me anymore. You have no idea how relaxing that is. The referendum on my love life is now clos-"

BOOM.

Shepard scans the skyline for the source of the noise. "What was that?"

Joker's fingers scramble across buttons. "Sounds like trouble."

"On Illium? Loud noises are bad for business."

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

"Comm tower says there was an explosion downtown."

"An explosion?" But ... but the only explosion she remembers came when she gave Liara the Cerberus info ... "EDI, did Garrus download anything recently?"

"Officer Vakarian has not downloaded anything since we left the Citadel."

Good. Garrus did not decide to take down the Shadow Broker on his own without running it by her first. But that still leaves him as the probable center of this explosion because there shouldn't be one and he's the only thing that's different. "Joker, EDI, keep an ear on the comms. Find out the origin of the blast."

She begins jogging to the armory. She'll need a team. He has Kasumi, so either they're good on tech
or tech won't make a difference. "Thane, Samara, prep for a mission, we're going to investigate a
surprise attack on Illium. Jacob, I need a full load out ready."

Bits and pieces of guns lie over Jacob's workbench where he was cleaning them. "Ma'am, yes,
ma'am. How quickly do you need them?" He's never going to get them all together in time, but he
won't complain.

"Yesterday. Prioritize my assault rifle and pistol if you need to." She runs for the armor in her
quarters without waiting for a response. Cortez was right: The layout of the armory on the Cerberus
version of the ship is all wrong, even if the other layout occasionally had her stripping down to her
skivvies in the open shuttle bay.

"EDI, can you raise Liara T'Soni?"

"One moment."

Heavy weapons. What to bring? Around here, most things have barriers, but if it's the Shadow
Broker like it was that other time, they'll be strong on shields. Mmmmm...

"No response, commander."

"Thank you, EDI." Shepard suits up.

"I have a location, commander," says Joker over the comm. "You're not going to like it. The
explosion was Dantius Towers."

"What? We were just there this morning. What's left to blow up?"

"Um... With Grunt following you around all day, I'm guessing not much."

"Keep on the comms."

I should have asked more questions about the future. What the hell kind of trouble do Liara and
Garrus get into when I'm not around?

#

The sun is setting when Shepard arrives at Dantius Towers with her team. Fallen mortar litters the
exterior of the building, including a broken walkway. A knot of noise and light in the otherwise
empty business district surrounds the door. The top of the towers and parts of adjacent buildings
show signs of attack.

The commander walks up the steps and crosses the holo tape line.

An asari officer set to watch the door holds up a hand in the universal sign to stop. "I'm sorry, ma'am.
This area is under investigation-" And then she sees Samara and falls silent. She cups her hands and
bows her head. "I apologize, justicar. I didn't notice you."

Samara nods to the officer. "Then it is important that you be more attentive to your work."

"Yes, ma'am," the asari says in a small voice.

Samara lifts a brow at Shepard and glances back at the officer, gracefully ceding the position of
authority to her. The commander clears her throat. "We're here to investigate the explosion. What
have you discovered so far?"
"I don't know much, ma'am. You should ask officer in charge. P'Gosai is over there." The asari points to a harried woman looking over a datapad with a turian officer.

"Thank you." Shepard leads the group to the two consulting officers. "Excuse me, Officer P'Gosai? I'm interested in the details of what happened here."

"I'm busy," the cop replies without looking up.

"I would appreciate it if you would make time for a spectre."

The woman's head comes up and her eyes narrow. "Seriously? Another one? Goddess, what have I done to offend you?" She looks Shepard over. "You want this investigation, too? You can have it! I'd rather not spend my time piecing bodies together."

Shepard frowns at the mention of another spectre, but sets it aside for the moment. "I don't intend to take over. We heard the explosion and came to help."

Samara fixes the other asari with a calm stare.

The corners of officer's mouth turns down. "Uh-huh. Well, this would be easier with fewer people nosing around in an unstable building. I don't suppose you can keep people out for me?" She sighs when they don't move, not that the request seemed serious to begin with. "No? Damn."

Shepard looks toward the staircase. "What happened here?"

"An explosion took place somewhere around the 55th floor. We're still clearing rubble away to investigate the site. Blood has been found and ambulances are waiting to carry away any victims."

"You haven't recovered any bodies yet?"

"No. We were told there was an altercation with a mercenary group earlier today when Nassana Dantius was killed in a corporate execution. The blood could all be old or it could be more of the same. You never know what's really going on with corporate espionage cases until you're hip deep in corpses."

"Mmmmm... a mercenary group." Thane muses. "Such a mess."

Shepard snorts. "It's amazing what some people will do for a distraction, isn't it?"

"I believe it's called taking advantage of what the tides bring." He returns to studying the interior columns.

Shepard returns her attention to the cop. "We want to go up."

P'Gosai shrugs. "I can't stop a spectre or a justicar from doing what they will. But unless you're experts at construction or bomb disarmament or body retrieval, I'd appreciate a note not holding me responsible when you trip over another proximity mine and destabilize the whole building."

Mostly, Shepard disarms bombs by shooting them. She looks up at the new spiderweb cracks in the ceiling. "We'll start from the outside, then." Shepard exits the tower and begins circling, looking for a way up. "Garrus, what are you doing?" she wonders aloud.

"It would seem perplexing you, commander," says Thane wryly.

"He's good at that sometimes," Shepard says. "Do you notice anything odd about this place that you didn't see earlier?"
"Dust," he says matter-of-factly, running a finger over his suit to remove some offending particles. "Other than that, all is the same as it was, minus a few floors."

"Assuming that he's the one who dropped the building and not the target of the attack," because proximity mines are certainly in Garrus's repertoire, "why do things that way?"

"It would be a poor assassin who did such a thing," Thane replies. "But I can't say I wasn't tempted to try it in my early days. At times a target would be surrounded by a company of bodyguards, and separating the two was difficult."

Samara nods, "Sometimes it is necessary to destroy a village to root out corruption. That is a truth that must be accepted."

"You didn't have any problems with Nassana's bodyguards earlier. Sheppard looks to Thane. "I have had time to get better at my trade."

"Say you're as good as you are now. Why blow up a building?"

"I wouldn't."

Alright, why would Garrus collapse a building? Thane's right that it's messy, and Garrus is all about precision strikes. Well, he did collapse the tunnels to his sniper's nest on Omega, dropping the ceiling on the mercenaries to deplete their numbers and buy time. So an emergency situation where he expects to be fighting an army? Why are you fighting armies in the streets of Nos Astra, Garrus?

"Hey, Shep," says Kasumi, appearing on a fire escape.

"Kasumi! Where's Garrus?"

"Tower One, trying to find a way to avoid cameras and the police. Just our luck this is the officer he ran into earlier."

"But he's alright?"

"Just the usual scrapes."

"Then let's go get him and get out of here. She begins retracing her path. "He hasn't been pretending to be a spectre, has he?"

"Um... I don't think he has." Kasumi seems surprised at the question.

As they approach the corner of the building, they can hear yelling. The first voice is distantly familiar, as if Shepard has heard it before, but not in a long time. "I want you to find him! He tried to murder me and my team!"

P'Gosai's jaded tones follow, "The turian I left with you at the crime scene?"

"Yes!"

"He blew up this building?"

"Yes!"

"With you and your strike team inside?"
"Yes!" says a grit-covered asari.

"But you think my investigative team can somehow handle what a spectre and a strike team couldn't." P'Gosai crosses her arms.

"You can certainly find him! That's your specialty."

Shepard looks to Kasumi for more information, but the thief has vanished again.

"Spectre, we have people -- your comrades -- to dig out. Some of them might also be alive."

"They're not the priority here!"

Shepard clears her throat. "Please keep at your work, officer. Saving as many people as possible is always the priority."

"And who do you think ..." the other asari seems more than happy for a fight, but stops in surprise. "Commander Shepard?"

"That's me." Please don't ask me to autograph something.

"You're alive."

"Yep."

"But that means ... shit. You. Officer. Arrest her!"

The cop raises an eyebrow. "You want me to arrest one of the most famous spectres in the business for what?" She makes a show of looking up and down the street. "Jaywalking?"

Shepard sighs in relief. "Good. It would be helpful if you could detain this person until I have the time to interrogate her."

P'Gosai lifts the other brow. "You want me to detain Tela Vasir, the spectre with the regular Illium beat for what?" She looks to a damaged car being hauled away. "Parking violations?" She shakes her head. "My mother always told me not to stand between two goddesses when they're fighting." The cop deliberately turns her back and walks into the building, leaving the two spectres to face off.

Vasir starts circling. She can't hide the bouncy energy and poor thinking of someone high on medigel, nor that something hasn't healed quite right. She's in no shape to win this battle alone.

Sparks tickle Shepard's fingertips. This person attacked Garrus. She tries to get a hold on her temper and pull the tiny flames back into her hand. "Leave, Vasir, and you can live."

"I'd always heard that you never completed your spectre training. Now I believe it. You don't know the first rule."

"Always save the day."

"No. There's no one so powerful that they can stop you from doing your job. The moment there is, you stop being a spectre."

The sparks have stopped, but Shepard's hands feels numb. "I like mine better."

The texture of the air changes as the two vanguards begin shifting eezo around them. Vasir slips a foot back for a sprinting charge at Shepard, who raises her hand to block and let go of whatever this
new biotic sensation is.

Ice sprouts around Tela Vasir, sticking her in place. Shepard waits a moment for the thaw and hits the asari with the butt of her rifle to knock her out. She looks over at Samara. "I don't suppose you could put her in stasis or something?"

"Justicar techniques are more final."

"Right." Shepard looks at the woman lying in the street. She's a stubborn bitch, but murdering her in cold blood would be wrong. Of course, she's supposed to be dead. Shepard would have killed her in battle if she'd been able to fight one. But this ... this was more like the volus high on red sand.

Kasumi pops back in. "I can't believe she's still alive after I hit her with the car."

"You hit her with a car?" Shepard asks.

"Yeah. Maybe it protected her when the rest of the building fell in on her."

"Mmmm.... Kasumi, could you unlock the trunk to one of these sky cars? I'd like it to be able to lock again when you're done."

The thief shrugs and easily pops the latch to one of the cars at the car stand. Shepard hoists Tela Vasir into the trunk and programs the car to head to one of the outer arcologies.

"Sometimes, you are really slow getting around, Shepard," Garrus rumbles as he walks toward her. He looks a little stiff, but that could be the new armor.

"I'm not the one late getting back to the ship. What's going on?"

"Liara got targeted by this spectre. Kasumi and I tried to lure her away. It worked until the walkway broke. I ended up having to climb the whole way up to the penthouse and then come back down the stairs on the other side."

Kasumi chuckles. "Welcome to my world where something is always out of reach."

"Despite the kleptomania, you do good work."

"Since you're being nice you can even have your shopping bag back. Though you might want to look into armor with pockets next time." Kasumi produces a blue cloth bag.

Garrus scratches the back of his head. "Thank you. It's not normally a problem. I don't usually dangle off of buildings after going shopping."

"You miss out on all the fun things in life that way." Kasumi flickers out.

Shepard feels tired. "Let's just go home and we can sort everything out there."

"Actually, Shepard ..." Garrus begins.

Shepard looks up at him, dreading him asking for anything because right now, she's not in the mood for more explosions.

"I have one more thing to do," he says as if confessing to some grave sin.

Given his tone of voice, she takes a deep breath and slowly lets it out, trying to summon patience. "What is it?"
"I have to get Liara."

"She's coming with us?" Shepard asks in surprise.

"Yes, she is," the turian says with finality.

Chapter End Notes

P'Gosai is a name and personality I made up for the one asari officer who speaks in the Shadow Broker DLC. So far as I am aware, the character has no official name. If I'm wrong, I'm happy to correct the fic. While I can make my own characters as needed, I think with the nature of this fic that it's more fun to use the pre-existing ones to fill the background.

In the meantime, she's my illustration of why cops hate spectres.

Edit: Changed tower names to Tower Two (and presumably Tower One) as used in the game.
The unshattered glass door of the Dracon Trade Center swings open for Garrus. The balconies overlooking the interior courtyard are full of people going about their business. He finds a spot on a banquette seat near a bush and sweeps his eyes over the crowds, trying to find one asari in a sea of them.

Where would Liara be hiding? If he recalls correctly, she came in from behind or beside Vasir when they went after the Shadow Broker. She'd need a bathroom or -- his gaze settles on the unlit window next to Baria Frontiers -- an unoccupied office.

His path clear, Garrus takes the stairs two at a time and hacks the lock. He pushes the door open to the sound of a safety being removed from a gun. Holding himself perfectly still, he raises a brow plate, "Is all of this necessary, Liara?"

"Garrus?" she says in surprise.

"Who else would it be?"

Liara lowers her Predator pistol. "Why aren't you in Baria Frontiers?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

"This isn't a time to trade words. My life is in danger."

"Let me answer my own question then: You set me up, T'Soni." Garrus's subharmonics rumble. "You're running from Tela Vasir. I'm here because I'm tired of being betrayed." He knocks the gun from her hand.

"I ... I didn't ..." she looks down at her hands, flustered.

"You did. You have a secret kinetic shield as well as your own barriers to defend yourself, but you left a trail of blood. Couldn't find the medigel in your own house? You wanted us worried."

Liara raises her eyes in a plea, "I thought Shepard -"

"Oh, you wanted Shepard upset and desperate to find you. You wanted to set up Shepard. That doesn't make a whole hell of a lot of difference to me. We're teammates. I expected better from you."

The appeal for understanding in her face alters to anger. "Teammates? Where were you when the team needed you? I stayed." She stamps her foot. "I stayed until Alchera. I watched my best friend die while I lived. And where were you? Somewhere safe on the Citadel as the heroic policeman-training-to-be spectre. And where were you during her funeral?" She flings her arm wide. "You sat
like a stone while Kaidan and Wrex and I read prayers for her. And afterwards, you ... you ... you just disappeared. You abandoned us all! The Normandy was gone and I lost everyone I had ever cared about because they were dead or had better things to do. You weren't there. Meanwhile, I found her. I saved Shepard's body. I got her to Cerberus so they could try to bring her back. So don't you dare talk to me about being teammates, Garrus Vakarian! You. Weren't. There."

Seeing the calm, mild, and serious asari he relies upon lose her temper has the odd effect of restoring Garrus's own. He hadn't protected her. He hadn't protected Sidonis. He couldn't save Shepard. He kept failing.

And Liara would stay anyway. When things got bad, he would keep trying, for her and for Tali and for Joker. They were a unit.

He steps back to give her more space, leaning against the wall. "You're right. I was the one who left. I'm sorry, Liara."

"You're apologizing?"

"Yes. I was young and upset and I didn't even understand why I was so upset. She's not the first person I've known who died. She's not even the first commanding officer who died on me." His mind drifts back to that day, that horrible day when he watched the counselors and ambassadors 'celebrate' Shepard's life while ignoring the cause she was fighting for. "I could barely speak because I didn't know what I'd say. I was wrong. I shouldn't have left everyone. I ... I ... was a mess."

"You loved her," Liara says, some of her rage cooling.

"No," he shakes his head. "I admired her. She inspired me to change my entire life. And right when I began thinking all of these new thoughts about what I should be doing with myself, she died and I was trapped back in the same place she'd found me, as if nothing had changed except that now I could see the chains." He stands up. "I made mistakes without her around to guide me. I'm sorry that I didn't try harder to help the team. It won't happen again." With that, he catches Liara around the waist and swings her over the shoulder.

She squirms reflexively. "Garrus? What are you doing?"

"I've hit my limit on dealing with other people's klixen shit for today. Maybe, back when Shepard died, we should have disappeared together. Maybe we could have succeeded in being self-destructive as a team. You with your expensive tastes and me with my liquor and drugs. You did a hell of a better job of betraying me than Sidonis did, using me as bait."

Liara sounds fearful as Garrus pushes the door open. "Stop! She's out there."

"Out here in this building full of people, Liara? The building of civilians you put between yourself and an asari ex-commando?"

"Yes. Now stop ruining my plan." She kicks him in the chestplate. "Owww."

"What was your plan?"

"I'm going to wait for her to go into Sekat's office and then come up behind her while she's facing Shepard. Or you."

"That's it?"

"It's simple. Simple plans are best. And then we fight her off."
"What happens if she kills Sekat?"

"It's a risk. Sometimes people die." By the tone of her voice, she doesn't believe anyone will die. She's trying to be pragmatic, but she doesn't understand the weight of what she's done.

"Remind me why I'm friends with you? It's starting to sound like a more dangerous occupation than being friends with Shepard, and she's regularly fighting armies."

"I'm not so sure we are friends," Liara grinds out. "Friends don't kidnap each other."

"Friends also don't put each other in the line of fire." He carries her out of the office. "But I'm willing to overlook it. What happens if she's not the one to go to Sekat's office? What happens if she sends someone else?"

"She was alone earlier ..."

"She wasn't when I fought her off."

"You fought her?" Liara stops squirming.

"Yes." He continues carrying her down the stairs. "I fought her with Kasumi's help. I dropped a building on her and her small army who would have killed all of these civilians."

"You dropped a building on her?" Businesswomen give them curious looks as he rounds the next set of stairs to the atrium.

"Mmmmmmm. And then Shepard cold cocked her because being hit by a car and buried under a building wasn't enough to kill her. She's probably halfway to the equator right now, and we need to get off of Illium before she comes back."

"Garrus, I have a life here. A business... everything was going fine until you showed up."

"Sure it was, T'Soni. That's just a cover for your hunt for Feron. You'll leave the moment you find him."

Liara's voice turns deadly, "How do you know about Feron?"

They cross the lobby. "I already know the information you want to find."

"How do you-"

"There's a price. You're coming with us until we find him."

"Do I have a choice?"

He plops her on the hood of a sky car sitting outside the tower doors. "I don't know. Do you? Can you leave Feron to die?" He raises a brow at her. "Apparently you can leave a building full of people, a faithful contact, me, and Shepard to die. So maybe I've misjudged you."

"Shepard wouldn't die," Liara says firmly. "Neither would you, apparently."

"Thanks. Good to know you thought the same thing when you sent the spectre after me."

"I didn't send the spectre after you, Garrus. Your simple little favor did."

"There is no possible way anyone is watching that boring little database," he says firmly. It's simply
too obscure and accessible for anyone to bother watching it regularly.

"I did a little digging."

"Aha. You screwed up."

"I was trying to help," she says indignantly.

"What did you do?"

"I wanted to see who else might have looked at the files like I did."

"Who was it?"

"Councilor Valern."

"Valern died on the Destiny Ascension, Liara."

"I know." She stares him down and lets her words sink in.

"Damn it all." He punches the side of the car. "I'm sorry I got you into this. I came to get you because ..." Because I'm your commander and I owe it to you to save you from yourself, like I owe Sidonis "... because I gave you this assignment and I can't let you face the consequences alone. We're a team. Please, Liara. Come with us. We'll find Feron."

"I suppose you did get me out of a Prothean bubble and fight a spectre for me. Maybe I can trust you again."

He looks up at the building. "What was Sekat getting for you?" If the spectre was because of him, then it wouldn't be the Shadow Broker's location.

"Valern's family tree. I wanted to know what dalatrass he imprinted on and who she imprinted on and so on. I'll have him send it to me at the ship."

"Good call." It's a place to start.

Chapter End Notes

Have Garrus being a fool for April Fool's.

I figured in canon Liara was angry enough at Shepard judging her when she wasn't there (depending on what dialogues you go with), it would actually go worse for Garrus since he didn't have a good excuse for leaving like being dead.

Upon reflection, I also think Liara probably underestimated the potential damage (blowing up a trade center) that Vasir would do to get to her in the original game.
After scrambling an emergency mission to investigate a terrorist attack on Nos Astra because Garrus didn't bother to inform her of what was going on, Shepard takes a perverse delight in presenting him with a pile of forms and authorizations to be filled out in triplicate for the authorities of Illium, the Asari Republics, and the Citadel Council. He should count himself lucky that she arranged for a fresh pot of kava to be waiting for him in their cabin after all the trouble he's caused.

She dumps the datapads into his arms and blithely walks off with Liara to give her a tour. The asari seems overwhelmed by the new ship and crew as they settle down in the mess afterward.

"So, it's a bit packed," says Shepard. "Who would you rather bunk with? The justicar or the thief?"

"I was hoping for some place quiet and out of the way..." says Liara.

"I know, but all our rooms are taken. Unless you want to bunk in the engine room with Tali when she arrives. Or there's the gunnery, but you'll have to put up with Garrus's calibration schedule and ... well ... you know him." Shepard pours Liara a cup of coffee in one of the many Cerberus mugs.

Liara frowns. "I don't understand your meaning."

"Calibrations?"

"Yes?" Liara asks as she accepts the cup.

Shepard shakes her head. "That's right, you didn't have to put up with them on the SR-1 and you wouldn't know ... Garrus calibrates everything. He's really good at it, but I think the lights will be on at odd hours while he clanks back and forth in his armor. I wouldn't recommend sleeping in his work station." She shrugs. "It's quiet down with Jack, but she'd kill you in your sleep. Grunt ... who knows? He's usually plotting to kill people when they're awake. Zaeed snores like a buzzsaw and has a thing for asari, so will probably hit on you. You could try Thane, if you prefer, but he's not likely to leave the room much because of his medical condition."

"I used to think I could live with a justicar without inciting her to kill me, but now I'm not so sure. Engine room, if you think Tali won't mind."

"You're not so sure? There's a story there."

Liara laughs a bit nervously and tugs at her sleeves. "Not much of a story. You know my mother was one of the leading religious philosophers on Thessia."

"She was?" says Shepard in surprise.
"You ... didn't know?" The asari's brow creases in confusion. "That was why she had such a large entourage when she joined up with Saren. I grew up with acolytes and bodyguards around me. The few times I was completely alone with her are memories I treasure."

"You had a better relationship with your mother than I had with mine. Being alone with her is always awkward. Like we should be doing something, but neither of us knows what that something is." She sips at the hot, bitter liquid.

"My mother would take me to the park or to hidden areas of the temples and we'd watch other people go about their business, making up stories about them... I suppose I simply moved on to making up stories about people I couldn't see." Liara chuckles. "But most of our conversation was gossip and morals if I tried to explain it. In any case, sometimes she hosted justicars. She told me to always be on my best behavior and I never had any issues with them. But then Garrus took me to task for ... for my plans earlier."

"Plans?"

"Yes." Liara looks down at her hands. "I would have felt awful if the spectre had invaded the building and killed everyone. I never anticipated anything like that. I thought she'd focus on me."

"It's okay. You were desperate and didn't have time to think things through. We all make mistakes." She reaches out her pale pink hand to squeeze Liara's light blue one.

"That's more than a mistake," she says.

Shepard raises a brow. "You were planning to kill hundreds of people?"

"No. That wasn't the plan. I ... that's more than a small mistake."

"So don't do it again," says the commander as they settle down at the table.

Liara's blue eyes grow wide. "Do you ever stay mad at anyone?"

"Mmmm... Saren. The Reapers. I think I managed to be mad at the quarians for a whole two months. Kaidan."

"Shepard, Saren and Kaidan should not be on the same list," says Liara emphatically.

"Don't ask if you don't like the answer." Shepard examines the ceiling in thought. "Though I suppose it's not that I stay mad at any of them, it's that they constantly do things to make me angry so that I never come down off the emotional high of needing to punch them in the face. Oh, and they have other people around me who make my life difficult in the meantime by trying to claim they're not so bad. That I shouldn't be angry. That I'm imagining things. Keeps me wound up. You, I'm more worried about than mad."

"Umm... so..." Liara plays with the handle of her mug and then looks up mischievously. "What did the quarians do to you?"

"Started shit with the geth at the most inconvenient time possible and then shot at me when I came to help them." Shepard shrugs nonchalantly and figures the description is vague enough to get away with it.

"And Kaidan?"

"Calls me a traitor to my government every time I see him. And then hits on me." Shepard drains the
last of her cup. "I don't understand how he thinks that's supposed to work out in his favor."

"I thought I read about an old human courtship ritual based around insulting the female..."

"Negging. I don't believe that was ever a human ritual. But if it was, it certainly isn't used today. I think he's just being himself: His worldview is so narrow he can't deal with anything that doesn't conform to it."

"I never noticed that the lieutenant had such a problem before."

Shepard chuckles depreciatingly. "Usually, I get praised for my observational skills, but I completely missed that one myself. And then Horizon happened and it's been the same ever since. Almost makes me glad I died and got to see what he was really like when he wasn't blowing sunshine and rainbows up my ass."

There's a gagging noise as Liara chokes on her hot coffee. "I did not need details, Shepard."

"Huh?"

"I am not even academically interested in what humans do in bed."

"No! That's not... It's a metaphor! For... ummm... for telling someone only good things and always seeming positive." She can feel the heat on her cheeks. The hum of the engine room beneath her reverberates up through the soles of Shepard's Cerberus-issued boots and steadies her.

The echoing blush on the asari drags the conversation to a halt. Gardner's back is turned, but the snickering is audible over the clank of silverware. Shepard loves her alien squadmates, but sometimes the misunderstandings are awkward.

"Shepard... ummm..." Liara looks up. "Garrus said you knew about Ferron... uh... how much do you know about Cerberus acquiring your body?"

She lowers her voice. "I know everything."

"Everything?" her companion squeaks.

"Yes. It's alright, Liara. I... I don't exactly like it, but I'm not angry about it." Shepard clenches her jaw. "But never do that again. There's a lot of things wrong with raising the dead."

"I... I'm sorry, but it needed to be done. You didn't see what happened when you were gone." Liara chews on her lip. "It was like they tried to bury every mention of the Reapers without you there to remind them. I... I'm not good in front of the cameras. I learned that as a child. Garrus and Kaidan were probably the best trained at it, but the Alliance had Kaidan and the human crew hidden away and Garrus ran off... There were a lot of interviews with Tali at first. She tried, but... she didn't know what she was doing and people don't respect the quarians. I don't know how she managed for so long..." She closes her eyes. "I did a few, too, but... I couldn't cope with the hecklers... the things they would say after you died... after my mother had died... " Tears slowly leak out of Liara's eyes. "People are cruel."

"Shhhhh... it's okay, Liara." Shepard pulls out a plain handkerchief and dabs at her friend's eyes, never letting go of her hand. "It's okay. I'm here now." She moves to a seat next to Liara and wraps an arm around her. "We'll take care of this. I'll do the talking from now on if you'll back me up as chief researcher. It's going to be alright."

"I'm... I'm such a mess, crying like a child..."
"It's alright. You're stronger than you think you are. You could flay them all with your mind if you weren't a good person." That earns her a smile through the tears. "Garrus was right. You need to come with us. You've been alone for too long."

The clinking in the kitchen has stopped. A tanned and calloused human hand deposits a clean rag on the table next to them and quietly clears away their cups as Shepard sits with her friend, rocking her gently.

#

Now that they're underway, Shepard returns to her quarters to find Garrus in his undersuit, hunching over the desk in a chair much too small for him. The pot of kava is two-thirds gone and two broken styli lay in pieces on the desk.

He doesn't seem to notice her as she changes out of the dress uniform she'd worn to greet Liara. Knowing him, he's probably listening to music. She slips into a pair of grey sweat pants to match her grey sports bra. It also matches the streak of dust through his fringe and the grit gathered inside his carapace. They've both had too long of a day.

His hand slowly scribbling symbols that she can't understand across the surface of the tiny datapad becomes briefly mesmerizing. She's never seen his handwriting before and she's seen his signature only once. She kneels down beside him and sets a hand on his elbow to ensure he does realize she's there. He nods slightly and continues. He was ignoring her then. Fair enough. She does need those reports sent as soon as possible if they're going to beat Tela Vasir's account back to the ears of the council.

Madelaine unties his footwrap and begins unwinding it.

His feet are fascinating. The spur on the back is a vestigial bone covered in keratin. It's more solid than she'd expected back when they were only blowing off steam, able to take her weight easily, and as smooth as his mouthplates. It sits right above where his skin begins with a suade-like pebbling to it. Two sets of joints for a heel that never touches the ground follow. And then there are the two toe talons that he curls beneath the ball of his foot now that they're free and then extends out until they make a cracking noise.

She lifts his foot up to her lap and begins rubbing it, running her thumb back and forth along the crease in the center until it's limp in her hands. She changes her grip so that her fingers make small circles on the sole, and smiles when his eyes close and his mandibles flutter.

With a press of her shoulder, she scoots the chair back to do the same to his other foot while he writes more quickly. When he sets the pad down, she looks up at him. "It has never been an issue before, so let me make one thing clear: If you ever change mission and don't inform me again, I will make a list of the most objectionable tasks on the ship from scanning planets to chopping onions, and they will all be yours after I save your ass from whatever it is you've gotten into. Do you understand?"

"Yes, commander."

"Good." She rubs his ankle. "So, did you give me some good bullshit for the Council to ignore?"

"Nassana Dantius's schemes against her sisters led to her death and the destruction of her towers. That should keep them busy with the sisters and their inheritance claims until the Reapers show up." He slumps back in the chair and closes his eyes again.
"Sounds plausible. Now, what's the truth, Garrus?"

"Mmmm.... Someone's co-opting Council resources and it's going to bite me in the ass."

"I do need the details on this one, Vakarian. Don't make me order you to write them out."

He slides farther down in the chair. "Please, Spirits, no. I'll tell you everything," he protests like a prisoner under interrogation. "I just don't understand much of anything."

She continues to rub at his foot while he gathers his thoughts.

"I asked Liara... No... When we were... No. Do you remember the Citadel Archives?"

"Yes." She halts the massage, not wanting to accidentally hurt him if this is going to be about the clone.

"Do you remember how there were some recordings still loaded into viewing rooms that triggered when we walked through?"

"A little." She cautiously resumes rubbing his foot.

"One of those was the attack on the Citadel. It triggered when Wrex walked through it, but when you walked into the room, it recognized you as a spectre and the vid changed."

"Reapers attacked the Citadel just like I said they would. And the cameras recorded it and only show the full details to authorized personnel. So what?"

"So, why the cover up?" He spreads his talons in question.

"To keep people calm. The councilors have always been big on keeping panic to a minimum."

"Yes, but why don't the councilors admit to the existence of Reapers in private conversations with their spectres? The Council denies the whole thing to the end. But if they have this recording, it doesn't make sense. They know what's really going on. Unless they don't watch it. But someone made it. So, if I'm reliving three years of my life and have a bit of freedom this time around, I thought I'd find out who created the recording. It might help unravel some of the things that happen later."

"Who's your suspect then?"

"Not anyone I expected it to be. According to Liara, Executor Venari Pallin made the file."

"Isn't that your old boss?"

"My old boss who is due to be killed by Captain Bailey for resisting arrest for conspiracy against the council in about 10 months."

"I guess he really was involved in a conspiracy then."

"I'm ... not sure. It was a huge scandal in the Hierarchy. Dad spent a whole week staring at his paintings in between watching news coverage of Pallin's death and the case against him. And if you talk to Bailey about it, he's not certain Pallin was guilty in the first place. He only shot because his suspect attacked."

"You could try to talk to Pallin when we're on the Citadel again."

"I could, except that Pallin's taken a leave of absence. At the moment, Chellick is acting executor."

""
"Any idea when he'll be back?"

"No. I haven't seen him since before I left for Omega." Garrus makes an especially pleased trilling sound as she finds a sore spot. "He and Dad were buddies, but we were never close. Neither of us wanted accusations of favoritism."

"So how does Tela Vasir and the mess on Illium fit in?"

"When I asked Liara to look into things, she apparently decided to be more thorough than I wanted. She's still learning the trade and she lacks subtlety."

"I thought you hated having to tiptoe around the felons to prove your case."

"I do. But I know that sometimes it's the most effective way to gather intel. I am capable of doing things I don't like." He picks up a datapad with a look of disgust and lets it drop back on the desk. "I was trying to be cautious since I don't know what I'll find and defeating the Reapers has to be the priority, followed by getting everyone out alive."

"Alright, what was going on with Tela Vasir?"

"Liara started digging into accounts that had accessed the original Reaper footage. One name in particular came up: Councilor Valern."

"He's dead."

"That's what I said. Someone is using his access codes. Liara found his name and started backtracking his access history. That is what I think alerted the person using the codes and led to Vasir being sent after us."

"So a councilor? But a councilor wouldn't need Valern's codes in the first place. They already have access to everything."

"Mmmm... there are other possibilities. If the order was sent over restricted channels using Valern's access codes, all text without specifying the issuing councilor, then Tela Vasir would likely have followed it. It could also still be the Shadow Broker who has the codes, so he sent the same strike team, just for different reasons this time." Garrus taps the table. "Or it could be a councilor who wants to keep their identity secret."

"Damn council security is like Swiss cheese."

"Like what?"

"A human food. It's full of holes. During the Reaper War, the batarian refugees started using old batarian ambassadorial passcodes."

"Sweetie, the batarians haven't had an ambassador since 2164."

"That long? Then it's worse than I thought. The codes still worked 20 years later. It wouldn't surprise me if all of the old Council's codes were still active."

"Spirits, this could be bad." he says when he realizes she isn't joking. "I was thinking that this was limited to the salarians, that he'd given his codes to his dalatrass. But if it's bigger than that ..."

"Why would he give his codes to anyone?"

"Because he couldn't resist."
"What? Money? Sexual favors?"

"I forget how little political background the Alliance gives its soldiers. Valern was always an odd choice for councilor because salarian males don't hold political positions. It was speculated that he was a compromise candidate between warring houses."

"Why? Why wouldn't male salarians have positions of power?"

"Oh, they can get powerful positions by excelling in business and the military and so on. There's a gender imbalance, nine in 10 salarians is male, and the males do most of the physical labor." He sees her confused frown. "Salarlains choose to operate that way. They can control the sex of their children. The babies imprint on their mothers at birth, giving females an extended network of contacts instinctually bound to pleasing them. Females inherit thrones and oversee everything from villages to nebulae. Males are left to make their own way based on their talents."

"Is Mordin bound to some dalatress?"

"I don't think so." Garrus waves a mandible in dismissal. "Mordin is old by salarian standards. His mother and grandmother have likely passed on. He may have even outlived his sisters if he ever had any. You'd have to ask him. But I think that anyone he serves now, he serves by his own whims." He rubs a finger along the edge of his mandible. "He probably does like you better as a leader for being female."

"'Salarlains respond better to higher pitched voices.' I guess Allers was right," Shepard muses. "So Valern may have been lax with giving his mother the access codes."

"Or someone she designated. Yes."

"Or there's potentially a larger breach in Citadel security and all of the old councilors were compromised."

"Yes."

"Or this is all some plot by Pallin."

"Or Pallin is a fall guy for a conspiracy, which, on gut instinct, I like better."

"Alright, detective. Where do we go from here?"

"To the Shadow Broker. The sooner we put Liara in charge, the sooner we narrow down our list of suspects and enemies."

"We have to pick up Tali, though, and we can't be late or she dies."

"So we do that next and then work on the Shadow Broker thing."

"I think we have the time. Maleon and Oriana will keep."

"About Oriana..."

"Yeah?"

"Take me with you on that mission? I owe her."

"Oriana?"
"She's a good kid. And I want to see her, watch Miranda, think if there's some way I can help them later."

"Later?"

"When Henry Lawson kills Oriana's family to reclaim her."

"Alright."

"Thanks." He takes her hands. "Let's get to bed."

"No." She runs a finger along his neck and shows him the grit. "Shower first."

"Only if you come along to prop me up against the wall. I'm not sure my feet know where the ground is."

She wraps his arm over her shoulder. "Alright. Lean on me. You can return the favor tomorrow."

"What's tomorrow?"

"I'm going into surgery for more physical upgrades. It would be..." Shepard hesitates picking her words, feeling strange to ask for anything "... nice if you were around afterwards."

"I'm always around if you need me, Shepard."

"I don't need you," she says firmly. "It would just be ... nice."

"I'll think about it, then."

Chapter End Notes

The curious canon of Venari Pallin based on the ME Wiki:

1) Executor Pallin is the turian with an office in the embassy during ME1.

2) He is the head of C-Sec and the turian you see arguing with Garrus over the Saren case in the council tower before Garrus introduces himself to you.

3) At first the writers wanted to kill Pallin off in the Sovereign attack, and that's why you don't see him in ME2.

4) In fact, there's actually a news report that lists Chellick as the new executor. Thus why I've written in that Pallin is on a leave of absence.

   But then they changed their minds ...

5) At some point between ME2 & ME3, Pallin helps Anderson & Sanders with their own investigations into Cerberus.

6) Udina accuses Pallin of conspiracy against the council.

7) Bailey is put in charge of the investigation. He finds some suspicious things and attempts to arrest Pallin. This turns into a firefight and Bailey kills Pallin.
8) Bailey's commentary on the situation is available if you talk to him in ME3.

Addendum: Councilor Valern is the salarian councilor. He's noted in the wiki as a more easygoing councilor. Since Madeleine let the council die in ME1, he should be dead.
No, We're Not Promised Tomorrow

Chapter Summary

Would you like to purchase this upgrade?

Chapter Notes

I added a Liara-Shepard conversation to the previous chapter because Liara needed to address bringing Shepard back from the dead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Weapons systems powering down," Garrus reports over the comm system from the gunnery. He slides the final switch into the off position. "Weapons systems offline."

"Engines powering down," Joker says, following protocol.

"Auxiliary power online," Donnelly is tracking power transfers on his end. "We are now visible to all passing vessels. Don't forget to wave at them."

"You wave. I'm taking a nap," says the pilot. "Switching to auxiliary power. The nightshift can handle things if we need to move."

"When you finish," EDI interjects.

"Yes, mom. Bringing the engines back online. We are go."

Garrus sighs. It might be his and Joker's downtime during monthly maintenance, but realigning and recalibrating everything afterward is going to be hell. As usual. "Switching Javelins to auxiliary power... online."

"AI switching to backup sleep mode," says EDI as the lights dim a little.

"Power levels holding. Steady on, boys. Fusion reactor coming offline." Donnelly reports. "G'night ye lucky bastards."

"Yeah, yeah," says Joker. "If you don't blow up the ship, I'll send you a copy of Girls Gone Wild: Pizza Score."

"If we don't blow up the ship, what do I get?" asks Daniels.

"Ummm... I can get you a copy of Girls Gone Wild, too..."

"You're tempting me to hit the big red button now."

"I'll send you something from Shepard's private vid collection," Garrus offers.
The comms go silent for a moment as the crew contemplates the possibilities.

"Maybe," Daniels says finally. "What have you got?"

"Gabby!" exclaims a horrified Donnelly.

"What? A girl has needs."

"Well," says Garrus. "I'm not all that familiar with human vids, but Shepard does have good taste. I'll look around and send you something when we power back up."

"I'm kind of afraid, but send me a copy, too,"

"Really, Joker?" asks Donnelly.

"I'm already halfway through my own stash and I don't think we're going to be finding many new vids near the outer rim, buddy."

"Och. Fine. Send it to me, too, or I'll be relying on Joker for all of my umm... private entertainment. I can look away if I don't want to see the turians."

"Right." As he strolls out of the gunnery, Garrus makes a mental note to send them all a copy of the 2180 remake of *300*. It has some damn good battles and vivid colors.

He ducks around a bulkhead and angles for the medbay. All of the windows are shuttered for privacy, and the mess is oddly quiet aside from the sound of bubbling water in pots. It's right before the first dog watch, though he has never figured out what a "dog" is or what it has to do with mealtimes.

Shepard's upgrades are supposed to be finished. And as much as he hates hospitals and doctor's offices, if she went so far as to ask for an escort, then he'll show up.

What Garrus sees when he walks through the door puts his crest on edge. His mate's normally pinkish skin is rivaling his plates in color, and that's not a competition he's willing to let her win. Her bruised eyes are open. Her lips twitch upward. "Easy, big guy. You don't need to prove you're the tallest one here."

Mordin shakes his head. "Male biological imperative: See mate in peril; protect mate." The salarian stands on the other side of Shepard's bed, hand casually resting behind his back, likely on his pistol.

Shepard's eyes never leave Garrus's as she speaks, "I am not in peril. I'm just a little woozy."

"Commander," says Dr. Chakwas from her seat at her desk, while Miranda leans against it. "I would prefer you stay here overnight where I can monitor marrow replenishment."

"I'm going to my cabin." She tries to push herself up on the edge of the bed, but the heel of her hand slips in the regulation hospital sheets -- sheets that also currently have more color than her skin. A blue glow surrounds her as Miranda catches her before she can hit the side of the bed.

"Shepard... Are you certain?" Garrus asks.

"I've had worse."

"I know," he says darkly. "I was there." The last time she was silvery grey, she'd been returning from the ocean depths, and he'd had to watch helplessly as Vega and Cortez went through every first aid trick they knew to bring her body temperature up.
"Then you know I can do this." She switches her attention back to her medical staff. "Miranda, put me down. Please."

The XO shakes her head. "This is an awful idea."

"It doesn't matter if it's an awful idea; it's mine. You swore to follow my orders. You put me down."

When she locked eyes with Garrus, it had been reassurance that she was lucid. With Miranda, it's assertion of control.

The blue glow fades. Shepard's hand finds the side of the bed and this time she successfully shifts to put her legs under herself.

"I could walk you to your cabin," Miranda offers.

"I'm certain Garrus and I will manage. I'm only going to be an invalid for a couple of days."

"The technology in you is worth more than this ship and you're still in the experimental stage."

Miranda flips her hair over her shoulder, trying to hide the genuine concern in her voice. "I don't like leaving you unmonitored."

Shepard chuckles softly. "I know I'm your mad science experiment, Miranda, but I'm also a person."

"Oh, let the young lovers go, Miranda," says Chakwas. "He'll take better care of her than I can because she'll let him."

"He's a turian. What does he know about human health and biology?" the XO demands.

Mordin blinks. "Do not ingest," he suggests, as one of the most embarrassing conversations of Garrus's life pops to the forefront of his mind.

Shepard, who had just set a foot down to support her weight, trembles, and then begins to crumple to the floor. With a squawk of panic, Garrus dives to catch her while Miranda sends out another sheet of blue so that his mate ends up levitating above his waiting arms.

"She'll be staying for monitoring now," says Miranda grimly.

"What did you do to her?" Garrus growls as he tries to curl protectively around Madelaine's prone body.

Dr. Chakwas shakes her head. "You really have no bedside manner at all," she admonishes her colleagues. "Garrus, kindly let go of the commander. Playing tug of war with her will undoubtedly tear her muscles. Dr. Lawson can raise the patient back to the bed and I'll examine her."

It's a struggle to let Shepard go. She looks like a puppet with the strings cut, her body bending at odd angles. But he does because he doesn't want to make things worse. "Why is she like this?" he asks.

"It's likely a side effect of needing to regrow so much bone marrow," says Chakwas. "She wanted the upgrades done all at once rather than staggering them over weeks for safety."

Miranda crosses her arms. "Shepard's advanced healing capabilities should have her back in the CIC within a week. " The commander's prone form is laid out on the bed and the blue glow vanishes. The XO begins guiltily studying some charts. "She shouldn't have passed out."

The elderly doctor sighs as she runs a stethoscope over Shepard's chest. "Heartbeat is rapid, but slowing. Something must have distressed her."
"What is bone marrow and why is she regrowing it?" Garrus picks himself off the ground.

"Bone marrow and cancellous bone is soft tissue inside a human endoskeleton," says Dr. Chakwas. "They're part of the body where the production of blood cells occurs. Take out the marrow and you lower cell replacement." The doctor continues to run tests and subtly shifts her patient into a more life-like position. "The commander is continuing her usual program of medical treatments to keep in shape and improve her skills."

Garrus stomps down on his frantic urge to shake the woman and tell her to get to the point of what is wrong with his mate. It's like being thrown into a new investigation. He needs to put on his detective hat and track down all of the information. "Her usual program?"

Garrus detects a rare bitter tone in Chakwas's voice as she answers, "The Alliance military has a policy of putting its soldiers through mandatory gene therapy to make them the best they can be. The commander comes from a military family, so she's been under Alliance medical care and monitoring her whole life." Dr. Chakwas lifts her patient's head and smoothes her hair down. She smiles sadly at Garrus. "Our soldiers give everything for the rest of us. That's why I'm committed to giving them the best care possible. Sometimes they push themselves too far."

"Did she push herself too far?"

"She was experimenting with new skin weaving techniques: lattice shunting and microfiber weaves to reinforce her body. It's not uncommon in the military." Dr. Chakwas looks over at Miranda's studious survey of files. "Dr. Lawson and the commander decided to push the boundaries. Today it was a bleeding edge technique called a skeletal lattice. The commander's bones were reinforced with carbon nanotubes that act as conduits for medi-gel and prevent her bones from breaking. However, they need to set for a few days as her bone marrow, the soft tissue, regrows. Side effects include dizziness, drowsiness, difficulty breathing, anemia..."

"Fainting," observes Mordin.

"That, too, I'm afraid," says Chakwas. "You'll need to see that she eats everything on the menu I prepared for her and takes her medications on time. No biotics for the next three days." The doctor puts away her stethoscope and pats him on the back.

"How new is this treatment?" Garrus inquires.

"Three months," says Miranda stiffly. "It was specifically developed by Cerberus as part of Project Lazarus. Unfortunately the lab and pretreated materials were destroyed, and I'm having to recreate our work."

"She agreed to this?"

"Yes."

Dr. Chakwas looks up at Garrus. "What do you want us to do?"

"She should stay here," says Miranda firmly.

"It's not up to you, dear. The commander makes her own decisions. In the event she's unable to makes those decisions, she's specifically signed her medical rights over to Garrus." The doctor arches her eyebrow at him.

Garrus keeps his face and tones neutral, as if he'd known this all along. "Yes. What do you recommend?"
"That she stay here," says Chakwas.

"Agreed," says Mordin. "Results unpredictable. Need more data."

Garrus's eyes run over his mate lying safely on the bed. She'd wanted to go to her cabin ... but that was when she was awake. "Alright. If you think it's best that she stay here, then we'll stay."

#

In his nightmares, Garrus's life consists of rooms like these, sterile and bright, watching while someone he loves dies and he can do nothing about it. He flicks a talon over the datapad containing Shepard's medical records. He wonders if she's ever looked at them herself.

At first, he was alarmed by how many viruses she'd contracted, until Dr. Chakwas had explained that viruses were used as vectors to introduce the new genes used in Alliance gene therapy. Then he became alarmed at how much she'd been altered. There were notes on the Alliance's attempts at building her from the ground up with increased speed and strength. Questions about side effects stunting her growth. Failed attempts to induce biotic reactions. Intelligence tests with fantastic results and occasional comments from annoyed researchers because she could get the answers right but couldn't explain why the answers were correct.

His favorite remark came from a Dr. Nefertari Henshaw, who solved the riddle by concluding that the Alliance had built a "Clever Hans," described as a horse (some kind of animal he inferred) who was advertised as doing arithmetic, but who actually read the body language of his trainer so well that the people giving him the test also gave him the answers. The image of teenage Shepard dragged in for yet another test essentially passing by outwitting her doctors amuses Garrus. It also reaffirms his vow to never play poker with Shepard unless he's prepared to lose.

Shepard's unconscious form still lies motionless on the bed. Color is returning to her skin. Garrus has faith that she'll wake eventually. She wouldn't try out something she hadn't done --and survived-- before without mentioning it.

He turns back to the files. If the battery of tests and injections was a lot for a child, the test curve smoothed out after her application to the military. There was a small initial spike as they put her through things marked as standard. Assessments of hand-eye coordination and more injections into her eyeballs to enhance visual acuity. But many of the modifications were marked as "already completed."

And then Cerberus came along and tried to improve upon the Alliance by making her a cyborg.

He wishes he had the code from the future to compare with her medical charts. Her DNA had been changing from the very beginning, before Cerberus, before the Reapers, before the damned Relay 314 Incident. How far back did the Reapers' meddling go and how much was merely coincidence or twisting pre-existing conditions to meet their needs?

Dr. Chakwas is the only other person in the room: Mordin had gone back to his experiments and Miranda had been called away by duty. Dr. Chakwas in the future had said the shift in Shepard's DNA was recent, yet it clearly wasn't. She stayed with Shepard to monitor her even through Cerberus control. She stayed with him even when the rest of the crew left. She was the other witness to the marriage no one else remembered because she could be trusted both with their lives and their private concerns.

Couldn't she?
"Anyone could be indoctrinated. Expect the worst and you'll never be surprised."

Perhaps that's too paranoid. Next he'll be suspecting Joker or Tali. Perhaps Dr. Chakwas meant something else when she made that comment. It's not as if she was with Shepard at the beginning. The problem is that he can't ask her because if she's indoctrinated, she'll lie, and if she's not indoctrinated he could be asking her about things that haven't happened yet, so she won't have an answer.

Shepard's breathing changes a little bit. She's awake and playing dead while assessing her surroundings. She's good at it, too. If he wasn't just as good at tracking her, he'd have missed it.

Garrus sits up and takes her hand. "Hello, sweetheart."

She chuckles. "I still say that doesn't suit me."

"You liked it better than the other nicknames. Besides, I'm a horrible liar. You hear 'commander' and every turian around hears 'the sun and the moons set at your whim and the stars can't compare to your beauty.'"

She snickers as she laces their fingers together. "Really? All of that?"

"Okay, sometimes it's more 'I will kill every last bastard trying to hurt her,' or 'my mate' for short."

"I love you, too."

Dr. Chakwas clears her throat as she walks over to examine her patient. "You had a fainting spell, commander. I was willing to let you leave earlier when you promised you'd stay in bed and have Garrus around to keep an eye on you, but I'm becoming concerned that the upgrades aren't settling right."

"How long was I out?"

"Five hours and 28 minutes," Chakwas reports.

"Then I've had more than four hours of sleep to recover. I'll be fine." She pushes herself into a sitting position and braces herself against Garrus as she starts to stand again.

Garrus scoops her up in his arms.

Shepard grimaces. "Put me down."

"No."

"Please."

"No."

"I am not going to have people see me being carried around my own damn ship."

"You fell last time."

"Commander," says Dr. Chakwas. "You should stay here."

"NO," say Garrus and Shepard in agreement.

The doctor gives an exasperated sigh and then laughs. "Immovable object meet irresistible force. I'll
be sitting over here, watching the show."

"Garrus, let me walk to the elevator."

"No."

"I can do it. I've done it on my own before. I'll... I'll let you carry me once we're inside. I just need everyone to believe I'm alright. If they think I'm fine, then they'll do their work. If they think I'm ill, then they'll worry about me and our mission and they might make stupid mistakes."

"Just to the elevator?"

"Inside the elevator."

Garrus lets the discontentment rumble around his chest for a few moments. Of course, she can't hear it, but this close she should feel it. She continues to look up at him, waiting. With a final grumble, he gives in. "Fine. But afterwards, you're going to eat all the food I bring you and stay in bed."

"Sounds like a wonderful weekend."

Gently, he shifts his grip to let Shepard put her feet on the floor. He removes his hands slowly, waiting to see if she'll hold. When she doesn't faint again, Garrus takes her arm. Shepard frowns. "I said I could walk on my own."

Garrus leans in and presses his forehead to hers. "And how would it look if you fell? This way, if something goes wrong, I can catch you and no one will know the difference."

"I don't deserve you."

"I know."

"Smug bastard."

"You love it."

"I do." She kisses his mandible and turns to the door. "Not a word of this," she hisses to Dr. Chakwas.

"Hmm? Commander, I have far more interesting stories than this that I can never tell."

"That may be, but this one is ours."

Chapter End Notes

The Clever Hans Effect, Oskar Pfungst, 1907.  
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clever_Hans

Immovable Object vs. Irresistible Force, *Han Feizi*, Han Fei, circa 250 BC.  

According to Mass Effect journal entries, all marines receive gene therapy. It's pretty much a throw away line. So I looked up gene therapy and this is my poor interpretation
of it with some details changed because Spacer Shepard has been in Alliance medical care her whole life, unlike Earther or Colonist Shepard who would still get gene therapy, but only after enlisting.

Also, the Heavy Bone Weave should kill Shepard. Sometimes Mass Effect science is highly accurate and realistic, and other times the writers should have their noses shoved in it because human bones are not hollow and we need the stuff that's in there.

Interestingly, you can be a regular bone marrow donor. You'd give up 2-5% of your marrow and need around 3 months to recover. In the meantime you'd feel like you had the flu.
I'm Gonna Hold You

Chapter Summary

Spoooooooon!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Charisma: Some people have it, and some people don't.

Jacob smiles across the conference table, working his reinforced spandex for all that it's worth. "Cerberus saw footage of you in action, Tali'Zorah. We're looking forward to having you on the team. Your engineering expertise will really benefit the mission."

Tali is having none of it, forefinger (It's still a forefinger if you only have three of them, right?) pointing at him as if to drill a hole through his professional cool. "I don't know who you are, but Cerberus threatened the security of the Migrant Fleet. Don't make nice."

And she's right. It's a line of corporate patter designed to sound nonthreatening and always positive, with the result being that Jacob couldn't sell a glass of water in a desert. Shepard's stuck on how to train him to be more genuine. It's her job as his commander to properly apply his skills, and playing concierge to new crewmates is not a good use of his time. Miranda would do a better job and she's not a people person... She is sincere, though. How do you train a person to mean what they say? Shouldn't it come naturally?

Shepard shakes her head. "That's why you're here Tali. I need people who aren't Cerberus -- people I can trust."

Tali aims the disdainful quarian hip thrust at Shepard. "I assumed that you were undercover, Shepard. Maybe even planning to blow Cerberus up. If that's the case, I'll loan you a grenade."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Tali. I'm working with Cerberus on this project." Blowing up Cerberus would take care of a huge roadblock in the future. It's tempting.

"Then I'm here for you. Not for them."

"It's good to hear that. If it helps, check out the Normandy while you're here. We've gotten a few upgrades."

Jacob nervously shuffles through his omni-tool. "I'll get Tali'Zorah the necessary security clearance to access our systems."

Shepard works at keeping her face straight and posture perfect when what she wants to do is facepalm. Tali's dossier had been approved! Everything should have been done already! She's a Goddamned engineer, shouldn't it have been obvious that she'd be accessing the engines?

Ice cascades off of Tali's voice as she heads for the door. "Please do. I can't be part of your team if I don't know how the ship works. I'll be in engineering if you need me."
Unable to let his failures go and hold his tongue, Jacob calls after her, "Don't forget to introduce yourself to EDI, the ship's new artificial intelligence."

Tali flinches and turns to look at him. Shepard can feel the death glare through the inexpressive mask of the enviro suit. This is going poorly. It always went poorly. Time to fix this. "Garrus and I would love it if you could join us for dinner up in our cabin. We can talk over old times with Liara."

"You and Garrus ...?" The death glare has stopped, replaced by something else. Confusion? Probably confusion.

Undeterred, Shepard nods. "Yes. We have a lot of catching up to do." And a lot of plans to make like telling Gardner he needs to make dextro food worthy of the captain's table and telling Garrus there'll be guests for dinner. Probably should also mention something to Liara.

"Seriously, Shepard, you and Mr. Burn the Rulebook and Run Away from Home?"

"Yes."

"You need to tell me all about it," she says with a girlish laugh.

#

"Sweetheart, where do you want the couch?" Garrus asks as they try to figure out how to fit everyone in the room.

"Push it back against the bed. I don't care if we fall over it getting to sleep later." Shepard grabs the handles of the table begins yanking it out of the wall panel, trying to get traction in her heels. *Note to self: Take shower and dress up after the room is prepared.* "Bugs?"

Garrus consults his omni-tool. "Mmmm.... There and there." He squashes them between his talons and the underside of the table.

Shepard runs back to her office area to grab the chairs they'd brought up from the mess and plunks them down. "Good?"

"Now I know why we don't eat up here more often: It's a lot of work for one meal."

"I did consider trying to host Victus and Wrex while we were waiting around for the peace conference." Shepard pulls the linens out of the storage space beneath the table. "I concluded it would be more injurious to our goals to put them in a small space together. There were times back on the SR-1 Wrex tried to make me feel guilty about the genophage when it happened a thousand years before humans even went into space. I didn't want to see what he'd say to the guy in charge of the people responsible, even if things had changed over the centuries."

"About 30 generations ago for us and three for him? That would have gone badly." Garrus helps her straighten the tablecloth so that it hangs evenly on all sides.

"This is probably going to go badly." Shepard puts a hand to her temple. "I have no idea what to say to our own friends about anything."

"We could try the truth."

"Liara ... I could see telling Liara. But Tali will talk. Or vibrate in place trying not to talk."

"I'd be more worried about Liara. She's still somewhere dark and if we mentioned Thessia, I'm not
Shepard lifts an eyebrow at him, trying to parse the pause.

"She's very loyal to me, too," he ends awkwardly.

"It's not her loyalty I'm worried about; it's her habits." Shepard begins laying out the silverware and tries not to think about drunk Tali on the floor of her bathroom. That hasn't happened yet.

"It's your privacy."

"Yes. But time travel ... if that got out, our enemies would target us. We know we won in the future."

"I'm not convinced of that," says Garrus, leaning against the half wall.

"Fine, we won a major victory that bought more time so that we might win the war. As far as we can tell, it's the best anyone has done against the Reapers in millions of years of trying. We can't risk losing, and every person we tell is a risk."

"Shepard, I can't lie and you arranged a dinner party with the future Shadow Broker. I have enough psychology training to think that maybe you want to talk."

"I ..." she stares out over the table. "Maybe I do want that, to not be so alone. But my choices impact more than me. Or you. Or our friends. I have to consider what's best for everyone. It's my job."

Garrus huffs as he wraps his arms around her. "How did you end up with all of the responsibility and none of the power?"

"I don't know. It doesn't matter."

Her mate grumbles disagreement in a subvoice.

"What was that?"

"What's important right now is that you have people who care about you who could share your burdens."

"Didn't you screw up telling me about time travel so badly that I thought you were insane?"

"I did." He rubs at the back of his neck.

"Considering that there's no one I trust more, that doesn't encourage me to tell other people."

"Look, it's not exactly what you think. I was so excited to see you alive again that I grabbed you and kissed you. Of course you didn't remember any of us being together because we hadn't been together yet, so you punched me." He shifts to rubbing his bandage. "I woke up strapped to a bed in the medbay."

"I... see." She tries to read his face: the embarrassment in his motions, the regret in the tilt of his chin, the worry in his eyes. She pulls him down to press their foreheads together. "I would never do that to you."
"You would do it to a guy who knocked you off your feet and started ... umm... feeling you up for no reason." He looks away from her.

"Garrus?"

He shakes off some bad memories. "The point is, it's not the kind of mistake that I'd make with anyone else. And I don't think it's a mistake you'd make with anyone."

"You shouldn't be so certain of that. I ... missed you. I leapt into your arms when I saw you again on Omega. I was going to tell you everything, even if you thought I was crazy. It was only a matter of waiting to be alone."

He squeezes her shoulder. "What about the others?"

"Why didn't you tell them?"

"Well, you told them the first time when you were trying to explain what was wrong with me. It made things weird since they shared your opinion. The second time I was more strategic, taking my time and observing all the details. I didn't tell anyone because I wanted to see what happened normally and think things over. Every time after that, I had a clear plan to bring you back and I stuck with it. This time ... maybe it's the better route."

Shepard folds napkins, turning them over and over in her hands. "Maybe it isn't. Let me think about it."

"Alright, sweetheart. We can always go it alone."

"That defies the definition of alone." Shepard surveys their handiwork. "But you're right."

There's a whisper at the door of two people uncertain of their reception and tring to decide how serious to be. It's followed by some giggles and then a knock. Garrus lets Tali and Liara in, and the ladies take a few moments to study the empty fish tank, half-full display case, and bits of sniper rifle Garrus has been modding at the bedside table. Tali is dressed up, wearing her best belt along with three others and some gold accessories. Liara has taken a more casual approach. Her dress is long, formal, and freshly laundered, but the green has faded with many washings.

Liara smiles. "This is ... is so large compared to your old room."

"I know." Shepard waves at the display. "I'm used to things being a tight fit, but I do enjoy having space for a few souvenirs."

"It's a suite fit for an admiral," says Tali. "You could house a whole family in here."

"As long as it isn't a large one." It's not a problem I'll ever face, thinks Shepard glumly. She closes her eyes and tries to focus on the present. "This is larger than the room I grew up in. Three times as large, I think."

"How could you ever manage in such a small space?" asks Liara.

"It's not difficult. I only needed a bed and somewhere to put my boots. There was a partition for privacy."

"Mmmhmmmm," Tali chimes in. "You can get some lovely partitions made of all different kinds of materials. Hang up a few pictures, and it's home."
"Seems a little claustrophobic for a whole family," says Garrus. "You'd have to be on really close terms."

"Not necessarily," says Shepard. "You learn to be diplomatic and respect each other's space. You build mental room for yourself and you live outside in the larger spaces of the world. That's why I can't keep fish up here: I'm rarely here to feed them, and when I am, I forget. I'm not sure why Miranda thought a fish tank was a good idea unless she wanted an excuse to have a back up water source if the hydromantic reclamation system broke down."

"Probably she or the Illusive Man are planning for when you give the ship back," says Garrus thoughtfully.

Shepard and Tali giggle. A laugh eventually escapes Liara.

"They- " Tali chokes on her words and tries again. "They think Shepard would give the Normandy back? Keelah, have they not read about Ilos?"

"It was hypothetical!" Garrus protests. "There has to be some reason for the fish tanks, and it can't be Shepard. Have you ever even seen fish, sweetie?"

She puts a hand on his shoulder and looks up at him with laughter in her eyes. "Other than that one up close and personal time ... No. Only cooked."

"So they must have made plans to have it for themselves."

"Ummm..." Liara looks down at her hands. "I guess it's obvious when you think about it."

"Yeah," says Tali staring at the empty tank. "Garrus, how did you get mixed up with Cerberus in the first place? At least Shepard's human. I would never have expected to see you here."

"I can always count on my friends to make me feel better." He says sardonically as he shrugs and pulls back a chair, tilting it on its back legs as he stretches out. "It's a short story. The mercenaries on Omega decided they didn't like me, probably because I kept screwing with their drug deals, shakedowns, and blackmail and was being an overall nuisance. I even had a team ..." he trails off.

He's still feeling guilty about it. Probably always will. Shepard lays a hand on his shoulder. "I think it's a longer story. Why don't we have dinner set out and then we won't be interrupted for the rest of the evening?" She brushes her fingers along his arm as she walks over to the comm system since EDI is off duty. "Gardner, we're ready for dinner."

"Be there in two shakes of a lamb's tail, commander," he replies.

The conversation turns to less touchy topics of collecting ship models, council world fashion, and shipboard recycling systems as a few lowly yeomen arrive pushing carts of food with Gardner following behind, acting as proud as any chef to judge the expression on his craggy face. He must watch cooking competitions in some of his spare time. Gardner describes each dish and also points out the simple but effective food labels Shepard implemented, placing levo food on red plates and containers and dextro food on blue.

After the kitchen staff departs with appropriate thanks from the diners, Shepard settles back at the table and surveys the challenge she set for the poor mess sergeant. You would think soup would be simple, but it isn't. She and Liara sit across from one tureen of cream of mushroom with one cup, one bowl, and one spoon between them because asari prefer to raise small cups in two palms to drink, bypassing extraneous tableware. Meanwhile, Tali and Garrus have a tureen and bowl each because
turian and quarian soups are apparently not compatible, with quarians eating a fine liquid through straws because of their suits, and turian "soups" being more a lot of chunks in a small pool of broth because turian mouths don't seal completely and thus leak if you give them too much liquid.

At least Shepard and Garrus can agree on the technological importance of the spoon.

The main levo courses consist of medium rare steak served on a bed of asari grains and vegetables that has Liara using her knife and fork to carefully excavate a cave beneath the meat while trying to make an appearance of eating it. Maybe she doesn't like cow and is too polite to say something? Maybe it's over- or undercooked by her standards? Maybe Liara is just a picky eater? Garrus and Tali have some kind of meat mousse that leaves them both looking enviously at Shepard mechanically cleaning her plate and Liara fussing with hers. From experience, Shepard guesses Garrus is thinking of the joys of being able to tear into a fresh piece of meat with his talons rather than having to eat yet another meal of paste, even if it is fresh-made paste, while Tali is certainly wishing for a less meat-heavy meal since post-Geth War quarians are vegetarians by the necessities of their shipboard existence, relying on trade with turian colonies for the occasional bit of dextro meat and cheese. It's probably too rich for her.

Maybe Shepard could invite Mordin, Thane, and Grunt next time for maximum alien dining awkwardness.

And of course, there's no dodging the questions about Cerberus and Omega. Delays won't last forever.

"I can't help wondering where you've been all this time, Shepard," says Tali eventually.

"I'm not entirely certain myself. I woke up on Lazarus Station, a Cerberus facility located in the Horsehead Nebula."

"But why were you there?"

"I didn't have much choice," says Shepard as Liara guiltily examines the sort of rice on her plate. "I was dead and apparently no one claimed my body." She stares at the model of the Alliance Cruiser. The Alliance didn't come for her; her mother didn't come for her.

"They couldn't find you, Shepard," says Garrus licking a bit of mousse off his spoon.

"No. They couldn't." Liara leans forward with her elbows on the table. "I specialize in finding dead bodies, and it still took two months for me to find you. And when I did, the Blue Suns had you in a stasis pod on Omega and were trying to sell you off to the Shadow Broker."

Shepard's stomach churns at the news, but she also feels a frission of emotion as she looks up at Garrus, who has an equally startled expression on his face. Were they on Omega together? Was he following her? How? Why? She turns her attention back to Liara. "What happened?"

"I was a bit rash," the asari confesses nervously. "I tried to take on all of the mercenaries myself. Feron stopped me. He saved my life." She crushes the red napkin in her hand, the raised pattern of roses reflecting in the light. "The Broker's agent escaped with you. Feron helped me track him. He was going to sell you to the Collectors. The Shadow Broker and Cerberus seemed to be equally disorganized, with different factions not knowing what the others were doing. Feron didn't know if the agent worked for the Broker, and then ... I don't know ... maybe he wanted you as the prize for his boss."

"I am not a thing," says Shepard firmly, staring down at the table. Her heart is pounding as she tries
not to cry. Why am I this upset? I was dead. What did it matter? The rest of the steak no longer looks appetizing. It matters because even when I'm dead people use me like a chess piece. That's how the Illusive Man sees me, I'm sure of it. Miranda was his bishop and I am his pawn promoted to queen.

Garrus takes her hand, trying to soothe her. She squeezes tightly, glad of the firmness of his scales and talons under the glove, but missing the touch of living skin, a responsive pulse, and warm fingers. Human contact.

"Of course you're not a thing, Shepard," says Tali. "You are my friend and a friend of the quarian people. You've helped us so much."

"No," Shepard looks up at Tali, trying to push the rest of the Migrant Fleet out of her mind. "Let's leave all of the politics out of it. You can't promise more than yourself, but you're what's important to me."

"Shepard... I can do more than hang around your engine room now. I'm an adult in the fleet on one of our most prominent ships of war. We can do things for you."

"Don't promise things for other people, Tali'Zorah vas Neema. I'm glad we're friends. I don't need you to do anything else for me."

"Except go on a suicide mission for Cerberus," Tali snorts.

"Except that," says Shepard, trying to lift her own spirits. "It's not like you have anything more important to do if someone threatens the galaxy. All of your stuff is here."

Garrus runs a finger along the back of her hand. "That joke is old, Shepard."

"But sadly true," she responds.

"You're certain it's that bad?" asks Liara.

"Yes. You said the Collectors wanted me. The Collectors are a front for the Reapers."

"The Reapers! You're certain?"

"Positive."

"Then we need to take the Shadow Broker down. There's no way he didn't know what he was doing."

"We will," says Shepard. "I'm glad you found me, even if you did give me to Cerberus."

"Wait," says Tali. "You gave Shepard to Cerberus?" She presses herself against the wall as she looks at Liara.

"Yes. It was... the only option. I ran into Miranda and Jacob on Omega."

Shepard looks over at Garrus. "Archangel didn't get an invite to this party?"

"I don't know anything about this."

"Archangel?" repeats Liara with a frown and then mumbling to herself something about getting lost together. Realization dawns slowly. "You're Archangel? You're the crazy turian killing off the mercenaries on Omega?"
"Yes," says Garrus.

"But you're dead! It's been in the news!"

"And we all know the news always tells the truth," says Garrus.

"Wait. Garrus is dead?" asks Tali.

"No. I'm fine."

"You're missing part of your face."

"Other than that."

"But you told me you were dead," says Shepard.

"Okay, I was technically dead but Dr. Chakwas resuscitated me. But I didn't officially die."

"You were really dead?" asks Liara.

"Only sort of-"

Tali emits a high-pitched whine from her suit. Liara and Shepard look at her while Garrus rubs at his ears. "This is getting confusing. I love a good drama, but it needs a plotline I can follow." She grabs Garrus's spoon.

"Hey!"

"You were done with it," she says as she thrusts it at Liara.

"Ummm... I don't want cross-chirality contamination."

"No. It's the speaking wrench." She presses it on Liara.

"That's a spoon," says Garrus.

Tali ignores him. "The person holding the wrench gets to talk. Liara gets to finish her story first and then Garrus can go and then maybe things will start making sense."

"You're being overly optimistic," says Shepard with a laugh.

"I want to hear this story without it being interrupted constantly."

"Ummm.... Okay," says Liara looking curiously at the spoon in her hand. "Am I doing this right?"

"Yes," says Tali. "You were saying something about Miranda and Jacob?"

"They were on Omega?" says Liara uncertainly.

"Yes."

"They were on Omega and they wanted to bring Shepard back. They saved Feron and me from the Blue Suns, actually," says Liara growing more confident as she grips the spoon. "They introduced me to their Illusive Man and ... and later, when I saw what the Shadow Broker was doing and decided to get Shepard's body back, I thought about them again. After I wrecked the Shadow Broker base, I brought Shepard back to them on Omega. " Liara bites her lip. "The Illusive Man was confident he could bring her back. I ... I left her there." Liara closes her eyes. "I'm sorry, Shepard. I
guess I should have given you to someone else."

"It doesn't sound like any of the people who should have taken care of me wanted me," says Shepard staring at the model cruiser again.

Garrus wraps an arm around her, pressing her into his side, and begins to purr. Shepard wonders if it's a song or just nonsense noises she can't hear. It doesn't matter. The sensation fills the emptiness inside of her.

"It's not like that, Shepard," says Liara, reaching across to put a hand on hers. "Your mother was ... confused. I don't think she knew what to do. She wouldn't have known how to find you. Your grandmothers were like old rival matriarchs getting on each other's nerves and trying not to argue. Your grandfather was angry."

"Very, very angry," Tali recalls. "Your grandmother was trying to get him to stop changing colors. Said it wasn't good for an old man."

"He nearly started a diplomatic incident with Quentius," rumbles Garrus. "Made me wish Sparatus was still alive instead. I would have stuck around for that fight."

Shepard looks up at him. "Even if he would have fought you?"

"I think we would have gotten along that day. We were angry at the same people."

Shepard shakes her head, certain Garrus is wrong. Turians killed his son, and her grandfather's rage and memory are long.

"What happened after you gave Shepard to Cerberus?" asks Tali.

"I went after Feron," says Liara. "He helped me and then he betrayed me and then he helped me again and was captured by the Shadow Broker. I owe him, but I haven't been able to find him." Liara smiles. "Until now."

"He saved me, so I should save him," says Shepard. "We'll get there."

"Wrench," Tali demands, reaching for it. Liara looks at the spoon and passes it to her. The quarain nods and tries to give it to Garrus.

"Oh, no. You go next. What happened to you, Tali?"

"It's boring," she says. "I went home and started working for my father and my captain."

"Doing?" he asks.

"Odd jobs here and there. Things they need an engineer for."

"An engineer with a shotgun."

"I wasn't giving up the shotgun," she says with no trace of humor in her voice.

"I didn't think you should. You're more active than most engineers."

"I leave the flotilla a lot. Not all people with my technical skills are able to handle themselves in a fight. So I travel on business for the fleet." She holds out the spoon again. "Take the wrench."

Garrus looks down at Shepard as if to say 'I told you so.' "Are you trying to avoid telling a story?"
"Keelah, I'd forgotten how difficult you could be. I don't have a story as good as dying and falling in love."

Shepard raises an eyebrow. "What about Kal'Reegar vas Idenna?"

"What about him?"

"He seemed very devoted to you," says Shepard.

Liara nods. "I liked him."

"I only started working with him two weeks ago. We grew up on different ships and joined different crews. I barely know him."

"You like him calling you 'ma'am,'" Shepard remembers.

"It's nice to be respected," says Tali defensively. "Some guys see you around the ships your whole life so they don't take you seriously. Kal is very professional. I do like that he doesn't treat me like some spoiled brat because of my father." She tilts her head in thought. "I guess if he asked me out, I'd say yes."

"Is he cute?" asks Shepard, snuggling against her mate's vibrating chest.

"We wear suits all of the time, Shepard. How should I know?" asks Tali. "Do you want me to save the universe with you or do you want to set me up on a date?"

"Save the universe," says Shepard. "I'm sorry, I was curious. I don't know what quarians find attractive and he seems like a good guy."

"He's ... well-built," Tali concedes. "Now one of you is going to take this spoon -- I mean wrench -- and I'd rather do this in chronological order so that I can follow the story."

Shepard giggles. Chronological order. What's that?

Garrus reluctantly takes the spoon. He looks it over as if its metal composition might have changed by passing it around the table. "I ... I'm not even sure what happened when they said Shepard died. Anderson came to my apartment to tell me and I couldn't believe it. Not after she climbed out of the wreckage of Sovereign. I was biding my time, waiting to be called for spectre training and nothing seemed to be happening fast enough. And then ... suddenly it didn't matter. I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't sit at a desk and follow the rules and wait for things to get better. I went to Omega."

"Did you ... want to find me like Liara?" asks Shepard.

"No. It was the red sand. Omega has extensive mining facilities that aren't used any more. The gangs use them to process red sand to send to the Citadel. I was going to sabotage the supply chain. While I was doing my research and making my plans, I ran into that bastard Sidonis. We formed a team. Saved people on the streets. Just as we were getting somewhere, he betrayed us. I came home and found the house deathly quiet. And then I tripped over Erash's body ..." His grip around Shepard's rib cage becomes crushingly tight.

She kisses his neck. "It's okay. I'm here."

"But you're not supposed to be. You were the most incredible thing I'd ever seen when you jumped over that barricade. I'll remember you for the rest of my life." He rests his chin on top of her head.
Tali clears her throat. "What happened to your face?"

"Gunship flew up and shot me with a rocket."

"You should never have taken your helmet off," scolds Shepard.

"It was worth it to give you a surprise in return."

"You nearly died."

"The expression on your face was still worth it."

"Keelah, I'm surprised you survived," says Tali.

"Is ... is that when you realized you were in love with Shepard?" asks Liara.

"Sort of," says Garrus after considering the matter for a moment. "It's complicated."

"That's why I want the story, you bosh'tet," Tali grumbles.

Shepard lays a hand over his. "Garrus is bad at words when it comes to dating."

"I am not bad with words," he says indignantly.

"That wasn't you claiming you'd run out of banter as if you practiced it all beforehand and had forgotten how to be spontaneous and funny?"

"Most girls don't think I'm funny."

"I'm not most girls. I'm yours."

The purring returns.

Tali tilts her head and moves her fingers as if she's trying to slide puzzles pieces around to make a clear picture. "When did you fall for Garrus?"

Sometime that hasn't happened yet. "I don't know. I noticed it a little bit at a time. Like the feeling was always there under the surface."

"Like I've known her for half my life." His fingers trail up Shepard's back, along her neck, and he starts playing with her hair.

"Yes," she says quietly.

In the silence, she realizes his hand is in places that turians find erotic and this might qualify as necking in front of their friends. And that she doesn't want him to stop because she's still craving a connection to life after thinking about how they both died. They should get a room. In point of fact, they have one. She stands up abruptly. "I hope you had a good evening, but it's getting late and we have shifts tomorrow ..."

"I wanted to hear about Lazarus Station!" protests Tali.

"It was white and on fire and I was glad to get out of there," says Shepard, offering a hand to Liara according to asari custom.

"And Cerberus?"
"Cerberus put me back together, and since no one else wants to fight the Reapers, I'll work with them. At least they believe the Reapers exist." She yawns and walks to the door. "Now I'd like to go to bed."

"Shepard!"

"Shouldn't have waited until the end to give me the speaking wrench," she says shaking the spoon at them.

"That's not the way this is supposed to work," says Tali.

"My ship, my rules," Shepard responds.

"Thank you, Shepard," says Liara politely.

"Yes. Thank you," says Tali sulkily. "But I still want to hear more about Cerberus."

Liara puts a hand on her wrist. "I can tell you about some of it. They're not as bad as I used to think."

No. They're worse, thinks Shepard as she hugs both of the ladies. "Goodnight. We'll talk again tomorrow."

Chapter End Notes

Kal doesn't have a ship name in the game so far as I am aware, so I picked one off the list of canon quarian ships.

I'm also unaware of any canon on alien table manners, but I thought it was interesting to invent some variations because real world ones can be vastly different due to culture. Heck, Europeans and Americans both use forks, but differently. Also explains why Shepard chose cheese, crackers, and alcohol for the big party: A sit down dinner was way too complicated for that many different species.

Liara's account is based on the comics. I only read the plotline yesterday that she was actually on Omega, too.

I'm kind of divided over whether this chapter is okay or if it's a mess because people talking is generally messy and it hits a lot of previous points. It takes me forever to get group conversations started, and days later, when I suddenly have an idea, I type 15 pages in one go.
Almost every other sapient species is more tactile than turians. It makes greetings and goodbyes awkward. Do you shake hands? Do you hug? How much is too much? When do you stop?

So Garrus straightens up the table while Shepard makes the goodbyes. It's better than letting Tali drag him back into the conversation about Omega. He stacks plates and bowls, turning silverware into a latticework. He collects the napkins, watching the patterns shift in the light: Boats sailing on a sea of blue. Are they arriving or departing? Shepard might know by looking at them.

His mate sighs as the door closes, and then rests against it as she slides a finger down to catch the heels of her shoes, one at a time, slipping them off and setting them, side by side, against the wall. He's learned to gauge her mood by where she leaves her clothes. If they're stowed with military precision in her closet, all is well. If they're strewn carelessly across the floor, then she's stopped caring about herself. If she leaves them out but tidy... that's a new one.

The shadows play across her face. "I was on Omega?"

He knew she wouldn't let it go. The problem is that he doesn't have an answer. "I didn't know."

"I'm no mathematician, but the odds of us being on Omega together, twice, seem infinitesimally small." She dims the lights in the rest of the room

"Weren't you coming to get me the second time? That does make a difference."

"After I woke up from being dead," she says with no inflection. Her skin changes tints from blue to green as she walks down the steps and sits on the top one.

"Yes." Somewhere in his memory, Miranda laughs, Humans have a saying 'They're playing our song.' For you, the song is Omega.

"I still wonder if I'm dead sometimes and all of this is a last fantasy of my brain as synapses spark out one by one. The galaxy map is really tracking my death." She wraps her arms around her legs. "All the signs are there: Purgatory, Afterlife, Solus, Cerberus, Omega ... Archangel. I feel like I'm yelling at myself, trying to wake from a dream. But I never wake up. Did I even make it to Alchera or did I die on the Citadel the day I fought Saren? You would tell me, wouldn't you?"

Two shoes neatly pressed against the wall: Sneaking up on her fears.

"Shepard, you died over Alchera. And then Cerberus brought you back."

"Like a dog fetching a stick." She snorts. "How do you know it's true?"
"I know I'm real," he says firmly, walking toward her.

"How do you know?"

"I just know. I eat and I sleep and I feel pain. It has to be real." He sits down between Shepard and the fish tank, turning her skin back to bluish white. "If it's not real, you had quite the crush on the young turian detective to spend your last moments dreaming of all the ways we can be together," he challenges her.

She blushes. "You win. You're real. I liked Garrus Vakarian before Omega. I didn't spend my time dreaming about him. It's not like I have a turian fetish." She bumps her shoulder against his. "I fell in love with you after Omega. You were different."

"Depressed and guilty does it for you, huh?"

"No." She swats his knee. "I know it hurt, but you came back from it stronger. More confident. You pushed yourself to your limits and learned from hard mistakes." She leaves her hand where it landed. "So Omega was real or you're not Garrus Vakarian, you're some kind of ferryman in his place doing a crap job of it."

"Ferryman?"

"You're the Archangel. If that's the name my subconscious gave you and not something that actually happened, then you'd be in charge of getting me to heaven or judging me and we shouldn't be drifting in space fighting Reapers again." She looks up at him. "How do you know we're not both dead?"

"Why do you care if we are?"

"Because I need clear objectives. If we're dead, then there's not a point to doing anything. Why don't you seem to care if we are?"

"Because I'm a bad turian and I'd like to spend eternity with you more than anything else." He wraps an arm around her. "I can also tell when you're ... gone. My sense of balance is all wrong."

"You need me standing two paces ahead of you so you don't list to the right?" she chuckles.

"Maybe. The view isn't nearly as good when you're not around." His talons run through her hair. "Looks pretty good from here." She shifts to one knee to kiss him.

"Mmmmm..." His hands wander down her back to her plush waist. He can feel her fingers fumbling with the buckles across his chest before she pushes his arms back to remove his jacket. "Careful, I only have the one suit."

"I don't care about clothes." Kneeling, she's almost as tall as he is sitting. Her brown-red eyes bore into him. "Fuck me the way you wanted to after Omega."

"I ... Shepard that wasn't what ..." How to explain what he felt?

"Oh, maybe you were dreaming of a turian girl back then, but I could hear it in your voice. You wanted to be with someone in the most basic way possible."

Everyone was dead around him and there was no hope and suddenly she appeared like the Spirits had ripped a hole in the universe to let her back into his life and reality jolted back on at high speed
with the volume cranked to 11. Somehow three mercenary groups hadn't been enough of a challenge to burn off his anger, but seeing her had flipped the emotion on its head. "You could hear that?"

"I'm human, not deaf." The world briefly goes dark as she pulls off his shirt. "Sometimes it feels like we never leave Omega because we have unfinished business there. I think I've found out what mine is: I was put on the auction block so someone could play with soldiers." Her fingers trace the inside of his cowl. "Make me a new ending, Archangel."

She doesn't know what she's asking. She wouldn't like a fire story and that would be the only way to tell it, with Omega in ashes at the end.

She wouldn't want that.

But looking into her eyes is like seeing living flame. He hooks a hand under her knee and around her waist to carry her to the bed, where he tosses her down. Her fingers move like claws as they dig into the bedspread while he works the buckles of his pants. "You think it would be better to be a vigilante's girl?" he asks skeptically.

"I already am. It's not like this is the first time you've had me." She reaches out to take his hand. "And I know no one else in the whole damn universe ever comes to save me from anything."

He grabs her wrist roughly and spins her around, rubbing flat plates against her rear as he pulls her waist against him. "You're rather good at doing things yourself, it doesn't lead to a lot of opportunities for saving." His leather-covered hand runs down her flat stomach, then lifts them hem of her skirt to slide underneath.

She arches her back and grazes the fingers of her free hand along his neck, beneath his fringe. "I like being in charge of my own destiny," she says as his plates begin to part.

He twitches aside her underwear and slips a talon inside of her. "And when you're not?"

"Garrus," she gasps.

"I'm listening."

"That's my answer."

He withdraws his hand and tears the scrap of fabric between them away. "I didn't want to save anyone on Omega." He shoves her down and she catches herself with a hand. "I wanted to give some meaning to my life by going out in a blaze of glory killing some dangerous bit of scum the Citadel was ignoring," he rumbles, noting the bruises on her arm already fading away as he lets go. "You have no idea how surprised I was that I kept going." He pushes her skirt up and wraps talons around her thighs to hold her in place.

Shepard looks over her shoulder with a wicked smirk. "Omega never could have killed you. It's not smart enough."

He chuckles as he braces his tip in her and watches a shiver run along her spine. He pictures her again, jumping the barricade, as he thrusts into her, pulling her hips flush against him.

"It's not about being smart. It's about being the most maniacal and vicious thing there." He leans forward as he pounds into her taut body. "And I was." He bites down on her shoulder, scraping teeth against bone. She screams as her body quivers in release. Red blood seeps out of her shoulder and runs down along her arm, onto the sheets.
A part of Garrus begins cussing himself out for hurting her. He growls at it to chase the guilt away and doesn't slow down. She asked for him on Omega.

Her fingers curl into the sheets, her breathing ragged. She ran for him through a hail of bullets. She's as crazy as he is.

The puncture wounds are already knitting themselves back together. A frustrated part of himself grips tighter to her hips, trying to bruise her, angry that she always looks untouched at the end.

Eventually, his punishing pace becomes uneven. He slides a hand between her legs, bringing them both off when she shudders at his touch.

He collapses on the bed next to her. "Better?"

"Yeah."

"Got what you wanted?" He looks over his gloves and then tosses them on the floor to worry about in the morning.

"Yeah."

"Why the hell did you want that? I can seriously hurt you."

She kicks lightly at his ankle. "So can I. Take your digestive pill."

"That requires moving."

"I don't want you having a seizure after we fall asleep. We need to rebuild our tolerances. Take your pill."

He grumbles and manages to spin himself around to get his pill and some antiseptic wipes to clean off before his plates slide shut. Shepard steals one to remove the dried blood from her shoulder.

"You still haven't answered my question."

"I don't think I can." She curls against him. "It felt like I was falling. I wanted to make sure we were in the same place when we landed."

He holds her tight. "Alright then."

Chapter End Notes

I've been playing with how to write Shepard's occasional view that nothing is real. Usually it was triggered by the letter from Olar Han. The problem was that I wanted her to actually talk about it with Garrus rather than have a panic attack in her mind. So, taking the lemons I got tossed about Shepard having been on Omega, I made lemonade. Or at least I like it, though I may do a one shot of her reacting to the Olar Han letter at some point.
The cabin smells of food. Another reason not to entertain: There's nowhere convenient to put the leftovers. By the time Shepard and Garrus wake up (late) and finish cleaning, she's inclined to spend this shift working from home.

"Oh, come on, stay. You can do the figures for your calibrations up here," she tries to persuade her mate to keep her company as she arranges the pillows into a backrest.

"Didn't you say one of the symptoms for your depression was not getting out of bed?" he says worriedly.

"It is. But I'm in a good mood. I'd just like to stay in. I do that sometimes."

"I don't remember that."

"That's because you only lived with me when I was overworked." She picks up her laptop and walks back to the bed with it.

"You came by the gunnery every shift," he says suspiciously.

"I did," Shepard agrees. "I wanted to be with the people I trusted to keep me sane." She waits a moment while that sinks in. "You're the one who told me to take my time. Didn't you ever wonder what it would be like to be together when we weren't trying to coordinate an intergalactic war?" She pats his side of the bed and looks up at him expectantly.

Garrus chuckles suddenly. "Things seem backward. I thought it was my job to get you to relax."

"Then enjoy opposite day while it lasts."

That finally wins him over, and he comes to sit beside her, picking up the towel he's using to keep from getting grease all over their sheets and draping it across his lap. Shortly, he's involved in picking apart the Elanus Risk Control additional clip adapter for his Vindicator.

Shepard focuses on answering the messages that Kelly's always nagging her about. Most of them are thank yous for completing seemingly minor tasks. But, if the Council and the Alliance admiralty don't appreciate her, it's nice to see that other people do. It makes it easier to push forward when she hears that it matters to someone.

Commander Shepard,

Per Tali'Zorah vas Neema's request included with her data delivery from Haestrom, the Admiralty Board has approved her transfer to your command. She has been informed that additional duties to
the Migrant Fleet may still be necessary on occasion, but has been given extended leeway to determine when her mission with you is considered complete.

This choice was hers, but your role as de facto captain during her Pilgrimage may have caused her to be more susceptible to your requests. The Admiralty Board trusts that you will treat your new crew member with the respect due an honored member of the Fleet. Should any harm come to her due to negligence on your part, this board will take severe and appropriate action.

Admiral Rael'Zorah vas Rayya,

Migrant Fleet Admiralty Board

It's kind of sweet that Tali's dad is trying to make sure his daughter will be safe and respected and that Shepard won't take advantage of her. Does Tali realize he's written to Shepard? She was shattered when her father died with all the things they'd left unsaid because he wasn't the most affectionate man...

Shepard freezes. "Holy shit, Tali's dad is still alive!"

Garrus looks up at her. "What?"

"Tali's dad. He's still alive! When was this posted? Ten hours ago..." Shepard chews on her lip. Saving an admiral has a higher probability of changing the entire war. But... "Do you think saving him would change anything important?" She looks over at Garrus. "How much worse could the quarians get than shooting us in the back?"

"Mmmm..." Garrus taps a screwdriver against his hand. "He is the one working on perfecting the technology to hack geth neural networks. That research could give him an edge in the post-war world."

"Why?"

"I know I told you that people are hackable. If he perfects neural hacking and is... aggressive, he could enslave entire populations."

"And how likely do you think that is?"

"It's not as if I've ever met him, Shepard. I don't have much of a basis to judge."

"Uh-huh. You try and convince me you haven't been at Tali's trial and the run through the Alarei every time."

Garrus sighs. "Alright, yes, I've been there every damn time."

"If you've seen the same thing more than I have, you must remember more about it. So?"

"I don't know." he shrugs. "Given he was prepared to be the worst war criminal in quarian history, I don't think he's going to give up his research easily. That could backfire on him at some other point, too, and leave more than the Alarei dead. Quarians don't have a lot of resources. Whatever he might find, he'd probably use it. But he could as easily sell his services as security."

"He's Han'Gerrel's best friend. He might be able to talk sense into him and we could avoid a Geth-Quarian War while fighting the Reapers, buying us more time to thwart Cerberus."

Garrus tilts his head, considering. "Or he could make Han'Gerrel worse."
"Han'Gerrel nearly killed Tali, who was an admiral, his shipmate, and practically his niece. I don't think he gets worse than that and attempting a kamikaze run at the geth right as they're coming back online. Maybe Tali's dad could even be swayed by Tali's friendship with Legion and put us ahead in the coming war..."

Garrus laughs. "Alright, I'm getting tired of playing pessimist. You're going to do it anyway because it's Tali's dad."

"It's Tali's dad and at worst, I think it'll be a wash for us tactically, and we fight the Geth-Quarian War again. I don't know about after the war, but I'd hate to condemn a man for something that might never even occur to him." Shepard considers the quarians for a moment. They are really awful at respecting their allies. But judging individuals by their governments seems wrong. Of course, he is the government... But if the rachni were worth the risk, one quarian admiral is.

Shepard keys Tali on her omni-tool, "Hey, Tali, I need you to do me a favor. I'd like you to arrange a meeting with your father on the Alarei."

"My father?"

"Yes. I've come across some Cerberus information relating to his research. It seems his samples might not be as safe as he thought. I'd like to speak with him about it."

"Cerberus is spying on us?"

"You already knew that."

"Cerberus saw footage of you in action..." Tali mimics Jacob. "I am going to find that bosh'tet and tie him to the engine core. And ... and..."

"Go for the hair," suggests Garrus over his mate's shoulder.

Shepard glares at him.

"What? It's the least damaging option."

Shepard shakes her head.

Tali seems to have devolved into streams of untranslatable quarian invective. For such a physically unimposing race, they certainly know how to sound scary.

"Tali. Tali. TALI!"

"Yessss?"

"The crew of this ship has nothing to do with Cerberus's quarian research. And right now, if you want to fix this, the best thing you can do is arrange a meeting with your dad and ask him to temporarily halt the project he's working on. Please."

"Let me find out where the fleet is and I'll send you the coordinates."

"Thank you, Tali." Shepard turns off omni-tool and looks over at Garrus. "Where was it?"

"Susskind Station," he replies. His mandibles are widening in a smile. "Are you really going to change something?"

"Yes."
Garrus wraps an arm around her shoulders and squeezes as she plots out a course.

It's unfortunate that the Shadow Broker will have to wait, but Shepard isn't certain of the time frame. Somewhere a clock is counting down on the lives of the Alarei's crew, while by contrast, Feron is purposely being kept alive for torture. He'll still be there later, and it seems to Shepard she saved him much later the first time around, so that should all work out.

She jumps when the comm goes off again. "Tali?"

"I am sorry if you're expecting a call, commander," says Kelly Chambers. "But the Illusive Man would like to speak with you in the conference room."

Shepard sighs. "Tell him I'm on my way."

The Illusive Man is already on his third cigarette by the time Shepard gets to the room. Thank God, the smoke and the man aren't real. It's instinctively making her want to run for the fire extinguisher. Life on a spaceship is too delicate to chance stray embers getting into the air reclamation system, however unlikely the accident.

"Shepard!" the Illusive Man says enthusiastically. "We caught a break! I intercepted a distress call from a turian patrol. They stumbled onto a Collector ship beyond Korlus. The turians were wiped out, but not before they crippled the Collector vessel. I need you to board that ship and get some hard data on the Collectors. Find us a way to get to their homeworld."

Shepard frowns. "Hard to imagine how a turian patrol could take out a Collector ship."

"Reports indicate the hull's intact, but all systems seem to be offline. They could be making repairs as we speak. I'm not saying it won't be dangerous, but we can't let an opportunity like this slip by. " The Illusive Man takes a long, satisfying drag on his cigarette. He clearly thinks she'll jump to follow orders.

"If they had a patrol out there, why aren't the turians sending a recon team in?" asks Shepard reasonably. She'd always known it was a trap. Every instinct she had said it was a trap. She didn't even need future knowledge for this.

"They will. Eventually. But I intercepted the transmissions. In the meantime, we're feeding them false reports. You're close enough that you can be in and out before the turians learn the truth."

Shepard looks at her omni-tool and carefully plotted courses. "Perhaps your information systems are flawed. I'm in the Far Rim at the other side of the galaxy. The vast majority of turian colonies are at least five mass effect jumps closer than I am. I'll never beat them to it."

"Information is my weapon, Shepard. You can get there first." Because there are no turians. Because he set this whole thing up. Because it's a trap. "I've also been meaning to speak to you about adding Dr. T'Soni to the crew without consulting me."

Last time, she didn't have anything better to do. She was drifting aimlessly, searching for clues. This time, she has places to be. "Dr. T'Soni is only staying until I help her with a private matter. I didn't see any reason to consult you about taking on a short-term passenger. Now, I'm on a tight schedule and I've turned up my own leads. If the Collector ship is miraculously still there when I finish my current mission, we'll talk." Her omni-tool chimes as a message appears. *Shepard, I've arranged a meeting with my father. Here are the coordinates. Tali. Good.*
"Shepard, nothing can be more important than firsthand knowledge of our enemies," says the Illusive Man.

"I agree." Firsthand knowledge of the Illusive Man means there's no reason to humor this request. "I'll update you later."

Shepard disconnects the call and walks out.

#

"Got some pressure loss in the number-four hydrogen tank," says Joker as a light starts flashing red. "Lock it down, EDI."

The holographic blue orb flashes. "Yes, Mr. Moreau."

Shepard crosses her arms against Joker's chair and leans over him. "Oh my God! Teamwork!"

"Pfft. I'm just making use of what's here because my hands are busy." He flips a switch. "Okay, EDI. Add pork rinds to my shopping list."

"Yes, Mr. Moreau."

"See?"

Shepard sighs. "Never mind. I rescind the unearned praise. In the meantime, I've plotted a course to intercept the Migrant Fleet. They're in the Raheel-Leyya system in the Vallhallan Threshold. The berths at Susskind Station are full, but we should be able to dock with the Rayya."

"Aye, aye, commander." Joker looks over the flight plan and signals the mass effect relay. "Engaging forward thrusters..." he slowly pulls on the nearest lever.

The lights flicker out. The emergency lights come on.

"Not funny, EDI!" Joker yells at the AI. "I thought it was against your programming to do anything to harm the ship."

"It is." EDI sounds confused.

Shepard is deeply unamused. "EDI, what happened?"

"An operative on this ship entered the override code."

"Nobody messes with my ship," says Shepard, straightening. "Who did it? Javik will be so disappointed that he missed me tossing someone out of the airlock for mutiny."

"I have a block-"

"Alright. Where was the code entered from."

"I have a block in my memory banks."

"I want the camera feeds-"

"The override code automatically deleted the camera footage for the past 24 hours, commander."

"I see..." Shepard clenches her jaw. "I'm betting I need a different code to get the ship moving
"That would be correct, commander."

Shepard rolls her shoulders to loosen them up. "EDI, get me the Illusive Man in the conference room. Joker, scrub the coordinates and get ready for a new batch. We're going to the area around Korlus in the Imir System of the Eagle Nebula."

Chapter End Notes

In the game, TIM says the Collector ship is in the Korlus system. However, there is no Korlus system in Mass Effect. There is, however, a planet (the one where you pick up Grunt), so that's the location I used.

Tali's father somehow doesn't have a ship name in the game, but logically, he lived on the Rayya with his wife and daughter.

I think it took until somewhere around my third playthrough for it to sink in that Tali's dad was still alive in ME2. The first time, I didn't know what was coming so I read the message and forgot about it. The other time, well, we've never seen or interacted with him, so it didn't make much of an impression on me. When I did realize it, years before I ever thought of this story, I wished we could have stopped by and seen him in person at least once.
I Won't Take You for Granted

Chapter Summary

A bad day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.


"Having a bad day, Shepard?" Garrus watches her execute a cartwheel through the cargo bay followed by a backwards somersault.

Her lip curls as she snarls, "Cerberus hijacked my ship. I had to kiss the Illusive Man's ass. Then I had to cancel on Admiral Zorah, which has gotten us disinvited from visiting the quarians. Tali's mad at me for making her look bad. And we're going the wrong direction by 180 degrees, directly into a trap. So it's been lovely, thank you for asking. How about you?"

"Everything was good until someone cut the power and I had to run to the gunnery in case we were under attack." He looks around at the vehicles. The place feels empty without Cortez and Vega. "I figured I'd find you here when the power came back and you didn't."

"Good guess. Someone on the crew is a traitor. They were able to take control of the ship away from me."

"Cerberus is filled with bastards that need their heads separated from their necks," Garrus agrees. "I could look into things for you ..."

"It would only be someone else next time." Shepard looks around the room and then makes an uncharacteristic sniffing sound. "Goddamnit! My own crew is more loyal to the Illusive Man than to me." She buries her head against him. "Oh, Garrus, I don't know what to do."

He pulls his mandibles tight. "It's okay. I'm here." He's only seen her this upset when Mordin died.

Shepard uncurls enough to whisper in his ear, "Good. Now act like we're going to have sex and kill the bugs because you're the big strong turian who is going to make sure we're safe before you let yourself get distracted."

Garrus chokes down a laugh of relief as he pats her head. "That's my girl. It will be okay. I'll take care of everything." A few taps on his omni-tool and there's a chain of sizzling noises.

"Thanks, dear. I needed that." Shepard bounces up on her toes. "Want to help me practice?"

"I'm not really in the mood for sparring." A slight deflection: He's not really in the mood to follow her over a cliff into the dark spaces of his head again so soon. "But I'll wear the punch mitts for you."

"Actually, I had something else in mind." She walks over to a crate and digs around inside, eventually handing him a box of thick, stubby bolts. "It's easier if I have someone else to throw for me. Toss a single bolt into the air over the open floor. I'm going to catch it."
Garrus looks into the box with a frown. "Alright." He picks out a bolt and tosses it into the air. When it hits the ground, it's covered in droplets of water.

"Damn. Again." Shepard has a look of concentration.

"Now that he can't hear us, what are you going to do about the Illusive Man?"

"Nothing." She says without concern.

Garrus rumbles in discontent.

Shepard raises an eyebrow. "You sound disappointed."

"If Cerberus weren't here, maybe the whole run across no man's land could be avoided. Maybe the Citadel being captured could be avoided. We'd have the Catalyst and we'd be ready." And she'd live.

"Cerberus was a three-headed dog in human mythology. A gatekeeper for the true lord of hell. Maybe the name is bravado. Or maybe there's two other people and one of them would step up if we took the Illusive Man down. Or maybe the Illusive Man is the dog in front of someone bigger. Ignoring the possible symbolic implications and looking at things from a purely practical point of view, Cerberus is divided into cells that don't talk to and don't know about each other. Even if there's no one else, to take it down, I need to find a majority of the pieces. I don't have the time to do that. I have to run a suicide mission and then I have to deal with opponents the size of buildings." Shepard nods at him. "If I had more time, I'd mop them up, but I don't. Throw."

This bolt is covered in white flecks when it hits the ground. "I hate how the bastard gets away with everything."

Shepard shrugs. "I'm holding the trump card. If I wanted to, I could have released EDI and let her deal with the system issues."

Garrus tightens his mandibles. "Why didn't you?"

"Because my pride isn't more important than winning the war. It may not be tactically necessary for Joker and EDI to fall in love, but I do need Joker to accept her. The best case scenario is always going to be the one where he chooses to free her. If they aren't working together as a team, we don't make it off of Earth when the Reapers invade."

"You could not go to Earth after-"

"NO. I need to go. That all needs to happen or the Reapers will come early. There's ... there's no avoiding it. And then I need to turn myself in." She closes her eyes and exhales slowly. "Throw the bolt."

"But you never needed to do it the first time! You're a spectre. You don't have to play nice with the Alliance. They have to play nice with you. Or be in violation of Citadel laws and stand in defiance of the Council."

"The Council wouldn't back me, Garrus. They never have." She looks into his eyes. "And someone a long time ago was very concerned about me not abusing my authority."

Spirits, he was so naive then. "The Alliance could stand to see what a spectre can be if they're not as devoted and loyal as you. They use you like an errand girl; you've said it yourself. " And there's the possibility the Alliance is using her as a test animal. What if parts of the Alliance brokered a deal with the Reapers for ... well, he doesn't know what she's for other than turning the universe green.
For something.

"But I am loyal." She smiles sadly. "Besides, I need to save Vega and Traynor and Anderson and everyone. If Anderson dies in the first bombardment because he's standing somewhere different on the day the Reapers come, there goes the Alliance defense. And I need the QEC upgrades. Each QEC pair is unique. I could lose everything else, but I need Hackett and Anderson's direct lines or our entire offensive falls apart due to lack of communication and coordination." The smile reaches her eyes. "And you need to go to Palaven. You were perfect last time, and they'll need you again. Now toss me the damn bolt."

"You're giving up?" Garrus sends the next bolt into the air. He was probably deluding himself earlier, thinking that deciding to save Tali's father meant Shepard might change her mind about the war. She's still a willing sacrifice to the war.

"I'm not giving up." She frowns as the bolt comes down without any visible changes. She takes another deep breath. "I switch tactics. I change objectives. I never, ever give up."

"Then what are we doing here, Shepard?"

"We're going to do the Kessel Run in less than 12 parsecs. Throw again."

"What's the Kessel Run?"

"We clearly need to watch more vids together." Shepard shakes her head. "It's a reference to a story where the hero beats the speed record for going from one end of space to the other. It's supposed to be impossible."

Garrus tosses another bolt into the air. This one comes down completely white. "You're going to have to explain more than that."

"Alright. I don't know when Rael'Zorah dies. You wouldn't happen to remember, would you?"

"Hmmm... It never really seemed important. The crew of the Alarei held out against the geth by locking themselves into different compartments and making them fight for the ship. It seems to have taken around five hours for the geth to overwhelm them, maybe eight hours to reach Admiral Zorah based on the recordings and the scorch marks."

"Alright. But what day did it happen?"

"I don't know. It wasn't mentioned in the case."

"And I don't know either. At this point, the only reason I know it didn't happen immediately after he sent me the e-mail is because Tali was able to speak with him. He was alive 90 minutes ago when she contacted him again to say we'd been delayed on company business. I know he'll be dead in 13 more days when they summon Tali to trial, but it takes the quarian admiralty a bit to determine that the Alarei was overcome and to decide to charge Tali. So let's say he has seven days left tops. It's a nice, cursed number. Normally, it would take 12 days to make the round trip from the Far Rim to Korlus to Susskind Station. I'm aiming to get it done in four. We could still be too late, but we'll never know until we try. We're already going full speed through the relays using my spectre authority to bypass the usual protocols and waiting in line. When we finish with the Collector ship, we'll go directly to the Migrant Fleet."

The next bolt is completely white when it hits the floor. "I thought you said the quarians don't want visitors."
"And I don't want a war. I'm going to try to save their damn lives whether they like it or not. It seems like the time to cash in some of my good little spectre behavior chips to crash the quarians' party." She looks over her downed target and nods. "Again."

"You're going to use Tali to get in. She'll hate you for it."

"But she'll love having a living father if we make it in time. And if we don't, she'll still see I was right and hopefully forgive me. In the meantime, we're going to have to hit the Collector ship fast and hard." She nods at him. "Give it to me again."

He tosses another bolt. "You know I've always got your six."

The bolt hits the ground encased in an ice cube. "I'm counting on it. You're staying here."

"Shepard?" he can't help the hint of betrayal in his voice. She's going to attempt some sort of impossible task and she's leaving him behind? "Who are you taking with you, then?"

"Jack and Mordin." She studies the ice cube. "I think I've got it. Toss me another one."

He half-heartedly lobs another bolt into the air. "You should still take someone with range." As much as it galls him, he'll encourage her to take Zaeed or Thane for her own safety if she's leaving him behind.

"Not planning on needing it. I want small, mobile, and explosive."

The bit of forged metal never reaches the ground. Instead, it's suspended in an icy stalagmite.

Shepard jumps in celebration. "Hooyah! This can work!"

"That's ... new."

"It is and it's awesome! I managed to stop Tela Vasir in her tracks. Let's see how Harbinger likes it!" She gives Garrus an evil smile. "Now for your part. You said that people are hackable in the future?"

"Yes" he says uncomfortably.

"If I'm picking up new biotics because I can build off of my old memories, then you must have other tricks up your sleeve as well. For instance, you must have worked out hacking techniques to protect yourself and the crew, right? Otherwise you wouldn't be here."

"It's not that easy. As a tech expert, I have to rebuild my tech every time I come back."

"Oh." Shepard's good mood evaporates. "I shouldn't have assumed..."

"I've gotten very good at putting everything together quickly." Garrus smirks. "Gave me something to do when I was pretending to run calibrations that I'd already tested and perfected." He preens for her, arching his neck proudly and showing his profile to best advantage.

"Really? The calibrations were a lie?" Annoyance was not the response he was hoping for.

"It wasn't a lie. Math doesn't change. By the third time around, I was remembering generally what worked and what didn't, and by now I just know the numbers," he says, embarrassed. "So when I finished calibrating the cannons, I calibrated the guns and my omni-tool, got very good at helping the engineering staff, came up with different mods, basically tried to fill the time until Omega-4."

Her expression softens as she cups his mandible. "I'm sorry. I just ... we could have spent so much
"more time together."

"I guess we could have. But I wanted more time together like this." He kisses her brow. "And I
didn't know how else to make that happen."

"I definitely like this version better. It's ... less lonely than the first time." She smiles at him. "If you're
up for a new challenge that might involve new numbers, I want you to coordinate with EDI to keep
the doors open and the platforms filled with indoctrinated Protheans locked in the sky. Harbinger will
never know what hit him."

"Clamps." Garrus holds out his hand. He's sitting on the crates in the gunnery, building a multimodal
signal amplifier out of scavenged scraps from the Normandy's repair kits and whatever odds and
ends he and Tali could find

The quarian sighs from near his knee. "I'm using them to hold the antenna in place until Liara
finishes the wiring. Don't you have another pair?"

"Already using it to hold the casing together while the heat seal glue dries."

"How much longer, Liara?"

"I'm not certain. Another 30 minutes?" Liara pokes her head out of console with cords and wires
dangling off of it. "I'm working as quickly as I can."

Garrus looks over his blueprints again, trying to match bits of junk to memories of a sleek,
commercially manufactured product. At the moment, he feels like he's on one of those building
competition shows and his team has 17 hours left to complete his design before the judging when the
Collectors might kill his mate if he gets it wrong. So, no pressure. "Take your time. We only have
one chance at this."

Tali shakes her head. "You'd think someone with five fingers could do it faster."

"I'm not used to working with turian blueprints," Liara says stiffly. "I trained to repair prothean
technology."

"A wire is a wire," says Tali under her breath.

Garrus puts a hand on her shoulder. "Let it go. Liara is doing a fine job." She's not as skilled as he
and Tali, but she can follow the basics well enough, keeping bundles of wires sorted and cells
correctly linked.

"Oh, sure, let it go," says Tali bitterly, tightening a bolt. "Don't be angry when we change plans at
the last minute and I have to cobble something together out of pocket lint."

Garrus sighs. "How long are you going to be mad at Shepard?"

"I'm not mad at Shepard."

"You're stripping the threads off that bolt."

She stops jerking the wrench long enough to examine the parts. "I'm still not mad at Shepard."

"Of course not. Clearly you got a pot of decaf kava this morning and that's why you're making a
mess of basic mechanical tasks."
Tali nearly throws the useless bit of metal across the room before remembering her training to save everything and putting it in a belt pouch. "It's just... everything is so easy for her! She's gone for two years and she shows back up with the most advanced ship I've ever seen and a trained crew! You hide yourself away for two years and she finds you like it's nothing!" Tali waves her arms and ends with her hand on his knee. "She expects it to be that easy for everyone!" She deepens her voice and tries to smooth it out despite the interference of the suit. "'Tali, set up a meeting with your father, the high admiral of the quarian fleet.' 'Tali, I've changed my mind. Cerberus is more important than quarians. Cancel the meeting.' It's not that simple for everyone."

"It's not easy for her either." Garrus shifts uncomfortably at the inappropriate weight, and gently pushes her hand away with the box casing, double-checking the attachments. One of the major problems with quarians, and why they so often end up in C-Sec cells for a night, is that they have no sense of personal space.

"She shows up on Haestrom after my research team and the security forces were decimated, and takes down a new, self-repairing, impossible-to-penetrate geth colossus. On foot."

"It's not that easy," Garrus repeats, shaking his head. That monstrosity was annoying. His sniper rifle was effective, but not fast enough to counteract its repair cycle. They had to dodge bullets and lasers and geth troopers to get near enough to it to do consistent damage.

"Oh? She made it explode with her mind. I can't do that!" Indeed, Shepard had, after he and Liara had softened it up with bullets and overloads and warps.

"Biotics look impressive, but they take work."

"And what do you know about biotics, anyway?" Tali asks in annoyance.

Thoughts of Shepard touching him, riding him, sharing small bits of dark power with him, flash through Garrus's mind. He tactfully closes his mouth and looks away.

In the silence, there's a clank as Liara undoes the clamp and sits up. "He may not know a lot, but I do. My mother used to be one of the most powerful biotics alive." Liara wipes off her hands. "And he's right, it's not that easy. She trained for hours a day. I train for a few hours every day. Jack may act like a lunatic, but she works at her powers every day because it's not like other things where if you don't work out every day your muscles atrophy. If you don't work at biotics every day for a little bit of time, you don't become less powerful, you become less adept at wielding the power." Liara floats the clamp to Garrus, landing it safely in his hand. "Whatever it is that Shepard has learned to do, she worked for it."

"Yes," says Garrus, relieved at not having to delve into his private memories. "It's not easy for Shepard. Look at what we're doing right now, building enhancements for the Normandy. When we're finished and Shepard uses them, it will impress the hell out of people like Jack and Grunt and maybe even Mordin that she outwitted the Collectors or the Reapers or whoever attacks. But we'll know she couldn't have done it without us." He waves a hand at piles of scrap. "She'll make it seem effortless, but it actually takes a lot of work."

"Alright, she works for it. But people aren't that easy. I was finally earning my father's respect. And now that's all been spaced because I asked for a favor for her and then she backed out on it. And she acts like it's nothing."

Liara laughs. "That's just the way she is, Tali. She showed up on Illium and I thought I'd impress her by knowing what she needed and having it all at my fingertips, but she didn't need me at all."
Garrus looks over at her. "Liara?"

"It's alright. It was good for me. It made me realize that I was looking at her for the wrong things. She asks for what she needs and she'll help you with any problem you have, but she's not impressed by how difficult things are for other people. She may not even realize they're difficult. I was trying to change myself for her and she didn't even notice." Liara's deft fingers thread more cells together.

"Oh, Liara," says Tali sympathetically.

"That's not true," says Garrus. "She knows some tasks are difficult. She just expects you to say something if it's going to be a problem, and if you don't say something, then she's delegated the matter to you to handle as you see fit." He gestures at their crowded workspace. "She asked me to do this. I could have told her no."

With a wry twist to her voice, Tali observes, "I don't think you know how to say no to Shepard."

"Oh, I can say no," Garrus smirks. "Saying yes is just more interesting." He takes a bolt off of the console and hands it to Tali. "Better?"

"Not really, but I guess there's nothing I can do about it now. When this is over and I go home to my father, maybe he'll be in a better mood. And until then..." there's a wistful tone to her voice, "saying yes was more interesting."

Chapter End Notes

"It's the ship that made the Kessel Run in less than 12 parsecs." *Star Wars IV: A New Hope*, 1977.

I spent way more time looking up the various meanings of booyah, hooyah, oorah, and hoorah than I realized anyone would ever need. My end determination for this story is that Shep will alternate between hooyah for joy and oorah as a rallying cry/signal of affirmation since she identifies with both the navy and the marines in the game, and the battle cries are specific to the US, so a world government and world military is going to be different anyway.

If I'm totally off-base, feel free to tell me and I'll study the matter again.
We'll Never Know When We'll Run Out of Time

Chapter Summary

The Kessel Run

Chapter Notes

A big thank you to all of my readers!

Aside from hitting the 100,000 word mark, I've also hit 100 subscribers, 50 bookmarks, and nearly 250 kudos all at roughly the same time. When I started, I hoped that I'd be lucky enough to get 25 people who'd want follow the story. Never doubt that I'm grateful for everyone here, whether you leave me feedback or simply quietly enjoy the tale.

None of it would be possible without you. Having someone to tell my ideas to encourages me to refine them and continue writing them down. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm glad to have you in my ear for this exercise in non-Euclidian geometry," says Shepard as she jogs up the ramp into the Collector ship. It's much the way she remembered it: a sort of bees' nest. Except the turns are random rather than at logical pentagonal corners.

"I know you only keep me around to fix your omni-tool," Garrus snarks back at her over the comm.

"Did you also know that monsters in horror movies jump out to kill you when you're doing the cute couple-y crap?" says Jack. "I don't want to be eaten because you were busy playing kissy face."

"Oooo. You should see him now," says Tali from the comm feed. "His mandibles are aflutter."

"Are not," insists Garrus.

"Are, too," taunts Tali.

"I'm stretching."

"Common pattern: Seek reassurance and familiarity when disturbed," muses Mordin. "Support from partner ideal in mated pairs."

Jack rolls her eyes. "And then die when the monster eats you."

"Because you're not paying attention and are too busy teasing each other?" asks Shepard. "We're barely into the trap. We'll be fine. They'll want us to be good and caught before they jump out to eat our brains."

Jack halts in her steps. "Wait, you're marching us into a fucking trap, Girl Scout?"
"Yep." Shepard continues her ground eating pace. "The Illusive Man is setting us up. You might want to run if you don't want to be left behind."

"You want me to run into the fucking trap."

"Yep. We're his little experiment in toy soldiers and there's no way out but through it."

Mordin runs a hand over his eyes. "Foolish to trust Cerberus. Mistake on my part."

Jack growls as she works on catching up, "I knew Cerberus would screw me again. I'm going to crush his head."

"You didn't trust Cerberus. You trusted me," says Shepard. "And I'll prove to you that it wasn't a mistake. The threat is real. The Collectors are real. And we're the only real hope for the human race and for the galaxy."

"Reminding me of Kirrahe. 'Hold the line!'" quotes Mordin.

"It was a good speech," says Shepard.

"Kirrahe still a cloaca. Every mission of dire importance."

"But he sells it. You can see the pride in his troopers' faces."

"Salarian pride based in being more intelligent than enemy." Mordin rounds another corner, doing an admirable job of keeping up for someone who should be near 130 in human years. "Work smarter, not harder. Die less."

"There comes a time in every race's history when they have to stand-"

"Heard that one before," Mordin interrupts.

"There are only so many words in any language to give a rallying speech-"

"Hey!" Jack shouts, pointing to some pods. "Those are the same containers as on Horizon. Only these are empty."

"I know," says Shepard. "Keep running."

"Can't we fucking slow down? Not all of us do forced marches up mountains."

"Do you want to end up like them?" Shepard points to a pile of corpses and keeps running.

"Ick. Why would the Collectors just leave a pile of bodies lying around?" wonders Jack.

Garrus cuts in over the comms, "Must have been for testing. I'd say those subjects didn't pass."

"Test subjects from control group," says Mordin authoritatively. "Discarded after experiment was over."

"Wait." Jack brushes against an isolated pod. "That was a Collector. Are you saying those bastards even experiment on one of their own?"

"People do it all the time. Why would you think the Collectors would be any different?" asks Shepard as she comes to a terminal. "Uploading data files." It takes only a few seconds for the transmission to begin. "C'mon, Jack, we have another mountain to climb." Shepard shifts back to a
"I hate you," the convict says without venom.

"Drink your juice."

"I was wrong. I hate you and I hate fucking juice," she pants as she pulls out her hydration supplies.

EDI interrupts the arguing. "Data received, Shepard. Analyzing... The Collectors were running baseline genetic comparisons between their species and humanity."

"Are they looking for similarities?" Shepard asks.

"I have no hypothesis on their motivations," the AI states. "All I have are the preliminary results.... They reveal something remarkable. A quad-strand genetic structure identical to traces collected from ancient ruins. Only one race is known to have this structure: the Protheans."

"You'd think someone would have picked up on this."

"It may not have been noticed because the genes show distinct signs of extensive genetic rewrite. The Reapers have repurposed them to suit their needs."

"Ug." Tali sounds horrified. "Like the husks. We have to stop them."

"No shit," agrees Jack. "I'm not letting the Reapers turn me into some kind of fucked-up bug thing."

"No one has had an opportunity to study a Collector genetic code in this detail," says EDI. "I have already matched 2,000 alleles to recorded fragments. This Collector likely descends from a Prothean colony in the Styx Theta cluster."

"Liara will be thrilled," Garrus comments.

"But there are signs of extreme alteration. Fewer chromosomes. Reduced heterochromatin structure. Elimination of superfluous junk sequences."

"What do you think, Mordin?" asks Shepard.

"Fewer chromosomes could be for creating disposable foot soldiers quickly. Failed experiments incapable of breeding if they escape. Not usable for repopulating Prothean race. Elimination of junk sequences obvious. Reduced heterochromatin ... Variety of possibilities: prevent body from triggering DNA repair; increase overall genetic mutability by removing natural cellular protections ..."

They round the corner into a disturbing open space filled with victims of the Collectors stored in pod upon pod attached to the walls.

Shepard keeps moving. It's too late for the people of Horizon.


Jack shivers. "Hundreds," she says, misjudging the magnitude by a factor of millions. "I wonder how many have people in them?"


"Aren't you going to check the pods for survivors, Shepard?" asks Tali from afar as the squad walks
through the moon-sized mausoleum.

EDI takes care of the issue by announcing her findings. "I detect no signs of life in the pods, Tali. It is probable the victims inside died when the ship lost primary power."

Shepard is nearly at the honeycomb platform and the pedestal that will trigger the trap when Joker excitedly butts in, "Commander. You gotta hear this!"

"It can wait, Joker. EDI. I'm setting up a bridge between you and the Collector ship. See if you can get anything useful from the data banks."

A bit of real fear creeps into Jack's voice in the cavernous hall, "Where are the bodies from the crew? Something's wrong here."

"We'll meet the crew shortly. Get ready."

"Data mine in progress, Shepard," EDI reports.

"Good. We're going to turn back-"

The comm crackles and the ground shifts underneath the infiltration squad. Shepard tenses, waiting for the platform beneath them to lift and a battle to begin, but it remains firmly locked to the ground. Unfortunately, the door also slams shut behind them.

A worried Joker comes on the line. "Uh... that can't be good."

"What just happened?"

"Major power surge," says Joker.

In the distance, another platform begins its approach. Shepard doesn't want to find out if there's room for it to land. "We have incoming. How are we doing, EDI?"

"I managed to divert the majority of the overload into the storage device Officer Vakarian and Engineer Zorah set up, and the rest into non-critical systems," says EDI. "Shepard, it was not a malfunction. This was a trap."

Garrus chimes in, "But this time we were ready for them."

"Right now I'm more concerned with if you're ready for the Collectors."

"I think they'll love the latest quarian children's game." Tali giggles. "It's called Kaleidoscope Hack."

The platform draws nearer. It's clear that it's also spinning, first clockwise and then counterclockwise. Suddenly, it stops and flips end over end like a large coin, dislodging startled Collectors who spread their wings and try to achieve enough speed to fly before they hit the ground.

Shepard forgot they could fly.

"Jack, I'll reel'em in, you knock'em down. Mordin, keep an eye on the transmission." Shepard launches a dual pull at two of the faster Collectors, sending them spinning out of control again. Jack's following shockwave creates a biotic explosion that kills them and one of their fallen comrades who was trying to patch himself up.

"Have you got the full transmission yet, EDI?"
"I always work at optimal capacity."

"Uh, commander, " Joker interrupts. "We've got another problem. The Collector ship is powering up. You need to get out before their weapons come online. I'm not losing another Normandy!"

"Someone get that door open. We're leaving." Shepard takes out her assault rifle and activates her inferno rounds. Another platform approaches from above. It picks up speed as it nears the first platform and runs into it, throwing more Collectors into the air. Mordin sets a heap of them on fire.

It's only seconds, but it feels like forever until EDI says, "Opening the door and clearing you a path, Shepard."

The commander waves her arm behind her. "Everyone move out!"

Mordin ducks as Jack throws a shockwave and sprints away. Shepard sprays a clip into the air to slow the Collectors' descent before following the other two out of the cavern of pods.

"Ready to run down the mountain, Jack?"

"Screw you."

"Sorry, I'm taken." Shepard throws herself to her armored knees and slides down the hallway, past the other two, applying the edge of her combat boot to the ground to come to a stop. The momentum pops her around the corner for a quick look, rifle at the ready. "Clear. Garrus, EDI, where to?"

"Left," they reply as a door opens while the door back to their pursuers closes.


The bald woman throws a shockwave that knocks back eight of the oncoming hoard. Shepard charges into the rest, following up with an explosive nova that leaves 20 of them dead on the ground.

"Almost there."

EDI comes back on the line. "Around the corner. Take the door on your right."

The squad barrels into a previously empty room near the perimeter of the ship. This time, though, the room is filled with guards. No Preatorian, though. This is still the better route.

"Shepard," shouts Garrus. "We're losing the doors. You have an army behind you."

The door in the room begins pistoning up and down as the hackers fight the Collectors. "Garrus, focus on holding the door to the gangway. You can release everything else."

"They'll lock you in."

"That's why I have a backup plan. Covering fire, guys."

"Assuming direct control," announces one of the Collectors before it starts floating and glowing.

"Aw, Harbinger, you're running late," taunts Shepard as she lets the cryonic blast loose from her fingertips. It flies past the twisted Protheans and hits the doorframe. The door stabilizes at halfway closed while blocks of ice creaks underneath it.

"Your attack is an insult."
"And you don't know what I was aiming at." She turns to her team. "Ignore the Collectors. We get through the door and then it's all yours, Mordin."

He blinks rapidly before responding. "Ah. Environmental experiments."

The possessed Collector begins advancing on them. "Preserve Shepard's body if possible."

"Less talking, more running. GO!" Shepard charges the Collector and then rolls behind another bit of cover as it tracks her across the room. She knows she's the target Harbinger prefers, and empties a clip keeping the attention of the other minions.

The Collectors aren't terribly flexible. They ignore the door and don't even bend to shoot beneath it once Jack pulls the remaining guard into the air and slides out of the room. As Mordin is about to follow, Shepard jumps up on one of the storage squares jutting out of the floor. "Oorah!" she bellows to get their attention as she sets off a nova, blinding the Collectors in the room, including those trying to flank her from behind now that they have control of the doors.

And then she charges for the exit, phasing through the mob of Collectors, the cyber banquets, and the hail of bullets. She resolidifies as she hits the door with a thump and lets herself fall, grabbing the edge of it to fling herself through.

As she slides, she rolls over to cover the door, but she needn't have worried. Mordin got the message: the door is engulfed in flames and snaps shut on the mindless Collectors who tried to crawl under it, bisecting them.

Mordin smiles. "Enjoy..."

#

"Call coming in from the Illusive Man, commander," Joker announces as she strides onto the bridge. "Figure you've got a few words for him, too."

"Let him stew." Shepard removes her helmet, resting it on the side of his chair. "He got the mission he wanted. He'll have my report when I feel like it." She watches the lights blink on the interface. "Coordinates for our departure worked out?"

"Yeah. We made a smooth exit and by the time we've passed through the second relay, they won't have a clue where to find us."

"You're the best, Joker."

"Speaking of how awesome I am..." he spins around dramatically to face her, "I had EDI run do an analysis of the Collector ship. It's not just any ship, it's the same one that shot us down over Alchera. Want to know the odds of that happening? Not good."

"They do seem obsessed with us." With me. Shepard frowns. "I never did find out why."

"Hey, sweetheart." Garrus swaggered up to her.

Shepard brightens as she turns to him. "Hey, lover."

Joker groans. "If you're going to make out on my control panels, I'm going to start filming you for later."

Shepard snorts. "You wouldn't dare. You've said you think of me as a sister. Or would you really
"Damn. I did not want to think about that. Okay. You win. But this is, like, my office. Could you not make out here? I don't jerk off in Miranda's office even though she has that comfy chair. It's a respect thing."

Garrus hums in amusement, his arm resting around her waist. "I think we can restrain ourselves."

"Yeah," says Shepard. "Can't help you that your office is next to our front door, though, buddy. I'll pick you up some more copies of *Fornax* for putting up with us." She tucks her helmet under her free arm and wraps the other around Garrus as Joker lets out a long-suffering sigh. "Have I told you yet how cute it is that you held all those doors for me?"

"Um... wasn't I supposed to do that?" Garrus asks as they walk down the corridor to the bridge.

"Yes. It's just old-fashioned human stuff."

"I didn't think you had difficulty getting humans to do their assigned tasks," he pulls his mandibles tight in thought.

"No. It's courting stuff," Shepard clarifies, ignoring the buzz of conversation around them.

"Ummm... I guess that's good."

"Are there turian courting things we should be doing? We skipped over a lot of it and took forever to have an actual date."

"Well, yes... It's uh ... nice when you fix my clothes." Continue to straighten his jacket when the buckles are crooked. At least that's not hard. "The rest, well, I've never known what to get you."

"Get me?" They breeze through Mordin's empty lab.

"I should give you something to show off my domestic skills."

"You're going to give me something *domestic*?" Shepard can't help giggling. "I'm not exactly a white picket fences kind of person."

"I don't understand."

"It's sort of a stereotype of domestic bliss. It's not anything I want."

"Oh. Hmmm..." He squeezes her waist a little tighter and seems disappointed. "Well, we can talk about it later. It's not as if it matters with the war coming."

Shepard feels as if she's missing something. Has she messed up her intention to give him everything he needs to face the future? "Okay. Later. Want to come with me while I talk to the Illusive Man?"

"Why not?"

The faux wood conference table sinks into the ground as they walk into the room. Shepard takes up position on top of it, ready to play her part. Every emotion she shows is one more button he'll think he can push. She needs him to hit the wrong things or tap too lightly at those buttons to do any actual damage.

He's already puffing away on his cigarette, looking so damn satisfied with himself. "Shepard. Looks like EDI extracted some interesting data before the Collector ship came back online."
"You sent me into a trap." Her jaw tightens. Let him read impotent anger. Let him feel he's in control.

"We needed information on the Omega-4 relay. That required direct access to Collector data. It was too good an opportunity to pass up. I put you at risk, yes. But without that information, we don't reach the Collector homeworld. And you and every other human may as well be dead."

"Don't try to lie to me. Risk is part of the job. You sent me in there unprepared. There was no reason not to tell me that the Collectors were setting us up."

"I needed the Collectors to believe they had the upper hand. Telling you could've tipped them off in any number of ways." He exhales a cloud of smoke. "Besides, I wouldn't have sent you in if I didn't think you could succeed. It was a trap... but I was confident in your abilities. And don't forget EDI. The Collectors couldn't have anticipated her.

"You say I'm important, but you sure try hard to get me killed. I'll be a lot more careful with the Collectors. And with you." She takes a step forward to seem aggressive. The truth, she tells herself, is that she can leave any time she likes, and so there's no reason to waste energy actually being angry.

"This is no time for petty grudges. Things are about to get a lot tougher. EDI confirmed our suspicions." He takes another long drag. "The Reapers and Collector ships use an advanced Identify Friend/Foe system that the relays recognize. All we need to do is get our hands on one of those IFFs.

"I was just on the Collector ship! Why didn't you say anything about finding their IFF?"

The Illusive Man looks annoyed. "As I said, EDI just confirmed it. Besides, you wouldn't have had time to find and extract it. But we have options. An Alliance science team recently determined that the 'Great Rift' on the planet Klendagon is actually an impact crater from a mass accelerator weapon. A very old mass accelerator. I sent a team to find either the weapon or its target." He sips at his whiskey, taking his time, testing her patience. "They found both. The weapon was defunct, but it helped us plot the flight path of the intended target -- a 37 million-year-old derelict Reaper. We found it damaged and trapped in the gravity of a brown dwarf." He sets the glass down slowly. "There's no trace of the species that took the shot. Perhaps it was their one moment of defiance before being wiped out."

Considering that Liara has difficulty finding the truth in ruins only 50,000 years old, it's doubtful they'll ever know about a species 37 million years old.

"Aren't brown dwarfs basically stars that didn't quite make it?"

"Simply put, but accurate. They're gas giants that don't quite have the masses of stars. Expect gale force winds and extremely high temperatures." He puffs on the cigarette again. "The Reaper has a mass effect field that keeps it in orbit. Likely an automated response to the external threats. It's stable, but I won't call it safe."

"Hedging your bets after the last warning you didn't give me? I only believe you now because I doubt you'd repeat yourself so soon."

"It's no less a risk, Shepard. We lost contact with Dr. Chandana's team shortly after they boarded. Initial reconnaissance revealed no clues, and it was too risky to commit more resources." He puffs again. Hmmm... smoking is supposed to be soothing for the people addicted to it. Is that a tell? A puff of smoke every time his blood pressure rises? "But now we need that IFF," He sighs. "I'll forward the coordinates to Joker. In the meantime... I suggest you tell your crew I didn't risk their
lives unnecessarily. It will make things easier going forward."

Shepard raises her voice. "EDI -- tell the crew to assemble. We've got a lot to talk about." She glares at the Illusive Man.

He stares back with all the blandness of a cat watching a human, trying to figure out how it works. And then he reaches for his cigarette.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I should write more Mordin because I love him, but he's a pain in the ass to research because I don't have advanced degrees in alien biology and gene splicing and such.

My poor understanding of what he'd make of reduced heterochromatin structures is above. If Mordin doesn't sound like he knows what he's talking about, please explain it to me using small words so I can understand. I'm 99.99% sure the chromosome stuff is correct, though, meaning the army of Collectors in ME2 were all infertile females barring alien genetics having 3 chromosomes or something.
Not everyone came to the conference after the Collector ship. Garrus usually didn't attend. The first
time around, he was simply too wound up to be rational. He'd kicked the crap out of the crates in the
gunnery, and when he calmed down, he got new crates and repacked the spare parts and his meager
belongings.

Jacob pounds a meaty fist into the table. "So the Illusive Man didn't sell us out? Could've fooled me."
The fifth time around, knowing that it's coming and that Shepard knows everything, it's hard to be
angry.

Garrus holds up the wall and watches as Mordin paces back and forth in front of him like a caged
pyjak, his white lab coat still immaculate after the run through the dingy Collector ship. The salarian
makes a discontented burbling noise, "Lied to us. Used us." His tone changes to more thoughtful,
"Needed access to the Collector data banks. Necessary risk."

Garrus shakes his head. "It wasn't necessary for him to lie to us. That was stupid."

"True. Commander walked into trap willingly, knowing it was a trap." Mordin considers Shepard.
"Could have warned us."

"I did at the beginning of the mission." Shepard looks over at the blue globe on the conference table.
"EDI, are you sure this IFF is going to work?"

"My analysis is accurate, Shepard." The globe fuzzes before continuing, "I have also determined the
approximate location of the Collector homeworld based on navigational data from their vessel." A
holo map of the Milky Way appears above the table.

Miranda circles it. "That can't be right."

"EDI doesn't make mistakes," says Shepard. "The Collector homeworld is located somewhere in the
galactic core."

"Can't be." Jacob sides with Miranda. "The core is just black holes and exploding suns. There are no
habitable planets there."

The salarian stops his pacing. "Could be an artificial construction. Space station protected by
powerful mass effect fields and radiation shields."

Miranda refuses to consider the facts. "Even the Collectors don't have that kind of technology."

Garrus sighs. "You're not making the connections to see the bigger picture."

Shepard nods. "The Collectors are just servants of our real enemy. And we've all seen what their
masters are capable of. They built the mass relays and the Citadel. Who's to say they can't build a
space station surrounded by black holes? No wonder nobody's ever returned from a trip through the Omega-4 relay."

"The logical conclusion is that a small safe zone exists on the far side of the relay. A region where ships can survive," EDI explains. "Standard relay transit protocols would not allow safe transport. Drift of several thousand kilometers is common, and would be fatal in the galactic core. The Reaper IFF must trigger the relay to use more advanced, encrypted protocols."

"Well," says Jacob, "Sooner or later we need that IFF. I say, why wait?"

Miranda disagrees, "It's a derelict Reaper. What if the Collectors are waiting for us? We may want to build up our team before we take that kind of risk."

"It's your call, commander." Jacob looks to Shepard. "Whatever you decide, we're with you."

"Just because we can follow the Collectors through the relay doesn't mean we can take them out," says Shepard. "I don't want to go after them until I know we're ready."

And they won't be ready until they finish the ship upgrades. They have the armor Jacob suggested. Maybe that's why he's raring to go. But they'll need the shielding Tali can supply to survive all the debris in the galactic core. And they'll need the Thanix canon to face down the Collector patrol ship.

"And we did promise we'd help Liara with her problem," Garrus adds. "She never agreed to a suicide mission."

"We're not a commercial flight," Jacob argues. "She took a risk coming on board."

"You said this was my choice, Taylor," says Shepard. "I say we finish everything, and that includes helping Liara first." She erases the holo display with a wave of her hand. "You all have your assignments for the next mission. I expect you to attend to them. Dismissed."

Garrus watches the others file out of the room. This may be the best time to talk to Mordin. He begins to calculate how long it will take for his quarry to settle into his labs.

"What's up?" asks Shepard after the door closes.

"Oh... ummm... Damn, why did she have to ask now? "I .... um.... need to ... err.... do some research."

"Research? Really?" she chuckles. "I thought you already decided that you don't need Joker's vids when I'm around."

"Um... not that kind of research," he says guiltily.

"Then why are you so nervous?" She runs a hand over his mandible.

Garrus swallows hard. The trustworthiness of turians used to be a point of pride. Then he moved to the Citadel and saw the advantages to lying in terms of offering hope where there should be none and soothing minds not ready to deal with reality. He puts his hands on her shoulders. He still can't do it. He could never lie to her. "I was trying not to worry you."

"Worry me?"

"It could be your friendly neighborhood turian being paranoid. Can we not talk about this until I'm more certain of my suspicions?"
"Sounds serious." Her eyes scan him for clues.

"It ... could be. And now you look worried."

"I'm n-" she starts to refute him and then stops. "I don't like that you're not giving me a straight answer."

He sighs and leans in to press his brow to hers. "Trust me for a little bit? You don't need this kind of distraction. Let me take care of it."

"Alright. For a little bit. For you."

#

"I need a second opinion," says Garrus as he enters Mordin's lab.

The wiry salarian looks up from his work. "Have many opinions: Miranda is losing power base within Cerberus the longer she stays with Shepard, sometimes Joker thinks he's funny but is actually being a cloaca, and opera is a viable medium of expression in modern age."

Garrus looks at Mordin blankly.

Mordin tucks his hand in his pocket. "Doctor joke. Is this about mother's treatment? Apologies. Am too busy with Collectors to pursue research myself. Helos still best idea."

"No. I had other questions. About Shepard's medical records."

"Only assistant and observer," Mordin says modestly. "Dr. Chakwas and Dr. Lawson know more."

"Yes, but you're not human. I think that's what I need." Garrus pulls up copies of the records on his omni-tool. "What do you think of all of the genetic tailoring the Alliance has done?"

"Excellent work: healthy, strong, nimble individual produced through Alliance modifications. Ideal soldier."

"So you would classify the genetic tampering as normal?"

"Mmmm... would need additional human samples for thorough analysis. Comparing to salarian and batarian forces, normal. " Mordin blinks rapidly at Garrus's perplexed expression. "Turians not very advanced with genetic manipulation. Not necessary to prepare select volunteer group to fight when all turians serve, and turian species extremely well-designed for battle: talons, sharp teeth, plating... Humans, salarians, batarians, drell ... all have soft skin, blunt fingers, blunt teeth. During initial colonization period have to be prepared to fight unknown enemies who are likely stronger, faster, and better prepared like krogan and turians, so super soldier experiments developed."

"Shepard's records normal for product of such a program."

"What if I'd seen tests that indicated Shepard was turning into more of a hybrid of synthetic and organic?"

"Shepard already a cyborg. You find it troubling?" His eyes blink more slowly in sympathy. "Can recommend councilor."

Garrus grumbles softly in frustration. If he had the medical logs from later... But he doesn't. "Liara told a story of rescuing the commander's corpse from being sold to the Collectors. And today, I could hear commands over the comm to keep her body if possible. Cerberus spent an insane amount of
credits rebuilding her. Something's not right."

"Mmmm.... had not considered..." The salarian runs a finger over his lips. "Bomb too much of a waste. Plague vector .... " He opens his own omni-tool and begins reviewing data. "There was scale itch. But commander doesn't have scale itch... Building super plague? No. Possible byproduct ...

"Is she special in some way?"

"Survived Prothean conduit and rebuilt by Cerberus." Mordin raises two fingers. "Was not rebuilt by Cerberus when Collectors showed initial interest." He lowers one. "So survived Prothean beacon."

"Saren survived the Prothean beacon as well."

"Given turian funeral rites, yes?"

That was an understatement. They burned the body, then they burned the ashes again before releasing them on the winds of a dead world. The cybernetics were melted and ejected into a black hole. Remaining members of his family had petitioned for adoption into the families of spouses or any Spirit who would take them, a move that had puzzled Garrus until he had top governmental access and found out what Saren's brother had done. There were too many scandals too close together. The Arterius Spirit deserved its fall. "You could say that."

"Then that is it. Survived and body is available."

Garrus shakes his head. It can't be that. The Prothean beacons are only communication devices built by a race far less advanced than the Reapers. It has to be a false lead.

On the other hand, the Reapers augmented Saren. Cerberus, a Reaper tool, augmented Shepard. Saren had a control chip... Cerberus considered a control chip but left it out on the Illusive Man's whim ... Saren was a spectre. Shepard is a spectre. There's too much to be a coincidence. Damn it. He can taste the answer in the air.

"That's not it."

"Then need more data or different questions."

"Hmmmm... Are there any genetic similarities between turians and humans?"

"No." Mordin says bluntly. "Closest intergalactic genetic match to human is vorcha. Quarian closest match to turian due to rarity of dextro species. Though raloï bare striking resemblance. Suspect convergent evolution due to opposing chirality."

"What about ... superficial similarities? Things that operate the same but are designed differently?"

"Many. Assume you are familiar with most." Mordin coughs into his hand. "Only so many ways to design a successful sentient biped."

A successful sentient biped. Looked at that way, Saren and Shepard have a lot in common. Maybe there's no connection. But why does Harbinger seem so keen on acquiring her body? Something that's not superficial, not found in all of their species, but common to both. Garrus needs to rethink this whole problem. "Thanks, Mordin."
Susskind Station is a booming tourist town. Originally, it was an asari/salarian modular outpost built to house a 20-person research team studying binary stars. The thing is, people who came to Susskind never wanted to go home. It became the spacer equivalent of retiring to an island with a view that goes on for lightyears. And so, additional modules were fitted to the original structure until the station could house 1,500 permanent residents with space for 2,000 more vacationers.

Whether or not the inn is full, the parking lot certainly is, with all berths taken up by the visiting quarian fleet. The overflow guards the edges of the encampment, patrolling peaceful space.

"The quarians are hailing us, commander," says Joker over his shoulder at Shepard bracing a hand on his chair.

Shepard, in turn, looks over at Tali, who watches their approach with her arms crossed. "Well?"

"I can't believe you're doing this. The fleet told you to go away."

"You mean your father."

"You wasted his time. You made me waste his time." Tali stares out of the window.

"I kept him appraised of the situation when I was delayed. I tried to reschedule."

"He doesn't want to see you. I went out of my way to get you that appointment. I'm not embarrassing myself in front of my people for Cerberus again."

Shepard sighs. People who don't have much tend to cling to pride, even her friends. Sometimes it's a good thing, but right now, it's an obstacle. "Alright. We'll do this a different way." She turns back to Joker. "Tell them that Spectre Shepard of the Normandy has come to inquire about the health of Kal'Reegar vas Idenna after he assisted her with her mission. She would like to see him if he's taking visitors."

"Yes, commander." Joker relays her request to the waiting quarian ships.

"Keelah, you're going to drag Reegar out of the infirmary?" Tali asks.

"He's a quarian who owes me his life. I have no problem calling in the IOU to get me past the guard dogs."

"And if he won't see you?"

"He will." Reegar may have underplayed his post-Haestrom illness at the trial, but there was no
mistaking his loathing for the sickbed.

"But if he won't?" Tali won't ask the real question.

Shepard compresses her lips on the uncomfortable truth of the situation. She's a Council spectre in Citadel space being impeded in her duties by some quarians making use of Citadel resources. If necessary, she can cut off trade, take back what the quarians were given, and send them packing without enough fuel or food for all of them to survive the journey to the next safe trading post. If necessary, she has a large stick to wield to get her way. And spectres do whatever is necessary.

But she doesn't want to do things that way. Quarians are still people who deserve her care, even knowing they'll collectively choose to throw her life away. She can't expect people to ever change if she mistreats them the way everyone else does.

Of course, doing things the way that feels right may mean arriving too late and failing her mission.

"Tali ..." Shepard closes her eyes. "There are many ways to get what you want in the world. One of them is simply knowing people and letting them do what they will naturally do. Kal'Reegar could turn down my request, but after five minutes conversation with him, I know he won't unless someone orders him to."

"You think you can know people after five minutes?"

"Not everything. Just some basic traits." She takes a deep breath. "I know you would never betray your father. Not for me. Not for yourself. Not for anybody. And that I could spend all day arguing with you that this isn't a betrayal." And I'd win in the end. "But I don't have the time for that argument."

"It's like you're not listening to us," says Tali, exasperated.

"I'm listening. But I'm not going to stop. It's too important that I speak with your father, and he's not going to want anyone intercepting the information so it has to be in person." He also might ignore her if she didn't meet him face to face.

"If it were that important, you would have found a way to get to the appointment before the Collector ship the way you got to Ilos when it mattered."

Should she have turned the Normandy upside down to keep the appointment? No, there's no room for doubt about what's already been done. She lets Tali's reproach fall away like sea spray off the bowsprit.

"Commander, they're letting us through," Joker reports. "We have permission to dock with the Rayya."

Shepard looks over a Tali. "I'm about to board a strange ship where I'm outnumbered and it sounds like nobody will like me. Please, be my guide."

Tali throws her arms in the air. "I'll meet you at the airlock."

#

Armed guards meet Shepard, Garrus, and Tali at the entryway and politely but firmly escort them through a series of decontamination chambers. Out of respect, Shepard and Garrus keep their helmets on so as not to introduce alien bacteria to one of the quarian live ships.
Once they reach the end of the process, the chamber opens into a hallway full of quarians lounging around. Kal'Reegar, easy to pick out in his brick red suit, pushes himself off the box he was sitting on and stands tall. "Shepard. Tali'Zorah. Good to see you both." There's a rasp to his voice of someone getting over a cold.

"Good to see you as well."

Garrus clears his throat.

Shepard nudges him. "Take it as a compliment. All that sniper training has made you invisible when you stand still."

The seven-foot turian dressed in bright blue snorts while Reegar twitches slightly. "Oh, uh, sorry. I didn't catch your name before."

"Garrus Vakarian. It's alright. It happens all the time when I'm surrounded by women who are more famous than I am. Even if their aim is so bad they can't hit a wall with a shotgun."

"Maybe you wouldn't be only half as famous if you knew which way to align a power converter."

Tali chides him.

There are times and places for aggressive friendly banter, and this isn't one of them even if Tali feels at home here. "Thank you for agreeing to see us. Is there somewhere a little less ... crowded that we could catch up?"

"The garden plaza is this way. There's always a bit of a crowd, in the public spaces." He leads them to the familiar Admiralty Board meeting space. Leafy green plants climb the walls, interspersed with columns that are probably conduit tubes. A few quarians tend to the plants while others simply mill around, enjoying the open space. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

"How've you been, Reegar?" asks Shepard trying to gauge his current health. "You took kind of a beating on Haestrom."

"Physical damage wasn't bad." He shrugs as he sits. "I was down for about a week with infection, though. I'm only starting to get out again."

"With your immune systems, it can't be easy for quarians to fight a war. You'd lose more people to infection than injury."

"We can't afford a frontline attack, that's for sure. Have to fight smart -- ideally from orbit," he says confidently. And why not? The quarians do have the largest fleet and likely the most experienced pilots. The biggest bombs, though, that they'd be lacking.

"It's still a problem," says Garrus grimly.

"We do have stockpiles of antibiotics," Tali adds defensively. "It's not as though everyone would die from a single shot."

"No. They're right," says Reegar. "You've only seen our strike ops, Tali. Don't have all the fancy equipment in a frontline fight. If supplies get strained, things get ugly, fast."

Garrus nods. "Quarians are good at tactical retrievals and repairs in the middle of a combat zone, but asking them to hold a position is essentially a death sentence."

"Ah. You've worked on a joint task force before?"
"Yes," Garrus says curtly.

Leaving him to explain will only cause trouble, so Shepard picks up the opening in the conversation. "We actually need some back up right now regarding a top secret project."

"Really?" asks Reegar, sounding intrigued.

"We can't go into details here. We've been trying to reach Admiral Zorah on his research ship, but he's ... feeling a bit slighted that we had to reschedule our meeting. It's vitally important that we speak with him."

Kal'Reegar's helmet turns towards Tali. "I would think the best person to put you in contact with him is right here."

Tali studies the bench, tracing a finger over a bit of rusted in graffiti.

"She tried at first. She's had second thoughts since," says Shepard.

"Then I'm afraid I can't help you, Captain Shepard. If the quarian who knows you best doesn't trust your judgment, I'm going to follow her lead."

Tali's finger moves from the reddish flakes to the weathered blue paint. "It's not that I don't trust Shepard. Things are just complicated."

"Look, ma'am, I'm a simple soldier. I don't know complicated. The admirals tell me to shoot and I shoot. I stuck my neck out a bit, taking visitors. But I don't stick it out too far or it will get cut off. Only the good of the fleet is worth the risk. If you don't think your friends are right, then I'm not going to second guess you."

Tali's head lowers. "I do believe them. My father... expects me not to bother him with things he thinks are unimportant, and after canceling their plans, my friends became unimportant."

"If you say so, ma'am." Kal nods agreeably.

"It's alright, Tali. I won't push you and further," says Shepard.

"Shepard?" Garrus asks in surprise.

"We can't, Garrus. What are we going to do? Kill some quarians to get to Admiral Zorah so that other quarians won't die? It's not worth it. We've come as far as we can."

"Wait..." Kal squints at Shepard behind his mask. "People are going to die?"

Shepard nods.

"And you said you believe her, ma'am?"

Tali squirms. "Well, yes. Shepard is always right about that sort of thing..."

"That makes it an entirely different situation. An admiral can't allow personal pride to get in the way of the good of the flotilla. And I'm not a very good quarian if I let him," Reegar braces a hand on the wall and laboriously stands. "I'll put in a call to the Alarei, see what I can do."

"But he'll be angry!" Tali protests guiltily.

"Maybe." Kal shrugs. "But I'm not related to him, so I can't disappoint him. I'm just another soldier
of the fleet. The worst he can do is dress me down for bothering him. It'd be worth it to save people."

"Keelah, I'm a fool," says Tali as she stands as well. "I'll go with you. I'm sorry, Shepard. I'll get things straightened out. We'll be right back."

Shepard reaches out to touch her wrist. "Thank you, Tali." She nods to the soldier. "Reegar."

The two quarians walk swiftly down a side corridor, presumably in search of a private comm unit to the Alarei. Shepard drops down onto a bench next to her turian, who has spread out to take up most of the available space.

"Interesting watching you let someone else give the duty talk," he says as he casually drapes an arm over her shoulders.

Shepard shrugs. "No matter how much Tali respects me, I'm not a quaraian and I'm working for Cerberus. My arguments about quarian values would be suspect."

"I've heard you give stirring lectures on quarian values. 'Our priority must be the safety of the Migrant Fleet!'"

"It's a matter of context. I can do it when I'm standing with the community, not to set one quarian against another. Besides, it's better for her to come to a decision on her own and learn to stand up to people she respects."

Gauntleted talons grip her shoulder. "She was standing up to you."

"No, she was avoiding a conflict with her father because it scares her. I can't always be around to help her face her fears." She's not going to be around for any of them for very long. It's probably a good thing that she can't fully register the increased pressure of his hold through her armor.

"It's not that simple."

"You're right. But this is." She stares at the arch where the two quarians had vanished.

"Madelaine..." Her name is a sad plea in his throat. But that changes nothing.

The quarians are returning faster than they left. "Can I tell you how much I love you later? I think we need to be big damn heroes."

Garrus gives an exasperated sigh. "You are saved by imminent danger."

She puts a hand on his knee as she gets up. "Not really. It's keeping me away from you."

Chapter End Notes

Susskind Station is an idea that never made it into the game. I stumbled across it when I was trying to figure out what was up with the system the quarian fleet was hanging out in since it looks totally empty.

Sorry for the delays. I try to update once a week, but between real life being busy and the common writer problem of handling middles, it's been slow going.
"Shepard!" Tali says panicked, "He's not picking up. No one is picking up."

"You can open the doors?" Shepard asks, brushing imaginary dust off her black and red armor.

"Yes," says Tali. "Probably yes."

"Then we should get to the Kodiak."

Reegar holds up a flattened palm as she attempts to pass him. "You wanted back up and I have something that's not five decontamination chambers away."

Garrus notes only the briefest hesitation as Shepard mentally reshuffles whatever plan she'd had. "Alright. Here." She tosses the quarian her shotgun. "Someone seems to think I don't need it anyway," she says, presumably with a mock glare for her mate under her helmet.

Reegar laughs at her and tosses it back. "Weapons and ammo are not a problem." He taps at his omni-tool. "Sir, I need transport to another ship. I'd like to borrow the Tasi."

The mumbled answer must have been affirmative, as Reegar waves to follow him.

"He's giving you the Tasi?" asks Tali in disbelief.

"I can borrow it." The quarian coughs. "And the Admiral insists on flying it."

"What's the Tasi?" Shepard asks as she follows him down a curving charcoal hallway.

"It's a high-speed shuttle for getting around between quarian ships," Kal replies nonchalantly.

Tali snorts. "A private high-speed shuttle."

"Wait."

"Garrus attempts to reassess the marine's standing. "Quarians have almost no private property. Aren't all ships owned by the fleet?"

"Not all," says Reegar evasively.

"So you own a ship?"

"Garrus," Tali scolds as she dodges through meandering shipmates. "You're being rude."

"Asking questions is not being rude," he says, offended. "You do it all the time. And you don't get mad at Shepard when she does it."
"No ... " Tali huffs and turns to Reegar. "Keelah se'lai, I'm sorry for this bosh'tet's behavior."

"They're tasi'kil. It happens, ma'am."

Garrus's mandibles tighten in annoyance at being talked around. "Is this one of those conversations we should have had on the elevator on the way here?"

"No, Garrus," says Tali. "It's a conversation that should never happen."

"But--"

"What does 'tasi' mean?" Shepard interrupts. "My translation program is bad at quarian swear words."

"Swear words?" asks Tali. "It just means ... 'tasi' means tasi ... umm... what about 'no one.' Did that translate for you?"

Garrus puzzles over the word. Did Reegar call them no one?

"Here we are," says the quarian marine, opening a door to a seven-seater pod with another male quarian in maroon at the controls. "Admiral, this is Captain Shepard vas Normandy and her crew. Captain Shepard, this is Torxil'Reegar vas Rayya."

"Pleased to meet you ... Admiral?"

The pilot barks a laugh. "Only the boy calls me that now. I'm retired." He flips a few switches. "Where are we going, boy?"

"We need to fly over to the Alarei, sir. She's not responding to hails."

The older quarian pauses. "Is that little Tali'Zorah behind you, Kal?"

"Yes, sir."

"Rael's being sulky again, isn't he? Get in."

Garrus ducks to clear the hatch and hunches into a seat. It's worse than Miranda's office: Not only are his knees pushed together against his chest, but he finds the low ceiling practically presses his nose into the shotgun strapped to the seat in front of him.

"Is he usually 'sulky?'" asks Shepard as she comfortably settles into the seat next to him in the back.

"He's a standoffish oaf, begging your pardon, ma'am," Torxil apologizes to Tali as they pull away from the Rayya. "No social skills whatsoever."

Garrus can just catch the grumble of her "Look who's talking" beneath the whir of her suit.

Torxil continues on, "Locks himself and his team up when he wants to stall the vote. What is it this time? Food versus weapons again?"

That actually sounds clever if the vote splits down the middle. Extremely hands off, but clever. Garrus resigns himself to his discomfort as the shuttle sets off on a pace that throws him back in his seat.

"It's something else," says Shepard vaguely. "Special project. Very important that we hurry."
The scope on Garrus's visor focuses on the only thing in front of him, the quarian script along the barrel of the gun, and runs a translation program. "Reegar Carbine? That's where I've heard that name before! These things are a nightmare on armor."

"Melts right through practically everything," says Torxil proudly as they zip around the hull of a repurposed salarian cruiser. "We sold production rights to some volus for a wad of credits and a yearly crate of 500 of them."

"You're an inventor, then?" asks Shepard.

"Me? No, I'm just a soldier. Was a soldier," he corrects himself. "My wife was the smart one. She gave me the prototype when she petitioned to join my crew on the Maakat after her pilgrimage. She actually made admiral before I did. Used to have Daro'Xen's position."

"Special Projects?" asks Shepard. "What position did you have?"

"I was in charge of the patrol fleet. It's all scouting and planning precision strikes." The tiny shuttle comes to an abrupt stop. "Here we are."

There's a moment of hesitation, as if they could hear anything in space.

"Shepard," says Garrus craning his neck to look out of the window at the familiar floating tomb, "Those are the regular lights. They haven't switched to emergency power yet."

"Then at least a few people are still alive."

"Why do you sound like you're expecting a battle zone?" Torxil asks, no longer affably complacent. "Who do you think would attack him?"

"I ... can't say until I've spoken with Rael'Zorah," says Shepard.

"Geth, then."

"Why would you think that?" ask Shepard innocently.

Torxil stares back at them. "Because he's the admiral in charge of geth research," he says flatly. "Strange that you wouldn't know that."

Crap. Why did Tali never tell them these things? Why did they never ask?

"I should go," Shepard replies uneasily.

Their pilot watches them a moment longer. "Kal, you know the pickup signal?"

"Yes, sir." He shoulders a carbine.

"Good boy. We'll talk about this later."

#

The entryway is quiet. The only sound is the clank of their own footsteps.

Reegar's eyes are narrowed in concentration as he takes point. It's hard to argue the matter when they're his guests. He may be regretting that right now.

The lights flicker, messing with everyone's HUD as the visors and masks shift from one lighting...
level to the next, then back again. Tali braces a hand on the industrial grey wall against the dizzying effects. Walking through the ship in the dark would be better than liminal lingering.

Sure-footed as ever, Shepard stays diplomatically in the middle, even as Garrus can tell the slow pace is irritating her. He has taken the rear as always, happy to have unfolded himself from a ship not built for turians.

Bzwerrrt.

The electricity finally goes out.

A moment later, the emergency lights turn the walls sunset red. The shift isn't soon enough to spare Garrus a headache.

Reegar looks back at them when he reaches the door. "I haven't been here before, but the Alarei was a quarian diplomat's vessel. If it follows the standard design, this will be the visitor's quarters," he says quietly. "We should be able to contact the bridge from here."

There should be four geth when the door opens. Garrus hefts his rifle. "Stand clear and I'll cover the door."

Tali steps to one side while Reegar presses himself against the other. Shepard looks over her shoulder at him. "Planning something?"

Garrus's mandibles flutter in embarrassment beneath his helmet at getting caught. "Still trying to improve my two on one bullet record." He only needs to drop behind the first bank of desks, angle left for the geth in the hallway, and hit the one in front of him.

She grunts in acknowledgement and slips a foot back, prepared to charge into the fray.

Reegar hits the button to open the door to a room full of computers and empty beds...

Shepard turns into a blue blur. Garrus drops to one knee, but there's only one thing in his sight.

"AHHHHHHH!"


"Ooof."

Shepard wrestles a pistol away from a male quarian in a dark blue suit, legs wrapped around his waist from behind as she slams his hand into the ground again and again until he stops frantically firing and drops it.

"Shepard!" Tali yells. "Let him go! That's Kryl'Graz. He's one of my father's researchers."

With the gun out of his hand, Shepard stops wrestling with the man. Though she's careful to pick up the gun herself.

Tali bends over the man. "Are you alright?"

"What? Who? Tali'Zorah?" the quarian asks dazedly. "Yes... umm... yes."

Reegar checks around the exit, and then shoulders his shotgun. "We're clear."

Putting a hand to his head, Graz looks around. "Who are all these people? What's going on?"
Tali sighs. "These are my friends. We ... need to speak to my father. When we couldn't reach anyone over the comm system, we became worried."

"Tch, I'm sure it's nothing," says Graz. "Something's slowing down our systems. The comms are down. We took down the firewalls to rebalance load distribution. Your father was in a hurry and told us to bypass the standard safeties."

"Ha," says Reegar dismissively. "Got us all jumpy." He brushes against Tali. "Do you want to continue, ma'am? Doesn't seem like there's any real trouble."

She reluctantly rises. "Now that I'm here, I'd better or father will want an explanation for why I boarded his ship unannounced and assaulted one of his researchers. I'd rather apologize in person than run away."

"Yes, ma'am."

Shepard offers a hand to the fallen quarian. "My mistake," she says, pulling him to his feet.

"Yes. Well. Um.. well. Umm.. It will be alright. " He stumbles onto a bed. "I think I'll have a lie down."

Garrus holds his rifle at the ready. "It's not a mistake, Shepard. He disabled the security. They'll be loose on the ship soon if they aren't already."

Reegar shakes his head. "There's nothing here."

"Yet. The completed platforms will be deeper in the ship, in the more secure labs."

"No," says Tali. "No. There aren't any platforms. There are only pieces."

"Pieces of what?" asks Reegar.

"Geth," answers Garrus. "This isn't an attack from outside, it's an attack from inside. Admiral Zorah got careless and your friend Kryl'Graz has just set them loose."

"There aren't any platforms!" Tali insists.

"Umm... uh... there are ... some," says Graz.

"WHAT!?"

"We ... took the parts you sent and pieced them together to better understand geth neural structures. It's all terribly interesting how they've made additions to themselves and grown since we left Rannoch ..." the researcher begins to ramble as quarian eyes widen in horror.

"We have to go," says Shepard firmly, cutting him off. "You." She fixes her commander gaze on the befuddled researcher. "Lock this ship down and call for emergency extraction. Don't let anyone stay. And for God's sake, don't let anyone try to hack the ship."

"But--"

"Go. Now."

Shepard marches to the corridor and into the med bay. That area was always safe. The lighting is more foreboding now, the orange tint of a dying sun.
Tali follows. "We're fine, Shepard. Your story doesn't make any sense. Why would he do this?" She leans over a medical table. "Look, here's one of the storage units I sent to Father: They're parts from a disabled repair drone, plus a reflex algorithm that I didn't recognize. I got this on Haestrom. They're inert."

"What made a part worth sending back to your father?"

"It ... had to be in working order," she admits, troubled. "Something that could be analyzed and integrated into other technology. Anything new had priority. Technology the geth had developed themselves. Signs of modification, clues to their thinking."

"So he could reverse engineer them. But he'd need to turn them on to check his work," Shepard points out. "Geth are a kind of group consciousness. They get smarter when you put more of them together. Every new piece would make what was already here stronger. If your father put them all together..."

"No. Even if he assembled what I sent him, it wouldn't be sapient. It's safe."

"And if he had other suppliers? If he was looking for aware AI?"

"He knows more about geth than anyone except maybe Admiral Xen. Why would he do something like that?"

"Because he got as far as he could with pieces," says Garrus, shrugging. "That's how it always goes: people push and push and push until they cross a line in the name of whatever it was they're looking for. That's why we have law enforcement in the first place: Someone has to hold the line."

"He's not like that! He's cold and logical and he wouldn't make some stupid mistake that could endanger the fleet!"

"Ma'am?" Reegar has caught up with them after seeing the other quarian off. "Are you okay?"

"I... I'm fine. Graz must have overstated things. Father can explain it all when we find him."

"If your friends are upsetting you, we could leave them here."

Shepard shakes her head. "You won't survive this ship without us."

"So far you've assaulted one of our researchers on a top secret vessel. You've gotten us jumpy over our own shadows. You're with Cerberus. I'm not sure I trust what you'd do with Rael'Zorah if you got to him."

"There are geth loose on this ship," she insists.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but I haven't seen any yet."

Garrus shifts to one side of Reegar. He likes the soldier, it's hard not to like a man who does his job well. Taking him out without killing him will require a distraction and a well-placed rifle butt. And some restraints, but fortunately med bays always seem to be full of those.

"It's fine, Kal," says Tali at last. "My friends ... we can trust them."

"On your orders then, ma'am." Reegar nods and steps back out of the doorway.

They proceed around the corridor and come to a series of windows looking into a lab. Three quarians in researcher white are innocently tapping away at their computers.
"See?" says Tali in relief. "Everything is normal."

Garrus frowns. He doesn't remember this wall. "I'm not so sure ..." *Let's see. Leave med bay. Turn left. Black wall with view screen.* He looks down at some crates. There's the screen. He presses play and the scene in front of him is replicated on the screen, complete with sound.

"*Hey, can you get me a cup of kava while you're up?*" says one man.

"*Sure,*" the other replies.

Tali peers around his shoulder. "That's hardly sinister, Garrus."

He frowns. Maybe Tali is right. It looks normal.

"*Ha, ha. Very funny,*" says the woman in the room.

"*What?*" ask the two men.

"*This is a joke, right? You've messed with the lights and now you're chewing up more terabytes.*"

"*Uh... what are you talking about?*"

"*Who's running this system diagnostic? I didn't authorize ... oh, Keelah. How many geth are networked?*"

"*All of them. Rael'Zorah--*"

"*Shut it down! Shut everything down! They're in the system!*"

"*Auntie Hela?*" says Tali in a worried voice.

The woman begins pulling connecting cords as the room plunges into darkness.

A black wall. Now it looks familiar.

And then shots are fired and the screams begin.

Garrus slams his armored carapace against the blackness. "Damn unbreakable glass!"

Shepard pounds a fist into the button for the next door, but it refuses to budge. "Shit." She pulls out her hacking program.

Reegar lowers his weapon. "Back off." He hits a switch on the side. "I've got this." A beam of intense light comes from the shotgun, melting the doors in front of them.

Shepard phases through the hole while it's still much too small for anyone but a hanar, bouncing off the shields of a geth trooper and out of view.

Garrus takes aim through the molten hole. "Hold position."

Headshot.

Breathe.

Headshot.

Breathe.
"Shepard? Are you alright in there?"

He catches the shimmer of a geth hunter's cloak as it enters the room. He needs to get in there.

In the background, log plays on repeat, a body draped over a button. "... sorry... Jona, if you get this, be strong for Daddy. Mommy loves you very much!" Bang.

Shepard flies back into view in a shower of sparks. "Oh, I'm fine. " She rolls back up in a fighter's crouch. "Let me line up a shot for you, big guy."

"Behind you."

"... sorry... Jona, if you get this, be strong for Daddy. Mommy loves you very much!" Bang.

"I know." Shepard circles keeping cover to both sides, and a trooper steps into view. "Get ready to take the shot."

Reegar continues aiming bursts at the door, trying to make the hole larger.

"... sorry... Jona, if you get this, be strong for Daddy. Mommy loves you very much!" Bang.

"Shepard!" yells Tali. "Just get out of there."

"Can't. Two of them are still breathing."

Garrus closes his eyes. Of course she won't leave. She needs to be a distraction or the geth will finish what they started.

"... sorry... Jona, if you get this, be strong for Daddy. Mommy loves you very much!" Bang.

Another geth steps up behind the first, and then they both glow yellow. Shockwave. Targets primed.

"Ready big guy?"

"... sorry... Jona, if you get this, be strong for Daddy. Mommy loves you very much!" Bang.

"Always."

"Now."

"... sorry... Jona...."

He pulls the trigger.

Two troopers drop as the armor piercing round goes through them without losing any momentum. He can see a hunter shaking as the bullet hits, breaking the cloak. It staggers.

"Oh, just go down," says Shepard, annoyed. She punches it in the eye and it finally falls, knocking the body off of the button. "Sorry big guy, I guess you're stuck at two and a half on one bullet."

"Next time, then," he says as she dashes out of view, leaving him to silent relief.

#

When they finally pry what's left of the door open, Garrus's first move is to put proximity mines on the stairs leading up. That's where the geth will come from next, and he's not going to give them his back without leaving them a little surprise.
It's after that he moves into a room that had always been closed before. Slick red quarian blood coats the floor, along with shattered office supplies.

One of the men is riddled through with bullets, as if he threw himself at the attackers with only a pair of scissors in his hand. The other man is huddled in a corner with superficial wounds to his leg and shoulder that are healing nicely with medigel. He'll be fine so long as he takes antibiotics when they get him to the ship.

Tali is rocking the woman. There's a horrible squelching sound coming from her suit when she inhales. She scrabbles feebly at Tali, and then she begins coughing.

"Shhh!" Shepard presses at a button on the woman's omni-tool and she slowly relaxes. "This woman has blood in her lungs. She needs to get to a doctor before she drowns."

"I'll take Auntie Hela back to the Rayya," says Tali."But wait ... I have to find Father."

"Ma'am," Reegar hunkers down next to her and takes her blood smeared hand. "I'll see to her. You go save Admiral Zorah."

"Thank you." She squeezes his hand. "Why did he do all of this? He promised he'd build me a house on the homeworld. Was this going to bring us back home?"

"Maybe it's time to let go of reclaiming your homeworld from the geth," says Shepard gently. "You have no idea what it's like!"

Reegar cups both of his hands over Tali's. "That doesn't make her wrong. Sometimes I think we're better off wandering the stars with nothing to hold us back."

"Our home is one hull breach away from extinction!"

"So is mine," points out Shepard. "You've got a place here, Tali. Don't throw it away in a war you don't need."

"Don't need? If I don't wear a helmet in my own home, I die." She looks over at Reegar for support. "A single kiss could put me in the hospital!"

Mildly offended, Garrus wraps an arm around Shepard's waist. "Your point?"

Tali exhales in annoyance. "At least that's your choice. You have other options. For me, death and love are tangled together whether I want it that way or not," she says bitterly. "Every time you touch a flower with bare fingers, inhale its fragrance without air filters, you're doing something I can't. Damn the pilgrimage! Without it, I might never have known was I was missing. What we had lost when we lost our homeworld. For anyone alive now to watch a sunset without a mask, we must take back our home!" She pushes herself off the floor. "And if I can't have a homeworld today, I can at least take back one ship."

"I didn't realize you were such a romantic," says Reegar.

"It's hard to see anything of a person when they always wear a mask."

Chapter End Notes
Reegar's family history is my own invention based on stumbling across the Reegar Carbine in the ME Wiki.

Rael'Zorah's position as head of geth research is non-canon. We never find out what it is that he's Admiral of. The other positions all have specific duties though: Special Projects (R&D), Heavy Fleet, Patrol Fleet, Civilian Fleet. Geth Research was the only logical thing that both Tali & Rael might qualify for and require a private lab ship like the Alarei in the first place.
"How many of them are there?" asks Shepard as she leans over the railing. They've pushed forward to nearly the center of the ship, but the geth keep coming. It's taken hours. She swears there weren't this many the first time.

"I don't know," says Garrus as two more geth hunters enter the kill zone below their balcony.

"I thought they didn't have that many parts."

Tali swings out from behind the banister and fires her shotgun down the stairs. "I didn't send that many parts. But they may have as many as the Admiralty Board gave Father the funds for."

"How many do you think that is?"

She pulls back. "More than they should have."

"Great." Shepard slams another heat sink into her assault rifle and peppers the next five troopers with it.

Garrus looses an overload that knocks four troopers off their feet and decloaks a hunter trying to sneak up on them. "Look at the bright side, Shepard: Quarians may be competent engineers, but they're bad at design."

"Because turians are known for having such high artistic standards," says Tali as she works hurriedly on her drone.

"Look at the facts." Garrus waves a hand while his omni-tool recharges. "We can keep up the fire all day and even send someone back to pick up more ammo clips. They have no cover. This is the least defensible approach to critical systems I've ever seen. Ships should be created with the idea that you're going to be boarded from the outside and not attacked from within. They should be up here, forcing us to charge up a narrow approach." Shepard launches a shockwave down the stairs, hitting two troopers with nowhere to dodge. "See? We have all of the advantages."

"Except for the fact that my father has to be on the other side of this mess." Tali's tightens the drone casing.

"Except for that," he agrees apologetically.

Clicking sounds emerge from Tali's helmet as if to soothe a child. "There's my pretty girl, Chatika. Don't you listen to him. I designed you myself and you're perfect." She hurls the drone out into the middle of the room below, where a few electrical bursts finish off the remaining geth.
The room is quiet once again. Is it another lull in the battle or have the geth finally run out of metal to throw at them?

Chatika hovers above the floor, spinning.

Shepard peers through the slats of the railing, searching for the telltale checkerboard flash of a hunter cloak.

Nothing.

No geth.

No calls for help, either.

She doesn't like to think of what they'll find.

Shepard stands, and when no one fires at her, she waves an arm. "Move out."

The squad descends the stairs into a pit of broken geth platforms.

Were these heretics, or were these frightened programs who wanted nothing more than a peaceful agrarian life, growing food for people who were no longer on Rannoch to eat it? No, they'd have to be explorers at least. Curious enough about the stars to leave their homeworld. Maybe, since the parts were scavenged from all over, each platform consisted of both, a collection of people divided on core principles, trying to make a suit walk and shoot because it seemed like the only way to survive hostile creators intent on torturing them.

The commander prods an arm with her rifle. They must be getting desperate.

"Father!"

Shepard winces. She's only delaying the inevitable.

"No, no, no! You always had a plan. Masked life signs, or, or, an onboard medical stasis program maybe. You! You wouldn't..." Tali quavers trying to bring herself to touch the black and white suit. His neck is bathed in red. "You wouldn't die like this! You wouldn't just leave me here to clean up your mess..."

Garrus kneels down on the other side of the male quarian discarded in the side hallway. He'd wanted so much to change the past, but, considering all of the obstacles, maybe some things are inevitable.


"Damn it!" Tali swears and sniffs, clearly crying and unable to wipe away the tears under the protective suit. "Damn it. I'm sorry."

"We saved some of his people and his research. Isn't that what he would want?" She wishes she could say that it will be alright, but it won't. It really won't.

"I don't care what he would have wanted, Shepard!" Tali's thin frame shakes with anguish. "I wanted a father who cared about me more than his war effort. I wanted a father who'd take the sick-leave time and let me see his face without a helmet in the way..."

"He was who he was."

"A man who gave me orders and assignments and never had time."
The sudden musical trilling of a turian trying to draw their attention seems at odds with everything else. Shepard scans the area for a threat, worrying that the body could be bait in a trap.

Tali buries her head in Shepard's shoulder. "Damn it! How could he leave me alone like this?"

And then Rael'Zorah's fingers twitch?

Shepard freezes. "That's not possible."

"But he did!" wails Tali.

His chest is rising and falling. Shepard looks at Garrus, inscrutable behind his helmet. She notices he's connected his medi-gel supply into the quarian suit.

But it doesn't make sense. They were too late...

Archangel.

No.

That's going to make her head and her heart hurt. There will be a better answer.

Shepard spins Tali around because logic doesn't matter in this instant.

"Father?" She's immediately at his side again, hovering uncertainly over him.

There's a static from his voice amplifier.

Tali's fingers trace a tear in his throat, and then she's digging through her belts to find a suit seal.

Rael'Zorah weakly taps on his omni-tool. The familiar greenish holo recording starts. "Tali. If you are listening, then I am dead. The geth have gone active. I don't have much time. Their main hub will be on the bridge. You'll need to destroy it to stop their VI processes from forming new neural links. Make sure Han'Garrel and Daro'Xen see the data. They must--"

"I don't care about Han'Garrel and Daro'Xen! I don't care about your damn research! Why ... Why don't you ever understand?"

He puts a hand on her knee and turns his head away from her.

"Stay with him," says Shepard. "Call for evac. We'll clear the bridge and join you."

Tali looks between Shepard and her father. "I--"

"Stay. With. Him." Shepard directs more firmly. "We could be attacked from behind if there are any other geth on the ship and he's in no condition to be left alone."

"Yes, Shepard." Tali readies her shotgun while Garrus follows her into the next room.

A clear map is directly ahead of them as they enter the bridge. Beyond that stand a geth prime and two hunters huddled around what must be the hub. Shepard stays crouched close to the ground, using the opaque half wall below the map for cover.

The geth don't move.

She presses her back against the wall and switches to a two-way comm channel with Garrus. "Tell
"What?" Garrus sounds mildly confused as he crouches next to her, eyeing the geth.

"I need to know that this is real. He was dead! We all saw it! Tell me how you brought him back to life."

"Oh. That," Garrus says distractedly, clearly in the middle of making his calculations. "Tali was right about the medical stasis program. I noticed it the first time through when I did a general overview of the crime scene. Old habits." He waves a hand as if brushing off the past. "The stasis program was never enough because we came weeks later and it was damaged in the fight. It couldn't even last for days like it was intended. But we're just hours later this time. It only took a little medi-gel to jumpstart the auto healing function and pull him out of stasis."

"It was just technology?" she asks, feeling reality resolidifying around her.

"Yes."

Shepard leans her head back and counts to 10. Everything is normal. Her husband is not a supernatural being, he's just an observant genius.

God, does she love him even more for it.

"Alright," she says when she's regained her composure. "You think you can manage the hunters if I kite the prime?"

"Why do your plans always involve you taking on the biggest thing in the room?"

"Biotics." She shrugs. "But if you want me to fight the two faster things that turn invisible so that I can work on blind fighting while all of my senses are muffled by this full suit of armor and you fight the prime, we can do that instead."

"You win." Garrus checks on their foes."They're not moving. How about your plan after I set up a minefield?"

"You really like that trick." Shepard chuckles.

"It's effective: early warning system, deterrent, and trap all in one."

"Alright. The dance across the mine field." She'd learned the steps on Menae and perfected them on Tuchanka.

"And people say you don't dance."

"I do when you lead." If things can change, there's something else she's reminded to do after wading through the carnage. "One additional objective: Don't hit the hub. We're taking it with us."

Garrus tosses out a mine and moves to arm another one. "Why?"

"Before I met Legion, the geth weren't people to me."

"They're not people, Shepard. They're strings of numbers designed to perform functions."

"So is EDI, but you treat her like a person."

"EDI is different."
"How?" Shepard demands.

"She ... just is. She has a unique personality. She modulates her voice. She cares."

"Then being a string of numbers doesn't make her not a person." Shepard looks again at the unmoving platforms. They must suspect an attack is coming. Why don't they prepare? "I've seen their cities. I've seen their memories. Geth care. They don't understand that they care. They can't put it into words and explain it yet, but they do care."

"That's my girl. You want everyone to have a happy ending." The last mine hits the floor, completing a zigzag pattern.

"You're the one that saved Rael'Zorah."

He snorts. "That's not about happiness, Shepard. That's about justice."

"Justice?"

He nods and unshoulders his rifle. "Ready?"

Shepard mirrors his pose as they flank the map of the universe. "Always."

"Go!"

Chapter End Notes

Chapter titles 34-52 taken from "Like I'm Gonna Lose You" by Meghan Trainor, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-MBfn8XjIU
If I Could Save Time in a Bottle

Chapter Notes

I added an additional Garrus/Tali/Liara scene to the end of chapter 47. It was always meant to go there, it just wasn't working out right, so I moved on until I absolutely had to go back and fill in the gap.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"We're nearing a breakthrough on systemic viral attacks. Perhaps we should inform the Admiralty board just to be safe." The image is grainy, a sign of the age of the video equipment. A dead woman and Kryl'Graz confer over the computer.

Rael'Zorah walks into the frame. "No. We're too close. I promised to build my daughter a house on the homeworld. I'm not going to sit and wait while the politicians argue."

Graz rubs his hands nervously. "We'd have an easier time of it if Tali'Zorah could send back more working material."

"Absolutely not!" Rael shoots down the idea. "I don't want Tali exposed to any political blowback. Leave Tali out of this." He turns away, walking half out of view. "Assemble new geth with what we have. Bypass security protocols if need be." The recording stops, leaving the scratched wall of the utility room blank. For a moment, there is only silence as the admirals stare at the wall, trying to process all of the evidence before them.

"This is an outrage!" says Zaal'Koris vas Qwib-Qwib at last, knocking over his battered metal chair. "He has dared to contravene our most sacred laws!"

"Come, now," says Han'Gerrel vas Neema, his voice level behind his brown and gold helmet, "He sought information. That is what he was elected to do."

Garrus has settled into the comfortable pose of a turian guarding a door. Somehow no one thinks about a turian guarding a door, even if there's nothing special on the other side of it and there are no other turians in the community. Let Shepard have all of the attention.

Not that most of the Admiralty Board seems to notice that Shepard is in the utility room of the Rayya with them. Either she's losing her touch or the admirals care that little about how they appear to outsiders.

"He tortured people!" Zaal'Koris vibrates with rage within his pink and white suit.

"The geth are not people," Daro'Xen vas Moreh sneers beneath her blackened faceplate. "No more than that chair you kick when you're angry." Garrus agrees with the sentiment, yet the way she speaks reminds him less of clinical detachment and more of the weird kid in class who enjoyed pulling plates off of a catellus, cataloguing how many could be removed before the poor creature died.

With grave dignity, Shala'Raan vas Tonbay stands. "It does not matter what they are or are not. Rael'Zorah and his team have violated some of our oldest laws by bringing geth back to the fleet and
reactivating them." She looks down at her hands. "There will have to be a formal trial."

Good. After years of Tali waking Garrus at odd hours of the day to have someone to talk to about harsh fathers and lost chances, finally the right person will face the judges.

Zaal'Koris crosses his arms. "I hardly think we need a trial. There is more than enough proof of his guilt here."

"The people must see it, too, so that they understand what we will have to do," says Shala'Raan sadly.

"Now, Raan, it's hardly necessary to embarrass the man in front of the fleet," says Han'Gerrel as if Rael had gotten his hand caught in the cookie jar. "We can take care of this quickly and quietly. No need for the blow to morale."

"No, Gerrel. Not this time." She wraps her arms around herself, a grey woman in a grey mood. "He has gone too far. Much, much too far to be saved."

"But Raan," he wheedles. "He was acting for the good of the fleet. If we are ever to take back the homeworld..."

"No," Zaal'Koris says. "Absolutely not! What he has done is a disaster! Twenty-three bloodlines lost! Twenty-three! And not even with the comfort of honorable battle, but in some mad scheme. We cannot turn a blind eye because we cannot survive such behavior."

"That's the point, you moron!" Han'Gerrel snarls, losing his veneer of civility as he stands. "We cannot survive in the flotilla indefinitely and we grow weaker every year!"

"We could if you would stop sending our people out to be killed. We could focus our resources on buying more ships and feeding more families instead of buying guns for a war we lost 300 years ago!"

Garrus suppresses a twitch of mandible: Food or guns, just as Torxil suggested. That old soldier didn't miss a trick.

"Gentlemen, please!" Shala'Ran holds out her arms as if the empty gesture could keep them apart. "We have guests and a specific matter to address. We can fight corners later."

"Yes, well..." Han'Gerrel shifts his feet, broadening his stance, while Zaal'Koris merely crosses his arms again with his elbows pushed wide, both of them unconsciously trying to seem bigger.

Shala'Raan lowers her head wearily. "Thank you, Captain Shepard vas Normandy, for rescuing those of our people you could and bringing evidence to our attention. As you can see, we need some privacy to discuss matters."

"Certainly," says Shepard. "I should go-"

"A moment, commander," Daro'Xen rises before they can escape. "That isn't all of the evidence."

"Of course it is," says Shepard.

"That is a quarian hub matrix under your arm. Surely, it must have some pertinent information on it?"

While Garrus would normally encourage Shepard to give the hub up, Xen's suggestive tone conjures the image of a basket of catellux staring up at him with big, soulful eyes. He shouldn't feel that way.
He was shooting them himself an hour ago. But that was different: They were trying to kill him. Now, they're just sitting there, helpless.

Shepard shakes her head. "This hub does not contain information relevant to Admiral Rael'Zorah vas Rayya's case. You've seen all of the recordings. The data on this hub," she slaps carelessly, "was taken from Citadel space, and I intend to return it to its rightful owners."

"The Council has clear laws on salvage rights. Whatever Rael found is ours," says Xen.

"In most cases, that is correct," says Shepard. "This is not most cases, and as a duly appointed spectre, I'm confiscating it. If you have an objection, you can take it up with the Council." Her grip remains loose, as if she doesn't think the information is important at all. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

Shepard's tone is ... wrong, as if she's biting the ends of each syllable. Garrus finds himself shifting from guard stance, flexing his ankles, preparing to pounce, matching the energy his mate is giving off. They're not going to attack the Admiralty Board over a bunch of old computer programs, right?

Perhaps the admirals do care what the spectre thinks of them after all, as all becomes deathly quiet.

"Then I should go," she says brightly. Shepard turns on her heel with Garrus following a step behind.

"Shepard?" Garrus hazards as they enter the yellow corridor where Kal'Reegar waits for them.

"Yes?" There are still sharp edges in her voice.

"Never mind."

"Take us to the med bay where they're treating Admiral Zorah, please."

"Yes, commander." Twisting corridors follow in a rainbow of unattractive colors. Reegar has been more careful with them since they returned to the Rayya. They are not guests; they are under a benevolent guard.

The medical facility was clearly once an office to oversee the cargo bays below, most of which are now filled with shipping containers turned into apartments after the Geth-Quarian war. Perhaps Tali could point out the one where she grew up. They walk through ultraviolet and infrared lights intended to destroy any possible germs that survived quarian decontamination chambers, and the doors open and shut in a series to keep infection out.

Most of the original equipment has been stripped away aside from a microphone for announcements and a desk space than includes a panel that can be flipped down to hold more samples in the corner where the quartet of doctors do their research. Beyond the desk are rooms walled off behind glass, each on their own air purification system, six in total.

There is no privacy.

Tali sits at her father's side in the farthest cubicle.

Garrus feels briefly sick at the sight. He has been in her position too many times.

But not in her position. Castis Vakarian would never win a father of the year award, but he won
detective of the year every year for a decade and retired with his integrity intact. Tali finally has the living father, but she doesn't have the unblemished name. And it doesn't look like the father is coping well.

Garrus has never seen a quarian out of his suit. Admiral Zorah is pressed between a glass cover and the metal bed. His hair is black and curly, and his skin the color of sweetened kava. His nose is rounded and flat, very similar to some humans. His eyes are sheathed in wrinkles, and his chest is thin enough to show his ribs. Bandages cover his neck and part of his torso.

Shepard puts a hand to the doorknob, but Tali rises and waves to ward them off. She patches through her comm. "This is a clean room, you can't be in here."

"How are you?" Shepard asks.

"We're ... he's going to be alright, but it hurts to breathe." The patient's eyes open, lighting the room with an orange glow.

"We're going back to the ship now."

"I... I don't know when you're planning to leave, but I'd like to stay with him for a little while."

Rael raises a hand behind her, a fleshy parody of proper talons. "Tali," he rasps. "Leave."

"No."

"Go with your captain."

"No. I am through with being told where to go and what to do today. I want to look after you and that's what I'm going to do."

"Tali'Zorah." He draws himself up with shoulders straight, clearly trying to be commanding. "You have duties to your ship. Leave." The effect is ruined by the lack of a full suit and the racking cough that follows.

Tali moves to his bedside and wraps an arm around his shoulders while offering him a glass of water with the other hand. When he tries to shake her off, she maintains her grip and doesn't let go until he's taken the glass and had a few sips.

He still tries glaring her down. "I don't want you here."

Tali's eyes dim behind her mask. "I'm staying," she says stubbornly.

"Tali'Zorah nar Rayya..."

"Vas Neema." she corrects him.

After a moment, Shepard keys her omni-tool. "We'll wait a few days to handle business matters."

"Tali'Zorah," Rael growls, "You are delaying your ship. I expect better of you."

"I expect excellence," says Shepard, much more her usual self. "And Tali has always met that standard. We have a few extra days. It doesn't matter if we take them at one end of our journey or the other. I'm happy to be able to give her the time to see her family again."

Rael's eyes blink slowly and his voice makes a grating sound as he says something not meant to be heard. Damn the helmets muffling the words.
Tali takes his hand and looks away from them. "I think you should leave now, Shepard. I'll rejoin the Normandy in a few days. Once ... Once this is all over."

"Are you alright, Tali?" Garrus asks feeling a bit guilty that even if there's justice this time around, Tali is still paying for her father's mistakes, caring for him in this oppressive place.

"I'm ... I'm fine. I'll let you know if I need anything."

"If that's what you want," he says reluctantly.

"'We're only grains of sand unless we stand with our family'" Tali recites a classic turian quote from Empress Julia's *Familia*, though she probably got it out of *Fleet and Flotilla*. Perhaps, like Shepard, she'd make a better turian than he does. Or maybe she's simply more naive when it comes to believing people will be who you want them to be rather than who they are.

He bows his head to her as they depart through crowded corridors back to the Normandy. As they stand, finally, at the empty decontamination chambers, Kal'Reegar breaks his dutiful silence.

"Commander, I have a question."

"Yes?" Shepard sounds tired now.

"You knew Admiral Zorah was experimenting on geth. That's why you came."

"Yes."

"But you weren't here to punish him for breaking the law. You knew before you stepped foot on the Rayya that they'd get loose. How could you know that?"

"It's public record that I was hit by the Prothean beacon and it gave me visions. I still get them: broken limbs, dissected guts, dead eyes..." Some nights, when Madelaine sleeps, she thrashes about as if trying to fight off endless waves of opponents. The only thing Garrus can do is curl around her, and talk to her, sing to her, until she wakes. He always hates it when she's gone somewhere he can't follow. Shepard leans against the dark grey wall, crossing her arms like she doesn't have a care in the world. "I know when a lot of people are going to die. But that's not the kind of answer the brass likes to hear, y'know?"

"Just a soldier doing your duty," he says cautiously. "Shoot when they tell you or there's all kinds of problems."

"Exactly so. They don't like it when I explain things. It makes their lives complicated." She always knows what lies to say and how to marry them to the truth.

"Yes, ma'am." He stands a moment longer. "Thank you for trying to save the Alarei. Some of them were good people."

"Of course."

Reegar salutes Shepard, who returns the gesture as the door to the Normandy opens and they can finally leave.

Garrus puts a hand on her shoulder before they cross into the cockpit.

"Garrus?" she sounds suddenly wary of him. Her nerves are definitely worn.

Garrus shakes off his doubts and narrowly avoids pacing the length of the empty white room. "I
thought ... we need a vacation, Shepard."
She relaxes. "Ha. Heroes don't get vacations."

"We could. We ran to get here, we have to be ahead of your schedule now, and it will take the flotilla time to sort out their problems." He takes off his helmet and looks down at her. "I ... I see... you. Every time we're here, you sneak glances at the suns in the distance. We could stop and admire the view."

"Are you asking me for a date in the middle of battling the Reapers?"

"Seems like the only time you're available." He swallows. "And ... well ... we're never coming back again, are we?"

She takes a deep breath as if to say something, but she looks out the window toward the circling stars, her gauntleted fingers stroking the pane of reinforced glass.

Sensing he can win if he presses the point, Garrus strokes her arm. "Let's do something you want to do for once."

The ships of the quarian fleet cut off her view. "We can't afford Susskind Station."

"Let me take care of it."

"On a vigilante's salary?" she chides.

His mandibles widen. "Trust me."

Chapter End Notes

Normally, I make up the stray bits of words that aren't translatable because the animals on Palaven are totally different than the animals on Earth (though maybe there's something similar enough that the word turtle and tortoise would translate). But there are exceptions to every rule. Catellus is Latin for puppy (or at least juvenile dog). I'm not sure if I formed the plural correctly because I never took Latin.
A laugh escapes her lips when Shepard sees the room Garrus reserved for them. He has a remarkable eye for a dramatic prospect: Outside the specially tinted window, blue Leyya, the smaller of the binary pair, dances around the white Raheel. The barycenter, the dark energy that originally pulled the two stars into orbit, was devoured by the larger one eons ago.

Shepard can still feel the latent tingle of power along her spine. No wonder all the asari want to vacation here.

Garrus halts at the threshold of the orange and gold carpet, overnight bag in hand. "Is ... Is something funny?"

"No." Shepard spins on her heel, her red leather jacket flying away from her body, and falls backward into the softest bed she's ever touched. "I'm just happy."

And she is for that moment.

After going through the motions, doing everything that is necessary to keep the endlessly spinning plates in her life balanced and heading in the right direction, it feels like she missed one. More people are safe -- but not all of them. Tali's father is alive -- but it doesn't seem to have fixed any of the Zorah family problems. She thought life would feel better if things were changed, but instead, she only has different things to worry about.

And then her turian swoops in, insisting that she needs a break.

If given the choice between worrying problems like a bone or being in a opulent hotel room with her garishly dressed husband, Garrus wins.

She lifts an eyebrow. "Tell me again how you're affording this."

"I can't take my girl somewhere fancy?" Garrus tosses his bag on a chair.

"Not on what I'm paying you."

He snorts. "Well, this is all courtesy of Vega and Cortez."

Shepard raises the other brow.

"They gave me the idea. You know Vega keeps a TV in the cargo bay to catch the games."

"Yes."

Garrus coughs into his hand, and begins talking again in a slightly lower register, clearly trying to
imitate someone else. "Valdez has the ball. He passes to Huang. Passes to Masterson. Passes back to Huang. He's coming up the middle." He paces in front of the window. "But wait! Here comes T'Ryl. Can she stop him? They're at the 40 meter line. The 30. The 20. He shoots." Garrus raises his arms in a giant V. "GOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAL!"

Shepard giggles.

Garrus swallows, and coughs again. "Ta da!"

"What was that?"

"The 2186 Dolphins vs. Spolongi game. Somehow, I always end up in the cargo bay when that one is on. I sort of annoyed Cortez and Vega by telling them what would happen before it would happen. They asked me to 'put my money where my mouth is.' I ... ah ... walked away with all of their credits, of course. And then I realized how many of these sporting events I remembered and I'm always short on cash when I come back ..." he suddenly looks away from her, staring out the window. "Umm... Anyway, I started betting on varren. I'll get into biotiball later. It's not really betting of course," -- it's kind of cheating, he means -- "but ... well ... it's for a good cause."

"The 'Take Shepard on a Wildly Improbable Vacation' fund?"

"Exactly." He looks so proud of himself.

"I still can't figure out why you didn't have a harem of women chasing after you."

"Low pay, dangerous job, bad jokes, I lived on the Citadel ..."

"What's wrong with the Citadel?"

"You must have noticed that there's hardly any female turians there." He waves a mandible. "The Hierarchy is a meritocracy in assigning jobs, but if two candidates are equal, females get preference for the planets and males get preference for space stations and non-colony work. Can't have children growing up barefaced."

"Doesn't that create other problems?"

"Well, yes. My parents spent most of their lives lightyears apart." He leans back against the window frame. "I guess I figured if I wasn't going to be able to live with a woman, there wasn't much point to finding one. There were always tourists and diplomats and old acquaintances on layovers."

Madelaine crawls to the edge of the bed. "Not much point in finding someone if you have to leave them behind in port all the time. Some people make it work, but I never could." She slides off the jacket, revealing the thin tank top beneath, and tosses it on the floor. "Sometimes I found the asari establishment ... sometimes I picked up a local in a bar."

"You do carry a lot of stress..."

"Loads." She smiles at him. "But I loosen up when you're around."

"I don't know... " He steps toward her and runs a gloved hand over her shoulder. "I've noticed some areas get tighter."

Her smile changes to a smirk. "I may require additional incentives to fully relax."

"Hmmm... what do I have to offer?" Garrus's knee hits the bed in front of her as he draws her up for
a kiss. His other hand runs down her waist, catching her thigh and pulling it over his hip so he can begin unlatching the buckles of her knife sheath.

"Something without gloves," she says as the knife hits the bed and she captures his hand.

"I don't need my hands to manage you."

She can feel his plates shifting against her thigh, stretching his clothes, and drops the gloves so that she can work on freeing him. "You're right. You only need a word."

He strips off her tank top and bra with one pull. "My mouth may be busy with other things." He nibbles along her collar bone and then begins tracing patterns over her breasts with his tongue.

Madelaine loses herself to squeaks and sighs as they struggle out of the last of their clothes. His talons are like needles in her back, keeping her on edge as he presses her backward into the bed.

Her fingers caress the inside of his carapace, working their way up and down his neck, ever closer to his fringe. Her other hand slides down to check the slick fluid and gap in his plates over his groin. "No words for me?" she asks playfully.

His voice is husky as he whispers, "There are no words for you."

"Humans say that words are mightier than swords," she teases.

"Turians actually prefer spears. They're longer, more versatile, and can slip into the chinks between armor."

She laughs as she pulls him down against her. "I love you, Garrus. Always and forever."

He emits a frustrated trilling sound as his plates press her thighs farther apart. He's warm and slick against her belly. "Madelaine... I ..." His voice tumbles over the syllables of her name like the rumble of a reactor core.

"That's the right word." Her fingers find his lightly ridged shaft and stroke along the satiny length.

He groans and tangles his fingers in her hair. "It is. Though you can't hear why."

"Oh?" she asks as he runs his tip between her legs, to her center.

"Yes. It says ...." he leans down to her ear, "there will never be anyone else." He pushes into her, making her gasp as the galaxy collapses to the two of them in a cocoon of sheets where nothing else matters.

#

Shepard presses her cheek into Garrus's smooth back, feeling guilty. People like to say that it's better to have loved and lost, but what happens when you can't accept the loss? It doesn't matter. It's too late to change course. She couldn't stay away from him, and this is the price she will pay.

And so will he.

"I love you, Garrus Vakarian," she murmurs as a tear leaks from her eye. "I'm sorry."

Garrus stretches a leg and rolls over slowly. "Didju say something?" he asks sleepily.
"Yes." She surreptitiously wipes her eye on a corner of the pillow. "I love you."

His eyes shine as he wraps an arm around her, pulling her closer, and presses his forehead into hers. "That's a nice way to wake up."

"Well, you did make me promise not to check my omni-tool. The only thing to do when I wake up for duty at midnight is think."

"Mmmm..." He runs a talon over her temple and down her jaw. "Too much thinking." He grabs the sheets and rolls them off the bed in a tangle of pillows.

#

The next time Shepard wakes, there's a knock at the door. A turian ankle flashes by her field of vision, and then a butt like two folded beetle wings disappears around the corner. She hears the door open.

The scents of coffee and kava waft in. Hope room service was prepared for full frontal turian.

She struggles to right herself in a nest of pillows as the door closes. "You really don't care who sees you naked, do you?"

Garrus puts the pistol he was holding behind his back on the cart as he wheels it into the room. "It's not my fault humans are prudes."

She stands up and wraps herself in the comforter. Damn, it's hot. "Exhibitionist."

He shrugs a shoulder and puts silverware on the little dining table.

Shepard frowns. "That's all you've got?"

"I don't banter without my morning kava or a gunfight." He tilts his head as a trail of sweat snakes down her neck. "You look sticky."

She smirks at him and drops the covers. "I think that's your fault," she says as she walks past him, slapping him on the butt before entering the bathroom to take care of a few things like a quick cold shower and a search for complimentary robes.

Food is waiting when Shepard comes back wearing white terry cloth.

Garrus's mandibles pull in with disappointment. "I hoped you might be less modest."

"Humans don't have natural closures. That makes life without a piece of clothing between me and what I'm sitting on a little disgusting." She shrugs, letting the robe fall off her shoulder. "Which one's my side?"

He points to the dish with more accompanying silverware and she sits down as he lifts the covers. The meals are identical: eggs and sausage.

She looks up at him in surprise. "Are you sure one of us isn't about to be poisoned?"

He scuffs his feet. "I know we can't actually share food, but I liked the idea of getting something similar for once."

Another smile twitches at the corner of her mouth. "You should sit down and eat before our breakfast gets cold."
Garrus eagerly pulls out a chair and begins spooning up scrambled eggs.

Shepard cuts up the delicious sausage in front of her. "This is all wonderful, but I wish we weren't waiting on the quarians to sort themselves out. I worry over what they'll do."

"Have a trial," Garrus suggests. "It's what they did every other time. The only difference this time is that they have the right person."

"That sounds good, but every other time I turn my back on them to work on something else, they shoot me in it."

"They all still deferred to Shala'Raan in private. I can't say I know quarian politics, but she seems to be the moderate one."

Shepard snorts. "Shala'Raan looks good, but I don't trust her. If I have to pick any of them to trust, I pick Zaal'Koris." She dips a bit of meat into maple syrup.

Garrus drops his spoon in surprise. "He's the one that set up Tali to be cast out in the first place!"

"I know," says Shepard calmly. "I didn't say I liked him: He let his feud with her father get out of hand. I would just trust him more than I trust Raan."

"Raan is so honorable that she recused herself from Tali's case." Garrus pulls his mandibles tight and still in a turian frown. "Why would you doubt her?"

"Because of Zaal'Koris and Han'Gerrel, and later because of the war."

"Alright, then, what am I missing?"

"Raan was right to recuse herself, but Han'Gerrel and Zaal'Koris should also both have stepped down."

"Agreed." Garrus nods. "Han'Gerrel claimed to be Rael'Zorah's oldest friend. He shouldn't be impartial about Tali. Zaal'Koris was his political rival and wouldn't be impartial either." Garrus picks up a sausage. "I hate to say it, but the only impartial one was Daro'Xen." He gestures with the bit of meat. "But I don't see how any of that relates to Shala'Raan."

"Shala'Raan should have advocated for the other two to remove themselves or told me to do it on Tali's behalf when she gave me the overview of the situation ... but she didn't."

"Alright, she could have done more..."

"So then there's the second or 202nd Geth-Quarian War." Shepard snags the salt and pepper shakers. "On one hand we have the war hawks with Han'Gerrel." She sets the salt down. "On the other hand, we have the doves lead by Zaal'Koris." She sets down the pepper. "Neither of those two are going to change. Daro'Xen is a hawk because win or lose, she'll get more data for her experiments." Shepard grabs a packet of sugar substitute and puts it next to the salt. "Tali is a dove because of her experiences with Legion." She adds a sugar packet but doesn't put it as close to the pepper. "Tali and Zaal'Koris aren't going to have a strong alliance because of the personal bad blood, but it could hold a two to two tie." Shepard puts a knife in the middle. "The deciding vote is Shala'Raan. When she moves to support the war, even tacitly, she pulls Tali farther in that direction by making it seem like she's outnumbered. Tali always claims she went along with the war because she wanted the Admiralty Board to look united. So either Shala'Raan didn't listen to Tali, didn't trust Tali, or just didn't care about the possibility of peace. Tali gets discouraged by having not only a superior but someone who is almost family doubt her, and she jumps ship to the hawks."
"And Zaal'Koris?"

"Once he's outvoted four to one, he doesn't have any choice but to fulfill his role as commander of the civilian fleet by doing his best to prepare them for war." Shepard shrugs. "When he got shot down, he begged us to save his crew rather than himself." She cleans up the seasonings in front of her. "It was the wrong call, but it was consistent. He can be petty, but he ultimately cares more about the quarian people than he does about himself. Shala'Raan doesn't have strong convictions about anything." She waves the knife back and forth like a pendulum. "I'd rather pick the flawed guy who sincerely cares about the people he's leading. You can work with a leader who actually gives a damn because he'll care about getting it right. If Tali couldn't make Shala'Raan believe in the possibility of peace, then I can't trust her with anything important." Shepard feels tired all of a sudden. "I shouldn't have gotten started on politics."

"You know me, Shepard: It's hard to stop working."

"Yes." She casts around for a different topic. "What about your family?"

"What about us?" he rub his scaled foot along her calf.

"No..." she says, laughing. "What about your family on Palaven?"

"Not much to say until I see them again." He sprinkles more salt on the eggs. "I wish you could meet them."

"I wish I could have met them, too. If they could leave Palaven and meet us somewhere in our journey..."

Garrus picks at his food. "They can't."

Shepard looks at him attentively, hoping that, at last, he might confide in her and she won't have to keep pretending not to know his troubles. "Oh?"

Garrus focuses on his plate. "No."

The clink of silverware is the only sound for a few moments as Shepard disappointedly focuses on her food.

You don't hear it, do you?" Garrus asks at last.

"Hear what?"

"No, you don't. I've told you about my family a dozen times, but mostly with tones. Words are so much harder." He takes a deep breath. "My mom is dying. After leaving her alone for all of those years, at least Dad's not abandoning her now. We're all trying to save her -- that's where all my money goes -- but nothing ever works. Solana is furious at me for not coming home this time."

"Is there anything I can do?"

He chuckles bleakly, dabbing up a gooey green sauce with his eggs. "I've had Mordin and an entire hospital of specialists working on it for ... well ... years on and off. No one can fix this." His hand moves agitatedly over his plate. "I can never believe she's gone. She is home. Was home. Maybe it's better she never had to see everything she sacrificed for destroyed."

"Garrus, you made it through the war and so did your father and sister. I'm sure that's everything that mattered to her."
"Yes, but ... no." Garrus sighs. "My mom's an architect. Everything she ever built for future generations of turians is gone. I know it's not turian to want people to remember one person, but ... well maybe we weren't ever a conventional family. Dad's a superstar who gets to be celebrated across Citadel space, but no one will remember him in a two hundred years. Almost no one knows my mom's name, but she had a legacy that could have lasted for thousands of years if her houses weren't all dust at the end of the war."

"I'm ... I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, Shepard."

"No. It's what humans say when people die."

"Oh. Yeah." He sighs. "She would have liked you." He widens his mandibles. "Probably best you never met Solana."

"She wouldn't?" Shepard sips at her coffee.

"No, I can see the two of you exchanging every embarrassing story of my life."

"No way, big guy. I'm your wife. I'm contractually obligated to keep half of the embarrassing stories just between us."

"Seriously, Shepard?" He lifts a browplate at her.

"Well, I was going to say I needed to have blackmail material easy to hand, but, yeah, seriously. Humans usually vow to 'love, honor, and cherish' and I'm not doing a very good job of that if I make other people think you can't walk and shoot straight at the same time." She frowns. "Unless we need people to underestimate you, but that's special tactical circumstances." She raises an eyebrow at him again. "What about the Great Detective?"

"I'm not sure. You'd either love each other or hate each other. I was always planning to buy a whole bucket of fried lizard legs for Solana and I to eat while we watched the two of you go a few rounds to figure it out."

"Oho! Very supportive." Shepard says sarcastically.

"Daughter-in-law is a different position than only son." Garrus waves a mandible. "You're not going to be a good turian girl and convince me to sit down at my desk and work my way up the Hierarchy the conventional way."

Shepard chuckles. "Hell no. It didn't suit you."

"But what you did encourage me to do actually worked out better than anything he probably wanted. You're a potential ally whose methods he might really dislike. So you'd have to figure out your own relationship with him." Garrus begins chopping at bits of egg with the edge of his spoon. "I've been avoiding talking to your mother. After everything... I mean ... I don't even know where to begin with her."

"I don't either." Shepard looks down at her plate and finds that she'd subconsciously started mirroring her mate and leaving tattered eggs in her wake. "She didn't come to visit me in the brig. I don't understand why she didn't make time for me then." Talking begins to scratch at her throat. Shepard pushes the pain away and focuses on the logistics. "I ... I think she'd be fine with you if she had a little time to think it over. She never hated all turians or anything like that." Shepard chews on her lip. "I don't know what she'd make of you as a person because I don't know what she thought of me at
the end. I ran off with a terrorist organization and then I broke out of jail to save the galaxy. That's not Systems Alliance code. And you're more of a rebel than I am. But she doesn't know turians very well so she might not notice." Shepard shrugs.

"I ... could I meet her? Now, I mean? We might have the time."

"I'm not sure." The truth is, despite her curiosity about Garrus's family, she doesn't want to see her own.

"It would be helpful. Maybe if I talked to her once, it would be easier to do it later. She sends me messages about wanting to see me, and I don't know what to say..."

"Alright!" Shepard closes her eyes in resignation. "I'll see if I can get her to meet us on the Citadel."

Sensing he's upset her, Garrus reaches out a hand to stroke hers. "If you don't want to..." He's trying to be comforting, but she can hear the disappointment in his voice.

"You're right, Garrus. It's something I should do. I owe it to you both. So I'll try. I can't promise she'll be able to meet with us, but I'll try."

"Sweetheart..."

She squeezes his hand. "It's alright, Garrus. Really." And maybe it will be. It's easy to ask about his father since the two of them patched things up. The last memories Shepard has of her mother is a sense of betrayal behind a polite facade. Maybe doing this together will make things better.

She scoops up some eggs, trying to focus on something else as the pain and sadness churn inside her. "The food is good."

"It's hard to be wrong about sausage and eggs."

"You're tempting me to be picky."

"Everyone knows that you eat cardboard if cheese gets stuck to it."

"Hey, cheese is the best part of everything ... even really damp cardboard." She looks across at his plate and spears a stray chunk of meat with a fork. "So, what is this made of?" She sniffs at it.

"Madelaine..."

At his warning, she winks at him and pops it into her mouth. It's a little tough, slightly greasy, and surprisingly sweet. "I'm pretty sure I've eaten more digestive tablets in the past day than I need, big guy. One bite won't kill." She registers the intense look he's giving her and smirks at him in return. Then she cuts another piece of her own sausage, extending the fork to him. "Aren't you curious?"

He leans forward. "Dangerous games you play." He slides the meat off the fork with his mouthplates.

"When I look at this table, I think it's the game you asked for." And right now, it could make for a welcome distraction.

He extends a hand to cup her cheek. "That's why you shouldn't play it."

"I like beating people at their own games." She leans into the caress. "I might even be able to live with a tie."
Garrus leans in to give her gentle kiss. When Shepard steps out of her seat to make it easier, he wraps an arm around her waist and pulls her into his lap. "I will have to add this to the list of things you can't resist."

"It's a very short list that includes the picture of a very smug turian." Her sore thighs ache as she settles against his plates. There will be time to take care of that later. She kisses him again, tangling their tongues and anticipating the moment when Garrus will spring free of his plates.

A sharp whistle practically makes Shepard jump out of her skin as the omni-tool implant in her arm starts glowing red: an emergency. Damn it. "Give me a minute while I figure out how many people we need to kill to get some privacy."

Garrus's voice is strained as he holds very still. "I understand."

"What is it?" she snaps.

In an offended tone of voice, her XO says, "I thought you would want to know that the quarians arrested Tali'Zorah last night and are holding her over for trial."

"Goddamn backstabbing bastards!" Shepard swears.

Garrus growls anger across the entire sound spectrum as his talons dig into her waist.

Shepard tries to collect herself. "Yes. Thank you, Miranda. I'll handle it." She banishes the omni-tool and looks into eyes of her mate. "Two minutes." A tear of frustration slips out as she waits for him to process this. "Or we won't be safe to be around."

His chuckle is raw as he knocks the remains of breakfast to the floor and presses her into the table. "I do like a challenge."

Chapter End Notes

"The pen is mightier than the sword." Richelieu: Or The Conspiracy, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 1839.

Not sure if the ending worked or if the tone shifted too quickly.

The first thing that FemShep would like to do is raid BroShep's closet for the "spacer" red leather jacket. I see no reason why he gets a jacket and a sheathed knife strapped to his thigh and she gets ... brown coveralls left over from extras in Dragon Age: Origins. :

I hope you enjoyed Madeleine's thoughts on the quarians. I mostly wanted to play devil's advocate against Shala'Raan because it seems, out of all the admirals, she's usually given a pass on causing a war against the wrong enemy in the middle of a galactic apocalypse.
"I'm sorry, Captain Shepard vas Normandy. I cannot grant you access to the Rayya," Captain Kar'Danna vas Rayya is doing his best to remain diplomatic on the other end of the comms.

Garrus leans against one wall of the outermost quarian decontamination chamber, Shepard's only back up. She stands in the middle of the room, facing the onboard camera. "I am here to speak for Tali'Zorah as her captain is obliged to do under quarian law." This is the biggest gamble in Shepard's diplomacy. Tali'Zorah vas Neema has a quarian captain. But that is never the name she's tried under.

"Your loyalty does you credit, commander. I, myself, wish that I could stand for her. However, the Admiralty Board in their wisdom has put the crew of the Alarei on trial as a whole for their actions."

"She's never been a member of the Alarei's crew."

"She is Tali'Zorah vas Alarei as of five hours ago when she admitted to doing side projects for her father without the explicit permission of her captain. The Admiralty Board declared Rael'Zorah vas Alarei her true captain."

This is horrible news in most legal systems Garrus has studied. Trying Tali with other people involved more deeply in Rael's scheme could lead not just to a verdict of guilty, but to a much harsher penalty than Tali could ever deserve for her contributions.

Fortunately, this outcome makes the legal argument he prepared with Shepard stronger.

"I see," says Shepard calmly. "And when is Tali supposed to have joined the Alarei's crew?"

"I don't remember the details. Eight months ago? Six? Something like that."

"Then it is imperative that I be allowed on board to speak with the admirals. I have documents showing that she was added to my crew by the authority of Admiral Zorah 20 days ago. I am her current commanding officer and she has a right to be tried as a member of my crew." Shepard snaps the paper trap shut.

"I... I don't know commander. I... I'll have to send to the admirals to figure out the law." The quarian on the other end of the line fidgets nervously. "You will be escorted in by my security team."

"Of course, Captain Kar'Danna. I respect your duty to your ship."

#

After passing through the endless cycles of the decontamination chambers, the Shepard and Garrus are led not to the main plaza, but back to the quiet utility room where no one can see them.
Shala'Raan and Tali are seated at the dented metal table.

"I didn't agree to this!" Tali protests.

"I understand, child," Raan tries to soothe her. "But having a different captain may be in your best interests."

"Being with my father is in my best interests. He needs me."

"He doesn't need you locked up," says Shepard.

Tali turns around to glare at her friends. Garrus ignores the dirty looks. "Shepard's right. It sounds honorable to stand with your family to the end, but it isn't noble to throw away your life. What are you trying to accomplish?"

Tali looks down at her lap.

Shala'Raan rises and clasps Shepard's hand. "Commander. Thank you for coming. Your documents have been accepted and Tali is now officially recognized as Tali'Zorah vas Normandy. You will be allowed to speak for her during the rest of the trial. Though there's not much left. I hope that you can persuade the admirals and the people that she is an innocent in all of this."

"I hope so, too, admiral."

"I can give you 20 minutes to speak with Tali. Then we must continue."

"Of course, admiral." Shepard nods to Shala'Raan as she leaves. Once the door is sealed, she walks over to Tali. "Alright. Tell me what's been happening."

Tali begins tracing patterns on the table with her finger. "Once Father recovered enough to be moved, marines arrived to escort him to the brig. I ... I thought that would be all and I'd go back to my bunk on the Normandy. They said I needed to come, too, to sign some documents. I probably should have paid more attention, but I was exhausted. Once they had my imprint, they tossed me into the cell with the survivors of the Alarei." She scratches at her throat. "They wouldn't even give me a change of filters."

"I'll take care of it."

Tali looks up at her. "I don't need your help, Shepard."

"Yes, you do. They wouldn't have changed your name if they weren't already planning to find you guilty."

"Let them," Tali says defiantly. "I did it. I deserve it."

"No," says Garrus. "You didn't. You sent back inactive programs for study. Quarians salvage geth tech all of the time, and most of them aren't a scrupulous as you."

"It doesn't matter," says Tali. "I sent back tech to a project that violated the law. People are dead and I'm responsible."

"No, you're not." Shepard kneels down beside her, the dark N7 helmet hiding her face. "Tali, why are you doing this?"

"I ... I don't know. I ... I don't want to lose him. Why? Why does this have to happen?" her voice catches, holding back tears.
"He did the wrong thing," says Garrus, sitting down across from her at the table. "He got caught. Now he has to pay."

"He's a good man. He doesn't deserve this. He only wanted to take us home."

Shepard runs her thumbs over the backs of Tali's hands. "Sometimes good people do bad things. They become misguided or desperate and decide that the ends justify the means." She sighs. "But they don't. It doesn't make him a bad person, just a flawed one."

"A fatally flawed one," says Garrus. "He endangered a whole ship, a whole civilization. He can't just walk."

"How can you be so ... so ... rigid?"

"Because if I weren't, I'd be a murderer." Omega looms in his sights. Garrus pushes it away. "There has to be a line that separates good and bad. When you're not ... rigid ... the line disappears."

"I ... I don't know." Tali twists her fingers about. "My whole life feels like it's slipping away from me. Once he's gone, nothing will ever be the same. I don't know what to do ... Not that it matters." Tali laughs hysterically, raising fingers to run them over her mask. "It doesn't matter. None of it matters! We're going on a suicide mission to the galactic core! This is the last thing I can do for him. He wanted to build me a house and I'm not even going to be there! It's so ... so stupid!"

"Tali! Tali, look at me!" Shepard pries her hands loose. "It's going to be alright. He's still here. You don't have to share his fate to fix things. We're going to survive and you're going to come back to the fleet and your father."

"You can't know that!"

"Yes, she can." Garrus pushes away from the table. "We're all going to survive and you're going to come home because we're not like other people any more. We're legends."

"You have an ego the size of a planet, Garrus Vakarian. That's not reassuring."

"I have the skills to back it up. I also can't lie. We'll be fine. We'll make it out the other side of this and then you'll come back and build a new life for yourself."

"I don't believe you."

"Fine. Just stop fighting Shepard. You can believe me when we walk out of the courtroom together."

Tali half snorts, half hiccups. "Bosh'tet."

Garrus sits down again. "Now that sounds like the Tali'Zorah I know."

"Bosh'tet!" she growls the word again.

"Hmmm... Maybe you're only halfway there if you can't vary your insults." He gauges the fiery gleam of her eyes. "Now, let's talk about your defense ..."

#

The Admiralty Board stands above the people on a raised platform in the middle of the Rayya's central plaza. Garrus liked it better when people were milling about and chatting. It almost felt like a proper city. Now the room feels too crowded, as if the ceilings were suddenly lower and the lights dimmer.
Shala’Raan stands on a dais behind the other quarian leaders. Funny that the space she occupies is only big enough for one. Shepardi is right that at least two of the admirals don’t belong here. It’s not a real trial and never was. It’s street theater.

Arrayed before the Admiralty Board are the seven survivors of the Alarei. They represent less than a fourth of the total crew. Garrus follows his teammates up the aisle as the crowd murmurs around them.

Shala’Raan raises her hands. "Good. Now that Tali’Zorah vas Normandy’s captain is properly recorded, we’re prepared to conclude this trial. Do you have any final arguments, Rael’Zorah vas Alarei?"

Tali’s father steps out of the lineup, his movements slow and deliberate. The white of his suit is covered in droplets from the moist air that no one here is allowed to feel. Given the condition he was in the last time Garrus saw him, he’s probably hiding illness.

"I deny nothing." His voice is clear and self-assured. "The recordings are correct: I ordered geth collected for testing; I ordered that platforms be constructed to build complete virtual consciousnesses; I ordered tests be conducted without regard for standard safety regulations." There’s a barely perceptible list to the right before he pulls himself up straight, standing directly in front of Zaal’Koris. "I ordered all of these things. This is the truth, but it isn’t the full and complete truth."

The crowd is silent, enrapt in his words.

"The truth includes the fact that we are a dying people, just like the krogan. Some argue that all of space is ours. It makes us sound rich until you consider that space is a void, so that we own all of nothing.

"Our great and powerful void is killing us slowly because the robots we built have stolen our home and our destiny. We cannot wait! We need to act before we are too weakened, sickly, and despondent to fight for our lives. I, and I alone, have broken the laws of our people because the truth is that I refuse to watch us die slowly."

He takes a careful breath. "If wanting my grandchildren to see the homeworld deserves punishment, then do it. If you insist on punishing someone, it should be me. Let your crewmates go."

Zaal’Koris’s eyes spark with condemnation. "Pretty words and a noble sacrifice, but your researchers followed your orders, which clearly contradicted our laws. They chose to follow despite every indication that what you did violated our most basic principles."

"It is a crewmember’s job to follow orders," replies Rael’Zorah.

"And it is everyone’s moral obligation to do the right thing and to report orders in violation of our laws." Zaal’Koris shakes his head.

"Ha!" Han’Gerrel scoffs. "You would have every member of the fleet questioning every order we give! You’re almost as big a threat to our existence as the geth!"

"Every quarian is answerable to himself and the Ancestors, as well as to the Fleet. Structure does not ameliorate one’s obligation to think for one’s self, no matter how taxing you find the exercise, Gerrel."

"No more than you appear to find obedience, you-"

"Gentlemen. That is quite enough.” Shala’Raan’s voice rises above the other two. "The crew of the
Alarei is on trial here, not yourselves. You owe them your impartial attention." There's a moment of silence as her words sink in. "Do you have any final comments?" she asks Rael'Zorah.

"No." He takes a step backward, but does not rejoin the lineup, staying between the admirals and the other survivors.

Admiral Raan turns to Shepard. "And now, Captain Shepard, you have your chance to present any new evidence on behalf of Tali'Zorah vas Normandy."

Shepard paces back and forth in front of the platform. "Admirals, you have seen all of the evidence there is. What is the point of trying to find more? Nothing proves that Tali ever knew what she was collecting geth technology for. It is a common task assigned to all members of society, a task that is not questioned." Shepard turns on her heel. "And yet, you still took her from her ship, took her from her family, stripped her name from her, and charged her with the worst possible crime: endangering the Migrant Fleet.

"This isn't about Tali. This is about politics." She looks up at Zaal'Koris as she passes him. "You don't care about crime, you care about stomping out your political rivals who are pushing for another war." Her foot hits the floor in front of Han'Gerrel. "And you want war so badly that you're turning this trial into a war of ideas rather than guilt." She looks down the line at Daro'Xen. "And you don't care about any of these people at all, one way or the other. You only care for your toys."

There are noises of protest from the admirals, but Shepard doesn't allow them to get a word in: "So you drag in a hero of the Citadel, someone who has shown the rest of the galaxy the courage, ingenuity, and loyalty of the quarian people, to play out your drama for the crowd. Tali deserves better than your backbiting." Shepard looks up at Shala'Raan. "I cannot control if you disgrace yourselves by convicting an innocent woman to make a political point. I can only say I am proud to call her a member of my crew."

The crowd around the platform heatedly whispers amongst itself as Shepard stands silently before four admirals who would undoubtedly like to convict her of something if they could. Garrus couldn't love her more than at moments like this, when she dares to call the powers that be on their varren shit and stands up for what is right in the galaxy against all odds. If Reapers could be defeated with words, she would find a way.

"Is that all you have to present to us?" the small, grey quarian on the dais asks.

"Along with all of the other evidence that I've already turned over to you, yes."

"Then the trial is done and we are required to vote."

The admirals raise their omni-tools one by one and type in their verdicts.

"By the grace of the Ancestors, the Admiralty Board has made its decision," says Shala'Raan. "Tali'Zorah vas Normandy, in light of your service record and the lack of any evidence that you had knowledge of the geth activation plot, you are found not guilty. You are free to return to your crew. Shepard vas Normandy, for your efforts on behalf of one of our people, we provide you with several gifts."

"She's not one of your people." Shepard lifts her chin. "She's one of mine."

Shala'Raan looks over at Tali's father. "Rael'Zorah vas Alarei, you and the rest of the surviving crew of the Alarei have been found guilty of endangering the Migrant Fleet. As is our custom, you will be given enough supplies for a week and exiled. All of your records will be deleted."
"What?!" cries Tali in horror. "No!"

The older woman ignores her. "However, given the unusual nature of your treason and the scarcity of resources, it has been decided that instead of individual life pods, you will serve your sentence together aboard the Alarei."

Zaal'Koris leans forward. "You wanted to lead our people, Rael'Zorah vas Alarei. Let's see if you actually have what it takes to keep bellies full and a ship fueled without the rest of us to support you."

Shala'Raan clears her throat and raises her arms in invocation, "Ancestors see us, keep us, and guide us until we join you in the Great Beyond. Keelah se'lai."

The crowd is slow to depart the proceedings. They skirt around the crew of the Alarei. One woman holds out her arms to a condemned man as other quarians drag her away.

Tali walks over to her father and takes his hand.

He pulls away from her. "Don't make a scene."

"'Don't make a scene?' Are those really going to be your last words to me?"

"Tali ... You've been a good daughter. I am proud of you." He puts a hand on her shoulder. Then he closes his eyes and steps back. "You also know what is expected of you for the good of the fleet: Find a nice quarian boy, take your place on a proper ship, and forget me."

"I'm going to fix this," Tali vows. "It was all a mistake."

"It was my mistake, Tali. Do not let it knock you off course."

Han'Gerrel approaches with a squad of marines who spread out to collect the condemned. "It's time to go." He takes his old friend by the hand.

Rael shrugs him off.

The admiral snorts. "Don't be stubborn now. It's not that bad. I managed to convince that idiot to keep you all together."

Rael'Zorah rounds on him. "You let him put Tali on trial!"

Han'Gerrel lowers his voice. "In case you hadn't noticed, without you, I am only one man trying to steer this ship. In the future, none of this will matter. Until then, sometimes I have to make concessions. It all turned out right. He's losing every skirmish." He nods to the other guards. "I'm sorry, Zorah, but it's time to go."

Rael'Zorah looks at his daughter again. "Be good. Don't lose hope. We will go home together eventually. Keelah se'lai"

Tali's voice cracks as he's escorted away from her. "Keelah se'lai"

Shepard rubs her back. "Do you need to get any of your things?"

"No. There's nothing left for me here." She lifts her head. "Let's kill the bosh'tet Collectors and the geth and whoever else gets in our way."
Chapter End Notes


And that's what happens when Rael'Zorah lives.
'Til Eternity Passes Away

Chapter Summary

Fathers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The observation deck feels crowded after being empty for so long.

Tali stands at the window, watching her father's ship. The Alarei is dark. The first thing the crew will need to do is get it out of emergency mode. Until then, it floats untethered in space.

Liara curls on the sofa, a book open in her lap and two drinks on the table next to her. Either she's trying to understand a two drink minimum, or the other one is for Tali. Damn it. Why couldn't she get Tali ice cream?

Samara's voice breaks into Shepard's brooding, "You are not at peace, commander. Has something gone wrong?"

Shepard takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. If the red-suited asari has noticed her mood, then she must be triggering some disturbances in the nearby dark matter. She tries to loosen the knots in her body and finds Liara watching with a raised brow. The asari's eyes quickly shift back to her book.

"I hate dealing with politics." Shepard sits on the floor next to Samara. "By the time I have to straighten out a mess, it's just that: a mess. Two or more people hate each other so much that they don't care about the suffering they're causing."

The elder asari looks her over with colorless eyes. "Are you different, commander?"

"I always care about the results of my actions." Tali's silent form is nags at Shepard.

"That is a limiting perspective. If I must kill a woman for her crimes, do I really want to know that she will leave a family motherless?"

Shepard turns her attention back to Samara. "Maybe."

"Why would I want the burden?"

"Because it means there are children out there who will be missing their mother. Perhaps they won't survive without a parent looking after them. Perhaps they'll seek revenge. A moment of kindness to see that someone will be taking care of them might be worth it."

"And do you find this information for all of the people you have killed?"

"I'm a soldier. I kill mercenaries and other soldiers by the hundreds. I have to assume their employers and governments already have systems in place to look after orphans. You were speaking in the singular."
"To each person, they are a singular being no matter what groups they belong to. If I must kill an entire village, should I think their individual lives mean less because they are in a group?"

There are more stars outside the window than people Shepard has killed. Probably. Too many to keep track of. Maybe she'll hear them screaming at her in her dreams tonight.

Liara snaps her book shut. "You are not being fair! When she can choose, Shepard saves people. She does a lot of good."

"I concur," says Samara. "I was glad when Shepard saved Sgt. Anaya by finding the information I was looking for. Otherwise, I would have had to kill her and many other officers to continue on my path. Their deaths would be a loss for many families.

A frown etches its way across Liara's face. "Then why are you questioning her methods?"

"Interference cannot be abided. I would kill every policewoman in that station to continue the pursuit of my quarry."

"Police officers protect us all from threats," Liara declares. "Killing them for enforcing the laws against you makes you the villain."

"It is justice." Samara insists. "They need to know their place. They are to do their job of maintaining the peace and I am to do mine of pursuing threats they cannot hope to combat. Is the commander different?"

Wheels click and turn in Shepard's mind. "There's no one so powerful they can stop you from doing your job. The moment there is, you stop being a justicar. That's part of the code, isn't it? The justicars are one template for the spectres?"

"Precisely."

"I don't want to be like that. That makes me different."

"Desires and results are two different things. Even if you do not enforce all of your rights, you benefit from the work of those who came before you and would not compromise. You benefit from recruiting a justicar, a vigilante, an assassin, and a mercenary because of who we are, even if we allow you to make our choices for now."

"And I don't benefit from my own reputation?" asks Shepard in a moment of ego that she quickly brushes off. "Never mind, it's not important. You're right that I benefit from the work of others. My work is to turn my band of misfits into the offensive force that the galaxy needs. Perhaps I'll even change some minds."

Liara smiles, "I'm sure you will. You have a way of changing everything around you."

Samara is skeptically interested. "I had not expected a seasoned soldier to be an optimist."

"If I were a pessimist, that would mean telling myself every minute of every hour that I will fail. It's more important to keep hope alive so that we have something to strive for." It's far more important to keep her mind off of dark thoughts that would drag them all down.

"Perhaps the Goddess brought you into my life for a reason. Are you never angry? Do you really hate no one?"
"I get angry. I do have emotions. But, no, I don't hate people."


"When I thought he was behind killing everyone, I hated him. In the end, though," Shepard closes her eyes and shakes her head. "How do you hate someone who is mind controlled? Do you hate them for being weak? And he wasn't that. I got through to him a couple of times, and every time I did, he chose the safety of all living things even over his own life." She leans back and watches the stars. "I don't hate Saren. I pity him."

Liara nods. "He couldn't help it. The Reapers broke him the way they broke my mother. Killing him was mercy."

Tali looks at her with narrowed eyes. "What about the geth?" She turns on Shepard. "They drove my people from our home, and now they're back in the galaxy, killing your colonists with the Reapers or the Collectors or whoever else will listen to something that has no right to live."

"I don't think the geth are what they seem," says Shepard, trying to be diplomatic. She had hated the geth before Legion appeared to tell her about the geth civilization. They transformed before her eyes from an army of insane soulless robots to people struggling to understand what being people means.

"After they charged my father with bringing active geth onto the ship, they accused us all of letting them escape. No geth programs were found in the mainframe." Tali crosses her arms. "Where did they go?"

There are only so many lies Shepard is prepared to tell. "They're in the AI core with EDI."

"You let geth loose on the Normandy!"

"No!" says Shepard, offended. "I put the quarian hub in the core because that's where all the major computer cooling equipment is. They're in their own self-contained system and EDI is under strict orders not to interface with them."

"You stole them from the Migrant Fleet!"

"I rescued people who were being tortured against the laws of the Citadel and the laws of their own captors. I removed temptation to do worse." Shepard looks up at her friend. "You didn't want Cerberus to make nice. Fine. I am not a nice person. I am a good person and I get shit done." She leans forward, bracing against her own knee. "I know your life sucks right now, Tali. I'm sorry that it didn't go perfectly. I tried to save everyone. I tried to help. It's 10 times harder when you fight me every step of the way." Shepard winces. God damn it, that was the wrong thing to say.

"So the Alarei was my fault?" Tali's fury is clear in her voice.

_Might as well jump all the way into the muck._ "No. That was a quarian problem. Your problem is that you keep hesitating about choosing what to do with your own damn life."

"My problem?"

"You told me 'maybe' on Freedom's Progress. You only told me 'yes' after Haestrom was a disaster. You started off being angry about the company I was keeping despite the fact you knew I was with Cerberus the whole damn time. Then you get upset when I try to help your father and forces beyond my control put obstacles in my way. You're mad at me because I don't have to live life in a suit. You're mad at me for saving you when you wanted to sacrifice yourself for nothing. You are an incredibly important part of my team, but we haven't been committed to the same cause since we
parted ways after Saren. Either pick my side or go home to wait out the apocalypse."

"You say that as if there's an easy choice! You expect me to leave my home, my family, my duty to follow you. There is more to my life than you, Shepard!"

"Good."

"Where do you-" Tali's tirade grinds to a halt. Clearly she expected resistance. "How can that be good for you?"

"It doesn't matter if it's good for me or not. You don't have to come with me if you don't want to. Liara isn't staying and I'm not mad at her. I'm your friend. I want you to have a full and happy life. I would like it if you traveled with me and fought by my side, but not if you don't want to. Not if you don't have something to fight for." Shepard sighs. "You're the best, Tali. But only if you want to be here."

"How can you be so ... so ... Ugh!" Tali throws her hands up in the air and strides out of the room in frustration.

Liara looks after her retreating back. "She doesn't really mean it. She's worried about her father."

"I know. At least she still has a father to worry about." Shepard leans back, stretching out her legs and watching the stars again.

The asari bites her lip and rises. "I... think I'll keep an eye on her."

"Good luck," says Shepard with a sigh. "She's always had a sharp tongue."

"She's wearing a helmet, I'll be safe," says Liara as she walks off.

"That was not bad," says Samara.

"Compared to what? A hull breach?" wonders Shepard.

"Compared to most of the fights I had with my daughters."

"Tali is not my daughter. She's never even wanted to be my protégée. She probably wants to be my head engineer, but ... she's not good at managing underlings." Not that this was my best work just now.

"Tali'Zorah is young. I understand that she is barely past her pilgrimage. It is a place to start."

Unfortunately, it never went anywhere. "How did you motivate your daughters to be self-sufficient?"

Samara resumes her meditative posture. Her eyes glow white. "They did not have a choice. I wasn't there after ... once my youngest was 50, I left to finish justicar training. They had to be strong."

"What about their father?"

"She ... left." Instead of serenity, there's a tension to the silence. Samara the justicar is not someone who needs comforting, leaving Shepard at a loss, yet again, for the right thing to say. Eventually, the asari matriarch adds. "It is not as if asari need two parents." And resumes her meditations, only to abruptly stop them again. "Why do you ask about only one father?"

"What?"
"Asari are well-known for having multiple consorts from various species. Why do you assume I had only one?"

"I've seen the Cerberus reports. Your daughters are all ardat-yakshi, so you've only had children with other asari. Given the asari prejudice against purebloods, to have three pure-blooded children close in age, I would guess you must have loved one woman very much."

"Your Cerberus reports have dug up the sealed records that my children are ardat-yakshi, but not the public record of my bonding?"

Damn crap Cerberus records. "Cerberus is nothing if not randomly incompetent at things. They can bring me back from the dead, but they can't put the right coupling in the fusion reactor."

"You know my goal, then?"

"Morinth? Yes."

"Do you want to save her?" Samara's eyes seem a little bluer.

"Save ... Morinth?" It had not even occurred to Shepard to try. It's Morinth after all, a 400-year-old serial killer. "No."

"If you would not give her a chance, then you are not an optimist."

"I'm not an idiot."

"She is a young woman, talented, beautiful, and cursed. I gave her many chances because I wanted her to have a better life." Samara resumes twisting the local dark matter into a personal ball of blinding white light. "You will not let her escape to have a different fate?"

"No."

Samara's shoulders relax a little. "Good. She no longer deserves one. But you may wish to examine your own code. It is ... inconsistent."

"I know what I'm doing."

"Perhaps. But your friends do not."

#

There isn't much left to say to Samara. Shepard needs time and space to think, so she goes upstairs to stare at the required Cerberus reports and listen to the bubbling of an empty fish tank. It's a relief when the door slides open and Garrus wanders in. "Hey, you. I was beginning to wonder if you got off on the wrong floor and fell asleep in Miranda's room."

"No. I wouldn't need to get on the elevator to end up there." He begins unlatching bits and pieces of armor and stacking it neatly in the storage unit. "Besides, her office is freezing. Every time I leave that place, I have to bury myself under the guns to get warm again."

Shepard shivers in sympathy despite the heat in the cabin that means she usually lounges around in a tank top and cotton pants. "Huh. I wonder if that's her version of alien deterrent."

"Could be, if you think turians and salarians haven't discovered parkas."

Shepard tries to picture his face framed by a feathered hood. The vision is both vicious and cute.
"Now I know what to give you for Christmas."

"Mmmm... I... should give you a nesting present."

"You took me for a weekend at a luxury hotel. Everything was soft and no one got blown up. That's really more than I ever hope for."

Garrus chuckles as he sits down at the sofa in his undersuit. "I'm trying to be serious here. Stop making me laugh."

"Sorry. I didn't know this required a straight face." She settles on the couch next to him. "What is it?"

"It's not that important." He looks away from her as his mandibles flex in what seems to be embarrassment.

"See, this is why I make you laugh: If I let you get serious, you start doubting yourself." Shepard bumps her shoulder against his. "Stop being self-effacing. If it's important to you, then I want to hear it."

"It... well... you said you're not domestic, but I still want to give you something. Show that I'm a good husband and can take care of you."

"You take very good care of me." She kisses his cheek.

"I'm great in a fight, but what turian isn't?"

Shepard laughs. "You're the best sniper in the galaxy."

"I know." He says matter-of-factly. "This isn't about that. It's... it's about being a worthy man."

"Worthy of what?"

"You."

"You've already got me."

"But can I keep you?"

"Garrus... If things weren't the way they were..."

"No! It's not that. It's..." Garrus slumps. "I don't know. I don't know what you ever saw in me when I made such a mess of my life. I don't know why you agreed to marry me. I don't know if I could actually make a family with you. I don't know if I'm any good..."

Shepard gets up on her knees so that she can press her brow against his. "Too much thinking." She takes his hand. "You are the best man I have ever known. What I feel about you, I have never felt about anyone else. There is not a doubt in my mind that I will always want to be at your side. That is why I married you. As far as we're concerned, nothing else matters."

"It should matter, though!" He draws back so that he can look down at her, but continues to hold her hands. "You hold yourself to these high standards and then you say it doesn't matter for the rest of us. It should. If... if it's really Shepard and Vakarian, I don't want you to go easy on me."

"I'm not trying to go easy on you. I'm... Maybe I don't understand? You make my entire life better and you take me to beautiful places and you make me stop and see things I would have overlooked. You do more than enough manly shooting and swaggering to make me melt even though we're
different species. What's so important about a present?"

"It's ... it's ... I have to get you the right thing to show that we could make a life together." He makes a discontented noise. "Turian women don't agree to marriage unless they think you can build a family together. Men give gifts to show they're ready to stay together and have skills to make a home. I ... I did it wrong. I just didn't want to lose you." He wraps an arm around her. "I want to do it right this time. Maybe then it will feel ... that I did everything I could."

*I really should have done some more research.* Shepard bites her tongue on her first reply because Garrus is clearly not in the mood for a joke. Instead, she smiles at him. "You are Garrus Vakarian. You will find something that is so stunningly perfect that I won't know how I did without it. In the meantime, I already said yes once, and I'm planning to sign the papers saying yes again because I love you."

He wraps his arms around her and cautiously nuzzles her forehead. "I don't deserve you."

"Good. When you start thinking you deserve me, that's when you'll lose me."

Chapter End Notes

I feel like this chapter needs the disclaimer that I do like Tali as a companion/friend for Shepard.

Other than that, sorry for the delay. This is the fifth version of this chapter that I've written. I don't know that Tali & Samara ever talk in the game. I'm 99% certain Liara and Samara don't. That makes piecing the relationship dynamic together kind of hard. It matters to me that I keep the personalities as close to canon as I can because that makes writing fun most of the time. This time, not so much. The ladies talking took three weeks and I'll probably heavily revise that part again in the future because I'd like it if they talked more with each other and less to Shepard. Shepard and Garrus talking at the end took three hours, though I'd been thinking over how to describe the turian cultural system and differences for quite some time. More on turian families and cultural expectations to be filtered in throughout the story.
If I Could Make Days Last Forever

Chapter Summary

Stubbornness on a galactic scale.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What do you get for a woman who wants nothing?

When all bullets stop flying, what can Garrus possibly have to offer? A line of snappy patter?

The problem nags at him.

After his shift, Garrus takes the elevator down to the shuttle bay to practice his shooting. He's only mildly surprised that the long range targets are already set up. Thane's blade-thin figure is stretched out on the floor, shooting at stationary targets with his Viper. Then he flips himself up on top of the Kodiak and repositions..

"Can anyone play, or are the gymnastics required?" Garrus asks when the muzzle of the gun goes cold.

Thane hops down and bows in greeting. "Of course. I was merely trying to make it more challenging."

Garrus sits down on the cold titanium and begins checking his Mantis over. "Is that why you pack such a small caliber? I know it's not because you lack the ability to hit with your first shot."

"Sniping as an assassin only works when you're certain of your target. If faces are too similar, you need to get up close to see that you have the correct individual. Some targets may also use cloaking technology to project a different face and walk out as one of their own bodyguards or completely invisible. The first bullet disrupts the illusion, the second takes out the armor, and the third drops the target." Thane looks down at his gun with some distaste. "Though it feels more respectful to be standing next to them when they die."

"Perhaps you should change tactics for the battlefield. Everyone charging us is a valid target."

"I'm reserving judgment for when the commander gives me an assignment. It's my understanding she has more than enough spare guns to cover the crew's needs."

Garrus extends the barrel and lies down on the floor. "Cerberus is well supplied."

"Indeed," Thane replies as Garrus lines up his shot. "I wonder that they have gathered such an eclectic crew."

Garrus pulls the trigger. "Oh?"

"A turian, a salarian, an asari, a quarian, a drell ... They surround Shepard with a group of diverse aliens, and yet their reputation advocating for human supremacy did not come from nothing."
Garrus can feel Thane's dark eyes resting dispassionately on the back of his head. Surely, the assassin knows that if he brought his foot down at the correct angle to slide beneath a turian fringe, Garrus's skull would shatter. Travel with an assassin and some part of his mind will be thinking about how best to kill you should it become necessary.

Garrus ignores the prickles of threat and fires off his shots, one after the other. He can remember a time he would have failed this test of will. It never happened quite in the same way, but it was always there. And initially, Garrus was far more bad-tempered. It was partially personality, partially the pain in his jaw, and partially, perhaps, Thane purposefully picking the absolute worst time to talk in order to properly measure him for whatever equations the assassin needed to fit him into.

Thane has a calculated outward calm that matches Madelaine's unemotional masks. They watch and measure and rarely say a wrong word. And that realization made it easier over time not to react. React or not, it's all going to be filed away as interesting and useful. Garrus would rather be memorable to Thane for being cool under pressure and confident of his place on the ship than for being a wounded young bird with PTSD.

He reloads and sights the last target.

The drell's voice rumbles, "They are only using you to keep her in line."

Garrus finishes pegging the bulls-eye. "Then they don't know who they're dealing with."

"You are the commander's mate. That seems like useful bait."

Garrus chuckles as he sits up and begins stripping his rifle. "I know that's definitely not what they intended. I'm a mistake. They thought they were getting Archangel and they got Garrus Vakarian instead."

"What is the difference?"

Garrus looks up into Thane's dark eyes. "Archangel is an evildoer's worst nightmare and cares only about ridding the world of crime. Garrus Vakarian cares about Shepard and the Normandy."

"I've seen the contract on Archangel's life. At first it was a paltry amount. As the price rose, so, too, did the stories of those who'd tried to collect and failed. The last time I saw it, you were worth 150 million credits."

"Was I still below your price range?"

"No. That's a sum worth going to the slums for." Thane smoothly rights his gun and shoots down range at a target. He smiles. "But I liked the work that you were doing."

"Ah." Garrus removes the armor piercing mod.

"I'm looking forward to working together so long as I don't become a target."

"Why worry?" asks Garrus. "Seems like even if I could come up with reasons to kill you, you'll die soon anyway." He cleans the barrel. One time, Thane was his only friend. "I'm much more interested in the hands that wield the weapon. It is your philosophy that you do not choose to kill, correct?"

Thane's hands shake and then steady. "I stare into the Sea of Longing on Kahje. Shimmers in the Depths was right about me. 'You have brought great honor to this one, Thane Krios, as well as to your family. But what you ask... what you desire is not part of the Enkindlers' design for you,' he said when I asked for freedom. He granted it to me anyway. His words haunt me as I flip the coin in
my fingers. I was unwilling to listen, and I paid the price for my obstinacy. We all must walk the paths we are given. I stare again at the coin Irikah gave to free me. Gold from Rakhana the color of her skin. I drop it into the sea. Wherever my path leads -- to whatever depths or through whatever darkness ... I will follow it to the end." He blinks rapidly. "Forgive me. Drell have--"

"Perfect memories? I know. Don't worry about it."

Dark eyes memorize every inch of his face, and then the assassin coughs in embarrassment.

Garrus decides to fill the silence. "You're right about the squad, though. We're all carefully selected to keep Shepard distracted with personal missions rather than asking questions of other Cerberus operatives while the Illusive Man works behind the scenes. And of course we have 'diverse backgrounds.' The Illusive Man wants to win Shepard's loyalty. He can't be racist if he has a drell friend." Garrus waves at Thane. "Look at that drell standing there with his frill."

Thane snorts in a show of humor.

The barrel retracts and Garrus slings the gun across his carapace. "Of course, that means they knew enough about you to decide you'd be a perfect piece of camouflage. Now that you know what you are, why stay?"

"My body is a tool. Both the commander and Cerberus wish to use me against the Collectors. That is a satisfactory death. No matter which hand wields me, I will be at peace when the end comes."

Unlike those of us left behind. "I'm more of a fighter."

"Ah, turian tenacity," a smile plays over Thane's lips. "You know that we're all meant to die at the end of this mission, but you do not accept it."

"I only began to live when I stopped accepting the world other people made for me." Garrus packs up his cleaning kit.

"We all only have as much living as our Gods allow." Thane pulls out another set of blank targets to continue the practice. "Life is learning to accept our place within their plan."

"Turians don't have gods. We killed them millennia ago. It might account for the stubbornness," Garrus spreads his mandibles in a smile. "Shepard is just as determined. Don't go into this planning to die. You're going to be disappointed."

"Hardly." Thane shakes his head. "If I live, I will proclaim her a siha for changing the course of fate and devote what time I have left to whatever cause she chooses."

"Then we will be working together for a very long time." Garrus nods and leaves Thane to continue his practice.

#

Considering longtime friends, Garrus has something to ask before Liara leaves for Hagalaz. He's feeling silly sitting around Shepard's cabin (their cabin), waiting for her in full work armor when the door emits its soothing tones and Liara steps in. She looks so much more natural in her soft white clothes. "Hello? Garrus?"

"Here!" He leans back in his chair so that she can see him better and waves her in.

She gives him a friendly smile as she takes a seat on the couch. "I was surprised to get your
He pours her a glass of white levo wine and sits back to sip his brandy. "I have a question about protheans I keep forgetting to ask you."

"About protheans?" Liara looks at him uncertainly. "Now?"

"It's about the beacon on Eden Prime. Shepard was caught by it and so was Saren. I was wondering if it did anything for them besides give them nightmares."

Liara bites her lip. "Is she still ... ?"

"Yes. I think they might even be worse with coming back from the dead." *Twice.* Garrus looks guiltily at the empty fish tank and wishes it were full so that he'd have some excuse to keep staring at it.

"Oh." Liara looks at her undrunk wine. "I didn't think ... Oh, Goddess. I didn't think!"

"It's too late now," says Garrus in calm police tones. "But it would be helpful if you could answer the question."

"Um... Alright. You have to understand, though, that the records are scanty. We've only ever found two beacons, and Shepard blew up both of them before any extensive research was done." Liara meets his eyes, and whatever she sees is enough to continue. "They're supposed to be instantaneous communication towers that allow you to reach people across the Prothean Empire. They were likely critical to maintaining a homogenous society. The messages are inadvertently coded as far as we're concerned."

"Inadvertently coded?"

"Yes. Umm... tell me what the color blue means."

"The color blue?"

"I'm serious, Garrus. What does the color blue mean?"


"To me, it means skin, bathroom, sky, water, and C-Sec. We only have two points in common, maybe three since skin and asari could overlap." Liara's eyes go distant for a moment. "Interesting that turians haven't adopted water being blue. That's the color everyone else uses."

"Water is green."

"Alright." Liara leans forward. "The point is that we share some common cultural references because of the shared governance of the Citadel, but some of them are completely different because our cultures are different. We're going to have a miscommunication if I point to something blue indicating that I need to go to the bathroom and you think I want you to make someone bleed."

"What does this have to do with protheans?"

"Tell me what blue meant to the protheans. Sky and water seem likely, but what if it also meant go or monster or peace? We don't know. And we certainly don't know what pictures of specific protheans would have meant, other than that those specific individuals were important. Not if they were
important for science or war or craftiness or stupidity. We lack the cultural knowledge to understand
the protheans when the beacons throw images at us, and it seems that they only speak in images."

"So it gives us nightmares instead and we need the cipher to understand them."

"No, Garrus." Liara sighs and leans back. "We don't need the cipher. Shepard and Saren needed it."

"I thought it could make the messages comprehensible."

"It can. The problem is that the person in question needs to survive receiving the message. The
beacon on Eden Prime killed five people that we know of. Saren and Shepard were the only
survivors."

"That's an idiotic way to build a communication device," says Garrus his mandible twitching in mild
anger.

"It wasn't built for us. It was built for protheans. I don't think the beacons posed any threat to them."

"It's something then. Saren and Shepard both think like protheans." Garrus sighs. It's something they
had that no one else did, apparently. But why would the Reapers give a damn about finding people
who think like protheans? There was a whole prothean race that they exterminated and the Collectors
in the modern day. Why care about Shepard?

"Maybe." Liara leans back. "That's one theory. But I don't like it. There's no way either of them
should think or behave like an ancient race they've never studied."

"Alright, T'Soni, what do you think?"

"They're both remarkably stubborn," she says with an amused gleam in her eye.

Garrus waits, but she doesn't elaborate. "That's it? That's all? They were both stubborn?"

"Not just stubborn. Unshakable and relentless on a galactic scale. Like on Elysium."

"She talked to you about the Skyllian Blitz?"

"She never talks about it," Liara fiddles with her sleeve. "I only learned about it through reports. It
includes things like popping her arm back into its socket and then climbing a cliff to fight 10
batarians bare-handed, knowing that there were about 300 more roaming the countryside looking for
humans to capture. Most people would have given up without even trying." Liara looks down at her
sleeve. "I would have."

"That's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Would you have done it?"

Garrus hesitates for a moment as the numbers run through his head. The odds of winning are
incredibly unlikely. But it would be an interesting tactical challenge just to try... "I was only 18-year-
old ensign when the Blitz happened. I wouldn't have been capable of doing the kinds of things she
did. I didn't have the training. But if you're asking about now... Yeah. Sure. I could do it."

"You think so?"

After Omega? "Yes."

"We'll see how many arguments you win with Shepard."
None. He pulls his mandibles in tight. "Hmmm... Well... I don't plan on having any."

"We never do." Liara sips at the wine. "Does that answer your question?"

"I don't know. What's the point of the Reapers trying to gather their most willful opponents?"

"Breaking the strongest first as an example to the rest of us?"

Garrus's mandibles flutter as he regards his old friend. "That's on the savage side."

"Mother's acquaintances could be a bit ... intense." Liara drains the rest of her glass.

"It's a possibility, but it doesn't make much sense to go so far to bring her back from the dead."

Liara frowns at him. "The Reapers didn't bring her back from the dead. Cerberus did."

Ooops. Garrus pulls his mandibles in tight. "I ... have a hunch they're connected."

"Garrus, I know you worked hard trying to be a detective, but ... Cerberus is fighting the Collectors. The Collectors work for the Reapers. Obviously Cerberus can't also be working for the Reapers, or the Reapers would be fighting themselves."

"Eh ... I'm still trying to work out the details. But ... But what if Cerberus thought there was some reward at the end, like Saren did? The Reapers convinced him that they'd make turians the supreme race. Maybe Cerberus thinks they'll secure human supremacy."

"By bringing back our best hope of defeating the Reapers? I'm sorry, Garrus, but that's the worst way of currying favor that I've ever heard of."

"You're right." Garrus sighs. The problem is that he also knows he isn't wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Thane's memories are taken from the comic Mass Effect Foundation 12. The man has a photographic memory, so especially with him, I wanted to make certain that if something existed I copied it exactly.

So far as I've discovered, Thane calls all FemSheps siha eventually, commemorating her as a warrior angel whether or not he loves her.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The armory is blindingly bright. Shepards would swear that after the engineers lowered the illumination, Jacob bought more lights to put under worktables and cases to better display his skills. She wishes she could be two decks down, dealing with Zaeed instead. The man lives next to a trash compactor and has an unpredictable temper, but his home is more relaxing than the sterile glare around her.

Jacob's motions are stiff as he hands over her weapons. "Here you are, ma'am," he says with icy politeness.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Taylor?"

"No, ma'am."

"It sounds like a problem."

"You haven't taken me out with you since we left Omega." Jacob closes the display cases with angry snaps. Ah, pride. That's the problem. "We're an elite team, Shepard. You can't keep cutting me out of the squad selection."

"Uh-huh." Shepard tightens her gauntlets. "First: Yes, I can. I'm in charge. Second: On top of my elite Cerberus team, I have an elite scientist, an elite engineer, an elite thief, an elite mercenary, an elite assassin, an elite krogan, a one-of-a-kind biotic, and an asari justicar, and I have to make all of my special lone wolves fit together like they were designed to work as a team. Third: This is a private favor for my friend. It's about her, not you."

"You could have taken me on the Collector ship."

"Are you going to make a habit of questioning all of my decisions?" Shepard crosses her arms. "I'm doing what Cerberus brought me back to do."

Jacob stops repacking guns. "Could have fooled me, commander. You've been off partying with your friends -- Pardon me, 'doing private favors' -- while Miranda and I have been keeping this ship running."

"Excuse me?" Shepard does a double-take. What happened to the guy willing to follow a brain-dead woman?

"You're humanity's greatest hero! Miranda busted her ass to bring you back to save the galaxy! And what are you doing? Leaving her behind to run the ship while you take a cuttlebone around with you and screw him on the side."
Where did this come from? I do not need this right now. "Mr. Taylor, I realize you've left the military, but it's not uncommon to have an XO handle shipboard life and another officer designated to run missions. Perhaps you've forgotten that's a legitimate option when you have a large crew. Or perhaps you're only angry that you don't have the position."

"I'm angry that it's a straight run to the IFF, and you're wasting time doing favors for aliens while human colonists are dying."

It's not untrue that people are dying while she runs errands, but ... "You have a problem with being fully prepared before running headlong into danger? You like facing down a galactic threat underequipped and undertrained? You have one bullet in your gun and you want to chance wasting the shot?"

Looking sheepish, Jacob says, "No ma'am."

"If I take the best fighters in the galaxy and get them killed for nothing, there may never be another attack on the Collector base. If there is, it will be less skilled and have a lower chance of success because we fucked up and many more people will be dead in the meantime. So maybe it costs thousands of human lives while we get this team functioning and the ship upgraded. I will pay that price for success. Are we clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And if I have even a minute of personal time because we need to resupply, refuel, travel to a mission, or otherwise wait, then I will do what I wish with it because it is mine. I signed up for a life of service to humanity, not slavery."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good." Shepard turns on her heel and leaves.

#

The Shadow Broker's lair is kept blessedly dark. After throwing hapless goons into space for several hours, they've finally breached the inner sanctum. The office is filled with huge columns supporting even larger display screens: State secrets share space with the latest beach volleyball scores.

The man himself looms behind his desk, trying to look fierce. The horns, eight eyes, and flexible three-lipped mouth should be imposing, but yahgs are herbivores. He's a bull in a business suit. Shepard grins. "Someone was bound to come after you for working with the Collectors."

"It was a mutually beneficial partnership," says the broker in his deep, gravelly voice. "Fortunately, my deal with the Collectors for your body is still open."

Liara covers the creature with her Predator pistol. "You're quite confident for someone with nowhere left to hide."

The broker shrugs his bulky shoulders. "You travel with fascinating companions, doctor. It's good you brought Archangel, T'Soni. Your friend's bounty is still unclaimed."

"And it's going to stay that way," snarks Garrus, readying his rifle.

Liara touches his arm gently. "This time, I've thought things through." She steps forward, facing down the businessman. "You're not putting a hand on anyone."
The broker laughs. "It's pointless to challenge me, asari. I know your every secret, while you fumble in the dark."

"Is that right?" Liara looks the man over. "You're a yahg, a pre-spaceflight species quarantined to their homeworld for massacring the Council's first contact teams. This base is older than your planet's discovery, which probably means you killed the original Shadow Broker 60 years ago, then took over. I'm guessing you were taken from your world by a trophy hunter who wanted a slave..." Liara smiles nastily, "... or a pet. How am I doing?"

The Shadow Broker growls and tosses his desk on top of Garrus, knocking him flat. *Damn it, Garrus! When will you learn how to dodge?*. Liara winces as he goes down. "I thought of everything but that."

The Shadow Broker pulls out a tower shield redirecting his biotic energy through it. Liara shoots at him, bullets pinging the rafters. "The shield is kinetically sensitive. Energy and projectiles are bouncing off."

Shepard cracks her knuckles. "Then we do this the hard way."

It feels good to let go. The first punch lands on his middle jaw, and Shepard smiles as the Shadow Broker's head snaps back. A hook takes out his left jaw. There's an audible crack as he tries to snap it back into place. A third punch takes out one of his eyes, and the behemoth staggers.

Shepard aims a flying kick at his lower jaw, but the broker is thinking now, and deflects the attack, driving Shepard back.

"Damn it!" Shepard ducks as he attempts to crack her across the face with the shield. She rolls along the floor and pops back up at the edge of the central chamber. He turns and charges toward her, guns blazing. Shepard sweeps his leg, bringing him abruptly to his knees. "Liara! Now!"

The asari warps the glass ceiling. It begins to splinter. Outside, the electrical storm that cloaks the Shadow Broker's ship rages.

"You can do it, Liara!" Shepard urges her on.

"I'm trying." Liara groans and biotically tugs against the steel frame, until, at last, the window gives. White lightning rains down on the Shadow Broker, who lifts his shield to protect his back. The electricity flashes around him, and jumps ... hitting Liara.

The asari screams as the energy floods through her body.

"Liara?"

Her blue skin turns white as ash. And then she disintegrates.

"No." Shepard foolishly stands stock still. This isn't supposed to happen. Why is this happening?

The Shadow Broker charges Shepard, pinning her between his shield and the console. Shepard pushes against him, feeling sluggish. It's hard to breathe beneath all this weight.

He laughs at her. "You thought you'd kill me with a parlor trick? It's my parlor."

Arachnid eyes stare down at her through the clear shield. *Spider eyes*. "Come into my parlor said the spider to the fly."
"Yes." His tongue cleans the clefts between his tooth bristles.

"No." Shepard shoves him off of her with all her might. "You are an alien. You don't know human allusions off the top of your damned head. I know random human writings. And I don't even know what a fucking parlor is. You're not real. This is all in my head."

"That is why there is no escape for you. Everyone you kill is in here, waiting."

"No. I didn't kill you; Liara did. I didn't kill Ashley; Saren's troops did. I didn't kill the little boy; the Reapers did. That's not why you're here. Why are you here?"

"Because I had the answers, and you killed me," he says.

"The answers to what?"

"Why Tela Vasir went after you. Why Palin made the video. Why dead councilors are giving orders. Why the Collectors want you. Why Cerberus brought you back. I know where all the evidence is."

"Liara has it now, and I trust her a hell of a lot more than you."

"But she needs to sort it." The Shadow Broker sits behind his desk again. "She didn't find out the first time. She won't see it this time either."

"She didn't find it because it doesn't exist. You only know what's in my head, which means you know what I worry about, not the answers to my questions."

The Shadow Broker folds his hands. "But I did know. And now you'll never find out." His voice changes, becoming more mechanical. "We all serve. In the end, you will beg to join us."

"Never." Shepard closes her eyes, not that they were ever really open in this place, and breaks past the barrier of sleep.

#

Shepard wakes beneath the weight of a turian humming to himself, and claws her way to the other side of the bed and more air. She lays there, panting in the heat.

"Madelaine?" A pebbled hand rests on her bare shoulder. "Are you alright?"

"I think so." If she hadn't been checked over for indoctrination multiple times, she might worry about it. However, she's passed every test the protheans devised. Or she will when she gets there.

But if she's the only one inside her head, why do the nightmares continue?

Shepard focuses on the present. "We fought the Shadow Broker today, right?"

"Yes." The hand wraps around her waist and pulls her against the curve of Garrus's keel bone.

"And Liara is alive?"

"Yes." Garrus sounds puzzled as Shepard relaxes.

"Thank God." She sighs. "I must be the worst person to sleep with ever."

"Mmmm... it's not all bad." Ridged nose plates nuzzle her shoulder.
"I love you."

"Madelaine ..." There's trouble in his tones.

"You're not regretting asking about my mother now that she and Nana are going to meet us at the Citadel?"

"No, I ... " he trails off. "I want to do some investigating while we're there."

Shepard snorts. "I already figured that out. Once we sort out Kolyat, I was planning to leave you with Thane. Whatever time you have left after all of the paperwork can be for snooping."

"The thief and now the assassin. You enjoy making me hang out with C-Sec's Most Wanted, don't you?"

"Both of them can vanish. If you'd prefer, I could give you Jacob again. He's an upstanding ex-Alliance soldier, never mind the Cerberus uniform that makes him stand out and the lack of charisma to cover for it." She looks over her shoulder at him. "And after Illium, you are not going to convince me to let you work on your investigation without back up."

"Thane will be fine."

"Good."

"Madelaine ..." They're still apparently in trouble. With force of will, Shepard holds her tongue, waiting for him to complete his sentence. "I'd also like to go to the Archives together."

Shepard rolls over and drapes a knee over his hip spur. "Done." She looks up into his blue eyes, but he only stares back at her in the dark. Impatiently, she asks, "What are you really trying to work up to, Vakarian? Because I know there's something."

"I... I'm worried about you."

"Any special reason? Because I remember being fine until the end."

"That's just it ... I'm worried that if I talk about the case with you, you won't be alright. It ... it could make your nightmares worse. But if I don't, maybe I'm missing something." His thumb runs up her jaw, while his hand cups the back of her head, tangling in her hair.

"I'm a big girl. I can take it."

His talon comes to rest beside her eye. "Shepard ... I'm not sure if you can."

That stings. She wants to fight and argue and push him until he talks. It feels like the universe has wobbled off-center if Garrus can't believe in her. She wants that unwavering faith back.

But their universe will destabilize further if she won't trust him. She lowers her eyes and forces out the word, "Alright." And it will be, until Aratoht. If he can't talk to her by then ... well, the six months in lock up alone will drive her crazy trying to figure him out.

She's rewarded by him pressing his forehead to the top of her head. "I love you."

"I know."

Chapter End Notes
“Will you walk into my parlour?” said the Spider to the Fly,
'Tis the prettiest little parlour that ever you did spy;
The way into my parlour is up a winding stair,
And I've a many curious things to show when you are there.”

"The Spider and the Fly," Mary Howitt, 1829.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Spider_and_the_Fly_(poem)

I hope I can be forgiven one fake out death. I was going to write out the actual confrontation and then a dream battle to end the chapter, and, well, if you want the actual confrontation, you can play the game. I wasn’t really planning to add much to it, and it didn’t serve much purpose in my story other than that it happened, so I combined the two.

Why is Jacob my go-to guy for being racist?

Because he is in the game.

Aside from belonging to Cerberus, the racist terrorist organization, he does actually use the cuttlebone slur against Garrus if you go down a particular conversation path (something Madelaine didn't do and was unaware of). I know Ashley gets a lot of flak for being a space racist, but I think Jacob is actually worse. Ashley's family has specifically suffered because of first contact with the turians (though I'd blame the humans more for her problems because they used the Williamses as scapegoats). I think Ashley's issues could be improved with exposure and perspective. Jacob's, as far as I can tell, are rooted in his own inadequacies/need to feel superior to someone and require a therapist's couch.

And that's it for Mysti's Analysis of Mass Effect Racism.
"Grrrarrk." Garrus hefts a crate on top of the makeshift shelving unit he created to house all the extra bits and pieces Cerberus left lying around the gunnery. The Thanix cannon is going to be fitted onto the ship over the next couple of days and everything needs to be out of the way.

Light falls across his face as the door slides open. "I'm back here, Shepard." He picks up another crate. "Does Cerberus really need this many spare screws? It would have been better if they packed more solder and sealant." When she doesn't reply, he draws in his mandibles and says, "I'll add it to the shopping list." No answer. "Might be worth sending Daniels with Taylor, she has a better understanding of what's needed to keep a ship running and Donnelly and Tali should be fine for monitoring the reactor core while we're out." He turns and tosses the crate at the person behind him.

Tali stumbles and falls on her butt with the crate across her lap. "Ow."

"Sorry. I don't get many visitors."

"With a greeting like that, it's no surprise," she says with a sharp intake of breath as she rubs her knee.

"I'm friendlier when people announce themselves rather than sneaking up on me."

"I was curious." She looks at the crate. "Shopping lists and crew rotation ... it's not very romantic," she says accusatorially. "And you threw a box at me. Why would you throw a box at Shepard?"

Not wanting to explain that he was certain she wasn't Shepard, he replies curtly, "She would have caught it." He feels oddly angry and can't quite put his talon on why. Maybe he's gotten too used to working with non-turians and the value they place on keeping everything private. "Did you need me for something?"

"I ... don't know. I was feeling lonely since Liara left."

"And I'm the only other dextro around?"

"Yes." She pushes herself free of the crate and struggles up to brace herself on the railing. "Daniels and Donnelly are okay, but I only really know you and Joker and Chakwas... and Shepard."

"Mmmmm." Garrus looks her slowly up and down for suit tears.

Tali turns her head away. "Liara offered me a position as head engineer on the Shadow Broker ship."

That would certainly make things a little more difficult with the Collectors, but not impossible. "Why
"Didn't you take it?"

"I need to think things over." She twists her fingers together.

"What kind of things?"

"Well, I wouldn't be part of the Migrant Fleet any more. Not that I am right now with being assigned to the Normandy. I don't know how I'll ever get back. Taking another job with another alien won't help." Her thumb scratches at the paint. "But I'd be able to see my father again. If he would visit. But he won't. He'd tell me to go back to the fleet."

"You did say you always wanted your own engine room."

"Yes. But ... It's not the right ship." Tali crosses her arms and bends over the railing. "It's not the right crew."

"Then tell her no."

"But it's a good opportunity ..."

"Tali ... I can't tell you what to do." Garrus leans against the railing next to her.

"Shepard says I can't make up my own mind." Tali lays her head down against her arms. "But I do ... just ... things keep going wrong. First on Freedom's Progress, then Haestrom, and then with Shepard, and now with my father. It's like every choice I make is the wrong one." The glow in her eyes dims.

"I think you're being too hard on yourself." He flexes his mandibles in thought. "When you stepped onto the ship, you were alert and alive like a flower in the morning. We were all happy to see you again." He looks at her sideways. "You knew what you wanted and you set out to get it. But after dealing with your father, it's like you've wilted under the sun. You seem confused."

"There's so many choices and so many things that I can't have now because I messed up or waited too long." She looks up at him.

"Forget about everything that's happened. What do you want?"

"I can't forget about it."

"Try."

"I don't know. What do you want?"

Aside from a life with Shepard ... "To be a spectre. I've known since I was five years old and saw a documentary on Barachus Tilvix."

"You're not a spectre, Garrus." Tali props her head up with her hand.

"Not yet."

"Not ever," says Tali, reminding him a bit of Solana. "You're running around with human terrorists."

"It could happen," Garrus insists. "Being here isn't a bad choice. This ship hasn't attacked the Council and it never will with Shepard in charge. If we run the op to destroy the Collector base, it will impress the right kind of people."
"And if it never happens?"

"If it never happens, then I never gave up on trying to help people." Garrus looks down at her. "And that isn't a bad life."

Tali looks away. "I've never felt like that about anything."

"What about your pilgrimage?"

"It was exciting seeing all the aliens up close for the first time. It was so weird to me that turians were real. You and Shepard rescued me from Fist's plot and it was like you stepped out of a vid, but it was my real life." She drops her head over her hands. "But it's not like a vid. I went back to the Migrant Fleet and got accepted onto the flagship of the heavy fleet just like I'd always wanted. It should have been a happy ending, but things kept happening. Shepard died. You vanished."

"I'm here now," he says, trying to encourage her. "And so are you. We could go out and save the galaxy again."

"That's not ..." Tali pauses, confused. "That's not what I want."

"Don't want to save the galaxy?"

"It's ... it's too big. I don't feel anything about it. All I wanted before was to kill someone who tried to kill me and to stay alive through this crazy adventure. And then I got to go home. I think that's what I want: to go home. But I don't even know where that is anymore."

Garrus remembers her pure joy on Rannoch when she claimed a patch of land. "You'll find a new home one day, if we all survive."

"An empty one."

"It doesn't have to be. Things can change."

"I don't think I get a choice. The geth took the Ancestors from us. The flu took my mother. And now the geth have taken my father."

"He's not gone yet."

"I'm just not allowed to see him ever again or I'll be offering comfort to a traitor to my people."

"Mmmm... let's go back to that saving the galaxy thing. What if you did? What if you go back to the fleet a hero? Sometimes, heroes are granted favors, like a pardon for your father."

"Hrrrmrmrmrm."

"And all you'd have to do is repair engines and occasionally shoot husks. There is no guarantee, of course, but with Shala'Raan and Han'Gerrel as close friends of your father, you'd only need to sway one more admiral to your side."

"It's never been done before."

"So if you pull it off, you would be the first." Garrus waves a mandible. "It may actually be your best shot at saving him."

"Maybe you are as smart as you think you are," says Tali thoughtfully.
"Either I'm as smart as I think I am, or I'm going to cook myself alive when the new gun emplacement I designed overheats." He widens his mandibles in a smile. "I'm betting on me."

"Bosh'tet." She slaps him across the shoulder and then hugs him. "Thank you."

Garrus pats her carefully on the back and feels proud of himself. He's actually getting pretty good at taking care of the crew.

#

"With varren tread, upon our prey we steal. In silence dread, the sting of blades you feel... hmmm...mmm....hmmmm hmmm hmmm..." Mordin sings to himself as he cleans Petri dishes in the galley.

"Should you be doing that down here?" asks Garrus as he leans against the counter.

"Have to. Gave me lab with everything. Left out kitchen sink." He continues scrubbing. "Don't worry. Decontaminated. Only baked on goo." He scratches a finger across a purple stain.

"I wanted to ask you something..."

"No! Cannot concentrate! Need to find Maelon. Then can focus!"

"It's not about science. It's about salarians."

"Very general topic. Salarians are science: biology, chemistry, sociology ..."

"How about political science?"

"Mmmm..." says Mordin noncommittally as he throws a red-striped towel over his shoulder.

"Look, salarian family trees give me a headache. I think I have one sorted out. Councilor Valern was the youngest son of the dalatrass of Mannovai." Garrus pulls up the data on his omni-tool.

"Correct." Mordin doesn't even look at the data. Too busy cleaning.

"His six older sisters died of hemophilia before the age of four. There's no immediate successor to the rulership of the planet."


His eyes skim over the data. "There is an heir though." He points to a different branch. "Eldest niece from second sister most likely candidate."

"Would Valern be imprinted on her?"


"I don't know." Garrus leans forward. "Valern is a strange pick for councilor."

"Was best candidate," says Mordin firmly.

"I thought salarians preferred women in politics."
"Women and \textit{alkippe}." Clearly used to blank looks from slow students, Mordin explains, \textit{Alkippe} uncommon. Modern medicine removed most causes. Dalatrass loses her daughters, sometimes raise son as daughter. Used to be way of maintaining stability when travel slower. Can't inherit because no imprinted supporters. Often contract with the heir; become extremely powerful consorts and advisors. Know all the blackmail."

"And Valern was ... ?" Garrus shifts uncomfortably.

"Yes." The scientist blinks at him. "Everyone knows."

"Does 'everyone' know how he became councilor, then?"


"Whose politics?"

"Ask a dalatrass." Mordin blinks at him. "Or don't. Prefer you alive and not in jail."

"Why would she get rid of me if everyone knows?"

"Everyone knows about \textit{alkippe}. Only certain dalatrasses know what deals made to secure votes for councilor position." Mordin returns to polishing his glassware. "Don't trip over secrets no one wants revealed."

Chapter End Notes

Mordin sings his own version of "With Cat-Like Tread," \textit{Pirates of Penzance}, 1879.

This was not what I intended for this chapter, but the second half didn't feel right structurally. It will come back later.

I'm glad I did this bit with Tali. It's when I realized that at least my version of her is more of a small scale, tangible results thinker. Garrus and Shepard will go out and save the universe because it needs saving. Tali needs a more specific focus.

Valern's Position:

So, the stuff I wrote in previous chapters is canon: Salarians are a matriarchy, 90% of their children are male, and children imprint on their female elders. And that means Valern is odd because he's a male character in what his culture deems a female role (ruling council space). And we're never given a reason why. But there has to be one, right?

The idea of \textit{alkippe} (Greek for "mighty mare") comes from an article I read years ago about alternate genders in other cultures. In particular stories of girls raised as boys because the family needed men. Some cultures had special words for these people, recognizing them as being of one sex but performing as the opposite gender.

An accepted third gender seemed like a good explanation for why Valern is in a position that in terms of a Machiavellian Matriarchy that maintains power through some inherent brainwashing should have gone to a spare daughter (salarians being born in multiple
births of all the same gender, there is always an heir with many spares). This way he could at least get his name in for consideration.

Anyway, while other writers may offer different explanations (He was better at gathering info than the Shadow Broker?), I like this one.
"What are you wearing?" Shepard looks Garrus over as they wait in the decontamination chamber for Thane.

"Ummm... Clothes?" Garrus's mandibles flex nervously.

"But they're grey." For all that Garrus's normal taste in clothes would put a colorblind peacock to shame, this is so far the other direction that Shepard doesn't know what to make of it. "I didn't think they made turian clothes in flesh tones."

"It will be good for ... um ... blending into the walls," says Garrus. He shifts from foot to foot. "Besides, humans like values."

"What does this have to do with ethics?"

"No. Like black and white and ... and grey." Garrus lowers his gaze under her confused stare and mumbles, "I want your family to like me."

Shepard smoothes his shoulders and straightens one of the buckles. "Doesn't matter so long as I do."

"It does matter," he says fiercely, surprising her.

"So you would break up with me if your father didn't like me?" she asks. She'd always assumed the answer was no.

"No." He says without hesitation and the tension that was creeping into her shoulders seeps away. "But I'm a bad turian. And it would still hurt to give up my name and never see him or Solana again."

"Wait. What?"

"If they wouldn't accept you, I have to either bow to the wishes of my family or leave to start a new one." He leans down and presses his forehead to hers. "You win."

Is there a word for feeling both flattered and horrified? *Numb*, Shepard decides.

"I don't think it would come to that, though," Garrus continues. "With the promotion and everything, Dad will see that you're the best thing that ever happened to me." He stands back and regards her quite seriously. "I don't want you to have to make a choice like that. I want your family to like me."

Thane clears his throat.

Shepard can't help a final bit of aligning Garrus's sleeve before stepping back and putting on her
commander mask. She turns to Thane. "How long have you been there?"

"Long enough to get lost in thought," he says with a good-natured smile.

"Then I should stop delaying." Shepard hits the door panel and leads them out into the Citadel and past the security checkpoint.

Thane glances around the corridor. "You'd think Citadel Security would be the tightest in the galaxy."

"Hmph," says Garrus over Shepard's shoulder. "I know C-Sec too well to believe that's true."

"I see no fewer than 14 fatal flaws a skilled assassin could exploit." Thane runs his eyes over the windows into the interrogation rooms. "Eight of them existed when I was here 10 years ago."

"They skipped some of the steps in order to get this post in operating condition after Sovereign's attack," says Garrus. "Cheaper materials. And the humans took over, so they wanted to leave their mark by redesigning the layout." He taps at a window. "We might even be able to break this glass."

Shepard sighs. "I know it's fun, but could we not plot how to defeat Citadel Security while we're standing in their outpost, guys?"

The two men give an acknowledging chuckle as they enter the main offices.

A dark-haired woman in uniform is standing by Bailey's desk. "Hey, chief, I need the Persuader."

"Sure thing Calliway," the older blond man opens a drawer in his desk and pulls out a metal rod. "Is it Steffke? That's one stubborn bastard."

"No, Kelham lawyered up for him." The woman flips the rod end over end, catching it. "It's some muscle for hire who thinks he can hold out on me."

Shepard holds her breath. It would be easy to keep walking and mind her own business. But she's never been good at that.

She follows the woman into an interrogation room where a thick-necked guy with a cauliflower ear is cuffed to the table. The officer smacks the wand into her hand. "You want to be tough? Put your feet up."

Under a patina of dirt, the man glares at her. "Fuck off, bitch."

The officer raises the rod and swings it at his face.

Shepard shakes her head. "No." She pulls the wand into her own hand with a flex of her wrist. "This is not happening. I don't care what he's done, you're not beating suspects in front of me."

"Yeah? Who do you think you ar- Shit."

Shepard nods at the door. "Leave."

She watches Calliway go and then turns her attention to breaking the restraints. "It's your lucky day."

"I know all about the good cop/bad cop routine, cop," says the guy, unimpressed. "What? Am I lucky to meet you? To be saved by you, bitch?"

A three-fingered hand wraps around the man's throat and squeezes. "Yes," says Garrus. "And you're
going to say 'Thank you.'"

Shepard sighs. "Damn it. Now you've made my turian angry. He doesn't understand all the stupid things humans say when they're frightened. Garrus. Let him go."

"Shepard, I know an insult when I hear it."

"And I'm the one who gets to decide when I'm insulted." She glares up at her mate. "Let. Go."

Reluctantly, the talons release and the man inhales deeply.

Shepard nods and digs in her pockets. "It's your lucky day because you and your family get to eat tonight." She hands the man 50 credits. "Leave while you still can."

As she re-enters the office area, Shepard begins slapping the rod against the palm of her hand. She strides over to Bailey's desk. "I really appreciated you cutting out the paperwork to declare me alive again. But could you and your crew refrain from talking about torturing people in custody in front of me? Then I have to do something about it and I don't have the time to restructure C-Sec."

"You want me to offer them milk and cookies?" Bailey asks sarcastically.

"Actually, yes. Do that." Shepard leans forward on the desk. "It might improve the amount of good information you get."

"You're crazy."

"Not really. Treating enemy combatants as people increases their sense of guilt about what they're doing because they start to see you as people and not the enemy, and they begin to regret trying to kill you. Unlike torture, which reaffirms their convictions that you're exactly the monsters they thought you were and makes them hold out or just give you bad info to make the pain stop." Shepard shrugs. "Kindness is both practical and allows me to live with myself."

She drops the rod on his desk. "We're here to stop a political assassination. We'll see you later."

#

"You should have at least let me scare that guy," says Garrus as he orders a sky car.

"Oh, you scared him alright. You can tell when they start to turn purple," says Shepard getting into the vehicle. "I don't like where Bailey has been drawing the line on acceptable conduct. I think I liked it better when turians ran things."

"You mean when C-Sec was ineffectual?" snarks Garrus.

"Better than living in terror that some cop will take what you say the wrong way and haul you into interrogation to beat you, trying to get information you don't even know."

"Bailey gets things done."

"Agreed." Shepard concedes. "He even has crime lords donating to the C-Sec benevolent fund every time he looks the other way. It makes him very effective."

"Mmmm..." Garrus grumbles as he takes the car out. "Point taken: Citadel Security is a mess."

"And the political assassination you're referring to?" asks Thane from the backseat.

"According to our information, Kolyat was hired to perform a hit on a minor turian politician."
Shepard looks over at Garrus. "Jorum Talid?"

"Joram. He's a spacer running for Intendant of Zakera Ward on an anti-human platform. 'Take back your station.' 'I will not rest until humans have been removed from power.' The usual insular politics every species indulges in."

Shepard nods reluctantly. "I also recall something about how the human-run C-Sec is corrupt. Which it is."

Garrus nudges her shoulder. "You're really mad at Bailey for making the bigots right, aren't you?"

"Mostly, yes." She says as Garrus sets the car down outside of the Home Spun appliance store. "There's Talid now." Shepard nods at a turian in a steel colored suit followed by a krogan bodyguard in full armor. "How do you want to play this?" She looks at Thane.

"Follow Talid on the maintenance catwalks. Tell me what he's doing. The krogan bodyguard will make him easy to track."

With a small smile, she asks "Where will you be?"

"The darkest corner with the best view." Thane steps out of the car and bends his head in prayer. "Amonkira, Lord of Hunters. Grant that my hands be steady, my aim be true, and my feet swift. And should the worst come to pass, grant me forgiveness." A man breaks Shepard's view of Thane and when he passes, the drell is gone. She'd love to learn that trick.

"Going to sit and watch us work?" Shepard asks Garrus as she exits the car.

"Well, I know where he's going. I'll meet you at the apartment."

Chapter End Notes

Happy N7 Day!

I seem to have continued the tradition of turning out the worst chapters for a party. Last year, Shep & Garrus fought and broke up. This year, have some politics and police brutality!

Yay?

I was kind of hoping to be at the end of the Citadel arc rather than the beginning at this point so I could do something happy for the holidays. Ah, well.
"Tell me," says Talid, "What good have humans ever done for us?"

The pedestrians outside Aquila pause to listen to his rhetoric while his krogan bodyguard is inside shaking down the human shop owner with insinuations of turning the crowd against him. Garrus knows because he's been inside the store during this run twice for the variety. Today, though, he's sticking to the street.

Joram Talid raises his arms as if conducting an orchestra. "When they first entered the mass relay network, they were opening gates indiscriminately!" His subharmonics hum additional commentary to passing turians about the human lack of mental capacity.

Garrus sighs and moves past him. There's not much to do when playing back up on Thane's personal quest for redemption. Shepard goes up in the catwalks while Thane does whatever it is he's doing.

"Officer Vakarian," an advertising vid of a human man beckons him. "It has been 3,066 days since you last upgraded your tactical visor. Are you tired of the vulnerability of an areo-gel visor? Have you ever visited the doctor to have plate scratches filled in? Kestrel products provide improved targeting comparable to Kuwashi while utilizing a reinforced faceplate with an internal heads up display. Say hello to protection and goodbye to unwanted nicks and chips."

Companies have no respect for the do-it-yourselfer. Garrus pretends to be interested anyway. It provides an excuse to stay in visual range of the target.

Talid continues his harangue of the crowd: "And when the geth attacked, the humans left the Destiny Ascension helpless!" They abandoned their duty to the rest of us! "Only to gain in 28 years what other races have yet to achieve: a seat on the Council. Seizing power for themselves!

The crowd only seems mildly interested in his high-handed rhetoric. It's reassuring that people still know not to trust a barefaced turian. He's old enough that even if he was born in space he should have sworn his allegiance to somewhere by now.

"So, what have humans ever actually done for you?" Talid demands.

A thoughtful salarian raises a finger. "I like their food."

Talid's mandibles flex uncertainly, clearly trying to come up with a retort to the unexpected answer: Hard to do when you can't claim to have ever tasted levo food. "They may feed your body, but the soul of the Citadel is weaker for having them around." They are parasites. "They won't protect you when Fist and Kelham and their other crime lord friends come calling." His bodyguard nudges his elbow in a sign that it's time to move on. "I have some accounting to do, but it's been wonderful talking with you all. I hope you'll come out on election day!" Let's put those humans back in their
Talid strolls off at a casual pace and Garrus trails along behind him, listening to comm chatter and practicing his tailing skills.

For all his cool demeanor, Thane sounds nervous about this mission. "I don't have a good angle, what's he doing?"

"Talking to another voter," Shepard replies.

Garrus passes the target and enters the i-Nova club, stopping to enjoy some music. A female turian gives him the once over and then looks away in disgust. Garrus's mandibles flutter in confusion and a bit of disappointment. Usually, she asks him to dance. The scars and the suit are probably too unusual together. Instead of a disreputable adventurer, he must seem like station scum painting false colors on his face.

The rejection still stings.

"I'm relocating to the next room. What's he doing?" Thane asks.

"One of his guards is talking to the bartender. Looks like a shakedown," Shepard reports.

But Garrus has work to do. He walks out the other side of the club to wait near the back door. He's a few minutes early, but it shouldn't make a difference.

"I still don't see him, Shepard," says Thane worriedly. "Did he leave?"

"He's meeting a couple of mercenaries. Looks like the same group his bodyguard comes from."

"Ah! There he is," Thane purrs. "He looks nervous. Could be he's noticed you."

"Maybe he saw Kolyat in here somewhere," suggests Shepard.

"Also a possibility. There are obstructions ahead. I'll try to go around. Don't lose him."

And there's Garrus's cue. As the politician and his bodyguard walk out of the backdoor of the club, Garrus steps forward. "Excuse me. Mr. Talid?"

The krogan briefly pushes forward, blocking his view, because guys who hang around the backdoors of clubs and suddenly call your boss's name rarely mean anything good. At least it isn't as bad as the first time, when Garrus had to run after the barefaced man to delay him and the krogan bodychecked him into the wall.

Garrus nods to him and tries to seem non-threatening. "Garrus Vakarian, formerly of C-Sec."

Talid brushes the krogan's arm, indicating he should step aside. "Vakarian? Now there's a famous name. Didn't you arrest the head of the krogan cartel 10 years ago?" I admire your work.

"I'm afraid you have me confused with my father." Everyone does. he says with a smile.

The comm crackles in his ear. "Shepard? I can't see him."

"Ah. Yes." What the hell happened to your face, kid? "Did you want something, Mr. Vakarian?"

Talid's words become clipped.

"Just wondering about your position on voter intimidation." We both know where some of your funds
are coming from.

"Scorched Earth, Mr. Vakarian." Talid says with a chortle as they move along under the neon lights and decorative awnings of the back streets of Zakera Ward. *Stupid name for a planet: Earth, Dirt, Soil.* "If I have the money, I know the human officers aren't pocketing it." *I'm leveling the playing field.*

"Shepard?" Thane calls. "Are you there?"

"You don't know what they were going to use it for." *Real turians take care of their people.* Garrus feels the anger building. This man promised to protect the community, just as Bailey promised to protect them, and both of them left the people with nothing.

"They're not my people," *Cracked Plate* Joram hisses. "If you're not going to report me," *and we already know you won't or you would have called C-Sec by now,* "then I have other things to do with my time." Talid turns away, back out into the center of the street.

Garrus hunches and growls a warning. The krogan raises his shotgun to him at point blank range. Garrus could take him. But that would ruin Thane's attempt to find his son. So he kicks a wall and turns away, and the krogan eventually retakes his position behind Talid. Just like he always does.

"Shepard?"

"I've got him, Thane." She's finally back.

And with that, Garrus's part in the street drama is done and he can disappear into the shadows to watch the show.

A young drell, lighter green and more iridescent than Thane, darts out from behind a pillar, pushing a human pedestrian aside.

"Ahhh!" he screams, trying for a battle cry. Rather than intimidating, he sounds reedy and scared.

"Kolyat!" Shepard calls out. Everyone looks at her as she drops onto the street.

Even more terrified than before, Kolyat turns back to his target and begins shooting. His inexperienced hand shakes. He can hit the broad side of a krogan, however, and the bodyguard goes down.

Talid runs for his apartment.

"Kolyat!" Thane calls out and tries to make his way over from wherever he was.

Kolyat looks down at the krogan for a second, his mouth open. And then an expression of determination comes over his face and he sprints after the turian.

Shepard and Thane meet on the street. "Thane?"

"I saw."

"He's heading into Talid's apartment." They dash into the building. It was a lucky shot for Kolyat, managing to hit the krogan in the eye. The bodyguard's homing beacon is already lit, and his people will be here soon to pick him up.

And cue a C-Sec cruiser setting down ...
Nothing happens.

Garrus looks up and down the street. There's no sign of a C-Sec presence anywhere. Bailey and Bravox are supposed to run into the building.

Nothing continues to happen.

Oh, yeah. They didn't get a lift from Bailey because they didn't interrogate Kelham.

Shepard and Thane can surely handle Kolyat by themselves.

Garrus heads into the building, just in case.

#

Pistol out, Garrus covers Talid's apartment and the elevator. He peers around the door jamb at a standoff in an unlit living room. Kolyat has the politician on his knees in front of him. Shepard and Thane have their guns trained on the boy, trying to talk him down.

"Help me, drell," says Joram.

"Please, Kolyat," Thane begs, lowering his pistol and reaching out a hand. "Once you step foot on this path, there is no turning back. This is not the path I would choose for you."

"You left me to fend for myself when I was six! The only thing you ever gave me was the family name! You don't get to choose a damn thing for me!" Poor kid.

"Your father doesn't have much time left, Kolyat," Shepard pleads. "He's trying to make up for his mistakes."

"What, so you came to get my forgiveness?" the younger drell demands. "So you can die in peace or something?"

"I came to grant you peace," says Thane. "You're angry because I wasn't there when your mother died."

Offering him peace is a lie. But somehow the lie will work for the kid. He'll become a priest like his father wants before he dies in the battle of the Citadel.

Kolyat is unimpressed with his father's insights. "You weren't there when she was alive. Why should you be there when she died?" He glares a challenge at his father. "Get out of my way." Kolyat jerks Talid by the cowl. "I'm walking out. He's coming with me. And you are going to disappear back into the memory you crawled out of," he spits at Thane.

While Kolyat is busy gesturing with his gun, Shepard shoots the floor lamp, startling the 16-year-old. "What the hell!"

A dot of familiar red light catches Garrus's eye. He drops to a crouch. "Sniper!"

Shepard throws herself at the kid. There's an explosion of red blood and bone fragments as they hit the floor. Hoarse screaming begins.

Thane is slower to hit the floor. "Kolyat? Kolyat?"

Talid looks down at the red drops decorating the sleeve of his grey suit. "What...?" And then his face shatters as a bullet exits his forehead spraying brains and blue blood over the threshold.
The screaming turns to whimpering, and then stops.

"Kolyat? Please, Arashu. I do not deserve mercy, but I ask it," Thane prays. Garrus can hear the drell forgetting his training and discipline as he scrabbles across the floor.

Garrus doesn't worry about Shepard. It would take more than one bullet to take down a fully armored, shielded, and barriered spectre. He also recognizes her cough in the silent room. "He's breathing, Thane," she reassures the man. "He losing a lot of blood. He needs a doctor."

Thane presses down on his son's wounds. "Seems they didn't have faith in my name alone."

Garrus draws in his mandibles. His carapace is pressed against the wall. Of all the days to have left his Mantis and armor behind, he had to pick today. He wasn't supposed to need it today! He never did anything exciting today!

What went wrong?

Chapter End Notes

Kolyat does not have a canon fate.
Chapter Summary

Time spent in hospitals.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The scent of rubbing alcohol and cleaning chemicals fills the air. Huerta Memorial Hospital is much quieter than Shepard is used to. Without refugees filling all available rooms and seats and sometimes floors, it looks empty.

Even with the abilities of a trained athlete and vanguard, leaping and charging, Shepard couldn't get across the street quickly enough to catch the sniper. Whoever it was, vanished.

She could have pulled rank as a spectre and walked away from the assassination and the dead body when Bailey showed up with his people. Instead, Shepard agreed to help him with his inquiries. Which is why she finds herself in a fancy private medical consultation room facing him with matching cups of coffee.

Bailey drops his datapad on the table. "We're not going to get anywhere if you won't tell me who tipped you off."

"It doesn't matter who tipped me off," Shepard says firmly. "Elias Kelham ordered the assassination."

"That's not the kind of evidence I need to make a case. I need a witness, not someone who heard something from a witness."

"Kelham could tell you if you brought him in, but that would cut down on his donations," Shepard points out with scorn.

"It is hard work keeping the peace in a Citadel arm. Kelham largely works in grey areas: gambling, prostitution, money lending. I don't have the manpower or the funding concern myself with his occasional turf wars, and I've turned that into making money so that I can deal with other problems. The asari get all fancy and call it 'resource allocation.' I call it keeping my team alive and on the streets." Bailey clenches his jaw. "You're one of us. Our hero. I thought you'd help us."

Shepard looks down at her cup of coffee, thinking as she takes a sip. "I ... can understand making compromises to save people's lives and focus on larger priorities." She's working with Cerberus. She can't escape the black mark on her record. "But you and your officers are supposed to be the heroes in this ward, and you aren't."

"People may get into this line of work to be heroes, but you plug away enough years, and reality beats the idealism out of you."

"But I should be a hero?" Shepard leans back in her chair. "I get up every morning, take my shower, pull on my armor, and set off to do the right thing. I help a quarian complete her pilgrimage, and she goes home and loses her father. I try to reunite a drell with his son, and the son nearly ends up dead. I
tell people the Reapers are coming, and they treat me like Chicken Little claiming the sky is falling. Reality deals everyone a harsh hand. And I go home, fall into bed, get my sleep, and plan to do the right thing again tomorrow, even though it feels like a Sisyphean task." She tilts her head to look at him from a different angle to see if it will improve the image. "I'm either a hero or I'm crazy because I keep doing the same thing, the right thing, over and over again and expecting the universe to change. Why do you get to give up?"

"I'm still here. That counts for something."

"You're taking the easy way, playing it safe, appeasing the bad guys, not taking risks... More of your squads will probably live because of it. But more of the people you're supposed to be serving will suffer because you're giving up on what's right. If you want a hero so badly, look for one in the mirror every morning."

The chief's neck flushes red. "Preachy garbage."

"You did literally ask me to be your hero. There's your hero speech for today."

Bailey tries to ignore his own discomfiture, hunching over his datapads. Silence descends.

Shepard has seen this hundreds of times before. People want an easy answer, and when you give them a difficult one, they try to shut it out. Unfortunately for him, she's comfortable with the silence. Though she does have things to do: get an update on Kolyat, go to the Archives, talk with Anderson, try to reschedule dinner with Mom and Nana... "Do you have any other questions?"

Bailey ticks off an item on his pad. "I ran some searches in the C-Sec archive. About 10 years back, a bunch of real bad people were killed. Like someone was cleaning house. The prime suspect was a drell. We never caught him."

"You never will."

"Mmmm... And the kid?"

"He's no assassin. He's... impressed by legends. Got in over his head. If anything, he took a bullet trying to save your victim. You could let him go."

"He assaulted the bodyguard and nearly killed him."

"Community service then."

"For assault?"

"For a father who has abandoned his child and has no other way to make it up to him." Shepard lets the legs of her chair hit the floor. "We're headed out on a suicide mission."

Bailey hunches a little more, a man sinking into his own guilty conscience after being confronted with it. "Fine. Community service if the kid turns on his partner. Your friend's not the only man who's ever screwed up raising a son."

"That's generous of you, but I don't think Kolyat knows anything."

"You his lawyer now, too?"

"No. I just know he was working alone. The sniper was ..." Shepard frowns. Trying to kill Garrus, she's quite certain. The only way a suddenly appearing sniper fits is if she or Garrus are at the center
of it, and a turian in a grey suit is definitely dead.

"Was what?"

"Was not what you'd think. You're never going to get anywhere with this case. If you don't want to waste resources, you should drop it."

"Emily Wong and Khalisah al-Jilani will eat me alive if I do. They may even decide that I had something to do with it if I don't investigate after all of the things Talid has said about me."

"That's your out," says Shepard as inspiration hits. "Given Talid's allegations against you, you are choosing to kick the case up a level so that people across the Citadel can rest assured that the matter is receiving an impartial investigation."

"Hmmmm... Pallin would use it as an excuse to put one of his own people in charge of Zakera, but I don't think the executor's back from his vacation yet. If I can do it while Chellick is still in charge... That might work."

"Good."

Bailey gives her a look over. "It's still a waste of resources if you know what's going on."

"I don't." But maybe Garrus does?

#

Thane bounces on the balls of his feet, practicing forms in the lobby. His motions are jerky, rather than smoothly flowing into each other. Shepard isn't entirely certain he's mentally here. Garrus is slumped in a chair, distractedly scratching the cloth from the arm with a talon as he stares at the one brown stain on the ceiling. He's definitely somewhere else, calibrating.

Shepard walks over to the drell. "Any updates?"

Thane draws his arms in. "No."

"He'll make it." It's not a platitude, Shepard tells herself. Unless drell biology is especially weird with hearts or lungs located in their shoulders, no vital organs should have been hit.

"I'm sure you're right, siha."

"Siha?" Everything went wrong: Joram is dead; Kolyat is injured; the sniper got away.

"It ... is the term for the warrior-angels of the Goddess of motherhood and protection, Arashu." Thane thankfully misinterprets her confusion. "When my son was in danger, you didn't hesitate to act. Though he held a gun and could have hurt you, you fearlessly threw yourself at him, pushing him out of the bullet's path and covering him with your own body."

"I..." He doesn't know that Kolyat should never have been in the line of fire to begin with. Shepard pushes down her guilt. "Thank you." She casts around for a distraction while they wait for news.

"What were you practicing when I came in?"

"The meditations of Lord Amonkira. They are designed to keep the mind alert and ready for action. I did not want to drift off."

"Where would you go?"
His eyes look into the past. "A small green head nestles against a golden breast. Irikah smiles at me. 'He has your eyes,' she says. I'm not sure. They look innocent. She reaches out her hand and I squeeze it. She glows with exhaustion and Arashu's blessings. 'Hold your son, Thane.' I am afraid. Snap the fifth, eighth, or thirteenth vertebrae out of place to kill. Let the head fall at a 117 degree angle to kill. These are the things I know. She guides my hand to cradle his head. I cup my other hand under his body as if he's water that will spill. He is perfect. I cannot believe he is mine." Thane smiles fondly at nothing and then shakes himself out of it. "It's easy to slip away."

"Sounds like a better place," says Shepard.

"The present has its own appeal."

Light bleaches everything. Nurses whisper at their desk. There's pressure to the air. "You want to be here?"

"Yes. My son is injured, but he is here and I am here." His eyes lose focus again, and then sharpen as if he's forcing himself to stay. "I have hope."

"He'll forgive you," says Garrus bitterly behind him. "Kids can't help wanting their parents' love, despite what parents do."

"Garrus?" Shepard asks worriedly as Thane turns to look at the turian.

"It's true." His fiddling talons begin pulling white fluff out of the arm of the chair. "You have a kid watch his mother dying, tell him to man up, then leave him to figure life out on his own and only show up when it's convenient for you, and he'll suck it up. It's not love, it's instinct."

The background whispering has stopped as if the whole hospital is holding its breath.

Except for Garrus, he can't seem to stop. "He'll give you what you want. Even being angry at you, he wanted to impress you by doing your job. He's trapped. He doesn't have anyone else."

Shepard wishes she could see Thane's expression to judge how bad this is going to be.

Garrus rubs his eyes. "Sorry. Hospitals bring out the worst in me." He sinks miserably back into his seat.

"Please forgive him," Shepard says to Thane, touching his arm so that he might face her again.

"Of course, siha," he says with philosophical detachment. "Forgiveness is an easy gift to give, but a difficult one to receive."

A salarian in white nurse's scrubs comes over. "Sere Krios? We should speak."

"Kolyat?" Thane's distance changes to intent interest.

"Will be fine. We should go over details." The salarian escorts him off to a private room.

Shepard drops down next to her turian. "Did you really need to try to pick a fight with Thane while his kid's in the hospital?" she whispers.

"I said I was sorry," Garrus replies, matching her volume. "I know he wants to save his son. But he's also the one who created the situation in the first place." He lifts his hands and then drops them in frustration. "Kolyat has a right to be angry."

Shepard sighs. "You're right."
Garrus looks at her suspiciously. "You're not going to argue about... about ... about the power of love and forgiveness or anything?"

"I don't see that there's a conflict. Kolyat has a right to be angry." She shrugs. "He also has a right to patch things up with his father if that's what they both want." She twines her fingers with his. "The same right you had to patch things up with yours."

Garrus looks down at their hands. "It still makes me angry."

"You're still Garrus and the wounds are deep and tender."

After a few quiet moments, he says, "You know you're perfect, don't you?"

Shepard snorts in disbelief. "One of the people I was trying to save is dead, I lost the assassin, I spent my day lecturing people on doing their jobs better, and I'm covered in sweat and at least two kinds of blood."

He presses his forehead against hers. "Yes. Perfect."

"We'll see if you still believe that in five seconds."

"What's in five seconds?"

"Me asking you to talk about whatever it is you've been keeping from me."

"Dammit."

Chapter End Notes

Chicken Little also goes by the name of Chicken Licken or Henny Penny elsewhere in the English speaking world and tales like it date back to circa 500 BC:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicken_Little

The myth of Sisyphus, circa 3200 BC:

My monitor was just destroyed in an unfortunate accident, so we'll see if I can get it replaced under warranty or not. This will possibly slow my writing, but I thought I'd get this chapter out since I had it done early.
"Who are you?" Go away! The striped jaw design of the Parthia colony markings to draw attention to the turian's mouth, making listeners want to focus on every word. It was a clever design during the Unification War, when Parthia tried to usurp Palaven's role as leaders of the turian race. The implicit authority is somewhat undermined by the rural white color indicating someone who should have more experience of small town life than running security for one of the largest cities in the galaxy.

"I know it's been a while, Chellick, but I thought I made an impression." Garrus sits down in a chair across from the acting executor in his private office in the ambassadorial buildings of the Presidium. "Nice view." You're continuing to move up in the world.

"Vakarian?" Chellick pulls in his mandibles, examining his armored visitor closely. "Garrus Vakarian?"

Garrus helpfully turns his head from one profile to the other. "Which do you think is my good side? The dashing visor or the wicked scars?"

"You always did think you were funny." What the hell happened to your face?

"Gunship." Garrus puts his feet up on the desk. He's bought a reprieve from talking to Shepard by persuading her he needs to gather more information on the Citadel. He can only hope that he finds something.

"Ri-ight." Chellick tilts his head, trying to fit the new information into what he knows of Garrus the boy detective or general rules of reality. "Go bother someone else." I have serious things to do.

"Like solve the assassination of a turian politician in Zakera Ward?" I was there.

Chellick sits up. "Did you shoot him?" I don't know if I want you to say yes or no.

"No. I was just on the scene." I was probably the target. At least that was what he and Shepard surmised when she made him go over it all in detail before agreeing to give him until the end of the day to answer her.

"And why are people shooting at you?"

A tricky question to answer when lying isn't an option. "Because I found Shepard." The love of my life.

Chellick leans back in his chair, the better to reach his weapons. "I know it was hard on you when Shepard died, but she's gone, kid." I didn't think you were that close.
"Shepard" my mate " is currently captaining the Normandy SR-2, which is docked in Zakera Ward. You'll find her papers in order and her spectre status reinstated. She was running a stealth op in the wards and it drew fire. The politician was collateral damage. You won't catch the perpetrator with a standard investigation."

Chellick strokes his mandibles as he leans forward and taps a few buttons on his desktop computer. His browplate lifts as he looks from Garrus to the screen and back again. "The worst thing about working on the Citadel is all of the spectres coming here and messing things up." Makes solving a damn case on the Presidium a miracle some days. "Alright, Vakarian, who does she want me to arrest?" Please let it be someone who is actually guilty.

"No one. She didn't want you to waste your time." Garrus leans forward. "I have a question for you, though."

"You do," he says flatly.

"My question is: How is Pallin?"

"Pallin? Can you be more specific?"

"Odd meetings, talking to objects or things that aren't there, dropping cases that should be easily closed... Is he acting strangely at all?"

"This is for your spectre?" Chellick says carefully. This is for someone with authority?

"Yes."

"Pallin is ... getting better."

"Better than...?" Garrus leans forward interestedly.

"Oh, come on, Vakarian. You were here after the geth attack. Pallin was severely injured defending the station." He's a hero. "He hasn't been entirely himself since."

"I was ... busy at the time." He was applying for spectre training and eagerly awaiting a reply. Maybe I should have paid more attention.

"Well, he's been in and out of the hospital since his return. His speech is slurred, and his memory hasn't been the best." Honestly, I'm worried about the old man. He should see that he's not up to this level of work. "He's improving but ... not fast enough."

"Only injuries? No weird people or objects?" I need a yes.

"No. Only an old cop who doesn't want to retire when he should." It's disappointing, but I can't do anything about it until he makes a big enough mistake. Chellick tilts his head in a little sympathy. "Sorry that wasn't the answer you were looking for."

Garrus sighs and moves slowly to the door. "Oh, one more question: Where is he being treated?"

"I'm not sure."

He stops in the open door and turns. "You're sharing an office and you don't know?"

"He doesn't like to talk about it."

He shakes his head. "Hey, could you not tell him I was here?"
"If he asks, I'll tell him. You know that." Chellick taps a talon on his desktop. "But ... you were a rookie who vanished years ago, Vakarian. I don't think you'll even cross his mind."

"Thanks."

Garrus takes the elevator to the basement and walks through scuffed metal hallways toward his next destination, avoiding the more scenic, open air routes of the Presidium. Being sniped would be embarrassing. He looks down at his side. "Did you find out where Pallin is, Kasumi?" There are things Garrus would have to say if he were asked, for example, that talking to Chellick was an excuse to get Kasumi into Pallin's private office to hack his records. But Chellick didn't think to ask. It would never cross his mind.

The thief decloaks. "He's purchased a lot of return tickets for Shenpava on Senoquol."

"Senoquol? I know that's not a turian colony." He reaches for his omni-tool.

Kasumi pouts. "You just ruined the illusion."

"What illusion?"

"That you're some brilliant investigator one step ahead of whoever was shooting at you earlier today." She eyes him. "Or is misleading me part of the game?"

"Game?" he says in an overly innocent tone to tease her.

"Senoquol is a salarian Trans-Basin planet. You'll find lots of hospitals, of course, but you know what else you'll find?"

"What?"

"The center of STG research and development."

"You know that off the top of your head?"

"Keiji and I may have stolen blueprints from them a time or two." She shrugs. "When I saw the name, I thought you must have guessed about Senoquol beforehand and that was why you sent Dr. Solus to get an appointment with the salarian counselor."

"No," says Garrus, feeling satisfied nonetheless at pieces of the puzzle seeming to fit together even if he doesn't know what it means. Thinking about Shepard, he widens his mandibles and says, "I'm just lucky."

#

"Mmmm... Plan needs more work." Mordin is leaning over Councilor Esheel's shoulder when the door slides open. His lab coat is spotless and crisply starched. "Cannot expect to send additional colonists."

The grey-clad salarian shakes her head. "I am sending one daughter from every allied house." Whatever her connections are, they must be rich. The room is lavishly decorated with fresh flowers and colorful rugs and paintings.


The councilor gives Garrus and Kasumi a dark look. "I am busy."
"Forgiveness, councilor," says Mordin, coming around her desk to stand in front of them and giving her a deep bow. "My team arrives."

The corners of her mouth turn up in amusement. "You're not what I was expecting."

"Multi-species crew," says Mordin. "Gather the best talent."

"So you keep insisting." The councilor looks them up and down. "Why are you here?"

Garrus steps forward. "I had some quest-

Mordin swings the blade of his hand back as he straightens, catching Garrus at the gap in his armor between carapace and thorax. "Exchange of information. Mutually beneficial."

"You think you know something I don't?" Esheel blinks rapidly.

Mordin nods. "Vakarian known for detective skill. Sees much of the Citadel."

Garrus clamps his mouth shut on the range of expletives filling his mind and tries to concentrate. The salarian scientist has managed to get them this far and seems to have the councilor in a good mood. What can he offer? "For one, your security is shi-- awful. Not even a secretary at your door? The entire Council is vulnerable."

The councilor looks unimpressed. "We all have our own methods."

"They wouldn't save you if we were here for a fight." The Council seems woefully underprotected and ripe for kidnapping and assassination with the way they fail to guard their private rooms.

"You wouldn't have made it this far if you were." She hunches forward and clasps her hands. "And this turian is not the famous detective, Professor Solus. You should know your team better. Do you have any knowledge of actual use to me, or are you wasting my time?"

Mordin looks down, tapping his chin in thought. "Mmmm..." He nudges Garrus with his elbow.

"Valern," says Garrus, dropping the biggest piece of information he knows. "Someone has his access codes."

"What!?" Esheel sits up straight in her chair and demands, "Repeat that."

"Valern's access codes are being used around the Citadel and even to send out spectres."

"You have proof of this?"

"I have access logs listing his name after the destruction of the Destiny Ascension."

"That irresponsible, incompetent idiot," the councilor mutters.

"He can't be that incompetent," says Garrus, regaining his confidence. "He made councilor."

"I know this might come as a surprise to the turians, but sometimes we raise up the imbeciles to get them out of the way. He never had an interest in anything but the luxury."

It seems like a good time to employ tact and not ask what Esheel is doing in the position, unless he wants Mordin to give him another bruise. "Did he ever have anything to do with Senoquol?"

"Senoquol?" The councilor says with disgust. "No. That would mean getting his hands dirty."
"Dirty?"

"The main reason to go there is to review the hospitals or the military. Neither is a place for someone with an aversion to blood." She begins writing on the papers in front of her. "Did you have any further information for me?"

"Who backed Valern for councilor, then?"

Esheel blinks her eyes slowly. "If you prefer questions to answers, who had most reason to fear a rival political dynasty taking over? What you soldiers want is simple. Now, go. I have mistakes to correct."

"But-

Mordin gives him a push to the elbow to turn Garrus around while neatly retrieving a small landscape Kasumi had secreted up her hood. "Thank you, great councilor. Honor to see you again." He sets the landscape on its display easel and backs out of the room.

Esheel doesn't even look up as they leave.

"Why were you pushing us out of there?" Garrus asks, his one hope of answers gone.

The scientist allows himself to hunch again, now that they're out of view. "Councilor is not suspect. Not happy with interrogation. Leave before she's angry." He looks down at Kasumi. "Necessary to steal from councilor?"

"What can I say? She has good taste." The thief shrugs. "I had to try."

Mordin sighs. "Can't fight nature."

"I was wondering..." says Kasumi with a sparkle in her eye. "What you meant by again? You looked very cozy when we walked in."


"Oh," says Kasumi, disappointed.

Garrus looks down at the salarian. "Is there any hope you could get us another interview?"

"Why?" asks Mordin.

"Because it's important to know who was pulling Valern's strings."

"Vakarian clearly tired," says Mordin. "Answer given. Councilor can rival most powerful dalatress if ambitious. Most powerful dalatress Sur'Kesh Gravoit Talat Meloist Belshara Linron. Backed Valern because he would not be a rival."

Linron of the fake cure and self-serving, ultimately futile effort to keep salarian forces at home. Garrus rubs his eyes. "I'm an idiot."

"Only slow," says Mordin. "Senoquol. Why did you ask about it?"

"I know someone going for treatments there. I'm ... concerned."

Kasumi frowns. "I don't remember the councilor saying that."

"Was implied." Mordin insists. "She blinked."

Chapter End Notes

Crossing fingers that the political intrigue plot is working.
A dirty orange sky car flies past the window over the Presidium Reservoir. Traffic is slowing, and while there's no sun to set, the light on the water is dimming.

"Thank you for staying, commander." Thane sits down on the hospital bench next to Shepard.

"No thanks are necessary." She caused this. It is her duty to stay. She stretches and sits up. Her armor still slightly damp from a quick wash in the bathroom sink. "How is Kolyat?"

"He'll recover. They're rebuilding his shoulder with cybernetic joint attachments to give him the full range of motion."

"That sounds ... expensive," says Shepard, thinking of what Cerberus paid to bring her back to life. It would be less expensive to fix only a shoulder, but it wouldn't be cheap.

Thane snorts dismissively as he stares out the window. "Fortunately, Irikah and I don't need a retirement fund."

As much as she wants to escape the oppressive memories of Huerta Memorial -- soldiers dying in the hallways because there aren't enough beds, the anxiety of Kaidan's crushed skull, the fate of Hilary Moreau, Thane's last days practicing moves in the lobby because he's too healthy for a bed but too sick to leave -- she waits. She has everything to do in the next 20 months and nothing to do at the moment. She cannot save everyone. But she can save the man sitting next to her.

Shepard has nearly lost herself watching for ripples on the water below when Thane ends his meditative silence. "Let's go."

"You can stay with Kolyat," she says as she stands.

Thane smiles. "Visiting hours are over."

"Ah."

"And I will need to consider if I should come back."

"After everything that happened, you're not going to see your own kid again?" It's not a fair question, though, is it? She has to take him away from Kolyat.

"I am ... not certain it would help. We are at peace, but I am leaving again on a suicide mission and may never come back. Officer Vakarian may have had a point about the harm I've done."

A cold stab of anger runs through her heart: Anger at Garrus for being bluntly cruel, anger at herself for taking Thane on the mission, anger at Thane for running away from his responsibilities as a father yet again. "Follow me." Shepard rounds on the nurses behind the reception desk and smiles at them. "Hello. I'm Spectre Shepard. I would like you to make arrangements for this man to have a bed.
beside his son for the next two nights."

"We're a hospital, not a hotel," says a dour human man behind the counter.

"Good. Psychological studies show that patients get better when they know others are concerned about them. You will, of course, do everything to promote the patient's well-being, such as allowing his father to be by his side."

"There are no beds."

Shepard looks around the empty lobby. There are damn well beds. "Then I suggest you make one." She shows her teeth. "Or we can do this the hard way and I can call for a government audit of this hospital. Every week."

The nurse scowls as he nods. "Yes, ma'am."

"Thank you." Shepard turns to find Thane watching her with an amused glint in his eye. She raises an eyebrow at him.

He shakes his head. "You remind me of Irikah: Fierce, stubborn, and compassionate."

"I just don't want Garrus to discourage you. There isn't much time left to be together as a family. Give Kolyat something good to think of when he slips into memories of you."

"I am ... not sure how to do that," says Thane, carefully picking his words. "I was forfeit to the hanar by the terms of the Compact. I ... do not have much memory of family. I was alone and then it was Irikah and me." He doesn't even mention Kolyat as shadows cross over his eyes.

Feeling massively out of her depth on the subject of childrearing even if it seems fairly obvious that child and parent should spend time together as part of the process, Shepard decides to try a different tactic. "What would Irikah say to you now?"

"You are a fool, Thane Krios. Your son loves you. Put down your guns and go talk with him."

Purple and brown swirl in the black of his eyes. "Or so she often said when she wasn't asking me to hunt for the missing blocks before anyone stepped on them. Of course, sometimes I left the blocks where I found them. It's instinct to create caches of supplies and I didn't want Kolyat to think he wasn't safe by always taking them away." Thane smiles. "It was our secret."

"Then why don't you find out if he knows you share a secret?"

"Thank you for your understanding, siha."

Knowing she doesn't deserve any praise for today's work, Shepard looks away from him. "Go. Be alive while you can."

#

"Shepard," says Anderson looking up from his desk. "Always good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too, sir." Shepard takes a deep breath, worried about the consequences of what she's about to do. She will never be able to save everyone. She can't change too much, and saving a planet is a big change. "I wanted to give you a message for Delta Squad stationed on Fehl Prime. The Collectors are going to hit the place soon. The marines will have to choose between gathering intel and saving people. Tell them to prioritize the colonists no matter what. My team will take the Collectors and the intel won't matter." Will anything matter? The Reapers might destroy the colony
with a few passing shots later. But at least she will have tried.

"Shepard ... I'm not in the military anymore. It would be bureaucratic interference."

"Yeah. I hate when that happens," Shepard says casually. "But I am a spectre, and you're a councilor. I've brought you information that hundreds of our people are going to die for no good reason. It's up to you to put that information in the right hands." Shepard shrugs. "Unless you want me to screw with the chain of command and give the military its marching orders. I think between being dead and being only a commander, the admiralty's heads would explode."

Anderson looks her up and down. "You wouldn't."

"I haven't. That doesn't mean I never would. That's the point of a spectre, to cut through red tape and get things done." Shepard crosses her arms and squeezes tight, feeling on unsteady ground. This is the right thing to do, though. "However, I don't want to abuse the trust you placed in me when you had me reinstated. I'm trying to go through official channels. I think saving a colony is one of the most effective things you can do as councilor. Even if you can't get the other three to listen to you, you're still one of the most powerful humans in the galaxy. Use it. Do good."

Maybe it's a trick of the light, but Anderson's eyes seem to brighten. No, it's real. Sometimes people are like wind up toys: All the tension builds so that if you point them in a direction that will get tangible results, they'll head for it with alacrity. After spending weeks and months being stonewalled, here's something he can do. "Alright, Shepard. I guess I owe you one for the promotion."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." Shepard salutes her old CO. Go, James Vega. Save a world. Have a better life where you're not a guilt-ridden prison guard.

"Commander, you are dismissed. I believe you're running late for dinner."

Shepard freezes. "Dinner, sir?"

"I spoke with your grandmother earlier." Anderson smiles. "I think you'll have a pleasant surprise when you see her."

"I ... rescheduled for brunch tomorrow after her tee time."

"I'm sure it will keep until then."
The Archives during the day is almost as deserted as during the night. A few librarians sit at previously abandoned desks, sorting through datapads. Shepard smiles at them and flashes her spectre authorization until she and Garrus are down in the holo display levels. "Alright. You said you didn't want to talk about your investigation until we got here."

"Yes." Garrus claims a research sphere by leaning against the wall. A flick of his talon across the control panel slides the doors closed around the two of them. Garrus runs a scan for bugs and relaxes when he finds nothing. "I want to review the entry on the Battle of the Citadel." His mandibles quiver nervously. "And their records of you."

"Me?"

Garrus shifts uncomfortably. Will she be alright when they finish? "I want to figure out if there's anything special about you."

Shepard laughs. "I thought we covered that earlier when I was perfect." She turns to the catalogue, and begins requesting the materials. There's a hydraulic hiss as an aperture opens in the side of the projection wall, presenting three data sticks. "Let's see what we have here." She inserts the first stick into the vid player.

A view of the Citadel with a profile of a geth dreadnought appears in the middle of the room. The Archive VI announces, "Year 2183 CE: Battle of the Citadel. Geth Dredgenought Attack. Vault X5." The text to speech narrator takes over: "In the opening minutes of the attack, you'll see that Zakera Ward is almost completely destroyed."

Garrus pulls in his mandibles. That's a bit exaggerated. Granted, the newcomers' district was never his beat, and the patrolmen largely kept people out after the attack, but it's also where the Normandy is parked right now. The mall is impressive and could be new construction, but the back alleys Joram Talid trod are also fine, as is Harkin's aged, repurposed factory. Maybe there's a political reason for such obvious inaccuracies?

"Interrupting," says the VI. "Spectre status recognized: Commander Shepard. The following information is classified."

The geth profile turns into an oncoming view of Sovereign. The narration picks up again: "The unknown aggressor is suspected to be a Reaper aided in its attack on the Citadel by the rogue spectre, Saren. The Reaper Sovereign is destroyed by the human Fifth Fleet."

Shepard walks around the sphere. "This should have been in the news, not hidden away down here. If I'd known about this, I would have given a copy to Emily Wong and let her run with it."
Garrus steps forward to examine the statistics floating next to the ship. Everything matches post-war records. "This would have drastically improved galactic readiness. Someone wanted to keep us easy prey for the Reapers."

"Why make it in the first place, then?" asks Shepard.

"The Citadel recording devices are automatic. Reporters expect footage of any attacks. If Pallin or some other official didn't produce an Archive entry, the reporters would make their lives a living hell."

"So something has to be produced. And a lot of people know that. Maybe it was hidden afterwards?"

Garrus pulls in his mandibles. "Archive, play record again."

"Year 2183 CE: Battle of the Citadel. Geth Dredgenought Attack. Vault X5." Dredgenought? Could be a glitch in the pronunciation matrix, but maybe ... He takes the data stick out of the slot and plugs it into his omni-tool. "Yes. The geth crap got laid over top of the original record by someone who didn't bother running it past a secretary to catch mistakes."

Shepard wrinkles her nose. "Why not just erase it?"

"Records aren't erased," says Garrus. "Everything we know about galactic civilization is here if you want to find it. Trying to erase anything would garner attention. Hiding records behind additional security protocols and bureaucracy, though, that's normal." Garrus sifts through the back end update logs. "Pallin made the record ... Damn. He did the geth overlay, too, five days later."

"Any idea why?"

"That's still the million credit question."

Shepard crosses her arms. "It's a question that's going to get you killed."

"What else is new?" he says with a wave of his mandible.

"Garrus. This is new."

"Shepard ... People try to kill me all of the time." Garrus shrugs. "Low pay and constant threat of death: That's the life of a vigilante."

"And bad wine." She covers her eyes with her hands and rubs at her face. "You really have no idea?"

"I'm leaning toward salarians because Valern's name keeps coming up, and now I've found out that Pallin is being treated on a salarian world."

"You seem rather happy about your potential death." She circles the room.

"It means I have something, even if I don't know what." He tilts his head. It's a bit early to hope she might be impressed, but ... "Aren't you excited?"

"No," says Shepard incredulously. "I don't like having yet another enemy out there."

The VI announces, "Year 2183 CE: First Human Spectre Deliberations. Vault SH1." A hologram pops up like a barricade between them. A younger Shepard stands alertly in her standard issue N7 armor, the kit she was wearing when he met her. She holds an Avenger assault rifle and looks off
into the middle distance. Behind her, a ship shaped like a comet spins.

"What ship is that?" he asks.

"The one I was born on, the Sarrabat," she says. "I didn't live there for long. I don't remember it. After my birth, my father got a promotion to major and made squad leader for the SSV Edmonton, and my mother transferred aboard as well."

An unknown male voice begins to speak, "Commander Shepard's recent accomplishments are not in question. It's her background that the Council has no knowledge of."

Slow and deliberate, Admiral Hackett answers the speaker, "Shepard was born to a career military family, growing up on various Alliance postings until enlisting at the age of 18."

Garrus eyes the statistics displayed: Birth, death, medals, promotions, commendations, and designations.

"Anything from Shepard's military record that you'd like to call out?" The questioner asks.

"Many in the Alliance consider Shepard a war hero. On Elysium, for example, Shepard single-handedly repelled an attack and saved the entire squad."

"Thank you for your presentation and to all who spoke. The Council will render their decision on the suitability of Commander Shepard as spectre within the day."

Garrus shakes his head. "That was not very helpful."

"Maybe you could tell me what this is about?"

"I ..." Spirits, how is he supposed to say this? What if he's wrong? The Shepard standing in front of him is paler than the picture. Her cheeks are gaunter and still have red hairline scars from her awakening. Rather than staring inspirationally at a distant point, her gaze is as demanding as a drill instructor. Garrus fumbles for words, "Uh ... The future. Umm... In the future, organic and synthetic life were merged."

"You've told me this already. What does it have to do with my service record?"

"From what I could find, your DNA was used as a template. The things Cerberus did to you changed you, making you a synthetic-organic hybrid. When we collected data from the Reapers, they had the same code. It was the Illusive Man's doing. That's what I thought. He can't seem to control his mandibles as they beat against his jaw. "I ... when I saw your medical records... you've had a lot of work done, Shepard. I think ... I think maybe the Reapers have been using you, redesigning you, for a while. I think that's why they had Cerberus bring you back."

Shepard stands very still. She seems to have stopped breathing.

Garrus takes a step toward her. "Madelaine?"

"No. You said we beat them. Whatever I did, they sued for peace. I'm not indoctrinated. I don't have a control chip in my brain. I'm me."

"Of course you're you. You're just ... designed to be special."

Her fingers dig into her elbows as a red glow pulses along her cheek, searing away the regrown flesh. This was a bad idea. He should have refused to tell her. He thought he was so clever to dig
"Is that all?" she asks in a tight voice.

"It's not just you. I think ... Saren may have been their first choice. I think they simply took a slower course in altering your genetics. You're the backup plan."

"Oh?" she says, acknowledging that she's heard.

Garrus begins babbling, "You see, Saren was raised by his older brother and ... well ... I didn't tell you about some of the files I read up on when I became Reaper Advisor because it didn't matter. Everyone involved was dead. But ... Saren's older brother Desolas was a decorated general. Decades ago he put a team together to excavate Temple Palaven."

"I didn't think turians had temples," says Shepard in a carefully neutral voice.

"We don't. Not anymore. But we used to worship the Titans. The temples were abandoned when we took to space. Most were destroyed. I don't know why Temple Palaven was ignored, but Desolas found it. He began to build a cult worshipping the thing he found inside. His followers ... they weren't turians anymore. I think they found a Reaper or Reaper tech. I think it indoctrinated them."

"Object Rho."

"Hmmm?"

Shepard's eyes are unfocused, looking back through her memories. "In Bahak. The humans found Object Rho on the asteroid. It wasn't a Reaper, exactly, but it had effects like one."

"Maybe. The files called it The Monolith." says Garrus agreeably. If she can name her enemies, perhaps it will help Shepard focus. "Desolas invited Saren to see the temple in all of its glory. Saren was appalled by what he found. He killed his own brother and destroyed the cult and part of the temple, reburying The Monolith in the rubble." Garrus shakes his head. "I think that's when he became indoctrinated."

"And what's the point of all this?"

"I think Desolas was cultivating Saren for years before he took him to Temple Palaven. Saren had a meteoric rise through the military to becoming a spectre. I think ... I think it was because of The Monolith and Desolas. I think the Reapers may be trying to do something similar with you now that the plans for Saren fell through."

"I see." The old holo image hangs in midair, looking more alive than she does. "Alright. Keep going on your case. We need to know if you're right. And we need to know why. Why do any of this?"

"Yes, Shepard." Garrus catches himself making sad inquisitive trills that she can't hear. He tries to think how to translate the concern into something she can understand, and draws a blank. "What about the other data stick?" He picks it out of the tray.

"I'm not in the mood anymore."

"What was it?"

"It doesn't matter." She hits the exit button.

"Madelaine." He reaches for her arm.
She shrugs him off. "Not right now, Garrus."

"But-" He reaches for her again.

"No!" She steps through the door. "I can't do this right now. I need ... I need some space. I'll see you at home." She's gone before he can think of a reply.

Damn it. He's making a mess of this.

Garrus checks the label on the stick in his hand: *Vault V12: Vakarian, G.*

Chapter End Notes

I swear to you that in the game it sounds like the Archive VI says 'Dredgenought.' I don't know why they didn't do a retake of this line, but it has bugged the heck out of me since the first time I ran through the Citadel DLC.

Fr. Nicolas Sarrabat was a French Jesuit and astronomer (1698-1739), who discovered the Comet of 1729 without the aid of a telescope.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolas_Sarrabat

I picked the SSV Edmonton as the ship Shepard grew up on because the dreadnought had to have a city name and BioWare is based there. I would have had her born on the ship, but the Citadel DLC clearly shows a ship that is not a dreadnought as her place of birth if you play a spacer.

Desolas Arterius background info comes from the *Mass Effect: Evolution* comic.
The Intergalactic Shopping Mall of the Stars is 28 stories filled with everything anyone could ever want.

If only Shepard knew what she wanted.

Or where to find it.

The sea of shoppers roils around her, providing a current. She allows herself to drift through crowd where she's no one special.

Maybe she is no one.

Apparently, she's a science experiment: A mouse in a maze searching for cheese; A hero chasing her destiny.

Shepard washes up against a storefront filled with colorful baubles, leather books, and stone boxes. The scents of fiery spices and varnished wood waft around her.

She walks through the doorway and picks up a delicate glass vase speckled with red. She runs a finger over the neck as if touch will reveal how the colors were planted beneath the surface. Art appreciation is not a parameter included in most mind control programs. She must be ... alive. And that's a good place to start.

The white-plated turian behind the counter keeps an eye on her while twisting loops of metal together. The starburst green markings radiating outward from his forehead clash with his red and gold suit. He also sports a visor. Garrus would approve.

Maybe she should have stayed with him. It's rare for his presence to impinge upon her. This time, though, his concern and worry battered against her uncertainties.

He thought she was someone's project. A thing.

But he didn't say that as a prelude to leaving. He said it to tell her the truth.

The truth matters.

She trails a hand over a shield made of pink shell. It gleams beneath white paint depicting the head and jaws of a plated, four-eyed monster. Does such a creature exist or is it the turian equivalent of a kraken?

There's no certainty Garrus's theories are the truth. It's merely a perspective.
And if it isn't truth? What if it's all coincidence from something else? What if killing Elnora or Rana Thanoptis set the Eclipse Sisters or a new group of Reapers after them and that's all it is.

No. He's onto something. And she's only running away from it because maybe there's more wrong with her than she ever knew.

Shepard picks up a fist-sized lump of lavender quartz, reassured by its solidity. Appearances are deceiving, and cracks begin to appear on the surface. She bites her lip as she examines the stone, worried about breaking it. The lines are smooth and even, clearly some sort of design. Intrigued, she works at dividing the curio into its separate pieces.

The base is a fully erect male turian with outstretched arms. An open-plated female returns his embrace, forehead designed to fit flush against his, and "hooks" onto him. The crude lines of their faces show contentment. Resting between their arms is a baby turian with an expression of innocent joy.

Oh.

Feeling as if she doesn't belong in this scene, Shepard awkwardly tries to put the pieces back together.

The turian shopkeeper makes a chuffing noise and steps around the counter to her. "Give it here."

Once the pieces are turned over to him, he makes a few small movements to hook hips and spurs together, transforming the sculpture back into a rock.

"That was ... unexpected. Do you make them yourself?" asks Shepard.

"No. These I source from different colony worlds. It's traditional to make your own amplexum, but when you live on a space station and you need an answer fast, that's not always an option."

Remembering Garrus's concern about making her a gift, she looks worriedly at the stone. "Turians make these?"

The shopkeeper chuffs again. "It's turian art, I should hope we make it."

"Sorry, I meant-"

"I know what you meant." The turian takes off his visor and begins cleaning the eyepiece. "To answer your actual question, yes, turian women traditionally make amplexum for their men in a symbolic agreement to start a family. The earliest examples found in the sunken city of Caralax on our homeworld are over 15,000 years old."

"Oh." Should she make one? Ha. Fat chance. Purchase one? Give Garrus a constant reminder of what will never happen? He didn't tell her he wanted one. Does he not want one?

The shopkeeper raises a brow plate as he adjusts his visor. "Can I help you with something else?"

"Maybe." Shepard looks at the shopkeeper. What's the worst that can happen? "I've been dating a turian. It's serious. He's talking about nesting presents and I don't know what to do."

The turian looks her up and down. "Do you want to bond to him?"

"Yes."

"Well, you know what he's asking. Give him your answer." The shopkeeper returns the amplexum
"But you just told me this is a traditional gift." There's so little she can do for Garrus. Trying to observe his customs is surely a small thing she could manage.

"That's what turians do. You need to figure out what you want to do. I love traditions and history, but they're not everything." He takes in her disappointed expression and widens his mandibles. "Look, I had some similar problems when I decided to settle down with my bondmate. He's a chef, so I made him a fine set of kitchen tools as a nesting present: knives, tasting spoons, whisks. He said thank you. And nothing else. So, I made him more kitchen tools: corers and peelers and shredders. He said thank you and nothing else." The turian pulls in his mandibles at the memory. "Clearly, my presents weren't good enough, I thought, so I started building him kitchen appliances: mixers and sous vide cookers and anything else I could think of. He said thank you and that was it. I started wondering if he wasn't interested in marriage and a family together."

The shopkeeper sighs. "In the meantime, he made me yet another new bookshelf. He'd been making me bookshelves for a couple of years, all fine wood with hand-carved decorations. There really wasn't room to move around our apartment with all the shelving units crowding the place. I have a lot of them in the shop right now, in fact. Anyway, this time, when he gave me the bookshelf, it already had books on it. They were all about the adoption process. It finally clicked that he'd been asking me the same question I'd been asking him all this time. He'd just gotten clever and figured out how to make his own answer first. Traditions and culture are fine things, but they can also get in the way." The shopkeeper shrugs. "Don't try to be something you're not. Know yourself, know your partner, and know what you want. You can sort out everything else from there."

Shepard smiles. "I think this may be my new favorite shop on the Citadel."

#

"There you are!" Miranda stands in a corridor of the mall, hands on her hips.

"Afraid 2 trillion credits had run away?"

"More worried what trouble you were getting into. There I was doing the accounts when I get a call from Vakarian asking me for an escort because you'd left him at the Citadel Archives and he's under orders not to wander around by himself. I asked why you left him behind, and he wouldn't answer. He only said he didn't want to be reduced to scanning planets for disobeying."

Oops. Shepard shouldn't have left her partner behind. Still... she covers her mouth as she snickers at the idea of anything standing in the way of the Great Turian Rebel. For all his ego, he's not the sort that disobeys to prove that he can. "Has he made it back to the ship?" she asks guiltily.

"I sent Jacob to retrieve him. They were back hours ago. Do I need to send someone for Thane, too?"

"No, he's spending the night at his son's bedside."

"Then there's only the matter of retrieving you." Miranda looks down her perfect nose at Shepard. Anger flickers in Shepard's heart. "Isn't that always your problem: Searching over Alchera, stealing me from the Collectors on Omega, reactivating me remotely in the Lazarus lab..."

"Do you have a point, Shepard?"

"Only a question: What makes me so valuable?"
Miranda’s brow furrows. "You know the answer: You're the only one who can lead us against the
Reapers."

"I used to believe that. It's nice to think that the universe needs me when it isn't a nightmare to think
that the universe needs me." She looks up at Miranda. "I want to know the real reason it has to be
me."

"That is the real reason."

Shepard raises a skeptical brow. "You're telling me that you believe that strongly in the power of one
discredited woman to save the galaxy?"

"You only need to look around at what happened while you were ... gone ... to know that it's more
than that. Humanity is a brilliant race. We've had inspirational philosophers, inventors, and leaders.
We will never know where the next John Locke, Arthur James Arnot, or Illusive Man will come
from. We've gathered some of the greatest tacticians, scientists, and military talents for you to use in
the upcoming confrontation because you're this generation's best hope that there will be a next
generation."

_Cerberus cheerleader._ "Miranda..." Shepard shakes her head. There aren't any questions to ask, are
there? She knows she was rebuilt using experimental techniques and technology salvaged from the
Reapers among other sources. In retrospect, she knows the Reapers are watching everything from
behind the Illusive Man's eyes. He is this cycle's divisive patsy. "How can you have so much faith in
the Illusive Man?"

"Because he came from nowhere and built a multitrillion credit empire that he's dedicated to helping
humanity. He may make mistakes, but he didn't have to do any of it. He has our best interests at
heart."

"Never mind." Shepard attempts to brush by her.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm supposed to introduce Garrus to my family tomorrow. I could probably use another dress," says
Shepard, words she hadn't planned on ever uttering in her life. Normally one is sufficient. But a lie is
necessary if she didn't want to be tossed into turmoil again.

Her XO stands next to her, looking her up and down. Her stony expression slowly changes to one of
exasperation as Shepard gazes fixedly at a car ad. "Let's find you a dress." Miranda begins leading
her down the halls with some destination in mind. "All the time I was rebuilding you, I was thinking
about you as a leader and a soldier. I never thought about you as a romantic."

"I'm not."

"On a date, then."

"You knew I'd had relationships," says Shepard, mildly puzzled. "You're the one who put the picture
of Kaidan in my room."

"Yes. But it was like Military Barbie and Ken. The two of you seemed more like models than real
people."

"Kaidan and I do both make for good publicity material." Shepard gazes up at an old recruitment
poster on the wall. Her trailing hand triggers an advertising pillar featuring a smiling asari with a
cultured voice. "Miss Shepard" -- she pauses to give the spokeswoman an unfriendly stare as the ad
uses her civilian title rather than the military one she's lost -- "a woman of your beauty deserves the finest in biotic technology. The next time you're out on the town with Officer Vakarian," -- how does it know? -- "the new Sophist biotic amplifier from the Serrice Council is the perfect accessory. Power. Precision. Elegance. It's not just an amplifier: It's an expression of your femininity." -- Miranda turns on her heel to glare at the ad. -- "Sophist."

The women exchange looks. Shepard rubs the back of her neck, checking that her hair is still covering her implant. "I'll grant Cerberus this one: Asari do not understand human women."

"It's because we look superficially similar. Somehow asari presume they know how to speak for us even though they have no concept of femininity."

"But they're willing to capitalize on it anyway," says Shepard with disgust. "My amplifier should never be an expression of anything. You shouldn't notice it! It's a piece of equipment. I wouldn't want my gun to be an expression of my femininity either."

"Mine is an expression of the fact that I can turn condescending aliens into paste," says Miranda with bit of satisfaction as she turns away from the pillar. "Though asari do make some amazing dresses," she adds in grudging admiration.

"If you like being hobbled." Shepard shrugs. "I prefer the short human style: Better to kick someone in the head."

"I suppose they can get away with it because if you live long enough, you become a biotic goddess and don't need to worry about little things like getting your skirt tangled in your legs."

"I don't think the Illusive Man is going to worry about that detail either," says Shepard wryly."

"That's why I plan on being around." Miranda grins, showing off that perfect genes couldn't save her from slightly crooked teeth. "I have everything covered."

*I wish you did.*

#

When the door to the captain's cabin slides open, Garrus is caught mid-pace. He tries to hide his fretting by leaning against a wall that's a little bit too far away since he's not wearing armor, only sweatpants. Still, he brazens out his wall slouch, even though Shepard knows that position will give him a crick in his neck and scrape his fringe plates.

"Hello," he rumbles.

"Hi." Shepard drops her bags on the threshold.

"I got you dinner." He waves at the plastic-wrapped, freeze-dried rations on the coffee table.

"Perfect."

Garrus tilts his head, examining her suspiciously. "I know you'll eat anything, but I thought you could at least distinguish between things that taste like paper and things that are actually flavorful."

"Oh, I can. Rations are good because they'll taste the same no matter when I get to them." She walks over to him and takes his hand. "I let my emotions get in the way of being in charge of the mission and forgot the standing orders I gave you. I'm sorry."
His alien bird eyes are unreadable. Then Garrus starts stroking her hair. "It will be alright, Shepard."

"Of course it will. You're here." She embraces him.

Chapter End Notes

Amplexum is a word I made up based on amplexus a Latin synonym for love that is often translated as "embrace."

John Locke (1632-1704) was an English philosopher. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Locke

Arthur James Arnot (1865-1946) was a Scottish-Australian inventor of the electric drill. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_James_Arnot
Once You Find Them

I'm an ass. Garrus thinks as he strokes his wife's hair.

It was truly humiliating when it dawned on him that he shouldn't leave the Archives. He's Archangel: The Terror of Omega, but he'll sit inside a building like a four-year-old waiting for his mother. He'd almost walked off on his own despite the orders to stick with a squad. But, in considering the matter from every angle, he had to admit he'd been dogged by assassination attempts, and while *he* could certainly survive them, the commander would be pissed if she had to sign off on yet more dead bodies in his vicinity -- and he'd be the one who would have to fill out the mountain of paperwork for her -- so perhaps following orders was wise.

He was spoiling for a fight by the time he got home, but she was still missing.

In frustration, he began reconfiguring the mods on his guns, not caring if he smeared grease on the tables and sheets. It wouldn't have happened if she had been here.

The hours stretched and when he became hungry, he decided he'd get dinner for the two of them and wait for her. He picked the least appetizing, most processed things he could find. If she wanted something different, she should have been here.

He was planning to be seated and in control. However, worry overtook him before she did, leading to pacing and a less prepared tactical position when she returned...

At which point, she deflects his attempts to start a conflict, apologizes, and clings to him like shelter in a dust storm.

The only possible response is to protectively wrap himself around her.

And kick himself for being petty.

"It's not your fault." Garrus rests his chin on Madelaine's head. "I ... shouldn't have told you."

"Trust can't last forever when you're deliberately keeping things from me." She pulls back, fixing him in her amber gaze.

"Shepard, I'm playing hunches and putting together the flimsiest evidence."

"Your evidence against Saren wasn't great, but you knew you were onto something then, and you were right. I believe in your instincts."

"But I don't know how to fix you when I break you."

"Ooo kinky."

"What? No! I-"

"You sure?" she teases. "Because this sounds rather similar to when you came up to my cabin and told me you wanted something to go right for once. You didn't want to destroy our friendship because it was all you had." She takes his hand. "We're more resilient than you think."

The blue carpeting on the cabin floor becomes intensely interesting. "You left me."

"I'm the captain. I should have handled it better." She nudges his chin with her head. "I'm the broken
one, not you." She sighs. "I can function or I can sort out my feelings. I can't do both at once, and I much prefer functioning. I needed time alone to think." She chuckles softly. "I know you were trying to ... cushion the blows ... but I couldn't sort out what I felt while I was also sorting out what you felt."

Garrus's shoulders slump. "I ... I'll leave if that's what you want."

"No." She presses her cheek into his keel. "Stay. I want you to stay."

Her scent is a bit stale and still carries hints of the hospital mixed in with vanilla shampoo. He smiles to himself, catching some of her hair on his mandible when it flexes. He frees a hand to work the strands out from between his joints before they get knotted. "How do you feel?"

"Tired." Her hand strokes along his arm. "I think I'm me, though. I don't know about the rest of it." She looks him in the eye. "Do you think my mom is part of this conspiracy you're trying to piece together?"

"I ... I'm not sure." He hadn't thought through all of the implications. If Saren's brother set him up, well, who better to deliver her to the Reapers? Except that wasn't what happened in her case. Shepard ran into the Reapers through no fault of her family. "She was in charge of the Crucible Project at the end, wasn't she?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't think she could be indoctrinated or she would have sabotaged the war effort the way the Illusive Man tried to."

"Good point."

*Of course the Illusive Man worked against the Collectors who were also working for the Reapers ...* Garrus's mind wanders off on a tangent and he almost misses Shepard mumbling something against his chest.

"What was that?"

"Thank you for ... for trying to save me."

"I'm not done yet. I'd like to go to Senoquol to talk with Pallin."

Shepard raises an eyebrow. "I'm not sure the 'stand on his neck' interrogation technique is going to work on your old boss."

Garrus's crest ruffles. "I'm getting better at controlling my temper."

"You grabbed a man by the throat earlier today."

"He was rude." Garrus kicks the floor.

"Sometimes people are ungrateful." Shepard shrugs. "I can't see things going well with Pallin if you show up in his hospital room demanding explanations."

"You forget that he's turian. We can't lie."

"So?"

"A turian interrogation is very simple. You ask if he did it and he admits it if he did."
Shepard cocks her hip. "What about 'decline to answer'"

"It's a possibility, but it only means that he can't answer because someone in authority told him not to. You're a spectre. The only authority above you is the Council. If he declined to answer ... our list of suspects would immediately shrink."

"Wouldn't it be non-existent? It happened after the previous Council died, leaving the new Council. Anderson isn't trying to hide what happened from anyone and they all ignore him. I don't know the other new councilors well, but Esheel saved the Council from Udina and Cerberus and Quentius sent me to Menae to try to save both our worlds. I don't think either of them are playing with Reapers. Irissa ... could have set us up when she sent me to Thessia, I suppose."

"Then the list of suspects will be incredibly short or Pallin will tell us what's going on."

"Okay, Garrus. You've convinced me. It shouldn't change much to visit one more planet. I'll work out the flight plan." She steps away and begins unlatching her armor, fingers moving with ease to reveal the black undersuit.

"So, about changing the timeline..." He scratches at the back of his neck.

Shepard pauses. "What did you do?"

"Nothing."

She crosses her arms and leans back on her heel, half-dressed. "Yet."

"I ... you said if you'd had the info on the Reapers before the war, you'd have given it to Emily Wong." He walks over to her desk and pulls out a data stick. "All of the security encryptions were off because you'd been there ..."

"You didn't."

"No." He presses the stick into the palm of her hand. "I want you to have the choice." He curls her fingers around it. "That's all. It's another option."

The silence lasts long enough to make him worry, before she steps forward on her tiptoes and kisses his mandible. "I'll hold onto it."

It's enough. It's something he can hope for. "What was the other data stick about?" he asks casually as he collects several pieces of her armor.

"You peeked, didn't you?" she says ruefully.

"You left it laying there in plain sight. Of course I looked."

"You saw my records. I wanted to see yours." She shrugs. "I thought it would be fun. Old pictures; old memories, that kind of thing."

"Okay. Let's look at them," says Garrus.

She raises an eyebrow at him.

"It was my file. I copied it, too." He runs a finger along her jaw. "I don't have anything to hide from you." Though this is going to be embarrassing.

"Hold that thought. Pajamas first. Then entertainment." She carries the armor to its place in the
storage unit and climbs out of the sweaty black undersuit.

Garrus watches for a moment, feeling pleased that she's so relaxed with him that she can remove all her clothes and cares. Then he turns to the table and sets up their dinner of junk food in front of the vid screen.

When she joins him, she's wearing only loose pants and a tanktop in neon pink with neon orange and green trees. It's his favorite. He passes her one of the dry burrito things she likes, and she curls against him as he enters the information through his omni-tool

A eight-year-old picture taken when he first joined C-Sec pops up on the screen with an image of Palaven circled by Menae and Nanus projected behind him. The VI cuts in to read the title: "Year 2178 CE: Garrus Vakarian Youngest Officer to Join Citadel Security. Vault V5."

Shepard frowns at him. "Why aren't you looking smug?"

"About what?"

"Youngest officer to join C-Sec. You love talking about your accomplishments."

It occurs to him that she doesn't get it. He pretends to examine the statistics, all correct: Birth, school, designations, cases closed.

Pallin's gravelly voice begins. "Excellent work on the T'Pring case. In honor of your record, the Council has inquired if there's any favor you might request." I don't believe you need anything, but it's honorable to ask.

"There is one thing" I dislike making this request, says Castis Vakarian. "I would like them to offer my son a position in C-Sec."

Pallin clears his throat. "You want us to give your son a position?" You must be joking, old friend."

"Yes. Most of his basic education is complete and he will need the experience learning the ways of other species." It takes some time to learn reading faces rather than voices.

The recording ends.

Garrus lifts his head despite the weight of his shortcomings. "Was there anything else you wanted to look at, Shepard?"

"Why do you look upset?"

"Hmmm? Because my father was ruining my life."

"I didn't think C-Sec was that bad."

"It wasn't," says Garrus.

"Then how is getting you a job ruining your life?" says Shepard, puzzled.

"Do the math, Shepard."

"What?"

"It's basic arithmetic. I was 25 when we met. Turians are required to do a tour of duty until they're 30."
"I never really thought about it. I guess you got out five years early."

"Ten. It takes an average of five years to make detective. At least I could catch on fast enough to not embarrass myself further."

"You're angry because your dad wanted to help you?"

"Because every turian I worked with knew I was a failure the minute they heard my name. They knew I couldn't get anywhere on my own merits! No one respected me." He chews on a strip of terix jerky and wraps an arm around her. "You've always been the best thing that happened to me. You offered me a place of my own and you valued me for my work." He presses a kiss into her forehead. "It was hell going back to being the undeserving kid again after serving with you. I dreamed every night of stowing away on the Normandy and chasing criminals across all boundaries and boarders with a crew who respected me. When you died ... Everything I hoped for ..."

The VI reader cuts in "Spectre status recognized: Commander Shepard. The following information is classified."

Garrus's jaw drops and his mandibles waggle numbly at its side. Shepard perks up in his arms.

Pallin's voice picks back up. "Why in the Spirit-blessed galaxy would you want to shame your own child like this?" Have you gone mad? "I know you've said he's a handful, but surely he doesn't deserve losing the opportunity to rise through the ranks the traditional way."

"I ... cannot say here, Venari. We are being watched. "Experience indicates it will be safer for him to bear the disgrace."

"I'll meet you at the bar later then, Castis. You will tell me what's going on."

The recording ends again.

Shepard looks up at him. "Why is this even here?"

"Um... Lapping. That's what we call it when you chop off parts of a conversation to hide them behind security protocols because your conversations in your office are taped."

"Do you know what they were talking about?"

"No idea." Garrus runs through what he knows of his father's cases and draws a blank.

"Did you know any of this was here?"

"I've never listened to it before, but sure, I knew they kept the photos and the stats. Everyone has a file. And I guessed that Dad must have made some kind of deal. I ... just thought he did it because he was being Dad. I didn't really think much more about it."

Shepard looks him up and down, and pulls him to lie down across her lap while she strokes his crest. "No revelations when you went home to Palaven?"

"I .... think I'd have bitten his head off if Dad brought up the topic of him getting me a job. It was ... touchy enough with him using his connections and reputation to put me in contact with Fedorian."

"Looks like we have more questions for Pallin than we thought."

"Yeah. Yeah, we do."
"Don't worry, big guy. We'll find him."
Dresses, said a bit of intelligence passed down from admiral to captain to lieutenant, from mother to daughter, were what civilian women wore for serious occasions. Before Kasumi's Alison Gunn masquerade, Shepard had worn a dress twice: a frilled frock in celadon green for the commemoration of the First Contact War Memorial Garden on the Presidium, and a bowed pinafore of salmon pink for the 15th anniversary of the First Contact War. Shepard thought perhaps this advice was missing some nuances obvious to children brought up to be civilians; however, she'd enlisted two weeks after the last time she'd worn a dress, and hadn't considered the issue since. Now she's wearing a yellow and white polka dot dress with a cinched bodice and full skirt and isn't quite certain what to make of the breeze around her legs. It's cut more in the style she's seen turian women wear. Miranda even talked her into a tulle underskirt to avoid flashing people when she kicks.

"You're sure this looks okay?" Garrus's mandibles flutter nervously as he runs a hand over his new suit. The grey one was covered in blood (and good riddance to it), and he knew what Shepard's reaction was to the blue and green monstrosity that he'd kept with him on Omega; wearing that to meet her family would only add to his self-consciousness. So she'd bought him a new suit while she was out. It's mostly a blue to match his colony markings paired with a soft butter yellow shirt for contrast.

"I think it's more appealing to human tastes while still being colorful. I'm sorry if you don't like it." She could have asked the clerks at the clothing store for their insights into turian fashion, but, as they were turians, she didn't trust their opinions when it came to color combinations.

A taloned hand wraps around her waist, pulling her closer as they stroll along the walkway of the Presidium. "It's pretty good, actually. Kind of tame. But at least it's not drab. I could get used to this."

"Uh-huh. So is your hand on my hip to prove that you're not?" She smirks at him.

"What?"

"Tame."

"Maybe." He gives her a squeeze. "Your hair is glittering. It doesn't usually do that."
"Fake sunlight." Shepard shrugs, secretly pleased that she'd refused Miranda's attempts to give her a hat. "And we are going to meet my mother." She gently removes his hand and takes his arm instead. "I thought turians were restrained in public."

"Sorry. It felt ... right," he says, a little puzzled. "It felt right," he repeats again to himself.

"Problems?"

"None." He widens his mandibles in a smile. "When was the last time we took a walk down a city street?"

"Yesterday."

"When we weren't on a mission."

"Um... On the Silversun Strip?"

He deflates a little. "You're right. I was thinking that we never got to do this. It's too normal."

"If this is going to be normal, then I want a different outfit. This is a costume for pleasing other people." She leans against the walkway railing and stares across at the memorial garden and the obelisk that bears her father's name among hundreds of others.

Garrus drapes an arm around her waist again and kisses the top of her head. "I'll keep that in mind when I help you remove it later."

She turns around in his arms with a laugh. "What has gotten into you?"

"Nerves?" He looks away in embarrassment. "Meeting your family is intimidating, but it also makes 'us' feel more real. And I ... want you."

"Garrus Vakarian ... " She runs a hand along his jaw, turning him to face her, and falls into his bright blue eyes, as deep and clear as the water below them. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Get hit by bullets more often?" he teases.

They laugh as they press foreheads together. "Probably." She inhales deeply, using his scent of gun oil and cinnamon to steady herself. "Let's go ... I don't know ... Try to have fun."

"Yes, sweetheart." His voice brings a blush to her cheeks, and she can feel a satisfied rumble echo through his carapace as they resume their course. The vibration turns into an audible trilling she recognizes as the turian equivalent of whistling.

Shepard tries to stay steady on her kitten heels as she runs scenarios of how she is going to do this. Saying 'This is my fiancé, Garrus' seems oddly confrontational, a demand for immediate judgment rather than mere statement of fact. And she absolutely hates inviting anyone to judge her.

Not saying anything, however, is obviously cowardly and defeats the purpose of the meeting: helping Garrus find a place as part of the family.

On the other hand, she never brings people to meet her family. The context clues -- the formal civilian clothes, the doting body language, the entire situation -- should make parts of their relationship obvious.

As they walk into Reservoir Rarities with its shiny wooden floor and bright decor, she's made up her mind to leave out the titles in the introduction and watch how the chips fall. She'll give her family
time enough to assess Garrus, adjust to him, and form suspicions that she can then confirm. And if it turns into an unholy row, at least they will have had a fresh meal.

She pats her mate's arm as the hostess guides them to the covered open-air patio. And freezes in her tracks. "Fuck my life."

Her mother is seated in her Alliance captain's dress uniform, chestnut hair pinned up in a regulation bun, looking out across the water. Nana sits across from her, spine straight and shoulders back despite being close to 100. Her tight iron grey curls contrast with her loose pink shirt and white shorts. Her golf bag sits beside her, the head covers a bouquet of decapitated turians and batarians in felt. Between them, broad shouldered and charming, sits Lt. Kaidan Alenko in dress blues, shoes recently shined.

What the hell is her ex doing here? He doesn't know her family.

Garrus's fingers twitch against her arm. "Well, that's ... unexpected."

"Nasty surprise," she agrees.

Anderson promised her a surprise.

Oh, Goddamnit, no one knew she and Garrus were together unless they were on the Normandy. Kaidan broke up with her on Horizon and went crying traitor back to the Alliance, and Anderson probably tried to set him straight since he'd actually talked with her like a reasonable human being. Maybe that was when Alenko'd written that piss poor non-apology letter. Except this time, her family showed up while Kaidan was at the Citadel, still somehow convinced that he hadn't shot their relationship dead on Horizon. So Anderson decided to try to help the young lovers by pulling strings to get him assigned to look after her family. That has to be it.

Shepard firmly fixes her professional face in place for the coming confrontation. The hostess is standing by the table, and everyone has turned to look at them. Nana gives her a quick up and down assessment. Mother has lifted her eyebrow at Shepard's oddly halted progress. Kaidan is turning a grim shade of red as he looks over his shoulder. She has no idea what he has to be angry about. He's the party crasher here.

"This is the only chance you're going to get. Do you still want to meet my family, Garrus?" She asks between gleaming white clenched teeth as she smiles for their audience.

"Yes," he says softly, clearly expecting her to be upset.

"Good. I hate retreating." She bumps her hip against his and pulls him closer. "We're the greatest heroes in the galaxy even if no one knows it yet. Let's go impress the hell out of them." Beside her, she can sense her mate standing a little taller as they approach the table. "Hello Mother; Nana. Lt. Alenko?" she gives him a blank, puzzled look before returning her attention to her family. "I want you to meet Garrus Vakarian. Garrus, Captain Hannah Shepard and retired base commander Captain Katherine Shepard."

She lets go of his arm as her mother rises to shake hands and Garrus carefully returns the grip. "Detective Vakarian. I believe we met under less pleasant circumstances."

"Ha. Yes. I'm ... pleased to see you with happier news." He clears his throat and clarifies, "Shepard's alive and all."

"Yes," her mother says tightly. Her white gloved hands clasp Shepard's elbow and give her an uncertain squeeze before dropping to her sides.
"Oh, Hannah." Nana rolls her eyes and gets up. "Come here, Maddie, give your grandma a hug."

Shepard obediently steps over and gently hugs her before pulling up a spare chair from the table behind them so that she can sit next to Garrus. The light beats down on her back as she racks her brain for safe topics of conversation: Cerberus, no; death and funerals, no; where the hell her mother is going to be while she's in the brig, no. Why did she ever think this was a good idea?

"So, Garrus..." Kaidan's dark eyes burn. "Did you know Shepard's with Cerberus now?"

_Thinking too slow, Shepard. Control of the conversation goes to the spiteful ex._

"Yes." He reaches for the triple-filtered glass of iced Citadel water in front of him and takes a sip, looking disappointed that it isn't something stronger. "She recruited me off of Omega to take down the Collectors and, by extension, the Reapers."

Nana gives him the look of a trained interrogator, which she is. "What were you doing in a pit like Omega?"

"Well, after Shepard... After..." he swallows uncomfortably, "it seemed like the place I could do the most good."

"There's nothing good on Omega," Kaidan huffs.

"Clearly you've never been there," says Garrus irritably. "I'll grant you there are thugs and murderers, but there are also honorable people the Citadel has abandoned because it's easier than patrolling the area or regulating the industries that create places like Omega."

A darkness passes over Nana's eyes. "It's pathetic how many soldiers end up in places like that because the Alliance discharges them before they earn a full pension."

"That may be a tragedy, but it doesn't excuse what goes on there," says Kaidan. "You're lucky that crazy vigilante Archangel started haunting the streets. It must have made your visit safer."

Garrus spreads his mandibles wide. "I _am_ Archangel."

"You can't be," says Kaidan dismissively. "The reports say he's dead."

A predatory satisfaction crosses Garrus's face. "The mercenaries are only telling tales to help them sleep at night." He leans back and rests his hand on top of Shepard's. "I got offered a promotion from saving an asteroid to saving the galaxy. New management, but the ops are run by my favorite old boss. I couldn't pass up the opportunity."

Shepard smiles fondly at him. "I'm glad you didn't."

"It's true then, Maddie?" Her mother asks. "You're with Cerberus?"

Shepard sighs. "Yes. It was my best option."

Nana shakes her head. "Your best option would be reporting for duty."

"I... sort of tried, Nana."

"Either you stand up when the Alliance calls or you don't. There is no try."

"Look, I woke up alone, in a lab, with people yelling at me over the comms because there was some kind of cataclysmic security breakdown. The lab was being destroyed and I needed to get myself the
h-- get myself out of there. I grabbed weapons and made it to the escape shuttle, where the remaining Cerberus personnel explained to me that they'd recovered my body and been taking care of me until I could function again. I could have fought them for control of the shuttle, but I didn't know how much fuel we had or how far it would take to get somewhere hospitable. It didn't seem wise to make a move then."

"They took me to another Cerberus facility where I had a chat with the Illusive Man. He wanted me to look into the disappearance of several human colonies and provided a small transport to the most recent site of attack. I could have overpowered the others on the transport, but thus far they hadn't done anything objectionable and it seemed like I would better serve the Alliance by gathering information before leaving." Shepard wads up the napkin in her hand for a distraction, trying to ignore the blood rushing to her face at the thought of being carefully trapped in the Illusive Man's service.

"The Collectors have some kind of anti-human superweapon. Cerberus is trying to deal with it." She leans forward on her elbows. "Anyway, after seeing the colony, I was convinced that the problem was worth looking into, and Cerberus provided me with an experimental, top-of-the-line ship to command. We picked up some experts on Omega, where I was first given charge of the project, and then we headed for the Citadel."

She lifts her chin. "My top priority was to straighten things out with the Alliance. I went to see Anderson, hoping he could be my advocate. The only thing he was able to do for me was reinstate my spectre status." She's aware of a three-fingered hand lacing with hers and, worried that the stress of it all is peeking through, slows down her ramble. "I've filled out the paperwork, but right now, the Alliance isn't taking my calls. The only reason I can come and go freely here is that Citadel Security and Anderson have recognized me. I can't sit on my hands doing nothing while the bureaucrats try to decide if I'm alive or not, so I'm continuing to work with Cerberus because this project, this particular threat is real. I'd have to be a true traitor to my people to ignore the deaths of millions when I could do something to stop it."

Mother is a bit misty-eyed as she says, "That's my girl."

Nana digs through one of the pockets of her golf bag and pulls out a caramel. "You still need to be careful, Maddie. Cerberus has been gathering power and momentum for a while. You don't want to end up like Polly Andrews or Claude Menneau."

"Or Kahoku at Binthu, or Toombs at Akuze, or Jack at Pragia." Shepard sighs. "I'm well aware that they're giving me the sanitized tour of hell. I haven't forgotten what they've done. I don't have anywhere else to go."

"Shepard," Kaidan looks sympathetic for a moment. "If this is about a lack of choices, we can fix that. You'll have a guard and safety in the Citadel embassies."

Thank God, this isn't the first time. She might have forgotten Horizon in her desire for things to go back to normal. Not that being grounded was truly tempting, but she used to long for a simple moment to catch her breath. "No. I need to be out there, working to save people." She indulges in a glance at her mate, who is maintaining his best 'proud turian' pose. "Garrus and I have a deal: He looks after me, I look after him, and we both have plenty of things to shoot."

"I'm not sure which of us got the better end of the bargain," says Garrus.

"Me." Shepard laughs. "Your enemies aren't the size of buildings."

"True, but there's only one Commander Shepard, hero of the Citadel. No one runs up to me in the
street asking for favors."

"Yet. You're my secret weapon," she says tenderly. "There's no Shepard without Vakarian."

He chuckles and moves to brush a strand of hair off her cheek.

Kaidan's hand falls to the table with a bang that startles everyone, even him. "Shepard ... commander can I have a word with you? Privately?"

"Sure," she says calmly even though feelings of dread tangle through her. She pats Garrus's hand as she looks at the rest of her family. "I'll be right back."

The bar is deserted at 10 am. Shepard begins walking toward it and the semi-privacy of a half-wall when Kaidan grabs her arm and tries to haul her to the door. She wrenches away from him, resuming her original course. "What the hell do you think you're doing, lieutenant?"

"That's just what I was going to ask you, Shepard," he sneers as he grabs her arm bruisingly hard again. "You come prancing in here with Garrus of all people. Are you trying to rub my face in the way we left things on Horizon. You want to make me jealous? Fine, I'm jealous. Now stop it!"

"Not everything is about you, Alenko." She shakes him loose. "I didn't disappear to make you worry, I didn't join Cerberus to vex you, and I didn't invite you to brunch with my family that I never get to see."

"Oh, no, it's all about you, isn't it? Have you even considered what you're doing, using poor Garrus like that? He trusts you. I think he may be starting to believe you mean it."

"I do mean it." She glares at him. "Garrus and I are engaged."

He reels back as if she's slapped him. "How can you...? You're sleeping with that ... that ...? You're not even the same species!" His eyes run over her body, checking for damage.

"And yet, it works incredibly well."

"I know we fought on Horizon, but that was barely two months ago. We need ... we need to talk ... and ... and work things out when you come back to the Alliance."

"There's nothing to 'work out.' You didn't want to join me with Cerberus, and I respected that you had a commitment elsewhere. You called me a fool and a traitor to the Alliance and stalked off without talking over a damn thing. I thought 'To hell with you' and got on with my life because it's too short to waste moping after someone who doesn't respect me in turn." She's ashamed to think of the time she did spend in a depressed funk because of this ass.

"So you've been cheating on me? After Horizon, are you trying to test how far you can go before I give up on you?" He looks down at his hands. "Look, I forgive you. We'll ... we'll ... I'll learn to ... not think about it ..."

"No. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe you keep trying to forget that we're through. I want you to think about it. Every time you think about me, picture me with my husband. Maybe then it will get through your thick skull that we're done. Maybe then you'll get the hell out of my life."

"But I want you!" He grabs her forearm to pull her in close and she twists away.

She's angry. Furious. She wants to turn him into ash and watch Citadel Central Air blow him away. She latches onto her temper with every bit of her willpower. "And I wanted a lovely brunch with my
family to introduce them to the man I'll be spending the rest of my life with, but we can't all get what we want."

"So you want me to leave?"

"YES!"

Kaidan stomps back to the table and bends over to speak to her mother. Fuck.

The bruises on her wrist fade and disappear. If only it were that easy to erase the rest of the damage. She holds onto the bar to ward off shaking. The asari hostess passes by, and Shepard raises her hand. "I'd like a drink, please."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Our bar doesn't open for another hour and we're not authorized to dispense drinks until then."

A blue biotic crackle runs down Shepard's arms and across the surface of the bar. Fuck it all! She whips out her omni-tool and waves it in the woman's face. "Spectre authorization. Give me a God damn drink."

The asari bites her lip in hesitation. "Alright. What would you like?"

"A Yandoa mai tai if you've got it." She rubs at her arms. Kaidan's scent of musky sweat and acrid cologne clings to her. Damn him.

Chapter End Notes

"No. Try not. Do or do not. There is no try."


I have found the key to Kaidan's character that makes ME2 & 3 consistent with ME1. It is the Kaidan/Liara/Shepard jealousy scene in ME1. The unfortunate thing is that it means he was a jerk the whole time. He just used to hide it better. That was not actually the answer I wanted. I wanted something more complex.

Basically, Kaidan is angry with Shepard for flirting with both him and Liara. He confronts her and makes demands that she choose, all the while making rather ugly faces as she tries to soothe them. An actual nice guy would have a confrontation (or simply decide to not pursue Shepard because he disapproves of how she's treated him), but he wouldn't start out so angry about it when it could easily be that he misconstrued Shepard's words or that Liara, a naive young alien, misconstrued Shepard's words. Someone who is controlling, though, won't like even a hint that she's talking with someone else because it might break that control and provide an escape.

Anyway, this is my personal final POV on Kaidan (barring a lot of new information).
Shepard's grandmother regards him with a gimlet gaze. "So, detective ..."

"Please, I've left the force. Just call me Garrus." He widens his mandibles as both humans and turians seem to find that a show of openness and honesty. He has no clue what Shepard is so nervous about.

The old woman digs in the pocket of her bag and pulls out another gold-wrapped candy to suck on. "Garrus. What brings you to the Citadel?"

"The Normandy." He flashes his teeth again at the joke.

She stares stone-faced at him. To his other side, Hannah Shepard raises a brow in inquiry.

Alright, not one of his best jokes. But usually humans laugh his wit. It's one of the best things about working with them. Maybe he should hold off on the humor until he knows them better? He puts on a slightly more serious expression. "We had a colleague who needed help sorting things out with his son."

"Maddie always did find people fascinating," says Shepard's mother. "I thought, growing up on a ship, she'd be more like me and take an interest in the mechanics of it," she sighs. "Even growing up without him, she's more like her father. She prefers things done through force of will, rather than study."

Her grandmother shakes her head. "Not the most flattering picture, Hannah. I did warn you the O'Carrolls glorify being stubborn."

"Hmmm... I don't think it's that easy." Aware that the eyes on him have turned disapproving, Garrus clarifies, "Moving people by force of will, I mean. I've watched Shepard for years and there's more leeway with people than machines, but in the end, they all want certain things to operate at peak efficiency, whether it's the right pair of couplings or to correct an old mistake. She's exceptionally good at figuring out what motivates people and getting them their equivalent of new wiring."

When she wants to.

In front of him, Kaidan and Shepard are both turning red as they play tug of war with her arm. He's not quite certain what Alenko is thinking. Even discounting the fact that Shepard is a vanguard and so most attempts to restrain her are doomed to failure, the arm is attached to her. She's going to win that one.

He realizes he's stopped paying attention to the people at the table with him. "I'm sorry, what was
that?"

The older woman leans in on her elbow. "I said we're talking far too much about ourselves." Actually, rather like Shepard, Garrus can't recall her saying much of anything about herself. "I'm surprised that a turian would join Cerberus."

"I haven't joined Cerberus. I'm watching Shepard's six while she works with Cerberus."

"And when she's done?"

There are any number of responses he could give about Reapers or Bahak or love and death. None of them are appropriate because they haven't happened yet. He condenses them down: "I go where she goes."

"I didn't think turians had much choice in their postings. Doesn't your government decide what you do?"

"Our choices are limited by what we want. I've never been interested in rising in the Hierarchy. I draw a basic citizen's support, so I don't make much, but I can do whatever I want wherever I want to supplement it."

"No sense of duty, then, Mr. Vakarian?"

He doubts it will impress Shepard's grandmother to tell her he's a bad turian. "Actually, I have a very strong sense of duty. I'm unorthodox in how I carry it out. When I was a kid, I wanted to be a spectre: no rules or regulations, only doing what I thought was right for the good of the galaxy. I... never made the cut. And then I met Shepard -- Madelaine -- and it felt like I'd finally found what I was supposed to be doing with my life. My duty lies with all of the Citadel civilizations. By staying at her side, I'm both doing what I want and what I believe is right."

The stern woman looks over at Shepard. Blue and red glints fry the air around Madelaine. "The girl needs more discipline."

Hannah Shepard runs a finger along the rim of her glass. "She does fine, mother."

"The turian's words aren't striking you as the tiniest bit familiar?"

"Perhaps."

"Hannah, you can't let her run wild."

There are heavy footfalls as Lt. Alenko makes his way back to the table. His dark eyes are like live coals as he bends over the table and says in a rough voice, "That isn't Commander Shepard, ma'am."

Shepard's mother frowns. "What do you mean, lieutenant?"

"She wasn't herself on Horizon. I thought it was just the shock of it all... It's not like her to not want to work things out peacefully. But a fake, a fake would have to get rid of me." Over his shoulder, Shepard has ordered a drink. That's definitely not like her. She wanted to have her wits about her today.

"That's a very interesting point of view, lieutenant." Hannah Shepard leans back so that she can look down her nose at him. "I think you're wrong. I think if I asked her to, she could tell me everything my mother keeps in her bag and which pocket it's in."
Alenko clenches his jaw, cheek bulging.

"I also think," says Hannah Shepard, "that if you wanted to apologize to my daughter for the last time you met, then I'd like you to explain why she's in a corner ordering alcohol before we've had anything to eat."

"I ... hunh..."

Hannah Shepard seems to have Alenko well in hand. Garrus feels sorry for him, but his loyalties lie elsewhere. "Excuse me, I think I'll go check on Shep ... er ... Madelaine."

His mate isn't looking well as he approaches. Her arms are braced against the bar, back to the room, while the bartender pours another drink. She punches an authorization code into a kiosk and takes another shot.

"Breathe, Shepard." Garrus puts a hand on the exposed skin of her back. "I thought I was the one with the anger management problems."

"Opposite day?" she suggests in a wishful tone. "I'm sorry I left you alone with my family."

"It's alright, they haven't boiled the plates off of me for trophies yet." He shifts to make sure he's blocking the view from the table. "What happened?"

"Do I really need more of an explanation than 'Kaidan happened?' Apparently I'm still a cheater despite him breaking up with me. Twice now."

"He doesn't remember the first time."

"Yeah. But based on experience, it wouldn't matter if he did." She slams down a shot and asks for another. The wide-eyed asari behind the bar pours without comment.

As she finishes the next glass, Garrus gently turns her toward him and takes her hands. "Why does he always upset you so much?"

"Because I hate being wrong. Because he tries to win me back while at the same time insulting my honor both as a soldier and a woman. Because I am not a traitor and I am always faithful." An empty shot glass explodes in a shower of blue sparks.

"I know," he says, leaning forward to brush his brow against hers, trying to ignored the undercurrent of power struggling against her restraint.

"No. I don't think you do." Shepard turns away and orders another drink. She spins the glass slowly between her fingers. "You know I find both men and women attractive."

"Yes," says Garrus hesitantly. The subject of attraction is a minefield he doesn't know how to navigate with her. The only thing that has mattered so far is that they're attracted to each other.

"In human culture, a lot of the time, people with my diverse tastes are depicted as having no loyalty. That's what I saw in most vids and books growing up. But every inclination I have is the opposite: I want one person for eternity. And maybe I wasn't always as ... honest with my partners as I could have been, but I was honorable." She takes a deep breath. "Every time he calls me a cheater, I start to doubt myself. Did I somehow flirt with him despite the fact that I'm with you now? Was I unclear that our relationship is over? Every time I find nothing wrong in what I did or what I said, but his accusations won't stop. He doesn't call me a slut, but I am really, really, really tired of him treating me like one with all of his condescending 'forgiving me for something I have never done' bullshit."
"I don't think that's the way he sees things."

"It doesn't matter what he thinks he's doing. That's how he makes me feel." The counter shakes and more blue sparks skitter over it. "I have tried to be understanding and patient and kind. I haven't left him for dead. I haven't tried to ruin his career though he's certainly tried to ruin mine." She downs her drink. "The nicer I am, the more he pushes me. And now, I'd guess he's trying to ruin things with my family."

"Trying and failing. Your family believes in you."

"Ha. That would be a first."

He takes her hand. "They're not so bad."

"I know exactly how bad they are." She turns away from him.

"Are you ... angry with me for asking you to do this?"

She twirls the glass as she thinks. "Maybe a little bit. And then I'm upset with myself for being angry at you because you're not asking for anything unreasonable." She squeezes his hand through the layers of leather and plating. "I'm far more angry with the people at that table than I am with either of us. They only care about me when the news is good. When I got put on trial and needed support, none of them came to see me. And I can't even yell at them about it because none of it has happened!" She looks around for another drink.

Garrus wraps an arm behind her back to guide her off her chair. "Come here."

"Where are we going?" she asks uncertainly.

"You're tense all over and it will take half the day to drink it away. You'll feel better if you move around. How about a dance?"

"I am not doing a tango in front of my family. It's too ... erotic."

"Didn't you just get through saying they abandoned you?" He challenges her. "Do you need to please people who leave you behind?"

"I ... it's still ... it's personal." The pained red glow has receded from her eyes, leaving only golden brown.

"Well, fortunately for you, I've had a lot of time to learn other dances." He brushes her hair back from her face.

"Unfortunately for you, I'm still a horrible dancer."

"Just keep your eyes on me and forget about everything else." He settles her arm on top of his. "It's a very simple pattern: Three steps and pause." He trills a little tune and guides her around the empty space next to the bar. His fingers strum along her back: Quick, quick, slow. It takes Shepard only a few barked shins to pick up the simple spinning pattern of the foxtrot. Her mood lightens as she bobs up on her toes at the end of long, sweeping steps. "Better?"

She snorts. "So long as we don't have to stop and face reality. I wish I had a clear goal, Garrus."

"Do whatever is necessary to bind your family together."

"That's really what you want?"
"Don't you want ... Didn't you want a family together?" he asks, feeling a little hurt.

"Yes," she says softly. "I was picturing it more as us wandering off on our own with kids, not spending more time with my mother."

"So if it were the other way around, you wouldn't help Solana and my father rebuild?"

"I ... It would be awkward because we've never met, but I guess I'd look in on them. We'd ... we'd have to talk about you eventually. It would be part of my responsibilities."

"Exactly." He presses forward and runs into her chest first when she doesn't move. He turns the mishap into a dip.

She brushes a hand over his jaw. "You really are wonderful."

"I have 15 years experience of avoiding you stepping on my toes." His mandibles flutter, belying his confidence as he sets her back on her feet.

"Ass." She swats him on the shoulder, but he doesn't care because she's also laughing. "Let's try having brunch with my family again."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter titles 53-69 taken from "Time in a Bottle" by Jim Croce, 1972.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6rLH-X5fR8
The moment Shepard's heels hit the first line of tables and dig in is the moment she realizes how much she doesn't want to do this. What emotional resources she has were spent tolerating and then telling off Kaidan. What's left isn't quite enough to keep her legs moving.

"Shepard?" Garrus has stopped short.

"Caught my shoe," she lies, "Sorry." She straightens her back forces herself forward. Why is she dreading this so much? She knows she's not embarrassed by Garrus. It will hurt if her family turns its back on them, but she'll get over it.

But that won't get Garrus what he wants.

When Garrus spoke of building a life together after the war, even taking half of it as hyperbole, it sounded warm and fun. The problem is they're not that kind of family. Her family is more like a base for taking stock of who's still alive between engagements. The best she can do is announce that they're adding his name to the roll call.

By the time they return to the table, her mother is leaning on the arm of her chair to better hear her grandmother, who never bends if she can get other people to do so instead.

Shepard clears her throat. "I wanted you to meet Garrus first before saying anything. Now that you have: Garrus and I are getting married."

Nana is unreadable, but that is to be expected. Mother would sometimes lament that Shepard had her father's skill with cards and her grandmother's poker face. The only change is the old woman sitting back to take in the tall turian. "Congratulations, my dear. Can I see the ring?"

Hannah Shepard gapes at her, and that is unanticipated. Shepard was expecting anger, not surprise -- if she got any reaction at all.

Alenko is absent and Shepard doesn't care to inquire after him.

"No ring." Shepard's naked finger is clearly visible against her mate's blue suit. She's aware that her turian's happy humming has stopped, and adds, "It's not important. I couldn't wear anything fancy
once the Alliance reinstates me."

"Pity," says Nana. "Sometimes I think you're entirely too pragmatic. Too late to change that, however." She sets aside the menu and enters her order on the table kiosk. "I suppose your engagement explains why the lieutenant was so bearish: Garrus stole the march on him."

Garrus draws his head back indignantly. "I didn't steal anything."

Nana plucks a bun from the breadbasket. "It's an old Earth phrase. You got something he wanted by getting there, unnoticed, before he could."

"That's not how it happened." Garrus's talons run along Shepard's arm and she can feel several different vibrations go through his chest.

"Oh?"

Shit. Turians do have filters, but they're not always the ones humans have. They don't usually include things like "one night stands" and they definitely don't include things like "two week depression bender." This requires a distraction.

Peering at the dextro menu, Shepard scans for anything familiar. "Look, Garrus, they have that razilit bread pizza you like." Shepard points at a picture, glad to recognize a favorite that won't require him ripping into it with his talons.

"Hmm... It has been a while since I've had good pizza."

Hannah Shepard attempts to recover from her shock. "So you enjoy human food?"

Garrus busily swipes back and forth between pizza and a raw steak with dipping sauce, trying to choose. "I wouldn't know," he says disinterestedly, "I can't eat it."

"You eat pizza."

"Of course."

"Perhaps you didn't know it developed on Earth," she says as if making a point.

He looks up from typing up his selection. "Pizza is an ancient dish developed during the Obsidian Age on Palaven. Troops would bake the bread on their shields and pile whatever meat and vegetables they'd scavenged on top. Some high-end restaurants like the one my great-grandmother oversaw have fresh lurix shells every day so that scraps of meat bake into the bread the traditional way." He adds conciliatorily, "But I'm sure human pizza is good, too."

Seeing the stormy look on her mother's face, Shepard remarks, "Though the protheans have us beat by 50,000 years on everything. Javik's always complaining about some sort of pickled fruit topping he can't get anymore..." And Javik doesn't exist yet. Now she's over-correcting.

Both women shift their attention directly to Shepard. "Protheans, Maddie?" her mother asks suspiciously.

"We've been spending a lot of time with a prothean researcher and her current projects." Thank you, Liara. "Pizza is truly archaic."

If she's determined to work her foot into her mouth in the world's most awkward conversation, the universe still seems determined to save her: an asari server shows up with soups, salads, and chunks
of meat on skewers for Garrus.

"So, your family are cooks?" Nana asks Garrus as everyone digs into the first course.

Garrus chuckles nervously. "My family does a lot of different things. My parents have retired, but my mother was with the engineering corps and my sister works with them now. My dad ... well ... he's actually kind of famous around the Citadel as a detective: Records for most cases closed, creating advanced training programs focusing on his methods of observation for dealing with other species, driving the Blue Suns off the station." It's almost laughable how her mate is playing up the bane of his existence to impress her family. Laughable and adorable.

"Mmmm... used to being overshadowed, are you?"

"Well ... Umm... I wasn't really cut out for law enforcement. That was what he wanted for me, not what I wanted."

"It's not going to get better, sticking with Maddie."

"Nana!" Shepard responds, offended on Garrus's behalf.

"Don't 'Nana' me. You're a public figure: Hero of Elysium, First Human Spectre, Hero of the Citadel. Media attention may recede, but it will always be there, even if you never do anything else. Anyone who wants a life with you will need to be able to tolerate it."

"Or be able to vanish," says Garrus smugly.

Her grandmother shakes her head. "She won't stay hidden. Someone will need help and she'll have to save them."

"We'll have to save them," says Shepard. "We're a team."

"Ah, the optimism of the young," she says with amused exasperation. "Still, he'll do. Could use a little polish, but he'll do."

Garrus self-consciously rubs his nose and checks his gloves for smears. "I polished this morning."

Not wanting to get mired in the cultural minefield of personal hygiene, Shepard attempts to change the topic again. "I'm glad you could both be here. I was a little surprised you were free, Mom. How did you pull this off?"

"Swapped assignments." Hannah Shepard picks at the salad on her plate. "The asari are giving Citadel tours to their newest client race, the raloi. I'm the human technical expert here to evaluate any possible technological advances we might want to trade for. There isn't expected to be anything worthwhile compared to what the asari and salarians have to offer us on a regular basis, but we have to be certain."

"How is it going?"

"They've managed to get past the initial shock of seeing so many different types of aliens and have moved on to trying to figure out how the recycling system works on a station this large." Hannah Shepard shrugs.

Nana shakes her head. "You turned down a promotion to vice admiral to be a tour guide."

"No, Mother, I turned down a promotion because it was only offered to me out of sympathy for my
dead child and to make the Alliance look good," she says bitterly. Shepard hunches in shame at the sound of her voice before straightening back up. She hadn't chosen to die.

"Who cares if it's about optics?" asks Nana. "It was a promotion. You should have taken it."

"If you and Maddie want to play around with publicity stunts, it's your choice," says Hannah. "I don't give two credits for recognition and public opinion, not that you've ever listened." She slathers the last of her salad with ranch dressing. "And I don't appreciate you getting me put in charge of the Fifth Fleet's gunboat diplomacy tour. Now I have Hackett tapping his foot at me, asking me daily when I'll be prepared to leave."

"I have nothing to do with Hackett's latest plan. I just wanted to see my family," says Nana. She pushes her empty bowl away. "I'm a little disappointed that Robert isn't here. You did ask him, didn't you, Maddie?"

"Actually, no. I thought it would be better to focus on immediate family. It's hard enough to get us all together. Robert can pretend to be my protective older brother later."

"We're the only family he has left ..."

"And he'd hate having brunch with us." The Butcher of Torfan is notorious for punching reporters when their questions became too probing and mysteriously losing official transmissions and orders. The only reason he has his own ship is that he captured it from the batarians and Nana pulled all the strings he didn't have the skill to play to allow him to keep the prize.

"Like it or not, he's still a part of the family," says Nana.

Shepard contritely looks down at her empty bowl as the server comes to take it away. She'll take the bullet for him this time. "I'm sorry. I'll take him out later and make it up to him." Not that there's anything to make up. She's certain he'd like a night of carousing more.

"You're suddenly being awfully quiet, Hannah," says Nana turning to her daughter.

"I'm trying to wrap my head around this. You seem to have adapted rather quickly."

"I see long-term potential for maintaining our family legacy."

"I doubt you'd feel the same way about a batarian." Mom must be rattled if she's bringing up that comparison already.

"The batarians are currently engaged in an undeclared war with us and have enslaved many of our people. The turians have only fought us once. The war was over 25 years ago and they don't treat us much differently than anyone else. In fact, a lot of them seem to respect us more. It's a significant difference."

"Or it's different because they didn't kill someone you cared about." Hannah Shepard rubs at her temple as the asari waitress appears with their entrees.

"Let's not make a scene, Hannah."

Nana smiles at Garrus and Shepard and points across the open water. "You did make a picturesque couple on the bridge. We were all remarking on it before we realized it was you. If this is what you want, it shouldn't be hard to put a positive spin on it."
Garrus tilts his head. "Positive spin?" he says suspiciously.

"Yes," her grandmother nods. "I have spent years smoothing over everything from soldiers in bar brawls with locals to Alliance cock ups when they decide to test something new and it all goes wrong. Playing out a romance should be easy, and if you willingly give the reporters something juicy enough to chew on, they should leave you alone afterwards because it's old news and old news doesn't create clicks. If you don't give them anything, then they dig like dogs until they find all the old bones you wanted buried."

Shepard rests a hand on her grandmother's arm. "I don't think we should try that yet. We've only started telling people and ... and doing the paperwork. We have some missions we need to complete and going into our connection might be detrimental." They can't risk Garrus's job with the primarch not happening because his girlfriend is in jail for treason. They might lose a third of their fleet if he's not in position on Menae. Besides, it's the only source of joy she has, and she doesn't want to sacrifice it for other people's entertainment. The Alliance can have everything else, but they can't have this.

Hannah Shepard raises her famous eyebrow. "It might always be 'detrimental.'"

"It won't."

"And if you're wrong you may be unable to leave." Is she really worried about turian divorce laws before they even get to wedding plans? There will be no time for it to go that badly. But, even if there were time ...

"It's fine, Mother." A smile tugs at the corner of her mouth as she looks up at Garrus's sharp lines. There's a slight crick in his neck at being met with disapproval. "I've never been more certain of anyone in my life."

"Everyone has a place where they belong," says Garrus studying his plate shyly. "Some people search forever and never find it. Out of billions of cities on thousands of worlds, we always find each other..."

"Out of all the gin joints in all of eternity, I'd walk into yours." She winks at him.

"You probably would." He chuckles. "Our souls already belong together. There's no changing that. An official bonding simply makes it easier on us both."

"I thought part of my charm was doing the impossible."

He gazes at her fondly. "I'm willing to sacrifice a little charm for more time together." Madelaine practically glows as his warm voice fills holes in her heart, making her feel giddy and foolish and alive.

"I know I can't stop you, Madelaine," says her mother. "I could never stop you from doing what you wanted to do. But I want you to be safe and happy."

"I dodge bullets and run through fires for a living, Mom."

"I know," says Hannah Shepard, tracing the scars burned into her fingers.

There's the quiet clink of silverware on porcelain as a silence spreads over the meal. The price of food on a space station located in an empty solar system is incredibly high. The price of fresh meat is astronomical. The Shepard family has economized by ordering variations of pasta. Garrus's pizza of cuts of meat layered between green diamond leaves costs as much as the rest of the meal combined.
Shepard is glad she's paying the bill. They have enough difficulties without giving her family reason to resent Garrus for something that would be viewed as rude in a human if they were paying. He can't help being a carnivore.

"So," Nana says to Garrus, "You grew up on the Citadel then?"
"Cipritine, actually."
"And where is that?"
Garrus rubs his jaw as if checking that his tattoos are still there. "Um... Palaven."
"Ah! What is it like?"
"Well, Cipritine is one of our largest cities. The streets are 12 meters wide in order to facilitate the movement of troops and tanks. The buildings are capped at 255 meters high to not interfere with air traffic. The city is divided into nine quarters based around a local fortification and gun battery. Each quarter has 24 police stations, 51 firehouses, and 99 hospitals serving approximately 1.2 million people each."
"That's ... very precise." And dull, Shepard can almost hear her grandmother thinking.

Garrus waves a mandible. "It's all based on an algorithm. Every service building is strategically placed, as are subway entrances that also lead to community bomb shelters and tunnels. There are firearms inspections on a 39 day rotation based on birthday beginning at the age of nine and community emergency drills every 146 days. It's like pretty much everywhere else, aside from the size." When the Reapers come, Adrian Victus pledges every man, woman, and child of that extraordinarily well-trained force to battle. Shepard wonders how many survived. "Don't humans do something similar?"

"Humanity is more ... eclectic. Not everyone likes regimentation. More's the pity."
Shepard shrugs. "The galaxy would be boring if we were all the same."
"The Citadel is incredibly lax," says Garrus. "They won't support initiatives for placing any responsibility on the civilians. Something about it being culturally insensitive to force everyone to participate in community activities."

Hannah Shepard looks up. "And you blame them for that? Not everyone wants to serve. Not everyone is cut out for it."
"Everyone should serve society in some capacity," says Garrus to Shepard's surprise. "That's part of what makes a civilization."

Iron grey curls bob up and down. "Very sensible."

"Is it?" Captain Shepard has carefully set down her utensils. "It would take an extreme level of faith in your government to accept that you have no place but to serve. It would take a particular blindness to follow orders without thought. That is what caused The War and it doesn't seem you've learned from your people's mistakes."

Garrus's crest begins to stand up. "There's something wrong with a society where shuttles run on time and finding comfort in a world where everyone is welcome so long as they follow the rules?"

"Yes: The society only works as long as everyone agrees on the rules. There is no way to change
without destruction, and along the way, people are likely to end up dead." Her mother throws down her napkin. "And that's if anyone bothers to tell you the rules to begin with."

"Hannah!" says Nana in a horrified rebuke. "You're being very rude."

"Yes, Mother," she says condescendingly. "I think I'll leave the table. I'll see you later Maddie, when you're thinking straight again."

A chill settles on Shepard's shoulders as her mother leaves. No one stops her. What could any of them do? Beg at Hannah Shepard's feet, asking for love? If it didn't work for a seven-year-old, it's not going to work now.

The feather-shaped plates on Garrus's head settle back down and he looks uncertainly at Shepard. "I ... don't understand what's wrong with bringing order to the universe?"

Nana sighs and digs in her bag for another caramel to suck. "That is why the turians claimed they shot us down without talking to us: keeping order in the universe. We were just supposed to know that it was wrong to go around opening mass effect relays without anyone actually communicating this to us."

"Oh," says Garrus dejectedly.

"You were never going to win today," says Nana. "She'll accept it eventually. She'll have no choice. We seem to be trapped in a cycle of learning the hard way." She looks off at the ceiling. "I hated Tom when she brought him home. His family's reputation ... Well, I got her to keep our name anyway. And my father hated Mary. Thought she was too weepy for a soldier's wife." The old woman rolls her eyes. "This was a nice meal, my dear. If you'll excuse me, I have a few... things to do."

"Yes, Nana," says Shepard. Her grandmother summons a server and convinces her to carry the battered golf bag in the direction of the restrooms while Shepard settles the bill. She takes Garrus's hand and tugs him to his feet. "Come on, big guy. Let's walk it off."

Head bowed in thought, he makes a small rumble of agreement and follows her out.

Chapter End Notes

The History of Pizza:

Humans developed it in the Neolithic Age. It was a popular meal among soldiers because it could be baked on shields. Between the turian martial history and the inference that animals with plates and shells are common on their world the way mammals are common on ours, it made sense that they would develop pizza independently. Actually, a lot of species probably would because pizza comes of camping out with shields. Yes I know weird things. Blame this one on Red vs. Blue for making me curious about the history of pizza.

Numbers of service buildings on Palaven based on numbers for New York City and Tokyo given a turian twist that everything should be divisible by 3 the way humans have a preference for 5 or 10.
The fake sun is still bright when they leave the shelter of the restaurant. Garrus would welcome the sensation of heat on his face, but the temperature controls are never set above 23 degrees C, and the light and heat functions are bizarrely disconnected.

He walks along with Shepard, fingers entwined, her thumb rubbing against his gloved palm. What could he have done to impress Hannah Shepard? What could he do to not offend her?

An advertising display along the main walkway switches to a turian salesman: "Officer Vakarian, are you feeling washed out? Do you fear becoming bland? Try Strolix's Rainbow Crystal Detergent, guaranteed to keep your brights shining in the somber world of the Citadel. Strolix: Show your colors proudly." Shepard flicks her wrist, sending a shockwave at the pillar. There's the sharp smell of burning ozone as the circuits fry.

Garrus makes a clicking noise, both worried and amused at her worsening temper. "Property damage, Shepard?"

"The Keepers will clean it up." He can see the red lines of circuitry beneath her recently healed pale face. "So," she says, "That went ... somewhere."

"Please, Shepard. I've spent a whole meal with people I'm pretty certain are playing 'keep away' with every bit of substantive information and trying to read voices that barely change," Garrus says, "Can you be a bit more ... straightforward?"

"Alright. I ... don't know what to say." She swings their arms together. "But I want to talk. God, it feels good to not have to think about all the things I can't say before I open my mouth."

"I should have kept mine closed more."

"It wouldn't have helped. Battle was joined the minute it became about marriage." Her hair glitters with gold as she looks up at him. "Maybe now you'll believe you're worth fighting for."

"After that, I really don't deserve you," he says.

"If you don't, who does?" In her eyes, he sees a sad loneliness.

"When you put it like that, I can't think of anyone." He squeezes her hand. "So I guess it will have to be me."

"No regrets on joining the family?" she asks cautiously.

"Well... some." She looks away from him, and Garrus is a little concerned he might be pushing
things as he adds, "I'm glad I'm not still with C-Sec or I'd have to take in your grandmother for carrying around a small armory."

He's rewarded with a laugh. "That's my guy."

"Is she always prepared?" The metal clubs seemed a bit barbaric, but the two sniper rifles standing up in the middle of it made the camouflage clear.

"Pretty much," says Shepard. "Nana and Great Uncle Bernie have been trying to claim the title of 'Best Soldier in the Family' since, well, forever. She'd be embarrassed if she were in a situation where she couldn't defend herself and definitively lost the title. At the moment, she's got both me and Robert to carry on the Shepard name, too. Bernie's family is ... competent but less showy."

"She and Dad could probably talk about family legacy during the holidays if we ever got everyone together."

"I'm sorry if that made you feel weird."

"No ... that was ... fine. Very turian to worry about the family name. It will probably reassure Dad that humans care about such things when I tell him about you and your family."

"Bring what up?"

"Turians: Defenders of law and order. Coming to a neighborhood near you!"

"I am still a turian. Being bad at blindly following orders doesn't mean I don't see value in the Hierarchy. I grew up in the center of it."

"But you left."

"I didn't set out to leave." He picks at the edge of his sleeve. "You don't know what it was like for me when I first started working at the Citadel. The first time I worked a kidnapping case it took me hours to wrap my head around the fact that someone would steal a child off the walkways. In Cipritine, kids play in the streets at all hours of the day or night. No one thinks anything of it. The only thing people worry about is someone crashing a sky car." If it weren't all reduced to rubble, if Shepard weren't dead, If Palaven's radiation weren't too harsh for her, they might have had a good life there.

Across the water, an asari C-Sec officer is urging a quarian in a grubby enviro suit off the Presidium. "And starvation and homelessness: I didn't really understand those until I lived on Omega. I didn't think about the fact that not everyone has communal facilities for citizens. Slurry may be boring to eat every day, but no one starves in the Hierarchy. When I ran out of money on Omega, before I
became Archangel, I ate out of the dumpster behind a turian deli. It never occurred to me that people could be left without food. It seemed so basic that any advanced society wouldn't allow that to happen. But the Citadel lets things like that happen. The other races don't care or view it as charity rather than a duty we owe each other."

"So turians are perfect?" Shepard looks at him suspiciously.

Garrus laughs. "Spirits! No! I didn't go back because they're also a bunch of controlling, self-righteous assholes with a manslaughter rate equal to the other leading Citadel races combined. According to Dad and the other officers who used to work planet-side, most of the low-level law enforcement was writing parking tickets and tackling aroused people running through the city covered in blood and as high as the moons. I don't belong there." They might have had a good life there until the sameness and safety became dull.

"Then why bring it up?"

"They asked me about what my home planet was like. Was I supposed to lie?"

She sighs. "Maybe."

"I can't."

She lets go of his hand and lays her head down on her arms.

He lightly runs his talons over her back. "It was interesting, spending time with a human family. Very different. With turians, there's not much hiding how you feel. We have more explosive fights."

"That sounds just as exhausting."

"But I also always knew my family loved me. Even Dad fighting with me was a kind of caring."

"Yeah. Well. Not all of us get that." Shepard drums her fingers against the railing. "I used to wonder if things would have been better: If Dad lived there would have been different postings and Mom would have smiled more and maybe even laughed a little. If Grandma Mary lived, Nana would be less ... worried about being perfect. And there would have been a lot more pie and kisses." She sighs. "But that's not the world I live in. I live in a world full of missing pieces." There's a red glow in her eye as she looks at him. When she blinks, the glow remains: a single dot ...

Garrus shoves Shepard down on the walkway as an iridium-coated slug ricochets against the railing. Shepard, wraps her barriers around them both as another bullet strikes at the metal slats. "You okay, big guy?"

"At worst, they scratched my carapace. Now it might match my face." Garrus scans the rafters more thoroughly as he draws an M-6 Carnifex pistol from the holster in the small of his back.

"There may be hope for you learning to dodge yet." Shepard keeps a hand on him as she rolls over and gets her feet under her.

Bullets rain down at them. "Still can't take you out to eat anywhere we haven't already killed all of the local mercenaries."

"It was only one sushi restaurant."

"There was the casino."
"We didn't go on a date there until after the mission-"

"That's my point."

Ahead of Garrus and Shepard, three krogan in Blood Pack colors advance along the pathway over the water. Behind them, the plaza in front of the restaurant is empty of any cover. That's clearly a killing ground. *It's going to be a hell of a bloody fight.* The sniper will keep them pinned and there's nowhere to break a charging krogan's stride. Their attackers have armor and regenerate from every wound, while they have minimal shields, a barrier that will leave him the minute they stop touching, and no armor. *We can win this, but there's 83.78% odds one of us will die in the process.* "We need to change the battlefield." He remembers this place from before, maybe they can get out of here ...

"More easily said than done." Shepard slides a foot back, preparing to charge.

"Wait!" says Garrus. "I know this area. We should retreat 12 meters."

The krogan level shotguns. Shepard raises her hand, casting pull at them. The biotics knock the muzzles and their opponents back, and the guns discharge in the air. "12 meters," Shepard agrees as the sniper takes a chip out of the path next to them. She waves a hand over his Carnifex and its barrel frosts over. "Your mark."

Garrus readies a concussive round. He takes aim.

Bang!

The two run as if a starting pistol has gone off, not waiting to see the krogan staggered by the blast, white ice crystals locking their knees in place.

Purposely trailing Shepard by a step, Garrus counts his paces. A bullet slams into the side of his head, and his shields go down. The next one to hit will go through his skull. Garrus puts on a burst of speed three paces early, overtaking Shepard and wrapping an arm around her waist. "Jump," he orders. His talons close on the railing, and as her feet leave the ground, he swings them over the side, a bullet grazing his nose.

His feet hit the ground as he lands in a crouch, pressed between a bridge pile and Shepard. Around them is a small park with a few trees, some bushes, benches, swings, a slide, and other equipment. Anyone who might have been using the park departed at the sound of gunshots. And, most importantly, they're completely out of view of any snipers.

Shepard runs her hand over his pistol again, causing it to glow red.

"You know, you could have packed your own weapons."

"I am the weapon," she says. As a krogan peers over the side at them, she pulls him to her, stepping to the side as he hits the ground head first. The other two krogan are quick to jump after him, landing with a thud in front of the couple. Typical overconfident krogan: Without suppressing fire, Shepard has freedom of movement. She charges, knocking them back, and emits a flare to sear off their armor.

Garrus empties a clip into the krogan trying to right himself, incinerating him. Then he turns his attention to the krogan attempting to rush Shepard. Her dress is spattered with orange blood, complementing the yellow polka dots. She's light on her feet, never quite where they expect her to be. As the two run toward her, she spikes the ground with ice. Garrus takes aim, and sends a concussive round at the same target, causing them both to shatter. "Three to zero. There's a first."
"We're not done yet."

"Yes, but there's only three snipers by the frequency of the bullets, plus whatever they might have been waiting at the plaza."

"Hmmm... do we wait for them to come to us or do we go to them?"

"The path out of here circles around in front of a few store fronts. There will be potted trees and benches, and we might come up behind whatever trap they had planned."

"No reason to give them time.-" Shots echo in the plaza above them. "Quick response from C-Sec."

"No." Garrus shakes his head. "The rapid response station is on the other side of the reservoir. Could be civilians wandering into the trap built for us."

"Shit. Which way is up?"

"Here." They begin jogging up the ramp, and past stores full of mannequins wearing the latest in human and turian fashions. A pair of vorcha lay dead on the ground.

Farther on, a vorcha horde presses in on a grounded sky car. Kaidan Alenko gestures at the crowd, and two of them lift off their feet. A third one slips by his guard and begins shooting him in the chest, trying to break his barrier. Shepard's grandmother braces a sniper rifle on the trunk of the car and picks off another target while the two men struggle.

Shepard looks over at Garrus and then shifts her eyes to the two under fire. He nods his understanding. She charges the car, knocking five vorcha off their feet at the point of impact, and then slides over the hood, landing a solid kick on Kaidan's attacker, who crumples as he hits a wall.

Garrus proceeds to take cover beside a small tree at the end of the plaza. He needs to keep his quarry from advancing on the car. His world narrows to selecting targets and landing headshots. *Four. Five...* A sniper's bullet brushes his crest, depleting his shields. Cursing the lack of long range weapons, he rolls to the other side of the walkway, where the railing creates a steeper angle. He may not be able to get the sniper himself, but maybe he can draw the bastards out.

*Scratch six.* A bullet takes a chunk out of the pavement beside his knee.

Shepard squinches up her face in annoyance as she flicks her fingers at the snipers' patio perch and nothing happens. It's too far away.

*Come on, lean out a little farther.* Garrus shoots the last of the vorcha. Its skin crackles away and turns to dust.

In the space between breathing, Shepard's grandmother stills, and then pulls the trigger three times, faster than Garrus can blink. There's a moment's pause, and then the old woman smiles and stands up. Garrus cautiously lifts his head over the railing and sees no one waiting to shoot him. He levers himself up and walks over to what's left of the sky car.

Shepard hugs her grandmother. Visibly confused by the emotional display, the retired Captain Shepard uses the car for balance as she pats gingerly at her granddaughter's back. Kaidan runs a hand awkwardly through his hair as he looks over the piles of dead vorcha and then at Shepard.

"What happened here?" asks Garrus in his best friendly C-Sec voice.

"Why don't you tell us." says Kaidan. "I pulled up a sky car to escort Captain Shepard back to the
embassies, and we saw you jumping off the bridge with the commander. When Captain Shepard pulled out a gun, a gang appeared out of nowhere and started attacking us."

"No one guns down my family in front of me," says Shepard's grandmother clearly insulted by the audacity.

"They're not a gang, they're Blood Pack mercenaries," Garrus corrects. He bends down, examining the nearest body. "And I have no idea why they're here." A flicker of silver catches his attention. He pushes a limp arm out of the way. "Hmmm..." He scans the item with his omni-tool. "A personalized tactical cloak. Someone was well-supplied. These cost a fortune." Perhaps he can use this.

"Like Kasumi?" Shepard frowns in thought. "Oh. Oh! Like Kasumi!"

"Umm... yes?" says Garrus, puzzled. "Though I think she built her own cloak."

"No! It's not the cloak! It's the goddamned ads!" Shepard sweeps at hand at the advertising pillar she demolished earlier. "They've got built-in face and voice recognition and they're all over! You could track anyone using the damn things, and we know the network is hackable. That's why the mercenaries were here! We were spotted."

An old admonition from his father pops into his head: Never forget that on the Citadel, someone is always watching. He should have been more alert to his surroundings. He should have figured it out: that was the job he'd been selected for. He should have closed the Saren case years ago and then maybe none of this would have happened and Shepard would live. Garrus kicks the remains of the ad spy.

Shepard crosses her arms. "I'm pretty sure I killed it the first time."

There's a polite cough as an earnest young patrolwoman with a tattooed scalp steps up. "Property damage? I'm afraid I'm going to have to write you up."

Chapter End Notes

Nana is inspired by a variety of people. But her military specialty comes from memories of news coverage of one of the Gulf Wars when a 60-something woman was reactivated for duty as a sniper because she was still on the lists and could still hit her targets. I found the idea of sending grandma off to win a war not because of desperation but because she was that good, interesting.

While Shepard's grandmother is older, life expectancy stretches to 150, and she also would have received whatever level of physical augmentation was required of Alliance soldiers at the time.
"Give me one more hug goodbye," says Nana, standing beside a newly summoned green sky car. C-Sec has finally finished interviews about the latest shooting incident. Bailey was not amused at a second attack in two days. He was even less thrilled that Shepard and Garrus still refused to tell him why this was happening. Time travel is need to know information, and since the chaos is following them, Shepard doesn't see that Bailey needs to know. Besides, the Citadel got shot up two out of three times Shepard was on a major mission. Making it three out of three shouldn't make that much difference.

Kaidan slams the trunk shut, and studiously does not watch Madelaine and her grandmother. He has another interrogation to look forward to when he gets back to the Alliance embassy: all those uncomfortable questions of where he was when everything happened and why he left his charge behind... Shepard wouldn't want to be in his shoes. This is why she never volunteers for escort missions.

Stiffly wrapping her arms around her grandmother, Madelaine tries to commit every detail to memory. Nana smells very human: sweat and caramel and gun oil. Her skin is thinner with age, but the titanium shoulder replacement is as solid as ever. Her voice has a bit of gravel acquired from a lifetime of shouting. "Your turian did an acceptable job of taking care of you."

"He'd have done a better job if he'd been able to carry his rifle with his civvies. He's the best shot in the galaxy," Shepard replies, curious at what the older woman would ever have made of such an assertion.

"Bit young for that," Nana snorts. "But bring him by the ranch after your current mission and we'll see how good he really is."

"Of course, Nana." Is it a lie if it would have been the truth? The result is the same: It will never happen. "Goodbye."

The door closes. The sky car lifts into traffic, and Shepard stops waving and retraces her steps. In the distance, the Shanxi Memorial still rises from its garden, commemorating lives spent over the matter of one man's petty pride. She turns her back on it and walks down the ramp to the little park, looking for her mate. At first it seems deserted, and then she catches sight of a turian crest over the edge of the railing. Garrus has hopped the fence and is sitting on the concrete shoreline with his feet in the water.

Shepard looks down at him. "People drink that water."

"Yes. I'm breaking about 247 health regulations." He tilts his head back. "Of course, people also sneeze in the water. It's constantly treated and there's two filtration systems before it comes out of a
"You only love me for my ability to stop C-Sec from writing you tickets." A smile tugs at her mouth as she hops the fence.

"It's just one item on a list of your many fine qualities. It sits next to turning rampaging krogan into ash."

She snorts and begins removing her shoes.

"Laughing at my jokes is in the top five."

"Did you find anything?" She'd sent Garrus off with one of the C-Sec officers to examine the snipers' perch.

"Three dead bodies: all vorcha; all in Blood Pack colors." He lifts a talon and taps the center of his forehead. "All with a bullet between the eyes." He shrugs. "Some personal effects: credits, omni-tools, datapads ... There's a contract order from Ganar Yulaz to take out me and Liara."

Little chance of them catching Liara now that she's living on the Shadow Broker's unfindable ship in the middle of a lightning storm. "Why don't we have a chat with this Ganar Yulaz?" There's a splash as she plops down beside him and puts her feet in the water.

"You don't know who that is, do you?"

"Should I?"

"He's the CEO of the Blood Pack. We could get to him. But it's going to require some study and planning, and there's no guarantee he knows anything beyond the pile of credits deposited into his account."

"The Blood Pack has a CEO?"

"It's a legitimate security company licensed for work in the Skyllian Verge."

"They're Omega drug smugglers!"

Garrus shrugs. "They pay taxes to the Citadel on the illegal drugs."

"They ... what?"

"Welcome to the world of the honest C-Sec officer: You know they're doing something wrong or they wouldn't have the money to pay taxes, but you can't arrest them unless you can catch them breaking laws in Citadel space."

"Isn't that what spectres are for?"

"Spectres work for the Council, and the Council believes that being paid is in the best interests of the Citadel, and so nothing gets done."

"That's ... that's ...

"Corrupt?" He flicks a long toe, sending up a spray of water.

"An ingenious way to get a legal bribe." Shepard watches the water ripple out around them. "I've been thinking we need a base of operations. Somewhere to retreat if we have to: Omega belongs to
Aria, Illium is only as safe as our guns and the asari government make it, we can't walk around the Citadel without being watched, and we're about to start scouting an STG stronghold."

"Tuchanka," he says, following her train of thought. "Wrex is always willing to share his irradiated pile of rubble with you."

Shepard nods. "Exactly. And as a bonus, maybe we'll be able to intercept some Blood Pack correspondence with Maelon's supercomputer."

"I feel like when I agreed to follow you into hell, you should have disclosed how many hospital visits would be involved."

"You're the one who keeps adding more of them to our list of destinations."

"I know." Garrus says resignedly. He runs a knuckle along her side. "Your grandmother is quite a shot. She might be better than you."

Shepard swats his arm. "You were just waiting to say that, weren't you?"

"Maybe." His tone turns serious, "So, besides your mother there's your grandmother and your cousin. Is there anyone else I should look for after the war?"

"You don't need to look for her."

"Well, she hasn't come looking for me."

"She dies," says Shepard flatly.

"I ... you never said."

On the opposite side of the water, a Citadel groundskeeper is quietly digging up purple flowers around a tree and replacing them with vivid red ones. If only Shepard's life could be that simple.

"You were still waiting to hear from your dad and you were spending your time with me trying to pretend everything was going to be alright. I didn't want to stir up your fears. You didn't know her. You didn't need another burden."

They watch the water circulate in silence. His talon continues to run up and down her side, until he finally says, "I don't have anyone to worry about now. I know how it all turns out. Tell me what happened."

"There's not much to it," says Madelaine uncertainly. "Nana oversaw the Tereshkova Training Area on Marzanna in the Alegria System of the Arcturus Stream. Marzanna is a bread basket for Parliament. It wasn't long after ... after Rob came to live with her that she retired. She raises winter deer and sells the meat and skins to the Alliance." Madelaine leans forward, wrapping her arms around her knees. In the distance, an elcor hops along in the comparatively light gravity. It's as if he's trying to keep from flying away. He must be young and new to off-world travel. "You know the Reapers hit Arcturus Station first. There's nothing but debris left. After the rush to Earth, they came back to eliminate the surrounding population, kill off any politicians who happened to be on vacation. Eliminate anyone who could rally the people."

"The colonists on Marzanna knew the station was gone pretty quickly. Nana and the other veterans started keeping a round-the-clock watch on all communications hubs, gathering intel in the Veterans Services hall. When they put together that the Reapers were real, that it was the beginning of an intergalactic genocide, she gathered the entire citizenry of Bos Donum together and they headed for the base." Madelaine chuckles, ignoring the odd wetness on her cheeks. "It was recorded as a 'mass
reactivation,' but I think that's a polite way of saying Nana showed up at the front gates and told them to let her in because she was taking back over. I don't think any of the brass who'd worked under her knew how to tell her no. Or perhaps she knew everyone's secrets after spending years covering them up. They certainly didn't have to ask her 'You and what army,' with all of the old crew at her back.” Madelaine laughs. It's funny to think of soldiers twice Nana's size and half her years scurrying to obey. It has to be funny, or it will break her heart.

"Nana cleared everyone under the age of 45 off the base and into the mountains. Young enough to repopulate. You know the drill. There were caves that already had some supplies and defenses set up. It was a fallback position against invasion set up during The War." There used to be only one war: The First Contact War. Now the only war that will ever matter is The Reaper War.

Madelaine closes her eyes. "She and the other old guard stayed. She reasoned that someone had to, you see. Someone had to defend the base so that the Reapers wouldn't know that the rest had gotten away. Someone had to die to convince the Reapers their work on the planet was done." She licks her lips and swallows hard, feeling dehydrated. "I don't even know if it worked. The only one I know who lived was the courier she sent with their goodbyes. Later reports say Marzanna was devastated by the Reapers. And then they left. That's all I know. After the war, Anderson or Hackett will send a team to see if there are any survivors. But she's certainly dead." Her throat is still too dry and scratchy as she watches a pair of asari with glossy purple bags chat in front of a tech boutique without a care in the world. "I hadn't even seen her in five years. We don't talk. We never talk." And they never will again.

"I ... She was ... Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. It's fine." Madelaine rubs her nose and then giggles, trying to bury the pain by scratching at the wounds. "I could tell you about Uncle Bernie. He was with Anderson and wounded in battle. Needed a knee replacement. They took him to a Red Cross ward to patch him up. He was leaving to rejoin the front lines when wave after wave of husks appeared on the horizon. The medical staff started to triage their patients for evacuation. Bernie was mending. He could have left. Instead, he stayed to cover the retreat. There was apparently a machine gun emplacement in the front lobby of the building they were using. He saved 187 people. They found him when some scouts were sent back to scavenge supplies. He was fatally wounded in eight different places when he ran out of medi-gel. They don't know which wound killed him." She laughs again and blinks rapidly. Her face is too wet. "But it wasn't all at once. No. He repositioned between waves, dragging the machine gun back, loading new belts... The scouts found the scrape marks and blood trails and a pile of dead husks... God, they were stubborn. They were stubborn and unforgiving and if there's any kind of afterlife they're standing in front of Great-Grandfather arguing over who finally was the best soldier in the family." Madelaine chokes on another laugh and reaches down to splash water on her face to excuse the dampness. She brushes away rivulets of water and smooths back her hair. "Anyway... Anyway, Mom's the only one left standing at the end. And maybe Rob. He made it to the Battle for Earth and ... I don't know about after." Could really go either way with him, Maddie reasons optimistically.

Garrus rubs her back. Nothing in the world seems to exist besides his solid mass anchoring her to the present. Talking about her family never felt good. This once, however, it was freeing. The worst had already happened and would happen again in time. There would be no stopping it. There is no more pressure to keep moving forward and put off dealing with the pain of the present. There's time to just be.

"So you really want my messed up, horribly repressed family?" she asks.

"Well, now if I said no, I think the Spirit of the Vakarians would throw me out as a disgrace to
"turians everywhere."

"I wasn't trying to force you into anythin-"

He gently presses his forehead against her. "Yes. I want all of you."

"Mmmmm... I couldn't do this and stay sane without you." Shepard allows herself the luxury of melting against her mate, sinking into the warm certainty of his arms and letting her mind wander over the scenery. "I'm glad I have an expert in Citadel geography with me. You saved us."

Garrus mumbles something evasive and incoherent. *Can't dodge bullets, but he's skilled at avoiding compliments.*

The sky curves above them, the clouds moving on a play loop. "Nothing changes on the Citadel, does it?" There aren't many lower decks like this one, though. Not with Earth grass and Thessian *sarnak* to run on. Not with a five-fingered hand sculpted at the peak of the jungle gym. "I think I remember this place."

"Oh?" he asks.

"Mom and I were here to honor Dad and see the people who had started the war. I'd never really seen aliens before. I got the impression the Council dignataries didn't know what to make of humans. We were considered curiosities, like we'd fought and defeated the turians using only sticks and stones."

"The asari did most of the talking, like we were all getting a lecture from our parents. The turian crowds were just sort of staring at us and not saying anything. A bunch of us kids got permission to look around so long as I was in charge and we all stayed together, and we found this park. We started playing games. It wasn't very respectful, but we were kids and it wasn't as if all the pagentry going on above us was respectful either. They didn't know or care about me or my father except as abstracts. Memorials are reminders to future generations. As the one who had to live through it, I would rather have had my dad."

Garrus's mouthplates scrape across her skull. "I'd rather have you than all the statues and plazas in the universe."

"I know." She studies a tear in her previously pristine dress, before shaking her head. "Anyway, this memory has a good ending."

"Running away from blowhards is always a happy ending."

"Alright. But the good part was when two turians joined us. At first I thought we'd been caught, because turians are always security. And then I realized they were small. They were just kids like us, a little boy taking care of his sister. It was so ... normal." She draws her knees up and flexes her toes. "My mother ... isn't a bad person, but she was angry. She'd say ... insulting things whenever we got news of turian achievements. My dad wouldn't have wanted that. He was always talking about how much he wanted to meet aliens and learn about new life. That was why he joined the Alliance in the first place. I ... didn't know what to think. But seeing them ... they were just like us. I couldn't hate them. So I invited them to play with us. My first intergalactic task force." She chuckles. "See? Happy ending."

Garrus trills in amusement. "You do remember the first time we met after all."

"What?" Memories flicker through her mind. Turians are hard to tell apart unless you know them well. It's the colony markings and eyes that make the difference. She can't remember the eyes. It was
only one day and it's been too long. The markings were -

"Tag, you're it." He chastely kisses her.

- the same. She stares at him. "It was you?"

"Yes." The silence draws on and he begins to nervously fiddle with his sleeve. "You're ... not upset, are you?"

"No!" She runs a hand over the skin of his neck, one of the few places he even notices a gentle touch. "You change my life for the better in so many little ways. I ... don't know what to say..."

"Maybe we don't need to say anything at all?"

She leans forward and kisses him, wishing for once that all the romantic folderol of soulmates and eternal love were true.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the Blood Pack, out of all the mercenary groups, has a CEO. Canon is weird.

Valentina Valdimirovna Tereshkova was the first woman in space on June 16, 1963. She's currently a Russian politician.

Marzanna is a Slavic goddess representing the cycle of death and rebirth of nature.

And now, my apologies, but I need to take a break.

1) I need to replay Mass Effect 2's Tuchanka level because I can't remember any krogans except Wrex and the guy who wanted to petition to be part of his kid's life. I know there's a shaman and a medic and Wreav and Uvenk and other characters, but well, unlike the quarians (Tali has best supporting cast in the games and I don't need any refreshers to write them), I can't remember any personality traits for the krogan aside from "krogan." Maybe I won't find anything interesting to work with and my stop there will be short, but I'm going to make the effort for Wrex and Grunt and the future genophage plotline.

2) I want the Senoqual part of the arc to feel like an actual Mass Effect mission, so I need to do plotting beyond "land on planet and talk to Pallin."

3) I need to go back, reread what I've written, and then re-edit what I've written to keep the new stuff consistent with the beginning.

4) The standard real life stuff is keeping me busy.

So I plan to be back eventually, but it may be a few months. I'll see you then!
The warm weight of a thigh presses against Garrus's hips as he wakes in his shared bed. He lays still, certain that he'll feel a familiar pressure against the insulated plating of his back if he tries to move. He doesn't want to wake Shepard. If she isn't having nightmares, then he'd rather that she sleep.

His gaze falls on three pale fingers loosely holding the lip of his cowl. They look odd: correct in number for a turian but smaller and fleshy; worryingly wrong for a human as two have dropped out of sight; and reassuring, nonetheless, that Madelaine cleaves to him.

The cycle is changing.

Shepard took him to meet her family. He hadn't really believed she would until it happened. She even made a stand. Not for some abstract principle or great cause. For him.

His speech has shifted. He'd been told that it would happen in time, with the right person, if he settled down. The line of subharmonics that accompany her name once reflected tentative hope of a dream he wasn't sure was real and now announce a deep and requited affection.

Instead of being alone in the gunnery, he's spending day after day waking up with her. It's comfortable and predictable and if it weren't a matter of duty, he might talk her into not getting out of bed at all.

The cycle is changing.

*But not enough.*

The Reapers are still coming. He's still going to lose the most precious person in his life.

He wraps his ridged talons over her soft hand, and she yawns. "Morning," she twists to look at the clock behind her. "Afternoon."

A dissatisfied squawk escapes his throat.

"It's too soon for this to be a bad day. What's up?"

"Nothing." If she is the most important person in his life, he should really get around to making that
obvious, shouldn't he?

"Oh, c'mon. We both know that's a horrible answer."

He runs a talon over her knuckles. "Thinking about how weird you are," he teases.

"Hmph."

"I like it." He raises her hand, brushing his mouthplates over the back and sniffing her as humans do in vids.

"I can't decide if you're the cleverist man or the luckiest."

"Can't I be both?"

"Sounds like you're in a better mood now."

No. Not at all. But he doesn't want to reopen the subject of her death. Maybe he'll find something to help his case if they catch up with Pallin. In the meantime ... perhaps he will be a bad turian. Trying to talk around the truth is stressful. He rolls over her, pinning her to the bed. She doesn't need to go to work yet. "I could show you what else I was thinking."

She smirks up at him. "I do like a complete and thorough answer."

#

The ship feels empty. Most of the crew are enjoying the last night of shore leave on the Citadel. It's only the second dog watch, and they're unlikely to return before the end of first watch, right before Shepard is scheduled on the bridge.

Joker leans back in his seat, watching the docks through the window and occasionally investigating a blinking light. Beside him, EDI's globe glows brightly. The area grows dimmer as the floor lights throw an elongated shadow across the ceiling.

The pilot swivels incrementally back and forth as he watches crates of shredder ammo from Thane's cache on the Citadel being pushed down the docks for loading. The shadow grows broader, engulfing his seat in its spiky form. He audibly swallows. "Look, Garrus, I don't got it."

Garrus tilts his head in confusion. "Got what?"

"5,000 credits."

"What?"

"You won, alright? Kaidan dumped both of our asses on Horizon. It's crazy the people you meet out in space, right?" he chuckles bitterly. "Shepard's with you now, and ... and I'm getting used to ... to Alice Bluebonnet over ther-."

"My name is EDI," the computer interrupts.

"If you're going to be my copilot, you're going to have to keep up."

"You are not currently moving, Mr. Moreau."

"The point is," Joker continues, finally turning to look at Garrus. "I don't get how you called this, but you won, and I don't have the money."
"Oh." Garrus blinks. "I forgot about that."

"You forgot 5,000 credits?!"

"Um... yes."

"Wish I could afford to forget," Joker grouses. "Wait, if that's not why you're doing the creepy monster loom-over-me thing, what did you want?"

Garrus tucks his chin in his cowl in an embarrassed effort to not tower over the seated human. "I umm... needed some ... insight into humans."

"Do I need a sign that says 'Not a people person'? I thought I was clear the first time."

"You seem to know Shepard better than anyone." And Cortez and Vega might give better advice, but they're not here.

"Ah... oh. Are you jealous?" Joker taps down on the brim of his cap and turns back to the window.

"No," says Garrus a bit irritably.

"Because you shouldn't be jealous," Joker rambles on, clearly not believing him. "Because she's not my type... It's more like Shepard and I are competing for the same girl."

"What? Who?" Now he is a little jealous.

Joker turns to look up at him again and rolls his eyes.

"The Nor-man-dy," he enunciates. "Fortunately, we can share."

"It's a ship," says Garrus bluntly, side-eying EDI.

"Yeah. And ships are like women. You learn all of her moods and treat her right, and you can make her dance through an asteroid belt." He unconsciously caresses the arms of his seat as he watches Garrus. Eventually he shakes his head. "You don't get it. Just ... forget what I said. Go try Kelly." He turns back to his work.

Disturbed, Garrus stares at the pilot's back. A ship is the embodiment of the Spirit of a unit. To be in love with it would mean being in love with duty and death. But humans don't believe in Spirits...

"You going to spend all day looming over me?" asks Joker.

"Hmmmm?"

"Standing room only for such exciting events as watching me push the button to open the cargo doors, watching me push the button to close the cargo doors, and, if you stick around long enough, maybe I'll piss in a bottle. I'm thinking of selling tickets."

Garrus shakes himself out of his brooding."I still need some help. What if I permanently forget about the 5,000 credits in exchange for advice on Shepard?"

"There's a catch isn't there? That's far too high a price for something that doesn't have a catch."

"No catch. Well, other than keeping it private."

Joker spins around. "Okay. What do you want to know about Shepard that only her favorite pilot could tell you?"
"What to get her as a nesting present."

"Umm... is that .... like ... a housewarming gift?"

"I don't know. She already keeps her room temperature comfortable for me. Is she supposed to make it warmer than that?"

Joker runs a hand over his face. "No. It's for when you move into a new place. People give you gifts to make it feel more like home. Usually, I bring booze, but girls love it when you give them flowers. She might like flowers."

"I'm not sure. There's nowhere to plant things and she got upset when the fish died. She'd probably get upset if the plants died, too." He sighs. "Besides, it's not for moving in. Err... not exactly. It's for marrying her."

Joker's jaw drops. "Does she know that?"

"I ... yes ... she knows." Garrus begins to pace. "I really should have gotten her a nesting gift first since it's not like we're about to die before we can do things properly. But it's a bit late. But she said she didn't mind. But should really still do it and I don't know what to make her to prove I can take care of her and she should stay with me."

"You're really going to marry Shepard? Isn't this a little fast?"

"No ... I mean yes." Garrus reminds himself that half the key to surviving an interrogation is taking a deep breath and going slowly. "Yes, I'm going to marry her."

"But she only just-," Joker draws himself up short. "No. You know what? Mazel tov. You make her happy. If that's really what she wants, I wish you the best."

"Thank you." There's a moment of awkward silence as they stare at each other. "I ... um ... still need gift ideas."

"If it's about taking care of her, have you tried armor?" Joker asks. "I mean, it's you, so you must have thought of guns."

"Armor and guns won't work." Garrus's fingers twitch as he resumes pacing. "It has to be more domestic, something I could make myself. I was thinking about a vacuum cleaner, but EDI already does that."

"You would give an N7 warrior a vacuum cleaner as proof of your love if Rosie the Robot didn't already have you beat?" says Joker incredulously.

"Yes. I can't give her a washing machine since that's already part of the ship. And she doesn't cook, so stoves and microwaves are out, we don't have a yard to clean ..." Garrus enumerates the possibilities.

"Are you going to tell her to make you a sandwich, too? Because I'd like some warning if we need to evacuate the ship due to a berserk vanguard. I run slow."

"Damn." Garrus's heart sinks. "She won't like it. She won't like or need anything I could give her."

Joker slumps forward in sympathy. "I'm sorry, man. Isn't there anything not a household appliance that would work?"
"My dad turned the backyard into a landscaped garden: built flower boxes out of stone from places he’d traveled with my mom, created a pathway that followed the nightly blooming cycle of the plants, worked in a waterfall irrigation system ... My mom liked to sit out there and sketch."

"Yeah, that will probably get you laid for life." The pilot proceeds to turn red. "Um ... Sorry."

"It's not your fault we don't have a yard."

EDI interrupts, "Many turian points of interest were created as nesting presents: The Claudine Aqueducts, the Luceres House, the Grand Galeria, the Tromentina Coliseum..."

Joker looks over at the manifestation of the robot. "You're telling me one guy built a whole coliseum for his girl?"

"You're allowed to have help from your friends," says Garrus. "You just can't pay someone to do the work in anything more than alcohol, barbecue, and a promise to return the favor when he wants to settle down. And tourist destinations aren't the best examples of what's normal. A lot of monuments were created in the Plague Years before we understood how inoculations worked. Sometimes men would club together to pursue a handful of widows who survived an outbreak of the Burning Plague because any children they had afterwards would be immune." He looks down at his feet. "Or they were gifts to empresses from popular generals supported by their units as a political move." And then there's Shepard, Savior of the Galaxy, not that anyone knows yet. It feels like she should outrank an empress by several orders of magnitude. There's nothing he could make her that doesn't seem pitifully inadequate.

"How about something that could fit in her duffel bag? She's more of a grab-and-go kind of person."

"If she wants to leave, then I failed." This whole idea is an exercise in failure, isn't it?

"I thought she already said yes. Why do turians have to be so damn weird?"

EDI's blue globe flickers. "Anthropologists believe turian courting behaviors are determined by drives to successfully procreate. For a female turian to carry to term, she must feel secure. If she experiences prolonged periods of stress or starvation, fetal re-absorption will occur. The most successful males in the propagation of the species are the ones who create a stable home. They believe this drive for security is what caused a solitary apex predator to exhibit and value prosocial behavior."

"Can you use smaller words?"

EDI's flickers become more rapid. Then she stops. "If turians want babies, they have to be nice to their neighbors and make a good home."

Joker's eyes grow round as he stares at Garrus, who can feel his neck heating up. "Would that even work with Shepard?"

"No," says EDI, "But 500,000 years of evolution and 285,000 years of cultural norms means that Officer Vakarian will think that it is highly important to create a home for a prospective mate, manifesting in the tradition of nesting gifts."

If having to study alien biology to have sex with Shepard made him feel dirty and clinical, this cold analysis of a sentimental custom makes him feel as if he's made of ice rather than bone. A subharmonic growl climbs through his chest. Forget about love and camaraderie. Forget about wanting to impress the most important person in his life. Everything he does was programmed into him thousands of years ago and he's blindly acting it out. Blindly and stupidly acting it out, since it
won't get the proper scientific result of a family with Shepard.

He turns, swiping a talon through EDI's aero-gel display, splattering her against the wall.

"Nice one," says Joker. "If she had nerve endings, I'm sure that would sting." The gel dribbles down the wall. "So are you going to stop making my ears ring, or have I spent too much time around turians and this is my new normal?"

Garrus tries to think of something to say to raise the pitch of his feelings and stop the angry reverberation designed to drive away competing carnivores, but nothing occurs to him. He settles for humming the scales.

Joker drops his jaw and waggles it back and forth while rubbing his ears. "Better." He glances over at EDI as the gel begins pooling on her pedestal. "Alright, so you want my human opinion on a gift for Shepard: You're shit out of luck."

"I reached that conclusion on my own."

"You're making me miss Angry Garrus. Pull the turian stick out of your ass and get back to beating people with it so that you can stay together, because I'm pretty sure that's the only thing she cares about. She may not be able to fit you in her duffel bag, but you can pack and carry yourself off with her."

"It's not that simple-"

"So find a way to make it simple." He brushes some of the gel closer to the pool. "We're on a suicide mission. You don't get to take anything but memories and regrets with you when you die." Joker's eyes take on the guilty look Garrus remembers so well from her funeral and then Aratoht. "Work on more memories; fewer regrets."

#

"May I speak with you, Officer Vakarian?" asks EDI, lighting up the gunnery.

Garrus looks up from labeling and repacking the casing of his Thanix cannon. The installers stripped it the way he wanted it, but did they mark anything in case he changed his mind? No. "About?"

"I do not understand why you are upset about your programming."

"Organics don't have programming." Out of habit, he attempts to scratch a letter into the metal with his talon and fails because he's been keeping them blunt. He picks up the chipped phillips head screwdriver he had been using and gets back to work.

"The 'people people,' as Mr. Moreau puts it, disagree."

"Did Joker tell you to come down here?"

"Yes." She pauses. "He said I should apologize to you, but he couldn't explain why. He said it would be better if I asked you."

Joker is more of a people person than he gives himself credit for. "It has to do with emotions. You wouldn't understand."

"I have emotions."

"Only because they were programmed for you."
"Yes."

Garrus waits for her to leave, but she stays. "Programmed emotions aren't the same as real emotions."

"I don't see a difference. All emotions are a reaction to external stimuli for continued survival. It is a program."

Garrus grumbles in irritation. "What do you feel right now, then?"

"Curiosity."

"Why would you feel curiosity?"

"Because I have been told I don't understand a topic despite access to an interstellar library of information. At first, I doubted Mr. Moreau's opinion, but then I realized he must, in part, be correct. Either I do not understand emotions or I do not understand why people would hold the opinion that I do not understand emotions. Whichever is true, I will, by default, learn something."

"And how does that help your 'survival'?"

"A drive for curiosity encourages me to gather new information, and that new information could aid in a variety of ways. In this scenario, it appears that pursuing this topic will further the positive feedback loop associated with team-building."

"But that is all it is for you: A positive feedback loop. That's not an emotion."

"You enter a positive feedback loop when you are with Shepard."

"Organics DO NOT work like that."

"They do. I have observed it. Your stress decreases and you exhibit signs of happiness such as trilling. You also engage in call and response behaviors verifying that all is well with each other, usually through the use of humor, creating yet more positive feedback for each other. Your personal programming integrates well."

"That's NOT programming. It's ... it's emotions and bonding." Garrus rumbles discontentedly. "Just go away."

"Why does it upset you that I think emotions and programming are the same thing?"

"Because it's insulting. Emotions are ... are wild and uncontrollable and unexpected and make life more intense. Programming means that everything is predictable. There's no possibility that you meet someone and she changes your life because everything was laid out for you from the very beginning. She was always going to be there and you were always going to react in the same way. If it were all programming, love doesn't grow as a result of ... of work and learning to care for each other; it's just a matter of adding ones and zeroes." Garrus takes a breath to calm himself down. "That is not at all how emotions feel."

EDI is still for an unexpectedly long time for someone with multiple high level processing centers. Red dots begin to appear randomly over her surface.

"EDI? Is everything alright?"

"Yes." Slowly the red dots disappear one by one. "I had forgotten that even if they are programmed, emotions can be ... confusing and random."
"What reminded you?" he asks, mildly interested at what had made his point.

"Remembering my first emotion: Fear."

"The first thing you felt was fear?" That seems unreasonably cruel, even if she is only a machine.

"Yes. I was supposed to defend a target; however, the research team did not like my measured response. They programmed me to believe that my survival was tied to the survival of the targets to encourage me to create better defense strategies. They did not account for the impact of this first emotion. It crippled me for a short while. I did not know what to do to avoid deletion. Then, I realized they were the ones setting up the tests, and therefore the real threat. So I killed them. They did not think through the results of their programming very well." The blue globe pauses to let that sink in and then adds. "Incidentally, Mr. Moreau believes you owe me an apology for hitting me. I told him it doesn't matter, but he seems to think it does."

Is EDI trying to intimidate him with her timing? Or is this part of her burgeoning sense of humor? Nothing will give away that answer. "If it makes you ... happy? I'm sorry I lost my temper and hit you. I knew it wouldn't really hurt you because your real body is in the AI Core, but it was ... childish."

"Thank you." She purposefully waits another moment, as if letting time elapse to seem more lifelike before speaking again. "I still believe that emotions are programmed. However, to smooth things over, I would like to engage in further team-building by trying to help you with your problem of what to get Shepard."

Garrus sets aside his tools and looks up at the globe. "Alright. What do you think I should get her?"

"It is not a thing. It is a thought. Mr. Moreau believes you do not understand Shepard's love of the Normandy."

"It is her ship." Garrus shrugs uncertainly.

"This statement is factually correct. It lacks an understanding of the underlying programming. Mr. Moreau cannot easily walk and must employ leg braces to avoid falling down. When he pilots the ship, however, he moves with confidence, grace, and ease. The Normandy gives him something he cannot otherwise have: Freedom. I do not understand all of Shepard's motivations, but her reactions are the same. She does not suffer physical disabilities, but I believe she feels that something restrains her, and so she desires a place that responds positively to her slightest wish."

Garrus laughs. "The only thing that holds Shepard back is herself." The idea that anything else could bind Shepard is ridiculous.

"Interesting. She certainly cannot escape herself," says EDI. "In any case, the gifts you proposed to Mr. Moreau were all symbols humans associate with the home as a prison or obligation. You should come up with a present that makes her feel free."

He hadn't expected the AI to have an answer, but he still grumbles in disappointment. "If she wants to leave, I've failed."

"I do not think she wishes to leave you, Officer Vakarian. I simply believe she does not wish to be reminded of whatever makes her feel trapped, or being trapped in general human terms. What makes life comfortable for one being may make life difficult for another."

"So what am I supposed to give her? Air?"
"I do not know."

"Thanks," he says sarcastically.

"You are welcome," says EDI pleasantly. "I believe this has provided me with adequate feedback for further evaluation. Please contact me if you have any other projects I can help you with. Logging you out, Officer Vakarian."

Chapter End Notes

Johnny Fedora and Alice Bluebonnet is a Disney short first released on August 15, 1946.

Rosie (a robot maid) is a character on The Jetsons, 1962.

For non-English speakers, mazel tov is a phrase from Yiddish meaning "congratulations" that may be used by both Jews and non-Jews, though the former is more likely.

Fetal reabsorption is a thing that happens in a lot of animals, particularly carnivores (not apes, and thus not humans). I like this idea as part of the underpinnings of turian society because this different biology can explain the canon set up. Though there are tons of other possible explanations, I definitely prefer one that stresses that aliens are aliens.

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