A Matter of Life and Death

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<td>Character:</td>
<td>Valni Severan, Kenneth Donnelly, Gabriella Daniels, Erata D’Ceni, Zaalia Gerumis, Lia’Vael nar Ulnay, Urdnot Chaill, Elaine Harrison, Shepard (Mass Effect), Garrus Vakarian, Tali’Zorah nar Rayya, Daro’Xen vas Moreh, Vetra Nyx, Tiran Kandros, Urdnot Wrex, Jona Sederis, Illusive Man, Harbinger (Mass Effect), Original Female Turian Character(s), Original Male Turian Character(s), Original Asari Character(s), Original Female Character(s) of Color, Original Male Character(s) of Color, Original Krogan Character(s), Original Elcor Character(s), Original Geth Character(s), Turian(s), quarian - Character, Krogan - Character, Geth - Character, Elcor - Character, Asari, Reapers (Mass Effect)</td>
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A Matter of Life and Death
by XenoSapian

Summary

2186 – Valni and Kenneth are trying to make their relationship work, but the trauma of past
events is taking its toll on Kenneth. Valni, too, is struggling in her new job, not least when she has to arrest Kenneth’s boss, Commander Shepard. To make matters worse she discovers her late father may have been murdered; a sadistic merc is trying to kill her; a deadly enemy is after a mysterious Geth device… And there’s the small matter of a Reaper invasion.

The battle to save the galaxy takes Valni from Earth’s moon, to the pastures of Palaven; from the barren wastes of Tuchanka, to the towering cities of Thessia, and ultimately leads to a confrontation that may cost her everything.

As her father once said: “There is no victory without sacrifice.”
## Prologue

### Dramatis personae

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<td>Valni Severan</td>
<td>Turian female</td>
<td>Spectre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gabriella Daniels</td>
<td>Human female</td>
<td>Former Cerberus Engineer</td>
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<td>Kenneth Donnelly</td>
<td>Human male</td>
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<td>Erata D'Ceni</td>
<td>Asari maiden</td>
<td>Structural Engineer</td>
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<td>Zaalia Gerumis</td>
<td>Turian female</td>
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<td>Lia'Vael vas Moreh</td>
<td>Quarian female</td>
<td>Special Projects Researcher</td>
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<td>Urdnot Chaill</td>
<td>Krogan male</td>
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<td>Vica Severan</td>
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<td>Alfren Severan</td>
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<td>Naami Kamau</td>
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<td>Elaine Harrison</td>
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<td>Alliance N2 Sergeant-Major</td>
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<td>Commander Shepard</td>
<td>Human *****</td>
<td>Former Spectre/Prisoner</td>
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<td>Garrus Vakarian</td>
<td>Turian male</td>
<td>Senior Advisor on Reaper Forces</td>
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<td>Tali'Zorah vas Normandy</td>
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<td>Djamil Leptis</td>
<td>Turian male</td>
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<td>Antoni Cressoni</td>
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<td>Captain Verress</td>
<td>Turian female</td>
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Valni had fond memories of her childhood.

At nine-years old she had few cares in life. Her free time was spent in good-natured, if boisterous, rivalry with her siblings, and kept in check by her parents. Her mother was soft-spoken but keenly intelligent, and her father, though strict, was always quick to smile – especially when Valni performed a new kata successfully. Valni was happiest when she was training. Her only cause for concern was a niggling feeling that maybe she shouldn't love violence as much as she did. But when she was sparring with her brothers and the adrenaline was flowing she had to admit that beating up her brothers was so much fun!

Her older brother, Avitus, squirmed as he tried to free himself from Valni's armlock.

"Dad! Make her stop!" Avitus cried out, his shrill voice slightly muffled by the fact he was face down in the grass.

"It's your arm, you stop her," Titus replied.

Maintaining a watchful eye on the match, Titus Severan, Special Ops Commander and Governor of the Northern Provinces (and a formidable martial artist, if he did say so himself) gauged his son and daughter's performance; amusement, and no little pride, making the tan skin around his eyes crinkle as he tried to suppress a smile.

Standing beside him, Titus' old friend and Tribune of the Hierarchy, Gaius Alicix watched the display with interest. The Tribune had known Titus for nearly twenty years and trusted him with his life – Titus had even saved Gaius' life on more than one occasion, so if there was one thing he could assured of it was a warm welcome at the Severan residence.

On Titus' right, Avitus' twin brother, Arrian, shouted words of encouragement (or derision, depending on who was winning), while Titus' partner, Vica, lounged on the grass opposite, holding their youngest, Alfren, in her arms; the six-year old eager to jump in with his junior medi-kit and patch up the wounded.

"Do you yield?" Valni asked Avitus.

"No! Ow!" Avitus bawled as Valni applied more pressure. "That hurts! Alright, I yield. I yield!" Avitus tapped his free hand rapidly on the ground.

Valni immediately released his arm. Avitus struggled to his feet. He was muttering under his breath and held his right arm tenderly.

"Are you hurt, Avi?" his mother asked.

Avitus shook his head, but his pained expression said otherwise.

Ever the helper, Alfren leapt to his feet and ran to his older brother, a tube of medi-gel clasped in his tiny hand. Avitus recoiled from his younger brother as if he'd been burnt.

"I don't need it," Avitus said stubbornly.
"Avitus," Vica said, her tone suggesting she wasn't in the mood to argue, "if you've pulled a muscle, let him help."

Reluctantly, Avitus allowed Alfren to smear his arm with the alien-made medi-gel. The relief was immediate and Avitus' expression relaxed.

When Alfren was finished, Avitus mumbled his thanks, then flashed a stern glare at Valni before running off to join his twin.

Gaius chuckled and turned to Titus. "Visiting is such an education," he said.

"You're always welcome here, Gaius," Titus told him, "we value your visits."

"Even if they are unannounced," Vica said, reclining on her elbow, her mandibles twitching as a wry smile played on her lips.

"I hope I wasn't interrupting something?" Gaius asked.

"Not at all," Vica replied, "but I take it you're not here simply for our 'educational' value."

Gaius smiled. "Am I that transparent?" he asked. Vica inclined her head. Gaius nodded admiringly; Vica had always been a shrewdly perceptive woman. The Tribune reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved a slim box. He handed it to Titus. "I know you're not one for ceremonies."

Titus opened the lid. Inside was a circular medal inscribed with the Hierarchy insignia.

"The Palladium Star?" Titus asked in surprise.

"You repelled the Batarian pirates over Aephus. You've earned it."

"We drove the batarians away from the shipyards. But I didn't capture them. And I certainly didn't earn this."

"The Primarch disagrees."

"This came from the Primarch?"

"On my recommendation."

Titus snapped the box lid shut. "You shouldn't have done that, Gaius."

"What are old soldiers for?"

"The squad deserves this more than I do."

Gaius shrugged. "You can try to give it them but you know they won't accept it."

Titus grunted, reluctantly agreeing with his friend. Titus' squad were unwaveringly loyal and proud to a fault. There was no way they would agree to take an award meant for someone else.

Gaius patted Titus' arm. "I'm sure you'll think of somewhere appropriate to stick it," he said.

"One place does come to mind!" Titus said, smiling. "Why do I put up with you?"

"I ask myself the same question, old friend," the Tribune replied with a grin.

"This calls for a celebration," Vica said as she rose to her feet. "Would you like a drink?" she asked
The Tribune grinned. "As if you have to ask."

Vica led Gaius back towards the house.

Titus didn't follow them, instead he called over his four children.

"What's that?" Alfren asked, pointing at the medal box.

Titus took the Palladium Star out of its case. The children gazed at the medal in awe.

"They gave you the Star?" Arrian said, his mouth open.

"What was that for?" Avitus asked.

"You must be proud, dad," Valni added.

"Only of my family and my squad. Pride in yourself is vanity. It leads to overconfidence and an arrogant spirit. That is the path of destruction."

"Sorry," Valni said contritely.

"I want one of you to take charge of this for me," Titus said. "But who should look after it?"

A chorus of 'Me! Me!' filled the air as Avitus, Valni and Arrian all raised their hands, seeking their father's approval. Titus waited patiently until the battle for supremacy had died down.

"A true Hierarchy soldier always thinks of others before themselves, and puts the squad's needs ahead of their own," Titus said.

He turned to Alfren.

Smiling, Titus knelt down and pinned the medal on the aspiring medic's chest.

"You keep this safe until I come to reclaim it, alright?" he said.

Alfren's broad grin lit up his small face. Alfren thanked his father, and then turned and dashed off to show Vica his prize.

The disappointed trio watched Alfren run towards the house, with their father trailing after him.

Avitus pouted. "I'm the oldest, I should have the Star," he complained.

"You're not," Valni said. "Vereen's the oldest."

"But she's not here, is she. She's at boot camp, which makes me the oldest."

"You're only a few minutes older than me," Arrian pointed out.

"Yeah, older but not wiser," Valni told Avitus. "I can still kick your ass!"

"I let you win," Avitus said.

"In your dreams!" Valni scoffed.

Arrian gave his brother a shove. "You're just jealous 'cause she's got bigger horns than you!"
"I do not!" Valni protested.

"They're bigger than Reen's," Arrian told her.

"Yeah, Val wants to be a boy when she joins the Hierarchy," Avitus taunted.

"No, I don't! I hate boys!" Valni yelled.

"You train like one," Arrian said mockingly.

"Sweaty, stinky Valni! Sweaty, stinky Valni!"

"Stinkhorn! Stinkhorn!"

"Shut up, Arri!" Valni screamed.

She turned and stomped away.

The twins giggled. "She's so easy," Avitus said with a wink at his brother.

Then a deep voice boomed behind them, "Boys!" Avitus and Arrian froze.

"Go inside and tell your mother what you said!" Titus ordered.

Cringing, the twins scuttled back to the house, not even daring to look at their father as they ran past.

Titus didn't follow them. His focus was on Valni. Not that he needed to worry, he knew exactly where she had gone. It was where she always went when she was upset.

The cliff-face.

Valni sat on a boulder on the cliff-top overlooking the Luciana grasslands.

Her brothers' words had hurt. They always hurt, but Valni had learned to defend herself against them. She didn't dwell on the past, she focused on the future.

Valni had her future mapped out: at fifteen she would enlist to serve the Hierarchy – specialising in hand-to-hand combat like her father. She would steadily rise through the tiers to a command position, and enjoy a long career before eventually having children of her own, not that she was in any hurry to find a partner (boys were yucky!), though she recognised it may be necessary in the future, just so long as she could stay on Palaven far away from those strange blue-skinned aliens that ran the galaxy (aliens were nearly as yucky as boys!).

More importantly, though, she would make her father proud…

"Is there room for one more?"

Valni recognised her father's voice but didn't bother looking at him.

She shrugged nonchalantly. If dad wanted to sit next to her, then fine. Whatever.

Titus perched on the boulder next to his daughter and gazed out at the pastures.

A comfortable silence settled between them.

It was a game they played. Neither of them wanted to be the first to speak.
But inevitably, one of them had to lose the game. And that was usually her father.

"Did I tell you about the time I sparred with Master Jue'bruc Fanleen?"

Valni sighed. "Yeah, you did, dad."

"Really?" Titus said innocently. "Even the story of how he broke my ribs?"

"Lots of times," Valni assured him.

"Oh… Well, I guess I have talked about him a lot. There must be something I haven't told you."

"I doubt it."

"Hmmm… Well, did I tell you Master Fanleen helped plan the invasion of Earth during the Relay 314 incident?"

"Against the newcomer aliens?"

"The humans, yes."

Valni's lip twisted. "They're horrid! Weird-looking and belligerent."

Titus grinned, admiring his youngest daughters expanded vocabulary. "I don't disagree. But they're also disciplined and powerful. A good soldier should respect his opponent in battle. You have to learn to understand them; to think like them. Because any enemy worth their salt will be doing exactly the same to you. Remember, if you can study your opponent you can learn to predict them, and if you can predict them then you can beat them. That's how we won against the humans."

"I thought the asari ended the Relay 314 Incident?" Valni said.

"True," Titus admitted, "but we were on the verge of beating them. Our ground troops weren't making any headway at Shanxi, so the leadership decided to take the fight to Earth. Our combined fleets would have neutralized their military and brought the civilians under the protection of the Hierarchy. No more need to fight them ever again. There would have been peace. But then the asari and salarians stepped in. They realised what was happening – despite our Councillor's effort to keep the invasion secret – and voted to end the conflict. The asari even positioned their largest dreadnought between our forces as a show of strength. But, in truth, the humans surprised us. They were stronger than we thought. Master Fanleen judged them a threat to galactic peace. He thinks they can't be trusted."

"Is that what you think?"

Titus took a deep breath before replying. "As much as I admire Master Fanleen, I don't believe we should judge an entire species based on one skirmish. Or their appearance," he added wryly. "Everyone has something to contribute to the galaxy. The humans are outsiders now, but with the right guidance they could be so much more." Titus paused for effect, hoping his analogy had taken root.

But Valni shook her head. "Well, if one of those hideous aliens came near me I'd put it in an arm lock and throw it down on its stupid, flat back."

"A sound strategy, but not the best way to make friends," Titus said with a grin.

"Who'd want to be friends with that?" Valni said heatedly.
Titus watched his daughter clench and unclench her fists. Her mandibles were clamped against her jaw and her chest was flushed. She had never made friends easily. Children her age were taller, more developed; hardly any girls had a crest of horns like hers. Valni was an outsider. Even at home. Invariably, the times she did try to make friends, some idiotic class-clown would make a joke about Valni’s height, or her horns. It didn't go down well. And usually ended in recriminations and a few cracked carapaces – mostly other children's.

But despite these setbacks, Valni kept trying.

She persisted.

And eventually she learned restraint. She learned when not to fight.

He taught her how to control her emotions so that her anger wouldn't show.

Like now.

Titus tapped at his chest. "You're still flushed, time to study your forms."

Valni nodded and hopped off the boulder. They moved closer to the cliff.

Standing side-by-side, they gazed out over the silver-green grasslands. Golden rays of sunlight pierced the clouds. The scent of rho'dainnberry and spice drifted on the wind.

"Centre yourself," Titus said and slowly drew his hands upwards with his wrists bent. Valni followed his lead and they moved into the first form. She exhaled, extending her right arm out and turning her fingers into a hook. Bending her right leg, she slowly crouched down and moved into the 'Penetrating Palm' form, her left leg straight and her left hand touching her toes. This changed into 'Pulling the Louza's Tail' as Valni shifted her weight to her left and moved her hands around in a series of arcs.

The slow sequence of movements was performed in perfect unison.

A feeling of serenity settled upon her. Valni's frustration evaporated as if carried away on the evening wind. The world seemed to melt into the background. There was only the now; she no longer noticed the grass beneath her feet or the sun on her face. All that mattered were the forms and the energy flowing through her limbs.

This was a moment of true peace – a moment that Valni always cherished. The forms were her way of connecting to her father; with his wisdom and compassion and love.

She swore she would always follow his teachings.

19 Years Later

_Vallhallen Threshold – Final Weeks of the Reaper War – 2186 CE_

Valni’s lungs screamed for air.

She lay pressed against the cold, metal deck, her eyes and carapace stinging from the pressure change as precious air escaped into the frozen depths of space. The emergency shields weren't working properly – likely due to the firefight – and the breach in the ship's dorsal hull was blowing out the atmosphere faster than the environmental systems could replenish it.
Her situation was bad.

It wasn't helped by the gaping wound in her abdomen.

Valni clamped a hand over the wound, trying to stem the blood seeping between her fingers. She gritted her teeth against the pain. Her vision swam. The shriek of venting air roared in her ears. All her senses were under assault.

Just then the deck-plating shuddered beneath her. Valni recognised the tremor. The vessel had jumped to FTL. The ship was powering away from the Raheel Leyya system; away from her squad-mates. Part of her was relieved: her squad – those who'd survived, at least – were out of danger.

Despite the pain, Valni was formulating a strategy.

*If I can get to the Command Centre, she thought, I might be able to alter the course or deactivate the drive core.*

But even as the idea flashed in her mind she knew it was hopeless. The navigation computer was code-locked, and the only person who could unlock it had been blown out of the hull!

Valni looked around, searching desperately for something, anything that could help. Every item not tied down was gone – medi-packs, breathing masks, weapons, they'd all been blown out.

The only things left standing were the sleeping pods. If she could reach one, she might have a chance: The pods were hermetically sealed, they would have their own oxygen supply.

Valni began to drag herself across the floor towards the closest pod.

The crawl was painfully slow. Her arms trembled from exertion and lack of oxygen. She could feel the pull of unconsciousness tugging at her mind.

Drawing her last reserves of strength, she clawed her way to the pod and reached up, her talons scrabbling for the lock.

But it was no good. Valni couldn't support her weight.

Her hand dropped, blood painting a blue smear down the glass.

Her strength had gone.

*This is my fault*, she thought bitterly. She'd failed to read her opponent. She couldn't predict her enemy's movements; and now she was paying the price.

*I let you down, dad.*

There was nothing she could do.

She'd failed.

Valni shut her eyes.

*I'm sorry, dad. I'm sorry...*
Downtime

Chapter Summary

Valni and Kenneth enjoy some quiet time together on Illium.

_Hotel Azure, Nos Astra, Illium – 21:30 LT – 4th November 2185 CE_

Valni waved the blade in the man's face.

Her victim eyed the silver blade in alarm. He tried to struggle, but it was no good. He was completely at her mercy. A shiver of anticipation slid up her spine. She grinned, secretly relishing the heady feeling of power. Valni caught her reflection in the polished metal and realized her mandibles had coloured with excitement.

"This would go a lot quicker if you stopped squirming," she told him.

"Who said I wanted this to be quick?" the man beneath her replied.

Kenneth sat bare-chested in one of the hotel's comfortable lounge chairs as Valni straddled his legs, a cut-throat razor pressed against his foam-covered cheek.

"Where did you get a straight razor?" he asked.

"Spectre supplies," Valni explained, "I think the quartermaster mistook it for a human-made weapon."

"You will be careful, won't you?" he said, his voice slightly strained.

"Aww, don't you trust me?" Valni teased.

Before he could reply, she slowly dragged the blade down his left cheek. She wiped the razor clean on the towel draped across his shoulder and then repeated the procedure, shaving his skin clean from cheek to jaw.

Kenneth let out a small sigh. "Well, for someone who once claimed she'd never used a razor, you have some skills."

"Oh, I'm pretty handy with a blade. I so rarely get the chance to use one."

"You learn that as part of Spectre training?"

Valni shook her head. "No. Sword classes in pre-school."

"You had sword training in pre-school?"

"What, human education doesn't include basic knife safety?"

"Not at that age. For me, knife safety consisted of being told not to run with scissors in Parochial school."
"Really?"

"Dinna stop me from accidentally stabbing Sister Bernadette in the shin when I tripped over a hassock!"

Valni creased up, her body shaking. "Don't make me laugh, I might take your ear off!"

"So much for knife safety," Kenneth muttered.

Valni tilted his head back and began to shave his neck. Kenneth suddenly became very still. His fingers dug into the armrests.

"You seem nervous," she said conversationally.

"Nah! Too busy watching my life flash before my eyes," he mumbled.

She grinned. "Remember the last time I did this?"

Kenneth resisted the urge to nod. "Arcadias – that night in your cabin. You used my safety razor."

"I never cut you though, did I?"

"No, you bit me!"

"You can't blame a girl for getting excited."

"And you scratched me with your talons a few times."

"I was being playful."

"Should I be worried you're bringing knives into the bedroom now?"

"Whelp! Quit complaining, or I'll shave you with a sword next time!"

"Aye, you would, too!"

To his great relief, she finished shaving his neck. Kenneth relaxed his grip on the armrests. Valni switched sides, lifting her right arm up to reach his right cheek. She leaned in so close her mandible brushed against his goatee.

After being forced to stare at the ceiling, Kenneth had to admit the view had improved dramatically.

Their eyes locked.

Almost without thinking, his hands rested on her thighs.

He caught a whiff of her perfume.

Oh, dammit, she smelled good!

The pressure on his lap was beginning to get uncomfortable.

"Enjoying the view, Mr Donnelly?" she breathed, the razor hovering above to his cheek.

"Just taking it all in," Kenneth murmured. "It's breath-taking."

Valni moved closer and whispered in his ear. "It comes on Spectre expenses."
Kenneth frowned. "'Scuse me?"

"The room," she added with a grin. Then she dragged the blade down his cheek. "The Council wanted a quiet investigation into Shepard's fight with Tela Vasir. Officially I'm here as part of a public relations trip. But no reason why I can't mix business with pleasure."

"So, it's damage control? Because Vasir was killed?" Kenneth asked.

Valni nodded. "The hotel was worried about the potential fallout from a Spectre dying on the premises – even if she was corrupt." She put the razor on a side-table and cleaned his face with the towel.

"Well, I could get used to this," Kenneth said. "Matriarchal suite, free room service… complimentary barber." Valni chuckled. "Good thing I was owed some shore-leave."

Valni draped the towel behind his neck and touched her forehead against his. "I'd say you've earned it after everything you've done."

"Shepard did all the heavy lifting. I mostly stood at a console and rowed with Gabby."

"You don't give yourself enough credit," she said softly.

Kenneth's hands glided up her waist to encircle her back, stroking her carapace through her thin shirt.

"Aye, well, there was some gunplay involved."

Valni's fingers sank into his hair. "Oh yeah? What kind of weapon were you using?"

"M-8 Avenger assault rifle," Kenneth breathed. "I was grasping it firmly, just like you told me."

Valni almost purred. "Mmmm, that's my boy."

Their lips met.

The kiss was like taking a gulp of air before plunging into watery depths. Lips, teeth and tongue found one another, duelling playfully like old warriors.

Valni leaned into him, savouring the way his chest muscles flexed and stirred beneath her. A growing heat radiating from his waist suggested something else had stirred.

Kenneth's hand slipped beneath her shirt.

"Does the Council know you're – hmmm – fraternizing with the enemy?" Kenneth asked between kisses.

"You mean, do they know you're with Cerberus?" she said. Kenneth nodded. "Of course, they do. But then, maybe I'm undercover and I've been sent to probe you for information?"

"I can take any amount of probing from you, woman."

"Good to know."

Her fingers glided over his stomach and reached for his belt. She undid the clasps with dexterous ease and worked his trousers down his legs, only to be greeted by a picture of herself grinning back at her.
"What?" she exclaimed. "Oh, you didn't buy *those*, did you?"

Kenneth's underwear was plastered with cute *chibi* caricatures of Valni, and stamped with the brand name *Hello Spectre*.

"I saw them on the Citadel and I thought of you," Kenneth said with a wink.

Valni groaned. "Well, they're coming off!"

"That's the idea. I'm glad we're on the same page."

"And you're to never wear them again!"

"But I need your picture to keep me warm at night."

Without warning Valni seized the razor on the table and cut Kenneth's boxers at the elasticated waist.

"Easy, woman!" Kenneth exclaimed.

But Valni was too busy tearing apart the ruined boxer shorts to listen. Only when she had stripped him naked did Valni calmly and carefully put the razor back on the table and survey her handiwork.

"That's a much better view," she declared.

"I could have just removed them," Kenneth pointed out.

"But this way ensures you can never put them on again."

"Then I probably shouldn't mention the other five pairs I have in my kitbag?"

She picked up the razor again.

Kenneth eyed the blade anxiously. "You wouldn't?"

Valni winked and spun the blade around, handing it to Kenneth. He took the razor gingerly. Then Valni slipped her thumb under her shirt and tugged, offering it up for sacrifice.

"Fair trade? One garment for another?" she suggested.

Kenneth glanced around at the open plan hotel room; nearly every wall had floor-to-ceiling windows giving an unrivalled view of the Nos Astra cityscape and the passing lines of skyscars. He suddenly became acutely aware of his nudity.

"Shouldn't we, I don't know, drawer the curtains or something?"

She flashed a wicked grin and shook her head.

"I'm a Spectre. Who's going to complain?" she said, neglecting to tell him the windows were two-way electrochromic glass; people outside the room couldn't see inside.

Taking his hand, Valni guided the razor to the hem of her shirt. The blade sliced her fabric apart with ease and Valni shrugged her arms out of the slashed shirt, exposing her chest.

"You certainly know how to keep a man on his toes, don't you?"

Wordlessly, Valni pushed herself off from his lap and stood up. Her hands shifted to her khaki leggings and she undid the clasps at her waist. The leggings parted. Her clothing tumbled from her
body and lay forgotten on the floor.

She stood before him naked.

Valni extended her hand.

Kenneth needed no encouragement and practically bounded from the lounge chair.

Taking his hand she led him into the bedroom.

Valni piloted him to the foot of the bed, and wrapped him in her arms.

They remained standing, locked in a passionate embrace. Kenneth's hands explored her back; while Valni's long fingers delved lower to examine his firm legs and his (pleasingly) taut backside.

"I've missed this," she said.

"Just the one? Or both together?" Kenneth asked, noting the cheeky hands gripping his buttocks.

"Definitely both."

"Perhaps we could make this a regular thing? Bet you could get free rooms at any luxury hotel in the galaxy?" Kenneth's lips traced a line down her neck. "Where are you being sent next?"

"You know, I could arrest you just for asking that," she said distractedly. She loved the feel of his lips on her neck.

"So, you'd... restrain me. Tie me down?"

"I'd have no choice."

"I'd be OK with that," he said. He was doing something wonderful to her neck.

Valni groaned shamelessly, her chin and mandibles buried in his hair.

*Spirits! Why does that part of him have to be so excruciatingly pleasurable?*

"I'm going to Earth." It wasn't classified information, but the words tumbled out of her mouth before she knew she'd said them. "Well, to your moon, anyway."

Kenneth's lips trailed up her neck. "Now I'll have to tie you down for spilling Council secrets."

"I'd like to see you try!"

"That sounds like a challenge, Spectre," he teased.

This time she did purr. "Mmm, I like it when you call me that... do it again."

"As you wish... Spectre."

They kissed again.

Eventually, the couple sank back onto the bed and surrendered to the urgent cravings their bodies demanded.

Valni's first realised something was wrong when she noticed that Kenneth wasn't in her arms.
They normally slept close, their shared body heat easing her to rest.

But Kenneth wasn’t close.

Valni stirred. Slowly, she became aware the mattress was rocking slightly. She turned over, her hand stretched out, searching for him, but he wasn’t beside her.

A few seconds later, she realised the sheets were wet.

Valni was awake now. There was moaning. She looked around.

In the dim light, Valni could make out a dark shape at the base of the bed. It was shivering and whining.

It took her a moment to realise the shape was Kenneth.

And he was talking in his sleep.

Valni crawled closer.

"Kenneth?"

He continued to mutter and whine; his words nonsense ramblings.

But then she touched his arm: He was soaked in sweat.

The sheets beneath him were drenched.

Valni had seen this before, though never in humans. He was having a flashback. And his ramblings had a moment of clarity, "No! Don't touch her! Don't! Please don't!"

"Kenneth," Valni said, nudging his arm.

That was a mistake. Though she had seen past trauma resurface in her turian comrades, humans were psychologically different. They reacted differently.

Kenneth's eyes shot open. He saw her and screamed.

"Get away!"

He lashed out.

Valni had to grab his wrists, holding him a death grip as he flailed convulsively.

"Get off me!" he screamed.

"Kenneth! It's me. It's me."

It took a moment, but eventually he calmed down. His eyes cleared and recognition dawned. He took a deep breath, gulping back a hot sob of relief.

"Valni?"

"I'm here," she assured him, though she still had a firm grip on his wrists.

He was visibly shaking; adrenaline still coursing through his veins.
"I thought… I thought you were… one of those things."

"It's okay…"

Kenneth flinched out of her grasp and sat up. He retreated backwards until he was sitting upright against the headboard, refusing to meet her gaze. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I couldn't stop them."

"It's alright," she whispered.

"I wasn't good enough. They got past me… I couldn't stop them."

"Don't think like that, Kenneth." She inched closer to him.

"They threw me in a pod. I thought it was a coffin. I panicked. I thought I was going to be buried alive. And…" his voice faltered.

Valni reached out and stroked his chest – she hoped that wouldn't upset him.

Kenneth didn't try to flinch away this time, that was something, at least.

She chanced touching his cheek, trying to turn his head so that he would face her. His face was still wet with sweat, and, she realised suddenly, with tears.

With some gentle coaxing, he finally looked at her, his expression a battlefield of shame and fading terror.

His eyes were damp.

"I'm sorry I wasn't stronger."

Valni didn't say anymore. She leaned in and gathered him in her arms.

He hugged her back, his grip tight, finding comfort in the warmth of her embrace while Valni sunk against him like a drowning woman clinging to driftwood.

And held him. Just held him.
You've come a long way," the psychiatrist said to Gabby. "You should be proud of your progress."

The Alliance Veteran Affairs office on the Presidium was not an area Gabby had ever visited before, and neither did she ever imagine she would need to. The VA's primary function was to provide support to veterans following their service in the Systems Alliance, including counselling and rehabilitation. As a former Alliance engineer Gabby was eligible to receive counselling from a VA appointed psychiatrist. The fact she now worked for Cerberus, technically a rogue organisation, was, surprisingly, not a barrier to her receiving benefits. The only thing that would have disqualified her, it seemed, was if she was dishonourably discharged.

Decorated in calming blues and yellows and furnished with several comfortable lounge chairs, the psychiatrist's office smelled faintly of incense. Despite the tranquil surroundings, Gabby's fingers anxiously tugged at the brown threads of her casual spacer overalls (she didn't think it was wise to wear her Cerberus uniform) as she talked with the Alliance psychiatrist, Doctor Kira Matsuo, who sat the reclining chair opposite.

Beside her, Gabby's asari friend – and for one unforgettable night, her lover – Erata D'Ceni, reached over and patted Gabby's arm reassuringly.

"I still have the dreams," Gabby said.

Doctor Matsuo gave a sympathetic nod, the dyed red tips of her short black hair bobbing as she spoke. "But not every night."

"Most of the time. Including last night."

"Recovery is a marathon, not a sprint," Matsuo replied. "Nightmares or intrusive memories are a side-effect of your experiences. It is also well-documented that women are more likely to develop PTSD than men. But there are many treatments available: Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, Present Centred Therapy, plus various medications…"

"I'd prefer not to take drugs."
"I understand. We would only consider that as a last resort. Not that I think you will need them. Believe it or not, you are improving."

"It doesn't feel like it. Every time I think I have a handle on what happened, I have another dream and relive it all over again..."

"This is nothing you should feel ashamed about. There is no fixed time for recovery. With that in mind, have you discussed the event with any of your colleagues since our last session?" The doctor referred to the electronic tablet in her hand. "With your friend, Kenneth, perhaps? You said he was also captured during the attack."

"No," Gabby said.

"You aren't interested in a joint session? I'd be happy to see you together."

Gabby shook her head. "Actually, I haven't told him I'm here."

"I see..." There was a pause as Doctor Matsuo glanced at her omni-tool. "Our time's almost up. Before our next appointment, I would like you to get into a place where you can start talking about the attack in detail. I believe it would be beneficial. I would also encourage you to restart activities you may have been avoiding since the event – exercise, weapons training, whatever it may be. It will help your brain overcome its flight or fight response when reliving the trauma and allow yourself to heal."

The session over, Gabby thanked the doctor and she and Erata and made their escape.

They flew back to the Presidium Commons in companionable silence.

Erata eyed her friend with concern, but kept her distance. As much as she wanted, yearned, ached, to sweep Gabby into her arms and never let her go, she fought the impulse, albeit with great reluctance. Gabby was still haunted by the memory of the Collector attack and Erata was going to give her all her support to recover. Whether that meant just being her friend and standing at her side, or if Gabby wanted something more (Oh, Goddess, please let her want something more!) then Erata would support whatever decision she made.

Eventually, the skycar landed and they exited the vehicle.

The Commons was as bustling as ever; Erata led Gabby down the wide hall, avoiding a group of volus who were having a particularly heated argument about economies of scale, and out onto a walkway overlooking the Presidium lakes.

Erata turned to her friend. "You hungry?" she asked.

Gabby shrugged. "Not really."

"When was the last time you ate?"

"Yesterday lunchtime."

"You need something to keep your strength up," Erata insisted. She gestured at the café on the far left of the Commons. "We could go to Apollo's?"

"Are you my mom now?"

"If I need to be. Yeah."
Gabby almost smiled. She glanced at the asari engineer, her expression softening, and released a weary sigh. "Thank you for being here for me, Erata. I wasn't expecting you to drop everything and come to the Citadel."

"Not a problem. I was in the area."

"I thought you were working somewhere near Alpha Centauri?"

"It's only three Mass Relay jumps from here."

"Three Relays? That's a 30-hour journey."

"Yeah, it's practically next door."

This time, Gabby did smile.

Erata grinned as she watched Gabby's face light up. *This* was the Gabby she remembered. Not the fearful shadow of herself the Collectors had turned her into. *This* is why she hated those insectoid monsters. They had very nearly stolen Gabby's smile. Well, almost. It was a delight to see it again.

When Erata received Gabby's vid-call to say she had 4-days of shore leave alone on the Citadel (apparently Donnelly was spending his shore leave on Illium), Erata had literally dropped what she was doing and jumped on the first transport to the Citadel. She wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to spend some time with her friend.

Still smiling, Gabby reached over and curled her fingers around Erata's hand.

"Alright Mom. You win. You can buy me lunch."

Hand in hand they made their way towards the café. Erata tried her best to act cool and collected, but for some reason her heart wanted to leap out of her chest.

*My hand's sweaty. Goddess, why is my hand so sweaty?*

After they were served by a talkative and surprisingly matriarchal-looking asari in a red dress, they took their food and moved to a table on the balcony.

They chatted for a while. Erata steered the conversation away from the *Normandy* or any reminder of the Collector attack and guided it towards Gabby's family. Gabby talked about her folks back in Boston, waxing lyrical about her home town and the Bruins hockey team, but Erata could tell her heart wasn't really in it. As an engineer, and self-confessed 'introverted nerd,' Gabby wasn't good at small talk.

Eventually, the conversation petered out, and after a moments silence, Gabby broached the subject Erata had been trying to avoid.

"You can ask me. I know you want to."

"Ask what?"

"Why I didn't tell Kenneth about going to the VA Centre."

"That was your business. I didn't want to upset the apple tart."

"Apple cart," Gabby corrected.
"Tarts are tastier," Erata said with a grin.

Gabby chuckled but shook her head. Erata was still being evasive. "You don't have to walk on eggshells around me." She glanced down at her hands. "It's stupid, but... I didn't tell him because I didn't want to look weak."

"You don't think he has nightmares?"

"I know he does. I hear him thrashing around in the night. The Normandy walls are thin."

"Then he's probably heard you, too."

"Yeah, I just..."

"What you're going through doesn't make you weak, Gabby."

"I can't fall apart now. So many people are relying on me. On us – Shepard, the crew, all those colonists that were taken. I have to be strong. Otherwise the Collectors win."

Erata held Gabby's hand. "You don't have to do this alone. You know you can tell me anything."

"I wouldn't know where to start. The things I saw..."

"Then don't tell me. Show me," Erata said. "Let me in. Let me help."

Gabby held Erata's gaze. She knew what Erata was proposing: The Meld. A merging of memory and emotion. Gabby had experienced this unique asari bonding technique before. Of course, her melding with Erata was under slightly different, and indeed, much more pleasurable circumstances.

Slowly, Gabby shook her head. "You don't want those things in your head, Erata."

"I can handle it."

"I don't want those things in your head..."

Erata leaned in close. "They're already there," she said in a low voice. "We've both fought them, Gabby. You on the Normandy. Me on Omega. I know how terrifying those things are. We both have scars – even if we can't see them."

"You never said." Gabby's voice was barely a whisper.

Erata reached up and gently cupped Gabby's cheek. "You're not the only one who doesn't want to look weak," the asari said. A half-sob, half-laugh escaped Gabby's throat. "But you're not alone. Together we can beat them. Show me what happened. Let me see... please."

In reply, Gabby held Erata's other hand. Erata closed her eyes

She leaned in and touched her forehead to Gabby's.

Then her eyes opened; two black orbs glinting as memories blurred and minds merged.

Erata gasped.

The emotional toll of the Collector attack had compressed Gabby's memories into disjointed vignettes that were little more than brief images coloured by primal shades of terror.
I am standing in the Normandy engine room, a datapad in my hand as I listen to the soothing, rhythmic hum of the drive core.

Kenneth is walking past me, a cup of coffee in his hand. I get his attention and show him the information on my pad. He takes the pad and sips at the hot liquid as he reads the data and together we walk back to our stations, Kenneth losing himself in the numbers.

Strangely, I couldn't be happier. I am content. Everything is functioning as it should. In that moment, I flash a smile at my oblivious friend.

Suddenly, an alarm cuts through the air. The voice of the ship's AI, EDI, sounds over the comm.

"Proximity alert. Proximity alert. Enemy vessel to starboard. Collector virus detected in Normandy computer. Propulsion systems disabled. GARDIAN battery is offline. Enemy ship now targeting Starboard Cargo hold. All hands prepare for boarding action."

The crew spring into action. There is a frenzy of movement.

Kenneth runs to the gun rack and starts handing out assault rifles to the crew.

He passes me an M-8 Avenger rifle. I unlock the safety. The gun is familiar, I've fired one before many times, but I've never really enjoyed using it.

We dash into the corridor and position ourselves outside the Starboard Cargo hold.

There's a crash and the sound of whistling air. I can feel my ears pop. There's a change in air-pressure. The intruders have broken through the hull!

Then the pressure stabilises.

We wait, our guns trained on the large doors.

A second later the doors open.

Beyond is a creature unlike anything I have seen before. It looks like a giant insect, except it's the size of a skycar. Black. With four legs, an armoured head and body, and what looks like several human heads in its giant mouth, as if the creature is carrying a group of mutated humans with glowing eyes in its maw.

We open fire, unleashing a hail of bullets. The creature absorbs the flak.

Then it moves. Leaping and pouncing like a cat. Crewman Rolston goes down. He shrieks in pain as the monster impales his shoulder with its front leg.

The creature leaps again. It knocks Sarah Patel to the floor. Sarah screams. But the creature doesn't kill her.

It's immobilising the crew; taking us out one-by-one. It wants us alive!

Before I know it, it's on me. I fire point-blank, straight into its open mouth but the bullets have no effect.
One swipe of the massive leg sends me sprawling on my back. The wind is knocked out of me and my gun skitters away.

My vision darkens.

I jerk awake when a strong hand grabs my shoulder. I'm flipped over and forced to my knees. I look up and want to scream. A monstrosity is standing in front of me. It looks vaguely human, except its skin is grey and putrid and pierced by metallic tubes. The creature has glowing eyes and its mouth is a permanent rictus grin. A massive hump sits atop its left shoulder. It's a perverse imitation of life. A husk. I try to cry out, but my throat closes up.

The creature starts to drag me towards the Starboard Cargo hold.

I hear a shout and turn my head.

It's Kenneth. He's struggling in the grip of another monstrous-looking creature, but his focus is on me. He's reaching out and pleading with the thing dragging me across the floor.

"No! Don't touch her! Don't! Please don't!"

But the creature ignores him.

I don't hear anymore as I'm dragged down the corridor into the depths of their ship.

I can't move. I'm trapped in some kind of pod with a transparent lid. Beyond the pod is a vast open space filled with identical pods.

With growing horror, I realise I recognise the space. It's the Collector ship, just as Shepard described after the Commander boarded one of their vessels in an attempt to rescue the colonists.

Terror almost overwhelms me.

I know what the Collectors did to those colonists.

How much time has passed? An hour? A week? I don't know.

The adrenaline from the attack has worn off.

My head is aching.

My stomach is rumbling. I'm desperately hungry. How long since I ate? Are the Collectors likely to feed me? They obviously want to keep me alive. But why? Am I going to be interrogated?

My pod is standing upright.

I can see another pod through the transparent lid. It's close; about 3 metres away. And there there's someone inside it. But it's not one of the Normandy crew.
It's a young man in overalls, probably no more than eighteen years old. I think he's a colonist. Maybe he's from Horizon colony?

Just then, he wakes up. He opens his eyes. And looks at me.

And he starts to scream.

Then I see why. Hundreds of miniscule things are crawling over his skin. Something red. Something alive.

As I watch, his body begins to disintegrate. The red things are taking him apart. He claws at the pod, trying to escape.

But his fingers fall off.

And he's still screaming. Still struggling in the pod. He's still alive and being dismantled right in front of my eyes.

Within seconds his body is gone. I can see something being pumped out of his pod through a large tube attached to back of the pod.

The Collectors have liquified him. As if he was farmed. Processed.

Before I know it, I hear more screaming.

I can't see them but someone else is crying out in terror. Someone else is being liquified. I don't know if it's another colonist or someone from the crew.

Please, God, don't let it be Kenneth.

I can hear more screams. I shut my eyes.

The horror of it all is too much.

My mind goes black.

I can hear banging outside.

What's that noise?

Is this it? Is it my turn to be 'processed'?

Opening my eyes, I see something. Something huge. It's trying to get into the pod!

But it's not a Collector.

It looks like a krogan wearing silver armour. A second later I recognise the figure.

Grunt!

The krogan super-soldier rips open the pod.

I fall forward and Grunt catches me in his arms. He's surprisingly gentle. He lowers me to the floor. Then he rushes off to open more pods.
I sit up and look around. Commander Shepard and the whole squad from the Normandy is prising open the prisons and the crew are spilling onto the floor around me.

Miranda Lawson opens Dr. Chakwas' pod. Commander Shepard helps Kelly Chambers out of her prison. And Sarah Patel. And Crewman Goldstein.

And then Kenneth.

The relief is almost overwhelming.

For the first time in a long while, I dare to believe I'm safe.

And hot tears spill down my cheeks.

Reality came back in a rush.

Erata took a deep breath, trying to steady her heart rate. Gabby's emotions were still fresh in her mind. She felt the dampness on her cheek and wiped at them absently, slightly surprised to realise she'd been weeping.

As Erata gathered her wits, she noticed half the patrons in the café were staring at them, including the group of volus bankers they'd passed in the corridor who were now sat at the table opposite. She hadn't even seen the volus come into the café.

How long were we melded? she wondered.

Turning back, Erata saw the tears streaking Gabby's face. She reached forward and stroked her thumb across her cheek.

"Oh, Tiger," she murmured.

Gabby held her gaze. A moment passed.

Then Gabby leaned in.

The kiss was unexpected and drew a muffled gasp from Erata's lips. With a sudden, blissful sensation of light-headedness Erata found herself grinning like a prepubescent maiden stealing her first kiss.

When Gabby eventually pulled away, Erata honestly believed the heat from her face would set off the fire alarms.

They stared at each other for a long moment, the spell eventually broken by the wheezing, rasping breath of a volus.

"Bah! Why don't you – wheeze – get a room, Earth Clan!"

Erata turned to give the volus a scathing retort, but Gabby's reply stopped her dead.

"Why not?"

Erata blinked in surprise. "Really?" she asked, half believing what she'd heard.

Gabby nodded. "It's not a bad idea."
Their love-making was unhurried and tender – a world away from the frenzied excitement of their first encounter in Erata's Citadel apartment all those months earlier. Since Erata had given up her apartment following her reassignment, the hotel suite was a necessity and thanks to the use of her company's credit-chit, it was also luxuriously furnished.

She didn't Meld this time, preferring to let her hands do the talking. It proved to be an education for both of them as if exploring Gabby's body for the first time.

Gabby's hair tickled Erata's face in ways she hadn't noticed before. There was a line of freckles on her waist that Erata eagerly mapped with her lips. Her skin tasted sweeter than she remembered, not as salty, with a tinge of a fruit-scented body wash. And Gabby especially liked having her ears nibbled, which Erata found puzzling at first but, judging by the low moans escaping Gabby's throat, she couldn't argue with the results.

It was a renewal; a rediscovery of every silken curve and toned abdominal muscle.

Erata revelled in the joy of release. Both her own and Gabby's. She loved every inch of her partner. Although venerated might have been a better description as she sent Gabby into fitful spasms, all the while silently appealing to Athame to wipe the memory of the Collector attack from Gabby's mind, if only for a night.

Eventually, exhaustion overtook them and they lay sated and sweating on the wide bed.

Erata held Gabby close, their legs coiled together, heads touching and bodies nestled comfortably in each other's arms. Erata could feel her mind drifting as the fog of desire gradually faded, to be replaced by the unwelcome insectoid memories of the Collectors.

Erata remembered her fight against the Collector army on Omega. She recalled how scared she felt during the battle. But even then, none of the Collectors had got close enough to touch her, let alone bundle her into one of those revolting stasis pods.

With the memory of the Collector attack on the Normandy still fresh in her mind, Erata hugged Gabby a little tighter, whispering another prayer to the Goddess she'd learned as a child, before finally joining her in blissful oblivion.

And for the first time in weeks, Gabby slept soundly.

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, I would like to thank all of my readers for your patience. Updates to my stories have been non-existent these last few weeks. Recent real-world events have put a dampener on my writing. A family situation developed around Christmas and spread into the New Year. While I won't go into details about that, it left me in entirely the wrong frame of mind and my writing suffered as a result. Thankfully, everything seems to be getting back to normal so I should be back on track with AMoLaD, and other stories.

Many thanks again. You're all stars! :-}
Valni travelled to Earth's moon to meet with the representatives of the Andromeda Initiative.

Warning: This chapter contains spoilers for the official prequel novel 'Mass Effect: Initiation'.

High Lunar Orbit, Earth's Moon, Sol System – 21:30 LT – 8th November 2185 CE

The view of Earth was spectacular. Valni gazed through the Alliance shuttle's portside window at humanity's homeworld. At 380,000 kilometres, the bright blue planet hung motionless in the black sky, the light from the sun sparkling off the cerulean surface and the shape of one of its major continents just visible beneath the wispy clouds – 'Africa,' she seemed to remember it was called. Despite the overabundance of water (Earth had far too many oceans for Valni's liking), the planet was undoubtedly beautiful, if not quite as striking as the silver/green vista of Palaven.

Seeing planets from high orbit always fascinated her. This marble-sized world was home to 11 billion souls, and yet if she put her hand against the window she could eclipse the entire planet behind her thumb. It put the incalculable scale of the universe into perspective.

"Is this your first visit to the Sol System?" a voice asked.

Valni turned her attention away from the view. A human woman, dressed in a red and white Andromeda Initiative uniform, was sitting in the shuttle pilot seat. The pilot cocked her head and regarded Valni with a pair of pale blue eyes, her youthful face framed by a bob of tousled red hair. Strangely, Valni experienced a flash of recognition. She had never met the woman before but her soft accent reminded her of Kenneth's own pleasing burr. For a brief moment, Valni wondered if she was some distant relative of Kenneth's.

Valni dismissed the idea as soon as she thought of it – Not all humans are related, she reminded herself – and gave the pilot a friendly smile; suddenly wondering what would motivate someone to leave their homeworld forever on a one-way trip to a new galaxy.

"It is, yeah," she told the woman. "Earth is beautiful."

"You should see it up-close."

"Well, my boyfriend did promise me a tour of Scotland."
"Scotland?" the woman said, raising her eyebrows in surprise. "He has good taste. You're in for a treat. I'm sure you'll love the Land o' the Leal."

Valni frowned. "Land of the Leal? I've never heard that expression before."

"Otherwise known as Land of the Faithful. Or Heaven on Earth, if you'd prefer," the pilot explained, flashing a cheerful grin. "Not that I'm biased or anything." Valni couldn't help but chuckle. "So, does your boyfriend work in Scotland then?"

"No, he was born there."

The pilot looked at her askance. "He's human?"

"Last time I checked."

"That's surprising."

"No, I like to check quite often, actually," Valni said with an equally cheerful grin.

"Wow," the woman muttered. "In that case, you have good taste." They shared a laugh. The pilot held Valni's gaze for a moment, then she glanced away, her cheeks reddening slightly. "Kind of a shame you're spoken for, really."

"How so?"

"Now that I know you have a thing for Scots, I might've been tempted to invite you to dinner."

Valni gave the pilot a wry smile. "Is flirting with your passengers' part of the service or is it an optional extra?"

"On the house," the pilot said coyly.

"So, you're saying I'm getting it 'Scot-free'?

The pilot laughed, openly and freely. It was a joyful sound. "Oh, that is wonderfully corny… And now I really am tempted to ask you out!" **Enterprising Young Men

The pilot yawed the shuttle to port and brought the vehicle into its final approach.

"If you don't mind me asking, why did you decide to join the Initiative?" Valni said.

The red-headed woman smiled. "I wanted to join for months. I loved the idea of breaking free from the Milky Way and exploring the universe. The moment I laid eyes on the Nexus I knew I'd made the right decision. You'll see."

Valni peered out of the viewing port. On the moon's surface she could make a series of airtight modular structures linked by conduits and sealed walkways. Valni guessed the lunar base served as a staging post for the Andromeda Initiative. As she watched, three transport shuttles rose from the base and started to follow in their wake. In fact, there seemed to be a build-up of traffic. More and more shuttles were joining their flight lane, all heading in the same direction.

"We're almost there," the pilot announced.

Valni peeked over the pilot's shoulder. Ahead of the shuttle were four capital-sized ships. Some 1500 metres in length, the grey-skinned ships were a strange configuration: twin-hulled with four enormous x-shaped variable geometry navigation vanes at the rear. Apparently, each ark could carry
up to 100,000 colonists.


"Where's the Nexus?" Valni asked

"Right there." The woman pointed at a vast silhouette hidden in the moon's shadow.

As Valni watched, the sunlight crested over the surface of the moon and the dawning light illuminated a massive superstructure.

Approximately fifteen kilometres long, the silver-grey space station resembled two Citadel Ward arms fused side-by-side to form one huge structure. The lights from smaller construction vehicles surrounded the space-station like a swarm of bees. Valni felt her jaw drop. Reading the Council's dossier on the Nexus was one thing but seeing it with her own eyes was quite another. The Nexus dwarfed the other ships. This immense station would be the focal point, the nexus for all the ark ships, and serve as the seat of power in the Andromeda galaxy. A new Citadel, with a new Council leading the way.

"The Initiative aren't playing around, are they?" Valni remarked.

"Hell, no!" the pilot said.

The pilot activated the comm and requested permission to dock on the Nexus. When permission was granted she guided the shuttle between the Ark ships. With its final approach locked, the shuttle headed towards the Nexus docking bay.

Valni stepped through the Nexus shuttle bay doors onto a wide corridor.

The area was packed with human, asari and krogan workers, each wearing matching Initiative uniforms, all busying themselves as they wired-up power relays or checked key systems. With less than a month before the Nexus was due to depart, there was an atmosphere of excited urgency among the workers. In the midst of this crush of people, a krogan woman – the workers were addressing her as 'ma'am', so Valni figured it was a safe bet she was female – supervised the army of engineers. Valni had met only one krogan woman before, a female from Clan Urdnot. But she had kept her face covered by veils. The female krogan here didn't bother with coverings which prompted Valni to wonder if veils were only worn by females living on Tuchanka or whether it was a custom unique to Clan Urdnot.

Valni's attention was drawn away from the krogan by a human male striding towards her. Valni instantly recognised him from his dossier: Alec Ryder, former N7-ranked Alliance marine and Human Pathfinder. Envisioned to be part scout, part soldier and part scientists, the Pathfinders' role was to spearhead the survey of new worlds in Andromeda. Pathfinders could identify planets fit for habitation and advise the Nexus on which colonists would be best suited to live in these new environments.

Valni took a moment to size Ryder up. The man was well-built for an older human. His dark hair had a silver sheen and his swarthy face was weathered by time, but he held himself ramrod straight, which only served to emphasise his height. He was taller than Valni by a good 20 centimetres.

_Spirits! Why does everyone have to be taller than me?!_

"Severan, I presume?" the man said. His voice was so deep that if Valni hadn't seen him speak she
might have mistaken him for a krogan.

"And you would be Ryder," Valni said. She held her hand out in greeting.

Ryder clutched her hand in a crushing grip. His voice wasn't the only thing that was krogan-like.

"Let's get this over with," Ryder said gruffly as he released her hand. "There's enough real work to be done without these distractions. This way!"

With that, Ryder turned and set off down the corridor. Valni hurried after him and quickly fell into step as they marched side-by-side down the corridor.

But rather than head towards the Operations Centre as Valni expected, Ryder marched to a transit station. A skycar was waiting for them.

Ryder clambered into the driver's seat and ordered Valni to get in. Valni did as she was told – the turian habit of following orders was hard to break – and the skycar lifted off. Ryder piloted the vehicle away from the maintenance area. They flew headlong into a connecting tunnel. The vehicle was briefly plunged into darkness, then the skycar emerged into a vast open space that was oddly familiar.

It looked like the Presidium on the Citadel.

Valni gazed down at the view. Freshwater lakes sped below them, the water surrounded by lush parklands with trees and verdant turfed areas, all set beneath a huge domed blue sky with projected clouds and artificial sunlight. The only difference was that the horizon didn't curve upwards like the Presidium ring, but rather stretched along the entire 15-kilometre length of the Nexus.

Ryder yawed the skycar to starboard, giving Valni a better view of wide walkways screened by hydroponic gardens. Valni suspected that Ryder was trying to impress her by showing off the facsimile of the Presidium. And as they flew over a service yard that was busy assembling a sleek, delta-winged scout ship, she had to admit it was working.

Eventually, Ryder eased the skycar towards a habitat area where a lone figure was standing beside a landing pad.

Ryder settled the vehicle on the landing pad and opened the clamshell doors. Valni exited the vehicle and almost did a double take when she saw the person who was waiting for them. Dressed in a simple, form-fitting grey jumpsuit that belied her status as one of the wealthiest humans in the galaxy, the lone figure was none other than the founder of the Initiative, Jien Garson. **

Valni and Ryder moved towards her.

"Spectre Severan. Delighted," Jien Garson said as she held out her hand. Valni shook it. The genius, trillionaire, inventor, philanthropist regarded Valni with a piercing gaze but there was also warmth in her dark eyes. Shorter than average than most humans, the top of Garson's black, pixie-cut hair barely reached the tip of Valni's mandibles.

"Finally, someone who isn't looking down on me!"

"I wasn't expecting the founder of the Initiative to greet me," Valni said.

"I always have time for a representative of the Council," Jien replied affably.

Valni smiled inwardly. She didn't doubt Garson's words. Valni's official visit to the Nexus had been
pre-arranged by the Council months ago, but certain events had delayed her visit until a more suitable
time. An incident involving the theft of highly sensitive information had publicly revealed the
existence of the Initiative's unlicensed research into artificial intelligence. As Valni discovered from
the dossier, the Council were aware of the Initiative's prototype AI, 'SAM', but, for reasons of their
own, had decided to overlook it. However, the theft of Ryder's AI code had revealed to the public
that the Initiative was vulnerable. The Council had to be seen to be doing something so arrangements
had been made in secret promising minimal scrutiny of the Initiative in exchange for scheduled
"courtesy visits" by Council representatives.

Today was Valni's turn.

Valni inclined her head towards Jien Garson.

"As long as you're still in the same galaxy, eh?" she said.

"Quite so." Garson replied with a smile. "We may be leaving the Milky Way behind, but we will not
forget where we came from. The history of every race travelling with us will be honoured. Our hope
is to expand the influence of every species beyond this galaxy."

"But not necessarily expand the influence of the Council."

"No. The Council's reach is long but it won't extend to Andromeda. As one of their agents, I hope
that won't be a problem?"

"Not for me," Valni told her. "I doubt I'll be in a position to care by the time you arrive in
Andromeda. Spirits, who knows if the Council will even exist by the time you wake up?"

"The asari have led the Council for millennia. An asari child born today will be middle-aged by the
time we reach our destination. I very much doubt there is any force in the galaxy that could challenge
their rule."

"Which is one of many reasons the Initiative was founded," Ryder said. "To allow us to evolve
beyond the limitations of this galaxy. To build civilisation on our own terms, without it being handed
to us on a plate by the Council."

Valni's gaze flicked between Garson and Ryder. The representatives of the Initiative couldn't be
more different: Where Garson was all smiles, quiet composure and charismatic eloquence, Ryder
was brusque and direct and very much to the point. He certainly didn't go in for diplomatic
platitudes. But as Valni glanced around the impressive facsimile of the Presidium, there was no
denying they worked well together.

Jien Garson followed her gaze. She gestured at the lakeside view. "If I may inquire, what do you
think of the Nexus?"

"Very impressive," Valni said truthfully. "I have to compliment you. It was a nicely stage-managed
introduction."

"Stage-managed?" Ryder asked with a frown.

Valni smiled. "The shuttle's approach to the Nexus was perfectly timed with the sun dawning over
the surface of the moon. It lit up the station brilliantly. There's work going on all over the station and
yet I just happen to be dropped off in the corridor jammed full of engineers. And then you fly me
here to meet the founder of the Initiative when we could have easily met in the Operations Centre.
Oh, and the way your shuttle pilot flirted with me; that was an interesting touch."
"She flirted with you?" Jien asked, a smirk spreading across her face. "Is that so?"

"Remind me to have a talk with Anwar," Ryder growled.

Valni glanced at Ryder and Garson, doubt suddenly gnawing at her gut. Had she read too much into the pilot's flirtations? "I don't want to get anyone in trouble," she said. "I wasn't offended."

"Think nothing of it," Jien assured her. But Ryder continued to glare at her.

"'Stage-managed,'" he repeated scathingly. "We have more important things to do than entertain you."

"Alec..." Jien began.

"No! It never changes. Humanity will never be allowed to grow unless we escape the constant scrutiny of the other species. Only then can we level the playing field. This is why we're making the trip. Even now the Council are keeping tabs on us."

"Yes," Valni admitted. There wasn't any point in denying it. "As are the Hierarchy, the Republics, the Alliance, the Salarian Union. And even the quarians," she added. "They're all uneasy about your on-going research into artificial intelligence."

Ryder's expression hardened. He fixed Valni with a glare. "They're worried about my work? Why? We'll be in Andromeda. What's that got to do with the Council?"

"Your prototype SAM has 'ruffled a few feathers', to use a human expression. The Council have concerns about the possible long-term threat an AI may pose to them."

"Even over a distance of two-and-a-half million light years?" Garson asked.

"Asari take the long view," Valni said. "You've stated the journey to Andromeda will be one-way, but if you can travel there what's to say that your descendants won't decide to make the journey back to the Milky Way."

Jien Garson nodded in understanding. "And they're wondering what it will mean for the future of this galaxy," she mused, "without the Council there to monitor SAM's evolution– or control his development."

"Let me see if I understand this," Ryder said; there was a definite edge to his voice. "They're afraid we're planting the seeds of some future extragalactic geth uprising?"

"Every attempt at creating a sentient AI has been a disaster," Valni said. "I've read about the incident with the rogue AI at the Alliance Black-Ops site last year." She nodded at Ryder. "And the experiments you conducted while you were part of the Alliance. It's why you were dishonourable discharged."

Ryder was scowling now. "Turians are certainly forthright," he said.

Valni shrugged. "We both know what happened. Why pretend otherwise?"

"What exactly do you know about the Black-Ops site?" Ryder asked.

"That like every experiment into AI research, the results got away from those involved. A kernel of your AI code was stolen and taken to an Alliance lab built into an asteroid in the Pamyat System, designated Quiet Eddy. You sent an operative to retrieve the stolen code, but when she arrived it had
already been integrated into a VI called Medea. It went rogue. The base was compromised. People
died. Your operative fought her way out but was almost killed in the process. It's why the Council
made AI research illegal. No-one wants another war like the quarians had with the geth."

"So, the Council sent you here to do what?" Ryder demanded. "Delay our launch? Shut down
SAM's blue box?"

"I haven't been ordered to interfere with your AI. I doubt I could even if I tried."

"Others have already tried," Ryder said.

"Yes, I know." Just a few months ago, a terrorist group had planted a plasma bomb in Ryder's
shuttle. Luckily Ryder wasn't in the vehicle when the bomb went off, but the blast had caused
extensive damage to the AI core beneath the shuttle bay. Ryder himself had barely survived, and the
damage to the core reportedly delayed the launch of the Nexus by several months. "Rest assured, the
Council have no desire to prevent your departure. In fact, they seemed adamant that you should be
allowed to leave on schedule."

This time, Ryder did growl. "How magnanimous of them."

"I'm simply here to explain the Council's position. As a courtesy to you."

"You know where you can stick the Council's position!" Ryder snapped.

There was a tense silence as Ryder glared at Valni. She met his gaze, holding him in check for a long
moment.

The tension was broken when Garson cleared her throat. "Well, we seem to have reached a natural
interlude." Garson activated her omni-tool and clicked at the interface.

Just then, a turian man appeared in the doorway of the habitation wing. His facial carapace was
bone-white and he had blue colony markings under his eyes. He marched forward and stood behind
Valni, keeping a respectful distance from the trio.

"This was an interesting meeting, Spectre Severan, but I'm afraid other matters demand our
attention," Garson said. She gestured at the turian standing behind Valni. "Nexus security will escort
you wherever you would like to go next."

"I understand," Valni said.

"Please enjoy the rest of the tour." Garson shook Valni's hand. "A pleasure, Spectre."

"Thank you." Valni held her hand out to Ryder. The man who grasped her hand tightly and gave it a
quick, perfunctory shake.

The meeting over, Valni turned to follow the turian security officer, but then stopped and turned
back. "Oh, just one more thing, if you don't mind." She raised her right hand to her forehead as if
she'd just remembered something, her face a picture of benign innocence. "There was mention in one
of the Andromeda Initiative Spectre files making reference to a… benefactor?" Valni frowned
theatrically. "But there was no name listed. I was wondering if you could fill the gaps in our
records?"

Valni had to hand it to Garson and Ryder, neither of them so much as flinched. Their expressions
were like granite, giving nothing away.
Jien Garson smiled and asked, "The Council has no record of this?"

"I'm afraid not. Call it a hole in the net. The Council's knowledge only goes so far. It's strange, really; neither the Asari or the Salarians seem to know the identity of your benefactor."

Valni studied their faces; other than a slight tension in Ryder's cheek as he clenched his jaw, neither of them reacted.

"We take the confidentiality of our investors very seriously," Garson said, her tone still light and breezy. "That information must remain classified. I'm sure you understand?"

Valni smiled and nodded. She wasn't about to push the matter. This wasn't why she was here. "Of course. I have to admire your loyalty to your sponsors. Trust is a rare commodity to find these days."

"Happy trails, Spectre," Ryder said.

"And to you," Valni told him.

Turning away, Valni followed the security officer into the habitation wing.

The security officer had barely said a word by the time they boarded the *Nexus* tram. The officer activated the tram console and the large doors shut behind Valni and the tram slipped quickly along its rails.

The tram was between stations when the officer abruptly triggered the console again and brought the transport to a full stop.

He activated his omni-tool and tapped away at the interface. Valni's own omni-tool pinged as it detected a jamming field enveloping the tram.

Valni looked at the turian officer, and the real reason for her visit.

"We shouldn't be overheard now," the officer said. "Sorry for the subterfuge. I couldn't risk a message being intercepted by Nexus control. There are too many eyes on the Initiative at the moment."

"You're the Hierarchy contact?"

"Tiran Kandros," he said. "Former Lieutenant of the Hierarchy. Recently discharged."

"Kandros?" Valni repeated. "Any relation to Bron Kandros?"

Tiran looked surprised. "You know my cousin?"

"I served with her on *Arcadias* for a short time."

"Small galaxy," Tiran remarked. "Bron is a credit to the Kandros name, not like her sister, Nyreen. Or me for that matter." Tiran shuffled his feet as he glanced down. Evidently talking about his family was not a happy topic. "My cousin went rogue," he admitted. "Nyreen got involved with some bad people on Omega. As far as I know she's still there."

"Bron's sister is a biotic, isn't she?"

Tiran nodded. "Nyreen never did like the restrictions of the Cabal. She rebelled, abandoned her unit, her family, everything. All to escape the curse of the Kandros name. To live a free life."
"Doesn't seem that different to what you're doing, to be honest – starting a new life in another galaxy. Is that why you volunteered for this assignment, Kandros? To start afresh?"

"Forgive me, Spectre, but my reasons for joining the Initiative are my own damned business."

Valni gave a nod. She didn't want to push the matter. "Very well. Let's hear your report," she said. "Your message said it was urgent."

"Have you heard of a planet called Haestrom?" Tiran asked.

Valni frowned. "It's a former quarian world. It was colonised before the geth uprising. But it's been abandoned for centuries. Why?"

"Earlier this year the geth launched an offensive against a squad of quarian special forces on Haestrom. Most of the quarians died. Apparently, there were only two survivors."

"What's that got to do with the Andromeda Initiative?"

"Do you know how the Initiative surveyed the Andromeda galaxy?"

"It was something to do with the geth, I believe," Valni said, recalling the file she's read.

"Yeah," Kandros said. "The geth had converted three Mass Relays into one superstructure: the Kolas Array. It was capable of faster-than-light scans using the combined relay corridor. Effectively it was a colossal telescope. It's how the Initiative obtained such accurate scans of Andromeda. The images were almost in real-time. I should know; I led the raid on the array to gather the data."

"Impressive feat of engineering."

"Yeah, but the real question no-one's asked is, why? Why did the Geth build the array? What were they searching for? And more importantly, why did they decide to build it after the attack on Haestrom? Garson and Ryder are trying not to draw attention to it, but I can tell it's peaked their interest."

"So, what did the geth find on Haestrom that prompted them to construct the array?"

"I'm not sure. The rumour I heard was something to do with the planet's sun aging faster than it should. As a Spectre you would have access to more information than I do. You could try interrogating the survivors. The squad was led by a quarian named Tali'Zorah vas… something. Their names keep changing depending on what ship they're on."

"Tali'Zorah vas Normandy," Valni said promptly. "Yeah, I've met her."

"Well, I guess you know everyone, don't you?" Tiran said, a hint of annoyance creeping into his voice.

"Get to the point, Kandros."

"A few days ago, one of the quarian scientists from the second wave ark, the Keelah Si'yah, made a survey of Haestrom for the Migrant Fleet. He recovered something – A geth data package. His encrypted report to the fleet said it revealed the truth about Haestrom's sun. But before he could return to the Keelah Si'yah, he was killed. Someone intercepted him. He was tortured. Left him for dead. Fortunately, he'd already put the data package in a secure drop to be picked up later. A quarian on pilgrimage collected the package and put it on a transport."
"And you know where that data package is?"

Tiran nodded. "The pilgrim contacted the Fleet via an unsecured vid-link. We intercepted it. Now, normally a retrieval operation like this would have been given to Ryder's second in command, Lieutenant Harper, but with so many eyes on the Initiative, Garson and Ryder didn't want to draw attention to it, and frankly the operation wasn't considered a priority so the job was given to one of our… procurement specialists."

"Procurement specialist?"

"She's little more than a mercenary, but she gets the job done. It was supposed to be a simple job, but with this information about the quarian scientist and the geth I fear she may be in over her head. I can't provide back-up without arousing suspicion, but you can." Tiran reached into his jacket and brought out a datapad. "This contains all the info about the transport ship the data package is on. You shouldn't have any trouble locating our specialist." Tiran gave her the datapad. "I know it doesn't sound like much, but it might be worth looking into."

"A lead is a lead. What's your procurement specialist's name?"

"Nyx," Tiran said. "Vetra Nyx."

Chapter End Notes

With many thanks to the fantastic Bayzee and RyderAndromeda for beta-reading this story, and a big thank you to everyone for their patience; I'm sorry you had to wait so long for this chapter. It does come with a cracking soundtrack: 'Enterprising Young Men' by Michael Giacchino.

The music starts when the shuttle pilot confesses she'd like to ask Valni out, and ends when the skycar lands on the Nexus landing pad.
Valni teams up with a merc drifter named Vetra Nyx. But working together proves challenging, especially when they uncover the contents of the quarian data package.

*Balor System, Caleston Rift, Terminus Systems – 06:10 ZULU – 9th November 2185 CE*

The *MSV Icarus* wasn’t what she was expecting.

The majority of cargo ships operating in the Terminus Systems were owned by traders and independent contractors who would often purchase obsolete junker ships at knockdown prices and overhaul them. Most of these freighters looked like they were held together with spit and polish. Start-up costs for independent traders often proved to be prohibitively expensive, and many struggled to make a decent living. As a result, many traders resorted to smuggling or transporting data packets to systems most reputable companies wouldn’t risk.

The *MSV Icarus*, however, was an Athabasca-class freighter. Often mistaken for Kowloon-class cargo carriers, the Athabasca-class were multi-leveled starships with minimal armaments and were all too easily boarded by raiders.

Valni knew from experience how dangerous the Terminus Systems could be. The Terminus was a hotbed of piracy. Slaver gangs and mercs roamed the systems, occasionally invading the neighbouring Attican Traverse to raid poorly defended colonies. Since these attacks fell outside the jurisdiction of Citadel space, the Council rarely responded directly, preferring to take a non-interference policy rather than risk a costly war that could unify the loose affiliation of gangs against the Citadel forces.

The Terminus was lawless, and Valni pitied the traders who were forced to ply their trade amongst deadly stars.

But people had to make a living.

"Turian shuttle, your approach is not scheduled. Please identify," a male voice said over the shuttle’s comm. Valni activated the link.

"This is Council shuttle *Tiberius*, operating on Spectre authority. Requesting permission to dock with the *Icarus*."

"Shuttle *Tiberius*, say again. It sounded like you said you had a Spectre on-board?"

"That is affirmative, *Icarus*," Valni said. "You’re speaking to her."

There was a long pause.

"Pull the other one!"
Valni sighed. This happened more often than she cared to admit. People tended to veer towards scepticism when she told them of her Spectre status. Although, to be fair, it usually happened when she met them face-to-face.

To counter this, Valni had fallen into the habit of giving out her credentials as a matter-of-course. Sometimes she wished the Council had issued her a Spectre badge so she could flash it.

"Sending authentication code now," Valni told the man via the comm. "Be advised, I will need full access to your shipping manifest and am authorised to carry weapons. Please don't test me on this, it's been a long trip."

There was another pause as her codes were authenticated. The reply came a few seconds later.

"Um, sorry Spectre," the voice of the man said. "We weren't expecting someone like you. Are we in trouble?"

"Not yet. Now, are you gonna open the hanger or shall I make my own entrance?" Valni replied. She was in a hurry and sometimes diplomacy needed a big stick to get things moving.

"Opening hanger bay. Please proceed inside," the voice said. "A crewmember will be there to meet you with the shipping manifest."

Valni thanked the man, then switched off the link and piloted her shuttle into the docking bay.

The Icarus' cargo bay was larger than she thought. Unlike the modular cargo holds of the older Kowloon-class ships the Icarus' cargo bay was one huge, multi-tiered area with catwalks and gangways criss-crossing the upper levels. Massive cranes with dangling cables were built into the topmost deck to haul the cargo containers that filled the hold.

Valni glanced at the cargo manifest she'd been given by a nervous-looking human crewman. It wasn't especially organized and gave only a vague idea of where the package might be located.

Valni clambered onto one of the crates to try and get her bearings.

The place was like a maze. The way the containers were arranged made navigating through the hold difficult. Valni sighed. Even with the manifest, she knew it was going to take a while to locate the package.

"You're a long way from home," a flanging voice sounded below her.

Valni peered over the edge of the crate.

Standing in the narrow gangway between the containers was a tall turian woman in dark grey combat armour. Her carapace was pale with two blue colony markings running from her browplate to her mandibles in an inverted 'V', and a holographic visor covered her eyes. She didn't appear to be armed. Valni guessed she'd relinquished her weapons when she'd boarded.

"But I guess you Spectres can go anywhere they like, can't they?" the woman added.

"How'd you know I'm a Spectre?" Valni asked.

"Word travels fast..." the woman replied. "And I may have hacked the ship's comms. Freighters like this have the worst firewalls."

"You're from the Nexus, I take it?"
The woman flashed a smile. "Guess my reputation precedes me." She gestured at her chest. "Vetra Nyx. Wrangler, provisioner, gun for hire, and obtainer of rare antiquities."

Valni smiled back; she recognized the line from one of Kenneth's favourite movies. "Cute."

"Why, thank you. So are you."

Valni cleared her throat. "Yeah, I've already had my fill of compliments, thanks."

"What brings you to this neck of the woods?"

"Same reason you're here. I was advised you might need an extra gun."

"And the Initiative sent a Spectre? Wow! I'm touched. Seriously, I'm getting the warm fuzzies here."

"Actually, the Initiative didn't send me. They don't even know I'm on-board."

"And the fuzzies are gone."

Crouching, Valni grabbed the edge of the crate and leapt down, landing nimbly in front of Nyx. She stood up to face the merc, her head barely reaching Vetra's shoulders.

Vetra gave her an admiring smile. "Wow, you are small," she said. "I mean, human smol! Like a little pocket-rocket."

"Funny," Valni said without enthusiasm.

"Let me guess: the Council trialling a new model of sub-compact Spectre?"

"Yeah, side-splitting," Valni deadpanned. "Think you can tell me one I haven't heard?"

But then Vetra's expression changed, she stared at Valni as if seeing her for the first time. "Wait… I thought you looked familiar." A broad grin lit up her face. "Hello, Spectre!"

Valni groaned. "Don't tell me you're a fan of that brand, too?"

"The one with your face all over it. Sure. It's adorable."

"Shoot me now," Valni muttered under her breath.

"Wasn't expecting to meet a celebrity on this trip. Maybe I'll get you to sign my underwear?"

"I… really hope that won't be necessary," Valni said carefully.

"Don't worry, I'm not wearing them at the moment. Technically speaking I never actually bought them."

Valni turned away. This was a conversation she really didn't want to be having. "Let's just find that data-package," she said as she moved between the crates.

Vetra trailed after her, an impish grin still playing on her face.

"Hey, if they ever make you into an action figure, would it be life-sized?" Vetra asked.

"You do know I'm armed, right?"
Navigating through the crates turned out to be a massive pain-in-the-ass.

Very often the pathways narrowed to a dead-end, forcing them to clamber up and over the containers. Valni appreciated the exercise, but there was no doubt she was going to have several choice words with the owners regarding their organisation.

"So, who tipped you off?" Vetra asked as they jumped down from another crate. "Can't imagine Sloane Kelly would send someone like you out to help someone like me. I bet it was Kandros. He seems like a sneaky bugger!"

"He certainly likes to play it close to his chest," Valni agreed.

"I didn't think he had that kind of pull."

"Everyone has a past."

They turned a corner and entered a long passage heading towards the stern of the ship. According to the manifest, the data-package was supposed to be somewhere there.

"You know, I checked your file on the flight over," Valni said.

"I have a file? What does it say?"

"Born on Palaven, but you left when you were young. As such, you were never inducted into the Hierarchy. Officially you're not even a citizen. Both parents gone. You were left alone to raise your baby sister by yourself. That's a lot of responsibility. Records are sketchy, but you were apparently involved with smuggling, merc gangs, and — according to Hierarchy intel — suspected of being part of a group that stole classified information from a military base on Menae…” Valni paused for effect. "Though there's nothing concrete to support that."

"You almost sound impressed," Vetra observed.

"Confused. You're obviously skilled. You're intelligent. You have knowledge of other cultures. Why did you decide to become a gun for hire?"

"You ask that like it's a recruitment option on career day. 'Oh, yes, it's my ambition to risk my life so my sister won't starve!'" Vetra said with scorn. "It wasn't a choice. I did it to survive."

"I get it," Valni assured her.

"Do you?" Vetra did not sound convinced. "On a related note, how did you become a Spectre? Did you have to audition for it or something? Was there a dance off?"

"I crashed a cruiser into Tayseri Ward. Almost took out the Dilinaga Concert Hall."

"And they made you a Spectre for that?" Vetra chuckled. "Spirits! If they knew about all the crap I've done, I'd be Primarch by now!"

"There were several captives being held on-board, including the CEO of Armali Council."

"Ah! Rescuing people in high places. Yeah, that'll do it."

"It wasn't favouritism. I was being evaluated. I just didn't know it."

"You can't have been very observant."
"My team and I took down a slaver group. We were rewarded for our actions. We weren't given preferential treatment."

"Uh-huh. What did your parents do?"

"Mom was an envoy. She's retired. Dad…" Valni hesitated, "he was Governor of the Northern Provinces back on Palaven."

"Oh, sure, no favouritism there," Vetra scoffed.

"I earned my rank on my own merits. I wasn't riding my parent's coattails."

"Keep telling yourself that."

Valni stopped and glared at Vetra. "What is your problem?"

"Some of us weren't born with a silver spoon in our mandibles. Some of us had to do what was necessary to not die! Those merc jobs I took, I hated those jobs. But I did them because I had to. I protected my kid sister. Even though I was still a kid myself. You grow up fast in that environment. Not everyone had the life of privilege you enjoyed."

Valni turned away and continued walking. "You know nothing about my life."

"You had parents, you had security, you had the Hierarchy," Vetra said, as she trailed after Valni. "Those are things me and Sid never had the luxury of knowing."

"We all have our trials and tribulations," Valni replied. "It's how we rise above them that determines who we are."

"Didn't realise Spectres were armed with philosophy degrees," Vetra muttered.

Valni continued to the end of the path and looked down at the datapad. According to the manifest the package sent by the quarian scientist should be right in front of her.

"This is it," Vetra said, pointing at a rectangular box that was about a metre long and half-a-metre high.

"Are you sure?" Valni asked her.

"See that weird symbol on the corner?" Vetra said, indicating a black motif that looked vaguely like a starship. "That's a quarian mark. Helps pilgrims and quarian explorers identify packages in secure drops. This one means it's to be sent to the Migrant Fleet."

Valni stared at the container. "That's a large crate for a data-package."

"Maybe it has a lot of padding?"

Valni switched on her omni-tool and scanned the crate. She frowned. "I'm not getting any readings from it."

Vetra also activated her omni-tool. She hunched down beside the container and started a decryption program.

"What are you doing?" Valni said.

"Opening it up," Vetra replied. "Let's see what we're dealing with."
"Wait, we don't know what's insi…"

But Valni's protest was cut short when, with a hiss, the top of the crate opened.

Vetra jumped back.

"What in the Spirits' name?"

The two women stared at the contents. Inside the crate was a grey, elongated robotic head with a single photoreceptor at the front.

"That's a geth head!" Vetra exclaimed.

"Not just the head," Valni said. With the crate open she was able to scan the contents properly. A complete geth had been folded into the container.

Without warning, the photoreceptor sprung to life.

"Whoa! What did you do?" Vetra accused.

Valni reached for her weapon. "That wasn't me," she said as her Phaeston assault rifle snapped open in her hands. "It must be reacting to the scan."

The geth uncurled itself, it's legs and arms lengthening as it stood up in the crate.

Then its glowing photoreceptor turned to face them.

"Online."

On the edge of her vision, Valni saw a Carnifex pistol appear in Vetra's hand; the merc levelled it at the geth. Valni eyed the pistol warily. She thought Vetra had given up all her weapons.

"Where did you get that?"

"I'm a smuggler. I'm good at hiding things. I snuck this one away."

"I hesitate to ask where."

"There's a hidden compartment in my chest-plate. Don't get cute!"

"I'm a Spectre," Valni told the geth. "If you make any threatening moves I will shoot you."

"Spectre rank acknowledged," the geth said.

Vetra blinked in surprise. "Ummm… should geth be able to do that?" she asked.

"What the hell were you doing in there?" Valni asked the geth.

The geth looked down and regarded the crate in an almost quizzical fashion. Then it looked up. "We do not know."

"Where did you come from?"

"We were on Haestrom. A Creator scientist approached us. He was studying the effects of the parent star's premature eruption into a red giant. We had a mutual goal. We shared data. Then the Creator disabled us. Our systems went dark. Consciousness was not restored until the container was opened."
"This is… this is weird, right?" Vetra said hesitantly. "It's not just me?"

"How did the quarian disable you?"

"An energy weapon. The Creator was armed with a scaled-down arc projector. A high-ampere shock scrabbled our neural pathways. This platform's self-repair protocol was neutralised until we were freed from confinement."

"You said you shared data with the quarian. Did you tell him what happened to Haestrom's sun?" Valni asked.

"We told him," the geth confirmed.

"And then he shot you?" Vetra asked.

"Yes."

"That's gratitude for you," Vetra huffed.

"Can you tell us about Haestrom's sun?"

"In light of the actions of the Creator, no."

"I need that data. Can we make an exchange?"

The geth's photoreceptor seemed to blink. "What part of 'no' caused confusion?"

"I don't know much about geth, but are they programmed to be sassy?" Vetra asked.

"Most of them can't even talk," Valni said. She nodded at the geth. "What are you?"

"An autonomous unit. We function independently of the geth network. Our virtual intelligence processors are optimised for gathering scientific data and limited interaction with organics."

"A geth VI?" Valni asked.

"This platform is currently running 1,100 programs."

"Like Legion?"

"Legion?" The geth paused and looked away as if it was remembering something. "The designation given to the platform sent to contact Commander Shepard. We serve a similar purpose. We were sent by the true geth to study the impact of extra-terrestrial offensives on extinct worlds. Our journey took us to Antibaar, Corang, Feros, Helyme, Kopis, Therum, all planets known to have suffered bombardment by hostile forces."

"What were you doing on Haestrom?"

"I repeat: all planets attacked by outside forces."

"I'm a little lost here," Vetra said. "What does it mean, 'true geth'?"

"A small percentage of geth split from the Collective," the geth explained. "These heretics spearheaded the attack on the Citadel. They are not true geth."

"Geth have political factions?" Vetra exclaimed. "I think I'm getting a headache."
Valni kept her focus on the geth. "But the only race I know of that went extinct are the Protheans," she said.

"That information is restricted," the geth said.

"Are you saying Haestrom was a Prothean world?"

"That information is restricted."

"Is the aging of Heastrom's sun somehow linked to the Protheans?"

"That information is restricted."

"Not very chatty, is he?" Vetra muttered.

"We have discovered that reticence is a useful survival skill," the geth replied. "However, with the right incentive we can achieve consensus."

"You want to negotiate?"

"We have information you desire. Our continued survival depends on that information. Until you can guarantee our safe return through the Perseus Veil, that information is restricted."

Vetra shook her head in amazement. "Playing it close to its chest, isn't it?"

Valni didn't ask where she'd learned that human expression. She lowered her weapon.

"Well, this day just took a left-turn."

Vetra chuckled. "No kidding." She lowered her weapon. "But if it'll help cheer you up, I could still get you to sign my underwear."

"You really couldn't have picked a worse time, could you?"

"Got to take the opportunity where you can!"

"Don't embarrass me in front of the geth."

The geth cocked its head as it regarded the turian women. "Is this behaviour typical of organic social interaction?" it asked.

Valni’s gaze flicked between Vetra and the geth. Even by her standards this was one of the most bizarre situations she'd been in.

At that moment (and much to her relief) an alarm sounded.

"Um, Spectre. Are you there?" a voice said on her omni-tool.

Valni answered. She was grateful for the distraction. "This is Severan. What are those alarms?"

"A ship just dropped out of FTL. I think they're pirates. They're targeting our engines. They're demanding we hand over the quarian package."

"What kind of ship is it?" Valni asked.

"I'm not sure. But it looks Alliance in design."
"Show me," Valni ordered.

"Hang on."

A second later, Valni's omni-tool synced with the Icarus' navigation cams.

A holographic screen appeared above her arm showing an external view of the freighter. A ship was positioned directly ahead of the Icarus. It looked like a Fenrir-class Alliance corvette, only it wasn't in the standard blue Alliance colours. It was white and yellow, and its thrusters were emblazoned with a distinctive logo.

Valni stared; her browplates rose.

She recognised the insignia on the ship.

The last time she'd seen that elongated hexagon bordered by gold lines was on Kenneth's uniform.

Cerberus!
Pirates of the Caleston Rift

Chapter Summary

Valni and Vetra battle Cerberus.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*Balor System, Caleston Rift, Terminus Systems – 07:20 ZULU – 9th November 2185 CE*

Valni looked up from the image of the Cerberus corvette hovering above her wrist and glanced at her companions. Vetra and the geth looked concerned. Well, Vetra looked concerned – the geth was still standing in the crate, its glowing photoreceptor focused unblinkingly on her face. Valni quickly gave up trying to guess what the alien machine might be thinking. Geth were impossible to read.

She turned to Vetra; they shared a look.

"Trouble?" Vetra asked.

"Trouble!"

"They're attempting to dock," the captain said.

Valni turned her attention back to the link. "What kind of defences do you have?"

"Minimal GARDIAN batteries. Certainly nothing that could take on a corvette."

"What do you have in your armoury?"

"A few rifles. But mostly pistols and small arms."

Valni cursed softly. "Don't do anything to provoke the raiders. Keep your crew out of the way. Keep them safe. The raiders are only interested in the quarian package. Let them come to us."

Vetra stared at Valni. "Come to us? Are you high?"

"We can't stop them boarding," Valni told her. "But we can control where we fight them." Valni turned her attention back to the link. "Open the armoury. Be ready to distribute as many weapons to the crew as you can. But wait for the nod from me. We'll try and thin the herd."

"Thin the herd?!" Vetra exclaimed. "What can the two of us do against armed raiders?" she asked incredulously.

"We have combat experience," the geth pointed out.

"Oh, like we're going to give you a gun!"

"We managed to get out a distress call," the voice on the link continued. "Blue Suns ships are on
"Blue Suns?" Valni said. The Terminus Systems were so dangerous that traders were often forced to hire merc groups like the Blue Suns and Eclipse who would charge extortionate sums to patrol the region and ensure the safety of the transport ships. "Ugh. I'd rather take my chances against the raiders."

"Speak for yourself," Vetra said.

"I have history with the Blue Suns."

"Who doesn't?" Vetra jabbed her thumb at their robotic prisoner. "What do we do with this one?"

"Get it out of that crate for starters," Valni said.

The geth obligingly stepped out of its crate.

Valni pointed at the uppermost level of the cargo bay. "We need to get to high ground. We're sitting ducks down here. This maze is a killing ground. We need to see the raiders coming."

Vetra nodded and pointed her weapon at the geth. "You heard the Little Lady; get your iron ass up that stairwell."

"Little Lady," Valni muttered heatedly as they hustled between the containers.

"Would you prefer 'Ankle-biter'?" Vetra asked cheekily.

"Oh, shut up, Gigantor!" Valni snapped.

The geth led them to metal staircase leading upwards. They clambered up the steep steps and had just reached the catwalk above the crates when the main doors on the far side of the bay opened. Six heavily armoured men entered the cargo bay. Covered head-to-foot in thick white and yellow armour with metal helmets that completely covered their heads, the raiders were carrying white submachine gun in a configuration Valni didn't recognise.

"They don't look like any raiders I've seen before," Vetra said.

The geth cocked its head. "Assault troopers," it said. "They are unshielded but heavily armoured. Our sensors are detecting submachine guns, electro batons and frag grenades."

"That's expensive gear," Valni said.

Behind the troopers, four smaller raiders appeared and dashed past the armoured men. Clad in form-fitting light armour and full helmets similar to that of the troopers, the new arrivals were – judging by their feminine body shape – either asari or human women.

"What the hell is that?" Vetra exclaimed.

One-by-one the feminine raiders drew what looked like single-edged half-metre blades from a sheath on their backs and held them in their trailing left hand as they ran. Then a flash of light flickered across their bodies and the sword-wielding raiders vanished into thin air.

"Tactical cloaking," Valni said.

"We have encountered these organics before," the geth said. "They have the designation 'Phantoms'."
Vetra frowned. "What kind of idiot brings a sword to a gunfight?"

"Monomolecular blades," the geth added. "Optimised for cutting through armour. Addendum: Phantoms have projectile blasters implanted in their gauntlets."

Vetra inclined her head at the geth. "He's handy in a tight spot!" she said admiringly.

"Stay with the geth," Valni said. "Keep heading up. Watch out for the troopers. I'll deal with the Phantoms."

"How are you going to fight an enemy you can't see?" Vetra asked.

"They're not the only one who can vanish," Valni told her, before turning and running down the catwalk. **Cannon in D Minor**

Vetra sighed and pushed the geth up the stairwell ahead of her. "You heard the woman; let's go, tin can," she said. "Spirits! Can't believe I'm risking my skin for a geth!"

"Your epidermis appears unblemished," the geth observed.

"Thanks. I moisturise. It's a proprietary blend."

On the catwalk, Valni could see the troopers start to fan out as they searched the lower level for the quarian package. Evidently, the Cerberus troops hadn't realised that the crate had already been opened. But it probably wouldn't take long for them to realise the package was gone, or what used to be inside. Valni had to move quickly. She ran across a skywalk bridging one side of the hold to the other and activated her own tactical cloak, vanishing in a flash of light.

Below her one of the troopers had already reached the open crate. Despite their heavy-looking armour, these Cerberus soldiers could move surprisingly quickly.

"Package located," the trooper said over his comm. "It has been opened. Repeat: the package is open. No sign of the geth. Target is mobile."

Valni frowned. *How did Cerberus know the crate was carrying a geth?* Then she recalled Kandros telling her the quarian scientist who had sent the package had been tortured for information. It must have been Cerberus who'd captured the scientist.

She knew that it wouldn't take long for Cerberus to find Vetra and the geth.

Valni glanced around the open-plan cargo bay with its bridging skywalks and dangling cables. She was mindful of her training from military college: *Use your environment to your advantage*. Already a plan was forming. She needed to take the heat off Vetra; she had to provide a distraction. Of course, that meant putting herself in the line-of-fire.

*Story of my life.*

Decision made, Valni deactivated her cloak and brought her rifle to bear on the trooper standing by the open crate.

"Hey!" she yelled.

The trooper looked up, raised his submachine gun, and activated his comm.

"Hostile spotted!" he reported to his squad. Just as Valni planned.
She opened fire. The trooper took a full burst of rounds in the chest and fell backwards. But he wasn't dead. He groaned and tried to sit up. Normally a full burst from a Phaeston rifle could drop a charging krogan.

*That armour must be damn thick!*

A noise from her right made her turn. A couple of troopers had soared onto the skywalk from the level below, propelled by rocket boosters on their backs. Not only was their armour strong, but it was capable of limited flight.

*Spirits! That's all I need!*

The trooper landed on the skyway and opened fire.

"Hostile engaged!" one of the troopers yelled.

Valni quickly holstered her rifle as she leapt for one of the hanging cables to escape the hail of bullets.

She swung out, using her momentum to take her to the other side of the cargo bay, as far away from the enemy as she hoped she could get.

It was a vain hope.

As she hit the catwalk on the other side of the bay, a Phantom materialised in front of her.

Valni brought her rifle up and fired. The Phantom thrust out up her right hand and projected a biotic shield to absorb the flak.

Without warning, a burst of energy erupted from the Phantom's gauntlet. This time Valni's barriers took the fire and she staggered under the blast.

In that moment, the Phantom leapt forward with her sword raised.

Valni instinctively lifted her assault rifle to deflect the blow. The Phantom's blade, its edge sharpened to the width of a molecule, sliced through Valni's rifle as if it was mist.

Valni stumbled back. She dropped the useless bisected rifle and leapt away from another wild swing. The Phantom's movements were powerful but unskilled. Valni suspected that Phantoms relied on superior weaponry and the element of surprise to take down enemies in a single strike and weren't used to someone who could dodge their attacks.

Valni let the Phantom take several wild swings as she evaluated their style.

She saw an opening and exploited it.

The Phantom tucked her hand under her body as she geared for another attack, but Valni was ready for her. As she swung her hand, Valni darted in and caught the Phantom by the wrist. Valni twisted her body, throwing her weight onto her front foot and forcing the Phantom into a shoulder throw.

Momentum took the Phantom over Valni's shoulder and pitched her over the railings. The Phantom screamed as she fell into the cargo bay, the sword slipping from her grasp and landing on the catwalk at Valni's feet.

Valni scooped up the blade. It was light, perfectly balanced and exceedingly sharp.
She smiled. She may have lost one weapon but she'd gained another.

On the uppermost level of the cargo bay, Vetra and the geth hurried past a row of containers stowed on the catwalk. She'd seen the Spectre escape the troopers and her heart stopping battle with the Phantom, but she resented the fact she could do nothing to help her. Running from a fight was not Vetra's style. She desperately wanted to shoot something. She wanted to face her enemy.

She got her chance.

"A Phantom is approaching," the geth suddenly announced.

Vetra looked around. "Where? I can't see them."

"We can. They are in front of us."

Vetra stared. She still couldn't see anything. Just then, a figure appeared by the stairwell ahead of them. It was indeed a Phantom. And she had spotted the geth.

Vetra heard the Phantom say "Target acquired" into her comm as she ran towards them.

"I'm guessing they want you alive?" Vetra said. "But everyone else is expendable."

"That would be our assessment, too," the geth agreed.

Before Vetra could react, the geth turned at lightning speed and pushed her between the containers.

"Hide there! We will interact with the Phantom," it told her and then turned to face the enemy.

The Phantom rushed forward and dropped into a crouching position in front of the geth as she thrust out her sword menacingly.

"Freeze, geth!" the Phantom said in a rasping tone, her speech electronically distorted by the helmet. "You're coming with us!"

"Your vital signs indicate elevated stress levels," the geth said conversationally. "If it helps you to relax we could sign your underwear?"

The Phantom recoiled as if burnt. "What?!" she exclaimed, her voice heavy with confusion. That hesitation was all Vetra needed. She leapt out from behind the crates and blasted the Phantom in the chest with her Carnifex. The Phantom's shield took the force of the impact. A second round drained the shields and a third penetrated her armour. The Phantom flew backwards over the railing. A resounding clang echoed around the bay. Vetra glanced over the railings; the Phantom was sprawled atop one of the crates, trying to raise her hands as she groaned weakly in pain.

Vetra didn't tarry. She hustled the geth towards the stairwell.

"Whatever you do, keep asking that!" she told it.

Below them, Valni was hunting. She crossed onto the skywalk, the sword grasped firmly in her hand. On the other side of the bay a figure silently snuck onto the skywalk. The Phantom didn't try to conceal her approach from the turian. Seeing the stolen sword in the hands of an enemy alien infuriated her. She sprinted towards the lone turian. The turian responded in kind and they charged, the Phantom gaining speed for her a final attack that would all but cut the turian in half.

The Phantom shouted a battle cry as she drove her blade straight through the turian's chest.
It passed harmlessly through Valni's body.

The Phantom turned to see the holographic decoy vanish at the same moment the real turian appeared behind her.

"Two can play at that game!" Valni said and came out swinging.

The Phantom barely had time to raise her blade in defence.

Sparks flew as the swords clashed.

The Phantom hurled herself to the left and then sprang forward. Valni parried a thrust and responded with a riposte. The lethal blades sang and hissed as they came together, creating glittering arcs of lights. The swordswomen made for an arresting sight, their blades whirling as they fought in the middle of the skywalk. The Phantom desperately blocked a cut from Valni's sword as Valni tested the Phantom's defences, looking for an opening.

Valni's suspicions were correct: Phantoms were trained for quick killing blows, not extended swordplay – Especially against a skilled opponent with a stolen blade.

The Phantom backed up, flailing desperately as Valni pressed her advantage. The Phantom narrowly avoided a diagonal slash that left a shallow gouge in her breastplate. Then Valni lunged forward, driving the Phantom backwards. A final flick with the point of her blade sent the Phantom off-balance. She lost her footing and fell, her sword clattering away. The Phantom raised her arm protectively as Valni swept her blade up for a killing blow.

But Valni wasn't aiming for the Phantom.

She swung the blade in a wide vertical arc at the skywalk. There was barely any resistance as the monomolecular blade sliced through the metal walkway in one clean sweep.

The skywalk shuddered and dropped about a metre. The Phantom stared at Valni; in that moment Valni could almost see the look of shock on the Phantom's face as, a second later, the skywalk gave way.

Valni leapt for a dangling cable to her left. The Phantom was not so lucky and scrambled for purchase as the metal walkway buckled, pitching her into the cargo bay with an almighty crash.

With one hand holding a hideously sharp blade and the other hand gripping the cable, Valni was alarmed to find she couldn't get a grip on the slick, oily chain. Her hand slipped. The cable sped through her fingers, burning her. Desperately, she let go, falling several metres to land beside the body of the dazed Phantom.

Shaking her head, Valni clambered to her feet. She was on the lower decks, in the maze of containers, with several heavily armed enemies gunning for her. She needed back-up.

Valni activated her omni-tool and opened a link to the Icarus' bridge.

"Yes, Spectre," the voice of the Icarus crewman replied.

"I'm giving you the nod!"

"Understood," came the reply.

"There she is!" someone called out.
Valni looked up to see another Phantom standing on the upper catwalk pointing her sword at her. Behind her were a pair of troopers. Valni activated her cloak and vanished as the Cerberus troops opened fire, sending ricochets in all directions.

Above her, Vetra watched Valni’s fall into the cargo bay.

"We’re going to help her," Vetra said firmly.

The geth didn’t argue, which surprised Vetra. Being a synthetic, she’d half expected it to respond by reciting the low odds of survival. But it didn’t. It simply nodded in agreement.

But no sooner had they started to move to the stairwell when two troopers rocketed over the railings, gouts of flame firing from their backs. They landed on the catwalk with a clang.

Vetra brought her Carnifex up and fired. The closest trooper staggered under the impact but he didn’t go down. His armour bore the brunt of the onslaught.

Vetra dived for cover as the second trooper opened fire. The geth, however, didn’t seek cover. Instead, it ran forward and grabbed the trooper Vetra had shot, using him as a human shield. Then, with a twist of robotic muscle, it lifted the trooper over the railings and pitched him into the hold.

But now it had lost its shield. Seeing the geth was vulnerable, Vetra emerged from hiding and charged the remaining trooper, firing her gun relentlessly. The trooper ducked behind a crate, only to emerge a second later with his gun trained on Vetra.

He had the drop on her. There was nowhere to hide.

Then a narrow spread of holes blossomed on the trooper’s chest. The enemy went down under the stream of bullets and lay still.

Bemused, Vetra looked to her right. The geth was standing by her side, the first trooper’s submachine in its hands.

Vetra eyed the geth warily, wondering if it was about to turn the submachine gun on her. She knew next to nothing about geth but was fairly certain trying to disarm it would not be a good idea.

"Thanks," she said cautiously.

The geth lowered its gun. "You should gather the enemy's weapon. It will increase your firepower," it advised.

"Good call," Vetra agreed and hurriedly picked up the gleaming white submachine gun from the dead trooper.

Below them, the sound of gunfire echoed around the bay. Valni was in trouble.

"We've got to get down there," Vetra said.

"The stairs are too slow," the geth said as it holstered the gun on its thigh. Without warning, it seized Vetra around the waist.

Vetra started. "What are you doing?"

"This way is quicker," the geth said by way of explanation. And then leapt over the railings.

They fell into space. The geth caught a dangling cable in its free hand and let the chain slip through
its fingers and the pair dropped like a stone. Vetra clung to the geth, its oddly warm metallic muscles flexing beneath her fingers. Despite herself, she couldn't suppress a squeal of terrified laughter as the ground came up to meet them at an alarming rate. At the last second, the geth squeezed the chain hard and they slowed to a perfectly judged halt, organic and synthetic toes brushing the ground.

The geth released her.

Vetra released an obscenity.

"Warn me next time you do that!" she exclaimed.

"As you wish," the geth said.

And together they advanced on the enemy.

They wound their way between the crates, emerging to a scene of all-out war.

Four heavily-armoured troopers were converging on their position, two limping Phantoms were carrying a third injured Phantom between them, while the last Phantom standing was locked in a battle royale with Valni as their swords clashed. Valni looked like she had the upper hand.

Vetra and the geth came out firing.

The troopers took note of the new arrivals but seemed loath to fire at the geth. Maybe they were worried about damaging their precious package?

Vetra ducked behind a crate and provided covering fire with her stolen submachine gun while the geth advanced on the trooper's position. The troopers were so focused on Vetra and the geth that they didn't notice the *Icarus* crew emerge through the cargo bay doors until it was too late.

The crew let loose on the raiders. The Cerberus agents suddenly found themselves on the defensive as they fought on three fronts against a turian woman and her geth, a turian maniac with a sword, and the crew of the *Icarus*. Caught in the flanking crossfire, a running retreat was the only option.

One of the troopers put his finger to his ear and activated his comm.

"We are being overrun. What are our orders? Do we withdraw?"

"*Do you have the Asset?*" a deep male voice demanded over the comm.

"No, sir! There was a complication."

"*Do not let the Asset fall into enemy hands. If you can't capture the geth, destroy it!*" the voice ordered.

"Understood," the trooper replied.

Over to the right, the Phantom Valni was fighting suddenly activated her tactical cloaking and vanished.

Valni swung her blade at the space the Phantom was but the enemy had gone, presumably retreating with her teammates.

Out of the corner of her eye, Vetra noticed one of the troopers reloading his weapon with explosive rounds.
Vetra glanced at the geth. It was standing out in the open. Vetra launched herself from cover and ran at the geth. "Get down!" she screamed.

The geth saw her running, then looked at the trooper aiming his weapon towards it.

It made a decision.

The geth caught Vetra by the arm and threw her back behind a crate just as the explosive round took the geth in the chest. A deafening blast echoed around the hold. The geth was torn to pieces. Robotic arms and legs spun in all directions. **

Vetra and Valni covered their heads.

Several seconds passed before they rose from their prone positions. By the time their senses had cleared enough to stand, the troopers and the surviving Phantom had gone, retreating to their shuttle in the docking bay.

Vetra emerged from her prone position on the floor and staggered to the remains of the geth, her ears still ringing.

"It pushed me out of the way," Vetra said. "Why'd it do that?"

Valni had no answers. She was staring at the smoking remains of the geth scattered on the ground.

Just then her omni-tool lit up as a message came through.

"The raiders are retreating," the Icarus' captain said. "Blue Suns' ships have just arrived in the system."

"Understood," Valni replied numbly.

She suddenly felt drained. She caught Vetra's eye; the merc drifter evidently felt the same way.

All that effort and they were no closer to discovering the truth about Haestrom or why Cerberus had taken such pains to capture and ultimately destroy the evidence.

It had all been snatched away.

Valni settled down on the floor beside the broken geth.

Had it all been for nothing?

Chapter End Notes

This chapter features a belter of a Two Steps from Hell soundtrack: Cannon in D Minor. The music starts when Valni says "They're not the only one who can vanish." and ends in an explosion. Enjoy.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!