## This One's Heart is Pure

**Summary**

Even on a Cerberus vessel, love will find a way. Starting with their first encounter, the epic love story of Thane Krios & FemShep.

Multiple PoVs, but mostly Thane & FemShep. Follows cannon, for the most part, but with added juicy bits! ME2 - ME3... maybe beyond! Rated M for select chapters & of course Jack's language. FYI written in UK English, not US. Updated at least once a fortnight.

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by **GarnetSeren**
Silently, he inhaled as deeply as his lungs and the enclosed space would allow. The vent in which he crouched, undetected, had no immediate access to the outside. Therefore his own body heat, which had elevated due to his quick assent through the tower, was causing the air to become hot and stale.

He blinked slowly.

His keen eyes surveying the large room directly below him, through the chinks of the ventilation grid. He had spent several minutes assessing his target; an asari by the name of Nassana Dantius, along with her guards.

Then a vision had, quite literally, stormed into the office. A red haired human female, clad in black armour, radiating an aura of fierce determination.

Subconsciously, he titled his head to the side; observing the woman who had interrupted his immediate plan.

He had followed her unabashed advance through the tower with interest. Whilst he, himself, had negotiated the winding ventilation ducts, she had blazed a path through the heart of the building.

His current study of her brought a new realisation to him. Namely, that the armour which he'd originally thought was fully black, actually had a vivid red stripe down the right arm; and a small logo, on the right side of the chest piece.

A knowing smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, as recognition dawned.

The glimpses he'd caught of her had been too fleeting before. Now he realised he knew this woman, or at least, knew of her.

He'd lost count of how many times he'd tossed back a photo of her, or walked out of a meeting, at the mention of her name. There were innumerable times he'd rejected contracts on her; believing the first human Spectre was too important, doing too much good, to be taken out by an assassin's bullet.

He'd even offered up a silent prayer to Kalahira, when the news of her passing had been broadcast. Though those reports now seemed extremely premature.

*The boundaries which divide life from death, are at best shadowy and vague*’ he quoted silently.

Pushing the thought aside, he turned his attention to the woman's companions. Whereas she stood composed, almost serene, her two companions were decidedly less so.

The venom in both their eyes, whilst studying the mercenaries, made him curious as to how a turian and a krogan; two races known for their fighting skills and who hated each other, followed the petite human female so devotedly.

Even with the woman's reputation, witnessing her command of her team as he had done, while they moved through Nassana's tower complex, was still something to marvel at.

So absorbed was he with the woman, he'd failed to follow the unfolding conversation below him.
It wasn't until the lights of a passing sky car caught and illuminated the woman's face; highlighting the startling emerald colour of her eyes, that his attention was forced back into the immediate present.

His breath caught, unexpectedly, at their beauty.

'Now is not the time for distractions, Thane!' the drell chastised himself.

Even though this was an unpaid contract, he considered it one of his most important. This was to be his last job, and he wanted it to be successful.

Silently, Thane took a slow inhalation of breath; focusing his mind, and forcing his attention away from the sight of the alluring human.

With his attention centred, the conversation from the room began to drift to him.

"I'm sure you find this all very ironic," stated Nassana. "First you take care of my sister, and now you're here for me. Well you made it this far. Now what?"

"You really think I'm here to kill you?" the redhead positively drawled. A sly, half-smile tugging at her red painted lips.

"Do you have another reason for destroying my tower, Shepard? Decimating my security?" the asari demanded.

A fleeting smile played on Thane's own lips as he considered this. The trio headed by Shepard had certainly helped provide a distraction, allowing him to get so far into the tower, with the bare minimum loss of life.

He'd even been able to save some innocents along his ascent, and he half attested that to her distraction.

"I'm just looking for someone," Shepard stated sharply.

'Someone. Does she mean myself?' Thane wondered, his breathe catching again.

It felt as if his heart fluttered for a second, almost in excitement. He blinked slowly, the scales of his brow bunching together as he frowned; puzzled by his body's reaction.

So distracted had the thought made him, he missed the asari's reply. However, Thane was keenly aware of the commander's emerald gaze, drifting up towards the vent were he waited. He was caught again in the pull of her eyes, before finding himself drawn to another half-smile that graced her face, as she crossed her arms.

'Does she suspect I am here?' he pondered.

His pulse beginning to race, when her eyes seemed to lock onto his. For a moment, vivid memories threatened to break free.

Never since the first sighting of his beloved... now lost... Irikah, had anyone made him falter during a hit.

Bitterly, he shook his head as if to clear it, and he felt a slight pang of guilt, as he forced the memories away.

Below him, the conversation continued.
"Who the goddess gave you right to play god?" Nassana demanded. "I may not be perfect, but look at you. We both kill people for money. What's the difference?"

Thane flinched at the comment. His hands clenching and unclenching, as he tried to dissipate the tension that was slowly beginning to build.

The asari's question irked him sorely. He doubted anyone in the galaxy, had failed to hear about the first human Spectre becoming Saviour of the Citadel. By all accounts, the commander was a hero… at least, before her disappearance.

"You kill people because you think they're beneath you; they're in your way," Shepard answered coolly, her jaw tightening. "I kill people when they leave me no choice."

'Such conviction' Thane thought.

He studied the redhead; taking in her clenched jaw and the hardened look in her emerald eyes. He found himself believing her.

Thoughts of Arashu's warrior angels crossed his mind, and the same memory of his Irikah pulled at his conscious.

Silently, he took a shuddering breath. It was time to act, before the memories had the chance to fully resurface. So without hesitation, Thane let himself drop gracefully from the vent.

Stealthily he was behind one mercenary. Neck snapped. A punch in the larynx of another, blocking the air way. One shot fired into the heart of another, whilst turning out of a bullet's trajectory, and catching the M-5 Phalanx falling from the mercenary's dead fingers. Another bullet shot directly into his target's stomach, before catching the asari as she slumped. Mere seconds had passed by.

He gently lay the body onto the desk, almost reverently. Folding the arms across the chest in a sign of respect, he then stepped back and regarded the body.

Despite knowing the wickedness and cruelty Nassana had wrought, Thane took no pleasure in killing her. Taking another's life left an indelible mark on the soul.

'Kalahira, goddess of oceans and the afterlife, grant...' he began to pray.

"Impressive," came the flanging voice of the turian. "You certainly know how to make an entrance."

'Is that admiration in the voice? Resentfulness?'

Thane's mind flashed quickly through the possibilities, but ultimately he was left unsure. There were too many variables for him to discern the turian's emotion.

Shaking off the wonder, he focused his mind back to his deceased target, continuing his prayer. However, he was fully aware of quiet footsteps approaching the desk.

"I was hoping to talk to you," Shepard said.

Her voice broke through his concentration. It seemed softer than when she'd spoken to the asari, or issued orders to her team during combat; which caught Thane slightly by surprise. He'd expected that someone with the commander's reputation would be forceful at all times.

"I apologise," he replied, honestly. "But prayers for the wicked must not be forsaken."

"Do you really think she deserves it?" she questioned.
Thane smiled inwardly, wondering if Shepard realised that in one sentence, she'd told him so much... that she held an altruistic look on the universe, that she looked for the good in all people, any race, that she encountered.

He couldn't help but find it charming, and for some reason he couldn't explain, Thane found himself hoping his reply would not lower the commander's opinion of him.

"Not for her, for me," Thane answered, almost sorrowfully. "The measure of an individual can be difficult to discern by actions alone. Take you, for instance. All this destruction…chaos..."

He paused. Once again drawn to Shepard's eyes, as she watched him walk slowly around the desk towards her. Thane considered telling her what he saw in her, this warrior angel; he wanted her to know he posed no threat to her. But most of all, he wanted to know why she had come looking for him.

"I was curious to see how far you'd go to find me," he stated, more confident than he perhaps felt. "Well here I am."

He caught a flicker in her eyes, but could not discern the emotion. Amusement? Appreciation? He was uncertain.

Though his attention was sharply drawn from the human, as Thane noticed the turian and krogan tensing behind her. Their weapons were still drawn, and it made him pause momentarily. After all, he hadn't been so successful in his career, without having a healthy sense for self-preservation.

However, the commander remained relaxed in posture. Dauntless.

"I do want to talk to you, but how did you know I was here?" she questioned, her tone even.

He was almost taken aback. From his previous experience with humans, he'd expect a flash of anger from his last statement. Not an politely worded enquiry.

Then again, it shouldn't have come as a surprise. The commander had a distinct reputation among the other species; one for being the opposite of what was expected from her race as a whole. It forced Thane to bite back the smile that threatened to form.

"Gunfire and explosions," he answered, truthfully. "I prefer to work quietly. If I have to fight through guards, I've made a mistake. I rarely make mistakes. You disrupted my plan, but your distraction eventually proved valuable."

'Is that a ghost of a smile on her lips?' he pondered, as he returned the commander's steady gaze.

He was trying to test her; wanting to know how well she held her composure. Though in truth, Thane was starting to wonder if he should perhaps be more concerned by the turian standing to the woman's left, who was looking agitated.

Decisively, Thane moved closer to the trio. Consciously keeping his hands loosely clasped behind his back. He wanted to appear confident, but not seem a threat. He had no intention of fighting them, unless they struck first.

"Let's cuts to the chase. I need you for a mission," Shepard replied, with no noticeable edge to her voice.

"Indeed?" he replied, impressed.
"You're familiar with the collectors?" Shepard asked.

The way she spoke the name, as if it tasted foul on her tongue, belied her apparent calmness. Thane nodded in response, and found himself walking in sync with the petite redhead; towards the desk, and away from her two companions.

'I intrigue' he thought. 'So much confidence, so much trust. Trust in her own abilities perhaps? Those of her team mates? Or perhaps trust that I won't harm her?'

His musings were cut short, as she continued.

"They're abducting entire human colonies," she explained, an edge of anger entering her pleasant voice. "Freedom's progress was their handiwork."

Thane was far from surprised, when she stated the intent to bring them to justice. He had expected it, already understanding what she was about to ask of him.

He gazed contemplatively out of the office's large plate glass window. He could easily hear the determination in the commander's voice, and didn't doubt it for a second. However, he wanted more information; on her, and on the mission.

"Attacking the collectors would require passing through the Omega Four relay. No ships have ever returned from doing so," Thane stated.

"They told me it was impossible to get to Ilos too," Shepard's retorted.

"A fair point," he agreed, unable to hide the small chuckle in his voice. "You've built a career on performing the impossible."

Thane realised, belatedly, that his words acknowledged that he knew who she was, but decided that was a trifle concern. He had already made up his mind.

"This was to be my last job," he told her, plainly. "I'm dying. Low survival odds don't concern me. The abduction of your colonists does."

He watched in quiet amazement, as emotions once again flitted across her emerald eyes. These, however, he had no trouble reading. They were ones of sadness and concern. Ones that caught him off guard, because he realised they were directed at him.

"I hadn't heard that. Is there anything I can do?" she asked, cementing Thane's assumption.

"Giving me this opportunity is enough," he found himself confiding. "The universe is a dark place. I'm trying to make it brighter before I die. Many innocents died today. I wasn't fast enough, and they suffered. I must atone for that. I will work for you Shepard. No charge," he added, shaking her gauntlet glad hand.

It hadn't taken Thane long to collect his limited possessions, from the meagre apartment he'd taken in Nos Astra's poorer district. Less than a standard galactic hour.

He'd already given most away to his neighbours; admitting to himself, that he hadn't expected to return alive from the assassination of Nassana Dantius.
So it was only with a small cache of his most prized sniper rifles, and an even smaller pack of clothing and cherished books, that he approached the commander's ship.

The Normandy was impressive, and there was no denying her beauty. Though Thane was surprised at the Cerberus logo emblazoned on the hull. Their extremist views didn't seem to coincide with what he had heard, and then witnessed, of Commander Shepard.

Putting aside any speculations, and deciding to find an appropriate moment to ask her about it, Thane left his baggage in the decontamination area, as instructed, and strolled into the ship's communication room.

He was greeted with the sight of the commander deep in discussion with a dark skinned human male, who was clad in what seemed to be a Cerberus officer's uniform.

That wasn't surprising, but what he hadn't expected, was that Shepard wasn't wearing a uniform at all. Instead, she was clad in a figure enhancing black dress. He couldn't help but eye her appreciatively.

"I've heard impressive stories Krios," stated the officer, as he noticed him. "Sounds like you will be an asset to the team. That is, if you are comfortable have an assassin watch your back."

Thane caught the edge of hostility in the man's voice, and watched as he direct the last statement towards Shepard. Without knowing why, Thane found himself wondering if there was anything between the two. For some inexplicable reason, the notion bothered him.

"I've accepted a contract," Thane interjected, resolutely. "My arm is Shepard's."

"Uh-huh. Don't know about you, but I am loyal to more than my next pay cheque," the officer stated, in a disbelieving tone.

"Obviously he is too. He is doing this mission gratis. What's your concern Jacob?" Shepard countered.

"I don't like mercenaries. And an assassin is just a precise mercenary," Jacob replied.

Though Thane was pleased and intrigued with Shepard's defence of himself, he wondered if that was really what this Jacob was concerned about... or was it just Cerberus' distaste for non-humans.

Whichever that case, he was glad to witness that the commander seemed to hold no such prejudices.

"An assassin is a weapon. A weapon doesn't choose to kill. The one who wields it does," Thane found himself explaining, more in the hope that Shepard would understand, rather than wanting to ease Jacob's misgivings.

"Where should I put my things? I'd prefer some place dry, if anything is available?" he asked, not wanting to appear rude.

There was an electronic beep that filled the room.

"The area near the Life Support Plant on the Crew Deck tends to be slightly more arid than the rest of the ship," intoned an artificial yet pleasant voice.


Though surprised, it seemed discourteous to be impolite, even to a synthetic being. And a single
glance at Shepard, had him wondering if he'd seen yet another ghost of a smile.

He bowed to the woman, out of genuine respect; and the slight nod in return from her, was a surprisingly satisfying response.

Without further ceremony, he left the room. However, years of training caused him to pause for a brief moment, once the doors had slid shut behind him.

"He seems quite civil," the AI's said, causing Thane to smile.

"We need all the help we can get," Shepard stated, her voice travelling through the closed door. "He's not what I expected from an assassin. He may surprise you."

Thane's smile widened slightly, glad that he had at least made an impression on her. One that was seemingly positive. Though he still couldn't figure out why that was so important to him.

However, the cutting remark that followed from Jacob, made Thane decided he would need to be wary around that human. And not wanting to be found loitering, he quietly went in search of the Life Support Plant.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note
For those who would like to know: "The boundaries which divide life from death are at best shadowy and vague" is an Edgar Allan Poe quote.
If she were to ever look back on this moment, Commander Shepard doubted she would be able to figure out how she managed to stop herself from pulsing with blue energy, as her powers threatened to flare from pure, unaltered rage.

It would be so easy, simple even, to just hurl the asari out the window with a biotic Throw. Instead, she reluctantly settled for positively glaring daggers at the woman in front of her.

Their first and last meeting, had been almost three years ago. Shortly after the successful 'closure' of a slaver ring on Shirjila, and had taken place in the glaring white lights of the imaginatively named Embassies Bar, aboard the Citadel.

Even then, Shepard had wanted to put a hole squarely between the eyes of the "condescending Bosh'tet", as Tali had grumbled, once they'd left that meeting.

Now, Shepard's finger twitched to the trigger of her M-12 Locust. The gun was her new pride and joy; her own spoils from Kasumi's last heist.

Despite her outwardly calm persona, one that had been perfected after years of rigorous military training, Shepard was feeling pretty irritated, to say the least.

After the seemingly endless battle up through Dantius Towers, that had taken the best, or worst… depending on your outlook… part of two hours to traverse the labyrinth of corridors, Shepard's patience had firmly run out.

She was aggravated by the fact that their time had been divided between dealing with mercenaries pointlessly throwing their lives away, and tending to the scared and wounded survivors of the guard's rampage.

So now Shepard was fighting the urge to empty a thermal clip into the self-righteous asari; wanting to paint the wall blue with the Nassana's blood. Purely on behalf the injured, and often dead, workforce they had encountered.

Truthfully, if she, Garrus and Grunt hadn't traipsed through the damn awful tower in order to track down the elusive drell assassin; Thane Krios, who was to execute a hit on the asari, Shepard had to admit she would have put a bullet in the woman's brain by now. And she couldn't help the sly, half-smile that pulled on her lips at the thought.

She was doing her best to tune out most of what Nassana was saying; trying to bide her time until the assassin struck. Though her patience was on a knife edge, and more often than not, Shepard found herself replying to the asari's drivel... with ever increasing hostility.

Shepard almost laughed that Nassana accused her of being there to kill her, and she let her gaze drift towards the ceiling vent, doubting the asari would realise what she was doing; it was most likely spot for the assassin to be perched. Since the duct was the most secure place to stage a solitary ambush from.

Despite the thought being far removed from her usual patient and understanding nature, Shepard was enjoying the prospect to seeing the asari get what she deserved.

'What had Parasini said? Loving nailing asari, so ageless and superior?' Shepard wondered, darkly.
Thankfully, it seemed she wouldn't have to wait long, as all of a sudden, one of Nassana's guards suddenly shifted into high alert. The asari commando began to glance around the room, her hands grasping her M-5 Phalanx tighter, as an almost scared look crossed the faces of the other two mercenaries.

Nassana glared at Shepard, obviously still convinced she was the one behind the disturbance.

"You… stay put," the former diplomat instructed, pointing an incredulous finger at her.

Shepard couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at that, but mere moments later, she watched with interest as a sleek figure drop gracefully from the vent.

For a split second, their eyes met, and Shepard was drawn to the black depths of his, before the man set about his task with silent zeal.

Stealthily he was behind one mercenary, snapping his neck. A punch in the larynx to a second block their air way. He fired a single shot into the heart of the commando, whilst turning out of a bullet's trajectory.

Shepard was certainly impressed, as she watched him catch the gun, falling from the mercenary's dead fingers. A final shot was fired, directly into Nassana's stomach, and the assassin caught the asari as she slumped.

Paltry seconds had passed by, and Shepard realised she had been unconsciously holding her breath. She exhaled slowly, as the drell assassin gently lay the body onto the desk, almost reverently.

Shepard had to admit, she was very impressed with this Thane Krios. His skills were every bit as good as the dossier had stated.

She also found him quite alluring, as she studied him carefully, which surprised her. Though far from a xenophobe; especially taking into account her past trysts with a certain turian requisitions officer on the Citadel, Shepard had never encountered a drell before. He certainly intrigued her.

"Impressive," Garrus' stated, breaking through her thoughts. "You certainly know how to make an entrance."

Shepard barely contained a chuckle. Her 'bad-ass' turian best friend sounded almost envious.

However, the assassin was seemingly ignoring them. His hands were clasped and head bent, in what she assumed was a silent prayer. Her teammates still had their guns readied; since years in the military had taught her to always plan for the worst eventuality, but she wanted the assassin to know they were not a threat to him.

After frowning in an uncharacteristic moment of indecision, Shepard started to walk slowly towards the desk; having already decided they needed Thane on the team.

'More like want him on the team' her mind rebuked.

"I was hoping to talk to you," she said, her voice losing some of the 'commander persona' she used during missions.

"I apologise," Thane replied. "But prayers for the wicked must not be forsaken."

'Wow, that voice' Shepard thought, her heart feeling like it had skipped a beat.
His voice was like velvet, rich yet gravelly, but she was surprised at his words. She looked at him questioningly, and felt her breath catch as his onyx eyes locked onto hers.

Despite their alien quality, Shepard was sure they were eyes she could happily get lost in. For a moment, her mind focused purely on the man's attractiveness, before silently cursing herself in annoyance.

‘You're here to recruit him, not simper at the sight of his dark eyes’ she chastised herself.

"Do you really think she deserves it?" she asked, resolutely keeping her tone even.

"Not for her. For me," Thane replied, solemnly. "The measure of an individual can be difficult to discern by actions alone. Take you, for instance. All this destruction…chaos. I was curious to see how far you'd go to find me," he stated. "Well here I am."

Shepard watched him walk slowly around the desk towards her, his movements were fluid. Graceful and poised, like a dancer... or a panther, sleek and deadly.

And though she could feel her two companions tense behind her, guessing they probably heard Thane's last comment as a challenge, Shepard couldn't help the flickered of amusement, that surely shone in her eyes.

'I like this guy already' she thought.

"I do want to talk to you… but how did you know I was here?" Shepard asked, conscious to keep her posture relaxed.

"Gunfire and explosions," Thane answered, as he moved closer. "I prefer to work quietly. If I have to fight through guards, I've made a mistake. I rarely make mistakes."

Another smile threatened to break her calm demeanour. Thane's confidence reminded Shepard of her of a certain turian vigilante, and she could practically feel her best friend's agitation at the remark.

Garrus was quite competitive, and she knew there'd be some very interesting exchanges between those two; ones that she looked forward to witnessing.

"You disrupted my plan, but your distraction eventually proved valuable," Thane continued.

'That comment could have come right out of Garrus' mouth' she thought, biting back a wry smile.

Cutting to the chase, Shepard explained the mission in brief. Resolutely, she kept her manner professional, though she suspected the way she grit out the word 'collectors', belied her apparent calmness. As she finished her disclosure, Shepard watched as the drell turned silently to the window, and seemed to stare contemplatively out onto the sites of Nos Astra.

"Attacking the collectors would require passing through the Omega Four relay. No ships have ever returned from doing so," Thane stated.

His voice held no hint of fear, and Shepard's respect grew for him.

"They told me it was impossible to get to Ilos too," she was quick to retort.

"A fair point," Thane practically chuckled. "You've built a career on performing the impossible."

She blinked in surprise; his statement seemed to indicate he knew who she was, something he hadn't implied up until that point. In the momentary silence that followed Thane's admission, Shepard tried
to read the assassin's face, looking for any tells or hints at his thoughts or feelings. Disappointingly, she found none.

"This was to be my last job," he continued, plainly. "I'm dying. Low survival odds don't concern me. The abduction of your colonists does."

Shepard was taken aback. The Illusive Man's dossier hadn't mentioned this, nor had the assassin's previous performance hinted at any ill health. For a heartbeat, she was dumbstruck. Both from Thane's admittance, and from genuine surge of concern for the drell. Shepard knew, all too well, that death was not an easy thing to live with.

"I hadn't heard that. Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

"Giving me this opportunity is enough," Thane replied. "The universe is a dark place. I'm trying to make it brighter before I die. Many innocents died today. I wasn't fast enough, and they suffered. I must atone for that."

He sounded remorseful, which touched her.

"I will work for you Shepard. No charge," he added, as they shook hands.

Upon returning to the Normandy, Shepard had her customary shower, and changed into her 'casual' clothes. Though she supposed that casual didn't exactly fit the figure hugging, black dress she'd chosen to wear; the one Kasumi had given her a few weeks previously.

'I wonder if this is really appropriate to wear to welcome our newest recruit on board' she had pondered, as she changed.

Shepard was the first to admit, she liked the dress; and how much her enigmatic thief smiled, when the woman saw Shepard wear the outfit she had chosen. But was it really suitable?

She had eyed the Cerberus emblazoned uniforms, that hung in her closet, with disdain. They had be 'provided' for her, upon her resurrection, and she still hadn't gotten around to throwing out. The only thing that she was glad of, was the knee high, flat soled boots that she'd tugged on instead of high-heels.

Now she stood talking with Jacob, in the Normandy's Communication Room; thankful that Miranda had been unable to join them, whilst they discussed Thane's recruitment mission. The meeting was fairly informal debrief, as they always were, when her self-appointed XO wasn't around.

Shepard was sure Kasumi wouldn't be far away; knowing her friend's crush on the Cerberus officer, as well as the thief's love of subterfuge, made it a pretty safe bet.

Though before she could begin to guess were the petite Japanese woman was hiding, her attention was caught by the quiet hissing of the door opening. Thane strolled in, elegant and composed, and she found those dark onyx eyes upon her once more.

"I've heard impressive stories, Krios," Jacob stated. "Sounds like you will be an asset to the team. That is, if you are comfortable having an assassin watch your back."

Shepard could hear the edge in Jacob's voice, clear as day, and knew it was a statement of officer's distrust, rather than an actual question. She wasn't happy, and fought hard to resist the urge to scowl at the man.
He hadn't accompanied her through the tower, and hadn't witnessed Thane's skills, nor even spoken to him. In Shepard's mind, he had no right to question the drell's motives. However, before she could answer, the assassin began to speak.

"I've accepted a contract," Thane stated, with a calm confidence. "My arm is Shepard's."

"Uh-huh. Don't know about you, but I am loyal to more than my next pay cheque," came Jacob's riposte.

As surprised as Shepard was at the assassin's admission, it didn't outweigh her annoyance at the officer's questioning doubts.

Her once infinite patience was being tested again, something that happened nearly on a hourly basis, since her resurrection. She could have happily dismissed Jacob then and there, but wasn't about to let a possible volatile situation begin to simmer between the two men.

"Obviously he is too. He is doing this mission gratis," she defended, conscious to keep her agitation hidden. "What's your concern?"

"I don't like mercenaries, and an assassin is just a precise mercenary," Jacob huffed, his posture remaining closed.

Shepard stared at him in disbelief, literally biting her tongue to stop the tirade that wanted to flow.

'Of all the hypocritical bull' she fumed silently. 'What the hell does he think he is? A Knight in shining armour?'

"An assassin is a weapon. A weapon doesn't choose to kill. The one who wields it does," Thane interjected, calmly.

His dignified response cooled her anger, and Shepard gave the drell an appraising look. His comment echoed her own belief on the subject. She had never had problems with assassins, as long as they weren't after her or her team.

Truthfully, Shepard regarded them for their skill and training, and from what she had witnessed so far, she figured Thane Krios was mostly likely the best.

"Where should I put my things?" the drell asked, obviously considering that he had given enough of an explanation. "I'd prefer some place dry. If anything is available?"

There was an electronic beep. "The area near the life support plant on the crew deck tends to be slightly more arid than the rest of the ship," intoned EDI's artificial, yet pleasant, voice.

Shepard watched Thane intently for his reaction. Most were wary of the inclusion of a full Artificial Intelligence on board the ship. However, the drell only seemed mildly surprised, which Shepard fully accepted, before he acknowledge EDI with as much courtesy as he had shown to her and Jacob.

A smile played on Shepard's lips, as she found her esteem of him raising yet again, and she nodded an acknowledgement to Thane's respectful bow as he excused himself.

"He seems quite civil," EDI declared, before another beep signified her signing out of the room.

Shepard had to suppress a giggle before addressing Jacob, she was certainly with EDI on that one. "We need all the help we can get. He's not what I expected from an assassin," she admitted. "He may surprise you."
"Yeah and he may not," Jacob replied bitterly, before he too left the room.

Shepard gave a small sigh of frustration, realising she'd have to keep a closer eye on the officer from now on.

Unsurprisingly, she watched Kasumi slowly materialise into view; and she allowed herself a whole hearted grin, as she noticed the mischievous glint in her friend’s eyes, that were barely visible beneath her ever present hood.

Shepard raised an eyebrow expectantly, knowing all too well where this conversation was headed.

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**Author's Note**

Before anyone thinks it, the requisitions officer is not Garrus. It's the turian from ME1 that is in the C-Sec 'shop'. With the way Shepard always said: "show me what you got" to him, I always thought it sounded like a really bad pick-up line.
There were few things in life that his extensive training had not prepared him for. Unfortunately, Thane encountered one the moment he step out on the CIC.

Yeoman Kelly Chambers was, by all accounts, a seemingly pleasant individual. However, her over enthusiastic greeting, and not to mention the shameless flirting, had put Thane on the back foot from the start. He had never been subjected to so much exuberance directed solely at himself before, and in truth, it was more than a little unnerving.

Any who witnessed the interaction would admit he made a valiant effort to remain courteous, despite his discomfort. Though the moment Chambers had touched his arm and told him, very suggestively, she would be happy to offer any hands on help he may need, Thane found himself hurrying to the relative sanctity of the elevator.

'Women speak two languages - one of which is verbal' he thought, wryly.

"I commend you Sere Krios," the artificial voice intoned. "Most people don't last that long against the Yeoman."

He looked up at what he assumed was the AI's camera. If he didn't know better, he would have said the voice sound amused.

"Perhaps a warning to future recruits would be advised," he stated, dryly.

"Acknowledged," the AI said, sounding almost like it agreed, before it began relaying messages. "Doctor Chakwas has requested you see her in the medical bay at your earliest convenience. Also, your belongings have been moved to your quarters, as specified during your debrief with the commander."

As the elevator reached the next level, Thane issued his thanks before exiting in search of the doctor. In truth, he was dreading any encounter with the ship's medic, but reasoned he may as well get it over with. However his fears were mostly unfounded, as he found himself levelled by the slate blue gaze of the doctor.

"Ah, Mr Krios. I didn't expect to see you so soon. Most like to avoid their medical as long as possible," the woman greeted, briskly. "The commander messaged me after your meeting, informed me of your… situation."

He began to open his mouth to offer the same statement as he had to Shepard, that he required no assistance, however he found himself silenced as the medic merely waved her hand. The woman shook her head, her short silver hair barely moving from the concise movement.

"Spare me the arguments," she said, not unkindly. "I merely wish to know the condition, and any medication or treatments you are undergoing. I also need to take a body scan, just as every other member of the crew has undergone, in order to have a baseline to work from, should you be injured during any mission."

Thane hadn't expected the doctor to be so understanding, and couldn't help the small smile that formed on his lips.

He vaguely realised that he'd probably smiled more since encountering the commander, than he had done in the previous ten years.
"I appreciate your discretion," he replied, moving towards the medical scanner, the doctor had motioned to moments before.

The scan and discussion had taken longer than expected, but it hadn't been as invasive nor as unpleasant as he had feared.

However, upon leaving the medical bay, Thane was confronted with the turian and krogan that had accompanied the commander through Dantius Towers.

The krogan snarled at the sight of him, causing Thane to check his step. After the earlier encounter with Jacob, he had no wish the engage in further hostilities; certainly not ones that could be avoided.

"Don't worry. Grunt's just a little protective of the commander," the turian smiled, mirthlessly, motioning towards the krogan.

"Oh? And you're not Garrus?" a light mocking voice called.

To the surprise of all three men, a shimmering figure of a woman uncloaked, and walked between them.

"Besides, it's sweet how much he cares about his Okasan," she called over her shoulder, before disappearing into a nearby room.

'Okasana?" Thane wonder, before his translator turned the unfamiliar human word, into the more familiar drell word for Mother. 'That is intriguing'

"Damn thief," grumbled the krogan, before shouldering his way past Thane, towards the Mess Hall.

Thane inclined his head towards the turian, but could feel the avian eyes follow him, as he slipped into the relative quietness of the room that would be his home for the foreseeable future.

He gave a ragged sigh, as the door slid shut behind him. The incessant, familiar ache that normally settled in his bones after prolonged exertion, began to plague him; as did the tightness in his chest. He bit back a grunt of discomfort, as he sat in one of the chairs, and tried to control his breathing.

In the supposed sanctity of the room, he allowed himself to relax slightly. Resting his elbows on the table in front of him, and his chin upon clasped hands.

Gazing out into the violet hues of the Drive Core, he contemplated over the unexpected turn his life had taken.

'The tempest in my mind doth from my senses take all feeling' he mused.

In truth, he was much more interested in the works of Earth's philosophers, but he occasionally indulged in works by the planet's most celebrated authors as well. Besides, the quote seemed fitting; especially for the brouhaha of events the day had thrown at him.

All too soon though, Thane was brought out of his thoughts as he heard the whoosh of the door opening behind him. Quiet footsteps approached, and he controlled his instinctual need to strike; already suspecting who it was.

Concentrating on taking steady breathes, Thane resisted the urge to turn towards the piercing emerald eyes he was sure would greet him, fearing he would be lost to their pull if he did.

"Do you need something?" he asked, simply.
"Have a few minutes to talk?" the commander asked.

The softness of her voice, once again, caught Thane off guard. Though, more than that, he was surprised that Shepard posed it as a request, rather than an order to debrief. It was not what he'd expected from such a notable military leader; one known for getting the job done.

"Certainly," he agreed, warmly. "We haven't had the chance since I joined."

"You could say that," Shepard chuckled.

Her words let Thane assume that the passing hours had been just as eventful for her.

He watched from the corner of his eye, as she surveyed the room, before her gaze landed on his neatly piled belongings. Her brow furrowed, and she began to nibble her bottom lip.

Shepard's unexpected behaviour forced Thane to turn his attention to her fully; assessing her as thoroughly as she had done the room.

"Are you going to be comfortable here?" she asked suddenly, wiping round to face him.

Just as quickly, Thane averted his eyes, and resumed his study of the drive core. He could feel the mild blush rising up his throat; embarrassed at almost being caught in his appraisal. However, if the faint chuckle the commander gave was anything to go by, his actions hadn't gone unnoticed.

In the reflection of the window, he watched Shepard lean her right shoulder against the far wall; her gaze upon him. He blinked slowly. He'd expected her to move to sit in the chair opposite him, and he wonder if there was a reason for her actions.

"Thank you for your concern, but the room is most adequate," Thane assured. "Though I feel there is more you wish to know."

"When we met, you said you were dying," Shepard stated, forthright but gentle.

There was something in the tone of her voice, that caused him to pause momentarily. He wondered if she'd already spoke to the doctor; until he watched, in the reflection, as her emerald eyes also turned towards the drive core.

The apparent sadness in her eyes spoke volumes to him, and his mind wandered to the reports of her demise.

'How close did she go to Kalahira's shore?' he mused.

"Yes," he agreed. "I thought you'd want to know more. You don't need to worry about the rest of the crew, my illness is not communicable, even to other drell. It's called Kepral's Syndrome."

He straightened his posture, as her eyes returned to him. He braced himself against the pity he expected from the commander, waited for the unhelpful responses that the admittance usually brought. However, Shepard merely gave a weak smile, and tilted her head to the side as she regarded him.

"That thought had never crossed my mind," she dismissed, with a flippant wave of her hand. "Though I'd appreciate if you would explain it to me," she added, seriously.

Once again, it was a request, not an order. Thane found it was his turn to do the regarding, and he levelled his gaze, unblinking, on the commander. She didn't flinch under his scrutiny, only raised an
eyebrow slightly, which merely served to confuse him.

"I can go ask Chakwas, if you'd prefer," she shrugged. A movement that pushed her away from the wall.

He quickly realised she had interpreted his silence as a refusal, and was about to leave. Before he had consciously decided to do so, he was calling out to her. Unsure as to why, but very certain he wanted her to stay.

"I do not mind," he assured. "But please, sit."

He gestured to the one remaining chair in the room, hoping she'd recognise his meagre offer of hospitality. He regretted that currently, it was the only thing he was able to offer, other than the answers the commander wished to have.

Thane watched as Shepard hesitated for a moment, then smiled warmly and took the seat. And with her smile upon him, for once he found he didn't dread the coming conversation.

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Author's Note
For those who would like to know, 'Women speak two languages - one of which is verbal' and 'The tempest in my mind doth from my senses take all feeling' are both Shakespearean quotes.
A New Recruit (Shepard PoV)

Shifting to perch on the edge of the conference table, Shepard regarded her kleptomaniac friend with anticipation; waiting for the inevitable.

It was always the same story, every time the crew encountered a good looking male, the Japanese thief would set about some hair-brained scheme to set her up. Jack had dubiously dubbed it 'Operation Get Shepard Laid', and the commander doubted that this time would be any different.

Unsurprisingly, she didn't have to wait long for it to start.

"Well Shep," the thief smiled, cryptically. "I have to admit. Thane has a certain mystique about him. He's not my type, but I get it."

"Uh-huh," Shepard smirked.

She'd be damned if she was going to let on that she did, in fact, find the drell attractive. Shepard had already learnt her lesson; after one fateful trip to Dark Star, when she admitted that she thought the turian bar tender was good looking. After that night, and a hangover that even her cybernetics had a hard time handling, she had vowed to keep silent about any interest she had in any man.

The pout that Kasumi shot her was truly award worthy, and Shepard couldn't help the giggle that escaped her. Shaking her head, she manoeuvred past the thief, and through the armoury; hoping the other woman would get distracted by Jacob along the way, as she often did.

It seemed her plan had worked, since Shepard made it to her terminal on the CIC, without further incident. Right up until Kelly Chambers appeared by her side, holding two steaming mugs of tea.

Shepard eyed the offered drink suspiciously. No one aboard the Normandy came baring gifts, not without an ulterior motive. The chirpy Yeoman was no different; and with Kelly being the unofficial counsellor aboard, she was the one most likely to come with a hidden agenda.

"All right, out with it," Shepard grinned, taking the offered mug.

"Thane carries himself with such cold confidence. I'm not sure if I find him scary or sexy," Kelly stated, in a conspiratorial whisper.

Rolling her eyes, Shepard took a sip of tea. It was quite evident that Kasumi had roped Kelly in to her plan, which would probably mean Jack was also in on it somehow.

Shepard gave a quiet sigh of resignation. Truthfully, she was just as much a sucker for this sort of banter, as the women who were instigating it were. Though she had no intention of admitting anything, she may as well play along, even if just a little.

"A lot of women like bad boys," Shepard replied, wryly.

'Not that I consider Thane a bad boy, but there's no denying, he's got definite appeal' she added to herself.

"A lot of women… like you?" Kelly enquired, almost sounding hopeful.

Shepard shot the Yeoman a sideways glance and laughed. The 'puppy dog eyes' Chambers was giving, were almost as good as Kasumi's pout. Still chuckling, Shepard drained her mug, then patted
"Better luck next time, Kelly," she consoled, walking away in the direction of the bridge.

"Though I live a dangerous life. Dangerous men fit right in," she called, flippantly, over her shoulder.

"I like you more and more each day Shepard," the Yeoman laughed.

Shaking her head, Shepard made her way to the cockpit. Since the days of the SR1, she liked to tour the ship; talking with her crew after every mission. Anderson had taught her the importance of being aware of a crew's feelings, and it was a lesson Shepard had stuck to religiously, ever since gaining her own command.

After all the time they'd worked together, it had become customary for her to start with pilot Jeff 'Joker' Moreau.

"Shepard, another dangerous alien on board?" Joker greeted.

He spoke before she had even reached his chair, and the pilot's tone was thick with characteristic sarcasm; not that there was anything surprising about that.

"It's good to see you too, my little black rain cloud," Shepard grinned, leaning her arms on the back of his seat.

"Thanks," he said, bluntly. "Why can't you collect coins or commemorative plates or something?"

People were always surprised with how Joker spoke to the her; and the things he got away with saying. Only the likes of Garrus understood that their relationship had a comfortable sibling-like quality to it; and Shepard smiled affectionately at the top of Joker's head, before tapping the brim of his cap, forcing it over his eyes.

"They just don't have the same excitement," she laughed.

Leaving the pilot to his grumbles, Shepard made a b-line for the Tech Lab, and Mordin. The geneticist had become a sort of eccentric Uncle figure to her, since his recruitment; even if he was a salarian, and acted every bit like the 'caffeinated hamster' that Kelly had once likened him to.

Therefore, Shepard wasn't that surprised when she found him furiously tapping away on his computer terminal, singing to himself.

"I am the very model of a scientist salarian, I've studied species, turian, asari and batarian," he was muttering under his breath.

"I'm quite good at genetics as a subset of biology," Shepard sang, sweetly.

Mordin coughed, whether in surprise or embarrassment, Shepard wasn't sure. Though his mouth twitched into his funny little smile.

"Ah Shepard, good memory. How can I help?" he asked.

"Got a minute to talk?" she asked, fairly sure of the answer already.

"I'm sorry, what?" Shepard asked, before she'd consciously decided if she actually wanted clarification.

"Scale-itch," he stated. "Also about to test new bio-weapon. Not on us, of course. Didn't think I had to specify, but Joker got nervous."

"Um…" she managed, fairly certain she was now gaping at the professor.

"Have been trying to map contamination vectors. Requires focus. Ship-wide infection of human-tailored virus possible if I slip," Mordin explained.

The proverbial light went on in Shepard's brain. Cocking a hip, she raised an eyebrow, and regarded the salarian with expectation.

"Anything else I should know about?" she asked, calmly.


Shepard laughed at the salarian's antics. Holding up her hands in surrender, she began walking backwards, towards the door.

"Okay Mordin. I get it. I'll leave you be, just try not to blow anything up with whatever you're doing," she smirked, before leaving the lab.

A few more minutes were spent on the CIC, talking to the junior members of the crew, but nothing of importance arose. Continuing her ship-wide rounds, Shepard step into the elevator and pushed the button for the Crew Deck.

Only half way through the decent, she could hear the unmistakable snarl of a hostile krogan.

'You've got to be kidding me' she thought, smacking the button again, in a useless bid to make the thing go faster.

Right now, Shepard could only think of one person aboard that Grunt would want to threaten, and after Jacob's earlier antics, she was even more concerned for the drell.

Once the elevator opened again, Shepard rounded the corner to the Mess Hall; only to be greeted by a sullen looking Grunt, with an ever patient Samara sat opposite him.

Shepard flashed the asari an appreciative smile, before moving toward the main battery in search of Garrus. However, she was stopped in her tracks, as Jack unexpectedly popped her head up from behind the kitchen island. The biotic practically slammed three mugs onto the counter as she stood.

"Ah, queen of the girl scouts," Jack greeted loudly, smirking. Before dropping her voice to a whisper, and glancing over to Grunt. "Don't worry, we'll keep an eye on him."

Shepard blinked in surprise. Even though the younger woman had mellowed considerable since coming aboard, Jack was not usually one to offer her help voluntarily. Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, even if that horse was one seriously unstable biotic, Shepard nodded her thanks and continued her way.

The warm glow of the main battery had become a little oasis to Shepard, ever since Garrus had come aboard. Not that she was surprised that having her best friend around, had made the Cerberus built vessel feel like home.
As usual, she found the turian fawning over the ship's new Thanix Gun. Chuckling, Shepard hopped up onto the stack of crates, that always served as a seat when she visited, and waited for him to finish the algorithm he was labouring on.

"You sure you know what you're getting into?" he asked, without looking up from his console.

Frowning in confusion, Shepard regarded her best friend. Though before she could ask what he meant, Garrus continued speaking.

"Spirits Shepard, I could smell you! I know you're attracted to the assassin," he grumbled.

She starred, open mouthed, in shock. It only lasted a moment, before her earlier frown quickly turned into a scowl. It was a rare occasion that Garrus annoyed her, but this was certainly one of those times.

The pair had been out on the pull together numerous times, and even drunk, he was never this obnoxious. With some force, Shepard pushed herself off the crates, trying to clamp down on the building anger, that was threatening to bubble.

"Charming as ever, Vakarian," she snapped. "If you're in that sort of mood, I'll leave you to it."

Shepard swept past him, radiating annoyance and command. However, as she was about to palm to door's mechanism, she felt a taloned hand wrap gently around her wrist.

Glancing over her shoulder, she was met with a very concerned looking turian. His worried chirp disarmed her, cooling her anger slightly; and reluctantly Shepard turned to face him. She raised an eyebrow expectantly, waiting for his explanation.

"Just be careful," he pleaded. "You don't know anything about him. I don't want you to get hurt."

Settling into her usual stance, albeit with the turian's hand still wrapped around her wrist, Shepard smirked up at her best friend.

"Garrus, just because I think he's good looking, doesn't mean I'm going to jump into bed with him... despite Kasumi's best efforts."

He still looked at her sceptically, but he nodded his understanding. With the turian's mind put at ease, at least for now, Shepard decided it was prudent to check in on Cerberus' Australian officer.

Miranda Lawson may have been her official executive officer, but Shepard had never been able to fully trust the woman. However, she'd been surprised when the woman hadn't appear at the debrief with Jacob; even if it had been a relief. And just one look at the officer, told Shepard there was something seriously wrong.

"Miranda, you're one of my crew, tell me what's on your mind," she instructed, before even taking a seat.

"I don't like discussing personal matters," Miranda replied, almost sighing. "But I find myself in the uncomfortable position of needing to ask for your help."

"Go on…" Shepard prompted, settling into a chair.

"I have a sister, a twin. You know about my father, he's still hunting her," the officer explained.

The worry and desperation in the woman's voice, was a startling contrast to her usual crisp and
efficient tones. In truth, Shepard didn't need to hear the rest of the explanation, to know she would be helping Miranda. However, their discussion provided valuable background information, and helped them formulate a decent plan of action.

"Don't worry, we'll protect Oriana," Shepard reassured.

With the promise made, and Miranda wanting to throw herself into more preparation, Shepard headed to the Life Support Plant.

Since the next mission was to be on Illium, she figured it would be an excellent opportunity to assess how the assassin fit into team dynamics. The green light on the door indicated it wasn't locked, so Shepard regarded that as open invitation; the same as she did with the rest of the crew, and enter the room.

"Do you need something?" Thane's rich voice greeted.

He faced away from her, and was the perfect picture of quiet repose.

"Have a few minutes to talk?" she asked.

To her quiet delight, he agreed. Though, against her better judgement, the conversation started more seriously than she'd originally intended. Throughout Thane's detailed explanation of his condition, Shepard's heart had gone out to the man.

Though when he explained that sufferers of Kepral's Syndrome eventually suffocated, Shepard's breath caught in her throat.

Memories of her final moments came clear in her mind, and in that instance she fully stopped regarding Thane as an assassin. In her eyes, he became a part of her team; who she regarded as her dysfunctional adopted family. She was determined to help him somehow, and she was thoroughly impressed with his demeanour.

"You don't act like a dying man," Shepard smiled warmly, trying to convey her growing esteem.

"You have the advantage there Shepard," he replied. "You've already died. Perhaps later you can give me some suggestions."

Despite the bluntness of his remark, she didn't feel upset or offended. She'd heard the almost teasing tone that had crept into his voice, and was more than happy to discover the assassin had a sense of humour; one that was seemingly as dark as hers, Joker's and Garrus'.

Shepard's smile widened into a grin, before she out right laughed.

"When I figure it out, I'll let you know," she told him. "Though seriously, if you need anything, let me or Chakwas know."

"Thank you for your concern. Trust me, this won't affect my performance," he replied.

Shepard's eyes widened, as a myriad of innuendos flashed into her mind. Stifling another laugh behind a polite cough, Shepard took her leave.

Not wanting to accept Thane's fatalistic attitude however, she messaged Mordin asking for a meeting. She was determined to offer Thane any help she could; whether he wanted it or not, and she knew that the eccentric scientist was the best place to start.
The Compassionate (Thane PoV)

Back in the relative safety of Life Support, Thane mulled over the day's events; his sight lost in the dancing purple haze of the Drive Core.

He'd not expected to accompany the commander on a mission so soon after joining her team, expecting that it would take at least several days, before she felt she could trust him. It had surprised him even more to learn, that he would be taking the turian's place on her six.

It wasn't lost on Thane, that placing him to cover such a vulnerable spot, was showing a great amount of trust. It was a decision he had overheard many complaints about, from almost everyone on board, and one had been determined to honour.

Thane also hadn't expected that the first mission he'd accompany Shepard on, would be in the sprawling city where he had lived for two years. Furthermore, he'd been surprised that the mission was more a personal favour to a crew member, rather than a direct order from Cerberus, or the commander's old contacts in the Alliance.

Though if he was to be honest with himself, Thane was mostly surprised by Shepard's countless acts of compassion. It was one thing to hear of her good reputation, but another entirely to witness how deserved it was.

Light dances around the room. Shepard's head turns in the direction of a quarian and asari in heated debate. She indicates to Miranda that she will join her shortly, motions for me to stay alert. Then confidently moves to converses with the pair in front of us. The asari shifts uncomfortably at her approach.

"Before you do anything hasty, know this quarian signed the agreement voluntarily, and her servitude contract is completely legal on Illium," she defends.

The commander settles back onto her right hip, eyes darting between the pair. "What if I bought her myself, I could let her go and everyone would be happy," she asks. Her voice is soft but determined.

"A gallant offer, with three problems," the asari states. She goes on to explain the issues of the suggestion, namely expense and location.

"There's also a fee for freeing me before my service period ends," the quarian speaks for the first time. Her voice is quiet, remorse distinct even over her voice modulator. "I don't want them to take me off to a mine somewhere."

Fierce emerald coloured eyes are gentle, as they regard the quarian with care. More information is exchanged, logistics discuss. Shepard's shoulders relax, a small nod indicates a decision made. "I'll talk to the Synthetic Insights representative and see what I can do."

Thane broke from the memory, and couldn't help the chuckle that escaped him. The astonished look on the Contract Brokers face at Shepard's offer of help, was still in the forefront of his mind. As was the quickly changing reaction of the Company Representative, as the commander somehow convinced them it would be good for business to purchase the quarian's contact.

It was something to behold. There was no doubt that Shepard had a gift with words, but Thane had been most touched by how she had politely refused payment for helping; then took the quarian aside to offer some comforting words and advice.
He shook his head, remembering that was all just from polite enquiry. Shepard helping others out of the goodness of her heart. Thane briefly acknowledged his growing sentiment for the commander, before another memory washed over him.

A human male leans on the bar, trying to emulate threatening behaviour toward an unimpressed bar tender. "That's right! Anyone messing with me will answer to my good friend…Commander Shepard?" His voice peaks and wavers with uncertainty.

"Hey, if you know this idiot, can you rein him in before I slap his ass with a singularity?" the bar tender drawls.

Red painted lips smile towards the asari behind the bar. Then emerald eyes regard the human male with sand coloured hair. Shepard settles back into her hip, arms folded across her chest. She raises an eyebrow, waiting for an explanation.

Thane's lips spread in a wide smile, as he thought of how Shepard had quickly gathered the information that was required, settling the situation within minutes. Her resolution even led to the arrest of a corrupt weapons merchant, and an extremely happy bar owner. One who had offered a round of free drinks, the next time Shepard and her crew came to Eternity.

In truth, Thane was more than a little impressed with the fiery redhead. The way she had successfully concluded two separate problems for people, all in the time it had taken Miranda to meet with her contact, was impressive. Shepard's efficiency with those matters had heightened Thane's confidence in her; convinced their actual mission would also be a success. However, it proved anything but straight forward.

Emerald coloured eyes look into stormy blue. "I'm ready whenever you are Miranda," the commander states. Her voice full of concern.

I nod my own accent. My hand is Shepard's. I am ready whenever she needs me.

Stormy eyes cloud with sadness. "Thank you, Shepard. I appreciate this. I hadn't planned on Eclipse… but they never planned on you," Miranda says.

Painted red lips curl into smile, a black gauntlet hand lays on a white clad shoulder in reassurance. She turns, and her unwavering emerald gaze locks onto me. I realise I am already lost. I know I will follow her anywhere.

Watching Shepard as she progressed through Dantius Towers, had not prepared Thane for the admiration he felt towards the commander. He had already seen that she had a grace and poise on the battlefield, that was purely unique, and witnessed her compassion and kindness towards strangers... yet to observe her tenacity as an ally, that was a privilege.

A Gunship is sighted, and words of concern are exchanged. Within moments, it opens fire. Our skycar crash lands, but no injuries are sustained. Shepard's armoured gauntlet runs through her flame coloured hair. Her emerald eyes softly question my health, and that of the jumpsuit clad operative. With concerns dismissed, the softness is replaced by smouldering fury. Her red painted lips curl into a snarl.

"No-one endangers my team," she states.

Her anger is undeniable. A heartbeat is spent checking her weapon, before she strides out, side by side with the other woman. Determination etched into her very being. She is a vision.

Thane's mind lingered on that memory, reliving the breath that had caught unexpectedly in his throat.
In that moment, his earlier assumption of the petite red haired human was confirmed. It was undeniable. She truly was a warrior angel. Fierce in wrath and a tenacious protector.

He had to smile at how quickly things escalated from there. One moment, he was witnessing the two women discussing Miranda's sister with a mercenary lieutenant. The next, he was unclipping his trusted Viper Sniper Rifle from his back, as he watched Shepard simultaneously slit the lieutenant's throat with her Omni-Blade, and cause a volatile crate to explode, by shooting out it's containment field.

The blast killed a couple more mercenaries for good measure, leaving Thane to admit that while not subtle, it was incredibly effective. It hadn't taken long to wade through the torrent of Eclipse mercenaries after that, and as they approached their final target, Thane had been amazed with Shepard once again.

Her forethought to shield Miranda from the guilt, that would have undoubtedly come from killing a friend, was commendable. The warmth and comfort she later provided the Cerberus officer was touching. However, Shepard's determination to stand by a woman that, by all accounts, she wasn't fond of, had been the most telling for Thane.

He had been honoured to be working with Shepard, even if the ensuing fight had been much harder than expected.

The asari commando's biotics allowed her to move around the battlefield startlingly fast; often too quick for Thane to track with his Sniper Rifle. That, coupled with the dangerous crates of Minagen X3 littering the dock, had caused him no end of consternation.

In truth, those crates caused Thane more worry than the asari ever could. The potent drug was lethal, and both Shepard and Miranda were at real danger, due to their closer approximation to the canisters. The realisation that he wouldn't be able to fully protect the commander, had sent his pulse racing.

Red particles dance in my scope, as they rise from the destroyed crate. I watch, powerless, as worried glances are exchanged between the two women. Before long, looks of uncertainty are replaced by something more sinister. Something savage, deadly.

Storm coloured eyes widen, and red painted lips smile in response. Biotics flash blue in the dimness. Gun shots ring out across the battlefield in reply. I hold my breath as I watch Shepard release a biotic charge, her short red hair dancing like flames. She connects with her target, and the asari staggers.

I loosen a bullet, as I release the breath that I did not realise I was holding. The final enemy is down. The battle over, but no relief is found.

Emerald coloured eyes find stormy blue, both women laugh, slightly too wild. The released drug has already taken affect. My heart stutters as I drop from my perch. Desperately hoping any damage is not permanent.

The sound of footsteps mercifully pulled him from the memory; Thane didn't want to relieve the worry that had gripped him. Anxiousness that had only dissipated, after Doctor Chakwas had shooed him out of the Medical Bay.

However, a smile tugged at his lips, as Thane realised who was approaching; having already learnt to recognise the way Shepard walked.

"Do you need something?" he asked, keeping his eyes on the drive core.
"Have a few minutes to talk?" the commander asked, sounding exhausted.

"Certainly," he agreed, wondering if she was still suffering from the after effects of the drug.

He stood, ushering her into the opposite chair before she could protest. It allowed him that chance to look over her carefully. He was thankful to find that, despite the evident tiredness in her face, the commander seemed to be no worse for wear, from her brush with Minagen X3.

'Praise be Arashu' he thought, almost sighing in relief.

"If you don't mind my saying, you don't really seem like an assassin," she said, conversationally.

Her comment was a little unexpected, and Thane watched as she leant her face against the palm of her hand, her eyes regarding him appraisingly. Even after years of honing his observational skills, Thane still found Shepard's tone hard to discern.

'A hint of amusement perhaps?' he wondered.

The subtle raise of her eyebrow, alerted him that she was waiting for some sort of response.

"You've spent too much time fighting thugs who think custom painted armour makes them professionals," Thane said, earning him a small chuckle from the commander, as he had hoped. "The hanar trained my body for this role since I was six years old."

That small admission had set in motion a tidal wave of conversation. Starting with Shepard's alarm, and ending with a thorough explanation of the compact between the drell and the hanar. Thane could not think of a time, during or after his service to the Illuminated Primacy, when he had ever discussed the nature of his work so openly. Not even to Irikah.

He had never expected to find such honest acceptance from anyone, especially from a person of another species. It was surprising, yet very welcome.

The conversation had progressed to include a brief history of his people, their background and fate. It would be a lie to say that he wasn't more than a little charmed that the commander was an avid listener; only interrupting to ask for clarification on a topic.

After knowing Shepard for a mere thirty-six hours, Thane was already beginning to regard her as a valued companion. Which was something he had not sought out, since the passing of his beloved wife.

"You don't work for the hanar anymore, what changed?" Shepard asked, seeming genuinely interested.

He took a subtle, steadying breathe; debating how much to disclose, and unsure how much he wanted the commander to know. Irikah had been the only person he had ever opened up to, and even then, most things had remained hidden. He had no other friends, or relations that he would turn to. Now however, Thane found himself looking into striking emerald eyes, and felt his resolved slipping.

'Would it be so wrong to let her in?' he wondered.

"I was asleep for a long time. I paid no attention to what my body was asked to do, but then… Laser dot trembles on the skull. One finger twitch, he dies. Then, the smell of spice on the spring wind. Sunset coloured eyes defined in the scope. The laser dances away."
Thane came back to the room with a sigh, pausing as the memory intensified the ache that had sat in his chest for so long. He inhaled slowly, pushing thoughts of his beloved Irikah from the front of his mind. As he exhaled, he hoped the commander hadn't noticed the tears in his eyes.

Thane also felt a whisper of embarrassment. He knew many races found the drells' ability of perfect memory recall unnerving, especially humans. Cautiously, he raised his eyes to Shepard's, unsure of the reaction he would be greeted with.

"My apologies, drell slip into memories so easily," Thane conceded.

"Was that one of your assassinations?" Shepard asked, calmly.

Her reaction had thrown him once again. He'd expected at least a small sign of surprise from the commander; though all out suspicion and revulsion wasn't an uncommon reaction to his solipsism. The way she simply accepted something that was so alien to her, was utterly confounding, as well as extremely endearing.

"Ah…Yes," he told her hesitantly, unsure how to proceed, as emotions began to churn inside him. "Perhaps we can discuss it later? I've wasted enough of your time."

Thane would be eternally grateful for the compassionate nature of the commander. For with only a slight smile and small nod in acquisition, Shepard left in silence.

But though it was what he requested, the room seemed somehow emptier without her presence. Sighing, Thane turned his attention back to the playful dancing hues of the Drive Core, and was lost to his memories.

Author's Note

Hopefully it was clear that the parts in italics were Thane's solipsism, and 'italics inside commas, like this' were thoughts.
As Thane, Miranda and herself entered Nos Astra's most affluent bar, Shepard critically appraised the place. The music wasn't too loud, so you could hear yourself think, and it wasn't heaving with drunks packed in like sardines. You could actually move around, without someone thinking they could grab your ass... a far cry from Chora's Den, or even Flux, back on the Citadel. As bars went, Eternity wasn't so bad.

Figuring Miranda would be some time with her meeting, Shepard waved the Cerberus agent off, before surveying the bar some more.

It wasn't long before her attention was drawn to a quarian and an asari, just inside the bar's entrance; having a somewhat heated debate. It certainly seemed like they could use a hand, and even though that was the case, their situation was resolved quickly and easily.

However, another one quickly surfaced. A problem that came with a very distinct shape…


"Commander Shepard?" the sandy-hair man squeaked.

'Yes...Conrad Bloody Verner!' she sighed.

After what was perhaps the most convoluted explanation Shepard had ever had to endure, she found herself walking towards the shopping district. She spared a quick smile for Thane, who remained at her side; whilst she hailed Garrus, over the communication system.

"Hey big guy, just ran into an old friend from the Citadel," she said, barely containing a chuckle.

Garrus groaned at the other end. "Don't tell me... Conrad Verner?"

The puzzled look Thane gave, caused Shepard to explain her countless encounters with her 'Number One Fan', two years prior. It was cringe-worth to recall, and Garrus' laughter didn't help her feelings about it all. Especially now that Conrad was now trying to emulate her, and failing miserably to boot.

"I believe imitation is said to be the highest form of flattery," Thane said, deadpan.

"And sarcasm is known to be the lowest form of wit," she shot back, grinning.

To Shepard's infinite relief, it didn't take long to clear up the mess that Conrad had created; the whole matter being settled within fifteen standard galactic minutes. She even managed to urge the delusional man to return home to his wife, though she couldn't help but feel sorry for that poor woman.

At the same moment, it seemed Miranda had finished her meeting with Lanteia; which meant they could get on with the actual mission.

However, after a quick debrief, it became evident the parameters had changed, drastically... it certainly wasn't a simple relocation of Miranda's sister anymore.

Shepard sat nursing a bright blue glass of asari hard liquor, in the Port Observation Lounge, as she finished recounting the day's events to Kasumi and Jack.
Her head thumped from the after effects of the Minagen X3, and Shepard wondered if she should have followed Miranda's example, and had a lie down; instead of opting for a quick shower, before changing into another one of her countless black dresses.

"Come on Shep, you can't expect us to believe you only asked Thane to accompany you for his 'knowledge of Illium'. You could have taken Samara," Kasumi chortled, trying to goad her.

"He's a good sniper," Shepard answered, demurely. "Which compliments the more short ranged fighting style that both myself and Miranda favour."

Jack snorted. "Tall, grey and grumpy won't like to hear you have a new favourite, Boss Lady."

Shaking her head gently, so not aggravate her headache, Shepard set her empty glass down onto the bar, and smiled a polite goodbye.

Quickly, she extricated herself from the all too familiar conversation, that would undoubtedly follow. Not that Shepard didn't enjoy the banter, her head just felt too fuzzy for her not to let slip some admission or other... and she wasn't fool enough to admit anything.

Leaving the Observation Lounge, Shepard turned towards Life Support. She hadn't seen Thane since he'd helped her and Miranda into the Medical Bay, after the mission. So she supposed it was as good a time as any, to check up on the newest member of her team.

Privately, Shepard hoped she hadn't embarrassed herself too much, whilst under the drug's affect; but for the life of her, she couldn't remember anything after the first canister exploded.

"Do you need something?" Thane greeted, as she entered the room.

Shepard wonder if he knew it was her, when she entered, since she would have expected him to be guarded, jumpy even; after spending so many years working alone. She also figured Thane must have acquired many enemies, working as an assassin, yet he always seemed relaxed when she entered.

"Have a few minutes to talk?" she asked, quietly.

"Certainly," his agreed, before ushering her into the remaining chair.

Thane's gentle fussing surprised her, not that Shepard was going to complain about the kind attention. It was something she would never have attributed to someone with his reputation, nor was it something her life as a marine had prepared her for. She found it charming, and just a little cute...

...who'd have thought the galaxy's greatest assassin, would be such a gentleman.

"If you don't mind my saying, you don't really seem like an assassin," she stated, leaning her cheek against the palm of her hand.

"You've spent too much time fighting thugs who think custom painted armour makes them professionals," Thane stated.

Shepard chuckled. He did have a point.

"The hanar trained my body for this role since I was six years old," he continued.

Looking back, Shepard would be forced to admit she did a very good impression of an Aye-Aye, as she stared at him in shock. She shook her head in disbelief; immediately regretting her action as her brain, or possibly her implants, throbbed in protest. It left her feeling a little bit nauseated, though that
could have also been from his revelation.

"Six?" she gasped. "You've been killing since you were six?!"

"Of course not," he replied, defensively. "I didn't make my first kill until I was twelve. They were training me. I was not to be used and thrown away. I was an investment."

_Twelve... because of course that's much better_ she thought, dryly.

Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose; the drug fuelled headache getting worse. Lowering her gaze, she studied Thane for a moment, from beneath her lashes. There was no hint of anger or resentment in his posture, just the calm confidence that seemed indicative of him... she had to be missing something.

"You were a child, not an investment," she said, cautiously.

Thane smiled slightly. "I've given you the wrong idea," he told her, gently. "They valued me. Yes, as a resource, but also as a person. They regretted their need for me."

Shepard was certainly far from convinced; it brought up memories just a little too close to home, for her liking, but she didn't want to upset or insult him. Partly because it probably wasn't wise idea, to get on the wrong side of the galaxy's most successful assassin. But really, Shepard knew that it stemmed from her not wanting to jeopardise what could be a budding friendship, between her and Thane.

Despite knowing him for such a short time, she was already starting to like him. So closing her eyes momentarily, Shepard took a slow, calming breathe; trying to collect her thoughts despite the pounding in her head.

"The hanar? Excessively polite, worship the protheans. They don't seem the type to train assassins," she smiled.

It was a small gesture, no more than a twitch at the corner of her mouth, but it was the most she could offer; given the topic of conversation.

"Every species trains assassins. The hanar are only unusual in that they require another species to do the killing for them," he replied. "They have a strong grip and natural toxins, but I've never seen one move quickly outside of water, or fire a gun."

A giggle escaped before Shepard managed to bite it back, and Thane looked at her questioningly.

"Sorry," she apologised, smiling fully this time. "Just remembered the last time Joker made me suffer through a Blasto movie."

"Ah," Thane chuckled. "Those most accurate and credible works of cinema. How is your head?"

His abrupt question signalled Shepard's turn to look at him questioningly.

"You've been wincing," he explained. "I presumed it was from a headache."

Good looking, charming and observant... if she wasn't careful, Shepard could see herself falling for Thane, hard.

Resting her cheek back against her palm, Shepard regarded her companion. She was unsure if she should just dismiss his concern, like she would to almost everyone on board, or answer him truly.
Against her better judgement, Shepard chose the latter.

"Yeah, the Minagen did a number on me," she admitted, giving a half smile.

"I see… please, excuse me for a moment," Thane replied.

With that, he slipped out of the room. Frowning in confusion, Shepard glanced about the room, her eyes falling to the display cabinet to the right of the window. There, proudly on show, where enough sniper rifles to make any marksman drool; especially Garrus.

Even as a shotgun lover, Shepard found it an impressive collection. However, before she managed to summon the energy to stand and inspect them further, Thane returned. In his hand he carried a glass of water, and a small bottle of what looked like analgesics. Without ceremony, he set them down in front of them.

"Marry me?" Shepard mutter, unabashed.

Gratefully, she swallowed two pills, along with a refreshing gulp of water. Thane merely chuckled at her, so Shepard chose to forge ahead. Hoping to gain more understanding, both of the assassin in front of her, and the drell culture in general.

"So, why did your parents agree to the hanar training you?" she asked, taking another sip of water.

"The agreement was made under the compact. It was an honour to our family," Thane explained.

Pride was evident in his voice as he spoke, but his comment did little to help her. Shepard frowned slightly; she wasn't exactly sure what he meant, and still wasn't convinced that what his parents did was right. Thane must have taken her expression as a silent question, for he elaborated further:

"We live on the hanar home world because they rescued us, some of us, from extinction. We owe them our lives."

From anyone else, Shepard suspected the statement would have sounded over dramatic. But from Thane, it came out as a simple fact. It piqued her curiosity.

"Why was your race going extinct?" she asked, hoping her question wasn't too blunt.

"Over population," Thane replied, succinctly. "That must sound trite to you, humans evolved Mass Effect Drives before the problem became acute. Our home world, Rakhana, had few resources. We hadn't even developed Fusion Power before the soil failed from over use and pollution. The hanar found us a century ago. They sent hundreds of ships, evacuated thousands of us, billions more had to be left behind."

The remorse that resonated in his voice was harrowing, and Shepard found herself holding back on the urge to simply hug the man in front of her. Even though she already knew it, she couldn't help thinking that life could be incredibly cruel at times; the universe, incredibly unjust.

"What's the state of Rakhana now?" she questioned, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"Do you read your philosophers?" he asked.

Shepard tilted her head at the unexpected question, waiting for him to continue.

"A man named Thomas Hobbs: 'When all the world is overcharged with inhabitants, then the last remedy of all is war. Which provided for every man with victory or death'," Thane quoted. "As
Rakhana died around them, my people slaughtered each other for mouthfuls of water, crumbs of food."

Unwanted tears threatened to show in the corner of Shepard's eyes. Tendrils of memories regarding her lost childhood, orphaned on the grimy streets, in one of Earth's many metropolises ghosted around her brain.

Vehemently, she fought to concentrate on her discussion with Thane... this was about him and his people, not her sordid past.

"You don't work for the hanar anymore, what changed?" Shepard asked, hoping to subtly shift the subject.

A strange, far off look entered Thane's onyx eyes. It seemed to her as if he was weighing his options; almost as if he was deciding whether or not to let her start to know him, as a person, rather than an assassin.

Then, Thane gave a barely perceivable nod, as if he'd made a decision. Shepard found herself leaning forward slightly, intent to listen to whatever he was willing to reveal.
As Thane walked onto the Crew Deck, he was struck by the unfamiliar sight of the pilot; Jeff Moreau, sat at one of the dining tables.

To his knowledge, the human man never left the cockpit. And to see him engaged, in what seemed like a heated conversation with the Normandy's resident turian; Garrus Vakarian, was somewhat disquieting.

It also ignited Thane's curiosity, and he decided to put the skills of his profession to use, which was something he'd refrained from doing, since boarding the Normandy. But silently, he melted into the sparse shadows of the Mess Hall, settling in to observe their exchange without being noticed.

"This… this isn't right," the pilot stated, shaking his hat covered head.

"Hackett had no right requesting this of her," the turian agreed, giving an aggravated sigh. "Even if it's as Shepard believes and he's asked her as a sort of... what do you human's say, 'tough love'?"

"She shouldn't be alone out there," Jeff continued in a wavering voice, almost like he hadn't heard Garrus speak. "She should never have been out there alone…"

As the pilot's voice trailed off, Thane could see tears glistening in the man's eyes.

"Joker, you know she doesn't blame you. None of us blame you," Garrus stated, laying a hand on the man's shoulder.

The human shook his head. "Last time we were here… I watched her… she got spaced… she got spaced because of me… I watched her die… I watched her die because I wouldn't leave the damn cockpit." The distress and anger in Jeff's voice were undeniable.

'So it's true' Thane realised, in horror.

He could feel his heart rate quicken with the understanding. Despite hearing the reports two years ago, the commander's very presence had forced him to believe that they were nothing more but misinformation. Since meeting her, Thane had speculated that Shepard had perhaps spent the past two years in some sort of coma, rather than dead.

Now however, he found himself accepting that she had indeed touched Kalahira's shore. A forlorn keen from the turian, brought Thane's awareness back to the conversation in front of him.

"She saved you because she wanted to, Joker, because that's what Shepard's like," Garrus stated, plainly. "I asked her to let me go down there with her. Damn, we nearly had an argument about it.

She told me: 'turian's really hate the cold, remember?'... like I wouldn't risk the damn cold. I'd walk into hell for that woman. I tried explaining that if I was willing to risk the plague to help her find Mordin, I'd risk a dose of hypothermia."

"I suppose she pointed out she nearly knocked you on your ass, for offering to go into the plague zone?" Joker snorted, sarcasm seeping into his tone.

Thane watched silently as Garrus flared his mandibles in a turian grin, nodding in agreement before suddenly raising a hand to his visor.
"I read you, Shepard…" he said into the communication link. "No that's fine. Uh-huh. Well… good. Yes okay. We'll wait for you there."

Thane watched as Jeff regarded the turian, before raising an eyebrow in question. It was a gesture he'd witnessed the commander do countless times, since he'd come aboard. Now seeing the pilot do the same, Thane speculate that the pair must be close, since he knew not all human's used that facial expression. If fact, they were the only two aboard the ship who did.

"Well?" the pilot asked, impatiently.

"She's back in the shuttle, apologising she took so long planet side," Garrus explained, and both men shook their heads, before the turian continued: "Said she had found a couple of items at the crash site, that the memorial beacon had been planted, and that she wanted us both to meet her in her cabin."

"How did she sound?" Jeff enquired, standing almost shakily to his feet.

"Honestly, a little haunted. I'm worried about her," Garrus admitted. "Do you need help?"

Thane suspected that Garrus was referring to the way the other man limped, instead of walked. He didn't know the cause, but guessed that it was either a long standing injury, or a genetic defect.

"I'm fine. Shepard and the Normandy aren't the only ones who got upgrades," he stated, dryly. "Besides, she died to save me, least I can do is risk a broken leg or two in order to fetch her a stiff drink."

'Medical defect' Thane decided.

He silently watched the pilot's progress towards the Port Observation Lounge, and once Garrus had also left the Mess Hall, Thane stepped out of the shadows. He was only mildly surprised when Kasumi materialised next to him.

"Hmmm…" the thief murmured, her mischievous eyes shining beneath her hood. "Guess I'm not the only one with a friendly interest in Shepard's choice to solo this assignment. Or perhaps yours is more than a friendly interest?"

She flashed him an impish grin, before disappearing from sight again. Thane shook his head. He knew full well what Kasumi was implying, but right now all his thoughts were with Shepard; wondering how she was faring, and digesting that the rumours of her death were true.

He'd already come to suspect that the commander was a remarkable woman, yet he couldn't begin to imagine how she had returned from Kalahira's Shore.

After spending the preceding hours in deep meditation, Thane became aware of familiar footsteps padding softly into the room, and couldn't help but smile.

He'd supposed Shepard would passed on her routine evening visit, in favour of spending the night in the company of Jeff and Garrus. But despite his assumption, Thane had secretly hoped she would choose to seek him out; which resulted in him having two mugs and a pot of herbal tea, a blend known for its calming benefits, waiting in case she arrived.

"Do you need something?" he asked, in what had become 'the usual way'.

"Have a few minutes to talk?" Shepard replied, her voice uncharacteristically shaky.
"By all means," he agreed. "May I?"

He gestured towards the pot of tea, and felt a warm hand lay on his shoulder for a moment. It was a pleasant sensation.

"That would be wonderful," she smiled.

As he poured their drinks, Thane glanced at Shepard from the corner of his eye; though he was pleased the commander slipped into the chair opposite, without any prompting from himself, he wondered at the sudden familiarity. On all her previous visits, he had to offer her the seat, before she would take it.

'Is it a sign she has become more comfortable around myself, or a sign that she is more unsettled by her assignment than she appears?' he wondered.

A soft chuckle from the commander brought Thane from his musings, and he blinked at her in surprise. Shepard chuckled again.

"You're not the only one who's observant, Sere Krios. I can see you looking. Come on, out with."

Slightly embarrassed at being discovered, he smiled and slid a mug towards hers, biding a little time while he collected himself.

Thane supposed he shouldn't be too surprised, that Shepard had found him out; she was a brilliant tactician and commander, both of which required good observation skills. However, he was unsure how to precede.

He'd begun to regard Shepard as friend, and didn't want to cause her any distress. Though, with an inaudible sigh, Thane decided to take the most direct course of action.

"Are you well?" he asked, gently.

Thane watched as Shepard stared into the amber liquid in her mug, almost as if she was searching for answers in its warm hue; before she took a sip. Her smile of complete contentment would have been etched into his brain, even without the help of solipsism, and Thane felt a small glow of pride, at being able to bring her even a small amount of respite, from what troubled her.

"If you keep plying me with tea that tastes this good, I'll never complain about anything again," Shepard teased. "Though, seriously… Yes, I'm okay. Well, mostly."

Her final sentence was accompanied by an almost shy smile, as if she were admitting a great secret. In that moment, Thane realised that even though the commander had many friends, many people she could rely on, she most likely never shared her troubles. Or at least, very rarely and to very few.

He found himself wanting to offer that to her; to allow her the chance to unburden herself, if she ever chose to.

"Shepard, if you need to talk…" he began.

"Thank you," she quickly interrupted, looking away from him. "I really appreciate it Thane, but it was hard enough explaining it to those who were there, and even then…"

Thane regarded Shepard quietly; the way her voice trailed off spoke volumes to him. It seemed the commander was showing more vulnerability to him, than she did with many people. He was honoured by her trust, and vowed it was something he would cherish and uphold.
"I understand. Though please know, the offer will always stand," he told her. "Now, is there anything in particular you wish to discuss?"

The smile she gave him was a mixture of relief and gratitude, and one that called his own in response. Shepard nodded, before taking another sip of tea. Thane couldn't help but chuckle as her smile widened; it seemed he would need to acquire more of the blend, the next time they docked on the Citadel.

"The last time we talked, you started speaking about a past event as if you were watching it," she stated.

She sounded genuinely intrigued, and if it hadn't been for the faint haunted look that still lingered in Shepard's eyes, Thane would have presumed it was just a light hearted enquiry.

Taking a drink of his own tea, he silently regarded the woman in front of him.

'If this will take her mind from her demons, who am I to deny her?' he thought.
From the Frozen Gates of Hell (Shepard's PoV)

It was a wasteland. A bleak, barren, ice encrusted wasteland. Wreckage jutted from the snow drifts, columns of twisted metal straining towards the grey tinted sky. There was an eerie stillness that hung in the air and a pregnant silence, like the hush found only inside a place of worship.

Only the sounds of Shepard's footsteps crunching on the compacted ground, and her breathe condensing the inside of her mask, broke the reverence. The apparent calmness unnerved her.

Shepard's mind swirled with thoughts and memories, as she fought to control the quickening pace of her breathe; and against the rising panic that made her heart hammer in her chest. Most of all, she fought the urge to check the oxygen line connecting her helmet to the rest her suit; knowing full well she was in a different set of armour that didn't have an outside oxygen line that could be torn away from her helmet, for the very reason that caused her pulse to thump in her ears.

She tried desperately to tell herself that this was just another random, desolate planet. That this was just another crash site of a once proud Alliance vessel; which she had to admit, stood on a lot firmer ground than the MSV Estevanico had, thankfully. She tried to convince herself that this was just another assignment that Admiral Hackett had personally asked her to look into. Except it wasn't.

After accepting the fact that she couldn't pretend those things, Shepard had tried to be rational about the whole situation. Mainly telling herself that Admiral Hackett, the adopted Grandfather of her multi-species family, would not send her on an assignment that he didn't think she was up to, he was just dishing out a dose of 'tough-love'.

At least... that's what the extranet messages exchanged with Councillor Anderson, de facto Father figure, had led her to believe.

However standing on Alchera's surface, ankle deep in snow, amidst the debris and wreckage of her beloved Normandy, the original Normandy, made Shepard tremble like a scared child. The ship that she had once called home, was now just scattered remains that should have been her tomb.

Knowing it was only the three-headed dog of Hades that she had to thank for being able to stand in this forsaken place, instead of just being a dog-tag like the ones hanging from her gloved fingers, did not help her sense of guilt.

Shepard's feeling of culpability only intensified as she found herself standing in what was once the Mess Hall. Visions of Kaidan Alenko brought tears to her eyes. He was a good marine, a great biotic, who she cared for. Not in the way that the ship's scuttlebutt would have led you to believe, but it had still torn her heart, when she'd left him to die on Virmire... knowing it had been the right decision for the mission, didn't stop the hurt or the remorse.

Pausing by a half-buried Mako, Shepard's mind flashed back to two years previous, with the vehicle skulking in the corner of the Cargo Bay. Garrus busying himself with repairs, muttering almost under his breath about commanders and cliff jumping in tanks, whilst she stood talking with Ashley besides the weapon store.

Thinking of Ashley reminded Shepard of all the religious based discussions they'd had. She wasn't a religious person herself, but always enjoyed spiritual debate. Her thoughts lingered on a particular conversation regarding Dante's Inferno, mainly the level reserved for violence.

The image of the seventh layer was supposed to be boiling rivers of blood and fire, not the frozen
wasteland that Shepard found herself in, yet she was convinced this place was her own private hell.

Moving through the wreckage, she found herself in the shattered remains of the CIC. Without much effort, she recovered a datapad that had belonged to the ship's XO and Navigator, Charles Pressly.

A slight smile formed on Shepard's lips, as she remember how he'd saluted her, once she had taken over from Anderson. It had felt odd at the time, since she had briefly encountered the officer during the aftermath of the Skyllian Blitz. Then they'd served together under Anderson aboard the SSV Tokyo; they'd been equal ranks. So he saluting her had never felt right, something she had told him often, and something she'd eventually realised was his way of winding her up.

Reading through what was left on the almost unintelligible logs, caused Shepard's smile to widen. Pressly had been so against the non-human members of her crew at the beginning of their mission; it was nice to see written evidence that his opinions had slowly changed and become more accepting.

Approaching the ruins of the cockpit, Shepard could practically see Joker going about his business at the helm. She had stood behind his seat hundreds of times, chatting to him about a mission or just some random garbage.

A surge of emotion swept through her, causing Shepard to steady herself against the ruined chair. Despite the fact she'd declined Joker's offer to accompany her, she wished he was beside her.

The man was a brother to her. She hated that he blamed himself for her death, and at that very moment, the most important thing Shepard wanted to do, was give Joker a hug. She wanted to remind him that she didn't blame him, and that she would do it all again, just to make sure he survived.

Eventually, she stumbled from the ruined cockpit, and with twenty dog tags entwined in her grasp, she came upon a towering wall of metal.

'Normandy SR1' could still be seen emblazoned on the scrap, despite the grime. Shepard halted, staring up at the letters, as another flashback over took her.

She could clearly remembered standing at the private Dock 422, and admiring the beauty of the SR1, with Garrus and Tali by her side. She shook her head and managed a sad smile; remembering her last conversation with Thane, and how he'd relived a brief memory whilst she watched with fascination.

'Is this how it is for him?' she wondered.

Taking in the surroundings again, Shepard supposed this would be an appropriate place for a memorial to the lost crew, and she went about setting up the beacon.

Once it was secured, she took a moment to bow her head in memory of those who had suffered the fate that she should have endured. Not having a faith of her own, Shepard had no one to pray to, so she simply hoped the crew had made it to whatever afterlife they believed in.

With respects paid, she turned towards the shuttle, though a small dark object suddenly caught her eye. It seemed the gentle wind had blown away some of the drift, revealing what turned out to be her old N7 helmet. Shepard just stared, frozen. Her breathe stuck in her throat.

This was the spot her lifeless body had fallen. This was her grave.

She sank to her knees, gripping the battered piece of armour until her fingers ached. Right then, Shepard desperately wished she hadn't been so stubborn; she wished she'd allowed Garrus to come with her, as he'd asked, but she had wanted to protect him from the pain; just like she had Joker.
Since her resurrection, Shepard had always figured it had been harder to mourn her for two years, than it had been for her to wake up on a Cerberus operating table.

As always, she wanted to keep them safe, even at her own cost. But at that moment though, as she clutched the charred helmet to her breast, Shepard wasn't the Saviour of the Citadel; she was just a woman who wanted the comfort of her best friend.

Staggering to her feet, she called into her comm. link: "Garrus, are you there?"

"I read you, Shepard…" came the crackled response.

"Sorry I've taken so long," she apologised, hating the sound of concern in Garrus' voice.

"No, that's fine."

"I've found a couple of things around the crash site I'd like you to see," she told him, hearing a muffled confirmation. "I've also set up the memorial, in front of some wreckage still baring the Normandy's name."

"Well…Good." Garrus' voice sounded strained.

"Could you meet me in my cabin when I get back to the ship? Would you ask Joker for me as well?" Shepard asked.

She needed their company, mission reports could damn well wait... screw whatever Miranda or the Illusive Man thought of it.

"Yes okay," Garrus agreed. "We'll wait for you there."

Once inside the shuttle, Shepard didn't feel much relief. Alchera would probably always haunt her nightmares, but she was glad she had confronted that demon. Perhaps in time, the horror would fade and she'd appreciate the stillness.

She typed out two quick messages on her Omni-Tool, for Hackett and Anderson respectively, before allowing a weary sigh to escape her. She really needed a stiff drink.

The hours Shepard had spent reminiscing with Garrus and Joker, had revived her mood somewhat; and the dark emotions that had settled on her planet side, had almost disappeared by the time she left the Port Cargo Area after talking to Grunt.

The young krogan was always a priority on Shepard's rounds, and she made no secret that she viewed him as an adopted son. And though unexpected, she had come to love him calling her mother when they were in private, happy he felt the same bond.

Normally, she would have checked in with the engineers before hunting out Jack for a quick game of cards, but she still felt a little shaken by the day's events. So breaking from routine, Shepard decided to message the biotic, along with Kasumi, asking if they wanted to meet for drinks after evening meal. With that done, she headed directly to Life Support.

Shepard had noticed that she looked forward to her conversations with Thane, just as much as she did those with Garrus, Grunt or Joker. And she supposed that talking with him now, would eradicate the last whispers of uneasiness. So without ceremony, she entered the room.

"Do you need something?" Thane asked..
Shepard had to smile, at what had become the familiar greeting between the two of them. "Have a few minutes to talk?" she replied, silently cursing herself that her voice sounded shaky.

"By all means," he agreed. "May I?"

He gestured towards a pot of tea, and Shepard smiled, laying a hand on his shoulder in quiet thanks. "That would be wonderful."

Unsurprisingly, the first topic of conversation had regarded Alchera. Or, more to the point, avoiding the topic of Alchera. What had surprised Shepard was Thane's offer to listen, if she ever wanted to talk. It was sweet and unexpected. She'd never been the type to share her problems with people, but knowing she could if she needed, meant more to her than she could really explain.

However, it was the drell's simply acceptance to drop the topic that touched Shepard the most. In truth, she almost sagged in relief.

"Now, is there anything in particular you wish to discuss?" Thane asked.

"The last time we talked, you started speaking about a past event as if you were watching it," Shepard stated.

The vivid memories from Alchera still unnerved her, but besides that, she was genuinely interested in Thane's ability. When she'd first learnt about the asari Mind Melds, Shepard had spent hours discussing the process with Liara. It had fascinated her, even if in practise it left her with a throbbing headache, and she was just as curious about the drell's memory.

"Drell have perfect memories," he told her. "We can relive any moment of our lives in perfect clarity. It's difficult to control at times. Some of us disappear into, um… let's call it Solipsism."

"What do you mean by Solipsism?" she queried.

Being quietly interested in philosophy, Shepard had heard of the idea before, but mostly from the viewpoint of the Seventeenth Century Philosopher Descartes. Not that she often admitted to reading his work, if ever. Given that it was subject that already interested her, Shepard was most intrigued to hear Thane's undeniably more modern viewpoint on it.

"When a memory feels as real as life, it's as valid as life," Thane replied. "Thinking about a moment brings about the smell of cut grass, the warmth of another's hand on yours, a taste of another's tongue in your mouth."

She quirked an eyebrow at Thane. If it had been Garrus or Zaeed telling her a similar story, she would have known they were teasing her. However, she was still unsure if her current, usually stoic, companion had a playful side. Dark humour, yes. Playful? That remained to be seen. So Shepard remained silent, trying to fight the smile that was slowly forming on her lips.

"Wouldn't you rather lose yourself in such a memory, instead of spending the night alone, staring at walls of metal and plastic?" Thane continued.

His comment caused Shepard's smile to briefly break through depleted defences. Despite the increasing temptation to flirt with the man, who was becoming more handsome to her each minute she sat opposite him, she decided it was probably best to play it safe... at least for now.

"Isn't there a risk you could lose yourself in bad memories as well?" Shepard asked, seriously.
"Of course," Thane answered, simply. "Remembering times I have taken bullets is… unpleasant, but I can look at my knee and see it's not shattered. The memories that are harder to escape are those of despair."

The way his voice lowered to almost a whisper, made Shepard's heart ache in sympathy; it was plain to see that something very real and painful caused the sadness in her companion's eyes. She was hard pushed to fight the urge to reach across the table for his hand, to give it a comforting squeeze.

"You can remember everything that's happened in your life?" she asked gently, hoping to steer the topic slightly away from what was troubling the assassin.

"Nearly. I expect if we remembered the birth trauma we'd never recover from it."

Thane's blunt statement caught Shepard off guard, and she let out a ripple of surprised laughter. He chuckled in response, and for a moment the pair sat in comfortable silence, both taking sips of tea. Shepard couldn't help but smile into her mug, it was probably the best tea she had ever tasted. The fact it also smelt divine was also helping her to relax.

"You can relive every assassination you've ever made?" Shepard asked, against her better judgement, but intrigue had got the better of her.

'Curiosity killed the cat' she thought, wryly.

"In perfect detail," Thane replied, in an unmistakably honest tone. "Every mistake I've made, every target's last breath."

"That sound's difficult. At any moment you could relive the guilt."

Shepard watched Thane lean forward, resting his arms on the table and joining his hands together. She marvelled at the fluidity of his movements, he moved as graceful as a dancer.

Then he looked her directly in eyes, and Shepard realised she found the man utterly beautiful, never mind handsome. She sincerely hoped that this new found attraction had no outward manifestation, and Shepard was thankful that she'd never been the type of woman to blush.

"Guilt? No," he said, his rich voice no more than a breathe. "I've never felt any particular guilt about my contracts. My employers killed them, my body was only the tool they used. If you kill a man with our gun, do you hold your gun responsible?"

She lowered her gaze and contemplated what he'd said. She found his response interesting, and could see the logic there, but it only led her to wanting to know more. To be able to figure out how is mind really worked.

"Your body doesn't make the decision to shoot, your mind does. You make the choice to kill," Shepard countered, consciously keeping her tone neutral.

"When someone aims a gun at you, you pull the trigger. You don't think. It's reflex," Thane stated. "Any combat training conditions the body's reflexes. My training was very thorough. Drell minds are different from humans. We see our body as a vessel, and accept that is not always under our control."

Shepard smiled at him. In truth, she found drell minds fascinating... though perhaps it was only a particular drell that interested her. Forcing away the tempting yet inappropriate thoughts that tugged at her mind, Shepard decided to continue to play it safe. To gather more intel. on the man who sat opposite her.
"So how are we different?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Humans often believe in a soul distinct from the body. A spirit responsible for moral reasoning that lives on after the body's death. Our belief is a bit more literal," Thane explained.

Nodding, her smile widened. Thane's last statement made her think of Ashley, and she wondered what her old Gunnery Chief would think of the assassin's explanation. Then, a mischievous thought hit her, and she levelled the assassin with an appraising gaze.

His earlier 'taste of another's tongue' had seemed teasing, now she wanted to see if she could push him further. Most of all she was dying to know who had been the one to block his shot, in the memory he had mentioned yesterday. Shepard had a sneaky suspicion the memories were of the same person.

"So, last time we talked, you remembered one of your assassinations," she prompted. "Something about sunset coloured eyes?"

"Ah, that time… Laser dot trembles on the skull. Spice on the spring wind. Sunset eyes defiant in the scope. A bystander noticed my spotting laser and threw herself between me and the target. She couldn't see me but she stared me down."

Thane's easy shifts between normal conversation and periods of Solipsism amazed Shepard. She also noticed how the drell smiled when he recalled the memory. It seemed certain there was more to it than he was letting one. After another sip of tea, Shepard clasped her hands under her chin and studied the assassin.

"You telling me that was just another vivid drell memory?" she smirked.

"Not… No," Thane admitted, but sounded hesitant. "She was a vivid person."

Shepard sensed her companion was starting to feel uncomfortable. There was definitely more that Thane wasn't letting on, but she wouldn't push him further; especially after the understanding he'd shown earlier regarding Alchera. Shepard rose from her chair, and gave Thane an affectionate smile.

"I should get back to my duties," she lied, gently.

She supposed it was as good an excuse as any, but as she moved towards the door, Thane stopped her; catching her wrist as she walked by. She blinked in surprise, and looked at him expectantly.

"Shepard, I appreciate these chats we have," he said, releasing her wrist and sounding uncharacteristically tense.

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"Shepard, I appreciate these chats we have," he said, releasing her wrist and sounding uncharacteristically tense.

"You've spent a lot of your life alone, Thane," she soothed.

He gave a short joyless laugh. "Work fulfilled me. Reading…" He sighed. "I've barely spoken to anyone outside my family. It seems there will be no-one to mourn me when I die. You're the only friend I've made in ten years."

Shepard wasn't sure if the drell got embarrassed, but Thane was certainly looking uncomfortable. The honesty of his admission struck her, hard. She'd never expected the assassin to appear vulnerable, but at that moment, he looked all but lost. Resolving to lighten the mood before she left, Shepard decided to throw caution to the wind… figuring that if he didn't feel the same, she could always pretend she was teasing.
"Friend huh? Well, it's a start," she flirted.

"A start?" Thane sounded a little surprised. "That's... intriguing. I will always be here to talk."

Not trusting herself to say anymore, Shepard flashed him a devilish smile before exiting the room. As the doors of the Life Support Plant closed behind her, she took a moment to compose herself. Thane's response had been more positive than Shepard had expected and, just as she had suspected, the last tendrils of dread and gloom left by Alchera had vanished.

As her smile threaten to turn into a grin, she headed towards the Medical Bay. The doctor had become an adopted mother figure to her, and talking with Karin would give Shepard a better excuse for her demeanour, rather than having to explain why the cryptic drell had that effect on her. Especially with an enigmatic thief prowling the corridors.
The message Thane had received from Barla Von had sent a cold shiver down his spine, and it had taken several minutes before he could force himself to move.

Emerging from the dim light of the Life Support Plant, he blinked at the brightness of the Crew Deck; hoping a soothing cup of spiced tea would help calm the disquiet that threatened to engulf him. He had barely taken a few steps into the Mess Hall before he was accosted by a familiar redhead. Unfortunately, it wasn't the flaming auburn tresses of the commander, but the subdued copper tones of Kelly Chambers.

Not wishing to discuss his concerns with anyone other than Shepard, Thane politely deflected the Yeoman's queries, before requesting that a message be passed on to the commander; informing her that he wished to speak to her at her earliest convenience.

The following hours had passed at an uneasy pace. The turmoil that raged within him, had distracted Thane to the point that he didn't hear Shepard finally enter his room. He cursed himself silently. He had never left himself so unguarded, so vulnerable, and Thane was angry with himself that he didn't notice the commander, until she was almost by his side.

"Shepard," he acknowledged, his voice strained.

"What's wrong?" she asked immediately.

"It seems more difficult to talk about, now that you're here," Thane admitted, reluctantly.

Shepard moved into his field of vision and perched on the edge of the table. Close by him, but not intimately so. A gentle hand on his shoulder forced him to meet her gaze, and he found undeniable concern in her emerald eyes.

"Thane, talk to me," she requested.

The kindness in her voice nearly crumbled him resolve. Fearing he would lose his composure, with the tenacious redhead close enough that he could reach out and hold her, Thane decided a few moments of distance would help quiet his racing mind. He found himself standing before the wall mounted display, that housed his most prized weapons.

"I had a family once," he told her, his voice threatening to falter. "I still have a son. His name is Kolyat, I haven't seen him for a very long time."

"How long?"

He turned to look at her. Shepard was sat more fully on the table, though turned to face the drive core. Her feet rested on the chair she normally sat on, and her left elbow leant on her knees. She cupped her cheek in the palm of her hand and was giving him a sideways glance.

"Ten years," he admitted, bitterly. "He showed me some of his school work and asked if we could 'dance crazy'. We did that when he was younger."

"What sort of dance is that?" Shepard smiled, looking at him fully.

"It's…

I check my extranet contacts. I expect an update on my next target. The console plays music. Old,
unfashionable. Kolyat jumps into the room. 'Hi Father.' Runs around in circles, I scoop him up, toss him into the air. He shrieks, laughs. "Spin me." The console beeps. I...put him down. Click the message. "Father?" he pleads. Tugs my sleeve. "I need to read this." I say. I don't look at him."

Thane trailed off as the memory faded. He bowed his head, unable to meet Shepard's eyes. He was ashamed how he had failed to be a good father to his son.

He also suspected that the commander's esteem of him had diminished, and that it would do so further, when she knew the whole truth. However, Thane was surprised when he felt Shepard touch his arm; he hadn't even heard her move.

"Did something happen to them?" she asked, quietly.

"I abandoned them," he informed her.

Thane braced himself against the anger he expected. Instead, he felt her hands grip his biceps, and he realised how dainty she actually was; her hands were much smaller than he'd expected.

Shepard gave his arms a gentle squeeze that forced Thane to look up. He was met by her steady emerald gaze. Quickly, he searched her eyes for the disgust he was sure he'd find, but was surprised to find only concern. He watched as the commander tilted her head to the side, a sad half-smile on her lips.

"I'm beginning to know you, Thane. There's more to it than that," she stated, before releasing her hold.

He regarded her for a moment then gave a small smile, belatedly realising that Shepard was right; she did know him. The revelation surprised him, since they had only known each other for a few weeks.

Giving a slight sigh, Thane led Shepard back to the table and sat opposite her. He remained silent for a moment longer, deciding how much he was ready to explain.

"It was nothing dramatic. No sneaking out in the middle of the night, no final argument or slammed door. I just, did my job. I hunted and killed across the Galaxy. 'Away on business' my wife would tell people. I was always away on business," he explained, solemnly. "When my wife departed from her body, I... attended to that issue, leaving Kolyat in the care of aunts and uncles. I have not seen him or talked to him since."

"That's not the choice I expected," Shepard admitted. "Why didn't you raise him yourself?"

"My body is blessed with the skills to take life. The hanar honed them in me. I have few others. I didn't want that life for Kolyat, I had hoped he would find his own way, if he hated me so be it. He would not have shared the path of sin."

Thane shifted uneasily, as Shepard's emerald eyes searched his. It seemed the commander was weighing his words, before a warmth registered on her beautiful features. She gave a barely perceivable nod, as if she understood.

"Something's changed," Shepard said. A statement, not a question.

"I used my contacts to trace Kolyat," Thane admitted. "He has become, disconnected. He does as his body wills."

Shepard raised an eyebrow in question. "You'll have to explain that one to me."
"Disconnected. The body is not our true self, the soul is," he explained, simply. "Body and soul work as one in a whole person. When the soul is weakened by despair or fear, when the body is ill or injured, the individual is disconnected. No longer whole."

"What's happened? Is he hurt?" she asked.

Thane was struck by Shepard's genuine concern; he hadn't expected it. The commander had never met his son, even he had been a member of her team for a relatively short time, but it seemed to him that she honestly cared.

"Something happened that should not have. He knows where I've been, what I've done," Thane clarified. "I don't know his reasons but he's gone to the Citadel, taken a job as a hit man."

Shepard shook her head in what seemed like disbelief, before levelling her gaze on him. "What do you need from me?" she asked.

He blinked slowly, letting her words sink in. There had been no hesitation in Shepard's offer to help, no prying for more details or scepticism. He was humbled by her kindness.

"I'd like your help to stop him," Thane admitted. "I'm afraid some may have seen we share a name and assumed we share skills. I don't know why he would accept the task, but this is not a path he should walk."

The commander lay a hand over the top of his. "Of course I'll help, but I don't have your contacts and I don't have your tracking skills. What can I do?"

Unable to meet her eyes, Thane looked down at their hands. Her porcelain skin was a stark contrast against his green scales. It was oddly comforting, and unthinking, he turned his hand so that their palms where touching.

"Shepard, the last time I saw my son…

_They wrap her body in sea vines. Weighted it, with stones. He tries to pull from me. Calls for her. The hanar lift her off the platform. They sing like bells: 'the fire has gone to be kindled a new'. He begs them not to take her away. They let her body slide into the water. He hits me. 'Don't let them. Stop them. Why won't you…' It rains. It always rains on Kahje. Warm water pours down his face._"

Thane broke from the memory, the pain and sorrow making his heart ache. He lapse into silence, only then registering that Shepard was gently stroking his knuckles with her thumb.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you relive that," she all but whispered.

Guilt echoed in her words, caught Thane off guard. It had him fighting the compulsion to pull her close to him, to take selfish comfort in her embrace. He knew he shouldn't be surprised of the commander's empathy; it was an integral part of Shepard's nature, but he hadn't expected her to show such sympathy to him. He felt undeserving of her regard, and ashamed of his thoughts. She deserved better.

"Perfect memory, it is sometimes a burden," he told her, dryly.

He heard Shepard huff out a laugh, and looked up to see her smiling at him. There was a warmth and affection to her look, that he hadn't expected to find. She gently removed her hand from his and moved to stand.

"I can imagine," she replied. "I'll get us to the Citadel as soon as possible."
With that, she was gone.
When Shepard had received word from Kelly that Thane wanted to see her, she hadn't expected the conversation to be as serious as it was. The situation the assassin found himself in was dire, and she hadn't hesitated to offer her assistance. This had resulting in need to instruct a new course for Joker, though this was nothing unusual. Neither was the pilot's complaints.

"You do it on purpose," Joker huffed. "You wait until we're almost out of a quadrant before making me turn around. What is it this time? Miranda run out of shampoo?"

"Stop complaining," she grinned, setting down a steaming mug of black coffee in front of him. "Look, I even brought you a bribe."

Shepard dropped into the co-pilot's chair without ceremony; kicking off her shoes, and folding her legs beneath her. She took a sip of her own drink, hot water with a slice of lemon, before she began to watch her de facto brother skilfully piloting their ship. A comfortable silence settled between, and her gaze slowly slipped to the myriad of stars, that seemed to zoom past the windows.

"So really, what we hightailing it back to the Citadel for?" the pilot asked, his eyes never leaving the consoles.

She bit her lip, trying to decide what to tell him. She didn't like disclosing the crew's private business, but always strived to remain as honest as she could. It was something Anderson had always complimented her on, and she had no intention on letting her father figure down; even if he wasn't there to know.

"It's a request from Thane, his son could be in trouble."

"Another potentially dangerous alien, why am I not surprised," Joker grumbled. "Do me a favour Shepard, don't recruit him, we don't need another one. Oh, and if you want my advice, only go for guys that don't come with baggage. And children are always baggage."

"Dating advice from the perpetual bachelor," Shepard laughed.

That set the tone for the next three hours of FTL travel. The pair bantering back and forth, teasing and ribbing each other. It helped keep Shepard's mind from worrying about Thane, for which she was thankful, and she suspected that was Joker's intention.

Shepard had a feeling she'd need all her wits about her for this mission, so the distraction had been a welcome reprieve. As they approached the open arms the Citadel, Shepard went to meet Thane and Garrus in the decontamination room.

When she'd spoken to the turian, Shepard had strictly ordered him to wear casuals for the mission, though she was hardly surprised when he turned up in armour. However, she hadn't expect it him to be carrying a kit bag, and she eyed it suspiciously. Even though Thane had yet to arrive, Garrus leant towards her ear, obviously wanting to keep the conversation out of EDI's audible range. His mandibles were close enough to tickle her skin as he talked.

"I've word on Sidonis," he hissed. "He's on the Citadel, I've brought your guns and armour. I won't let him get away Shepard."

For a moment she regarded her best friend; taking in his drawn expression, and the icy glint in his eyes. Reluctantly, Shepard nodded. She didn't agree with Garrus' plan to kill the other turian. His
need for blind revenge unnerved her, but she was his friend. Which meant she would stand by him, for better or worse. Though Shepard hoped she'd be able to bring the issue to a more peaceful solution... Garrus was not a murderer.

"Alright," she agreed. "Whilst I help Thane, you can snoop around. Once we're done, I'll help you track down Sidonis. Okay?"

With a rumble of agreement, he stepped away from her, just as Thane joined them. The assassin also eyed the bag the Garrus carried. The turian merely shrugged, before he pointed a talon at her.

"It may have escaped your notice, but this is Commander Shepard. That means someone is guaranteed to try shoot us at some point today. I'm just trying to make it so she doesn't end up dead," he stated, dryly.

"What, you mean again?" she retorted. "I wouldn't dream of it, don't think the Illusive Man would rebuild me a second time."

"You're probably right. Bet he's figured out you're too much of a pain in the ass," Garrus agreed, his mandibles flaring into a grin.

"Love you too big guy," Shepard said, flippantly.

It was said in jest, both she and Garrus knew that, but as she alighted to the Citadel, Shepard noticed the odd look Thane gave her. He was so hard to read, that she couldn't tell what he was thinking, but she put it down to worrying of his son. After all, it couldn't have been anything else.

"Sirius," Shepard called in greeting, to the C-Sec officer standing guard on the entrance to the Zakera Ward outpost.

The turian flare his mandibles into a wide grin. "Good to see you again, ma'am."

"Bailey in?" she asked, hoping the captain was on duty. It'd make both missions a lot easier if he was.

Before the officer could reply, a familiar New-Yorker accent could be heard through the door: "You'll have to make him scream a little, he's not going to tell you everything 'cause you ask."

"I'll take that as a yes," she sighed, shaking her head.

Once the security scan was finished, she walked into the main room of the outpost, calling out to the captain as she did:

"That really necessary, Bailey?"

"Ah, Shepard," the captain smiled, standing to shake her hand. "How can I help my favourite Spectre?"

"Favourite huh? Why does that sound like you're the one after something?" she laughed.

"I'm not stupid enough to end up owing you a favour," Bailey defend, smiling. "But what can I do for you?"

"My associate is trying to find his son," Shepard stated, gesturing towards Thane. "We think a local criminal may have hired him."
"Hmm… should be easy, we don't see many drell here," the captain informed, already typing into his terminal. "Ah, here we go. One of my men reported a drell recently, and he was talking to Mouse, interesting."

"Mouse?" Thane questioned beside her.

"Just a petty criminal. Probably not the guy who hired your boy, but likely a messenger," Bailey explained.

"This Mouse been in any major trouble?" Shepard asked, wondering if he was a bigger play in this mess than it currently seemed.

"Not really. His M.O. tends to be data running, fencing stolen good, and selling illegal VI personalities. Actually he was selling one of you," the captain grinned.

"Me!?" Shepard practically spluttered. "Why would anyone want a VI of me?"

The thought just didn't compute.

"An attractive, charismatic woman, known for kicking ass… no, I couldn't imagine why that would be popular," Garrus drawled.

"Yeah, when you erased a file it would say 'I delete data like you on the way to real errors'," Bailey added, evidently enjoying winding her up.

"Wow, that's pretty extreme Shepard," Garrus rumbled in amusement.

She gave the turian a playful jab to the abdomen. "Laugh it up Vakarian," she grumbled.

"Apparently it's pretty buggy, but you should still pick up a copy. Mouse is usually upstairs outside the Dark Star, he works out of a public comm. terminal," the captain stated.

Shepard couldn't help but roll her eyes at Bailey, before glancing at Thane. Catching the amused look in the assassin's eyes, she flashed him a friendly smile, then motioned him to follow her. The pair exited the outpost, leaving Garrus to find out more information regarding Sidonis.

Once they were out of hearing distance, Thane stopped her with a gentle hand on her forearm.

"You didn't tell him Kolyat plans to assassinate someone," he said, barely concealing the question.

"He's a cop, an old fashioned one. He'd try to stop Kolyat, and one of them could end up dead. I don't want that," she told him, honestly.

"Yes of course. Thank you Shepard," he replied softly, before stepping aside to let her to lead the way.
In amicable silence, Thane and Shepard made their way to level twenty eight. They could hear the thumping rhythm of the Dark Star, long before spotting their quarry; a dark hair man, who paced back and forth holding a datapad.

Thane’s heart sank. Despite the ten year time lapse, he had to concede that this was indeed the same Mouse he’d befriended a decade ago. And from the look on the young man’s face, it was evident the former duct rat recognised him too.


"Be still Mouse. You can change your pants in a moment," Thane replied, patting the younger man on the shoulder.

"How do you know Thane?" Shepard interposed, sounding suspicious.

"Krios? He didn't…." Mouse broke off, glancing at him. "If he didn't say nothing, then I ain't either."

Thane was honoured that his former contact still held such loyalty to him, even after all the years, but he was also ashamed of the mistrust he'd inadvertently caused the commander.

Shepard had been an unexpected beacon; unwittingly pulling his soul from its battle sleep. She deserved much more than the pitiful friendship he had to offer in return. Thane lowered his head in disgrace, fearing he had lost the commander's trust.

'Arashu, let her forgive me’ he prayed.

"When we heard the name, I didn't think it could be the same Mouse. He was a contact on the Citadel when I was still active," Thane explained.

Shepard gave an almost imperceivable nod.

"He and some other children would gather information on my targets," he continued, cautiously.

"You put children in danger to spy for you?" she asked, incredulously.

"Children, the poor, my people's word for them is drala'fa, meaning the ignored," he defended. "They are everywhere, see everything, yet they are never seen."

In truth, he had disliked the need to use the children, but it was a sad truth that the drala'fa were an undeniably useful tool.

Thane hoped he'd have a chance to explain things further to the commander, once they were in private, but Shepard's face was indecipherable. Yet after a moment's pause, she inclined her head towards Mouse and stepped back, leaving a clear path for Thane to reach the other man. Intent on not allowing himself to dwell on Shepard's reaction, he stepped forward and in a smooth motion, gripped the collar of Mouse's shirt.

'He is not a child anymore' he reminded himself, dragging the young man closer.

"You gave another drell instructions for an assassination, who's the target?" he demanded.
Thane heard Shepard crack her knuckles behind him, and was unsure if it was a conscious action or not. It was an intimidating sound all the same, even to a skilled assassin like himself. It made him more thankful that he'd never gone up against her, that he'd never felt her wrath... something he hoped to continue to avoid.

"I don't know, I didn't ask," Mouse stammered in reply. "The people I work for, can make me disappear. I'd like to help you Krios, you always did right by us, but I ain't going to die for you."

"Look, you know Thane. He wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. Do it for him," Shepard unexpectedly implored, in a soothing tone.

Her interjection surprised Thane immensely, especially after he'd obviously angered her, and glanced a sideways glance at his companion; however, her 'Commander Mask' was firmly in place. Though noticing his gaze, Shepard's emerald eyes met his in an unwavering look, before giving him another brief nod.

"I want to, he was always nice to us," Mouse stated, wringing his hands together with nerves. "But these people ain't nice."

"Nobody is going to know you talked to us," Shepard promised.

"Mouse, I swear that you won't be named," Thane stated, adding his own reassurance.

The former duct rat held up his hands in a sign of defeat. "Alright, alright. He came with that holo you took of me, said he wanted a job. I ran through your old contacts to see who'd give him a shot. The guy who offered was Elias Kelham."

Thane grit his teeth at hearing Kelham's name, he had always disliked the man; even if the crook had been a useful contact, and never questioned why Thane refused to meet him in person. He hoped that would come in useful now.

Assuming the conversation was finished, Thane nodded his thanks to Mouse and turned to leave. He only checked his steps when he heard Shepard began to speak, her soft voice laced with dry amusement.

"One other thing, that Shepard VI you're selling…"

"Oh Shit! You heard?" Mouse interrupted. "Look, you were dead. It was totally legal to make a VI of you."

Thane turned back to see the terrified look in the young man's eyes, but his attention was drawn to Shepard's nonchalant posture. Her hip cocked and head slightly tilted to the side. He didn't imagine she was actually upset with Mouse for the VI, but not being able to see her face meant, Thane couldn't fully gauge her feelings. However, he nearly laughed aloud when her response came.

"Give me a copy, and we will call it even," Shepard quipped.

Mouse looked complete bemused. "What? I mean sure, yeah, absolutely. Sorry about the whole…"

The young man trailed off, looking unsure of himself or the situation. Thane moved back towards the pair, feeling almost as if he needed to help his former contact deal with the commander. If he struggled against her charm and intelligence, he expected Mouse to floundering within seconds. However, Shepard surprised him again as she gave a disarming smile, and nodded towards the nearby bar.
"Want a drink?" she asked.

Mouse visibly relaxed. "A drink with a dead Spectre? Sure, why not. Not like this day can get any weirder," he stated, before walking up the stairs.

The inside of the Dark Star lounge was barely lit, only blue lights above the bar and the strobe lights of the dance floor illuminated the place. If it wasn't for the noise, Thane would have conceded this was the perfect place to find out more about their target. Though even the deafening music had it's advantages; making it almost impossible for anyone to eavesdrop their conversation. Despite hating clubs and bars like this, Thane couldn't fault the commander's tactic.

"Tell me about Kelham," Shepard stated, setting down the tray of drinks.

"Human. Moved to the Citadel about ten years ago," Mouse said without hesitation, as he picked up a bright blue drink that could have only been asari hard liquor. "He was a minor player when you was here Krios."

"What changed?" Thane asked.

He nodding his thanks, as he accepted the glass that Shepard offered him. The purple concoction smelt like Bina, and he smiled at her softly.

"He got big after the geth attack," Mouse continued. "He runs the rackets on the lower end of the wards. He's seriously bad news."

"You did good Mouse," Shepard praised, before taking a sip of her shockingly bright green drink.

"Yeah, hope I live long enough to pat myself on the back," Mouse replied nervously, glancing around the bar.

"Kelham will never know," Thane reassured again.

"I hope not," Mouse stated, downing his drink in one gulp, then moved to leave. "I'm out of here Krios. Perhaps I'll see you next time you're in town, just don't bring the family."

He would have supposed Mouse was referring to Kolyat, since that was why they had questioned him, until the former duct rat looked pointedly at the commander. Thane blinked his double lids, twice. He half expected some sort of rebuke from Shepard at Mouse's insinuation. However, she seemed completely unabashed and unconcerned, merely shrugging as Mouse left.

"That couldn't have been easy," she said, looking at him with concern.

"Mouse knew more about my life than Kolyat ever did. He smiles up at me, broken teeth and scabby knees. Bare feet black. A dead end future looking up at me. Worshipping the petty gifts I have to offer. I was the only good thing he had back then, but I left him, as I left Kolyat."

Shepard gave a understanding smile, and moved to sit next to him in the booth. "Mouse said you had a holo of him."

"A foolish bit of sentimentality," he admitted. "I can perfectly recall every moment I spent with Mouse. He pulls at my arm, smiles. He wants to know I'll remember him. That anyone will remember him. I take the holo. He smiles at himself in miniature on my palm. Then a frown wrinkles his brow. He pats my pockets checking for other holos. 'Where's your son Krios?' he asks."
The memory had him blinking back unanticipated tears, as he looked over at the commander. Unexpectedly, her hand held his, as it rested on top of the polished black glass table. Her touch was warm, and her close proximity afforded him a waft of her scent; a heady mix of floral and spice. Thane smiled into his glass as he drank, enjoying Shepard's warmth and closeness.

"Don't blame yourself," Shepard assuaged, squeezing his hand.

"I will do as you ask, if you answer me one question," he stated, cryptically.

"Hmmm?" she hummed, moving to look at him fully. She raised an eyebrow in expectation.

"Why is your drink green?"

She outright laughed at his seemingly random question, before draining her glass of it's contents. In truth, Thane was both genuinely curious as to it's contents, but also wary that it could be hiding something hazardous to the commander's health. It really was an outrageous shade of green, and something lethally toxic could easily be hiding in it.

"That is a very good question," Shepard agreed, smirking. "All I will say is that it often is, when a particular bartender serves me. If you want to know more, ask Kasumi."

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**Author's Note**

For those of you who are wondering, just like Thane, why Shepard's drink is green… Remember back in chapter 4, Shepard mentioning a turian bar tender from Dark Star? Now think back to the game, remember to copious amounts of drinks that end with Shepard passed out on the bar's bathroom floor? One of those drinks is batarian ale, which the bar tender mentions he's never seen anyone other than Shepard handle… There's your answer! ;-)
It had taken longer than Shepard would have liked to get Kelham into custody, but Bailey did come through for them, eventually. Something Shepard was extremely grateful for, as she'd dreaded having to pull rank on someone who was almost a friend.

Once the captain had confirmed their suspect was waiting in one of the interrogation rooms, it was only a matter of a brief discussion between Thane and herself, to decide how to proceed; which resulted in Shepard leading the questioning.

For once in her life, both lives when she thought about it, she decided to play the 'Spectre Card'. A phrase that Shepard had learned from her one time mentor Nihlus Kyrik, literally another lifetime ago. After a single, steadying breath, she breezed into the interrogation room as if she owned the place.

"Hope I'm doing you proud Nih" she thought, wistfully.

"My name's Shepard. I'm a Spectre," she stated, before Kelham had chance to speak.

"Prove it," the criminal sneered, arrogantly.

Shepard drew her rarely used M-6 Carnifex, a gun she only ever carried on the Citadel as a balance between being civilised and being protected, and made a show of looking at the pistol almost reverently as she spoke. Wanting to act the part of reneged Spectre to the tee, Shepard also let a wicked smirk spread across her face; as well as letting a faint amount of biotics show in the form of a faint glow of blue, which surrounded her like an aura.

"I don't need to prove anything, Spectres are above the law, we clear?" she stated.

"Crystal," he replied.

Kelham's cocksure tone was belied by the noticeable glance he shot Thane; almost as if he was pleading with the drell. Which was utterly ironic, because out of the two of them, Shepard knew her companion was the one most likely to get heavy handed on the crook. After all, it was his son they were trying to find.

"Good," Shepard drawled. "Fortunately we're not after you. You contracted an assassin. Who's the target?"


Shepard stifled a laugh, she didn't expect it to be that easy.

"Thanks. You won't see us again. No offence, but you're a problem below my pay grade," she called flippantly over her shoulder, as they left the room.

"That may go down in history as the shortest interrogation ever," Thane informed her, deadpan.

"I aim to please," she quipped, giving the assassin a playful wink.

They found Garrus nearby, leaning against the one-way mirror of the interrogation room they'd just left. One look at the wide spread of his mandibles in a turian grin, let Shepard know he'd watched
everything that had unfolded; and had greatly enjoyed the show.

By his armoured feet, sat her kit bag, and he tapped it gently; subtly reminding her that he'd known she'd be in need of it. Shepard rolled her eyes at her best friend.

"Admit it Shepard, you enjoyed that," Garrus stated, tossing her the bag

"I'm sure I don't know what you're implying," she replied in mock innocence.

"It seems associating with an assassin is turning you a little renegade commander," the turian joked.

Thane gave a cough, trying to hide his chuckle.

"Well that's a first, most people would blame a certain rogue vigilante I'm friends with," Shepard retorted, grinning. "Goes by the codename Archangel, you may have heard of him, he's a fellow turian, after all."

Shepard could still hear Garrus' laughter and Thane's chuckle, as she ducked into the woman's locker room to change into her armour. She slipped out of her plain black dress and into her under suit at an admirable speed; a skilled she'd honed even before her life in the military.

Only a few minutes later, Shepard was clicking the last piece of her black and red armour into place. Even though she was grateful for his forethought, she had a feeling Garrus would never let her forget about it.

The culmination of the thirty minute skycar ride, had Shepard standing side by side with Thane, surrounded by the bustle of Shin Akiba; the human centric commercial district of Zakera Ward. Both appraised their target. Despite the hubbub, it was amazing that people were giving them a wide birth, almost instinctively.

"How do you want to play this?" she asked.

Shepard had already decided to let Thane direct the situation; it was his son, at the end of the day.

"Follow Talid on the maintenance catwalks," he requested. "Tell me what he's doing, the krogan bodyguard will make him easy to follow."

She nodded. "Where will you be?"

"The darkest corner with the best view," he replied, in his usual enigmatic style.

She rolled her eyes and flashed him an impish smile, before moving towards the maintenance hall. By the time she made it to the catwalks, Thane was lost to her in the jostling crowd, but she could still hear his voice over the comm. link:

"Amonkira, Lord of Hunters, grant that my hands be steady, my aim be true and my feet swift. And should the worst come to pass, grant me forgiveness."

'Wow, I need to ask about his gods. That sounded impressive' Shepard decided.

Truth be told, she missed the religious debates she used to have with Ashley on board the original Normandy, and had already wanted to know more about the drell's beliefs. Hearing his prayer had only increased her curiosity.

Shaking her head, Shepard returned to the task at hand. She silently followed her target;
remembering a conversation from two years previous, where Garrus had explained that in turian culture being barefaced, as Talid was, meant you were someone not to be trusted. Incidentally, it was also a slang term for politician, which had made Shepard laugh at the time.

Now, after trailing the turian for a few minutes, Shepard decided he was barefaced in every sense of the word. It irked her sorely, to watch the politician's bodyguards extort business owners, without being able to act. She positively bristled knowing he was going against his own political stance, purely because he had a grudge with her race. She was debating tossing a Warp in Talid's direction, before movement in the bar below caught her attention.

"Holy hell," she muttered.

She was utterly transfixed at the sight below her. In all her years, Shepard didn't think she'd ever seen a dancing turian. However, not twenty feet below her, there was actual evidence that some could seriously let lose. Only a moment later, she realised who she was watching; the Presidium grounds-keeper, who she'd met the same night as the batarian ale debacle.

'Dann. If I knew he could move like that, I'd have gone after him and not the barman' she thought, ruefully.

"Shepard?" Thane called, sounding confused.

"Did you know turians could dance?"

The words were out her mouth before she could stop them, and there was a pregnant pause before the drell answered.

"No. Perhaps it is part of his political manifesto?"

It took Shepard a moment to realise that Thane thought she was still talking about Talid, but before she could correct him, a flash of teal coloured scales snatched her attention.

Adrenaline kicked in tenfold, and she instinctively rushed across the remaining gangway. Guessing it was Kolyat, Shepard shouted his name. The young drell turned his head briefly towards her, his onyx eyes widening slightly, before turning back and shooting one of Talid's bodyguards.

"Thane!" Shepard called over the comm. link.

She dropped to ground level, only to find the assassin keeping pace beside her.

"I saw," he replied, curtly.

The pair raced, full pelt, through the apartment block; ignoring the cries and sobs of shocked spectators. It didn't take long to locate Talid's apartment, the destroyed pot plants and over turned furniture in the hall was a good give away.

Upon entering the residence, they found Kolyat standing over the kneeling turian; a gun aimed at the back of Talid's head, readied for execution. Shepard moved to take point, her Carnifex now exchanged for her beloved Locust, and raised in anticipation of armed confrontation. Silently, she prayers it wouldn't come to that, even if just for Thane's sake.

Whilst the assassin tried to reason with his son, Shepard was quickly alerted to C-Sec's presence. Thankfully, Bailey had chosen to come himself. It came as some relief, since Shepard suspected no other officer would be prepared to stand alert, rather than just shoot the rookie gunman.
However, her relief was short lived as she watched Thane step towards his son, unarmed. Her heart was in her mouth, hoping Kolyat didn't turn on his father.

'Amonkira, if you exist, protect him' she prayed.

The way the younger drell glared at Thane, with the gun still tightly gripped in his hands, made Shepard's blood run cold. She wasn't prepared to take any chances with her friend's life.

Aiming to cause a distraction, Shepard shot a floor lamp that stood to Kolyat's right, causing him to lower the weapon and recoil in shock from the shattering glass. With his guard down, Shepard quickly tugged off her gauntlet, before landing a right hook squarely on Kolyat's jaw; making him stager and drop his gun. Then without hesitation, she moved to stand between father and son, glaring at the latter.

"Talid, get the hell out of here," she said through gritted teeth, her eyes not leaving Kolyat.

The turian didn't need telling twice, and with the hostage out of the way, Bailey took over. He directed one officer to bag Kolyat's gun as evidence, and ordered the others to secure the rest of the apartment block. The captain himself unclipped a pair of handcuffs; but to Shepard's surprise, he gestured to his team to wait, evidently giving Thane a moment with his son.

"You son of a bitch!" the young drell blustered.

He directed the insult more at Thane than anyone else, and Shepard found herself very tempted to punch the young drell again; but decided her usual tactic of words might serve the situation better.

"You're father doesn't have much time left Kolyat," she stated, firmly. "He's trying to make up for his mistakes," she added, in a much gentler tone.

"What?" Kolyat directed his question to Thane. "So you came to get my forgiveness? So you can die in peace or something?"

"I came to grant you peace," the assassin replied, slowly stepping around Shepard. "You're angry because I wasn't there when your mother died."

"You weren't there when she was alive, why would you be there when she died?"

Kolyat's voice shook with rage, and as Shepard watched Thane bow his head, she was torn between comforting her friend, and another urge to punch his son. She could understand Kolyat was upset, but it didn't stop the compulsion to protect her team mate.

But figuring it best to bide her time, Shepard kept a respectable distance; thankful that Bailey decided to do the same. She nodded to the captain to show her thanks.

"You're mother. They killed her to get to me. It was my fault," Thane admitted.

"What?" Kolyat gasped in disbelief.

Shepard also gave a surprised inhalation.

"After her body was given to the deep, I went to find them. The trigger men, the ring leaders. I hurt them, eventually killed them," Thane explained. "When I went back to see you, you were older. I should have stayed with you."

"Then I guess it's too bad for me you waited so long huh?" the young drell retorted, bitterly.
"Kolyat. I've taken many bad things out of the galaxy," Thane said, tenderly. "You're the only good thing I ever added to it."

Shepard's heart ached in sympathy for the assassin, easily realising the extent of pain her companion had endured. Though watching the tear rolling down Kolyat's cheek, had her fighting back her own; annoyed at how her 'mothering instincts' had emerged since her resurrection... it was something that previously only Grunt had managed to kick off, and Shepard wasn't sure how she felt about Kolyat eliciting the same response.

"This isn't a conversation you should have in front of strangers," Bailey interrupted, in a surprisingly kind tone. "Boys, take Kolyat and his father back to the precinct. Give them a room and as much time as they need."

Shepard could have hugged Bailey for that, and the thought nearly caused her to laugh. She'd never been an overly affectionate person before; especially to people she didn't know very well. She knew Joker would have teased her relentlessly if he knew, saying she was going soft as she got older, which was possibly true.

Or perhaps it was another thing death had changed about her, Shepard wasn't sure. She gave a tight lipped smile to Thane as he passed her, and as the two drell were escorted from the apartment, Shepard turned to the captain.

"I'm surprised you're letting him do that," she confessed.

"You think he's the only man who screwed up raising a child?" Bailey asked her, regret etched on his face. "I have to get back to the precinct. Come on, I'll give you a lift."

'So, another father with regrets' Shepard mused.

She rested a hand on the captain's shoulder, giving it a reassuring squeeze. Emotion rippled in the Bailey's eyes, and she gave him a warm smile.

"Thanks," she smiled. "I owe you a drink when your shift's done."
Pause for Thought (Thane PoV)

Thane sat quietly, his elbows supported on the table in front of him, and hands clasped together with his chin resting on them. He'd given up trying to meditate hours ago, and had struggled in vain to compose a message to his son, so now Thane was shifting in and out of solipsism.

It had been just thirty six hours since Shepard had help reunite him with Kolyat, and the evening they returned to the Normandy, was the first night she hadn't visited him during her rounds.

Thane couldn't deny to himself that he'd been more than a little disappointed; and at first, he'd worried that his revelation about Irikah's death had disturbed the commander... that she'd decided that the company of an assassin, was no longer palatable to her. However, a conversation overheard by chance had waylaid that fear.

I hear footsteps outside my door. I tense, hoping they are Shepard's, knowing the rhythm is not correct. Hushed female voices reach me through the ship's metal walls.

"Kasumi, do you know if anything happened with the commander today?"

"I know she went to the Citadel earlier with Garrus and Thane, why?"

"I was speaking with Gardener in the Mess Hall and saw Shepard making her evening rounds. She completely avoided the Main Battery, and walked straight passed Life Support when she went to see you, and again when she left, it's not like her. She's never bypassed either before."

"I wouldn't worry Kelly. She probably went to help those two with some personal matters on the Citadel, and whatever happened she thought it best to leave them both in peace for the night. You know Shep, she's always worrying about the rest of us."

"Hmmm, that could be the case... but, and I don't mean to cause offence, after you two came back from Bekenstein she spent hours talking with you. Had me hold all messages, and even persuaded Gardener to relinquish a tub of ice cream."

Soft laughter echoes. "Yes but that's because Shep knew I needed the company, some girl time. She even let me paint her toe nails." More laughter bounces off the walls. "Both Thane and Garrus are the strong, silent type. She'll be giving them space and nothing more. Shep's probably already got a mission lined up to drag them both on in the morning."

A quiet sigh escapes unseen lips. "You're probably right. Talking of girl time, are you joining us tonight? Apparently Shepard has managed to get Miranda and Jack to agree to be in the same room as each other. Though I'm not sure she's managed to commandeer any more ice cream."

Thane drifted out of the memory, smiling. At the time, he'd found comfort in the words of the petite Japanese thief. Now, Thane couldn't help his smile widening at how accurate Kasumi's prediction had been. Since Shepard had indeed requested both Garrus and himself, join her on a mission the next morning, albiet through EDI.

Our footsteps ring out across the metal floor. She is waiting for us. Red painted lips curving into a beaming smile.

"Something you're not telling us commander?" questions the drawling, flanging voice of the turian beside me.
Emerald eyes lock onto ice blue. Shepard's excitement is radiant. She rises on her toes, almost childlike. "We're going to get the light of my life."

I am confused. Who is this that could cause the commander so much joy? My heart aches. I have lost my warrior angel even before I can confess my growing feelings.

Turian mandibles flare out in a grin. "Tali!?"

Emerald eyes catch mine. She gasps. Gives an embarrassed cough. "I'm sorry Thane," she says. "That was unprofessional of me." Her beautiful face tries to hide it's smile. Laughter still dances in her eyes. "We are headed to Haestrom, in the hopes of recruiting the best Machinist there is, Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, or is it vas Neema now?" Her brow furrows.

"Not to mention your adopted sister, eh Shepard?" The turian's voice is full of warmth and amusement as he speaks. "So our little quarian is coming home..."

There is a crackle of static. The voice of the pilot speaks over the communication system. "Don't worry Garrus, I've got the video feed of our fearless commander actually squeaking like a space hamster, when she found out the next recruit was Tali!"

Deep turian laughter fills the Cargo Bay. Emerald eyes narrow in a mock scowl. "Thanks Joker, there goes all my street cred."

I am unfamiliar with this term, but Shepard is laughing now, beautiful and radiant. Her laughter draws out my own, I find it hard to stifle. Her eyes find mine and she pokes out her tongue, much to my surprise.

"Don't you start as well!" she warns me, smiling.

Thane had revelled in witnessing the commander being so natural, so completely at ease. He'd felt honoured that she'd allowed him to be included in the banter, and more than a little relieved that it wasn't a romantic interest they were on route to... perhaps more relieved than he was willing to admit.

The shuttle ride to the planet's surface had taken a little over twenty minutes. Fifteen of those had been spent listening to Shepard in full 'Commander Mode', as she detailed the mission, and issued caution regarding shields due to increased solar radiation.

Thane had used the final five minutes to browse the extranet, looking for the meaning behind Shepard poking her tongue at him. He'd discovered it was a juvenile rebuke, used commonly among humans, often in a playful manner. He'd smiled inwardly, enjoying the realisation that this warrior angel felt comfortable enough in his presence to be playful.

He found this newly revealed side of the often fierce commander very endearing; as had the reunion he'd witnessed between Shepard and the young quarian.

The two women clasp hands. Their bond evident despite differing species.

"I wish I joined you back on Freedom's Progress, but I couldn't let anyone take my place on something this risky," the synthesised sounding voice states.

Vivid emerald eyes convey a look that speaks a silent question. Glowing eyes smile in response behind a purple envirosuit mask.

"Now I can leave with you, and send this data to the Fleet. If the Admirals have a problem with that,
they can go to hell."

*The two women embrace tightly, the affection heart-warming, causing me to smile. The turian beside me gives a low chuckle: "Just like old times."

Upon returning from his solipsism, Thane stood, and stretched out the muscles in his back and legs, as his thoughts returned to the present.

Shepard had insisted on transporting the only other remaining quarian, a marine named Kal'Reegar, to his rendezvous with the Migrant Fleet; which would take an estimated twenty seven hours. Even though Shepard had stated it was solely in appreciation for the marine keeping her adopted sister alive, the wink the commander had given Tali when she thought no-one was looking, hinted at an ulterior motive that made Thane chuckle.

Shepard was full of enchanting quirks and curiosities; ones that only depended his growing affection for her. Every time he looked at the commander, Thane realised there was more layers to her than he could hope to ever fully understand.

Though even with this knowledge, Shepard had still surprised him by issuing an informal invitation to a 'movie night', that was being held in the Starboard Observation Lounge.

If he were to be honest, Thane had hoped the commander would have sought him out for a quiet talk that evening, but he was not opposed to a relaxed group event. Which surprised him. His ten years of self-imposed near isolation, could never have prepared him for how he was starting to warm towards the eclectic crew that Shepard had assembled.

In the quietness of the room, his Omni-Tool ping, pulling Thane from his thoughts. In concise movements, he flicked it open, and was greeted by a message from the commander.

**Movie Night starts in five. Remember all talk of assignments and missions is strictly prohibited. Anyone breaking this order will be promptly thrown out the airlock. You have been warned.**

Shaking his head in amusement, Thane moved towards the exit, before another ping heralded a second message.

**Girls won't let me stop to make tea. If you could smuggle me some in, I'd be eternally grateful.**

Thane couldn't help chuckling at Shepard's last message. He could perfectly imagine her being bustled past the Mess Hall by Kasumi and Jack, perhaps Gabby and Kelly as well. So resolving to do his best to accommodate her, Thane made a detour to the Normandy's kitchen.
Warm jets of water eased Shepard's aching muscles; steam building in the small enclosed space of her private shower room, as she let her mind replay the events of the day.

The mission to Haestrom had been arduous and crawling with geth, but had ultimately been successful, culminating in her being reunited with her beloved Tali.

There'd also been the bonus of another surviving quarian, a marine by the name Kal'Reegar. He'd made a very positive impression with Shepard. His strong voice, confident personality and admirable work ethic, were matched with a toned physique, that was well defined by his red envirosuit. If she hadn't already been dealing with her growing feelings for a certain drell assassin, Kal'Reegar would have certainly caught Shepard's attention. Well... right up until she saw Tali's eyes light up behind her purple mask, when she caught sight of the marine, that is.

So, in a bid to show her gratitude to Tali for rejoining her, and also to Kal for keeping Tali safe, Shepard had insisted that the Normandy would transport the marine to his rendezvous with the Migrant Fleet. She wanted to give her friend a little slice of time, with the man who evidently adored her; though Shepard doubted that anything had actually been admitted between the pair.

Turning the water off, she stepped out of the shower, and dried off with a fluffy white towel; a small luxury she permitted herself. Another black dress was her choice of attire for the evening, this time a cotton skater style; and within fifteen minutes, Shepard was dressed and had finished reapplying her make up... being a marine all her adult life, meant she'd learnt to be extremely economical with her time.

Which was just as well, since the door to her room suddenly slid open; revealing a suspiciously pleased looking thief, a giddy grease-monkey, and a shifty looking biotic... which could only spell trouble.

Once in the Starboard Observation Lounge, the majority of the squad piled onto and around the room's large sofa. Shepard found herself ushered into the middle of the group. Garrus sat to her right and Tali to her left, with the quarian leaning into her slightly, in a comforting manner.

With a great flourish, Kelly deposited two large bowls of what looked like popcorn on the coffee table. Well, one looked like popcorn. The other was a strange mix of greyish-green lumps, leading Shepard to believe it must be the dextro equivalent.

Out of habit, Shepard took a deep breath, hoping she'd at least be able to imagine the amazing buttery smell of Earth popcorn. To her shock and delight however, her brain told her that it was actually popcorn. The real, honest-to-goodness, used to be a part of a plant, authentic type.

Then her sense of smell was treated to another onslaught of tempting scents, as a steaming mug appeared in her line of vision. The spiced aroma caused her to smile, and she glanced up at the drell who offered her the drink.

"As requested," Thane whispered into her ear, before moving away to find a seat.

Kasumi and Jack, to their credit, had managed to come up with what was possibly the perfect movie for the motley crew; a twenty first century production called Serenity. Shepard had no a clue how she'd done it, but Kasumi had managed to convert the file into the appropriate viewing format.
Proving she was not only the galaxy's greatest thief, but also a tech expert to boot!

For a whole, blissfully uninterrupted twenty minutes, the crew avidly watched the movie. Though true to form, it wasn't long before the hushed silence was finally broken.

"Hey Commander, don't you think that Mal seems oddly familiar somehow?" Joker asked, in faux innocence.

Shepard sighed trying to disguise her smile behind her, now-empty, mug.

"I can't really see what you mean Joker," she said, deadpan.

Intently, Shepard tried to focus on the movie. Not that it helped her in anyway.

**Zoe: So... trap?**

**Mal: Trap.**

**Zoe: We goin' in?**

**Mal: Ain't but a few hours out.**

**Wash: Yeah, but... remember the part where it's a trap?**

"Yeah, you're right. The whole turning up somewhere really stupidly dangerous in order to help out a friend doesn't sound familiar at all, what was I thinking?" Joker said, sarcastically.

Without missing a beat, he added: "So I know we aren't supposed to talk about anything work related, but EDI picked up a distress call on a remote volcanic planet that...."

Shepard lobbed a cushion at the pilot, causing the rest of the crew to erupt with laughter. It merely knocked off his trademark hat, but she grinned at him triumphantly when he turned to scowl at her.

"Okay, okay. So you've ousted my secret obsession with brown trench coats," she said. "So, if I'm the real life Mal Reynolds, who's my Zoe?"

Kasumi giggled. "Oh Shep, like it could be anyone but Garrus."

Another wave of boisterous laughter washed around the room, as the turian in question managed to look indignant for all of thirty seconds, before his mandibles flared out in a grin.

With exaggerated movements, Garrus settled further into the couch, draping his arms against the back cushions. His left arm span *alone* was long enough to reach round Shepard and Tali combined; which reminded her about their reach and flexibility conversation a few nights previously.

"I admit, it's obvious that Zoe is the stylish one of the pair," he agreed.

"Must therefore give you congratulations, Vakarian," Mordin stated. "Must warn you, human/turian relations can be problematic. Chafing."

There was an audible silence in the room, with only the playing film making any noise. A few crew members had begun to look confused, but a grin began to spread across Shepard's face; she was sure she knew where this was going.

It seemed so did Kal, if the mutter of: "Keelah!" was anything to go by.

"Sure he will make you happy, Mr Moreau," Mordin added.

"What?!" Joker and Garrus sputtered at the same time.
"I believe the professor is highlighting the relationship between the characters Zoe and Hoban Washburne. With Washburne being the pilot, and Zoe his wife, it is easy to deduce the relationship between Mr Moroe and Officer Vakarian," EDI's pleasant voice intoned over the comm. system.

The look of abject horror on the two men's faces had the room filled with laughter once again, and it was several minutes before the crew began to recover.

"So, this Wash seems like he'd give you a run for your money Joker," Shepard said, smiling sweetly.

The pilot gave a derisory snort. "This is fiction, commander," he replied.

He waved a dismissive hand in the direction of the holoscreen, at just the right moment.

**Wash: Can I make a suggestion that doesn't involve violence, or is this the wrong crowd for that?**

"Well, he's certainly got your charm," Miranda stated, dryly.

"I have to concur with Operative Lawson's assessment," EDI agreed.

"I think that Samara would make a good Inara," Zaeed slurred, a bottle of batarian ale hanging loosely in his grasp.

"Only for her spirituality," Kelly interjected, nervously.

The composed Justicar, sitting crossed legged on the floor, merely smiled. "I found my spiritual side in my matriarch years. My days as a maiden were spent quite differently, I can assure you."

The women in the room led the next round of laughter, whilst the majority of the men spluttered and coughed in embarrassment. However, Zaeed appraised the asari with a look that was only just the decent side of lecherous.

"I guess I would be Simon Tam," Doctor Chakwas stated, mater-of-factly, swirling her Serrice Ice Brandy around it's glass.

"Hell Doctor, no-one can patch us up then scold us for being injured like you can. You're the assured choice," Shepard agreed, flashing a cheeky smile.

Several minutes past as the crew simply enjoyed the movie. Shepard found that both she and Tali had settled back into Garrus' out stretched arm, and the quarian's head had slipped onto her shoulder. It was a comforting feeling, one that oddly felt like home. However, Kelly soon piped up, disturbing the peace.

"I hope you don't mind me saying so, Thane," the Yeoman began. "But I could see you as Shepard Book. With your spiritual side…"

"Not to mention his dark and dangerous past," Joker interrupted.

This time it was Tali who flung a well-aimed pillow at the pilot's head in retribution, as Shepard turned to catch Thane's eye. He was sat slightly behind the group, in a part of the room where the shadows gathered. Which didn't surprise her.

"I could see you spending your retirement helping protect innocent people," she told him.

Since their first and only discussion regarding his Kepral's Syndrome, Thane's illness had become the white elcor in the room between them. Tonight was no different, and the assassin simply gave a small smile in response.
She wouldn't admitted, but Thane's gesture made her heart flutter. However, a low rumble of laughter from Garrus, alerted Shepard to the fact her best friend had caught her increased heart rate; or at least his visor had.

"Damn turian. Damn visor," she muttered under her breath, barely loud enough for Garrus to hear.

"I think our resident quarian would have to be our engineering specialist," Jacob said, raising his glass in a toast to Tali.

"Yeah, but Gabby here would have to be included. Since Kaylee's a nymphomaniac," Ken teased. His broad Scottish accent only adding to hilarity.

"Kenneth!" Gabby explained, punching her counterpart hard in the shoulder.

"Jayne Cobb reminds me of you, Kal," Tali declared, speaking around her 'emergency induction port'.

"I'm not sure that I follow, ma'am," the marine replied, almost shyly.

"He's brave, tries to look after the crew," Tali explained.

The quarian gestured to the current scene, where Jayne was rushing to check the harnesses of the Serenity's crew, before assuring his own safety.

"And you kind of sound the same," she added, her glowing eyes smiling behind her envirosuit mask.

From her position sprawled on the far corner of the couch, with her legs lazily thrown over Grunt's knees, Jack gave a bark of laughter.

"I've seen the series related to the movie," she stated. "That Jayne has a gun he's obsessed with, names it Vera. Not unlike grandpa with Jessie." She finished her sentence by inclining her head in Zaeed's direction.

"Heh, Heh, Heh." Grunt's version of a laugh echoed around the room, in obvious agreement to Jack's assessment.

"River reminds me of Jack," Kasumi said softly, earning her a glare from the biotic.

"I can see the similarities of being raised in a facility against her will," Garrus agreed, carefully.

He had accompanied Shepard and Jack to Pragia, and Shepard supposed it was that fact alone, that allowed the ex-convict to accept the turian's evaluation. Since all he got in reply for his observation, was a half-hearted middle finger from the biotic.

"There's also the complete instability, and psychotic tendencies," Miranda stated.

For once, there was no malice in her voice, and since she was gripping her cocktail glass quite tightly, Shepard guessed her comment was more alcohol fuelled than anything. Thankfully, the crew's attention was pulled back to the movie before a fight could ensue.

Mal: Y'all got on this boat for different reasons, but y'all come to the same place. So now I'm asking more of you than I have before. Sure as I know anything, I know this - they will try again… So no more runnin'. I aim to misbehave.

"Hey Commander, Mal even does inspirational speeches before a mission," Joker goaded, easing the
tension in the room.

"He's got some good lines, I may even steal some," Shepard conceded, giving the pilot a wink.

"Would the Illusive Man be Mr Universe?" Jacob asked, suddenly.

Shepard gave an over-dramatic, obviously fake gasp. "Mr Taylor, I believe you just uncovered Cerberus' most closely guarded secret."

The laughter that followed was uncontrollable, and even Miranda was left holding her sides as she gasped for air. Something that Shepard noticed with great satisfaction... there was hope for her yet.

"Interesting. Parallels drawn for all 'good' characters, but one not covered. Film's villain, the operative," Mordin stated.

Somehow, the salarian managed to add a sinister edge to his last word, despite the speed he was speaking.

Garrus gave Shepard a nudge to attract her attention. "Only one contestant for the role of 'bad guy'."

"Harbinger," she agreed, sighing.

"Yeah. That means that Shepard is actually River then," Jack surmised. "Especially with all that 'Shepard, I know you feel this' shit back on Horizon."

"Hell no!" Shepard argued. "You can keep River, I'm happy sticking to being captain, thanks."

"I believe that the roll of leader suites you best," Thane stated, quietly.

It was the first time he'd spoken all evening, causing everyone to turn and regard him.

"There are a lot of similarities in personalities between you and the captain, however..."

The drell trailed off, his onyx eyes fixed onto the film, and a smile pulled at his lips.

"I can certainly see you doing that."

The entire crew's attention followed Thane's, as they turned back to the movie. On screen, River was in a solo battle with a group of crazed 'reavers'. Practically dancing, as she moved and turned; killing the enemies with a combination punches, kicks and slices from a sword and hand axe.

The squad cheered their agreement to Thane's assessment, as the character of River did a graceful back bend, slitting the throats of several enemies in a sweeping arch. Shepard led the roar of laughter that followed herself.

Once the credits were rolling, Kasumi set about mixing cocktails for the group. Shepard noticed they were mostly a combination of the thief's favourite: Memory Stealer, and the milder Thessian Temple.

However, the hooded woman handed her a glass that's contents didn't match either drink. Shepard raised an eyebrow in question, as she regarded the green liquid, suspecting her friend was up to something; though at least it wasn't neon, which ruled out batarian ale.

"It's a Weeping Heart," Kasumi told her. "To get you acclimatised."

If Shepard was the sort of woman to blush, she was sure she would be scarlet. She knew a Weeping Heart was a Martini infused with mild drell-skin venom, and she didn't doubt that Thane was close
enough to hear thief's assentation. She also had the feeling that this cocktail was only the first of many, that Kasumi would press on her.

Stealing herself, Shepard caught and held Thane's gaze, as she raised the drink to her lips. Before taking a sip, she gave the drell a devilish smile above the rim of her glass.

'There's no harm in a little flirting' she figured.

"I aim to misbehave," she said, winking.

Author's Note
Inspired by and dedicated to Church, hopefully it will further sucker punch you in the nerd heart!
Siha (Thane PoV)

The day had passed slowly; the after effect of the previous night's gathering.

Thane had spent the morning conversing with Kal'Reegar, before the quarian marine had to depart for the flotilla. It had been an enjoyable few hours spent in an unusually quiet Mess Hall, since the majority of the crew still sleeping off the effects of Kasumi's cocktails.

Thinking of the cocktails caused Thane to lapse into solipsism.

Moving towards her, I noticed she holds a distinctive green tinted drink, unlike the others being served.

"To get you acclimatised," the thief tells her.

For a heartbeat she is still. My pulse quickens as I realise why the drink looks familiar, realise what it contains. Then her emerald eyes are upon me. She raises the glass to her red painted lips, smiles at me over the rim, almost in toast.

"I aim to misbehave," she quotes the movie that's just ended, and I am lost in her.

Shepard's actions had thrilled Thane. He'd long realised that Shepard had woken him from his battle sleep, and that she had ignited in him feelings he thought had died with his beloved Irikah. A realisation had both revived and scared him.

However, Thane had only seen the commander twice during the day. Once when she passed through the Mess Hall on her way to the Medical Bay, presumably to visit the pilot who had spent the morning there. The second was when she'd accompanied himself and Tali to bid farewell to Kal'Reegar.

In truth, Thane was worried Shepard was avoiding him, and wondered if she was embarrassed, or perhaps regretted her flirting the night before.

It was this thought that Thane had been meditating on for quite some time, as he gazed into the Drive Core's purple hue; when unexpectedly, he heard the sound of familiar footsteps entering the Life Support Plant. A smile tugged at his mouth, despite the nerves that began to build behind his stoic countenance.

"Do you need something?" he asked, cautiously.

"Have a few minutes to talk?" Shepard enquired softly, sounding a little unsure.

"Of course. I am always here for you," he admitted, honestly. "How was your day?"

Without ceremony, the commander moved to the seat opposite, and Thane couldn't help but notice her different attire; a fitted tank top and loose sweatpants. He'd become so accustomed to the dresses she usually wore, that her appearance, whilst still attractive and beautiful, surprised him.

"Productive. Well, at least that's what I said when debriefing Miranda," she grinned, wryly. "In truth… hard, stressful and overcomplicated. You'd think batarians would have learnt not to strike Alliance outposts by now."

Thane couldn't help chuckle at her exasperated toned. "That sounds eventful."
"Hmmm… No more than usual," Shepard replied. "EDI picked up a distress call from Franklin, which meant spending the morning in discussions with Joker and Miranda about the best course of action. Though that meant hanging around the Med Bay, and how Joker managed to break a rib whilst asleep is beyond me."

"I take it you went to investigate," Thane stated.

He was fairly sure of the answer, knowing how Shepard liked to help people; it would also explain the commander’s absence for the day.

"Am I that predictable?" she laughed. "I took Massani and Jack. Mainly because Zaeed was storming around the lower deck, like a bear with a bad head. And in just five minutes, Jack had managed to get into arguments with Grunt, Ken and Miranda. All separate issues… I figured the chance to blow something up might calm them both down."

The corner of Thane's mouth twitched. "It did not go as planned?"

"That obvious?" Shepard smiled. "I shouldn't complain, the mission was successful. Honestly, it was almost an exact replica of a mission I was on with Garrus and Tali two years ago. But with the pair of them here nursing hangovers, disabling the batarians' defences and over riding the weapons systems was a bit of a nightmare."

A noticeable edge of annoyance had crept into her soft voice, as she explained the events of the day. Thane gave Shepard an appraising look, taking in the tightness of her shoulders, the rigidity of her posture, and the way she ran an absent-minded hand through her cropped red hair. She was a picture of stress, and it concerned him.

"You seem tense," he told her, debating offering some sort of assistance.

At that Shepard rolled her shoulders back. "I'll be fine, especially after testing Garrus' reach against my flexibility. He called me 'squishy' one too many times last night, so kicking his butt around the hanger will be excellent stress relief and payback," she grinned. "Anyway, enough about me and my day. How are you? How's things with Kolyat?"

Thane blinked slowly, trying to dispel the unwanted thoughts of the other type of stress relief turians were known for. Shaking his head, as if it would help, he smiled at her. He was touched she had thought to ask about his son. It spoke of genuine interest.

"Our problems are not ones that can easily be solved," he admitted. "It is difficult, but all things worth keeping are. I suppose the story of my wife's death took you by surprise?"

It was a topic Thane didn't relish broaching, and another subject that had plagued his mind. The memories that threatened to resurface were agonising, but he felt he owed the commander that much. Whether she returned his growing feelings or not, Shepard had been a good friend, and she deserved the truth, if she wished to hear it.

"I figured you would explain to me when you were ready," she replied, giving him a reassuring smile.

Shepard's consideration and kindness humbled him; it was more much than he deserved, though it did little to help calm the turmoil he felt.

His agitation was building, and he stood, hoping to ease the tension forming in his muscles.

"I appreciate your patience," he told her. "I kept my work clear of our home life. I assumed that
would be enough to protect Irikah. That, memory I mentioned before.

*Laser dot trembles on the target's skull. The smell of spice on spring wind. Sunset eyes defiant in the scope.*

That was Irikah, that was how I met her. She saw my targeting laser as she walked by, and threw herself in the way."

Thane sat down heavily, fighting to keep hid composure; something that usually came so naturally to him. He noticed the warm look on Shepard's face, though it was accompanied by an inquisitive glint in her beautiful eyes. It amazed Thane to realise the incredible woman before him wanted to hear his story, to know his past.

"So how did she go from blocking your shot, to having your child?" she prompted, gently.

He couldn't help the smile that was pulling at his lips. The good memories of Irikah, along with the welcomed presence of Shepard, relaxed him. Which lead him to become more animated than he would usually be, as he spoke.

"I had to meet her," he confessed. "The memory possessed and endowed me. I fell on my knees before her, begged her pardon. She introduced me to the world beyond my work. Eventually she forgave me, later she loved me."

As he talked, Thane suddenly became aware that his reaction upon first seeing Shepard, was strikingly similar to the feelings Irikah had caused him... the burning desire to know the woman he observed, wanting to make a good impression.

He felt his heart rate quicken with the realisation; Arashu had miraculously sent two Sihas into his death filled life. Both had awoken him from his battle-sleep, and he'd fallen for them both.

"I guess she impressed you," Shepard teased, quirking an eyebrow.

"She woke me up.

*Her body trembles. Not fear, indignation. Her mouth moves: 'how dare you'.*

You and I are trained to sacrifice ourselves to save others. How often does a civilian step in the way of a bullet to protect someone they've never met? I thought she was the Goddess Arashu," he explained. "She met my eyes through the scope, and my purpose faltered."

Thane watched as the mirth in his companion's eyes was exchanged for sorrow. For a moment he worried he had somehow upset her, which was the last thing he intended.

But then Shepard unexpectedly reached for his hand across the table, gently laying hers on top. Unable to help himself, Thane turned his hand over, so their palms were touching; just as he had, the last time she'd reached for him.

"When you talked to Kolyat, you said she'd died," Shepard said, cautiously.

"I let myself become complacent. I thought Irikah and Kolyat were safe. I stayed away too long, and my enemies came for her," Thane explained, angrily.

"Who came for her?" the commander asked.

"Batarians," he snarled. "A slaver ring preying on hanar outer colonies. I killed their leader. They paid the Shadow Broker to find out who I was, but they were afraid of me, so they went after her."

He lowered his gaze, too ashamed to meet the emerald eyes in front of him. He had failed his wife, failed his son, and admitting it to the woman he was falling for, only reinforced the hatred he felt for
himself. He didn't deserve Shepard, not even as a friend; he was beneath her.

"You told Kolyat you hunted her killers down," she stated, quietly.

There was no hint of distaste or disapproval in the voice of the fiery redhead; which was a slight surprise and an immense relief to Thane. Though that couldn't stop the memories of Irikah's lifeless body, that assaulted his mind. He found himself shamelessly gripping Shepard's hand, in a desperate attempt to hold back the thoughts, that threatened to consume him.

"Irikah woke me up. When she passed I returned to my battle-sleep," he explained. "My body hunted her killers, murdered them. I was taught to grant death quickly, cleanly, to minimise suffering. Them, I let them linger."

The loss of Shepard's soft hand against his, as she pulled it away, set Thane adrift. He hung his head; regret and shame warring for dominance, until he felt a warmth cup his face. He looked up to see the commander leaning across the table, her emerald eyes full of concern, as her thumb gently stroked his cheek frill. Subconsciously, he leaned into her touch.

"You were operating on instinct, by your own rules you can't blame yourself," she told him.

"But I made the choice to hunt them," Thane replied. "They are the only lives I have ever taken of my own choice. The only deaths on my own conscious."

He paused, sighing sadly. "I haven't spoken about my wife in... I don't think I ever had. I didn't have anyone left to tell it too."

With that admission, Thane was hit by a wave of recognition. He realised just how much he valued the remarkable commander; it wasn't a case of simple infatuation, but something deeper. Yet, he had no idea if he was being foolish hoping Shepard could see him the same way.

Silently, he looked up at the beautiful warrior angle in his presence. His Siha.

Confused, Thane watched as Shepard bit her lower lip; a trait he noticed she only did when anxious, and she glanced away from him. A cold certainty dawned then, and he braced himself for the rejection that was sure to follow.

"Maybe I haven't been as upfront as I should be," she sighed. "I'm here for you Thane, whatever you need."

He blinked his double lids slowly, twice. He was awestruck. His mind racing to process the possibility that the commander returned his feelings, that she cared for him.

Once again emotions warred for dominance. Guilt and elstion. The former towards the memory of Irikah, knowing she would always hold a large part of his heart. The latter because the vibrant woman in front of him, considered him worthy of her attention.

"You..." he faltered, swallowing hard past the lump in his throat. "You are very kind. Thank you for listening Siha."

"I think my translator just glitched," Shepard smiled. "What did you call me?"

"Siha," he told her, returning her affectionate smile. "Someday I will tell you what it means."

______________________________

Author's Note
For any who are wondering, Franklin is the moon from ME1 that N7: Javelin Missiles takes place on.
Leaning against the stark white desk of the Medical Bay, Shepard stared at Doctor Chakwas; though her look of worry was quickly morphing into one of amusement.

Still, she couldn't quite process the information she had just been given. It seem unfathomable, and part of her was wondering if it was some elaborate joke; since Karin did have quite the wicked sense of humour, when the mood took her.

"All of them?" Shepard asked again.

She was almost certain that if she asked enough times, she'd out the doctor's hoax.

"Yes commander, all of them. Even Joker, Engineer Donnelly and Mess Sargent Gardener."

Chakwas replied, seriously.

Her eyes widened in surprise. "What? How? They never leave the ship."

"I'm currently running diagnostics on the strain to figure out the how, but the what is very simple. Every male member of the crew, ground party or otherwise, human or otherwise, has contracted what seems to be a previously undiagnosed strain of the influenza virus."

Shepard let out an exasperated sigh, but a smile was now tugging on her lips. In the past seventy two hours things had become… interesting, to say the least. And the last mission on Franklin was the only suspect that either she or the doctor could pinpoint. Since the Normandy had spent the rest of the time in transit out of the solar system, only stopping to scan any notable planets that EDI identified.

Really, there didn't seem to be any other culprit. Which lead Shepard to believe that there had been more to the batarians' missiles, than previously thought.

"So basically, I have half a ship comprised of snivelling babies with ManFlu," she stated, dryly.

"That is an accurate evaluation, commander." EDI's artificial tones chimed in, with a definite hint of amusement.

Shepard couldn't help but laugh, despite the fact this could turn into a serious situation.

"Alright EDI, request the ladies meet me and Doctor Chakwas in the Mess Hall in five minutes."

"Could you also lock Joker out of the system?" Chakwas enquired. "He's under strict medical orders for bed rest."

"Better make that a command EDI, we all know what he's like," Shepard added.

"You have got to be kidding…." Joker's irate tone came over the comm. system, only to be interrupted by a sneeze.

"Acknowledged Shepard. Logging you out."

Unceremoniously, Shepard dropped into the remaining plastic dinning chair, and surveyed the assembled crew. None were showing even the slightest hints of illness, which only added to the strangeness of the virus that was currently running rampant aboard the ship.
Distractedly, she nodded in thanks to Kasumi, who handed her a steaming mug of what smelled of green tea with a hint of lemon. The only concoction the thief ever gave her, if she wasn't plying her with Weeping Heart Cocktails.

"So ladies, down to business. As Doctor Chakwas has already explained, ever since we returned from Franklin, our boys have been struck down. Initial tests indicate that it's the dreaded ManFlu."

Her statement was greeted with exaggerated groans from the humans of the group, though confused looks were exchanged by Tali and Samara.

"I fear you have us at a loss, commander," the Justicar stated.

"Basically, the men have contracted a strain of influenza. Now typically, human males will moan, whine and exaggerate the condition. Whereas a woman would simply get on with."

"Keelah," Tali muttered. "Men are the same whatever the species."

"You don't know how right you are," Kelly said, earning her a mostly playful shove from Jack.

"Thank you Chambers, that's an image I really needed," Miranda groaned.

"Right," Shepard coughed, trying to get the conversation back on track. "So, whilst the guys are struck down with this terrible virus, it's up to us women to pick up the slack, and keep an eye on them. As you may have guessed, EDI is in charge of navigation and piloting whilst Joker is… indisposed."

As one, the group turned to look through the Med Bay window, at a grumpy looking pilot wrapped in a pile of blankets on one of the cots. The Mess Sargent wore a similar expression in the bed parallel, and Shepard noticed she wasn't the only one hard pressed not to laugh.

"Doctor Chakwas will be solely in charge of Joker and Gardener's care," she stated, forging ahead. "But the rest of the men need to be split between us, in order to ease the Karin's burden."

There were murmurs and nods of agreement, causing Shepard to let out a relieved sigh. With a group of such independent women, she'd worried it would either turn into an argument, or result in her having to issue formal orders. To have them willingly agree made delegation a lot easier, and a lot less of a headache.

"Okay. Kelly, normal duties as well as looking after Mordin please," Shepard instructed.

"Certainly. Want me to feed your fish as well?" the Yeoman asked, flashing a cheeky smile.

Shepard led the laughter herself. It was well known she could strategise and plan, as well as organise and command. Hell, she could even remember to look after herself and her space hamster; Jenkins. But the fish... those poor creatures were unfortunately another story, especially when she was overworked.

"I appreciate that Kelly," she agreed. "Miranda, will you be able to pick up some addition mission reports from me?"

"I can handle all the reports for the duration of this 'incident', commander," the Cerberus officer replied, deadpan.

"Miri, I can practically hear the air quotes around incident," Shepard chastised, smiling. "But that would be great. Thank you. Samara, would you be willing to take care of Zaeed? I think you're the
only one who will be able to handle him."

The Justicar inclined her head in a small nod. "Whatever will help, Shepard."

" Hmm... " Shepard hummed in thought. "EDI, is it possible to run the Main Battery calibrations remotely?"

"Certainly. Officer Vakarian would not need to be disturbed," the AI affirmed.

"Great. Tali would you be able to look after Garrus. I will help you where I can with that stubborn turian, but I'll be primarily taking care of both Grunt and Thane."

"Planning on giving the assassin some personal attention?" Jack leered.

Thankfully, Tali interrupted anything further that might have been said. "Of course, Shepard. Need me for anything else?"

She gave the quarian a thankful smile. "Your duties will remain the same as our Chief Engineer. Gabby, I need you to pick up Ken's slack, not that I doubt you already do."

"No problem, commander." Engineer Daniels agreed. "I'll also keep him out of trouble."

"Good luck with that," Miranda scoffed.

Her words set off another wave of laughter. They all knew how stubborn the Scotsman could be.

"Alright, Kasumi. Will you be able to take care of Jacob, whilst sharing the armoury duties with Jack?"

The thief's eyes lit up under her hood. "Sure thing, Shep."

"I'll give you a hand with Grunt too," Jack muttered.

Shepard blinked in surprised. The ex-convict was not one to help often, if at all, unless it involved blowing something up. With this in mind, and knowing the biotic wouldn't want a big deal made out of her uncharacteristic offer of kindness, Shepard simply nodded in agreement.

"Right ladies, we have our assignments. Move out," she grinned.

Figuring they would possibly run out of medical supplies before this was over, and guessing that she and the rest of the women would certainly be in need of a well deserved break, Shepard plotted a course of the Citadel.

Upon hearing EDI's confirmation, she began her tour of the ship, starting with the unusually, dimly lit Tech Lab. Where she spotted a certain salarian lying beneath a pile of blankets

"So, how's our patient?" she asked, cheerfully.

"He's doing okay, commander." Kelly chirped back.


"You'll be fine," she chuckled. "Keep up the good work, Chambers."
Shaking her head in amusement, Shepard left the professor in Kelly's capable hands. Then without preamble, she ducked into the armoury, intent on making sure Jack hadn't blown anything up.

Thankfully, everything seemed in order, though neither the biotic or Kasumi were anywhere to be seen. Shrugging, Shepard headed to the elevator, punching the button for the Crew Deck and listening to EDI's update on their ETA to the citadel.

After exiting the elevator and rounding the corner to the Mess Hall, Shepard was greeted by the sight of Tali hovering over the stove; the steam from whatever she was cooking fogging up her mask. Walking over, Shepard chanced a look into the boiling pot. The contents looked less than appealing.

"Shepard, Kasumi made a pan of… I think she said Meezzo soup," the quarian stated, waving a gloved had in the direction of a second large pot.


"Yeah, Liquamen and Liebstoeckl soup," Tali stated, proudly. "When I told Liara about the situation, she sent me the recipe!"

Chuckling, Shepard left the quarian to her cauldron, and headed to Life Support. The room was only lit by the purple hues of the drive core, that danced through the uncovered window, though it was still light enough for her to move around unhindered.

She found Thane looking a little disgruntled; huddled on his cot and wrapped in an extra blanket, that Shepard had brought from her own quarters. She found it hard not to snigger at the sight of such a fearsome assassin, brought down by a simply flu bug. It was oddly adorable. Smiling affectionately, she offered the bowl of soup to Thane, who accepted it with slightly shaking hands.

"My thanks, Siha," he replied in a whisper.

"Your throat no better?" Shepard enquired.

"Your near constant deliveries of spiced tea has alleviated some of the tenderness," Thane replied, hoarsely.

"I'll be back shortly, I just need to check in on the others," she informed.

On impulse, Shepard reached out and gently cupped the side of his face, running a thumb lightly along his cheek frill. If anyone had saw, she'd have said she was merely checking his temperature. In truth, she just wanted to offer a little comfort to the man who was slowly winning her heart. She was hard pressed to resist the urge to kiss him; he just looked too damn cute.

Though without further ado, Shepard went to check in on everyone else. Starting in the Port Observation Lounge, where Kasumi had managed to persuade Jacob to rest. She walked in on the thief fluffing pillows behind the officer's head. It was an oddly domestic sight.

"Enjoying yourself, Mr Taylor?" she called in mock innocence.

"I'm not one for forcing these kind of talks," Jacob huffed, as he wrapped the blanket more firmly around himself.

"He's doing fine, Shep." Kasumi assured, an impish grin her purple lips.

Figuring things were well in hand, Shepard slipped out of the room and back into the Mess Hall.
There was no sign of Tali, but the quarian's modulated voice could be heard through the doors of the Main Battery:

"Bosh'tet! I have a shotgun."

"I'm in the middle of some calibrations," Garrus replied, his flanging voice sounding muffled.

Biting back a sigh, Shepard palmed the door lock, finding Garrus stood at his usual console, but with the addition of a blanket wrapped around his head in a similar style to Tali's hood. Through the mask of her envirosuit, the quarian was glaring daggers at her turian companion, and Shepard could blame her. Garrus was being ridiculous.

"No you're not," Shepard scolded. "EDI's dealing with the guns, you need to rest."

"Shepard, really, I'm fine," he moaned.

"Gunnery Officer Vakarian, as your commanding officer I order you to strip your armour, and get into that goddamn bed. Or I'll let Chief Engineer 'Zorah use you as target practice for Chatika."

After her outburst, Shepard stood with her hands on her hips; a stance mirrored by Tali. Silently, the pair of them waited for the turian to obey, and it seemed that pulling rank had the desired effect on Garrus, who begrudgingly complied. Once he'd settled himself into his cot, Tali moved to lay another blanket over his shivering bulk.

"Thank you, Shepard. He's been such a Bosh'tet," Tali stated, though there was affection in her voice.

"Just give me a shout if he starts acting such a turian again." she winked.

"I hate you two." Garrus mumbled, sleepily, from beneath the covers.

Laughing, Shepard left her two dextro team mates to their bickering, and went to check on Miranda. The Cerberus officer was nose deep in datapads, but seemed oddly content with that. Since there was nothing press that needed her attention, Shepard made a quick stop in the kitchen, then headed for the Medical Bay.

"How's my favourite pilot doing?" she beamed, handing a mug of sweet tea to a disgruntled Joker.

"All the planets and moons you go to, and the only thing you guys ever bring back is this damn flu?" Joker griped.

"Not enjoying your gift? I'm offended," Shepard teased. "How's bunking with Gardener?"

She gave a quick glance to the Mess Sargent, who was still deep in conversation with Chakwas, and was hard pressed not to laugh, when she noticed that even whilst sick, Gardener was still trying to charm the doctor.

"The man's snoring could wake the dead. It's just my opinion though, there's really no need to go spreading it around," Joker grumbled.

Shepard quirked an eyebrow. "Unlike your virus."

"Really, commander?" Joker's green eyes squinted in a mock glare.

Deciding Joker really did need to rest, and with everyone else attended to on the Crew Deck, Shepard headed for the elevator yet again. This time she punched the button for engineering, and
thankfully, EDI had no new updates. With how things were currently going, it was more than Shepard could hope for.

Upon reaching engineering, she was relieved that everything seemed quiet. Though rounding the corner to the engine room, she nearly tripped over a put-up cot that stood near the door. She looked down to see a figure lying on it's side, blankets pulled right up to their eyes. Only the tufts of ginger hair gave away who it was.

"You came all the way down here to see us?" Ken asked.

His thick accent was harder to understand with his voice raspy from the virus, and muffled under the blankets.

"I had to see how my fellow redhead was doing," she grinned, ruffling his hair.

"He should be court-martialled for insubordination," Gabby stated. "It took both me and Tali to coax him to bed, and then it was only into that damn thing."

The two women heard the Scotsman mumbled something about false pretences, causing them to both laugh. After checking there was nothing more that either of them currently needed, Shepard went to check on her baby. But before she even made it to the Port Cargo Area, she heard Grunt shout:

"But I am krogan! I don't get sick."

For a moment, Shepard wondered who he was talking to, before she heard Jack scoff: "So what? You're still a plague zone like the rest."

Silently, Shepard peeped around the corner, and nearly laughed at the sight that greeted her. Grunt was tangled oddly in a mountain of blankets, and the biotic sat cross legged on top a stack of crates, shuffling a deck of cards.

"So why are you here?" Grunt demanded.

"I'm immune," the ex-convict shrugged. "We playing or what?"

Then out the corner of her eye, Shepard noticed a fair sized arachnid that had begun to scuttle across the metal floor. It was a bad move for the creature, as Jack had noticed it too. One moment it was presumably living it's life quite happily, the next, there was an indentation in the mental where it had been.

'Poor thing' Shepard thought.

Grunt grinned his slightly unnerving smiled. "You blow everything up, like Battlemaster, I like you."

Shepard just walked backwards, retreating from the room before the pair spotted her. She shook her head and smiled, not in the least bit surprised at those two bonding. Though as an afterthought, Shepard tapped a quick message on her Omni-Tool; sending it to Grunt, letting him know she had checked on him and would stop by again later.

That left only two more people to see. Turning on her heel, Shepard headed for the Starboard Cargo Area, and was treated to a scene that wasn't much better. Zaeed lay on his cot, blankets a mess, with Jessie laying on the floor beside it. Samara was leant against a crate, eyeing him critically.

"Figured it might end something like this," Massani gasped.
"You are being overly dramatic," the asari replied. Her cool tone making Shepard smile.

"Man up Gramps, it's only the flu," she quipped, joining the Justicar at the side of Zaeed's cot.

The mercenary let out a hoarse cough. "Smart money is on Reaper tech."

Samara and Shepard exchanged knowing looks. "Sure it is."

Sighing slightly, Shepard re-entered Life Support; it felt like hours had passed since she'd left. Unsurprising, Thane had barely moved from the position she'd left him in. Smiling, Shepard offered him one of the two mugs of spiced tea she'd brought with her.

She was resolutely trying to ignore the worry of what the virus was doing to Thane's already fragile lungs. Though thankfully, his breathing didn't appear to be any worse than it usually was.

But Shepard's head was pounding regardless, and she rubbed her temples absent-mindedly.

"Siha, are you well?" Thane rasped.

"Isn't that my line?" she grinned. "And you still haven't told me what that means."

"You are looking pale," he stated, blatantly ignoring her.

Shepard quirked an eyebrow, as she watched him drain his drink in usual haste. Chuckling, she set his empty mug on the table behind her, then leant her hip against his cot.

"If you haven't notice Thane, I'm always pale," she said.

"And beautiful," he replied, quietly.

His gaze did not quite meet hers, and though he compliment was wellcome, it surprised her.

"Flattery will get you everywhere, Sere Krios," Shepard chuckled. "Anything you want?"

Thane's eyes snapped up to hers, an unreadable look on his face. For a heartbeat neither of them moved, neither spoke. They simply shared that look, that moment, which seemed laden with unspoken intentions and desires.

Instead of words, the drell simply lifted up part of the blanket, as if in invitation. Shepard's heart thudded, unsure why such a simple movement held such promise. She hesitated for a moment, knowing she was standing on a threshold. Another heartbeat passed by, before she noticed the new look in Thane's eyes.

He seemed nervous, and with that realisation, her own worries melted. Smiling softly, Shepard kicked off her shoes, and grabbed a book at random from the singular shelf that ran along the nearby wall. Nimbly, she slid in beside him.

After a moment's pause, Thane snuggled closer; forcing Shepard to adjust her position, so she would still be able to read comfortably.

"You only want me for my body heat," she teased, feeling him shiver slightly.

"That is merely a pleasant bonus, Siha," he murmured into her abdomen.

Content to settle in for quiet evening, Shepard turned her attention to the book she had retrieved,
grinning as she realised what it was: Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan.

Author's Note
This was inspired by a KinkMeme prompt that asked for Shepard's Love Interest to be ill with a simple bug, and for her to look after them, and is dedicated to SparklyQuarians and Lady Amiee. For those who would like to know: Liquamen and Liebstoeckl, are traditional Roman ingredients. Since the turian civilisation seems roughly based on them, I thought their food would work. In actual life, Liquamen is/was a salty fish sauce and Liebstoeckl is/was umbelliferous plant with yellowish flowers. Its dried roots are used as spice, and seems to be a kind of celery.
Revenge Sought (Thane PoV)

Several days had passed since the outbreak of influenza aboard the Normandy. Both Thane, Garrus and Mordin had escaped with relatively minor bouts of the virus. However, the human men were still suffering it's affects.

Thane praised the gods that, so far, it seemed there was no lasting damage to his lungs. Had there been, he doubted his ability to accompany Shepard on her mission. Which after what they'd endured so far today, Thane realised he needed for his own peace of mind.

An image of a rainbow scaled drell flickers on the datapad.

"Feron," murmurs the asari. "He's still alive."

Emerald eyes regard azure orbs, questioning. "It sounds like you and Feron were close."

"It's funny, he betrayed me more than once," the asari explains. "He was double dealing for Cerberus, the Shadow Broker. But in the end, he sacrificed himself for me."

Porcelain fingers entwine with periwinkle blue. "Any friend of yours is a friend of mine, Liara. What's the next step?"

The shuttle rocked violently, pulling Thane from his solipsism. He watched as Shepard braced herself against the metal seats, trying to avoid knocking into the asari who sat by her side.

She offered him a weak smile, before returning her attention back to the datapad she'd been reading. With an inaudible sigh, Thane slipped back into the memories of the day.

"Liara's in there!" she shouts in anguish.

Flames billow from the third floor of the Dracon Trade Centre. Debris scatters the pavement, remnants of the bomb blast. I steal a fleeting glance at my Siha's face. A mask of fury covers her beautiful features.

"This is...problematic," I utter, quietly.

"Keelah," our companion whispers, through a voice modulator.

A gauntleted human hand squeezes a gloved quarian's in reassurance. Emerald eyes catch my gaze. I nod my assent. We set off at a run into the ruined building. Pain hits my chest, acrid smoke fills my stricken lungs.

Another jolt of turbulence hit the shuttle, and the commander's datapad clattered to Thane's feet. Looking up, he saw the asari sprawled across Shepard's lap, and an affectionate smile touched the red painted lips he was coming to love.

"You alright Liara?" Shepard asked, helping her friend to sit up.

"I think so," Liara replied, hesitantly.

Silently, Thane leant over, offering the discarded datapad to Shepard. Their fingers brushed as she took it, and a warmth in shone her eyes; a sharp contrast to their current situation. He gave her a small nod, then returned to his thoughts.
I watch the two women approach the asari Spectre through my scope. They stop, guns raised in identical stances, the asari Spectre grabs a human waitress, pushing the barrel of a Vindicator to the woman's temple.

I hear Shepard's voice over the communication system: "Vasir, I sacrificed hundreds of human lives to save the Destiny Ascension. I unleashed the rachni on the galaxy. So for your sake, I hope your escape plan doesn't hinge on me hesitating to shoot a damn hostage."

My heart rate quickens. I know it is a ruse. She does not take lives needlessly, though I wonder what my Siha has planned.

The Spectre levels her assault rifle towards my team mates. "You're bluffing."

My finger caresses the trigger of my sniper rifle, as I line up a shot on the target's skull. A blue shimmer of biotics catches my gaze.

"Now Liara!" Shepard commands.

A biotically pulled table knocks the unsuspecting Spectre several feet. As I drop from my sniper's perch, I hear a splash of water. I rush forward, intent on being at my Siha's side for the coming fight.

A dull thud brought Thane back to the present. He was greeted by the unexpected yet pleasant sight of Shepard kneeling almost between his knees, obviously having been knocked from her seat by the shuttle's erratic movements.

Tendrils of tantalising thoughts wove their way into his mind, as the commander gave him a rueful smile. Pushing them aside, Thane offered Shepard his hand in order to right herself.

"Hagalaz," Liara stated, suddenly. "The oceans boil during the day, then snap freeze ten minutes after sun down."

Thane watched as Shepard patted her friend's shoulder, whilst regaining her seat.

"The Shadow Broker lives in this?" she asked.

"His ship follows the sunset. He's completely undetectable in the storm, unless you know where to look," the asari said.

She gestured out of the shuttle's small window, towards the tempestuous clouds. However, Thane let his attention slowly shift, moving from observing the two woman discussing their strategy, to his hushed prayers to Amonkira.

He was determined to fully avenge his beloved Irikah's death, as well as protect his fiery commander. He would have his revenge.

The smell of blood and burnt flesh assaulted his nostrils, as they entered what appeared to be the ship's interrogation suite. It took Thane's modified eyes milliseconds to adjust to the gloom, before he spotted the limp body of another drell strapped into what appeared to be an electric chair.

"Feron," Liara whispered, cautiously.

"Liara?" the other drell murmured.

"Hold on, we're getting you out of here," the asari called.
Liara rushed towards a control panel situated along the upper part of the room, and Thane watched as Shepard narrowly missed grasping her friend's shoulders; obviously concerned that tampering the controls could harm the captive.

It was a thought Thane shared, but had little time to voice. He caught the utterance of a plea from the drell, before a cry of pain reverberated around the enclosed space. Electric blue light pierced the darkness, as the other man's battered body arched in agony. Sympathy and anger twisted in Thane's gut.

His gaze shifted towards the two women, and was greeted by the sight of a tense looking Shepard holding onto Liara's arms. The commander was physically keeping the asari balanced, but there was a haunted look in Shepard's eyes that he had never seen before.

On impulse, Thane stepped from the shadows, and closed the distance between them. He lay a hand on Shepard's shoulder, hoping it would offer her some form of solidarity and comfort.

"I thought this looked too easy," she muttered, angrily.

"This chair plugs into the Broker's info. network," Feron called to them, panting from the effort. "You have to shut off the power. Pull me out now and my brain cooks."

Thane felt Shepard tense; the movement was almost imperceptible, but he'd grown to know his Siha. He knew the way she moved and held herself, and he saw the tightening of her jaw as she regarded Liara, whose azure complexion had turned ashen at the news.

"Do you know where we can cut the power?" the asari asked.

"It won't be easy. You'll have to go to Central Operations," Feron gasped, fighting for breath.

Thane's heartbeat quickened in empathy, understanding the desperate pain brought from the need for more oxygen. He noticed a dark look, one that he hadn't witnessed before, flashed across Shepard's features. Though she quickly schooled her face, returning it to a neutral mask, however the darkness still linger in her eyes. It sent an unexpected shiver down Thane's spine.

"We'll get you out of here," Shepard promised.

"You know he's waiting for you right?" Feron asked, a look of guilt washing over his palid face.

The grin Shepard gave was feral. "I'm counting on it."

Shepard halted her determined stride a few feet away from the slightly curved desk, that stood towards the back of the circular room. Caution and training had Thane remain hyper vigilant, his keen eyes watching for the first signs of hostility.

As the commander levelled her M-12 Locust at the large creature that sat behind the desk, Thane followed her lead, training his own SMG on the hulking figure who sat appropriately bathed in shadows.

'Very atmospheric' he thought, dryly.

"Here for the drell?" the silhouette asked. "Reckless, even for you commander."

"That bombing on Ilium wasn't exactly subtle," Shepard retorted, coolly.

The imposing form in front of them clasped it's meaty hands together. "Extreme but necessary."
"No it wasn't," Liara spat. "Neither was caging Feron for two years."

"Doctor T'Soni, your interference caused all this. Feron betrayed me when he handed you Shepard's body. The drell is simply paying the price," the Broker said, his voice abrasive.

"You were working for the Collectors. If Feron hadn't turned on you, someone else would," Shepard stated.

"It was a mutually beneficial partnership. Fortunately the deal is still open for your body," the Shadow Broker replied.

The admission set Thane's blood boiling. The monster had already cost him his beloved Irikah, he refused to let any harm come to Shepard. Glancing to his companions, Thane noticed how Liara had tensed, but the commander seemed unaffected, merely raising an eyebrow at the Broker's threat.

Not for the first time, Thane wondered if Shepard had a plan already devised, or if she was simply an expert at masking her anger and fear.

"You're quite confident for someone with nowhere left to hide," Liara snarled, a faint blue glow beginning to surround her.

"You travel with fascinating companions, doctor. Bringing an assassin was shrewd, T'Soni. I will give Mr Krios' son my regards," the Shadow Broker stated, apparently ignoring her.

'No!' That single word resonated though Thane's mind. His anger threatened to consume his self-control, to drag him back to his battle-sleep. Not trusting his voice to speak, he made a deliberate and controlled reload of his Tempest. The clicking of the heat sink echoed in the momentary silence. To his surprise, Thane heard the commander give an actual snarl.

"Don't bet on it," Shepard sneered, venomously.

"It's pointless to challenge me human. I know you're every secret whilst you fumble in the dark," the Broker boasted.

Thane heard the commander give a mirthless chuckle. The noise sounded alien, dark and menacing. He chanced another glance in her direction her, and found that she had also begun to emit a blue biotic glow. Her emerald eyes were darkened with anger, and her beautiful features set cold. The very picture of an avenging angel.

"Is that right?" Liara asked, mockingly sweet. "You're a yahg. A pre-space flight species, quarantined to their home world for massacring the Council's first contact teams. This base is older than your planet's discovery. Which probably means you killed the original Shadow Broker sixty years ago, then took over. I'm guessing you were taken from your world by a Trophy Hunter who wanted a slave, or a pet. How am I doing?"

It appeared the asari's supposition had been accurate, as the gargantuan form of the Shadow Broker suddenly unfolded to its full height. Instinctively, Thane began to shift into a defensive position, intending to find a vantage point from which to strike. However, before he could, the yahg punch the desk clean in two, grabbing one half and hurling at the trio.

Thane felt the metal encased wood make bone breaking contact with his torso. Hitting the floor, he managed an agonising turn of his head towards his teammates. Relief swept through him as he saw the two woman lying side by side, clear of debris, Shepard's armoured arm protectively around...
Liara's waist.

His last moments of consciousness caught the commander's slow clamber to her feet. Thane blinked, trying to focus, but his senses were beginning to dull. He tried to move but a sharp pain stabbed at his chest, and his vision quickly faded to black.
Promises Kept (Shepard PoV)

Almost in slow motion, Shepard watched the gargantuan form of the Shadow Broker unfolded to its full height. She would never admitted it, but the sight was one of the most unnerving things she'd ever witnessed. But gaping in shock cost her precious seconds, as the yahg punched the desk clean in two, grabbed one half and hurled it at them.

Instinct and reactions took over, as Shepard jumped to the right, grabbing Liara around the waist and pulling her out of the object's trajectory. The moment the pair hit the cold floor, Shepard heard a sickening thud, that could have only been the desk making contact with Thane.

Her stomach lurched as a quick glance confirmed that the assassin was pinned beneath the debris, but there was no time to check his vitals, as the Shadow Broker bore down on her and Liara. Whilst scrambling for cover, Shepard found herself committing an uncharacteristic act of faith. He may not have been her deity, since she held none above another, but in desperation she silently bargained with Amonkira.

'Spare Thane's life, and I will repay you with the blood of the Shadow Broker'

Simultaneously, both women unleashed a volley of shots and biotic powers at the Broker. However, with his upgraded kinetic shields, their enemy was impervious to all but up-close melee attacks. Which was just... typical.

Cracking her knuckles, Shepard thanked the spirits for the heavy bone weave Cerberus had upgraded her with, otherwise the situation would be a lot more daunting than it already was. Since the battle, and it really was a battle instead of a fight, was gruelling.

More often than not, the yahg used his superior strength against them, hurling the two women into each other and sending them sprawling to the floor. After their fifth consecutive tumble, both Liara and Shepard had had enough.

"If you can get him to bring up that shield one more time, I have a plan," the asari stated.

Shepard followed her friend's gaze up to the ceiling, and the electrically charged panel above the centre of the room. A wicked smile pulled on her lips, and she nodded in agreement. After taking only a heartbeat to prepare herself, Shepard sprung out of their meagre cover, and ran a faux Charge at the Broker, but nimbly rolled beneath his hulking form at the last moment.

"Liara, now!" she commanded.

Intent on gaining as much distance as possible from the yahg, Shepard sprinted away from the behemoth, determined not to get caught in the electrical discharge. As Liara fracture the panel with a biotic pull, the strength of which Shepard had never before seen, before directing the charge into the Shadow Broker's body.

In an intense white flash, and a shock wave that sent to women flying, the yahg was no more. Dazed, Shepard sat viewing her surroundings, and vaguely realised Liara was at her side. Gingerly, she grasped the asari's outstretched hand and rose to her feet, idly wondering if the god would accept smouldering ash instead of blood.

"It's over," Liara whispered, awed.

Without hesitation, Shepard pulled her friend into an elated hug, utterly relieved she'd managed to
However, a soft groan jolted Shepard back to her senses, and she quickly ran to the pile of debris pining Thane. Gently, with the last of her biotic strength, she set about moving the shards of metal and wood from her companion. Once satisfied that she'd cleared the majority off his body, Shepard knelt down and administered a hefty dose of Medi-Gel by linking their Omni-Tools together.

A frantic buzz of chatter from the Broker's flashing blue consoles stole Shepard's attention momentarily, but seeing Liara approach them with a determined stride put any worries she had at ease. Confident in her friend's abilities, Shepard turned her attention back to the injured drell, and allowed herself a moment of indulgent sentimentality, as she removed one of her gauntlets to stroke his green scaled cheek.

It took the Medi-Gel a few minutes to work before Thane's eyes blinked open, and moments later, Shepard gently helped him stand. Distantly, she could hear Liara's soft words being transfigured through a voice modulator to that of the Broker's, and was impressed and proud of the asari's resourcefulness.

Though suddenly, unbalanced yet hurried footsteps captured Shepard's attention. Looking up, she saw Feron readying a M-3 Predator. Thane tensed instinctively to grasp his gun, but Shepard caught his hand gently, halting his movement. When he looked at her questioningly, she merely gave a small smile and shook her head.

"Goddess of Oceans. It's you," Feron mumbled wearily, staring at Liara.

"So, Liara T'Soni. Archaeologist, kick-ass biotic and... Shadow Broker?" Shepard smirked.

"I don't know if I'm ready for you to call me that," the asari giggled, before wrapping her arms around Shepard again.

Like Tali, Liara was another adopted sister to Shepard. She knew her almost better than she knew herself, and it seemed the events of the day were starting to catch up, as the asari started to tremble in her arms. Shepard turned her head in order to catch drell's attention, and thankfully both men understood her unspoken request for privacy.

"We'll check the power systems," Feron informed, before leading Thane out the room.

Shepard turned her attention back to Liara, tightening her hold around her friend's waist.

"It's alright," she soothed, as the asari's sobbed. "You've been running yourself ragged for two years. You're allowed to cry, you've earned a break."

Liara gave a soft laugh. "I suppose I have, but for now let's figure out our options."

Half an hour later, the pair had finished the briefest overview of the terminals possible, and Shepard had managed to convince Feron to submit to a medical. She also issued Thane the same order, just for good measure.

Once both men were in the capable hands of Doctor Chakwas, Shepard turned her attention to planning on how to convince Liara to stay at least one night on board the Normandy. The woman clearly needed some respite, and Shepard figured a girl's night with Tali and herself could be the remedy... just like old times.

A long hot shower was Shepard's first port of call, followed by grabbing the plate of food she had...
unexpectedly found waiting for her on her desk. The note left with it indicated that Garrus had arranged for Gardener to prepare her something she could eat cold, and the filled baguette was a very welcome sight.

Once dressed and make-up reapplied, Shepard headed for the Medical Bay, intending to check on both Thane and Feron. Upon arriving, Chakwas informed her that Thane had already been discharged after a procedure to mend several broken ribs, and Feron was lying under heavy sedation. The medical scanner was busy mapping his injuries, and Mordin was on standby should his expertise be required.

However, Liara still sat next to the drell, her face tear stained. Shepard quietly crossed the room, and wrapped her arms around her friend's shoulders.

"He'll be alright, Liara," she whispered. "The best doctors in the Galaxy are taking care of him. Stay the night. Feron will need at least a day's rest, and you could do with some as well."

Liara sighed, finally relenting. "You're right. Thank you, Shepard."

"Let EDI know when you're ready, I'll be on my rounds until then."

Shepard gave the asari a kiss on the cheek, before exiting the Medical Bay. Despite Karin's reassurances, Shepard needed to see that Thane was okay with her own eyes, which dictated that her first visit on her rounds would be Life Support. Though on a whim, she first dropped by the kitchen, intent on bringing the assassin a mug of his favourite spiced tea. Once brewed, she continued to her destination.

"Do you need something?" Thane asked warmly, as she entered the room.

"Have a few minutes to talk?" Shepard replied, smiling at the familiar greeting.

"Of course, Siha. Join me," he agreed.

His invitation gave her the perfect moment to deposit the steaming mug of tea in front of him. Thane raised his brow ridges in question, causing Shepard to chuckle.

"I've been thinking about you," she shrugged, hoping it appeared nonchalant.

"And I you. Will you hear my confession, Siha?" he queried.

Shepard's interest was piqued, though she'd have been worried about the word 'confession', if it hadn't been for the smile tugging at the assassin's lips. Not wanting to seem too eager, she rested her forearms on the table and smirked.

"I'm still waiting for you to explain what Siha means," she said.

"I need to explain myself to you first," Thane admitted. "When I married Irikah, the hanar let me leave their service to raise a family, but I had no other skills, so I freelanced. When Irikah was killed, I pursued those responsible. Once I eliminated them I had no goal. I accepted the Dantius commission as I didn't know what else to do."

Shepard frowned. "Not the healthiest attitude to take on a mission."

"You're right, it's not," he conceded, without hesitation. "I had resigned myself to death. I would have fulfilled my contract, and if Nassana's guards caught me afterwards, it would have been a good death."
"I had no idea you planned to die in there," she whisper, her voice thick.

"It wasn't a plan," Thane assured, much to her relief. "My body had accepted its death. My mind had been dead a long time." He leant forward then, capturing her hands between his. "But I met another Siha, few are privileged to meet even one."

"You still haven't told me what a Siha is," Shepard smiled, gently.

"One of the warrior angels of the Goddess Arashu. Fierce in wrath, a tenacious protector," he told her.

Shepard felt her heart thud hard in her chest. She was astonished, and humbled. To hear that the man she was falling for held her in such high regard... it was stunning. Her mind was a whirl of thoughts, almost causing her to miss what else Thane had to say.

"I confess, I've come to care for you. Perhaps I'm being foolish, we are very different," he said, quietly.

Shepard felt her smile widen. To say she was delighted, would have been a gross understatement. She moved her hands to entwine them with his, and instinctively her fingers spread to accommodate Thane's fused digits.

"I'm not sure we know each other well enough to call it love, but I feel something for you too," Shepard admitted. "Something more than friendship."

In a fluid movement, Thane stood and stepped around the table. He drew her up and to him, wrapping his arms around her. Shepard relaxed into his embrace, inhaling his unique scent of spice and leather.

The only time they'd been so close was when she offered him comfort during the influenza outbreak. Then it had been companionable, a friend offering another comfort, with only a hint at something more. This was entirely new ground for the both of them.

"I've never felt affection for another species," Thane murmured into her hair. "I'm not sure what to do now."

"We'll just have to figure it out," she told him, playful.

Thane tightened his hold of her. "I look forward to the memories."
In the warm temperature and dim light of the Medical Bay, Liara sat motionless as she desperately prayed to the goddess, with tears leaving salt tracks down her cheeks. After all he'd been through, all he endured, Feron deserved to pull through.

Shepard had come and gone, somehow managing to persuade her to stay the night, to rest and relax. She still wasn't sure how the human had gotten her to agree, but she was grateful for her friend's persistence anyway. Feron needed and deserved the rest, even if she didn't.

"Liara?" called a modulated voice, from the doorway. "Shepard told me some of what happened, I was wondering if you'd like a tour of the ship. Maybe grab something to eat?"

"Go," Doctor Chakwas prompted, looking up from her desk. "He'll be out cold for several hours yet, and I'll be here the whole time. You need to rest as much as Feron does, and you'll be no use to him if you end up in the cot next to him from exhaustion."

Liara felt torn. On the one hand, she'd missed Tali the past two years, but on the other, she felt it was her duty to stay by Feron's side. However, Doctor Chakwas was a very determined woman, not someone you could easily argue with, and Liara imagined the good doctor would turf her out if she didn't leave on her own accord. So with a reluctant smile, she relented. Though, as she began to stand, pure impulse caused her to lean over and kiss the sleeping drell's scaled brow.

"Please get better," she whispered. "I need you."

The ship wide tour culminated on the top deck, outside what Liara presumed was Shepard's cabin. Something that was a vast step up from the original Normandy, where the commander's room was directly off the Mess Hall. The quarian beside her palmed the lock, and as the door slid open, Liara was greeted by an unexpected blue glow.

"What the goddess?" she wondered.

"Shepard, it's good to see you've kept them alive this time," Tali stated, having already entered the room.

Frowning, Liara followed her friend into the cabin, and soon realised what the quarian was talking about. An impressive fish tank took up one entire side of the room. Moving closer, she spotted a school of Thessian Sunfish swimming about, as well as several Illium Skalds and Prejek Paddle Fish. It was actually a really relaxing sight, and faintly reminded her of the times she would visit the National Aquarium on Thessia.

"Yeah, only because of that aquarium VI you whipped up," Shepard laughed. "Did you enjoy the tour Liara?"

Gratefully, Liara accepted the glass of Thessian Red the commander handed her.

"Yes," she admitted. "It may not be the original, but it's a beautiful ship. And I ran into Joker, he seemed happy to see me."

"Keelah! Of course he is. We've all missed you," Tali informed her.

Liara couldn't help but smile, it was good to be with her friends again. "I think perhaps he just
wanted to ask if I'd 'Embraced Eternity' lately."

"He didn't… oh what am I saying, of course he did," Shepard laughed.

Without hesitation, the commander ushered both her and Tali towards the L-Shape couch that stood in the lower part of the room, snuggly tucked into a corner behind a display case wall. There was a perspex wall that divided the area from the upper level, and Liara wasn't surprised to find Shepard had started to fill it with replica ships. Though it was a little heart-wrenching to see a model of the SR1 hung to look like it was pursuing the model Sovereign.

However, it was also so completely Shepard, that Liara's last lingering doubts over who Cerberus brought back were completely irradiated. And as the three of them sat, Liara caught the commander's hand.

"I didn't say it before, but thank you Shepard," she said. "I don't think I could have saved Feron without you, and if wasn't for Doctor Chakwas, well… I don't think his prognosis would be quite as good."

"Liara, if it wasn't for you and Feron, I wouldn't be alive now," Shepard said, squeezing her hand.

"Besides, we're sisters," Tali stated, bumping against her shoulder.

"Sisters," Shepard agreed.

The commander raised her glass in an impromptu toast, and after the three had all taken a hearty gulp of their respective drinks, Liara fished a small box out of her pocket. In truth, she was nervous about giving Shepard the gift, unsure how the commander would feel about it. However, in the core of her, Liara felt it was something that needed to be done. For all of them.

"I brought something for you, something I thought you might like to have back. It took some digging, but I recovered your tags," she told the human.

Liara chose to ignore how Shepard's hands shook slightly as she accepted the box, though the tears in the other woman's eyes were harder not to notice. She watched as the commander opened the lid, revelling the small twisted pieces of metal. Though warped in shape and charred in appearance, the tags still held the faint inscription of Shepard's name and rank.

"I didn't think I'd ever see these again," the commander stated, her voice thick with emotion. "How did you even…?"

"They changed hands more than once," Liara admitted. "But it was actually Admiral Hackett who gave them to me, so I could return them."

"I always liked Hackett," Tali suddenly announce. "He said really beautiful things at your memorial… oh Keelah! Shepard. I'm sorry!"

Wincing, Liara looked over to the quarian, and noticed her glass of was already empty. Which certainly explained the slip, as Tali never could handle her alcohol. The commander gave a small laugh, but it sounded strained. Liara wasn't sure, but she thought she heard Shepard give a small sigh as she set the tags on the coffee table, before she looked towards the fish tank.

All at once, the guilt of not being able to join her friend when they first reunited came flooding back.

"Shepard? How are you?" Liara asked. "I mean really."
There was a slight pause before Shepard hung her head. "Honestly? I'm tired. Tired of dealing with Cerberus, and the Council not believing me."

"Their short sightedness doesn't diminish what you've accomplished," Liara consoled.

"And we believe you," Tali insisted, slightly hiccuping.

"Wish everyone else did," Shepard practically whispered.

Liara felt like her heart was breaking for her friend, and she reached out to clasp the commander on the shoulder.

"Garrus told me about what happened with Ashley on Horizon. She's wrong and you know it. There wouldn't be anyone left at the colony if it hadn't been for you."

"She was always a Bosh'tet," Tali added, breaking the tension.

"True, but a hell of a soldier," Shepard smiled. "Thanks though. I don't know what I'd do without either of you."

"Well, you'd be left with only Jack and Kasumi to gossip with for a start," the quarian said, nodding sagely.

"Gossip?" Liara asked, smiling at the uplift in topic.

"Yeah, scuttlebutt is that Thane has a thing for her," Tali informed in a stage whisper. "But none of us can get it out of her if she likes him back. Maybe you should try Liara."

She regarded the commander, and noticed the cryptic smile on the woman's lips. To Liara, that little gesture spoke volumes. It was something Shepard had done for as long as Liara had known her, whenever she was trying not to lie to a friend.

So she levelled the human with a knowing look, well aware that even though the commander had no difficulty facing down the council or an enemy, that she found it almost impossible to lie to her friends. There was always some mannerism that gave her away, usually it was her smile.

"So, Thane?" she questioned, watching how Shepard failed to stop her smile spreading into a grin.

"Keelah! I knew it!" Tali exclaimed, excitedly. "I knew Kasumi kept giving you those cocktails for a reason!"

"Okay, okay," Shepard laughed, though there was a sadness to her green eyes. "Yes, Thane. I care about him, a lot. And his Kepral's Syndrome isn't that bad yet, but… I don't know how much time we will have."

Liara took Shepard's hand again. "You're going through what an asari does with a shorter-lived spouse. It's not about how much time you have, it's about what you do with it."

To her relief, Shepard gave a small huff of laughter. "When did you get so wise?"

"I learnt from the best," Liara teased, squeezing her hand.

"You tend to rub off on people, Shepard," Tali agreed.

"He seems a good man, and I hope you two find happiness together," she added.
"So, how are you?" Shepard asked, turning the tables.

"A bit overwhelmed," Liara admitted, trying not to sigh. "I plotted revenge for two years. Now it's over, Feron is free and the Broker's network is ours."

"You're not going to turn into a crazy recluse with information on everyone in the Galaxy are you?" Shepard teased.

"I can see the temptation, but helping you take out the reapers will keep me honest. Mostly..." Liara replied, smiling.

"Now... tell us about you and Feron," Tali giggled, pouring herself another drink.

"There is nothing to tell," she stalled.

"But you like him," the quarian insisted.

"I… cannot deny that," Liara relented. "But he's been through a traumatic ordeal. Most likely he'll be emotionally fragile and will need time to heal. I must be respectful of that, otherwise I would be taking advantage."

"Or he could already have feelings for you," Shepard argued. "I'm not saying jump him as soon as he's out the Med Bay. Just, don't rule anything out. You care for him, so be open to where it could lead."

"And now we're back to normal, with Shepard giving the advice," Tali slurred.

In a haze of alcohol and laughter, the rest of the night flew by. The trio spent the time reminiscing and gossiping, listening to music and watching Tali's favourite film 'Fleet and Flotilla'. Liara hadn't felt more happy or more relaxed in two years. It felt good. It felt like home.
A week had passed since the assault against the Shadow Broker. A week that, for the first time in a decade, Thane had managed to sleep without guilt fuelled nightmares haunting him. It seemed that the old Broker's death had allowed Irikah's memory to finally rest.

The Normandy had spent longer than expected orbiting Hagalaz, due to Feron's injuries requiring more medical attention than previously predicted. In that time, Thane had grown fond of the other drell, and visited him regularly in the Medical Bay whilst his body healed. However, it was Feron's mind that troubled Thane. He hoped the obvious affection the man felt towards Liara would pull him through, though that was unfortunately far from certain. Before their departure, Feron had promised to keep in touch, a vow that Shepard had also managed to extract from Liara.

Now the Normandy was once again in transit, travelling between the Sowilo System and Osun, and the day had progressed smoothly enough for Thane. The morning had been spent in meditative practise with Samara, and the afternoon in friendly competition with Garrus, since they were still trying to figure out who the best sniper and hand to hand expert was.

When evening had arrived, Thane had retired to the Life Support Plant, looking forward to Shepard's nightly visit. However, she never came. Instead EDI had informed him of a request to meet the commander in the Communications Room, and the summons gave Thane a sense of foreboding. Despite suspecting something was wrong, he was not ready for the coil of concern that wound its way to his heart, as he looked upon Shepard's face. Anxiety, agitation and apprehension swirled in her usually vivid emerald eyes, and without thinking, he crossed the distance between them and pulled her close.

"What troubles you, Siha?" he asked, his voice full of concern.

To Thane's dismay, Shepard took a step back, gently disentangling herself from him.

"We are on our way to Omega," she told him, barely making eye contact. "It's a personal mission for Samara."

The way she refused to meet his eyes, set Thane on edge. "Indeed?"

"It's a take-down mission. The target is an Ardat-Yakshi, a prevalent serial killer whose chosen weapon is sex. Samara has been tracking her centuries," Shepard paused, taking a deep inhalation of breath. "I'm to be the bait."

Thane's heart was in his mouth, and his stomach lurched in trepidation. He blinked slowly, trying to rationalise what he had just been told. Tendrils of dread began to claw at him, slithering snakes of worry worming into his consciousness. He had already lost his wife, he would not lose the woman he was falling in love with as well. On their own accord, Thane's hands cupped Shepard's cheeks, and slowly he tilted her face to look at him.

"Siha, is that wise? Could I not…" he tried to protest.

A gentle hand against his chest halted his plea. "I appreciate your concern, but there's a snowball's chance in hell that I'd let you take my place."

Shepard paused again, this time closing her eyes. When she opened again, Thane was chilled by what he saw. Never before had the fiery redhead looked so vulnerable. A ghost of a smile pulled at her red painted lips, though it disappeared before it had even reached her emerald eyes. Slowly, so
slowly lest she pushed him away again, Thane wrapped his arms around Shepard and pulled her tightly to him.

"Thane, will you hear my confession?" she asked, quietly.

"As you wish, Siha," he replied, resting his cheek on the top of her head.

"It's common knowledge that I was an orphan, who grew up on the streets back on Earth," Shepard stated, her voice muffled against his chest. "What the Alliance covered up is the fact I was part of a gang, the Tenth Street Reds. There was no 'anti-alien' or 'pro-human' crap back then. They were just a gang, the lesser of the evils at the time."

There was no mistaking the tremor in her voice as she spoke, and he stroked indistinct patterns along her back, hoping she'd find it comforting. Unable to stop himself, Thane kissed Shepard's forehead, and silently cursed as he felt her tense. Though to his slight relief, she soon tightened around him, as if she were trying to find comfort in his embrace.

"The authorities don't much care for the fate of a street rat, and there were countless stories of girls disappearing, later turning up dead, clearly battered and abused," she explained, solemnly. "I was only ten, but it didn't take me long to figure out what my chances would be without the protection from one of the gangs. Most of the other girls I knew ended up as prostitutes. It was only my emerging biotics that saved me from that."

He felt Shepard shift her weight, and reluctantly Thane loosened his hold on her. Once again she step back, though this time her hands trailed along his arms, and her fingers entwined with his as she leant against the table. Squeezing his hands, Shepard flashed him a sad smile, before her gaze firmly settled on the floor between their feet.

"But even that was eventually used against me," she continued. "As soon as my body started to develop, I was used as the gang's primary 'honey trap'. The boss said my pretty face hooked the men and my biotics, laughably limited as they were at thirteen, gave me an edge the other girls didn't have, so I could go into riskier situations. It was five years before I escaped that life by enlisting."

Thane's mind stuck on her age, she'd been no more than a child. His heart ached hearing of her abuse, and he vehemently wished he could bring to justice those who had used her in such a way. He couldn't begin to understand how frightened Shepard must have been during that time, but it explained a lot about her. About why she went out of her way to help anyone and everyone, and how she became the warrior angel he knew her to be.

"Siha," he began, hoping to comfort her, but couldn't find the words.

"Other than Anderson and Garrus, only you and Samara know the full truth," Shepard stated. "And I only told Samara, because I didn't want her Justicar's code forcing her to kill me or something, after we've dealt with the collectors."

The joke was poor, but it helped to ease some of the tension between them. And as much as Thane hated to admit it, he was beginning to understand Shepard's reasons for agree to the mission. She thought her past put her in better stead, that it gave her better understanding of their target and what was needed, than another would have. He couldn't fault her for that.

"What is my roll to be?" Thane asked, simply.

Pure relief lit up Shepard's face. "I'd like you to accompany myself and Samara. Whilst she believes your tracking skills could be invaluable, I need you there for other reasons," she admitted. "You're
the best assassin in the Galaxy, and your skills would not only let you blend into the background, but they could keep me safe."

For a moment, Thane simply looked at her, letting her words sink in. Never in his life had someone said that his skills, ones honed to kill, made them feel safer. Which was exactly what he'd heard in the commander's words. He understood the gravity of what Shepard was saying, a seasoned marine like herself would not give her trust easily.

He was humbled by the confidence she had in him, and there wasn't a doubt in Thane's mind that he would do everything in his power to protect her. Raising her hand to his mouth, he brushed his lips over her knuckles.

"I am honoured Siha," he told her, truthfully.
The Prey (Shepard PoV)

Omega. The cesspool of the galaxy. Several months may have passed since Shepard's first visit to the lawless station, but nothing much had changed. Though there were slightly less vorcha to be seen now, which caused a sly, self-satisfied smirk to tug at Shepard's lips.

Unfortunately, the place still smelt putrid. A repulsive mix of bodily fluids, refuse and stagnant water. The latter of which was some sort of perverse triumph for a space station. She couldn't help as her nosed wrinkled in disgust.

"For the love of all that's holy, couldn't someone sort out the damn ventilation," she grumbled.

"The Heart of Evil has always had a… unique smell, commander," Samara stated, serenely.

The trio's first port of call was to the infamous Afterlife. Shepard wasn't the greatest fan of the place, especially after a particular encounter with a certain human-hating bartender. Though oddly enough, she genuinely liked the self-proclaimed Queen of Omega. Despite their vastly different viewpoints on the galaxy, Shepard and Aria had developed an accord over the months. A grudging respect shifting into some strange, cantankerous friendship.

There were a few other redeeming features to the place as well, one of which had a distinctly turian shape.

"Commander," a flanging voice called out in greeting.

"Gavorn," she smiled, clasping the turian's taloned hand. "How are you? How's Lionel?"

The last part was added in a hushed whisper, the captain's relationship with the human eezo miner was a closely guarded secret. One that the few who knew, were particularly vigilant at keeping. Even twenty eight years after the First Contact War, turian-human relationships were often viewed negatively, with the couples treated with derision at best, blatant bigotry and violence at worst.

"Good, good," he replied, answering both her questions. "Here to see her Ladyship?"

Shepard couldn't help but laugh. "What else? Like I could come to Omega and not see my bosom buddy?"

After agreeing to meet the turian later for drinks, Shepard jogged up the stairs to Aria's 'throne room', Samara and Thane by her side. She bit back a smile, as the asari gave her a terse nod, then gestured for them to sit. A raise of Aria's painted eyebrow sent one of her henchmen scurrying, only to appear moments later carrying four drinks.

Samara and Thane both declined the offer, but Shepard knew this game well, it was one they had played every time she visited. After the customary shot, of what turned out to be asari honey mead this time, Shepard settled down to business.

"You've got an Ardat-Yakshi lurking about your station," she stated, matter-of-factly.

"I knew it," the pirate queen replied, leaning forward. "Nothing leaves a body quite so… empty."

"You haven't taken steps to kill her," Samara asked.

"Why would I? She hasn't tried to seduce me," Aria retorted, shrugging her shoulders.
It didn't surprise Shepard to find out the station's queen bee already had an inkling that a dangerous fugitive was roaming her home... it was Aria and Omega after all. What did arouse her curiosity, was that after almost pointedly ignoring one another, the two asari were regard each other in a way that indicated there was some history between the pair. Mentally, Shepard filed that away as something to ask the Justicar at a later date, because bizarre friendship aside, she doubted she'd get an answer from Omega's CEO.

"Who was her victim?" Shepard queried, wanting to move the conversation along.

"A young girl, pretty thing. Lived in the tenements near here. What was her name?... Grizz?!" Aria's last word was a summons, and another familiar turian soon appear. "Grizz, what was the name of that young girl found in Zeta district?"

"Nef Grahn, lived with her mother Diana," he answered, crisply. "Good to see you again, commander," he added, flaring his mandibles in a wide grin.

Shepard smiled at the turian, giving him a friendly nod, before turning back to Aria. "Thanks for the intel."

"Good luck finding her, better luck catching her," the asari said, as Shepard stood to leave. "And commander... you really should find a nice young man to keep you warm at night. From what I hear, I'm sure Grizz would be willing to offer his assistance."

"In a heartbeat," the turian rumbled, eyeing her suggestively.

Shepard laughed, slightly tempted to flirt light-heartedly with Grizz, who really was quite attractive. But out of the corner of her eye she noticed Thane tense for a fraction of a second. If she didn't know better, Shepard would have wondered if the assassin was jealous, but he just didn't seem that type of man. Something she was thankful for, since she'd never had time for that sort of drama. She hated possessiveness and jealousy, they didn't belong in a relationship, and reminded her too much of her time with The Reds.

"I'll let you know if I ever get that desperate," she teased instead, before heading for the exit.

It didn't take long to find the correct apartment. With only a handful of manky streets to traverse, and one mad batarian preacher to circumnavigate, before they stood outside the gloomy adobe. With unspoken agreement, Thane slunk into the shadows as Shepard and Samara visited the grief stricken mother.

To Shepard, Diana was a true warrior. Despite her obvious and understandable torment, the woman valiantly set about giving them any information she could about Morinth. Even to the extent of giving them access to Nef's room and video journal, with the diary alone proving to be invaluable. It hinted at ways Shepard could lure their quarry into striking, and more importantly, it gave them a location. Afterlife's VIP section, along with it's 'secret' password.

Shepard was thankful that she'd had the forethought to bring a 'suitable' outfit to infiltrate the VIP lounge, albeit one that was chosen by Jack and Kelly. A plunging, blood red cat suit that was similar in style to Miranda's jump suit, but slashed to Shepard's navel, barely covering her ample breasts.

With Diana's kind permission, she quickly changed clothes, before exiting back out onto the grimy streets of Omega with Samara by her side. Unfortunately, the moment the pair emerged, a group of batarians walked by. Shepard fought a hard won battle not to silence their lewd and lecherous comments with a heavy warp blast.
"Say the word, and I will silence them for good," Thane whispered in her ear.

His voice suddenly so close almost made Shepard jump. She gave him an appreciative smile, as he slipped his long, leather jacket onto her shoulders. His thoughtfulness afforded Shepard her first look at his impressively toned arms, and she gave an involuntary hum of admiration. She'd always had a weakness for nicely defined arms. It seemed Thane had heard her appreciation, or at least noticed her lingering gaze, because he was almost smirking as he regarded her.

"You look ravishing, by the way," he whispered into her other ear, before melding into the shadows once more.

Shepard almost giggled... giggled, much to her consternation. She was not some blushing virgin with a crush, yet Thane often made her feel like a simpering school girl. It was maddening but not exactly unpleasant, though for the time being, Shepard pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind.

With her head held high, and an exaggerated sway to her walk, she made her way to the VIP section, Samara close at hand. Silently, Shepard reluctantly slipped Thane's coat from her shoulders, missing it's comforting scent immediately, and handed it to the asari. They knew the plan, there was no need for further discussion, so after a crisp nod to the Justicar, Shepard sashayed her way to the bar's entrance.

"Do you want something?" the turian bouncer asked, as she approached the door.

"Someone told me the rest of Afterlife is nothing compared to this place," Shepard said conversationally, strategically placing a hand on her hip to accentuate her waist.

"Sounds like a smart person. Who was it?" he queried, his gaze roving her body.

"Jaruut," she told him, earning her a nod of acceptance.

"I clock off in three hours," he told her suggestively, as she walked past.

Shepard flashed him an impish smile over her shoulder, before entering the club. Once inside, her senses were assaulted. The flashing lights, the pounding music, the smell of sweat and alcohol... it left her wishing for a hot shower in a dimly light room.

With a small sigh, she step around a frantic man who was spouting some nonsense about an asari and a band, before moving towards the dance floor. Contrary to her friend's popular belief, Shepard could dance, and rather well. She just hated doing so in the type of establishments her crew dragged her too. The clubs reminded her too much of her days in the gang, and it would take at least another life time to forget the leers she had once been subjected too.

But swallowing her pride, Shepard stepped onto the pulsing tiles that changed colour to the beat of the music. Within seconds she was swaying seductively with the hands of a pretty asari on her hips. She could admit that the other woman was attractive, but Shepard had never been interested in asari that way... and the woman wasn't Thane. So she focused back on the music, until raised voices caught her attention.

"Come on baby, I can pay. I'm a good tipper too," a drunken turian propositioned one of the club's dancers.

"I told you to stay away from me," the asari shouted back.

"Playing hard to get? Give it up baby, I'm sold," the turian leered.
Males like that made Shepard's skin crawl, and she'd dealt with more than her fair share both before and after enlisting. They never failed to make her see red.

Quickly, she positioned herself between the drunk and the dancer, hoping to shield the other woman from the unwanted advances. Of course, the turian was either too drunk or too stupid to know what was good for him... probably both. After he tried to accost her instead of the asari, Shepard sent him flying with a small biotic Throw, making sure he was sent close enough to the entrance for the bouncer to remove him.

"Thanks for that, security was asleep," the dancer smiled. "If you're around later, I'll buy you a drink."

Alcohol sounded like an excellent idea, and after that encounter, Shepard really felt like she needed one. Deciding Morinth could damn well wait, at least long enough for her to have a drink, Shepard pushed her way to the bar. Though as she waited for the bartender to mix her cocktail, who was thankfully a human so there was a lesser risk of being poisoned this time, an idea struck her.

"Busy night?" she shouted over the thumping beat.

"Not bad," he replied, sliding over her order.

"Crowd looks a bit bored," Shepard stated. "Bored people don't spend much."

"You going to tell me how to fix that?" he called back, sarcastically.

She shrugged. "A round of drinks on the house shows that you appreciate their business. Your rep. will improve and you'll make more money in the end. You'll certainly be a hit," she added, giving him a flirtatious wink.

"Maybe… Worth a try. Once," he agreed. "Listen up, everyone! We love having you here, so a round of drinks on the house!" the barman cried, actually loud enough to be heard over the music.

An excited cheer erupted from the crowd, and as they started to mob the bar, Shepard pushed her way back through the throng of people. That's when she felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end, heralding the unmistakable feeling of being caught in someone's crosshairs. Turning her head, Shepard caught the image of a sleek silhouette through a cloud of red smoke, and cold shiver rippled through her.

Morinth.
Aboard the Normandy, the night cycle was progressing normally... well, for the most part. Four people sat staring blindly out of the large observation window, the orange tinted glow of the district below offering them no comfort. All four of them had gathered with just one reason in mind, to wait on Shepard's return. They knew that it was supposed to be a confidential mission, but Kasumi had defend very eloquently that it wasn't her fault that neither the commander nor Samara had thought to check she was in the room before they started talking.

Jack had to agree. They were fucking idiots for not thinking that the one member of the team who had made a career of being invisible, might actually be happily moving around the ship cloaked. It was just common sense. Not that it mattered right then, since Jack was sat on the edge of Kasumi's sofa, her foot angrily tapping the floor.

'Where the fuck are they?' she wondered.

Jack had been reluctant to admit it at first, but she liked Shepard. Actually, really liked her. The stupid way she was always so positive, the stupid way she was driven to help people, the stupid way she came to check on her, every night, without fail. It was only recently that Jack had realised she looked up to Shepard as the older sister she never had.

That was the reason Kasumi's titbit of gossip about Shepard's next mission had worried her. That was the reason she had told Tali, then Garrus, knowing they'd understand her worry. To her credit, so did Kasumi, the Japanese thief had spent hours trying to hack into feeds on the station, looking for anything that might give them an update.

Jack had even debated telling Grunt, but that idiot krogan cared about Shepard even more than she did. He'd have been in more of a state than the four of them in the room combined were, and they were pretty fucking beside themselves.

"Joker, any sign of them?" Garrus asked through the comm. system.

"Nothing," the pilot grumbled in response.

'How could she be so fucking stupid?' Jack fumed, silently.

An Ardat-Yakshi, Kasumi had said and Joker, the fucking creep that he was, had 'accidentally' overheard their conversation via the comm. Which was why he knew about the mission and had joined their vigil. He had his uses though, for starters he'd quickly found out what an Ardat-Yakshi actual was, and it was horrifying, even to Jack. A fucking asari, fucking nymphomaniac, fucking serial killer... what the fuck was Shepard thinking?!

"She has Thane and Samara with her, I'm sure she'll be fine," Tali tried to reassure, wringing her hands together.

Jack snorted. She had nothing against the drell, and even she could see that his attention towards Shepard was more than just wanting to get his dick away. If it hadn't have been, she'd have left him a smear on the wall. So she was sure he was watching out for the commander.

It was that fucking asari Justicar that Jack's anger was directed at. If it wasn't for her, Shepard wouldn't be doing this fucked up mission.

Despite having a hunch that Samara's biotics were even more powerful than her own, Jack was
pretty set for a fight with the asari if the commander came back with even a scratch on her. Actually
she was pretty set for a fight with Shepard when she came back. Okay, perhaps not a fight, but some
pretty harsh fucking words.

Jack was particularly mad that when the commander had asked her opinion for a disguise for this
mission, she’d been told it was just gathering intel. inside Afterlife, and Shepard wanted something
that wouldn’t seem out of place. The fact she’d left the part out about hunting down a fucking asari
serial killer really fucked her off.

Garrus gave a frustrated growl, causing Jack to look over at him, and she actually felt sorry for the
stupid fucking dinosaur. He looked how she felt. Actually worse, considering how fucked up his
face was.

"Guys, I think I've got something," Kasumi suddenly stated. "Tali, can you help me clean this up?"

Jack watched as the two hooded women hunch over the thief's Omni-Tool. There was the sound of
hurried tapping, followed by some under-breath cursing, though Jack was pretty sure she heard
"Bosh'tet" and "Kusottare" muttered a few times, whatever the fuck they meant.

Minutes later, Tali gave a triumphant whoop and sat back, allowing Jack and Garrus to peer over
Kasumi's shoulder at her Omni-Tool. Grainy footage from a camera outside an apartment building
was playing, and seconds past before two women emerged from door, one leaning against the other,
a few seconds later and another figure joined them. A distinctively drell shaped one, who swept the
leaning woman into his arms and began to carry her. Jack's stomach sank to her boots.

"That can't be fucking good," she thought.

Or at least, she thought that she had thought it, right up until Garrus' large taloned hand curled round
her shoulder.

"Er… guys. They've just got back," Joker informed them over the comm. "Thane's taken Shepard to
the Med Bay."

"Shit!" Jack exclaimed, jumping from her seat and rushing out the room. She was halted at the
entrance to the Med Bay by Thane, who stood with his back to the closed door.

"Peace Jack," the drell replied. "She had a few scratches on her neck, nothing serious. Siha insisted
that they were already healing, I chose to bring her to Chakwas as a precaution."

At one time, Thane's calmness would have irritated the fuck out of her. Now, Jack did actually feel a
little better for speaking with him. Not that it lasted long. She was furious with Samara, and turned to
head in search of the asari bitch. But before Jack could start her rampage to find the Justicar, she felt
a hand close around her wrist. On instinct she spun, fist glowing blue, and threw a biotic assistant
punch at the culprit. Thane merely leant out of the way, easily dodging the attack.

'Smooth bastard'

"My apologies, I did not mean to startle you," he told her. "But peace Jack. Leave Samara be. The
mission… it was not easy on her."

She wasn't surprised he had figured out what her intentions were, and there was something in the
tone of his voice that made Jack believe him. Something was evidently fucked up about the whole
situation, aside from Shepard being injured. A little reluctantly, Jack nodded mutely, her rage finally
"Thane, is Shepard alright?", "Keelah, what happened?" Garrus and Tali said at the same time, suddenly appearing at her side.

Jack tuned out as the drell repeated his explanation to the pair, and turned on her heel, heading back to Kasumi's room. She needed a fucking drink. The thief, god-fucking-bless her, already had a one waiting for her. And by the looks of it, the sneaky bitch had managed to smuggle some batarian uncut onto the ship. Jack offered Kasumi a feral grin, as she hopped up into one of the bar stools, intent on downing the bright green liquid. Then, a thought hit her.

'What the fuck is a Siha?'

Not long later, Shepard entered the room, still wearing the same blood red cat suit that Jack had advised her on early. In fairness, the commander did look pretty fucking hot in it. Jack also noticed that the scratches Thane had mentioned, seemed to be completely gone, which must mean Shepard really was okay.

Jack blinked several times, trying to dislodge the dust that was obviously irritating her eyes, because there was no-fucking-way that she was about to cry.

"Bit late to be drinking?" Shepard grinned as she settled onto the stool next to her.

"What is drinking? A mere pause from thinking!" Kasumi quipped from behind the bar.

"Seriously?" Shepard laughed. "You're quoting Byron at a time like this?"

"Hey, I just finished re-reading The Deformed Transformed," the thief smiled. "It was one of Kaji's favourites."

Deftly, Kasumi slid a drink over to the commander, and Jack wasn't at all surprised it was a glass on Weeping Heart. She bit back a snort, if she hadn't known better, she'd have placed bets that the thief was in cahoots with Thane to get Shepard hooked on drell venom. Any other bastard, and Jack would be seriously wondering if that was the case, but even she realised that the assassin wasn't that kind of guy. Sure, he was a merciless and high trained killer, but she knew he wouldn't do anything anything to harm Shepard. Fuck, the lingering looks he gave the commander were enough to make even her start to believe in romance, and wasn't that fucked up.

"Hell, I'll drink to that," Shepard stated. "To Kaji, and his excellent taste in books."

In truth, Jack had no idea what the other two women were on about. But with a shrug, she joined the toast all the same. Just happy her sis…commander was okay.

Author's Note
First up, I apologise for the amount of bad language in this chapter, it probably contains nearly every swear word for the entire story! The chapter was fairly fun to write, though a little cringe-worthy, since I don't actually swear a lot myself, but seriously… how can you write Jack and NOT swear? For those who may like to know: Kusottare is, apparently, shit drip in Japanese. Nice huh?
Flames engulfed the sleeper pods as the Normandy shook violently, sending Shepard stumbling across the tilting deck. She had just managed to get Liara, Tali, Engineer Adams and Doctor Chakwas to an evacuation shuttle, and was now on her way to launch the distress beacon.

It was a small relief they'd managed to drop Wrex off on Tuchanka a few days ago, and Garrus was already back on the Citadel, about to start his spectre training. Since she didn't have a clue how they'd have faired in the cramped space of an escape pod... the krogan would have probably needed an entire one to himself.

As Shepard reached the control panel for the beacon, she wasted no time in entering the code to activate it, sending it into space.

"Skipper!" Ashley shouted, over the roar of the electrical fires.

"The distress beacon is launched," she informed her Gunnery Chief.

"Will the Alliance be here in time ma'am?" the other woman asked, anxiety evident in her voice even through her helmet.

"They won't abandon us," Shepard replied, perhaps a little more confidently than she felt.

"Joker's still in the cockpit. He won't abandon ship, I'm not leaving either," Ashley stated with conviction.

Shepard nearly groaned in frustration. "Ashley, I need you to get the crew onto the evac. shuttles. I'll take care of Joker."

Ashley paused for a moment, before snapping off a quick salute. "Aye, Aye."

Convinced the lieutenant would safely see the rest of the crew off the ship and into the evacuation shuttles, Shepard headed for the bridge. Even through her helmet's visor, the billowing smoke made visibility almost impossible, and she stumbled as the Normandy lurched violently for a second time. Whilst dodging the electrical sparks from dislodged power lines, Shepard heard Joker send desperate mayday calls. As she listened, she felt her pulse quicken. The thought they were losing their home was gut wrenching.

She frantically tore through the remained of the crew deck, but her progress came to a slow crawl, as she opened the door to the Information Centre. Her heart thudded in her chest. The majority of the hull had been ripped away, and only her magnetic boots kept her from floating off into the abyss. An eerie, loaded silence accompanied her walk towards the cockpit, and Shepard carefully manoeuvred around the debris of their home, that now floated haphazardly in the vacuum. As she step through the barrier curtain, the incessant bleeping of control panels assaulted her.

"Come on Joker, we have to get out of here!" she yelled, tapping the pilot on the shoulder.

"No. I won't abandon the Normandy, I can still save her!" Joker argued, his green eyes frantic.

"The Normandy's lost, going down with the ship won't change that," she reasoned.

Shepard adored the man who had become a brother to her, but hell if he wasn't infuriatingly stubborn at times.
Joker sighed. "Yeah...okay. Help me up," he relented, before shouting in horror: "They are coming round for another attack!"

A vivid yellow beam sliced through the disintegrating hull of the Normandy. Shepard shielded her eyes from the light, before turning her attention back to Joker. She grabbed his arm, though rougher than she had intended in her desperation to get him to safety. Honestly, Shepard felt dreadful when Joker cried out in pain, as much as she wanted to get him into the escape pod, she didn't want to inflict any broken bones on him.

With Shepard almost carrying the hobbling pilot, they made it to the last escape pod. The door opened automatically as they approached, allowing her to ease Joker into its safety as gently as possible. She felt terrible guilty for hurting him, and didn't want to aggravate his Vrolik Syndrome further.

"Promise I'll buy you a drink next time we are on the Citadel," she bargained.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked the Normandy, knocking Shepard away from the shuttle. It seemed that the blast had damaged her magnetic boots, for she failed to gain any traction and felt herself begin to drift. Instinctual co-ordination helped her find the pillar were the manual release button for the pod was situated, and as a second yellow beam penetrated the hull, she didn't hesitate to punch the button and evacuate Joker.

"Commander! Shepard!" he cried over the comm. system.

Another blast shook loose her hold on the pillar, and sent her tumbling into a hunk of metal wreckage. The impact winded her. Dazed, Shepard floated into the abyss.

"Joker, I don't regret a thing. Don't blame yourself. I love you bro," she said into her helmet's microphone.

However, when only static returned, Shepard realised that the beam had disabled the communication system. Her breaths began to echo in her ears, and she glanced at the burning wreckage that had once been her home, in an abstract manner. Watching it explode was surreal, like something out of one of Garrus' awful action movies.

It was getting harder to breath, and Shepard wondered if her pressure suit was failing, before a hissing noise grabbed her attention. Primal panic gripped her. Her suit was venting oxygen at an alarming rate. She tried in vain to grab the external pipe, but it was out of reach. Warnings flashed across her visor's HUD. Ten seconds of breathable air left.

Ten... 'Oh shit. This is bad'

Nine... 'Please let them all be safe'

Eight... 'Anderson better keep the fight going'

Seven... 'Spirits, don't let Joker blame himself'

Six... 'Hope Wrex unites the krogan'

Her chest felt like it was caught in a vice, each breath came shallower than the last.

Five... 'Ashley should be promoted'

Four... 'Hope Tali gets her choice of ship'
Three… 'Wonder were Liara's next dig will be'

Two… 'Garrus better take my place in this fight'

As Shepard's vision started to turn black, the light pouring over the crest of the nearest planet stole her final breath... maybe there was a higher force in the universe, for her final sight was beautiful.

Shepard's eyes snapped open, and she woke in a cold sweat. Her breath came in heavy gasps, as she stared out of the skylight at the star speckled vastness. Panic gripped her, and it took Shepard several fear filled moments for her to realise she could actually breath.

Also, EDI's quiet enquiry if she needed Doctor Chakwas helped Shepard remember she wasn't floating above Alchera. Whilst taking a deep breath, she scowled at the stars above her bed. After that first terrifying instance when she'd woken to the sight, Shepard never left the skylight open a second night.

She ran a shaky hand through her cropped, red hair. Ever since her resurrection, Shepard had become used to her sleep being interrupted by nightmares, but even visiting the SR1's crash site hadn't caused the dreams to be so vivid. It seemed her encounter with Morinth had longer lasting effects than either she or Samara had anticipated.

There was no doubt she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep for the remaining of the night cycle, and glancing at the zero three hundred that her Omni-Tool displayed, Shepard was met with the unpleasant realisation it was much too early to start her daily routine. But with a sigh, she rolled ungraciously out of the sheets.

Idly, as she stretched out the kink in her back, Shepard wondered if Thane would still be up at this hour. She could certainly use his calm company, but felt guilty for wishing the drell's sleep was as disturb as hers.
A Stolen Moment (Thane PoV)

Thane sat with only the hum of the Normandy's engines breaking his solitude. He had tried meditating to calm his racing thoughts, but to no avail.

Hours had passed since returning from Omega, and still his mind was disquieted. It had unnerved him to see his usually strong and vivacious Siha so subdued. She had looked haunted as they had returned to the ship, and now he longed to go to her, to wrap his arms around her and hold her close. Yet he had been unsure whether his attentions would have been welcomed... they had only just admitted their attraction to each other, and with the nature of her ordeal, he doubted she would want any physical contact at this time. The fact it was the early hours of the morning, also dictated that it would be unseemly for him to request entry to Shepard's private cabin.

Resigning himself to a sleepless night, Thane prepared himself for another attempt at meditation. But as he steadied his breath, the doors to his room slowly slid open. He had left them unlocked, on the off chance Shepard would come to him. However, even though he was delighted she had sought him out, the comforting smell of her perfume caused Thane to worry.

"Do you need something?" he called in greeting, trying to keep his concerns at bay.

"Have a few minutes to talk?" Shepard asked.

Despite how it wavered slightly, her voice was as soft as summer rain to him. In a fluid movement, Thane stood and closed the distance, unable to stop his arms from wrapping around her. To his surprise and delight, Shepard relaxed into his embrace without hesitation, causing him to smile. He took a moment, breathing in her scent and memorising the feeling of her in his arms.

"You needn't ask," he told her truthful. "Time is short for me Siha, but any I have is yours to take."

"How are you feeling?" she asked, stepping back.

A look of concern was in her beautiful, emerald eyes and Thane felt a pang of guilt, he hadn't mean to alarm her.

"No worse than ever. You needn't worry. And you? You are well?"

Taking her hand, he led Shepard to the table and held out the chair for her. The gesture caused her to smile, and Thane supposed being a marine afforded her little chance to be treated like a lady. Once she was seated, he brushed his lips to the back of her hand, before taking his own seat again.

"No need to worry about me," Shepard assured him, though her tone was less than convincing.

"Siha?" he sighed, reaching for her hand.

To his surprise, Shepard rolled her eyes and gave a soft chuckle. "I'll be fine. A nightmare woke me up, I couldn't get back to sleep so came down to get a drink. I saw your door was unlocked..."

The way she trailed off, shrugged and sheepishly looked to the floor, was one of the cutest things Thane had seen her do. It was a far cry from the tough marine the galaxy knew her to be, and he was humbled to be allowed to see this side of her. However, he certainly didn't fail to notice that Shepard had arrived drink-less. On impulse, Thane stood and moved to Shepard's side in a single, fluid
movement. Without a word, he bent and picked her up in what he heard human's call 'bridal style'. The squeak of surprise she gave was utterly adorable.

"Thane what are you…?" she began.

"Trust me," he asked.

Shepard immediately rewarded him with a warm smile, and once she nodded her ascent, Thane carried her out of the Life Support Plant. After a few long strides, he gently sat her down on one of the Mess Hall's work tops, then set about brewing a speciality tea. It had become harder to source all the herbs and spices for the blends Thane created, especially now he rarely visited Kahje, but he'd been lucky to find a supplier during the last stop at the Citadel.

When the herbal tea was ready, he helped Shepard down from the counter. With one hand against the small of her back, he ushered her towards the elevator, balancing the tray holding the teapot and mugs in the other. After a few minutes spent in companionable silence, they reached the floor of her cabin. He paused outside her door, waiting to be invited inside. For a reason Thane couldn't explain, this seemed to amuse his Siha, who laughed before grabbing his hand and pulled him over the threshold.

Shepard led the way towards the seating area, and Thane valiantly tried to ignore the tempting thoughts that entered his mind as he moved past her large double bed. Carefully, he deposited the tray onto the coffee table, before pouring two mugs of the fragrant tea and handing one to Shepard.

"So what are you doing up?" she asked, before taking a sip of tea.

Her hum of appreciation caused him to smile, and for a moment, Thane debated telling Shepard the truth. Of his worry and concern for her, but the haunted look had vanished from her eyes, and he refused to bring it back. Instead, he answered with something that meant he wasn't lying, but would also continue to lighten her mood. Choosing to keep his words vague, Thane hoped to tease her.

"Over thinking," he stated. "I'm looking forward to the end of the mission."

She raised an eyebrow in question, and set her now empty mug on the coffee table. "Oh?"

"It's been many years since I felt I could relax anywhere," he explained, slipping his arm around her shoulders.

"I spent two years dead," she told him. "Every moment seems irreplaceable now."

Her last sentence was punctuated by Shepard shuffling closer, curling her legs underneath her and settling into his side. Her candidness humbled him, and his heart swelled with feelings for his fiery Siha. If her words were as true as he supposed them to be, then it was an honour that she would choose to spend her 'irreplaceable' moments with him, a lowly assassin.

"I spent ten years dead, I understand the feeling," he replied, kissing the top of her head. "Strange I should only reawaken now, when there is so little time left."

Shepard's head snapped up, and for a moment there was a ripple of emotions in her emerald eyes, before she gave him an impish grin.

"We owe ourselves a memorable vacation. We should pick a destination, there must be some travel brochures in the ship's computers."
His heart flutter at the implications of her words. "I would very much like to see a desert," he admitted.

"Why am I not surprised," Shepard teased, settling her head back on his shoulder. She sighed. "We have a long way to go before we can relax. I just hope we get to."

Her small, almost-admission of worry concerned him. It quietly spoke of her doubts and fears. Gently, he cupped Shepard's cheek and turn her to face him.

"I don't intend to let my body pass before its time," he soothed. "I will watch over you."

As single tear rolled down Shepard's cheek and Thane worried he had caused her unintentional upset, until he saw the smile that graced every feature of her beautiful face. The look she was giving him spoke of love, and his breath caught in his throat. Silently, Thane praised the gods for granting him the blessing of this wonderful woman, whilst carefully wiping away the tear drop from her porcelain cheek.

"Siha, I would worship you body and soul, should you decide me worthy," he whispered. "But tonight, I humbly ask to be allowed to stay and comfort you."

Her slight nod and the tentative brush of her lips against his, was all the answer Thane needed. Swiftly, he picked Shepard up, before carrying her across to her bed in two even strides. As he lay her petite form onto the mattress, he took a moment to marvel at her beauty, committing every detail to memory.

Quickly, Thane shook off his jacket and toed off his boots before joining her. Pulling Shepard close, he kissed her temple, which earned him a delightful giggle from his Siha. As she snaked an arm across his torso, Thane inhaled her unique scent, spice and floral, revelling in the comforting warmth and contours of her body against his.

He was more than content with the stolen moment of tenderness, and as he drifted off to sleep, he praised Arashu for her kindness.
Jacob's hands shook with rage, his teeth and jaw clenched with the same anger, his finger tensed around the trigger of his Carnifex as he stared at a living ghost. No. This thing was less than that, less than human. The bastard wasn't a man, certainly wasn't a father or a captain. Simply scum. The slightest movement would end the tyrant, would avenge what he'd done to his crew. It would be so easy… but what would his mother say? Or his Granny? How would they feel if she found out he'd killed his own father, even if the bastard deserved it.

"That's it? You created a harem and played king?" he spat. "Ten years in a juvenile fantasy!"

He felt a hand on his shoulder, barely more than pressure through his armour. "Jacob, we can help these people. Cerberus or the Alliance can have ships here in days, we can get everyone out," Shepard stated.

"He's not worth the fuel to haul him out of here," Jacob argued. "Hell, he's not even worth the air he's breathing, and he's damned lucky I don't even think he's worth pulling the trigger."

With an angry sigh he lower the gun, and turned away from the man who had once been his father, shrugging off Shepard's hand as he did. To her credit, and Jacob's relief, the commander didn't seem offended.

"Don't worry, we'll secure him for an Alliance trial. For every year here, he'll get ten to think about it," she assured.

He couldn't help but snort. "Giving him all the time in the galaxy, commander. The man that did this doesn't know right from wrong."

"I'm sorry Jacob, I did the best I could," the acting captain apologised.

Jacob's anger surged again. Without warning, he swung round and hit the man with a forceful right hook, sending him to the floor.

"I'm ten years past believing that."

Without another word, he turned on his heel. As he strode away, Jacob found Thane by his side, and he sent a half-hearted scowl towards the drell. Jacob still couldn't say he liked the assassin, but he could admit that he was coming to see why Shepard thought Krios was such an asset. The drell was deadly, precise and efficient, even Jacob couldn't argue with that. However, Krios was still just a mercenary, just the same as that blasted Massani.

Well... Jacob had thought that right up until this damn mission anyway.

The way he felt about a lot of things had changed with this mission, but the way the assassin… the way Thane... had helped the victims back at the encampment. Yeah, Jacob could admit he may have been wrong about the drell.

"What is it Krios?" he asked.

"A bird is safe in its nest, but that is not what its wings are made for," the assassin replied, cryptically.

Jacob stopped in his tracks. He might be starting to appreciate the drell's skill, maybe even think he
was a decent person, but he'd be damned if he could put up with Krios' poetic way of speaking. Hell, Jacob was a simple no-nonsense kind of guy, he didn't even understand it most the time.

"And what is that supposed to mean?" he demanded.

"You are a good man Jacob, the actions of your father cannot change that, and you are not lesser for knowing the truth," Thane said, calmly.

Whatever answer he'd been expecting, that certainly wasn't it. Self-consciously, Jacob rubbed the back of his neck, but before he could think of anything to reply, the commander jogged up to them.

"Shuttle's in bound. Chakwas and Mordin are coming down, along with Garrus and Tali," she informed them. "Thane, I want you helping the doctors with the crew. Jacob, I need you to help team dextro locating any mechs we might have missed."

Without waiting to hear their replies, Shepard continued down the path towards the camp. Jacob watched as she raised a hand in greeting to the Gernsback's doctor, who came to meet her. He heard the drell at his side give a chuckle, and found himself smiling as well. The commander had a habit of winning people over easily, and even though the remaining Gernsback crew were traumatised, they had trusted Shepard almost on sight.

"Hey Krios," he called, when the assassin set off after Shepard. Once Thane turned to face him, Jacob held out his hand. "Thanks man."

For a moment, Thane simply regarded him, unreadable as always, before he accepted the gesture. They shook hands firmly. Jacob doubted it was the start of a friendship, but it was certainly the start of a better working relationship. Which was enough.

Author's Note
First and for most, dedicated to Hershel Green. And for those who may like to know, 'A bird is safe in its nest - but that is not what its wings are made for' is an Amit Ray quote.
A Blessing from Arashu (Thane PoV)

"The rare shaft of sunlight soothes my scales. The blanket is soft beneath me. The smell of cut grass hangs in the still air. Her hand is warm in mine. Sunset eyes sparkle with mischief as she leans closer to me. Her lips press against mine. The kiss deepens and I feel her tongue trace my lower lip, I open my mouth granting her silent request. Her tongue dances with mine, she tastes of the sweet berries we have been sharing."

Thane broke from the memory to find tears rolling down his cheeks. Blinking, his eyes came to focus on the beautiful face of his commander, her features etched with concern. He looked away from her emerald eyes that were so full of sorrow, and his gaze came to rest on Shepard's porcelain hand. It hovered inches above the bowl of Strawberries, a surprise thank you gift from a woman called Leslie; one of the survivors from Aeia.

Cursing himself for not keeping his Solipsism in check, a deep wave of sadness washed over him, mixing with his self-directed anger and growing feelings of guilt. In truth, Thane was ashamed of himself. He could never forsake his beloved Irikah, but he hated the hurt that episodes like this surely caused his fiery Siha. He had already admitted to himself that he had indeed fallen in love with Shepard. The night they had spent, not quite a week ago, simply curled up in her bed after their mission on Omega had confirmed it.

However, this realisation had only proven a trigger for releasing every memory he had of Irikah, and most often they resurfaced inappropriately, to assault the precious time he spent with the commander in private.

Thane bowed his head in remorse and regret, unable to meet her emerald gaze. As he heard the slow scrapping of a chair moving across from him, Thane's heart began to ache. He had always known he didn't deserve his red haired Siha, and he could not blame her for leaving. The pain he surely caused Shepard in moments like this was unacceptable.

He loved her with every fibre of his being and, because of this, he would not stop her as she walked out the door, no matter the personal cost. Thane heard her soft footsteps begin to move, and with a shuddering breath, he resigned himself to only being able to protect her from afar.

Fresh tears began to well in his eyes, though suddenly, to his surprise, he felt warm arms wrap gently against his chest. Heat and softness pressed comfortingly against his shoulder blades and neck, and a light caress of lips touched the crown of his head.

"Thane," Shepard whispered, as she tightened her embrace.

His double lids blinked, then blinked again. Thane did not expect such a tender farewell, it was far more than he deserved, yet it only served to deepen the pain of his Siha leaving him. Feeling her hold loosen, he knew it was goodbye. Then, Shepard's soft palm cupped the side of his face, turning it towards hers. She slid a thumb across his cheek, wiping the straggling tears away, and she offered him a sad smile.

'Perhaps Arashu sees fit to give me a parting gift' he mused, mournfully.

The commander's full lips pressed against his, chaste and bittersweet. Thane's breath shuddered, as he sought to memorise every extra detail he could of this finally blessing. Shepard broke from the kiss and brought her other hand up to his face, and he couldn't avoid looking into her emerald eyes that had filled with their own tears. Thane hated himself all the more for disrupting the pure beauty of
them, and for letting his past ruin the opportunity he'd been offered at finding happiness with the vibrant woman in front of him.

He felt her hands glide down the soft leather sleeves of his coat, before her fingers entwined with his. He was becoming confused. It didn't feel like goodbye unless it was some human custom he wasn't aware of.

With a gentle tug, Shepard pulled Thane to his feet and manoeuvred around the chair, before slowly directed him backwards towards his cot. As his thighs found the metal side of his basic excuse of a bed, Thane relented to the commander's gentle push, and lay down on the canvas. With graceful agility, his Siha slid in beside him, reminiscent of the time when he was suffering from influenza.

The comforting weight of her arm pressed against his abdomen, made Thane realise Shepard had positioned herself to cause the least amount pressure on his lungs. Her supple fingers began to stroke his side through the leather of his vest, and he let out a shuddering breath.

"It's alright," she soothed. "Talk to me if you need to, otherwise know I am always here for you."

Shepard's words and voice lulled him like a gentle ocean tide, her closeness calmed him. He was struggling to comprehend the comfort she was offering him, knowing he didn't deserve the compassion she was giving.

"Siha," Thane's voice came out as a choked sob, and he was ashamed at his lack of control over his emotions. "I'm sorry," he said. "I miss her, and I'm sorry, Siha."

Again, Shepard pressed another reassuring kiss to his scales, this time his temple. "What exactly are you sorry for?"

Her question surprised him, and Thane turned to regard the Siha who lay beside him, reaching a hand to run through her fiery hair. He loved the exquisite texture and alien nature of it, never tiring of it's tactility. He was still unsure if these would be his final moments of closeness with Shepard, and he savoured the feeling of it between his fingers even more.

"I am sorry, because you deserve better than what I am giving you," he told her. "My memories of Irikah should not steal away the moments I am blessed to spend with you, and I am sorry for the pain they cause you Siha."

Shaking her head, the commander leant forward and brushed her lips against his. A ghost of a kiss. A tantalising tease of what could be between them, if the gods saw fit to grant him more time with her.

"Thane," she said, in little more than a sigh. "You never, never have to apologise for your memories of Irikah. She was your first love, your wife and the mother of your son. I couldn't, and wouldn't, change that. Nor do I feel jealous or want to replace her."

Shepard pressed another, slightly deeper kiss to his lips. "The only hurt caused by you recalling those memories, is regret knowing that I can't do anything to ease the pain you feel over her."

"Siha, I…"

Thane was interrupted by another soft kiss, this one sweet and tentative.

"I know you still love her, and I know you still miss her," Shepard told him. "There is nothing to feel guilty about, and honestly I'd be worried if you didn't feel that way."
She moved closer, her body easily moulding to fit against the contours of his. "I am grateful to Irikah, she helped shape you into the man you are. The man I…" She paused briefly, looking almost shy. "Know and care for."

In one swift movement, Thane wrapped his arms around Shepard and pulled her flush against him. He kissed her porcelain cheek, before looking deeply into her emerald eyes for the first time since his relapse into Solipsism.

"You humble me," he confessed. "A large part of me will always love Irikah, but please know Siha, though I miss her, I do not yearn for her. You are a blessing from Arashu, the light in my darkest hour. I would not trade my time with you for the world. Is that the correct human phrase?"

Thane allowed himself a small smile, as the radiant warmth on Shepard's beautiful face told him that it had indeed been the correct wording.

"Until my last breath, I am yours in this life Siha," he told her. "And when the worst finally comes to pass, I will await you on Kalahira's shore."
Shepard snuggled closer into Thane's slightly cooler body, trying not to dwell on his last sentence. She didn't like to think of death in general, it brought too many questions regarding her resurrection, but the thought of Thane's passing chilled her to the core.

Despite the comforting nature of his words, they troubled her. Shepard respected the drell's religion implicitly. However, not having the same beliefs, she doubted that Kalahira would allow a non-believer to meet their lover on her shores... but that was all too morbid. Mentally shaking herself, Shepard pushed the thoughts away. She was laying in the bed of the sexiest man she had ever met, their limbs entwined... those thoughts had no place in her mind at that moment.

Thane's frequent slips into solipsism didn't faze her, yet Shepard hated the anguish the memories often caused her companion. Telling him that he never needed to apologise for his memories of Irikah was probably the most honest thing Shepard had ever said, however, to be fully truthful to herself, she might have to admit that there was the tiniest pang of envy that Irikah had been blessed with more time with Thane than she would ever get.

Feeling the weight of his onyx gaze, Shepard shifted herself so she could look into Thane's eyes. On impulse, she kissed him deeply. Something she had not done before, since their relationship was barely passed the admittance stage.

"You're a wonderful man," she smiled.

Thane blinked at her, seeming surprised. "I believe you are bias Siha."

"Perhaps," she agreed. "But it's still true."

Another kiss followed her small concession.

"I would wish I could live up to your words, but my life has been ill-spent and filled with sin," he sighed.

Shepard bit back a sigh of exasperation. She hated how her companion belittled himself.

"If it was so full of sin, why did you go out of your way to protect the salarian workers in Dantius Tower?"

It seemed Thane choose to ignore her. "The only positives I've had in my life are Irikah, Kolyat and you. I cost Irikah her life, Kolyat still resents me and, even though I praise Arashu daily for granting me your favour, I am still at a loss as to why you would want..."

"Thane," she interrupted, vexed. "I swear if the end of that sentence is 'why would I want to be with an assassin like you' or anything remotely similar, I am going to beat you with your pillow."

In truth, it was an utterly pathetic threat, especially when you considered how flat and lightweight Thane's pillow actually was, but it earned her a small chuckle from the assassin. And Shepard supposed was something at least, considering the melancholy mood Thane seemed to be in, which was so unlike him.
"Terrifying threats aside Siha," he said, wryly. "I have done no deeds that make me worthy of you."

His words confused and slightly annoyed her. Thane's self-deprecation caused Shepard no end of chagrin, and she could honestly shake him at times. For a man who was so cultured and intelligent, he really seemed to lack the ability to grasp that his actions had often saved innocent lives. It was maddening.

"I'm ignoring how daft that actually sounds," Shepard chided. "But if you feel you need deeds, what about exterminating an entire batarian slaver ring that was preying on hanar outer colonies?"

"That is a terrible example," he told her, his voice betraying his struggle to keep up the subdued banter.

"Thane, what is it? Talk to me."

Shepard let the concern she felt show in her eyes. It was becoming painfully obvious that Thane's anxiety ran deeper than worrying he had upset her with his impromptu Solipsism of Irikah. Gently, she stroked his cheek frill, his scales cool under her fingertips, as she waited for a reply. She could see new tears glistening in his onyx eyes, which prompted her to wrap her arms tightly around him. He looked so torn.

"Siha, I…Why?" he asked at last, his voice wavering. "Why me? How did I become so lucky as to meet you Siha, to earn your favour? What do you see in a lowly assassin?"

His usually velvet voice was now no more than a whisper, he sounded almost lost, and from a man who was normally so cool and quietly confident, it was stunning. It left Shepard feeling shocked, and she was pretty sure she looked it. Thane was normally a stoic individual, ever calm and collected, which made his doubts even more jarring... and concerning.

"I don't think I understand, Thane," she admitted cautiously.

"When I met Irikah, I fell on my knees and begged for forgiveness. She woke me up, introduced me to things outside of my work. In her I found my absolution, I saw the error of my ways," he explained.

Realisation hit, hard. Irikah may have loved Thane but, from the sounds of his own confession, she had never accepted him for who he was. Which obviously left the assassin conflicted, struggling to reconcile his training and duty, with seeking to make the woman he loved happy. It was becoming evident that any misgivings Irikah had, had transformed into Thane's mental flagellation and it was tearing him apart. Finally, something inside Shepard snapped, and her anger flaring towards the deceased woman. Enough was enough.

Shepard took a shaky breath, she knew at least some of what she was going to say could upset Thane, especially with his mood so dark, but it needed to be voice. He needed to know that Irikah was wrong.

A momentary war raged within her, as she wondered how best to handle the situation. However, 'Commander' style quickly lost to 'Shepard' style. So with her decision made, and one graceful movement later, Shepard sat straddled across the assassin's waist, her hands locking his wrists above his head.

She leant down, holding her face close to Thane's, their noses almost touching. Certain that she had his full attention, she choose to ignore how erotic the position actually was, and as Thane's eyes widened with surprised, Shepard made her first attempt to remedy some of the doubts Irikah had
caused.

"So the main question you have is, why do I want a lowly assassin like you?" she asked.

Thane gave the barest movement of a nod, signalling her to continue.

"Could be that this lowly assassin just happens to be a damn hero," she told him.

Quickly, Shepard planted a kiss on his lips when Thane went to speak. She refused to hear any arguments against what she was telling him, and other than outright gagging him, kissing seemed like the most logical method to keep him silent.

"You are a damn hero Thane Krios, spirits know how many hundreds if not thousands, of lives you saved by destroying that slaver ring. And in Dantius towers, I spoke to two very grateful salarian brothers who you saved, even had an email from one of them raving about how great you were."

She paused for a moment, allowing her words to sink in, before continuing.

"Also, I can't forget that this lowly assassin just happened to sign up for a suicide mission, gratis, to save thousands if not millions of lives with hardly any questions asked. You're a damn hero Thane. I am proud to say I know you and to be with you. You're also a man Kolyat can be proud of too."

"My name is not…"

Thane's protests were silenced with another, longer kiss.

"I think about my time with the Reds," Shepard murmured against his lips, "All those men I lured, most were extorted but some were killed, their deaths are on my hands."

"Siha, you were a child, forced…"

"And you were six when your parents agreed to let the hanar take you for the compact," she interjected.

At that moment, Shepard had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop from smiling. It seemed her change in tactics had worked as she watched Thane's double lids blink slowly. Obviously that point struck it's mark, just as she intended. By his own admissions, he had not chosen the life he had led, his career had been thrust upon him. Yet he still thought he was to blame for all the bad that had befallen him and his family... it was heartbreaking.

"You told me yourself, you being chosen was a great honour for your family," she reminded him. "It may have been a honour, but you were still just a child, thrust into a situation out of your control. It's not like you could choose what profession you would have under the compact, was it?"

Thane broke their eye contact and shook his head slightly. Evidently, strike two had just hit home. Quietly, Shepard took a deep breath, preparing for the third and fourth points she was about to make. She ducked her head, forcing Thane to meet her gaze again.

"I was thirteen when I was first used, against my will, as the Reds' honey trap. I was terrified. You were a year younger than that when you were forced to make your first kill."

She silenced Thane when he went protest with another kiss. It seemed a very effective way of shutting him up.

"In your own words, Thane Krios: ‘an assassin is a weapon, a weapon doesn't choose to kill the one
who wields it does'."

Releasing his wrists, Shepard placed her hands gently on each side of his face, stroking his cheek frills gently. She knew he would argue with the last point she wanted to make. It was the one she believed most fiercely, and the one she knew Thane would find hardest to accept, so even though her actions were affectionate, Shepard was making sure he didn't have the chance to look away from her face. She needed him to see the sincerity behind her words.

"With that in mind Sere Krios, Irikah's death is not on your conscious."

She had to break her speech to silence him again. With a deeper, rougher kiss than before.

"It is not on your conscious because you were following orders when you targeted the slaver ring leader. And even though you were no longer bound to the Illuminated Primacy, look me in the eyes and tell me it wasn't a government official that hired you, since the slavers were attacking hanar colonies."

Knowing he couldn't bring himself to lie to her, and knowing he wouldn't betray an employer, Thane's silence answered her thinly veiled question. Shepard smiled at him warmly, stroking the sides of his face, waiting for his response. Thane's own hands were tracing indistinct patterns on the small of her back, through the material of her dress.

"You reason shrewdly," Thane said, finally.

"Do you remember the conversation when you explained what happened to Irikah?" she asked, tentatively.

He answered with a small smile, one that said: 'I'm drell, you know I do.'

"I'd already agreed to help Liara with the Shadow Broker, even before we knew about Feron, and the night you told me about Irikah, I silently vowed to have you with me. I'd hoped it would let Irikah's memory rest more easily on your conscious," she admitted.

"Siha," Thane whispered.

His eyes searching hers, though Shepard couldn't fathom what questions he was seeking answers to.

"When we were there, on the Broker's base, my resolve was waverering. Looking at Feron, my training was faltering and I was close to tears. Your hand on my shoulder grounded me, gave me the confidence I needed to be Commander Shepard."

She noticed the widening of his eyes at her admission, and guessed he didn't fully believe her. Taking a deep breath, Shepard steadied herself for the rest of the admission. It was going to leave her feeling vulnerable, an experience she hated, but Thane needed to understand what she saw in him... how she felt about him.

"Seeing you pinned by the debris the Broker threw at us, made me feel sick. I couldn't check your vitals, I didn't know if you were alive or dead, so I um..." she hesitated, feeling sheepish. "Sort of prayed to Amonkira, hoping to bargain for your life with that of the Shadow Broker's."

Shepard sat back on her haunches, though her knees were still either side of Thane's hips. His silence was making her feel uncharacteristically nervous. She swallowed with slightly more difficulty than she'd ever admit, her mouth feeling dry and her heart pounding in her chest. Shepard felt exposed revealing those details, but they were what Thane needed to hear, needed to understand.
"And you know, it wasn't just your skills as an assassin that made me want you as back up when we went after Morinth," Shepard continued, deciding she may as well admit everything. "I needed you there. Not the best assassin in the galaxy, not a highly trained sniper but you, Thane Krios. The only thing that gave me the will power to break that bitch's control over my mind, was thinking of you."

"Siha, I…"

It seemed Thane was lost for words. Surprise was evident in his face, along with a look, that if he was human would have to be described as bashful. It seemed he wasn't accustomed to compliments, and an idea suddenly stuck Shepard, washing away any insecurities her admissions had caused.

She reached for Thane's hands that had fallen loosely to her hips and leaning forward, pinned them once more above his head. Lowering her face so their noses were once again almost touching, Shepard looked deep into his onyx eyes, a devilish smile on her lips.

"You're a wonderful man," Shepard told him, repeating the words that had set this conversation in motion.

"You are handsome." She kissed the right side of his jaw.

"Intelligent." Followed by one to the left side.

"Charismatic." A kiss to his right cheek.

"Charming." And then his left.

"Thoughtful." She kissed his forehead.

"Kind." As well as the tip of his nose.

"You are also sexy as hell," she divulged in a sultry tone, finally caressing his lips with a lingering kiss.

Thane's chuckle reverberate against her chest. "I am now convinced you are bias, Siha."

"There's more," Shepard said, keeping the sultry edge in her voice. "You're the best damn assassin in the galaxy."

Her smile widened at the confused look on her companion's face. She knew the next list of qualities would be everything Irikah had hated, but Shepard wanted Thane to realise that they were parts of him that she highly valued and admired. She want him to understand that she respected every part of him, that she cared for him, regardless of the faults he thought he possessed.

"You're grace on the battlefield is worryingly distracting. You're skill with hand to hand combat is amazing. You're stealth is unparalleled, to which I may or may not be envious. You have great control with your biotics. Your self-discipline is incredible. And even though I can't possibly choose between you and my best friend, you are certainly a marksman extraordinaire."

She punctuated each sentence with a kiss, reversing the order she had previously used, and her last statement earned her another chuckle from him.

"You are a remarkable woman Siha," Thane smiled. "Though I fear you will give me an ego."

Shepard took a deep breath, realising she had one final admission to make, one that she was scared to say. Releasing his wrists once more, she placed her hands either side of his face as she had done
earlier. It was now or never.

"I love you, Thane Krios," she told him, looking him directly in the eye. "I love everything that makes you the person you are. Your exotic features, our distinct differences, your spirituality, the way your mind works, your philosophical outlook, the dry humour you hardly ever let people see, and your skills as an assassin."

Slowly, Thane reached up to cup her face, and Shepard leant into the touch. She wasn't ashamed to admit that she more than enjoyed the feel of his scales on her skin. She turned to kiss his palm, before continuing.

"Others chose you for that role, yet you exceeded mere skill. You became the galaxy's best, because of your dedication to your people's compact to the hanar. Your talent is not a sin. Since your people have a God of Hunters, surely your aptitude is a gift from Amonkira?" she asked. "You once told me you have few skills other than those to take life, but I don't think you have ever considered the wider picture. Those skills allow you to protect others, to keep them from harm."

Thane's double lids blinked, twice. "I think I have misjudged you, Shepard," he said, his voice unsteady. "You are not a Siha, but the reincarnation of Arashu herself."

"I love you, Thane," she repeated. "All of you."

Shepard lowered her lips to his once more, breathing in his familiar scent of spice and leather as she did. As the kiss deepened, she closed her eyes and could feel their heartbeats start to syncopate. Only the faint hum of the drive core mingled with the sound of their heated breathes.

Shepard ran the tip of her tongue along Thane's lower lip before gently biting its fullness. His breath hitched, and he pulled her body closer to his, as her fingers teasingly stroked the sensitive skin of Thane's wine coloured dewlap. Their lips locked again, with more fire behind the touch, and Shepard was vaguely thankful Kasumi had been acclimatising her to drell venom.

She felt Thane's tongue brush her lips, almost as if seeking permission. Her breath caught in her throat, as she realised his tongue was slightly bifurcated at the tip. Opening her mouth, Shepard's own tongue began a sensual dance with Thane's. He faintly tasted of the Strawberries they'd shared, with an underlying hint of exotic spice that was purely his.

The feeling of his tongue was slightly rougher than hers, adding to the pleasant sensations as they explored each other with playful flicks and caresses of their tongues. On impulse, Shepard curled hers to stroke the roof of Thane's mouth gently, and felt his hips buck involuntary in response. She sighed contently, and as the kiss intensified she felt his hands slide from her hips towards her rear.

There was an electronic beep.

"Commander. There's a call from the Illusive Man, flagged for you immediate attention," EDI's synthesised voice stated through the comm. system.

Shepard let out an annoyed groan, which made Thane chuckle.

"Alright EDI, let him know I will be there in five," she answered, as politely as she could.

"Acknowledged..." EDI seemed to pause. "I am sorry if I have interrupted anything, commander." The AI sounding almost embarrassed.

Knowing that she and Garrus had disabled all but the most necessary surveillance equipment aboard the Normandy, meant Shepard knew that EDI really had no idea if anything had been interrupted.
She couldn't help but laugh.

"Nothing to worry about, I'll be there shortly."

"Understood. Logging you out commander," EDI stated, and Shepard could have sworn the AI sounded relieved.

"Duty calls, literally," Shepard said, smiling at Thane.

She gave him an affectionate kiss, before extracting herself from their shared embrace. As she walked to the door, Shepard straightening her dress and ran her hands through her ruffled red hair, in the hopes of bringing her heart rate back under control. Unexpectedly, she felt Thane's arms wrapping around her torso, encasing her arms and restricting her from palming the door mechanism.

"I love you too, Siha," he said, his velvet voice finally devoid of its earlier sorrow.

He kissed the junction where her neck met her shoulder, before relinquishing his hold. Shepard turned briefly and placed a tender kiss on Thane's cheek, just as she had the night he'd explained what 'Siha' meant, before slipping through the door and heading for the Communications Room.

Chapter End Notes

So I think it's pretty self-explanatory regarding Thane's cheek frills, but in case anyone was wondering, the dewlap is the red part of his neck. Since he has reptilian ancestry, it seems this would be the most likely reptile anatomy as many have dewlaps which they can extend and retract. They are also usually a different colour from the rest of their body. There is similar reasoning behind him having a slight forked tongue, think of a Burton's legless lizard rather than a snake or Komodo Dragon if you want reference for my thoughts.

Other than that, the building of immunity is of course by drinking Weeping Hearts cocktails, and have been used throughout the story because MEwiki states that drell venom is: 'mild enough to be served in drinks, and may cause mild hallucinations on oral contact'. Since Shepard is pretty much a cyborg after her resurrection, and can apparently drink ryncol and batarian uncut without too many issues, along with Jack's comments in ME3 about a biotic's metabolism being able to process alcohol quickly, I personally doubt drell venom would affect her at all.
Thane stood with his hands clasped behind his back, perfectly at ease. However, he watched the wary looking Garrus who was seemingly intent on creating a groove in the hanger's metal floor with his anxious pacing. They were waiting for Shepard to join them at the shuttle, for an assignment she'd requested they join her on to the planet Zeona.

The debriefing had given Thane the impression it would be a relatively simple task, retrieving a prototype vehicle at the personal request of The Illusive Man. However, the mere mention of the Hammerhead exploration rover had put Garrus in a pensive mood. The turian had been muttering and growling under his breath since the pair had left the informal meeting in Shepard's cabin, and Thane had watched his friend with a mixture of amusement and intrigue, as they waited on the commander.

"What causes you distress?" he enquired, as Garrus completed another lap of pacing.

"He's just worried I'll steal all the fun with the new toy," Shepard called, as she exited the elevator.

Thane smiled affectionately at the petite redhead. He indulged in taking in her figure, sleek and powerful in her black and red armour. Each day, she grew more beautiful to him.

"Fun!" Garrus exclaimed, disturbing Thane's thoughts. The turian's subharmonics flaring loud enough for him to hear. "One word Shepard, Mako!"

The commander's laugh was music to Thane's ears, but his own mirth was short lived as he watched his Siha walk up to Garrus, curling one hand around the front of his cowl and resting the other hand against his scarred mandible. Thane was hit by an unexpected wave of jealousy, as the turian lowered his forehead to rest it on Shepard's. He knew what that gesture represented.

Objectively, he knew the two were close, but in that moment, Thane was starting to suspect their relationship wasn't purely platonic. The way his Siha smiled up at the other man, made his heart lurch. Only a handful of nights ago, Shepard had admitted her love for him. To see her acting this way with someone else... Thane didn't know what to make of it. The fact the other man was known to be her closest friend, had his stomach threatened to lurch at the implications. He felt betrayed watching them together.

"Garrus, I promise. No cliff jumping."

The seriousness in Shepard's voice brought Thane back to the scene in front of him. He heard Garrus make a contented, and probably subconscious, purr that only helped to increased Thane's uneasiness.

"Well... good," the turian rumbled.

"Though Joker informs me that Zeona is a lot like Therum," Shepard grinned like a mad woman, a teasing note entering her voice.

Thane watched as Garrus' mandibles pulled tightly to his face, and his talons gripped the commander's arms. "No... Don't even think it."

"It's only Lava big guy. It didn't kill us last time," Shepard said, sweetly.

The twist in their interaction left Thane feeling more confused than ever. He was still rooted to the spot, wondering what was going on.
"Spirits Shepard!" Garrus growled, before quickly thrusting Shepard towards Thane, much to his surprise. "Krios, your girlfriend is a madwoman."

Thane's double lids blinked, twice. It was the only outward evidence of his surprise at hearing the turian refer to the commander as his girlfriend, yet his heart felt like it was suddenly hammering in his chest. Shepard, for her part, merely laughed.

"Come on Garrus, it wasn't that bad," she smiled.

"You made a five hundred year old krogan Battlemaster scream, Shepard. Yes, it was that bad!" Garrus huffed at the commander, before turning his attention back to Thane. "Maybe you can explain to girlfriend that you do. Not. Drive. Into. Lava!" The last five words had the turian glaring at the redhead again.

"Siha?" Thane questioned, utterly confused.

He was unsure if he was more perplexed by the intimacy he'd witnessed between Shepard and Garrus, the convoluted conversation that was happening in front of him, or the fact that the turian had twice referred to Shepard as his girlfriend.

The latter was not an unpleasant thought, but as far as Thane was aware, no one knew of their shared affection. And adding to Thane's surprised, Shepard turned a radiant smile to him, before kissing him sweetly.

"I'll explain in the shuttle," she told him, before glancing over her shoulder towards Garrus. "The Lava was an accident, but if it will make you feel better, you can drive the Hammerhead first."

The turian looked completely shocked at this, which caused Thane to chuckle slightly, despite himself. The worry of seeing his Siha's closeness with Garrus was beginning to fade a little, with her gentle kiss certainly helping.

"Shall we, gentlemen?" Shepard enquired, gesturing to the waiting shuttle. "Besides, after this you two are accompanying me into a dead reaper, so surely a jaunt in a new vehicle is nothing to worry about."

"I'll say it again Shepard, Mako…" Garrus growled.

Several hours later, Thane sat in Life Support staring out into the hues of the drive core. The simple retrieval mission had turned into anything but easy, and had taken them from Zeona to Lattesh, from there to Corang, onto Karumto before finally finishing on Kopis. Combined with the countless geth to fight through and a prothean relic, that Thane had a suspicion was now displayed somewhere in the commander's cabin, along with Shepard's driving that had been almost as abhorrent as Garrus had described it, he was really beginning to believe that his Siha had an endemic perchance for trouble.

Thane sighed as he thought about Shepard. Despite letting himself relive the memories of each moment he'd spent with his fiery Siha, lingering particularly on their last private conversation and the very interesting direction it had been heading in, he was still struggling with the affection he'd witnessed between her and Garrus.

He had never thought he was a jealous man, but with his previous conviction that the commander was leaving him due to his Solipsism of Irikah still fresh in his mind, Thane was struggling to regain control of his feelings. Which only worsened when he became aware of the familiar footsteps that
were approaching.

"Do you need something?" he asked, keeping his tumbling emotions from his voice.

"Have a few minutes to talk?" Shepard asked, softly.

"Of course, Siha," he agreed.

"I've been thinking about you," she smiled.

As she slipped into the chair opposite him, his mind quickly latched onto the fact Shepard had spoken the same words the night they had first admitted their attraction to each other. It was a touching gesture, and he felt a smile tug at the corner of his lips. However, his emotions were still in turmoil. He loved her completely, but his doubts and worries would not rest.

"And I you, though it has occurred to me that I might not be foremost in your mind."

Shepard's beautiful face wore the expression of complete surprise, before Thane watched her emerald eyes widen in what he supposed must have been realisation. She reached for his hands across the table, causing him to look down at their entwined fingers. Despite his worries, Thane found himself smiling and marvelling how his Siha's human fingers always spread so naturally to accommodate his own fused digits.

"You're the only one I want, Thane," she told him, gently.

"That is..." he paused to swallow the lump of relief that was forming in his throat, cursing how emotional he had found himself recently. "I'm glad to hear that."

Before he could say more, there was a chime from the door, followed by a whoosh and heavy footsteps. "Sorry, the panel was green. I didn't realise you had company Krios," the flanging tones of Garrus stated, and the commander began to stand. "Don't leave on my account, Shepard," the turian added.

"I have mission reports I need to go over with Miranda before I turn in for the night," Shepard replied.

As she walked around the table, Thane stood to accompany her to the door.

"I can see myself out," she smiled.

To Thane's slight surprise, kissed him tenderly, before turning to leave.

"Goodnight gentlemen, I'll see you at zero eight hundred, so we can save yet another bunch of people incapable of looking after themselves."

And with that, she was gone.
Mistaken Affection (Garrus PoV)

Agitation and worry coiled in Garrus’ gut, as he paced the width of the Main Battery. He was concerned about Shepard, her admission before their previous mission had surprised him. Since returning, he couldn’t get it out of his mind. It churned his gizzards, and he needed to do something about it.

Now, Garrus was under no illusion, he knew the commander wasn't just some paragon ideal, she was a woman. A hell of a woman, but a woman all the same. He knew she had needs, wants and feelings, just like the rest of them. Spirits, he'd been out with her on 'The Pull', as human's liked to say, countless times and had even discovered her tastes usually lay outside her own race, so that wasn't what was causing his worry.

When Shepard had asked to talk, Garrus hadn't thought much of it. As usual they chatted crap, teasing each other and bantering back and forth. Certainly nothing out of the ordinary for them. Well... right up until he'd told her the story about the recon. scout, following it up by suggestively pointing out they hadn't had shore leave for a while. Shepard had stated that if he needed to blow off steam, Kelly would probably be willing. He’d shot back that she was the one most likely to have a cross species liaison, and suggested Thane.

That's when it had happened. That small, almost shy smile that had formed on her lips. His gizzards had tightened at that, knowing that there was something more behind that smile than sexual attraction. It was akin to the look his sister Sol would get, whenever she'd talk about Chellik, who she was now planning to be mated to.

Garrus had sighed, before dropping down onto the crate next to Shepard. She'd given him a questioning look as he'd put his arm around her shoulder, but when he'd simply said he'd have her back, she had relaxed so willingly into him. Almost like she was relieved. That had hit him with the force of a charging krogan.

Remembering that moment had made up his mind. Quickly, he left the Main Battery and headed for Life Support. The lock was showing green, so Garrus went in, only to be stopped in his tracks by the sight of Shepard. His mandibles twitched, he really didn't want to have this conversation in front of the commander. She'd probably either laugh at or kill him, and he didn't like either scenario.

"Sorry, the panel was green. I didn't realise you had company, Krios," he stated, only to watch the commander begin to stand. "Don't leave on my account, Shepard."

"I have mission reports I need to go over with Miranda before I turn in for the night," Shepard replied, walking around the table.

Garrus noticed that Thane stood, possibly to accompany her to the door.

"I can see myself out," Shepard said before kissing the drell. "Goodnight gentlemen, I'll see you at 08:00 so we can save yet another bunch of people incapable of looking after themselves."

And with that, she was gone.

Garrus' gizzard's lurched again. It wasn't that she'd kissed the assassin that bothered him, it was the obvious tenderness that had him worried. It was the horrible thought that Shepard could be setting herself up to be hurt... that's what Garrus couldn't handle it.

They were more than best friends, spirits... they were more than siblings really, they were partners.
There was no Shepard without Vakarian, no Vakarian without Shepard. He'd always have her back, Garrus just hoped she wouldn't kill him for trying to look out for her.

"Do you need something?" Thane asked, in crisp politeness.

Unable to help himself, Garrus sighed and rubbed the underside of his fringe. He was never good at this sort of thing, his sister Sol would certainly back that up, but it needed to be done. Shepard deserved the very best, to be loved and cared for, and Garrus simply needed to make sure that was what she was getting. To do any less would be dishonouring their friendship, though he was glad no-one would be able to hear the tremor of discomfort in his subharmonics.

"You may think it's none of my business, but I need to ask, what are you intentions with Shepard?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Thane replied.

Garrus' mandibles hung open for a moment, before snapping back firmly to his face. He was utterly confused.

"Me?!"

"You two are close," the drell stated, calmly.

"She's my best friend," Garrus told him. "I've had Shepard's six since the moment we met, and that's why I'm here. She cares about you, and I want to make sure you're not messing her about. If you hurt her, I'll kill you."

Even though the threat was real, he tried to keep his voice neutral. Garrus doubted Shepard would appreciate if he started a full blown fight with this man. He watched as Thane's double lids blinked twice, then the assassin smiled, though his posture remained regiment. Garrus gave a tentative sniff, but there was nothing in the drell's pheromones to give away his feelings. It was frustrating.

"Then I have done you an injustice, Garrus. I love Shepard, and will protect her until my dying breath," Thane replied.

"Well… that's good to know," he sighed in relief. However, he was a little puzzled with the drell's words. "But what injustice?"

"Earlier, in the hangar…" the assassin began.

It started as a rumble of amusement on a subharmonic level, but in only a few seconds Garrus couldn't help but laugh out loud. He finally realised what Krios had been thinking, and found it highly amusing. Sure, there was no one in the galaxy he respected more than the commander, and she was a hell of a soldier, as well as very attractive for a human. But she was Shepard, his best friend, his partner.

"Spirits know what you'd make of seeing Shepard with Wrex then!" he grinned. "First time we visited Tuchanka, she practically leapt into the krogan's arms."

"Indeed?" Thane asked, seeming to relax.

"Yeah, those two are close. I think Wrex views her as a sister, he's certainly called her 'part krogan' enough," Garrus explained.

"He is also the screaming Battlemaster you mentioned earlier?" Thane's question was more a
statement.

Garrus' mandibles flared in a wide grin, and an idea struck him, one Shepard would possibly hate... but never mind.

"How about we go grab some of the slop Gardener tries to pass off as food, and I tell you all about your girlfriend's crazy antics on board the SR1?"

"That sounds, intriguing," Thane smiled.

Many hours, and a few bottles of respective beers later, the two men were still sat in the Mess Hall laughing. The current topic was Garrus' recount of how Shepard had handled a preaching hanar on the Presidium three years previously. Neither had heard the lift slowly descending from the upper decks, nor the soft padding footsteps approaching them. It wasn't until Garrus felt a small, warm hand gently tug the tip of his fringe, that he realised Shepard was stood behind him. Mainly because she was the only person other than Sol who could get away with doing that. And even Thane looked surprised, for once.

"Siha?" the drell asked.

Garrus titled his head, wondering what the spirits that meant.

Shepard chuckled. "I'm choosing to ignore that it's now zero two hundred, with a mission in six hours. Instead, I'm going to steal your beer, Sere Krios, and enjoy both of your companies."

With that, the commander slipped into Thane's lap in a graceful movement. She wrapped one arm loosely around the assassin's shoulders, before resting her bare feet on Garrus' own thigh. Since he wasn't wearing armour for a change, he could feel how cold they were. Without thinking, he wrapped his talons around them, hoping his body heat would rub off. It was only when she wiggled her toes that Garrus consciously realised she had five digits on each foot.

"You have weird feet," he announced, earning him a playful scowl.

"Well we can't all evolve from prehistoric dino-birds now can we," she shot back, before snagged Thane's half empty bottle of beer from the drell's hand. She took a gulp. "So, how bad have the stories been?"

"Well, I was just about to give an in depth recount of your run-ins with Verner, since I'm guessing you didn't give Thane a proper explanation, when you saw your 'number one fan' on Illium," Garrus grinned.

Shepard buried her face in the crook of the drell's neck, almost hiding behind his collar.

"Oh Spirits! Kalahira, take me know," she muttered, causing both men to laugh.
The turbulence that buffeted the Normandy was on a parallel with what they had faced heading for the Shadow Broker's base over Hagalaz. It was not a good sign, and it took all of Shepard's control to stay up right as she staggered to the cockpit. When a particularly nasty jolt knocked her off balance, she grabbed hold of the pilot's chair to steady herself.

"What's with all the chop Joker?" she asked.

"I'm doing my best." Was his curt reply. "The wind's gusting to 500kph."

It wasn't like Joker to be snippy. Sarcastic sure, but never snippy. The strain of keeping the Normandy on an even keel was very evident in the pilot's green eyes, as he glared at the monitors. Shepard admired that in him, the unwavering determination he put into piloting their baby. Gently, she patted him companionably on the shoulder.

"You're best is so damn awesome, I'm not used to feeling our girl jostled like this," she half-joked.

He flashed her a toothy grin, before turning serious again. "There's a second ship alongside the reaper. It's not transmitting any IFF, but the ladar thinks the silhouette is geth."

"Of course... why not? The more the merrier!" she grumbled. Surprisingly, the buffeting suddenly stopped. "Not that I'm complaining, but what just happened?"

"The reaper's Mass Effect fields are still active, we just passed inside their envelope," EDI explained.

Through the cockpit's window, the hulking corpse of the reaper came into view, and Shepard gave an involuntary shudder. The thought that she would soon be walking through a dead body, albeit a synthetic one, was less than appealing. In truth, the knowledge made her skin crawl. Shepard had known for a long time that she lived a strange life, this just fully cemented it.

"Eye of the Hurricane, huh?" Joker muttered.

Shepard could only managed a small grunt of agreement, her eyes and thoughts still transfixed on the reaper. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to go very wrong. However, approaching footstep shook Shepard from her musings, and she turned to face the welcome sight of Thane and Garrus. With a nod, she motioned the pair to join her in the decontamination room of the airlock.

Shepard silently eyed her team mates, not that she needed too, since she had chosen them knowing they were more than capable. Though Shepard still had Tali and Kasumi on alert, in case anything got too dicey… they were tech experts after all, and she had a tendency to expect the worst.

"Docking with reaper imminent," Joker instructed through the comm. system.

"Ladies? You ready?" she called.

"Standing by." "You bet, Shep." Tali and Kasumi replied at the same time.

Shepard chuckled. "Boarding party ready," she affirmed to Joker.

Unable to help herself, she gave Thane's hand a quick squeeze before heading out the airlock, unsure if it was to bolster her nerves or his. As the airlock doors slide open, they were greeted with a sight
that was less than welcoming. The Cerberus research vessel, that was now apparently deserted, stood between them and the reaper. It was eerily quiet, and Shepard's senses screamed that something was deadly wrong. Slowly the trio inched forward, hyper alert, and with their guns raised. Each footstep only made the sense of foreboding grow.

"There are too many shadows in here," Thane whispered, an unusual edge to his voice.

"Exploring an abandoned area, expecting something mechanical and nasty to jump out at any moment... just like old times," Garrus said, deadpan.

The turian's voice was hushed, and even though Shepard couldn't hear the subharmonics, her ears felt the small vibrations that she'd come to know meant her best friend was nervous. But knowing she wasn't the only one was not a comfort.

Cautiously, the trio continued moving forward, until they reached a row of consoles. Shepard signalled her team to stay alert, before activating the middle terminal. There was nothing of note, until she found a log from Doctor Chandana, the lead scientist on the research team. It still didn't reveal much, just that the crew had been edgy and the team had also felt the same uneasy atmosphere the three of them were feeling.

Her stomach started trying to twist itself into knots, something was very wrong here. Another console near a pair of medical stations held another of log, one that hinted at the first exposure to the reaper's indoctrination, with the lead scientist 'listening' to some samples. Shepard's nerves felt electrified.

"Anyone else getting the impression this is going to end like the collector ship?" Garrus drawled.

"Now why would you think that? It's not like TIM's ever sent us into a trap before," she replied, sweetly.

It was no secret that Shepard was still angry over the Illusive Man's stunt regarding the collector ship. She did not take kindly to those who put her crew, her family, in danger. The fact that her boyfriend had been wounded by a collector bullet, and her best friend had nearly been crushed by a Praetorian, just added to the animosity.

Shaking her head, Shepard took point before motioning for Thane to open the door to the next section... the reaper itself. Years of training helped steady her nerves, and kept them from outwardly manifesting. However, her feeling of apprehension only grew whilst she watched the lock mechanism turn from red to green. As the heavy metal door slid open, an unnerving judder knocked the three of them off balance. Shepard found Thane's strong arms wrapped around her, keeping her upright, and heard the metal of Garrus' armour collide with the hull of the ship. She winced at the noise, it was far too loud in the renewed silence of the reaper.

"Normandy to shore party," Joker's voice rang with worry over the comm. link.

"Talk to me," she replied.

"The reaper put up kinetic barriers, I don't think we can get through from our side," he explained, sounding panicked.

"We're trapped. How disquieting," Thane murmured, close to her ear.

Shepard flashed him a tight lipped smile, appreciating how his dry humour helped ease her own nerves a little. He dipped his head in a slight nod in return, leading her to believe that had been his intentions.
"Joker, EDI, I need options," she stated over the comm.

"Shepard, a kinetic barrier can only be produced by a mass effect generator. That is true for any ship, even a reaper," EDI intoned. "At the moment of activation, I detected a heat spike in what is likely the wreck's mass effect core. Sending the coordinates now."

Her Omni-Tool bleeped as the information was transferred. "Received, thanks EDI."

"Commander?" Tali's voice came over the comm. "EDI's just updated us. The core is the only thing maintaining the reaper's altitude."

"Of course it is," Garrus uttered, his mandibles pulled tight to his face in agitation.

"So when we take the barriers down to escape, the wreck falls into the planet's core?" Shepard asked.

"Yeah, everyone dies, I get it," Joker grumbled.

"You're the best damn pilot in the galaxy, if any helmsmen can pull us off this thing before it reaches crush depth, it's you," she stated, letting her confidence in him echo in her voice.

Joker chuckled in response. "Good hunting," he called, before cutting the link.

After running a hand through her cropped red hair, Shepard turned to face her teammates. "So…"

"We precede as planned," Thane surmised.

"We should be able to recover the research team's data," Garrus said. His flanging voice sounded a little less agitated.

"Agreed. We'll make a sweep for survivors and data, then knock this ugly piece of crap out of the sky," Shepard affirmed.

Once again, she moved to take point again, and heard the two men chuckle behind her. It seemed to Shepard that her two most trusted companions had decided between themselves the roles they would play. She trusted them both equally on her six, as they were both excellent snipers, but Garrus took his usual position, whilst Thane moved to her eight. Since this allowed for better use of his biotics, Shepard was hardly going to complain.

Whenever the three of them worked together, she found she needed to give them little guidance. A small feat when she considered Thane had only worked solo before joining the team, and not even Wrex had been able to seemlessly blend in with her and Garrus' almost telepathic bond.

Pressing forward into the reaper itself, with only their Omni-Tools providing any real source of light, they came to a section of catwalks. Shepard stopped dead. Shriveled corpses and dried bloodstains littered the floor, the air was thick with decay and her stomach threatened to lurch.

All she could think was: shit!
"These look like failed husks," Shepard stated.

It wasn't so much her words but the way she said them, that made Thane's scales itch. It was like she was dazed, but with an edge of unspoken horror that reverberated just at the back of consciousness. When his eyes finally fell to what the commander was staring at, his gut twisted in revulsion. Those... things were an abomination. Thane was sure this moment would come to haunt his nightmares, and he understood the far away quality to her voice. Unable to continue to look at the twisted corpses any longer, Thane bowed his head.

'Kalahira, grant that their souls find peace across the sea' he prayed.

"I've heard stories about this sort of... atrocity. I thought they were exaggerated," he whispered.

"Are you alright?" Shepard asked.

"Perfect memory is not always a gift," he replied dryly, earning him a smile.

Stepping carefully to avoid standing on the decomposing bodies, Thane followed the commander's lead, with Garrus covering the rear. Slightly passed the catwalk they had entered by there was a third terminal, and similar to the ones they had found aboard the Cerberus research vessel, there appeared to be nothing of note except a single video log. The footage contained two scientists apparently sharing the same memory, before one began to see things not picked up by the surveillance equipment. Thane gave an involuntary shudder, it was unnerving to watch.

Endemic memory may not always be a blessing, but to think of someone... something being able to manipulate his memories... it was yet another thing that would undoubtedly stalk his sleeping hours.

"It sounds like the reaper was affecting their minds," Garrus stated, glancing around the gloom filled space.

"Stay alert," Shepard ordered, an edge creeping into her voice.

Thane watched as she moved to take point, and on her signal, the three of them slowly began to move forward. After only a dozen steps, a spine-chilling moan filled the air. Desperately, he scanned the darkness trying to spot the enemy. It nearly took him by surprise when he did, the creature was closer than he expected.

"Target right," he called, sending a low powered Warp into the thing.

"I fucking hate husks," Shepard growled, tossing several of the shambling horrors over the side of the platform with a well-aimed Throw.

Vaguely, Thane realised that was the first time he had ever heard the commander swear, and he'd been by her side for many battles. The fact alone spoke volumes to him, none of them reassuring.

Time seemed to lose meaning, as several waves of the monsters hurled themselves at the trio, and a combination of biotics and gunfire took down all but one of the enemy. How the husk had managed to shuffle it's way through their attacks, Thane didn't know, yet he watched in horror as it grabbed at Shepard, attempting to maul her with it's needle like claws. For a moment he felt helpless, unable to loosen bullets or biotics less he hit his Siha. Thankfully, a break finally came, as Shepard directed a biotic-aided punch at the head of the reanimated corpse, causing it to stumble backwards. He seized
the moment and released a high powered Throw, putting real distance between the husk and the
commander.

"Garrus!" he called, hoping the turian would understand his request.

There was the familiar crack of a single bullet leaving a high velocity rifle and the creature dropped
twitching to the floor, a hole in the centre of it's forehead. Thane gave a sigh of relief, and watched
Shepard lean back against a crate, her eyes focused on the ceiling of the chamber they were in.

"That was a little close," she panted.

At first, Thane presumed she had meant the husk's attack, until he saw the singe mark across her
cheek. It seemed Garrus had seen it at the exact same moment, for the turian gave a distressed chirp,
before rushing to the commander's side. Thane wasn't far behind him, but stopped abruptly when
Garrus gently ran a talon along the mark. Despite having cleared the air, he couldn't help the pang of
jealousy he felt, even if he logically knew the turian was applying topical Medi-Gel.

"Spirits Shepard, I'm so sorry," Garrus whispered.

"Not what I meant big guy, but don't worry about it," Shepard replied, almost cheerfully.

Upon reaching the pair, Thane held out his hand. "Siha?" he asked, finally managing to bring her
emerald gaze away from the ceiling.

She gave him a sheepish smiled, and took his hand without hesitation. Even in armour, the
commander was still petite and with no effect, Thane helped Shepard to her feet. With a hand gently
under her chin, he turned her head so he could see the wound. However, the combination of Medi-
Gel and what he assumed where her cybernetics had already taken affect, and the mark was rapidly
fading. There were a multitude of things he wanted to say at that moment, but decided to leave
anything sentimental until they were in private.

"After your recounts of your hunt for Saren, I had wondered if the technology to make husks came
from the geth or Sovereign," Thane told them.

"I'd say this confirms it as reaper tech," Garrus replied, an edge creeping back into his voice.

Shepard nodded her agreement. "Just be thankful these ones don't detonate an electronic discharge
like they did two years ago."

"Electronic discharge?" he asked, assuming he'd miss heard her.

"Eden Prime," she stated. "Once they went down, the damn things would dispel an electrical pulse-
shock-thing. That mission was going to hell in a hand basket long before Nihlus went down."

"Hell in a what?" Garrus asked, sounding as confused as Thane felt.

"It's a human saying. Don't worry your pretty little brain about it," the commander chuckled. "Ready
to move?"

Both men nodded their agreements, and using the sparse cover that was available, they moved
further into the reaper. It wasn't long before the wail of husks heralded another upcoming skirmish,
but suddenly gunfire sounded to their left. As they quickly turned a corner, they came upon several
of the reanimated corpses lying on the floor, single bullet wounds to the heads. The hull of the reaper
returned to it's quiet brooding.
"Sniper," Thane declared. "Someone else is still alive in here. They're a rather good shot."

He was actually quite impressed. The only vantage point he could see in the area was far enough away to make the head shots tricky, even for someone as seasoned as himself. Garrus grunted an agreement, and Shepard simply chuckled.

"You two seem a little disgruntled. Fear your roles as the galaxy's best snipers are under threat?" she asked, sweetly.

"Hardly," Garrus dismissed. "I couldn't see the shooter, though it could be a survivor from the science team."

"Possible, but doubtful," Shepard replied. "We know Cerberus likes to train their operatives well, but you've seen the logs. The last one about seeing things coming through the walls… I don't think anyone would be mentally stable enough for these types of shots."

"I agree. Too much skill was required," Thane stated, carefully looking around the dimly lit walkway. "Siha, there's another console here," he advised, finally finding something that could prove useful.

Shepard nodded to Garrus, who quickly set about mining the computer for relevant date. After several minutes, another log was available: "Chandana said the ship was dead. We trusted him. He was right. But even a dead god can dream," the anxious looking man on the video said.

"What the hell does that mean?" Garrus growled, in obvious agitation.

"In his house at R'lyeh, dead Cthulhu waits dreaming," Shepard murmured, seeming lost in thought.

In alarm, Thane and Garrus exchanged a worried glance. That was not the type of thing the commander would usually say, and a wave of fear and dread clawed at Thane as he looked back at his fiery Siha. Her words did not bode well.

Author's Note
For those of you who would like to know, 'In his house at R'lyeh, dead Cthulhu waits dreaming' is not some random gibberish I made up, it is actually a quote from H. P. Lovecraft's 'The Call of Cthulhu' (which is a very good read).
Shepard's words hung in the air, and Garrus chanced another glance at Thane. For once he found evident emotion on the assassins face, and sorely wishing he hadn't. To see a man who constantly hid his emotions show such blatant worry and fear… it was not a memory he relished reliving.

"Siha?"

Thane's voice broke the silence, much to Garrus' relief and he watched as the drell cautiously lay a hand on Shepard's lower back. Though it was a gentle movement, Garrus could see the coiled tension in the man, as if he was expecting for the commander to lash out at any moment. Not that he blamed him, because he was also concerned Shepard was starting to suffer from the reaper's indoctrination. He had no idea if it could happen so fast, but she was not acting like herself.

Garrus inhaled sharply as Shepard began to turn around, and found himself raising his Vindicator into a battle ready stance. His heart pounded in his chest, dreading what he would see when the commander fully faced them. The thought he had lost her again, especially to reaper indoctrination, was almost too much to bare. But then Shepard merely smiled, looking a little embarrassed and Garrus softly keened his relief.

"Sorry," she said, biting her lower lip. "The words reminded me of something. A centuries old work by H. P. Lovecraft 'The Call of Cthulhu', it was supposedly inspired by Tennyson's sonnet 'The Kraken'."

For a moment Garrus simply stared at her, his assault rifle now hanging loosely by his side. He couldn't believe her sometimes. The absolutely worry and torment she'd just caused both him and Thane, and he bet the commander probably didn't even realise they had thought something was wrong. Garrus was relieved beyond measure, but he still wanted to shake her for scaring him. Then her words caught up with him, well... one in particular, and he outright laughed.

"Wait... Tennyson. You're saying that scaring us by quoting some ancient human verse is actually Ashley's fault?" he asked, his mandibles spread wide in a grin.

Shepard shrugged. "Pretty much."

"You are a wonder, Siha," Thane stated, dryly.

"You are a wonder, Siha," Thane stated, dryly.

The commander gave the drell a sceptical look, as she moved passed him. "I don't think you mean that as nicely as it sounds."

Silently, Garrus followed Shepard as she walked towards a cavernous area at the head of the catwalk, and his sharp eyes quickly made out the faint outline of spikes in the distance. It was a sight that caused his blood to run cold and gizzards twist. Once he was by her side, Garrus wrapped his taloned hand around her shoulder. It was the closet thing they could get to a hug whilst on a mission, however her gaze never left the lifeless bodies impaled on the spikes.

"We've seen these before, Shepard," he said, his voice dropping several pitches. "Dragons teeth, your people call them."

She nodded. "They were on Eden Prime."

"There are tales of such things among my people," Thane's said, in an angry whisper. "Devices buried on distant worlds that turn the finders into abominations."
That made Shepard look at Garrus sharply, and unable to stop himself, he leant his forehead against hers. He'd never forget that mission, neither of them would. A survey team, fifty humans strong, 'willingly' turning themselves into husks. Liara had been outright sick at the sight, and Shepard and himself hadn't fared much better.

"Trebin!" They said at the same time.

Tactfully, Garrus moved away when Thane joined them. Things may have been set straight between the two off them, but drell were not that different from turians in their instincts to protect their mates. Garrus wasn't delusional, despite his greater height and weight, he was fairly sure the assassin would be the victor should they ever end up in a real fight.

Which was a situation he wanted to avoid, for Shepard's sake as much as his own. A sigh from the commander brought him back to the present. She had turned from the oppressing spectacle of the dragon's teeth, and was eyeing the rest of the room.

"See how the room is arranged?" she queried. "They treated this thing like some kind of alter."

Garrus couldn't repress the low growl that escaped him. "It does look like that. But why would they want this to happen?"

"You heard the logs. They were hearing things, seeing things. They were being indoctrinated," Shepard replied, angrily. "We can't help these people now, but we won't let the machines use their corpses like this."

"Agreed," Thane affirmed, sounding just as resolute as the commander.

Garrus flared his mandibles at that. Now that he knew the drell fully returned Shepard's feelings, he could happily admit they were a good match. She needed someone strong and dependable, and Thane had proven himself to be just that.

Looking away from the couple, Garrus spied what seemed like an encrypted door on the left side of the cavern. It piqued his interested, and he flipped open his Omni-Tool to run some preliminary tests before alerting the commander. However, it seemed Shepard had already spotted it.

"Garrus, think you can hack this door?" she asked.

Garrus' gave an indignant snort, before nodding towards his Omni-Tool. "Already on it, Shepard."

In less than thirty seconds, the door slid open with a hiss revealing another airlock. Thankfully, this one was still well lit, and free from any blood spatter. It was a vast improvement.

"Please stand by. Equalising pressure with exterior conditions," an automated voice announced. "Remember, safety is everyone's concern. We have gone five days without a workplace death."

Or not.

"That is... less than comforting," Thane said dryly.

"Five whole days. Probably ran out of people to die," Garrus stated, grimly.

Shepard's lip curled into a snarl. "Wonder if TIM set these people up too?"

"Would it really surprise you?" he replied.

"Almost expect it," Shepard stated.
After signalling for them to stay alert, the commander's gauntleted hand palmed the door panel. With extreme caution, they made their way into what appear to be a large storage room, with multiple crates arranged neatly on the various platforms. Garrus quickly followed Shepard's order as she silently signalled for him and Thane to get into cover.

For a split second, Garrus looked away from her, and in that moment an eerily familiar moan sounded. His head snapped up, and his heart skipped a beat when he saw two husks behind Shepard. She was quickly spinning to face them, already glowing blue with biotic energy and her M-12 Locust raised. Garrus unclipped his sniper rifle off his back as quickly as he could, but before he could fire a shot, both husks crumpled to the floor. He looked over to Thane, who had his own Viper Rifle propped up on a crate, but the drell shook his head. That left only one other option.

'Guess this mystery sniper really is good' he admitted to himself, albeit reluctantly.

Author's Note
Hopefully, you will remember WAY back in ME1 when Ashley quotes Tennyson's Ulysses. I figured her and Shepard would have discussed other works by him and that lead on to the link between The Kraken and The Call of Cthulhu (which is actually a true fact, for all you fact seekers – yes I'm really nerdy and I spend a lot of time reading these works that I reference and looking up facts about them!) So there you have it.
Letting out a shaky breath of relief, Shepard eyed the crumpled bodies of two husks and couldn't help but appreciate the skill of the sniper. Despite how close the two bullets had come as they whizzed past her face, they hadn't even brushed her skin. She was impressed.

Hoping to catch a sight of whoever it was, she turned in the direction of her unknown assistant. Shepard's eyes widened in shock. Instinctively, she raised her hand, glowing blue with biotic energy, and readied a powerful Shockwave. Then waited.

The geth unfurled itself to full height, and even at a distance it was an imposing sight. To her greater surprise, the synthetic lowered it's rifle before addressing her.

"Shepard-Commander," it said, and the digitised voice sounded respectful.

She shook her head. It was difficult enough to comprehend the geth could talk and knew who she was, without trying to assign emotions to the synthesised voice. Shepard could also have sworn she saw the geth nod it's head to her, before it walked away. Shepard shook her head again, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Thane approach.

"The geth was the sniper. I thought geth didn't speak," he stated.

"And since when did geth operate alone?" Garrus questioned. "They get smarter the more of them there are."

Knowing they had a geth expert back on the Normandy, Shepard tried to contact Tali through the comm. link but was only met with static. Then, wails and moans started to drift from the other side of the hanger-like space.

"Just how big was the science team?!" she grumbled.

Damping down her biotics, Shepard shifted into an offensive position and switched back to her beloved Locust. Without breaking a sweat, she unloaded a full heat sink into a group of shambling husks.

"Destabilising their bodies," Thane called.

He sent a warp into another group, letting her and Garrus deal with several more groups of husks and Shepard's new 'favourite'; the self-detonating abominations, before an enemy Shockwave sent the trio staggering and knocked out their shields.

"Damn Scion," Shepard grit out. "Garrus, find a perch. Thane, suppressing fire," she ordered, as she began to power up a biotic Charge.

"Siha!" "Shepard!" Thane and Garrus both shouted in alarm.

"I trust you both not to hit me," she called, before releasing her attack.

Her Charge met the scion with neck-jarring force, and sent the behemoth staggering backwards. Shepard made a hasty retreat as Thane peppered the monstrosity with bullets from his Tempest; he'd closed the distance between them much quicker than she expected. Finally, the scion fell, a skillfully placed bullet piercing it's skull.
"Scoped and dropped," Garrus gloated.

Shepard winced as she tried to turn her head. Damn, it hurt. Absent-mindedly, she rubbed the back of her neck. The impact from her Charge was a little more forceful than she would have liked. A hand caught her unoccupied one.

"Are you well, Siha?" Thane asked, worry evident on his face.

Before Shepard could play down the injury, she felt talons gently ghost across the hand that still clutched the back of her neck.

"It's probably whiplash," Garrus muttered. "But you should see Chakwas when we return to the Normandy."

"Indeed," Thane said in agreement.

Shepard gave a half smile, knowing she was defeated before she even had a chance to argue.

"Not like I can say no to the pair of you now, is it. But come on, we have a reaper to destroy."

Moving forward from the impromptu battle field, they found a final console in a sterile looking corridor. She signalled Garrus to work his magic, and almost immediately, the terminal gave up its secrets.

"This must be it," Garrus said with conviction.

"I will take your word for it," Shepard replied.

She really hoped it was the IFF. She'd had enough of this place.

"So the Cerberus team did recover it. But where are they now?" Thane asked.

"Other than the ones we found impaled on the Dragon's Teeth?" Garrus queried.

"We probably killed them in that last wave of husks, or they're lurking past this door protecting the core," Shepard reasoned.

She gestured towards the metal that separated them from the reaper's Mass Effect generator, trying not to sigh.

"And I thought I was the optimist," Garrus joked, wryly.

Taking point, Shepard signalled the turian to open the lock. Tension coiled in her gut, her senses heightened and ready for the expected battle. It wasn't until the door slid open fully, and no attack came, that Shepard realised she had been holding her breathe.

She exhaled slowly, letting her Kuwashii Visor scan the area. In front of them was the glowing core of the Mass Effect generator and a geth, the same lone unit that had saved her from the surprise ambush earlier. It was feverishly working at a control panel, seemingly unaware that a group of husks were lurching towards it. But a force field blocked their path, rendering them useless.

Just as Shepard was about to try to yell out a warning, the geth turned and deftly shot three husks with an assault rifle that it unnervingly wielded in one hand. It was impressive... and scary.

Once the immediate threat had been dealt with, the geth unit turned its attention back to the terminal. Moments later, the force field deactivated, allowing the trio to enter what must have been the reaper's
engine room. Cautiously, Shepard moved forward, perplexed at the geth's behaviour. On her peripheral, she noticed another group of husks shambling towards the unit, though the loud hum of the drive core was masking the sound of their eerie wails.

"Your four!" she called out, hoping it would understand.

It did, but as the unit turned, one of the zombie-like horrors managed to sink its claws into the geth's outer shell. From the oozing white fluid Shepard could see, she presumed it had damaged one of the unit's synthetic muscle.

"Damn it!" Shepard exclaimed.

She was unsure why the sight of the geth's body slumping to the floor upset her so much, perhaps it was from a sense of duty... the unit had saved her life earlier. Though instead of wasting time trying to decide, Shepard sent a biotic Throw towards the cluster of husks, her lips twisted into a sneer.

Propelled by her attack, the reanimated corpses tumbled over the nearby guard rail before falling to their second deaths. Unhooking her Arc Projector, Shepard glanced at the two men beside her and raised her eyebrow in question. Even without words, they understood her intentions.

"We shall cover you, Siha," Thane told her, his velvet voice quietly confident.

"On your six," Garrus agreed.

With a brief nod, Shepard turned her attention back to the glowing core, powering up the Arc Projector as she stepped closer. Subconsciously, she positioned herself protectively over the body of the fallen geth.

Several minutes later, the core had been overloaded by the Projector's electrical pulse, and the engine room was littered with the now fully dead corpses of husks and abominations. Shepard strapped the heavy weapon to her back and looked down at the geth, debating taking it with them. It seemed her two companions had followed her gaze, and unsurprisingly, they both had opinions. A smile tugged at Shepard's lips, when both men spoke at the same time.

"Leave it. We already have enough trouble," Garrus stated, hotly.

"It's behaviour was... interesting. I would bring it," Thane said, calmly.

Dreaded moans and lumbering footsteps sounded behind them, and the reaper began to shudder violently. Powering up a heavy Shockwave, Shepard turned towards the exit, ready to fight their way through.

"Tali said no one's ever captured a geth intact," she stated, not taking her eyes off the incoming husks.

"You know the risk. That's all I'm going to say," Garrus replied, obviously annoyed.

"It is a significant risk," Thane agreed. "But not our first."

She spared him a glance which he returned with a brief smile, before directing a Warp towards the incoming husks. Shepard followed his attack with her Shockwave, effectively ploughing a path through their enemies.

There was a stutter of static before EDI's voice called over the comm: "Commander, the derelict is losing altitude, I suggest immediate evacuation."
"Guess we're out of time. Garrus grab the geth. Move out," Shepard ordered, taking point.

There was the clang of metal on metal, and Shepard glanced behind her to see Garrus hauling the geth's body over his shoulder. He grunted under the weight, before giving her a terse nod, signalling he was ready. Another violent judder rocked the reaper's hull, hampering their progress towards the evacuation point. More husks and abominations appeared to block their path, though their moans and wails were drowned out by the noise of the combined rapid fire from Shepard's and Thane's respective SMGs.

"ETA two minutes," Joker shouted over the comm. link.

"Open the airlock," Shepard instructed.

"Aye, Aye."

The welcome sight of the Normandy rapidly came into view, and with the quickly depleting gravity, Shepard was able to help Garrus throw the geth's body towards the awaiting airlock. She shouted at him to get himself aboard and the turian quickly took a running leap, following the synthetic through the opened hatch of the ship.

Explosions began to rip through the reaper, making it harder to stay upright. More husks surged towards her and Thane, their SMGs eating through the available heat sinks.

"Go!" she shouted, grabbing his arm as his gun clicked empty.

There was a heartbeat when Thane regarded her, a mixture of emotion in his onyx eyes, before he obeyed her order. Though it was clear he had done so reluctantly.

In a final desperate attempt to keep the husks at bay, Shepard unleashed her rarely used Nova attack, decimating the nearby enemies. It bought her time, and dragging in a ragged breath, she turned and ran towards the end of the catwalk, following her team mates with her own leap of faith.

'Come on, come on, come on' was all she could think.

Shepard's boots made a deafening din as they connected with the metal floor of the air lock, but a nearby explosion sent a pressure wave that threatened to suck her back out of the gaping doorway. However, to her immense relief and gratitude, she found Thane's muscular arms wrapped securely around her waist.

Tears of gratitude threatened to form, so Shepard leant her head against his chest, shielding her face from view.
Leaving Shepard's side when there were still waves of husks approaching had torn at Thane, but he'd relented. She was his love, but also his commander. He would not disrespect her by not following an order, but it had still felt like he was abandoning his Siha.

He watched as she raced her way along the catwalk, before pushing off the platform. The seconds past like hours until her boots clattered onto the metal floor of the airlock, but before he could utter thanks to the gods, there was an explosion that buffeted the Normandy.

For a sickening moment Thane didn't think he would reach her in time, then his arms were around Shepard's waist, pulling her back from the brink. EDI must have witnessed the scene, since the hatch door quickly slid shut with an audible hiss. His heart pounded in his chest, and he held Shepard tighter.

Watching his Siha nearly fall to her death would be another thing that would haunt his memories. Though suddenly, he felt a tremor ripple through Shepard's body and quickly realised she was suppressing tears.

"Siha, you are safe," he whispered in her ear.

Shepard gave a bare perceivable nod before sharply inhaling.

"Joker, we're clear. Go!" she called out.

She didn't raise her head where from she leant against his chest, or let go of him. So Thane braced himself as well as Shepard, as the Normandy began to accelerate. However, he nearly lost his footing as they hit FTL, and only Garrus' steadying hand stopped him falling and pulling Shepard with him.

"My thanks," he said, regarding the turian.

Garrus nodded in response, before turning worried eyes to Shepard. After a moment's hesitation, the turian ran his talons gently through the commander's red hair. Only then did she lift her head and smile at them weakly.

"Too damn close," she huffed. "Thanks for catching me, Thane."

He couldn't help but chuckle. "You needn't thank me. I promised I would protect you until my last breath, I intend to honour that."

There was another slight jolt as the Normandy exited FTL a few seconds later.

"We are clear of the planet, commander. Commencing decontamination," EDI suddenly announced. "Estimated time, five minutes."

Shepard smiled, as she disentangled herself from Thane's arms. "Better do a double run. Who knows what tricks the reaper's have up their metal sleeves," she instructed.

"Understood commander, do you need medical assistance?" the AI inquired.

Before Shepard could reply, both Thane and Garrus spoke at the same time, the same answer in mind.

"Yes!"
They both turned to the commander, neither refusing to back down on the matter. Thane had an inclining that if it was either of them on their own, Shepard would have argued. Instead, she merely rolled her eyes.

"Notify Chakwas I will be down to see her shortly," she said, leaning against the wall. "Also, notify two security officers that they need to situate themselves outside your AI Core. I want this geth secured and shielded in there."

"Understood. Logging you out Shepard," EDI replied.

The double length decontamination passed quickly enough, and as the doors slid open allowing them back onto the ship, Thane moved to help Garrus with the geth. However, the turian had other ideas.

"Make sure she goes to the Med Bay," he said, gesturing after the commander who had already exited and moved to the cockpit.

"Of course," he agreed.

Following Shepard, Thane watched in quiet amusement as she planted a kiss on the pilot's bearded cheek.

"Knew you could do it Joker," she praised.

"Just like Therum," Jeff agreed. "Definitely medal worthy."

Shepard laughed, light and honest, making Thane's heart swell.

"How about a drink instead?" she asked.

"Hmm… throw in an asari stripper and I'll think about it," the pilot bargained.

"You drive a hard bargain, Mr Moreau," Thane stated, smiling. "But if the commander doesn't agree, I will certainly buy you your dance."

"See. Even the murderous alien thinks I deserve it," Jeff said, folding his arms smugly.

Thane chuckled. He had grown used to the pilot's way of speaking over the months, and his words did not cause him pause. For her part, Shepard merely shook her head, though she was still smiling.

"Alright Joker, set a course for Omega," she relented. "EDI, tell Chamber's to issue notice of twenty four hour shore leave, effective as soon as we dock."

"Of course, commander. Though Operative Lawson requests a meeting once you have seen the doctor," EDI stated.

"Tell Miranda I'm in desperate need of a shower, then quite possibly some food, so I will meet her in the Communication Room in one hour. I will not be disturbed until then, unless the collectors or reapers show up at our door in person. Is that understood?"

"Yes Shepard, logging you out," the AI replied, sounding almost amused.

Chuckling, Thane ushered the commander through the CIC towards the elevator. Once inside he punched the button for the Crew Deck, determined not the leave Shepard's side until she was in the capable hands of Doctor Chakwas. Her Charge against the Scion bothered him greatly. He knew she was a highly skilled Vanguard, but he also knew how fragile the human neck was.
Thirty minutes later, Thane sat staring into the purple hues of the drive core, trying to mediate on the day's events. He had even locked his door for a change, in an effort not to be disturbed, though it was still not going well.

His mind had locked onto that dreadful moment he thought his Siha would fall, and Thane could feel his mind begin to slip into unwelcome Solipsism, before a chime from his door roused him. With a sigh, a mixture of relief and frustration, he pushed himself away from the table and went to address whoever was seeking entrance. He half expected Garrus, or perhaps Kasumi or Tali, since they had been on standby during the mission. However, as the door slid open, it revealed his Sihs, now divested of her armour and looking freshly showered.

As he was about to greet her, Thane suddenly found himself pushed back against the nearest wall, Shepard's lips pressed fiercely to his. Her kiss had more fire and hunger to it than any of their previous encounters, and Thane felt his steely self-control begin to falter.

He had a moment of clarity to palm the door shut, before instincts took over. Quickly, he reversed their position, and Shepard inhaled sharply as the cool metal touched the bare skin of her arms. That moment tugged Thane almost to his senses, and he broke their kiss, intending to ask if this was what his Siha really wanted.

But before he could speak, Shepard gripped the collar of his coat and pulled him back to her. Their mouths met roughly and her tongue demanded entrance. He felt electrified by her.

Firmly, Thane ran his hands down the length of Shepard's sides, only stopping once they reached her thighs. Without halting the passionate dance of their tongues, he easily lifted Shepard up and revelled in the feeling of her toned legs wrapping around his waist. Her fitted black dress had ridden up with the actiob, and Thane caressed the newly exposed skin as his body kept her pin to the wall.

It was becoming harder to ignore his instinct's demand to take her there and then, to claim her. His iron will was beginning to crumble. Shepard he felt too good, too willing. He was torn. As much as he wanted her, he wanted to lavish his Siha with the love and adoration she deserved. He brokr their kiss to trail softer ones along her jaw.

"Siha, please," he begged, almost wishing she wouldn't take heed of his desperate request.

Shepard sighed, and Thane wondered if he had offended her before she suddenly chuckled.

"I can only go to my meeting if you put me down," she teased.

Gently, Thane did as she asked, smoothing the rumpled fabric of her dress as he did.

"Thank you," he told her.

However, he was unsure if he was expressing his gratitude for her shared passion, or for understanding his request. Shepard smiled up at him, before kissing him again, this time soft and sweet.

"You're too tempting for your own good Sere Krios."

After that, Shepard then left the room without a backward glance. Leaving Thane to stare longingly after her.
Miranda rapped her perfectly manicure fingernails against the polished surface of the board table. She was not a woman with infinite amounts of patience, and what she had was wearing thin. Even though the commander had help her relocate Oriana and had an obvious success record during the missions she under took, Miranda was starting to wonder where Shepard's priorities lay.

"EDI, where is Shepard?" she asked again, through gritted teeth.

"I'm sorry Operative Lawson, I do not have that data available," the AI replied.

"What do you mean, no available data?" Miranda demanded.

"The commander gave strict instructions not to be disturbed for one hour. Therefore her tracker is offline," the AI informed.

"EDI, I order you to find where Shepard is," Miranda grit out, seriously starting to wonder about the Illusive Man's decision to include a full AI aboard.

"I'm sorry Operative Lawson, but the commander's orders supersede yours. There has currently been forty two minutes and thirty seven seconds since the order was issued, negating my ability to comply with your request."

She bit back a scream of frustration. The Illusive Man had issued very strict time frames for reporting back to him about the missions, and Shepard had turned delaying the reports into an art form.

Apart from that, Miranda was extremely concerned about the geth that the commander had brought on board. There may be a long standing reward within Cerberus for an intact geth, and even though she could see the potential of studying them, what Miranda really wanted was the synthetic off the ship.

After the commander had helped rescue Oriana, Miranda had come to fully respect Shepard, as a person and as a leader. She was even starting to trust her, but as far as the geth was concerned, Miranda believed it was a liability and that Shepard was out of her mind.

She let out an angry sigh, and just as she was about to start another round of pacing, the commander finally walked through the door. Miranda eyed the other woman critically. Shepard was freshly showered and changed, wearing a fitted black dress. Despite it not being a Cerberus uniform, it was smart and suitable for a ship's commanding officer, so Miranda didn't have any complaints.

However, the flushed look on the commander's face made her suspicious. Taking a deep breath, she tried to put aside any misgivings. This meeting would take long enough without her trying to pry additional answers out of Shepard.

"I think we need to discuss the unique piece of salvage you discovered," she stated.

"Speak your mind," the commander replied.

Biting back the first comment that sprung to her tongue, Miranda simply set about trying to get the synthetic off the Normandy.

"We need better equipment to fight the reapers. An intact geth would be invaluable to Cerberus' cyber weapons division."
She watched as Shepard's eyes narrowed, a hardened look that masked the woman's usual good nature. A lesser person would have flinched under the gaze, but Miranda merely crossed her arms. Though she did have to mentally remind herself the look was directed at the idea, rather than herself... at least she hoped it was.

"We'll have to disagree on that, ma'am," Jacob interjected, entering the room. "I saw enough of these things on Eden Prime. Space It."

Actually. That wasn't that bad an idea, and if the commander went with that, then Miranda wasn't one to complain. However, she was smart, and had worked with the Illusive Man long enough to know he wouldn't be happy if he ever got wind she'd 'allowed' a potential asset to be destroyed so easily.

"Cerberus has a long standing cash bounty for an intact geth. I assure you, the reward is significant," she countered.

"That may be, but I've killed hundreds of these things, this one acted different," Shepard replied.

"Exactly why we should send it to the cyber division," Miranda pushed.

"I'd like to know why it has a piece of N7 armour strapped to it's chest," the commander stated.

It was almost like she hadn't heard. Or was choosing to ignore her, something Miranda wouldn't rule out.

"Battle trophy maybe? Would a machine care about that?" Jacob asked, frowning.

Miranda shook her head. The idea was absurd. "No. Trophies imply emotions that AIs don't have. I doubt it's more than a convenient field repair."

There was a beep from EDI's console. But when the AI didn't actually speak, Miranda presumed it was no more than a maintenance warning, or something similar, and turned her attention back to the commander. Shepard sighed. She looked troubled, which worried Miranda. It was never a good sign.

"I've lost count of how many geth I've killed, but I've never had the chance to talk to one," the commander stated, sounding tired. "This one tried to communicate with us. Hell, it probably saved my life. Why?"

A cold dread swept over Miranda as she realised what Shepard was planning to do. It was dangerous, irresponsible, and utter madness.

"Reactivating the geth is a risk. If you do so, it should be for humanity's best interests and not your curiosity."

Out the corner of her eye, Miranda watched as Jacob crossed his arms, looking pointedly at the commander. It was rather impressive, the way he could look both respectful and angry at the same time. She'd seen Shepard give a similar look before, and Miranda had come to suspect that it came from the shared Alliance experience.

"I still think our 'best interests' involve an airlock," Jacob stated.

Shepard shook her head. "I'm not deciding one way or the other until I know what we've got here. I want to start it up. Interrogate it."

Miranda leant forward on the board table, dropping her head in resignation. For a split seconded she
wondered if she was above begging Shepard to reconsider.

"If we reactivate it, there's no guarantee we can deactivate it again."

"Bullets can," replied Jacob, curtly.

To her chagrin, Shepard actually laughed.

"That's not what I..." Miranda began, before Shepard cut her offer, holding up a hand for peace.

"Thank you, both of you, for your recommendations. I've made my decision," the commander stated.

The unsaid words spoke loudly. Shepard was in charge, and that was that.

"Tali's going to freak when she hears about this," Jacob muttered.

Miranda couldn't help but agree.
Sentimental Humour (Shepard PoV)

Numerous times throughout the meeting, Shepard felt like bashing heads together. It wasn't that she didn't respect both the Cerberus officers' opinions, she did, appreciated them even… to a certain degree. But she sure as hell didn't like or agree with them.

Before the meeting, Shepard had already made up her mind that she wasn't about to hand the geth over to Cerberus, and she certainly wasn't about to space it. After all, if she planned to kill it, she'd have left it on the derelict. Though that wasn't what was really bothering her right now. It was that parting shot that had her seething. She wasn't sure if Jacob had meant in the way it sounded, but trying to use Tali against her was completely out of line.

However, it wasn't like Shepard didn't have her own reservations about the quarian's reactions. In truth, she fully expected her adopted sister to pop a suit valve.

"So what about this Reaper IFF?" Jacob suddenly asked, thankfully changing the subject.

There was a familiar electronic beep. "I have determined how to integrate it with our system. However, the device is Reaper technology," EDI intoned. "Linking it with the Normandy's systems poses certain risks."

Over the months, Shepard had grown to see EDI as a person. A disembodied person, but a person nonetheless. She probably liked her more than the actual Cerberus personnel on board.

"I trust you, EDI. I know you won't let anything happen to the ship."

"Understood, commander," the AI replied, sounding a little surprised, in Shepard's opinion. "It may take several hours before the IFF is ready for shakedown. I will alert you as soon as it's ready."

"In that case, hold off on starting the integration until we dock at Omega. Shore leave should give plenty of time for our systems to adapt," she said, before turning her attention back to the two operatives. "Until then it's business as usual. Dismissed."

Shepard received a brisk nod from Miranda, and a crisp salute from Jacob before they departed. Leaning against the table, she let out a tired sigh, but smile when an unsurprising shimmer caught her eye. Slowly, the friendly figure of Kasumi materialised into the room. The Japanese thief was smiling her cryptic smile from beneath her hood.

"I knew you'd be watching," Shepard greeted.

"What can I say Shep? Jacob was here," Kasumi chuckled. "And don't worry, Tali already knows about the geth and I told her about your plan. She says it should take no more than a hour to repair the unit for it to be ready of activation."

"Thanks," she laughed. "Kelly will think you're after her job at this rate."

Shepard watched her friend re-cloak and presumably exit the room, the door opened then closed at least. Once she thought that all parties had left the Communication Room, Shepard called to EDI.

"Do you require assistance, commander?" the AI's pleasant tones enquired.

"I heard your beep earlier EDI, and I'm damn sure Miranda is wrong about AIs and feelings," Shepard stated. "I just thought you should know, it's largely down to my interactions with you, that I
am prepared to give the geth a chance."

There was a long pause, as if EDI was mulling the information over. "Thank you... Shepard."

Smiling to herself, Shepard headed to the cockpit, though on her way, she stop by her terminal in order to message Aria. It seemed prudent to warn the asari that the entire crew were about to descend on her station. Especially since their 'relationship' had so far been a cordial one, and Shepard thought it was best to keep it that way.

Pleasantries done, she sought out Joker.

"There's my hero," Shepard teased, as she entered the pilot's domain.

"Careful *commander*, your boyfriend might get jealous," he replied, grinning. "And I'd really rather not have an assassin wanting me dead."

She chuckled, before sliding into the co-pilot's chair. "That obvious, huh?"

"Only to those with eyes, Shepard. Oh, and that don't carry around an enter species' worth of Xenophobia," Joker stated.

Shepard smirked at her de facto brother. She'd honestly thought that she and Thane had been discrete, though evidently not as much as she had hoped. It wasn't that Shepard cared what other people thought about their relationship, but she couldn't deny the nigglng worry that something may happen to Thane *if* Cerberus... or more precisely the Illusive Man, found out. Their pro-human agenda hardly lent itself to being supportive of inter-species relationships.

However, there was no point worrying on 'what ifs'. Liara's pep talk had helped her see that, and she pushed the concern to the back of her mind.

"Which brings me nicely to my next point," Shepard said. "I've been meaning to ask you for a while, what do you think of the squad now? Quite different from our hunt for Saren, huh?"

"Just a bit," Joker laughed. "Well for starters, it's good to have Tali back, I always liked her. And it seems like Garrus has worked that stick out of his ass, but now he's trying to beat guys to death with it. I can't believe I liked the old Garrus better. Then your baby..." He paused, as if trying to think of the exact right words. "Grunt is... not a stabilizing element, so I'm hardly surprised you've all but legally adopted him."

The sarcasm was expected, but still left Shepard shaking with laughter.

"Carry on," she managed to say.

"Hmm... the rest of your crazies, let me see," Joker said, scratching his beard. "I like Kasumi, she's fun to be around, even if I feel the need to check the Citadel for parts she may have pawned. And I have to say, Jacob is way too nice a guy for all the ways he knows how to kill people. Zaeed is like you, walking blunt-force trauma, but takes cheques... as long as it's not my money, I'm good. I'm not saying anything about Jack though. I'm not stupid."

By this time, tears had started to stream down Shepard's cheeks, and she was gasping for breath as she laughed. Joker stopped his tirade long enough for her to suck in a lungful of much needed air. The pilot merely shook his head at her, grinning.

"I feel like Samara could shoot me in a very tranquil manner, which doesn't make me feel any better about it," he stated, deadpan. "And I'm not really surprised that Mordin acts superior to everyone,
like he's got tenure at FU. I certainly wouldn't say anything bad about Miranda, and expect to survive the reprisal. And while we're on the subject of hard headed women, I have to say, Ashley… such a bitch. I mean she was front line with you against Sovereign, yet I'm the one roped back into saving the Galaxy. I mean, what the hell?"

"We all know you're the force that pulls it all together, Joker," Shepard teased, trying to wipe the tear tracks from her cheeks.

"Better believe it," he grinned back. "But I have to ask... a geth, on the ship. Geth?! I know we're all bloody insane, but..."

"That you're expert opinion, Mr Moreau?" she asked, sweetly.

"Damn straight," Joker stated, crossing his arms.

Shepard grinned at him, despite how much her face muscles her were hurting from laughter. She tapped the brim of his hat playful, as she headed back to the CIC, though she hadn't even crossed the threshold of the bridge before he called out to her again.

"Hey Shepard, I just realised I left one of the of the ground team out," he said, turning his chair to face her. "Have to say, Thane seems like the strong, sensitive… murdering type. You know they are always great to have a round, a real cuddler."

Joker smirked at her, his eyes shining mischievously from beneath the peak of his cap. She knew what he was up to and merely laughed, shaking her head.

"My lips are sealed."

"Seriously though Shep, as long as he makes you happy and treats you right, that's good enough for me," the pilot stated, all hints of teasing and sarcasm melting away.

His words had her blinking back tears of a different sort. She and Joker were close, but they weren't soppy people by nature. What he said meant a lot, and he knew that it did. Not having any 'real' family to speak of, her crew were everything to Shepard; they were her family. Though not wanting to make a big deal out of the moment, she simply gave Joker a quick peck on the cheek.

"Thanks Jeff," she told him, trying to keep her voice from wavering.

"Any time, sis."
A Friendly Warning (Thane PoV)

The past hour had been spent in quiet meditation and prayer, desperately trying to control the passion and desire his Siha had ignited in him. However, it was not progressing as well as Thane was accustomed to. Or had hoped.

Every time he closed his eyes, all he could picture was Shepard pressed against the wall. So tempting was the image, that Thane had already relived the moment ten times, and each time his pulse was left racing. She consumed him.

With a resigned sigh, Thane exited his small room. He hoped that the normal chatter of the crew deck would at least distract his mind from his carnal thoughts, since he had failed to quieten it.

As Thane entered the mess hall, his gaze fell immediate to the trio stood near the Medical Bay. There was his radiant Siha, her back to him, as she spoke to Garrus and Tali. Their conversation soon met his ears.

"The hardware repairs have been completed, Shepard," the quarian stated, her voice sounding tired through her voice modulator.

Shepard clasped the other woman on the shoulder. "Good work, Tali."

"So… are we activating it?" Garrus asked.

The turian's subharmonics carried the slightest hint of apprehension, though Thane was sure he was the only other person to hear it.

"Not yet. I'm issuing mandatory shore leave for twenty four hours whilst we're docked at Omega," Shepard replied.

Garrus' mandibles pulled tight against his face. "Omega, commander?"

"Yes Archangel, Omega."

Shepard's voice had taken on the teasing quality it often did when she addressed her best friend, and it drew a smile from Thane. His Siha had a wicked sense of humour, and he was happy not be on the receiving end of it.

"I'm never going to live that down am I?" Garrus questioned, shaking his head.

"No," the two women laughed in unison.

"You are coming for a drink Garrus, no arguing. I have a shotgun," Tali said, matter-of-factly.

"I believe when a woman issues that sort of demand, it is wise not to argue," Thane smiled, as he joined the trio.

He lay a hand gently on the small of Shepard's back. She twisted her upper body so it was mostly facing him, whilst her lower half remained as it was; it was quite a feat of flexibility. A radiant smile graced her red painted lips, but before she could say anything, Garrus let out a hum of surprise.

"Spirits Shepard! How can humans twist their bodies like that?" the turian asked, mandibles twitching the whole time.
Shepard laughed. "I told you, we are very flexible."

She raised an eyebrow to punctuate her last word, before giving a wink.

"Keelah!" Tali exclaimed, laughter ringing in her voice.

The quarian's hand rubbed her purple mask where her forehead would be, as Garrus turned his attention to him, mandibles flared in a wide turian grin and a knowing looking in the other man's eyes. Thane merely smiled affectionately at Shepard, as he tried desperately not to follow that most appealing train of thought.

"Indeed, Siha," he chuckled.

It had taken a further three hours to reach the Omega Nebula, and Thane had been changing into a light grey version of his leather suit, when a ping from his Omni-Tool had alerted him to Mordin's request of a meeting.

He finished dressing quickly, strapping his Tempest to the holster inside his jacket and pocketing several throwing knives... it was Afterlife they were heading to after all... before making his way to the Tech Lab. After being granted access, Thane stood calmly, hands lightly clasped behind his back, as he waited for the salarian to finish his work.

"You wished to see me?" he queried.

"Yes, wanted to talk to you. Medical matters," Mordin informed him.

Thane's still posture became even more rigid, disheartened by what the conversation would surely be about. The scepticism he felt must have uncharacteristically flashed across his face, since Mordin quickly shook his head.


Thane knew of the affection between his Siha and the scientist salarian. He had heard Shepard described Mordin as an eccentric uncle on more than one occasion, so it was of little surprise the doctor was voicing concerns. Even if he was doing it in a professional manner.

"She is my Siha," Thane told him truthfully. "I would worship her, body and soul, if she decided I was worthy."

"Of course," Mordin seemed slightly mollified by his admission, though that didn't stop the salarian's tirade. "Regardless, prolonged human to drell skin contact can cause small rash, itching. Oral contact may cause mild hallucinations for humans."

Thane nodded solemnly. "Shepard does not seem to be affected by the hallucinogens, I believe Kasumi has been insisting she builds up a resistance by drinking Weeping Hearts."

He paused, as the memory of the movie night tugged at his conscious.

"The rash does concern me. I do not wish to hurt her, though I cannot simply walk away. Do you have any recommendations as a doctor?"

"Have heard of Kasumi's instance. The cocktails are simple yet clever. Presume that there is more
personable experience regarding hallucinogens?" Mordin enquired.

Thane simply blinked his double lids. He was not one to divulge private information readily.

"As I thought," the salarian continued. "Can supply oils and ointments to reduce dermatological discomfort, which could affect both parties, not just Shepard."

"Could that be arranged?" Thane asked.

"Will have bottles sent to Shepard's cabin for both of you. Labelled as scar treatment, more discreet," Mordin said, tapping away at his Omni-Tool as he spoke. "Will forward advice booklet to you. Valuable diagrams, positions comfortable for both species, erogenous zone overviews."

With that, Thane was handed a unassuming looking box of what turned out to be specialist prophylactics. He blinked, twice, slightly surprised with how this conversation was going. It was evident the salarian had been planning this talk for a while, and being more in-depth than Thane would have ever expected.

However, he gave Mordin a slight, respectful bow. Though he had not sought it, Thane was not too proud or indignant to accept the help and advice.

"My thanks," he said, simply.

"Must warn you. Do not hurt her. Repercussions for you would be… problematic," Mordin advised, pacing back and forth as he spoke.

Despite the threat, one that Thane knew was extremely serious coming from the former STG member, he couldn't help but smile. It was endearing to witness how much other members of the team cared for his Siha.

"You needn't worry," he replied. "I love her and will protect her until my dying breath."

Author's Note
Dedicated to Lady Velvet C. Peterson, whose love of Mordin inspired the latter half of this chapter.
Exiting the elevator, Shepard made her way to the Port Observation Lounge. With the decision made to leave reactivating the geth until after the crew had some well-deserved shore leave, she had spent the past indulgent hour getting ready for a night, day... something... at Omega's infamous Afterlife.

So her eye shadow was a little smokier than usual, and her red lipstick a little darker. She was clad in the figure hugging, faux leather dress she'd first worn to help Kasumi infiltrate Hock's party. It was a nice dress, but most importantly, the material meant it was the thing least likely to get ruined in the seedy nightclub.

Without ceremony, Shepard entered the lounge that Kasumi had appropriated and found the Japanese thief, along with a sprawled out Jack, listening to a thumping rock song. A very ancient one, if Shepard were to guess, as it was much better than the awful techno rubbish that seemed to play on every station.

Within seconds of Shepard entering the room, Kasumi was handing her a suspiciously familiar looking Martini glass. There was no surprise that she was plied with a drell venom infused drink. Kasumi had been doing so at every opportunity, for the last few months.


"I've told you before Shep, you need to acclimatise yourself," Kasumi said, giving an impish grin.

Shepard's mind wandered to the very heated kiss she'd shared with Thane just hours before. Though a pillow soon ricocheted off her hip, bringing her out of her thoughts.

"By the look on your face, you're doing plenty of acclimatising," Jack sneered, without malice. "Get your head out of your knickers and hurry up, get changed."

"What's wrong with this?" Shepard laughed, gesturing to the dress she was wearing.

Kasumi let out a giggle. "Nothing, but this is better. He'll love it."

The dress that was held up for her inspection was a black, lacy number. Short, body hugging, but not too low cut. Shepard reached for the article, and raised an eyebrow as she felt the material. It was actually sublimely soft, which meant it probably 'cost' a fortune. The dress was really rather nice, though Shepard didn't think she wanted to know where or how it had been acquired.

"Don't give me that look Shep, I didn't steal this one," Kasumi explained, in a mock indignant tone. "Kelly bought it when we last went to the Citadel. She's never worn it though, and thought you might like to have it."

Of course Kelly was in on it too. Rolling her eyes, Shepard quickly changed dresses, completely unabashed. Shyness was not a commodity for a marine.

She was in the middle of smoothing out the figure hugging material, as the doors opened with a soft whoosh, allowing the six other women of their unusual group to enter. And it seemed, not for the first time, they all had an opinion or an accessory to add to her outfit.

"You look lovely," Dr Chakwas complimented.

Samara handed her a gold choker, one that was slightly slimmer yet similar in style to the one the
Justicar wore herself.

"It's beautiful," Shepard told the asari.

"We all know you hate high-heeled shoes, these should be better," Miranda said.

The officer tossed a pair of kitten heeled, knee-high boots towards her, and she grinned in response. Gabby was kind enough to help Shepard balance whilst she tugged on the shiny black boots.

"It suits you, commander," the engineer told her, cheerfully.

"So, how do I look?" Shepard asked, placing her hand on her hip and cocking it to the side.

"Fuckable!" Jack declared, which was a high compliment from the ex-convict.

As they left the Port Observation Lounge, Tali grabbed her hand. "He won't be able to keep his eyes off you, Shepard."

She smiled at her friend, giving an appreciative eye to the black and gold envirosuit Tali had opted for, instead of her usual purple one. In truth, Shepard hadn't even been aware quarians could change their suits, certainly not on a none flotilla vessel at any rate. It caused her to idly wonder how many antibiotics her adoptive sister was currently swimming in.

"Your suit is amazing, Tali," she replied. "Have you sent Kal a picture? I'm sure he'd love it."

"Perhaps Archangel will love it too," Kasumi quipped, in a stage whisper.

"Keelah!" Tali laughed, swatting the thief's arm.

Whilst the group stood waiting for the tortuously slow lift, there was a small ping that interrupted their conversation. It was no surprise to find it was Kelly, and the Yeoman quickly flipped open her Omni-Tool. However, the message wasn't actually for her.

"Shepard, Mordin requests you meet with him in the lab before we set out."

Perplexed, she nodded. "Okay ladies, I'll meet you by the airlock. Tell the guys to go ahead, Tali make sure Joker goes with them, he should listen to you. I'll drag Mordin along with us."

Upon the ladies' bizarre insistence, Shepard had waited in the elevator until EDI gave her the all clear that the guys had left the ship, before she exited onto the CIC. The heels of her borrowed boots echoing against the metal floor, as she made her way to the Tech Lab.

"Mordin?" she called out.

"Ah, Shepard. Wanted to talk to you, medical matters," the salarian said, fast paced as ever.

He barely paused to take in her outfit, and his lips twitched into his funny smile. She pointed a finger at him.

"Don't," she warned, smiling.

He nodded once. "Aware that mission is dangerous. Different species react different to stress," he continued, causing Shepard to raise an eyebrow. "Sexual activity normal as stress relief. Still recommend caution with Thane. Drell-human liaisons complex. Thane complex as well."
It vaguely occurred to Shepard that the conversation should, perhaps, be awkward. She regarded the salarian as an eccentric uncle figure after all, but she knew Mordin was only thinking of her well fair. Both medically as a doctor, and emotionally as a friend. With that in mind, she let the strangeness of the conversation wash over her. Experience had taught her it was usually the best method to adopt when dealing with the salarian anyway.

"Thane is important to me," she told him, truthfully. "I don't want to hurt him, but I'm not just going to walk away."

"Of course," Mordin nodded solemnly, before a smile tugged at his lips again. "Hormones. Regardless, come to me when rash develops."

Her eyebrow raised higher as she regarded the salarian, vaguely wondering if he was pulling her leg.

"You have a recommendation as a doctor?" she asked, only half-joking.

"Prolonged human to drell skin contact can cause small rash, itching," Mordin explained, seriously.

"I presume you have something that can help?" Shepard asked, already knowing he would.

"Oils and ointments to reduce discomfort, have already sent bottles to your cabin. Oral contact may cause mild hallucinations. Know Kasumi has been trying to build up your resistance. 'Weeping Heart Cocktails'… simple, yet clever," Mordin said, his voice laced with amusement.

Shepard's mind stumbled over the fact he'd already sent things to her cabin. Though stumbled may have been an understatement. In reality, her train of thought hit a proverbial brick wall, and her mouth started talking on its own accord… completely against Shepard's better judgement.

"The hallucinogenic qualities stopped taking affect very early on," she admitted.

Idly, Shepard remembered how she'd barely felt buzzed even on her first taste of the cocktail. Her first kiss with Thane had barely tingled.

From the look she caught on the salarian's face, it was evident Mordin knew it wasn't just the experience with the drink that she was talking about. For a moment, Shepard honestly thought the scientist would ask her to take part in some sort of inter-species-relations experiment, or something similar. Really, she wouldn't have put it past him.

"Also forwarding advice booklet to your quarters. Valuable diagrams, positions comfortable for both species, erogenous zone overviews," he said instead, tapping away on his Omni-Tool as he spoke. "Gave EDI relationship aid demonstration vids to use as necessary."

Shepard glared at the salarian in mock suspicion, when she realised what that actually would entail.

"Wait a minute Mordin, you're just yanking me around aren't you?"


"Uh-huh. That would be almost convincing if I didn't know you, Mordin," she replied, deadpan.

Mordin smiled at her affectionately. "Enjoy yourself while possible, Shepard. Will be here, studying cell reproduction. Much simpler. Less alcohol and mood music required."

Shepard laughed, grabbing the salarian's hand. "Not tonight. You're coming to Afterlife, even if I
have to drag you there."
Several Aliens Walk into a Bar (Thane PoV)

Not for the first time, Thane cursed the pulsing blue and red lights that were playing havoc with his enhanced eyes. He didn't frequent establishments like this unless he was working, mainly due to the discomfort the lighting caused. However, Shepard had made it clear that she wanted all the crew to meet for a drink, and Thane had no intention of disappointing his Siha.

He couldn't help chuckling when he thought of how the group of seven men must have looked, when they'd entered the club. Four humans, a turian, a krogan and himself, many sporting vicious scars... it made for a truly memorable sight. Yet the elcor doorman had merely nodded them in, leading Thane to believe Shepard must have sent word ahead to Aria.

That was another thing that had amazed him about the commander, how she managed to win over almost everyone. He had heard Shepard sometimes call the asari a friend, and as much as it seemed to be a joke, the few interactions he'd witnessed between the pair led Thane to believe his Siha was actually the closest thing Omega's queen actually had to a friend.

Returning to the present, Thane nodded his thanks to the turian bartender who slid his order of asari honey mead across the bar, before he turned to survey the room. On his peripheral, Thane saw the ladies of the Normandy; each of them looking lovely, arrive with Mordin. However, to his disappointment, a distinctive redhead was missing.

"Where's Shepard?" Joker yelled, before Thane had a chance to enquire.

"Aria wanted to see her," Kelly shouted back, over the thumping beat of the music.

"I swear that blue bitch has the hots for her," Zaeed leered, loudly.

"She will after she sees her get up tonight," Jack retorted.

The human biotic was wearing the widest grin Thane had ever seen her give, it was actually a little unnerving. He was about to ask what she meant, when a low whistle caught his attention. Thane glanced at the three younger human males, and found their eyes all locked on the stairs that led up to Aria's private area.

"Looking good, commander," engineer Donnelly called, in his distinctive Scottish accent.

Thane turned to follow their gaze, and was greeted by a vision. His Siha's body was encased in a black lace dress that hugged her every enchanting curve. Shiny black boots reached her knees, and left a tantalising expanse of porcelain skin bare between them and the hem of her short dress. A gold choker graced her elegant neck, drawing attention to what Kelly had once informed him was called a décolleté.

He noticed that her red painted lips were several shades darker than usual, a tone that also adorned her fingertips. The make up she wore around her eyes was almost black, making her emerald gaze even more prominent and captivating than usual. Her hair was aflame by the reddish hues of the lighting. She was a vision, one that spoke to his most primal needs.

He watched as Joker handed her a familiar looking glass, whispering something in her ear. Shepard laughed, before she turned her gaze towards him.

Thane looked back at her hungrily, only to be stunned when his fiery Siha raised her glass to him as if in a toast, a devilish smile playing on her full lips. Memories of the movie night pulled at his
conscious once more, but the captivating sight of Shepard halted his slip into Solipsism.

It took all his self-control not to close the distance between them, knowing that if he did, his desires would engulf him. Thane watched as she sashayed towards the bar, walking straight passed him and ordered a second drink. He pointedly ignored the turian who was now flirting with Shepard, choosing to study her drink of choice. Another distinctive green cocktail was slid towards her waiting hand, and Thane smiled to himself.

There had many times when he'd witnessed various people, particularly Kasumi, hand Shepard a 'Weeping Heart', but this was the first time Thane had seen her ordering one herself. Despite the extremely intimate kisses they had already shared, Thane was finding the sight of his Siha choosing to drink a beverage laced with drell venom inexplicably arousing.

The deliberate sway of Shepard's hips as she walked away from the bar momentarily banished all other awareness from Thane's senses. His double lids blinked slowly, and he came to realise that most the other men, along with a good handful of women and a lot of asari, had also taken notice of Shepard and her movements. The looks the other patrons were giving his Siha reminded Thane of the last time they were on Omega, with Shepard clad in a red cat suit.

His elevated heart rate was only tempered when he watched her slide into a booth, along with the other ladies of the Normandy. Reluctantly, Thane forced his gaze away from the woman he loved, and he tried to turn his attention to the conversation that raged between Garrus, Zaeed and Grunt.

Normally, he would have enjoyed debating the finer points of sniper and assault rifles, but the presence of his warrior angel called to his very essence. Though Thane had to admit, at least to himself, that the worship he wished to lavish on her was more physical than metaphorical.

The conversation in front of him broke for a moment, as a barefaced turian approached their portion of the bar. The newcomer held up one of his talons, signalling to the bartender what he wanted, before turning to look at the group.

"Grizz," Garrus acknowledged.

"Archangel," the other turian replied, in a tone so low, Thane barely heard it.

Without another word, the barefaced turian left, holding a familiar looking cocktail. Thane's posture stiffened as he watched the turian walk over to Shepard.

Thane remembered him, it was the turian Aria had tried to set the commander up with. His pulse began to race, as Grizz leant down and said something that made the commander laugh. Though a taloned had on his forearm pulled Thane's attention away from his Siha.

"Don't worry," Garrus said. "He's one of Aria's men, she probably sent him."

That didn't exactly give Thane confidence, but he trusted Shepard, and the fact he'd witnessed her turn the turian down did help a little. Giving a small nod of acquisition, he returned to debating the pros and cons of adding a precision scope to an assault rifle. Several minutes later, he faintly heard the musical sound of Shepard's laugh.

Turning towards the group of women, Thane saw that they'd left their booth, thankfully without Grizz, and his Siha was currently being pulled towards the dance floor by Kasumi. However, a very drunk looking quarian was wrapped around her waist clinging for support, as she walked.

On impulse, Thane excused himself from his companions, then slipped into the nearby shadows. Lapsing back into his old methods of tracking a target was not hard, though this time he enjoyed the
action, as he followed the commander's enticing movements instead of a commission.

The last time they were on Omega, Thane had witnessed that the stories of her terrible dancing were greatly exaggerated. This time was no different. The sway of Shepard's hips to the pulsing rhythm was hypnotic, and for the time being, Thane was content to watch from the shadows. He enjoyed seeing his fiery redhead 'let her hair down', as humans' liked to say. His eyes never left her swaying form, drinking in the sight of her exquisite body and the play of the lace over her curves.

Her first dance was a very alluring display of femininity, along with the other ladies of the Normandy, all supple sways and sashays. The second was a tentative shuffle with Joker, and Thane was charmed by how conscious Shepard was of the pilot's condition: Vrolik Syndrome, as he had finally found out.

The third was a humourous affair with engineers Donnelly and Daniels, which had the red haired man spinning the two women multiple times, normally at the same time. It wasn't until the fourth 'song' that someone outside of the Normandy crew went to approach the commander. As the batarian closed in on his Siha, Thane deftly slipped behind her on the dance floor, and pulled her flush against his body.

His hands found her hips, and caressed her through the lace material. He spared a threatening glance to the intruder, before lowering his head to the crook of her neck. Throwing propriety to the wind, Thane kissed and gently nipped the junction between Shepard's neck and shoulder, as he inhaled her scent. A heady mix of floral, citrus and a spice that was purely her.

To his slight surprise, Thane was forced to stifle a groan as Shepard unexpectedly ground her rear back into him. On instinct, he wrapped his right arm around her lower torso, holding her body tighter to him.

The passion he had felt during their last heated kiss was building again, and rapidly. He couldn't stop the delicious thoughts of what he would do to her, should she let him.

They swayed in time to the beat, and as Shepard reached behind her to stroke his neck, Thane ran his left hand down her now exposed side. He hummed in appreciation as she slightly shivered at his touch, arching her back mere inches away from him. With a low, throaty chuckle, he spun her to face him. His hands positioned dangerously low on her back as he pulled her close, their hips flush against one another, and Shepard's elegant arms snaked around his neck.

His lips instinctively found hers, and he kissed her hungrily, pouring his desire into the delicious gesture. Thane's need and arousal grew as Shepard returned his affection with the same ferocity.

"I want you, Thane," she breathed, barely audible over the pulsing beat of the club.

He was almost undone. "And I, you."

Gently, Thane nibbled the soft skin on her neck, and his ministrations had her arching into him, pressing delightfully close.

"I need you, alone, now," she told him, in a sultry growl.

Her voice a siren's call, especially as her hand bunched the collar of his jacket in a tightening grip. Thane was about to pull away from their embrace, to offer her his arm and escort her back to the
Normandy, when a soft thud caught both of their attentions.

Momentarily he shut his eyes, not knowing the interruption but recognising it all the same. With an inaudible sigh, he turned slightly, and was greeted by the sight of Tali sat on the floor. The quarian was gazing around, seemingly bewildered, whilst the other crew laughed in good nature. He heard Shepard utter a small sigh of her own, as she smiled at him in resignation.

"No rest for the wicked," she murmured, pausing to squeeze his hand, before she turned her attention to the inebriated quarian. "Come on Tali, time to go home."

Deftly, Shepard hoisted the younger woman to her feet. But before Thane could offer any assistance, a crash near the bar pulled his attention, and he chuckled upon seeing Grunt sprawled out on the floor. He heard his Siha cough beside him and glancing in her direction, clearly saw the mirth dancing in her emerald eyes. It was evident she was trying not to laugh.

"Can you help Tali, whilst I take care of my big baby?" she asked, gesturing towards the comical sight.

"Of course, Siha," he replied, happy to help despite their interrupted intentions.

"Will you take her to my quarters? I've not seen her this drunk before. I don't want to leave her alone, and Karin deserves a night off," she said, sounding a little guilty.

"If you wish," Thane replied, determined to hide his disappointment.

Shepard's red painted lips curled into another devilish smile. "I promise, I'll make it up to you," she purred into his ear.

She kissed him tenderly, before making her way to an argumentative Grunt. Thane offered Tali his arm, and the quarian sagged against him as they made their way slowly to the exit. She giggled, then apologised, as she stumbled for the third time. At this rate, Thane knew it would be a very long walk back to the Normandy.

"Allow me, Miss Zorah," he smiled, before gently sweeping her into his arms.

"Oh Keelah! I'm starting to see the appeal," Tali laughed.

They were joined moments later by the trio of Shepard, Garrus and Grunt; the krogan being supported between the other two. Thane noticed as the turian flared his mandibles in a wide grin, as he regarded himself and Tali.

"I didn't know you were into sharing, commander?" Garrus laughed.

"Executive privileges of… of being Shepard's best friend," Tali slurred.

"Best friend? You've replaced me?" Garrus said, in mock indignation.


Thane chuckled at their banter.

"Keelah, what am I then?" Tali asked.

The quarian wiggled in Thane's arms, trying to glare at his Siha.

"My sister, that's why I'm apparently sharing," Shepard replied, smiling.
"My Battlemaster is the greatest and shouldn't share!" Grunt suddenly exclaimed. "You deserve to be honoured like the warrior you are mother," he added.

His large head lolled to rest on top of Shepard's, and no one present was surprised at Grunt's affectionate term for Shepard. It had long become common knowledge among the Normandy crew of the bond the two shared. Sights like this had also become a more frequent occurrence, especially when the young krogan had been drinking.

Thanh couldn't help but smile lovingly at his Siha. "We are in complete agreement, Grunt."
Shepard let out a sigh, as the warm water ran through her cropped red hair, and down her supple body. Afterlife had actually been good fun, much better than she'd expected. Plenty of drink, the company of good friends; even Aria had been unexpectedly pleasant... there had even been dancing, something Shepard had thoroughly enjoyed for a change.

A wave of arousal hit her, as she thought of the final dance of the night. The luxurious feeling of being pressed against Thane's toned body, the taste of exotic spice on her tongue as they kissed. Turning the dial of the shower, Shepard blasted herself with cold water. She needed to stop that train of thought. Because as much as she wanted to spend the rest of shore leave with her skin pressed against Thane's scales, it was a very drunk quarian that was lying in her bed, not a devastatingly handsome drell. Not that she really minded... too much, at any rate. At least that's what she kept telling herself.

After towelling off, Shepard slipped into the black shorts and tank top that made up her sleepwear, then filled a glass with water and headed out of her private shower room, into the darkness of her cabin.

"How are you holding up?" Shepard asked, softly.

Tali groaned. "S'all spinning."

"Try drinking some of this."

She handed the glass to her friend, who fumbled as she tried to fit her 'induction port' into the opening on her mask.

"So many... efforts," Tali slurred.

"You okay, Tali?" Shepard asked again, trying not to laugh.

"Fine. Suit doesn't let me get overly intox... intox... drunk. Will have it all flushed out in a minute."

"Sure it will," she soothed, stroking the top of Tali's hood. "Just get some sleep until then."

Within minutes, the quarian's breathing became deep and rhythmic. Shepard smiled as she settled back against the headboard of her bed, Tali sprawling out next to her. Quietly, she powered up her Omni-Tool. Since the chance for practical instruction had eluded her for the night, Shepard she could at least start educating herself with the advice booklet Mordin had sent.

Shepard would never admit it, but she'd spent the entire night cycle avidly reading the material Mordin had provided, though she never quite dared play one of the 'relationship aid vids'. Shepard knew full well the amount of teasing she'd have endured if Tali had woken up, and found her watching one, especially since the material wasn't as starkly clinical as she had first feared... her mind had boggled over the extranet links to 'how to please your drell lover' sites.

Her 'research' meant the sleep cycle passed quickly, even though she hadn't actually, but Shepard was still relieved that Doctor Chakwas had chosen to resume her duties before shore leave had officially ended. Even with thoughts of Thane in her head, Shepard knew she had things to do, and only felt a little guilty when she left a still woozy Tali in the Karin's capable hands.
Once that was taken care of, Shepard managed to track down a pair of guards who had elected to return to duty early as well, mostly thanks to EDI's help. So without hesitation, she summoned them to the AI Core.

"Peterson, I'm powering the geth back up. Be ready," she instructed the guard she vaguely recognised.

The man looked mildly surprised that she had remembered his name, though quickly gave a crisp saluted. Satisfied, she aproached the geth, immediately noticing the barrier EDI had already erected, that shone a bright blue in the dimness of the room.

"I have isolated our systems and erected additional firewalls," the AI pleasantly intoned. "I am prepared to resist any hacking attempt."

She nodded. "Stand by."

Without hesitation, Shepard activated the sequence Tali had programmed into her Omni-Tool the day before. An electrical charge pulsed gently through the geth's body, and after a few seconds, the lens of it's head shuttered before a light appeared. Shepard presumed it was it's optical lens, especially after it seemed to blink.

There was what sounded like electrical feedback, as the unit levered itself into a seated position. The movement seemed unnatural, similar to Dracula rising from a crypt in those cheesy 'horror' movies Joker liked to subject her to. However, in real life, it was actually a little unnerving to watch. Then the electrical feedback became louder as the geth swung it's metal legs off the improvised bed and stood. The unit was a good foot and a half taller than Shepard, but with the way it was regarding her, she oddly felt it posed little threat.

"Can you understand me?" she queried.

"Yes." Was the simple, synthesised response.

"Are you going to attack me?"

Shepard was fairly sure of the answer already, since it had saved her life back on the derelict, but she wanted a recording of it all the same, hoping it would ease the minds of the other crew members.

"No."

"You said my name on the reaper ship. Have we met?" she asked.

The geth unit slightly lifted the panels around it's optics. "We know of you."

Shepard hummed thoughtfully. "You mean I've fought a lot of geth."

"We have never met."

"No, you and I haven't, but I've encountered other geth," she replied, patiently.

"We are all geth, and we have never met," the unit stated. "You are Shepard. Commander, Alliance, human. Fought the heretics, killed by collectors. Rediscovered on the old machine."

"Old machine? You mean the reaper?" Shepard wondered aloud.

"Reaper. A superstitious title originating with the protheans. We call those entities the old machines," it replied.
She nodded before inhaling deeply, weighing her next move. "You seem to know an awful lot about me."

"Extranet data sources. Insecure broadcasts. All organic data sent out is received. We watch you," the geth replied.

Shepard tilted her head to the side, looking the unit directly in it's 'eye', whilst she cocked her hip and settled into her usual stance, as nonchalantly as she could. For some reason, gut instinct told her something major was about to happen.

"You watch *me*, or you watch organics?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Which?"

The geth paused briefly. "Both."

"What do you mean, 'heretics'?" she asked, changing tactics.

"Geth build our own future. The heretics asked the old machines to give them a future. They are no longer part of us," the unit told her. "We were studying the old machine's hardware to protect our future."

Shepard eyed the geth sceptically. "Are the reapers a threat to you too?"

"Yes," the unit replied.

"Why would they attack other machines?"

"We are different from them. Outside their plans," the geth explained.

"What future are the geth building?" Shepard queried, warily.

"Ours."

She bit back a sigh, feeling a headache building. "Will anyone else be affected by whatever it is you're doing?"

"If they involve themselves, it will," it replied.

"So you aren't allied with the reapers?" she checked.

"We oppose the heretics. We oppose the old machines. Shepard-Commander opposes the old machines. Shepard-Commander opposed the heretics. Co-operation furthers mutual goals," the geth stated.

Surprised, Shepard took a step towards the barrier, a move that was mimicked by the geth. She wasn't entirely sure if she'd heard it right. Was the unit really asking what she thought it had? Clarification was definitely needed, for her own sanity if nothing else.

"Are you asking to join us?"

"Yes," it answered.

Shepard crossed her arms, deliberating. She knew there would be many objections, but the unit had
saved her. If it wanted her or the team dead, that wouldn't have happened. She took a deep breath, gut instincts had always served her well, and she was certain the geth wasn't a threat. So she gave a slight nod before disabling the forcefield, hoping Tali wouldn't hate her for it.

"Then what should I call you?"

"Geth."

Shepard just managed to stop herself rolling her eyes. "I mean you, specifically."

"We are all geth."

The urge to face-palm was quickly growing. "What is the individual in front of me called?"

"There is no individual. We are geth," it replied. "There are currently one thousand, one hundred and eighty three programs active with this platform."

Shepard just managed to stop herself from snorting... one thousand, one hundred and eighty three, was that all?! Thankfully, there was a familiar electronic beep, before EDI's blue hologram appeared in the room.

"My name is Legion, for we are many," the AI quoted.

Shepard smiled. "That seems appropriate."

"Christian bible, the gospel of Mark, chapter five, verse nine. We acknowledge this is an appropriate metaphor." the geth agreed.

"We are Legion, a terminal of the geth," the synthetic continued. "We will integrate into the Normandy.

Shepard held out her hand to 'Legion' in a friendly gesture. The geth looked almost confused, obviously computing the action, before it took her hand and shook it. She was palpably relieved that it did so gently, since a crushed hand would not have been pleasant, nor would it have been easy to explain that the geth hadn't meant to hurt her.

"We anticipate the exchange of data," Legion told her in farewell.

After asking EDI to notify her when all crew members were aboard and relatively awake, so she could call a meeting to explain about the seven foot geth that would be roaming the ship, Shepard decided it was the perfect time to stop by Life Support. She hated how their night had ended, and even knowing that Thane understood, she wanted to start to try and make amends.

"Do you need something?" he greeted.

Shepard smiled at the familiar greeting. "I had originally planned on apologising again that our plans were cut short last night."

"But now there is more on your mind." It was a statement, not a question.

Before Shepard could answer, Thane stood and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her close. She went willingly, snaking her arms around his neck. Tenderly, Shepard gave him a chaste kiss, fighting the temptation to deepen it, before simply smiling up at her… boyfriend, she supposed. A thought that made her smile spread into a grin.
"We have another squad member," she told him, earning her a raised brow ridge in response. "The geth unit. It's name is Legion."

"Geth not only speak, but have names?" Thane enquired.

Shepard was not shocked that he took that piece of information in his stride, he wasn't the type of man to be easily surprised. However, she gasped as he left a trail of kisses from her jaw down to her collar bone as he spoke. In truth, it was becoming increasingly hard not to be distract by Thane's careful attention.

"Actually, EDI named him," Shepard managed to explain. "We spoke, and it requested to join the crew."

"Which you naturally agreed to," he said, before his lips grazed hers.

"You don't seem surprised by this." She cupped his face with her hands, and enjoyed looking into the depths of his onyx eyes.

"Siha, you have returned from Kalahira's shores in order to recruit the galaxy's most enigmatic thief, a vengeful mercenary, and an unstable biotic. Along with a turian vigilante, a salarian scientist, a tank-bread krogan, an asari Justicar, a quarian machinist and a drell assassin onto a pro-human ship that has a fully sentient AI."

Thane paused, giving her a measured look. "Why would I be surprised that the first human Spectre, Saviour of the Citadel, Arashu's Angel and the woman who has captured my heart, would befriend a geth and have it work alongside us?" he asked.

It took Shepard a few moments to realise Thane was being serious, before she smiled and shook her head.

"Just shut up and kiss me," she laughed.
Consensus had been reached.

Programme 0392 through to programme 0403 sent the enquiry to EDI, whilst programme 0404 through to programme 1183 organised all relevant data that was needed. The remaining three hundred and ninety one programmes dedicated their runtimes to predicting possible outcomes.

EDI replied via FTL transmission. The fully sentient artificial intelligence was not a factor that the one thousand, one hundred, and eighty three geth programmes had permitted into the expected mission parameters. However, the Enhanced Defence Intelligence had quickly become a trusted data exchange.

Programme 0392 through to programme 0403 did not get to finish the reply, as Shepard-Commander entered the AI Core. Programmes 0726 to 0749 recorded visual, as the human took precisely 6.72 seconds to walk the 7.35 metres. The other one thousand, one hundred and sixty programmes dedicated runtime to forming consensus on which programme should speak. Programme 0052 was elected.

"Shepard-Commander," 0052 greeted. "We have completed our analysis on the reaper's data core."

"Did you find anything useful?" the human asked.

"We were sent to the old machine to preserve the geth's future. We are prepared to reveal how," 0052 explained.

0726 to 0749 continued to record the commander, as programmes 1175 to 1183 issued instruction to focus the optical on the human's facial expressions. 0726 to 0749 complied, with programmes 0890 to 0900 dedicated to compiling the data, and 0282 to 0298 referencing all known visual biomechanics.
"The heretics have developed a weapon to use against geth. You would call it a virus. It is stored on a data core provided by Nazara, the entity you call Sovereign," 0052 continued. "Over time, the virus will change us. Make us conclude that worshipping the old machines is correct."

"I thought geth couldn't be hacked or get viruses, at least for more than a few seconds," Shepard-Commander stated.

Programmes 0282 to 0298 worked to their highest capacity, relaying concluded data within a picosecond to the other one thousand, one hundred and sixty seven programmes. Shepard-Commander was displaying the emotion of surprise. Programmes 0375 to 0396 dedicated their runtimes to computing a reason, whilst 0513 to 0545 collated relative data to exchange.

"Altered programmes are restored from archives, new installations are deleted," 0052 relayed. "This heretic weapon introduces a subtle operating error in our most basic runtimes. The equivalent of your nervous system."

0726 to 0749 visually recorded Shepard-Commander nod. Programmes 0002 to 0009 activated the plates above the optic lens, slightly raising then lowering the metal, as 0063 to 0072 had informed that some facial gesture was the required reaction.

"An equation with a result of 1.33382 returns as 1.33381. This changes the result of all higher processes. We will reach different conclusions," 0052 finished explaining.

"Do you know where the data core is?" the human asked.

"The heretic's headquarter station, on the edge of the Terminus," 0052 stated.

Programmes 0726 to 0749 recorded Shepard-Commander move to rest her weight to one side. 0466 to 0477 searched for known data sources on this gesture, whilst 0282 to 0298 referenced known visual bio-mechanics.

HTTP 204.

No data could be found on the human's current facial expression. Though, a nanosecond later, 0466 to 0477 returned with documented footage of recorded posture. The archival references advised that Shepard-Commander was awaiting further data exchange.

"We will provide coordinates. Normandy's stealth systems are necessary to safely approach," 0052 continued.

"EDI, have Joker set a course to the location Legion provides," Shepard-Commander called into the Normandy's communication system.

"Understood, commander," the Enhanced Defence Intelligence replied, via analogue communications before sending data by FTL transfer.

0726 to 0749 visually recorded the human's facial expression. 0282 to 0298 retrieved relevant data
within a microsecond. Hope. Shepard-Commander was hopeful of this conclusion. All remaining one thousand, one hundred and forty four programmes dedicated their runtimes to extracting a satisfactory reply. Consensus was reached.

"Total victory is a possibility. We cannot judge the odds at this time. Regardless, we will begin preparations," 0052 replied.

Programmes 0726 to 0749 visually recorded Shepard-Commander turn and walk away. However, exactly 1.13 meters from the door, the human stopped and turned back to face them. All one thousand, one hundred and eighty three programmes paused for a picosecond. 0726 to 0749 resumed visual recording, as all other programmes went into stand by mode.

"Legion, I want to ask you something," Shepard-Commander stated.

One thousand, one hundred and fifty nine programmes shifted into over drive, all dedicated to calculating predestined data exchange. 0726 to 0749 continued visual recording. Only 0052 had the presence of data to speak.

"Topic?" it asked.

One thousand, one hundred and eighty two programmes reached instant consensus that was the correct reply within known safe parameters.

"When we brought you aboard, I noticed you have a piece of N7 armour welded to you. Where did you get it?" Shepard-Commander asked.

Programmes 0726 to 0749 continued to record visuals, as one thousand, one hundred and sixty programmes referenced all known data. Consensus was not reached. Another try. Consensus was not reached. Ten more tries. Consensus still not reached. For a microsecond, 0726 to 0749 paused recording. All one thousand, one hundred and eighty three programmes referenced all known data. Consensus was reached.

"It was yours," 0052 replied. "When you disappeared, we were sent to find you. We began where you first encountered the heretics."

"Eden Prime," Shepard-Commander acknowledged.

"After the old machine's attack, it was heavily defended. We were discovered," 0052 stated, whilst programmes 1001 to 1015 directed the platform's arm to the cavity in the hardware. "This is the impact of a rifle shot."

"You've been looking for me for two years?" the human asked.

0726 to 0749 recorded visuals, as Shepard-Commander raised an eyebrow. Programmes 0282 to 0298 referenced known visual bio-mechanics, concluding that the human was sceptical. 0113 to 0125 instructed the correct course of data exchange.

"We visited Therum, Feros, Noveria, Virmire, Ilos. A dozen unsettled worlds. The trail ended at the Normandy's wreckage. You were not there," 0052 replied. "Organic transmissions claimed your death. We recovered this debris from your hard suit."

"That still doesn't explain why you used my armour to fix yourself," Shepard-Commander stated.

One thousand, one hundred and eight two programmes went into high alert.
"There was a hole," 0052 said.

"But why not fix it sooner, or with something else?" the human asked.

All one thousand, one hundred and eighty three programmes started the rapid review of all known compiled data.

**HTTP 444**

The review had no satisfactory outcomes. Cross referencing necessary.

**HTTP 404**

Consensus was not reached. More in depth analysis was required.

A 003000 E4 90 BBH
A 003002 82 RJAC #$6952
A 003003 R9 DXT
A 003004 31 10 12 YJK
A 003007 13 QPL #$7531

Consensus had been reached.

"No data available."

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**Author's Note**

So that was my very first attempt at writing Legion. It was hard, but quite fun. For those who would like to know, no the bios code at the start and end are not (to my knowledge) real coding. However, HTTP 204 is no content, HTTP 444 is the error code for no response and HTTP 404 is for requested resource not found. Also, the binary code (the jumble of numbers for those who aren't sure) does actually mean something, and I will list the English translations below in the order they appear in the chapter.

1. EDI, can you notify Shepard-Commander we must speak with her?
2. Of course. She is already on route.
3. Acknowl...
4. I told you she would listen.
"Are you sure EDI?" Shepard asked.

"Yes commander, the distress signal is of known quarian signatures. Further scans indicate it is from the Cyniad, a scout ship for the Idenna," EDI repeated.

Reluctantly, Shepard stepped out of the shower. Not long ago Thane, Legion and herself had returned from the heretic station, where they had successfully rewritten the enemy programmes. But the installation of the reaper IFF was taking longer than EDI, Joker, or any of the engineers had envisaged, and they were now in a gentle orbit around Gei Hinnom. However, it suddenly struck Shepard that the Cerberus AI seemed to have an awful lot of information on the quarian vessel. Something wasn't right.

"EDI, why do you have so much information of ships from the migrant fleet?" she queried.

There was a pause, almost as if the AI was unsure what to say. "Cerberus and the Cyniad have…

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history. I do not have full access to data logs, but it seems related to the attack Tali'Zorah mentioned."

"So any survivors are hardly going to be happy to see a Cerberus vessel coming to their rescue," Shepard surmised.

"That is an accurate hypothesis," EDI agreed.

Shepard sighed, as she finished towelling off her hair. This was all she needed. There hadn't even been time to eat since the last mission before she was being thrown into another, even her armour still had visible signs from the last fight, white synthetic 'blood' splattering the hard suit. Shepard sighed, and more than a little stiffly, she pulled on the thermal leggings and long sleeved top she wore as under-armour.

"How many survivors?" Shepard questioned.

"The number of life signs detected in the vicinity is uncertain. Local wildlife may be interfering with the accuracy of the biological scan." EDI explained.

She bit back another sigh. "Ok, call the entire ground team and tell them to meet me in the comm. room in fifteen. Fully suited."

"Understood, commander."

With that, there was an electronic beep that signalled EDI had logged out, and Shepard clipped the last piece of her armour in place. She barely had the chance to grab an energy bar from her desk draw, never mind have time to worry about her appearance, before she was punching the call button on the elevator... thank fuck for asari and their semi-permanent make up.

It took less than ten minute minutes for the team to assemble in the end. Calmly, Shepard eyed the twelve members of her ground team, paying particular attention to one woman in particular. For a moment, she'd have given her biotics for Garrus' sense of smell, or Thane's keen observational skills. However, she was having to rely on her own gut instincts, but thankfully it was saying that Miranda was just as surprised as everyone else about the quarian crash site.

"So, as EDI explained, we have no indication of survivors, hostiles or benign local wildlife. We also
can't take the Normandy in due to the IFF, so we'll be taking three shuttles down. Miranda, Jacob, you'll pilot two of the shuttles."

Shepard held up a hand for silence, as the perfect biotic went to interrupt. "The quarians do not have a good history with Cerberus, and I don't intend to upset any survivors unnecessarily. So Legion, you will pilot the third shuttle."

"Acknowledged, Shepard-Commander," the unit replied.

"Samara, Zaeed, Kasumi... you're in Miranda's shuttle. I want you patrolling the eastern parameter of the crash site. Garrus, Jack, Grunt... you're with Jacob on the western parameter. Garrus, Kasumi, I want regular updates."

"Sure thing, Shep," "Of course, Shepard," the thief and the turian replied at the same time.

"Tali, Thane, Mordin... You're with me and Legion. Mordin, bring all the medical supplies you think we will need. Jacob, Miranda, prep your shuttles with provisions. We don't know how many survivors we have, their condition, or how long they've been planet side. I want everyone in the hanger in twenty minutes. Dismissed."

Shepard sprinted from the hanger via the services corridor, leaving the elevator for Tali and Mordin to transfer the sole quarian survivor; Forzan vas Idenna, to the Medical Bay. The message EDI had relayed whilst they were planet side had chilled her to the core. Dread and worry coiled in her gut, making her physically feel sick.

Rushing to the comm. room, Shepard found Joker sat on the board table, elbows rested on his knees, and face buried in his hands. Shepard could have cried. The warring emotions of elation that Joker was alive, and burning rage that the rest of the crew were gone, churned inside her. However, Shepard blinked back the tears. The last thing her adopted brother need was to see her choked up.

"Jeff?" she called, softly.

"I'm sorry, Shep," he muttered into his hands.

Quickly pausing to remove her gauntlets, Shepard knelt in front of the pilot and gently pulled his hands away, before cupping his face and tilting it so he had to look at her. There were clear tear tracks on his cheeks that disappeared into his beard, and his green eyes were completely devoid of their usual spark. It broke her heart to see him like this, but before Shepard could say anything, Miranda stormed through the door, with the majority of the team following in her wake.

"Everyone? You lost everyone?" the Cerberus officer demanded. "And damn near lost the ship to?"

Something inside Shepard snapped. Before she could stop herself, Shepard had risen from her crouch and punched the woman square on the jaw, the momentum of standing adding to the force. Miranda dropped to the floor, a look of utter shock on her face.

"Enough!" Shepard growled.

"It's not his fault Miranda," Jacob agreed, tactfully placing himself between the two women. "None of us caught it."

Shepard gave the man a slight nod of thanks, before moving back to Joker's side, perching on the table beside him. Thane and Garrus soon joined them, and even Jack came to squat in front of the pilot. The biotic lay a surprising gently hand on Joker's knee.
"Ignore the cheerleader," she said, in an angry whisper. "She's a fucking bitch."

"Mr Taylor is correct," EDI chimed in. "The harmful data in the collector drive was even more sophisticated than the 'black box' reaper virus I was given."

"Sounds like it was a rough ride," Garrus said, his mandibles pulled against his face.

"Indeed, how are you feeling?" Thane asked, clasping the pilot lightly on the shoulder.

They had all heard EDI's account of the situation on their ride back to the Normandy, and Shepard flashed both men a quick, tight-lipped smile, before turning her attention back to Joker. The pilot gave a weak smile, one that seemed a little jagged. Carefully, Shepard took his hand in hers, noticing the angry swelling that was already beginning to form... just how many broken bones had he suffered.

"There's a lot of empty chairs in here," Joker stated, his eyes fixed to the floor.

"We did everything we could, Jeff," EDI stated.

"Yeah... thanks, Mom," the pilot sighed, in reply.

Absently, Shepard stroked Joker's hand as she spoke to EDI's hologram. "Is the ship clean? We can't risk this happening again."

Surprisingly, it was Joker that answered. "EDI and I purged the systems, and the reaper IFF is online. We can go through the Omega Four relay whenever you want."

For the first time since Shepard entered the room, the pilot looked up and directly met her gaze. She saw the silent question in his eyes, and had every intention of agreeing and support his decision about EDI. However, before she could reply...

"Don't even get me started about unshackling a damn AI," Miranda stated.

Careful not to hurt Joker, Shepard slipped off the table and rounded on the Cerberus officer, fully happy to lay her out this time. However, a cool hand grasped her wrist, and she looked back to see Thane's intent gaze on her. His grip shifted from her wrist to her hand, before giving it a gentle squeeze, and Shepard relented with a sigh.

"What the hell could I do against the collectors? Break my arm at them?" Joker defended. "Besides, EDI cleared the ship. She's alright."

"I assure you, I am still bound by protocols in my programming. Even if I was not, you are still my crew mates," EDI insisted, causing a small smile to tug at Shepard's lips.

"EDI has had plenty of opportunity to kill us, she isn't HAL. I trust her," she stated, glaring at Miranda. "And if you can't, you have two options. Leave out the nearest airlock, or accept we need all the help we can get."

Jacob gave a short, mirthless chuckle. "It seems we have everything we need to rescue the crew."

"About time we took the fight to the collectors," Jack sneered.

"Agreed," Shepard affirmed. "EDI, send a message to the Idenna, let them know we have a quarian needing immediate transfer. Joker, have Mordin check you over, then get back to the bridge. The rest of you, to your stations."
To her complete surprise, Joker stood on slightly shaky legs and gave her a smart salute, something he hadn't done even when they were both Alliance. It didn't go unnoticed the way the pilot winced as he did so, but that made the gesture all the more poignant to Shepard.

"Who's like us?" he asked, much to the evident confusion of everyone besides Jacob.

Shepard laughed despite the situation, snapping off a crisp salute of her own.

"Damn few and they're all dead. Now, move out."

Author's Note
HAL is a reference to HAL 9000, a computer in Arthur C. Clarke's Space Odyssey.
Kolyat stared blindly at the message that remained on his Omni-Tool screen. He had tried to write a response several times in the past half hour, each being deleted before they were even half way through. He sighed and rubbed his hand across his face, trying to reawaken himself... he hadn't a clue what to say.

He was at a loss as to what to write back. Things were improving between them, but Kolyat was still angry, and if he were to be honest, he was scared. After not long being reunited with his father, he hated the thought of them being separated so soon.

Eventually, Kolyat simply closed the message, unable to find the words to say. With a sigh, he drummed his fingers across the surface of the desk. He felt disquieted, he needed to talk to someone, someone who would understand. However, there was only one other person he could think of, and their last encounter had hardly been friendly. Still, she had sent him an email after that, informing him that he could contact her should he need anything. He supposed the offer still stood, and after another moment's hesitation, he typed a quick message.

**Commander Shepard,**

_I know you are about to go through the Omega Four relay. I hope you are successful. Please bring my father back safely._

Kolyat.

He hesitated once again, before hitting send. It was hardly a masterpiece, but it got the point across in an amicable tone. Sitting back in his chair, Kolyat breathed deeply, trying to calm himself. One thing his father _had_ done for him when he was young, was teach him how to meditate. He remembered the instructions in perfect detail, even if he was struggling to follow them. Though a sudden beeped from his Omni-Tool disrupted him.

**Commander Shepard,**

_I have every intention of all of us making it back alive, none more than your father. I promise._

Shepard.

He blinked his double lids slowly, twice. Kolyat hadn't expected a reply, never mind one so quickly. Almost in slow motion, he rested his elbows on the desk in front of him, leaning forward as he re-read the short reply for a second and third time. For some reason, those nineteen words seemed to have some hidden meaning, some hidden layer. Kolyat suspected what it was, even if he had no proof.

When he had first witnessed the commander and his father together, there was something that caught his attention. At the time, he hadn't been sure what that something actually was, now though, it certainly seemed that there was more to their relationship than commander and crewman.

**Commander Shepard,**

_I did not expect a reply so soon. Thank you for the reassurance._

_I know I have no right to ask, but I feel compelled to. Is there something between you and my father?_  

Kolyat.

Quickly, he hit send before he had the chance to change his mind. Really, Kolyat wasn't sure why he was asking such a personal question. It wasn't exactly his business, and he wasn't even sure he
wanted to know the answer or how he felt about it either way. But he was almost certain that there was something between Shepard and his father.

Bailey had taught him to read between the lines, and Kolyat had re-examined his memories many times, which always culminated in the same conclusion. The way his father had looked at the commander when Kolyat had seen them together, was the same as ones that he'd once witnessed directed at his mother. However, he felt unexpectedly nervous as he waited on her reply.

Kolyat,
I had just finished a vid call with Councillor Anderson when your message came through. My crew is my family and I would give my life for each of them. You're father speaks of you often. He is very proud of you, and loves you dearly. Even though I plan on us all coming home, this is a high risk mission. If you have something you want to tell him, do so now. Take care of yourself, and either I or your father will contact you once we return. Shepard.

He re-read the message several times. Oddly, having someone he didn't really know but who knew his father say those things... it made it seem more real and genuine somehow. During his reading, Kolyat also evaluated what Shepard did, or perhaps didn't say. He was still fairly sure there was something more to their relationship, and having the commander state is father was like family to her, spoke of deeper feelings than simply sexual.

In truth, Kolyat had already decide that if he had to accept that his father was in another relationship, he wanted it to have a meaning, and Kolyat had a feeling it did. It also surprised him to discover that he was starting to like the human commander too, even if his jaw had twinged for a full month after she hit him.

Commander Shepard,
Thank you for your kind words. I will pray to the gods for your safe return. Kolyat.

After sending that last message to the commander, Kolyat re-opened his father's message, finally knowing what he wanted to say. It was nothing as eloquent as what his father had wrote, but it was honest and from the heart.

Father,
We still have much to catch up on. Return safely, and may the gods be with. Kolyat

With that, he pushed himself away from his desk and walked to his small balcony, the only outside space his tiny apartment provided. Without preamble, Kolyat lowered himself onto one to the brightly coloured floor cushions, before he clasped his hands and bowed his head. For the first time ten years, he prayed.
The ship was too quiet, too desolate. Meditation had done little to calm the growing discord, so now he paced.

Thane knew Shepard blamed herself, due to her unreasonable speculation that if she had been on board, she could have saved them. He had watched as the commander had consoled and commended Joker and EDI, only to dismiss any attempts from the crew at reassuring her. Even Garrus and Tali's words had fallen on deaf ears, along with his own sentiments.

So Thane had left Shepard's side, reasoning that she needed some time alone to collect her thoughts. To prepare before their impending mission through the Omega Four relay, that they were currently on route to... but it didn't sit right with him. So he'd tried to distract himself. First by writing and sending what could be his final message to Kolyat. Then, he'd checked and cleaned his weapons for the coming battle. Meditated, prayed. He had even composed a farewell letter to Shepard, to be delivered after his demise, whether that to be on the collector base or through his Kepral's syndrome.

But now in the unnerving hush of the ship, Thane's heart demanded he seek out his beloved redhead, and he finally relented.

After reaching the top deck, Thane spent a few agonising minutes pacing the corridor outside her quarters. He was uncharacteristically nervous, unsure of what to say or how to act, he felt almost like an adolescent again. But with his mind still in turmoil, Thane drew a steadying breath, before entering her cabin.

His perfected calm demeanour faltered the moment he laid his eyes on his beautiful Siha. She sat in the lower part of her room, engrossed in the datapad she was reading. Clad in one of her customary black dresses, Shepard appeared freshly showered, her red hair still shining damply in the dim light. He watched as the commander looked up as he entered, her brow furrowed in confusion at his sudden appearance, but a small smile was forming on her red painted lips all the same.

"Thane?" she murmured.

Hearing Shepard utter his name, sent Thane's heart thumping in his chest. He approached her slowly, resisting the growing urge to pull her into a fierce embrace.

"Siha, I…"

He paused, unsure what he wanted to say. His mind stumbled over his swirling thoughts, and he began to pace as he spoke, unable to meet Shepard's verdant gaze.

"I have known I would die for many years. I have tried to leave the galaxy better than I found it. You helped me achieve more than I thought possible. We've righted many wrongs, I've spoken to my son. I should be at peace on the eve of battle…"

Thane turned to face his Siha, only to find that she'd silently slipped from her chair and closed the distance between them. Shepard reached for him, lightly catching his left hand and right forearm, in what seemed like a gentle attempt to halt his pacing.

"Stop. Don't give me a speech," she said.

As always, Shepard's voice was as soft as summer rain, and her emerald eyes were full of understanding and compassion. It humbled him, he felt undeserving, which made Thane lower his
"I'm ashamed," he admitted.

Thane felt Shepard's right hand move to stroke his face, but gently caught her wrist, stopping the caress. He was unworthy of her comfort.

Unable to control the raging emotions he felt, Thane turned from the commander and leant on the desk she'd been using moments before. A single, unbidden tear escaped, and he could feel the small droplet roll down his scaled cheek. It was a testament to his weakness, of his failure to remain strong for his warrior angel. Thane's calm faltered, and he punched the metal surface of the desk. But it did little to reign in his fears and frustrations, and he could feel Shepard's gaze on his back. It drove him to speak.

"I have worked so hard, meditated and prayed and done good deeds. I've atoned for the evils I've done," he told her.

Glancing over his shoulder, Thane was sure he would find disgust in his Siha's eyes, especially because of his evident lack of control. But all he saw was concern and understanding, and a look he found himself desperately hoping was love. Thane turned away from her exquisite features once again, ashamed as another tear rolled down his cheek.

"I prepared, but I consider my body's death and a chill settles in my gut. I'm afraid, and it shames me."

To his surprise, Thane felt his Siha's warm, delicate hand encase his own. The one that was still bunched in a fist and pressed into the surface of her desk.

"Thane," she murmured.

The whispering of his name was a siren's call to his soul, and he found himself turning to her, his arms snaking around her slender waist as she spoke.

"Be alive with me tonight."

Shepard's sultry tone was no more than a whisper, as she caressed his face with smooth fingertips. Her gentleness released a wave of emotion, and more unbidden tears escaped Thane's eyes. Primal instincts took over as he pulled her close.

He revelled in the softness of her red painted lips against his, in the fresh citrus taste of her as their tongues danced together, and the alluring suppleness of her exotic curves. His hands wandered, almost on their own volition, to the zipper of his Siha's dress, and Thane felt Shepard's nimble fingers move to the clasps of his own clothing.

Their kiss deepened and he inhaled the floral scent of her perfume, smiling inwardly as he realised it was a gift he'd bought her. He ached for her, body and soul. But it was no small part of Thane's brain that told him that a lowly assassin such as himself was not worthy of the reincarnated goddess in his arms.

"Siha… I'm not a deserving man for your affections. Please, let me do the right thing and stop this now," he managed to say.

His heart was breaking as he mumbled against her intoxicating lips, but Shepard's response came instantly. She pushed Thane's jacket off his shoulders, her hands following the fabric down his arms, until cool air met the usually clothed scales. Her emerald eyes, darkened by desire, burned with a
devilish light.

"I love you, Thane Krios," she told him, confidently. "You remind me what I'm fighting for."

Shepard's words were interjected with tantalising kisses from his cheek frill down his dewlap, whilst her hands ran over the leather of his tunic, before slipping under the hem and tracing indistinct patterns on the scales of his hips with her warm finger tips.

The need to feel her warm flesh against his scales became overpowering, and Thane made short work of his tunic, before returning his attention to her dress. He slid the zipper down, torturously slow, before helping her out of the soft cotton fabric..

Thane smiled with unbridled appreciation as he gazed at the porcelain contours of his Siha's body. Thin black lace encased her hips and hid her sex, a style he had learnt were called 'French Knickers' from his time on the Citadel. There was also the unfamiliar sight of triangles of black lace covering her ample breasts, held by thin looking straps.

They were a part of Shepard's anatomy that Thane lacked experience with. Even though drell women did have breast-like protrusions, they were not mammary glands, as drell younglings were born with the ability to eat solid food. So the softness of Shepard's breasts, along with the delicate material adorning them... which drell women didn't need due to the density of their muscles, both enamoured and confused him.

Despite their alien quality, Thane found the fleshy globes more than attractive. They were part of his Siha after all, and the educational material Mordin had sent him had stated they were an erogenous zone for human women. However, his brow furrowed as he ran his fingers tentatively over the lace, he was unsure how to remove the article of clothing... he wasn't even sure what it was called.

"It's a bra," Shepard stated, smiling.

Thane blinked his double lids slowly. It was as if she'd read his mind.

"Allow me," she continued, before reaching behind her back.

Within seconds, the 'bra' was loosened, and his Siha allowed the straps to fall down her arms before discarding the item onto the nearby couch. Thane felt her hands move back to his hips, before ghosting to his abdomen, as they resumed their lingering kisses. Deftly, Shepard unfastened his leather trousers, and the loosening fabric made room for his growing member.

In a fluid movement, Thane cupped Shepard's rear and lifted her, forcing her to wrap her long, toned legs around his waist. Their torsos pressed flush against each other, and the feeling on her bare skin against his scales was intoxicating.

To Thane's immense delight, and slight surprise, Shepard let out a soft, feminine giggle. He knew it would be a memory he would revisit often, even before he reverently lay her on the bed, the blue hue of the fish tank bathing her porcelain skin. His eyes drank in the ethereal sight of his goddess, and he felt his breath catch in his throat.

"You look beautiful, my Siha," he whispered.

"Always yours," she replied, smiling.

Shepard's loving tone lulled him, which allowed her to catch him off guard, as she flashed him a cheekier grin. Before Thane could brace himself, Shepard had gripped the opened waistband of his trousers, and pulled him on top of her. Only embedded instincts allowed Thane to catch himself on
his forearms, placed either side of Shepard's head, before his full weight fell on her.

He ran a hand through Shepard's flame coloured hair, gazing into the emerald depths of her eyes. To his amusement, Thane felt a tug on his waistband, and his Siha raised an eyebrow in the way he had come to adore.

"I want these off," she demanded, barely concealing a laugh.

"As you wish, Siha."

Even as Thane rolled off her, quickly shedding his boots then leather trousers... baring himself fully to Shepard... a ghost of apprehension crossed his consciousness. Would she find his body too alien for her?

He felt the mattress shift slightly, and Shepard was soon kneeling beside him, her gaze raking down his body. Thane fought to keep his breathes even. He was far from inexperienced, but his encounters had only been with his own kind. Now, he was becoming aware that there was a real chance his Siha was not as captivated with him, as he was with her.

However, his fears were waylaid somewhat as Shepard gracefully moved to straddle his waist. Propped up on her forearms, she brought her head close to his. But instead of closing the distance with a kiss as he expected her to, Thane became aware that his Siha was breathing in each of his exhalations. His lips curled into a gentle smile, humbled by the thought this beautiful woman was showing him. Firstly, by consciously keeping her minuscule weight off his chest which reduced the pressure on his stricken lungs, but also by the breath-play. The practise was an ancient, intimate act that lovers who worshipped the old gods would share. As a prelude to more physical, amorous activities.

Her use of it was intreguing.

Thane briefly reflected that it had taken months to convince Irikah to partake in the ancient ritual, but his beautiful red haired human was willing participating in a drellish custom, without him even requesting. He felt in awe of the woman above him.

With a fluidity that only years of training could provide, Thane managed to prop himself into an upright position, pulling Shepard's legs around his waist as he sat cross-legged on the bed. His member pressed tantalisingly against her thinly veiled sex, but Thane concentrated on pulling his Siha into a tight embrace, continuing their breathe-play.

He felt the supple planes of her skin warm his cooler scales as he gently placed one hand on the small of her back, and another between her shoulder blades. Thane was unsure how much Shepard knew about the practise they were participating in, but it was an ancient meditation meant for lovers. One that focused on harmonising their energies, their desires, and he was elated at how receptive his Siha was to it, as they slowly rocked back and forth. Tenderly, Thane kissed her collar bone, which rewarded him with Shepard pressing her body closer, and the love he felt for his fiery companion grew with each breath.

Avidly, Thane watched as a radiant smile graced his Siha's lips, and felt her warm hands caress his face. He caught the right and lightly kissing her palm, savouring the slight saltiness that met his lips.

"I love you, Siha," he told her, before pulling her into a bruising kiss.

His hands moved in light strokes, from her shoulders to her décolleté, and it seemed to him that Shepard leant back instinctually, creating a slither of separation between their torsos that allowed him
access to her alluring breasts. Experimenting with touch, Thane ghosted his fingertips down the fleshy globes, smiling as his Siha gasped and arched into his attentions, as his fingers brushed the rosy buds in the centre. Intrigued, he tentatively brushed the pads of his thumbs over each bud, and was curious to see them stiffening. He raised a brow ridge, and glanced to his Siha's face, questioning the reaction.

"It shows you're doing it right," she whispered.

Thane had been so engrossed with her breasts, he'd failed to notice Shepard was tracing the swirls of his markings down his muscled arms, her fingers running down the natural dark green patterns, making him shiver pleasantly.

"I like these," she informed him.

"I am glad, Siha."

Smiling, Thane wrapped his arms around her waist and tipped her backwards, allowing his mouth access to her breasts.

"I like these," he said, playfully mimicking her words.

He languidly licked from the underside of her right breast, and Shepard gasped as he flicked the rosy bud with his tongue, it's slight bifurcation enabling him to caress each side of the peak as he did. Her murmured appreciation led him to repeat the attention on her left. Her grip tighten on his biceps and a wave of manly pride shot to Thane's already engorged member, as he heard her speak, breathlessly:

"Thane, I need you."

"As you wish, my Siha," he smiled.

In a fluid movement, Thane had roll Shepard onto her back. Propping himself above her, he kissed down the toned plane of her stomach as his hands gently but firmly ran down her sides. Reverently, Thane worshipped the exotic gift that was her body.

Slowly, he slid the lacy fabric from her hips, trailing the exposed skin with soft kisses. He was surprised when his lips met the smooth skin of her pubic bone, as his research had shown that humans had hair in this area... perhaps it was a personal choice.

Pushing his wonders aside for another time, Thane gently pulled the lace garment down her toned legs, kissing down the left until he had fully removed the fabric from her enchanting body. He placed tender kisses on the instep of each of her feet, praising her for the goddess she was, before trailing kisses back up her right leg until he came to the hidden delight of her sex.

The soft mewls and moans his Siha made in response to his attentions had been like music to his ears, but the breathy way she whispered his name nearly broke his control. Forcing his attention away from her apex, Thane ran a hand from her pubic bone up her stomach and breast bone, before cupping the side of her beautiful face. He lay beside her, gazing into the emerald pools of her eyes, as she caressed his cheek frills. Pressing his lips to hers, Thane sort to express his adoration in a deep, lingering kiss.

"I love you, Thane," Shepard whispered.

Her soft breathe against the sensitive skin of his lips, made him shiver with pleasure. He felt the warmth of her tongue run the length of his bottom lip, before her teeth gently bit the flesh and pure desire surged through him as he pulled her into a tight embrace.
"I once told you, I would worship you, body and soul," he whispered, against her ear. He pulled back slightly, intent on looking into her eyes. "Allow me to do so."

Shepard's answer came as she licked up his dewlap, her tongue deftly following the contours of his neck as her finger tips began to move lower down his torso. With a great deal of effort, Thane caught her hands, halting to sensual thrill. He brought her hands to his mouth, kissing each palm in turn.

"This is about your pleasure, not mine," he told her. "Let me praise you like the goddess you are."

Smiling, Shepard shook her head but relented to his request, allowing Thane to gently push her back to relax on the mattress. Kissing her delicious lips, he ran his hand down her torso, gently skimming the rosy bud of her left breast as his mouth paid homage to the right. His hand came to rest at the apex of her thighs, and his palm settled on her public bone, as his fingers stroked more familiar territory. In languid circles, he caressed the nubbin of her sex, drawing out gasps of pleasure from his Siha.

As she arched from the bed, Thane slipped his fused digits into her velvet folds, eliciting a long soft moan from his lover. Kissing Shepard deeply, his tongue danced with hers, as his fingers lovingly stroked the inner walls of her sex. Her warmth and wetness called to him, breaking down the barriers of his control. He wanted to be inside, to feel her envelope his member, he needed her with every fibre of his being. With unrushed movements, Thane positioned himself between his Siha's legs, before quickly rolling on one of the specialist prophylactics. Once ready, he closed the distance between them, the head of his drellhood nudging the velvet petals of her sex.

His gaze sort Shepard's emerald eyes, seeking out her permission, her agreement to join with him so completely. The look of love Thane found in his Siha's eyes, would forever be etched into his perfect memory. He began to slowly push his member into her warmth, just an electronic beep broke the hush reverence of the room.

Reluctantly, Thane halted his movements, as EDI's synthesised voice invaded their private pleasure.

"I'm sorry if I'm interrupting anything, commander. But Jeff wished that I inform you that ETA to the relay is fifteen minutes."

Thane bowed his head to his Siha's breasts, before he pulled away from his lover. Shepard let out a frustrated groan, one that echoed his own feelings.

"Thanks for the heads up EDI, I'll be on the bridge shortly. Instruct all crew to battle stations," Shepard said.

The level of calmness in her voice, was belied by the lingering looks she was giving him.

"Acknowledge, logging you out."

EDI's console beeped as the connection was cut, and Thane offered Shepard his hand, helping her from the bed. Once standing, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in for what could be their final embrace.

"Whatever happens, know I will treasure the memories of this night, Siha." He kissed her cheek tenderly.

"Don't think I'm done with you yet, Sere Krios," she smiled. Her soft hands caressed the back of his head and nape of his neck as she spoke.

"Until later then." Thane kissed her neck and collar bone.
"Later," Shepard agreed.

With a final, emotion fuel kiss, they reluctantly broke their embrace.

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**Author's Note**
The breathe-play is inspired by Tantric Sex practises. I figured with Thane being so spiritual, it would be likely that there would be some sexual/sensual aspects that he would seek to include. Which is just my personal opinion of his character.
Her foot tapped the floor impatiently, as the holographic projection of the Illusive Man's galactic hide-out materialised into view. They were ten minutes from the Omega Four relay, and even though Shepard could admit that a very begrudging respect had grown for the Cerberus leader, she had better things to be doing than talking to him. Despite that, she held her tongue and allowed him to speak first.

"Shepard, I wish I had more information for you," he said in greeting. "I don't like you heading through that relay blind, but we don't have much choice."

Despite the fact the Illusive Man sounded genuinely concerned for once, it did little more than mildly surprise her, and she found herself biting back the urge to snort in response. Shepard had certainly not forgot about his betrayal aboard the collector vessel, and still suspected the derelict reaper had been also a set up. Though whether it was aimed at her team or the scientists, she wasn't sure... but once bitten, twice shy.

"I'm not going alone, I've got the best working with me. If we stick together, we will make it," Shepard replied, matter-of-fact.

"I knew we brought you back for a reason, I've never seen a better leader," he praised. "Despite the danger, it's a great opportunity. The first human to take a ship through... and survive."

For a moment, Shepard had to mentally check she wasn't staring. That was high praise from the Illusive Man, something she doubted even Miranda Lawson got to hear. Determined not to let him have the satisfaction of seeing her surprised, Shepard cocked her hip to the side and raised an eyebrow. Compliments aside, begrudging respect only held up so far, and her patience was growing thin.

"Is there anything else?" she asked, trying to keep her tone neutral.

"I just wanted you to know, I appreciate the risk you are taking. Regardless of your opinion of Cerberus, of me, you are a valuable asset to all of humanity," the Illusive Man replied. "Be careful, Shepard."

To say his last sentiment was unexpected would have been an understatement. However, despite the Illusive Man's seeming concern, something rubbed Shepard up the wrong way. Though that was something to deal with later. Right now, she had a job to do. With a brisk nod, Shepard turned on her heel and strode out of the Communications Room. She quickly made her through the empty CIC, each deserted work station adding to her determination, before she joined Joker in the cockpit. Shepard took a moment to quietly observe the oddly red glowing relay, and lay a hand gently on the pilot's shoulder.

"Back into hell?" Joker asked, his hands hovering over the controls.

"Hopefully it's not a one way ticket," she smirked. "Let's make it happen."

"Aye, Aye," the pilot affirmed, smiling macabrely as he set to work.

Even after all the missions they'd worked on together, Shepard still found it utterly mesmerising to watch as Joker's skilful hands danced over the Normandy's controls. There had been countless ships that she'd served on before working aboard the SR1, and Shepard could honestly not think of a better pilot. She smiled proudly as she watched, allowing herself a moment to witness a master at work,
despite the looming danger.

"Reaper IFF activated. Signal acknowledged," EDI stated.

"Commander?" Jacob's deep voice called over the comm. system. "The Drive Core just lit up like a Christmas Tree."

"Drive Core at critical levels," EDI advised, her artificial voice sounding almost strained.

"Re-routing," Joker said, his tension only evident by the set of his shoulders.

"Brace for acceleration," EDI commanded, as the Normandy entered the relay.

Those few minutes had passed in the blink of an eye, and Shepard's brain barely caught up quick enough to allow her to brace herself between the pilot's chair and the corner of the navigation panel. Shepard shut her eyes as the red glow of the relay engulfed the ship, illuminating the bridge with an aggressive light.

'Let us all get through this jump in one piece' she prayed to any deity that might exist.

"Ah shit!" Joker exclaimed, suddenly.

His voice forced Shepard's eyes to snap open, and what greeted her was not a welcome sight. Emerging from the relay, they'd immediately encountered the Omega Four debris field. Her eyes opened wider in astonishment, and she felt almost overwhelmed by what she saw. A ship graveyard on a galactic scale.

Deftly, Joker manoeuvred the Normandy through hulking corpses of long destroyed vessels, before finally letting out a relieved huff of breath.

"Too close. These must be all the ships that tried to make it through the Omega Four relay. Some look ancient," he stated, in a hushed tone.

"Wonder if this is how they felt entering the Bermuda Triangle for the first time?" she said, deadpan. "If you see any called the Mary Celeste, we're high-tailing it out of here."

"I have detected an energy signature at the edge of the egression disc," EDI advised.

Shepard's attention snapped towards a cylindrical mass that was barely visible on the horizon. "It has to be the collector base. Take us in for a closer look."

They made steady progress for several minutes, Joker effortlessly guiding the Normandy through the floating debris. Or so it seemed to Shepard, she knew that impressions could be deceiving, and had no doubt it was taking all of her adoptive brother's concentration to keep them safe. However the gentle cruise was quickly interrupted as several monitors lit up, flashing almost furiously... never a good sign.

"Careful Jeff, we have company," EDI warned, as an all too familiar ship came into view.


Shepard's breath involuntarily hitched, when he grit out:

"Not those beams again!"

The panic in the pilot's voice matched the growing fear Shepard felt, as she regarded the welcome
party's yellow lazer beam. On the outside she remained the steadfast commander, on the inside… that was a different story.

Her heart began furiously beating and dread began to coil in her gut. In truth, she felt sick. Gently, Shepard lay a hand on Joker's shoulder, and she could physically feel how tense he was. He was obviously reliving the same memory she was.

"You can do it, Jeff," she assured, her voice no more than a whisper.

However, 'Spirits not again, please not again' repeated on a loop in her mind. Especially as Joker was forced to swiftly dodge another beam that came uncomfortably close.

"Now they are just pissing me off," he almost growled.

And despite the obvious danger, Shepard couldn't help smile as Joker called to the AI:

"EDI, take these bastard's out."

Shepard was so engrossed in watching Joker, it wasn't until she felt a tentative hand on her forearm, that she realised someone had joined them in the cockpit. Turning to face the new comer, she was greeted by the sight of a tense looking Miranda.

"As long as the new plating holds…"

The Cerberus officer didn't need to finish her sentence, they all knew their thoughts lingered on the fate of the original Normandy.

"I'm sure Jacob knows what he's doing," Shepard replied, forcing a tight lipped smile as the Normandy suffered it's first hit.

'Hold together girl' she pleaded, silently.

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Author's Note:
The Mary Celeste was a British merchant brigantine, famous for having been discovered on 5 December 1872 in the Atlantic Ocean, unmanned and apparently abandoned (the one lifeboat was missing, along with its crew of eight as well as two passengers). The mystery was popularised by Arthur Conan Doyle, though he renamed the vessel Marie Celeste.
Despite Miranda's cool exterior, her breath caught in her throat and with wide eyes, she watched the yellow beam barely miss the hull. She chanced a glance at the commander and found the other woman staring directly ahead, her hand gripping the pilot's shoulder. In the faint reflection that Miranda caught in the monitors and viewing panels, she saw the haunted looks on both Shepard and Jeff's faces. In that moment, she truly understood... they'd lived this before.

"Coming for another round," Joker declared, before casting his eyes quickly up to the commander.

Shepard gave a mirthless grin. "Do it!"

"Come on girl, let's give it to them," the pilot grit out.

Even Miranda was impressed with the speed of which Joker's hands flew over the controls, and it was with grim satisfaction that she watched as the Javelin Torpedoes and GUARDIAN lasers made contact with the collector vessel. Several further shots were exchanged, before the Normandy was rocked by incoming fire, which forced Miranda to brace herself against the bulkhead.

"Report!" Shepard demanded.


"It's moving towards the Hanger," Joker updated.

Quickly, he brought up a hologram of the ship to show the exact location. Shepard merely nodded then moved away from the pilot's chair, her face unreadable. However, Miranda couldn't help but lean in the get a better look, wondering what the hell 'it' was.

However, she felt a tap on her shoulder and looking behind her, Miranda found the commander raising an eyebrow. Instantly, she knew what was wanted, and made her way to the armoury to grab their weapons. It took a minute at most, and when she met up with the other woman outside the elevator, Shepard was giving instructions through the comm. system.

"Garrus, I need the Thanix powered up and standing by. Thane, meet me at the elevator. We have an uninvited guest to attend to."

The ride down to the Hanger was thankfully uneventful, the elevator only stopping to allow the assassin to enter from the Crew Deck. He offered a silent, polite bow as he stepped on, but it didn't go unnoticed by Miranda how close the drell chose to stand by the commander. Never touching, but too close for a casual acquaintance.

Realisation suddenly dawned, helped by the memory of Shepard drinking countless Weeping Heart cocktails. At one point, the revelation would have caused her revulsion. Now Miranda honestly wasn't sure what she thought about it. But as the elevator doors slid open, she knew she had a job to focus on.

The ensuing fight was gruelling, though thankfully EDI had managed to erect kinetic barriers ensuring that oxygen and gravity levels were still maintained. The 'Oculus', as EDI had identified the intruder, had been whittled down to a quarter of it's synthetic health according to the commander's visor, before it escaped by punching another hole in the hull. The damage forced the AI to divert more power to erect further barriers, and the strain on the engines could be heard from the floor above.
"We are sitting ducks out here, I have to try lose them in the debris field," Joker called through the comm.

"I trust you," Shepard replied, without hesitation.

Miranda knew the commander and the pilot had history, it was exactly that reason the Illusive Man had wanted to recruit Jeff in the first place. However, the complete faith Shepard had in him was something she could never understand. And almost immediately, Miranda wanted to question the commander's opinion, as a shudder knocked her into the bulk head, hard.

She shook her head in a hopeless attempt to try end the ringing in her ears, and looked up to see the drell braced against some crates, trying to shield Shepard from the flying debris. Albiet a little reluctantly, Miranda was forced to admit that despite being an alien, the assassin was a good match for the commander. Even though she really couldn't see the appeal... surely he felt scaly?!

Another erratic lurch knocked Miranda off balance again, and she found herself sliding to a halt next to the couple. To her surprise, she found one of the drell's arms around her waist and one of Shepard's hands around her wrist, which stopped her from moving when the next jolt hit.

"This is worse than a roller coaster," Miranda muttered.

The off hand comment surprisingly earned her a grin from the commander and what she thought was a confused look from the assassin. Idly she mused if drell had roller coasters, which was followed by her wondering why she had thought that in the first place.

"It's hardly the happiest place in the galaxy," Shepard retorted, before calling into the comm: "Report."

"Kinetic barriers steady at thirty percent. No irreparably damage," EDI reported.

"Though Shepard, you have a friend incoming!" Joker interrupted.

"It seems our guest hasn't had enough of two such lovely ladies," the drell interjected, deadpan.

For a split second, Miranda just stared at the assassin. She didn't actually know he possessed a sense of humour. He always appeared quiet and reserved.

"Flatterer," Shepard laughed.

Before she could react, Miranda watched as the commander ducked under his arm, and sprinted into cover behind another crate. Slightly in a state of shock, she watched as Shepard unclipped her Arc Projector. The sudden suction she felt as the 'Oculus' barrelled back into the Cargo hold, brought Miranda back to the present. There was a faint hiss when a kinetic barrier sprung up to seal the new hole, and a nod from Shepard was all that was needed for her to prepare a Heavy Overload.

The next ten minutes past in a blur... and an uncountable amount of thermal clips. The only sounds were of near constant weapon fire and biotic explosions. Just as Miranda was about to prepare another Overload, Shepard suddenly hollered the order to duck. Quick to comply, she found herself hunkered down behind one of the Normandy's cooling fans with the commander to her right, and the assassin beyond her.

Without warning, an almighty bang came from the direction of the Oculus. It seemed like the intruder had exploded in an impressive fireball, if the flames licking around their improvised shield was anything to go by. Miranda turned to the other two, unsure what to say, but was halted in her attempt as the assassin spoke.
"I think it's going to stay dead this time."

His tone came out so dry, that even Miranda had to smile. She watched as Shepard flashed him a cheeky grin, though before the commander made any reply, Joker called over the comm. requesting they got back to the cockpit immediately.

After scrambling back to their feet, Miranda noticed the subtle squeeze Shepard gave the drell's hand, as well as the obviously affectionate look the assassin gave the commander in return. His devotion was actually pretty evident, when she thought about it. And human or not, it was something Miranda could respect.

"No rest for the wicked... isn't that your human saying?" the assassin asked.

"You'd think stopping Saren and Sovereign in my past life would have counted for something," Shepard retorted.

Despite herself and the situation, Miranda couldn't help but smile.

Author's Note

So was I really the only one who got annoyed that EDI points out the Oculus is in Engineering, only for you to fight it in the Hanger?! The Javelin Torpedoes and GUARDIAN missiles are mentioned on the Mass Effect wiki as being the other weapons the Normandy has, besides the upgrade of the Thanix. I figure that the cannon would have been an addition, rather than a replacement. Thus the Normandy has all three!
Payback's a Bitch! (Shepard PoV)

Shepard jogged through the deserted CIC and back into the cockpit, Thane and Miranda close on her heels, only to stop dead in her tracks the very moment she crossed over the threshold. Shepard's gaze was fixed resolutely ahead, whilst her brain frantically tried to fathom the sight that greeted her. If she had been more aware, Shepard would have thanked Thane for his quick reflexes, as he deftly avoided knocking into her halted form. Miranda wasn't so astute, and the resulting collision sent both women stumbling forward, but neither moved their gaze from the view in front of them.

Quietly, Shepard instructed Joker to find them an inconspicuous place to land.

"Too late, looks like they are sending out an old friend to greet us," the pilot replied, grimly.

An uncomfortably familiar ship once again lurched into view, and moved to intercept them. Shepard's mouth went dry at the sight of the vivid yellow beam. Her stomach threatened to heave, and her breath caught in her throat.

Shepard could feel the panic begin to rise... cloudy memories; memories of floating in the vacuum, memories of her death, fought for dominance over her mind. With a shuddering breath, she squeezed her eyes shut, hoping no one else realised her internal struggle.

However, nothing escaped her assassin's notice, and Thane's hand came to rest on her armoured shoulder. She couldn't really feel it through the metal and carbon fiber, but the gesture made the corner of her mouth twitch into a small smile regardless. With a steadying breath, Shepard forced the fear to the back of her mind.

"This will end differently, Siha," Thane whispered, reassuringly.

Shepard nodded, opening her eyes. "Time to show our new teeth. Fire the main gun."

In less than a heartbeat, the brilliant beam of the Thanix Cannon made devastating contact with the Collector ship, slicing deliciously into the hull. A wicked smile spread across her face at the devastation. Despite her past and her career, Shepard did not enjoy violence. However... this she could enjoy.

"How do you like that, you sons of bitches!" Joker hollered, triumphantly.

"Paybacks a bitch!" Shepard grinned. "Get in close and finish them off."

Shepard couldn't help but share her de facto brother's glee, nor did she think she could ever explain just how elated she was to grant Joker this moment. To give him the chance and opportunity to bring them both closure. It had been two years, and another life, but finally the pair of them were getting revenge... and they weren't the only ones.

"Give them some from me!" Garrus called over the comm. system.

"Show those Bosh'tets what we're made of!" Tali added, via the same link.

"Better hold on, it's going to be a wild ride," Joker replied, punching the cannon's release button. "Give them hell girl!"

In truth, Shepard was never entirely sure if Joker was talking to her or the Normandy at that moment... really, it didn't matter. Especially, as the collector ship was engulfed in an impressive
fireball. However, the elation of watching the enemy explode was short lived, as the resulting shockwave violently buffeted the Normandy.

All of a sudden, it felt like every monitor in the cockpit was sounding an alarm, with lights flickering and damaged electrics sparking overhead. Subconsciously, she gripped the back of the pilot's chair as Joker frantically tapped the control panel trying to get a response. Once again, the scene came much too close to memory for Shepard's liking.

"Mass Effect field generators are offline. EDI, give me something!" Joker shouted.

"Generators unresponsive. All crew brace for impact," the AI advised, her synthetic voice unnervingly calm.

What really happened next, Shepard couldn't say. It all happened too fast and was too much of a blur. What she did know, was that the Normandy's landing was far from smooth.

Both Shepard and Miranda found themselves lying in a heap of tangled limbs on the floor. Thane was sprawled against the far bulkhead, and Joker had been knocked clear out of his chair. Quickly extracting herself from Miranda's long limbs, Shepard scrambled to the pilot's side. Despite Joker's own Cerberus upgrades, his Vrolik's Syndrome was still a real concern. Gently, she helped him back into his chair, and his groans of pain squeezed at her heart. No matter how long they knew each other, Shepard would never get used to seeing him in agony.

"Joker, you okay?" she asked.

"I think I broke a rib... or all of them!" he wheezed, painfully.

"Multiple core systems were overloaded in the crash," EDI advised. "Restoring operation will take time."

Joker and Shepard exchanged concerned glances, both realising the weight of what that meant, and she felt the vague pressure of Thane's hand on the small of her back through her armour. The intention behind the gesture helped uncoil some of the building tension, and as Shepard shifted her weight close to him, she let out a quiet sigh.

"We all knew this was likely a one way trip," Miranda said, her voice hushed.

"I'll do whatever it takes to stop the collectors, but I plan to live to tell about it," Shepard replied, with a certain she didn't entirely feel.

"I'm glad you're in charge," Joker grinned. "What's next?"

"How long until the collector's find this landing zone?" she queried.

"I do not detect an internal security network," EDI explained. "It is possible that they didn't expect anyone to reach the base."

"And if we are lucky, their external sensors were hit like we were. They might not know we're alive," Joker reasoned.

"That's morbidly comforting," Shepard stated, tapping the brim of the pilot's cap. "Thane, grab Mordin and head into the Comm. Room."

"Of course, Siha," Thane agreed, bowing before leaving the cockpit.
"Miranda, radio the rest of the team. Debriefing in five," she continued.

With barely a nod of confirmation, the Cerberus officer was striding through the CIC, barking orders through the comm. link. Trying not to grin at Miranda's demeanour, Shepard held out her hand to help Joker from his chair without preamble. She knew if it had been anyone else, with possibly the exception of Tali, the pilot would have caused a fuss. However, he simply accepted the gesture, and carefully rose from his seat.

Gently, Shepard wrapped her around his waist in order to help him. Despite his condition, Joker was a well-built man, and Shepard had to brace herself to take the majority of his weight. Slow and steady, the pair made their way to assemble with the rest of the crew.

"Just another day in the office, huh?" Joker quipped.

Shepard couldn't help the small chuckle. "That it is. It's going to be a hell of a fight."
Belief and Trust (Thane PoV)

Quietly, Thane stood near the head of the table, his hands clasped lightly behind his back. He was subtly studying the other members of the crew, trying to gage their feelings and block out his own concerns, as they waited for his Siha to join them.

Samara was to his left, quietly composed, and he hazard a guess the asari was meditating. Garrus stood opposite Thane, and the look on the turian's face was an echo to the apprehension he himself felt. The two Cerberus officers; Miranda and Jacob, stood polishing their pistols. Mordin and Tali shuffled uneasily, talking in hushed tones regarding the suit modifications the salarian had just finished helping the quarian install.

Zaeed stood on the left side of the door, the mercenary's arms crossed and his scarred face grimacing in a snarl. Grunt paced in an agitated manner, with Kasumi and Jack trying to placate the krogan. Legion simply stood to attention by the right side of door.

Thane couldn't help but be impressed with the team his Siha had assembled, and just as he thought that, the commander walked purposefully into the room, the pilot limping dutifully at her side.

"This isn't how we planned this mission, but this is where we're at," Shepard stated. "We can't worry if the Normandy can get us home. We came to stop the collectors, and that means coming up with a plan to take down this station. EDI, bring up your scans."

A projection of the collector base materialised into the middle of the octagonal table. The image slowly rotated to allow everyone to see the structure, before settling back in it's original position in front of Shepard. Then EDI highlighted on particular location on the hologram.

"You should be able to overload their critical systems if you get to the main control centre, here," the AI informed.

"That means going through the heart of the station, right past this massive energy signature," Jacob said.

The dark skinned human tapped at his Omni-Tool, causing another part of the image to illuminate. Thane quietly studied the image, his eyes narrowing in the process. He didn't like the thought of blazing a trail through the station, it left them too vulnerable... it put his Siha in too much danger.

"That's the central chamber," Shepard explained. "If our crew, or any of the colonists are still alive, the collectors are probably holding them in there."

Thane caught the concerned undertone in his Siha's voice, and barely stopped himself from reaching out to her. Here she was not his lover, but the commander. His keen hearing caught a vague rumble of subharmonics, and he looked up to see Garrus giving him a knowing look. Thane inclined his head in a small nod of acknowledgement, understanding that the turian had also heard her waver, before turning his attention back to the discussion at hand.

"Looks like there are two main routes, it might be a good idea to split up to keep the collectors off balance. Then regroup in the central chamber," Jacob advised.

For a moment, Thane's heart felt like it skipped a beat. The operative's suggestion seemed logical and had merit, but tendrils of worry still clawed at his mind. The thought of being separated from his Siha
during what could be their final hours, their final fight, churned his gut. But he forced himself to remember that here Shepard was his commander, not the woman he loved.

Pushing the concern to the back of his mind, Thane intently focused on the hologram, as different parts of the structure became highlighted as Jacob spoke.

"No good. Both routes are blocked," Miranda interrupted, manually pointing to the hologram as she spoke. "See these doors? The only way past is to get someone to open them from the other side."

"It's not a fortress, there's got to be something," Shepard grit out.

Thane noticed that her beautiful face had taken on a stoney quality, almost like a statue, and he watched as the commander leant on the table. As her emerald eyes intently searched the hologram, Thane returned his own gaze from his captivating redhead, to the mission schematic. He agreed that there must be a way, some flaw in the structure's design that his training could exploit. His eyes searched, and quickly found a likely route.

"There," he stated, gesturing to what he'd found.

Shepard gave him a tight lipped smile. "Yes. We should be able to send someone in through this ventilation shaft."

"Practically a suicide mission, I volunteer," Jacob said.

The operative spoke calmly, crossing his arms and settling back into a stance Thane had often seen the man use in more relaxed situations. As noble as the offer was, he couldn't help but think that it was unwise. Jacob was a good soldier, but it seemed that the task would need a more expert approach.

It also didn't go unnoticed by Thane, that Kasumi turned her head sharply to look at the Cerberus officer. Despite the thief's face being obscured by her hood, he was sure he saw a flash of worry in the woman's barely visible eyes. His heart went out to the young human. He understood the concern and barely controlled panic, since he felt the same for Shepard.

"I appreciate the thought Jacob, but you couldn't shut down the security system in time," Miranda interjected. "We need to send a tech expert."

Thane blinked, slowly. Though he could assume that the operative's opinion was valid, he felt the woman spoke out of place. Shepard was the one in command, and the decision was solely hers to make. Not that he envied her, especially as he watched her brow furrow as she glared at the hologram.

"It's your call, commander. Who do we send into the shaft?" Jacob asked, evenly.

Shepard offered a small smile to the officer. "Your offer is appreciated Jacob, but Miranda is right. We need a tech expert," she replied. "Tali, I'd prefer your expertise more on hand. Legion, you can hack through anything, and I trust you. I'm sending you into the shaft."

Thane smiled to himself, it was a shrewed move. Especially with Shepard deliberately stating that she trusted the geth; a member of the team that some still had trouble with, particularly Tali and Jacob. However, having accompanied his Siha on a few missions with the synthetic, Thane had begun to trust Legion as well. He had also witnessed the geth's exemplary electronic skills first hand,
aboard the heretic station. It was a good, logical choice on his Siha's part.

The geth unit quickly checked it's assault rifle, before nodding at the commander.

"Acknowledged," it intoned.

"The rest of us will break into two teams and fight down each passage," Shepard informed. "That should draw the collectors away from what you're doing."

"I'll lead the second fire team, Shepard," Miranda volunteered. "We'll meet up with you on the other side of the doors."

"Not so fast, cheerleader," Jack sneered, glaring at the other woman. "Nobody wants to take orders from you."

Next to the tattooed woman, Thane saw Garrus shake his head. He knew that the turian's gesture could be taken in many ways, but suspected the other man's opinion reflected his own... that Shepard didn't need the constant interruptions. But that Jack had a point.

He certainly wouldn't want to be following Miranda's orders, he didn't trust her. However, Thane held his tongue, though the corner of his mouth twitch as he noticed his Siha was seemingly trying not to smirk.

"This isn't a popularity contest," Miranda stated, dismissively waving her hand. "Lives are at stake. Shepard, you need someone who can command loyalty through experience."

Thane watched as Shepard nodded. "You're right Miranda, but I'm sorry, there's only one person I trust to lead the other team."

Her emerald eyes immediately locked onto the icy blue ones of a certain turian, and Thane watched as Garrus pulled his mandibles tight to his face, giving an almost imperceivable shake of his head. For several moments the pair regarded each other silently; a gaze that spoke a volume of unknown messages and feelings, ones that no one else in the room could fathom.

Eventually, Garrus gave a crisp nod that was answered by a small but proud smile from Shepard.

"Garrus is in charge of the second team," she informed.

"Well, at least he knows what he's doing," Miranda admitted, reluctantly.

"Yes, he does," Shepard replied, resolutely.

Another look was exchanged between his Siha and Garrus, and if Thane were to be honest, moments like that between the pair often caused a ghost of jealousy to take residence in his chest. But it went as quickly as it came.

He could clearly see the unease and worry in the turian's eyes whenever his gaze flickered back to Shepard, and Thane could empathise. He had truly expected that the three of them would be forming the forward team, as they often did, and Thane highly respected the way Garrus had held any objections or grievances he might have had.

However, Grunt suddenly pounded his meaty fists together and chuckled his slightly disturbing laugh, which made Shepard's reasoning crystal clear. Garrus was about the only person other than
Shepard that the tank bred would listen to. Once again it was a shrewd choice, and spoke of her expertise as a leader. A calculated look entered Shepard's emerald eyes, and her confident manner commanded all their respect. Even Jack was standing to attention.

"I don't know what we are going to find out there, but I'm not going to lie to you, it's not going to be easy," Shepard told them. "We've lost good people, we may lose more. We don't know how many the collectors have stolen. Thousands, hundreds of thousands... it's not important. What matters is this: Not. One. More. That's what we can do, here, today. It ends with us. They want to know what we are made of, I say we show them, on our terms. Let's bring our people home."

There was a deafening roar of agreement from the other members of the team. Whoops and hollers, curse words, Keelah Se'lais, and an unnerving krogan laugh. However, Thane chose to show his agreement with a respectful bow, a gesture that Samara also chose to use.

"Thane, Jack, you're with me. We'll be backing Legion," Shepard instructed. "Joker, EDI, keep our home safe. Everyone else, follow Garrus. Stick together and give the collectors hell," she added.

As the crew poured out of the Communication Room, Thane hung back. He had been intent on catching his Siha alone, one last time, before they disembarked. Instead he found himself silently watching the hushed exchange between Garrus and the commander.

"Shepard, are you sure?" the turian questioned.

"Yes, big guy. I know you can do it," Shepard replied.

"But, Omega…"

Garrus trailed off, his eyes down cast and mandibles twitching in anxiousness. Thane had only heard vague stories of the turian's time on Omega, and how the commander had found him. What he'd heard seemed bad enough, but now Thane reasoned it was far worse than either had previously let on.

He watched as Shepard gently placed a hand on the turian's scared mandible, and Garrus lowered his head to touch Shepard's forehead. This time, Thane felt no pang of jealousy at the affection.

"Omega wasn't your fault. I believe in you Garrus," she told him.

"So do I," interjected Tali, joining them. "Besides, I have my shotgun."

The quarian rested her M-23 Katana against her shoulder in emphasis, and Thane's mouth formed into a small smile, just as Shepard and Garrus chuckled at Tali's antics. Smiling with obvious affection, the commander pulled each of her friends into a brief hug, letting her role as leader slip for just a moment.

"Stay safe, the pair of you," his Siha requested.

"You too, Shepard," Tali replied, before she left the room.

Silently, Thane watched as Shepard walked towards the still seated pilot. Joker was leaning on the table, one arm wrapped tightly around his torso, indicating that his body had taken quite the blow during the crash landing. As Shepard carefully helped the pilot to his feet, Thane gave an involuntary wince in sympathy at the look of pain that crossed Joker's face, and he greatly admired the man for
the resolute way he dealt with the agony he was surely in.

"Come on bro, time to get you back where you belong," Shepard smiled.

"Next upgrade, I'm getting self-dispensing Medi-Gel," Joker quipped, as the pair left the room.

Just as Thane was about to follow them from the communication room, Garrus called his name. The turian stood rigid, his mandibles pulled tight to his face. He radiated tension. Thane inclined his head in acknowledgement, silently waiting for Garrus to speak his mind.

"I'm not happy I won't be on Shepard's six," the turian informed him. "But I know she trusts you... Spirits, I trust you." Suddenly Garrus' posture changed, and he began to shuffle uneasily. "Just... keep her safe."

Thane held back the small smile that threatened to form, fully understanding the turian's distress. "You needn't worry. I will give my life to protect her."

"I know," Garrus sighed. "But make sure to come back alive as well. She needs you."

Thane blinked his double lids slowly, surprised by the sentiment, before shaking the turian's hand. "Take care, my friend."
Side by side, Garrus walked with Thane towards the airlock. He still wasn't happy. It just didn't feel right, not being on Shepard's six... not to mention her questionable decision about putting him in charge of the second team.

Garrus let out a frustrated subharmonic grumble. The team needed him to be strong, Shepard needed him to be strong, and that's exactly what he would be. Even if he still thought she was crazy for trusting him to lead the second team, he'd step up to the plate... as he'd heard some of the human crew say. He paused briefly at the cockpit to pass Joker an assault rifle, along with a hefty stock pile of thermal clips, just in case. Then Garrus made his way to join the commander. As well as an overly happy looking krogan, it seemed, which didn't bode well.

"I will make you proud, Battlemaster," Grunt told Shepard.

"You already do. Just give them hell," she smiled in response.

The krogan youth pounded his meaty fists together in exuberance. A wide, and slightly unnerving grin spread across his broad face. Garrus repressed a shudder, a krogan smile was often a turian's nightmare. However, he couldn't help his mandibles twitching into a lopsided smile at the pair. He'd gotten used to Shepard and Grunt's unconventional relationship over the months they'd worked together, and if Garrus were to be honest, he wasn't that surprised she'd all but adopted the young krogan.

"Getting him riled up for me, thanks Shepard," he called.

"You're welcome," she grinned, as Thane slipped a discrete arm around her waist. "Spirits know how to spoil a woman, surrounded by three of my five favourite men."

"So you have your baby, your boyfriend, and your ever stylish best friend," Garrus drawled. "Who are the other two?"

"Joker and Anderson, of course," she replied, without hesitation.

"Anderson?" Thane questioned.

Garrus flared his mandibles in a surprised smile. After everything that had happened, it was sometimes hard to remember that other than Tali, Joker and Chakwas, none of the other crew had been there for Saren. Which meant most of them hadn't met the human councillor... which was a shame. He liked Anderson and respected him a great deal, it would be interesting to discover what the rest of the crew made of him.

"The original captain of the Normandy," Shepard explained. "Damn best CO you could ever wish for, and the closest I've ever had to a father."

"No one is better than you, Battlemaster," Grunt boomed.

"We are once again in agreement, Grunt," Thane told the krogan.

Nodding his own affirmative, Garrus regarded Shepard warmly. She really was the best CO he'd ever had, the best damn friend as well. Spirits, she was more a sister to him than Solana was... he
cringed inwardly, the last conversation he'd had with Solana hadn't gone entirely well, and news about their mother had been worrying. Perhaps if, when, they made it out of this mess, he'd ask Mordin if he had any ideas.

Thankfully, the rest of the team finally arrived, armed to the teeth, effectively pulling Garrus from his morose thoughts. Tali bumped against his arm, a smile evident in her eyes.

"Just like old times," she laughed.

"Definitely," he grinned in response.

"Alright you motley lot," Shepard stated. "Let's do this!"

It came as no surprise that Shepard was the first to embark. Without hesitation, she jumped from the opened airlock and dropped the several feet to the collector base. Thane followed the commander, swiftly dropping effortlessly beside her. If he were human, Garrus would have rolled his eyes. Even though they were friends, the drell's smoothness got to him, and Garrus really didn't know why.

He himself moved to the hatch in three easy strides, but stopped to wave Jack in front of him.

"Don't worry grumpy, I'm not letting her out my sight," the biotic stated.

Not waiting for a reply, Jack jumped to join Shepard. Her combat boots made a louder-than-necessary din for such a slender woman. Garrus shook his head. He never thought the angry human would have become such a team player, but she had, he even suspected Jack had come to see Shepard as a sort of older sister. Really, it made sense. Tali and Liara had done the same aboard the SR1... as had he.

Before exiting the hatch, Garrus regarded the eight under his command.

"You heard the commander, we're to give the collectors hell. I know you're more than capable, just no heroics. If we're to get through this in one piece, we need to work together."

Without waiting for their agreements, he leapt to the oddly rocky surface of the collector base. He looked over to Shepard, and the pair exchanged crisp nods, respect and comradery etched into the action. It still felt wrong not to be on her six, but Garrus couldn't deny the tiny swelling of pride he felt, knowing she trusted him not only with her life, but the lives of those she cared for. No one had ever had so much faith in him as Shepard did, not even himself.

"No more rockets," she called, smiling.

"No more dying," Garrus shouted back.

To his surprise, he receive a salute along with Shepard's customary smirk. He couldn't help but chuckle, as he led his team down their designated tunnel. The teams had agreed on an open comm. link, allowing everyone to communicate easily, and a few minutes later, Legion's voice could be heard.

"Shepard-Commander, we are in position. Exterior temperatures are slightly elevated. No obstructions detected."

"Acknowledged," Shepard replied.
"Shepard-Commander, we wish you…” There was a pause, and in any organic, it would have seemed like they were hesitating. "Good luck," Legion finished.

Garrus flare his mandibles in a wide smile. He never thought he would think so, but the geth was alright. He was slowly beginning to realise why Shepard trusted it so much. It was also apparent the unit had a high level of respect for the commander... or at least whatever the synthetic equivalent was. Even Tali was slowly coming around to the geth, which is something Garrus never thought possible.

"You too, see you on the other side," Shepard stated. "Team Mako, are you in position?"

Garrus let out a huff of amusement. He shouldn't be surprised with the name, yet he was. It was just like his commander to think up something so utterly ridiculous. Beside him, Tali giggled, obviously also remembering all the near misses they'd in that retched machine... it was a fitting name.

"Mako? Really Shepard?" he grinned. "We're in position. Meet you on the other side of those doors. Stay safe, you crazy human."
Their progress into the bowels of the collector base began relatively easy. The steady decent along the downwardly sloping corridors went unhindered... for a time. Only their footsteps echoing around the hollow halls could be heard, until a faint droning noise pulled Shepard's attention to the right. She let out an angry sigh as the unwelcome sight of a group of inbound collectors came into view.

"I'll throw you like a toy!"

Jack's whoop, brought Shepard sharply back to the present. The biotic's Pull dragged three collectors from their flight path and into the line of fire from Shepard's M-12 Locust. She ended their lives easily. Beside her, Thane sent a high powered Warp at a collector who had been aiming for her head.

"Your body is dust," Thane declared.

"If I didn't know you better Sere Krios, I'd say you were enjoying this," Shepard teased, smiling.

"Garrus here, we're taking heavy fire but we're moving forward," Garrus called through the comm. system.

The rattle of bullets and multi-species cursing could be heard over the link. The sound sent Shepard's heart rate pumping, much quicker than engaging in battle directly ever could. She didn't doubt Garrus' abilities for one minute or those of the rest of her team, but knowing she wasn't the one taking point for them churned her insides. Though before she could reply, a quick hand signal from Thane brought her attention to the incoming wave of collectors on their left.

"Siha, reinforcements," Thane notified her.

"Same here, big guy," she said in the comm. “They've rolled out the welcome party for us. Shepard out."

As Shepard spoke, she ducked behind the nearest cover, sending a high powered Throw to the nearest group of collector's as she did. The firefight raged for several minutes, the burst of bullets and flashes of biotic energy were only interrupted by a call from Legion. His synthesised voice had the very un-synthetic edge of nerves in it.

"There is an obstruction in the tunnel," the unit informed her.

Shepard began to quickly glance around the poorly lit area they were in, looking for any way to clear the geth's path, all the time dodging bursts of automatic gunfire. Thane grabbed her shoulder as they hunkered down behind a low wall, before pointing to a dimly glowing console that Shepard's own bionic eyes barely made out.

"There, a control panel, by the ventilation shaft," Thane instructed.

"On it!" Shepard affirmed.

Thanking the spirits for Thane's enhanced eye sight, Shepard ran full pelt down the corridor. She deftly avoided the peppered spray of enemy bullets aimed at her, before crashing unceremoniously into the console. She palmed the control panel, and the pneumatic sound of pistons being released
filled the hushed area.

"Obstruction removed, proceeding," Legion acknowledged.

Signalling for her team to follow, Shepard set off down the corridor, trying to keep as close to the pipe Legion was using as possible. The drone of collector wings greeted their erratic advance, and a quick scan by Omni-Tool revealed several waves blocking the path to the doors. Without waiting for instruction, Jack sent a massive Shockwave at the nearest group of advancing collectors.

"I will destroy you," the biotic hollered.

"You're stealing Harbinger's lines," Shepard called.

Dodging bullets as she ran from cover to cover, she sent a biotic Throw towards any enemy that had escaped the Shockwave, really glad she'd taken time to re-learn some of her old attacks, and trying not to dwell on how Cerberus had changed her body. Now was not the time nor place to think of such things.

"Not my fault that thing's got the hots for you, boss lady," Jack laughed.

"You've got to be kidding me," she shouted over the burst of her SMG.

An orange flash caught the trio's attention. "Assuming direct control of this form."

"You've really got to be kidding me!" Shepard grit out. "I'm blaming you for this Jack!"

She slammed herself into cover behind a pillar, giving an undignified grunt as her shoulder impacted the smooth surface. And just as Harbinger sent an extremely high powered Warp in their direction, Shepard managed to pull Thane into cover as well. Before they had any real time to get their bearings, the reaper controlled collector general detonated a Nova blast, forcing her and Thane to sprint from their cover. They quickly joined Jack, bunkered down behind a low level wall.

"Why do you resist us, Shepard?" Harbinger called.

"How the fuck did you manage to get the fucking thing to fucking hit on you?" Jack growled.

At Shepard's signal, the three comrades sent Warp attacks directly at the collector general, completely synchronised with each other. The orange glow around the collector dissipated and the body slumped to the floor, lifeless. Shepard let out at a small sigh of relief.

"You do seem to have caught it's attention, Siha," Thane said, dryly.

Shepard gave the drell a sardonic look. However, the concern on his unusually impassive face made her breath hitch in her throat. For Thane's benefit, Shepard forced a smile, though she knew it was one that didn't make it to her eyes.

"Lucky me," she quipped.

"Yeah, like one alien isn't enough for you Shepard," Jack leered.

Shepard snorted, shaking her head as she urged them to press forward, opening several valves for Legion and eradicating a few waves of enemies along the way. Just as the doors came into view,
Jack shouted out in alarm, and as Shepard turned to regard her, she found the woman's eyes were fixed rigidly on the orange glowing collector. Shepard let out an exasperated sigh.

"Stop Shepard!" Harbinger demanded.

Static chattered through the comm. before Garrus' voice broke through: "We've ran into heavy resistance, we're running behind schedule but we will catch up to you at the rendezvous point."

However, Shepard was too focused on slamming herself into a nearby collector with the use of her biotic Charge to answer.

"We have encountered our own difficulties, Harbinger has come to greet Shepard personally," Thane replied to Garrus.

As he spoke, there was evident strain behind his neutral tone. Garrus' reply was lost to a loud crackle of static, which sent worry coiling round Shepard's gut. Trying not to worry about the other team, she concentrated solely on the fight in front of her. Several collectors fell to her biotic Charge, but before she realised it, Shepard found herself face to face with the glowing collector general. Her lip curled into a sneer as she dodged what appeared to be a modified Singularity attack.

"You cannot escape your destiny, Shepard. I am the harbinger of your perfection," the reaper control collector stated.

Perfection? Oh yeah... that was a whole new level of creepy.

As Shepard levelled her beloved M-12 Locust at Harbinger, the collector's head practically exploded. She turned abruptly to see a steely looking Thane lowering the barrel of his Viper. An unexpected shiver ran down her spine at the sight, one that was hardly unpleasant.

"Harby's really got your boyfriend pissed," Jack laughed.

"Indeed," Thane agreed.

There was a darkness that had entered his rich, gravelly tone that threatened to send more shivers down her spine. Whether from fear or excitement, Shepard couldn't say. Though in that moment, she was sure she'd caught a glimpse of the assassin who'd hunted down his wife's killers. Shepard had known Thane was deadly from the moment they had met, but that was something else.

"Shepard-Commander, we anticipate we are nearing the end," Legion called through the comm. link. "There is one final obstacle. Waiting on you, Shepard."

Shepard blinked in shock. Legion had just used only her name for the first time. She shook her head, clearing her thoughts.

"On our way," she called back. "Double time it," she instructed Thane and Jack.

Shepard ran to the final control panel, smashing her gauntleted fist into the glowing console, before rushing to join her team at the doors, just as the drone of collectors grew louder. Signalling her team to give her some covering fire, Shepard frantically tried to access the door, but her fingers couldn't find purchase on the smooth surface. Desperately she hope the other team had reached the other side.

"Come in!" she called over the comm. link.
"Look out! Seeker swarms," Garrus' flanging voice could be heard shouting through the link. Shepard could hear gunfire and explosions through the system, and her heart began to race. It was evident that the turian hadn't heard her. Biting back a curse, she turned to aid Thane and Jack with their current fight, peppering a nearby collector with her SMG.

"We are in position," she shouted over the comm. "We need this door open, now!"

When only static greeted her, she realised the signal was being jammed. She needed a new plan, fast, but nothing was firth coming. Then to her relief... albeit only shortly lived, she heard Legion over the comm. system.

"Shepard-Commander, the door has malfunctioned," the unit informed her. "Re-routing protocols now."

There were several seconds of elevated heart rate and growing panic, as they continued their firefight against an increasing amount of collectors, before the metal door screeched open in protest. The trio quickly slipped inside the newly revealed room, just as more collector reinforcements advanced.

"Here they come," Shepard shouted. "Fall back."

"Suppressing fire, don't let anything through that door," Garrus instructed, suddenly appearing at her side. "Sorry we're late, ran into some old friends."

Shepard couldn't help but chuckle. "Nice of you to join us, partner."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his mandibles twitch in an acknowledging smile. Shepard could also see Legion furiously tapping away at the control panel, trying to close the door again. She glanced a Thane, who had moved to stand on her left side. He nodded his response, already knowing her plan.

"Samara," Shepard called.

"We will put them where we need them," the asari answered.

A smirk pulled at her lips at the Justicar's response. It was evident that Samara had guessed what was being asked, just as Thane had. The asari stepped gracefully to the other side of Thane, her hands already glowing blue with biotic energy. Together, the three released synchronised Throws, hurling the enemy back several meters, just as the doors shut with a metallic bang.

"Nice work Legion, I knew I could count on you," Shepard told the geth.

She took a moment to regain her breath, before patting the unit's armoured shoulder, and Legion raised the 'brow plates' around it's optical light.

"Shepard-Commander," it acknowledged, sounding almost pleased.

However, Miranda called out, breaking the relative calm:

"Shepard, you need to see this."
No One Left Behind (Thane PoV)

Thane's gaze travelled around the vast, cavernous space the squad found themselves in. The walls, floor and other surfaces shone with a strange reflective luminescence. Pipe work stretched along the expanse of 'roof' space, and dusty light filtered down through unseen windows.

There were subdued gasps of shock from other members of the team as they surveyed their surroundings. It was eerily quiet, especially after the frantic gunfights both teams had fought through. Instinctively, Thane lay a hand on his Siha's forearm, unsure if it was for her comfort or his.

"I think we've found the missing colonists," Miranda called.

The Cerberus operative pointed to what looked like a sleeper pod, a woman's head and shoulders visible through the translucent green membrane of the upper half of the capsule. Thane felt the commander squeeze his hand, before moving from his loose grasp and towards the pod, her stride almost hesitantly.

He watched her movements, his senses on high alert as Shepard placed a gauntlet clad hand onto the upper membrane of the pod, her emerald eyes narrowed in concentration. And though he kept most of his attention on the commander, Thane walked off slightly to the right of the first pod, intuition driving him to investigate the darkened recess.

"There's more, over here," he called.

The seemingly lifeless bodies chilled him to the core, and Thane knew that his voice came out more forceful than he had intended. He could hear the shuffled footsteps as other members of the team began to check the dimly lit space, each confirming locations of pods.

Suddenly, there was the sound of muffled banging, then a startled gasp from Shepard. Thane turned, his muscles coiling in preparation to rush to her side. But before he could move, he caught the horrified look on the commander's face, and his gaze was drawn to the female colonist inside the pod.

"Spirits!" Shepard whispered, horrified. "She's still alive."

The woman inside the pod began to frantically pounding on the solid sounding membrane, and at the same time Shepard tried to break open the pod's 'window' from their side.

Too quickly to truly comprehend, the colonist's sallow skin began to mottle, blood pushing through the pores. Her face turned black and dark blood splattered the inside of the membrane, as the trapped woman banged harder on the pod. Thane rushed to his Siha's side in order to help her open the pod, but there was an agonised scream that wrenched at his soul, as the trapped woman disappeared from sight. Thane couldn't help stare in shock.

"Get them out of there, hurry!" Shepard yelled.

Her commanding voice broke through Thane's morbid trance, seemingly along with that of the squads. Grunt was the first to really react. The young krogan lunged towards the nearest pod, and using the butt of his shotgun, attempted to bash in the translucent membrane. Thane quickly ran to the next, to find a stricken Yeoman Chambers trapped inside. Hurriedly, he ran his hands along both sides of the pod, convinced there had to be some sort of release mechanism.
"There's a clasp to the left," Shepard shouted.

Without question, Thane deftly followed her instructions. The membrane 'door' of the yeoman's pod opened with a sickening sound, one that reminded him of eggs being cracked. He caught the dazed woman as she half fell, half collapsed from her former prison. Putting an arm loosely around the quivering shoulders of the startled woman, Thane comforted her the best he could.

"Miss Chambers," he said gently.

The yeoman looked up at him with tear filled eyes as sounds of pods opening filled the cavern, along with muffled sobs and heavy breaths. All the while Thane consoled a shaking Kelly Chambers, who clung to his jacket like a frightened child.

However he kept watched, his keenly alert gaze following his Siha, as both she and Miranda rushed to the last pod; inside appeared to be the sedated figure of the Normandy's doctor. For an unknown reason, the pod was closed with a different mechanism than the others, but after seconds of frantic exploration, the Cerberus officer evidently located the pair of clasps on the right of the door. The pod opened with an unexpected hiss, and Shepard deftly caught the falling doctor.

"Doctor Chakwas! Karin?" she called, gently.

The doctor made a faint mumbling sound in response.

"Are you ok?" Shepard asked, as she seated the older woman gently on the floor.

Thane's attention was dragged from the scene in front of him, as the yeoman made an unsteady effort to stand. He helped her to her feet, supporting the woman's weight as she tried to find her balance. She trembled almost uncontrollably, and Thane slipped a steadying arm around Kelly's waist to keep her upright.

"Shepard?" Doctor Chakwas questioned, her voice shaking. "You… you came for us."

Thane's head snapped back in the direction of the commander, as he heard a strangled noise emanated from her red painted lips. He wasn't sure if it was a sob or a laugh, it sounded like a combination of both, and the mixture of relief and hurt in his Siha's emerald eyes confirmed his suspicion.

He longed to go to her side, but was reluctant to leave the yeoman to her own devices just yet. However, as Shepard moved to stand from her crouched position, pulling the doctor with her, Kelly batted his hand away and shuffled closer to the commander, obviously intent on walking unaided.

"No one gets left behind," Shepard answered.

"Thank god you got here in time," the yeoman stated, "A few more seconds and… I don't even want to think about it."

"Kelly!" Shepard breathed.

A tight smile formed on her red painted lips, and Thane watched his Siha reach out and take the other woman's hand, squeezing it in gentle reassurance. Despite the awful situation they were in, his heart swelled with love and pride as he watched Shepard interact with the rescued crew. It was
humble to witness her care and compassion for others.

"The colonists were... processed," Dr Chakwas explained, haltingly. "Those swarms of little robots, they... melted their bodies into grey liquid, and... pumped it through these tubes."

It was obvious that the doctor was trying to keep her voice as neutral as possible, though the horror was evident in her steel blue eyes. Thane's gut twisted in disgusted, and he heard Garrus' subharmonics ring with discomfort. Even Grunt gave a low growl, evidently disturbed by the revelation.

"Keelah," Tali muttered, forlornly.

Thane lay a hand on the quarian's shoulder, and the other members of the squad shuffled around uneasily, listening to the doctor's explanation. Only Shepard managed to fully keep her composure, but gods knew what it cost her.

He caught the haunted look in her emerald eyes, and the thin line her normally full lips were pressed into. It hurt not being able to simply reach out and console his Siha. But as suddenly as it appeared, the look was gone, and as her gaze drifted to the ceiling her eyes became fierce.

Thane followed her line of sight to the pipework along the ceiling.

"Why are they doing this?" Shepard asked, quietly.

"I don't know. I'm just glad you got here before it happened to us," Doctor Chakwas replied.

"Me to," Shepard said, giving the older woman a gentle embrace.

"So are we," Miranda spoke up. "But we still have a job to do. We've done well so far, let's hope we can finish the job."

"Joker? Can you get a fix on our position?" Shepard called into the comm. link.

"Roger that, commander. All those tubes lead into the main control room, right above you," the pilot replied. "The route is blocked by a security door, but there's another chamber that runs parallel to the one you're in."

Shepard nodded, and seemed about to speak, before EDI interjected:

"I cannot recommend that. Thermal emissions suggest the chamber is overrun with seeker swarms. Mordin's countermeasure cannot protect you from so many at once."

"What about biotics? Could we create a biotic field to prevent them from getting near us?" Shepard questioned.

Her gaze fell to Samara and Jack, and Thane nodded his agreement to her choice in counsel... after all, they were their two most powerful biotics.

"Yes. I think it may be possible," Samara answered. "We wouldn't be able to protect everyone, but we might be able to get a small team through if they stayed close."

"She's right, boss lady," Jack quipped.
"I could do it too. Any biotic could handle it," Miranda stated.

Thane held back a weary sigh. He was unimpressed with the Cerberus officer trying to project her perceived dominance, especially when he doubted the validity of her statement. He knew his biotics certainly weren't strong enough to create such a barrier.

A grumble of annoyed turian subharmonics let Thane know that he wasn't the only one growing tired of the operative's antics, just as Jack huffed out a joyless laugh. Thane was expecting a terse rebuke from the biotic, similar to the one she'd given in the Communications Room but to his pleasant surprise, the tattooed woman gave a calm opinion grounded in reason.

"Yeah, but Samara's got centuries of asari knowledge to back up that shit."

"My thanks, Jack," the Justicar said.

Thane watched the asari bow respectfully to the young woman, and saw the look of shock that flashed across Jack's face. He had to fight hard against the smile that wanted to form on his lips, up until Miranda let out an undignified snort.

"Shepard, who do you want to maintain the field?" she asked, tersely.

"Thank you for your input Miranda, but Samara and I will take Thane and Jack through the seeker swarms," she stated. "The rest of will you provide a diversion by going through the main passage. We will open the security doors from the other side and meet you there. Garrus, you're still in charge of Team Mako."

It seemed to Thane that the commander had pre-empted another interruption by Miranda, and the Cerberus officer did not look happy. He also noticed the turian's mandibles spread in a small smile, and realised the turian was relaxing into his roll.

"I'll keep the defenders busy, you slip around the back," Garrus agreed.

"What about me and the rest of the crew, Shepard? We're in no shape to fight," Dr Chakwas reasoned.

"Commander?" Joker called through the comm. link. "We have enough systems back online to do a pick up, but we need to land back from your position."

"We can't afford to go back Shepard, not now," Miranda almost yelled.

Thane couldn't help clenching his teeth, and his hands curled into fists at his sides. He was strongly debating putting the operative firmly back in her place, before his Siha's voice invaded his thoughts.

"Enough, Miranda!" Shepard snapped, before she softened as she spoke to the rest of the crew. "You'll never make it alone. Mordin, accompany them. Kasumi, go as back up."

Thane's adoration for his fiery red-head grew. She was Arashu herself.

"Joker, need location of landing zone. Will meet you there," Mordin called to the pilot, tapping feverishly away on his Omni-Tool.

"Aw, now I won't get to find anything valuable to steal," Kasumi quipped.
The master thief smiled cheekily at the commander, before offering Kelly the support of her arm. Shepard nodded to the younger woman.

"Okay, we have our assignments, let's move out," Shepard instructed.

Thane moved to slip past Shepard, to take his position alongside Jack and Samara. As he did, he gently brushed against her arm to subtly show his support.

"As you wish, Siha," he murmured into her ear.
Belly of the Beast (Shepard PoV)

The chamber was dark, practically pitch black beyond the faint blue glow cast from Samara's biotic barrier that surrounded their small group. Shepard repressed a shudder, she'd intensely dislik ed the dark ever since being spaced. Now, travelling through the belly of the beast, she could feel the hairs on the back of her neck begin to stand on end, a mixture of apprehension and the increasing build-up of static energy.

Her gaze cast about the gloom, unable to make anything out that was more than a foot in front of them, and she hoped Thane's keen sight was faring better. Glancing to see how the Justicar was holding up under the strain the barrier projection, Shepard was relieved to see Samara was her ever serene self, which helped reduce some of the anxiousness that she felt.

"Try to stay close, commander," the asari called.

Tentatively, they began to make slow but steady progress through the eerily quiet space. Only the insistent buzz of the seeker swarms permeated the silence. Out of instinctual habit, Shepard took point, switching out her beloved SMG for her M-27 Scimitar. She knew the shadows gave more opportunity for surprise attacks, and her shotgun certainly had more kick in close quarters than her Locust.

So Shepard trained her gun steadily ahead, her gaze casting about through the gloom, seeking out any sign of hostile forces whilst Thane and Jack flanked her and Samara.

"Garrus here, team is…. positi… Shepard." The message was broken with static as it reached her over the comm. system.

"Shit! The swarms are interfering with radio contact," she muttered.

Through the buzz of the seeker swarms, a faint hum of collector wings could be heard. At Shepard's slight nod, Samara moved behind one of the pillars for cover, since she was unable to engage in combat whilst maintaining the barrier.

An unwanted orange glow illuminated the darkness, and without hesitation, Shepard began to empty the thermal clip of her shotgun into the hovering body. At the same time, Thane threw a low powered Warp at Harbinger, before he deftly exchanged his Tempest in favour for his Viper.

"You will know pain, Shepard," the reaper controlled general called.

Within seconds, a bullet ripped through the collector's head. Shepard glanced out of the corner of her eye at her lover. She took in the steely look in his eyes, the hard set of his jaw, and controlled movements... every inch the calculated assassin. Shepard couldn't helping thinking Irikah had been mad, Thane was sexy as hell.

"If I die Shepard, I'm haunting you!" Jack yelled over the hail of bullets.

The biotic's voice pulled her attention back to the fight on her left. Unable to stifle her laugh, Shepard refrained from responding further, and simply timed her own Shockwave to coincide with Jack's. Their combined effort took down the majority of the collectors, and Thane skilfully picked off the remaining two with precise shots from his sniper rifle.
"Are you alright, commander?" Samara asked.

Shepard nodded to the asari, absent-mindedly biting her bottom lip.

"Ready to move, commander?" Samara questioned.

Shepard barely registered what was said but nodded again, her mind elsewhere.

"Siha?" Thane asked, moving to block her path.

"Really, I'm fine," she assured, her voice a little too shaky for her liking. "It's just unsettling having another reaper know me by name. Sovereign was creepy enough."

She gave him a small smile, hoping her bluff worked. Jack snorted, probably seeing right through her, since her eyes gleamed wickedly.

"Shit Shepard! Just means you're doing something right. Must be scared of you, to learn your name."

Shepard laughed. "I prefer that reasoning over Harbinger having a 'thing' for me."

"I've not ruled that out, boss lady," Jack sneered back.

Shaking her head, Shepard signalled them to move up and they went in silence, the darkness and sullenness of the area pressing in on the four of them, before Garrus' sudden voice through the comm. link stating that hostiles were engaged nearly made Shepard jump.

As her heart rate began to return to it's normal battle rhythm, the whirring of a platform filled the air. Once again, Shepard signalled for Samara to get down, and the asari cautiously moved to the limited cover. Unhappy with the sparse protection, Shepard frowned, just as the unnerving wails of husks and abominations greeted their ears.

"Jack, cover Samara," she instructed. "Keep them off her!"

"The bastards are as good as dead," Jack replied.

The ex-convict brandished her M-23 Katana enthusiastically, before bunkering down beside Samara. Shepard took up her own defensive position, with Thane on her six, just as the first wave of husks reached them. It took several long minutes, but once the last of the cannon fodder had fallen to the combination of Warps, Throws and a barrage of bullets, the collectors began to descend.

"Amonkira reveals them," Thane stated, dryly.

She flashed him a half smile. "Cover Samara. Jack, with me. Timed Shockwaves."

Without argument, Thane fell back. He took up position protectively beside the Justicar, whilst Jack sprung up like a rabid varren, and raced to Shepard's side. With practised ease, the two women sent their Shockwaves into the heart of the collector forces, and all but one went down.

"I will kill you all!" the biotic whooped, slightly too cheerfully.

"Fuck!" Shepard cursed, as the inevitable happened.

"My attacks will tear you apart, Shepard," Harbinger stated.
Before she could fire a shot, or the possessed collector managed to release a single attack, there was a double crack of gunfire. Thane swiftly sank two bullets directly between it's eyes, and for a moment, Shepard blinked in shock.

"Fuck! You'd think buggy would have realised that your guard drell is going to sink bullets into before it can get it's hands, claws... whatever, on you," Jack jeered.

Shepard gently shoved the other woman's shoulder, mostly playfully, as they made their way back to Thane and Samara.

"What?" the biotic grinned.

Deciding it was best not to give Jack any further ammunition, Shepard simply shook her head and took point again. The pattern repeated itself twice more. Samara would point out incoming forces, then seek cover and maintain the barrier. Jack would help Shepard dispatch the majority of the enemy wave, mostly with biotics since their thermal clips were running low. Thane would set up near Samara, keeping the asari safe, whilst taking care of any collectors that escaped the biotic onslaught. Which was mostly just Harbinger.

It dawned on Shepard that somewhere along this mission, Thane had developed a more personal vendetta against the reaper. He was always focused during an assignment, but the rigid set of his strong jaw, the cold fire that shone in his eyes, and the way he would grow so still as he lined up a shot whenever the possessed collector entered the battlefield… that was all new.

Though before she could think more of it, Shepard was pulled from her thoughts by Samara's voice.

"I can see the entrance," the asari panted. "Need to get there soon."

"Hold on, we are almost there," Shepard reassured.

She vaulted over a low wall, dodging a hail of bullets from the latest collector wave, before glancing at her friend. The strain of maintaining the barrier for so long was beginning to show. Samara's normally regal posture was now stooped, and exhaustion was heavy in her voice. Even Jack was beginning to throw worried glances towards the Justicar.

Thane quickly followed Shepard's lead, but chose to use the slight elevation to give covering fire for their two remaining team mates. He peppered the new wave of enemies with bullets from his SMG, just as Samara stumbled whilst manoeuvring over the low wall. Jack and Shepard both reached out to steady her again.

She ushered the worn looking asari passed her, switching out her now empty Locust with her recently acquired M-76 Revenant. Silently, she hoped Garrus' instructions over the last few weeks had sunk in, and she adjusted her grip on the unfamiliar and weighty assault rifle.

"We need to move quickly," Thane advised.

"Alright, let's move!" Shepard shouted. "Thane, with me. Suppressing fire."

"Hurry, Shepard!" Samara called, a heavy mix of anxiety and pleading in the Justicar's voice.

"Jack, get that door!" Shepard commanded, her own voice straining to hide her concern.
She could barely hear the biotic's swearing and pounding fists on the control panel, or the slide of hydraulics and metal, over the heavy gunfire. However, Shepard did hear the low, aggressive snarl Samara made as she warped the barrier into a heavy biotic Throw.

Shepard decided there and then, that she'd never reveal the tiny bit of envy she felt over the assertive and slightly cocky swagger the Justicar managed, as they walked away from the battlefield. N7 armour didn't afford her the range of movement Samara's red suit, and Shepard doubted her biotic's would ever be as strong or afford her as much protection as the Justicar's did.

But the frivolous thought was put aside as soon as the heavy doors slid shut again, and Garrus' frantic voice broke through the comm. link.

"Come on Shepard, where are you?!"

"I copy, what's your position?" she asked.

"We're pinned down by the door, taking heavy fire," Garrus replied.

"Just hold on, we're coming," she called back. “Samara, get this door open."

Shepard pointed to the door at the opposite side of the room they had entered from, and the pair set off at a sprint, Thane and Jack close on their heels. With unspoken agreement, the ex-convict took up position next to Shepard on the left side of the door, whilst Thane took up the right, shielding Samara from any hostiles that may break through Team Mako's defences.

Thankfully, the asari managed to make short work of the lock, and as the door finally slid open, Shepard bodily dragged the nearest team member into the room. It just happened to be Zaeed, and the grizzled mercenary gave her a smirk in thanks. The rest of Team Mako followed, and the whole squad provided suppressing fire to keep the collector forces at bay.

"Seal the door," she instructed.

Samara quickly obliged, but not quick enough. In sickening slow motion, Shepard watched as a white hot bullet passed through the closing metal, and heard the heart-wrenching sound of the bullet contacting armour.

She watched in horror as Garrus double over, one taloned hand gripping his abdomen.
Hold the Line (Garrus PoV)

Pain. That's the first thing he registered as the bullet impacted. He doubled over, knees buckling as the projectile hit his midsection. He heard the pop of static as he clutched his middle, and felt the breath rapidly leave his lungs. Forcing himself to suck in a lungful of air, Garrus gingerly removed his hands from his abdomen, trying not to let them shake as he did. His shoulders visible sagged in relief as realisation took hold. There was no blood on his talons. Tali's shield improvement had worked. He really owed that quarian a drink now.

To his surprise, he found Shepard kneeling beside him, and Garrus flared his mandibles at her in a weak smile.

"Worried about me, Shepard?" he drawled.

The humour was forced, they both knew it, but it was what they did. Unabashed, Garrus' eyes roamed over her body, just as obvious as hers did to him; checking for any sign of injury. Thankfully there were none. But before he could offer any prayer of thanks, Shepard hit him playfully in the shoulder, then dragged his head down to meet hers.

"Ass," she hissed.

He chirped an apology to her, realising just how worried she's been. Shepard stood, offering him her hand. Anatomically, it was a useless gesture as he weighed so much more than her, but Garrus accepted it all the same, and slowly rose to his feet.

"Bosh'tet," Tali chided, smacking him on the arm as well.

"I glad you're happy to see your shield boost worked," he joked. Once again, it was forced, but he knew she understood.

"A less practical field test would have sufficed," the quarian replied, her hands resting on her hips.

Garrus mandibles flared in a genuine smile. "You look like Shepard when you do that."

"Indeed," Thane agreed, suddenly appearing by his side. "Are you sure you are well?"

He nodded. "Winded, probably bruised to hell, but alive. Thanks to quarian ingenuity. How about you? Shepard?"

"It was an… eventful passage," the drell replied. "Harbinger has taken a very personal interest in the commander, and I am taking a very personal interest in him."

There was a cold determination in Thane's voice that Garrus recognised and understood, and he growled in approval. With reassurances given and received, he went to stand by Shepard's side as she surveyed the rest of their team. All were showing signs of fatigue, but luckily there were only minor injuries.

Miranda had a graze from a bullet on her right forearm, Jacob had a small cut above his left eye. However, Legion's shell was riddled with holes, and Garrus watched as Shepard raised an eyebrow at the sight. The commander glanced between the geth and himself, obviously seeking an explanation. Though before he could speak, Tali answered for them.
"Chatika failed, and a group of collectors managed to corner me," the quarian explained. "Legion used himself as a barrier between me and the collectors... He saved my life."

Garrus suppressed a growl as he remembered how spirits-damned angry and worried he'd been. Tali was still obviously shaken by the experience, many of them were, but they'd come through it.

"Creator-Zorah required assistance, we provided," Legion stated. "Our platform is more robust than creator suits, it was logical to protect Creator-Zorah."

"Logical or not, thank you Legion," Shepard said, patting the geth companionably on the shoulder, before turning her attention back to Tali. "You sure you're okay?"

"Minor suit lacerations, nothing dangerous. I'm already swimming in antibiotics, nothing to worry about," the quarian assured.

Shepard gave a sigh of relief. "We're relatively secure here, take a few to hydrate and grab an energy bar."

There were appreciative grunts and nods from the squad.

"Also, I want a count of ammo. This isn't over yet," she added.

"On it Shepard," Garrus affirmed.

He began collecting the team's thermal clips, whilst making impressively short work of a dextro ration bar. He half listened to Shepard's conversation with Joker via the comm. link, though his interest was only piqued when EDI chimed in. Garrus glanced at Thane who had joined his task of collecting thermal clips.

"Is it me, or does the AI sound pleased?" he asked.

"Do not worry. Both Shepard and I have noticed EDI's inflections. If you are going mad, you are not alone in your decent," the drell replied, dryly.

"EDI what's our next step?" Miranda suddenly asked.

Garrus scowled. "Thane, Shepard won't take a break when there's planning going on. Will you see if you can make her?"

Perhaps it was a low blow, roping in her boyfriend, but it was for Shepard's own good. Garrus had witnessed her do it enough times during their hunt for Saren. Then, he'd always won out... eventually, but never without a struggle. He suspected Thane would have a lot more luck, with a lot less aggravation.

"Of course," the drell replied.

Garrus watched as the other man walked over to the commander, handing her a bottle of water and a ration bar, whilst whispering something in her ear. Shepard smiled weakly, before gulping down the liquid.

Slowly, almost hesitantly, Thane reached up and cupped the side of Shepard's face with his palm. In
return, the commander leant into the touch, as the drell ran his thumb gently across her cheek.

Garrus snatched his gaze away. He felt like he'd just intruded on an incredibly private moment, despite the fact the whole squad was present. Of course, Tali chose that moment to appeared at Garrus' side.

"At least she's happy," the quarian whispered.

Before Garrus could respond, Joker called through the comm. link: "Commander? You have a problem, hostiles are massing just outside the door. Won't be long until they break through."

"Thanks for the heads up," Shepard replied, nimbly hopping up onto the nearby ridge.

"Do you remember Kirrahe?" Tali asked him suddenly, her tone hushed.

Garrus couldn't help but flare his mandibles in a grin. The salarian captain they'd met on Virmire had certainly been an interesting character, and he knew Kirrahe and the commander had developed a friendship of sorts. Garrus shook his head, trying not to laugh.

"Hold the line," he muttered.
Thane’s heart clenched as he watched his Siha hop onto the nearby ledge. His keen gaze saw the fleeting look of weariness in her emerald eyes, and noticed the way Shepard rolled her shoulders, as if to alleviate discomfort.

As he watched the commander's deep inhalation, Thane felt the overwhelming need to protect and comfort her hit him harder than ever. There was also a swell of pride as he memorised Shepard’s strength and determination; the aura of righteousness and power that surrounded her.

"A rear guard could defend this position well, and keep the collectors from overwhelming us," Shepard stated.

There were murmurs of agreement from the rest of the squad.

"Pick a team to go with you Shepard, everyone else can bunker down here and cover your back," Miranda said.

For once, the operative's words and tone did not incite a rebuke from anyone... even Jack. Thane could sense Garrus shifting beside him, and completely understood the turian's agitation. Sparing his friend a brief glance, he observed the tightly drawn mandibles, and the concerned yet steely look that Garrus was giving the commander, before Thane returned his own gaze back to his fiery Siha.

He had already realised that neither he nor Garrus would function sufficiently unless they were at Shepard's side for this final battle. However, they need not have worried, since the commander called both their names without hesitation.

The pair needed no further instruction, and readily joining Shepard on the ledge just as quickly. Thane's eyes met her emerald pools as he stepped up, and he bowed his head slightly, hoping the small gesture would convey the love and respect he felt for her.

"I'm ready, commander," Garrus stated.

"As am I," Thane affirmed.

Before the question could be raised, Shepard informed the rest of the crew that Miranda was in charge. To Thane's slight amusement, he noticed the pointed look the commander gave Grunt. It reminded him of Irikah whenever Kolyat went to stay with his aunt or uncle, and the corner of his mouth twitch at the memory.

"Anything you want to say before we do this?" Miranda asked.

"The galaxy is depending on us. The collectors... the reapers, they aren't a threat to us, they are a threat to everything, everyone," the commander stated. "Those are the lives we are fighting for, that's the scale. It's been a long journey, no one is coming out without scars."

Thane watched as Samara nodded her solemn agreement, and Grunt pounded his fists together, almost excitedly.

"But it all comes down to this moment," Shepard continued. "We win or lose it all in the next few minutes. Make me proud... make yourselves proud."
"We'll do our best," Miranda replied, eliciting loud stirrings of agreement from the rest of the squad.

"Let's be big goddamn heroes!" Zaeed growled.

"Hell yeah," Jack whooped, as Grunt gave an unsettling laugh.

"Keelah se'lai," Tali exclaimed, brandishing her shotgun.

"Shepard-Commander" Legion inclined it's head.

"May the Goddess protect you," Samara said, serenely.

"Commander," Jacob saluted.

"Good luck, Shepard," Miranda added, a tight lipped smiled forming on the operative's lips.

The commander nodded crisply... almost solemnly... to the crew, before turning to face the direction of the final fight. She gave a command to EDI, and with a shuddering jerk, the platform the trio found themselves on detached from the rest of the ledge. Thane bowed his head, clasping his hands in front of his chest, as he began to pray.

'Amonkira, Lord of Hunters, grant that our hands be steady, our aim be true and our feet swift. And should the worst come to pass, grant us forgiveness'.

Abomination (Shepard PoV)

An unwelcome steady stream of collector forces had accompanied them on their traversal of the platformd. The three of them had made short work of each wave, moving with a synchronicity born of companionship, respect and trust. Until finally, they stood on the last platform as it glided easily into the next chamber, but Shepard felt a twist of apprehension in her stomach.

"The tubes are feeding into some kind of super structure. It's omitting both organic, and non-organic energy signatures. Giving these readings, it must be massive," EDI informed. "Shepard, if my calculations are correct, the super structure is a reaper."

"Because Harbinger just wasn't bad enough," she muttered.

Thanks to EDI's lovely piece of intel. Shepard's stomach started to twist itself into knots. Before long, her gaze was caught by the monstrous sight, and she resolutely swallowed the bile she could taste in the back of her throat. Shepard stared at the abomination that was suspended in the middle of the chamber, a grotesque pantomime of a human skeleton.

"Not just any reaper, a human reaper," Shepard practically spat.

"Spirits," Garrus whispered.

"Precisely," EDI replied. "It appears the collectors have processed tens of thousands of humans. Significantly more will be required to complete the reaper."

Another wave of revulsion washed over her, as the platform jerked to a halt, connecting to a walkway in front of the monstrosity. Shepard couldn't help but focuse on the grinning jaw of the reaper skull. She repressed a shudder, hoping neither Thane nor Garrus had noticed her reaction. Of course, it was a futile hope, and Shepard felt her lover's hand brush against hers, providing quiet reassurance.

"What do the collectors gain from turning humans into this reaper… shell?" Shepard asked, desperately trying to keep her voice calm.

"It may be facilitating the reaper equivalent of reproduction," EDI hypothesised.

Garrus pulled his mandibles tight to his face."Creepy… but possible."

"It may serve another purpose, I do not have the data to speculate further. However, it is clear that the collectors are merely pawns, the technology and ability to make this reaper is not their own," EDI explained. “It is likely that each different species construct each reaper. In this case, the collectors provide the labour.”

Shepard noticed Thane was shifting from foot to foot, it was extremely uncharacteristic for him and spoke volumes about the wariness he felt. Knowing it was her turn to provide comfort, she discreetly caught his hand with hers, gently squeezing for a heartbeat, before letting go.

"A fitting explanation for some of what we witnessed aboard the collector ship," Thane stated, sounding pensive.
Shepard nodded her agreement. "They're building it to look human, why?"

"It appears the reaper's shape is based on the species used to create it," the AI replied.

She shot Garrus a startled look, one he returned looking equally agitated.

"What the hell created sovereign?" she whispered.

"Reapers are machines. Why need humans at all?" the turian asked.

"Incorrect, reapers are sapient constructs," EDI informed them. "A hybrid of organic and inorganic material. The exact construction methods are unclear, but it seems probable that the reapers absorb the 'essence' of a species. This reaper is in very early stages of development, an embryo in human terms."

The bile threatened to rise yet again, and Shepard couldn't help the small gasp that escaped her lips. 'Essence' and 'embryo' reverberated around her head. The words sounding inexplicably abhorrent, though the latter providing a morbid glimmer of hope.

"So, it's not alive yet?" she questioned. "We can still stop it being bor… created?"

"The process can be stopped," EDI assured. "But it is unclear how far it has developed. I cannot, for example, tell you if it has awareness."

The thought that the monstrosity could have been watching and listening the whole time sent a chill down her spine.

"This thing is an abomination," she stated, anger beginning to seep into her voice.

"Agreed, Siha," Thane said, resting his hand on her shoulder,

"How do we destroy it?" Shepard wondered aloud.

"The large tubes injecting the fluid are a weak structural point, destroying them should cause the structural points to collapse, and the reaper to fall," EDI advised.

It was as good a plan as any, but before they could do anything, the faint whir of platforms filtered into the quiet chamber.

"Hold on EDI, we have some old friends to take care of," she replied. "Garrus, right tubes. Thane, left."

Shepard was intent on dispatching the horror as soon as possible, and without question, her team mates did as she asked. Both aimed their sniper rifles to the centre of the upper tube on their respective sides, and the simultaneous shattering of glass told Shepard that the first pair of the six tubes were destroyed.

Happy in that knowledge, she sent out a powerful Shockwave at the newly arrived collectors. The flash of blue biotic energy lit up the dingy chamber, and a short burst of bullets from her reloaded SMG followed.

In the time it had taken her team to disconnect the tubes, Shepard had finished dispatching the collector troops.
"Showing off, commander?" Garrus drawled.

However, before she could retort, the agonised creaking of metal on metal filled the chamber.
Abyss (Thane PoV)

With the last support shot, the screech of twisted metal filled the chamber, like the dying howl of some mythical best. With a final shuddering groan, the construct disappeared from view and for a heartbeat, Thane felt a sense of relief. Until the commander stepped forward, towards the edge of the platform.

For some inexplicable reason, the sight gave him a sense of foreboding. His gaze caught Garrus', who nodded in return, indicating he felt the same. Without a word, the two men stepped forward, their respective sniper rifles raised. Thane gently pulled Shepard away from the edge, and surveyed the drop with Garrus. Nothing. They turned in unison, to face a bemused looking Shepard, her hip cocked, eyebrow raised and a smile tugging on her red painted lips. Thane's breath hitched in his throat... she was beautiful.

"Really guys?" she questioned, rolling her eyes before she spoke into the comm. link. "Shepard to ground team, status report."

"Jack here, I'm tagging them as they come, but feel free to call for an exit any time." Came the unexpected reply. "And don't worry, the cheerleader is fine. Just busy applying some lip gloss."

"Acknowledged. Head back to the Normandy, and tell Miranda she better have a good application on. She needs to be her best for the journey back," Shepard laughed. "Joker, prep the engines. I'm about to overload this place and blow it sky high."

"Roger that, commander," Joker replied over the comm. link.

"Lip gloss?" Garrus asked, voicing Thane's own question.

"It's a translucent substance some women and asari coat their lips with. It's just Jack's way of telling me Miranda's been injured, but well enough to be applying her own Medi-Gel," Shepard explained, her emerald eyes never leaving the control panel she was working on.

A wry smile tugged at Thane's lips. "An interesting analogy"

"Um, commander? I've got an incoming signal from the Illusive Man. EDI's patching it through," Joker called over the comm. link.

Shepard gave a small, tired sigh and the unguarded noise had Thane fighting the urge to hold her tightly. However, he decided that was best left until later... truly believing perhaps for the first time that they could all make it out alive.

There was a melodic ping and Thane held up his arm, letting the hologram to be projected through his Omni-Tool, which allowed the commander to continue her work, as Garrus began to pass small Omni-Detonation charges to her.

"Shepard, you've done the impossible," the Cerberus boss greeted.

"I was part of a team, I didn't do it alone," Shepard replied.

"You did what you had to do, and acquired the collector base," the Illusive Man continued. "I'm looking at the schematics EDI uploaded. A timed radiation pulse would kill the remaining collectors,
but leave the machinery and technology intact. This is our chance Shepard, they were building a reaper. That knowledge, that framework, could save us."

Thane blinked his double lids, slowly. He couldn't help but wonder if the Cerberus boss honestly believed Shepard would agree to that, not missing the subtle inflection on the 'our' and 'us'. Somehow, that incensed Thane more than the Illusive Man trying to persuade the commander to keep the base intact.

Shepard abruptly stopped her work on the console, and began to stalk towards the hologram.

"They liquefied people, turned them into something horrible!” she hissed. “We have to destroy the base.”

"Don't be short sighted. Our best chances against the reapers is to turn their resources against them," the Illusive Man argued.

Shepard glanced up at Garrus. The turian shook his head, subharmonics humming with anxiety.

"I don't know Shepard, what happened here was horrible, but we have to destroy the reapers. If we destroy this base, then all these people died for nothing."

"They were working directly with the reapers, who knows what information is buried in the base,” the Illusive Man pushed. "This base is a gift, we can't just destroy it."

Having become so close to the commander, Thane could clearly see how she was struggling. Warring between what she felt was morally right, and worrying whether it was the best choice in their fight against the reapers. He suspected that Garrus was feeling the same considering the turian's words, but Thane knew Shepard wouldn't forgive herself if she went against her beliefs.

"Siha, I have dedicated my life to killing those who deserve it, it is best that we do not become what we hate,” he interjected, kindly.

The holographic Illusive Man snorted. "An alien could never understand what humanity has at stake."

There was a flash of anger in the commander's emerald eyes. "You bastard! No matter what technology we might find, it's not worth it!"

"Shepard, you died fighting for what you believed. I brought you back so you could keep fighting, some would say what we did to you was going too far, but look what you've accomplished. I didn't discard you, because I knew your value. Don't be so quick to discard this facility, think of the potential," the Illusive Man argued.

Thane clenched and unclenched his fist. To his left, Garrus gave a low, menacing growl.

"We'll fight and win without it. I won't let fear compromise who I am," Shepard stated, turning her attention back to the console.

"Shepard, think about what's at stake. About everything Cerberus has done for you, you…"

Thane cut the link with a degree of satisfaction he would never admit, ending the Illusive Man's tirade. Shepard nodded her thanks, as she armed the Omni-Detonations charges.
"Let's move, we've got ten minutes before the reactor overloads and blows this whole damn station apart," the commander informed them.

However, another groaning shudder of the platform halted their retreat. A strange, synthesised noise filled the air, one that made all three of them flinch.

To Thane's horror, he realised the reaper abomination had clawed it's way out of the abyss, just as it's metal skull loomed into view. He vaguely heard his Siha yell to get into cover, as a red beam emitted from the monstrosity's mouth, narrowly missing him.

The next several minutes moved in a blur, with a few sporadic moments of heart stopping worry interjected, when Shepard would run from behind cover to aim her Arc Projector at the reaper larva. But Thane's non-instinctual awareness only returned once he found himself sliding backwards across a falling platform.

He desperately tried to halt his rapid descent, but his fingers failed to find purchase on the smooth metallic surface. After meeting his Siha, he had begun to want to live again, to fight by her side, to keep her safe. Now he felt as if his Gods were playing a cruel joke on him.

However, his heart leapt as he felt the brush of finger tips against his. Thane looked up into Shepard's emerald eyes, finding them shining with fierce determination. He twitched and stretched his fingers, trying to grasp her hand, but to no avail.

His feet slipped over the void, and Thane tried to drink in the sight of his fiery Siha one last time. But as his waist followed his feet and legs into the abyss, he shut his eyes, not wanting the fear in them to be last memory of him.

Suddenly, Thane felt the unexpected but entirely welcome sensation of a hand around his wrist. His shoulder jarred painfully at the abrupt halt to his decent, and he inhaled a shaky breathe, opening his eyes to look into his Siha's emerald pools once again. In the time it took Thane to blink, Garrus was at the commander's side, reaching for his other hand, and with unspoken co-ordination, the pair hauled him away from the cavernous drop.

An explosion burst bellow them, and Thane could feel the heat on the soles of his feet as he clambered onto the platform. There was no chance for him to catch his shuddering breath though, as the platform was rocked by the shockwave of the blast. The tremor sent the trio tumbling across the smooth surface, this time falling in the opposite direction.

Thane felt something heavy collide with his head, and the world went dark.

Through the blackness that surrounded him, Thane heard the screech of moving mental, which was followed by the heavy slam of something hitting the floor. There was a heavy pressure on his chest that made it hard to breath, and difficult to concentrate, but he thought he heard familiar footsteps.

Thane vaguely thought he heard a soft voice call his name, but his consciousness was too fuzzy for him to be sure. However, the feeling of an armour clad hand on his shoulder soon accompanied the voice, and Thane forced his heavy lids open. He squinted them against the unwelcome light, and managed a weak smile as Shepard's beautiful face came into focus. Unable to get enough breath into his lungs to speak, he gently stroked her cheek before she helped him to stand.

After a few tries, Thane managed to keep his balance so his Siha could rush from his side to the trapped form of Garrus. The turian lay a few feet away, pinned by a short pillar. Thane took a few,
experimental deep breathes, and winced at the pain. He guessed that several of his ribs were broken, though to his great relief, his lungs seemed to be no worse than usual. But before he could administer any medigel, he was distracted by his Siha's actions.

He watched in amazement as a faint blue halo surrounded Shepard, before she hefted the pillar from her best friend, then hauled the turian to his feet in a far less dignified manner than she'd used with him.

Garrus flared his mandibles at her. "Commander?"

The turian's flanging voice was a mixture of pain, amusement and astonishment, as Shepard slumped against him.

"Biotics and Cerberus upgrades," she mumbled, exhausted.

There was a hiss of static through the comm. system that made Thane wince, before Joker's panicked voice broke through: "Do you copy? Commander? Come on Shepard, don't leave me hanging!"

"I'm here Joker. Did the ground team make it?" she called back.

"All survivors on board, we're just waiting for you," the pilot replied.

Suddenly, the unmistakable sound of seeker swarms began to gather behind them, and Thane saw his Siha's eyes widen. She shouted her command to move, whilst ushering both him and Garrus reluctantly in front of her. The trio set off at a run, and Thane concentrated on pushing passed the burning pain in his lungs, certain that his companions were fighting their own injuries and determined not to be a burden.

"Human, you have changed nothing," an unwanted familiar voice stated. "You're species has attracted the attention of those infinitely your greater. Those you call reapers will be your salvation, your destruction."

Unsurprisingly, the hum of collector forces began to fill the air, but thankfully no orange glow came into view. Both Thane and Garrus reached to unclip the guns.

"Don't stop, just keep running!" Shepard yelled, frustration edging her voice.

Instinctively Thane obeyed, as did Garrus. The trio's sprint somehow picking up in pace, as the rendezvous point came into tantalizing view.
Enemies and Gentlemen (Shepard PoV)

Shepard ran frantically towards the gorgeous site of the Normandy as it loomed into view, not questioning why Joker stood at the airlock with an assault rifle in hand, of all things. Especially as a bullet whizzed past her cheek, and a dull thud could be heard behind her, which probably meant Joker's shot had impacted with a collector's head.

Part of Shepard was impressed with her de facto brother's aim, though she was only partially paying attention to the part of her brain. Really, her instincts had taken over long ago, and every fibre simply screamed RUN!

To Shepard's relief, Thane and Garrus easily made it into the airlock, since Joker provided them with excellent covering fire. However, as she made her own approach, falling debris knocked the last section of platform away. But Shepard continued to run, increasing her pace and forcing herself to push past the growing pain... hoping her cybernetics wouldn't fail her.

She launched herself towards the Normandy, the gaping maw of the cavernous drop goading her as she leapt. The bursts of gunfire faded to background noise, as the thump of her own heartbeat in her ears drowned out all other sound.

Shepard's gauntlet clad hands clanked against the metal floor of the air lock, her fingers desperately searching for purchase, as her lower half hung over the taunting abyss. Relief barely registered as Shepard felt four strong hands grab her, and she looked up into the concerned faces of Thane and Garrus. In one fluid motion, they pulled her fully into the air lock, and for a brief moment she knelt on the floor; her hands trembling and breaths heavy, as she tried to regain her composure... that was too close.

"EDI, close the door!" Joker shouted.

He hobbled back to the cockpit, and Shepard spared a fleeting smile of thanks for both Thane and Garrus, before quickly scrambling to her feet and following the pilot.

"Detonation in ten, nine, eight..." EDI warned.

"Yeah, I get the gist of it EDI. Hold on," Joker interrupted, almost growling.

Taking his words literally, Shepard gripped onto the back of the pilot's chair, as he took evasive manoeuvres. The Normandy suddenly lurched forward, and even though there was no sound, it was obvious the collector base had exploded. She held her breath, bracing herself against the increasingly turbulent ride, and watched how Joker's brow furrowed in deep concentration.

"FTL engaged," he warned.

The Normandy surged forward again, this time at Joker's command, towards the Omega Four Relay. Shepard let out a shuddering breath as the Relay's mass effect field caught them, and she sent a silent prayer to Thane's gods and Garrus' spirits that they would all make it.

There was the ominous flash of red that was only associated with the Omega Four Relay, before the Normandy was ejected unceremoniously back into the Omega Nebula. As Shepard released the breathe she hadn't been aware of holding, a raucous cheer erupted from the CIC. It seemed the entire squad and crew were whooping and hollering; even Thane and Samara had abandoned their usual
calm demeanour to smile indulgently.

"We made it," Shepard grinned. "We bloody made it!"

Leaning around the pilot's chair, she placed a kiss on Joker's bearded cheek. "You're a damn hero!"

He swatted her affectionately away with his hat. "Yeah, well... Figured I owed you one," he muttered, bashfully, adjusting his baseball cap back into place. "Anyway, Omega?"

"Omega," she agreed.

She tapped the bill of his hat before turning to head to the Comm. Room... there was unfinished business she had to deal with. However, her progress was hampered by the steady stream of hugs, handshakes and high-fives from the ground team and crew. Grunt's embrace lifted her fully off her feet despite her full armour, earning them a boisterous round of laughter.

There was no sign of Thane, but just as Shepard was about to duck through the armoury to get to her destination, Garrus grabbed her by the wrist. Their armour clunked together as he dragged her into a rough hug, before he brought his forehead to hers in their familiar gesture.

"First Saren, now the collectors. Remind me never to get on your bad side, Shepard," he laughed. "I almost feel sorry for the reapers."

"Ass," she chuckled, giving his mandible a quick peck. "Thanks for catching me."

"I'm fairly sure I owed you one dramatic rescue," Garrus drawled in reply.

"Just the one?"

She gave the turian one last squeeze, before she continued her journey. As she reached the battered remains of her destination, Shepard stood on the threshold, trying to ready herself for what would hopefully be the last conversation she ever needed to have with the Illusive Man. After his stunt on the collector base, she considered their working relationship officially over. She took a deep breathe, grateful that this part of the ship was currently quiet. The only the sounds were her breathing, and the occasional crack or sizzle of exposed electrical wires.

"Siha?" Thane questioned.

His voice suddenly breaking the silence made Shepard jump slightly. He'd approached so quietly, that she'd failed to notice him until he was stood next to her. She smiled at her lover, though knew it didn't quite reach her eyes.

"I'm failing miserably at trying to calm myself before speaking to TIM," Shepard explained. "I don't want him to see how much his crap back on the collector base got to me."

"A wise choice," he agreed. "Do you wish for me to stay?"

Shepard's smile returned in full as she regarded the man in front of her. Then without warning, she pulled him into an impulsive kiss. It was much more chaste and restraint than she wanted to give him, but she did have unfinished business to settle first.

"If you like," she agreed. "EDI, patch me through to the Illusive Man."
"Connecting you now, Shepard," the AI informed her.

Thane move discretely to the side, melding into the shadows, as the familiar figure of the Illusive Man materialised into view.

"Shepard, you're making a habit of costing me more than time and money," TIM 'greeted' her.

"Too many lives were lost at that base, I'm not sorry it's gone," she replied, evenly.

"The first of many lives. The technology from that base could have secured human dominance in the galaxy, against the reapers and beyond," he argued.

"Human dominance? Or just Cerberus?" she questioned, suspiciously.

"Strength for Cerberus, is strength for every human," TIM told her.

She grit her teeth, her anger building once again, and hearing the minuscule sound of Thane shift his weight, told her the drell was just as aggravated as she was.

'Breathe, keep calm' was silently repeated like a mantra as she studied the Illusive Man. Shepard watched as he flicked ash from his cigarette, and took a sip from his glass. A sardonic smirk threatened to lift the corner of her lips as she remembered Ken's distrust of TIM, purely on the grounds he drank American bourbon over Scottish whiskey.

As Shepard remember that conversation, the holographic Illusive Man stood and began walking towards what she supposed would be the holographic version of herself.

"Cerberus is humanity. I should have known you'd choke on the hard decisions, too idealistic from the start," he chastised.

It took all her self-control not to snort in indignation. "You knew who I was from the start, and I've known what you are, along with the price of dealing with you. We do things my way from now on. Harbinger is coming, and he won't be alone. I'm going to make sure we are ready when they get here. You can fall in-line or step aside, but don't get in my way."

"You sure that's what you want?" the Illusive Man questioned, his inhuman blue eyes glaring at her. "You're taking a hell of a risk, Shepard."

"I don't think so. I'm going to stop the reapers, but I'm not going to sacrifice the soul of our species to do it," she said, defiantly.

"I know about the drell," TIM threatened.

An icy tendril began to crawl it's way up her spine, but Shepard refused to rise to his bait. She instructed EDI to lose the channel, barely biting back the snarl of anger that wanted to escape. She turned away from the dissolving hologram, and her eyes came to rest on Thane.

A lump formed in her throat at the thought that she'd put him or Kolyat in danger, and her concern must have shown in her eyes, because before Shepard could speak, Thane had made short work of the distance between them. Wordlessly, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close despite her armour. For several calm moments they stayed like that, as Thane ran a soothing hand through her tousled hair.
"Do not worry, Siha," he comforted.

She gave a brief nod. "I need a shower, then to take stock of repairs."

"I understand. Summon me if you require any assistance, for any reason."

Thane placed a gentle kiss on her forehead, before pulling away from their embrace. He bowed to her, then took his leave, and Shepard couldn't help smile at his retreating back.
After leaving Shepard, Thane had sought out Mordin in the Tech Lab. The salarian had skilfully repaired his cracked ribs, along with taking a new and slightly painful lung biopsy. With that done, Thane had made his way down to Life Support, via the maintenance hallways.

Now he sat at his small table, smiling warmly at the static hazed, orange tinged projection of his son. The image shone from his Omni-Tool like a beacon of hope, and it was a true testament to Shepard's charisma and ability that he was able to do this.

"So... you're really alright?" Kolyat asked, hesitantly.

"Yes Kolyat. The only damage I sustained was to my ribs, which has now been repaired," Thane assured.

There was a brief pause of silence on the other end. "And Shepard?"

Thane blinked his double lids, twice. He was surprised by his son's question, and supposed it was not as innocent an enquiry as it first appeared. However, before Thane could reply, Kolyat continued speaking; though there was an accusing look in the young drell's eyes.

"I'm not foolish enough not to realise I quite possibly owe her my life. I certainly owe her my job," his son conceded. "I'm also fairly sure there is something between the two of you."

"Kolyat, I..." Thane began.

"Do not insult me, father. I'm a C-Sec officer now, remember. You speak about her often enough in your emails," Kolyat interrupted.

Taking a steadying breath, Thane awaited the inevitable rebuke. However, none came.

"She will never replace mother, but... she... I... know she is a good woman. We spoke via email, before your last mission. She promised to bring you back unharmed," Kolyat admitted. "And I doubt she did that to anyone else's family."

Thane inclined his head in a small bow, humbled. "She is... well. I believe better for severing ties with our previous employer."

"That is... good. Where are you now?" his son inquired.

"ETA to Omega, fifteen minutes. All crew are reminded of the mandatory twenty four hour shore leave," EDI's synthesised voiced called over the communication system.

Kolyat's brow furrowed. "Omega?"

"The ship sustained heavy damage on the journeys through the Omega Four Relay. Siha has ordered that we dock on Omega for emergency repairs," Thane informed him.

"You call her Siha?" There was a cooler edge to his son's voice as he spoke. "That's what you called mother."
Thane's breath caught in his throat, a sense of dread pulling at his conscious. He inclined his head in acknowledgement, fearing words would only anger his son. Kolyat let out a harsh breathe of air, and Thane braced himself.

"If anyone is worthy of mother's stature, I suppose it would be the famous Commander Shepard," his son told him, before taking a deep breath. "Are you returning to the Citadel?"

Taken aback, Thane blinked in surprise. "As yet, I do not know what Siha plans. Though I would suspect as much, and I hope that we will."

There was an indecipherable look in Kolyat's eyes, as a small smile formed on his mouth. "Right, good. Well, my lunch break is over. I need to get back to work."

His son cut the link before Thane could give his farewell, and he sat back in his chair, as his gaze drifting into the purple hues of the drive core. Unable to help himself, Thane chuckled.
Shepard would always be thankful for having unexpected friends in high places. Never more so than when she sat at her computer terminal, at the culmination of her 'rounds' through the extremely battered Normandy. Her duties had taken several hours, most of which had been spent in deep conversation with Joker, Garrus, Tali, Ken and Gabby, along with EDI and Miranda. The time had been spent meticulously cataloguing the required repairs, assessing a suitable location for the work, and trying to figure out the best way to fund them now they were no longer part of Cerberus.

Thankfully, a quick vid. call with Liara had dealt with the latter part of the problem, with the new Shadow Broker generously offering to foot the repair bill. However, the repair list was extensive, and the Normandy was in no state to fly to another, more suitable system. So the decision was made to have emergency repairs conducted on Omega, before travelling to Illium for more extensive work to be done.

As the Normandy practically limped towards the infamous station, Shepard had sent an email to Aria. Politeness was at the forefront of the message, since she had long ago decided it was advantageous to keep on the good side of the pirate queen. However, she had requested recommendations from the asari, just on the off chance, but fully expected to be ignored. To Shepard's infinite surprise, the self-appointed CEO of Omega proved her assumption very wrong.

Shepard,  
My network informs me you just made it back through the Omega Four relay, no doubt congratulations are in order.  
I will be sending my own, personal experts to meet you at the docks and assist with repairs. As a token of my appreciation, I expect to see your crew enjoy my hospitality in Afterlife's VIP section.  
- Aria

Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Shepard had ordered twenty four hours mandatory shore leave effective immediately upon docking. Followed by the promise of a more extensive break once they reached Nos Astra. She was grateful to Aria for allowing her crew some reprieve, albeit a little shocked and wary of Omega's ruler. However, a second email from the asari had made her laugh, despite the suspicions.

And Shepard,  
Come find me once you tear yourself away from your assassin. We can compare notes on drell lovers over a glass of Weeping Heart.  
- Aria

So docked at Omega, with an acceptance email sent and the majority of the crew already aboard the station, Shepard's hand hovered over intercom button. Her mind had lingered on thoughts of her time with Thane before the relay, and the 'unfinished business' they had. With that in mind, she had made her excuses not to join the crew for the beginning of the celebrations, promising she would catch up with them later... as well as making it up to them once they reached Illium.

Shepard had then 'retired' to her quarters for the evening, positive Thane would choose to remain on board the Normandy, due to his dislike of nightclubs. She had enjoyed an indulgent shower, reapplied her semi-permanent make up, and then changed into the black lace dress she had last worn to Afterlife, for-going any underwear underneath.
"EDI, who is still on board?" Shepard queried.

"Sere Krios is currently in the Life Support Plant, I have no information on his activities. Samara, Doctor Chakwas and Mess Sargent Gardener are in the Starboard Observation Lounge, engaging in a game of Skyllian Five," the AI replied.

"Thanks EDI."

"Logging you out, Shepard."

Shepard sighed. She was nervous. Why? She didn't know. Wrex would probably tell her to grow a quad, so after a steadying breath, she hit the intercom and connecting it to Life Support before she lost her nerve.

"Thane? If you are free, would you like to join me in my cabin?" she asked.

There were several seconds of delay, before Thane's velvety voice answered. During that time, Shepard fidgeting with the hem of her dress as she waited.

"As you wish, Siha," he replied. "I will be there shortly."
Thane moved silently through the shadows. Omega held no threat for a skilled assassin like himself, yet he preferred not to linger on the station regardless. He had only disembarked in order to buy a bottle of the finest asari Honey Mead that Afterlife stocked, a favourite of Shepard's. He intended on bringing the small gift to his Siha as soon as the opportunity arose. It was a paltry gift compared to the break he’d arranged at Hotel Azure for them once they got to Illium, set up with help from the Liara. And it certainly paled in insignificance, compared to the surprise that awaited collection aboard the Citadel. That was the first step on a path he never thought he’d walk again, though one he wouldn’t let himself dwell on for the time being. Once back in the docking area of the station, Thane slipped unhurriedly into the Normandy's airlock. He called to the ship's AI, as he waited for the decontamination process to end, inquiring into his Siha’s location.

"Commander Shepard is currently in her quarters, Sere Krios. Would you like me to notify her of your enquiry?" EDI replied.

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary. However, please inform her that I will be in the Life Support Plant, should she require me,“ he said.

Unable to help himself, Thane smiled at EDI's acknowledgement, and he made his way through the deserted CIC towards the elevator. Once inside, he punched the control button for the Crew Deck. The Normandy's third deck was similarly deserted as the second. The majority of the crew were revelling in Afterlife's VIP section, though faint sounds of laughter could be heard from the Starboard Observation Lounge. Without preamble, Thane entered his small room, setting down the bottle of alcohol on the table and folding his jacket over the back of a chair. With a sigh, he lay on his cot. It was taking all of his considerable self-control not to make his way to his Siha's cabin. The only thing preventing him was the ghost of shame he felt, from barging into her quarters before they had entered the relay. Thane was still ashamed that he had not been able to control his emotions, still angry with himself with burdening his Siha with his worries. It had been many years since he had been so brash, and as penance he resigned himself to await her summons. However, thinking of the previous evening also led his mind to wander to the more sensual activities. Tendrils of Solipsism caressed his mind and smiling, Thane happily let himself fall into the memory.

Cool air hits the uncovered scales of my arms, I repress a tantalising shiver. Emerald eyes, darkened by desire, burn with a devilish light.

"I love you, Thane Krios, and only you," she tells me. "You remind me what I'm fighting for.”

Siha's gentle voice is music to my soul. Her words are interjected with kisses. Soft, red painted lips move from my cheek frill down my dewlap. Porcelain hands run down my tunic, before slipping under the hem. Soft finger tips are warm as she traces indistinct patterns on the scales of my hips.

Thane's own hands slowly traced the memorised path that Shepard took down his body, and he could feel his growing arousal press against the confines of his leather trousers. He let his fingers unclasp the fastening of his trousers, freeing himself.

Her delicate hands move from my hips, ghosting to my abdomen. Red painted lips caress mine, my tongue eagerly seeks out hers. She is exotic and intoxicating. Nibble fingers deftly unfastened my trousers. I suppress the urge to moan, as the loosening fabric makes room for my growing arousal. Wanting to feel more of her, my hands cup the exquisite flesh of my Siha's rear. I lift her up. Her
long, toned legs wrap around my waist. Our torsos press flush against each other, the soft globes of her breasts warm the scales of my chest. To my delight and surprise, she lets out a soft, feminine giggle. It is the sweetest sound I have heard. I lay her reverently on the bed. The blue hue of the fish tank bathes her porcelain skin. My eyes drink in the ethereal sight of my wonderful Siha, my perfect goddess.

"You look beautiful, my Siha," I whisper.

"Always yours," she replies.

Thane let out a shuddering breath as his hand curled around his rigid girth, but was wrenched from his Solipsism by a sharp beep from the intercom terminal. He clenched his teeth, suppressing a groan of annoyance before he heard Shepard’s soft voice. It took a few moments for his pleasure muddled brain to process her request, and barely registered the nervous lilt in his Siha's voice. Thane took a steadying breath, trying to calm his elevated heart rate.

"As you wish, Siha. I will be there shortly."

After several minutes of concentrated meditation, Thane was able to adjust his clothing to conceal the visible remnants of his arousal. Picking up the bottle of Honey Mead, he made his way to the elevator, stopping by the ship’s Mess Hall to acquiring two glasses on his way. Standing in the lift, Thane smiled to himself. He intended to finish what they had started the night before, to worship and adore every part of his Siha, and he hoped she would allow him to do so.
Amorous Congress (Shepard PoV)

Shepard waited, leaning against her desk in what she hoped appeared like a nonchalant manner. For some inexplicable reason, the great Commander Shepard was strangely nervous, and it was not a feeling she could ever really remember having. She fidgeted with the lace hem of her figure hugging dress, trying to distract herself. The sound of the door whooshing open grabbed her attention, and her eyes flew to the handsome drell. Thane was clad in his 'trademark' black leather, except for his coat, which gave Shepard a wonderful view of his toned arms. He bowed to her, a slight smile on his lips, and her nerves melted away. She gave him a warm smile in return, but arched an eyebrow once she noticed the bottle in his hands. Thane crossed the short distance between them, before setting the bottle and two glasses on her desk.

"A small gift, Siha," he explained, moving to stand in front of her. "You are a vision."

"I believe we have unfinished business, Sere Krios," she said in a sultry tone.

After letting her fingers slowly run across his cheek frills, Shepard's touch ran down Thane's dewlap and across his shoulders, before her hands came to rest on his muscled biceps. Without hesitation, Thane pressed his full lips to Shepard's, his hands resting on her lace covered hips. She breathed in his familiar scent of spice and leather, and smiled inwardly as she felt the pressure on her lips intensify. Shepard ran the tip of her tongue along Thane's lower lip, before gently nipping it's fullness. In response, his strong arms wrapped around her waist as his tongue began a languid dance with hers. His attentiveness forced Shepard to repress a contented moan, as she revelled in the differences of his slightly bifurcated tongue. There was no warning as Thane deftly lifted her up, forcing Shepard to wrap her legs around his waist. He supported her with his cooler hands cupping the bare, warm skin of her rear. Breaking their kiss to meet her eyes, Thane looked at her questioningly, a smile tugging at the corner his mouth.

Shepard grinned back at him, devilishly.

"I've been thinking of you," she whispered, looking at him through her lashes.

A deep chuckle reverberated in Thane's chest. "And I you."

She could feel the truth of his words through his clothing, and gently bit her lower lip in anticipation. Without hurry, Thane carried her easily to the bed, and their evening of passion started as unpressurised as the previous night. Languidly, they undressed each other. Caressing the newly revealed parts of each other's, still alien yet appealing, bodies as each article of clothing was removed. Once they lay bare together on the soft white sheets, Shepard noticed a look of almost shyness cross Thane's usually stoic features, prompting her to remember a similar look from the previous night. Even as he kissed her tenderly, Shepard couldn't help but wonder if he thought she didn't find him attractive. As Thane withdrew, he cupped her face gently, and she let her eyes wandered appreciatively from his face to the toned expanse of his chest and broad shoulders. Admiring the swirling markings and vibrant hue of his scales, before returning to his face. He was stunning. However, to her surprise, Shepard found a look of uncertainty mixed with the adoration Thane was regarding her with.

"You are beautiful, my Siha," he whispered, affectionately.

Shepard smiled, and caressed the side of his face. "So handsome, sexy."

Thane blinked slowly, twice. A mannerism she had come to learn meant that he was surprised. The
look in his eyes was certainly... unbelieving. Shepard frowned, appalled at the idea that her lover
didn't believe she found him physically attractive. With a gentle hand, she pushed Thane's shoulder
until he lay flat on his back. Trailing her fingertips along the enticing swirls of his scales, Shepard ran
her hand down his chest and abdomen, appreciating the way his muscles rippled and twitched at her
touch. She couldn't help but smirk while listening to how his breathing became heavier and more
ragged. Placing a teasingly light kiss on Thane's lips, Shepard began exploring his body with her
mouth. She kissed and licked down his wine coloured dewlap, noticing the slight hitch in his breath
as her tongue mapped out the subtle ridges. Her lips curled into a satisfied smile, when she heard him
groan in pleasure, as she continued to kiss down his well-defined chest. Upon reaching his abdomen,
Shepard ran her tongue along one of the dark green swirls that wrapped around Thane's side. She
was rewarded with a barely audible gasp, and the pleasant sensation of her lover tensing in pleasure.

Making a mental note to exploit that discovery at a later date, Shepard's hands ran across Thane's
lower abdomen. She ghosted around the sensitive skin of his groin, and came to rest on his thighs,
gently massaging the powerful muscles. Not having the opportunity to do so the previous night,
Shepard let her gaze fall indulgently to Thane's already engorged member. His length, girth and
shape was not dissimilar to that of an average human male, except for the tantalising ridges and the
rich wine colour that matched his dewlap. From her position between his legs, Shepard raked her
gaze up his impressive physique, before her eyes locked with his. Thane still looked
uncharacteristically nervous, but instead of frowning, Shepard let a teasing smile form on her lips.
Without breaking eye contact, and her hands still lightly massaging his thighs, she slowly lent
forward. Silently, Shepard prayed that the hallucinogens wouldn't suddenly start to affect her. Then
with a languid stroke of her tongue, she caressed the length of him, and revelled in Thane's stuttering
breath. Closing her eyes, Shepard repeated the motion several times, enjoying his taste and texture
whilst turning his shaky breath into pants.

"Siha," he called, a pleading note to his voice.

Shepard's looked at him through her lashes, and raised an eyebrow playfully. "Hmmm?"

"Siha, please," Thane panted.

"Just repaying your worship," she replied, in a sultry whisper.

His breath hitched as her mouth moved back up his length, before another groan escaped him, as
Shepard gently kissed the tip of him and swirled her tongue around the head. Without warning, he
surged forward, and swiftly pulled her onto his lap. A laugh was startled out of her, though the sound
was swallowed as his lips met hers in a bruising kiss. The intimacy of their position heightened
Shepard's already fully awaken arousal, and in one fluid motion, Thane had rolled them. She
hummed in approval as her back lay comfortably on the soft cotton sheets, with the scales of Thane's
body pressed deliciously against her softer skin. The gentle bubbling of the fish tank was the only
sound in the cabin, other than their heated breathes. Shepard ran her blunt fingernails up his sides,
unable to suppress a giggle as he unconsciously bucked against her. Thane gently caught her wrists
in one of his skilled hands, and pinned them above her head. Looking into his onyx eyes, Shepard's
heart began to beat faster, her desire for him growing.

"You do not play fair," Thane whispered against her ear.

The sound of his velvet voice sent pleasant shivers down Shepard's spine, and she shuddered
slightly. Thane's other hand began to trace a teasing trail along her body. The path he took lightly
skimmed over Shepard's left breast, down her rib cage, and along the curve of her waist, before
coming to rest at the apex of her thighs. In slow circles, Thane caressed the nubbin of her sex.
Gasping in pleasure, Shepard arched from the bed as he slipped his fused digits slowly into her. She vaguely thought that it was him who wasn't playing fair, before his mouth brushed hers. In reply, Shepard gently bit the fullness his bottom lip, loving how he responded by deepening their kiss. With unrushed movements, Thane relinquished his hold on her wrists, and positioned himself between her legs. It didn't escape Shepard's attention that he had produced, seemingly from nowhere, a prophylactic.

'Smooth operator'

Wrapping her arms around his waist, she brought their bodies flush together. Her mouth sought his, their tongues dancing together as he joined with her, effortlessly. Thane's next thrust stole coherent thought from her momentarily. Shepard gasped, enjoying the feeling of fullness he gave her. Then she realised she must have shut her eyes at some point, for opening them, she found Thane looking at her intently. A smile was tugging at the corner of his mouth, one that looked a little bit smug. Not one to be outdone, Shepard rolled her hips, coaxing a gasp from him. She smiled at him cheekily, and Thane's answering chuckle reverberated against her chest. After that, their lips met hungrily, the exotic spice of him bathing her tongue, as he set a steady pace that she met easily. Time was lost to them both, and Shepard enjoyed the ripples and waves of pleasure their union created.
The dingy orange glow of Omega penetrated through the skylight, into their quiet oasis. Thane lay sated, pleasantly drained after hours of love making, with his beautiful Siha in his arms. She dozed lightly against his shoulder, and he stroked her arm in a lazy manner. A smile pulled at his lips, as his mind wandered to earlier in the evening.

_Emerald eyes look up at me, her red painted lips curl into a smile. My heart hammers in my chest as she leans forward. Her supple tongue caresses me, stroking from base to tip. Her worship awes and humbles me, she steals my breath away._

Breaking from the memory, Thane smiled warmly at the sleeping woman nestled into him. Those moments had become one of his most cherished memories. Not necessarily for the sensual pleasure they contained... which was wonderful, but more for it being the instance he fully realised the depth of Shepard's love and desire for him. Thane ran a hand through her tousled red hair, before pulling her closer, enjoying the radiant heat she gave. With a soft groan, Shepard's eyelids flickering open, revealing the emerald depths of her eyes. She smiled at him sleepily.

"Hello, lover."

He couldn't help but chuckle. "Hello, Siha."

Shepard grace him with a light brush of her lips against his, before she buried her face into the crook of his neck. Her warm breath ghosted across his scales, causing him to shiver pleasantly. Smiling, Thane kissed the top of her head, whilst running a hand down her uncovered spine. He marvelled at the feel of her naked skin against his palm, as sleep slowly took hold of him once more.

"You should stay here," Shepard mumbled.

"I had no plans to move," he replied, half asleep.

With narrowed eyes, she looked up at him. "Don't be obtuse. I mean, you should stay here."

Pushing herself up onto an elbow, Shepard gesticulated in a sweeping motion to the expanse of her cabin. For a moment, Thane felt his heart thump hard in his chest, as his breath caught. He soon lost the fight to control his smile from breaking into an all-out grin. He pulled Shepard back down to him, her body perfectly moulding into his side, and asked if she was certainly. She sighed dramatically, and rolled her eyes.

"I wouldn't be asking you to move in if I wasn't," Shepard retorted.

"An intriguing proposition, Siha," he told her, dryly. "There are certainly merits, and if it is what the great Commander Shepard desires, who am I to disagree."

"Thane!" she laughed.

Shepard pushed herself away from him, out of his embrace, and reached for a pillow. Before she managed to grab one, he gently caught her hands and pulling her back into his embrace. Thane's lips brushed Shepard's in a chaste kiss, before resting his cheek atop her head, her tousled hair tickling his nose slightly.
"It would be a honour," he said, seriously. "And a pleasure."

"Smooth talker," she smiled. "We need to plan that memorable vacation."

"Indeed, though I would request to visit the Citadel first," he said.

Her laugh was like music. "That goes without saying. The plan is to go as soon as the repairs are finished. Anderson would finish the job the collectors started if I didn't." She paused. "I was also thinking, maybe, we could... um... invite Kolyat to dinner? I mean if you want, or think it's a good idea."

It was a rare occurrence to see Shepard flustered, and Thane would never tell her... for fear of some pillow hitting reprisal, but he found it utterly adorable. He cupped her face, stroking the porcelain skin of her cheek, causing her to look up at him through her thick lashes. Thane's heart felt like it skipped a beat, she was so beautiful.

"Siha," he soothed. "Your suggestion is most agreeable, and one I appreciate immensely."

"Really?" Shepard asked, sounding hopeful.

Thane kissed her lips gently. "We spoke earlier, he asked for you."

Sitting bolt upright, she looked at him, questioningly. "Does he know... about us?"

"Yes," Thane admitted, smiling. "I had planned to tell him in person, following the successful end to our mission, but he had already worked it out for himself."

Shepard wrapped her arms around herself, and nibbled on her lower lip. "And is he okay with it?"

He chuckled. "Do not worry so, Siha. He is fine," he reassured. "He did mention an email you sent him, before we hit the relay."

"I wanted to reassure him, let him know I fully intended on bringing you back," she shrugged. "It was the second message I sent him, the first was just after you two had been reunited." A quiet, nervous laugh escaped her lips. "That one was just apologising for hitting him really."

"He holds no grudge," he told her.

Playfully, Thane pulled Shepard back down to the mattress, kissing her tenderly once her face was level with his. She sighed contently, and relaxed into his arms once again. He hummed in approval as her bare body pressed against his, and began to trace indistinct patterns down her spine.

"Now that is decided, Siha, where would like to visit, on our memorable vacation?"

"Well, I used to have an apartment on Intai'sei, out in the Phoenix system. Won it in a bet against the admiral that ran Pinnacle station, at the beginning of my hunt for Saren," she told him. "Though I suppose I need to check with Anderson if it's still mine."

"Another Exploit of the renowned Saviour of the Citadel?" Thane teased.

Shepard chuckled. "I need Tali and Garrus to help retell the story, it's not the same without Garrus'
complaints." She shook her head at the memory. "Failing that… there's Terra Nova, in the Asgard System. That has an equatorial desert. Asteria in the Hades Nexus has the deserts but really it's out, because the Oxygen level is quite poor. Then there's…"

Thane blinked his double lids, slowly. He smiled, the theme of her choices was not lost on him. They had discussed his wish to see a desert during a conversation, many weeks ago. He appreciated Shepard's thoughtfulness, but a sense of guilt weighed on him.

"Siha," Thane interrupted. "Do any of these locations interest you?"

She shrugged. "I'm more a tropical beach and crystal clear oceans sort of woman. But you wanted a desert, and a desert you shall get, my love."

"Are you…"

His words were cut off by the press of her lips against his, halting all thoughts of trying to argue. Thane stifled a groan, as Shepard licked up the sensitive skin of his dewlap, before kissing him again. In a fluid movement, he quickly pulled her on top of him, running his hand down the supple plain of her back. Shepard moved to straddle his lap, and the action forced Thane to bite back another groan as her hot core pressed against his rapidly growing arousal. With considerable effort, he stopped himself from joining with her immediately, and fumbled on the night stand for a prophylactic. Thane's task was made all the more difficult as Shepard ran her nimble tongue along the inside ridge of his cheek frill, making his breathe stutter. Once sheathed, Thane gasped as her warmth encompassed him. The velvety feel of her flooded his sense, and a surge of pure pleasure swept through him. It started at his tip, the travelled along his shaft, before tingling it's way up his spine.

"You feel so good," he whispered in her ear, nipping the lobe.

Shepard rolled her hips, grinding down onto him, with her customary smirk tugging her lips. Thane chuckled as he wrapped his hand around the back of his Siha's neck, and pulled her close enough to press his lips to hers. Thane thrust as he did, rewarded by her gasp of pleasure ghosting across his lips. With each ensuing thrust, Shepard's warmth seemed to hold him in a tighter embrace. He caressed every part of her beautiful body that he could reach, maintaining as much eye contact as their joint pleasure would allow. She murmured his name softly, her voice no more than a breathy moan, as he stroked against a particularly sensitive spot inside her. Unable to help himself, Thane pulled his Siha flush against him, before rolling to change their position. Not once did their union break, and Shepard undulated beneath him, causing the familiar sensation built like a wave. It was the gentle scrap of her blunt nails down the scales of his back, that sent the cascade of ultimate pleasure through his body. Thane nuzzled into Shepard's neck, pleased to feel the rising heat and pulses that heralded her own release. A few heartbeats later, she joined him with a sweet mewl of pleasure.
Feron paced the airlock as he waited for Liara. His gut churned, and unconsciously he rubbed at the scales of his wrists. The scars were fading, but feeling them made him subconsciously tugged the sleeves of his jacket a little lower. He let out a ragged sigh, and his fist pounded against the metal wall, though it did little to alleviate the growing tension he felt. When Feron heard the sound of Liara's familiar footsteps, he leant against the bulk head. He tucked his hands in his pockets, hoping to look nonchalant and not the nervous live wire of energy that he felt. Though, as usual, she saw straight through it.

"Feron, if you don't feel up to this, you don't have to come," Liara said, gently.

She placed a hand lightly on his forearm, and he swallowed past the lump in his throat, trying to ignore how his heart rate had jumped to FTL from such a simple touch. Feron forced a grin, insisting he was fine. However, Liara gave him a look... one that said she knew he was lying, but she had the kindness to let it be. She moved passed him, opening the doors to the shuttle, and Feron couldn't help the how his eyes skimmed her figure. His feelings for the asari had been developing since their search for Shepard's body. Thoughts of her had kept him going through the worst of his torment, though Feron had never held an illusions of her returning his feelings. He had betrayed her too often to hope for that, and he knew he didn't even deserve her friendship. Yet that had begun to change when she had shown up, Shepard and Thane in tow, to rescue him from the previous Shadow Broker. Actually, that was a lie. When Liara had first turned up with the commander, Feron had honestly thought he was hallucinating. Later, when he realised they were real, he had his hopes dashed when he saw the asari practically fall into the human's arms. It was only later, after he had relented to Shepard's request for a medical and he lay in the Med Bay of her ship, did he realise he had a slither of a chance with Liara.


Liara?

"Please get better. I need you."

Blinking, Feron came out of his impromptu Solipsism, only to find Liara's brilliant blue eyes focused on him. Her gaze was searching, but not unfriendly. Once again, he tried to placate the asari by insisting he was fine and without giving Liara to opportunity to refute his claim, Feron slipped past her and into the shuttle's small cockpit. He sighed heavily as he sat in the pilot's chair, hating lying to her yet again, but he didn't want to worry Liara... or have her think any less of him. In truth, Feron was terrified, though he was unsure why. Of course it was the first time, bar the Normandy, that he'd left the Shadow Broker's ship in over two years. However, after all his torment aboard, the sane reaction would be elation to get off the damn thing. Except, he wasn't and he hated how weak he was. It was the reason he had yet to confess his feelings to the woman he loved. She had been a strong, independent woman when he had first met her, now she was the damn Shadow Broker. She didn't need a broken man confessing his feelings for her, she needed someone strong and dependable at her side. 'Someone like Shepard'. Feron's hands shook as he took the controls, something he knew was not lost on Liara when she sat in the co-pilot's chair.
"Feron…" she began.

"Please, Liara. I'm fine," he insisted, setting the navigation point for Illium. "Where are we meeting them?"

"Hotel Azure," Liara replied.

The small, wistful smile that tugged at her lips made Feron's gut twist in dread.
Deception (Thane PoV)

He couldn't help but smile as he watched Shepard lean against the arm of the pilot's chair, her emerald eyes shining intently as Nos Astra's port came into view. Thane didn't fully understand why she was so delighted to be returning to Illium, but she seemed jubilant, which was enough to make him happy in return. Reluctantly, he shifted his attention from his Siha as a small, three fingered hand pressed against the middle of his back.

"After time adrift among open stars, along tides of light and through shoals of dust, I have returned to where I belong," the quarian stated quietly.

"Tali?" he questioned, perplexed by her poetic words.

"From what Shepard told me, this is where you two met," she explained. "It's evident the two of you belong together, but this is the start of your story."

The quarian gestured out of the window, somehow managing to point out the Dantius Towers as she did so. Thane chuckled at the romanticism of his young friend, charmed by her outlook on life.

"Indeed," he agreed, smiling.

"Just don't go hogging her all to yourself," Tali warned, hands on hips. "The rest of us want to spend some shore leave with her too."

His smile threatened to turn into a grin. Only one person aboard knew of his arrangement with Liara, lest someone slipped and told Shepard that one of her dearest friends would be awaiting their arrival. It was a surprise that ensured Thane could not keep her to himself, but it was one she deserved. One Thane expected Tali would also enjoy, as well as possibly Garrus and Joker.

"You have my word," he replied.

Thane tried to hide his amusement behind solemn words, though at that moment, Shepard turned and caught his eye. He met her emerald gaze, and schooled his features into a neutral mask. She raised an eyebrow at him, resting her weight onto one hip as she did. A smirk forming on her red painted lips.

"You're hiding something, Sere Krios," she accused.

"Shocking notion," stated the only person who knew of his plan. "Thane a valued and trusted member of the team. Your lover. Has nothing to gain from… deception."

He inclined his head in a nod of acknowledgement as Mordin joined them. "My thanks," he smiled.

"Now I know something's up, and you're in on it," Shepard said, levelling a faux scowl at the salarian.

Mordin held up his hands in a placating gesture. "Spent shore leave on Omega visiting old clinic. Transit time to Illium provided opportunity to educate Miss Chambers on Gilbert and Sullivan. No time to conspire against you."

"Siha, I have no secrets from you," Thane told her, calmly.
He clasped his hands behind his back, and silently prayed that Shepard would forgive him for that small lie.

Author's Note:
Dedicated to Lady Velvet C. Peterson, for her love of Mordin!
Touched (Feron PoV)

"Liara?!

Feron's head shot up at Commander Shepard's voice. For some reason the human sounded surprised, which made him frown, surely the commander knew they were coming. His frown turned into a wince, as he watched the pretty human wrap her arms around the woman he loved. Liara pulled Shepard closer, their bodies flush, and Feron couldn't help the ragged sigh that escaped him. They looked good together, he couldn't deny it. Both undeniably sexy, not afraid to be seen in the full glare of the hotel lights. Whilst he sat hunched in the shadows, trying not to draw attention to himself. He'd been fooling himself, he could see that now. In the weeks since his rescue, Liara touched him just a handful of times. Simple, slight gestures. Never something as meaningful or heartfelt as the embrace he was witnessing now.

As Feron watched, the two woman drew apart slightly, and he knew this would be the part that would shatter his hopes. They would kiss, then disappear to one of the hotel's luxury rooms. Cementing his knowledge that Liara was forever out of his league, confirming she'd never return his feelings, or touch him like she did the commander.

"Keelah! Liara!"

A quarian ran towards the two woman, wrapping her arms around both their waists. Feron was utterly confused, and cocked his head to the side as he watched. Shepard kissed the new comer on the top of her hood, before disentangling herself and allowing Liara and the quarian to properly hug. Then, there was a flanging laugh that the commander turned towards, and her face lit up by a beaming smile. The turian flared his mandibles out into an approximation of a grin, in reply. When he reached the three woman, he tugged Liara into a hug. There was a human male that limped behind the turian, and Liara linked arms with him as soon as he was close enough to reach.

"Did you know?" Shepard asked, still grinning.

The turian shook his head. "It's good to see you again, Liara.”

"And you, Garrus," the asari replied, smiling.

"Have you embraced eternity lately?" the human male asked, smirking.

"Joker!" Shepard admonished.

However, the commander was laughing as she tapped the brim of the man's cap over his eyes. Feron bristled. Wasn't it enough that he had lost the woman he loved to the great Commander Shepard? Why did he have to witness all this easy-going comradery? Why did the red haired human have to act so at ease with the interruptions, like her time with Liara wasn't precious? Out the corner of his eye, he noticed the sleek figure of Thane join the group. Feron quite liked the other drell, he'd been good company whilst he was recovering in the Normandy's Med Bay. But the way Liara giggled as Thane took her hand and bowed over it... Feron felt sick. He'd never been that suave, that sophisticated. He was a mess, first jealous of the commander, now of his friend. It was pathetic. However, when Liara thanked Thane for suggesting the meeting, a wave of anger swept through Feron. He felt betrayed. During their talks, he'd all but admitted his feelings for Liara to the other drell. To know Thane had a hand at ruining any chance he may have had... Shepard's shocked gasped derailed his train of thought.
"You knew!" she asked, green eyes wide. "You son of a…"

Feron felt like his brain had short circuited as he watch Thane capture Shepard's lips with his. It was a kiss that spoke of deep emotion and a lot a familiarity. He glanced at Liara, expecting her to be glowing blue with biotics, ready to throw the interloper away from her lover. But all Liara was doing was standing there, smiling! She looked... delighted. It was all kinds of messed up. Feron stood quickly, intending to just walk away from it all, before Thane's words halted his escape.

"Siha, forgive me," he said. "You have done so much for me, for all of us. The least I could do was surprise you with a visit from your sister."

Sister. That word rooted Feron to the spot, and spun around his brain like a space hamster in a zero-gravity wheel. Sister. Liara had never mentioned she had siblings before, but it explained why she had been so determined to rescue Shepard's body all those years ago. Though, it still didn't seem right, the ages and timings seemed wrong to him. The more Feron tried to work it out, the more confusing it became.

"Why didn't you tell me, you Bosh'tet!" the quarian demanded, hands on her hips.

"Because you also deserved the surprise," Thane replied, smoothly.

Feron would have wondered about his words, until he notice that the commander had begun to look around the foyer, obviously searching for someone. He supposed she was looking for the rest of her crew, until she inquired about his location. Feron blinked his double lids slowly, utterly surprised that Commander Shepard was looking for him. However, before Liara had even answered, the human's vivid eyes landed on him. The smile that lit up her face was almost as radiant as the one she had given the asari. She looked genuinely happy to see him, and it baffled him. Sure, Shepard had come to speak to him whilst he was aboard her ship, but Feron always figured the commander was just being nice. Now though, she gently slipped out of Thane's hold and walked towards him, practically grinning. With a quiet cough, Feron cleared his throat.

"Hello, commander," he greeted.

To Feron's surprise, Shepard wrapped her arms around him. For a heartbeat, he forgot how to breathe. Other than the few, fleeting touches Liara blessed him with, he hadn't been touched by another person without the intention to inflict pain on him, for over two years. Without thinking, Feron pulled her closer, revelling in her warmth and comfort. Once he realised his actions, he felt embarrassed and began to loosen his hold on the human. However, the commander evidently had different ideas, as she gently tightening her embrace. Feron found himself blinking back tears he didn't know he had wanted to shed. The realisation that she somehow understood, and didn't mind, floored him. He relaxed back into their shared moment, and closed his eyes.

"Thank you," he told her, quietly. "I can see why Thane calls you Siha."
Finding Liara waiting for them in the foyer of Hotel Azure had been a wonderful surprise, as had the realisation that between Thane and the asari, they had arranged for the whole crew to stay in the luxury hotel. It was a relief to see Feron looking better too, and it was almost a double celebration as the nineteen of them drank the night away at Eternity. Now, after abandoning the guys at the hotel's bar, the ladies of the Normandy plus the newly 'appointed' Shadow Broker, sat on the luxuriously squishy bed of Liara's suit. All ten were in various states of inebriation, Tali was so far gone that she'd decided it was a great idea to open a comm. link with EDI, so the AI could 'learn about girl talk'… It came as no surprise that both Jack and Kasumi had brought more alcohol, and as the drink continued to flow, their conversation turned decidedly more gossipy. There was speculation about Gabby's relationship with Ken, and attempts to pry information from Miranda about her previous affair with Jacob. There was of course, particular scrutiny regarding Shepard's relationship with Thane, and Liara's budding romance with Feron.

"So, Sh…Shep…Shepard, and Liiiiiiiiara…" Tali slurred. "Was Fornax telling the truth about drell penises?"

The quarian's glowing eyes had narrowed into thin slits, as she regarded both Shepard and Liara in turn, whilst she leant against the headboard. Refusing to rise her drunken friend's bait, or to admit that the article had certainly been right, Shepard merely bit her bottom lip in the hopes of controlling the smile that threatened to spread across her face. Unfortunately, Liara flushed indigo and fell right into the trap.

"Goddess! Tali!" the asari giggled. "You can't ask something like that."

"Why the hell not, Blue?" Jack grinned. "We all know boss lady here is boning the assassin. Bet you're bracing eternity with skittles too."

"Skittles?" Liara asked.

Shepard struggled to swallow her mouthful of bourbon, the usually smooth drink doing it's damnedest to choke her. After a few seconds of regaining her breath, she noticed Liara giving her a questioning look, but all that served to do was send Shepard into a wave of giggles.

There was a polite cough, before Miranda began to explain: "Skittles are brightly coloured sweets from Earth. I'm guessing because of Feron's multi-coloured scales…"

The Cerberus operative trailed off, her eyes widening in realisation, and glanced at Jack in a rare show of comradery. The biotic's answering bark of laughter, made harsh and rough by the copious amounts she had drank, reverberated around the plush room.

"Fucking hell, about time!" Jack goaded. "So Blue, can you taste the rainbow?"

"Jack!" Gabby exclaimed.

The engineer stared, opened mouthed, at the tattooed woman for a split second, before succumbing to a wave of hysterics. Her laughter was soon joined by Kelly's, and the two women fell against each other, tears running down their faces as they tried, and failed, to regain their composure.
"What does that..." Liara began to ask, innocently.

"Don't ask!" Shepard interrupted, her tipsiness causing her to nearly shout. "Just... don't ask, Liara. For the love of all that is holy, don't ask."

Liara stared at her in shock, but began to slowly nod, as if agreeing that it was best to stay ignorant. However, Tali was far from satisfied with the answer. Even as she tried, and failed, to fit her straw into the opening of her mask. It took more will power than Shepard would like to admit, to try not to laugh at the younger woman's inebriated state. Though she took pity on her bemused friend, and leant over, holding the straw still whilst Tali aligned it with the opening.

"Bosh'tet emergency induction port, needs more calibrations... and c-ome on, Shhhepard, what does shhhe mean?" the quarian begged.

"Tali, it's a straw," Shepard told her, gently.


"I believe Jack is referring to Feron's taste, after his climax from oral sex," Samara stated, serene as ever.

"I would agree, that is the most logical assumption," EDI's pleasant voice intoned over the comm. link.

"I have to admit, I have often wonder the differences myself. Whether the different composites of amino acids would equate a different taste," Karin Chakwas stated, swirling the Serrice Ice Brandy nonchalantly around her glass as she spoke.

"They do," Kelly admitted.

'Should have seen that one coming' Shepard thought. No one else seemed particularly surprised at the Yeoman's admission of first-hand knowledge either.

"Kinky bitch," Jack chuckled.

"You know, before I came on board the Normandy, it was years since I had a close group of girls to hand out with," Kasumi chirped.

"Hell, before I met you all, I never had a group of women to do this with," Shepard admitted, settling to lean against Liara.

"So, before us, you were a by-the-book marine?" Kelly asked.

Shepard laughed, shaking her head. "You evidently haven't read my file pre-alliance. But I meant more that I didn't get the opportunity as a kid, and as a marine, well... apart from the make up and being able to walk in heels, I was always 'one of the guys'.

"Well Shep," Kasumi grinned. "One thing my old group of friends used to do was something called 'question time', each girl gets to ask another a question, of any nature, and it must be answered."

A mischievous gleam had entered came the thief's almost hidden eyes, something that never boded well. Shepard raised her eyebrow at her Japanese friend, a smirk pulling at the corner of her mouth.
She had a feeling she might somehow end up regretting this.

"Alright, Miss Goto, I'll bite. Hit me with your best shot."

Kasumi didn't even pause to think. "Okay, most embarrassing sex dream?" she laughed.

The alcohol Shepard had already consumed had sent a warm buzz through her body, not enough that she was drunk, but certainly enough not to be embarrassed by the topic of conversation. She knocked back the rest of her bourbon, hoping the coming admission would never leave the room.

"Erm, okay… Well, I recently had one about Garrus," she replied, calmly.

"SHEPARD!" Liara and Tali shouted in unison, almost deafening her.

"Fuck! Does tall, green and scaly know about your smutty fantasies?" Jack leered.

"No, no… not like that," Shepard laughed, waving her hands frantically, as if she could dispel the other women's thoughts with the gesture. "No, I dreamt I went to see him in the Main Battery, and when I got there, he was… um…" She paused, taking a breath, before practically spitting out the next five words as fast as she could. "Talking dirty to the Thanix."

She bit her bottom lip, trying to control her smirk as raucous laughter erupted from the other women.

"Oh my god, I can see it now," Gabby huffed out, between laughs. "Yeah baby, you know I'm the only one who can calibrate you right."

"How about: 'I have my sights on you, and I'm ready to pop my heat sink'?" Miranda asked, deadpan.

"I wish I were a derivative so I could lie tangent to your curves," EDI stated.

There was completely stunned silence for a whole minute, before the giggles started again. They quickly turned into all out hysterics, and it was several minutes before the laughter began to die down. They were all left breathless and teary eyed. The human's cheeks flushed pink, the asari's flushed indigo, and the purple mask of Tali's envirosuit seemed to have fogged up slightly.

"Actually his line was 'I could iterate over you all night long' but, yeah…" Shepard admitted, after she had finally composed herself enough to talk.

At that point, Tali laughed so hard that she promptly fell off the bed. As Shepard leant over the side to see if her friend was alright, a wheezing sound came over a voice modulator.

"Oh, Keelah!"
Liara sat blushing, her cheeks a deep indigo. She had been sure that only Shepard and Tali knew of her feelings for Feron, she hadn't even admitted to the drell how she felt about him. Though it seemed the heavily tattooed woman; Jack, had realised it quickly enough. When the ten of them had piled onto her hotel bed, Liara had no idea then night would turn out like it was. Not that she was really complaining, or even at all. She'd also never had the opportunity to simply 'hang out' like this, other than her time on the SR1. Even embarrassed, Liara was actually enjoying herself, there was something special about bonding with other women like this. Frivolous, drunk and giggly. However, Liara was still pretty sure she owed the commander for deflecting the conversation away from her and Feron.

"Samara, any unexpected liaisons?" Shepard asked, grinning.

"Aria T'Loak," the Justicar stated calmly.

"Holy shit," Jack muttered, sounding almost awed.

"Really?" Liara asked, snapping her eyes to the older asari. "The Aria T'Loak? I thought your code would have prevented that."

"It was many cycles ago, in my maiden days," Samara explained. "She was just a dancer in Afterlife then, I was a member of the newly formed Eclipse Sisterhood at the time. It was a tumultuous affair that lasted a mere handful of decades, nothing serious."

Liara nodded in understanding. It was an incredibly short romance by asari standards, though it seemed the human's thought of it differently.

Gabby, one of Shepard's engineers, gasped in surprise. "Decades, that's… that's quite a long time."

"For a human, yes, but not for an asari. Think of it more in terms of your human months," Liara supplied.

Kelly nodded, a look of serious concentration crossing her face. "That makes a lot of sense with your life expectancy."

"Indeed," Samara agreed, before turning her attention to Doctor Chakwas. "Karin, may I ask if you have had a similarly unexpected partner?"

The doctor laughed. "It's not quite a partner, but I did have one extremely regrettable blind date."

There was a chuckle from Miranda. "You surprise me, doctor."

"Shut it, cheerleader, let the doc talk," Jack sneered.

Liara bit back a smile. She was not a fan of Miranda either, ever since the operative refused to help with rescuing Feron, but she was starting to like Jack. However, Liara was still thankful when Kasumi handed the two women a new drink each, tactfully distracting them. The last thing Shepard needed was to be breaking up a biotic fight, even if Liara was sure she and Samara could help keep the peace in that respect.
"Well, it's going back fifteen years," Chakwas began. "I was stationed aboard the SSV Fuji, we were docked at the Citadel for refuelling, and one of the engineers decided to step me up on a blind date with a 'charismatic politician who was rising in the ranks', as she called him."

Shepard paused in her action, glass raised half way to her lips, and raised an eyebrow. " Spirits, don't tell me, it was…"

"Yes," Chakwas laughed. "None other than Donnell Udina,"

Shepard cupped her face in the palm of her hand, groaning. "Scarred. Scarred for life."

"Aaaaaaand?" Tali slurred.

"And nothing. Well, not with Udina. The horrible little weasel," the doctor replied.

Liara smiled at the description. She wasn't really sure what a weasel was, and made a mental note to look it up later, but it seemed like a good word to describe the human ambassador.

"Ooo, now we're talking," Kasumi quipped, her eyes glinted beneath her hood.

Chakwas chuckled but shook her head. "It was an utterly terrible date, if you could even call it that. We met for drinks at an overly expensive bar on the Presidium, and he spent the entire evening talking about his plans for politic power. After an hour, I was seriously contemplating ways to knock the weasel unconscious. That was until a very strapping, young C-Sec officer approached where we sat are the bar."

"This sounds interesting," Miranda grinned.

"Definitely," Liara readily agreed, leading forward. "What was he like?"

"Oh, he was very pleasing on the eye," Chakwas admitted. "Broad shoulders, chiselled jaw, cropped blonde hair and the most amazing blue eyes." The doctor closed her eyes momentarily, smiling contently at the memory. "He must have seen how bored I was," the doctor continued. "Because without a moment's hesitation he was telling me how sorry he was that his shift had over run. He helped me down from my bar stool, placed my hand in the crook of his arm, and promised to take me to a 'wonderful little restaurant' that had just opened in one of the nearby wards, as a way of apology."

"How romantic," Kelly gushed, a dreamy look on her face.

"Did Udina say anything?" Miranda asked.

Shepard laughed. "Most likely: 'This is an Outrage!'".

She punctuated her impression by slapping the bed hard, which caused Tali to bounce slightly. Liara couldn't help her outright laugh. It was a scarily accurate imitation.
She couldn't help but grin. It was a damn good impression of the horrible maggot, even if she did say so herself. Liara and Tali certainly seemed to appreciate it, if their fits of giggles was any indication, and the good doctor was smiling broadly. It was certainly safe to say that there was no love lost between the crew of the Normandy, and the human ambassador. Shepard was so thankful that that council had shown some common sense, for once, and asked for her opinion on who to make the first human councillor. And in her opinion, Anderson was doing an excellent job.

"Actually, you're not far wrong," Chakwas admitted, smiling. "However, Armando just turned to him, saying 'I'm sorry sir, but you seemed to have accosted my date, I'm sure yours won't be too late' and then led me out the bar without a backward glance."

"Hang on, Armando?" Shepard asked, trying to figure out why she knew that name. "Not, Armando Bailey by any chance?"

"Why yes, I believe it was. Why, commander?" the doctor replied.

Shepard grinned at the older woman. "Hell doc, I see him every time I go the Citadel. He's captain of the Zakera Ward precinct now."

"It is a small galaxy," Samara smiled.

"Cut the crap," Jack interjected, practically bouncing on the bed. "What happened with C-Sec? Any handcuffs?"

"No. No handcuffs," Chakwas chuckled. "He did take me to dinner, which really was wonderful, followed by a night cap back at his apartment."

Shepard couldn't help but giggle when Tali literally squealed in delight. It was an extremely strange sound, as it distorted through the quarian's voice modulator. Though it was still ridiculously cute.

"Keelah! You go doctor," Tali laughed. "So, Shhhepard, is this Bailey still good looking?"

The quarian loll'd her head against her shoulder as she spoke, and Shepard rested her cheek on top of Tali's hood in return. A few moments passed as she considered her friend's question. The C-Sec captain was pretty nice, in a ruffed sort of way, and Shepard admitted as much. Promising to introduce Tali the next time they docked at the Citadel.

Jack snorted. "Not like we can take your word for it."

"And why not?" Liara asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Because she's fucking a lizard, is why not," Jack retorted.

Shepard snapped back to sitting upright, barely avoiding knocking Tali off the bed, her mind warring with itself over whether to be outraged by biotic's slur or just brush it off as Jack being well... Jack. But before she could make up her mind though, Kelly was already speaking.

"Jack!" the yeoman admonished. "The drell are a beautiful and fascinating race. Thane, in particular,
is a very attractive and interesting representation of his species."

"Quit the insightful crap," Jack snarled. "We all know you're jealous the boss lady beat you to him."

Kelly pouted. "Only a little."

Shepard raised an eyebrow, before responding with a half-heartedly thrown pillow of retaliation. The yeoman merely grinned in reply.

"Don't worry Shep," Kasumi chirped. "We all know Thane's really into you. His eyes go all a flutter whenever he talks about you."

Shepard wasn't sure how to respond, and, not for the first time, she was thankful she was not the type of woman who blushed. To her relief, it seemed Chakwas sensed her floundering.

"Now, I believe it is my turn to ask a question," the doctor said. "Tali, any embarrassing crushes you wish to share?"

At that, Kasumi reached over to top up the quarian's glass, presumably to supply some liquid incentive. Shepard couldn't help but smile, as Tali mumbled something too low for their translators to pick up.

"I'm sorry Tali, but I didn't catch that," Liara informed, in a tone slightly too sweet to be completely sincere.

The quarian muttered something, slightly louder, but still too quiet to hear.

"No, still didn't get that," Miranda said, evidently trying to hold back a smile.

A third time, Tali spoke, but still inaudible to the other women.

"For the love of god, spit it out woman!" Gabby goaded her fellow engineer.

"Wrex!" Tali finally shouted. "Keelah! I used to have a crush on Wrex!"

The admission was accompanied by wildly gesticulating hand movements, that sloshed the newly replenished turian brandy out of her glass. *That was totally unexpected* Shepard exchanged a brief look with Liara, before they promptly fell into each other laughing.

"If anyone from the old days, I'd have guessed Adams, never Wrex," Shepard finally managed to say, between heaving breathes.

"Goddess, Tali. You certainly make it hard on yourself," Liara giggled.

"Bosh'tets," Tali grumbled.

Chakwas reached over and patted the quarian reassuringly on the hand, and Shepard felt a small pang of guilt that she was finding the idea so funny.

"Who's Wrex?" Kasumi asked.

"He was our resident krogan back on the SR1," Shepard explained.

Tali cough, embarrassed. "EDI," she called into the comm. link, trying to deflect attention from herself. "If you could, which of the guys on board would you choose?"

There was a tangible pause of silence before the AI answered. "Legion would be the most logical choice, given that we are both synthetic. However, I would choose all of them. I enjoy the sight of organics on their knees."

'I'm never going to get that image out of my head' Shepard realised, before she was overcome by a fit of uncontrollable giggles, and the room was filled with clamorous laughter.

Author's Notes
Dedicated to Lady Velvet C. Peterson & Church-Caboose-Shepard.
After indulging in another drink with the rest of the male crew, Thane subtly motioned for Feron to follow him. He sensed the other drell was ill at ease, as well as witnessing his reaction when Shepard had hugged him early. It was evident he was a long way from recovery, and Thane wanted to help however he could. Getting Feron away from the increasingly drunk Grunt and Zaeed seemed the most logical first step. Once outside the hotel, Thane lead the other drell to a quiet park he had frequented during the two years he had lived in Nos Astra. It was always peaceful, and the high shrubs and bubbling fountains gave a sense of seclusion and peace. For a time, the pair sat on one of the stone benches in companionable silence, as Thane waited patiently for the other man to feel ready to speak.

"So, you and Shepard?" Feron finally asked.

Thane smiled. "Indeed."

"How long?"

"Shortly after the assault on the Shadow Broker's base. Though the feelings were there long before," he answered honestly.

Feron nodded. "I get that." There was a momentary pause. "Earlier, you referred to Liara as Shepard's sister."

"I did," Thane agreed.

Patiently, he waited for the other drell to steer the conversation. Another long pause of silence stretched out between them, before Feron turned his head to look at him directly, the first time since they had entered the quiet park.

"Are they?"

"They regard themselves as such," he replied.

"So… She giggles, wrapping her arms around the human's waist. She begins to tremble, the other woman pulls her closer before looking over her shoulder. I understand the look, the silent request for privacy. My shoulder's sag as I agree. I know I have lost her, how can I compete with Commander Shepard? That wasn't…"

Feron trailed off and went back to staring into the middle distance. Thane smiled in understanding. He was never one for sharing thoughts and memories unnecessarily, but felt this particular one would help the other man... at least in this regard.

"Her excitement is radiant. She rises on her toes, almost childlike. 'We're going to get the light of my life.' I am confused. Who is this that could cause the commander so much joy? My heart aches, I have lost my warrior angel even before I can confess my growing feelings." Thane broke from his solipsism to find Feron looking him thoughtfully. "We were heading to recruit Tali. Siha regards her crew as family, and treats them as such."

"Siha? That is a fitting title for Shepard," Feron smiled.
"It would also suit Liara, would it not?" Thane gently pressed.

There was a sigh from the other drell. "Another reason why I have nothing to offer her."

"The most desired gift of love is not diamonds or roses or chocolate. It is focused attention," Thane quoted.

Feron regarded him sceptically. "Do you really believe that?"

"There is no reason why my Siha chose me worthy of her attention. I know I am not deserving, but I thank the gods daily for their blessing," he replied honesty. "Love has no reason, and it is love, not reason, that is stronger than death."

"In other words, I should just tell Liara how I feel?" Feron asked.

"I cannot tell you want to do, but there is no dishonour in honesty," Thane stated. "Though if you want my advice, have courage. It may not be as hopeless as you fear."

In truth, from what he had witnessed of Feron and Liara together, from the Shadow Broker base up until tonight, Thane was sure the asari return the affection. He had also overheard Tali's teasing and Shepard's more subtle encouragement, whilst they had been at Eternity, which he took to be a good sign. Thane had grown fond of the other drell, and if anyone deserved a shot at happiness, it was him.

"Thanks, you may be right," Feron relented. "Now, if you have any wisdom on how I can stop the memories of the past two years overwhelming me..."

Thane lay a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I know no wisdom, though I can teach you some meditation practises that would perhaps help."

Feron regarded him for a moment before nodding. "Alright," he sighed. "It's not like I have anything to lose."

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Author's Note

"The most desired gift of love is not diamonds or roses or chocolate. It is focused attention" is a Richard Warren quote, and "It is love, not reason, that is stronger than death" is a Thomas Mann quote.
It had taken less time than expected, seventy two hours on Omega and a further week docked in Nos Astra, to get the Normandy SR2 back on it's feet... so to speak. In that time Shepard had busied herself with celebrating with her crew and catching up with old friends, namely Liara. That had somehow turned into plans for a couples holiday with the asari and Feron, since they had finally gotten together. The week on Illium had even included Shepard being dragged shopping, and as much as she had protested at the time, she was now thankful for Jack playing dress up using her as a human doll. Even if it was one of the surrealist experiences Shepard could remember, which was really saying something. Who would have thought that a woman who had spent the first part of the mission wearing cargo pants and nothing but two belts strapped across her chest, would have such good taste in clothing. But the evidence spoke for itself in the guise of form fitting back jeans, silver tank top and cropped faux leather jacket that Shepard wore. The ensemble was partnered with her trusty combat boots, 'to give it a laid back appeal' according to Jack, and the silver necklace she had worn to Hock's party, 'to give it a bit of extra class' according to Kasumi. Now though, Shepard paced the airlock. She felt stupid doing so but she couldn't help it, she was nervous, much to her disdain. Give her a band of mercenaries, no problem. A horde of husks, piece of cake. A charge against the collectors, child's play. Even a rumble with a reaper was a walk in the park compared to this. After all she had faced, which included a tango with the Grim Reaper himself, Commander Shepard was nervous about dinner with her lover's son. It would have been laughable, except for the pneumatic drill that had replaced her heart and was pounding against her rib cage.

"Approaching the Citadel now, commander," Joker called to her over the comm. system. "Say 'hi' to Anderson for me when you see him. Oh, and try not to punch your date's son, it's very bad form I've been told."

"Thanks for the advice. I planned on toning down the vengeful vanguard act for the afternoon," she retorted.

"Good idea, though sassy sentinel is apparently quite 'in' at the moment," Joker teased.

"Sassy? I'll remember that," Shepard laughed despite herself.

There was a low chuckle from behind her, and turning she was greeted by the very welcome sight of Thane, dressed in his customary black leathers. A smile was tugging at the corner of his mouth, and Shepard was hard pressed to grab him for a kiss.

"Don't even start," she warned, deadpan.

"You look beautiful, Siha," Thane said, apparently ignoring her comment. "Kolyat will meet us at the Zakera Café. He informed me they have opened a new seating area since our last visit to the Citadel."

Shepard nodded in response, absent-mindedly biting her bottom lip. 'Please let this go okay' she prayed to any deity who might be listening.

As promised, Kolyat was waiting for them outside the café. Shepard was torn between being relieved he had turned up, and nervous as hell. The gentle butterflies she had felt, had now been
replaced by rampaging krogan in her stomach. She gave Thane's hand a squeeze, unsure if it was to reassure herself or him, before plastering on the most convincing smile she could manage.

"Kolyat," Thane greeted his son.

"Father. Commander," Kolyat replied.

"Please, just Shepard," she told him.

The younger drell regarded her with an undecipherable look for a moment, before nodding.

"Alright," he agreed, leading them inside. "I booked us a table, since it gets busy this time of day."

"By the spirits, Commander Shepard!" exclaimed a flanging voice.

Shepard winced. 'Just once, can I not have a quiet outing?' She turned in the direction of the voice, preparing herself to meet a fan... or worse, a reporter, though sighed in relief when she caught sight of the turian chef she had befriended many months ago. She grinned at him, and clasped his hand in easy comradery.

"Amulius! Long time my friend, how have you been?"

"Really? Do you know everyone on the Citadel?" Kolyat asked, dryly.

"Only the important ones," she winked.

Kolyat gave an amused snort, Thane smiled and Amuluis' mandibles spread in a wide turian grin.

"You honour me," the chef told her. "But what can I do for you?"

"We have a table booked," Thane explained.

"Under Krios," Kolyat added.

Amulius looked between Shepard and Thane, before shaking his head. "Oh, commander... You'll break Etarn's heart."

The chef ushered them to a table that was in very conspicuous view of the large window. Shepard rolled her eyes, causing Amulius to twitch his mandibles into a turian version of a smirk. She narrowed her eyes in a mock scowl at the chef.

"Etarn, are you sure? Because, the way I remember it, it was lust at first discussion of sniper scopes between him and Vakarian."

Amulius laughed, deep and rich. "You may be right. However, there will be a lot of disappointed turians now, commander."

With a friendly pat of her shoulder, he left them to greet other customers.

"It looks like you have competition, father," Kolyat stated. "I presume he meant Etarn Tiron from Rodam Expeditions."

Shepard nodded in reply, her sharp eyes catching the subtle quirk of the young drell's mouth.
"A very well respected and well liked shop keeper," he continued, almost innocently.

Shepard laughed when she caught the fleeting look of suspicion... or perhaps concern, in her lover's eye. Thane gave her a questioning look, and Shepard his hand as reassurance.

"His sales pitch is something else," she covered.

Kolyat grinned. "Did he get you with the nathak?"

"No, the shatha," she admitted, chuckling.

The younger drell gave an exaggerated groan in response, that had Shepard laughing fully. Subtly, Thane squeezed her knee under the table before smiling at the pair. Things were looking promising, until a familiar cream suit caught Shepard's attention out the corner of her eye. Her smile faltered. She forced a steadying breath, using the calming techniques Thane had taught her, before steeling herself for the unwanted interaction. And despite the imminent meeting with humanity's ambassador, she made a point of remaining seated.

"Shepard," Udina grit through his teeth.

"Udina," she replied, her tone only slightly more civil."I'm surprised to see you so far from the Presidium."

"Anderson sent me," he replied, disdain evident. "And what are you doing..." Udina's words trailed off as he noticed her companions. "Drell!" he practically spat. "You're having lunch with drell?!"

Anger surged through Shepard, and it took all her self-control to slowly stand up, rather sucker punch the slimy weasel in the stomach. It took more effort to control her shaking hands, that were trembling with the pent up rage, than she would like to admit. Eventually opting to clasp them behind her back, her nails digging into her palms.

"No," she told him. "I am having lunch with my partner and his son."

"You're... what!?" Udina snarled.

"My partner, and his son," she repeated, slowly.

"You're the first human spectre, do you have any idea the implications of..."

"Of what, exactly?" she interrupted, fighting to keep her voice calm. "That I am dating a compassionate and fearless man who willing risked his life for the good of the galaxy? Or that we are enjoying the company of his son, who is a respected member of C-Sec? Because, quite frankly, I consider it a privilege to know them. Now, as I'm sure you can appreciate, I am a very busy woman and I have a more pressing engagement."

With that, Shepard sat back down in her seat, and turned her attention to the two drell who sat stoically regarding her. There was a steady stomp of feet, and once she was sure Udina was far enough away, she let out an exasperated sigh. Thane raised a brow ridge at her.

"I didn't hit him," she defended.
"Indeed, Siha," Thane replied, dryly.

Kolyat laughed. "I can see the ambassador's a fan of yours, Shepard," he teased. "But hey, a respected member of C-Sec and a privilege to know, I could start to like you."


"Hardly, but throw in some hand to hand training and we'll see," he replied.

"Hand to hand?" she asked, confused.

The young drell rubbed his jaw. "You have a hell of a punch. I figured I could learn something from the great Commander Shepard," he goaded.

She face-palmed, only partially for dramatic effect. "I'm never going to live that down am I?"

"It would be impossible for us to forget, Siha," Thane teased.

"Damn drell and endemic memory," she grumbled, a smile belying her words even as she spoke. "Fine... You win. If you wish to be knocked on your ass, who am I to argue."

"A word of advice," Thane said, conspiratorially. "She favours her right leg when preparing to attack, a well-timed kick will knock her off balance."

"Just wait your turn, Sere Krios," she warned. "There will come a time he challenges you to hand to hand, and I will give him all your inside secrets."

Before either drell could reply, a pretty young asari approached their table, asking for their order. Shepard glanced guilty at the untouched menus on the table, before looking up at Kolyat. She hadn't been since the refurbishment, and didn't have the slightest idea what to order. Since the younger drell has suggested the café, Shepard stated she would trust his judgement, and Thane nodded his agreement.

“I suppose three chef's specials, and three spiced teas then," Kolyat told the waitress.

"Very diplomatic," Shepard smiled, once the asari had walked away.

Kolyat shrugged, grinning. "Not all situations can be resolved by punching things, Shepard."

She gave an exasperated but good natured groan. "Damn the creator that gave your race perfect memories."

Her grumble was merely replied to with chuckles from her two companions.

Author's Note
Nathaks and shathas are animals listed on the Mass Effect Wiki, in case anyone was wondering.
A Chance Meeting (Kolyat PoV)

When arranging to meet his father and Shepard for lunch, Kolyat wasn't sure what to expect. He'd been apprehensive. Sure, things were improving with his father, and he'd shared a civil conversation with the commander via email, but that hadn't really prepared him. Thankfully the meal had gone well, and he'd found it easy to talk to them both, even enjoying their company. Though, as the trio departed the café, Kolyat began to have a sinking feeling.

"How long are you staying on the Citadel?" he asked.

"I am unsure," his father replied.

The older drell was unable to look him in the eye, and Kolyat's gut twisted with a sudden wave of nausea. Even though he was now an adult, and he'd come to understand the work his father was doing, the motherless child in him still felt like it was being abandoned. Rationally, he knew it wasn't true, so he tried to push the feeling away. Shepard caught his eye and gave him a warm smile, it was strangely comforting.

"We are on our way to the council to clear some shore leave, Thane can contact you as soon as we know," she explained.

"I understand," he nodded.

Kolyat would never admit to it, but he'd done some research on human customs, and held out his hand for her to shake. Without hesitation, Shepard shook it, and he marvelled at how warm she was. Then, to Kolyat's immense surprise, Shepard kissed him on the cheek.

"We will let you know by tonight," she promised.

Comforted by her words, he turned to his father. After a brief pause, he gave the older drell a brief hug. "Speak to you later then."

"Of course," his father smiled.

There was a shrill ping, and on apparent instinct, both Kolyat and Shepard flipped open their Omni-Tools. There was a relieved sigh from the commander, and his father chuckled. However, he wasn't so lucky.

All nearby personnel required at Dark Star. Drunken krogan brawl.
Bailey.

"Well, I need to get back to work," Kolyat explained, closing the message. "Good luck with the council."

Shepard laughed. "Thanks. For once, I think it will be fine."

Unsure what she meant, Kolyat smiled politely and took his leave. Stopping briefly as he waited for the elevator, he turn back in their direction. The sight of the commander and his father holding hands was a surprisingly reassuring sight, and Kolyat returned Shepard's wave, before entering the lift. The enclosed space was packed tight, as it often was at this time of day. He found himself in the
uncomfortable position of being squashed between the metal wall, and a hulking krogan in full armour. It only got worse as more people crammed behind him, and Kolyat was winded slightly as someone bumped into him. He was about to complain, when he realised it was a very pretty human female that stood facing him.

"I'm sorry," she apologised, smiling sweetly.

For a moment, Kolyat was lost in the beauty of her warm brown eyes. Until a salarian bumped into her, pushing her flush against his body. On reflex, he wrapped his arms around her, and turned so she would be shielded from most of the jostling.

"Are you okay, miss…?" he asked.

"Oriana. Oriana Lawson," she replied, her smile widening. "And you are?"

"Kolyat Krios," he told her.

Cursing the slip, he hoped the noise from the other occupants of the elevator had muffled his answer to anyone else who may have been listening. He'd promised his father that he'd go by an alias, something Bailey had also agreed on, but something about the woman in front of him made Kolyat want to tell her the truth. As the elevator came to a halt, he ushered Oriana out in front of him, keeping a protective arm around her shoulder. They stop as soon as they were a decent distant from the surging crowds, and Kolyat was debating asking for her contact details. Right up until Sirius Virilin came barrelling up the stairs.

"Come on kid. The captain said it was getting nasty," the turian said, as he ran past.

Never one to argue with his C-Sec partner... much, Kolyat merely offered a formal bow to Oriana before running after Sirius. He hoped he would have a chance to track down the pretty human another time.
As the doors of the elevator slid closed, Thane let out a contented sigh of relief, and he felt a light squeeze to his hand. He turned to the beautiful woman beside him, taking in her cropped red hair and emerald eyes that crinkled with her smile. Suddenly, she laughed, clear and enchanting, whilst she wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him in to an impromptu embrace.

"Well, that went better than expected," Shepard beamed.

"Indeed, Siha," Thane smiled.

He tightened his hold on her as the elevator slowly ascended up the Presidium Tower, and during the slow climb, his mind replayed the previous two hours. Lunch with Kolyat had gone surprisingly well, and Thane was sure it was thanks, in no small part, to Shepard. His Siha's relaxed nature and her ability to draw his son into playful banter or coax stories about his role in C-Sec, had helped no end. For a large part of the meal, Thane had sat in silence, simply enjoying the company of both his lover and his son. He enjoyed watching their easy interactions, hearing them both laugh. However, it was their departure that his mind fixated on.

We depart the café, preparing to take our leave. Kolyat turns to me.

"How long are you staying on the Citadel?" he asks.

I am unsure, and tell him so, unable to look him in the eye. I worry he will think I am abandoning him again. Siha smiles in understanding.

"We are on our way to the council to clear some shore leave, Thane can contact you as soon as we know," she tells him.

Kolyat nods. "I understand," he replies, holding out his hand for her to shake.

She takes it, but surprises him with a kiss on the cheek. "We will let you know by tonight," she promises. I cannot help but smile at the exchange. My Siha, so friendly and reassuring. My son, far more accepting than I dared hope.

To my surprise, Kolyat embraces me, briefly. "Speak to you later then," he tells me.

"Of course," I reply. My Siha's porcelain hand entwines with mine, as we watch Kolyat walk away.

"Come on, Anderson won't let me live it down if I'm late," she tells me, pulling me towards the rapid transit terminal.

The ping of the elevator brought him from his Solipsism.

"So, are you ready to meet the only man I've ever considered a father?" Shepard asked, smiling.

A twist of uncharacteristic nerves coiled around Thane's gut, and he sent a silent prayer to Arashu that the meeting would go well. He had given the same prayer when he had faced meeting Irikah's parents. Despite all that had happened in his life, the additional knowledge and experience he now had, Thane still felt apprehensive. He wanted to make a good impression on the man his Siha held in
such fond regard and high esteem. The concern must have shown on his face, because Shepard pressed her lips to his in a tender kiss.

"It will be fine," she smiled. "He'll like you, if that's what you are worried about."

She held his hand as they walked through the pristine white corridors of the Citadel tower, and Thane was humbled that his Siha would showcase their relationship so publicly, especially in such an important place. He allowed himself a small smile.

"Forgive me my foolishness, that should be confined to youth. But I cannot help but wish to make a good impression on the man who means so much to you," he told her.

She paused, mid stride and turned to look at him. "Thane," she almost whispered.

Her emerald eyes shone momentarily with unshed tears, and he had worried his words had caused unintentional hurt. She blinked, before a radiant smile graced her red painted lips.

"Sere Krios, you've always been a smooth talker, but that's possibly the sweetest thing you've ever said," she laughed.

Smiling, Thane brought her hand to his lips and kissed the backs of her warm fingers.

"Come on," she told him. "You'll turn me into a puddle of swooning female hormones if you keep this up, and I refuse to be late."

He gave a small bow, her hand still clasped in his. "As you wish, Siha."

Nearing the human councillor's office, raised voices could be heard. "It is an outrage!" a voice shouted, loud enough to be heard through the door. Thane recognised it as belonging to the human ambassador; Udina. Evidently Shepard recognised it to, for she began to mutter under her breath. Her words set Thane's translator bleeping furiously, struggling to keep up with the commander's string of expletives. She was rather creative with curses when she was angry. Without hesitation, his fiery warrior angel hit the door's control panel and walked into the office. As usual, Shepard was confident and determined, and pulled him gently with her.

As they entered, a rich but firm voice was answering the ambassador: "Shepard's personal life is no concern of yours, nor is it a concern for my role as a councillor."

Shepard squeezed Thane's hand, before letting it go. She threw him a quick wink and he once again raised a brow ridge at her, this time in question. He couldn't help wondering what his Siha had in mind, having long since learnt to recognise when she was in a devilish mood.

"Councillor, it's good to see you still don't take kindly to idol gossip," she called out in greeting.

"Spectre, it is good to see you. I read your reports, very impressive work. On behalf on the council, I thank you for your hard work, and welcome you back to the Citadel," the councillor replied, reaching out to shake her hand.

"Thank you, from myself and my crew," she replied, clasping his hand. Her face unreadable and tone professional. "I have brought along Sere Krios, an invaluable member of my team."

Upon this unexpected introduction, Thane stepped forward and offered the human councillor a
formal bow. The man nodded his head in return.

"Officer Vakarian sends his sincere apologise, but he had a pressing conference call with Palaven to attend," Shepard added.

"I'm sure there will be time for a debrief, with Vakarian another time. Despite him not completing his Spectre training, he is a fine asset, and I am pleased that you have him back on your team, commander."

The councillor seemed to remember the other man in the room, though Thane had the inclination that this was a rehearsed game between the councillor and Shepard.

"Udina, you are dismissed. Hold my calls, unless high priority, until further notice. I have much to discuss with the commander and her team mate."

"Certainly, councillor," Udina practically spat.

The moment the ambassador was out of the room, and the door's lock glowing read, the councillor broke into a wide grin. There was a crackle of static as the man tapped on his Omni-Tool, and Thane hazard a guess that he had just short circuited any bugs that had been in the room.

"Thank the gods, Shepard. I was worried about you child," the councillor said, his voice full of warmth and emotion.

Thane watched as the councillor pulled the commander into a tight embrace, and took a moment to take stock of the other man. His warm, earth toned skin contrasted quite starkly with Shepard's porcelain complexion. His face was weather worn and wrinkled, showing his active military service before his position on the council. His coffee coloured eyes revealed the strength and compassion of the man, and Thane understood how he had become councillor.

'A good man'

"I missed you, Dad," Shepard replied, smiling.

She hugged the councillor tighter before stepping back, towards Thane. His Siha reached a hand out to him, silently asking him to come closer, which he readily obliged.

"Thane, I'd like to introduce you to David Anderson, humanity's first councillor. The best CO a soldier could wish for, and the greatest father an unruly orphan could ever hope for," she praised. "Dad, I'd like you to meet Thane Krios, the galaxy's greatest assassin. One of the best shots a CO could want, and the most selfless and loving man a woman could ask for."

Her pride for both of them was evident not only in the words she spoke, but in the tone of her voice, and both men were left smiling from her praise.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir." Thane said.

He went to bow again, as was custom in drell society when meeting the parents of your beloved, but Anderson's hand on his shoulder stopped him abruptly.

"No need to bow, especially to an old soldier like me," the councillor laughed. "But it is good to meet you too, Krios. And it's about time you found someone who made you happy," he added,
smiling widely at Shepard.

Without fuss, Anderson ushered them into the seating area that took up a small section of the office's balcony.

"However, before we continue, there's one item of business I really do have to discuss with you."

Thane fought a smile as he watched Shepard close her eyes in a, presumably, faux wince.

"What's the damage?" she asked.

"There's a formal ball being held tomorrow, in your honour, and it is expected that you and your crew attend," Anderson informed.

Shepard's eyes snapped open. "You have got to be kidding me! What the hell for? It's not like the rest of them ever believed me. Hell, Sparatus even had the nerve to air quote me for spirit's sake."

His Siha made a vague gesture with her fingers as she said this, and Thane presumed that was what an 'air quote' was, assuming it was somehow offensive. Thane studied Shepard silently, noting the way her emerald eyes shone with a certain defiance. He raised a brow ridge questioningly, but held his tongue, not wanting to interrupt. Anderson, however, shook his head.

"Valern has always supported you, you know that. Though having a former STG member on your current squad has helped to sway him further. Tevos was convinced by the Justicar who travels with you, as well as some helpful intel. your old friend Doctor T'Soni sent her way. The turian councillor... well, we both know what Sparatus is like. He even argues with his own Primark, so I wouldn't take it too personally."

"You do know the rest of my team includes a tank bread krogan, a possibly psychotic convict, a master thief, a grizzled mercenary, a geth unit as well as a dozen ex-Cerberus agents. Only Tali could be considered an upstanding galactic citizen, and she's quarian! Too many races still stupidly treat them as second class citizens," Shepard stated.

"I think you're forgetting an assassin and a vigilante," Thane added, dryly.

"Yes, and a dead Spectre too," Anderson laughed. "As for the ex-Cerberus, I have already granted them political immunity for their previous affiliation, it didn't escape my notice your ship has also lost it's Cerberus logo."

Shepard nodded. "During emergency repairs on Omega. Though the job was neatened up once we got to Illium."

"I like how you class that as an emergency, but there is no need to worry on that front child. The geth... well, that could be a little harder," Anderson conceded, looking pensive.

"Despite the attack on the Citadel two years ago, it is my experience that very few are familiar with how the geth appear. It may be possible for Legion to be passed itself off as an assistance mech, perhaps for Mr Moreau," Thane supplied.

"That could work," Anderson agreed.

Shepard scowled at Thane. "You're not supposed to be helping him," she grumbled, before giving an
exasperated sigh. "Fine, you win Anderson. But know you already owed me and my team two
weeks paid shore leave for the collector base, this stunt has just bumped it up to three."

Thane couldn't help but smile, unsurprised that his Siha would be working this to their advantage.
The glittering light was reflected and refracted around the hall by hundreds of crystals, and Shepard found herself squinting at the brightness. She still couldn't believe she had agreed to any of this. Anderson had a lot of making up to do. With a quiet sigh, Shepard linked her arm through her adoptive father's. He patted her hand reassuringly.

"How did I let you talk me into this?" she whispered.

"I mentioned free drink and food. Don't worry, it will be fine," he replied.

"Presenting Councillor Anderson and Spectre Shepard."

The announcement by the tannoy VI forced them to walk down the gilt covered, curving stair case. Shepard found it was a hard won fight to keep her breathing steady, and remember to pay attention to the floor length hem of her emerald green dress. Hundreds of pairs of eyes regarded the pair critically, making her stomach lurch. This was far more daunting than taking on the collectors, but eventually they reached the polished floor of the banquet hall.

"I hate these pompous events as much as you do Shepard. Just think of it as an infiltration mission. You look lovely by the way," Anderson stated.

"I'm just thinking of the champagne fountain," she retorted.

Her wry comment caused Anderson to laugh warmly, and Shepard smirked in reply. She allowed him to lead her to the table where the rest of the Normandy crew sat and to her surprise, he bowed and kissed he hand before departing. Thane rose to greet her, placing a hand on the small of her back. Shepard turned to the drell, and regarded the rich red of his unsurprisingly leather suit.

"You are a vision, Siha," he murmured.

Just as she was about to reply, Joker's sarcasm halted her:"Looking good Commander. Green suits you, the dress is nice too."

The pilot's baseball cap was still firmly on his head, despite him wearing a tuxedo. Laughing, Shepard reached over and tapped the brim of the cap until it covered Joker's eyes, he grinned at her in reply. Taking her seat, Shepard glanced around the table. Garrus sat to her left, wearing what she supposed was his dress-armour from his days in C-Sec. Next to him was Joker, followed by Tali in a fetching bronze and gold envirosuit. To Shepard's pleasant surprise, Kal'Reegar sat next to her and then Legion, who's optical light blinked rapidly as he spoke to the two quarians. Kasumi was to the geth's left, in what appeared to be a deep purple hooded dress. Jacob looked handsome in his tuxedo, much more than Gardener who sat fidgeting in his. Doctor Chakwas looked sophisticated in a demure black gown, as did Samara who wore a surprisingly high neck, floor length gold dress. Zaeed looked down right miserable in his tuxedo, and hadn't even bothered to fasten the bow tie that hung limply around his neck.

Gabby was wearing a silver gown, and sat next to Ken, fixing his lopsided bow tie for him. Kelly wore a metallic purple number and was engaged in conversation with Mordin, who wore a black version of his normal outfit. Another surprise was Wrex and Grunt sat side by side, in what appeared to be new and identical, black and silver armour. There was an empty space in the seating, in
between Grunt and Miranda, who wore a plunging red dress. Liara sat next to the Cerberus officer, in a shimmering white high-necked dress and Feron was beside her, looking very dapper in a dark blue... naturally leather, suit that enhanced the rainbow colour of his scales. Finally, to Shepard's right, was a devastatingly handsome Thane who was smiling at her with unhidden affection. Heavy footsteps caught their attention, and the pair turned to see an annoyed looking Jack, stomping towards the table. The ex-convict was wearing, of all things, a pink floor length gown. Though her customary combat boots jutted out beneath the ruffled hem. Jack threw herself down into the empty chair.

"The food better be worth it," she snarled.

"Got to be better than Gardeners," Joker quipped.

"Well I just have to say Jack, your dress hugs your figure in all the right places," Ken drawled, his Scottish accent thicker than usual.

"Kenneth!" Gabby punched her date, not so lightly on the shoulder.

"What? I'm just giving the woman a compliment. All of you ladies look like a brawshag," the engineer said, grinning cheekily.

"Keelah! I don't what that means, but I'm sure it's not good!" Tali replied.

The quarian rubbed her faceplate, where her forehead would be, causing Shepard to stifle a chuckle. When it arrived, the food was sublime, which was unsurprising... considering this was an Ambassadorial dinner. Once the plates had been cleared away, the orchestra struck up a waltz and every guest made the way to the dance floor, as was customary. As Thane began to lead her into the dance, Shepard squeezed his hand tightly.

"I'm so glad Chakwas arranged for us to have Cotillion classes beforehand," she whispered.

"Indeed, Siha. It even seems young Grunt was paying attention."

Shepard turned her head to see a very pleased looking krogan, dancing with a very amused looking Jack. As the melody ended, the crew of the Normandy left the dancing to those more versed at the fine art. Heading back to their over-sized table, Liara pointed out that Grunt had placed Jack's hand in the crook of his elbow, much in the same way the Thane did with Shepard.

"Thane, you haven't been giving the krogan pointers, have you?" Feron teased.

A flash of biotics, and a following by a crash, caught their attention. The quartet turned to see Miranda glowering at Grunt, her hands still glowing blue as the krogan sprawled against a ruined podium. A marble statue lay in pieces around him.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" the operative yelled.

"Fuck this, Miri!" Jack growled.

The ex-convict stomped out of the room, just as Miranda hit the young krogan with another biotic slam, then ran off to catch up with Jack. Poor Grunt hit another pedestal displaying another marble statue, but this time the impact set off a domino effect and soon, every statue in the room lay in heaps of rubble. Shepard wasn't sure if it was the scene of absolute devastation, or the shocking revelation...
that Jack had been Miranda's date for the evening, but something left her utterly speechless.

"Don't worry Shep, I saved one of the statues," Kasumi's disembodied voice laughed near her ear.

Shepard sighed. "By saved, you mean stole."

"A thief's gotta do, what a thief's gotta do." Jacob shrugged, eyeing the damage.

"I need a drink," Shepard muttered, darkly.

"I think I will join you, commander," Doctor Chakwas stated.

Without further preamble, the two women headed towards the glass fronted bar. Half a hour later, Shepard left the doctor sipping Serrice Ice Brandy with Gardener. She made her way back to the table, though was interrupt by a shaggy haired young woman, who was obviously going for the androgynous look and was wearing a metallic purple suit with matching tie.

"Commander Shepard? Pleasure to meet you. I'm Big Skittles."

Shepard simply blinked at the other woman. "Pardon?"

"Big Skittles, I'm sure you've heard of me. I've topped the charts several times over the past two years."

"I'm sorry, Miss Skittles, I have no idea who you are."

"Big Skittles is a male pop singer that has a large fan base," a familiar voice said, full of disdain.

"Kolyat?! What are you doing here?" Shepard smiled.

The young drell indicated to his C-Sec uniform. "Officially, guard duty."

"And unofficially?"

"We believed you were in need of some assistance, Shepard-Commander," Legion stated.

The effeminate 'celebrity' beamed at Legion. "Cool, you have a talking robot."

"We have you covered, Shepard-Commander." Legion sounded dejected, as it turned to so called pop singer.

"Come on, Shepard. Let's make a break for it," Kolyat whispered.

With Legion keeping the celebrity distracted, they found it easy enough to make a strategic retreat. Kolyat lead her back to the Normandy's table, and to Shepard's delight, he slipped into one of the empty chairs. Causing his father to give them a questioning look. The younger drell shrugged in reply.

"I'm due for a break."

"He can do worse than hanging out with us," Feron laughed.
"Yes, because this crew is the model for well-adjusted adults," Liara quipped.

"Speaking of well-adjusted, where's Zaeed?" Shepard questioned.

A three taloned hand wrapped around her shoulder. "Over there." Garrus pointed to an inebriated Zaeed, gesticulating wildly as a turian nodded with conviction.

Shepard quirked an eyebrow. "Is that Sparatus?"

"It is," Anderson replied, taking a seat opposite her.

"And before you ask, Kelly snuck off somewhere with Grunt," Joker informed her.

She was about to bury her head in her hands at this news, before a nerve grating voice shouted across the room: "THIS IS AN OUTRAGE!"

Turning her head towards the bar, Shepard saw the normally collected Doctor Chakwas leaning against the bar and doubled over. Udina was slowly turning an interesting shade of puce, and Shepard could have sworn the suspicious looking substance across the ambassador's shoes was alcohol induced vomit. Gardener was rubbing Chakwas' back, in what look like a soothing manner, before he turned to wink at Shepard. The sound of laughter distorted by a voice through her modulator caught Shepard's attention.

"Keelah!" Tali muttered, before promptly falling off her chair.

Shepard woke herself up giggling. To most, that dream would have been a nightmare, instead she found it rather amusing. Not that she wanted the impending evening to go like that, but it was evidently something her brain had needed to get out of it's system... so to speak. Whilst her eyes adjusted to the dim blue haze that her fish tank cast into the room, Shepard desperately tried to stifle her giggles, in order not to wake her bed fellow. She failed.

"What is so amusing, Siha?" Thane asked, his velvet voice muffled by sleepiness.

"Just a dream, sorry to wake you," she soothed, feeling guilty.

Thane mumbled something Shepard's translator didn't quite pick up as he pulled her into a tight embrace. She stroked the cool scales on his back in reply, and felt him smile against her neck.

Gazing over his shoulder, Shepard caught a glimpse of the emerald green silk dress that hung on the outside of the closet. Even though she was dreading the formal ball, Shepard was looking forward to wearing the dress, especially after how Thane's eyes had lit up when he'd first caught sight of it. Thinking of the coming evening threatened to set her off giggling again. Her dream was still very fresh in her mind, and she had the feeling she'd need all the help she could get.

'Spirits. Arashu. Please let tonight run smoother than my dream' Shepard prayed.

Unfortunately, there was no denying that she was wide awake. Squirming slightly, she managed to activate her Omni-Tool without breaking Thane's embrace, and caught sight of it's clock. 07:45 it read, fifteen minutes before her alarm would sound. Shepard smiled, it felt so decadent to sleep until that time, but shore leave was shore leave, and she snuggled back into her partner's arms contentedly.
"Thane," she whispered, not wanting to disturb him if he had fallen back to sleep.

"Yes, Siha?" he replied, his voice had lost some of it's sleepiness.

"Did Kolyat get back to you about this afternoon?"

Thane kissed her forehead. "He did indeed. He's arranged with Bailey for an extended lunch break, so he can join us at the Presidium Lake."

Shepard's smile turned into a grin. She, along with the help of Tali, Kasumi and Kelly, had arranged for the whole crew to get together for a picnic by the Lake to kick off their celebrations. Even Anderson, Wrex and Liara had agreed to be there, and Shepard was excited to have nearly her whole adopted family relaxing together. It was a shame that Hackett couldn't be there, but Kolyat attending would be great.

"You know," Shepard said. "Whether he likes it or not, Kolyat's already been adopted into the bizarre mix of people I call a family."

"Knowing the group of people that concerns, I'm unsure if I should be elated or concerned," Thane replied, deadpan.

Equipping her most convincing faux pout, Shepard did her best to look hurt, but her antics merely caused her lover chuckle. She swatted his arm playfully, before another thought suddenly set off another wave of giggles. Thane raised a brow ridge in question.

"Sorry, I was just thinking what it might be like if we got to live like a normal family. You, me, Kolyat and Grunt in some apartment somewhere, with Urz coming with us, along with Jenkins and the fish," she explained.

"Some may argue with your definition of normal, Siha," Thane smiled. "But it is a very appealing though."

The sound of the alarm cut through the air.

"As appealing as it is, it's time to get up," Shepard replied, before brushing her lips against his. "Do you need the bathroom before I fog it up with steam?"

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**Author's Note**

**Inspired by a KinkMeme prompt:**

Shepard gets invited to a formal event and she works out a deal to get the entire crew of the Normandy to go. Bonus points for: Kasumi stealing stuff, people making jokes at Gardner about the quality of the food, somebody holds cotillion classes beforehand, somebody starts a fight because somebody is getting a little handsy with their LI (bonus points if its Miranda who starts a fight and Jack's the LI), Legion seduces someone on accident, Shepard runs into a celebrity who became a celebrity while she was dead and said celebrity gets angry that Shepard doesn't know them, Zaeed and some turian general get smashed together and start a game of one-up-man-ship, Chakwas spends the entire time at the bar and winds up retching on someone's shoes, Kenneth making cracks about all the lady crew members being in evening gowns, Jack doesn't wear a dress (or does and the entire crew is in awe), Kelly slips off with
another guest for fun times, Grunt smashes an entire room of very expensive things by accident.

Also, Big Skittles is based on Justin Beiber!  (Sorry if anyone actually likes him) And for those who would like to know, a brawshag is a 'pretty woman who looks like they'd be great to have sex with'. You can blame my husband for that, he's Scottish & can be scarily like Ken!
The Package (Thane PoV)

After leaving Shepard's side under the guise of going to collect Kolyat, Thane set off for Shin Akiba. His ruse wasn't a complete fabrication, his son did join him on his mission, but there was an ulterior motive that Thane didn't want his Siha to know about. At least, not yet. From the rapid transit terminal, it took only a few minutes to reach their target location. Away from the main bustle of the commercial district, down a secluded side alley that tourists never ventured and only the select, highly regarded clientele knew of. Without hesitating, Thane palmed the lock mechanism on the discrete metal door. It opened with a low hiss of hydraulics, and he ushered his son inside, following closely behind. It took mere seconds for their eyes to adjust to the gloom of the place, as only select sections of the room were illuminated, and the glass encased treasures sparkled in the dim light. A shadowy figure emerged from the darkness, and gave a respectful bow.

"Ah, Sere Krios," a raspy voice greeted. "So good of you to arrive promptly, and with company."

"Mr Prince," Thane replied. "Allow me to present my son."

Silently, Kolyat stepped forward, and offered his own bow. Thane nodded his approval. His son had no reason to respect the man in front of them, nor had any knowledge of the human's particular talents, but was willing to accept he was someone to be respected. He was proud of Kolyat. A thin smile pulled on Mr Prince's lips, as he shuffled to one of the cabinets. There was a sequence of bleeps as the human entered an unlock code to the glass container.

"A credit to you, I'm sure," the old man replied. "Now, I'm sure your time is a limited commodity, so I will not detain you longer than necessary."

With a showman's flourish, Mr Prince turned back towards them, with a speed that belied his ageing years. He brandished a small black box, it's lid removed, and lay it directly underneath one of the shafts of light. The human then shuffled away, leaving them to decide the suitableness of the object. Thane regarded the item with intense scrutiny before deciding it was, indeed, perfect for the job required. However, Kolyat furrowed the scales of his brow.

"Are you sure, father?" he asked.

"Indeed," Thane smiled in reply.

For a long moment, Kolyat regarded him critically, before a smile quirked his lips. Thane nodded, pleased his son understood. Both of their gazes shifted back to the intricate pendant that sat on it's bed of black satin, it's swirling silver design catching the light. There were four small precious stones that Thane had chosen from earth. Despite their alien quality, they were easy enough for the two drells to identify.

"I know the emerald is to represent you, the garnet... did you chose that red because of Shepard's hair?" Kolyat asked.

Thane nodded in agreement. His son then pointed to the third and fourth stones, one tanzanite and one amber.

"These are for me and...?"
"Grunt," he reply, laying a hand on his son's shoulder. "If she is willing to bond with me, she is accepting you. Just as I am with her son."

"I didn't know Shepard had a child," Kolyat muttered, shaking his head. "She's a good woman. Just don't… don't screw up like you did with mother."

Mr Prince interrupted any reply Thane would have made, by shuffling back into the room. "I trust it is to your liking, Sere Krios. It's been a long time since I've had the pleasure of creating such a unique piece."

"It is exquisite," he replied, giving the human another bow. "You are a master craftsman."

The old man gave a rasping chuckle. "But of course."

Author's Note
Mr Prince is named for a famous jewellers, Daniel Prince, in London.
Shepard looked around the twenty two strong, motley group of people that made up her adopted family, and unapologetically grinned like an idiot. They were all sat on a large collection of rather gaudy blankets, on one of the banks of the Presidium Lake, a spot Kasumi and Tali had chosen. The area was shaded from the artificial light by blossom covered trees, a type that Shepard was sure only grew on the Citadel, and surrounded by flowering bushes. The air was fragrant, and surprisingly, had a very natural feel... considering they were on a space station that had originally been built by a race of sentient machines. Her left thigh was slowly becoming numb as Urz, who Wrex had kindly brought along on his visit from Tuchanka, did the best puppy dog impression a varren could give. His heavy head rested on her lap, and absent-mindedly, Shepard rubbed his scalp causing the animal to loll its tongue and drool. Vaguely she wondered if this was what normal felt like, though the thought soon had Shepard shaking her head, as her grin began to morph into a smirk. Leaning to the right, she gently brushed against Thane's hand to catch his attention.

"You were right," she told him.

"Indeed?" he asked, a slight hint of humour in his voice.

She nodded. "My definition of normal is definitely warped."

"What does that mean?" Kolyat asked.

Grinning, Shepard gestured around the eclectic group, many of whom had stopped their own conversations to listen.

"Well take our present company, this is my family," she told the young drell.

Kolyat blinked his double lids twice. "Family? You're not even the same race as half of them."

There was a wave of laughter, accompanied by a happy sounding yap from the varren who had started trying to make friends with Anderson. Of course, Anderson being Anderson, he was humouring the animal by scratching Urz under the chin.

"Well, I guess you need full introductions then," Shepard said, in mock formality. "First there is the faithful family dog, Urz."

At the sound of his name, the varren rolled over and looked imploringly at her. Laughing, she obliged the soppy creature and rubbed his belly.

"Then there's Anderson, my Dad," she began, moving from left to right around the group. "Joker, my annoying little brother."

To emphasise the point, the pilot flicked one of the peanuts he had been munching in her general direction. It ended up landing on Urz, who happily gobbled it up.

"There's Garrus, my best friend," Shepard continued, ignoring the interruption. "Though, he's most likely my twin as well! Then Wrex... definitely my older brother, and Grunt who's my son."

At the revelation, Kolyat's large black eyes opened wide, and he glanced between Shepard and
Grunt, before turning to his father. The utter shock the young drell felt was more than evident. Grunt simply grinned his slightly unnerving, toothy grin, whilst Thane chuckled at his son's surprise. Shepard nudged her lover gently with her shoulder, shaking her head and smiling.

"It takes time to acclimatise to the Normandy way of life," he assured Kolyat.

"True," Shepard conceded. "But yes, son. It was love at first nearly crush trachea."

Kolyat looked positively aghast.

"Heh, heh, heh," Grunt laughed. "The moment she held a gun to my gut, I knew I liked her."

"I always knew you were part krogan, Shepard," Wrex grinned.

"Was that before or after she head-butted your rival?" Garrus asked, deadpan.

"Hang on, you head-butted a krogan?" Kolyat asked, astonished.

"Several," Thane answered, dryly.

Shepard smiled ruefully, shrugging. "They deserved it."

Feron started laughing. "That's nothing, Shepard went hand to hand with a Yahg, before Liara killed it with biotics. I have the video if you don't believe me."

"Don't even think it!" Liara warned.

"So back to introductions, and jumping across the blanket," Shepard interrupted, before Feron managed to talk himself into the doghouse. "There's Liara, my sister... the type that helps you with your homework. And since Feron's her boyfriend, I suppose he's got to be included as family too."

"Aw, I feel so loved. Thanks, Shep," Feron chortled.

"Next to Liara is Tali, my little sister... definitely the type who took the vid player apart just to see how it worked," she continued.

"Keelah!" Tali exclaimed. "How did you know that?"

Garrus and Shepard laughed at the same time. "Spirits Tali!" and "You didn't?" were uttered in unison.

"Just the once. Father insisted I took engineering classes after that," the quarian admitted, sheepishly.

"A wise man," Anderson agreed, smiling.

Shepard knocked against him playfully, on Tali's behalf.

"Glad I'm not the only one who did that," Gabby chuckled.

"Why am I not surprised?" Ken teased.

Shepard sighed in mock exasperation. "And then there's two of my cousins, Gabby and Ken,
constantly bickering."

"And we are all taking bets on when they are finally going to get together," Kasumi quipped. "The odds at two to one that it'll be by the end of shore leave, and four to one that it'll be by the end of this week."

The group laughed at Ken's dumbfounded expression, as Gabby turned pinker and pinker by the second.

"Moving swiftly on," Shepard continued. "Next to Ken is Gardener, an uncle to the group who makes a mean calamari gumbo. Mordin, the eccentric uncle who helps create the coolest science projects. Then Zaeed, the grumpy uncle who likes to bore... I mean regale you with war stories."

"Listen girl." The mercenary pointed a finger at Shepard. "You're just jealous of the adventures me and Jessie have got up to."

"Who's Jessie?" Kolyat asked, glancing around the group.

"The old man's gun," Jack sneered. "He's fff...udging obsessed."

"What the hell was that?" Joker asked, laughing.

Jack gave a dismissive shrug. "The boss lady asked me to tone down the swearing, I agreed. Just 'til after this stupid social thing tonight."

Shepard smiled at the biotic. "Jumping back over the blanket, there's Jack. The type of sister that set fire to everything she could," she continued to explain to Kolyat.

Jack looked stunned for a moment, before returning Shepard's smiled almost shyly. However, she quickly seemed to remember there were others present.

"Don't go all soft on me, Shepard," she scoffed.

Shaking her head, Shepard continued: "Next to Jack, there's Kelly... another cousin. Then Kasumi, the sister who used to steal everyone else's toys."

"Only the good ones," the thief replied, her eyes shining mischievously beneath her hood.

"Then there's Jacob and Miranda, another two cousins. And Samara, the wise aunt of the group," Shepard explained. "Next to Samara is Karin Chakwas, my mother figure."

Chakwas smiled warmly at her. "Heaven knows you worry me enough with all the trouble you get in."

"And finally, there's Legion." Shepard paused, biting her lower lip. "Hell Legion, you're a good friend but I have no idea what family member you would be. Do you want to be a cousin?"

"That would be satisfactory, Shepard-Commander," the geth unit replied.

"Glad to hear it, Legion" she laughed, before turning her attention back to Kolyat. "Oh, and whenever you visit the Normandy, you will meet EDI."
"Because no dysfunctional family is completely without a disembodied, wise-cracking AI thrown into the mix," Joker retorted, dryly.

Kolyat raised a brow ridge, questioningly. But before Shepard could answer there was a sudden loud rumble, that disturbed the peace of the afternoon.

"Enough talk, where's the food?" Wrex grumbled.

"Gardener, will you do the honours?" she asked, trying not to laugh.

With the flare of a showman, the mess sergeant began to unveil the copious amounts of food that had been prepared for their picnic. Soon there were platters and plates littering every spare centimetre of the blankets, and Shepard's eyes lit up when she spied the large bowl of potato salad, that had made it's way to her end of the group. Not to mention the plate of devilled eggs that sat nearby. Glancing around, she noticed that both Garrus and Tali had their own individual boxes of dextro food stuffs. But before Shepard could question what was in the packs, her attention was drawn to Zaeed, who was making short work of unlatching the drinks cooler. She spared a moment thanking the Spirits that she had Kelly pack it, knowing the last thing she needed was a drunk crew showing up to tonight's formal social engagement. Which would certainly have happened, if anyone else had packed the cooler. For the next half hour, very little conversation was had, but the cumulative sounds of a large group of people enjoying good, tasty food filled the air.

Author's Note
Dedicated to Lady Velvet C. Peterson
The relaxed comradery of the crew was easy to get used to. Though the evident affection, that transcended species and known racial tensions, took a little bit more effort for Kolyat to wrap his head around. However, once the food had been demolished, he began to relax into the dynamics. It unsurprising to find out that the crew of the Normandy, past and present, had a competitive nature. Kolyat smiled when then human called Jacob challenged Councillor Anderson to a game called Frisbee, which seemed to quickly turned into a bout of the original crew verses the new. Kolyat noticed that Joker, Samara, Zaeed and his father excused themselves from the game. He was about to question the older drell about his decision, when he noticed that Doctor Chakwas was looking ready to make her own excuses. Kolyat blinked in surprised as he watched Anderson offering his hand to the woman, helping her to her feet.

"If an old solider like me can hack it, so can you Karin," the councillor grinned.

"I suppose David... if I must," Chakwas relented, smiling.

Kolyat once again turned to his father, only to find Shepard kneeling beside him, concern evident in her eyes. The commander murmured his father's name, almost in a whisper, only to have him stroke her cheek in reply. Kolyat wasn't sure what message was contained in the gesture, but Shepard nodded her understanding. The affection between the pair was evident, and if he had any doubts before about the validity of their feelings, they were washed away in the moment. It hurt Kolyat to admit, but even with his perfect memory, he couldn't remember his father ever looking as happy with his mother. He watched silently as Shepard smiled, before she kissed his father tenderly. Then, her gentle smile turned into a smirk.

"Spoil sport!" she teased.

Without warning, the human turned and caught Kolyat's hand. He looked up at her questioningly, only to find himself being hauled to his feet.

"Blame your father," Shepard laughed. "You're on my team now."

Noticing Liara had also pulled Feron to his feet, Kolyat chucked as he shrugged off the jacket of his C-Sec uniform. He saw little point in arguing with the commander, and even though he had no idea what this game involved, Kolyat was intrigued to try. It could be fun. Once Shepard was satisfied that he was going to join, she called to Grunt to join them. The young krogan thumped his meaty fists together, grinning menacingly. At least, Kolyat found it menacingly... and subconsciously, he move closer to the commander. Shepard merely smiled and shook her head at the krogan's antics, and not for the first time, Kolyat wondered if the human was perhaps a little crazy.

"Come on Shepard, two krogan! How is that fair?" Jacob goaded.

"Oh, and ten against six would have been perfectly fine?" she replied, sweetly. "Feron and Kolyat make our team up to eight, so Grunt evens it out to nine a piece."

"But why Grunt? Because, apart from Legion, we are a full human side now," Gabby said.

Grunt bashed his fists together again. "I cannot fight against my Battlemaster!"
Kolyat glanced between Shepard and the krogan. Surely Battlemaster didn't mean mother, though knowing krogan, it could very well mean exactly that. He shook his head as he watched the commander lay a hand on the young krogan's forearm, in an almost placating gesture.

"Grunt. It's a game, not a fight," she sighed.

Wrex roared with laughter. "Pyjack! We are krogan, they are the same thing."

"That would certainly explain a lot," Garrus observed, dryly.

The large krogan clapped the turian on the back. "You're just jealous of our physical superiority, hatchling."

"Keelah!" Tali exclaimed, gleefully. "Pyjack, hatchling. I dread to think what you call me and Liara."

"Lunch," Wrex replied.

"Bosh'tet!" Tali laughed, swatted his arm. "I have a shotgun."

"And I can flay you alive, with my mind," Liara smiled, sweetly.

Their threats merely made the krogan grin an unnerving toothy grin, and Kolyat couldn't help but shudder a little. He looked on, completely bemused and a little aghast. He noticed Feron did as well, and was relieved that he wasn't the only one that felt out of their depth. Kolyat felt a bump against his shoulder, and glanced to his left, finding Shepard beaming up at him. Her green eyes were shining a little mischievously.

"See what I have to put up with?" she laughed.

"I can see what you meant by family," Kolyat admitted, smiling hesitantly.

"And now you're part of it. Poor kid," Shepard teased.

"Call me a kid again, and I will start referring to you as the 'face punching tyrant'," he laughed.

"I will push you in the lake!" she threatened.

"Oh yeah?" he asked. "Want to bet on that commander?"

Vaguely wondering what in the gods name he thought he was doing, Kolyat effortlessly picked Shepard up. She was much lighter than he expected, and managed to throw her over his shoulder. Then again, the commander was clad in a pair of jeans and a fitted black top, rather than armour... which probably had a lot to do with it. Not pausing to think, Kolyat quickly crossed the distance between the collection of blankets and the lake's foreshore. Part of his brain thought he was mad for doing this to the Commander Shepard, never mind his father's girlfriend. However, he could hear most of the crew encouraging him, shamelessly. Even Shepard herself was laughing, despite struggling against his grasp. He realised, for whatever reason, she was letting him do this. After experiencing the force of her punch, Kolyat had no doubt Shepard could get free of him if she really intended to. Without stopping to wonder her motives, in one swift movement, Kolyat threw the commander into the water. For such a petite woman, Shepard made a rather impressive splash. A raucous cheer, that was followed by boisterous laughter, erupted from the group. He noticed even his
father was laughing, which was something he hadn't expected, since Kolyat had figured he'd have to make some sort of apology for being so disrespectful. Sooner than anticipated, the commander was back on dry land, dripping wet, with her eyes narrowed into a scowl.

"You'll pay for that, Krios!"

His heart sank. Despite the crew still laughing, Shepard was mad, and he knew he was probably going to get his butt kicked. She moved too quickly for him to do anything but brace himself, and as she flung her arms around his neck, Kolyat readied himself for the pain that a hard landing on his back would bring. To his surprise, he found himself pulled close to her body, and into a very soggy hug. For a moment, his mind raced trying to decide if this was a ploy or not. Then Kolyat noticed Shepard was standing on her tip-toes to compensate for the height difference, something that ruled out her being able to attack effectively. With a relieved sigh, he returned her embrace, not caring if he was getting drenched in the process.

"Welcome to the family," she whispered.

He could hear the smile in Shepard's voice, and for the first time in a decade, Kolyat felt like he belonged... and that things might just turn out alright.
Love and Courage (Thane PoV)

Thane sat waiting for Shepard on her… their bed. He was feeling uncharacteristically nervous, restless even, and adjusted the lapel of his new leather suit for the umpteenth time. The suit was a deep dark red, or so the sales assistant had told him. To Thane's enhanced eyes, it was merely another shade of black. But he had intentionally chosen the colour, one he could not see, simply to compliment the emerald green he knew his Siha would be wearing. A smile tugged at Thane's lips, as he tried to envisage what his warrior angel would look like in the dress. It was the same shade as her enchanting eyes, a shade that almost represented his verdant scales. He wondered, not for the first time, if she had chosen the colour for that reason.

His mind was brought back to the present, when he heard the water of the shower switch off. A new wave of anxiousness wash over him. Of its own volition, Thane's right hand removed a small black box from the pocket it had been nestled in. His gaze shifted to the unassuming item, and he let out a shuddering breath. Thinking back to a few hours previous, his mind slipped easily into Solipsism.

"Kolyat stands beside me, his brow furrowed.

"Are you sure, father?" he asks.

I know why he questions. Human tradition dictates a ring. However I want to represent this gesture, this bond, in a way that represents our customs. How can I tell my son that I want to leave my Siha with a piece of our culture, a piece of me, for when I draw breath no more? But then Kolyat is bright, and he knows.

"Indeed," I replied, simply.

Thane was pulled from his Solipsism, blinking back tears, by the opening hiss of the bathroom door. Looking up from the box that was tightly clutched in his hand, he was greeted by the embodiment of a goddess, and his eyes hungrily drank in the sight. Shepard's short, fiery locks tousled perfectly, and the shading around her eyes, that made their emerald hue appear more vivid. The deepened red that graced her luscious lips, which was mirrored on her fingertips. The shimmering green material flowed, like liquid, over every enticing curve of her body. He was awed by her beauty, and unable to help himself, Thane swiftly crossed the distance between them. He wrapped his arms around Shepard's slender waist, pulling her body flush with his. The silk of her full length gown brushed the floor, making a quiet swoosh as she moved. A soft, feminine giggle escaped her lips, which pulled a smile to his.

"You are a vision, Siha," he murmured. "I am ashamed to admit, I am jealous you will be walking in on Anderson's arm tonight, rather than mine."

"I guess I will just have to make it up to you once we're home then," she smiled, coyly.

Thane couldn't help the broadening of his smile, and he tightened his hold on her. But before he could reply, her brow furrowed in what looked like discomfort. She squirmed against him, emphasising the fact.

"Spirits Thane, what's in your hand? It's digging into my back."

His heart thudded in his chest and, for a moment he looked away from her. Thane was embarrassed that in his enrapture with her, he had all but forgot the box still clenched in his hand. Uncertainty
began to uncoil in his gut. Taking a small step back from her, just enough to look into her emerald eyes without releasing his hold, Thane prepared himself with another shuddering breath. A look of concern crossed Shepard's beautiful face, as she cupped his face in her soft, warm hands and began to gently stroking his cheek frills with her thumbs.

"What is it, my love?" she asked, softly.

'Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage' Thanे silently recited.

"Siha, I once told you that time was short for me, but whatever I had was yours to take," he said, quietly.

Her smile was sad as she nodded, indicating that she remembered and the thought hurt. Not wanting for them to dwell on the inevitable, Thane quickly set about opening the lid of the box, his hands shaking slightly as he did.

"I apologise for the selfishness of my request," he continued, his voice strained with emotion. "But will you bond with me, become my wife, be mine?"

Shepard gasped as her gaze fell to the intricate piece of jewellery, her porcelain fingers tentatively caressing the pendant. "I already am. But yes. Yes Thane, of course I will bond with you."

Unable to control his joy, Thane pulled her too him, tears welling in his eyes as he crushed his lips against her in a rush of emotion. 'Thank you' he praised the gods. 'Thank you'

Author's Note
If anyone was wondering why a pendant and not a ring, I figured with their fused digits, drell wouldn't have wedding bands & a necklace seemed more practical than a bracelet or anklet. Also, if any would like to know: 'Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage' is a quote from the Chinese Philosopher Lao Tzu.
Elation (Shepard PoV)

'Oh spirits! Oh gods! Oh goddess!'

Tears welled against Shepard's eyelids as she returned his kiss. Love, passion and joy were the fuelling emotions. When she was unable to resist the need breathe any longer, she snaked her arms around Thane's neck and pulled him into a tight embrace. With the life she lived, Shepard had never in her wildest dreams thought she would be granted this particular happiness. She was only vaguely aware that Thane had spoken again, and only because he motioned to the pendant that he held in his hand. Shepard beamed at him, unable to hide her excitement, as she unclasped the necklace she currently wore. Out of love and kindness, she would never mention how Thane's hands shook slightly, as he fastened the engagement pendant around her neck. Once it was in place, Shepard couldn't help but slip back into the shower room to admire her reflection. She was tentatively caressing the swirling design of the silver, when she heard Thane chuckle. Glancing in the direction of the sound, Shepard saw him leaning against the door frame, looking the happiest she had ever seen him.

"How did you know I liked garnets?" she asked.

Her finger gently stroked the deep red gem, but when Thane merely gave a shrug, Shepard couldn't help but laugh. She reasoned it must have been Liara, who had let slip the certain piece of information, not that she minded. Thane wrapped his arms around her waist from behind, his head resting on her left shoulder as they both regarded their reflections. Shepard went back to studying the pendant, as Thane trailed light kisses along her neck. The emerald was clearly to represent Thane, though in her opinion, it didn't do his scales justice. Her fingers glided across the two remaining stones, one amber and one tanzanite. Shepard wasn't sure what or who they were meant to represent, but she could hazard a guess...

"Grunt and Kolyat," Thane murmured against her skin.

Smiling, she turned in his arms. "It's perfect. And you're wonderful."

"I believe you are bias, Siha," he replied, smirking.

The fact that Thane was repeating the words he had said to her, the night she had admitted her love for him, was not lost on Shepard. She moved to kiss him, but before their lips could meet, there was an electronic beep... Perfect timing, as usual.

"Commander, your escort has arrived and is waiting for you in the CIC," EDI's pleasant voice intoned.

"Thanks EDI, on our way."

"It seems appropriate that I offer congratulations to you and Sere Krios," the AI added.

Shepard couldn't help but laugh, and she could feel a chuckle reverberating in Thane's chest.

"Well you're officially the first, so thank you again EDI."

"You are welcome, Shepard. Logging you out."
Shaking her head, Shepard looked at Thane and eyebrow raised. "Is it just me, or did EDI just sound happy to you?"
A Simple Mistake (Kolyat PoV)

Trying to hide his discomfort, Kolyat wrung his hands together, trying to hide the action behind his back. How the quarian had taken one look at him and known he was hiding something, Kolyat would never know. He was equal parts glad and upset that Tali wasn't a member of C-Sec, she would make an excellent officer... and she'd probably show everyone else up, if her observational skills were always that good. Another person he was rather relieved was not a member of C-Sec was Liara. Where Tali had instantly known he was hiding something, the asari had managed to wheedle the secret from him in an embarrassingly short amount of time. Five standard minutes to be precise. Kolyat was appalled with himself, and he certainly needed to ask Sirius about getting some training at withstanding interrogation. If he couldn't handle one asari maiden being nice to him, Kolyat hated to think how he would fare against a hostile interrogator. He had only been mildly mollified when Garrus has stated that Liara had learnt from the best, meaning Commander Shepard.

Thinking about the human brought Kolyat back to the crux of his problem. Would his father be mad after finding out he had let slip about the older drell's plan. More importantly, had Shepard said yes? After everything he had witnessed between the pair, Kolyat doubted the commander would turn his father down, but there was always that possibility. He couldn't begin to imagine the mortification of being rejected, then facing an expectant crown straight afterwards, especially one like the Normandy's crew. However, everyone present seemed excited and jubilant. Kolyat had even heard some mutterings along the lines of: “About time” or “Thought Shepard would have beaten him to it”. Knowing those that knew the commander the best expected her to accept his father's proposal was a little comforting. Still, Kolyat sent a silent prayer to Arashu, that Shepard would say yes... as well as a small one for himself, asking that neither found out he was the one that had revealed their secret.
As the metal doors of the elevator slid open onto the CIC, there was an unexpected raucous cheer, interspersed with some very krogan sounding roars. Shepard glanced around those assembled, vaguely registering that their formal dress was in stark contrast to the way they whooped and hollered. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed a proud looking Anderson, along with a very a sheepish looking Kolyat. Shepard subtly squeezed Thane's hand, before flicking her gaze towards the younger drell. He chuckled and gave a slight nod in rely.

"I believe our engagement has been announced," Thane whispered, a hint of amusement in his rich voice.

She squeezed his hand, smiling. "Who's your money on?"

"I can assure you that it was not me, commander," the AI explained. “Nor was it Jeff, though he did hacked the camera located in your cabin's entranceway.”

"Joker…" Shepard began.

"Hey commander," the pilot interrupted. "Green really suits you, the dress is pretty nice too."

More rowdy laughter filled the CIC and Shepard noticed, with a hint of amusement, that Thane's body went ridged for a moment at the pilot's revelation. The skin of his dewlap began to darken a fraction, and Shepard wondered if he was blushing. However, before she could ask, she was assaulted by a squealing Tali and grinning Liara. The pair gripped her in a fierce double hug, forcing her to let go of Thane's hand. Their attack was shortly followed by Kasumi and then Kelly... even Jack pulled her into a rough embrace.

"Those bridesmaid dresses better not be pink," the biotic hissed.

The rest of the congratulations were slightly more sedated. Pleased smiles and respectful handshakes... mostly. Other than Doctor Chakwas, who held both her hands tightly. She also felt a rough hand wrap around her right shoulder, and looking up, Shepard was met by the kind face of Anderson.

"I'm so pleased, Shepard. You of all people deserve some happiness," Karin stated.

"Thane does seems like a good man. I happy for you, child," he smiled.

"Thanks Karin, Dad," Shepard smiled.

Shepard couldn't help but giggle as she relaxed into her adoptive father's embrace. Though the peace of the moment didn't last long, and was promptly shattered by a krogan bellowing her name. Wrex pulled her into a one armed hug, that lifted Shepard clean off her feet. With ease, he hefted her up to sit on his left shoulder. Much to her chagrin, she let out an undignified squeak of surprise, as he carried her over to where Thane stood with Kolyat, Garrus and Grunt. Much to the amusement of the rest of those gathered.

"Wrex, put me down you oversized turtle, before I kick your quad," Shepard threaten, fighting not to laugh.
The warlord simply ignored her. "A drell, Shepard? He's not as bad as a turian, but certainly no krogan."

Grinning widely, Wrex deposited her in front of Garrus. The turian's mandibles flared into a wide smile, and pre-empting some cringe worthy teasing, and punched him playfully on the arm. Shaking his head, Garrus gently held her face in his taloned hands, before bringing his forehead down to meet hers. Shepard's hands came to rest lightly on his wrists, as happy tears threatened to prick her eyes.

"It's about time you found some happiness, Shepard," he told her. "Thane's a good man."

"Going soft on me big guy?" she teased.

The turian replied with an indignant huff, before pressing his forehead more firmly into hers.

She squeezed his wrists. "Think you can be my turian of honour?"

Garrus cocked his head to the side, his mandibles trembling in a way Shepard had learnt meant he was confused. "I have no idea what that is," he admitted. "But I'll always have your six."

"No Shepard without Vakarian, right?" she grinned.

"Exactly," Garrus agreed, almost solemnly.

He gave Shepard a quick hug, before hastily stepping out the way of an overexcited krogan. Grunt crushed her into a fierce embrace, almost squashing the air out of her lungs. It made her thankful for the heavy bone weave, and the copious other upgrades she had been giving during her resurrection. Eventually, Shepard managed to wiggle out of the young krogan's grasp, smoothing her dress as she did.

"Battlemaster! Your mate's arm is strong enough to protect you," he boomed.

"Grunt has already explained to me, in some detail, what he will do to me if I don't," Thane stated, dryly.

As her fiancé was called away by Feron, and Grunt meandered off with Wrex, Kolyat quietly stepped up beside her.

"Don't think I will be calling you mother, commander," he stated.

Shepard's eyes widened in shock. "Kolyat, I…"

The young drell lightly bumped her shoulder with his. "I am teasing, Shepard. I am pleased father has found you." He hesitated. "I am pleased to have you in my life as well. Though I'm sorry, it was me who let slip about his plan to the rest of your crew."

"You ass," she smiled, elbowing him playfully in the ribs.

Without warning, Kolyat hugged her. "Now you're going to be my stepmother, I guess I can come to you for advice?" he said, almost whispering in her ear.

Shepard leant back and look the young drell in the eyes. "You could have regardless, but what is it?"
Kolyat looked away, seemingly embarrassed. "Well there's this girl... woman, a human."

She gave him her best encouraging smile, but couldn't help wondering if Thane had ever been as awkward as his son was. It was rather an endearing imagine, one that forced Shepard to bite the inside of her cheek, lest her smile turned into a smirk. The last thing she needed was Kolyat to think she was laughing at him. However, before she could ask any questions, EDI's nearby console beeped.

"Commander, councillor, the transport for you and your guests has arrived. Your requested arrived time for the dinner is in thirty two minutes precisely," the AI stated.

Shepard let out a quiet sigh. "Thanks for the death sentence EDI," she replied.

Her retort caused another wave of laughter from her adopted family, and during the hubbub, she turned her attention back to Kolyat and squeezed his hand in reassurance.

"We'll have a proper talk about this later, I promise."
How the Other Half Live (Thane PoV)

Light. That was Thane's first impression of the banqueting hall, light and very bright. Highly polished flooring made from a pale real wood caught his attention first, followed by the ivory coloured walls, that were only interrupted by full length windows draped in white gossamer. The bright white of the table clothes and chair covers, the shining silverware were noticed next. Before Thane's attention was pulled by the way the stark lighting was reflected and refracted from thousands of faceted crystals, that hung from a cacophony of gold chandeliers. He could concede it was a very beautiful room, even if it was also exceedingly pompous. And after a lifetime of knowing that shadows equalled safety, Thane couldn't help but feel vulnerable and exposed. Glancing across the singular empty chair at the table, he regarded Garrus. The turian had forgone his customary armour in favour of dark blue civilian dress clothes, and Thane admired the ease in which Garrus seemed to adapt to the opulent surroundings. Observing the rest of the table, he turned his attention to the rest of his companions, trying to distract himself from the misplaced uneasiness. Thane too the chance to appraise their different appearances, something he had not done during their congratulations aboard the Normandy.

Joker, who sat next to Garrus, had for once forgone his trademark baseball cap, and Thane noticed the man's verdant eyes for the first time. Next to the pilot was Legion, who had made it onto the Citadel in the guise of Joker's assistant mech. Tali was next to the geth, in a bronze version of her envirosuit and to her left sat the quarian marine; Kal'Reegar. The marine had apparently been invited at the request of Councillor Anderson, much to Tali's delight, though Thane suspected his Siha had something to do with it. Kasumi was next, her face still obscured by a hood, except this one appeared to be attached to a long purple dress. Jacob sat with his arm casually draped over the back of the thief's chair, and Thane caught the twinkling of Kasumi's eyes beneath her hood. He knew of the woman's deceased lover, along with the grey box that was now in her possession, so it was nice to see her sharing some companionship.

Mess Sergeant Gardener sat in deep conversation with the good doctor, and Thane was unsurprised by the appreciative glances the sergeant kept giving Chakwas, who was dressed in a demure black gown. Next to the doctor, Samara sat serenely in a very conservative high necked gold dress, a far cry from the plunging red armour the Justicar usually wore. Zaeed was leaning back in his chair, arms crossed and looking mutinous as Engineer Daniels, who had just finished adjusting Donnelly's bow tie, sat tying his for him. Thane realised then that the human men were wearing almost identical tuxedos, before returning his attention to the brown haired woman clad in a shimmering silver gown. Gabby looked beautiful, something that didn't seem to be lost on Ken. Kelly sat next to Zaeed, fastening a bracelet around Jack's wrist. It was no surprise that the yeoman wore a dress. What was a shock however, was that the biotic also wore one. A dark grey version of the metallic purple dress Chambers wore. Thane nodded respectfully to Jack, when she caught his eye, she gave him a tight lipped smile in reply.

Thane noticed, with only a little surprised, that Grunt was sat in a similar manner to Jacob. The young krogan's armour encased arm was slung across the back of Jack's chair, whilst he discussed killing klixen with Wrex and Mordin. The professor wore a black version of his normal white suit, whilst the two krogan wore similar black and silver armours. Which Thane supposed must be their version of formal attire. Miranda sat next to the salarian, in a plunging red dress that was not too dissimilar to the emerald dress Thane knew the commander wore. She was talking to Liara, who wore a shimmering white dress, identical in style to the one Samara wore. Thane smiled when his eyes came to rest of the joined hands of Liara and Feron, the asari's periwinkle skin contrasting against the yellow and green scales of the other drell's hand. It good to see them finally together. His
attention finally fell to Kolyat, who sat next to him and was regarding him with some scrutiny. But before Thane could question his son, the tannoy grabbed his attention.

"Presenting Councillor Anderson and Spectre Shepard," the VI announced.

He turned to the sweeping staircase that dominated one side of the hall, and his heart swelled with pride as he watched the commander glide down the steps. She was smiling almost serenely, her arm linked with Anderson's. They made a handsome sight, the councillor's black tuxedo the perfect accompaniment the showcase Shepard's emerald dress. Thane was only slightly envious that he was not the one to escort his Siha this evening. Though as his gaze fixed on the silver pendant around her neck, he couldn't help but smile. After all, she had agreed to be his.

"You did well to win her over, father," Kolyat whispered.

Still transfixed on the woman descending the stairs, Thane only managed to nod in reply. There was a sedate round of applause as the pair reached the foot of the staircase, and to his astonishment, the commander curtseyed as Anderson bowed. It appeared Thane wasn't the only one surprised, if the ripple of laughter around their table was anything to go by.

"I didn't know Shepard knew how to curtsey," Liara giggled.

"I thought she'd bow like Anderson," Tali stated.

"No, the dress is too low cut. If she bowed, there'd be too much cleavage on show," Miranda explained.

"A dinnae ken 'bout too much cleavage, but ah suppose tis a sight ainlie fur Thane noo," Ken said.

The man's thick Scottish accent had only become broader with the alcohol he had already consumed, and Thane's translator worked overtime trying to figure out what had just been said. Before he could answer the engineer, Thane realised that Anderson was leading Shepard over to their table. Swiftly he stood, back erect and shoulders back, his hands clasped behind his back. He watched as the councillor lifted the commander's hand to his lips, before offering her hand to him. Stepping forward, Thane repeated the gesture. It earned him a deeply affectionate smile from his Siha, as well as another round of applause from their table. Which was accompanied by whispers and murmurs from the guests at the other tables. Ignoring the gossipers, Thane held out Shepard's chair for her.

"Do you think they've figured it out yet?" Shepard asked, smiling.

"I doubt it child, their heads are so far up their…" Anderson coughed, seemingly remembering where he was.

"Politicians are not known for noticing things outside their immediate concern, Siha," Thane stated, dryly.

"That's one way to put it," Anderson smiled, clasping Thane's shoulder. "I'm sorry I'm not joining you all tonight. But thanks to the commander, one of us has to go pretend they like listening to the other councillors drone on."

"It could have been worse. They could have chosen Udina for councillor, and you'd have ended up his lackey, instead of the other way round," Shepard smiled, cheekily. "Besides, if it gets really boring I could come over and have Sparatus air quote me again."
"Yeah, that's always fun," Joker quipped.

Shaking his head, Anderson took his leave, laughing until he reached the councillor's table. The evening progressed easily and enjoyable. With sublime food, exquisite champagne and in Thane's opinion, the best company the galaxy had to offer. Once the dinner service had been cleared away, the pleasant yet wholly synthesised music was replaced by the warm up notes from a violin. Thane was not overly surprised that the Citadel Philharmonic Orchestra had been hired for the occasion. And soon the warm up became of full, vivacious melody.

"The Masquerade Waltz," Shepard and Miranda said, at the same time. "I love this piece," they both smiled.

"Okay, now that's just creepy," Joker laughed.

"May I?" Thane asked, holding out his hand to Shepard.

"I haven't waltzed since my N7 graduation," she smiled, placing her hand in his. "So I'm probably pretty rusty."

"Keelah! Up until that shore leave on Omega, none of us thought you could dance at all," Tali giggled.

"She has a point," Garrus drawled.

Shepard's narrowed her eyes at the turian, but before she could do anything more in retaliation, Thane led his Siha to the floor. With a flourish, he swept her into his arms. His endemic memory let him easily recall the steps required, and to his delight, Shepard easily followed his lead. She danced with the same poise and grace that she had on the battlefield, and for once, Thane did not mind the attention they were getting. He felt proud that the amazing woman in his arms was his fiancée, knowing how lucky he was. It wasn't until the third dance, the Skater's Waltz as Shepard informed him, that they were interrupted.

"May I cut in?" a warm voice asked.

Thane couldn't help but smile, and he kissed Shepard's hand before offering it to Anderson. He bowed to them politely, before leaving the floor. Though upon hearing his Siha giggle, Thane glanced back to the couple.

"I've not danced to this since your graduation," Anderson said.

"Remember that dress that Hackett's sister lent me?" Shepard smiled.

"The purple one that was too long, and I had to desperately try and avoid stepping on," the councillor laughed. "How could I forget, child?"

Thané stood enraptured as he watched them dance. They were effortlessly in sync with each other, and it was a joy to watch. As the song finished, Kolyat took over from Anderson as the commander's partner. Thane was a little surprised, but his smile widened as he watched the pair. He lost himself for a while, simply enjoying watching the dance to the unfamiliar melody, and was only vaguely aware of Miranda informing Jacob the piece was 'Over the Waves, by Juventino Rosas'. It was delightful for Thane to watch his son dance with Shepard, and he was humbled that his son had
accepted his Siha so easily, it was a far cry to what he had expected. Though Thane was soon pulled from his musings, as the tempo of the music slowed considerably. A piano took up the main haunting melody, accompanied by violins.

"Dreamcatcher," a voice said beside him.

Turning, Thane regarded the pilot who gave a shrug.

"Time to see if these heavy bone weaves were worth the pain."

Before he could reply, Joker had moved to the dance floor, and replaced Kolyat as Shepard's partner. She looked delighted, smiling warmly at the man she called a younger brother. His son came to stand by his side, whilst the commander questioned the pilot's certainty, even as he began to lead the extremely slow waltz.

"You led us on a suicide mission, yet you're questioning my wanting to dance," Joker laughed, "I didn't break anything on Omega, and this slow enough that I should be fine. Just don't expect any of those fancy turns that lover boy was doing."

Thane gave a quiet chuckle at the pilot's words, as he watched them move together. Their dance was beautiful and emotional, causing a few pairs of glistening tears in the eyes of the Normandy crew. Thane's included. As the song came to an end, the two embraced before walking the join the rest of the group, that had gathered at the edge of the dance floor. They were greeted by a small round of applause, one that Thane would never admit to starting.
Ma'am (Kal'Reegar PoV)

When Kal'Reegar had first been told his presence had been demanded... for that is how it came across from the Admiralty Board, for a meeting being held by the Citadel Council, he was far from impressed. In truth, Kal only gone because he knew that's what Tali would do, if she had been the one summoned. It was not really a secret that he admired Tali, she was the bravest quarian he had ever know. Hell, to him, Tali was even braver than her friend Commander Shepard. So Kal had acted how he thought she would, even muttering 'Bosh'tet' under his breath, when the board had dismissed him. However after reaching the Citadel, he still had no idea why he was needed, and his meeting with the human councillor had only added to the confusion. He was given an address and a time to turn up, but no hint or indication what it was about. All Kal could think about was how he wished he could talk to Tali, to ask her opinion or for advice. However, his last mission on Adas had destroyed his Omni-Tool, and he had yet to find a replacement.

Now he sat her side, in the most opulent place he had ever seen, though Kal still had no real idea why he was there. For all intents and purposes, it was a celebration dinner for the Normandy and her crew, something he was not a part of. It wasn't until Commander Shepard had given him a wink, that Kal began to have an idea that she had something to do with it. Not that he was going to complain. The human had done more for the quarian people than anyone had, bar Tali, in centuries. He also knew the two women were close, which gave him the small hope that perhaps something had been said between the pair. Before this evening, Kal would have thought it was an impossibility. Smart, important women like Tali'Zorah didn't fall for grunts like him. Then again, he had never believed that quarians would be able to get along with geth, but he was currently witnessing Tali speaking quite amicable with one that everyone referred to as Legion. He was so lost in thought, that it wasn't until he felt an unexpected hand on his forearm, that Kal realised Tali had been talking to him. He turn to her, about to give an apology until he saw her bright eyes crinkle with amusement.

"What to go somewhere more private to catch up properly?" she asked.

There was a smile evident in her voice, and for a moment, Kal's brain stumbled over what she was asking. Though part of him had to wonder how private did she actually mean. His heart beat furiously in his chest, and before he consciously realised what he was doing, he found himself standing and offering her his hand. He was immensely proud he didn't tremble as he did so.

"I'd like that, ma'am," he managed to say.

She tilted her head to the side, regarding him intently. "Kal, just call me Tali."

Kal couldn't help but smile. He loved how she said his name. "I'll work on that, ma'am."

Author's Note:
Dedicated to SparklyQuarians
Breakfast Date (Shepard PoV)

It was the morning after the night before, and Shepard woke feeling only slightly worse for wear. Which was surprising... if she was perfectly honest, because she couldn't remember too much after her slow waltz with Joker, thanks to all the free flowing champagne. It must have be down to the upgrades Cerberus had given her, that she didn't feel like death warmed up. There were only vague recollections of the night. Mainly watching Grunt dance fairly gracefully, for a krogan at least, with Jack. Along with the realisation that Sparatus wasn't actually that bad, as she listened to the councillor and Zaeed swap war stories. When her Omni-Tool suddenly vibrated, Shepard let out a relieved sigh that she had at least enough sense to switch it to silent, before she had fallen into bed. Squinting against the dim blue light that filled the room, Shepard groggily fumbled to retrieve the message.

Shepard,

Remind me not to go drinking with you, ever. My head hurts from all that champagne. Are we still on for breakfast? I'm told you humans swear by something called a 'fried breakfast', if it really works for hangovers, I'm there!

- Kolyat

She smiled to herself. 'Poor kid, must be suffering'

Good Morning Sunshine,

The Citadel doesn't really offer the authentic greasy fry up your friends at C-Sec have probably been going on about, but Amulius does a pretty good (and a damn sight healthier) version. Give me half hour to grab a shower and get through customs (I know, really need to sort out booking a hotel) and I'll meet you outside the Zakera Café.

- Shepard

After hitting send, she carefully wiggled out of the loose embrace of her Fiancé, moving slowly as not to wake him. She smiled contentedly at Thane's sleeping form. It was rare for the drell to ever look so unguarded, and Shepard enjoyed indulging herself, by stealing glances during the rare times she was awake before him. Cautiously, not wanting to disturb Thane or aggravate her niggling headache, Shepard sat up. She briefly stretched her arms over her head, before padding quietly to the shower room. The warm water helped ease her aching muscles and washed away the lingering grogginess. As she emerged back into their cabin, Shepard was feeling much more refreshed, and probably look it too... now she had reapplied her make up. Grabbing one of her favourite black dresses, a relaxed shirt style that she liked to belt around the waist to define her figure, Shepard quickly dressed and tugged on a pair of comfortable knee high boots. She strapped on her Carnifex, which hung low on her hip, and tapped out a quick message on a datapad for Thane. Kissing the top of his head, she left the note next to his still sleeping form, then headed out to meet Kolyat.

'Who'd have thought I'd end up with another adult son' she grinned.
Cracking one eye open, Thane watched as his Siha's shapely behind disappeared behind the closing door. He had awoken as soon as Shepard had gently slipped out of his arms, but had been content enough to remain motionless in the cosiness of their bed. It wasn't unusual for her to head for the bathroom the moment she was awake. Despite her constant denials, Thane knew it was because Shepard found the temperature of their cabin slightly too warm, and the shower cooled her. He had tried to adjust the climate control several times for her comfort, only to have EDI explain she was under strict orders not to lower the temperature. Which was typical of his Siha, who would always put others' needs and desires above her own, so Thane had conceded defeat over the issue before they had even reached the Citadel. Smiling at the memories, he stretched, then pushed himself upright and reached for the datapad Shepard had left.

Thane,
Gone to meet Kolyat. He's got a girl related problem he wants my advice on!
Not sure how long I will be, but I will ping you once we are done.
If you're free later, want to meet for lunch? We could try Stand, since Kasumi has been raving about their ramen again. My treat.
Shepard

His smile widened as he read her message. Never in his wildest imaginings had Thane considered he would be given another chance at happiness. Now, not only had he been blessed with the love of another Siha, and another chance to make things right with his son, but he had something he never thought he would have again... a family.
"So, who's the girl?" Shepard asked.

"Well, as I told you she's human. Her name is Oriana, she's only just move to the Citadel," Kolyat explained. "I met her the day we came here for lunch, then bumped into her again yesterday and got her contact details."

Shepard simply paused all movement, her cup half way to her mouth as she stared at the young drell. Thankfully their booth was much more private than the last time they had ate at Amulius', so hopefully no one other than Kolyat could see her gawping. She prayed to any deity that might be listening to be wrong, but Shepard had a hunch she wasn't. Taking a steadying breath, she set down the cup that still hadn't made it to her lip, hoping that when she spoke there would be no edge to her voice. After all, it wasn't his fault if it was the same woman.

"This might seem a strange question Kolyat, but is her surname Lawson?" she asked, trying to keep the creeping edge out of her voice.

"Yes, why? Don't tell me you know her as well, the galaxy is too big," he laughed, nervously.

"Oh boy..." she sighed."You don't make things easy on yourself do you kid?"

"Shepard, if I wanted riddles I'd have gone to my father," Kolyat snapped,

He sighed, burying his head in his hands. Without thinking, she reached across the table and pulled his hands away. To Shepard's mild surprise, Kolyat accepted the gesture and laced his fingers with hers. He regarded her quietly for several seconds, before giving her fingers a brief squeeze, then joined his hands in front of himself. The manner in which he sat was very reminiscent of his father, scarily so, and Shepard couldn't help but wonder if he knew that. However, that was probably a discussion for another time.

"Do you remember Miranda, my XO? You danced with her last night," she asked.

Kolyat nodded.

"Well, Oriana is her sister. It's not my place to explain the details, but Miri is very protective of her," Shepard continued. "Now, from the correspondents I've shared with Ori, she seems a really nice girl. Clever and charismatic. I have no issues with helping you with… well whatever you're going to ask me, but I just wanted to give you a heads up."

He blinked twice, before smiling. "Thank you Shepard. It means a lot that you're still willing to help. And don't worry, I don't plan on annoying your XO. You knocking me about was bad enough, I don't need another woman doing it as well."

The next hour passed quickly, with the fried breakfasts that Amulius had prepared helping to chase away the remnants of their hangovers as they talked. The Oriana part of the conversation was resolved quickly, with only minor suggestions from Shepard. Kolyat decided to invite the younger Lawson on a dinner date, that would be followed by watching the latest recital of Neilsen's symphonies by The Citadel Philharmonic Orchestra. The young woman's acceptance came within seconds, after Kolyat had invited her.
"Seems like you impressed her," Shepard smiled.

"You think?" Kolyat asked, toying with his tea cup.

"Yeah, trust me. A woman doesn't reply that quickly unless she's interested. You'll be fine," she assured. "Want another drink?"

With two more spiced teas ordered, their conversation drifted to Kolyat's work with C-Sec. Shepard was delighted and relieved to find that he really was enjoying it, not that she had doubted Bailey when he had told her as much during his last email. It was just nice to hear it from Kolyat himself. Their talk then meandered towards holidays, firstly discussing their ideal vacation destination, before winding up talking about Shepard and Thane's impending holiday with Liara and Feron.

"We'll be departing in two days' time for Intai'sei. Though we will be back again once the week is up," she informed him.

"Why there? The Phoenix System isn't a typical tourist destination," Kolyat enquired.

"Anderson confirmed last night that I still have an apartment near the Intaiseikatsu desert. I won it in a competition on Pinnacle Station, a military training facility out in the system. After my death, Anderson ordered the apartment turned into a retreat for injured personnel, but it's thankful free this next week," Shepard explained.

When Kolyat simply stared at her, she started to feel self-conscious. Not something Shepard was used to.

"What?"

"You returned from Kalahira's shore," the drell whispered, full of awe. "No wonder my father was captivated by you."

Once again, Shepard was glad she was not a woman to blush. "Um, thanks... My resurrection came with a lot of strings attached, but it was certainly worth it."

"What happened?" he asked, complete unabashed.

Before she could answer, Amulius approached their table. "Sorry to interrupt Commander, but I thought you'd like to know an old friend of yours has just come in," the turian drawled.

Shepard raised an eyebrow in question, which earned her a wide turian grin.


After uttering a string of expletives that their translators would hopefully not pick up, Shepard began to look for an exit route. Thankfully, Amulius took pity on her and offered them an escape through the back of the building. After promising the wire the turian the payment for their breakfasts, Shepard informed Kolyat it was time for a tactical retreat. Without argument, the drell followed her through the café's kitchen, and out into a maintenance corridor. Glancing around, Shepard wondered where would be the best place to go, knowing she needed somewhere to lay low whilst that woman was on the prowl.
"Come on, my apartment isn't far from here," Kolyat informed her, leading the way. "Isn't al-Jilani the reporter that got kicked by a volus and head-butted by a krogan?"

"Yeah, I've been close to punching her a few times myself," she admitted.

As she followed Kolyat, Shepard reached a new appreciate for Kasumi's hood, since she doubted the thief even had to worry about being seen in public. Thinking about her Japanese friend made Shepard wonder if Kasumi would be willing to provide her with a tactical cloak. Even if she never used it on the battlefield, it would be handy in this sort of situation. Ducking her head, Shepard tried to conceal her face the best she could, lest someone recognised her. The last thing she needed was someone to call out her name, alerting that infuriating woman to their escape route. To her surprise, Shepard felt a strong arm wrap around her shoulders, effectively shielded her face from the milling crowd.

"Thanks Kolyat," she muttered.

"Not far," he replied. "Don't think this diversion gets you out of explaining."

"Wouldn't dream of it. I simply can't wait to regale you with how I became a modern day messiah," she said, sarcastically. "Though first, going back to the holiday. We're going with Liara and Feron, you're more than welcome to come. If you'd like."

"Honestly, I'd like to," Kolyat admitted. "But there's no way Bailey would give me leave at such short notice."

By this point, they had reached one of the many nondescript apartment blocks on this part of the Citadel. Kolyat quickly typed an access code into the door, before ushering her inside. They rode the elevator in silence for several minutes, and Shepard couldn't help wondering why, with all the technological advances they had in the twenty second century, no one had managed to make a fast moving lift yet. It was one of the many mysteries of the galaxy. During their snail paced assent, Shepard quickly typed a message on her Omni-Tool.

Thane,

Having to lay low in Kolyat's apartment for a while. Had a close call with my favourite reporter, only thanks to Amulius that we managed to slip away. Once the coast is clear, fancy a stroll around the lake before lunch?

Shepard

His reply came almost instantly.

Siha,

I am sorry that your breakfast was interrupted, and I would like nothing more. However, Liara has just contacted me. Perhaps you should switch on the Citadel News Network.

Thane

Shepard's brow furrowed in confusion, wondering what was going on. As she pondered, she followed Kolyat to his apartment and into it's living room. She gave a cursory glance around the space, noting the cream and brown colour palette, and the haphazardly stacked magazines... completely with a copy of Fornax peeping out from beneath the pile. Shepard couldn't help chuckling to herself. Kolyat was such a typical bachelor.
“Think you could you switch on CNN?” she asked.

"Sure, but why?” he replied, quizzically.

However, Kolyat's question was quickly answered when the holoscreen came into focus, and Shepard couldn't help but gape at it. There she was, clad in the figure hugging green dress from the night before, with her arm linked with Thane's. She swallowed thickly.

As you can see, Commander Shepard, humanity's first Spectre, left the formal ball that was being held last night in her honour, on the arm of a mysterious drell. Many have speculated at who this drell is, but my sources indicate that he is none other than famed assassin, Thane Krios.

The scene shifted to a grainier image. Through the bustling crowd, Shepard could just make out her own red hair, and Kolyat's arm around her shoulders. It had evidently been taken during their escape from the café.

However earlier today, the Saviour of the Citadel was seen in the arms of yet another drell. Sources indicate that this is C-Sec officer Kolyat Nuara.

"Nuara?” Shepard queried, not taking her eyes off the screen.

"My father once used the alias Tannor Nuara. After reuniting with him, we discussed and agreed it would be safer for me to use the surname as well," Kolyat explained.

It would not be the first time that Commander Shepard has been involved with a member of C-Sec. During the hunt for the rogue Spectre; Saren Arterius, the first human Spectre was often seen in the company of turian officer Garrus Vakarian. The two were seen in a very intimate embrace after the final battle for the Citadel.

The montage froze on the moments after Shepard had clambered down the rubble. She was pulled tight into Garrus, their foreheads touching, and both wearing ridiculous grins. In the background, Tali leant against Anderson for support, who was also smiling broadly. Suddenly, the scene shifted to al-Jilani doing a piece to camera, with several images framing the shot. Looking closely, Shepard saw still shots of her and Wrex, with her sitting on his knee drinking on Tuchanka. Her and Grunt beaming at each other, whilst covered in blood just after his rite. Her and Liara walking through Nos Astra, their arms linked. Her and Samara having a drink in Afterlife during shore leave. Her and Mordin browsing the kiosks on Omega together. Her and Feron walking along one of the Presidium bridges, evidently taken just after the group picnic, if her wet clothing was any indication. Her and Kal'Reegar shaking hands last night. Even her and Councillor Sparatus dancing together during the formal ball... Something Shepard certainly did not remember, damn champagne.

The only conclusion is that Commander Shepard is a raging Xenophile. And this reporter has to ask how much can we, humanity, trust our first Spectre. When it is evident that she has turned her back on humanity. For now, it may only be in her personal life, but how long will it be until she is jeopardising humanity's galactic strength? This is Khalisah al-Jilani, signing off for Westerlund News.

"What the hell was that?" Kolyat's asked, incredulous.

"A declaration of war," Shepard replied, only half joking.
Thane watched, silently from the shadows, as Shepard talked confidently with the ebony haired reporter. His Siha was relaxed and at ease. The smiles she shared with Miss Emily Wong were in stark contrast from the relationship Shepard had with Westerlund's al-Jilani. It was almost comical, how different the commander treated the two women, despite them both being reporters. It was a profession that Thane had grown wary of, thanks to his time spent on Illium. But he was willing to trust his Siha, she had never led him wrong. However, he was adamant that he would keep a watchful eye on the proceedings, all the same.

"The producer has just confirmed the formal interview about your work against the collectors is now airing. Allowing time for the full vid, it gives us thirty minutes to do the more informal interview. Give or take. Considering the interesting footage that's programmed to interrupt as if it were a hack. Are you sure your other half doesn't want to join you?" the reporter said.

"Just a quick touch up!"

An overly happy asari, who was obviously the make up artist, ran over to the two women. Thane bit back a smile at the disgruntled look his Siha gave, as an overly charged powder-puff hit her face, sending particles shimmering into the bright studio lights. Once the asari was busy with the Emily Wong, Shepard looked over to the shadows he had concealed himself in, and gave a knowing smile. It caused his breath to catch in his throat. She smirked as she assured the reporter that he wouldn't be joining them, and Thane's mind wandered to earlier that morning.

*Her image flickers through the orange glow of my Omni-Tool, a smile tugs at the corner of her mouth, the mischievous glint in her eyes is visible even through the slight static. She informs me that she had set up an interview with the FCC, and their reporter has agreed to insert the footage Liara recently found. My brow furrows.*

"Are you sure that is wise, Siha?"

"After the stunt al-Jilani just pulled? I'm pretty damn sure."

"That is precisely my worry. Miss Wong is another reporter, and my time on Illium certainly led me to believe that was a profession worth being wary of," I reply.

*My Siha's musical laughter filters through the connection. "Yeah, I can remember a very informative report being broadcast in Nos Astra, about this amazing drell assassin. Can't recall his name, but that asari reporter certainly made him sound sexy and mysterious."*

"Siha..." I can't help the chuckle that escapes my lips.

*She smiles at me. "Seriously though, I trust Emily. We've worked together before, back during the hunt for Saren. Her and the FCC are more focused on actual news, so the main reason for the interview is a public debrief regarding the collectors. Anderson has just pinged me the official sanction to be able to do so. There will be a second, shorter interview allowing me to 'address my critics', as she put it. You're more than welcome to join me in front of camera if you want?"

I return her smile. "As kind as your offer is Siha, I must decline. It is your star that burns brightly, it is your path to shine. It is mine to protect you from the shadows."
I watched, stunned, as she averts her eyes from the screen and smiles almost shyly. "Thank you Thane," she all but whispers. "My gift from Amonkira." Her gaze returns to the camera, her eyes full of love.

Before I can answer, Kolyat's calls from off screen: "Shepard, the car's arrived."

She glances over her shoulder. "Thanks Kolyat, I'll be right there." She turns her gaze back towards me. "I won't be long, I'll PM you once it's over. If I don't see you first..." she smiles, cutting the link.

Unexpectedly, my Omni-Tool flashes again, alerting me to a message.

Father,
Shepard knows what she's doing, I'd say trust her. But I'm getting a sense of how your mind works, so here are the co-ordinates for the news studio.
- Kolyat

The sound of feminine giggles and the reporter's voice, brought Thane swiftly from his memory. His eyes focused again on his fiery Siha. She sat with Miss Wong, in the blaring white of the spot light, on the plush grey couch. Thane had missed what was said to make them laugh, though he did hear Shepard's reply.

"Sorry, all the drell I know are spoken for, though I know a few good looking, eligible turians."

"Ladies, we are ready to start recording," a harried looking salarian called out.

"Thanks Imart," the reporter replied, before turning back to Shepard. "Ready to do this? I promise no awkward questions, and we can cut anything you don't like before it airs."

Thane blinked slowly, twice. It seemed he had misjudged Miss Wong. He couldn't help but smile at how Shepard's posture straightened, her eyes shining with steady determination, like she was ready for battle. He doubted anyone else would have noticed the change in his Siha. Most would only she her nod her reply as a dim, red beacon lit up, signalling that recording had commenced.
Fighting Dirty (Shepard PoV)

Taking a subtle but deep breath, Shepard prepared herself for the next interview. She had never considered herself a sly or sneaking woman before, but al-jilani's latest stunt was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Now, thanks to Liara, she had a way to get back at the bitch who was almost as much of a bane on her existence as the reapers were. Which was no small feat, especially considered the eccentric group of people that Shepard called family. Really, she knew what she was about to do was petty, but there was only so far she could be pushed without breaking. It was this or violence, and thankfully Emily Wong had readily agreed to help with her retaliation.

"Commander, thank you for joining me again," the reported 'greeted'.

"Always happy to be here at the FCC, Emily," she smiled in reply.

"So after your return from your recent mission, which all us at the FCC would like to thank you for again, you have been sighted with a drell companion. Speculation has it that he his famed assassin, Thane Krios. Would you like to comment?" Emily asked politely.

Shepard carefully adjusted the collar of her shirt style dress, hoping the act looked subconscious, as she fully revealed the silver pendant that hung around her neck. Purposefully, she had opened a private comm. link with Thane, who she knew was hiding in the shadows, and had to bite back a smile as she heard in gasp. Even though he knew about her plan to out al-Jilani as the hypocrite she was, Shepard had mentioned her intention to reveal their engagement. As far as she was concerned, she had nothing to hide. She was proud of her fiancé. However, Thane was a deeply private man, and Shepard hoped he wouldn't be offended by her disclosing so much.

"It would be hard not to comment after recent gossip reports," Shepard smiled. "There is holographic evidence of me in the company of former Illuminated Primacy agent; Thane Krios, after all. He is an integral and valued part of my team. The same team that recently destroyed the collector threat, and what woman wouldn't want to spend time with such a debonair man? Handsome, charismatic, a hero, but I may be bias. He is also my fiancé."

Emily clasped her hands together in delight. "How romantic, the commander and the specialist. I'm sure the viewers at home would love to know how Sere Krios swept you off your feet."

"A girl's got to have some secrets," Shepard chuckled.

She gave an exaggerated wink to camera, a move that had the production team roaring with laughter. To the side she saw the producer, a turian with dark brown plates and striking white markings, talking to the salarian; Imart. The phrase 'broadcasting gold' was muttered, but Shepard didn't get a chance to hear anymore of their conversation.

"I don't think we can begrudge the Saviour of the Citadel that," Emily grinned. "Though how does your fiancé feel about the recent footage of you and C-Sec officer Nuara?"

"That?" Shepard scoffed, waving a hand dismissively. "Sere Nuara is a trusted friend. Both myself and Thane have worked with him during investigations, alongside Captain Bailey. Most notably to uncover the extortion of several businesses, by disgraced politician; Jorum Talid. The footage that was captured happened to show the moments Kolyat was trying to shield me from the paparazzi."
Emily nodded with understanding. "And unfortunately any footage is better than no footage for that sort of story," she agreed, sounding almost forlorn. "That same report also drew into question several other of your relationships. Most notably with Officer Vakarian. Would you like to comment on those insinuations?"

The smile that crossed Shepard's face couldn't be stopped if she tried, and she was sure it positively glowed with affection. Thinking of Garrus always had that affect on her. It was probably a good thing they hadn't met earlier, considering how much trouble they managed to get into now, Shepard could only imagine the havoc they would have cause together when the were younger. She was also immensely grateful that Thane was not a jealous man, she knew most wouldn't be able to accept the close bond she shared with the turian.

"Garrus Vakarian," she grinned, shaking her head. "Over the years, I've had two outstanding XOs. However, Garrus has operated as my second in command almost from the moment he joined my crew aboard the Normandy SR1. His knowledge, skill, and dedication to duty has been invaluable to me. His honour, integrity and loyalty has never ceased to amaze me. He has willingly accompanying me on two suicide missions for the good of the galaxy. He is the pride of the turian hierarchy as far as I'm concerned. A damn good soldier, an excellent gunnery chief, and my best friend."

"Best friend?" Emily asked. "Some may find it unusual that a turian and a human would form such a bond."

Shepard's smile turned sad. "It is a shame, with all that history has taught all of us, that prejudice is still rife. As for human, turian relations in particular, the Relay 314 Incident was decades ago. There were heavy losses, casualties and sacrifices on both sides during the First Contact War, but it was resolved by a peace treaty. It would be disrespectful to our ancestors, to our fallen heroes, if we dishonoured them by not accepting and utilising the peace they brought both races."

"Inspiring words," Emily smiled, before continuing. "You have often been known to accomplish what most believe impossible. Which could explain why you have been seen in the company of two krogan over the past couple of years. Most races find it difficult to work with them, what's your secret?"

"No secret at all, Emily," Shepard replied. "I simply treat them with the same level of courtesy and respect as I would any other person. Species is irrelevant, race and creed have little meaning, it's a person's attitude that matters. As such, I have been fortunate enough to receive the honour of battle-sister to famed krogan Battlemaster Urdnot Wrex. As well as finding myself the adoptive parent, and Krantt member, of Urdnot Grunt. Who I proudly helped during his Rite of Passage, where he became the first krogan in centuries to defeat a Thresher Maw on foot. Also, Garrus Vakarian became the first turian in history to become a Krantt member."

"There is no doubt that your crew is the epitome of accepting and open minded, with so many races living and working together," Emily stated. 

"They certainly make me proud," she agreed.

Emily suddenly paused, touching her ear as if a message was coming through her earpiece. Shepard was hard pressed not to smile, knowing this signalled the second part of her plan. She watched as the other woman nodded once, before adopting a fairly convincing surprised expression. Shepard raised an eyebrow, but otherwise kept her face passive.

"Commander, there seems to be a video featuring one of your most stout critics that has suddenly
gone viral. We would like your opinion, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Of course," she nodded, benignly.

A holoscreen unveiled behind them, and Shepard turned to watch the video that Liara had uncovered. Even though she knew about it, it was the first time she had actually viewed the footage, in a bid to make her reaction as real as possible. Her brow furrowed as she watched Khalisah al-Jilani passionately kissing an unknown asari. Liara had mentioned revealed what a hypocrite the reporter was, but Shepard hadn't expected it to show anything more than the two hands or something similar. Thankfully the angle of the footage obscured the asari's identity, whilst leaving al-jilani's identity clearly visible, something she was sure Liara had intended. Beside her, Emily cleared her throat.

"Considering the level of criticism Miss al-Jilani has levelled at you of late, how do you feel about this revelation? This blatant hypocrisy?"

Shepard sighed, wearily. "Honestly, I feel sad. I feel sad for the asari, for if I was in her shoes, I'd be wondering about my partner's feelings for me, after they issued such a personal attack against another for their cross-species relationship. I feel sad that it seems Miss al-Jilani is so unsure of herself, that she has to call into question the relationships I share with my lover, friends and family. That is what my crew is to me, you know. Past and present, a collection of the best friends I have ever had, that turned into family." She paused, looking earnestly into the camera. "There is so little point of racism and hatred. I am proud of the different species I call family. From my drell fiancé, turian best friend, krogan son, asari and quarian sisters, salarian uncle and myriad of human siblings, I'm proud of them all."

"Some non-human critics may point of that there are several races, that have not made it onto your crew," Emily stated.

"That is true," she admitted, smiling. "Though they may not be members of my crew, I could happily list several members of other species who I consider friends or trusted contacts. Volus information broker; Barla Von is perhaps the most recognisable. Along with the Presidium's beloved shop keeper; Delanynder. Who I've had the pleasure of sharing many a 'drink' with." She shook her head, chuckling. "Crazy nights."

The revelation had the production team in a fit of laughter, once again. Presumably from trying to picture the 'famous Commander Shepard' getting drunk with a hanar.

"I really owe a special thanks to elcor ambassador; Calyn," she continued. "He was the first person to make me feel welcome here on the Citadel. He's a great guy, wicked sense of humour too, when he isn't working. Then there's several batarians I could mention, all currently residing on Omega. Marsh, who's one of the most knowledgeable and reasonable shopkeepers I've met. As well as Anto and Bray, two of Omega's security detail. Hell! I'd have recruited Bray months ago, if I though Aria would let me get away with it. Unfortunately, I've met very few vorcha outside of hostile combat situations. Hopefully that will change in the coming years."

"It may come as a surprise to some, to hear you praise batarians, commander," Emily said, matter of fact.

She raised an eyebrow. "Why? Because of Elysium?"

Emily simply nodded.
"That's just stupid," she muttered, before looking directly at the camera once more. "The Skyllian Blitz was a heinous act by Terminus pirates. Yes there were a lot of batarians involved, but the attack was co-ordinated by a human; Elanos Haliat. My team encountered and killed him during a mission in 2183. There may be many batarian mercenaries, slavers and pirates. But there are also many fine batarian civilians, to think otherwise is once again falling into racial stereo types, that have no place in this day and age."
"Great minds think alike!"

Shepard's words and laughter made Liara giggled in response. She had hoped for a quiet, romantic stroll around the Presidium Lake with Feron, but she wasn't going to complain about meeting up with the commander and Thane. Especially since the pair had obviously had the same idea, and the four of them began to meander across the nearest bridge. As they walked, they passed a group of asari huddled around one of the news terminals.

"So, your interview seems to be going down well," Feron grinned.

"I think that's more to do with the hacked footage, rather than anything I said," Shepard winked.

Before Liara could reply, someone in heavy armour collided with her, knocking the air out of her lungs. The force nearly sent her to the floor, and if it wasn't for Feron's hands wrapping around her upper arms to keep her steady, she was sure she'd be in the middle of picking herself off the ground right now.

Blinking back winded tears, she looked up into a face she hadn't expected to see again, at least not in person.

"Hey, watch it asar… Liara?"

"Hello chief," Shepard said.

Her voice was friendly enough. Though it didn't go unnoticed by Liara, how the commander squeezed Thane's hand, almost as if she was seeking reassurance. Her heart went out to her friend. She had heard from Joker how Shepard's meeting with Ashley had gone on Horizon, and Liara didn't don't that it was still a raw nerve. Perhaps it was for both women, if the rigid set to the chief's jaw was anything to go by. Having fully regained the ability to breathe properly, Liara went to stand by Shepard's side, narrowing her eyes at the other human. They had never really seen eye to eye on the original Normandy, and after hearing how Ashley treated the commander on Horizon, Liara had a few choice words for the marine, if the moment arrived.

"Commander," Ashley replied, crisply.

"What are you doing here?" Shepard asked, politely.

"I could ask you the same thing," Ashley practically spat. "Especially with who you're with, no offence Liara."

The marine glowered at the two drell, contempt radiating from her like a cloud of miasma. Of course, Liara had always known the marine was anti-alien, but hadn't realised to what extent. It was shocking, and the change in atmosphere descended like a physical presence. Out the corner of her eye, she noticed Thane lay a hand of Feron's shoulder, evidently halting any rebuke. At the same time, the commander's posture became impossibly erect, and even in civilian clothes, it was hard to mistake her for anything other than a military leader.

"I am out with my fiancé, and two close friends," Shepard replied, tersely. "Enjoying shore leave now that our mission has been successfully concluded."
"Didn't know you were into women, commander," Ashley stated, coolly.

Realising what the marine was insinuating, Liara's eyes opened wide in shock. 'Goddess, she thinks...'. Her train of thought was cut off by Feron's arm wrapping around her shoulder, and she noticed Thane's arm wrapped around Shepard's waist.

"I'm not," the commander replied, calmly.

To her utter disappointment, Liara watched as Ashley's face warped into a look of complete disgust.

"What the hell are you thinking?!" the marine demanded. "An asari is bad enough, but at least you could have kids. A drell though?! First you turn your back on the Alliance, then humanity."

Liara's patience had worn thin. "Ashley, you have no right to say that..."

The marine snorted. "And I'm surprised you're okay with it, you were almost as bad as Kaidan!"

"I... I..." Liara stammered, anger and shock stealing her voice.

Sure, she had a crush on the commander when she first joined the crew, nearly everyone did. But that was put to rest after the first month aboard. Their friendship had then grown into a close, sisterly bond. Something Liara wouldn't trade for anything.

"It's pathetic," Ashley sneered. "And..."

Whatever else she was going to say, was swiftly silenced by Shepard, and Liara gasped in shock. She had never seen the commander so much as raise her voice to a friend before, let alone of hand. But Liara couldn't deny that it was incredibly satisfying to see Ashley sprawled out, having been floored by a punch from the commander. Liara watched as Shepard cocked her hip, crossing her arms. It was the pose she often adopted when people were trying her patience, though it was usually reserved for mercenaries... or the council.

"Enough!" Shepard growled. "I thought you had grown up a lot more than this chief, but I guess I was wrong. I may not be Alliance anymore, but I am a Spectre, and I'm seriously debating having you arrested for disturbing the peace. So I seriously suggest you learn to keep your bigotry to yourself, lest you encounter someone with less patience than me."

With that, Shepard snagged both Liara's and Thane's hands, gently ushering them away from the prone marine. Feron followed without any prompting, his arm still wrapped tightly around her shoulders. The commander lead them to a small café area that had opened just outside of the Consort's chambers, and in silence the four of them found seats at a table that overlooking the water. Suddenly, Feron chuckled, breaking the tension that surrounded them.

"So, you used to have a crush on Shepard?" he asked, grinning.

"Only a little one," Liara admitted, almost shyly.

"And another life time ago," Shepard interjected.

"Still, I commend you on your excellent taste," Thane stated, deadpan.

"Hey Shep, you're fiancé is coming onto me," Feron laughed.
"All part of the plan," the commander grinned. "Liara, what do you think about eloping?"

“Goddess!” she muttered in reply, before succumbing to all out giggles.

Author's Note
Inspired by an unfilled KinkMeme prompt.
Bouncing along the rocky plane, safely shielded from the blistering sun by the protective walls of the M-35 Mako, Shepard felt oddly at peace. Which wasn't something she ever expected to feel inside what was, for all intents and purposes, a glorified tin can with wheels. Smiling to herself, she lay a bare hand against the slightly warm metal plating and absent-mindedly traced the welding with her fingertips. On her peripheral, Shepard noticed Liara didn't look entirely at ease, with her blue fingers gripping tightly to the firmly padded seat. She gave an indignant huff, as her mind wandered back to the hunt for Saren. Her driving hadn't been that bad, especially considering what a nightmare the Mako was to drive in the first place... because seriously, who in their right mind built a vehicle with manual steering in the twenty second century? It was ludicrous.

"Siha?" Thane questioned.

His voice was low, with a hint of concern to it, as he gently squeezed her hand. Shepard's smile became softer, and she leant her head on his shoulder for comfort. Though she was loathed to admit it, she couldn't help tracking the rise and fall of his chest out the corner of her eye.

"Just thinking of the old days," she explained.

"It is… strange, how reminiscent being in a Mako is," Liara agreed.

Shepard flashed the asari a wry smile. "And from the way you're holding on…"

"There is nothing wrong with my driving," Feron interrupted from the driver's seat.

The two women shared a look, before bursting out laughing.

"That's what the commander used to say," Liara grinned.

"They never believed me either," Shepard sighed, dramatically.

"After experiencing your handling of the Hammerhead, Siha... no comment," Thane said, deadpan.

"Ass!"

Even though she grumbled, Shepard snaked an arm around his waist, before snuggling in closer. The journey continued on for several minutes in a comfortable silence, and Shepard shut her eyes, listening contently to Thane's breathing. Another smile pulled at her lips, when she realised his breathing had steadily grown more even, since their touch down on Intai'sei a few hours before. Cracking her eyes open, Shepard regarded Liara.

"Do you remember Edolus?" she asked.

"Admiral Kahoku's missing marines?" the asari questioned.

Shepard hummed the affirmative, nodding her head against Thane's shoulder.

"Goddess! Between the mummified salarian, constant meteorite shower and the Thresher Maw, how could I forget?" Liara paused, furrowing her brow. "And that is what you're thinking of, whilst we're
on holiday?" Liara asked, incredulously.

"This reminds me of it a bit," Shepard shrugged.

She gesticulated around the Mako's cabin, to clarify her point. Though as she did, one of the vehicle's wheels hit a pot hole in the baked and cracked desert surface, without warning. The unexpected jolt sent Liara sprawling against the Mako's side panel with a surprised yelp, and Shepard to the metal floor with an undignified thump. On instinct, she braced out her right hand and found herself gripping Thane's knee for some semblance of support. She smiled up at him ruefully, as he offered her his hand.

"This reminds me of our approach to Hagalaz," he stated, dryly.

Shepard raised an eyebrow at him, as her smile transformed into an impish smirk. But before she could form a retort, the Mako jerked to an abrupt stop.

"You have arrived at your destination. Thank you for travelling with drell Intergalactic Tours, and please enjoy your stay at Kalahira's Reject Luxury Apartment. The finest holiday resort the human Alliance has to offer," Feron quipped.

"You're as bad as Joker," Shepard laughed.

"You didn't have to put up with the pair of them, the night of the ball."

Even though Liara sighed, Shepard caught the affectionate smile her friend gave the drell. Chuckling, Shepard pushed open the Mako's hatch, and scorching dry heat hit her like an incendiary blast. It momentarily sucked her breath away. As she jumped down from the cabin, Shepard's sandalled feet kicked up a plume of dust, that the insignificant breeze swirled away, whilst it attempted to ruffle the light barège fabric of her cream coloured dress. After slipping a dark pair of shades over her eyes, she ran the back of her hand across her forehead where beads of perspiration had already began to form. It was hot! Shepard glanced to her left, and felt guilty for being relieved to see Liara wasn't fairing much better than she was. Shepard looked past her friend at the two drell. Both wearing loose, open necked, white cotton shirts and tan trousers. Their bare feet were seemingly unaffected by the hot sand, though the sight made her subconsciously wince. With unshielded grins on both their faces, and the picturesque ochre dunes towering behind them, Thane and Feron were certainly worth admiring. Shepard sneakily snapped a holo with her Omni-Tool, immediately sending a copy to Liara.

"Those two better appreciate this," the asari muttered, almost under her breath.

"Well, they certainly look happy," she smiled.

Peering at the golden horizon, Shepard was thankful that her shades blocked out most of Phoenix's glare, and that Mordin had managed to cook up some extra strength sunblock. She was in no doubt that with her fair complexion, she'd have been resembling a lobster in record time otherwise. Idly, she wondered if asari could get sunburn. Not wanting to find out, Shepard ushered Liara into the prefabricated structure that made up the apartment, as they biotically pulled their luggage behind them.

"Come on... We'll be better off hunkering down until dusk falls."

"Leave the boys to play whilst we relax in the shade?" the asari smiled.
"Anderson tells me they installed a Jacuzzi, and I just happen to have brought a bottle of honey mead with me," Shepard winked.

"I like the way you think," Liara giggled, waving dismissively at the dunes. "The boys can have their dust."
The heated sands warmed the soles of Thane's feet, as he surveyed the vast ochre dunes of the Intaiseikatsu desert. Their picturesque sweeps and curves awed him with their monotone beauty. Thane tried to keep his face schooled in it's customary stoic mask, but his sheer delight broke through decades of training, and he broke into an unabashed grin. For the first time in over a decade, he inhaled deeply. His smile widened when no pain came with the inhalation, which was a blessing from Arashu, just like his beloved Siha. Noticing Feron had his back to him at that moment, Thane indulged in a moment of sentimentality, and quickly took a picture of the rolling landscape. It was foolish really, however he wasn't inclined to care how indulgent he was being. Despite his endemic memory, Thane wanted a more tangible memento of this vacation. The first he had ever taken.

"It's something else, isn't it?" Feron said, quietly.

"Indeed," he nodded.

"I see the ladies have already wimped out," the other drell chuckled.

"So it would seem. Though truly, they are indulging us."

"Let me guess, Shepard's secretly a beach resort type of woman as well?" Feron asked.

It was Thane's turn to chuckle. "I suppose our Siha's are more alike than one might first expect."

"You mean there's more to them, other than being smart, sexy and scary as Kalahira?" his friend teased.

With abandon, Feron flopped down into the sand, sending particles up into the light breeze. Sedately, Thane joined his friend, giving a hum of acknowledgement. Laying back on the warm sand, he memorised the way the sand shifted as he sat, the grains running like water down the dune. He didn't think anything needed to be added to the conversation, and settled on clasping his hands over his abdomen as he gazed up into the perpetually peach sky. A comfortable silence and an overwhelming sense of peace descended on the pair, as both men watched the apricot colour clouds drift weightlessly overhead. It wasn't until Phoenix's tangerine hue began to caress the horizon, that either of them spoke again.

"Should we see what the ladies are up to?" Feron asked, sitting up with a yawn.

Standing to brush the sand from his back, Thane nodded his agreement. "A fine idea."
Indulgence, Interrupted (Shepard PoV)

Thanking the spirits she'd had the presence of mind to pack her bikini near the top of her case, Shepard quickly shimmed out of her dress, and removed the small blade she had strapped to her thigh. After discarding her underwear, she quickly pulled on the deep purple, halter neck swim set she'd picked up especially for the trip. In mere minutes she was padding barefoot to the apartment's spacious bathroom, and found Liara waiting for her. It seemed Shepard hadn't been to only one to indulge in some retail therapy. The asari was clad in a gold two piece swimsuit, that complimented her periwinkle complexion perfectly. Shepard gave her friend a knowing smile.

"I see you came prepared," she teased.

"As did you," Liara grinned, eyeing the faint mark around her thigh.

"Old habits," Shepard shrugged.

Waving the asari on in front of her, she followed Liara into the cream tiled bathroom. Between the two of them, they quickly had the large sunken Jacuzzi filled, and Shepard breathed in the relaxing floral scent of the bathing salts, as her shoulders slipped under the swirling water. The smell was reminiscent of jasmine and honeysuckle, and closing her eyes, Shepard let out a contented sigh as the steam gently curled around her head. The low flickering light of the real candles, which Liara had found in a small carved wooden cabinet by the door, cast a warm glow to the dimly lit room. Only the bubbling of the jets, and the relaxed breaths of her and Liara could be heard in the tranquil space. It was pure bliss. She stretched languidly in the warm fragrant water, feeling the tension of the past several months bleed out of her.

"Siha?" Thane's velvet voice called out.

"We're in the bathroom," she answered, smiling.

"It's a shame that they can't join us," Liara said, voicing Shepard's own thoughts on the matter.

"Well, Feron could join you occasionally, if he was careful," Shepard stated, a smirk tugging at her lips. "Think of all the fun you could get up to."

"Actually I find helping him with a sand bath very… rewarding," the asari divulged, a mischievous tone to her voice.

Shepard cracked an eye open. "Spill. That's how you two got together isn't it?"

Liara's cheeks flushed indigo. "That's not how it started," the asari insisted. "After Chakwas discharged him and we got back from the Normandy, he was having problems with the scarring, especially around his wrists, but also on his back. I helped him a few times, and it… sort of… gradually…” She trailed off, looking a little sheepish.

"It went from there," Shepard finished. "I can certainly see the appeal."

Without warning, there was a sudden bright white flash. The unexpected light left her blinking rapidly, seeing stars. Liara shrieked, throwing a sponge at the interloper, and the responding throaty chuckle revealed it was Feron. The rainbow scaled drell effortlessly side stepped Liara's retaliation,
before deftly moving towards Shepard's side of the tub. He laughed heartily as he dodged the following flannel that she threw. Kneeling, so his face was almost level with hers, Feron tapped his Omni-Tool, revealing the holo he had just taken.

"I can hardly let Thane miss out on such a wondrous sight," he grinned, eyeing them both appreciatively. "The two most beautiful women in the galaxy, relaxing in bikinis."

Shepard couldn't help the chuckle that escaped. "Don't think I'm past pulling you in here."

"And I'll hold you under," Liara threatened.

Feron just laughed. "I can think of worse ways to go," he winked, barely escaping the splash of water Shepard sent his way, before slipping out of the bathroom door. "Thane, I've got something to show you," he called out, as his footstep receded from the hallway.

Liara sank back into the water, giving an exasperated sigh. "Why do we put up with them?"

Shepard followed suit, closing her eyes again and letting the jets massage her shoulders. "Hey, don't tar Thane with the same brush. That was all Feron," she defended, smiling.

The asari hummed her agreement. "Yes. You lucked out with a gentleman assassin, and I end up with…"

"A loveable rogue with a cheeky smile," Shepard concluded.

There was a contented sigh from the other side of the Jacuzzi, and Shepard opened an eye to squint at her friend, raising an eyebrow.

"I suppose he is," Liara conceded. "Neither of us have done too badly for ourselves."

"Not in the romance department," she agreed, her fingers tracing the delicate pendant around her neck. "It'll be you next."

Liara gave an amused snort, evidently understanding what she meant. However, nothing more was said for several minutes, until Shepard reluctantly hoisted herself to sit on the side of the sunken tub. She reached for a fluffy tan coloured towel, humming in appreciation as the softness enveloped her.

"I don't know about you Liara, but I'm getting all pruny."

The asari laughed as she followed suit. "And that will never do."
Thinking on it, Feron considered that maybe... just maybe, bursting in on the women had been a bit brash and rude, even for him. However, he honestly couldn't think of a reason any straight man wouldn't be tempted to do it. Besides, Shepard had actually laughed and Liara had seemed only mildly annoyed, so it didn't seem he'd caused too much upset. He hoped. And it wasn't like he was keeping the spoils for himself, his endemic memory would serve him well, the pictured had been purely for Thane's benefit. It was a complete by accident that Feron had hit copy, instead of the send button, honestly…

He found the older drell standing in front of the large, panelled window in the apartment's living room, watching as the sinking sun set the horizon on fire with a myriad of orange flames. It was a beautiful sunset, and despite what the majority of his ex-girlfriends would say, Feron could be downright romantic when he wanted. So he typed out a quick message via Omni-Tool to Liara, suggesting a walk once she and Shepard were done in the Jacuzzi. When that was done, he quickly pulled up the holo he had taken, and correctly hit send this time. Through all their encounters and conversations, he had always found Thane to be calm and collected. Not without humour, but certainly more... mature and gentlemanly than he was. So Feron wasn't really expecting much of a reaction, if any at all, to the holo. However, the raised brow ridge and slight pull at the corner of the other drell's mouth was a surprising satisfying reaction. He supposed for Thane, that was down right gawping. The elder drell's eyes never left his Omni-Tool.

"My thanks," Thane stated, dryly. "If you will excuse me…"

Biting back a chuckle, Feron watched as the other man quickly slipped into the bedroom he was sharing with the commander. 'Not a bad idea...' With his grin turning into an all-out smirk, Feron made his way to the room he was sharing with Liara. 'Would Thane kill me if he found out Shepard will be joining Liara in my fantasies?' he wondered idly.
Hunger (Shepard PoV)

Shepard slipped into the dimly lit bedroom, absent-mindedly fiddling with the top of the tan towel that was wrapped around her. She was thankful that she had the forethought to shutter the window to Phoenix's powerful rays, keeping the room marginally cooler than it would have been. As it was, the air was warm and still, with the faint fragrance of the Desert Stars and Ghost Flowers that bloomed near the prefab. Without warning, strong hands slid around her waist before pulling her backwards, until she was flush with a toned but lithe body. Shepard smiled, and murmured a hum of approval, when a gentle breath ghosted across the back of her neck. Lips kissed the junction of her neck where the muscles blended into her shoulder, as scaled fingers tentatively slid up her arms, and began to trace indistinct patterns on the exposed skin of her décolleté.

"What have I done to deserve this? To deserve you?" Thane's rich voice whispered in her ear. "You awakened me, gave me back a reason to live, gave me reason to hope, to love."

"I could ask you the same," Shepard replied in a sultry tone.

She could feel his lips form a smile against her skin, as he kissed the side of her throat. With her own smile growing, Shepard turned in his arms, only for her towel catch and fall loose, which revealed her bikini clad body to the balmy air. Thane gave a hum of admiration, as his hands caressed the toned expanse of her back, his fused digits stroking each side of her spine. Enjoying his ministrations, she pressed her body against his. Her right hand moved to caress his face, whilst the left lay gently on his defined chest. Shepard had never seen or felt him breathe so well.

"You are an irresistible vision, Siha." Thane murmured. "I had found myself indebted to Feron for that wonderful holo, but now…"

Almost of their own accord, Shepard's fingers curled to lightly scratch her blunt nails across the patch of scaled chest, that was left visible by Thane's shirt. The responding flash of hunger in his eyes was not lost on her. It was predatorial, a look she had never seen before. At one time the dark desire may have caused Shepard to pause, but now it ignited something in her that sent pleasant shivers down her spine. However, she watched in dismay as a look of both shame and embarrassment meld together on Thane's handsome features before he glanced away, taking the briefest of steps back. Even though she had no idea what was going through her fiancé's mind, Shepard had an inclination it would have something to do with Irikah. Without hesitation, she looped her fingers over the waistband of his trousers, gently caressing his hips on the way past.

"I need you Thane," she told him, her voice a low seductive whisper. "All of you."

Thane blinked his double lids slowly, twice. He seemed caught in an uncharacteristic moment of trepidation, then a smile began to slowly unfurl on his lips. Suddenly, Shepard hit the bed before her brain had chance to register what had happened. Her breath caught in her throat as she looked up into Thane's onyx eyes as he leant over her, his hands planted either side of her head. He looked so sexy that it should have been a sin. She couldn't help the pleasant shiver that tumbled down her spine, as a wicked smile spread to her lips. Shepard raised an eyebrow in a silent challenge, wanting Thane to allow himself to be carried away by the primal passion that surged between them. She didn't need to wait long. His lips crashed against hers with almost bruising force, and his tongue demanded entrance that she willingly gave, matching his fervour with her own wanton lust. Their fevered kiss broke only momentarily, just long enough to allow Shepard to pull Thane's shirt off over his head. She gently raked her nails languidly down his back, enticing a low growl from him. Grinning
wolfishly, Shepard wrapped her legs around his, pulling him closer. She delighting in the hardness that pressed against her, as well as the way their hands caressed every centimetre of each other's torso. However, there was a polite knock at the door that halted their exploration.

"Shepard? Thane? We're heading for the walk, would you like to join us?" Liara's voice called, somewhat hesitantly.

Biting her lip in a bid to stop herself from laughing, Shepard looked up through her lashes at a smiling Thane. It was so utterly typical for their moments of intimacy to be interrupted, but at least they both chose to see the comedy in the intrusions. She raised an eyebrow in silent question, to which Thane nodded in reply, before he started to nuzzle and kiss her neck affectionately.

"Just getting changed, won't be a moment," Shepard managed to say.

"We'll wait for you in the lounge," Liara replied.

Shepard grunted an acknowledgement, barely concealing a squeal, as Thane playfully nipped her neck. In retaliation, she quickly reversed their position, grinding herself against him as Liara's footsteps retreated from the door. Shepard was about to tell him she'd seek real vengeance for that little stunt, until she caught the look of fire that still smouldering in his onyx eyes. Unable to help herself, Shepard kissed him deeply. Making a silent promise... later.
Blinking slowly, Thane woke to the comforting feeling of Shepard snuggling closer to him, and the pleasant warmth of the desert air surrounding them. Carefully, so as not to disturb his Siha, he checked the time on his Omni-Tool. Zero Five Hundred. It would be hours before they needed to be awake. Smiling, he settled back onto his pillow and Shepard sighed gently in her sleep, almost as if in answer to his happy mood. He couldn't help but pull her into a tighter embrace, revelling in her small weight against his chest. He had praised Arashu the night before, for the small miracle of his lungs no longer holding the familiar ache of laboured breathing. But he knew it was really the goddess' angel that he should be praising. It was Shepard's love and kindness that had granted him this blessing.

"Thank you Siha," Thane whispered.

"What for?" she mumbled, unexpectedly.

Her soft voice was heavily muffled by sleep, even though she shuffled impossibly closer, entwining her legs with his and snaking her hand across his chest. As pleasant as her closeness was, Thane instantly felt guilty. She got little enough sleep as it was, and he hated that he had disturbed her. Especially since she seemed to be resting peacefully for a change, a rare commodity, as Shepard was often plagued by nightmares. Thane wasn't sure what to make of his Siha's night terrors, drell did not dream as other races' did. But Shepard's explanation of the beacon and cypher, led him to believe that perhaps what she endured were not strictly nightmares.

"I did not mean to wake you," he apologised, quietly.

"I'm happy to be woken with thank you cuddles any time," she smiled, sleepily. "Though I still don't know what you're thanking me for."

As she spoke, Shepard planted small kisses along his collar bone. A chuckle escaped him without warning, and he kissed the top of her head, trying to stifle the laugh.

“For being my inspiration, my Siha, my future wife." Thane replied.

Propping herself up on an elbow, Shepard looked at him pointedly, a devilish smile quirking the corner of her mouth. His eyes were drawn to her luscious lips, that were still slightly swollen from their fevered kisses the night before. Tendrils of tantalising Solipsism pulled at his mind, and to distract himself, he ran a hand through Shepard's tousled fiery locks. He rolled on top of her, their bodies flush and their lips almost touching.

"So nothing to do with last night?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Perhaps," Thane concede, smiling. "Perhaps."
Biting back a sigh, Shepard rode the elevator up the the council offices. The moment their shuttle had arrived back on the Citadel, a young Alliance private; one Bethany Westmoreland, had been waiting for her. She had been quickly informed that Hackett had requested a meeting with her, and although Shepard was under no obligation, she had readily agreed. Thane had been as wonderful as ever, simply taking her bag from her, and stating that he would wait at Kolyat's for her. Which was why she was wasting her shore leave, stuck in an elevator that moved at a glacial pace. Not for the first time, Shepard marvelled at with all their technical advances, not one of the council races had managed to invent a fast moving lift. Eventually, she reached the upper floor of the Presidium Tower, and strode purposefully down the corridor. It felt a little strange to be here alone, but Hackett's message had been clear, this was to be an extremely private meeting. Without preamble, Shepard entered Anderson's office, and stopped short. Standing within was the admiral, without the councillor in sight.

"Commander, thank you for your time. I'm sorry to disrupt your shore leave," Hackett greeted, solemnly.

Shepard raised an eyebrow. “The use of my title, Steven? This can't be good...”

There was the briefest twitch of a smile on the old man's face, before his features became stony once again. In reply, the icy tendrils of dread that had been ever present since the hunt for Saren, began to crawl up Shepard's spine. Trying to stave off the feeling of dread, she perched on the edge of Anderson's polished desk, and ran a hand absent-mindedly through her cropped hair. She studied her friend quietly, and it quickly seemed that all formal protocol and procedure had vacated the premises, when Hackett gave a ragged sigh, running his hand across his face. Shepard had never seen her adopted grandfather looking so agitated, and it made her worry for him.

“What is it?” she asked, quietly.

“We have a deep-cover operative out in batarian space, Doctor Amanda Kenson. She recently reported in, citing evidence of an immediate reaper invasion.”

"Shit!" Shepard murmured.

Hackett snorted, without humour. "My thoughts exactly."

"The Alliance hasn't reinstated me, why tell me this?"

“I received word that the batarians arrested her. They're holding her in a secret prison outpost on terrorism charges. I need you to infiltrate the prison to get her out of there.”

Shepard's brow furrowed. “My vanguard training didn't give much time for infiltration, but I have Kasumi Goto on my team, between us…”

"No Shepard," Hackett interrupted, unable to meet her eyes. "I need you to go in alone... as a favour to me."

Dread coiled in her gut. "There's more to it.”
The admiral looked positively miserable. "Amanda is my… friend. If the batarians see a fully armed squad, they'll…"

"Kill her," Shepard finished, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Tell me about her."

"She and I go pretty far back," Hackett admitted.

Shepard nodded her understanding, the admiral's wording telling her everything he couldn't say out loud. This woman wasn't merely Steven's friend, the blatant look of worry in his steely eyes gave the truth away immediately.

"She's a top scientist, and Alliance agent," he continued. “One of the few up to the challenge."

"I think I like her."

"You would," Steven admitted, smiling sadly.

"It's a priority," she assured. "I need to speak to a few of my squad, get advice and figure out upgrades to help the infiltration. Then, I'll round up Joker and we'll head out this evening."

"I'll send over some personnel from the Orizaba to man the flight," he told her.

She nodded her thanks, keenly aware that her non-combatant crew still needed down time from being rescued from the collectors. Then, surging to her feet, Shepard quickly crossed the distance between them, and lay a hand on Hackett's shoulder. A heavy moment of silence passed between then, before Steven briefly squeezing her hand that rested on his shoulder. Without another word, he left... presumably to reassign his people, which left Shepard to flop unceremoniously into Anderson's office chair. She sighed, a melancholy mood settling on her, as she tapped her Omni-Tool to life. So much for two more blissful weeks of shore leave.

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**Author's Note:**

For those of you who would like to know, the SSV Orizaba is the Fifth Fleet's Flag Ship (Source: ME Wiki). I figured that despite Hackett normally being based on Arcturus Station, he'd use his fleet's Flag Ship if he was to use any of them.
Setting down his teacup, Thane flicked open his Omni-Tool to accept the incoming call. He blinked twice, surprised to see his Siha appear, since he had assumed she would simply come to Kolyat's apartment once her meeting was concluded. The sight of her caused him concern. They had only returned from Intai'sei one galactic hour ago, then Shepard had been smiling, now her brow was furrowed and her posture slumped. Thane's heart constricted to see her so.

“Siha, is everything alright?”

A brittle laugh escaped her. “No. Far from it. A mission's gone FUBAR and I'm having to solo to hopefully rectify it.”

Try as he might, Thane knew he failed to keep his expression from falling, though he quickly reeled in his outward emotions. Whatever was happening, the last thing Shepard needed was to feel guilty. Whilst it was true that they should be looking forward to another two weeks of shore leave, this was who Shepard was... a true Siha. He had accepted that their lives would be like this, the moment he had admitted his feelings for her. However, something still nagged at him.

"Siha, you do not work…"

"It's not the Alliance," she interrupted, quietly. "It's a personal favour for Hackett. A close friend is MIA."

Remaining silent, Thane let the implications of that sink in. Unlike Anderson, he had never met the admiral, but he knew Shepard held the man in high regard. He also appreciated that she had helped him stop Kolyat from succumbing to a life of crime, as well as helping every other member of the team as well... Something Garrus had admitted she had also done during the hunt for Saren. After she had sacrificed her time and resources to help him, Thane would hardly condemn Shepard from helping the person she regarded as a Grandfather.

“When do we depart?”

There was a long pause, before Shepard whispered: “We don't.”

Whilst they had been speaking, Kolyat had returned from work and was now perched on the edge of the sofa, just out of view of Thane's Omni-Tool. His son looked as displeased at the news as he felt, however he knew there would be little point in trying to argue with his Siha. Currently they were discussing the situation as lovers, but Thane was under no illusion that she would revert to commander mode if she felt the need to. Despite the misgivings he had, he wanted to support her the best he could, so he took a calming breathe.

“I understand. When will you be leaving?”

Tension visibly drained from Shepard's body. “Thank you, and possibly nineteen hundred hours. There's only going to be Joker to round up, as Hackett's sending his own personnel to allow our crew to R and R. I'm going to see if Garrus, Kasumi and Mordin can meet me somewhere, to discuss tactics and mods I can use. Will you be free?”

Upon hearing the news, Kolyat began to nod, indicating they could use his apartment for the
meeting. Thane smiled at his son, humbled that he wished to help. As he turned back to his Omni-Tool, he noticed Shepard was biting her lower lip, something she only tended to do when she was nervous. It was rare to see his Siha as anything other than confident, and Thane hoped that his lack of immediately response was not the culprit for her sudden show of anxiety.

"Kolyat says we can use his apartment," he explained. "I will arrange some lunch for us."

A look of relief washed over Shepard's face. “What did I do to deserve you?"

Unable to help himself, Thane chuckled. "I will see you soon, Siha."

Author's Note
FUBAR – Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition
MIA - Missing in Action
SNAFU (Joker PoV)

Jolting awake, Jeff hurriedly glanced around the cockpit, trying to figure out what had woke him from his very pleasant dream. Then his Omni-Tool vibrated again, alerting him to an incoming call. Rubbing his face in an effort to wake up, Jeff sat up in his incredibly comfortable chair, retrieving his baseball cap from his lap. The only person he could think would be calling him was Shepard, since Karin was off celebrating her daughter's graduation from medical school, and the rest of the crew had given up trying to drag his ass out the pilot's chair months ago. However, the commander was still just as stubborn as she was during their hunt for Saren. He hated leaving his baby, and even EDI's constant presence no longer seemed annoying, in fact her company was rather... nice. Not that Jeff would ever admit it. Still, mulling over a growing friendship with an Artificial Intelligence was not going to answer the call that was still vibrating his Omni-Tool.

"Commander," he greeted, jovially. "What's a pretty woman like you, contacting a ruggedly handsome guy like me for?"

Shepard rolled her eyes. "I just couldn't stay away."

"You know... I'm getting the impression this isn't a social call," Joker stated.

"I need you to pilot for me," she smiled, somewhat sheepishly. "Hackett's got a mission that's been FUBBed."

"And called in the cavalry," he replied, dryly. "You remember we don't work for the Alliance anymore, right?"

She gave him that half smile of hers that said: 'Yes I know, but...'

"So, Sit. Rep?"

"SNAFU," she sighed.

Jeff peered at the image of the commander. This was obviously bothering her far more than she was letting on, and he got the impression there was something she wasn't telling him. Probably several things, if her frowning was anything to go by. Shaking his head, Jeff started his preflight checks. It was probably a little premature, but it never hurt to be prepared... especially where Shepard was concerned.

"When do we depart?" he asked.

"Seventeen hundred. I've got some preparations to make before hand."

He nodded in understanding. "Don't worry about it, Shep. Me and EDI will wait for you... enjoying the calm before the shit storm."

Author's Note:
FUBB – Fucked/Fouled Up Beyond Belief
SNAFU – Situation Normal: All Fucked Up
Sit. Rep – Situation Report
Despite all the things he had seen and done during his illustrious career, Steven Hackett had never felt quite so nervous as he did stepping through the airlock, and boarding the Normandy. He also couldn't remember the last time a person had made him feel nervous, the fact that is was a disabled pilot that had him warily glancing over his shoulder as he moved into the CIC, was even more unusual. But Flight Lieutenant Moreau had scowled at him the moment he had walked passed the cockpit. In the back of his in, Steven was thankful that the rest of the present crew were men and women from his own fleet. Especially since he remember reading Anderson's report, that cited Shepard's team included an assassin, an ex-STG member and a krogan... to name but a few.

The elevator ride down to the Crew Deck was uneventful, and he nodded a greeting to the doctor, as he strode in to the Medical Bay. The man stopped him briefly, informing him the commander had only sustained a few minor injuries and would soon be fine. It was a relief to hear, as Steven didn't think he'd be able to forgive himself if Shepard had been seriously hurt. He cared for the woman a great deal, but he knew Anderson would have his head if anything bad had happened to his adopted daughter. As it was, the situation was bad enough. Amanda was dead, despite Shepard's best efforts, and the Alpha relay had been destroyed. There were heavy political implications, as well as personal ones, but Steven believed the commander's incredibly detailed report. The fact Shepard had also managed to include footage she'd somehow saved from her visor's camera, would help their case when they brought the reaper threat up at the next meeting of the Defence Council. However, despite everything he had seen and read, Steven wasn't prepared for the haunted look in Shepard's eyes. It spoke volumes about her feelings regarding the whole mess. The myriad of bruises to her face, and the sling that was support her left arm, were testament to just how hard she had fought.

"Doctor says you'll be fine," Hackett said by way of greeting.

"Don't let this fool you," Shepard replied, gesturing to her injuries. "I did put up some sort of fight."

Carefully, Steven sat down next to the commander on the examination table, trying not to jostle her too much as he did. It hurt that she wouldn't make eye contact with him, though it didn't take long to notice the datapad that lay on her lap, and he guessed she'd been trying to compose a message to her fiancé. He made a mental note to have Anderson forward him the man's contact details. After all, Shepard was a friend as well as a hero, and Steven felt he owed her partner an explanation... as well as a promise. He was damned determined not to let anything else happen to her. It wasn't like the batarian's could actually **prove** anything. Shepard gave a quiet sigh, that roused Steven from his thoughts. He took a good look at the woman, and was startled to find she looked almost defeated. Even though he wasn't the most tactile person, Steven gently lay his hand over hers.

"Sounds like you went through hell. How do you feel?" he asked, carefully.

Shepard gave a snort, holding her ribs as she did. "Death warmed up?" she suggested. "Mostly fine. No more visions, if that's what you're asking. Devastated about the outcome though."

He nodded. "I know you did the right thing, Shepard. I fully believe it was the only option available."

After humming an unconviced agreement, the commander finally glanced at him. "Have to say, didn't expect you to come for a debrief. in person."
"You went out there as a favour to me, like hell I'm not going to be here to have your back." He paused. "Did Anderson fill you in on the plan?"

"Yeah," Shepard sighed, dejectedly. "I can't believe he's resigning his post over this."

"Officially, he's stepping down to take up the mantel of Alliance Admiral. There's no actual evidence against you," Steven replied. "The most is that an unmarked ship, vaguely matching the Normandy's description, was flagged leaving the relay before it was destroyed. Thanks to your current IFF, the majority of your identification signatures were masked. The only thing that was picked up, was that the ship was a registered human vessel."

"Yet here I am... Handing myself in," she said, glumly.

"You know that's not the case," Steven argued. "With the data you retrieved from Amanda, the Defence Council has agreed that the reaper threat is real, and that preparations have to begin. Chakwas and Ms Lawson have forwarded all details regarding the Lazarus project to the Alliance, so you're clear on that front too. However, with your fame and reputation after Elysium, it's likely the batarians will try target you... as a symbol if nothing else. You know you're our best chance of stopping the reapers, we need you there to help the planning."

"More like keep me alive long enough to meet the reapers head on," she stated, grimly. "You know... my fiancé doesn't have long to live, and I'm being forced away from him to go hide somewhere. I won't even be able to speak to him."

Shepard's gaze fell to the floor, as she shifted position, so her forearms rested against bent knees. Her forehead came to rest on her arms, as she let out a weary sigh, and if Steven hadn't known better, he would have thought she was trying not to cry. His heart twisted at the news. He hadn't actually known that. Actually, his long time friend had only stated that this Thane Krios seemed a good man, and was a drell. Idly, Steven wondered if David even knew that his daughter's fiancé was dying. Not that it mattered, the situation was still the same. The fact that Shepard was now in this predicament, because he'd asked her to try save Amanda, left a bad taste in his mouth. Steven let out a ragged sigh, scratching his goatee as he did.

"I promise we will figure out something. Might not be able to get messages from him to you, but we should be able to work a system so that could pass messages on for you. Sparingly, of course. Lest we give away your position. Perhaps Anderson, or your guard could..."

"Guard?!" Shepard demanded, her head snapping up.

"Bodyguard," he assured her. "As a precaution only. Your dad is on route to debrief. him as we speak. He's a good soldier, staunch supporter of you, and David thinks you will like him."

She narrowed her eyes, before asking tersely: "Who?"

"Lieutenant James Vega."
Time had slowly begun to lose meaning for Thane, and he was vaguely aware that he was becoming tu-fira... lost in another. However, since Shepard had left on her mission for Hackett, he had found himself slipping into memories more and more frequently. And now that she was Earth bound, with little hope they would be able to see each other in the near future, Thane found the only thing tying him to the present was Kolyat. He sighed, letting the datapad he'd been re-reading... the last message his Siha had managed to send him, drop onto the bed beside him. Knowing there was nothing that needed his attention, and little that would disturb him, Thane slipped easily into solipsism.

I stand silently. The shadows of the dimly lit room shrouding me, as I wait for my target. I am unsure what has led me this course of action, to conceal myself in such a familiar manner, waiting to strike. Regardless, I am here now. Quietly I tap off the air-conditioning unit, immediately turning cool artificial air balmy. The pleasant scent of desert flowers permeates the room, and a smile forms on my lips. There is a gentle, hydraulic hiss as the door slides open, admitting my target. A towel wrapped goddess... my Siha. She doesn't hear me as I approach. And I am sliding my hands around her tempting waist, my breath ghosting across the nape of her neck, before she realises I am here. The murmur of approval that she mews, jolts through me. I am unable to resist pulling her back flush against me. Feeling her warm body press against mine is like a drug. I hunger to feel more of her, to explore and worship Arashu's exquisite gift. I slide my fingers tentatively up the soft, pale skin of her arms, to trace indistinct patterns on the exposed skin of her alluring décolleté. She turns in my arms, the towel catches and falls loose. Her bikini clad body is revealed to the warm air, and my eyes. She is breath taking. I tell her so.

I caress the toned expanse of her back, revelling in the way she presses her body against mine. One of her porcelain hands caress my face, as the other lays gently on my chest, lightly scratching her blunt nails across my scales. The small action ignites me. I need her, selfishly want her to submit to me, call out my name in pleased praise. The hungry, unbridled passion is something I thought long forgotten. The folly of youth, and it shames me. She is a goddess, deserving of only the most attentive love and worship. I dishonour her with my carnal desires, and I realise that she must have noticed the way I look at her. I glance away from her emerald eyes, knowing how truly unworthy I am of my Siha. To my surprise, she doesn't hear me as I approach. And I am sliding my hands around her tempting waist, my breath ghosting across the nape of her neck, before she realises I am here. The murmur of approval that she mews, jolts through me. I am unable to resist pulling her back flush against me. Feeling her warm body press against mine is like a drug. I hunger to feel more of her, to explore and worship Arashu's exquisite gift. I slide my fingers tentatively up the soft, pale skin of her arms, to trace indistinct patterns on the exposed skin of her alluring décolleté. She turns in my arms, the towel catches and falls loose. Her bikini clad body is revealed to the warm air, and my eyes. She is breath taking. I tell her so.

A bang in the corridor stirred Thane from his solipsism. Squinting through bleary eyes, his vision was assaulted by the glare of artificial light. His brow furrowed at the discomfort, and without hesitation he turned over, closing his eyes once more. He contemplated burying his face into his pillow, to block out the unwelcome intrusion and slip back into solipsism, since he knew it was only Kolyat making the noise. However, Thane was not to be so lucky. The hiss of the door to his room sliding open, was closely followed by the distinct sound of his son's foot steps.

"Father?"

Blinking his double lids rapidly, trying to hold back bitter tears, Thane begrudgingly emerged fully from his solipsism. Even with Kolyat by his side, the waking galaxy now merely meant a desolate
life without his Siha. He felt his son's hand lightly rest on his shoulder, followed by a brief squeeze of reassurance that forced Thane to meet his eyes. He was surprised to find that they held a look of fire and defiance, one that he was sure Kolyat had picked up from Shepard. Gingerly, Thane pushed himself to an upright position, wincing as his chest constricted painfully.

"Good morning, Kolyat," he greeted. "How was your shift?"

Ignoring the question, Kolyat sat down unceremoniously on the edge of the bed, producing a datapad as he did. Intrigued, Thane glanced over the condensed message, discovering it was from Anderson and stated Shepard's safe arrival on Earth. The knowledge brought him some comfort, but not much. His time was short, and even with Kolyat back in his life, it seemed emptier without his Siha's presence. He'd had a bad feeling... almost a premonition, about her last mission. One that was unfortunately proven correct. Now a week later, Thane had only received two messages from her, and knew communications would only get worse. Not that he didn't understand. He agreed with Anderson's suggestion of a blanket ban on incoming communications... however, it didn't make the reality any easier. Thane sensed Kolyat regarding him critically, and he glanced up from the datapad, finding worry written clearly on his face. For a moment, he thought his son would say something regarding Shepard. However, Kolyat offered a tight lipped smile instead.

"I'll get breakfast started," he stated.

Without waiting for a reply, Kolyat left the room, leaving Thane blinking in surprise. When Shepard had left on her solo mission, he hadn't expected his son to offer him a place to stay, but was more than thankful for the kindness. The Normandy had become home, and now the ship was gone, along with his beloved Siha. In truth, Thane felt adrift. He was unsure what the gods had in store for him... for them, and it would take a while to find an available apartment on the Citadel. Silently, Thane stood, and went through his morning stretched before dressing. As he shrugged on his coat, the front doorbell chimed, which was quickly followed by the sound of muffled voices. Slipping out of the guest room, he soon found who the visitor was.

"Hello Liara," Thane greeted, smiling politely.

"It is good to see you," the asari replied, kissing his cheek. "I've information on Shepard's bodyguard. One Lieutenant James Vega. An excellent marine by all accounts, and a staunch Shepard supporter."

"That is good to hear," he replied, genuinely relieved. "Though I doubt you are visiting just to pass on such information."

Liara shook her head. "I know the protheans hold the key to defeating the reapers. The visions Shepard had during our hunt for Saren... they hinted at something, something major. I'm headed for Thessia."

"I see," Thane said, at length. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Before she could answer, his Omni-Tool pinged. Hoping it might be Shepard, he smiled apologetically, before connecting the message.

"Ah, Thane. Must see you. Immediately. Matters of the most important. Will be at the Citadel within the hour. Suggested place to meet?"

Despite being a disappointed it was not his Siha, Thane couldn't help smile at the salarian. He had
developed a particular soft spot for the geneticist, ever since their talk regarding Shepard, before the Omega Four relay. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Kolyat raise his brow ridge. Liara simply chuckled quietly.

"Good morning, Mordin. We could meet at Apollo's on the Presidium. Perhaps and zero nine hundred?"

"Excellent!" With that, the salarian cut the connection.

"Is he always like that?" Kolyat asked, perplexed.

Thane chuckled. "Invariably."
A Galaxy Apart (Shepard PoV)

CE 2186: 30/01
T,
We have safely reached Earth. I cannot disclose the location, but it nicer than I expected. It feels strange to be back, I've not seen my home world since I graduated the academy. I wish I could have shared my homecoming with you. I am sorry for this mess. I miss you.
- S

CE 2186: 14/02
T,
Most human’s celebrate today as Valentine's Day, a day of romance. I never considered myself a sentimental person before, but seeing all the hearts adorning every shop window... it makes me miss you even more than I thought possible. Please remember I love you.
Other than that, DA had to depart last week for Grissom, due to an incident. Now resolved. DA informs me Jack's been convinced to become a mentor for the Ascension Programme. How badly do you think our hell raiser will corrupt the kids?
- S

CE 2186: 25/03
T,
DA informed of the incident re: Bailey/Pallin. I smell a rat. Or more to the point, a slimy weasel. Here, preparations are slow, more talk than action. Not that I'm surprised, it just makes me more agitated that I am separated from you, from our family, when nothing concrete is happening. I hope you are well. This ban on incoming communications is driving me crazy. My upbringing never gave me a reason to be religious, but I've spent so much time praying to your gods, that you are okay. My heart is yours, always.
- S

CE 2186: 20/04
T,
It is not just a cliché to say human's talk about the weather, a lot. It's raining here, it has for the last twenty days. I can't help wonder if this is what Kahje is like. Perhaps one day, you and Kolyat will be kind enough to take me?
Time is passing slowly here, the defence council isn't doing enough, though training with JV is helping to keep me calm and in decent shape. He's a good marine, but not as challenging as you or G. Defences have started to be launched. SH has informed me of the suspected events on Omega. I am concerned. I doubt we will be ready, but thoughts of you keep me going. I hope to see you soon.
- S

CE 2186: 30/05
T,
Gruesome news care of our old friends. Though some good has come of it, in the form of new ally, RE. Hopefully, he can shed some light on the dark times ahead. We need all the help we can get…
Here, plans are progressing and troops are finally being deployed to Luna.
Away from the coming war, it's approaching traditional 'wedding season' for the western world. Makes me wonder what sort of ceremony we would have. Human, drell or a combination of both? I prefer the latter option. Where would we honeymoon? Until our holiday on Intai'sei, I always preferred the beach. But seeing how happy and well you were makes me wonder about another desert. Perhaps here on Earth? The area around the Sierra Nevada is supposed to be stunning. I love
you. The weight of your pendant around my neck, gives me hope during our time apart. You are never far from my thoughts.
- S

CE 2186: 25/06
T,
A major meeting is being called in a week’s time to establish how our efforts are going. I still feel it is too little, too late. But at least the defence council is finally taking the threat seriously. Evac. plans are being drafted, and there are now multiple bunkers in every town and city across the globe. Selfishly, I'm hoping this meeting may shed some light on when I will be able to see you. I desperately hope you are well. I try not to worry, but that's harder said than done. I hope you know how much you mean to me.
- S

Author's Note:
T = Thane
S = Shepard
G = Garrus
DA = David Anderson
SH = Steven Hackett
JV = James Vega
RE = Randall Enzo (ME: Infiltrator)
The trio stood, side by side, surveying the dusty brown terrain. It was mostly Shepard's message mentioning the Sierra Nevada on Earth, that had lead them there... Along with Oriana's suggestion to scout for honeymoon destinations, and Kolyat's incessant prompting. So Thane had eventually indulged them both, which was how they found themselves viewing the stunning panoramic scenery of the Chihuahuan Desert. The warm air was filled with the sounds of chirping and buzzing. The sun was setting, sending warm rays dancing into the sky. The colour reminded Thane of Irikah's eyes, and he sighed quietly. He still missed and mourned his first wife, but he felt the pain of Shepard much more keenly. It had been nearly six months since his fiery Siha had departed for Earth, and he missed her terribly. Knowing she was somewhere on the planet, but not knowing where, was maddening.

"It's a shame Shepard isn't here," Kolyat stated, gently.

"Definitely. I really like her," Oriana said, smiling softly. "It really is a shame she has to miss this."

"Indeed," he agreed, solemnly.

The background chirping ended without warning, which caught Thane's attention. His gaze fell from the brilliant sunset, before scanning the baked earth and quickly discovering the reason. Partially hidden by a tuft of Blue Grama Grass, an amber tinted scorpion had captured a large, green field cricket as prey. Thane watched the scene for several moments, when suddenly, a tightening feeling gripped his chest. It was vice like in it's ferocity, and he found himself doubled over, gasping for breath. Desperately, he tried to suck in air, but was unable to do so. Panic began to spread through him. Faintly, Thane heard Kolyat call to him, and Oriana's voice frantically shouting for medical assistance. But before he could reply, he found himself falling to the ground, completely powerless to stop his decent. His last thought was of Shepard, as the world turned black.

Author's Note
The Chihuahuan Desert is in New Mexico, the location Thane states he & Kolyat go to during the Citadel DLC.
Bailey stood, staring blankly at the metal door, wondering what the hell he was going to say. A ragged sigh escaped him, and he scrubbed a hand across his tired face. He knew the pair of them had been through so much, more than any father and son should, even if you just took the past six months into consideration. The commander's forced absence in Earth, the limited communications with her, not to mention Thane's 'attack'. Despite that salarian scientist's new treatment, Bailey knew his friend was not doing well. Hell, he'd even helped him move into a private room at Huerta Memorial, after the scientist and Kolyat had convinced Thane to do so. The whole situation was so complete fucked up, even before this happened. Squaring his shoulders, Bailey palmed the door's locking mechanism and once it turned green, he strolled into the apartment. He made his way to the living room, and was greeted by the sight of the two drell practising some form of kata. At least that's what it looked like to him.

"Good evening, Armando," Thane greeted, without even turning round.

"Bailey," Kolyat nodded in greeting.

"Define good," he sighed.

Unceremoniously, Bailey set down the bag he was carrying on the only table in the room. There was a distinct clink of glass bottles, causing the younger drell to raise a brow ridge and the elder to turn and regard him. Without hesitation, he tossed two of the bottles to the other men, before popping the cap off one for himself and sinking into the couch. The distinctive, sharp tang of batarian uncut assaulted his tongue as he took a large swallow, before the vivid green liquid burned down his throat. It was not the most pleasant drink in the world, but this conversation was hardly going to be pleasant either.

"There's no easy way to say this... Earth's been hit," he grit out.

In all the time he'd know Thane, the elder drell had always appeared calm and collected, unflappable. But the way he simply downed half the bottle of ale in one go at the news, spoke volumes. Kolyat, for his part, looked like someone had punched him in the gut. Bailey's heart went out to both of them, but especially his young officer. Even if Kolyat never said it, he knew the younger drell now looked to Shepard like a mother... and he'd already lost one. Seriously, it was all kinds of fucked up. Thane's quietly spoken inquiry into his family surprised Bailey, not that it really should. The man's humility that always got him. The drell's fiancé was stuck on Earth, yet he thought to ask about his kids. If anyone deserved the description of a gentleman, it was Thane Krios. Bailey sighed, and took another swig out of his bottle. He watched as his friend drained his remaining ale.

"Nothing. The only report was a short military broadcast: Luna all but decimated and Earth hit."

"Arashu, protect them. Kalahira, do not take her," Thane whispered.

Bailey hadn't a clue who the drell gods were, but he could related to the sentiment. His mind focused on his kids, praying that if there was a God, he'd keep Many and Owen safe... Shepard too.
Author's Note:
A kata is a sequence of martial arts movements (karate mostly) practised solo.
Begrudgingly, Shepard's eyes began to focus. Through a plume of choking dust and acrid smoke, chunks of debris filtered into her vision. She winced, as the ringing in her ears crashed painfully against what sounded like someone calling her name. Shepard clutched a bloodied hand to her pounding head, as she heard the muffled voice becoming louder. It vaguely sounded as if someone was panicking and calling her name, but she felt too groggy to be sure. Hell, she wasn't even sure what had happened, though she wondered if maybe Anderson would know. At the thought of her adopted father, worry began to gnaw at her. She didn't know where he was, and in a desperate attempt to find out, Shepard forced herself into a seated position. Every inch of her body protested as she went, and she tried to call out his name. The sound came out as a pathetic croak, the blistering heat from a nearby electrical fire jammed the words in her throat. Hazily, the previous events began to realign themselves in her mind, and it left dread coiling in the pit of her stomach. The reapers had reached Earth. Nausea began to wash over her, but before it could over take her, Shepard felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. After several rapid blinks, her eyes finally adjusted to the dust filled gloom, and Anderson's face swam into view. With more effort than she would ever admit, Shepard managed to force a weak smile for her adopted father, as he offered her his hand.

"Don't remember it hurting this much after Sovereign," she grunted.

"Victories usually don't," the admiral stated. "Here, take this. You've got to get moving."

Without ceremony, he handed her his old but loved M-3 Predator, before they began picking their way across the room of fallen rubble. The weight of the gun was a welcome feeling, and offered a surprising physiological boost. Which was probably the result Anderson had been after. Whilst he called into the comm. link, Shepard carefully checked each of the prone bodies they came across, closing the eyes of the dead as she went. Every last member of the Alliance Defence Council was dead, and it was a marvel how the pair of them had come through the blast not only alive, but mostly unscathed. Shepard was not a religious woman, but she mused that there must have been someone or something looking out for them at that moment.

"Lieutenant Commander Williams, is that you?" Anderson called through the comm. "What's your status?"

At the name of her old gunnery chief, Shepard's head snapped up. Despite their recent differences, she hoped Ash was okay, she also hoped that James Vega was alright. She had grown fond of her guard during the past six months. He'd help keep her sane during her imposed grounding, and reminded her somewhat of Garrus from their days hunting for Saren... with a sprinkling of Joker's wit added into the mix. As she waited for Anderson to finish debriefing the lieutenant, her mind wandered to Thane, along with the rest of their family and friends. Silently, Shepard prayed to whatever gods might exist, that they were all safe and sound. She didn't know how she'd cope with this war without them. Squaring her shoulders, Shepard scouted the remainder of the destroyed room, before she froze. Staring almost unseeing, out of the ruins of the large panelled window, she witnessed a scene of utter devastation. The synthetic legs of a reaper stomped it's way through the high-rises of Vancouver, leaving nothing standing in it's wake. Smoke and flames billowed from what remained of the skyline, joining the screams and shrieks of terror that filled the air. A stab of sorrow and regret pierced her heart.

I'm sorry I couldn't protect your home, Kaidan'
"We can't reach the Normandy," Anderson continued explained into the comm. "You'll have to fly it, and we'll meet you at the landing zone."

"Any news on Vega?" she asked, once he cut the link.

"On route to the Normandy with Williams," the admiral replied.

Shepard nodded her acknowledgement. Then without another word, and only a quick knowing look for each other, the pair dropped from the ruined window. Neither knew what horrors awaited them, but she felt they had a chance of rendezvousing with the Normandy regardless. After all, they were both damn fine marines.
With a sigh, Oriana rested her head on Kolyat's shoulder. She had left Thane and Bailey commiserating together in the lounge, and had gone in search of her boyfriend, once he'd gone to lick his wounds in private. On instinct, her middle and forth fingers of her right hand separated, to accommodate his fused digits, as their hands entwined. Just moments ago, she had walked into his apartment, only to hear the devastating news about earth. Now, she was stood by Kolyat's side, on his tiny balcony, gazing out over the hustling Ward below. Her thumb began to idly rub the teal scales on the back of his hand, Kolyat silently squeezed her hand in reply.

"This is Commander Shepard we're talking about," she said, quietly."You know she's a total bad ass. She'll be fine."

Kolyat gave a small huff of laughter. "I hope you're right."

'I do too'  

Though Oriana would never admit it, she was also worried. There was no doubt the commander could seriously kick ass, but could Shepard survive the reapers? That was a question she wasn't sure of the answer to. Yet it couldn't hurt to hope, in the very least. As Thane... and Miranda, had once told her, Commander Shepard had made a career out of doing the impossible. And as she thought of her sister, Oriana had an idea.

"I can try contact Miri, if you like? See if she knows anything," she offered.

"You two talking again?" Kolyat asked, sheepishly.

Giggling, Oriana bumped against his shoulder. "Of course, it only lasted a day. And you know, it wasn't because your drell. She simply doesn't like me dating."

He looked far from convinced. "She was Cerberus."

"Was," she pointed out. "Apparently, working with Shepard changed Miri's mind about a lot of things."

"I've noticed she has that effect on people," Kolyat smiled, weakly.

Turning his head to face her, Oriana kissed him tenderly, enjoying the faint tingle on her lips as she did.

"Shepard's kicking ass and taking names. She's a total Valkyrie," she assured.

At his utterly confused look, Oriana couldn't help but giggle.

"It's a human thing. Don't worry about it."
"Running out of ammo," Anderson declared.

His announcement sent a tendril of dread curling around Shepard's, but pushing the worry down, she merely grunted an agreement. The M-3 Predator had clicked empty long ago, which had left her relying on ever depleting energy levels, to hurl the mangled monstrosities away from them. As she did so, Shepard wondered darkly if perhaps the creatures had once been batarians. They continued on in this vein, Anderson taking well timed shots, whilst she sent biotic Shockwaves into their enemies. Shepard snarled triumphantly, as several of the nightmares scattered like bowling pins. Idly, she thought she needed to thank Jack for teaching her the move, if they made it out of this.

"Hope they get here soon," the admiral added.

"You and me both, Dad," she called.

Their words were barely audible over the enemy's gunfire. However, the fleeting smile from her mentor let Shepard know he'd heard her. Wistfully, Shepard thought how wonderful some covering sniper fire would be, as she ducked to charge a Nova Blast. Within a few seconds, she was springing up from her sparse cover, intent on decimating any remaining reaper ground forces. However, the horrific view of the reaper towering against the skyline, was momentarily pushed to the back of her priorities... as the beautiful sight of the Normandy swept into view.

"The cavalry has arrived!" hollered a familiar voice, through the comm. system.

"Joker?!" Shepard laughed, in relief.

"About time," Anderson agreed.

"Let's go," she instructed.

After briefly tugging the wrist of his jacket, Shepard set off at a run, clearing the fallen obstacles in her path with ease. It was with no small amount of pride, that she noticed Anderson kept pace without effort. With the distance between them and the Normandy decreasing quickly, Shepard began to feel that they could really make it. Especially as she scrambled up the last bit of debris, the stood between her and her beloved ship. The hanger door began to open, and with instinct propelling her, Shepard leapt for it's relative safety. To her surprise, it was Ash's hand that reached out to steady her. She flashed a brief smile of thanks to her old gunnery chief, when the woman welcomed her aboard, before turning back to the hanger's opening. She was ready to help Anderson aboard, however there was something in his stance that sent the coiling dread swirling in her stomach once more. And when he called out her name in the authoritative tone he used during meetings, Shepard's heart sank. Her eyes pleaded with her adopted father, and his gaze resolutely met hers. Unflinching.

'Don't do this Dad'

"Come on!" she shouted.

"I'm not going," Anderson stated.

Shepard wanted to plead, beg, hell... even cry if it would make him come with them, but she knew it
was futile. They were marines, this is what they did, for better or worse. The dread and worry choked her, and she only managed a sober shake of her head in reply.

"You saw those men," he continued. "There's a million more like them, and they need a leader."

"We're in this fight together Dad, if you stay…"

The shake of his head cut off her protest. "It's a fight we can't win, not without help. We need every species, and all their ships, if we even stand a chance of defeating the reapers."

Shepard knew it was the truth, but it didn't stop the worry, or the fear. Her eyes dropped from his, and she grit her teeth to hold back the flood of emotions that warred within her.

"Go to the council," he continued. "Convince them to help us."

"What if they won't listen... again?" Shepard asked, inwardly shuddering at how whiny that sounded.

"Then make them listen, that's what you do," he challenged. "Now go. That's an order."

She bit back an indignant snort. "I don't take orders from you anymore, remember?"

Silently, she watched as Anderson reached into his trouser pocket. Over the sounds of destruction that waged in the background, Shepard could have sworn her enhanced hearing picked up the faint sound of jingling. She stared at the admiral.

'You're kidding me. That son of a…'

"Consider yourself reinstated, Captain."

There was a distinct note of pride in Anderson's voice, as he tossed Shepard a set of dog tags. She couldn't believe it. Not only had the Alliance decided to fully reinstate her, at last, but also give her a promotion. She almost laughed at the absurdity of it. Her gaze lingered on the shiny metal for a moment, before lifting back to the only father she had ever known. With a lump forming in her throat, Shepard clutched the dog tags over her heart, before giving the admiral a weak smile. He nodded his silent acknowledgement, before continuing his orders.

"You know what you have to do," he told her.

"I'll be back for you, and I'll bring every fleet I can," she promised, sombly. "Good luck, Dad."

"You too child."

Determined not to show any fear, Shepard turned to walk further into the hanger, briefly catching the confused look on Ashley's face. Risking one glance back, she saw the Anderson give her a crisp salute before jogging to the landing skycars. She saluted as the his vehicle departed. Years of training let Shepard feel that her old chief had stepped beside her, and in silence, they watched the remaining marines usher civilians into the waiting cars. Suddenly, the dreadful screech of the reaper filled the air, and sent the remaining evacuees scurrying to the nearest skycar. A wave of nausea washed over Shepard, as the red light of the reaper beam lit up the surrounding area. A gasp of horror was wrenched from her throat, as she watched... helpless, when the beam engulfed one fleeing car, then another. Tears threaten, and Shepard screwed her eyes shut, forcing the barrier to hold back her
sorrow.

"Lord, have mercy on their souls," Ashley whispered quietly.

"Joker…” Shepard called into the comm. system, her voice wavering as she did.

The pilot's demeanour was as sombre as hers when he answered: "They won't even see the tail lights."
In all his life, Thane had never been a drinker, the path of an assassin requiring sharp skills and a clear mind. But he gladly accepted the glass of asari hard liquor that Bailey offered him. He had a fierce respect for the human, stemming from the officer helping to save Kolyat from a life of sin. Then several months ago, once Thane had taken an apartment not far from Kolyat's, two had become gradual friends. The recently appointed commander was the only person outside of the Normandy that Thane trusted, other than his son, and had also been the first to break the devastating news of the attack on Earth. Now the pair sat in the relative comfort of Kolyat's sparse apartment, sombrely sifting through news outlets and intelligence feeds, in the hope of finding information about their missing loved ones.

"Is there any word from your family yet?" Thane asked.

"Still nothing," Armando replied. "But Mandy and Owen are resourceful kids, and Dawn is fiercer than a cornered bear about them."

"From the stories you have told me, you taught them well," he assured. "I am sure both they and their mother will make it at least to relative safety, if they are not already at an evacuation station."

"Hopefully. How about you? Heard from Shepard?"

"No."

As he spoke, Thane made a conscious effort to keep his tone even, despite the turmoil he felt. Though before he could elaborate, he heard the faint whoosh of the apartment's front door opening, followed by two heavy bangs. The corners of his mouth twitched into the barest hint of a smile for a brief moment. His short term stay with Kolyat, when he had first began to reside on the station, had taught Thane to recognise the sound of his son kicking off his boots. A moment later, Kolyat hurried into the living room, barely pausing to shake Armando's hand in greeting.

"Father, switch on the ANN."

Thane did as his son requested, and the trio sat silently, intently watching the grainy image of a young man dressed in Alliance dress blues, with the grim backdrop of rubble and smoke.

"We can report that the repatriated Normandy has left Earth's orbit and that first human Spectre, Captain Shepard, has been reinstated and re-appointed as the ship's captain. As yet the mission is classified, but…"

The marine was cut off by a deafening sound, and static engulfed the video feed. The sound of terrified screams followed, before the screen went dark and silent. A familiar, pretty woman with bobbed dark hair replaced the oppressing blackness. The image was still grainy, but evidently filmed from a news studio.

"That footage was broadcast from Vancouver just two hours ago. We are unable to report the Normandy's mission, but I am sure that you will join me in wishing Captain Shepard, and her crew, good luck and god speed. I'm Emily Wong, reporting for the Alliance News Network, Los Angeles."
Thane blinked his double lids, twice. Despite the desolation he had just witness, he couldn't help but feel one thing. Hope. He was also very intrigued to hear how she got promoted, and prayed they'd both live long enough to hear the story.
T,
Earth under attack. With J, JV and AW. Safe on Normandy. DA stayed behind. Leading resistance. SH sending us to Mars. Pray you are safe.
- S
UNKNOWN ERROR: MESSAGE COULD NOT BE SENT.

CE 2186: 02/07 – 19:00
T,
- S
UNKNOWN ERROR: MESSAGE COULD NOT BE SENT.

CE 2186: 02/07 – 19:05
G,
- S
UNKNOWN ERROR: MESSAGE COULD NOT BE SENT.

CE 2186: 03/07 – 06:00
T,
Estimated ETA to Citadel 36 hours. Are you available to meet? Location? Pray you are well.
- S
ERROR: COMM. RELAY UNAVAILABLE.

CE 2186: 03/07 – 20:00
T,
ETA 22 hours. SH has contacted via SACC. Earth situation dire. No contact from DA. Are you safe?
- S
ERROR: COMM. RELAY UNAVAILABLE.

CE 2186: 03/07 – 21:30
K,
Have not heard from your father. Is all well? On route to Citadel. ETA 20.5 hours.
- S
ERROR: COMM. RELAY UNAVAILABLE.

CE 2186: 04/07 – 10:00
T,
ETA 8.5 hours to Citadel. Growing concerned. Please reply. Pray you are well. I love you.
- S
ERROR: UNABLE TO CONNECT. ADDRESS UNAVAILABLE.

Author's Note:
FUBB = Fucked Up Beyond Belief
SACC = Secure Alliance Communication Channel
"Father... just try," Kolyat huffed, in exasperation.

If his feelings hadn't been in such turmoil, Thane would have smiled at his son's insistence. But it had been two days since the Alliance News Network report, that stated the Normandy had left Earth. And those two days had been filled with agonising silence, interjected only by the regiment of his physiotherapy sessions, along with visits from Kolyat and Bailey. There had been no word from Shepard, Anderson, or even Liara. Nor were there any further reports regarding the Normandy, nor her mission. Thane was long past trying to deny his worry and agitation to himself, yet he could not let his misgivings show so easily. He had been trained better than that. He also felt it would be a disservice to his Siha, should he break down. Even if she had changed her mind regarding their relationship. With the wait of the galaxy on her shoulders, he would not blame her for doing so. Shepard had more important things to worry about, than a dying spouse.

"If her time on earth has led her on a path away from me, I would be selfish to interfere," Thane replied, solemnly instead.

Kolyat stood up in annoyance. "You know Shepard is not like that, there will be a good reason she hasn't messaged these past two days. Maybe comms are down, maybe her Omni-Tool is damaged, or maybe she can't get access of her old comm. address. I thought you loved her? She agreed to marry you. So for Arashu's sake, just message her!"

The young drell's voice had risen until he was almost shouting, as he flung a datapad in Thane's direction. He caught it with ease, and looked at the glowing orange screen. There flickered an unfamiliar extranet address, one that seemed to be Shepard's Alliance contact detail. He couldn't help but wonder if Kasumi had been helping Kolyat with his hacking skills, since he knew the thief was lurking somewhere about the Citadel. Deciding it was a question for another time, Thane merely smiled, and raised a brow ridge in imitation of the gesture Shepard used so often.

"Bailey helped me track it down. The Normandy contacted the tower requesting permission to dock a few hours ago," Kolyat shrugged.

A lump threatened to form in Thane's throat. He felt humbled and surprised that his son had gone to such lengths for him. He struggled to find adequate words of thanks, as the tiny bubble of hope once again beginning to swell. He so desperately wanted Shepard to be alright, and for them to be reunited. Perhaps the Normandy docking was a sign, an omen he wouldn't have known about, if not for his son. Though before Thane could dwell on it, a ping interrupted the growing silence. Muttering an apology, Kolyat quickly flipped open his Omni-Tool. Thane watched silently as his son's eyes grew wide, and rapidly darted back and forth along what must have been a message. Silently, Kolyat turned his wrist so that the interface was visible to Thane.

**Hey Kid,**

**I went to down to dock D24, to see if I could find out if it's definitely still Shepard in charge. All things considered, she's looking well, but one of her crew is being transferred as an emergency to Huerta. It wasn't private enough to tell her about your dad.**

**Bailey**

Without looking up, not wanting to let Kolyat see the tears of relief that threatened to spill, Thane nodded his acknowledgement and began to type into his own Omni-Tool.
Siha,  
I've called and sent messages, but gotten no response. It seems likely comm. systems are out, so I do not expect this will get through either, but I heard a rumour that the Normandy was docked here at the Citadel. 
Are you well? I'm at Huerta Memorial Hospital under the name Tannor Nuara. Please excuse the moniker and this email's encryption – in my line of work, it is unwise to advertise my location, particularly when I am not in good health. 
We should meet before circumstances force us apart again. I love you.  
- T.  

As he hit 'send', a clamour from the hallway caught both Thane's and Kolyat's attention.  
"Get that IV in," one voice instructed. 
"Emergency surgery needed to reduce the swelling," another said. 
"Suspected crush damage to the coronal structure," proclaimed yet another. 
"Temporal bone seems to be damaged too," added another. 
"Doctor, the equipment and room are ready," another informed. 

Then, an achingly familiar voice could be heard through the commotion: "Hang in there. Ash." 

"She's in the best hands, Captain Shepard. And Doctor Chakwas has been alerted as you requested," a pleasant voice soothed. 

"Thank you," Thane heard Shepard reply. "Though could you tell me if there is a drell…" 

The realisation that she was looking for him, over took the wonder that she was alive and had seemingly been promoted, and made Thane's body moving towards the door of his room, before his mind could register the act. 

"Shepard," another familiar voice interrupted. "Udina's called a meeting of the council. We need to be there, now." 

"Okay Liara," Shepard replied. 

Her tone alarmed Thane, she sounded so defeated, something he had never heard in his Siha before. He rushed into the corridor, with Kolyat close behind, only to witness her retreating form walking determinedly towards the elevator. He felt a hand squeeze his forearm, and turned to see his son's concerned gaze upon him. 

"She'll be back," Kolyat consoled. 

"Indeed," Thane agreed. "Arashu protect her."
Leaving Earth had been hard. Leaving Ash, sleeping in a medically induced coma, had been agony. Though selfishly, leaving the Citadel without even knowing if Thane was alive or not, had been the hardest thing for Shepard. Now she found herself standing in the desolate waste that had once been Menae. As the turian general; Corinthus, explained that her sole reason for being there, was dead. If she wasn't Captain Shepard, she probably would have screamed. There had also been no word or sighting of her best friend either, which had only added to her dark mood. Idly, Shepard realised that not knowing how her adopted family were doing, was slowly going to drive her insane.

"I'm on it Shepard. I'll find you the Primark," said a confident, flanging voice.

Shepard couldn't help the smile that took over her blood splattered face. "Garrus!"

"Vakarian, Sir. I didn't see you arrive," Corinthus greeted.

Her keen eyes watched how her best friend's mandible twitched with discomfort, and she almost outright laughed. Shepard had never doubted that her turian had been destined for great things, but that wasn't going to stop her from ribbing him. She couldn't wait to hear the story, provided they lived long enough to have the opportunity to hear it. After all, it wasn't everyday that she saw generals saluting Garrus, and him looking at her almost sheepishly... his eyes silently begging her not to comment. Shepard settled for smirking at him in reply, not wanting to ruin his image. However, once Vakarian turned to face her, it took all Shepard's willpower not to wrap her arms around him... as she had done eighteen months previously, when she had found him on Omega. To her battle weary eyes, her best friend looked magnificent. She revelled in the fierce grip of both his hands on hers, and she swallowed thickly, watching how his eyes travelled over her face.

"You're alive," she grinned.

Garrus' mandibles flared into a wide, self-assured grin. "I'm hard to kill. You should know that."

At his exaggerated wink, Shepard did laugh. It was honest and without care, for the first time since the dreadful Alpha Relay incident. A fact that must have shown, as her Cerberus enhanced hearing let her overhear Vega and Liara whispering, whilst she studied the map of Palaven's moon with the two turians.

"Hey doc, that the old friend you were talking about?"
"Yes, one of the two best snipers in the galaxy."
"There history there?"
"They've been best friends since our hunt for Saren."
"You sure? Lola and that Vakarian seemed rather choked to see each other."
"I am"
"Wait, you said one of the best snipers. Who's the other?"
"The captain's fiancé."
"Dios. Lola's engaged?!"

Shepard barely managed to hide her smile, as both party's conversations came to an end. Garrus' with the conclusion of who the next Primark was; one Adrian Victus, and the other with a surprised looking James and mischievous looking Liara. She eyed her adopted sister suspiciously, knowing no good could come of the Shadow Broker smirking, before introducing the lieutenant to her best
friend.

"James, this is Garrus Vakarian. He helped me stop Saren and the collectors. He's one hell of a soldier," Shepard said, pride evident in her voice.

The turian puffed out his chest, just a little, at her praise. Which caused Shepard to roll her eyes in amusement.

"Garrus, this is James Vega," she continued. "The poor soul who was tasked with keeping me out of trouble on Earth. So far he's proven to be a good soldier, awful shuttle pilot though."

"Vamos Lola! Estevan managed to buff all the dents out," James laughed.

After shaking hands with Vega, Garrus turned his attention to Liara, and gave the asari a similar greeting as he had done with Shepard.

"Good to see you in one piece, Garrus," Liara said, sounding relieved.

Once the brief pleasantries were done with, it was back to gruelling business. With the help of General Corinthus, they soon had an estimated location for Victus. But before they could set out, Joker made an agitated call over the comm. system.

"Captain! Shepard, come in."

"Can this wait Joker? We're in the middle of a war zone," Shepard replied.

She reached for her right ear out of habit, rather than actual need, since her Kuwashii Visor had upgraded her sub-dermal implant for the battlefield after her resurrection. Garrus noticed, and flared a mandible in a lopsided grin. Of course he noticed, he was the one who had upgraded her visor, but Shepard still raised an eyebrow at him, daring him to comment.

"It's the Normandy. It's like she's possessed. Shutting down systems, powering up weapons," Joker explained, his voice sounding tense. "I can't find the source."

"Should I go back and take a look?" Liara asked, quickly.

Since Shepard hadn't even started to form a plan, she settled for a grateful smile and a simple nod of acknowledgement for the Shadow Broker, before turning her attention to Garrus.

"You said you were with Victus this morning?"

Any reply that the turian could have said, was lost to the raised voice of James: "Incoming harvester, heading for the airfield."

"General, tell Victus we'll rendezvous here," she instructed Corinthus. "Coming Garrus?" she added, coyly.

He clicked the heat sync of his beloved Viper rifle in response. "Are you kidding? I'm right behind you. Just like old times."

She took point, her strength and determination somewhat renewed, and grinned. "Where you belong."
Author's Note:
Dios = God
Vamos = Come on
"Reaper advisor, ha! Shame they didn't listen to me. Or to Shepard..." Garrus muttered to himself, angrily.

His rage had been steadily increasing, since being hailed by over the comm. by one of General Corinthus' lieutenants, and informed that Fedorian was dead. The feeling refused to abate, as he swiftly ran back towards relative safety of the Canrum Compound. Garrus wished he had more information, but all the young lieutenant added was that someone was on Menae, and demanding the next Primark. This had been followed by a stream of data sent from the general, concerning possible candidates. Though if Garrus was honest, he had outright ignored the feed. He was more than a little suspicious as to why no-one had mentioned exactly who this someone was, and why he was the one required to talk to them.

'It better not be that weasel, Udina'

Garrus had no real idea what a weasel was, but he had heard Shepard and Doctor Chakwas call the current human councillor it enough times. He still couldn't quite believe Anderson had relinquished the post, as soon as the stupid Alpha Relay incident had happened. But Garrus admired the man for sticking by Shepard so publicly, especially since he hadn't been able to, nor had Thane. With his gizzard's twisting in guilt, he realised it had been several weeks since he had spoken to the drell. The preparations for the reapers, as underwhelming as they were, had taken up his every wakened minute. He was ashamed to admit, but he wasn't even sure if Thane was still alive.

'He's got to be... for Shepard's sake'

It seemed that just thinking of his best friend had somehow called her to Menae. As Garrus was sure he could hear her authoritative voice, demanding what she needed, once he entered the blast gates that protected the compound. He almost laughed. Despite all the horrors he had faced in the six months they had been parted, knowing Shepard was there on Menae, made the weight he was carrying seem lighter. He checked his hurried steps, and settled into a more confident stride. When he called out his greeting, Garrus couldn't help noticing the wide grin that spread across her blood splattered face. Her smile seemed like a beacon in the hell that Menae had become.

'I can see why Thane calls her a warrior angel, and she is attractive, for a human' his brain thought, catching him by surprise. 'Hopefully Thane's still alive' he added, loyally.

"Vakarian, Sir. I didn't see you arrive," Corinthus greeted.

He winced inwardly, waiting for some witty remark from Shepard, but was relieved when her grin merely turned into a smirk. Obviously, she had decided to go easy on him, for a change. Deciding to play it cool... as human's said, Garrus clipped his Viper rifle to his back, before gripping both Shepard's hands in his in greeting. Perhaps, tighter and a little longer than he had intended, but Garrus didn't really care. After six months of her absence, and the several days he'd spent on the spirit-forsaken moon, he'd have happily hugged her. It was only the presence of General Corinthus that stopped him, anyway. Since grabbing his former commander, and pushing his forehead to hers, was hardly the professional look either of them liked to portray in public. However, without releasing her hands, his eyes searched her face, and was troubled by what he saw. Sure, she really was attractive when he looked closely, but she also looked tired and worn. Her eyes didn't shine as they
once had, and the set of her jaw was tenser than he had ever seen before. But still, she smiled.

"You're alive."

Swallowing his worry, at least for the time being, Garrus flared his mandibles in an exaggerated grin. If Shepard could push her doubts aside to smile at him, it was the least he could do in return. He threw her a one liner, in the cockiest tone he could muster, and added an attempt at a human wink... anything to keep her smiling. To Garrus' immense relief, it had the desired effect. Shepard laughed, whole-heartedly, until her eyes watered. He hadn't realised how much he had missed that sound, and couldn't help giving her a genuine smile in response. But with his mission accomplished, Garrus turned his attention to Shepard's squad for the first time. He was relieved to see Liara, but it was the hulking human marine that was now walking towards them, who caught his eye.

"He'd give a krogan a run for their money"

"James, this is Garrus Vakarian. He helped me stop Saren and the collectors. He's one hell of a soldier."

Regardless of the fact that she was no longer his commander, the evident pride in her voice pleased him immensely. Even if it caught him off guard. He knew Shepard valued him, but to hear the way she spoke of him... to say he wasn't use to it, was an understatement. Then again, for the longest time, Shepard was the only one who had believed in him. Especially when he had lost all faith in himself, after Omega.

"Garrus, this is James Vega," Shepard continued. "The poor soul who was tasked with keeping me out of trouble on Earth. So far he's proven to be a good soldier, awful shuttle pilot though."

The thought that she had been assigned a guard angered him, to the point his subharmonics rumbled briefly, enough to make Corinthus turn his head. Then his brain caught up, and realised Shepard spoke of the marine with confidence, and some affection.

"Vamos Lola! Estevan managed to buff all the dents out," James laughed, as he offered his hand to Garrus.

He shook the hand the lieutenant offered, all the time wondering what a Lola was, never mind the word that caused his translator to glitch. He briefly greeted Liara, but as soon as the pleasantries were over, Garrus clapped a hand on Shepard's armour clad shoulder, and ushered her towards the map Corinthus stood bent over.

"The general filled me in, we know who we are looking for," he told her.

As he spoke, his hand remained resting on Shepard's shoulder. Seemingly subconsciously, she settled onto her right hip, which brought her body closer to his. The general gave a questioning subharmonic chirp at the closeness, which Garrus pointedly chose to ignore. His friendship with Shepard was not up for debate, nor was it anyone else's business. Seemingly giving up, Corinthus decided to address Shepard.

"Palaven Command informs me the next Primark is General Adrian Victus."

"Know him Garrus?" she asked, their close proximity making her look up at him.

"I was fighting alongside him this morning," he explained. "Life long military, gets results, popular
with his troops. Not so popular with military command..."

"Think he can get the job done?" she asked.

"We both know conventional strategy won't beat the reapers. Right now he could be our best shot," Garrus replied with confidence. "And I trust him."

There was another subharmonic question from Corinthus, this time queering his personal input. And once again, he did not answer. He knew how to read between the lines of Shepard's questions, knew what she was really asking was if Victus could be trusted, and he was happy to give her the affirmative. Even if he did have to wonder when he started picking up all the silly human sayings that he now knew.

"Good enough for me," she stated. "Okay, let's get him on the shuttle and get out of here."

Though before they could set off, Shepard creased her brow and raised her right hand to her ear, despite her Kuwashii Visor negating the need for her to do so. Garrus knew this was habit, for he had been the one to modify her visor to enhance her sub-dermal implant on the battlefield. He couldn't help flaring his mandibles in a grin. It was kind of... cute, actually.

'Wait! Did I just refer to Shepard as cute?!'

It seemed that Liara was also patched into Shepard's feed, which didn't surprise him, since the asari was now the Shadow Broker. From Liara's next question, it seemed to Garrus that something was wrong on board the Normandy. He cocked his head to the side, about to ask, when there was a shout from Shepard's fellow marine. As Vega bellowed his warning, he unclipped what Garrus assumed was a custom M-8 Avenger.

'Nice gun, and he seems to have some guts'

"General, tell Victus we'll rendezvous here," Shepard instructed Corinthus. "Coming Garrus?" she added, almost flirtatiously.

Garrus laughed, and clicked the heat sync of his beloved Viper rifle in response. "Are you kidding? I'm right behind you. Just like old times."

"Where you belong," she quipped.

As Shepard took point, Garrus couldn't help his mandibles spreading wider at her reply. 'It's good to have you back, Shepard'
The fight against the harvester, along with the monstrosities that had once been barians... and presumably turians, had been arduous and hard won. Covered in gore and ichor, they made their way back to the outpost, and Shepard was disheartened to find there was still no sign of Victus. There was also no word from Liara or Joker, which made her worry. Looking to distract herself, as well as wanting to offer what help she could, Shepard set about bolstering the turian troops that manned the barricade walls. Garrus and James by her side. Almost without thinking, she volunteered to relieve an injured gunner from a mounted turret. With her teammates covering her flanks, Shepard managed to successfully keep several waves of husks at bay. She had been pleasantly surprised that the defences had held strong, and there had even been some banter between the three of them. Mostly that comprised of James having to explain what 'fish in a barrel' meant to Garrus, and the turian muttering his second favourite catchphrase:

"You humans are weird."

Things had been going relatively well, until a true behemoth entered the arena. In truth, Shepard couldn't remember exactly what had happened. One moment, she was stood on top of the barricade, glowering at the horror that could only be described as a brute. The next, she was making a desperate barrel roll between the creature's legs. Frantically, Shepard half scuttled, half ran from it's impossibly long reach. Dimly she could hear Garrus' and James' worried shouts, as she hastily bunkered down behind a large boulder. Taking several shaky breathes, whilst the ground shuddered with each lumbering step the great beast took, Shepard began to charge the most powerful Nova attack she could muster with her dwindling energy.

'Amonkira, lord of hunters, grant that my hands be steady, my aim be true, and my feet swift, and should the worst come to pass, grant me forgiveness' she prayed.

Indulging in one last lungful of air, Shepard swiftly threw herself out of cover to face the brute. With a ravaged cry, she leapt.
Garrus had to admit, fighting alongside Shepard again felt good. Or at least as good as war ever got. The lieutenant had impressed him as well, with his skill and determination to protect the commander, it was obvious Vega was a good soldier. After dispatching the harvester, the three of them stood on top of the south barricade. Shepard on the mounted turret, and both himself and James covering her flanks. Their rapid gunfire managed to easily dispatch the legions of husks that the reapers threw at them. But all of a sudden, things started to go horribly wrong… A monolith of a creature lumbered into view, a grotesque hybrid of what appeared to have once been turian and krogan. Repressing a horrified shudder, Garrus couldn't help wondering if his feelings mirrored what Shepard must have felt, when confronting the reaper embryo aboard the collector base.

"What the holy hell is that thing?!” exclaimed James.

The marine steadily emptied a full heat sync into the massive brute, but the rounds barely made a mark. However, what it did do, was catch the monstrosity's attention. With alarming and unexpected speed, the beast ran full-pelt at the barricade, and impacted with jarring force. Garrus watched, almost in slow motion, as Shepard lost her footing and fell.

"Lola!” "Shepard!”

Though both he and James shouted at the same time, the only thing that really registered in Garrus' auditory canals, was the roar of his own blood. For a moment, he was stunned as he watched Shepard half scuttle, half run from the monster's impossibly long reach. Though by the time she had hunker down behind a large boulder, the gravity of the situation had reinserted itself, displacing the sense of surrealness. With one mind, Garrus and James began to rush down the side of the barricade, to Shepard's aid. However, the pair stopped short, as Shepard suddenly leapt from behind the rock. With savage force, she slammed herself into the ground... fists first, mere inches from the brute. Garrus had to brace himself, as a powerful shockwave of blue biotic energy radiated from Shepard's impact zone. With an anguished roar, the creature crashed to the floor. The attack was primal, impressive, and down right terrifying. He doubted anything would have survived the direct impact, but he emptied his clip into the beast for good measure.

“Lola!”

James panicked shout, dragged Garrus' eyes from the corpse, just in time to see the lieutenant launching himself at a husk that was heading for Shepard. Spurred on by panic and adrenaline, he rushed to his best friend's side, all the while worrying why she was still kneeling. Unmoving. To Garrus' slight agitation, the marine reached her first, and was a little startled to see Vega cup Shepard's face with his hands. She shifted her head slightly, presumably to look at the lieutenant through her red fringe. It was only at that moment, that Garrus realised that her normally close cropped hair was now slightly longer, the front bit falling slightly over her brilliant green eyes. The realisation worried him, because for Shepard, that was down right slovenly. As he drew near the kneeling pair, Garrus watched as Vega rip apart a foil packet, and helped empty the paste into Shepard's red hued mouth. He let out a low growl at the familiarity, not recalling a time when his best friend had ever required such assistance. But then he noticed the sheen of sweat on her barely visible forehead, and the way her hands were seemingly trembling uncontrollably. Thinking of how powerful her last attack had been, left Garrus assumed the sweet smelling gloop was biotic energy rations. As well as fearing that Shepard may have damaged her L-chip, since she still hadn't made a move to stand.
"Cerda loca," James muttered, smiling.

The marine's calm demeanour did nothing to ease Garrus' worry or frustration. If anything, it aggravated him further. Almost shouldering Vega out of the way, he knelt in front of Shepard and grabbed her shoulders tightly. Garrus was alarmed to see how sallow her pale skin looked, as well as how dazed and unfocused her eyes were, unable to fully focus on him. Though something in his gizzards told him it was more than just the strength of the biotic attack, that had left her so drained and disoriented. However, all that did was fuel his anger.

"What the spirits were you thinking?!" he growled. "What would Thane say? What would he do, if you got yourself killed?"

'What would I do?' he couldn't help wondered.

The look of hurt that flashed in Shepard's eyes, twisted his gut with guilt. She stayed silent, and glanced away from him. To Garrus' horror, he could swear he saw tears glisten in her eyes. A new type of fear gripped him, when he realised what he had actually said, and how he had hurt his best friend. Keening with remorse, he lay his forehead against hers, and pressed gently. Relief flooded him, when she pressed back without hesitation.

"Spirits Shepard, I'm sorry."

"Sorry I worried you, big guy," she whispered back.

"Just... be more careful," he said, quietly. "Please."

Shepard raised an eyebrow, as her customary smirk returned to her face. "I'm hard to kill, you should know that."

________________________________________________________

**Author's Note:**
*Cerda loca = Crazy Bitch*
The mission on Menae was deemed a success, though to Shepard, it didn't feel like it. Too many were dead or M.I.A. Both Earth and Palaven burned, and neither she nor Garrus knew if their friends and family were safe. However, Shepard did take small comfort in the fact the Primarch had been retrieved. Victus also seemed decent enough, though she didn't know if she trusted him. But Garrus did, and that was good enough for her. It was good to have her best friend back by her side. And having two turians on board also gave her an excuse to return to the Citadel, something Shepard had been trying to decide on for some time. She had official declared it was to pick up dextro supplies, but she had caught the knowing looks from Joker, Garrus and Liara. The latter having discretely promised to try and hunt down any information she could on Thane. That was how Shepard now found herself standing just inside the entrance of Huerta Memorial's atrium. Liara had picked up an encrypted message that Thane had sent, several days before, which stated his current alias and location. The relief of knowing her fiancé was alive had brought Shepard to tears. Though thankfully only the Shadow Broker, her bot Glyph and also EDI were witnesses, all of whom Shepard knew would be discrete. However, the way that Garrus had squeezed her shoulder, as the crew disembarked from the Normandy, led Shepard to believe the turian had an inclining of her destination.

If Shepard were to be honest with herself, she was nervous. The same churning anxiety that she had battled with, when presented with their first lunch with Kolyat, twisted her stomach. Then, if had been the worry of being accepted. Now, it was because she had no clue as to what she would see, when she found Thane. His message had given no real clue to his state of health, nor had Liara managed to find out anything... Huerta's archives were reassuringly encrypted. However, the fact Thane was residing in the hospital, led Shepard to imagine him hooked up to drips and an oxygen mask. So she was almost brought to her knees with relief, as she spied a sleek leather clad figure, shadow boxing in front of one of the large plate glass windows. Shepard swallowed a little thickly, as she admired the view. He was as alluring as she first met him, and it took more willpower than Shepard knew she possessed, not to run over and simply fling her arms around him. She didn't want to make a scene, preferring to keep their reunion as intimate as possible, so she opted for indulging in another lingering gaze, before calmly walking towards him. Shepard smiled to herself, her heart beating faster, as he turned before she had even called out a greeting. She watched as Thane simply stopped. He didn't move, smile or even speak. His onyx eyes simply roved over her face and body, making her uneasy. Self-consciously, Shepard tugged the hem of her N7 hoodie. In truth, she had thought about buying a dress to wear, but had needed to see him too badly to stop for shopping. However, this wasn't the reunion she had been hoping for.

'Stupid Kasumi and her stupid romance novels'

Though during Shepard's moment of self-scolding, Thane seemed to find his voice. "Siha, when I heard Earth was under attack, I was concerned you hadn't made it out. I tried to contact you, but never got through."

Shepard practically breathed his name, as he stepped towards her, uncharacteristically hesitant. She was happy that Thane was at least still using her 'pet' name, but couldn't believe how awkward this conversation felt. Despite the sinking feeling in her gut, Shepard desperately tried to hold onto her smile. Though she couldn't help thinking of all the time that had been lost to them, wasted, as she cooled her heels waiting for the Alliance to get their act together. A smaller, more frightened voice at the back of her mind, wondered if Thane had changed his mind about her... about them. He was acting surprisingly cautious, which hurt. Her mood must have shown through, as she noticed him...
reach out his hands to her, almost tentatively. Once again, Shepard swallowed thickly, as she
suddenly realised that Thane was utterly unsure what to do. It was astonishing. It was not like Thane
to doubt himself... though Shepard had witnessed it a handful of times. The realisation brought with
it a mixture of relief and compassion. Without hesitation, she entwined her hands with his, her fingers
parting on instinct to accommodate his fused digits. Shepard smiled, revelling in the feel of his cool scales against her skin, and she hoped the small gesture would help him realise how much she'd missed him.

"It's been too long." Shepard murmured. "I was starting to think I'd never see you again."

"I sent a few messages, both whilst you were on Earth and afterwards. But I suspect they never got through," Thane told her.

"No, they never," Shepard frowned, squeezing his hands slightly. "Though I did get your last one,
just before we docked this morning."

"Is that why you're here?" he asked, sounding hopeful.

"After an invitation like that, how could I refuse?" she purred, cupping his cheek. "Though I also
need to visit a friend who got hurt on my watch."

"The marine we encountered with Feron and Liara? I believe she will be starting physical therapy
with my class soon," he stated.

It felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Despite Ashley's email earlier, Shepard had no
real idea of how the other woman fared. And with Earth in ruins, she couldn't believe that with Earth
in ruins, she was being blessed with both of them being mostly okay. She breathed a sigh of relief,
and Thane gently rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand that he still held.

"I cannot forget what happened at the lake," Thane continued. "But if she means something to you,
then I will help how I can. As long as she is here, consider her under my protection."

'Spirits, I love this man'

"She does. Ash can be a bitch, but she was part of the original crew. She was a friend once,"
Shepard explained, fighting to remain composed. "So I appreciate that, Thane. Thank you."

Thane smiled, a little sadly. "I am near the end of my life, it is a good time to be generous."

It had been several days since Thane had been blessed with a stolen glimpse of his Siha. Several days of waiting, of uncertainty, of not knowing. Meditation hadn't calmed him, praying hadn't calmed him, so now he found himself in the hospital's atrium shadow boxing... for a lack of a better term. His gaze was focused out of the large plate glass window, onto the deceptively peaceful view of the Presidium below. Even though Thane's mind had been drifting into memories, his keen hearing picked up faint, yet familiar footsteps behind him. At first he tried to tell himself he was being foolish, idly hoping for something that was not true, before he caught the delicate hint of a particular fragrance. It was a scent wrapped up in memories of passion, comfort and love.

'Siha?'

Thane's mind raced as he turned, braced to face the apparition that he would surely find. However there Shepard stood, in all her radiant beauty, more breathe taking than his perfect memory had recalled. The sight of her stunned him, rooted him to the floor he stood upon, though his eyes hungrily drank in the sight of her. Her tousled fiery locks, her porcelain skin, her emerald eyes and painted red lips. Even though Thane longed to hold Shepard, to pull her into a tight embrace, uncharacteristic nerves held him back. Something was off. Her eyes didn't shine so brightly, her mouth didn't quirk into it's familiar smile. Her outfit was different too. Instead of the dresses he had become so accustomed to, she wore dark jeans and a black 'hoodie'... at least that's what Thane thought the jacket was called.

'What if she has merely come to say goodbye'

He swallowed thickly. "Siha, when I heard Earth was under attack, I was concerned you hadn't made it out. I tried to contact you, but never got through."

"Thane, it's been too long," she smiled, almost sadly. "I was starting to think I'd never see you again."

Shepard's voice held a jumble of tones. Relief, joy, regret, sadness. It caused him more worry, and Thane found himself holding out his hands to her, in desperate hope she'd reach for him. No matter how strong he appeared outwardly, he was still a man, scared of losing his love for a second time. Though as Shepard's warm fingers curled around his, Thane bit back a relieved sigh, and silently said a pray of thanks to Arashu for small mercies.

"I sent a few messages, both whilst you were on Earth and afterwards. But I suspect they never got through," Thane explained.

"No, they never. Though I did get your last one, just before we docked this morning."

Her brow creased for a moment. "No, they never. Though I did get your last one, just before we docked this morning."

'A week to reach her!'

"Is that why you're here?" he asked, cautious but hopeful.

"After an invitation like that, how could I refuse?" Shepard's tone took on a sultry edge, one that made his heart quicken it's pace, as she cupped his cheek. "Though I also need to visit a friend who got hurt on my watch."
"The marine we encountered with Feron and Liara? I believe she will be starting physical therapy with my class soon," he stated. "I cannot forget what happened at the lake. But if she means something to you, then I will help how I can. As long as she is here, consider her under my protection."

"She does. Ash can be a bitch, but she was part of the original crew. She was a friend once," Shepard explained, fighting to remain composed. "So I appreciate that, Thane. Thank you."

No matter the months he had spent in his Siha's presence, Thane was always humbled by her generous spirit. Even when people did her wrong, Shepard would try to help them, as long as they weren't beyond saving. It was good, and it was admirable, but it worried him. Despite loving that part of her nature immeasurably, Thane worried that it would one day be her downfall. She was too good, too kind, too believing. Shepard had looked past all his faults, and somehow decided he was worth her time, worth her love. It was an unbelievable blessing. Thought no matter how much he loved and worshipped her, Thane knew he would never be worthy of his Siha. He would let her down, no matter how hard he tried, he would hurt her. His fate was set, and his time was short, but Thane still wanted to at least try to live up to Shepard's faith in him. He tried to smile for her.

"I am near the end of my life," he explained. "It is a good time to be generous."
Shepard's heart felt like it skipped a beat. She felt sick, disoriented. Knowing Keprel's Syndrome was fatal was one thing, but with Thane looking so well, Shepard had wanted to hope... however delusional that may have been. Subconsciously she took a step back, and her hand went instinctively to her neck, were the delicate silver chain that held her beautiful engagement pendant hung. Her fingers curled around it like a talisman, as if it could somehow protect her from the pain his comment had caused. Tears threatened to prick her eyes, as she regarded Thane. The look of worry he gave her was heartbreaking.

"Siha," he whispered. "I have only a few loves left, and you are my last."

'To hell with it!'

Not caring who might see, Shepard finally closed the distance between them. Her lips brushed his tentatively, and she inhaled his welcomed scent. One of leather, and spice, and home. Consciously, she kept the kiss chaste, unsure how Thane would feel with such a public display of affection. But the look he gave her once they pulled apart, lead Shepard to believe that they were finally on the same page.

"Well... I see you want to make up for lost time," Thane smiled. "I should warn you, you may not want your final memories of me to be in this hospital. Kepral's Syndrome is... not kind."

'Or not...'

Even in her own emotional state, it wasn't lost on Shepard how Thane's hands trembled slightly as he held hers. Nor the way he avoided her eyes. Now, standing so close to him, she didn't fail to see how shallow his breathing was either. Fresh tears pricked her eyes, and she swallowed thickly, determined not to dwell on the inevitable. After having already sat through several of Liara's pep talks regarding the matter, she wasn't about to just neglect the asari's wisdom. Seeing Thane as he was now, Shepard felt more determined than ever to be there for him. She wanted to be there to reassure him, to comfort him... to love him, when he needed her though most. So cocking her hip and raising an eyebrow, Shepard allowed a smirk to tug on her lips.

"Trying to get rid of me?" she asked. "Bet you've had all the nurses after you. I warn you, Mr Tannor, she better be pretty."

Thane all but breathed her pet name, before shaking his head and pulling her gently into a very welcome embrace. It felt even better than Shepard remembered to be held in his strong arms. She hugged him back, but was careful not to squeeze too tightly, as she once again indulged in inhaling his comforting scent.

"You're a fool, Sere Krios, if you think I'd ever walk away from us," Shepard whispered, before pulling back enough to look at him. "Are you allowed out of this place?"

"As long as I'm accompanied, in case of complications," Thane explained. "I often spend an afternoon at Kolyat's apartment."

"Does that mean we can grab lunch together?" she asked, hopefully.
"Only if you allow me to treat you," he replied, smiling.

The look on his face told Shepard that she wouldn't win if she argued, despite her having intended to spoil him for a change. Trying not to pout, she let out a sigh in defeat, and gave Thane a lopsided smile.

"Not like I'm going to convince you otherwise," she replied. "Let me go check up on Ashley, then I'm all yours… well, until I get another desperate message informing me that there is an imperative mission only I can carry out. Probably to traipse across the galaxy to retrieve some general's grandmother's china or something…"
One Heart (Thane PoV)

Thane regretted his words instantly, and watched as Shepard took a step away from him, hurt evident in her emerald eyes. Her hand quickly went to her neck, drawing his attention to the delicate silver chain and pendant she wore. A surge of quiet elation swept through him, almost disbelieving what he saw was correct. No matter how much he had hoped, Thane had not thought that his wonderful Siha would still return his feelings. Swallowing thickly, he called to her, before he desperately explained how much she meant to him. He would have said more, but a pair of soft red lips met his. The kiss was chaste, reminiscent of the ones they first shared, bathed in the purple haze of the Normandy's drive core. It left Thane wanting more. More time, more closeness... simply more of her. He hoped Shepard didn't notice how his hands trembled, from a strange combination of relief and worry.

"Well… I see you want to make up for lost time," he smiled, before growing serious. "I should warn you, you may not want your final memories of me to be in this hospital. Kepral's Syndrome is… not kind."

As much as the words hurt to say, Thane knew he owed Shepard the truth. Really, other than his love, it was all he had left to give. During his gruelling wait to see her again, he had prepared himself for every answer he suspected Shepard could give him. From her being relieved that she could walk away with a clear conscious, to her beautiful emerald eyes welling with tears. However, Thane had not been prepared for the response she actually gave. He wanted to laugh as Shepard cocked her hip, raised an eyebrow, and allowed a smirk to tug on her red painted lips.

"Trying to get rid of me?" she asked. "Bet you've had all the nurses after you. I warn you, Mr Tannor, she better be pretty."

Shaking his head, Thane pulled Shepard gently into the embrace he had been longing to give her. He whispered his endearment for her, as he allowed her presence to ease his aching heart and soul. Her long absence had hurt more than words could describe.

"You're a fool, Sere Krios, if you think I'd ever walk away from us," she whispered, hugging him back. "So, are you allowed out of this place?"

Thane nodded. "As long as I'm accompanied, in case of complications. I often spend an afternoon at Kolyat's apartment."

"Does that mean we can grab lunch together?" she asked, a mixture of hope and uncertainty underpinning her soft voice.

"Only if you allow me to treat you," he replied.

Try as he might, Thane could not control the smirk that pulled at his lips, as he watched Shepard try not to pout. Even though she sighed, there was a tinkle to her emerald eyes that had not been present earlier. A fact that made him inordinately proud of himself, especially when she graced him with a charming, lopsided smile.

"Not like I'm going to convince you otherwise," she conceded. "Let me go check up on Ashley, then I'm all yours... well until I get another desperate message informing me that there is an imperative mission only I can carry out. Probably to traipse across the galaxy to retrieve some general's grandmother's china or something..."
"Any moment I spend with you is priceless," he smiled.

"Smooth talker," Shepard grinned. "I doubt I will be long with Ash, meet you back here in fifteen?"

"As you wish, Siha."

Without another word, Thane brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, before giving her a slight bow. The soft giggle she gave in return was both unexpected and delightful. It was rare to startle such a demure sound from his Siha, and Thane's smile widened in response. He watched appreciatively, as her hips swayed as she walked. She truly was a goddess made flesh.

"So… things are okay between you two?" a voice behind him asked.

Schooling his face, Thane turned to his son. "Yes. I believe so. As far as they can be."

"Do you know how long she's staying?" Kolyat asked.

Thane shook his head. "I don't believe she knows herself, though perhaps I will know more after lunch."

"So you don't need me to bust you out of here today?" Kolyat teased, grinning. "Bailey said there's a new restaurant opened near the Meridian Market, an asari place that's supposed to be really nice."

'Dating advice from my son?'

"My thanks," Thane replied, trying to hide his amusement.
"I'd like an answer, Lieutenant Commander," a voice stated, as Shepard neared Ashley's room. "The galaxy has need of exceptional soldiers like you. Now more than ever."

'What the hell is that waste of space doing here?'

"I still need time. You will have my answer soon, I promise," Ashley replied.

"I look forward to it," the councillor said, as Shepard stepped through the door. The man turned to leave, and he glared at her in passing. "Shepard," he acknowledged, in a hostile tone.

'Slimy, gutless weasel'

Shepard forced a tight lipped smile."Udina."

There was a soft chuckle from Ashley, as the door slid closed behind the councillor.

"Spirits, I hate that jerk," she grumbled.

"I think the feelings mutual," the other woman agreed.

"I got your email," she stated.

Pulling a chair from beside the door, Shepard sat beside Ashley's bed. Despite the lingering tension in the room, the act was incredibly... normal. The situation was reminiscent of the days shortly following Virmire, when the chief was recovering from a shotgun inflicted stomach wound. Smiling slightly, she pulled a small paperback from the large cargo pocket of her fatigues. From it's dog-eared pages and tattered cover, it's age was evident, and Shepard knew she really owed Kasumi for coming up with it on such short notice. Ashley's eyes lit up at the battered book.

"And a present," Shepard explained.

"Ulysses? How did you…?"

"A friend with a love of books tracked it down for me," she shrugged. "So, what did the weasel want?"

"He's offered me a Spectre position. It's an honour and all… but… I don't know," Ashley replied. "I need to think about it some more."

Shepard raised an eyebrow. "It's a big decision, it's smart to give it some thought."

It was Ashley's turn to raise an eyebrow, which caused Shepard to smile. She understood what her former gunnery chief was getting at. Sure, she might have taken exactly zero seconds to decide, but she had known she was a candidate before speaking to the councillors. Also, at the time, there was only a megalomaniac threatening the safety of the galaxy... not a full race of sentient machines hell-bent on wiping out all intelligent life. Shepard shook her head, trying to clear the dark thoughts from her mind, at least for the time being.
"So, how you been doing?" she asked.


Biting her bottom lip, Shepard shut her eyes. "That all she say?"

"No… she may have mentioned a demand that Doctor Chakwas get up here now, or you'd use your Spectre status to make sure no-one would serve her Serrice Ice Brandy again," Ashley chuckled.

"Yeah… that may have been a little harsh."

"Not that I'm complaining," the chief replied.

The two lapped into silence, and Shepard took the opportunity to take stock of Ashley's injuries. From what she could see, the marine was sporting two impressive black eyes, a multitude of cuts and scrapes to her face and one hell of a fat lip. All other injuries seemed to have been healed in remarkable quick time. Despite the growing awkwardness, Shepard breathed a sigh of relief. Ashley's survival was a close cut thing, and if it hadn't been for Karin's impressive skills, she didn't doubt her fellow marine would be dead. Or at least severally brain damaged at the very least. Regardless of how hurt she had been with Ashley calling her a traitor back on Horizon, not to mention the chief's attitude towards Thane, and how angry the marine's attitude had made her back at the archives, Shepard still valued the woman. They had been friends once. Not as close as Tali or Liara, nor even as close as Kasumi and Jack had become. But she had once been a friend, one that Shepard couldn't deny missing. The thought that her one time friend could have died, without them clearing the air, left Shepard swallowing thickly.

"We didn't have time to talk… before," she said, quietly. "I thought maybe if you were up for it…"

"Yeah," Ashley agreed, immediately. "I wasn't sure you wanted to. You were pretty clear on Mars about where things stood."

Shepard hummed an acknowledgement, letting the other woman say her piece first.

"So, okay. You cut all ties with Cerberus, I accept that," the lieutenant stated. "It's just that, if you're giving the orders, I need to be able to count on you."

'Ironic'

Shepard's mouth tugged into a half smile. "That works both ways," she stated, calmly. "It's a damn mess out there. All we've got is the people around us. We have to trust each other, or this doesn't work. Deal?"

"Deal," Ashley agreed, looking relieved.

"When you're back on your feet, we'll talk some more," she said, standing to take her leave.

"Captain, Shepard… wait," the marine called. "There's another thing, I'm sure I should mention it."

"What is it?"

"I have family, back on Earth… I haven't heard from them," Ashley informed, frowning as she
"You're sisters?"

The other woman nodded. "Mom too. It's driving me crazy."

Carefully, Shepard lay a hand on Ashley's shoulder. "Try not to worry, I'll look into it."

"When I thought you were dead, I lost hope. I'm telling you..." Ashley stated, choosing to look out of the window, rather than at Shepard. "But when you came back... I was ready to believe... anything. I mean, maybe this problem can't be solved by some grunts shooting the bogeymen in the face, but if you think it might help, I'm game."

Despite being stunned by the woman's admission, Shepard couldn't help but laugh. "Now that sounds more like the Ash I know."

"Stay safe out there, Skipper," Ashley smiled."And... I'm sorry, for what I said, about your fiancé."

'Not me you should apologise to'

Pressing her lips together, Shepard nodded her acknowledgement, before striding to the door. She stopped on impulse, and turned back to the Lieutenant Commander.

'The past is the past!'

She snapped off a crisp salute. "Who's like us?"

"Damn few, and they're all dead," Ashley laughed, barely managing to return the gesture.
A sleek, black clad figure caught Karin's peripheral vision. As he so often did, Thane was waiting patiently for her to end her current conversation. Without hesitation, she nodded a dismissal to the junior doctor she had been talking to, and turned a warm smile towards the drell as he approached. As he reached her, Thane inclined his head in a small bow as greeting, as he always did. She waved him into a nearby chair, before seating herself in the one opposite.

"Good day, Thane. I don't believe our next appointment is until tomorrow," Karin smiled.

"Indeed," he agreed. "Though I wish to speak with you, if I am not interrupting?"

"Not at all. How are you feeling?"

His lips briefly twitched into a small smile. "All things considered, I cannot complain."

Karin nodded in understanding. It really was a small medical miracle, mostly thanks to Professor Solus' genius, that Thane was still alive. However, time was still running out and she couldn't help but hope Shepard would be able to see him again, before Keprel's Syndrome fully dominated what time the drell had left. Pushing away the sombre thoughts for another time, Karin regarded the man in front of her. She doubted that she would ever be an expert in drell body language, and certainly not Thane's, but there was something in the rigidity of his posture that piqued her interest.

"I get the feeling that this isn't a strictly medical conversation," she pressed, gently.

"Not… no," he admitted, another small smile forming. "I trust your opinion implicitly, doctor. I would like to know if I would be permitted to spend the night away from the hospital."

There was a spark in Thane's black eyes that hadn't been there before, at least not since Shepard had returned to Earth. It lead Karin to surmise that Shepard was back on the Citadel, or at least was intending to arrive shortly. She suppressed a knowing smile, and feigned innocence.

"A night at Kolyat's?"

Thane shook his head, the smile becoming more permanent. "No. Siha is aboard the Citadel, we are shortly going for lunch. It may be foolish to hope for more, but…"

Chuckling softly, Karin held up a hand to halt his worry. "Thane, I know Shepard. I'm sure she's just as eager to spend time together as you are. As your doctor, I must warn you to exert caution. Over strenuous physical activity is not advised, though gentle exercise would be beneficial."

She patted his arm reassuringly, even as her smile took on a teasing edge. And from the look he gave her, Karin was sure Thane understood her meaning. She broke their eye contact for a moment, quickly typing into her Omni-Tool, and with seconds she received the confirmation she wanted. Smiling, Karin looked back up into his dark eyes.

"The pharmacy nurse will be here shortly," she explained. "I've asked her to prepare an overnight kit, to be used in case of an emergency. Though I suspect you'll be fine."

"My thanks," Thane replied.
After waving a hand dismissively, Karin levelled him with an even stare. "That's my advice as a doctor, but as a friend, I suggest you enjoy the time you have together. I've known Shepard for years, and I can assure you, she isn't going to leave you because things get difficult."

There was a moment of silence between them, before Thane began to speak, his voice quiet and full of emotion: "Karin… thank you. Though I have a request to make."

She leant forward and took his hands in hers. “Of course.”

"Help watch over her? When I draw breathe no more."

"Without a doubt," she promised.

Thane's gaze was so earnest, that Karin found herself blinking back tears. She would have said more, but Shepard's jovial voice called out to them, and the woman quickly joined them. Karin gave her adoptive daughter a quick once over. The newly appointed captain looked frighteningly worn, and if the dark circles were anything to go by, Karin doubted that Shepard was sleeping all that much. Otherwise, she looked in remarkably good shape, considering she was on the front line. Without preamble, Karin pulled her into a tight hug. "You look better than when I last saw you," she smiled.

"Yeah…" Shepard smirked. "Think I may owe you a bottle of Serrice Ice, for the miracle you've worked on Ash."

"I won't say no to that, but I know I am keeping you from your date," Karin replied. "Have fun, the pair of you. And Thane, don't forgot that package, it should be at reception for you."

The drell bowed to her, before offering his arm to Shepard. The smile the captain gave, was enough to warm and break Karin's heart. She loved the fiery redhead like a daughter, and Thane was a good man. It seemed so unfair that their time together was going to be so short. She waved them farewell, but as she watched the pair walk towards the elevator, a thought struck her. With a chuckle, she quickly typed out a message on her Omni-Tool.

Shepard,

As I am sure you are aware, Thane's condition is progressing. Extended overtly strenuous activity is not advised, though gently exercise would be very beneficial, as is massage. I have attached leaflet on the most effective techniques. Please ping me when you're next free for a drink.
- Karin

Hitting send, she smiled. Even though she considered Shepard to be the daughter she never had, being the captain's friend, allowed Karin to be more forward than she might have otherwise been. The time Shepard had with Thane was short, but she was damned determined to help make it as happy as possible.
"I can't believe that damn monument is still there!" Shepard grinned.

"And why is that?" Thane asked, genuinely curious.

"Because that monument is the conduit that connected the Citadel to Ilos. It spit out the Mako after the gorge run. With me, Tali and Garrus inside it," she explained, still smiling. "Wonder if the keepers ever got the scorch marks out?"

For a moment, he wondered if he should ask for clarification, but thought better of it. This was his Siha, after all. And if the gleam in her emerald eyes was anything to go by, Thane knew he was probably better off not knowing. So instead, he smiled indulgently, before leading Shepard gently by the hand. Apollo's Café was a nice 'open air' affair, that overlooked the Presidium's lake. The monument in question was still clearly visible from the seating area, a detail that made Shepard. Shaking his head, Thane tried not to smirk as he guided her to the café's kiosk. As the pair studied the menu, there was a deep throaty chuckle from the other side of the counter. Tensing on instinct, Thane turned his head sharply, and was greeted by a mature asari giving his Siha a broad grin. Immediately he relaxed his posture, recognising who the woman was.

"Well, well. Commander Shepard... or is it captain now?"

"Matriarch Aethyta," Shepard smiled. "Long time. What are you doing here? Illium not cutting it anymore?"

The asari shrugged. "Something like that. Though, with the galaxy the way it is, seemed the Citadel was the safest place to be. Anyway, what can I get you babe?"

With the food ordered and drinks collected, the pair made their way to a small table, situated near the glass railing that faced onto the water. The sound of one of the lake's many fountains faintly reaching them, as they sat in silence. There was a distant, faintly hurt look in Shepard's emerald eyes, and it disturbed Thane to see it there. He reached across the table for her porcelain hands, reminiscent of the times they had shared in the Life Support Plant. As Shepard's screwed her eyes shut, Thane squeezed her fingers, as a tear slid down her cheek. He gently wiped it away.

"Siha?" he questioned, gently.

"Damn it!" she muttered. "Can we talk about the white elcor in the room and then just get on with enjoying our time together?"

"As you wish," he told her.

"How long?" she sighed, sadly.

'Not long enough'

"I've been to several doctors," Thane explained. "My favourite gave me three months to live… not long after you left for Earth."

"So, no one really knows," Shepard surmised. "Seems quite a difference though, ninety plus days."
Not that I'm complaining."

Thane smiled slightly. "Mordin… may have had a hand in it."

"Oh?"

"An experimental drug and treatment plan. It has helped to slow the process," he stated. "When he first came to me about it, he said he was: 'happy to help'. As well as trying to fulfil one of your requests…"

He let the statement hang in the air, as an unspoken question, and watched as Shepard's eyes widened.

"Oh!" she gasped, before giggling. "I asked him to look into when you first came aboard. Figured his STG contacts might have an idea or two, but he never mentioned it again." She nibbled her lower lip for a moment. "I would say I'm sorry, if it seems I went against your wishes from when you first joined the team… but I'm not."

"Siha, it is through your tenacity and want to protect a stranger, that I am able to share this moment with you. I would not accept an apology, even if you gave it, as there is nothing to apologise for."

Thane would have said more, but unfortunately his body chose that moment to be wracked by a coughing fit. It wasn't a particularly bad one, by previous standards, but it did leave him feeling breathless and blinking back strained tears. When he was finally able to breathe somewhat easily, he glanced up, and found Shepard had moved to the seat next to him. Her eyes were full of concern, and without a word, she passed him his drink. He sipped it gratefully, and he squeezed her hand in thanks, as the cool liquid eased his throat.

"Are you in a lot of pain?" she asked, almost hesitantly.

"At times," he admitted, truthfully. "The oxygen transfer proteins don't form correctly. Your human equivalent would be haemoglobin. As a result my blood is low in oxygen, no matter how much I breathe in. I get tingling, numbness... and that is the best of it. As for my brain, I cannot track the damage. I just experience dizziness from time to time."

He glanced away, partial from shame and partial from fear. With so much resting on his Siha's shoulders, Thane felt like he was only adding to her burden. Before he met Shepard, he was content to die. Then she had awoken him, and gave him reasons to fear Kalahira's embrace. Barely seven months ago, he had admitted his fear to her, and now his body was rapidly propelling him to his end. Despite the assurances to the contrary, Thane couldn't and wouldn't blame his Siha, if she walked away. However, he felt her warm hand squeeze his tightly, which caused him to look at her questioningly. Shepard raised an eyebrow, as a smirk formed on her red painted lips.

"Guess that puts you at a disadvantage for a drinking contest. Good thing I had other plans..."

She accentuated her statement with a wink. And just like that, the tension and doubt were gone.
Detour (Shepard PoV)

During their lunch, Shepard's Omni-Tool had alerted her to a message, twice. She had resolutely tried to ignore them, but only messages from trusted friends and allies were redirected to her, whilst she was away from the Normandy. Knowing this was beginning to niggle at Shepard's mind, but she had only just been reunited with Thane, so other people's messages could damn well wait. No matter how much it was driving her crazy. There was a chuckle from the man beside her, and Shepard cast her gaze away from the Presidium Lake, to his onyx eyes. The look Thane wore suggested he knew exactly how much it was starting to get to her. Rolling her eyes, Shepard gave his hand a gentle squeeze, before letting go. He knew her far too well. Quickly, she brought up her messages, and couldn't help raising an eyebrow, when she regarded the senders. Doctor Chakwas and Liara, the only two people that definitely knew she was currently with Thane.

'Must be important'

Shepard,

As I am sure you are aware, Thane's condition is progressing. Extended overtly strenuous activity is not advised, though gentle exercise would be very beneficial, as is massage. I have attached leaflets on the most effective techniques. Ping me when you're next free for a drink.
- Karin

Trying and failing miserably, Shepard couldn't help the smirk that pulled at her lips. Chakwas was getting as bad as Mordin. Shaking her head, she opened Liara's message.

Shepard,

I believe you humans have a saying: 'A little bird told me'. Well, a little bird told me that Thane has overnight release from Huerta. With that in mind, I have taken the liberty of booking a room for the pair of you at Athame's, the asari run hotel close to the Council Chambers. I know you will try to argue with me, but the room is already paid for, and is booked under Tannor. Just this once, I will ask you to please allow someone to look after you. The pair of you deserve a haven of happiness during these times, and though this is tiny compared to what you have done for me over the years, please accept this gift.
- Liara

"Wow," Shepard stated simply.

Her smirk had morphed into a look of shock. Silently, she turned her wrist to allow Thane to see the message. He blinked slowly, twice. Showing his own surprise.

"Indeed," he agreed, dryly.

“I suppose it's a terribly bad idea to cross the Shadow Broker,” she smiled.

"I would have to agree Siha. I know which hotel she means, though I warn you it is very… opulent,” Thane warned.

'I can imagine how expensive that means'

Shepard sighed with resignation, before gesturing to her hoodie. "Well, I better not show up in this
then. Mind a brief detour?"

"Only if you allow me to treat you," Thane stated.

"You treated me to lunch," she pointed out.

Shepard had never been very good at accepting gifts or being spoiled, which Thane had a habit of doing. She felt guilty for it. His love and time was enough for her. Hand in hand, they left Apollo's waving farewell to Aethyta as they went, before calling the elevator. Once it arrived, Thane ushered her inside the cabin before him, as he always did. He wrapped his arms around her waist as they descended.

"Indulge me," he asked.

"I can't convince you otherwise, can I?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"No," he chuckled. "There may also be an article I already have in mind for you."

That piqued her interest. "Oh?"

"Patience," Thane smiled.

Without another word, he led her from the elevator, and they wound their way through the bustling crowd of Shin Akiba. Soon, Shepard found herself in front of a very fancy looking store. Pierre Bissette Couture the sign read. She sucked in a breath, both Miranda and Kelly had raved about this designer, throughout their mission against the collectors, So Shepard was under no illusion as to how expensive the dresses would be.

"Thane, no…" she began.

"Please," he interrupted, gently.

He draped one arm comfortable around her shoulders, whilst he pointed to a dress that stood to the right hand side of the window display. Shepard couldn't help but gasp. It was gorgeous. A deep purple knee-length number, with capped sleeves, a cinched in waist and a sweetheart neckline. One that would undoubtedly show off her ample cleavage.

"Siha, you are always beautiful," Thane whispered. "But I think, in this dress, you would look… ravishing."

The way he said the last word... low and gravelly, was distinctly sexy, and sent a pleasant shiver down her spine. Glancing away from the dress, Shepard met Thane’s onyx eyes, he was regarding her with a look of pure lust. Turning fully to face him, she gave him a sultry smile, and ran her hands discretely down his sides.

"Whatever you want," she relented.

The gaze seemed to intensify. "You."
Feeling on top of the world... it was an odd expression that Thane had heard many humans use, though always considered it an absurd saying. A belief he had held right up until that moment. Walking into Athame's, with Shepard on his arm, was an indescribable feeling. She truly looked ravishing, in the dark plum dress he had bought her less than an hour before. And if the appreciative glances from the hotel's other patrons were any indication, Thane wasn't the only one to think so. Without preamble or incident, they checked in and found their room. It was a spacious and ornate affair, done in pale blues and shimmering golds. There was a small seating area in the room, with plush white leather coaches, which soon merged into a sleeping area that was dominated by a large bed covered in white silk sheets.

"Large enough for a krogan orgy," Shepard chuckled.

"Siha," Thane sighed.

In truth, he had missed her dry quirky humour, and smiled despite his exasperated tone. His gaze admired her shapely form, as she brushed passed him on her way to scope the bathroom, leaving Thane to survey the rest of the room. Directly opposite the bed, was a floor to ceiling window that looked out onto the Presidium Lake. But as attractive as the view was, Thane repressed a shudder. There had been too many times that he had exploited just such an instalment. Quickly, he typed a command into the window's control panel, that turned the shear plate glass opaque, and shielded them from any unwanted attention. For a moment, the room was plunging into darkness, before small low level lights flickered on. They cast a warm orange, almost romantic glow to the room, reminiscent of candle light. He chuckled, wondering what his Siha would make of the ambience. There was a delighted sounded squeal from the bathroom, a sound Thane wasn't aware the fierce commander could make, followed a sultry sounding giggle.

"This tub looks amazing," Shepard called. "But there's something in here I think even you will like."

Her words and tone intrigued him. Moving to join her in the bathroom, Thane tapped the environmental control as he passed, drying and warming the air, aiming for a happy medium between what would be ideal from him and comfortable for Shepard. As he entered the bathroom, his eyes immediately fell to the polished white marble counter, near the double sink. There stood two, rather impressive, care packages. One evidently for his Siha, which was filled with various beauty products and fragrance oils, and one obviously for him. He smiled as he took in the two jars of different sands, one dark for thorough exfoliation, and the lighter one meant for fine buffing. There was also a pot of amber coloured oil, that Thane knew would smell like Arctotis, the vibrant coloured flowers native to Rakhana. The required heating torches and wash clothes were provided as well. Smiling, Shepard silently handed him a datapad.

Thane,

Liara told me about her idea, so I had Delanynder put this package together for you. I'm sure you know by now, that me and Liara got together after she helped me bathe. I suspect it was something you and Irikah shared, but there's just something about five digits instead of four rubbing rubbing the sand on... Trust me, and you can thank me later.

- Feron

"Well," Shepard purred. "You seem a little overdressed for this. Need me to help?"
"I'd like that," he smiled.

The look she gave him was positively smouldering, and Thane's heartbeat sped up in response. Suddenly, flash of doubt seared through his mind. His health was rapidly failing, his stamina was not what it once was. Thane doubted he would be able to perform as he once had, and worried he would not live up to his Siha's memories, already knowing he wouldn't live up to his own. He gently caught her hands as she reach for him.

"Siha, you should know that my cardiovascular system is not what is wa…"

His warning was cut off as Shepard's soft lips met his, the kiss was gentle yet still full of passion. Thane could feel her delicate hands slide up his arms to his shoulders, before swiftly divesting him of his coat. He hummed his approval as their kiss deepened, his tongue eagerly seeking out hers, as he revelled in the sweet familiar taste. She was as intoxicating as ever. And Thane almost whimpered, she she slowly pulled away.

"You were saying something?" she asked, coyly.

"I've missed you, Siha," he murmured.

"Let me take care of you," she whispered, against his lips.

"Will you let me return the favour?" Thane asked.

Shepard merely smirked, before her lips found his again.

Author's Note
Arctotis is actually the scientific name for African Daisy, a plant native to South Africa that are richly coloured. Usually pink, yellow, orange and red, but occasional white. Since they like hot climates, I thought it was a good flower to link to a desert planet. Also, Delanynder is the hanar shop keep Shepard meets in ME one the Presidium.
As the sands gently heated, Shepard set about slowly undressing Thane. She caressed each new expanse that was revealed, and revelled in the feel of his cool scales under her fingers. Even though his warning still swirled in her mind, Shepard pushed it aside. In this context, she refused to let his declining health be an issue, especially tonight. There weren't words to describe how acutely she had missed him, during her tenure on Earth. The passion she had felt during their first time, before the relay, still burned within her... but this wasn't about lust, not entirely. Once Shepard had him naked, she couldn't help the way her eyes travelled his body. Thane was still as alluring and sexy to her, as he had first appear in Dantius Towers. She paused to kiss him deeply, humming in approval as she inhaled his welcome scent of spice and leather, before ushering him to sit on the side of the empty tub. As Thane did so, Shepard shimmied out of her dress, and folded it carefully on the counter before kicking off her high heels. She could feel his eyes upon her, and knowing how he liked her in black lace, she kept her lingerie on.

"You are a vision, Siha."

His rich voice sent a familiar, pleasant shiver down her spine. Smiling, Shepard grabbed the jar of dark sand and sat behind him, kissing his shoulder. She took a handful of the warm, coarse sand and carefully applied it to Thane's back. He visibly and audibly sighed as she did, and Shepard couldn't help her smile widen. The sand wasn't as rough as she had been expecting, and it wasn't unpleasant against her skin, which let her relax into enjoying bathing her fiancé. As she reached his lower back, her fingers splayed to cover as much of his scales as possible, Thane gave another contented sigh.

"You are a marvel."

His smile was evident in his voice, and Shepard leant around his side to kiss his cheek. On impulse, she cheekily flicked out her tongue, licking his cheek frill as she pulled away. The action caused Thane to suck in a shocked breath.

"And full of surprises," he chuckled.

"Only for you," she replied, gently.

Taking her time, Shepard rubbed the sand down his toned arms, before slinking onto her knees in front of him. Even though she had moved in order to reach his legs more easily, it took more willpower than she would like to admit, not to pay attention to his impressive drellhood and concentrate on his muscled legs. Somehow, she managed. Even if she lingered on massaging his thighs for longer than was strictly necessary. Then after retrieving one of the wash cloths, that she had left soaking in warm water, Shepard carefully wiped away the coarse sand from his body. Once she was sure all the grains were gone, she reached for the jar of lighter coloured sand. This one had the texture of sugar, and starting from Thane's feet, she rubbed it into his scales. Upon reaching his thighs once again, she pushed them apart to allow her to kneel between them, as she applied the sand to his torso. Shepard chose to keep her weight on her haunches, rather than her knees, and the position caused Thane's drellhood to nestle in her ample cleavage. This drew another, throaty chuckle from her lover. Shepard looked up at him, through her lashes, her eyes wide with mock innocence.

"You do not fool me, Siha," he smiled.
Thane ran his thumb gently across her lower lip, and as Shepard moved to stand... intending to lavish attention onto his back, she kissed the pad of the digit. Indulgently she caressed the toned expanse of muscle, before retrieving the second wash cloth, and wiping away the fine sand. Once finished, Shepard kissed him sweetly, almost teasingly. A feather light brush of her lips against his, before she sank back to her knees in front of him, and began massaging his powerful thighs again.

"Then maybe I should tell you of all the things I thought about, whilst I was kept away from you," Shepard whispered. "Of all the nights I lay awake thinking of you, of all the dreams of you when sleep finally came. Or maybe you want to hear how I've craved you touch, your kiss. How I've felt empty without you by my side. How I've wanted to touch you, taste you."

Shepard stopped her hand's ministrations, before she very slowly and deliberately licked the length of him. The action pulled a ragged moan from Thane, and Shepard couldn't help but smile impishly. She placed a hand on top of each of his thighs, as a silent request for him to remain seated, before she drew him into her mouth. Languidly Shepard caressed him with her lips and tongue, and hummed her approval, when Thane's hands wound their way into her cropped hair. She licked and sucked him with a hungry passion, and the tensing in the strong muscles under her hands, told her he was close. But as Shepard was about to prepare herself, Thane gently pushed her away.

"Siha, please," Thane all but gasped.

"You're right," she conceded.

Her smile turning wicked, as she gracefully stood and gathered an armful of soft towels, along with the pot of amber coloured oil. Thane looked at her quizzically.

"I knew I missed a step," she winked.

Adding extra sway to her hips, Shepard exited the bathroom. She could hear him chuckle, as she lay the towels across the bed.

"You coming?" she called.

Without warning, she felt strong arms wrap around her. "For you, always," he teased. "But please, indulge me further." Before she could ask what he meant, Thane stepped away from her, as his hands slid to her back. Deftly, he unfastened her braid's clasp, whilst his breath ghosted across the nape of his neck. Smiling, Shepard let the fabric slip to the floor, and it was swiftly followed by her French knickers. She pressed her naked body fully against his, before glancing over her shoulder and kissing him deeply. She hummed her approval of the familiar texture of skin to scales, and her tongue dancing with his bifurcated one. Calling on her depleting willpower, Shepard finally broke the kiss, and gestured towards the towel covered bed. Thane caught her lips in another soft kiss, before he obliged her silent request. Once he was settled, Shepard set about smoothing the fragranced oil onto his newly buffed scales. She took a deep inhalation of the heady aroma, and began to massage the taunt muscles of his back.

"This smells amazing," she grinned.

"It is made from Arctotis petals." Came the muffled explanation. "A native flower of Rakhana."

Lapsing into silence, Shepard lovingly rubbed, stroked, and kneaded Thane's muscles. She enjoyed
watching how the tension practically seeped out of him. Once she was convinced his back and shoulders had been thoroughly attended to, Shepard gently helped him roll onto his back, and was only mildly surprised to find his earlier arousal still very evident. Unable to help herself, she threw Thane a sultry look, as she straddled his hips. She purposefully kept a tantalising distance between them, even though she wanted nothing more than to join with him. Despite desperately wanting to indulge the growing heat she could feel, Shepard knew there was something to be said for patience. Summoning a level of willpower she hadn't realised she possess, she dutifully began to massage his abdomen and chest with the warm oil. It was pure accident that some of her movements had her rubbing her core along his length... honestly.

"Siha."

Thané's quiet plea was utter after the fourth time she rubbed against him, causing her to smile gently at him. Even without Shepard's own considerable need, the look he gave her would have made her oblige. Thanks to her own heightened arousal assisting, Shepard easily slid onto his length. She gasped at the delicious feeling of being filled and the familiar, yet still exciting, ridges of him. Thané's hands moved to rest possessively on her hips, and she felt him move to thrust within her. Squeezing him with her inner muscles, Shepard gently pinned Thané's hands to the bed near his head, and brought her face level with his.

"Let me take care of you," she said, in a sultry whisper.

Once Thané kissed her in agreement, Shepard set a torturously slow pace, one that would take them through the night.
Revelation (James PoV)

The first thing James noticed, as the captain came back aboard the Normandy, was that she was no longer wearing fatigues and a hoodie, but a very figure hugging purple dress. The next thing his brain registered was that she looked hot. The third realisation was that she was smiling, honestly smiling. Not the smirk she wore when she was teasing, or a forced half-smile when she was trying to be positive for everyone else, but a genuine smile. She was stunning.

"Damn Lola!" he greeted, grinning. "Te ves bella. Who's the lucky man?"

"How'd you know I didn't just get all dressed up for you, Vega?" she teased.

"Because that is most definitely an after dark dress, and it's now zero nine hundred."

"Oh, you sure? Then I guess I'm going to need to change, care to help me?" Lola smiled.

James could feel the blush creeping up his neck, and he backed up towards the cockpit. If it had been any other woman, he would have pushed the flirting further... seen how far it could go. Especially as he watched the way she sashayed up to him, causing his mouth to go dry. But this wasn't any other woman, it was Captain Shepard, the woman he'd idolised since basic. The hero he had strived to be like. A living legend.

"I'm... Um..." he stammered.

There was a cackle of laughter from the pilot's chair. "Oh man! Shepard, warn me when you're next going to do that. I want to get a close up of Vega's face. Utterly priceless."

"Pendejo!" James scowled at Joker, before laughing. "So really, anyone I know?"

"Know many assassins?" the pilot asked, before turning his attention back to the captain. "I have to say, green is still looking good on you, Shepard."

'Lo que está hablando?'

"Original," Lola chuckled.

James frowned. "Huh?"

Joker made a show of clearing his throat. "Now Vega, as you are well aware, Shepard is one badass babe. It goes without saying, she needs an equally badass guy. So natural, she chose the Galaxy's most renowned assassin to marry."

"Married?" James repeated, a little dazed.

"Not just yet," Lola replied, smiling. "And you won't find a ring anyway." The captain held up the pendant that James had noticed she never removed. "He's drell."

For a moment, he just stared at her, letting the information sink in. James guessed the pendant was the equivalent of an engagement ring. Part of him was a little disappointed, because he definitely didn't stand a chance with her, though he probably would never have had the nerve anyway. However, the majority focused on how happy she looked. Her smile lit up her entire face. She was
gorgeous before, now she was breathtaking. At one time, the captain had been his idol, now she was his commanding officer and quite possibly his friend... not to mention his Lola.

'Figuras que iría por un extraterrestre'

"Well Lola," he grinned. "I can't say I'm surprised. As long as he treats you good and makes you happy, that's what matters, right?"

Author's Note
Tevesbella – You look beautiful
Pendejo – Asshole
Lo que está hablando – what is he talking about?
Figuras que iría por un extraterrestre – Figures she’d go for an alien.
The two weeks they had spent system hopping, as Joker had taken to calling their forays into the various solar systems looking for valuable intel, the team had picked up a number of interesting items. Items that Shepard and Liara were sure would be of great worth, should the right people be found to analyse them. So with that in mind, she had ordered Joker to set a course for the Citadel, shaking her head as the pilot wagged his eyebrows suggestively. Sure, the bonus of returning to the space station was being able to see Thane again, but Shepard was not selfish enough to put her wants and needs before the greater good. In truth, if it hadn't been for Liara's insistence, she'd have probably pushed on for another week or town. And with Garrus quietly informing her that the dextro rations were running low, their destination was set. However, even if they were returning for purely practical reasons, that didn't stop the excitement Shepard felt at the thought of reuniting with Thane again. An excitement that grew, when she received the unexpected but very pleasant orders for mandatory shore leave, from Hackett's. The admiral's sly titbit of information, regarding an apartment, had piqued her interest. Which was how Shepard found herself sat in a hired skycar with Thane at her side, just forty five minutes after the Normandy had docked. His arm was leisurely draped around her uniform clad shoulders, and a lazy smile tugged on his lips, thanks to the hospital granting him a reprieve for the duration of Shepard's shore leave. Their transit took another thirty minutes, but soon the skycar's doors opened with a hydraulic hiss, which granted Shepard her first look of the Silversun Strip. One glance at the flashing neon lights, and the bustling crowd, made her grimace a little. But thankfully there was no incessantly loud music to contend with, which was a relief.

"In the years I have been visiting the Citadel, this is an area I have rarely frequented," Thane stated, conversationally.

"Reminds me of Vegas, back on Earth," Shepard smiled in reply. "It's where they hold all the N7 graduation parties."

Quickly, she grabbed their bags before Thane had a chance to, earning her a shake of the head and slightly narrowed eyes. Smiling brightly, Shepard merely hefted the two kit bags onto her right shoulder, her hand tightly gripping their canvas straps, before grabbing Thane's right hand with her left. She knew that if she didn't think fast, a lengthy debate regarding his health along with his desire to do what was gentlemanly would start, and Shepard was much too tired to argue with him. Even if it would be done so calmly and incredibly politely. She was also worried that in her current state of walking exhaustion, there was a real probability that she'd gave into whatever he wanted, and that would no doubt involve carrying their bags... which was against Karin's strict orders, and Thane's conditional release from Huerta, not that he needed to know that.

"So... Tiberius Towers," Shepard grinned. "Any idea which direction that is?"

Several minutes and two helpful asari later, the couple entered a foyer that was decked in what seemed to be black marble, along with a silvery-white metallic trim. A metal that looked suspiciously like iridium. It created a look that was ostentatious, but also tasteful, something that only the asari ever seemed to manage. The sound of steady footsteps approaching broke Shepard's revere, and she looked up from the section of floor she had been studying, to see a pretty cornflower blue asari smiling politely at them.

"Greetings, I am Erassla T'Nezor, the concierge for Tiberius Towers. Can I be of assistance?"
"Please," Shepard smiled. "We're looking for apartment seven one nine."

"Oh! Commander Shepard, we've been expecting you," the asari announce. "Take the second elevator to the top floor. Apartment seven hundred and nineteen is at the end of the corridor."

The ascending journey was smooth and rapid, which was greatly at odds with the rest of the elevators that Shepard had dealt with recently. Without preamble, they made their way down the bright lit yet empty corridor, that was richly decorated in warm brown wood and cream marble. It was a pleasant surprise that only two other apartments resided on the same floor, and if the names that were holographically displayed beside each front door were anything to go by; Chellick and Von respectively, Shepard doubted the neighbours would pose any problems for them. She and Thane paused briefly outside apartment seven one nine, and as Shepard keyed in the door's unlock code, she noticed the holo-display was suspiciously devoid of a name. But before she could ponder this, the door slid open, and they were granted the first sight of their accommodation for the next week. To say it was more than Shepard was expecting was on understatement. She sucked in an astonished breath, as she drank in the sight of the place. Soft grey slate and rich mahogany wood decorated the walls, soft cream carpet and stylish black marble adorned the floors. She was sure there was a lot more to take in, but her eyes were sharply drawn to the fire that burned in the centre of the room. Logically, Shepard knew it was a computer generated hologram with a built in temperature control, but it actually looked real. It was more than impressive. Though before she could take a closer look, there was an unexpected chime from the apartment's intercom, followed by Samantha's chatty voice:

"Captain, I've got Admiral Anderson on the QEC. Patching him through to you now."

Reeling in surprise, Shepard dropped the bags that she'd been carrying, and they landed with heavy thuds against the polished marble. Distantly, she was aware that Thane squeezed her hand, but she was too shocked to acknowledge it. Shepard hadn't heard from her adoptive father in months, and the time had been spent constantly worrying him. As Shepard stared at the nearest holoscreen, situated next to the front door, Anderson's warm face flickered into view. He looked exhausted.

"Dad?" she whispered.

"Shepard," he greeted. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

"Dad!" she huffed out a relived laughed. "How you holding up?"

"Day by day, child. Day by day."

She solemnly nodded in agreement. "Hackett sent me a message about this apartment."

Anderson's image smiled on the flickering screen. "I want you to have it," he told her. "Take it off my hands."

"Dad, are you serious?" she asked, taken-a-back.

"You need a place that's yours. Somewhere to recharge, clear your head, and whatever else you may get up to that a father doesn't want to know his little girl does," he laughed. "Kahlee wanted us to settle down there. The thing is, the longer I'm on Earth, the less I want to leave. If we win this, when we win this, I want to stay on the planet I've fought so hard to defend. You on the other hand have other commitments, a family that isn't tied solely to Earth."
"That's very generous. Actually, it's amazing. Thank you," she laughed.

"It's practical," the admiral insisted. "We need you in the best shape possible if we're to win this. I need to know you're in the best shape possible for my own peace of mind, and I'm sure Thane feels the same too."

"To put it mildly," Thane agreed, coming to join Shepard at the front of the monitor. "You have my thanks, Sir. Though I apologise I have not been able to give your daughter what she deserves."

"Nonsense," David laughed. "What Shepard needs is a good man who loves and supports her. You do that. Now make yourselves at home, damn it. It's yours."

Shepard chuckled, her arm sliding around Thane's waist. "I'm sure we can manage."

Anderson seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "Okay... Good. I've been meaning to do that for a while now. I need to go, we've got a meeting scheduled shortly. Shepard, look after yourself. I'll... talk to you soon."

"Be careful out there, Dad," she said, quietly. "I miss you."

"You too child. Take care of each other."

With that, the connection ended and the monitor turned black. Wordlessly, Thane wrapped his arms around Shepard's shoulders, holding her close as she fought to keep the unwanted tears at bay. Comforted by the firmness of his lean body against her back, and the pleasant smell of leather and spice that was uniquely him, Shepard's breathing quickly calmed. Pulling away slightly, she looked up at Thane through her lashes and smiled ruefully.

"Welcome home."
The zing of cinnamon was followed by the wispy undertone of sage, as the flavours swirled on Thane's tongue, and he smiled into his cup of amber coloured tea. The artificial light of the fire held his attention, as the orange pixilated flames danced almost in time to the soft music, that drifted throughout the entire apartment. Even though Thane knew it was merely a brief interlude in the madness that the Galaxy found itself in, he couldn't help but reflect that it had been a long time since he had felt so relaxed. Just as he thought that, a loud bang and a groan sounded from the downstairs bedroom, disturbing the peace. Chuckling quietly to himself, Thane set his teacup down on the mahogany coffee table, and rose from the plush leather couch. Silently, he moved through the apartment, coming to lean against the bedroom's door frame. A smile tugged at his lips as he regarded the prone figure of his son, with Shepard kneeling above him, one hand against his chest and the other holding both his wrist to the floor.

"You fall for that every time," Shepard panted, smirking.

"I know," Kolyat grumbled. "But at least you're out of breath this time."

"True," she grinned, shifting to stand. "You're getting better."

Once Shepard had moved slightly away, Kolyat flipped himself to his feet, causing Thane to fully smile. It was one of the first moves he had taught his son, once he had come to reside on the Citadel, after Shepard's departure to Earth. As Kolyat shrugged off his tunic, Thane's attention shifted back to his fiancée, and watched as she discarded her N7 hoodie. Hunggrily, he drank in the sight of her porcelain skin, in stark contrast to the black combat pants and sports bra she wore. His Siha was lithe and lean muscles, with generous curves that Thane had come to greatly appreciate. He still couldn't believe that the stunning woman before him, had agreed to be his wife.

"I nearly had you," Kolyat insisted.

"Dream on, sunshine," she laughed, before turning her brilliant smile towards Thane. "You going to stand in that doorway all day, love?"

Chuckling, he pushed off from the door frame, before taking a seat on the large double bed that took up half of the room. With his failing health, Thane knew it was unlikely that he would ever be able to spar with Shepard again, though that didn't mean he couldn't help train Kolyat with her. As much as he had tried to stop his son from following in his footsteps, Thane found comfort in knowing is knowledge and training could help Kolyat, and is role within C-Sec. So the next hour saw Thane instructing him on different techniques, focusing on ones that could help him win a match against Shepard, since his Siha was one of the most formidable opponents around. If Kolyat could hold his own against her, he stood a good chance against anything his vocation threw at him. Though inevitably, each round ended Kolyat flat on his back, with Shepard trying not to grin too much at her victory. After the seventh time that his son ended up on the floor, Kolyat held his hands above his chest in a sign of defeat.

"Okay, okay. I yield," Kolyat huffed.

"Yeah, anymore beatings and Oriana is going to be having words me," Shepard laughed, hauling Kolyat to his feet. "Speaking of which, I better go grab a shower, otherwise I'm going to be late."
With a quick kiss for Thane, and a wink to Kolyat, she dashed out of the impromptu training room. He smiled after her, as his son unceremoniously flopped down on the mattress beside him, breathing heavily. Regarding the younger drell, Thane chuckled at the pensive look on his son's face. Though at Kolyat's small sigh, he found himself stroking his son's forehead, as he did when he was a small child. Quietly surprised and thrilled that Kolyat would left him so such a thing.

“What troubles you?” he asked, plainly.

"I find it strange. Ori treats Shepard like an older sister."

"Truly that is not surprising," Thane advised. "I believe Miranda is only four years older than Siha, and the two are friends. From what you have told me, Oriana does not hear from her sister as much as she would like to. It is not unusual that she would form a bond with Siha."

"It's not that. Not really," Kolyat admitted, rubbing a hand across his face. "Ori sees her as a sister, I can appreciate that, I suppose. What feels strange is the woman I love considers Shepard a sister, where as I... She will never replace mum, but I guess I see her as Grunt does."

Thane couldn't help but smile. Before meeting Shepard, he would never have imagined his life would change so dramatically, and for the better. The gods had blessed him when they had sent him another Siha, not only into his life, but that of his son as well. He regarded Kolyat affectionately.

"I understand," he replied."Your mother was a remarkable woman, and irreplaceable."

"You still love her," his son said. It was a statement, not a question.

He nodded. "I always will, and yes, Siha knows this. Just because I still love Irikah, that does not mean my feelings for Shepard are lesser for that, or not as strong. Nor does my love for Shepard diminish what I feel for your mother."

There was a long drawn out silence, both of them lost to their private thoughts. Until Kolyat finally spoke:

“Thanks... Dad.”
Heart to Heart (Kolyat PoV)

Kolyat suddenly awoke, panting for breath and disoriented. Slowly, his sensitive eyes adjusted to the near gloom, and recognition replaced his feeling of displacement. A murmured groan sounded next to him, and shifting his weight, Kolyat looked at his companion who still slept soundly. With a shuddering sigh, he leant over, brushing her chocolate brown locks from her sweet face. But tonight, even the sight of Oriana did little to calm his sense of disquiet. Giving her shoulder a quick kiss, Kolyat slipped out of bed, and pulled on a pair of loose lounge pants. Barefoot, he exited the room that had unofficially become theirs, and silently walked into the large open living space. He expected to find solace in quiet meditation given the ungodly hour of the morning, yet he was surprised to find Shepard sitting cross legged on the sofa. More surprising was the almost vacant way she stared into the flickering, artificial flames of the fireplace. Kolyat’s chest tightened as he regarded her. She looked so diminutive sat there, clad only in what he knew were her sleep clothes, black lounge pants and black tank top. Her N7 hoodie lay crumbled in her lap, as her hands wrought the fabric into knots. Carefully he moved forward, suspecting it was dangerous to startle her from such a deep reverie. Shepard was a deadly marine after all, perhaps the Galaxy's deadliest warrior, if news reports and his father's tales were anything to go by.

It was unusual to see her without his father, since the pair were together as much as her hectic schedule and his father's declining health allowed. Which made Kolyat wondered why she sat alone, never mind at the ungodly hour it was. He was so lost in his musings as to why she was not abed, that it wasn't until he reached the marbled floor of the seating area, that Kolyat saw the glistening tear tracks on her cheeks. The sight stopped him dead. Though he must have made an unwitting noise, for Shepard quickly whipped her head in his direction, shifting into a crouching position on the couch before he had even managed to blink. Another heartbeat later, Shepard smiled weakly and rubbed her hands across her tear stained cheeks, as she sat back down. Kolyat hated to see the worried and embarrassed look, that flitted across her usually smiling face. Without thinking, he hopped over the couch's arm, and settled himself beside her with a bounce. His antics earning him a snort of subdued laughter.

"Sorry if I woke you," she said, sheepishly.

"You didn't," Kolyat assured quickly. "I couldn't sleep."

"Bad dreams?"

For a moment, Kolyat wondered how on Kahje did she know that. But a quick glance at her pale face, killed the retort that was forming on his tongue. Shepard looked exhausted and drained, it was worrying to see. He was so used to seeing her as some indomitable force, it was unnerving to see her so… human, and oddly gratifying. In that moment he realised, perhaps for the first time, she was letting her guard down around him. This was the real Shepard, not the legend, and she was letting him see the side that only her closest friends saw. Kolyat felt suddenly honoured.

"Something like that," he admitted. "What about you Shep?"

"Shep?" she chuckled. "Only other person to call me that is Kasumi."

Somehow, Kolyat sensed that her mask was falling back into place, that she was covering up her own hurt for his benefit. He felt guilty that she felt the need to do so. Without really thinking, Kolyat slipped his arm around her shoulder in a loose embrace. For a moment, Shepard tensed. He
wondered if he had crossed an unseen boundary, and considered apologising, before she sighed suddenly. Glancing at her, Kolyat found Shepard looked even more tired than she had a moment before. Then she relaxed against him, settling her head against his bare shoulder. He blinked twice in surprise, realising how much trust she was placing in him right then. Kolyat guessed there were only a handful of people Shepard trusted enough to let her guard down, and he really was honoured she was now including him. He hugged her a little tighter.

"Really Shep, how are you?"

"Honestly? I'm worried," she admitted, quietly. "About everything, everyone. But selfishly, I'm most worried about Thane."

"Father is lucky to have you," he told her, solemnly. "So am I."

If Shepard noticed the slight waver in his voice at the admission, she was kind enough not to mention it.
Leaving Thane had been more gut wrenching than usual. The apartment Anderson had given them was both a blessing and a curse. Not only did it grant them privacy and a welcome reprieve for whenever she made it back to the Citadel, but it also reminded Shepard of everything she wanted but couldn't have. And her mask must have cracked more during her stay than she thought, because it wasn't only Garrus, Joker and Liara giving her sympathetic glances, but Vega and Samantha as well. Her melancholy mood had sat heavy on her all day, until EDI had informed her that the krogan's had contacted them, seeking a rendezvous. Which was how Shepard found herself standing in the Normandy's shuttle bay, clad in her beloved black armour... mostly at Joker's insistence that you always needed armour around a krogan, grinning at her adopted brother. Garrus and James had also come to welcome the krogan party, whilst Liara and Samantha were waiting for the salarian's, up at the docking chamber. But all of that blurred into the background, at the sight of the krogan leader.

"Wrex!" she exclaimed, excitedly.

"Shepard!" he bellowed, in reply.

The impasse continued for another second, before Shepard threw away her military training, and launched herself at the krogan Battlemaster. Of course, Wrex caught her with ease. Her armour clanging loudly against his customary blood red suit, as he crushed her into a fierce hug. Idly, Shepard was relieved she had taken Joker's advice, as she'd almost forgotten what a vice-like grip Wrex had. The suddenly, the krogan held her at arm's length, despite not putting her down. He was looking at her intently, and for the life of her, Shepard couldn't figure out what he was looking for.

"Wrex?" Shepard questioned.

"Shepard?"

Suddenly, the krogan's grin got impossibly wider... presumably only just realising the way that he was holding her. Or maybe he had found the answer he was looking for. Shepard had learnt that you could never really tell with krogans. However, as Wrex finally set her back on her feet, she decided it was probably time to act more professional. So grabbing his gauntlet, Shepard shook his huge hand, that greatly dwarfed her own. The krogan nodded his acknowledgement, and patted her on the shoulder.

"Wrex," she stated, formally.

"Shepard."

"Are they always like this?" James whispered to Garrus.

The turian snorted. "Yes."

"Wait until the Ryncol comes out," Joker chimed in, over the comm. system. "And when the head-buttting starts. That's always fun."

"Dios, Lola! You head-butted a krogan?" James asked, bewildered.

"Several!" Garrus, Wrex and Joker answered simultaneously.
Shepard rolled her eyes, whilst James' widen with shock, before he smirked knowingly at her. Cortez chuckled, even though he'd been trying to pretend he hadn't noticed the commotion happening just meters away from his workstation. Shepard merely smiled, thinking back to easier times, sat on the banks of the Presidium Lake. When Kolyat had been the one to ask that question, and Thane had been the one to answer. Another pang of homesickness hit her. But before Shepard's mind had chance to dwell on the fact her fiancé was thousands of miles away from her, Samantha called through the comm. system:

"Captain, the salarian Dalatrass has just come aboard. Liara and Ensign Copeland have escorted her to the War Room."

"Understood."

Sighing inwardly, Shepard pinched the bridge of her nose. She had a feeling this was not going to go well, and couldn't fail to notice the way her krogan brother stiffened at the news. Not that she could blame him, considering the history and bad blood between the two races. She was still secretly stunned he'd agreed to the meeting at all, and was sure that it was only his friendship with Garrus, that had convinced the krogan to entertain the Primarch's request.

"Wrex, play nice," she warned, then turned her attention James. "Since the Normandy has changed so much, will you show my brother where the meeting will be?"

"Sure thing, Lola."

Once James had directed Wrex towards the elevator, Shepard's gaze slowly turned to Garrus. Before she could even speak, he held up his taloned hands in mock self-defence, his mandibles flaring widely in a grin.

"I know," he said. "Round up the Primarch, then try and stop the three of them from killing each other before you get there. I know the drill, Shepard."

His mood suddenly sobered, and he lay a hand on her shoulder, before resting his forehead against hers. Shepard sighed quietly, before pressing back into Garrus' comfort and affection.

"Don't worry," he said, gently. "If anyone can pull this off, it's you."
Basking in the warm climate of their apartment, Thane stood at ease. He had foregone his customary leathers, in favour of an open-neck white shirt and tan trousers, reminiscent of the attire he had worn during their holiday on Intai'sei. His hands were clasped lightly behind his back, and a smile tugged at his lips, as he avidly drank in the sight of his Siha. Granted, he still ached to be able to simply reach out and touch her. But the QEC afforded them an opportunity they had been denied, during the long months she had been on Earth. Thane watched avidly, as Shepard ran a hand through her cropped red hair, and her red painted lips pulled into a half smile.

"Are you sure you are well, Siha?" he asked.

"Yes, love. I promise I am fine, just... I'm just tired, and missing you terribly." She paused, seeming to contemplate something. “Though I've had some wonderfully vivid dreams lately. I'm looking forward to making at least a few of them a reality, when I next see you."

Thane blinked in surprised, before his smile widened. "I will endeavour to live up to your fantasies, Siha."

"Remember, your reputation precedes you Sere Krios. I know you will more than deliver," Shepard replied. "You always do."

The look she gave him, as she said those last three words, set Thane's heart pounding in his chest. Upon reuniting with his Siha, he had been greatly concerned, regarding her reaction to the stark reality of his failing health. He'd worried he would not live up to her memories, that he wouldn't be able to love and support her like she deserved, that he would no longer be able to please her like he had. And yet, despite all those fears, Shepard had accepted their circumstance whole heartedly. Even reassuring him along the way. Time and again, she waylaid his doubts, and constantly reminded him that he was loved, cherished… desired. He praised Arashu every day for allowing him to keep the gift of Shepard's adoration, and prayed daily to Kalahira to keep his Siha safe. So far it seemed the gods were indulging him. And with his smile morphing into a smirk, Thane watched intently, as his Siha nibbled her lower lip. He noticed how the lighting of the room she was in, made her red lips look several shades darker than usual, and felt an unexpected wave of solipsism tugged at him. Feeling emboldened by her words, and assuming she had some privacy to even start this conversation, Thane let the memory wash over him.

"Pulsing music and flashing lights assault my senses. I study the crowd. Searching, hunting. A whistle catches my attention. I turn, to be greeted by a vision. She wears a second skin of black lace. She is a goddess made flesh, a siren's song to my most primal desires. She is handed a glass filled with green liquid. I know the drink, recognise that it contains the venom found on my skin. The realisation is arousing. Desire is set aflame further, as she raises her glass in toast to me. Her emerald eyes sparkle mischievously over the rim. All I can think of is closing the distance, of capturing her red painted lips with mine. I want to press her against the wall behind her, feel her legs wrap around my waist. I blink, take a breath. She is a goddess and deserves more. I will bide my time, but she will be mine."

Still smiling, Thane slipped out of the memory, and was greeted by his Siha's lovely eyes darkened by desire. He was fairly sure he heard her whisper: "Holy Shit", but before Shepard could actually reply, EDI's disembodied voice chimed over the comm. system, alerting her to an incoming call from Admiral Hackett. She gave to affirmative in a neutral voice, and once EDI had sighed out, Shepard
cocked her hip and looked Thane directly in the eye.

"You are an evil man, Thane Krios," she smirked. "Though maybe I should thank you. You've certainly given me something new to think about, when I'm alone in my cabin tonight."

Thane watched, transfixed, as Shepard rubbed the back of her neck. Then she began to trail her hand down the bare skin of her throat and décolleté, before caressing her right breast through the fabric of her navy blue tank top. His eyes followed hungrily, as her hand stroked down her side and across her hip bone, towards the button that fastened her combat trousers. A slender finger tapped the fastening, and Thane found his eyes snapping back to Shepard's beautiful face. She gave him a wink, before blowing him a kiss and cutting the connection. For several moments, Thane stared at the blackened screen, before laughing out loud. Shaking his head, he made his way to the small bar at the back of the apartment. He felt the sudden urge for a strong drink, and was starting to fully appreciating, perhaps for the first time, Joker's belief in cold showers.
"Office Vakarian is currently in the Shuttle Bay," the disembodied voice informed him.

Repressing the urge to shudder, Adrian Victus did what he thought any worthy turian Primarch would do, and thanked the AI politely before hurrying to the elevator. Logically, he knew this EDI still knew where he was. But he couldn't help the instinct, the drive to get to where he was going, as quickly as possible. Perhaps it was his subconscious thinking that there would be safety in numbers, even if there was no apparent threat… Well, no more of an apparent threat, than an unshackled AI usually presented. He disliked the idea intensely, but the Normandy wasn't a hierarchy ship. Besides, both Captain Shepard and Garrus Vakarian seemed perfectly happy with EDI, and it was their ship he supposed. Since everyone seemed to regarded the sniper as Shepard's acting XO, even though he wasn't Alliance, or even human for that matter. It was something Adrian couldn't help but be a little confused yet smug about. He liked Garrus. The younger turian was a damn good soldier, an excellent advisor, as well as someone Adrian found himself thinking of as a friend.

Though before he could follow the train of thought, the elevator doors slid open, indicating that he had finally reached the fifth floor. As he stepped out into the the Shuttle Bay, Adrian found himself assaulted by an air thick with pheromones. The smell was convoluted, almost confusing with it's layers. But there was the unmistakable growl of a turian male in his prime, followed by a loud thud. And the scent of pheromones spiked. Androstadienon was the strongest, though an undeniable undercurrent of androstenone was there as well. There was no doubt in Adrian's mind that the male was Garrus, though he couldn't smell any other turians, and he wasn't aware of any asari on board. Well none other than Doctor T'Soni, who never seemed to leave her room, so he was at a loss to think who the other person could be. Unperturbed, Adrian strode forward, and rounded a stack of crates that had been blocking his line of sight, only to be halted in his tracks. There, pressed against the side of a Kodiak was Captain Shepard, whose legs were snuggly wrapped around Vakarian's unarmoured waist. The red haired human was grinning widely, whilst Garrus' subharmonics hummed with amusement and affection. Adrian was unable to decide if he should make his presence known to the unusual couple, or make a tactical retreat. Though before he made up his mind, he was treated to a spectacular show. Slowly, Shepard unhooked one of her legs from Garrus' waist, before somehow twisting her body to bring her leg to rest around the young turian's opposite shoulder. Without warning, the human arched her back in a way that would put an asari dancer to shame, and pushed away from the Kodiak. The unexpected movement caught Vakarian off-balance, forcing him to take a step back. Shepard used the momentum to twist again, sending them both to the floor. Adrian's subharmonics rang with unconcealed concern, as it looked like the captain would fall beneath Vakarian's greater weight, not a pleasant fall for a human's lighter bones. Though at the last moment, Shepard managed to flip their position. She landed straddled across Garrus' waist, her hands planted on his chest for balance, as her chest heaved with exertion.

"Spirits, Shepard! How do humans move like that?" Garrus hummed, admiration evident in his subharmonics.

Laughing, the captain sat on her haunches before springing backwards, flipping in the air as she did, and landing neatly on her feet with a single bounce. Her antics had Adrian's mandibles opening in shock, even as Vakarian chuckled at her acrobatics. Shepard wink at Garrus, as she bent to pick up her towel. Which afforded Adrian a very interesting view of curvy hips, a rear that would rival an asari, and an almost scandalous glimpse of bare waist, as her tank top rode up. He swallowed awkwardly at the sight.
"Flexibility beats reach every time my sweet, deluded turian," she chortled, before noticing Adrian. "Primarch. Need me for anything?"

"No… no," he stammered, thankful human's couldn't hear subharmonics. "Actually, I was looking for Vakarian."

"Then I will leave you in his very capable hands," she smiled.

Adrian's mind flashed with all sorts of images, as the captain jogged towards the elevator. A throaty chuckle brought him back to the present, and he warily eyed the other turian. Whereas Captain Shepard may not have heard his subharmonics, Garrus Vakarian most certainly had. The younger turian was eying him with amusement, his arms crossed but posture relaxed. Victus felt like heaving a sigh of relief. Primarch or not, Garrus had caught him thinking less than appropriate thoughts towards Shepard, and the human was Vakarian's. If not his mate, then certainly his partner. Which meant that Garrus would be well within his rights to lash out at him, if he felt affronted.

"The captain is a formidable woman," Adrian complimented, cautiously.

"And a lot more besides," Garrus replied, cryptically. "Though I doubt you came here to discuss Shepard's finer points."

"No." He gave an embarrassed cough. "There are some reports from Palaven, that I want to go over with you."

Vakarian sobered immediately. "If you can give me a moment to clean up, I will meet you in the War Room."

In silent agreement, the two ascended through the Normandy. Garrus embarked on the third deck to change, as Adrian continued to the second. Where he endured the agonisingly slow weapon's scan, before proceeding to the War Room. Letting out a weary sigh, he hung his head before reaching for his mug of now cold tisane. It was not unusual for him to drink his beverages cold, and with a shrug, Adrian knocked back the spiced liquid in one gulp. Setting the mug down with more force than needed, he glared as the galaxy map. He hated it more each time he studied it, though faint voices broke his revive. The words were too muffled for him to make out clearly, but there was no mistaking the sudden scent of arousal. Against his better judgement, Adrian quietly made his way towards the alcove that housed the Normand's Quantum Entanglement Communicator. Keeping to the shadows, he saw the holo of a drell male smiling. Shepard was the one talking to him, the one whose arousal Victus could smell. As intoxication as the scent was, he found himself furious and his anger only grew as he heard the commander say, in a husky voice:

"You are an evil man, Thane Krios. Though maybe I should thank you. For giving me something new to think about when…"

Whatever else the cheating hussy was about to say was lost to Adrian, as Vakarian rumbled a greeting. Turning abruptly, he eyed his friend, his mouth going dry as he tried to decide how best to break the news to the younger turian. He found himself floundering with his words, and spent the next fifteen minutes absent-mindedly discussing the latest news from Palaven, as his mind desperately sought a way to brooch the topic. However, just as he was about to, Shepard hurtled past like a Shatha was on her heals.

“Shepard?” Garrus called.
"Vakarian," she replied, her tone clipped and harsh.

Adrian fought to keep control of his angry subharmonics. How dare that... harlot talk to his friend in such a manner? What made him bristle more, was even though Garrus looked mildly surprised, he didn't seem hurt, just concerned. It riled Adrian all the more, especially when Vakarian reached out and snagged the captain's wrist, and pulled her back towards him. He heard Garrus sigh, as he tilted Shepard's face up to his, and pressed his forehead against hers. Even after discovering their relationship, Adrian hadn't expected such a public display, not that the captain deserved such devotion. Then again, the pair had seemingly forgotten they were not alone, since their was no other explanation for such open affection.

"Shepard?" Garrus tried again.

"Hackett's just been on the QEC," she stated, making Adrian bristle at the lie. "After the distress call Samantha found, the one regarding the academy, I asked him for any info." Shepard paused, taking a steadying breath. "Garrus, he said Jack was there!"

"Shepard, ETA to Grissom is fifteen minutes," a male voice called over the comm. system.

"She hears you, Joker," Wrex suddenly boomed.

As the krogan leader stormed into the War Room, he made a beeline for Shepard. He shoved Garrus away from the captain, somewhat gently, and turned Shepard to face him. Adrian watched as she starred up at the Battlemaster, and for a moment he was struck with just how small Shepard actually was. It made him fume even more, how she was carrying on behind Garrus' back. Though as Wrex clapped both his hands over her small shoulders, and she set her jaw in response, Adrian admitted that perhaps she had answered a second call.

"Pyjack, she's one of yours," Wrex announced. "And we all know to be one of yours, you have to have a quad."

"Damn right!" Shepard agreed, nodding. "You coming? Or would you rather keep playing politics?"

The krogan merely laughed, which Shepard obviously took as a yes.

"Go get Liara and Vega. We'll meet you in the hanger," she instructed.

As the Battlemaster barrelled his way out of the room, Garrus approached Shepard again. His subharmonics rang so loud with alarm and worry, that it set Adrian's teeth on edge. Even though she couldn't hear them, Shepard must have sensed something was wrong, for she gripped Vakarian's forearm tightly. There was a tension in her body that Adrian hadn't seen before, and if he wasn't so furious with her deception, he may well have offered the captain his assistance. Not that he was exactly clear what was going on, but Adrian was left with the impression that it was something major.

"I know it breaks my preferred formation," Shepard said, quietly. "But this is Jack... and Cerberus."

"And we're not taking any chances," Vakarian concluded. "Don't worry Shepard, we'll bring her home."

As the pair left the War Room, the captain wore a look of fierce determination, one that Adrian suspected meant she was blind to everything except her impending mission. Garrus on the other
hand, paused at the door, turning to look at Adrian directly. His subharmonics rumbled a quiet
apology, even as his mandibles pulled tight to his face.

“I'm sorry, Primach,” he said, simply. “I know the reports are important. But this is family.”

Author's Note
Androstadienone create feelings of comfort and can help to increase feelings of intimacy, and
androstenone contains the most potent molecules regarding sexual attraction.
Tisane is a non-caffeinated drink, made from an infusion or herbs, spices of other plant
material in hot water.
Rubbing a gauntlet clad hand down the half of her face, that was not obscured by her Kuwashii visor, Shepard half-heartedly wondered how she kept ending up in these situation. Or, more to the point, how she kept letting herself be dragged into them. Not three days ago, she had been fighting through Grissom Academy with Garrus, James, Liara and Wrex at her back. They had found an angry but unscathed Jack, and helped the pint-sized biotic save her students. They had also rescued the Academy's headmistress, who turned out to be none other than Kahlee Sanders. The woman Anderson had almost proposed to, before the reapers hit. Seeing the smile on her adopted father's face had been worth it, and the success had bolstered all of their moral. Now though, as Shepard found herself in the balmy air of Sur'Kesh, her resolve was starting to waver. All but one of the salarians seem to have simultaneous heart attacks, thanks to Wrex's krogan air drop. A part of her brain happened to be rather impress with her friend's stunt, it was quite the spectacle after all. And the larger part of her brain was doing a very un-leader-like jig, upon realising that the sole salarian keeping it together, was none other than Captain Kirrahe. Shepard barely suppressed a grin, whilst she watched him stride forward, ushering and reassuring his cohorts as he did.

"Shepard, forgive my peers. We have only just received word of your arrival," Kirrahe greeted, clasping her hand rather than shaking it.

"Captain, it's been too long," Shepard replied, genuinely happy to see him.

"It's Major now," he corrected, smiling. Before eyeing Wrex and lowering his voice. "Is he going to be a problem?"

Another moment, from another life flittered across her mind. Smiling wryly, Shepard cocked her hip to the side, and raised an eyebrow. She wondered if Kirrahe realised he was repeating the same question that he had asked her on Virmire.

"I believe we've been here before," she stated, blithely.

Squaring her shoulders, Shepard turned to face the krogan, who was busy antagonising several guards with something regarding salarian livers. After barking her orders to stay with Steve and the shuttle, and placating Wrex with some honest flattery regarding his ability to keep their exit clear, she managed to get a grumbled agreement from the krogan. Nodding, more out of relief than satisfaction, Shepard turned her attention to her other two team mates. There were no words necessary, as Garrus and Liara offered their own nods of affirmation, and fell into step beside her. In silence, they followed Kirrahe across a plaza, to a waiting elevator. The major opened the door for them.

"A mutual friend will meet you below," he explained. "I'm going back to…"

"Make sure Wrex doesn't cause any trouble?" Shepard surmised.

"Officially, yes. A krogan with a shotgun wandering the base.... think of the casualties. Our med bays couldn't handle it."

As Kirrahe spoke, his black eyes darted around frantically, whilst he tapped a command into his Omni-tool. There was a sharp crackle of static, one that made Shepard think of listening bugs being destroyed, before the salarian leant forward and whispering conspiratorially:
"STG are with you Shepard. Regardless of what the politicians decide."

"You would do that?" she asked, cautiously.

"It would be an honour to fight alongside you again."

With that, Kirrahe gave a tight lip smile, that couldn't fail to remind Shepard of Mordin. She was hit by an unexpected wave of homesickness, missing the family that was scattered across the galaxy. Though a sudden alarm halted her thoughts, and she looked to Kirrahe for an explanation. The salarian's face turned grim as he regarded his Omni-tool. Shepard's gut coiled in apprehension, before she met Wrex's worried gaze across the plaza.

"Sensors have picked up activity on the perimeter," the major advised, without prompting. "Hurry, Shepard. Our friend will meet you below."

"Always nice to see a friendly face," Garrus commented, dryly.

"Do you know who this friend is?" Liara enquired, as the elevator descended.

Before Shepard could answer, the metal doors slid smoothly open, revealing another more than welcome face. Despite the gravity of the situation, she couldn't help but grin.

"Shepard. Excellent timing. Good to have you here."

"Mordin?" she beamed.

Unable to help herself, Shepard threw her arms around the salarian's neck, propriety be damned. It had been too long since she'd seen him, and the war was making it less and less likely that she'd manage to see all of her adopted family again. Which left Shepard determined to make every greeting count. Hell, she'd even hugged Jack when they'd gotten to her, even after her fellow biotic had punched her square in the jaw!

"Eyesight still sharp," Mordin teased. "Surprise understandable. I hadn't expected to return to work."

"You're back with STG?" Garrus asked, moving to shake the salarian's hand.

"Special consultant. Had to be me. Someone else might have gotten it wrong." Mordin paused, and glanced around shifty. "Helped female krogan. Fed information to clan Urdnot. But can explain later. Also have news that will interest you on personal level, Shepard. Will have to wait. Security warnings not normal. Need to get off world for sake of krogan."
Garrus paced back and forth outside the medical bay like a caged animal. Logically, he knew it
wouldn't help the situation, but he couldn't bare to drag himself away... in case. In case of what? He
didn't know. The opaque windows gave no hint to what was happening inside, and that was driving
him to distraction. Garrus' sanity was only holding together because Mordin was the one in there
with her. Well, the salarian and the female krogan they had rescued, but she was in worse shape than
Shepard. Just minus the bullet holes and scorch marks from the bomb blast. That damn bomb. Garrus
knew he shouldn't have believed her, when she'd said her suit had taken all the damage, he should
have noticed the way she was limping. She should have told him she was injured. But then again,
Shepard was never one to make a big deal out of her injuries... Suddenly, a bottle of dextro beer was
pressed into his hand. In his occupied state, Garrus hadn't realised anyone had joined his restless
vigil, until then. He turned to see Vega take a large gulp out of his own bottle, before offering him
half a smile.

"Don't worry Scars, our Lola's as tough as they come," the marine assured. "Dios! She charged a
damned Atlas back on Grissom, remember? A few Cerberus bullets aren't going to keep her down
for long."

Despite his worry, Garrus couldn't help but chuckle. "Spirits, the collectors killed her once and all it
did was piss her off. I know she'll be okay, it's just..."

"Si, I know," James sighed. "You'd rather take the bullets for her. Someone aims at her and some
weird, twisted fear and anger grips you. You want to take every one of the bastards down, or die
trying."

Cocking his head to he side, Garrus considered the human marine. This could well be the only time
he had ever see the lieutenant serious. The fact Vega was summing up exactly how he felt about
Shepard... well it didn't really come as any surprise that their dysfunctional family had grown again.
Shepard had a way of pulling people to her, and once you were in her magnetic field, you were
doomed to be won over by her charm. He'd even seen her win over a career criminal and convince
them to go straight, not to mention somehow talking Saren into committing suicide, for spirits sake.
He's also seen her take worse hits that a small bomb blast, and a couple of lucky bullets, but that
wasn't the point.

"I've lost her once. I'm not prepared to do that again," Garrus admitted, quietly.

"You're not alone in that mi amigo. But Lola would kick our asses if she heard us," Vega laughed.

"Heard what?"

Both their heads snapped towards the sound of her voice, both equally relieved to see Shepard
leaning against the medbay wall, regarding them with a raised eyebrow. Barely thinking to set his
bottle down, Garrus was on his feet and by her side in seconds. For a moment he considered
wrapping his arms around his waist, and pulling her into one of those hugs that humans and asari
liked so much. That was until he noticed the bandage wound tightly around her midriff, pushing her
under-shirt askew. Trilling quietly in concern, he settled for resting his forehead against hers.
Thankfully, there was no one around to hear how his subharmonics wavered with relief and
gratitude.
"What's the verdict?" he asked.

"That we really need a medic on board?" Shepard joked, which Garrus scowled at. "I'm fine Big Guy. One of the bullets grazed a rib, that's all. Mordin patched me up, I'm just going to be sore for a few days yet. Since there's been no distress calls, and Mordin wants to make sure the female's health is fully recovering, we're heading back to the Citadel for supplies and a day or two of shore leave."

Garrus hummed his approval. "I'll be in the Main Battery if you need me."

With that, he pressed his forehead to hers with a little more force, before heading towards his area of the ship. Out of the corner of his eye, Garrus saw Vega toss Shepard a bottle of beer, before the pair settled down at one of the galley's tables. The door of the Main Battery had barely slid shut, before his Omni-Tool pinged, alerting him to a message that Liara's network had kindly picked up and forward to him.

**Garrus**

I hope this message finds you well. I thank Arashu daily that you are by Siha's side when I cannot. Though I must admit, I am in need of your aid, with both a favour and a request. I would like to speak at your earliest convenience. May Amonkira guide your hand.

Thane

Garrus' mandibles spread in a grin, but before he had any real chance to contemplate his friend's message, Victus walked in unannounced. Not that his visit was a particular surprise, but the Primarch's body language screamed of discomfort. Though more telling than that, was the fact that Victus was purposefully masking his subharmonics. It made Garrus both intrigued and uneasy. Taking a good look at Adrian's face surprised him somewhat, the Primarch looked a lot older than his forty five years. Garrus had expected the older turian to be direct, but it was several seconds of watching Victus wring his hands together, that prompted him to break the silence.

"What is it Adrian?"

Victus sighed. "Vakarian. Garrus. I know. About you and the Commander, I mean. Please do not think I am racist, that is not what is driving me to tell you this. The thing is..." He paused to sigh again. "The thing is, Shepard is cheating on you. I overheard her talking to a drell via the QEC, her pheromones alone..."

Finally overcoming his initial shock, Garrus was unable to control himself, and started to laugh. Granted, it was an unexpected honour that the Primarch felt it was his duty to inform him of something like this. But mostly it was mindbogglingly that Adrian had thought there was something more than friendship, between himself and Shepard. It was also plain hilarious, that the person Victus thought the Shepard was 'cheating' on him with was, in fact, Thane.

"Spirits, Adrian!" he huffed.. "Of all the people. Not Vega, not Joker, not even Wrex... but her own fiancé."

"I know, I'm sorry, I... what?"

"The drell," Garrus smiled. "Thane Krios. He's Shepard's fiancé. A good man, hell of a sniper. Only reason he's not with us, is his health. Which isn't good."

Genuine sadness rang in his subharmonics. It would be a terrible day when Thane passed, and Garrus was deeply worried how it would affect his best friend. Shepard had been through so much,
even just counting the years they'd known each other, not to mention her life before hand. Garrus could remember how hard she had taken losing Kaidan on Virmire, and could well remember his own grief, when she had been killed. Her death had sent him into a dangerous tailspin of desperate vigilante heroics, depression and a heavy stims dependency. He dreaded to think what Thane's death would do to Shepard.

"But earlier, in the hanger?" Adrian asked, cautiously.

Chuckling, Garrus shook his head. "We've spared together for years, since the hunt for Saren. I just once made the mistake of telling her about a liaison with a recon. scout. Shepard's never really let me live it down, and loves to bring it up during our matches," he grinned, which earned him a sceptical look. " Anything else... well, she is an attractive woman, for a human. But, first and foremost, she's my best friend."

"And what you said to the marine?" Victus questioned.

"I meant every word," Garrus replied, without hesitation. "Before I meant her, I was lost. I had no direction, until she came along. Headstrong, vibrant, opinionated, but willing to listen and give people a chance. She took us all in. Myself, Wrex, Liara, Tali... our quarian," he explained. "She didn't have to, but Shepard went out of her way to make the Normandy a home for us, just as much as it as for the human crew. Her death, it ripped us apart, and it nearly destroyed me. When she came back after those two years, I thought the Spirits had sent her to guide me home. But instead she saved me, again. Like always. I'd die for her, without a second thought. Unfortunately, she'd do the same for us, it's what got her killed in the first place. But we're family. It's as simple as that."

Author's Note
Spanish translations: 'Si' means 'Yes'. 'Dios!' means 'God!' and 'Mi Amigo' means 'My Friend'.
Anxiously, Thane paced the atrium. It had felt wrong not meeting Shepard at the dock, or at least awaiting her at their apartment, but the reason was important. And at least Liara was keeping his Siha busy, he hoped. Getting the Shadow Broker on board with his plans had been quite easy, and even Jack and Joker had been surprisingly supportive. Thane regretted being unable contact Anderson, Tali or Grunt. Though after contacting Wrex, the krogan leader had assured him that he had the support of Clan Urdnot, regardless. Thankfully, that only left Garrus to speak to, and the turian was the person Thane most wanted to speak to. Despite his career as an assassin, he wasn't enjoying the prospect of keeping things hidden from his Siha, though he felt that needs must. Which was why he was still pacing around Huerta, even though his appointments had long since finished.

"Sorry I'm late," a flanging voice greeted. "It took me a while to loose Shepard, since I'm guessing you didn't want her to know about us meeting. Otherwise you wouldn't have chosen this place."

"Indeed," Thane replied, smiling slightly. "Is she well?"

Garrus nodded. "All things considered. Liara and Cortez, our shuttle pilot, are keeping her busy. Shopping, I think."

"That is good." Thane paused to regard his friend. "And you? Are you well?"

"I'm alive and at Shepard's side, I can't complain," the turian stated, returning the scrutiny. "I can't image what you're going through Thane. I'm happy to help, whatever you need."

He sighed in relief. "Thank you. That means more than you know, though I regret that I have more than one request."

The turian tilted his head to the side, as an invitation to continue.

"The first regards Shepard, and the inevitable event of my passing," he stated, solemnly. "I know Siha is fully capable of looking after herself, but I ask you, please, take care of her when I am gone."

Even though the words came out smoothly, each was a monumental effort to say, and left a leaden feeling on his tongue. Despite having once come to terms with his impending death, since meeting Shepard, Thane found himself dreading that day. Though he fought to those thoughts hidden, especially from his Siha and Kolyat. Asking another to watch over her when he could no longer, left a bitter taste in Thane's mouth. However, he knew Garrus would care for her without hesitation, or reservation. He was simply asking for his own peace of mind. After all, he had always carried the personal belief, that the two best friends would have become romantically involved, if he had not come along. Shepard had awoken him from his battle sleep, had taught him you could love more than one in a life time, and he was sure Garrus could do the same for her... when the worst came to pass. The turian's eyes widened in surprise.

"Are you…?" Garrus shook his head, as if dismissing a thought. "You know I have her six, in everything. But if you need to hear it, yes, I will look after Shepard. You have my word."

"Thank you," he smile. "Though as I said, there is another request, maybe two. There is something that has already been set in motion, that I would like your help with."
Garrus' mandibles flared in amusement. "And I suppose this *something* has everything to do with Liara and Cortez keeping Shepard distracted for the day."

"Perhaps," Thane replied, cryptically. "Walk with me? I will explain everything to you, though I feel we will need to elicit additional help."
Guilt was beginning to gnaw at Shepard. She had been on the Citadel for three hours, forty two minutes and thirty seven seconds... not that she was counting, yet she still hadn't seen Thane. She had intended to go straight to their apartment, but had been waylaid by Liara and Steve, and only managed to exchange the briefest of messages with her fiancé so far. Naturally Thane had been understanding, which meant Shepard's morning had been spent shopping in Shin Akiba, and culminated in her two companions dragging her into Pierre Bissette Couture. Similar to when she had encountered the designer shop with Thane, Shepard spotted what she would consider the 'perfect' dress. A floor length, halter-neck number, with a concealed slit up the side. The silk used to make it was dyed a rich wine colour, a shade that was almost a perfect match to Thane's dewlap.

After heavy lobbying from Steve and Liara, Shepard had tried it on, and of course it fit like a dream. There had been no price tag, so she had returned the dress to it's hanger, knowing it would be far too expensive to buy. Liara had other plans though, and promptly informed Shepard that it had already been paid for, assuring her it was a bargain at less than half price. However, the asari still refrained from disclosing the actual amount, which made Shepard suspicious. But defeated by her friend's kindness, she had mutely accepted the bag, and the fact she had tears in her eyes at the generosity, was thankfully ignored by her companions. After that excursion, Shepard had hoped to slip away to see Thane, though fate had other plans. Bumping into Samantha and Gabby had not been unwelcome, however the two women wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, and soon Shepard found herself in an asari run beauty parlour. Liara and Steve had the smart idea of making their escape, but as she was primped and preened by a stunning matriarch, Shepard felt less inclined to envy them. When she looked again into the illuminated mirror, she was amazed to see her reflection. For the first time in months, she looked well rested, perhaps even younger. Her hair was artfully mussed, and her make up was reminiscent of a twentieth century pin-up, with amazing eyeliner and a sultry red lip. It was a shade that matched her new dress perfectly, oddly enough. Nearly two hours had passed, before Shepard was finally able to make her excuses to Samantha and Gabby, and started to head to the apartment. Though once again, fate had different ideas. For as soon as Shepard made her way to the nearest transport terminal, she encountered Oriana. The younger Lawson was clad in a figure hugging, floor length gown, that was a shade of teal that reminded Shepard of Kolyat.

She hugged the young woman in greeting, before asking where she was headed. That simple question put another ball in motion, and Shepard soon found herself wearing the new dress, and walking arm in arm with Oriana, into the Silver Coast Casino. The establishment was apparently holding a charity event, to raise money for displaced colonists, which was naturally a cause that Shepard could fully support. It seemed she wasn't the only one, for she quickly spotted Garrus and Septimus Oraka amongst the crowd, and both turian's looking dashing in their black formal wear.

"Well don't you two look handsome," Shepard smiled.

Septimus flicked his mandibles into a somewhat cocky smile, before unexpectedly taking her hand, and brushing his mouth plates across the back in an imitation of a kiss. Garrus chuckled at her mild look of surprise, and offered her his arm, once the General had released her. Whilst Septimus offered the same courtesy to Oriana. The four of them made their way through the crowd, to the Casino's upper level, where a more intimate bar was situated. Amazingly, they found a table close to the dance floor. Shepard couldn't help but smirk, when she noticed that both Garrus and Septimus were getting appreciative glances, from a group of female turians stood by the bar.

"So, turians on shore leave. You come here often?" she joked.

"Yeah, I come here often," Garrus retorted. "It's a good place to blow off steam. The scenery's not
bad either." He raised his glass of turian brandy towards the females, before flaring his mandibles at Shepard in a grin. "Though the view in front of me is even better."

Shepard laughed at his flirting. "That supposed to melt a girl's heart?"

Vaguely, she noticing that the music had changed from the usual techno beat, to something more melodic. Passionate. A synthesised tango track, and Shepard couldn't help but smile. She had loved ballroom dancing, ever since Anderson had taught her various styles years before her N7 training began. He had always stated it was to help her footwork on the battlefield, but Shepard knew it was really just his guilty pleasure. The tango had always been her favourite, though she had very rarely danced it. It was not one that leant itself to partnering your adoptive father, after all. Suddenly, a hand gently lay on her shoulder, rousing her from her thoughts.

"Bailás, Lola?"

Smiling, Shepard turned her head to look up at James, who stood there grinning expectantly at her. Smiling a little flirtatiously, she took the lieutenants hand. As he pulled her to her feet, Shepard noticed he was out of uniform for a change, dressed smartly in a pair of black slacks and a white mandarin collared shirt. His broad chest and shoulders were well defined by the cotton material, and Shepard could well understand why so many women, asari, turian females... and even a couple of men, were practically drooling over him. Once they had moved into the centre of the dancefloor, James smoothly pulled her into a close embrace, seductively running his hand along the underside of her arm, until they were stood in the familiar position. Shepard looked up at him through her lashes, they were so close, that their lips were almost touching. She smiled warmly, as he began to lead, the beat of the music dictating their movements. The lieutenant was an excellent dancer, and led her in a series of caminatas, boleos, paradas and giros. Shepard occasional interjected with a caricia, the slit of her dress allowing her the room to pull off the alluring move. They finished their dance with a lavish back bend, and Shepard fully enjoyed the feeling of James' strong arms supporting her. She was engaged... not dead, after all. The sound of clapping and cheering erupted. Bemused, both Shepard and James glanced about the room. Their dance had seemingly attracted an audience, and she noticed Oriana had even been filming it. Embarrassed by the attention, they both gave a hasty bow and hurried from the floor, to rejoin her small group.

"That was quite the performance," Septimus remarked.

"Enough excitement for one day, Shepard?" Garrus chuckled, his mandibles flaring widely.

With unspoken agreement, the five of them left the casino, and finally made their way to Tiberius Towers. They chatted amicable as the lift ascended, but as they stepped out onto the floor that housed Shepard's apartment, Garrus held her back gently by the arm, as the other three made their way down the corridor. She looked up questioningly at her best friend, and raised an eyebrow. But Garrus was looking everywhere but Shepard's face. Biting back a small sigh, she cupped his mandibles, and tilted his head so their eyes met. They didn't have too many heart to hearts, but they usually always happened in unexpected places, and usually started with Garrus looking extremely uncomfortable.

"You know I have your back?" he asked, unexpectedly.

"I do," she reassured, without hesitation. "You're my best friend, my partner. You've got me, I've got you."

Gently, Garrus pulled her into a loose embrace, and rested his forehead against hers. "Thane's a
lucky man. And I just want you to be happy. You deserve it."

Unsure as how to reply, and feeling uncharacteristically emotional at his words, Shepard simply smiled up at him. Thankfully, Garrus didn't seem to expect a reply. Instead he chuckled as he released his hold, before offering her his arm again. Amused at his actions, she grinned as she accepted the gesture. Arm in arm, they made their way along the now deserted corridor, towards her apartment. Their companions were nowhere in sight, and Shepard assumed Oriana had let them in, since she and Kolyat had all but moved in as well. Though without warning, the front door slid open, and revealed a sight that stopped Shepard in her tracks. The lights in the apartment had been dimmed considerably, and the floor was scattered with red, white and pink rose petals, that contrasted with the pale stone. Actual candles joined the petals, and seemingly created a path that meandered further into the apartment. Low music was playing, a rhythmic drum beat that sounded vaguely tribal, and the heady scent of incense filled the artificial air. Shepard's brow furrowed as she regarded the scene, and began to pull away from Garrus. The turian stop her movement by trapping her arm, and pulling it closer to his body.

"Trust me," he whispered.

Feeling bemused, Shepard allowed herself to be led along the path, towards the back of the apartment, to the bar that was tucked away there. But her steps faltered as they rounded the corner. A large mass of people were crammed into the relatively small space, and on the large screen that dominated the back wall, Shepard could see images of Anderson, Hackett, Grunt, and Tali along with Kal. The slightly jerky movements of the images, led her to believe that they were actually live feeds to the respective person. Tears began to well in her eyes at the unexpected gesture, yet she was still completely confused by the reasoning for all of this. Then the crowd parted. Revealing a very dapper looking Thane, who had exchanged his customary leathers for a black, open neck shirt and charcoal grey trousers. Kolyat and Feron were beside him, similarly attired, and the three drell stood against the backdrop of the spectacular view of the Silversun Strip. Thane positively beamed when his eyes locked with Shepard's, and he gave her a chivalrous bow. Her frown and confusion melted away, as realisation began to dawn. She subconsciously squeezed Garrus arm, as she glanced back behind them, at the aisle of petals they had just walked along. Her gaze travelled back to Thane, and noticed that near him was a suspiciously familiar looking hanar.

"Delanynder?" she queried, in a hushed tone.

"Apparently our old friend was a priest, before he became a merchant," Garrus said, in a conspiratorial whisper.

His words drew an unexpected giggle from Shepard, as she surveyed the room once more. Her gaze fell to Anderson's grainy image, but despite the static interference, his proud smile was plain to see. Then she beamed up at Garrus, realising the true importance of his words back in the corridor. Since her father couldn't be there, he was giving her away. She couldn't think of anything more fitting, and as she let him guide her through the crowd, her smile only grew. Once they came level with Delan, Garrus pressed his forehead to hers once more, before giving her hand to Thane. He step away then, and out the corner of her eye, Shepard saw Wrex sling an arm around his shoulders.

"Siha," Thane greeted.

Even as he raised her hand to kiss her knuckles, Shepard could see the question in his onyx eyes, and squeezed his hand in reassurance. Obviously, she knew most women would not appreciate a surprise wedding, but she had long accepted that she was not most woman. And though growing up, she had never pictured herself as getting married, this was perfect to her. She had no doubts that Thane was
the man she wanted to spend their rest days with, and even knowing their time together was limited, Shepard was not going to let that spoil their happiness. Thane arranging this, along with the day of distractions... for obviously he was behind that too, only confirmed that he was the man for her.

"This one is pleased to welcome you all to this most joyous occasion," Delan announced, his body illuminating in various subtle colours as he spoke. "The joining of Captain Shepard and Sere Krios. One heart with two souls."

As far as Shepard was concerned, that description was perfect, even as she idly wondered about the use of titles, instead of forenames. Then again, the hanar believed in having a face name, as well as a soul name, so Shepard supposed it was something to do with that. Though she wouldn't be surprised if Thane had requested as much, since he knew how much she despised her first name. The thought made her smile, and not caring if it was the 'done thing' or not, she stepped closer to Thane and slipped an arm around his waist. Without hesitation, he returned the gesture and pulled her closer. Smiling up at him, Shepard rested her free hand lightly against his chest, as they listened to the rest of Delan's words.

"This one asks, if there are any objects to this union, speak now," the hanar intoned.

"Anyone tries it, I'll blast you into next week," Jack warned, causing the room to erupt in laughter.

Once the noise had quietened again, Delanynder seemed to nod. "This one asks, do you, Sere Krios promise to love and cherish Captain Shepard? To care and support her, for as long as you draw breath?"

"I do," Thane solemnly vowed.

Kolyat moved to stand beside them, and offered a ring box to his father. After accepting the item, Thane carefully slid the silver band onto Shepard's ring finger, and she took a moment to admire it's beauty. A swirling silver design had been carved into the surface, and four precious gems were set into the metal. The same gems that adorned the engagement pendant, that currently sparkled in the romantic light.

"This one asks, do you Captain Shepard, promise to love and cherish Sere Krios. To care and support him, for as long as you draw breath?"

"Without a doubt," she grinned.

Her response elicited another ripple of laughter from their gathered friends, as Liara stepped up beside them. The asari handed Shepard an identical ring to the one she now wore, yet this one was suspended on a simple silver chain. Her smile widened at the details Thane had considered, as she fastened it around his neck. Her fingertips tailed down the length of chain, admiring the contrast against his verdant scales. Thane's hands came to rest on her hips, and Shepard's hands travelled up his chest, before coming to rest on his shoulders. She longed to kiss him, to seal their union, but she was determined to have patience. He had evidently put a lot of thought into this, and she didn't want to ruin it. So she settled for gently nibbling her lower lip in anticipation, her eyes firmly locked onto his.

"It is with great honour, that this one pronounces you joined. Husband and Wife. Two halves of a single whole. May your love be as nurturing as a Spring tide," Delan proclaimed. "Sere Krios, this one instructs you to kiss your bride."
Laughter and cheering filled the room, as Thane's lips finally pressed against hers. Shepard breathed in his familiar scent, spice with only a lingering hint of leather. Despite the almost irresistible urge to deepen their kiss, she resolutely kept it chaste, very conscious of their audience. Especially when a suggestive wolf whistle pierced the air, that sounded suspiciously like Joker, and made her giggle into their kiss. Reluctantly, Shepard pulled away from Thane's lips, unable to repress her smile as she looked up at him. Without warning, he swept her into his arms, holding her bridal style. They both laughed, ad he spun her round once, much to the delight and surprise of their guests, who clapped and hollered in appreciation. No one but Shepard, had seen the stoic drell so animated before, and she grinned before capturing his lips again. She didn't care how cliché it was, this was certainly the happiest day of her very unusual life.

Author's Note

Yes, the tango scene is inspired by the Garrus citadel date, but I figured it was too short a time for Garrus to learn to Tango after his conversation with Thane, therefore James stepped up to the plate! Since I think most people imagine it was Vega who gave Vakarian those dance lessons, I know I do. The song that I had in mind for the dance was Tango Santa Maria, if anyone wants to know. '¿Bailás?' translates as 'Dance?' The one word invitation is often used in Buenos Aires at a Milongas (a Tango dance event). Dance (Tango) terminology (yes, I used to be a dancer, thus using the proper words!):

- Close embrace - A way of dancing in which the dancers' torsos remain touching throughout.
- Caminata - A figure based on walking, usually with a series of small, quick steps.
- Boleo - A movement in which the leader changes direction to create a momentum which causes the follower's free leg to swing out along the floor.
- Caricia - A leg caricia (lit. caress) is a decoration which involves one of the dancers running their free foot lightly up the outside edge of their partner's leg, usually during a parada.
- Parada - In this movement, the follower is brought to a standstill, usually with at least one foot touching the leader's extended free foot, often with both dancers bending their knees and dipping down.
- Giro - A turn in which, most commonly, the follower walks around the leader, who forms the centre of the turn.

Also, glossary of rose colour meaning:

Red – romantic love, beauty, respect and passion
White – reverence, humility
Pink – perfect happiness, appreciation and admiration
Ashley remained quietly at the back of the room, perched on a bar stool, and she diligently tried not to fidget, when both Wrex and Joker eyed her warily. However, she had no intention of doing anything to mar the occasion. When Thane had approached her in the hospital to invite her, she had been suspicious... more about his intentions of inviting her, than his intentions towards Shepard. It had taken one very awkward video call with Liara, before Ashley had agreed. Because even though she was a lot less xenophobic than she had been during the hunt for Saren, she still hadn't been convince about a human being with an alien, let alone someone as renowned as Shepard. Yet, when Ashely saw the Skipper's face light up, when she saw Thane... well, it somehow seemed right. Just has the captain walking in on Garrus' arm seemed right. And Garrus seemed to be grinning with pride, if turians could grin. Ashley wasn't really sure on that point, but he certainly looked proud. She even found herself clapping and cheering along with everyone else, when Thane picked Shepard up and twirled her around. The nearby comment of: "Dinnae ken he could crack a smile," said in a broad Scottish accent, had her out right laughing, to the point she had to lean on the bar for support.

"It was good of you to come Ash," a soft voice greeted.

Smiling sheepishly, she turned to face Liara. "I'm glad you convinced me."

"You wouldn't have forgiven yourself, if you hadn't," the asari stated.

"Right as usual," Ashley smiled. "I should go and thank Thane, he didn't need to invite me."

"He understands about mistakes and regrets," Liara answered, cryptically.

Without another word, the asari left to join Wrex and Garrus, who were seemingly trying to convince Joker to take up target practice. Shaking her head in amusement, Ashley scanned the crowd. The majority of the people she didn't recognise, though Vega threw her a cheeky wink when he spotted her, before turning back to his conversation with a rainbow coloured drell, and a young woman with chestnut brown hair. After another sweep of the room, Ashley's eyes fell to Thane who was embracing a younger drell, who she assumed was his son. Before her gaze finally settled on Shepard, who was talking with Tali via the QEC. The other quarian with Tali, seemed content to sit back with his arm loosely wrapped around the machinist's slender shoulders, whilst the two women talked. As Ashley watched the two chat animatedly together, she was hit by an unexpected wave of nostalgia, remembering all the times they had sat chatting around the dining table of the SR1. Regret then coiled in her gut, and sighing sadly, she leant back against the bar. This is where she wanted to be, back by Shepard's side, and something told her she had made a huge mistake accepting Udina's offer.

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**Author's Note**
'Dinnae ken' is Scottish for 'I didn't know'.
Beaming from ear to ear, though with tears still evident in her ears, Shepard said goodbye to Anderson. Hackett had already departed to attend yet another war meeting, Grunt had left to prepare for a classified mission that Wrex was sending him on, and Tali along with Kal, had already been called away by the Admirals. Trying to gain control of her tumbling emotions, Shepard turned from the screen, only to come face to unexpected face with a handsome drell. Though as luck would have it, he was not her husband. Still, she smiled broadly as she returned Feron's tight hug.

"Congratulations," he grinned. "You both really deserve this. Though me and Kolyat wanted to seek your blessing for... something."

Shepard raised an eyebrow. "Does Thane already know and agree?"

There was a ninety nine percent probability that her initial suspicion was correct. As Feron tried to suppress his smile, that threatened to get impossibly wider, Shepard was certain her hunch was correct. And if Thane already knew and agreed, who was she to stop them. Besides, as happy as she was to finally be married, she wasn't the biggest fan of being the centre of attention. So if she could share her 'big day' in an even more meaningful way with a few of her adopted family, then why not.

"Go on then, lover boy," she chuckled.

"Thank you, Siha," Feron laughed.

A raised eyebrow and a questioning look was Shepard's reply.

"What? You are one," he shrugged. “And Thane doesn't get the monopoly on that word."

With that, Feron left to join Liara by the piano, giving Kolyat a discrete nod as he passed the younger drell and Oriana, who were leaning against the kitchen island. As she watched the him in amusement, a pair of strong arms slipped around her waist. Leaning back against Thane's chest, Shepard sighed contentedly.

"Either the reapers have invented a love virus, or you've been giving those two pointers."

"Perhaps," came his smooth reply. "I believe it paid off."

Synchronised gasps emanated from both Liara and Oriana, as both women simultaneously threw their arms around their respective drell. Raucous laughter and cheering erupted from the gathered crowd. Indulging in the distraction the other happy couples were creating, Shepard turned in Thane's arms, and kissed him deeply. Her hands wandered up the soft cotton of his shirt, before resting at the nape of his neck, gently caressing the scales there. Thane hummed his approval, pulling her flush to his body as his tongue sought entrance to her mouth. The feel of the slightly bifurcate tip, never ceased to excite her, and she gladly assented. The taste of champagne had replaced the unusual hint of spiced tea.

"Okay kids, enough of the PDA already. Some of us are trying to drink here!"

Almost feeling like a teenager getting caught, Shepard grinned. "Sorry Joker," she called over her shoulder.
"They are newly weds, Jeff. Twenty four thousand, nine hundred and seventy five separate extranet sources cite their behaviour as normal," EDI stated, as her robotic body came to join them at the bar.

"So few?" Thane murmured, before kissing Shepard's temple.

"Ah, increased courting display. Completely expected in species that view marriage as part of mating ritual. Predict a return to normalcy by tomorrow morning... Afternoon at latest," Mordin chimed in. "That, or guests will be too hung over to notice."

"Certainly a relief," Thane replied, deadpan.
"Kasumi?!

"Happy to be here, Shep."

"What?! You think we were going to miss out on this shindig? Not a chance princess!"

"Zaeed?!"

Thane looked up from his conversation with Garrus, Joker, and Shepard's new recruit; James, to see his Siha being tightly embraced by the enigmatic thief. A proud smile formed on his lips as he regarded his wife. She looked radiant, and the figure hugging dress looked better than he had ever envisioned. His smile turned into a smirk, as he watched Zaeed pulled Shepard into a rough, one armed hug, that practically lifted her from the floor. Under the grizzled mercenary's other arm, he carried a crate that unsurprisingly clinked as he moved.

"Did he really just called Lola, princess?" James asked, his eyes wide in surprise.

"Indeed," Thane chuckled, intrigued by the lieutenants own name for Shepard.

"Yet you call her Lola," Joker grinned.

"Apparently I look like a Lola," Shepard announced, as she joined them.

"And what does a 'Lola' look like?" Feron asked, as he stopped beside the group.

"Hot and tough," Shepard winked.

Her laughter was like music, as she started to chuckle when James slowly began to turn an interesting shade of red. His hazel eyes darted nervously to Thane, and he couldn't help but smile, since he was not in the least bit perturbed by the man's assessment. Anyone with the gift of sight, could see how attractive his Siha was. Coupled with her kind heart, keen wit and intellect... Thane was just thankful the gods had smiled upon him, allowing such an amazing woman to return his feelings.

"You have excellent taste," he complimented.

As the hours wore on, Thane wandered between the various clusters of friends and family, that filled their apartment. Sometimes he accompanied Shepard, at others he mingled alone, and eventually stood with arms leaning against the metal handrail of the mezzanine level. Silently he observed the wreckage below, where bodies littered every available surface, and when a spare space was not available, people lay sleeping haphazardly on the floor. Luckily Kolyat and Oriana had retired to their own room, with Liara and Feron claiming the guest room. Joker was reclining on the largest coach, his head pillowed on Doctor Chakwas' lap. Garrus and Wrex were sat on the floor, propped up against each other, with bottles of their respective alcohol still clasped in their hands. Jack and Kasumi were curled up on opposite ends of the second living room sofa, both peacefully asleep, and Mordin was inexplicably sprawled atop the coffee table. Even though he didn't want to contemplate how that had happened, a smile tugged at Thane's lips as he regarded the scene. Part of him dreaded to think what the rest of the apartment would look like, and idly wondered what other interesting
positions the rest of their guests had gotten themselves into. The only person that seemed to be awake down there was EDI, whose new body silently moved around the prone forms, diligently trying to neaten up the aftermath.

"Looks like we are the last ones standing," Shepard suddenly whispered.

"I believe you are correct, Siha."

With his smile widening, Thane handed Shepard the datapad that he had loosely clasped in his hands. He chuckled at the raised eyebrow she gave him, but shook his head. He had found it carefully nestled with the other gifts, that had now taken over the poker table in the office. As Shepard leant her back against the railing next to him, the intoxicating floral and citrus scent of her filled Thane's scenes, and he couldn't help but lean down and kiss the juncture where her shoulder met her slender neck. She muttered something that suspiciously sounded like 'tease', before she kissed his cheek, and activated the datapad. Miranda's face surprisingly appeared.

"It appears congratulations are in order," the hologram stated. "I'm sorry I couldn't be there, and that I cannot offer you an explanation just yet. Just know I'm happy for the pair of you. Shepard, you deserve this happiness. Thane, treat her well. Hopefully I will see you both soon. Take care."

The image flickered, before revealing Jacob. "Shepard, Krios. Congratulations. Sorry I couldn't make it, things are a little crazy. Not that I need to explain that to you guys. Anyway, next time I make it to the Citadel, I owe you both drinks."

Samara then replaced the ex-cerberus officer. "It is good to know that happiness can still be found, even at the darkest of times. Though I am not there, know that my thoughts are with you both. I hope to see you again my friends, take care of each other and may the Goddess' blessing go with you."

Static took over the scene, before a series of numbers appeared: 01100011 01101111 01101110 01100111 01110010 01100001 01110100 01110101 01101100 01100001 01110100 01101001 01101111 01101110 01110011

"Legion..." Shepard smiled, wistfully. "Hell I miss them. All of them."

“As do I,” Thane replied, slightly surprising himself.

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**Author's Note**

Legion's message is 'congratulations' in binary code.
Acceptance (Shepard PoV)

The gentle hum of the life support system, and sound of rhythmic breathing, was all that broke the hushed silence. It was very rare for Shepard to be awake before Thane, but this morning, she lay with her arms wrapped around her husband from behind, and staring into the darkness. In the artificial night, Shepard couldn't help but let her mind slip away from the elation of the day, and drift towards the unwanted worries of the future. Kissing the back of Thane's shoulder, Shepard found herself blinking back tears, as she pressed a hand gently on his chest. The shallowness of his breathing scared her, truly and deeply terrified her, perhaps more than the reapers ever could. To her mind, a race a sentient constructs were much less daunting, than a disease she couldn't fight. She couldn't wage a war against Thane's declining health, and unless Mordin came up with a brilliant cure... or Miranda stumbled across some useful Cerberus data, Shepard knew she was going to loose him. She was going to have to watch him waste away, or perhaps worse, she wouldn't even be with him in his final moments. Tears managed to escape her tightly clenched eyes, and the barest hint of a shuddered breath woke Thane. She gave him a watery smile as he turned over and pulled her into a tight embrace, their naked bodies entwining effortlessly. Slowly, Shepard ran a hand down his exposed back, savouring the way his scales felt against the skin of her palm. She inhaled deeply, almost as if she was trying to memorise his scent. Her smile became more genuine as Thane kissed the side of her neck. They both knew there was no possibility of making love again, their earlier activities, as sedate and languid as it had been, had tired Thane more than either of them were willing to acknowledge. But lying together as they were, with no words needed, brought a closeness and bond all of its own. However, the sudden flashing of her Omni-Tool, rudely shattered their private moment, and Shepard scowled at the offending object with all the contempt she could muster. It earned her an amused chuckle from Thane, as he regarded her in the orange light.

"Answer it," he prompted.

Shepard began to protest, only to be silenced with a chaste kiss, and Thane's hand carefully smoothing down her ruffled hair, before he gently stroked her cheek with his thumb. She gave a contented him, and was tempted to burrow back into his arms, before her Omni-Tool flashed again.

"Answer it," Thane smiled. "And do not apologise. I've always known who you are, Siha."

Sighing in defeat, Shepard flicked open her tool's screen, and blinked in surprise at the face that greeted her. "Primark Victus? What's happened sir?"

"Captain. I'm sorry to call at such a time, but an imperative issue has just come to my attention. It is too sensitive to discuss over this connection, but you need to know it could impact the talks with the krogans. We need to speak at the earliest opportunity."

Biting back another sigh, Shepard rubbed a hand across her eyes. "I'm not sure if you are aware sir, but I got married less than nine hours ago. I will not be returning to the Normandy until zero eight hundred, Citadel time, as per Admiral Hackett's orders. If it is suitable for you, we can debrief at zero eight fifteen."

"Thank you Commander," Victus replied, sounding slightly relieved. "And... congratulations."

After giving a weary half smile, she cut the connection, and flopped back into Thane's welcome embrace. His arms tightened around her, as he kissed her temple.
"You were recording that," he observed.

"Gut instinct," she explained. "I think I'll have Garrus check it once he's awake. See if he can pick up any subharmonics or any other gestures I'm never going to see." There was a moment of silence, as Shepard entwined her fingers with Thane's. "And I'm sorry about that," she apologised. "I should have switched the damn thing off."

Thane's chuckle was raspier than Shepard would have liked, but it still made her smile.

"Siha, I love you for who you are," he told her. "And you need never apologise for being the galaxy's Siha, not just my own."
Bloodied and bruised, suffering from exhaustion and dehydration, Tarquin wasn't sure how long the or his squad could hold on. Their ammo supply was none existent, their rations almost depleted, and their shelter was barely holding together... Not to mention that he heard mutterings of mutiny from his men. It was a desperate situation, though it was a relief to know that aid was finally incoming. Even his men had seemed to regain some faith, some hope that they could survive this situation, but only once they heard the famed Captain Shepard and Advisor Vakarian were inbound. The fact that they had all been patched in to the incoming team's comm. system, was also improving moral. The friendship, and sometimes speculated romance, between the pair was legendary. Witnessing it... or at least hearing it, was something else entirely.

"Two days Shepard! Don't you humans do something called a honeymoon?" Vakarian called, over the sound of heavy gun fire.

"Sure we do, big guy. But all the good locations have too many reapers this time of year," Shepard hollered back.

Tarquin wasn't sure what they were discussing, but it didn't really seem to matter, the pair had been bantering back and forth since the comm. systems had been linked. For the next minute, only gun fire and biotic blasts could be heard, until the human suddenly muttered: "Shit!", and a large explosion followed. There was the unmistakable sound of rapid heavy rifle fire, followed by scrambling.

"Shepard?!" a female voice shouted.

"Damn it Shepard! Don't you dare be dead!" Vakarian demanded.

Despite his lack of faith, Tarquin found himself uttering silent prayers to the spirits, that the captain was alright. He may never have met the human, but he was certain she was the galaxy's only hope to win this war. Coughing could be heard over the comm. system, but it wasn't until he heard Shepard stated: "Don't worry big guy, I'm tough to kill. You know that", that Tarquin release the breath he hadn't known he was holding.

"Captain? Are you alright?" he asked, unable to stop himself.

"Fine Lieutenant, just some cannibals wanting to share their toys," she replied, sounding chirpier than necessary.

"Shepard, it was a grenade," the other woman chided, sounding exasperated.

"Come on, Liara. Getting spaced didn't stop her, do you really think a grenade would have an effect?" Vakarian chuckled.

"Besides, it was only concrete that fell on my head," Shepard remarked. "It's a lot less painful than head-butting a krogan."

Tarquin's mandibles twitched in disbelief. Did he just hear her right? He could hear his men muttering amongst themselves, obviously speculating whether the captain had done such a thing, or not. Famed hero she may be, but Shepard was still a human. Where their skulls even thick enough?
"Wrex would be so proud," the one called Liara replied, deadpan.

"He did seem rather happy at the time," Vakarian informed.

"Lieutenant, back on route to rendezvous. ETA fifteen minutes," Shepard announced, evidently ignoring her team mates' remarks.

Turning his back to his men, Tarquin let his mandibles flare in a grin, despite the hierarchy's social norms. He had never experienced a commanding officer like the human, had never know one be so relaxed and friendly with their recruits... and that went for off the field, never mind in the middle of a war zone. It spoke volumes for the human in Tarquin's book, and perhaps also hinted why so many were so loyal to her.

"Understood, Commander," he replied, hoping he sounded professional.

Several minutes passed, with only brief interjections of gunfire, before Tarquin heard more chatter from the commander's team: "Shepard, I've been thinking."

"Hope it didn't hurt too much, Garrus," the captain retorted.

"Cute. I was thinking that you might be tough, but humans are pretty squishy as a species," Vakarian commented.

"You won't be saying that, once I've pinned your sorry ass to the mat later," Shepard laughed.

Her comment gave Tarquin pause, as it did his men, if their shocked looks were anything to judge by. As far as he was aware, the alliance ran their ships very different from the hierarchy. Not that it was a surprise, as humans had very different attitudes to turians in general. But for all intents and purposes, it did seem that the commander was referring to a sparring match, and with a subordinate.

"Dream on, Shepard," Vakarian chuckled. "You know I have superior reach."

"Actually Garrus, statistically Shepard is more likely to win your next match. She has beat you the last four times," Liara supplied.

Shepard's laughter could be clearly heard over the comm. system. "More proof that flexibility is superior. But don't worry big guy, you know I only keep you around for your looks."

Despite still being shocked, Tarquin couldn't help but chuckle. The captain didn't appear to be anything like he was expecting. And despite the less than ideal situation, he felt it would be an honour to meet the human. Perhaps he could even learn something from her, because spirits knew, turian techniques hadn't worked so far.
"Here come reinforcements!" Liara yelled.

"Don't these guys ever let up?" Shepard complained.

"Captain, I need more time," Tarquin called over the comm. system.

Shepard ground out a rather inventive curse, as she slid into cover next to Garrus, who tossed her a spare thermal clip. Not having time to reload, she settled on hurling several Cerberus troops from their Kodiak, with a well aimed Push. Garrus chuckled beside her, even whilst he sighted down the scope of his Viper, and cleanly took care of another two combat engineers. Confident in her best friend's abilities, Shepard turned her attention towards the other turian's location. Not fifty feet away, the Primarch's son was desperately trying to rectify a massive mistake, made by his people centuries ago. And thanks to Cerberus, the ancient bomb was well and truly visible... Wrex was going to lose it.

"Roger that, Lieutenant."

As she spoke, two of Tarquin's own men went down to enemy gunfire. Garrus made a noise that almost a growl, before practically aiming his rifle over Shepard's shoulder, whilst she trapped a Centurion in a stasis bubble. A single bullet dropped the bastard, along with a trooper that had just taken up position beside his leader.

"Scoped and dropped," Garrus crowed.

Smirking, Shepard surveyed the battlefield, before beginning to sprint towards the next viable cover that would take her closer to the Lieutenant's position. All of a sudden, she felt herself being propelled forward by a localised blast, as Liara yelled her name. She landed with a harder thump than she'd have liked, before managing to scramble for cover behind a collapsed concrete pillar. Once hidden, Shepard quickly tapped out the command for her Omni-Tool to do a full armour scan, and set about bolstering her shields. Her Omni-Tool pinged, signalling it's diagnostic was complete. Shepard's mouth twisted in a savage smile as she read the 'all clear'.


"Thank you, Captain Obvious... and just peachy. Now take that thing down!"

Not waiting for confirmation from her squad, Shepard sent a powerful Shockwave towards the mech. At the same time, Liara unleashed a Heavy Warp, and Garrus sent a well timed Overload. Between the three of them, they quickly reduced the Atlas to a smoking hunk of scrap metal. Trusting that Garrus would have her six, Shepard sprang out of cover and raced towards Tarquin's position, calling for his status. For a moment, there was no reply, and the silence churned her stomach. Then there was a crackle of static from the comm. system, before the turian yelled triumphantly.

"Captain! Firewall is down! I'm in!"

"Knew you could do it, Kid!"
Shepard leapt up to join him on the platform, and after a glancing assessment, she stood with her back to him, confident that the wound across his left mandible was only a graze. Ready her beloved M-12 Locust, she studied the lay of the land. A smile briefly touched her lips, as she felt the slightly different weight of her SMG. The change was thanks to the upgraded barrel, that Thane had installed the morning before she resumed her duties. She knew most women would not be happy to receive gun mods as a wedding present from their spouses, but to Shepard, it meant a lot. Suddenly, Tarquin muttered something that made her translator glitch. Glancing over her shoulder, Shepard could practically see tension radiating off the young turian. He was tapping furiously on the bomb's console, as Garrus and Liara joined them on the platform.

"Cerberus has hacked the mechanism! It's set to detonate!" he explained.

"Disarm it," she instructed.

"No time!" Tarquin growled. "I have to separate the trigger from the bomb! Cover me!"

"Crazy son of a nathak!" Garrus muttered.

Shepard caught him giving the lieutenant a worried glance, before switching out his sniper rifle for his new Phaeston. And as she watched Tarquin climb the rusty ladder that scaled the bomb's side, she was forced to agree with her best friend's assessment, though she couldn't help the slight smirk brought forth by the young Victus' attitude. He may have lost the respect of his men, in the aftermath of a risky move that didn't pay off, but the lieutenant was making up for it now. He was doing himself, and the ninth platoon, proud. His recklessness also reminded her somewhat of Garrus, when they had first met.

"We don't need any crazy heroics," she called. "Just separate the trigger, and get your ass back down here in one piece."

Turning away from the lieutenant's assent, Shepard neatly killed a Cerberus trooper with a bullet through the throat, when he dared to get close to their position. Heavy pants of breath, along with gears being forcibly turned could be heard overhead. Faintly, the sound of pistons firing joined the noise, before Tarquin gave another frustrated growl over the comm. system. Boots running on mental resonated loudly, followed by a scrambling sound.

"Head's up!" the Lieutenant yelled.

Only moments later, a metal hatch cover landed a mere foot away from Shepard, which was a little too close for comfort. Liara gasped, as the ominous screech of metal scraping against metal filled the air. Looking up, Shepard's eyes widened at what she saw. The younger Victus was barely hanging on to the rickety ladder, his feet dangling in thin air, as the arming mechanism he was holding onto, shifted and loomed precariously over the chasm it was situated by.

"Tarquin!" she shouted.

"Victory... at any cost."

His voice sounded steady, but if the flicker of Garrus' mandibles were any indication, a lot was being said outside Shepard's range of hearing. Her chest constricted as she watched the lieutenant tug free one last holding pin, and the metal arm began to drop. For a sickening split second, all she could do was watch Tarquin's free fall. Then common sense finally reasserted itself.
"Liara!"

Her voice seemed to snap the asari out of her own daze, and thankfully, nothing further was needed to be said. Liara instinctively knew what Shepard was intending, and quickly threw a stasis bubble around Tarquin. Drawing on all her available biotic power, Shepard caught the suspended turian with a Heavy Pull, managing to haul him out of the way of the falling debris, just before it crashed into him. Then, as Liara's stasis bubble began to deplete, Garrus ran forward toward the railing, that separated the platform from the fathomless drop, and managed to grab Tarquin by the gauntlet. With a final surge of energy, Shepard managed to pull Tarquin over the railing. However, she miss judged the force and ended up sprawled on her back with two, very heavy, turians on top of her. Even in her armour, she could feel their weight pressing down on her much smaller body.

"Cortez? Extraction required, and have Mordin on standby."

Liara's voice was barely audible over the loud crash caused by the bomb's impact, not to mention the ringing in Shepard's ears. Evidently, she had hit her head when she landed. She watched a little dazed, as the asari helped a shaking Tarquin to his feet. The young turian swayed heavily, and in the end, had the majority of his bulk supported by Liara to keep him steady. With a groan, Garrus rolled off Shepard, and gingerly rubbed his fridge whilst offering her his hand.

"Good thing I'm so squishy, huh?" she jibbed, wincing as she stood.

Within seconds, Steve was bringing the Kodiak to land. "No further Cerberus activity," he advised.

Cautiously, Shepard made her way to the shuttle, before gingerly taking her seat. She couldn't really remember feeling so battered, perhaps when she woke up on the Cerberus operating table, or after debris from Sovereign fell on her, breaking her arm and a couple of rids. Right now, Shepard was certain there were at least several broken ribs protesting every movement she made.

"You okay, Commander?" Steve asked.

"Never offer to be a crash mat for turians. They're heavy," she grumbled.

"But you're so comfy," Garrus grinned, throwing an arm about her shoulder.

"Are they always like this?" Tarquin asked, sounding a little bewildered.

"Yes," Steve laughed, as he engaged the shuttle's engines.

"Usually, they are much worse," Liara agreed, taking a seat opposite Shepard. "They're getting mellow in their old age."

Shepard snorted. "Not all of us can flay people with our minds, Liara."

"No, some just make blunt force trauma a way of life," Garrus teased, leaning his head against the bulkhead.

Closing her eyes, Shepard settled against his shoulder, as the adrenaline left her body. "You're just jealous you're not this stylish, big guy."

Thane's eyes rapidly flickered back and forth, as he intently followed the commotion on the screen. His lips twitched into a small smile as the footage ended, and his gaze drifted back to the message still open on his Omni-Tool.

**Thane,**

*Tuchanka has been a hell of a ride so far. Reapers and Cerberus making it hot and heavy.*

**Talking of heavy, never get in the way of a falling turian!**

*My heart is with you.*

**Shepard**

His smile widened as he reread the message. He hadn't been sure what she had meant at first, however the footage he had just witnessed had made it much more clear. Thane also wasn't sure how Liara had managed it, but whatever the asari had done to bolster the communications between him and Shepard, had been Arashu sent. Even though the messages had to be brief, fifty words or less, it was more than worth it. Weeks of endless uncertainty had thankfully been eradicated, at least for the time being. And with so little time left for him, Thane was glad that some burden had been lessened.

Feron's weekly visits, since returning from the Terminus system, also helped. Currently, his fellow drell was lounging on the living room sofa of Shepard's apartment.

"She's a hell of a woman," Feron drawled.

"Indeed she is," he replied, handing back the datapad. "Need I ask how you obtained the footage?"

Chuckling, Feron shrugged. "I was logged onto the system, when Liara was uploading the mission log. There's a little from Shepard's suit cam, and some from Garrus', but her's was the clearest." Feron paused for a moment, his gaze falling to the artificial flames of the fireplace. "I know it must be driving you crazy, not being with Shep. And with only so much that can be safely passed via QEC or Omni-Tool, I figured you might want to see your Siha kicking ass."

"Thank you," he replied. "It helps knowing that most of her family are there for her."

"But doesn't make it any easier, does it?" Feron sighed.

Before Thane could answer, his Omni-Tool pinged, alerting him to another message. There was a tiny flame of hope that it would be Shepard again, but with her last message sent only nineteen hours ago, it was incredibly unlikely. Communications may have been improved, but they had decided on a fair usage policy, limiting themselves to one message each a day. Of course, his prediction was right. However, the contents were not unwelcome. In fact, he was intrigued.

**Thane,**

Could we bring our scheduled meeting forward from tomorrow? If you are available, I'd very much like to discuss some new research Mordin has sent over. Both myself and Dr Michelle have gone over the evidence, and it looks more than feasible. I will be in the Huerta labs until 18:00 this evening.

**K. Chakwas**

"Good news?" Feron asked, tilting his head to the side as he regarded him.
"Perhaps," Thane replied, smiling slightly.

In the years since his diagnosis, he had learnt not to misplace his hope, and this would not be an exception. Then again, at one time, he would have outright dismissed following this up. Since he had believed he did not deserve a chance, but Shepard had changed his outlook, along with Kolyat. Now, Thane felt he owed it to both of them, to at least hear what the good doctor had to say.
Adrian had watched the footage, time and again, and each time his heart was in his mouth. Watching his son fall... if it hadn't been for Shepard, Tarquin would be dead, he was sure of it. And yet, he hadn't even thanked the woman. Since the successful completion of the mission, Adrian had spent his time either giving Wrex a wide berth, or catching up with Tarquin and his men. Now his son was safely aboard the Indomitable, with what was left of the Ninth Platoon, and the krogan leader seemed to be occupied thanks to Lieutenant Vega and his sparing invitation. With the never ending stream of war reports finally slowing down for the night, Adrian decided it was high time to seek the captain out.

“EDI, where is the captain?” he asked, still feeling self-conscious about talking to the AI.

“Shepard is currently in the Life Support Plant,” EDI informed.

His mandibles twitched in confusion, it seemed an unlikely place for the captain of a ship to be, but then again, humans could be quite strange at times. So presuming cultural differences were at play, Adrian made his way to the Crew Deck, barely passing a sole as he did. Upon exiting the elevator, he found the Mess Hall to be deserted as well. Only the night cycle lighting, accompanied by the orange glow of the Main Battery, cast any illumination on the desolate space. Due to the Normandy's stealth system and state of the art core, the ship ran nearly silently, and Adrian found himself almost creeping the short distance to the Life Support Plant, in case he disturbed the silence. Normally, he would merely call out a greeting as he entered a room, and being Primarch certainly allowed him to do such a thing. However, Adrian found himself hovering outside the door, taking comfort only from the fact the lock was glowing green. He wasn't sure why he was feeling on edge, perhaps it was knowing he nearly lost his son today, or the fact he still felt guilty over doing Shepard such a disservice previously... even if she didn't know about it. But no matter the reason, Adrian still found himself hesitantly palming the lock, and quietly walking into the dimly lit space. The ship's drive core cast a purple haze to the small room, creating an oddly peaceful ambience. At first glance, he couldn't see the captain, but moving further into the room let Adrian soon spot her. The petite human was sat facing the core, head pillowed on her forearms that were, in turn, supported on a small table. For a moment, he wondered if this was some sort of human meditation, but after moving further into the room, Victus realised the captain was asleep. A dark material of some was draped about her shoulders, and his sensitive nose picked up the scent of leather and spice. A white coffee mug pushed to the far side of the table was the likely source of the latter. Just as he was about to leave, not wishing to disturb the captain, the door slid open behind him. Before he could turn to confront the new comer, he heard a soft rumble of amused subharmonics.

“Didn't expect to see you here, sir,” Garrus stated in a low voice.

Adrian's own subharmonics trilled with discomfort. “EDI informed me the captain was here, I did not expect...”

“This is... was Thane's room,” Garrus interrupted, his gaze falling to the sleeping woman. “She doesn't sleep. Since... coming back, she's always struggled, but it's worse this time round. It was only yesterday she told me this room gives her a some peace, so I'm not surprised to find her asleep here. Mordin dosed her up with some pretty heavy sleeping tablets, so she could get some rest before the mission tomorrow.”

Silently, Victus merely nodded, standing back as Vakarian moved towards Shepard. Adrian had expected his follow turian to gently wake the captain, so he trilled in surprise when he watched
Garrus carefully picked her up. He held her as one might a child, one arm under her knees and one
supporting her back. Despite his surprise, Victus noticed that the material wrapped around her was
actually a long line, leather coat.

“Garrus?” Shepard murmured softly, sounding almost still asleep.

“I got you,” Vakarian replied, beginning to carry her out the room.

“Always got my six,” the captain mumbled, contently.

Vakarian chuckled lightly, as Shepard turning her face into his chest, and swiftly fell back to sleep.
Mutely, Adrian found himself following them, though he wasn't sure why, and waited quietly for the
elevator with them. As the lift finally arrived, both turian's found themselves stepping backwards, as
Wrex' hulking form emerged. The krogan shot him a withering look, before his unnerving red eyes
fell to the captain and Vakarian.

“You're carrying my sister there, hatchling. Take care of her,” Wrex rumbled.

“No need to worry,” Vakarian smiled back.

With a terse nod, the krogan made his way to the Port Observation lounge, and his departure allowed
to humans to emerge. Adrian wasn't sure of their names, though he was certain they were both pilots.

“She fell asleep in there again?” the one with hat asked, sounding concerned.

“I'll see if I can find a cot to put up in there for her. She might rest more often,” the other stated.

The pair moved aside to let them on the elevator, and the hat wearer affectionately stroked the
sleeping woman's hair, before both men disappeared into the Mess. Once inside the lift, Adrian hit
the button for the captain's quarters, guessing that was where Vakarian was headed. He eyed the
younger turian, critically.

“You love her,” he stated, unperturbed by his earlier blunder.

“We all do,” Vakarian answered simply.

The was no hint of deception or defence in his subharmonics, which left Adrian to accept the
younger turian was either being completely honest, or was a lot better liar than he ever gave him
credit for.

“Shepard's gone above and beyond for all of us,” Vakarian continued. “She's done more for me than
any other CO I've ever met. Spirits! She done more for me than my own family would or could.
She's a better friend than probably any of us ever thought we deserve. She never falters, never fails
us, and is always doing what others can't, don't or won't do. It's not often we are able to return the
favour, but when we can, we do.”

Victus couldn't help but flare his mandibles in a small grin. “I'm the last person to judge, she just
saved my son after all. I'm just surprised at how much affection everyone seems to regard her with.”

“They're all soppy bastards,” Shepard suddenly yawned. She blinked, almost as if in a daze, as she
regarded him. “You're good looking when you're not scowling,” she unexpectedly announced,
before looking up at Garrus. “Why are you carrying me?”

“Apparently because I'm a soppy bastard,” Garrus chuckled.
“Probably right,” Shepard agreed, slurring.

Within seconds, her eyes were shut again.

“She will not remember any of this,” EDI's disembodied voice advised, as the elevator doors finally opened on the top floor.

“Thank the Spirits,” Adrian muttered, relieved.
A New Dawn (Shepard PoV)

The whole mission on Tuchunka had been hard, hot and hellish, and after dodging a damn reaper lazer and several brutes, Shepard didn't think the day could get much worse. Or at least she hoped. So heaving great gulping breathes, Shepard staggered into the dilapidated tower building, stumbling each time the ground shook. The sound of Kalros and the reaper still battling beneath the earth, could clearly be heard, and was most likely causing the vicious tremors. Bracing herself as another shockwave rocked the building, Shepard peered around the dust filled gloom.

"Mordin, is the cure ready?" she shouted.


Shepard relief was palpable. "She's okay?"


A smile pulled at her lips, because she couldn't agree more, Wrex was putty in Eve's hands. Though the good feeling was short lived, as both her and Mordin had to jump out of the way of falling debris. The dilapidated tower was quickly tumbling down around their ears, helped along by the vicious tremors. Cursing vividly, Shepard narrowly managed to dodge another hunk of concrete that tried to flatten her. An explosion billowed from one of the upper rooms of the tower, and it was clear that heading up would there be suicide. Hopefully, that wouldn't be needed...

"Control room at top of Shroud tower," Mordin informed. "Must take elevator up."

Her stomach dropped. "You're going up there?"

"Yes. Manual access required, have to counter STG sabotage. Ensure cure dispersed properly," he replied, calmly.

'Shit. Shit. This can't be happening'

Rooted in horror, Shepard stared after her adopted uncle, it wasn't evident from the look in his eyes, that he was determined to do it. Mordin was ready to sacrifice himself for the krogan, to make right what he had done, to die for the greater good. To Shepard, it was Anderson and Earth all over again. Her chest constricted and her gut began to twist itself into knots. After Kaidan, she had sworn never to loose another team mate. It didn't matter if Mordin was no longer under her command, he was still part of the Normandy crew. Part of her family. Without thinking she grabbed his wrist, halting his stride, as a further explosion rocked the building.

"This whole place is coming down. There has to be another way," she pleaded.

Mordin shook his head, taking hold of her gauntlet glad hand. "Remote bypass impossible. STG countermeasures in place. No time to adjust cure for temperature variables. No. No other option. Not coming back. Suggest you get clear. Explosion likely to be... problematic."

He squeezed her hand, before letting go and walking briskly towards the elevator. An unwanted tear
escaped Shepard's eye as she jogged after him, she had no idea how to convince him not to do it, but she couldn't just let him go to his death. As they reached the elevator, Mordin turned to her again, a small smile forming on his thin lips. Shepard faltered, her voice caught in her throat.

"Shepard, please. Need to do this," he said. "My project, my work, my cure, my responsibility. Would have liked to see how it ends, sure you'll do fine with out me."

"I'm sorry," she choked out, another tear rolling down her cheek.

"I'm not. Had to be me. Someone else might have gotten it wrong," he stated.

Just as Mordin went to press the elevator control, there was an unexpected crackle of static over the comm. system.

"Shepard," EDI's voice called, distorted by the interference. "Professor Solus is not entirely correct. I am inbound with the back up vials of the cure. If he uploads his data to me, I can dispense the cure."

"EDI...?" Shepard began.

"My body is not imperative for my survival," the AI explained. "I am the logical choice."

"And Joker...?" she attempted again.

"Is totally understanding," the pilot's voice cracked through the comm. "Just get that crazy salarian, and yourself, out of there."

"Commander. ETA three minutes," Steve's voice chimed in. "Approaching top of the tower for target drop."

Shepard and Mordin shared a look. He nodded. Together they sprinted from the tower, and all the while, the salarian typed furiously into his Omni-Tool. They headed towards where Garrus and James waited with Wrex, Eve and the rest of the krogan troops that had accompanied them. Shepard stumbled on the falling debris, only to be caught by Garrus. Their armours clanking together loudly, even as he swiped her cheek, to hide the tear tracks that had cut a path through the grime on her face.

"You just can't resist falling for me," he drawled.

"You're just too smooth," she retorted.

"You okay, Lola?" James enquired, shooting her a concerned look.

Before Shepard could reply, EDI's voice called through the comm. system: "Dispersal commencing." The line then went dead. At that moment, an intense pressure wave hit them from above, the force knocking them to the ground. Looking up, they were greeted by the top of the tower radiating an almost ethereal cloud of white. The glimmering particles formed tendrils, that caught the ever prevalent breeze, and drifted the length and breadth of Tuchanka. If anyone noticed fresh tears were rolling down Shepard's cheeks, awed and humbled by the sight, they were kind enough not to mention in. She found Mordin's, and the salarian squeezed her gauntleted fingers in understanding. Blinking through the happy tears, Shepard noticed a black dot, that could only have been a shuttle, quickly withdrawing from the tower. After a moment, another crackle of static sounded down the comm. system, followed by some welcome news.
"Captain," Steve called. "I have EDI. She managed to get herself back to the shuttle before she seemed to deactivate."

"I assure you, I am fine Lieutenant Cortez," EDI interjected, after another buzz of interference. "My body's main frame has overheated, deactivation of the platform was required to maintain it's integrity."

Shepard laughed in relief. "Have Daniels standing by to help with repairs," she instructed, before glancing up at Garrus. "Think you're up to the challenge, big guy?"

"Always," he replied, his mandibles flaring into a wide grin.
'Damn, that's pretty'

Wrex was eternally glad that no one could read his mind, especially Shepard, because the small human would never let him live that thought down. She’d no doubt jibe that he was going soft in his old age, which... could be true. Speaking of the human, Wrex found her standing side by side with the salarian, both their faces up turned towards the top of the spire. He watched as Shepard held out her hand, some of the shimmering particles evaporating as they landed on her gauntlet. Wrex grinned, wide and toothy, when he considered his sister... for that was what Shepard was, plain and simple. If he hadn't already considered her such, what she had done today, for his people, cemented it. He felt a hand touch his forearm, the grip firm, even through his armour. Turning his head, Wrex regarded the female shaman, the miracle that had let this cure become a reality. He would never admit it, but both his hearts beat faster as he looked into her bronze eyes, and not just because she was the hope for the krogan's future.

"Suggest evacuating immediate vicinity," the salarian babbled. "Shroud unstable, resulting explosion will be... problematic."

"You heard Mordin, into the trunk," Shepard commanded.

“Ever the leader,” Wrex chuckled.

He gave the human a leery grin as he spoke, and she raised one of those weird eyebrows at him in return. Shaking her head, Shepard allowed the shaman to get into the vehicle first, before clambering aboard. The two females were closely followed by the salarian... Mordin, then went Garrus and the human male: Vega. Giving the tower one last appreciative glance, Wrex hauled himself into the trunk, and Shepard banged on the steel wall, alerting the driver to beat a hasty exit. The journey back to the base was thankfully uneventful, and Shepard fell asleep against Garrus' shoulder, as had been the custom during their hunt for Saren. When the turian noticed Wrex' gaze, he flared his mandibles in a wide grin, before looking down at the sleeping human. The captain only opened her startling green eyes again, when the trunk was hit by a pressure wave from the exploding tower. He watched as her eyes found their way to the viewing screen, that clearly depicted the destruction of the Shroud.

"Good riddance," Shepard muttered.

"Agreed," the shaman stated.

The two females shared a look, before Wrex's omni-tool bleeped unexpectedly. Flicking it open, he was greeted by a message from Garrus, though the turian was doing his best to look inconspicuous. Which was rather hard for a turian to do, especially on Tuchanka.

Get the feeling that those two make a formidable force?

The message was simple and direct, though the ten words rang astonishingly true, and a rumble of laughter reverberated around Wrex' chest. Shepard gave him a questioning look, whilst the shaman shook her head. But still chuckling, Wrex was the first to jump down from the truck, when it shuddered to a halt. He patiently waited for the two women to disembark, though didn't wait for the rest of Shepard's squad, before leading them towards the Hollows.
"Long time ago, my father betrayed me in this place. His own son," he recounted, gesturing around the amphitheatre. "He tried to kill me, so I had to kill him. Right over there."

He pointed out a hunk of crumbling cement and iron, a sight that hadn't changed much in the last five hundred years.

"That's what the genophage reduced us to, animals. But you changed that today, Shepard.,” he smiled.

"Now we will fight for our children, not against them," the shaman declared. "We have you and Mordin to thank for that."

"Expect some kids to be named after the pair of you," Wrex chuckled, only half joking. "And tell the turians I will deploying troops to Palaven immediately."

He lay a hand on Shepard's small shoulder.

"And when you are ready to kick the reapers off Earth, you let me know. I will be by your side. The krogan are back in business."

His laughter boomed around the Hollows, as he bumped his head against the human's, in an affectionate version of a headbutt. Shepard's laughter joined his for a moment, before she turned to smile at the shaman, and the two clasped hands.

"What will you do now?" Shepard asked.

"Spread the hope you have given us," the shaman replied, without hesitation. "Even now, there are clans gathering in the Kalfic valley. I'll go speak to them, to make sure this gift isn't squandered. Thank you, for all that you've done. And know that Urdnot Bakara calls you a friend."

Wrex' chest filled with proud, even though the look on Shepard's face was priceless. Shock, affection and humbleness all clearly visible. He was hard pressed not to laugh again, so settled on clasping the human's shoulder once more.

"You have been a sister to the krogan, Shepard. A sister to me," he grinned. "We can and will defeat the reapers."

He meant every word he said, though the entire time, all he could think was: 'Bakara, pretty name'. 
Knots (Shepard PoV)

Apprehension knotted Shepard's stomach, as she walked through the CIC. Several crew members turned to watch her, with a mixture of wariness and surprise evident on their faces. Not that she could blame them, it was a rare day that she wandered the ship, clad in her black and red armour. But *something* had prompted her to gear up, before descending from her cabin... gut feeling, sixth sense, woman's intuition... call it whatever you like, Shepard felt that something was about to go *seriously* wrong. It didn't matter if this was only supposed to be a simple supply run to the Citadel, to refuel and restock after Tuchanka. Trusting her instincts had kept Shepard alive so far, she wasn't going to start second guessing it now. As she entered the cockpit, Joker glanced up at Shepard, as she lay a gauntlet clad hand lightly on his shoulder. He shook his head, an eyebrow raised. She wasn't sure if it was because of her armour, or from the seeming lack of response from the tower. He tried to hail them again, but when no response came, Joker huffed in frustration and propped his elbow on the arm of his chair, and rested his cheek on his clenched fist. Whilst the pilot was disgruntled, Shepard was growing more uneasy, and her stomach tried it's best to twist into knots. Trying to stave off the urge to pace, she sat down in the co-pilot's chair, since EDI's body was still being worked on by Gabby.

"I cannot detect any civilian or military communications from the Citadel," the AI suddenly announced.

"What the hell is going on down there?" Joker muttered. "Even if there were a station malfunction, they'd have backups online. I have a bad feeling here..."

"Me to," Shepard replied, quietly.

Joker threw her a worried glance. "Checking emergency channels."

For several moments, the pilot typed away furiously at his controls. Before his hands stopped suddenly, poised over the holographic keyboard. His green eyes grew steadily wider.

“Thane? Shit! Yeah, hang on she's here.”

At the mention of her husband's name, Shepard was up and out of the seat before she had consciously thought to do so. Her heart was pounding, and it took more effort than she'd like, to swallow past the lump forming in her throat. Without waiting for an order, Joker punched in the command to broadcast the connection.

"Siha. The Citadel is under attack. Cerberus troops are everywhere and they're in control of the docks," Thane stated.

“Are you safe?"

The words were out before Shepard could worry if they were professional or not. To be honest, she didn't care. She may be *the* Commander... now Captain... Shepard, but she was *just* Shepard, first and foremost. Thane's voice sounded uncharacteristically raspy, and his breathing sound laboured. Her stomach began to coil itself into tighter knots. Hearing how much the Kepral's Syndrome had progressed whilst she had been away, was worrying enough, but his news was chilling. There was a pause before Thane answered, almost as if he was debating with himself.
"No..." he admitted. "I had to evade their commandos at the hospital. I'm in a Presidium store front."

"Have you heard from Kol or Ori?" Shepard questioned, fighting down the panic. "Did Ash make it out?"

"We got separated," Thane admitted. "She said she had to protect the council. I'm going to C-Sec headquarters. It has been compromised, but C-Sec's response depends on it. Hopefully, I will find Kolyat or Bailey there."

"As long as Cerberus is holding the headquarters, they have the station," Shepard agreed.

For a single moment, she let the worry and dread wash over her. All her fears and dread bubbled to the surface for one terrifying moment. Then, after taking a carefully controlled breath, she packed her feelings and emotions away in their mental compartment. There was no time to be just Shepard anymore.

"Alright..." she sighed. "Joker, get us away from the docks and close to C-Sec headquarters. We'll deploy in the shuttle. Thane, be careful. Don't take unnecessary risks, please. EDI will link up our communicators, we'll be there soon.

"As you wish, Siha," Thane replied, solemnly.

At the same moment, Joker stated: "Aye-aye, captain."

'Amokira, lord of hunters. Grant that our hands be steady, our aim be true, and our feet swift. And should the worst come to pass, grant us forgiveness'

Shepard silently recited the prayer, as she hurried back through the CIC, towards the elevator. To her surprise, Garrus was waiting for her, presumably having just left a meeting with the Primarch, who was still awaiting rendezvous with his fleet. Her best friend gave a slight nod as they stepped into the elevator together, then he punched the button for the Shuttle Bay. A slight smile quirked the corner of Shepard's mouth, despite herself and the situation, as she watched his movements.

"Not like you were going to leave me behind," Garrus shrugged.

Normally, Shepard would have thrown back some witty retort, but instead she began worrying her lower lip with her teeth. It seemed compartmentalising 'just Shepard' was proving harder these days. She took a slightly shuddering breath, stealing herself for whatever was to come. Never one to miss her changing moods, Garrus placed a single talon under her chin, and tilted her face to look at him.

"You know Thane," he rumbled, deep and reassuring. "If anyone will be fine, it's your assassin."

"Thanks, big guy," Shepard replied.

She gave his wrist an affectionate squeeze, just as the elevator came to a stop. As the doors slid open, Shepard was greeted with the sight of a very broad marine, dressed in custom blue armour. She didn't ask why James was already suited, instead choosing to catch her beloved Locust, as soon as the lieutenant tossed it to her.

"Hey Lola," he greeted, calmly.

"Be ready to depart shortly," Steve called.
It took a moment to locate the shuttle pilot, but Shepard soon found two boots sticking out from underneath the Kodiak. She wasn't sure if the preparation was EDI's doing, or if her new team had come to know her that well. Unexpectedly, Mordin hurried over to her, a shiny white and matt grey shotgun in hand.

"Venom shotgun," he announced, almost beaming. "STG charged semi-automatic. Had Kirrahe forward it for you. Use like grenade launcher."

"Thanks Mordin."

Another tiny smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, as she hefted the weighty shotgun to her back. Back during the fight against the collectors, Shepard had learnt it was often better not to press the salarian for more details, she had a feeling this was one of those times. After watching Mordin hurrying out of the hanger, Shepard turned to find James and Garrus holstered their own weapons. Really, she wasn't surprised the two of them had instinctively geared up. Garrus' spot on her six was a universal given, but since Thane's absence, James had managed to sneak his way into the final position. She had grow to trust the lieutenant to have have her back, almost as much as she did Garrus or Thane.

"Shepard, I've managed to hack into the Citadel's security feeds," Liara suddenly announced, over the comm. system. "I should be able to link it, real time, to your Omni-Tools."

"Good work."

Without another word, Shepard hauled herself up into the Kodiak, just as Steve started the engines. Strapping herself in, she began to silently recite Amonkira's prayer again, trying to dampen down the knot of anxiety, that had worked it's way more tightly into her gut. Vaguely, she wondered what Thane would think about her using the prayer, as a type of mantra before every fight. On a whim, she flicked open her Omni-Tool and started to type.
The Green Mile (Thane PoV)

Fighting against the way his chest burned, as he painfully drew in another breath, Thane forced as much air into his lungs as the damaged organs could hold. Dead Cerberus bodies littered the floor, and he hunkered down behind a partitioning wall, for a moments reprieve. Unexpectedly, his Omni-Tool vibrated, silently alerting him to a message. Cautiously, Thane opened up the screen, unable to conceal his smile as he read the five, simple words.

I love you, my hero.

'Siha'

Suddenly, Thane's communicator crackled, and her presumed EDI was connecting him to Shepard. However, it was Bailey's voice he heard through the static.

"Shepard, I saw those Cerberus troops on you, I thought you were done for."

"I'm hard to kill," she quipped back.

Her blasé tone brought another slight smile to Thane's lips, one that widened when he heard Garrus' distinct chuckle over the comm.

"What you doing here, Bailey?" Shepard continued. "I thought you'd be up in the tower."

"Getting my ass shot off, trying to retake headquarters," Bailey huffed. "Cerberus took it in the first push. We gotta kick them out of there. Everyone in C-Sec is flying blind without the network."

Thane winced with guilt. He had been with his friend not long ago, only leaving his side at the officer's instance, urging him to try track down the councillors. Thane had reluctantly agreed, knowing that the skills the hanar had honed in him, could make all the difference. There had still been no sign of Kolyat, though Bailey had tried to assure him. His son had been patrolling the eight hundred block... ironically, and it was believed that the residential district of Zakera Ward, was one of the least affected areas on the Citadel. Plus, Thane knew Shepard had been training Kolyat whenever she could, he should be fine. He hoped... Garrus' voice through the comm. system, broke into Thane's thoughts.

"How bad is the situation? Do you know if the councillors are still alive?"

"Siha..." Thane called into the comm. link.

There was no response.

"Shepard..." he tried again.

"They spilt up. I'll know more if I can access a terminal inside," Bailey explained.

Biting back a growl of frustration, Thane grit his teeth. It was obvious that though he could hear them, his communicator hadn't synced with theirs yet. Footsteps sounded down the hallway, and slightly leaning out from behind his cover, Thane spotted a lone Cerberus trooper. An engineer, by the looks of the turret, that he was unstrapping from his back. Refusing to let the enemy set up any
defences, or be alerted to his position, Thane attached the silencer to the barrel of his Tempest, before neatly sinking a bullet into the back of the trooper's head. It wasn't as clean as it would have been, if he had been able to get hold of his Viper, but the sniper rifle was housed at the apartment. As luck would have it, Thane still carried his SMG with him at all times, concealed within his leather coat, otherwise things could have gone a lot worse for him so far. As an extra precaution, he launched the Override programme Garrus had built into his Omni-Tool. 'A secret wedding present', the turian had stated at the time. It was one that Thane was immensely grateful for, as the turret flickered and sparked, before emitting a small plume of smoke.

"I'll get the door, if no one interrupts me with a bullet this time," Bailey stated dryly.

There was another crackle of static, before the line went dead all together. Uncharacteristic panic threatened to grip him, as Thane waited in deafening silence. He tried to ignore how his chest protested with each breath, or how his hands shook as his unscrewed the silencer. Keying in the command to his Omni-Tool, Thane sent a shot of medigel through his system, hoping to stave off the mounting pain. Without warning, the hallway was plunged into darkness, only to be relit, moments later, by low level emergency lighting... a faint greenish cast, that illuminated the narrow corridor. The dimness suited Thane well, and silently he crept forward, intent on reaching the duct work at the far side of the walkway. Once inside the ventilation system, Thane was sure he would be able to move around the Citadel mostly undetected. Another crackle of static sounded, and Shepard's voice came through the comm. link, sounding slightly muffled.

"One councillor is better than zero, where am I headed?"

"He could be in the executor's office. It's fairly defensible," Garrus advised.

Thane smiled slightly, though it morphed into a grimace as he pulled himself up into the duct. He clenched his eyes shut, desperately drawing in a shaky breath, determined not to let his health keep him from Shepard's side. His Siha needed his help, and he'd gladly give his life for her. Now that he had a destination, Thane wasted no time in setting off. His endemic memory allowed him to traverse the network of ducts with relative ease, even whilst he gritted his teeth against the burning pain.

"Just a sec," Bailey called.

There was a buzz of interference, before the line seemed to clear fully, not even a faint crackle of static in the background.

"There, now we can talk by omni-tool," the officer said.

"Siha?" Thane tried, hoping she would hear him this time.

"Thane!" Shepard gasped, sounding relieved. "Did you hear any of that?"

"Yes," Thane replied, trying not to sound too out of breath. "I'm nearing the building now, but running is difficult. I'm in the ducts. I'll try to get to you."

"I know you will," Shepard replied, her voice sombre. "Just..."

"I love you," he said on impulse.

Thane couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to go wrong, that one of them wouldn't make it out of this. And gods willing, he was determined no harm would come to his Siha. He closed
his eyes, and formed a perfect picture of her in his mind's eye. Her beautiful face, cropped red hair tousled, clear emerald green eyes sparkling with mischief, her painted red lips quirked into a half smile. Leaning his back against one of the metal walls of the duct, Thane bowed his head.

"I love you too," Shepard relied.

A smile formed on his lips, even as he began to pray: "Amonkira, lord of hunters. Grant that our hands be steady, our aim be true, and our feet swift."

He was only slightly surprised, when he heard Shepard's voice join in with his:

"And should the worst come to pass, grant us forgiveness."
The Protector Redux (Shepard PoV)

Shepard had acted without thinking, instincts and battle-rage guiding her, as she had shot out the window glass, and jumped to the level below. Vaguely she heard Vega curse, before it seemed both he and Garrus followed her lead. Their boots clattered loudly on the metal floor as they landed, since neither were as agile or light as she was. Though Shepard's attention was fully honed on the enemy before her, and it seemed the Illusive Man had a new pet, one peculiar looking bastard the cut her patience to the quick. Biotic energy was already surrounding her, and a Heavy Throw manifesting, even as she aimed her Venom shotgun him. Her Kuwashii visor monitoring every one of the enemy's movements.

"Don't even think about it," she grit out, through clenched teeth.

"Shepard, he's going to kill us all," Valern rasped out, his back to her.

The salarian councillor had his arms raised in supplication, even whilst the would-be assassin aimed a glowing palm at him. However, Valern wasn't looking at his would-be assassin, but instead at the exit. For a moment, Shepard wondered if the councillor met someone else. At the same time, in the back of her mind, she couldn't help but think the Cerberus agent looked... and acted, like some bad imitation, of a twentieth century comic book character. She idly wondered that if she let Joker watch her suit's footage, would he be able to come up with a suitable comparison? A moment later, Shepard wondered if her thoughts proved she was finally going mad.

"That remains to be seen," she replied, calmly.

"I mean Udina," Valern hissed. "He's staging a coup. He's got the other councillors now... ready to hand over to Cerberus."

"Meirda!" James cursed behind her.

To Shepard's immense annoyance, the would-be assassin started to chuckle, as he advanced menacingly on the councillor.

"Three on one, bosh'tet," she growled. "It's over."

In her peripheral, Shepard caught the hint of movement. A black, silent shadow moving gracefully towards it's target. Her stomach began to tie itself in knots. Worry and excitement twisting together in a strange dance, for there was no doubt in her mind who it was. Shepard would recognise Thane's movements anywhere, and even through there was a thrill that tinged along her spine at the thought of fighting with her husband by her side again, terror also gripped her. Her drell assassin was much too sick, to be pushing his already abused body to extremes. Despite all of these emotions, years of training meant her face did not betray her, or more importantly, Thane.

"No," the Cerberus agent smiled. "Now it's fun."

At that moment, Shepard's galaxy ground to a halt, as the barrel of Thane's Tempest clicked into place. The muzzle was almost touching the would-be assassin's choppy, jet black hair. As if on it's own accord, Shepard's body moved forward, roughly grabbing the salarian councillor by the arm, and thrusting him in James' direction. Vega grunted, Valern obviously colliding with him, but Shepard barely noticed. Her eyes were locked on the sight of Thane, going hand to hand with the
Cerberus agent. They seemed fairly matched, trading blow for blow, which Shepard felt did not say much for the Illusive Man's new lackey. Thane was fighting well below his usual standard, moving slower than she had ever seen him do, though his punches seemed almost as powerful as they had been before. After a moment's indecision, Shepard launched herself at the goon, just as he managed to flip Thane over his shoulder. Faintly, she heard a grunt of pain, as he landed hard on his back. In that moment, Shepard's gauntlet clad fist connected with wannabe's jaw, sending him slightly backwards. Thane flipped to his feet, a move that greatly belied his failing health, and readied his SMG toward the Cerberus agent. Second nature made Shepard draw her Locust, and still completely in sync with one another after all this time, they fired simultaneous shots at would-be assassin. Their attack should have put the wannabe down, however... he simply wasn't there anymore.

Cautiously, the four of them closed ranks. Moving slowly, to stand back to back in a circle, with Valern ensconced in the middle for safety. Adrenaline coursed through Shepard's veins like a drug, and she gathered her biotic energy around her once more. She fully intending to unleash a Nova Blast, the moment the bastard showed himself again. However, Thane had other ideas. He managed to push her out of the way of the would-be assassin's katana, the moment the agent rematerialised, and charged straight for her. In the back of her mind, Shepard couldn't help wondering who brought a sword to a gunfight, especially in this day and age... though the thought was most likely driven by shock, as her attention was firmly riveted on Thane. Who, after delivering a swift roundhouse kick to the would-be assassin's head, launched the agent across the room with a low powered Throw, before bending to retrieve his discarded Tempest. As the wanna-be flipped to his feet, Shepard made to confront him. Intent on facing down the coward that not only threatened the councillor, but also her husband as well. However, Thane once again had other plans. He stopped her from readying her biotics for a Charge attack, by catching her armoured forearm. Not once did he take his eyes off the target, though he forcibly pulled Shepard behind him, much to her surprise. Thane had never acted like this when he was part of the crew, this overprotective and single minded side of him was new. Then again, Shepard supposed he was no longer under her command... though she could never imagine him as not part of the Normandy crew.

"Please Siha," Thane said, his voice quiet and determined. "I will not lose you as well."

That was all he murmured, before rushing the enemy. Thane leapt, avoiding the Warp blast directed at him, and firing off a shot that seemed to hit the Cerberus agent in the shoulder. However, as Thane landed, he slumped to the floor clutching his midriff. For a heartbeat it wasn't clear what had happened, until the sickening sound of a blade leaving flesh filled the ominous silence. The sound of Garrus inhaling sharply, and Vega muttering: "Dios de mierda" made it to Shepard's ears. Though the noise sounded faraway, almost as if she was hearing it from underwater, as her focus narrowed down to the blood that dripped from assassin's blade. A savage, primal scream ripped from her throat, as the bastard had the audacity to grin at her, and Shepard empty her thermal clip aiming at the agent's retreating back. She thought at least one bullet hit him in the back of the shoulder that Thane had shot, but by that point, the agent was of no concern to her. Not giving a damn if she was breaking every regulation in existence, Shepard frantically scrambled to her husband's side. She tried not to retch, as she skidding in the puddle of dark red blood, that had began to pool around Thane's prone body.

"Kalahira don't you dare take him now," Shepard half pleaded, half demanded.

Tears were already streaming down her face, as she gently turned Thane onto his back.

"Spirits, Arashu, Ancestors, God... if you fucking exist, don't you dare fucking take him now!"
The pain, intense and inescapable as it was, was vaguely comforting. At least, in an abstract way, as it meant he wasn't yet dead. The cold wash of medigel flooding his system, was a much more welcome sensation, as was the warm hand cupping his cheek. Thane dragged in a shuddering breath, and inhaled a sweet floral scent... her scent, and his heart clenched. He would never be able to explain how much it meant, that his Siha was with him in these final moments. For even though Thane still clung to life, he could feel himself slipping away. Each heartbeat felt like a grain of sand slipping between his fingers. He felt a weight being pressed into his abdomen, and vaguely realised that Shepard was trying to stem the bleeding. He could feel her stroking his cheek frill, and felt a drop of warm liquid hit his face, followed by another. His heart clenched again, realising his Siha was crying. He longed to hold her, to reassure her... But his senses felt dull, his eyes refused to open, and his body would not cooperate. He tried to reach for her, but his fingers merely twitched against the slick, warm surface he lay upon. Some part of his brain realise he was resting in a pool of his own blood, but that was now of little concern. His Siha was crying, she needed him...

He drew in as much of a breath as his battered lungs would allow, hoping to flood his senses with her smell. If these were his last moments, Thane wanted to savour as much of his Siha as he could. Vaguely, he could hear the soft cadence of her voice, though struggled to comprehend the words. Still, the sound lapped at him, lullling him like a gentle wave. Another cold wash of medigel flooded his system, followed by another, and another. Then came the uncomfortable itch, as muscle and skin knit back together, which preceded the tightening of his abdomen. It was a powerful sensation, to experience the moment his life blood stopped draining out of his body, but it left him feeling weak, disoriented and light headed. Though, with a desperate will, Thane managed to force his eyes to open. The stark light was painful, but the welcome sight of Shepard's face, finally swam into relative focus. His sight was still blurry, but he drank in the sight of her, and his heart clenching once again, as he noticed the tear tracks that marred her beautiful face.

“Siha...” he rasped out.

“Thane!” she sobbed.

With a heavy and shaky hand, Thane reached for her, and Shepard quickly cradled his hand to her cheek. Though the effort proved too much, and as he arm dropped back down, his fingertips left smears of blood across her porcelain skin.

“Bailey and the medics are on their way,” Garrus' voice said, from somewhere off to the side.

Thane would have turned his head, to search out his friend, if his concentration wasn't solely honed on his wife. Her vivid emerald eyes were filled with concern and tears, and she worried her lower lip with her teeth. Even like this, she was a vision, his warrior angel. Thane hated to see Shepard in such a state, but could die in peace, knowing she hadn't been harmed. Footsteps suddenly rang across the mental floor, rousing Thane from his hazy thoughts.

“Shepard... shit!”

Bailey's accented voice was unmistakable, and it was only moments later that the human male came into view, hunching over Shepard's kneeling form.

“The doctors are already on standby, Chakwas too.”
He watched as Shepard nodded mutely, her features tight and drawl, and he knew she was fighting with herself.

“Go...” Thane rasped out. “Your mission... Go...”

Fresh tears began to roll down her cheeks, and she slowly began to shake her head. He'd never seen Shepard like this, so broken and torn. Thane knew she was warring with her sense of duty as a soldier and Spectre, as well as her sense of duty to himself and their marriage. It broke his heart to see her so conflicted.

“Go...” he repeated, his breathing laboured. “Siha... please...”

A choked sob ripped from her, and Thane vaguely heard Garrus' subharmonics whine in sympathy, before Shepard's lips crashed into his. This close, a hint of salt undercut her floral scent. He slowly moved a protesting arm, but managed to tangle his fingers in her cropped, fiery locks. The moment was all too brief, and as she pulled away, he could taste her despair as a tear fell onto his lips.

“I love you,” she told him, her soft voice hoarse with emotion. “Don't let Kalahira take you.”

His mouth twitched into a hint of a smile. “I'll try.”

Shepard kissed him again, soft and tender. It felt like goodbye.
Numb (Kolyat PoV)

Numb. There was no other word to describe how Kolyat felt. Sure, his arm ached from where he had given blood, as did his back, from sitting hunched over the bed for so long. But over all, Kolyat just felt... numb. Oriana had tried to comfort him, as had Doctor Chakwas, but he'd politely sent them both away. In his mind, there was now only one other person that should have been in the room with them... His father's hand twitched on the bed, and Kolyat gripped it, fiercely. Hating how cold it felt.

"Where is she?!" he muttered harshly.

"Told her... to go..."

Panic gripped Kolyat, as he observed his father. Despite the transfusion, he was still too weak from the blood loss, and combined with the damage already afflicting his lungs, it seemed he had little time left. Kolyat had numbly complied with this father's request to remove the oxygen mask, terrified of what it meant. In the background, the monitoring machines bleeped rhythmically, as they kept trace of his father's weakening heartbeat. Kolyat squeezed his eyes shut. It was true that he still had a strained relationship with his father, but things were getting better. He wanted the older drell in his life, and that was thanks to Shepard. It sat a little uncomfortably with Kolyat, but it was the human he wanted there with them, not his mother. He still dearly missed her, and Shepard would never replace her, but it was the human that Kolyat wanted by his side. She was family now, and he couldn't remember his father ever smiling as much with his mother, as he did with Shepard. The stomp of heavy boots running along the corridor could be heard, and as Kolyat's eyes snapped open, his father slowly turned his head towards the door. There was the faintest of smiles on the older drell's face, and Kolyat could have sworn that his father's breath was slightly deeper than before. Then with a hydraulic hiss, the door slid open, and Kolyat's breath caught in his throat, when he caught sight of his step-mother. Shepard looked... haunted. She was free of her armour, clad in black combat pants and the oversized N7 hoodie, the one she loved to lounge in. Yet it didn't seem like she had taken time to wash up, as her cropped red hair was dishevelled, and there was a bloody hand print on her cheek. Kolyat's stomach twisted, once he realised that his father must have left it on her, for the mark was clearly a drell's hand. Silently, Shepard crossed the room to his father's bedside. Even though she bent to kiss his father on the forehead, nose, and then mouth, her hand searched blindly for his. Kolyat's free hand took hold of hers, even as his breath caught again. The image of her bonding pendant swinging in the air, as she bent over his father, would be etched into his mind for a lifetime. So would the look of raw emotion clear across her face.

"My life is not worth yours," Shepard whispered.

"You and Kolyat... are the only loves... I have left," his father panted.

As his father lifted a weak hand to cup Shepard's face, skimming the bloody hand print, a strangled sounding sob escaped her lips. Without conscious though, Kolyat stood and moved around the foot of his father's bed. On instinct his arms slipped around Shepard's, and as usual, the slightness of her surprised him. What surprised Kolyat more, however, was the fact that the fearsome soldier was actually trembling. That's when he fully realised, that the great Captain Shepard, was scared. The realisation left him feeling numb.
"Kalahira, don't you dare take him!"

The phrase repeated itself, over and over, in Shepard's mind... so many times, that it became a mantra. Even when Kolyat's arms slid around her, holding her tight to his chest, it was all she could think. Then Shepard felt the young drell's chin drop to rest against the top of her head, which roused her from her looping thoughts, and her left hand curled around one of his forearms. Her right hand drifted from Thane's cheek frill, and settled over his chest. She smiled weakly, as his hand moved to cover her own. Even in that awful moment, she loved to see the contrast.

"Siha," Thane breathed. "I'm afraid I've picked a bad time to leave."

Shepard blinked back tears. "You're a hero, Thane. You couldn't disappoint me, even if you tried."

"Such pleasant things from your lips..."

Thane's body was suddenly wracked by a fit of coughing, and Kolyat moved quickly to hit the button, that would administer painkillers to his father.

"Excuse me... breathing is difficult," Thane apologised, breathlessly. "Siha... it won't be long. I need to know... if the councillor survived."

Shepard gently raised his hand to her lips, and kissed his knuckles. She nodded, but when she tried to speak, the words came as a muffled sob.

"Yes father," Kolyat interjected. "Three are alive, thanks to you and Shepard."

"Udina is dead," she managed to say. "He instigated the coup. Ashley shot him before he could had the others to Cerberus."

That wasn't all that had happened, but Shepard had no intention on telling Thane that it was a close call. That Ashley nearly shot her, and Garrus nearly shot Ashley, and Vega had nearly shot Bailey... when he and his officers had broken through the damaged elevator door. There was a tiny, knowing smile on Thane's lips, almost as if he knew she was holding something back. He gave a ragged exhalation, that sounded painful, before squeezed her hands tightly.

"There is something I must do before it gets worse. I must..."

His words dissolved into another coughing fit, though he refused let go of Shepard's hands. Tears began to fall freely, as she held on to him. Kolyat place a hand on his father's shoulder, and the two shared a look, before the younger drell bowed his head. The cracks in Shepard's heart began to splinter, as she heard the next word Thane uttered.

"Kalahira..." he began. "Mistress of inscrutable depths... I ask forgiveness. Kalahira, whose waves wear... down stone and sand..."

Another bout of coughing shook Thane's body, and Shepard found herself perching on the bed, holding her husband close. She hadn't even been consciously aware that she had moved.

"Kalahira, wash the sins from this one," Kolyat continued, his voice low and resonant. "And set him on the distant shore of the infinite spirit."
Shepard felt her stomach twist in tighter knots, as she realised they were reciting a prayer for the dying. The splinters dissecting her heart grew wider, and it took all her will power not to break. She kissed Thane lightly on the temple, rubbing his arm in what she hoped was a soothing manner, as he settled back down on the bed.

“Kolyat... you speak as the priests do,” Thane smiled, his voice weak. “You have been spending time with them.”

The younger drell nodded, before walking back to Shepard's side. “I brought a prayer book,” he said, hesitantly. “Shepard, would you care to join me?”

Numbly, she nodded. She didn't actually want to, but she knew it would bring Thane comfort. So she bent down to give him a tender kiss, before slipping off the bed. Kolyat opened the book for her, holding it open in his right hand, whilst his left arm came to rest around her shoulders. Vaguely she noticed the book was hand written, in beautiful looping lettering. Though to her surprise, she quickly realised it was written in English, not drellish as she would have expected. Both of Shepard's hands held Thane's tightly, as she realised what this was... a final gift to her. A piece of him, that she could always hold dear. Humbled by what her husband had done for her, Shepard began to read.

“Kalahira, this one's heart is pure, but beset by wickedness and contention,” Kolyat recited.

“Guide this one to where the traveller never tires,” she joined in, quietly. “The lover never leaves.”

Her voice cracked, and she felt Thane gently stroking her knuckles with his thumb. Shepard took a shuddering breath, desperately trying not to sob, as her breaking heart began to beat fast. This meant a lot to Thane, she wanted to do it justice... for him.

“Guide this one, Kalahira, and she will be a companion to you, as she was to me.”

As she spoke the last word, Thane's hold on her hands loosened. He gave a shuddering breath, and his eyes slipping closed. As her husband flat-lined, Shepard crumbled to the floor, and her heart finally shattered.
Holding Shattered Pieces (Garrus PoV)

The scent of antiseptic and medigel assaulted Garrus' nostrils, as he paced the hospital corridor. Twenty steps one way, twenty on the return. He'd lost count how many passes he'd made, in front of the door that led to Thane's room, and Oriana had given up on trying to get him to sit. All he kept picturing was Shepard bent over Thane's body, a dark red smear across her cheek, and the blood had still been on her face, even after she had changed out of her armour. There had been a frantic look in her eyes, as she had raced back out of the Normandy, to a skycar already waiting to take her to Huerta, courtesy of Bailey. Even if Garrus hadn't already intended to follow her... Joker's observation would have given him the motivation needed. Hearing that Shepard had worn the same haunted look, when he had taken a rocket to the face, twisted Garrus' gizzards in a way he couldn't describe.

He was so lost in his thoughts, that he barely had time to dodge out the way, as a herd of doctors barged past him, and converged on Thane's room. He was only vaguely aware of Mordin and Chakwas leading the charge. Bile rose in his throat, as the high-pitched whine of a heart monitor met his audio canals. There was only one thing that could mean, and Garrus found himself holding his breath. Moments later, Shepard and Kolyat emerged from the room, and the air was forced out of his lungs at the sight of his best friend. She looked devastated. Her eyes were red, and tears rolled steadily down her cheeks, cutting through the stain of Thane's blood. Shepard had been holding Kolyat's hand, until Oriana ran forward, and threw her arms around her fiancé. Then Shepard just stood there, motionless, her gaze unfocused but trained at the floor. Garrus' chest clenched, he'd never seen her like this. Shepard was always so strong, determined and resolute. Now she looked broken, shattered. Cautiously, he approached, his visor recording her biometrics. When Shepard had died, it had ruined him, destroyed him. Garrus had felt like all the light had been sucked out of the galaxy... and they were only best friends. He couldn't image what it would feel like to lose your mate. Tentatively, he moved to rest his hands lightly on her shoulders, wary in case she lashed out. Spirits knew that was how he had reacted, upon hearing of her death.

However, Shepard merely looked up at him through her damp lashes for a moment, before she all but launched herself at him. Her arms wrapped tightly around his waist, and as she buried her face into his chest, Garrus was glad he'd had the presence of mind to change into his fatigues, before chasing after her. He doubted Shepard would have found much comfort, pressed against the cold metal of his armour. His arms came to encircle her, and as she let out a ragged sob, he tightened his hold. He lightly pressed his mouth plates to the top of her head, hoping to reassure her. If they had not been in public, Garrus would have done more to comfort her... he knew she liked to have her fringe petted, for instance... but even now, he was conscious of prying eyes. It was at that moment, that Chakwas appeared in the door of what had been Thane's room. The woman's face was set hard, though her gaze softened, when her eyes fell to Shepard.

“Take her home,” the doctor advised. “I'll come by the apartment as soon as I can.”

With that, Chakwas slipped back into the room. Knowing the doctor was right, Garrus manoeuvred Shepard in his arms, moving so his left arm was securely wrapped around her shoulders, and she was tucked into his side. He rumbled quietly, remembering that she had once said she found his voice soothing. Garrus took a tentative step forwards, not quite sure if he would manage to steer her away from the hospital. Though alarm coursed through his veins, at how complacent his normally fierce best friend was, as he easily guided her through the hospital and towards the elevator. Kolyat and Oriana trailed close behind them, the younger Lawson seeming to physically support Thane's son.

“I've hailed a skycar,” Oriana murmured. “It should be waiting for us on the lower level.”
However, things were never that easy. The moment the elevator opened on the lower floor, they came face to face Khalisah al-Jilani. Garrus tried, and failed, to repress a growl as the reporter closed in on them. Which even managed to rouse Shepard from her grief induced daze. He felt her tense, though didn't allow her to wiggle out of his grasp, no matter how much she tried.

“Captain Shepard,” al-Jilani called, her camera already rolling. “Your husband was admitted to hospital less than a two hours ago... the viewers will want to know why you are now in the arms of another man.”

Garrus felt Shepard's biotics begin to flare, a tingle of energy that whizzed across his skin, and glancing at her, he understood the dark look that crossed her face. She was furious... and so was he. For a moment he warred with himself. Should he allow Shepard to attack the report, who deserved it, or should he defend Shepard's honour, and suffer her possible wrath for think she needed saving. In the end, his speculation didn't matter, because before either of them could react, Oriana Lawson had lunged and punched the reporter square in the nose. Despite himself, Garrus' mandibles twitched in a small smile. Right then, Oriana had a striking resemblance to Miranda.

“You bitch!” Oriana spat, looking murderous.

Wanting to capitalise on al-Jilani's surprise, Garrus quickly ushered Shepard, Oriana and Kolyat into the waiting skycar, before rounding on the reported. It was far from his proudest moment, grabbing the woman by the front of her dress, and bodily hauling her off the ground, but he was overcome by the overwhelming need to protect his best friend. He growled, low and menacingly.

“Have some respect,” he rumbled. “The captain's husband has just died, helping to save the council. If you don't leave her alone, there will be hell to pay, as you humans like to say.”

With that, he dropped the reporter unceremoniously to the floor, and purposefully strode towards the skycar. Behind him, Garrus heard al-Jilani issuing instructions to her camerabot:

“Halt recording and delete. Send a message to the network; Captain Shepard is to be left alone, for the foreseeable future.”
Time had seemed to have lost all meaning. Though if Shepard thought about it, she doubted a single sleep cycle had past yet. However, she wasn't entirely sure... everything was a blur. She vaguely remembered staggering into the apartment, Garrus' arm wrapped tightly around her shoulders, with Kolyat and Oriana following close behind. They young couple made their way to their bedroom, whilst Garrus had silently pressed his forehead to hers. She had no idea how long they had stood like that, before he had scooped her up in his arms, and carried her into the main bedroom. Shepard recalled shuddering uncontrollably, as Garrus lightly set her down on the edge of the bed, and being surprised when she had heard the large whirlpool tub being filled. It had been strange... a novelty really, to soak with someone else in the tub as well. But it had been comforting to have him with her, and to allow the jets to ease out the physical pain her body felt, as her head rested on Garrus' shoulder. He'd continued being a sweetheart through the rest of the afternoon, and had curled up with her on the bed, without her asking. The turian had seemed to sense she was avoiding what should have been Thane's side, and had snuggled up on her side of the bed, without asking a single question. When the effort to hold herself together got too much, and she had begun to sob in earnest, Garrus had tightened his hold of her, and keened in sympathy. In that moment, Shepard didn't think she could love her best friend more, even if she had tried.

Now though, she sat alone, perched on the end of the too large bed. Shepard knew it wouldn't be for long, since Garrus had only gone to pick up some takeaway food for the four of them, but she still felt lonely. Even though she could hear the tinkling of glasses, and the pouring of liquid, indicating that Kolyat and Oriana were pottering about. And it hadn't been that long since her step-son had been with her, since he had quietly handed her an OSD, and murmured that he had found it earlier, in a box whilst looking for some old holos to show Oriana. That was the reason why Shepard had her omni-tool open, debating whether to activate the disk that she had already inserted into the large holoscreen on the wall. With a shuddering sigh, she hit the command button, and Thane's handsome face flickered onto the screen. It took a great deal of effort to choke back the sob, that had suddenly formed in her throat from the sight of him.

"Siha, I have thought over what you said," her husband said. "And in retrospect, I think leaving the Normandy was for the best. It was saddening, to see our crew go their separate ways, but it is better than answering questions in an Alliance Interrogation Room. For I doubt even your charm could have saved me from suspicion. I hope this message finds you well. Kolyat is kindly allowing me to stay in his apartment, until I can find my own close by."

In the video, Thane paused, glancing to his side and blinked twice in quick succession. Shepard couldn't help but give a watery smile, it was such a Thane mannerism, which he would do whenever he felt uncomfortable. Fresh tears began to well in Shepard's eyes, and her breath became shaky and uneven.

"I think the first attack I had scared him," Thane's holo continued. "Perhaps I shouldn't have said that. I don't want you to worry, or feel guilty that you are not with me. Just... face it bravely. I know you are good with that. I love you. I hope the Alliance listens. I know the chance is slim, but keep in touch, if you are able."

As the video ended, Shepard stifled a sob. It hurt knowing his message had not reach her originally, and in light of recent events, the pain was as tangible as a knife piercing her already shattered heart. Stiffly, Shepard moved from her perched position, to sit cross legged. She risked a glance at the untouched side of the bed, but when tears started to roll down her cheeks, she snapped her eyes.
away. With a deep ragged breath, Shepard hit the command for the next video to play, and tried to ignore how her hands shook as she did.

"Siha, it was a relief to receive those last two messages from you," the image of Thane stated. "Though I am sorry I missed this 'Valentine's Day'. I will endeavour to make it up to you in the future. As much as it was a joy to hear from you, I am unsure whether you received my message. Anderson warned that communications would likely be restricted, and I suppose communications from someone with my reputation even more so. The irony is, I am a danger to no one these days, I am even paying taxes on my investments."

A weak chuckle escaped Shepard, even as more tears left burning tracks down her cheeks. She shifted position again, hugging her knees up to her chest, and seriously debated reaching for a pillow to hold and bury her face into.

"I can't expect Kolyat to do so if I don't," the holo continued. "He is doing better. He is temperamental, but working for C-Sec means he is staying out of crime. I can tell he is serious about changing, it has cost him more than a few friends, though Oriana seems a positive influence on him. Send something back if you can, Siha. I can only learn so much from news reports about you."

Clasping a hand to her mouth, Shepard cried in earnest, though managed to muffle the sound with the sleeve of her N7 hoodie. Through her shuddering, Shepard slipped off the bed and she sat on the floor, her knees drawn up to her chest. After several minutes, she managed to regain enough composure to play the third message on the OSD.

"Siha, once again, your last two messages were silver linings. I believe that is the human expression," Thane’s holo said. "I am still unsure whether you have received my previous messages, so I have tried a false identity, to try to get this one to you. We’ll see if it works. I have good news and bad. The good news is that Kolyat, Oriana and I took a few days to visit Earth. Light the shade of Irikah's eyes, plants the shade of Shepard's. Shrill sound of chirping stops. I scan the ground, see two tiny bodies locked by claws..."

A sound somewhere between a huff of laughter and a choking sob, escaped Shepard's lips. She hadn't realised how much she had missed Thane's lapses of Solipsism, until she was watching it again, even though it was only a recording.

"Excuse me." Thane's image gave an embarrassed sounding cough. "As I was saying, we saw a beautiful sunset in New Mexico, and a scorpion eating a cricket. I wish you could have joined us. The bad news is, I had..." He paused to sigh. "I fainted and struck my head. Kolyat has convinced me to stay at Huerta Memorial on the Citadel. I will be there from now on. I still don't want to die in a hospital, but it's where the doctors are. And Kolyat... I love him. That means I must trust him. Goodbye Siha, I love you. Let me say that now in case I cannot later."

The flood gates were now well and truly open. Without restriction, Shepard let the tears fall. Her grief was so consuming she could barely breath, and the shattered pieced of her heart all but crumbled. The emptiness she felt was so vast, she couldn't even summon the energy to curse the deities, that she had so desperately prayed to. It took several moments to realise someone had wrapped their arms around her, and it wasn't until her cheek pressed against cool leather and scales, did Shepard realise who it was. However, that just made her cry harder... since it was the wrong drell holding her. Kolyat should not be the one comforting her. Thane shouldn't be dead in the first place.

'Kalahira, I want him back!'}
Several minutes past as she cried on her son-in-law's shoulder, though it came as some sort of morbid relief, to realise she was not alone in her tears. Kolyat's own landed on her clenched hands, and mingled with hers. Eventually the sobs quietened, and Shepard snaked her arms around the young drell's waist to return his embrace. He buried his face in her dishevelled hair.

"Is there any left to view?" he asked, quietly.

Unable to trust her voice to speak, Shepard simply nodded. There was one message left, and as much as she wanted to hear her husbands voice, she was also dreading playing it.

"Do you want me to stay?" Kolyat questioned, hesitantly.

Before Shepard could answer, a turian shaped shadow fell over them. "I'll stay... There's food downstairs, alcohol too. Oriana's dishing it out."

After giving Shepard a brief squeeze, Kolyat rose and left the room, mumbling a quiet thanks as he left. Without a word, Garrus sat on the foot of the bed, since turian knees weren't made to sit like she was. His talons carded through Shepard's hair gently, and she rested her head against his leg. Then, before Shepard could process what was happening, she found herself cradled in her best friend's lap. It startled a small, watery laugh from her. She had forgotten how quickly Garrus could move, when he wanted to. His mandible fluttered against her cheek.

"You ready?" he asked.

Still not trusting herself to speak, Shepard simply hit the command to play.

"Siha, I have prepared emails, sent videos, even composed paper letters," Thane's image said. "I know this will not reach you, but it must be said. I once had no reason to live, then suddenly I had two: you and Kolyat. Circumstances keep us apart, so Kolyat takes up much of my time, but... I don't know if it's obvious to humans... Fist slams the table. She comes to me, fingers cool and soothing. 'Thane, be alive with me tonight'. I cannot forget you... That is what humans say. With us, it is a state called tu-fira: 'Lost in another'. It can consume us. In case you are in the same pain, I want to say... You have only made my life better. You gave me you, brought me back Kolyat... Even the Omega Four relay made me feel... purposeful. We are alive, Siha. And when we are not, I will meet you across the sea."

The damn was well and truly broken. Hearing her husband relive the beginning of their first night together, destroyed the tenuous hold Shepard had on her emotions. Hearing Thane's doubt that she had missed him, longed for him, loved him as much as he had her... it stole her breath, causing her to choke on a sob. Shepard was physically shaking. It hurt so damn much, and explained why he had been so hesitant, when they had first reunited. Though it was Thane's parting words, hearing the depth of his feelings for her, that truly undid Shepard. She wanted to hold him, kiss him... remind him how she needed him, loved him unconditional. He had been her shining light in the darkness, but he was gone. Shepard all but wailed her grief, the daggers of pain and loss too sharp and swift to defend against. A waving keen broke from Garrus in sympathy for her heartbreak, and he rocked her gently, stroking her back and hair as she cried. As Shepard sobbed, her omni-tool pinged several times, alerting her to an incoming call. She ignored it, and tried her hardest to bury herself in Garrus' warm embrace. However, the turian's omni-tool soon started to ping, after the third tone he sighed and connected the call. Neither were expecting to see Mordin.
If Kolyat had been holding anyone's hand other than Shepard's, he would have worried he was hurting them. His hand clasped hers so tightly, that he could feel her knuckles shift under his grip. However, Shepard just squeezed his hand back, silently reassuring him that she understood. He took a shaky step forward, Shepard still at his side, and together they tentatively approached the hospital bed. It seemed so surreal, being back in that room... only hours before he had watched his father flat-line. And if it hadn't been for his fierce grip of Shepard's hand, the warmth of her skin on his scales, Kolyat would have thought he was in some sort of twisted dream. As it was, the room was warm... hot by human standards, if the flush on Shepard's cheeks was anything to go by. Monitors bleeped, the climate control whirred, and the other medical equipment hummed unceasingly. Though there was another sound, incredibly faint but blessedly repeating. A sound Kolyat had never dared think he would hear again. Almost in a daze, his hand left Shepard's, only for him to curl his arm around her waist as they came to stand by the bedside. She returned the gesture without hesitation, and Kolyat felt her dainty hand grip the leather of his coat in a vice-like hold. This close, he could feel her trembling, and on instinct, Kolyat hugged her closer. Shepard looked up at him then, tears still evident in her emerald eyes, though there was a hesitant smile on her lips. Nothing needed to be said, he understood.

Kolyat's gaze fell back to the prone figure on the bed. Verdant scales that had once been muted, now brightly contrasted the crisp, white hospital linens. But still, even as he watched the chest rise and fall in a calm rhythm, if it hadn't been for his tight hold of Shepard, Kolyat would have sworn it was a dream. But it wasn't, it was real... His father was breathing. His father was alive.

Cannulae, along with intravenous tubes, spanned the length of his father's left arm, accompanied but a drainage tube, that seemed to be exiting the left hand side of his chest cavity. A vivid scar ran from his father's left underarm, around his sternum, to his right underarm. He was hooked up to a ventilator, an oxygen mask covered his mouth and nose, which seemed to be helping the steady rise and fall of his chest. Tears rolled down Kolyat's cheeks, when he noticed his father's fingers twitch on the bed. Gently, Shepard took his hand and placed it over the older drell's. Her small, porcelain hand contrasted greatly, when her palm rested on top of his.

All of a sudden, Shepard gave a huff of laughter. Kolyat's eyes snapped up from their conjoined hands, to her face, before his gaze quickly drifted to his father's. In an instant, he understood the human's happiness... his father's eyes were open, regarding them both warmly. Unable to say anything, Kolyat gave his father's hand a gentle squeeze, one that was returned, albeit weakly. Shepard however seemed to know exactly what she wanted to say. It was so typically Shepard, it was almost hard to remember the broken, sobbing mess he had cradled in his arms, not one hour before.

"Guess Kalahira didn't want her ass kicked today," she grinned.
Haze (Thane PoV)

His eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light, as his body adjusted to the dull, aching pain that radiated from his chest. It was darker and quieter here, than it was in Huerta Memorial, and Thane couldn't be happier at hearing the gentle hum of the Normandy's engines. It meant he was home. The past three days were somewhat of a blur, something he attributed to the copious amounts of pain killers, immunosuppressants, and anti-infection drugs that had been pumped into his system. Even with the shaky recollections, Thane knew he was lucky. Blessed even. He could remember the fight with the Cerberus assassin, as well as speaking with Kolyat and Shepard in the hospital... then there was nothing until he had blinked awake, with a heavy pain in his chest, and Mordin standing over him. Though even without the drug induced haze, Thane doubted he would have fully understood what the salarian had explained. However, he mostly got the gist of it... The samples the geneticist had taken during their last meeting, had provided the culture to grow him a new set of healthy, undamaged lungs. Thane also understood that he'd flat lined, then had been brought back to life by Mordin's genius, and Chakwas' extensive medical knowledge.

A warm gently weight on his right hand caught Thane's attention, and pulled him from his thoughts. Slowly, he tilted his head towards the feeling, and found himself fondly regarding the top Shepard's tousled red locks. His Siha was sat in a chair by his bedside, hunched over the cot, which was something he could only vaguely remember seeing, whenever he'd been awake enough to open his eyes. Her head was pillowed on her right arm, and her left hand lightly clutched his right. There was a grey, military issue blanket draped about Shepard's shoulders, and from what Thane could make out, she was dressed in her regulation fatigues.

"She hasn't left your side," a voice said.

Thane twisted his head in that direction, not daring to move more of his torso than necessary, and found Karin Chakwas smiling at him. The doctor gave him a brief nod, before turning her attention to the monitor he was still hooked up to. Tentatively, Thane took a deep breath. It was a strange feeling, being able to breath freely again. And he found that a decade was long enough, to make the simple act an alien concept to him... one that he was enjoying immensely. At that moment, Shepard stirred from her sleep and blinked up at him, groggily. Her eyes then fell to his chest, as a sleepy smile spread across her face. She brought the hand that she was holding up to her lips, before cradling it to her cheek. Her smooth skin was warm beneath his scales, and Thane lightly stroked Shepard's cheek with his thumb. Neither heard nor saw Chakwas leave the medical bay.

"I'm never going to get tired of waking up to you," Shepard announced, in a whisper.

"Siha..."

It was all Thane managed to say. As a lump formed in his throat, when he noticed the unshed tears in her emerald eyes. Gently, he pulled at her hand, indicating he wanted her to join him. Without hesitation, Shepard perched beside him on the cot. She sat so that her head rested on his shoulder, and her right arm was slung over his abdomen. Anyone else would have thought the position was casual, however Thane knew different. His Siha's hand lightly rested over the now healed wound, left by the assassin's blade. Only a faint line of uneven scales remain, though even that was hidden by Shepard's warm palm. Another wave of exhaustion washed over Thane, as he felt another surge of pain killers flood his system. Slowly, his eyes began to drift close, and he rested his cheek on top of Shepard's head. His Siha gave a huff of laughter, though wiggled to gain a more comfortable position herself. The last thing Thane heard, before sleep claimed him again, was his wife
whispering: "I love you."
Putting Plans into Action (Shepard PoV)

The last few weeks had been hard. Events and situations that Shepard was still finding herself having nightmares about... not that nightmares were a rare thing anymore. However, in this moment, she found herself very content. Really, Shepard knew she was more happy than she probably had a right to be... there was still a war with a race of sentient machines going on, after all. However, right then, the state of the galaxy was the last thing on her mind. It was late into the night cycle on board the Normandy, all non-essential crew were in bed, and the shuttle bay hanger was deserted. Well... except for the two of them. She was crouched behind an appropriated supply crate, sighting down Thane's M-97 Viper, whilst her husband stooped over her. He gently guided her hands into the correct positions, since muscle memory was insisting that Shepard held the rifle like a shotgun. A smile quirked her lips. It had been many years, right back when she had first joined the Alliance, when Shepard had last handled a sniper rifle. She had proven, quite early on, that sniping was certainly not her calling in life. Not that Shepard had ever really minded. She had gone through basic and N-training, along with her illustrious military career, without ever feeling the need to master the weapon. However, that had since changed... namely thanks to her husband's steady recovery from his surgery, two weeks before.

Thane was still a long way off being fully recovered, but he was well enough that convalescing had started to take a toll on him. He was restless, and even though they had never directly spoken about it, Shepard knew Thane was starting to think himself a burden. Whereas Kolyat had managed to quickly integrate himself into the crew, becoming Traynor's junior office, Thane had not been able to transition so easily. Shepard had watched how he had withdrawn into himself, spending much of his time in their cabin, practising as many forms of martial arts, as his recovering health would allow. But Shepard knew that wasn't enough for him, and she couldn't blame him... since she knew she would feel the same. So with Chakwas and Mordin's approval, Shepard had formed a plan. Target practice was just stage one, something both the doctor and professor had agreed would be a safe way to build up Thane's confidence. Though Shepard's ultimate goal for the evening was to 'recruit' her husband, as the Normandy's physical instructor. In truth, Shepard was a little nervous about broaching the subject. She was offering the roll as the captain of the ship, rather than Thane's wife. Though she worried he would see it as an act of pity, rather than her genuinely wanting to recruit him to enhance the crew's skills and prowess. Which was why she had thought to broach the subject, by first asked him to train her to use a sniper rifle... He knew that it was not a skill she possessed, so if he could teach her to use one at even a mediocre efficiency, Shepard hoped it would give her solid grounds to make her offer.

"Focus."

Thane's voice was a warm whisper against Shepard's ear, and his breath slightly ruffled her cropped hair. Unable to help herself, she turned her head slightly and stole a small kiss from his unsuspecting lips, before sighting down the Viper's scope again. She felt more than heard, Thane's chuckled response, as his chest leant against her back.

"Focus Siha," he chided, a smile in his voice.

Shepard did as she was instructed, momentarily emptying her mind from other distractions. So far during the session, she had come to think of sniping as a type of meditation. The act of focusing closely resembled the way Samara had taught her Kundalini, a form of yoga that helped to hone her biotics. However, the end result of sniping was obviously a lot more destructive, not that it was a problem. She was a marine after all, and sometimes simple meditation didn't cut it. Even if she never
got a proper handle on using a sniper rifle, Shepard felt she'd probably use the training as some sort of stress relief. Though the longer she spent with Thane's rifle in her hands, the more she wanted to do her husband proud. With a controlled inhalation, Shepard sighted her target... a ballistics dummy, that Cortez had mysteriously unearthed from somewhere in the cargo hold. For several heartbeats, she let herself grow accustomed to the Viper's weight, having used a M-92 Mantis and a M-98 Widow so far during the session. The latter had nearly dislocated her shoulder with its recoil, despite her heavy bone weave, which had quickly put it on the 'never to use' list... along with the M-920 Cain, that Mordin had once invented.

With an evenly measured exhalation, Shepard caressed the Viper's trigger, just as Thane had shown her. As the practise round was released, she gritted her teeth, trying to dampen down the grunt of discomfort at the kick back. Glancing up from the scope, Shepard was surprised to see that the projectile had, for once, hit the target in the rough proximity she had been aiming for. She felt oddly triumphant, even though the bullet had hit the 'cheek bone' of the dummy, rather than the centre of the forehead. Thane took the rifle from her hands, before settling it and himself against the crate that Shepard had crouched behind. With more effort than she would have liked to admit, she stood to join him, wincing as her knees twinged in protest.

"You are improving," Thane observed, kindly.

"And you have the patience of a saint," she smiled. "Though I admit, your patience is paying off... If this was back at the academy, I'd still be hitting the wall."

"It is still hard to believe, the great Captain Shepard..."

"Shoots a sniper rifle with as much finesse as an elcor," she finished, wryly.

Thane gave her a rare grin. "Perhaps not quite so bad... Vorcha would more accurate."

"Gee, thanks," Shepard retorted.

She struggled to hide a smile, as she cocked her hip to the side, and crossed her arms... trying to look indignant. However, Shepard quickly relented when Thane took both her hands in his, and gently tugged her towards him. She hummed in approval, as Thane's strong arms slid around her waist, and revelled in the way his toned body felt against hers, as she pressed up against him. A smirk quirked the corner of his mouth.

"You have many fine qualities, Siha," Thane stated, solemnly. "However, you're sniping skills are not one of them."

His deadpan teasing startled an unexpected bark of laughter from her. Though before Shepard could think of a retort, Thane's full lips met her hers, and her hands eagerly slipped around the back of his neck in response. Only the sound of their breaths, mixing with the gentle hum of the Normandy's engines, could be heard. The smell of discharged heat sinks, mingled with the familiar smell of spice and leather, that had finally replaced the smell of antiseptic. When Thane's slightly bifurcated tongue brushed along the seam of her lips, Shepard readily granted him entrance, tasting spiced tea, when her tongue started a languid dance with his. Thane's hands travelled from from her waist, moving to cup her rear, and pulled her closer. Shepard gave an involuntary gasp, as she felt her husband's evident desire, and soon gave herself over to the moment.
Somehow, they had managed to make it up to their cabin... which Thane suspected was mostly thanks to EDI. The elevator doors had been waiting open for them, once they had managed to stumble from the makeshift firing range, refusing to let each other go as they moved. Shepard's lips had been intoxicating... more so than usual. Since his own resurrection, they had kept their private moments sweet yet sedate, cautious not to push his new lungs too far. Though this evening, something had seemed to ignite in both of them. The moment the elevator doors slid shut, Thane had pressed Shepard against the wall, his lips still fiercely locked with hers. Her back had bowed, arching her body closer to him and his desperate need for her. He'd hungrily inhaled her heady floral scent, and tasted a faint hint of mint, as his tongue had eagerly danced with hers. When the elevator had finally reached their floor, Thane had lifted Shepard into his arms, though she protested... even as she'd instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist. In the back of his mind, he'd faintly wondered if he would suffer for his impatience in the morning, but in the moment, that hadn't mattered. Once again, the doors had opened automatically from them, as had the one leading to their quarters. Their clothing had been hurriedly shed, which left a jumble of discarded items strewn across the floor, telling their lustful story.

Now Thane lay on his back, in the rumpled wreckage of their bed, with his Siha poised above him. She was a vision. An alabaster goddess, bathed in the blue glow, cast from the gently bubbling fish tank. An almost wicked smile pulled at her kiss swollen lips, and her emerald eyes were darkened by desire. Where Shepard's porcelain skin met his scales, Thane could feel an almost searing heat, and the feeling made him burn for her to finally close the distance between them. However, his Siha held herself so maddeningly still above him, that Thane seriously debated begging. But before he managed to finish the thought, let alone form a sentence, Shepard's lips crashed into his. She was fierce and wild. Her tongue demanded entrance, just as he slid easily into her welcoming softness. Thane groaned in response, overwhelmed be the feel of her. He bucked up instinctively, pulling a moan from her, that vibrated against his lips. After that, Shepard moved above him with abandon, and Thane could do nothing but follow her rhythm. She felt amazing... his well revisited memories had not prepared him for how good she felt. It was a blessing, and a curse. The pleasure was mounting too fast, heat pooling so quickly, that it too hard to keep control. As Thane opened his mouth to warn Shepard... to beg her to slow down, to allow him to please her as she deserved... a low, guttural groan escaped him instead. As she rocked forward, his mouth was left panting against the column of her throat, and his fingertips slipped on her sweat soaked skin, as he desperately attempted to pull her closer. The conclusion was inevitable. Thane buried his face in the crook of Shepard's neck, just as the first wave of release crashed over him.

An unknowable amount of time had passed, before he managed to sheepishly look at his Siha, who had gracefully moved to curl up by his side. Her head was pillowed on his shoulder, and her tousled hair tickled his cheek frill. He swallowed thickly, trying to think of some way to apologise to her... or at least a way to start. Not since his youth, had he made such a devastating faux pas. However, before Thane had chance to speak, Shepard lifted her head and looked him squarely in the eye. There was an almost mischievous glint in her emerald eyes.

“Don't you dare!”

With that, Shepard settled back down beside him, dragging the crumbled sheets over them as she did. After a moment's shuffling, she lay her head on his chest, and Thane could have sworn he felt his Siha smiling.
“Why isn't she answering?!”

Jeff pushed off his cap, and ran a hand aggravately through his flattened hair. It wasn't like Shepard not to answer his calls, and she never usually ignored his pings. Sure, it was approaching one in the morning, but still... this was Shepard. Shepard was never asleep at this time of the morning. Biting back an annoyed, Jeff tried to hail her again, with the same response. Namely, nothing.

“There better be a good reason you're not answering me, Shep,” he muttered.

“I have disabled her comm. link,” EDI suddenly announced.

He nearly jumped as her android body appeared beside him, holding out a steaming mug of black coffee. Frowning, Jeff took the offered mug, and took a tentative sip... he wasn't sure if android faces could actually look hopeful, but oddly, EDI was doing a damn good impression. Jeff's eyes widened a little in shock. He hadn't been holding out much hope that the coffee would be drinkable, the last attempt had been an unpalatable sludge, but this one was surprisingly good.

“Liara helped,” EDI supplied.

“I'll remember to thank her,” Jeff replied, before cocking his head to the side. “And what do you mean, you've disabled Shep's comm. link?”

“Shepard and Thane are involved in some... personal matters. I thought it best that they were not disturbed, unless it was an emergency. Is it an emergency, Jeff?”

Despite himself, Jeff chuckled. “The quarians probably think so...” Quickly, he re-opened the original audio link. “Hey, Tali? Looks like Shep's doing the nasty with lover boy. I'll get her to call you later.”

“Keelah!” the quarian squeaked. “Joker, you bosh'tet! Be thankful this is a closed channel. Next time I see you, I'm setting Chatika on you!”
The Normandy was currently hurtling through space, at faster than light travel, heading towards the Perseus Veil. The main reason Thane knew this, was because he had been in the cockpit chatting with Joker, when Shepard had issued the order to set course. The journey wasn't going to be overly long, though it would take two more days to get to their destination... a rendezvous with the quarian fleet. So other than the general duties that came from inhabiting a starship, the entire crew were on unofficial down time. As such... in the quiet dimness of their cabin, Thane leant back in the plush leather chair, that was situated in the upper office. He smiled slightly at the small ball of fluff, that sat happily in his cupped hands. To anyone outside their immediate circle, it would have been a surprise that the fearsome Captain Shepard doted on a small, fuzzy space rodent. But Thane had long since come to respect the bond his Siha shared with her space hamster. It was rather... cute. In truth, he was rather fond of Jenkins himself. Which was why he was currently sat with the rodent cupped in his hands, waiting for Shepard to finish her shower. As he heard the water switch off, Thane stood gracefully, before gently depositing Jenkins back in his perspex cage. Really, it was quiet a marvel that the little rodent was still going strong. After all, the space hamster had experienced the collector's invasion of the Normandy, both journeys through the Omega Four Relay, as well as a stint as a resident in Kolyat's messy apartment. As well as being relocating to Shepard's... their, apartment on the Citadel, before ending up back on board the SR2. Really, Jenkins was much like Thane himself, if he were to be honest, and the comparison made him chuckle. Moving towards the couch in the lower part of the room, Thane idly wondered how Urz was holding up. The varren was another unexpected piece, of the puzzle that was Shepard. He knew his Siha missed the beast, and he was sorely tempted to ask Liara to help him contact Wrex, in order to see if an arrangement could be made, to bring Urz aboard the Normandy. As Thane sat down in his preferred spot on the oversized couch, his gaze wandered towards the empty fish tank. It's blue illumination was the only light in the cabin, though it was starkly empty, devoid of it's aquatic life. In truth, it was a little bit of a mystery as to wear the fish had gone. Especially since he knew Grunt had sworn he had nothing to do with their disappearance.

Thane had been so lost in his musings, that he had failed to notice that his wife had left the shower room, until her comforting floral fragrance reached his nose. On his peripheral, Thane saw Shepard descend the three short steps that separated her office from their living space. He couldn't help the hum of appreciation that escaped him, or his body's reaction, as he watched her naked form approach... his embarrassment from last night, long since put to rest.

Shepard was a vision as she stood before him. Strong, lithe muscles covered by smooth, alabaster skin. Her red hair was tousled and still damp, and her face was devoid of make up, which somehow made her appear younger. Her verdant eyes were regarding him intently, as she nibbled on her naturally rosy coloured lower lip. Without hesitation, Thane held out his hand to her. He avidly admired the pleasing sway to his Siha's hips, as she walked around the coffee table. In a movement that was almost languid, she slid into his lap.

"I've been thinking about you," Shepard announced, her voice a sultry whisper.

And all at once, Thane felt decidedly overdressed.
Shepard's lips quirked into a smile, as she felt Thane tense momentarily. She knew it was a cheap shot, sauntering around their cabin naked, but damn! Shepard had missed the more... physical aspects of their relationship, and last night had just left her wanting more. So now that she was sure Thane was well on the road to recovery, Shepard intended to fully capitalise on the forty-eight hours of down time. A hum of appreciation escaped her, as she felt Thane's hands caress the bare skin of her back. She couldn't help but giggle slightly, when his nimble fingers began to trace the swirling tattoo that now sat between her shoulder blades. It had been a wedding gift from Jack, who had personally worked on it, whilst they had waited for everyone else to wake up from their hangovers... that felt like another lifetime ago. For Thane, she supposed it technically was. At the time, Shepard had half wondered if she was insane, for giving her fellow biotic free reign over her skin, but the intricate phoenix design was actually beautiful. She loved it, and the fact that Thane was tracing the design from memory, gave Shepard the impression her husband approved as well.

With practised ease, she slipped Thane's jacket off his shoulders, and pushed it down his muscular arms, until it pooled around his waist. She revelled in trailing her fingertips along the newly exposed scales, and even though the temperature in their cabin was cranked up to an almost desert like heat, Thane was still cool to her touch. It was something Shepard doubted she would ever get bored of experiencing. Closing her eyes, she leant her cheek into Thane's palm, as he cupped her face. Vaguely, she wondered if it was a by-product of her early life on the streets, or her less-than-mundane two lives, that led her to feel the safest in the arms of the galaxy's greatest assassin. However, as her eyes flickered open again, her tumbling thoughts were chased away, as Thane leant towards her. This close, Shepard could see the dark green of his irises, barely visible beneath the black outer lids. As Thane ran his thumb gently along her lower lip, Shepard closed her eyes again, as well as the distance between them. His lips were soft and cool against her own, and she wound her arms around his neck, prompting Thane to deepen their kiss. Without her lips leaving his, Shepard moved to straddle Thane's hips, the supple leather of his trousers and vest were cool against her naked skin. Without warning, Thane deftly picked Shepard up, causing her to first yelp, then giggle in surprise. He was the only person who ever managed to surprise her.

Reluctantly, Shepard decided the smirk on his lips, was worth her moment of indignity. She returned her husband's smile, wrapped her bare legs around Thane's lithe waist, and happily let herself be carried over to their bed. Silently, she marvelled at the fact, that her husband could actually carry her with ease again. And it was no surprise, that Thane lay her down gently on the bed. However, Shepard hadn't been expecting the speed in which he hurriedly undressed himself. It was a rare occasion for her beloved assassin to ever do anything without poise and grace, but in this instance, he seemed fevered. Not that Shepard was going to complain. The sight of Thane's naked form still sent butterflies flittering around her stomach, and she didn't bother to hide her grin of appreciation, as his sculpted form knelt over her.

"I love you, Siha," Thane whispered, before capturing her lips once again.
Burn (Thane PoV)

Revelling in the alluring suppleness of his Siha's pleasing curves, Thane caressed Shepard's naked skin. He inhaled deeply, drinking in the floral scent of her, and enjoyed the fresh mint taste of her, as their tongues languidly danced together. It was a pace that was squarely at odds, with the primal need that was building inside him. It had been far too long since Thane had enjoyed Shepard's body, and devoted himself in worship his wife as the goddess she was. The time that Kepral's Syndrome had stole from them, had felt like an eternity. His days had been filled with longing for her, and his nights were engulfed by vivid, re-lived memories of their most intimate times. The previous night had not sated his need for her, nor had it given Shepard what she deserved.

Almost of it's own volition, his left hand began to trail down the enticing length of her body. Teasingly, Thane lightly skimmed over her left breast, down her rib cage, and along the curve of her waist, before coming to rest at the apex of her thighs. In slow circles, he caressed the nubbin of her sex. A pleased smirk formed on Thane's lips, at Shepard's pleased gasp. As she arched from the bed, he slipped his fused digits into her velvet folds, eliciting soft moans from his lover. Languidly, he licked from the underside of her right breast, and she gasped again. Thane flicked the rosy bud with his tongue, it's slight bifurcation enabling him to caress each side of the peak, whilst his fingers lovingly stroked the inner walls of Shepard's sex. Her warmth and wetness called to him, breaking down the barriers of his control. He wanted to be inside her, to feel her envelope him. He needed her with every fibre of his being, and it seemed he was not the only one so effected, for Shepard suddenly gripped his bicep like a vice.

"Thane, I need you," she gasped.

"As you wish, my Siha."

With a single stroke, Thane hilted inside her, and his lips met Shepard's in a bruising kiss. He felt her blunt nails dig into the scales of his shoulders, as his right hand tangled itself in her cropped, fiery locks. The pace they fell into was frantic, passionate and unrelenting. It wasn't a pace that would let them last the night. But as Shepard's emerald eyes, now darkened by desire, met Thane's, he knew that the hunger he felt was reciprocated. He shifted, so that he caught her right leg hooked over her shoulder, and grinned at the way her eyes widened in surprise. They had two days to be romantic, attentive and gentle. Right now, they needed to burn.
Kal's lips quirked into a smile, as he watched Tali pace back and forth. He already knew she was
uncharacteristically nervous about the upcoming meeting, though if he hadn't, the constant pacing
and the almost frantic wringing of her hands, would have given Tali away. As amusing as it was to
watch, it worried Kal, it wasn't like her. Normally she was calm and confident, a ray of light in the
dark, and there had certainly been enough of them over the last few years. Now though, she was a
worried ball of nervous energy. One that was likely to wear a groove in the airlock's floor, before her
anxiousness abated.

"I don't think we have the resources to repair the floor, ma'am," he teased, gently.

At the sound of his voice, Tali whipped around to face him, and her silver eyes narrowed behind her
purple envirosuit mask. Characteristically, she cocked her right hip, and crossed her arms.

"Kal, I asked you stop calling me that," she chided.

"Technically, I am on duty ma'am," Kal replied, drawing out the last word.

"But it's just the two of us here," she smiled.

Slowly, he gave a calculated nod of his head. "It would seem you are correct, ma'am."

In two easy strides, he crossed the distance between them, and since they were indeed alone, he
pulled Tali into his arms without hesitation. As she relaxed into his embrace, Kal rested his helmet
atop of hers, cradling her close. He knew she was nervous about the meeting, but he couldn't for the
life of him figure out why she was so anxious about seeing Shepard again. From everything he had
heard and witnessed, the two women were close, practically sisters. The human had defended Tali as
fiercely as he would himself, on many occasions. Which was the main reason the captain had won
his respect, along with her fighting prowess, and the evident care she felt for her crew. It was
something Kal had noticed had rubbed off on Tali, first when she returned triumphant from her
pilgrimage, and then again after her fight against the collectors. Tali'Zorah vas Normandy, for she
had never fought to have her name reverted to 'vas Neema', was a remarkable woman. One that Kal
still had a hard time believing returned his affection. The ancestors had smiled upon him, when they
had brought Tali into his life.

"Do you think she will be mad?" Tali asked.

"What for?" he queried, genuinely perplexed.

"That I haven't told her?" she explained.

As Tali looked up at him, her eyes wide with concern, an unexpected huff of laughter escaped Kal,
and he tightened his hold on the woman in his arms. It was just like her to worry about manners and
politeness. She was the sweetest being alive, not that he was inclined to tell her... certainly not whilst
her shotgun was just a mere arm's length away. She was still a deadly force to be reckoned with, and
not purely thanks to her time spent with Shepard. He squeezed Tali close, though all he could think
about was what it would be like to kiss her... sometimes the suits were absolutely maddening.

"You were only appointed a few days ago," he pointed out. "And a message couldn't reach the
Normandy, whilst they were in FTL anyway."

There was a gentle hiss from the hydraulics of the door mechanism, which indicated the rest of the boarding party... mainly the other four admirals, were about to enter the airlock. With great reluctance, Kal relinquished his hold of his girlfriend, and re-took his position by the outer door. There were no rules regarding fraternisation, but he refused to let Tali seem unprofessional, especially in front of those airheads. As he hefted his Reegar Carbine, a smile pulled at Kal's lips, as he watched Tali secure her own Carbine to her back. The line of weapons had been named in honour of his family's work as marines for the flotilla, and Tali had taken to using one as her weapon of choice, ever since they had become a couple. Every time Kal saw her with it, he was filled with an overwhelming sense of pride. She turned to smile at him.

"Thanks Kal."

He gave her a respectful nod. "Just stating facts, ma'am."
Leaning against her empty fish tank, Shepard couldn't help the smirk that tugged at her lips. Despite the headache the quarians'... no, that certain quarian admirals... had given her, Shepard still found reason to smile. Three years ago, when she first met the two women who currently sat on her sofa, Shepard would never have imagined how they would end up. Of course, she had no doubts the three of them would become friends... once Liara's crush had been gently and safely navigate, that is. But Shepard couldn't have dreamt how their lives would have been altered, since their hunt for Saren. Humanities' greatest hero, the galaxies most powerful person, and one of five admirals in charge of an entire race. Three years ago, no one would have believed herself, Liara T'Soni and Tali'Zorah would be such powerful women. Not even Shepard herself.

“Admiral Tali'Zorah vas Normandy!” Liara beamed.

“Keelah!” Tali muttered, burying her masked face into her hands.

“It's certainly got a ring to it,” Shepard smiled. “But are you alright?”

She could well imagine how her adopted sister was feeling. Being a leader was no easy task. It came with sleepless nights, gut-twisting worry, and a bucket load of second guessing yourself. However, Shepard couldn't be more proud of Tali. Just like Garrus, Shepard had always seen a glimmer of greatness in the quarian, almost from the moment they had met. Garrus had proven himself to be an amazing leader, despite his set back on Omega, and Shepard had no doubts that Tali would do the same.

“No... No, I'm really not,” Tali sighed. “Seventeen million lives are riding on me... and I don't know if I can save them.”

Throwing Shepard a concerned look, Liara slid an arm around Tali's slender shoulders, in a loose embrace. Understanding exactly how Tali was feeling, Shepard took a more... practical approach. Without preamble, she looted her private stash of alcohol, and quickly poured the quarian a healthy shot of turian brandy. She set the vivid blue liquid down in front of her friend, and handed her a sterilised emergency induction port.

“You're doing everything you can,” Shepard reassured.”If the worst happens to the fleet, it won't be because of you.”

“I helped my father... and Xen's ideas! The new tech that made an invasion too good to pass up... that's based on my father's work,” Tali stated, still refusing to look up. “If they die because of me... if... if I don't...”

“We'll get them out of there safely, Tali,” Shepard promised, perching on the coffee table. “And Xen's a bitch.”

“I'm sure I can get Glyph to pull up some interesting data on your fellow admiral,” Liara offered.

There was an almost wicked smirk on the asari's lips, which caused Tali to finally gave a huff of laughter, though it still sounded a little hollow to Shepard. Shaking her head, Tali took hold of both Shepard and Liara's hands, her three digits curling around their five. Behind her violet mask, the quarian's eyes shone brightly, and Shepard couldn't help but wonder if Tali was crying. She
squeezed the quarian's hand in silent reassurance.

“I don't know how you manage, Shepard. And I know I couldn't do this without you. Both of you,” Tali confessed. “I feel like I'm bluffing. Trying to convince them that the admiral's daughter knows what she's doing.”

“But the admiral's daughter,” Liara said, quietly.

“The admiral,” Shepard affirmed.

“I know,” Tali nodded, solemnly. “And at least now, I can push back against the worst ideas. That's why I accepted the position... and because of you,” she added, looking pointedly at Shepard.

To say Shepard was surprised, was a little bit of an understatement. “Me?”

“When they offered me the position, I asked myself what you'd do. I thought you'd take the chance to make things better,” Tali explained.

“Funnily enough, that's why I took over the role of Shadow Broker,” Liara admitted, sounding a little sheepish.

For a moment, Shepard merely regarded the two women in front of her. Logically, she knew people thought of her as a hero, though it wasn't something she had ever gotten used to. Even ‘just' being the Hero of Elysium, was a hard thing to wrap her head around most of the time. To hear herself, a street rat from Earth, called a hero... it was still something Shepard had a hard time believing. And having two of her closet friends basically telling her she was their role model... it made her head spin. Desperately, she wanted to crack a joke, make a light hearted jab at herself and move on to easier topics. But her throat was refusing to work.

“You've given up so much,” Tali continued. “Stood too long without allies, I didn't want you to do this alone.”

“I'm never alone,” Shepard whispered, trying to blink back unexpected tears. “You guys have always been with me.”
The sound of gunshots rung out across the hanger, and the smell of discharged heat sinks filled the air. Thane was using his favoured Viper, whilst Garrus was firing his new Adas assault rifle. According to Kal'Reegar, the Adas was a specialist anti-synthetic rifle, that Tali had insisted bringing to show Shepard and Garrus. Apparently, it was the young quarian's hope, that the new gun could help the humans and turians gain an advantage over the reapers. The arrival of a new gun, had naturally prompted Garrus to suggest some target practice, whilst Tali was in private 'talks' with Shepard and Liara. Thane had readily agreed, as had Kal, who was accompanying the quarian admirals as an escort. However, Thane had a feeling there was more to the story.

“I noticed Tali now carries a Reegar Carbine,” Thane said, conversational.

“She does,” the quarian marine acknowledge, as he ejected a spent heat sync.

“Does that mean you've finally asked her?” Garrus cajoled.

“No,” Kal sighed, leaning against a nearby crate. “Doesn't seem right now. With Tali an admiral, and I'm just a marine.”

“Yeah... why would an admiral want the most decorated marine in quarian history?” Garrus chuckled, over the rapid fire of his rifle.

“It would be no more unusual, than humanity's hero marrying a renowned drell assassin,” Thane said, nonchalantly.

He couldn't help the smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth, as Kal'Reegar regarded him for a moment. The quarian's eyes narrowed slightly behind his dark grey enviro-mask, however there was no malice in the look. It seemed more like the marine was trying to gage the sincerity of his words. At last, Kal nodded. The smirk that pulled at Thane's lips, widened, as he picked up the new M-25 Hornet... an SMG that Mordin had been tinkering with. The salarian had taken it upon himself to modify the Cerberus weapon's accuracy, and reduce the gun's recoil. There were two models ready, one for himself and one for Shepard. And with his Siha otherwise engaged, Thane had agreed to test it during the impromptu target practice. Out of the corner of his eye, Thane took a moment to regard the quarian beside him. He fully empathise with the man. He had also been full of doubts and worries before finding the courage to ask first Irikah, then Shepard, to commit to a lasting relationship with him. He could perfectly recall every moment he had agonised over the decision to ask both of his amazing Siha's.

“Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage,” Thane recited, before pulling the Hornet's trigger.

Garrus chuckled. “Normally, I don't go for philosophy, but that actually made sense.”

“Agreed,” Kal nodded. “And if you two are finished telling me to grow a pair...”

“Perhaps we could now figure out, why such an upstanding turian, is still a bachelor?” Steve Cortez quipped, as he approached the trio.

The shuttle pilot come requisitions officer, was carrying an M-8 Avenger. And not for the first time,
Thane had to credit the Alliance for insisting that all it's personal had a decent proficiency with at least one weapon. It seemed the Avenger assault rifle was the gun of choice for pilots, for even Joker wielded one when needed... Remarkably well, in fact.

“That's easy,” Garrus drawled, propping himself against a crate. “The three most desirable women in the galaxy are already in relationships, and those three are a tough act to follow.”

“Didn't you know Lola, Doc and Sparks before anyone else?” James chimed in, appearing to lean against a nearby crate.

“Hmm... that's true,” Garrus agreed. “But Shepard is my best friend, and I see Liara and Tali like sisters. Tali is the same age as my little sister. Having eyes means I know they're desirable, however...”

At that moment, Thane was slightly distracted by the comforting, floral fragrance that always heralded his Siha's arrival. And in true Shepard style, she didn't waste time in announcing herself. One thing he loved about his wife, was the easy way she pulled people together, treated them like family. And as families often do, Shepard's love involved a healthy dose of teasing.

“The big guy goes for an attractive fringe and a supportive waist,” she called out.

“And he's a bosh'tet with no taste,” the quarian added.

It came as no surprise that both women were carrying their respective weapons. Shepard had her Locust, and Tali was brandishing none other than a Reegar Carbine. Out of the corner of his eye, Thane noticed Garrus' mandibles flare in a wide grin.

“No Liara?” the turian asked, ignoring their jibes.

“She had a call to make,” Tali dismissed, shouldering passed Garrus' much larger frame.

“Feron?” Thane enquired.

The only answer he received, was Shepard's red pained lips curving into a knowing smile.

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Author's Note

The quote that Thane recites, is by Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu.
Despite already knowing the day was going to be a shit storm, purely thanks to the 'discussions' with the quarian admirals the night before, Shepard's mouth still hung open in shock... and quite a lot of horror. She had seen a lot of things in her two lifetimes... and this was the only thing that came close to the disgust and anger that she felt, upon finding her crew aboard the collector's ship. Thankfully, her helmet hid her stunned expression from EDI and Tali, who had also come to a standstill beside her. Wading through the torrent of reaper corrupted geth had been bad enough, not to mention finding the massive dome of reaper tech, that powered the dreadnought. But this... this was beyond. This was Legion. Shepard's heart pounded furiously at finding that her former teammate... her friend, a captured prisoner inside of the dreadnought... and she could feel the dark energy of her biotics pulse, as her temper flared. Just as she was about to call out to the geth, who was bound and suspended by thick cables above the platform, Legion raised it's head and their optical light seemed to blink in surprise.

"Shepard... help us."

Shepard only managed to nodded her agreement. Legion's request had sounded so full of actual emotion, she had been caught completely off guard.

"I am pleased we have the chance to free you from confinement," EDI stated.

As the android moved towards the nearby computer control panel, Tali's three digit hand closed around EDI's forearm, halting her intention.

"Shepard, wait! The geth are being controlled by the reaper signal."

"Right... this thing," she sighed, gesturing to Legion's prison.

"So for all we know, Legion is with them," Tali argued. "Maybe Legion sided with the reapers voluntarily. Or maybe its hacked."

Gritting her teeth, Shepard bit back her gut reaction response, which was to scream. She knew Tali's feelings towards the geth, and she felt foolish for hoping that maybe their time fighting with Legion against the collector's, would have helped put her sister's prejudices aside. It seemed that was too much to hope for, but that didn't matter. Shepard knew Legion was innocent. Synthetic or not, Legion was her friend. It didn't matter if the geth unit no longer served aboard the Normandy, they were still a part of the crew. And since Kaidan, Shepard had sworn that no crew mate was left behind.

"Legion helped us fight the reapers before," Shepard countered. "There's no way they would have agreed to this."

"Your caution is understandable," the geth stated. "Once free, we will submit to any restraints you deem necessary."

"That is extremely reasonable, Legion," EDI replied.

"Agreed," Shepard nodded, curtly. "EDI, do you think you can work your magic?"
"Analysis is required," the AI replied.

With that, the android set about studying various parts of the machinery. Behind them, Shepard could her Tali pacing agitatedly. Legion for his part merely blinked his optical unit once, before turning his attention to EDI. Shepard's smile slightly behind her mask, as she realised it was the first time Legion would be seeing the AI's new body.

"EDI, we did not expect you to gain license to operate a personal unit," the geth stated.

The comment was so out of context, since Legion was still suspended in the dome, waiting patiently to be freed, the it startled a chuckle from Shepard. A huff of unexpected laughter also came from Tali. It was only years of intense military training, that stopped Shepard from whipping her head around, and staring at the quarian. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed that EDI paused in her examination of the reaper technology for the briefest of seconds, before resuming her task again.

"I never thought I'd say this, but... it's good to see you again Legion," Tali confessed.

Legion's optical blinked. "Likewise, Creator'Zorah."

"Now that's cleared up, what is this thing?" Shepard asked, gesturing to the dome.

"It uses our networking architecture to broadcast the old machine's command signal, to all geth. Simultaneously," Legion explained.

"So getting you out of there will shut off the reaper signal?" she queried.

"You cannot simply remove the restraints," Legion advised. "We are secured by hardware blocks nearby. It shackles our operating protocols."

A shiver ran through Shepard at the piece of information. Since finding the geth suspended in the dome, she had experienced a feeling of deja-vu. Now hearing that, Shepard understood what was causing the feeling. The whole thing was eerily similar to how they had found Feron, bound aboard the old Shadow Broker's ship. The realisation churned her stomach, and she was glad she hadn't asked Liara to accompany them, as originally planned.

"I am familiar with the concept," EDI stated.

Another shiver ran up Shepard's spine. "The AI shackles that Cerberus used to keep you under control?"

"Yes," EDI replied, sounding a little testy. "Used by organics, it is... understandable. But for geth to install this in a formally independent unit, is... unnecessary."

"That's not the word I'd use," Shepard muttered, angrily.

"No..." Tali agreed, quietly.

"The hardware blocks are on the far side of the room," Legion explained.

Even though the geth remained as patient and as calm as ever, Shepard could have sworn there was a sadness to the unit's voice. Her heart went out to Legion, as it would to any of her crew, her family. Quietly, she activated a closed channel back to the Normandy, as she set off in the direction Legion
had indicated. A moment later, a welcome voice was speaking to her.

"Is everything alright, Siha?"

"Charlie foxtrot," she replied.

Those two words earned Shepard a huff of laughter from her husband, and a small smile pulled at the side of her mouth. It had been a giggle sort of morning, months ago, when they had lounged in bed, and she had explained what some of the more colourful military acronyms meant. But in these situations, it had certainly paid off.

"What can I do to help?" Thane queried, calmly.

"Have Garrus and Gabby standing by, maybe Liara as well," Shepard stated. "We found Legion... he's been held prisoner."

There was a moment of heavy silence at the other end of the comm. link, before Thane eventually replied: “Understood.”

"Over and out," she acknowledged, before cutting the link.

**Author's Note**

Charlie Foxtrot is the polite acronym of Cluster Fuck, which in turn is an acronym to say that something/situation is completely messed up.
Patiently, Thane waited for Shepard in their cabin. There had been a tremor in her voice when she had reported finding Legion, and he knew his wife would somehow find a way to blame herself for the geth's incarceration. It was something she often did... shouldering the blame for all of their problems. Thane wished Shepard wasn't so hard on herself, but her empathy was one of the many things he loved about his fiery redhead. The door to their room opened with a gentle whoosh, and Thane looked up from where he was sat, at the foot of their bed. Shepard leant against the door frame, helmet under one arm, and half a smile tugging at her red painted lips.

"Now that's a sight I will never get tired of," she greeted.

Thane chuckled as he stood to meet her. His appearance was no accident... he well remember a late night conversation with Shepard, a few weeks ago, when she had informed him, in her usual blunt way, how much she appreciated his physique. With that in mind, he had left his vest and jacket hanging in the closet, and wore only his leather trousers and boots. The scar across his chest was now nothing more than a curved line of discoloured scales, thanks to Chakwas' medical know-how, and it did nothing to dampen his confidence.

"I thought you might approve," he smiled.

Despite her armour, Thane pulled Shepard to him as soon as he was near enough, ignoring how cold the metal felt against his scales. He cupped her face in his hands, and captured her lips with his own. He knew nothing more would come of their kiss, not for the moment at least, but it was enough. There was a satisfaction to being able to pull a smile to her lips, and give her a welcoming kiss, when she returned from a mission. If nothing else, it meant that they were still both alive.
“Shepard.”

'Seriously! Another one knows my name!'

She couldn't help it, that was all that went through her mind at that moment. Perhaps it was fatigue, from the twenty hours of almost none stop fighting... or perhaps it was near hysteria from everything that had happened on Rannock so far... especially since she had just faced down another reaper, this time on foot for Spirit's sake! And it knew her name... but of course it knew her name... because there was nothing to make a galactic war against a race of sentient machines even creepier, than having them all seemingly know her personally. Jack had once said that it meant they were scared of her, and even though Shepard wasn't sure if she agreed, it gave her courage to look it right in the eye... optical lens... lazer sight... whatever. Or that could have been the adrenalin still coursing around her veins.

“You know who I am?” she asked, sounding more nonchalant than she felt.


'Harbinger, of-bloody-course!'

"And what if we don't let you continue?” Shepard demanded.

“You have no choice.”

She snorted, trying to hold in a bout of laughter... which made her think it was definitely hysteria. “I disagree, and so do the billions that are rising up to resist you.”

“You cannot comprehend the magnitude of our presence,” the reaper stated.

Shepard crossed her arms and cocked her hip. “We might surprise you.”

“You represent chaos. We represent order. Every organic civilization must be harvested, in order to bring order to the chaos. It is inevitable. Without our intervention, organics are doomed. We are your salvation.”

A wave of horror passed through Shepard's body at the reaper's words, and only her rigorous training, stopped it becoming a visible tremor. She refused to let it have the upper hand, to let it know it's words bothered her. Behind her, Shepard heard footsteps approaching, that surely signified that her squad had returned for her. It was against her orders, but she figured she could let it slide... by now, Shepard had simply come to accept they were all as stubborn as she was... and it seemed Kal was just as bad as Tali.

“You're just a machine,” she argued. “This time the organics are taking control.”

“A philosophy reminiscent of the quarians. Observe the results of their efforts to maintain control.”

Shepard got the uncomfortable notion that the reaper was not only goading her, but laughing as well.

“The geth are more than mere machines, something you cannot understand,” she stated, with conviction.
It was something she truly believed. Even before the geth's reaper given upgrade, Shepard had a hard
time seeing Legion as just a machine. Since first encountering the geth on Eden Prime, she had since
fought side by side with one, and come to call Legion a friend and teammate. She had gone into the
geth conscious... something she was sure Thane and Garrus were fuming about, and learnt they had
not attacked the quarians first, but had tried to defend their lives. They had not driven the quarians
from their home world, but patiently waited, caring for the planet, until a time came that the quarians
saw sense. Now the reaper code had upgraded them into fully living synthetic beings, something that
far outstripped the Old Machines. But the reaper didn't seem to have an answer to her statement, for
all it said before deactivation was:

“Finish your war. We will be waiting.”

A heavy feeling settled in Shepard's gut. She knew exactly what the machine was insinuating. She
was also fresh out of ideas, so hoping for some sort of miracle, she hailed EDI.
The lighting aboard the Normandy flickered to emergency, and all the panels on the bridge went dark, including every one in the cockpit. Within seconds, the comm. link to the ground team cut out. This all happened just after Shepard had called to EDI, through the communication system. Unable to help himself, Jeff cursed vividly and loudly, barely stopping himself from slamming his hand onto the control panel in frustration.

"EDI, what the hell is going on?" he demanded.

No reply came.

A sound akin to a growl emanated from Garrus, and Thane sat up straighter in the co-pilot's seat. Both men had taken to spending time with him in the cockpit, when Shepard was on a ground mission without them. For the drell, that was a daily occurrence... and to Jeff's surprise, he found Thanе quite enjoyable company, as they waited for the captain to return. It was rare for Garrus to join them, as Shepard hardly ever left the turian behind. Really, the pair had been partners pretty much from the first days aboard the SR1, making them pretty much inseparable. Though this mission, Shepard had decided to take Tali and Kal as her back up, along with Legion. Jeff could see the logic in her decision, and he couldn't disagree with it... bar the part when she entered the geth's hive mind! That was just bat-shit-crazy. And even putting that to the side, not taking Garrus had made the anxious waiting party grow from two to three. He had originally joked that they were getting a taste of what he went through every mission, but now with EDI not responding, having a natural predator and a trained assassin in the same room as him, set Jeff a little more on edge than usual.

"EDI, respond!" Jeff demanded again.

Worry began to coil around his gut, as the consoles continued to refuse to respond. They had just seen Shepard take out a reaper... on foot! Now Jeff had the awful suspicion that the downed machine had something to do with the Normandy glitching out. Sure, EDI had cut out on them before, namely when she had transitioned into the android platform, but this seemed a lot more critical. It came as no surprise that footsteps could be heard approaching the cockpit, he knew Traynor would be wanting to know what was going on, and how she could help. What wasn't expected was that it was two sets that hurried towards them, instead of just one.

"Are you having any luck getting through to EDI?" Samantha asked, appearing on his peripheral.

"Nothing," he replied, agitatedly.

"Meirda! Is there nothing from Lola?" James' distinctive voiced asked, from somewhere behind him.

"No," Thane replied, calm as ever.

However, everyone had come to learn, the calmer the drell appeared, the more anxious or angry he usually was. It set Jeff even more on edge, and the next several minutes were filled with tense but active silence, as he and Sam tried unsuccessfully to re-establish connection with EDI. As the minutes dragged on, Kolyat appeared to help Garrus try and reconnect the comm. link with Shepard and the ground team. Thane had left to see if anything was amiss in the AI core, and James had gone to reassure the rest of the crew. Then, all of a sudden, everything reactivated.
"EDI?!” he almost shouted.

"Yes, Jeff?” she replied, calmly.

"What the hell?!" he demanded. "What the hell just happened?!

"There was an incident ground side, Shepard required my assistance."

"Incident?" Thane enquired, rejoining them.

"Yes. Whilst Shepard and Tali were talking down the quarian admirals, Legion had determined how to broadcast the upgrade to all geth, though his hypothesis would have resulted in his deactivation,” the AI related.

"Legion's dead?” Jeff asked, slowly.

He exchanged a worried glance with Garrus, who was now leaning against the bulkhead. They both remembered how badly she had taken Kaidan's death. Jeff chanced looking at Thane, he was pensively looking out of the viewing screen.

"No. That is what Shepard required my assistance with."

"So what happened?” Garrus asked.

"After conversing with Legion, I ascertained there was a more satisfactory way to workaround the problems with uploading the code," EDI began. "Whilst Shepard and Tali managed to stop the quarian attack, myself and Legion reverse engineered the reaper's algorithm, then backdoored his database to begin the upload. Our progress speed was reduced due to the need to combat the reaper's shields, firewalls, and asymmetrical keys that were still active. However, the outcome is most satisfactory."

Jeff lifted his hat, and ran a hand through his flattened brown hair. There were not many times that EDI's explanations went over his head, though this was unfortunately one of them. However, he was brought some comfort by the fact that even Garrus and Traynor, were looking mildly perplexed.

"Oh, is that all? And here I thought it would be something complicated," James laughed, as he re-entered the cockpit.

Unable to help himself, Jeff grinned. He knew the marine was nowhere close to the unthinking meathead, that most people assumed him to be. Hell, if he was, Anderson wouldn't have assigned him as Shepard's bodyguard whilst she was back on Earth. Nor would the captain have been happy for him to remain such an integral part of the Normandy crew. However, it was only Vega who could get away with asking for clarification the way he did. It was almost like an art form, and Jeff respected him for it.

"We activated the communication nodule inside the dead reaper, and linked it with Legion's data core. Which made it possible to transfer the data without Legion having to deactivate," EDI explained, a little more clearly.

"Normandy... do you read?"
The sudden sound of Shepard's voice through the comm. system made everyone jump slightly, even Thane, which made Jeff grin.

"We hear you Siha," the drell replied.

"Everything okay there?" she asked.

"Just peachy," Jeff announced. "What's your situation?"

"Good," she replied, a smile evident in her voice. "The geth are going to help the quarians settle on the southern continent. If Traynor is with you, have her send a message to Hackett. Inform him that quarian and geth engineers will be joining the crucible project."

"So... you managed to stop a whole war by yourself?" Garrus drawled, his mandibles flaring.

"There was a speech, it was very motivational," Tali replied through the comm.

"Of course there was," Thane said, dryly.
Quiet Attentions (Thane PoV)

Unsure whether to sigh or chuckle, Thane regarded Shepard. His wife was currently slumped over her desk, datapads scattered haphazardly around her. By the looks of things, she had barely made it out of the shower, before Traynor or EDI had alerted her to some important message that needed her attention immediately. Thane would never condemn Shepard for her work ethic, or her determination to help every soul that she could. However, seeing her clad only in a towel, asleep at her desk, worried him. She was running herself ragged, though at least the temperature in their cabin was warm enough to mean she wouldn't catch a chill, but it still disconcerted him. They hadn't long left Rannock, Tali and Legion once again on board, and he knew Shepard hadn't eaten yet, which was something else that was concerning him. She never seemed to find the time to eat, and if she did, it was normally only a ration bar or some biotic energy paste. It was something he vowed to bring it up again, but only once she had slept sufficiently. Careful not to wake her, Thane picked up his sleeping wife, and carried her gently to their bed. She murmured once, as he unwrapped the damp towel from her body, but otherwise she remained fast asleep. Which was another thing for him to worry about. Even though Shepard could fall asleep just about anywhere, she was not a heavy sleeper. A pin dropping would normally wake her up. So seeing her completely pulled under by sleep was unnerving, and Thane typed a quick message to Doctor Chakwas, who had elected to stay on board, asking for any advice. As he waited for her reply, he took stock of their cabin. It seemed that at least this time, Shepard had managed to take care of her armour before sleep had overtook her. Meanwhile, her weapons were laid out on the coffee table, along with the various cleaning tools that were required for their maintenance. And Thane couldn't help but wonder, how long it would be until his Siha was once again in harms way.

"EDI?" he asked, quietly. "What is our current course?"

"Shepard instructed Jeff to set a course for Eden Prime," the AI replied, in an equally hushed tone. "There has been a distress call from the colony. Admiral Hackett has asked her to investigate."

Thane's brow furrowed. "And our ETA?"

"Thirty six hours and twenty five minutes," EDI explained. "Unless an emergency arises, I will notify crew to defer to either Garrus or Lieutenant Vega, until the captain next leaves your cabin."

A smile tugged at his lips. "My thanks."

There was a faint electronic beep, that indicated the AI had logged herself out, before the only sounds left in the room was the gentle bubbling of the fish tank, and Shepard's peaceful sounding breaths. Really, Thane wasn't at all surprised that his wife had managed to get a synthetic life form to worry about her. Two actually... as Legion had followed her around, offering his assistance, from the moment they returned planet side. It was only when Shepard had stated she was coming up to their cabin, that the geth had accepted she didn't currently need help with anything.

As Thane sat on the sofa, intent on taking care of Shepard's weapons for her, his omni tool pinged. The moment he read the words: **Hey Deadshot**, he knew who the message was from. It was the nickname James Vega had taken to calling him, mainly thanks to a night playing cards, where the marine and Joker had tried to come up with a suitable sobriquet for him. Apparently, it was after some twentieth century comic book anti-hero. In truth, he wasn't sure why Vega insisted on giving everyone nicknames, but since Garrus had been landed with the moniker 'Scars', Thane considered himself lucky he hadn't ended up with 'Scales'. Smiling, he read the full message.
Hey Deadshot,
Guessing Lola hasn't eaten again. I'll be whipping up some huevos rancheros soon, does she want any?
- Vega
PS Messaged you in case Lola's asleep... she has a mean right hook!

Trying not to chuckle, Thane typed a quick reply. He had no idea what the dish actually was or what in entailed, but if it could be eaten cold or reheated later, he was determined to make sure Shepard at least ate some of it. It had to be better than the ration bars she was trying to solely get by on.
The Kodiak shuddered slightly, as they entered the planet's atmosphere, but it was nothing that Steve hadn't warned them about. The first and last time Shepard had been to the planet, Joker had steered them in aboard the original Normandy, and the ship's design and build had shielded them from the turbulence. The shuttle was not so fortunate, but with the SR2 being far too big to make the covert drop that was required, the Kodiak was their only option. So Shepard sat on the uncomfortable metal bench, her back pressed against the bulkhead, and gazed out of the shuttle's tiny window. Garrus sat to her left, and Liara to her right. Tali had also insisted on tagging along, though had opted to be Steve's co-pilot for the mission. Since Thane had still not been cleared for active duty, he was monitoring their communications, along with Joker.

"Eden Prime..." Shepard sighed, already feeling weary.

"This is where it all began," Liara said, in a hushed tone. "Where the prothean beacon gave you the vision."

"And... where Saren launched his first major attack with the geth," Garrus drawled.

"And where Nihlus lost his life," Shepard added, bitterly.

"Yes... And now with Cerberus here, Eden Prime's colonists are under attack again," Liara stated.

"They've had it tough," she agreed. "Though it seems like more than just three years ago."

Garrus lay a gauntlet clad hand on her shoulder. "I remember the reports. I was busting my ass, trying to find evidence against Saren, and hearing that he'd attacked a colony while I sat mired in bureaucracy... that was a bad day."

A smile quirked the corner of Shepard's mouth, and she bumped her shoulder against her best friend's arm. Since the very first days of knowing the turian, Garrus had complained about red tape, and made no secret about his hatred of the politics and bureaucracy that came with it. During their friendship, it had become a running theme, one that she would often tease him about. And impending mission not-with-standing, today was no exception. Garrus' mandibles flare, almost in anticipation.

"You always did prefer a straight up fight," Shepard said, affectionately.

"And you're always good at helping me find them," he retorted.

"We have visual," Tali suddenly declared.

The trio turned to the small viewing screen, that was situated on the wall opposite the window. A sickening feeling of deja-vu washed over Shepard, as a scene eerily familiar to Saren's attack greeted them. Buildings and fields were on fire, black smoke was billowing into a red tinged sky, and bodies littered the ground. She could clearly remember how Anderson had tensed beside her, and how Nihlus had let out a surprised sounding growl, as they viewed the footage all those years ago. Now it seemed almost a replay of events, though this time it was Liara tensing, and Garrus growling.

"Cerberus hit Eden Prime hard. Whatever they found here, was worth a major offensive," the asari declared.
"I'm picking up survivors from other parts of the colony," Tali interjected. "But they've killed everyone near the dig site."

"Shit!" Shepard grit out, running an armoured hand roughly through her cropped hair. "They deserve better."

"I know," Liara consoled. "But what I can find of reports, state that the Alliance did everything they could to evacuate colonists, but... Cerberus came in so quickly."

"If we find survivors, we will do what we can," she stated, resolutely. "But what about this artefact? Any hint if it's part of the crucible?"

"The Alliance didn't get any specifics about what Cerberus has uncovered," Liara explained. "I know it would help to have another source of information about the catalyst, but we can't count on that."

"Captain, I'm bringing you in as close to the dig site as I can," Steve announced. "No way to avoid detection, but you should have a few minutes leeway."

"Understood," Shepard acknowledge, before regarding her two ground-team mates. "Alright, get ready to move."

"On your six," Garrus grinned.
The Discovery of a Life Time (Liara PoV)

Liara gave a slight sigh of relief, the immediate threat taken care of. Thanks to a combination of her and Shepard's biotics, along with Shepard's and Garrus' gun fire, they had made it to the dig site without too much trouble. There had been one close call, due to a Cerberus turret... but that had been narrowly avoided, thanks to Tali's directions over the comm. link, and Garrus' ability to Overload machines. So after a brief check with the quarian, who gave the all clear, the trio approached the dig site's walkway. Whilst Shepard and Garrus kept a watchful vigil, Liara set about raising the elevator. It took a matter of seconds to enter the correct code, and the lift was soon ascending from the dig site. She took the opportunity to try an accesses the Cerberus files, that were now stored on her Omni-Tool. It proved relatively easily to hack through the encryption, but what she found stunned her, and her eyes widened in shock, as the elevator reached their level. There was a large, black metal box situated in the middle of the platform. Liara swallowed audibly.

"Shepard... it's not a prothean artefact. It's a... prothean."

"Like the... collectors? Or those bodies we found back on Ilos?" Garrus queried, sounding wary.

"Like the bodies we found on Ilos," Liara stated. "But this one's alive."

"Alive?" Shepard repeated, sounding sceptical. "You're right, that doesn't sound possible."

With excitement and trepidation coursing through her veins, Liara nervously stepped onto the elevator. She paused for a moment, gathering her courage, before resolutely walking towards the oblong casket. She could see why it had been referred to simply as an artefact by the researchers, because at first glance, the box didn't seem to resemble much. But upon closer inspection, Liara could make out faint carvings along the perimeter, and what looked to be a concealed control panel, situated at one end. Cautiously, she activated her Omni-Tool, just as two distinct sets of footsteps sounded on the metal platform, which indicated that Shepard and Garrus had followed her.

"We all saw the status chamber back on Ilos. The only reason they failed was a lack of power," Liara explained. "Cerberus found this in an underground bunker, and it still has power. This prothean has been in stasis for fifty thousand years, just waiting for us. Think of what we could learn!"

A smile quirked the corner of Shepard's mouth. "There's my archaeologist," she teased. "What do you about the protheans... The people, not the technology."

"Given your experience with the prothean cipher, you probably know as much about them as I do," she said, honestly.

"And for those of us who weren't attacked by malfunctioning alien tech..." Garrus drawled.

"The prothean empire spanned the known galaxy. They uplifted countless other species to join the galactic community," Liara explained.

"Galactic community? You think they had something like the council?" he asked.

"Yes, exactly," she beamed.

"Hopefully, it was a little more reliable than the current one," Shepard interjected.
Liara nodded. "Their cultural and artistic expression are quite close to the ancient asari. And given their interest in helping other species, it is clear that they believed in inter-species cooperation."

"Keelah! Could this help us finish the crucible?" Tali asked, via the comm. system.

Her brow furrowed as she considered the question. In truth, she didn't know. The prothean in status could come from any background. They could be a scientist, a warrior, a farmer, or even a simple fertile member of the populace, put into status in the hopes of ensuring the protheans future. There wasn't even a guarantee that they would be able to understand each other, once the prothean was out of the pod. And then there was the dreadful chance, that they wouldn't be able to release the prothean from stasis... but then again, doubts wouldn't get them very far. Shepard had taught her that. A bleep from her omni-tool indicated the scan was finished, however the results were far from ideal.

"I hope so," Liara replied. "If this single prothean was put into stasis, they could be the foremost scientist of their time, or perhaps the wisest councillor. Though Cerberus damaged the life pod when they excavated it. The life signs are unstable."

"Then lets get them out of there," Shepard stated.

"No! Breaking open the pod would kill them!" she almost shouted. "We have to find the command signal that ends the stasis mode. And we have to figure out how to open the pod, without doing more damage."

"It seems Cerberus took over the labs nearby," Tali advised. "To research what was found at the dig site, I assume. So that's likely your best bet."

Garrus gave an unexpected growl. "Hate to break it to you ladies, but it's going to have to wait. Looks like we got company."
In total disbelief, Thane watched the footage that was being broadcast by Shepard's suit-cam. It seemed well beyond the realm of probability, but he couldn't deny what he was seeing with his own eyes, even if his mind was struggling to process just exactly what he was seeing. Never in his wildest dreams, did Thane expect to be witnessing something so monumental... and the mood in the cockpit seemed to reflect the general consensus of shock. Kal'Veegar sat silently staring at the console, his glowing eyes wide behind the grey glass of his envirosuit mask. Joker had removed his trademark hat, to scratch at his flattened hair. And James had stopped resting against the bulkhead, and was now leaning over the pilot's chair, his mouth agape.

"Blood hell!" Joker muttered.

"Dios! Esto está loco!" James exclaimed. "Lola, te metes en locuras de mierda!"

It came as no surprise to Thane, that his translator failed in understand what the marine was saying... it never did, when James spoke his own language, since the translators had only ever been set up for human standard. However the tone was clear, as was the way the human folded his muscled arms across his chest and scowled at the screen. Thane decided it was safe to assume that James thought what they were witnessing was unbelievable. He also had a feeling the marine was calling Shepard out, for getting herself into another extraordinary predicament It was something he had often heard the behemoth of a man do often, and knew his Siha respected James for it. It was also a sentiment that Thane could fully agree with... Shepard had a skill of making the impossible a reality.

**Author's Note**

Spanish translations: Dios! Esto está loco! - God! This is crazy! & Lola, te metes en locuras de mierda! - Lola, you get into crazy shit!
Contact (Shepard PoV)

Not wanting to waste time, lest more Cerberus troops arrive, Shepard hurriedly punched the code into the pod's control panel. With a hiss, several clamps seemed to unlock and the stasis chamber began to slowly open. For a piece of machinery that was fifty thousand years old, it seemed to be functioning remarkably well, and with seconds, the pod revealed it's slumbering inhabitant. To Shepard, the prothean did look remarkably like the collectors. Which actually come as a slight surprise, because even knowing the collectors had once been protheans, there had been no way to tell what extent the reapers had gone to, with their modifications. But this living prothean did resemble a collector. There was the four eyes, and a head shape that reminded Shepard of some type of beetle. There was no recognisable nose, but four slits in the centre of the face that Shepard presumed were for breathing. The prothean did have a recognisable mouth however, even though it's lips were so thin, that they were almost none existent. There didn't seem to be any skin, not like a human or asari at any rate, but plates similar to a turian, which were a tealish-green. A colour that vaguely reminded Shepard of Kolyat. For some reason, there was something about the prone figure that led her to believe it was male, and it wasn't just the lack of breasts being defined by the prothean's red clothing, attire that looked a little similar to drell leathers. No... it wasn't that, because turian females also lacked breast. There was just something very masculine about the prothean's face, and it seemed she wasn't the only one that thought he was male either.

"It may take him some time to fully regain consciousness," Liara stated.

Garrus gave a hum of agreement, though before Shepard could give her own opinion, the prothean opened his eyes. Four vivid yellow orbs were revealed, each with two black pupils. Without warning, a biotic blast knocked all three of them off their feet. To Shepard, it felt like a mix between a Push and a Warp, though thankfully it wasn't powerful enough to do anything more than to knock them off balance. She managed to scramble to her knees, just in time to watch the prothean stumble out of his stasis pod. He was clearly disorientated, which gave Shepard time to notice he had feet not too dissimilar to a quarian's or turian's. She got to her feet slowly, not wanting to alarm the prothean, as did Liara, though the prothean still began to warily back away from them. Garrus seemed a little more dazed, and from the way the turian was lying, it appeared he had hit his head on a nearby crate.

"Be careful, he's confused," Liara warned.

"Keep an eye on Garrus," Shepard instructed.

She knew her friend would be eager to speak to a living prothean, to be the first of the modern asari to do so, but Shepard didn't want to risk any of her family being hurt. She doubted that the prothean would attack out of spite, but it was an all too real possibility, that he could do out of fear or confusion. There was no telling what his final conscious moments had involved, but Shepard figured that whatever they were, they wouldn't have prepared him for waking up fifty thousand years in the future. She was hoping to gently convince the prothean that they weren't a threat, but he suddenly whirled around, and grasped her shoulders firmly. Her eyes widened in shock, as a wave of images, similar to what the beacon and the cipher had given her, assaulted her mind.
Nausea hit him first, then pain that stabbed into his brain, and sent him to his knees. Javik hadn’t expected that reading the alien would cause him such discomfort. Before his forced stasis, such a simple act would have presented no problem. So it was extremely obvious, that he had been in the pod for far longer than any of his people had envisioned. It did not bode well for the fate of the empire, or the state of the facility, in which he and his compatriots had slumbered.

"How many others?" Javik asked, his gaze trained on the ground.

"Just you," the alien stated, quietly.

He made a vocalisation that was part distressed, and part annoyed.

"You can understand me?" the alien queried, sounding surprised.

Javik wanted to snort. If the alien knew so little, it proved how truly primitive they were.

"Yes. Now that I've read your physiology, your nervous system... it's enough to understand your language," he explained, exasperated.

"So you were reading me, whilst I was seeing..."

"Our last moments," Javik sighed, cautiously getting to his feet. "Our failure."

"Your people did everything they could," the alien stated. "They never gave up, and fought to the end. It was more than some would, and I could use some of that commitment now."

For some reason, the alien touched one of the strange protrusions on the side of it's head. It's brow furrowed in a disturbingly elastic way. It looked... confused, or perhaps concerned, Javik wasn't entirely sure. However, on his peripheral, he noticed two other aliens approaching them. He turned to face them, ready to defend himself should the need arise. Though he was taken aback when he recognised one of the races immediately.

"Asari," he announced.

Then realisation dawned, the other two... the one he had spoke with, as well as the one behind the asari were also familiar.

"Human, turian... I'm surrounded by primitives," he realised in dismay.

"It's not safe here," the human suddenly declared.

"Shepard?" the turian said.

The way that single word was said, led Javik to believe that must have been the human's name, or perhaps rank, as it was spoken with obvious respect.

"Cerberus is coming in hot," this... Shepard explained, before turning to him. "Will you join us?"
"You fight the reapers?" he asked.

"Yes!"

There was a very familiar look in the human's eyes, and despite being a primitive, Javik could appreciate that look. It spoke of determination, of stubbornness, of resilience. It was a good look, even on the face of a primitive. He considered his limited options for a moment, before nodding.

"Then we will see."
It had barely been a full hour since they had returned from Eden Prime, and Shepard had wanted to
give their newest guest time to settle in. She had quickly ordered Traynor to dispatch an overview
report to Hackett regarding the prothean, mainly as a courtesy, since they had a QEC meeting
scheduled for thirteen hundred anyway. Which had earned her the opportunity for a long awaited
shower, and some indulgently stolen quiet moments with her husband. Time that Thane had insisted
were spent with him tending to her, since he was adamant she had been rolling her shoulders more
than usual... not that she was inclined to complain. She gave a contented sigh, as Thane's talented
hands gently kneaded the protesting muscles of her shoulders.

"Do you have time to sleep before your call with Hackett?" Thane whispered.

Not entirely what sort of 'sleep' he had in mind, Shepard looked over her asked, but before could
speak, there was a beep from the comm. link.

"Shepard, Doctor T'Snoi has requested your assistance in the Port Side Cargo Bay," EDI informed.

Throwing Thane a lopsided smile over her shoulder, she rolled her eyes in answer to his question,
before lightly kissing him as she moved to stand. In truth, a had nap sounded truly wonderful,
especially one where she could have slept with his arms around her, but it was obvious that luck was
not on her side.

"Port Side?" she questioned, looking towards EDI's console.

"Some issue with your new dangerous alien," Joker replied, sarcastically.

Biting back a less than contented sigh, Shepard grabbed her uniform jacket that had been discarded
over her office chair, before heading to the lift. She had worried the prothean may cause some issues,
though it was more likely that some of the greener crew members would cause issues, similar to what
had happened back on the SR1, so the summons was not unexpected. It was also no surprise that
Thane kept pace beside her, standing to the side to let her enter the elevator before him, as well as
selecting the Engineering Deck as their destination. Shepard raised an eyebrow at him in question,
trying to dampen down the smile that threatened to form on her lips. She didn't need to ask him what
her husband was doing, she knew him too well for that.

"In case you have need of me, I will be conversing with Gabriella and Kenneth," Thane stated.

"Thank you," Shepard replied.

She was genuinely glad of his polite insistence, so saw no need to call him out. And since the
incident opening Grunt's pod, Shepard had accepted that back up may be the smarter idea from now
on. She gave Thane a feather light kiss in appreciation, just moments before the elevator door
unexpectedly opened on the Crew Deck. Garrus nonchalantly entered the elevator, or as
nonchalantly as a turian carrying an assault rifle could, at any rate. It always seemed to be more of a
swagger, at least where Garrus was concerned, and Shepard eyed her best friend suspiciously,
cocking her hip to the side as she did.

"Just on my way to see Adams," Garrus stated, avoiding her eyes.
"Mm-Hmm..." she hummed in reply.

"Calibrations," he added, his mandibles flaring into a grin.

Figuring there was no point in arguing the toss, Shepard settled for shaking her head at him. It was obvious both Thane and Garrus were of the same mind, and she had learnt during the mission against the collectors, she had no chance of holding out against both of them. They were not only an efficient combat team, but also very proficient in making her cave into their demands. Oddly, it made Shepard smile, if only inwardly. It was nice to know they cared.
Thane stood silently watching, as Shepard's figure disappeared behind the doors to the Port Side Cargo Bay. He had pushed accompanying her as far as he thought he could get away with, but it hadn't left him any time to obtain his SMG, which left him solely reliant on his Biotics... Biotics that hadn't been tested since Doctor Chakwas and Mordin brought him back. As Thane silently debated this fact, a taloned hand rested on his shoulder. He turned to face Garrus, and couldn't help the small smile that tugged at his mouth, as he regarded the offered SMG the turian held out to him. How the turian had gotten away with carrying his assault rifle, when he had boarded the elevator was beyond Thane, though it had been amusing to watch Garrus avoid looking at Shepard.

“Shepard can handle herself,” the turian suddenly announce. “And Liara is in there with her.”

"Indeed," he agreed, solemnly. "They did defeat the Shadow Broker together, after all."

In the back of his mind, Thane wasn't sure if he or Garrus were trying to convince each other, or themselves. And knowing Shepard could handle herself, didn't help the worry Thane felt. It was childish to admit, but he didn't like being left behind on a mission... and neither did Garrus. True, visiting a new crew member was hardly a mission, though it somehow felt the same feeling. Just as he was pondering this, the sound of the elevator dragged him from his thoughts. James, Tali and Kal'Reegar emerged, both their respective shotguns. A small smile tugged at Thane's lips, and Garrus flared his mandibles in a brief grin.

"You're well armed," the turian drawled.

"Out of gun oil, Scars," James shrugged.

"All of you?" Garrus chuckled.

"Shut it, Bosh'tet!" Tali hissed.

“She does have a shotgun,” Thane stated, deadpan.

During the exchange, Kal had come to stand beside Thane, and chuckled under his breath. As the other three continued to talk among themselves, the pair kept a silent watch on the doors to the Port Cargo Bay, up until Thane's omni-tool bleeped, alerting him to a message:

**Watching the camera feed now, will let you know if something happens. So far, just talking.  
- J**

Once again, a small smile pulled at Thane's lips. Even if he could not always do so himself, it was reassuring to know that others' were always looking out for his wife, and with the addition of James and Kal, it appeared as if their eclectic family had grown... again. Thane marvelled at how his Siha managed to draw so many people to her and her cause, and the way she made them all feel a part of something bigger. It made him think back to the hunt for the collectors, and the first night he had found himself wanting to be part of the group, the first night Shepard had flirted with him. Silently, Thane gave a prayer of thanks to Arashu for blessing his life with his fiery Siha, before focusing his attention back on the door. If Shepard needed him, Thane would be ready.
Silently, Liara sent another curse to the goddess for this time wasting mess. She could logically see that the marines were simply doing their jobs, likely following some protocol or order or something, but it was hampering *her* job. It was hampering *her* research. A real, living prothean was knelt less than a metre from where she stood, and she couldn't talk to him. It was crazy. It was maddening. It was enough to drive an asari to throw someone across the room, and the only thing really keeping that urge at bay, was knowing Shepard would disapprove if she did it. And at that exact moment, the captain nonchalantly strolled into the room, looking like nothing out of the ordinary. She even gave Liara a smile, as she nodded a greeting.

"What's going on here?" Shepard asked.

One of the guards stepped forward. "Sorry captain, we thought it was best to dust off the regulations: Assume Hostility. At least until you arrived, ma'am."

Shepard nodded, but didn't go to speak. Instead, she simply looked over to the prothean, who had finally raised his four eyes from the spot on the floor, that he'd been studying of thirty minutes. A heavy silence hung in the air, and at least two of the four guards in the room shifted uncomfortably, something Liara found herself itching to do as well. But still neither the prothean, nor the captain, went to speak. And in just a few short seconds, the silence had become unbearable. It left Liara feeling the need to say something.

"But he's not new," she argued. "I've spent my life studying protheans."

Suddenly, Shepard lay a hand unexpectedly on the guard's shoulder, before moving passed him. The marine almost jumped, his brown skin darkening as he flushed with obvious embarrassment. A small smile threatened to form on Liara's lips, as she thought back to the many times Shepard had caused a similar reaction in Ashley or Kaidan, during their hunt for Saren.

"At ease," the captain instructed. "I don't think our guest will be a problem, will he?"

"That depends on you," the prothean stated.

His voice was unmistakably male, low and rumbling. Slowly he rose from his kneeling position, only to suddenly lunge forward and grab Shepard by the shoulders. Liara went to ready a Stasis field around the captain, to keep her safe from the shower of bullets that would surely follow in seconds. However, Shepard made no move to break free from the prothean's hold. The human even went so far as to make a gesture with her right hand, one that Liara had learnt meant to stand down. It was a signal designed to silently say the situation was under control, and as much as Liara trusted Shepard, it didn't make her feel any better. The marines in the room also looked none to happy about the situation either.

"I can sense fear in you," the prothean continued, staring directly at the captain. "Anxiety and distress. The reapers are winning."

"What do you mean: 'You sense'?" Shepard asked, calmly.

"All life provides clues for those who can read them. It is in your cells, your DNA. Experience is a biological marker," he replied, releasing her.
The researcher in Liara snapped back to the forefront, and quickly she called sent a message to EDI, instructing the AI to send her the recording of everything that was being said. Her mind couldn't help but seizing on the revelations that might be revealed.

"Then what exactly did I experience back on Eden Prime? That was one hell of a flash back," Shepard queried.

"The battle left its mark on me," the prothean explained. "I communicated this to you. It works both ways."

"Like your beacons?" Liara asked, unable to contain her curiosity any longer.

Though without warning, the prothean suddenly took hold of Shepard's shoulders once again. He had moved with such a speed that Liara took a surprised step backwards. Though once again, the captain didn't even flinch. Instead, she even went so far to almost mirror the prothean's gesture, by tightly gripping his biceps. There was no way to tell if this was a conscious move, or an instinctual one, for Shepard's eyes never left the prothean's face. And despite being concerned for her friend's safety, Liara couldn't help but watch, enthralled.
Shepard winced as the onslaught of images finally subsided. Her head throbbed, a headache she suspected would undoubtedly last for days. It wasn't as unpleasant as the experience of connecting with the beacon or obtaining the cipher, more an amped up version of mind melding with an asari. But despite that, it still left her longing to lay down in a dark and quiet room, preferably for at least a week. She pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to stave off the pain.

"You... found one. You saw it all... our destruction, our warning," the prothean muttered, backing away. "Why weren't they heeded? Why didn't you prepare for the reapers, human?"

"It's captain," Shepard grit out. "And because nobody would fucking listen!"

There was a gasp from behind her, which sounded like Liara. Shepard couldn't blame her friend, it was rare that she lost her temper, and swearing was an even rarer occurrence. The prothean merely blinked his four eyes at her, probably able to feel the anger and frustration, emotions Shepard had carried since Saren. Stifling a weary sigh, she began to massage her temples with thumb and middle finger of her left hand. The headache was definitely becoming a migraine, which was all she needed, on top of everything else. She took a deep breath.

"The warnings didn't come through clear," Shepard stated, a little calmer. "The first beacon nearly killed me, and gaining what we referred to as the cipher wasn't much better. Between myself and Liara, we pieced together what we could, and used it to halt a reaper invasion three years ago. Not long after that I was killed. Two years later, I was brought back and sent to stop another reaper threat. Following that, there was six months of fighting to get idiot politicians and admirals to take the threat seriously. Believe me, I've been fucking trying!"

"Then the extinction was delayed," the prothean replied, seeming a little impressed.

Somehow, Shepard got the impression he understood her frustration.

"Now we have your plans for the device," Liara interrupted. "We're going to build it."

"Device?" the prothean queried.

'Not good...' 

"The weapon your people were working on," Liara replied, haltingly. "I'd hoped you could tell us how to finish it."

Without hesitation, Shepard flicked open her omni-tool and called up the plans for the weapon, before projecting the image against the bulkhead. For several drawn out moments, the prothean silently regarded the plans. Though eventually, he shook his head.

"We never finished it," he said, his voice full of remorse. "It was too late."

'Shit!'

A look of pure devastation crossed Liara's face, before it was replaced by the mask she wore as the Shadow Broker. Shepard rubbed her forehead. A stiff drink before crawling to hide in a darkened
room... that was going to be her plan. Even better, was asking Thane to smuggle a bottle of something strong into their cabin, so she could simply drink in the quiet sanctuary... and if the entire contents of said bottle had disappeared by morning, it wasn't as if her biotic abilities and Cerberus enhancements wouldn't have burned up the alcohol before she started shift... it was a good plan.

"Then I take it you don't know anything about the Catalyst?" she asked, keeping her voice even.

"No..." he replied, almost regretfully. "I was a soldier, not a scientist. Skilled in only one art: killing."

"What was your mission?" Liara asked, quietly.

The prothean sighed. "Among my people, there were... avatars of many traits: bravery, strength, cunning. A single exemplar for each."

"Which are you?" Shepard prompted.

"The embodiment of vengeance," he replied. "I am the anger of a dead people, demanding blood be spilled for the blood we lost. Only when the last reaper has been destroyed will my purpose be fulfilled. I have no other reason to exist. Those who share my purpose become allies, those who do not become casualties."

Morbidly, Shepard couldn't help wonder that if not for Thane, would her life would have taken on a similar meaning. She could certainly understand the sentiment, and though his outlook was extreme, Shepard could see the reasoning behind it. It was ruthless and callous, but she didn't think she should be an objective judge of what was right or wrong. After all, they were only at the beginning of the war against the reapers. They could still hope, and still be optimistic they could survive the terrible trials to come. The prothean was looking at it from the other side, with the eyes of a defeated, decimated race.

"So far, nothing in our fight against the reapers has been that cut and dry," Shepard started.

"Because you still have hope," the prothean interrupted. "You still hope that this war will end with your honour intact."

"It isn't honour I hope for," Shepard answered, truthfully. "I have hope that this war will end, with the defeat of the reapers. That no other race will end up extinct, and that we won't have sacrificed everything we are to achieve that."

There was a heavy silence that followed her words, and the prothean regarded her thoughtfully. Eventually though, Liara gave a polite cough, breaking the oppressive quietness. When the prothean's four eyes settled on her, the asari calmly pointed to a polished piece of metal that stood on a nearby console. The shiny silver and blue object had been recovered close to the prothean's stasis pod. And not knowing what it was, Liara had insisted it be brought back to the Normandy... just in case. Not that Shepard disagreed. If anything, she had been curious to see if it did belong to the prothean.

"We found this at the dig site," Shepard shrugged. "I assume it belongs to you."

He eyed the object for several moments, before nodding once. "It is a memory shard."

"Could it help us with the device?" Liara pressed.
"No..." he said at length. "It contains only pain." The prothean dragged his eyes away from the shard, intently fixing them back on Shepard. "But I will help you fight. And the last thing the reapers will hear before they die, will be the last voice of the protheans sending them to their grave."

Shepard was just about to thank him and ask his name, deciding it was best to close the conversation there, and let the prothean actually settle in. However, Liara had gotten that look in her eye. The one she use to get back aboard the SR-1, when it sounded like she wanted to dissect her brain... It never boded well, and Shepard found the throbbing in her head coming back in full force.

"If you don't mind, I have a few more questions I'd like to ask," Liara announced.

"Here it comes..." Shepard sighed, under her breath.

"I've written over a dozen studies on your species. I've published in several journals..."

"Amusing. The asari have finally mastered writing," the prothean interrupted.

"I'm... sorry?" Liara replied, affronted.

"Never mind... what is it you wish to know?"

"I think that maybe questions can wait for another day," Shepard interjected, tactfully. "After you have had time to properly settle in. Though, it would be useful to know your name."

Liara gave her a look that was part hurt and part annoyed, however the prothean simply regarded her coolly. After several long silent moments, he gave another singular nod of his head.

"Javik."
Encroaching Darkness (Thane PoV)

A small smile tugs at the corner of my lips as I await my Siha in our cabin, the news I have just received is too good for me to contain it. She exits the shower room, cropped red hair darkened by the water, a towel wrapped snugly around her body. A body that is thinner than it was when we first met, one that has more scars each time we lay together. Before, each new mark would make me regret that I was not at her side. To protect, to shield. Hopefully not any more... She raises an eyebrow expectantly at me, causing my smile to fully form.

"I have just been speaking to Mordin and Karen," I inform her.

Eyes the colour of emeralds widen, she has already guessed what is coming next.

"They have cleared me for active ..."

Before I've even finished my sentence, her arms are around me, her body pressed tightly against mine. I breath in her familiar, comforting smell. My cheek is pressed against her still wet tresses.

"I have just the mission," she states, and I can hear the smile in her voice.

The ceasing of the skycar's engine hum, pulled Thane out of his memory, and he glanced at his wife. Her face was set in a mask, but instead of armour, she was clad in her standard issue fatigues, with her rarely used Carnifex strapped to her thigh. Behind them, James sat mirroring the commander, wearing fatigues, with a heavy pistol being his only weapon. Thane had followed their example, opting only to bring his SMG, concealing it discreetly in the inner lining of his leather coat. However, after Cerberus' attempted coup, Shepard was not leaving anything to chance, and perched on a nearby building was Garrus and Legion, their sniper rifles at the ready. Silently, the three of them filed out of the skycar, before walking into the glass fronted lab. They were greeted by a cacophony of artefacts, computer and research equipment, as well as a level of lighting that threatened to make Thane's eyes sting. There were also two men in lab coats, both bent over monitors, separately pouring over what looked to be a never ending flow of data. Shepard called out a pleasant greeting, which prompted the older of the two men to turn to them.

"Ah, Captain Shepard," he smiled, extending his hand. "We've been expecting you. Will you give me a moment?"

Shepard inclined her head, returning the smile and handshake. "Of course, Doctor Bryson."

"Hadley," the doctor called to the other man. "Can you gather the Leviathan data for us?"

Without waiting for a reply from his assistant, Bryson led them further into the lab, nodding a respectful greeting to both Thane and James as he passed. There was a surprising lack of people, considering how large the building was, and Thane couldn't help but wonder why. However, there was nothing about the doctor, nor the lab, that was setting off any warning bells... yet. So far, it seemed this meeting was legitimate. Which was a small miracle, given what they had faced so far, and Shepard's perchance for finding trouble.

"My apologies captain, the rest of my team are out investigating leads right now," Bryson explained. "But welcome to Task Force Aurora's base of operations."
They had come to a large room, filled with data displays, and a galaxy map that was similar in design to the one aboard the Normandy.

"What's your assignment?" Shepard asked.

"Our mandate is to investigate legends, rumours, old stories..." the doctor replied. "Particularly about reapers, from before anyone knew they existed."

That peeked Thane's interest. He had never know any military or government to take an interest in fables. Those who sought to prove or disprove such things, were often seen as little more than crackpot scientists, unstable at best. However, with Admiral Hackett personally asking Shepard to meet with Bryson, Thane was certain the Alliance was taking the research more seriously than one might expect. But given that the reapers, a race that no one once believed existed, were now rampaging across the known galaxy, Thane could see the validity of such an endeavour.

"I could have used your help three years ago," Shepard said, deadpan.

James gave a snort of laughter, that he quickly covered with a cough. Thane's mouth twitched in threat of a smile, and the two men shared a look.

"Yes," Bryson replied, solemnly. "If people had paid more attention to your warnings and the prothean beacon, we may not be in this war. But now with the new information we've uncovered, the breakthroughs we now have..."

The doctor never got to finish his sentence. At that exact moment, his assistant walked into the laboratory, an immediately, Thane sensed something was wrong. Pure instinct and reflexes had his arm slip around Shepard's waist, and pulling her back to him. James also seemed to be acting on instinct, for the marine already had his heavy pistol aimed at Hadley. Though before he could react further, the assistant had shot his employer squarely in the chest. As Hadley began to turn his gun towards them, Shepard began to glow blue, her powerful biotic energy causing Thane's scales to prickle. She released a low powered Throw, not something that would seriously hurt their assailant, but it was enough the send him backwards towards the wall, with enough force he was knocked unconscious. Thane wasted no time in kicking the gun to the other side of the room, before hurrying to the doctors side. However, it was too late, and a slight shake of his head gave Shepard the negative. His Siha had crouched down by the prone assistant, a steely look in her emerald eyes, and James went to guard the entrance to the building, giving Garrus and Legion an update as he went.

"Joker! Get C-Sec to my location, now!" Shepard called into the comm. link.

"You shouldn't be here..." the assistant suddenly stated. His voice had a distant quality, and his eyes were staring blindly at the ceiling. "The darkness can't be breached."

A cold feeling of dread swept through Thane, and he silently moved to his Siha's side, his SMG drawn. Shepard spared him a fleeting glance over her shoulder, her eyes concerned. It was obvious she felt the same as he did, though the thought gave him little comfort. The assistant's words were ominous, and Thane knew it wouldn't bode well.
Coming in Hot (Shepard PoV)

The shuttle shuddered violently as it entered the planet's atmosphere, scans had shown that Namakli was not the most hospitable place, but the jolting of the Kodiak was still unexpected. Shepard could hear Cortez quietly cursing as he fought the turbulence, and despite herself, she found a smile wanting to tug at her lips. Abandoning all pretext of taking her almost habitual pre-mission nap, Shepard opened her eyes and regarded her two team mates. Thane was sat beside her, head bowed and hand clasped, and she knew without a doubt that her husband was silently reciting Amonkira's prayer. It felt more than good to have him at her side again, both personally and professionally. However, their normal squad had to deviate from what had been an unstoppable team, thanks to Victus hailing Garrus with critical Hierarchy information, just moments before departure. So it was Javik who stood to her left, tightly holding on to the support bars, as he regarded the shuttle's onboard data steam.

"I understand we have reports of an attack on a group of scientists," the prothean announced.

Shepard nodded, before calling into the comm. system. "EDI, can you tell us anything else?"

"You are heading for the main site, of a series of excavation sites established under Doctor Bryson," the AI replied. "Staff records confirm that the project lead is his daughter, Ann. Intercepted messages reveal she has recently uncovered another artefact link to 'Leviathan'."

"And we still do not know what Leviathan is?" Thane interjected, opening his onyx eyes.

"Exactly," Shepard sighed. "And this attack means that the reapers are one step ahead of us. We need to pick up the pace. And since Bryson's daughter is our only lead, our objective is clear."

Both men gave her a determined nod of acknowledgement.

"Cortez?" she queried.

"Nothing so far, Shepard," the shuttle pilot replied. "If she's down there, she hasn't responded to our hails. We're getting some strange signals though, give me a minute."

"The reapers could be causing interference," Thane suggested, calmly.

Javik made a noise that sounded like a hum of agreement. "That is not unlikely."

"The artefact Ann Bryson uncovered could be causing additional complications," EDI speculated.

"Agreed," Shepard smiled, mirthlessly. "After what it did to Bryson's assistant, anything is possible. Cortez, take us in."

"Copy that."

As they approached the dig site's landing platform, a burst of unexpected static broke through the comm. system. Noises that sounded like words crackled through the buzz, but were too distorted to clearly make out. However, it sounded human. Before Shepard could give EDI the order to clean up the transmission, the shuttle swerved violently, sending her out of her seat. Stumbling, she managed to make it to the cockpit, just in time to witness Cortez dodge another attack from a harvester.
"Tracking multiple boggies," he advised, through gritted teeth.

"Can you get us over there?" Shepard asked, pointing to what looked like the site's control tower.

"Negative. It's too hot," Steve stated. "Heading to a lower platform. Hang on."

The thought of having to make a blind drop from a fast flying Kodiak, into a battle zone, with two large harvesters closing in on them was hardly a welcome prospect, but Shepard trusted her crew. If Cortez thought that was their only safe option, she would take his advice. Trying her best to stay upright despite the jostling, she joined Thane and Javik by the shuttle's door. The prothean gave her a terse nod, whilst her husband subtly squeezed her hand in reassurance. The pressure barely registered through her armour, but it was a comforting gesture all the same. And despite the galaxy falling to pieces around them, it felt good to be fighting by his side again.
 Whilst Shepard and Javik finished off the last of the reapers' ground tropes, Thane helped a slightly dazed Ann Bryson into the waiting Kodiak. The recent revelation that Leviathan could be a rogue or defected reaper, still weigh heavily on his mind. Along with the ancient cave paintings, and witnessing one of the marauders trying to use the now destroyed artefact. Thane was sure it would take many hours of meditation, to digest everything that had been revealed today, however, he knew those thoughts could wait. Keeping an eye on the bewildered scientist was much more important, not least in case she exhibited more worrying signs, of being under what had sounded like Leviathan’s control. So whilst enquiring after her health, Thane helped Ann settle on one of the shuttle's metal bench, just as his Siha and Javik jumped in the Kodiak, with the door hissing shut behind them. Cortez wasted no time, not even waiting for the Shepard's order, before quickly departing the now decimated dig site. The boosters kicked in at that moment, and Thane's hand shot out to steady the scientist, when she lurched forward in her seat.

“Did I... blacked out?” Ann asked, hesitantly.

“Leviathan took control of you,” Shepard stated, gently. “We cut the connection, before you got hurt.”

With a respectful nod to both women, Thane moved to the side, to allow his Siha to crouch down in front of Ann. Silently, he took a seat next to Javik on the other side of the shuttle, acknowledging that the prothean hadn't yet holstered his assault rifle. Personally, Thane didn't think that the scientist posed any threat, now that the artefact had been destroyed. Yet, he couldn't begrudge someone being extra cautious, especially if that person had suffered through what Javik had.

“Leviathan itself?” the scientist queried. “That's incredible.”

“The reapers seem as interested as we are,” Thane mused.

His observation earned him a grunt of agreement from Javik, who generally didn't interact with anyone other than Shepard.

“Yeah...” Ann said at length, leaning to rest her elbows on her knees. “It certainly seems that way.”

“We were hoping you could help us figure out why,” Shepard explained.

Gracefully, she moved to sit beside the scientist, and Thane could tell by the set of his Siha's shoulders, she was preparing to reveal the fate of Ann's father. Despite growing up as an orphan, or perhaps because of it, Shepard was always extremely sympathetic to those who had lost a family member or loved one. And the empathy she felt was all the more obvious, as she removed her Kuwashii visor, her emerald eyes swimming with compassion. Out of respect, Thane averted his eyes, and was only mildly surprised to notice that Javik had done the same.

“First... Doctor I... have some bad news,” Shepard continued, quietly.

“Ann, please,” the scientist replied, distractedly. “Suppose Leviathan has broken away from the other reapers, never went back to dark space. Like a rogue, or even a defector... I have to call my father, he'll want to know.”
On his peripheral vision, Thane noticed the younger Bryson went to power up her omni-tool, though Shepard's gauntlet clad hand gently halted the action. In that moment, a powerful thought struck him, and he was left to wonder if his Siha was thinking of Anderson.

“Ann, you need to listen to me. Okay?” Shepard stated, kindly. “Your father, is dead. I'm sorry.”

The scientist's brow furrowed in confusing, her hand moving to grip the captain's like a lifeline.

“He's... what? Dead? He can't be dead,” she whispered.

Shepard shook her head sadly. “We met with him. Hoping to find out what he knew. Something... happened.”

“Something happened?” Ann parroted.

“You are not the first to lose control,” Javik announced, in his typical blunt manner.

“You father's assistant...” Shepard continued. “One minute he was fine. The next, he drew a gun on your father. I couldn't stop it, I'm sorry.”

"I can't believe all this...” Ann muttered, staring blankly at the floor.

"The time for grief will come later. We must find out what is behind it all,” Javik stated.

Disquieted, Thane shook his head. He could appreciate that things had been different in the prothean's era, but sometimes he found himself wishing Javik would either learn some tact, or keep his opinions to himself. On more than one occasion, Thane had found Liara glowing blue with rage, or Tali close to tears at one thing or another that the prothean had said. Now, Javik's words had left an already shell-shocked Ann Bryson looking utterly devastated. Shepard's shoulders were set rigid, and the look she gave the prothean was less than friendly. Thane had the inclining that she only held her tongue for the scientist's sake, which meant the night cycle onboard the Normandy had the chance to be even more fraught that usual.
Loco (James PoV)

Loco. Absolutely loco. Artefacts that could manipulate a person's mind. Scientists that thought it was twenty one seventy six. Getting shot down by something they couldn't see, on a water world, in what seemed to be an alien version of the Bermuda Triangle... Not to mention a pretty hairy fire fight, against several waves of reaper troops ,that had appeared almost from nowhere. And now Lola was planning to go down into the deeps of the torrid ocean in a hunk of junk. The whole situation was totally bloody loco. So biting back an annoyed sigh, James narrowed his eyes, and squinted through the sheet of rain towards Lola and Estevan, who were huddled together. They were obviously going over any sort of safety measures the shuttle pilot-come requisition officer-come closet engineer, had managed to whip up. However, the howling wind made it impossible to hear what was being said. Glancing to his right, he found Scars also glaring at the pair. James was no expert on turian expressions, but even he could tell his fellow soldier was fighting between respecting the captain's orders, being worried for a friend, and angry at the risks that friend was about to take. The whole situation was completely loco, and James said as much. Scars made a noise that sounded like a hum of agreement, his mandibles pulled tight to his face.

“I doubt even Thane could talk her out of this,” the turian stated.

“You're probably right,” James agreed.

His mind wandered to the captain's husband. At first, it had been a hell of a surprise to find that Lola was married at all, let alone to an alien. However, Deadshot made her happy, which made the drell okay in his James' book. Plus, he had been there when Thane had saved the salarian councillor, as well as fought along side him and Lola, after the drell's recovery from his near fatal wounds. Deadshot was one hell of a fighter, not that it was entirely surprising, given that he had been trained as an assassin since he was a small child. Something James still struggled to get his head around, but then Scars' flanging voice suddenly pulled him from his thoughts.

“Listen Shepard, you know I'm all for crazy ideas, but this one is off the charts,” the turian grumbled.

“We've come too far to stop now.” Lola paused, tilting her head slightly. “Besides, the way home is through Leviathan.”

Scars looked like he was about to try and argue, but Estevan cut him off.

“Okay, seals check out. Oxygen pressure is nominal. Systems are go,” he announce. “It's as ready as I can make it.”

A wicked grin spread across Lola's face, the one she usually reserved for just before she Charged an enemy. James' heart sank a little. That smile, whilst hot as hell, always spelled trouble.

“Let's go!”

“But Shepard...” Scars started.

The turian's voice was strangely quiet, and his gaze intense. At first it surprised James, until he realised that Scars must have been thinking back to the destruction of the SR-1. It had devastated James to hear of the captain's death, a funk that hadn't truly lifted until well after Fehl Prime, and Anderson had personally come to drag his sorry ass off Omega. He couldn't imagine how it must have hit Scars, and the other members of Lola's original squad.
“I'll be fine,” the Shepard reassured.

James watched, as she pulled Scars down by the collar of his armour, then pressed her forehead against his. He wasn't sure what the gesture meant, but it seemed significant to the turian, since Scars' shoulders visibly relaxed. She then clasped hands with Estevan, and through James a wink, before hopping up into the machine's cockpit, with far more grace that any soldier should possess. For some reason, at that moment, James couldn't help wondering how much attention she had paid, during their impromptu late night Spanish lessons, back on Earth... later, he would chalk it up to the stress of the situation.

“Hey Lola, ten cuidado!” he called.

She grinned back at him, flirtatiously. “Para ti? Siempre.”

Author's Note:

Decent into Madness (Shepard PoV)

The dark and lonely decent into the seemingly fathomless ocean, had left Shepard feeling disorientated. The gentle bubble of the oxygen supple, had been the only sound she could hear during her free fall. It had slowly... oh so slowly, drove her mad. Now, coming face to... face with... whatever that thing was... it didn't seem right. Shepard blinked and frowned, before scrunching her face into a contorted mask of pain. Something didn't feel right. Was something wrong with the drive mech she was in? Was it her? Wasn't she supposed to looking for someone... something?

“You have gone too far.”

Shepard felt, more than heard, the words as they were spoken. They echoed around her head, leaving her mind feeling cavernous and empty. All she could think of, focus on, was that ageless booming voice. Though there were flashes, snippets of... Shepard shook her head, unsure. Were they memories she was failing to recall? Her memories? It's memories?

“I... had to find you,” she stated, unsure.

“This is not your domain. You have breached the darkness.”

Darkness. Why did darkness ring a bell? More flashes, more things just out of her reach, out of her grasp. Squeezing her eyes shut, Shepard forced herself to concentrate. There was... something. Something clouding her mind, her memories. Or perhaps someone. Was it someone? There was a flash, a little more defined than before, a little more colour. Green... green. That colour was important. Green. Shepard gasped, as a face materialised in front of her. She knew him. Why did she know him? Fighting against the building migraine, she tried to focus, tried to remember. Green was important, that face was important. Slowly... oh so slowly, things got a little clearer. Her eyes snapped open, in shock. How could she forget her husband's face? An unbidden sob threatened to choke her throat, but she pushed it down, focusing on the cloudy memory. They were somewhere bright, white. It was almost painful to see through the glare. Two other people were with them, one who Shepard though was a krogan for a moment... But that didn't seem right, the colour was wrong, as was the build. Then there was a voice:

'Dios Lola, is this research worth?'

Vega! Shepard smiled at the memory. Not long after that conversation, James could have been at Olympics try-outs, with how high he'd jumped, as a re-animated husk head had scared him senseless. She remembered chuckling at her lieutenant's surprise. Thane had hidden his growing smile, by turning away to inspect a large dinosaur looking skeleton, in the far corner of the lab. And even Ann had managed a weak smile, despite the tragedy that had not long befallen her family... Ann! Ann's research... that was important. There was a name. What was the name?

“Leviathan...?” Shepard mumbled.

She felt more pressure begin to build in her head, and her vision was starting to get a little blurry. Shepard stifled a yawn, she felt tired... bone achingly tired. To the point it took too much effort, to lift her hand, to wipe away whatever the warm liquid leaking out of her nose was. She squinted at her hand, confused why there was a red smear across it. Vaguely, Shepard realised that it must be blood, and assumed the trickle leaving her ears was the same. She was only mildly concerned about that fact, or at least thought she should be concerned about... but couldn't exactly remember why.
Everything was starting to feel quite sketchy. It was getting harder and harder to stay focused, but Shepard knew it was important... at least she thought it was. There were pieces, fragments, but nothing that really made much sense. She clenched her jaw in an effort to keep focused. She was here to ask something, to find something out. Did it have to do with reapers? That word felt familiar... the confusing red liquid could wait.

“You killed a reaper, I need to know why,” she stated, through gritted teeth.

“They are the enemy. They seek our extermination.”

“But... I thought... you... were a reaper,” she replied, hesitantly.

“They are only echoes. We existed long before.”

Shepard's brow furrowed. She was sure there were implications to that... big implications. She couldn't exactly remember time lines, or exactly why they were important, but she was sure the reapers were... old. And dangerous. And the enemy. And needed to be stopped... Yes. That seemed right. And this... thing. This... Leviathan? Was this Leviathan? Did it matter? If this was Leviathan, it said was older than the reapers... was that important?

Biting back a groan, Shepard shook her head, in the hopes of clearing it. She didn't feel like herself... her own thoughts didn't feel like hers anymore. Were these thoughts her own? She took a deep breath, trying to calm the confusion. Someone had once taught her breathing techniques, ones that helped balance her, made her more focused... Hadn't they? She remembered that much... she thought. Though she couldn't remember the who, and it infuriated her. Shepard knew she must know who had taught her. They were excellent techniques, from what she could remembered, and it seemed important. Where they important? Yes... they must be important... more than important, in fact. There was something about the colour green... Green. Green was a good colour. She liked green... though she couldn't remember why. There must be a reason though... right?
As Shepard all but fell out of the mech, after it had breached the surface, Garrus had rushed to her side. Without preamble, he helped her back to the shuttle, just as Cortez touched down at rendezvous point. To be honest, help may have been an understatement. In fact, Garrus had all but carried his barely conscious captain, ignoring the blood trickling from her nose and ears, whilst Vega gave them covering fire, from the pair of brutes that were attacking. Actually, the brutes in question weren't acting like they normally would... they were fighting each other, rather than lumbering after them, as they made their escape. However, Garrus didn't have time to wonder about the implications. He barely had the presence of mind, to realise it was Vega jumping into the shuttle after him and Shepard, and not a reaper troop.

“Loco!” the marine muttered. “Estevan, can you get us out of here?”

“We're good to go,” the pilot replied. “I don't know what Shepard did, but the pulse is now offline.”

The feeling of the shuttle rushing towards the planet's atmosphere, barely gave Garrus a moment's relief, as he looked at Shepard's unmoving figure. The trickle of vivid red blood coming from her nose, was made all the more stark, because of the pallid hue of her already pale skin. Without thinking, Garrus' talons began to gently card through her cropped red hair. He desperately held back the need to keen, as he lightly pressed his forehead to hers. Only the feather light breath that ghosted across his mandible, gave him any hope. However, being this close to Shepard, brought a new set of worries. Her lips were turning blue, and Garrus knew that was not a good sign in a human.

“Shepard! Wake up!” he snarled.

Hurriedly, Garrus began unbuckling her armour. It was only something he had learnt to do, after a particularly nasty krogan charge back on Virmire, which had dislocated her shoulder. That had been one hell of a mission. With both the Shepard and Wrex almost needing to be cut from their damaged armour, thanks to them taking the brunt of the assault. For such a petite human, Garrus was still surprised at the almost reckless way Shepard through herself into situations... even after all these years. She worried him to death, and he was only her best friend. He couldn't imagine how Thane must feel.

“Scars?” Vega queried, sounding confused.

“She's freezing.”

Those two simple words had Vega springing into action, and as Garrus continued to remove Shepard's outer armour, leaving her clad in her thermal under-suit, he was glad at how proficient the marine was. Within minutes, Vega returned with no less than three thermal blankets, a small emergency heater Garrus wasn't even aware the shuttle had, as well as a handful of what appeared to be biotic MREs... Which was quite a substantial amount, given that the large human could almost rival a krogan in size.

“Come on, Shepard,” Garrus pleaded, his subharmonics trilling with concern.

Gently, he wrapped his best friend in two of the three blankets, barely registering the clanging of armour hitting the shuttle's metal floor. He had been so focused on Shepard, he hadn't realised what Vega was intending to do, before the marine sat on the floor beside their captain, and pulled her into his lap. Body warmth. Simple, efficient and hopefully effective. Wordlessly, Garrus helped tuck the remaining blanket around the two humans, before turning his attention the the emergency heater.
Before long, the back of the shuttle was as warm as they were going to get it. It wasn't as hot as Garrus would like, so with barely a second thought, he began to shuck his own armour... intent on adding his own body heat to Vega's.

“Cortez, can you get a message to the Normandy?” he asked. “Get Chakwas to meet us in the shuttle bay.”

At the same time, he heard James murmur: “Come on Lola. Deadshot didn't pull through surgery, just to watch you die from hypothermia. You're tougher than that.”

Gingerly, he sat down beside the marine, and they gently manoeuvred Shepard between them. Garrus didn't understand Vega's insistence on bestowing nicknames on everyone, but at least he understood how he had gotten Scars... or why the lieutenant called Tali 'Sparks'. However, Garrus wasn't entirely sure why Shepard had gotten Lola. Something about reminding Vega of someone he once knew, or was attracted too... Garrus couldn't really remember what the captain had said. However he had to admit, bizarre nicknames not-with-standing, mentioning Thane was a shrewd move. For the first time since returning from the mech assisted drive, Shepard dragged in a full gasping breath. It was swiftly followed by a violent coughing fight, one that left both Garrus and Vega pointed trying to ignore the blood that Shepard spat out afterwards.

“You okay?” Garrus asked, gently.

Shepard took several large gulps of the water he offered her, before nodding in response. He noticed her hands shaking as she held the bottle, tremors that were obviously not from cold, since they still hand her firmly wrapped in their arms and three thermal blankets. Silently, Garrus reached for several of the biotic sugar pastes, and almost laughed, as he watched Shepard demolish five of the tubes before she managed a weak smile.

“Yeah... yeah,” she replied, a little shakily. “I'm fine. Hell of a headache though.”

Relief flooded him. “Never do that again,” he whispered, cupping her face in his talons. “Never again.”

“Hate to say it Lola, but I'm with Scars,” Vega stated, quietly.

The captain refused to meet the eyes of either of them, though she did give a barely noticeable nod. Garrus supposed that was the best they would get. Perhaps he should see if Thane could talk some sense into her? And if that failed, he'd try hailing Anderson through the QEC. Shaking his head, to dismiss the idea... she'd have his hide if he tried, Garrus settled himself back beside Shepard.

“How did it go down there?” he asked, changing the topic.

There was a spark of fire in Shepard's eyes as she looked at him, a smirk tugging at her mouth. Despite his worry and the situation, Garrus found his mandibles flaring into a grin. He knew that look, and it only ever spelt trouble. It meant his Shepard was back.

“We found it,” she confirmed. “It's real, and a lot more than we ever imagined.”

“So... was it worth almost dying for?” Cortez called from the cockpit.

Shepard gave an undignified snort. “Well... it's going to help.”


“One for the history books,” Shepard agreed, smiling.
Garrus gave an exasperated huff. Sometimes, he still really didn't understand humans. But when Shepard shifted to press her forehead to his, he couldn't help but smile as well.
The Hero Returns (Thane PoV)

Thane paced the width of their cabin several times, whilst he waited for Shepard to finish her call with Admiral Hackett. He couldn't believe the risk his Siha had taken, just hours before. Fear and panic had gripped him, when communications to the shuttle and ground team had cut out. But that was nothing compared to the raw terror he had felt, when he watched Garrus carry a bloodied Shepard to the medical bay, before handing her over to Karin and Mordin. The turian had quickly been ushered out, and the door and windows shuttered, before Thane had managed to slip inside. James had reassured him it wasn't as bad as it looked, whilst Steve and Garrus recounted what they knew had happened to his Siha. However, their vigil soon turned silent, even though they were joined by Tali, Liara and Kolyat. Sixty minutes had slowly ticked by, before Shepard had finally emerged from the medical bay, still wearing her under-armour. Instantly, Thane was by her side. But before he could pull her into his arms, let alone speak with her, Samantha had alerted them to an incoming call from the admiral. Thane had swallowed past the lump in his throat, as Shepard gave an apologetic smile and squeezed his hand affectionately, before rushing to the elevator. His sensitive hearing had picked up Garrus' unhappy trill, as well as James' not so subtle 'Dios! Lola!', before he decided to head for the lift himself. He was in no mood for small talk, so thought it best to wait for Shepard in their cabin. And so he had waited, as another thirty minutes slowly passed by. As he drew near the fish tank for the seventy eighth time, EDI gave her familiar warning chime.

"The admiral has issued Shepard with mandatory shore leave," the AI advised.

Thane couldn't help the small smile that twitched the corner of his lips. "My thanks. Has Siha's conference concluded?"

"No," EDI replied. "The topic has turned to the crucible."

"So she did not ask you to inform me of our impending shore leave?" he asked, his smile broadening.

There was a slight pause. "No."

Unable to help himself, Thane chuckled. "My thanks. Though EDI, if I may, why did you think to inform me?"

"Biometric readings indicate you are in distress, Thane. Since my sensors show you pacing, it is easy to hypothesis that you are neither sick nor injured," the AI explained. "Analysis indicates your distress is linked to the captain, most likely her health and well being, after her last mission. I sought to help alleviate your condition. Was this not the right course of action?"

At that moment, the cabin doors opened with a gentle whoosh, revealing a tired looking Shepard. The top part of her under-armour had been rolled down, presumably during her ascent to their cabin, leaving her torso clad in only a black sports bra. Angry bruises mottled her porcelain skin, some already a vivid purple. She seemed to sigh in relief, as she stepped from the brightly lit hallway, to the dim light of their cabin. A bottle of analgesics was gripped tightly in her right hand... something that relieved and worried Thane in equal measure, since his Siha usually refused medication.

"No EDI, that was very thoughtful of you. Thanks," she replied for him.

"Your welcome, Shepard. Rest well."

With a gentle beep, the AI logged herself out, whilst Shepard turned weary eyes to him.
“Please don’t,” she began. “I know you're probably angry, but I don't have the energy. My head is killing, and I've already had lectures off Garrus, James and Karin. Let me sleep, and you can shout at me in the morning.”

Thane blinked, twice, before quickly crossing the distance between them. Five long strides brought him close enough to pull her into his arms, and once his Siha was safely in his embrace, he finally began to relax. He kissed the top of her head, before leaning his cheek against her ruffled hair, and inhaled her scent. She smelt of salt, ozone and heat sinks, though there was slight the faintest hint of her floral perfume, still clinging to her skin. Thane understood why she assumed he would be angry, he supposed many would be, yet he had known she was a warrior angel, before he had fallen in love. Shepard had woken him from his battle sleep, stood and faced his trials alongside him, gave him back Kolyat and gifted him with a life he had never dreamt possible... to love and support his Siha unconditionally was very little to give in return. No matter how much he worried for her.

“What of Steve and Mordin?” he asked, trying not to smile.

Shepard pulled back and looked at him incredulously, before suddenly giggling. “I thought you'd be mad.”

“I worry for you, Siha,” Thane replied. “But I trust you more.”

Sighing contentedly, she nuzzled back into his embrace, and squeezed him gentle. “What did I ever do to deserve you?”

Thane kissed the top of her head again. “I ask the gods that same question every day, Siha.”
Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit. SHIT!

Damn it, Shepard!

They were the only thoughts that ran through Jeff's mind, as he hobbled as fast as he could, to the rendezvous co-ordinates. He had always laughed at Garrus' paranoid streak, but couldn't be more thankful that the turian had insisted on installing a SOS protocol, on all of the team's omni-tools. It meant Jeff hadn't needed to break radio silence, and alert the goons to his location, whilst contacting the others. Which in turn, meant he could clamber gracelessly in to the waiting shuttle... with the help of EDI's sleek metal hands, and flop unceremoniously onto the floor, having only to worry about the unsurprisingly fractured ribs and broke wrist... instead of dodging a hail of bullets as well. Jeff squeezed his eyes shut, and desperately tried to get his ragged breathing under control. The pain he felt from the breaks was nothing out of the ordinary, and as Cortez advised on their departure, Jeff opened his weary eyes. Thane's face swam into view, causing him to curse under his breath.

"Are you well?" the drell asked.

Jeff bite back a retort. It was obvious to see he wasn't okay. He was supposed to be having a quiet dinner with Shepard, and instead he lay like a stranded fish on the shuttle's floor... but that wasn't Thane's fault. Not to mention, that it was obvious the assassin was itching the know where his wife was, but was still trying to be polite. The drell didn't have many tells, but Jeff had noticed that he blinked quicker, whenever he was worried about Shepard. So Jeff bit back his retort, and gave a tired sigh, still not daring to get up off the floor.

"I'll live. More worried about Shep," he replied. "We were ambushed. Seems the meal was a set up."

There was a bang, from somewhere beyond Jeff's range of view, before Garrus came suddenly into view. The turian's mandibles were pulled tight to his face, and a wave of guilt twisted in Jeff's stomach. Sure, he was less than pleased about being used as bait, but also a little bit proud. Quietly pleased that Shepard had thought he could make it to alert the others, despite being a walking cripple, and not being armed... as was the restaurant's policy. Jeff had been so surprised, and perhaps a little bit excited, when he'd received Shepard's email. Over the years, they had hung out countless times in the mess hall, her cabin, and even in dingy bars across the galaxy, that the captain somehow always managed to persuade him too. However, they had never gone out somewhere so upmarket. The sushi place was the talk of the Citadel, which meant it was posh, which meant Jeff had even made an effort, bought a new shirt for the occasion and left his cap at home... which also unfortunately meant that Shepard had only been wearing a little black dress, and a pair of strappy heals, when the gunmen had opened fire. Jeff knew how tough his adopted sister was, she'd come back from the dead for crying out loud, but not even Captain Shepard was bullet proof. A similar thought must have gone through Thane's mind, because the drell's shut his eyes and exhaled a long breath... which was a giant reaction for the assassin, he was practically a nervous wreck. But before Jeff could say anymore, static crackled through the comm. system, followed by a quiet, and pained sounding:

"Fuck."

"I'll try clean up the link," Garrus muttered, tapping furiously at his omni-tool.

"Siha?" Thane called.

They heard the captain mutter: “Bloody fish tanks.”

There was a harsh buzz of static, before she answered: “Just peachy, though I owe Liara a new pair of shoes, I've lost the ones she leant me.”

The distinct sound of gunfire could be heard over the comm. link, followed by a quiet grunt from Shepard. Jeff squeezed his eyes shut, trying to swallow past the lump that had formed in his throat. Metal fingers began to gently comb through his dishevelled hair, and looking up, he forced a small smile for EDI's sake. She might be synthetic, but she was trying.

“Siha?” Thane called again.

An agonisingly long pause dragged out, before Shepard finally panted: “I might need a little back up.”
“Lucky for you, Archangel is your best friend.”

Despite the predicament she found herself in, Shepard couldn't help smiling at Garrus' comment. Even just hearing him on the other end of the comm. link, made her feel better. She'd have probably chuckled, if she wasn't so certain that several of her ribs where broken, not to mention currently being hid behind a frozen fish stand. The irony was not lost on Shepard. After today, she never wanted to see a fish that didn't live in her fish tank, ever again. There was a crackle of static through the comm. system, that made her wince. It was obvious someone was either trying to hack the link, or block communications completely... then again, it could be something that Brook's was doing, which didn't make Shepard feel any better. There was just something about the other woman, that didn't sit right with her, and she hoped she'd get a chance to ask Thane or Liara for their opinion. And just at that moment, her husband's voice broke through the static.

“... if you can hear me, Joker explained. We're on foot,” he advised, his voice barely audible. “... as fast as we can.”

Seeing an opening in the enemy's patrol, Shepard didn't waste time replying, and instead slunk through the shadows, towards the market's exit. As guilty as she felt about losing her borrowed shoes, she was rather glad of it, since her bare feet let her move about silently. Shepard knew she was lucky, since the soles of her feet were about the only part of her body, that hadn't been cut to ribbons by either the aquarium or billboard glass. Which meant her footsteps weren't leaving a trail of bloody breadcrumbs for her enemy to follow... a small mercy, she supposed. Her dubious luck held out a little longer, as she ducked behind the last of the market stalls, and came face to face with a beautiful medikit. As she quietly popped it open, Shepard's eyes widened in surprised delight. She was determined not to think about why a butchers stall needed such a well stocked kit, and was just thankful for it, as she flooded her system with three medigels, and stocked her Omni-Tool with a further two. Just as she slid the medikit back in it's place, Shepard heard the unmistakable sound of military boots on the other side of the stall. Her heart began to beat a little faster, thanks to the sudden spike of adrenaline that surged through her system. Taking a deep breath, Shepard prepared a powerful Nova attack, hoping her luck would hold just a little longer.
Garrus' mandible twitch in amusement, as he caught sight of Shepard. Only the captain could vault over the hood of a skycar, and take down a merc with the butt end of a stolen pistol, whilst only wearing a skin tight black dress. And he had to admit, she looked damn good doing it. Shepard may be his best friend, and a human... but even Garrus could admit, she was easy on the eye. Thane was a lucky man. However, the torn state of her dress, and the mottle of ugly bruises that stained her pale skin, made him click his mandible in frustration. As good as she looked in figure hugging leather, she was too vulnerable and exposed... she was human for crying out loud, he didn't know how Thane coped. Garrus also know Shepard would knock him on his ass, if she ever heard his thoughts, so he decided to cover up with worry with sarcasm.

"Having a bad day, Shepard?" he drawled.

"You could say that," she smirked in reply.

"It is good to see you in one piece, Siha," Thane said, smoothly.

"You should see the fish tank," Shepard replied, deadpan.

Garrus chuckled, shaking his head. The drell's sense of humour was so dry, most would miss it. Just as they would miss the slight limp Shepard was trying to hide, as she walked towards them. Quickly, he scanned the floor behind her, checking for blood. If she was serious about the fish tank, Garrus expected that her squishy human flesh would have been cut to pieces, but thankfully there was none to be seen.

"Landing pad is just over there," Garrus advised, gesturing behind himself. "But it's behind a locked gate."

Shepard snorted. "Of course it is."

"Perhaps we should look for a control panel," Thane suggested. "And Siha, you look divine."

"Definitely a nice outfit," he agreed, grinning. "But what's this about a fish tank?"

The captain rolled her eyes. "We'll discuss it later."

"A damn shame," Garrus continued.

"The food was delectable," Thane added.

"We'll talk about it later," Shepard sighed.

She pushed passed the pair of them, her pistol raised, but Garrus was certain he saw her lips twitch in a smile. He glanced at Thane, and flicked his mandible out in a smirk. The drell inclined his head in response, which had Garrus biting back laughter. For the assassin, that was practically a grin. Thane enjoyed teasing Shepard just as much as he did, and it was a shame that no one would ever believe him about it.
Thane didn’t much care that the others were assembling downstairs, he was more preoccupied with the woman who was currently soaking in the whirlpool bath. As Shepard bathed, Thane collected an assortment of clothing for her, and laid them out on their bed. He knew they were about assemble in the dining area, intent on plotting their next course of action against those who had tried to kill Shepard. However, Thane was loathed to see his wife go into full military mode, after the ordeal she had just been through. Naturally, he saw the reason for the meeting they had called, but he’d be damned if he didn’t at least try to look after his wife. Which was why, instead on her standard issue BDUs, he had laid out a pair of comfortable sweat pants, that had once been his, a grey tank top Thane was sure was originally Liara’s, and a very oversized hoodie, that must have been Vega’s at some point. Looking at the collection of clothes, he couldn’t help but chuckle. His Siha had a bad habit of appropriating clothes. At that moment, Shepard left the bathroom, clad only in a beige towel. Not wanting to waste the opportunity, Thane caught her light around the waist, and gently pulled her flush against him.

“Are you sure you are well, Siha?” he asked.

“I'd prefer to just have the reapers trying to kill me,” she chuckled. “But yeah, the soak worked out the last of the kinks.”

“And are you sure this Brooks can be trusted?” Thane queried.

Shepard sighed. “No. There's just... something about her that I can't quite put my finger on.”

He nodded in understanding. There was something about Brooks that bothered him. Thane hadn't met her yet, but there was something very familiar about the woman's voice, when he had heard her over the comm. link.

“Do you wish for me to watch her?”

“Would you mind?” Shepard asked, quietly. “I don't like being so suspicious...”

“But you are,” Thane concluded, smiling. “And it is no trouble, Siha.”

“Thank you.”

Her words were said in a murmur, as she pressed a kiss to the hollow of his throat. He squeezed her tighter in response, and hoped his Siha knew he would go to the ends of the galaxy for her. Thane was about to tell her so, when there was a light knock on the door, before Liara quickly entered their bedroom, and flashed them an apologetic smile.

“I would not interrupt if it wasn't urgent,” the asari stated. “But I thought you'd want to know, I can't find Brooks in the Alliance database.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow. “Funnily enough, we were just discussing Brooks. I'm not terribly surprised.”

“Thank you.”

Her words were said in a murmur, as she pressed a kiss to the hollow of his throat. He squeezed her tighter in response, and hoped his Siha knew he would go to the ends of the galaxy for her. Thane was about to tell her so, when there was a light knock on the door, before Liara quickly entered their bedroom, and flashed them an apologetic smile.

“I would not interrupt if it wasn't urgent,” the asari stated. “But I thought you'd want to know, I can't find Brooks in the Alliance database.”

Shepard raised an eyebrow. “Funnily enough, we were just discussing Brooks. I'm not terribly surprised.”

“I have already volunteered to watch our new... companion,” Thane advised.

Liara nodded. “Good. Feron is pretty good at that sort of thing, I'm sure he will be happy to help you. But what do you want to do about her, Shepard? She could be working for the people who attacked the restaurant.”
“It's crossed my mind,” she admitted. “But I think our best bet of getting to the bottom of this, is to act like we don't suspect a thing. See what leads Brooks throws our way, we might get lucky, but we need to be on our toes.”

Thane hummed his agreement. He hated the thought of his Siha being so exposed, especially with an imposter by her side, but he trusted Shepard's judgement. If this plan was what she thought was the best course of action, then he would do everything he could to support her in it. However, if this Brooks did betray his wife... well, Thane had already planned the woman's death.

“As you wish, Siha.”
Shepard plastered on her most convincing faux smile, as she linked arms with both Garrus and Wrex. Her best friend was dressed in what she assumed was a turian tuxedo, whilst the Battlemaster wore the krogan version. Both looked rather dashing actually, and Shepard was certain she didn't look half bad herself. During the planning stages of this operation, Kasumi had appeared from nowhere, and handed her a fitted black dress, that had a very handy slit up the back of the figure hugging skirt. Brooks stood next to the Wrex, clad in a blue latex dress, which might looked good but was terribly impractical. There was no way she could fight in that outfit, and it was just another thing that set alarm bells off in the back of her mind. Thankfully, Thane and Feron were already inside the casino, lurking somewhere in the shadows with Kasumi, unbeknownst to Brooks. James had already gone ahead, and escorted Liara into the charity event, whilst Tali and Legion monitored the building, which Brooks was aware of.

“Looking good, Shepard,” Garrus drawled.

“I did the best I could, without a carapace or crest,” she grinned.

“Your best has my mandible on the floor. Damn!” he replied, suggestively.

“Practising your pick up lines?” Shepard teased.

Wrex huffed out a chuckle. “I look ridiculous.”

“Think of it like camouflage,” she retorted, deadpan. “You don't want to scare the prey.”

“Then we need to find bigger prey,” he replied.

The krogan gave a sidelong glance to Brooks, agreeing with Shepard that something just wasn't quite right with the woman. The others she had managed to talk to in private, namely Thane, Garrus, Joker, Kasumi and Liara also agreed. To the point, that Joker had insisted on having two skycars waiting for them, the other piloted by Steve, in case anything went wrong. Despite all of that, Shepard knew she had a part to play, so dutifully posed for pictures with Brooks, when the gathered paparazzi called for one. Even Garrus and Wrex stood together, arms slung around each other in camaraderie, the very picture of co-operative coexistence. The news outlets would eat it up, and Shepard couldn't practically see the headlines, and couldn't help chuckling to herself. Eventually, the four of them made it inside the casino, where James and Liara waited for them.

“Lola! You are looking fine,” Vega grinned.

“I must admit, James has a point. You are looking lovely tonight,” Liara complimented.

“Dressed to kill,” Shepard quipped.

“Hopefully not,” Brooks stuttered. “And whilst everyone is looking at the krogan, I'll get to ventilation shaft.”

Shepard nodded. “Okay, time to get this show on the road.”
Trapped (Vega PoV)

Dios! This was loco... even by Normandy standards. But then again, if anyone was going to have a psychotic clone trying to kill them, it was Lola. This sort of **miérda** seemed to follow the captain, and James was a little surprised that he was actually surprised by the turn of events. Trapped in an impregnable vault, with the captain and the hulking krogan Battlemaster. However James had pictured dying, it had always been in the line of duty, but never like this. It was just too... bizarre. After giving up trying to find a crack in the vault's glass, he turned to his companions, and tried not to flinch at the almost maniacal grin the Battlemaster was giving Shepard.

“Refresh my memory; didn't we use to win these things, back in the old days?” Wrex chuckled.

“Well, it's one for the highlight reel,” James smiled, a little feebly.

“Do I really sound like that?” Shepard asked, seemingly ignoring them.

“As long as I've known you, yeah,” the krogan laughed.

The captain wrinkled her nose in disgust. “James?”

“Hmm... yeah! Yeah now that I think about it,” he replied. “But just a thought; maybe we should be worrying about the vault we've been sealed inside forever.”

“Yeah... we're not going to worry about that?” Wrex asked.

“How come no one told me before? It sounds so stupid,” Shepard complained, still ignoring them. “I'm open to feedback.”

James starred at her for a moment, gaping. He knew Lola was pretty cool no matter what the galaxy threw at her, but this seemed a little extreme. Though what made it weirder, was the way Wrex was just rolling with it. Krogan's weren't exactly known for their laid back attitude, so maybe he was missing something?

“Well, I thought all humans said it, like some weird earth custom or something,” the Battlemaster explained.

“I love you,” Shepard smirked. “What about you, Vega?”

He shrugged. “I don't know. You're the captain, Lola. You can say whatever the hell you like.”

“I say it with more confidence though, it's more a: that's all for now,” Shepard continued.

“Spoken like a true krogan,” Wrex grinned. “Show 'em who's boss.”

“Oh damn straight. Rank has it's privileges, Lola. End the conversation however you want,” he agreed, feeling a little out of his depth.

Shepard raised an eyebrow. “You sassing me Vega?”

“I thought that was Garrus' job?” Wrex asked. “Not that it matters. There's probably not a lot of air in here. An hour, tops.”

“I could use: I'll talk to you later,” Shepard mused, still ignoring them. “Leave them wanting more...”
“Come on, Lola!” James pleaded, distressed. “Why aren't you more worried about this?”

“What... hmmm? Oh,” Shepard replied, distracted. “Glyph, you still out there?”

“Yes captain,” the bot replied.

James looked at Shepard incredulously, whilst Wrex merely laughed. It figured the captain had a plan, even if she didn't bother telling anyone about it. Still, he shook his head as he watched her, trying not to worry when she fidgeted. But it was worrying, as Shepard didn't fidget. She was always cool, calm and collected. Which meant the clone must have shaken Lola more than he realised, not that James could blame her. Fighting someone wearing your face must be a real mind fuck, especially after already dealing with being resurrected.

“Once you get this damned thing unlocked, go find the others,” Shepard continued. “No one steals my ship... not even me!”
Aftermath (Thane PoV)

Thane breathed in the floral scent of Shepard's shampoo, as he held her closer. They were curled up on their bed in the apartment, and she was still shivering and shaking in his arms, she had been for over thirty minutes. He'd found her, all but crumpled on the floor at the foot of the bed, huddled in an oversized grey sweatshirt that Thane was certain had once been Steve's, muttering to herself: "She just let go", over and over. He'd known that the fight with her clone, not to mention just learning she had a clone, was a trying experience for Shepard. Along with falling through a fish tank, getting locked in an impregnable vault, several other assassination attempts, as well as discovering that her clone planned to kill Jenkins... which Thane suspected had almost pushed Shepard over the edge, she really loved that space hamster, after all. And still, he hadn't been expecting her to suffer so much because of her clone's suicide. Really, he supposed he should have, since his Siha was just that type of person. And yet... Thane truly hadn't anticipated her devastation.

As Shepard buried herself deeper into his embrace, he rather hoped she never found what had happened to Brooks. Thane knew the moment that he set eyes on the supposed Alliance soldier was not who she claimed to be, he'd encountered her before... or rather, he'd encountered another of her aliases: Rasa. He'd let her survive then, believing it was the right thing to do. Perhaps it had been at the time, except it had nearly cost his Siha her life, several times. This Rasa had abused his gift of leniency before, but Thane wasn't going to let her do so again. He'd intercepted Garrus and Wrex, as they'd been escorting the woman to Bailey for holding, and neither of them had questioned why he sank his omni-blade into her heart. He suspected that neither agreed with Shepard's decision to let the imposter live, but had tried to abide by the captain's plans. Perhaps they simple thought she would give Thane more lenience, since they were married. In truth, he didn't want to find out. He hadn't relished disobeying her orders, but also hadn't been willing to risk a threat to his Siha's life going free, and with the state of the galaxy, a successful escape had been a very real possibility.

Silently, Thane kissed the top of Shepard's head in silent apology. The tremors that had wracked her body had finally stopped, as had the sniffing. Her breathes were more measured now, bar the occasional hiccup, so he hoped her tears had finally ceased. He hadn't to see his Siha crying under any circumstances, but the clone didn't deserve Shepard's mourning in the first place. Eventually, she tilted her head up to look at him, and gave a watery smile. Thane kissed her forehead affectionately, before wiping the tears from her beautiful face. He was about to offer some words of comfort, before there was a polite knock at the bedroom door. Shepard gave to command to open the door, but merely glanced over her shoulder, as James' walked in. Thane barely concealed a smile at the look of embarrassment that crossed the behemoth's face, before the marine settled on smirking at Shepard.

"So Lola, vamos a la fiesta o qué?" he grinned.

Thane's translator glitched terribly, as the lieutenant spoke, but from the smile on Shepard's face, it was obvious his Siha understood.

"Qué te parece guapo? Voy a beber usted bajo la mesa," she replied, winking.

Once again, Thane had no idea what was said, but James laughed heartily. Before nodding, presumably in agreement, then after promising to go find Glyph and 'Scars', left them alone again. With a contented sigh, Shepard settled back into his arms, and Thane decided any questions he had could wait. His Siha was feeling better, and that was all that mattered.

Author's Note
Spanish translation (I'm not fluent by any means, so if it is wrong, correction is most welcome):
“So Lola, vamos a la fiesta o qué?” - So Lola, are we going to party or what?
“Qué te parece guapo? Voy a beber usted bajo la mesa,” - What do you think handsome? I'll drink you under the table
When Shepard had agreed with James' idea for a party, she hadn't envisioned discovering a quarian, all but passed out on the downstairs bathroom floor, just three hours into the festivities. Tali was sprawled out on the beige tiled floor, stroking the brown fuzz bathmat, as if it was some sort of animal she could pet. Unable to help herself, Shepard snapped a discrete holo with her omni-tool, before crouching down beside her obviously drunk friend.

“Tali, are you okay?” she asked, trying not to smirk.

“Yep! You want to see my tattoo?” the quarian replied.

“I don't think you have a tattoo, Tali.”


Shepard quirked an eyebrow, and decided to full sit on the floor, since it seemed liked she'd be here for the long haul. She wasn't aware that her friend knew of the tattoo Jack had done for her, to make up for the ones Cerberus didn't see fit to replace, or perhaps Tali was referring to the old ones. The ones that belong to a surprisingly more carefree time... time before Saren, collectors and the damn reapers... before watching her clone commit suicide. Shepard shook her head, trying to dispel the sour mood that was creeping over her. Tonight's 'fiesta' was supposed to be celebrating everything they'd achieved and survived, so far. And she refused to wallow... no matter how drained and worried she felt. Her friends... her family deserved better than that. Fake it until you make it, right? At least Tali was doing an excellent job at providing a distraction.

“You want to know what it is?” the quarian continued. “You want to know? It's a pretty bird, like yours, but made of rainbows. Aaaaand, it's flying out of the eye of a skull, being held in the mouth of a thresher maw, with a naked woman holding a sword on it's back.”

“Impressive,” Shepard replied, deadpan.

“Jack said Kal would think it was hot,” Tali explained. “Do you think it's hot?”

Trying not to smile, she nodded. “Definitely.”

“Awesome sauce.”

“But why the sudden urge to get a tattoo?” Shepard asked.

“Because I'm hard core, like eezo, baby!”

Shepard really tried not to roll her eyes, but failed miserably. And as much as she loved her adopted sister, she couldn't help wondering if EDI or Glyph had this recorded. It would be pure gold in the morning.

“And Vega's look hot. And yours look hot. And Jack suggested it.”

“Remind me to talk to Jack in the morning,” Shepard chuckled. “Where did you get the omni-tattoo anyway?”

“Down in the lower wards, near the bottom,” the quarian replied.
“I meant where on your body,” she clarified, patiently.

“So did I...”

“Tali!” Shepard laughed.

“Tooottally worth it,” the younger woman giggled. “Learnt that one from Liara.

Shaking her head in amusement, Shepard helped her friend to stand, supporting all of the slender woman’s weight. Slowly, she led a very pliant but clumsy Tali out of the bathroom, and towards the downstairs bedroom. She was fairly sure Kolyat and Orianna wouldn’t mind, and there wasn’t a chance in hell that she’d manage to get the quarian up the stairs. Shepard was already considering carrying Tali, and there were only twenty steps from the bathroom door to Kolyat’s bed. Negotiating stairs would just be a nightmare.

“S’all spinning,” Tali slurred.

“I'm not surprised,” Shepard chuckled. “How many did you have, anyway?”

The quarian seemed to ponder for a moment, before shrugging. “Don't know. Ask Traynor.”
Despite the light-hearted bickering, playful jibes, and general boisterous camaraderie that always accompanied the crew of the Normandy whenever they went out on mass, Thane could sense there was something wrong with his Siha. He had first sensed it when they awoke, even though Shepard was none worse for wear, regardless of the fact she ended the night drinking shots of ryncol with Wrex, Grunt and Jack. It seemed to only intensify as she bid farewell to those who couldn't join them back on the Normandy. The krogans were heading to Palaven, whilst Jack was going back to her students. Zaeed was off to rally the Blue Suns ready for the push for Earth, Kasumi was joining work on the Crucible, as was Samara, Mordin and Legion. Jacob was due to reunite with Brynn and the rest of the Gelix scientists, before also joining the Crucible project, whilst Miranda was trying to rendezvous with Oriana. Thane had been a little surprised that Kolyat hadn't volunteered to help find his girlfriend, who had left the Citadel some weeks earlier with her parents, though perhaps he also felt something wasn't right with Shepard.

The feeling of wrongness only intensified, the nearer they drew to the docking bay. His Siha's smiles, that had been strained throughout her goodbyes, was now more of a mask than anything else. She was withdrawn and distant, barely responding to even Garrus and James' attempts at banter. When they reached the docks, there had been such a press of bodies, that for several irrationally terrifying minutes, Thane had lost sight of Shepard completely. Eventually he spotted her. A lonely figure, hood drawn to hide her fiery hair, as she stood staring out of the large plexiglass windows. The Normandy's silhouette dwarfed her, and for a single fleeting moment, his Siha looked so diminutive against the vast backdrop of space. Of course, that was the moment that they all noticed that something was wrong. James and Tali muttered not quiet under their breath... Dios and Keelah respectively, and Garrus gave a forlorn trill. Joker let out a ragged sign, while Liara and Ashley exchanged a worried look. Karen shook her head, Kal wrung his hands... a habit he'd apparently picked up from Tali, whilst Kolyat and Feron both shuffled uncomfortably. Even Javik seemed concerned, though naturally that was packaged in the scathing comment of: "it is not proper for a captain to appear small". But for the prothean, that amounted to out right admitting being worried. So deciding that enough was enough, Thane was about to join his wife, before Joker stopped him.

"Give us a moment."

It was a statement, not a question. But regardless, before he could even answer, the other man was limping away towards Shepard. Thane watched as Joker, in a rare show of affection, draped his arm around her shoulders. Surprisingly, she lowered her hood and gave the pilot an almost sheepish smile. Not really wanting to intrude, but still wanting to offer his support, Thane began to slowly make his way over to the pair. The rest of the crew followed close behind.

"All right," Joker sighed. "Game on."

"At least we threw one hell of a party. Probably the last one," Shepard replied, quietly.

Thane's gut twisted at how worn his wife sounded... he was afraid to admit it, but she almost seemed defeated. Even Joker stared at her for a moment, before shaking his head. Garrus trilled unhappily, before striding forward and settled a hand on the captain's lower back.

"That doesn't sound like my Shepard," the turian stated.

"She means the last one until she finishes kicking the reapers' asses, because that's the plan," Joker corrected.
“You'll find a way to win this,” Garrus assured.

Their comments, or perhaps their belief, earned a small but genuine smile from Shepard. Either way, Thane was thankful for it.

“Can't wait to see what the hell you make us do next,” Joker chuckled.

“Best times of my life were spent on that ship,” the turian stated, nodding at the Normandy.

“We've had a good ride,” Tali added, joining them.


Sensing a dismissal, the crew awkwardly headed for the decontamination room. As they passed Shepard, both James and Steve squeezed her shoulder, whilst Kal saluted. Samantha gave a nervous wave, Liara and Kolyat offered smiles, and Ashley winked. Feron even went so far as to ruffle Shepard's hair in passing, muttering: “always wanted to do that”, as he went. Even Javik gave the captain a nod before he joined the others, leaving Thane finally alone with his wife. As she continued to stare out onto the Normandy, he gently laced his hand with hers.

“I am glad you were able to take time to celebrate. You deserve it,” he said, quietly.

“I'm just glad you could be here with me,” Shepard replied, squeezing his hand.

“I will always be with you, Siha,” Thane assured. “I would not trade the time I've had with you for anything. Please know, it's been a good fight.”

“A great fight.”

A single tear slipped down Shepard's porcelain cheek, and without thinking, Thane pulled her into his arms. Together, the stood as a tiny island of stillness, in the sea of people that bustled through the docks. Silently, Thane prayed to his gods, begging them to let him keep his promise as he vowed to his Siha:

“It won't be our last.”
“Captain, Thessia is under heavy reaper attack!”

Joker's warning made bile rise in Shepard's throat. It was always a bad start when he used her title, but she had never expected the rest of the sentence. It was supposed to be a simple pick up mission, a tip off from the asari councillor, but seemed like that plan had gone south. Without wasting any time, Shepard jogged towards the cockpit.

“Sit. Rep,” she ordered.

“There's activity across most of the planet,” Joker advised.

“What about the temple? Can you raise the scientists?”

“Negative. All channels are scrambled across the spectrum,” he stated, glancing over his shoulder. “The mission's looking pretty dicey.”

Shepard bit back a sigh. She knew he was right, but there was too much riding on getting to the hidden beacon. At that moment, Liara appeared by her side, looking sick to her stomach. Shepard spared her friend an small, sympathetic smile. She could remember all too well, what it felt like to realise your home world was being invaded.

“Shepard, that's my home down there...” Liara whispered. “I have to go.”

“I know. Get to the shuttle,” she instructed. “EDI, tell Javik to meet us there. Have Garrus, Kal and Vega on stand by.”

“Understood, Shepard,” the AI replied.

“Thane,” she called into the comm. link. “You have the deck.”

“As Shepard spoke, she quickly made her way through the CIC, ordering Samantha and Kolyat to keep hailing the scientists, as she went. Her husband was just stepping off the elevator as she reached it, and he subtly squeezed her hand in reassurance, as they passed each other. Shepard barely summoned a fleeting smile for him, before the metal doors slid shut, and she descended to the shuttle bay. The moment the doors hissed open again, Garrus tossed Shepard her visor.

“I tweaked the settings,” the turian rumbled. “It'll give you a farther field of vision, and I've updated the targeting system to better track the banshee's warp movements.”

She managed a tight lipped smile of thanks. As a rule, Shepard hated anyone messing with her stuff. Her best friend was an exception to the rule, as was Thane. If either stated that her equipment needed an upgrade she hadn't thought about, she tended to believe them, so she gave no argument. Another person creeping onto the list was Steve. So when the shuttle pilot came requisitions officer passed her a new utility belt, explaining he'd packed extra biotic field rations, Shepard chose not to question his motives. Instead, she gave her friend a nod of thanks, before suiting up and jumping on the shuttle. Though as they prepared to take off, she couldn't help but pray to any god or spirit out there, that Thessia wouldn't fall to the same fate of Palaven and Earth.
Damn it Shepard, had apparently become Garrus' mantra over the years. But when the asari commando had radio in 'unknown hostiles', even he hadn't expect to find his best friend dangling over a chasm, after a Cerberus gunship had almost blown up the temple she was in. Then again, Garrus hadn't expected their old employers to be on the asari home world, whilst it was being overrun with reapers, but he supposed there was no smoke without fire... as humans liked to say. Not that any of it matter, because the look on Shepard's face once he managed to haul her up, would haunt Garrus to his dying day. Her eyes were blown wide, and her hands were trembling, but he knew instantly it wasn't from her latest brush with death.

“Leng. Where's Kai Leng?”

Garrus let out an unhappy trill as he realised the implications of Shepard's words, and he didn't need to understand Vega, to know what 'pendejo' meant. Regardless, he was all but knocked out the way, when Shepard suddenly lunged forward and started to sprint towards the temple's entrance, only to be halted in her stride by Javik. Who actually deigned to touch someone for once.

“He is gone, captain. Vendetta along with him.”

Though he didn't know who or what that was, from the tight set of Shepard's jaw, Garrus knew it was bad. However in that moment, it paled in comparison to hearing the asari lieutenant desperately call for help, with Shepard unable to establish contact. He quickly tried to boost the signal, using the new Omni-programme he and Tali had recently cooked up, but before Garrus could implement the algorithm, terrified screams could be heard on the other end of the comm. link. Moments later, the red skyline turned dark, as two reapers descended. Liara choked back a sob, and seemed to waver on her feet, but as usual, Shepard was there to steady her... just as she was always there, for all of them. Off to the side, Garrus could heard Vega and Kal cursing in their respective languages, though surprisingly, he felt Javik step up beside him. He eyed the prothean warily, full expecting a scathing comment about Shepard's leadership, and how it didn't live up to his 'cycle'. However...

“The captain is under a heavy load. She will not admit it, but she needs support. This does not make her weak.”

If they had been anywhere other than a war zone, Garrus' mandibles would have flared in shock. He wasn't entirely sure, as Javik had only seemed to function on disdain and anger before, but Garrus was fairly convinced the prothean had actually admitted to being worried about Shepard. Which was about damn time. Not that it mattered right then, as his top priority was getting their crew off the doomed planet. Thessia was lost, but Garrus was damned if he'd let any of his friends die, and as usual, it seemed Shepard had the same idea.

“Let's move it people,” she barked, before calling into the comm. link: “Steve, ETA to rendezvous?”

She was all business again, but that didn't fool Garrus. He'd never disrespect his best friend, by calling her out on the field, but luckily, despite species barriers, they didn't need words to communicate. So when Shepard briefly caught his eye, Garrus gave her the look: 'Shepard...'

She shook her head: 'not here'.

He faintly nodded, then tilted his head slightly: 'I know. Later?'

Shepard's lips twitched, almost like the thought of smiling was too much: 'Yeah... later.'
David's fingers drummed against his thigh as he waited for the call to connect. He'd only just heard about Thessia, and as soon as Hackett had disconnected, David had punched in the code for the Normandy. Knowing Shepard, the kid would be beating herself up about it. She might be a thirty two year old, highly decorated marine with a ship under her own command, but she was still his daughter. He knew her, and knew the beating she'd be giving herself. Since he couldn't be there in person, a pep talk was going to be the next best thing... besides, he didn't think a hug and a steaming cup of hot cocoa would cut it this time. Especially when the vid. comm. connected, and he saw her face. Shepard looked haggered, and though she was in her standard issue fatigues, the layer of crime that covered her face and hair was obvious, even through the bad feed. What he wouldn't give to be able to give her that damned hug...

“Shepard, I heard about Thessia,” David greeted.

“We were so close, Dad,” Shepard sighed, brokenly. “So damned close to ending the war.”

The barest hint of a smile twitched the corner of his lips. He'd been worried with all the pressure placed on her, and knowing how this defeat would weigh her down, that he'd be facing the legend, rather than the woman. So even though his heart broke for how defeated she seemed, David was glad to see his daughter looking back at him through the static, and not the captain.

“You didn't think it would be that easy, did you child?” he asked, gently.

She shook her head. “I knew going in, there wouldn't be a minute of this war that was easy. I knew since boarding the Normandy without you. Hell... I've known since Saren.” She laughed humourlessly. “But seeing Thessia fall... knowing it was my responsibility.”

“Shepard, do you know how many times I got my ass handed to me over the years?” David asked.

The abrupt question earned him a ghost of a smile from Shepard, which was a ray of hope.

“Surviving the First Contact War back in the day, was a goddamn miracle,” he continued. “They said I was a hero. I just felt lucky to get out alive.”

There was the faintest huff of laughter from his daughter, her smile growing slightly and turning wry. Which was progress. David knew all to well that Shepard understood the feeling, he'd coached her through the first few months after Elysium, after all.

“So maybe Kai Leng did beat you. What of it?”

“It could cost us the war,” she reasoned, quietly.

It was David's turn to shake his head. “These guys in the resistance, they know it's a losing proposition. They know the chances of surviving are slim to none. But we all signed up anyway,” he explained. “Hell, I'm sitting in London right now, staring at rubble. I was born here, and it's looking like I might die here, too.”

“The hell you are!” Shepard snapped.

“There's my girl,” he smiled. “You want my advice? I say point us at the reapers, and we'll take our chances. Cerberus and the crucible be damned.”
She chuckled at last. A little watery, and a little ruefully, but at least genuine. Shepard was a remarkable young woman, a damn good marine, and a fine commanding officer. But as proud as David was of her, he couldn't help hate the expectations placed on her, or the heavy load she always bared without complaint. And though he knew without a shadow of a doubt that Shepard could pull off the impossible, looking good whilst proving every doubter wrong, it was good to see some of the girl he first met shine through, even if it was only every now and again. She looked more like herself, instead of the legend.

“Always had a way with words, Dad,” she smiled. “And you'll make it through, because when this is all over, you have to show me around London again. It's been ten years since we were last there.”

David huffed out a laugh. “It might need a new coat of paint first, but it's a date.” He paused for a moment, studying her. “Shake this off Shepard. You can do this.”

“I will,” she promised.

There was so much more he wanted to say, but he could see one of his majors patiently waiting to use the QEC. It seemed their time was up, and all David could do was hope that the talk had helped.

“Stay safe out there, child.”

“You too.” There was a heavy pause. “I love you, Dad.”

They were not words they said to each other often, so tears he hadn't expected, began to brim in David's eyes. He wasn't one to worry about what others thought, and he was more than happy to show his emotions, but he doubted seeing their commanding officer crying would be good for the troop's moral. So after a steadying breath, he nodded encouragingly to his daughter.

“Love you too. Anderson out.”
“Is this truly a good idea, Siha?”

Thane was never one to question his wife's decisions as a commanding officer, that was where her experience lay, not his. However, her anger towards Cerberus was very obvious to him, as were her guilt over Thessia and frustration over having to restock and refuel before pursuing Kai Leng, so Thane couldn't help wondering if these were driving her to accept Aria's request. Not that he minded the idea of helping the dethroned queen of Omega, as much as a surprise the asari's email had been. It was just Shepard going alone, that he objected to. Despite his Siha's tentative friendship with Aria, the asari wasn't exactly an ally, and though Thane doubted it, he couldn't rule out the former CEO turning on the captain, and betraying her to Cerberus.

“No,” Shepard replied. “Like everything in this damn war, it's dicing with death.”

She had paused in the act of throwing things hurriedly into her kit bag, to look at him as she spoke. There was a glint in Shepard's eyes that Thane hadn't noticed earlier, and it drew a small smile from him, as it meant she had a plan. Though before he could ask, the door to their cabin whooshed open, however no one entered... or so he thought. A moment later, two figures shimmered into existence, as they dropped their tactical cloaks. Thane couldn't help but chuckle, when Kasumi grinned from beneath her hood at him. As for the other person...

“Ah, Shepard. Good to see you again. You as well, Thane,” Mordin greeted. “Must say, dangerous plan, but sound. Aria cannot object.”

Thane tilted his head as he looked at his wife, silently asking for clarification, whilst biting back a smile. He really should have known that his Siha had a plan in mind, and probably had even before she'd first left the ship to meet Omega's former leader.

“Aria only objected to the Normandy and her crew,” Shepard stated, blithely. “You're an advisor, so technically not a crew member. And Kasumi and Mordin aren't even based on the ship.”

“And I adamantly refused to be dragged along again,” the thief added, cheerily.

“So I see,” Thane replied, drily.

Without hesitation, he dutifully held out his arm, when Kasumi gestured towards his omni-tool. He half paid attention as the thief updated his tactical cloak, configuring the new model that she and Mordin had recently created, whilst he also listened to the salarian babble to Shepard about the new mods he'd created for her beloved Locust and shotgun. A few minutes later, Liara was entering the cabin, and handed a datapad to Shepard.

“This is the most up to date information I can get on Omega,” the asari stated. “I'm afraid it isn't much, but it does highlight some of the more fortified areas of the station, as well as the exact number of personnel Cerberus deployed there.”

“This is a big help, Liara,” Shepard assured. “And a peace offering.”

“You feel our assistance will not be appreciated,” Thane stated, rather than questioned.

Shepard chuckled. “This is Aria we're talking about. She'll either laugh and praise my audacity for ignoring her rules. Or try kill me, for disobeying her rules. Either way, it'll be an interesting trip.”
A Cerberus cruiser hadn’t been what Shepard expected for Aria’s ship, but she could appreciate the irony of it. Bray had greeted her amicably at the docking port, none the wiser for the three additional quests, and lead her to the queen bee’s CIC. The asari was barking orders at the crew, quite professionally, and not for the first time, Shepard wondered what Aria had done for the centuries before becoming Omega’s ruler. It was unusual to see the asari wearing sleek black armour for a change, though somewhat reassured Shepard that if she had been stupid enough to come alone, at least she’d have had some real back up. To be truthful, she still fully expected to be working closely with Aria, the others were mostly for back up, should things get dicey. And considering they were dealing with Cerberus, she expected they would do.

“The guest of honour has arrived,” Aria drawled in greeting. “We can finally start.”

The was the cue. Giving a subtle gesture with her right hand, Shepard signalled the others to decloak. Kasumi materialised to her left, Mordin to her right, whilst Thane protected her six. None had their weapons drawn, but just like Shepard, they carried them very visibly. She watched, amused but wary, as the asari’s eyes widened momentarily. Though before Aria had a chance to react, Shepard tossed Liara’s datapad to her. The available details clearly displayed, as a peace offering, as much as vital intel. Taking a chance, she stroked over to the galaxy map the asari stood beside, and started to study the layout. The other’s stayed were they were, looking relaxed yet lethal. Apart from skill, style was important when dealing with the asari, and Shepard knew she’d chosen her squad well.

“They aren’t crew,” Shepard stated, without turning to Aria. “So let me guess; you're planning to infiltrate the enemy fleet.”

The asari actually laughed. “Well played, Shepard, and exactly. We position ourselves to strike a crippling blow, then my forces join the fun.”

Shepard nodded. She could see the reasoning behind the strategy, but it was risky. There was a high potential that they'd lose a lot of ships and personnel. Not that she didn't think Aria had accounted for that, the asari was certainly ruthless enough to consider them acceptable losses. Then again... was she really so different, after ordering the protection of the Destiny Ascension, another lifetime ago.

“A lot could go wrong,” she warned.

“The assault's been planned for weeks. For now, just sit back. Let me steer,” Aria replied.

It was a novel ideal, taking a back seat for a change, and Shepard was certain the asari knew it. Unable to help herself, she smirked at her tentative new partner... since she supposed Aria had more or less been an ally, since she’d first stepped foot into Afterlife. Figuring her team might need some confirmation, Shepard gave a tilt of her head in acceptance.

“This should be interesting,” Kasumi quipped.

“Indeed,” Thane agreed, dryly.

Shepard wasn't certain, but she thought she heard Bray chuckling. It was certainly going to be a hell of a ride.
Stranger Things (Thane PoV)

Thane would never admit it to his Siha, but he clearly saw the fear in her eyes, when she demanded Aria call for evacuation. In that split second, he couldn't help wondering how close this came to the loss of the original Normandy. Perhaps the asari saw it to, because the moment she met Shepard's gaze, Aria was following her instructions. The batarian; Bray nodded a silent thanks to his Siha, and nothing at all was said until they were securely inside an escape pod. Kasumi and Mordin were first, Bray and himself were next. Shepard then shoved Aria in, before grabbing a straggling turian mercenary roughly by the collar, and dragging him into the pod as well. Thane shifted slightly, allowing his Siha to crash into the seat beside him. Her 'commander' mask was firmly in place, and fleetingly, he wished for a visor like Garrus wore. At least then, he would be able to monitor her stress levels, rather than relying solely on instinct. If they had been among the crew, Thane wouldn't have hesitated to take Shepard's hand in his. As it was, he settled for pushing his knee against hers, as the harnesses automatically fastened them in place. It was the only show of support he could think to give her, and was thankful when his Siha returned the gesture in acknowledgement, before turning her attention to Aria.

“Well, at least you got some free defence upgrades out of it,” she quipped, darkly.

The asari snorted. “Are you always so annoyingly optimistic?”

“Yes”, “Invariably” and “Indeed” were the unanimous answers Kasumi, Mordin and Thane all offered on Shepard's behalf. Bray seemed to barely managed to bite back a chuckle, and the turian mercenary flared his mandibles in a grin. As Thane took stock of the newcomer, he realised he had encounter the male before. They sat in silence for several minutes, bracing themselves the best they could against the turbulence that buffeted the escape pod. Despite his attempts at subtle meditation, even Thane became dis-quietened by the rising tension that was building between them all. Apparently, he wasn't the only one, because the turian soon broke the collective muteness.

“Thanks for the hand back there, commander.”

“Captain,” she shot back, grinning. “But don't mention it Grizz. Couldn't exactly let you get your ass blown up now could I?”

“Shep's only got room for one completely reckless turian in her life, you know,” Kasumi chimed in.

“How is Archangel these days?” Aria asked.

“Still a pain in the ass,” Shepard replied.

“He learnt it from you,” Mordin stated, deadpan. “Only reliable probability.”

“I knew there was a reason I didn't let you back on my ship…”

And just like, the tension was broken. Thane glanced at his Siha, and found her smiling her trademark smirk at the salarian. Kasumi grinned from beneath her hood, Grizz out right laughed, and Bray chuckled openly. Even Aria's smile seemed more genuine than usual, a true testament to Shepard's way with people. So for the first time since hearing about the asari's plan, Thane thought that it might not prove to be his Siha's most reckless mission after all. Perhaps their partnership could work. Stranger things had happened, like humanity's shining star falling in love with a drell assassin...
Petrovsky's outer defences were down. Bray and Grizz, along with Mordin and Kasumi, had secured the rendezvous point for Aria's fleet. Shepard, Aria and Thane had gotten through some of the general's more elaborate ward defences on route, with the pirate queen actually acting like the team player she'd promised to be. They'd even met an old friend of Aria's; a turian female by the name of Nyrreen Kandros. It was obvious that the two had history, but something about the newcomer made Shepard think of Garrus' recon. scout story... and if they ever made it back off Omega, she resolved to ask her best friend more about it. Throughout it all, Thane had remained a shadow, fighting alongside the three women, but staying cloaked at all times. Shepard was almost certain he was the only reason they had made it to Aria's bunker unscathed, since he'd ambushed more than one Cerberus trooper during the last skirmish.

Unfortunately, overall losses in the first assault had been high, but at least they were all now safely sequestered in Aria's once secret lair. Unsurprisingly, Mordin was already patching up the wounded, with the help of a handful of the asari's staff. Kasumi had somehow persuaded Bray to let her into their systems... though knowing the thief, she'd most likely hacked into them right in front of the batarian, just to prove she could. News of a resistance group calling themselves 'The Talons' had come to light, which seemed to make Nyrreen edgy... not that Aria noticed, until the turian had disappeared. The timing was highly suspicious as far as Shepard concerned, and it was apparent that her husband was of the same mind, as he pulled her aside the moment an opportunity arose.

“I believe Ms Kandros' disappearance is no coincidence, Siha.”

Shepard nodded. “She's not Petrovsky's spy though.”

“Agreed. However she is highly trained, and stated herself, that she was more the willing to defend the station,” Thane mused.

A smirk pulled the corner of Shepard's mouth. “I actually won't be surprised if Nyrreen's the Talon's leader.”

“Or Garrus' recon. scout.”

“So I'm not the only one then,” she chuckled, quietly. “Would be rather fitting... Archangel's old flame being the head of Omega's resistance.”

“And what of Aria's reaction?” Thane asked.

“I'm trying to to think about it,” Shepard admitted, before sighing. “How do we keep getting dragged into these situations?”

“You,” he replied, deadpan. “I merely follow your lead, Siha.”
Waiting (Garrus PoV)

Garrus paced restlessly in the War Room. He knew Shepard was impulsive, but going off to help Aria T'Loak on a whim, was reckless even for her. Okay, so he knew his best friend would have a better reason than just feeling like it, but it still irked Garrus that she'd not only left him behind, but also went without saying anything to him. Yet she'd told Liara of her plan... but then again, he supposed that was the perk of being the Shadow Broker. The only consolation he had, was that Shepard had at least taken Thane with her. Which was certainly an improvement from the last time she'd gone off without him, though it still didn't sit right with Garrus. He should be on her six, not left behind, even if it was to run the Normandy in her stead... and wasn't that a thing to try and get his head around.

Garrus knew they were best friends, and that Shepard trusted him with her life... but trusting him with her ship, their home. Well, it would be a lie to say that he wasn't at least a little bit proud, to find out that Shepard thought of him so highly. But it went further than that. Garrus had known he'd been her unofficial XO since their time with Cerberus, but he'd never dreamed that she'd make it official. Apparently she had. Because as well as Liara handing him Shepard’s orders via a datapad, the asari had included a document that had really confused him at first. It had taken Garrus a couple of reads to process that he was looking at, was a legal paper. It specified that the Normandy was not an Alliance vessel but privately owed; namely by Shepard and Joker equally... which didn't surprised Garrus in the least. However, the inclusion of his own name had been actually shocking. He was named official XO, which wasn't that hard to accept, but there was a clause in the document that stated if Shepard died, under any circumstance, then her half of the Normandy's ownership was transferred to Garrus. Which would make him captain... and spirits if he knew how to process that. So he chose not to.

Instead, he had taken to pacing the War Room. Waiting. Of course, he'd made the rounds that Shepard normally would, read over the reports and intel. that had come through since she'd left, checked on Palaven's status, and vid. called the Primarch to give his advice regard their troops deployment. But with all that done, his gizzards too in knots to eat, and his brain too occupied with worry to calibrate, Garrus had found himself in the War Room. Dividing his time between growling angrily at a holographic layout of Omega, and pacing anxiously. It had been six hours. Six hours since Shepard had left, and Garrus was already going out of his mind. The part of his mind that wasn't planning on strangling her... as long as she returned unscathed, was marvelling how Thane hadn't gone insane, with all those months he'd been stuck at the hospital. There and then Garrus realised how lucky he was that Shepard was his best friend, if she'd somehow ended up as his mate, he'd have probably died from a heart attack by now.
Thane kept a solemn watch, as Aria stood frozen, and his Siha knelt down where Nyreen had once stood. Nothing was left, just black scorch marks on the concrete. The Talon's leader had sacrificed herself to save the station, to rectify the monstrous mistake Cerberus had made. How they had ever thought to control reaper troops was beyond him, and yet, he wasn't at all surprised. The fact that they'd engineered the so called 'Adjutants', to be able to infect any life form in order to create replicas of themselves, was truly horrifying. Looking at the charred ground, Thane couldn't help but wonder how many of the dead reapers had once been Omega citizens, or how many more vile atrocities Cerberus would through at them. As it was, he had already seen enough horror in Shepard's eyes to last a life time.

And now, Thane knew she would be blaming herself for Nyreen's death. It didn't matter that they had only just made it through the blast doors, barely catching a glimpse of the turian behind her biotic forcefield, before there was a detonation inside. Presumably, the resistance leader had snagged a bomb belt from one of the dead Cerberus troops, before trapping the Adjutants with her. It was desperate, it was heroic, and exactly the type of thing his Siha would do. Which didn't bare thinking about, but would explain why Shepard seemed a little shell shocked over Nyreen's death. He knew it wasn't the suddenness of it, she was a marine after all, and a Spectre. Like him, his Siha had accepted death as an everyday part of life. But he wondered if Shepard had ever understood a person's last act, last thoughts, like Thane suspected she did for the Talon leader. His fingers twitched, longing to reach out and comfort his wife, but he knew it wasn't the time nor the place. They still had a mission to complete.

Quietly, Shepard began to mutter something under her breath. Her voice was too low for Thane to catch everything she said, but he caught some words, such as 'spirits' and 'home'. Though not certain, he imagined it was a prayer Garrus much have taught her. After she was done, Shepard rose from her crouch, and the movement seemed to jolt Aria out of her trance. The asari's biotics flared to life, and without warning, she raced towards Afterlife. Shepard sighed, before heading after her, and without hesitation, Thane followed.

“Do we have a plan, Siha?” he called.

Shepard shot him a look. “Stop Aria from getting herself killed.”
Slender hands firmly held each side of Shepard's face, as chapped lips pressed fiercely against her own, hard and unyielding. The scent of smoke and blood filled the stale air, whilst cheering could already be already be heard from outside Afterlife. When she was finally able to pull back, her gaze met surprisingly expressive lavender eyes. The asari seemed just as surprised at her actions as Shepard felt, since she was almost awkward, when she finally released her. Unable to help herself, Shepard snorted a laugh, and shook her head at the absurdity of the whole thing. Petrovski lay dead at their feet, killed by Aria's own hands, and Thane was stood not a fifty paces away. And yet, moments before, the queen of Omega had grabbed and kissed her, with her husband watching on. If the whole debacle on the station hadn't be crazy enough, this certainly iced the cake. Perhaps the asari had similar thoughts, because Shepard could hear her chuckling too. And when she caught Thane's eye, she could clear see his amused smile, before he melted into the shadows.

“I didn't think I'd enjoy having a partner,” Aria suddenly stated. “Thank you for not interfering. Killing that man was deeply satisfying.”

“I can appreciate how you feel,” Shepard admitted, quietly. “When I get my hands on Kai Leng...”

Unexpectedly, she felt a hand settle on her shoulder. Glancing to the side, she was met with surprisingly understanding eyes. It was obvious that Aria had no idea how to console anyone, or even simply how to be a friend, but it was equally obvious to Shepard that the asari was actually really trying.

“You'll get him,” Aria assured. “It may take some time to remove the general's stink from my throne, but don't worry, I'll honour our arrangement. Troops, ships, and a mountain of eezo. You've earned it.”

“The citizens of Omega have been through a lot, Aria. Try and remember that,” Shepard advised.

“They better remember who liberated them...” the asari paused, before sighing. “But I will.”

“I'll be going then.”

Aria nodded. “Bray will take you back. I have a station to whip into shape.”

Shepard tried not to smile. Nyreen's sacrifice wasn't far from her mind, and she was almost certain it wasn't far from Aria's either. Hopefully, the CEO would honour her lover's ideals and goals, and make things better for Omega's survivors. So, after a handshake that was a lot less awkward than their kiss, Shepard left Aria to her grand speech. Thane quickly materialised beside her, and she slipped off her gauntlet in order to slip her hand into his. He squeezed it reassuringly, just as Kasumi and Mordin appeared beside them. Bray joined them in the more conventional way, of simply jogging up to them.

“You got a galaxy to save, Shepard,” the batarian greeted. “Let's get you off this rock.”
Without thinking, Kolyat stormed in the captain's quarters, the moment EDI indicated her debrief with Garrus had finished. There was no sign of the turian, nor his father, but Shepard was fairly easy to spot. She was sat crossed legged in front of the fish tank, clad in just shorts and a tank top, with Jenkins the space hamster perched on her shoulder. She looked so surprisingly relaxed, that Kolyat felt momentarily guilty that he was about to disturb her, and despite the gnawing worry he felt, took a moment to snap a quick holo on his Omni-Tool. Drell might have eidetic memory, but his father wasn't there to see his wife at that moment, and Kolyat was sure he would appreciate it.

“You going to get over here, or just stand dithering in the doorway?”

He hadn't expected Shepard to call out to him, and nearly jumped at the sound of her voice. Shaking his head, Kolyat went to crouch on the floor beside her, stroking Jenkins' fluffy head as he knelt down. He followed Shepard's line of sight to the fish tank, and was surprised to see her watching him through the glass's reflection. She offered him a quirk of her lips, the type of smile she did in greeting, when she knew there was something on your mind. Kolyat didn't want to think how many times his step-mother had directed that smile at him, since he'd boarded the Normandy. He'd planned to be formal, when he brought this to her attention, treat it like the debriefs he'd seen Garrus and Vega. But seeing Shepard face to face, or reflection to reflection, Kolyat realised he couldn't. Sighing, he hung his head, and silently passed her the datapad he'd been holding in a vice-like grip. Several moments passed, as Shepard presumably read and re-read the document on screen. Even without eidetic memory, Kolyat could recite the message by heart; a broken note from Oriana. The latest correspondence his fiancée had sent him, and he was terrified that it would be the last.

Reached Horizon. Something wrong.

That was all he, Samantha and even EDI had managed to piece together from the scrambled message. And not only was it terrifying, it was frustrating. The note contained a lot more data, but it was so corrupted, there was no hope of unscrambling it. So even though Kolyat had brought it to Shepard's attention, he couldn't offer her any further insight, other than the fact that Sam had tracked that blasted Kai Leng to the same quadrant. He'd even tried to get in contact with Miranda, but to no avail, and though he wasn't overly fond at the human biotic, he was somewhat worried about his future sister-in-law as well. Beside him, Shepard suddenly sighed, sounding more weary than he had ever imagined she could. And once again, Kolyat was hit by a wave of guilt. He was about to apologise, until she took his hand in her much smaller once. She shifted her weight until her shoulder was pressed against his, and Jenkins quickly scurried across to Kolyat's.


There was a heavy pause, before the pilot solemnly answered: “Aye, aye, captain.”

Nervously, Kolyat risked glancing at his step-mother. “What's code red?”

“Top priority,” Shepard replied, quietly. “Only used when family's missing.”
“This is Oriana Lawson. Stay away from Sanctuary. It's not what it seems.”

Shepard and Thane exchanged a look, when Ori's voice came over the comm. link. It was unsettling similar to what the young Lawson had sent to Kolyat, and Shepard wondered if she'd managed to send something to Miranda as well, as it would explain why she hadn't been able to contact Miri. From what Steve had indicated, the message was recording, which didn't surprise Shepard. Oriana was a resourceful young woman, and it was just like her to set up a warning beacon for others.

“Please you must listen to me,” the recording continued. “They're using...”

Static cut off the rest of the message, or at least Shepard hoped it was static. The area directly outside the 'Sanctuary' entrance had seemingly suffered heavy damage, and though there was no sign of reapers or Cerberus, that didn't mean there wasn't a presence near by... especially since Traynor was certain Kai Leng had headed here. Hopefully, the comm. specialist was managing to keep Kolyat preoccupied, because even though he was good at following orders, the Krios men weren't exactly known for keeping a level head, where family was involved. On the other hand, Shepard hoped Samantha wasn't running herself ragged. Traynor had hid it well, but it was obvious to her that the other woman was concerned about what had happened on her home planet. Unexpectedly, Garrus' hand landed on Shepard's shoulders, rousing her from her thoughts. She glanced at her best friend, and raised an eyebrow in question.

“If Oriana is here, Miranda won't be far behind,” the turian rumbled.

“Indeed,” Thane agreed.

“It would be likely,” EDI's disembodied voice chimed in. “From what I am still able to access from the Cerberus database, it seems Henry Lawson contributed significantly to the rebuilding of Horizon.”

“You can still access their database?” Shepard asked.

“Do not worry captain, they are not able to infiltrate our network,” the AI assured. “Legion helped me set up several data mines whilst he was onboard. Nothing of significance has arose.”

“Until now,” Garrus interjected.

Shepard sighed. “Hell in a handbasket.”

“Would you prefer a storm in a teacup?” Steve called, from the cockpit.

Thane blinked slowly, twice. Whilst Garrus' mandibles outright flared open in confusion. Shepard shrugged, before a smile tried to pull at the corner of her mouth. If they weren't inbound on a mission that was even churning her stomach, she'd have probably taken the opportunity to torment them further. It was equal parts adorable and hilarious, to confuse them with something she just took for granted.

“Didn't translate?” she asked, innocently.

Garrus shook his head. “Humans are weird.”
Consolation (Thane PoV)

After fighting through reaper remnants and an extraordinary amount of husks, they finally found them in a fairly secure lab. Dozens of terminals crackled and hissed with static, others were overturned completely, though the odd one or two were damaged but still intact. Garrus set about trying to decode one such computer, whilst Shepard hunkered down by the sparking wires of another terminal. Thane stood guard, switching his SMG back out for his favoured Viper rifle, and positioning himself directly between his two teammates. His instincts may mean he'd protect his wife first and foremost, but that didn't mean he wouldn't try to protect his friend as well. Thankfully, nothing sprung out at them unexpectedly, though Garrus soon trilled in annoyance, abandoning his terminal somewhat angrily. Thane tilted his head in a silent question, but the turian merely gave an annoyed shake of his head, presumably there was nothing left to be salvaged. The captain suddenly cursed not quite under her breathe, and turning towards his wife, Thane saw the terminal she was working on blink to life.

“You got it, Shepard,” Garrus stated.

Miranda's voice soon filled the room: “Heading to the tower to disable the communication scrambler. I have to get word out. Some refugees are turned into husks. Some are indoctrinated and shipped off to the Illusive Man. Whoever's left is used in experiments. The data indicates that my father is trying to figure out how reaper indoctrination works.”

There was a moment's silence, as the three digested what they had just heard. Thane bowed his head, to offer up a prayer, his translator glitching as Garrus cursed vividly. Shepard's gauntleted hand punched the table beside the console, leaving a considerable indent. Thane could easily understand the sentiment, he could well remember feeling so overwhelmed with emotions, that you simply needed an outlet. He'd had a similar reaction before the Omega Four Relay after all.

“Tricking refugees with food and shelter, only to turn them into test subjects,” she growled. “And for what?!”

“It is indeed abhorrent, Siha,” Thane agreed.

“Miranda mentioned shipments,” Garrus interjected. “Could lead us to the Illusive Man.”

Shepard sighed, unhappily. “Could be... the bastard.” She shook her head, as if to clear it. “Come on. Miri said she was headed to the tower.”

Thane exchange a worried glance with Garrus. He could just make out the turian's concerned rumble, and he couldn't agree more. The situation was fraught enough, but it was so unlike Shepard to lose her composer during a mission. The dent she'd left in the metal table kept drawing his eye, and not for the first time, Thane was eternally grateful that he'd never come up against his wife as an enemy. Shepard always radiated the steel and compassion of a warrior angel, but in that very moment, with eyes narrowed in anger and jaw set rigid in determination, she was a sight to behold. However, Thane also saw the slight tremors the rippled through her battle-honed body, she was practically vibrating with agitation, which concerned him greatly. There was no doubt that Shepard was the most skilled warrior he had even known, but that didn't mean her emotions couldn't get the better of her... make her vulnerable. So hoping to diminish the chances of that happening, Thane sought to offer her the words of comfort and assurance he was sure she needed. Shepard was a marine, not a robot after all. Unable to hug her like he wanted, due to her bulky blood stained armour, he settled for resting his hands on his wife's shoulders, and looked directly into her fierce emerald eyes.
“We'll reach her in time, Siha,” Thane consoled. “I am sure of it.”
Cavalry (Miranda PoV)

Despite the dire situation, Miranda felt a sigh of relief escape her lips, the moment Shepard barrelled through the door. Even though her father still had Ori by the throat, with a gun pressed to her temple, there was something about seeing the captain's familiar red and black armour, that gave Miranda a sense of peace. Shepard had never let her down, unlike everyone else but her sister, and she was certain the other woman wasn't going to disappoint her now. Not to mention that Ori was practically the captain's daughter-in-law now, and she knew that Shepard would go to any lengths to protect her family. A small smile tugged at the corner of Miranda's mouth, as the captain levelled a SMG at her father... it was almost nostalgic, watching Shepard wield the same gun she'd carried throughout their mission against the collectors... but that could be the blood loss talking.

“Put the gun down,” Shepard commanded.


“Sorry she missed,” Garrus rumbled, aiming his assault rifle.

“Where's Kai Leng?” Shepard demanded.

“I don't know. Gone. He took my research and left us to die.”

Miranda blinked in surprise, as Thane suddenly materialised next to her, hidden from her father's view by the metal cabinets that littered the room. He held a finger to his lips, in a very human gesture, before linking their Omni-Tools together. Another sigh escaped her, as medi-gel flooded her system. It wouldn't heal all the damage Kai Leng had done to her, since Miranda was certain she had several cracked ribs, and at least a dozen lacerations that could possibly be bleeding internally. But the pain relief took care of the gun shot wound in her shoulder, courtesy of her father. She took the SMG Thane handed her, and offered a brief smile, as he once again faded into the shadows. The drell had always been a mystery, but Miranda was certain he was off to find a sniper's perch, especially since Garrus was at Shepard's side, toting his assault rifle. With more effort than she'd like to admit, Miranda managed to drag herself up to stand on shaky feet. She had no idea what the captain was planning, but one look at her friend's face, told her that it wouldn't end well for Henry Lawson. In that moment, that was reassurance enough.
Oriana was safe, being fussed over by Kolyat. Miranda was safe, recuperating under Karin's care. Henry Lawson was dead, killed when Miri threw him through a plate glass window back on Horizon. Garrus was pouring over the limited data they'd managed to retrieve from Sanctuary, trying to unpick any thread that could help them in the war, with EDI and Liara's help. Kai Leng had fled, but not before Miranda had planted a tracer on him, so Joker and Traynor were extrapolating a course that would take them right to the Illusive Man. Thane was helping Steve with weapons maintenance, along with Ashley and surprisingly Javik. Which left Shepard knocking Vega around the hanger, not that James hadn't landed his fair share of good punches. One such hit left a trickle of blood trickling from her nose, which she wiped away on the back of her sparing glove.

“You okay, Lola?”

Shepard used Vega's lapse in concentration, to connect a well timed kick to his ribs, which made him grunt in surprise and stagger sideways several paces. James shook his head, only partially in disbelief, before he outfit charged at her. The move was reminiscent of how Wrex liked to spar, so Shepard managed to easily jump out of the way, having had many opportunities to practise. James swung a leg out, hoping to knock her over, though she managed to flip and hand spring out of his considerable reach. They began to circle each other again.

“I'm fine, Jimmy,” she panted. “Just...”

“Wired,” he finished for her. “I get that.”

After a quick nod of agreement, Shepard rushed at him. Though instead of aiming a punch or kick to his solid muscles, she effortlessly slid between his legs, before catching him around the ankles, which left Vega crashing face first into the mat. Without hesitation, she straddled his prone form, and the knuckles of her right hand dug into the femoral nerve near his hip. A second later, James tapped the mat, signalling he conceded. Exhausted, Shepard flopped beside him, and willed her heartbeat to even out. There wasn't many people that could make her break a sweat whilst sparring, but Vega was certainly one of them. With a grunt of effort, she kicked off her training shoes and socks, and lay on the blessedly cool floor in her yoga shorts and tank top, staring up at the hanger ceiling. James remained face down, the pillowed his head on his forearms.

“Dios!” he huffed, after finally regaining his breath.

For some reason, that made Shepard chuckle, though her chuckle soon became uncontrollable laughter. Thankfully, James soon joined in, and the pair were left gasping for breath, with tears streaming down their cheeks, without explanation. Shepard imagined they must look a sight, but she didn't care. She might feel a little off kilter, but also lighter than she had in a long time, the tension draining out of her. There was a good chance her pent up emotions had caused the laughing fit... but at least it wasn't crying, which always left her with a pounding headache. Shepard sighed, feeling almost contented, before a heavy weight settled across her ribs. Huffing out another chuckle, she manoeuvred Vega's meaty arm until it rest more comfortably across her abdomen, and threw her own arm across his bare back. They lay like that, in their weird half hug, until their heart rates finally evened out.

“Thanks James, I needed that,” Shepard confided, quietly.

Vega turned his head to grin at her. “Anytime, Lola.”
Flour settled like a fine layer of snow, over the kitchen's black counters. White hand prints marred the usual pristine navy of his fatigues, and James was almost certain he'd gotten powdered sugar in his hair. Still it didn't matter, not even the swipe of bright pink icing that coated his cheek could deter his proud grin, when he stepped back and surveyed his handiwork. Dozens upon dozens of perfect cupcakes lined every spare a work top, frosted to perfection with a swirl of vivid pink icing. His Abuela would be proud. With everything that had been going on of late, he doubted anyone would remember it was Valentine's today, but he'd be damned if he missed his Abuela's favourite holiday. James could remember every year of his childhood, his Uncle Teo would take him to her house, that would be festooned with bright red and pink flowers, with a myriad of baked goods would be waiting for anyone who visited. It was one of James' fondest memories, and he wanted to share a little piece of it with his friends.

At that very moment, Thane rounded the corner of the mess hall, before blinking twice. Shepard had told James what to look out for, and he was certain the assassin was surprised... probably confused to, since he wasn't sure the drell had any similar holidays. Regardless, he gave his team mate a beaming smile, before sweeping up a large bouquet of flowers, that had been sitting in a sink full of water. James wasn't sure how EDI had managed it, but he was thankful the AI had managed to procure two dozen red roses, and keep them beautifully preserved since the last time they'd been on the citadel... cryogenics, with the help of Mordin, he'd have bet.

For his part, Thane blinked again, at being unexpectedly presented the large bouquet.

“For Lola,” he explained, still grinning. “From you, of course. I'm not suicidal enough to make a move on your lady, amigo.”

“My thanks,” the drell replied, actually sounding unsure.

James chuckled. “It's Valentine's day... the day of love... romance. I'm not exactly sure how Lola feels about roses, kinda hard to slip that question casually into a conversation, but they are traditional.”

“Ms Goto assured me, Shepard does like roses,” EDI chimed in, over the comm. unit.

“Ah,” Thane smiled, at last. “Then you certainly had my gratitude. I was not aware of this... festivity.”

“You can deliver this to Lola, as payment,” James declared. “And this is from me.”

Without ceremony, he passed one of the delicately iced cupcakes to the drell. It was made from his Abuela's recipe after all, so he wasn't going to let anyone else take credit for his hard work. Not to mention that he'd made Lola's a little extra special, making it slightly bigger than the rest, and adding some sprinkles he'd been surprised to find amongst his ingredients order. There were still enough cupcakes for all of the ground crew, human or otherwise, and the several support staff that James knew by name. He'd even managed to persuade Estevan to procure some fruit, that their dextro teammates could enough instead. But still, he'd put extra work into Lola's gift, and he wanted her to know it came from him. The captain's friendship meant more to him than he could explain, so the little cake was his best method to show it.

Thane smiled at him knowingly. “I will make sure that Siha knows.”
Thane re-entered their cabin later in the evening, to find Shepard gazing at the roses he had left earlier. In that moment, his fiery Siha looked content, and Thane vowed to find a way to repay James for his forethought and kindness. Of course, he remember Shepard mentioning Valentine's Day in passing, during one of the sparse emails she'd managed to send during her stint on earth. However, she'd never explained that it meant anything to her. But watching her now, Thane silently promised to shower her with love and appropriate tokens, every single Valentine's they shared from now on... and any other human holiday Shepard had failed to mention.

“They're beautiful.”

Shepard's quiet whisper roused Thane from his thoughts, and he smiled indulgently at his wife. He felt honoured to see the delicate care that she traced a vivid red petal with, a shade that almost perfectly matched her painted lips. Without a thought, he crossed the distance between them, and wrapped his arms tightly around her waist from behind. Shepard settled back into him and brought her hands to rest lightly on his forearms, before sighing.

“Joker's set a course for Cronos Station,” she stated. “I've just confirmed with Miri, it's the site of Cerberus' headquarters.”

“You already have a squad in mind?” Thane asked.

She nodded. “EDI and Vega. Legion is rendezvousing with his there.”

Thane swallowed the panic that always gripped him, whenever his wife ventured on missions with out him. Normally she'd take Garrus for back up, but without the turian going, he was doubly worried. Shepard must have caught the concern on his face, via the reflection in the glass of her model display, because she quickly squeezed his arms.

“I need Garrus manning the bridge. The crew need a leader, in case this is a trap,” Shepard explained. “Javik, Ashley and Kal will be readied in the second shuttle, in case we need extraction.”

“And what of me, Siha?” Thane queried, quietly.

Shepard met his eyes in the reflection. “I need to know you're safe, and as far away from the bastard as possible.” She took a steadying breathe. “I'm sorry, I know I'm doing you a disservice, but I can't...”

Her words trailed off, and Thane could feel his Siha's whole body shudder with the effort to hold in tears. Silently, he tightened his hold on her, and buried his face in his wife's unruly hair. Thane hated not going with her, but he could understand Shepard's reasoning. As much as he wanted to be at her side, to protect her, he could see that his presence could distract her, and the last thing Thane wanted, was to put his wife in danger. If him remaining on the Normandy could bring her peace of mind, then he would grant her that... at least this time. Thane fully planned on calmly addressing the issue later, once Shepard had returned from her mission. But for now...

“Then I will help Kolyat and Samantha monitor the comms. until your return,” he vowed.

A single tear slid down Shepard's porcelain cheek. “Thank you.”
Revenge (Shepard PoV)

It had started out as a fairly good day, Hackett's confirmation that the Crucible was ready bar the Catalyst, had been a relief to hear. Joker had pulled another flying feat to get the Normandy as close to Cronos station as possible, but the kodiak's landing had been less than stellar, despite Steve's best attempts to out manoeuvre the shots being fired at them... still, they were all in one pieces. James had been a forced to be reckoned with, proving how much he earned his N7 commendation, even taking out an Atlas by himself. EDI's extensive knowledge of Cerberus, as well as her hacking abilities had proved invaluable during their assault on the station... but finding out she had been clinically brain dead, that had been overwhelming. Hearing how they'd used the likes of Donnelly, Karin, and Joker to get her on board left a bad taste in Shepard's mouth. James, spirits bless him, had laid a heavy hand on her armoured shoulder throughout the holotapes, muttering intermittent insults aimed at Cerberus the whole time. He well and truly earned 'younger brother' status then. However, it wasn't just Shepard that was forced to face her past. EDI's own revelations weren't any less harrowing for her, especially when the AI had asked if she was angry, for not revealing she had been the rogue VI from Luna. And Shepard could honestly say she wasn't, and that was before discovering EDI had defended the Normandy from Cerberus' cyber attacks, after she'd severed ties. Shepard was thankful, but what she didn't appreciate, was coming face to... face, with what was left of the reaper embryo. It was disturbing, to say the least, couldn't that thing just stay completely dead? James had cursed up another storm, which oddly helped Shepard feel a little more at easy, or at best, like she wasn't about the lose her breakfast. Talking to the Illusive Man's hologram nearly changed that, though at least her suit cam had captured the conversation. Perhaps it would finally put Ashley's doubts to rest. Seeing Vigil again had been a relief, even if the prothean VI's revelations had been quite shocking, even for this war.

But all that paled in comparison, when Kai Leng reared his ugly head. Shepard may have been trained as a marine, may have been heralded as the galaxy's greatest hope, before first and foremost, she was a woman... she was a wife. To her, all the knowledge they'd gained storming Cronos station was paltry, when compared to avenging Thane. She knew part of her would feel guilty for it later, but Shepard had never felt more satisfied, when she wiped around to face her already beaten enemy. Shattering his outdated katana with her gauntlet, a taking a single heart beat to appreciate the tightening in Kai Leng's jaw, as his sword broke into pieces. She was high on fury, and driven by the need for revenge, when she flicked out her Omni-blade. Perhaps she should have been worried, at the undeniable urge to grin, as she grabbed hold of her husband's wound-be assassin's collar. Before thrusting her blade indiscriminately through the kevlar armour, vaguely thinking she really needed a way to thank Zaeed for the upgrade, even as she stabbed Kai Leng again and again. Twisted the blade slightly with each trust, just as her husband had taught her.

“That was for Thane, you son of a bitch!”

The growl in her voice sounded foreign even to her, but Shepard still kicked the corpse hard, just for good measure. To her surprise, the sound of rapid fire from an assault rifle killed the following silence, as James emptied a clip into Kai Leng's unmoving body. She caught his eye the moment he lowered his gun, and offered him a tight lipped smile. He nodded in response.

“I got you, Lola.”
Everyone in the cockpit jerked in surprise, more or less at the same time, before all but his eyes slowly turned to look at Thane. Instead, Jeff glanced up to view the drell's reflection in the plate glass of the windscreen, and had to bite back laughter, at the usually stoic assassin, looking just as shocked as everyone else was. Garrus made a strange noise, which Jeff supposed was the turian equivalent of clearing your throat, and over the comm. link to the second shuttle, they could hear Ashley muttering: “Damn!”. In the co-pilot's chair, Tali shifted somewhat uncomfortably, muttering: 'Keelah' not quite under her breath. The only other person beside Jeff that didn't seem at all surprised by Shepard's actions, was Liara. The asari caught his eye through the window's reflection, and gave a tight lipped smile, he nodded in response. As out of character as the display they'd just witnessed was, neither was surprised at the anger and violence their friend had dealt to Kai Leng. Jeff had seen the rampage Shepard had gone on after Garrus had gotten hurt on Omega, he guessed Liara was thinking about her own actions against the former Shadow Broker. If anyone was to understand what Shepard was going through at that moment, Jeff supposed it was her. And if he had anything to do with it, after Shep had whatever sort of reunion she needed with her husband, she was going to spend some quality time with her asari sister. He knew she'd need it, pressing 'end of the galaxy as we know it' shit could wait just a little while longer.

“That was... unexpected.”

Thane's quiet and ever so slightly hesitant words broke the tense silence that had fallen over the cockpit. Jeff could hear someone shuffling uneasily behind him, and presumed it was either Samantha or Kolyat. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Garrus rub the back of his neck, like he'd taken to doing whenever he was unsure what to say. Jeff couldn't help but snort then. Were they all really that surprised that Shepard had gone full fire and brimstone, avenging angel of death, on Kai Leng's ass... really? She was bad enough avenging strangers she had never met if they'd been wronged, but mess with a member of her family, and boy... he'd just signed your own death warrant. But it seemed, they really were surprised, because everyone bar Liara turned to look at Jeff.

“What?” he groused. “Don't tell me you're all actually surprised at that.”

“It's really not at all surprising,” Liara added, before anyone could argue. “Shepard is not know for letting wrongs go unpunished.”

“Indeed,” EDI's voice chimed unexpectedly over the comm. system. “And considering this involved a family member being hurt, there was a ninety nine point nine percent chance that Shepard would avenge what was done to Thane.”

“And the point one percent?” Samantha asked, almost hesitantly.

“Evolves from the possibility that Shepard could have died before being able to do so,” EDI replied, evenly.

A new silence descended on the cockpit, and Jeff presumed everyone was letting that piece of information sink in. Though he certainly didn't need to, he knew exactly what brand of crazy drove his adoptive sister. He also doubted Thane really needed to do so, since the drell knew Shepard almost as well as he did, so he figured the guy was basking in the whole 'wow, she really loves me' shit, that Jeff knew he'd be doing, if EDI ever found the need to mercilessly kill someone as revenge for hurting him... which was kinda hot to think about, in some weird twisted messed up way.
Rallying Words (Thane PoV)

Thane stood in the shadows as Admiral Hackett strode aboard the Normandy, heading directly to where Shepard stood by the galaxy map. He watched as every Alliance personnel saluted as the decorated leader passed, all accept Joker, who tipped his hat instead. Even Garrus saluted the admiral, but not Shepard. Instead the two clasped hands and forearms in a firm yet friendly handshake. Thane watched as Hackett's eyes quickly roamed over Shepard's face, and he knew what the other man was searching for, any signs of the toll the war was taking on humanity's best and brightest. He should know, he did it every night when they went to bed. There was obviously a silent conversation going on between the two, because eventually the admiral nodded, a grim smile pulling at his scared lips.

“Let's make sure the fleets are ready,” he declared.

Shepard's gaze flicked towards Samantha and Kolyat, his son practically scurried to his console, whilst the young specialist was remarkably calm as she grabbed a nearby datapad and furiously tapped commands into it.

“All fleets reporting in, Sir. Ma'am,” she replied.

Together, Shepard and Hackett walked up the platform that looked over the swirling galaxy map, and intrigued, Thane stepped out of the shadows. He soon found himself beside Garrus, with Tali and Liara quickly joining them. There was a heavy pause, where the two war heroes shared a look, before Joker announced the comm. link was open to the entire fleet. A fleet that Thane was reminded not only consisted of the human alliance, but comprised of every race in the galaxy. Turian, asari, salarians, quarian, the joint ships of the hanar and the drell. Krogan, geth, elcor, modified volus merchant vessels, even the batarians and vorcha. The most surprising was Joker's sudden information that Rachni ships and mysterious Leviathans had also joined the assembly. At that moment, Javik arrived and stood solemnly beside Thane. He eyed Shepard with obvious consideration, before barely turning his head towards him.

“Your... wife, is quite remarkable,” the prothean stated, quietly.

Thane inclined his head in silent acknowledgement, his attention quickly turning back to the duo in front of them.

“Never before have so many come together,” Hackett began. “From all quarters of the galaxy. But never before have we faced an enemy such as this.”

“The reapers will show us no mercy,” Shepard continued. “We must give them no quarter. They have terrorised our populations, but we must stand fast in the face of that terror.”

“They will advance until our last city falls,” the admiral stated. “But we will not fall. We will prevail. Each of us will be defined by our actions in the coming battle.”

“Stand fast. Stand strong. Stand together,” the captain added, resolutely.

There was a quiet, modulated chuckle from behind the small group of friends that had gathered to watch the speech, and Thane glanced over his shoulder to find Kal'Reegar stood at attention, watching the pair.

“The apple didn't fall from the tree,” he observed. “That's the human saying, isn't it?”
Thane smiled slightly, just as Garrus left to join Shepard and the admiral, when the captain beckoned him over. He was filled with a mix of pride and worry for his wife, but was saved from needing to find his voice, when James' rich laughter rolled over them.

“Sí, amigo,” he grinned. “You should see Anderson though, could convince a penguin to fly that man.”

“That's not even a saying,” Joker called from the cockpit.

Trying not to give away his growing anxiety, Thane simply watched the retreating figure of his wipe, his posture growing more rigid and his calmness becoming more forced, with every step she took towards the war room. By the time the trio had disappeared from sight, Thane longed to escape to the quiet confines of their cabin. He needed to centre himself, to compartmentalise the fear and concern, or he wouldn't be able to support his Siha as she deserved. However, before he could slip away into the elevator, a hand unexpectedly landed on his shoulder. Glancing behind, Thane came face to face with Liara looking older than he had ever seen.

“ Shepard... she knows what she's done. She'll get us through this,” she smiled, weakly.

Thane couldn't help but wonder at what cost. He couldn't lose another Siha, he refused to. At that moment, Javik walked passed them, giving him a pointed look.

“If anyone can survive what the reapers bring, it is the captain,” he stated, solemnly.

Blinking in surprise, Thane inclined his head for a second time in silent thanks, trying not to smile at the prothean's surprisingly reassuring words.
Earth (Shepard PoV)

When Joker stood to salute her, after expertly manœuvring them through the reaper minefield surrounding Earth, Shepard nearly cried. He never saluted, anyone. Of course, she'd saluted the bastard right back, blinking back tears, before pulling him into a hug. They'd not long discovered Hilary had died, and she'd whispered her promise to be back before he knew it. There was no way Shepard was planning to leave her de-facto brother alone in the universe. There was a lot of people depending on her, but Joker was one of the most important ones. Really, she'd thought that would be the last emotional display for her day, after pressing her forehead to Garrus' and stealing a quick kiss from Thane as they boarded the Kodiak with Steve... they had a war to win after all, and she had to be The Captain, and not just Shepard. But that plan went out the window, as soon as she heard Anderson's voice behind her. She didn't care that they were in a second kodiak, surrounded by unfamiliar soldiers, her Dad was standing right there goddamn it! Without hesitation, Shepard threw her arms around his neck, their armour clanging loudly together.

“I knew you wouldn't let me down, Shepard,” he greeted.

“It's good to see you,” she replied, unable to help her grin.

“And you're a sight for sore eyes,” Anderson agreed.

She took a moment to give him a once over, smirking at the N7 logo barely visible through the dirt and scratches on his chest piece. He looked older than his forty nine years, heavy bags around his still warm eyes, and a new scar snaking his jawline. Still, Shepard's heart felt a little lighter seeing him in one piece, and she finally stepped back to let him shake hands with Thane and Garrus.

“How we looking?” she asked.

“Now that the heavy defences are dealt with, Hammer can land. What's left of the resistance is holding a Forward Operating Base,” he explained. “But the reapers are countering already. Once we regroup, it's going to be up to Hammer Squad to take up the fight.”

“The situation was bad on Palaven and Menae, but it must have be brutal here, cut off from the rest of the Alliance,” Garrus mused.

“It's been touch and go from day one,” Anderson confirmed. “But once we figured out the reapers were focusing on the major cities, it became easier to avoid direct contact.”

“Until London,” Shepard sighed. She knew how important the city was to him, it must have been an especially hard blow.

“Yeah. We held back as long as we could, sending in recon teams. Lost a lot of good people planning this attack. Knowing you'd bring us help... we held on.”

“You have managed admirably,” Thane stated, solemnly.

“Without you and your resistance, we'd be dead in the water,” Shepard agreed.

There was a snort from one of Anderson's marines, a man named Coats. “The admiral is being modest. He's the reason any of us are still alive.”

Anderson shook his head. “Let's not start handing out medals just yet. This fight is just getting started. And Hammer better be ready for it.”
Shepard nodded. “They didn't start out together, but they're ready to stand side by side and win this war.”

Garrus flicked his mandible in a turian smirk, and Thane took a controlled breath that indicated he was smothering a chuckle. It had been a hell of a ride, to get the allied forces together. At the start of it, Shepard never would have believed the alliances she'd forced. Vorcha and batarian troopers, standing shoulder to shoulder with humans and asari. Krogan working with turian and salarian forces. The drell giving ground presence for themselves and the hanar, whose ships had combined with elcor and volus vessels, to bolster the aerial assault. Even the military portion of the quarian fleet had joined the effort.

“Good. That's what it's gonna take,” Anderson stated, knowingly.

“We'll get it done, Dad.”

“The whole galaxy united... too bad it took the reapers to bring us together,” he mused.

“Shepard's the one that brought them together,” Garrus interrupted.

She spared a quick smile for her best friend, and out the corner of her eye, caught Thane regarding her proudly. Anderson gave a small chuckle, clapping a hand on her shoulder.”

“Exactly. I know you didn't like leaving, Shepard, but nobody could've accomplished what you've done.”

Thane nodded in agreement. “A true Siha.”
Garrus watched Shepard say her... well, goodbyes... to the crew. Surprisingly, the one she shared with Wrex had affected him the most. During their SR1 days, he'd always been curious about the bond the pair had developed, but after everything had happened, after everything Shepard had done for the krogan, after Wrex had proudly proclaimed her sister and actually inducted her into clan Urdnot... Garrus thought he understood. So when she'd finally found him, he pressed his forehead to hers, not caring who was around to see. Soul mates weren't a notion only humans had, turian culture had them too, though the idea wasn't reserved to romantic partners. They could be siblings, friends, brothers or sisters in arms... and Garrus had long since accepted that the crazy human in front on him, was his. It took all his willpower not to keen, when she pressed her forehead harder against his. If his heart was breaking this much, he couldn't imagine what Thane was going through. They were all warriors, they knew the score, knew the cost, knew the chances were slim.

“Shepard,” he breathed. “So I guess... this is...”

“Just like old times,” she whispered, her voice wavering.

He managed to force a chuckle for her. “Might be the last chance we get to say that.”

“You think we're going to lose?” Shepard asked, barely pulling away from him.

Garrus found her gauntlet clad hands and squeezed. “No. I think we're about to kick the reapers back into whatever black hole they crawled out of. Then, we're going to retire somewhere warm and tropical, and live off the royalties from the vids. Maybe even find out if a turian can be a good uncle to a human-drell hybrid.”

Shepard chuckled, albeit a little watery. “I'm game. Though I think adoption is a better idea.”

His mandible flicked out in a smirk. “I suppose there will be a lot of little krogan around soon. Sure Wrex would give you one of his, and Grunt would love a baby brother or sister.”

“We just have to beat the reapers first,” she sighed.

Completely non-plused by who could be watching, Garrus pulled Shepard into as tight a hug as their armours would allow. He nuzzled the top of her head, careful that his mandibles didn't tangle in her still strange hair, and made the comforting rumble that she always called a purr. It caused Shepard to chuckle slightly, even though he noticed her wiping tears from the corner of her eye... a sight that he no longer thought as weird, but still found just as distressing.

“James told me there's an old saying... here on Earth,” he began. “Be in heaven half a hour, before the devil knows your dead. Not sure if the turian heaven is the same yours, but...” He leant down to press their foreheads together again. “If this thing goes sideways, and we both end up there, meet me at the bar. I'm buying.”

“Shepard and Vakarian storming heaven, guess there's worse ways this can end.”

“But maybe some other day?” Garrus suggested. “And Shepard... forgive the insubordination, but your best friend has an order for you. Come back alive. It would be an awfully empty galaxy without you.”

To his surprise, Shepard leant up to kiss his scared mandible. “No Shepard without Vakarian, right? We'll make it, we always do.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “But if I'm up there in that bar and...
“Your not, I'll be looking down watching your six for a change. You'll never be alone.”

“No Vakarian without Shepard either,” he replied, his voice rough with emotion. “And we'll make the reapers wish they'd never been born.”
Silently, Thane approached Shepard, as she stood regarding the desolate waste that had once been a thriving city. From the shadows, he had watched her talk with each of her crew, either by QEC or in person. She'd grinned, gave rousing or comforting words, but Thane knew his Siha... she was saying goodbye. He doubted many other's saw it, except Wrex and of course Garrus. If Jeff was not so focused on believing he wouldn't lose Shepard again, perhaps he would have seen it to. The hug Anderson have given her, just before Thane stepped out of the shadows, seemed to indicate Shepard's adoptive father was also saying his farewell. He had nodded respectfully as he passed the human, slightly surprised when a warm hand landed on his shoulder, and Anderson regarding him warmly. Thane had bowed his head, no words needing to be exchanged, before he turned back towards his Siha. In the wan moonlight, tear tracks glistened on her cheeks, and not wanting to intrude on her thoughts, he simply settled for standing beside her. He hadn't expected her to unclasp her gauntlet, and deftly slip her hand into his. Shepard's fingers effortlessly slid to accommodate his fused digits, and as it had many times before, the gesture made Thane smile. With a gentle tug, he pulled his Siha into arms, holding Shepard as tightly as her armour would permit. Her breath shuddered, and Thane knew she was fighting back tears. He swallowed thickly, torn between being amazed that this wonderful warrior angel would let him see her most fragile moments, and angry that the fate of the galaxy had been forced onto her shoulders. Tears slid down his own cheeks, and he was unashamed to let Shepard see them, as he tilted her face up to meet his gaze. Gently he traced the contours of her face, committing everything to memory, as he had done a thousand times. Smiling to himself, Thane let his fingers wander back over the bridge of her nose, along her cheekbone and down to her jaw. Shepard quirked an eyebrow at him, in silent question.

“I was half expecting to see Vakarian's markings painted on,” he smiled. “Wrex has already officially adopted you into his clan, I'm surprised Garrus hasn't yet.”

Shepard huffed out a quiet laugh. “I'll make a complaint,” she agreed. “After all, even the quarian's recognise me as Shepard vas Normandy.”

“And you are a beloved member of the Krios family,” Thane added, indulgently.

“I wouldn't have it any other way,” Shepard stated, lovingly.

Unable to help himself, Thane pressed his lips to her red painted ones. He breathed in deeply, inhaling the very faint floral fragrance of her perfume, that was barely detectable under the clawing smell of smoke, dust and ozone. His tongue gently brushed the seam of her lips, seeking permission, before starting a languid dance with Shepard's. Realistically, now was not the time for taking things slow or indulging, but Thane selfishly wanted to savour one last kiss... just in case. She surprisingly tasted of cheap alcohol, probably rum courtesy of James, since he knew the marine had started carrying a hip flask with him. But all too soon, their kiss came to an end. Tears stained both their cheeks, and Shepard gave a shuddering breath, before rest her head on his shoulder.

“I'm scared, Thane,” she admitted, in a whisper.

“As am, Siha,” he murmured back. “But know, if the worst comes to pass, I will await you across the sea.” Thane paused, to tilt her face up to look at him. “Then we can find that bar and wait for Garrus.”

Shepard's startled laugh was music dancing into the blazing night.
The Final Farewell (Shepard PoV)

Shit, shit, SHIT, SHIT!

The reaper beam hit a nearby mako, jack knifing the heavily armoured jeep, and tossing it in the air as if it was a child's toy. Shepard's heart beat frantically, as decades of training had her dropping to the ground and sliding along the rubble. Through the cloud of dust, she could just make out the mako's chassey, as it passed barely inches above her face, before crashing loudly behind her. In an instant, Shepard's heart was in her mouth, and she scrambled to retrace her steps. Thane and Garrus had only been a few steps behind her during the entire run. Reflexes once again saved her, as she instantly ducked and roll, when the vehicle suddenly exploded. There hadn't even been time to process what she was seeing, before she reacted, and now riding on adrenalin, Shepard vaulted over the smouldering wreck, before rushing the Thane's side. Her husband coughed, his new lungs obviously not appreciating the acrid smoke, and his right arm hung loosely at his side... dislocated at the very least. He took a heartbeat to squeeze her hand with his good one, before the pair of them ran around to the other side of the charred mako. Shepard let out an involuntary growl. Garrus was pinned beneath the wreckage, obviously alive, since he was trying in vain to push the warped metal off his trapped leg. Before she could formulate a plan, a bellow rang out behind her, and glancing over her shoulder, and Shepard momentarily smirking. Wrex and Grunt were racing across the battlefield, only skidding to a halt once they were right beside them. The krogan's shouldered the mako without a word, and thanks to the inches of wiggle room, Shepard and Thane managed to pull Garrus free. Blinking, she quickly looked away from the obvious blue blood that was seeping out of a large gash on the turian's leg, before throwing his arm over his shoulder. Thane supported his other side, and with Wrex and Grunt providing cover fire, the quintet managed to hobble for cover, hunkering down behind some large rubble.

“Normandy, do you copy?” Shepard yelled into her comm. link. “I need evac. Right now!”

Static crackled in her ear piece, Joker's voice barely audible. “We're taking heavy losses up here, Captain.”

“It's family,” she grit out through clenched teeth.

“Shit! Okay, okay.” The distant sound of Joker barking orders at the crew could be heard, before he came back on the link. “We're on our way, Shep. EDI's got a lock on your position.”

The wait for the Normandy was agonizing. Minutes that felt like hours, spent trying to apply pressure to Garrus wound, trying not to look at the way his spur hung from his leg. Interspersed with helping Thane shore up the barrier, that Samara had helpfully taught him how to create. Though when the ship finally came into view, Shepard found it hard to swallow. The scene was so eerily familiar to how Joker had pulled her and Anderson's asses out of the fire, when the reapers first attacked Earth. Just as the boarding ramp touched the scorched earth, Shepard felt a heavy hand rest on her shoulder. Glancing up, she met Wrex's blood red eyes. The krogan gave her a meaningful look, before barely banging his forehead into hers. Grunt did the same, grinning wickedly, as the two took off towards the help the allied forces on the far side of the battlefield. Swallowing passed the lump in her throat was hard, though Shepard pushed the feeling aside, as she hefted Garrus back onto his unsteady feet. Liara and Ashley, who were both covered in blood, ran down the ramp to meet them. The asari took the heavy turian off the hands, bolstering him with her biotics. Ashley took one look at Thane's arm, before she was yelling into the comm. link for Chakwas to prepare medical for two patients. Behind them, the battle still raged on, the screeches of the reapers and the sound of gunfire filled the air. Shepard took a deep breath, steeling herself, until she took a step back off the ramp.
“Joker, you've got to get out of here,” she called into the link.

Before the pilot could reply, Garrus growled in anger. “You've got to be kidding me.”

“Don't argue, Vakarian,” Shepard snapped back.

“Siha...” Thane tried to interject, sounding broken.

She shook her head, forcing herself to meet her husband's eyes, and could see he was holding back tears. In that moment, Shepard knew Thane understood what she was about to do. Yet he stood still, strong, waiting for her order. If it was possible, she felt a little more in love with him. Their situation was heartbreaking, soul destroying, and Shepard knew he was doing his best not to make it harder for her.

“We're in this 'til the end,” Garrus continued to argue.

“No Shepard without Vakarian,” she agreed, turning to her best friend and smiling shakily. “No matter what happens here today... no Shepard without Vakarian.”

Obviously struggling to walk, the turian hobbled towards her, one large talon hand wrapping around the back of her neck, as he pressed his forehead against hers. Shepard could feel his stuttering breath across her face, and heard the keen he was undoubtedly trying to suppress. Her heart broke a little, knowing it was the closest a turian ever came to crying. Closing her eyes, she pushed her forehead against his a little harder.

“There's no Vakarian without Shepard either,” Garrus muttered. “You need to remember that.”

On impulse, she rose to her toes and pressed a feather light kiss to his scared mandible. “I love you too, big guy.”

His taloned hands gently gripped each side of her face. “You have an order,” he told her, sternly, before stepping away.

Thane didn't waste a moment enveloping her in as tight a hug as her armour, and his injured arm, allowed. He stayed silent, his breathing even, controlled. Though Shepard could feel his tears, as his cheek pressed against hers, his tears mingling with her own that had steadily begun to fall. She had never expected heartbreak to be a physical pain in her chest, but that's how it felt. Her breathing shuddered as she buried her face in his neck, inhaling the comforting scent of leather. She felt guilty, selfish, for indulging in this final moment when hundred of thousands of people were dying. When billions, trillions of lives depended on her. But Shepard needed this one stolen moment. She needed to hold Thane one last time, cement one final image of her husband in her mind, needed to say goodbye.

“Look after our boys,” she whispered.

Thane nodded, his grip on her tightening, before he captured her lips in a final kiss. Shepard's hand slipped to the nape of his neck, and she turned his softness into something fierce. A hard press of lips, of breaths threatening to turn into sobs. A kiss that spoke of regret and sorrow, a kiss that tasted of tears. Shepard all but wrenched herself away from him, knowing if she didn't now, she'd never let go.

“I love you,” she choked out.

“You are my heart, and I will always love you, Siha,” Thane replied, brokenly, stroking her cheek. “I'll see you again, in this life or...”
“Across the sea,” Shepard finished, squeezing his good hand. “I'll be waiting for you.”

With that, she turned and ran.
Together (James PoV)

“Lola, usted hembra loca!” James yelled after Shepard.

Without wasting another moment, he grabbed a new helmet, and raced after his captain. He didn't even waste a moment to glance at Deadshot or Scars, James could only imagine how they were feeling, being taken out of the action due to injury. And whilst Chakwas had only just finished patching up the large gash across his forehead, thanks to his faceplate losing the fight against a piece of falling debris, he had been given the all clear to return to combat. Also, Lola hadn't told him he couldn't run after her, so James didn't care if his actions were technically insubordination. Shepard might be his captain, but she was also his friend, and he'd be damned if he let her kill herself purely because she wanted to save everyone else. So he raced behind familiar black and red armour, listening to the screech of reapers, and Anderson barking orders to the other units in his ear. Until the terrible moment that a reaper turned it's beam towards their stretch of barren earth, the lazer carving up rock and flesh indiscriminately. Without thinking, James rushed forward, capturing a back-pedalling Shepard around the waist, and throwing them both out of the direct path of the beam. The captain landed on her back beneath him, and James barely had the presence of mind to try to keep his greater weight braced on his knees and forearms. There was another terrible screech, and Shepard's hand shot up and grabbed him around the back of the neck. His helmet clanked against hers, and she pulled his head down in attempt to shield it from the next blast. James thought he saw a shimmer of blue biotics, as the captain tried to throw up a barrier, but he could already feel the heat against his armoured back, before the world went white.

James had no idea how long he had been unconscious, and only became aware of his surrounds when he felt a shove against his shoulder, before being rolled to the side. His head was pounding, his ears ringing, and his eyes definitely didn't want to open. He felt confused and disoriented, but eventually his hearing came mostly back, and he could hear one of the majors... Coats perhaps, talking through the static. With difficulty, James forced his eyes open, and the sight that greeted him made his breathing hitch. Shepard was sat up, though swaying badly. The left armour of her scorched armour clanged to the floor, revealing burnt flesh beneath. She then tried to remove her helmet, the face plate blackened and cracked, though with only one working arm, she failed miserably. Ignoring his own protesting body, James forced himself to his knees, gently swatting Shepard's hands away to release the helmet's lock. He tried not to gasp when her battered face was revealed. Large lacerations that bleed profusely, along with already darkening bruises and a swollen right eye.

“Dios, Lola!” he muttered, as he watched her reset her own dislocated shoulder.

He winced as he reached to remove his own helmet, the metal of his back plate grinding disturbingly together, and worryingly digging into his shoulder blade as he moved. Just looking at Lola, James knew his own armour wound be ruined, since he'd been leaning over her as the beam hit. Their state of the art suits might be in tatters, but they'd saved their lives that was for sure. Unfortunately, the still hadn't made it to their target location. When he chanced giving the area move than a cursory glance, dead bodies and parts were strewn around as if a child had had a tantrum in a toy box. That's when the last of the ringing in his ears was replaced by the telltale wail of a husk. Instinct had him scrambling for his assault rifle, despite the way his back protested, and shot the three shambling creatures as Shepard sent out a shockwave, dispatching an encroaching marauder. Their didn't seem to be any more enemies, and what they thought was a teleportation beam hummed not too far in front of them.
“Got any medigel?” Lola gasped, as she collapsed back to her knees.

James nodded, about to link up their omni-tools, before she shook her head.

“Dispense what you can, removing that back plate is going to hurt,” she grit out, as she began the release the locks on her grieves. “Armour this damaged is only going to slow us down. We need to get to the beam.”

Nodding, James followed Shepard's commands. She might be loca for still trying to complete her objective, but he also knew she was right. The motorised hip joints of his suit were already locking up, and he was fairly certain metal from the back plate had pierced his skin. He shot himself with two medigel packs, reserving the last one for when Shepard managed to pull the metal from his shoulder blade. Unfortunately, she was still operating one handed, since her own dosage hadn't fixed up her injured arm and shoulder, and it took several tries to remove his upper armour. It didn't help that it felt his skin came off when she peeled off his damaged undershirt. Apparently kevlar and neoprene were just as useless against the reaper beam as metal alloys were. Eventually, they were both divested of their ruined armour, mostly thanks to each other, and clad in what remained of their under suits. Shepard's had survived mostly intact, though the left arm was completely missing, with several large cuts all over her body... the dark glistening around each gash revealing how much blood loss she'd already suffered. James' suit had faiored less well, thanks to him taking the brunt of the burning to his back. Lola had to cut him out of the undershirt, leaving him only in the compression pants, since his gloves had somehow become stuck to his gauntlets. His back hurt terribly, even after using the last of his medigel. They were quite the pair, staggering to their feet after collecting their weapons and any nearby ammo they could find. He knew Shepard wasn't faring much better than him, as she stumbled, before heavily leaning into his side. She blinked up at him, a look of confusion flashing across her features, that made James' gut twist in knots. It was obviously she was suffering from some sort of head injury, most likely thanks to whatever managed to crack her faceplate. But she was conscious, standing, and still able to string a sentence together... so James just had to hope it wasn't something serious, like a haemorrhage.

“I have to do this,” she whispered, sounding apologetic.

It took a moment for James to realise what she meant, and despite the way his abused skin and muscles protested, he wrapped a muscular arm as tight around her shoulders as he dared.

“Not a chance, Lola. I didn't follow you all this way, for you to leave me at the finish line. We do this together.”

He half expected Shepard to argue, maybe even punch him for the very obvious insubordination, but she didn't. With a huff, she strapped her shotgun to her hip, before reloading her SMG. James hefted his assault rifle to lean against his free shoulder, still not releasing Lola, even as she cautiously settled her injured arm around his waist. Leaning into each other for support, they shuffled towards the blindingly white beam... together.
Left Behind (Thane PoV)

Thane paced the length of Life Support, then back again. The purple haze of the drive core was the only light that illuminated the small room, and did little to calm his racing thoughts, but was oddly calming. He couldn't stand to be in their quarters, not whilst there was no news from Shepard, so he had made his way down to his old room. When Kolyat had no objections, Thane had taken refuge there, and though waves of solipsism lapped at his mind, it was still more bearable than being surrounded by his Siha's presence. The scent of her shampoo and perfume permeated their quarters, and though he usually took comfort in the familiar smells, they were too overwhelming right now.

Absent-mindedly, he rolled his shoulders. Karin had not long reset his dislocated one, and given him a hefty dose of medigel, but still the pain persisted. As much as he wanted to demand to be able to return and look for Shepard, he knew he would just be a liability to her. It was a bitter pill to swallow... as human's say, but Thane could understand his Siha's reasoning for sending him back. Though that didn't mean he had to like it. He wasn't the only one, but were he had begrudgingly endured his wife's order with as much grace as he could muster, Garrus had been another matter entirely. So much so, that Karin had sedated the turian, lest he tried to do something stupid... which would prolong the already suspected eight weeks of recovery, his leg injury required.

With a sigh, Thane sat down at the table... the table he'd shared so many memories with Shepard, and let his head fall into his hands. Hiding away in life support was perhaps one of the most cowardly things he could do, yet Thane just couldn't bring himself to go to the cockpit. He really should, even though he had no idea how to steer or navigate the Normandy, he felt he owed it to Joker to sit with him. The pilot had already lost Shepard once, and Thane could image all to well, the thoughts that must be going through the human's mind. Still, even lifting his head from his hands felt like too much effort. Especially after the first few tears began to silently run down his scaled cheeks.

He felt like a failure. Angry that he had not been quick enough to avoid injury, angry that he hadn't been able to stay at his Siha's side... the only comfort he had was that James had raced after Shepard, and even that did little to ease his conscious. No matter how devoted the young lieutenant was to their captain, Thane knew it should be him out fighting by her side. He liked James well enough, but the only other person he trusted to protect his Siha, was currently unconscious in the med bay. No one could watch Shepard's six... as Garrus liked to say, as well as they could. Regardless, he started to recite another prayer to Amonkira, just as EDI's voice filtered through the comm. system.

“Thane, I was hoping to ask for your assistance,” the AI said.

Wiping his eyes, he lifted his head. “Of course.”

“It regards Jeff. I need you to sit with him... for me.”

“Is everything alright?” Thane asked, not bothering to disguise his concern.

There was a distinct pause before EDI answered: “My mobile platform is already on route to Shepard's and Lieutenant Vega's last known co-ordinates. I would prefer for Jeff not to be alone... in case.”

Thane wasted no time in hurrying to the elevator. “EDI, my thanks.”

Not for the first time, he wondered if the AI was smiling when she replied: “They are my family too, Thane.”
Shepard screwed her eyes shut, as the pounding in her head grew stronger. Her thoughts felt jumbled, hazy, like dark tendrils were trying to wrap themselves around her brain. Bile rose in her throat as she stumbled over to Anderson, her adoptive father's breathing just aslaboured as hers. James wasn't faring much better, though managed to remain mostly upright as he staggered over to them. Indoctrination. That terrifying reality that had twisted the Illusive Man further into madness, but he now lay dead on the warm metal floor. Part of Shepard's mind couldn't believe she had talked another person into suicide, another part couldn't help think of poor Saren, and it was little comfort to realise TIM hadn't been as 'adapted' as the old turian had been. Hopefully, no grotesque metal skeletons would pop out of the corpse to fight them... but that was a distant thought. As she spent most of her cognitive energy fighting off the reapers. She could feel them, inside her head, trying to get through. But it felt like something was stopping them, blocking them. And not for the first time, she wondered if Leviathan had done something to her, when she'd entered it's home. Though that didn't matter right now, what did was seeing this through, to the very end. So whilst James helped Anderson to his feet, Shepard made her unsteady way to the sole control panel in the room, and typed in the codes Liara and the unity scientists had deciphered. As the last command was entered, her father grunted in pain, and she hurried to his side, bracing the arm James wasn't already holding. Worry coiled in her gut as he swayed on his feet, his face battered and bruised, a thing trail of blood dripping from beneath his hat. Shepard tightened her hold on his bicep. They'd been through too much together, to let it end here, Anderson deserved better than that.

“We did it,” she whispered, trying to bolster him.

He smiled, somewhat hazily. “Yes, we did. You ever wonder how things would've been different? How our lives would be... different, if this hadn't happened?”

Shepard exchanged a worried look with James. “Sure...”

“I never had a family, Shepard,” Anderson continued. “Never had children, until you barrelled into my life. Gotta ask, now you're married, you plan on settling down?”

“You pushing for grandkids already?” she joked.

“You'd make a great mother,” he complimented. “Look what you've done for Grunt, and Kolyat. And think how proud any kids would be, telling everybody their mum was Admiral Shepard.”

She managed to huff out a week laugh, trying not to think about the last time he'd thrust a career advancement on her. It felt too much like goodbye... again. “Admiral huh? You promoting me again, Sir?”

Anderson managed a weary shrug. “Someone ought to. You did good, child. You did good. I'm proud of you.”

Shepard squeezed his arm. “Thank you, Dad. I'm proud of you too. But this isn't the time for goodbyes, we need to find a way out of here.”

“Agreed,” James finally chimed in. “Any ideas, Lola?”

Static suddenly burst through their previously dead comm. links. “Ca...in, Ca...in Shep...”

Unable to help herself, Shepard gasped. “EDI?! EDI, is that you?”
“...ing to your lo....tion, Shep...” the AI replied, disjointedly. “ET.... five mi....”

The line went dead again, but that brief transmission boosted Shepard's moral. She glanced at James, relieved to see the familiar spark return to his all too sombre eyes. Even Anderson managed a smile, and gripped her hand tightly in his. In reply, Shepard nodded determinedly. It seemed like the cavalry was about to arrive.
Panic (Joker PoV)

Under his breath, Jeff cursed. He should have known Thane entering the cockpit was suspicious, since the drell had been skulk in life support for hours, but he doubted even the assassin knew the full extent of EDI's plan. She had locked him out of her comm. link, even refusing to speak to him via the onboard system, and only left a short message that basically said: don't worry... like that could really happen. Jeff drummed his fingers irritably on the console, as he fought the urge to bounce his leg... his bones may have been reinforced by Cerberus, but he wasn't about to risk breaking anything so needlessly. He must have sighed without realising, because suddenly Thane's hand was resting on his shoulder. Glancing up from beneath his hat, Jeff regarded the man that was more or less his brother-in-law, and for the first time could clearly see emotions on the drell's face. Which first struck him as odd, until he realised Thane must be making a conscious effort to show him. Seeing his own fear reflected on an alien face wasn't as unnerving as Jeff might have supposed, and it was oddly comforting, in a way. Thane was the strong, silent... not so much murdering... type, to see him worried made Jeff feel less of a fool for how his stomach was typing himself in knots. He scrubbed his hand across his tired eyes, before angrily throwing his cap onto EDI's abandoned chair.

“She's not coming back, is she?” he whispered, more to himself than Thane.

“Jeff...” the drell began.

“No, not Shep,” he amended. “Shep's going to come out of there guns blazing, carrying Vega over her shoulder.”

Both men huffed a laugh at the image, managing to somewhat dissipate the tension that Jeff only just noticed had filled the cockpit.

“I mean EDI,” he continued, quietly. “The only reason the guys aren't back yet is something's holding them up, a problem with the catalyst... it's not firing up or something, I don't know. But that's got to be the only reason they aren't back yet, because there's no way Shep's going to go out like this. So there must be something, and EDI figured it out, and she's gone in there to help. And she's not coming back, or at least her body isn't coming back, and I know she's more than a hot sexy body, but I can't lose her!”

Tears were streaming down his face by the time he'd finished, but Jeff didn't really notice, as it was so hard to breathe. He was only vaguely aware he was having some sort of anxiety attack, when he opened his eyes... which he didn't remember closing, to Thane kneeling in front of him, calmly instructing him how to breath. In for the count of five, out for the count of five. In for the count of five, out for the count of five. Slowly, the panic began to subside, and Jeff could feel the odd sensation of Thane stroking over his knuckles. It was... actually really soothing. He wouldn't be at all surprised if the assassin was hypnotising him somehow. Snakes could hypnotise their pray, right? And drell had reptilian ancestry, didn't they?... oddly enough, that wasn't the weirdest thoughts Jeff had had that day. Shaking his head, he leant back in his chair, and Thane gracefully rose to his feet again.

“Thanks man,” Jeff huffed, too drained to feel embarrassed.

Thane actually smiled a little. “It was nothing.”
Shepard couldn't believe what she was hearing, and not just from that... that... *star child*... thing. Fucking reapers! It looked just like the little boy she'd seen on earth, and for a sinking moment, she couldn't help wondering if she'd been indoctrinated. Not that it mattered right now, and she could get Chakwas to look over her after this was all done... and it would soon be all done, if EDI started to make any sense. Or perhaps she was making sense, and she just couldn't process it, since her head was still pounding, but not quite as bad. Thankfully EDI had thought to bring some medigel with her, which both James and Shepard had insisted on dosing Anderson with first, before splitting the remain packs between themselves. Anderson was looking a lot better, the head wound had stopped bleeding and the worrying, greyish tinge to his skin has dissipated. James' back was on the mend, as was her face and arm. All three were far from recovered, but certainly on the mend, thanks to EDI... who Shepard was almost convinced was talking about sacrificing herself, much to her horror.

“**Shepard, I was present for your interaction with the Catalyst,**” the android explained, patiently. **Again. “Control is a viable option, but my conscious is better suited to the task than yours.”**

“**EDI, you can't do this,**” she tried to argue.

“I am a prime example of how synthetics can live peacefully with organics,” EDI replied. “Without the need for synthesis. I operate independently, thanks to you and Jeff.”

Shepard had a sinking feeling she was about to lose another friend, and in a last ditch attempted, asked: “**And what about Jeff?**”

“**And what about Thane?**” EDI asked, calmly. “You are not replaceable, Shepard, and Legion has already helped me lock away part of my memory bank. Once I have taken control and moved the reapers away, my consciousness will be able to be rebooted. And I am certain that Tali and Gabby would be able to build me a new body.”

“You've obviously thought this through,” Shepard stated.

“This was not the initial perimeters I had calculated, though the results are more favourable with this equation,” the android said. “I am certain if there had been time to explain, Jeff would have also reached the same conclusion.”

Reluctantly, she nodded, knowing EDI was right. Without thinking, she pulled the other woman... synthetic didn't seem to matter anymore... into a one armed hug, still hesitant to use her burnt arm too much. When she first stepped on board the SR2, Shepard hadn't been sure what to think of EDI, but right now, it was obvious she was hugging another sister.

“**Thank you,**” she whispered.

Whilst tears steadily slipped down her cheeks, EDI squeezed her carefully in reply. And Shepard was certain that if she could, the woman would be crying as well. It wasn't goodbye, not exactly, but it sure as hell felt like it.
Gritting his teeth, Feron swung himself into the kodiak, landing harder than he would have liked... that last husk had gotten in a lucky last strike, before he'd managed to finish it off. He was certain there was no serious damage, but bruised ribs still hurt like a bitch, as he'd once heard Shepard say. Thinking of the woman brought an almost grim smile to his face. Not so long ago, Feron would never imagined he'd be off *again* looking for the famed human, but here he was... though hopefully he wasn't looking for a body this time. Taking as deep a breath as he dared, he pushed the thought aside. It took her ship exploding and being spaced to kill Shepard the first time, Feron couldn't... wouldn't... believe the reapers would have finished her off. And not just for his sake; which had a lot to do with it, since she'd become one of the few people he considered family. He could imagine, all too clearly, what her loss would do to Thane... he'd be lost to battle sleep, if he didn't immediately try to follow her across the sea. Then there was Kolyat, and that krogan child of hers... not to mention the turian; Garrus, who Feron was convinced was as much Shepard's soul mate as Thane was. A universe without Shepard in it was a bleak place, and he refused to accept that was her fate, even if they'd all seen the catalyst crash. Liara's network had picked up a brief energy spike seconds before the debris started to fall, a signature that was apparently very similar to that of a reaper transport beam... he wasn't sure how she knew that, and probably never wanted too either. But that slim hope is what had him running for the nearest intact transport, only vaguely surprise that Shepard's shuttle pilot was there, along with the quarian; Tali.

What did surprise Feron, was that moments after he set foot in the kodiak, that blasted prothean arrived too. It wasn't that he disliked Javik... not exactly. It was hard to begrudge someone who had witnessed the extinction of their entire race their bad attitude, after all. But still, the prothean just rubbed him up the wrong way... yet another saying he'd gotten from Shepard. For all Javik tormented Liara, Feron could sense the other male was at least impressed with the asari; as he damn well should be, Liara was amazing. But he suspected it was more than a begrudging respect, he's witnessed how the prothean's barbed comments had softened recently... and it wasn't that he was jealous. Feron trusted his fiancée, implicitly, but his lifespan was limited compared to hers... even without galactic genocide breathing down his neck... and seeing the person he *knew* would be with his wife after he was gone, was a little disconcerting to say the least. Not that he'd mentioned this to Liara, with the stress she'd been under lately, Feron couldn't discount having a Singularity thrown at him.

Still, he exchanged a respectful nod with the prothean, though before either of them could speak, Tali suddenly hopped into the shuttle. There was a nervous energy about her, as she rapidly typed into her omni-tool, and a quick glance at Steve who had just climbed aboard, confirmed Feron's suspicion that there was news about Shepard.

“*You have located her?*” Javik asked, expectantly.

The quarian nodded, not bothering to look up. “*Normandy is also on route, but we should be quicker.*”

“*Is she okay?*” Feron asked, not caring about the worry showing in his voice.

If he could see Tali's face, he'd expect her to be biting her lip, as she wrung her hands together.

“I'm not sure,” she admitted. “*Whatever happened up there, it's fried some of EDI's algorithms, but from what I can tell, she's in one piece. Legion was able to clear up some of the data, and confirmed James and Anderson are with her.*”
Feron sat down heavily, barely managing to make the metal bench, as relief washed over him. One piece... it wasn't the best prognosis he'd ever heard, but he'd been sent out to fetch her lifeless corpse once. She'd barely looked human back then, but she'd been resurrected... no use trying to be coy about it... and if that could be done once, it could be done again. Cerberus was gone, thank Kalahari, but Miranda was still out there. He'd seen the files, she was the one who had managed the impossible, and yes it took some serious money, but Liara was the shadow broker. Not matter what shape Shepard was currently in, Feron knew it would work out okay.
Waiting (Thane PoV)

Thane stood side by side with Garrus, staring intently at the blacked out medical bay window. Despite the too many emotions that were warring inside him, Thane tried to keep his calm exterior, if only for the wandering crew members that passed by their vigil. He knew he wasn't fooling Garrus... who only had his sedation lifted, to make way for the trio that were now in Karin and Mordin's capable hands... but the turian wasn't in any better state. You didn't need to know any turian physiology, to realise the captain's best friend was a nervous wreck. Naturally Thane felt the same, his Siha was merely feet from him yet couldn't be farther away, but he was certain that there were only perhaps five or six people onboard, that could tell his calmness was merely an act. In contrast to the collected visage he put forward, Thane's eidetic memory was having a field day... as human's say. Recalling over and over again what he had witnessed, desperately trying to pull him into solipsism.

Not so long ago, he'd watched the gut wrenching footage for Tali's suit camera. He'd seen the footage of Feron carrying an unconscious Shepard, with Javik hauling a barely conscious James over his shoulder, whilst Steve rushed to help a clearly dazed David Anderson to his feet. Wrex and Grunt had arrived moments later, to help Tali fend off some straggling husks and cannibals. Time had seemed to stand still on the Normandy's bridge, even though he was aware of Joker furiously working the helm controls. They touched down minutes later, and Thane had rushed to the hanger to take his wife of Feron, and carry her to the waiting doctors himself. A full hour had passed since then, and there'd been no news from either Karin or Mordin.

Now the adrenalin was starting to wear off, and tedium was trying to join the ever present worry. The only interruption to his vigil had been Feron's silent arrival. His fellow drell had quietly told him EDI had just advised Joker to head for the relay, his rainbow hued friend wasn't entirely sure why, but thought the AI was about to implement whatever plan she and Shepard had agreed on. Before Thane could ask for any details, Ashley's voice... who had taken command of the ship since both Shepard and Garrus were 'indisposed'... came over the ship wide comm. link.

“All personnel are to report to their designated stations, we are about to make an unscheduled jump. There may be some system shut downs, as all none essential power will be diverted to the med. bay. Top priority goes to the safety and well-being of Admirals Shepard and Anderson, as well as Commander Vega, so do not be alarmed if your section goes dark. That is all.”

With a click, Ashley ended the debrief, and Garrus' mandible flickered in the first hint of a smile Thane had seen, since they'd started the assault on Earth.

“Wonder if she knows she got another promotion?” the turian asked.

He smiled slightly. “If Siha does not, I will leave you the dubious honour of informing her.”

“It's not Shepard I'd worry about,” Steve suddenly said, announcing his presence. “You know Jimmy's ego; imagine what he'll be like after he realises he's been promoted.”

There was a synthesised sounding groan from the galley area, followed by: “Oh Keelah!”

For the first time since reaching Earth, Thane managed a genuine smile.
Shepard had only vaguely heard the woman's voice through the haze of sedation, as well as a man's rushed words a few minutes later. However, even through the fog of medication, she felt the jolt that suddenly rocked the ship she was on... was it the Normandy? Shepard wasn't sure, but she could hear the frantic beeping of angry machines all around her. Though her eyelids felt like lead, she managed to crack them open, as her hand blindly felt for the side of the cot. All this was far too familiar, and though she couldn't exactly remember why, thanks to the heavy pounding in her head, Shepard was certain she should be hearing a woman shouting at her over a comm. link.

Groaning, she managed to heave herself into an upright position, whilst something tugged painfully at the skin of her elbow. Forcing her eyes open a little more, she took in the unwelcome sight of an IV, and wasted no time in pulling it out. To her surprise, the hand that pulled out the needle was swathed in bandages, as was the rest of that arm. And though her fingers moved fine, the rest of the limb felt surprisingly numb... nerve damage? Shepard couldn't really think clearly, or remember much. She'd talked to EDI on the reaper, she was certain of that, and escaping with Vega and Anderson... sudden panic gripped her. Where they alright? She couldn't think, the pounding in her head was almost unbearable, had she fried her amp? She didn't think so, but Shepard thought she remembered debris... of being surrounded by, underneath, and on top of debris. Broken stone, twisted metal, choking dust... had she hit her head? Why couldn't she remember?

By now, her breathes were coming fast and erratic, though Shepard didn't realise the rising panic she felt, until a gentle hand wrapped around the bicep of her unbandaged arm. Initially she flinched, not expecting the contact, but hand didn't retreat... she was oddly grateful for that. So blinking rapidly, Shepard tried to focus on the face belonging to the hand, but her vision was to blurry. She saw green though, and green was good... right? She screwed her eyes shut, trying to remember. Yes! Green was good, Thane's scales were green. Was it Thane who had hold of her? The hazy person sort of had his shape, Shepard thought... guessed. She wasn't sure, why couldn't she remember?

Not that it matter right then, as another jolt shook the ship... the Normandy, surely it was the Normandy? It had to be the Normandy if Thane was here... was Thane here? Another shudder knocked Shepard off the cot, sending her tumbling to the floor. It didn't hurt as much as she expected... just how drugged up was she? Once again, it didn't matter as arms tightly wrapped around her, just as machines and equipment started clattering to the floor.

Shepard could feel leather beneath her unbandaged palm, and instinctively, she tightened her hold on the smooth fabric. Thane wore leather. Taking a shuddering breath, she inhaled the smell of the material as well as the scent of spice... all at once, the tension left her. No matter how muddled her brain was, her heart and soul knew that smell. At the exact moment her body relaxed, her companion adjusted his hold so she was cradled against him. Smiling into his neck, Shepard took another deep breath, as her bandaged hand came to rest lightly on his chest, simply feeling it rise and fall. She wasn't entire sure why, but Shepard knew it was a precious feeling. She also knew without a shadow of a doubt, that whatever else was happening, she was home.
Blue Skies (Thane PoV)

Thane had run into the medical bay, as soon as Joker had issued his warning about the jump. He wasn't entirely sure he understood the details, something about whatever EDI was planning to do, could seriously interfere with the relays... which turned out to be entirely accurate. Thane had held Shepard throughout the resulting turbulence, surprised but not unprepared for how disoriented his with was. Karin had warned him of the high levels of sedatives and pain relief Shepard had coursing through her veins, as well as the slight brain injury and the damage that had been done to her extensive cybernetics, particularly her optical implants... thought to be from rubble hitting her, after the party had escaped from the reaper. Thane's heart had broke a little at the news, fearing he'd never see the beautiful emerald hue of his wife's eyes again, and the understanding of what it would mean for Shepard's future. Though to his immense relief, she had at least focused on him, after he had initially surprised her. Seeing her so vulnerable and so unlike Shepard, had heightened Thane's protective urges, and he cradled his wife to his chest throughout the crash landing.

Frayed electronics sparked overhead, crew members were dousing out small fires, as grey smoke drifted through the corridors. Thane gingerly helped a stubborn Shepard out of the medical bay, trying not to chuckle about her refusing to be carried, even though Karin had only just reversed the sedative's affects. Miraculously, the elevator was still in working order, though the ride to the bridge was slow and clunky. With his wife tucked tightly to his side, Thane eventually picked their way through the jumbled mess that should have been the CIC, towards the cockpit. Both Joker and Garrus were waiting for them, and the pilot explained that EDI and ship-wide sensors were down. Meaning not only did they have no idea where they had crash landed, but no one knew the extent of the damage the Normandy had taken. The only thing that had been confirmed before the system blackout, was that the outside atmosphere was breathable. So whilst Joker spoke, Garrus managed to wrench open the docking hatch.

Cautiously, the five companions stepped out into the bright sunlight, Shepard leaning heavily into Thane as they made it down the rocky outcrop the Normandy was perched upon. With awe, he took in the brilliant blue sky, lush jungle, towering rocky mountains, and the very faint sound of the ocean lapping at an unseen shore. It was breathtaking, and without thinking he kissed the top of his wife's, smiling into her unruly fiery locks. Garrus was furiously tapping into his omni-tool, whilst Joker looked around in clear amazement, just as Liara and Tali jumped down from the damaged ship. And to everyone's surprise, Wrex joined them shortly after... apparently no-one had realised the krogan was part of the squad evacuated from Earth.

Thane felt more than heard Shepard sigh, and realising his wife probably couldn't see their wondrous surroundings, he sought to start describing the scene to her. However, his attempt was cut short, as Garrus suddenly laughed. He looked to the turian for an explanation, though his friend ignored everyone's questioning looks, in favour of lightly pressing his forehead to Shepard's.

“We're on Virmire,” the turian stated, quietly. “The south side, about a day's trek away from... well, you know.”

Unable to help himself, Thane tensed slightly, which would only be noticeable to Shepard, as she was still pressed against him. Of course he had heard all the stories about the crew's hunt for Saren, he had held his Siha as she cried, still mourning the loss of her friend and colleague. So naturally, Thane was concerned with how the revelation would affect her. He needn't of worried, and was only mildly surprised when she tightened the hold she had around his waist, whilst reaching for Garrus' hand. Smiling almost serenely, Shepard turned to look at the brilliant blue sky, and for the first time...
since the start of the ward, Thane thought she looked content.

“Thanks Kaidan,” she whispered.
Sighing contentedly, Shepard lent against her husband's shoulder, watching out of the large plate glass window, as 'Uncle' Garrus ran around after their children. Her vision was still a little blurry, but Miranda was certain that the procedure in a month's time would be the last. And though it was annoying to need glasses now, Shepard really wasn't going to complain. Both she and Thane were alive and well, and considering how much had been stacked against them, it was nothing less than a miracle. As was the relative peace and quiet they now enjoyed.

Although she had accepted her promotion to Admiral, though it was more an advisory position now a days since the children were still so young, Shepard had actually been offered the role of humanity's Counsellor. However, she had insisted that Anderson had resumed the duty... he'd grumbled at first, but had slipped back into the role with ease. It probably helped that he'd moved back into the newly repaired apartment he'd gifted Shepard, along with Kahlee, and his grandchildren were live in visitors for four months of the year. James and Steve had finally gotten together, and had bought the apartment next door. Their twin daughters, Hannah and Jane, loved whenever the Shepard-Krios clan came to stay. Samantha and Ashley had bought an apartment the floor below, just weeks before they got married. There was an ongoing joke, that before long, the tower would solely be populated with the Normandy's crew.

The remaining eight months were split equally between their home in Intai'sei, where both Kolyat and Ori as well as Feron and Liara had built residences near by... since the asari had figured a way to bounce her network through several decoy ships... and their home on Virmire, that was right next door to Garrus. She'd made a promise after all, somewhere tropical, though with the added edition of state of the art air cycling for Thane both inside and out, around the perimeter of both abodes. It was a good life, and though some might worry for the children's school, they didn't. Since EDI had decided to become a tutor, mostly thanks to the new body Tali and Gabby had managed to build for her that looked entirely human, neither Shepard nor Thane could think of a better teacher for their little tribe. Whilst on the citadel, where EDI and Joker were now based due to the new cross-species flight academy he was head of, she taught in person. The other eight months, she gave her classes via her old hologram, it was the perfect solution to the intergalactic nature of their family's lives.

Of course, there were regular holidays to each of their children's native homeworlds, which saw them criss-crossing the galaxy. From Paladin so that little Adrian could grow up to fully know his culture as well as his namesake, to Rannock so that young Leni'Raefal could see the planet her parents had died to protect... and to visit Auntie Tali and Uncle Kal, who had just celebrated the birth of their daughter Naanu, as well as Uncle Legion. It was very rare for them to visit Kahje for baby Iri, named in the memory of Irikah... Shepard's idea, much to her husband's surprise... as it held too many memories for Thane. She could understand his reservation, and doubted they'd take the twin toddlers David Junior or Jacqueline to Earth as often, if Nanny Karin hadn't taken up residency at the freshly built Alliance Memorial Hospital, in London. Nasyxphia... Syx for short, had made it perfectly clear she didn't like the stuffy temples on Thessia, though both Shepard and Thane had agreed it was good for the young asari to see her homeworld at least once a year. Irsol felt similar about Sur'Kesh, though he did enjoy visiting his Uncles Mordin and Kirrahe... who had finally stopped hiding their relationship and had moved in together. However, they had no trouble persuading triplets Khurgal, Kuksoor and Kesh, to visit Tuchanka and their birth parents. Wrex and Bakara always spoil them, and Grunt and Auntie Jack always made a point of bringing baby Rarax. Urz usually came on those trips, mainly so he could play with Eezo, which mostly involved them...
letting the baby ride on them. It was a crazy life, but to Shepard, it was paradise.

She hummed in happy agreement, as Thane gently kissed the top of her now shoulder length mop of curly red hair.

“I love you,” she sighed.

She could feel Thane smile, as he moved to kiss her temple. “I love you too, Siha.”

Chapter End Notes

Just wanted to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has read, followed, and enjoyed this story. Both here and where the beginnings were originally posted on FF. It's been two and a half years of my life dedicated to writing this, and it's so bittersweet to end it here. Thank you for all your support, and love for this story, you've been wonderful!

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