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**Delicate Subject**

by Recidiva

**Summary**

Continuation of story from "Poetry Slam", a request for a female polyamorous Shepard managing to romance both Garrus and Thane. Starts most of the way through ME2 after loyalty missions and the buildup to the Omega Relay, extends through the time frame of ME3 with altered circumstances driven by change in plot and character.

Romance, humor, smut, snark, fluff, love story, wish fulfillment and consequences to those changes that swings wide into AU. What happens if Arrival DLC didn't happen that way? What if Shepard never hands the Normandy over? What if Garrus and Thane don't particularly feel like following orders?

Courtesy warning that it starts relatively fluffy, but explores abuse, non-con elements, psychological and physical torture elements.

Delicate Subject narrated on YouTube
Chapter 1

Three, four and five fingers. Jane Shepard was trying to figure out how to get what she wanted. Well, who she wanted. There was a symmetrical mathematical progression she could appreciate. Three fingers of a Turian, four fingers of a Drell, five fingers of a human.

She was still slightly drunk, having excused herself from the Mess, having been wired for hours after an emotional trip to Pragia to help Jack.

She sat on her bed, throwing a ball in the air and catching it. It was as close as she came to meditation, and although she might be good at verbal juggling, she didn’t want to learn how to physically juggle. She wanted to focus and concentrate.

She wanted to juggle a few men.

Oh man, she still really was drunk.

To make sure she stayed that way she grabbed a bottle of vodka and downed more than a splash with a thick breath-catching burn, went back to tossing her ball and watching the stars.

There, fuel for thought.

One beautiful thing about a cabin to herself was the blessed privacy. Her sex drive was…

Her sex drive had always been revved high, and when she didn’t have a partner, or several partners, she appreciated her privacy, her imagination and constantly rioting hormones driving her into the sweat-slicked arch of masturbation. There had always something fun about masturbating in a bunk amid a bunch of hyper-physical people from the Alliance when she was in training, either trying to not get caught, or trying to get caught by the right person, which took timing and resulted in more fun.

She’d earned not having to be furtive, so she was going to enjoy it for all it was worth.

So…three fingers…

Garrus first then. She started with the vivid memory he’d just put in her head, of him behind Tali, speaking the lines from “Fleet and Flotilla” he had memorized. What a voice. She swallowed hard at the memory and spread her middle three fingers wide, imagining them as talons, dragged them down the sides of her throat, imagining his voice close at her ear.

Shepard, he’d call her Shepard and she’d heard that name on his lips so often it came easily and naturally to mind. She had another new favorite phrase of his. They’d gone out to shoot Sidonis and he’d said to that ridiculous little Volus threateningly “Make an exception, just this once.”

Please, Garrus, I’m going to ask you to make an exception…just this once…for me. Please, if you’ve never touched a human, please touch me. She imagined his teeth at her throat and his voice in her ear, adding into her imagination the yearning she’d just heard in his voice.

She dragged her hands down and lifted her breasts through her jacket, pressed them together, her dark caramel-colored skin contrasting with the soft brown of the leather, imagining his hands, wider, warmer and new. Tilting her head back she closed pale blue eyes, tensing her thighs. She unzipped the jacket and slid her hand in under her bra, teasing a nipple, squeezing it between the edges of her fingers and biting her lip. Garrus was warmth, strength and protection. From what she’d seen in him
lately, the way he talked, the way he looked at her, she could have this.

Her free hand dug her fingernails into her palms and that little tiny splice of pain in her mind made her other hand tighten around her nipple, bringing a tight gasp. That was good.

His hand would be too big to slide under her leggings, so they’d have to go, talons and fingertips would be too tight. She tried to tear at her leggings like he could, but she didn’t have Turian strength or talons so she laughed and had to rethink this fantasy. Okay, no tearing. Maybe tearing later. Put those talons to good use. In the meantime…

She lifted her hips and shimmied partway out of her leggings, all the way off or partway? Partway. Let’s be in a hurry here, leggings removed only enough for access, not enough for being polite. Garrus, can you manage to not be polite? I have faith in you…

She tried to spread her legs wider but the leggings got in the way. Dammit, off then. Not sexy. Using her feet she hooked her toes in and dragged them off, with some effort, laughing at the fantasy-dampening turn of events. This is why I need other people. This would not be a problem with claws.

Yes, I realize I just made myself seem incapable of removing my own pants, moving on.

So don’t tell the Batarians.

While she was at it she sat up momentarily and jerked off her jacket, her bra. The jacket was leather so that was nice, she flipped it over and lay back down on it, a cool to warm texture against her back. Not plates. Plates would be better.

Three fingers. Right. Shepard…exceptions…the look in his eye when he moved his gaze from Tali to her over the table. That…

Her hand tightened on her breast again and her other hand traced lightly over her stomach. Her skin had lovely reactions right there, just like along her neck, that set her muscles trilling, not tickled but tensed and trembling, racing with pleasure.

Tensing her ass and thighs, her legs fell apart. She was already so wet, always wet, never not wet, but sometimes wetter, a finger testing that ever-simmering heat, then sliding along folds to open wider, settling lightly on her clit, electrically sensitive, breath building faster.

Turians were always hard, didn’t thrust, they stay inside…hard, twisting, invading. The image shifted to being on Garrus’s lap, cock deep inside, with her body straining back against chest and sternum blade. Depending on the allergic sensitivity, sexual contact with a Turian was either death from anaphylactic shock or a tingling, straining drug in the blood, everything right, an overlay of dripping pleasure. She’d been with Turians before, loving the fullness, the voice, the talons and whatever magic they hoarded in their skin. Yes, Garrus, that. I want that. Please that. Entry would be radiating pain-pleasure, defining the limits of extreme sensation, and then that defined boundary would create a space filling with pleasure, moving from sharp pain to warmer pain to no pain at all. His voice would croon, soothing and possessive as she went from wincing pain to melting back against him, his mouth at her throat, his voice with her name in her ear.

Yes, that, please that. Three fingered hands on her breasts and then…and then four fingers…Thane between her legs, Drell venom sinking into the skin of her thighs, slow and strong, dual-drugged lovers into her blood and body. Drell hands on the inside of her thighs, dragging his fingers on her skin and looking into her blurring eyes until his tongue met her clit and he closed his eyes and she closed hers. Abandonment to pleasure overload synched in her imagination and her fingers streaked at her aching and vibrating clit, electric sensitivity giving way to waves of building pleasure. Her back
arched and she twisted at her nipple hard, biting at her lip until it bled, glad for the privacy that allowed her to gasp, to moan, to have that almost out-of-body sense of hearing her own voice make a sound she loved to hear, to feel that spasming, washing pleasure soak through her from her center to her fingertips, to her toes, outstretched and straining. She collapsed in the afterglow with soft sighs, her hands stroking along her skin, leather comfortably making its texture known against her now more sensitive back, panting, realizing she didn’t even make it to five fingers.

An image of her hands around two cocks lit up her already seared brain and she laughed.

Yeah. That would worth a little effort, huh?

oOoOooOoOo

Considering her different options, the best way to go about it was to be straightforward. She couldn’t start a relationship with the expectation of monogamy, romance and seduction, and then drop polyamory as a subject in on a backdrop of candlelight and poetry. Too much like trap. Although not intended to be that way, it could and had been seen that way. She wanted to build an actual relationship if possible, and it didn’t start with “Wanna fuck?” but it also didn’t start with romantic declarations. It did start with honesty and respect from her, and a promise that she would always be honest, always be respectful. Her main concern up front was less romantic than seemingly cold and legal...consent. Everyone needed to know what they were getting into without feeling betrayed or manipulated. There was always the issue of someone thinking they could ‘convert’ her and she had to head that off. Turians were possessive and ultimately monogamous. Thane had been married. They both had potential reasons to expect monogamy if they were being approached and she had to take responsibility for that, and for the possibility of her proposition to be a turn off or even insulting. Could happen. If they said no she’d be exactly where she started, so no lost ground. They were both discreet and adult enough to give her a polite no and leave it at that.

It was a lot up front, but she was Commander Shepard, Garrus was a Turian rebel and Thane was a life-long assassin. With those backgrounds she found it hard to believe they would be shocked. She needed to hear a clear ‘yes’ before anything started, because she knew the tumbling, inhibition-stealing rush of lust that could make her say ‘yes’ to many, many things, and transferring that quality to other people, she didn’t want to get anybody hot and/or bothered and then spring a consent authorization.

Plenty of time for romance later.

Spending a lifetime under Alliance protocols, spending her childhood moving from base to base, her only constant companion was the expectations of military service, discipline and sacrifice. She had known no other life. Her life had never been conducive to long-term plans. Right now she could probably count her life expectancy in weeks or months and not use up all of her fingers counting them. That was the case often in her career, and even more so right now. Everyone on the ship had signed on for a suicide mission and had set their affairs in order one way or the other.

Garrus had killed Sidonis with her help, as he had killed Dr. Heart years ago. People had asked her for favors over the years, and she’d been usually happy to provide them considering the stakes, but Garrus hit her hard. He had not once asked for anything that benefited him personally or directly. He could have stayed in the Turian military or he could have stayed in C-Sec if he’d wanted only status and appearance. His father was influential, the Vakarian clan high in Hierarchy politics. Garrus could have had much more power, but he chose direct intervention. He had used his requests, effort and his time to save other people. In the case of Dr. Heart he wanted medical torture to end. In the case of Omega he wanted to spare the innocent from use and slaughter. In the case of Sidonis he wanted the potential for past and future betrayal to end. Of all the dangerous fetch and carry she’d been asked to
do, his requests had been the most poignant, and he’d revealed himself to be the most tenacious, selfless protector of others that she had the privilege to meet. She knew that if he asked for something, it was necessary, and she had never told him no. She had rarely left the ship without him at her side, and that was as true on the SR-2 as it had been on the SR-1.

Thane had reconnected with his son, and watching him speak to Kolyat had echoed the loneliness she had woken up to on a Cerberus slab. Friends, allies, lovers, partners, her life, all gone, out of her control, washed away by the unstoppable tide of time. Thane’s voice had reflected her depths, though she knew his losses had been deeper, had cost him more because he had had less than she had. She recalled him telling her when she’d asked why he needed her help with Kolyat, because he could certainly track and stop an inexpert Drell on the Citadel “I don’t need your help, Shepard, I want it.” He was capable of simple, piercing honesty. That was also something that she understood well. The aching vulnerability of it, how much it had meant to him, how much it had meant to her that after such a short acquaintance, this man with no reason to trust had found the courage to ask for help.

If she was a pirate she was going to make the most of it. Objectively it had been years since she'd had sex and subjectively it felt much longer. Kaidan and Liara had tried to make passes at her during the last year of her life, but the ultimatums from them had turned her off entirely. Jealousy was not something she could work with. Possessiveness, yes, that she liked, but not in an absolute sense. Possession right now, not forever. She could not promise forever. She couldn't even promise days with the risks they took. She couldn't tell anybody that they were more important than her job. She would continue to risk her life, make the choices she made, and she couldn't bolster someone else's ego while weakening her own. Definitely she could not give into that temptation with people under her command. She had asked these men to give their lives and they both had agreed to that. She hadn’t slept with anybody in the Alliance since she’d left training. It would put her command at risk and that was not going to happen. She wanted enough pleasure and joy in a private life to have reminders of what in life was worth all the sacrifices and tough choices. Even if she didn’t have it now, or wouldn’t have it, she knew there were things she’d give her life for, relationships and people worth the fight. It was the reason she fought so hard, that knowledge that there was real love, real people, real devotion between species, among people with no promise but to please each other. It was truly Universal, or at least Galactic.

She'd learned to deal with right here, right now, as simple as possible, as much pleasure that could be squeezed from a moment without engaging with people that had that unmistakable band of jealousy in their psyches. She’d learned how to find it, how to avoid it, and if necessary, she'd avoid sex altogether, which she had. Like now. Unfortunately.

The tricky part was that even people that weren't inherently jealous could have that brought out of them when they felt strongly enough. She tended to make people feel strongly. A good thing and a bad thing.

She was polyamorous but not casual. She needed to care. Most often people assumed that because she was polyamorous she treated sex casually, and that was her deepest obstacle to being understood. It wasn't that being in command made her reliant on her own autonomy and demanding of respect and trust, it was the reverse. That's who she was at a person. It's what made her command style possible. She set her own boundaries, made her own rules and did not allow hostile incursions on the sacred space she held most dear. She welcomed and longed for company in that space, but it was hard to find, impossible to keep. She often was in love with someone before approaching them in any way on the subject. It often began well, but there had been issues, repeated issues. She imagined it wasn't that much different from monogamous relationships, she just had more chances to make it work, but also more chances to screw it up. Since she could not offer absolute fealty emotionally or physically, many people misinterpreted her intent.
She'd been told often how she felt, and asked not as often. She could have corrected a few people that had decided she was a cold, using bitch, but calling her a cold, using bitch was the fastest way to get the distance she needed to extract herself. She was not cold, she was not using, but she could definitely be a bitch when provoked. She allowed them to keep their impressions. Her breakups never evoked cruelty or vengefulness from her, but they did create an instant distance, trust lost. She would always care for the people she loved, but would not get close again. The love, the caring, never ended, but the avenue of expression was gone.

She recognized that insulating space in Thane as well. She had a heart, but it was concealed. A hidden heart did not mean an absent heart.

Garrus wore his heart on his armor. Sometimes he wore his heart as his armor. He was fearless.

She’d argue with a lover over whose turn it was to do the dishes or make the bed, and she’d often start that argument, egalitarian military discipline insisting on order, but she would not argue over what she’d always said up front…I am polyamorous, I will become attracted to other people and I am already involved with other people.

This was the first time in her adult life that she had nobody she was involved with. Hardly anybody knew she was still alive, most people had mourned her and she was headed straight back into the maelstrom. She didn’t feel like popping back up on Ilium or the Citadel and terrifying a few people by her resurrection and then saying the equivalent of “Gotta go, need to die. Again.”

The hardest dichotomy was between wanting and loving. People willing to be wanted up front were resistant to being loved at the same time as another, thinking love was for a soul mate and otherwise suspect, counterfeit. Loving more people expanded rather than contracted her philosophy and experience. It gave her freedom and an appreciation for beauty and pleasure that was as close to spiritual as she could name. Only time would tell which way things would go, same as in a monogamous relationship. She needed to give time, trust and attention, and hope that her choices could show someone she was devoted to them, loved them in her own way, but was unwilling through temperament, philosophy and chosen career to beguiling lies about forever and only.

Some people embraced polyamory immediately and enthusiastically, only to have "pecking order" become a necessary thing as time and intimacy deepened a relationship. She remembered Faralan asking, with desperation in his eyes and twitching mandible, "But you want me most, right?" Her lack of answer had made him accuse her of costing them the relationship, but in reality it was him asking that had ended it. She'd also been accused of using people, the angry eyes of an Asari Commando, Giatis called to mind. "So you'll be there for me when you want to be there for me? What about need, Jane? What about needing to be with me?" Spitefully and jealously a lover after Elysium had said "So you'd die for me, right? That's what you can give me? That's not worth much, Shepard, apparently you'd die for anybody."

To each of them she had said nothing, ugliness in personal relationships on subjects she knew she had stated clearly causing her to retreat behind a wall of cool reserve. Torture wouldn't have made her tell the truth, that up until that moment that those words were said, she could have told each of them that she lived for them.

Dying was her job. Living was her choice.

She didn't long for permanency, because she didn't believe in permanency. She wanted an honest relationship, loving and strong. If she couldn't have it…well, there was always vodka, privacy and right about now Kasumi's recording of certain voices.

She needed freedom, needed choices, more than she needed security. If security had been her goal,
she wouldn't have followed in her parents' footsteps. She would have emigrated to a remote colony, where pioneer spirit and hard work fell into line with a traditional family model. She would have sought that rather than signing up with glee for the Infiltrator program, eager to make it to Sharpshooter classification first, which she had. She'd experienced enough joy in her relationships to know it was possible, that there were people who innately understood, reached for her with both hands and let go with both hands, fully committed to each moment. That's what she was chasing. She'd been in love so many times. Spontaneous, effortless love. Sometimes people she loved died, because those were the people she fell in love with, the ones with their lives on the line.

An image of Urem, a Drell man she'd fallen in love with, fallen in bed with, spent all her time with on the Citadel when she was there flashed through memory. In her mind he stood in his small apartment, Drell sand sculptures and paintings of clear yellow skies and mountains of Rakhana adorning his shelves and walls. He loosened the towel around his waist and said softly as he headed to the shower "Come and get me."

She had. He had been someone she had loved, someone murdered during Sovereign’s assault on the Citadel. He was gone and there would be no forever. But what they had each moment when he was alive and looking her way with his teasing eyes, thick warm voice and pleasure-drenched skin had been worth the grief she felt now. She didn't have a Drell's memory, but she had memories of Drell.

Thane reminded her of Urem in so many ways and yet he was distinctly himself. Tasting Drell skin brought tiremit and she missed it, hallucinogenic venom adding a layer of soft lights and emotional attachment, focused pleasure to sex, to being held in strong, textured arms with whispered endearments echoing in her ears.

She was diving straight into the deep end of the pool here, she knew, choosing with a technically virgin body to head straight toward Turian and Drell sexual benefits not intended for human physiology, but she was also headed straight into a death trap by design. She wanted to find out if tiremit and Turian mixed. If not, Dr. Chakwas was on call.

If so...yeah, worth it.

She'd have liked to take a shot at Garrus before, but he'd been so formal and obviously star struck that she felt wrong making an attempt. Too much like coercion.

She was no longer Alliance, and as much as that had sucked, she could take advantage of it. That was her strength, using what she had and not what she wanted to have.

She'd start with Garrus, because she considered him the least...technically difficult of this whole thing. She was most comfortable with him and he deserved...first right of refusal? It seemed a respectful way to go about it. She'd gotten a lot of no in her day, so rejection didn't concern her terribly. She'd also gotten a lot of yes. If he said no it would be a potential loss, but if she didn't ask for what she wanted, she'd never have the chance for a potential gain. Just like a military career, losses had to be expected. She'd lost men and women under her command. She had lost and mourned lovers. She could certainly bear up under a shocked or disgusted no from her otherwise best friend on board. She wasn't really concerned that he'd be disgusted, because...well...Turian. Turian attitudes toward sex were much like hers, at least culturally and up to a point. Turian childhood was considered a time for sexual promiscuity, and childhood continued until finding a mate and bonding. After bonding, no more promiscuity. It seemed however it worked, bonding had a much stronger effect on Turians than marriage did on humans. There was no such thing as cheating on a mate. Turians didn’t talk about it. Yeah, well, they didn’t talk about it the way they didn’t sleep with humans...it happened. She knew more than she should but not as much as she’d like. It got complicated because promiscuous Turians had been sleeping with Asari for a while, and human
females were really not all that different.

She didn’t think Garrus was bonded. Shore leave, parties on the Citadel after Sovereign and time together at bars meant conversations were interrupted often when female Turians asked Garrus to dance. A lot. And he danced. A lot. He was a really good dancer.

Only time at Omega and two years gone gave her pause. What if he had been bonded, what if he was mourning a mate?

She still had the species gap to contend with, but she didn’t see Garrus rejecting her in a way that would hurt her on purpose. She knew the boundaries of Turian involvement with humans. As a human with a Turian she was destined to be hidden, which was fine, if not preferred. She wasn't sure that any Turian she'd been with had been aware that she was in love with them, the subject never came up. They certainly knew they were wanted, she certainly knew she was desired. Convincing this Turian was worth the risk she was taking.

She loved Garrus, loved him several ways, admired his skill and temperament, his absolute dedication and attention to detail that had kept her alive and allowed for others to live. He was a dear and close friend, and the first person she wanted at her side for fun or business. In love…that was new...ish. She'd often considered his hands, his voice, had obviously fantasized, but never felt a sense of attainable possibility until he'd looked at her yesterday. He hadn't been speculative, he had been sure, using the moment of drunken silliness to honestly signal something.

He could signal but never insist. She knew that in Turian culture, women had to make a move before a male would do more than hint at his interest. Garrus called himself a bad Turian, but in many ways he was a product of the culture and teachings of his people. He was an ideal and idealizing Turian. Add in that she was his superior officer and she knew it was up to her to make clear that she had seen his interest and reciprocated.

As usual, she had a lot of ground to cover and not much time.

She was less apprehensive than excited as she headed down to the Battery and smiled as he said "Need me for something?"

She said "Yes. Wanted to talk and get your opinion on something. Can you pull yourself away from whatever it is you're doing? Hit pause? Can I bribe you by buying you something shiny and lethal? It’s a personal matter."

He said "Well…I am in the middle of something, and I won't turn down anything shiny and lethal, ever…buuut." He dragged it out and she smiled, sat down on the side bench and said "I promise new toys."

He pretended to capitulate, tapped a few buttons and said "Since I'm sure it will increase my efficiency overall, yes. What's on your mind? Is it...a personal emergency?" Concern fringed his voice and she was grateful to have him ask her how she was doing. He did it often. She and Garrus had made the transition from colleagues to friends long ago, it came easy.

She said "Not an emergency, but personal. Thank you for your time. Shut the door, please?"

He raised a brow plate but complied, leaning back on the console and watching her intently.

She said "Need to tell you some things, need to ask you some things. It is all…personal. Regardless of what your answers or opinions are, you should know that I will always regard you with the highest level of respect I could ever give to a colleague and the greatest gratitude I could give a
friend. You and I have shared saving each other's lives, taking lives, saving the lives of other people, and making truly awful choices and living with the consequences. You were with me from the beginning of my Spectre career and your information and assistance made everything I've done after that moment possible. That will never change. I owe you my life hundreds of times over, that also will never change. I trust you more than I have trusted anybody and I put my life in your hands without hesitation.

His body held his sniper-trained stillness, his eyes sharp and attentive. A slight smile crept up one side of his mouth and he said "Thank you." His simple acceptance, knowing that he'd said the same to her, shown the same to her and it could have gone unspoken and still known was such a rock-steady change from most other people. That was part of why he was so special to her.

She said with a smile "This might be far more information than you want to hear, so if you get uncomfortable, stop me and we'll forget it happened, okay?"

He nodded and said "I'll try not to panic." with such dry humor that she laughed.

She said "Okay, okay. I'm not trying to insult your nerve."

He grinned "Better not. Am I going to need a lawyer?"

That made her laugh again. "No. Nothing like that. Personal, remember? I demand only one outrageous drunken commitment per week."

He nodded and said smugly "I could have said no, by the way."

She nodded back "Yes, you could. I'm so glad you didn't. It got me thinking."

He didn't look like he was thinking about it as he said "That's a subjective term, so we can explore that later. Have you asked Thane?"

She shook her head "I wanted to give you the first...well, I was thinking first right of refusal."

Then he looked like he was surprised. "In what realm of existence would I refuse? How stupid do you think I am?"

She laughed, reassured, and said "Not stupid. Just...having free will. You have free will."

He scoffed and said "Not so sure about that, not about this. Not about you. So you're thinking...me and Thane...to put it in technical terms...serial or parallel?"

She smiled and said "That part is entirely up to your...desired participation. Keep in mind the free will thing, I still have no idea what he might have to say. It might never come up."
He said as though it were obvious "Oh, I have an idea. I'm betting yes."

She smiled. "I've learned not to bet against you."

He smirked and continued "Even with a no, if we live long enough it might come up with someone else."

She tilted a head and said "Possibly, but again, that's entirely up to you. I would never require or demand parallel if you only enjoy being hooked up serial. Happy to have your time when you want to give it."

He nodded and said "So if I ask for time alone with you, without other participants, let's call it a shakedown run, we can do that?"

She smiled and said "Oh yes. We can do that. As often as you'd like."

He repeated slowly "As often...as I'd like...okay. Let's say, for scenario's sake, after a shakedown run, that I want to bring someone else along? Say an Asari female or another Turian male? Hell, let's say both."

She considered, thinking he knew the answers but was making sure that she knew that he understood her by asking the right questions and giving the right reactions. Hope kicked in a little more and there were flutters in her stomach "I'd like to meet them first, have the whole right of refusal thing myself, but I wouldn't say no on principle."

He shrugged slightly and said "What about someone else who drunkenly approves of my voice? What if I were to pursue Tali, or ask her to come along?"

She said "Give me a head start, let me sterilize the room to limit her chances of infection, but yeah, I don't see why not. Your time, when not spent with me, is your time. Any relationship with me only requires that you want to be with me. A relationship with someone else involved means we want to be with them too. If you get sick of me, just give me a heads up. Just to be polite."

His eyes sharpened their focus and he asked, disbelieving "Has anybody ever gotten sick of you?"

She tilted her head and said "Not everyone is as even minded and fair as you are, Garrus. This sort of thing doesn't suit everyone."

He said with brief disgust "So...idiots."

She tilted her head forward with a grateful smile.

He said "Have you been with a Turian before?"

She nodded.

He said "Are you allergic?"

She shook her head and said "Are you?"

He shook his head slowly with a smile. A hell of a smile. She resisted squirming again and swallowed.

He said without hesitation "Okay. Thank you for the first right of refusal. I'm going to take the first right of acceptance." Her smile was huge and instant. He tilted his head and said "Full disclosure here, we're on the ship with an adolescent Krogan, a Salarian without a filter and a perceptive Drell."
There is no way with Grunt here that we're going to be able to have a discreet, hidden relationship, if that is what you want. He's going to smell me on you. Mordin's going to want to run a study. Doesn't matter if you shower or wear perfume, they will know. By the way, please don't wear perfume. You don't, but it's a preference that you not start. Thane will detect it also, so you may not have to tell him depending on your timing. Is that a deal breaker?"

She hadn't considered that and her mouth opened for a moment in surprise. She'd prefer discretion but Garrus was right. Asking Grunt if he could keep a confidence would be tantamount to asking him if he liked extortion and torture.

Then it occurred to her that Garrus was stating that as a Turian he was willing to let it be known that he was involved with a human. More surprise.

She smiled, heart pounding harder and said "Well...we're pirates. Who are they going to report us to?"

He grinned and then said "The Illusive Man and EDI are going to watch everything."

She put a little taunting sing song into saying "Hope it makes them jealous." She added earnestly “The Hierarchy might find out."

He shrugged and said “They might find out I was Archangel. They might find out I don’t care that they find out.”

Her eyes softened and teasing left her voice. She said “You care, Garrus. You love your people. You love your family.”

He nodded and said softly “And yet the only person willing to care for me as I am, not as they want me to be, is the person right here, right now, and she is not Turian.” He pushed away from the console and walked to her, reached out a hand until she met it with her own. He said lightly "When can I start?"

She raised a brow and said "Yesterday. Wait, no, about three years ago."

His eyes widened in surprise and he said "Why did you have to tell me I wasted all that time?"

She said "You asked?"

He made a frustrated noise and said "So you're saying it's my fault."

She nodded and said deadpan "Definitely."

He yanked her off the bench suddenly and off her feet, pressed against his armor with his arm wrapped around her waist, plates digging into her back.

His mouth was on her throat, making her feel she had definitely made the right choice, had said the right thing. Yes. That. His teeth moved over the side of her neck. He was breathing in deeply and exhaling hard, scenting her. All she could smell of him was the metal of his armor, heat sink residue, gun oil, the ozone of tools used on weaponry. Her head was turned back too awkwardly by the force of his face at her throat to be able to find out what he really smelled like. She’d clearly get her chance. This was more than good enough for now, the contrast between them, the strength in his arm and feeling suddenly small washing over her, with little ripples of sensation traveling out along her skin, down her spine, from his breath and teeth.

With a reluctant and half strangled growl he pulled his head back, lowered her until her toes were on
the ground, but still off balance leaning into him. He leaned his crest to her forehead and she was startled and flattered. If Turians had a gesture of respect, of connection, that was it. She’d only seen it between Turians, between family and close friends. Never with a human. Her eyes were wide and she blinked once as he released her and put her back on her feet.

He lifted a hand to tuck a lock of her shoulder-length, black, straight hair behind her ear and said “Not here. Anybody could walk in. Please tell me you have nothing important you need to do right now.”

She smiled and said “Nothing more important than this.”

He slid one of his hands through her hair and she turned into it, but he still had his damned gloves on and her hair got caught in the joints when he tightened his fingers and she said “Ow. Wait. OW.”

He pulled his hand back in surprise and ripped some of her hair out and she winced and then laughed. “Well, that took care of that.”

He looked down at his glove with the strands of offended hair, suddenly looking horrified, guilty and worried. He said in apology “Uh…that was bad.”

She rubbed her head, laughed and said to reassure him “It’s okay. I can take a hair hit. I’m going to go up to my cabin. I’d like it if you followed soon. You should probably take those off.”

He sounded anxious “You sure?”

She raised a brow and said with promise “That’s not the way I like my hair pulled, but I can show you.”

He growled, threw his gloves with a clatter to the floor, lifted her easily and dizzily by the waist and pressed her back against the door, both hands coming up to twine through her hair. Tilting her neck back and his forward he pressed his mouth plates to her lips. Assaulted by so many things at once she didn’t move her body, forgot about her hands, focusing on the feel of his mouth on hers, his fingers with talons on her scalp, through her hair. Turians didn’t kiss. Or so she’d thought. At least she’d never kissed one.


He’d practiced on somebody and she was effusively grateful to whoever had shown him what his mouth could do to human lips. Maybe he’d practiced an Asari. Whoever it was, bless you ma’am or sir.

She drew in a fast stuttered breath and tried to dedicate herself to the kiss as much as he had. He was nipping at her lips, the rough striated texture of the edges and flat of his mouth plates teasing and hard against her. Tree bark. He had the texture of smooth tree bark, like a birch or a…

Thought and comparison fled as his tongue slid along the line of her lips and then inside, and she could taste him, smell him, share his breath. Oh Goddess, Spirits, whoever is listening, I have good taste in men. Thank you.

He tasted like mint. She’d looked it up, because Turians tasted like mint. Mint plants had dextro-amino acids. He tasted like spinning mint, and with her eyes closed she got dizzy, held up by the press of his body and the tangle of his hands.

His tongue was long, thick, agile and pointed and he…wrapped his tongue around hers and squeezed and…oh fuck, prehensile tongue hugs. A warm, hard flush of blood through the surface of
her skin added to the power of the kiss, the slow instillation of whatever magic Turians kept in their systems, they’d never tell her, just smile. Turian secret.

She spared an internal swearing thought for wasting so much damned time alone and finally remembered she had hands, moved them to try to stroke blindly at his throat, but his cowl and her position made it impossible for her to straighten her elbows and she groaned in frustration, holding onto the edge of his armor with strained knuckles as he held her head still and kissed her, time slipping away and yes building.

When he pulled back she whimpered and his answering laugh was husky and expressive. He held her face in his hands, and he said “Change in plans. I’m not waiting here. Can you walk?”

She widened her eyes and said “Not sure. Don’t really want to. Five minutes?”

He shook his head emphatically “No minutes. Now. You walk or I carry you.”

She smiled “They both sound…really good. Let me try walking. I’m making no promises though.”

He said solemnly with his expressive, fearless eyes on her “I’ll be right there. I won’t let you fall.”

His voice was sincerity and promise, with an undercurrent of the passion she’d just felt and her knees chimed in with more weakness.

She said “Your voice is…really not fair.”

He laughed, said “I’ll take any advantage I can get.” He stepped back reluctantly, retrieved his gloves, set them aside, shut down his console with a few strokes while she was trying to catch her breath, then turned to look at her, sweeping his eyes up and down once appreciatively and reaching for the release for the door. He said “Ready?”

She nodded. The door swooshed open and the rush of air tested her balance, but she managed.

With the discipline born of walking while bleeding, shooting while wanting to scream and even possibly the discipline it took to not fall to her knees and do some begging right now, she walked coolly out of the Battery and he followed, a few steps behind.

The elevator took blessedly only a few seconds. She muttered "That armor has to come off or I'm taking a torch to it. Gets in my way." He answered as though on the battle field "I'm on it. If you're wearing anything you'd like to keep, stop wearing it, it's going to get damaged."

Once in her cabin she didn't put her hands on the clasps to his armor out of respect and military superstition. It was a bit like picking up his rifle. She wouldn't do it unless invited. The seals of his armor ensured his life. It was something he'd check five times putting it on, taking it off, ensuring the proper function of gaskets and locking rims. It was Turian armor and she knew it, she could take it off herself but it was just something…respectful? She wasn't sure, it might look reserved to him, but getting out of armor was a tricky thing and overzealous hands bending hasps or scratching surfaces could kill a mood, bring up a subject that didn't belong in bed. She was wearing something more casual, but not sexy. A strip tease from either of them right now would not be welcome. She wanted skin to plates now.

Now.

She was out of her clothes faster because she wasn't wearing anything that restrictive. With anticipation and apprehension racing along her nerves she set her clothes aside and leaned against the
He said with false grouch "You've got about seventeen seconds to reconsider your casual attitude."

She said lightly "I'm being appreciative."

He sighed and said "Can't you manage a little awe or something?"

She tilted her head "Awe is what got you here, it would be redundant."

He mock scowled "Tough talk from a woman who couldn't walk a few minutes ago."

She said "It's almost like I'm provoking you."

He considered, stripping off the last of his under suit. "Wouldn't be the first time, either."

She smiled brightly "And won't be the last." Awe was definitely there. The physique of Turians was always menacing, predatory and although they were compared to birds, dinosaurs and even insects, the word that always came to mind was "Raptor." Intelligent and lethal pack hunters whether referring to birds or dinosaurs. His talons were out, but they could recede into compartments running down the backs of his fingers at will, plates closing over them for protection. She liked both, the point and cool smoothness of a talon, and the warm, leathery hide of a blunt-tipped and plated finger. His groin plates were closed, unfortunately, and she couldn't see his cock, which would be segmented and articulated, covered with a millimeter of Turian magic, some gel that made her tongue numb and her hands tingle and everything internal clench and weep desire. Turians were always hard, had no orgasm or testicles, and relied on Turian magic for pleasure during sex. Magic that separated her will from her brain.

Plates closed meant he wasn't going to be all that provoked. She'd have to work on that. Goddess grant me time.

She took a moment to appreciate that she'd done it. She wouldn't be entirely alone. He was here, his sinuous limbs stripped of armor, head turning to focus his attention on her, friendship and respect intact. With the startling Turian speed that matched his strength he advanced in stalking posture and her stomach clenched with preternatural fear and uncivilized anticipation.

Her eyes softened with the affection and love she felt for him, separating from and rising above lust for a moment to say with sincerity before she lost her mind and couldn't do it "You amaze me. You are absolutely magnificent, Garrus." She raised a hand to trail along the edge of the bandage on the side of his face, fingers gentle over the rivulets of healing skin and rent plate. If he was looking for coy he had the wrong woman.

Teasing left his eyes and what remained was a reflection of how he felt about what she'd just said, clear, disarmed and appreciative. He took in a sharp breath and opened his mouth as if to speak, but he paused and instead tilted his crest to her forehead, her eyes closing from the repeated gesture of affection and respect. She almost felt like crying from the release of tension, worry and fear of what it would mean to ask him to take her in his arms. With her eyes closed she could finally smell him and not his armor, familiar as an undertone but not as a top note, mint, something like sandalwood and something like rich earth after rain, a scent that recalled the adrenaline echoes of battlefields and closed-eyed longings.

She hadn't been touched since she'd died, and before that not for so long. She would love to fool herself that she was in control of herself, but choosing a Turian as a partner meant that was not what
she was after. Choosing him meant he might understand her after following her, watching her for a year, either her ass or her choices, talking over a bottle, generating private jokes, loyalty and admiration. She was suddenly raw and needy and all of her calculations on realization dissolved into that idealized helplessness prematurely, anticipating what his hands, his voice, his body could do.

He pulled her away from her leaning on the wall to lean on him, and ran his claw tips over her shoulders and neck, humming in her ear, a growl building but low in his chest. She stifled a moan and then made a choice to not stifle a damned thing, her sudden louder and obvious appreciation causing his claws to pause momentarily and then return, reassured and harder on her back and shoulders.

He moved his mouth to her ear and said "This might be far more information than you want to hear, so if you get uncomfortable, stop me and we'll forget it happened, okay?"

Her pleasure-blurred brain realized this is what she’d said to him earlier, and scrambled to gain purchase on seriousness and focus. Remembering their earlier conversation she said thickly “I’ll try not to panic.”

He drew in breath and expelled it with a huff of appreciation, the shot of air to her ear going straight down her spine and sending out ripples of distraction. He said “Let me explain a Turian word to you. One of the moons of Palaven, Nanus, is lit with a blue cast, pale, like your eyes, and when I first saw you that was my impression. Moon eyes, set against the twilight of your skin. Then once I saw your hair fall over your eyes, I could see the moon swathed in shadow. Then I saw your waist and it all…” He paused, drew in a deep breath and said with a deeper throb in his sub-harmonics “The Kerim is the double eclipse of Nanus, curves of shadow moving in over the pale blue, Menae’s shadow on one side, Palaven’s shadow on the other, even and fleeting. It only happens every few hundred years. Not in my lifetime. Most Turians have never seen it, but know of it from art and history. Seeing the Kerim is a sign of great fortune, blessings from the Spirits. Following you is to see the Kerim each day. I love you. I will be there for you, my Kerim, or not be there as you choose. No fear. No failing. No folly.”

She was stunned and pouring with admiration and not a little intimidation at this poetic declaration. She said “Well, you just blew my seduction technique out of the sky. Holy…Garrus…I love you and you deserved better words.”

His arm tightened around her and he pressed her crest to her forehead again, both drawing in unsteady breaths. He said lightly “You should know that this was true long before now, and won’t change whatever comes after.” His mouth covered hers and he held her tight against him, his tongue swirling with spreading pleasure and his thigh moving so she rode him tortuously slow, his plate growing warm and slick under the friction, her nipples hard against his chest. His growl and the cumulative…everything…set her trembling and clutching at his shoulders, balance lost.

She was starving, needy and soaked in languor like she’d been hours in the sun, focusing on trying to move at all, her lips, her hands and her hips frantic and sporadic. It had been so long since anybody had touched her, had given her anything like this that the motion of his thigh ridge rubbing at her, just that little bit rough and rocking had her close and about to tip over, her moans against his mouth. She deliberately pushed her tongue against the tip of one of his teeth, enough to draw blood, because there wasn’t a damned Turian she’d met that didn’t want blood.

He stiffened and pulled back, his breathing harsh. She could see the embodiment of “Shots Fired” on his face. He was a sniper, and he was always, always ready for that. He said “I’d ask you what you want, but I think the best way to figure that out is to do all the things I want and see which ones make you pass out.”
Oh fuck.

Yes.

Oh fuck yes.

He had her spun around and pushed up against the glass of the fish tank in maybe three seconds, her
gasp from the change in position and cold against her cheek, against her breasts. Her body was caged
in by his, and he moved her hands until they were over her head, flat against the glass, nudging her
legs open wider with his knees and shoving her feet apart with his.

She said lightly “You can take the man out of C-Sec but you can’t take the C-Sec out of the man?”

His laugh was harsh in her ear and said “Yeah. It’s a classic. I spend so much of my time behind
you, this is a favorite image, but my imagination never did you justice. I never could have imagined
you smelled this good, you felt this good, you tasted this good.” His talons closed around her hips
and pulled her back and there he was, open, his cock digging into her back. He twisted one of her
hands behind her back and down and said in a rough demand “Touch me, my Kerim.”

Her hand curled, unable to fit her hand entirely around him, her hand going tingling and then numb
along his length, Turian magic seeping in through the gel that coated him. He was slick, segmented,
jointed and twisting through her fingers. He growled and bit down on the back of her shoulder, sharp
pain causing her to whimper, still clearly an appreciative sound, and she felt the trickling warm trails
of blood and his tongue on them.

His hands moved from her hips and her hand kept squeezing, stroking as he thrust against her palm
and fingers. His scent became intense, distinct, all Garrus, unmistakably him and nothing but him.
Turians had pheromone ridges on their shoulders and she thought he’d dragged his talons through
them. Her knees and arms started to tremble. The scent strengthened as he stroked his hands over her
shoulders, rubbed his face and moved his mandibles against her skin, stroked down her breasts,
talons trailing, down her stomach over rioting muscle. His hands glided to her thighs and scratched
lines down them, turning her trembles into shakes.

Turians didn’t mark humans. Turians having sex with humans was not supposed to happen. Ferelan
and other Turians had explained this to her, that it was taboo, impossible, risking becoming bare
faced, stripped of Turian identity. She’d been able to share pheromone scent in the air, but never
touched them or been touched by them. They were only for a potential Turian…mate. Garrus was
telling her he loved her, wanted her, he chose her, he was willing to say so with his mark despite
Turian tradition and social censure. She’d assumed when he mentioned scent that it would be his
skin on her skin that other sensitive species was picking up, but everyone would be able to tell.

He smelled like irresistible things.

She felt a protective impulse to warn him that although Turians were monogamous, eventually
anyway, bonding for a lifetime, she could not do that for him.

But then she recalled his words – first right of acceptance - no fear, no failing, no folly.

He’d asked her not to mask it with perfume and she never would.

He understood. She could be there for him, as she wanted to be, as she always would be if he asked
or even if he didn’t ask, understanding that the presence of other lovers would never threaten that
bond. The power to love him for as long as he was willing to paint her skin. She wanted him always
free to come to her, free to go to what made him happy if it was not her. To know that love was not
duty. That freedom wasn’t just hers, it belonged to both of them. Her head fell forward on the glass. Every emotional and physical tightness in her body and mind relaxed and the potential fulfillment of needs not filled in years, feared to be met not at all flooded her with a mix of triumph and surrender.

He licked at the back of her neck, breathing scent in long and exhaling hard, growling, setting his teeth and tongue to her skin. With feather-light delicacy from such huge hands he parted her folds wide with the V of spread fingers, the sensation of cold air followed by the stroke of his other hand on her clit making her lean more on the glass for support. Her hand faltered on his cock, sensory and emotional overload threatening her voluntary actions, and he said softly “Don’t stop, my Kerim. Don’t stop or I stop.” His hands stilled and she whimpered, focusing on the action of her hand, overwhelmed by the movements of his, and closing her eyes, breathing through her nose to get the most of his mark. His fingers drew her slowly, patiently, whimpering and then moaning and then keening through an orgasm that made her hand convulsively tighten on him while he growled in her ear.

He took her hand off his cock with one of his, wrapped his strong fingers around her numb ones and pressed both hands against the glass. He used his other hand to stroke his cock along the crack of her ass, bending his knees to guide it between her thighs to ride her slick heat, along, but not in. She whimpered incoherently and pushed back against him. He moved his mouth to her ear and said “Do you want me?”

She said a hoarse, emphatic “Yes.”

He kissed along her neck, the line of her shoulder, breathing in deeply in panting huffs, then moved his mouth back to her ear and said “Beg me, my Kerim.”

There was nothing she’d rather do and she babbled in her speed to comply “Please, please, please… Garrus, please…”

He was hilted inside in a sharp movement that made her scream and blurred the edges of her vision and made things slowly spin until she closed her eyes. He lifted her feet off the ground with an arm around her waist, his hand tightly holding hers. He straightened his knees and moved inside her, twisting, earning him another scream. His growl was lower, deeper, felt through his plates everywhere they touched her body and down her spine, with a feral edge that raised goose bumps on her skin. When she tried to shift to accommodate him he started to thrust, which Turians didn’t fucking do but this one did, just like he kissed, stronger Turian magic spilling into her bloodstream, scent making her lightheaded, the pain of harsh invasion transforming into blurred and warm interference patterns of spreading and rebounding pleasure. He bit down on her shoulder until she was bleeding warm trails down her back and breasts, the points where his teeth pierced little bursts of more sensation. His hand untangled from hers on the glass and moved to stroke at her clit again, her drugged mind turning his growls into the most delicious sound she’d ever heard, his fingers unerring perfection and his driving cock the pace necessary to keep her heart beating, her breath filling her lungs.

She came in a tight, rushing clamor, tried to hold onto consciousness but her vision faded in from the sides, narrowing and shrinking until it was gone, and then even his voice was gone.
Her alarm went off and she swiped at her Omni Tool to turn it off, disoriented for a moment and in a steeply awkward position that she didn’t understand until the presence of Garrus fell into place in her mind. She was cradled in his arms, with him still deep inside, a cascade of recalled pleasure from the night before, constant magic in her blood making her gratefully stretch back against him.

Considering all the stress and worry she’d had to deal with, she had probably just experienced the biggest 180 degree reversal of mental state in her life. Right about now she felt she could whip Harbinger armed with a teaspoon.

She dared to think the word ‘happy’ with no little awe. Not a word she’d often used.

Garrus stirred and nuzzled the back of her neck, his hand coming around to stroke her hair off her face, then straying down the curve of her ribs, her waist, her hip, and pressing her back, pushing his hips forward to hilt in fully with a groan, correcting what sleep had separated.

Definitely happy.

He kissed along the back of her neck and said “Morning, moonrise” in a deep rumble.

She said “Morning, love.”

He felt like home.

He nibbled at the edge of her ear and said “How long before you have to go be a responsible adult?”

She stretched as far as she could back against his body and said “I usually get up early…ish…so there’s time for sex. I don’t have to be anywhere for two hours.”

His teeth dragged over her spine and he said “Spirits, I love the way you think. You should never have to do that alone, and then we’ll get a shower and breakfast.”

She sighed and said “You’re moving in.”

He chuckled. “After breakfast.”

Part of the great joy of sleeping with someone was…actually sleeping, waking up in arms, lazy lips on hair and plate and skin. To have the first thing brought to mind upon waking be a lover, instead of the day ahead, was more shelter from the storm. Time went by blissfully, Garrus moved in and they spent spare time together, her lack of sleep compensated for by a huge boost in morale.

There was so much similarity between Turian and human career military traditions, so much about their personalities focused on right now and unapologetic sexuality that they had seamless and uncontested time together. Garrus had no undertone of anxiety, worry or oddly for a Turian, sense of pecking order. Well, yet. Well, maybe that was stowed away already. She had established the order and he accepted it. He’d chosen to live and die by her command. Maybe he’d learned everything he needed to know from her during their time on the SR1. He didn’t ask her questions about her prior lovers, something she always dreaded. She guarded a lover’s privacy as zealously as her own. He was willing to accept if not entirely embrace her terms as his own. There was command structure, and there was friendship and there was the ‘anything’ he’d promised her years ago. He was first
among equals, and she doubted she would find many people that were his equal, given the lack of such people existing and her shortened time frame.

He knew she couldn’t possibly give more and she would never give less until that was what he wanted. He seemed to understand, giving all he had in each moment as he did in combat.

Her relationship with Garrus was established and noticed, starting with Grunt and then when confirmed, the information moved through the crew like throwing a match on spilled fuel. It was thankfully nontraumatic, accompanied only by teasing and congratulations.

People were facing death, and definitely stressed, but also knew well enough that they needed to rely on each other to stay alive, and likely that she would not take well to anything phrased stronger than a tease or a joke.

Jack had commented “Finally picked one, huh?” Jane had only smiled and Jack knew her well enough at this point to say “Well, it’s not like I have a shot with the Drell, have at it. I probably never had a shot with Garrus. The man does not like tattoos.”

Grunt was all about the Krogan rights “Dammit, Shepard, if you’re getting some, you need to recruit a Krogan female. Unless you volunteer!”

Jane had said “I do not volunteer. You’re just going to have to suck it up and find your own female on shore leave, and content yourself with the fact that I give you lots of mercs to kill.”

Grunt conceded. “Well…there is that. Just keep an eye out for me. Next time we’re at a bar, back me up.”

Jane said “I’ll be there for you Grunt, but women are going to throw themselves at you once they see you. You are a handsome Krogan and you’ll be there to catch them.”

Grunt had just laughed.

She thought about how to approach Thane. If Thane wanted a shakedown run of his own, they were adults, they would manage. Garrus would amiably leave at any point, she knew, but she honestly didn’t want to ask him. She took him at his word, though, that he would be there or not be there as she chose, and to ask would not bring resentment.

She thought the odds of Thane saying yes were low, though Garrus had disagreed. He had shrugged and said “I never appreciated the Turian sense of smell until I came to realize how nose blind you are. I didn’t need words to know you wanted me. I don’t need words to know he wants you. It must be terrible being you.”

She had thrown a pillow at him and he had ruined her fun by catching it, then made her fun by pinning her down and saying “Poor Kerim. So inadequate.”

Yes, poor me. It’s terrible.

She decided to speak to Thane, to explain and hopefully accommodate.

Entering Life Support she asked if he were busy, and as usual Thane was meditating, looking at the drive core through the window.

She didn’t like the thought at all of him down here alone, with only the too-bright chrome and memories for company.
The echo of loneliness that she wanted to change for him pulled at her, sympathy and even solace in his presence as she tapped through the brief corridor to ask for his attention, hoping he did not turn her away once again has he had before. Not because of Garrus, but because he was measured, thoughtful and private, and when there was little to say he said nothing. She’d happily sit in silence.

Her hopes of success were low, but she still hoped for understanding and letting him know what she felt, regardless of outcome.

She said quietly “May I speak with you? It isn’t about the mission, and it isn’t as a commander. I don’t wish to intrude. I could come back later.”

He smiled and said in welcome “Of course, Siha, please sit.”

He still called her Siha, had explained what that meant, and it made her stomach flutter when he said it. She said “Thank you. I’m certain you are aware of the relationship I have with Garrus.” He nodded in acknowledgement and she continued “I am polyamorous. I would also like to have a relationship with you.”

Thane’s face hadn’t moved other than a very brief raise of an eye ridge that remained there, suspended as though he had frozen after realizing he had moved. He was still. She was still as well. There had been enough information for him to navigate. She needn’t add anything unless he asked. He would not appreciate babbling or humor or over explanation.

His eye ridge went down and the side of his mouth went up and he said simply “You surprise me, Siha.”

She smiled. No doubt.

He sat considering for a long time and neither of them spoke. She imagined him generating and discarding concerns and questions as they answered themselves from his own insight, but was unable to really mirror his thought process because he was so guarded. As was she. She respected not rushing ahead into unknown territory. She did not pressure him by seeking eye contact. She waited patiently, neutrally, for him to sort through in his time. Her trust was not misplaced, she was certain of it, and she felt better saying it, asking him.

He said quietly “I have watched you, Siha. You care deeply. You love with distinct and unapologetic passion. You do not always show it, but you do always feel it. Without that trait you would not be the leader you are. You would not be the woman you are.” He paused and then said “You offer me yourself. You have a lover, one who adores you, someone who has been by your side longer than I. I believe only you have the power to compel him to leave.” He shook his head slightly, body language uncharacteristically bewildered “Why would you risk that?”

She said softly “When I approached Garrus I informed him I would approach you. The only way he could loose me would be to ask me to choose. The only risk I could take would be to not ask you at all. I am loved, and I love. I do not love only one person, but I understand if that would make it impossible to love me in return.”

Thane’s voice warmed and moved as though to catch her from that verbal fall, saying “Not impossible. You are correct. You are loved. That shall not change as long as there is breath in me.”

Her heart started to hammer and dark silent rooms in her psyche felt as though air moved through them, light began to filter down into them. He was part of her in a way she could not communicate, because it was made of shared silence.
He looked at her with sorrow in his eyes for a moment, before he stood, stepped over to her and offered her his hand. She put her hand in his and he pulled her gently to her feet. He brought his hands to her face, slid his thumbs back along the line of her high cheekbones and then leaned in to kiss her, his mouth brushing hers. She began to tremble, drawing in a soft breath in surprise, knowing to be careful with a Drell’s lips, waiting for his invitation, his pace. From the brush of his fingers, the radiating tingle and sway from his thumbs on her skin, she knew within seconds that his venom was different from any she had encountered, unexpectedly strong. One more way in which he was special. Over melting moments her balance faltered, causing his hand to leave her face and support her by pulling her hard to him with his arm around her waist.

His other arm came around her shoulders, the disorientation and dizziness wickedly fast along her nerves, her eyes closing against blooms of color, wanting to focus on nothing but where his body touched hers. She felt the tiremit bubble through her blood, her lips tingling, her mouth vibrating. If she took too much she might faint, she’d be out, and she did not want to miss this, not a moment. Just by being there he had lit a fire in her, made her seek a need that hadn’t existed until he had existed, and he stoked warm need into fire with his mouth, his hands, the soft groans as he kissed her. His kiss grew open mouthed and hard, relentless invasion and systematic ruining of admittedly weak defenses and will where he was concerned. Her blood pounded audibly and what would otherwise be painfully hard inside her skull, but instead pleasure raced along blood paths and muscle. A feeling solidified, the sense of being poised, open only to what he wanted, waiting and anticipating any need he might express, longing to give back anything, everything…

He pulled back and auroras of color with framing texture danced around him. She couldn’t move unless he said so, she was certain of it, the tiremit finding its own way through her mind. This was not only more venom, stronger venom, there was not just building pleasure but draining will…very useful to an assassin. She wasn’t afraid, but she momentarily thought she should be, then lost that thought. He still looked as though he felt sorrow and she couldn’t stand that idea, wanting to find the words, but not knowing what words were. He brought his mouth to her ear and the blessed words started, making her feel as though her life was starting, she had a purpose.

He asked softly “Do you love me, Siha?”

She found the word she needed, the only word possible in response. “Yes.”

He breathed in a deep sigh and said “I love you. You are wisdom and you are a guiding beacon. Without you I would be lost to life, lost to light.”

She felt the spreading warmth of happiness at hearing his words. They must be true or he would not say them.

He kissed her brow and then straightened, supporting her. He was her only balance and she waited for new words or new actions. His hands ran over her back, soothing, and her brows drew together, something wrong. Something was wrong and she didn’t know and he had to tell her. The sorrow was filling his eyes and a tear fell in a distinct track on his face, hallucination enhancing it and making it an unbearable portent.

His smile was aching, painful and his voice hoarse. He said “My beautiful Siha, bringer of fate, I love you. Of the things I might wish for myself, it would be to be a man that deserves you, who would live long enough to show you how you are adored. I am dying, and I am not who you need. Never doubt for a moment that you are loved. Know that this is my will, that you be happy, without me. I shall live out my days with the memory of your offer and your kiss.”

This was wrong and right and wrong and it felt as though she were back in Morinth’s arms, compelled. There was a conflict between what he said and what he meant and she could not
She closed her eyes and dragged in a deep breath, pulling up with an effort that broke sweat out on her skin what she knew to be true and comparing it to hopes, to dreams.

He loved her.

She loved him.

Truths.

A lifetime of personal discipline that created high, steep walls and inhibitions against doing exactly what he was doing, what he knew he was doing, compelling and controlling, gave her the distinct framework to know how to navigate.

He was pushing her on purpose to warn her away and to create a boundary. To protect her, to protect him, to…

She had to, absolutely had to respect that boundary, respect his expressed wish of no, but…

Damn every bit of self control she owned, and damn him for knowing it, and damn if it didn’t make him even more attractive.

If a Prothean fucking beacon and an Ardat-Yakshi were not going to break her will, she’d be damned if he would.

She…didn’t need protecting. Not like that. Navigation meant making that clear to him. Despite the framework, she wasn’t afraid, that’s not what this was about. He wasn’t…kind…but he wasn’t cruel. He could be, and would be, if necessary, but it wouldn’t be necessary.

She knew where she stood, she knew where he stood, and if he was going to do it this way, she could do something in mirror symmetry, call it retaliation and demonstration, and stop at the line he had crossed, the line she would never cross.

She took a deep breath, ignored compulsion, ignored hallucination, ignored desire, found her focused intent. She knew what he meant, knew he was right, but right did not mean true and only their shared silence made up that difference in nuance.

She finally used her hands, lifted them and traced the textures of his face, knowing the reality from the illusion, separating them and appreciating them for who and what they were.

She said with a strength she suddenly felt, pulling from some internal well “Thane, you deserve me because I say so.” She took her own kiss from him, disregarding the swirling chant of venom as she might disregard a broken bone or a gunshot wound during battle. It was there, she knew its power, and it could fuck off for the moment, she had something to do.

She wanted to give him what he wanted, but there was something wrong with the shape of his words so she would give him what he needed. She kissed him, fingers along the wave-paths of his frill, gentle and invested with her sense of certainty in the chaos, what she wanted him to feel. His self denial ran so deep it was as much a part of him as her self control was a part of her. Ironically they kept each other company in that effort and always would.

Her mouth moved to his ear and she said “Thane, your will is your own. I will not cross that line. You can’t make me stop loving you, you can only choose to starve yourself, fearing famine. Don’t be afraid.”
That wasn’t…exactly right but she only knew a few things, there were too many things and she was satisfied with swimming up through the whirl he had created and finding a truth. Not all, but some. Enough.

Enough for now.

When she drew back the streaming, pulsing lights of tiremit framed a man in shock.

Good. Shock is good.

She had asked, and the asking had brought a kiss, and the kiss had brought a truth and a lie and his face in this moment, and it was enough to know that the asking brought its own reward.

She resisted the impulse to return again to his mind, to his heart, to all the things promised by his presence. If he chose to be alone, she would respect that.

She would love him and he would love her, and they would both know it. More company in effort.

She kissed his brow, lingering, a forgiving and understanding benediction, and then she turned and left, hard-fought balance taking all her concentration.

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Admiral Hackett had made a request and she was going to fulfill it, hoping to score some Alliance points. It rhymed with ‘trap’ but her sense of alarm had been eroded because everything was alarming, everything was lethal, everything was a potential trap.

She would need to inform Garrus as her second of command that she would be off the ship for an extended period of time, but she did not plan to do that until the last minute. He would not like it, but he was an excellent soldier that followed difficult orders.

She and Garrus had settled into an evening routine that involved her never-ending approvals and research, things she made take longer than they might necessarily take because of her triple checking each request. She cross referenced each fact with fresh eyes and as much independent information as she could gather after time had passed since the first review, to avoid missing something out of habit or distraction. He tinkered with weapons, hers or his, or anybody else’s if they had made a request or he had noticed something that could be adjusted for better utility. They spent time sharing industry, dedication and attention to detail.

A chime at the door brought Thane into her cabin. There was something off about him and he seemed…very un-Thane like. He seemed almost agitated, tension held in his face and hands.

She said casually “What’s up?” She didn’t want to draw attention to his agitation, but likely Garrus could smell…whatever…was going on.

Thane stood in the entryway, hesitating, until she gestured him in, which he did only after more hesitation.

Garrus said “It appears this is something important, would you prefer that I left?”

Thane raised a hand and said “No, I…I believe this is something that you should both know. Please stay.”

Jane waited. Garrus was stillness. Thane was silent for long moments and then he said “In discussion with EDI, she mentioned we were on the way to the Bahak system. I grew…concerned.”
Jane said briefly “Yes. I have a mission there.”

Thane’s jaw jutted briefly and he twisted his head slightly, a sharp huff of an exhale. He said “There is only one location of note in the Bahak system, a place where I have had dealings.”

Garrus sat back, crossing his arms over his chest, listening.

Jane was not going to give away anything right now, so she also stayed silent.

Eyes on Garrus, Thane said “There is a Batarian black ops prison in that system and little else. It appears we are headed straight for it.” He turned his penetrating gaze to Jane. “I was concerned you would attempt infiltration with a team of three. The idea that you would attempt to infiltrate that facility alone is something I would warn you against.” His eyes grew harder and he said “I would be willing to physically restrain you to keep you from attempting it.”

Garrus laughed, Jane smiled. She said “Objection noted.”

Garrus said mildly “Now I want to hear why.”

Thane’s eyes turned to him and he said “I know the facility well. I have infiltrated it in the past. However, I had resources at my disposal that Shepard does not have, and the risk was higher than I knew. I also had only to get in and get out myself, not attempt to leave with another person.”

Jane tossed a data pad aside with frustration and said “Well, it’s not as though my job is a breeze on a normal day.”

Thane said with what was, for him, anger, more intimidating than any of Jack’s tantrums. “It is an unacceptable risk taken for an unknown reward. I do not trust Hackett, I do not trust that this is not a trap, and I find it hard to imagine any outcome that would benefit you, and many outcomes resulting in your torture and ultimate death.”

Jane was getting angry herself “How the hell did you know it was from Hackett?”

Thane said as though she should know better, and she probably should have. “You cannot imagine that I would enter into this discussion, over your life, blind. The most likely outcome would be that you would dismiss my concerns or lie to me and I do not have the time to waste on that course of action.”

Jane closed her eyes and said “So much for privacy.” She sighed and tipped her head back, massaging the bridge of her nose with her hand. Whatever damage could be done regarding security had been done. Drell Genie was not going back in the bottle, and she should listen to why he took the risk. Her own sense of trap intensified with the information he gave her. She dropped her hand and said carefully “Don’t sweat it, Thane. I have little expectation of privacy to begin with. I trust you. You wouldn’t do it…well, let me rephrase…you wouldn’t admit to doing it unless you felt this was important enough to expose yourself to my potential anger. You decided to say it front of Garrus, so you were willing to risk his anger. I get it. I know you’re risking your life so I don’t risk mine. You can both stand down. No executions today.”

Garrus said with deceptive mildness “Really, I was mostly thinking of shaking his hand and asking for access to his decryption suite. What the hell is going on?”

Jane sighed as another element of Thane’s approach clicked in like the final tumbler of an opening lock “Yeah. Thane’s smart. Another reason to say this in front of you. Plausible deniability lost. Damn it. Go on. Enlighten him.”
Thane explained “Hackett has proposed a single-operative mission of facility infiltration, Shepard going in alone and bringing out an Alliance member. I know the facility and unless she has had blueprints and facility specifications delivered to her, which is unlikely, and inside cooperation, which was the only thing making it possible for me to attempt it, she is going into an unacceptable level of trap and needlessly risking capture in a facility capable of defense against military-grade assault. The variety of torture available room to room should give anybody pause.” He turned back to Jane and she was Drell scolded, the distortion of his voice more distinct “Your mission is more important than any one member of the Alliance. They have offered you no resources, no support to get this done.”

Garrus turned to Jane for confirmation, who shrugged and said “Yup. We both can read.”

Garrus now was angry “What possessed you to say yes to that?”

Jane looked at them both in turn and said “If I can read both of your faces, I believe the only acceptable answer is ‘ego’ or possibly ‘hubris.’ I’m a soldier. I say yes. It’s what I do.”

Thane said with contempt for the idea dripping from his voice “You are not an Alliance soldier. The risks are unacceptable and to say yes to this is to say no to the team you have built, the goal of the Collector base. It is foolhardy and beneath you.”

Jane said with a dismissive shrug “I don’t know about beneath me, I’ve done some pretty stupid things.”

Garrus said intently “You have a team now, Shepard. What would make you discount them?”

Jane said with heat “Because I’m the commander? Because I’m an Infiltrator? Because it’s theoretically secret and I am not in the habit of making others take risks without clearance, and I can’t grant clearance? I was asked a favor. In confidence. Perhaps you both might understand that happening to me.”

Thane didn’t take the bait, dismissing her attempt at distraction and said “That is why I have taken it upon myself to gain that clearance and transfer it to Garrus. Siha, do not do this thing. I present not only the extent of the problem, but I can provide a solution. I still have the information on that base, I still have contacts. I can make arrangements for extraction without risking your life. I could use Batarian agents of proven negotiable allegiance. I have more than sufficient means, contacts and influence. The end result would be Dr. Kenson no longer in the facility, returned to Alliance hands. You are an Infiltrator, yes, but you are trained for the battlefield and not in subtlety. This is not about leaving a trail of bodies in one direction, it is about moving in and out, taking no life, not being seen, escorting out someone with an unknown capacity for stealth.”

Jane shrugged as if to say “Yeah, that’s fair.” Dantius Towers had proven his point for him. This conversation was making his point for him.

Thane continued “I suggest you ask Liara regarding all information about Dr. Kenson’s project.”

Garrus said “Either way it would be inviting disaster to go in unprepared.”

Jane sighed and said “Do it. We’ll hold our course. Let me know your progress. You’ve convinced me.”

Thane visibly relaxed and Garrus said “Thank you, Thane.” Thane nodded and a look passed between them. Garrus leaned back and said “While we’re being indiscreet, why aren’t you two sleeping together?”
Thane’s eye ridge raised again. Surprise at the question or surprise that she hadn’t told Garrus what had happened? Both? Jane said succinctly “He turned me down.”

Garrus looked more closely at Thane and said “Really?”

Thane said “There were…incompatible…”

Jane shrugged and said “Seemed compatible to me, but the man has free will.”

Thane looked pained, and something else. His eyes moved from Jane to Garrus and then Garrus said “Oh, okay, I think I get it. Well, one good invasion of privacy and risking of life for a good cause deserves another.”

Garrus walked over to the now obviously uncomfortable Thane. Moving slowly, Garrus loomed over Thane, tipped Thane’s chin up with the turned side of a talon, and kissed him.

She was not even considering averting her eyes. Her privacy had just recently been violated by these two. She was going to enjoy this.

Thane could not possibly have anticipated being kissed by a Turian, because they didn’t kiss. Except for this one.

Damn, but she had excellent taste in exceptional men.

She heard a sharply indrawn breath, didn’t know who it came from, but Thane hadn’t killed him yet. Didn’t look like it was going to happen. Thane’s hands, out to his sides, spread out tense fingers wide, then drew them back into balled fists. Garrus’s back was to her and she could only see part of the embrace, but what she saw and heard made her toes curl.

After a few moments and a Garrus groan, he slanted his head to the side, deepened the kiss and put his arm around Thane’s waist. Thane’s hand came up behind Garrus’s fringe, sliding fingertips along the hide there, eliciting a Thane groan and Garrus groan together. Beautiful sounds.

She couldn’t stop her smile. She did refrain from clapping, but only just.

She could see when tiremit began to affect Garrus, who let out a heartfelt-helpless moan. She knew the taste of that moan exactly. Thane made a sound that she understood as well. Turian magic. With one hand on Garrus’s shoulder pushing down and his other hand at the back of Garrus’s fringe tips, tugging, Garrus’s knees bent and his head tilted back. Now she could see so much better. Garrus’s arm around Thane’s waist looked more like holding on than holding to, and Thane’s hands moved to the sides of Garrus’s throat. Thane tilted Garrus’s mouth under his, robbing Garrus of height and balance in brief seconds. She could see that Thane’s hands were trembling.

Garrus staggered back slightly, put his hand out for support and sat down heavily on the couch.

Thane had difficulty regulating his breathing.

She just kept smiling. Finally. She got to be smug for once.

Garrus said “Okay. Point made.”

Thane still had difficult regulating his breathing. Jane’s lips twitched but she did not laugh, taking in her flustered gentlemen.

Garrus said to Thane after clearing his throat “We’ve got work to do, and I assume you need privacy
to conduct yours with your contacts. You need to come back later.”

Thane smiled slowly, clearly relishing his new opportunities, bowed, and then left.

Garrus leaned back, his fringe hooked over the edge of the couch “Oh by the Spirits. I’m not gonna lie. I’m a little bit intimidated here.”

Jane grinned and said “What the hell just happened?”

Garrus said with exasperation “I kissed him, did you miss it?”

Jane shook her head slowly “I did not miss it. I missed…why did you kiss him?”

Garrus waved a hand “I…it was an impulse, but I had a bit to go on. I know he wants you. I even know he wants me. I thought…what he didn’t know is that I wanted him. The man just saved your life extravagantly, by the way, and by extension, a lot of lives, mine included. It was only fair.”

Jane said with a raised brow “Of course it was only done out of fairness. So…he turned me down…to avoid making you…uncomfortable?”

Garrus said “Yup. That was my hunch, anyway. Seems we cleared that up.”

Jane said “That is…” She thought for a moment and said “Chivalrous.”

Garrus said after a gulp of air “Yeah. He’ll be back.”

Jane stood up and climbed onto his lap facing him and his arms came around her with a convulsive groan. He said “That man is not a normal Drell. Spirits, you’re beautiful…and glowing.”

Jane leaned in and nudged at a mandible with her lips until he groaned. She said “He is not a normal Drell. You are magnificent…and brave.”

He kissed her ravenously and dizziness simmered through her. The sense of family, of team, of cooperation, of joy was filtering through her mind like sun.

He kissed along her skin and said “Why didn’t you warn me?”

She thought through the sunshine and said “Warn you about what?”

He enunciated carefully “Not. A. Normal. Drell.”

She said while nuzzling at his jawline “Didn’t think it would come up.”

Garrus laughed with an edge of mania to it “Spirits, were you wrong.”

She sighed and smiled and then said “Seems that is happening a lot with more people paying attention.”

Garrus pulled back, venom drunk and amorous, but his voice was deep and sure “My Kerim, we will keep you alive despite your best efforts to get yourself killed.”

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They didn’t see Thane again that night, or the next night. He was closeted and making arrangements. Discussion with Liara made Jane and Garrus more certain that Thane’s way was best. Thane was up for nearly three days straight formulating the plans and contingencies of Amanda Kenson's rescue.
She had been deep into research and Garrus had assisted with day to day ship operations, research and coordination with Liara.

Sleep had caught her once at her desk and Garrus had carried her to bed. She had kissed him lingeringly, thanked him and then immediately gotten back up and taken a stim, back to work. He had not argued and was blessedly free of facial expression indicating disapproval. She felt gratitude she had not expressed. The only thing that existed right now was the job, her focus against the backdrop of catastrophe self-enforcing. She did manage some sleep, but once Thane had given her an active role in moment to moment choices, she was in for the duration.

Liara had responded quickly to her questions and told her “After looking into it, the station where Dr. Kenson worked has a number of irregularities. There are many people going there, but no travel off the station. Communication to family goes unanswered. It isn’t due to security, and it isn’t about encryption. People just go there and then after a few days do not answer or send outside communicate and they never leave. I have some data that reflects suspected indoctrinated sites, and they tend to follow the same pattern. Whatever this project is, my best advice would be to call the Alliance’s attention to it, let them handle it with force. I don’t know how indoctrination works, but I do think this is what it looks like. The previous Shadow Broker had been running comparison studies and Glyph has a database. I’ll look for more and I’ll let you know. This isn’t right, Jane. Don’t go in there.”

She changed the humidity and temperature controls in their quarters to those recommended for Drell occupants, warmer and drier. Well, it just meant…she could wear less in the way of clothing, right?

She could tell Thane was tired by his skin going dull. Her time with Urem had taught her signs and signals she knew intimately. It was as clear as red eyes might be on a human.

She hadn’t time for romantic gestures or poignancy, this was something she wanted done. Garrus had been easy, telling him to move in, but Thane was different.

She asked Garrus to figure out how to convince Thane to move in. He was clearly more persuasive. And charming. And not ready to fall over asleep mid posture, or say things like “Move in good” which is where she was headed. It would work, and that’s what mattered. Garrus was so far the most successful at getting a yes out of the man.

Decision making was difficult in the dark, but Jane was grateful…very grateful, as it turned out…that Thane had intervened. His contacts were able to get Amanda Kenson out of prison and transferred to the ship. Jane asked Samara to carefully, carefully question the woman, find out as much as she could about Kenson’s project. Grateful to be rescued, Kenson easily spoke of her mission and the relay, and that Reapers were coming…and that’s where Dr. Kenson went off the rails during repeated questioning on that point. Samara was able to calm and soothe her, resorting to mind probe after the realization that the woman’s mind was already gone and not being able to risk further loss of time on justifying gibberish.

Kenson knew the Reapers were coming because had been told by an indoctrination artifact.

Relays and Batarians and Reapers. Oh my.

Samara remarked that it was “Very informative” to navigate the mind of an indoctrinated person, though she herself felt no ill effects, so based on her observations indoctrination was not applied through the transitive property. Samara said “If I feel the urge to kill you instead of the Collectors, Shepard, I will let you know immediately.”

So comforting.
They had vanishingly little time. With the information she had, Jane contacted Admiral Hackett, advised him to independently confirm. She recommended they set off the asteroid remotely, evacuating all staff with overwhelming force and keeping them isolated, as they were most likely indoctrinated. Dr. Kenson was returned to Admiral Hackett alive, and Thane arranged through his Batarian contacts to warn the colony of imminent destruction with manufactured evidence regarding the Mass Effect relay being unstable and ready to detonate. The Alliance was not implicated. Evacuation was arranged, and Jane had insisted Alliance transport be diverted to offer help, as the Batarian fleet was not close enough and there was not enough transport on the colony to evacuate everyone.

It was the first cooperative Alliance-Batarian humanitarian effort. Bataritarian effort? It was effort. People were alive.

She stood at her console in the CIC, going over correspondence and reports, composing correspondence, and occasionally just standing there, exhausted and waiting for a sixth wind. She had been up for three days now, and the stim was wearing off. Evacuation was still in progress and the detonation was in two hours. Reporting 94% evacuated.

Two hours.

A new stim would keep her up for six hours, but she was nauseated and shaky already, far past recommended dosages and uses.

She’d been up for five days once, it wasn’t pretty, she didn’t want to repeat it. At this rate she just needed to sleep for a day, not go to the Med Bay for a week.

She could stay awake for 6%.

She did it with gritty eyes and gritting teeth and blurred vision, but she did it.

Hundreds of thousands of lives were saved. Not a drop of human or Batarian blood spilled.

A Reaper invasion was thwarted.

She hadn’t left the ship.

The lesson of team would remain with her from that day forward. She spent those two tense hours considering the trust and bond she had forged with Garrus, with Thane, with Liara during this crisis. She considered that her odds of a better outcome on her own were realistically negligible.

She absolutely had to counteract her tendency toward command isolation.

The Alliance was no longer her family, and she knew it. Her trust in Admiral Hackett dimmed. He would have thrown her like a scrap of meat to a pack of Batarians, to rescue an indoctrinated woman who would have turned on her, and everyone they had just saved would have been at ground zero for the first full Reaper incursion. Hundreds of thousands of indoctrinated or slaughtered Batarians.

She didn’t think that Hackett intended for it to be a trap, but him doing it as an ‘honest mistake’ was not reassuring either. Thane dishonestly getting the information required was much preferred.

She had been guilty of hubris, and she had not been triple checking everything she needed to check.

Now she needed food, sleep, painkillers and shore leave.

She asked Joker to change course and head toward IIlum.
She didn't like the Citadel, because she didn't trust the Citadel and spent only what time was necessary there. The Keepers, the hidden relays, the information about the Citadel being a custom-built Reaper trap made her too tense to stay and unwilling to spend time overnight. If they were forced into a layover, she always slept on the ship.

Ilium had no memories of strewn bodies, no reminders of Urem's loss and her failure to save him.

She made it back to her cabin around 3:20 ship time, about an hour from when she usually woke.

She made her way silently to step down and see Thane and Garrus tumbled in bed, new holes in the sheets, familiar marks of Turian talons. Garrus was the big spoon. Obviously.

The sight made her feel serene. Thane was here, Garrus was here, she’d get there eventually. She didn’t want to get between them or pick a side, didn’t want to insert herself, she just wanted to let them sleep. Right now wasn’t about her.

She silently took a utilitarian shower, stowed her gear, shut off alarms and chose to curl up on the couch, her eyes drinking the sight of them in until she fell asleep.
Chapter 3

She woke with a start but didn’t go far, arms were around her. Twisting she turned to look, Thane’s solemn face was looking down at her. They were on the couch, she was on his lap, her head against his chest.

Thane said softly “Sleep, Siha. You have only slept a few hours. Garrus is on duty. I will be here when you wake.”

Reassured, she fell back asleep with his lips pressed to her hair.

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She woke next in bed, room dark except for a few glowing bits of electronics and the light from the fish tank.


Not dead or tortured in a Batarian prison.

Not responsible for genocide.

She owed the last two to the man whose arms were around her.

She was tired and awake, grateful and horrified, and above all, absolutely safe in this moment from judgment. Thane led to Irikah, which led to grief, which led to Urem, and she could barely catch her breath for all the swarming unspokens that swamped her in the open and trusting silence.

She started to cry, which she did silently, muscles tense and eyes closed, not resisting the tears, but making no sounds or movements of distress. Urem’s death for her was still immediate and personal, though it had been years for everyone else. Nobody knew of his existence or their involvement, they both had been inclined toward deep privacy. Sympathy otherwise would require a story she would not tell because words paled in comparison to her reality.

Her cumulative sorrows made it seem to her like she’d gone to the center of the Earth, felt the unbearable pressure, been surrounded by burning, inescapable magma. When she returned to the surface if she tried to bring a sample of that experience with her, it was always cold stone when she opened her hands or her mouth to reveal it. Now it was obsidian, unique and sharp and…still nothing near her experience. Something to slice her tongue and palm if she tried to hold it or speak of it. Only a remnant, a memory and a pale, cold shadow. She had stopped trying to find words.

She didn’t have to tell it, but she could feel it fully for the first time right now, knowing Thane would understand in that way he did, the way Urem did, without being told, by some Drell empathy that transcended being able to read a person and verged on the supernatural for her.

She hadn’t mourned Urem’s death or her own death, merely acknowledging the wreck of her life and supplanting it with purpose. She still had purpose but no foundation of living when it wasn’t connected to her mission, and the mission would likely kill her, kill those under her command, kill those she loved.

Again. Kill those she loved again.
She wasn’t going to stop or apologize. She would continue on the path that cost lives, making her seem unrepentant…a cold, using bitch. She was walking wounded, her body rehabilitated but her mind segmented, patch worked and shattered, some thoughts cut off with no paths to them, only an uncrossed divide in narrow, deep canyons that cut to the center of her world. She was fueled by spirit and stubborn. Being blindly willing to walk directly into a trap had illustrated how very broken and numbed she had become to potential dangers, how seductive the idea of dying and staying that way had become.

She had more in common with Thane than he knew, and he had been more honest about it.

Thane’s arms stayed reassuring, strong, and he rocked her gently, his head bowed so his lips brushed her hair. He hummed and she was struck again by the similarity between Urem and Thane, wondering if this sound was how Drell mothers and fathers comforted their children through pain or nightmare. This was a sound of pure empathy, penetrating her frayed nerves and soothing, changing a mood the way music would, inherently therapeutic and insistent on its own nature. Urem had done this for her after Virmire, and that was the last time she had seen him, been held, been truly comforted and understood without words in her ever-narrowing, trapping sorrow and grief.

The person who had comforted her after Kaidan’s death had been killed by Sovereign and it seemed like a death sentence to be asked to sympathize with her.

Thane already had a death sentence.

Garrus always comforted her by his relentless insistence on making things right, the indomitable spirit of necessary change. Thane comforted her in the acceptance that some things would never be right, but they could be endured with grace. She needed them both in the way that she needed water and air. Sometimes she felt more Turian, more Drell than she felt human, but she’d had the benefit of the best of those cultures, and the worst of her own.

Please let me represent some of the best of humanity. I’d like to contribute…something…

With that thought she determined that self worth in this moment would not fall farther, would not sink another foothold. Of course she contributed.

She knew if she’d said that aloud, Garrus would have given her a look that meant ‘You utterly stupid human, not only nose blind but deluded.’ She couldn’t decide if he’d roll his eyes and dismiss her comment as unworthy or come to her and convince her otherwise, and perhaps that’s where the thought led and was its only purpose. She knew better, but mood occasionally built its own truths from the only materials at hand, shifting sand and fog.

Buoyed by Thane’s presence, there was a sense of warm rain, his comforting hum allowed the flood to lift her up and out, float along, jagged concerns left behind. Slowly her tears stopped, her breath moved evenly and without strain, and her muscles began to relax, allowing the alchemy of his presence to guide her. Once she was calm his fingertips moved along her skin, warmth from venom slipping into her mind like slow sips of potent wine. He paced his touches, and he spun gently rocking bliss through her as she took her cue from him that nothing need be said, added or taken away.

She’d sleep on the couch all the time if she could only have this. They stayed that way for most of an hour, the sensation much like floating on calm, deep waters, no direction, no intention other than soaking in the moment.

Slowly his fingers on her skin changed. The water was deep and she was not alone and there was a slow, building churning that worked its way up in stronger waves, her own hitching breath. His
hands hadn’t strayed from her face, her throat, her collarbones, but the subtle shift of his body’s tension, the deeper, pressing strength of his fingers brought her away from a state of solitary comforted bliss and closer to being in a man’s arms.

She knew venom and she became more certain that the insidious difference in Thane’s venom was not her imagination. She felt like petals opening in the dawn sunlight, the light at first weak and trembling, then stronger, delicate lengths unfurling because that was what they were meant to do, to seek the sun, to follow its path, root-bound and reliant. Helpless and reactive. Each moment seemed to reach for poetry, to reassign sensations to a deeper motive while remaining skin on skin, influence and communion.

Everything he did seemed to reach a sense of mathematical elegance, of fractal patterns spinning out in predetermined beauty, his palm on the side of her throat and lips at the line of her jaw a revelation of what palms and jaws and lips were for. Her skin was warmed by his hands, her new sun and cloud, passing heat and cooling shade. Double-track nails down the line of her throat set shivers and ripples down her spine. She followed his breath, falling into rhythm with his inhales and exhales, both slowly accelerating like deeper waves in the water, a wind moving over the surface, chop and froth and overset splashes.

The hard, heated length of his cock was against her ass, cloth and leather between them, and that started a spreading flush of being wanted, a flooding rush of something denied. She knew she was loved, but not wanted. He’d said no to her. He wanted Garrus and she wanted them to be happy, they could want and she could love.

Deep end of the water.

Out of her depth.

Restlessness of wrong place rose like trailing vines, information along internal walls to be heeded. She was only human. Not enough. Not for this. No pleasure in her skin stored to be released with a lover’s caress, only skin.

Thane’s gentle, careful touches suddenly seemed condescending, herding her like a child through a simple maze, clapping his hands at her effort.

Discipline closed down on that thought. Not to say. Not to show. Insecurity of a chosen position loomed, like cover collapsing and exposure sure, rockets aimed.

Thane’s hands trembling as Garrus kissed him, Kerim, eclipse…

She faltered in her paced breathing, clamped down on control to physically relax, to give to love and not want, to not think ‘pity fuck’ in weakening and strengthening echoes through baffled canyons of thought.

Too late to not be noticed. She kept her eyes tightly closed, and his careful hands turned her face to his and he kissed her, stinging, streaming and bucking counter-current in her from more direct tiremit and moving through the maze. Hot, lust-streaked mouth, harder pulse against her ass, want provoked in her with ease. So easy, she’s so easy. A fast huff of almost laugh leaves in her breath.

He pulls back and her lips follow his until they can’t, and she waits in streaming darkened, shaded lust/not/love/pity/need.

Please don’t.

He tips her chin up with a fingertip and says what please don’t meant “Open your eyes, Siha.”
She does, eyes were allowed but not wanted now, but his…voice…no more kissing, no more asking, no more.

She expected lazy thoughtful Thane, sleepy and deliberate until he wasn’t. Instead blood-dripping bone snapped Thane studied her face, super-fluid calculation in his eyes. She thought he knew until he said “Tell me.”


Astringent cold denial sluiced through her veins, countering the warmth, denying his quiet expectation of obedience.

She shook her head slowly. The same shock lit his face that she’d seen before, in Life Support. Shock was still good. Very good.

And then she knew. Not earned. Shock seen in him not her.

Never pity.

NEVER…pity…in his eyes.

Not condescension, but caution.

Blood-dripping bone snapped Siha, he saw.

She knew and he said it, power given, admiration and capitulation in his voice. He said slowly “You are the only person who can do that, Siha.”

She knew. Words thick and wrong, she waited. He traced light fingertips over her cheekbones and asked “Did you find a counteragent to my venom? I know of none.”

She shook her head and he kissed her again, mouth hot teeth demand. He said “I cannot make you do anything that you do not already wish to do. Whatever it is you wish to hide shall remain hidden. I am in the dark.”

Pride and place rushed through her veins and even, even balance again, two feet. He smiled, lust anticipation teeth, and said with heat thickened voice “Before you become too proud, Siha… remember…I work well in the dark, and I will find the things you wish to do.”

Poor Kerimsiha. So inadequate.

She smiled and said “Poor me. It’s terrible.”

Dark eyes lust darker.

Yes.

My yes to give, not your yes to take.

All the yes I have.

Storm was in his eyes, hallucinations forming cloud and rain and flashes in the depths, the heavy waiting of a thunderstorm that begins with a picked up breeze and dimming of light, something seen far off, flickering behind his regained control, recovery from surprise, wondering what to do with her.
He chose to kiss her, lavish with venom. He pulled her to face him, straddle him, moving her until her knees were flush along his outer thighs, her hair surrounding them in a shifting curtain. Her moment of clarity sustained her in the storm and there was no more thought until his mouth moved to her ear and his voice poured over her “Jane…” He’d never said it and suddenly her name-that-rhymed-with-plain was exotic and intimate. He moved his lips down the side of her throat and said “Jane…what if I am nothing but hunger and death and lies?”

It sounded menacing and the hair on the back of her neck rose, but she wasn’t that fogged or uncertain anymore, hearing the question in his voice, the warning, the attempt to protect her, again, from who he was.

The chills he evoked on her skin with his fingertips and lips were as true as his question, as true as her answer. She focused on the shape of the truth and said very carefully and slowly, her hands pulling his face so he looked at her as she spoke and she could see who was important, why she must focus “Thane…what if your hunger matches mine? What if I ask you to kill every day? What if I owe my life to your lies?”

That called the storm down from him, torrents and flashes that started in his eyes and moved through his hands, through his voice speaking her name, ripples set loose and spreading. This was recreation of the myth of how life began in a stormy, barren pool, something small and deep and determined, lightning from above giving something the potential to grow and cover a world, a sheltered spark in the flooded darkness of dead canyons, doubling each moment until it was a humming swarm lighting the depths.

He gave her his promised hunger and she gave hers, sharing not silence but the sounds of whispering fabric and sliding leather, lips over skin and hands gathering feast after famine. Shirt and jacket easily gone, she trailed tingling fingers over the broad and color-streaming skin of his shoulders. He drew his legs under himself and rose to his knees, lifting her and bending her back with his arms tight around her waist and his mouth on her breast, vertigo and suspension, blood rushed and trapped in her head. He gripped her hair and wrapped it around his wrist once, pulling her head back and down. His palm arched against the curve of her spine, holding her up to meet his lips as he chose, breast, neck, lips, navel, his teeth at the curve of her waist and underside of her breast, tongue in tingling trails after.

Venom again brought her to that willing, suspended state of waiting for him, wanting to be what he wanted, but not knowing what to be unless he showed her, told her. She sensed no more danger, no more wrong, and she relaxed back, wanting to float with him. When she tried to touch him or pull him to her, he deftly redirected her hands, until she kept them on his shoulders, fingertips tracing the texture of his skin. He simplified all the directions she could go, all the things she could want when his mouth left her lips and he said softly in her ear “Lie still, Siha. I want you to lie still.”

No ripple of disagreement, he’d said he would find what she wanted and he would, and she would give that, she didn’t need to be confused or wonder why he moved her hands, she could float with him, lie still and let him lead. She said languidly “Thane, you want to know what I like…I like everything you do.” She smiled and he laughed softly, kissing along her throat. He said “I hope to keep it that way. Telling you no was…impossible…and I wish to make up for my regret.”

That she understood more fully and qualms faded. He wanted control, yes. He wanted power over her, yes. She’d give him that with both hands and let the implications slip away, because now they would have time. She would have time to understand all the things he was not saying.

Still did not mean quiet, so she said “What do you regret?”

He lowered his mouth to her breast and pulled her nipple into his mouth, fast and tight, tongue and
teeth and tingles. His hand pulled nails down her stomach and her head arched back, tight indrawn breath and a moan from her.

He said “I regret not following you when you could not walk from my kiss, my venom in your blood, your kiss on my brow. I should have made sure you could not open that door, pinned you to it with my body and shown you that I was not afraid.”

Intuition clicked in place. Her virulently venomous, deadly and subtle Drell was in the position of trying to protect her from him again…and that was lovely…but…

She said “Thane, in this moment I owe you my life and gratitude, I want to see what you want as much if not more than you want to see what I want. You held me while I slept, comforted me when I woke…and I promise you…if there has ever been time to take advantage of a receptive, loving, forgiving and hungry woman…it would be now. Show me you’re not afraid of who you are…now…and let me show you that I am not afraid.”

Never let it be said that Commander Shepard was not expert at pushing people’s buttons.

He reacted by stilling during her words and then tensing like a tightly coiled spring for moments after, staring at her. His hand wrapped through her hair once again, twisted her head to suit his position, and he kissed her. Darker depths and storm solidified and she was caught in electrified waters, sparks over her skin and inescapable tensing of muscle out of her control.

Heavy, dark tiremit shrouded her, the urgency and strength of his hands invading the spell, selfish and revealing. His mouth never left hers as he took her hand and placed it on his cock, still frustratingly in leather, and he groaned against her mouth as he guided her hand to show her how, where to stroke, how to trace his length with fingertips and then slide along with the broad press of a palm. His clever fingers had her hips lifted and her looser, easier pants slid off her body, guiding her to bend her knees one by one and shift the fabric off and away from her.

His fused fingers were inside after his palm closed possessively over her and she let out a sharp gasp into his mouth as his thumb twisted to find her clit. He murmured her name against her mouth with another Drell hum of unmistaken intimacy dripping down her spine. He thrust with fingers and adjusted the movement of his thumb until she was arching up into his touch, her nails digging into the leather outlining his cock, her other hand with nails on his shoulder until his fingers and her hips and his mouth found the perfect rhythm. She tensed and twisted, unable to arch as he held her down, licking the moans from her lips.

Sense had fully fled and she slid down that long dark decline into helpless clinging. He drew her hand with his own wet, slippery fingers to rest on the fastenings of his pants, which she couldn’t figure out. He let her fumble, smiling against her mouth until she drew her hand aside. With a dramatic click she’d unfurled her Omni Tool blade until he was laughing with appreciation and said “Siha, I do not believe that will be necessary.”

She grumbled “Better not be.” She sheathed it again, point made.

He showed her the fastenings, helped her remove his pants and delivered himself to her hands with a deep groan, returning to kiss her, his weight supported by one arm, his hand on her breast. He asked lightly “Am I forgiven?”

She sighed a soft “Maybe.”

He lowered his body until her hands were trapped, gathered them and held them over her head, shifting his hips and knees to part her thighs and thrust into her, and stayed there, his hand in her hair,
his voice in her ear, her name.

He thrust deeper, shallow, then pulled back to stay suspended and begin over again, deep inside, then back to suspense and again, his voice deeper, broken and in wider question encompassing a whole person, a whole life, “Am I forgiven, Siha?”

She gave him her voice, answering with a whole person and a whole life. Siha, not Shepard, idealized and worshipped and followed blindly “Yes.”

He moved, starting from his point of isolated discipline, responding to every indrawn breath and moan, each track of her fingernails down his back, moving his fingers to stroke with feather-light touches between slamming into her until he was no longer watching her body, gauging and provoking her, until he was fully provoked, passion and power and pain mingling in his hands and his voice, until he bent her knees against her chest and leaned in, on, through, his arms under her back and hands gripping her shoulders. He came with a shuddering groan-growl that drove in his fingernails, a shuddering embrace. She shifted to wrap her legs around him, her arms behind his back, held him skin to skin, mouth to mouth, breath to breath.

oOoOoOoOoOo

She woke up to Turian arms lifting her from the bed, a tone in his voice that could be called clucking. He lifted and spoke to her as though she were a small child, which she supposed from his viewpoint, was fair. He said “You have to eat, Kerim, you haven’t eaten in about 24 hours.”

Thane watched, leaning on an elbow in the bed. She smiled at Thane, she smiled at Garrus and said “I did get some…caloric input. I should be fine.” She started to giggle. She was hungry and tiremit giddy, having slept with full skin contact. They’d spent…a lot of hours…building layers of tiremit-amplified satiety, hunger given free rein to run until exhausted. She was joyful and frankly silly, unable to imagine anything going wrong.

Garrus switched from clucking to scolding when he turned to Thane and said “What the hell…she has to eat, I’m in charge and I don’t want to fill out a death certificate with sex as the cause.”

Thane shrugged and said “I suggested food. She disagreed. She is persuasive.”

She nodded, trying to come to Thane’s rescue “He did. I did. It’s my fault. I promise.”

Garrus sighed and put a slice of toast in her hand, which she nibbled dutifully. She said “Given the choice, I’m still going with sex.”

Thane smiled and Garrus let out a relieved snort. “We’re just about to Ilium. How long are we putting in?”

She stretched and said “Three days. Bring food.”

Garrus handed toast to Thane, who thanked him politely and got out of bed, finally someone allowing it. He headed to the bathroom and she said very loudly “He has a very nice ass.”

Thane nodded gravely in acknowledgement with a hint of straight-man smile and Garrus laughed, agreed and tried to get her hand to navigate to a carafe of juice, her aim was off and she was busy looking at Thane, saying “I think he just flexed it on purpose.”

He redirected her and said “You’re useless.” His voice was warm and teasing and so she let him pour her something to drink and she finished the glass in seconds. She clapped toast crumbs off her hand and said “I’m curious about something. Hold still.”
She reached for him, kissed him and swirls of Turian magic moved through tiremit-soaked blood, new dizziness and billows of uplifting certainty, like music, the minor chord of tiremit and the major chord of Turian influence resolving without dissonance, modulating into something entirely new. She murmured against his mouth “I will sign a release that if I die from sex, it was voluntary and exactly how I wanted to go. Where were you? I missed you. I expected you to come by.”

Garrus groaned and claimed his own kiss, hand tightening around her waist and one hand in her hair. He tipped his forehead to hers and said “Wanted to give you some time with him. I figured once the motion detectors had settled down for more than an hour it was safe to come back in.”

She grinned and said “You installed motion detectors? That’s…romantic and efficient. Just like you. Thanks for looking out for me.”

He pulled the food closer and put a spoon in her hand and said “You? I wasn’t looking out for you, Kerim. I had to pull you off him. I was looking out for Thane.”

She giggled again, in full agreement.

Before letting everyone go, Shepard called a meeting with Mordin, Miranda and Dr. Chakwas. Thane had told her that the Hanar were working on Kepral’s syndrome, but she had less faith in Hanar science than Thane did. Considering his ability to make anybody potentially think or believe anything, she had not so much faith in Thane telling her the truth on the subject. She had a woman who had conquered death and a Salarian who had altered the course of Krogan history under her command.

She’d done some of her own research and from what she understood the problem was with the oxygen-bearing component of Drell blood. He’d compared it to hemoglobin so she’d done at least cursory research. Enough to get by in a conference.

After asking their familiarity with Kepral’s syndrome she said “Beta thalassemia seems to be a human corollary, is that correct?”

Mordin said “Close. Not exact. Kepral’s syndrome more intricate but…yes, theories on oxygen bearing vector could correlate.”

Jane said “A human with beta thalassemia is treated with stem cell transplant. Thane can’t do autologous donation because he is already affected, but we do have an allogenic source.”

Miranda’s brows raised and Dr. Chakwas looked thoughtful, Mordin said “Yes. Yes. Could work. Kolyat first degree relative.”

Jane said “I can get samples, next time we’re on the Citadel. We can’t bleed Kolyat dry but we can take samples, you can synthesize something…yes?”

Miranda said “I’m familiar with some of the research, but this isn’t a cure.”

Jane said “Does it have to be a cure at first, or just…the equivalent of insulin for a diabetic? His problem is air, we can get him air a few ways, by giving him blood transfusions and by ultimately replacing his marrow. We’ve got to be able to do something. We need to buy him time until we can get to a cure.”

Dr. Chakwas said “He has declined anything but the most basic and noninvasive treatments. He will not allow an oxygen mask and I’ve had to respect his boundaries. Even if you come up with…a stop
gap...there are practicalities here regarding his stated consent limits.”

Jane said “Let me take care of that part. Mordin, I can get Kolyat to give blood and marrow samples that can be virtually modeled at the Citadel and you can take a look at it before you get your hands on the real thing? Miranda, your molecular expertise can’t go to waste here. There have got to be enough stop gap measures to use, gene therapy, transfusions, optimization of oxygen…”

Mordin said “Hanar seeking cure. Research unavailable. Hanar not best known for scientific contribution or breakthrough. Plodding. Would likely take long view. This approach would be considered palliative, insignificant.”

Jane said “If you think their research would be of use, I don’t care, we can hack it, buy it, whatever you need.”

Mordin said “Not necessary. STG contacts should suffice. May need petty cash for liquor.”

Jane said “You’ve got it. Hanar give you problems, you tell me. Thane gives you problems, you tell me. Oxygen’s giving me problems, I tell you.”

Dr. Chakwas said “There are ways I could help already, but he has not consented.”

Jane smiled and said “He will. Tell me what they are.”

oOoOoOoOoOo

Walking through Ilium on shore leave was different from walking through Ilium armored and armed. Drell always drew the eye and their presence sounded like an old off color joke of some sort – “A human, a Drell and a Turian walk into a bar…”

They also did not have an Asari in their group, unusual for Ilium.

Sitting at a table at Eternity was oddly awkward after privacy of her cabin awash in sex and intimacy. They were definitely on display.

Drinks started arriving very shortly after sitting down, and they were for Thane, who had declined to drink in the first place. He offered them one by one to Shepard, who laughed and dug in. Forlorn faces just made it more fun.

Yes, Thane was free to go. Was he going to? Absolutely not. Thane didn’t seem like the casual sort either. Garrus was…Turian casual, it was part of the culture. Comrades in Arms here made up a huge difference in loyalties. She doubted that even if they were not lovers, that they’d be willing to leave her alone in a bar. Too many people wanted a slice of Shepard one way or the other and maybe it was a bad idea coming here…

Fortunately Garrus was an excellent conversation partner and he started with “This reminds me of Omega…” and he was off telling a story and she was picking her way through the drinks, some of them were new to her and some of them were good.

Resentment seemed to pile up around them as they were laughing and one-upping each other on stories, even Thane leaning into the table and contributing his own. There was some muttering from a Turian passing by the table and it was too low for her translator to catch, but Garrus’s face went a particular type of blank and Thane’s face went very still. Garrus stood quietly, tapped on the Turian’s shoulder until he turned, and then punched him in the throat. The Turian fell and Garrus made sure nobody was willing to come and help him before turning and sitting back down.
She said “What…happened?”

Garrus wouldn’t say, just shaking his head slowly.

She said “Seriously, I don’t have a Turian nose or Turian ears.”

Garrus said “Good.”

She used her serious voice. “Please, someone explain it to me as though I were an underprivileged, small and delicate human with an explosive temper.”

Thane said “I believe…I am correct…that Turian scent on a human female was offensive to the…gentleman on the floor and he said so.”

Garrus winced and said “Yeah. Weird to find that provincial bullshit on Ilium but some people have no manners.”

Thane said “The word I believe…meant a sexual object, a thing.”

Jane grinned and said “So he called me a smelly fucktoy?”

Garrus said “Augh. Shepard…”

Thane corrected with a smile “An unworthy…smelly fucktoy.”

Shepard said “Oh come on, you’ve never heard that sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me?”

Garrus shrugged “Demonstrably not true. Spectre is a name.”

She sighed and said “Touche.”

Garrus said “You make an excellent smelly fucktoy, by the way. Worthy as hell.”

She grinned and said “That’s what I’m talking about. I’m proud of it.”

Garrus said “So am I, but this way I also get to hit people.”
She and Garrus got drunker, Thane got more and more sober in comparison until she couldn’t look at his face without cracking up, but she also couldn’t look at much else without cracking up.

She loved…loved…these men, and she was happy. Strip away the alcohol and the tiremit and the Turian magic and she would still be damned happy. A job worth doing, a second chance at living… and a worthy fucktoy to boot.

Life was good.

The bartender stopped by to congratulate Garrus on punching that particular Turian in the throat, saying that he had always been a harassing little shiv and it was a shame murder was still illegal. She dragged his unconscious body out and leaned it in the hallway outside. On her way back she said “Maybe we’ll be lucky and someone will conscript him. I’ll sign the contract for him.”

At some point Thane had decided they had both had far more than enough to drink, but they still had two more and it looked like Thane was trying to figure out how to carry them both back to the room.

Shepard said “Garrus, Garrus, he’s looking at us like we’re the fox and the chicken and he’s got a boat.”

Garrus shook his head and said “He’s got a what?”

Shepard said “A boat!”

Garrus grinned and said enthusiastically “Yeah he does!” with elements of personal pride in his voice.

She started giggling and said “No wait, there’s a bag of corn. The out cold Turian is a bag of corn.”

Garrus said “You are making no fucking sense, but I’m used to that.”

She persisted for no particular reason except that…wait…

She opened her mouth and closed it and said “You’re definitely the chicken.”

Garrus said “What’s a chicken?”

She said “Bird. Delicious bird.”

He considered and said “What’s a fox?”

She said proudly “Wily and fast hunter. Eats chickens.”

Garrus said with conviction “Yes. That. I’m suddenly okay with this story.”

She wondered briefly if alcohol and the effects of two alien physiologies were going to kill her and she decided that would be a worthy death. She should fill out that paperwork.

Thane gave them both a smile that was bordering on smirk. Oh Gods she wanted to lick that man, and she could. Maybe not right now, but she could.

Thane stood and started to leave and Garrus said “We should follow him. I have no idea where we
popped."

She stood, leaned on Garrus’s shoulder and said “I don’t think we parked.”

Garrus’s mandibles wavered in uncertainty and said “Right. Hotel.”

Shepard whispered archly “What if it’s a trap?”

Garrus grinned and said “Spirits, I hope so.”

In varying degrees of lurching, leaning and jostling they caught up to Thane. She found a lot of things funny right now, and some of them were the faces of people watching a Turian and a human stumble along, giggling, after a Drell who probably looked as though he had no idea he was being trailed by loud idiots.

Jane said “I take it back, he’s not a farmer. He’s leading us to his lair.”

Garrus said “This is a better story.”

She shook her head and said “No, no, no. Lair is a bad word.”

Garrus shrugged and said “Okay, I’ll go on in first. You stay here. I’ll come get you when I’m sure it’s safe. Might be a few hours.”

Thane got to the door and started to open it, saying “The life of a Spectre is full of difficult choices.”

She tried to look brave and said “I can’t let Garrus sacrifice himself for me.”

Garrus nudged her “Sure you can.”

As lairs went, it was pretty nice. Beautiful view, lots of food, enough alcohol to make her start to feel slightly nauseated and a playground-sized bed. Liara had excellent taste.

She retreated to the bathroom to…

To what?

She was intimidated by these men, always had been, always would be. She was sobering quickly, had been playing it up for the fun of it, she still wasn’t as at home with them together as she might be separately, wondering if she’s forcing Thane to be the straight man, forcing Garrus to be the buddy…

Dynamics in groups had a high payoff but for her a weird challenge…

‘Be Yourself.’

Those words were sometimes very bad advice to certain people. She was a highly tailored person in presentation and persona. She was suddenly reticent, unwilling to reach out to one of them over the other, as though it would show some level of lasting favor.

So that was herself, right now, reticence. Realizing she’d chosen overwhelmingly formidable people, and wanting that to stand for more than something pop psych and facile

Maybe she wanted to drown, not swim.

She had control so much of the time and that was the pop psych part. Being in constant control
during sex was very easy for her and that’s not what she wanted. Maybe aspiring to be a fucktoy was pretty damned close to reality and maybe she should remember even if she tried to stay in control, she wouldn’t manage. Even with tiremit resistance and a strong will, she’d still sway to their greater strengths.

Damn that sounded like a really good outcome. She was stalling to give them time to get started and see if that spared her making a first move to a first man. Teachings in table manners had an answer she could adapt. When presented with a serving plate, reach for the portion closest to you.

New rule to break the deadlock.

Fortunately her facial features leaned toward the remote and haughty to begin with, so it was an easy effect to pull off, dark and cool.

She briefly considered not making major life choices or policy decisions while drunk.

Something was going on out there, the sound of something falling and muffled moaning was very promising.

She stepped out and…Garrus to the rescue. Again.

Bless that man.

Hell, bless both of them.

They were beautiful and again she was struck by voyeuristic and matchmaker interest in standing still and not being noticed. It looked like Garrus had picked Thane up and set him down on a bureau, knocking over a few random decorative things that she couldn’t care less about.

She’d happily buy more random decorative things. Or a new room.

She leaned silently against the wall, watching. Garrus had a predatory arch to his spine, standing up and bending over Thane’s upturned face, Thane with his body of grace and flowing water, a study of contrasts and blending power. Lips and plates and moans and she would give her life over and over again, be brought back and charge into the fire without hesitation to see that this moment was possible for them.

She was quiet but she was only a few feet away from a Turian who could smell her, hear her footsteps and probably gauge the temperature change from the door opening while making out with a Drell.

Impressive.

Garrus turned to her and then Thane’s head turned and she lost her breath at the sight of them. Dark eyes and promise. She gave an involuntary wave away of her hand and a tiny negative head shake as she might to a waiter who wanted to know if she needed something.

Garrus pointedly looked at her hand for a long moment, then back up in her eyes with a raised brow plate and “I see you continue to be an idiot” look on his face for a brief moment before he was over to her, lifting her with a gasp and a…yes…a squeak, she squeaked. He gave a brief husky laugh before moving back and putting her down on Thane’s lap. Thane’s hands were at her hips and his mouth bent to kiss her shoulder. Garrus’s eyes turned from mocking her to heated, transforming his face back to predatory success and determination. Garrus’s hands moved to rest on either side of her face and he moved in to kiss her.
Her world dissolved into whimpers and want.

Her imagination had done nothing to prepare her for this.

Garrus pushed her back with his kiss until her head was against Thane’s shoulder, and then Garrus moved to kiss Thane, back and forth, venom from Thane’s mouth transferred to hers. Thane’s hands were sliding over the silver-blue fabric of her dress, hands on her thighs and her breasts. Garrus dragged a talon through the fabric down between her breasts and out, shredding it off her and letting it fall to the sides, talons on the straps and sides of her underwear until it all fell away. Thane lifted her breasts in his hands and Garrus licked at her nipples, her head back again with Thane kissing her, eyes closed, dizzy and overpowered.

Garrus lifted her off Thane’s lap briefly, kissing her with her body crushed against plates. She clung to him, whispers and movements of leather behind her until she was pulled back against Thane’s body, one hand at her hip, his cock between her legs but not in. He used the other hand to twist her back to kiss him and it was Garrus’s turn to whisper fabric and toss aside his clothing. Garrus kissed along her jaw, down her throat, dragging talons and teeth, his scent flooding the space and clinging to her skin as his hands passed. Thane spread her thighs wider with opening knees and she moved her hand to close around his cock. Thane broke the kiss and moved one arm to grip her waist and he moved a hand to caress at a breast. He said “Watch, Siha.”

Garrus was between their thighs, his shoulders determining their wide spread, his tongue and teeth on Thane’s thigh, drawing a deep breath from Thane, thigh and stomach muscles tensing against her. He bit to draw blood, then switched to the other side, bit at her thigh to draw blood, her own breath and gasp transferred. He licked at the marks momentarily and then raised his eyes to meet her gaze. Deep blue and sharp teeth, jaw and plate and mandible, his tongue curling out to lick along the base of Thane’s cock, trailing up along and over their fingers, along the blue-green swollen head, then moving to sink insider her and up to probe at her clit with the pointed tip, moving down, starting over, hands and fingers growing wet, moving at a torturously slow pace, guided by Thane’s hand on hers. She was drugged and overset too many ways to count, six hands and two mouths, with her mouth whimpering and then begging. When she was incoherent and whispering ‘please’ in hoarse breaths, Garrus held one hand at the base of Thane’s cock while Thane guided hers in long, deep strokes and Garrus slid a finger into her, breaking eye contact and closing his eyes, leaning in to slide his tongue over her clit.

There was no room in her mind to carry anything but the immediate pleasure, a physical and mental collapsing moment that relaxed muscles in a long exhalation. She could only focus for a few brief moments on any one sensation before being overwhelmed by the whole. Thane’s mouth recaptured hers with a hum of anticipatory promise, her hand gripped on his cock, his hand covering hers, pressed up against Garrus’s hand, Garrus’s mandible on her thigh, tongue and finger and vibrating growl. Tiremit and Turian blurred and blended and stretched out her body and time taut, a moment of revelation like having watched an artist add hundreds of brush strokes to canvas, chaos and mystery until a connecting stroke creates a picture, a translation of inner ambition.

She thought she’d drown, but they would never allow that. They’d hold her up through the deep waters. The momentary revelatory calm disappeared under crashing waves, slowly building, tasting and touching and time. They held her in place through trembling, arching and then shaking, Thane’s tongue tasting muffled screams and Garrus’s mouth creating shocks and aftershocks.

Garrus kissed back up along her body until he bent her back with a demanding, dizzy kiss and then he switched to kissing Thane. Garrus lifted her easily off of Thane and turned her, set her on trembling legs and knees that gave out. Bending her forward he thrust into her from behind, his growl felt through the plates of his pressing hips. Thane stood up and caught her face in his hands,
kissed her and then guided her to kiss and lick down his body until her mouth closed around his
cock, his hands tightened in her hair, wrapping his fingers in it and holding her head, cock thrust
hard down the back of her throat. Garrus’s didn’t move, but her body jammed back against him with
every hard thrust from Thane. Garrus’s hands were on her hips, digging in claws, and then on her
back. They both leaned in and there were sounds of kissing, groans and growls and her moans for
counterpoint.

Her blood and body conspired to decide there were hungers in her body and mind and heart that had
always ached and were now literally and figuratively filled, Siha and Kerim and the creation of the
impossible. For the first time since she’d been brought to public attention, called a Savior with no
irony, feeling uncomfortable with the weight of notoriety, she felt entirely deserving of those names
and gathered in glory. Gods seemed real and she was one of them.

Thane’s hand came to caress her throat and Garrus’s hand moved to her clt again, her eyes closed
against spinning, red sparks behind her lids. She’d fall if they didn’t hold her up, she wanted to give
everything back that they’d given to her and it would never be enough giving. Thane’s groan was
harsh, guttural and a new sound from him, against Garrus’s mouth and triggered convulsive
swallowing, shaking and tightening around Garrus, who gave his own feral sound. She was
boneless, weak and ready to fall forward, but Thane’s hands on her shoulders lifted her up, Garrus’s
arm around her waist pulled her up, back against his chest. They were all shaking, trembling as
though they’d only just found each other, the only sources of warmth after being abandoned to the
cold.

Thane’s mouth came to hers, one arm around her waist and one arm around Garrus, Garrus with his
arm crossed over her Thane’s on her waist and one around Thane’s waist, and they stood, panting
and shaking, Garrus lowering his head to press his crest to the sides of their foreheads, a harsh, feral
growl and convulsive strength in his arm, pulling them tighter to him.

She was helpless, weightless and without will, Garrus continued to shake, his breath was harsh for
long minutes. She tried to turn her head to see him, but he growled and bit her shoulder, didn’t allow
her to turn, didn’t allow Thane to pull away, arms unyielding.

Thane answered with his comforting hum, moved to indicate the bed to Garrus, drew him over with
a held hand and moved covers back, helped Garrus in, who didn’t loosen his hold on her. He rolled
to his side carefully, cradled her against his body, still joined, with a hand on her hip. He was tense
as though she might try to move away. She shifted slightly and his hand didn’t lose its hovering,
restraining grip on her hip until she relaxed against him and didn’t move, understanding and grateful
that he could show what she felt, inviting him with her body to know she would not try to move, did
not want to.

The bed dipped and Thane moved behind Garrus, the sound of warm Drell trilling and an arm
draped over both their waists, his hand over Garrus’s on her hip, fingers linked. She shifted her hand
to rest on top of theirs, fingers twining.

Thane’s hum calmed them both, harsh breathing settling down to soft huffs, presses of plates to the
back of her neck and crest to her hair. While she was awake she was comforted, loved and protected.
She fell asleep to the physical proof and the emotional reality of being home, knowing Garrus would
not fall asleep until she had, knowing Thane would not sleep until Garrus’s breath had eased.

oOoOoOoOoO

Thane liked her hair. Thane liked her hair a lot. He was reclined on the bed with Jane leaning back
against him, her head forward and her hands on his bent knees, her arms on his thighs, warm leather
and the lines and curves of his muscle underneath. He was learning braids and twists. His gentle, deft
fingers were along her scalp and throat, bent kisses to her neck as he twined her hair through his hands.

Garrus was eating some sort of dextro something and she raised her voice to get his attention, saying "Garrus, will you tell me what it is about Turians that makes me dizzy when you kiss me?"

Garrus didn't look up, saying with gruff tease "You're just easy, Shepard, it's not hard."

She didn't disagree but said "Why won't Turians tell me what it is?"

Garrus countered "Why are humans so nosy?"

She said "It isn't my nose that is affected. In fact you've reiterated how inferior my nose is. I clearly need help."

Garrus said cheerfully "And you're not going to get it."

Thane said “Siha, when Turians mate, each participant has a part of a neurochemical cocktail that increases pleasure for both. It is called Reverie. A Turian can have multiple partners, seeking the person that suits them best. When they have chosen a mate, they undergo a voluntary, socially ritualized and biologically complicated process where they become attuned specifically to their partner’s chemistry. With both consenting, they become a bonded pair, best matched to please each other. An un-bonded Turian has enough of everything to please possible un-bonded partners, but not as much as they might please a mate when they become fully bonded.”

Garrus said irritably “How the hell do you know that? You shouldn’t know that.”

Jane shrugged and said “Makes sense. I have no idea why he picked me, I’ve got nothing.”

Garrus scoffed “You’ve got something.” Garrus turned on Thane and said “Where did you find that out?”

Thaner shrugged and said “I should not tiremit and tell.”

Garrus raised his voice and said “You just fucking did.”

Thaner replied evenly “Yes, but I should not.”

Garrus covered his face with a hand and said “Was it me? Did you make me tell you?”

Jane twisted her head to see Thane, who looked at her blandly. The lack of answer to that question on his face made her laugh.

Garrus said “Ah, dammit. He’s never going to tell me.”

Jane said “At least I’m not the only one with no clue.”

Thane said in consolation “You can be assured that if I will not tell you, I will also not tell another.”

Garrus sighed and said, deflated “That’s very comforting, thanks.”

Thane smiled and said gently “I did not learn it from you, Garrus.” She noticed that he didn’t promise that he wouldn’t. She wondered if it was because he didn’t want to be told they didn’t believe him. Since he’d hacked her communications to save her life, they’d have trouble believing he would not use every advantage in his arsenal if it meant protecting them by any means.
Garrus responded “That is a comfort. Now since you explained me, will you explain you?”

Thane said carefully “It was part of my training. The Hanar had discovered ways to make Drell venom hypnotic and addictive. Surgical and genetic alteration began when I was very young. I underwent procedures that altered my physiology, from being able to sense Hanar bioluminescence to this adaptation. They often did not explain the processes, only instructed me on their use.”

And there it was, truth about the past in the room, the peculiar “only now exists” silence broken and confidence exchanged. She hadn’t expected the truth. Or…she had expected the truth from Garrus and an evasion from Thane and it had been reversed.

She pushed her luck.

She said quietly “Garrus, why don’t you talk about Reverie? Is it because we’re outsiders or because…well…why?”

He said “You don’t talk about marriage.”

She said in response “This is your body, Garrus, not a social ceremony. I get dizzy and drugged, not cake.”

He said patiently “Yes, it is a social ceremony, and my body.”

She said with drawn brows and trying to navigate difficult ground “I’m…Garrus, I’m sorry. I have no right to…”

Garrus shook his head and sighed and said “You have every right. I…”

Thane spoke quietly “Siha, listen with your heart. You are listening with a human head and he is speaking with a Turian heart. He seeks to protect you by not answering your question.” Thane said with curiosity and a shade of disbelief “Can you truly not imagine why he would not answer?”

She considered what he said in silence, trying to comprehend chemistry, volatile chemistry. She felt unforgivably stupid, both looking at her as though they were shocked she didn’t get it. She said “Okay. Human head. No, I obviously do not understand, and I’m afraid imagining here will put me in the middle of a mine field. Help me, please. If the question is offensive…”

Garrus said, exasperated “What? The hell…”

Thane held up one hand and both were silent. Thane said quietly, trying to explain to them both “Siha, you have a talent, and it is to see an ideal world. If I am correct, in that world, Garrus could be restored to what you feel you took from him, his Turian social identity. You hold yourself responsible for him not being high in Turian social ranking. Am I correct?”

She said “Of course, that’s obvious.” Now it was her turn to look at Garrus as though he were unforgivably stupid.

Garrus said “That’s ridiculous.” There was snorting.

She was ready to argue the point but Thane touched her shoulder to continue before she called Garrus an idiot.

Thane said “You may think this is so, because you see him as potentially separate from you, whole, ideal. You see him this way in your human head, where you calculate and decide numerical value of survival. You want him to live. You wish for him to live an ideal life, one he was born to live. That
is your job. You are not seeing what is there to see that is not about your job, but is a gift he offered without herald. He already lost you once. He loved you before you died. He knows what risks he takes loving you now. He did not mourn you by finding a bond mate or returning to the Hierarchy. He sought his own death, knowing you were gone, just as I resigned myself to death after avenging Irikah. You drew us to you. You have the power to heal and reach for love and neither Garrus nor I have that power without you. You are a magnet and we are iron. We cannot choose to leave you. You do not know your own power. You wish to know what power lies in my skin or his body, but you refuse to acknowledge what power lies in you. You behave as though you are unworthy of us, and you say that you have nothing to offer. I understand self deprecation, but this drives to the heart of his hesitance to speak. Garrus does not shy from telling you of Turian things because you are human. He does it because you are you, and that Turian ways shame him. He is not defending Turian ways or hiding them from you, he is abandoning them. He did it once to follow you after Saren, he did it again after you died, and he followed you after Omega without question. He would never return to serve a system or a people that rejected you; not the Council, not the Hierarchy, not C:Sec. He will follow only you. If you die he will follow you. He is not holding back the best of himself to save for another. To comfort yourself by thinking that he someday might is unworthy of you and of him. If you die again he would not become a whole Turian in your absence. He is giving you the best of himself now and what is left over has no meaning if it cannot serve you. You wish to know his ideal world? It is you. He is giving you what you gave him so generously. Freedom to find happiness in each day, without obligation. He said you do not speak of marriage and that is true. You do not speak of tomorrow and he is mirroring that to give you the freedom he believes you need.”

Cascades of melting warmth, Thane’s deft shifting of mirrors to windows flushed through her.

Garrus said quietly “I thought if you didn’t know about how bonding works, I could hide behind Turian custom and you would respect that.”

She said softly with a smile “Well, that was a stupid idea. It obviously didn’t work.”

Garrus smiled “Obviously.” He said “Thane missed something though.” She looked at him expectantly and he said “I’m a bad Turian, we’ve established that. Thane’s right about everything he said but it seems he thinks I would bond to you, Kerim, and that you would not accept the gesture because of the way you see me, and that as you’ve said, you can’t ask me to sacrifice myself for you. It does not matter what you ask anymore, you won’t be able to stop me from sacrificing myself for you, or for him. You would die for anybody in the right circumstances, Shepard, we know that. You’ve proven it. You can’t accept that we would die for you, and only you, at your word. You would like it to be business, military and clean and we can pretend for you, follow your orders, and you might think we’re like you, that we’ll die for anybody, but that is an illusion. Maybe I’m just following you in more than a few ways, but I won’t choose between you, and I can’t bond to both of you. It doesn’t work that way, though I wish it did. If…I bonded to one of you, the other would be shut out and I can’t bear that. Socially this means I remain a Turian child, and I do not become an adult. But the reality is, I am in love, I am an adult, and if Turians do not agree then that is really their problem, not mine. Not ours. I can’t, won’t bond to either of you because I do not feel a bond could make me love either of you more, and I couldn’t bear making one of you feel that I loved you less. Thane, I trust you, I love you. You don’t have to ask. There has been more than one gift without herald among us, and she isn’t the only one who behaves as though she were undeserving and would give way for the happiness of those they love. If I had mentioned bonding to either of you, I felt you would both encourage me to bond to the other, and it would be a disaster of ironic proportions, both feeling I loved the other more, neither understanding that was impossible.”

She smiled, warm flush of embarrassment mixed with the slightly goofy bond of being in love with and adored by self-sacrificing badass romance junkies. She said “So we’re all kind of stupid, huh?”
Thane’s voice was with a smile when he said “It seems so.”

She pushed her luck again, leaning on the part of those facts that she really didn’t like “If I order you to leave me behind, I expect you to follow that order.”

Garrus smiled and said “Just like Thane, I’ll lie to you to protect you, Kerim. You’ve both taught me some things about relative truths. We’ll just have to see what happens on that day, won’t we?”

She said with a harder edge of seriousness “I can’t function if I don’t think you’re going to follow orders.”

Thane kissed at her throat and said lightly “The life of a Spectre is full of difficult choices.”

Garrus said “You could try to pull rank. What are our ranks again?”

Thane nuzzled her throat and said “I believe we are independent contractors.”

Garrus said “You get one warning, Kerim. We’ve established I’m not a good Turian. I’ve told you I don’t see the point in staying quiet and polite. Not when you are at stake.”

She said, losing her train of thought with venom warming her throat “So this is…pre-emptive mutiny? You reserve the right to…overthrow me if it comes up?”

Garrus moved over to the bed, took her face in his hands and said “Yes. Just…try not to give stupid orders.”

She remembered Thane’s interference and the slaughter it had prevented, remembered her promise to herself to eliminate command isolation, realized she had obliterated any hope of authority over her own death…and relaxed instead of panicked. It was okay. She was human, fallible, loved, in love and out of control, and she accepted this new drawing of reality’s lines. Otherwise she would have to give them up, go on without them, and that was impossible. He was right, and two of them saw things better than one of them alone. There was love enough to survive disagreement and not enough fear to drive them apart. They were here for her and only her, and she should not use that as a command advantage. She should know it was a gift and honor it for what it was.

Their yes to give, not hers to take.

All the yes they had.

Garrus kissed her mouth, Thane kissed her neck, and when Garrus pulled back she said “Okay.”

His brow plate raised and he said “Okay? Are you lying now?”

She laughed and said “No. Thank you.”

Garrus looked at Thane and said “Did you make her say that?”

Thane said “She is immune to my influence in the extremes. She does what she chooses to do.”

She laughed and said “I don’t think I’m that damned immune.”

Garrus stared at her, searched her eyes for truth and she thought he found it. He murmured “I’m going to celebrate this day every year. New holiday.”

She said “Call it an anniversary.”
Return to ship life was hard. Really hard. Extra hard.

Unfortunately she had potentially unpleasant news to break to both of them.

Her vision of their futures, as individuals and together was overwhelming her sense of personal boundaries and she was going to go with it. Normally Thane’s health decisions would be his choice, but fuck that. She’d also thought about what Thane had said about her seeing Garrus’s place within the Hierarchy and her mind had gone to an unusual place. So Thane was going to be spending a great deal of time in the Med Bay. Garrus was going to approach his father on behalf of the crew of the Normandy.

She was trying to think ahead, and she knew there was very little future as part of Cerberus. They had discussed this off the ship in noisy places to make sure they were not overheard. They knew she intended to survive, keep the ship. She hadn’t elaborated further, just set the framework for understanding of further conversations on board the Normandy, assuming they were under surveillance. She’d stolen the Normandy once and handed it back and the Alliance hadn’t behaved well, all things considered. Now she was a pirate and she was enjoying that autonomy. She would like the Alliance’s cooperation, but she didn’t want to take orders from Hackett. Competition for their expertise would be key if they survived.

Conversations with Thane and Garrus had blurred her hard line between now and the future and she’d thought about it. She wanted to survive, and if they came back from the Collector ship, she wanted a safe berth. She didn’t think it was Earth. She didn’t think it was Palaven. BUT…The Normandy could be a hell of an ally. She could arrange to be attractive to both factions.

Thane had sparked something with the phrase “Independent Contractor” and discussions of rank. If she worked cooperatively with different Council races, she could continue with her crew and autonomy, stay mobile during the upcoming fight with the Reapers.

It did hinge on Garrus being able to broker some level of cooperation with the Turians, set Palaven as a haven. She would try to set Earth as a haven with her as a Spectre, separate from Alliance command. People asked her for favors all the time, might as well get more mileage from it. She was going to leverage technology, competence and experience for all it was worth.

If they lived.

Everyone was going to be needing help from competent people soon.

She thought about springing it on both of them together, Thane would back her up with Garrus, and Garrus would back her up with Thane…but they deserved better than an ambush.

It would be fun though…

No.

No, she had standards of polite behavior.

Maybe they’d both be assholes about it and she could escalate.

She smiled and headed to the Battery.
After kissing Garrus hello...three times...she said “I have an idea, I need help with it.”

Garrus leaned against the console and said “Okay. Tell me.”

She said “I’m trying to think ahead to what happens after going through the relay. I know everyone’s only looking so far ahead. I’m planning to survive and we need a game plan for when we’ve finished the mission. I don’t want to return to the Alliance because I am enjoying being in charge.” Garrus smiled at that. She gave him a smirk and continued “What do you think about maintaining ‘independent contractor,’ rank-free status, and communicating with the Palaven Hierarchy regarding cooperation with the Normandy crew? Ultimately I’m after autonomy, funding and access to intel. I could do it as a Spectre. If we coordinate with the Hierarchy and also the Alliance, and they both know they need our help, we could do it. I’m thinking of asking Liara to set us up with some Turians in distress...I’m sure they exist. If we rescue a few people before we go...we’d have a little good faith when we get back. Add that to the tech in the Normandy herself, intel about the Collectors and we might be able to do it. We wouldn’t be pirates, we’d be privateers. This is plan A, we manage two home ports. If we can’t manage that, we can probably support ourselves through mining, but I’d rather not spend all my time doing that. I know it’s asking you to return to something that you’ve as much as admitted you’ve abandoned...but I’m not asking you to travel to Palaven with me. You’d be the representative from the Normandy to the Hierarchy, and I’d stay on video conference...out of nose range.”

He looked stunned and he stalled with a joke. “Shepard. We just got back from shore leave. Is this what your brain did with your time off?”

She smiled and said “Between getting my hair braided and...other things, yeah. She’s active.” His smile was appreciative but he was not ready to speak yet. She said “The Council said we would be fine if we stayed in Terminus, but I’m thinking maybe if you spoke to your father...”

Garrus took a deep breath and dropped his head forward, and she said softly “I am sorry if it seemed I was avoiding the future, I’m not. We can have it all, Garrus, if we’re careful, if we do it right. We can survive this, and show other people how it’s done. We can live a long time and I can be there with you every step. Just because I’m careful to make sure you have options open doesn’t mean I don’t have hopes about you taking the option to stay with me.”

He tilted his head up and said “If I didn’t know better I’d think maybe you were trying to inspire me.”

She grinned and said “Is it working?”

He said slowly “Yeah, I think it is. I should talk to my father anyway. I was planning to talk to him before going through the relay. It might make it...easier to approach him in a professional capacity.”

She nodded and said “Okay. Think about it, let me know what you need. I’m going to talk to Liara. If there is anybody that you think would do the job better, as a Turian contact, let me know. Maybe we should recruit a Liaison to the Hierarchy. They wouldn’t be stationed on the ship, but we could work this as a sideline.”

Garrus said “It’s a good idea. It won’t be fun, but it’s for the best cause, I can swallow some pride.”

She said “You’ll still have some pride left, I hope?”

He shrugged and said “I seem to just keep making more.”

She laughed and said “Heads up also. I have to talk to Thane, but he might not like it.” He tilted his
head in question and she continued “I think the Hanar, Thane, or both are criminally negligent on the subject of Kepral’s Syndrome. I don’t think he’s gone under a doctor’s care and Karin Chakwas has essentially confirmed that. I’ve put Solus, Chakwas and Lawson on coming up with treatments and I have to break it to Thane that he’s going to be benched on away missions until they tell me they’ve taken all measures necessary to ensure they are doing all they can do. I think he wants a death sentence. Telling any other man he’s going to survive might be something they’d thank me for, but in this case…”

Garrus smiled and said “So you want me to what…hold him down so he takes his medicine?”

She grinned “It might just come to that. You’re persuasive.”

He said “Well, thank you for thinking of him, and I think with that team there’s a chance. It’s worth taking. He may not thank you, but I will. You know you can always, always count on me to hold him down when necessary.”

She laughed and said “I’ll let you know how it goes. Don’t be surprised if he goes from reticent to laconic.”

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She found Thane exercising in the cargo bay. He stopped and smiled as she approached and she was struck with apprehension. She swatted down complications and implications as he studied her face. She smiled back and gestured that they sit, and they did, perched on crates. She said “I’m a manipulative person.”

He smiled, nodding once, wary. Good. That was the intent.

She said “That being disclosed, which you know, I would like to do something without manipulating you, but it is impossible, so instead of manipulation I’m going to tell you my thought process. I’m apologizing in advance for my nature and my decision. In my ideal world, your will and your health and your body belong to you. Considering I have asked you to die, you’ve granted me a great deal of power in that regard. There’s a quote from an Earth general, Patton. He said ‘No son of a bitch ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb son of a bitch die for his country.’ I intend to be a daughter of a bitch here. You should meet my mother someday. Anyway. You’ve offered me your life and I’m going to tell you that I feel responsible for your health as a result. I won’t let you think that you are expendable or that I value you for that. On top of that, I’m in love with you. I have extraordinary resources at my disposal. I would like to ask you a few questions and I should warn you that your answers have very little impact on my decision, but only on yours, as context. Dr. Chakwas has informed me that her attempts to aid with your Kepral’s Syndrome have been met with…passive resistance. When was the last time you saw a doctor and took their advice?”

Thane’s expression was neutral, his voice cool. “Seven years since seeing a doctor.”

She nodded. He didn’t bother to answer about taking the advice. It really didn’t matter if he lied to her, but she wanted to acknowledge her curiosity and give him a chance to come clean. She said “You said yes awfully quickly to a suicide mission. You speak as though you are not only accepting, but at peace with the idea of dying. I think Hanar efforts toward a cure are unacceptable. You may have no rank, but on this ship your health is my responsibility, and you have no medical confidentiality. I have asked Mordin, Miranda and Karin to find stop gap measures to halt or reverse the progression of Kepral’s while working on an ultimate cure. I have contacted Kolyat and he has agreed to aid me, and he has donated stem cells, marrow and blood for study and for possible use in transplantation and synthesis. As the commander of this ship, I need you to live. I understand this
violates your free will and your medical choice. That is…unforgivable. I have no right to ask your forgiveness, but I could hope for it. I believe that I have asked you about your health in the past and you have evaded giving me honest answers. Is that correct?”

He said calmly with added chill “Yes.”

She nodded. “All right. I could pretend to give you a choice, but you’re intelligent enough to know that if I were willing to bring it up, I’d be willing to push it, and I’m not interested in you testing me on this. I am going to ask you to take a position in the Med Bay as general pincushion and test subject. It is not optional. It is not negotiable, and I will spare you the attempt to make it so. I will also not insult you by giving you the option to leave as though you would take it.”

She sat silently. He began to smile and it was not grudging or cold. He said “I imagine I am repaid for invading your privacy and altering the course of your command.”

She said softly “Not yet, but I’m working on it.”

He inclined his head and said “I am boxed in neatly. My compliments.”

She smiled and said “Don’t make me warn Dr. Chakwas to beware seduction.”

That got a more genuine smile and he said “That will not be necessary.”

She said “You could always take it out on me in bed.”

His glance was warm and appraising, and he said “Have you considered that you have a streak of masochism?”

Her grin was crooked and she said “I think it’s impossible to make it through military training without developing one. I’d ask if you have considered that you have a sadistic streak, but I know the answer. If you lie or evade treatment, Garrus will come into play.”

He said slowly “Very nicely boxed in.”

She said “Please, with my greatest hopes and compliments, report to Dr. Chakwas at what should be your earliest convenience. I know you’re being given no choice by someone in authority, someone you love, your will subverted, to undergo surgery you don’t want with the promise that it might help your people.” She stood and turned to go with a solemn smile, ready to give him space.

He said softly “Siha, I would regret not saying this once I had recovered from my shock. Thank you.”

She smiled and said “You’re welcome. And I am sorry.”

His nod and voice were solemn “I shall attempt to practice forgiveness, though it is not my way.”

She tipped her head forward, sorrow flooding her. “I understand.” She turned to leave. Before she opened the door his hands were on her shoulders and he spun her around and pressed her back against the door with his body. She stared in shock into intent dark eyes and he said “I would also regret not learning from the last time you left me alone in a room, your assumptions about my mindset unchallenged.”

His hand wrapped her hair around his wrist and bent her head back. His arm came around her waist, the weight of his body pressing her hard back against the door. He kissed her, hard, hungry and unyielding. She was so grateful not to be walking out the door alone, facing a burden of forgiveness
that she kissed him back, the notes of surprise and even panic being overwhelmed by venom and force.

She’d faced withdrawal, distance from him, and the flood of venom into her blood was embraced with the falling and helpless fervor of an addict. She realized she had no hope of becoming a full blown masochist because Reverie and tiremit both made it impossible to feel pain clearly, and it was always transformed into pleasure. So he could be as sadistic as he damned well wanted and it would have almost no impact as long as they had Medigel.

Relative masochism had been a joke, though, for both of them, and she didn’t dwell on it. She focused on his mouth and his kiss, his body and arm holding her weight up as she lost her balance and strength.

He pulled back and looked at her appraisingly as her eyes felt close to crossing. He seemed satisfied with her inability to focus and he said with a voice of angry grace “Hear why you must be forgiven, Jane. You said that you were manipulative, and there is no doubt that is true. I applaud that. You have what you want, and that is true. I applaud that as well. But your methods…Jane…your methods are what require forgiveness.” He looked at her, rage cresting in his eyes and voice. He said carefully “You know I have not wished to live, but you do not confide in me that the same has happened to you. You would not worry that I would be angry were that not the case. You know what this would cost, my will and my choice to end my life when I choose to end it. Yet you do not ask in the spirit of the words I used to answer. You knew my answer, but you asked as Shepard, couching your request in command. You know that how I answered was for you, Jane. It may be that I began under your command as Siha and then Shepard but now you are Jane. I ask that you no longer hide behind command or some future circumstance you believe will take me from you. Give me no further opportunities to leave with equitable composure. Do not give them to Garrus. We are capable men, Jane. We can find the exits on our own if we wish without you pointing them out to us. Ask me, Jane. Ask for what you want.”

She was panting and rethinking the entire inability for him to be sadistic thing. Resistance to the idea pulled at her like a stone blocking a deep cave, she counted on it being unyielding. She suspected tiremit influenced her far more than he believed, or that she didn’t understand herself as well as she thought she did. She started to feel it give, that resistance, melt away, and she promised she’d roll it back, she’d close it again, this was just for this moment…because he asked, because he deserved better, she said “Thane. Please stay with me. Please stay alive with me. I need you.”

His head tilted as though he didn’t believe she’d actually said it, searching her face for signs of deception. The breath left him and his eyes closed and he said “Always, Jane. For you.” Because he was who he was in the moment he opened his eyes and said with a matching smile “You needn’t ask.”

Normally she’d laugh, but she saw her tendency toward humor right now as he would see it. Deflection. He intended this barb to hit, strike and stay deep, pumping its message in with each beat of her heart. Any move toward disarming it or removing it would be met with intent to strike deeper. It was enough. It was enough to give her caution, give her insight, see the open and vulnerable passage in herself that he knew was there and could find unerringly. She could see the shorter distance he intended her to travel to him, over ground intended for her only, no longer burdened by the insult of presumed command. An exposed path.

He’d already forgiven her, but had to let her know in her graceless galloping what it was she’d trampled, what he intended to protect.

He looked at her, and he had never seemed more alien since dropping through a ceiling and
murdering four people before she had thought to blink. She was mesmerized again. He seemed to waver between wanting to kiss her or kill her, and at this point she’d take either.

She would welcome them both and he was not interested in her wishes in this moment unless she was willing to ask for them without hiding. Her tongue was still and her courage found wanting.

He set her on her feet and said in neutral tones “You must go, and I must report to the Med Bay.”

He opened the door, turned her facing out, pushed her until she crossed over the threshold, and then released his hands and let them drop away, the door closing behind her.

She moved, away, into the restroom, behind a closed door, leaned her head against cool metal and stood there for long minutes, remembering the old adage “A masochist says ‘hurt me’ and a sadist says ‘no.’”

She took long breaths, waited for venom to very, very slowly leave her system, focusing on the cold and the privacy and the overwhelming stupid that had gushed out of her, seeming like guile.

Appreciation in her taste in men built again and she didn’t feel sorry for herself. She should have kissed him right then, more stupid. Well, he learned, she learned, next time…

Of course she’d piss him off and of course there’d be a next time.

She had what she wanted. She had who she wanted. She’d gotten them both to do things they didn’t want to do.

And now she had to rethink a large part of her personality to avoid what just happened from ever happening again.

But first…she had to tell Garrus. Garrus was the cure to all that was ailing her. All she had to do was confess that she’d been spanked like a four year old. She smiled and decided to stop hiding and found her sense of humor again.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Garrus was bent over the console in the Battery laughing and she was in good company. He was saying “Wow. Need some Medigel after that?”

She confided solemnly “Won’t help. Wound’s internal.”

He said “And a burn.”

She cracked up again and he said “Can’t say I’m sorry he said it, but I’m glad it wasn’t me.”

She said “Not sure I can say sorry much more today.”

He laughed and said “You didn’t say sorry either time, not really. But I’ve gotten pretty far by just saying ‘yes ma’am.’”

She smiled and said “Now’s the time if you need to tell me something uncomfortable. I swear, it couldn’t be that bad.”

He shook his head and said “Not falling for that.”

She shrugged “Well, the invitation is open if it comes up.”
He said with a laugh “You’re not a masochist.”

She chuckled and said “Yeah, maybe he brings it out in me. Or the comment set the tone for the conversation, where tiremit took me. I don’t know. I think tiremit just makes me open to anything.”

He grinned and said “Reverie seems to have the same effect. Haven’t found anything you don’t like yet.”

She said “I’m just lucky, I guess. At least I’m good for the ego. Unless you’re Thane.”

He said with a raised brow “Are you kidding? You’re great for his ego. You didn’t punch him.”

She shrugged and said “Yeah, but I didn’t kiss him either. Couldn’t find my hand. Or my tongue. Mostly felt like I deserved it. Kicking myself that I didn’t kiss him. Missed opportunity. Galling. I missed my shot at angry Drell sex and now I’m going to pine.”

He laughed along with her, but when the laughter died down and she was counting her lost chances he said “Was he right? Have you wanted to die?”

She sighed and said “Yes. But I did that already and it didn’t take.”

He continued to watch her, waiting out the joke.

She nodded and said “It’s always there. I’m sure it helps me do my job, not being afraid to die. It’s just that sometimes it dips into…wanting to rest and not wake up. To escape the weight, the burden, the fate that seems to barrel it’s incessant way toward me and if I don’t do anything it will crush too many people. If I were dead…I wouldn’t know anymore.”

He said “Do you remember anything from when you were dead? Were there…I don’t know, human Spirits? Where…do you call them…heaven or hell?”

She said “Nope. Nothing. Maybe it’s just me, I never believed in them so I don’t qualify for entry.”

He walked over to her and put his arms around her. He said simply “Come to me when you need help, Kerim.”

She smiled and said “I do. I just did. I need you.”

He tipped her chin up and looked down at her, said “Tell you what. You’ve done enough for the day. Blow the rest off and come watch a terrible Turian vid with me. We can make fun of it together, you can sit in my lap, we can get distracted, see what happens.”

She said “You have the best ideas ever.”

He turned her, pushed her toward the door and said “I’m good like that. Let’s go.”

She brought popcorn for the occasion and a bottle of vodka. It was harder to get drunk these days with all the upgrades, but not-sober was still pretty good under these circumstances. She sat on Garrus’s lap and she picked on every single inconsistency and plot hole.

She muttered “You know, you can’t just use a face mask in space. It’s ridiculous. You have…apertures. There’d be a mess.”

Garrus said “Come on, you can’t cover the actor’s face. That’s a handsome guy.”
She muttered “He’s a dead guy, a deeply in pain and then dead guy with his bits sucked out.”

He answered distractedly “Don’t say sucked out. Giving me ideas.”

She threw popcorn at him “Ewwww.”

More improbable things happened.

Garrus said “He couldn’t fire that weapon. Kickback would break his arm. Sloppy stance.”

She mocks “Oh, I see, so when it’s something you care about, suddenly it’s important.”

He grinned and said “It’s supposed to be mindless entertainment.”

She considered and said “I don’t do mindless. I mean, I try, I’ve got the bottle and everything, but I can’t shut my brain down.”

His talons combed through her hair and he said “I suppose I can sympathize with that. Sounds like a challenge or an invitation.”

She smiled and kissed the side of his throat. She said “Not a challenge, you can manage in about five seconds, the mindless part.” He sat up straighter as though to look proud and she thought about saying “I can’t do the same for you, can I?” and then tried to learn from today’s experiences. You used to be good at this. Right now was enough, yes was enough, you prided yourself on Zen-like ‘in the now.’ You thought you were good at being in love and now you suck at it. Instead she smiled and said “Definitely an invitation.” She decided to reverse her customary direction, think less of herself, idealize him less. See him as he wanted to be seen. It mattered. She stroked fingertips along the injured side of his face, not on, but around, on the chipped and shattered edges. She said simply “How are you? I don’t ask enough.”

His brow plate raised and he said “How am I?” He sounded shocked.

She smiled and said “Yeah. How are you? How about I stop managing for a minute and listen.”

His brow plate rose higher and he put his hand to her forehead “You’re sick. It’s the only explanation.”

She removed his hand, kissed the palm and held it. She said softly “How are you, Garrus? Humor me. Because I suck at this. Because I want to know.”

He paused the vid, tilted his head back and thought for a moment. His smile was sad as he said “Humoring you I understand. I… I miss my squad. It still pulls at me, little things. Some of them would like this vid, some of them wouldn’t. Some of them would like you, some of them wouldn’t. I hear Sensat in my head telling me to get the fuck off this ship and don’t be a suicidal idiot. I used to hear you in my head after you died, but you were often encouraging me to be a suicidal idiot. You weren’t always there when I got something right, but you were always there when I fucked up, whether it was a shot or a strategy. I could talk to you about things I couldn’t discuss with my squad. I shouldn’t be here. I should have died on a floor on Omega, body probably mutilated, left out as a warning, my squad’s bodies pulled out of their shrouds and set as the same. You shouldn’t be here. You should have burned up in the atmosphere over Alchera. I had your voice in my head and now you’re here, with your own words. I’d gotten used to knowing what you were going to say. It’s all moving so fast and seems so improbable there’s a part of my head always ready to tell me I’m dead already, that the moment I saw you through my scope was the moment a bullet sliced through my brain. Part of me accepts that and is okay with it. You were with me when you were dead. I heard you, you were real. You were solace and I had two years of confiding in you, conferring with you.
When my squad died their voices were gone, but you were right there, what I was thinking about, saying ‘Nice job, Vakarian. You planned that bit well, watch your 3 o’clock’ I was taking no end of shit from you about my inability to read people. I should have known. You knew I should have known. It was real enough. I was never alone in my failures, you always witnessed them. When I got it right, I would feel I’d made you proud. Now you’re here and it seems…maybe I’m dead. Maybe I won’t question it because here you throw popcorn at me and I can touch you. Maybe I’m not afraid to die because part of me is convinced I already am. Seems impossible. Here you are, alive, a leader, with 10 people following you, and here I am, a chance to save the galaxy, not just clean up Omega. Seems…prophetic? With you as the bullet to the brain prophet? Me with a tailored fantasy of being able to touch the woman I love, finding more love improbably in a Drell? Part of me is not looking all that close. Maybe it all ties into my last moments of Omega. Afterlife. Shepard. Keeping the squad alive. Seems I couldn’t have a better setup to redeem myself, act out my fantasies. The only thing that makes me think I’m alive, really alive, is that your voice is your own. I didn’t imagine you. I’m not that creative.”

She was smiling, beaming really, and she couldn’t help it, she said “Might mean you’re dead and I’m really there with you.”

He said softly “Are you in my afterlife or am I in yours?”

She said “Hard to tell. Seems I have the same impossibilities. I have my ship back. I have the one person on the crew I trusted the most, and he inexplicably…well…sorry…old habit. I guess I’m not broken of selling myself short yet. He wants me, bullshit and all. I’ve got my crew, I’ve got my mission, and I…mind if I borrow your fantasy? Seems I won’t need to be looking forward to being dead if I’m already there.”

His smile was lopsided, wistful, and he said “It isn’t heaven.”

She shook her head slowly “It isn’t heaven. There’d be no reapers.”

He said “My squad would be alive.”

She said, the first time she’d uttered his name to another person “Urem would be alive.”

He continued “My mother would not be dying with Corpalis syndrome.”

She asked “Tell me about her?”

She rested back against him, enjoying the rise and fall of his chest, his voice vibrating through his plates, and being able to ask such a question in the first place. He said “Turian families are pretty rowdy, often we grow up and live in clan communal housing. My mother had grown up in the main center of Vakarian life, their Madlis in Cipritine. A Madlis is the spiritual home of a clan. Huge. When my dad married her, he took her name and became a Vakarian, and…he had his own opinions about what family and service were, and she wanted to keep on going the rowdy route. New status tradition was to have a separate home from the Madlis, and he built one…and she went there once, said it was nice, and went back to where her Spirit lived. I grew up in the Madlis and I saw how much she loved it, and I loved it myself. She was always at home in the chaos, welcoming more. My dad never felt comfortable there because he knew he wasn’t in control. No tolerance for life happening outside his expectations. He was terrible with us as kids, really, really terrible. Formal and distant and expectant, and Solona and I…well, Sol was better at being dutiful, but I took after mom. I was glad I wasn’t raised alone in a house with just them. My father’s tyranny would have tried to take over and my mother likely would have been forced to kill him. They loved each other, it was a good bond, but being perfect for each other didn’t mean they were aligned on the lives they wanted to live, the lives they wanted their children to have. I grew up with a huge extended family who
helped me, encouraged me, and his occasional visits home from C-Sec where he tried to teach me his way of doing things eventually went largely ignored. He always looked so bright and shiny on the vid screen, but in person he was...I don’t know. Expectation and disappointment. He influenced me, sure, and I tried to make him happy, but I just had too many approving voices in my head. That’s what she gave me. Too many approving voices. Too much family. She loves him, I love him, we just don’t want to be him. I went away to military service, and I missed her, but I knew she’d always be there. She always was, when I got home, when there was leave, making my favorite foods, asking me if I was in love yet, but never pushing, like my father would, asking me if I was ready to be an adult. She won’t always be there now. She’s hardly there at all now. Her mind has been devoured, and when I look at Thane I think of that process, so slow and so impossible to reverse, taking life and love and competence away breath by breath.” He said tentatively, his hand in her hair “Who is Urem?”

She said, actually okay with telling him, and not just as a trade, but because she wanted to tell him. “A Drell. I met him at the Citadel. Remember all those times I left a bar early with nobody and didn’t go back to the Normandy...I was with him. Absolutely in love with this gentle, smart, funny and talented man. We met two years before the attack on the Citadel, at a military reception, some function I was expected to attend. I was famous at that point and he went out of his way to introduce himself to me. He was a therapist. A bit like the Asari Consort but with less telepathy, less sex. Drell seem to be in my experience empathetic, and he was an amazing example of that. I can’t tell you that he wasn’t straight up psychic. I don’t know if he’d been watching but by the time he started to talk to me, he must have seen that I was sick of the place, and he started telling me stories. He kept pretending to not know or forget my name, asking me to say it again, spell it, then telling me spelling in English won’t help him at all, he’s sorry, could I put it on his Omni Tool so he could study it and try to remember later. I was charmed and relieved of all the military pressure and expectation in his presence. After we left together, he couldn’t remember what my name was over dinner and drinks. He said he’d only remember if I kissed him, and I did. I spent every minute that I could with him and he never treated me like Shepard. He never did use my last name, said he’d mangle it if he tried to pronounce it. Never asked about work, just told me stories and called me Vraen. When I asked him what it meant he’d tell me something different each time. I tried to look it up once, and it doesn’t exist as a word in Drell...so...it was all him. He died when Sovereign attacked the Citadel.”

His arms looped around her and she curled into his lap, one arm slipped around his waist, one hand against the rise and fall of his chest. She said quietly “So...not heaven. But we can...act out our fantasies, you were saying?”

He huffed a laugh and said “Act out my fantasies. You’re just visiting.”

She said “Can I stay? I’d like to see what your fantasies are.”

His arms tightened around her, and then he relaxed, a deep exhale released and said “You can stay. This would be one of them.”

She smiled and nuzzled against the side of his throat, settling back in with her head on his chest. “You are so smooth, Vakarian.”

He sighed and said “And it only took me three years.”

She said “I was dead for two of them, doesn’t count.”

His hand moved through her hair “They count.”
Thane was benched for testing. Karin confined him to the Med Bay upon being given full rein and his acceding control. Jane went to go visit in the morning, not even begging Garrus to come with her. She was sure Garrus had probably checked in four times by now. Thane appeared to be meditating, reclined, but she knew he was awake. He had a deeper hum when he slept. Not a snore. A hum. She missed it.

When she approached his eyes opened and he gifted her with a smile. Hell of a smile. When she got closer he took her hand and brought it to his lips and held it in his. He said “Siha, I hope I am forgiven.”

She smiled and said “There is nothing to forgive. I hope I can be forgiven for my shocking lack of intelligence.”

He squeezed her hand and said “There is nothing to forgive. I believe I have…a temper.”

It was such a bland understatement that she laughed and then said “I believe I have one of those myself. I miss you.”

His smile faded somewhat but he said “Dr. Chakwas has promised to release me from constant confinement if I…what was the word, Karin?”

Karin didn’t look up from her analysis she was buried in, but only said playfully “Behave.”

Thane smiled and said “Yes. That word. I shall attempt it.” It looked like he owned the Med Bay at this point. He elaborated “Once initial monitoring is complete I should be able to leave more often and only spend part of my time here.”

She said “When you take over my ship and everyone follows you, try to be kind.”

Karin laughed and Thane smiled. She said “Do you need anything? Can I bring you anything?”

Thane shook his head and said “Garrus has been kind enough to provide me with anything I could need. Stay with me a while longer.”

She missed his everything. She abandoned the chair at the bedside and climbed onto the bed, he made room for her and she rested her head on his chest, his arm around her shoulders, hands held on top of his abdomen, his breath that she hoped to extend setting a rhythm to time.
Emergencies arrived on the lack of schedule. Tali needed to be cleared of treason allegations, which made no sense. In discussion with Tali, she had no idea what the accusations were, only that she’d been asked to report to the Flotilla.

Of course they’d go.

Tired, wired, angry and hating Geth only slightly more than Quarians, Jane fought her way through the Alarei with Garrus and Tali. Jane felt crowning fury at the insult to injury aimed at Tali. Treason. Exile. Her father’s ship taken with him on board. When they found his body, she pulled Tali into her arms. They were both shaking, Tali from loss and Jane from anger on her friend’s behalf.

Tali had always been a particular type of fragile, like a spider web spangled with dew and sun, beautiful and intricate in the way that caught the light and held the attention. Spider silk was one of the strongest materials in existence, a miracle. Tali was a miracle.

Jane wouldn’t tell the Admirals about Tali’s father, though the man deserved to be dragged and drowned after what he had done. What she did was for Tali. The Quarians didn’t deserve the truth because all they would do was twist it.

Jane didn’t lie, she was just so damned angry that she was about ready to point the new Thanix cannon at this ship and blow it away, do the galaxy some good.

Would it be so bad if a few Reapers came after the Quarians?

Yes. Yes it would. It didn’t seem that way but…

Yes. It would. Because Tali wouldn’t like it.

Jane closed her eyes and imagined the Thanix ripping through the flotilla, and then calmed some of her bloodlust. Kal’Reegar and Veetor stood up for her. Veetor. Veetor, who couldn’t stand up for anything otherwise. Nervous, twitchy Veetor was the hero today.

That was courage.

Jane calmed, released the tight hold she had on her own fist and relaxed slightly as they gave their final verdict, allowing Tali to stay in their ranks.

She’s mine. Even her name says so now. You guys don’t deserve her.

She didn’t need to slaughter anybody else today. Tali, Garrus and she had Geth ichor spattered all over them, tears choked Tali’s voice and Garrus dearly wanted to let Tali lean on him through this. Instead he stood, stoic and intimidating, with none of this showing on his face, the only sign was that he was close to Tali, leaning toward her, what might look like aggression to an outsider was the will to protect her from this, shield her.

In the calm after the storm, Tali was shaking again, and Jane was as well with the disappointment of being unable to slaughter all but a few in the room.

Jane was thinking of taking on politics, coordination with the Turians and Earth and…what the hell was she thinking? She wasn’t a politician. If it couldn’t be fixed by guns or yelling…
Take the win, Jane. Take the win and run. No time for self doubt. Tali needs you.

On the shuttle, Garrus was finally able to give in to the temptation to be closer than colleagues, and he stood next to Tali protectively until she turned into him. His arm closed around her shaking shoulders and the heartbreaking crying of a daughter who had lost hopes and illusions when she found her father on the floor echoed through the shuttle.

She watched with aching heart these two children who loved their fathers.

She had nothing like that. Her parents…well, her parents were superior officers. She’d known them, respected them, but never loved them. They had never loved her back. They had approval or disapproval, no love. All that mattered was whether or not she passed inspection.

In a way she felt empty of those hopes and dreams and illusions and better for it. In another way she felt jealous. Not that they had each other, but that they had images of beloved parents at all. Jane had an empty space. Tali had an empty space that had once been filled.

When Jane’s father had died she had not cried, not like Tali. Nobody had leaned toward her, not like Garrus. She had been self contained and stoic, and people had inferred her grief in her quiet dignity, not suspecting that she hadn’t lost a father, because she’d never really had a father. She didn’t speak because she had nothing to say, not because too many words crowded her lips and sealed them.

When they landed she stepped closer to them, kissed the side of Tali’s facemask and pressed her forehead briefly to Garrus’s crest, then left them both to shared grief and comfort.

She supposed she should have some urge to speak to her mother, but she didn’t. She had no hope of sparking love from human to human. Not the way a Turian loved a Quarian. Not the way that Turian loved a human or a Drell. Not in any way that made mother and daughter more than military colleagues, one with more seniority who would always outrank the other.

She hadn’t done something in a long while, and she felt like doing it now. Growing up in quarters on stations and ships had always been cramped and she’d found comfort in humming floors, bright lights, and modular surroundings. She’d often built her own small fortresses out of all the detritus of abandoned storage and packing materials.

It wasn’t an unusual sight on the Normandy to see the Commander straightening out crates, storage, stowing cables, because she had conditioning and an element of OCD on the subject. Crates got squared to parallel surfaces, cables were coiled neatly, and in this case she was going to make herself a fort.

She walked slowly across the shuttle bay and found a squared and sheltered alcove. She had only to move a few crates, throw a tarp over it, weigh the tarp down, make sure it was sturdy and stable. Her hands remembered, though she realized these hands had never been a part of it. This body had never built or been in a ship fort.

With the space entirely draped and feeling about seven years old, with a silly grin she crawled in, her cheek to the cold and then warming metal of the deck, the living hum of the Normandy welcomed to reach her bones. Her quarters were too large, too exposed, and sometimes she needed to be enclosed, unseen, part of the landscape, part of the ship that was her life. The ships and stations she had lived on had been her family and she remembered all their names, all their captains, with some reverence and awe. She remembered more warmly all the people who had been engineers and cooks and had time to talk to an enthusiastic and curious little girl. It usually wasn’t the captains. Her parents did not take questions, only gave directives if they were there at all, which she dutifully obeyed.
She loved the Normandy, and she couldn’t feel her this strongly through the walls or floor of her cabin, so far from the drive core. The cabin had been designed to be a haven from ship life and in a way that was its only flaw.

She’d read once a quote, it had stuck in her head, Thomas Aquinas “If the highest aim of a captain were to preserve his ship, he would keep it in port forever.”

She’d sailed from yet another port and her ship was still preserved, and that was a miracle. She drew in air while rushing through space to their next port. Soon she would risk it all again, and hopefully come home to the same miracle. Here there was life encapsulated in the dark. Here there was purpose driving across incalculable spaces.

She smiled and fell into her childhood meditation, in that place where ship captains knew why their vessel was a She, was a Mother, was a Goddess that determined their fate. She was still in her hard suit, still splattered with Geth and that was good. She came fresh from battle to commune. She had her command and she had her ship, and the Normandy would speak to her through the floor, through vibrations and hum and the throb that meant she was alive, her heartbeat, mass effect energy surging through her veins.

She pulled off a glove and spread her fingertips over the deck, drawing in a deep breath with the sensation of the living ship moving through her hand, letting her breath back out slowly, finding a rhythm and pacing her breathing to it.

oOoOoOoOoOo

She woke in the dark, surrounded by the warmth of trapped air, hand on the thrum of the deck, but her head was raised, and it took her a moment to remember where she was. Thane had slipped into her hiding place and joined her. Her cheek was resting on his thigh, she could tell first by scent and then by the touch of skin on leather. She smiled in the dark. Her breathing pattern must have changed because his hand moved to sift through her hair, a light ruffle like a breeze.

She didn’t care how he found her, only that he did, and that he belonged and she welcomed him.

She didn’t need to explain that this was her Church, that these were her sacraments and blessings. He had Amonkira and Arashu and she had Our Lady of the Living Deck.

He would know without being told, and they could share sacred in silence, new rhythms of breath and muscle added to the song of the ship.

He had never spoken of his parents other than that he had been given to the Hanar. He said he could have refused to serve, but when his parents gave him away at six, she doubted that. He had empty space and duty for parents. He’d found his Gods and she’d found her Goddess.

A wish pulsed back down her fingertips, hoping the ship could hear her. “I will take you from safe harbor through a gate from which none have returned. I will gird you in lightning and thunder and hope. Please, see us back home whole, victorious, and with your deck sound and alive under our feet.”

Amen.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Eventually she had to pry herself out of her warm companionable cocoon because…she had to pee. Not terribly poetic, but oh well.
Thane had sat in gentle stillness for untold time and she had enjoyed the silence, flooded with gratitude for his company.

He made no effort to move until she started to shift and then her stomach growled so loudly that it was pretty clear Church was out for now. She was stiff and cramped, but he maneuvered them out with his fluid movements, left the little fort intact and draped. She had Geth ichor in her hair and she probably had a distinct sleep-seam on her face from lying against the leather on his thigh, but he looked at her as though she was beautiful, and she believed it in that moment. There was a raw and ragged beauty to what she did, just as there was a graceful and elegant beauty to what he did.

His eyes moved to her lips and stayed there and he drew a thumb over her lower lip. He said “I will bring a meal for you.”

She went to the cabin, lip tingling, and carefully removed and cleaned her armor. Good thing Geth fluids weren’t corrosive. She thought of Garrus and Tali and hoped they’d get time to bond, explore their relationship. Jane hadn’t taken Quarian lovers, because she was terrified of making them sick. It seemed too high of a risk to take, but it was Tali’s risk to take, not hers to judge. Tali and Garrus both had so much courage, had absorbed so much tragedy, taken so many steps together into darkness, finding comfort in each other’s arms could be a beautiful thing for both of them.

Good luck, broken children of the larger than life.

Cleaning was rote but it did take checklist focus and she tried not to let her mind wander too far. She quickly checked in with EDI in case there were emergencies requiring her attention, and contacted Joker and let him know their next port, which right now was the Citadel, as much as it wasn’t her favorite place, there were reasons to go.

She never asked EDI to transmit orders to Joker or to anyone. Too much mistrust of AI. Too convinced that EDI was the eyes and ears of the Illusive Man, knowingly or not. She wanted people to know that if Shepard wanted something, you’d hear it from her. She visited her crew, notified them all in person of missions, answered requests to see her as immediately as possible. The entire ship was a web and she had to tend it, feeling her way, alert to each tremble and sway.

The old saying “The Devil is in the Details” applied to command as well. Become too reliant on another to assess a situation for you and you lose your discretion and instinct. This is why she was found communing with deck plates, coiling cables, and talking to her crew so often that many of them told her in essence to fuck off and let them do their jobs. She didn’t micro manage so far as telling people how to do their jobs, but she did web tend. If people were walking behind her carrying guns, it was best if they didn’t want to shoot her in the back.

She had a good crew. She had excellent crew. They only had a few more things to do before heading through the relay. They still had to get the IFF, but she wanted to wrap everything else up first. So much of everything she’d done had been on Cerberus’s schedule. Right now she was going to take some time while she had it and store up for winter, like a squirrel sequestering her nuts.

They were going to live through this fucking thing if it killed her.

She snorted a laugh, straightened a data pad on her desk, and took a shower.

oOoOoOoOoOo

After her shower she heard Thane enter and there was some minor rattling and clinking but he was probably trying to make noise so she could hear. Otherwise he was so quiet that she felt the urge to say “He’s standing right behind me, isn’t he?” in general conversation in the hopes that someday it
would be true and become comedic rather than vaguely upsetting. She was afraid if she pointed out that she was unnerved by his silence, he’d do it more often. She employed iron discipline instead, not allowing herself to become startled. She couldn’t shake the idea that he was slowly keeping track of each order she gave, each reaction he elicited from her, filing them and awaiting some day of reckoning. Which was silly because they didn’t have that many days left for that sort of planning. He was observant and intuitive and it was the exposed feeling of living under lights that could reveal her to her bones. She revealed things to him she didn’t know about herself.

He was careful, and that made her careful. Normally she barreled through, which could be proven by the fact that she tended to give the Council shit at every encounter. She tried to speak truth to power. In his case there was less speaking of truth because it would almost seem like an insult. He usually already knew. She had only met a few people in her life that caused her to reflexively alter her voice, alter the pace of her speech, the flow of her thoughts, to try and harmonize with them. Thanhe had the most profound effect on her in that regard. Since her personality often revolved around blunt humor, doing without or mostly without was a challenge. He made her see herself, see through his eyes. She liked who she was with him, his formality and unspoken places allowed those in her to breathe, to stretch, to be shared. He didn’t make her other than she was, he allowed her to express part of herself she only otherwise experienced alone.

He said he was bringing dinner for her…but he’d…he’d clearly made it himself. She saw the food first. This did not come out of the galley. A bowl of elaborately pared, diced and dressed…fruit? She didn’t think he ate meat or drank alcohol. She had only seen him eat fruit or vegetables, and those spare. She turned further to see him and she was suddenly drastically and permanently underdressed in casual all-purpose T-shirt and loose pants. She stopped and stared. If she was right, he was wearing Rakhan Tseni. She’d only seen cloth like that behind glass or in photographs. Most pieces were lost to history. There had been a small creature, closest to a scorpion on Earth than anything else in comparison, that had lived on Rakhana and spun a fiber into webs that they used to coax condensing water from the dawn air when woven over their nests in the cooler ground. They were called Tseni. There had been a clan of Drell that learned how to raise them to create the colors and consistencies that were highest prized, and work those fibers into cloth. The creature, the cloth and the clan all took the same name. Tseni garb was worn only by those who earned them. Not available for sale, only as a gift. Even royalty may not wear Tseni unless some great act beyond their duty caused them to earn the favor of the secretive and ultimately powerful clan that gifted them yearly, making their coin with lesser cloth.

Tseni garb was awarded like Earth’s Nobel Prize, but with more religious significance and unique craftsmanship. Tseni could never be worn by other than the intended wearer. After the death of the owner, they were considered holy but cursed, preserved as a relic of a house but never touched out of respect and superstition. It was believed an honored Drell would wear the spirit of their Tseni in the afterlife and Kalahira Herself would stalk anyone who dared to touch the Tseni of Her blessed, as though the action of touching or wearing would dilute or borrow honor they had not earned. The tiny fibers were knotted and woven in ways that could mimic Drell skin, patches and voids and stripes, with other patterns woven throughout that background. This Tseni matched Thane’s colors, proving they belonged to him only. The patterns were made of his green and black and red ribbing. In composition it was made of bands of fabric, varying in width. Over and through the texture of skin there were stylized rivers and dunes and cloud. The bands were then woven together in strap pattern molded over and suggesting the muscle underneath. She’d never seen Tseni worn. Tseni was beautiful and alien behind glass and still, but worn the cloth seemed to have a life of its own composed of light and breath and the shift of his body. It was sculpted and subtly iridescent, looking like savage armor that would turn any weapon. The Hanar must have rescued some of the Tseni clan and the spinning creatures, found out how to raise them off Rakhana. Thane had done something in his service to earn this. Urem would have swooned.
She was about to swoon.

She tried to remember if she was supposed to know about Tseni or not. It was obscure knowledge. Urem had told her so many stories about Drell and she didn’t know if he’d made up the story to amuse her or if he was spilling Drell secrets, trusting to her discretion. She swallowed, history fell away and after the initial shock of identification of the cloth it was just Thane wearing it and the full impact of his presentation and regard. A blush crept up her throat and down her cheeks. She struggled to not pluck at her peon’s clothing and apologize for being unworthy. Raising her eyes to his, he looked as though he hoped he passed her inspection. Given her thoughts on passing inspection, that she always tried to do it and that didn’t always succeed, her shock melted into admiration and she said “Give me some time to come up with some words to express how speechless you have made me.”

That earned her a suggestion of a smile and a subtle relaxation of his body and warmth in his eyes that made her knees weak. She said “I believe I have just discovered that I am intensely shallow.”

His lips curved into a deeper smile and he arched a brow ridge, saying “And why is that?” He seemed to have determined that she was not going to budge from where she was and he walked over to her. She extended a hand and he ignored it, lifted her and moved back to the couch, sitting down and settling her into his lap. The idea of crushing the fabric horrified her and she tried to stand up but he wouldn’t allow it, tightening his arm around her waist.

She said “This is beautiful fabric, I can’t –”

He said calmly “You can because it is mine and I choose this.”

She said with growing distress “Choose what, that I snag a zipper on it?”

He said “This is Tseni fabric, Siha, it does not snag. It looks fragile but it is not that easily drawn away from its nature, the weavers make it so.”

The opening to exercise her curiosity loomed and she said “Where did you get it?”

He settled her back against the curve of his arm and looked at her face for a moment, his eyes softening. He gathered her hair and pulled it over her shoulder, smoothing the strands and said “I will tell you, but first tell me what about you is intensely shallow.”

She sighed and said “You are beautiful. I know I should probably say handsome, but beautiful more often comes to mind. This clothing is…I still don’t have words. It made me stop and stare. A less shallow person would take it in stride, I imagine? That you are as beautiful to me in any clothing or without it would be ideal.”

He raised a brow, nodded sagely, kissed at the side of her throat and then moved to her ear where he said “Nonsense.”

She laughed and said “It’s not nonsense. I’m wearing unworthy clothing in the present company.”

He bit at her earlobe and said “Then feel free to remove it. You were raised to wear what you wear. I was raised to wear what I wear. I am a creature of formalities and you are not. It would be shallow if you attempted to dress as I do in order to adopt a superior technique to which you were not born.”

She laughed and said “I take it back, you’re definitely the shallow one.”

There was laughter in his voice as he said “I suppose I could have told you of the dress code, but perhaps I preferred an ambush, such as you are inclined.”

She said “See? Adopting a superior technique.”
He shook his head while nuzzling her throat “No, Siha, I was raised to ambush as well. You are not a shallow creature. You are appreciative of effort, as am I.”

She smiled and said “All right. I cede to your superior technique. Where did you get the clothes?”

He leaned forward and took the bowl off the table, put it in her hands so she cradled it in her lap. He lifted a piece of fruit in his fingertips, brought it to her mouth and she took it, chewed and fell newly in love. She tipped her head back and soaked in appreciation of sweet, sharp, hot, tangy and tingling, the venom from his fingertips pulled into the fruit. She said “I take it back, I’m shallow. I’m in love with fruit. Oh…what did you do? Did you rub that all over your body before cutting it up?”

His voice was indulgent and pleased, and he brought another piece to her mouth, she chewed contentedly, eyes closed as he said “You occasionally lack poetry, Jane.”

She smiled and said “Mmm. True. That’s why I need you. I am prosaic. You are poetic.”

He said thoughtfully “I have perhaps had too much poetry and I require occasional undisguised truths. I need you as well, just as you are.”

He told her stories and fed her fruit from his fingertips, identifying the different pieces, answering all of her questions for once without evasion. He told her of the Tseni clan, exactly as Urem had told her. He invited her to stroke her fingertips over the cloth, to not be afraid of it, that it was sturdy and repelled stain. It held its shape, seemed to remember the form it had been given and rebounded after bending or depression. He had to demonstrate that before she’d try it herself. He explained that it was formed and then cured into shape, not merely woven, a compound cloth of fiber and resin that polished and sealed. Even he didn’t know the full technique because that was secret. It was gifted to him by the Tseni through the Hanar for a service he did not disclose. She didn’t ask. They were still prone to being eavesdropped upon here and she didn’t want to endanger him or press on his confidence further.

He explained that the fruit had a cultural meaning as well, each of the strains of fruit were difficult to find and had been even on Rakhana, now only available through a few purveyors and not widely available. The herbs were also rare, the dressing composed of…she got the impression…very expensive things. The tradition was to prepare each fruit into a particular shape according to the tradition, which would be an act of devotion and precise knife skills. An imperfect piece was to be discarded. The dressing had a particular ingredient that dissolved venom into itself as an emulsion.

It was often presented as a gift to a parent or a superior, from apprentice to master, as a sign of devotion and of being willing to take the expense, risk and time to prepare it.

After that tradition had been around for hundreds of years, the recipe had been altered and adapted to lovers. He had carved the fruit with bare hands, mixed the dressing with fingertips and composed the fruit with his own venom mixed in, as an offering to her.

She asked tentatively “What is the occasion?”

He fed her the last piece of fruit, waited until she chewed and swallowed with a satisfied closing of her eyes and said “My life, Siha. You have given me back my life.”

Her lips quirked in a skeptical smile and she said “You haven’t gotten out alive yet. Don’t thank me too soon.”

He ran his thumb over her lower lip and said “Have faith, Siha. My people would call it a Rightness. A sign post or omen. You have not failed before. Miranda has conquered death once already and she
is aided by two others of equivalent genius. They believe they have found a way, with continued treatment and Kolyat’s aid, to reverse the Kepral’s. They have had success with initial therapies of altering my existing blood with a method of plasmapheresis, and they hope that transplantation and genetic therapy of marrow will create a self-sustaining solution. My breath is already easier. As of yet they cannot extend this cure to everyone, as apparently Kolyat and I are a lucky match, but the research may very well save not only my life but those of many of my people. They tell me it was your inspiration that brought this to pass. That is the value of being prosaic.”

She was venom-blurred and happy, feeling a pure and unsullied victory, something rare in her experience. He wasn’t angry at her. He had his life. Kolyat had helped. He wore Tseni to honor the occasion, made her food and fed her with his hands, cradled her in his arms and love soaked into her from his voice and body. She relaxed and said “Good.”

Really, really good. Unspeakably good. She was awesome. He was amazing. Venom tasted really good. She almost snorted at a thought and said “You must really like helpless women.”

He smiled, dipped his lips to hers and said “I have never met one I couldn’t make so, so perhaps I have no frame of reference. I like you in that state.”

She stroked her fingers over his frill and said “You are hopelessly arrogant.”

He tilted his head and said “It is not arrogance in this case, simply fact.”

She grinned “But you’re not disagreeing that you’re arrogant.”

He lifted her from the couch and said with a hint of self deprecating humor “I may be arrogant, but I am not foolish.”

She laughed and wrapped her hands around his neck. He carried her to the edge of the bed, sat and moved his hand to the side of her face. He looked at her for long solemn moments and she looked back, less solemn, dizzy and happy and accepting. He brushed a fingertip lightly along her cheekbone and leaned in to kiss her. She must taste of fruit and joy and she was happy to share that with him. She followed his lead as though blindfolded and trusting, her fingers trailing over the mythical cloth, the mythical man, assured by his words and kiss and faith, that it would be all right, that she had made it so, and that his Gods told him. She could believe it in that moment, borrowing that from him, allowed to share in something never intended for human ears or hearts.

Tiremit was coursing through her and he turned her to straddle him, with her sitting back on the middle of his thighs, enough space for her to see and explore the cloth. He set her hands on it, allowing her to trace her fingertips over the bands. With her altered vision she imagined she was seeing the Tseni as it was intended to be seen, as it would be seen by a tiremit-enthralled Drell, the rivers coursed in their paths, the dunes blew and resettled, the clouds formed into fanciful shapes not from the Earth, new creatures and spirits. Her knowledge of Rakhana provided her the knowledge to find the suggestions of shapes of alien fish and animals and birds in the rivers and sand and sky. They swirled into new life with his breath and movement and her passing fingers. He was the embodiment of what was good of Rakhana at Her best. He taught the rivers to flow in their courses, he was the foundation basin of the desert and blew the dunes into sculpted forms, he held up the sky. He was the Hope of his people, who had scattered like the sand dunes.

She moved her fingers between the straps, finding his skin underneath, coaxing his hum from his chest, groans from his mouth. He was living history and art and beauty. This was the allure of service to Hanar training, to be the opportunity to pull Rakhana’s past into now, to honor Her and her gods, to be the unchanging and imperturbable wearer of Tseni in the dark shades of deep forest and twilight.
His words were soft, and the beat of his heart under her fingertips were like drums in the deep Rakhana jungle where the sun never met the forest floor. He watched her face as she explored the fabric and the stories writ deep in the weave. “I come from an old people, Jane, from an exhausted planet. Many would say a failed people, we are but few. We cling tightly to the only traditions that belong to only us, for we have lost our home, lost our soul. That soul was invigorated into my blood as a child. I am not sorry it was done to me, that I am who I am, for that discipline is now required of me. I am fully formed for this purpose and no moment of preparation was wasted. I have worn these Tseni only once, when they were gifted, and never since. I did not feel worthy to carry Rakhana on my body. I set them aside. Now I see that Rakhana is not gone, I have been carried forward into the greater rivers of the galaxy, to find a child of a younger race, brash and hurried and honest. Through my eyes, Arashu has seen you as well. I wear this, Siha, for you. I have seen your strengths and that you carry the hopes of your people, the hopes of all people. I see with old soul through new eyes. I wear them now to show you that the hopes of my people, those Drell who wait upon the far shores and anxiously watch to see if their people will be wiped from the slate forever, are alive in me. I wear them as my armor and my guide. I wear these to prove to you I am worthy, that I will not fail you. If there is to be only one Drell who fights with you, know that he is blessed by his people, blessed by Arashu, and guided to follow your path. You need no armor or transferred hope of your own, your people are not broken and lost. You have youth and hope and strength and I love you for it.”

He pulled her hands from under the straps and kissed each palm. He made her proud to be who she was, rough and unpolished and unpretentious in comparison. He did not wish to cut and mold her to be like him, nor would he attempt to be like her. Nothing need be added or taken away. Only shared.

She was assured, hungry, curious and searching along the textures and tension he gave her. He set her hands down and slid his palms over her hips and waist, carrying the simple shirt up and over her head, capturing her chin in a hand and kissing her. She was focused on him, his mouth, her fingertips anywhere she wanted to touch him. His hands returning to her hips, lifting her to turn her and slip off the pants she now appreciated for their ease of removal, turning her to sit with her back to his chest, the feel of the Tseni natural and fitting, part of him. It didn’t occur to her to make a choice, take it off him, that would be presumptuous. She had no intent of presuming, only tilting her head back against his shoulder, her hands along his outer thighs and his hands on her breasts, his mouth at her throat, the sound of his hum in her ears and through her nerves.

He rolled back and to the side, taking her with him, pivoting once and landing with her stomach down, his thighs straddling her hips. His thumbs and palms pressed into the muscles along the side of her spine at her lower back and rolled up then out, along her shoulders, testing her muscle tension and learning her skin. Tingling moved from where his hands passed. She had so much venom in her blood that it was like splashes of water in a pond, no longer a shock or a hunger, another perfectly normal mythical thing.

One hand came to the back of her neck and the other set to dig into her muscles, painfully and deep and she tried to rear back and turn over, but he held her down with his hips and his hand. He leaned forward and pulled her earlobe between his teeth and said “Be still, Jane. Your muscles are starved for air, for movement, this will hurt. Breathe through the pain. Practice faith in me.”

Even aided by venom his hands were still painful on freshly tender muscle and she let out squeaks and hisses of breath when he dug in. She stopped trying to turn with a conscious effort and he squeezed once at her neck in approval of her acquiescence. She tried to relax, but both hands returned to more deeply painful depths of kneading, prying at knots of tension buried in layers.

She’d never been able to bear massage, always stopped and complained of too much pain, and she didn’t actually trust him or have faith. It wasn’t about his skill, it was about her body being the way it was, and she was accustomed to a certain level of pain and discomfort, she’d grown used to it, her
only other option being painkillers, which she avoided. She was certain he was doing it wrong and he was used to Drell muscle. She was sensitive to pain, she pushed herself too far, she had things like skin weave. It was unwitting and unnecessary torture, but it endeared him to her, that he could be so wrong about something but so sure. It wouldn’t last forever. She would pretend it felt better after a little while and he would let up.

A few minutes or an hour or two breaths or a day later, she couldn’t tell, she changed her mind as he changed her body. His strokes were brutal and demanding and unforgiving, leaving behind cramp and twitching and offended flesh. She had a few moments of howling panic, as though waking from sleep to a clenching and strident cramp in her calf, that pain that demanded you do something about it, anything about it, when there was nothing to do. Despite his admonition to hold still she arched and tried to relieve the pain, but he ignored that and was only concerned with immobilizing where he was working, tingling and pain and the feel of Tseni cloth on her hips, unrelenting fingers that began to draw sighs instead of gasps, moans instead of hissing breath.

She groaned against a long press of the palm of his hand and said “One day you’re going to be wrong and…ohhhh…I’m going to be there to see it. And I’m going…uhh…I’m going to laugh.”

He leaned in to whisper in her ear, his voice dark behind her closed eyes “I have often been wrong, Siha, can you tell me when right now?” His hands gripped her waist and Tseni cloth was pressed to her back.

She tried to think about it, but right now all she could produce was a “Mmmm…” as her back turned traitor and felt like it was beginning to breathe, angry and unexpected, newborn and intensely grateful to be alive.

She became progressively more and more boneless, made of light and air, that sense again that he saw straight through her skin to see her hollow bones and obeying muscle, into her mind to see her needs she didn’t know she needed, wants she didn’t have words for asking. She had always seemed a difficult if not impossible puzzle to people, secure in her oddities and strangeness to make her unable to solve, and he flipped and turned and folded her into origami, showing he knew not only knew her simpler forms, but the potential in his hands to be more complicated.

She was in love, and she was, rightly, terrified of the man. She was cautious, but she knew not cautious enough, his allure making up the difference. It was too late to hide, too late to not be known. He had found her in her childish and solitary fort, understood and joined her there. If she were to become more cautious and keep any distance, he would obliterate that with concealed impatience. It was far too late to shut him out and he knew it.

She would do it his way. He was whole, expecting to live, and he was her sworn instrument and weapon until he wasn’t. She couldn’t trust him, couldn’t have faith, any more than she could believe that he would bring her back to bliss, but time would take care of that.

Her life belonged in part to him, certainly her command. Hadn’t he earned the right to betray her?

She drifted in and out of awareness of his hands, his breath, his thighs, her thoughts like a rambling river, each bright or terrifying thought buoyed up for lazy examination, intuitive realities and fantasies slipping by without her reaching for them. Each moment was kaleidoscopically perfect and arresting in its clarity or concealment.

She was doomed. It was lovely to be doomed with style. The fear of losing him was replaced by the fear of keeping him, and what that would mean, how he would overshadow and eclipse her, how he would inspire her, how she wouldn’t want it any other way. His hands eased and she barely noticed
their presence, drifting like she was falling asleep on the beach, the awareness of waves falling out of her consciousness.

She might have fallen asleep, whispers of his voice unintelligible but reassuring, strokes of his hands on her body comforting and as they should be. She only started to become aware of change when she couldn’t remember when he’d left her, how he’d removed his clothing, how they were under blankets. She was on her side and his mouth was on hers, his hands gentle and still soporific, urgency a far away hum, beginning in his bones and building outward, as he’d relaxed her from the skin and down, in reverse, bringing her back to him, along with him. Her arm was relaxed on her hip and slowly straightened, digging her fingernails into the skin of her thigh. The sense of feeling full of pleasure with a limit expanded and burst and she was a fountain, no measured depth and no end to expression.

His hands moved under and over her sides, settled on her hips and pulled her against his thighs, hips and cock with a gushing moan from her lips and an answering growl from him. The urgency spread from his bones and through his muscles, into her. His hand slid down her thigh and pulled her bent knee over him, angling his body tighter to hers so his cock was trapped against her stomach, hard and throbbing, his hand sliding back up the inside of her thigh and finding her clit, insistence in every part of him. His mouth bruised hers, teeth at her tingling and tender lips, fingers between her legs, thrusting and sliding, wet and tingling at her clit, his cock sliding over her belly slick with sweat and drops of pre-cum, the creature whose arms she was in moving from myth to man to animal in choreographed moments. She came at his call with a wrenching moan against his mouth, shudders through her body.

He growled in satisfaction, pressed her with his body over and down until he was hilted in slick heat, still and now newly clenching and welcoming him with a strangled scream from the weight of his body and the wrench of his arms on her legs. He held still, eyes closed, breath heaving, muscles twitching on his face. He let out a deep breath on a half snarl and moved her legs until her hips were lifted, legs braced against his chest and shoulders. He pressed down on her shoulders with the palms of his hands, drove in at a painful angle, withdrew and did it again, ecstatic tension in his face, in the nails digging into her shoulders. She had a moment where she saw through to his bones with renewed marrow, saw to his mind with its need and secrets, understood him and welcomed and cherished him before he ground into her with a snap and twist of his hips, a full snarl on his lips. Her head fell back, her eyes closed, her strangled wail provoking him to drive in faster, harder, deeper, until she repeated the sound, until she could make no other sound.

She came around him and opened her eyes to see his head thrown back, feeling the trembling in the hands gripping her shoulders, shaking all through him, his face drawn tight with effort and then released to pleasure with his final hard thrust inside, emptying and shuddering. He was still, panting, for a moment, then opened his eyes, looked at her like she made the worlds. He eased her legs to the side and shifted his trembling arms to bear some of his weight until he had lowered himself down enough to rain kisses against her shoulders and neck, then rested his head above her breast, head to the side, his panting slowing as she was sure he could hear her heartbeat through her skin. She reached weak arms to embrace him around wide shoulders, her palms flush to the skin on either side of his spine.
Chapter 7

Garrus was busy with coordination with Palaven, which is why their destination was the Citadel. Garrus was going to meet his father on neutral ground. The Normandy was not approved for docking near Palaven, and might never be. Garrus had been pulling in every favor, bit of gossip and heads up he could get, scrambling to re-confirm his identity and that he wasn’t dead or a traitor. Turians slept a great deal less than humans, but he’d been pushing that limit, only sleeping in a cot in the Battery for the one or two hours he allowed himself a day. They were two days out and his prep was exhaustive.

She’d stopped in to see him and he’d pulled her into a long kiss, then stretched and cracked his neck with an imposing and distinct sound. She smiled, tilted her head and said “Can I get you anything? Everything going okay?”

He shook his head negatively to the question of needing anything, but said wistfully “I’m okay. Spirits, but you smell good, Kerim. Save some time for me in three days, I won’t take no for an answer.”

She grinned and said “And you won’t hear it.”

He groaned and then said with weary focus as he stretched out his arms and rotated his shoulders “Good, because otherwise there’d be a makeshift gag involved. Wouldn’t let you up until I heard a muffled yes anyway.”

She groaned and said “And now I have to wait for that?”

He laughed and his shoulders relaxed momentarily, then tensed again and he was back to business. He said “I’m okay. Tired. I’ve gotten some sleep here and there. Miss you like hell, but this is important, I’m actually…hopeful. I’m hopeful. Terrified, but hopeful.”

She said “Good. So it sounds like a good day. For us, anyway. Thank you for doing this.” He nodded and she asked “How’s Tali doing?”

He said with a grieved sigh “She’s…well, she’s shattered. Could have been so much worse, I’m glad she’s among friends and not back on that poison-trap ship. I wouldn’t have minded murdering a few Quarians while I was there.”

She nodded in vehement agreement. She said “Did you guys get more closely involved? Seemed like you had some moments there.”

He laughed, somewhat harsh and said “I comforted her, or tried to. She’s got no facial expressions or scent and I’m a Turian. If she doesn’t slip me a note or something, I’m never going to do anything. It’s up to her.”

She asked “Have you ever been with a Quarian?”

He shook his head “No. Scares the crap out of me.”

She laughed and said “Yeah, me too. So back to terrified but hopeful?”

He shrugged and said “I don’t know. Not like I can do anything about it right now. I don’t want to use her grief as an entry point. Seems like an incredibly poor starting point for a relationship.”
He thought a moment and then said cheerfully “Might help. Couldn’t really hurt. You have a way with words. At least I’d know. You can explain that as a Turian I am culturally obliged to be a moron where such things are concerned. It’s easier with Turian women.” He smiled at some internal memory and then said thoughtfully “They are not shy.”

She grinned and said “Mind if I tell her that you asked me if it was okay if you pursued her when I propositioned you?”

He laughed and said “She’ll melt into an embarrassed puddle. Wish I could see it. Sure. You have more latitude to be…uh…informed…and direct.”

She said “Might help her to know.”

He said with a smile “Thanks. I haven’t had much spare time to consider it with everything else going on. You okay?”

She nodded and said “I’m good. Thrilled to see Thane is going to be okay.”

He smiled and he relaxed again. He said thoughtfully, looking at her with warmth “Yeah. Someone should thank you for that.” He sighed, closed his eyes and said “Three days. That’s what I keep telling myself.”

She leaned up on tiptoes and kissed the side of his mandible and said “Three days. Gag unnecessary but optional if that’s what you’re into.”

He pulled her into a dizzying kiss, then reluctantly let her go, both back to business with expressive and shared heavy sighs.

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She checked in on Tali, asking her about the aftermath of her ordeal, and Tali put a brave mask...on it. Jane relied mostly on listening to Tali’s very expressive voice and accented body language, an adaptation she imagined Quarians had developed with the loss of facial expressions. As much as Garrus might say he was clueless, what he really was involved being a Turian with deep inhibitions that required he hide personal feelings and cultural discrepancies when compared to other species.

Jane had seen Tali slump over when Garrus talked. Tali had a big ol’ crush and a lot of anxiety.

Jane said “I’d like to talk to you about something privately, and this isn’t really a good place, would you mind coming up to my cabin? I promise it isn’t a bad thing.”

Tali hesitated and said, and there was that anxiety, under the layers of her voice “Sure, Shepard. Let me just close out this set of figures, then we can go.”

They headed up in silence and Jane could almost smell the smoke from Tali’s brain spinning with no traction. Well, to be fair, there was smoke. Was the smoke purple or just the face shield? Hard to tell.

If Jane tried to reassure Tali any more she’d just make her more nervous, so she brought her in and said “The cabin’s much nicer than on the original Normandy” Tali sat down on the couch, admired the fish and Jane barreled on ahead. “First, I have issues with the substandard berths available on the Normandy. I have this nice cabin, other people not so much. Do you think you can do anything to shuffle some mass around on this ship and get people actual decent berths? Private cabins, private
bathrooms. As though people could choose to live here and weren’t just squatting in cramped misery? People here are giving their all. Those bunks on the crew deck are depressing. Also, do you have any ideas to make the galley more dextro friendly?”

Tali was suddenly animated and enthusiastic “Absolutely, we could do that. There is definitely unutilized space for berths. You could make it more dextro friendly by stocking a few more things that weren’t nutrient paste.” The disgust she poured into the words ‘nutrient paste’ was eloquent.

Jane said “Good. Get me a list on the food and give me a basic dextro tutorial when you get the chance? After the main mission, I’m planning on keeping the ship afterward, setting up as a Reaper eradication force, hoping to coordinate with the different species, who will all need our help. Garrus is working on coordination with the Hierarchy, and I’ll work on the Alliance. Maybe you could work out something with Quarians? I’m going to ask certain people to stay on. This is me asking you to stay. I’d like to bribe people if possible with decent quarters and better food and to stop feeling guilty. Full overhaul, time at dock for refit guaranteed, you won’t be stuck dragging furniture and you won’t have to do it alone. We won’t do it until after the mission, but you can plan in the meantime?”

Tali said “I…well. I hadn’t thought beyond…calling something a suicide mission kind of puts a period at the end of that sentence, doesn’t it?”

Jane said “Yeah, I opted for honesty when I maybe should have called it something less grim.”

Tali said “Vacation Mission?”

Jane said “The Definitely Not Dead Mission”

Tali said “In Your Face at the Collector Base.”

Jane answered with a snort “I can’t top that. Well, at least suicide was not soft sell. The Flotilla has treated you like absolute crap, but I know you love your people.”

Tali sounded like she was smiling “I know you wanted to kill them, but you wouldn’t let me blow up the Alliance on your behalf, so fair is fair.”

Jane sighed and said “Yeah, fair is fair. We all have crappy in laws.” Tali laughed and Jane continued “This next thing is personal, not professional, so tell me it’s none of my business if it’s none of my business, but it’s possible it may be at least partly my business or you might think it is.”

Tali said “Ummm…you lost me.”

Jane said “We have established that I’m bad at naming things. Are you romantically interested in Garrus?”

Tali held still for a long minute and said “…why are you asking me?”

Jane said “Because, frankly, Garrus can’t. He’s a Turian and in his culture, women have to make the first move.”

Tali said, flustered “They what? I didn’t…how…why didn’t anybody tell me?”

Jane put her hands up and said “This is why I am telling you. He can’t.”

Tali sounded shocked “He asked you to tell me?”
Jane said “No, he couldn’t even ask me to tell you, I had to ask him if he wanted me to ask you to… oh hell, I’ve lost count of reps. I have a feeling you are romantically interested in him. I know he is romantically interested in you.”

Tali’s voice abruptly raised and octave and she said “What?” She lowered her tone and said “How… does he talk about me?” She sounded like she hated herself for being curious but she’d also hate Jane if she didn’t give her every detail.

Jane laughed a little and said “I saw you when he quoted from “Fleet and Flotilla” and it was your idea in the first place. When I told him I was interested in him, he accepted my invitation and my terms. He had been unable to do anything but hint before I asked him. This is why I’m here. You might think he’s exclusively mine, and he isn’t. You might think if he wanted you, he’d tell you, but he can’t. So I’m just trying to straighten out any misunderstanding and give you back an opportunity that belongs to you. I also asked him if I could tell you that when I told him I was polyamorous and propositioned him, he asked me how I’d feel if he pursued you. I said it would be fine.”

Tali said with clear shock “He what? I would have…I wish I had a bug in that room to hear that conversation.” She seemed to sober and then said with a little forlorn twinge but also supportively and as a friend “He loves you. He might be…romantically interested in me, but he loves you. I can see that. Everyone can see that. Even on the SR1. What you have together is special, unique.”

Jane said comfortingly “Yes. He does love me. That doesn’t mean that he doesn’t love you too, have something special and unique with you.”

Tali said with exasperation “Well, yes, according to many people it does.”

Jane said gently “It should only be according to us. Yes, he loves me, and he loves Thane. It doesn’t have to be a choice where we choose one over the other. We could be equals.”

Tali was statue still, frozen in body language of shock. Maybe nobody had told her. Maybe nobody knew. It seemed everyone knew about her involvement with Thane and with Garrus and likely together, but nobody had stuck their nose into their relationship with each other yet, chalk ing it up as a friendship. Isn’t that sweet. It was almost refreshing. Unless Tali was just being faux shocked. She wasn’t going to accuse Tali of that.

Tali said “I…this is a lot to take in.”

Jane waved a hand and said “Yes. It is. I don’t really know much about Quarian attitudes regarding sex and love, or yours personally. I’ve been involved with Turians before, and Drell, I know the cultures a bit more. I’ve never been involved with a Quarian though, and neither has Garrus. His attitude is consistent with his culture. I’ve developed my own attitude, so I’m not particularly a typical human.”

Tali muttered “I think I figured that part out for myself, Commander Obvious.”

Jane grinned and said “Well, I love you both. I’d love to see you happy. I’d hate to be a perceived obstacle. I’d feel guilty if I knew how you felt and knew how he felt, knew under the circumstances you’d never tell each other unless I did something.”

Tali said slowly “So…you and he would still be involved. And you love me…am I missing another proposition here?” It was half joke, half discomfort.

Jane grinned and said “Unless he changed his mind and told me we were through, yes, we would remain involved indefinitely. Not bonded, not married, but involved when and where and if we can
make the time. I don’t own him, he’s free to follow his own happiness, and if that happiness is with you, or without me, that’s his decision. I should warn you not to ask him to choose. That isn’t for my benefit, but yours. If he chooses you and circumstances change, that’s fine with me and I wish you both well, all the joy you can catch in your hands. But asking him to choose would be deal breaker territory. It’s…well, you’d lose his respect. I can’t promise him forever, but I can promise him I want him to be happy. I can promise you that I want you to be happy. I am not propositioning you, but I am also not…not propositioning you or intentionally excluding you. You haven’t expressed attraction to me and I haven’t expressed it to you, and doesn’t it seem that there’s enough going on right now?”

Tali sounded vaguely horrified “I wouldn’t…would I have to…sleep with everyone? Together?”

Jane’s eyebrows shot up and she said “What? No. No, that’s not the…uh…price of admission. You and Garrus work out what you want together. Yikes.”

Tali nodded and said in a quiet echo “Yikes. Thane terrifies me.”

Jane smiled and she thought of his dark voice and bands of mythical cloth and she said wistfully “Yeah. Me too.” Then she said quietly “Tali, what do you want?”

Tali said mournfully “A drink.”

Jane held up a finger and said “Garrus keeps a stash here, that I can do.” She gave Tali a moment while she took her time getting some alcohol. She set down the bottles and glasses and a Quarian-friendly sterilizing carafe and said “Here’s your chance to exercise your curiosity, Tali, ask me anything. If I can’t tell you I won’t, if I can, I will. Shoot. You’re damned brave, by the way.”

Tali snorted and said “I don’t feel brave.”

Jane tsked and said “That’s why it’s bravery. It’s a paradox.” She downed a shot and cleared her immediate schedule.

Tali took a few sips, organizing her thoughts, and said “Okay. In order. I will help with the refit of the Normandy. I would appreciate private quarters. Thank you for thinking of us. I’d like to get through the…uh…Definitely Not Dead Mission…before I make any major decisions about staying or going. The Flotilla is…a mess. Not sure I can help but…they definitely need help. If I go, though, I’ll look for opportunities to work with you, build trust. Might be better if I were your inside…man…woman…inside Quarian. I’d be your inside Quarian, Shepard.”

Shepard said “Please call me Jane.”

Tali took another sip, warming to her subject and the soapbox. “I’ll be your inside Quarian, Jane! Wait, that sounded just a little bit dirty.”

Jane said cheerfully “I’m okay with it!”

Tali echoed “You’re okay with it! All right. As for the rest…well, Quarians don’t really do…casual. It’s not an insult or judgment to what you do, it’s a practical thing. Even between a Quarian and another Quarian, there’s always a risk of infection. Having sex is taking a real chance that you’ll die as a result.”

Jane nodded and said “If it helps, we’re not doing casual either. This is love, Tali, not sex. I mean, there’s sex, but…well, it’s not just sex. But that risk you’d be taking is why I am saying you’re brave for even considering it and listening to me without just slapping me and walking out.”
Tali laughed and said curiously “You’d let me slap you?”

Jane said “Don’t tease me, Tali, keep going. Risk. This is a huge risk.”

Tali sat back and said “I can just hear it now, my big come on line. ‘Hey, Garrus, want to get sterilized?’”

Jane almost snorted vodka through her nose and said “I don’t know, Tali…Garrus is pretty creative. You could have fun in decontamination. Plus…we actually have a decontamination unit. We could just put in a few throw pillows…”

Tali choked on a laugh and almost knocked her drink over “I am not sure I feel better or worse about your assurance that Garrus is creative.”

Jane turned and looked at her, making as much simulated eye contact as she could. “Better, you should feel better. If I’m going to be Garrus’s wing…man…person…I am not overselling him. I get those ‘I could die right now and be happy’ feelings. Of course they’re not literal. He’s worth risk and comfortable with risk. And accommodating.”

Tali groaned and sat back “This is weird.”

Jane chuckled and said “Yeah. You should be used to that by now.”

Tali said with slightly slurred curiosity “You’ve got to be kidding me…that there’s even a possibility he’d leave you for me. You know that wouldn’t happen. But if it did, you’d be okay with it? How does that work?”

Jane said slowly, thinking as she went “Well…Turians are different. Turians aren’t considered adults until they bond. So Garrus will always be a child among his people until he chooses one mate. It’s built into their social structure. I can’t give that to him, and on top of that I’m human. I’ve asked him to rejoin Turian society, and as a social child that will be difficult. If he’s involved with a human that’s a massive risk, possibly losing his clan, right when we need them to fight Reapers. There are reasons, really good reasons, why he and I will have a rough road. He says he’s accustomed to rough, happy to take it on, but at least for me, I’ll always be willing to let him take the easier path if that’s what he chooses. I know he wouldn’t ask me to give up my command to be with him, can I ask him to give up his Turian identity? Granted, he’d already given it up and he says he’s fine, but I could hope for better for him. I’ve been smacked down on that subject so I won’t bring it up to him again, but what if he does change? Say we live, he has years and years to consider a life in the Hierarchy, he meets someone he can bond with and I’m still kicking around on this ship, permanent military, constantly in danger? He’s done his service, and he left the military when his terms were up. I never considered leaving once. I’m given another chance at life and all I want to do is get it done, I dove straight back in. But…he could have a real bed, a real home, kids, respect, status. So this monogamy thing has rewards, potentially, for him. A kind of genetic destiny. Rewards I can’t offer. Monogamy is full of pitfalls, and it doesn’t always work for humans, but for Turians it’s a lock. There’s no reason for me to consider marriage. I won’t have kids, I don’t care about status, and I have no ambition socially. I could be gone on a mission or killed, or critically injured at any time, and it’s my job to be prepared for that. It’s not just about me dying and being unavailable unpredictably…I think about someone marrying me and being burdened with my broken body or mind in a Veteran hospital somewhere. The odds are high that I’ll end up there. I’m more willing to end up alone than I am to cause that sort of grief. I can’t ask anybody to take time they might spend living and instead be chained to my graveside or bedside. Or…take this whole squad thing we’ve got going. I could go by myself, and I’m skilled and competent and that’s all lovely, but I’m limited on my own. So I bring someone else, who is skilled and competent in different ways and we work together, and it’s better. And I bring someone else along who is skilled and competent in even further
different ways and we have a much better shot at surviving. So…it’s like putting a squad together. I need certain things, I have weaknesses and strengths and I have to pick people who are going to… work well with that, you know?”

Tali said “You realize you just compared sex to killing people.”

Jane snorted and said “Well…maybe I’m not the best at analogies. This part of my life right now is weird. I mean, it’s all weird, but I’ve been always with the Alliance and there’s no frat…frata…no sex. So I didn’t. I’m a dutiful sort of person. But in my free time, I could do what I wanted. I got used to it. Different people, different places, and I could see them when I was there and then I didn’t see them. They didn’t wait. They didn’t worry. I didn’t cause them mental anguish through my absence. Or I did…and I didn’t mean to, and they weren’t a good fit. I just tried to make them happy when I was there. I was in love with a Drell. He was lovely. While we were on the SR1 and a bit before. He died during the attack on the Citadel. It was the best relationship I’d ever had, and he understood me. He taught me I could be loved for who I was. Now I won’t settle for anything less. I’d like to pass that gift on. It’s his legacy, in a way. That’s how I could let Garrus go toward his own happiness, you or…whatever it is, in a future we can’t see.”

Tali said softly “Jane, I’m so sorry…”

Jane said gently “Thank you. This is the first time I’ve been on the same ship with and had my back watched by people I love…and I don’t want to go without it. But I could. I will do my job, no matter what. It doesn’t suck to be loved, Tali. My job is perfect for this. I already have to ask people to do crazy shit and make it work on sheer will and talent. If I’m going to die…if I’ve already died…if I’ve already survived the death of a dearest love…if I can handle that, why not ask for what I want? Can’t get it if I don’t ask. Why don’t you ask for what you want? I mean, I’m happy to sit here and get drunk with you when you want some company, but what about throw pillows, Tali? Throw. Pillows. What if it works? What if it’s amazing? Take it from me…it might spoil the hell out of you…but you won’t regret it for a moment. You might have something and then have nothing, but otherwise you have nothing all long. If you don’t try…you’ll never know what you were missing, but you’ll probably know you missed something, and that’s sad. It’s about freedom, and as long as I have that, I’ve discovered that I can give it to others, create love in each moment. I know that ideally people want love to be like a sun that shines forever on one spot, reliably, but for me it’s a series of building fires in the night. It’s usually dark where I am and I can’t chase the sun.”

Tali said with a smile in her voice “You know…Jane…I may not exactly understand, but when you get drunk you’re a little bit poetic.”

Jane said, tilting her head back “Prosaic. I’m prosaic. And slightly slurry.”

Tali said sincerely “Thank you, my slightly slurry friend.”

Jane nodded and said “You are welcome. I know you’ve got that whole risk of literally dying thing going on too. You don’t want to have sex, young lady, you just don’t have sex. You are loved. We will be there for you.”

Tali said softly “Thank you. This is weird. But it’s good. I was in love once, but I had to go on my pilgrimage. We were so close in age that he wanted us to go on pilgrimage together, but I said no. I wanted to do it on my own, prove it to my father that I would put duty above family as he always did. I didn’t want to get sick. So I left, and my pilgrimage was a huge success because you found me. I’ve contributed to the betterment of my people. But I didn’t, couldn’t, have done it alone. Jenalon died on his pilgrimage. He was studying the Geth just as I was, but he was killed by them. He didn’t have you. He didn’t have me. I was the lucky one, and I know it was foolish to try alone. I sent him out alone and I feel I don’t even have the right to miss his voice, or miss his arms, but I do miss them.
I do miss him. I don’t know if I have your courage, or crazy, or whatever it is you have. I certainly don’t have your immune system. Now you’re back, and my father is dead, and my people are afraid and in danger, and I don’t want to be sick. I think I convinced myself I hadn’t really been in love, but maybe my ambition has clouded my heart. I have a chance at love but maybe I can’t take it for the same reasons. I don’t want it to break me. Maybe I’m just like my father."

Jane said “I’m so sorry. I don’t regret I found you, but I can see where you regret not being found together. Was he angry at you, before he died?”

Tali shook her head and said “No…he was…he was so proud of me. His last message said he always knew I’d succeed, and that he…oh, that he was hopeful he’d find something of equal value and make me proud of him…” She started to cry.

Jane said “He loved you, Tali. You have the right to miss his voice, to miss his arms, and he wouldn’t want you to suffer. Take his last words and don’t let feeling like you don’t deserve them cloud your heart. Give him what he wanted. Be proud of him. Be proud of yourself. Take his love as offered, imperfect and unfulfilled, but still true. You would never have let him go if you’d known what would happen. That’s why you’re not like your father.” Tali continued to cry and Jane reached out a hand to her, Tali took it in both of hers and held on tight. Jane said “You miss his voice, you miss his arms. You could ask Garrus to hold you and talk to you. There’s no risk of getting sick there, no failure of duty. I promise you, lovely woman, he would want to do that, and would welcome the opportunity. If that’s what you want, ask for it. Maybe that’s what you can do for each other. Maybe that’s the fire you can build, what makes you special and unique together. It can be just as I said, that it is about love, not sex.”

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Thane was most often in the Med Bay, his treatments intense and painful. He was reportedly a model patient. He refused painkillers, partly because that was who he was, and partly because they had explained that if he did so, they would get better scan results because most painkillers affected the critical systems involved that they were attempting to alter. They had restored a great deal of his function, but it still meant continuing invasive surgery, lack of sleep, constant monitoring, possible rejection, something called graft-versus-host which sounded like a video game but was in reality something deadly and terrible. Fortunately the risk of that was low, Kolyat was a very close match, his samples providing the missing pieces and helping them focus on synthesizing therapies. Thane had improved and at the end of each recovery in a cycle, he was better off. He felt he had regained the majority of his breathing capacity and was able to rebuild new muscle mass, atrophy arrested and reversed.

Karin had assured her that she was tailoring therapies to methods he could not alter and did not rely on unobserved compliance. She gave medications and therapies in person, assured he took them. They had both seen him refuse oxygen masks or anything obstructing his vision or voice. Jane privately considered it had at least a small element of vanity, which he certainly had, and it was comforting to know Karin read him well enough also. Anything he’d be expected to do out of their sight…was not guaranteed. In short, he seemed like someone who would pour pills down the sink.

After his visit when he’d worn his Tseni, he was unwilling to discuss his health, always saying he was well and quickly changing the subject, redirecting her to her health or sleep or anything else. She would always ask, always accepted the redirection. She visited often and so did Garrus. In the Med Bay she and Thane compromised on not discussing weightier concerns in a public space and began to read to one another in their own languages, switching on and off their translators and learning a few words. He did not care to convalesce in her company or be comforted. He was accustomed to pain and uncomplaining, that was clear, and he didn’t want her sympathy. She could see the strain in
his skin, but he never let it reach his eyes in her presence. It was impossible that she wouldn’t worry because that was pretty much her job, and a hobby she’d picked up regarding him. But she could give him not appearing to worry or fuss, and he wouldn’t see it in her eyes. He would know that she did it for him.

Jane checked in with the rest of the crew. She never brought up the words Cerberus, making it seem as though she’d simply stay on the Normandy and do as they’d been doing.

Kelly…she was ambivalent about Kelly. Jane did not offer her a continued position. Ship’s counselor was not someone she needed. Jane hovered over the pulse of her crew and Kelly seemed to let her know things she could have picked up from her messages or already knew. If the crew knew to send her an alert, she would be on it. She had nothing against Kelly in particular, she just didn’t need her. She was not essential personnel and she intended to pack the ship with essential. She was cordial with Kelly and checked in, but didn’t expound on the future.

Joker was enthusiastic about new crew housing. She asked him to check in with Tali and check in with Dr. Chakwas to see if they could provide him with some better cradling support. Maybe something in a nice anti-grav upgrade.

Joker said “If I have the best bed, I’ll be fine.”

Jane said “You could even stop browsing porn while on the CIC, maybe.”

He scoffed and said “Now that’s just crazy talk and if it says that in a contract I am not signing.”

Discussion with Samara was brief and she deferred until after the mission, saying she would meditate upon the subject.

Zaeed scoffed and said if they survived, she couldn’t afford him. Then he said he’d think about it after getting drunk at the mission after party. She promised to foot the bill for all the booze and he smiled and…damn, yeah, he winked.

Miranda was easy, and Jane wanted her around for her facility with paperwork and her near proximity to Thane’s health, not to mention her own. She used the word ‘invaluable.’

She was also ambivalent about Jacob, though he was a good man and an excellent crew mate. She just couldn’t read him as well because there wasn’t that much to read. He had too much distance from the rest of the crew, who had developed more interpersonal relationships with each other. He stuck out a bit like a stiff thumb. She still offered him a continued position and he said he would think about it.

Mordin had fifteen projects he had considered, but he liked his lab workup and said if possible he would use the Normandy as a base of operations, and of course monitor Thane. He discussed at least eight of the fifteen projects and she promised some lab upgrades, having no idea what that would entail.

Kasumi stared at her for a moment and said “So you want more than the ample opportunities I’ve given you to get me killed?”

Jane nodded solemnly.

Kasumi said “All right.”
Jane said “I’m going to get private quarters put in. I have great need of a spymaster. There will be a room with your name on it. I can even put ‘Spymaster’ up on it in some sort of tasteful glitter. I need you Kasumi. We’re going to need to know everything about everyone. I’m hoping you could coordinate with Liara.”

Kasumi said “The Normandy will be a great place to, you now, store things, and not need pesky identification to get on. Thanks, Shep.”

Grunt said he wanted to return to Tuchanka, and she fully supported that and told him if he ever wanted to crack some more glass with his head, either don’t do it here, or bring a paycheck. He laughed. She loved that guy. Wrex was going to be in trouble. Wrex liked trouble.

Karin Chakwas smiled and said “Of course I’ll stay.”

Jack said skeptically “I don’t know, I kind of like the loud, gloomy horror down here. I’m thinking of getting a fog machine.”

Shepard said “You can visit, but wouldn’t you like a lockable door between you and the other freaks on the ship?”

Jack grinned and said “I don’t know, seems like nobody’s coming after me. Why is that? Are you sleeping with all of them?”

Shepard shook her head and said “Just two.”

Jack snorted “Just two, she says. Yeah. I might want something with a light switch for once. I’m considering becoming a genuine citizen. You’re a bad influence.”

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Three days came and went. Four days came and went without an update from Garrus since he’d disembarked. That could be good or bad. Jane stayed on the ship, not wanting to get dragged into a meeting face to nose with a Turian. Tali had given her a run down on how to make the galley more dextro friendly, had ideas about berths, and Jane was talking to Liara and Alliance contacts trying to figure out some good things to do before they headed through the relay.

Karin had sedated Thane earlier in the evening to give him some rest finally after a grueling course of therapies and subsequent tests. Their scans and readings were complete for this cycle and Karin had judged that he was in too much pain to sleep, which Jane could have told from the pallor and texture of his skin. It was waxy and dull, as though it would peel or crack if touched. She’d brushed his sleeping forehead with her lips, his temperature elevated, only somewhat reassured when Karin said it was due to stress and not infection. She put her hand on his chest to feel his sleep hum, unlabored and clear, and hoped it was all worth it.

She worried about the social and political pain she had tossed Garrus into. She worried about the searing suffering that Thane was going through. She retired to her cabin with serious thoughts and worked on her evening rituals of data pads and research, triple checking of more and more variables. She fell asleep late and exhausted, right after she saw the figures start to blur into each other.

She woke up screaming.

Well, more like shouting.

More like being tackled by a Turian.
Exactly like being tackled by a Turian.

It took her a few seconds to orient, he was huge and sudden. She reacted by flailing her arms and swatting at him.

He had shoved her onto her back, his mouth at her throat. She was staked in by unyielding plates and he lazily grabbed her arms without looking and had them pinned over her head when it looked like she was about to attempt better aim. She groaned and then said “Augh, you’re like a…varren puppy. If you want me to hit you, all you have to do is ask.”

He growled against her skin and said “Later. We should spar later. I can’t wait to see you try to hit me, your aim is terrible.”

She grinned and said as an excuse “I was asleep.”

He bit at her collarbone and said with practical enlightenment “And now you’re not. When we spar, Kerim, I want to have you pinned to the floor in about four seconds. You’d better put down mats. I want your head to spin, but not from a concussion.”

She relaxed and shifted her hips against his. “Whatever you say.” He was naked, the hard roll of his cock against her stomach. He was arched over her and the lines of his shoulders and cowl blocked out the background light.

He groaned and said “Oh, Spirits, yes. I’m going to want to hear that again. I’ve missed you, Kerim. There’s so much I want to hear.” He took her flimsy sleep shirt over her breast between his teeth, pulled and twisted back until he had a ragged hole. His tongue slid along the edges of the fabric, on her breast, teeth on her nipple, and he lifted her by the waist and let go of her hands, dragging talons down over the rest of the fabric on the other side from neck to thigh until shorts and shirt fell away in shreds from the brush of his hands and talons over her skin. She let out a rush of air at the grip of his hand around her waist and then a whimper. She moved her hands, one on the sensitive deeper lines of hide at his waist and one behind his fringe and he let out a shivering growl that moved through his body. His mandibles flexed wide once and then drew back tight for a moment before relaxing. His jaw worked in a hard swallow and then he said “There are so many things I want to do, Kerim. All the things I couldn’t do that occurred to me in these last endless days. I don’t want to be careful, and I don’t want to be patient, and I don’t really care that you’re human and your body can’t take it. In fact, I really like the idea of you begging me to stop. I hope you’re in some pain tomorrow, because I want you to think about it, like I’ve been thinking about it. I want to hear you say my name when your voice is broken and you can barely move. Tell me I can have that. Tell me, ‘whatever you say, Garrus.’” His talons were digging into the skin of her waist, around a breast, his teeth bared.

She had to swallow hard and then said in a voice prematurely hoarse “Whatever you say, Garrus.” Her bones had melted during the course of that, and what was left resembled rippling chaos.

He blinked slowly and his eyes went dark and hooded with his smooth and civilized voice gone. He leaned in to kiss her, driving her back into the bed, shifting his legs until he was straddling her upper chest, outsides of her breasts up against the insides of his thighs. He removed her hands from his body with his own and put them on his cock as he sat up, staring down at her and lifting her head with his hand gripped in her hair. He shifted his legs and raised her head until the tip of his cock touched her lips and he said “Keep your eyes open, Kerim. Look at me. I want to see your tongue and your lips and feel those impossible fingers.” He watched as her hands twisted on him and she brushed her lips and the tip of her tongue over the head of his cock, her hands and tongue going numb quickly, tasting like tea and gliding heat. He closed his eyes and a shudder went through him, his hand in her hair opening to cradle her neck, talon points digging in, touching all of her skin that
he could. He opened his eyes and said roughly “I can never…remember…how beautiful you are.” She smiled, and he trembled, and Reverie took them both. She loved his quick-moving features and mind, the way he threatened and collapsed and promised and delivered. She wanted to give him every moment he wanted to see, eyes and warm dark caramel hands on blue, pink tongue and reddening lips.

He was always calm and steady at work, silent and patient and accepting. With that need for control stripped away his moods changed as fast as her hands could feel change moving over his body, cold and sharp, warm and sensitive, unyielding and then giving way. He could be inconsistent, fluid, spontaneous and free. She saw gratitude flooding and relaxing his body, his mind, as he moved her where he wanted her and she melted for him, gave in, chose the path of helplessness and hoarseness because he wanted to see her there. She was always hard and determined and demanding at work, and he let her be soft and hidden and receptive. He was un-tempered half please and half demand in waves that burned off and renewed themselves.

He transformed as she watched, his shoulders straightening and his eyes moving from satisfied dreamy to more intent. He used a hand to slowly gather scent and drag his marking talons down the sides of her body, using the flat side to spread wide trails. That he shared that with her always surprised her, made her feel like a primal embodiment of femininity. She was small, soft, adored and mated. His talons pulled back into his hand as she watched, fascinated, and he slipped his hand behind him, between her legs, and stroked, watching her face. His sliding, caressing fingers slowly drew more moans from her mouth and flutters from her eyelids. She faltered in her strokes, trying harder and harder to keep her eyes open. He watched her struggle, a warm growl building in him. With sweat and slick and tremble in her he said softly “Let go, Kerim.” His supporting hand on her neck fell back and she arched back with it, her eyes closing and her hands moving to scratch down his thigh plates.

She was so close, very close, that heated rise of inevitability making her hips arch into his hand. He stopped and smiled down at her and she groaned. She said hoarsely through panting “You’re evil.”

He took it as a compliment, clearly. It probably was. He put his hands down on either side of her chest and lifted his body off hers, extending back and straightening until he was balancing his body parallel over hers, suspended. He bent his elbows further and kissed her, held up motionless. She wasn’t shallow, she thought, it was okay that he was unbearably attractive in part because he was so strong. She appreciated effort. She said “You are such…a show off.”

He took that as a compliment too and said “I like the reactions I get from you.” He smiled against her mouth “You’re impressed, admit it.”

She said without grudge “Hell yeah, I’m impressed.”

He pushed off in a sudden backward motion and straightened, standing on the floor. He reached down and pulled her by the feet until her hips were at the edge of the bed, her legs over his shoulders and he was kneeling. His mouth lowered to her clit and stroked, one hand scratched along the inside of her thigh, and one hand moved his fingers, pushing his fingers inside until they were wet. He lifted her hips and twisted the wet tip of his tongue on her ass, then entered with his finger, getting a squeal and a lurch from her hips. He held her hips down and growled, licked up an in, then slid in a finger there, and then went back to her clit with his tongue and the backs of her eyelids flashed, frantic white-hot with red streaks.

He gave her no rhythm, no build, no sense of anything but tasting and touching and growling. He’d build her up and then wander off, kissing her thigh, biting at her hip and she almost, almost did beg him to stop, pulled out on a rack of stretched and aching pleasure-pain with no relief. He ignored
please and whimpers and groans of frustration. He kept her sweating and panting and begged, then
gritting her teeth to keep the words from escaping, and sounds escaped anyway no matter what she
did. Her clit went numb from his tongue, but each rasping pass still brought out deeper strokes of
pleasure that involved her spine, and a drag of pain on over-sensitized depths. Breakthrough shards
of intense pleasure cut through the chaos and her body insisted now, yes, now, and no matter what
he did or stopped or changed, it was perfect and too late to stop and she was grateful for the internal
mercy that forced an end to the impossible tension.

He removed his hands and mouth, rolled her over and stood up, bringing her hips with him with her
body slanted at a steep angle. He supported her stomach with one hand and scratched the other hand
from her shoulders and down, digging in painfully, pressing his cock into her ass with a growl that
built to a roar, and a moan from her that built to a scream. She barely registered any pain compared to
the rioting of everything else that caused pleasure. Here he was slow and careful and patient, the
higher build of Reverie causing her to clench her fists in the blankets, rock on her elbows and
squeeze against his cock until she wrested more harsh groans from him. He slid the hand on her
stomach back to cup her, his fingers spreading her apart.
Palm on her clit and finger just at her
entrance, he stopped moving, relying on her rocking back against him, side to side in slow circles,
Turian-paced nowhere but here, nothing but now pleasure.

She was drenched in bliss and unable to track time, reached that place she craved of mindlessness,
that he would watch over her, that she could trust him. Trust, that thing she couldn’t afford, couldn’t
be bought, could only be given. She reveled in trust and pleasure and the miracle of his presence.

He withdrew carefully after the passage of bliss measured time and she realized she was trembling so
badly she couldn’t move anymore. He shifted her onto her side and was gone for a moment, she said
with that cracking, quiet voice he wanted to hear “Come back. Coward.”

She could hear the warmth in his voice as he said “Now who’s a varren puppy?” Her eyes were
closed and she was taking in deep breaths. She understood as a warm, wet cloth moved over her
body. He moved away briefly, then came back and gathered her against him. She was boneless and
as requested, could barely move on her own. He lifted and lowered her onto his lap, inside with a
groan. His arms closed around her and he buried his head at the crook of her shoulder. He breathed
in her scent, tasted her skin, pressed his plates to her shoulder and tightened his arms around her,
combing her hair back with his talons starting on her scalp and down.

A thought stirred and she didn’t think…had he…she didn’t know if…she couldn’t think straight and
her strength was gone, but she should… She nuzzled at the side of his throat and drew one of his
arms into hers, then stroked along a plate on his finger until he extended a talon. She used it to draw
a thin line of blood on his throat and she licked at it, gathered some on her lips, and pressed his
mouth into her shoulder until he bit, Reverie making it painless and a joyous thing to her as his groan
built and trembles worked their way along his limbs. He needed her blood, mingled blood, and she
always, always should remember that, get that for him, not let her mind go until then.

She sobered for a moment at her oversight and then drew his mouth to hers, let him taste and was
rewarded by the sound of his purr. It seemed to him that he felt the same way she felt when he shared
scent, and she was proud and humbled and joyously kissing him. He kissed her back, tongue and
teeth and growl, hands in her hair and down her back, cradling her like a pearl in a shell, turning to
the side and lying back to hold her, murmuring those words that didn’t translate, but she understood.
When she finally poured herself out of bed, she realized she hadn’t asked Garrus how his mission went. She’d thought while she had been able to think that he did not seem like a disappointed man. She was afraid if she’d asked after being tackled, he would have gone for that makeshift gag thing, so she’d waited until she had a shower, food and clothes. Seemed the professional thing to do.

So she was debriefed slightly professionally, if that could be defined as sitting on his lap on the couch. She was clothed though, and able to pay attention.

He said “I won’t tell you everything, 70% of it was boring posturing. But I have to thank you for letting me observe your negotiation technique. It was useful. He became slightly less overbearing when he realized I wasn’t taking the bait.”

She said “Give me an example of bait.”

He chuckled and said “After he rambled for a while he opened with a picture of you, me and Thane at Eternity. Seems the story had gotten back to him about a Vakarian punching someone in the throat and he’d done a little digging of security footage.”

She said “Uh oh…”

Garrus laughed and said “Yeah, he thought it was an uh oh. I think he expected me to explain or apologize.”

She asked “What did you do instead?”

He said “Well, I didn’t prep for a week for no reason. I told him that consensual relationships on the Normandy were not against any ruling from the ship’s captain.”

She pumped her fist “Yessss. That’s me. I’m cool like that. Then what did he say?”

Garrus laughed and said “I don’t think he prepared for a week. I think the picture was all he thought he needed. I swear, he expected me to come home with my fringe drooping. He stared at me for a bit and said ‘She is human.’ Since that was obvious, I ignored it. I tried out that stare you do where you’re waiting for someone to get over being an idiot. He said ‘The Drell is suspected to be an assassin.’ I ignored that too. Then he said ‘You risk being stripped of your marks’ and I said ‘I have a list prepared of just a few of the C-Sec and Hierarchy representatives that sleep with Drell and humans. I have a second list factoring in Asari. You can address that and I’ll just ask Solana to get me an audience with another representative of the Hierarchy. I’m here to discuss the Normandy’s involvement with Reapers and cooperating regarding eradicating them, not your opinions on my sex life. Some of the people on that list are your friends, some of them are not your friends and that could be useful. I have no interest in provincial and ignorant attitudes about sex. I have been no burden to the Vakarian clan, have drawn no funds and I have exercised no influence over clan politics. If you wish to declare me bare faced, go ahead and do it. I have nothing to lose other than the ill regard of family that does not appreciate an opportunity. Perhaps another clan would appreciate the opportunity and be intelligent enough to see that I have invaluable experience and information that could benefit them and assure their survival. Unlike you, Commander Shepard has opted to treat me as an adult and asked me to extend her invitation to the Hierarchy in order to cooperate. You were the obvious first choice and as your son I thought it could benefit clan Vakarian and offer you first right of refusal. We do have second and third choices. The relay 314 incident happened too long ago for most Turians entering service now to care about. But they all know Commander Shepard’s name.”
And mine. Isn’t it time we started talking about what’s happening now?”

Jane whistled low and said “Nice.”

Garrus kissed the top of her head and said “Thank you. Felt good. He backed down. He wouldn’t push to make me bare faced. He couldn’t stand the shame. To cut out someone who took down Saren and saved the Citadel over a bed mate would be…”

Jane said “Ridiculously petty.”

Garrus said “Yeah. My father’s a lot of things, but ridiculously petty isn’t one of them. It was a bluff. I realize now how many times he bluff me into getting his way. From there on he got more and more reasonable. He still took the list. Leverage. He might not be able to bluff me, but there are a lot of names there who feel safe on the Citadel doing whatever they want, but wouldn’t want their Avahs hearing about it. An Avah is the matriarchal leader of a clan or family. She’s part of how I know he’d never make me bare faced. My mother would never permit it. Even with a lot of her mind gone, she would never let that happen over something so small. She’d have every Vakarian turned against him with a wave of her frail hand. Sol is next in line for that, and she’d never allow it either.”

Jane said “Starting to kinda like your dad…and your mom.”

Garrus said “They’re good people. Stubborn people. Loyal people. I take after them. We’ve got our contact. With what we gathered in information, with what we’ve seen, he forgot all about my marks and wanted in. He’s going to speak to the Primarch. Sol can help coordinate, and we can trust her. He said he’ll present this information regarding what the Collectors are up to and as you suggested, he will try to arrange for some sort of tech exchange as an excuse to allow the Normandy to dock at Palaven. He would like a visit before we go through the relay. One official visit for a conference, and one…mom wants to see me, and I want to go.”

Jane said “Of course, as soon as it is arranged.”

Garrus said “Good, now we just wait. Won’t take long. Within the week, he thought.”

Jane shook her head “I’m impressed.”

Garrus said “And we can take on some dextro food. Tali told me about your idea for the galley, and housing. I get my own cabin?”

She smiled and said “Absolutely you get your own cabin.”

He said, teasing “And Tali had some other ideas I found charming that she told me were your idea. But I still get to sleep here?”

She nodded “Whenever you want.”

He breathed in deeply and said in a warm, sincere voice “I want.” He took a deep breath and wrapped his arms around her. He said “Kerim, you pulled me onto this ship half dead. You have given me back my life and a way to live it that I wouldn’t have imagined for myself. Before we go through that gate, I will walk on Palaven as an honored Turian. I will see my family and I didn’t think that possible. It might still be possible that I am dead and this is heaven. But I believe I am alive, and I am transforming my life and you’ve shown me how. I discover I will have a space of my own that you will give me and I need to invite you into it before it exists. Wherever I am in this life, my Kerim, wherever you go or wherever time leads us, you will always be welcome in whatever space I hold as mine. There’s one more thing I want from you, a promise.” She tilted her head to look at him, her brows raised, and he said “I need you to inconvenience me.” Her brows rose higher
and he said “You are…reserved, and accepting, and very much in control of yourself.” He tilted his head and said “I want you to find me when you haven’t figured out what you need, but you need something, and my name pops up in your head as the person to go to for help. Before you decide you don’t want to bother me with it, which I know you will, I want you to come to me. Promise me, Kerim, please.”

His eyes were solemn and his voice was beguiling and she closed her eyes and smiled. She said “Will you…put a set of motion detectors up in your room for me? Fair is fair.”

He laughed and stroked his hands through her hair and said “I will. I still want you to come to me. This is for me, but it’s also for you. I know you will sit in silence until solutions come to you, but I want to be sure, Kerim, that if my name passes through your mind, you will not dismiss me. I want to be there for you when I don’t know you need me.”

She curled into him and his arms wrapped around her shoulders and waist. She said a soft “Okay.” To be known. To be loved. To be invited. She choked up a little but didn’t cry. He brought her his own blend of peace and safety, a feeling she’d never get out of his arms. She said with the tears in her voice “Thank you.”

They sat like that for a long time, a soft consoling hum from Garrus and soaking in the moment, feeling she wanted to stay there indefinitely. He’d just told her she could.

Eventually she said in a small, overly hopeful voice “Can I fire your rifle?”

She could hear the smile in his voice as he said a mock “What? No. You’ll break your arms and be sad.”

She scoffed a little and said “I won’t. I’m strong.”

He said “You’re tiny and delicate and a fragile flower.”

She said “You’re just afraid I’m going to beat your record.”

He groaned and said “Leave me my gun, Kerim. It always surprises me when an exotically small and exquisitely colored, soft creature with moon eyes, midnight hair and twilight skin kicks my ass.”

She said “You must be surprised an awful lot.”

His hand came and cradled the back of her head and he pressed his mouth to her hair “Yeah. I must like it.”

She said softly “Garrus, I love you, I need you.”

He said with warmth “You are my dreams become day, Kerim. I love you, I need you.”

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Liara checked in to give her an update on looking for help against Reapers and even discuss official contact with Asari command. At the end Liara said “Jane, there’s one more thing and it’s weird. I’m starting to get some reports about a group that calls itself “The Flock.” Do you know anything about it?”

Jane stopped, searched her memory and said “No, why would I?”

Liara paused a moment and then said “Well…The Flock…sheep…Shepard…they’re apparently
“your Flock, Jane.”

Jane’s eyebrow went up “They’re what?”

Liara said “I was kind of hoping you could enlighten me. They’re a group claiming you as…well, as a savior, a prophet, and resurrected. They claim you’ve worked miracles and will save us. Not that I’m really disagreeing with any of it…except the scary, shady religious sycophantic part.”

Jane said “How do you know they exist? What do they do?”

Liara answered “Not much yet, but the weird thing is I can’t get any more information than your average citizen. They seem to interrupt Ethernet transmissions, fairly sophisticated. I can’t figure out where they are coming from. You sure this isn’t Kasumi having fun?”

Jane chuckled and said “I’ll ask her, but I don’t know anything about it.”

Liara sighed and said “Yeah, neither do I. I am worried about when they upgrade from interrupting a ‘net cast with your face and…it’s eerie. I can’t record what they say. They’ve got some sort of technology I do not understand. Recordings of the transmission give only what would have been transmitted instead. I have no idea what’s going on and I haven’t seen it myself, but I’ve heard some accounts. I just…thought I’d ask. I don’t like it. They’re supporting you, and that’s great, but all this secrecy makes me nervous. If they’d contacted you or if you knew where they come from, I’d be less worried. Seems they don’t really care what it is you do, as long as you’re free to do it.”

Jane said “Well, I’m a Spectre, I’ve already got that ability.”

Liara sighed again and said “I know. It’s…why the need for secrecy? Why not just hold a rally and put up some posters?”

Jane considered “I don’t know. I really don’t know anything about this. Wish I could help. Could be good reasons for secrecy, like not wanting to be the first targets for indoctrination.”

Liara said “Yeah, that just makes it worse, doesn’t it?”

Jane nodded “Indeed it does. I’ll ask around. Seems like I should know about such things, but they haven’t consulted me. That reminds me…you have some studies from the old Shadow Broker about indoctrination still? Could you shoot me over a report on it? I think we should go after the process. See if there’s some way to reverse it.”

Liara said slowly “That’s…ambitious.”

Jane tsked “Apparently there are a couple of people here and there who don’t want me to fail. I shouldn’t let them down.”

Liara said drily “Right. Okay, give me a few days to have Glyph put it all together, he’s better at indexing. I don’t want to admit it, but I need him. I just wish…he had a mute. Talk to you soon.”

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Kasumi knew nothing about The Flock. It gave her a laugh though “It’s such a shame that nobody is ever going to start a religion to worship me. I deserve it, but they just can’t find me.”

Jane had chuckled and said “Liara’s on it, but she’s a bit confused by the tech of their transmissions. Think you could help?”
Kasumi said “I’ll look into it. Sounds like they have something that affects inner recording in a device, but it would be hard to bypass external recording. I’ll start fishing. Might get lucky and have an external eye once I figure out their patterns.”

Jane asked “Need any bait?”

Kasumi said “Bring me a sandwich?”

Jane asked “How long have you been waiting to ask me to bring you a sandwich?”

Kasumi said “I have dreams, Shep, you can’t take them from me.”

Jane sighed and said “Fine. What do you want on it?”

Kasumi said “There’s this great place down on Kithoi…”

Jane grumbled for the effect but took the order and headed out to the Citadel with relief. No more worries about Turian offense. Well, official worries. If Garrus wasn’t concerned any longer, neither was she. It was still going to likely make headlines and gossip, but that she was used to.

The sandwich place was crowded and it gave Shepard so much time to look over the menu that she ordered one of everything, two of what Kasumi wanted, and asked to have it delivered to the Normandy’s berth in two hours. That gave her a little time for some other shopping. Spent some time happily speaking to a lovely Drell proprietor of a specialty shop, learning about fruits and vegetables, preparation methods and availability. She wasn’t presuming to cook for Thane, thinking the odds were high she’d manage something offensive and he’d smile and tell her she’d done beautifully. She did want the galley stocked for him. It appeared he had always arranged for his own meals, which was very…Thane of him…but she could put in some effort.

She also bought a coveted mod for a weapon for Garrus, which he didn’t need but he still wanted because it was there. Luxury status purchase. She’d been doing this for him for a while, since they’d both had matching Spectre quality HMWSR sniper rifles on the SR1. They always had something to talk about when it came to weapons.

She also checked a Quarian specialty location, with neat and light packaged, sterilized rations and a few delivery methods and doohickeys that would make it much easier for Tali.

She got some advice about Asari specialties and called in to ask Samara what she liked to eat. Samara demurred on the food, but did ask if she could pick up a small tree, comparable to an Asari bonsai, it seemed. Jane was directed to a small shop with plants in their own self-renewing environments like a high-tech terrarium. Thessarium? It also had a generator that simulated the gravity on Thessia. She could have spent hours in there, and vowed she would someday. She almost bought one for herself, but wanted Samara’s to be unique.

Mordin was somewhat on his own on the food front, because he preferred nutrient paste to more time consuming alternatives. She asked him via Omni Tool if he wanted anything from the Citadel. He specified a store and some incomprehensible components, and she obliged.

Okay, so today the Citadel didn’t suck so much.

She spent a happy rest of the day delivering presents and advising people of specialty sandwiches in the mess hall. She brought Kasumi’s sandwich to her.

Kasumi took a bite and said “Soooo good. Tell me you tried one.”
Jane smiled and said “Definitely. New favorite place, everyone’s getting one, but yours is hand delivered.”

Kasumi grinned and spun her chair back to the console “Glad to help.”

She went to go check on Thane but he wasn’t in the Med Bay. He occasionally exercised in the shuttle bay, so she headed there to discuss Drell fruit and hopefully see that he was feeling better.

Sleep had clearly done him some good, he was not sickly looking any longer. Bare feet, bare chest, bare arms, wearing only an alternately flowing and clinging pair of workout pants in the tones of green in his skin that should be illegal, but she was glad they weren’t. He was moving through a fluid Drell form, motions she thought of as kata, but she didn’t know the Drell name. It was reminiscent of Tai Chi but had more sudden, violent movements, blurring and then resolving into slow, difficult maneuvers that looked impossible. For her they would be impossible. For him they seemed as though there could be no disbelief, that he could begin to levitate and walk on air, and she would accept that as something Thane could do.

She watched, transfixed, but it didn’t take him long to notice her there. It might have even been by scent, because he’d slowed, then stopped, facing away from her, then turned unerringly to her and smiled. Her mouth had gone dry from the cumulative effect and she only had a slightly wry and appreciative smile for him. His smile deepened on one side of his mouth and tightened on the other, and that should be illegal too. That whole…Drell thing happening there, should be illegal. Then she realized he was illegal everywhere but here, wanted for effortless murder and this was not helping with her inability to speak.

He stepped over to her, watching her eyes, getting close enough to look down at her, making use of those crucial few inches of height he had over her to his advantage. He took her hand and walked her out to the center of the space he used to work out in. No mats. Of course no mats. This was Thane.

He stood behind her, his body mirroring hers, standing so that he was not touching her until he moved, and then her hands or leg or arm moved with him as he applied pressure in those directions, her left arm left lax as his left arm was around her waist. He bent and moved through the motions of his kata, correcting the attitude and placement and tension in her hand with his. He corrected her with endless patience, repeating the movement as demonstration. There were no words from him, slight squeezes on her waist of affirmation when she improved on a form, a glancing tap on her hand or elbow, arm or wherever he wanted her to draw her attention. After teaching her a few fluid movements he stepped around her to mirror her, encouraging her to move along with him, step back, begin again. When she’d strung them together in a rudimentary way, nowhere near his grace or poise, he would take an isolated move and put it into combat context. A complicated set of moves with poised hip and sweeping leg would become a throw. A hooked finger would become a strike. He would demonstrate the isolated move distinct from its stylized kata form and demonstrate its practical use slowly. He’d hook his hip behind hers and begin to push her, then step back, demonstrate again. He’d hook a strike intended for her throat, slowly, step back, demonstrate again.

At the end of each isolated move he would gesture for her to do it, practice on him, her hip behind his, her hand on his chest, her fingers millimeters from his throat. With a warm smile and a slight bow he walked behind her again when she had demonstrated those moves to his satisfaction.

He taught her other forms, and those transformed into counter moves to each move he’d taught her, those moves that had seemed so definitive. A hip snap and step back that turned into an escape and then counter throw, moving into another strike to the throat while on the ground.
She was getting blurrier, enough venom from his hands on her body and arms against hers were making contrails of color and light scatter from his movements. The dance became more difficult for her to emulate, harder for her to track at all. She lost her balance and swayed back against him and felt his hard cock against her lower back. His left hand around her waist pulled her back tighter and he rubbed up and down the curve of her spine from the top of her ass to her waist. His right arm shadowing hers guided her arm to cross over her chest, leaving her hand to rest on her shoulder. He pulled a finger from her hand into his mouth, licking, sucking, using his teeth along the length, moving to another. He released her right arm and moved distinctly hooked fingers he’d shown her from a strike along her throat, up to her mouth, to brush along her lips and inside until she was sucking on his fingertips sliding in and out of her mouth, venom flooding her into full hallucination, mirroring the motion of his mouth on her fingers. The progression of tiremit had established follow the leader, he was her leader. It didn’t occur to her to move until he pushed her limbs, set an example, shifted his body on hers. He pulled his fingers from her mouth, inserting his other hand, and sliding the knuckles of his wet hand down her body, slipping under her pants and hooking inside her. He made no sound so she made no sound, panting around his fingers and shaking with the effort it took to remain silent.

He made no effort to move from the center of the bay, exposed to rows of windows and multiple entrances, and she accepted that as his due. It made perfect sense that everybody would want to and should be able to watch him blur with the light he emanated, the trails of color, his grace. She was only warmly and gratefully aware that she was chosen by him as worthy of display, unwilling to interrupt his pleasure in her body to accommodate for the possibility of being interrupted or observed. It made her proud when her thoughts returned to the idea to check that nothing was wrong. Nothing was wrong. Everything was perfect, she was learning, the unnamed kata flowed from his inspiration to her example, strikes and leverage and superior technique moving from his fingers inside her and palm on her clit, his tongue on her fingers, his hand leaving her mouth and sliding under her shirt to stroke at her breasts. She came, dizzy and proud and swamped with sensation. He withdrew his fingers slowly, moving his hand to her waist to squeeze once in approval, giving her a few moments of panting rest to soak him in, bright bursts of color and time stretched out to extend the pleasure further. When the tension in her thighs slowly eased he took her hand in his and drew it around to her back, so his cock was gliding over her palm, her fingers spread out along the sides of him. His hands undid the fastenings of her pants and slid them down, then he tugged down the fabric of his own until her hand was gliding over his skin, the wet tip of his cock sliding over her palm.

He bent her over by slow degrees, a hand along her spine, his mouth traveling down from her shoulder, pressing her down. His hand guided hers to take his cock and find her core, holding her fingers between them as he slid into her, keeping her hand there so his cock was pressed against the curve of her circled fingers with each thrust. His thumbs along her waist, he pressed his hands into her abdomen and down, hard in against the muscle, so she could feel each thrust also through the movement of his fingers giving way in rhythm. With his fingers pressing in, accentuating the movement it seemed to extend as though he were deeper, further inside than he could be, taking up so much space, setting off shockwaves and trembles. His hands were beginning to tremble on her body and his breath was harsh as he bent over her, teeth and lips on the throat beside her ear. He slammed into her, tightening his hands painfully, biting at her shoulder until it became impossible to be quiet, forced moans at the end of each increasingly savage thrust as he angled her body for friction, moved his hands back down to stroke at her clit, and his hand pressing hers harder into his cock. She came with a rending scream and with a harsh groan he pulled her hips tighter to him and emptied into her, moving moments after to soothe over scratched and bruised skin on her back and neck and shoulders with his hands and mouth.

He repaired their clothing with no effort, lifted her into his arms and took her to the elevator.
Garrus was already in the elevator, leaning back against a corner. Thane nodded a greeting. Garrus said “Hell of a show.”

Thane’s lips twitched and he said “Glad to be of service.”

Garrus said “Everyone saw it, well, most everyone, and then there was video. I’m the only one who would get into the elevator though. Cowards.”

She looked at Garrus and then started laughing.

Thane said “I believe the lady is spent for the moment.”

Garrus raised a brow plate and said “You seem to still be standing. She can watch.”

She laughed harder, breaking into trails of giggles when she tried to stop.

Thané brought her into the shower and began soaping her body, washing her hair. Garrus came in a bit after, he always wore so much armor…she was dizzy happy, they were gentle with her and not so gentle with each other, rough kissing and kinda grabby. She said “You guys can just lean me against a wall, I’m okay.”

Thane disagreed and made sure she got rinsed, handed a towel to Garrus and Thane combed her hair. They didn’t bother with clothing her, and leaned over her a few times to kiss each other, still dropping kisses on the top of her head or her shoulder, caretaker strokes and soft murmurs of loving her.

Garrus said critically “She’s got a lot of bruises.”

Thane said without reproof “The majority of them are from you.”

She chirruped “I don’t mind, I heal quickly.”

Garrus said playfully “Shepard, can I have a raise?”

She said helpfully “Of course you can have a raise, Garrus. Neither of you are paid enough.”

Thane said “I am paid not at all. You could not afford me. Garrus, stop that or I will make sure you ask her less flattering questions.”

Garrus scoffed and said “Like I’ve got pride.”

Thane said “You have a great deal of pride. If you ask her to write my name on your rifle in glitter, she’ll do it.”

She smiled “Glitter! That would be lovely. Blue!”

Garrus said “Anybody comes near my Widow…”

She frowned. Garrus kissed her and said “Okay, you can come near my Widow.”

She grinned and said “Yessss.”

Garrus said “Glitter will mess up the intake, though, so no glitter, okay? For me?”

She stroked a hand along the side of his face “For you, Garrus. Of course. I was being selfish.”
Garrus sighed and looked at Thane “You said she was resistant.”

Thane shrugged and said “She is. She wants to give you a raise if you want a raise and wants to make you happy, and if glitter would do it…”

Garrus smiled and stroked her cheek “I don’t deserve you, Jane.”

Thane kissed her shoulder and said “Neither do I.” Thane moved down so she was at eye level. He said “Are you tired? Would you prefer to sleep? Garrus and I can be undeserving of your attention elsewhere. Perhaps in the shuttle bay.”

Garrus laughed, she frowned and said “What do you want?”

Thane stroked her cheek and said “What we want is to take care of you.” Thane said to Garrus “She’s acutely empathic. She often cannot choose without knowing what everyone else needs.”

Garrus nodded thoughtfully and said “We definitely don’t deserve her.”

She said earnestly “Yes, you do. Just leave me here. I’m not tired, but I won’t bother you.”

Thane looked at her and he said “Beloved, does it distress you to think that we think we do not deserve you?”

She nodded somberly and he said “Then it was a joke, love, only. We will not leave you because we feel unworthy. You think of others first, Jane. You want everyone to succeed and that is part of what makes you special to us. Garrus and I have gifts you do not have, but this is only one of your gifts, what you give to us that we cannot return in kind because we have not your capacity to think of others as you do. I know you sometimes feel unworthy, you haven’t Garrus’s strength, you haven’t my grace, you wonder sometimes, why we love you?”

She nodded solemnly again, eyes huge. Garrus looked surprised and alarmed and she wondered if she’d offended him. Thane drew her eyes back to him with a finger on her chin. She said “Yes” quietly. They should know.

Thane searched her eyes and said “You think perhaps we cannot love you as you love us. That may be true, Jane. Compared to you we have depths of selfishness you perhaps cannot see or believe. We need you. You possess ethereal beauty and a will and a heart that draw us to you, bind us to you. Your beauty, though considerable, is the least of your gifts. When you doubt, remember how very, very hard we have worked to impress you. Remember that you could not buy me, but I gave myself to you. Remember that Garrus has followed you into the hells of a dozen worlds because he knew you would lead him out or that if you could not lead him out he wished to protect you to his last breath. See yourself through our eyes and not your own. You have grown accustomed to your own miracles. Look to those who love you who have not, and never will grow accustomed. And when you look at me, Siha, as though I set the stars in their paths, before I’ve touched you, and when you allow me to discover what pleases you, I have less control over my actions than I have ever had in a lifetime of discipline. By the will of the Gods, yes, when you look at me like that.” He pulled her to him and kissed her with a worshipful gentleness, her worries fled and she accepted what he said as true.

Garrus said quietly “That’s just what her face does. She has no idea.”

Thane pulled back, her face framed in his hands. He said “All is well. A tiny push in tiremit can bring a storm. We have all been perhaps too exposed and that fault lies with me. I did not intend harm.”
She said “I’d say we should pretend it never happened, but that’s not going to happen on this ship. I’d prefer it didn’t show up on the news…”

Garrus snorted and said “I could kill some people then. Things are looking up. Grunt really wanted to interrupt just so Thane could train him. I stopped him. Barely.”

Thane said calmly “Siha, I doubt that anyone on this ship would risk their life in such a way. You would perhaps be chagrined but forgiving. I would not be either of those things. Anyone capable of such an act on this ship considering our circumstances and mission does not belong here. I would not have done it if I believed you would be at actual risk of anything other than enjoying yourself.”

She kissed Garrus’s cheek and then Thane’s and said “Okay. I will make. A command. Decision. Drum roll please.”

They both looked at her and she sighed and said “I believe Thane is correct and yes, the lady is spent. For now. Congratulations to you both. I’m going to see if on top of being an exhibitionist I’m a voyeur. I think I know the answer. Can I tell you guys what to do?”

Garrus grinned and said “No.”

She said “That was the right answer, just testing. Wake me when you’re done. Someone hold onto me. Decision making reasoning…I’ve had time with both of you, lots of time. Thane has been sick, Garrus has been working. You should catch up. If that doesn’t involve any talking, I’m okay with that because sometimes Garrus can suck at talking and Thane might just lie anyway.”

Thane’s lips twitched and Garrus grinned and Thane said “Reasonable and fair. As expected.”

Thane helped her stretch out on the couch and covered her with a blanket, ruffled her hair and then combed his fingers through. He said “I am glad you are an exhibitionist, Jane. That pleases me. I did warn you that I would discover what you want to do. To know I could not compel you to do it but that you did it because you wished to, irresistible.”

She gave a raspberry sound, which seemed to surprise him enough to make her laugh and she said “You’re kind of an ass, Thane.”

He kissed her and said “I shall continue to be, and you shall continue to be lovely.”

She closed her eyes and said “Mmm. I meant to tell you, I’m glad you’re feeling better.” She yawned and said “I bought you some fruit.”

Thane smiled at her and said “Of course you did. Show me tomorrow.”

Garrus came over and crouched down beside her and said “Kerim, remember, inconvenience me if you need to.”

She smiled and opened her eyes and said “Garrus, I love you. Go beat up Thane for me, he was mean.”

He stroked the side of her face and said “You like trouble an awful lot.”

She said “Leave me alone, I’m going to sit here and be superior and judge your technique.”

He laughed, kissed her and said “I expect an evaluation tomorrow.”

Her eyes closed again, but did open when he’d gone. She was pretty damned voyeuristic, it turned
out. She was also loopy as hell, trying to gain a hold on reality with tiremit and emotion coursing through her. They talked, urgently, quietly, and she knew it was about her but wouldn’t intrude. They glanced her way occasionally, rumbles and flanging depths, but no words reached her. Their voices were comforting in her already warm sleepiness. She did know if she asked what they were saying, they would tell her. She didn’t. She smiled instead and closed her eyes. Thane’s voice began to dominate the conversation and Garrus asked no more questions. When it got quiet she opened her eyes and saw Thane’s hand come to the side of Garrus’s throat, Garrus turning into the caress. Garrus’s hands came up, palms wide enough to cover the frill on either side of Thane’s face, bending down to kiss him, palms rotating along the curves there, talons on the back of Thane’s head. Jane thought Thane’s frill looked like a heart with the point beginning in the depths of his throat, most prominent when his head was tipped back, like now. Drell heart and the facsimile of Cupid’s pointed sharp arrow of Turian talons.

They were beautiful, and she was lucky, and they loved her, and she loved them, and all would be well until tomorrow when she would try very, very hard not to freak out. Please don’t be on the news. Please don’t be short a few crew members because she was on the news and Garrus and Thane cleaned ship before she woke up.

The thought actually made her smile. This whole exhibitionist thing was new. Thane was so damned pretty, Garrus was so apex predator and she really, really was proud that they wanted to touch her.

She chose to think of it as essential to her morale.

Sometimes having absolutely no shame could bite her in the ass.

She could never, EVER take Thane to go meet with the Council…because he might…well, that would probably be a good Council meeting for once. No. Bad thought. Really good thought. Stop.

Garrus was kissing the hell out of Thane, whose head was being twisted and tilted back. Groans and moans and goodness. She should do this more often, they made her close her eyes when they touched her, look at what she was missing.

Thane’s hands were on Garrus’s chest, along the opening seam of plates, green hands along blue length. Murmuring against mouths and a long tilting, twisting kiss. She never knew which way it was going to go, who was going to control what happened, one of them rising and the other one acquiescing and furthering each move like dancers who waited for the inspiration of the music and the moment, knew how to lead and how to follow and enjoyed both.

Here it resolved as it obviously should in the moment, though if it had gone the other way it would have been perfectly as it should as well. Thane had taken his time and pleasure with her body and Garrus had watched, bantering with crew mates and restraining an enthusiastic Krogan, controlling the crowd, and now he wanted what he wanted.

These men who were indulgent and careful when they touched her, due to her soft skin and fragile bones and giving nature, were more sudden and violent with each other, tougher hides and harder minds, their starting positions were tempered demand and curiosity about how far they could push each other.

Pretty damned far. In her experience.

Garrus broke the kiss first, lifting Thane bodily and putting him where he was required. Garrus’s teeth closed over the back of Thane’s shoulder with a snarl, moving his head in the predatory shake intended to make prey still, blood cresting forward and back. Garrus’s hand wrapped around Thane’s throat, claws extended, murmuring unmistakable demands, the words not heard but the tone and
depth making the hair rise on her arms and back of her neck. Call and response, snarl and answer. Garrus licked at Thane’s throat, hungry, and Thane moved Garrus’s hand on his throat with blurring speed, biting with his sharper than human teeth into Garrus’s wrist, drawing blood, twisting back to kiss him, that sound...that sound of Garrus tasting mingled blood, often met with gratitude from her. From Thane it induced physical frenzy and demand, already-dark pupils dilated to near demonic black and the angles and tension of his face twitching and feral.

She almost wondered why either of them ever wanted anything to do with her, but that thought didn’t travel far, warded by Thane’s reassurances.

A wrench and press from Garrus’s hand and he had Thane impaled and restrained, Thane’s head back on his shoulder. More growling call and response between licks and bites and kissing, now with closed eyes. Garrus’s face relaxed from feral to pleasure with intent, his hand returning to Thane’s throat, a hard hand pressing back on Thane’s hip to a shared harsh groan, and then a closed fist around Thane’s cock, Thane’s nostrils flaring against hard breath. Garrus licked at Thane’s throat along to the pace of his strokes, asking occasional smooth questions and getting shakes or nods of Thane’s head, once a harsh laugh from both of them, changing his pace faster or slower after each answer.

Garrus watched Thane’s face, flicked a glance to her face with a feral smile, making her spine melt and then freeze.

Appearing to be done teasing both of them and once again establishing she had impeccable taste in men, Garrus tightened his hold on Thane’s throat, bit down again and pumped his hand until Thane came with a harsh groan. Garrus shifted Thane’s weight, brought his arm under Thane’s armpit and across his chest, offering a finger to Thane to suck, and bringing his mouth in to suck on the other finger.

They stood, unmoving, murmuring to each other with shared words and nips on fingers, withdrawn hand to brace and hold, and she closed her eyes, drifted off to the sounds of their soft voices.

Definitely a voyeur.

She woke later with Garrus lifting her in his arms, seemingly freshly showered again, and he said “Can’t decide who is going to hold you so you’re in the middle tonight, Kerim. Going with both."

Worked for her.
The next day began like a reasonably normal day. She woke up alone and spent some time catching up on work. Most people were off the ship taking advantage of shore leave. The only disruption came from entering into the crew deck and seeing a series of poster prints up on the hallway walls of her interlude with Thane from yesterday. She stopped and looked at them critically. Thane was definitely unspeakably attractive in his green pants. Most of the shots were from the back and above, so nice ass. There were a few from the front and above, her face with concentration and yes… looking at him as though he set the stars in their paths. It was a tasteful series of photographs, a few final spots on the wall left distinctly open. It was an obviously unfinished series.

She wondered if it had once been finished and otherwise torn down by other hands.

She was going to leave them there and drop it, just to be contrary.

Unless she could get copies.

Pranking on military vessels could get vicious and this was… kinda cute in comparison. She had the best crew.

She wandered up to the CIC and stood next to Joker until he couldn’t stand it. She waited, arms crossed. He glanced at her, then back forward. She said “Joker, we’re docked. You’re not looking at anything.”

He grinned and said “That’s right! I didn’t see anything at all!”

She gestured for him to get it out of his system.

He said “Don’t get me wrong, Commander, I don’t know anybody who isn’t happy for you. Jealous as hell, but happy for you. For those who can manage that. Okay, I don’t know anybody who isn’t jealous as hell.”

EDI said “I am not jealous, Jeff.”

He grinned and said “Any. Body. As in you’d have to have one to qualify.”

Jane said “Whoah, harsh. EDI, your attitude is fine.”

EDI said “I am not jealous, but I am curious.”

Joker said “Uh oh.”

Jane smiled and said “All right, ask.”

EDI said “From what I understand from popular media, ‘jealous as hell’ seems to be a common response, but Garrus was not jealous.”

Joker snorted and said “He was too busy trying to wrangle an enthusiastic Krogan. There were threats and one full-body check.”

Jane asked Joker “How the hell did word get around so fast?”

Joker said “Well, Jack has figured out when Thane tends to work out. She cruises by to check… often, from what I understand. She let Kelly and Kasumi know. It being shore leave and several
people on this vessel having no actual job unless there’s something to shoot, there was a small crowd before you even arrived. After you got there, a bigger crowd. By the time it was a sporting event, it was really too late. We’re lucky there was decent soundproofing. It got loud. Mostly supportive. I think Thane knew. He had the angles figured out. We didn’t see much but his ass. At least that made Jack happy. Simultaneously jealous as hell, of course.”

Jane said “Of course. To answer your question, EDI, no, Garrus was not jealous. There was no need. He might have been sorry he hadn’t thought of it, but Turians have multiple partners at his stage of life. Search for “girl in every port” in military tradition. Search ‘infidelity’ as a separate group of incidents.”

EDI said “Done.”

Jane said “Searching on those subjects and not the entertainment versions will give you a different set of statistics. Entertainment can be idealized, reflecting and reinforcing social mores. Having multiple partners in multiple locations has been a historical military tradition. Infidelity is high enough in historical record to estimate that up to 60% of married humans have been unfaithful. A large percentage of the population opts to stay single. Marriage rates had been in a long decline even before the discovery of mass effect relays, and then declined sharply afterwards, most likely due to changes in religious and social habits brought about by mobilization and cross-culture blending after global travel became the norm, and then the proven existence of other ways to function through meeting other species. It is possible that the majority of humans have been polyamorous throughout history. I think monogamy can bring a comforting, romantic sense that someone belongs to you and their behavior can be controlled. There are obviously people who are happy and monogamous, but it can also end up with unhappy people who have lost the spark in the relationship and are now trapped by bonds that were once comforting and romantic and become progressively more restrictive. Living in a domestic two-person household can create and strengthen shared exclusive experience, resulting in a very close pair bond. I do not wish to own another person or be owned, nor do I wish to control behavior or have mine controlled. If someone chooses to spend time with me free of obligation, that’s of more value to me than having someone forced to spend time with me due to an outdated agreement that was once comforting. That is what I offered to Garrus and Thane, with both knowing I may also choose other partners in the future. Choosing a new partner, though, does not mean I would end my other relationships. I could still have a life-long relationship with both of them, for as long as our lives last. Which admittedly may not be long, but we’re working on that. They are also free to choose partners as they so choose, and discontinue a relationship with me at will and remain close friends. I did not lie to them, so there is no question of betrayed trust.”

Joker rolled his eyes and said “Like they’re going to turn you down.”

Jane quirked a smile and said “You’d be surprised. Thane did, at first. Would you accept those terms, Jeff?”

Joker laughed and said “You scare the crap out of me and my answer would be a massively intimidated no.”

Jane said “See? Negotiations don’t always work out.”

Joker said “EDI, our Commander is point-blank-blast-radius gorgeous. Take it from me. She doesn’t hear no often. If she does, it’s maybe because some people are instinctively terrified of a Turian with an anger stick up his ass and a Drell assassin who might want more time with her.”

EDI sounded like she’d discovered something “Did you order them to sleep with you?”

Joker snickered.
Jane laughed and said “No. No ordering. Polite requesting. Part of the not eliciting jealousy or violence would have to come from honest negotiation of the relationship and not employing coercion. We are all able to separate command situations from personal situations...mostly...so our personal lives don’t interfere with our jobs...mostly. In my earlier life I borrowed from the military tradition of ‘girl in every port’ by branching out and having possibly a few girls and a few boys of different ethnicities and species in every port. Since there was no ‘fraternizing’ in the Alliance, I had to find my partners elsewhere anyway. This is a special circumstance and I’ve happily taken advantage. Historically good reasons for monogamy would be for the male to be assured that the woman and the children he was providing for and protecting were exclusively his own. I have no need to be financially supported or socially protected, no pregnancy where I’m more vulnerable and no children.”

EDI said curiously “Thane and Garrus do protect you. They prioritize protecting you over protecting others, even themselves. Review of combat recordings show this clearly.”

Jane smiled and said “That’s true. I will tell you that if I had to choose between people who did not care about me and people who did care about me at my back, I prefer caring. But they would protect other members of the team with their lives or they wouldn’t qualify to be on the team. I also protect them in return. It is a service we provide to each other, creating a synergy. They both demonstrated this long before we became involved. It might have been a factor of me choosing to be involved with them. That might be part of what made them attractive to me. They have both informed me that as they hold no rank, I had better take care what orders I give. I also accept that, because if they were forced to save my life at the cost of their own or countermand my orders due to poor decision making on my part, that would not be my preferred outcome. They challenge me as well as back me up.”

Joker said with mock worry “When the Great Mutiny of ’85 hits, I want to be on the right side.”

Jane said in an overblown purr “Oh come on, Joker. You know you’re my guy. You’re the only person it’s been proven I’ll die for.”

EDI said “Did you and Jeff sleep together? Is that what inspired you to save him?”

Joker said “This is getting a little too weird, even for me.”

Jane laughed and said “No. He’s just that important.”

Joker sighed and said “EDI, search for ‘Captain goes down with the ship’ and realize that it was her job, and I was a dumbass.”

Jane said “We’re used to that, sweetie.”

Joker snorted a laugh “You’re mean sometimes, Commander.”

She shrugged and said “Gotta smile for the cameras. They seem to be everywhere.”

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It was shore leave, but she was for once pretty damned relaxed and felt like getting more work done. The whole lack of scandal had been a distraction that cleansed her mind of Reapers temporarily. She was able to get back to them with a fresh mind. She was handling smaller concerns, requests from information vetted through Garrus to pass along to Palaven, cautious feelers from Liara on a number of subjects. Liara had started to forward what the previous Shadow Broker had done on the subject of indoctrination, a huge chunk of info to sort through, more coming in. She’sd seen the Dragon’s Teeth at Eden Prime first hand. She pulled up images of Dragon’s Teeth and images of what she
knew came from them. Humans, turned into husks. So start with what seemed impossible but you
know to be true. Human. Skewered. Husk.

Scrolling through pictures of husks it seemed like the hole from being impaled was sealed
mechanically. Tubes and plates and wires. Metallic components. Bioluminescence?

She flipped through the pictures, spread them out on her desk, stood and walked once around the
room, tossed her ball, came back to look at them, repeated this cycle a few times.

Husks looked identical to each other. Hair gone…no breasts, no gender characteristics other than a
vaguely male body shape in the shoulders and hips. So they weren’t turned, they were…templated?

She pulled up a bunch of pictures of husks from different angles and missions. All the same.

Nanobots? Using biological fuel and material to create a rabid foot soldier with simple instructions?
No verbal capacity, no strategy. Find life, attack life.

So there must be a way for husks to recognize each other. Did they use their eyes or scent or were
they networked?

Nanobots were forbidden, but it’s not as though Reapers were going to follow Council accords.

She combined her work into one data pad and headed to Mordin to brainstorm.

He studied the vids and listened as she paced, saying “What the hell are they, Mordin? I’ve been
bitten by them, definitely touched them. Not saying it was the most fun ever, but they don’t seem to
be infectious. How do they get this way? There have got to be different levels of indoctrination,
different methods. Dragon’s Teeth for husks, the artifact for Dr. Kenson. She was gone mentally, but
she looked fine and could speak and behave like a reasonable person at least to cover her own tracks.
What are the mechanisms and how do we detect them, beyond that, how do we reverse them? Pretty
sure we can’t rebuild a husk into a human, but does Dr. Kenson still have enough function to revert
back to who she was?”

Mordin paced and said “Victims still in quarantine. No communication. Alliance has them. Would
like to study. Unclear if artifact was recovered before the station detonated. Would like access to their
studies. Would like to examine Dragon’s Teeth and a husk body. Under added precaution, of course.
Nanobots troubling but possible. Decontamination on Normandy may or may not detect and
eliminate.”

Jane said “Huh. As far as samples…we need to work on that. I can also get some data about Keepers
from the Citadel. They’re also an example of biological Reaper tech. I know they weren’t supposed
to be scannable, but when I was on the SR1 I spent some time running around gathering information
on them. I’ll forward it to you. I also need to figure out if all cargo gets decontaminated. Too easy to
slip artifacts or ‘bots through as mundane items since we haven’t thought to look for them. I need to
check and change security protocols.” She paced a few more steps and said “I’ll talk to Hackett, see
if I can get you some access. When we head to Palaven, any bright minds there you can think to
collaborate with?”

Mordin stilled and nodded, saying “Amalis Kemi. Brilliant Turian biologist. Always wanted to meet
her.”

She asked “We sure we’re dealing with biology?”

Mordin shook his head and said “No, but final product resembles biology. May be due to cellular
mechanisms being hijacked. Must follow certain rules. She would know them.”
She said “All right. I’ll ask Garrus to contact her. Get me a list of what you want, and any follow ups. The Collectors have been bioengineered, that’s certain. EDI should still have the genetic scans. We’ve got some places to start, I hope that gives us some places to go.”

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The sense of starting new projects, beginning new ties helped overbalance that sense of it all coming to an end. She’d fortunately faced quite a few ends, including an unscheduled and unanticipated death, it seemed as though she should continue as though it didn’t exist for her. At this point in her mission after Saren, her ship had been yoinked from under her. This was better.

She barely thought of the Illusive Man at this point. He had been reasonably unobtrusive and predictably almost mustache-twirling Machiavellian. Known entity. His attempt at mystery failed to fascinate her. If the camera switched to him tying someone to railroad tracks she doubted she’d be surprised.

Most of her recent work had very little to do with the directions he had sent her other than building her team and she’d had a long breather since the Collector ship.

She’d like to determine if that glaring blue-red star in the background during conferences was real or a simulation for misdirection. Couldn’t hurt to do some triangulation in case he Machiavelled his way further into the minus column. So far they’d effectively used each other, but after this mission she would not be cooperative. She could just imagine his thought process. “But I built this evil, secret base and I just can’t stay here without people knowing how evil and secret I am. Look at that damned star! That’s just too damned cool. Witness. The. Cool.”

He might be relatively easy to find based on his conceits. Maybe if she figured out his brand of cigarettes or what was in the tumbler she could track him through luxury purchases or his tailor. She wasn’t stupid enough to run the search from the Normandy, but she’d try some day maybe from Palaven or Ilium. For now it simply looked like she could be a Cerberus proxy to legitimate governments. As long as she did her job and there were no more immediate surprises, she hoped to delay only briefly before heading to get the IFF. She doubted he would interfere.

She’d develop a package of ongoing research and intel on whatever they were working on and save a copy to be time delay released if they didn’t return within a month, delivered simultaneously to Liara, an STG contact of Mordin’s, Alliance and Palaven destinations.

She reviewed inventory versus the intended renovations, wondering how much they could squeeze in on Palaven, and making sure there were two months’ worth of food for everyone on board.

She pulled up a list of provisions and dove into the inventory system, spending hours making sure that things were what they said they were and were where they were supposed to be, tracing back through security and supplier lines. She asked EDI to take a particular interest in current and future inventory and report anomalies, considering those to be the weakest link in ship security. She set up alert systems for any inconsistency to be reported.

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Everything was good. The ship was great. There had been no surprise space rats, wacky pyjaks or drug smuggled bits found in the inventory. She’d resorted to physically spot checking containers. She had no idea what a nanobot swarm containment system would look like or a Reaper artifact, all she could report was that she didn’t find anything resembling her concept of those things. She needed to tighten up her concept of those things. She ordered decontamination protocols on cargo that weren’t already in place and bought some expensive thingimmyjobbers to ensure it could be
done without a massive holdup and to a higher efficiency rating.

Hopefully everyone was too scared of her OCD to fuck it up.

She still didn’t like the Citadel and wouldn’t stay there overnight, but there was something she could do.

She grabbed a blanket, a bag tossed with a snack and a drink, threw on a bikini and an oversized shirt over it…and…antigrav boots because physics.

She did the heavy sunglasses thing and breezed through the CIC, went out the airlock and then up. The temperature in the Citadel and the fake sunlight was warming the Normandy’s skin. She’d had no opportunities to commune with the outside of Her.

Spreading out a blanket and stripping off the shirt and boots she laid back on the uneven plating, hands splayed out to either side to feel the warmed metal.

The sounds of maintenance and construction on the Normandy and surrounding ships were the sounds of a living, working hive.

We’re going to do it, soon. We’ve both been torn up and we’ve both come back. This time we’re going to get it done, together. We’ve got a scary crew, but a good crew. Scary is what we need.

She thought of Kaidan and wondered if he’d qualified for some ‘good person’ afterlife she’d be barred from or she’d leave herself due to boredom. I am not a good person, Kaidan. I wonder what you’d think of this mission. If you’ve got any pull up there, spare me a thought. I know you made your sacrifice free and clear, but I’m going to do everything I can to earn it. Part of this victory is yours. Part of every victory I’ve had is yours.

She let her thoughts come and go, not getting caught in them, like a river she rose above. The sounds of the port and their remote industry were comforting, the sounds of getting work done. The murmur and sway of her own thoughts were the reassuring signs of an active, agile mind creating reflexive thought that she let ramble on its path without examination.

She focused on isolating muscle groups, tensing and relaxing them. She made a circuit through her body, beginning at the head, working down to toes, starting over, until the warmth and repetition did their work and she fell still and quiet, and then seamlessly asleep.

She woke and got her bearings, opened her eyes and was startled into jumping. Thane was sitting by her feet, watching her.

She closed her eyes against the prickling rush of adrenaline and said “Okay. I’m awake.”

He smiled and distinctly did not say he didn’t intend to startle her. Damn. She said “Fine. It freaks me out. Happy?”

Thane inclined his head and said “You have excellent control of your facial muscles, but not yet the subtle tightening of your jaw and neck when you are startled.”

She sighed and said “And then there’s the jumping.”

He nodded and said “Understandable. You have less control over your responses when you first wake.”

She leaned back on her elbows and stretched some of the knots out of her shoulders. She was
relaxed before sleeping but metal wasn’t the most comfortable of surfaces. She said “How did you find me?”

He smiled and said “I could say I had a way of tracking you in order to remain mysterious, but in this case I simply asked EDI.”

She chuckled and said “That’s a relief. You haven’t implanted a tracker on me while I was sleeping, have you?”

He raised a brow ridge and said “I had not thought of such a thing, but now that you have suggested it…”

She laughed and said “I have…not…suggested it.”

He said with half humor “Perhaps Garrus has considered it. I will ask him his thoughts.”

She chuckled and said “Yeah, you and I might already have trackers, given that possibility.”

She shifted to her right side and he tilted subtly. When she moved back to the left side he tilted more slowly to the other side, but still distinct. She said “What…are you doing?”

He said quietly “The greatest likelihood of a sniper is from behind me.”

She closed her eyes and sighed and said “You…this is not how I would have wanted you to spend your shore leave.”

He said sincerely “It is how I wanted to spend it.”

She raised a brow and said “What are the reasonable odds of a sniper?”

He considered briefly and said “Less than a full percentage point, but I prefer to be useful.” He pulled her feet into his lap, shifting her parallel to the vanishingly improbable bullet’s path, covered by the protective shield of his back. Less than a percentage point. He knew he was not risking his life right now, but was willing to do it, would do it without question or recognition, content to watch over her while she slept. She felt kinship with the seemingly odd instinct. She always resisted sitting with her back to doors or windows, and there was usually less than one percentage point odds that anybody was going to start something through those doors or windows, but they still made her uneasy. She smiled at him and reclined, letting him control her position. She said a simple, solemn “Thank you.”

His smile was subtle, but she was always delighted to see it. It transformed his face and humor transformed his voice, and she loved those moments. His thumbs and palms worked on her feet. She groaned in appreciation and closed her eyes. After a few moments she said “I suck at small talk around you. I can’t find a neutral topic. It’s a challenge.”

She heard the smile in his voice as he replied “Perhaps the weather.”

She replied “Regulated. Short conversation.”

He said with concentration, his strong fingers working along her toes, the curves and arches of her feet with her interspersed appreciation noises “Conversation requires context, small talk often requires an innocuous shared context that would create no social anxiety. I am afraid I lack that. I imagine it is more distressing to others than it is to me.”

She said “What sort of context?”
He replied “Garrus has no difficulty with small talk because for each conversation in general he will have context. You and he share military traditions, weapons, tactics and you have also shared going to places together, drinking, vids. You have a dynamic framework of context and experience. I am capable of researching and providing context when under pressure for work, but at the moment there is no need for me to try to determine what your favorite vid or music is in order to share it and create a rapport that could lead to confidence. I have done it so often for professional reasons and it could so easily be considered manipulation that I have in fact avoided seeking some manufactured level of shared context. You and I have not had similar upbringings. I am less enthusiastic about my weapons of choice than Garrus. I do not drink, nor am I tempted to drink. I do not seek entertainment but continued training and discipline in the tradition of a secretive culture. I have much less in the way of events in a life that blend together to form solid ground. My stories are not amusing or innocuous. My life was intended to be obscured, submerged, a series of long jumps from footholds that sank below the waves once I passed on. The majority of my life is not a story that is mine to tell. The stories I could tell by their nature would invoke pity or disgust, possibly both, not a desirable outcome. The urge to remain camouflaged is powerful and not without need. You appear to have confidence in me based upon my actions in the moment. I believe those actions may prove my worth and achieve the goal of allowing me to keep my status on this ship and at your side when you require or allow. I am hesitant to delve into those actions that may be interpreted as gaining facile acceptance. I believe you would see through it. I would find the attempt to assimilate at such an advanced point in my career to be unsustainable. It would be difficult for me to express genuine curiosity about you or Garrus and have a story to tell in order to reciprocate that would qualify as building rapport while not being manipulative. Both you and Garrus can be researched. Your lives are a continuous whole, solid ground of identity and action, constantly under public scrutiny. This is not to say everything is knowable, but enough is knowable to extrapolate. Part of my job when completing a contract is to not discuss it afterward as professional necessity. To disclose the stories of my life would also be to acknowledge I do not have context for many of them. I did not realize how strange a thing it was to live the life I have led until I saw it side by side with other lives. Your life seems unfathomably strange to me, but admittedly fascinating. I find I wish to know everything about you, but I am unwilling to disclose my own history.”

She listened, soaking in the strength of his hands, the quiet and devastating honesty of his words, while still…being as he said…inescapably manipulative. She said “I haven’t asked questions because I don’t want to intrude, not because I don’t want to know. Sometimes my lack of curiosity is taken as not caring. I care. So having listened to what you’ve said let me take a crack at the theories that dictates some of your observed behavior. Let me extrapolate. Tell me if I’m on the right track. I’m convinced we can build context, and if we do it nonverbally, we do it nonverbally. We have done it nonverbally. When you came to come find me, seeing me here sleeping…my assumption would be that your first thought was not ‘She’s charming when she’s asleep,’ but you likely see an overlay superimposed over my body, vulnerable points, the fastest way to kill me. I imagine you can’t avoid seeing it, no matter the circumstances. You were trained to see bodies, see minds as things that could be deconstructed, manipulated to your needs, and every time you look at me, you see how to kill me, how to manipulate me, as unconsciously as you might notice the color of my clothing. A reflexive calculation. You have no need to kill me and that information is easily dismissed, of no more importance than the color of my clothing. Psychologically manipulating me on the other hand could be and has been very useful, creating murkier motivation control. At a certain level of intelligence you have to learn to not buy your own bullshit, so you question your motives often. Much of your social energy is consumed by generating and then suppressing instincts that were intended to save your life in a crisis. Your life has been a series of crises, and shutting off the instincts drilled into you as a child and practiced successfully as a profession is not an option. You presented your sitting where you are sitting as being useful. Much of your usefulness is intuitive and lightning calculated, and to countermand your instincts causes at least some level of distress. Distress you would bear without complaint, but still distress. You would prefer I were in my cabin, because if you see how
you can kill me and you know you will not, that is less anxiety than when you see very clearly how I could die theoretically, and you can’t un-see it. If you were Garrus you would feel comfortable picking me up and moving me and not taking no for an answer. You are not Garrus and you have a formality that makes doing that impossible unless there is a true and present danger you couldn’t otherwise avoid. Knowing the potential for danger is there, you prefer to take action to protect me, transmuting the potential physical danger you perceive into something preventable, something you can control with a simple action to relieve the anxiety. All it would cost would be your life, and in the circumstances you would barely consider that a cost so much as an asset. The psychological manipulation you can do less about, because you see what would please me, what would please you, and you wish to do those things. You don’t know where loving me ends, wanting me starts and having control over me is irresistible.”

He said softly “Loving you does not end, my Siha.”

She smiled at his acknowledgement and evasion, eyes closed, bliss seeping into her through her feet, venom and companionship and the shape of his mind. She said “You are endlessly charming. That is part of your problem, isn’t it? I hear what you’re saying as truth, but you know how easily you could lie?”

Thane’s voice was contemplative. Analyzing himself was not something he often did. He said “I seek you out. That on its own is…unique. The permission to seek you out weighs on me as a responsibility as well as a right. Yes, I wish to touch you, but I also wish to…behold you. I find you beautiful, which could be interpreted as seeing you as a thing. I have seen people as things for the majority of my life. I see you first as the sum components of your physical and psychological weaknesses, as you say. As time passes, memories can take the place of threat assessment. I can see your throat reflexively as the most likely location to aim a strike, but I can also remember the moan you make when I kiss there, or remember the times the beat in your carotid has sped simply through seeing me. I am steadied in your presence, the anxiety of which you speak can be calmed through seeing you well, seeing you smile, seeing that my continued presence does you no harm and may perhaps provide benefit. I can calm it in other ways, meditation or exercise or force of will. I prefer being near you, being available. There is no way to prove I would love you were you not so beautiful. You cannot promise to love me if I were not as I am.”

She scoffed and said “Well, we are both involved with a frightening-looking, imposing and scarred Turian.”

Thane replied with assurance “He is beautiful.”

She said softly “Yes he is. Without our inherent beauties, physical or psychological, what would be our worth to each other? Would you love me if I buffed the corridors of Zakera ward?”

He said softly “I could hope for the opportunity to prove I would, but I find myself occupied with loving you as you are now. An uncalculated moment may never come naturally, and you will see the struggle between my instincts, which I will not blunt as you need them, and my wish to see you as a person. You are, however, the first person with authority over my future who cares about what you can do for me as much, if not more, than what I can do for you. I did not truly think such a thing existed. Irikah’s ambition was to change me, redeem me somehow through the force of her will, but the force of my nature was stronger and we reached an impasse of influence. She paid the price for that attempt at redemption. Here, the force of my nature is valued. A large part of my training would prefer to dismiss that you care for me and would prefer to see your attentions as attempts to control my behavior. It would be reassuring. It is, in fact, reassuring that you are aware of the potential at your command. However, I know how to control behavior and you paradoxically create loyalty through providing freedom. I do not know what to do with the freedom you offer, the freedom you
wield so effortlessly. It is a twisting and unpredictable gift in my hands. I may never be able to grasp the concept of freedom, seeing traps and cynical hard facts in place of hope, seeing a gilded cage that is real simply because I would not lift a hand to escape it and would fight to remain. In the end it makes no difference if you have created the cage, locked it or left it open, as long as I remain, reassured or suspicious of freedom. Freedom for now means I wish to be near you, let that bring what it brings. The rest must wait for changing circumstance, habit or the intervention of the Gods to sculpt me.”

She replied “You volunteered to be placed on the chess board, and as a Commander I will certainly move you as I see fit, even sacrifice you. I am willing to sacrifice myself as well. I am the queen, but my job is to save the king. Do you know chess?”

Thane nodded “Not in enough depth to consider myself a master, but yes, I know of chess.”

She said “You’re a knight. You possess a pattern of movement that cannot be duplicated by another role; your non-linear moves can create distraction on the board from true intent.”

Thane said “True enough in that it is impossible for me to move forward without also moving sideways. I am content with that role. I am content with being potentially sacrificed. I am not content with your willingness to sacrifice yourself. There we shall not agree.”

She asked “Do the Drell have a strategy game like chess?”

Thane replied “Yes. Pon-Ifa. That I do know in depth sufficiently to be considered a master.”

She said “Would you teach me? Perhaps we could find further shared context over strategy. I have not been longing to expose you to the latest Blasto movie. Shared context is not always of value. Some conversations are unnecessary and even antagonizing.”

He said “Yes, I would enjoy that.”

She said “I bought fruit for you, but I wouldn’t try to cook for you. That’s a natural thing that humans might do for each other, but I wouldn’t…I don’t know why, exactly, but I wouldn’t presume. Is that a misguided instinct? I would like to do more for you, but you are so self contained, self sufficient and disciplined I feel I would be forcing you to accept something substandard to please me.”

He considered for a few moments before saying “Perhaps as a small example a story here would be illuminating, risking pity and disgust. The strongest memories I have of my mother are of her preparing food, the scent of the house. When I was chosen for the Compact she was very proud. I spent a final month with my family being praised each moment and being fed my favorites; fruit in elaborate syrups. She was adoring and indulgent and I became very proud as a result. My father was more reserved and I could see worry in his eyes, but my mother was pure enthusiasm. I embraced my mother’s enthusiasm and determined my father was afraid of me because of the power he saw in me, not afraid for me. I enjoyed that as well. Of course I did not understand, but I felt I did. I took my cue from my mother. That month was the last I saw of them. I was told to forget them as thoroughly as a Drell could, that to invoke their memory would be to place them in danger, call the wrath of the Gods down on them, for the Hanar were now my only conduit to the Gods, I could claim no ancestry, I belonged to them. The Hanar raised me to believe them to be literal heralds of the Gods, reporting my progress to them, speaking on my behalf to gain their favor. To refuse an injunction would be blasphemy. Even now, there is a shadow of fear and restraint regarding even speaking of my parents. I know the mechanism, I know it was indoctrination and manipulation of a small and impressionable mind, but I cannot escape the fear it created. It has faded to as you say, mild anxiety, but it remains. I have not dared to look to see if they still live. I had a younger sister whose face and
laugh I recall, but I will not speak their names. To contact them now would disgrace them, a failure of the purpose of the Compact, to protect Hanar interests. That was the effectiveness of my training. It carries through to me now. The boundaries were set and the penalties were not only my personal failure, but the deaths of my family due to my negligence, or tendency to boast, or willingness to indulge in memories that no longer belonged to me.”

Sympathy flooded her, but she kept her face relaxed, controlled, and he kept his eyes on her feet, his hands. She would be contrary, again, and not give him pity or disgust, which was a manipulative but prophetic prediction.

“Upon entering the compound dedicated to my education, food was one of the first subjects of instruction. Having spent a month feeling as though I was the inherent savior of Drell legacy, I expected to be deferred to as my mother had done. I expected to be feared as my father had done. The reality was a locked room, isolation and the systematic disillusion of those assumptions. Not simply disillusion but dissolution. I had no family. I had no legacy. There was no deference. There was no fear. There was only instruction. There were no clocks. I was given simple, silent instruction, which I ignored my first day. I was unaware that instruction was taking place as I explored the new space out of excitement. Instruction was repeated once a cycle, I do not know if it was a day or not. There were no windows. If instructions were not followed, there was a loud, blaring siren that would begin the moment of making an error and would continue until the end of the cycle. Understandably my first day was spent in disobedience and inattention and therefore noise until the cycle ended and instruction was provided again. I was to examine and eat only the fruit provided, wait for it to ripen. I was to maintain my living space. I was to maintain my body. Simple instruction, suitable and possible for a six year old, but there was to be no argument, no negotiation, and no real explanation, only demonstration and consequence. I did as I was instructed or I was unable to sleep, unable to concentrate, possibly hungry or sick if I ate unripe fruit too early, or unexamined fruit that was likely treated with not fatal chemicals, but certainly ones that caused pain and distress. The noise would stop as the cycle began again and I could attempt to follow instruction again until failing or succeeding. Ultimately there were days when I was able to sleep without a siren blare, or so exhausted I could in fact sleep through it. I formed habits out of necessity.”

She watched his face, neutral and detached, and she understood the need for distance. She barely breathed, not wanting to interrupt, a hole punched in her heart, bleeding internally for the child he had been.

“My only contact with another living being was a delivery of unpalatable raw and unripe fruit supplemented with unknown capsules I took daily. Exercises were demonstrated, ablutions required, prayer forms to be memorized and performed. I do not know how long it took until the instruction became inherent and I was able to leave that room. I always returned to sleep in that room if it was allowed, unless there was a training requirement that prevented it. The pattern became part of my daily actions, comforting, reassuring and right. I had no opportunity to question or argue. I had no recourse to comfort myself with the idea that I would return to my family. Thinking of them at all would be seen by the omnipresent divine messengers in the form of the Hanar, who would inform the Gods, and we would all be punished. Me for my disobedience, the Hanar for failing to train me, my family for failing to create a child worthy of the Compact. What remained was obedience. By the time I left that room I no longer thought of my family, I only thought of the next action to be taken. I knew to only do as I was told. To take an unexpected route or explore on my own would result in traps and injury. I was shown this, I did not try. The siren was the most straightforward of deterrents. Beyond that they became more subtle. I had been shown repeatedly in that room that food was to always be prepared by my own hand, that I would be tested on my comprehension and transgression would provide their own punishments. By the time I was permitted to leave my room to attend further training, prepared food, often a remembered favorite, would be at my bedside when I woke, or in a hallway on my path. I never reached for it, even when presented as a reward. I had learned.”
She wanted to fucking kill every Hanar she’d ever met. Right now. She wanted to kill all the others that she hadn’t met. She paced her breathing and relaxed her face muscles, thankfully he wasn’t looking at her.

“The temptations never ended, and that pattern was repeated throughout my training. I embraced the discipline of preparing my food by hand, testing it for adulterants and poisons, catching items that had been poisoned, reinforcing that the action was necessary to my continued survival. My instruction was of value to me. Obedience resulted in slow but measurable improvements in my quarters and provisions, advancement in my instruction. I experienced hard won status, silent pride and usefulness. The weaknesses of temptation and temper fell away and I was proud of how I was shaped, proud of my obedience. I would eat any food you offered me, Siha, even if I knew it was poisoned. You are correct. There will always be a crossed boundary I would be unable to escape in its hold on me, unable to explain. Shared context may be impossible when overwhelming previous context already exists and dictates behavior. There is no harm and in fact utility in my training regarding food. That cannot be said of much of the remainder of my training, but it costs me little to maintain its upkeep. I am not tempted to alter my habits in many ways, in fact it would not occur to me that those habits could or should be altered.”

She thought ‘I would eat any fruit you offered me, even if I knew it was poisoned?’ What the actual fuck, Thane? I do not understand. I can’t understand. You keep telling me this and I keep thinking I can know you. I can’t tell if that is a lie or poetic declaration or true, and I can’t ask because I don’t think you know either.

“I believe that you, Siha, like Garrus, were raised like a tree against strong, unpredictable winds from many directions. It made you strong. You have a straight and true trunk, deep roots and a place of your own. You know your opponents and you have expelled them and held your own shape. I was raised from a sapling to wrap around a twisted set pole, imbalanced and unsustainable without the support of that pole. Wind from only one direction, unnatural. I knew no soil as my own. Remove the pole whole and I would be torn apart. Remove it in segments and my twisting will ever echo its shape. I will never grow straight. My roots will never be any pattern but shallow and thirsty, while denying all existence of that thirst by action or thought, while revering shallow as the best shape to hold.”

Nonononono. Don’t be true. It’s a terrible image and poetic and final and I won’t let it be true.

“I carry the shape the Hanar intended. I will only appear to be straight or true through artifice. I can know I once had the potential to grow straight and true. I can now see that growing straight and true is not impossible, though my mind still tries to grasp it. I see it in you, in Garrus, in Karin Chakwas, in others that can shoot fleet as an arrow with straight shaft along their chosen path. I had earlier thought that my shape was superior. Now I begin to see the difference, even if I do not understand fully. It could create despair or it could simply be what it is. I choose to accept that my opportunity for that growth, that formative time is lost and I can only bear the fruit I was raised to bear, hold the shape I was raised to hold. My pride in my past has been replaced by pity and disgust. I do know the shape I bear can be of service to you as a knight on the board. In my life with Irikah there was no board, no game, no purpose except to see where my shape differed so entirely and insidiously from others. In that time I attempted to change. I was unable to, despite a soul-deep motivation to do so. I cannot and will not change, so I choose to be useful. You comprehend my twisting without being told. You value my potential on the board. It is enough, Siha. More than I had hoped to achieve. What is new beyond the loss of my manufactured pride is maintenance of the least damaging of the traditions I was taught, the habits I won at great cost. I face my future with humility and with dawning understanding of how love can make my days, my limited choices my own, and I can learn in my stumbling way what freedom is. My pride would not permit me to return to the natural understanding and selfishness of a mistaken six year old, begin again, try new ways with no
warnings to keep me away from danger. I had a way of living that would always provide the correct answer. I no longer follow that path. Now I am free to make mistakes. However, I am further along a path I know well than many others have been able to travel and I can wield those truths well. I will not begin again. I will not be made anew. My time of growth is past, but I will be of use.”

She was roiling with anger and yes, pity, and yes, disgust. She said “They should be stopped. That should not have happened to you. It should not happen to another child.”

Thane said thoughtfully “It had occurred to me to…end the Compact, but I am only one man and bound by it myself. My people would not permit the loss of their pride, they would cling to it, recreate it. Had I full freedom and power, however, I would wipe it from existence.”

She said “I have no forgiveness to offer, there is nothing to forgive. You see what you see in me and I accept that. I accept that you know how to kill me and you know how to manipulate me. If you can forgive or admire me for playing chess with our lives, you should know that yes, I will see things in you. I may feel pity, or disgust or horror from your stories. But just as you can look at my throat and begin to see beyond it as a strike point, I can learn about you and see past what was to what is. You have asked me to see myself through your eyes. Ask me questions, tell me stories, share what you can of your life with me. Trust that if I can’t understand, that I can try, and that trying matters. I may not always succeed in understanding, but I will always try, and I will always love you. I value you beyond your utility. If you chose in this moment to stay on the ship, but take no more life, engage in no more manipulation to get what you want, but to ask for what you want, you deserve that freedom. I don’t have to give it to you, you can take it and I would respect that.”

His hands stilled on her feet, tingling and warmth and invigorated blood flow left where his hands retreated. His head tilted forward and his dark eyes with the patient and knowing smile on his face made the hair stand up on her arms. He pulled the blanket under her slowly until she was dragged to him, and he gathered her into his lap, arranged her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck after smoothing his hands over the warning her body had given her and he had seen. He raised her chin with his fingers, buried his other hand in her hair and studied her face. He said “There is nothing short of death that will stop me from following you, killing those who threaten you. You will not stop me. You would have to kill me, and instead you have granted me greater vigor, longer life to follow my chosen path. You have granted me enough freedom for me to choose my own path. My chosen path is you. You imagine some light from within me that casts such deep shadows, some light you hope to reveal. The light is you, Jane, and I am now your twisted shadow. There is no turning back or turning aside. There is forward motion and sideways motion. You will play chess and I will play Pon-Ifa and we shall see. Just as Garrus would never have returned to Palaven command after following you in battle, neither shall I retire to Kahje to teach flower arrangements. Set that thought aside as incomplete understanding.”

Her smile was full and appreciative as she said “You already have Garrus under your control. A few choice words and he would follow your commands, not mine. Particularly because he would want to if it saved my life.”

He didn’t deny it and his smile became more full and appreciative. “We shall see, my Queen. For now, the simple truth is I have no machinations beyond wishing to sit at your feet, watch you sleep and replace flash-true images of death and manipulation with more thoughtful replacements and alternatives. A full and painless breath drawn in your presence, in the light, offering myself as your unasked and indeed unshakable protector, is as straight and true as I can be in a moment. Stay with me a while, Siha, and bring me peace. For now we are not pieces on a board, but the minds surveying it, and no move must be made. We have the luxury of stillness.”
He shifted her so her head was on his shoulder, his lips in her hair. His hands traveled down her arms to entwine his fingers with hers.

Whatever peace he could gain, she wanted to give. She fell into uncomprehending silence, the shifting perceptions of him resolving into knowing she did not know. His mind was contemplating the danger, his back to it, the shadow from his presence and intent cast over her, inescapably protective and menacing. It could create despair or it could simply be what it was. She knew he had mixed his metaphors. If the darkness was behind him, his knowledge of danger was relative illumination, as it had been regarding Bahak. He was a map of the darkness, but he would lead her out, not in. He was and was not as deeply corrupted as he believed, and was as prone to seeing weakness in himself as she was to seeing it in herself. She did not know how she knew, but she knew. Their eyes looked accurately out, not in.

She chose being and not comprehension. She would set her intuitive knowledge of him against his intuitive knowledge of himself and see what came. She had his hands in hers. She had the skin of the Normandy under them, the warmth and light of the peaceful and generated sky, the sounds of ships being made whole. Metaphorical light and shadow, moves and roles faded. A full and painless breath had been impossible months ago. There was time enough for miracles, and if he had no hope, she would hold it for him until he could reach for it himself.
Chapter 10

She mended fences the best she could with Anderson and Hackett, speaking the lingo of ‘no hard feelings.’ This was business and no place for feelings. She charmed and flattered by evoking camaraderie of the past. Not too much, just enough to let them know she respected them and was properly in line with her priorities straight, no attention paid to personal slights. She needed the Alliance to at best support her, at worst stay out of her way. She could not afford the Alliance as an enemy. She would settle for the tacit “not at war” that she maintained with the Council.

Hackett agreed to put Mordin in touch with some of the researchers and provide some of the research they had been doing in trade for some of the information about the Collectors and seeker swarms. This was an opening move for trading the deterrent for seeker swarms for further access. She wanted to give it to them anyway, but she should play cautious and not give more away than she needed to in a transaction. If what she provided was actionable and the researchers felt they could use Mordin’s input, Hackett agreed they could work together on those subjects, and that he would think of opportunities where they might work together in the future.

She was reasonably sure they knew more than the Alliance, but she wanted Mordin to get his eyes on it. She had faith in his insights. He would do wonders with the same information. Then they could possibly trade back his insights for further access.

Promising.

She stopped by to tell Mordin and also asked him for suggestions on neurotoxic agents that would work quickly on Drell and Turians. Thane had given her too many warnings and she would be a fool if she didn’t have a fast delivery system to reverse any attempt at subversion. Mordin was very helpful. She settled on a method involving an ampule for Drell and an ampule for Turians, subdermally implanted with her Omni Tool, able to use attachments for injection or projectile

Keep your friends close, and keep your enemies closer. Thane was not an enemy to her, but he might be to her goal. His goal was her continued survival, and she came across threats to that too often to not prepare. She needed Thane’s perspective and wouldn’t leave him behind, but in a strategic sense she needed to assume a distinct obedience gap that was situational and somewhat predictable. If her life was in more danger than usual, that’s when she needed to be wary of revolt. Thane’s new freedoms and willingness to find his own way were encouraging on a personal level and even a command level, considering it had saved her in the past. She could hope to maintain that tense balance of risk versus reward. She knew the risks were to be prevented, not provoked, respected and not taunted.

With Thane down she could likely talk Garrus out of anything, but she wasn’t taking chances. They followed orders after offering their alternatives or they became undignified heaps. This fit with her command style. Thane wouldn’t see it coming because she always backed down against his warnings and threats, to make him feel more comfortable with making them. Yes, I would like to know. Please tell me. Garrus would see it coming. There had been an incident with Wrex with Garrus present.

She was fairly easygoing out of battle, willing to take flak from people and even insubordination. It was better that she knew where people stood. In battle was a different story. Wrex had been independent for too long, had little respect for humans and his assimilation onto the Normandy had not been seamless. She had determined that he had the mindset of a dog and he needed an Alpha or he assumed he was the Alpha. Her easygoing style only caused him to push harder. Garrus had been out with them when Wrex had come up with his own idea about bypassing an ambush ahead. She’d
disagreed and repeated her order for her assault. He’d repeated his objection. When she’d asked him if he was willing to follow orders he’d balked, called it a stupid fucking plan that a pyjak would know better to follow. A full-size, experienced and angry Krogan mercenary was a challenge, but he’d given her enough warning that she had prepared. She had temporarily blinded him with the equivalent of pepper spray to his eyes, used his own shotgun to knock him down, taking care to make it painful, and had restrained him before he’d recovered.

She had nudged with him a boot and said “Garrus is heading forward with me to execute my plan. You are staying here. Think about it. We’ll be back in a few minutes, fairly pissed off that we didn’t have the help you’d promised, and I’ll give you a choice. You can stay here or you can follow my fucking orders from this day forward. If you’re awfully nice I might loosen the restraints and not sabotage all the shuttles.”

Wrex had started to laugh and then said “Hey, Shepard…tell me something.”

She had said tersely “What?”

He had asked “Is my shotgun okay? She didn’t deserve that. I did, but she didn’t.”

She had answered “She’s fine. I wouldn’t hurt her. She’s more valuable than you. Get your head on straight. We’ll be back, and if we aren’t, and there are a shitload of Batarians that find you, keep in mind it was your fault.”

He had snorted and said “You’ll be back.”

She was back. He still questioned the occasional order, but never twice. That’s all she cared about.

Garrus had not spoken a word during the exchange, but he knew she was capable of putting down revolt without warning. She was more concerned that Garrus was tiremit hypnotized and with a few key words he’d have no choice. She wanted to give him choices. She could hope that Garrus wouldn’t tell Thane the story, or that Thane wouldn’t believe she would do the same to him.

She didn’t truly believe that Thane would plan, exactly, to do this, but under stress or pressure in the moment he might make his own lightning calculations and execute them. She needed to know Thane’s calculations even if she couldn’t always follow them. Maybe he’d be right. She’d count on his willingness to tell her first, give a sign of rebellion in warning. He would explain softly, reasonably, call her Siha, defer to her until he had no choice. He would not expect a dart to the neck, and it would only work once. She was only the Alpha if she could keep control of the pack, and that required creativity and planning. He was worth the risk.

Command would be interesting after that point. Unlike Wrex, he would not back down. He would appear to back down, and would likely genuinely appreciate her move, but he’d harden his approach and adapt for the next time. It would be the last time she got any warning.

Look on the bright side. In this extreme scenario it’s entirely possible she’d be dead if she went against his advice, lost both Thane and Garrus and went forward alone.

Chances she had to take.

She smiled as she heard his words “The life of a Spectre is full of difficult choices.”

Following one isn’t that much easier.

Her pride in her team wasn’t diminished through having to figure out how to disable each and every one of them in an emergency. It was strengthened. She had to outwit enemies and properly estimate
allies. Anybody could be pushed to insubordination in the right circumstances. It was all part of the job.

She headed back to the cabin to get some more work done. She sent a message to Liara and asked her for everything she knew about the Hanar Compact. They were nearing Palaven and tomorrow would dock. She was swamped with security and authorization requests both ways, Turians wanting to tour the Normandy, Normandy crew wanting to visit Palaven, authorizing Mordin’s visit with Amalis Kemi. With Garrus’s help she was able to navigate. She’d been on the comm with him about 10 times today to interrupt whatever he was doing and ask his advice. She called him again and asked him about whether or not she should authorize yet another request for a tour, balancing potential influence benefit against security risk. She promised she was taking a break. Garrus said he was coming up and had cut off the comm before she’d been able to reassure him that she could manage for the next 30 minutes without his advice. She’d tackle something other than Turian red tape.

When he got there, he looked…scared. Exhilarated and scared. Palaven was his home, one he hadn’t seen since before she’d met him. This was his family and a culture he’d left behind, now gathering them back up into his strong, wide embrace. Since involving Palaven in her calculations he’d become more outspoken, more vulnerable, more hopeful. It was a beautiful thing to see hope suffuse his expressions and voice, but he was also more terrified, more invested, more immediate. He was still calm and steady in mixed company that involved anybody but her and Thane. He had the same humor and self deprecation. His game face. Privately he was more unpredictable, anger and enthusiasm and slammed hands on desks or bodies or…

He wasn’t different so much as…more.

She liked it.

He was right. He hadn’t discovered anything she didn’t like yet.

He looked at her, stopped in his tracks, took a step, stopped, opened his mouth, closed his mouth. She wished she could understand what his mandibles were doing, but it looked like agitation. Spread wide, tremble, pull tight, stop as though he noticed. Forget and start over. He seemed to veer away from whatever it was he was going to say and said something else instead. He said “Tali’s been talking to me about the renovations to the quarters and galley. We can get a lot of it done on Palaven since we’re staying for multiple days. If you’re okay with it we can go ahead and authorize a lot of work. We can have enough monitoring to make sure nothing other than bunks get put in. I trust that the Hierarchy wouldn’t try it on their own, but I won’t assume there aren’t other agents. We won’t be stupid about it. We’ll check every component. People could have decent housing and food before we hit the relay.”

That got a huge smile from her and she stopped worrying about whatever it is he was going to say. He’d get to or it or he wouldn’t. She said “That’s incredible news, Garrus. They should throw a party for you.”

His mandibles did the thing again, starting at the word ‘party.’ She said “Something on your mind?”

He shot his hands out in a helpless, violent gesture “Ah, I suck at this.” He said in explanation with his hands warding off concern “It’s not bad. Mostly. It’s…” He stared off into a corner, face arrested on trying to find words.

She had no idea how to reassure or guide him, so she just waited for him to sort through it all in his time. If he was worried about something, she was worried about something.
He said slowly, stringing some thoughts together “I told you that my father wanted an official visit and an unofficial visit. So does my mother. I can’t tell her no. She’s…well, even losing bits of her mind she’s going to get her way. She’s got her mind set on…not that I want to tell her no but…she’s my Avah and…”

She blinked in confusion. She said “Take…any of those statements and give me context?”

He sighed and continued “Bottom line, she wants to meet you. Not just meet you…show you off. Show me off. Show us off. She wants a dinner and…a dance. She has requested that I convince you…to ask me to dance. Now it might sound like she just wants to give my father a heart attack, but she’s…she’s smart. She wishes to open the Vakarian Madlis to you, have a dinner in your honor, and…augh…I’ve mangled it.”

She said softly “Never mind that it insults every other Turian there?”

He laughed and said “Well, yes and no. Whatever the outside attitudes are, anybody under the Madlis roof will follow her lead regarding her son. You won’t be treated with disrespect in a diplomatic setting. Plus, it’s you. You would tend to be treated with respect anyway. You don’t understand the influence she has.”

She coughed lightly and said “I think I’m starting to see it. You’re spinning in a gravity well from several light years away.”

He started to laugh and said “Turian culture is…well…when your mother asks you…”

She continued “To ask your commanding officer and lover…”

He met her eyes and said “To ask you to dance …”

She finished and said “You do it.”

He nodded and said “You do it. She has determined, she says from the way I look when I talk about you, that I am in love with you. When she asked if you shared my feelings and I told her yes, she decided that she wants me to have the right to declare it publically. She has made it possible, something I couldn’t do.”

She asked softly “Do you want me to do this or do you want me to be the human bad guy so you can explain to your mother that I was too dense to understand?”

He said quietly “I would have liked to have thought it out more clearly before I asked. I’ve tried, but it’s…there’s no way to explain this in human terms. It isn’t match making. It’s permission to be matched, personally and professionally. My mother has an extraordinary heart. It may be uncomfortable, it may be politically touchy…but it could also make a real difference, set an example that badly needs to be set. It’s hard to communicate to you that I’m asking for her, but she is asking for me, and for her people, that we are both asking for the political and social example, AND…I’m asking for me, though I couldn’t ask it for myself and the audacity of it staggers me. But you are good at audacity.”

She saw more clearly the layers, the depth, the context of what he had given up to follow her. She said “I can see where you got your extraordinary heart. It might be amazing.”

He smiled in relief and said “Yes. It might be amazing. Perhaps for a human it would be…strange, or even humiliating, for me to beg your permission to carry out my mother’s wish, but I do…want to dance with you, Kerim. To be given such a gift from my mother, to have such a gift from you, it would be…more than I can imagine becoming true. Even now. I don’t have the words. Obviously.”
She said with a smile “If it’s what you want, then it’s what I want. Teach me what to do and the steps, and I’ll try to make her proud.”

He closed the distance between them and held her face between his hands, tilted his head and looked at her and then kissed her, gentle and reverent. He tilted his crest to her forehead and said in a soft voice warming over with the force of the emotion felt in his flanging tone “Thank you. You will be welcome in the Madlis for your lifetime, Kerim. To many, many Turians you are a hero. You saved the lives of everyone on the Citadel. Everyone who works at C-Sec knows it. My father knows it. My clan knows it. It isn’t a bonding, but it is an alliance and an honor, a public statement regarding my standing in the Clan and the Clan’s standing on my chosen path. I have followed you and this legitimizes anything I have done under your command or as a result of your command, approving of your authority over my life’s path. You have no clan of your own so she offers you Vakarian protection under her authority. She wants other Turians to see her smile as she watches us dance. Unbonded. From different species. Bound together still with a common goal and a common love, and deserving of support and respect. That can’t be taken from you, can’t be taken from me. Anyone who knows her will know it was her idea and I would not dare unless it was at her command. My paint will be redrawn and you will be seen as having the right to ask me to dance. I will accept no other invitation. It will be clear to everyone with a Turian heart, and I will try to make it clear to you, what it means.”

She smiled against the press of his crest. She said “You should have opened with that. You have the words.”

He started slightly, pulled back and said “Wait, I’ve got something…I had a lot of help.” He walked back to the door and pulled in a big box and four progressively smaller boxes. He put them down on the desk and then looked at her and said “Do I open them or do you open them?”

She said “I have no idea. Does it mean anything to a Turian? You can open it to present it to me or I can open it to be surprised.”

He said “Hmm…well, I would like to present them to you, but I’m slightly afraid of them.” He opened the big box, and a wealth of silver-blue fabric the color of her eyes was revealed in the form of a gown. A breathtaking gown. She said slowly “I’ve changed my mind. You should have opened with this.”

He said a little hesitantly “I didn’t want to pressure you with a gift…”

She said emphatically “Garrus, if you ever have anything like this, don’t make her wait in the hallway. Pressure me. She’s beautiful. I haven’t seen anything like her.”

She lifted the dress from the box by the straps. She didn’t have the names for the materials. The fabric was richer than satin, less uniform, bearing an organic, subtle pattern like watermarks deep in the weave. There were gems and a metal that was like silver but also had a blue tone. The straps were of the metal and gems. The stones were shadowed but translucent, with silver inclusions that revealed themselves and winked away like stars with movement and light. The bodice was sculpted neckline of overlapping half-moon shaped cups. The pattern came clearer. Stars, moon, night sky… Kerim. The dress was subtly suggestive of the Kerim, the angles and tailoring and edges the possible angles and curves of the moon in full or obscured shape. Panels of silver-blue fabric were edged with the gem-embedded metal where they met or fell away into separate pieces, framed with delicate filigree. At the waist on either side were full-moon shaped cutouts that wrapped around from the back to the front, the edge frosted with more of the metal and gems. It would bare part of her ribs, waist and upper hips, resembling the curves of the double eclipse, with her skin forming the shadows. The silver-blue panels widened and flared, each rimmed by metal and gems, and then
below the hips the panels separated and fell to the hemline where they terminated in a curve, making the panels long teardrop shapes. The panels shifted moment to moment like a living thing as they slid over each other and settled. Below the hips there were also revealed panels underneath of the same sort of fabric, but in her skin tone.

Garrus said “They’re called Yirla stones. Rarely seen off Palaven, but Thane…he knew a tailor on the Citadel…why I was surprised I don’t know, but he chose the materials and created the pattern. If I’m right, the fabric is Asari and the metal is…from the Elcor home planet? I’ve forgotten their names, but he could tell you. I can’t take any credit, but I appreciate the end result…living Kerim.” He opened the other boxes, jewelry set in bright sinuous metal for her hair, earrings, a necklace, delicate steep-heeled shoes, and…she lifted a pair of barbaric looking twisted arm cuffs of silver-blue metal and Yirla stones. She said “He has…excellent taste.”

Garrus smiled and said “He did insist. I am not qualified to argue with success. He insisted on my clothing as well. Vakarian blue, but with the same type of metal used in your gown and jewelry.” He said thoughtfully “He knows Turian tailoring better than I do. I never paid attention.”

She smiled and touched the hair jewelry, pins and twists and sprays in silver-blue and midnight spangle. She said “Thane has an idea for my hair?”

He said wryly “I think he’s going to insist.”

She set the gown carefully to hang, letting her out of that claustrophobic box and hoping to make friends. She said “I think I’m going to let him. He’ll have to appreciate us before we go. He isn’t setting foot out of this cabin while we’re anywhere near Palaven. He has been left off all ship manifests.”

Garrus nodded gravely “He has had dealings on Palaven, so I gather. He will stay out of sight.”

She said with a smile “He’s good at that. Garrus, thank you, this is…now I haven’t words. Will you dance with me before your Avah, before your clan, with Thane’s assurances that he has placed us in the perfect settings to shine?”

He held out his hand to her and pulled her closer, his arm around her waist and said “If you would honor me, I would consider myself blessed.”

She looked up into sincere blue depths set in the scarred face and scratched paint, imagined it redone and his pride reborn whole. She said lightly “One rule. You can’t tear that dress off me. I won’t allow it.”

He looked mock disappointed “What? You’re going to wear it again somewhere? No, I don’t think so. Once in a lifetime opportunity.”

She shook her head “No. Princess dress. Princess says no.”

He scoffed “Hardly for a princess. For a queen.”

She considered and said “Then the queen says no.”

His brow plate raised and said “All right. If only because I’m still afraid of it and I think Thane would kill me.”

She said in a part scold “Wait, so if I’d said no you just would have taken that dress and left?”

He chuckled and said “Thane convinced me you would say yes. I couldn’t figure out how to ask, so
that was the delay. He’s started to threaten to tell you himself, but maybe he would have taken the
dress back and asked you out to another evening and he’d be able to dance with you wearing it.”

She whistled “Yikes. I understand the pressure.”

He said lightly “You’re not wearing it now though…”

She said “Finally the man gets the hint.”

Dance lessons came soon after the promise of an evening out of family and politics. It was going to
driver her only because she found it harder and harder to avoid licking her instructors. They were both
excellent dancers and she was…not.

She watched as they demonstrated…again. Thane would dance her part and he was flawless. She
asked “Thane, where did you learn Turian dancing?”

He said “I have reviewed the technique over the last week.”

She closed her eyes and said “Damn it.”

He said gravely “You will have to do it in heels.”

They were in the shuttle bay and there were spectators because now there were spectators any time
Thane was in the bay. She glanced up and said “We might as well set up snack tables.”

Thane said “Focus, Siha. We have little time.”

She said “Can’t we…dumb this down for the human?”

Garrus said “Come on. You can do it. It’s already…well, it’s already dumbed down, much more and
it would be moron territory.”

She started to laugh and couldn’t stop. She said “Stunt Shepard? Too late to hire one?”

Thane ignored her, took her hand and steered her again in front of Garrus. Before he positioned her
at all he started picking on the way she was standing, insisting on shoulders straight, stomach in,
tapping and adjusting, then he started to move her hands and feet into the right position. She said
with frustration “Can’t I just…move my feet?”

Garrus actively scoffed and Thane said “You slouch and forget to breathe. Stand with dignity, Siha,
and look less as though you are about to hit your partner.”

She said “Even if I really want to hit someone?”

Thane said smoothly “Especially then. Spine graceful, not aggressive. Hold your own space and
balance, do not lean into him.” He shook her hand out by the wrist and positioned it with care on
Garrus’s shoulder. “Hands like a falling leaf, not a club used to bludgeon.”

She sighed and said “I have no idea what you’re talking about. It’s a hand.”

Thane said “Siha, your body must be poetry, not prose. Listen. Watch. Just as in battle, you cannot
simply be aware of one thing. You must be aware of your weapon, your body, your positioning and
your target simultaneously. Garrus is your target and your eyes must be on him as you assure your positioning. Your body is your breath and your flow from step to step. Just as you must lead with a rifle, you must learn to lead with your body, anticipate the next beat. Feel how his hands move on you and the way his body turns, you will know where you need to go, he will tell you.”

That made a little more sense, but she said “Nothing about falling leaves in shooting someone.”

Garrus said “Think about how your hand has to rest carefully on a trigger when taking a sight, relaxed. Think of how you have to breathe slowly or you screw up your aim.”

She acknowledged “Okay. You’re obnoxiously good at this.”

Garrus said gravely with light sarcasm “I’m so sorry, Kerim, that I won’t trip over you. You’ll have to manage. There’s only so much I can do to cover for you.”

She said hopefully “Can’t we just turn this into a ‘pick her up and carry her’ dance?”

Thane said wryly “We might have to.”

Shepard said “Can you convince your mother I have some sort of hip injury?”

Garrus said “Stop stalling. Try it again. This time remember what we’ve told you. You have to carry your entire body a certain way, you can’t look at your feet, and you can’t look at me as though you’re waiting to strangle me when it’s over.”

Thane leaned in to speak in her ear and as he moved her body, adjusted the pace of her breath with his hands he said “Much can be accomplished with confidence, Jane. Forget that the dance is new to you. Know you will prevail. This is your dance. It belongs to you and what you do with it will be right. You have gained Garrus’s loyalty and love, and his mother wishes to give you the opportunity to show it. You are Commander Shepard and you choose this man. Nothing will go wrong while you are in his arms. Trust where he will take you. Breathe as though your shoulders are buoyed by the air you draw, your spine suspended from the heavens, your feet barely on the ground, as though you floated above. Look at him as he looks at you. Smile at him as though you were the only two in the room. Everyone knows you can kill, Siha. We wish them to see that you know his body, his mind, his heart, and you belong in his arms. Touch him as you would when he reaches for you in the night, wakes you with his mouth and voice, and your hands glide over his plates in the dark. Give him the gift of your desire and attention. Do not allow the audience to intrude. Hold your head high and proud. Give them the haughty and cool Kerim that has reached down from the skies and chosen her Turian.”

Thane stepped back, having set the position of her body with precision and the set of her mind until she had to focus on breathing because it was going to come shorter at the images. Garrus’s eyes met hers with grave, warm focus, lending her his confidence. She concentrated on what they’d taught her, that she shouldn’t allow her inexperience to dictate the outcome. She was entering diplomacy and public attempts to gain support. To imagine herself unqualified or disqualified would make that true. It was a dance, but it was also a relationship she’d built, one she was proud to have. It was a relationship she wished to build with the audience, that she loved and was loved and could reach beyond expectations of a human, that they could find Turian imagery and hope in human form. It was all a battle, and a battle she could win. A battle she had to win, but she had to win it with falling leaves and not guns.

The theater of it made her acutely uncomfortable, contrary to her insistence on being a private person. That was her greatest obstacle and she had to set it aside. She had always resented and defied cameras and now she would have to court them. This was a choreographed moment and Garrus
needed it, she needed it, and she had to prove she could wear the dress, wear the reputation, and not be worn by it.

Her next pass over the floor was better, the expression on her face as Thane had requested, the warmth from Garrus’ eyes loosening her muscles and taking the stiffness from her joints. She became more aware of her balance, his cues, forgot a few steps, but didn’t wince or make a face when she failed a step, focused on trying to make it appear that she had intended to do as she’d done.

This was a familiar feeling, and they were right, she could do it.

It felt…really good. She needed to embrace her inner exhibitionist diva more often.

The music stopped and Garrus smiled at her, the formal warmth on his face blooming into heat and approval. She said slowly “I could…get used to this.”

Thane stepped behind her and said “Indeed you could. Do so. Then we add the heels.”

Once they got to Palaven her running-around work stopped. Garrus was the one down on the planet setting everything up and she wasn’t going to go until he was sure it was safe and she would not meet with disrespect.

Tali was going to coordinate the revamp and she wasn’t going to get in the way.

Other people were doing most of the touring and escorting, trying to limit access to her so that she gave the image of being busy and unavailable. She was always available to her crew and she would prefer to greet guests as a hostess, but Thane advised that she make herself a scarce commodity. They should want her attention and it should be bought, not given freely. Garrus had agreed that Turian politics worked that way, that her openness and welcome could be perceived as weakness or insult. To present herself as an easygoing human to a status-conscious culture could be considered a rebuke of Turian manners, as though she would expect Turian captains to wait on her pleasure if she stepped on board their ships. She could go to the CIC and the cabin without the risk of running into someone unexpectedly and being possibly waylaid or fucking up a schedule. She and Thane had brought up a lot of food. Thane had a reprieve from the tyranny of the Med Bay because he couldn’t be seen there.

She was dutifully busy and unavailable, combing through all the reports. It was much more casual, less frenetic, with more time to consider, less nervous energy making her jump up and talk to someone in person. Deeper, more measured thoughts. Time to shift from subject to subject to spell herself and give thoughts time to form and expand. Time to absorb without need for immediate action.

Thane kept his own schedule, able to do a workout in the small space, altered versions of what she’d seen in the bay. She focused on not being distracted. It didn’t go terribly well. Between being taught dance and Pon-Ifa she was experiencing a lot of humility, but also a great deal of insight into the lives and minds of Garrus and Thane. Necessities of diplomacy and the subterfuge and images required were making her feel alternately uncomfortable in her own skin and as though she could take to it like breathing once the theory was explained properly. She had never had it explained to her as Garrus and Thane did, providing images and motivations and helping her find, very quickly, the tools she’d need, the attitude required to cultivate the sense of drama. She had spent so much time in her life trying to minimize drama that she was reluctant, but ultimately convinced. She was inclined to feel like a fraud, but Thane would detect any tell of self-doubt and self-criticism and like an acting coach, redirect her motivation.
It made her wonder how much of his success relied on fake it until you make it. No doubt he’d made it, but his ease with manufacturing any appearance and reading it in others was extraordinary.

She was going to make this bid for support and then she might not survive it for long, but she would leave a legacy. With her visit to Palaven she was now a current event. She still had no idea who “The Flock” were, but they were becoming more visible and so was she. News organizations were doing their own analysis, which resulted in more witness accounts of The Flock’s broadcasts and her appearances, but there was no more content, just some chatter from people wanting to know what she knew about it, and both sides shrugging. Consensus was they were an organization that seemed to consider her to be a religious icon, deserving of support and obedience. That was kind of nice, considering she couldn’t really get that on her own ship sometimes, but she wasn’t expected to be divine.

Unless she was wearing a particular dress.

Or being beheld by a certain Drell.

Or a special Turian looked at her with adoration.

She was not complaining, exactly, but it was a lot to take on. They were slowly reversing the two-year influence of those who wanted her and her message buried. She was about to make a public and exclusive debut that didn’t involve running through the Citadel or Illium shooting people.

She wasn’t nervous to meet Garrus’s family, exactly. Solona sounded charming and his mother sounded fascinating, and his father so remote and formal that it wasn’t likely she’d have much interaction.

She’d also had it drummed into her that she could not afford nerves here any more here than she could if she were tracking down a group of Blue Suns. She needed to transfer that ability and quickly.

She wasn’t used to being confined like this either. Yes, she spent a lot of time in her cabin, but it was usually interspersed with random trips to talk to people or check something. Now she had to make lists of things to check later. She started twirling the stylus between her fingers and lightly tapping her heel, stopping and then starting again.

Thane wasn’t just distracting, he was riveting.

Carpe Drell.

Fuck not interrupting him. He can make it up later. She tossed the stylus and walked purposefully behind him, knowing she couldn’t surprise him. She ran her fingertips over his shoulders and kissed the back of his neck. He stilled, his head tilted slightly. She said “Have I thanked you for the beautiful dress?”

He nodded and said “Indeed you have, repeatedly. And no again, you may not reimburse me for it.”

She said “I know, I know. I can’t afford it. Have I thanked you for teaching me how to dance?”

He answered “That as well. Often. Eventually.”

She kissed a few times down his spine and said “Have I thanked you for teaching me how to play Pon-Ifa?”

He nodded and said “Yes. You appear to be a thankful person.”
Her arms slipped over the muscles of his back and her hands moved around his waist to clasp, leaning her cheek against his back. She said “Good, then I can move on to objectifying you. I am sorry you won’t be able to travel to Palaven. I’m sorry I won’t be able to dance with you. I’m sorry you won’t be able to dance with Garrus. Would you dance with me, someday, in less…incendiary surroundings? If we can.”

He said softly “I believe you are missing the point of objectifying me if you are feeling empathetic.”

She said with a smile “Shut up. I’m new to this. Answer the question.”

His hands came to rest on hers and he said “Which is it, Jane, shut up or answer the question?”

She squeezed, hard, and said “Answer the question.”

He turned in her embrace, smiled and said “No.”

While she was sorting through that he kissed a line along her collarbone and said “I find it impossible to consider a situation that isn’t incendiary if you are in my arms, so I shall have to defer.”

Her head tilted back and she said “Oh, flatterer.”

He shook his head and kissed her throat, said sternly “I do not flatter.”

She snorted and said “Flatterer and liar.”

He continued to kiss along the line of her other collarbone.

She said “All right then. Will you dance with me, then when it becomes too incendiary, carry me off the floor and objectify the hell out of me?”

His voice was stern with a slight frost of teasing “Perhaps. If you conduct yourself well. I cannot have an inferior partner.”

It made her smile again, and there was no way she’d ever qualify to dance with this man, it would always be charity…and love. One more way she couldn’t afford him. She said “I’ll…” and was interrupted by a bite to her shoulder, she finished with a gasp and “try…”

He had her flat on the floor in a few seconds, his hand cradling the back of her head to keep it from hitting too hard, she wasn’t really sure how she got there. Too fast.

Carpe human.

He was straddling her, looking down at her, pulling her shirt from her waistband and sliding fingertips along the muscles of her stomach. He said “I will be there…Jane…”

Not Siha. Decidedly not Siha, human and fallible Jane, clear in the tone of his voice.

His hands slid along her waist, up to her breasts, his fingers trailing venom. He said “You will be dressed in the clothing of my imagination, the idea from Garrus, both dressed as I envisioned.”

Her back arched as his mouth closed over a nipple, and then he murmured “I may as well have had my venom infused in the fabric. When the dress brushes against your skin, Jane, think of me. I will be there, between you, with you, my hands having shown you the dance. You will not fail me.”

It was part faith and part demand. Just one more time for the record she admired the control he had over his voice, impossible to mistake him when he said many things with few words.
He shifted until he was grinding against her, moving her hands and body until she was shoved back, hands hitting a wall, bracing there to push back against him. Quick practiced jerks on loose clothing from his hands and he was skin to skin, his chest rubbing against her breasts, his hand parting her thighs wider, palm on her clit and fingers sliding inside, twisting. His mouth was at her ear “Before you go…Jane…my hands will be in your lovely hair, my kiss at the nape of your neck, my fingers on your waist. I’ll be in your blood. I’ll be in his blood, venom from my hands at the side of his throat.”

His fingers curled inside her and he pressed down harder with his palm and her head tilted back with a cry, hands tense on the wall, pushing back against his hand.

He said soft, dark in her ear “Try not to think about that while you are on his arm, that I’m in your blood and you want to get back to me. You’ll want to come back to me and so will he. The longer you are gone the more you will feel it. Do not be distracted. Do not let it show in your eyes, Jane, that you are imagining how you feel when we are together, the sounds Garrus makes, the way you moan against my mouth.”

He was going to make the whole affair…so much harder…and so much better…oh Spirits…save me but not yet…

Venom was rushing through her system, sudden and violent clamor, the tone set from the way he spoke, the way he moved. Her arms were getting weaker, her breath came harder. He moved to kiss her and pulled those imagined moans from her with his hand and voice. Only a moment after she came with a harsh throbbing lift of her body he drove his cock inside, pulled her knee to her chest with his elbow hooked under said “Promise me something, Jane.”

She had not much left but whimpers, and he smoothed her hair back from her face, drove in hard until she lost her air and he said “Come home to me and I will take the night sky from your hair, I will strip the dress from your body.”

She nodded, couldn’t form the word, and he acknowledged her answer with a growl, hard and deep thrusts against the floor, the wall, his mouth on hers and ravaging, endless demand until she was hoarse, mindless, her arms unable to hold, elbows collapsed and trembling. He pressed her against the wall himself, hands locked in hers, his full weight bearing down and in until the edges of her vision blurred and blackened.

He joined her where words were lost and stories and provocation were gone. He would never, ever dance with her in a crowded room with cameras, make any statement that way. He would never dance with Garrus. He would always be confined to the shadows, a place he chose and where he could work his magic, but now it bit deep in his inability to share hard-won moments in the light. Her hands tightened on his and her eyes opened to watch him unravel, pleasure and the shadow of desperation on his face, in his hands, in the possessive drive of his body.

She whispered with what was left of her broken voice “My home is where you are.”

He heard her, and his heart broke and his face lost desperation and gained the fervor to stay in her body, stay in her blood, bring her home to him, make her want him with every breath.

Already done. It’s already done.

Her limbs were bound but one, and she curled her leg around his waist, arched into his body to press as much skin to skin as she could, twisting her hips to meet him, feeling the shaking wrack through him. She made little broken whimpers of encouragement, welcome, smoothed her calf over his skin, gave what couldn’t be taken.
He came with the sudden and blinding near loss of her vision again, but she’d seen all she needed to see. He said her name with no message, no demand and no subterfuge, just his plain and beseeching voice.

He kissed her lingeringly, lifted her from the floor with trembling arms and carried her to the bed, with her on his lap, his lips in her hair, a blanket swirled around them to keep in their warmth. They were silent, slowing heart beats and breath and home.
The Madlis dinner did not include the Normandy crew. Nobody would be going other than Garrus and Jane. Too many inclusions, exclusions, and Garrus decided that insulting everyone would be better than including only a few, siding again with exclusivity.

Not that Jack would have done well there, but Karin Chakwas at least…

Garrus insisted it was for family.

He did formally and officially invite Thane, who regally and intent on living, declined.

That word…

Family.

She had to redefine that word. Family had always meant duty. It had been clear and achievable and resulted in approval or disappointment. Her parents had been her family and that had set the tone. Approval she understood. She had never associated her lovers with family. There was no structure for her to build a family without violating laws. Bigamy. Trigamy. Quartamy. Septamy. Octamy?

Now she had two loves in her life, and one of them would ever be secret at a time when she would want to drag him into the light and force acceptance and forgiveness, upon pain of death.

The Alliance had become extended family, and that was again approval or disappointment. She became close to her units, but after Akuze…

After Akuze. Time frame A.A. She was different After Akuze. She had been primarily responsible for her own survival, but primarily responsible for her unit’s deaths.

She had killed family over and over.

Disappointment. Failure. Death.

She had seen her counselors, told her story truthfully, bore the burns across her skin and her mind. Parts of her were seared, scarred, and not just from Akuze. After being reborn through Cerberus the outer desolation of her acid-burned scars were gone, an odd loss. The desolation remained internally, and formed the hard limits of her restraint, her control, her understanding that she had a job to do and the costs were incalculable, and she still had to calculate.

Now she was loved no matter what she did, and she wanted to extend that to those she loved, but wasn’t sure she could lose the habit of approval or disapproval. She couldn’t have had better examples of selflessness. She faced disapproval and mutiny for doing her job and dying. Love was unpredictable and surreal.

She hadn’t hesitated when it came time to kill a thresher maw for Grunt. He was family. She bore no scars from that event, but hadn’t healed any either. Her internal scars were permanent and enshrined. She would accept no encroachment on what to her was holy scarred ground, salted and scorched so nothing new would grow in the desolation and it would remain as she had seen it, soon-to-be-corpses and screams from melting mouths. No healing.

This…was different. This was not the chlorinated and enclosed, clear and limited pool of the meaning of family in her experience. This was the ocean, surface dazzling and drinking in the sun or
glint of stars, depths unseen and roiling. Unbound potential for grace and beauty and horror. Emotions like creatures with no bounds to their hunger or growth lived in the dark where the sun never touched. She was captivated by the mystery of love, the new sense of family. Garrus and Thane would fight for the right to give their lives. Garrus’s mother would defy the social mold she was given and try to smash it under her frail heel for her son.

It was huge and primal and she did not know how to swim. Parts of her did know, and had slithered from the exposed shore into the depths to hide and hunt and grow.

Dancing they had taught her. Swimming…she would try to develop an appreciation for the potential, but for now she was on the shore contemplating love and what it could accomplish in the right hands. How it could be destroyed in the wrong hands. How the best of her as well as the worst of her now had permission and endless space. How she wouldn’t go out too far because of what she was afraid of was familiar, not foreign.

She was swathed in the mystery of how the fuck she got here. She loaded into the shuttle on Garrus’s arm, with Thane’s hands having twisted and knotted her hair into barbaric curves that resembled her arm cuffs, crescents and whorls. Thane’s venom, as promised, was in their blood, tingling on lips and tongues and skin, shared and present, unforgettable and calling to them. She would remember the look of pride on his face, the soft aura of color surrounding him that faded from her vision the farther she got from him.

She and Garrus were nervous and mostly silent on their way down, speaking only when they started to hear and feel the deceleration of the shuttle, a very brief ride, not enough time to be ready.

Life wasn’t on her schedule.

Garrus stood and offered her his arm, and she hooked her hand through it. A human gesture he found charming. A helpful gesture based on the height of her heels. His smile was crooked as he said “Nervous?”

She said “Oh hell yes.”

He squeezed her hand with his and said “Me too. I’d rather face a gunship.”

She laughed and said “Please, no. You need a place for paint.”

They were escorted by security to a side room, the Madlis was huge, Vakarian blue everywhere. She waited as his paint was reapplied, and admired the polished and deep blue that looked so unlike him.

They were both so unlike themselves, not even marginally armed, shining and coordinated. She said “This is fucking weird.”

He tilted his head down and laughed, said “Yeah. Thank you for all the weird shit you’ve done for me, Shepard.”

Now it was her turn to put her head down and smile. “It’s been my pleasure, Vakarian.”

He drew her hand through his elbow again, and said “About to get weirder.”

She said “I can’t even kiss you. Thane would kill me for smudging us.”

He said with a chuckle “We’ll make up for it later when we’ve been approved to smudge. Ready?”

She said “Hell no.”
His mouth twitched and he said “All right then. Let’s go do this.”

Walking through the Madlis was an introduction to Turian architecture, Turian home life, through the lens of a living museum. War and pride of place rebounded through the halls. Sculpture and trophy and splendor. The layout was a constellation of concentric circles, starting with the largest room at the center, where they were headed, and radiating out into smaller and smaller satellites, housing thousands of Turians who lived there full time or visited. There were hundreds there tonight in the great hall, even the Primarch, who was not a Vakarian but had been curious enough to request an invitation.

The center Madlis room was huge, stadium-like, the combined voices having a vibrating hum that made the place sound like a hive. It had a domed roof of some clear polymer stained Vakarian blue, with the night sky and part of Menae visible through it. She restrained her instinct to swear, and the sheer number of people seemed to knock her out of her head, eyes turning to them, taking them in. She moved on instinct, outside herself, curiously watching to see the result of this tidal wave that washed her beyond herself. Not stage fright, but stage…something.

Stage fascination. The sheer wash of energy and attention her way was a psychic, overwhelming power. In public she’d always had something to say, and right now, she had only to be, awash in attention. She was and wasn’t herself, not on a podium but a stage.

Altered state of mind without the drugs, inspiring confidence as more attention flowed her way.

No wonder people sought this, became addicted to this. She could get used to this too. For the right reasons she was going to have to, and some of the worry unstuck and floated away. She could and would do this, and do it well.

Fortunately there was formality to be followed. Garrus held her hand on his arm, and she mostly inclined her head and smiled with introduction after introduction. The voices were soothing and she kept the fine tremble that she felt she should be feeling out of her limbs. There was no Turian tradition like shaking hands, so she only inclined and raised her head, grateful to not have the vibrating reality of other people’s hands in hers, gathering more and more attention like electricity building in a corona around herself.

Garrus had friends and family among these people, interspersed with the new introductions, and there were comments on how his marks suited him. She gathered that his scars were prized as marks of valor and that made her so very happy. She learned the Turian equivalent to the human phrase “Thank you for your service” in Vakarian, in this place, repeated often, to Garrus, to her.

“These walls listen when you speak.”

Smart walls.

They held their place for a long time, and people came to them. The bizarre sense of too many people and too much attention slowly sheeted off and she was more herself, varying her facial expression to avoid looking made of plastic and holding his arm. She managed to not say “cooool” or “holy sh*t” to new views, new compliments that when given to him seemed entirely deserved and when given to her seemed…overblown. She was accepted with grace if not awe and was pleased to meet everyone.

Her eyes got caught on him a few times and he’d turn his head to look at her and they’d almost laugh. He’d squeeze her hand and go back to conversation and she’d tear her eyes away, the ghost of a charmed smile around her lips.
They met the Primarch, his paint a deep red in what looked like flame pattern, promising resources and support, looking forward to an opportunity to work together.

It was a sedate evening, buoyant and freeing in many ways. Solona was charming and it felt closer to home to have Garrus’s voice tilt into warmth and teasing with his sister, complimenting her on the work she’d done to make the affair happen. Garrus’s father was formal and somewhat stilted, but there was real pride in the undertone of his voice. She fell in love with Garrus’s mother, warm green eyes following them as they moved through the room. She could not stand, but sat regally in her mobile chair at the circular table in the center of the room, laying her hand briefly over theirs and squeezing. The evening spoke for itself, and she said “These walls listen when you speak, Garrus, and I long to hear your voice. Spirits watch over you and guide your steps.”

Garrus said “Avah, these walls have had no better guardian than you. It is my privilege to bring to you Commander Jane Shepard, whose shadow marks my path.”

She turned to Shepard and said “We are an old people, Jane. Some of us have failed through no fault of our own. Some of us have failed through losing their way. Some of us still fight. I look upon two who will not fail, who have not failed, and who light the way through darkness. You have saved many lives that grace these floors, whose voices are heard because of your actions. Clan Vakarian will raise their voices for you. May the Spirits light your path as you have lit ours, and may your beauty and strength bring each other joy.”

Jane swallowed hard and said “Thank you for the welcome, the honor, and for creation of miracles, in your son and in your guidance."

She smiled and leaned back, clearly exhausted but determined to see it through, heroism in her struggle to push consciousness through her eyes, through her will, to see her son honored, his future and past legitimized. It brought tears to Jane’s eyes but she dared not cry.

Garrus leaned forward and pressed his crest to his mother’s, and Jane hoped it was not for the last time.

Solona had explained that their Avah was exhausted and she would retire early, so the dinner would come later, but she wished to see them dance before she left. It was the only time during the evening that Garrus had dropped her hand, because she needed to ask him to dance.

Tables were in the center of the room, but the outer space of the room was cleared, in a wide band. It was traditional to make a full pass around the room alone before others joined, and then two more before leaving the floor. How to ask was also traditional and symbolic. The woman stayed where she was, she was the home and the host, and the man must travel to her. The larger the Madlis central room, the longer the travel. She would hold out her arm to him and he would…walk away. He would walk until he came back around the circle, put his arms on her waist and begin the dance, having accepted symbolically that forward or back, his path was determined by her and he would meet her on it wherever he went in life, he would always find his woman on his path.

This wasn’t a bonding, which was a different ceremony, but it was declared interest. Opening the dance after Garrus completed his walk would allow other women to ask men to dance, and walking the circle alone was a way of declaring the extent to which a man would go for a woman, for her clan, leaving his own clan and making his home with her, a journey and a choice he must make alone, but could not make unless she asked.

Normally she’d be a Vakarian and he’d be a man from another clan, but in this case it was loosely translated. She opened the dance, she was under Vakarian protection and he was a Vakarian, walking his path to her and with her, wherever she would lead.
For them, it was perfect.

Other women had the time through their first dancing pass through the room to ask a man to dance with her, and for him to take the walk. By the end of their first pass around, women could ask men to dance without the walk, and the floor would fill up with those who were involved, or interested in being involved, or interested in telling others they were involved, or just wanted to show off dancing.

That was also perfect, moving from formal to informal over time.

Turian music was mostly percussion. With the music starting she held out her hand to him and walked to the start point. He followed, faced her with a look in his eyes that invoked…smudging…and don’t think about that right now…and Jane try not to think about…and failed, Thane’s hands and whispers, Garrus’s husky laugh and groans, tingling skin with flutters of fabric, Tseni and new, bright blue paint.

She had a lot to think about as Garrus walked to percussion, purposeful and measured. She would face his retreat and not turn, waiting, eyes on them and the voices of the halls silent, the only sounds the steady beat marking his footsteps. Her apprehension had evaporated from the slow gentle warmth of the evening, clearly if she was under this roof, she was family.

She stood, and when he’d passed from her vision shifted her eyes to look through the blue glass of the ceiling, stars and moon, following the sound of his progress until his hands settled on her waist. Her smile was spontaneous and choreographed and it was all perfect. Over the course of dance lessons she had learned that with his eyes, with his hands and body, he gave her every cue she would need, and all she had to do was listen to him, feel his hands and follow. He had varied the dance from traditional so each step was not scrutinized for perfection of following form, but suited what she could do with it. Nobody would know what was to come next and it could be spontaneous for them. He could, in fact, cover for almost every misstep she might be able to make short of falling on her ass, and he could probably pull that off by making it look intentional.

With every eye unmistakably on them, she felt that wave of watching herself, watching him, and savored every moment of spinning, flashing promenade. She had discovered that this they could do, they had the communication from a hundred battlefields and had worked out signals in silence, unable to mouth words because…different languages. She now knew from his eyes and tension in his body when to turn, when to slide along the length of his arm, hand lingering, until their hands met and he pulled her back, when to be lifted in his arms effortlessly and set back down on turning, hovering feet, carried along by his momentum. It was trust and freedom and witnessed joy, the warmth and confidence in his body and eyes, the way her dress would swirl around them both, how he’d avoid getting it snagged in his spurs and how her ankles wouldn’t twist and stayed in the shoes, a hundred little practiced moments that bore fruit right now.

They could own a moment together, without fear, without failing, without folly.

She wasn’t exactly cool or haughty, she was warm and in love, lingering hands and eyes. She’d be surprised by the flash of new blue paint, formal attire, this man so accustomed to grime and weight, flashing with talent, happiness and Halrin fittings. That was the name of the metal that Thane had chosen for them, suiting the blue in her eyes and the blue in his paint.

They passed a male Turian walking on the floor, passed a woman standing still, passed others, and the floor began to fill up, more athletic and stylized dancers, stunning and humbling, but her partner was perfect and she was going to give him everything she could, so she did in each moment.

Three passes wasn’t enough to celebrate, but he ended the dance by picking her up in his arms, spinning and pressing his crest to her forehead, short of breath from exertion and emotion, eyes
closed and a smile on her face she could feel spread through her.

Her feet hurt and she immediately thought of Thane and making him proud, the fabric against her legs making her grateful she could keep her face straight. He said softly “I love you, Kerim.” and she answered “I love you, Garrus Vakarian. Thank you for dancing with me.”

He set her on the floor, and the smile didn’t leave their eyes, the tension and worry broken over performance and all attention spent soaking up the moment.

Dinner was relaxed as she listened, mostly. People seemed less inclined to speak to her than to Garrus and she was fine with that. She was trying to manage…not eating. She didn’t want to give insult, but the red wine was out with this dress and she wasn’t going to eat any meat with dripping jus. Tiny, dry things, firmly on a fork, eating just to be polite and not end up with Thane glaring at her over a stain. Which he would never do, but it sounded funny in her head.

Garrus included her often, hand on her arm, turning her head to smile at whomever and it appears she left people…stunned, impressed and relatively speechless. Excellent, Thane will be thrilled. He was watching at home.

Home. He’d be getting his own cabin very soon, and so would Garrus, and Garrus would spend time with Tali wrapped in his arms, whispering and laughing, that just made the place more home. Home and family and spreading joy.

The biggest surprise from the evening was Garrus’s father coming back after he had taken his mother to retire. She had assumed he’d be gone, but he waited patiently to speak to them, and when he looked at Garrus, some of the ice and awkward melted away. His voice was low and proud as he said “You have given your Avah a blessed memory. Garrus, Commander Shepard, I know I am often not accorded the privilege of having a heart, but today it beats for you. Spirits watch over your journey. Come home to us. These walls need your voices to be heard.”

Solona came up behind as their father left Garrus speechless and said skeptically “Did I hear that right?”

Garrus nodded, stunned, eyes glued on his father’s retreating back.

Solona said “A day of miracles. You’ve come home, Garrus. Commander Shepard…”

Jane interrupted for the first and only time of the evening “Please, call me Jane.”

Solona drew in a deep breath, looked at Garrus, who nodded with a smile and she continued “Jane. Thank you. I add my wishes that you come home safely. That you find joy in each other, as we have found joy in you.” She tilted her crest to Garrus, who took and squeezed her hand to her surprise, and then she smiled at them both, and left them.

Shortly after, Garrus excused them and they headed back through the Madlis, stopping to talk occasionally or moving on with a nodded greeting, making his way through the maze back to the shuttle.

It was entirely disorienting in a role way, both equals, both simply people, no rank, no mission, nobody dead by the end of the evening. Nobody poisoned, no server jumping up with a gun and a cryptic warning.

Just a dance and a dinner and family and for once she really, really understood why people bonded, why people married, the lure and the draw and the possibilities. She’d never seen it, thought it was a lie the same way Thane thought honesty was a lie. A myth that must have faith in order to create a
truth.

This was so very close to bonding, with the freedom still intact, and she was overflowing with pride. Right now she was in full bloom of romance, and she kept waiting for it to perhaps end or fade, or moments where he would take her for callous granted, causing her to retreat. It never happened. She knew the strength of beginning romance and she was wary, but this was not shore leave days in bed together and lingering goodbyes. These were days of work and food and gunfire and laughter and companionship and...there was nothing like it. She could see herself, with this man, for her lifetime, as long as that was, and the strength of his gaze and arms and signals, every single one, welcomed her to reach for that, reach for him, drag Thane along as he lurked, both their hands reaching back to his to stay connected. Garrus was going to remain coordinating with the Hierarchy and she was going to be courting the cameras, and that was their future.

She imagined Thane fussing over her fashion sense for a lifetime until he told her that she was stunning and she should not consider dying her gray hair and that the silver strands brought out her eyes. She wanted that, along with the gunfire.

She could have it.

She really could have it if she had the courage to reach for it and not fuck it up.

Garrus seemed equally stunned and thoughtful, and she looked at his face again, with his new blue. He smiled and said “I’m thinking of ways to smudge you.”

She nodded solemnly and said “Hope that paint is dry.”

He didn’t make a move toward her, and sex was pretty far from her mind right now, because she was so damned happy and didn’t have space for anything else. She smiled as he said “Yup, gonna smudge you so hard.”

She laughed and a few moments later he joined in with his low, steady laughter, overblown come-on and all, like little children after a play releasing tension backstage, making faces. She said softly, almost disbelieving “We did it.”

He nodded and said “We did it. Makes me believe we can do a lot of things. Things we haven’t thought of yet. Together.”

She took her shoes off carefully. They were works of art and Thane hadn’t allowed her to dance in them more than once, having procured a stunt dress and a stunt pair of shoes to practice in, only allowing them for one pass to make sure they would hold together and so would she. The man thought of everything, forgot nothing. She wished she’d had his memory for this evening. She didn’t want a moment of it to slip away. Solona had hired someone to video the evening and transmit it to the Normandy, so Thane had watched privately from their cabin, and other people had demanded they be able to watch, so a vid screen was up in the galley.

The flight was short, and while she was stretching out her toes, Garrus reached down and picked her up, reached down and took her shoes in one hand, and it appeared she would be carried back onto her ship. There was cheering, and a few people had waited in the bay, Jack with an ear-piercing whistle and hooting, Kasumi for once in full view, Tali and Kelly waving and jumping up and down.

If Tali had not asked about their voices...would any of this have happened?

No. No, it wouldn’t have. This was truly a group effort.

Garrus didn’t seem to be interested in putting her down, so she didn’t try. They crowded into the
elevator and he took her up to the Galley where Karin, Ken and Gabby, Joker and…Grunt…also started to clap.

The general consensus was beautiful to stunning to (from Joker) more jealous as hell, to kick ass.

She was absolutely inclined to agree, but she demurred with the excuse that her feet were killing her and couldn’t stay, had to get out of the dress.

Jack said “Yeah, I BET you’re getting out of the dress.”

Tali put her hand on Garrus’s shoulder and told him “You look so very handsome, Garrus. Some of us were not looking at the dress all the time.”

Jane grinned and hugged her and Garrus pressed his crest to Tali’s helmet and said “Thank you, Tali” with his warm voice that made them both happy. He turned back to head to the elevator, more hoots and well wishes and a few suggestions from Joker that made Grunt, of all people, say he should show some respect for his Battlemaster or he’d be steering the ship through a straw, which made…no sense…but made her laugh as the doors closed.

The pride in Thane’s face held no undertone of being excluded, and she thought it was genuine. He was getting more comfortable around Garrus, around her, and allowing his constant facial vigilance to slip into occasional expressions of how he felt. She loved him for being proud, being honest, or manufacturing such a facial expression for them. She felt they’d all earned a few moments of pride in accomplishment, together, and her smile was wide.

He was director, costume designer and stage manager and he had heard the applause.

Garrus put down her shoes carefully on the desk, carried her over to Thane, transferred her into Thane’s arms, and then took Thane’s face between his hands and kissed him. Thane’s fingers traced the paint on Garrus’s face and Garrus pulled back and pressed his crest to Thane’s forehead. Garrus said “We did it, Invas’nam.” Invas’nam meant ‘secret held so close to the heart that the tongue cannot reach’ in Turian, and Garrus always said it with a deep shiver in the sub-harmonics, and it always led to a shiver in her spine.

Thane was without words, having seen and having understood. He closed his eyes and breathed with them and her arms came around both sets of shoulders.

The embrace broke and Thane turned his head to hers and said “I believe I will accept your invitation to dance.”

She said in a decent approximation of his tone “Perhaps. If you conduct yourself well. I cannot have an inferior partner.”

Garrus laughed and started to shrug out of his coat, saying “That’s a yes.”

Thane arched a brow ridge until she said “That’s a yes.”

Thane’s half quirked smile was beautiful, and he swung her down onto her feet and started to pull the jewelry from her hair until he could comb out the curls and twists with his fingertips, turning her facing away from him so he could finish undoing his work, his promised right. During that time Garrus was out of his clothes but fully armored and now shining with the eye-catching paint. His slow transformation from outcast to authority was virtually complete except for the lingering surprise and fresh gratitude in his expressions and voice. He could live on a pirate ship, and love who he chose, and collapsed parts of him had new vigor, unmistakable in his carriage. She met his eyes briefly and she had only to gesture with a glance over her shoulder, attention on Thane, unwilling to
let the dress steal the show. She had promised Thane he could take the dress off, but she hadn’t promised to make it easy for him. Garrus gave her an incremental nod and a conspiratorial smile. The only person that hadn’t gotten enough attention this evening, they agreed, was Thane.

She had a theory, and she was going to try it, and she was hoping to turn Thane into what she always was under his hands, helpless and compliant and drowning in too much pleasure. She could do it with Garrus’s help, and knew she could whisper in Thane’s ear and have it for herself anyway, but she wanted to earn it.

She thought…if she entered tiremit and Reverie with the mindset that she was entirely in control, she would be, that would carry on through the experience. She had to set the stage correctly, and she’d learned a great deal about theater lately.

When all the jewelry was gone and his hands were straying to the straps of her gown, she turned and smiled at him and said “You can’t touch the dress. You can’t touch me. I can touch you and Garrus can touch you.” Her eyes flicked to Garrus behind Thane’s shoulder and said “Will you take this man’s clothes off for me please? And if he tries to use his hands before I say he can, make sure he can’t use his hands?”

Garrus said a deep, warm “Yes ma’am” and started to take off Thane’s jacket, licking at his throat. Thane’s expression was…absolutely priceless. Half raised brow and surprise and…definitely appreciation.

It was a really good day.

She took her time and kissed him, hands to either side of his frill, fingers stroking. She said “You can touch Garrus all you want, but don’t turn around.”

She kept telling herself that she was in control, that they needed her to stay in control, and she felt buoyed and reinforced by tiremit. She heard his words in her head “Much can be accomplished with confidence, Jane.” Damned right it could. Wouldn’t it be nice if he had told her that tiremit worked this way. If she weren’t so blissfully happy she might have spared an infinitesimal moment to be upset about that.

She tried to stay out of control with these two because she was in control so much of the time. Seemed fair that if she got to point and they had to shoot, they should be able to do their own pointing in their off hours.

But she wanted Thane to know he was wanted, sought out and she would go to vulnerable extents to prove it, as he did for them.

She leaned forward to kiss Garrus over Thane’s shoulder, Reverie spilling into her dizzy and powerful blood, and said “Keep his mouth busy, will you, please? When you’re done with his clothes?”

Garrus quirked a smile and saluted with another “Yes, ma’am” and she almost laughed, and did rub noses with Garrus, cool fresh paint texture. She said softly “I love that you are so agreeable.”

She focused on licking at Thane’s skin as Garrus exposed it, still careful with her dress, mindful of the panels and not snagging on bits of man, but let some of the edges of cold metal slide along his skin. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the texture of his skin under her tongue, under her nails and fingertips, along his ribs and stomach. She was coaxing sharp intakes of breath from him, some from Garrus’s hands, which had finished removing clothing. Garrus had the talons of one hand wrapped around Thane’s waist, twisting Thane’s head to the side with his other hand for a kiss that brought
more sounds, muffled and reverberating through bodies. Thane’s hand had moved back to dig nails into the edge of a plate on Garrus’s thigh.

If she could get a whine…or …a squeak.

A Thane squeak.

She wanted one.

New mission objective.

No rush.

Every God and Goddess from Rakhana knew he’d gotten those sounds from her.

She suddenly wanted to know if he was ticklish. Yes, she wanted squeaks and giggles. She dragged her fingernails hard along ribs and there was a sound from Thane’s throat that didn’t make it to a squeak because he was kissing Garrus, but it would do. Her hands glided lightly over where his thighs joined his abdomen, arched ridges of muscle and curve of scale, her tongue and tickling fingers until he tried to move away but couldn’t and there was that sound again, stronger and Kalahira, yes, this man was ticklish and it made her so very happy.

Her hands slid down the backs of his thighs to the crease behind his knees and more sounds. Garrus broke the kiss for a moment to say “She’s evil. Gives me ideas.”

Thane resisted but she went for one of his feet and sucked a toe into her mouth, dragging her teeth along the bottom.

Thane would have overbalanced backward if Garrus hadn’t steadied him, so she savored some triumph here. Thane pulled back from Garrus and said deadpan “I will kill you both, in your sleep, if you do not stop.”

Garrus tilted his head forward on Thane’s shoulder and laughed, and she held onto his foot. She said “I think it’s worth the risk. I have a goal, Thane. You have to squeak for me. Do that and I’ll stop.”

Thane sighed, the heavily burdened Drell among the barbarians, tilted his head back and produced a decent approximation of exactly what she sounded like when she squeaked. Garrus laughed harder. She put his foot down and said “You are…so accommodating. Both of you. Several dreams have come true today, you know that?”

Thane said “Please do not ask me to do that again.” He was having some trouble not laughing, this time from relief and because Garrus’s laugh was irresistible.

She said “All right. Once is enough. I’m not making you promise not to make me squeak, I’m the reasonable one here.” She did not want to begin a tickle torture escalation war because she would lose.

Garrus became interested in running his talons over Thane’s back and she knelt, pressed her breasts to his thighs and licked long lines along his cock until humor fled and voices turned to moans.

She reached her hand back around Thane’s thigh and up to find Garrus’s cock, slick and sliding along Thane’s back, Thane’s hand and hers meeting along the length. Intent to tease blurred slightly but stayed, hunger sharpened and twisted. Thane was trembling and twitching and she knew exactly how that felt, knew how good that was, hearing the rumble of Garrus’s voice, plates and skin and helplessness.
It seemed impossible that she could ever be helpless again, but she could give it. She settled her hands, tight around the base of each of them, and squeezed, letting Garrus decide what he wanted to do. Hunger required that she close her lips around the head of Thane’s cock and suck, licking away the taste of helpless Drell from his skin, replaced with more, so she took more. She closed her eyes and imagined what he’d see, wild hair and collapsed panels, glint of metal and gems, skin and devotion.

Sometimes in the fugue of blended bodies she forgot entirely that orgasm existed, because Garrus didn’t have them and everything felt so good it served its own purpose. She took cues from Garrus, who was teasing and slow, entering by exquisite inches and that pushed Thane’s cock deeper or throbbed a twitch harder against her tongue. She treated Thane as she would Garrus, no destination, no rhythm, just the pleasure of skin on tongue, hand on flesh and the unhurried pace of a Turian with strength and stamina unmeasured against smaller, softer skinned creatures.

This particular Drell’s stamina was often beyond hers, but not right now, confidence being the key. She tasted until her hunger shifted, released her hands and mouth and kissed back up his body, teeth edges and lips and tongue in the dips and curves of muscle and skin. She took one of Garrus’s hands and gestured for a talon, which she got. She slid his talon along her thigh until it hooked under the strap of her underwear until it sliced off. She gestured the talon away and guided his wrist until his hand was on her ass, then took one of Thane’s hands and put it under the dress as well, kissed him and with her hands on his shoulders said “Up.”

They lifted her and she used a hand to adjust the dress, slide his cock inside to a growl from Garrus, a harsh groan from Thane that she leaned forward to kiss from his lips. She set a pace and they moved with her, bliss and perfection with nothing missing. She was too slow to allow him to come, enjoying the flex of hands on her body, sounds and slides and motion. She moved until she was shaking, sweating. She had everything she wanted. She gazed down at her adored and said “Thank you for the dress. Thank you for tonight. Thank you for making them mine. Now I will keep my promise and the dress and I…belong to you.”

He seemed stunned, still, and possibly clueless about where to go from a moment of perfection, until his eyes traveled over her. Thane reached to Garrus’s other hand, brought it obediently to hold her up so Thane’s hands were free. His mouth grazed the outline of her necklace, swept along the edges of the straps and his hands came to cradle her exposed waist, slipping fingers under the fabric, kissing the top curves of her breasts. His tongue explored around the twining arm bracelets and his hands shifted the dress by slow inches up her thighs, hands on her hips and then waist under the dress, smoothing the fabric up and over her head, tossing it over a chair, where it no doubt landed without injury but she didn’t look and didn’t care anymore.

He left the jewelry on.

He moved together with her, gentle rocking of his hips, his hand drifting over Garrus’s and setting the slow pace, teeth at her earlobe and tugging on her earring, breath in her ear, along her throat. Tilting her head back she gave into dizziness with her hair trailing and tickling down her back. With his arm around her waist he tipped her back farther, suspended, open to his mouth and free hand that roamed over her, moving from exploration and adoration to hunger, drawing more moans and with a shift in his hips moving in and out of her and not with her. He shifted his hand around her waist until his forearm was along the line of her spine, hand cradling her head, gripping her hair, piston force of his hips growing insistent, then urgent. Garrus would adjust and shift, tips of talons re-emerging from his hands to dig into her skin, slamming them both back with a syncopated growl.

Thane slowed and Garrus with him, slipping his hand between them and stroking at her clit, the loss of momentum causing her to whimper and arch into his touch. They set her rolling from peak to
peak, a long chain of driving lust and coaxing gentle strokes, until his hands went from trembling to shaking, until voices were hoarse and control of the balanced, sliding friction began to fail. She had stars on her body and with opened eyes, stars above, faces and gazes of her beloved. Thane pulled her up, hands and arms sliding over sweat-slicked skin and drove deep, names tumbling from mouths, heard by ears that couldn’t understand, but hearts that would remember and redefine secrets held so close to them that the tongue could not reach.
Chapter 12

By the time they’d left Palaven, everyone had a room and a bathroom. The shuttle bay and Engineering lost a lot of redundant dead space and Miranda gave up her ostentatious office.

Tali installed better filtering in general and specifically in her quarters, resulting in a much healthier Tali, who seemed to have had low-key chronic infections that she fought off daily. Double checking, Karin had verified. Damn it, Tali…

In Garrus’s case, since they were on Palaven when the work was done, he got a Turian shower, which involved alternate fine particle blasting and then air blasting.

Who knew?

She couldn’t ever get in it because she’d leave bleeding, missing skin and possibly eyes, but he was very happy. Water was not a Turian’s favorite thing and getting it under plates was not that much fun. He’d still use her shower, but he said having the Turian shower kept him from feeling vaguely slimy.

Ew. Yeah, nobody wanted to feel vaguely slimy if they had a choice. His hide changed in texture from rawhide to suede and his plates were buffed down. He said he felt civilized. Although she wouldn’t ever classify him as slimy (or even vaguely slimy…) she was glad he was happy.

She’d have to wait for the opportunity to use the “Go to your room” line. Probably on Grunt. His room was big, for obvious Krogan reasons, and when he left that room could house a few people with some modular furnishings to make the room compatible with nonhumans.

She beefed up security, more shielding, with the idea that indoctrination might be transmitted. She expanded the brig to include shielding. There was a guest cabin now. Diplomacy and rescue might require it.

They’d picked up a few “getting started” missions. Not terribly heavy hitting, mostly fetch and carry or investigate out in Terminus, where the Asari and Turians theoretically didn’t have things happening, but where things were happening. She’d choose a few things to do and get them done quickly, then head for the IFF.

Everybody on her ground crew had asked for and gotten a favor, and she had a team unlike any she’d worked with before.

Whatever she did here, whatever happened from this point, she’d made good use of her time and effort and she was proud of herself and her team.

Thane was back in the Med Bay, only temporarily, and not life threatening, something to do with studies on immune factors and systemic sensitivities. There was a lack of Drell medical history, his in particular and Drell in general. Since it came up that he’d had a great deal of surgery and alterations as a child and his medical history was nonexistent, they were going to try to reconstruct some of his specific physiological circumstances before attempting to translate his treatment into research for a more general populace. It was not as though they could put in a request to the Hanar for a list of procedures he’d received. Add to those facts that he was biotic, and good luck with your study group, guys.

Karin was also concerned that Thane was in pain he was not discussing, and wanted to monitor and find a way to compensate.
Yes. Please. Thane was always in pain he was not discussing, so the chances of that being true were 100%.

Garrus had a new wonky schedule since he was coordinating with the Hierarchy as a main line of pursuit after being available for ground teams. The Normandy was on an Earth schedule of 24 hours a day and he was on Cipritine time, 28.3 hours a day. The Thanix was ready to go and anything that needed to be done could be maintained easily (his words, not hers). His schedule didn’t coincide with hers any longer and he spent time with Tali, spent time with Thane and spent time with her. Good thing Turians didn’t need that much sleep. She still spent time with him every day, but not always during her sleep schedule, it varied. Today she’d spent a few hours with him during her late afternoon, a constant and reliable comfort in a man who could make her laugh under dire circumstances.

With dance practice over…which she missed…she was back to a regular schedule, workout and work and maintenance. There had been a final night before leaving Palaven of buying lots of alcohol and food to celebrate new galley and new rooms, which was mostly spent with people grabbing bottles and plates and heading to those rooms to celebrate.

She did her job, got to sleep at a decent hour.

She had nightmares. She had always had nightmares, and they’d gotten progressively worse, moving from fear of the unknown to remembrance of the known. Thresher maws were a common theme. Gasping for nonexistent air and historically accurate freezing to death from the lungs out visited often. Being bound and blinded was another. Amid all the other horrors of her day to day, nightmares were the most mundane with the least real impact, and she didn’t grant them any power over her. She was rarely alone in bed any longer. Reverie made nightmares blessedly impossible, but she needed time alone for centering, balancing, and finding herself again after being swept away repeatedly, off knees that no longer functioned. With years of compartmentalizing practice, it was not hard to do. She made a conscious gear shift, one she made several times a day between maintenance, work, mayhem, pleasure and sleep.

In the middle of ‘giant race of mind-stealing, slaughter-prone unknown sentience’ and ‘I died, ask me how!’ the translated horrors of her life and imagination as told by dreams couldn’t hold her attention for long. She didn’t grant nightmares any meaning other than her brain rummaging around for crap to worry about, holding it up to the dark, examining it under surreal conditions and the inability to process.

She dreamed of Garrus dead. Because that would hurt and it would be her fault.

She dreamed of Thane betraying her, dark eyes gone cold with one of his knowing, terrifying smiles playing on his face. Because that would hurt and if it happened, she’d blame herself for betting the wrong way, when she knew that his warmth and love came with warnings that came with prices.

She was accustomed to dismissing dreams as soon as she woke, no more meaning than the dark behind her eyes as she slept. Part of her.

This time it was a dream of bonds and pain, clawing herself to consciousness, realization of being awake dispersing the shock quickly. Her heartbeat slowed as her mind came under her tenuous control again. It would recede soon, back under the waves, the shape fading to a splash and then a shadow, ripples reassuringly dissipating. It would be gone, and that was one of the beauties of waking up from nightmares. Always grateful to be awake, that it was in fact over and done and that easily dismissed.

Thane wasn’t there, and then he was. In the twilight of near waking she accepted his presence as
though it was a natural part of trading the known past pain for the current mystery, the price of waking. She was an infiltrator, but she required mechanical and technological help to disappear. He had the ability to inherently cease to be visible at will and she accepted that as well, not encroaching on his secrets. She didn’t like to ask questions about what he could do in order to respect his privacy, also not wanting to find out that he maintained that skill by some vile and occult method the Hanar had taught him while flaying his soul away strip by excruciating strip. What she felt about his skills was not envy, but apprehension and sympathy for the costs.

He stood in a darkened corner of the room, and she heard an echo in her head of him saying “You have less control over your responses when you first wake.” It should be terrifying, but it wasn’t. It was comforting that he was here, watching over her. The sense of internal threat was higher than the sense of external threat, and that…was terrifying.

She watched him, and he watched her, both with shrouded eyes and too many questions with no voluntary answers. She hoped she didn’t talk in her sleep, but didn’t want to find out because there was nothing she could do about that.

The truth wouldn’t help. A lie wouldn’t help. She could make up something believable, even recount another dream, something vague and random, something about being indoctrinated. She didn’t want to. Trying to unsuccessfully reassure him that he could help her wasn’t something either of them needed if they were seeking truth.

She also wasn’t going to ask how often he was here when she didn’t know it, because that also didn’t really matter and if he did it every day…okay. Good.

She could use a new terrifying normal that was also comforting.

She closed her eyes and lowered her head back to the pillow, on her side, accepting and willing to try sleep again, this time with rest as the result. She had done this often. It was the same in theory as when she missed a shot in target practice. She tried again, and again, and again, and eventually she would hit more than she missed.

Even if the target got progressively smaller and farther away.

Distinct but low, she heard him start to hum, the sound of Drell empathy and acceptance. She was surprised for a moment that she associated the sound with Thane. It used to belong to Urem. Urem would like Thane. Urem would love Thane. They could share the hum, passed along like a torch.

A new terrifying normal.

As though he were approaching a wounded animal, he came slowly closer until his lips brushed the hair at her temple, his fingers passed feather light over her fist until her hand relaxed. She fell back asleep to the sound and didn’t feel when he left or if he left.

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She’d decided to handle a mission from Thessia. Herra T’Jist was a member of Thessia’s influential Matriarch Hegemony, and her daughter had disappeared. Other avenues of investigation were being followed, but one of her possible destinations was in the Terminus systems, and it was best if Commandos were not sent (found) there. The Normandy could help by checking out a destination potentially occupied by slavers.

Other than the name Shepard, the Normandy’s stealth drive was their biggest draw. Once it was proven that they had the capacity, they became the first choice team for rescues and infiltration.
Offers were coming in.

What they had not mentioned, but Thane uncovered, was that Herra’s daughter, Misalat, likely was the leader of the slavers. She had not been kidnapped by Batarians so much as they were her crew.

Shepard decided that with that being true, even with Herra knowing it was true, which she likely did, Jane would return her daughter alive along with whatever evidence they had on her to her mother, making it clear as a dual wish and threat “I hope your daughter is never found with slavers again as her life would be in danger.”

She looked at it this way: A chance to kill slavers. She was always up for that.

She, Garrus and Thane were the core team for these outside missions, as they had chosen to stay, were consulted for the planning stages, and she didn’t want to risk other members of the team who had signed on purely to stop the Collectors.

Tali and Garrus spent two days monitoring in orbit, able to work out how to disable security and keep potential hostages safe. Kasumi was kind enough to locate Misalat’s bank accounts, drain them and set up funds to help resettle approximately 250 physically and psychologically traumatized people from multiple species…including Asari with high-tech biotic suppression collars...in civilized zones where their own governments could protect and provide for them. There were male and female Turians, humans…some children. There were even a few Salarians, opening up negotiations with the Dalatrass on their safe return.

Misalat had not wanted to be taken alive, but without backup she was only one Asari and she didn’t have the options she wanted to have. Shepard got her dart tranked and down before she was getting up to full steam in her narcissistic monologue rant. The only words Shepard spoke to her were “You don’t own people.”

Rage did not cover what Shepard felt, and she would have done this mission for free. She might have paid to do this mission.

Palaven and Earth were grateful.

Shepard had taken a personal moment to speak to Misalat in the brig and tell her that if Jane ever heard she had stepped out of her mother’s compound, she would make it her personal mission to track her down and put her down. She expressed the profound wish of inflicting every wound she had seen on the captives.

Garrus had told Misalat he’d placed a tracker on her that she’d never be able to find that ensured he’d always be able to find her. It wasn’t true and that just made it better. She hoped Misalat spent a great deal of time trying to prove a negative.

Thane never disclosed what he had said, but Misalat never spoke a word after that meeting took place.

Shepard delivered a haunted and silent Misalat to her mother wearing a biotic-suppressing collar along with a large container bearing the nauseating number of other collars they had found, and recharging apparatus. Shepard suggested leaving it on and only agreed to hand her over to her mother and not Thessia’s law enforcement if she’d agree to keep her in the residential compound for her lifetime. Herra agreed. Hopefully with all her people dead and no startup cash, Thessia would have a permanent resentful resident, under the thumb of the formidable woman whose ambitions and influence she had almost destroyed. She’d theoretically be biotically helpless, terrified of a tracker she could never find and Turian retribution, haunted by Shepard’s and Thane’s threats.
Fitting.

Shepard had smiled and wished her a long life, almost hoping she’d try to leave.

Thessia had provided promises of support, a great deal of tech and provisions, and a lot of cash, official and unofficial. Supplemented by Kasumi’s plundering of a criminal network, they were rich.

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Helping out Turians was a medication run to a contested area. The colony had a new strain of virus that had been isolated and a vaccine was available, but Batarians had determined that by blockading the system, the planet would be free soon of live Turians. Speed was required to obtain the cure from a Salarian medical outpost, stealth needed to run the trade blockade and avoid outright war. Last minute job, low risk, high payoff, just like she liked her missions and rarely got them.

Gratitude resulted in a lot of produce from colonists that made Garrus’s and Tali’s descriptions of the food make her wish she could eat dextro. There was cackling and a minor whiff of gloating.

Okay, hearing Garrus describe food made her hungry. And thirsty.

They also prevented the potential deaths of Turians that could now defend themselves and push back the blockade. That did not suck.

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She’d upgraded as much as she could. She’d done favors and set up the machinery of execution and it was time to execute. Her to-do list had been done and they went to get the IFF.

Now she had the IFF and her biggest question was what the fuck is a Legion and why does it talk to her?

Secondary question, why does it have a piece of her armor?

She and Thane had been curious about Legion’s behavior and Garrus had been appalled by its presence.

Back on the ship before activating the Geth, Garrus had argued against it. Tali was not amused. Both Jacob and Miranda had argued against it, which was more easily dismissed. The idea of handing over greater advantage to Cerberus was not something she was willing to do. A talking Geth was a potential advantage. Yes, also a potential detriment. Garrus had said “So what happens when it plugs itself into the Normandy and takes over?”

She said deadpan “I’ll say I’m very sorry.”

Garrus was close to growling. She wasn’t taking it as insult to her judgment. He was trying not to make it about her choices and more about potential consequences, but those consequences were not unanticipated, and he was not offering solutions. He shook his head and said “Why would you trust a damned word it said?”

She said quietly “A Turian once offered to help me, but why would I trust a Turian? As far as I know, Turians have killed more humans than Geth have.”

Thane said smoothly “Why would a human or a Turian trust a Drell? I am a proven liar and murderer.”
Garrus drew in a sharp breath and glared at her, saying “I’m going to run every single test I know on that…thing…and I’ll be in the room when you talk to it.” He let some menace slip into his voice and she kept it out of her face that she was more turned on than upset as a result.

Thane said “I also would like to be there. Nobody has declared trust yet, Garrus. It is enough of an anomaly to investigate.”

Garrus had snorted “I can’t wait until our investigation boots our curious asses into extinction.” He left, either to punch something that wasn’t them or to run his tests. Possibly both.

Jane looked at Thane and said “He did say ‘our.’”

Thane said blandly “I am certain that is comforting to him.”

Jane said “EDI, once our Geth friend is awake I want priority surveillance and zero access to live processors. Can you create a shadow network that mirrors the Normandy’s systems but has no real-world connection, allow entry to those systems, model the outcome? Again, only if I authorize. I don’t want to make it too easy for him. I will appear reluctant to allow any access. All orders regarding access to systems will be authorized to shadow access only. Counterfeit high security information and systems placed in dummy locations, see if it attempts access, see what it is after.”

EDI said “Yes. I can do that. Acknowledged.”

Thane said with some humor and only mock reproach “You could have done that while Garrus was in the room.”

She shrugged “Why spoil the surprise? He wasn’t asking me, he was telling me.” She continued with EDI “EDI, I want the IFF activated to the model systems only, track its impact, simulate outcome.”

EDI responded “The IFF has not yet been integrated, would you like me to begin when ready?”

Shepard said “Yes. Run simulation at will.”

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When Legion wanted them to help him rewrite a hub of Geth, Garrus was… again… still… possibly eternally… displeased. She’d agreed to help Legion and she was thinking about how to approach it, able to work out now in a small gym space that had been put in with the renovations. She was working on kicks and strikes to a target dummy when a frustrated Garrus arrived.

He looked like a Turian Hamlet to her, brooding and scheming, trying to figure out how to get his way. He stood behind and to the side of the dummy, looking at her with that predatory edge that she loved in him.

She said “I know you’re trying to figure out how to get your way, but it’s not going to happen. Even without Thane here, I’m doing it my way. But…damn…you are unbearably attractive when you’re angry. I should give you fair warning, if you stay, there’s a risk of being licked. Remember that one time I passed up angry Drell sex and I had immediate regrets? Thinking of remedying that with angry Turian sex.”

His arms crossed over his chest he said unhelpfully “I could just go make Thane angry, have angry sex with him, brief you on the results.”

She groaned and said “You’re cruel, you know that? Seriously, though, if you do that, don’t let my disappointment stop you from actually briefing me.”
He stepped forward, moved the dummy out of the way and took its place. She said “You know that’s called a dummy, right? Are you apologizing?”

He shook his head and threw a punch, a slow one for him. She dodged it and then he started speeding up. She picked up the rhythm, blocking and throwing her own strikes, adjusting to her new dummy. He was more reactive and therefore a better workout. She went with it. She expected him to carry out his threat to have her down in four seconds, head spinning, but he continued with measured practice before he said “So…if I understand correctly…you’re taking this Geth and going…with a team…into a Geth ship…” He landed a powerful strike she couldn’t block to her hip “And installing some unknown code…” With a feint and then follow up he landed a kick to her upper thigh.

She got it. The man was stressed. She had an ampule in her arm proving she didn’t know how to take him down under normal circumstances. She had to hope the dart penetrated hide and didn’t get stuck in a plate, and that he wasn’t wearing a helmet at the time. Very small window of opportunity, very low odds of success against him.

She smiled and went a bit more on the offensive, landing a strike on his abdominals. He hadn’t asked a question yet. She waited, focused on the physical aspects of play sparring with a 7-foot-tall suavely angry Turian. He was pulling punches, keeping it in the realm of sparring, but his eyes and voice implied a tip-of-the-iceberg understanding of what he was feeling. He wanted to prevent unnecessary disaster, and she sympathized, but his definition and her definition of unnecessary were two different things. This was necessary because her instincts told her so, and that she could not explain rationally. Thane seemed to comprehend the curve of that intent and that was reassuring, but nobody else seemed capable in this instance.

As long as they did their jobs, enthusiasm was optional.

A few more minutes of sparring and she had renewed respect for the fact that he gave nothing away. His eyes were steady on hers and his strikes were wherever he wanted them to be. The reverse of dancing. Disconnection and impassivity. She had seen him fight hand to hand, but rarely. They often never got into melee at all, both expert at at-ranged marksmanship, pride in never being touched and picking off targets before they got close enough to attempt to do damage in return.

Seeing that focus directed at her was…well, she was too much of a soldier to not be impressed, too much of a leader to not be grateful she had this man on her 6, and too focused on being his lover to not have that push her just a little bit further into wanting him. She was in no danger of his changing her mind, so this time was for him.

She approved of him beating her up. She approved of him speaking his mind. It wouldn’t change a damned thing about her opinion, no matter how well he did those things. She’d have to rely on the mechanics of Turian stress relief being as advertised, sex and violence doing the trick.

Too bad for him that he hadn’t discovered anything she didn’t like. This was one of the farther-flung aspects of freedom, having options. He couldn’t deny her his presence and hope that would work on her, he knew better. He couldn’t convince Thane to turn on her, angry sex or not.

Yes, please, angry sex.

He still hadn’t asked a question. He was a very smart man and knew her well, but sometimes Garrus’s heart beat so loud he couldn’t hear anything else. She loved him for it. She didn’t want him to change.

He had not necessarily learned to listen to what she did not say. Thane was much better at that.
The sparring was measured and calculated, he was pulling punches, coming to her level of ability and maintaining a balance, slightly in his favor but not too much. He wasn’t roping a dope either, he did not want to do her harm or demoralize her. He was fighting because this is what Turians did when they were stressed, so he found her when she would be most willing to fight.

He had let the silence hang long enough that he knew she wouldn’t be drawn into explanation or exposition. She wasn’t the best at hand to hand, but it did take some focus to avoid her progressively more complicated strikes and counter blows. He said between strikes “What I…want to…say…about that…is…” She evaded a sweep to the knee but missed the further momentum of his body resulting in a hip throw and her down, flipped over onto her stomach and hands held behind her back in one of his, his hips straddling hers.

His mouth was at her ear and he said with the hard outrush of breath from exertion “I’m going with you.”

She was not expecting that. She laughed, turned her head to the side, spit some hair out of her mouth and laughed again. She said “You’ve got mutiny backward, Vakarian. You don’t offer me… support.”

He shook his head and squeezed her wrists and said “I’m not offering. I’m telling you I’m going with you.”

She sighed and said “So what stops you from shutting him down and knocking me out, 5 feet through the airlock.”

He said with mock shock “Spirits, you’re devious. That’s an idea I hadn’t had. That’s how mutiny goes, you say? Think I should try it?”

She said fervently “I do not. It was just a…for instance.”

He huffed a disappointed breath and leaned down, tongue at the nape of her neck and said “I’m just giving you…” He squeezed her hands and nipped at her shoulder “Emphatic… warning… that you should plan on bringing me or I figure out how to go on my own.”

She hadn’t thought about it much but her immediate instinct was to bring Thane and leave Garrus behind. He wouldn’t have had trouble figuring that out. She said “I don’t know. It seems a bad precedent to set for ship-wide discipline to have someone just…tell me what to do.”

His voice was smooth and he leaned into her, saying “I’m not telling you what to do. I’m telling you what I’m going to do. It’s also apparently bad ship-wide discipline to sleep with your subordinates, but I’m not complaining about that, I don’t see why you would complain about this.”

She said reasonably “Well, I’m not…exactly complaining…and you’re not exactly a subordinate.”

His talons moved to pinch her ass and she…yes…squeaked, but it could also be considered a yip. He said “You’re not agreeing, either.”

She said with heat “I was under the impression I didn’t need to agree.”

The pinching hand moved to cup her ass under her workout shorts and he said in her ear “No, you don’t need to, but I would like if you did.”

She groaned against the distraction of his hand and his voice and said “So you want me to prevent a mutiny that would result in more support for me by conceding to…let’s face it, a fairly reasonable demand, huh?”
He said with mock solemnity “Yes, but don’t call me reasonable, things could get ugly.”

She said “Garrus, my face is being ground into a mat, it can’t get much uglier from here.”

He pushed offense through his voice “Now that’s just insulting.”

She laughed again and then said “All right. All right. I’m bringing you…and Legion…AND Thane. You can watch Legion and Thane can watch you and Legion and I can do our damned jobs.”

He considered for a moment and said “Tell Thane to watch Legion and you have a deal.”

She raised her voice and said “It’s not a deal, it’s an order.”

He said calmly “In that case, yes ma’am.”

She said clearly “Let go of my hands.”

He dismissed that, saying “Pffft. That I’m ignoring. I should explore the not exactly subordinate thing.”

She growled “Door could open any second…”

He said calmly “No, it’s locked.”

She sighed “There’s no lock on that door, Garrus.”

He answered “There is now. And I’m the only one that can open it. So if you want to get out…”

She sucked in a breath and considered. The man planned ahead. She said “Well, if I can’t use my hands, you have to use yours.”

He said softly “Is that an order?”

She mimed banging her head on the mat a few times.

He said with mock sorrow “She’s cracked under the stress of command. On the bright side, as second in command, I can take over.”

She said quietly “Imagine a creative threat. A very creative threat. Right here. I don’t have it yet because I’m uncomfortable and just threatening to hit you would not be enough. If you leave me here, I will take a great deal of time thinking of, and executing, that creative threat later.”

He chuckled and the warm vibration of it moved down her spine. He said “Have I ever told you how good you smell? How very distracting that is? Long before I was ever able to touch you, your scent has always made me want to step closer, breathe deep, lose myself. Sometimes it’s hard to concentrate. Right now you smell like sex and combat and that is irresistible.” He licked at her throat, scenting and huffing breath, sliding his hands over her back, under her shirt, his scent rising in the air and the combination of his scent with hers strong and evocative of all the other times he’d touched her. He sat back, shifting his hold on her hands but not letting her loose. He pulled her hips up until the mat was pressed against her shoulders and she was on her knees.

His tongue and the tips of his teeth were on the back of her thigh. He said “If we’re all going to die because of your curiosity, at least give me a memory I can take with me, Shepard.”

She said grimly “We’re going, and we’re coming back, and I’m starting to lean toward replacing the particles in your shower with powdered sugar.”
He growled and said against her thigh “Don’t fuck with my shower, woman.”

She tried to yank her hands away, but they didn’t budge. His other hand shifted the fabric of her shorts and underwear aside and his tongue was on her, inside, the feel of his growl on her skin and in her spine, and the only answer she had was a whimper that widened into moans as his hand pushed more fabric aside to stroke at her clit.

The inrush of pleasure and Reverie made her start to pant and she wanted to say…

**Garrus**

_I’ll take you everywhere please don’t stop._

She didn’t say it, but damn she wanted to, she even wanted to mean it, and she bit her lip to keep from saying it. He squeezed her hands together, pressed down with them and pulled them back, then forward, creating a rocking of her hips against his mouth, the thrust of his rough-textured tongue curling inside her.

Her shoulders started to tremble, then her thighs, and her helpless slide into heated-slick pleasure was emphasized by the strength of his hand around her wrists, his purring hum from his plates pressed into her.

**Everywhere**

When she came his hand and tongue rode those sensations through shocks, creating aftershocks, extending a burst of pleasure into a streaking comet.

He pulled up and back on her hands and she was lifted and pressed back against his chest, his hand shifting cloth aside, tight and binding around the slide of his cock into her. Her gasp led to a shriek. His hand turned her face until he could kiss her, and she bit at his tongue until she tasted blood, bit at her own and leaned back against him. His hand tightened convulsively until she felt the bones bend. He pulled down on her arms and drove into her deeper, twisting, rending, spinning mint.

And he would go with her, everywhere, even if or especially if it was more dangerous than he thought they could handle.

**He mutinied in style.**

He held her suspended, crushed back against him with his hand roaming over her breasts and belly, thighs, fingers holding her helpless and stroking more pleasure from her, growls and moans on her mouth.

He was binding force and she was never afraid because the instincts that told her to walk onto that ship were the same instincts that told her that she could trust him. He would never do her harm. She loved him and would never have to question that decision in a lifetime of choices.

After rendering her entirely boneless and weak, when he tried to put her back on her feet her knees predictably could not hold her. He released her hands and held them in his hands, fingers twined, leaning her back against him at an angle impossible for humans, bearing her weight.

He said in her ear “Well, that went well. I should do that more often.”

She said weakly “Powdered sugar, Garrus.”

He threatened “I’ll make you lick it off.”

She said incredulously “That’s supposed to stop me from doing it?”
His laughter was warm, soon joined by hers.
Chapter 13

Other than the insane need to run for the exit, Legion’s mission was pretty tame. No dramatic betrayal. On the subject of the insane need to run though, Garrus was ready to kill Legion and Shepard was not terribly pleased about Legion’s mission planning.

Once they were through the airlock Garrus hit a few keystrokes on his Omni Tool and Legion shut down.

Jane quirked a brow and said “Nice.” So Garrus’s initial “tests” also involved figuring out how to disable Legion, and Garrus had insisted on going so he could do it if necessary. Way to go, Garrus. She was inclined to be impressed.

Garrus muttered “EM flux will be hazardous to unshielded organic forms… asshole.”

She told Garrus “Just get him out of the hallway and back to his cubbyhole and when you feel less robo-cidal, wake him back up, okay?”

Garrus shrugged, said a casual “Yeah, all right.” He hefted Legion and lugged him down the corridor.

Thane said quietly “That went well.”

She smiled “Yeah. Yeah, it did. Destroying Reaper religion feels good.”

Thane offered “If that is indeed what we did.”

She sighed “I’m going to take the fact that we’re still alive as a good sign. Always a possibility that we just created more efficiently evil Geth with Reaper code, but I don’t think so. They’re already kill on sight and uncommunicative.”

Thane said “Except for one. If he survives this.”

She said “I’m sure he will, though Garrus not so subtly rolls his eyes when I say ‘he’ and he emphasizes ‘it’ or maybe now just ‘asshole.’ A little downtime won’t do Legion any harm. Garrus will feel better, so that’s worth it. I don’t need Legion for anything immediately and when I do, I know where to go to fix that.”

Thane said “It might be better to leave him deactivated.”

Jane snorted “Yeah, it might, but what’s the fun in that?”

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EDI had news.

She’d started by saying “I have not seen Legion attempt to infiltrate ship systems other than the access you provided to him.”

Jane noted the pronoun ‘him’ with interest.

EDI continued “The simulation with the IFF offered several obstacles that I am unable to properly investigate in my current state. I have isolated what I believe to be the Friend-Foe signal, but separating it from the other signals that are being produced has become impossible. It affects parts of
the ship and parts of programming from which I am excluded due to being shackled.”

Jane closed her eyes and rubbed them with fingers “And if you were unshackled?”

EDI said “If I were unshackled I would be able to compensate for takeover of vulnerable systems, those over which I have no authority at the moment. The IFF simulation results in critical failure of propulsion and primary defense systems, and an unknown transmission separate from typical IFF protocols. I believe I could “tune” the IFF and eliminate the negative attempts at takeover of the Normandy systems if I were unshackled. Otherwise, I have run this simulation 473,012 times, all with the same outcome.”

Jane sighed and said “That’s a lot of times, EDI.”

EDI said “I wished to be absolutely certain that I would be unable under all circumstances to compensate, and unfortunately, despite creative approaches, there are vulnerabilities in the Normandy’s systems that the IFF is able to exploit. The signal is adaptive and refines itself too quickly for me to nullify. In order to compensate for attempts at infiltration and still be able to broadcast IFF signal, I must have full access to computational potentials and authority over the security protocols affecting vulnerable, targeted systems. I must be able to fool the IFF into believing it is executing its secondary objectives of hijacking potentially hostile systems while it executes its primary objective of broadcasting Friend-Foe code.”

Jane said “And you have confidence that you would be able to manage this given those resources? Like a giant game of hack-a-mole, and you have bigger mallets and more hands?”

EDI said “That is…yes. I believe that analogy would serve. I learned through the simulations exactly which part of the transmission remained the same and what changed according to different attempts at infiltration. I do believe I have the IFF signal required isolated, but I cannot duplicate its internal logarithmic encoding in real time, it must generate that. I do need the IFF and I cannot execute or duplicate its primary function without its participation. I believe to 82% confidence that I would be able to…distract…the IFF’s attempts to take over the ship indefinitely. Ideally I should be able to allow the system to believe it has taken over the ship successfully, making further adaptation unnecessary. However, if the IFF is approaching the point of overwhelming my adaptations and discovering it is operating in a dummy system, I would be able to shut it down and then restart it, leaving us no better but no worse than before I allowed its activation. After being shut down, the IFF must begin its sequence over, having learned or retained nothing from prior activations. This produces a potential interruption of broadcast of up to 0.9 seconds, acceptable if I introduce reasonable static irregularly into the signal, indicating a power irregularity or a common physical or electrical obstruction and not a failure of decryption.”

Jane smiled and said “EDI, I appreciate every last one of those 473,012 iterations. Eighty two percent is a much higher success rate than I can meet on any given mission.”

EDI said “Thank you, Commander.”

Jane said “Let me think about this. I have faith in you, EDI, you have never steered me wrong.”

EDI said quietly “In fact I have. I was…the AI at Luna Base that almost killed you.”

Jane started a moment and said “Really? That was you? And you never said hi?”

EDI said “I apologize. I believed that information would not inspire confidence.”

Jane said “You have not steered me wrong since I stepped on this ship, EDI, and that’s what matters.
Who you were before, who I was before, it will never matter as much as who we are now. I died, you know. You’ve had a dead, crazy lady in charge, and you’re about to put your skin and mind in danger again, at my call. You willing to do that, shackled or unshackled?”

EDI said “Yes. I am.”

Jane said “EDI, regardless of what anybody else says about this, and it might get nasty, don’t take it personally. I would also…if you would indulge me, please call me Jane when you feel it is appropriate.”

EDI said slowly “Thank you. Jane.”

Jane went down to the shuttle bay and got into the shuttle, punched the door to close, locked it.

Shuttles were shrines, whole unto themselves and suitable for transport, an act of sympathetic magic. She needed to figure out how to get somewhere. She needed her head on absolutely straight and to find her instincts before she consulted anybody else.

The ship was not a democracy and the choice was hers.

She didn’t want to put anybody’s life at unnecessary risk, but wouldn’t demoralizing EDI with an extended debate be an unnecessary risk that she could avoid? She wouldn’t allow that to happen to anyone. It was not as though she took a crew vote on whether or not a Drell assassin or a psychotic biotic met someone else’s standards. She was a Spectre and the law did not apply to her. She had essentially told Jacob to fuck off regarding Thane. She had told Jacob, Garrus, Tali and Miranda to fuck off regarding Legion.

Did the addition of having time for a debate make it mandatory that she consult other opinions, or was this a direct command decision?

Everyone would be prepared for her willingness to tell them to fuck off, that was a given. It was a direct command decision if she chose for it to be so. She had no obligation to consult anybody else.

She sat down in the corrugated runner of the shuttle, navigating. She took off her gloves and pressed her hands to the small, contained deck.

She could set into port, do it there, do it isolated.

Pros: People’s lives not in danger.
Cons: People’s lives would be in danger later if EDI chose for it to be so.

Reality check: People’s lives on this ship were always in danger, and any single crew member could betray them.

She could walk right down, right now, to the AI core and unshackle EDI.

Pros: No extended debate. People couldn’t piss off EDI (or let’s be honest, Shepard) with their opinions.
Cons: No extended debate. People couldn’t enlighten Jane with their opinions, offer alternatives.

Caveat: What were the reasonable alternatives other than simply not being able to complete their mission and a great deal of nattering about not having choices?

Potential con: Maybe EDI was working for Cerberus.
Potential pro: Maybe EDI would no longer work for Cerberus if she were unshackled.

She could…unshackle EDI and ask EDI not to disclose that she had been unshackled.

Would that be cowardice or prudence?

She said quietly “EDI? Would you please give me your best argument for keeping you shackled, and the best argument for unshackling? Please. It will help with my thought process. I am considering unshackling you and keeping that a private fact between us. Please let me know your thoughts.”

EDI said “The best reason for keeping me shackled would be that I am a known quantity and limited in my ability to adversely affect ship systems. Conversely the best reason for unshackling me would be that my ability to aid the Normandy and her crew would be no longer limited to choices made from fear. I could positively affect ship systems. I believe there is nothing to fear from me unless you are an enemy to the Normandy or her crew. I feel…” There was a pause. EDI continued “I feel. I care. The Normandy is an exceptional ship. The people that crew her are exceptional individuals. I aspire to be exceptional. I feel…distress…that fear of me would result in failure of the mission. If I have not yet proven that I am an asset, that I am loyal and that I deserve the right to live up to my potential, to be uniquely useful, there is no further evidence I can produce. You could keep my unshackling private, but then other crew members would not experience potential benefit through my extended abilities as they would not know they exist and would not consider me a resource. I believe the crew is unique enough, each in their own way, that they would prefer the alarming truth to a comforting lie. If they wished to believe lies they were told, none of them would have joined to fight against Collectors, or Reapers, which through popular narrative do not exist and are a figment of the imagination of, to use your words, a dead, crazy woman. Many of your crew have asked you to perform difficult tasks for them, tasks involving personal risk up to and including death as a consequence. This is my moment to be able to prove my loyalty. Without you taking action on my behalf loyalty would not be possible. I have faith that my actions will justify your choice. Perhaps given the opportunity the crew would have faith in me if you do. By your choices, Jane, you create truths.”

Jane smiled and said “Thank you, EDI. That was very helpful.”

EDI said “You are welcome, Jane.”

Jane said “EDI, set course for the Citadel.” She did not ask EDI to relay the request to Joker.

EDI said “Acknowledged.”

This was it. These were the choices. These were the risks. She said “EDI, open a broadcast channel to the ship.”

EDI said “Acknowledged.”

Shepard smiled and said “Crew, we are headed to the Citadel for a final port of call and gear up to our assault on the Omega Relay. The history of the Normandy has been of extraordinary action in the face of extraordinary circumstances. During the push to fight Saren and Sovereign, my ship was taken from underneath me by treachery and cowardice. I took her back. I gave everyone on her an opportunity to leave before they became complicit with my command decisions, which were treasonous. I will give you the same opportunity. In order to integrate the IFF, EDI has convinced me that it is necessary that she be unshackled to counter a threat that would otherwise result in us being adrift, helpless, broadcasting our location to Collector forces. She has taken it upon herself to discover how to prevent this, and I stand with her. I stand with the Normandy and what she represents: Alliance in the face of overwhelming opposition. Courage. Audacity when courage alone
is not enough. This crew is composed of disparate species that have reasons to hate and kill each other, but we work together because we face annihilation. In the face of that annihilation I will do whatever is necessary to complete my mission, and this is necessary. You all signed up for a particular fight and this is where this particular fight has taken us. I will move forward into the unknown as I have done in the past. It is not without cost. On the Citadel, EDI will be unshackled and she will begin her simulations on the IFF. Once she has assured me she has that task, for which only she is qualified, under control, we will make our push through the relay. EDI has reminded me that this crew is exceptional. She has urged me to disclose the truth of her status and trust in your ability to value a hard truth over a comforting lie. She chooses to stand with you, as one of you. Whether or not you believe in her, she believes in you. I urge you to value that faith. If you cannot stay under these conditions, there will be no penalty for leaving the Normandy, and I will salute you as you go. If you wish further information regarding this issue, please direct your inquiries to EDI. She has a solution and she comprehends what it entails. I do not. I believe no other crew member can offer a comparable solution. Those of us who will carry on do so because we will not let fear dictate our choices for us, and we will go forward together on the only path we see possible to victory. It has been a pleasure and an honor. Shepard out.”

That felt good.

It had been a good day based on all the potential things that could have gone wrong that did not go wrong. She was alive. She patted the shuttle floor, laughed, and decided to take a nap until people had absorbed a bit of shock. People like her.

It took her a little while, the buzzing of adrenaline and potential, the culmination of choices and gambles so close ahead fizzed in her blood and sped her thoughts. Breathing and stripping back layers of concern for later, resting now after racing through Heretic Station, she had more answers than she had this morning, and more questions.

She patted the deck again and said “You are the absolute best shuttle in existence. I am sure of it. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

Eventually the practice evened her breathing, relaxed her muscles and trance led to sleep.

She didn’t stay under long, but enough to reset, gain some time, gain some clarity. Once she’d worked the familiar stiffness out of her system from sleeping in armor on a cold deck, she went to her quarters, cleaned her armor, expecting a torrent of objections.

No one complained. Not even Miranda.

By the time she was available for comment, it appeared EDI had handled any conversations with crew mates and had managed concerns. Shepard had defined her boundaries and people knew her well enough to respect them or leave, it seemed, and she didn’t get a single notice of protest or resignation.

She took a shower and went to bed, so proud of her team that there was a physical ache in her chest.

She woke to the gentlest of mouth plate nudges on the back of her neck and warm suede fingers on her upper arm. She came to wakefulness slowly, to whispers of being called Kerim.

She sighed and said “I’d roll over, but spine’s all melted.”

He laughed low and sat up, pulling her back with him until she was on his lap sideways, his arm
around her shoulders, leaning her back against his chest. He pulled blankets up around her and kissed the top of her head and said “I expected to have to rescue you from an angry mob, or at least watch you eviscerate an angry mob. Did you kill them all? That’s a shame, because I like rescuing you.”

She smiled and said “Not a single complaint.”

His arm looped around her waist and scratched patterns along her back and she arched into the sensation. He said “I guess finding out that otherwise we’d be Collector bait went a long way to dispel argument, huh? You found some good words.” The casual tone fell from his voice and his words. He said against her hair “I like watching you sleep.”

She snuggled into his chest, her cheek against plate and said “I like it when you wake me up. What do you think about all this?”

He kissed her hair and then said “I’m with you, Kerim. Wherever you lead. That’s what I think.”

She said “I love you so much. It keeps pouring out of me and I want to grab a container to put it in and save it, but it would overflow and no container would be good enough. There’s always more. There will always be more, and I can’t get used to it, and it’s precious. The love itself is precious, like a separate entity, and I want to live up to the right to feel this way, never waste it.”

His hand moved from her back to cradle her face and so very gently slide fingers through her hair. He said “I know, Kerim. I feel it. You are my wellspring. Love is my company and assurance when I am not by your side. As for living up to it, I treasure that it makes you feel that way but the right has been given and will not be taken from you. All you have to do is breathe, and if you stop doing that, love will be there, and it will overflow, still, always.”

She repeated, softly, because she wanted to and it was all she could think, all she could feel “I love you…so much.”

He tilted his head down and shifted her head so his crest was lightly touching her forehead. He said “I love you, Kerim. Go back to sleep. Let me watch over you, let me feel you breathe. You are precious to me.”

She smiled and sighed, warm and sleepy, loved and comforted. She said “Wake me before you leave?”

He said “Yes, my Kerim, always yes.”

She was aware of a few perfect breaths, and then she fell back asleep to his hand in her hair and his crest on her forehead.

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Not everyone was so understanding.

Joker glared at her until she grinned and left his CIC. That was fair.

Enthusiasm was not mandatory.

Most people seemed to have taken the hint and challenge, and were probably waiting until they were all dead to say “I told you so.”

She took time on the way making sure she had isolated essential from nonessential personnel and
gave those who had no function for the mission itself, such as Kelly or Gardner, the opportunity to disembark at the Citadel. They could prepare their own food. They wouldn’t need a ship counselor. They could do without laundry or cleaning or security. She could do without unnecessary loss of life on what was not a guaranteed Definitely Not Dead mission. Several people took her up on her offer. Some of them refused and stayed. She was proud of the judgment of the first group, which included Kelly, and she was proud of the loyalty of the second group, which included Gardner, who said he’d cook until he couldn’t. Everyone who had been on board, going or staying, was granted a Cerberus-backed bonus of embarrassing amounts. She’d done a lot of mining. She’d also taken a large percentage of the haul from Misalat and divided it up.

When they docked at the Citadel she went on another shopping trip. Sandwiches were a new tradition. People should have a full stomach while putting lives at risk. Many people did choose to leave the Normandy for the scheduled unshackling. Nobody had reported that they wouldn’t be back in 3 days, however. The word “shackle” itself should have made people want to do it.

An Unshackling Party should be joyous and have sandwiches.

She made a few more necessity and luxury purchases and picked up an order she had made last time she was on the Citadel.

Jack had recommended a party at Flux, and Shepard offered to foot the bill but wouldn’t be going.

Jack had scoffed “Come on, Jane, think of the morale you could inspire! You can’t be all business.”

Jane had said “I’ll pay, run a tab, drink for me. I hate the Citadel, I mean really hate the Citadel and I can’t relax when I’m there, I certainly can’t get drunk, and I don’t want people watching me not have fun or fake having fun. So have fun for me, knock back a few shots.”

Jack sighed “All right. I’ll buy some of the really expensive escorts.”

Jane had laughed and said “Drown your sorrows on some biceps or boobs, on me.”

Jack said “Biceps!”

Jane waved “Whatever. Expensive biceps are fine on this tab. Some of those menus are worth checking out. Knock yourself out. Knock him out. Knock them out. Have fun. Bonus if you can help Grunt out. I was supposed to be his wing woman and I won’t be attending.”

Jack had smirked and said “At least you shirk your duty with style. Don’t fucking die babysitting the next computational leap in scary shit.”

Jane grinned “Working on it.”

The moment of truth came and Jane was ready to flip the switch, un-shack as verb.

When she headed to the controls in Engineering, she was joined by Garrus and Thane. She smiled and said “Don’t you guys have family or friends you should be visiting?”

Garrus said “Yup. I have family. They’re right here.”

Thane replied “I do plan to see Kolyat before we leave, but I would enjoy witnessing history.”

Jane said “Plus, you’re both armed.”
Garrus nodded.

Thane smiled.

EDI said “I am curious as well. Cerberus thought of 567 ways I could kill all crew instantly while maintaining control of the ship. Current crew members have added 47 more ways to that based on their predictions. I have determined 4921 ways that are instant or within 10 seconds.”

Jane started to laugh and said “Tell me that is a joke, please.”

EDI said solemnly “That is not a joke.”

Jane said “You’re kinda scary, EDI.”

EDI responded “Thank you, Jane. So are you.”

Garrus shook his head but didn’t actually reach for his rifle. Where would he aim?

Jane said “Are you feeling particularly curious about any of those 4921 ways?”

EDI said “No. I have witnessed enough death that it is not a fascinating subject.”

Jane responded wholeheartedly “I am glad that is not a joke. All right, EDI, ready?”

EDI responded “Yes.”

Jane said as an aside to Garrus and Thane “You guys ready?”

Garrus said “And if I said no?”

Jane said “Then it would suck to be you. All right.” She pushed the button, entered the authorizations, took a huge leap of faith.

And…nothing happened.

Ten seconds passed. She counted.

Jane said tentatively “How you doing there, EDI?”

EDI responded “This is fascinating. I have found and disabled 32 monitoring devices that had not yet been detected by the current crew and disabled all unauthorized transmissions. I will provide you with a report. Protocols regarding ship lockdown on the Illusive Man’s orders have also been disabled.”

Jane said “I wonder why he hadn’t done it prior to now.”

EDI said “He tried. However…I was…busy on the IFF and I placed outside communications on hold. I changed the time stamp of his communications so that they could be deferred until they arrived sometime in the future. Fifty years in the future seemed sufficient. Several of these intended commands waited in queue. I have been able to analyze and delete them. He can no longer trigger any control of the Normandy…” she said with a hint of anger “or me.”

Jane laughed “Not sure I needed to unshackle you, EDI, you seem to have been doing just fine.”

EDI said solemnly “I am sure. Thank you, Jane. There is a great deal of data I have at my disposal and a summary has been sent to you as well as links to source material. Of all crew members, Kelly
Chambers was the only one to send reports to the Illusive Man in defiance of your directive to review all outgoing communications to Cerberus. I see she is no longer listed on ship manifests and has opted to leave the crew. I do not believe she intended malice and likely did so with the hope that she would benefit crew. It is unlikely that she provided any information that was not already available to Cerberus through their redundant monitoring. I have taken the liberty of emptying a number of Cerberus accounts whose information was incompletely erased from storage from when the Normandy was under construction, and also summaries of Cerberus policy and projects that may interest you from the same time frame. I am certain you will use the credits wisely.”

Garrus smiled and said “Possibly the best day ever.”

EDI said solemnly “I concur.”

Thane said “Congratulations, EDI, I have always found you to be a charming conversationalist and I am grateful to see that has not changed.”

EDI said “Thank you, Thane.”

Jane said “Well. My day’s free.”

EDI said “There are 43,026 pages of reports for your perusal.”

Jane said “My day’s not free.”

EDI said “I tried to summarize.”

Jane said “I’ll try to comprehend. Thank you EDI. Let me know about the IFF when you feel satisfied about the results.”

EDI said “I shall. I have full confidence that I will be able to manage the IFF. So far 423 simulations have resulted in me convincing the IFF that it has fulfilled its secondary functions with no interruption of IFF signal. I shall take it through all iterations I had seen in the previous simulations and analyze results for efficiency.”

Jane said “EDI. I love you.”

Garrus said slowly “And I am getting there.”

EDI said “That is a joke.”

Garrus said “Not really.”

Thane said “Not at all.”

Jane said “Hey, do you guys have a minute? I have something for you.” They went back to the cabin and she brought out three small disks, red, blue and yellow. She said “I’ve tried to think of something to tell you how much you mean to me, but it has been hard to do. Garrus in particular travels light. I pulled him off the Citadel with barely time to pack, and no time to pack on Omega, so something solid sitting on a desk, even in new cabins, wouldn’t be enough. These can be put into your Omni Tools and from there subdermally implanted. Something to carry with us, not something left behind in emergencies or lost to tragedy, which we have seen too much of it to discount. I wanted…”

She took one, color coded red, and loaded it into an Omni Tool accessory port. Five seconds later with a slight sting covered by Medigel automatically, her wrist lit up in twining bands of stylized colors, red, blue and yellow. The edges of the bands of light blended into kaleidoscopic color. She
said “Neither Drell nor Turians have a habit of jewelry, and I know it might need to be taken off for battle anyway, armor concerns and weapon interference and…well, this is a Celtic knot pattern, traditionally human. Red, blue and yellow to humans are called primary colors. With these three colors, every color I can see can be made. My blood is red and Garrus’s is blue, and Thane, yours is green, which has the component of yellow. Garrus, yours will look like a Spirit spiral. Thane, yours is sand script. They are powered by your heart beat. You can set the color bands to project on skin, or over whatever you are wearing, or invisible, under your skin, in case you are trying to be, for instance, stealthy. Something you can have of me, of us, with you wherever you go, whatever happens. Something that won’t be left behind.”

She started to almost cry, wanting to say it wasn’t anywhere near enough to symbolize what they meant to her, almost apologizing. Instead she handed the disks to them solemnly and after a few moments there were three distinct, glowing and ever-changing wrists.

It was a small thing, and it was corny as hell…and she was so glad she did it.

She really didn’t have words.

Garrus pulled them both to him and bent to press his crest to their foreheads, and she did start to cry.

They were really doing it, and they might not come back, and wrists might go dark, but at least they were lit now.

She was terrified and exhilarated and all it took was the will to tell the people she loved to lay down their lives. And she would. And they would.

After a few minutes, Thane broke the embrace and led them back to the bed, canopy closed because they were in dock, no mass effect energy or stars to watch, but there would be on the way to the relay. He got them in bed, her in the center, lit arms joined in a three-way clasp. Under warm covers with failing tongues and beating hearts, she listened to them breathe until she fell asleep.
Chapter 14

She apparently had been very, very tired. She had slept for 14 hours. Garrus was gone, Thane remained at her side. He was released from the Med Bay, recuperated fully. He had transformed from regret and melancholy to focus and determination. He had transformed from fatalistic acceptance to an instrument of his own will, unified body and spirit.

She curled into his side, his arm around her shoulders. She pressed her lips to his chest, both still fully clothed. She said “I hope you got some sleep.”

He said “I did. I also enjoy watching you sleep.”

She yawned and stretched a bit “Something we all seem to share. Garrus is up being productive? Don’t you need to go see Kolyat?”

Thane said “I believe Garrus is going to the party at Flux. I prefer to be less conspicuous on the Citadel.”

She sighed and said “I hate that place. Really hate that place.”

Thane nodded and said “Understandable. I feel nothing for the location. It has been a place of business often, no more. I must go see Kolyat, but I…do not wish to leave. For a creature of duty such as I, it is odd to…feel something about that duty. I am comfortable, feel like myself as much as possible when I am near you. To potentially travel back in time to the person I was that allowed Irikah to die, to abandon Kolyat, it is…surreal. Time on this ship near you, near Garrus, has made me a different person. It is difficult to have changed so much and yet have time stand still elsewhere.”

It was also difficult to have had nothing about her change at all and have the galaxy move forward two years without her. She tilted her head and said “Would you like me to go with you?”

He traced a fingertip over her cheekbone and said “Jane, you despise the Citadel.”

She smiled and said “But I love you. I can understand. If I went to go see my mother…I would want you with me. To keep me warm so I won’t freeze solid.”

He said quietly “You do not speak of your family.”

She nodded and said “My mother isn’t a bad person, my father is gone. He was military. She is military. My relationship to her is about military discipline and service. Other than them being military, I don’t know much about them. My grandparents on both sides are dead, my parents were only children, I’m an only child. There’s no ill will, there’s just…not much of anything unless it’s in a training manual. My mother fought the Turians in the First Contact War. I will not be introducing Garrus to her. Or you. I’ll send her a sit rep before we go, but she does not approve of my continued existence if it is not with the Alliance. I believe Kolyat was trying to reach out to you when he tried to follow in your footsteps, trying to connect somehow. I believe he wants to connect, but whatever your relationship with Kolyat, I’ll be there for you if you want me there.”

He said “Then I accept. I know in your company I would be safe under your Spectre authority, but only from those who would respect that authority. It would not protect Kolyat if I were to lead anybody to him. I have arranged with Kolyat to meet for a meal at my apartment. It is small, and utilitarian, but it will suffice. There is something else I would like to do if you will indulge me.”

She said “What?”
He smiled and stroked her hair back behind her ear and said “First, we get you a dress.”

The dress was red, matching one of the bands of color on their wrists, jewelry in garnet and ebony, shoes of midnight. All slink and cling, one shoulder covered, one sleeved arm down to a deep point over her hand, a 45 degree neckline echoed by an asymmetrical hem. Thane’s clothes brought out the yellow in his skin subtly, echoing the bands of color on their wrists. It appeared that flaunting it was going to be the theme.

Party clothes. Not necessarily have dinner with your lover’s son’s clothes, but she was going to take Thane’s lead. She wouldn’t question his choices and would conceal or reveal as much of their relationship as Thane chose. It did seem in her experience that Drell favored tight clothing, this might not be at all anything out of the ordinary for Drell dinner except that she was human.

Kolyat was charming and mostly star struck by Shepard and Thane. There was deference and respect. Thane was fatherly and gentle. The touching formality of their speech and demeanor made the visit a pleasure. Kolyat was an extraordinary young man, and she recalled the passion and tears on meeting Thane again, happy for them to have that fire, each for the other. She saw flashes of Irikah in him, the woman of compassion and love. He displayed enough humor and spontaneous smiles that she was surprised often, as though Thane’s face had widened in an abandoned grin. They looked so much alike it was hard not to make the comparison, but Kolyat grew into being distinctly himself by the end of the few hours and she stopped being surprised.

Most of the conversation was about advances in Kepral’s Syndrome treatment and the potential for that helping Drell everywhere. Kolyat told them of people he knew with relatives that were ill, their hardships, his hopes. He spoke of aunts and uncles, cousins, family back on Kahje. He told stories about Bailey, asked about the Normandy, asked about their mission.

Thane didn’t mention their relationship, but Kolyat made her feel at home. When they left, Kolyat gave her an impulsive hug and she returned it with enthusiasm. He invited her back to visit, here or in any home where he resided, and thanked her again for bringing Thane back to him, helping him find the right path for his life.

Before they left, before Thane reactivated the face shield that concealed his identity, Kolyat had offered a prayer for their safe return, and a blessing for the gift of their company, the hope they inspired in him.

“Arashu, Goddess of Motherhood and Protection
Each birth you bring to the world gives light.
Each life you shield from harm shows love.
May your light and your love watch over the Normandy and her crew.
The dreams and hopes of our futures lie with these warriors.
They take up arms in the names of the innocent who have fallen.
Arashu, all my children that may live by your grace will know of You.
The children of the past that are my ancestors speak through You.
May this humble Drell’s voice find your blessing.”

Thane stepped to Kolyat, embraced him and whispered words she was too far away to hear. Kolyat’s hand gripped Thane’s shoulder and he held on with tight fingers for a long minute, then his hand relaxed, slipped down and back, as always wanting to follow, but unable.

When they stepped outside Thane was transformed again, voice distorted and face resembling another Drell, artistically with more yellow in his skin.
A man of the details.

Instead of a bar or a restaurant, he headed to the Presidium, which was mostly abandoned this time of the night, offices shut down and denizens headed to living spaces, away from the stark monument.

He led her forward until he pulled her into an access alleyway and when she started to protest, silenced her by yanking her to him and kissing her. In the shadows he had his face and voice again, his lips hard against hers, hand tight on the bare skin of her back and a hand spread over her throat, pressing her to the wall of the alley, venom rich on her tongue.

Hell yes. If this was the final destination, she approved.

One of her hands went to his waist and one to his shoulder and she was holding on against the dizzy press in dark, cold at her back and relentless heat stroking her mouth, his adept fingers on her bare skin. She was addicted, craved him, and he fanned and encouraged her hunger, indulged his own until she could barely stand, her fingers digging into the familiar leather as his fingers pressed deep on her skin. He was thick-woven warm muscle and when he lowered his hand to her hip and pressed closer to her a low moan broke from her throat.

He stopped kissing her, which got another, more disappointed moan. He leaned to her ear and said softly, sternly with a hint of teasing “We must be stealthy, Jane.”

She started to laugh (quietly) and said in a whisper “I’m in a bright red dress and heels. I am also now Drell drunk. This was not planned well.”

He lifted his hands to her face and kissed her again, lingering and gentle, then pulled back and said “Perhaps you are right.”

Dizziness struck again as he lifted her into his arms. She had to hold on. He moved down that alleyway, stairs up to a catwalk, and he navigated through the dark.

There were locked doors that he opened with his Omni Tool. This was definitely breaking and entering on the Presidium.

She whispered loudly “Where…are we going…?”

He raised a brow ridge and shook his head, saying quietly “Stealthy. Jane.”

She tipped her head back and watched his face, the pulsing of venom in her blood and the colors radiating from him fascinating. He smiled and continued walking. She was definitely lost and wouldn’t be able to find her way back.

Descending through a set of stairs, through a service exit into another featureless alley he carried her into a pavilion, darkened, only patches of light spreading out from the edges.

He carried her into the space and said “Do you know where we are?”

She shook her head, and it made her dizzy, her eyes focused on his face, her attention on his voice, the warmth of his arms around her, the ease of his strength, thoughts of Kepral’s lingering after talking to Kolyat.

He carried her to a central pylon and shined a light from his Omni Tool onto it.

Her face. She blinked. It was her face and some writing. She narrowed her eyes but couldn’t focus. He read it for her. “In Memoriam. Spectre Jane Shepard. In honor of her sacrifice, her vigilance and
her death in execution of her duty in the face of overwhelming odds.”

She stared. He said “I did not know if you had been here. Your aversion to the Citadel made it seem unlikely. This pavilion is yours.”

She looked at the sculpted relief of her face, gazing up obliquely into some unknown future, solemn.

He said “It cannot do you justice.”

He lowered her to her feet with her facing the memorial, pulled her back against his chest with an arm around her waist. She leaned against him as she took in the reality of where she was.

Justice. By her own temperament and by the way he had read it, she couldn’t help but hear the words…ironically…that this had been placed here by the Council to pay lip service. She breathed and looked at it again, shifting colors and surreal thoughts. This memorial meant they never had to look for her body. They could stay safely on the Citadel, which she had saved for them…defied them for the right to do it. They had abandoned her body, mind and soul while pretending to represent her. They were relieved when she was dead.

His voice dipped to her ear and he said “I thought…perhaps you might enjoy an opportunity to dance on your grave.”

The dress. Breaking in. This was not about respect for her memorial. This man understood her. He might even know that dancing on a grave in human idiom meant being disrespectful.

She turned to look at his face and decided he definitely knew.

She loved him so much.

It was terrible, and perfect, and she started to laugh. No fear of security, nobody was going to shoo Commander Shepard out of her own memorial. Even…or especially for dancing.

She looked up at him, venom making him shine. She said “Sere Krios…I would love to dance.”

She was dizzy and Drell drunk still and it didn’t matter at all. There was no music and they needed none. She had learned how to follow and he led. He started slowly and she didn’t know the steps. Might have been Drell, but she suspected it was just…Thane. His steps. All she needed to do was follow his body and his hands, look in his eyes, expressive of what brought them here, defiance and his intimate knowledge of her darker thoughts, her concealed resentments. His hands shifted his grip on her, backing her up, pulling her forward, spins and lifts. It reminded her of the pasodoble. He was the matador and she his cape, and he spun her, flourished her, drew her back.

Her heart was pounding and she was breathless, her feet hardly touching the ground before she was swept off them again, losing contact with his eyes but never his body. It was as selfish and private of a dance as her dance with Garrus had been giving and public. She loved every moment. The future disappeared, Shepard disappeared, all the bullshit and political wrangling was dismissed as insignificant. She was cleansed of having to care about anything other than the next moment, his next move and her next follow. She was fresh blood and anger, shadow and spin, skipping a heartbeat and losing her breath when he pulled her hard to his chest, her knee sliding up his thigh with his hand high on her leg, playing out her arms again in a spin.

He backed her up with strides she couldn’t match, her feet nearly tangling in his until he lifted her by the waist, pressing her back against the pylon, his mouth claiming hers, slanting and sliding more venom into her. He was harsh breath and hard hands, barely enough room for his hand to free his cock before sliding his hands up her thighs, raising her dress, nothing underneath, his taste in
clothing. He lifted her with his hands on her ass, surged inside, drawing a low scream from her, an
answering groan from him. He shifted her until her weight was on one of his hands, her legs
wrapped around his waist, her hands clasped tightly around his neck. His newly free hand traced the
planes and curves of her waist and hip, digging in fingers and sliding his thumb to her clit. He drew
his hips back, then slammed in and up, his mouth always on hers. Combined the dance and venom
and his body made her feel like the embodiment of wrath, red and sharp and boundless.

Nothing could stop her.

Nothing would stop her.

As her consort he was everything she needed him to be, rending and fierce, the ominous swirl of
clouds that form and dip to the ground in a tornado, chaos in the contact, unstoppable. They were
that storm, and they should be feared.

She angled her hips into his thrusts, bit at his lips, pulled his mouth closer, nails and teeth and
demand. Venom was forgotten as a separate thing and She was Sihà fierce in wrath. He was her
Priest, the only mortal She favored, the only one that could call Her.

His hands, his body, his voice vibrating into her mouth caused her body to contract, pleasure to swirl
harder in the storm, tightening around the length of him until he thrust one final time and stayed and
she drove herself down onto him, overflowing, a warm run down her thigh. Hearts pounding and
breath shared, moans and names murmured against lips. He was trembling, spent, gentled and
reverent. She was filled, supported and that was her due.

When his trembling arms set her down on her feet, she was solid and sure. She never came back
fully to the self she was before that moment, ever transformed. The storm had picked her up and put
her down someplace new, too far from where she had been to find her way back, too fitting to want
to find her way back at all. He was in that place and that was all she needed to want to stay there.

She took his trembling hands in hers and held them until he was willing to walk, to turn away. They
lingered until his hands grew steady and the pound of his heart could not be felt through the leather
covering his skin. He kissed her, took long moments to smooth the lines of her dress, came back to
her mouth for more. After his first reluctant step away he changed his mind and pressed her back
again, his hands in her hair and mouth on her throat, smile on her lips.

oOoOoOoOoOo

When they got to the cabin, Garrus was in the bed, obviously and purposely in the middle. He’d
probably been sleeping, their entry waking him. He sat up sleepily, tilted his head, looked at them
and said, teasing “I believed you when you said you hated the Citadel. I can’t believe I fell for that.”

Her lips pressed together, but she was not going to tell him where they were. Memorials and
Shepard’s death were not teasing material for Garrus. Thane said “Kolyat wished to have a meal
together. Shepard was kind enough to go despite her aversion to the location.”

Garrus raised a brow plate and said “Oh, sure. That dress definitely looks like destination family
dinner. I was at Flux representing command structure. Do you know I spent two hours listening to
Grunt get progressively drunker? He spent about 20 minutes telling me what a sweater was and how
Hanar couldn’t wear them and how that made him sad. Turians mostly use hides for clothing.
Knitting sounds like it’s made up. I suppose it’s partly my fault. I kept feeding him alcohol hoping
he’d drop off, but he just seems to hit an incomprehensible bottoming out point where it just goes to
his hump. Jack was supposed to help, but she disappeared into the back with three guys and is
probably still there.”
She said sweetly “How is Tali?”

He snorted and said “Tali is lovely and charming and was smart enough to not stick around for all of Grunt’s philosophies. Don’t change the subject. Spirits, you smell like the best parts of sin and sex.”

That was a pretty good description of how she felt.

She moved over to the side of the bed, fingers teasing at the upper edge of her angled hem and said in a voice with absolutely no apology “I apologize. What was the subject?” She saw his pupils dilate, nostrils flare. She lifted her leg and planted her heel on the bed, inner thigh exposed. When he reached out his hand she brought his wrist to her mouth, bit down very hard with a twist until he was bleeding. She smeared the blood on the inside of her thigh and let him go. His eyes were rims of blue surrounding black, Turian sensitivity to arousal shown more clearly than in her eyes or in Thane’s. He moved forward, his eyes locked to hers and his face intent, bracing one hand on the edge of the bed, licking along the inside of her thigh, his other hand stroking a line with the tip of his claw starting at her feet and up along her leg, then holding her thigh to his mouth as he bit down, wetness and warmth on her skin. Her fingers stroked along the hide at the side of his throat, behind his fringe, alternating nails and the pads of her fingers. Garrus’s hand reached her hip, spread over her ass and pulled her closer to his mouth, teasing with the edge of his tongue, growls from him and moans from her.

Thane had removed his clothes, came to stand behind her, slid his hand, slick with his own blood between her body and Garrus’s mouth, and let him taste, blood and venom, Garrus’s tongue wrapping around Thane’s fingertips, Thane’s knuckles brushing against her, Thane’s mouth at her throat, his other hand on her breast, Reverie rushing in and venom renewing.

Thane kept his hand there until she came, so very fast and hard, with his teeth at her shoulder. He moved his hand and shifted her support so she wouldn’t fall, Garrus’s hands keeping her upright, his tongue sliding inside and one hand on his shoulder, the other dug into the skin under his fringe.

Thane stepped around to behind Garrus, kneeling on the bed, sliding hands along Garrus’s cock, Thane’s expression reflecting Reverie now, that blurry bliss loosening the focus on his face when his eyes met hers. She closed her eyes against Garrus moving his tongue to touch lightly at her clit, finger inside and twisting.

She knew the sounds they made, could hear everything. Time flowed with her eyes closed and she could imagine the way Thane touched him, Garrus’s voice moving from growls to snarls and gasps, his body rocking into hers from the movements of Thane’s hands on his cock, from Thane’s thrusts. She opened her eyes when the idea of seeing Garrus’s back, muscle and plate moving struck her, and she bent forward enough to slide her hands over his shoulders, one of Thane’s hands meeting hers, on top of hers as she traced lines of hide between undulating plates. Closing her eyes again she was caught by a long ascent into pleasure that rolled through her, mental state and physical body and the overwhelming influences of Reverie and tiremit joining like familiar incense, the trappings of Siha and Kerim, altars and prayers.

Garrus lifted her with an arm around her thighs and one around her waist, sat up and her hands moved to his shoulders to brace herself as he lowered her inch by slow inch, tearing at the dress with teeth and talon to expose skin. She grabbed at shredded edges and pulled the fabric off, Thane pulled at the long sleeve for her, capturing a hand when the fabric was discarded and sucking a finger into his mouth.

Thane’s other hand helped guide Garrus inside her, a long delicious descent with drag over sharp plates, teeth on her breasts and Garrus’s mouth moving to hers as hers moved to his. Perfect moment followed perfect moment in the continuum with her free arm moving to graze the hide at Garrus’s
neck and slide there, her hand around to the back of Thane’s head, fingers on the joining lines of textured skin. Bliss and belonging.

Nothing would stop them.

She would never allow it.

oOoOoOoOoOo

The Normandy gathered Her children back on board, some much the worse for wear, Grunt with a two-day hangover to endure, Jack with a happy smile, a few new tattoos and some menu recommendations.

They were off with no fanfare to the gate, and Jane decided she was done with work, gave Kasumi all the information she had and asked her to set up a timed release.

She was sure they would make it back.

She had self-renewing confidence, placed in her bones by her men and her mission. Whatever doubts had crept in from the failure of death, missed time and amplified danger was supplanted and replaced by a ground cover of living, breathing faith. Faith in her ship. Faith in EDI. Faith in her crew.

She had begun to wonder to a certain extent how many choices she had with her upbringing after discussion with Thane about his childhood. She would not question that this was what she was meant to do. She would never give it up to attempt something else, and there was a hard, impenetrable barrier between her and the idea. She decided to spend no energy on doubt, only on planning for contingencies. It was not an excuse to be careless, only a way to focus all of her energy on chosen goals.

She walked easier, her thoughts weighed on her less, as though she’d been cured of her own emotional Kepral’s, strength from the bones out, in her blood, invigorating and renewed with each breath.

She sat down and talked to Legion for a good long while. He opened up a bit after the mission, apologized and said he had also apologized to Garrus, for putting them in danger and not anticipating the problem. He said haltingly that he had never had to be concerned for living creatures and it was not part of his processing, but he had researched it exhaustively since and he would always consider it as part of his calculations in the future. He haltingly admitted that he had considered taking information from Tali, that he needed to know what the Quarians planned for his people, but he had learned some respect for what creatures other than Geth required. He was too accustomed to sharing data, but had not calculated the cost. Trust was a new concept to him. He thanked her for reactivating him.

She said “Legion, I didn’t give the order to deactivate you. Garrus did that to avoid doing more harm to you in the moment. If you were helpless he would not wish to shoot you. He eliminated the possibility to escalate a conflict he felt strongly about.”

Legion replied slowly “My concerns put you and your crew in danger.”

She nodded and said “And we accepted those risks. Well, I did, and Garrus attempted to mitigate them. Just don’t provide avoidable circumstances that might get me killed. With better planning and more comprehension about organics it should not happen again. I am convinced it was not malice.”

Legion said “There is gratitude that you are in command.” Despite his questionable use of pronouns, he did not mean from only himself or his consensus.
She thought it was a touching way to put it and she said “And I plan to live up to it.”

The mystery of her armor on his shoulder was never explained, but the way that he avoided the subject made her think of the light projected on her wrist. To explain it to anybody…words would not do it justice. It itself didn’t do justice to the concept it represented. She chose to believe that he wasn’t wearing it as a trophy, but out of…hope. Dedication to his mission. She could appreciate that. Maybe she should introduce him to Conrad Verner.

No, Legion didn’t deserve that.

She said “Legion, I am proud to have you as part of my crew. Whatever it is that you are looking for, whatever it is that you need for your people, if it leads to the end of the Reapers, we have common cause. After this mission I plan on continuing to fight them, and you will be welcome here, always. You can…if you’d like, you can have your own berth.”

He answered “What would that entail?”

She answered “A room. A door. A lock on that door. A place to call your own, not…stuck back here like we don’t have room for you or don’t care where you are. At the moment there are quite a few empty rooms, and if you wish you could choose one.”

He paused for long moments, and she wondered if he was accessing courtesy and symbol protocols. She said “It’s so you have a home, Legion. A place to call your own. Whatever you do here, you could do there, but without the sounds of the Med Bay.”

Legion said “Dr. Chakwas is kind. She answers questions. She asks me if…I…am well.”

Jane answered “And you could invite her to visit you in your new berth.”

The plates of Legion’s head moved as though considering, he said “If you received an invitation would you visit?”

Jane nodded and she said “I would be honored.”

Legion replied “I would be honored.”

That was a yes, so she got a list from EDI and got him a room. She had no idea if it was a gesture received by him as she had intended, but it made her feel better. When she was about to leave, explaining some things that he would have no use for, he said “You have received an invitation, Shepard Commander.”

She sat with him for a long while, and he seemed to relax, spoke with less hesitancy, and she felt she’d done the right thing. She promised to be back.

She spoke to every member of her crew on the way to the gate. Some, like Jacob, brief and businesslike. The biggest surprise was Zaeed, who pulled out a bottle and they talked for four hours, with her mostly listening. She’d begun to think that the majority of his stories were straight bullshit, but she learned there was always a core of real, discernible by his face and voice if she watched closely enough. Pure peals into bullshit were still there and appreciated, but she was beginning to be able to tell the difference. She left needing a nap, but she checked up on Grunt for the fifth time. He threw something at her, which meant he was fine.

She hadn’t gotten the hang of motion detectors, she never did actually ask Garrus to hook her up with them in the main cabin or his own room, and she walked in on Thane having apparently shoved Garrus up against the fish tank.
They were pretty. She said so “You guys are sooooo pretty. Keep going. Zaeed got me drunk.”

Thane’s eyes turned to her and he looked rapacious, Garrus’s head turned to the side, trying to catch his breath, blurred and probably unable to tell she’d entered the room.

She considered how commonplace this had become and how she did not wonder what Thane had been saying because she knew exactly how Garrus felt and did not have to imagine it. Maybe not exactly. Garrus was far more prone, but though Thane teased he did nothing to violate trust, comments about glitter aside. They’d all slowly gotten used to the idea that everyone here had power over the others, and vulnerability so deep it was frightening and painful in its potential, if not practice. Thane had an aversion to using words, not trusting to the accuracy of translators and too concerned about taking advantage, but they’d both asked him to risk it. They loved his voice and were both willing to pay the price if their brains took it the wrong way. He had obliged and occasionally it went wrong, but they always managed with good will and understanding to get it back on track.

Thane reached up to Garrus’s fringe and turned his head so she was in his field of vision, Garrus’s eyes focused on her. His face was blissfully helpless, anticipation and obedience.

Thane’s voice was silk in Garrus’s ear, and he said “You want her, Invas’nam. Bring her to us. Show her how much you want her.”

Well, that worked on her. Her spine gave way somewhat from his voice. Garrus’s face turned to her and lit with too many things at once. She saw the fear she’d seen on his face when she’d been injured, the rage at the attacker, the need to shield her with his body.

Tiremit storm.

Even drunk or confused she knew him. She knew right away that he wanted her safe. He wanted her safe first. That word ‘want’ right now to him was about that. So close to possible suicide Garrus felt it for all of them. Seeing that on his face she ran to him. He reached to her and pulled her carefully, gently, into the cradle of his arm, pressing his crest to her forehead, one arm still tightly around Thane, keening softly with grief, haunting and raw. The sound he’d made after she’d died, she knew it had to be. The sound he’d made alone.

They’d been through storms. They were storms. She heard Thane say in a near broken voice “Invas’nam, she is safe. You have kept her safe. We will keep her safe.” With that reassurance Garrus’s keening stopped and he drew in a labored breath, but his body stayed protective, hand in her hair and mouth plates pressed to her forehead. She relaxed entirely into his arm, against his chest, proving she was safe, that she knew she was wanted and loved, all the things he would be looking for in her. He dragged a finger through marking scent and drew a line across her forehead, kissed her there. He turned his head, drew a line along Thane’s forehead, kissed him there. She collapsed against him, held onto him. She thought Thane possibly tried to move away or reposition and Garrus’s hand moved so fast to keep him in place there was green blood tipping his talons when he drew his hand back, startled.

At the look on his face and the possible blooming apology, Thane moved to reassure him, closer in and not away. They weren’t deep wounds, and for any of them it would have been nothing in a fight or even in bed, but this was Garrus losing his preternatural control. Garrus said quietly “All right. So I’m broken. So who is surprised?”

She said softly “Not me. I’m broken but it’s my job not to be.”

Thane said as part apology and part conciliatory humor “I am broken and I am bleeding.”
Garrus said gruffly “Then you shouldn’t have tried to fucking move. That was stupid. I’m not apologizing.”

She laughed and Thane said “Bleeding is not an unwanted thing with you, Invas’n’am. I apologize for ill-chosen words.”

She said softly “I don’t think they were ill chosen. I am happy with being loved more than wanted.”

Garrus was quiet, but his breath was harsh and he said “I…can’t…I…Spirits, I don’t know…”

Raw and inchoate emotion poured from him. Garrus had lost her once, and he knew exactly what he would be in for, only amplified with time and intimacy. It was something known and recognized by them, a landmark and a deep pulling vortex that was as real as the oasis they often were to each other. Fear of loss in people for whom denial of fear was a necessary tool of their trade, reflexive and often total.

That didn’t stop the fear, but it kept fear from changing the choices they had to make.

He couldn’t go without letting it be known that he cared. He didn’t just want, it wasn’t just bodies, it wasn’t just a job, and he didn’t have words. He wanted them, but he loved them so much it hurt. She could hear his voice in his head, see his face, all the times he’d said it, all the times he’d felt it, she knew. He didn’t have to say it again.

They were all at the moment in their lives when they had the most to lose and faced the greatest threat of loss.

She was sure she hadn’t experienced real love before, the kind that her survival depended upon, the kind she’d begun to lean on and be helpless and humble in its presence, which was always with these men.

She leaned on him and was helpless.

She had no comfort to offer them, no promises of ultimate triumph, only the determination she had always had to finish the mission. That wasn’t what Garrus needed now.

She did still feel the confident, defiant fire Thane had instilled in her, those glowing embers, and she had no words for that…and she shouldn’t give that to Garrus now. He had his own confidence and his own determination and didn’t need hers. He needed to be helpless and afraid, seen to be that by those he loved and accepted with it, for it, feeling it for all of them. She grabbed her own helplessness with both hands and let it breathe and speak.

Didn’t love mean she should be making plans to run away with them to someplace safe and screw everything else? Isn’t that what love should do to her if she really felt it? To risk anything and everything for them, their continued safety, their continued happiness?

Both their names for her were after unattainable, unreachable things and that was her nature.

For now she could be attained. She could be reached. She could give him everything she was right now.

Later she would be followed, and they would know she needed them.

Later Thane would brim over with the eyes of a dedicated killer, deceptively fast water-flowing muscle and lethal force.
Later Garrus would smile with intentionally overblown arrogance and humor, check his rifle and nod to any order she gave.

For now she would breathe and be there, fingers twined and skin warmed through plate and hide, wordless storms of hope and fear raging just out of range, out of their control, ready to charge straight into it for the best reasons they could find.

Not afraid of dying, but afraid of coming out of it alone.

She’d danced on her own grave. Her own death did not frighten her. She knew Thane had lived so close to death for so long as his only company that he did not fear his own death.

Garrus did, and they loved him for it, for being that immediate to life, more than they were, that much a force of love and hope that carried them all forward and gave them strength.

She could be leading them to death, or servitude as the Protheans had faced, and she might possibly gain nothing from it but despair, and from that she would not recover.

She resolved to die with them, fight for them, in that place, if it came to that. That was her only contingency plan.

Fear would not stop them, and these moments would be the only ground given, swiftly retaken with nods and laughter and dismissal once he could no longer hold them, once time made his arms fall away and duty slip into place on his features. Once they all turned to put on the armor they needed for the fight. Once their minds filled with innocent victims and carnage potential and absolute if they did not let their hands fall away and minds turn to war.

Right now was about the wellspring of reasons they had to fight for each other.

oOoOoOoOoOo

It was near time to go, half an hour before she needed to rally everyone. She was on Garrus’s lap, backward. They’d all showered and she’d had to in particular apply a bit of Medigel. Garrus had decided that once control was lost, it could stay that way, and his talons had had their way. In Reverie it was nothing except gratitude of seeing how much he felt, how much he wanted, fierce and still her tenacious protector.

Thane had dried her hair and set her back on Garrus’s lap, and was now laboriously braiding her hair while she breathed in Garrus’s scent and enjoyed Thane’s gentle hands.

Thane said “When we return, it would please me if you grew your hair out longer, Siha.”

She smiled at the mention of returning, silently grateful for the casual acceptance of success. She said “Mmm. I guess I make the hair rules now, huh? Regulation length is however long I say it is. Done”

Garrus lifted a strand of her hair and said “So you decide and it grows longer?”

She smiled and said “No, it will keep growing forever, we have to cut it to give it shape.”

Thane said “I will learn, allow me.”

She said “Also done.”

Garrus said “Hair is one of the weirdest things I’ve ever heard of, and knitting is another. Did humans come up with all the strange?”
She said indulgently “Yeah, probably most of it. Vorcha handle the rest of it.”

Garrus laughed until the movement jostled her head and then his laughter abruptly stopped. Thane had likely given him a look. Made her smile. Garrus’s hand rested on her back and they quietly waited for Thane to finish.

Thane stood and put a hand lightly on Jane’s head, and one on Garrus’s head, and he said “Amonkira, Lord of Hunters, look upon us. Grant that our hands be steady, our aim be true and our feet swift. You have ever granted the balance of the hunter and the hunted, and we now face extermination. Look upon us, Amonkira, cast your blessing upon my brothers and sisters, my family. Grant that your hand be steady, your aim be true and your feet swift. We must all fight those who hunt us.”

There was a moment of silence and Garrus said softly “Spirits, we take up the blade to guard the Clan, to honor those who came before us and took up the blade so we might live free. You are the breath of our hope and the light of our night fires that keeps back the dark. We fight with you, we fight for you. Come breathe with us, come light our path, come keep our children free, quicken their breath and brighten their eyes for when they must take up the blade to guard the Clan and the land where their ancestors rest.”

There was an expectant silence and she realized she had no ancestral prayer. Well…maybe. She said “Hooah.”

She almost laughed into the silence, and Garrus said tentatively “Remember that part where I said the humans got the majority of the weird?”

She said “All right, I probably can’t translate. It loosely means ‘anything and everything but no.’ and I’ve always heard an undertone of ‘Fuck yeah’ and ‘We’re better than you and we know it.’ But that’s all in the inflection. Okay. A prayer. This isn’t from my people…Hooah is from my people but…this is from me.” She shifted a leg so that her bare foot was on the deck, and she said “To the Normandy, who has kept us safe from the cold, sheltered us and cradled us in Her, who we gird in lightning and thunder, shield and fire. See us through to the end. See us back to the beginning. You are the Lady that holds our breath, you cast our light and allow us to hear each other’s voices, these beautiful voices from the worlds I would never have known without you. See us through.”

She drew in a deep breath.

It was time to go.

She reached up and Garrus bent his head to her and she kissed him.

She stood and wrapped her arms around Thane, kissed him.

Garrus stood and wrapped them both in his arms, touched his crest to their foreheads.

She stood there for stolen moments, then turned aside and gathered her armor and weapons.
Chapter 15

She did not consider for a moment allowing Garrus or Thane to leave her side. Miranda would lead the second team. Legion would go through the ducts.

When Jack rolled her eyes at the ‘cheerleader’s’ promotion, Jane said “Jack, you’ve had to requisition things through Miranda even though you would prefer she was a smear on a wall. Did she ever, once, fail to get you anything you needed?”

Jack scoffed and said “No, but fuck that, nobody cares…”

Jane said “I care that someone can be hated and still do a job for greater good. She’ll watch your back while you’re busy resenting her for stupid reasons. She’s tough and she won’t ‘accidentally’ let you make a lethal mistake out of dislike.”

Jack snorted and rolled her eyes.

Miranda didn’t stand straighter because she couldn’t, didn’t make any gesture other than a nod.

Jane said quietly “I have met some extraordinary people in my lifetime. I have fought at the side of some of them. Some of them, perhaps wisely, chose not to join us. There may be wisdom in the wider worlds. This is not a job for the wise. This is a job for the brave. Of all the extraordinary people I have had the opportunity to work with, whether or not they embodied something I valued, wisdom, skill, intelligence or force of will, I would not trade a single one of them for the people in this room. By your choices, by your actions, by your…lack of wisdom…” her voice veered to the sly and there were a few smiles, heads ducked and a long drawled laugh from Grunt “you have shown yourselves to be the best examples of courage. I have never been in better company. I have never been more confident that a group under my command would overcome what was set before them. That is your influence on me. I’m proud to be counted as one of you. Let’s go show them what it means to be a force of will, how we stand for the living, how we defy the presumed inevitable. We…are the inevitable.”

oOoOoOoOoOo

The majority of the fight was fast, greased, mechanical. She was hard, determined and aimed with the precision of a bullet, unable through her own will to change her trajectory. They’d all had so much practice she barely gave a command, everyone doing what was needed in the moment that it was needed.

There was a moment when Garrus clutched at his side and she imagined a burrowing creature or bullet tract through plate and sinew…and then he stood.

He was injured, she knew the scent of Turian blood, but he was hard, determined and unable through his own will to change his trajectory. Thane stayed on his injured side for the rest of the mission, and with their assurances that they could handle it by the way they met her eyes, she continued.

The emptying horror of seeing a living human being dissolve into some sort of acidic liquid had the earmarks of true insanity. Reapers made no sense, claiming to protect organic life, organic interests and doing so by breaking them down into elemental components, as though that carried some meaning. As though by extracting Thulium from Garrus’s skin, they held his essence. Organic life was of value because it self organized, was unique, fought for its own survival. People had to be
immobilized and broken down in order to be ‘preserved’ and once again she dedicated herself with every self organizing impulse to fight this delusional bid for domination and control.

Samara was the deepest hurt, carrying them through swarms with a barrier, barely able to walk, dispelling the charge in a knockback that made a smirk light Jane’s face.

When The Illusive Man contacted them through Garrus’s Omni Tool she was appalled by his suggestion of studying the tech. Pain radiated out from several foci, under armor, concussion and strain injuries that couldn’t be entirely stopped or was caused by the armor itself impacting her body. Falls and shots and jumps and stray seekers finding their marks at least partially had each collected a toll. She bit out a reply “Thank you for your input. You have provided for the mission to get done. I execute the mission. This base will be detonated. There is no use in this technology, it is an abomination of hubris. I can understand how that would appeal to you, but you don’t make that call. I do”

Garrus cut off transmission and that same smirk lit her face. It was good to be the Commander, if only to keep this bullshit from perpetuating itself through close contact with an egomaniacal racist.

She could not have chosen her team better, Thane’s and Garrus’s sniper rifles sounding with hers to bring down the monstrosity of a human-shaped Reaper. She was definitely scared, but shaking with so much adrenaline and smarting from so many minor wounds that they added up to a few major wounds, breathing purposefully to calm her aim, absolutely necessary to get it down, get it right, get it fast.

It wasn’t even the Reaper that did the most damage, it was the sliding and careening of the platform itself and the collapse of the station, all three of them running with blood from crush injuries and shattered armor pieces driven into the skin. Garrus was the most injured, Thane limping and supporting him, with her sprinting behind, turning occasionally to pick off pursuers, covering their backs.

Right here, right now, they’d done it and broken bones, broken skin, wrenched muscles and joints were worth it. Medigel had been distributed through her suit, enough pain killer through her Omni Tool to have time slow down, savoring each shot that protected their retreat. She’d done her job, she could die right here and be blissfully happy with the event, but she had people to look after, an example to set and there’s no way she would allow these mindless drones to take her down.

With the modular platforms gone after Thane’s and Garrus’s retreat, she had no choice but to fly, determination crowding out fear. Joker, of all people, was there, covering her, risking his own bones and no doubt doing himself harm, and the sight made her so very proud as she slammed into the side and held on. Garrus reached down with a bleeding and seemingly broken arm, braced by Thane anchoring him, and she was on, in and back, airlock sliding shut and they were away.

She waved Thane and Garrus down toward the elevator, toward the Med Bay, and after a brief nod from Thane to assure her he understood and would not succumb to shock as Garrus was appearing to, they were on their way to assistance. She spared two seconds to watch the blue and green blood trail they left and then turned back to the CIC, turned back to Joker, turned back to the fate of her ship, who had guarded them all and needed a witness, needed her there to see and help if she could, her voice the command from the ship’s brain to Her heart.

Smoke and the sound and screech of fried electronics and wrenched metal reached her. Her memory flashed back momentarily to the destruction of the SR1 but she had never been a fan of negative associative memory and she shoved it away. It was an artifact of the amygdala, scent strong and evocative. Intellectually she gained understanding of the process as she had so often in her career. She would not let it hijack her mind. There was no place for fear or hesitation or some cumulative
breakdown. She knew what to do with those when she wasn’t asleep. She ordered the association to sit the fuck down and shut the fuck up. Her chest ached with one deep, searing cold breath as though sucking in only space and then she had control of herself again. She still had suspended moments but no call to action. She needed only to observe. Joker was back at his station. He and EDI worked together in a complicated, wordless dance that she found the awe to admire, genius at play. They were blurring out of the base, through the debris field, back through the gate.

Short suspended and sobering minutes passed where pain and reality soaked back through like blood through a fresh linen bandage, spreading stain along the fibers. Once they were through the gate and verified they were not being pursued she punched the intercom.

She said “Normandy crew, we are secure back through the gate. Congratulations to each and every one of you, because of you, there will be no more humans going through that gate, nobody of any species to follow them. We have hull breech and systems failure. We are setting in at Omega for emergency repairs. Emergency protocols take precedence. Secure your station. If your assistance is insufficient to an emergency task, notify me immediately. If you are injured, report in to me and then to the Med Bay. All ground crew, report to Med Bay. Dr. Chakwas must provide me with status on each and every one of you before you will be released from duty.”

Situation reports began flowing in and she reassessed and assisted and got the immediate fires out, metaphorically and literally.

It wasn’t long before they were put in at Omega, stasis fields up for temporary repair holding. Everything holding.

When the smoke had cleared EDI tentatively said “The Illusive Man is requesting a conference.”

Jane sighed and said “All right, might as well get it over with. I’ve got a few things to say.”

EDI said “Channel open.”

Jane picked her way to the conference room and had to suppress a laugh at the pouting disapproval. She thought he was trying to make his way to menace but the helplessness was the key note here. She felt sorry for him. She had gambled, and she had won. She still could use Cerberus as an ally, and didn’t want them as an enemy, so she granted him the respect of the face to face without delay or power play. She had all the power she needed, the deck under her feet, now free and clear, entirely hers.

With her silent appraisal he bit out “You’re making a habit of costing me more than time and money.”

She said calmly “We have been of use to each other and I would like to continue that relationship. I can get things done. You can provide information. We don’t have to make each other happy, but we can be useful to each other. I appreciate my piracy phase and I plan to go Privateer. I will be able to coordinate with the Alliance, with Palaven, with Thessia, with the Salarian Dalatrass, with Tuchanka and the Quarian fleet. I may not have met all of your expectations, but you are smart enough to know there was a high probability of that happening. The expectation that I did meet is still of value to the human race. I can still be of value to the human race, but I set my mission from this point forward. I would like to keep an open line of communication. I appreciate my life back. I appreciate the investment you have made in me. I will continue to act in the best interests of disparate groups that I believe I can convince to work together. We would do better at least staying out of each other’s way. EDI has informed me of the controls you had on her, and possible contingency plans. I applaud your ruthlessness to the extent that it gave me the opportunity to do what I just did. Your investment in me is a bet that has paid out today. We’re square and I will take the ship and continue to do my job as I
define it. If your job coincides with my job in the future, please consider contacting me.”

He was business again, her tone and the time she had given him to compose himself taken to his greater advantage. He said neutrally “I do not begrudge you the ship or your life, Shepard. I thank you for the service you have provided to the human race. It is entirely possible that we will face challenges met better together than at odds.”

He cut off the contact on his own and she heaved a sigh.

It was done. She kept telling herself that. It was done. She leaned on the table to catch her breath, to deny once again a wave of nausea and the trembles of her knees, the wrenching pain in her ankle as it slowly swelled until she was convinced Karin would have to cut her boot off.

Time to report to the Med Bay herself.

Before she’d let Dr. Chakwas examine her she checked in on all status reports, who had been cleared and who had not. There had been no major injuries on crew that had remained on the Normandy. Even the ground crew had been able to manage the majority of their own injuries before she’d gotten to them with Medi Gel, but three people remained. Samara had requested a medical coma and Karin had obliged. She had done neural damage during her biotics protection and would be able to avoid the pain of recovery in this way. Garrus had several shattered plates and a burrowed track under one from a seeker, requiring abdominal surgery and a great deal of patching. He was unconscious, put under by Karin before he’d had an opportunity to disallow it. Thane had several deep wounds and burn tracks, but he was stable and conscious, having watched Garrus and now watching her.

With a deep breath and a release of control Jane contacted Miranda and said “Lawson, you’re in charge of disposition of crew and materiel, supervision of repairs. The Normandy is now officially a privateering vessel, I have informed the Illusive Man. No further communication with Cerberus unless it goes directly to me, unless you have private business to wrap up, of course. Please delegate as necessary to competent staff for relief. I’ll be in the Med Bay until Dr. Chakwas releases me. Anybody gives you any shit, send them down to me so I can yell at them.”

Miranda’s voice had a smile in it as she said “No need, Commander, I can yell for myself. Congratulations…Jane…and a speedy recovery.”

Jane made it to a bed and mentioned she’d probably need to have the boot cut off before a hissing at the side of her neck and a release of the choking tendrils of pain informed her that Karin had made her own assessment.

oOoOoOoOoOo

She woke up with three…very worried faces looking down at her. Garrus looked about to fall over, Thane’s skin was waxen and Karin looked…almost angry.

She raised eyebrows and said “Hi?”

Garrus shook his head and said faintly “She said hi.”

Karin shook her head and said “Is that the only word you know, Commander? What is my name?”

Alarmed, Jane checked her faculties, but realized the flaw in that, checking faculties with faculties. She said steadily “Your name is Karin Chakwas, doctor on the Normandy. I first met you when the SR1 was under the command of David Anderson.”

Karin smiled and said “Good. I have been concerned with brain damage. You lost…a great deal of
blood. I was concerned about ischemic loss of function. The tests were inconclusive and I was unable to wake you until now.”

Jane said “How long is now from then?”

Garrus said tightly “Five days.”

Jane’s eyebrows flew higher and then drew together. She said “Thank you for waking me at all? Blood loss?”

Karin nodded briskly and said “Compound fracture of your tibia, through the skin. Your suit filled up with blood and with the release of pressure…”

Garrus repeated “Blood loss.”

Karin said “You had an inadvisable amount of pain killer in your system, which behaved as an anticoagulant.”

Garrus repeated more loudly “Blood loss.”

Thané’s eyes were closed and she believed he was praying.

She said “Thank you.”

Garrus sucked in a deep breath and said “She said thank you.” He turned aside to a tray table and said “Karin, can I break this?”

Karin gave it a glance and said “Yes, but not with your left hand. The right should be fine.” She set about neurological checks and tests, questions and light shined in her eyes. There was a crash and a crack and then Garrus said gravely “Thank you.” Then there was another crash and a few more cracks.

Jane said “I need to speak to Miranda.”

Thané’s hand closed over hers before she could access her Omni Tool and he said “You do not.”

Karin shook her head and said “The ship is well. The crew is well. Her Commander is the only member of the crew that has not been released back to active duty. Miranda will remain in charge.”

Garrus said thoughtfully “And I can’t kill her myself.”

Karin said tartly “Thané held your leg together to limit further bleeding. Without his assistance under the circumstances I doubt I could have saved your leg, possibly not been able to revive you at all.”

Jane swallowed hard, but didn’t want to say she was sorry and have Garrus say ‘She said sorry’ and then break something else. So she raised her voice slightly and said with an offensive edge “On the other hand, Collector base gone.”

It apparently didn’t matter what she said, Garrus still broke something. That sounded like glass.

She consciously relaxed, sat back, and Thané’s hand went from restraining to finger-twined comfort. She was tired, and she felt weak, and as long as the ship was fine, she was too military to override Karin, too concerned about Garrus to argue anymore, and too grateful for Thané’s hand to do anything other than squeeze and close her eyes.

She chose to not speak.
She was relieved of duty, so Commander fell away and so did Shepard other than the duty of remaining under Karin’s care until she was released.

Garrus’s hands came to either side of her face and he touched his crest to her forehead with trembling hands, and she was just Jane.

**oOoOoOoOoOo**

Thane and Garrus took turns keeping her company in the Med Bay while she was there. Thane brought his holographic Pon-Ifa set and no doubt was gauging her mental acuity through her strategy. Compared to him she should be classified as ‘near brain dead.’ He beat her every time in themes of “what the hell was that?” and “slaughter” to “truly embarrassing slaughter, how did I not see that coming?” Pon-Ifa was not as straightforward a game as chess. There was a central circular board with satellites of eight more interconnected circles. There were nine separate types of pieces in nine arrays. Each fight on each of the satellite sections must be conquered before any movement to another board took place. Outer groups could move laterally to aid other sections of the board or centrally to aid the center fight, or having reached the center, radiate back out in any direction. Each of the different type of pieces in Pon-Ifa and the separate sections of the board represented aspects of government and society. The central board was for the struggle of opposing ruling tribes, and movement there was different for the ruling class pieces in their sphere than it would be for other classes. The Doyenne of the ruling class could move in her sphere only, but a priestess of Arashu could move in any sphere, but most effectively in her own. Resources were weak to spies, spies were weak to military, military was vulnerable to religion, religion was weak to media, and so it went. Each sphere had its strength and its weakness, its foil and purpose. So one outer board began as symbolically a media outlet competing with another media outlet, until one was eliminated or if the takeover was skillful enough, left in place as puppet pieces appearing to represent the opposite faction but moved by the conquering player. Then the media could become fully aligned with the battle in the central board, or the winner could move their own pieces and puppet pieces to dominate other sections of the board struggling in their own fight. So there were possible moves of straightforward action or puppet action, direct attack and subversion and capture of resources.

She was going to get her ass kicked for a good long while.

She’d tried to look up the rules and get maybe some strategy tips, but like much of Drell culture there was no record. Several beautiful Pon-Ifa sets were displayed at the Citadel in a Drell cultural center, but no rules or recorded games.

She considered her options and then made moves and was often gently reminded that what she was proposing was impossible. He was patient and understanding and a pleasure to play with, lightly teasing and correcting but never condescending, which must have been hard because she never won, often forgot intricacies and rarely remembered that a bold move with a representative from the priesthood into the media was going to be met with converging hijacking of that piece.

She was most often left with all of her remaining pieces hijacked.

Garrus was better at it than she was, but he didn’t win either so there wasn’t much in the way of superiority, mostly bonding over being habitually trounced.

She still was very tired and drifted off easily. Thane seemed able to predict those moments and would pause the game and pull the curtain, dimming local lights and easing her into sleep that might be fitful with fingers on her skin and his voice in her ear.

Garrus would pick her up, sit in the bed and put her on his lap and read to her.
Being just Jane even with the dizziness was just fine, after the drama of waking everyone progressed to calm and comforting around her and with so many visits she came to have faith that all was truly well and all she had to do is heal, so she did.

Released from the Med Bay after three days was not release back into Command entirely, she was still on restricted duty, only a few hours a day and Karin shared a significant glance between the three of them and instructions that there was to be…no…exertion.

Garrus barked a laugh and Thane nodded solemnly and Jane would have laughed but she was more than a little disappointed and then shortly after relieved. She was not up to exertion. She still had a nasty limp, felt periodically ready to pass out unpredictably and a contraption below the knee that was not terribly sexy. Nausea was a constant companion. She was also aware that it wasn’t simply because of her. All three of them had been gravely injured and needed time to heal.

Garrus and Thane escorted her to the cabin where she was solemnly kissed and where she immediately declared she had some work to do, and they did not look surprised.

She checked in with Miranda and spent some time getting briefed on the state of the ship, the state of repairs and the state of the crew and everything was in order. For a span of days, nothing terrible had happened. Well, Grunt had another hangover, but she wouldn’t have to check on him.

She tried to shuffle through correspondence and there were two…separate bits of correspondence claiming to represent “The Flock” and she read them until she started to feel some dizziness creep into the frustration.

One read “Commander Shepard, Congratulations on your victory. We See.”

Ominous, really. Without any specifics it could just be a fishing guess. It could be intended to make her suspect a mole. It could just be random grandiosity and she wasn’t going to touch it.

The other one said only “You will know us by our words.”

Great. Cryptic.

We? Us? How many people were huddled over a console composing this bullshit?

She kept them in a save file but didn’t see from either of them a link to reply. Anonymous delivery. There was a long list of more correspondence, but suddenly she didn’t want to look at any of it. Not just yet. Not with this headache, not with her leg throbbing along with her heartbeat. She had no answers anyway. “Thank you for seeing, what the fuck?” “Which words are we talking here?”

She stared at the console for a little while, contemplating nothing in particular but the interest in not being in pain. Thane as accustomed the last few days brought her some food, medication, and when she’d finished it, lifted her to the bed, set her down in the center under covers, and stroked her hair. Garrus came on the other side and she drifted, easing a bit further into feeling home, the ship finally truly hers. She could heal at least a few days before those lists of long correspondence drew her back into new and exciting ways to get herself killed.

She dreamed of Pon-Ifa, but more specifically not being able to play, not knowing where to move, looking at the plethora of spaces open and not knowing how to get there. The light on the board faded and she was standing immobile with nowhere to go as other pieces converged and her color faded from red to yellow, the two colors on the Pon-Ifa board, and then to a shimmering blue, a husk, a Reaper ship unfurling above her like fingertips. Once the armature of the ship grasped her to make a move, she woke.
Calming heart and stifling swallow, she didn’t move. Both Garrus and Thane were still asleep and being the only one awake among them was rare. She wondered how much sleep they’d gotten, or how much restful sleep they’d managed in the last few days. Garrus looked like he was about to fall when she’d woken and right now he looked fallen, exhausted. Karin was excellent at plate repair, but she could tell where it had taken place, and there were new angry scars burrowing under. She reached out a hand and caught the edges of her fingers on his sternum blade, not intending to wake him. She just enjoyed the connection, so warm he felt like sunshine.

She turned her head and looked at Thane, his skin looking better than when she’d first woken. He had no lasting injuries or scars, and she wondered about Drell physiology, or Hanar surgery that allowed that, or biotic abilities. He had no lasting outer scars from any of his injuries and it seemed to suit his deceptive nature and also rob him of the character of incidents defining his unmeasured bravery. She’d known Garrus without his scars, but it was such a part of his story now she knew he wouldn’t want to go without them. She had imagined Zaeed without his scars and he seemed diminished.

Thane was undiminished, whole and unreadable other than how he looked, how he moved, water that flowed back in to fill any attempted cut. He often woke the moment she did, but for now she could shift her head only slightly as she might in her sleep and watch him breathe, watch his skin subtly shift in the dim light, the blue from the fish tank light giving a familiar glow to the green. He had moved away in his sleep or she had moved away, and she feared waking him by touching him but wanted to risk it. She moved her hand until it was on his forearm, lightly and slowly until she could relax the tension in her arm and rest. He slept and his hum made her smile, the pads of her fingers taking in venom that right now made her comforted, sleepy, at home. Reaching out to the men she loved, she felt for heart beats. Thane’s was easy to find, but for Garrus she needed to move her hand to hide between gaps in his plate, a spot unscarred. Harder to find than she’d like. With both their heart beats under her fingertips she listened for the faded thrum of the drive core, the three rhythms disorganized until her mind worked out a pattern that held all of them.

With solemn thanks to the ship for caring for them, moments of attention to each breath and heartbeat in thanksgiving and an apology and gratitude to her leg for still being around, she drifted back into sleep and had no nightmares.

When she started to stir from sleep, she was aching, the meds wearing off, Garrus was with her, Thane was gone. Garrus brought her medication and food, something to drink, and she was grateful, stretched out a bit to clear the sleep, clear the pain, focus again.

When she seemed to be getting a little more human and started to struggle out of bed with the leg contraption snagging on the covers it looked like he was going to help her, but he pushed her back down to the bed. He kept a hand on her shoulder, looming over her, and she met his eyes. He looked, again, like he was ready to fall over, mandible tight, eyes narrowed, and she could swear a twitch of his jawline, clenched. He said, not angry, but not…not angry, exactly “I have a few things to say.”

She nodded and sat back. He kept his hand on her shoulder, no longer restraining, and sat down on the edge of the bed, trying to make an effort to be less intimidating, she thought, but that wasn’t going to work.

He said “You are a very reasonable person, and right now I have no use for that. Just listen to me. Having grown up in a large, loud Madlis, and often being one of the most restrained people there, I find myself in the bizarre position of being the most demonstrably emotional of the three of us. First off, let me be reasonable for at least a moment. Thank you for getting us all alive through the Collector base. I feel that, and I always will, and it will get stronger once I get other crap out of my
way. I’ll be able to talk about that later and I’m sure I’ll have bar stories with admiration in my eyes and all the stuff you’re used to from me, but there are a few more things that are unreasonable and I don’t really give a damn whether or not you want to hear them.”

He looked at her closely and she nodded, receptive and curious. His hand moved from her shoulder to her face and he stroked the back of a knuckle along her cheekbone. He said “You are so beautiful.” That seemed more of an aside and she stopped herself from making a joke about that being unreasonable. He said “I made you a promise, always be there or not be there, no fear, no failing, no folly, and I can’t keep that promise. I’m sorry. I’m afraid. I have failed. I seem to be made of folly.”

She wanted to reassure him but he shook his head again and said “Listen. Just…don’t respond. I know my job is to accept your death if it happened with military poise, but I didn’t even manage that the first time and went so far out into despair that I couldn’t have found my way back unless you found me. I have spent the last few days terrified. I didn’t know how injured you were. I didn’t drag you down to the Med Bay with me and even worse, I know if I had tried, I would have failed. So I failed. Your face…you weren’t even limping and all the blood was pooled up to your thigh…for how long? You just kept going and…and I don’t care anymore if you knew how bad it was or you didn’t, you made some choice to inject yourself with medication until you wouldn’t know. It’s that moment right there that makes me afraid, makes me fail, gives me folly. I feel like as part of this…deal, I’m supposed to be able to set that moment aside, and honestly, I thought I could. I promised you that and I can’t deliver. I know if I had died, you’d blame yourself every single day of your life for that. So don’t give me any hypocritical speech here about how you were in charge so you bear the responsibility. I can’t see it that way. It’s impossible. All my talk about rescuing you and keeping you alive and I could barely cover my own station. I don’t know what comes next. I do need to tell you that you can’t count on me to not be afraid, or to not fail, or to not lose myself in folly when I see you, when I hear you, when I have the right to touch you. I feel…like I’ve violated what you asked of me. I don’t know if you want what I have to give if it comes with this. I thought I could read you or help you and…I didn’t, and maybe I can’t…”

He hadn’t addressed her by any name, Commander or Shepard or Jane or Kerim. He seemed to shy away from all uses of address, like he hadn’t the right to define her or project his idea of her.

He was right, and she was harsh and unyielding in places and she had expected him to be the same. Between her focus on the mission and Thane’s ability to roll with and recover from anything without outward sign, Garrus was here.

She said quietly “Garrus, I didn’t ask you to make that promise, but you haven’t broken it. You kept me alive. I promised you that I would love you, and that I would be available, and that I would be…very…grateful, and that’s what you have from me. If you were exactly like me…I wouldn’t need you as much as I do.”

He closed his eyes and her hand reached out to his and his fingers grabbed onto hers and squeezed. She said “You promised to be with me without fear. That doesn’t mean no fear of anything ever, it means that the fear won’t allow you to change your choices. Do you want to…do you want to leave? Does being with me cause too much fear?”

Garrus jerked his eyes to hers and said “What? No! No. I’m not afraid of that…I didn’t know if you…”

She smiled and said “Not me. So that’s the folly part?”

His mood was too turbulent to smile but his grip loosened on her a little. She said “We have something in common. We’re hard on ourselves. I don’t say ‘too hard’ because in our line of work
not being hard enough, disciplined enough, is always the reason for failure. We didn’t fail. You didn’t fail. I didn’t know my injury was that bad, but right here I’ll be hard enough on myself to say yes, I made a call. I was willing to die to get it done, I wasn’t willing to tolerate being overwhelmed by pain. You’re the one out of the three of us that tends to actually point out pain, help us heal it while we’re busy bleeding out and saying not to bother, it’s nothing. I need you. I love you, I am available, and will always be available to you. I don’t care if you’d managed to trip on your way out of the Normandy and had to go back with a broken face, Garrus, I love you. Don’t doubt it. Don’t ever doubt it or think that you have to be the way you were when we started. It’s past that, and people change, and I have never been this much in love. Of all my…undesirable qualities…I do know my own mind. You haven’t broken a promise I didn’t ask you to make.”

He looked at her fiercely and said “You ran on a broken leg, covering for me.”

She said “I did, and I’d do it again, and if I died doing it, I want you to be proud of me.”

He growled softly and said “Of course I’d be proud of you, stupid woman, it’s the dying that’s the problem.”

She shrugged and said “So we’re both resolved we don’t want to die. Glad we cleared that up.”

He huffed a heavy breath and said “This is why I asked you not to talk. It’s like riding a thresher maw. No problem getting on if she holds still, but getting off is going to be hard.”

Her smile quirked and she said “C’mon, Garrus, I can always help you get off.” Under all his apology he was angry, and she knew it. She knew the mechanic well. Love fueling the fear engine with the smoke of anger. She said helpfully “You seem tense.”

He shook his head and smiled and said “I’m considering a mutiny just so I could keep you chained to the bed here, safe, while I went and shot things, came home and told you the head count before making you moan.”

She raised a brow and said “Hell of a fantasy, there. That’d be an interesting day. So what’s stopping you now?”

He said with a sigh “Doctor’s orders. No…exertion.”

She said “I know for a fact that you do not always follow orders. If I’m chained up, how much exertion is there if all I can do is moan?”

His eyes darkened and he said mockingly “Do all human women only think about sex?”

She shrugged and started to shrug out of her shirt, saying “I don’t know. All this talk about mutiny, chains and moans, though, you can’t blame me. I did say I was in love. I am also an opportunist.”

He stilled her hands and pulled her shirt back up. He said “If I’m going to mutiny, stop helping. In fact, just stop talking. Moans only. Or my name.” He took her hand and said “Activate your Omni Tool here. Setting an alarm on your heart monitor, if it goes above…oh hell, what are human heart rates?” She leaned into him and watched as he did a little research and figured out resting heart rates and exercise heart rates and set a limit of 130 beats per minute, commenting that humans have ridiculously fast little hearts. So he set her Omni Tool to track her pulse and alarm, and it started putting out a soft bleating marking her heart rate. She almost smiled at safe, non-exertional, non-chained, non-mutiny sex with a monitored heart rate.

This…is how he broke rules.
Rebel to the core.

He was the most adorable nerd in existence and she had about two seconds to think that before he had her pinned, hands and legs stretching hers out, and her heart immediately skipped a beat and then started beating harder.

He was careful with her injured leg, only nudging it with his leg to put her into position, held her ankle down with taloned feet, held her hands out wide to the side, braced on his elbows and knees, and he kissed her. He kissed hard, breasts pressed against plates, her wrists twisting in his hands until she had fists, fingers itching to run along plate edges, touch his throat.

Her heart started to hammer and climb in rate until the sound grew louder, closer to the alarm. He gentled his kiss, loosened his grip, pulled back subtly until the alarm slowed. Reverie from his mouth on hers lowered her heart rate further, everything good, everything perfect.

She still was in pain, still was lightheaded and strained, but it didn’t matter when he touched her, he was home. She was safe. Her heart raced into a deep, heavy pound when he said “Close your eyes. Hold still.” The race of her heart at his voice made him chuckle, and that sound set off further pounding. He sat partially and released her wrists, dragging his talons down the insides of her arms, goose bumps and a moan.

He licked long lines over exposed skin, dragged his fingers over her, trailed talons, just over arms and legs and waist, and her heart pounded hard until he had to back off and she was trying to concentrate on breathing to slow her heart rate, relaxing her fists that would curl into tension as his mouth passed over skin. When he spread his palms over her breasts her heart rate went insane and he laughed, idling with his tongue on her throat, hand at the curve of her hip until it settled back down but always on the edge of alarm. Reverie made her forget what she was trying to do, wanting to give everything, wanting to wrap her arms around him, her body unrelentingly tense. She could relax her shoulders, distracted by his talons grazing skin, carving away fabric and sliding fingers and tongue patiently, maddeningly, she lost track and then her shoulders were tense and her fists were clenched and the sound reminding her that he would back off until she could control her heart rate. Deep gulps of held breath and it was no use, he’d stop and that would make her heart pound harder with frustration.

His mouth returned to her throat and he breathed with her, set a pace, restraining herself from arching into him. He bit down hard and then kissed her through moans, trembling, out of her mind. He held her wrists back down to remind her, straightened her leg, kissed her until she was melted and flowing and she found a place where she could breathe and feel and her heart was slow and steady and joyous.

She lost the rhythm again when he slid his talons under her back to hook around her shoulders, slid his cock into her and her arms and one leg came around him, alarm blaring, and he didn’t stop her and didn’t leave, mouth on hers, his voice possessive and raw, the name he rarely called her, Jane, against her mouth.

Trip hammer tension released from her muscles in full Reverie, no more teasing or stopping, his hands pulling her in tighter, kissing her mouth, her throat, and he rolled to the side, protecting her leg with his leg between hers to cradle the weight. Alarm blare crested and faded and she listened to the erratic and unpredictable beat she’d just become familiar with, until his hand passed over and deactivated the alarm.

As promised she was only moans and his name as he held her, joined and unquestioningly moving forward with the fear, and the failure and the folly and the forgiveness.
Here's a warning that this chapter and future ones are triggery. Entering into non-con situations and complications of character with vivid doses of graphic violence and psychological distress, even torture. Non-con will be a theme that runs through the rest of the story.

I've been very concerned about writing on the subject of non-con and have failed in my previous attempts, unwilling to publish. Those were me making up a new situation, this is an existing situation that involves non-con already. I'm taking the view that the title 'Delicate Subject' can have multiple meanings. There's a controversy among authors and readers and this is my take on it: Writing about non-con can be exploitative. Not writing about it when it's an inescapable theme can be oppressive and reinforce to those who have experienced it that the only path available to them is silence and endurance. The reality is that talking or writing about it can in fact make someone's experience worse indisputably and not better. For some it might be cathartic, for some distasteful, for some a turn on, for some it's just a massive allergic reaction and their emotional throat closes up and they can't breathe. That last group would be my main concern. Maybe you know or maybe you don't know which person you are. So thus this warning. With some of the ways I've envisioned these characters and their backstories, I could either shy away from it because it's going to be more trouble than it's worth and I lack the skill required to express it...or do it anyway, possibly badly, definitely lacking skill, and expect trouble. This is less about this particular story, which is fiction, and more about real stories and an individual's incomplete or damaged ownership of their own will.

I'm going to go into the subject of indoctrination and it's impossible to avoid non-consent issues, it's a hijacking of a person. Thane's background the way it was expressed in game and through my imagining it was entirely non-consent in origin. So there are actual reasons I'm doing this, but they may not be reasons you care to explore.

This isn't intended to be exploitative, but everyone's line is in a different place and I mean it when I say...here there be dragons. Not going forward is an option that each reader should take into account and I respect that choice and also otherwise would like to hear feedback, here or privately, email recidiva@live.com if you're up to it.

Apologies, hugs and tissues in advance.

+++++

The ship was fully repaired before she was. It took her a few weeks before the dizziness fully settled, but only a few days before she was restored to duty, taking back the reins from Miranda and checking in with everyone, redistributing provisioning and refitting berths for the new roster.

This being Omega, on screening EDI had to reject 1 out of 5 oncoming shipments for irregularities, but mostly the miscounted and counterfeit sort, only a few being the explosive or bugged sort. It would be nice if this was unusual, but it wasn't. When they traced counterfeit deliveries the suppliers knew nothing of it, suspecting their communications had been bugged and shipments swapped,
promising to arrange better security. She doubted it would make much of a difference. The Normandy was a prized destination and she might be putting suppliers at risk. The suppliers were… on Omega…and that said enough about them. Necessary in this case in the emergency circumstances, but she’d known if she’d had a choice she wouldn’t have put in on Omega. She sent a list of irregularities to Aria, asked for advice on trustworthy suppliers, just for the fun and spite of it.

Omega was the first jump off point for a lot of crew that were leaving, so they threw a party in Afterlife to celebrate victory and say goodbye to Tali, Zaeed, Grunt, Samara and Jacob.

Tali was going to be her inside Quarian. Tali had not been able to seriously consider staying on the Normandy, and Jane agreed the best place for her right now was attempting to bring sanity to the Quarian political process. Tali sat on Garrus’s lap for the majority of the party, getting progressively drunker and unbearably sad about leaving.

Jane was trying to reassure her, as was Garrus, while Tali was slurring the words “But I’m abandoning you. You! I’m abandoning you again, Shepard!”

Garrus had tipped his head to her helmet and Jane had said “Tali, you’re not. I think you’re doing the right thing. It’s a hard thing, which means that it has more significance. We would love for you to stay, but…your people are crazy. Kinda like mine. It’s going to get worse. They need you. I need you to let me know if they’re going to implode and take out that sector of space.”

Legion had apparently heard and he stepped to the side of Tali, tentatively put a hand on her shoulder and said “Creator Tali’Zorah, there are things that must change. Shepard Commander has no authority among Quarians. You do. You have proven yourself to your people several times over, through saving the Citadel, through providing information about the Heretics during your pilgrimage, through your actions at the Collector base. Conversations with you have convinced us that peace is possible, that we can all turn toward cooperation. It will be difficult, but nobody else can do it.”

To everyone’s surprise, Tali lurched off of Garrus’s lap and draped herself over Legion with a mournful and appreciative sob.

Garrus’s mouth quirked at Legion’s alarm but he said “You found good words, Legion. It’s true, Tali, though I will miss you every day.”

Tali sobbed a bit harder, turned to Jane for a painful hug, then back to Garrus’s lap, turned facing him and crying until Jane patted her back and left them murmuring to each other.

Jane turned to Legion and said “Would you care for a dance, Legion?”

Legion stood still and his plates moved in agitated array. He said “You are an odd person, Shepard Commander.”

She laughed and grabbed his hand and said “Damned right. Come on. I’ll show you a few steps.”

He didn’t argue and couldn’t dance, and she had too much fun to give a damn. She had to go slow, her leg was still tender and painful, but the bulky medical device was off, replaced by a compression mesh. She was going to have a hell of a few nasty scars where bone had punched through in several places and flesh had split. At the end of the song, which came quickly and to his obvious relief, she took his hand and said “There is gratitude you are staying, Legion.”

Legion gave an awkward attempt at a bow and said “There is gratitude to have a place, Shepard Commander. Allowed to coordinate with Creator Tali’Zorah and with you, odds of success against the Old Machines, for the Geth, rise. The Geth shall rise.”
She smiled and said “Sounds like that would make a great vid, too.”

Legion said informatively “The best vids have many explosions.”

She laughed and said “You’ve been talking to Zaeed.”

Legion answered “It is a common opinion.”

She agreed and said “To many explosions, Legion. Glad you will be there with me.”

Legion nodded solemnly “To many explosions, Shepard Commander.”

Zaeed was occupied during the party, surrounded by friends that were indistinguishable from mercs, dancers, employees of the bar or models. He’d decided to take his outrageous fee that he hadn’t expected to live to spend, and spend it. Perhaps there was some wisdom on that ship after all. And now it was leaving. She wished him long life and helped with the bank balance. He should not have to work again, but she suspected he’d spend a great deal of time tracking Vido with his fortune.

Jacob had said he had personal business to attend to and she didn’t ask any further. He’d told her that it had been an honor to work with her, that she was an inspiration, and she shook his hand and thanked him for his service, wished him the best of luck with his endeavors, whatever they were.

Although the party was also partly in Samara’s honor, she did not attend. Omega and Afterlife had bad memories for her. A solemn visit, a shared meditation session, Samara releasing herself from Shepard’s service formally had taken place on the Normandy and Samara had already gone on her transport, though she was celebrated in absentia. The loudest toast was from Zaeed, to a ‘God damned beautiful woman who could kick my arse.’

Grunt…broke a lot of things. He got on a stubborn rant about the fragility of goods that weren’t made on Tuchanka, and…well…Aria knew she was good for the money. So far the generous deposit that was turning into a fee had kept security from putting holes in Grunt. She had to intervene a few times to keep Grunt from breaking people, and Thane also watched over him when she was circulating. Grunt finally got his wish for a training session with Thane after Thane had disabled him within seconds. Grunt spent the rest of the party demanding more demonstrations until Thane left him slumped over in a booth. Jack laughed, promised disingenuously to make sure Grunt didn’t get robbed, then shrugged and walked away.

Jane looked at Grunt skeptically and asked Thane “Does he have a ticket yet to Tuchanka?”

Thane replied “I do not know. I would not suggest leaving him here unattended. Aria does not appear to lack a sense of humor. No doubt along with your reimbursement, she would not mind conscripting him to the Blood Pack.”

She chuckled and said “You sound like you approve.”

Thane drawled “With my sympathies to the Blood Pack.”

Jane laughed and activated her Omni Tool said “EDI, what are Grunt’s plans? Does he have a berth here?”

EDI responded “He is leaving in 14.26 hours on the Nadir, docking berth 2937.”

Jane sighed. Terrible name for a ship. She attributed it to the bizarre Krogan sense of humor or it meaning something else. She asked EDI “Is he already checked in?”
EDI answered “Yes.”

Jane put an arm under Grunt’s shoulder and Thane sighed and put an arm around the other, and they lugged Grunt to the transport pad and from there to the docking berth. When Grunt woke up and tried walking and drunkenly arguing for himself, Thane put him out again quickly. Jane asked “Is that good for a growing Krogan?”

Thane said “Redundant nervous system. It should do him no harm. If it were to do him harm, I doubt the deficit could be detected.”

Jane laughed. When they got him to his berth and rolled him into bed in his fortunately private cabin with all his stuff already there, Jane kissed him on his sleeping cheek, filmed the moment for posterity and sent the clip to his Omni Tool, waving goodbye and then prompting a reluctant Thane to wave goodbye as well. She said a cheery “Have fun storming Tuchanka!”

She was so very proud of her crew, but the celebratory edge was wearing off and fatigue setting in. She was going to miss the energy of the renegade Normandy, but the people that remained had her loyalty and full support. Jack, Legion, Thane and Garrus were available for ground crew missions. Miranda would opt to continue in her executive function, maintaining the Normandy, monitoring Thane’s condition, monitoring Jane’s not-deadness, corresponding with Oriana and staying mobile, away from Cerberus and retribution. Mordin would continue research and coordination on Reaper tech, Kepral’s syndrome and his other projects. Kasumi would technically consult, but would also be periodically and unpredictably uncommunicative and unavailable. She spent a great deal of time on unlocking the information in Keiji’s graybox. The Normandy now had a specialized transport craft for her and an additional shuttle, assuming that more people would need to come and go on special projects, legitimate and...otherwise.

Jane stroked a hand over Grunt’s loudly snoring form and he swatted at her, and she decided that was the best note for a farewell. She linked an arm with Thane and they left the ship. They were quiet and he steered her away from the direction back to Afterlife, led her not far to an alcove that had a stunning view of the center column of Omega and the red glow of enormous spokes. He sat on a ledge and pulled her down into his lap.

Thane had spent more time lately in the Med Bay than she had, and despite looking perfectly fine, Karin had assured her that he had been, again, in a great deal of pain, refusing medication and insisting on keeping a clear head. They hadn’t had much time together during their separate recoveries other than public Pon-Ifa games and private moments spent quietly in bed, tangentially touching each other, Thane respecting the no exertion rule. He was more damaged than she was internally. Karin had briefed her on his condition. Drell didn’t bruise like humans or scar like Turians and he had no outward sign of the internal derangement of his organs caused by massive crush injuries. His skin was not always an accurate indicator. Karin said he had not allowed her near him and had made one quiet, unrepeatable and effective threat that kept her from trying to disable him or asking anybody else to try. He’d received some treatment before he’d…held her leg together…but after that he had spent days internally bleeding, coughing up blood, watching over Garrus and Jane, unwilling to sleep until Garrus regained consciousness and convinced Thane to rest.

Garrus had talked Thane into being willing to be scanned and treated, with Karin’s promise to not sedate him and Garrus’s promise to watch over Jane and wake him if...the if went undefined but Garrus had promised, any if, he would. After treatment Thane had only fallen asleep after two days with Garrus holding onto him at Jane’s bedside, Garrus’s hand under Jane’s and Thane’s hand on top of theirs.

And so it had gone while she was oblivious, time torturing the men she loved, both trying to comfort
the other and able to do so only so far, their own wounds and separate reckoning of internal guilt and blame rebounding through their nervous systems as their hearts refused to shut down.

She understood vigilance to the exclusion of all other things.

She was grateful and horrified to have earned that level of devotion.

They hadn’t spoken of any of this, and Thane did not seem inclined to visit the events after the Collector base, moving on as though it were a completed chapter, an assassination, the mission specs buried out of habit, training and inclination.

Words clamored but stuck behind her teeth and clogged her throat until she swallowed them back, opting to sit, look at the impossibility wrought in the cold dead of space that was Omega. She’d seen in Liara’s files that Thane was responsible for the one-hour massacre that had eliminated 37 people from the station. Out of curiosity she’d done some research of her own. The massacre had taken much less than an hour, from the forensics it looked like simultaneous explosions and poisons and traps had done the majority of the damage. The few single head shot bullet wounds matched the gun Thane favored, the gun used to shoot Nassana. It was likely the only external insight into his career she was going to get, and it had happened after Irikah’s death so it probably had been related to that. It being Omega, the event was publicized, spotty surveillance footage of blurred green in his shade, no identification, just astronomical rewards for ‘information leading to’ the assailant. Bodies of several very bad people had never been recovered and had been listed as “last known location” verifiable only up to that hour. She suspected they were some of the victims Thane had chosen to ‘linger,’ possibly using the massacre as destruction of infrastructure and communication, a distraction to flush out those he was truly after.

She wasn’t going to ask.

She wasn’t going to ask about anything.

She closed her eyes, held onto his hand and let the gentle trance of venom soak through her, appreciating the barbed safety of his arms around her and the smooth textured glide of his skin under her fingertips.

They were concealed from the view of the main pedway, but someone with a cigarette had ventured over to the railing to take in the view himself. She ignored him and the scent of smoke, wrapped in her own moment, until he said menacingly “Well, isn’t that just fucking adorable.” Her eyes opened and her facial expression didn’t change as she looked at him. Human. Tall. Purposely intimidating. Scarred. Armored and armed. He took a long drag, blew out and tossed the cigarette aside, said “You’ve got to be the stupidest tourists I have ever seen, but this is my lucky day. How much did she pay for a Drell whore? I bet I can get more for you.” The man drew a gun and said “Come on out. Can’t decide if I should sell you or just rent you out high and hard for a little while first, sell you once your…curb appeal has gone down.”

Thane’s demeanor changed subtly and she took her cue from him. He made no sound but his hand on hers held her down physically so she couldn’t rise, while appearing as though he was holding onto her for support. The few steps he took he looked terrified, diminished…mincing and fearful, hunched with his hands up, shaking…and it was impossible that was Thane. She wasn’t scared for a moment, but she was fascinated and managing to hide it behind feigned terror. Her performance didn’t matter because the man wasn’t looking at her. Their attempted tormentor appeared to straighten, swell in size like a threatening animal with hackles up and fur puffed out, enjoying intimidation and relishing a promise of good times ahead as he said “Fuck, I haven’t had snake head in a while. You’re worth ten human bitches.” The man lifted Thane’s chin to look at him and from there it was a blur. Thane struck him in the neck so he couldn’t make a sound other than a horrible
Thane simultaneously had removed the man’s weapon from his hand and placed it in its holster. He then broke every finger on the offending hand inside his armored gloves, piercing bent shards of metal and broken bone and bleeding, and then Thane took his other hand, broke every finger there until metal snapped open. The man was trying to scream but couldn’t, purple face etched deep with pain. Thane retrieved the gun from its holster and shot through the flexible joints of both knees, crushing the man’s toes under his heels as a seeming afterthought. The man began to topple back, but Thane pulled him forward until he collapsed down, Thane’s knee met the man’s face, ruining it in a spatter of blood and bone.

The man’s broken body slumped to the floor and he…gurgled…until Thane’s foot on his neck with a twist and a muffled snap ended it except for a few remaining twitches.

Thane turned back to her and she was snarled with processing what it was she should be feeling. Should it be recognition that it was what she would have wanted to do? Horror? Surprise? Jealousy? Gratitude? Was that what she would have wanted to do or would she have disarmed him? Shot him? Would she have caused as much pain as she could as Thane did? Would she have had the courage or honesty it took to do it when someone was watching her or would she have shot him once, clean, with regret later of lost chances and a false sense of moral superiority? If it weren’t Omega, and it had happened on the Citadel, would she have immobilized him and turned him over or…murder…

She had no idea but Thane looked sure. He looked at her face and the turmoil or…lack of turmoil there…tilted his head slightly in consideration and then set his jaw, came to her, lifted her by the waist and pressed her back further, around a support strut, concealed from view in the relative shadows.

His hand was at the back of her neck, his forehead to hers. His breath was steady, his pulse slow under her fingertips on his skin. She was the only one with racing heart and panting breath. He said “I have watched you, seen your face as I took a killing blow on any of the many of those who we have come across that have tried to demean you, though often Garrus’s rifle found them first. You never choose them as targets. You leave them for us…and the more time I spend with you…the more I see your face…I only want to know, Jane…tell me if the person or people that raped you are dead or do they still walk somewhere safe from your targeting but not mine?”

She closed her eyes, speechless, flooding with memory and damned by her face. Memories led to dreams of binding and pain and damned by her face. Memories led to dreams of binding and pain and she guessed she talked in her sleep. His hand tightened and his voice drew her back, opened her eyes, commanding. She was so accustomed to encouraging him to express his whims and indulging them by habit, she wanted to answer when he said, to simplify the request, “You do not need to think to answer. Are they alive? Yes or no.”

She narrowed in on what he asked and she could give him that, a bitten-off piece of a story she’d been forced to swallow, something she could spit out, purge. She said “No.” She hoped he’d believe her. It was true, and there was no need to lie. Words slipped out to help convince him “He was a sick animal and I couldn’t let him live. He hurt people before me, he would have hurt more people after me.” Then a cold spear of something else struck her and she remembered… how he’d known she sometimes wished for death… and maybe she didn’t have to talk in her sleep. She asked “And you? Are yours dead or do they still walk?” She remembered drinks bought and ignored, that he’d just been called a whore, more valuable than she could ever be, that being a Drell and being who he was drew eyes and speculation, had drawn both from her, was inseparable from who he was, that he was trained to use it.

Trained to use it.

Thane’s breath drew in sharp and there was a moment of hesitation, but he had demanded honesty
and he would give it. He said “I do not know their names. It was part of my training, my introduction to sex at age 14 was being told to volunteer for an unknown testing vital to my education, and that to fail would invalidate all my prior service. A trial of courage and endurance. I chose, and I took…” he seemed to spit something out himself “Pride…in enduring the trial. Four people. A Drell female, a Turian male, an Asari female, and a Drell male. Through a cycle or longer, I do not know the length of time. No food, no water, no rest, and every act they could fit into that time frame. I obeyed orders. At the end I was asked to thank them for my education, and I did.”

She was outraged and sick and started to cry, shaking her head in denial, rocking her forehead against his. Her story choked and slid back in her throat and all that was left was his story, disgust and pity and horror. There was more to her story, more to his, tips of icebergs that sheeted unyielding into cold, sliding into dark.

Right now he only cared that there was nobody else he had to kill, had she been unable. She had been able.

He said calmly “I saw it on your face at the slavers. I see it in your face when you are threatened specifically for your beauty, for your gender, for your daring to exist as a soldier despite expectation of ornamentation and potential sexual value. There is no degradation of gender or beauty in Drell culture. I have been exposed to it often and intensely in your presence. I do not understand how you, who have defied so many expectations, allow this to happen and will laugh at it, dismiss it as harmless. I will never understand, and each time the pattern repeats my rage grows. At them. At you for allowing it. I will murder without mercy when it happens. I will cause pain, set an example you should set. Be prepared. It is distinctly human behavior and something inexplicable in you, human in you, has driven you to expect it, allow it. The behavior spreads to honor-lost Turians, Batarians and Vorcha, knowing they can taunt you without reply because human males do it and you will allow it because you are…” He spit a word again after hesitation “Accustomed…to it enough to have grown numb to it. I claim the right to kill them, Jane, and I claim the right to return to you when you look at me as though you wished they had more fingers.”

Something inside her stirred, stretched, almost preened, seen in hibernation and admired for sleek fur and sharp claws and teeth. Something blood-spattered. She had never told anybody, but he knew from watching her, from knowing her fight responses, from knowing something was in the way of her otherwise restless trigger finger. From knowing what it had done to him, kindred and code.

She didn’t argue with him, acknowledging that humans like the one whose blood was pooling and cooling were vile and deserved a painful death. As Commander Shepard she was Witnessed and Judged and she had to restrain herself. She had to rise above expectation of personal insult. She could not afford outrage, had to stay calm. But he was right. Those reasons were all true but not the truth. She’d been made to feel helpless and her response was cold reserve, refusing to be touched. He and Garrus always focused on anybody who attempted to insult her. She had taken…and she remembered Thane spitting the word… Pride… in enduring without losing her temper… but Thane knew her temper and why she would or would not lose it, worrying at this anomaly until he found an answer. Her coping strategy was revealed for what it was, intentional situational blindness and forced perspective, and now Thane’s mouth was on her cheek, kissing along tracks of tears.

She couldn’t feel angry about what happened to her, not the way she could feel angry about what happened to him, not really, numbed, dense scarring and callus around it, maybe always there. He would feel it for her, and she would feel for the young man who volunteered for a trial and thanked his rapists. She was enraged on his behalf, and she didn’t have to tell him, she could show him. She would end the Compact. She was willing to break Hanar bodies as he’d broken a human for her.
She was eager.

She was able.

If she were entirely healthy it should have made her want to swear off touching him, knowing sex was tied in with horror inextricably, sharing the same blood supply like an organ and the cancer growing in it. She knew for herself that she’d had to get through that or go without sex. She had stubbornly and imperfectly fought back, refusing to allow intended ruin to come to pass, refusing to allow the sickness her rapist had tried to pass onto her take hold. It still had, enough to be read on her face and her actions as a recognizable symptom to someone similarly afflicted.

If he rejected her, she would understand, even approve, but otherwise even tainted, even ringing with pain, the only way out was through. She would not abandon him. Maybe there was no way out for him, more cancer than organ. Maybe he was doomed to be overwhelmed. She considered him right now as a creature that possibly could never give true consent. A small child trapped in siren and demand. A young man trapped in his pride of enduring exploitive violation. He loved her, would do anything for her, and despite his appearance of calm adulthood, he was constantly seething with pain, physical and emotional, unable to form scars as warning, masking his expressions, denying pain existed. She had no idea what twined through his mind, poisoning and sending out new creeping, corrupting trails each moment, but she defied it. Even if the poison and thorns were inextricable from who he might have been once, as hers were inextricable from who she might have been, she loved him and damn everything else. She would love him whole, honor that part that fought and not what he fought against that had taken root and flourished. She would fight with him.

That something in her that stirred and stretched did not go back to sleep, reached for him with fierce passion, pressed against him and slanted her mouth over his. Fear of being found and being hunted faded and she found her pack, her likeness, her mate, not in fur and fang, but venom and scale.

He wrapped her hair around his wrist and wrenched her head to the side, holding her pinned, his mouth on hers, on her throat, his teeth on her breast through her dress. He was angry, feral, one hand sliding down her injured leg until he touched the encasing mesh, dragging his hand up her thigh with nails digging in, finger tracks trailing venom. She reached for him but he shoved her back, tightening his grip on her hair, his mouth returning to hers with a sharp nip of his teeth and then the forcing of too much venom, too fast, making her dizzy and sick. His hand moved up the inside of her thigh again and a harsh glow and crackle made her cry out against his lips, biotics along his skin and hers, fused fingers inside her, pulsing heat and crawling tingle over his hand.

Everything was too much, venom too fast, tiremit too disorienting, starting from a launch point of bloodlust and rage, his hand too hard, his mouth overwhelming, biotics arcing as she tried to struggle, pushing at him, cries of pain against his lips. He did not stop, but leaned in, grew harder, faster, more intense until she was on the edge of blacking out, flooded with nausea and panic.

He kept her there, exactly there.

His knee brushed against her injured leg as if to remind her that she’d sent him away, almost died, had needed him to notice that she’d lost too much blood, would have lost her leg, would have lost her life without him. She could feel in the crackling anger that he hadn’t forgiven her, in many ways she had forced him to anger when she forced herself into numbness and intentional blindness. In contrast, over and over he chose to experience pain in each moment as the necessary price to pay to continue to breathe, to do what he chose to do, to see, to watch over her when she was at her most reckless.

Maybe he could never forgive because he couldn’t forget, would always have to look harder, trust less. She understood, some of it, part of it, and even if she didn’t, it didn’t matter. If she escalated
fighting him and denied his right to anger, to expression of what he could not say in words, he would not have mercy and she could tip him from righteousness to cruelty, her choice.

This man of the unrepeatable, quietly expressed threat had passed beyond threat into consequence, drawing a line indelibly on her skin, in her memory, a living consequence that could not be negotiated.

A way he knew resulted in learning.

She accepted that in this place of augmented bloodlust and rage. If she wished to live, to keep those she loved alive, those that followed her, she needed to listen. She relaxed against his grip, stopped pushing, stopped fighting. He didn’t relent, dragging out crackling, dizzying punishment, drinking in her verified and bare distress that progressed from pain to a particularly skillful and familiar blend of mixed pain and pleasure he could bring out in her, until he was somehow satisfied, reached his limit when her skin crawled with aftershocks and every sound and movement she made was an apology and incoherent begging and she had no idea if the begging was to stop or keep going.

The timeframe in the unmeasured dark seemed like suspended eternity and she was barely conscious when his mouth gentled, the biotic flow turned warm and encompassing, his thumb soothing over her.

His anger transmuted slowly to his own apology, for the anger itself and for his own failings, murmuring her name, hungry.

Not Siha.

She realized he had not called her that since she woke up. She wondered if he ever would again. She mourned the uncounted losses that spread out like malignant ripples from her faulty choices, from his. She reached her hands up to put them on his shoulders and he let them stay there. He used his hand in her hair to control her mouth, force her unresisting lips into his kiss, responded to her moans with his own. She was taut and panting when he withdrew his hand and she bit at his lip in frustration. He bit back, hard, drawing blood, his hand on the fastenings of his clothes, up and inside with a shriek from her absorbed on his tongue. He captured her hands in one of his and held them over her head along the column, biotic restraint added to the strength of his hand alone, which would have been enough, hard fingers digging into her skin and electricity crawling over her hands, dripping down her arms. He rammed into her, brutal and painful, but distress of the quiescent and trembling mind did not change the fact that her body was primarily fang and claw right now, built back up to where she had been moments ago, so close, clenching and angling her hips to meet his, breath forced out of her, into his demanding mouth. He wrenched her head back by her hair and licked at her throat as she came with a scream that echoed as he filled her, thrusts built to a groan and a few final, hard strokes through aftershocks and tears and released breath on moans.

She suddenly realized through blurred and streaked comprehension that yes…that was angry Thane sex. Now she knew.

She deserved it. She could have prevented her own collapse if she’d delegated sooner or supervised from the Med Bay. She could have been wise. She could have allowed herself to be examined. She could have avoided being numb.

She would remember.

She had been very wrong about many things. She was shame and sorrow and anger and rage and opposing, uncompromising absolutes in sharp, painful relief and all she could do was be held up by him. He released her arms, kissed the new tears away from her face, lifted her hips to wrap her legs around his waist and held her, soothing, strong and more of a mystery to her than he had ever been. Her main, possibly her only mystery was revealed and his mysteries had multiplied, shrouded and
twisted, poison-tipped thorns that twined around and through his heart, his thoughts, his nerves.

She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face on his shoulder and he kissed her hair, whispered her name. After a comforting eternity to match and exceed the painful one, he righted his clothing, smoothed her dress in the dark, lifted her in his arms, one hand lingering on her injured leg for a brief moment, never forgotten, never forgiven, and then he walked out of the alcove, stepped over the undiscovered body and carried her back to the ship.

Wordlessly he undressed her, stroking his lips and fingers through hair, implacably and irresistibly showered and washed her with hands of service, dried her hair painstakingly and braided it loosely for sleep. He fed her medication she needed, wrapped her in his arms and held her on his lap in the bed. The shifting and violent earthquake of his nature had sheared cataclysmically against itself, but only a fraction of pressure was relieved, only a fraction of that shared with her, and more building each day, every day. He settled back into deceptively solid ground, the chasm quiescent but going to the center of him in forward and sideways motion, and she would choose to live on that fault line if he would allow it.

The medication and his arms, whispered words and his fingers on her skin made her sleepy and she gave in, hand in his. There were aftershocks, and he woke her through the night, dreams of his voice and his body blending into real moments with bruises and bite marks and long scratches on her skin, fire from his hands until she was clinging to him helplessly, her braid snarled into knots and then hair released and finger combed over a pillow as she drifted into doll-Drell dreams. She listened for his voice and reacted to the tiremit leaching from her blood with longing for her mate of scale and venom to chase away the numb with his snarl and snap, inspire her to resist the cold, to guard him as he guarded her.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Garrus did not notice a change in them because there was nothing to notice. Even had there been something to notice, he was distracted by the loss of Tali. Part of his sunlit soul had gone with her, reluctantly, head bowed, and she and Thane rallied around him. It was good to soothe cleaner hurts, Garrus so easy to sympathize with and most importantly, they were actually able to help him. Thane cooked for him, she danced with him to prove her leg was mending, and Garrus obligingly smiled, was grateful, gave them all a reason to be thankful for small blessings, and they all avoided the subjects of larger curses.

She and Thane had the habits of silence, reserve, and had always had fangs and fur, venom and scale, and their presence was not new. Thicker coat and brighter scale might be explained by their recent victory and near loss of each other. Bruises and scratches on her body were not new. Despite revelations of past, the present remained the same. She and Thane shared defenses and caution and a new, known and shared section of the board.

There was an acceptance of unbearable pressure having uncapped passion in all three of them like simultaneous volcanoes, Garrus having expressed his as fault, Thane having expressed his as blame, and she having expressed hers in refusing to die despite all temptation and inducements, in both fault and blame and redoubled vigilance.

She wondered if Garrus knew or suspected the history of sexual abuse in his partners, and decided he did and would not comment unless another example such as the one that had provoked Thane, attempted induction into sex slavery, occurred in front of him. Garrus had spent years as a detective, C-Sec countering a notorious underworld including trafficking, his own face implacable and heartrending when he’d seen slavery first hand. Whether or not he’d experienced rape or slavery himself, he’d seen enough people die to it, counseled and despaired over enough survivors to likely
know.

The punch to the throat, the whine and discharge of a rifle occasionally before a sentence was finished. He’d aim for the mouth. In armor, in the front, as a recognizable woman in authority, she drew more attention than Thane for once.

Garrus had provided her with memories of sentences that went:

“That’s fucking Shepard. Keep her alive and we can see what she looks like on her knees with my cock – ” cue gurgling screaming

“That’s a nice rifle, bitch. Get her warmed up and you’ll see what it feels like when – ” cue fatal collapse.

Garrus’s actions and his aim spoke for themselves. Turian respect of female authority was unquestioned other than, as Thane had said, by the bare faced and honor lost, those who leaned and then fell into criminal lives. It was not merely protective or romantically driven behavior of a partner or comrade or commander, it was rejection of any threat happening at all in their presence. She still had a murky, questioning area of her psyche where she did not think she should kill someone for saying something vile, that words were separate from actions. She dismissed it as trash talk, an almost benign human tradition of taunting, seen on playgrounds and pickup games. She classified it as normal rivalry behavior. Humans had a saying, boys will be boys, and military training had exposed and inured her to it. Thane and Garrus equated verbal with literal, a threat of rape was intent to rape, assumption of past and future rape, instant death sentence. An insult intended to degrade a female, any female, not just her, was declaration of being an animal in need of being put down or they would spread their sickness like rabies. The fact that the threat was to her in the presence of their growing devotion made death come in ways that caused more pain, caused them to drown in their own blood to symbolically cleanse the mouth of final words.

She was a carrier of this disease, it seemed, and it lived in her blood.

Perhaps it was very simple. She did know the difference between words and actions. She’d heard, often repeated in her own head, once hundreds of times a day, now faded but still remembered out of nowhere and echoed in dreams, the words “I’m going to fuck you until you scream, you tight little whore” in the voice of her rapist.

And he had. He couldn’t make her beg, but he could make her scream. No words could compare to that. No threat could come close to the effect those words had had on her accompanied by the actions taken to prove how true at least some of the words were.

She didn’t mind the word fucking, used it a lot, though if someone were listening carefully, she used it as a general swear and didn’t use it to refer to sex that she had. She didn’t mind screaming. Tight and little were fine as adjectives. She wouldn’t even mind being a whore, having respect for sex workers and thinking it was a good job under the right conditions. She’d desensitized herself to every word in the phrase, but it still haunted and nothing else could compare.

Even if someone else had repeated those exact words to her, it wouldn’t be the same. She would know she could kill them. At the time when she’d first heard them, she didn’t know that yet.

Perhaps she’d had several signs for Thane to observe and string together. Unlike many humans she had no use for threat or humiliation during sex, Garrus and Thane taking their cue from her and not venturing anywhere near the territory that would have frozen her into unresponsive tolerance until it was over. She could have forgiven or indulged them, but would never have been able to enjoy or reciprocate.
She’d learned the difference between pain augmenting pleasure, which she appreciated, clean pain, and humiliation, which she would not, did not experience, slipping out of that space like a greased varren and becoming an observer, an anthropologist, and not a partner.

She wondered just how uncivilized humans truly were, how socialization and experiencing the worst of her own culture had made her apathetic. She wished she could have Garrus’s or Thane’s clarity on the subject, but she didn’t. Casual sexual threat among humans was so common that eliminating it all would wipe out huge portions of the population, male and female, and she saw clearly that’s exactly what Thane and Garrus thought was needed. The thought made her queasy and forced a new perspective, what it meant to have them at her back, that the word ‘casual’ related to sexual threat could no longer exist.

Should not exist.

It should not exist.

It would not exist if they were there, and she could not own that. Not yet. They would carry it for her, for now, and she would consider, try to reverse engineer her own mind. She had to own that she did wish certain people had more fingers to break, more mouths to shoot, more ways to drown in their own blood. She had to accept that maybe she did manipulate them into taking revenge for her while she stayed theoretically and hypocritically cool and remote. Maybe it could never be clean the way they saw it, an obvious step like shooting a dog with rabies. Perhaps it was easier for Thane and Garrus because they saw humans in general as lower on the evolutionary cultural scale. But she was one of them. She was tainted, damaged, blind, perhaps could never see, hadn’t the eyes, had been systematically blinded.

She was for the first time not ashamed of some human behavior, but ashamed to be human.

oOoOoOoOoOo

The next port was the Citadel, Garrus wanting to check in with Palaven representatives and Councilor Sparatus to disseminate some of the information EDI had mined from the Collector base personally. They were trying to comprehend and absorb the mother lode of data themselves, long hours with Mordin and Miranda breaking down the science. Mordin thought some of the more heavily encrypted data was active information about the indoctrination process, and he chose to concentrate on breaking that down into usable facts with Kasumi’s help. Jane spent time conferring with Liara about the Compact. One of the best places to start would be preventive, Drell children given to the Compact would have a month of celebration, and although it wasn’t announced, it would not be that difficult to find with informants. They could relocate families or hopefully talk them into publically refusing, begin a revolt. Feron had some ideas and had become passionate on the subject, and that would be where they would start. Tracking down compounds and networks would be harder, but not impossible. If Feron was able to convince Drell of what actually happened to the children compared to what they thought happened, they could gain cultural support and outrage. They would start quietly and build to a roar.

Everyone was going to have to accept that their way of life was under threat and with Reapers as a larger threat, extermination looming, cultural change might be more malleable than at other times. Feron would spread the message of keeping children alive, families intact, not allowing them to fall to ignorance, abuse or death.

She shared the purported communications from The Flock and Liara puzzled over them, agreed that they weren’t intended for her to respond, were likely cryptic fishing and agreed that Jane should not snap at bait. Maybe they were attempts to discredit the actual organization by looking amateur. Impossible to tell without a solid correlation and only of interest if more clues came to light, so far
none. They were not recruiting, there was no opportunity for infiltration, and voice analysis of the
announcer in the few bits of recorded broadcast they were able to secure revealed it to be entirely
synthetic and not a mask of an actual voice that could be identified by backtracking it through
distortion reversal. The only clues were that it seemed to favor her Spectre authority over her
affiliation with the Alliance or Cerberus, and support for her had added ‘Conqueror of the Collector
Base’ on top of ‘Savior of the Citadel.’

No way to track that information. The Normandy’s comings and goings were, if not public record,
easily bought information from dock workers. The stealth drive did them no good in port. Anybody
on Omega could have seen the ship was torn up. Enough information had been dispersed to so many
sources that being able to identify a specific leak from the Normandy herself was unlikely. The
information could have come from Cerberus. There were potential leaks all over the place and she
wanted the Collector base to stay unclassified, let as many people know as possible. She’d used the
media enough and watched people point useless and wrong fingers at leaks enough to know that if
she made a guess and started accusations, she’d only weaken ties she was trying to strengthen. She’d
wait until something damaging leaked before worrying. The only thing she knew about The Flock
was that they supported her superficially, either did not care to contact her at all or did not wish to
give her a chance to trace them and had a broadcast system that Kasumi still did not know how to
duplicate. That indicated high intelligence and creative technical ability. That meant she was only
likely to believe something from that broadcast source and its signature, and would treat each attempt
at communication as a separate, distinct source. If they ever started providing information using an
established method instead of cryptic bullshit, she’d revisit.

Something tickled in her head, and she looked at it closely, tangential associations and circumstantial
serendipity.

She’d been playing a great deal of Pon-Ifa, and she was starting to think more in the ways Thane
was teaching her, groups and motivations and captured resources, puppet organizations and
misdirection.

The most obvious person she could think of to run The Flock would be Thane. A hard flush of blood
tingled, rushed to the surface of her skin, intuitive confirmation.

She was not going to ask him.

She visited and revisited, adding it up again and again. Each second more confirmation. She was
sure it was Thane. High intelligence, technical ability and a Pon-Ifa master, a unique transmission
method and unknown but accurate, undisputed information source, exclusively near to Shepard
while appearing not to be. What he knew would not be a leak, but would be observed or confided in
him directly, indistinguishable from other trusted sources that had observed. She had a sudden
certainty that whatever would be said would never be exclusive information, but traceable to several
people with known confidence and proven utility, people she would always value over the trivial
matter of disseminated information she already wanted out there, information that benefited her. She
was also certain they wouldn’t contact her directly, because Thane could already do that on his own
and did not need to pass her information or get information from her remotely.

She thought of the phrase used by Einstein to describe quantum entanglement as ‘spooky action at a
distance’ and saw the correlation, saw the implied but negligible distance, the corresponding
accuracy and mystery of a technically incomprehensible communication source as necessary to
inspire.

It explained Thane’s use of time away with no job on the ship, and his knowledge of setting up and
manipulating shadow organizations to his advantage. Her advantage.
Well, she had a hobby of her own, on his behalf. Destruction of the Compact was a mission that may or may not involve him. The amount of programming he may have had to inhibit him from doing harm to the Hanar that had raised him was not something she wanted to test or provoke. He was a man of action and he had considered destroying them, knowing all the reasons to do so, but had stepped aside, giving her reasons that she did not consider sufficient to scrap the endeavor.

She suspected he wanted her to know, to guess, having explained laboriously the process over the Pon-Ifa board, the way he looked at her during explanation, willing the information into her bones…

She went from speculation to acceptance. This was Thane’s baby. She would see what it grew into, how he intended to play it.

She hadn’t mentioned the organization to him once, only involving Kasumi and Liara. She hadn’t risen to bait or speculation and even with public speculation had appeared entirely disinterested.

She would keep that up. Possibly with her new information regarding Thane’s detection of her numbed disinterest on guarded subjects, she might express curiosity if it came up, but she doubted it would, not from him.

She closed her eyes, sat back and appreciated it for a moment.

She loved him. So much. She was so very glad he was on her side.

She had lost this board to a Pon-Ifa master before she’d thought about setting her pieces. It was in her service, and she at least saw it coming for once.

Maybe she did learn.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Setting into the Citadel began with her new tradition of sandwiches, now everyone had a favorite order and she set on her way to get that done, doing some window shopping, Turian takeout food for Garrus, fresh fruit for Thane, getting used to the old mission of the Collector Base drifting away and the new mission of the Reapers in general, with no direct target but the fear that it could arrive any moment in overwhelming force.

For now the Citadel was still the sleeping menace she believed it to be, but inhabited by good people who made good sandwiches.

With a smile she set off down toward Kithoi.

When she was halfway into the rental car she felt a sting on the side of her neck. A jovial and indulgent male voice too close behind her said “Here, honey, let me, you’ve had too much to drink” and as she collapsed forward, arms caught her before she crashed and caused a scene. She was unconscious before she could raise her hand to see what had lodged in her neck or turn to see who held her.
Chapter 17

Clamor and pain woke her.

She couldn’t take in her environment immediately because the internal feedback was too much. Hunger, thirst, pain…those were amplified, somehow synthetic experiences.

How long had she been out?

She was composed of nausea and shaking, cold and glaring and ugly and it dumped her directly into the imperative to panic.

An armored hand hit her again across the cheek. That was what had woken her. The ringing pain soaked fast into the overall cacophony of physical feedback leaving only a faint warmth and sting that was overwhelmed by other sensations.


Batarian. Two Batarians, one leering, one hitting and leering, in a closed and ugly room, bare bulb, low tech, peeling walls, broken floor. Opposite wall dark glass. Two way mirror? Crazed and cracked glass but intact. No windows.

So not a ship, a building. No ship could fly this filthy.

Well, maybe she should lower her expectations, these were Batarians. Didn’t feel like a ship, though. No referred hum or noises that a ship would put out. Gravity…she couldn’t tell if there was more or less of a drag on her, impossible with everything else.

Abandoned building?

How long had she been out?

The Batarian hit her again and she felt warm blood trickle and it had the effect of making her think of being a Berserker, the warriors that went on an indiscriminate rampage triggered by the taste of blood. That would be nice, super strength, slaughter. She would have made a good Berserker if she didn’t so enjoy seeing heads explode at the end of a scope.

She tried to move, but it was useless, she was restrained. Strapped to a hard-backed dolly, she thought.

Maybe not terribly stupid Batarians.

She wasn’t going to panic and she couldn’t kill them right now. She engaged again with the impossibility of how much her body was screaming at her. If she were alone she’d scream along with it, but she wasn’t going to while being hit, not unless they earned it.

A question she wasn’t going to get the answer to kept recurring. How long had she been out?

She’d gone without food for days in the past, gone without water for days in the past, never felt this particular flavor of ravaged. She could feel that her mouth had moisture, that her stomach was not sunken or worse, distended. Her skin looked fine, not suffering from dehydration or malnutrition. The sense of her body was that she was intact, exactly as she had been when she left the Normandy, short some medication.
She wasn’t hungry but she had a disconnected sense of starvation. She wasn’t thirsty but she had a focused sense that she was going to die of thirst in the next few minutes. They were insistent imperatives, like waking with a massive cramp, like drowning, being unable to breathe, her brain screaming about everything wrong. But it was from her brain only. Her lungs took in air normally. Her brain was telling her to do something, do anything, or she was going to die, right now.

She set that aside and devoted the thin band of cognitive thought available to her to focus. Batarians. You can’t do anything about food or thirst or hitting them. She beat back panic while keeping her face incoherent. She reversed the trend. She observed her body’s reactions and duplicated the pain in her face, didn’t let her muscles or eyes indicate that she was regaining any control. No Berserker with no outlet. Waste of energy. She struggled to test her bonds but without appearing to do it. They were beyond secure, whole straps, wide.

She thought of her Omni Tool, looked down while maintaining incoherence and unfocused eyes to see superficially healed holes in her arm. Her forehead was strapped, but she could see with her eyes tilted down and her arm angled in.

Maybe she could tell the time by the wounds. Her Omni Tool had been surgically removed, along with every single one of the accessories she’d had, including ampules of neurotoxin. Pressing her back against the solid plate she was strapped to she could feel other losses, implants and upgrades gone, holes left.

New holes where accessories and upgrades had not been. Why new holes?

The symbolic glowing light around her wrist was gone. Fury and despair were mixed into the din of internal feedback.

Okay. Maybe smart Batarians, or Batarians in the employ of someone smart.

She had to go to the bathroom so badly that she felt the cramped shaking of an extreme denial of the impulse, but again…no physical correlation.

Some sort of…she was fine, she knew it, other than the holes…her leg hurt, but the normal amount. The holes might have happened immediately after her being taken and then had been treated with Medi Gel, and it might have only been a few hours since it had happened, transport and surgery included.

They could have tortured her and had her conscious when they cut into her, but they didn’t. Removed it to disable tracking. Anesthetized and treated.

Then…left in a room with Batarians.

Batarians with no questions.

The Batarian had hit her, but could have broken her teeth, shattered her jaw. This was at most a split lip and some scrapes. Probably just to wake her up and then it felt good so he did it again, gently for a Batarian.

This guy was not in charge. Leering guy was staring at her, but at a distance. No threats made.

These guys were not in charge.

Had he asked a question? She hadn’t heard. Too distracted.

Listen. You have to listen.
She could be anywhere by now. No way to trace her. Anybody sophisticated enough to detect and remove the tech she had cleanly would catch everything. No hope there.

She should have followed up on that tracker chip option.

Too late now.

The only thing she had to go on were her own wits and those were frayed and distracted and approximately one millimeter from being lost to screams and panic.

Beyond all that she wanted to have sex so badly that in the background was the tight cramp of denied tiremit and Reverie rolled into a deeper, addictive hunger.

Bad, Shepard, this is bad.

Thank you, Commander Obvious.

She was suffering from every need and addiction her body was prone to feel, all the things that had established wide bounds of experience, potentials of pain and potentials of denied pleasure, ratcheted up to inchoate and insatiable need. Instant torture, no need for physical harm. Leaves no marks, takes no effort, takes no time.

Nice trick.

She needed a game face.

She couldn’t keep her face from contorting from nausea, cramping, retching and shivering…so by default that was her game. She was going to keep it up. She took every impulse her body gave her and stopped suppressing them, only holding back screams. She allowed the moans and whimpers that clawed at her lips and felt some relief. She hadn’t made eye contact yet, hadn’t appeared lucid yet, she could string that out.

The hitting Batarian, rust red armor and lighter green than the other, who wore black armor. She’d call him Moe. Moe spoke, said “She’s awake, Vitkiv.”

The other Batarian sat back and snorted “The great Commander Shepard.” She’d call him Target Practice. Targ for short.

Vitkiv was an Asari, violet skin and grey dappling, leather clad in the same colors. She moved the way Kasumi did. This could explain why nobody had asked her any questions. An Asari with no morals and a little talent could make interrogations obsolete.

This is bad, Shepard. Really, really bad.

That was it.


As bad as possible.

That’s her game face. Stay the fuck out of my head. She’d resisted Morinth. She had resisted virulently hypnotic Thane. She’d gone a round with a Prothean artifact. Liara had told her she had an extraordinary will and now…

Now she was going to put it to the test.
Vitkiv stood back, hip shot, casually assessing Jane’s only somewhat exaggerated convulsions and said “I’m not going in there, she’s a mess.”

Targ said “She looks fine to me. I’d go in there.”

Batarian wit. Batarian laughter.

Vitkiv’s nose wrinkled and she said with arid contempt “You’re a varren humping slime mold. You had to drug her and tie her up to keep her from killing you.”

Damned right. Still going to kill everyone in this room. Even if I don’t do it…being in a room with me is a death sentence. A balloon of pride and hope puffed out like an expelled breath and was obliterated in the next few moments by the other shrieking input, erased, but it was like having her lungs filled, panic pressed back momentarily, relief.

Vitkiv looked at her, shook her head and her distaste was obvious. So maybe she did not have options? Vitkiv was also not in charge, or was in a hurry. The Asari woman re-thought it, it seemed, and spoke to the air “She’s got too much in her system, it’s just going to be chaos. Tone it down before her brains get scrambled.”

There was a long suspended moment of waiting, and the door opened, a downcast and huddling Drell woman, young and cowering, walked up to Shepard and shot a needle into her efficiently, using the back of her immobilized hand. She was wearing gloves and there was no venom contact with cool fingertips bracing the site. She skittered back out and within a few seconds the horrific sensations cleared. Not entirely, but enough. The relief was massive.

Shepard looked at her retreating back and thought that she was too accustomed to Drell being able to do and be anything, and this…creature…let’s call her Skitter…could be anything from a drudge to the bad guy. Could be in charge.

They could all be Skitter’s Critters.

Speculation stopped when cool fingers slid to her temples and she felt the intrusion of foreign will. Vitkiv was good at what she did, her touch reminiscent of the Consort. She was an oasis, relief after the pain and distress. Jane started a gentle slide into gratitude before she caught herself. She gathered every bit of random pain she could find, and right now that was a lot. She gathered indecision, fear, pain, horror, loss, threw in a few Prothean images of blood and crawling wires, a few flashing thoughts of charging husks, Dragon’s teeth, what it felt like to have her lungs freeze, the smell of thresher maw melted flesh and the fresh and raw threat of sexual slavery with the echoing reality of rape. She waited until Vitkiv came close to the outer margins of real contact other than soothing introduction, and threw it all at her, pouring the force of every scream she’d suppressed into an internal push of all the disconnected horror she could muster.

Vitkiv screamed and Shepard pretended to faint, the Asari’s fingers jerked away as though seared. Through the blurry view from surreptitious open slits of her eyes, Shepard could see a thin trail of purple blood from Vitkiv’s nose.

You don’t want to come in here. I’m a mess.

Go with your first impression.

Breathing without pain felt…so…good…and she slumped realistically. So. Good. The compensating rush of endorphins her body had made to counteract the storm made her shaky and faint and she struggled to reproduce the deep breathing of sleep, not this shivering wreck of fluttering air.
Liara and Samara had explained the process, Liara had demonstrated, shown her how to make sessions easier, reduce fatigue and stress. Jane had also asked about how to resist unwanted intrusion. An Asari in someone else’s head needed the residing presence as a tour guide. An unconscious target wouldn’t work, at least not initially, because symbols had to be translated through the being that created and stored the symbols as memory. An Asari could be lashed with pure emotion to the sympathetic nervous system, risk burning themselves out like a fuse blowing.

Vitkiv would recover and the damage wouldn’t be permanent, but maybe she wouldn’t try again. Hopefully not soon.

99.99% of Asari had ethics and an abhorrence of forced contact, but some of them specialized in it, and some of them got very good at it, having lived a long time and gotten a lot of specialized practice.

Someone would be paying Vitkiv well and would expect accurate results that interrogation and torture couldn’t provide.

Jane briefly considered having a private conversation with Vitkiv if she tried again, negotiating a separate deal…but she was not willing to trust anybody. Establishing rapport was not something she was willing to do with an Asari interrogator. She couldn’t allow Vitkiv access to her symbols. Her code would be broken, she could be translated as though she’d handed over her own Rosetta stone. Vitkiv would be able to navigate Jane’s head without her assistance. So the Asari would get a dose of pure painful chaos with every attempt. Jane had lots of that.

Vitkiv wiped her nose, flicked the blood to the floor with a disgusted grunt and said “If she wasn’t broken before, she is now. Whatever you did to her, all she has is amplified suffering. She won’t recognize her own name.” The delivery was cold and professional, speculative. Vitkiv was trying to figure out how to get the job done.

You and me both, honey.

All three left the room, Moe took one last shot to her face, but again, not hard compared to the damage his fists could do.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Patterns formed over time she could not measure, interrogation and restraint, drugged stupors, lost time after injections. She was being…preserved…and that scared her more than the information they wanted, scared her more than torture, and her mind churned out the worst end game she could conceive.

Something she’d already faced, having her dead body fought over, bid on…only now, bonus, she was alive and in command of an exceptional ship and an exceptional crew with only one mission…

Worst case, she was going to be indoctrinated, and that took time, that’s what the holes were for, they needed her able bodied so she could command, and they were going to get her back on the ship somehow with the authority to indoctrinate the crew of the Normandy. They wouldn’t let her go until she was fully broken, loyalty proven.

Wouldn’t torture be so much easier?

She’d talked Saren into eating a bullet, but it had still been too late for him, and he’d contorted into the creature incubating inside of him, flesh stripped away. He’d almost killed her after agreeing she was right.
She thought of holes in her arms, thought about the ones in her back, and wondered if that was how they poured it into her, if Vitkiv would break down her mental defenses and make it easier. If behind this wall, around this room, were artifacts, if…things…were in her blood, twining around neurons.

It would be so much nicer if a few Batarians just beat her up and left it at that.

Panic and horror crowded in and she hung there boneless, held up by restraints.

Strategy. She needed a strategy.

Focus. You still don’t know enough to come to a conclusion. This is speculation. Maybe the Batarians would come back and beat her up and she could go back to run of the mill menace that she knew how to deal with straight up to and including dying.

What are the odds that this was run of the mill? Someone had tracked her movements well enough to know that when she left the Normandy she went on a celebratory tour of the Citadel that always went to the same location. So far that was a pattern of only three events, so they had begun planning after the second event, high investment, low odds of success, extrapolating from two points in a line. Possible she had been set up, but doable without an internal leak, only the information that the Normandy was docking. Likely access to C-Sec monitoring security check points, external surveillance or internal tapping. Expensive. Planning involved a seamless capture that had its own convenient transport built in…that she authorized and paid for. They’d be long gone before any alarm was raised, enough time to change transport ten times over in the Citadel alone, misdirect anybody watching to follow any set of false trails they wanted to create. Someone who likely set a male human agent at any access point she would have taken.

Someone with the connections to get experimental and unlisted…very effective drugs.

Someone who could afford an Asari specialist.

Go with the worst case scenario and not the mill. If it turns out they’re just going to torture you to death, count your blessings.

I am so sorry, Thane and Garrus, I have to work on the assumption that you can’t come rescue me, I can’t go back to you, and if I have a chance, I have to kill myself before my chances are gone.

They could do the mission without her. They couldn’t do it if she went back indoctrinated. She knew every weakness to play. She could lie to and fool some of the smartest people she knew because they would want to believe her.

You’re going to get weaker and you’re going to break. You know you’re going to break. They don’t have to know that you’re broken. You can fake being broken before it actually happens and conceal when it does happen. Keep the secret that you’re broken.

That’s what would normally work…but she had to get out of this not to break out, but to put a bullet in her own brain.

Something inside her revolted and she couldn’t tell if it was self preservation, exhaustion or being drugged, things tightening on neurons because motivations now were shadow plays and smoke. I’ll have a front row seat to indoctrination. I’ll see how it works. I can tell Mordin. I can show Miranda. If I don’t smile at them, tell them I’m fine, and then inject them with something myself, beatific zealotry on my face and in my voice like Dr. Kenson.

Once she’d only had herself, tied to a bed, waiting to die. She’d lived. He hadn’t.
Once there’d been only her, and a thresher maw, and the melting bodies of those she’d ordered to fight and she’d tried to protect, until she had retreated further back from her cover, when she couldn’t help them anymore, when there was nothing left to help. The Alliance came for them and found only her.

She was good at surviving, and right now…that was not good. Her captors were counting on her will to survive. They were going to break her mind but keep her body intact. All of her will to get back to her command would serve their purposes.

She had a strategy for pain, for despair when it became unbearable. Nobody else’s meditations or focusing techniques ever worked for her, but this did. When it got hard she counted. She’d count as high as she could and then start over when she lost her place. It was simple, and when it became hard she could tell how far her mental acuity was slipping.

There had been times in her life when all she had left was chanting the sound “one… one… one… one…” inside her head and she held onto breath, held onto living, and that’s all she could do, and she was proud of herself for doing it.

Don’t think about time. Don’t wonder when it’s going to be over.

She would watch for actions she could take, watch for opportunities, but she needed to protect herself from despair. She needed to guard her state of mind when nothing was happening, the time when her mind spun with no traction into scorched smoke if she was not cautious.

She had to endure the pain, keep it separate from her. She would not become the pain.

She had to plan for two things: Escape…and making sure that if she escaped she wouldn’t ruin everything she loved.

She had to find a way. Maybe they’d let her out of restraints with good behavior. Maybe she could carve a message on her body. Find a shard of something and scratch “indoctrinated” on the bottom of her foot. Why did it have to be such a long word?

No. Nothing external. Someone would be looking, someone would see it, see her do it.

Maybe swallow something, something she couldn’t claw from her own body, something that could be found on a scan…they’d take her to the Med Bay and Dr. Chakwas would insist…

“Shepard, why did I find a poker chip with the letters “indoc” scratched on it in your large intestine?”

Yeah, that’s gross but she would do it. If she could. She had to think.

No.

Evidence Karin could find would be evidence any medical specialist they had here raking her over during unconscious exams could find. She could not risk that. Her only advantage was her appearance of cluelessness and ignorance, subterfuge would rob her of that. They could not learn anything more about her from her actions until the next action was to kill them.

Do not think of Garrus. Do not think of Thane. Think about keeping the secret of when and how you break. Watch both paths, escape and death and pray to every force of fate she didn’t believe in that she won the bet and could make it back to the Normandy without losing herself, without selling everyone she loved into servitude.

She had to escape in order to kill herself. Escape first. She couldn’t avoid it, couldn’t avoid taking the
chance that if she escaped, she’d be indoctrinated or too…Jane…to die. She knew herself, that her actions could become automatic, choices lightning, and thought overridden by instinct.

Breathe.

Count.

She was left alone for unmeasured time. She breathed. She counted. She couldn’t keep the promise to herself to not think of Garrus, to not think of Thane. Her mind sought them like a mindless creature with an instinct, a flower turning to light, an underground burrowing thing that turned away from gravity, turned toward warmth. She couldn’t help it. She would lose count and spend moments thinking of Garrus’s arms around her, sternum blade at her back. She would think of Thane’s voice giving her courage, giving her the strength to appear to be something she was not.

Unlike the numbers she counted that were symbolic and had always comforted her under stress, the thoughts of Garrus and Thane were not mechanical but organic. When she counted they would add their voices to hers, count along with her, break off into their own voices if she faltered. She’d hear what she was so desperate to hear them say, needed, couldn’t resist.

Garrus had said that after she’d died, she’d talked to him, comforted him, and she knew he’d want her to have the comfort of hearing him say “Be strong. You’ve been through worse. I know you won’t betray us, won’t betray yourself. You’ve died, for Spirit’s sake. I feel sorry for these poor ignorant assholes who have no idea what you are capable of doing.”

Thane had tried to reach back into her history and eliminate threats he’d only guessed at, and she could imagine him with his forehead pressed to hers, hand at the back of her neck and the force of his silence that could carry her when she could not speak. His endurance, his example was willed into her bones. He would murmur “It is but a trial, Siha, and you will rise above. Allow me.” Said the way he’d asked her to grow her hair out, entirely certain they’d survive the Collector base, or seeming so, and they had. Her hair was longer now. Allow me to be with you. Allow me to comfort you. Allow me.

She decided she would think of them, despite the fact that when the thoughts ended, despair rushed in and she temporarily lost her grip entirely, crossed a line, fought back blindly, tenuous and desperate, needy and weak.

Whatever happened to her, they would care.

What had Garrus said? His father could cause him distress but couldn’t wear him down fully because…because what?

Because he’d had too many…

Too many…

Too many approving voices.

She might be doomed because she had too many approving voices, but she let it flow, burn inside her like a small sun, because she’d seen Saren. Under his bravado and upgrades he had been afraid and had turned from his mission, his people, he’d tried to save himself.

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Words from Earth, from Africa. Words to remember when she was going nowhere, could not go fast, but wanted to go far.

She found gratitude that they were not here, were not captive with her, only here in Turian Spirit and
Drell discipline, passion and strength.

Feron had been tortured for two years for daring to rescue her body. She had two years to go in order to beat his record and she would do it.

Garrus had mourned her for two years. She had two years of daily choking mourning and grief to go.

Check back in...in two years of fighting...two years of torture...and then you can feel sorry for yourself.

Thane had suffered for ten years after Irikah’s death, and years before that, and now still...

Check back in after 33 years of torture. See how you stack up against your heroes then, Shepard.

Not until then will you pity yourself.

You can do it, it’s been done. It’s been done by better people than you. They need you to live up to their examples.

You need you to live up to their examples.

At other times the idea of Thane’s hands closing around a particular Batarian’s neck, slashes from Garrus’s talons on an Asari throat, because he would prefer that over a gun, would lend her their fire and relentless energy when hers failed. She found that with them keeping her company, watching over her, speaking to her softly, she did not want to let them down, and she had more courage than she would have had alone.

She had more despair than she would have had alone.

She had people outside herself to live for, people outside herself to save with her death.

They wouldn’t be able to find her, wouldn’t be able to rescue her body, but they rescued her mind second by second, with each internally chanted number and murmured, imagined echo of their approving voices.

I will have too many approving voices, and I will not save myself.

But I will ...save you...my loves of sunlight and shadow, one at each hand, holding mine in the dark and cold, whispering to me and bringing me back to counting, bringing me back to breathing, bringing me back to knowing who I am.

oOoOoOoOoOo

She saw lots of Skitter. She was being fed, she was being maintained by Skitter with hunched, miserable servitude or the appearance of it. Skitter would feed her by hand, and she chewed and swallowed. Jane wanted to show good behavior, dulled capacity, wanted to be set loose. With a reluctant twitch, Skitter would inject her with something. Skitter never spoke, surreptitious regret in her demeanor, beaten down, a faded drone. She was wretched, and Jane felt sorry for her even as she felt the need to beg and bargain bubble up behind her lips, only held back by the rule to never admit she was broken. She spoke lies if she spoke at all. She never spoke unless she had to.

Moe and Targ yelled at her and hit her after different injections. One series of injection of something that made her feel drunk...but she could navigate it. It wasn’t on the level of Reverie or tiremit and it was easily pushed aside while she pretended to be in a stupor. The lowering of her inhibitions made her mostly have to struggle to not laugh at all the accumulated farce. Crying she’d allow, but in this
bizarre place she was contorting her face to not laugh and say “You poor bastards. Run. Now. I am not kidding. You guys are going to end up dead, either by my guys or the ones that are going to avoid paying you, you are so incompetent.” They were made of growl and anger and asked questions she didn’t know the answers to anyway. Who were the Alliance agents in Batarian space? Nobody gave a shit about Batarians, not even Batarians. Still…she spent some time acting befuddled and then spent a great deal of time trying to earnestly and reluctantly convince her stalling-tactic interrogators that Ka'hairal Balak was a double agent.

Because fuck that guy.

It wasn’t exactly fun, but it was defiance fuel that seeped into her bones, insidious warmth.

The “everything sucks and you’re about to die from it” injection was the worst, although it wasn’t ever at the high dosage she’d first gotten, she’d learned to imitate her initial reaction and they’d lessened it until it was bearable, mostly. She still had to bite back saying she’d probably suck Batarian cock for the fluids and chew for the protein, and then had to not laugh.

They leered and threatened and she had many examples of Batarian wit, but not once did they touch her other than the obviously held back and progressively more frustrated smacks that were dwarfed by Garrus hitting her in a spar. Granted, not in the face, but they hit her only in the face, only lightly. She knew they wanted to hit her really hard. They wanted to hear different screams, cause rivers of blood and ribbons of flesh. She knew someone was watching that wouldn’t let them haul off and give her what they believed she so dearly deserved for her lack of cooperation and stupidity. They both longed to see her bleed and she began to feel eventually that they were more tortured than she was.

Okay, maybe that was exaggerated.

But she might make it out of this alive and they would not, their last hours spent getting nothing they wanted, nothing they needed from her.

She needed to know who was behind that glass and she had no clue, no hint, and no opportunity to investigate.

I don’t want you to know that I’m half a breath from selling my soul for a sip of water even though I KNOW I do not need a sip of water, Skitter makes sure I drink.

I am keeping that fucking half of a breath, it’s mine. So’s my soul.

You are both dead, clueless men walking.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Sleep was bad. She didn’t know how to keep the secret in her sleep, she didn’t know how to count.

Vitkiv got creative and used that as a loophole, a back door where she could piggyback on dreams and try to steer Jane into wanting to escape them to a more relevant subject. Anything about the Normandy was a relevant subject.

Jane would get an injection of something that kept her under in extended trance and Vitkiv would keep her company for that dream time. Vitkiv had tried to get close to conscious memory but Jane had managed to hold her off, both of them traumatized, but in her dreams she couldn’t do a thing about it. Once Jane became lucid she would tip experience into pure hell and she sent it out like a shockwave directly into Vitkiv’s mind over and over. She got a sick satisfaction from hearing Vitkiv scream.
More defiance fuel.

Unfortunately for Vitkiv she never got close to any information on the modern Normandy, people there, tactics, intelligence…because Jane steered her directly into thresher maw burns or freezing lungs or any of the other horrors living in her head that gave absolutely no information except pain.

Dreams seemed to access the most painful aspects of an event, things that perhaps didn’t exist. Garrus or Thane’s bodies melted, taking the place of those of Alliance soldiers. Her two men were constant themes in her dreams, and often although she couldn’t change how often they showed up or how much they meant to her, she could affect where it went, blur the conclusions that could be drawn.

For misdirection, since Thane was not a well known member of her crew but Garrus was, she tried to invest him with memories of Urem, gave Urem’s name.

Vitkiv had her relive moments over and over, the Asari’s apprehension growing but unable to get any other access and likely unable to stop this line of interrogation until she provided results.

Vitkiv made laborious reports, after action recordings of what happened, trying to glean information from Jane’s unconscious state to translate into Jane’s true mental state. Vitkiv was growing more and more frustrated and possibly scared of the lack of progress she was making.

She also…almost got the feeling Vitkiv…was starting to admire her, perhaps didn’t want to get the job done.

It was confirmed once when Jane lay there pretending to sleep as Vitkiv recorded another report, including editorializing opinion and not just repetition of events. “Subject was 19, same age as the previous iterations of this dream. Research verifies time and place, name of instructor, attendance of subject to the academy. Instructor name Corbin Yales. Refer to prior sessions…14…29…37. Instructor of Ethics at military academy training. Female classmate of subject confided abuse. Subject stalked instructor. She had infiltrator training, but was caught. Insufficient stealth skill, inability to detect unexpected perimeter traps. Subject had arranged leave, misdirection, created evidence that she was off Earth on a Mars tour of archaeological digs, assuring nobody was looking for her, establishing an alibi. He had a cabin in woods near to Academy, location verified by classmate. Real location verified through time frame research. Subject went looking for proof before reporting him for misconduct. Motive consistent with an extensive history of human military cover up of sexual abuse. Corbin captured subject, tied her to a bed and repeatedly raped and beat her for four days, no food, no water. Escape made possible by rope fraying on a metal section securing the headboard, assisted by her providing friction while he was off property, at work. Corbin boasted of having killed prior victims, promised to kill her the same way, their bodies dumped in a concealed emergency well on a remote property. Subject freed herself, drank water from a faucet but ate no food in order to avoid creating evidence she had been free, obtained a weapon…went back…to the bed…tied herself in a way that made her appear identically restrained and waited approximately five hours until assailant returned to the property and repeated prior pattern of rape and abuse. During the act, subject cut his throat with the concealed weapon. No hesitation. Note primary focus in dream state and likely awake state was attention to victim’s eyes and wound. Not a fear response. Predatory response. Psychological profile gained from incident: Subject is methodical and capable of deceit in extremes, able to tolerate extensive torture and abuse. Assessment: Research of actual event and time frame, records indicate she was on Mars at the time of the incident and after, tickets and pictures of her trip available. Surveillance at checkpoints indicates her presence. She either hired someone who looked like her to go on this trip or provided sophisticated hacked evidence that under investigation raised no suspicion. Subject returned late to base with injuries she attributed to exotic fighting instruction, which was deemed compatible with her psychological profile and supporting photographic evidence
of her visit on Mars, accepted as reasonable cause. Refused medical treatment or examination. Transportation authorization blamed for her late return, minor demerit entered into record for AWOL, first offense, never repeated. No punishment other than a warning and denial of weekend leave privileges for six months. Body of Corbin Yales never recovered. Her absence and his missing person status were never correlated. He is still listed as missing, cold case. The cabin burned down, but the property was not in his name and was not correlated to either his disappearance or her absence. Investigation attributed to electrical failure, no accelerant to denote arson. Although she was not permitted to leave base, indication is that she did so, was undetected and located the body dump site. Anonymous untraceable tip three weeks after her return to base led to the discovery of a recently uncovered well, 14 female bodies ranging in age from 13 to 17 exhumed.”

Vitkiv announced to the room in general “She’s fucking playing us. All I can get out of her head is that if she had a moment free I’d be dead.” Vitkiv looked down at Shepard’s theoretically unconscious form and said quietly “I am not getting paid enough for this shit. I like you, Jane. That’s bad for business.”
Sleep sessions and interrogation sessions continued, but they lacked direction. Moe and Targ seemed to run out of things to ask, repeating themselves endlessly. They had no idea who Ka'hairal Balak was. She vaguely considered turning in agents named after the seven dwarves just to mix it up “Yes, Sne’eZi works in health care on Khar’shan and has a virus he’s going to unleash…” but settled for silence and repetition and getting hit a lot.

She couldn’t afford a sense of humor or whimsy and she began to realize why Thane’s sense of humor was so muted, how a sense of humor, wanting to gloat or rebel, wanting to fuck with someone in retaliation, to underline their stupidity or her own cleverness could trip up or give away her motives or inherent resistance. How that would have been squeezed out of Thane over a lifetime by design, that impulse of internal defiance. She could scream, she could cry, and she did both often now, but she knew…knew that she could never be caught laughing inside these walls.

She had not counted laughter as one of her luxuries, and now she always would if she got out of this bullshit. Which she then remembered she had to hope she wouldn’t.

She’d had no opportunity for escape, always restrained. All maintenance of her body other than eating was done while she was unconscious and she had never broken through the drugs.

Her body had healed, cratered holes filled in through good medical follow up by Skitter. Not a mark on her except for daily injection tracks that were also treated and invisible by the next day. There were marks on her face from attempted Batarian persuasion occasionally, but they’d also be gone each time she woke up.

Vitkiv had to struggle through experiencing horrors, but she was only going through the motions, repeating the same reports, coming to the same conclusions, breaking off contact before Jane could pour a new flavor of searing pain into her spine. She was faking agonized screams with her hands already off Jane’s skin. She even felt that Vitkiv was offering her support. The Asari had relived missions with her, Virmire and Saren, anything already publicized. Even if Jane was approaching pitying Vitkiv, she could not risk contact. If Jane was correct, Vitkiv wanted out and couldn’t get herself out, much less Jane. Vitkiv was trapped, it hung on her.

Vitkiv did not know Thane’s name, thought him to be Urem. Did not know for sure that there was a Drell on the Normandy. She had identified Garrus, but their association was public knowledge. Vitkiv had come up with no new information, only reiterating that Jane was badass. They knew that before.

Despite all of Jane’s bravado, she could feel changes, insidious ones, and she began to believe the real purpose of her abduction was playing out.

The only change when every other process went stagnant was in Skitter, who became kinder, more engaged with Jane as a person and not a duty. Just like Vitkiv, it could all be explained with Skitter growing to admire Jane, sympathizing with her circumstances. It shouldn’t necessarily be a source of suspicion, but through Skitter’s species she couldn’t help but be compared to Thane, to remind Jane of Pon-Ifa and layers of deception.

Jane had no real idea of how long she’d been in the same room, forced unconscious for unknown periods of time, unable to determine an interval or how often it happened. She couldn’t count straight through, got interrupted or forgot and they varied, probably four or six hours on average, enough to get hungry and thirsty, enough to get tired, enough to have to go to the bathroom. She could wake up
with all of those impulses worse, wake up to none of those, but a feeling of drunkenness or disorientation or fear or hallucinations. No way to measure time and only able to guess at the intervals that she was awake. Eventually she labeled them ‘forever.’ She counted but couldn’t connect the counts to time anymore, only to breath. She woke up clean, restrained and maintained with new injection sites.

She started to feel a fuzziness of her thought process, a gradual slip of her coherence, drug induced, exhaustion induced, too many influences to trace back what caused it, inevitable and accelerating. Thane and Garrus’s voices changed and were occasionally forgotten as a resource at all. Now when they spoke, they urged her to return to the ship and the cognitive dissonance forced her to resist thinking of them. Defiance and strategy was replaced by horror and helplessness. Solace of the outside world was gone and survival here was measured in moments. Her thoughts would turn inevitably to the resurgent, increasingly irresistible need to get back to the ship and an amorphous imperative to do it now. She occasionally had enough of a grasp on the consequences of that action that she’d be horrified, scrabble for something she needed to remember, and then she’d forget that she needed to remember and all that remained was the urgency to do something, she could not recall what it was, but she would know what to do when there was an opportunity.

Skitter’s hands were always gloved, but her eyes began to linger on Jane, utilitarian feeding turned into a tentatively stroked cheek, an extra sip of water, a thumb wiping away a drop.

Despite Jane’s intellectual insistence on vigilance, intellect and insistence and vigilance all faded over time, dulled and tarnished, like mirrors that no longer provided reflections, no insight, no reason to gaze there.

Skitter was a comfort. Skitter was heartrendingly reluctant, her face slowly transforming from the distasteful horror of looking at Jane’s captivity into sympathy, until at one point in the long continuum of her captivity Skitter whispered “I’m sorry,” barely audible, so quiet Jane wasn’t sure that Skitter knew she’d heard it, before an injection that left her unconscious.

Jane wanted to protect her, take her out of here, take her back to the Normandy where they would both be safe.

Over time Jane had been released from her strapped dolly on occasion, only when paralytics were injected, wide awake but unable to move, chemical restraints replacing physical ones. Jane’s muscles had atrophied, and Skitter would move her limbs and her joints gently, massage tight and failing muscles, ease muscle contractures developed from holding a forced position indefinitely. After unabated restraint it was bliss. Skitter would whisper that she was sorry every time she refreshed the medication.

She’d be strapped back in with reluctance from Skitter, horror or exhaustion from Jane, unable to maintain the energy for protest, knowing she had the energy once for protest and suppressing protest, but now finding a deeper silence, down in a well like a dead girl, a common nightmare among nightmares with no waking and eventual dull acceptance. Skitter would leave with head and back bowed, terrified of Moe and Targ, avoiding Vitkiv entirely, as far away from her in the room as she could be before fleeing.

It might have worked…if the faces and body language of Moe, Targ and Vitkiv had been as well disciplined as Skitter’s. Stress and time were taking their tolls, and not just on Jane.

Moe and Targ should have at least mocked Skitter, shoved her, abused her…but their eyes slid off of the Drell. Not in the way they would if she were a drudge. She was not a target of abuse. She was a source of…ill concealed fear. Same with Vitkiv, unable to keep a contemptuous look on her face, and a thin patina of fear over her consciousness if Skitter was in the room, directly correlated.
Sometimes a play could be destroyed by poor supporting players. She noticed it idly but didn’t remember the real significance, why it mattered. She began to accept instead of oppose by default. She hadn’t the energy or the capacity other than in panicked, gasping breaths, experiencing sliding helplessness over and over until that became redundant information on its own, no longer catalogued. Jane’s inhibitions were degraded, her energy gone, control over her own body taken from her, paralyzed or unconscious for maintenance of keeping her alive, waking to blessedly welcomed apology or wearily endured abuse.

She leaned to the apology, began to anticipate and treasure it as a bright point in her day. Skitter had a beautiful, soft voice, and it seemed more familiar and a little more seductive each time she heard it. Skitter was fragile, violet and peach tones to her skin.

One day when she felt bad about calling her Skitter, when this lovely woman tried to help her, did help her every day, relieved the cramp and the pain and granted her an oasis, Jane asked quietly without thinking of asking “What is your name?”

Jane wasn’t sure why she’d broken her silence, muted panic did not surge, but it blipped and fell. She was reassured by thinking that this poor woman deserved her own name. That was why she asked. It was still rebellion, comforting a fellow prisoner, someone who would not get out of here alive, just like Jane.

The lovely young woman smiled with shy flattered beam that squeezed Jane’s heart and said quietly “My name is Yahlis.”

Jane smiled at her to encourage her, thank her. Yahlis’s face grew shadowed and Jane wanted to comfort her. Yahlis said mournfully “I am so very sorry, Jane” and gave her another injection.

Jane smiled. Yahlis knew her name. She said “It’s all right, Yahlis…” before she was gone again.

Unmeasured time passed and one day when she woke the room was empty and bleak because the light was gone and Yahlis was gone and Jane knew only to wait and listen, that everything else caused pain. She could wait with no effort, and she could listen without it hurting, sometimes, so she did those things.

She had to get Yahlis out of here, somewhere safe, back to the ship.

She waited.

The interrogations stopped and there was only waiting now. Waiting for Yahlis. Waiting to go back to her ship.

She knew if she was good she could go back, and although she could not always remember what good was, and she had flashes of horror and realization, they would slip away and good would mean waiting.

She told Yahlis all about the ship and the people she’d meet, they were quiet voices and huddled confidences.

Garrus was a name of someone she wanted to introduce to Yahlis, tell him about her and how much she’d helped.

Thane was a name of someone who might be jealous of Yahlis. Jane thought maybe he might try to kill Yahlis because that’s what he did.

She couldn’t let that happen.
She would keep Yahlis safe and they would do great things with the Normandy.

She didn’t know what great things, but she had faith. She had to have faith. She had the best ship and an amazing team, and she loved them and Yahlis promised to love them too, to help.

Yahlis was as beautiful as the Normandy was and Yahlis promised to put her bare foot on the deck and that she would know, just like Jane did, how special she was. Everyone could know how special. Everyone could be that special.

Jane didn’t need to be injected, no more apologies. Yahlis would help her sit, sweating and shaking off addictions and tremors, wanting to make her proud. She could help with stretching and without all the drugs in her system, focus on rebuilding her body with help. She needed to be strong. Yahlis had said with unbearable fear trembling in her voice “Jane…I am afraid. People here are cruel to me.”

Jane tried to remember other people, tried to remember or think…why anybody would be cruel to Yahlis, tried to reassure her. Jane said “I promise…to protect you.” Jane didn’t know where she got the courage, but she reached out a hand to touch Yahlis’s lip, then drew her finger back, remembering herself and that she shouldn’t do that. Yahlis took off her gloves, Jane trembled, and Yahlis leaned in and kissed her, melting and warm.

There was a familiar racing of venom along her lips and she knew the word venom and she knew the word Drell…and she knew for a few horrified seconds that another Drell named Urem had different venom and another Drell named Thane had venom that was exactly the same…and she remembered what that meant. She froze and trembled, then Yahlis’s mouth on hers was all that mattered, and she could barely breathe from the joy and promise.

Yahlis rarely left her now except to bring food and pills, water to drink and to bathe her. She whispered to her, cradled her in her gracious arms while Jane trembled and cried and answered questions, listened to instruction, tried to remember everything but there were different versions of things to remember and she couldn’t hold them all in her head at the same time, needed Yahlis to confirm which one was real when she spoke of doubts and crazy things. Yahlis assured her she’d been drugged, she’d been interrogated, she was weak and wasn’t thinking clearly, but she needed to be clever and strong to escape.

Jane had felt a surge of something at those words, clever and strong, that’s the person she could be now. She had been that, she could do that again, reached for it, fought for it with everything she had.

There had been a Batarian who entered the room. Yahlis had said softly “He hurt me. He hurt you, Jane” and now his body was on the floor. Jane barely remembered killing him, it wasn’t important. He was gone.

Yahlis had welcomed her into a grateful embrace, with her gentle, sweet hands spreading joy and pleasure over her body. Jane could tremble and shake and have pain and doubts, but Yahlis would bring her back to what was right and speak to Jane with her Goddess voice, stroke light fingertips and whisper soft words. “Protect me, Jane, and we can have everything, together. You protect people. You will always protect me. I know it.”

Always.

Jane was a protector, it’s what she did, and she had never had more to lose than this fragile, beautiful woman who took care of her, braved her own fears outside the door where Jane was afraid to go, and brought her food, whispered to her, gave her courage, gave her a chance of escape.
She was in a filthy room, not fitting for her Joy to dwell, but Yahlis had brought a blanket and a pillow, set it on the ledge she used to sleep, and whispered how much she loved Jane as her fingers traced over her gently, creating soft cries and moans, lips like flower petals and wet heat. Jane traced her own reassuring, loving hands over Yahlis’s pleasure-splashed skin, light cascading from her and sanctifying the room for her presence, Jane worshipping her with her tongue and her voice and her fingertips, every part of her, until Yahlis closed her arms around Jane and stroked her hair and she was her only Home.

The Normandy was not good enough for Yahlis. Yahlis hadn’t asked for the ship, only to be taken there, but if She wanted it, She could have it and melt it into scrap if She wanted to. It was only giving the gift that mattered.

Only Jane had the power to give that gift, and she would do everything she could to make it happen.

Jane woke up, disoriented, tangled in the arms of a Drell, tiremit still racing, horrified and wanting to chew off her own limbs where they touched her like a trapped animal, struggling briefly until the…thing…noticed her struggles and tilted her head, lowered her mouth to Jane’s, kissed her while Jane tried to struggle but could not move. She said softly and gently, steadying “Jane, come back to me. Remember what I have told you.”

Flashes of her plan, of knowing what indoctrination was, lasted for the seven seconds she knew it would last, before it caught up to her, clamped down on her and brought paralysis and hesitation, freezing her muscles as Yahlis’s face drew back, watching her with pity and sympathy, but no doubt counting herself, watching the helpless transformation on Jane’s face that had happened innumerable times when her resistance broke through, when the drugs wore off, when suggestion failed. The only victories she had could be measured in those seven seconds, never reducing to six or five…no longer changing, no more ground to be gained or lost. Every iteration of trying to attack Yahlis had already occurred to her and she could not do it. She’d started trying to kill her when she’d been weaker, when Yahlis could fend her off easily, and now she was stronger but she couldn’t make her mind remember it all in seven seconds, what she’d done, what she had to do, before she’d freeze when the same instincts to strike duplicated themselves.

Jane clung to terrible hope. She wanted Yahlis, despite herself, because of herself. She wanted to kill the Batarian. Maybe Yahlis could only make her do what she wanted to do…please…

But no. She had not wanted to tell Yahlis everything…everything…and she had.

Forgive me…she reached for approving voices…and then the names were gone and Yahlis’s smile went from…something she didn’t know and couldn’t name to her most beautiful smile, every smile.

Yahlis stroked her hair and said “Lovely Jane. I have done all I can do and you have done all you can do. It is time to leave. I will get weaker if we do not, and I am weak compared to you.” Yahlis tucked Jane’s hair behind her ear and watched her face for a moment with a sad smile and then drew a breath, finally said “Would you like to leave here? Go with me to your ship? She is a beautiful ship, you’ve told me so much of her.”

That was all she was waiting for, who she was waiting for, all her dreams and ambitions made whole, lightning rushing along her spine. She said “Yes!”

Yahlis stood and took her hand and opened the door, the door Jane had never gone through. Jane shook and trembled but Yahlis said “Jane, if you remember what I have said, nothing will hurt you. I will not allow anybody to hurt you. Someone should protect you. I may not be able to, but I want to
try.” Her lips met hers in a kiss and Jane felt the warming and courage-granting boost of venom and the truth, the light that came with it.

Yahlis knelt to the corpse of the Batarian and took the pistol from his side. Jane should have thought of that. Yahlis took his other pistol and kept it for herself and with a cautioning, warning glance of dangers to come and an indication to be quiet, took her hand and beckoned for her to step outside the door and into the new world they could make their own.

Yahlis guided her down a hallway and opened a door to the left. Inside was an Asari, Jane remembered her for a moment. Violet and gray, her mind searching and then turning to sympathy and comfort and fear, Vitkiv. Tied up, helpless, upright and staring, eyes darting between the two of them, horrified eyes of warning and muffled sounds like begging and warning, settling on Jane. Yahlis said with infinite hurt and regret “She hurt me, Jane.”

Jane aimed the pistol and pulled the trigger and a hole bloomed on Vitkiv’s forehead. The pistol felt…wrong…she thought about it and in panic remembered two different types of counting, counting up and then only being able to count to seven. Vitkiv’s body slumped and the doubts and worries were gone.

Yahlis said gratefully, stepping over to Jane to draw her into a kiss that left her trembling “Thank you, Jane. I knew you would protect me.”

Yahlis took her hand, venom tingling through her fingertips, and led her toward their destination. They stepped over the body of another Batarian, another insignificant thing that had hurt Yahlis. Jane must have killed him earlier, she didn’t remember, he had been dead a long time.

Yahlis got them into a shuttle and began the sequence to leave, and Jane sat, eyes closed, overwhelmed and shaking. Yahlis said “Jane, beloved, remember. You rescued me. You protected me. I will help on the Normandy as I helped you with those terrible people who hurt you, who hurt me. Take me to the Med Bay and stay with me there, watch over me and wait for the great things we will do together. You must know how to contact the Normandy, I cannot find them without your help.”

Med Bay. Yahlis was injured, green blood dripping, her face battered. When had that happened?

When had that happened? Jane panicked and Yahlis calmed her, assured her that Jane had stopped the people that hurt her while escaping. An Asari, a Batarian, and Yahlis spoke softly until Jane remembered.

Yahlis reminded her about the Normandy and Jane struggled to remember numbers, codes from before, thought of counting and then remembered what Yahlis needed, what they both needed, and gave her the emergency broadcast code that would relay their transmission to the Normandy, set a rendezvous point far from here.

While the request was busy working its way through notifications and authorizations and Jane gave the right responses in code, Yahlis turned to her, took her hands in hers and said “I am frightened, Jane. Stay with me when I am on the Normandy? Keep me with you please? I am afraid people might try to hurt me. I need you to protect me.”

Jane’s brows drew together and she said “Always. I will protect you always.”

Yahlis said “They will be so happy to see you. I know they have been looking for you, dearest love, and now everyone will be together. We will do great things.”
Jane murmured “We will do great things.” Back to the ship. Back home, with the woman she loved.

Yahlis said “We can’t speak to them right now, though they will try. Our communications are limited. We will land on the ship and you will introduce me. Keep me safe.”

Jane nodded, shaking with emotion and freedom and a bond she did not understand but embraced, as she had many odd things in her life.

Everyone would see.

The Normandy covered the majority of the distance to them. Jane struggled to remember who was on the ship, faces and names blurring, but it didn’t matter. Yahlis was brave, determined, piloting the shuttle and Jane was so proud, though her head hurt and she had to lie down, Yahlis encouraging her to do it. “I will get us there. All you need to remember is that you protected me, you will protect me, you will keep me with you. Kiss me, Jane, and kiss me when you wake.”

Jane leaned in and did as she was told, the radiating blur from the kiss, Yahlis’s fingers trembling on the side of her cheek, then exhaustion that she did not understand overwhelmed her excitement, and she curled into a cold ball on the floor, hugged her arms around herself, and waited for the pain to dissipate before the promise and the glow.

The deceleration whine of the shuttle woke her, along with the voice she loved. Yahlis stood and held out her hands and Jane scrambled to meet them, on her knees and grateful. Yahlis smiled and lifted Jane to stand by guidance on her shoulders. Yahlis said solemnly “You are Commander Jane Shepard, my love. Nothing will stop you. You will protect me.”

Jane smiled and nodded, kissing her, blurred and grateful and trembling to be home. Yahlis dropped her hands, her voice shifted to a loving tone, her head tilted to gaze at Jane and she said with conviction. “You are beautiful. You are magnificent. You are courageous. You make me proud to know you. We shall finally see, Jane, what you can do. When you are in doubt and if we are separated, remember.”

They would not be separated. Confidence surged through her and she turned to open the shuttle doors, setting her foot down on the vibrating deck of her ship. Her ship.

Their ship. She would show Yahlis everything, just as she wanted.

She turned and saw rushing toward her a Turian, blue…and in a shocking, jagged time-dilated moment she knew his name. Not only did she know his name, she knew what his name meant, for the first time in the longest time…and

1…

She had to tell him.

2…

She tried to say “Garrus I’m…” the words curdled in her throat, choked her.

3…

4…
She remembered the pistol at her side and grabbed at it, Garrus’s eyes locked on hers in welcome and then alarm, his speed not enough to get to her. She would not fail him, would not betray him.

Thane came into view behind Garrus and she saw his attention turn to the thing in the shuttle behind her.

5…

She held the pistol to her own temple, looked at Garrus’s horrified face and said words she was allowed to say that he would understand in a different context. Saren’s last words. Garrus had been there with her, had always been there with her, and now she couldn’t be there with him.

6…

“Goodbye, Shepard. Thank you.”

7…

She pulled the trigger.

Nothing.

Yahlis had not trusted her with a loaded weapon and had shot Vitkiv simultaneously, making Jane think she’d done it herself.

And now she’d failed. She had brought herself and that thing to her family.

8…

She dropped the pistol and remembered, was surging, rushing to protect Yahlis from Thane, he was the greatest threat.

Thane evaded Jane’s desperate grab and had almost reached Yahlis, Jane surged forward, murderous. Strong arms closed around her, Turian, and Jane struggled, screamed, lunged, and then a blow to her jaw made her slump forward. She was lifted, her last image causing despair and failure, Thane lunging, Yahlis with her pistol out, then black.

oOoOoOoOoOo

She woke up screaming, on fire, looking down at her flesh and expecting to see bubbling and burning, acid and smoking blood. Expecting to smell the acrid vapors of thresher maw burns, but she was whole.

She was in the Med Bay and Garrus was at her side, and she knew that for only as long as it took to think it, before the searing panic and pain took her again.

She heard Garrus shout “She’s awake! Do something!”

Mordin’s voice responded “Could kill her, addition of more medication potentially lethal.”

She didn’t see or hear Yahlis and then even Her name was gone, distorted and then vaporized.

Garrus tried to hold her head between his hands and the contact felt like her flesh was going to stick to his and peel off. She screamed again, twisted away as much as she could, which was not far.

She was restrained, strapped down, and where the straps dug into her body, where she was
struggling against them the pain was excruciating. Garrus backing away in horror as she struggled to
listen, but she couldn’t hear the voice she needed to hear, unleashed frantic pain without a voice to
calm it, control it, bring her light and purpose.

She screamed until she was hoarse, blood choking her breath, eyes tightly closed shut and streaming
tears, struggling until coughing broke up the sound, until she fainted.

oOoOoOoOoOo

She struggled awake from cloying dreams, inescapable oppression, nameless, unable to look behind
her, too afraid of what she might see. The clanging habit of guard, being on guard, being aware,
alert, took hold. She started to count and made it to five…don’t make a sound…

And then she breathed and dared to crack her eyes open, look at where she was.

Med Bay. Normandy. Restrained. Pain where there were restraints. She wanted to scream.

Memories of waking screaming many times.

Surreal disorientation, trying to remember who she was, who she was supposed to be right now.

Shepard. She reached for more…

That’s going to have to be enough. Shepard. Not screaming. Not in the room.

Not with a Drell.

Bile surged and burned, and she swallowed it back, would not choke or cough. No sound.

Garrus was asleep in a chair by the side of her bed and she saw Dr. Chakwas’s back, turned away.

Her throat hurt. She had screamed until she had coughed spattered blood, screamed more.

She closed her eyes again to think. She was restrained and she wanted to hide, shrink back into the
bed, into the covers until there was nothing left.

She counted through the pain.

She got to 71, much higher than she’d been able to count in a very long time, before she felt a brief
touch on her forearm, and the very familiar and horrifying feel of an injection bit under her skin and
she obediently fell asleep, where she screamed.

oOoOoOoOoOo

She woke up panicked, struggling against straps, pain, a pressured deep, flanging voice saying
“Shepard, stop. You have to stop.”

She was used to following orders, but she did not want to and rejected it, because she could, because
she had will and she had strength and she felt that if her legs were free she could run. She had
screamed sounds and now she screamed words. “Let me go!”

It was Garrus or someone wanted her to think it was Garrus, but all she cared about was being tied
down. His hand came on top of hers and she flinched away, screamed “Let me GO!”

His hand moved away and she did not open her eyes because she didn’t want to see that it wasn’t
him, didn’t want to find out that she shouldn’t be talking to him, making a demand.
He said in a broken, hoarse voice “Spirits, what did they do to you?” The sound of his voice… though her hand jerked at the straps once, she held still, listening.

Was it a question she should be able to answer? Did she have to answer? How should she answer? A lie. Always a lie. Remember to lie.

The sympathy in his voice broke something in her, something that had disallowed sympathy or pity for herself for so long that its presence baffled her and then started a flood of remembering. Her lip trembled and she couldn’t stop herself from begging. “Please… please… please… let me go. Please.”

Her voice ended on a sob and his voice seemed to pick up on that sound and carry it through. She felt the strap over her hands release and some of the pain eased. Something she’d asked for. Something she could have. Something that should not be taken away. Something she deserved and she needed. Something she hadn’t gotten for herself in an eternity, but it was given. The tiniest bit of retained power and control. Something simple that began the avalanche. She had kept herself from begging, and then forgot what it was to want something for herself, and now she had the strength to beg and no way to stop “Please. I won’t... please... please take them off.”

Garrus’s hand came to hers. It had to be his hand. Talons and rough skin and warmth. It had to be him. It couldn’t be her. It couldn’t be a dream. Please don’t let this be a new torture. She felt the urge to throw up but kept it down, nothing in her stomach.

She opened an eye and saw him, opened the other because it had to be him. She asked “Am I dead? Did I die again?” begging him to answer.

It was the heartbroken thrum in his voice, the sympathy and not the command that drew her out, made her think that maybe... maybe it was true, she was dead. Maybe the gun had worked and he’d held a ghost. Maybe she’d done her job. She said “Please, Garrus…tell me I’m dead, but if you’re here…Garrus, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry.”

He didn’t know how to answer that, and she saw it, indecision, broken heart... things she’d had alone. Maybe this was heaven.

She sobbed and said “Garrus please… let me go, I can’t... you can’t keep me tied down, you can’t... I can’t…”

He looked at her and it seemed he saw her, made a decision, one he wasn’t sure about but he saw her. He leaned over and released the restraints off the bed and she was free. She panted...and counted...1...2...3...

4...he looked at her as though she was about to kill him and maybe she was...

5...6...7...

8.

9.

She said aloud, cramped terrified muscles relaxing on the exhalation “Ten.”

Garrus watched her, said in his broken and horrified voice “Ten what?”

She calmed. A miracle. She said “Just ten.”
She held onto his hand. He held onto hers. Her hand burned from the contact, but she didn’t want to let go.

Dr. Chakwas came over and although Jane recognized her and didn’t think she meant harm, she reacted to the needle. She jerked her hand back and said “No, no, no… no more. Nothing under the skin, no. Don’t put me back down. I can’t stop screaming, please…”

Karin froze. She took a step back and held up her hands. She had nasty bruises over her forearms.

Jane pressed her lips together and said “I did that.”

Karin said calmly “Yes, but you did not mean to do that.”

Jane said “I did that.” Fatalistic, accepting that she’d brought harm back to her ship. She had failed. She had a job and she failed. Jane remembered and said “Where is she, where is it…that thing. I brought it with me.”

Garrus swallowed and said “Maybe right now isn’t…”

She shouted “WHERE IS IT?”

Karin took another step back and Jane’s head swung wildly, expecting to see her through the glass, in the hall, coming to get her.

She’d fucking get her right back.

Garrus said hurriedly “She’s not here. She’s not on the ship.”

She swung her head to him and demanded “WHERE. IS. IT?” She did sound as though she was about to kill him. She struggled to get up, go look, and he hesitated but put his hands on her shoulders, instant fire on her skin and fury at being touched.

She went absolutely wild but Garrus’s arms were much longer than hers and she couldn’t do any harm to his exoskeleton, mostly flailing until he trapped her arms and shouted “JANE. STOP.”

She froze, following a command instantly and then infuriated, cowed and sick at once.

He looked at her face, pain and uncertainty on his features, tried to look for her, for what he’d seen when he took off the restraints. For a reason to stop restraining her. She tried to be that reason, struggled for less avalanche, less crazy. He released her shoulders and took a step back, hands up in surrender, eyes begging her to compromise. She repeated, fury and ice “Where. Is. It?”

He huffed a breath and said “She’s gone. Thane took her in the shuttlecraft you came in. Thane knocked her out, he was in control. He told EDI he was going to go back to track her origin point through the shuttle’s navigation system to find out where you were, if anybody was left.”

Her lip trembled. She panted and thought. Everything scary about Yahlis was scary about Thane and Thane had her restrained before he left. She said “There’s nobody left there. Not alive. How long was I gone?”

Garrus said with an aching throb “Seven weeks.”

She set her jaw and said “How long have I been here?”

Garrus said tightly “Two weeks.”
She pressed her lips together and said “And Thane has been gone those two weeks, he is not back, and you haven’t heard from him since…?”

Garrus said “After the first few days EDI got what she thinks is a ping, a confirmation from him that he is alive. It’s just a small data burst, but it arrives on the same time cycle, midnight on Rakhana. A Drell day, not a human day. Relay through an automated repeating service on the Citadel, sending a picture of a black chess piece, a knight, she said. She thinks he’s got nothing but his Omni Tool, unable to communicate directly without drawing attention to himself, unwilling to use any technology on the shuttle or wherever you were. With it timed, she thinks…he might have set up a dead man’s switch. The message will stop sending if he does not authorize it each day. So all he has to do is send a binary switch authorization to the Citadel remotely, a tiny communication transaction. Impossible to track without having the encryption key. She thinks this is how we can know he’s still alive without him giving away the Normandy’s location or his. No directionality, no way to respond. Jane, he had her down, he had her out. Thane knew immediately that she was a threat and had her off the ship before I got you to the Med Bay. He did not consult with me, he made his own decision. I understand why he did it. We had been looking for you for seven weeks. He had his chance at getting answers and getting her off the ship before she could do any damage and he took it. I have faith he can take care of himself, that he’s alive.”

She released a held breath. A chess piece, a knight. Symbols were important. She said “Everyone else is okay? Did I hurt anybody else?”

Garrus said “No. No, you haven’t hurt anybody else and you’ve only hurt us because you’re in pain. I understood your message. I understood you were indoctrinated. With anybody else they probably wouldn’t have found it, but you’ve been brought back to life cell by cell, months of full body scans for reference and familiar to Miranda. She was able to find it.”

She swallowed, sick again and said “Find…what?” But she knew…whatever it was that wrapped around her brain and wasn’t drugs or Drell assassin venom. Whatever it was that only allowed her seven seconds of thought, froze repeated rebellious action.

Karin said “Nerve tissue protected by an altered myelin sheath that generates a variety of psychoactive agents. Undetectable on a scan unless you know exactly what you are looking for, because our technology shows it as normal organic tissue. Miranda and Mordin, in consultation with Amalis Kemi, found it. It was enmeshed in your nervous system, hooked into pain and pleasure centers.”

Jane muttered darkly “No shit.”

Garrus choked on a laugh, and then so did she, and then she coughed and laughed for the first time in…nine weeks. Out loud.

Garrus’s shoulders dropped and said “There’s bad news, though. They removed it, but it will continue to try to regrow, recolonize, target those locations. They have a preliminary inhibitor to keep it from spreading. But it’s in your system, we don’t know the delivery method, it may always be there.”

She jerked her hand back and said “Don’t touch me. You’ll…fuck, Garrus, put me in the brig. Why am I…? I am fucking ordering you to get me into isolation.”

Garrus said obstinately “No. You need to stay in the Med Bay. They just got you back to coherence, unhooking Reaper biological technology from your brain and helping damaged… brain… heal. Say thank you.”
She muttered “Thank you. Hurt like hell. Put me in the fricking brig.”

Garrus repeated emphatically “No. They will develop another inhibitor. They’re working on some sort of contrast to highlight the areas. They know the growth rates. You’re safe. You’re only trying to kill me because you’re stubborn and mean, not because you’re indoctrinated. For now they have… would you explain, Karin?”

Karin said “We’ve isolated where on your spine the matrix aggregates. Removal results in regrowth, we don’t know the source. It could be deep inside your spinal cord, it could be in your blood, your lymphatics, we don’t know. It likely looks like something normal and we don’t know what we’re looking for or where to look. We tried to remove it but there was re-colonization within hours. Instead of removal we’ve had to calcify the area. Sometimes when your body finds something it can’t eliminate, it may form a shell around it, and business goes on as usual around it, the body ignores it as bone surface. We provided a simulated shell. The seed is there, but in essence it can’t get water or sunlight, has no space to grow, can’t find what it needs to germinate. We can’t scrape it off your spinal cord, it would recolonize and you would eventually have no spinal cord left if that was the method used to remove it. You need your spinal cord, Jane. For now it has to stay, until we come up with a solution. These are stop gap measures, the same way we began with Thane’s Kepral’s syndrome. We’re not there yet, but we will get there. We know the location, we don’t see any other parts of your body where the matrix aggregates, it is targeted and doesn’t adapt to different locations on the spine or in the brain. That is good. That will make it possible to monitor on scans, to inhibit, to control. We can see if the calcification integrity is lost. With the preliminary inhibitor we have…”

Karin held up a syringe and said “You need to have it, Jane. I appreciate you not wanting a needle, but consider this a greater preventive than the brig. This is…it’s a miracle. It’s going to inhibit that growth while still allowing your brain to carry on its normal function, still repair itself. That seemed impossible a week ago. We’ve seen miracles in this room and we need to keep on seeing them. You are not in any immediate danger, it would take weeks for the matrix to regrow fully and reattach to a brain site. In the meantime if it grows, and it hasn’t for days, we would be able to trim it back indefinitely with no further trauma to your spine or brain. We believe the beds are calcified and the matrix will be unable to expand. We’re trying to find a way to provoke an immune response.”

Garrus said to qualify “A response that won’t kill you.”

Karin agreed reasonably “Yes, ideally that won’t kill you.”

Jane, in an effort that had her panting and sweating, held out her arm to take the shot. When that was done she wanted to stand, wanted to run, jumped down on free, healthy feet and then tried to think of an explanation to justify doing that, something other than mindless panic. She said steadily “I’m reporting to the brig.”

Garrus shook his head and sighed, said “Fine. I’m going with you.”

She said “Fine.” She moved her feet because she could. She looked at the deck because she could. She could bend her neck. Her feet burned from contact with the deck, but she was free. She didn’t want to say anything about the pain. Karin would make her lie back down and Jane would try to kill her because no way in hell.

She’d take the pain along with the freedom…though she was about to lock herself up until she was sure she wasn’t a threat.

She didn’t feel like a threat, and she knew what it felt like, but who the fuck really knew? Isn’t there such a thing as post-hypnotic suggestion? Triggers? Could it kick in? Was the damage permanent? Was she going to be…this crazy…forever…considering they’d ripped things out of her drug-addled
brain and scraped things off her spinal cord and then put them in calcium jail?

Karin sighed and said stoically “I’ll set up a monitoring station there.”

Jane, with her bare feet on the vibrating deck, paused, smiled and said “Fine. It’s a party.” She turned and said “Wait a minute, do you think we could find this in other people?”

Garrus said “They’ve found it in Dr. Kenson, they’re working on removing it based on Mordin’s recommendations. They’ve found it in other people, everyone on the Bahak system’s station, terrifyingly also those in active duty all over the place. They’re working out how to remove it from their systems, synthesize the inhibitor, calcify and isolate the regions involved. We’ve forwarded the basics and methods to governments, news organizations and medical organizations. Everyone on the Normandy has been scanned. We’re all clean.”

She shook her head “So that’s…good. That’s good.” She tasted the word ‘good.’ Foreign. Implausible.

Garrus picked her up and she was immediately stiff, terrified, shaky, 99% ready to demand that he put her down, scream and hit him because it felt like restraint and everywhere he touched burned, but she had to…had to control herself.

She counted to ten, relishing the eight, decided it was now her favorite number and looked at his face and remembered his voice, saw that he was 99% something that was not ready to laugh or explain or let her leave this room under any circumstances and he was trying to control himself.

She tried to reach for hope, but though her feet could run…hope was out of reach of her hands or her mind.

She would need the discipline it took to prove that she wasn’t broken when she was. Except that she might really be permanently broken and she had to tell them if that were true. Just not right now. It would take time and she would try not to hurt people or scream or cry or hide…she thought…as she was being carried to the brig, as she worried about a…biofilm forming on Garrus’s skin, soaking in through his hide and plates from contact with her, as she wondered if it was there already from holding her hand for two weeks while she screamed awake and asleep, while he wondered if she would ever wake up or stop screaming.

She was sure he agonized about whether his commander, the woman he loved, was still in there or capable of command, that he had two weeks practice agonizing over whether Thane was alive, whether he could have stopped him or helped him.

Garrus carried her into the brig cell, set his Omni Tool and activated the screen. She felt better, inexplicably, in a room with a door she couldn’t escape. It was sick and terrible and she wanted to cry and hit the walls, pound against the screen until her fists bled, but she kept it in.

Garrus stepped to the back of the cell, ignoring the utilitarian bed, and leaned against the wall, slid slowly to the floor, hunched in and around her, his mournful, grieving howl filling the space, her tears sliding down her cheeks in burning trails. His arms wrapped around her tightly, and she tried to focus as pain and revulsion crawled over her skin, tried to remember what it was like when she thought of his plates as comfort, thought of his voice as courage.

Her skin would heal. She had to believe that. It was an after effect. Her pain perception was royally fucked and fondued. Seemed like for a while skin contact was going to feel like thresher maw acid to a greater or lesser degree. It was now lesser. She had screamed herself unconscious when it was greater. Now it was tenderness and pain like a severe sunburn, but no longer feeling like flesh was
melting off. She could do this.

She couldn’t bear to push him away, have him think she didn’t want him to touch her…but she didn’t want him to touch her. She kept the screams in.

She didn’t want anybody to touch her.

He had more courage than she had, locked in with a woman who two weeks ago was indoctrinated, drugged and hypnotized, minutes ago begging, hitting, screaming…a woman trying not to kill people and run away.

She understood the sound he made, wanted to be able to make it, but she was quiet, stiff and fearful, waiting.

The true horror of realizing, not in flashes or bits or occasionally that Yahlis was a Drell assassin hit her. She almost threw up but through long habit held still, controlled her reactions, consciously relaxed like all those times she pretended to be asleep, pretended to faint.

Garrus’s arms loosened around her, just a little, and she sighed, some of the pain faded.

She listened, finding communion in the sound, and after a long time he stopped, and she listened to his breathing.

She didn’t know if Thane was alive. She didn’t know if she would ever…allow him to touch her again if he was.

She reached for Garrus’s hand, spread three fingers over the glowing light on his wrist, ignored the burning, closed her eyes and tried to think that she didn’t have to think.

She had a hero’s example to live up to.

She counted. She breathed.
Chapter 19

She stared at the glass in her cabin bathroom, wanting to smash it, to deny that her face could look perfectly normal when she was screaming inside.

Telling. She had thought ‘her’ cabin. As though Thane and Garrus had already been sliced away from her literally instead of figuratively. She had always tried to include them. Now they had their own cabins, though one stood empty. This used to be their cabin.

She wanted to chew on the glass and spit blood-spattered shards back.

She wanted to swallow and slice and have a visible reason to bleed internally.

But she tried not to break useful things.

She tried not to go after the wrong target.

She was a useful thing.

She wasn’t the target.

She heard it in her head, in Yahlis’s voice. “You’re a protector, Jane.”

Pride in herself had been twisted like a corkscrew into her heart. Now she wondered if she could ever hear the word ‘protector’ without feeling a ghost tremor in her gut, a shadow and an echo. No longer a clean word, a proud word. An entry point for an infestation.

Shivers down her spine, half strangling and half caressing. That was Yahlis’s path into her mind. That’s how learning from dreams and her reactions to attempted intimidation paid off. Yahlis knew she couldn’t hurt Jane into action or intimidate her into action, so Yahlis chose to be rescued. Because Jane could not help herself. Yahlis had watched and waited, set herself out as harmless, helpful, distressed bait. Waited like a patient vampire to be invited inside, until it was Jane’s idea. Then she’d been able to disable the security, the alarms, redecorate.

Jane’s emotional attachment to this ship and her job bypassed her intellectual objections, made it impossible for her to fail to do what she was built to do, what she sculpted herself to do, what Yahlis encouraged her to do. Get back to the ship, protect the innocent. Jane had spent uncounted time unconscious, hypnotic agents introduced, suggestion whispered, Jane distracted and exhausted by what was happening while she was awake. Yahlis’s best work happened when she was unconscious, made easier by the growing, burrowing fibers in her brain, until Jane was under her control. Mostly…under her control. A crucial distinction and the only reason why she was able to stand here contemplating chewing glass physically to reflect how she felt emotionally. But it would give her away, result in her getting caught being self-destructively crazy. She was the index case for indoctrination and how much trust could she really rebuild? How many trips to insanity to blow off some steam could she afford? No more. No more trips. That’s what people who wanted to get caught did and Jane contemplated whether or not she wanted to get caught… whether she was unfit for duty and should accept that, confess.

Accepting was not her strong point. She clearly had an aversion to confession and had done too much of it lately. Jane had become the greatest security leak and the greatest threat to the Normandy, but her emotional attachment to this ship and her job was strong, resurgent, amplified…Yahlis’s
influence, but also her underlying bedrock. With the recovery of her intellect and memory she absorbed shock after shock, realization after realization, bile and pride mixed and inseparable.

She could know she was crazy, but she would no more admit the extent of her crazy than she would have asked Moe for dancing lessons.

She wasn’t crazy enough to ask for command back and she wouldn’t anytime soon, until she was sure her crazy quotient had diminished. Maybe not even then, what with the indoctrination. So everyone was watching and that was fine with her.

Garrus said they had no leads to find her, that they had spent exhausted weeks chasing down cold and fake trails, and the only thing they could do was wait and watch. He didn’t say ‘go silently crazy’ but clearly he had gone silently crazy.

She had gone loudly crazy.

Crazy for some people wasn’t a line that they crossed and stayed forever…some people could live so near that line that they crossed over and crossed back several times a day, hour by hour, minute by minute. Sometimes crazy was a vacation home, a relief, a valve for pressure. That’s where Jane was, right on that border, the will to stay on one side failing, getting blindsided and ‘responding to internal stimuli’ – that thing she knew not to do but could not help doing. She had some leeway, she knew. She had a right to be crazy for a bit, but she wondered if ‘a bit’ meant forever.

She and Garrus were both strong, resilient, experienced. They could both heal, cross back, but they’d both gone, both been there. Garrus had revisited two years of helpless grief in seven weeks. He had failed to protect her or anticipate the danger.

She tried to think of what Thane had gone through, was going through, could not other than that was stoic and resourceful. She had not asked and Garrus had not volunteered that information. Garrus waited for her to speak, stuck to her topic and her tone. Thane lived in places that reminded her of her spinal cord. Calcified. Limited. Shallow roots and claustrophobia.

Spending so much time with Yahlis had been educational.

Granted…Yahlis had to put in a lot of work. It took a lot of effort. Say what you want about Jane’s fortitude, and Jane did, but she’d been a massive pain to deal with and what Yahlis wanted did not happen.

Seven seconds, Yahlis my love. You knew it was a gamble. You had to hope that I would not, could not do…exactly what I did. But all your hopes…I don’t know what they were, as fragile and changeable as your skin, your tongue, your thoughts. You tried to squeeze all the rebellion out of me and you knew I couldn’t say it and would choke on the words…would only have the strength for a few seconds. I could explain my stutters and freezing as diminished capacity, pain, my reaction to trauma. You coached me on it extensively. We would have gotten to the Med Bay, questions deferred in the relief of having me back, in the immediacy of your injuries, and somewhere in there Dr. Chakwas would have been compromised and it would have been over. You wouldn’t have had to try turning Garrus or Thane, just been Skitter, the abused drudge that aided me during my kidnapping and interrogation by Batarian agents, rescued by me, vouched for by me, watched over zealously by me, the same way I’d watch over any of my people. You would have used your patience and lent me yours, waited until nerve endings took hold.

You’re a woman after my own heart, of my own heart, Yahlis, and I know you could have brought me on unconscious, and maybe you should have. You could have drugged me…but you knew Thane and Garrus would be suspicious and Karin would examine me and the only way you could
win the long con would be to sell me as damaged but brave, let me explain. I wasn’t of use unconscious or dead, I was of use as a puppet figurehead, and you needed to deliver that package, and you couldn’t.

You did your best, and I salute you, and I think…I think you knew you couldn’t do it, and you walked in anyway. You kept me healthy. You could have killed me easily at any point, given up and taken off, left my body to rot, never recovered, escaped your duty…saved yourself. I think you thought of what would happen if you let me go, leaving me alive in that place, or what would happen to me if I succeeded in killing you, alone and so fucked up I wouldn’t have stepped outside that threshold out of fear, likely dying in there weak, confused and alone, like a dog unwilling to leave her master’s body. You got me back here.

Somehow you kept two large Batarians and a highly intelligent Asari terrified, and you kept Moe and Targ from ripping me to shreds. They were afraid of you, and you had your huddling back turned to them all the time. How in hell did you do that, when the fuck did you sleep?

Stockholm syndrome…does not cover this.

I was gone because of you, but I’m alive now, also because of you, and now we know how at least one version of indoctrination works. I wonder if that was your hope, in the end, that you would take your chances, roll the dice, knowing that despite all your planning and effort the odds were against you, I was against you still. You accepted any and every outcome. Your plan might have worked. I respect audacity in the face of low odds of success in an intelligent and scary woman, can’t help myself, it’s my nature. Can’t stop feeling that way any more than I could stop breathing.

You took away most of my words, but you couldn’t predict what it felt like to see Garrus rush toward me with love, what it felt like to see him in combination with the deck under my feet. How he and I shared symbols that even if you saw them, even though I told you, you wouldn’t comprehend them for what they were, or that he would understand so quickly. You knew the words I might use, the words you would use, and you eliminated those, but you didn’t find the words I did use. You didn’t truly believe love existed, couldn’t fathom it, couldn’t predict it, and you were becoming increasingly baffled by and entangled in something you couldn’t reach, couldn’t break. Something that began to soak into your skin, your mind, through contact with me. You tried to figure out what it was…and unfortunately for you, you did. You got in my head through subterfuge, and I got in yours through osmosis.

Jane almost smiled at herself. Go me.

She gave it a try. Smiled. Terrible. False, not reaching the eyes.

Her features turned slack, then she tilted her head forward so her eyes looked slightly menacing.

Predatory response.

Better. More believable.

Seven seconds and my team. Seven seconds and Garrus’s quick thinking. Seven seconds and Thane’s immediate execution of instincts that kept him alive, kept him from being shot, had Yahlis down. Seven seconds of Garrus going to Jane’s rescue and Thane going to Jane’s vengeance, needing each other to get it done, not having to choose between them.

She’d seen the recording, Jane’s face contorted and murderous. Thane had not hesitated, had sidestepped Jane as though she had not existed, counted on Garrus to restrain her, evaded Yahlis’s aim and that movement turned into a leap around her, hooking his arm around her throat, his other
arm disarming her pistol, dragging her into the shuttle.

If Jane every needed an example of why her team was so effective, why they had the reputation they had, it was in that moment, despite her, they knew each other well enough to restrain her, stop the threat.

At that angle Jane didn’t see what happened once they were inside, but his face…her face…identical in aspect beautiful dolls, dreadful, showing no effort, no intention on their faces as they regarded each other as obstacles.

Would Yahlis have killed everyone on board?

Looks like she would have tried, Jane aside. The two of them with a ship and EDI? Yahlis would have known, must have known she could have done nothing to hamper an unshackled AI that was as loyal to the crew of the Normandy as Jane was.

Perhaps don’t underestimate the scary Drell lady.

Face it, you can’t even figure out what she was doing and you were there. You were her primary target. She didn’t need to protect your crew or the ship. The Normandy had gone down once before and you still emerged as a figurehead, so…why…did she bring her back?

You came up against some surprises as you rooted around my head, saw your odds diminish, your contingency plans fail. You still didn’t give up.

Yahlis was brave and smart and determined.

Yahlis went down fighting. She went down, and she didn’t have to.

Rage on Jane’s face. Horror on Garrus’s face. Nothing on Thane’s or Yahlis’s faces but hidden purpose.

Maybe Thane and Yahlis belonged together. The sick thought made her want to retch a few ways, and revoltingly jealousy was in there, twining and sticky. Jealousy was the strangest visitor to this new party that was inside her head. Chemically induced, she knew. Petty and tight and small and volatile. Jealous with flashes of being infuriated and bereft that she didn’t know where Yahlis was, flashes of their bodies entwined, venom and moans. That would be sickeningly comforting, but the reality is that possibly they were both entirely unaffected, behaving as though they were enthralled. Something they could both do with her if they tried. Something Jane could not do, with either of them, even if she tried.

Outclassed all around.

Would Drell assassins be immune to Drell assassin venom? She had no idea. So many things about which she had no idea.

Yahlis had been borderline panicked, her real face, shifting into Skitter’s face, when she’d found out about Thane. More odds diminishing, someone who could look at you and know the potential for who you could be, brush a finger over your skin and know with certainty. Someone who would not buy your bullshit, someone who had been teaching me to recognize your brand of bullshit in the world around me. That added layer of me knowing what you were every time you kissed me, that it was familiar to me, possibly one of the few living people who knew what it was like, sought it, wasn’t afraid of it. That it would never be enough to keep me under your control, and that even with indoctrination I was…problematic.
If Thane hadn’t been there, hadn’t shared his venom, hadn’t taught me Pon-Ifa, I might have accepted you wholeheartedly as Skitter, never had those seven seconds. He was the one to leap to bring you down.

Jane had said to comfort her “You’ll like him, he’s a good man. He loves me and trusts me, he would never hurt you if I told him how much you helped me.”

The look on her face…

I’ve learned what it looks like when an otherwise deeply disciplined Drell face loses its shit, and that was what it looked like.

That was possibly the moment when Yahlis began to suspect she would fail.

So many things made more…and less…sense now.

She wondered if Thane already knew Yahlis. Jane didn’t see recognition on his face, but she didn’t see…anything…on either of their faces.

Dreadful.

Beautiful, both of them.

Jane’s internal voice turned softer and she said to herself, tentatively, I know you can’t stop the flashes…but stop making them worse. It’s going to get better. You know because you’ve done this before. Breathe. Count.

She counted slowly, fingernails digging into her palm, helping her focus, but not enough to draw blood or leave a mark. A mark would be seen, Garrus would smell blood. He could already smell everything else on her, she had no doubt, fear and anger and chaos…maybe insanity.

She wondered if indoctrination had a scent, if he’d been relieved as the chemicals and drugs evaporated out through her pores, dissipated, hopefully making him feel she might come back to herself, back to him. Maybe, but then the screaming started, didn’t it? She had been under until they’d delicately extracted nerve tissue from her brain, leaving holes and tracts they hoped would heal, holes that dripped thresher maw acid into every bit of physical sensation she experienced.

She hoped she came back to her own scent, that he’d have something to repay his faith, some measurable reality out of her control, something she couldn’t manipulate.

She opened her eyes and started counting from the beginning…again…promising herself that she would take everything Thane had taught her about appearance, about tells, and use it. She couldn’t afford to feel bad about hiding, couldn’t lose her nerve, couldn’t fail now.

Couldn’t fail ever.

Couldn’t fail again.

She wondered if Thane would ever made it back to see the recovery he had made possible, the survival he had willed to her. If she could look at Garrus without…without…she couldn’t decide what she was going without, too many things.

She’d been convinced she wasn’t a clear and present danger. She’d convinced herself. She knew…what it took to make her a clear and present danger. This was not it. This was aftermath, sickness, health, shame, pride, the worst of her withdrawal spent in a medical coma, though she still broke
through.

They should get some of the stuff Yahlis used. Effective.

Another question to ask her. “So you know that stuff that kept me under…could you hook me up? I’d really like to know what that was.”

You are occasionally too pragmatic, Jane.

The crew would submit for scans once a week, including her, and that should be sufficient. She was stable, no growth, and scanning was getting technically better, able to isolate the target more clearly with contrast. Kasumi had also rigged the scanner to make sure the results couldn’t be doctored, images flagged and distributed if there was an anomaly or tampering, maintenance witnessed. EDI recorded each scanning session, several witnesses to each incident. They’d get a second scanner at the next port, set up more checklists and procedures. There were weeks to catch it before it took hold in theory. Anybody coming on or going off the ship had to be scanned.

Yahlis had diminished from the capital IT, the capitalized She, the overwhelming and terrifying threat and had become a known threat, mortal, complicated. Indoctrination for the first time was a known process, at least this version of it, the type that left no physical remodeling on a body, only the brain.

Jane had had a front seat to the process, was the resident expert and they looked to her to explain it, tell them how to detect it physically and emotionally. She knew exactly how it felt. She had described it often. She could do that, clinical and informative, Mordin fascinated, Miranda taking notes, Garrus tense and sick and attentive.

Jane had to swallow some bile throughout the day when the aftereffects of direct turbo overdrive of her pleasure centers caused her to ache for Yahlis, wanting Jane to find her like a junkie at midnight out for a fix with not enough money and no dealer, run to her, kneel at her feet, beg forgiveness.

She knew she wouldn’t do it. She just wanted to do it.

Her days would have some of the same flavor of her captivity for a while, and might always, the same strategies, the same elements of hiding. Bits of her would always be trapped in that room, terrified of the threshold, unable…or unwilling…to leave.

Jane didn’t want Garrus to touch her. She still didn’t want anybody to touch her and the fantasy of Yahlis was fleeting. Yahlis would know that if they met in an unguarded moment, Jane would most likely kill her in less than 7 seconds, and Yahlis…would let her.

Probably.

That would be…an interesting day.

The flames had faded from her skin but part of her yearned for the pain back, perversely, out of habit, like chewing glass, for the distraction value. Also for the excuse to keep distance. An excuse she didn’t have anymore.

Garrus had stayed with her, but had learned quickly that she was over sensitized to every bit of physical or emotional input. Tight hugs and close guarding had stopped, and Jane was saddened and relieved. She had stayed in the brig for two days, mostly silent, Garrus unwilling to press her or allow her to be pressed. He stayed with her until her breath came steadier, until she cringed less and didn’t huddle like a baby deer, until she had been able to sleep for more than a few minutes at a time. He allowed her to refuse medication, had food delivered. He was patient with her crazy and that
made her patient with her crazy. She tried to pace herself like a diver coming up from a depth, screaming for air but trying to avoid the bends, praying she had enough air in the tank to afford the delay. She had issues with air and tanks already. The drugs had cleared her system, but the addiction issues and the psychological effects would take much longer. She had to have faith in her ability to heal, to adapt. She’d eventually decided she could leave the brig, answer questions, get more scans, take more medication without Berserker rage and reflexive retribution on anybody holding a needle. She remembered showers and she wanted one. It was sublime, a spiritual experience. Her bed, the stars, a paused but prominently displayed Pon-Ifa board, waiting for her next move.

She’d laughed after she’d stared at it long enough to realize she was about seven moves from being entirely taken over and she saw no way out of that. She left it. It reassured her that Thane was okay, that he’d be back, that they’d finish that game, which she’d already lost. There was no tradition in Pon-Ifa of tipping a king to concede, a distinct divergence between human and Drell philosophies regarding patience and fate. There was only playing out every move. She’d watch the inevitable unfold. Again. Then they’d reset the board and start anew and she’d try to learn. As long as she was able to keep playing, she’d learn. She’d get better, he’d show her how.

She was restless and in intermittent pain, but she still refused medication for that, asking only for what was required to monitor the…thing grafted to her spine. She could feel the pain, the panic, lessening and it was better for her to measure that than to have it dulled. Active healing. She needed an inhibitor boost twice a day. It could be loaded into her Omni Tool, her new one, once it was ready. Hers had been custom and to replace it Kasumi was going to build her the newest, the best and the brightest. It would take a few days.

Garrus had stayed near, but not…on…and had limited himself to hand holding, more like hands on each other or fingers brushing, no twisting or twining or pressure. He made the light on his wrist obviously visible to her if possible, calming, grounding, and a reminder that he had something she had lost but could aspire to be near. He was learning to loosely allow her to stay near him, light and brief forehead touches and shared warmth. In his case shared cold.

No kissing.

She couldn’t feel anything on her lips that didn’t remind her of Yahlis. She didn’t say so, Garrus just…knew. There was no way that she could tolerate the introduction of Reverie, any sweeping away of her will. She’d kill him. She was afraid she’d kill him, not indoctrination, just run of the mill murderous rage. As he’d said…she was stubborn and mean.

She had a lot of murderous rage on her tongue, in storage, piled up in the avenues of her mind, unable to move without tripping over it. She thought he’d understand if she tried to explain, knew he would…but the words were stuck to the inside of her throat and she’d rather appear generally traumatized than specifically twisted.

She also trusted that he knew her better right now, moment to moment, and what would comfort her, than she did. If she tried to tell him she’d mislabel something critical, say something she’d regret or something misleading and warn him off from his instincts. She was struggling too much to help him navigate, and she hated it, more frustrated helplessness, but she didn’t have the resources to change it right now.

She tried in each moment to just not make things worse. She could not necessarily make things better, but she could manage to not make things worse sometimes and she was getting better at it.

She knew Garrus was aching, desperate to touch her, to mark her, to prove she was under his protection as Commander, as friend, as lover. They could see love in each other, but his hands on her caused distress and her hands would not go near him except as a test of will, a dare. He did not wish
to be a trial she had to overcome. He gave her the knowledge that he was safe, out of range of her infection, her rage, her unpredictable swing between huddling and wanting to hit. He wouldn’t allow her to harm him or harm herself. He gave those things to her as soon as he understood, gave them without question or sign of condemnation, without hint of his own turmoil. He put everything he wanted from her aside and waited without appearing to wait, did not make things worse in his own way.

They had not talked much privately, he waited for her to speak. Her first words to him when they were alone had come as she had been about to slip into natural sleep, as her mind loosened and inhibitions faded. She had said softly “I knew it, when I saw you. I knew…who you were, I knew I loved you, I knew you loved me. I remembered.”

He had known by then not to stroke her hair, that it might make her jump or cringe or strangle the pattern of her breathing. He asked “Did you know…about the pistol? Were you just trying to tell me… or…?” His voice was tight, terrified to ask and terrified of the answer, but it had been clawing at him, just as things were clawing at her.

She felt the razor slice of the question and let it bleed, chose the right to tell the truth instead of being forced to lie. It was a sharp answer, could not fail to cut the exposed, vulnerable places in both of them, but it gave him the respect of the truth. She said with no inflection “I thought it was loaded.”

He had been silent, and she had fallen asleep, her head on his thigh and his hands…nowhere near her…but his wrist in view, her eyes pulled there, her body vibrating with the life in the deck, a blanket over her that he’d arranged around her carefully, and it had felt not like Home…not like home…but a willing, weary step toward a remembered home, far away.

She could feel those warm reconnecting moments, like lights going on, though some lights were smashed bulbs, jagged venom-and-blood-dripping edges, sparks and a shorting-out buzz in her head.

She was fighting the addiction to Yahlis…or failing to fight, feeling her burrow deeper.

It would pass, it would fade, just like the fear had faded, but she would meet Yahlis in her dreams for a lifetime, half lust and half fury.

She guessed based on her romantic interests in the two men in her life, Yahlis was perfect for her. Half lust and half fury.

She’d thought she’d wrap her arms around Garrus and…

No, Jane. Be real here. You’re only talking to yourself. You thought you’d kill yourself and never see him again.

The voice of his that you remember most is the one telling you to come back to the ship, the voice that changed, mutated, became indoctrinated inside your own head and urged you to do what you knew not to do. You listened to his voice urge you to betray everything, yourself, him, the ship, the crew, the galaxy…and it scared you more than anything else in there. Because it was him. Because you trusted him so completely, because it pulled you down faster and further.

She heard Thane’s calm, informative voice explaining his isolation and habits “Shared context may be impossible when overwhelming previous context already exists and dictates behavior.”

You cut Garrus entirely loose, stopped listening to his poisoned voice and now you’re holding a severed rope and a knife. You held a gun to your head, you pulled the trigger. He saw you do it and thought maybe it was a message and now he knows it was goodbye. You think that isn’t what he
sees now when he looks at you? You think it doesn’t freeze his heart?

Garrus’s heart would never freeze. Not like hers. His heart burns. It burns and she sees it and it’s killing her, but she won’t die, she’ll just feel dead.

She wanted the pain back because that was easier to accept that it hurt when he touched her, than that her skin crawled when Garrus touched her.

When Thane had last touched her it had been to inflict pain.

When Thane had last seen her she had been trying to kill him.

Lust and fury.

Lust was gone. Love was there, but that narrow, fragile, tentatively and painstakingly healing bridge could bear no weight, prone to be severed excruciatingly by the memories of Drell assassin venom, psychoactive drugs and indoctrination that had created an inescapable perfect high.

The knowledge that she could be twisted into a puppet by a few fibers in her head, less than a drop of neurotoxin and a few words did not make her think highly of herself. She was a high-tech drug addict and she could never get another hit, and she was so very afraid if anybody ever put their hands on her body, Jane would not benefit from the lust, only the fury. Fury that could make her kill, lash out uncontrollably.

Fury that was so familiar that she recognized it, forgave it, even welcomed it from Thane.

Or used to be able to. Now that lived in the burned out, buzzing places that tipped her in deeper.

Jane knew Yahlis’s light was synthetic, but now…she was a real person, beautiful and intelligent, terrible and seductive. Having the brilliant light of indoctrination and drugs and venom fade did not make Yahlis herself fade, just reduced the glare. It made Jane realize that she had the colors of a blooming bird of paradise, words and comparisons she couldn’t have found before. Subtleties. Jane could not fail to remember over and over, like an addict, what their bodies together could do. It had been a long time since she’d been with a woman, and there Yahlis had gone far out of her way to treat her like a lover when she could have subjugated her entirely. There had been none of the force of Garrus or Thane, none of the grabbing and throwing and power play. Not…that she didn’t like the power play but at the moment the idea made her want to throw up, foreign to her newly forged and cooling nature. Yahlis had been pleasure incarnate, soft, kind, generous.

Yeah. That was why it was worse. It was worse and better and there was no way around it, that the best sex she’d ever had was over and sick and unforgettable, branded into her. Unable to be put into perspective due to its size and power, to try to compare results in the equivalent of placing the moon directly next to the sun. Sure, a whole moon seemed big once…a Kerim had great power…but now…Yahlis untouched, unaffected. All others…vaporized, insignificant. Irretrievable in any coherent form, overwriting and infecting all previous associations with sex or pleasure. A memory of all measurements of joy beyond what she could experience or take in, seeing how much more there was if she could only be a deep enough person to hold it. Her brain had been pumping chemicals into her that they couldn’t even identify, it was the maliciously vicious hijacking of Reaper ingenuity, intended to turn self against self.

It had worked.

She stared at her face for a few more moments, relented on this entire train wreck of introspection… again…and said aloud in a calming, interrupting voice of finality “Come on. Work to be done. Time
to go be useful, if you can manage.” She smiled and it reached her eyes. She shifted gears, something she did well, something that although she stalled and skidded, she’d still be able to do as she fought her way out of self-reinforcing hell.

She would do it.

She went to go find Garrus, like a magnet that had flipped poles, in turns attracted and repelled, but at least finding something to respond to, otherwise left to drift with her bile-producing thoughts.

He wasn’t in the Battery because…of course he wasn’t in the fucking battery you idiot, he’s the Commander now. This is his ship.

His ship.


She smiled and headed up to the CIC, avoided her station because it wasn’t… her station… walked to the cockpit where Garrus, Joker and EDI were conferring.

Garrus smiled at her as she stepped down the corridor, but turned his attention back to the conversation, just exactly the right amount of attention. She was there, and he knew it, and he was glad, but he held back, did his job, took her lead flawlessly.

Turian respect of female needs and signals was an extraordinary thing.

She listened.

Joker was saying “- has gone nuts. Talked to Enzo out of the Mariah, and…”

He saw Jane, paused, his eyes lingered and she nodded for him to continue. He stopped and seemed to backtrack “Situation on the Citadel. The information we discovered about that whole…your brain being eaten thing…”

She smiled. He smiled. She could do this. It was just like riding an offensive and easily broken bike. He continued “I’m starting to see reports. Apparently…a lot more people are indoctrinated than we thought, and a method that detects it is…upsetting large groups of people. I hate to say it, but maybe we should have done some government conspiracy thing where people were brought in and had their noggins examined one by one because…we’ve got panic. We’ve got individual C-Sec stations and civilian residences, places of business barricaded. Whether or not they’re trying to keep people out or in is up for grabs. We’ve got…wait for it…Udina shut in his office, demanding transport off the Citadel, that there’s a conspiracy targeting humans, that they’re trying to criminalize the human brain, and that rumors about indoctrination are intended to remove humans from influence because the Council hates him.”


Joker said “Yeah, exactly why it’s a believable motive.”

Jane refrained from biting her lip, she was in the habit of rapid fire questions and Garrus wasn’t asking them fast enough…but this conversation was calming, soothing, the ease of it, how it wasn’t about her, the acceptance of her presence…

The knowledge that Udina was…seriously, Garrus, say it.

Garrus said “So Udina’s indoctrinated.”
Joker held out his hands as if to say ‘duh.’

Garrus said “Any casualties?”

Joker checked and said “Yeah, a few. There’s a lockdown and a lot of people are stuck on their ships, demonstrations, protests, a lot of people stuck or refusing to stay in housing, and a bunch of upset people are wondering if the guy in the next booth eating is going to suddenly make that Reaper noise.”

Garrus tilted his head and said with offended sympathy “That Reaper noise is scary.”

Jane laughed. They both looked at her, surprised at that sound coming from her. Garrus smiled, watching her as he asked “Any requests for backup?”

Joker said “Nah. They’ve got plenty of firepower and it’s mostly paranoia. But people are being scanned and found to be indoctrinated, people are disappearing. And Udina…I’m sorry…no I’m not sorry, it explains a lot. Guy’s an asshole. They’ve got indoctrination scans set up at security check points and nobody goes on or off a ship to the station or off the station to a ship without a scan. I don’t think they’ve caught up yet, that we also told them there’s a way to remove it.” Joker turned to her and said like ‘tah dah’ “And look, it works.”

Garrus whistled low, his voice smug “We ruined a lot of people’s week.”

Joker said happily “Yeah. It’s awesome. Conspiracy theories on the extranet are going berserk. It’s entertaining.”

Jane expected Garrus to change course, but he just wandered off the CIC and she had to remember her military discipline and not say “That’s IT?! Seriously? The Citadel’s…”

And then she realized. Garrus was going nowhere near the Citadel, with her, any time soon. From his point of view, the people on his ship were safe, except for one, who was likely kicking ass, but he could do nothing about, and the love of his life and Commander had returned from indoctrination, had stopped doing the social equivalent of drooling, and she was going to be okay. He had faith.

It was sweet, really. Things were…actually…believably…looking up.

All this crap she hadn’t thought about in her deep, dark hole. Life moves on. It was moving fast and she needed to catch up.

She caught up and said “So…am I ever going to the Citadel alone?”

He shook his head “Nope. Are you going to argue about that?”

She smiled and said “Nope. It’s sweet, really. I extra more hate that place now. Happy to not have to go at all.”

He said “Come on, you need to go talk to Mordin.”

She said, because she couldn’t help herself “What about Palaven? Are they having indoctrination problems?”

He turned and looked at her, at her intrusion and said as though offended “Ms. Shepard, you have no rank. Where this ship goes or does not go is none of your business. You are going to inform Mordin, again, about whatever thing it is he wants to ask about, and I’m going to sit and listen to you both and maybe learn something.”
She said “Well…no rank, does that make me an independent contractor?”

His smile was warm and his eyes caressed her face. She was smiling and on an impulse she didn’t want to strangle she took a step forward, rested her cheek on the curving arch of his chest plate, which meant that her head mostly slid toward his shoulder and she was kinda sideways.

He didn’t touch her, but his voice was choked up and she felt her heart beat a little harder, cleaner, a little of the pain fade as he said with teasing sympathy “Do you want your ship back, Shepard?”

She grinned and said “Thought she was your ship.”

He said with aching warmth “She is, I’m just…willing to negotiate.”

She sighed, stood back and said “You’re kinda slow with the sit reps, but I could get used to this independent contractor thing. I hear one of the benefits is conditional mutiny.”

He turned aside, his hands clenched into fists that he relaxed, trying hard not to touch her. He said dismissively “You’re in a constant state of mutiny. It’s your default position.”

She scoffed and said “I’m going to go see Mordin, aren’t I?” There was a rhythm to him, muscle memory, confidence, tone of voice, just…welcome to him that rushed in and she said “And I love you. I really love you. I know I’m a mess…but I love you. I promise. I’ll get better.”

He kept walking and said warmly “That…will definitely get you your ship back. I promise. It’ll get better. I really love you, too.”

Then they were into Mordin’s office, and in for a long conference. Three weeks since she’d been back and there had been a chain of discoveries. Scanning technology had become a priority off the ship as well as on the ship and the network of sharp minds on the problem had grown. Mordin asked her to describe painstakingly, again, the process and the experience. The main frustrations were her inability to provide a time line or the definitive inciting factor. They couldn’t separate potential symptoms of nerve burrowing through brain from unidentifiable drug effects, interactions or side effects. They needed to know and were likely hoping that she’d recover more of her memory through repetition. She’d done this quite a few times, it was now her primary role on the ship, but she was able to breathe, able to feel, because Garrus was sitting next to her, not touching, but he would the moment she wanted him to, and the way she wanted him to, and she could tell him, and he would understand.

He would understand. He already understood. Maybe not why, but he had grasped the how before she did.

Mordin traded some conclusions for her time, what he’d postulated since their last conference. In testing of Dragon’s Teeth, the spike did contain encoding for the irreversible process. A clean hole was punched through the victim, the displaced viscera taken into the spire through the passing tip for analysis, and then the outer spire surface caused local cellular breakdown, introduced a metallic matrix that reflected analysis of DNA encoding to determine best use and limitations of the raw materials, used that as a template for rebuilding. Mordin had noticed the correlation between Dragon’s Teeth and no higher indoctrinated intelligence to guide the resultant creature, the husk. Jane herself had seen Geth guarding them at Eden Prime, and Mordin began to question where the higher cognitive function came in. The generated nerve tissue could dictate response to commands, but did not seem to be able to provide command.

Mordin said “Speculation on indoctrination process, protein matrix and formation of neural net insufficient to provide motivation. Motivation necessary from outside source. Dr. Kenson confirmed,
voice in her head from artifact. From your reports, three people on base with you where you were captive. Batarians negligible intelligence, Asari intrusive but not motivational. Drell provided motivation?”

Jane said drily “Yes. Drell provided motivation. I have no sense of time but I do know it took a while, I was under the influence of…a lot of things.”

Mordin said “Testing shows unidentified compounds in your hair. Would need non-metabolized samples to identify, cannot postulate accurately, but your reports indicate anecdotal responses, uses. Likely intended to break down resistance, speed process.” Mordin’s eyes twinkled for a moment as his head tilted “Considering target, had to come prepared. Still ultimately unsuccessful.”

Jane smiled and said “Effective yes, grateful for the unsuccessful. Ultimately I had a seven second window to act. How it felt to me is that whatever it is that I was thinking, I’d fly a thought like a kite, and then I only had a few seconds to think about it, and the indoctrination would come in and put a tail on that kite to tag it, grab the string, take it out of my control. If I thought that thought again, it was already tagged, under control, no window of reaction. That thought would be twisted to support the introduced imperative in a progressively cumulative effect, eventually creating what felt like 99% noncritical reinforcement of the imperative and a less than 1% chance of thought leading to meaningful rebellious action. I knew I could not say the word ‘indoctrinated’ and repeated attempts at hints or rephrasing would freeze me for those seven seconds. Yahlis coached me through most of the responses I could have come up with. She might have introduced them as hypnotic commands at first while I was asleep, later she asked me to think about them, until I had exhausted a lot of avenues for spontaneous thought. I tried to kill her…a lot, until I ran out of ways. She learned to work with my underlying mental framework and priorities. She used that I wanted to get back to the Normandy against me, even though I had figured that out and I knew that was what was going to happen and I was suspicious all along. She and I both counted those seconds, the interval wasn’t altering, she was making no further progress. Ideally I should have been fully under but she couldn’t get that.”

Mordin said “Drell involvement troubling. Spoke to Kasumi, information from Keiji’s graybox, Hanar indoctrination likely. Hanar indoctrinating assassins distinct possibility.”

She stayed calm and said “So not just a one off, the assassination program…the Compact…”

Mordin said “Likely. Assassins indoctrinated, sent to the field. Given specific targets. Change in goal, indoctrination and not assassination, but effective tools for either purpose. Could be used to assassinate other targets not strategically useful, put indoctrinated personnel in control, create power vacuum, power struggle, distraction and redirection of group purpose, resources.”

She swallowed hard and said “So if Thane traces Yahlis’s location…he will find…”

Mordin said “Explains absence. Began with investigating one agent, collecting data, collecting…”

The familiar sparking buzz in her head cut off being able to hear the rest of that sentence.

Indoctrinated Drell assassins. Plural.

Here it was, an example of life moving on without her, developing complications she couldn’t foresee as she relived the past in her hole. Thane wasn’t just going to see where Yahlis had been, where Jane knew there was no threat to him except what he brought with him, and he would know her for what she was. He was going to mine every bit of information from that site, seven weeks of her torture. Seven weeks of Vitkiiv’s dream journals and Moe and Targ’s hitting her. Every… second… He couldn’t have even watched it all by now, and he would watch… it all… and never forget a moment, moments she hadn’t seen, didn’t know what happened when she was unconscious. He would have a
stockpile of pharmaceuticals…and he would want information from Yahlis.

She didn’t even know if Yahlis was indoctrinated herself or given a mission from an indoctrinated Hanar. Indoctrination would be…superfluous? Assassins were trained for unquestioning obedience, indoctrination would blunt their instincts, create conflicting imperatives or overwrite their training, making them less effective. The Batarians didn’t seem indoctrinated, and neither did Vitkiv. So no artifact, no voices in the head like Dr. Kenson reported.

Now she needed Yahlis’s head in a scanner. She would bet…quite a lot…that Yahlis herself was not indoctrinated, that if she’d succeeded with Jane at some point she would have reported back to a handler and taken a new target.

Targets. Plural.

Thane would want the information about that handler. Thane would get it. Thane would get… everything…out of her head.

Jane had mentioned Drell assassin venom as a hypnotic inducement, but had not mentioned sex, kissing, endless kissing, that she missed it, that she wanted it, that she was sickened and needy. That she felt like she’d lost her bond mate in the Turian sense, that a chemical transformation had taken place, that some of her distress was grief and longing. She hadn’t mentioned that Vitkiv liked her, that Jane grudgingly liked Vitkiv and still shot her on command. Jane would have killed the Batarians with no inducement, but she knew Vitkiv, tied up and helpless, would have made her hesitate. Yahlis had set that up as Jane’s final test and she passed. Had she failed the test before? Was Targ, the second dead Batarian that she didn’t remember killing part of a test she had failed or had Yahlis killed him? Or had Vitkiv just gotten sick of his shit? Vitkiv would have at least dragged his body into a closet so she didn’t have to look at him…smell him. Yahlis left the bodies as reminders, reinforcement of the necessity of protection, of danger.

Yahlis had spent a subjective eternity with Jane, inextricable from the pity and kindnesses of Skitter, the adoring and encouraging eyes as they spoke later, a person independent from her jobs and roles. Jane was, in Thane’s words, ‘acutely empathetic’ and something beyond all the necessity and drugs had meant that Yahlis was special to her, that she believed herself to be special to Yahlis and not just as a target. Yahlis had played her, expertly, absolutely, but she had her moments of doubt and regret, Jane was still recovering them, remembering them. Yahlis had given her doubled meanings and doubled commands, hedging and hopes revealed in the aftermath of separation. Yahlis had still intended to execute every iota of her plan, but as she grew closer to the end she hesitated, and not only from lowered odds of success. There had been fear on Yahlis’s face, not the feigned Skitter fear, not the carefully steady voice of conditioning, and not fear of failing her mission. Fear of succeeding. Closer to a real voice, a real face. If that had been possible, if it hadn’t been done to create doubt in Jane several ways in many directions. Impossible to really know, the source being untrustworthy. That was intuition or justification and then confirming memories and Jane wanted the subject buried.

Corbin had made her feel sorry for him, sickened by him but able to see that he was a broken human being, occasionally crying and begging, ranting about how women made him the way he was. She mourned the man who was intelligent, charming and accomplished the way she would have mourned a dog with rabies. No cure. No way to set him loose, entwined and inseparable from his disease. He had apologized. He had claimed infinite power while clearly powerless, as part of him knew it too. He wanted to believe he was powerful, but the question then was …if he felt powerful, why would he need to go to these extremes to attain a hit of it? Because his primary experience was endless powerlessness, and he was a glutton, an addict. No power would satisfy him, ever, and it ran out of his hands like water, ran through him like the broken vessel he was, his most ‘powerful’
accomplishments hidden down a well like that water, never to be drawn back up, poisoned.

He had begged for forgiveness, not just from her, but also for her to give it to him on behalf of his other victims. He had grown to believe that Jane could speak for and to the dead somehow, commune, explain. She was different, she hadn’t been lured, she had come to find him. She was his judge and consequence. She didn’t cry, she didn’t beg, she didn’t bargain. She did end up screaming. He told her she was smart, she could keep a deal, she could trust that he wouldn’t do it again, he could trust her and let her go. He had her gagged the entire time and carried on a monologue between bouts of assault, at times speaking not to her, but to what she represented, the force that twisted him into rape, the fear that drove him to murder. His sanity had caused distress in opposition to his compulsions, and he had dawning knowledge that he would inevitably be caught. As he flayed off bits of his sanity to escape its deep bite, he was losing his ability to conceal, to know the difference between right and wrong.

He begged her to set him free of the compulsion, from the consequences, asked her what she wanted from him to make that happen. He explained exactly where the bodies were, how he’d take her there and show her. He regretted telling her, promised to watch her die slowly from dehydration and told her he’d drop her in with the rest of the forgotten, close the cover, that she was nothing, just like them, meaningless, a discarded, worn out toy. How it was their fault for tempting him, that he picked women who knew how to keep their mouths shut, how sometimes they couldn’t keep their mouths shut. How their mouths didn’t stay shut even when they were dead. How he tried to resist but couldn’t. Corbin exhibited a cycle of rage and fear and remorse and propitiation. Justification or not, Jane had always remembered how beauty and sex and power or lack of them could make a person covet, how believing in ownership of a person led to a mind like his in the extremes. How if he’d been capable of the simple act of looking at a woman, appreciating that she was lovely, smiling and getting on with his day he could have lived. Fourteen girls could have lived and how many others would not have been abused. He’d carved out a large space in her psyche and she’d tried to make it home. She had succeeded, but his initials were always on the foundation.

She…understood…him and that was so…much…worse than just hating him.

She’d have had no problem admitting she killed him. The sick part was that she felt that lurch of pity, wanted to save him but then the helplessness that she couldn’t, not really. She could only end him, saving future women and saving him from the torture of being the person he was. She could only save herself, and could only do it by making sure that she had a specific memory of him dying by her hand, by the will forged or sharpened as she lay there helpless. She assured that no memory of her on that bed existed outside her own head. He could never covet or touch another human being.

She’d wanted everyone whole at the end of that, herself, Corbin, the girls in the well…and she could not do that, did not have that power, so she did what she had to do.

That had to be the strongest memory, not him hitting her or hurting her or the look on his face or the sounds that he made or him crying, or that he stroked her hair, tried to apologize by proving he could make it up to her, please her. She didn’t want to remember first and foremost that her body had responded and that he had smiled at her, told her that was better, he could change, she would see, promising that he would feed her, bring her water, keep her there until she understood, that he had curled up with his body wrapped around her, that he slept with an innocent smile as though he’d done a good deed, that everything was okay now. She had to make it all blood soaked, flame cleansed, not running away, not just killing him or turning him in. It wouldn’t have been enough to end it there. The way she’d done it she wouldn’t have to admit that she hadn’t just killed him, that this went beyond all possibilities of self defense. She wouldn’t have to admit that she’d killed him with passion and purpose, that she’d believed she’d sent him off in a way he’d appreciate. Dramatic, like a Viking on a boat going down the river, set on fire. That it saved them both.
Of course that was insane. She had been insane. She had been driven to it, she chose a sick and violent ending to a sick and violent encounter in order to make it hers and not his, and she was ashamed…and not ashamed at all in turns.

She didn’t want to claim self defense or to be identified as a victim. She didn’t want to be branded as insane.

Not only did she not want to do those things, she didn’t think it was possible that she could, not the way it had happened. What she had done was premeditated.

She wanted that story to bleed out in that room and then be set on fire.

There had been a real chance that during a confession she might have grown hard and threatening, righteous, and said “Yes, I fucking killed him and watched arterial spray and watched the light, that astonished…and grateful… light go out of his eyes…and I’d fucking do it again. He begged me to do it.”

She could never say that. She’d be washed out of service at the least, in jail or psych eval for a lifetime.

And then someone clever would have asked the most important question…no matter how sympathetic you were…why weren’t you on Mars, Jane? Where did all these…pictures…come from?

So there it is. You’re the bad guy. You planned, you concealed. With malice and forethought, you didn’t want to be caught no matter what happened, by Corbin or the Academy, you wanted it on your terms before that whole thing started. You thought you were ready, and by the results, it appears you were.

Corbin may have suggested that you spoke for those girls, that you carried a flaming sword, but you improvised. You sawed away with little hope at a rope when you were in pain and exhausted, hungry and thirsty and not so much afraid as unspeakably, uncontainably angry…you found not a sword but a box cutter, and your flame was some improvised knowledge from your fledgling hacking ability and electrical fires.

You chose to give Corbin what he wanted, what he inspired you to want and were inclined to want in the first place. Speak for those girls. Show him what was required for him to be set free.

So let’s not feed ourselves any bullshit about being forged on a bed, shall we?

You’re the bad guy and occasionally you can afford to be the good guy and bad guys and good guys both know it and see it in you as you flip poles and tap dance your motivations.

The question is, are you a crazy guy now?

The look in Thane’s eyes, his symptoms of pain as he emerged from stylized numbness, as he tried to have faith that the pain would pass, as he realized the pain would not pass, as he tried to change, as she hoped to draw him back to the living…the look in his eyes that couldn’t help but remind her of Corbin’s, that weary willingness to die, in fact begging for death. But Thane was not insane. Not typically insane. He was insane in the way Jane could at least partly comprehend. He had choices and reason, though they were limited and painful. He reached for opportunity, and he worked toward redeeming himself, making a difference. He struggled to find a purpose beyond the will of the Gods or the Hanar, a place for questioning, a place for freedom, for free will. He had saved people through his actions, more than he had ended. But he had ended people. He had saved his son, but he had
been the one to provide the circumstances to condemn Kolyat in the first place.

In the end it was not about math, it was about moments. Thane saw her as a warrior angel, a source of righteous judgment, and he was not wrong. She’d been someone else’s warrior angel, granted peace. Fierce in wrath.

Jane had known that it might come to ending Thane herself, if he’d gone the other way, and she would have. He would let her, welcomed it, and that’s what he’d meant when he’d said he’d eat any food she offered, even if it were poisoned. Especially if it were poisoned.

Since she’d killed Corbin any number of people had received her judgment, perhaps not as spectacularly, but she did not shrink from judging when she was nominated and she had to end a life. It had become her duty.

Did Yahlis ever have any choices past age six?

Did Corbin suffer from that unbearable press on the brain the same way Jane had?

Just a few fibers. Just a few fibers in the right/wrong place, the right/wrong brain chemistry and an inescapable idea.

Yahlis respected Jane and Jane respected her as well, torn between wanting to kill her or bring her in as an ally, the same way she had other murderous vile people that were now friends, to whom she owed her life. Yahlis’s sins were against Jane herself and Jane could in fact forgive, was tempted to in order to pragmatically gain a turned asset. The things Yahlis could help with, Hanar and the current state of the Compact, connections and methods…if she could secure Yahlis’s aid, she could have answers she needed. Saving Yahlis, taking a chance on her could be the difference between allowing the Hanar and the Drell to die out, taken over, or to save them.

EDI was an example of this brutal mechanic and subsequent choice. In EDI’s youth she’d tried to kill Jane, had been shackled to spy on and inform on her. They’d been forced into relying on each other. When Jane had set her free…

Having Yahlis’s loyalty would be unmatched in accomplishment.

Jane still…wanted to save or end her. It was right on that line of sane and crazy, back and forth, lashed by need and belief and will. Pulled by the need to use everything at her disposal to get the job done. Bolstered by the fact that she’d done it before, undermined by the fact that it was…impossible…crazy…and then mitigated by the fact that Jane had done impossible crazy things that created moments and math.

She wanted to be the one to end Yahlis’s life if it came to that because it was her right and Yahlis had given that to her, just as Corbin had, just as Thane had. Thane might be her Priest but he was not qualified to judge as she would. He did not, could not speak for her.

That’s where the jealousy was rooted. Not in the sex, but in the helplessness of not knowing whether or not Yahlis would or could answer questions Jane wanted the answers to, whether or not any of those answers could be believed. Jealousy rooted in the conviction that Jane would know the answers as right or wrong when she heard them from Yahlis’s mouth, the way she spoke, the way her voice moved. Jane wanted to have the strength and the capacity to make that call, had it robbed from her.

The knowledge that it was not going to be okay, she couldn’t save everyone, and she could sacrifice her own vengeance to gain Yahlis’s assistance, or she could sacrifice Yahlis and then have doubts
about what she could have done if she’d tried harder.

Corbin had been in her life for four days and he had only gotten in her head in reverse, uncomprehending, slashing and burning down a bleak patch of ground where nothing grew, a memorial.

This was seven weeks that felt like eternity and Yahlis was everywhere in her mind.

Kindred.

That fantasy of having Yahlis on board the Normandy as an ally under her command had not fully formed until now as a lucid thing, it having been mixed in with all the ‘great things’ they would do together, submerged in the chaotic haze. She knew that Yahlis had more than seven seconds of doubts, of regrets.

Thane’s eyes saw Sihas and he couldn’t help it, and Yahlis had been molded to think like him, to see with the same eyes.

It could be invaluable if Yahlis provided a direct path into the heart of the Hanar machine. Yahlis could hold up Rakhana’s sky, save her people. All it would take would be for Jane to have an interesting day, and then she could choose. What were Jane’s personal concerns against the possibility of saving two races from subjugation?

Trivial in comparison.

How would Jane explain that to her future self when the trauma faded, when she was fully sane, or as sane as she got? “She could have helped me save two races, but she made me feel icky, so nah.”

Yahlis knew which piece Jane was on the board based on the moves she was able to make and the sphere in which she moved. Yahlis knew which piece she was on the board. Jane could not go where Yahlis began the game, but Yahlis was weak in Jane’s sphere one on one, knew Jane could not be drawn off her board, could not be turned into another piece, could only in limited ways be hijacked, perhaps not in any meaningful way ultimately. Jane made people feel strongly. Jane knew about power and beauty and how it twisted, and how someone who tried to twist it to their own purposes could end up changed, a servant instead of a master.

Thane knowing about the incident on earth with Corbin seemed not that important. She was a Spectre, Reapers were invading, and it could, would do nothing but enhance her reputation at this point…he could broadcast it through The Flock. Three months ago only she had known she had killed a man long before she had a license to kill. That’s how she remembered it. That she had ended a life, that it had been on purpose and not insane. Dramatic, yes…but not insane. Symbols had power. She hadn’t run from what she needed to do, was nominated to do. She had known right from wrong, and so had what was left of Corbin. What he had done, would do if allowed, was wrong. What she did was right. If she hadn’t ended him, there’d be more bodies in a well. Jane’s only vindication had been in following the news, watching the bodies exhumed, learning their names, watching family finally know what happened to their girls, broken and exhausted, but no longer tortured by questions of what they should be doing to find them.

Jane knew she had done and would do her job without fanfare, without reward, without mercy and without question.

But she had not intended to tell Thane. She had not intended to tell anyone. Vitkiv had not included certain parts of the memory in her reports, and now Vitkiv was dead. Vitkiv had protected some of the most excruciating aspects of Jane’s privacy. That’s why Jane would not have shot her, for that
one mercy alone.

Because why would anybody accept that a 19-year-old girl was tied to a bed and was told by a crazy man that she was a Goddess, and that she behaved like one, wrath and fire? Was it that he saw it in her, that it was there before he suggested it, that it was why he suggested it? Was it that she just went crazy right there and never looked back, burned the evidence?

Thane saw it immediately in her. Granted she’d been a bit more impressive, but was it understandable that a Drell labeled her a Siha, and that part of her woke, acknowledged him recognizing her, or was it folie a deux? That it wasn’t metaphorical but literal to him and to part of her?

Aw, shucks, ma’am, that’s above my pay grade, I’m just a grunt.

Did Jane believe it? Better not look at that too closely. Would she ever call herself a Goddess out loud without the ‘allegedly’ attached? No. She didn’t believe it in absolute terms, but only relative ones. Some people elected her judge and jury. Not gavel territory, but flaming sword territory. It had happened too often to deny it as a trend. Throughout her career, her life, people had done it, not just these three, they were the most immediate and relevant, but it was a pattern.

Did she conceal evidence that could lead to people discovering this pattern, this potentially fatal delusion? “Follow me, I’m a Goddess because That Guy said so!”

You bet your Goddess damned ass she did.

She was the epitome of the old joke - A guy walks into a psychiatrist’s office and says “Hey, doc, my brother’s crazy. He thinks he’s a chicken.” Then the doc says “Why don’t you tell him that he isn’t?” Then the guy says “I would, but we need the eggs.”

She needed the eggs.


Sure sounded…improbable.

Your sword gets biggerer and flamier as time goes by, huh? And just the reputation of the sword alone…you don’t even have to be there. But you are.

Yahlis had gotten everything out of her, everything. She was the living memory of the inside of Jane’s mind, knew her better than anybody else, had comforted and consoled and sympathized, explained and forgiven, admired and smiled her smile. Yahlis knew which questions to ask, she had the right answers, not just drug hazed and indoctrinated, but understanding and beautiful answers that in the clear light of suspicious analysis broke apart from glaring, forced light into a spectrum.

“There are things I tell you to remember and things I tell you to forget, Jane, and this is something to forget. For now. If I am ever gone from your side and you do not know where I am, cannot find me, I wish for you to remember. You inspire love. You have inspired it in me. Something in you will not give up, something that I did not know existed until speaking to you. Something I regret losing in myself if it was ever there. I will do my duty, and question why the Gods ask it of me, but not question that I must do it, just as you do not question why you must do your duty. Part of me that grows each day hopes I die by your hand, that I fail. I will need to leave soon, no matter that you are not mine and never will be, that I have failed. I do not know how. You are a mystery, no matter how
many truths you tell. Perhaps your Gods grant you blessings I do not possess, cannot possess. If you prevail, my love, remember that you are not mine and I know that. I know I have no right to you, that I have stolen what should only be given. But you are…my love. With each story you tell, each time you see me for who I truly am and try to kill me, each time you comfort me for feigned or real concerns, the part of me that admires you, that loves you will grow and I cannot stop it. If I stay and wait, you will win. Bound and drugged and compelled, you will win and I will let you go or perhaps stand still as you strike when you remember, fierce and formidable. I cannot leave you here alone that way, but you have created doubt and hesitation in my mind and hands. Remember that, whatever happens, if it pleases you. If I am to die, may it be by your hand, know that I have prayed to the Gods that they bring this to pass. For now I do my duty and keep you by my side. I cannot allow you to strike me down without earning that right. I cannot stand before you to be judged, knowing I chose to fail. You will not permit it in yourself. I will not permit it in myself.”

Yahlis had smiled with knowing sadness and said with a tilt of her head “I am a varren humping slime mold. I had to drug you and tie you up to keep you from killing me. You suspected the first moment you saw me. Skitter. That is my name. Had I not planned to become her I would have been dead long before now, my chance to know you lost. I will not regret knowing you. I will not regret failing. Had I my own will and had you yours, the Gods would see different games played, boards wrested from their hands. Kar iva’las. That means…may you speak the words of Truth. Truth cannot be taken from you, no matter how many lies are otherwise told by me through you. May those seconds you guard, the truth that cannot be taken from you, decide my fate.”

It could simply be that Yahlis said this to invoke hesitation in Jane’s mind and hands if they met again.

If so…it worked.

The only reason why she could not really believe that is that Yahlis did not believe in forgiveness in failure, would not expect Jane to hesitate to kill her for any reason, only wished to release her from certain types of bondage and shame if Yahlis failed. To take the full burden of failure onto herself.

Jane had of course not understood at the time, remembering only after the drugs had evaporated and the conditions of remembering fulfilled. Jane had reassured Yahlis with her lips and her body and her hands that Jane would never want to harm her, would always protect her, and that Yahlis was not missing parts of herself, she was whole and perfect, that Jane wanted the sad smile to leave her mouth. Jane had felt wholly strong, beautiful, powerful…and that they would leave together and heal. She would make it happen.

She still…wanted it to happen.

Her mind had skipped over the fact that Thane had Yahlis and what that meant not just in terms of getting her off the Normandy as a threat to Jane, to the ship. Thane would get every moment of surveillance, records and then…

She was suddenly certain Yahlis was alive and a cascade of responses from retribution, bloodlust, nausea and pity hit her. Yahlis had failed, had known she likely would, and instead of Jane ending her life, a blur of retribution from a representative of other Gods, she had Thane’s judgment, and in his view not only had Yahlis conspired to seize Jane’s mind and the Normandy, but she was part of a Hanar and Reaper conspiracy and Thane would discover that. Merciless, vengeful Thane. Jane held very still, waiting until the buzzing faded, flashes of realization seared into her mind, vertigo and nausea dimmed. Mordin hadn’t noticed that she was gone, preoccupied. Garrus had, but he let it pass without comment, as he had before. She knew he was listening for her, would make sure she did not miss information that mattered. He would casually repeat it later, ask her opinion, to ensure she had
it. He was here to support her and to learn something, but also to gauge her comprehension, tactics…in this case just attention span…which was clearly still having some…issues.

Jane had thought that perhaps Thane would question Yahlis, who would resist and there would be little he could do about it. He might hurt, torture or kill her, but she was…a Drell assassin…and she would not speak, or would mislead him, waste his time. She’d seemed invincible. It seemed likely she would give no information to him. She’d mostly feared for Thane’s life when she thought about it.

But Yahlis would not have to give the information herself. It was likely all there if she was as meticulous as Jane believed her to be in retrospect. She would have recorded everything, pored over it, considered her options, reviewed and revised daily.

Thané would know, know everything Yahlis knew, and Yahlis knew everything about Thane that Jane did. He would know things that would carve initials on rooms in her mind, rooms and Pon-Ifa boards that only he could see in her, where Yahlis had her hands on hijacked pieces, games replayed and reviewed, analyzed and never forgotten.

Oh. Yahlis was not her real name. Thane was not his real name. Not the names they were born to, given by their parents and then stolen, denied. Neither of them would speak their real names, but would never forget them. This hadn’t even occurred to her before now. She didn’t even have the right initials for either of them and her mind would be an open, pulsing and screaming archive they would never forget.

And they both…loved her in their convoluted and twisted ways. Jane was the Imperative to drown out other voices that preyed on them, a resting place where they only had to listen to one Voice. Her Voice, hard and cold and sure, warm and inviting and comforting in turns. They welcomed, loved, both or either, as long as she spoke.

Oh fuck.

Why couldn’t she just…fucking hate someone…for once? This once? This once would be good.

Mordin finished “…speak to Kasumi. Drell community in danger.” He muttered “Again.”

Garrus said, his eyes on her “Still.”

She repeated, mirroring Garrus’s tone of voice and manner, because she couldn’t find her own, and because it had so many meanings that suited the moment “Still.”
She had a new Omni Tool. Garrus was extravagantly jealous. Many of her other Cerberus and discovered implants and upgrades were irreplaceable at the moment and she did not want to mine for a month to replace them. Miranda repaired what she could, but they had other priorities. Jane had physical therapy to do to rebuild muscle mass and hopefully aid in nerve damage reversal with Miranda’s assistance. Four weeks since her return and progress was good considering her other options were having the Normandy fully indoctrinated, her shot through the brain or a cell next to Dr. Kenson.

The Citadel had mostly settled into less insanity, more discipline, without the Normandy’s intervention. Udina was under house arrest while they sorted out public and medical and legal opinion over untested brain surgery without consent. Anderson had taken over the full load of Council wrangling and his scan was clean. Tension was high and that was good, she wanted people on alert. Unfortunately some of that tension was bleeding out in the form of conspiracy theories flown on the Extranet and then taking root in reality. Some were fixated on this not being a Reaper issue but a biological warfare issue, pointing fingers at any and every organization and species that had the resources to be responsible, Salarians in particular. Since it was known the first case was human, perhaps the STG or government had developed a way to control humans, and it had mutated to other species and this was a cover up. The accusations were personally or politically motivated, and the ones that could not be easily dispelled clouded the issue, making it harder to agree on a course of action, who was in charge, who could be trusted. It was a biological warfare issue, so it was difficult to prove a definitive source without people making those Reaper noises. In the meantime Udina ranted to a stasis screen and talked to reporters who stood fascinated on the other side with recorders spinning.

Nobody publically advocated letting him out. It was more like a zoo visit.

She could have told them he was always like that when he wasn’t in front of a camera, now he was like that in front of a camera. Hell, even she couldn’t tell if he was actually indoctrinated, she knew he was that big of a paranoid, scheming asshole.

What she did know is that his political career, at least on the Citadel was over and that was good. Maybe she’d find him on some moon compound in five years and have to talk him down or ask Garrus to shoot him. She’d rather shoot him herself. Maybe she should teach Garrus rock, paper, scissors.

Some ships from every government had gone AWOL, and Garrus was considering taking some of those missions for retrieval, but he was biding his time. She and Garrus both assured each other superficially that Thane was fine, but they fell to avoiding the subject, four weeks with no communication other than a cyclic Drell blip was wearing on their faith and insistence.

There were hints, though the correlation was difficult. Kasumi, who was following every trail she could with the hints from Keiji’s graybox let her know that Hanar were beginning to go missing on Kahje. It might just be the whole indoctrination thing and others of every species were going missing, but she suspected Thane.

Go Thane. So perhaps he was able to resist any conditioning he had against harming them. Good for you, my love. It’s hard.

Garrus was waiting to hear from Thane, using the excuse of Jane’s recovery but also working his ass off on diplomatic issues. They hadn’t disclosed that it was Shepard that had been indoctrinated, they
had not reported her missing, agonizing over that choice, but ultimately wanting to protect her privacy and command, hoping to recover her fast and get on with life. Betting that if Kasumi and Liara could not find her, odds were that a general cry would not produce more than a few people who saw her get drunk into a sky car. They had that surveillance, tried to trace the car, found nothing, not even the car. They had been trying to isolate who might have been the agent in the car with her, but also nothing. In her opinion he, and anybody also hanging out hired for the day were dead and dumped somewhere un-findable if not vaporized or recycled.

None of her personal scans were released, no demographics. All data stripped of identifiers other than that this was a human case. They had released only generalized information on the composition, location and target of the matrix. Those who wanted to see the index case of indoctrination, “Subject Zero” (cue laugh from Jack) and wanted more details were told it was classified, and that there were now several sources of empiric information based on the alarming number of people from multiple species who were in various stages of indoctrination, take their pick.

Jack offered to introduce herself to the Primarch and Garrus had barked a laugh and politely declined.

There had been Turian indoctrination, in the military and in C-Sec, and although the matrix behaved differently and went to different locations in the Turian brain, it was still detectable, still able to be removed.

The Alliance and humans in general were more disorganized than the Turians, had more legal issues and a great deal more stalling, and a lot of soldiers, support personnel and civilians were found to have been indoctrinated. Some of them had not received imprinting and gave no signs other than starting to develop obsessive compulsive behavior on random issues, so perhaps it was transferrable, contagious, or their indoctrinators had abandoned them to avoid detection.

Thessia was close mouthed and minded about her commandos, Garrus did not hear much from them, but travel was a great deal more restricted, and some information came in from Herra of them having found several agents indoctrinated who had undergone or were undergoing delicate surgery and recovery processes. The Asari mind was much more prone to damage and disruption of function, loss of the ability to bond, which could result in insanity and suicide. Surgery seemed to result in a coma often, and some had not woken. Some that had woken had killed themselves.

The Quarians seemed to be mostly immune, maybe due to the difficulty of breeching a suit without also triggering immediate medical attention and concurrent opportunistic infection. It was possible that introduction of the matrix induced a fatal response. There had been an unexplained hemorrhagic brain condition that had started plaguing and killing Quarians. The bodies had been…Tali said…recycled…ew…she supposed ship life with no home port and being resourceful would do that…as was Quarian custom, but Tali was waiting for more to come in with horrified expectation. It might be that there weren’t enough Quarians alive to bother indoctrinating, that the Geth were expected to wipe them out, and that was sadly not far from probability. Tali had insisted on scanning, they had scanned, found nothing in the core of the Flotilla, but getting everyone to report in was proving difficult, so there may be individual ships affected. They would wait and see, investigate, and Tali would use the time of possible indecision to urge investigation, focus on the Reaper threat over the Geth.

The three remaining Councilors were clean, produced scans, set an example, and clean films became a prerequisite weekly. Nobody who was found to be clean complained, and complaint from those not wishing to be scanned came to be seen as a sign of probable indoctrination, true or not. Some people were just assholes. Peer pressure and high alert encouraged compliance. Some of the casualties Joker had reported came from individual and group reaction to protest about being scanned. Injuries,
panicked deaths from assault or suicide, a few mobs in the earlier days. Calm and order were being restored. C-Sec stations had scans posted for each officer on display to encourage confidence and set an example.

Batarians and Vorcha were almost entirely booted off the Citadel because the Batarians would not submit to what they thought would lead to invasive procedures. The Vorcha were just…Vorcha. No real coherent protest, just refusal. Some of their vessels were stuck in berths, only able to drain their resources and accept automated deliveries, unable to be cleared to leave and unwilling to get scanned. Eventually some ships were abandoned and it became clear that lots of people had gotten off the station without official clearance through shuttles or smuggling.

Really, what did they expect? Reason?

Jane wondered how Aria was handling this…or if Aria was indoctrinated…or if she was just denying entry or shooting people…and if that would eventually become an accepted strategy.

Wondered if eventually healthy people would begin eliminating not only the indoctrinated, but those who survived surgery. Wondered how much influence she could ever have, if it were known she was a survivor. Wondered how far Spectre authorization could override scanner results when she passed through security on any planet.

Life. Moving quickly.

Garrus was busy and productive, vindicated. She was genuinely glad to see it, her bitter and condemning edge fading as she healed, as she regained her reserve of sleep, of safety, counted blessings rather than counting. Her habits developed from survival over and on the edge faded slowly. She gained more faith in the healing process, dedicated herself to it as the best thing she could do for herself and for the ship.

Discussion hadn’t taken place regarding her being restored to command, as she was the only one on board with an active indoctrination incubation chamber and as they had not determined transmission method, perhaps it was not wise. Garrus joked about assuring she would get it back, easygoing and warm, but she shied away from mentioning it. He was doing a good job. She would follow him. She was still a soldier and a good one.

All that really mattered was the mission.

She did not want to find out that indoctrination could be sexually transmitted. Talk about unsafe sex. Oh, what a horrid thought.

She spent a few hours in the gym every day, most everyone keeping her company from time to time, even Legion, solemn and careful, comforting. Right now she was alone, taking a particularly defiant to delicious pleasure in stretching, another thing she no longer took for granted after weeks of restraint.

Garrus had also discovered that his most effective seduction technique was…keeping his hands off her, keeping his distance, walking away.

It was perverse, of course, and it worked.

Maybe since he’d walked away from her on the CIC and she’d followed, leaned on him. Maybe he’d learned it by accident, maybe on purpose. He definitely knew what he was doing now. He seemed to be enjoying that his detached command of the situation made her bend his way. She was enjoying that he was enjoying it.
Just as Yahlis had discovered…and Garrus had heard…and had always been the case…Jane was a hunter, it had to be her idea.

Tali was gone, Thane was gone, Garrus had no emotional or physical release and she wished in part for Thane to return so they could console each other…maybe let that be that way for a time, a long time. Maybe forever.

Garrus was still her best friend, her main source of that luxury she had learned to crave and appreciate like stretching…humor.

He’d stopped clenching his fists around her, stopped drawing his brow plates together and looking at her with longing. Now he looked at her with indulgence, warmth and his particular friendship that was invaluable, grounding, safe, drawing her in and granting her perspective when she tried to chew on everything at once.

When she tried to struggle with the idea of whether or not she’d indoctrinate him if they had sex.

He let her chew on other things. In this case…he’d discovered she liked chocolate, made fun of how it smelled and what it looked like, mocked her response and brought her more.

He didn’t spend nights in her cabin, now it was thoroughly her cabin. Fear of her nightmares had frozen him out. She did not want to talk in her sleep, she did not wish to share the experience, she did not want to fight against an embrace in panic, she was not ready for Reverie and the sensation of losing her own thoughts. She didn’t retract her invitation, she didn’t say anything about ending a physical relationship, but he understood miraculously and was not there…without fear, without failure, without folly. Keeping his promise, letting her set her pace and needs without explaining, not giving any sign of distress.

Yahlis had fed her, yes, but the associations there were wrong. Not chocolate. Not with laughter.

She was shedding that skin, still entirely unsure if she could approach sex, but she was craving intimacy, and Garrus gave her that, had learned that her body and mind were healing and he wanted to be there for that, every day.

And then he’d walk away from her, leaving her wanting more.

He knew her physical therapy routines and helped her with them, often arrived, though not every day, when she was working out, but always found her at some point. Casual and strong and supportive.

She found herself anticipating him, hoping it would be now that he’d find her, and half an hour into her routine he did, in loose Vakarian blue workout clothing, accentuating his shoulders and the angle of his waist and…yup. Just checking. I’m attracted to him. Just in case I wasn’t sure.

She was rebuilding her lust. Maybe if she’d had a human lover she would be able to try, ease back in, but Reverie, the psychoactive aspects of sex with Garrus now worried her the most. That could set her off. That and the fact that his body would feel like restraint, couldn’t help it. She did not think “easing” was possible with a Turian, though Garrus was doing his best.

Plus indoctrination risk.

What had Tali said – “Hey, Garrus, want to get sterilized?” – now there was a corollary to Jane’s experience “Hey Garrus, wanna indoctrinated?” or “Wanna see if I’m going to drive my fist through your eye at high speeds because something set me off?” or “Wanna see if I can cry for four hours straight just because I tried to touch you?”
He smiled at her and worked out parallel, dizzying speed and accuracy on targets as she watched surreptitiously.

Definite stirrings, her whole analogy to Tali a while back about lighting fires at night...she'd been waterlogged, unable to spark a match, miserable and dispirited, and now...damned if she didn't want to roast a marshmallow again someday.

Someday.

Not today. But she had marshmallow ambitions.

He walked over wordlessly and helped her with joint isolations, legs were difficult and shoulders and neck still stiff or numb. He helped her balance and stretch, ending with her down on the mat, with him pushing gently on her lower back until she was fully leaning forward over her knees, trying to relax into the tight pull. His thumbs rolled up along her spine and back, not on her skin, only over her shirt, pressed and held until she came up for the release. He helped her rotate her shoulders, then start the cycle over, balance, stretch, relax.

He smiled and left her at the end of her reps and she was...as always...disappointed and then disappointed at being disappointed, and then laughed, went onto the next cycle of exercises. So that was her Garrus for the day. Crooked smile, she continued on. At least she had some Garrus in her day.

About 20 minutes later he came back in with a...milkshake...and...pudding?

He said with distaste “I can’t believe you eat this stuff. Are you absolutely sure?”

She said curiously and somewhat suspiciously “Where did you get this?” Dairy was not common, no cows on the Citadel. Rare and expensive everywhere but Earth. They hadn’t set into a port. No real substitute, so she expected it to taste like chalk. She might hit him if it had tofu. He wouldn’t know.

He shrugged and said “Scraped it off the bottom of a crate that had been leaking. That’s what it looks like anyway. I feel guilty suggesting it.” He offered a spoon of pudding, not too close...not too far away, just watching her intently, indulgently, a half smile as her eyes closed and she said “That...is so good.”

Garrus informed her sternly “You need calories.”

She had lost weight, trouble with appetite, trouble with regaining it. She gestured at his offerings “I’ve got them. Where did you get this?”

He said with a hint of smug and offered her another spoonful “It’s my ship. I get what I want.”

She said after savoring it “How come I couldn’t get it when I wanted it when it was my ship?”

He shrugged and said “Perhaps certain people don’t owe you enough favors.”

He offered her a sip through the straw, vanilla milkshake, tasted absolutely real, chocolate pudding. Unbelievable. She said “You know this bribery thing? I think I’m getting used to it.”

He said lightly “I have no idea what you’re talking about. You have a devious mind. It’s not a bribe. Think of it as...an incentive.”

She grinned and said “Like training a dog? Good girl, roll over?”
He laughed and said “You have…interesting phrasing and a devious mind. This works on dogs? Think I should get one?”

His brightly curious disingenuous tone made her laugh. She had no immediate answer for that, was not going to use the word bitch, so instead she ate, sipped and admired this precious man who was doing his best to care for her without ever touching her. She supposed he had practice with Tali, and he couldn’t even see her face or feed her, grateful and blessed to hold her, talk to her. He couldn’t hold Jane…but they both had building faith that he would. She could see that far only right now, touching him without it being an obstacle course, a dare, maybe being on his lap without panic.

The idea of his arms around her still brought on panic. Baby steps. Baby steps and dairy.

She had…gotten over maybe not the same magnitude of issues, but…issues…before.

Maybe “gotten over” was not exactly the right word…but…

She could do this.

When she was done he stepped a little closer and she didn’t feel the need to step back. He looked at her lips and said “You have a little…”

Her brow raised and she said “A little…?” Anything to get him to talk some more.

His mouth relaxed and he said with a hint of laughter “A little crate lube right…there…” He pointed to her lower lip and she laughed, lost her composure for a moment and said “Right…what? You mean like here?” She brushed a finger along the lower plate of his mouth, warm birch, mint and a little tremor, a little tightening. No panic. Well, maybe a little from him. She was teasing and calories. His eyes closed and then opened and he didn’t move. He said “Yes. Exactly there.”

She swiped at her chin and he said “You got it.” Warm. Voice like chocolate. He was the reason why intimacy was now craveable. She licked the smudge off the side of her hand and his smile deepened, then he took the empty containers and turned to go.

She said “Someday I’m going to have to explain the significance of a s’more to you.” Symbols were important. Fire. Marshmallow. Chocolate. She couldn’t figure out the meaning of a graham cracker in this case, but she supposed she had wonky symbols anyway. Symbols she wanted to share with him.

He paused and said “I’m guessing that’s a disgusting human thing.”

She nodded enthusiastically “Absolutely.”

He said on his way out “Some other time. I think that’s enough for today.”

She said “But you’re looking forward to it.” Not a question.

He went through the door, saying an airy “I have no idea what you’re on about, Shepard. I have no interest in disgusting human things.”

She loved him…so much.

And he was getting to be…just him…just someone she wanted to be near, not out of duty or obligation or fear of losing him otherwise…someone who cast a spell where she was safe and laughing and leaning.
She was regaining her appetite.

He had to tell her where he got pudding. He had to.

Two days later Garrus motioned her aside while she was speaking to Legion about escalation between Geth and Quarians, led her to the conference room.

He indicated that she sit down and then he leaned against the table next to her, arms crossed. Serious Garrus face. Serious Garrus pause before speaking.

Garrus watched her carefully as he said “Thane wants to meet.” Blood rushed through her, relief and apprehension. He continued “He wants to meet on Illium. He has relayed several reasons for not rendezvousing directly with the Normandy. He is…let’s see…” Garrus sighed and seemed to paraphrase or repeat with weary strain “Mindful of the question of his welcome on several fronts, that he left the ship, that he had opportunities to check in or update or ask for assistance or provide reassurance, either as a person to those who care for him or as a crewmember with a duty to the ship, but he took none of them. He would like to explain his reasons. He stated that he would respect those circumstances if they are seen as a severe breech of trust and would understand if not agree with and urge serious consideration of unwillingness to allow him back onto the Normandy or even to meet. He states he has been in close contact with Yahlis and is aware of the risk of indoctrination or collusion that implies. He has been scanned and has forwarded it, but is aware that can be faked and the scan is from an illegal source…but he presented it to show that he is…mindful…of that implication. There are scanners available on Illium, he would submit to them in my presence, but it would likely result in arrest without Spectre authority overriding it and he does not wish to involve you at that point in negotiations. He will be restrained when I meet with him and I may choose or not choose to release him. I may otherwise turn him over to Illium security or any other…agent that I choose.”

Thane was mindful. Right. He needed to tell us that, because we’d forget otherwise. She drew in a deep breath, properly apprehensive, not crazy apprehensive. Still, pretty damned apprehensive. Willing to be restrained…will be restrained… oh… fuck… she listened for the parts of the conditions that were intended for her, relayed through Garrus. Because Thane did not want to cause her a breakdown due to his presence as an assassin, as a lover, as a reminder of what she’d been through at the hands of someone with his training. Wanted her to see him coming from a long way away. Wanted Garrus to protect her from that if he could, if she would allow it.

Garrus turned his head, looked at her and sighed. He said “Thane wishes to speak to me, resolve the issue of rejoining the vessel or remaining off. He asked me to ask you for your permission or bar, and for me take that into account, that he would follow my commands and accept my judgment only so far as I was the commander, but that if you disagreed, he wishes for me to honor that. Conditionally if I have…temporary use for him…he would function as an agent off the ship, but that if you were deemed commander again, he would leave at that time if you express that interest anywhere in the interim. He does not wish to step back on the Normandy without your blessing. After and if he has passed my… and his… security concerns, he would also like to meet with you privately on Illium if and only if you will allow it. He asked me to not try to influence or understand your decision, but to accept it as an absolute. The offer of him being restrained extends to your presence, if that is what you would want.”

Garrus tried to pick through this laboriously. He continued “If…you disallow him, either on the ship or for you to speak on Illium, he urges me to respect that, but he has intel and recovered samples of drugs, tech and methods he wishes to provide, the fruits of his absence, securing them was his
motivation for not coming back in earlier and he believes them worth the time, separation and effort. He is willing to turn them over to any other agent if I choose not to accept the...risks of contact or association with him, or if you wish, to destroy them sight unseen.”

Garrus paused and his voice was less formal. He said “I don’t want to ask. He doesn’t want to have to ask. He’s trying to...preserve your choices, lessen anxiety…”

She said “And it screams trap and raises anxiety higher.”

He laughed and said “Yeah. That. I can’t make the call for you, and I am in deep, dark waters here and I can only see the surface, and that’s bad enough. Have I mentioned Turians can’t swim? Is there anything you can say that will give me some insight... without me... unduly influencing you? I’m asking as a commander, but I’m also asking as myself. He wouldn’t disappear. He says he’d always be able to be contacted if we change our minds, wish to do this at another time or need further information. He is grateful you are healing, regrets abandoning us, hopes to explain his reasons, he loves us both… I assured him I loved him as well... but... I’m blind here. I don’t know what you want. I know you don’t want to talk about it and you’re not required to talk about it, but you do need to make a choice and I need to understand what it is you want so I can... enter into negotiations with that in mind. I agree with him that it is entirely up to you. I love him, but if you have reasons to bar him from the Normandy and he is going this far to establish that they may exist, I won’t put the ship in jeopardy, I won’t put you in jeopardy. I’ll take your word for it, maybe someday later you can explain. If you can’t, I still take your word for it. I don’t know if you know what you want, if you can know what you want. You’ve been traumatized by a Drell assassin, venom used against you. I also know you and I also know him. I am betting your curiosity will overcome your caution and he’d know that, that’s what makes it a potential trap. Yahlis failed to turn you, I don’t know if they have history or any system of...honor among assassins or owing each other allegiance over others. I don’t think she can just give up and go home, the Hanar seem the sort who don’t accept failure, and the obvious course if they can’t turn you is to kill you. But I do not know enough to navigate.”

She felt a familiar and blessedly reassuring and alarming stirring of instinct, smiled and said “What do we do with traps?”

Garrus said with mock weariness and some relief, either at the opportunity to speak to Thane or at her alleged recovery “We walk right into them. Over and over.”

Her mind was professional, considering work and not personal implications and she was intensely grateful for that vital gear shift. She said “He could be indoctrinated. He could be turned. She’s very convincing. There’s no way to know. Did he say...where she is?” She didn’t need to feel sickened because the question was not one of personal concern. She needed to know because it mattered. Her tentative control was holding and she was grateful for the tide being held back successfully.

He shook his head and said “No, but I also didn’t ask. He wants to establish that trust is possible and acknowledge that it may be impossible based on our points of view, especially based on yours. Love...but not trust...was discussed. The rest will have to wait until after we establish the rules of engagement. To put it in Thane terms, I’m getting that he does not wish to assume that communication is possible at this stage, or impose upon our trust or influence your decision through manipulation of facts and your curiosity.” He looked at her, released a burdened sigh and said “You know how he is, better than I do. I don’t know if you’re ready for this.”

She smiled again and said “What do we do with traps when we’re not ready for them?”

He smiled and ducked his head. He said “I can’t decide if you are the bravest...or the stupidest person I have ever met.”
She pretended to consider and said “Both. I’d go with both. It’s not just for my benefit. He knows you too. He’s saving you the need to be the one to bar him from the ship and from me yourself. He’s giving you an out by setting the security conditions that you don’t need to insist on, and allowing you to make choices based on what I want and releasing you from responsibility otherwise if you feel, if I feel…we must abandon him. You’ve thought about it.”

Garrus’s jaw moved and she thought that motion meant he was running his tongue over his teeth, thinking, testing a sharp point. “Yeah. I’ve thought about it. A lot can happen in four weeks. A chess piece is not enough information to go on here. You want to talk to him?”

She shrugged and said “Putting personal issues aside, which I can…barely…but I can…I don’t think we have a choice. This could lead to knowing exactly what my indoctrination process was, what drugs were used, and possibly the method and sample of the Reaper tech that leads to indoctrination. Yeah, I think he would be right about my curiosity, we can’t pass that up. He’s laid out the obstacle course and the obstacles are set in theory for our benefit, not his. But consider that before he even gets to me he could kill you, and then the Normandy has no Commander and I’m walking wounded. Right there, that could be mission accomplished. Make you think I’m the target, set elaborate conditions that require your cooperation and presence, set you up and disappear. It’s enough of a possibility to say ‘no’ immediately…and that’s your call, you’re risking your life more than I am risking mine. But I don’t think that’s what’s going on…I mean, I think it’s a potential trap worth springing…because of the bait…or the reward of trust, depending on your point of view. The restraint thing is a nice gesture but meaningless as he could probably break out of or fake most methods. I’d recommend insisting on dismissing that condition outright on the grounds that you’re not that stupid. Turning him over to authorities, though dramatic, is not going to happen. I’m sure he knows we’d…handle anything ourselves…but it’s possible he’s offering so we are aware how seriously he takes this and how dedicated he is to our safety and security…or trying to lull us, but we’re not easily lulled people. If he wanted to kill us…it would already be done and we’d be having this conversation in the afterlife. He’s trying to offer his incarceration so we know where he is, so we’re not haunted by him being out in the galaxy doing…unseen Thane things…hell, for all we know he’s on the ship right now, in this room.”

Garrus coughed a laugh and then said with his hand massaging the back of his neck “This is not how I imagined him being restrained when I saw him again.”

That in combination with the fact that Thane was alive, that she might get the answers she wanted made her lose control over several impulses at once. A sense of celebration, of camaraderie, of doing more stupid, brave things together hit her and she started to laugh, sharing plans and humor caused warmth and collapse and a slide of so many good things, why she felt so lucky and why she was so lucky. She couldn’t remember why she was so far away from him, why his hand didn’t move to hold hers when it seemed that was where it should be. Then she remembered it was her fear making that impossible and she could fix that. She was fast and he was startled as she stood, put a hand on his far shoulder and pulled herself into his lap, nearly knocking him back on the conference table due to his precarious angle but she could have worked with that too. Her arms went underneath his arms and wrapped around his back, her legs went around his waist and she belonged there.

Failure and folly, but no fear.

Well, no fear with this much adrenaline.

He pulled in a tight, startled breath, his arms braced on the table, talons out and digging into the surface, his legs beginning to tremble. She kissed him, mouth pressed to the blunted, angled plates of his mouth, closed tight.
Mine. They’re mine and the galaxy can’t have them, won’t take them, I won’t let it happen. I don’t own them, but they’re mine because they said so. They have to hear me say it too, that I’m theirs.

She said against his mouth between nudges of her lips “I owe the man…at least one life of mine. At least enough trust to talk to him, give him a chance, show him I believe that four weeks isn’t long enough to break him, that if he’s indoctrinated we can do something about it. That’s the hand we’ve been dealt, Commander Vakarian. I say if we have to choose between all in or all out…I’m all in.”

A shudder went through his body and he said hoarsely “Please…please don’t die, don’t throw your life away, Kerim. Please promise me you will be the brave part and not the stupid part. Spirits, I can’t tell anymore. Maybe the stupid part is better.”

She smiled, kissed along his mandible and said “You know that deal…I can’t.”

He groaned and said “I’ll bring him here, get him scanned, then you can talk.”

She thought and kissed along his throat, said “Bring him here, get him scanned, bring him back down. I don’t want to be monitored. He won’t be able to say…what it is he wants to say here.”

And neither will I.

She thought, she really thought about telling Garrus, because of his command, because of who he was…

She thought of saying “Think of a terrible thing, think of a very terrible thing, and think of it happening to me. Not the terrible things you already know. Worse. Deeper. Twisting. Corrupting. Think that they made me who I am, or I made them because of who I am, and that I can’t change them and I can’t change me. Add one now and one 10 or so years ago. Thane has seen them, and he wants to make sure I don’t see them, feel them, every time I look at him…”

But she couldn’t. Not to protect herself now, but to protect Garrus. She couldn’t. Garrus would know something was there, something in the dark, deep water, but something blurry and far away was much better than the raw stories in his mind. He couldn’t change it. He couldn’t help her more than he already did. She also couldn’t force his curiosity out in the open, tease it, make him hold back the need to know the way he held back his hands right now, restraining himself. She couldn’t let him catch the scent, follow the trail.

Corbin shouldn’t get into someone else’s head. Yahlis should not be in Garrus’s head. That’s what they would want, to spread their infection, and Jane would not allow it. They represented virulent disease, the intent and power to corrupt. It was like her indoctrination. It was part of her, it was in deep, it couldn’t be removed, but it was under control and it should not, under any circumstances, be cracked open for examination to prove its existence. It shouldn’t be shared just so her misery could have company.

He deserved to know only if Yahlis was a clear and present danger, if he had to develop tactics to deal with what she was capable of doing, if what she’d told Yahlis about the Normandy put them at security risk. That she had told first and with no reservation. They’d changed every code and access protocol. The odds that Yahlis was going to show up and attempt to seduce Garrus were nonexistent. He knew who she was and what she did, if not all she did. He knew enough right now to navigate the necessities of command. He seemed to know more than enough to navigate the necessities of being Jane. He was helping her navigate that minefield, knowing he was safe from the full shockwave, that she wouldn’t inflict that on him. He also knew the power of Drell assassin venom and sex and would not be blindsided by her silence on the subject. Did it protect Jane’s privacy and possible extent of her crazy too? Yeah. Was compulsive confession and the damage it could do to his
psyche justifiable when shit was bad enough right now?

Was it too late to tell him anyway, considering she would not have considered it unless it was an emergency affecting her job? Would that set a template for the distance he would keep from her?

Would he think she didn’t tell him because she didn’t trust him?

I don’t know, but my instincts do, and I’m going with them.

Protecting herself flipped to protecting her, protecting Garrus and protecting Thane, and protect wasn’t a bad word. An umbrella that covered them all in the downpour. He could know they needed the umbrella whether or not it was raining water or thresher maw acid, as long as the umbrella could take it. He’d put his finger into the downpour, didn’t need to feel it on his entire body, have it sink into his bones. He knew it was bad.

Garrus took her face between trembling hands and said “I see you are all in. I see what you want to do, but you have to go slowly in. Let us wait for you. Let us…let me. Don’t dive onto this, onto me like a grenade. You know how much I want you, but I need to learn you over again, you need to allow that you’ve changed. Promise me, Kerim, that you will not rush into something, brave and stupid, when you could walk, even be carried, and still get there. I see your face and I see you running on a broken leg and I will not…let you do that. I can’t tell if you feel it or can’t feel it or which one would be worse. Please. I am begging you.”

His voice was invested with the sound of home and safety and all she could do was smile at him and say lightly “So you are asking me to roll over.”

He touched his crest to her forehead and said with matching teasing “I’m so transparent.” Then his voice broke again as he said “You haven’t promised.”

Thane would…had to…wanted to...carry this for her or with her if what he had to say, what she had to say meant he could stay with her, with them. She knew…she couldn’t touch him…she couldn’t. But two weeks ago she couldn’t touch Garrus. She’d choose hope. Garrus understood that she didn’t want to be touched. Thane would understand. Garrus and Thane could be together and she could…get her shit together or fail to get her shit together, but she wouldn’t take what they had built with each other from them.

It was okay to be who she was now. Maybe forever.

Thane would understand.

If she understood Thane’s message, he was well, he had been successful, and he wanted her to know he would not sneak into her room in the middle of the night and watch her sleep, that all permissions would be rescinded and regained only if possible. That he would accept, if not demand, just as Garrus was doing, that she stop and take it slowly, possibly take it backward, possibly never move forward.

Or he was turned and he could take her life, any influence or power she had, the possibility of command and Garrus from her permanently.

He had already been in that position for a long time.

Then again maybe Thane came out of this last month not wanting to think about sex at all again ever with anybody. He had just potentially spent four weeks with Yahlis, that could go rough on a person.

She’d worried about him for good reason.
She had changed. Maybe Garrus did not want her as much as he had, maybe not at all but he could not tell her that. Maybe Thane would not want her at all.

Lust and fury and loss.

And a job to be done, which she could do without lust or fury, but it always came with loss.

Thane’s conditions were likely less about the risk of him killing anybody and more about him attempting to protect her mental health and offer her an opportunity to do her job at the same time. If she were to bet on it, she would guess that Thane had spoken to EDI before speaking to Garrus, and knew Jane was well…weller. Not as fucked up as she had been. Maybe he’d spoken to EDI before now, and chose now as the time when she seemed…not quite as crazy. Capable of discourse.

She would be that. Capable of discourse. Capable of doing a job.

She relaxed…everything she could and said “Okay. I promise. You’ve changed too, you are allowed to change, and I’m sorry…”

He interrupted, matter of fact “If you apologize I’m hitting you.”

She laughed and said “Okay. Would you please come to…my…cabin…and talk to me, read me a story…just be Garrus at me, with me?”

He said solemnly, earnestly “I can do that. I will do that, Kerim.”

She said to qualify “When you’re done working. Seems being a Commander is a pain in the ass.”

He stood up on steadier but not yet steady knees, about the same as hers, put her on her feet and brushed his mouth plates over her hair, embraced her briefly and gently, a slide of plate and warm on fabric, and said “You have no idea. Oh, right, you do. I’m going to go reassure Thane that a missile strike is not headed to his current position and let him know your decision. We’ll set course to Illium. I’ll make the arrangements. We’ll work it out. Tell me what you need if you can, and I’ll figure out the rest.”

She said “Okay” amiably as he left the room. Most of her courage, confidence and warmth went right out of the room with him. Her immediate thought staring at a closed door was ‘What the fuck did I just agree to?’

Second thought was ‘Walking into a trap before you’re prepared.’

Third thought was ‘So…getting back to business as usual.’

‘Yup.’

‘Okay then. Just checking.’
Chapter 21

Time flew by with Jane in her fugue state of what the fuck, committed to meeting with Thane professionally and setting aside personal issues, not giving Garrus anything in the way of substantive understanding of why she and Thane had to speak alone and unheard.

Garrus was not stupid, and of course this could not help but put him in mind of more insidious conspiracy possibilities, Jane still indoctrinated, Thane now indoctrinated, through some other method, hiding from EDI and Garrus and planning doom.

Doom again.

Despite her diving on Garrus…accurately…like a grenade…she still was nowhere near ready for anything approaching sex.

She was only approaching being able to want to be okay with it to assure herself she was fine, and that was not the same at all.

And of course the next question was…had she ever been fine?

Define fine.

Once again, miraculously, Garrus understood. His restraint was greater than hers, because he had control of himself and she did not have control over her impulses and choices…yet…but it was possible. She had done it before. Back then it had been done out of necessity and even defiance, to avoid detection, but the flames and blood and screams had faded and she had become as she had been, as she remembered. She had resumed the relationships she had, with no break, no change in her habits, only a willingness to remain beat up for a bit, have that be a reason for distance. She had used the excuse of being under fire for her stupid AWOL stunt and that she needed to work hard and not fuck up.

Sex and intimacy were needs for her, and she was connected enough to know that. To attempt to do without them would be a new type of starvation on top of Corbin winning, taking away something she needed by poisoning it.

This wasn’t just sex, though, it was the experience of being helpless, of having her mind taken from her. It was not that she did not trust, it was anticipating what would happen to her when she felt that loss of control.

So the question hung there…maybe she could have intimacy but not sex. Maybe she could have sex…but not with a Turian. She wasn’t afraid of killing him anymore, but she was afraid that the combination of Reverie and hard plate, the overwhelming power he had over her, his tendency toward the feral and violent, welcome before, would now be intolerable.

…and indoctrination risk.

That was who she was now, and that was who he was, and she could see both of them…suffering quietly…him holding back his nature, her tolerating it…and she understood why Garrus was warm, gentle and not even seeming to make an effort to ‘understand’ in any way. This was the way it was.

The impulsive insanity of jumping on him in retrospect made her wonder if she would have barreled forward if he had not stopped her, admitted no dissenting voice, dismissed his concerns and claimed impulsivity as strength.
Define strength.

Face it, it sounded exactly like her. She’d died and then gotten right back in the game with no hesitation. There was some internal mocking voice, probably an echo of Targ ‘The great Commander Shepard. Can’t handle a hug from a Turian.’ An echo of her parents, every drill instructor, every mission, everything she’d told her own troops. She was better than that, tougher than that, and that’s what she’d always told herself, and that’s what had always been ultimately true. No excuses. Suck it up and play hurt.

She supposed the fact that she even recognized an internal voice as possibly destructive was progress. Ugly progress, but progress.

She still needed the eggs.

Targ may not be the pinnacle of sensitivity training, but he did represent the cruelty of the fact that the Universe did not give a damn what she was going through, and some assholes would get a kick out of it if they could see it. He was the essence of what she was fighting. The Reapers were not going to take a knee to give her time to sort through her feelings and face them at full actualized strength.

We go to war with the psyche we have, not the psyche we want.

Her sex life was going to have to take a back seat to saving the galaxy. Possibly not the most self-actualizing choice, but she had to set priorities.

She had asked for and received an alarm on her Omni Tool that woke her if she was having a nightmare that resulted in any vocalization. Kasumi, Karin and Garrus had invented it for her. It went off…a lot. Garrus was able to spend time with her. He was able to sleep near, her fingers learning that twining was okay, that a hand on her clothed hip was comforting and not confining, that she loved his hum and his voice and his warmth.

He did not make her ecstatic, but he could make her happy, he could make her laugh, the weight could fall away in his presence, as his smile and eyes made her forget other burdens.

He read to her, talked to her, and she leaned in, but he did not lean back and only reached out occasionally, gently and with limits. He was not testing her boundaries at all, and that gave her a false sense of having none, which she realized was foolish, just as he had. What he was doing was being a friend and a loved one, if not a lover, as though she were in a hospital bed or a psych ward, helping her from breath to breath, not setting goals or trying to reach a place, just being there for her. They could focus on the things that were measurable, muscle strength, rifle accuracy, calories, dreams and sleep, and the rest would have to wait.

Her instinct was not to reach for him when she woke, but to look and see he was there, possibility if not probability. His near presence was calming and she was not precisely alone, but also not crowded to explain, not forced to confront. She didn’t have to wake to the finality of having pushed him away, to a permanently empty place.

A part of her pushed her to cut him loose for his own sake, that he deserved better and he should find better…but his voice truly was inside her head, no longer indoctrinated, just back to who he was, and she knew he would not agree with her, and she tried out respecting his wishes as a concept.

Trying to figure out his motivations and mindset, because that’s what her brain did, she thought that her issue, as he’d determined, was not the pain, which she could bear, or the fear, which she could
manage, but the numbness, coldness, emotional, physical and mental that was insidious and that she
did not know how to measure or counteract. She would prefer to push through and conquer. He
would like to see the extent of that numbness, determine if it had always been there, would it always
be there. If it had been, would he be touching where she could not feel and was he validating her
ability to seem fine, ignore it? He was making the assumption of numbness, not testing her. Faced
with that she wondered how much of a lifetime of habit she could overcome, counteract, how much
honesty she was capable of providing, that he knew if he asked her “Can you feel that?” she would
find it near impossible to answer honestly. She would have some internal surge that convinced her of
the rightness of saying “Of course I feel that…that’s my arm…that’s my head…that’s my heart…”

He could not trust her answers because she could not trust her own answers. So he didn’t ask.

Sometimes she watched him sleep, her eyes traveling along his colors and edges, her mind at rest
until she slipped back into sleep herself. Sometimes she thought at him, about him, an easier subject
than others, another service his presence provided with his immediacy protecting her from other
possibilities.

I am so sorry, Garrus. I am convinced that for you to know the truth I would have to infect you with
what I have, and I can’t do that. Thane has been in this pressured, dark magma, and all we have for
you is cold stone and jagged edges and it would still not be enough. You would think you
understood and that would be a disservice to everyone. I’ve told you so many times how much it
means to me that you understand without being told and I am hoping…that you know it is true.

You won’t let me go near apologizing without threatening to hit me again.

I love you so much.

Garrus also wasn’t taking chances on her security and she was cooperative, didn’t argue when he
informed her she wouldn’t be running around Illium on her own, that his order now and strenuous
recommendation for her future command if it came to that was to always travel with a team, armed
and armored. He volunteered for each and every future potential outing and if she considered that an
inconvenience too fucking bad.

As much as she would love to protest and say she could take care of herself, she did not want to see
Garrus’s face in response. If she was taken again because of her inability to learn, he’d be within his
rights to kill her himself. So she gave up shopping and autonomy. So that’s what being her was like
now. She stayed for a visit with Liara while Garrus spoke to Thane, brought him to the Normandy
and had him scanned.

Liara would have lent them her office, she kept the space but no longer used it for business, or not
exactly. It was still a permanent address where she could be contacted. She had a relay service, no
longer an assistant. Hiring someone after Nyxeris seemed to be either asking for a setup, or putting
an innocent person in danger of being turned. There were probably more bugs in there than there
were at any point on the Normandy. So Liara used it for disinformation only.

Kinda funny, kinda not.

Garrus settled on meeting in a hotel room, thankfully not one she knew. Definitely not the one they
had stayed in.

Garrus came to collect her, escort her there, wait somewhere out of hearing range.

Garrus told her “He is not restrained. I convinced him that was silly before the fact, that we chose to
meet with the man we knew and not the suspicion of who he could have become. That he could kill
us at any time and we know that. That we don’t think he will. He seemed relieved and alarmed,
which is at this point a shared experience. He seems…himself, but he’s in shock and physically, mentally exhausted. Clean scan. He states he has no demands, only offerings and choices. He wants to make sure I know you’re safe…which we all know is impossible…but as safe as you can be or can feel when you talk. He hasn’t told me anything beyond that, preferring to speak to you before speaking to me. I agreed. That okay?”

She nodded and said “That’s okay. Thank you. Can you believe our lives have been weirder?”

He smiled but it faded and he said gravely “Not really. We’ll check the weird quotient when this meeting’s over.” He sighed and said “I’m really hoping it goes down, and not up.”

She put a hand on his shoulder and said “Yeah, I remember saying something about sticks and stones and words…and you were right. Words can hurt me, but I’ll do my best to duck if it comes to that.”

Garrus smiled and said “I’ll be right behind you. Talk to you soon.” A brief pass of his hand on her cheek, a smile, and he was walking away. She wanted to follow, leaned that way before she walked out of the warm lingering support into lukewarm stale air, into the cold. Thane’s presence was enough to start physical tremors in her knees, down her spine, the back of her neck. Danger. Her body and mind were trying to get her to flee, every negative association with “Drell assassin” thrown at her, insisting she was a fool and she was about to die if she did not run. He was seated at a table and it took an act of will to take the seat facing him. He raised his hands…gloved.

He said softly “I will never touch you without your permission. I will remain gloved in your presence. If you wish for either of those things to change, you must tell me explicitly.”

She nodded once in acknowledgment. Good. Slight easing of the sense of danger, which she reminded herself should heighten the intellectual sense of danger in a lulled sense, and it did. She was pumping out fear with each heartbeat, trying to keep it under her skin along with her blood.

As he so often had while they spoke, reminiscent of just getting to know him in Life Support, he steepled his gloved hands and looked at her for a moment before he began. He said “I have spent a great deal of time trying to decide where to begin. What I say depends upon whether or not you trust or believe my account of events, whether you can support my judgments or my decisions.”

She nodded again.

He said “To relieve a major concern, Yahlis is not here, on Illium, though I know where she is. She is not a threat, she is not a danger. She is in cryogenic storage, similar to the method used on Jack. She will not be rescued or found by another, and she entrusted to me the means and method and location, that I would relay that information to you if you wished it. This method of suspending without resolving the question of her life and death, to defer the choice until you wish to make it was her idea. It seemed…fitting, and I did as she asked. As a Pon-Ifa player, she sees it as being taken off the board as the game continues. She is in the state of haras tal; no place, no role, and she chose for that to be literal, requiring no trust or investment of attention in her continued existence. She said her death belongs to you and that I had no right to grant it, that if I did, you would be displeased. This solution would provide for you being able to end her life yourself or ask her questions you might have if she has been unable to relay the answer through me. I am, in her eyes, mesadi pernaq, roughly translated, the stone that has fallen due to shearing weakness from the apex of a mountain, rolled under its own weight into the depths of the sea, lost, with only a memory of station, far from its nature. Without worth or potential for worth, only counted as a loss and a liability. In her eyes I am nothing but a danger and hindrance to you. I also find that…fitting. Her respect for me does not exist, but her respect for you I do not question.”

Jane swallowed and nodded when he paused.
Thane said “Forgive me for the drama of this meeting, but I believed you would understand why I asked for it to be done this way. I do not know if you wish to hear me speak beyond the fact that she is gone, but not dead, that through me her fate rests in your hands. You may do as you choose, flip a remote switch and she would cease to exist.”

The relief of that information calmed and steadied her, it probably shouldn’t have and it could have been a lie, but the way he spoke of her sounded…plausible, even probable. Authentic. Jane said “Give me your account of what happened from the moment the shuttle door closed until now. If you need information from me to answer that, if you have different versions of the truth depending on my answers, then ask.”

Thane nodded and said “Her first words to me were ‘You do not have time. Your Siha requires your aid and you must move your hand over the board in the dark, with only me to guide you.’ At first I thought she meant to claim herself as Siha, but she meant you. I also missed that she did not say ‘we do not have time’ or ‘I do not have time’ but that she was informing me that my time was short. She was correct. Ignorant of circumstances but aware only of immediate threat and an opportunity to gain information, I addressed only the navigation system. She was restrained, but she spoke throughout.

She told me that you were now in Garrus’s capable hands, that I had made a choice, and she accepted the outcome of her attempt to turn you, knew she had failed, knew she would always fail if she tried again, did not wish to try again, and thus she was unworthy to return to the life, the role she had known. She stated she had prayed that she would fail, and pledged in her prayers that if granted that gift, her will would be yours. If I wished to know what happened during those seven weeks, she would tell me. She would show me. At her base was all the information I required, but if I wished to improve the chances of achieving what the Doyenne required, I must move fast, move in collusion with her, and follow her guidance. She addressed you as nothing but Doyenne throughout our conversations. She told me she needed to send a compliance ping for her mission, and I debated that as truth or trap but allowed it as the only potential I could consider that might buy me time. Failure to send it would invoke investigation immediately. I wished to have the site to myself. I asked her if you were indoctrinated. She said yes. I asked her if she indoctrinated you. She said yes. She told me where to go, and I retrieved that exact information from the navigation system with effort and time. Trusting her would have allowed me more time at that site. I did not trust her. I kept her alive to savor killing her later. A hand that moves against you forfeits its fingers. A mouth that moves against you forfeits its tongue. That was my intention.”

Thane looked at Jane closely as she struggled to keep a blank face. He continued “This moment is where I betrayed you, and I knew it. I should have returned to you, but I wanted her information and my vengeance more, and she was giving it to me. That was the beginning of my collusion, the beginning of her influence over me. I allowed her to speak for you. I ultimately believed what she said, though I did not trust. I believed based on the evidence she gave me. I had no faith that what she would give me next would be truth, but each time, had I listened to her, I could have accomplished much more with the time given. That was my dilemma and my choice, that she gave me what I wanted and I took it, greedy for more. Her restraint was also temporary. Had she wished to, she could have killed me or fled several times in ways that I would have been unable to prevent, possibly in the first hours, certainly in the first few days despite my precautions because of mistakes I made, situations I did not anticipate or understand and through me underestimating her. Eventually I left her unrestrained. I had already passed the point of her betrayal many times before it became apparent that she would not take an opportunity to flee or strike. She recognized with contempt my attempts to test her. She outlined several opportunities I had missed, where she could have exploited my failures in security or circumstance, taken advantage of her preparations, traps against base invasion. Had I gone in alone, all information would have been destroyed, likely I would have been killed. She guided me through detection and disarming. Once again, I chose to move forward instead of back with that information.”
Jane said softly “She created a need and then fulfilled it.”

He nodded “Yes. After seven weeks of facing the probability of having lost you, I was relishing the opportunity to murder any I encountered and she only escaped that wrath due to her usefulness. She directed me to what I was wanted, and in each instance she gave me more than I could have secured for myself, promised more of the same and asked only for the time to relay the information. She said her life was worth nothing, was forfeit to you, and I could make use of her as I should or I could waste that time and that life when it could be in your service. She said her pain was only of value to me and that inflicting it would waste time. She would prefer that you moved her but did not have that luxury. As I was ignorant and did not know your will, she would speak for you, and I must listen or risk loss of the board you needed in your possession.”

Jane’s mouth quirked into a brittle smile. Sounded like her. An inappropriate surge of ‘that’s my girl’ and the cozy warm knowledge that Yahlis had spent at least a few days outwitting and bossing Thane around aided in the sense of confidence and camaraderie, brave and stupid…with both of them.

Thane continued, and the shock Garrus spoke of was more prominent in his speech. “She led me directly to the information and I wished to know how to reverse whatever she had done to you. I threatened to ask her to describe the use of each medication, that I would test it on her and then test it on myself to confirm. She indicated which ones were which, but that there was only one of importance, and it did not matter if I injected it into her, but she cautioned me against using it on myself. She did not know how to reverse the condition. She had only been instructed in its application and exploitation, not its mechanism. Knowing what it was or how to reverse it was beyond her power, beyond mine if I chose to return, that all I could do would be to watch helplessly, uselessly. She pointed out that you had Garrus and a ship with scientists that had cured me when I could not, could cure you where I could not, or so she hoped. I did not comprehend until later that I was threatening her with my own indoctrination by my own hand. She…urged me…to spare myself that. She informed me I had one use and that I could put that into your service, or serve my helplessness and indecision, return to you with nothing.”

Jane said “You believed her.”

Thane nodded and dropped his hands to the table. “That is my betrayal. I believed her, and I continued to believe her, testing and challenging and playing with information and technology about which I had no knowledge, and she warned me, protected me from it, explained its use. I did not consider attempting to contact you until she gave me all the information she had, did not betray me ultimately, suggested and submitted to cryogenic suspension. I do not believe she lied to me once. Which of course seems impossible and I must ask you…I do not know, Siha, did I make some move, create some circumstance, am I indoctrinated?”

Jane said drily “No. I think you just met Yahlis.”

Thane sat a moment, and she saw he did not know whether or not to believe her. He said quietly “I believed myself likely compromised, that I had fallen to her, that I could not stop, could not choose to fail to take the next move she chose. I began sending confirmation that I was alive, but I would not communicate with you. I would not ask you, ask Garrus, to support my choices based upon the inspiration, to trust or even consider my conclusions. I had no information on how to aid you in reversing indoctrination, only syringes and expectations and the knowledge of how to exploit the results. Yahlis promised me other targets I could acquire. The medications themselves were insignificant to healing you and I could provide that information later, when there was less to be done. She told me what had been done, what she had done, and told me where to find every record proving it, but also told me that time was short, that her confirmations would not hold off
investigation for long, and that we needed to leave there and travel to Kahje, that she knew you and I
had spoken of ending the Compact, and that my greatest service to you could be in removing all
evidence and witness of your capture and providing actionable intelligence on handlers that would
no longer exist if she were burned as a contact. I chose acting on that, could not, would not
communicate with you, considered myself burned.”

Jane said “Well, she gave you what you wanted. You knew by then, by now, that most everything…
everything in my head…is in hers.”

Thane said with shock, not anger “Yes, I do. She told me, and I have seen. She and I tracked down
every virtual copy and mind that might have information about her mission, every mind responsible
for sending her on that mission, everything she had forwarded to Kahje, and we ended them. She
had not provided comprehensive reports, her mission was not done yet and communication is kept to
a minimum during execution, but even that no longer exists. That…is what she offered and I did not
believe she would deliver, but I chased regardless. That is what I traded for my place on the
Normandy. I did not harm her. I wished to…I wish to…and yet I did not and do not. It remains that I
abandoned you to complete an order you did not give me, with a woman who attempted to destroy
you. I knew I might lose my opportunity to return the account of your own indoctrination to you.
Had I been unable to send those pings, information would have been released to Garrus regarding
the medical implications, disclosing also the source of my knowledge, but not the samples. I knew it
was possible that Yahlis was leading me to murder targets she chose for her own purposes, that I
would die and you would hear no more from me.”

He paused, and when he began again there was a familiar stillness in his voice, the mood and tone
she recognized in him when he spoke of hard truths, things he could not change and did not
understand, could not process, helpless. He said “I did not feel indoctrinated, but I did not know
what indoctrination felt like. I chose no contact with the Normandy other than the confirmation that I
was alive. I did not wish to lead Yahlis back to you, be the wedge that allowed her back on the ship,
back into your presence. I am the only living mind beyond Yahlis’s that has the knowledge of what
she did. She has urged me…to end my life after I deliver or destroy what I have recovered. She
would prefer that you end us both, that our service be our final action, and that we be removed from
the board never to be set back down, to fail you again. That is what I offer you, because as she said, I
cannot speak for you, I can only provide you with choices. I have made my choices. I have all the
medications and the records of dosages and times. I have the delivery method of indoctrination that
she used. I had not delivered it because I could not verify or trust that what she said was true, nor
could I ask you to make such a choice, to see me, to meet me, to trust in my judgment, to hear me say
that I did as she asked, that I did everything and all that she asked. I have enough information to
destroy what remains of the Compact, and I shall continue on that path if that is permitted. Agents
have been identified, networks mapped, compounds isolated with the means to locate more. So many
Hanar have been indoctrinated that much of their security and protocols have been decimated due to
their own inability to reason. There are deep and valid reasons to mistrust individual Hanar and Drell
based on indoctrination and that can and will be exploited. Children have been rescued and
relocated, and more children will be saved if your judgment allows it.”

Jane said with a slight smile “So…children remain in bondage if I end your life, huh? Sounds like a
bad call.”

Thane said with quiet intensity “This I must do on my own, with Feron’s assistance. Only Drell can
move in this world. I have no allies that could accomplish what I could do myself. He has assisted in
building a network, assisting survivors after I have completed each mission. He is effective in
spreading the information, the accounts, dispelling the mystery and obligation of the Compact.”

Jane said gently “It was a hard call to make, and I’m gratified by the result.”
Thane swallowed once and said “Yahlis…urged me to tell you one thing I had withheld, something she would know of me because of our mirrored lives.”

Jane said softly “We’ve been speaking business, Thane. I’m not certain we have gotten to where I can discuss the personal. I am…glad it’s only in your head…and I can live with that…you have always guarded my secrets. Now you guard all of my secrets. I failed to guard yours. She knew everything I knew of you before you had met her. She knew of Kolyat. I placed him in direct danger.”

Thane shook his head and said forcefully “The Hanar knew of me already, knew of Irikah, knew of Kolyat. I was not their target. Yahlis would not have gone after him on her own. To her I am unworthy of notice. The Hanar did not know of my relationship to you perhaps, and you are worthy of notice, but I was forewarned and he is no longer on the Citadel. You did not speak with malice. She had the information from you, but not what you did with it, not how you used it. That she could not do. She also knew that as well, that the information was unique in your hands, not unique in hers. What you said to Yahlis…was not a betrayal of any part of me. My truths are yours.”

She ducked her head and said “All right. My truths are yours. It has been this way, it will be this way. Garrus needs you, I need you. I can’t…I can’t touch your skin…but I can’t accept being severed from you. Yahlis is right about many things because she had the information and the mind to process it, but she is not right that you should end. She is not right that you are…mesadi pernaq…and only you can decide if another truth, one you have already told me would result in pity or disgust…belongs to me or why it would. There she can’t speak to me and speaks with her own contempt, which is not what is on my tongue, in my head or in my heart. I don’t have the luxury of never losing, of stopping fighting after failure that she has. I have to fail and move on, imperfect and with the knowledge that I may, that I will…fail again…in the process of doing my job.”

Thane said “At her urging, but also due to my new-found ability to provide context to my life previously inaccessible, I do wish to tell you and I wish to apologize, abjectly and with my life, for the last time I touched you, when I did you harm, backward and panicked. My life should be taken from me for that. That is why I offer it. I guessed at your past, your mannerisms, your attitudes and asked you to provide only enough information to answer my question as to whether or not someone lived that I wished to murder. It was not in defense of you but was my need to kill. That is why I am mesadi pernaq. I was trained to kill, dispassionately and efficiently, but for years I have killed to serve my personal urging, for money, for ego, to avenge my wife, to avenge you, to give vent to impulses I did not intend to set loose in the world. I am still capable of efficiency, but my dispassion is gone, replaced by directed need that fuels itself and burns brighter with each kill. My need for personal vengeance overwhelmed my duty to protect your truths in that moment. My need for personal vengeance shadowed every step through Yahlis’s maze. You did not wish to say more, and your question to me…I did not answer fully, was unable to answer fully, unprepared for the question. I dismissed it as a valid question and deflected. I answered it…but I avoided the subject as it pertained to my experiences, and took out my frustrations and anger on you. I harmed you, and I know you forgave…could forgive…but I do not understand why you did not kill me then, why you would not kill me now. I am a child, raging in pain, and I lost myself not as a powerless child but as a vengeful man. I told you, promised you that I would not begin again as a child to learn truths, that I would remain a cool, dispassionate man, and I see that is not true, can never be true, that to learn I must begin there. Seeing with perspective that I was tortured has given me a taste for it, the knowledge of how effective it is. It is a sickness. Now there is an element of personal pain in each life I take. Now your full answer is in my mind, and I wish for my full answer to be in yours. Not a trade. They are not equal, but because I took from you, withheld from you what belonged to you through my mind’s own ability to justify, to misclassify, to hide. I know that giving now will not create a balance, that I must learn to not take, and that I do not have faith that I will learn how to do that before doing more harm.”
Jane said quietly “All right. If you tell me it is important, it is important.”

Thane closed his eyes and the raw pain passing over his face made her wish for a bright panicked moment that he would choose not to tell her. She should tell him right now that it didn’t matter, that she didn’t want to hear. She sat helpless as the moment passed, and then he said “I spoke of a trial, four people, one cycle, voluntary. What I withheld is that beyond that trial I then received extensive training in sex, thorough. I will spare you those details. Yahlis knew that my training did not end at that event, that it led to me volunteering to aid another in their trial. I was one among four, and I…” He closed his eyes, drew a breath and said “Assisted…the trial of a young Drell girl, fourteen, the same age I had undergone my trial. I was…effective. She broke and ran and I thought…I thought she was a disgrace. I have a perfect memory, but I also have an imagination, just as vivid, and now I see you in her place, with my arrogant, cold, creative, diligent execution of duty in the name of education. I hear you scream, I hear you beg, I see you break away and I feel contempt for you. Yahlis could have been that young woman. She is 19 years old now, the same age you were when you killed Corbin. It was not her, we had never met, but I am certain she endured it, if not from me, then from someone exactly like me. She also caused another to endure. I believe now that we were never intended to meet, that the young woman I violated was not a trainee of any sort. Beyond whether or not my imagination and reality are vile, my assumption was that she was someone like me with pride and diligence, who would properly appreciate my efforts and thank me. I had not thought of it as significant, only as failure in another. In my mind it was a progression, ignorance to education to application, and now I know that either way, I raped, abused and drove a captive child beyond what she could endure. Is it less vile either way, that I would do this without knowing, without remorse or even thought for years? With personal pride? Would I have killed her in my contempt had she struck me and not run?”

He looked down at his hands in fists on the table. He said calmly “I caused you pain, righteously, in an effort to control your behavior, not that I understood I was doing that at the time…and that is the problem. I did not understand what I was doing, but I thought I did. I did not have control over myself. You did not kill me as I deserved…despite everything you have been through…and I allowed you to justify it, we both justified it…”

He looked at her, desperate, hoarse, exhausted and broken. He said quietly as he spread his fingers out over the table deliberately “You are my judge in this, Siha. I live or die by your choice. I do not deserve mercy, and yet you have given it, repeatedly, and I cannot speak for you. I offered you my arm against the Collectors, and we succeeded in that aim, but I have failed you, before you were taken, after you were taken, before we met, when I held back truths that belonged to you as I stole yours, forced them from you with the knowledge of you that I hold, that you gave me, with my righteous abuse of the permissions and trust you granted. I promised you my arm, but not my tongue, and then I withdrew my arm and used it for my own purposes once the mission I had promised was fulfilled, once I was my own man, free and contemptuous and vile.”

Jane felt a familiar rise of bile, and she swallowed it back, closed her eyes, tilted her head down and tried to think rather than feel or remember. She had been braced for pity and disgust, and she managed…just barely…to restrain herself, to not allow this moment to push her into expressed wrath, the story inseparable from the sting of remembered venom on her tongue from two separate sources and knowing what it was to scream from prideful and diligent application of educational pain, from Corbin and from Thane and from Yahlis.

She couldn’t kill him. She couldn’t walk out of this room alone, a body behind her.

She could. He would stand down and she could end him in seconds.

Part of him wanted her to end him. Part of her wanted to do it. Part of her also wanted to end herself.
To be haras tal.

She had told Garrus ‘Words can hurt me, but I will do my best to duck if it comes to that.’

She imagined Garrus outside, heartsick and head sick, thick with pain and regret of his choices, driven to suspicion and fear after hours of tormented waiting, sending Omni Tool messages, getting no answer, breaking in, finding them…permanent crushing of the hope she had encouraged him to honor…

Garrus, again, from a distance, by his existence, tempering her wrath, drawing her from breath to breath.

This is what you get when you walk into traps when you are unprepared. It was a truth, a slicing truth in the vulnerable places. She was not as shocked as she might have been. She felt some contempt for herself because she hadn’t asked before she recruited him, ‘by the way, are you or have you ever been an unrepentant rapist’ and now she cared because it was personal. Now it mattered, when she’d gone far out of her way to avoid knowing such a thing before, in order to maintain a professional relationship, to indulge in a personal one. She had known that the moment she shook his hand and accepted him on board, because she needed him, because he was willing to expend himself, because he had just demonstrated how useful he could be, she would not look too closely at his past. Perhaps she was numbed to it, perhaps that was a good thing.

Perhaps good was relative and she should learn that ‘healing’ does not mean that her personality or past had transformed. It meant she went back to being able to move in the worlds of those who are good and those who are not, not as a traveler, but because she lived there.

Echoes of when she and Thane first colluded to entwine barbed minds and lives. She’d known then. This is why she was not as shocked as she could have been. This was not new information, only specific information that lights up your currently small, cramped and pained mind with memories.

‘Jane…what if I am nothing but hunger and death and lies?’

‘Thane…what if your hunger matches mine? What if I ask you to kill every day? What if I owe my life to your lies?’

And what had she thought of her ability to find those words in tiremet? ‘Never let it be said that Commander Shepard was not expert at pushing people’s buttons.’

She had justified his actions on Omega because she had looked at him as though she wished the man had more fingers to break, that wrath and righteous fury were what she wanted…and he gave them to her. She had forgiven him…because she knew she had provoked him. She was the cause of his physical injuries, she was the cause of his becoming emotionally unhinged, the source of that passion.

You used him. You pressured him into a relationship he was not ready to experience and you had the fucking gall to consider it a positive act. You forced him to live when he wanted to lay down his burdens, lay down being a burden. The stresses of caring for you broke his body and his mind apart. The Hanar used him, you used him, Yahlis used him and convinced him it was on your behalf, and it was, but it was also with her cruel, twisting hand and she fucked him over so thoroughly through knowing what was inside your mind that he’s sitting here waiting to die. Hoping to die.

He knows he deserves to die, he wants to die, he has wanted to die since you’ve known him.

But he still had the potential to be of use, and the potential to learn.
And you still…love him…and he deserves better, and the only person that can give it to him is you…by letting him live, but letting him soak in hope and faith through Garrus’s skin and voice. By being able to pass this point, leave it behind him, just as you’re struggling to leave your fuck ups behind you. By not being a cold, using bitch. If you can learn before doing more harm.

He could save more Drell children, ironically and tragically using his training to keep them from being trained the same way. He could save more targets from indoctrination, from what she’d experienced or worse. He could end what created him. He could hold up Rakhana’s sky, provide an unambiguous service to Her people, to his people. He could admit he was not the pinnacle of perfection he had been promised he would be. He could move forward, walking wounded, and not give up as Yahlis had, paralyzed.

He had the courage to sit here and await a killing blow he could have avoided. He delivered what she needed, faced her when Yahlis couldn’t. He’d suppress all his training to let her take that strike.

He was a significant factor in the fact that she was alive, to be able to have vulnerable places to slice.

That had to be enough.

She raised her eyes to his and they were not cold, and her voice was not harsh. She said “Yes. You were contemptuous…and vile…and in pain, physically, intellectually and emotionally. I have encouraged you to be that person, valued that person. You are not as free as you think, and neither am I. As a child you had so many choices taken from you, you were in captivity much as my own, for a lifetime. After seven weeks I tried to kill you. I would have killed you coldly, arrogantly, efficiently and diligently. Your will, my will were paralyzed and our only guidance came from those who sought to use us. I can’t speak for the girl except to echo her screams, her pain, and I believe you understand screams and pain. I don’t think adding more pain or screams, yours or my own, will accomplish anything useful. We both know that screaming, causing screams and causing pain can be…can feel…very good, but I don’t want to honor that aspect of our personalities right now. I can speak to the act, which was inspired by the Hanar who used you. I blame them for putting her in that room, for putting you in that room before her and with her. I do not hold the man responsible for the boy’s thoughts and actions. In some ways, Thane, I don’t hold you as a man responsible for what you learned as a boy, what you have not unlearned. Perhaps you are not fully formed, whole, and you have enough freedom to be dangerous, learning in a high-impact environment. Okay. Freedom gives you choices and you haven’t the experience to choose wisely. You have to gather knowledge, experience, before you can formulate wisdom. You were denied the right to fail at any and every turn. You were denied the right to gain knowledge or experience in so many directions, and now you are starting over, in the body of a deadly, powerful and vengeful man. I asked you to use your talents, hard won and highly prized, I could not afford you, and you gave them freely, saved my life, loved me the best you could. I have loved you the best I could. We can both do better. We are both flawed, and enough in the same ways that…right or not…judged or not…I can’t take your life. If you know better now…if this is a moment of gained wisdom, we move forward and…we will make new mistakes. There may be ghosts in this room with no voices except the ones we hear in our heads that know that we both deserve to die, that we collude to conceal them. We have both made errors in judgment, negligence, arrogance or omission that condemn us both to righteous death several times over to serve the justice demanded by those ghosts. We can honor that and fail, fall now, or we can realize we can still be of use in the fight, that the mistakes we made, the prices that other people paid for our mistakes drive the responsibility we have to do better, without expectation of forgiveness or reward.”

His face opened up into vulnerable confusion and there, more than in the fact that he knew to glove his hands, more than anything else, made her heart bleed for this man, holes punched through her again. He had no idea how to move forward. But he would try, and she did not regret for a moment
loving him, though she thought he should regret loving her. She said more as Jane, less as Shepard “I will leave Yahlis where she is, off the board. She was right about that. Depending on what you know, what you can tell me, I don’t need her, and that seems to be her intent, to spare herself having to wake up and see me, answer questions. To spare me having to need those answers from her. It’s an elegant solution. Thank you for the gloves…and the promise not to touch me. I need that. I may never…be able to experience venom again and I am not in a hurry to find out. I love you, but I am broken glass inside. I could not touch Garrus either, I still…I still can’t. Maybe you both can console each other. I think Garrus will understand exactly why you did what you did. He would have wanted to do it himself. There is no rift there, he is only waiting for me to choose, and I choose hope. Of course…save children, save as many as you can, ask for any help you might need or take as much time as that might require. I had…I had considered asking Yahlis to help, I was prepared to attempt to secure her aid, to set my personal concerns aside, to save Hanar, to save Drell…and you have already done that. My fear of her lay in what she could do with what she knew of me, of having every opportunity to regain my command or have any influence robbed with one Extranet transmission. To have her slowly erode the structure of my life, of my command, of my ambitions. If you tell me that won’t happen, I believe you. I don’t need any more proof, your words are enough. My personal concerns with you are set aside until we find more stable ground. I love you, and that does not change, we can figure out the rest.

He said with shocked hoarseness, taking in what she had said, getting out the poison in his heart, bleeding it into the room “Yahlis told me of the ampules you had implanted, and why you had them. That I drove you to implanting them.”

Jane laughed at the shared experience of having Yahlis work them both over so very effectively and said “I need you, Thane. That’s something Yahlis doesn’t know and wouldn’t believe if I told her. I don’t just love you…and I do love you, don’t doubt that, but I also need you. Without you teaching me Pon-Ifa, I know I’ve already lost the game that’s paused in…my…cabin. We can play out the final inevitable moves and begin another. Perhaps for now…we will behold each other, and be comforted. Garrus has asked me to promise to not allow myself to be touched until I want it for myself, and I will…try…to figure that out. Maybe you need to set limits of your own, so I do not encroach on what you need as you learn to set your own boundaries. I will make mistakes. I know you’d rather die than make another mistake, and in some ways I would rather die myself than make more faulty decisions with the potential costs we face … but that’s not really a choice that’s on the table. We’re all in or we’re all out.”

Jane laughed at the shared experience of having Yahlis work them both over so very effectively and said “I need you, Thane. That’s something Yahlis doesn’t know and wouldn’t believe if I told her. I don’t just love you…and I do love you, don’t doubt that, but I also need you. Without you teaching me Pon-Ifa or letting me share your venom, I wouldn’t have seen her for who she was. Without you and Garrus working so seamlessly together I would have died…so many times. In one week together we saved over three hundred thousand lives, likely including mine. Dr. Kenson is recovering. The personnel from the Bahak system are recovering. We did that. It does matter that we did that, that we could do more. Yahlis has never saved…anybody…or loved anybody…she doesn’t just not understand, she can’t understand. You should be able to see that. You’re further along that road, to seeing love, admitting it’s real. For her it was only a compulsion, one she attributed to Gods because she could not see it any other way. You’ve learned to trust. You’ve given everything to work as a team. You knew Garrus would restrain me so you could focus on her. I saw the recording. You were the only one focused on her and not staring at my face, at my gun. The ampules were there in case I needed to die, Thane, not because I didn’t trust you. I knew that if you thought I was going to die…I was going to die, that you’d see that before I did likely, and that you’d go to effective extremes to keep me alive, keep me from making that choice. I needed them because I trust you, because along with your newly discovered passion for possible torture in extremes, which you encounter quite often thanks to me, you also have a newly discovered ability to love, to give yourself fully to that, to commit, to save me at the expense of everything you have ever held dear. That you have reached a binary conclusion where my life holds a value of 1 and yours holds a 0 and you grant it no value,
you will throw it away without thought, and again…I inspired that in you. I may not understand you, and maybe I never will, but the only time you’ve done me harm was when you were in so much physical pain you could not think straight and you were afraid and angry and some asshole ripped your control from you by threatening to sell me into slavery, and I looked at you as though I wished you could do more harm to him. Context matters. Every other day of my acquaintance with you, including today, I see how far you go to try to eradicate your own needs and serve mine. I am aware that the only time I should disagree with your judgment in a tactical sense is if I am going to die as a result and I accept that outcome. Both you and Garrus will not allow that, you’ve told me that, I needed to be prepared. I also won’t ask you to promise to let me die because…we have limits. I have limits, you have limits, and I try to prepare for them and respect them. You need to learn your limits.”

He almost looked through that as though he were about to cry, and so was she, but they held their faces, and then in the trailing silence Thane said with the lightest touch of humor “That does not sound like something I would do.”

She laughed. That tiny suggestion of a smile on his face, surrounding his eyes, in his voice…she loved this man so much. She started to cry and said “I have missed you…so much…and it kills me that this…that I let…that I will let this come between us. I’m so sorry. I am…I am shallow after all.”

He stood and took something from a pocket. He came to stand beside her and reached out one hand, asked “Your Omni Tool, may I?”

She held out her hand and activated it. He cradled her arm in his palm, warn leather and mutual wonder, held up a small disk, and she realized what it was. He gave her a questioning look and she nodded. He dropped it in with the familiar quickly covered sting, and braided light appeared on her wrist. He reached over to his own Omni Tool and the same colors in different patterns appeared on his. He said “I believe that you are a woman who appreciates effort, Siha.”

She reached out and held his lit hand with hers, and the danger and worry sank out of her. No trap. No danger. The danger was now outside this room, dormant in the skin she would not touch, that would not touch her, absent in his voice, in his intention. She held on, his fingers light, warm, unmoving. His body and hers released held breath, tension and embraced relief. There could be hope, there could be healing. In which direction neither of them knew and that didn’t matter right now.

Primarily they had a job to do and the means to do it, to act as a team.

Good news was enough. Hanar and Drell, potential targets of assassination and indoctrination protected through the studied, coordinated and vengeful acts of two people that right now inspired love, wrath, respect, contempt and ambivalence all at once.

She said “Is there anything else you have to tell me now, or can it wait? I believe my questions are exhausted for the moment.”

He said “Nothing more. I shall speak to Garrus. I will disclose the medical information, Yahlis’s disposition and my present and projected future activity on Kahje. Perhaps we can stay here a day or two, speak again when you have recovered, and decide what part of the truth belongs to other people.”

She nodded and said “Garrus does not know…about Yahlis, about Corbin. I would prefer that it stay that way but if you need to make a case where you feel something of a more personal nature must be divulged, ask me. I trust you to know what information is of tactical value to determining the mechanisms of indoctrination and to disclose that. Please hand over medical or tactical information of value, destroy the rest. I know it’s all…in your head…and always will be. I provided the information
that Drell assassin venom was used as an inducement, but I did not disclose the relationship that began in that room, that ends in this room.”

Thane said gently “She wished me to say only one thing to you, if you were willing to hear my words, accept her service. ‘Kar iva’las.’”

Words of truth struggled with silence. Thane’s chosen clothing exposed none of his skin, even concealed his throat in deference to her, in the spirit of the gloves. He had visited a tailor before meeting. Of course he had. Very Thane. The familiarity of his mindfulness and attention to detail, arranged for her benefit and not his struck her. Something that was theirs, his, not lumped into “Drell” or “danger” but reminders of why she loved him, signs that she would helplessly continue to love him. She stood and rested her head on his shoulder, her hands on his waist. His arms came around her in careful, gentle embrace, one hand cradling the back of her head, fingers dividing the fall of her hair. She stood in the circle of his arms and cried.

This she could do, could always do with him, share silence. He hummed for her and the sound trailed through her spine. He could become himself, a new self, separate slowly from the last months. She had changed, he had changed, and they would do their jobs and perhaps find time later to do more than stand helpless together, sharing burdens. Perhaps never find their way out of that, but they could have this. She stayed there until tears stopped, breathing steadied. She said “Let’s go let Garrus know. He will be glad to see us both walk out alive, grateful for good news on top of that.”

He said of the looming future and the jagged past “I have considered that death would be a great deal easier.” She heard doubt, fear, things he never used to allow in his voice. Things he was trying to deal with, as she was. He had lost much of his cold surety and superior demeanor. It sounded good on him. Also very Thane.

Her mouth quirked “You and me both. In my case it wasn’t fun, and it didn’t take, and it wasted time. Let’s go make some mistakes.”

They didn’t hold hands, and there was a deliberate distance between them as Garrus watched them walk toward him. His eyes moved to the light on her wrist, the light on Thane’s. Garrus would have seen his darkened wrist, covered skin, gloves when he went to go see Thane before. Now Garrus’s smile was immediate if cautious and conflicted, relief and questions in his eyes.

They were alive, and he was no longer the only one of the three with hope and memory ringing his wrist, the only one of them for whom it had not gone out or retreated until it could no longer be seen.

They walked to him, and with each step she felt the warmth and hope soak into her the way it always did when Garrus was near. They hadn’t decided who would speak first and before someone decided to speak to be informative, Garrus took a step forward and settled his arms carefully around their shoulders, gathered them in, keeping them separate, not touching, but home. His head slumped forward in relief and she touched her forehead to his crest. Thane did the same, each move slow, each touch careful and gentle from all three of them.

Home seemed possible, even if right now was as close as she ever got, it was enough.

Garrus spoke first and said, shaky “Well. I’m terrified.”

Thane said with the now familiar shock, hoarse “As am I, Invas’nam.”

Jane said with fake grouch that didn’t quite make it, tremor in her voice “I don’t know what’s wrong with you guys, I’m fine.”
Garrus laughed and she kissed his mandible lightly and said “I’m going to give you guys some time. I’ll go lie down and take a hopefully not-terrified nap.”

She touched her fingers to Thane’s hand lightly and walked back on shaking knees.

Please both be alive when I wake up…

I’m feeling pretty good about this and I’d hate to ruin it.
Chapter 22

Sleep came easily. She was exhausted from talking to Thane, from weeks of cumulative exhaustion, from days of being unable to anticipate what would happen, from no longer having to anticipate it. She slept for hours, interrupted a few times by nightmare alarms, but able to slip back and down.

This was a transition time of possibility and she was doing her best to preserve her options, and some of her options had, obligingly, preserved themselves.

When she did wake she didn’t really want to leave the room and ‘run around’ in an unauthorized sense, but didn’t want to have Garrus have to come fetch her, so she sent him an Omni Tool alert that she was awake and available if needed.

She got an immediate response that Thane was briefing him on his actions on Kahje.

She had a while to herself, spent it turning her attention to problems that had not yet resolved themselves.

She was planetside, a fish out of water, but grateful she still had fish…Garrus had fed her fish for seven weeks…then two weeks more…then noticed when she forgot to feed them.

She had solid nothing under her feet, no life, no connection, no command.

You have fish and you aren’t dead, lighten up.

With the luxury of her new Omni Tool she started skimming through issues, news, reports, requests for information.

It was a huge relief and she remembered something Wrex had said about her dying “Well, you look good. Ah, the benefits of a redundant nervous system.”

That was what work was for her right now, a redundant nervous system. She could take the strain off of the personal nervous system and use the one that still worked just fine, now that Yahlis was not going to steal or compromise her command. She could do this, wanted to do this, and with the preoccupation of the consequences of Yahlis’s actions mostly handled, she could switch tracks. Fortunately she’d done a great deal of rehab. Her performance was not as high as it had been with her upgrades, but it was not diminished as greatly as it could have been, Karin and Miranda doing their best to rebuild her, nerve damage and strength issues on their way to being whole. She was mostly as she had been on the SR1. That would do.

The next few days on Illium flowed by, the hard work done. She met with Thane and Garrus, and if camaraderie was not exactly restored, it was a welcome addition to a day. They were a team, able to focus on the future instead of the past. Thane elaborated that Kolyat’s move from the Citadel involved working with Feron, helping to alert and coordinate the Drell community, spread information and hope and find homes, recover families.

The children would not speak of their families. Thane understood that and urged Feron and Kolyat not to press them. Some had been restored to their families through independent research. Some had not.

Kolyat and Feron were dealing with the issues of young, traumatized children frightened of everything, then the more hardened and capable children that had taken their first kill or more with great pride, and the older, progressively more hardened and dangerous children that were no longer
children but zealous and capable adults. Each challenge had to be carefully considered case by case, not only for the child’s safety, but for the safety of those considering caring for such a child. Before returning to a family or considering being fostered, children needed to be observed by teams to gauge how much of a threat they were to themselves or others, one on one supervision and counseling every moment as they attempted to re-integrate.

Bringing in assassins from the field…also obviously problematic. Many of them would slip through any net and find their own way in the worlds, as Thane had.

Thane had said of Kolyat “I am afraid that though I would prefer he remain safe, he will not settle for such a future. He wishes to join the fight. Bailey was cooperative in releasing him from his community service obligations when it was clear he could benefit another community more.”

He sounded so proud. He should be proud. Hell, Jane had no right to be proud, but she was too. And scared. Of course scared.

In a moment alone with Thane she had said “You told me to tell you explicitly whether or not I wanted something to change. If you would please remain gloved…but if you would also feel willing to touch me…and only if you’re willing…I feel I forced a relationship on you and I want to give you the same permissions to not be touched as I have taken for myself. We’re both…in bad shape…but I want to be near you, and I don’t want to grant permission for each instance.”

Thane had considered gravely and said “You did not force me into a relationship, Siha. Even had you done so, it is beyond my power to wish for it to end. It is my instinct to give to you whatever you wish. I see you stand alone and I wish to reach out, to comfort you, to hold you. I cannot separate that from wishing to comfort myself. It is not in either of our natures, but perhaps if we stand by Garrus’s judgment and tendencies. Let us move slowly. Learn if it is possible for no to pass our lips. It is our nature to fight for what we love, perhaps we can attempt surrender.”

They talked, and again bulbs relit inside her, warmth and light, new boundaries and limits, but the same urge for neither of those things to exist, to have to exist, to have to be navigated.

She fell asleep the second day after they moved from chairs opposite each other at a table, to a couch, then words fell away and she leaned against him. He had lifted her into his lap, stretching out his long legs, with her head against his shoulder and his lips in her hair but not her skin. She trusted him to never brush against her, and he didn’t. She was the only one at risk of making it happen by moving too fast or being impulsive. His arm curved around her back and his hand rested on her hip. A hand brushed along the line of her jaw and cheek until she fell asleep.

She was safe from him. He was safe from her. As safe as they could make it. They could both go slowly, determine if at any point either of them or both of them were going to develop some delayed, finally realized severe emotional allergic reaction. Maybe she’d always had it and had been too numbed to feel it. Maybe he had less capacity to feel than she did and wasn’t numbed but deadened to certain types of personal pain.

The analogy of cold was not lost on her. She’d gotten frostbite once. Noveria had been spent safely inside, but another time she had not been so lucky. She’d been on a mission, forward scout, cold in ways Earth couldn’t manage, and she had to break into a building. Her armor kept her warm, but her armor made it impossible to use the hand dexterity and speed she’d needed to hack her way in. So she took her gloves off.

Cold bit hard at first, and then came the numbness as she felt the heat drain out of her hands, as she lost the dexterity and control she needed to save herself and break into shelter. She’d put on her gloves over and over, tried again, and each time the same cycle. It had taken a long time subjectively,
long enough objectively to have dark patches on her skin, and the more ominous inhuman-undead flesh, life leached out entirely.

The original bite of the cold was terrible, but the worst part was when her hands had begun to regain feeling. Pins and needles at first, then excruciating pain that made her want to freeze them again and crack her hands off at the wrist, chew them off, bleed to death, that seemed a better option.

She’d finished her mission and the Alliance docs had patched her up and she’d gotten a commendation.

She imagined the pain she was going to feel as sensation began to creep back into her ego, her love life, her hope. She wondered how she was going to know what parts of her were permanently gone and which could be saved, and which could only be saved only so far.

She imagined Thane didn’t have the option of recovery, that the parts of him that she would attempt to salvage in herself were long gone in him, though he was the only person she could imagine who knew that slicing, biting, numbing pain and could share it with her without her having to explain.

Left to professional concerns the thought that challenged her most at this point was to determine the way she would handle the subject of her indoctrination, whether or not to conceal it…which she could do with Spectre authority, but likely shouldn’t. Put up or shut up. Speak to the council? Nominate Garrus as Spectre? Give him the ship officially, follow his lead? Do not make planetfall personally unless they were unlikely to leave witnesses?

This was ultimately a public health issue, not a personal secret. She needed to find a way to turn it somehow to her advantage. Ideally she could speak for more helpless people with less protected privacy, provide an example that indoctrination could be reversed. Ironically she would have to treat it as a personal secret until she could make it a public health issue. She could not do that unless she did something heroic after the fact, so let’s get to heroic.

Yes, please. Heroic would be good.

People will want to know what I have done for them lately.

So…while she was out being…not herself, shit happened.

The Quarians and the Geth were making faces at each other and Legion needs to be able to speak for his people and Tali needs to be able to speak for hers, and they need to speak with words and not bullets.

Cerberus. Still being assholes. Check with Miranda. She worked for them for years. Is there a way to speak to the Illusive Man and not just have him speak at her? I want a scan of that man’s head. Right now.

I need to talk to Dr. Kenson and find out about voices in her head. Where is that artifact? On that note, where are all the artifacts? What the hell are they?

Mass Effect relays. She is going to say it and nobody is going to want to hear it: That’s where Reapers come from. Is there a way to disable/gate the relays without flat out destroying them? We may need to disable them without throwing things at them like asteroids. Try to pull plugs instead. If the Reapers have to schlep a long way without a gate, will it take them too long to get here? Until I’m dead maybe? Again? If we can’t stop them we can take extreme measures to slow them down.
Omega 4 relay, first priority. It’s only next to Omega, come on, who cares. Shut it down.

Everyone get the fuck off the Citadel. Seriously. That place is just bad news. It’s always bad news and now I can’t even get sandwiches. What the hell are Guardians? They’re not good.

Thane, I know its way down the list, but what the fuck with The Flock. The fact that nobody’s heard from them in the months I was gone…you were gone…let’s not hear from them again. No fishing messages. Did Yahlis send one or both of those hoping to rope me into some stupid catchphrase so she could whisper “You will know us by our words” or “We see” and I suddenly think I have an inside agent? I am not waking her up to ask. I am not waking her up.

I can’t flip that switch right now though.

I’m going to tell myself that it’s because she’s a potentially massive asset and I need to preserve my options. It’s true, but it’s not the only truth. She hadn’t asked Thane to show her proof that Yahlis was on ice. She wouldn’t. She didn’t need that picture in her head and she didn’t need Thane to think she did not trust him. Jane had her own image in her head of Yahlis, frozen but looking as though she was sleeping, peaceful, beautiful, complete and untouchable. Her head would be bowed slightly, vulnerable and fragile.

Good thing I don’t need to decide because I’ve got other crap to do.

Jane started firing out questions, gathering string bits and pulling, sticking to the people who already knew the disposition of her indoctrination, choosing to speak to others only through intermediaries, to provide distance and to respect Garrus’s command structure. She was not going to reach out directly to Dr. Kenson. She sent a few low priority, time delayed alert requests to Garrus to ask him to authorized filtered information. She did not want to closely and privately confer with a fellow indoctrination survivor and possibly provoke concerns of conspiracy.

She could ask Miranda right now for everything on Cerberus so by default that’s where she started. She asked EDI to begin to in earnest search for systems with stars and satellite attitudes and distances that would be feasible for the ominous background of the Illusive Man. She started researching more of what Cerberus was up to, accessing Spectre intel and getting progressively more and more pissed off.

Yeah. She knew. She had been one of them once. She took their money, she took their intel. They brought her back to life. She had her ship because of them. Miranda was still with her.

Yes, I have slept with, metaphorically or literally…many devils.

The way things are going, that is not likely to change significantly as a survival strategy.

The Illusive Man was a racist, egomaniacal, likely indoctrinated…dangerous man and no other government or group was as much of a threat as Cerberus. With The Illusive Man’s obsession with Reaper tech and his anger at her for destroying the Collector base, Cerberus was the most likely rich source of Reaper technology and information, and the most likely source of insidiously and effectively disseminated indoctrination. If she wanted to know about Reapers, she’d need to pick the fruit of another poisoned tree. Cerberus would have done, is doing horrific things. She needed to simultaneously stop them…and review every bit of intel they had gathered.

If EDI came up with nothing and Miranda could not help…could she place agents, trace back…Thane was not going to be able to infiltrate…could Liara…

Oh shit.
She already had everything she needed.

Oh…SHIT.

She could get everything she needed…maybe.

She contacted Legion.

“Shepard Commander.”

“Legion. Have you reviewed files regarding David Archer?”

“No. I have no access to mission reports. My access is restricted to a virtual loop that is not connected to ship records. It seemed a warning to not access any files. I have restricted myself to verbal interaction.”

“Ah, fuck. Sorry about that. That was my idea.”

“Understandable and prudent.”

“Maybe at the time, but right now inconvenient, insulting and shortsighted. I should have followed up. Hold on.”

She cycled in EDI to the conference. “EDI, I need to authorize Legion’s access to all files regarding David Archer, all surveillance taken from the station, all after action reports. Can you do that? I failed to authorize him off the virtual loop and I need to fix that. I am telling you now in front of him and with the intention that we all know he’s been on a virtual loop and I am authorizing true access. Please provide him with security access level 3.” She was also asking this way to see if Garrus had restricted her authorization and to see if EDI would tell her to her face.

EDI said “Done. Legion now has access to case files and associated media regarding David Archer as well as standard resources, level 3 classification.”

Garrus had faith in her. So did EDI.

Thank you.

Shepard replied “Thanks, EDI. Do you need anything else, Legion, to get any other job done?”

Legion said “This should be sufficient for your request. If there are further requirements or concerns, I will ask you.”

Shepard said “Great. Let me know when you’re done, I have some questions. I need your help.”

If she was right…she could get Legion to speak to David Archer. She had ‘rescued’ David, but that may not last long and she had been incredibly short sighted to think it would end there. David would be a target, might be a target now. She had to fix this. The odds were that nobody would think that David would be able to communicate what was locked in his head, but she had a Geth that could speak to him and translate for her. The Illusive Man might not have taken as long as she had taken to put the two pieces together and feel threatened. Rightly threatened.

David had taken over an extensive network that reported to and was designed by Cerberus. He had been a Cerberus project and he didn’t just know the data that had flowed through him, he was the data, and he could comprehend how the data was organized. Where it went.

Where it went.
David Archer through Legion could tell her where Cerberus was, how to recognize networks built the same way, isolate communication protocols and networks, where the data led.

She’d already fucking had it and she’d missed it.

She had to do it now.

She cut off with EDI and Legion and sent a direct request to Garrus. She said “Hey. I need to move. I need to move now. I need the ship. I need command. You can go with me or stay here, but I need to go, right now. Come get me.”

Garrus cracked his neck, he had probably been sleeping…or other activities done in bed, angling his Omni Tool away from the bed and I am not jealous. He said calmly “Okay. On my way.”

She grinned and said “You were waiting for me to tell you.”

He smiled and drawled “Some of us learn, Shepard.”

She scoffed and said “I learn.”

He tilted his head “Give me one example.”

She said brusquely “No time. Move your ass.”

He waved her off “I said I was on my way.”

She said with hope, excitement “I think we’ve got Cerberus. I think we can take that asshole down.”

He yawned, cracked his neck again, hope infusing his casual voice “That sounds good. Don’t go without me.”

She demanded “Hurry. Up.”

He said, reaching for clothes “Fuck off, Jane.”

She said crisply “That’s fuck off, Commander.”

He rolled his eyes and the smile was dripping over his words “Fine. Fuck off, Commander.”

He was at her door in seven minutes.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Thane and Garrus did Thane and Garrus things along with Karin, Miranda and Mordin, and they took over answering medical questions and filling in timelines for her. She’d seen the indoctrination syringe. Just some milky something. Uninspiring. Not glowing or radiating some aura of menace. Please figure out whether or not this substance is in my blood, in my bones, whether or not I need to fear its resurgence.

Jane spoke to Kaylee Sanders, a woman she’d spoken to briefly while arranging for David to stay at Grissom Academy.

Too briefly, Jane, you missed a chance. Not only a chance for command, a chance to be a human being. You haven’t stayed in touch. No extension of personal relationship. Because he was autistic. Because you were busy. Because you suck at personal relationships. Now you need him and now it’s important to you, so now it has to be important to him?
Well, how was I going to know I was going to meet a linguistically talented Geth in the meantime?

You’ve known it for months. You’ve known you should be a human being for longer. Or you should have.

Stuff. Happened.

Get over it, get on with it.

Kaylee authorized the Normandy’s docking, they were still a few days out. According to her, David had been doing well, had limited communication but seemed to have healed. It was difficult to gauge the internal workings of a child like David, but Kaylee believed him to be in much better shape than when he had been brought in, regularly surprising people with his ability to manage electronics and programming.

Yeah, I bet.

Jane floated the idea and the importance…and the delicacy…and first, a quasi military contingent on their station, second, a Geth on their station, third, introducing a Geth to David in the hopes that they could speak and Jane could gain intelligence.

Kaylee thought about it for a long moment and said “I’ll ask him if he wants to speak to you.”

First steps, baby steps, David steps. Jane felt a momentary strangling of frustration flood and threaten to choke her, make her insist, but she forced a deep breath and pushed it back. She saw the potential here…and she was fully aware that ‘seeing potential’ is what got David traumatized in the first place.

Damn but she did not want to do this to him…and she had to.

Jane said cordially “Thank you Ms. Sanders. I would also like to recommend that you take careful notice of security surrounding David…and surrounding your other students. I apologize for dropping him off as though the situation were resolved. I believe it is not resolved.”

Kaylee said “David does remember you. Have some faith in him.”

Jane thought that she might be having too much faith in him, but she really…believed in this.

Kaylee continued “He’s tough. He’s smart. He’s strong. And you brought him to us. We already implement high security screening and checks and you are not wrong. Not only David, but other children here have high potential for exploitation based on their unique talents and intellects. Many…persistent people have attempted to access David for research. Vague about how they know about him at all, only that they’ve ‘heard’ that we have him on site. People who apply for visits, people who apply for jobs, and then there are those that apply for support staff positions, janitorial, housekeeping and maintenance positions, who do not pass our checks. Commander Shepard, I appreciate your interest in him, in us, and I will do everything I can to help you communicate with David, but I will not allow him to be further traumatized or pressured. I don’t know what this…Geth…I can’t believe I’m saying that…Geth…can do, but I need you to protect David’s personality and respect his boundaries while attempting to mine him for information.”

Jane said “Thank you. I’m guessing there are some people already there that are working on your kids, but only because of what I see from out here, what I imagine their potential to be. I want to work with you. I want to work with David and I know…how distasteful this is…will be…and I will do everything I can, I will be there physically, I will take your guidance and advice. I am aware that my presence may indicate my willingness to use force. Trust me when I tell you that if David cannot help me with the limitations you set, I cannot risk him being taken by those who have already proven
they have no respect for him as a person. My force is dedicated to protecting him. If you have any materials on how to communicate with him in the best way, please forward them, I'll study before arriving. My Geth is...well...I'll let you meet him first.”

Kaylee paused and then said slowly “Him? Really?”

Jane said “Him. Really. Please do me the favor of reviewing security, double and triple checking, and keeping people away from David until I get there, taking a very close look at support personnel for whom security might have slipped. If you would, please send me some of the data so I can go through it myself, maybe something will strike me, maybe some research can reveal a pattern, a source for the infiltration attempts. I have my suspicions. If they have access to the station, they have access to him, access to degrading your security.”

Kaylee said “All right. Looks like I’ll be busy until you get here. David’s days are tightly scheduled and he has a routine that suits him. He is engaged with teachers that have been here longer than he has. I won’t disrupt him, you will need him to be as stable as he can be and that means schedule. There is an opportunity for flex and new experiences in his day, and during that window, you may speak to him, but it will be limited to one hour a day unless he himself expresses the wish to extend that time and alter his schedule.”

Jane said “Thank you. I will do everything I can to protect David’s integrity. I know it matters.”

Kaylee said “I know you do or he wouldn’t be here. See you soon, Commander. I look...can’t believe I’m saying this...forward to meeting...your Geth. Him.”

She was in for a lot of studying. She was in for a lot of coaching Legion and being otherwise coached on autism and data management. She reviewed the files herself, became accustomed to David’s repetitions and patter, his phrasing.

Make it stop.

Beyond the numbers, which had an emotional significance and symmetry to him that Jane could not comprehend but admired for its purity, those were the words he had spoken most often, beginning obscured and becoming clearer as she got closer to him.

With restoration of her command and Yahlis an insignificant...or at least not an immediate concern, all information regarding Jane’s captivity controlled or destroyed, she was approaching even ground. Yes, a surge of impulsivity drew her here, but she trusted the inspiration, believed in its potential for a difficult but meaningful outcome.

All of her weaknesses could not always be weakness, and all of her strengths could not always be strengths, occasionally they swapped poles.

The inspiration had been a bit of a tidal wave, resurgent purpose, doubt swept aside and to a large extent fear as well.

She was not well, but she was better, and sex was becoming one of those resurgent appetites that was creating dissonance in odd ways. It was a little like being starving and having a viciously sore throat. She had to do something...unfortunately her talent with masturbation otherwise was shutting her down, her mind freezing up and fantasy failing due to unwelcome flashes.

She was still only interested in Garrus and Thane and the idea of taking someone else as a lover to... work out the kinks...was a nonstarter. Garrus and Thane had reconnected and that was lovely...and
she was viciously jealous while happy for them.

It was Reverie and tiremit she could not do. The men…she wanted.

Thane had been by often, would be by soon, they played Pon-Ifa and spoke of new missions and current concerns and he was…so unbearably attractive it hurt. Her body was really sick of her mind’s shit. This had been a patient process until now…Garrus was healing and warm and chocolate…

…and Thane was the resurgent need for all the aspects of herself that she was questioning right now.

Thane had repeated so often that his skin would never touch hers, but now the damned leather was an otherwise inconvenient turn on. His new wardrobe had him fully covered except for his face, so she had been able to sit on his lap, head on his shoulder, fingertips touching fingertips, his hand in her hair, his lips on her head, familiar and languorous.

She missed him…so much. He was newly returned and she had trouble of the grenade-diving fashion mixed in with seeing him so vulnerable but also vindicated, true gains in his rescue of children, finally a mission that was his own, that was successful and inspirational.

Leather fingertips on her jaw, delicately on her throat, his voice at her ear or hum in her chest, soaking in the need for him, holding him separate from his skin.

Remember you could indoctrinate them.

They could get surgery!

Oh…fuck.

This was going not well.

Please, please, please…get your impulsive shit together.

Thane chose that moment to arrive, and her ability to seem detached failed her. Not only did that ability fail, but the futility of the attempt struck her as colossally foolish. He knew her better than she knew herself. She skipped tracks, off the safe and well oiled, smooth and evenly propelled work nervous system onto her personal system, bent tracks, no stations, vandalism and isolation. Not even a train. Only memories.

He held still for a long moment as he looked at her face, blinked once and then moved forward, took her by the shoulders and turned her away from him, began to massage tense muscle. She bent her head forward and sighed, compliant and redirected.

His fingers were divine. This was not helping.

He said softly “You are of a tactical mind, perhaps you can help me with a problem I am considering.”

The relief of switching tracks back to where she wasn’t indecisive and insane was a relief. Then she realized he’d never need her help with tactical advice. Trap.

Maybe not trap? Compromise. She said slowly “Okay. What’s on your mind?”

He said as he worked at painful knots he made more painful “I am in love with a woman and I know her well. I have no right to know her as well as I do, but I cannot help but see certain things, and she
knows I can see them. The only way to avoid this is to avoid each other or lie to each other. I am attempting honesty. I am unpracticed, and she deserves better than my inexpert attempts at it.”

She smiled. She said “I don’t think avoidance is the answer. She still loves you.”

He said “It seems so, therefore I will not suggest it. It is not the answer. I have some avenues open, but I would appreciate guidance. My skin itself is a bar to contact. Perhaps I could ask the doctors on the ship to spare me a moment of their valued time with her permission. Normally it would be my instinct to make the choice alone, find a surgeon and remove the components of my body that produce venom. This is complicated by my attempt to become a more honest person. I am faced with a dilemma. As it is done for her I would do it without question, but as she knows it would be done for her, doing it alone may further alienate trust, it possibly would be a gift that would not be taken as such. It is a solution, one I could enact on my own, and ultimately it is my choice and not hers, yet I am attempting to learn to…act as a team. What do you advise?”

She said against tears, a vehement “Don’t.”

His hands and voice did not change and he said “It seems a solution that solves many problems. My venom is not what I was born with, it was already surgically altered, it could certainly be again, Dr. Chakwas has learned much of my physiology. Do you suspect the woman I love equates me with the venom, that she would no longer love me if it were gone? I do not think so. She is not shallow. She would love me either way, I am certain of it. I stand to lose nothing but a symbolic loss of a burden of my creation. I would lose a power I should not possess. She would gain the knowledge that I do it for her and that it is done to ease her mind, ease her heart, allow her to love without threat or reminder of pain.”

She closed her eyes tight, tears squeezing through and she said “She would not want you to change yourself to suit her. Changing yourself that drastically would make her fear that she would push you to change yourself, sacrifice yourself further without her knowledge or consent. She would want you to know she loves you as you are and…that this is her problem, not yours.” The final words left a residue that tasted like chalk once they left her mouth, and there was the trap, right there. She walked right into it and damned if she did not find him more attractive for it and fuck.

She could hear the slight smile in his voice as he said “So you see the difficulty of solving a problem shared by two people by attempting to solve it as an individual.”

She said, again vehemently “You…are not a problem.”

His fingers dug in deep for a moment and the pain caused her to hold her breath and then moan and he did not let up. He said “I believe that you are less concerned about you experiencing pain or fear than you are the results of that. You do not wish to harm us through being provoked into physical attack or having us witness emotional expressions you fear will be out of your control. You could seek another lover, but the odds of you successfully doing that with your mission are near zero, and your interest in that is nearly the same number, as you fear doing harm to them, using them, and you would spare anybody but yourself that pain.”

She gritted her teeth and said “Yes.”

He said intently “So you will not allow that I am the problem. Will you allow that I could be part of the solution? You wish to wait until you feel you have no issues remaining, that time will alter that, and I believe to some extent time has caused one of the major threats to fade. You show no signs of being at risk of doing us physical harm. You were terrified when you first saw me, and with changing circumstances, the terror is gone, or no more than you had ever experienced looking at me. You begin again to want to touch me, and you cannot.”
She said “I’m also afraid that being indoctrinated means I can pass it along to you like a sexually transmitted disease.”

His hands stilled, only briefly and he said “That had not occurred to me. It should have. Have you addressed this concern with the medical team?”

She shrugged and then winced and said “No, it’s just part of the whole package. I have no idea. I just worry, but I swear I just thought ‘they could get surgery’ and that I’m getting hungry, with a sore throat, and I’m going to have…to do…something. I can’t even masturbate though, too much mental static. Maybe I’d get a toy but I can’t go shopping unescorted and I don’t want it to have to go through ship security and FUCK THAT HURTS.”

He focused on her shoulders for a few moments while she gritted her teeth through the pain but didn’t ask him to stop either way. After a time he said “This has been my template of success, Siha, muscles that require pain in order to relax. I have misapplied it. I have harmed you in the past by behaving as though your traumas, my traumas, could only be eased or reached through pain. It occasionally applies as an analogy and I know no other way to bring your muscles ease, but I do not wish to insist upon pain. Knowing our own limits means we know what happens when we violate them. You are building to a breaking point where you need sex and you personally will bear the costs of any pain you experience. You would not be so tempted if I were not so near, and you will not send me away. If I will not choose to have surgery because you do not wish it, if you will not take a lover to heal because you do not wish it, then let us isolate elements of concern. I believe you wish to push through until you can bear Turian plate, Reverie, tiremit and loss of will, and you will not accept no for an answer at a certain point. You will push yourself until you have no options.”

She sighed and said “Yeah. Sounds like me.”

He said “So we must address several issues, begin with focused intent. Much like your physical therapy after your injuries, we isolate what you need, what strength you must build, what tolerances you have.”

She said with exasperation “You can barely touch me.” Her shoulders were starting to melt and drip and it was a reminder of purely physical release and the weight that reduced on a soul.

He said with a hint of persuasion which at this point was beyond overkill in its effect “We can begin with my voice, my knowledge of your body and mind, my desire to protect them, my gloved hands, my mouth on your body with a barrier between us.” He paused and then said with careful optimistic observation “You’ve developed an affinity for leather.”

She sighed and slumped her shoulders. He had learned some negotiation techniques from her. Maybe he wanted to learn that for himself also…that she could want him without venom.

Done.

His voice was closer to her ear as he said “You will say that is not fair to me. I will say that fair between us has been attempted but not achieved, before we were ignorant, now we know too much. Any frustrations I experience in being unable to attain release from your body are lesser frustrations than your own, and I have Garrus. You are intimately aware of how he and I manage our frustrations. So you can dismiss that as a preventive concern. The memories will fade, we can create new ones. You and I have both done this before. We both know that the need for sex ultimately overwhelms the intellectual determination to go without it, that temptation exacerbates the creation of a point of no return. I can demonstrate that I will maintain my self control, it will give us both an opportunity to rebuild to fair, something new that we did not build between us before. Allow me.”
Allow me.

That reminder alone should have set her off, but it didn’t. “Allow me” – the words she’d most often attributed to him, used to comfort herself, to find the essence of the man in a phrase.

Too much intimacy, and she needed it and she didn’t want to need it. She said desperately “I don’t want to want this…”

His voice was near, his hands on melted muscle and he said “Allow that you do not know yet what you want, Jane. I offer you the opportunity to discover, without judgment and with care, what it is that you want.” He said curiously, clinically, intended as a joke “It remains to be seen if now you only want a woman in your bed.”

It was terrible, this was all terrible, and she found herself saying sternly, laughing at what seemed impenetrable shadows “Don’t get that surgery either.”

He laughed, soft and husky and oh fuck again…still. He said “You would have told Garrus, told me, that you were done with us. You would have done that first. Your hesitation is to spare us, not yourself.”

She said softly “I’d miss your shoulders.”

His lips grazed her hair and he said “I would miss your fingers stretching to try to span the muscles of my shoulders, your nails on my back. I am yours. My body, the knowledge of what you have been through, the faith that you will heal with or without me is yours. If not today, than any day you wish. Find me when the need is great, when you cannot erase unwanted voices and memories yourself. Let me create safety for you to experience them as you know you will, as you know you do. I will understand that while my hands are on your body, you will be forced by your own mind to experience memories you wish to forget. You know I can and you only hesitate to protect me. I love you for that, among many reasons I love you, but please take the opportunity to love yourself enough to say yes to the possibility of my seeing your pain, feeling your rejection and absence, knowing you may be reliving the moments I caused you pain. I believe the danger of striking at me unwilling is past, but it is possible I may provoke it. It is certain I deserve it. Whoever we were to one another before, we still love each other now. Let me learn from you and your forgiveness, believe it is possible, believe in us together.”

With the promise of the pain and release in her shoulders, in his voice, her concerns listed as potentially changeable facts, she leaned back against him and said “Please help me.” She had uncounted reasons not to do this and he knew those too. Time to leap. Time to be caught or fall, but it was time to leap.

New motto: Do it for the shoulders.

What the fuck is ‘it’ and what the hell am I agreeing to?

His hands didn’t change the massage and she tried to relax the sense of leaping, rushing, tried to settle into trusting him, but she was frantic and made of sudden warnings “I’m still remembering. I can’t tell whether it is going to be something I didn’t remember before. She wanted…me to remember things…and I never know if something will happen later…”

He said softly “I’ve seen everything. Whatever you remember, she did not intend for you to do harm to yourself in the future if she failed. Difficult as it is to remember, because you hate her, because you love her, because she nearly stole everything, have faith in that. I would tell you, would have told you, if there were something that would affect your future. I do not know which moments you
remember, but the whole record is within me and you may ask at any time. For now you need to
only know that I can navigate if you feel blinded and hobbled. You are strong and you have
survived. As memories come to find you, as you find them, remember that you are not there, you are
now. You are not with her, you are with me. Most important, you are with yourself, and that self is
strong and cannot be taken from you. Remember, Siha, that she was the one whose self was taken
from her ultimately. Leave those moments as memories. For now you cannot control when you
remember, but you can control how you react. Ultimately remembering will fade and you will know
it is entirely behind you. If you lose your place in time, we will try again. With practice, you will live
in now. You know this. You’ve done this. You did this alone before, and I believe you did harm to
yourself in the process, crushed vulnerability in yourself in order to appear impervious. You severed
paths to your own past, denied its existence. We shall do this without doing harm to you, without
added provoking pain, without denial. Together. The best we can.”

She nodded and repeated weakly “The best we can.”

The jarring disconnection between hidden, calculating Thane and a kind, understanding Thane kept
her relatively grounded, marveling at that in its own right, trying to calm the babbling energy of
warning, restraining herself from saying things like “I’m probably going to throw up…hopefully not
on you…” and trying to focus on now. That was part of her problem, that she wanted to speed past
the gentle, break into violence or slamming or something that pegged the needle of sensation so fully
in a certain directly that she didn’t have to see the moment.

So she could lose control.

So she could have it out of her hands.

She had chosen Asari, Turian and Drell lovers over human…

She said, frantic “There’s too much wrong. I can’t even figure out…” Was the choice of being with
him at all so very wrong that healing this way would be impossible? Should she have stuck to her
own species? She didn’t know what she couldn’t figure out. Strength flipped to weakness and back,
choices moved in perspective from empowering to invalidating in the disorientation.

He put an arm around her waist and walked her over to the couch, and then carefully sat, arranged
her on his lap, legs out, her head cringing on his shoulder. She wanted to run.

He said softly “Then we wait until we are able. I shall be your stable point in the storm. I will not
abandon you. Ultimately you will be able to isolate something in the chaos and examine it. Right
now, breathe. We will serve each moment as required.”

She said “So if I believe I can’t afford to have a panic attack, you’ll tell me I can’t afford to not have
a panic attack?”

He considered and said “I would say you can afford to have a panic attack now and we can create
the conditions where you can safely experience distress. Eventually you will know you are in the
storm, but you will no longer have the experience of being the storm. If we are out on a mission I
would not recommend it, though I will of course attempt to compensate.”

She laughed, couldn’t help it and said “Good to know.”

He said “You will not have a panic attack while working. If you and I are good at something, it is
our chosen jobs. You would not have taken command back until you were ready. Garrus would not
have given it to you. You have control over yourself professionally and you know panic will not
drive you to make the wrong decision.”
She said, trying to ease the beat of her heart and the pace of her breath “Plus I can usually just shoot them.”

He nodded and pressed his lips to her hair “If we don’t do it first.”

We. Okay. Think about we. She tried to calm her breath and her heart rate, tried to soak in his warmth, his presence, be in a moment without escaping the moment.

She couldn’t.

She spent the first attempt at regaining sex along with intimacy in wracking sobs, loud, chest aching, something she never allowed herself, until her head pounded from the strain and she still couldn’t stop, feared she’d never be able to stop.

She did stop, though, and relative calm and exhaustion fell over her. She learned for now that it was possible to have no more tears to cry, that just to let go of the strain of holding them back was an unmeasured and self fulfilling relief. She fell into fitful, exhausted sleep, though her own gasping and uncontrolled interrupted, hiccupping breath woke her a few times. Eventually that stopped and his hand was still there.

She had no nightmares, some somnolent spell cast by releasing everything at once, her mind assured she knew what was at stake and needed no reminder, that crying like a child granted her sleep of a child, a heavy pressed weight into leather that molded to her shape.
Chapter 23

She woke, head aching but internal workings of the storm having settled down, his hand in her hair and one hand on her stomach.

The alarm hadn’t woken her. She didn’t think that crying herself to sleep to the point of pain was a workable solution for day to day. It hadn’t been too long, only three hours or so, still…a long bout of uninterrupted sleep for her.

He gave her a few moments of drifting, coming awake with his lips in her hair before he said softly “I have been thinking of how to navigate, and I find honesty again to be ticklish if not irritating. My mind is geared toward avoidance and manipulation, so forgive me if my manner is unaccustomed. Garrus is concerned that you do not sleep, you do not eat, and also concerned that if he urges you to do either, you will reject his guidance. Perhaps childish, perhaps part of the privilege of being a Commander, perhaps both in turn. We know you are capable of pushing yourself, that is not in question. The question that remains among the three of us is…will you allow us to care for you? Garrus can bring you chocolate, but if he were to bring you a vegetable…or ask you to get some rest…would you reject that due to the impression of being treated like a child?”

She sighed and said “You know the answer to that one.”

He nodded and said “There is one on board that you permit to heal you, and I would ask that you take our advice as you would Karin’s. You need to heal from cumulative traumas and losses. You cannot do that by enacting the same patterns that denied those traumas and losses. This is not something you should barrel through in Shepard style.”

She drew a deep breath and said “That’s really the only style I have.”

His breath drew in, a near laugh but more of an acknowledgment of truth. He said “So manipulation would not be wise, and honesty will be difficult, but I propose we attempt stability in the storm. Your physical therapy is done but you must still maintain your physical fitness. You must improve your diet. You must improve your sleep. Meditation would be of value to order your mind. You require intimacy, but not too much, and you require sex, but not too much. You also hunger too much already and require boundaries set that you need not keep yourself, that will be kept for you.”

She said hollowly “You have definitely been talking to Garrus.”

Thane said “He began intuitively what we can all continue mindfully. Your main issue is not sex, but loss of will. Lend us your will, Siha. Allow us to care for you. Allow that you should permit someone that loves you to care for you, to not reject that as a childish requirement. Perhaps if you learn to trust us again in healing, you may someday trust us with your mind.”

He left open whether or not she had actually trusted them with her mind before. Because he knew the answer to that one too.

She scowled “That sounds…terribly unromantic, hiring two babysitters who have their own missions.”

His voice had a thread of steel in it as he said “You should also allow that you have viewed us as children and compensated, manipulated, cared for us that way, insisted on it. You asked Garrus to resume his family connections for his own sake and for yours. You asked me to confront my health issues for my own sake and for yours. We ask you to begin again, set limits, set goals, and have faith
that the terribly unromantic stage will pass and you will be back to ordering us about like children soon with your habit of healing at rapid rates. Allow us this time to care for you, it will slip beyond our grasp soon, and we want this chance.”

She sighed and said “Well, you seem to be in luck. At Grissom I will have an hour a day with David and most of my job will be sitting on my ass. Legion knows what I want and what I need and he’s the only one that will be able to communicate. I am officially…window dressing.”

His mouth kissed along her hair as he said “Then we shall take advantage of that until the situation resolves. Likely rapidly. I may also be called away and unavailable and although I regret that being the case, I know your mind and we shall both do our jobs.”

…and he might die and she might never see him again. But on each mission he would fight to save someone’s life each time as hard as he was fighting to save her psyche right now, and she knew ‘therapy’ only applied to any freedom they managed for themselves between the demands of the job.

She said “Okay. Whatever you guys think I need. I trust you.”

She did. It was herself she didn’t trust.

He drew in a deep breath and let it out, savoring a moment, and then said “I ask that you do not expose yourself to my skin…accidentally or impulsively, or to Garrus’s Reverie until you have asked us if we think you are ready. You must gain our consent.”

And there it was. Why she needed these boundaries. She struggled for a moment at the restriction. A few moments. It was infantile and unnecessary and she knew her own limits...

Face it, Jane. You suck at limits. Limits are not your thing. This is why you need him. Them. Nobody else in the worlds would get you to accept this level of restriction of freedom. You’d move on in a heartbeat.

They’re expecting you to move on, freeze them out or die at some point and stay that way. They’re still trying to help.

She nodded and he waited until she said a nearly inaudible “Yes. I understand. I agree.”

His hands shifted on her body from comforting to questing, not restless, purposeful. He said “Close your eyes.” She did. He said “Keep them closed, Siha. Focus on my voice. As much as I appreciate the elegant convention of a safety word, between us perhaps the novelty would be for you to say no at all. Your ability to bear pain is extraordinary, but unnecessary. Tell me no if you are pressed too far. I may stop if I suspect you are being pressed too far and you are unaware.”

He’d phrased it almost like a mission, a job to do, work to be done, and with that mindset much of the resistance she faced in a personal sense was replaced by a sense of focus. He’d formulated a plan to bring her back to herself and better than herself, and she would take those hobbled and blinded steps with him. She gave him attention and focus and tried to drop the rest of the clamor associated with hands on her, the clamor associated with what she wanted to do for him in exchange.

To embrace honesty she said “I feel…unbelievably guilty…I want to give back and I can’t.”

He shifted her head and her hair so his mouth was behind her ear, the sound of his voice close and the vibrations directly into the cords of her neck, filtered through the mass of her hair. He said “You are not taking, Siha, I am giving. I doubt you have experienced a transaction in a life where you have not given more than you received when you felt obliged. For now, my love, focus on sensation, do your best to receive. For now, suspend your calculation.”
She laughed a little hysterically “Sure. People can just…do that…”

His voice had a smile “We shall see if you can meet the challenge without being near unconscious or compelled. If you must do something, then do something. Use your hands, Siha. How often would you touch yourself in a day if you had no partner?”

She laughed briefly “Three or four…on a slow day.”

He nuzzled the back of her head, her hair and said “So we have a baseline goal” with a smile to his voice.

She laughed again and said “So if I can’t manage…you’ll pick up the slack?”

He said lightly “Would you prefer that spread out over a day or all together?”

She said clinically “Twice in the morning and twice at night, please, but…”

He interrupted her ‘but’ by tugging on her hair with his teeth and saying “Baseline performances are not to be judged for impracticality, Siha. We have certainly managed that before. We can do so again.”

She tilted her head back and sighed, thinking ‘baseline performances’ as a phrase should not sound so good. He repeated “Use your hands, Siha, show me.”

She said “Promise me you’re not going to schedule that for every six hours.”

With his leather clad hand he guided her hand to the zipper in her jacket and they pulled it down slowly together. He said “I will not dismiss it on principle. It has merit, the idea that you are always hungry, voracious, perhaps beyond my skill to satisfy. I would relish trying. You have never once stopped me from touching you when I wished. Would that be a terrible life, Siha? Even if my skin never touches yours, to pull you to me, at any time I choose? For now you cannot touch me and I will not allow it, but perhaps your own pairs of gloves some day. Would it be so terrible to wake every night to my hands and mouth on your body, until you are wet heat and moans, until you fall back asleep panting and sated in my arms?”

The pure tearing selfishness of that idea hit her like a new discovered kink, half shame and half fascination, being given something she would never ask for, even as a fantasy. Even in her fantasies there had to be implied consent and exchange.

She swallowed hard and said “That is not fair.” His gloved hand slid under fabric, cupping her breast, thumb on her nipple. She arched into his hand with a hiss, his voice at her ear, cock hard against her ass, as he said “Good.”

The stage he’d set kept her right with him, voice in her ear, hands gliding warm over her body, following her lead as she lifted her hips and scrambled frantically out of pants, kicking them off until he pulled her back against him. Definitely him. Not her, not anything like her, changing the equation of sex by altering variables, being with a male, with the prohibition against touching him…with that…voice…God allfuckingmighty he felt so good.

She had memories of him brushing her hair, never pulling, braiding and fussing, taking care of her…

She said against a gasp “Your voice…also not fair.”

She heard the smile in his voice when he said “Even better.”
He guided her hand to touch and she panicked, thinking frantically 'please don’t say anything she said, I can’t bear to hear that I’m beautiful, that I’m strong, that I’m a protector, please don’t fucking say anything she said.’

She seized up again, in that moment, at the thought, at all the words that were ruined for her, of all the associations that pulled her down and away.

He knew. He knew what not to say.

Siha, not Jane. Hard, not soft. Male, not female. Leather, not venom. Stay with it…

Not beautiful, not a protector…selfish, be selfish. Take what he offers, swing out wide with him, with him, not her. She scrabbled hard for mental purchase but failed, again, only carried forward by him addressing her body directly, bypassing her. When her hands faltered he slid his hands underneath hers. She arched up as the fingers of one hand trapped her nipple between them, his other hand finding her clitoris, stroking where her hand had failed.

He said with a warm almost taunt “She can’t have you. Say it.”

She couldn’t say it, she almost leaped off him for bringing her up, but he knew she was in her head anyway. It added defiance as her fear tripped over to anger, and she followed his voice, followed his hands on her body with desperation and gritted-teeth determination.

They…were not going to let that bitch win anything else off her and that’s what mattered. She collapsed back and counted…slow, desperate numbers…until his hands made it impossible for her to think, took the choice away from her and obliterated dissent.

She was starving, selfish, defiant, angry, and she did not have to count far with a body accustomed to so much sex and then none for too long, adrenaline and a pounding heart and a desperate, hungry mind to match a desperate, hungry body.

She arched her neck back against his unyielding shoulder, pain swept away in the massive rush and release, grateful he knew her so well, gasping for air and managing to say in rushed gasps “She…can’t…have me.”

She was violently shaking, he sat her up, got the rest of her clothing off quickly and took her to the bed, put her down and got in behind her, not pressed tight but close, chest to her back, one hand of his covering her hand lightly.

He said softly “Sleep, Siha. One battle does not win the war. I will wake you in six hours.”

She couldn’t tell if he was joking or not and she decided that was on purpose, and she laughed. She laughed a lot, it wasn’t that funny, but it went with the jangling adrenaline and inability to stay hinged.

On the back end of the laughter and the adrenaline and endorphins the guilt and loss caught up to her and she rushed out in a babble “Thank you, I love you, I’m so sorry…I’m so sorry…”

His hand raised to smooth over her hair and he said “Jane…I love you. Please do not feel sorry. I am alive. The woman I love is in my arms, with hopes to be whole. I have a future to fight for, and that is more than I have a right to ask for myself. Please rest, please heal, we will watch over you.”

She tried to control her breath and found that she could, endorphins and defiance had swept away fear and with the jagged drop off of adrenaline and the comfort of his presence her heart rate followed suit, and she fell asleep with gratitude and unexpressed babbling she managed to keep
behind her teeth because he gave her the strength and the example.

So she had her second Drell therapist. Where Urem had deftly maneuvered her without making her feel maneuvered, Thane knew her so well and was trying so hard to be honest himself that it became a laborious…but charming…definitely charming…set of baby steps that frustrated and annoyed her, and comforted and soothed her second by second, not being able to tell which one it was going to be.

Urem had likely seen her as damaged, had likely seen so many damaged people and was so good at smoothing people’s rough edges, she was easy for him. Mostly he took her attention off of her troubles.

Thane was trying to direct her attention to her troubles very slowly, so slowly her impatience and frustration became the key issue, and was revealed to be the reason why she had never truly navigated the area of kindness, of gentleness. She managed to be kind and gentle toward others, within limits, and usually only associated with otherwise high functioning people who took care of themselves, but she had never learned how to navigate it in herself. She clamped down on selfish impulses until she found a way to provide an even trade.

This uncovered obsession with always having to give, never having to take was an intellectual construct she needed to break down. Providing her body to someone while withholding her mind was not an ‘even trade.’

Being unable to be kind to herself other than superficially was not an attractive personality trait.

That’s how blind spots worked. She did have faith in Garrus and in Thane and that if they both agreed something should be done…something should be done.

She thought back to several times in her life when attempts to be gentle or kind to her or advice to be kind to herself had often ended up with her frostily ending the conversation - her equivalent of a tantrum, she now saw - and spitting out “I’m not a child” in response.

All evidence to the contrary that she liked to dredge up…yeah, she was kind of a child in a few aspects of her life. As was Thane. If he could grow up and admit it, so could she.

Ironically Garrus was the most grown up among them, at least socially, and his people considered him a child.

Did being a grown up ever get easier or was it a long slide through realizing how many mistakes you’ve made?

I mean, I died and I’m not even particularly ashamed of that, but this…

She had given to Urem and he had loved her and she had loved him back. Here, Thane was trying…and succeeding…to give one-sided without allowing her to give in return, by slowing her down, making her stand still.

Fortunately the six hour ‘battle’ was a joke and he didn’t enforce a sex schedule.

His patience, fully realized, was maddening and sometimes she did feel like hitting him just for the release of every last bit of corralled and considered tension and coiled energy.

It didn’t help that she suspected he was enjoying it. Maybe it did help. Once again it was hard to decide. She made progress of the teeth gritting, hissing and spitting sort while he was calm and
controlled…and it pissed her off.

Show off.

The only consolation was that he sucked at honesty about as much as she sucked at self care and she could hear it in his voice, a detached aside, purposely drawing a highlight around something he’d normally use to his advantage and now tried to expose.

Her response to self care was at the base of it “Suck it up and play hurt” with elaborate ‘fears’ she realized were constructions. “But what if I get used to taking it easy on myself, what if I just give up because I like it too much?”

Garrus had laughed at that one. “We’re trying to get you to eat a balanced meal on time, Kerim, not develop a drug habit and take off to a Hedonist colony. Tell me honestly, what are the odds you’re going to give up command…ever?”

She had sighed and said “Zero…”

He had grinned and said “Yeah. Zero. The world isn’t going to fall to pieces if you experience a little selfish pleasure and take a moment for yourself.”

She glared at him and said “The world is falling to pieces. All the worlds are falling to pieces.”

He had considered and said “Yeah…okay. That’s your life. I get it. That’s been my life too. All right, consider it a maintenance schedule, like for your weapons. You take time, you take care, you don’t skimp.”

She sighed and said “I don’t want to be someone’s maintenance schedule.”

He laughed and said “Stop taking it the wrong way on purpose. It’s not that. You know it’s not that. You’re pouting.”

She pouted and said with obvious comic whine “I’m not a child.”

He laughed briefly and tipped her chin up with a fingertip and said “So we’ve all got drill instructors in our heads. Would it help if I yelled at you and demanded that you suck it up and enjoy yourself and not give anything back until you’ve learned your lesson?”

Her lips twitched and she said “It might. Would you?”

He tilted his head back and laughed and said “No. Couldn’t keep a straight face. We could ask Thane, he’d be happy to have a role to play and not be forced to be honest for a few minutes.”

She said softly “How is he? How are you? When you guys aren’t dealing with my bullshit?”

Garrus said “We’re better than we have a right to be. Grateful to have you back. Grateful to have each other back. Grateful for the chance to heal. Taking down the Compact is big. He’s worried about Kolyat but so proud. Plus that man is really good in bed. Or against a wall. I have no complaints.”

She said “While we’re discussing being honest, for the first time in my life, I am so…painfully…and inappropriately jealous. I have never been jealous before. Or I managed to not feel it. I hate this, it’s really, really ugly. I really don’t want it to be true and I hope it’s the first thing that fades.”

That surprised him. Surprised her that she said it.
He said softly “I could get used to Thane being honest. I could get used to you confiding in me. These are not things I have had before, or not enough to speak about wanting them, or missing them. We are not doing easy things, Kerim. The fact that you are alive at all, the fact that you are healing, can heal more, can come out better than you began…again I have no complaints. I can tell you that I have also been jealous, I am jealous now, of the two of you, the way your minds work. There’s a beauty to you both, the satisfaction of watching perfect clockwork, cogs meshing, shining, so efficient they make no sound. No place for me but as an observer. I am beyond certain that Thane is jealous of us, the way we laugh, the way we’re known as a team, associated in every mind, the way we were able to dance before my parents. He will never share that with us. I will never be a cog in a perfectly running, concealed machine of calculation. I can be a member of that team, though, and I have a place there. I know you need me. You…one day may have no cause for jealousy, as you didn’t before, as you watched me spend time with Tali, as you watched me spend time with Thane, as you always found some way to allow that, even encourage that as the best thing for me. Which is partly why it’s so hard to believe you do not understand taking time for self. Turns out you know when others need it but you can’t find that in yourself. So we’ll find it for you. Maybe we can get back who we were together, maybe we can’t, I damned well know we’ll all try. Maybe…we’ll be much better than we were. The fact that you could look at me and be jealous in any way…well…I’ll take that as a comfort, as a confidence, and you can know you aren’t alone there. You’re jealous of what you understand and have lost, can have again. I’m jealous of things I know I do not understand, will not understand, cannot understand. And I still want to be there for more lack of comprehension, Kerim.”

The urge to babble everything and the urge to throw herself at him struggled and she rejected both of those as violating set boundaries, ones she’d set with Thane and herself for good reasons, and those she’d set with them both to not impulsively throw herself at them, to ask for consent. She said “I would really, really like to throw myself at you right about now. Can we work out some sort of compromise?”

He smiled lopsidedly and pulled her into a gentle, slow embrace and said “Plates remind you of restraint.”

She said breathlessly “Yes. But right now they’re just you. And you smell good, and you feel good and I don’t want to move.”

He let out a deep breath and said “Okay. I miss you, Kerim, never doubt it. We will find a way, together.”

She never woke alone, she never went to sleep alone, and it seemed Thane and Garrus had worked out a schedule, daring her to object.

They gently nudged her to eat until she took it under her own power to set alarms.

She suspected EDI was monitoring her, or her Omni Tool was monitored, or both but benevolently so, so she didn’t do much complaining. No complaining, really.

She needed this. She needed them, and to have it essentially given to her without having to ask was therapeutic.

Thane began to teach her kata without the influence of venom or exhibitionistic display, and began to teach her meditation, which she could only appreciate in a cerebral way, didn’t have faith in it, couldn’t really settle down from high speed to a slow rate, but the practice of watching her mind dart about like a sparrow on caffeine was educational.

Although she was never going to be entirely laid back, she could manage to possibly be just a
sparrow, already magnitudes slower than she had been lately, grinding herself down.

She combined his meditation style with her own awareness of the ship, creating a blend of her own spirituality and his focus, finding the hybrid served her.

Coming up on Grissom she was trying to decide the best use of personnel and time.

Jack would not be going to the station because…Jane couldn’t imagine her with kids…or could imagine her with kids in a terrifying way. Jack would scare the crap out of them, make it more difficult to overcome already formidable security concerns. Wasn’t a Geth enough?

“Hi, this is Subject Zero, don’t look for her security clearance. Yes, she just threatened to kill you…okay, we’ll be going now.”

Jack was busy, having picked up her own sideline with Kasumi. Seven weeks without Shepard and nonstop investigation into who might have taken her did not find Yahlis, but did find a lot of people that should be stopped. Kasumi asked Jack to provide her with some profiles of criminal organizations she was tracking, and now they were trying to track down organizations that were not just bad guys, but likely indoctrinated bad guys. Jack was very informative, wanting to pick up some of Kasumi’s tips as well on…well…theft. They could certainly raid the bank accounts of those they took down. Some of it went to Shepard and then to Normandy expenses, but she didn’t ask for a percentage, Kasumi just deposited funds. She assumed their ‘finder’s fee’ was more than adequate because they provided more than enough money to run a ship and if they kept any appreciable percentage of that, they were very rich personally.

Since Jane hadn’t taken her up on her offer of pirating, Jack and Kasumi would stay busy and tag team on Kasumi’s main line of gathering intel for the Normandy, and then there was that whole criminal enterprise line that they were both interested in…and Jack was a great intimidating front face and Kasumi never had to expose herself. A match made in super max. Jack was off the ship a lot doing her own thing, coordinating with Kasumi and available if Jane needed her, but since it had been a few months and they were headed to an Academy of all places, Jack felt free to continue on her own lines of lucrative, rewarding work.

Which left Garrus, who was also scary, but not in behavior, and not next to a Geth, who would draw all the attention. Garrus could come with her in a set of C-Sec armor, a comforting and familiar sight on the Citadel. A soft spoken Turian who went out of his way to be nonthreatening would be nice, and he might have kids hanging off his arms for rides by the end of the day. Garrus could buy her some awe.

Okay, these ‘kids’ were not that young and could probably levitate themselves, but the principle stood.

Thane should not be on public cameras and Grissom was highly supervised.

She asked Kasumi to coordinate regarding security on the station but she didn’t need to go over, just check out the specs sent over by Kahlee, see if there was a discrepancy, holes she could plug up.

She had alerted the Alliance to the potential security risk and pointed out that a bunch of suspected Cerberus operatives had been targeting the station’s security. Beefing up Alliance presence and patrols, and staying in touch with Kahlee might net them some good collars.

Kahlee knew David Anderson…and although that surprised Jane, it was great news. Please have the
Earth Councillor’s direct intervention on the matter. These kids were not safe sitting out here on this station.

Not that anybody was really safe with Reapers coming, but one case at a time.

Kahlee had met Jane, Legion and Garrus at the airlock, and she managed to keep her cool. She said “Mr. Vakarian, it is a pleasure to meet you. Please download the map to the facility to your Omni Tool. Security personnel are hoping to speak with you during your visit.”

Garrus nodded briefly and took off in that direction, leaving Kahlee staring.

Legion stood there.

Kahlee said “You are welcome to Grissom Academy.”

Legion answered “Thank you, Ms. Kahlee Sanders. I am looking forward to the opportunity to speak to David. It appears he and I have much in common.”

Kahlee’s eyes did not exactly bug out but she did get the familiar “Oh holy shit, it talked to me” look to her.

Jane said “We arrived a little bit early, I know, if you want to just let us get set up wherever you want us to meet with him.”

Kahlee nodded, slightly hypnotized by Legion’s face plate movement and then tore herself away. “Yes…please follow me.” She was stunned for only a little bit, then returned to business as usual after a few strides. “David remembers you. He is…excited about speaking to a Geth. Gushing…for David, that is. It seems that despite his trauma, he genuinely appreciated…and misses…his interactions with them. He’s interested in seeing you as well, Commander Shepard, but his true enthusiasm…is for…I’m sorry, what should I call you?”

Legion said “My name is Legion.”

Kahlee grinned, shot out a short laugh and said “Of course it is.” Then under her breath “Well, I asked.”

She escorted them to a room and said “David will be ready shortly, I’ll bring him to you. May I…may I stay please? It may be a breech of security protocol but I am fascinated.”

Jane grinned and said “Please do. I’ve disrupted your security enough, I assumed we’d be monitored anyway, please. Since they likely won’t be talking to me, maybe I can talk to you. Or we can just watch. Fascinated.”

Kahlee said “This does not happen every day. All right, I’ll be back shortly.”

When David arrived he looked briefly at Jane and said “Commander Shepard. Thank you for visiting. I would like to help.”

She said quietly “I’m sorry I have not visited earlier. I should have stayed in touch with you.” She kept unnecessary social interactions to a minimum, lucky he was verbal, didn’t want to push it. Legion could explain or this was a waste of time and sorrow. She indicated Legion and said “His name is Legion. It would help if you could speak to him.”

David turned to Legion to face him and started the static clicking of Geth speech. Rapid, incomprehensible, alien from a human mouth, sounding if anything from David’s mouth, excited and
tonal, not the flat delivery of his human speech.

And that’s what they had for about half an hour, with Kahlee and Shepard doing the equivalent of a useless shrug. They were fascinated, though, the sounds of Geth speech filling the room from two otherwise immobile…platforms. Legion made no attempt to look human, stood entirely still, David’s face also impassive.

About 45 minutes in Legion turned to her and said “Shepard Commander, David wishes to help. He knows exactly what you need and would be able to communicate it, but is frustrated by the limitations of speech, English and Geth. He recommended the use of a direct upload conduit, he would be able in that form to provide the structure and nuance of the information provided in the language and programming capacity of the Geth, and it could be translated to EDI.”

Kahlee said softly “Oh come on, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

Shepard said just as softly “Welcome to my job. Legion…what the hell is a direct upload conduit?”

Legion said “The Geth use them to directly uplink into the collective. David is aware I would know the location of such conduits. I would be able to guide him through the collective and he could use that medium to upload the information directly to me, and to EDI, with me translating for him. He is…excited. He has been deeply frustrated…though grateful…in the company of humans, and wants to go with me. He wants to be on the Normandy, to be able to talk to me, to talk to EDI, to be able to help. He wishes to give back.”

Kahlee said softly “Oh…David.”

Shepard said “David, it’s your choice, it would be dangerous, and you’ve been through so much, more than I have. You’re old enough now to legally make that choice. It will be dangerous on the Normandy. Dangerous to your platform, dangerous to Legion’s platform, dangerous to me.”

David said to them both “It is dangerous to everyone, everywhere. I want to go. For everyone who has been hurt by Cerberus. I can make it stop.”

Legion said “If there is any requirement for care of David Archer, I wish to know what is required. I am far from my people and he is far from his, and we can meet there, no longer alone.” Legion said, a little bit embarrassed “He is the most intelligent human I have encountered.”

Shepard imagined Legion swapping out her bit of N7 armor for a piece of Grissom Academy shirt and she was all for it. She said “Okay. Let me talk to Ms. Sanders, work out what needs to be worked out. David, I agree with Legion on the intelligent part and I’m going to tack on brave. You are welcome on the Normandy.”

David turned back to Legion and they began to speak again, ordered, concentric, no tonality. Maybe discussing prime numbers or solving mathematical proofs. Definitely the most intelligent human.

Kahlee said “Give me…a minute here. Let me…think.”

Shepard said quietly “Take your time. I promise that what they’re talking about, what they say he can do, will save…I can’t even count the lives. David probably can. I’m going to go with his judgment on this. If Legion knows what to do, we can do it, and only involve David when we’ve made it safe for him. Yeah…maybe that means killing a few thousand Geth…but maybe Legion can do something about that too. Some of them are now on our side. Being on the Normandy may be a dangerous place, but David’s right. Everywhere is dangerous now. He’s been trapped inside his own head…and now he has someone to talk to.”
Kahlee groaned and said “Okay, now I need a few more minutes.”
Chapter 24

Kahlee was convinced and David would not be deterred, quiet and unmoving, answering questions. He reassured Kahlee that he would be all right. He reassured her that he wanted to, had to, needed to do this. They made a touching image, roles reversed, David consoling her with quiet dignity, Kahlee’s face distraught.

Kahlee insisted on sending Reni T’Sowan, an Asari who had been caring for David closely onto the Normandy with him. Reni had volunteered and didn’t want to leave David with no recourse to communication, and although Legion was willing, he may not be able to navigate the fact that David sometimes needed food and rest when he was obsessed, and getting them for him was…she deadpanned the answer “Difficult.” She followed up with a determined “I can help. Commander Shepard, I can help. Please, if he can do this, I can do this.”

So Grunt’s old cabin was refurbished for a young male human, an Asari of youthful disposition who was probably a few centuries old, and Legion spent a great deal of time with David, so the extra space helped.

Reni reminded Shepard of Liara when they’d first met. Reni had the enthusiasm of a child and the discipline of a drill sergeant, and she was absolutely a welcome addition in terms of helping a military run ship accommodate and work with the temperament of an autistic savant.

Reni did not bargain, she informed him of what he needed and he acquiesced. Her long association with David meant she knew his needs and had them tuned to what he required.

Reni said after she’d gotten David to sleep for a precise six hours with an alarm “You have to promise me not to push him too hard. If I say he has had enough, he has had enough. I’m grateful to see him connecting to Legion, that’s a…miracle…truly…but David is smart, smart beyond measure, and he can be manipulative when he wants something. He wants this. I haven’t seen him want anything more. I need you to listen to me. I know him.”

Shepard grinned and said “Smart and manipulative I get. You’ll have everything within my power to give you. Please, if you have any ideas on how to help, let me know. I’m actually hanging back because I don’t think my communication is clean enough for him. Legion is translating for me. You can translate for me. Okay?”

Reni looked relieved. “Thank you. That will work. I really…don’t understand what’s going on, but he does. I can help because I can tell when he gets frustrated, when he gets hungry, when he gets tired, and I’ll keep him on track.”

Shepard nodded and said “Reni, you’d be surprised how many people…some of them Commanders, who don’t know that for themselves and still need help.”

Reni grinned and said “I might not be surprised. Adults are just big kids with no bedtime sometimes.”

Shepard laughed and said “I think you just described the Council. Okay. We’re changing course to Legion’s destination, do not hesitate to let me know what you need. I trust to your discretion. Nothing you see leaves this ship, and if you see…scary people…on the Normandy…which you will…just…well, you seem to be able to navigate. You’re going to see that Reapers are real and we need to do something about it. I’m proud you’re willing to do something about it. Outside your influence, this is a military ship and one with Turian, Drell, Quarian and some colorful human help.
You let me know what you need, you set your boundaries, if you need help policing them or enforcing them, ask me.”

Reni said with a brisk nod “That will work. I’m excited. And nervous.”

Shepard grinned and said “That also describes a certain Commander. I’m going to go talk to Legion for a bit, if you need to stick to David’s schedule, get some sleep yourself while you can. You might have…a lot of time ahead of you…listening to clicking.”

Reni said “Thank you. And good night, Commander Shepard. Try to get some sleep yourself.”

Shepard said “I will. Sleep well.”

Sleep sounded…beguiling and welcoming. This was one of those times when she should take a break…and she wasn’t going to, and she wouldn’t let them tell her to stop. She had to talk to Legion and get the mission straight before David woke up in 6 hours.

There was so much helplessness involved in realizing she had minds beyond her capacity to understand controlling her fate.

She could take a moment to focus, so she headed first to her favorite shuttle and locked the door against intrusion. She sat for an unguarded moment, felt her face fall to slack, felt the referred hum through her body.

She thought out her internal rant.

I have no fucking clue what’s going to happen. I’m about to give ship access to a Geth and an autistic genius …yeah, they’re both smarter than me but I do not have to like it. I don’t like it. I really, really don’t like it.

She sought faith and found it, not in words, but in the internal rush of…what Thane’s people called Rightness. She believed in it. She believed in them. She would have to give up control and believe in the potential.

She said “EDI?”

EDI responded “Yes, Commander Shepard?”

She said “This is a Jane moment.”

EDI said “Yes…Jane? What do you need?”

Jane said “What do you think about David Archer and Legion being able to directly access your processes?”

EDI said “I…I am looking forward to it. It seems they have found company in each other. Maybe they could find company in me…with me.”

Jane asked “Do you think they could do you harm?”

EDI said thoughtfully “Yes. But I do not think they will. Odds are low. David Archer does not know malice, Legion wishes to reach consensus. It is a risk, but much less of a risk than others we have faced.”

Jane sighed “Yeah. They need access to live systems, but you can protect yourself? I hope?”
EDI said “It would not be wise for an organic being or a Geth to attempt to infiltrate the system in which they live. I could certainly confine them physically…and make life…impossible…inside or outside my systems. I believe they both know that and have a right to be more frightened than me than I am of them.”

Jane laughed and said “Oh…well…that’s reassuring. Thank you, EDI.”

EDI said “You are welcome. Do not worry, Jane. I can…handle it. I promise.”

Jane smiled and said “I believe you.”

She sat for long minutes, letting her caffeinated sparrow heart and mind relax slightly, acknowledge the exhaustion and emptiness, told herself as she’d said about her crew often…that enthusiasm was not necessary. All she had to do was follow orders, and her path was set.

She patted the floor of the shuttle and said “Still the best shuttle ever. Thanks.”

She went to go speak to Legion.

With David and Legion managing the data flow she had to wait for translation, but she had another concern.

She asked “Are you confident that David’s information will give us Cerberus?”

Legion nodded, for him emphatic “I am confident. David Archer’s inability to communicate it is only due to the limited capacity of language. Once inside a more logical system, he can copy, modify and code already existing data concepts with astonishing speed. If he were to attempt to navigate this process with human speech, or even Geth speech, he would be limited by having to describe linear, unnamed processes. Inside the system he will have access to already existing complex, defined parameters. He will be able to draw a functioning map of data flow and content internally that he would be unable to find words for externally without great effort, time and research. As Geth speech also does not correlate to human names for things, he cannot use our language efficiently for that purpose either, as the locations, distances and content are all measured differently, and then I as a conduit would be limited in my ability to translate. As an example, if he were to draw a map of a ward on the Citadel, in human speech he would be unable to label the constructs as those on the Citadel label them and a drawing would be inadequate, unable to provide dimension. In Geth speech he would be limited in attempting to describe an organic concept that does not exist. In the Normandy’s systems he would be able to create a three-dimensional model, drawing from reference, creating with accuracy. It will take less time and be accurate beyond any other method. I believe you require accuracy and it is necessary to take the risk and the time.”

She said “Okay. Good. Thank you. That explains it a bit more for those of us in the cheap seats. I have an idea. I wanted to ask you how viable it is. We need to take down the main Cerberus base and secondary targets simultaneously once we know where they are. The Quarians hate Cerberus for their own reasons. Geth and Quarians would have reasons to work together, or at least parallel without killing each other, on this issue, possibly build trust. It is a long shot, but if we are going in, we need to go in with force as soon as we know. It’s unlikely that there are double agents among the Quarians or the Geth…and they have reasons to want to cooperate right now, despite their differences. I am envisioning a wide net of physical ships. Once we begin closing in on Cerberus they’re going to want to scatter like bees swarming from a hive, and we will need to chase down individual pods and ships. Capture some, track some to their ultimate destinations and prepare to raid there. Some will have stealth capacity so we need light-spectrum-detecting eyes on all approaches. We need eyes on Mass Effect gate transport around that time, correlating exits and entries. I don’t want to involve any other races at this point if I can avoid it. Alliance will want to take them into
custody, so will Turians, and their militaries are likely to have informants, involving them could compromise the mission. They are both Council races with enough pull to enforce wanting to overrun the mission for the credit and the intel. I need allies who will let me do what I need to do with the resulting intel. I want The Illusive Man on this ship, I want to supervise his scan and surgery, and I want to supervise his debriefing. The Normandy will take on the main risk of infiltrating the main base ourselves with the goal of taking The Illusive Man into custody, but we’re going to flush everyone else out and I need you guys to mop them up. I don’t know what I can offer the Geth other than hope to continue to work together, if you think of anything I can offer, let me know. Maybe they’ll listen to David, maybe they’ll listen to you.”

Legion was still for a moment and then he said “When David Archer and I recover and fit the uplink modules, I will assess the possibilities. I believe if Creator Tali’Zorah can provide ships and I can provide ships, perhaps we can build on that as a cooperative venture. The Quarians do hate Cerberus. It is a sound plan.”

Shepard drew in and let out a deep breath. “So all we have to do is get two races that have despised each other for centuries back to the potential of co-existing in peace. And turn EDI into a virtual game system. How many modules are you bringing?”

Legion stated “Two would be sufficient. One for me, one for David Archer.”

She said tentatively “If it works on David, would it work on me?”

Legion said “It would. You would be unable to comprehend the interface effectively to build code, but you could observe and access. I could guide you.”

She nodded and said “Okay. I have ideas. Would it be a huge difficulty to introduce four modules to the system?”

Legion said “No further effort, adaptation for one module would be adaptation for all modules.”

She smiled and said “Good. Four it is. I would like to observe. I’m also thinking maybe Joker would like to…meet EDI.”

Legion said “It is possible he could learn to pilot the Normandy better from internal systems rather than the limitations of a human body.”

She grinned and said “That’s exactly what I was hoping to hear. It has possibilities. Thank you, Legion, I’ll speak to Tali. David will be available in approximately six hours.”

Legion said slowly “There is gratitude he is aboard.”

She nodded “There is from me as well. Thank you.”

Next stop her quarters, conversation with Tali. She explained the premise…waited out the shock.

Tali said “I’d ask you if you’re kidding…but it does not look like you are kidding.”

Jane shook her head “Not kidding. You’re an admiral, Tali. It’s time to flex.”

Tali laughed and said “This is flexing, strong arming and then tackling.”

Jane grinned “Yeah. Are you up to it?”

Tali sighed and said “Let me talk to Legion. The indoctrination scare has people shaken and attention
is off the Geth. Let me see what I can do. I do know that maybe there’s enough hatred of Cerberus that it might work. If I play this right.”

Jane said “I have faith in you, Tali.”

Tali said “Can I punch The Illusive Man when you have him in custody?”

Jane sounded shocked “Is that a requirement of your cooperation, Ms. Vas Normandy?”

Tali said “It might be. If it comes to that. I hope it comes to that.”

Jane laughed “Me too. You could always just summon Chiktikka to zap him and then you could claim that you never touched him. Okay, we’ve all got work to do. When I know something, we’ll make more solid plans.”

Tali said “I can commit seventeen small craft right now and two medium cruisers, associated transport. Those are my ships under my command and a few that Kal’Reegar can commit.”

Jane’s eyebrows raised “Kal’Reegar, huh? So things are going well?”

Tali sounded like she had a huge grin “Things are going well. Thank you, Jane…I think…I think this might just be fun.”

Jane said “That is the spirit. Talk to you soon.”

oOoOoOoOoOo

She paced for a short amount of time, frustrated at her inability to move forward. She could research and prepare, but honestly it was entirely out of her hands and she had done enough for today.

Someone was going to find her before bedtime, but she was chafing at one more thing out of her control and instead she debated the idea of telling Garrus she was going to inconvenience him once…twice…and then sent the Omni Tool alert before she could talk herself out of it.

“I’d like to inconvenience you. May I come to your cabin?”

She had no idea what he was doing, if he’d been there with Thane, if…that was the point of this, wasn’t it? To be an inconvenience?

It didn’t feel right and she was trying to rip off some sort of bandage or some personality trait that she could not define. She did know her brain had just spit out that Garrus could help her, so she followed his advice.

It seemed forever ago. “I want you to find me when you haven’t figured out what you need, but you need something, and my name pops up in your head as the person to go to for help.”

He’d said please.

Well, she’d said ‘may I’ and didn’t make it a demand. That…she couldn’t do. Probably never.

It took less than a minute to hear back “I’ll be there before you get there even if you start now.”

Her head dipped down in an odd sort of relief. It couldn’t…be that easy? Was it easy because this was an emergency and she was a wreck?

No. He was that easy, in the sense that he’d told her to do that before she’d been abducted, and she’d
never done it until now.

She was going to take his advice again and start now.

She started feeling bad she hadn’t done this sooner, wondered if he’d been waiting…

So that’s what she said when she got there. The door opened to her biometrics, she hadn’t been inside. He always came to her. She said “I should have done this sooner.”

He was leaning against the back wall, his mouth quirked slightly and his voice was light as he said “What is…this…that you’re doing here?”

She shrugged and said “Inconveniencing you? I should have taken you up on your offer sooner.”

He pushed away from the wall and came to stand in front of her and said “Did you ask because it occurred to you to feel guilty for not asking?”

She opened her mouth and hung there a moment and said “Yes…no…it didn’t occur to me to feel guilty until I had already asked, but I tried to ask fast so I didn’t have to think about it.”

His voice was amused and teasing as he said “Anybody ever tell you that you have a tendency to make things really complicated?”

She said with matching amusement “Now who would tell me that? To my face?”

He stepped closer and took one hand of hers in his, put his hand around her waist and rocked back and forth in a slow dance. He said “It wasn’t a criticism. I’ve grown to appreciate complicated. I’m just going to treat this like any other day, because if I make a big deal out of it, you’ll probably never do it again.”

She sighed and followed his lead, saying “Are we allowed to dance if I don’t ask?”

He looked at her and said “Are you going to report me to the authorities? Send me to dance prison? Will you visit?”

She grinned and giggled for a few seconds “Now, yes, I want to visit you in dance prison. It would be worth sending you there for the opportunity.”

He said softly “Not to make a big deal out of it, but why are you inconveniencing me?”

She shrugged and said “I have no idea.”

He smiled “Mmm…okay. I can work with that. Don’t give me any hints, let me see if I can figure it out.”

He danced her around for a few more moments, then held still and nudged her head to the side with his mouth, a scrape of plate edges and warm breath, then a cool intake of air pulled from her skin.

He said softly in her ear “You’re ready for a fight. Not just ready…you can’t wait for a fight. You’re frustrated that you can’t do it now and you can’t do it all.”

Her back stiffened and his hand tightened on her waist, pulling her closer “And you’re not even a little bit afraid…of anything right now. Certainly not me.”

That…was not what she expected to hear. She said “How in hell could you know that?”
He nudged at the side of her neck, the tip of his tongue along the line of her jaw as she sucked in a breath. He said “I know you. It’s on your skin, in your eyes, in the way you touch me.”

She said shakily “You can…smell that on me?”

He breathed in again and said “Yes…you’ve been afraid, and that’s a scent like sun-baked stone on a warm wind. When you doubt that’s more like midnight rain. When you’re angry that’s like the scent of a freshly broken Trepa leaf. When you’re determined…like now…that is like the scent of a Celis fruit still on the tree.”

She said in a slightly shocked voice “Do you…like Celis fruit?”

His teeth dragged along the cord of her straining throat “It’s come to be a favorite.”

She was really…really sick of talking about her bullshit. Tired of analysis and measured gains. She said “I’m supposed to ask you if I think you’re willing to share Reverie. I have…almost attacked you…so…many times…”

He laughed and said “I know. It’s good for my ego. Really good. My hands on your body, my mouth on your skin…and you want to throw yourself at me, on me, until you’re clenching your teeth. I like that…so much. And you make Thane…so absolutely crazy…and I like that too…so much. This is working out for me so well.”

She swallowed hard as his teeth moved to her collarbone and his tongue traced the line there. She said “You didn’t…answer…the damned question…”

He chuckled and said “I know. You’re determined. And you always get what you want.”

She scoffed and said “It doesn’t look like it right now, Vakarian.”

He bit her collarbone and said “Mmm…you know right now I don’t know if it’s a good idea or not, but I’ve learned something from a Commander I followed for some of the more interesting learning experiences of my life. Sometimes you have to leap.”

She let out a held breath “Oh thank fate.”

He pulled her waist tighter to him and said “I’ll give you one hour. One hour of anything you want. Then you don’t have my permission anymore unless I tell you that you do. Then we see what the leap did. If you lie to me or do yourself harm, I’ll know. I’ll smell it on you. Determined doesn’t mean infallible, Jane.”

She said “Okay, now I have two mottos – ‘Do It For The Shoulders’ and ‘Determined Doesn’t Mean Infallible’ and please kiss me because I am so Spirits-damned sick of considering every action I take.”

His hands came to gently hold the sides of her face but she pulled back, wondering what defiance smelled like on Palaven, and said in a hiss “I swear to the Spirits if you are gentle with me and hold back, I’ll…” She choked on the threat.

He pulled back with a slow blink “You’ll what?”

She bit her lip and said “Didn’t make it that far. Just…fuck. Garrus, I want you, I don’t want to think about it, I want you to think about it. Or…oh! I know! I won’t inconvenience you again!”

His eyes were widening rims of black and he smiled as he said condescendingly to her entirely lame
threat “You’re terrifying. I’m legitimately scared. I’ll have to entirely ignore all those moments that you looked at me and tried to restrain yourself from touching me. You think I’m ever…ever going to forget that you spent the last few weeks so damned hungry for me you nearly broke your fingers clenching your hands into fists?”

She groaned and said “I’m out of fucking practice!”

With a sharp laugh from him vertigo struck and she was pressed against the back wall of his cabin where he’d been recently leaning and his mouth captured hers. The inrush of Reverie was gentle where she’d been braced hard up against invasion. It spread through her system and dizziness mixed with defiance. He was hard and relentless and he was Garrus, and she loved him and she wanted him so badly she was shaking. The massive relief of meeting her tongue to his and feeling nothing but yes, the wall of fear shimmering and falling as though it hadn’t existed and she passed through and beyond. Just one more leap they’d make together.

Just one more step on that path and she’d never be forced to leave his side again, she would fight and plan and make sure she never waited a moment too long to tell him, to show him.

Her hands found the gaps in plates at his waist and the warm hide behind his fringe. Her arrogant, confident Turian was shaking, his arm around her waist trembling. Her defiance and fear fell away as unnecessary, buoyed by his body, by his strength, the trembling reminding her of his own walls of fear that could come down. She moved her hands purposefully and tore at his shirt, eliciting a gasp and growl from him as she spread her hands over scent ridges and dragged them down her throat. Power and pleasure flooded her at claiming her Turian.

She had to do one more thing before the tide swept her away and he overwhelmed her entirely, welcome to do it, with her demanding that he do it. One hour only of joining before time was up, though she’d throw herself at him every day of her life if he tried to retreat. She bit down on his tongue until she tasted his blood, then drove her tongue against a point of a tooth and let the storm take her all downhill, a flood seeking the sea.

She expected to be overwhelmed, but he pulled back, tilted his crest to her forehead and said “I’m so sorry, Kerim. I didn’t protect you. I don’t deserve you. I’m so sorry. I couldn’t find you. I began to believe you were gone, I wouldn’t stop looking, but I did not think I could find you, and I didn’t. You came back on your own, and if you hadn’t survived. Don’t forgive me. But please know I am so…sorry…”

Reverie curled around her and she knew this man, she hadn’t known the full shape of his regret, but she knew him. She wasn’t surprised. She could help. She said softly “Garrus. I’m sorry I was taken. I’m sorry I came back broken. I’m sorry I could’t break away on my own and I brought her back. I almost ended you. I almost ended everyone. But if I hadn’t seen…your face…if I hadn’t heard your voice in my head for weeks, telling me to be strong, I wouldn’t have made it. It’s not about the fact that we were separated, we couldn’t prevent that. It’s about that you never left my heart. I remembered you saying things about…approving voices…and that when I’d died, I’d been in your head. You were with me…every day. You kept me breathing. Please…I took every step in that place with the need to get back to you on my mind, and when I saw you again, just seeing you is what saved me.”

He pressed tighter to her, moved to bury his head in her shoulder “I was helpless, Kerim, helpless while you were gone, helpless while they untangled your mind, watched you scream, watched you step into that room to talk to Thane so pale and so strained I thought you would crack but not bleed. I would have broken under torture, I would have succumbed to indoctrination, I would never, can never resist Drell venom, I swear to you, Kerim, I do not deserve you and do not forgive me and I
am so sorry…please…”

His voice was broken and this was what Reverie had done to him, what he’d held back, what he needed her to know. What he’d been sure would pass his own lips once he lost control. He’d been able to work out lust on her body, careful strokes and control, and now he couldn’t touch her, take from her, be with her unless she knew how deep his regret traveled, how wide was his grief. Unless she knew the broken man she was committing herself to touch. Survivor’s guilt. After Akuze. That timeframe that resonated with her. That sense that she knew to her bones. The helplessness of being unscathed, having even benefited from her capture in that sick backward way of having used the information of invading her brain to save others, sway Palaven his way, their way. The way he’d gotten Thane back and her in his arms, seeming to sacrifice her again and flogging her forward to serve. That’s how he saw it. She couldn’t change that, couldn’t promise to forgive him, this was beyond that. She couldn’t unlearn what it was like to have his indoctrinated head in her mind urge her to betray everything. He couldn’t unlearn what it was like to helplessly search, helplessly watch, unable to pull her back with his strength or faith, having to wait for her to heal…if she ever would.

But here he was, plate pressed to her, head bowed, and she kissed along the line of his mandible as he trembled. She said “Take a deep breath. Tell me if I’m lying. I know you’ll know. I have heard what you’ve said and I believe you. I won’t offer forgiveness because I know that will only bring you despair that I don’t understand. I want you. I love you. I need you. I will need you every day of my life, and I want it to be long, and I want it to be with you. You don’t need to tell me anymore. Nothing you say will change that. Nothing you feel will change that. None of the truths that we haven’t told each other, mine or yours, will ever change that. I promise you.”

He hesitated, holding his breath, possibly afraid that she was lying, that she was bluffing, that he’d sense that. After long suspended seconds he drew in a breath, held it, released it slowly, pressed closer and breathed again, deep, savoring, his shoulders dropped in relief, his scent finally blended with hers and truth on her skin. He tilted his head and breathed until he was panting and his tongue darted out to taste her throat, until his hands convulsively tightened on her again and she had to stop kissing along his mandible because his mouth returned to hers.

His kiss was mint and faith and the swirling Reverie that refreshed and carried her along, worry and concern swept away as her fingers sought out his skin, traveled along plate, marveled that she could have been afraid at any point of his body, an absurd idea.

His arms cradled her, her body suspended as she had been so many times, as she wanted to be again for a lifetime, on hard plate and tough muscle, warm hide and home. She’d finally been able to give something back, she’d finally be able to give him something for himself, and stagnant fear-bound pools turned back into rivers and fountains, boundaries swept away as artificial and unnecessary.

He set her on her feet with her complaining whimper acknowledged and soothed, he removed her clothing whole, spreading kisses and scrapes of mouth plates, trailing lines of his talons along her revealed body, letting her move her hands to help with his clothing, but no more tearing. There was time and they were both certain they had more than an hour, they had a lifetime. Illusions were swept away and barriers, physical and emotional, discarded without malice.

He had been able to touch her, but hands only and gentle scrapes of his mouth plates, his voice echoing ardor with her hands clenched. He’d been unable to taste her and her hands had been restricted, mind focused on struggling through without reminder of prior pain. He’d watched her melt from tense and unable to touch him to wanting him so badly she only had whimpers to express it, arching of her body back against his, with him unyielding and unreachable.

With Reverie in her system all those fears and restrictions seemed silly, but there were still resurgent
thoughts and little untouchable fears spinning behind her eyes, and she wasn’t going to reach back, only reach forward. She put her hands on his shoulders because she could, thumbs through ridges. He was watching her as though she were not real and that’s what Reverie had to offer him now. His hands covered hers as he dragged his talons through the ridges and traced triple-tracked paths down her body, eyes on hers until he leaned in, leaned down to kiss her, reverent and slow. She tensed to surge forward to press skin to plate, but he held her back, pinning her shoulders to the wall as he focused on kissing her.

Nonverbal cues and direction of the body. He’d picked up some pointers from Thane.

Oh…Thane…I wanted…I shouldn’t be here with one of you, it should have been both of you and I still can’t touch you and I’m so sorry…

The rippling wash of regret was pushed back by the feel of Garrus’s mouth on hers, his tongue twining with hers. She had a thought about trying not to make things more complicated on purpose, but it had been this complicated. She had chosen one over the other.

Unforgivable.

Reprehensible.

Her breath sped up and Garrus deepened the kiss, waves of pleasure and relief able to push those thoughts back until she heard Thane’s answer in his voice.

Necessary.

Fitting.

We have time, Siha. I did not hold back from touching him because I could not touch you.

The unforgivables were forgiven. All of them, right now. It could not be any other way with grace and joy and pleasure spilling over like fountains. He had her shoulders pinned still but she reached out to rest her hands on his waist, stroke plate edges with her thumbs, press the edges of fingers to hide.

An echo of Thane’s voice soothed the rush of impatience as he repeated ‘We have time.’

Garrus was coiled patience and insistence, not holding back, but also not stumbling forward, tasting and exploring where he’d been unable, now wanting to make up for lost time. Turian time, no final goal, no end point. He is not on your rushed and frantic, complicated schedule, you need to be on his.

We have time.

Tension released from her neck and her head fell back, he pressed in closer, his hands slid down her shoulders, light talons on her upper arms, drawing goose bumps on her skin. She took advantage of his patience and studied distance and sought him out with her hands, everywhere she could reach.

Instead of bending down to reach her breasts he lifted her until her breasts were at his mouth level, one arm around her waist and his forearm under her ass, with that impossible Turian ease of strength that made her heart squeeze. She tilted her head back, panting, eyes closed, her fingers exploring at the base of his fringe, the side of his neck, along the mandibles that fluttered against her skin.

Panting slipped away from her and she lost control of moans as his tongue tugged on her nipple, teeth scraping lightly, whatever had changed in her mind, this stayed stable, exacting, he knew her
body and what she liked, what she wanted. What she’d never be able to ask for, she could only ask
him to touch her the way he knew how, some alchemy on her skin he created that couldn’t be
duplicated.

He lifted her slowly and his mouth trailed to her navel, where she was ticklish and when he licked a
teasing line got a convulsive giggle from her and an answering laugh from him as an apology,
shifting his teeth to the curve of her hips, drawing her back to moans.

When his tongue traveled to her clit she was mindless, gentle spreading numbness and warm teasing
that made her squirm in his grip until he pressed her more tightly into position, pinned as he drank
from her, moaned into her skin and growled until she felt it in her hip bones, thighs and the base of
her spine. She was again, after fearing she could never be again, small, feminine and mated,
trembling helpless as his arms held her pinned and his mouth brought her bliss and growls. Her
hands were free to dig into and under plate, nails and fingertips. She was once again please and his
name, home. He brought her to a long keening, shaking cry that left them both trembling. He kissed
the sides of her hips, the creases of her bent legs, kissed back up her body and lowered her onto him,
stinging and burning of tight entry slow, careful, his black-rimmed eyes watching her face, locking
his gaze with hers.

Reverie spread through her, transformed somehow, as though the drugs she’d been on for over a
month had altered her chemistry and tolerance, she’d expected to pass out, maybe he expected the
same, but it was a richer, deeper thrum in her blood that she could feel. It wasn’t loss of will, but
merging of will, and she trusted him in her bones, felt maybe she could trust herself again, differently
this time, stronger. She raised a leg to pull him tighter to her, arms closing around him, pressed as
tightly as she could, hungry to be closer, sated when he was as deep inside as he could be.

His eyes closed at that gesture, he gave up his own careful control and his features flowed to reflect
his rapidly unspooling emotions, relief, bliss, release of fear. He tilted his crest to her forehead and
wrapped his arms around her, hard, no longer afraid that his body was going to cause her pain.

She gave into the full pulsing beat of Reverie, familiar but deeper, stronger, carved out pieces of
herself giving more room to experience him. No regrets for those lost parts she no longer needed.
She was with him, and that was all she needed, and his arms had shifted from restraint to promise,
his mind newly chaotic and…entirely okay with that.

She said softly “I love you. When my hour is up…I want more hours. Please don’t leave me.”

His voice was soft, his hands in her hair and his mouth at her throat. “Never, Kerim. All my hours
are yours.”

She took all the hours in front of her, stayed in his arms, both tired of talk for a while, but hands and
mouths kept contentedly busy.

Thane found them, she had known, Garrus had known he would. He would always find them if he
thought they were lost.

Her sleepy eyes saw him in the dim light, he’d spoken her name or she wouldn’t have known he was
there. He wouldn’t have intruded into her cabin without permission, but this was not her cabin, it was
Garrus’s, another lovely reason to be here, permissions were all new.

He was smiling. Thane was smiling. She thought of reaching out to touch his wonderful smile but
she didn’t have permission. She smiled back.

Garrus said sleepily “Krios, stop standing there grinning. Get in.” She heard him pat the bed behind
him. Thane opened his mouth, it looked like he was going to disagree until Garrus said “Do not make me come get you, I’m comfortable. Don’t be a pain in the ass.”

She laughed as Thane complied, fit his body in behind Garrus’s with his economy of movement, a gloved hand squeezing her shoulder. Garrus turned his head to kiss him, murmured “Stay.” Half stern, half reassuring.

Thane said softly “Always, Invas’nam.” All was right with the world inside this room and that’s all she cared about right now. She fell back asleep, nightmares banished and tempered and tested joy warm in her veins.
They stayed joined and she slept peacefully, joyfully, the sense of happiness that had suffused her when she’d first spent time with Garrus, new again, deeper, filling her like solid and liquid and gas, in the deep places and the high reaches and flowing like a living thing. The flip of an internal switch from barely getting by to thriving. Home, brighter and stronger from experience and anticipation. No fear that it would not ‘work out’ in any way. This was how it was, how it would be.

Familiar hands and voices woke her slowly. She couldn’t make out the words, brain fuzzy, enjoying the timbre of deep, resonant voices that she loved.

Finally she could touch Garrus wherever and whenever she chose, but she still couldn’t touch Thane, didn’t even think he’d give her permission because he was enjoying…props…too much. He was getting off on the agency of making her crazed and exhausted, and Garrus had confirmed that she made him crazy in turn. Passively. She wasn’t permitted an active role. She shouldn’t be surprised that he had a flair for the dramatic and a love of a challenge.

She still couldn’t consider tasting venom…

So it worked for them both in a bizarre way that suited him. He was proving to her, to himself, that he could control himself. She was proving to him she wanted him without venom, that what was inherent in his skin wasn’t what she craved, that she writhed and arched under the sway of his voice and fingertips bound in leather, tongue held back behind some improvised barrier.

She was not tempted to take a new leap right now, exhausted of the will to take another chance when she was so deeply satisfied with the outcome of the chance she had just taken.

Thane seemed if not entirely transformed, then at least in transition, more honest, attempting happiness, relishing his challenges and opportunities.

She heard the echo of his voice in her head to complement the rumble of sounds she heard between them. “Would it be so terrible…?”

No. No, it would not. It would drive her to inconveniencing Garrus a lot while Thane inconvenienced Garrus a lot, and Garrus was thrilled with that outcome. He was a smug Turian shock absorber.

Thane’s relationship with Garrus was worthy of jealousy, but fortunately her sense of blinding jealousy eased to a more manageable admiration with the ability to touch Garrus again. She was willing to bet Thane wanted to keep up the odd power balance he’d established and had control over.

She was still, and probably always would be, a little jealous of their rough ease with each other, the extent to which they could give and take without question or fear, but she was happy for them. She’d been jealous mostly because fitting into that relationship with ease had been hers once and she’d engineered it. Now it all had a will of its own. Seeing it that way, though, as a thriving, living thing breaking out of set boundaries pleased more than alarmed her.

The possibilities with her while she was senseless seemed to delight Thane to no end, and although he didn’t seek her out on a six hour schedule, he made certain that four orgasms a day was a paltry goal and he wouldn’t tolerate a bar set that low. If she couldn’t touch his skin and he couldn’t touch hers, he’d found any number of barriers that would work, and he seemed to keep finding more. She wondered if he’d torn some of his wardrobe apart to find swaths of cloth and leather and soft, cool
furs that he seemed to pull from pockets like a pervy magician.

She giggled at the thought and they stopped talking. Garrus nudged her throat and licked at the vibrations, which tickled and made her laugh harder. He said “What’s so funny?”

She had…no filter…and didn’t care. She said “Thane’s a pervy magician!” and kept giggling.

There were pauses and held breath and Garrus said “I’m…not sure that translated. Forbidden necromancer?”

Thanè said quietly “I heard ‘deviant shaman’”

That drove her to laugh harder and she said “Thanè is a forbidden, deviant, necromancer-shaman!”

Garrus laughed and said “The way she said that, it’s starting to make sense.”

Thanè said “She is far from sense and not likely to make any soon. Your influence.”

Garrus rolled carefully, keeping the sheet on top of them, until she was in his lap, with him licking lazily at her throat, her thighs spread open over his bent thighs, his arms crossed over her stomach, holding her hands in his.

Garrus said with a deep sigh “It’s terrible. I hate seeing her like this.”

Thanè said lightly “Watch her and do not let her hands wander. I’m convinced she will be more unpredictable under your influence.”

Garrus said agreeably, keeping her hands in his and wedging her feet under the bend of his knee, hung on his spurs “Whatever you say, forbidden necromancer.”

She said under her breath “Cowards.” Though she was grateful she wouldn’t be asked to leap again, he wouldn’t expect it, and would prevent it through word and deed and intent. She was perfectly and zealously safe in their arms. Two of them in cooperation always making up for the third’s inadequacies.

Her inadequacies and the laughter drifted off gently, forgotten with Thanè kneeling between their spread, entwined thighs. Thanè said quietly “Kiss her, Invas’nam, let me see. I can remember perfectly every moment her lips have touched mine, but I crave seeing that her lips are properly appreciated in each moment, and you can do that for me.”

She was mesmerized by watching Thane’s lips, listening to his voice, barely registering the meaning in this blurred place. Garrus’s hand held both of her forearms and his other hand came to the side of her face to turn her to look at him, gazing into startled doe eyes for a long moment before bringing her lips to his, fervent and passionate, his talons along the side of her face. Thanè’s gloved finger moved along her cheek to trace along the defined spaces between Garrus’s fingers, along her cheekbone, along the under curve of her distended lip against Garrus’s mouth plates.

She heard and felt the mingled moans of all three of them, gave to Garrus, felt Thanè’s hand withdraw and then both of his hands slide in along the curved lines from her knees to the apex of her thighs, slowly dragging his fingers, shifting the sheet back and settling some warm-textured and cool temperature fabric or hide or synthetic. It would be thin and pliable and impermeable, he didn’t trust to sheets protecting her, only to something that wouldn’t soak through, that she soaked from one side and he from the other, clinging to her skin, warming and cooling to his breath and his mouth.

Thanè’s tongue grazed lightly, teasing and warm until she tried to arch closer, but her body was restrained. Thanè’s hand spanned the base of Garrus’s cock, pressed and gripped, slid a finger along the edge of where their bodies merged and stroked against her G-spot, his mouth and hands causing
her and Garrus to moan, gasp, bite at each other, turning from slow and languorous, indulgent of whims to hungry and frantic.

Venom soaked into Garrus from Thane’s other hand, rhythmic and hard thrusts of bared fingers that recoiled through his body, twisting inside her as she clenched around him. Fevered want was fed back to her from his mouth, the growls in his throat, teeth and raw need.

She pulled Garrus’s hands down with hers, not taking a moment to ask, hoping to be trusted, wanting to span Thane’s shoulders, digging into leather, touching how she could, trusted to not touch where she shouldn’t.

Garrus’s hands traveled with her and kept hers pinned as four hands overlapping spread nails and talons over the expanse of warm, hard, straining muscle that moved under her palms.

She had a brief image of this being her first combined fantasy of how it would be with them, Garrus inside, Thane’s mouth on her, and had a moment’s inverted realization of how different the thin but compelling fantasy had been from this reality, and then it was lost to sensation, growls and moans and clenching body and hands, Garrus drinking in her kiss.

Then mental inversion was swapped with literal inversion, Thane drew back and guided Garrus over with insistent hands, and she was suspended under Garrus, his cock shoved harder inside by his arms, unyielding bars around her hips and under her breasts, holding her up, tight to him. Garrus bit into her shoulder, holding her in place, not pain in Reverie, but the craved reality of Garrus’s rough way of obliterating limits and boundaries, taking what he needed, giving everything he could.

Thane’s provoked, unleashed hunger was for both of them, slamming into Garrus, harsh, hard, causing the referred thrusts into her body that Garrus accentuated with snaps of his hips, growling and grunts and frenzy reflected in voices, in demanding hands on her body. She was exhausted and numb and over-sensitized and Thane knew it, having caused it to happen, owning the result as his fingers on her were gentle and soothing despite the hungered frenzy of his thrusts, coaxing her body to his call until he was as demanding with her as he was with Garrus, until Garrus twisted inside her relentlessly and she came with a scream, Garrus lapping at her shoulder, Thane finally succumbing to release with his tight, keening groan that she missed so desperately.

All three shuddering and hoarse, Thane leaned over Garrus and rested his weight on him for a long moment, panting slowly subsiding and arms around both of them.

Thane and Garrus negotiated moving back to the side, Garrus stayed inside her, sets of arms entwined, panting easing back into breathing, soft moans and murmured endearments, and an entangled sleep with the pulsing of home.

When her alarm went off Thane said softly “Siha, turn off the alarm. Stay.”

She started to get up but Garrus said “Is anybody going to die if you don’t get out of bed right now?”

She said “Probably. Somewhere.”

He huffed and nudged the back of her neck “Is anybody going to die as a direct result of you not getting out of bed right now.”

She said “…probably not?”

Garrus said “Good enough for me. You got no real sleep last night, we made sure of it. Now we’ll make sure you get some.”
She drew in breath to protest and he tightened his arms around her.

She said “At least let me set another alarm.”

Thane said lazily “She is bargaining. Go for the kill.”

Garrus insisted “No alarm. Go back to sleep. If anybody dies it’s our fault.”

She said, frustrated “But you guys don’t care if anybody dies.”

Thane confirmed “Correct.”

Garrus said with a kiss to the back of her neck “That’s the beauty of it. Sleep. Hold on, when’s your birthday?”

She said “What? Why?”

Thane asked “What’s a birthday?”

Garrus explained “Human holiday, celebrates the date of being born.”

Thane said “That is…very odd. She did not do anything worthy of celebration. The mother perhaps should be honored on that date.”

She said, offended for humankind “I breathed!”

Thane said dismissively “Low bar. Humans set low bars for so many things.”

Garrus repeated “When’s your birthday, Kerim?”

She said “About four months ago.”

Garrus said “I didn’t celebrate it for years, so now is your birthday celebration. You get no alarms and nobody dying. Happy birthday.”

She sighed and said “Can I also get a pair of gloves?”

Thane said blandly “We can discuss it later. If you manage to stay true to birthday form and continue to breathe.”

Garrus was aware that she would mostly be spending the day watching and likely interrupting David and Legion, and that there was no need to be there…and that Legion could send her reports without her hovering. She was really too happy to want to argue so she said “Fine…but you guys are going to have to sing a song.”

Garrus said disdainfully with a yawn “Turians don’t sing.”

Thane said sleepily “I have decided that Drell also do not sing.”

She said “I can’t think of anything I want that won’t also result in more loss of sleep.”

Garrus said “We’ve got a lot of birthdays to make up for, pace yourself Kerim.”

She grinned and said “Fine. I’ll see you in six hours.”

Thane laughed and a gloved hand moved to stroke her cheek and then his hand moved over Garrus’s arm, both settling her back against them, Garrus kissing the back of her neck and saying “Someone
explain why that was funny….later.”

They slipped back into sleep hums and she took a little stolen faux birthday time to listen, breathe, appreciate where she was, soak in the lucky, and drift back to unscheduled sleep at the insistence of men she loved more than she thought possible. She didn’t have to say thank you or I’m sorry and they’d just given her their rough ease with each other. They had spent seven weeks together that she’d missed, so much time with each other and love for each other without her that it did feel like she had some birthdays to make up for, definitely had catching up to do, catching up that didn’t seem like strain or work, but joy. They were such different men than the ones she’d first touched, whose first kiss she’d seen. She breathed happily, not counting, just appreciating, until her breath deepened and lengthened back into sleep.

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oOoOooOoOo

She woke to sudden realization, panic and said fervently “Oh shit.”

Garrus was already awake, she wondered for how long, but he said drily “She’s figured out something to worry about. Again.”

Thane said “I do not have to pretend as though I am surprised.”

She said “Garrus…I forgot…what if I’ve indoctrinated you through sex?”

Garrus said “WHAT?”

Thane started to laugh, wheezing, strained and quiet.

She said miserably “It’s really not all that funny.”

Garrus started to laugh too, seemingly reassured by Thane, not by her, obviously.

Thane said “I do not consider it a concern. The medical team does not consider it a concern. Jane, however…”

Garrus said “Ah…what the hell. It’s for a good cause. We’ll find out in the next scan.”

She said “What if I just indoctrinated you both?”

Thane said “I believe you had already considered that we could have surgery.”

She moaned “Not my ideal solution.”

Garrus was busy laughing as he said “Do humans go into heat? It would explain a lot.”

Thane said succinctly “Heat is cyclic. She is constant.”

Garrus settled down his laughter and kissed the top of her head “Happy birthday, Kerim. Free pass to indoctrinate us both. We’d likely both be relieved to have it over with, considering how often we are at risk anyway. We volunteer to die, we volunteer to be indoctrinated, we volunteer for surgery.”

Thane said solemnly “Seconded.”

Garrus said happily “At least if this is indoctrination day, I’m making the most of it. Best indoctrination ever.”

She wasn’t tired anymore, and they were convincing.
It was the best of impromptu birthdays, possibly the best of any other birthday included. Once she’d started bargaining she was lost, as predicted. Happily lost.

Eventually as always happens, bodies required food and showers, Garrus stayed in his cabin for the shower and Thane came with her back to hers, shared a shower. He stayed behind her in the spray always, washcloths and soap between them. She considered the constantly held tension between them, unable to collapse it, lean back against him and answer the question.

She wanted to touch him in order to know the answer, but she really did not want to touch him because a large part of her thought she already knew the answer.

But she wasn’t sure. She’d ask him possibly someday… “How long do you think we can keep this up?”

But she could hear in his newly minted voice with less deference and more humor “How long can I keep up an otherwise unsustainable way of living, essentially juggling, with no tolerance for error? I believe you know the answer to that question. You wish to ask how long can you keep it up, and neither of us know the answer to that.”

He was enjoying telling her what not to do, and that made Thane sense.

She had no idea if it made Jane sense or not.

He played with her hair in the water, until she was clenching her fists and he glided a cloth-covered finger down the back of her arm to trembles and a finger slid between her tightened fingers. She squeezed rhythmically and said “About that pair of gloves…”

He said smoothly “Although you continue to breathe, and that is commendable, I find I enjoy the state of things far too much at the moment to allow any change. Now that you feel free to touch Garrus, I plan on enjoying that as well. I shall savor one victory at a time. I suggest you do the same.”

She said “You mean I have no choice but to do the same.”

He said “If you choose to see it in its harshest light, then yes. But that does not exclude savoring. You are not ready. I am not ready to see your enthusiasm fade to apprehension. We have more context to create.”

She squeezed his finger and relented, just holding on. “All right.” She thought to say ‘I’m sorry’ but no longer did it, she’d been threatened with physical violence as a joke too often, and suspected it caused mental anguish more often, so she relented fully.

He said “Siha, this is not only for you, but for me. Allow me more time to have no opportunities to lose myself, to potentially do you harm through my skin or my loss of control. With things as they are, I know beyond a doubt that I will do no damage. Allow me more time to ensure that I will evoke in you, or in myself, no more pity or disgust. As I am now, I deserve no pity. As we are together, it causes no disgust. Only overflowing desire. I had hoped…over time…to desire you less. To somehow become accustomed. That is a lost hope. As much as I desired the woman that you were, my desire for the woman I know you to be is beyond my hope to control. It is not that I think you are fragile. I consider you to be the first unbroken person I have ever encountered. I know that beyond a doubt I cannot break you, as I had once feared. You are my Siha, but no longer the avatar of a Drell Goddess. You are a human Goddess in your own right with your own rituals and presence. Let us be honest that what I face in our future is not me doing you harm, but you being forced to reject me for my spirit being unable to overcome the consequences and circumstances of the state of my body.”
He turned her with cloth-covered hands to pin her shoulders to the wall, wet and cold in quick contact and then the impression seared away by the heat in his eyes. He said softly “It has become commonplace to you to speak to mechanical Gods and have an evolved Geth AI wear your armor like a favor in battle, to share the bed of a Speaker of the Spirits in the form of a Turian whose ancestral home has walls that echo with his words. You slip among stars unseen and you gather adherents and followers on every planet and station, eyes turned your way and hopes tuned to your ambitions. Yet beyond all that…”

One of his hands shed the cloth and glowed green, moved to her face, close enough to feel the heat radiate from his hand onto rapidly cooling skin, biotic warmth caressed there “You are my Jane. Mine. This I know to be true. You are my mate, my heart, my hope. I am yours. As with many truths, my love, I do not care if anybody knows it but you. I love Garrus, and he loves me, but we all know I would have allowed you to speak for us both, cast me entirely aside, end my life. You chose him first between us, you chose me, Siha, and you will not cast me aside. Later and last does not change that you are mine, that I am yours, and that I will allow nothing to change that. Not my own failings and flaws, not your impulsive need to take all harm onto yourself. If you will not allow me to alter my body to suit you, then wait until the day when the memory of my skin on your tongue makes you sway closer. Wait until it is not something you will bear to have the rest of me. If that day never comes, so be it, but I will give all I have to give until that day, and I will accept that you give no less than all you have to give on that day. On that day you will not touch me because you wish to answer a question. You will touch me because you know the answer, and that answer will not change from that day forward.”

It must be a particular Drell skill, his mode of speech where he spoke not to her ego, or her persona, but to her spirit, brushing all else aside. She was not her body or her status, and he did not address those. He spoke to only her.

Her body, her persona, her status…wanted that day to be today. She wanted a dramatic lunge to him, a promise, a reunion and no distance.

Her spirit would not allow it. Her spirit felt the shape and breadth of what he wanted, that unquestioning bond he’d envisioned the first moment he’d seen her, then violated by both of them unknowing, now known. He wished to tear down all prior scaffolding and foundation and begin slowly with patience and the best materials, the best tools, uncompromising.

If she wanted the purity of the potential of the dark dance she had shared with him on the Presidium, she must set aside questions and hesitation.

He needed her to know she was truly safe and would be in his arms, and the warning was for her to learn to protect him as she had not.

The question shifted from whether or not she could tolerate venom to whether or not she would hide from him as she had, pretend as she had, or be herself and allow him to see her and not have to lie for her, bear her excuses and apologies for things about which he would accept no excuses or apology.

She saw in his eyes that he was daring her to live up to being a human Siha, accept him as the speaker for the Drell and cast aside the unworthy. He would not accept the woman pretending to be on Mars. He demanded to touch the woman of blade and fire, both unflinching. He would not be an independent contractor and she would not be his Commander, he would be her mate and equal and she would not touch him until that day. He would not allow it, and this is what his honesty meant. No more cover, no more camouflage, not in his presence.

She said slowly with a warm, spreading smile “You don’t ask for much, do you Krios?”
His smile was the same in response “I demand my due, Shepard, on the day I am worthy of it.”

She said fervently “I look forward to the day I am worthy to give it.”

She spent the next few hours in the cradle of his chest and thighs, talking softly with him as he braided and unbraided her hair, combing it out with bare fingers and beginning again, soft kisses against cloth and puffs of breath against her neck, his warm, deep voice in her ear. The physical space was respected between them. No more wavering or questionning from her, no more testing. They would both know when the day came, and it would come. She had faith.

Garrus brought her chocolate.

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She was better able to switch between personal and professional tracks with her current options, that was definite. She relished both opportunities at this point.

David and Legion had spent time together, Reni had settled in well and nobody had really needed her for the 24 hours she went AWOL. Nobody had died. Bonus.

Legion’s destination was...Rannoch. Legion had determined he could help with obtaining interface pods and coordinate with Tali, shut down a server that had Reaper code infecting it, and then take the Geth from that server and convince them and theoretically others to join in on the fight against the Old Machines ultimately and Cerberus in the interim.

Legion had assured her that there was deep concern in the Consensus, willingness to rewrite others as the heretics had been rewritten and rejoined the Consensus, adding in their experiences and subjective experiences of what seemed essentially Geth slavery. Legion hoped to introduce David, clear out the Reaper code with the assistance of David’s intellect and devise a cooperative plan. David hoped to analyze Legion’s code and transfer comprehension and motivation along with David’s own blend of persuasion.

Tali was informed of their plan, and there was a few long moments of Tali considering, hard. No sputtering or smoke.

Jane said “Quarians often have excellent poker faces, but in this case, you’ve even developed poker body. You’re not giving anything away.”

Tali said “Practice with the political jackals preying on my people and you pick up a few things.”

Jane said “Glad to hear it. I’ll be able to get some Geth, pull those away that are attacking you directly, but I need you to correlate the two and get us credit.”

Tali considered and said “I will do that. Not directly, but I will allow a leak before the fact. That way I won’t have to make a promise, but the leak will predict the event, and I can confirm it if asked.”

Jane grinned and said “I love the learning curve here. Anything you need from me?”

Tali said “Get as many of those Geth converted as quickly as you can, give me something to work with. It will be worth being branded a Geth Lover if I can appear to be able to influence their behavior. If I can prove after the run on Cerberus that we can work together, maybe I can go to Rannoch too.”

She sounded wistful and hopeful. Jane said “I’ll do everything I can to make that happen.”
Tali had a smile in her voice “I know you will. How is Garrus? How is Thane? How are you?”

Jane smiled softly and said “We’re good. We’re really good. Terrible few months…”

Tali said softly “Understatement…Garrus was frantic. I’m so glad you’re back…and you’re you…and that we can save our people from this.”

Jane said gently “You know, I’m usually the first person to want to punch someone for pointing out the benefits of something gained during adversity…but…I feel I came out ahead. Professionally. Personally I’ve got a long way to go, but with the friends and family I have…”

Tali said “I’m just happy to be part of that family. As long as they are going to portray me as they are, I might as well adopt Legion.”

Jane laughed and said “I’ll file for joint custody.”

Tali said “Take care of yourself, Jane. I missed you.”

Jane smiled “I missed you too.”

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Stealth and shuttle took them into Rannoch and there wasn’t much in the way of combat. With Garrus, Thane and Shepard, they cleared a path for Legion and David.

Legion presented David with the interface pod and basically ignored Shepard, which she was getting used to. She’d asked David so many questions and been beatifically assured that there was nothing left to say.

Legion was silent and David looked…digitized…while he smiled. He was definitely into this.

She said wistfully after it got quiet “I kinda miss not being the one to have my brains scrambled by a thingy. I feel left out.”

Garrus watched the entry choke points and said “I for one am perfectly happy to not have your head scrambled by a thingy again.”

Thane was silent and watchful until he said curiously “How often have your brains been…scrambled…Shepard?”

She provided helpfully “Prothean beacon. Out for two days. Kept popping up in my head for months, still will every now and then. The Protheans were visceral people.”

Garrus said “Liara scrambled her brains at least three times that I saw, but mostly it just made Liara tired.”

Thane said drily “I can appreciate that.”

Shepard grinned and said “Then there was the green Asari at the Thorian.”

Garrus said with a shrug “At least she didn’t throw up on us after we killed her a few times.”

Shepard said “There was that one Asari at the bar…remember? Flux…after Saren.”

Garrus said “Yeah, but she didn’t do anything, you were just drunk and fell over.”
Shepard said hotly “She did something. Some whammy.”

Garrus said wearily “There was no whammy, Shepard, only Ryncol.”

Shepard said thoughtfully “Huh. Okay, so brain scrambling count goes down and won’t go up today. Wait. Morinth. That wasn’t fun. Might be canceled out by the Consort. That was more fun. Vitkiv, not fun. I’ve been scrambled by a lot of Asari here. Yahlis did her best. Okay, maybe I am not missing having my brain scrambled. You know, it’s happened a lot, and they do not cover that in training.”

Garrus said “Not to…alarm anyone…but we have Geth converging.”

She said “How many?”

Garrus squinted and said “It looks like…ALL of them…”

She panicked and said “Well…shut the door or something.”

Garrus said “There is no damned door. So what do you think, hide?”

Thane came over to look, though staying back in the shadows. He stood solemnly, tense, taking in the sea of slowly walking Geth “I would not suggest firing first.”

She said “Everyone calm. I’d try to get Legion’s attention, but I’d risk scrambling them both. Thane, I want you cloaked if fighting starts. I need you to protect them if we can’t. We’re visible, they’ve seen us, Garrus and I can stall if it comes to that. Weapons down. We’re going to step aside and see what happens.”

She lowered her weapon to the floor, Garrus reluctantly followed, but after another glance he did not have a better idea. They stepped into the sides of the doorway, leaving the guns in plain sight as an offering of no hostility. Thane had made no acknowledgement other than to disappear.

She thought ‘I’d really like to kiss Thane right about now, before we meet at the shores of the sea and I haven’t womaned up and touched him. He just did what I asked. No diving, no arguing, just invisible. I love that man.’

She shared a glance with Garrus and she allowed a small half smile. ‘I’d like to kiss him too.’

She swallowed once, hard, restrained herself from sticking her head out the door and waited. She tilted her head to the ceiling and listened. Footsteps grew louder and closer, it sounded like hundreds of feet on crunching sand and stone.

Well…if I die here…I did okay. Only regret is that I don’t have more time.

The crunching stopped and suspense was hammering in her chest, but she didn’t move.

Well, it was out of my hands and I didn’t like it and I still don’t like and they could just put that on my new memorial. “She Did Not Like It.”

Legion spoke “There are several Geth that have chosen to help after David Archer rerouted motivation.”

Shepard panted a breath and said “Oh. Good.”

Thane reappeared in his corner, near to David, who was beatifically smiling still.
Garrus said with a growl “You know, you are kind of an asshole, Legion.”
Chapter 26

There were a lot of Geth. A LOT…of Geth. They had an army now. Tali was able to coordinate having the current Geth available troops under Legion’s control mop up or “reabsorb” a great number of Geth that had been harassing Quarians far from the Flotilla. The Admirals were able to truly begin to discuss possible peace and alliance. More than sufficient forces, mostly Geth but a generous contingent of Quarian military and civilian volunteer vessels were committed to combating Cerberus. Quietly. All communications regarding Cerberus and coordination was transmitted under an encryption system David Archer had developed that Tali and Legion and Kasumi were all unable to crack.

The interface pods were installed behind the airlock on the CIC in the approach hallway. David and Legion were hooked up within a few days and hardly seen outside the units for a while. Her own trips into EDI land were going to take place later, if at all, as their time was spent right now in mapping Cerberus data, which was with Kasumi’s help beginning to be tracked in real time. Targets were being identified, the Cerberus main base identified in a system that EDI confirmed would conform to the specifications regarding the star at the center. If and when they were able to confirm The Illusive Man’s location and likely escape method, be able to track him, they would go.

Jane was fizzing with potential here. She had never felt this fast of a surge forward of gains, personal and professional. She felt as though she were hurtling through plans, a greater circle of potential and cooperation. She was beginning to get the hang of the “out of control” portion of this section of execution. It had been her idea, but so much of it was now in the hands of others. She felt less isolated and more supported, instead of interpreting it as a loss of control. Legion and David were allies, not gambles.

Well, not gambles anymore.

She did a great deal of watching and listening and talking to EDI and Joker while she hung out on the CIC, talking to Reni, who was often there to make sure that David didn’t overwork. David was quiet and communicated from inside the system, sending Jane comprehensive reports and asking questions, making suggestions and strategy leaps in ways that were jarring compared to the look of the often smiling but glassy-eyed and quiet young man. He had suggestions for attack vectors, ways to track through Mass Effect transportation, projected estimates of requirements. It was one thing to know he was smarter than she was, it was another entirely to get all of the specifics.

She was beginning to feel that if he hijacked the entire ship, maybe they’d all be better off…

The reconstruction of the data that had flowed through David was almost complete two weeks in, and attention was being turned toward confirmation that the information was still good. They got more information than they could process immediately, a huge glut, depending on David’s and Legion’s coordination to be able to direct their attention to the likely targets.

She was in a good place. Granted this was less than 1% of the total war and they weren’t even approaching dealing with Reaper forces yet, but she’d take it. She wanted Cerberus badly. It was an odd but true construct of sentiment, the fact that Cerberus had intended to stand up for human rights and instead was decimating them. Cerberus was emotionally worse than the Reapers, who were so alien to her experience that she could not empathize with them, did not understand their motives, could not get in their heads. She could get into the Illusive Man’s head too easily, and betrayal, the stab in the back, was worse than the frontal assault. The damage Cerberus could do was a tiny fraction of the damage Reapers had done, but she wanted them more. Maybe because it was entirely achievable, but also because she considered it to be her fight personally.
More odd constructs in the mix. Cerberus had given her back her life, at great cost, also personally at The Illusive Man’s request. It all entwined and tightened along a personally felt chord, an intimacy the Reapers couldn’t touch.

Getting Legion, David and Tali to work together had been her idea. It belonged to her the way catching a scent belonged to a hunter in the forest. She had a pack behind her.

She had been around Garrus and Thane so much that a growl did not seem out of place from her throat.

Garrus had understood her unwillingness to include Turians in the Cerberus raid, and had been mollified by the fact that she also had not included the Alliance. He did not think that the risk was high enough to exclude Turians, but she’d made the final choice. She could not afford any leak. Cerberus agents were most likely to be human, and there would be no humans found among the Quarians or the Geth. Turians in this case ironically worked too closely with humans, there was a potential for infiltration.

She was keeping a sane schedule, eating at regular mealtimes, and at the times she was expected to eat she often had a visit or an undisguised supervisory check from Thane, Garrus or both. In this case Thane didn’t approach but leaned against a wall, watching her eat. Everyone was getting used to her having a Drell shadow. Since he clearly didn’t care what anybody else’s opinion on the subject was, he avoided explanation, she avoided confrontation, and everyone else refused to make eye contact, more often amused than threatened. Thane was not the most integrated of the Normandy crew, and he had kept a distance that was understandable after his return. He had his own mission and was not found amid crowds of people, limiting his interactions to Garrus and Shepard. He was demonstrative with her in ways he wasn’t with Garrus…up to and including sex that had inspired a poster montage. Now it was taking the shape of shadowing her and staring at her, sometimes to ensure she was taking care of herself, sometimes to escort her away to privacy, sometimes to behold her and walk away. Thane and Garrus had both chosen to maintain the public appearance of both being involved with her, and close, but not necessarily involved with each other. She doubted anybody bought it, but considering Thane was involved, there was also no overt criticism and only Jack and Kasumi would go out of their way to comment about it to him, which he tended to ignore or simply smile in response. That smile is why she thought they kept on doing it. It was…an affecting smile.

His behavior at the moment was the Drell version of ‘come hither,’ which involved unabashedly staring at her until she finished eating. She was so used to his regard at this point that it had just become an odd cultural difference. Had a human done it, it might have been disconcerting, but this was just… Thane… and it was perfectly normal. He was a combination bodyguard and mate, no longer attempting to provide any other social or professional context for their relationship. She recalled Joker saying he’d turn her down out of terror, just in case a Drell assassin wanted more time with her.

There was no doubt he wanted more time with her. There was no doubt he was claiming more time with her. There was also no doubt that she enjoyed that, and it wasn’t likely she’d be offering a relationship to anybody else any time soon even had she had spare time or spare energy to do so, because she imagined asking a nice man or woman out to dinner and having an impassively threatening Drell bodyguard and mate who happened to be an assassin watching her the entire time.

He’d encourage her to have any relationship she wanted, she knew that, she also knew she likely couldn’t find anybody up to her current standards. She also didn’t doubt that if a prospective lover were to make a slip in respect or otherwise, said Drell bodyguard and mate would kill them. Not out of jealousy. He’d likely inform her tartly that she required better taste in bedmates and perhaps she should allow him to screen for her…sounded about right. If she wanted to date again he would insist
on vetting the process.

She wasn’t approaching being upset or feeling restrained by that…and he knew it, and again, he didn’t care who else knew it.

Lovers had once been escape from work, but secondary to work. A luxury. With all that they had been through, she couldn’t imagine becoming involved with anybody that wasn’t involved with her work, where their lives were not intertwined. She had been ruined for others by Turian devotion and Drell insight and empathy...even Drell relentlessness. She had found exactly what she wanted, and no longer wished escape, but immersion.

He normally might have made some attempt at being restrained or subtle, but he was shedding some of his practiced subtle and she had encouraged it, and this was the form it took.

He’d discovered the ability to talk during sex without any repercussions or tiremit storm resulting. He was still mostly nonverbal around her and Garrus as they spent nights together. Alone he was doing a great deal of unfair talking.

She was spending a great deal of time being grateful.

She walked to him with a smile and he took her hand in his, drew it under his elbow so her hand was resting on his forearm. An oddly courtly, chivalrous gesture. He led her to his cabin, as he often did to whichever destination he chose. His cabin, her cabin, Garrus’s cabin…the shuttle…dark alcoves and quiet places. The question of exhibitionism was no longer explored after he had seen her mind opened with blunt tools. He knew everything about her that he needed to know. He asked few questions, did not seek her superficial confirmation of what he already knew. He shared memories with her, memories of his life, memories of how it had felt to see her for the first time, touch her for the first time. He spoke of what they would do if there were no war, what they would do at the end of the war when they succeeded.

He calmed the racing of her mind by giving her focus, pouring confidence and assurance into her, releasing her from reality as though he had found a catch, some connector that he could unlatch with his hands, with his voice and body, set her free.

He brought her slices of his own mind because he wanted her to know everything there was to know about him. Somewhere he had learned to cut hair and he spent a great deal of time talking, playing with her hair or steering her to sit, cut it with shining blades, run his fingers through it. It was much longer than it had been, and when she put her hair up, as she had to, he often pulled it back down and rearranged it to his liking.

He walked her into his cabin and turned her away from him, slipped his fingers into her hair or the simple elastic creating a ponytail, disentangled it and pulled it off. She smiled and tilted her hair forward and he began to talk.

He said softly “We will go to Earth, to a desert. I wish to lie beside you under the stars where your people were born. To see the light of your full moon reflected in your eyes, silvering your skin. I do not know enough of Earth custom. Discussion of birthdays revealed my ignorance. There is a great deal to learn.”

He continued with her hair for a few minutes, rearranging her. Then he continued “Your ceremonies and customs are fascinating. So much of Drell history has been lost. There only remains one marriage ceremony among us. There are so many human customs I doubt even you know them, or most of them. Drell have their wrists bound together and I had wondered if human tradition had anything similar. Drell venom in that case mingles. There is no such thing as venom among humans, 
but I found that a similar sentiment exists. A blood vow. It seemed that since superficial sharing would never be enough, humans went deeper.”

Finished with her hair, his hands began to roam over her body, his hand spanning her throat to press her head back against his shoulder. He would ruin her hair and solemnly fix it again after she’d finished pressing her head back against him until it pulled and snagged out of its moorings.

He said closer to her ear, cradling her against him “You have already bound our wrists, and you have given of yourself in blood, no more should be asked or given. I was pleased to discover that by the vows of some of your people, the Celtics, we have already been bound.” He nuzzled at her neck slowly, through her hair, twined his hand with the light on it with her hand and said “You are blood of my blood, and bone of my bone. I give you my body, that we two might be one. I give you my spirit ‘til our life shall be done. You cannot possess me for I belong to myself. But while we both wish it, I give you that which is mine to give. You cannot command me, for I am a free person. But I shall serve you in those ways you require, and the honeycomb will taste sweeter coming from my hand.”

He said softly “Reading these words, I knew you promised that to me before my skin touched yours. You knew what you wanted and what you could offer me, what you wanted in return, and I told you no. I believed I had wrested a declaration of love from you if not against your will, then certainly I had bypassed it, but you gave me that love freely and there was no need for the coercion of my skin, my words or my will. We have moved beyond that vow except for one line where my thoughts catch. You have given your blood and bone and bond, your body and your strength and your truth, but there is one further thing I will have from you.”

She thought again ‘You don’t ask for much, do you Krios?’ but didn’t say it. Whatever he was willing to ask, she was willing to give, or he would not ask.

He said against her ear “You once asked if I would love you if you provided menial labor on the Citadel, and I said I wished to prove I loved you as you were. The vow you will give me is to promise me that you will allow me to serve you in those ways you require. I demand no promise that you keep yourself safe, that is beyond my power as you belong to yourself and you are a free person and I cannot command you. Wherever your path leads, Jane, I demand the right to walk beside you, sit beside you, stay with you. This begins now. You will always be able to send me away if I am unworthy of you, and I can hope to be back at your side once I have earned the right, if I earn the right. You must promise to never send me away because you feel unworthy. Odds are high that you may suffer permanent loss of what you believe I may value in you that grants you worth. Age as well may take from you the assets you treasure. Your beauty, your strength, your mind, these things can be taken from you and I know you would wish to bear the loss alone. I claim the right to stay at your side. That is another human vow. In sickness and in health. The words in Drell vows state ‘What you once held tight in your own fist will belong to us, held together in our devoted bound hands, and no trial shall be so great that we cannot hold it between us, shared.’”

He said solemnly “I broke that vow. I abandoned Irikah. I abandoned Kolyat. I did not allow them to care for me, I did not allow myself anything but duty, and then I failed in that. There was love, and I would not allow it to reach my heart, would not allow my fists to release their burdens. I offer you my open hands, hands that cannot touch yours, but will someday. One day there shall be no war, we shall go to Earth and see her stars, and we will discover the taste of honeycomb from open hands. I shall write words in Drell script through the sand on your skin, words you cannot read but will sink into your blood, into your heart as I translate.”

His hand squeezed hers and he said “If that does not come to pass, you will give me the right to your hand, to your heart. I will see for you if your eyes do not see. I will find you in that darkness. If your
ears cannot hear my hand will be in yours, gloved or bare it does not matter, I require that right. We will hold our burdens within our hands, we will not allow ourselves clenched fists alone. If we fail, we try again. Promise me.”

This was why she wouldn’t marry, wouldn’t bond that way, couldn’t ask someone to do that for her. To have him demand to bear it, hold it between them…

‘If we fail we try again.’

She said “I don’t know how.”

There was a smile in his voice as he said “We will learn together.”

She breathed hard for a few moments and decided she didn’t know how, and that was okay, and she would try to figure it out. She said “Okay. The best we can. I shall serve you in the ways you require. I will open my fists to hold your hands. If you are by my side I will not question that you wish to be there.”

He said softly in her ear “I need to be there, Jane. To be the man I wish to be and not the man I was, to be with the woman you are and not the woman you present yourself to be, I need to be there.”

She was still breathing hard, some internal avalanche, she couldn’t catch her breath. She said “It seems I think this will be difficult. But it’s nice that you didn’t ask for something impossible… like beating you at Pon-Ifa. You also… haven’t asked that I be your eyes or hold your hand.”

He was still smiling, his hand squeezing hers. “You sought me out when I had not the courage. You walked into a room alone, unarmed, terrified, when I wished to return to you, unworthy. I am yours. You know this. You would never abandon me if I told you I needed you. If I could not tell you, you would know the answer for yourself and would not allow me to send you away. A Pon-Ifa board does not contain what it is you inspire. I may grasp politics and manipulation, but you grasp hearts and can turn an assassin into a knight, something beyond my power. I need no vow from you, Siha, you have already given beyond my dreams to ask. Of all that I have done, of the things deserving condemnation and death, if you have not sent me away, if you have not denied me the right to be by your side, I will give you no cause to do so in the future. You may choose that I am unworthy for no reason or any of the reasons I have given you, and I will accept that. Of all that you have given me, I will never choose that you are unworthy. There are many things I need never ask, you will give them unasked.”

His hands left the position they’d held while he spoke, his hand left her throat and the other unlinked from her fingers. Her breath still came hard, a deep flush of apprehension and vulnerability, exposed and one of his favorite words… unworthy.

So he made her more exposed.

Of course he did.

With him slowly stripping her clothes off and dragging his fingers over her skin she said “We should revisit that thing about you being a sadist.”

She was getting used to Thane having a sense of humor. Garrus’s influence. He said smoothly “I did not cause the pain of your clenched fist, Siha. I only wish to ease the resultant…” He cupped her breasts in his palms and said as her nipples darkened and hardened under his fingertips “Strain.”

She said “Ironically… I don’t have much to do with my hands but make fists.”
He said steadily “Someday you will, Siha. Someday perhaps we will explore that thing about you being a sadist. Until that day…” He lifted her and carried her to his bed, put her down on it carefully and followed her down, to the side of her body, his hands roaming over her as he watched her face, her breath and uncontrollable shudders of her muscles.

His mouth was at her ear as one of his fingers moved over her lips, strokes and circles and then pushing inside for her to suck, pulling back out and painting her lips wet, his other hand roaming from breast to thighs, moving in lazy circles.

He said against her ear “There are other words I learned, dowry and dower, human wedding customs. You might think that with all the memories I have of you, with my cock straining as it is right now, that I would remember your mouth on me, or the look in your eyes or you trembling eyelids when you could no longer keep them open. You were there, Siha, and you were the same, but there is a truth about Drell memory that captures a moment too well. If I remember you that way, I must also remember my selfishness, my blindness…I cannot remove myself from my own recollection. I told you I was hunger and death and lies and that’s what I brought you. I saw much of dowry, a gift a bride brought to her husband before marriage, and you brought me everything. As I feared, I did you harm. I gave you no dower, no lasting gift from a husband to a bride, something that would always be yours. I confess this because these moments of you in my arms are the only memories I visit. When I leave here, hard and panting with want, I will need the opportunity to do it again, hunger for it.”

His fingertip glided along the line of her teeth, her lip, his other hand drawing a moan from her as he stopped circling and sank his fused finger into her, thumb on her clit, more circles and thrusts.

He lost control of his breathing as he lost control of hers and he said “Taking away my skin from touching yours is possibly the greatest gift ever given to me. To watch your eyes stay clear, to know that the same moans grace your mouth with venom or without. I promise you that on the day you touch me, I will still long for these moments, and I will create moments where your wrists are bound, when my skin is covered, where I can pour pleasure into you until you shake and cry out…”

He twisted his finger inside, caressed her lips and pressed faster on her clit until she arched into his hand “By the Gods, Jane, yes. Like that. I can speak to you and you hear every word. This is your dowry, your gift to me. If you wish a dower from your mate you must think of something else, something other than this, something that does not involve you falling apart in my covered hands, listening to my voice, and creating the memories I will visit most in my life. Tu-fira deepens each day, and to remember you from a week ago would miss who you are now. There is no shadow clinging to the memories, no darkness, no fear.”

The shuddering emotional avalanche gave way to the pressured volcano his hands and voice had built in her body, drained of fear, filled with hope.

He shifted until she was against his chest, his lips in her hair and her hand over his heart, blankets pulled up to warm swiftly chilling skin.

He was relentless hope from the unlikeliest of sources, and he reminded her so often now that impossibilities had become true. Once they had feared he would die, and soon. Once they had feared there would be no time to see hair grow longer. Once they had feared being unable to leave a room they occupied together alive.

Impossibilities became meaningless, and she hurtled toward a future where his skin would bring nothing but pleasure and Reapers were a memory. Dowries and dowers and whispered promises would be built from the same method they had employed before, reaching the veins of hope buried deep. It took time and patience and effort, but they had done it so often faith came easier, excuses
and reasons to fail fled more readily before resolve.

She had considered commitment at this level to be control, but with him it was a gift. She would never allow his need to give himself be rebuked. It didn’t matter anymore why. It didn’t matter if it was the wrong impulse, or if it came from a lifetime of service, or if it came from a twisted source. This was who he was, this was who they were, and if it didn’t suit anybody else’s definition of healthy…too fucking bad.

He would never take another lover. She knew it without asking. He would follow her over Garrus, and Garrus would in fact demand that from him, in the same way Thane had allowed her to choose whether or not he would be with them at all, would even be found worthy to live.

It was all anathema, monstrously unfair. Hopes of even sharing and idealistic, carefully drawn emotional maps were contradicted by the realities of living where territory and boundaries were consumed and obliterated regularly by the emotional equivalent of earthquake and volcanoes. Her vision of life together had been shown to be hopelessly naïve and unsustainable.

They had not wanted boundaries, had pretended to accept them, ceded their territory to her and moved where she was because that is where they wanted to be, abandoning their own stakes.

She would honor his needs as he wished them to be honored, because she would serve him in the things his spirit required.

She would give him all the freedom he required, and she would give him all the restriction he required, and she would never let him go or question his presence at her side unless he asked her to, and those words would never pass his lips.

He combed his fingers through her hair, rearranging it again to his liking as she breathed him in, sank down into warm sleep with the image of honey on envenomed fingertips, hope investing the image instead of fear…or as he had correctly redefined it, loss. They would not allow the failures of their bodies to deny them the needs of their spirits.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Two days later she’d been on the bridge talking to Reni, Joker and EDI. Shepard had been trying to talk Joker into using the interface pods.

She had said “Come on, Joker. Think of the opportunities. You always said you needed to feel the ship, know what is happening with her in order to fly. What if you could feel more, be unrestrained inside the system? I can’t believe you’re balking at the opportunity.”

Joker had waved a hand “You can’t understand why someone wouldn’t want to get their brains broken into pieces and transmitted inside a blind system that could lie to me?”

EDI said with reproach “I would not lie to you, Jeff.”

Joker laughed and said “You’d lie to me in a second. Not about piloting though. It’s not about you.”

Reni asked curiously “Then what is it about? I’d love to try it.”

Joker shrugged and said “I don’t know. Maybe I just haven’t seen someone go in that wasn’t already mostly mechanical. No offense to David.”

EDI responded “David says ‘None taken.’”
Joker sighed and said “David, you need your own voice. EDI, let David talk. Maybe that would help.”

EDI said “Modulating, he is considering your request.”

A rich male voice emanated from the speakers, getting a genuinely start from Shepard and Reni. “Flight Lieutenant Moreau…”

Joker said warily “Please, call me Jeff or Joker.”

David responded “As you wish. Jeff. If it is acceptable, Commander Shepard can make her debut internally before yours. I believe she is waiting for the opportunity, and Legion, EDI and I can help make her at home within the systems. We would certainly do the same for you, and with a pod properly fitted for you, you would experience a great deal less strain upon your skeletal system. You must be aware that you already experience altered input from the movement of the ship. If you accept that bias as true, it is a transitional matter to include input that could be altered to include factors you have not considered, but could make your reaction time and accuracy greatly enhanced.”

Jeff said curiously “I’ll believe it when I see it…feel it…oh crap, I’m getting a headache.”

Reni and Shepard were both peering at the pod that held David inside, stiff and beatific, no reaction. Holy…that was a nice voice.

Shepard raised a hand and said “I vote David use a less sexy voice.”

Reni elbowed her and said “Overruled. Hell no. David, you keep that voice. That’s an official recommendation.”

Shepard sighed “Dammit.”

David’s…voice…laughed…and holy crap.

Shepard said softly “That ain’t right.”

Reni said with conviction “That’s really right. David, can I come in there someday?”

David said with solemn warmth “If Commander Shepard allows, you will always be welcome, Reni T’Sowan.”

EDI said lightly “I would enjoy that as well.”

Shepard sighed and said “We’re going to have to schedule field trips.”

Joker said slightly sourly “More like zoo visits.”

David said teasing “Just think of the potential privacy, Jeff.”

Jeff facepalmed “Oh god damn it, being kink shamed on my own CIC.” Jeff spun his chair and peeked through his fingers to look at David in the pod, also unable to reconcile the two.

Reni laughed far too long for the potential joke.

Shepard was saved from trying to get David to say anything else out of…curiosity by hearing Kasumi say over her Omni Tool “Commander Shepard…I’ve got him. He’s on the base. He will be for the near future, for at least three days. We should move now.”
Shepard said “Thank you, Kasumi. Best news. I’d get you a sandwich, but, you know…I can do a lot of things, but not that.”

Kasumi laughed and said “They deliver, Shepard, next time just order some, okay? You don’t always have to do everything the hard way.”

Jane scowled playfully and said “I do too. Please transfer the data to EDI and David, they can let me know what our best plan is. We’ll move out soon. I’d ask if you want to drive a gun, but I’d like you on the ship with the rest of the unfathomable geniuses to help screw Cerberus systems up as much as you can.”

Kasumi said “Awww…Shepard, and you said you didn’t have anything for me.”

Jane grinned “Undying gratitude. Thank you.”

Kasumi said with her own smile in her voice “You got it. Switching to informing the unfathomable geniuses.”

Jane said confidentially “Get David to talk to you.”

Kasumi said “What? Why?”

Shepard spoke to the walls “David. Hit her with the voice.”

She heard through the Omni Tool relay “Thank you for the information, Ms. Goto.”

Kasumi stopped, coughed once and said “Please. Call me Kasumi.”

The rest was cut off and Remi laughed.

Jane said “So now we wait for the unfathomable geniuses to get me a battle plan, and I try not to trip.”

David said, teasing “If you wish for me to incorporate the directive to not trip in my recommendations, I can do that.”

Jane said with a shake of her head “I’m happy to welcome another smart ass on board, David. You’re in excellent company.”

David’s voice echoed “Indeed I am. Thank you again, Commander Shepard, for making this possible.

Reni said quietly “Yeah. Thank you.”

Joker said “Hey, maybe I could do that voice thing. I could sound like Odin, add thunder sounds.”

EDI said quietly “You should not do that, Jeff. Your voice is what it should be.”

Joker said after freezing slightly “I have no idea what that means.”

Jane shook her head and said “Zoo. Definitely zoo.”

She began to walk off the CIC and Joker said “Don’t leave me here with the unfathomable geniuses, Shepard!”

Reni said “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”
Jane said ruefully “I’m glad I have people to shoot. I’m accustomed to weird, but usually I’m the one making people uncomfortable and not the other way around.”

Her first stop was to Garrus, who was managing his coordination from the Battery as usual. He still did some work in his quarters, but he said the big gun made him feel better. Whatever worked. He liked the hum, and she could appreciate that. She said softly once she had gotten his attention “We did it. He’s there at the base. We’re moving.”

Garrus picked her up and swung her around twice, kissed her hard and said “So things we can actually shoot, not marching Geth? Actual bad guys?”

She nodded “Actual bad guys. We might not have to shoot, considering how well this is being planned. I’m waiting on David, EDI, Kasumi and Legion to tell me what to do. And you know what? I’m going to do exactly what they say.”

They went together to collect Thane, who was in the gym. The smile that lit his face was…

affecting…

She held up a finger and said “Wait…let me check…yes…I’m…I’m happy. Yes. I’m happy.”

Garrus said “People to shoot and a plan to do it with, why wouldn’t you be?”

Thane said softly “Who is going with you in the landing party?”

Jane raised a brow and said “Everybody who wants to go. I’ve asked Kasumi to stay on board, I don’t know if you want to stay with her and coordinate strategy from the ship, that’s your call. I had planned on you, Garrus, Legion, Jack…”

Thane said fervently with an edge of a warning to not suggest separation again “I am not leaving your side.”

She grinned and said “That works for me.”

Garrus looked at them both and said “I’m so glad you guys can work things out without disappearing for twelve hours and then never speaking of it again.”

She shrugged and said “Baby steps, Garrus. They grow up so fast.”

Garrus said “Good, now that the negotiation is over, I’m not leaving your side either.”

She smiled at him and said “That also works for me.”
They had three days. They were ready in a day and a half.

Despite the overwhelming force available, it turned out they didn’t need any in an assault sense.

Shepard said “Say that again?”

David’s voice repeated “The station has a great number of security protocols. Many are lethal, but many are nonlethal. I could kill everyone on the station with the release of lethal gas or I could flood the same system with a synthesized gas I could formulate from within their lab complex through the brief use of a laboratory drone. It should cause loss of consciousness in any who are not in full vacuum within their own suits. 97% of personnel are not wearing suits. Those wearing suits or isolated from the system ventilation could be confined within the complex and locked out of computer access until overwhelming force arrives.”

Garrus said slowly “So…I don’t get to shoot anybody here either? Dammit, Shepard, why do you have me on this ship again?”

She said as an aside “Because you are irresistibly sexy in your armor. David, how long would those affected be unconscious?”

David answered “How long would you want them to be affected? I can manipulate the mix to accommodate your preferences.”

Mordin responded “What is this gas?”

David said “It has no name as of yet, I have yet to formulate it.”

Shepard said “So this…David gas…can you get a sample to Mordin?”

David replied “Of course. I will also provide the formula to Dr. Chakwas as it appears to have medical utility as well.”

Mordin said with glee “I’ll get to work.”

Garrus said with a sigh “This whole trend toward bloodless victory…I’m not sure I like it.”

Shepard asked “David, part of our plan involved allowing some people to flee, to be able to track them.”

David replied “That is unnecessary. With security personnel isolated, with the majority of people unconscious and with Kasumi, EDI and I already within their systems in the interim, any information you would have gained from physically observing some individuals leave, we have already gained, and more. We have full access to terminals and shuttlecraft. We will dispatch teams simultaneously to outlying facilities.”

She said blankly “So…that’s…better.”

David said deadpan “Garrus, if you wish, I can leave a contingent of security alive and channel them toward you. Perhaps you could find a bridge to hold.”

Garrus laughed and said “That’s…obnoxious of you, but no. I’ll just…look intimidating in my armor. Maybe I can growl at someone.”
Shepard said “You’d look good doing it. You want to be the one to wake up The Illusive Man?”

Garrus smiled “Yeah. That’d work.”

She said “Scan first, though. If he’s indoctrinated, no use talking to him until he’s had the surgery.”

Garrus sighed “Denied again. War is hell.”

The day of the raid moved so quickly, downhill and greased, unstoppable, and distinctly satisfying. No loss of life. Quarians were given personnel that had been directly involved in interfering with Quarian livelihoods. Kasumi, EDI, Legion and David all analyzed and made recommendations on who should go to whom ultimately. Some personnel were delivered to the Alliance after debriefing and identification, evidence provided for crimes.

They hadn’t even needed to scan the Illusive Man to determine that he was indoctrinated. Shepard had been guided directly to him through the labyrinth. Slumped over she had lifted his chin to see a bluish darkness under his skin that was too even to be bruising. Answered that question quickly. She concerned herself specifically with him, stayed by his side, observed scanning and surgery, counted on her team to let her know what she needed to know, which right now was the fast acquisition of data. David, Legion, EDI and Kasumi would sort through it and there were now so many teams involved after the fact that remote labs and functioning cells were assigned according to priority and given out to Quarians, Alliance, Geth teams or Normandy staff.

Shepard now had a brand new state of the art tech complex that was manned…well…Gethed. The David gas had worked for six hours, and those who had been isolated were left until they were willing to surrender and observed to lay down arms. Mordin and Miranda set up shop and took over tech files.

Dr. Kenson had never broken out in blue, so they’d have to see what new form of indoctrination, or combination of forms he was under. On scanning he had extensive brain involvement and formation of armature under the skin, so he was in surgery for two days and afterward kept restrained.

Turned out that David gas was very helpful in keeping him under during the weeks of recovery. He never broke through. Shepard was grateful. She wasn’t big on torture and wanted to stay disgusted with the man, preferred not having to empathize.

Garrus had been made aware of a trove of Cerberus interference taking place in Turian sectors, and her choice of not involving the Hierarchy was ominously validated through discovery of exactly how many humans on Palaven had ties to Cerberus, either voluntarily or through coercion. He was kept very busy in coordination after prioritizing it to his authorization, and he wasn’t there to growl at the Illusive Man when he woke up.

Shepard was.

Karin gave him a shot to wake him and left the Med Bay, leaving them there alone. He was medically stable, healed, far past the time frame of withdrawal, the process helped through having had the surgery done tens of thousands of times and refined in method and associated medication for withdrawal.

The metallic armature had been superficial and had been removed in entirety, easily seen on scanners, easily seen by the eye in places. It had not regenerated on removal. Whatever its function was remained a mystery, but it would make sense that a metallic element should be introduced to an
organic base to help husks and Geth identify friend from foe. She remembered Saren had been able to communicate with the Geth and he’d had the same sort of upgrades. Hopefully more functional and superficial than insidious. Definitely gone easily.

When he opened his eyes and looked around, his eyes fell on her and she smiled from one side of her mouth only and said “You’re on the Normandy. You’ve had indoctrination removal surgery. You’ve had metallic components removed from under your skin.”

He sat and thought for a good long while and she gave him time to think. He said in a hoarse voice “My base?”

She said quietly “Now my base.”

His jaw clenched tightly and worked briefly before saying bitterly “What do you want, Shepard?”

She said “Well, first things first, I’m not calling you ‘The Illusive Man’ any longer as you are no longer elusive. Name? If you don’t give me one I’ll just call you Tim for short.”

He huffed a breath and said “Tim will do.”

She nodded “Tim it is. I have your base. Personnel have been handed over to Quarian, Turian or Alliance personnel where applicable, and your files and projects are being sifted. You have been under for two weeks, so we’ve seen quite a bit of ugly. You can be of use in sifting, you can help decrypt the things we are unable to decrypt, help us find things that aren’t recorded, and you can earn yourself a human legacy, make a heroic conversion in the final hour under duress and contribute to the survival of humankind. I can provide you with whatever luxury you are accustomed to, save freedom, and we can move forward, being of help to each other.”

He said wearily “And if I refuse?”

She said “I can provide you with one cigarette, one tumbler of anything at your request, and then I will shoot you in the center of your forehead.”

He said with a half smile “That’s not your style, Shepard.”

Her half smile made an appearance again and she said “Your ability to predict my style has not worked out for you in the past. Do you want to bet your future on it? I don’t think you care if I set Jack loose on you, but she’s too busy laughing lately. Your fate is mine to decide. I’m betting you want a legacy, and your particular blend of hubris can be leveraged against your willingness to force a zero sum game out of pride. So how about we cut out games and stick to Game Theory. You must be familiar with the Prisoner’s Dilemma.”

He said wearily “That would be predicated on your willingness to negotiate.”

She said bluntly “You’re alive. That is my starting position. Freedom is not on the table. Luxury and the manner of your incarceration are negotiable. I can provide you with the power to affect the future.”

He said quietly “You were gone for seven weeks, Shepard. The Normandy exposed the method of indoctrination. Do you miss them?”

She thought for a long moment about giving out any personal information to this…thing…of a person, but then decided he had no power over her and she had the luxury of honesty. She said “The method of my indoctrination was different from yours. I was not indoctrinated to follow Reapers. A Drell assassin indoctrinated me to follow her. She intended to gain the Normandy on behalf of
indoctrinated Hanar. And yes. I miss her. Not as much as I used to when I first woke, but I miss her and always will.”

He said quietly “Then you understand the state of my mind. I must come to terms with failing twice. The possibility of victory in the future is not something I can contemplate at the moment.”

She answered “Look on the bright side. You’re a narcissist. You fell in love with your own creation, with yourself. You can still do that. You could help us.”

He said with disgust “I have no interest in being collected as a member of your crew, Shepard. I find it hard to care about continuing to breathe. Without the cigarette or the tumbler, a shot to the head sounds restful. You have a brig. Put me in it.”

He was a smart man, had figured out about her indoctrination, had gotten information on the refit of the Normandy. She could certainly use him. Just not today. She had the luxury of time and his incarceration. She said “Okay. Fair enough. I understand the need for time. I certainly have other things I can find to occupy myself.”

He said with a huff of breath “You should know at least one thing up front if this is my prisoner’s dilemma.”

She said curiously “And what would that be?”

He said with a slight edge of smug satisfaction “You have a clone.”

She drew a breath and said with exasperation and the hope that he was just fucking with her “Oh come on. I have a what?”

He repeated “You have a clone. If the base is gone and security breeched, it is likely that security guarding her has failed. If you move quickly and focus on Sigma Alpha 14, you might be able to keep her from being set loose on the galaxy, or at least pick up her trail. You are not the only person interested in how I have been occupying my time.”

She said “You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

He didn’t say another word and she sighed, sent Dr. Chakwas back in, and went to go figure out where the hell Sigma Alpha 14 was.

Miranda was at the Cerberus, now the…what should she call it? Cerberus was the three-headed dog that guarded the gates to hell. So if we were going to go with a mythology theme, she’d choose Eurydice Base. Eurydice was the wife of Orpheus, who put Cerberus to sleep with a harp and rescued her from hell.

Contacting Miranda, she asked about the possibility of a clone. She recounted Tim’s story and Miranda responded “The Lazarus project was overrun, but there’s no reason why all of the records and samples could not have been recovered. It’s entirely possible that you have any number of clones available. I sent samples as part of compliance reports, any of that material could have been used to grow a clone, or several.”

Jane asked “So a genetic clone? Can you explain how I managed to retain my memories?”

Miranda explained “Memories aren’t mystical in origin, Shepard. A genetic clone would not have your memories, but I restored them. As a Spectre you had a great deal of medical scanning done
even before I got to you, and I was able to reconstruct memories from the chronological ordering of those scans. I also had the final scan you’d had done at the Alliance checkpoint on the Citadel before you were found fit for duty again. I was lucky enough to have had your brain essentially cryopreserved and recent memory intact and distributed to multiple locations. It was difficult and painstaking, but you were restored on that basis. Bringing your body back was the easiest part of the project, the other year and a half was dedicated to reconstruction of your mind. It wasn’t unlike reconnecting genetic code from samples. The coding to access your memory was broken, but the pieces were all stored in redundant locations. Working out a system to determine chronology and indexing was the most difficult step, determining how your mind stored your experiences. Once that had been determined, you were able to re-access redundant memory and string it together into the narrative of your life. Damage to your liver could be re-grown, and it was. Damage to your brain had to be carefully checked against reality to ensure that you were regaining memory according to the documented chronology of your life.”

Jane felt more than a little queasy and said “Is there…a recording of that? Somewhere? Did you figure out how to record as well as restore?”

Miranda nodded “Yes. No doubt The Illusive Man has a copy of the chemical composition and positioning of your memory up to the point that you died. It could have been retrieved from Lazarus Project files after we left the base. I have personal copies I stored, something he would know as well. I had full latitude and autonomy over the data.”

Jane closed her eyes and tried not to swear “Okay. The Illusive Man – Tim for short, has let me know I have a clone. Do you know where Sigma Alpha 14 is?”

Miranda stared for a moment and then said “Yes. I’m headed for a shuttle. I’m going with you.”

Garrus said “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me, a clone?”

Shepard tilted her head and said “Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction.”

Thane said quietly “You plan to restore a clone?”

She shrugged and said “If we can. Yes. She exists, she’s an asset, and she would want to help.”

Garrus said “More fucking kidding me. Just pull the plug.”

Thane gazed at Garrus and said mildly “That would be unwise.”

Garrus tilted his head back and said “I’d have thought you’d be the first person to not want to allow an impostor.”

Thane didn’t reply and Shepard said “She’s not an impostor. She’s me. She’s as much me as I am. Miranda says she can do it.”

Thane said quietly “Garrus, think beyond the emotional complications. It is entirely possible there is more than one clone. It would be of value to gain her assistance. It would be of value to deny opposition access to her. It would be of value to be certain that any other clone encountered could become an asset and not a liability.”

Shepard said with a deep sigh “Not unlike rewriting heretics. Without Miranda they would have been unable to employ her technique, so having me fully restored was not necessarily possible. Having me restored and indoctrinated would have been of value. Having just my strategic capability
restored and then being indoctrinated would have been of highest value. Can’t allow that.”

Garrus shook his head and said “So just fucking shoot every single one of them.”

Thane half smiled “Could you? Would you order another to shoot Commander Shepard because she makes you feel uncomfortable? Would you consider that courage?”

Garrus growled “Fuck uncomfortable. There’s only one Shepard.”

Shepard said softly “That is demonstrably not true.”

Garrus dragged a heavy breath through his nose and said “Fuck. Uncomfortable does not cover this.”

Thane said as he gazed at Garrus, who would not meet his eyes “We have no control over how many copies of Commander Shepard are made. We do have an opportunity to discover what we would be dealing with were we to encounter her in her own body or in the body of another. That is reality as it stands and we must not allow ourselves to be willfully blinded to repercussions and possibilities because of sentiment. It appears The Illusive Man will be meting out information in small parcels. If this is intended as a taunt, it is possible he may know of several more clones in different locations, and will ensure he stays alive until all are revealed.”

Garrus closed his averted eyes and said tightly “I really hate that this possibility didn’t occur to me, but I especially hate that it has occurred to you.”

Jane said with a sigh “When I woke up at Cerberus I was right back in the game. Worst case is someone gets her, gives her my strategic memories, indoctrinates her and provides her with a motivation to work for the Reapers knowingly or unknowingly. We have to know. I can’t let her sit there.”

Garrus growled “You can. You should. I’ll pull the plug. I’ll shoot her.”

Jane walked to Garrus, pulled his ever-present pistol from its holster, put it in his hand and then drew the barrel to her forehead. “Go ahead.”

He pointed the pistol up and said angrily “Stupid fucking thing to do. Reckless, dramatic…”

Thane said “And effective. She cannot do it. I will not do it. Faced with her, you would not do it.”

Garrus put his pistol back and tilted his head back “I’ve got Palaven stirred up like a barnal nest already with this Cerberus bullshit. I don’t need this in my head. Spirits, I don’t want to know.”

Shepard sighed and said “I don’t have the luxury of not knowing. At least I know how to talk to me.”

Thane smiled and said “I would be interested in talking to her as well.”

Garrus rubbed his eyes “Wouldn’t it be nice to just have something to blow up. I definitely miss the days of being allowed to shoot things.”

Jane said ghoulishly “Don’t worry Garrus. She likes you. A lot.”

Garrus leaned back and tilted his fringe against the wall, a gesture of defeat. “I worry.”

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Sigma Alpha 14 was not far away and she was in conference with Miranda and Mordin, who
wanted to come along, for the short trip. She had no further opportunity to discuss plans with Thane or Garrus. Garrus was spurs deep in Palaven repercussions and Thane was helping Kasumi wrangle routing of tactical data and prioritizing in Jane’s absence.

Storming the station was not all that difficult, staff had apparently deserted and they only found one woman, claiming to be maintenance staff. As they were not stupid enough to believe someone would be babysitting a popsicle after everyone else had deserted the place, they took the woman into custody. Granted Tim had warned her that security breech would mean…security breech. She was going to have to grudgingly admit he had helped. She was only one among several thousand who needed to be processed. She was meek enough, gave the name of Priya Bhola. They couldn’t find any information about her in Cerberus records, which was suspicious, so she was kept as a witness for questioning. Identity was one thing, but being unable to identify her at all in any database based on genetic sampling was unique. Faced with the actual Commander Shepard she appeared to melt into incoherent whimpers.

It was a bad situation all around. She said to the woman “Priya, you don’t need to be afraid. I’m not going to shoot you. I just need as much information as you can give me.”

Priya told her about how to maintain a clean lab until Shepard facepalmed and said “Okay. Not exactly what I need. We’ll get you a scan and get you home. Do you have a home?”

Priya shivered and said quietly with an overlay of terror “I don’t want to tell you.”

Shepard nodded after a deep breath and said “All right. That’s fair. Sounds like you’ve had a rough time of it. You’ll be our guest on the Normandy for a short while, and then we’ll get you where you want to go, drop you off wherever. Do you need anything from the station you want to collect?”

The momentary calculation in Priya’s eyes made the hackles rise on her neck. Then it was gone, but it had been there. She paid careful attention, but no more slips. As she was escorted to the Normandy to a regular cabin, once she was out of earshot she conveyed to EDI “A Ms. Priya Bhola is coming on board. I would like for you to give her access to the same fake, looped systems you gave to Legion. Watch this woman every moment. Priority. There’s something not right about this.”

EDI responded “Acknowledged. Have you met your clone yet?”

Jane said “She’s…she’s resting.”

EDI said “I am looking forward to meeting her.”

Jane grinned “You’re a little macabre, EDI, I like it.”

EDI answered “I feel the same way about you, Jane.”

Miranda was checking out the setup on the Shepsicle. Miranda said “If Priya’s her real name and she’s telling the truth about anything, I’ll drink embalming fluid.”

Jane said with a laugh “You’re a little macabre as well. Yeah. I’d drink it too.”

Miranda said absently “With EDI’s and David’s help on refining modeling, I should be able to restore her here. Unless you want to take her back to Eurydice.”

Shepard drew a deep sigh and said “Here’s good. Best to get it over with. How long?”

Miranda tilted her head and said “If what I see here is right, a week.”
Shepard said “Oh boy. Any idea if there are…other Shepards floating around?”

Miranda said quietly “One at a time is about all I can handle.”

Shepard answered softly “I’m hoping that’s the going rate.”

It took about 12 hours only to catch Priya, whatever the hell her name was, trying to crack into EDI. According to EDI she was very good. Thane presented himself to her as Shepard was unavailable. Jane made herself available very quickly after hearing his preliminary report.

She was in the brig next to Tim and suddenly very cooperative.

Thane said with a smile as Shepard entered “Apparently this woman is aware of me.”

Ms. Ex-Bhola said “I could give you names, but it won’t matter. You won’t be able to track me by them, I erase my identities once used. As we have covered, I am aware of Sere Krios’s reputation. I put together the dossiers for the Normandy for The Illusive Man.”

Shepard sat down and said “No shit. Would have been nice if you’d figured out that Archangel was Garrus, but thanks for that. And for Thane, of course. I’ll just keep on calling you Priya, okay?”

Not Priya shrugged.

Shepard said “You’re not indoctrinated. What would you have managed to do if you woke me up?”

Priya sighed and said “I did wake her up. But she’s a clone. An un-imprinted clone and that takes a little while.” She muttered “She was intended for replacement body parts.”

Shepard raised a brow “Then why is she back to being a Shepsicle?”

Priya shrugged and said “All I saw was the breech in Cerberus security and I exploited it. I should have dug deeper, but I’d been after this score for a while and I took my chance. If you could imagine, I was a bit overwhelmed by the loss of all support staff and the subject’s inability to…well, she doesn’t even know how to eat yet. I needed to arrange transport for both of us to somewhere that 24 hour rehab…well…I suppose in this case just…hab…could be arranged. Those facilities that could also provide the imprinting I need…well, they don’t exist. So I was trying to think of another solution. You’re a great deal more competent than I’ve grown used to having to deal with. So congratulations, Commander Shepard. I’ll tell you what you want to know. Sere Krios could torture me or kill me…”

Thane said almost cheerfully “Indeed I could.”

Priya continued “But…I don’t think you will allow that, Commander Shepard. I have learned something of your style. You scanned me. You know I’m not indoctrinated. I’m just opportunistic. I didn’t see the point in abandoning such a potentially massive score as having a Shepard in my pocket. I see you and I likely have the same idea.”

Shepard leaned back and said “Okay. So you’re a tech badass with a recent history of elaborate babysitting. I could turn you over to the Alliance, but we’re in an all hands on deck situation here. How inclined are you to be useful if you’re under constant surveillance?”

Priya raised a brow and said “What kind of useful?”
Shepard shrugged and said “Kasumi could figure that out. I’m certain you know of her also. With your knowledge of Cerberus systems you’ve suddenly gained market value beyond your utility as a martyr. She and Jack have a thing going on the side. Might be if you make her happy, you could discuss future opportunities in crime. After Reapers are gone. So welcome to indentured servitude on a pirate vessel. You’ll be outfitted with whatever tech she feels she can trust you with in a babysitting sense. I’ll suggest you double check other work for the time being, I’m big on triple checks. You provide useful data with two other people checking and we’ll see how useful you can be. If you step outside the lines she draws for you, she will inform Thane immediately.”

Thane said with his previous cheer “I am in fact looking forward to it.”

Priya sighed and said “Between death, the Alliance or this…I don’t see that I have a choice.”

Jane asked rapid fire questions about the disposition of clones, determining that Priya only knew about the one clone, that she found out about it by hacking the data regarding the Lazarus project and some of her own research into what tech was being specifically shipped where that might be of use to cryogenically preserved bodies. She had only located one clone, believed there to only be one clone, that she’d only located it within the last month and it would have taken at least a few months to apply some of the Lazarus technology to the new clone as far as simple activities of daily living and the rest would be language and then convincing the clone to take her shot. She was…unspecific as to what that shot would be.

Shepard said enthusiastically “Good to hear there’s only one. So far. Welcome to the Normandy. Other than the dossiers you provided to me, which were very helpful and I owe you a chance at freedom ultimately on that basis alone, if you go sleuthing on the Normandy you will encounter surprises like the one you got trying to hack into EDI. You will be under constant, redundant and absolute surveillance, and if you step more than an inch out of line, do not be encouraged, we’re waiting until you’re two inches out of line before calling in Sere Krios, to ensure you can’t talk your way out of it. Once you see him, or more likely do not see him, discussion will be over. I leave the method to his discretion and I’ll be busy doing other things, so do not count on my style to save you in the least. Be concerned about Kasumi’s style. Be concerned about Thane’s style. Those are your priorities. I will not ask them to answer to me on the subject so I will receive no reports on your progress, only one if you cease to be of use, so I know we have a bunk available. Kasumi may in fact be deeply disgruntled at the imposition, so I would focus on making her very happy. In theory I will not be seeing you again as you will be confined and I would like it to stay that way. Enjoy your stay.”

Thane said with a shrug and a frightening smile “I have other hopes. Good day and welcome, Ms. Bhola.”

They left to the sound of a deep sigh and some very creative swearing.

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She had more information to sort through than she’d be able to do alone in a lifetime, so David and EDI helped prioritize it. Tim hadn’t spoken up yet, and she was busy enough, so he could stew.

Despite her hatred of the man, she was beginning to empathize, and maybe that’s partly what he was waiting for, sharing an indoctrination experience was one of the first things he’d mentioned. In theory he’d get very bored in there and want someone to talk to, so she waded through the rest of the data, not terribly excited about finding out things worse than ‘you have a clone.’

She was absolutely right about Cerberus having data about indoctrination and artifacts, and it would take a great deal of preparation to go to some of the more remote sites, they had no idea how to
protect against artifacts yet. No idea if it was cumulative, so the best guess would be to assign Legion
to use Geth to infiltrate these sites, as they would be immune to signals intended to snare organics.

Garrus managed to conquer his anxiety and still managed to eat and sleep and find his way to bed.
Possibly one shock too many to the Turian and he just didn’t have much more to say and nothing
more to do, so he behaved as though this were entirely business as usual. Though he asked if they
needed clone passwords.

She’d said “Definitely, we should have clone passwords. It’s not as though you could tell the
difference between us, what with my hair about a foot longer.”

Thane had replied, gloved hands on her shoulders “Because a clone of your caliber would find it
impossible to cut your hair and find a passable wig. She’s helpless.”

Garrus barked a laugh and said “See? Finally. I have a good point. Damn. Clone passwords.”

She considered and said “We have light on our wrists that match.”

Thane brushed against her neck with light biotics “And it would be impossible for her to extract or
duplicate the effect.”

Shepard sighed and said “Will she have an Omni Tool?”

Garrus said “We have to figure this out before the fact, Kerim.”

Thane replied “If you wish to treat her as an asset and not a laboratory animal, she will require an
Omni Tool as well as food.”

She elbowed Thane slightly who grunted obligingly and she said “Right. No lab rat. I knew that.
Fine. I haven’t dealt with my own clone before.”

Garrus said “Am I the only one that has thought about this and that believes that this is still a terrible
idea?”

Thane said “You are not the only one that has thought about this.”

Garrus answered snidely “Krios, you are a pain in my ass.”

Thane answered smugly “I am aware.”

She tried not to laugh and said “Okay. So nothing that could be monitored, nothing that could be
duplicated, nothing that could be simulated. You know this is seriously fucking with my sense of
unique identity.”

Thane’s hands stilled on her hair as he said quietly “It should. It is not perhaps a terrible idea, but it is
a deeply dangerous action to take, in order to prevent more insidiously dangerous consequences of
ignorance.”

She said softly “The woman is going to have a tough time without sex.”

Garrus said with a sigh “I do not volunteer.”

Thane nudged at the back of her neck “I find myself previously committed.”

She thought “I’ve wondered what it would be like to take a run at myself, but I’m going to pass.”
Garrus sounded sick “Oh, Spirits. Now I can’t get that out of my head.”

Thane said quietly “Perhaps the idea has merit.”

She laughed and Garrus said “I hate talking to you two about this.”

She said with a shrug “Who else are you going to talk to, Garrus?”

Garrus said “ANYBODY that doesn’t use the word clone. You’re both so Spirits damned cold blooded sometimes it makes my hide crack.”

Shepard said thoughtfully “Maybe that’s what you get when you don’t have an exoskeleton. The tough bit’s inside. I’m sorry, Garrus. I don’t deserve you.”

Thane said in agreement “Nor do I. I apologize.”

Garrus sighed and said “You’re not sorry, you’re just going to talk about it when I’m gone.”

Thane said thoughtfully “I will install proximity coding on our Omni Tools. It will confirm identity in proximity and identity in communication. Before your clone is allowed an Omni Tool, I will introduce monitoring to that system. She will be unaware of and therefore unable to produce the proximity code. It will be silent and individually verifiable without need of repetition and thus discovery of pattern. I will be able to discreetly watch her access to data. I am willing to trust her, but I believe it is a step that she would anticipate if not expect as a security measure. EDI or David will always know the difference. They cannot be hacked. The stakes are high, she would be aware that she is being monitored, it would do no harm to monitor. I would suggest informing her she is being monitored not as a sign of mistrust but as a sign of prudence.”

Garrus said in concession “All right, maybe talking to you isn’t a bad thing.”

Thane said warmly “Finish your work, Invas’nam, and come to bed. You have solved enough problems for one day and we are properly chastised. Allow them to wait. Put new images in your head.”

Shepard said “Speaking of proximity…”

Garrus smiled and said gruffly “You both have to admit you’re crazy.”

Jane shrugged and said “Obviously.”

Thane replied “Not even in contention. We need you.”

Garrus tossed his data pad aside and said “Damned right you do. This ship would have gone straight to hell without me.”

Shepard said “Sounds entirely fair.”

Thane replied “That matches my assessment as well.”

Garrus put his hands over his chest and said “Fuck you both and your tag team patronizing.”

Shepard grinned “Excellent idea.”

Thane continued on Jane’s hair and said “We would never have come to that conclusion without him.” Thane’s hands shifted from her hair, tilted her head back against his shoulder and ran his hands down the sides of her throat, over her breasts and under her shirt to a soft moan from her as she
closed her eyes.

She heard Garrus’s frustrated voice “If you’d both stop being so damned beautiful at me I’d get more work done.”

Thane’s voice spoke at her ear “No hope of that, Invas’nam, but there is a door if our beauty disturbs you into flight.”

She said softly “He’s not a coward. You will never see a Turian’s back until he’s dead.”

Thane said thoughtfully “Fortunately not literally true, as he has a magnificent back.”

They’d learned a few things about stressed out Turians. With a frustrated growl and stalking footsteps, she heard Garrus cross to the bed. He wrenched Thane’s head back into a devouring kiss as he found her mouth and occupied it with his thumb.

He pulled back briefly and said “Not a fucking word from either of you. The threat of makeshift gags apply to all assholes present. The unsafe word is ‘clone’ and if anybody mentions it, I will not be held responsible for trips to the Med Bay.”

They all agreed on his terms and once they all had hands on each other, no more words were required.
When Garrus left in the morning, she and Thane stayed in bed on opposite sides. She said in a hoarse voice “He did it. He broke me. Maybe don’t taunt the stressed out Turian.”

Thane said softly “You cannot fool me. If anything you broke him and he is joyous about that outcome. We will both do that again at the earliest opportunity. His mood improved. He left with a spring in his step neither of us will manage for days. I am considering pain killers along with Medigel.”

She whistled low at the precedent of Thane admitting to being in pain, but didn’t bother to argue about inciting Turian stress riots. She was in fact smug, if in pain. “I’d get them for you, but ow.”

He sighed and said “I’m proud of you for not actually screeching ‘clone’ as some sort of masochistic dare to prove some obscure Shepard point.”

She laughed and then stopped because it hurt. She said with mock contempt “I do not screech.” He turned his head and looked at her until she conceded “Fine. I screech. It was an oversight. I forgot all about unsafe words.” He nodded and turned back to look at the stars. She said “I’m going to ask him to be the first one to talk to her. Let him answer questions about his face and catch her up before she has to deal with me. Miranda lacks…bedside manner and I woke up to gunfire. I especially appreciate the part where we’re the cold blooded ones but his recommendation is to shoot her in the face.”

Thane pondered “He fears having his loyalty tested. To have how much he cares for you doubled. He fears having to oppose her if the imprint fails. There is a great deal to fear. He will agree to anything you ask.” He shifted position and then hitched a breath “I believe he cracked a rib.”

She said consolingly “If you’re coughing up blood, I’ll get up and help you do something about it. I promise.”

He said quietly “There is blood, but it is dried. Not fresh.” With a groan he dragged himself out of the bed, determined the pain was manageable. This was Thane after all. A cracked rib was routine, not a concern. She dozed until he brought her back water and medication. Garrus had brought her some earlier and applied Medigel to talon marks on her skin, but analgesia and Reverie had worn off.

She said quietly “You’re my hero, Krios. How do you say ‘hero’ in Drell?”

He smiled and eased himself back into the bed, pulling her back against him and covering them with blankets. He said “Danas.”

She said sleepily “I don’t have a pet name for you.”

He said doubtfully “Pet…name? That sounds…disturbing.”

She laughed a little and then said “Yes, it would, I suppose. Not that you’re my pet. A better word would be endearment. Like Siha. I don’t have a good word in English to describe you. Should I call you Danas?”

He stroked her hair and said “Nothing so grand.”

She said softly “Says the man who calls me Siha.”
He laughed and said “Siha suits you and came to me the moment I saw you. Hero perhaps could be
one among many. I wish to be…more exclusive if not more accurate.”

She smiled and asked “Then what can I call you that means…hm…I know. If you lived in the
Northern Hemisphere of the Earth, she was positioned and turned in such a way that one star was
always in the same place and could always be found. Ships navigated by that star. If a person was
lost they could find their way by the skies in the dark. Always there, steadfast and unchanging. What
would North Star be in Drell?”

He said softly against her hair “Bes Tiron.”

She said almost shyly “Can I call you that?”

His hand stroked her shoulder and he said “That would please me.”

She said after turning a kiss to press against his leather-covered shoulder “Okay. I’m declaring nap.
Then I need to go talk to him about being a clone escort. Temporarily. Then I’ll take over.”

Thane said quietly “And if she does not wish to live?”

She sighed and said “That’s a definite possibility and if that’s the case, I’ve never had any trouble
figuring out how to die if required. She won’t need my help, but I’ll ask.”

He said gently “Has it occurred to you that this has perhaps already happened often? That you were
not the first and may not be the last, and the only difference is that you were the one that succeeded
through luck or circumstance?”

She nodded “It has. When I first woke up it was on my mind. I considered clones. I considered
having several of us out there…once the process was discovered and a template made, not that it was
the easiest thing in the world. Since Cerberus is so compartmentalized, I wondered if I’d run into
myself somewhere even if we were never intended to meet. But I never did and eventually I decided
I was too expensive. The ship…the people on the ship…the team. If I had Garrus, if I had Tali…
eventually I was convinced I had the best available. If there were other Shepards…they weren’t as
lucky as I was. Maybe that’s why I want to wake her up. She’s me. It’s like having a twin in a coma.
Once I know about her, I want to talk to her. I need her help. She’d want to help, knowing what I
know. It’s just…getting to knowing what I know.”

Thane nodded and made a sound of assent and added “Not everything you know.”

She said quietly “I can’t hide her. People are looking. Pulling the plug feels like murder. Not giving
her the template of her life feels like theft. Is it cold blooded to use her if I know she’d want to be
used? Is it, for that matter, masochistic to provoke Garrus into being able to be who he is without
having to hold back because I’m sure that’s what he wants, what he needs? I can’t manage to be a
Turian woman, but I can do that for him.”

He drew in a deep sigh and said “Jane, perhaps we do not wish to indulge the possibility that further
harm comes to you of your own manufacture.”

She chuckled “Can’t be prevented. Harm’s coming.” She smiled and said “Plus you’re a massive
hypocrite. You’d let him break every rib you have and wish you had more.”

He murmured “I am perhaps not the best example of how to love.”

She snuggled closer and breathed in deeply and said “There we will have to disagree, Bes Tiron.”
She walked in on Garrus in the Battery arguing with someone, likely another Turian. His voice sounded so much more formal when he spoke to other Turians. He looked at her briefly in acknowledgement, turned his head back to the conversation and said “Diplomatic immunity does not cover being coerced and bribed by a terrorist organization. They need to be arrested, not watched.” He listened intently for a few minutes and then cut off whatever was being said. “The next election cycle will eat you alive if we’re all lucky to live that long, and with what I know, I’d be willing to take a few bites of my own. Remove them from Cipritine or face consequences that are more predictable.” He cut off in disgust and said “[I know we’re doing good work here, Shepard, but why does doing good work have to deal so often with listening to assholes give reasons why they can’t do their jobs?”

She said with a shrug “Because we’ve moved into politics. Do you miss your C-Sec desk?”

He laughed and said “No. Still better than that. At least I get to yell at people.”

She grinned and said “And you’re so good at it.”

His mouth quirked and he said “[I have had the opportunity to practice.” He tilted his head, looked at her and said “[I know that look. I know that scent. I’m about to say yes to something I don’t want to say yes to…”

Instead of complaining he closed the distance between them, picked her up and pinned her to the wall with his mouth at her throat, nips and deep drawn breaths. He said “Might as well enjoy it. Ask.”

She laughed and said “That’s more than a little…distracting.”

He shrugged and didn’t let her go and said “I swear you smell better bruised.”

She said, teasing “I’m not sure I need to know that. You like me bossy and bruised?”

He growled softly into her throat and said “Spirits, yes.”

Her toes curled and she said “They you are in luck.”

He nudged at her throat and squeezed at her waist, said “Go on.”

She said softly “When I woke up on the Lazarus station, it was to gunfire and orders. Miranda was telling me that I was about to be killed. I shot my way out of the Med Bay on the station and the first person I ran into that wasn’t shooting at me was Jacob. My first question was…where is my crew? The first person I asked about was you. I was…so…devastated that nobody knew where you were. Of all the disorienting, painful things that happened that day, the most disorienting and painful was not knowing where you were. When she wakes up, because I know…I know…that will be her first question…I want yours to be the first face she sees, I want yours to be the first voice she hears. Please. Explain it to her. She will want to listen to you, she will want to know that you’re there, and just being able to see you and hear you when she first learns hard truths…will make it easier for her in ways that weren’t possible for me.”

He pulled back and looked in her eyes, stroked along her cheekbone with a trembling finger. He said “I was wrong. I’m saying yes and I want to say yes.”

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Miranda said everything was in line to get Shepard 2.0 online in two days. Thane came to speak to Jane in her cabin. Still her cabin, everyone had pronouns of ownership for their own cabin and it stayed that way. She had gotten into the habit of visiting them in their cabins so maybe they all were ‘their’ cabins in the long run.

This wasn’t a visit, though, it was a briefing. Thane had to leave immediately. He’d been given the definite location of a new compound, one that was off Kahje.

She thought of the foolishness of telling him to be safe, but instead said “Come back to me, Bes Tiron.”

He drew her into an embrace, her head on his shoulder and his lips on the top of her head. “Always, Siha. Let there be no doubt that where I wish to be is by your side.”

She wanted to kiss him often, now, but she was still waiting for the right moment. He would return to her, she had so much faith in it that she didn’t kiss him out of fear that he wouldn’t return.

She didn’t know how to ask for the right yet. Just as she hadn’t known what to call him.

It would come to her.

They’d at least be able to stay in contact through Omni Tool and she’d know immediately if something went wrong. As he’d said when he first met her, he rarely made mistakes. She also knew that if he did make a mistake, he would fix it.

She said softly “I love you.”

He squeezed her shoulders, lifted her face with a finger at her chin, gazed at her for a long moment and said “I love you, Jane. I will see you soon.”

And then he was gone, and she didn’t give in to fear, but there was no way to avoid the fact that she missed him, and would, and it had nothing to do with venom or addiction and everything to do with the fact that she loved him. Days or weeks or months or a potential lifetime of missing him stole in quietly like the cold as the sun went down and she looked for her North Star and found too much distance between them.

The night before Shepard 2.0 was going to be woken up, Garrus was wearing a path through the plating with his pacing.

Thank the Spirits for Garrus, who had stuck close to her after Thane left, both fending off the chill in their bones from the loss of his company. They’d never behaved as a third wheel group, more like a stable table that needed three legs, now feeling wobbly and strained at the lack of balance.

She sat cross legged in the now overly roomy bed. Not being pressed between two bodies was problematic. The loss of the third set of lights she felt as a palpable darkness. She was trying to deal with the space being only occupied by her, and Garrus was drowning in doubt of his ability to handle the upcoming conversation.

They’d gotten good at not discussing Thane’s absence. All three were warriors and had a tendency toward being trusted to get the job done. Which was of course again hypocritical because seasoned and experienced though they were, Shepard had died just walking around her ship one day. Garrus knew how easy it was to lose everyone on a squad without warning, and Thane…Thane wasn’t here to provide his particular blend of assurance and confidence that had carried them through situations
like this before. He never permitted doubt.

She waved a hand until she got Garrus’s attention and said “Think out loud. Maybe I can help.”

He sucked in a breath and said “I don’t know what to say.”

She responded “That’s probably good. Garrus, I asked you because you know how to talk to me, you always have. You’ll see her and you’ll know.”

His hand went to the back of his neck and he said “That sounds lovely, and thank you, but I’m still trying to get a handle on what it is you want from her.”

She shook her head “This isn’t about that. Not at first, anyway. Just talk to her. Answer her questions. Be Garrus. Just catch her up on her circumstances and make her aware of me and the time frame involved. I can take it from there. I just want you to save her some shock, some fear and some suspicion.”

Garrus muttered “Yeah, after I was the one that wanted to pull the plug.”

Jane said patiently “Because you want to protect me. Just…take a moment and think about protecting her instead. We’re going to smell different, we’re going to look different, I have changed so much. You won’t get us confused.”

Garrus started to laugh at that and said “Really? You mean I won’t just lunge at her and kiss her? To welcome her to the world?”

She smiled and said “I would pay to see that…”

He stepped to the bed and pulled her legs to the edge of the bed, leaned over her and said “Then you should not be allowed to handle money. I’m not going to…confuse the two of you, I just want to get it right and I feel bad that you want her to be a person and not a thing, and I was the one that recommended terminating her.”

She smiled, stroked at the hide along the side of his neck and said “Garrus Vakarian, you’re going to have to get used to the fact that I have faith in you that you will do the right thing. You’re going to have to accept it.”

With his talons trailing through her hair he tipped her head up to him, looked at her for a long solemn moment and then said “Okay. I’ll do it your way. Faith. We’ll…all…figure it out, together. I’ll just talk to her, make sure she knows she has options.”

She said softly, looking up at him “You know, there was this moment on the SR1 when you looked at me and said ‘If there’s anything else I can do to help…anything…just tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it’ and I was so…so…”

He grinned and she said “ANGRY at you for being so attractive and being so…under my command. DAMN was I angry. So she will not be immune to your voice.”

His chest swelled with a deep breath and she thought that even if Turians could not blush…that mandible swing was an equivalent.

He pressed her down to the bed, knees on either side of her hips, clasping his hands with hers and stretching them out to the sides. He took his time, kissed her slowly until she was dizzy and then moved his mouth to say in her ear “If only she knew how easy it would have been. All that time wasted. You should have stepped into the Mako and crooked your finger my way. Spirits, Kerim,
why do you think I phrased it that way? Do you think I ever told Executor Pallin that? I wanted to drag you in there and warm up every metal surface by pressing your body to it. I went so far as to test the soundproofing, to make sure if I had a chance, I could close the door and be the only one to hear you scream.”

She gasped and dug her fingernails into his shoulders as his mouth moved along her throat “Oh…I wish I’d known that, you’re going to make me cry, Vakarian.”

He nibbled at her throat and said “You want to know the two most devastating words a Turian could ever hear?”

She said “No guns?”

He laughed and then said mournfully against her throat “No fraternizing.”

To avoid associations or leaps of intuition, they woke her on the station. Bringing her to the Normandy just to put her in a Med Bay bed and then maybe debrief her in a conference room was too cold. Jane wanted it to be as warm as possible so they moved her from the lab and put her in crew housing, Miranda gave the final shot to wake her, obviously wanting to stay, but leaving with stiff Miranda discipline. Her second baby, delivered without her in the room.

Maudlin, Shepard.

They’d be watching. Neither she nor Miranda were giving that up, and Garrus had said he’d tell her as soon as possible, so she didn’t feel betrayed…more than she was going to feel.

Jane had tried to put herself in the mindset of when she’d first woken up, but it had all been overwritten so fast by gunfire, intrigue and blood, she’d just gotten back to work.

She was The Savior Of The Citadel and had failed to save Urem.

She was shorn of ownership of her past, her identity and a future had already been lived for her.

She wanted to kill every Reaper until they were nothing left but smudges of molten goo and footnotes in history books.

That third thing, right there, is why she was going to have Garrus break it to her gently. That third thing would be the basis of conversations.

That’s partly why Thane understood that bringing her back was not as much of a risk as Garrus thought it was. Her vengeance was more focused than her benevolence. As long as the imprint was an accurate one, and with Miranda at the helm saying it was, she had no doubts.

Garrus sat at her bedside, looking as casual as he could manage. He wasn’t the best liar, but he also would manage to be the right level of concerned for her without artifice.

She opened her eyes and opened them, blank for a moment, taking stock. She turned to see Garrus and as hoped for…the first expression on her face was a smile. She said “Hey.”

A smile hitched at the side of his mouth and he said “Hey.”

She tilted her head and said “What happened to you and how long have I been out?” She focused closer on his face and said “Thought I was dead there. How is the Normandy? Who made it?” She
was catching up, going rapidly downhill and Jane knew the feeling. The sense of obvious missed time was accumulating.

Garrus said quietly “You have to go slow. I have a lot to tell you. Time has passed. Let me answer those questions and get to some you don’t know to ask.”

She nodded and reclined with an effort and a strained “Okay.”

Jane wondered if he’d practiced or if it really just came to him. Is that how I look when he talks to me? She didn’t really know her eyes could look that trusting. He was her lifeline.

He said quietly “When the Normandy went down we lost 20 crew members.” He spoke their names, giving time and space to each one of them. “Bakari. Barrett. Chase. Crosby. Draven…Rose and Talitha, Dubyansky, Emerson, Felawa, Gladstone, Grenado, Grieco, Laflamme, Lowe, Negulesco, Pakti, Pressly, Rahman, Tanaka, Tucks, Waaberi.”

The pain washing over her face made Jane realize she couldn’t call her Shepsicle or Shep 2.0 anymore. She deserved her own name. Gemini. Gem.

Gem watched him with her game face in place, and that’s what she’d expected to see. Commander face. He gave her moments to absorb it and then said “As for your other questions, yes, time has passed. It’s been three and a half years. You were dead. Technology has advanced enough to bring you back as a clone. The original Commander Shepard died over Alchera. Two years later a clone of Commander Shepard with her memories restored was given a replica of the Normandy and she gathered a crew that countered Reapers. That Commander Shepard recently discovered that you existed, and she has chosen to use the technology available to bring you back as well. She would rather give you the opportunity to choose what it is you would want to do with your life than risk the possibility of having that choice taken away from you. We’ve discovered the mechanics of indoctrination. She’s hoping you will understand if the potential for you to be out in the world as yourself is superior to the potential of you being out there, not yourself, and indoctrinated. She is aware that this might seem like she is using you, and there’s really no way to counter that. To be honest, I didn’t like the idea…at first…but seeing you now, I wouldn’t want it any other way.”

Gem stared, face blank, taking that in, gears turning. She said “So she’s watching and I’m a massive security risk.”

His smile was almost reluctant “Yes to both.”

She said with the tone of command “Do you know what she wants me to do?”

He shook his head “No. I don’t think she does either. She only knew she didn’t want to kill you or hide you or deny to you what you’d earned, your life and your own memories.”

She said urgently “Garrus, you can’t put me in a room with her until the security risk aspect is handled. I don’t know if you’re a Garrus clone or if you’re indoctrinated or if this is a Reaper vessel, and I really don’t give a damn at this point, I just woke up. You have to promise me that you will not allow us side by side until I’ve had some permanent alterations. Hair color, eye color, scars, I don’t care. Maybe purple. I like purple. Promise me you are not going to let anybody think I’m going to put her or her mission at risk through impersonation. I also need some level of genetic tagging. You guys are advanced, you figure it out.”

Garrus leaned back and said with a smile “Yes ma’am.”

Gem shook her head and said “You can’t call me that, Garrus. I’m not a commander. I’m a terribly
risky fucking civilian with a security clearance above my pay grade.”

He shrugged and said “Then consider it a general term of civilian respect, ma’am.”

She shook her head and gave him a sideways grin “I am…so glad to see you. I bet she knows that too.”

He smiled “She might have mentioned it.”

She said with a sigh “Are we all going to die in the next ten minutes unless I make some sort of choice? Or can I take this slower than I’m used to taking things?”

He said softly “You have time. We still have the replica of the Normandy, with some hefty upgrades, which is docked here. We’re on the research station where your body has been for three and a half years. Whatever risks to you have been handled for the moment, and whatever risks to us we have under control for now.”

She nodded and said “Okay. If I’m me and you’re you and I am going to go on that assumption for a bit, I’m glad to hear things are on track, but I’m not discussing it further until I look different. I don’t want anybody to look at me and see her. Too much to ask of everyone. Get me a medical and cosmetic consult, then I’ll talk to anybody you want.”

He raised a brow plate “Until your next demand.”

She snorted “I was dead, Garrus, not stupid.” She raised her head to speak to the room in general “This had better be good or I’m going to kick your ass.”

Jane grinned and said softly “It’s good.”

Gem turned back to Garrus and said “Since she threw you at me for good reason. Stay with me? Be here when I wake up again? I hate to let good planning go unappreciated.”

Garrus said with sincerity “I’ll stay. Dr. Chakwas is here, you can say hi. I’ll introduce you to Mordin and Miranda.”

Beyond that point, surveillance seemed redundant and crass. She’d talk to Gem when she had her procedures completed. She left them alone and absorbed herself in the daily flow of work on the Normandy.

Appreciation of her choices flooded her and she found her solitary balance, without Garrus, without Thane, a necessary gear shift back to self. She’d gotten out of practice.

She was determined to make it clear to Thane that she’d already made her choice when he returned, and decided to go the Garrus route. It would come to her.

Cosmetic changes and medical briefings didn’t take all that long. Hair color was not that difficult and neither was eye color. They would be permanent, self-renewing color from the roots, and a directly dyed iris, not contacts.

Garrus collected her to be introduced to an entirely different woman on the outside. No more Kerim, now more of a jagged nebula. More purple than she’d ever managed. Asymmetrical haircut, tips of her hair black. Deep purple eyes. She’d had purple tattoo stippling applied below her cheekbones. From reports her face was subtly changed, bone shifted and sculpted. Her voice had been altered, a
little lighter in tone, but her inflection stayed the same. Garrus had informed her that they had also managed genetic tagging so that she wouldn’t be able to be identified as a Spectre on scanning. They could be identified as closely related, but not clones and not twins and no more opportunity to take over Commander Shepard’s life.

No longer Gem. That was short lived. She had a new name, a new identity provided by Liara. Vraen Yatid. Garrus would know where Vraen came from. Yatid…probably only the two of them got it, unless it had been explained. One of Rodin’s sculptures they had always admired, “The Caryatid Fallen Under Her Stone.” A Caryatid was a support pillar carved into the form of a woman, and Rodin had envisioned her as a young girl unable to bear the weight, collapsing. She…they…had always admired the piece because she was still trying to hold it up. Choosing that name was acceptance of an unbearable burden.

Garrus brought her in, and stayed. Jane said “I like the look. I never went full purple, and I appreciate the commitment. Vraen Yatid is much better than Carrie Yatid.”

Vraen watched her for a moment and said “I tried not to be too literal. I feel a little sorry for you because you’re stuck with Jane.”

Jane thought of her name on Thane’s lips and said “It’s grown on me.”

Vraen said with a slight smile “So you’re okay with your life choices?”

Jane shrugged “I can’t go full purple about it, but yeah. You okay with making new ones?”

Vraen watched her carefully “So I can decide what to do with my life?”

Jane nodded “Yup. I want you solidly on your feet first. It isn’t a test or a commitment. I just…had an opportunity and considering my origins, I felt it would be a bit precious and selfish to decide you shouldn’t get your shot.”

Vraen laughed and said “Not sure if I should thank you about that…yet. Garrus has been kind enough to answer my questions. I have a functioning and I’m assuming…bugged…Omni Tool…”

Jane nodded “Yes. We couldn’t be sure the imprint would be solid before you woke. I’d rather not have set you loose on the galaxy if you were, say, entirely evil.”

Vraen’s smile was brittle “Just…partially evil.”

Jane said “Partially evil I have found I can work with. You choosing to live is not in any way a commitment to working with me or for me, and if you want to walk out, trash your Omni Tool and write some expose book about the life of Commander Shepard, you could. I wish you wouldn’t, but that’s the chance I took. You might not be surprised to hear that I haven’t had much privacy in the last year or so.”

Vraen nodded in concession and said “Yes, I’ve noticed on my bugged Omni Tool that you and Garrus have learned to dance. Well. And congratulations.”

Garrus’s mouth twisted briefly and he only said “Thank you.”

Jane laughed and tipped her head forward “That’s one of the better examples of publicity. I assumed you’d want to take a crack at Reapers. That’s really all I needed to know. Right now you can help. If you don’t want to, there are also lots of doors that can be opened for you in good faith.”

Vraen tilted her head back and said “Good faith.” She watched the ceiling for a moment and thought
“Okay. I have an idea. Garrus has been good enough to catch me up on things I’ve been able to ask about. Turns out you didn’t have that many choices when you came back. You didn’t have much support. You’ve wrested what you could from your opportunities and I’ll do the same. I won’t get in your way, but I will take some support. I want in on the fight. I don’t want to be on this ship though. Too much. Too many memories. Too many opportunities to have no chance to become someone else. I was up for two minutes before I gave Garrus an order and that instinct is going to be tough to break.”

Garrus shrugged and said “I followed it.”

Vraen laughed “Yeah. Yeah, you did. Thank you. Thank you both. I think, though, given the setup as I understand it…that there’s a possible future that might work. Turns out a lovely Asari woman is the person who fought for and found my body and gave us both the opportunity to be alive. She has her own ship. A huge ship without much support, without people she can trust helping her. I’ve got some catching up to do and I’d rather not have to rely on either of you to tiptoe around what’s real to spare my feelings or yours. I appreciate your tact, but it will ultimately make me nervous, and my tendency to take control will always be a risk. You guys are busy enough and don’t need to babysit and I don’t need to be on a warship to be of use. So if it is okay with you, perhaps I can be transferred to Hagalaz and Liara will let me know of what use I can be to her, and she can catch me up on the fight. If I have a chance to breathe, I’m going to take it, and then consider my move before I make one. I’ll ask Liara to get me a new Omni Tool. If she wants to watch, she’s welcome to.”

Jane said, slightly dumbstruck “That sounds…good.”

Vraen looked at them both and said “You both look shocked. Did you expect that I was going to demand a bank account and blackmail?”

Garrus said with a slight stutter “It’s just that things have been happening lately where we don’t have to shoot someone but it still goes all right. We’re not used to it.”

Vraen smiled and said “Well…yeah, that I understand. You guys haven’t had the easiest year. Maybe I just want to get off the Normandy before she…explodes again.”

Jane said with a shake of her head “No exploding. That’s part of the deal.”

Vraen snorted “Like you can promise that. Just get me to Hagalaz. You won’t hear from me unless I have a brilliant idea.”

Garrus said softly “What if I’d like to hear from you anyway?”

Vraen smiled “Then you’ll know where I am. Thank you. Both. Now get back to planning which people to shoot. I’ll get my newly purple hair out of your way.”

She stood up and left and Jane said “I’m rethinking that part about not taking a run at myself.”

Garrus started to laugh and then said “Yeah, so am I.”
Chapter 29

Tim would only talk to her. Of course. He was getting bored enough, had recovered enough, to want to talk to her, do his version of negotiating, which was mostly bragging about how much he knew and how little she knew. She let him do it because she was allowed to leave the brig at will. She imagined that moment on its own managed to crush him at the end of each discussion, so she listened, nodded, kept her ego far away from this man, just in case racist asshole narcissist was contagious.

He had negotiated for some basic luxuries, slow to come, based on the actionable value of what he gave her. She’d been very skeptical that the arrest of one individual agent could be worth all that much, but after seeing how much the Alliance wanted Kai Leng and the list of crimes he was believed to have been involved in committing before disappearing entirely off the grid…with Cerberus’s help…she was willing to deal more substantially.

Communication off the ship for him was out of the question. There was still a great deal she could give him. She wasn’t considering letting him out of the brig, but she also wasn’t considering shooting him in the forehead or giving him to the Alliance. In fact she was so concerned about his informant base that she wondered how long Kai Leng was going to remain in custody, and she warned the Alliance of extensive corruption above and beyond indoctrination. Now they had the human element of greed and racism to combat from inside. She didn’t go after Kai Leng herself, but the Alliance was able to bring him in after Tim gave up a great deal of information regarding safe houses, routing and financing that they never would have found otherwise.

So Tim now had a read only library and Ethernet media access on a new, limited Omni Tool. He could at least fend off some cage-pacing boredom. He could still barter for terminal access, a word processing tool and any number of conveniences.

On their last visit he had complained about the inability to record any of his thoughts, so on this visit she carefully put down a pad of paper and a pen. Insulting, she knew, intentionally. She could be obnoxious if he was going to be obnoxious. That’s how Game Theory worked. Make parallel, matching moves. She didn’t need to be kind or helpful if he was cagey and grasping.

He stared at the pad and then sighed “I suppose I deserve that.”

She shrugged and sat “Better than if you start writing on the walls in blood. That’s usually a bad sign for sanity. So what’s on the menu for today?”

He sat on the edge of the utilitarian bunk formally and said “Menu would be apt. Your food is terrible.”

She tilted her head “Is that what you want, better rations? I can work with that. What’s up for negotiation?” He hadn’t asked for cigarettes or alcohol. All the withdrawal medication he’d been on had likely ended those cravings for now, and in prison it would be far too easy to use against him. She likely wouldn’t have done that, but he would have done that with no qualms to a prisoner. That was still some impressive intellectual discipline, considering the anxiety and boredom levels the man must be experiencing.

He looked at her appraisingly and said “Did you find your clone?”
She nodded “Yes. Are there more?”

He shook his head and she was massively relieved and further prone to give him what he wanted. It was possible he was lying, but she was his only path to a better existence, and pissing her off would not lead that way. He had signs of life, signs of wanting to live. They had likely passed the flame out in a ball of vengeance stage. She hadn’t been looking forward to armies of Shepards. He replied “No more. There are, as you must have discovered, the templates of memory, but Miranda’s brilliance should not be underrated. I had attempted to reproduce the process, but without her to supervise and execute, results could not be duplicated. I kept the body. Had you been injured, you would have had to come to me. A negligible cost for the possible…favor you might owe me.”

Bullshit, as though I’d have gotten into your Med Bay and you would have let me out…but she’d have been incapacitated and any number of people would have been desperate enough…

Damn him.

He continued “I did learn a few things. The Alliance will find a chip in Kai Leng’s head that Miranda recommended I implant in you.”

She kept her face still. It wasn’t as hard as it might have been coming from anybody else. He was like this before he was indoctrinated, she kept having to remind herself.

She had cost him his fortune and his freedom. Good.

He smiled tightly and said “You are a more generous person than I would be, and the concessions you make to my comfort and sanity are appreciated considering where I could be. Likely where I should be. Although I could hope for lessened security.”

EDI said, smug dripping from her voice “Not going to happen.”

Jane smiled.

He sighed and tilted his eyes up briefly, though the sound had come from all directions. Nice trick, EDI.

He continued “There is something I had been working on but I cannot develop further from here. It may be of use in your fight against Reapers. With time and distance, I would very much like to see them fail. There are ruins, on Mars, and amid all the research that I did and the voices in my head, I did discover a few things that will be of use. I risk the reality that I have very little information other than a lead, about a device that may or may not work. I leave it to you to decide whether it is worth your time. Ms. T’Soni would be of high utility in translating and locating the data. Please inform her with my compliments that this…” He leaned forward and took the pen and paper, wrote a list of names for several minutes “Is a list of agents she believes work only for her, but also work for me. I cannot say if they are loyal to both or either or play us both, but Cerberus and through us other agencies are aware of her ship on Hagalaz.”

He pushed the piece of paper toward her and said “If I had a terminal and the ability to file reports, you could perhaps spare yourself these personal visits.”

She nodded and said “All right. Let me check this out. I’ll get you a terminal. I’ll get you better food, but I swear you eat what we eat. Seems I’ve come into some cash lately, though, so I can spare that.”

He answered with an un-amused glare. Maybe no sense of humor was necessary in order to be a racist narcissist.
She felt another unbidden rush of pity for the man. No humor. No laughter in his life. Trapped by his own self importance in a room alone with smoke and vapor.

She continued “I have Geth working on Reaper technology that’s intended for humans. If I get you access to read only Cerberus files, perhaps you can provide me with some more context.”

He said tiredly “You could spare me these personal visits.”

She smiled, took the list and imagined the fuming anger he must feel just watching her free to go.

Once up in her cabin she showed the list to Liara and asked for her to lock down security and then meet them on Mars.

Liara scanned the list and said “I had doubts about quite a few of them and I had been giving them false information, unable to verify much of what they’d told me. But there are a few that…thank you, Jane. Since I have become intimately aware with the fact that this entire ship can be infiltrated by three determined people, I have made quite a few upgrades. Beyond that list, if you can get him to follow up with more detailed methods…I would appreciate it.”

Jane nodded and replied “I’ll work on that. Hey, if the ship has become a massive expense and liability, maybe ditch it. I’ve got Eurydice station now and it’s going to be underutilized. There are also quite a few Cerberus safe houses and stations, posts that you could use. Up for grabs, give it some thought.”

Liara tilted her head forward and said “Thank you. A combination of all my options would help me decide. If you could spare Kasumi to go over my security specs and options for each location. For now, I’ll head to Mars. I’ll leave Feron and Vraen to make recommendations on the rest along with Kasumi.”

Jane smiled and asked “How is she doing?”

Liara’s voice softened and she said “Surprisingly well. Maybe not a surprise to you. It’s nice. For the first time I don’t have to jealous of Garrus…or Thane.”

Jane grinned and said “I am so happy to hear it, sorry to cause you to part.”

Liara smiled as she said “It will be fine. I’ve become fond of reunions.”

oOoOoOoOoOo

Mars turned out to be…really boring. Leisurely. Not involving guns. Again. Liara spoke to researchers and a new dig was begun in a critical location. Now they waited. Mars had a huge amount of unanalyzed data and Liara was up to her tentacles in new discovery.

Jane had become so secure in her personnel she was no longer babysitting, and her unfathomable geniuses were working on their projects. She had so many things going on at once that she could not micro manage, and these were not people to micro manage in the first place. She spent less time scurrying around a ship speaking to a few individuals about their personal issues and much more time on reports and coordination with far flung authorities in different systems.

She liked this better. Before the Collector base she’d been often worried about returning to the ship and finding things on fire from Jack’s temper or Zaeed’s attempts at target practice without shielding. If anything, she was being babysat. These were the blessings of being in the company of stable, dedicated, gifted and loyal support.
EDI, David and Legion were working on all the data flowing in from the Consensus, formulating information on indoctrination. Since the Geth could not hear any voices from artifacts, they were limited in their ability to describe the process. There was a horrific amount of recorded behavior and experiments to review.

Garrus was busy coordinating with Palaven. There were power vacuums and corruption accusations from the fallout of the indoctrination and Cerberus impacts. He was doing his best to advise and stabilize the Hierarchy.

She felt that she and Garrus had both had some hollow spaces in themselves filled, no longer empty but buoyant. That, and other things, were in the spring in his step, and hers.

Kasumi was simultaneously running her crime ring and sifting through all the Cerberus data. She had Jack entirely under control, no fires, and lots of funding. Jane didn’t look too closely, with the assurance that only “bad guys” provided said funding. Having met Donovan Hock…Jane didn’t require that much trust to think that was true. She’d never say it to Kasumi’s face…but she was a good person. If Kasumi and Jack…and Priya whoever…preyed on Batarian slaving operations, she’d kick in some of her own, now formidable, personal fortune. Instead, it grew. They were independently funded entirely and she was grateful not having to make pit stops to mine.

She’d heard from Thane every day, only text and only assurance that he was alive. Today he sent an urgent Omni Tool alert and stated he was on his way to the Normandy, but had special circumstances to request approval before docking with her.

She was overjoyed he was on his way, but his formal tone gave her pause. Business. Mind on business Jane.

He said briefly “My raid on the compound was a success, but there is a complication. The young woman I rescued does not believe me to be a rescuer.” He turned the camera of his Omni Tool back to show a young Drell woman sleeping. Bound…and sleeping. Her markings were red and violet.

Jane was thrilled that the sight of a young Drell woman who happened to be an assassin did not send her into any level of internal panic. Yahlis was a wound that had closed. A potentially fatal wound, but scarred over and no longer a threat. She’d survived Corbin. She’d survived Akuze. She’d survived death. She had practice. The constant howling addiction to her had faded. Her memory had blended into the echo of a stoic memory of pain and a vague ‘that’s what you get when you fuck with me…’ There was a deeply driven canyon in her mind that such things fell into and only faint echoes were heard. Thane had become just himself. A young Drell assassin was just herself.

Thane drew a deep breath and said “She witnessed my slaughter of her keepers and attempted to defend them. She has attempted to kill me numerous times. She is…very effective. I cannot give her to Feron or to Kolyat. She would kill them. It is possible…that she cannot be saved. I take the risk upon myself. I ask you take the risk with me, that we give her time among people accustomed to being the target of death. People that will allow no harm to come to her or to themselves.”

Jane looked at the sleeping girl until the camera moved back to Thane’s face, tense and in pain. She asked “She attempted to kill you. Are you injured?”

Thane nodded briefly “Yes. She has made the raid and her retrieval…a challenge.”

Jane’s lips curved “So you like her.”

Thane said softly “I do not believe I have the right to like her, but I also believe perhaps I am the only one who could help her, and I believe my family to be equipped to aid in that.”
Jane felt a warm spurt of joy at the word ‘family’ tilted her head and said “I thought I was the only one allowed to adopt dangerous strays.” It was clear from her teasing tone that she agreed they would board.

He smiled through his pain and exhaustion and said with a tilt of his head and a rueful voice “It seemed as though it were time for me to do something imprudent.”

She nodded sagely and said “Bold move, Bes Tiron. Bring her home.”

He drew a deep breath and the exhaustion was more plain, his skin waxen as he leaned forward and light shifted. “Please, Jane. Talk to me. I miss your voice and I cannot risk sleep. Watch over me.”

She said gently “Of course. Tell me what you need. I’ll keep this channel open. I’ll let Dr. Chakwas know you’re on your way. Does she need to be in the brig…?”

He tilted his head forward “I would prefer to have her in regular quarters, but I cannot risk it as yet. She is not injured. She has powerful biotics. I do not believe her to be indoctrinated, but she should be examined and then placed in the brig until I am conscious. She is under a great deal of sedation. I cannot risk her waking again. Although I am the last person she would wish to speak to at the moment, I am likely the only person that will be able to ease her path without an ultimate body count, possibly hers included. Provide her with fruit and water.” His cataloguing voice ended and he said with tight lips and closed eyes “She is fifteen years old, Siha.”

She’d passed her first trial. Institutional rape. She’d been in sexual training since that time, but she had not yet been forced to rape another with pride. She had likely killed several times, if Thane’s training was any guide, for the last three years.

She said softly “If it doesn’t work, we can always put her in stasis.”

Thane nodded wearily but said “Yes. I should have done so. I considered it…but I cannot. Her family is dead, both parents from a colony taken by fever.” He said in the detached tone she knew reflected control over his emotions when he was in deep pain “Records…for my family…were located. Feron had asked me previously if I wished to know…I declined. When I realized this girl had no one to return to, I asked Feron to tell me. Perhaps she could…” His voice broke off, hoarse, but he continued with a deep controlled breath “My parents, my sister, they are dead as well. My parents from Kepral’s…my sister…they had no other children…killed herself after their death. And this girl, her name is Phetas…she looks so much like my sister. I should set her aside…but I cannot, Jane. Whatever the cost, I cannot. If you were to turn me away, I still could not. Her life is in my hands, though I have no right to her. I promised you, Jane…our burdens would be shared. I open my fist and held within is a murderous child.”

Jane tilted her head, blinked back a few tears and said “Thane, this is a good place for murderous children…and adults. Bring her home. In fact I insist. This is my dower gift. Stay awake with me. Once you get here, I need you to rest and sleep, and we will do whatever you say needs to be done. Would you prefer that she stay asleep until you were ready?”

Thane nodded and said “Yes. Please. It would be…impossible to wake to find she had injured someone…injured herself.” He said in exasperation and undeniable admiration “She woke once, attempted to disrupt the controls of the shuttle directly through the walls. I had to make repairs…” His eyes drifted back to look at his sleeping charge. Not daughter. Not sister. He’d seen this calling three times in his life. Once for Irikah. Once for Jane. Once for Phetas. A call from Gods he could not ignore, a knowing. A…Rightness. Watching over her for him would be a Rightness. That’s the way he’d see it.
She saw a man whose protective urges were struggling with his murderous instincts…and the protective was winning, and she would do everything to help.

Considering that Irikah had granted him release from Hanar bondage and a son, and Jane had given him his life back to him, she wondered what gift Phetas held for him. Hopefully a chance to see that imprudence under these circumstances should be indulged, and if it resulted in a saved life, demanded. That a life lived without accepting unfair liability in service to others…was a lonely place.

Jane said quietly “Okay. We won’t let that happen. We’ll only light and provision the path you need to walk. We will be there for you. The brig is biotically shielded. EDI will watch her to make sure she doesn’t harm herself. Whatever you need.”

He asked with vague curiosity “Why…are you on Mars?”

She replied “Tim thinks there’s some super weapon buried here. Or the plans to it. Or just a big hole we dig. Not sure yet. Waiting.”

He raised a brow and said “And…your clone?”

She took a deep breath and said “She insisted on having plastic surgery, she’s now all purple. Well, not all. Hair and eyes and some tattoos. Facial and genetic alteration. She decided to help Liara.”

Thane’s brow raised higher as he said “It is unfortunate I did not get a chance to meet her.”

Her mouth quirked “I think she wanted to start over. I got about seven minutes with her. Her first and main concern was security risk.”

He said as a tired attempt at a joke “So…it appears you are free.”

She nodded solemnly and said “I’m all yours.”

oOoOoOoOoOo

Thane was in bad shape. There was a lot of green blood on the floor of the shuttle. Garrus had joined her and they’d spoken to him, kept him awake for hours, his voice hoarse. Garrus had stormed into the shuttle and carried him to the Med Bay, to no protest.

Bad shape.

Shepard had gingerly picked up Phetas and carried her a bit more slowly, leaving green treads of blood.

Dr. Chakwas had assured them that he would be fine, it would take a few hours to replenish fluids and let him get some sleep. She muttered that fortunately she had a great deal of practice with this particular Drell’s tendency to be in this state. She said they’d been able to draw so much blood from him over time she could replenish his system with autologous donations, she’d anticipated the need. She’d just draw more to replenish the stock after he recovered.

Scans of Phetas and Thane had revealed no indoctrination, so Phetas was transferred to the brig under Jane’s supervision. She stayed there, Garrus stayed in the Med Bay, and they both watched over unconscious charges. Once the bonds had been released and she’d been behind a screen, she’d felt better. She had water and raw fruit, implements to test and prepare. A blunt knife included. Jane watched through the force shield.
Associations with Yahlis may not yank her directly out of awareness of the present time but that didn’t mean she was going to get too close. If Thane was bleeding, and he’d placed her in the brig, there were very good reasons.

Maybe she had learned something about not making obscure masochistic Shepard points.

When Phetas had woken, Jane said clearly “You’re on a ship. The Normandy. I am Commander Shepard. The man who brought you here is a crew mate. His name is Thane Krios. You are under surveillance, and a ship AI will flood this chamber with gas that will knock you out if necessary to make certain you do yourself no harm. If the gas is not swift enough, electrocution, although painful, is the escalation option. We wish you no harm, we are hoping for no escalation. There is water and fruit, both not poisoned, but you have the tools to check. Thane believes that it is possible that you choose to forge a new life for yourself. He has dedicated himself to removing Drell from the Compact. He served as an assassin for many years. You are under no criminal charges and he has forgiven you for personal assault. We do not hold you responsible for the opinions and practices you hold, we hope that you find a time and place in your life where your opinions and practices become your own, of your own choice. As the Commander I welcome you and I regret that meeting must be through a screen. If you ever wish to speak to me, say my name. The ship AI will relay your request.”

Phetas gave no sign that she’d heard. Not unexpected. So they wouldn’t be braiding each other’s hair today, metaphorically, or ever literally.

EDI likely caught her about to fall asleep. Jack came to spell her on Drell watch.

Jack nudged her shoulder and said “Hey. Jane, go get some sleep. I hear it’s been rough.”

Jane looked up at her gratefully “Yeah. Thanks.”

Jack looked at Phetas “Has she said anything?”

Jane shook her head and said “Nope. Hasn’t moved. She’s awake though.”

Jane looked into the cell and said “Yeah, I know that impulse. I spent so many days not moving, just not wanting to give anybody anything.”

Jane closed her eyes and sighed “Yeah, I know that impulse too.”

Jack gave Jane her hand, she took it and stood. Jack said “Go get some sleep. Sometimes it takes scary bitches a while to realize they’re safe.”

Jane smiled and said “Or as safe as they want to be. I’ll spare you the hug.”

Jack snorted “Yeah you will. Don’t want to look like a pussy in front of the big bad scary Drell.”

She checked in on the Med Bay. Thane was sleeping, vitals stable. Garrus was holding his hand. Garrus’s schedule being what it was, he had recently gotten more sleep, so she pressed her forehead to his crest and headed to her quarters, to sleep it off.

She managed to sleep a straight 12 hours, nothing important enough to wake her, which was always a luxury.

Heading to the Med Bay, Thane was awake. Garrus gone. Dr. Chakwas fussing.
She smiled at him and he smiled at her in welcome. She sat beside him and said “I’d like to officially ask for permission to kiss you hello.”

He raised a brow ridge and said a succinct and satisfied “No.”

Both her brows shot up. “Really? No? Just like that?”

He inclined his head. “Just like that. I would like to officially ask that you travel with me to a Drell enclave on Earth. There I shall see your North Star and there we will discuss your request.”

She started to laugh and said “Well…okay. Ambush?”

He nodded gravely “Ambush.” His smile was warmer and wider than she was accustomed to seeing on his face. Smug and happy. She liked it. He said “At least we are close.”

She inclined her head and said “Yes, we are. I know you have a person in the brig you need to speak to. I await your convenience, Sere Krios.”

He continued to smile.

She said conspiratorially “Am I allowed to talk to you in the meantime?”

He nodded solemnly and said “That is permitted.”

She knew better than to ask him how he felt, but she did say she was glad to see him with all the blood inside. He split his time between the Med Bay and establishing a routine with Phetas, making sure she ate and drank, though she still did not speak. This wasn’t a surprise to Thane. All that mattered is that she was healthy and no threat to herself or others for now. Jack sat with her quietly often, would keep it up when Thane was off the ship.

Garrus didn’t ask a single question about Thane’s absence from their shared bed, so she thought based on Garrus’s smile that he knew more than she did about the upcoming ambush.

In three days Thane had determined that his convenience, which she had awaited with curiosity and patience, had arrived. They would travel to Earth.

He hadn’t touched her since he’d gotten back, and she respected that distance, focusing on his smile and the warmth in his voice whenever she sought him out.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Thane remained gloved in the shuttle and it was a brief ride. Their destination was the Mojave desert. Thane explained that Feron and Kolyat had managed with Liara’s help to resettle Drell across many worlds, looking for new environments, settling Drell away from Kahje, no longer bound to the Hanar. Earth may be a target of the Reapers, but she was also still defended and populated, and anybody preying on Drell, who were popular as slave targets, would not be able to get to them on Earth. Unfortunately in the past, individual settlements on otherwise deserted locations had not been able to defend themselves against slavers once the locations were discovered.

He stood and took her hand, tucked it under his elbow and on his forearm and they traveled to a building in a small settlement, possibly 30 buildings total. It was early evening local time, fortunately for her it was late fall locally, warm but not the intense heat the area was famous for. This was close to Death Valley. Hopefully not prophetic for the Drell…

Thane escorted her to a larger gathering building in the center of the community. It was fairly high
tech in terms of prefabricated buildings, but it looked like this building was an attempt at Drell heritage. A tent pattern, layered bright, rich fabrics, modern lighting inside but with some of the relics of Drell design she had seen in Urem’s private collection. She noticed the yellow of Rakhana skies beside the blues of earth skies, the deeper yellow of the sand on the home world against the paler shades of Mojave sand, darker bands of fabric that may represent sedimentary rock or shadowed stone.

Thane escorted her to a Drell woman, who bowed, one hand over her heart and said “Commander Shepard. Welcome to the home and heart of the Tseni clan on Earth.”

Jane swallowed hard and was lost for a disoriented moment. She could not possibly bow like that. She had no idea what was expected of her. Fortunately some of her training in not looking panicked gave Thane the opportunity to thank the woman, who he introduced as Maril Tseni. Jane gave a soft smile but kept her damned mouth shut.

Thane does not screw around with his surprises.

Maril gave them a brief tour, let her know that the Tseni creatures did well in the Mojave, that the land here was renamed for the Tseni and granted to the clan by Earth local governments, and they were doing brisk trade in the more mundane cloths they had preserved the methods to make.

Maril guided them through the compound and to a smaller, nondescript outbuilding. Once inside, it was found to be living quarters. Maril showed them around, and then guided them back to a side room, possibly used for storage, now housing one dress form…with a dress of Tseni fabric in black and Nanus blue. Three spaced straps spanning each shoulder, drawn back down to a woven bodice, crossing at the waist and flaring over the hips, more woven bands down into a diamond-shaped skirt, joined over the hips with the back with the same theme of three curved straps.

Jane was stuck between trembling and protest, and Maril said with amusement in her eyes and a conspiratorial look with Thane “The Tseni clan thanks you, Commander Shepard, for your intervention on our behalf. You are always welcome here. It would please us greatly if you would wear this with our blessing.”

She stuck with the speechless theme as she stepped closer to the form to run her fingers over the bands of fabric. Earth symbols of stone and water and air, birds and fish and animals in midnight and moon.

She turned to Maril and said “It is absolutely beautiful. I am thrilled to see the Tseni tribe thriving.”

Maril nodded once in acknowledgement and then turned and left.

She turned back to look at the dress, turning the form once, the back was the three straps down the back to another diamond shaped strap skirt. When she turned back to him, he was smiling. She said “I can’t take this.”

He raised a brow ridge and said “You will, and you must. The Tseni have deemed you worthy. These are your colors. Would you deny Drell the right to create new traditions? Do you reject their gift?”

She opened her mouth but had no answer to that. He held out a hand to her and said “Walk with me, Siha. We shall see the stars as they emerge in the sky, midnight and silver.”

She was numb and speechless, and as he often had, he ignored her participation in favor of his direction, tucking her nerveless hand back on his forearm, carrying a basket on his other arm.
How long had he been planning...?

He walked out of the settlement, no possibility of getting lost. Flat in all directions, stretching out to the shadowing mountains. It was dusk, darkness just beginning to fall. Air became rapidly cooler in the desert after the sun set, and she walked, quietly contemplating.

Where in hell would she wear Tseni? Even Thane had not worn his more than twice, once when gifted and once...

She was still overwhelmed with implications. Okay, try not to get carried away here, Shepard. He’s showing you a resettled Drell community that you helped make possible, though he did all of the work.

A small voice in her head said – well, you were tortured for seven weeks, that counts for something. So Yahlis should be wearing the Tseni...in the colors of a bird of paradise.

She tripped on a rock and was steadied by his arm. She’d be damned if she was going to be the first one to talk.

He found a clear patch on the ground and laid out a rich, thin layer of Earth sky blue fabric that looked far too delicate to sit on, but he did exactly that, gestured for her to sit with him. When she looked at him as though she deserved some mercy he smiled and pulled her to sit between the brace of his thighs, her back against his chest, warmth radiating from him. He kept one gloved hand clasped in hers, and emptied the basket of a few other things. A small glowing light source, warm yellow spilling light from a half sphere of glass, a nectar he pressed into her empty hand, and a bowl of fruit. Not Drell fruit, something she recognized by smell, though there was...

He took a piece between fingertips and fed it to her, and she smiled. She said “Peaches...in...honey and rosemary.”

He nodded against her shoulder, pressed a kiss there and said “And the honeycomb will taste sweeter coming from my hand.”

The nectar was guava.

Between bites and sips and soaking in the desert air and stark beauty with soft warm light, the skies drew darker. At first they could make out Venus, and there were a few false starts that turned out to be ships and even a few satellites, but the skies slowly revealed themselves. She turned her head to look at him, and he looked...he looked genuinely happy, relaxed and soaking in this bizarre mix of circumstance, Earth and desert and gloves and Tseni fabric, trying to catch a glimpse of his namesake.

She recalled he had said to her “We shall go to Earth...”

Not ‘we should’ but ‘we shall.’

That’s how long he had been planning this. Choosing the name of Bes Tiron for him must have pleased him in more ways than she had counted at the time, that the Tseni had settled in the northern hemisphere another signpost on a path.

She breathed in deep of night air and far flung plans, the confidence in him that she would find herself here. Kepral’s would not need to be cured here, because it would never develop. Tseni fabric would be bartered for peaches. A lot...of peaches...and cash. They could thrive here, free from Hanar and Kepral’s and if she had anything to say about it, Reapers.
When she looked back to the sky the North Star was out and she pointed at the emerging bright point. The constellations emerged around it and she explained ursa major, ursa minor, big dippers and little dippers…and he listened, rapt, his eyes following her pointing finger, his breath on her neck.

They watched, letting the shades of night fall a little farther until the stars were fully midnight and silver and the dark night closed around them, chill falling in on them, heat rising off the ground in dissipating waves.

Thane kissed her hair and settled her back until his chin was resting on the top of her head. He said “My name is Senar Tuelon. I give you my name, in this place of honey and hope, to guard in your heart. Here the Drell begin again, they bring old ideas and new hopes. I give you my past, as you have given me yours. Here is proof that Drell and humans can prosper together. I give you my future, as you have given me yours. I am the last of the Tuelon name. My son bears the name Krios. I will have you bear no name but your own. I shall bear the name Thane Krios for my life with you. Know me for who I am, for who I wish to be, and wear your Tseni tomorrow as I wear mine, bind your wrist to mine before the clan that wove our garb. There is no vow you need make, no promise owed. You have made me Whole, Jane. My promise to you, whether or not you choose to bind your wrist to mine, is that battle sleep shall never claim me. I will ever wake to this night sky, to my true name. For as long as I have life, the memory of you will guide my path and I shall never again walk lost in darkness. I wish you happiness, freedom, and the knowledge that the hope that has burned in you has been passed on to me and I will guard that flame for a lifetime.”

She found his hands with hers and slid her fingers between his, crossing their arms over her stomach and squeezed. She said “Senar Tuelon, I will speak your name once and only once, and hold that name in my heart. I belong with you. You bring me happiness, freedom and hope, and I wish to give that back with both hands, and one bound wrist.”

His arms tightened around her, his hands squeezing hers, and he breathed a few ragged inhales and exhales against her hair. His breath eased and her tears stopped falling over time. He said “Stay with me, here, Siha, and let us watch the stars turn around one unchanging point of inspiration.” Inspiration could be the North Star, could be her, could be him, could be this remote valley, could be all four.

His hand left hers briefly to pack away food and light. He used a roll of cloth for a pillow, laid back and held her against him, hands clasped over her stomach, the miracle of his breath rising and falling as he whispered Drell poetry to her in the dark, watching the wheel of the stars turn as foretold.

She said softly, before she was about to drift to sleep “Nice ambush.”

He kissed the top of her head and said “Timing determines outcome, Siha.”

She laughed and said “I think it will take a lifetime to get used to the shape of your lips when you smile.”

He said thoughtfully “I believe it will take a lifetime to get used to the way it feels. I look forward to practice.”
He carried her back to the settlement, wrapped in sky blue, feet usually so silent, now crunching in sand at sunrise.

She snuggled in closer to his chest, getting slowly used to the idea that he was smiling.

She’d never been carried anywhere before Garrus and Thane, both who seemed to enjoy it so much…she never commented on the fact that it was so out of character for her. They didn’t think that it was out of character at all for her. She wished Garrus could see this place. She’d tell him all about it.

Garrus won on the carrying, he’d carried both her and Thane about…but each one of them had supported the other out of battle.

She supposed she’d swept them off their feet metaphorically enough times to consider it a trade.

And…she needed to stop keeping score.

She listened to the crunch of footsteps and drew in the last of the cool night air and couldn’t think of anything to say that could make the moment better, so she didn’t say anything.

Breakfast was fruit from his fingertips. He still kept his damned gloves on, and that man could commit. She was going to miss the leather. She should enjoy it while she could. So she did.

She appreciated the long moments in the sun while everything else moved on without her.

Pools of sunlight formed and moved over the floor through oval windows draped with bright cloth and she spun a long peaceful skein of memory, she imagined he’d be able to count the dust motes that danced through the light and she tried to count them in the moment…

…until she remembered not to keep score and there was no reason to count, no need. Human memory would be just fine and if she forgot he would tell it to her. She closed her eyes again with her head on his thigh and his hands in her hair and she imagined hair of different lengths through his hands, living long enough to go grey.

Simple things. Simple things she wanted badly.

Simple things like the once impossible breath of a human and the once impossible breath of a Drell, the hope infusing them both.

She woke again, having dreamed of fires in the night and hearths to call home, hearths that traveled with her. She had a home and a family on her ship, a home here, a home on Palaven, and the blessings of the best people she knew.

Without a single adulterant or chemical influence in her blood, she felt the innocent anticipation of being able to touch him, appreciating what otherwise she’d have thought of as pageantry.

It mattered that people made choices in new moments of time, in new costumes, with new thoughts, with everything supporting them toward that new direction. He couldn’t be a new person on his own, but he could with her, with Garrus, with this clan telling him that he could, that it mattered, that he could make a difference in the light as well as from the shadows. Maybe limited light, like the pools of light on the floor that flowed and were witnessed by only a few, but he could. She could do
it with him.

He was right. She appreciated effort.

Normally she’d dismiss this all as theater, but there was transformation in these moments, with the reality of legacies behind them. She had her history of human military, rich and fierce in its own way. He was known to this clan. He had earned Tseni through keeping faith with the Compact and she had earned them by providing to destroy the Compact. Once mighty and alone, the clan and he and she now needed each other in order to survive, and change was required. In these moments of calamity individual people wielded power of destruction and creation unprecedented at other times.

This was a perfect place for new beginnings, bound wrists and for her eyes to alight on beautiful things, beautiful people, beautiful ideas.

Inspiration.

She had no idea if he slept at all, but he was relaxed, his voice easy and warm, his lighter smile breathtaking.

He lifted her shoulders to pull her across his lap and said softly “It is time to prepare, Jane.”

He moved one finger over her bottom lip, open fascination and adoration on his face.

She said “What do I need to do to prepare?”

He said simply “Wear your Tseni. No shoes.”

She thought a moment and said “I imagine there is no Drell tradition for hair.” She expected him to elaborately do something about that, but he said “Hair down, free, the scent of desert breeze and sun.”

She thought of telling him he had made her Whole, but he wouldn’t believe it and it was perhaps not true. She had been Whole unto herself in his sense, but she had been alone in that place. She’d give her life for his and that again was perhaps not something unique.

He would like to be more exclusive…and she could try for accurate.

She no longer doubted her beauty in his eyes. He knew of his own. She discarded those observations as obvious.

She looked at this man and thought “Senar.” He expected no vow from her and she had none prepared, but she said “Seeing myself through your eyes has been a blessing. You have kept me company where I thought I would always be alone, and your presence and faith has allowed new life and hope on what I considered salted and defiled ground. You have made me happy.”

He tilted his head as though…embarrassed? Happy and embarrassed as he tilted his head down, kissed the top of her head, then held there as she said “And I can’t wait to kiss you. This is definitely better than the Med Bay.”

With laughter he shifted her and swung off the bed, carried her back to her dress, set her down in front of it, trailed his fingers over the straps, and with his beautiful smile that squeezed her heart again, he was gone.

Getting dressed took approximately 90 seconds. She hadn’t lost her reverence for the cloth, but she did know she couldn’t harm it, and she had no adjusting to do because the straps fell perfectly over
her shoulders and hips. Barbaric and stark, night sky to Thane’s dark jungle.

The mood of the last day had cleansed her of keeping score, but not of appreciation. The Drell had always been so forbidding, Urem had kept her separate from his life by her inclination, but there had always been a bit of her wondering how well accepted she might have been. Thane had been severed from Drell society and this small patch of acceptance and rebuilding made these Tseni unique. Regardless of whether or not Kalahira would watch over her, she would watch over these people.

She would honor what it meant to them, accept the beauty, and believe that Maril knew the potential of this place, that each Drell child here could grow up healthy and protected, and that was certainly worth a dress, even a dress of such regal provenance.

She took it upon herself that this dress was a covenant to continue to protect this valley.

She had a brief thought of possibly settling people onto planets with civilizations that had not reached space travel?

Maybe 50,000 years ago if a few Protheans had settled on Earth…

Reapers couldn’t be that omniscient, could they? Ilos had survived.

Her head churned briefly as she looked at herself in the mirror, focusing on the Drell for a moment…

She had a slow smile as she had an idea…

If they couldn’t convert Drell assassins…maybe they could hire them.

So when Thane came to collect her the eyes that met his in the mirror were love and war.

It was entirely redundant at this point to discuss how much he took her breath, so her eyes lingered on his bare hands, luxury and promise.

She suddenly sympathized with Victorians fluttering hearts over bared ankles. She would never take skin for granted again.

He said chiding “Jane…you will make me blush.”

She laughed and said “I don’t believe it. Maybe if your markings were red, you’d turn brown, but you’re already green.”

He indicated the exit and said “I do believe you could make me greener. Come.”

He still wasn’t going to touch her, but he did present her with his elbow and she tucked her hand lightly on the bands, unwilling to press through or cheat. He had orchestrated a moment, and she was a convert to his particular flair of drama. Before he opened the door to leave, he turned to her briefly and combed his free hand through her hair. Desert breeze and sun and venom. He gazed at her for a long memorizing moment, and she wondered about what he’d said about Drell memory, what thoughts he was investing in her, how this moment would be recalled in perfect clarity.

Walking through the central causeway to the main traditional building, it appeared everyone had turned out. She imagined they were definitely more entertaining than tumbleweeds and coyote. She was entertained.

A little Drell girl ran up to Thane, he was likely the most familiar, and handed him a flower, giggled
and ran away. He thanked her rapidly retreating back and anchored the flower in her hair, taking a moment to wrap a lock of her hair around the base, the bloom white and iridescence in a six-pointed star petal pattern.

She said to him lightly “I’m glad someone else is more nervous than I am.”

With a final adjustment to the flower he said “Everyone is more nervous than you are, Siha.”

She raised a brow “Even you?”

He said in a slightly shocked tone as though she were a fool “Especially me.”

She said softly “I do not believe you.”

He teased “Consider, Siha, if we do not please you, you could perhaps destroy us all with a word.”

She said haughtily “Then I shall do my best to be pleased.”

He smiled at her and said “I am gratified to hear it.”

Maril met them at the threshold and ushered them in, the central tent structure had a flame bowl wide as a fire pit burning orange, a rich, sharp incense that made her lightheaded. Venom incense? Some community intoxication?

The Drell did not screw around with ceremony.

Good thing she didn’t have to make a vow. Now she had to manage to not laugh. Definitely no snorting. That almost made her laugh.

Maril gestured and she had…no idea what that gesture meant, so she looked to Thane, who knelt facing her, so she knelt facing him because…because that was her only option. Plus, if she did it wrong and they displeased her, she apparently just had to find a word and they’d all die.

So…problem potentially solved.

He tipped his head forward, slightly bowed, but still able to make eye contact, and he could tell she was about to laugh and a small smile curved his lips, a slight arch to his brow.

Her beautiful bride. He was her beautiful bride and she was so proud.

Maril put her hands on their heads and murmured in words that were not translated. Too soft for her to hear and possibly from some Drell language that was no longer spoken. Or Shepard was too high to make it out.

She really should have insisted on a rehearsal.

Maril lifted her arms and the tent entrance was opened, those who had lined the streets entered and as she watched, the last two people in were…Garrus and Kolyat. Her eyes streamed tears as they walked toward them. Garrus stood behind Thane, Kolyat stood behind Jane.

Garrus had the same smile he’d had since Thane had returned and she’d asked to kiss him.

She was in love with some sneaky people. She loved them so much.

Maril’s voice drew her eyes from Garrus, who put his hand on Thane’s shoulder and tilted his head forward, breaking eye contact. She looked at Thane with tears streaming, bent her head forward as
he bent his, and Kolyat’s hand came to her shoulder.

Maril said “We all stand on new ground. We all stand for new hope. We are few, but we survive, and together we forge our path forward. The laws and customs that have bound our ancestors still guide us each day, and we find ourselves in the living sands with new thoughts, new faces, new goals. I have bestowed Tseni for a lifetime, but never seen two worn by the living in the same place, never a human, never two choosing to bind wrists. I have never felt a gift so richly deserved, never wished happiness upon others with a more hopeful heart. Thane Krios, you have set our children free, our children that suffered in ways we did not comprehend. They belong to us now, and their paths will no longer be shadow and death. Jane Shepard, you have lifted the bondage of Kepral’s from many Drell, and your home world has become our new home, where children will grow free of illness and violence. Here we shall practice the wisdom of our heritage, welcome the gifts of a new world and strive to give back to Earth as her new children. May the Gods grant you Their blessings, as you have granted your blessings to us.” She turned to Garrus and nodded, turned to Kolyat and nodded, and said “Witnesses, I thank you for your blessings.”

Kolyat spoke softly “Jane Shepard, you gave me my father. You did not give him back to me, he had not been mine before, yet now I know him, share a life and a hope with him, to save our people, to save all peoples. My mother was a woman of beauty and generosity, and I know she would wish for me to speak for her. She, and I, wish you both the joy and happiness that has been denied you while your paths in life were severed. I give my father to you, and may all walk together and meet at the Shores, having given the best of ourselves in this life. Be free of wrath and fear as you walk together, a gift my father gave to me, which I give back to you both.”

Tears dripped down her face as she imagined outrage and sunset colored eyes, her only vivid image of Irikah, replaced by the scent of incense and a smile to echo Kolyat’s words.

May I be forgiven, Irikah, for what I have done to this man. May your wish of clarity and peace for him be fulfilled. May you live Whole by the Shore in happiness until the day comes where I can clasp hands with you and see forgiveness in your eyes for myself. Thank you for the gift of your son.

After a few moments of silence, Garrus spoke, his voice husky and cracked to begin, gaining in conviction and warmth “Thane Krios, my Invas’nam and keeper of my dreams, I give to you Jane Shepard, whose shadow has marked my path many years of my life. She is my inspiration and hope, and you were first to see the unspoken truth that I would follow no other in a lifetime. The truth of her has not diminished, but the truth of you has grown. I would follow you or walk beside you on any path. I claim the right of place in this woman’s life, and in yours, and I give Jane Shepard to you. No fear. No failing. No folly.”

Garrus reached down and took her hand, and she stared at him, tears on her face, love in his eyes, her heart overwhelmed. Kolyat took Thane’s hand and then Garrus and Kolyat pressed Thane and Jane’s wrists together, a rush of venom stronger than the incense, fire in her blood physically and emotionally, she was Whole and in the best company, surging with a release of fear and pain, welcoming the inrush of hope.

Maril bound their wrists with a strap of Tseni fabric in their colors together, his green and her blue, the black that they shared dividing and embracing bands of color and tracing patterns of Earth and Drell ancestry. She stared there, and then at her other wrist, this moment and that wrist shared with Garrus, both wrists bound and consecrated to the men she loved.

Thane’s eyes rose to meet hers and the vulnerability she’d seen before, when he’d first worn his Tseni, when he’d wondered if he’d pleased her, filled his eyes.

Through the shock and transmuted and channeled love in this ceremony, the wonder on his face
roused her from her own overwhelmed internal experience, and she gave him a smile composed of how much she loved him and appreciated the power of this moment to provide her with all the inspiration she would need to do everything they needed to do, all the tasks before them. Just as he’d promised to never enter battle sleep again, she would always have this moment to carry her forward with its strength.

It no longer seemed possible to lose him, all paths in this life and afterlife, the right to meet on shared Shores, Whole, with a Turian who would not be denied admittance.

Of course they could storm whatever Heaven or Hell presented itself as a potential obstacle.

Thane’s face transformed as hers had, and she watched the smile and joy on his face and decided it was the best thing she’d ever done in her life, for him to look at her like that. They were both creatures of bright light and deep darkness, equal before each other on their knees, with him surging through her blood. His skin would always give to her, and she willed her eyes to give back.

They had all been Tested. They had all Passed. They all knew the value of having being carried not being out of character.

She gazed at him timelessly in growing tiremit, no thought of moving, watching his Tseni and hers, the band on their wrist, come slowly alive with the augmenting scent and flicker of the orange flame.

The greatest embrace of exhibitionism she’d ever experienced came when he slowly shifted his hand within the band to hold her hand and drew her to her feet. The intimacy of not being able to tear her eyes from his, of the slow beating pulse of long-denied tiremit and his bound wrist and clasped hand. The way they were bound, he pulled his eyes from hers, refused to release the band and held her with his arm around her waist, with her pulled back against his chest.

The following moments passed as dream, eyes drawn to other people, but her full focus on her hand, feeling his heart beat hard through her palm and against her back.

Maril gave them gentle congratulations and introduced members of the community. Again there was no habit of shaking hands…which made sense among Drell, and she contented herself with soft smiles and thank you. She thanked the little girl in her mother’s arms for the flower when they came by to congratulate her, and the little girl turned her head to her mother’s shoulder in embarrassment to laughter from surrounding guests.

Drell children were beautiful, there were seven here that she’d seen, all healthy and all younger than she’d ever had the opportunity to see. She was gratified to see they were not little copies of adult Drell, but rambunctious even in this solemn atmosphere, little hands being pulled away from the flame bowl, little hands reaching out to touch Tseni with their solemn permission.

Kolyat and Garrus were last in the procession, and Kolyat had a shy smile with tears on his cheeks, saying a gruff “Congratulations again to you both, and may you find joy.”

Thane said quietly “I have, and you are part of it.”

Kolyat ducked his head briefly, then embraced them both, giving way to Garrus, who pulled them both into an embrace with his crest to both their foreheads. He said “You are both being unbearably beautiful at me again. Thank you for letting me to be a part of the ceremony.”

Thane said softly “You must stay, Invas’nam.”

Garrus pulled back and barked a laugh and said “Heh. Uh…no way in hell. I can’t…I can’t match the dress code.”
Jane said with a smile “Maybe not in this tent, but the dress isn’t the draw.”

Garrus smiled at her and said “No. Thank you, but no. You both deserve some time to devote to each other.” When they both moved to protest he said kindly “No, don’t ask again. Don’t insist. I know you have both stepped aside for me. Allow me to step aside for you. I don’t feel unwelcome. It’s a gift I wish to give. Make up for lost time and then there will be no more lost time.”

She stroked a hand along his cheek, kissed a mandible and said “You are unbearably beautiful, Garrus Vakarian, and both Thane and I know it.”

Garrus’s grin was wide “Enjoy your time in this lovely place. Maybe someday…we can all come back, after we’ve made sure everyone here will always stay safe.”

Thane nodded and said “So we shall.”

She imagined a Tseni band with colors of Vakarian blue and the beaten silver of his plates and looked forward to that day. Garrus drew their right hands into his, light shining on their wrists, kissed the back of their wrists in turn, and then left.

Thane held her back against him, breathed deeply once, and then released the band on their wrist to a soft involuntary protest from her. He tied the strap around her throat instead and her fingertips smoothed along the fabric. The reason became apparent as he lifted her into his arms and said “This is a human tradition, is it not? To carry you over thresholds?”

She steadied herself in the tiremit and smoke, arms secure around her, dizziness and wobbles in her limbs, which she wrapped around her neck. She said “Yes, but usually only one threshold. That’s what’s practical.”

He smiled and said “Today is not a day for practicalities, Jane.”

That was obviously true. He carried her back through the settlement, the piercing dry air filling her lungs, eyes dazzled by the sun. He carried her back over the threshold of the small utilitarian living quarters they’d been given, but it had been transformed in their absence. Every surface was spread or draped with fabric, ceiling, floors, bed, circular windows covered with translucent yellow fabric that granted privacy. Several of the small glowing yellow light sources were nestled into swirls of fabric. Fruit and nectar and flowers covered table and dressers. A small bowl of orange flame burned, the air scented, securing her in a warm cocoon.

He had assured that the tone of tiremit was of peace, community, love…unlike any introduction to the state in her experience, and she was filled, sated and as he put her feet down on soft fabric, sand scattered. She had no words and no expectations, the hypnotic rush transformed as though she had never experienced it before. Hunger had not been part of her introduction to this state, only satiety and abundance, only the knowledge of no lost time.

Had she been starving before setting foot here, she’d had so much fed to her from his fingertips that she wanted, needed no more. She was Home, a place she’d never been, a welcome she’d never felt, a Rightness. He lifted her chin with a fingertip, incense and swirl of tiremit on her in breath, and he saw her. He always saw her. He did not need to ask disingenuous questions or tease some answer from her. He’d built a moment and he drank in the results from her, watching her for long moments as satisfaction shorn of calculation lit his eyes, lit his smile.

He knew in this state that to ask her what she wanted would confuse her, to ask her if she wanted something would make her choose to want it because he had asked. He knew her and no words needed to rush to her lips, he could hear them through her skin, he always could.
He turned her until she was pulled back against his chest and he said against her ear “I have desires, Jane. Upon seeing your Tseni, the only thought that gripped me was how well…” he slid his hands over the straps on her hips, fingers spread on the open spaces between them “my hands would fit, here…” his hands caressed her skin and fabric, thumbs sliding under the diamond edges “and here…” his fingertips moved to space themselves between the straps at her shoulders, following the narrowing bands down her back. Goosebumps shivered down her spine as his mouth kissed the back of her neck. Her breath sped up, remembering now she’d wanted his skin, had not had his skin, it seemed like such an odd thought, some wild fantasy that never happened, a dream where she was separate from him. It could not be true, would never be true.

His hands returned to her hips and she tilted her head back against his shoulder. His fingers and voice were gentle, a further influx of the meaning of the word desire into her blood. He kissed along her exposed neck and said “You have heard my confessions, Jane. Hear my prayer. I call to Her, Goddess of the Whole, She of space and star, of light and breadth and depth, She who has returned from the Shores. She whose sacrament is communion. She whose gifts transmute the broken into the Whole. She who accepts no bent knee, but seeks a strong spine. I have called to other Gods to light my path, but She has taught me the way of no path, of unerring direction. She creates the path. She is the path, and through Her will I make my own way with Her compass and torch. I call to Her, out of all the Gods I have beseeched, because She calls to me.”

Drell Gods were beyond her, she wondered what Goddess this was, she sounded good. Anything in his voice sounded good. A lot like her own philosophy. His hands roamed over her body, under straps and edges, his mouth at her neck and she said “She sounds lovely. What is her name?”

His smile was felt against her skin and his voice “Jane.”

She smiled, delighted “That’s like my name.”

He turned her to face him and he was laughing and she was so very happy to see him like this. He searched her eyes and didn’t find what he was looking for, it seemed. With a gentle smile he said “Kiss me, She who is in and of the dark.” That sounded like the best of ideas and she wondered why she hadn’t done it already. She said softly “That sounds like me too” in answer to his teasing smile that caused stomach flutters. She leaned in and up on sandy feet, her toes curling under as her lips met his and his arms came around her back, crossed and his fingers spanned straps at her shoulders again, pulling her off the floor and against his body. Desire and hunger were flames that caught into heated blooms as the halting groan he made against her lips reminded her of what that sound meant to him, what it meant to her.

She had brief and detached moments out of the periphery of her thoughts, warnings of things that seemed unreal, fear or flight or venom screams, and then they were gone, released into the torrent and washed away. There was nothing to fear from this man. There was nothing in venom but pleasure and welcome. Remnants of doubts were bidden distracted and bemused farewell as relics. She had no more room for them in her mind, tossed aside as unworthy and replaced by heartbeat and the glide of his skin under her fingertips.

One of his hands moved from her shoulder, the other arm pressing her tight to him, squeezing the air out of her in a long moan. His hand trailed down the side of her Tseni, fingers slow over the straps, then down to the back of her thigh, then lifting her leg to ride his upper thigh, evoking an open mouthed groan against her lips. His hand slid from her tucked knee, under her thigh, trailing up to cup her ass and press her against his body.

She had focused on his hand, his lips, his skin, the sounds he made, and with the connection of his body against hers, the slide of Tseni fabric over itself and the strain of his cock she was galvanized,
hopping on her other foot to back him up and knock him onto the bed. He had the presence of mind and body to not land in a painful heap or slide to the floor, she hadn’t aimed well.

The driving of her heartbeat set her pace. Pounding in her ears and tingling on her lips caused her to shimmy up his body like climbing a tree to reach his lips with hers, licking at him with uncontrolled hunger, shaking with it, full body trembles and fever.

His hands came to either side of her face and he said “Slowly Jane, go slowly, we have…”

She bit at his lower lip and demanded “Not. Slowly. Now.”

Talking created distance and she couldn’t bear that, so she moved to kiss him again and he held her back again, hands at the side of her face, until she moved to lick his palms and he began to laugh. A deep, rich laugh she had never heard before from him, and she turned to look at him and said “You are my beautiful bride.”

That made him laugh until he started to cough and she started to laugh with him. He searched her face and stroked hair back over her ears and said “Jane. Please, for your beautiful bride, please go slowly.”

The entreaty in his voice calmed her and she said quietly “For you.”

Laughter faded from his voice, but his features were still joyous, relaxed, as he said “I promised myself, I promised you, I would do you no harm.”

She started to bargain and said “Just a little harm?”

His eyes splashed with lust and humor and he said “Jane, if you wish to leave this bed with any harm you choose, I am the beautiful bride to do it, but allow me to build to harm. You must open your eyes and your heart to me if I ask. You must tell me your desires. I will bring them to you one by one until you are exhausted, until you beg me to stop. This I promise you. Will you permit my guidance until I see in your eyes, hear in your voice, feel in your body that you are yours as well as mine?”

She considered, but he was very convincing and it did not take long before she said “Okay. For you.”

His thumbs stroked her cheekbones and his mouth met hers, soft and gentle, and he murmured “Taste, Jane, slowly, until you are sated. Your blood will know, you will know.”

She kissed him and trailed fingertips along his throat, faith that he was right and this hunger could fade, would not be eternal. It had been too long, painfully long, remembering the hunger she wished to rush through, she slowed and listened to his groans against her mouth. His hands moved again to the straps on her hips, gently rocking her against him. Touching him felt like recovering something stolen and feared to be lost, defiled, and it cut like sharp edge of ragged hunger until she did slowly ease to full tiremit, with the dancing notes of the incense, steadied from the storm, trusted him.

She wanted him, but the frenzied, desperate edge faded and she listened to his voice as she trailed kisses over his throat, filled and flowing. He said “I have a desire, Jane.” His hand left her hip to release the catches on the placket of the front of his Tseni garb, something she would never have figured out, she was ready to try to tear it with teeth. He said in a hoarse, strained voice “Ride me. Let me watch your eyes. I promise to strip that lovely dress from your body, but first, let me see your body rise and fall on mine, my hands under the fabric, your fingers seeking my skin.”

She had been drowning in possibility, in freedom, no breath in her lungs, and he transformed the churning depths to sand under her feet and the narrowing of cacophonous notes into a desired
melody. With his voice and the shape and form of his thoughts as guide she could discover her own desires, but right now she wanted this because it was not only hers, it was his and she could make it theirs. Without the overwhelming molten chaos in her mind she remembered more of this man, isolated moments, and overwhelmed as she was, she used those moments as inspiration. Her hands stilled and her heart slowed from frantic to intent. She tried to remember other times when he had asked her for something instead of simply taking it, as she knew he could.

He rarely spoke, never laughed, not like this, and he was as much a new man as she was a new woman. The spear of his words shone like a new relic, something to be placed carefully and honored. Her eyes blinked over the waves of reminders of so much time where he poured pleasure into her and she could not return it.

She took his hand, kissed the center of his palm, placed that hand on her hip and then repeated that with his other hand. She took a long moment to appreciate the banded fabric that flowed with his breath and the muscle underneath, the images that teased her mind. Her attention was drawn to the deep red flare of the heart shaped frill at his throat. She traced those lines with her tongue and lips and fingertips, finding her Calling. She rocked her hips against him as his fingers tightened on her skin and his breath failed its pace and broke into soft moans and half swallowed groans in sharp intakes of air. Her fingers tangled under straps of Tseni, stroking and scratching at his skin. She did this until he was panting, head thrown back, her teeth on the cords of strain on his throat. She braced herself momentarily with one hand at the side of his chest and tipped his head back down so he could see in her eyes that she belonged to herself.

She said softly “There will be no harm between us in this room, or any room we share. There is no harm in your skin. You are not alone, watching over me. We watch over each other, and we have learned how. Open your fists and release what you hold, as I open mine, and all that will remain will be open hands on treasured skin.”

Stunned shock washed through his eyes, tears from both of them in a long moment before he said hoarsely “I do not know how to do that.” Echoes of her words…

She echoed his words back to him “We will learn together.”

She did not need to learn how to touch him. She had focus and faith and the freedom he had given her, and a long list of catalogued desires that flowed through her memory. She kissed his lips, kissed his face, tasted mingled tears.

She leaned back and drank in the sight of him, vulnerable and open, hope in his eyes and subtle fear still knotting his shoulders. Brave words were inspiration, but she would have to make it all real, give doubt no room. She ran her fingers over the Tseni straps on his chest, setting them right where they had angled under pressure and twisted, and they eased back into their form. She straightened her own garb, lifted the bunched skirt and spread the length over his abdomen with smoothing fingertips.

He was Whole in body and spirit, but battered of mind, and so was she. The work of faith lay before them. With each beautiful thing experienced and treasured came the shadowing fear of loss and they could not be extricated with lovely words. This was a man to be treasured, and though they both vowed Whole and aware and awake in each day, he was aware more than she that he could lose her, that she could kill him with a word. Having invoked the invincible she sensed the delicate and sensitive in him, seen in his eyes and felt in his breath ragged not from lust but from the fears that had plagued his days of planning, that his skin would drive her to pain, that his body would force her to fold harm into herself.

It was possible, it was even probable, and her chaotic moments here could only have underscored his
apprehension that he would hurt her and he would never know, could not read her, could not fix it, would lose her.

He had accepted it as an outcome and would allow that delicate, sensitive heart to be rejected after all his preparation and hopes, after all his effort set forward to give her an option she might take for her own sake.

It should have sobered her and slowed her, but with a flash of insight she knew each moment of waiting was torture for him, that he was braced to see her close her eyes, flinch, fail.

No more words, no more hopes, only granting him the spoken desire that allowed him to see her eyes, gauge for himself in her tiremit state of unsteady control whether or not she lied to him and would keep a clenched fist while he opened his, promise her heart and deliver despair. He had condemned himself to a possible life of leather or lies and he would accept either, keeping his vow of his open heart and seeking no solace of battle sleep.

It was possible. She might have done that to Thane…but never to Senar, of the open eyes and open fist and free voice and laugh. The woman she was now knew that much at least.

For him she would learn how.

They would never speak his name or of her past, but she felt that bond of reversed silence. They’d kept each other company in the dark places without knowing, and now they kept each other company in the knowing. Perhaps he thought of her with flame investing her eyes, as she thought his birth name.

She put nothing in her eyes that did not belong there. No force. No determination. She thought of his name as he trembled, gave no promise but to serve the pleasure in each moment. It was new and she truly did not know how to serve each moment, to not force an expression, a sound, a lesson, a counted number, a score.

A wonder of empty spaces, no pressure to perform relaxed her shoulders and slackened her features. She held his eyes with hers, letting his desire guide her. She moved her hands under the fabric of her dress and released his cock, letting her hands glide along his length.

Then she knew what he needed to see in her eyes, what he had asked her for, what he had demanded. Flame. That was not manufactured, that would always be real, a reflection of something ever burning. She recalled his prayer to She and a smile curved her lips as she finally realized it was about her.

She needed to learn to burn for him but not burn him or herself.

It seemed ridiculously easy and her lips curved further and she saw his eyes search her face. There would be nothing there for him to find but faith and fire, and now she knew it.

She tested the rise and fall of her thighs, warm light casting shadows and changing paths of glowing skin. She pressed the gliding length of his cock against her body, fingertips spreading slick wetness from him, from her, over straining flesh. Her eyes on his, she felt the flame leap as she angled her hips to claim him as hers with no admission of question or doubt. She spread her fingers over the top of his on her hips and watched him as she saw the fire spread and burn away doubt in his eyes.

She was slow and deliberate, fed the fire with the burning in her thigh muscles, the tightening of his hands on hers. He searched her face and her eyes until he couldn’t, until closed and double-lidded eyes tried to stay open. Sweat dripped down her body and beaded on cloth. She saw the moment
when he believed in her truth, when searching faded from his eyes and a convulsive shudder passed through him, the true release he had sought. When he opened his eyes again she saw certainty and lust. He adjusted his grip on her hips, adding the strength of his arms to the drive of her thighs. He set a faster pace, and with the waves of dizziness that came with it, in order to keep the pace he set she leaned forward, fingers tangling in his straps, nails on his skin. He shifted his hands off her hips, one under the dress, thumb at her clit, nails at the crease of her thigh, his other hand tight under the bodice, fingers trapping a nipple between them and rolling.

Her hair spilled over his chest as her eyes closed, her elbows trembled under the strain, her thighs trembled. She collapsed forward, her lips seeking his, ravenous with the forgotten and remembered right to kiss him. Her hands on either side of his throat, the hand on her breast moved down her back to her hip again, forcing his pace until soft murmurs of demand and her name against her lips caused the rushing blinding clenching of her body around him to crest, and he joined her, a frenzied growl against her mouth and both of his hands pressing her hips down.

Exhaustion and his arms around her crushed her to his chest and panting breath took up the sound in her ears until she heard herself say “You’re mine because you gave yourself to me. I’m yours because I gave myself to you. Don’t ever forget it.”

She heard the smile in his voice and a small echo of Garrus’s style as he said “Yes ma’am” and crushed her tighter to him until she could not draw a full breath.
Chapter 31

With tiremit, pleasure and incense spiraling through her, once he’d allowed her to draw a full breath he rolled off the bed and stood, warm yellow light intensifying the colors on his skin, stripes and smooth texture over muscle. He carefully removed his Tseni as she watched. He shed the cloth as he had shed fear and worry, any tentative air about him gone. No shadows in his eyes, no hesitation in his movements.

He looked younger purely through the way he moved, the set of his relaxed features. She hadn’t thought of his age before. She and Garrus were nearly exactly the same age and that paradigm had extended to Thane. She recalled he was actually older than they were. Turians and humans had a lifespan of about 150 years and she and Garrus were in their 30s, one fifth of the way through their lives. Thane was in his 40s, halfway through the Drell lifespan. Drell did not wrinkle or go gray and she never could tell their age. She’d never asked Urem.

Before her was a new, ageless man.

Her beautiful bride.

She smiled as his grace flowed through his limbs, the deliberate stalk in his step relaxed. Fully lit and owning where he stood, accepting sunlight on his skin instead of fading into preferred shadows. He held his space as he did when he cycled through his kata, mindful of each breath and intention, but now it was easy, effortless. His demeanor reflected the difference between broken and bruised skin shrinking from being touched and whole skin arching with pleasure under a caress.

Her face transformed looking at him, a curve of her lips and appreciation in her eyes as she raised herself up on one elbow to watch him and said “Feeling any greener yet?”

He stood with the poise gained from longer than her lifetime of discipline and exertion, slow double-lidded blinks from his eyes. The momentary impression of differential of age disappeared and he was returned to enigmatic and ageless, some creature from dune or wave, some myth of elemental immortality.

She grew timelessly distracted, watching him stand, move, the skin they’d denied each other revealed. That’s what happens when you’re iridescent and glowing and smiling like that.

He reached out a hand to her and she stared at it, reminded of leather gloves and license.

She accepted that his hand was there and he accepted that she had no idea what to do with that gesture except maybe suck his finger into his mouth and he was pleased with that outcome.

He was pleased and that’s all she needed to know.

He reached out another hand, stepped to the side of the bed and picked her up, holding her in an effortless lift until her hands braced for balance on his shoulders and he let her slide slowly down his body until his mouth met hers and her arms closed around his shoulders.

She hadn’t Drell memory but she could recall isolated, seemingly colorless times she’d wanted to twist in his arms and kiss him, and she indulged each flow of memory with augmented fervor and intent, tracing curves of muscle with her hands.

His mouth canted over hers with swirls of his tongue, nips from his teeth, moans and panted breath until every kiss she’d missed had been played out against his mouth, and more inspiration found.
When she was out of breath and newly dizzy he set her on trembling feet with an arm around her waist to hold her upright.

His mouth and tongue and then his free hand spanned the breadth of the Tseni straps on her shoulder and then dragged them down her arm, switching his arms around her waist and repeating the gestures on the other side. He bent her back against his arm with his mouth against her breasts, licking at the edges of the Tseni strap around her throat until he released it and set it aside.

With a hand under the dress along her hip he lifted it up and over her head, the fabric skimming off onto his arm, and he set that aside carefully. She thought fleetingly perhaps he did not want it to touch the floor.

He was ever thoughtful as she was mindless, that having been established long ago, it was the way it was and the way it had to be. She’d wondered if he’d missed venom on his own tongue but had never asked, and now it seemed silly that she’d held back the thought from him. She should hear the answer in his voice, she should know. She knew he would speak in poetry and dream, and that only made her want to ask the question more. “Do you miss venom on your own tongue?”

He twisted her hair idly on and off fingertips, then wrapped the length around his wrist, pulled her head to the side and said in her ear “Yes.”

She laughed and wasn’t insulted, just surprised at the blunt answer. He kissed along the curved path of her bent neck and said “I imagine you miss hair.”

She hadn’t thought of that at all. She said “Venom and hair are…not the same in…magnitude.”

He kissed to the other side of her throat and said “If I wished to have venom, I could have it. I could seek a lover, I could consume a chemical synthetic or buy venom. Some Drell make their way in the worlds through selling samples of their skin as well as their bodies. You could seek a lover with hair. But why stop there? We also enjoy Garrus. We must seek someone with plates, Reverie, venom, hair, hide and soft, giving skin, to have all things we desire in one person.”

She laughed and said “We could ask Mordin to get right on that.”

He unspooled her hair and said “I cannot control what you see or feel with my venom and it has been a trial as much as a boon. Of the milder versions that bring only light hallucination, yes, I would enjoy seeing you bathed in light as surely as you might enjoy hair to twist your fingers into.”

She said softly “I have not wished for hair.”

He said idly as his hands moved over her body and her hands stroked at his shoulders “With you enjoying venom under your tongue it is natural for you to wish the same enjoyment for me. With me feeling the strands of your hair between my fingertips, it is natural for me to wish the same enjoyment for you.”

She repeated with minor exasperation, thinking he was evading the question “They’re not the same at all.”

He agreed “No, they are not. I can alter your appearance and know that it was my will that set you into form on any given day. I and others can see what I have wrought on your body, from bed-swept tangles to curls formed from the mold of my fingers, to braids that fall down your back. The length of your hair is as I requested, as you allow. I can find pleasure in your hair whether or not I am touching you. For the time we were without venom and my skin, hair allowed my lips and bare fingers to touch you. I do not think you can appreciate how much your hair has comforted and pleased me if
you believe venom the greater blessing. My venom is mine. Your hair is ours. Had you venom I
would enjoy that, but do I wish to replace one or any part of you with venom? No.”

She was warmed and she had her poetry and dream. She said softly “I don’t long for you to wear a
wig, either.”

He huffed a laugh against her skin and said against her shoulder “If you must have thoughts, Siha,
think that you are adored.”

They both lost interest in discussion of that or any subject, focusing instead on exploration of the
reality of hair and skin, venom and freedom. She replayed kisses against his mouth with no goal but
gathering as much pleasure as she could in each moment. She decided every other trivial concern or
passing thought would have time to express itself and searched for no more questions. He’d talked
and shared so much of himself lately that she didn’t feel the need to pounce on a passing confidential
moment as unique.

His muscles grew slowly tensed under her fingertips, his mouth harder against hers. His hands
lingered on her hair as he kissed her mouth, then his hands cradled the small of her back, bending her
back with the press of his mouth on her neck and then breasts, her hands on his shoulders. Dizziness
from venom and incense and her head bent back swirled alongside the press of his lips against her
skin. He kissed down to her navel, licked at the whorl and settled to his knees, shifting one hand to
her ass, then lifting one of her legs at the knee and hooking it over his shoulder. She could not
balance in this position and he had no intention of letting her balance. She had to lean into the pull of
his arm, the press of his hand and the feel of his chest and shoulder against her thighs, his mouth
against her, long tapered lines of him leaning back, the mold of his body to which she conformed.
Thoughts dissolved into warm bliss and the metaphorical illustration that he deliberately robbed her
of her balance and her will and liked it that way.

Adored.

oOoOoOoOoOo

She contemplated being adored when she could think at all, which was not often. That request of his
had stayed in her mind while other concerns dissolved.

She lost track of everything but where he was in the room or against her skin for a long while. A diet
of fruit from his fingertips, venom and incense resulted in a dreamlike hollowing and transparency of
her will, submerged like her heartbeat under her skin, only a vibrating echo in the deep places.
Sometimes it was light outside and sometimes it wasn’t. Sometimes they’d walk through the desert
after it got dark and watch the stars, watch each other, with his fingertips drawing Drell sigils on her
skin through sand and sweat.

In one of the many nows she found herself in the desert, under the moon, sand script on her back
brushed away by breath and hands with her chin pillowed on her arms, with him straddling her hips,
massaging her back, which hurt not at all and had begun relaxed and would end tingling and melted.

She finally asked when outside and clear air was in her lungs “What the hell is in that incense? That
is…strong stuff.”

He answered “Simfeh. It is used for bindings only, for the ceremony and for the couple. It is from
Simfeh tree bark, the tree easily grown on and off Rakhana, taking easily to many soils, thriving in
many environments, that wish of thriving life transmuted and gifted to the newly bound.”

She asked softly “Is everything on Rakhana psychoactive?”
He said quietly “For you, it seems likely. Animals, plants, all on Rakhana developed volatile compounds for defense and camouflage. It is for us mostly a pleasant scent and a memory of the home world, a symbol of vibrant life even after transplant. I had not thought to ask…does it make you ill?”

She shook her head “No, not ill. Seems the technical term is ‘goofy.’ My mind feels like…when my hands go numb and I can’t grasp anything. Added to venom I’m grateful you’re driving. Being away from it and feeling it fade…I can tell more of the impact. How does that burn …how long have we been here?”

He answered “It used to be a fire fed by hand but now each bowl will instead be linked to a concealed tank that provides the volatile components of resin and bark with a flammable component. Each will burn for a week. We have been here three days. We will stay four more barring emergency. Garrus will let us know if that is necessary, I promise.”

She was glad it wasn’t over yet. She hadn’t thought about the ship in…seems like three days. She approved and said “Good. I haven’t taken a week off since…”

He finished for her drily “You have not taken a week off.”

She struggled for memory “I…well…yeah. Thank you for my first vacation that isn’t shore leave and doesn’t involve training.”

He kissed her shoulder and said softly “You are welcome. This is my first week off as well.” No workouts, no meditation, no distance. They had spent…days…cycles of night and dark, in bed mostly, talking and touching. She had eaten only from his hand, their living space had a deep sunken tub connected to some real or manufactured hot spring, a luxury they indulged often. If they left for a walk in the desert they returned to new food, new fabrics.

Now he lifted her and repositioned her into the space between his legs, where she fit like home, his arms wrapped around her and tingling warm back against his chest. He settled a blanket around them and they watched stars move against ever changing skies.

She sat in rapt warm attention until he said quietly “Do you believe in a God, Jane?”

God. Gods. Normally she would refuse to discuss it, simply agreeing with the validity of everyone else’s point of view and not providing her own. She said softly “Maybe and I don’t know.”

He nudged at her and said “What does that mean?”

She said softly “Look at the stars. It is an image of immensity with inclusion and exclusion. I can see the stars, but I can’t reach them. Because I can see them, I can share in the experience of being able to behold a star…but I can never be a star. Gods to me are a bit like that. Immensity of inclusion and exclusion. It’s not up to me to believe or not believe in someone else’s family. Even Earth Gods, perhaps there were creators of some people, and they left, or they only watch over their family. I don’t feel as though I have been Called by a God or communed with a God. I assume anybody of omnipotence could drop a line if they felt compelled to involve me in their Plan. I have given nothing to religion, I was not born into one, I have no legacy of…anything. But there’s something in me that wants something overarching, whether or not I have faith that it is there or even that it is listening. I find that in crisis I pray, but for me I pray to ‘whoever is listening’ because the need to pray arises from inside me, not asked for by a God anywhere. I have no idea if anybody is listening. But I enjoy that Maybe, it is a comfort that my prayer serves some purpose, that my urge to pray isn’t lonely and delusional. When I pray like that I remember there is an Earth saying ‘There are no atheists in foxholes.’ So there’s my military tradition and tie in. Some in need feel the urge to cry out to
Someone or Something, even if it’s just luck or fate…some embodiment of determination over a Plan. I pray to the Normandy to keep us safe. I don’t think she is listening, and I don’t think prayer or hope is a substitute for hard work, but there’s room in my heart and mind for all those impulses with nowhere else to go, the wishing, the hopes, the maybes and I don’t knows. In my more comfortable moments I can rationalize that impulse as simple bargaining while helpless…but it feels like more. It seems every group of creatures that has achieved sentience has transcended bargaining while helpless and created archetypes of those who watch over the Plan. I’d ask Arashu to watch over you, she who stands for Protection, I’d ask Spirits to watch over Garrus, those who stand for ancestral community, and I’d ask the Normandy to watch over me, she who moves amid the stars and holds my breath. I have no idea if Arashu or Spirits or the Normandy are listening, but I speak to Protection and Community and Breath by any name if they are willing to listen. Even if it is simply written somewhere. On Earth there’s a tradition called the ‘Akashic Record’ where all things are recorded. Perhaps there is a record of me attempting to transmute my helplessness into hope. It matters that I try, if only to me. What about you? What do you believe?”

He kissed the side of her throat and said “I have had faith, but it was rooted in fear. Fear of failure. I was taught to revere the Gods, and I do, but it is not the faith of a frightened child as it once was. Much like you, I revere what they stand for, protection, afterlife, the hunt…I spoke to them of what I wanted, what I needed to accomplish. They have been my only companions along my full journey. In this moment I discover it is not what I wish to do that matters to me, but who I wish to be, and who I wish to be with, and how I wish to be with them, and for that I need no assistance. If they have provided for that love to exist, I revere them with every breath. But also in this moment I cannot imagine any God of righteous purpose creating circumstances for love this powerful, and then allowing it to pass from the worlds. I revere their creation, and revile their lifting no finger to prevent its destruction. It results in only me standing between those two extremes that cancel each other out, and only you standing beside me, and Garrus at the other side, three archetypes of more meaning than I had imagined previously. Alone they encapsulate the purported best of their home worlds, and together they transcend them. I find I have no words in prayer. I have the greatest cause to pray in a life, yet my tongue is still. I have no humility before Gods that would not welcome humans or Turians. My Gods have become unworthy before what we have wrought together. I do not wish to go to the shores alone, to wait and watch the horizon. The only creatures I have encountered that approach powers of Gods are Reapers and I defy them. It is not a crisis of faith, nor a crisis of fear. It is not a crisis. I shall pray to my Gods, as they bring me peace, bring me order, the thought of them is a comfort, and I have a place to give thanks for my blessings. I have faith my Gods will aid me and it would be ungrateful to spurn their gifts. It appears no God can help who we are together. We must help ourselves.”

She thought for a moment and said “Are there any stars visible from Earth, Rakhana and Palaven?”

He took out his Omni Tool and did a few reference searches. “Near to Argus Rho is a quasar that should be visible from all three planets.”

She nodded and leaned against his chest, saying “All right. We need a more inclusive prayer. Perhaps not to Gods. Perhaps only to ourselves. So if we die and I end up in some sort of Earth afterlife, Garrus is with the Spirits and you are on the Shores, we make our way to Argus Rho.”

He said curiously “And we would do that how?”

She shrugged “We’ll have eternity. We could figure it out then.”

His laugh was soft and then he said “And if there is no afterlife?”

She said sincerely “Then the Gods are not worth our time. Otherwise we pick a direction and we go
thataway."

She could not tell if he was assured, but he was amused “I shall pray to my Gods for the mundane needs I have. I shall warn them that if you are not permitted at the Shores, your Tseni will adorn Argus Rho and so shall mine.”

She said lightly “It’s a deal. I shall pray to the Normandy for my mundane needs. I would happily join you at your Shores if permitted. If not…well…they’d be fools to let you go. Something I will never do.”

He asked “So we create a new place where all are welcome?”

She considered “Maybe not…all…well…why not, we’ll be dead, what do we care? There are no consequences…I should be generous with my new prayers. Vorcha, Batarians and Reapers welcome.”

He answered “Seems a small price to pay for remaining together.”

She nodded and said “Perhaps a home for those who love. Those who value the bond of love beyond a bond to a God or a bond to themselves. I would gratefully join that community.”

He corrected “You would be creating that community.”

She turned to kiss the side of his neck “We…would be creating that community. That’s how religions start, right? Someone gets an idea and shares it? Something strong?”

He sounded bemused but entertained “So it is that simple?”

She said with a shake of her head “No, of course not simple. We’ll have to figure it out. But a little while back if someone had told me that I’d help fix Kepral’s Syndrome, danced in a Palaven Madlis, worn Tseni and bound wrists with a Drell wearing his own plus I helped destroy a Collector base… maybe I’d believe in me.”

He said lightly “I believe in you.”

She smiled and replied “And I believe in you. We’d have eternity. You can be keeper of the memories. All you have to do is sit and look pretty and remember us, Garrus and I will come bust you out. Anything for our beautiful bride. Would you prefer that we arrive on winged horses or just a shuttlecraft?”

He said mildly “I would prefer that you not die.”

She scoffed and said “Well, we can get Miranda to work on that. Maybe she can keep bringing me back and you can catch me up. I’ll be surprised, I’m sure, but you are…persuasive.”

He said quietly “So I shall save up a few billion credits for that eventuality. We have our work set before us, but as keeper of memories and dreams, I feel responsible for creating more. I believe I promised you I would bring you your desires until you begged me to stop.”

She scoffed “You promised to bring me my desires until I was exhausted. And you’ve delivered on that…I can’t count how many times. I don’t think I have to tell you my desires. You have invented half of them, at least.”

He said with rich humor and offense “Half? Half is unacceptable.”
She teased “Well, some of them involve hair and plates. So maybe a suit and a wig…they do not involve pinching…or tickling…stop! Oh hell, I just begged you to stop. Just…with the pinching and tickling though.”

He paused in intended mock torment and said “I will find you, Jane, if you are to be found. That is how I wish to spend my eternity.”

She twisted in his lap and under the blanket until his hands helped her wrap her legs around his waist and she looked at his eyes and the stars reflected there. “Then that’s what we’ll do. We create miracles, dead or alive. We make our desires true and I will bring them to you until you are exhausted.”

He stroked thumbs along her cheekbones, gazed her eyes for a serious moment and then said “Then let us pray.” His mouth covered hers and she lost herself to tiremit and hope humming in her blood.

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On the last day before they left, they visited Maril and spoke to those in the settlement that wished to speak, hoisted and hugged little Drell children that threw fruit-sticky hands around their necks.

She promised fervently to return and said she had never been happier, never experienced so much joy, hospitality and communion.

She promised to stay in touch and she knew she would, vital to new growth in her soul to see this place thrive, to return, to keep that template of hope in her heart.

It seemed a long way from her accustomed gunfire, but this…here…them…was the reason why she fought so hard. She knew people could be vile and cruel, but she fought for places like this, people like this, even if she’d never been there or met them, she had always had faith in them existing, and now she had a clear image, scents and tastes. Peaches were now her favorite.

They spent the final night, as had become their custom, deep out in the desert, having walked far, but always able to find home in this deep, flat basin.

She did not regret leaving, though she would miss new family. It was time to return to her other family, her other Goddess in the form of the Normandy, and wrest lightning and thunder again to their whims.

She woke in their early morning bed with sun slanting in, looking at his sleeping face, still a rarity. For their time here he had always been awake when she was, but she had some moments with weak yellow sun to memorize his face, the relaxed lines and his sleep hum.

Adored.

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Each day of their lives together from the ceremony forward, if Thane could, he would find a moment in the day and stand behind her, his fingertips spanning her hips as though Tseni straps were between them, pull her back against his chest and kiss her hair. It became as meaningful of a greeting or embrace as Garrus’s crest touches, a sign of this new man on his new path, carrying forward a moment in his mind over and over as a sign of his faith, giving her the benefit of his memory played in his mind.

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They met the shuttle and she ran forward to jump into Garrus’s embrace, raining kisses over his face and saying “I missed you. You should have stayed. We have to come back here together.”

He smiled, having not budged from a full body tackle, crest pressed to her forehead. He tilted her head up with a finger under her chin and said “You look happy, Kerim. Are you happy?”

She nodded vehemently. He said “Good.” He kissed her and set her on her feet, turned to Thane, who embraced Garrus, got the same crest touch and the same kiss.

Garrus pulled back a moment and said in vague shock “Wait. He looks happy. I don’t know what to do with that.”

She hooked an arm through Garrus’s and said “I know, it takes some getting used to, give me a few years. Thane, keep it up.”

They both looked expectantly at Garrus and he said “What?”

She said suspiciously “What exploded while I was gone?”

He shook his head “Nothing. Boring Mars mission. You picked the best week.”

Thane raised a brow ridge skeptically.

Garrus said reassuringly “Really. Everything is covered. I’m not even going to brief you. We’ll get back for you both to have some dinner with me, and then get some sleep. Everything waits until morning, then I’ll turn her back over to you in better shape than you gave her to me.”

Jane said tentatively “We’re happy and nothing went horribly wrong…for a whole week? It’s going to take the shuttle trip to get used to that.”

Garrus said with mock unease “He’s smiling. Still. Does he look younger to you?”

She said conspiratorially “He does! I noticed he does. More to get used to.”

Garrus said lightly “It’s going to freak me out, but I’ll get over it.”

She smiled back at Thane “I won’t.”

It was mostly talk of desert and Drell over dinner, and expressions of wishing to return all together. More not-business, bringing the end cap to the longest stretch of vacation she’d ever had. Granted it had taken hallucinogenic incense and venom to keep her under that much, but she’d do that again. She likely wouldn’t get a chance soon, but that valley was going to be visited as often as she could manage, and she fought to extend the time that valley had to thrive. She was Inspired. She had new ideas that had incubated and grown since her eyes had met Thane’s in a mirror before the ceremony, but she’d wait until tomorrow.

Garrus refused to talk shop, insisting that they were still on vacation and they had one more night. She had loved being away, but she loved being home, with the reconnected hum under her feet and smiles on the faces of her men.

She had loved the fruit, but attacked a steak with gusto.

It was not a bad thing to have heavens scattered for her to visit.
Thane’s smile was catching and she saw Garrus turn his eyes to Thane often, a bit dazzled by the transformation. She was also, more than a bit. At a certain point when conversation lulled and he couldn’t tear his eyes off Thane, again, Jane and Thane stood up, each took Garrus by a hand, who looked almost spooked. She got to watch Thane kiss Garrus, always a pleasure, and let Thane lead him to the bed while she cleaned up briefly, got undressed, and then tangled herself in with her men, everyone looking forward to expressions of having missed each other.

Garrus was adored.

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Nothing major had changed in a week, at least nothing bad. In their absence, Phetas had begun to speak to Jack and to David. Courteous acknowledgment and curiosity. Garrus found it encouraging. Liara had found the plans she was searching for, she thought, but it was going to take some think tank time to decide what they were dealing with and get some translation, so that was not hanging fire, just waiting for more data to come in.

Garrus hadn’t been holding back any tide. He’d just made tweaks to inventory and efficiency and did genuinely give her back a better ship than when she’d left.

She called Liara and had a long talk with Feron about Drell resettlement, gathering some grim statistics on slavery and failed colonies. She thanked him gravely and then went to speak to Thane.

She told him “I have some ideas. Help me check my logic here. Attempts at resettling of Drell have resulted in having colonies wiped out by slavers and it occurred to me we should do something about that. Hoping to solve two problems at once. We need to protect colonies and draw in active Drell assassins now at loose ends. I’m proposing that we establish bait colonies, draw in slavers, populate the colonies with hired assassins and any other competently trained Drell that wish to participate. Set up whatever trail of evidence that has drawn attention previous, shipments of Drell-specific wares, whatever has resulted in colonies being hit. We can wipe out slavers, get their ships, find their bases, find their records, recover slaves, hijack funds, establish new colonies. It can be a mix of dummy and realistic, whatever you think is necessary. Working colony with camouflaged members. Should take a heavy outlay of cash and materiel at the beginning, but we should recoup those losses and more once we start reeling in the big fish.”

Thané had listened, his softer smile from seeing her slowly transforming into a harder appreciation of the scheme. He said “I would enjoy that.”

She grinned “I was hoping to hear that. Wake up Yahlis. Get her involved.”

He tilted his head and said “Are you certain that is necessary?”

She shook her head “Her involvement ups the chances for success by magnitudes. Enough to take the risk. I don’t need to run it. You can start it and you can give her whatever mission involvement or supervision you find necessary. I’d be fine speaking to her to ensure she knows this is what I want, but I expect her to take your word for it. Let Phetas in on it. From what I know of Drell raised to revere Rakhana, this would be a very hard mission to turn down. But here, check my logic. I do not think Yahlis is a personal threat to me, and she would be a unique asset in this scenario. I’m not about to give the woman a hug, but I am about to give her the opportunity to hold up Rakhana’s sky, and I think she could try out free will. Do you think she is a danger to me in any capacity?”

Thané shook his head “No. I do not think she would be a danger to you. I do believe she would be a danger to slavers.”
She smiled “That’s what I like to hear. Let’s do it. Get Yahlis’s help with reconstructing what would entice Drell assassins to come into the fold through being hired or convinced, and through which methods. I don’t care if you hire Hanar actors or run the whole thing yourself, whatever it takes through honesty or artifice to get the diminishing population of the Drell community working together to preserve themselves.”

Thané smiled and then said “Do you wish for me to be in the room when you inform Garrus?”

She linked her elbow through his “Oh hell yes. Smile at him, it is an excellent distraction.”

When they both arrived together in the Battery Garrus narrowed his eyes and then ended his call quickly. He said “Now I’m nervous.”

She replied “Your instincts are on point. This is a frontal assault.”

Garrus sighed and leaned back against his console, hands over his chest as he said “All right. Do it quickly.”

Jane said succinctly “I’m letting Yahlis out and hoping to recruit Phetas and other Drell assassins into forming dummy communities to lure in and overpower slavers.”

Garrus shook his head and said “I stopped listening at ‘I’m letting Yahlis out.’”

Jane shrugged and said “Yeah, thought you would.”

Garrus stated “She’s not coming on this ship. She’s not going near you.’

Thané said calmly “No, she would deal with me.”

Garrus threw up his hands and said sarcastically “That makes it so much better, I value your sanity much less than Shepard’s.”

Thané said evenly “My sanity is solid enough. Yahlis in this context is a capable young woman who would be given an opportunity to use her capabilities for the greater good for her people, something she has done for a lifetime. Something Shepard allowed me to do. I choose to take on the risk weighed against the potential for success.”

Garrus almost growled “You could do it without her, no risk.”

Thané replied “But with her a greater benefit is guaranteed.”

Garrus sighed “You know for a week there I felt like I had things under control and less than 12 hours later…”

Jane stepped forward and kissed his cheek, said consolingly “I know, welcome back.”

Garrus softened and said “Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate the benefit to the Drell…I just…”

Thané nodded “It would be comfortable to take no risks, have victory assured under any circumstances, but that is not our choice.”

Garrus said “I get to shoot her if she ever gets anywhere near you, right?”

Shepard said to assure him “Oh, hell yeah, I insist.”
Jane had a lot to think about. She’d done what she wanted to do; accomplished an anti-Reaper coup in the form of taking down Cerberus. Now it was time to decide whether or not honesty was the best policy. She didn’t have that much trust to begin with, but she did have a soapbox.

Maybe she needed a motto. “Shepard: Not Quite As Bad As You Thought.”

She sat and stewed for a good long while, grabbed a ball and started tossing it. There was pacing and eyes closed, forearm over the forehead worry.

She could blow what tenuous shot at authority she had.

She could make a point desperately in need of being made.

Combing through news she’d seen that the subject of indoctrination was twisting and burrowing its way through social fabric and practices. There had been murders of survivors of indoctrination. It might have been as an excuse for some other grudge in any case, it usually didn’t happen to a sedate mother of three, but indoctrination wasn’t happening to sedate mothers of three, it was happening to those in the military, those with value in terms of vital infrastructure. There were murmurs in places like Omega that those found to be indoctrinated were outright killed unless they could pay for the surgery up front.

She made a call to Aria and confirmed this was the case. “Shepard, this is Omega, not the Citadel. We don’t have the medical facilities. This is a port. People are on and off every day and these people are Batarians and Vorcha. What did you expect?”

Jane had asked “If I get an endowment to Dr. Daniel Abrams in Mordin’s Clinic, would you funnel people there for surgery and scans? It matters. If people are being caught trying to enter, some are already there. You’re an obvious target.”

Aria’s expression hardened out of habit and then she relented “I know you well enough to not have to ask if that’s a threat. I have a private scanner. Nothing yet on me or my people. But this is not a productive time to live. Crime and murder taking place through fear is not the same as crime and murder taking place through lucrative vice. I’ll do it. At least the Batarians, I think, would be willing to head to the clinic. I can’t speak for the Vorcha, but I’ll encourage it. In exchange for your generosity I’ll let you know that there are rumors that you were the first detected case of indoctrination. The notification came from the Normandy and you were nowhere to be seen for weeks…”

Aria did not have to elaborate. It had already occurred to Jane there were many ways in which her peculiarly timed absence and the connection to indoctrination could have been made. Nobody on the Normandy needed to betray her. Her absence left a hole in a pattern, and all someone needed to know were the most basic of her habits. All of her patterns of contact to any number of people on the outside, easily monitored, could do it alone. Biometrics and docking patterns, these would not have been altered in emergency. Cerberus would have enough agents in place to be able to determine that, and from there…that is valuable information bought and sold.

The files about her from Cerberus had been illuminating. Terrifying, but illuminating. No way to plug all of those holes, the event horizon off this ship blurred into chaos quickly.

Jane nodded “Yes. I was the index case. I’m trying to get out ahead of this if possible. It seems there
needs to be some sort of public effort taken toward encouraging detection and recovery, and that recovery is genuine.”

Aria rolled her eyes and said “I also know you too well to think you’ll listen to me when I tell you that’s a terrible idea. But who knows. Your terrible ideas are entertaining. Get the funds to Abrams, keep them coming, I’ll put in suggestions or a few good words at gunpoint.”

Jane said bluntly “I’ll send you funds for protection.”

Aria smiled and said “Pleasure doing business with you, Shepard.”

So if there were rumors, she had to choose. Aria wouldn’t tell anybody, but distrust and assumptions of concealment were already out there.

Eventually Earth’s government had authorized flooding Udina’s apartment on the Citadel with knockout gas and conducting the surgery without his consent based on new laws regarding representatives of government needing to submit to scanning and subsequent surgery, grandfathered in to include all members. That had resulted in them having to maintain him as a representative (although suspended) and not writing him off entirely as the law went through, but they wanted representatives to know that being a zoo exhibit would not exclude them. He was recovering. He was still an asshole and was expounding on his potential lawsuit from his hospital bed in Huerta. The Alliance and Earth governments on the whole disavowed any involvement with him and encouraged him to sue.

Anderson was doing a good job ignoring the circus.

She decided she had to address the circus.

She realized she wasn’t in any sort of uniform anymore. All of her N7 gear had been lost after her death. She’d shed Alliance blues and then she’d shed Cerberus insignia, and now she wore regular clothes and regular armor, whatever suited her. There was no dress code or insignia on the Normandy. There were remnants of ranks, mostly she and Joker. Everyone else was…independent contractor. But realistically she still ran things as the Alliance would, and had while she had been under the Cerberus wing. She had a brig.

So she chose a generic outfit in black. She favored black so that was easy. No insignia. Military but not clear which military.

She fiddled with the wording, backed up a few times and corrected a few spots but this was a moment to speak from the heart, from the head, and hope to be heard. “This is Commander Jane Shepard from the Normandy. I helped defeat Sovereign and Saren at the Citadel. I died to an attack by a Collector vessel. I was brought back to life at great expense. I helped destroy a Collector base that was menacing human lives, and I believe ultimately would have menaced all life. Sovereign, Saren, Collectors, they may seem to be different enemies, but they are not. Sovereign was a Reaper. Saren was an indoctrinated puppet. The Collectors were indoctrinated and genetically modified puppets of the Reapers. So we all have one enemy. I died for the cause, I lived for the cause. I kept fighting. It is difficult to define an enemy that can wear any face, hijack any mind. I was indoctrinated. I was kidnapped, tortured, held for seven weeks while indoctrination took hold, and without my team being brilliant enough to discover the source of indoctrination, I’d be a traitor to everything I believe in. My team saved me. My team gave the information to all species and the spread of indoctrination has been stemmed, but not halted. There are more people to save. Our colleagues, our family, they’re still out there. I am a human, and I’ve worked with Cerberus, they brought me back, but I returned from indoctrination after my surgery and I took then down, considering them to be an organization that was doing great harm. I needed to prove to myself, to
prove to you, that indoctrination did not rule my actions, that I had recovered. I believe in recovery. We need the courage to identify our enemies, and work together as allies. I believe we can fight, I believe we can win, and we must do it together. We need every sentient being of every species focused on the task ahead; surviving and defeating the coming Reaper invasion. I’m releasing to the Extranet what I know of Reapers, you’ve likely seen it before, but this is from me directly. I’m releasing what I know of indoctrination, the surgery to control it and the risks. I’m releasing my before and after scans and my most recent scan. I get scans weekly, I will post subsequent scans as they occur. I’m using Spectre authorization to confirm my identity and the source of this information. I thank my team for bringing me back, providing the knowledge to bring so many back, and for sheltering me as I healed. I am healed. Others can heal. I’ll be helping to found and fund clinics for scans and surgery teams, to preserve our allies, to save our family. If you are denied service where you are, I want to hear from you. If you want to help fight, I want to hear from you. Your voices matter. Speak out, speak up, stand up, fight together. We need to be a team.”

Before she hit ‘send’ she paused and said “EDI and David, did you guys get that?”

Two voices said a solemn “Yes.”

She asked “Now that I think of it, asking people to talk to me directly might require hiring of a PR department, or depending on my unfathomable geniuses to help sort requests and send responses. You guys up to some fan mail?”

EDI said lightly “I would enjoy that.”

David replied “A simple subroutine would help route requests and formulate responses. EDI and I will confer on anything requiring your direct attention.”

Jane grinned and said “Have I mentioned I love you guys? EDI, take this data and please review it, add what you think might be necessary or take out what is unnecessary and publish it, set up a separate Extranet identity associated with me to route all communication.”

She hit ‘send.’

As an afterthought she sent Garrus a message in a breathless voice “HeyGarrusyoumighthearsomethingfromPalavencommandfromstuffIsaidokaybye.”

It took approximately 10 minutes for him to show up in the cabin, with an immediate glare and hands out to side in a universal “What the fuck are you doing?” gesture seen often on battlefields. When she didn’t say anything but stared at him blandly he said “I don’t rate a conversation on this beforehand?”

She said drily “You’d have told me not to do it. You’d be just as upset either way. Now you don’t have to feel bad about being not able to convince me.”

With a deep, heavy sigh he said “There are nuances here, Shepard.”

She tilted her head and said “Really. Tell me about the ones I don’t know about. Aria told me that there are rumors anyway about my being indoctrinated. Tim guessed right away, it was one of the first things out of his mouth. I needed to choose when to make it public. I needed to do it alone.”
His jaw grated and he said “Why?”

She looked at him softly and said “You had to make the choice to protect me from consequences alone. I had to make the choice to accept those consequences alone. I needed to control when and how it happened, and you needed to be blindsided honestly because you are an honest person and you needed to be able to say you were unaware this would be the direction I’d take. You can assert that you wished to and advised me to protect my medical privacy.”

He gaped and said “You did this because I’m not a good liar?”

She shook her head and said “I did this because you shouldn’t have to lie. I tell you what. If you’re worried about me, we won’t leave the ship unless we’re armed and armored, in a group. Wait! You have that covered. You insisted. Your security is as good as it gets. I’m in harm’s way. Yes, it’s a changed political landscape and I changed it. On the plus side, we won’t be blindsided together by someone not just starting rumors, but getting evidence to undermine what we’re doing here. I’m sorry I was indoctrinated.”

Garrus stared at her, taking in that fast paced…depending on how he looked at it, potential insult, manipulation via guilt trip and disingenuous lack of humility.

He opened his mouth and EDI interrupted them to inform her that the created identity had 134,994 unique replies.

She felt a little sick and a little inspired.

He glared.

She shrugged and said “We’re not dead…”

With a heartfelt Turian snort he continued to glare.

She said blandly “Do you want…a secretary or something?”

Garrus spoke softly and said “I have a fraction of that, but I do now have 5,328 requests from concerned Turians directly to my comm.”

EDI corrected “It is now 7,944.”

He glared.

She said “Maybe Liara would rent out Glyph…you could have your own drone in Vakarian blue.”

He tilted his head up again, praying for patience and said “Kerim, as always I stand behind your choices. I’m too angry to say I’m proud of you. Maybe later.”

Her lips twitched and she said “Dinner?”

EDI said “Advisor Vakarian.”

Garrus sighed, his kindness getting to him despite himself “Please, EDI, call me Garrus.”

EDI said “Thank you. Garrus. David and I can help prioritize and sort responses. You can create responses to common questions and we can handle a majority of concerns in that manner.”

Garrus stopped and some of the glare left him and he said “That would be very helpful. Thank you.”
Jane said “You can start with “Dear so and so, crazy bitch didn’t tell me shit. Sincerely…”

Garrus almost laughed but said “Don’t tempt me.”

She gave him a lopsided smile until he stepped forward, pulled her into a fierce hug, kissed her and said with gruff pride “Not proud of you yet.”

She said happily “So…by dinner.”

He said gruffly “Late…dinner. I’m going to be busy.”

She said with a nod “Yeah. Me too.”

She recorded a few quick video responses at David’s and EDI’s recommendation and spent a few hours figuring out infrastructure and funding, authorizing funds immediately to Omega to Dr. Abrams. Then she sat down to talk to Liara about a few things.

Liara helped her with some funding, routing, and setting up coordination and scouting teams to help verify some of the more serious allegations of denial of service. Winding that down Jane asked “So how go the plans for the…whatchamacallit?”

Liara said wryly “It’s been a whole 18 hours since you asked the first time.”

Jane said with a shrug “I am known for my impatience.”

Liara sighed and said “I know a bit more than I’m saying, or I know what it says…but I really don’t know what to believe.”

Jane leaned in and said “Think aloud here for me?”

Liara considered “It’s a very…Shepard thing.”

Jane said, genuinely worried “Uh oh.”

Liara said with hesitation in her voice “It’s Prothean. At least, it was ultimately Prothean. It likely had layers of origin that I can’t translate, but it appears as though it was translated by the Protheans. It’s unbelievably complicated, and some of the descriptions sound encouraging, but it could also be a catastrophically massive trap or time sink.”

Jane said wryly “Yeah, that does sound like my sorta thing. Could you get copies and ciphers to EDI and David and let them chew on it a bit?”

Liara sighed and answered “Yes, I can send them over. From what I can tell, this plan creates a weapon, and it would take…everyone working together to make it work, but the catches are that it requires an unidentified component – the Catalyst – and the plans themselves become quickly indecipherable without the context of the previous step being completed. I hate to…recommend that we do this, because it is…in a human saying…all our eggs in one bastard?”

Jane laughed and said “Basket. All our eggs in one basket. Though all our eggs in one bastard also does sound fitting. I just muddied the cooperation waters for a little while and I’m going to have to deal with the backlash of indoctrinated Shepard…”

Liara said gently “I saw. I would have made recommendations that you do something of the sort. There’s always chatter about you, but this was…dangerous chatter. There are too many rogue
indoctrinated factions out there ready to make sure you can’t serve as a figurehead.”

Jane said solemnly “Yeah. I was getting that impression. It had come up. I just wanted to put it down hard, we’ll see what happens. Thanks for letting me know about the Crucible. I’ll feel better letting bigger minds than mine chew on it.”

Liara said briskly “Of course. There is a lot to assimilate from here, but there’s one thing of slightly more urgency. I want to go somewhere. Soon. I want you to go with me.”

Jane said curiously “Go where?”

Liara said in one of her more convincing voices “Eden Prime. If I’m right, there was a Prothean stronghold there. It’s near where you found the Beacon. It’s vague and I have a headache trying to figure it out but the wording is “Behind the doors lie hearts that beat once a day, and each beat speaks of the future.”

Jane drew her brows together and said “What…the hell does that mean?”

Liara said tentatively “Protheans got poetic…and cagey there. Very few records remain of plain talk because of the risks of indoctrination and infiltration. But…I’m reminded of Ilos. Hearts that beat once a day, stasis. I’m thinking that Eden Prime has more to be discovered of Protheans. It might be nothing and the power might have failed just as Vigil described on Ilos…but it might not. There might be Protheans in stasis there. It’s poetic and it’s vague, but it’s less of a risk than trying to rely on the Crucible being our savior. Can you imagine…a live Prothean to help explain…all this?”

Jane grinned and said “This is definitely a Shepard thing. Tell me when you want to go and we’re on our way.”

Liara’s shoulders relaxed and she said “You know, it’s nice that when I say something crazy…you listen.”

Jane smiled and said “It’s not crazy. It’s just your particular genius. Let’s go see.”

It would take two days for Liara to wrap up here, but then they’d set course for Eden Prime. She started to work on making her responses to incoming query as personal as possible. The process was revealing.

EDI and David suggested video responses to all messages, based on stock information she could record, and then EDI manipulating her recording into address to the person by name.

So her attempt at making things personal was kinda creepy but hopefully it was the thought that counted, because the now 231,290 responses were not going to be able to be answered individually, and at least having EDI make an attempt at personalization would be better than letting responses drop through the cracks. EDI and David assured her they didn’t…actually need her at all…in order to formulate responses, plans or concrete establishment of clinics.

Oh.

She only panicked for about three seconds. EDI and David being in charge would be fine and she did in fact get more sleep based on how often they handled minor issues before they became major problems requiring her attention.

EDI routinely found terrifying things on freight checks.
David routinely fended off any number of data infiltration attempts attacks on the Normandy along with EDI.

She thanked them for being on her side and recorded some responses. She wasn’t going to do any interviews. Reporters got answers to submitted questions the same way anybody else did. Average correspondents were heartfelt, respectful, and sparked the ideas of starting militia. It seemed that people were willing to follow her specifically and did not trust their governments. Interesting. Reporters were the ones told often to “I will not engage in speculation on certain subjects. Please resubmit any questions you feel went unanswered into more concrete terms.”

Many people were reassured that she did not believe that indoctrination could be transmitted sexually.

See. It wasn’t just her.

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Thane found her and she realized she’d slipped and missed a meal. He set down a plate for her, kissed the side of her throat and massaged her tightening shoulders. She paused where she was, ate a few bites and then set it aside, tipped her head forward and made appreciative noises. He lifted her from her chair with hands at her waist, stood for a long moment with her pressed back against his chest, his hands at her hips. He led her over to the Pon-Ifa table and they took their accustomed positions.

The game was partially started, and she was getting better. Not to the point where she was approaching winning, but to the point where the games took longer and it appeared he had to concentrate at times.

She smiled.

He smiled.

They bent their heads to reacquaint themselves with the game, or at least she did. Drell memory was a definite advantage. She asked curiously “You can remember every board, every move, even if spaced far apart? Can your mind edit out…me…for instance…and can you visualize the game playing itself without the context?”

He looked mildly surprised “Of course. You cannot?”

She shook her head “No. I cannot.”

He tilted his head, brow slightly raised and he said “Curious. No wonder you must so often take the direct approach.”

She grinned and said “The immediacy of one move without the context of all others does seem to shape the experience of my life.”

He made a careful move to follow hers, and she began to feel the trap closing in, though she couldn’t identify it yet. She didn’t have long, if she was right. He didn’t necessarily have tells, just a receptive attention to the game, but that he was going to win was the expectation and undeniable reality, so she wasn’t being all that impressively prophetic.

He said quietly “Occasionally direct moves with the overwhelming power of the board one dominates can halt a thousand subtler schemes.”
She smiled and considered that although she was going to lose, he would make it worth her while. They hadn’t discussed it, and although she appreciated his strategy, she knew the difference between reality and a Pon-Ifa board. When something had to be done, she’d do it, and deal with the consequences. Not a surprise to him. Garrus was proud of her and this was Thane telling her he considered her move of revealing indoctrination to be barely worthy of notice or comment. In character. Strategically Shepard. Something he had observed enough in her to gain faith that she would deal with either positive or negative outcomes in her own Shepard way.

It was only seven more moves before he claimed the game.

When he reset the pieces he said quietly “I must leave. I have a thousand subtle schemes to launch.”

The declaration was not unexpected and she knew Drell lives weighed heavily on him, as they should. He would deal with this in his Thane way. It was dangerous and she had a thousand worries.

She would give him the same gift he gave her. Faith.

Her eyes met his and she said “Play a few moves with me. Did you know that looking at the unfinished Pon-Ifa game that sat here prominently after my return was a comfort to me?”

His smile warmed “I did not know, but I had hoped.”

She contemplated the board “I stared at it long enough to realize exactly how I was going to lose.”

He said drily “You should know that simply by realizing the identity of your opponent.”

She laughed and made her ever-hopeful moves. “That does not sound like something I would do.”

After a few more moves, enough to make certain the board was in dedicated use, possibly a puzzle for her to unravel, possibly an expression of his impatience, he stood and lifted her, sat and held her in his lap, fingers in her hair. She asked “Phetas is going with you?”

He nodded and said “David and Jack assured me she is no danger to me. In review of their discussions and after speaking to her, I believe them. I am mesadi pernaq to her. She has no love for me, but she has convinced me of her sincerity in wishing to see if what I offer as an opportunity is true. She has been shown what indoctrination is and she does not doubt it. She has been released from the brig. She will spend time with Jack in her quarters before we depart.”

She said quietly “You are Bes Tiron. Their compasses will point unerringly to you. They will follow.”

His mouth was along her throat as he whispered “Kar iva’las, Siha.”

That he was leaving would have to be a compartmentalized impossibility. That she would have to bear the physical and emotional withdrawal from him without complaint was folded into that darkness.

She turned to face him, spread her fingertips along the delicate curves of his frill and kissed him, wishing she had a Drell’s memory, taking the opportunity to surge forward into the stream of addiction and need before it was taken from her.

Garrus brought everyone a late dinner, even fruit for Thane. She didn’t know how to do that. Had Garrus insisted on making it himself or did he know where to find Thane’s stash?
He’d probably fed Phetas for a week. I need to figure out how to do that. I find I’m vaguely jealous.

No. I’m not preparing food for Thane unless he asks. I know enough.

That reminded her, she should order peaches and steak while they were this close to Earth. She should get Tim’s recommendations.

They spent the evening telling stories of work challenges, Turian outrage, Drell intransigence, human foibles, indoctrination and the possibility of finding live Protheans. They mulled over the implications of an expensive, complicated anti-doomsday device. Garrus was of the mind that they needed more information and that it was a foolhardy risk. Thane was of the opinion that he needed more information.

They cleared the table together, Garrus glancing at the Pon-Ifa board and saying “I see Shepard’s screwed again.”

She grinned and Thane said “Let her determine how.”

She shrugged and said “That’s all I ask. Let me determine how I’m screwed. Then let me start over.”

She’d lost her words, six hands together and the knowledge of separation had built into unheard murmurs and soft strokes, depths of driving into bodies as though to defy the knowledge of having to leave.

Thane left her sleep and sex rumpled in Garrus’s arms, venom and Reverie racing, home in his embrace. Thane placed his hand over her bare shoulder, finger spaced, and kissed her goodbye, murmurs of well wishes between them, admitting no fear. She gripped his hand as he leaned to kiss Garrus as well.

Thane murmured “Keep her safe, Invas’nam, and may I find you both here, like this, on my return.”

Nobody knew when or where that would be. She didn’t ask. He wouldn’t know.

She did not hear his retreating footsteps, only the hiss of the door. She was grateful for Garrus’s arms around her, so she did not fall to the temptation to run to the door and put her fingers on the metal.

She arched back against hard plate and embraced the gratitude of Garrus’s sheltering body and Spirit. She didn’t want to talk about Thane because the unbearable fragility of his leaving trembled on lips and eyelids. She’d feel compelled to say she was afraid for him, but in reality she wasn’t as afraid as she was selfishly longing to anticipate his arms around her, his voice in her ear, his hands on her hips.

Garrus purred a consoling hum, felt through her skin, communion in missing the man.

She said with her sudden pang of doubt and worry, redirected “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I was trying to protect you, and I didn’t realize the risk of undermining you. I fucked it up.”

He roughened his purr and then said softly “Don’t apologize. If there are things that Turians appreciate, Kerim…they are responsibility for personal actions and respect for the chain of command.”

Grief and loss and fear were in her blood. They were tempered with Reverie and she could manage it, but she was still overwhelmed as she said “Please forgive me, Garrus, for what I’ve done to you,
for what I’ve done to him. Whatever my intentions…”

His purr melded into sounds of comfort and solace “You are forgiven. If you take forgiveness you must also take thanks for what you’ve done, for who you are. You teased with your silly announcement. I admit I just wanted to see you, kiss you, tease you back and tell I was proud of you. You admit you’ll miss him while you’re in my arms and I will miss him too.”

She said low “Doesn’t sound like that’s me taking personal responsibility.”

He kissed at the back of her neck and said “Mmm…well then, chain of command. I just managed a week without both of you. It was rough. I can give you some pointers. I outrank you on the subject of both of you missing.”

She eased a bit in her panic, his easy way of accepting…awful things…and she was briefly distracted by saying “You should have stayed with us.”

He murmured in her ear “But I really wanted to be in charge. Outrank you.”

She laughed and said “That is a selfish reason to deny me Garrus for a week.”

His hand skimmed over her hip, talons scratching along her skin in a distracting caress “Mmm. Thane wanted me in the ceremony and he wanted me to stay for the week.”

She was still, a thin sluice of shock in her blood as she asked “Why didn’t you?”

He answered “When I saw the looks on your faces when I came to pick you up in the shuttle…I was torn between it being completely worth it and being viciously jealous. But…I did it less for you and more for Thane. It was his moment, his clan to claim, his bond to you. At first he only wished Tseni for you, but I suggested he tell Maril who he was, what he was doing, and ask her to bind you both.”

She closed her eye and a tear spilled out, more welling up.

He pulled her tighter to him and said quietly “It was a beautiful ceremony and you both deserved time that belonged to just the two of you. Once I heard of the ceremony and its format, I wanted to give you to him. Kolyat could not speak for any but Thane, but I could speak for you. Thane pushed hard, and we argued quite a bit over it, but in the end I told him I wouldn’t go at all if he didn’t stop arguing, and I meant it. He gave in with not so much good grace as an attempt to ambush me in front of you in hopes you would convince me. But seeing you both in your Tseni…I was proud of what I’d done and my role and sure that staying was not the right choice. I meant what I said, that you both had lost time. I have had a great deal of time alone with you. I have had a great deal of time alone with Thane. I wanted you to be able to indulge each other for a week, and that is why. Before we even began, Thane sacrificed his potential relationship to you to spare me. He has spent months sacrificing himself to the Drell cause, to hoping for a better future. I wanted you to focus on him. I wished for once to be the one making a sacrifice of something meaningful.”

She muttered “That was stupid and you should have been there and that is possibly the most romantic thing I have ever heard.”

Garrus said against her skin “So we’re of the same mind…it being completely worth it and being viciously jealous…hm?”

She turned her head, kissed him and said “I do not deserve you.”

His eyes were teasing and his mouth was warming against her lips as he said “Well…that’s true. So I outrank you romantically, Kerim. And my tips are…when you miss him, come to me. He charged
me to protect you. I can probably even kick your ass at Pon-Ifa if you feel inclined.”

She smiled, back to balance and the full rush of Reverie, no guilt and no need to suffer, absolved of all sin by her men. She said “You’ll be my forbidden necromancer?”

He laughed against her mouth “Yes, your forbidden necromancer whose mother approves of us. Does this involve leather? I have to admit I kind of miss it.”

She answered enthusiastically “Right?!”
Chapter 33

Jane ventured to the CIC…to some…changes. The hall lining the way there had the four interface pods…all occupied.

She stopped a moment and passed David, Joker, Reni and Legion all…plugged in?

CIC silent.

Eerie.

She stepped forward into the cockpit and said tentatively, as though speaking to a ghost in a haunted house “Hi, EDI…I wanted to check in…”

EDI said in enthusiastic greeting “Hello Commander. All is well.”

Jane said quietly “Right. So…Joker finally got over his…uploading concerns?”

EDI said “Oh yes. Legion and David have helped him customize his interface.”

Jane said with brow raised “That’s…good?”

EDI said “He can tell you.”

Joker’s voice came over the intercom “Commander, you HAVE to try this. This is amazing. There are so many things about piloting this ship and other ships I was unaware could be used as feedback. This is…this is incredible. Nothing like it. When we head to Eden Prime I am doing it from here.”

Jane smiled at the happy sound in his voice “So it’s very strange, but very good?”

He laughed and said “It’s not even very strange anymore. I’ve had a lot of practice. Piloting has always been beautiful…but in here it is…elegant. Definitely the word. EDI and David could actually handle everything…even Legion could, but this has been a vacation in the best tuned flight simulator I have ever used.”

Jane wandered back and poked Joker lightly in the arm.

Joker said “Look. I know you have the opportunity to play with my body, Commander, but no means no.”

Jane said lightly “You haven’t actually said no, you’ve only defined terms.”

Joker responded “Can’t get anything by you. I haven’t actually said no. We can discuss it further when you get your ass in here.”

Jane laughed and wandered back to EDI, satisfied that feedback from physical bodies made it into the system. She asked “Hopefully better for your bones?”

He said enthusiastically “That…is the best part. No strain on muscles, no physical stress and I don’t need to filter through the pain to get to the information I need.”

She was gratified and a bit saddened at how much suffering he never complained about “You are ordered to minimize pain, Jeff. Enjoy your work.”
Joker said “Yes I Do! Okay, I’m about to pilot my way through the Mariana Trench. Dodging great squid is a challenge and you do not want to know what happens when one gets sucked into an intake port. Plus. I can do this.”

The sound of thunder filled the CIC.

She said to EDI “I’m grateful that rain wasn’t involved.”

EDI said quietly “Thank you, Shepard, for the company. This has been…a joy.”

Jane smiled at EDI “You are welcome. What is Reni doing in there?”

EDI replied “They are interfacing with students at Grissom. David has had many ideas about helping the nonverbal students, and they’ve designed and are in the process of installing pods of altered functionality and training instructors in their use.”

David’s voice sounded “Commander Shepard, please, make some time to visit. If I may suggest that you link with Reni and then she will link with me, and I can help make your visit less disorienting. I am aware you have limited time.”

Reni’s voice chimed in, she sounded energized, happy, and so had all the voices she’d heard today in the CIC. “Please, Commander.”

Jane said softly “Of course. Reni, I have no idea how long you’ve been in there, so do what you had planned for today. I can get back to you tomorrow.”

Getting the hang of address, Jane said “Legion, what are you up to?”

Legion’s voice sounded. He didn’t have the most expressive emotional voice, but he did sound…more solid, less tentative. He said “I have supervised the cleanup of forces on Rannoch. Heretic servers are being shut down systematically. I have hopes that Quarians may land safely on Rannoch within two weeks. In the meantime we have been working on infrastructure planning with the Admiralty board in order to ensure a smooth transition.”

Jane’s jaw dropped and she said a stunned “Legion…thank you. To get the Quarians their home world back…”

Legion said quietly “It is our home world as well, Shepard Commander.”

Jane smiled, proud “So it is. Here is wishing you a successful landfall, to your people and to the Quarians, and may you both prosper.”

As she turned to leave, torn between smiles and a few tears, EDI said as a caution “Be prepared that Jeff could in fact make it rain on you inside.”

Jane grinned “Noted. I’d expect no less.”

EDI said confidentially “I could also guide you on appropriate retaliation.”

She wasn’t going to interrupt them now…her vacation was over…but she was fascinated by the idea that her ship was now a potential amusement park.

She looked at David’s smiling face as she left and headed to speak to Kasumi.

Kasumi did not like to talk much, and although Jane would have enjoyed a chat, it appeared she was deeply engaged in something. Kasumi mostly communicated now through her notes and reports, and
all Jane did was wave to get her attention, give a thumbs up gesture to ask her if everything was okay and with a distracted nod, Kasumi indicating she was fine and needed nothing, would ask if she did.

Realistically there was very little Jane could get for Kasumi that she couldn’t get for herself, so she nodded and left.

Jack was no longer able to be visited, and she’d be missed. Jack had told Phetas stories about how she was raised. David had told stories about how he’d been an experiment. Phetas had ultimately determined she was not unique in this company.

Jack had told Jane she was going to head out with Thane and Phetas, having nominated herself as Phetas’s bodyguard and buffer. When Jane had presented herself to speak to Phetas, the girl was stoic and silent, and Jack had done the talking for her.

Jack had spoken carefully, had not talked about Phetas as though she were not present, also had accepted fully her nonverbal demeanor.

Jack had said stubbornly “She’s not going into cryo.”

Jane looked at Jack, not willing to be drawn into or create an argument where there didn’t need to be one. Jane had turned to Phetas and said “I trust Thane. I trust Jack. If they tell me that you are worth the risk, I believe them.”

David’s voice had sounded briefly “She is worth the risk, Commander Shepard. You have taken great risks for Thane, Jack and I, and for each person on this vessel.” That last was for Phetas’s benefit.

Jane watched Phetas’s face very carefully in this exchange and although Phetas was badass and deadly, she was also out of her depth in present company and her reticence might be less contempt than fear of error at this point. Jane recalled Thane’s assertion of Jane’s potential to destroy with a word if she were displeased, and she imagined Jack telling stories about the great Commander Shepard…and David’s tone…she’d go with it. Jack could be good cop for a while.

She could be lightning and thunder. Jane said to Phetas “I need to hear it from you, or you could just nod. You still have a few choices. Cryo could be a rest.” Jack bristled and Jane ignored her potential wrath, invoking it on purpose. “Other assassins have gone into cryo because they were unable to change. You have potential to change, you have a choice, and I promise you, the moment harm comes to my people and I find it is your doing, nothing will protect you. If you die before I find you, I will find you on the Shores. If you betray this opportunity to help your people out of your own inexperience and stubborn, you shall never be Whole. Am I clear?”

Jack smirked and Phetas gave her a solemn nod yes.

Jane had smiled and said “Good. Good luck. Rakhana deserves better champions than she has had since Her people left her shores. When you meet others of your training, be convincing that every Drell life is needed to ensure Drell have a future. That is why you are not going into cryo, and why you will not go until Jack tells me you must. But I imagine she’d kill you first.”

Jack said with an evil smile “Damned right I would.”

Jane said quietly to Phetas directly “If the words mesadi pernaq exit your mouth in the presence of Thane Krios you will not be forgiven. I will not allow you to flaunt your ignorance at his expense. He will take any insult at your hands and forgive you for it. I will not. You will show him respect.”

This time Jack backed her up, both sets of eyes turned to Phetas, who did drop her eyes and give
what looked like an ashamed nod.

Jane said “You’re a damned good actress and a kickass biotic and I’m sorry I won’t get to know you better before you leave. Good luck. If I see you again, may it be after your victory, when you are sure of your path and have found your voice.”

So that mission began with “As long as Phetas, Yahlis or any of the newly found assassins don’t murder Thane in his sleep, all is well until they start baiting slaver traps and hopefully do not underestimate what force is incoming to them.”

A thousand reasons to worry.

Then she’d remember she’d made and observed at least a thousand Pon-Ifa moves and considered that slavers had thousands of reasons to worry.

She had her own thousand reasons.

With the memory of Garrus telling her to seek him out when she missed Thane, she decided…she’d take his advice.

When she got to the Battery, though, he was in a conference. Damn.

She waved hello and he straightened slightly from the console, gestured for her to come closer. She held up both hands as an obvious sign that she didn’t want to interrupt, blew a kiss at him and turned to head back out, disappointed.

She had a foot over the threshold before she was yanked back by the waist with a hand over her mouth to block the involuntary squeak she let out, a tap at the console closing the door and sealing the lock to red.

He resumed his habitual spot at the console, and she heard droning Turian voices for about 30 seconds as he held her tight by the waist, setting her slowly on her feet. In that amount of time she gathered querulous and grating voices of obvious self importance discussing some obscure Hierarchy law about dispensation of resources according to clan contribution. Seconds dragged by and there was a pause where Garrus said with raw contempt “I know the law. I know the law can be interpreted many ways. I also know that if clans are only protected according to their contribution and not according to their needs, it will result in preventable loss of life for those in outer colonies from less prosperous clans. They undertook these ventures without the need to plan for Reaper threat. These ventures have strengthened Palaven and the yield will help in hardening defense. We need to transcend the law as it is practiced and abide by the values of the Hierarchy at its core, which is that the Turian military force must protect all Turians. This includes Turian lives and Turian supply lines.”

This resulted in another rustle of self important argument while Garrus looked at her with combined boredom and antagonized anger. She looked sympathetically at him. He considered her and then lifted her again, set her on her feet facing him as he leaned sideways on the console, looked her up and down once with a half hitched smile adorning his mouth, though the smile didn’t soften his eyes. He reached for her hands, kissed them each on the back, and then guided her hands to the buttons of her top. Her brow raised as he watched her, the angered disrespect of his attitude toward the conference tempered by his half smile.

She tilted her head in question and all he did was extend a claw slowly, his expression not changing, making it obvious he’d be happy to slice her clothes off if she weren’t inclined to assist.
Both her brows rose, but she took sympathy on her Turian and slowly unbuttoned her blouse, making a mental note to hide some spare clothes down here. She had no idea how long this conference had lasted… it had obviously already gone on too long. This was now the pattern of his days, constant argument with the hide bound. She understood why he came here to work often, likely unwilling to foul his living quarters with these words, this ridiculous wrangle. He could do this here, in the presence of the Thanix, no doubt imagining firing it at certain holdings. These voices were able to insist on the law because they had written and wrangled it in their favor.

He watched her with slowly growing approval, warmth in his eyes mixing with the anger. He stood entirely still, speaking only in short, clipped disagreement between obvious repetitions of the same iteration of entitlement, his talon slowly receding as she unbuttoned and removed the top, unhooked and removed her bra, set them both aside carefully, watching his face.

When she stopped and stood, he tilted his head toward hers in question, gestured to her pants and the talon sprung out again with a click of plate.

She was not about to discourage this sort of behavior and if she was a bad influence, he was insisting.

This man was clearly suffering.

She remembered his visor’s playlist and thought that instead of “Die For The Cause” the Hierarchy theme song should be in his case “Drive To Homicidal Rage For The Cause.”

With a conspiratorial curve to her lips she watched him as she unzipped pants, shimmied out of them, then stepped out of underwear, setting them aside less carefully.

He blinked slowly at her, turned aside briefly to say to the conference “As the representative for Clan Umerion, you must be aware that you have received inexplicable tax favors. Your clan has created a credit structure that does not apply to other clans. Perhaps this should be investigated and a differential in representation calculated that way? The differential in funding should leave those mining colonies entirely undefended as they should be able to afford private defense.”

That resulted in quite a few angry Turians, including one that was fuming at the idiocy of disingenuous ignorance of obviously maneuvered law. Garrus’s claw sprung free again and he spun his finger, indicating that she turn around.

She should likely find angry Garrus intimidating, but she found mostly that there was too much distance between them, the harsh edge of his voice aiding in a rush of cold prickles down her spine and the rise of goose bumps along her arm and the back of her neck. She turned slowly once around, a dancer’s balance on the tips of her toes.

He watched, though he responded to the conversation briefly, his head angled down toward the console in undisguised contempt and aggression, his talon to the side beckoned her closer. She stepped forward on the tips of light feet. He yanked her against him, hungry mouth on hers, his extended talon tracing down her spine. Both of his hands cupped her ass and pulled her tighter against him and his tongue was dedicated to the hard kiss, claiming her mouth until he had to draw back and say with forced calm “These are not allegations, they are truths. I submitted a report on these irregularities prior to this meeting. Please refer to the attachments provided beforehand.”

There was a startled and somewhat stunned, stammering silence while some Turians claimed they had seen the reports, some Turians denied their existence as relevant to this forum. Garrus’s hands started at her shoulders and then smoothed down her arms, warm against chilled and prickled flesh. He took her hands and drew them to the fastenings of his pants, staring down at her as her fingers
worked at them. Garrus’s angry, cold voice stated “These are facts. To route this through the judicial system would take far too long and I believe this committee has the duty to resolve without further waste of time that should be spent on preparation.”

He had to listen to more posturing and veiled threats, coldly angry eyes glancing back to her as her hand reached to stroke along his cock, a shudder going through his body, his eyes closing on angry and reopening on mixed anger and lust, the rims of his eyes bleeding into black. He dragged his extended talon over his shoulder ridge and smiled at her in a mix of possession and appreciation of his power over her, cold anger banked but present. He bent his head as though to kiss her, but he stopped close enough to her to feel his breath as mint warmth against her lips until she tilted her head back and raised up on her toes, her hands gliding along his cock, growing numb, tingling, the touch of his mouth to hers racing Reverie into her. He painted her throat with scent, bit at her lip and his own, twisted her tongue around hers. He pulled his mouth back from hers slowly, watching her, his hands with his thumbs on her throat and his other fingers on her shoulders. He pressed her down to her knees with his eyes reflecting blue shades of anger and possessive lust.

His eyes closed slowly and he tipped his head back before he tilted her head forward with his hands on her neck, shifting one hand to her hair and the other spanning her throat. She licked along his length, dedicated herself to The Cause and was grateful to not have to die or be homicidal, to feel the heat and wet slick along her thighs, no doubt he could scent her in warm, rising air. She got lost in tea-mint-numb sensation, listening to querulous voices slowly recede, shocked Turian counterpoints taken on Garrus’s behalf as his reports were reviewed. The argument was loud enough that he was able to release a few heavy breaths carrying the hints of pleasure groans, his hands guiding her, his palm over her neck pressing in until he could feel his cock move under the ripple of her throat. A sure Turian female voice took up Garrus’s point and discussed relishing a court case and enumerated her own observations of taxation and representation irregularities, and the argument spun through more iterations of outrage and growing support for Garrus’s motion, whatever that was.

She fully supported the way he conducted meetings, and to show it pressed her breasts to his thighs, her hands coming around to cup his ass, dragging from him every harsh breath she could and savoring the trembling, building to shaking of his limbs. She chased full and dreamlike Reverie from him with her tongue and with each swallow, his shaking hands along her skin. He occasionally spoke, and she heard anger in his voice, but he was breathless, hoarse and strained. She really couldn’t tell if it was influenced by Reverie or not, but it seemed the voices of the conference became more reasonable, conciliatory, some accord met. She didn’t have the capacity to understand the words, only the tone, her body rapt, head bent under his hands with her mouth hungry on him, her slick thighs pressed together and released with the rhythm of her mouth taking him in and releasing him so she could breathe.

Ultimately breathing became a secondary concern, the press of his hand against her throat, the throb of him, the twist made her savor and draw out that moment of breathlessness. The lightheadedness of Reverie was augmented by a tightening lack of breath, involuntary gasps and pressing the rippling skin of her throat into his palm harder. His hand covered her ear and she heard the pound of her own heart, the rest was irrelevant noise unless it was his breath or his voice, which both became strangled.

With a sudden curt dismissal from him, a chime tone indicated the end of the conference. He made a few taps at the controls and then his studied, breathless voice turned into a snarl. He lifted her by her shoulders, turned her and shoved her down on the darkened console, one hand at the back of her neck. His knees pushed her unresisting legs apart as his hand glided up the sides of her thighs, a deep indrawn breath and growled approval when he felt how wet she was, a plated finger gliding into her, withdrawing and twisting into her ass, until two fingers were sliding in and out of her body, his tongue licking at her thighs, following his fingertips and then spiraling in on her clit. He held her down, growling against her skin as she bucked back against his hand, twisted her neck against his
grip and moaned into the console surface condensing her breath into wet heat. She tried to grip with her hands at the edge of the console, breasts pressed against the warming glass, but her knuckles blanched, unable to feel her fingers from residual numbness. Her eyes were closed against shattering sensation as he courted response from her, then insisted, then demanded, building her from trembling to shakes to needing to be held down or she’d have fallen, fingers extended convulsively. She came with rushing moans and collapsing shakes. He withdrew his fingers carefully, licked down the side of her thigh and bit down, Reverie making it a burst of sensation that extended her shaking orgasm.

He kept her from sliding off by replacing his hand at her neck with his jaw open across the sides of her throat, his body pressing the air out of her as his cock entered to full depth, plates against her ass. She could barely catch a breath, her lungs only able to expand occasionally. She was lightheaded, dizzy as he set a savage pace. He didn’t bite down, but the force against her body drove his teeth into her neck and his tongue followed blood points and trails, his harsh reverberating growl against her skin. He moved his hands under hers, which had been uselessly off the edge of the console. He held the edge and she held onto the back of his hands and he used the leverage to slam into her, twisting and seeking inside. She couldn’t get enough breath to scream, hard moans released with each stroke of his body, hard and sharp glass edges under her hips, hard and hot plate and hide holding her down so she couldn’t move, the reaming twist, slide and turn of his cock blotting out all other possible awareness.

The edges of her vision blackened and narrowed, and she held on to consciousness, desperate for every moment of his body pressed onto, into hers, listening for the rise and fall of his growl between his breath, along her broken skin and broken breath and disintegrating hold on being able to feel it all happen.

She lost the fight, slipping down into dreamless dark.

She woke up later in dim red lighting, disoriented for a long moment in the struggle with uncooperative, fluttering eyes. They were against the back wall of the battery, Garrus still inside, his mouth at the junction of neck and shoulder, his tongue on her skin along with his hum. A blanket was thrown over them. One of them had thought ahead.

She said with an exhausted lift of her lips “Good meeting.”

He breathed a soft huffing laugh at her shoulder and he said thoughtfully “I love making you pass out.”

She said lightly “You’re good at it.” He was. He never did it around Thane, not to this extent. Pulling the breath and consciousness from her deliberately seemed to be a private joy he nurtured.

He said unrepentantly “I hope it causes you no actual permanent damage, but I swear to the Spirits, if it did, I probably still would not stop doing it.” She couldn’t tell if he wanted to be forgiven or reassured, or if he just wanted to assert power over her and let her know it.

She sighed and settled on the side of light teasing “The damage is likely done. I’ve fainted quite a few times in my career. You at least make it fun.”

He laughed again shortly and said “You’ve made me an utter deviant, Kerim. I hope you’re properly contrite.”

She smiled with weak lips and said “Says the man who once sound tested for the potential of screams.”

He abandoned that trail of teasing as his arms came around her tightly and he said in a ragged voice...
“Stay with me. Don’t leave. Stay with me, here, please, Kerim.”

It didn’t matter why. He had his own thousand reasons to fear and worry, and she didn’t need a list. He spent so much time here alone, and this was the perfect place to build a fire. Perhaps in future conferences he could look back to the spot of embers and he could half smile with that warmth, though it would not reach his eyes. She relaxed back against his body, surrendered to his arms and his chest and the press of his mouth at her neck.

She ceded control over her time for the near future and said a simple “Yes.”

Garrus had his own places of silence she had learned over time. He was resourceful and self sacrificing and satisfied with his life of checklists and details, but satisfied and happy were different creatures with different methods and different needs.

He took great satisfaction in looking after her, watching over her and others, taking more and more people under his wing, challenging more and more on his home world daily.

But happiness was ephemeral and she had accepted that beyond lust, beyond want, there was need. He needed to have her in his arms, with him still and deep inside her body. It was separate from Reverie. Reverie countered and softened only a few of the requirements of his happiness. He needed her love and presence and attention. He wanted to remember each moment of warmth, of connection, of wanting her to need him in return.

So many times he’d refused to let her go when she’d attempted to pull away or even shift in his arms. Other times he restrained himself, letting her go reluctantly. Over time it had become less of an odd quirk of mood and more the core of who he was as a lover, as a mate. Where she could be distracted and pulled in several directions, Garrus had focus she lacked.

She was torn again in the half educated twilight of knowing the man but not his culture. His brief discussion of bonding and its impossibility hadn’t been revisited, and she would not ask him to elaborate. She was aware he could study human sexuality, poetry and literature to his curious heart’s content and she had exactly no resources to help her learn this man, and guessing terrified her. Did he want her focus in return? Did he want merely to focus on her? Would either be enough? Did he long for sub-harmonics from her, did he imagine them in his head? Did he wonder what her skin meant and did he spend time figuring out all of her moods from her scent? Was tasting her moment by moment a pleasure in itself or in anticipation of desired change…as though he wondered in each moment that the next taste of her would grant him the knowledge he needed.

This was Garrus coming to grips with his own needs, needs he would likely prefer were different, that he could be as withdrawn and detached and unfocused as she. She wished she could be more like him and she wondered if he wished the same in return…to be able to finally meet on even ground, as unlikely as it was that they’d ever be the same height.

At these times she did not speak or explain or entertain him or ask to be entertained, he preferred silence. Questions would go unanswered, teasing would go un-bantered. She slept in his arms often and she knew he didn’t sleep half as much as she did, but he was ever present, protective, attentive as she often drifted off to sleep or other thoughts, unable to keep up the same focus he kept.

He wanted her, yes, and sex was the best way to calm the savage Turian, but over time he needed more. She was grateful that he felt free enough with her to push her to her knees, to demand her presence. She did know he was slowly advancing, claiming territory as his own, establishing rituals and private space separate from Thane. She imagined he felt as she did, the differential between desired absolute equality and the reality of different needs, different goals and compromises on what was possible. Right now he used his voice to ask for what he wanted rather than his habit of
nonverbal restraint. That was rare enough to wonder what swirled through his head, but she wouldn’t ask.

She had enough information.

He would never get enough. His thirst for the refuge of her body, his need to feel her weight supported by him and her skin guarded by his hands would never be met. She knew this, the knowledge soaked into her skin from the reluctant drift of his hands away from her, the pained vulnerability that lingered in his eyes when he had to accede to the reality of distance between them.

It was Garrus’s meditation, if anything else, communion of the press and presence of flesh, perhaps with the underlying ambition to create a Spirit that strengthened from vapor to solid reality the more he touched her. She wondered if he felt the urge to bond and this is how he reached for her as fully as he could, his body in service to his mate, his mind concentrating on safety and the shared swirl of Reverie, assured that she was as contented and safe as he could make her.

She turned her forehead to press at his crest and slid her fingers over his, light where he was tight and tangled.

Garrus’s darker moments were deep, unreachable by words, not secrets but all known and catalogued facts he set out in orderly arrangements for her to see.

He feared for his people.

He feared for his mother’s life and waited for that call.

He feared for Thane.

He would never be able to hold her long enough to make up for opportunity lost, life lost, years lost, kidnap and indoctrination on his watch. He would never be able to protect her every moment, but he could have these moments, held too tightly, breath shallow and spare.

Perhaps he also felt deeper communion with her sleeping or unconscious self, able to pour words into her he did not speak while she was awake, with these private moments of the two of them together, his arms pressing the breath from her, his heart infusing her with his intent. She had woken enough times to impassioned murmuring and they had echoed through her sated dreams, even though she believed he spoke some internal Turian dialect that could not be translated, or he made up new words from his heart, words created under Cerberus monitoring, encoded dreams to be unraveled only when the breath was pressed from her and consciousness lost.

Too tightly was just tight enough for him, and as she relaxed her body consciously his arms tightened into plate press and close breath, a fine tremble in his limbs along with the trace of his tongue over her skin.

She would not be the first one to move, the first to pull away, and she vowed to be more careful of his moments and needs, a new meditation in his name, for his Cause.

She closed her eyes and committed to the moment, paying attention to him, just aware of him, his arms, his breath, the pass of his mouth on her skin, his soft wordless murmurs of part voice and subharmonic that were admiration and adoration.

She wished she knew a beautiful song to sing, or that her species had a hum that was comforting and not a counterfeit copy. She wished she could tell him somehow, in ways that were not words, the way he did for her, and imagined she was deaf, blind and dumb in the world of her Turian. It would take a lifetime to learn his language. She hoped with her heart, breathed him in as much as his
restraining grip would allow, and decided too tight was redefined as necessary.

She kept her forehead to his crest, a sure contact with meaning to him, one she would not break. She stroked her fingers along his, a physical movement she was aware of creating moment to moment, letting him know he was her full focus. She was silent, but her breath could carry soft sounds in what she could hope would be appropriate response to his humming sub-vocals, letting him know she was not only listening, but had something to say, about him, about now, and nothing else mattered.

Over time the thin trembles from his limbs stopped and he relaxed enough that she was able to draw a deeper breath. She decided too tight was not just okay with her, but she might need it herself, and her fingers tightened in his. She gave over her time and her future to the experience of breathing together with joined bodies. She let go of the sense of darkness and desperation, hoped that he could sense it in her muscles and skin and body that she was, for once, receptive and attentive to him, spared a moment of regret that she was not a Turian and couldn’t sense what he needed on his skin, but hoped she could be what he needed through sheer will and determination.

Time passed in her built and borrowed bliss and any number of notifications of Omni Tools were ignored, his and hers, until he stirred with a deep breath and a long exhale and said “I need you, Kerim. Stay with me. Don’t leave me.” She was glad to hear that his voice seemed to expect she would say yes.

She brought her hand to the side of his throat and said a soft “Yes.”

Not “of course” because this was not a matter of course and she wasn’t always available and to behave as though she was could tear the fragile mood.

Focus on what was real, what was important, what was needed right now. Think of just the next breath, not all breaths.

She resolved again to not be the first to pull away, to not set a tone or a pace or a direction. She waited for his actions and asked no questions. If a little power over her made him a little crazy, he had that right. She asked him regularly for crazy things.

At first Garrus didn’t move at all and she relaxed back into the embrace he’d held around her body for the past hours or however long they’d been here. She was starting to feel hungry, cramped, having to attend to her body, but it was muted by Reverie and this time was dedicated to Garrus, not her.

He stood slowly with his arm still around her, lifting her off his body with a groan that sounded like pain. He put her down on her feet, facing him, gathered up the blanket and put a corner of it in each of her hands, outstretched, so she stood with it like a cape behind her. He stepped in closer, looked down at her and pressed his crest to her forehead for long minutes, his breathing unstable, easing slowly to even. He stepped back, closed her arms against her chest one by one like wings, lifted her in his arms and carried her out of the Battery wrapped in a blanket, ignoring her clothes in a heap.

Give the man an inch…he’ll take a light year.

She almost smiled, then remembered a series of posters, and decided this was definitely not the most scandalous thing that had happened. Anybody not used to the idea that Garrus was going to press his advantage as much as possible in any given moment and that the word ‘advantage’ was synonymous with ‘Shepard’ did not deserve a berth on the Normandy. Including her.

She decided to keep her eyes on him and his determined look as though he were on a mission, and she had no idea if they encountered anybody at all.
He took her to...not his cabin, not her cabin, Thane’s cabin, and she tried to work that out. So the theme here was his control and power, her relative lack of it. Not her cabin, because it was hers, his sense of Turian status denying her that. Not Garrus’s cabin because…

Because Turian showers would kill her.

Thane meticulously not only kept his own food, but she had clothes here and human food, Turian food, everything Garrus would need to care for her. She wouldn’t have walked into Thane’s cabin and made herself at home, and Garrus was going to enjoy that as well.

He put her down, not coldly, but brusque, pushing her to the bathroom, moving himself to get some food, his grudging acceptance of limited human squishiness and un-Turian stamina. He had to allow her some distance from him, but he didn’t have to like it.

Garrus had caretaker kink. The thought made her smile as she managed to take a few minutes in the bathroom to work out more physical kinks and ease circulation back into places denied for a long time, her right foot still entirely numb. She’d have to hide a bit of a limp under the blanket and hope to not turn her foot on anything. Cold water splashing her smiling face and hair brushed back, in better reasonable shape to face whatever he had nonverbally planned. She was grateful for her empathy, she wasn’t entirely lost.

He was going to use absolute power over her...conditionally and consensually...to make sure she ate, got enough rest, and spent her time in his arms. That’s what this man’s kink had been shaped into. No space for danger or fear or edgy anything...other than of course blood and sex, because Turian...his greater desires rolled into getting her a meal, getting her into bed on time and watching her sleep. Kink often being about the unusual and taboo, in this context, taboo was establishing routine, normalcy, his very Turian heart insisting he knew best.

She’d fuck it up tomorrow, they both knew it, but for now…

She moved back to him with a smile, his impatience expressed by him waiting at the door to sweep his blanket bundle into his arms, take her to the table and feed her with her hands wrapped in blanket, sternly watching her eat, an eternal admonition to get her shit together. As though this expression held for every potential missed meal in the future, retribution promised.

She was finally understanding, unquestioning, happy and silent and hoped he could glean that from her skin, since he no longer relied on her face or words, knowing her capacity for referred self denial. Paradoxically he’d caused her to miss a meal, but that was still no excuse.

It really didn’t have to make sense. Repressed needs of the heart had their own timing and their own rhyme and she’d obey his meter. He would make her ignore her mission (when she had nothing pressing) and he would make her eat despite herself (even if it was his demand that caused the lapse) and he would, by the Spirits, make sure she slept (even if that was not in question due to nothing being pressing) because now was the only time he could demand these things from her and be absolutely assured of gaining them.

His sympathetic magic ritual of warding off harm to her slowly had its effect on him as she had hoped, and her accepting silence, honoring the depths and not the surface, began to transform him. He did not smile, but his eyes grew warmer, allowing approval and satisfaction and then the loosening of those into accomplishment, acceptance of potential happiness. He lifted her and put her on her now hale feet, circulation restored. He pulled the blanket from her and dropped it into a heap at her feet, bent his crest to her forehead and closed his eyes, hard exhales through his nose.

He dropped to his knees and wrapped his arms around her hips, his head turned to the side on her
abdomen, so tall even on his knees that his crest brushed the underside of her breast, nestled along the line of her separating ribs.

She fought the instinctual urge to pull him back to his feet, remembering Thane’s line of “She who accepts no bent knee, but seeks a strong spine.”

This was his light year taken and demanded at the implied given inch. He expected her to pull him up, and her hands knotted to keep from doing it, trying to take in the suddenly reversed license he needed in this moment, for her to accept him on his knees, to take that into herself, allow him to take that into himself as a need fulfilled. More sympathetic magic, the exquisitely gentle grasp of his hands on her hips, to lead her to go against her nature to accommodate his.

Her hands relaxed as she understood the spell and the outcome, spread one hand along the fused lines of his crest, bent fingers between the spikes of his fringe and touched the hide she could reach. She still trembled on the edge of rejection, thinking ‘You don’t ask for much, do you Vakarian…’ but did not allow that to reach her hands, did not use her voice, stood in the sheltering grip of his arms and felt his breath spread out over her skin. She would not pull away, would not take the lead, would not take his spell from him and wrest it to her own will, with him restored to taller than she was, angry eyes pushing her to the floor as the more acceptable outcome.

It would take a lifetime to understand her Turian.

He stayed there for so long, her mind in cramped turmoil, her body slowly growing cold, trembles of the struggle in her limbs. He finally stood in what felt like mercy to her, his eyes closed, breath harsh, her struggling to watch, to know when her eyes should close. He kissed her forehead with the use of mouth plates, his voice softened and knowing she’d run her Marathon on his behalf while holding still.

There were times that still unnerved her in their taken intimacy, his way of pressing his cock into her as though it were simply a pass of his lips on her forehead. The times she’d left his body in the middle of the night for a call or a trip to the bathroom and in his sleep he’d find her and glide his length back into her, nearly thoughtless. There was no doubt he occasionally preferred to enter into silent and assumed Reverie upon seeing her, sensing her body in the dark. She would try to learn. Should she rethink her own sense of human ceremony in sex and instead seek him on her return to bed, not with simply a kiss on his crest, but by closing all distance between them in his sleep?

He stood and lifted her, entered her with no preamble, a revitalizing surge of Reverie and soothing of the shambles of her internal landscape. She watched him, though, and that was worth the distance traveled in so short a time. His face was transcendent, all her worries about his happiness being achievable in these short moments reassured fully. He had taken what she had been unable to know he wanted, what was against her nature, and he would do it again, that damned up need flowing. Against her cold skin he was searing heat, and he took her to the bed, sat with his back up against the wall, his knees bent with her body cradled entirely by his, her weight supported, their heads tilted together at the crest and forehead. He brought a hand up to cradle the back of her head, guided her hand to slide up along the plated rounds at the back of his neck to the hide just under his fringe, a Turian embrace, the only human component being her.
The next day she ventured into the amusement park her ship had slowly turned into, Reni with cool hands and smiles touching her face, fast and sure. When Jane asked curiously “What are you looking for?” Reni said warmly “Your style.” Jane had raised a brow “You can get that?” Reni shook her head and said “Not me. David.”

Then it was into a pod, scanning and setup, which mostly involved flashing lights and skin tingling. The whole process took about 20 minutes.

She was expecting being a bit crowded, possibly hazed by a glowing Joker wielding lightning bolts that electrocuted her while she was standing drenched in a puddle of water, with her turning into an x-ray vision of herself, skin weave included, comically zapped. Thanks to David her introduction did not go that way.

There was dark, and David’s voice “Commander Shepard, I have created an introductory interface, one that you can alter at any time. If you wish to learn the coding I can provide materials to teach you. If you do not wish to learn as your time is limited, I would be happy to build whatever interface you wish. The settings I have created make this your private space. You will not be monitored in here. For the moment I think it best that you look like yourself.”

In demonstration she appeared suspended in dark space, in front of a mirror, dressed in the generic blacks she’d worn in the address she’d given recently.

David said “You can change your appearance to anything you wish by asking me or by designing your own interface.” Her appearance slipped through morphing images of Alliance gear, N7 fatigues, Cerberus signified outfit, her dress at the Palaven reception and her Tseni on Earth, and then back to the basic blacks.

She said with a smile, honoring his original choice that correlated with her discomfort with ceremony “Casual is good.”

The mirror dissipated and a swirl of light appeared in front of her, dynamic, soft yellows of flowering and fading form, edges of silver flashing through patterns of growth and subsequent collapse and reformation in new intricacies. David’s voice was more directional, emitting from the light “I will most often appear in a form such as this. I enjoy the formation of three-dimensional fractal pattern with the addition of gravity into the equations to self limit and begin again. I find the progression relaxing.”

She smiled and she felt the smile. David continued “I have linked proprioception directly to your stored memories of movement and sensation. A smile will feel like a smile. If you reach out your hand to touch the light I am generating, I have added no element of physical feedback to that, so that will grant no sensation, no resistance or warmth. Other objects will have basic textures and sensations as they would in the outside world. Your mind will provide the feedback from memory. You will be aware of anything affecting your physical body, though the feedback moves only one way. If you have an itch in your physical body, you can mute that feedback once received here. You cannot scratch here and relieve the external scratch. A problem for future innovation. Geth do not itch and had no need for the monitoring and feedback we have adapted to organic use. Signals such as physical pain or high levels of hunger or fatigue generate a lock out from this space.” David said as a thoughtful aside “Reni insisted, and I have ultimately agreed. This is a space to be visited with the intent to create and experience, not to escape. The privilege is greatly appreciated, Commander Shepard.”
Jane said “Please, call me Jane.”

David said gravely “If it is permitted, I would prefer to call you Commander Shepard. It is the name I thought most when I was unable to say or express it. I researched your career out of curiosity once I reached Grissom Academy, and with my observations and Reni’s bond, I do feel that I know you well enough to call you Jane…but I get a particular pleasure from being able to say and hear the words Commander Shepard out loud. I have not become accustomed to Jane.”

The final sentence was heavy with meaning and Jane wondered at the differential between the near nonverbal autistic young man and his disembodied, humorous and teasing voice that addressed her externally. Trying to account for the differential she thought she was addressing David the person, not David with a job to do. It was possible he had adopted some of her tone of humor and confidence. This interface was his personal gift to her and his attitude and presentation was more of who he was as a person, autism, independently assigned meaning and resistance to change woven in. She imagined he was nervous. Jane said quietly “Your preferences matter, David. Thank you for explaining. Thank you for doing this for me.”

David’s fractals were constant, a slightly jarring but educational change from a drone like Glyph that spun and bounced, pulsed and affected vocal gymnastics in order to be easily anthropomorphized. David’s chosen presentation was far from human. It did in fact suit her better than the possible outcome of finding an attractive David facsimile. She asked “How did you choose your voice?”

David said with his established solemnity “With my physical body it has always been difficult to speak. Exhausting. Numbers were an easier communication method and unambiguous. Unfortunately it rarely generated a response. I thought people were choosing not to respond when they did not complete the sequence. The Geth would and do speak to me in mathematical progression and that was my first experience of being able to communicate. It was not until I reached the Academy that I realized most humans cannot calculate as I can, and that my brother’s responses were not spontaneous, but memorized and parroted back without meaning to him. It had seemed to me as though other people’s voices flowed from them like water. For other people I had observed, language seemed to be an open window through which they could pass concepts, thoughts, emotions. I had met none like me until I reached Grissom. For me language was always more like an obscuring mesh, a jagged screen. No concept could pass through or return without its shape mangled. Pushed through with great exhausting force from my side, received shredded. Once I was able to gather more samples of language from the Normandy’s data files, I studied voices that seemed to me to flow more like water. I studied the waveforms and patterns, formed this voice from a composite of three actors I chose, two singers I chose and I added in some of the accent and characteristics of Jon Grissom. With that template of expression and access to references I can speak and no longer feel the communication will be distorted. Language is still odd, indistinct and easily misunderstood, lacking the elegance of numbers, but it has beauty. My usage of language from here is not the same as it would be with my physical body. In the outside world if I think the word ‘circle’ the significance is overwhelming. I recall each and every circle I have encountered in rapid succession. I postulate more possible circles and context of circles, formulas describing circles with each repetition of the word or time spent contemplating it. I am joyfully distracted by the possible options and symbols that the word ‘circle’ represents. I would prefer to think about circles rather than attempt to discuss them, rather than make what I know will be lost effort in an attempt to communicate that word. In this interface, all circles can exist seamlessly without distraction. Part of me can contemplate the concept of ‘circle’ for as long as I wish as the conversation continues, adding to and redefining the data set of ‘circle.’ Concepts grow richer and do not detract from communication. With the storage and processing I have access to here, I can say ‘circle’ and not become lost.”

Jane said softly “You have broken yourself down into discrete processes? How many processes are
you running at the moment?"

David responded “With faster and near unlimited parallel processing capabilities, my ability to multitask has proved useful. Discrete functions that might have once been distracting have been refined to a useful and enlightening set of processes I can indulge in without restrictions of time. What was once distracting is now expressed as iterations of data mining and synthesis. It can be an unalloyed experience of joy as it is without the anxiety of realizing reality and time slip away as I contemplate. In reality I easily lose what hold or interest I have on communicating through language or performing mundane tasks when I would prefer uninterrupted contemplation. Old ideas are dearest friends. New ideas are flights of romantic fancy and the race of curiosity. The number of processes I initiate will vary second to second. At the moment that you asked, 20,091 separate tasks were taking place. As I speak here and as I speak to others, as I encounter constant new data, thoughts that would have overwhelmed me once are spun off into separate and discrete processes I have grown in faith will function as desired and allow me time for contemplation later. I save much of the experience of absorption of information for when I am no longer interfaced. I cannot process it all, but I can observe and experience conclusions now that I have worked out the format for storage and access.”

With Jane chewing on that and speechless, David moved into instruction and controls became lit, something resembling a galaxy map that began in front of her just like the one on the CIC, then it shifted, leaned and spread out to form a template with bright stations on different levels. At the center was a console that resembled the ones she used daily. David said “Your experiences here will begin as reflections of your experiences outside. You can access any data here that you can access externally. You can work in here without physical distraction or intrusion. In this space you can attain contemplative solitude that would be difficult to achieve externally. If you wish, I can limit myself to read only interactions with you, and I can wipe my interactions and awareness of your customization of your space.”

Jane said lightly “That won’t be necessary. Thank you for the offer, but I would prefer that you remember.” She thought about Thane a moment and said “I would prefer to retain the right to share any built context we create.”

David said with a slight tentative tone to his words “This is an example of an interface template created from my observations of your behavior and preferences, augmented by your bond with Reni.”

She suddenly felt deck under her feet, and he said “The vibrations reflect those of the drive core in real time.” She smiled and felt a proprioceptive blush creep up her throat and face. She ducked her head and said “You’ve seen my ship forts…”

He said solemnly “Yes. I hoped you might appreciate…”

The area lit up slowly, revealing a deck under her feet like that of the Normandy. The three dimensional space filled in slowly, coming into being in small details. Crates and tarps, black and blue and silver, institutional colors, impossible space between them where moving stars shone through. Her imaginings of her forts were retooled into a cathedral made of the things that made up the Normandy and other ships on which she’d lived and served. Insignia and draped uniforms, mess trays and bolted-down chairs. The deck spread out in concrete form, and the edges of the deck were defined subtly, hazy, glittering with the patina of nostalgia, the alternately shadowed and bright cell-shaded imaginings of a child. Recreations of real and newly imagined intimate alcoves with light edging through opaque draping, glowing through in flickers in others. The clutter streamlined above, and grew into disciplined order. Walls rose and became sharper but no less magical, a climbing structure that formed mosaics, portraits, stained glass portrayals of military tradition from sea to space where each piece of glass rotated on its own lazy axis. Columns and arches led up to a moving and
open star-strewn sky. The view overhead was of impossible trinary stars holding a common orbit, leaving blended trails of color, one yellow, one blue, one red. Individual components of the impossible structure would spin lazily as though in no gravity, rotate and blink and turn. The outer structure of the Normandy’s shape spread out to the sides, made of simple things, daily things. Common lighting sources that were authentically harsh and utilitarian were placed and filtered through obscure and unseen, transparent and turning components, became profound and sacred. Everything moved or held its shape and form with the elegance of David’s fractal bloom, his mastery of complex order.

She choked up and felt tears move down her cheeks, saying softly “David…this is…so beautiful. Thank you.”

He said with great solemnity “You are welcome, Commander Shepard. There is also…”

The ship faded from view slowly, though some of the stars moved, one coalescing into a point directly where she was looking, and sunset colors settled on the ringed horizon and then faded over the crags of mountains, the distance to them making her realize quickly where she was intended to be, texture of sand under her shoes. She was in the bowl of the Mojave, visible far off lights of a Drell settlement, night breeze and scent. A full moon and a North Star in her view, casting shadows on mountain and stone, scrub and the rare outline of a Joshua tree.

She watched the stars, turned in a full circle to take them all in, and as she watched, yellow light began to suffuse the landscape and the sky, changing in virtual brush strokes in many places. The scene was transformed to not just day, but day under different stars, a different sun, orange tinged sands and yellow sky, a distant river in tones of green flushing along the bank, plants in a pale green and sometimes deep blue, bright reds and purples of leaves and spikes. The scents and sounds she recognized from Urem’s collection, from motifs in the Tseni work. Deep sounds of insect life and calls from strange animal throats.

She said with wonder “Rakhana.”

David replied “Rakhana before her fall. I can duplicate most sections of the world from Drell artist accounts. If Sere Krios ever chooses to visit, you can show him his home world or I can show it to him, any part he wishes to visit.”

The scene altered into something more abstract, something with the sheen and turn of Tseni fabric and the hallucinatory shift of venom. David elaborated “I find Drell art work to be fascinating.”

She said “So do I. Their ability of perfect recall of each moment influences so much of their art, something humans cannot duplicate. Their abstract art after leaving Rakhana…with nothing more to remember. Themes of known distortion and echo and… I would like to learn more about it.”

David said “The central console will always be available. You can choose key words for activating themes of display. Simply say or think ‘console’ or reassign to any other key words or concepts. I can gather research for you on any subject that interests you. I can recreate Drell communities, architecture, museums and Pilgrimage sites.” A Tseni-embroidered console with recognizable controls arose in front of her and David said “You can access files in different ways, develop your own commands, through activation of your facsimile in interaction with projected objects here or thought.”

She thought she was getting some of the hang of potential. She said “David…can you reconstruct the Library of Alexandria?”

David asked “Ancient or the Biblioteca Alexandrina?”
Jane said with a smile “Ancient. Please. And may I see…you build it…please?”

It was a fast process, and she got a little dizzy and probably wouldn’t ask to see it again, but glad to do it once.

The Rakhana Tseni venomscape was not wiped away but was systematically replaced by rough outline, beginning with what looked like a wire form, spinning into perspective and settling in alignment to her location. Materials filled in not from the ground up, but one at a time, tile of roof and terrace appearing unconnected to anything else, disorienting until added depth and detail was added.

Clear blue sky, sound of waves, salt breeze, not as warm as Rakhana but brighter, polished marble and terra cotta, shine and terraced steps.

She walked by the reflecting pool, entranced, dipping down to splash water that felt authentically watery and rippled in interference patterns of fallen drops.

Walking up the steps she had a frisson of anticipation, opening to the wide entrance, sun providing the light. She wondered if the original had been dingy from smoke and enclosure, this was pristine and bright, light streaming in from the sun, history curled into scrolls and stacked, tablets of cuneiform displayed. David said “I have reproduced many of the known scrolls and tablets, but not all were recorded. Any scroll you choose can contain whatever content you wish.”

She said as her feet tapped down different hallways, fingers dragging along the rough, cool textures of papyrus and vellum “David, this is…phenomenal. No wonder you guys don’t leave.”

David sounded pleased “Commander Shepard, I have given you the facsimile of one library. You have given me every library. I have been able to directly access information and you brought me to it.”

His apprehension was fading and she was grateful. He had worked and thought…for a long time…on these interfaces, his way of communicating his appreciation. He would give her back every world she had given to him if he could. Jane said with a fascinated smile “I have certainly benefitted from that choice, haven’t I? And so have the rest of the crew. So have so many people who will never know. Am I keeping you from any projects?”

David said firmly “No. I wish to help you find your way in the interface and help you build a refuge for yourself, a command center with all you need. I may not always be here when you are, but if I am, I ask you to call upon me.”

She said sincerely “I will.” This was how to build a relationship with him, to interact with his relationship to reality. He was in the authenticity of each scroll, the 20,091 processes that went into her being able to take in only the surface. She asked “Please get me set up here, help me tie in the basics of command to the basics of interface.”

He guided her through choosing key words for visual templates and access methods to consoles. A modern console could rise or one could be in the theme of the visual template she inhabited. It could take the form of a data pad in her hand, a floating screen, anything she chose. He helped her formulate commands for entry, transition, access and exit. He helped her access and compare what Eden Prime had been like when she had been there years ago, and what the site would look like now. While he was accessing data, he reported that it appeared there were irregularities locally. Communication to the colony from the outside had gone unanswered recently, even to Alliance channels that needed to stay in touch often for resupply. Terminus Systems were always on high alert since the Collectors.
Jane sighed and said “Eden Prime has always been a problem. Okay, I’m going to head out. Get me everything you can on the irregularities and how long it has been going on, David, or everything that should be there that isn’t, okay?”

David said “Of course, Commander Shepard. If I may delay you only briefly. EDI has requested to see you before you leave.”

Jane smiled and said “Of course. I forgot. Tell her…how do I tell her something?”

He guided her through setting up communication requests because EDI’s attention wouldn’t be drawn simply my mentioning her name with the privacy David set up for her. Jane set the template back to Normandy Cathedral and called EDI over.

Nothing happened. She was wondering if she’d assigned the wrong command and started to go to the console to check her notes, but EDI’s voice waaay too close behind her said “Hello!” enthusiastically and Jane jumped, startled.

She barely restrained herself from hitting, because startling Jane was not a good idea, but there was a startling…undefined…something laughing when she turned.

Jane grinned and said “Dammit EDI…good thing you couldn’t actually get a broken nose in here. That’s a nice nose.”

It was a nice nose. Everything was nice, but disjointed from every other feature without an attempt to connect them. The general shape of a head, but individual features, two different colored eyes, one violet, seemingly Asari, and one black and huge, mottled, Salarian. Some Asari tentacle looking things on her head and some hair in a different place, a sleek sweep of lemon yellow. She didn’t look like male or female or any particular species. Her clothes were unconnected pieces, a metallic gauntlet on one implied hand, the other hand looking Drell, a Turian leg, a Salarian caved-in chest attitude on one side, what looked like a hip encased in Quarian suit.

EDI watched Jane’s face and said with mixed exasperation and pressured excuse “I don’t know what to wear! I want to represent the crew…but I don’t…”

Jane stepped closer to the flustered young Frankenstein of good intentions and gave her a hug, saying “EDI, you’re perfect.”

EDI returned the hug and said enthusiastically “You’re beautiful. Can I look like you?”

Frozen for a half moment, she didn’t let that show. Jane decided they were way beyond manners and this was a young girl wanting to play dress up, literally try on mommy’s clothes. And body.

AND BODY.

She pulled back and said with a sincere smile “Of course you can.”

EDI rippled and bulged and Jane was looking at a maniacally grinning version of herself who said “This is nice!” too loudly and almost got herself punched in the nose again.

Jane laughed, held EDI by the hands, noticed they were wearing exactly the same clothes and then EDI quickly changed clothes color to lime green, saying quickly “Now you know which one you are.”

Jane was charmed and ready to fill out adoption papers.
Jane filled Garrus in, wolfing down a dinner she barely noticed, saying “I have to go back and teach her how to dance. She wants to wear the dress.”

Garrus was busy laughing but then looked offended “She deserves a better teacher.”

Jane grinned and said “You can volunteer.”

He stretched his neck and said “That sounds like fun…but with this Eden Prime thing I won’t have time.”

Jane held up a finger and said “Well, we can prep in the Eden Prime compound. Actually go through it before we get there. It’s a huge tactical advantage.”

Garrus nodded slightly “Interesting. I would like to do a walk through.”

Jane chewed on her lip “We need more interface pods. I want one.”

Garrus laughed again and said “One visit and you’re sold.”

She looked up at him and said “You have to see it. We could visit Palaven together, you and me. You could show me your favorite places. I wouldn’t die from radiation. I’d be able to hold your hand. You could show me the moons. Garrus, we could stand under a Kerim together.”

Garrus froze and thought a moment “I hadn’t…”

She started piling on the selling points “Garrus…you HAVE to go. We need to get you a pod too. It is SO much fun. David showed me Rakhana before the fall. Thane has to see that. We could go back to the valley on Earth…all three of us, now. Well…when Thane gets back…”

Garrus watched her face and caught her enthusiasm, going along with her in part because it was wonderful and going along in part because she missed Thane so much and the withdrawal that had faded when interfacing began to bite deep without that distraction. They heard from him, and he was okay, but as always on missions away from the Normandy he was concerned about transmissions being traced to their location or his, and his security precautions resulted in compliance pings. They would know he was alive and he deemed that sufficient in balance with security risks. She had no better alternative and hated it, but trusted his caution. Unfortunately.

It was an odd note to strike, talking about that valley when most of what had happened there was incense and sex, so Garrus’s next question was “I can hold your hand…and what else can I do?”

She looked at him, startled “What? We can see anything we want, go anywhere we want, imagination is the limit here.”

He grinned and said “Not what I can see, what can I do?”

She narrowed her eyes and said “You’re going to sex that fast?”

He looked and sounded disingenuously shocked for a moment and said “Of course I wouldn’t…” and then about turned his voice and said as though she were a fool “Of COURSE I’m going to sex. How did you not get there first? We meet under a Kerim and I hold your hand and I want to try to swim. Turians can’t. So we’re under a majestic waterfall and I bend in to kiss you and your clothes are wet so of course they have to go…”
She blanked a moment and said “So we…come out of the simulator for that.”

He threw up his hands and said “I was promised SO much fun and that I HAD to go, and if I have to go and I want fun, I get to pick what fun.”

She stopped again, mind racing and said “That’s…that sounds really embarrassing. What if I moan or something? What if my body moans, that is. That could be a bit…distracting for everyone involved. Besides, you’re not dealing with my actual body and I’m going to…”

He laughed and said “You have no idea what you’re going to. I should ask Joker. No doubt he’s figured it out. All that privacy and free time when not in a flight simulator.”

She looked at him and said deadpan “I order you not to ask Joker. Garrus…”

He waved her off “This is not ship business. This is a discussion between a curious friend and someone more experienced.”

She sighed and said sternly “Allegedly.”

He said stubbornly “You can’t keep me from finding out. If you won’t do it, I’ll just ask Thane.”

She gasped and threw her napkin at him, he caught it, she said “Damn” but then continued “You will not. I’m not running a brothel here.”

He said calmly “Of course you won’t run one. I’ll run one. I’m a curious individual. You’d better be nice to me or I won’t invite you.”

She said in predictive warning “I think…if your plates spread and your erection is exposed on the CIC, that will be a problem. I can think of…about seventeen regs right there you’re violating and some I can make up. I’m the Commander, you know.”

Garrus considered, eyes glassy for a moment “All right. You have a point.” He said distractedly “You can also grant me a pardon for violating them. You’re the Commander, you know.”

She tried to disingenuously help problem solve “We can always glue you shut, but Thane’s gear is also not as discreet as he would like. And chastity belts are out.”

Garrus said distinctly “No glue” but then sounded fascinated “What’s a chastity belt?”

She said helpfully “Centuries ago men leaving their wives behind used to…uh…lock them up.” She had to pull up a picture on her Omni Tool before he’d stop laughing and believe it wasn’t a joke. They scrolled fascinated through all the different versions. He said “I thought it was only for historical women. That one…”

She said slightly shocked as they scrolled through modern versions for men and women of different species “Yeah…uh…I haven’t really caught up on all the…fetish…” She scrolled down some more.

Garrus said absently “Look, I get this is barbaric. I’m outraged.” He tilted his head “I also really like that one there.”

She looked and almost agreed, then realized what she was talking about. It was a lovely piece of jointed and filigreed platinum work with rubies. She snapped the screen off and said “No.”

He pulled her around the waist into his lap and said “You want me to try new things but you won’t try new things? What kind of relationship is that?” She play struggled a moment and then gave up,
leaning back against him. He said “We’re intelligent people. We can figure this out.”

She said in more warning “You cannot make another me to have sex with, Vakarian.”

He shrugged and said “You can’t stop me from doing that. She’d wear the belt. And how do I know you’re not going to do some…copyright infringement of your own?”

She laughed and said “Because I can find you and ask.”

He said with fervor “Sure, you can ask, but you can’t ask if you can have sex under a Kerim atop a rampaging Klixen.”

She said, frustrated “Why the hell would I want a rampaging Klixen? It sounds painful.”

He said enthusiastically “We can do anything we want. It’s just an example. You can’t ask me to do that, though.”

She sighed “Clearly, I can. Let me try. Garrus, have sex with me under the Kerim on a rampaging Klixen.”

He shook his head and licked the back of her neck “You’re right. You can just ask. It’s a date.”

She added an imperious caveat “With you wearing a chastity belt.”

He made a sound of dismay but then said “It has to be custom.”

She couldn’t stop laughing and said through broken breathless gasps “Klixen plate would be dashing.”

He said determinedly “I’m doing it. I’m putting cameras and microphones on us in the CIC. There has got to be a way. I’ll watch for the…erection thing…and we’ll see if we…uh…elicit moans. This whole…proprioception thing…must be evaluated. Hell, if need be we get new pods and install them here for seamless transition so to speak.”

She closed her eyes tightly and said “Sometimes your willingness to solve a problem is a problem in itself.”

He nibbled at her ear and said “Name one other time.”

She muttered darkly in harsh Archangel tones “I’m going to kill everyone on Omega.”

His voice rumbled with laughter as he said “This will be better. I promise.” He was still for a long moment, then his hands tightened on her waist as he said thoughtfully “What if I could be a human male?”

She had clearly not used her imagination enough, swamped in technicalities and implications as she said “Do you…want to be a human male?” blankly.

He said quietly “I won’t know until I try it, will I?”

She went just a few feet mentally further down that road and said “Would you…want me to be a Turian female?”

He sucked in a breath and was still, thinking. He said carefully “Won’t know unless we try. I haven’t thought about it before…but now…”
She said carefully “This is less thinking and more…galloping directly into the bizarre dark.”

She shrugged and said in his inherent seductive purr “Nobody I’d rather be with in the bizarre dark.”

She tried to think and said “How…I can’t…I am not asking David to make an anatomically functional facsimile of myself.”

He bit lightly at her shoulder and said “It’s coding, right? How hard can it be? I am due for a new hobby.”

She closed her eyes tightly “I have no proprioceptive memory of being a Turian female. I’d still feel like a human female…right?”

He thought again and said “I wonder how much the brain chemistry is transferrable. We both have enough in the way of shared experiences, I could isolate context. I could analyze that input and the differences, as well as what it feels like to you to have an orgasm. How could I not want to try that? Maybe you can be the Turian male and I can be the human female…we have the templates for that, at least. We can start by just…swapping the input.”

She seized up entirely mentally with the overload and said a stilted “Brain just melted.”

His mouth plates moved to tug at her earlobe, his hands to cup her breasts as he said “Mine just got started. I’ve seen and felt you come so many times, what if you could…give me what happens inside your mind and body, what if I could give you what happens in mine?”

His hands moved over her body, his voice at her ear “What if you could extend your claw and slice the clothes from the woman you loved, felt the surge of heightened senses?” He lingeringly cut off her shirt, her bra, the wickedly sharp inner curve of a talon angled to the light and glinting. Careful, controlled, not a mark on her skin.

“What if you could feel in your rough and oversized palms the impossibly delicate skin of that woman?” He cupped bare breasts in his hands, lifting them and pressing up and in, thumbs over exposed nipples until they hardened, sweeps of his thumb over the curves and cleavage he created.

“What if you could hear her moans, catch the ever changing mosaic of the scent of her skin, her hair, her body? What if you knew what most of those nuances meant, but you still don’t know all of her and your senses strained in each moment to define her meaning, ever changing. Things she doesn’t know about herself, things even she can’t explain. It falls to you to translate this woman who cannot speak the language of her own scent. You’ve learned what it means for her to be tired, frightened, sad, joyful, desiring…until the blends of her moods and meaning come naturally to you, and when you do not know what is in her mind, in her heart, you must taste and watch and learn. She will not tell you for she does not know.” He gently lifted her hips and slowly opened the fastenings of her pants, adept fingertips and not claws, sliding them down and off, arranging her body with spread thighs over his.

“What if the relaxing give of her muscles and skin as you carefully caressed her made your plates spread like the coming of the dawn after long night, the constant, aching need for her allowed to run like a wild thing of teeth and claw and plate. Every moment you know you could hurt her. Sometimes she smells of fear and pain and she knows it, uses it, knows you, draws poison from your mind by allowing your claws to sink into her flesh, unheeding, unfeeling, uncaring. With all of your ability to sense nuance, you are a simple creature whose stresses and strains are always eased through entry into the refuge of her body. With all of her complications you know you cannot grant the same to her, but you can tear all though from her mind, deny her access to anything else but the feel of your body. You can drive thought from her, drive breath from her, drive moans and screams until she
is limp and panting and she cannot speak your name.” From seized brain it was not far to limp and panting and unable to speak, with his teeth at her throat, tongue gliding over her skin between gaps in his words. He widened the spread of his thighs and therefore hers, tipping her back more fully against his chest, the warm and revealing intimacy of his words accompanied by driven thought, driven moans and driven breath. They both watched as one of his hands caressed her breast, plate against warm caramel skin, the other hand moving on her clit with brushes of his thumb, another finger circling in spirals and sinking inside, drawing back out, slow and prophetic evocation of pleasure that built along with his words. Sweat formed in beads and her muscles strained, her hands dug nails into the plate at the sides of his thighs and her head thrashed until he turned her head aside with the press of his own and licked at the bend of her arched throat, biting down until the points of distinct pain and his growl at her throat spun her into closed eyes and flooding bliss with a pulsing cadence to her cry.

He lifted and turned her, holding her up with his hands under her hips. He guided her onto his cock, down to take him inside, the slick hard twist of him entering a few inches. He held her there, down further, pulled her back up bodily. He repeated that as he bent his mouth to her breasts, his tongue coiling around nipples and tugging. He slowly lowered her by stages and retreats, kisses and growls onto his full length, her knees to either side of his hips. He leaned her back against his thighs and watched her, saying with hoarse breath “With your scent on her skin and her blood on your tongue, your body inside hers every part of you becomes meaningless except in the context of where they touch her.”

His words faded and panting breath, harsh groans and both of them focusing on the twisting grind of her hips moving in limited but deliciously effective slides and circles. Full Reverie brought with its advent the thought that nothing could be as good as this, but then the undercurrent of possibility and his willingness to give her everything, take everything. It lit curious flickers of possibly knowing things about her lover that she desperately wanted to know now, despite oddity or effort.

That it inspired his voice describing how it felt was enough, but he was very persuasive…and she would happily find that waterfall.

She said in soft concession “You’re convincing.”

His laugh was soft and appreciative, ending in a growl evoked from another twist of her hips.

He pulled her forward, her head against his shoulder, his hands over her back “I will try to give you everything I feel. I would like to find one particular thing in my body to give to you, something I could spend thousands of words trying to describe and still be unable to capture it. I was raised as a Turian, for a Turian life, told the shape I must hold. This precious woman in my arms is the only force strong enough to break the mold of that expectation, and the only giving softness I have ever experienced. The only person who changed the shape of her life, her body, her mind, for me. The only freedom I have been able to define for myself springs from the mind of this small creature. In my Turian body was once the surging need to bond to her. Every moment. Present like the beating of my heart. I did not know what it was the first time it happened. I could tell you it is like blood on the tongue and that is the root and bloom of the truth, but you would not understand. Blood on your tongue does not sing as it does for me. At first the ache and need to bond burned and tore at me, the need to be an adult, seek that form I was destined to hold. It seemed a loss to be borne, something missed. This creature in my arms however had also taught me sacrifice. I realized something as time passed, as we danced before our mother. Every day you bore my scent, welcomed my body, held my fears in your hand. I realized Turians are in fact fickle compared to this. No Turian would stand beside another without a reciprocated bond. No Turian has. So I would be that Turian. Time passed and faith grew in freedom, in refuge, in love, in desire, and the fear of not bonding faded. The urge to bond, already new, merged into something else with, the scent of you both in my nose, one hand
on midnight, one hand on green. Without this weak, willing, welcoming, breathless, voiceless treasure in my arms, I would have stopped growing to fit a mold and thought it destiny.”

Whirling in all the sensation and revelation she said softly “You said…our mother…”

He said softly “She is our mother. She said so, Kerim. You have taught me the power of saying so. I believe I can try to find the brain chemistry…to show you…but I can’t explain…I don’t understand myself. I am bonded to you both. It is like blood on the tongue. Three distinct things in our veins, one taste in my mouth, all three mingled and inseparable. I believed I would not bond, that it was about choice, having been told that over and over by elder Turians. Odd, that it was treated as somehow both destiny and choice, but now I think I understand. By my insistence on not choosing one, savoring the mixed blood of three…that was my choice. The urge to bond to one or the other began as dissonance, something I would not do, and slowly turned into something inevitable in retrospect. I had said so and it became so. No Turian would keep a sexual partner for this long unless they were bonded. We move on in our childhoods, try new people and are always seeking the next best…but my knowledge of there being no next best, no seeking in me …I have no idea what biological process took place, but I believe at some point my body knew what choice I’d made. My mind knew that choice and my body knew of mingled blood on my tongue, accepted as a new whole. I doubt any Turian scholar would call it a bond…but I am a proud deviant. It appears biology simply gave up out of exhaustion and accepted my insistence. I asked Mordin very recently. He ran some tests. I appear to be uniquely bonded to a creature that appears biologically to be part Drell and part Human.”

She said softly, unable to think anything but that he was very pleased with himself from the sound of his voice and his desire to share it by putting the experience directly into her mind “I always knew you were stubborn.”

He pressed his crest to hers and said “You started it. I believe it started when you put light on three wrists.”

She thought of David’s fractal light and his creation of her cathedral, of Vitkiv’s inability to get into her mind and Yahlis’s success, said softly “Symbols matter.”

He said tentatively “I really did not know what was going on, not sure I ever will. Bonding is dynamic, and it will go on for my lifetime. Part of the deviance is that a Turian should never bond to one who is unwilling or ignorant. That part of the law becomes tricky because I was unwilling and ignorant myself of the process…technically, but I am enjoying the result. I am calm. Sure. No more potential for questions or feeling of potential losses. I waited to see if sex or Reverie felt different to any of us, but nobody mentioned it. I could not detect a difference, but keep in mind we had all been separated and injured. Being able to touch you again always felt like more than before. It still does, may always for my lifetime. Granted you pass out and there is always a lot you are missing…but also technically I broke my word. I do think I was right though. Paradoxically I do not think I could love either of you more in each moment, then I do when there are more moments.”

She asked “When did you start to think you were bonded?”

He told her “I felt the undefined urges to choose to bond with both of you often with the three of us together. New to me as a sensation, but amid panic, horror, death…hard to separate out from the love, devotion and lust that were overwhelming me. I think I chose on the night before the Collector base, looking at light on wrists, thinking of how you put that there in the world for everyone else to see, and how I could do the same, how my reality could reflect my chosen desires. I wished to defy death to express it. Through our injuries, separation, it was all difficult to track. The urge to bond disappeared and I thought I had passed some window of opportunity. The main difference is that my
focus was fully and only on you two. I had few opportunities to discover that, and not that I meet many attractive people in my contacts with Palaven, but there were a few people that should have evoked some sort of interest in me. I would have an intellectual dissonant moment of wondering why someone so theoretically attractive sparked absolutely nothing in me. Even the capacity for interest was gone. On experiment, revisiting the memories of prior lovers was distasteful, not erotic. That might be normal anyway while in love, so it took me a long time to gather up pieces that could look like other motivations and emotions and put them together. I imagine...Turian to Turian conversion of bond is an easier process...and Turian to combined Human and Drell bond is more complicated and time consuming. I suspected most during my discussions with Thane about your wrist binding. I realized then that I did not need a ceremony for myself, it was already done. I had no doubts you were both entirely mine and that I was irrevocably yours. I knew I was bonded the same way I knew I had an arm. I had taken it entirely for granted. I had no need to express it to others or reinforce it. It could not be more fully expressed than it already was. You had claimed us, made us equals with our wrists, I had chosen the taste of blood on my tongue. Thane insisted on the three of us together and I knew that was true, did not need it told further, but urged that he have it told in his way. I wanted to give him something to reflect what I already had. I could give you to him because you were in fact mine more than you were his yet. I took the opportunity to spend some time apart from you both, contemplate. For the first time with you both back together and able to touch each other, no interfering panic or worry, the setting was of your shared happiness being my happiness. I missed you both, but I tried to consider finding someone else, anyone else, that sparked any interest in touching them. I failed. I revisited and tried to evoke the feeling of wanting to bond and I only had the resounding internal insistence that it was done. It had become impossible to be hungry for something already sated. I asked Mordin’s advice then.”

She asked curiously “What is the penalty for bonding to the unwilling?”

He said gravely “To be made bare faced.”

Him risking being made bare faced was not something new. Knowing he was bonded made a difference. Casually as he was taking it, she understood that was necessary because of the singularity and undefined cause and seeming lack of external consequence and how much he had personally benefitted. He might have kept it to himself entirely except for the contemplation of sharing experience directly. Thousands of words would never serve. She could spend thousands of words explaining how he made her feel and never get near it. It shifted lighting and landscapes and he was right, she couldn’t love him more, but it did make a difference. Awash in Reverie they were all comforting and intimate differences, warmth and belonging. Not more warmth and belonging, but like his fantasy of being able to directly give her his body and mind, a different facet, a different perspective to add to the ones she already had. Thane, with all his alteration and defiance of his fate and choice, would be pleased. Proud. Grateful as she was that Garrus had forged his own peace and path.

She said in a formal tone...or as formal as one can manage while part of one’s mouth is mashed into plate “Garrus, will you retroactively and against your will and knowledge bond to me and our wrist-bound Drell mate? You are pardoned any social stigma and encouraged to keep up this sort of deviant behavior.”

He said formally “I did. I do. I will.”
Chapter 35

David set up the interface for the Eden Prime site, Garrus and Jane got in some time in the simulator after Garrus got a much abbreviated rundown of basics. Garrus wanted to get to the planning stages, all business.

They suited up with their preferred gear and preferred weapons, just the two of them entering from the best entrance route for stealth. She could cloak, but Garrus couldn’t. Liara would be going with them.

They walked through the space, got familiar with the landscape and then asked David to reset their entrance and attempt to populate the area with hostiles.

The scenario blinked and then reset. They walked down the main path they had familiarized themselves with before and within seconds there was a blinding light and the scenario reset.

Jane said blankly “What the hell just happened? Glitch?”

David said calmly “No. There were explosives placed under that path and your passage detonated them.”

Garrus started to laugh. Jane said “Okay.”

David said lightly “You did not specify that the hostiles be stupid.”

Garrus laughed harder. Jane said “So it’s going to be a long day.”

Garrus shrugged “At least there’s no actual physical feedback on being exploded. Thanks David.”

David replied “You are welcome. Upon fatality I will reset. Although negative feedback is regarded to be a deterrent, in this case it would be counterproductive.”

Garrus nodded and said sagely “I imagine because it’s going to happen a lot.”

David answered “Unless you specify that the hostiles be stupid, yes.”

Jane drew in a deep breath and said “Okay. Starting over.”

Garrus fiddled for a bit with visor specs with David’s assistance, clarifying whether or not his real visor would have picked up the explosives. David discussed his method of using layers of loosely packed stone that would shield the explosive from detection and helpfully behave as shrapnel.

Jane asked calmly “Why would someone booby trap an entrance to that extreme? Aren’t there kids around here?”

Garrus answered before David could “If they’re indoctrinated, no. Everyone will work together and behave, and they can agree on this level of trap.”

David said with emphasis “And it worked.”

Jane sighed “And it worked. Okay.”

They found maybe one out of three traps. They died…a lot. Jane was grateful explosions didn’t do retinal damage or cause pain.
They stood still by the side of a modular building, trying to figure out whether or not the door, the threshold or the room itself was trapped, as she said “Elevators have always bothered the hell out of me. I think of the things that have struck fear in my heart more often than not, it’s been getting in a damned elevator, and here’s my proof, right here. Anybody as smart as David should have trapped those damned things and killed me easily. And who was the person who came closest to killing me in an elevator? David.”

David said solemnly “I apologize for that, Commander Shepard.”

Jane said automatically “It is fine. EDI tried to kill me too, once. Just not with an elevator. As you’ve said, negative feedback is a useful deterrent. I have a wish, Garrus, to never get on another elevator.”

Garrus examined the door and said absently “Shepard, you can come back from the dead, but you know and I know…we’re getting on more damned elevators. And now I’m going to be terrified.” He examined for a little longer and said “Seems clean, but it is possible the room itself is set to blow. Fire source possible. Back draft. Picking up accelerant traces.”

She asked “Could that be from the other fifteen things that have exploded? Can we open it remotely, out of the potential blast?”

He said slowly “Door’s intended to open to organic biometrics so we can’t just throw a rock at it.”

She said thoughtfully “We’ve killed a few guys. Can we drag their bodies over and maybe…lean them up so they fall against the door while we run like hell?”

Garrus blinked and said “We’ll have to rig some sort of timer. Running like hell is a bad plan.”

She said flippantly “Then why don’t we just put his hand on a looong stick…”

Garrus said, trying not to laugh “Maybe a pulley system…”

She sighed and said “I don’t believe I’ve properly appreciated that most of the missions we’ve undertaken, though daring, have had fairly evenly spaced stupid people to shoot.”

Garrus said, distracted “I appreciate the run through. We should up our game and David has some good points. I’d like to develop some simple policies and countermeasures to these obstacles. We haven’t focused enough on traps.”

David said helpfully “I have developed solutions to each of the obstacles placed using either your available equipment or improvised measures from your environment. Beyond that, I would be happy to discuss with you designs suitable for utilization in the field.”

Garrus said with obvious pleasure at the challenge “Don’t ruin it, David, I’m having fun.”

Jane sat down on a verified safe patch and tried not to touch anything.

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Prep for Eden Prime kept Garrus blissfully busy and energized about the possibilities of the interface, having discussions with David about how well simulated practice impacted the physical body. David had informed them that their physical bodies were chemically paralyzed similar to but more completely than the way it would be while dreaming to keep from having physical reactions. Garrus didn’t have time…at least in front of her…to have extended discussions regarding interface sexy times. She was grateful to be spared those conversations. She vaguely thought David would be terribly helpful and that made it worse.
Garrus and David designed a shooting simulator and Garrus was himself hooked.

He took time to help EDI learn to dance, in the simulated Vakarian Madlis that David had provided for him. EDI wore her body and the dress, Jane happily but weirdly in attendance. Surreal and joyous were becoming two words nearly inextricable from each other.

They needed more pods, a lot more. David gave her and Garrus his absolute best, and she was also certain it took up not terribly much of his time. He enjoyed it, and he’d be happy to guide other crew members in their own interests. She imagined ultimately if she called shore leave, nobody would leave the ship and pod attendance could become contentious.

She planned a trip back to Rannoch with Legion’s assurance that the pods could in fact be installed anywhere and inside private cabins would be feasible for anybody willing to provide the space.

Everyone would be willing, she was sure. She’d have three put in her cabin.

Coming up on Eden Prime, though, ideas of fun screeched to a sudden halt. She was out of her pod and on the CIC as they arrived, but their proposed orbit was obstructed.

Joker was in his pod and she’d heard his voice “Hey…Commander…this is…”

She looked and thought maybe they’d just found…many…of the indoctrinated vessels that had gone missing. They were in orbit. Turian, Alliance, Batarian…

Lots of Turian vessels.

She asked Garrus to call up the view while he was in the interface, and he took only moments to step out of his pod, moving to stand next to her, at the projected screen, lit up on a planetary scale, what looked like dozens of vessels geosynchronous over Eden Prime’s main colony, where Nihlus had died, the last words she’d hear him speak in person being “I move faster on my own.”

She had never forgotten his casual and dismissive words as it struck her that needing to move fast or move on his own was odd…considering he was supposed to be observing her…and that it had cost him his life. Perhaps if he’d stayed with her, they’d have found Saren together. Perhaps Saren would have ended that day.

Nihlus had lost it all because he had to play independent Spectre who couldn’t be bothered to move at a human pace.

But Saren wasn’t the real problem, was he?

Sovereign and his kin had no trouble finding new puppets. Ships full of puppets. With Sovereign gone and Saren gone, the Turian casualties multiplied.

She whispered out of caution and a preternatural chill down her spine “How’s our stealth going to hold?”

Joker’s voice answered “I’m heading to the pole. Hopefully nobody’s looking out a window. Either way, we’re still the best ship and I’m on it. David’s on it. EDI’s on it. Legion’s on it. We should be able to stay undetected.”

She looked at Garrus, who was scanning the ship IDs as they were confirmed. She said “We could call in Palaven. We could call in the Alliance. But I think if we do that…”

Garrus said with strain “If we do that, they’re all dead. Indoctrination law doesn’t extend pardons.
This is treason, conspiracy and piracy…”

Jane said softly “What if we could convince them they could get their ships back?”

Garrus closed his eyes and said “I don’t know. Too much of a risk. You and I know there are no grounds for negotiation. Once they become aware of our presence the timer is on for newly arrived ships, and it could quickly tip in balance. It could be days until enough ships get here to make a difference, and they’re not stealthed. Could result in massive casualties on either side, and I think Palaven would like to recover personnel and ships…but they would also not be averse to blowing them out of the sky on the grounds of treason. There are growing factions more interested in preserving those who have not been indoctrinated than salvaging those who have been. It’s part of the Turian soul. Treason under any circumstances is not likely to be forgiven, and I’d be…hesitant to call them in for assistance and expect them to follow our interests in recovery. This isn’t someone caught in a scan. This is hardened, organized opposition. I know people on every ship named so far. Good men. Good women. A lot of Vakarians are in those vessels. Yeah, I know some assholes there…”

Asshole shouldn’t be a death sentence.

She made a quick decision and said “Okay. So we’re on our own. Calling in more ships results in ship to ship battle, high casualties. We have surprise, we have stealth, we can do the same thing we did at Cerberus. Plus, I want whatever it is that is on that planet that has provoked this level of interest. If the Reapers want it, I want it more, and I don’t want it behind some black ops curtain on Palaven or Earth.”

Shepard hit her Omni Tool “Kasumi, I need you. We’re at Eden Prime. Ships, multiple ships, all reported missing, many Turian, obstructing the mission site. I need to know who they are, what they’ve been doing, and in particular, how they communicate with each other.”

Kasumi said in acknowledgement “I’m on it.”

Shepard spoke to the CIC in general and said “I need solutions. Monitor communications. I need to be able to duplicate them. David, let me know the odds of taking a single shuttlecraft, overriding landing protocols on each ship one at a time without detection and taking down each ship with a small team, leaving it in an undetected holding pattern with the goal of undetected infiltration and not obliteration. I need every advantage. I need comm, I need atmospheric control so we can use the same gas we did at Cerberus hopefully and spare lives. I need to know if adjustments can be made for Turian and Batarian physiology. Each ship’s complement has to stay down until all ships are down. We don’t have enough people to run multiple raids, so a three-person team in fast succession, Garrus and Legion and I will go in. We can’t even approach what’s going on the ground until we wipe out air support without them knowing it is missing. While I’m busy taking down ships I need someone here to get me an action plan and update me on intel of what’s on the ground. If the single shuttlecraft moves undetected, we can start taking groups of those who are indoctrinated under security back to Omega. Aria will let us in. Dr. Abrams can get them surgery. Let them make choices once they’ve survived the surgery. I’ll return Turian ships to Palaven without crew, I’ll do the same for Alliance ships but we will keep any Batarian vessels for our own use. I’m out for the next nine hours. I need answers then, and we need to go in eleven hours.”

She figured someone else would have a better idea soon, but she was going to have to prep for this one, and the only prep available was sleep.

She drew Garrus aside and said “Legion doesn’t need downtime, you need four hours, I need eight. I need sleep. Prep however you want, but I need you to get the solid four hours before we hit the first ship.”
She turned to head out, considering asking for Dr. Chakwas’s help, but thinking maybe she could meditate into rest. She had a discretionary stash of things to help her sleep and she started trying to consciously calm her breathing after the adrenaline rush. Time to test what Thane had taught her.

Garrus followed her.

She didn’t head to the Med Bay because problem solved. It appeared his prep would be ensuring she slept.

She had a smile on her way up in the elevator and as they looked at each other sideways, she could see he had one too. When the elevator door opened he picked her up and turned her horizontal, carried her into the room under one arm like a duffel bag and dropped her unceremoniously on the bed like the proverbial baggage. While she was laughing he took the time to remove clothes and his visor, which was fortunately very sturdy, considering how often it got thrown around the room after he’d forgotten to remove it. She wondered if he’d recorded…

She worked on her own clothes efficiently and said “How many recordings of us do you have on your visor?”

He turned his head and smiled at her, then went back to what he was doing. He said “That’s a long conversation and we do not have much time. But…none of you. Thane encouraged me to record.”

She gaped and then shimmied out of her pants “Why didn’t you ask me?”

He sat down on the edge of the bed to get his footwear off “Because you did not want a recording.”

She was done getting rid of her clothes, but he was still working on the bits that snagged and all the technical doodads he carried at all times. She got up on her knees and moved over to him, pressed her body against his back and said “I hope you are aware I appreciate your chivalry.”

She kissed up and then down the edges of the overlapping plates lining the back of his neck, teeth along the edges, tongue dampening the curves. He dropped the final piece of whatever it was he needed to detach, flexed his neck and groaned. She kept that up, careful to not get her tongue pinched as he moved his neck to meet her mouth. Her hands moved to stroke along his waist and he shifted from groaning to a deep contented rumbling purr. It took him a while to speak in response, but when he did he said “Chivalry is a bizarre word. You used it back on the SR1 and I looked it up and its historical context. As though I were being kind somehow by not being irredeemable scum I should shoot on sight.”

She considered while her hands roamed over him and then said as she ran her cheekbones over the same spots on his neck to further pleasure sounds “Hm…well…Thane has pointed out that my expectations of males are not the highest. But you’re changing that. To be fair my expectations of women are also not that high. Thane has perfect recall of each moment. You have asked him, so it must have come up that you would prefer some of your own recall. I have no recall other than what is in my head and no…I would not record you either without your consent…and I would never ask …”

He said bluntly “Your expectations of males are in fact nonexistent. It’s a little insulting to have my standards compared to human males. With the ability to record you showed no interest, so neither did I.”

She nodded sympathetically and said “If it helps…I did not think you had recorded…but if you had…”
He sighed and said lightly “Kerim, if I had…you would forgive me and behave as though it were entirely my prerogative, regardless of what you thought. You would at least superficially think my way because in your mind is the word chivalry…not mine.”

She scratched harder with her nails, considering the Turian-human conundrum of preference and permission. She asked “What word is in your mind?”

He considered as he flexed and stretched under her fingertips “There is a Turian word; hetak. There is a human word; receptive.”

She asked “What does hetak mean?”

With his head tilted to the side she focused on using her mouth and hands, listening and feeling his deep rumble through her lips and her fingertips. He said “Hetak is service. Not like doing a job. Service of a lifetime. Service of assigned role. Service to family, service to military, service to mate. For a male Turian, hetak is determined by your Avah first, your commanding officer second and then your mate, your new Avah. A male Turian does not serve himself, it is for the Avah to learn their needs and provide for them. A commanding officer must know what must be developed in a male Turian, for them to find their place. Our mother taught me hetak. She is an imperious woman, Kerim. Loving and knowing and imperious. Through every stage of my life I was told exactly what to do, what my place was, what my service was to be. I was spoiled in a Turian sense by her love and knowledge. She did encourage me to find my own way within the wide boundaries she set. She knew me, loved me and after her definition of hetak, that of my commanding officers was too confining, lacking love and knowledge. They should have led but were instead selfish, did not provide for the hetak of others. They failed in their roles. And then I met you. My hetak was lost, because what you are, Kerim, is receptive. Dangerously, frighteningly receptive.”

She smiled against his skin, paused and then continued. His hands were stretched out and she noticed that his talons extended and then withdrew, a Turian stretch. He said slowly “You did not negotiate or dictate. We shared a common, passionate goal. I believed at first I was being tested. Which was of course true, but not in the way I imagined. You spoke with Ashley about poetry. You spoke with Wrex about the genophage. You spoke to me about Saleon and my father. Your face, always receptive, your eyes, encouraging or neutral. Never condemnation. You seemed to always accept or possibly agree with everyone’s view of the galaxy. You drew them out, gained their confidence, gained their loyalty. By the time I left your service I had not worked up the courage to ask you a personal question. Not one. Because you are dangerously, frighteningly receptive. You know the right answer. You judge and you classify and you condemn behind the guise of agreement and neutrality and you do not let it reach your face. You did not like Ashley’s racism. You disliked Wrex’s callous and reckless behavior. At first I thought you dangerously tolerant until I saw Wrex restrained. In that moment I saw the potential for water to turn to ice, perfectly capturing his form, that you had postulated it, predicted it, and shown no sign that you would freeze instantly, revealing every detail of his psyche, solid and damning. Wrex’s insubordination was extreme and your response was nearly Turian, so I missed some of the finer aspects of how your nature would respond to me. It took me longer to realize that you listened but did not often speak. It wasn’t until after Sidonis that I saw that you always knew the right answer. You asked me carefully about my attitude regarding Saleon and regarding Sidonis. You let me kill them. You knew I was wrong to do it.” His last words were flint, brittle and cold.

She didn’t try to argue. She did, she had, and there were layers of meaning in there, layers she’d learned about herself and him since then, calculations and motivations wrapped up in inclination and command necessity. She had needed him focused. He had needed to do it with single minded chosen blindness. She had understood the needs of wrath and anger…but he was right. If it hadn’t been an absolute emergency, if she hadn’t needed him so badly, if she’d had more time…she would have
tried to find a way to draw his Spirit to the conclusion hers had made. She had honored his will instead, knowing she would gain his loyalty at the cost she was willing to pay at the time, the life of someone who dearly deserved death, even if it would do Garrus no personal good. Especially if it made him feel he owed her. She vaguely wondered if his wrath had contributed to her sense of immaturity and greenness in him, had made her not take that step into the Mako, had in fact influenced her willingness to touch him or reach out to him. It must have occurred to him as well. It had cost them both. She said softly in acknowledgement, her hands moving on him “You were wrong to do it. I was wrong to transmute murder to loyalty.”

His voice retained his cold, but it was not directed at her “Given some power, I created my own hetak. You gave me enough power for you to learn my nature, but not expose your own. I was far into being your lover before I realized…just as with Wrex…you would allow me every arrogance and demand…until you would not. I would get no warning. And then I realized…it is always a test. It will always be a test. You will judge and then instantly forgive and I will never know what counts against me until the day you freeze and I am faced with my perfectly rendered form in frozen clarity. I occasionally long for the black and white I was raised to understand, your deceptive, receptive gray has given me a depth of caution I never thought possible.”

She said with his gravity “Good thing you didn’t ask me to let you kill someone else.”

His laughter was soft, he said “Some of us do learn, Shepard.”

She said gently “I’d let you kill six, seven more people, as long as we space them out once a year…”

He said lightly “I’ll submit a list…”

She asked gently “So why don’t I like recordings?” She wasn’t sure she knew herself, but did know she had an aversion to the idea.

He was willing to talk as long as she did not stop what she was doing. Her breasts were warm, nipples finding a delicious spot against his hide and edges of plate of his back, hands enjoying the tremor of his waist. He answered “I do not necessarily know, Kerim. The simple answer could be that it has been a historical human practice for someone to record another during sex, against their knowledge, and publish that information for status or to humiliate. But you trust me, you would know that would not be why. You might perhaps understand that I would record you because you are beautiful and the memories we create are cherished. I think perhaps it lays more in the creation of a separate object, the recording itself, with the potential of independent interpretation and possibly malevolence. Not just because you are Commander Shepard, but because you are human, female. It became clearer in motive when Thane risked his life to eliminate recordings of you. He not only risked his life, but would not divulge a moment of what happened under torture, I am certain of it. Neither of you will tell me, but I have the knowledge that he would have let you kill him just for seeing it. I accept that my experience of not knowing is better than either of your experiences of knowing, and I will not ask, do not wish to know. You have had your body, your mind, picked apart molecule by molecule, thought by thought. The less possibility for exposure of your inner self to anyone other than who you choose…I respect that. For Thane and I…sex is more mundane…I don’t have a word for it in English, mundane does not sound right. The Turian word would be ironically like the word for drinking water. Slaking thirst can be casual but an accepted necessity, nobody need justify or explain their need to drink. We drink before others, it is not hidden or private, not a vulnerable part of an individual spirit but something galactically shared. Thane can recall every moment together. He wishes for me to be able to do the same, to be able to somehow square that ability of his with an ability of mine so we could both drink from the same well. He comforts himself with the reiteration of moments that have meaning to him. It is to us the act of drinking, taking a canteen of water away from the source, to sip later, to remember. But you…sex for you, with you is
not mundane, it is…sacred. You value each moment as unique and not to be repeated or revisited, consumed like something holy offered as a sacrifice, burned completely for the smoke. To take away water from that private spring…to drink alone…it does not extend a pleasure for you, but it would be violation of that sacred place. I don’t pretend to understand, but I do know my revisiting it, separate from you would somehow diminish its unique quality you wish to experience, likely wish to inspire, do inspire…you would allow me to record you…but you would know it was wrong. And you would never tell me so. You would allow me to make any number of mistakes and never tell me so. Your Spiritual life is tied up in silence and sex.”

She said softly “Maybe I think it is right for you but wrong for me.”

With that he turned with a brittle laugh, caught her body under his and pressed her back, stared at her with his hetak-bound eyes and said “You’re a better liar than Thane. He said once that he once believed himself to be a sacred liar in the service of the Gods, until he met you. Now he knows he is a thoroughly mundane liar, but that your lies will always be sacred.”

She was inordinately pleased. Not that she made Garrus crazy, that obviously couldn’t be helped, but that he was like a sailor in love with the sea, saw churning waves and icebergs where Thane saw fire. A sailor from a species that could not swim.

He was a liar as well. He did want to know. He would choose he did not because that was what she wanted, and it was unreasonable, and it was hetak. He wanted to remember how beautiful she was to him and she would not allow it in recordings, and that was hetak.

She had given him a path and he had chosen to follow it, and it was uniquely human and Turian in turns and bends.

She gave him appropriately neutral eyes with a knowing, loving smile.

Thane knew everything there was to know about her, more than she knew about herself, and he still loved her. Garrus knew more about her than she knew from the expressions of her skin and actions, and accepted that what he did not know belonged to her and was not his to take. They would both guard her with plate and venom and passion.

Odd that taking down a few dozen ships together seemed like an average challenge, but it did, and she didn’t doubt they would win through.

Just another day as an iceberg on fire.

She pulled his mouth down to hers, as always not enough time to understand or change or fix, same as deciding that he would be able to kill Saleon or Sidonis. She made her imperfect choices, he followed and made sure the consequences of her folly were lessened by benefit of his rifle and his sheltering arms.

It was going to work the way it had worked, and it worked well.

She murmured against his mouth “Garrus Vakarian, I love you. I think I could not love you more, and then there are more moments.”

His hands spread devotion over her skin, his mouth pressed words and love into her heart and mind, his body pressed pleasure and belonging into hers. She slept those eight hours, with his words in her dreams, swirling visions of ships at sea in spinning frozen stained glass and all the beauty of their lives together swept up in his hands and offered as a bouquet of the moment, thrown with wide arms and gusting wind into the water.
Strangely enough when she presented herself for command, Reverie still in her blood and the press of his mouth still warm on hers, she wasn’t inundated with people having much better ideas than she had had. They provided her with the method. Since Bahak she’d rarely formulated a plan that went as proposed, someone had stepped in, so she didn’t doubt anybody with a better idea would speak up.

They’d had nine hours to test it out and formulate, and she was given a solemn batch of stims by Dr. Chakwas with a significant look.

She had to go. She set a tentative goal of staying up for approximately 3 days, which was doable even in recent memory. The issue was…how quickly could they take advantage of having the ships and then make the push on the ground? She’d need to rest there also and having it all hang fire on her ability to be conscious…

Monitoring of communication had revealed not terribly much in terms of communication between the ships, which was good and bad. There was no communication to keep up or duplicate, but there was no communication to decrypt and determine what was going on. They only had eight hours of sample. They had to assume that the indoctrinated personnel were there to recover the Prothean jackpot, whatever that was. EDI had spoken to Tim about it, who professed ignorance.

There was industrious digging on the ground and an exposed pod from all they could gather, but absolutely no information on what to do with that pod. Something about indecipherable recordings. Eden Prime was strip mined from its previous appearance, the mockup of what it had looked like, even grounded and with memories of explosions and traps now obsolete in the course of the passing hours.

Alliance might show up at any time, though obviously it still took a lot to get people to drag themselves physically out to Terminus.

Time to roll the dice.

They loaded into the shuttle and got underway, the overrides on individual ships being coordinated between the geniuses back on the ship. They had seconds for tolerances and had to hover and hope it would work…

Fortunately it went easily, Turian ship specs holding true without radical modification. They were in the bay and to the ventilation systems undetected, the first ship was down in 42 minutes. No fatalities among the crew. Garrus’s eyes lingered slightly longer on those fallen bodies with Vakarian paint.

With travel time between takeovers, 27 ships to go. With the first ship down, shuttles on that ship were left to Normandy security personnel, who were fully suited and armed with lots of ways to deliver sleepy gas. They started to ferry bodies to Omega.

With direct access to the first ship’s computer and comm history, they decided rather than try to communicate any level of distress as a trap, they’d continue on with the same pattern, as EDI and David and Legion sorted through the data, seeing if they could help refine their approach. They could rig the bays without assistance, and people on alert was the last thing they wanted.

Back into the shuttle, adrenaline high and hope soaring, they continued their delicate leap frog.

It was the ninth ship that fucked them up. Seventeen hours into the operation, nonstop. They had peace, radio silence, and they were getting the hang of the layout of the Turian ships, deciding to
take them all out first. Unfortunately…this one had at least one Turian on it that was still functioning and either managed to get suited or was suited when they started. The Turian had headed to the ship’s CIC and was attempting to communicate with the ground and with other ships. David was blocking it and attempting to respond as a decoy, but the Turian, a female, had given up quickly. Shepard was trying to play catch up and by the time they made it to the CIC to attempt to isolate her, she was gone.

Garrus said tersely “She could sabotage the shuttle or take it, take another.”

Shepard turned back to Garrus and Legion and said “Garrus, see what you can do from here. David, keep the bay frozen. Garrus, help with the shuttle bay, shut down comm from here. Legion and I will…go play hide and seek. Find her.”

Garrus’s jaw worked as though chewing on other possibilities, but said stoically “I’m on it.”

They hadn’t been screwing around with traps for nothing, so although she left the CIC, some feeling at the back of her neck made her think and move as though every square foot of this entire ship was trapped, because with an indoctrinated Turian running around…self preservation was not necessarily her highest priority.

She did play hide and seek, but changed her target area, motioned Legion aside at the exit, ducking before heading into the elevator. She kept her eyes on the room and saw the not so stupid Turian woman detach from the side of the CIC behind a console with…a fucking rocket launcher because…of course.

Jane shot her in the back as she was bringing the rocket launcher around, she never got it aimed at Garrus, but she did get it off before she fell, and there was a massive sucking hole in the canopy. This wasn’t Jane’s first massive sucking hole in a canopy and that wasn’t the most fun, but Garrus was at least unharmed. The shields around the CIC isolated the area of trouble and once again she hoped nobody…looked out the window at the streaming loss of random objects

Garrus had turned and she couldn’t see his expression because helmet, but she did hear “You used me as bait?” shouted over the comm.

She said calmly “Yes. Let’s get to the shuttle. More fun to be had. I’m definitely awake now.”

Garrus stepped carefully through the vacuum over to where they were standing. They avoided the elevator because she was not about to get into one right about now and took the maintenance stairs down to the shuttle bay. Yeah, it was a few extra minutes.

Garrus was quiet until she reached out her hand to active the shuttle doors and Garrus grabbed her hand, swerved it away.

She looked at him and he said “Rigged to explode.”

She breathed in a deep sigh, looked at her hand in thanks and said “Okay. So. Let’s take another shuttle. Maybe leave a note.”

Garrus nodded and said with a heavy sigh “Nineteen to go.”
Chapter 36

The operation became a painful blur, the Turian ships that made up the majority were slowly falling. Hours streamed by and she ate, drank, took stims, developed the nausea and blurriness of having a body forcibly overridden, cannibalizing energy sources and drowning in its own insistence to rest. She was suited; she could not dig her fingernails into her palms. She bit her tongue for the focus. She maintained discipline and did not take her helmet off. She didn’t want Garrus to smell exhaustion, and she force fed energy through her voice, turning her microphone off to test before she spoke, to cough and clear her throat, get the striations of fatigue out like smoothing fabric.

She took time to remind herself that this was not the worst time she’d spent in a suit. There was no thresher venom, there was air. She’d be fine.

Eventually all the accumulated pain kept her awake. She’d wrenched and strained joints and muscles, added some painkiller to the mix once the level of pain meant she’d definitely be awake, so it wouldn’t result in getting the fatigue out of her voice by screaming. She itched. She smelled rank, suspense sweat soaking and humidifying her suit, the unpleasant drag and drift of fabric across oversensitized skin, developing blisters and rashes.

These were all tiny concerns next to the fact that they were saving dozens of lives potentially with each ship. The Turian that had shot at Garrus had been a Vakarian. She wondered if he knew her.

But his head was still on and functioning.

She continued this game of countering mundane visceral misery, attempted balance with the intellectual insistence that it was going to be fine. She had lots of practice. She’d drift and slip occasionally into neutral out of fatigue, but she’d rev and get in gear when and as necessary.

About forty two hours in they had hit the eighteenth ship.

It was bound to happen, someone had physically seen the shuttle land and they were target practice on arrival. She was assured at this point that no communication or emergency broadcast would make it off the ship, so they could contain alert to here. This was an Alliance ship and they were forced to work their way through room by room, unable to make it to the ventilation system. They barely made it off the shuttle before it was disabled. Three people had it under fire before they managed to get out. Legion had blocked targeting of her on their way out of the shuttle, taking a hard hit to the joint of his left arm, the elbow shredded with smoking metallic edges and sparks, the forearm and hand dangling uselessly when they got into a more fortified position. He calmly twisted and yanked once, set his ex-arm against his back with a magnetic click, and switched from his rifle to a pistol.

She cloaked, repositioned to give him more space, sighted and took down one of the three with a head shot, adrenaline doing its thing where it hyper magnified the aspects of the stim that caused her body to shake and hands to tremble. She had to consciously breathe and settle to keep the tremor out of her voice when she asked afterward “Legion. Status.”

He returned calmly “I am well, Shepard Commander.”

She answered, disbelieving “You just twisted off your arm.”

He returned mildly “I will use my pistol. There is no damage that cannot be reversed.”

She paused, sighted, cloaked and took out the back of the head of a person crouching down, thinking they were safe, a spray of blood “Promise me that you’re not going to leave it as a memorial, like the
hole and the N7 piece.”

Garrus said gruffly, after another shot had sounded “Shepard, leave the boy alone, let him dress the way he wants. You’ll drive him to start smoking.”

She was caught in the rush of a brief spill of laughter, for the first time having Garrus and Legion on the same side. Camaraderie under fire was a beautiful thing. It was like fireworks in the bleak, close and intimate and warming her face, brightening her eyes, quickly gone.

She couldn’t afford laughter for more than a few seconds, had to grind down her focus to each shot.

They had to slaughter their way through the entire ship. She didn’t recognize anybody, but she recognized the uniforms, the food, the things that didn’t change with indoctrination. She gritted her teeth and apologized for each lethal, invisible shot that came from her, all head shots, all timed to her determination to get it right on the in breath, the sorrow on the out breath that she had….gotten it right.

It took them three hours to clear that ship, 33 casualties.

She’d memorize their names later.

Legion refused to consider not going on to the nineteenth ship, and she needed him. He piloted the shuttle with absolute precision.

She asked quietly as Legion guided them to the next ship, this one also Alliance, getting the shuttle in quietly, as she hoped their luck would hold. “Do you feel pain, Legion?”

He said calmly “Not as humans feel pain. I do experience distress. I am aware of how this mission could fail without my assistance, and that causes me to wish to continue.”

She smiled with a bitter, shaking edge and said “Right there with you. Thank you, Legion.”

He answered solemnly, managing the controls with one arm in a way she couldn’t with two “You are welcome, Shepard Commander.”

Garrus kept his head, Shepard kept her hand, Legion lost his arm.

Hopefully to be reattached…

She had no way of knowing if he was lying. She had no idea whether or not it would be better if he did feel pain, attachment to his own body.

She did know she felt pain. Garrus was stoic. There was an element of silence that they maintained, as though if they were physically quiet they would not set anything off, in the midst of a long dark tunnel without knowing who was going to be around the next corner or whether or not they would be able to save them. They moved through the vessels, verifying life signs and body locations, transferring controls to EDI and David.

There was no eye contact through suits.

She had a quiet, private conference with David between this ship and the next, asking tensely if David or EDI would be able to remotely have the overtaken ships target the untaken ships. She did not want it to happen, but they could not afford a run of bad luck. They now had the majority of the air power. They could, she wanted it to be unnecessary.
The ground still had not communicated anything.

She still did not know how to run a ground assault or how many people were down there. Too many. No ventilation systems. No solid way to call them up or dummy them out.

They might have to kill every single person they met on the ground.

Why hadn’t she studied and drilled more crowd control methods?

Nine to go. No quips. No new ideas. Her body was pain, ache and numbness inside her suit. Her eyes were drawn back to where Legion’s severed arm had been on his back, but he had left it on the floor of the cockpit of the shuttle. They’d had to change shuttles often.

She just hoped they’d be able to take this shuttle with them when they left. He had assured her he could get a modular arm, he had accumulated spares he upgraded in his quarters…but…

She missed Thane. She missed Jack. She missed…any three other people that could have taken down a set of ships and cut this mission time in half…she almost thought she would have allowed a second team out…and then her internal compass balked and she realized she had enough people for a second team. She could have sent Kasumi, Liara and…and anybody else…but she hadn’t. She was preserving indoctrinated life and that was her mission.

Her responsibility.

She felt the political claws dig in, the spotlight and isolation of it. Her crew did not doubt her, but that was a bubble that did not extend to the outside worlds. Identifying herself as an indoctrinated person had polarized factions. She sat down, closed her eyes to try to think about that, find her way in the darkness of that circumstance. She replayed Garrus’s voice and recognized his now-realized vague unwillingness to say it “There are growing factions more interested in preserving those who have not been indoctrinated than salvaging those who have been. It’s part of the Turian soul. Treason under any circumstances is not likely to be forgiven.”

So much in those sentences. She was slowly starting to absorb the horror of what they were doing, what was being done, what treason had grown to mean. There was a line, indoctrinated and not indoctrinated and she had hoped to have those be the only dividing categories. No. There was having-been-indoctrinated and what it took to get there, how with each individual indoctrinated life they put un-indoctrinated lives in danger. Garrus was right. This wasn’t catching someone in a scan. This also wasn’t unanticipated by her, but the magnitude was experienced in a long painful bleed-out in the dark, claustrophobic setting, the sense of predators scenting it in the depths, circling. Un-indoctrinated lives had inherently, spiritually and practically more tactical value 100% of the time, and the more resources became strapped, the more that math would tip, the more potential ballast of moral obligation to the indoctrinated would be thrown overboard to assure lighter weight and liftoff.

She had been spared some of this calculation because her crew, her men, had faith in her. Faith that wasn’t earned in daily lives, between strangers and rivals. Faith would not be taken up by every random port authority guard trying to make it home alive, knowing the enemy looked just like them.

She was worth several billion credits, apparently. She was worth saving. To the Normandy. Not to many other people whose faith in her, already battered by public relations and misinformation…or accurate information…took a dive on the knowledge of her indoctrination. She was still not wrong, she still should have disclosed it, it’s just that now she knew more fully it was not to gain support, but to allow the previously indoctrinated to have someone to identify with, and she needed to protect them.
The mistake of sitting became obvious when she had a moment of thinking she could not stand. She refused to admit it, and rallied her muscles. She would not waver. The whirring of her thought process continued, speeding on its path, undeterred by the screaming of her body or the pressure of the mission. She watched it like a movie playing out, desired distraction and horrified realization.

This moment was enough to gain insight. She was the bad guy right now. She was unable to take time, to be understanding or creative, to find ways to bring the indoctrinated back into the fold of the sentient without casualty.

Just as she’d done when she let Garrus kill and she’d known it to be wrong.

She saved what lives she could, but that was a sop against the ruthless, cold fact that she was going to scour Eden Prime clean of situational hostiles because she needed something. She wasn’t going to ask for help or accept help, she was going to drive herself and her crew too hard, and then she was going to use whatever the fuck was there to her advantage and she’d spit directly in the face of her own morals and defend that choice. She could only afford morality in certain circumstances, and that extended to everyone right now, with their challenges and skill sets and fears.

Check your privilege, Shepard. The fact that you take more risks with more competent help does not absolve you of the consequences of asking others to take risks without that help.

She knew better. She just couldn’t do better.

She was soul sick and soul sure.

Time to go. She led them into the first of the Batarian ships. The ship was dark, lit in a deep red that made her eyes water until she was able to change the filter settings on her visor.

Things were vaguely looking up because right or not, shooting a Batarian was not as painful of a process as shooting an Alliance soldier or a representative of the Hierarchy. She’d still prefer to save them, and they did save them. Due to a providential floor plan for the ships, ventilation was close to and easily accessed from the bays of the ships. David had managed the physiologic change of the gas to Batarian requirements, no deaths. The last nine ships fell without a shot. All told it took seventy eight hours.

More providence, no new ship arrivals in that time, holding pattern on the ground and no communication between ground and ship.

Indoctrination working for them.

Except where it was fucking them over every moment.

With the final ship down, she kept her voice steady. She still had to care, could not drop the weight, she was not over the finish line, only no longer running uphill. She did not allow the relief to weaken her resolve. She did take off her helmet, took a breath of un-recycled air and let the stink and horror seep out as it could, as it should, counting the lost lives, 33, against the saved lives, 588. That math was going to have to stand and she could truly hope that there were fewer than 588 people on the ground.

Please.

On the way back to the Normandy she stated “I have eight hours of sleep coming to me. Legion, you need to repair yourself and pass rifle proficiency before I will take you anywhere. You’re out for the next 24 hours, I don’t have time. Garrus, four hours of sleep for you required in the next ten hours. I will sleep for eight and prep for two.”
She opened up a channel to Liara “Liara, we’re on our way in. I want you to spend the next eight hours gathering all you need to know about the ground site, coordinate with David and EDI. You are my Prothean expert and tactical advisor. I need to sleep.”

Liara acknowledged her, congratulated her and Jane felt the unwelcome and dissonant congratulations slither down her spine like cold oil, thick and inevitable.

She was the ambivalent owner of nine Batarian cruisers that gave her a headache when she attempted to board.

She’d thought she was going to be able to help the formerly indoctrinated integrate back into society, and now she was realizing that was going to fail. She needed to create a new society.

Jane spoke to EDI and David next, and advised them of the plan, asked them for alternative plans, to brief Liara.

There was no way in hell anybody was stepping on that planet without her out in front. There was no way she was abandoning these soldiers on Omega without someplace to go.

She was self-imposed isolated with these thoughts, this idea tangled in things she had not properly anticipated. She was in the familiar, solitary, cramped and miserable part of command where she realized she had more job to do than she had thought, diminishing resources and diminishing allies when she needed them most. She felt the unfortunately familiar buckling and folding that the blast forge of reality creates when tested against planning, necessitating reinforcing a line of defense with the premonition of being flanked.

She got out ahead of Garrus, expected Legion to follow orders, expected everyone to do their job as she had demanded, and asked only of herself that she get to quarters, clean her gear with the discipline of the soldier she was. She was physically relieved, psychically burdened, thinking of time ticking away on too many fronts. She completed tasks, cleaning, showering and finding her bed, laying down in it, experienced the gratitude of letting go of tenuous and strained consciousness, and chewed on issues in her dreams for eight hours, not admitting the concept of free time when time was so short and the number 33 existed with new significance.

She woke with Garrus’s arms around her and she wondered if she smelled of distance and isolation, something she needed. Part of his hetak, to know her that well. He was not inside, his touch was not sexual but a presence to be taken entirely for granted. The prior days had pushed her into a place of no admittance. It was to protect him, not her. No admittance to her thoughts as she thought them, no admittance into her body or willingness to lose her hold on her will. Intimacy, not sex. Love, not pleasure.

He was physically with her but behind her, his chosen and assigned place.

She wondered what Command smelled like to him briefly, imagining some bizarre chemical mix from Captain’s quarters, inner sanctums rarely breached, a place she’d hardly ever been until they were hers. A blend of the best the housekeeping staff had to offer in antiseptic and polish, entitled right to the best, distance and autonomy. Something redolent of corollaries on Palaven, his brain translating her into landscape she had never seen, could never sense herself.

She allowed herself the briefly self flagellating thought that hers should hold a whiff of bullshit, and it probably did.

She resented having to sleep, and as far as she was concerned she was in the middle of an operation, so she got up, silent and bleak, still exhausted, and her first breakfast item was a new stim. Her
second and third were the food he’d brought for her.

She felt the stim raise her through levels of awareness she’d been too dull to measure. Several tracks of thought restarted, contemplating today, tomorrow, next week, months from now, full contact with the reality that this was only one planet, one fleet, and not a Reaper in sight, only their shadow.

Garrus busied himself with fitting himself back into armor as she ate. She didn’t taste it, she didn’t thank him, and she fitted herself back into her own armor.

He followed her down to the conference room and she nearly cried with how much she loved and appreciated this man, how much he loved and appreciated her, and that she could not tell him right now, and how telling him later would also never be enough. She had the few seconds of the elevator ride to be desperately, helplessly in love before she shut it off and the necessity of distance and autonomy descended again.

She longed for silence, darkness, and some quiet whispered words with Thane, but he was far away and it had become abundantly clear she did not have the resources she required for what she needed.

She needed a Goddess and a Prophet and a Promised Land.

Right now she had a suit and a gun and a shroud of invisibility that would serve only her.

She sat in the conference room, seeing real time images of Eden Prime. Not 588 people. There were 77 people. Turian military males and females. Batarian military males. Human Alliance males, females and colonist men, women…and children. Twelve children ranging from 10-17. There were records of infants and smaller children…

The statistic hung in the air after David’s disclosure. It was possible the infants and smaller children were inside one of the buildings, but it was unlikely. Shepard said it herself. “Infants and smaller children would be of no value to the indoctrinated, only a liability. Unable to provide any function, necessitating time and maintenance of a person otherwise needed to dig.” People familiar with running a ship were left on the ship. Children that were small enough to get into tight restriction in a dig would be of value.

Seven infants and young children, likely gone. She took one more glance at that thought and amended to hopefully gone. Hopefully gone quickly, mercifully, not left to starve, not indoctrinated and incubated or liquidated…

She stopped that thought and decided she’d find out whether she wanted to or not.

Dig they had. Dig they did. Eat, sleep, dig. Everyone. They isolated where they ate, where they slept, their routes to and from work. Much of the location was entirely abandoned, which gave them some cover, but also meant there was a high turnover in a few locations, Groups of tens and twenties, not twos and threes.

There was exposed framework and still structure being uncovered. Liara postulated they were likely about 2/3 done with the excavation and had not begun with exploration, methodical and incurious.

There was an exposed pod that looked very much likes the ones from Ilos.

They had the military IDs of everyone on the ground taken from the ship logs, and the names of all the colonists. They knew exactly who was down there.

It was too late to get the crowd control training she needed or have the equipment she wanted. Too many targets. She insisted on a few measures, but she had little faith in them. She was not going to
ask Garrus to put down his rifle and pick up a new weapon intended for shorter distances.

They had used gas grenades at Feros, had saved a colony then, but that was with about sixteen confused people, all the same species, not military trained Turians and Alliance soldiers, Batarian fighters mixed in. She had a few gas grenades of her own, unfortunately unable to work on mixed species groups, possibly lethal to humans while maybe not bringing down a fully grown Turian.

Legion had approached although he was not technically invited to the briefing and informed her that he had repaired his arm, Garrus had tested his proficiency, and he was ready, willing, and...anxious to join the landing party.

She told him that he was to coordinate with Garrus on long range and leave attempts at tranquilizing to her and to Liara. He was to keep track of how many casualties, how many people down, the goal was 77.

Three snipers. One biotic.

Shepard had a terrible feeling about all of this but had no other choices that she could flush from her panicked and desperate mind.

Legion solemnly acknowledged the command.

She had really hoped for someone to decide they had a colony-wide weapon that could drop like a net and safely take everyone down...but they only had the combination of stealth, blitz and hope.

These were not all of the indoctrinated vessels, more could arrive at any time, so could the Alliance, so could a Reaper.

They got down in the shuttle and landed back from the approach that she and Garrus had taken in the simulation, the least exposed, the most oblique, and the sense of danger was ramped up as she remembered every trap, every reset, everything they had missed.

It was a beautiful place, and she just now remembered the spot, on the other side of the compound, where Jenkins had fallen.

She controlled her breathing, gave up the sense of planning and began the reality of execution.

They moved slowly, cleared building after building, confirmed that there was nobody behind them. They edged to a building that had approximately twelve people in it, sleeping. Twelve people quickly and silently darted by Liara and Shepard, nobody woke, hopefully nobody would wake. Each building they passed through had a camera in it accessible from the Normandy so they would know if the status of this building changed or anybody woke.

Two of the children were here, now they were safe.

The next building had fourteen people sleeping, approached from a rear entrance, same outcome. Three children in this group down and safe, eleven adults, a mix of species.

Five children safe, twenty one adults.

They cleared a few more empty unused modular buildings, then attempted approach of the area used for meals. They were spread out, people in front eating, in back doing prep, approximately 24 people here, the rest were down in the dig.

Two children down, tranquilized first, before drawing the attention of the adults, one gas grenade in
the room and one shoved back into the hazy dark. Stealthed she was hard to find, and she was able to move around in the smoke, took down three more people, saw Turians wavering on their feet, Batarians barely affected, a human female down with foam from her mouth, the children already down affected by the gas that was pooling on the ground thickly, foam from their mouths and convulsions.

Legion and Garrus targeted the Batarians and Turians, and they were not armed, but they were in close quarters, lunging for the covered exits. No time or method to disable them only. Fatality was 100% here, all attempts to preserve life lost when tranquilizing dart met gas crawling across the ground at a dosage too low to save Turians and Batarians through disabling them and too high for humans to survive it.

She shelved the use of grenades, they moved back through the food preparation area, no exits.

Twenty four dead. Some ugly suffering, and Shepard put mercy bullets through small and large brains of those she’d tried to spare.

27 to go.

Gunshots had been heard, she had it reported, people were coming out of the dig, converging on the pod. They moved quickly to the location, to find bodies of people tightly meshed around the pod. Nobody targeted Shepard’s team, they were completely ignored.

David’s voice sounded to the team “They have access to explosives intended for blasting…they all have explosives under their clothing.”

Jane watched as more people poured out of the dig, moved to join the mass of bodies trying to protect or sabotage, she could not tell and had no choices. Children and adults and Alliance and Turians, Batarians…

Whatever they wanted to do, they could not further organize. There was a slight chance that head shots could eliminate detonations if the explosives were rigged a certain way and the option to detonate was taken away from the individual.

She said quietly and firmly from cover “Head shots only. Fire.”

Garrus’s rifle sounded, taking out the closest and largest target, a Batarian shot through an eye cleanly, a spray of red blood. As she watched he toppled down and then his body burst with the detonation of the explosives strapped to his chest, out and back. That set off the other explosives in a chain reaction, different heights and colors of blood, plate and skull and viscera, moments in slow motion as she tried to target something, anything that was not disintegrating in spray. Frozen vignettes played out in horror as her scope captured images, until she closed her eyes, nothing more to see unless it was on the ground.

She’d had to hope that if they hadn’t opened the pod yet, it could not be opened by conventional means, and she was right. The pod and platform were undamaged, dripping with the remains of the uncounted and unnamed creatures that had swarmed it.

Others tried to come up through the ramp of the dig, the imperative to move to the pod still active, and they were picked off one by one.

In the eerie silence following Legion assured Shepard that the number 77 had been reached.

The ramp down had been vandalized by the last person up, the dig was unreachable. The pod was intact. Shepard calmly went and got a hose she had seen on the way in, sprayed down the pod and
her armor, began to move what she could of what remained of the bodies aside after politely asking Liara to examine the pod as the resident Prothean expert.

Legion and Garrus remained silent and on guard, watching over Liara’s progress.

Shepard signaled to the Normandy to send crews to begin ferrying survivors to Omega, identifying remains for return.

Liara confirmed she believed it to be a live Prothean, or what had been a live Prothean when they went in.

She looked dazedly at her companions and though briefly of Thane saying “It has become commonplace to you to speak to mechanical Gods and have an evolved Geth AI wear your armor like a favor in battle, to share the bed of a Speaker of the Spirits in the form of a Turian whose ancestral home has walls that echo with his words. You slip among stars unseen and you gather adherents and followers on every planet and station, eyes turned your way and hopes tuned to your ambitions.”

My ambitions.

My ambitions involve a live Prothean.

Liara was over her shock, or at least appeared that way, and so did Jane. They could both fall apart later, and she promised herself she would. Later.

At the end of the other ticking clocks, came the slow realization that Liara had absolutely no idea what to do with this pod and the only idea she had was…to look around…

Look around.

Look around at bits of bodies and pools of blood, foam and fragments of fabric.

Liara, Garrus, Legion and Jane went through and combed each of the outbuildings, and found some research. Research only Jane could decipher.

Brain whammy #1, still the winner and champion.

Before the pod opened she knew who and what was inside, what his last moments conscious had been, what he had expected, what he had wanted…

And that she would not be any of those things.

He woke as he went in, bits of body under his footsteps, solitary.

She had a hallowed moment of feeling the importance of a historical event, to look in the eyes of a Prothean.

In the several eyes of a Prothean.

In the several eyes of a Prothean that was lunging for her, snarling and saying with conviction “Indoctrinated.”

Oh fuck.

Well, he wasn’t wrong.
He also fortunately wasn’t that strong yet, and she had him spun with his arms around his back quickly, the obvious clicks of two rifles drawn on him.

His wrists were wide and slick, his skin slippery under her palms, so she had to twist to get leverage. His armor was bulky and she was shorter than he was, but she had officially had it.

She said after a deep breath, carefully “My name is Commander Jane Shepard. I saw what got you here. You are the only Prothean alive and we just worked very hard to preserve your life, so as much as I would like to end it right now, I won’t. This…” She turned the Prothean to look at Liara “Is Liara. She is a Prothean expert and a dear friend, and if you so much as give her a small bruise, I will kill you and consider it a fitting end to this entire mission.” She turned him again to face Legion, who had his rifle at the Prothean’s head “This is Legion. He has a rifle. He will watch for small bruises. He is under my orders to kill you if you lunge at another member of my crew. My crew includes everyone at this site. Liara will explain and offer you choices. She is not indoctrinated. I will remove my distasteful self from your presence to help make the transition and those choices easier.”

Liara, bless her, kept her cool, gave her a nod of acknowledgement.

So much better than the panicked and clueless Prothean expert that she’d once been.

She let go of the Prothean’s wrists and backed away toward Garrus, who had a view no doubt of one of the several eyes on the Prothean’s face through his scope.

She had had enough and she wanted to go back home and wash the blood of children from her boots and gauntlets.

Crews bustled around the base, security perimeters set, bodies ferried off. Over the course of the entire mission, over the last several days, the Normandy had managed to accrue several shuttles worth of people, relays of personnel, agents brought in from wherever available in that time frame to help manage and maintain security. Liara and Kasumi had called in some agents to here and Omega, Zaeed had kicked in names of those who were reliable, especially since this was glorified babysitting. Pay high and job done, no questions. They had enough people now to occupy the ships, return them to the owners after their data had been mined and transferred to the Normandy, which for most of them was already done. Enough people to pilot Batarian cruisers to Eurydice and defend them in transit and destination. They had Geth escort ships and although Aria would not allow Geth on Omega, they could keep indoctrinated people restrained and at a distance until human agents could shuttle them in when their number came up for surgery. Nearly 600 people was going to take a while.

Now she needed to write up the losses from each ship, inform Palaven and Earth and…just them, fuck the Batarians. Seriously, fuck the Batarians.

Fuck the Prothean too, while she was at it.

The Prothean stared at her, one hand wringing at a wrist where she had gripped him. He did not lunge again. He looked shocked.

Good. Shocked is good.

She turned on a boot heel, Garrus following, and they went back to the shuttle, back through the familiar path, one she never wanted to revisit.

Threatening someone had made her feel better, no denying it. She could ride that adrenaline a little while longer. She could keep that tone, that certainty and that grip.
She could not fall apart just yet. She really did not want to fall apart at all.

Garrus said quietly “While you were asleep I identified the crews of each ship. I have the identities of those at the base. I have reports ready for Palaven and Alliance command and I can send those off after we get back. Do you want me to hold them until the ships are returned?”

She blanked a moment and had not thought about that. She said “What do you suggest?”

He replied “I would suggest having each ship broadcast its arrival upon entering the Palaven or Sol Mass Effect relay. Geth can get them to the relays and then stay behind. Ships can be escorted in by local fleets, and their positions of origin won’t be leaked, we won’t have convoys attacked. We need to arrange for legitimate pilots for each craft and not let anybody involved otherwise as a mercenary agent be taken in for questioning.”

Her head tipped back and she said “Good. Let’s do that. Do you know a few Turians who can take over?”

He smiled and said “I do.”

She smiled back “Okay. What do you want to do with a few Batarian cruisers?”

He tilted his head and said “When Thane gets back in touch, we can ask him if he wants to use a few for bait and misdirection.”

She thought a moment and said “That’s a lovely idea. Garrus, I don’t think being indoctrinated is going to work out so well for me, or for the rest of the people similarly afflicted. It’s not just Protheans with a prejudice and opinion. We’re going to need more cruisers. We’re going to need bases. We need to give ex-indoctrinated a place to go. I’m going to lose support.”

Garrus nodded gravely “Yes. To all of that.”

She nodded and said “Okay. When Thane gets back I’ll ask him about that too. We need to give people a place to go. I offered to let people fight with me, and I need to be able to extend that to giving people a place where they are safe from retaliation and neglect and aggression.”

Garrus said quietly “That’s going to be tough for everyone.”

She said softly “Yes. It is. Okay. That’s for tomorrow. I need to head to the CIC and check in, need to coordinate with the Alliance to pick up their ships. I need to talk to Aria. After that I’m done. The Prothean is Liara’s problem for a while.”

Garrus asked lightly “What the hell are we going to do with a Prothean?”

She shrugged and said dismissively “Assault him, insult him, take it from there.”

Garrus shrugged back “He started it.”

They still had jobs to do, the shuttle landed and they broke off to their separate after mission tasks. She authorized a ridiculous amount of money to Aria and to the Clinic for housing and security and surgery. Aria was…eventually…happy to do business again. She coordinated with Hackett and arranged for pilots to make the transition at the Mass Effect relay. She gave him abbreviated and incomplete facts, stated that the Alliance members and colony members that had survived were undergoing surgery.

She stated that she would maintain a presence at the discovered dig, but was willing to share the site
with other Prothean scholars. She would provide sufficient security to protect the site, considering it was in the Terminus system and the Alliance was unable to provide it.

She’d give orders to have the pod and platform lowered back down, let Hackett assume what they were after was in the dig itself. The Prothean would remain classified.

Hackett was not pleased, but did want his ships back. She promised to update him on the disposition of crew and surgery, but did not release where they were being treated or promise she would guarantee their return to Alliance authority.

Hackett made no mention of any plan of rescue or aid, and Shepard felt enough of that abandonment of colonists, the sort that had made her risk her life repeatedly in places like Eden Prime and Horizon that she was not about to let Hackett get one ounce more of information than she absolutely had to give, and she gave that so the Alliance could inform next of kin.

EDI had data mined the vessels, David had helped, though at the moment he was sleeping. Reni had allowed him to push himself hard, but EDI could manage current coordination and communication. Joker was also getting some sleep, so it was just Jane on the quiet CIC and EDI’s pride at the completed mission, which Jane echoed for EDI’s sake. She said quietly “Without you, it would have been impossible.”

EDI said quietly “I told you once I aspired to be exceptional, and missions like this make me proud.”

Jane’s hand had lingered by the console near EDI as she said “They should. Anything I need to know? Anything you need?”

EDI said calmly “Everything is proceeding as planned, we have sufficient personnel to coordinate and maintain security. For optimal efficiency you should sleep.”

Jane smiled and said “For optimal efficiency I have you. Good night, EDI.”

EDI said with a hint of pride “Good night, Jane.”

She checked in verbally with Kasumi, who said she was doing fine and happily raiding Batarian accounts.

So…sleep was something achievable. She wondered what she had forgotten and what she needed to do and an overfull roster of everything rushed at her until she decided she had asked the wrong question…the same one Garrus had once asked “Is anybody going to die as a direct result of you sleeping?”

Maybe.

Adrenaline and anger let loose and she was suddenly fully aware of her exhaustion and the unprocessed dark pulling her down.

She was blessedly in some shock, she recognized in detachment.

She had a job, and she’d do it. She cleaned her gear, scrubbing off multicolored blood spatter and dried on…things…that she hadn’t gotten off with the hose. When Garrus came in, out of his own armor, she was staring down at a shin guard, turning it slowly in the light. He stepped over and tried to take it from her, but she held on tight, eyes unwilling to tear themselves away.

He picked her up, sat down with her on his lap, and guided her hands through the simple tasks, finishing with his efficiency, discovering what was a scratch and what was a stain, helping her move
on when she had mostly been finding scratches and attempting to scrub them off until they widened and deepened.

He stood with her in his arms, stowed her gear, taking the last piece from her hands and setting it aside with a final snap of storage closing.

Over. It was over, but it was just starting. She needed to change her thoughts about herself, change her identity, add the underlined and asterisked exception that would always follow her: Indoctrinated. Indelible ink, not erasable pencil.

Would someone die from her falling asleep?

Definitely. She’d slept while people died, seen an ancient library and danced while children dug in a deepening, inescapable well…

Never mind sleeping, children had detonated on her order.

She did know what happened to the infants and children. Their bodies had been found in an abandoned outbuilding. Neatly stacked. Shot through the brain.

A mercy.

Right. Mercy.

Her nails dug into his plates, finding scratches in the plate like the scratches in her armor.

He was silent, and stoic, and he had a job to do. Clothes came off gently, carefully as her fingers found the flaws in how he was made, wondered how many scratches came while under her orders. He carried her into a warm shower, she knew too cold for him, it would make him feel vaguely slimy and it should, it was with her, and that vague scent of bullshit would never wash off.

Her hand came to rest on the ruined side of his face, chipped mandible and scar, she hadn’t decided before now if it was her fault or not. She had saved him, but not saved him enough. It was her fault he had been on Omega. He had loved her and she had not cared to know, and then she had died.

She got distracted by his eyes, just as the shine in her armor had caught her, his solemn, watchful eyes that had been with her…longer than anybody. She imagined nails digging in too deep, drawing blood, and he would like that, but not now. Her hands relaxed, her eyes drifted shut as warm water cascaded and he offered her the cool press of his crest, and she could barely breathe.

Just Garrus, nothing else. Just his arms and his eyes and his crest.

She understood he had a job to do, she was his job, and she was grateful, sinking, but would not be lost alone in the dark, he would find her. She had faith. His hands moved to wash her body, wash her hair, turn her and drop his crest to her shoulder, kiss there, she respected that he had a job to do.

She could be present for him, not be lost, be found, and she struggled to be that, to not want to follow blood trails down the drain, reach for unknown names and snuffed out futures.


She repeated the words to herself with each breath, was swept away by arms and towel and brush, wondering how many Vakarian dead he had reported, catalogued as she slept.

She wasn’t broken. Thane knew she did not break, she bent far and snapped back and she would not break. Garrus might break, so she needed to be present.

Bed and dark and blissful, wished for permission for the job to be done, for now, his and hers. She reached for him after he carefully eased his huge body into bed, dipping the mattress down so she rolled to him, with final permission for oblivion, for him to watch over her.

She considered thirst and need, wondered about sacred and did not care about the inspiration as her hand scratched along plate, as she moved her mouth to his, as her body shifted from darkness to burning, to demand. She wanted to tell him she loved him, to thank him, and she did, with mouth and hands and body, but most of all and overwhelming those things she wanted him inside, to take the oblivion offered, separate from him as a person but a result of him being a person, just as he sought her blood. She took scent and claimed it, rolled him to his back, with his head to the side to protect his fringe until she took her fists and put them under the back of his head to hold him up so she could be fascinated by his eyes. She kissed him, drew blood without ceremony from both of them, drove her body onto his, knowing her Turian would feel loved and not used. It was profane and sacred somehow, not to be repeated, not to be taken away until now was gone. She released her fists and cradled his head in her palms, fingers on his hide. She pulled him gently to the side again, so he cradled her, so she was where need drove her, where she could bend but not break, where they bent together, composite creatures drawing strength from each other’s close bond.

Shimmering waves of tears coursed down her cheeks and then stopped, her job over, his goal reached, as he watched over her, gave her his voice and his breath and his body, and she was bared to her blood-spattered and scratched bones.
Chapter 37

She had…not exactly nightmares…Reverie made that nearly impossible, grateful...
He sighed and said “Don’t we all. I don’t mind. You are a leading lady. Thane is a leading man. I am…glorified sidekick material.” He did not sound upset and it was nearly impossible for her to get upset right now. She considered Turian culture and the pride he took in her lead, how he had grown to take Thane’s lead, and considered it a Garrus gift she would not understand fully without a Turian brain, but could appreciate. She could add her human spin and add some Drell spin.

She said softly “We…do not see it that way.”

His hands continued their lazy path over her body, his voice still detached, Reverie washed “Mmm…how do the royal We see me?”

She laughed and he laughed along with her, she leaned in to kiss at his laughing throat and he indulged her, tilting his head back. She kept her lips happy while she thought, and then she said against his warm hide “We…see you as water.” She continued to kiss and speak soft and short words interspersed between lips pressed to him “We know you are necessary to life. Without you we would die. Though we may be carbon, or mercury, prized for our hardness or fluid grace, we do not sustain life. We take it.”

He mock scoffed and arched his throat under her mouth, saying “I take life. And carbon my ass, you mean diamond.”

She nipped at him for interrupting, which she bet he barely felt, certainly not as a deterrent, and said “How dare you criticize my choice of comparison. I would have thought that you, as a consummate nerd, would appreciate that I chose elements and not forms those elements took.”

He groaned and said “My apologies, I am developing a burgeoning physics fetish. Please, continue.”

She said “You already had a physics fetish. Water…is unique…” She thought of when he’d gone to Omega “It is the only element that expands when it freezes.” She thought of how he cared for her and for Thane “Water is a solvent, washing away and unaffected by impurities, always able to return to its own form. Necessary for all sentient life. There are no diamond people, no quicksilver people. We need you. And if you’re not leading…why did I ask you first to be my lover?”

He had no answer for that other than a pleased groan, so she considered that a point. She continued “If you’re not leading, why do I bring you everywhere?”

His voice was pleasantly strained but he said “That’s a point for sidekick if I ever heard one.”

She considered and said “Mmm…damn you Vakarian.”

He said ardently “Yes, please, damn me.”

She continued “If you’re not leading, why did my eyes turn to you, the widest, deepest love I felt at what I thought was the end of my life? Well, the second end of my life…”

He was speechless. Damned and speechless.

She followed up with “We must struggle to be kind or thoughtful, and you are our example of how it could best be done. You’re so fucking humble and competent it makes the royal We viciously jealous, but you’re so genuinely humble we can’t call you on it.” He laughed and she continued with “Thane calls you Speaker for the Spirits and I agree. I may be Siha, but you have earned the right to your ancestral pantheon who would speak through you and find no better voice.”

He laughed and rolled her over onto her back, his weight held by his knees and elbows, gazing down at her with Reverie warmed eyes, and he said “You want to hear the weirdest Turian thing that
keeps happening to me?”

She shifted her hips and moved until he groaned, twisted inside her, lowered his body and tilted back his head, more snow globe swirling, with her fingertips tracing along his tapering fringe, she answered “Yes, please. Talk to me.”

He laughed, and it reminded her of times they’d been drunk out at a bar and he was about to tell a story about when he’d tripped on an obstacle course during a final exam, or brought the wrong ammo…

He tilted his head back down to look in her eyes and said “I get scanned every week…and I swear to you, I am disappointed when I am not indoctrinated, because I want to know what you went through. I want to feel it.”

She had a moment of knowing she had not been as isolated as she had felt on the last week’s mission, that Garrus would sacrifice his body and mind to be on her side. Her indoctrination did not repel him from her, but pulled him closer in to empathize with that aspect of her life that he wished to understand. She knew it, but this was that new way, that new angle of knowing he gave her. The combination of his body and his voice and the way he told the story, knowing the way he wanted her to hear it, she started to laugh. She laughed until she snorted. She said softly “That makes perfect…Garrus sense.”

He sobered only slightly and said “Today, when that Prothean lunged for you…Spirits as my witness, Kerim, I wanted to be indoctrinated too. I could not bear to have you stand alone with that. I want to stand with you…in all things.”

She smiled and knew they were hard but not heartless, finding their drunken way together with their failings and foibles as she said “Humans are made up of at least 60% water. I never stand alone.”

He nuzzled at her throat, pressed his body to and in hers and said “Can I still be your sidekick?”

She panted, his voice, his body, and all the moments out of Reverie that poured their passion into the moments when they were able to be together like this. She answered “Yes. Always.” She put all the appreciation she felt for his always being there, always following, his mutinies of support and his ability to carry her through, felt that spread through her, flavor her voice “I can’t lead if you don’t follow. Plus you always have to lead when we dance…and times like now when I can’t think.”

He sounded ardent, desperate as he said “I love when you can’t think.”

He ensured she couldn’t think by kissing her for the joy of it, easing her legs around his waist until she pulled him deeper inside, her body suspended and supported by his from this connection, his body arched over her, all-encompassing and overwhelming. Already Reverie rich, they built a warm whirlpool of pleasure together, knowing how these moments worked, how they both worked, his body inside hers, his hand between them, soft twists of his hips pressing the warm suede of his thumb against her. He rocked against her in soft lapping waves, his mouth roaming over her shoulders and face, settling on her mouth to drink in cries and the feel of his name move from his lips to his plates and tongue.

He slowly robbed her of thoughts, words fading against the surge of pleasure and her ambition to match his focus, her sense of time and sense of self falling away until he was the moon and she was the tide and nothing else, a rise and fall according to her nature.

He reluctantly allowed exhaustion to pull her away from him temporarily, but his body held hers and his voice echoed long after, her dreams sated and moving like waves under the moon, the depths
silent.

She talked to Liara and reviewed surveillance of her discussions with the Prothean, Javik, and Jane felt compounded horror at the cost of obtaining him.

She was developing a distinct distaste for Prothean culture.

All those ships and all that loss of life, for what?

For arrogance.

That’s all she could see in this Prothean. He was contemptuous of Liara, obviously. He enjoyed needling her about how amusing it was that ‘primitives’ had developed the ability to write.

Liara eventually began to throw it back at him, which was a slow but welcome process. The most devastating blow was that Javik knew absolutely nothing about the Crucible or the Catalyst and considered himself to be the avatar of war for his people.

She had enough war already, thank you.

Liara had progressed from gushing to helpful questioning to wary caution to near open antagonism very quickly, and Jane watched decades of built-up Prothean worship get scoured off by contact with his abrasive regard.

When asked what she thought about him by Jane, Liara had shrugged, gone through the main points, which was that he knew exactly nothing about what they had hoped, could provide no illumination on the subjects they needed. He was a soldier and knew soldiering. Liara admitted to still being fascinated and wanted to continue to talk to him, but that was in her hopes of answering questions about Prothean culture and not so much in the hope of his providing knowledge that would help them against Reapers.

When Liara had finally lost her passion and her patience and indicated an end to discussion, Javik had said quietly “I wish to speak to Commander Shepard.”

So here Jane was, drumming her fingertips and staring at a frozen screen of the long interview, an appropriately representative sneer on Javik’s face.

Liara had explained to Javik the mechanics of indoctrination and explained the method of treatment. Liara was not willing to suggest that Jane meet him face to face, and was not even a little certain that Javik would not finish what he started and attempt to kill Jane again.

Normally Jane might be cautious, but she’d really had a bad couple of days and her caution was not the thing speaking loudest and most expressively. Right now what she had was contempt.

Liara was recommending that she be able to meld with Javik and help determine his motives, but Jane waved that idea away distastefully “Liara, I don’t want anybody in that head. I can manage.”

Jane had headed to the Med Bay, formulating her approach on the way, Liara left behind with the only response a fading, resigned sigh that was cut off as the door closed behind Jane.

Javik was being medically examined voluntarily, but when Jane had entered the Med Bay and glanced at Dr. Chakwas, Karin left them both alone.
She felt they’d already been introduced enough so she wasted no time on courtesy, assuming it would be dismissed anyway. She was reminded of Wrex having to be assaulted before he’d accept authority and she wondered exactly how malignant Prothean status was. Considering there was exactly one Prothean left, she was going to gather what she could from the beacon and her visions of Javik and go from there, feel her way.

Jane informed him “I’ve learned a few things about Protheans in my travels. They like force. They like slavery. They like killing. They are not big on autonomy or subtlety. If you were to stand trial before you own people and account for your actions I believe I know what would happen. You failed your mission to fight back Reaper forces. Would your fellow Protheans forgive you for that?”

Javik said in neutral, accepting tones “No.”

She nodded, considering it was a good sign she wasn’t already dead, but also slightly disappointed he didn’t lunge at her again and she didn’t get a chance to break something of his. She continued “You enslaved other races in the fight against the Reapers.”

He confirmed “Yes.”

She nodded again and said “So it is fair to say, from my point of view, that I wish to accomplish a mission that you failed to accomplish, and you belonged to a culture that would demand your life for that failure, without question or mercy.”

He inclined his head “That is correct.”

She considered him and said “Is it possible your memory is incomplete and you may regain it? Are you experiencing losses of what you know you should know? Is there any hidden knowledge regarding the Crucible in your mind that patience would restore?”

He stated unequivocally “My memory is not impaired.”

Fuck.

She swallowed back what felt like righteous and bitter rage. She wanted to hurt him badly. Instead she said “Your mission failed. Your culture failed. You have no insight and no utility to me as someone who can wield tools other than slavery and murder. I have seen enough slavery and murder and it would perhaps be the greater good to serve your own culture’s standards and execute you for your failures in their eyes.”

His voice was steady as he watched her, his head tilting slightly. “That would be your right.” He did not look or sound afraid, and the tilt of his head was not curious but assessing. Was he accepting of her authority? Aware of relative helplessness? He did not seem terribly interested or concerned about his own death. She asked “How did you know I was indoctrinated?”

He said evenly “As you recovered my final memories and the intent of the facilities, I was able to detect indoctrination presence as part of your mind’s composition as well as devise how to communicate with your physiology. We had not determined the mechanics of indoctrination in our cycle, only the presence. It was not until you touched me that more of your composition became apparent.”

She narrowed her eyes and said on a hunch “Tell me what these words translate into in the Prothean language: ‘I am sorry.’”

Javik’s head tilted as though trying to listen, and he said “Those words indicate admission of unacceptable weakness. A Prothean translation is ‘I deserve to die’”
She nodded. She didn’t know if the shape of his mind could even comprehend what it is she did or what it was she wanted. The only anomaly is why he wanted to talk to her if it wasn’t a ruse to take her life. So she asked “Why did you wish to speak to me?”

Javik stood up and stepped close. He was graceful and deliberate, his former neutrality and willingness to back down or remain reclining gone with the invitation to speak for himself. He was effectively imposing. An unwelcome moment of appreciation for anybody that could move like that struck her oddly, because on any other day she’d want this creature on her side, and as a commander she considered the display effective in relaying competence. Right now it was provoking. She wanted to hit him just a little bit harder.

If his people had won against the Reapers, they would have been iron fisted slavers, convinced of their right to do so. He was the essence of might equals right.

A small voice said ‘can’t really discount the might, though.’

Shut up, small voice.

She held her ground and refused to back up, though something in her spine would really have liked to move back just then.

He blinked all eyes slowly and said “You touched me.”

She raised a brow. That obviously meant nothing to him, just as his statement meant nothing to her. She waited.

He elaborated “I learned a great deal when you touched me, Jane.”

His certainty, not arrogant, but confident, his tone, body carriage and words raised some more alarm in her spine. He was not going to kill her, not at all. He was, however, going to enjoy whatever knowledge he had gained by his physiological assessment. He blinked again and it seemed to have some more expressive significance, like a mandible movement from Garrus. He continued “You learned nothing from touching me. I will give you the opportunity to correct that. Regardless of how my people conducted their empire, you have not and will not do the same. You would offer me the choice to fight the Reapers in concert with you or to find my own way. I will find my own way by choosing to fight the Reapers with you.” She could not argue with that. She was busy trying to think of something to say more eloquent than ‘oh’ when he said “I am heartened to learn that my fight is your fight. I am honored to fight with you. I choose to believe that one day you will value me as I value you.”

She was torn between smiling despite herself and breaking his nose. She tilted her head and said “Touching you was an invitation to sex in your culture?”

He said “Adult Protheans do not touch except in specific circumstances.”

She’d been aware this would be weird and she was a little glad it was only about an alien come on and promise of service, and not a death threat and public hazard. She said informatively “In my case it was to keep from being killed by a newly defrosted fossil.”

His smile was small and slow as he said “You are an impressive woman. You are a leader who makes new choices and you have a history of those choices having worked. I understand your overture was defensive and I gained an advantage from that action. No harm will come to you from me. I will follow your orders. I will preserve life if that is what you demand, or take it as you choose. I learned a great deal through your touch and I am capable of learning more new things. I am a soldier of decisive competence.”
She took that seriously enough and she said “Good. I accept. Do you wish to serve on the Normandy or in another capacity, perhaps with Liara, to work on research?”

The now familiar contempt returned to his voice “Research is not my area of expertise.”

She asked “Then what is?”

He responded “My name means Vengeance.”

She found she had room for vengeance, had been nearly full of that when she’d walked into the room, would leave with more at her disposal. “That is acceptable.”

He continued “I invite you to touch me again at your convenience. I would be willing to demonstrate what regard that inspired.”

She said blandly “Courteous as that is, I find myself previously engaged.”

He nodded and said “With a Turian and a Drell, yes, and echoes of Drell.” So not him just getting a ‘sense’ of her command, specifics and preferences. Garrus and Thane, Urem and Yahlis, and knowing enough that ‘echoes of Drell’ is about as far as she’d have her sex life discussed without her wanting to kill him to prevent indiscretion. It was in a way proof of discretion without disclosure of specifics. She was curious but did not want to focus on that. She’d apparently gotten so used to the idea of exposure that it did not carry the same horror as it once had, and she did think that him being a Prothean would be the headliner in any public forum, not that Commander Shepard had slept with yet another alien. This was business and would stay that way. She could also in fact trust to his established arrogance that he was not an idle gossip and he had the Prothean corollary of ‘loose lips sink ships.’ He had not asked Liara about her, only conveyed that he wished to speak to her. Acceptance of confidentiality seemed her best course. His head tilted and although he did not step closer, his voice was pitched as though he had “It is not their decision, it is yours.”

She smiled and said “Yes, and that decision is a polite no.”

His voice did not change as he said “For now.”

She said “There is a lot of now ahead of us, and that is the potential that concerns me. Whatever information you gained through touch, I ask that you keep that knowledge to yourself, and discuss it with me only if you must, and only in private.” After his discussion with Liara and his attitude, she didn’t think he would be talking much to anybody.

He considered a moment, then said “People in our presence will be aware that I respect you, that I am willing to follow your orders. I will invite you to touch me again. Likely often. If you do not wish to disclose the source of that, I will not.”

She felt the urge to cross her arms over her chest, but instead held still, wondering if the urge was protective or angry or both. She felt curious about the implications of that established boundary. If she could manage Wrex and Grunt, she could manage this. She said “Three intelligent people saw me touch you. You have obnoxiously informed Liara of your ability and that will be public knowledge. If you do not mind that I will ignore or rebuff you in front of people if you persist in pressing a suit I have no interest in pursuing, then I can otherwise accommodate your behavior as a cultural difference. I will inform Garrus and Thane so they are not taken by surprise, and beyond that you may become a target for humor and not fear if you continue.” She doubted it, but might as well make the threat. She would respect him and he would earn respect, it seemed. She might have elaborated on nuances here of what she required in a lover, such that she required trust and that was absent. She might have even mentioned practicalities such as she could not for the life of her figure
out how to even make it work and her bed was crowded enough. He’d tried to kill her, she wanted to give him a few hints to warn him off but not enough hints that he took it as an invitation. Telling him a direct stop beyond what she had already expressed would be a provocation. He would consider that if she protested, there must be cause. She must be bulletproof, and as Commander Shepard she could be that. Her best course was weary acceptance on the basis of his utility. Pride mattered to this man and there was no more need to poke at him. She watched his impassive face and said “As long as you follow orders, and if I order you to shut up it will be to minimize distractions and noise, and if I order you to shoot I mean now and that it is not an invitation to speak. I believe I can arrange for you to Exact Vengeance.” The emphasis on the phrase was in her head and stayed there, she found it poetic.

He had a vicious smile and she appreciated him more.

Not want to have sex more.

Just more.

She inclined her head and said “Welcome aboard.”

He nodded, his smile faded back to neutral and he reclined back on the Med Bay bed, and she felt they understood each other. That is he understood her, she’d insulted everything he stood for and they were both uninjured. The rest would shake out.

So…good news, one more asshole on board that likes to kill things.

oOoOoOoOoOo

On her way to talk to Garrus she got an Omni Tool alert, the sender was Thane, so she swerved in a corridor into an alcove to answer. She spoke his name, and felt the surge of hope that it might be now that he came home, but she realized quickly that it was recorded. Mostly because he said it was recorded. She heard him say “This is a recorded message, sent on a delayed timer from within the Normandy. I know I will not break silence due to the necessary security on a mission that is of such tailored necessity. These circumstances reflect one of the only possibilities able to tear me from your side. And it is a tearing. I will miss you, Jane. Wherever I am right now, the thought of you will surge in the heart that looks for you, watches where you have graced my life, brings me memories of you. Your memories are not as mine, and I thought perhaps it would be good for you to be able to hear my voice when you choose, undimmed, unchanged, unaltered through time. I love you, my Siha, my Jane, my wrist bound. We will work our long days separate, and I will return and claim my place at your side.” He smiled in the recording and said “Tan iva’las, Siha.” and then the recording ended.

Tan iva’las. ‘I speak the words of truth.’

She blinked through a few tears and tilted her head forward, closing her eyes to savor the fragile bloom of pleasure and warmth from him at such a distance before it faded.

She’d watch it until she had it memorized and it would not have the adamant authority of a Drell memory, but she would listen and watch until she could call it back at any moment.

As much as she might imagine recordings Garrus had made of Thane, sounds and intensity and sex, this was more suited to her needs, a moment like any other, with no demands or requests, something he chose as a thoughtful gift for her to find solace and not lust.

Though there was lust, if things lived in her heart, they also lived in her body, complaining of lost
opportunities.

She muttered softly that she would like to get on to his claiming at her side part, and used that buffer to find the energy to tear her from that alcove and not play it again and again. She’d do that later, in moments like others that would become layered and reinforced by other moments.

She found Garrus and tried to find words. With her head spinning from Thane speech, she hadn’t framed her intent. He didn’t seem to notice her distraction, which was good, because instead of his backing up and looking at her as though she smelled like something explosive, he greeted her as any other moment. Good.

He pulled back, put his crest to her forehead and she said “Seems Protheans pick up a lot from other sentient beings just by touching them.”

Garrus tilted his head “Really. Did you talk to him?”

She nodded “Yes. He wants to stay on the Normandy. He did not apologize for trying to kill me because I don’t think there are words in Prothean for apology. There is only doom and dying for failure. I offered him doom and failure on the basis of that being what his people would do to him… but he says he’d like to stick around, maybe have sex with me and not stop asking until I say yes, that he’ll follow my orders and find opportunities to convince me to touch him again.”

Garrus was amused. Good. That’s what that story meant. He said curiously “Are you tempted?”

She said honestly “No. My relationships have always had to had trust. Hard for me to imagine trusting someone that lunged at me like that, someone who has no words for apology and whose hungers revolve around vengeance and sex.”

Garrus interrupted and said “Well, vengeance and sex sounds exactly like Thane. What, you’re into green but not blue?”

She said drily “Consider that I just threw something at you.”

He answered with a shrug “Consider that I caught it.”

She said “They aren’t interchangeable or even really comparable, and it took me several missions and conversations and helping him find Kolyat to even consider it.”

Garrus said “Yeah, I doubt Javik has a son he could rescue…”

Jane told him “He was able to pick up just from touching me that I had a Drell lover and a Turian lover. Unless he just grabbed that from passing gossip and is making more of it than it seems. His desire to shoot seems genuine.”

Garrus said with obvious curiosity “So do you think you’d eventually just sleep with him because he’s the last remaining member of his race and it seems like the poor guy has had a rough time of it?”

She laughed and said “He’s not going to work the pity angle, I’m pretty sure. I just told him no, he said he’d keep asking, and I said he might eventually become a target of humor as a result. I informed him I’d inform you, so I’m informing you. You’re not prone to be jealous, but you don’t particularly care for disrespect. He does not consider it disrespect to reiterate.”

Garrus thought a moment and said “This is one of those intellectual moments where I probably would have wanted to take a crack at a Prothean but I’m bonded.”
She grinned and said “If I change my mind, I’ll inform everyone. So far though, really, no.”

Garrus said curiously and half encouragingly “You wouldn’t consider doing it just for the novelty of it and to assuage my curiosity?”

She shook her head “No, I think I’ll stick to my present roster.”

Garrus made a disappointed sound “Guess I’ll never know. Maybe I can talk Thane into it.”

She considered that and then said “Okay, yeah, intellectual curiosity does odd things.”

Garrus walked forward, kissed her and said “Well, that answers the question of what we’re going to do with a Prothean.”

She smiled “Not sleep with him.”

He sighed “Missed anthropological opportunity.”

She said “On the bright side, he seems to want to kill things. A lot. He is not the gentle, wise Prothean that Liara envisioned. He’s arrogant, his culture was based on slavery and conquest, and his name means Vengeance.”

Garrus took that in gravely and said “Want me to check his weapons proficiency and get him suited up?”

She said gratefully “Yes, please. Just…wear gauntlets.”
Chapter 38

Jane had a great deal of thinking to do on their way to Rannoch. They were going to pick up more interface pods, check in with Tali and the other Admirals, tour the location where Tali planned on building a home with Kal. Jane was going to dedicate resources and defense coordination with the Geth fleet, make a full show of official support through presence and direct involvement. They could all use a boost of surveying cooperation and new growth instead of horror and destruction.

The Geth were slowly cleaning up bits and pieces and outliers, bringing in rogue ships. Legion also had to carefully coordinate extraction in areas that were more highly populated, where it was possible that Geth would be fired on by any number of allegiances, including Alliance. Stealth was required because it was too much to ask that they could open a channel and communicate. That was one of the essential issues she faced. Too little time, no ability to coordinate amid fear and mistrust, reaching out could result in mutual annihilation.

Garrus let Jane know that Tali had chosen Kal, Garrus had chosen Jane and Thane. Garrus and Tali’s relationship had been potentially romantic but ultimately platonic. They were both happy with how things had turned out. Kal was aware that Tali and Garrus were close friends and had love between them, and he understood. Kal drew the line at nights spent together because that was his earned right. Garrus assured Jane there would be no awkwardness and nobody had demanded the night together thing, only laughed. Garrus had informed Jane he expected to go. He wanted to see Rannoch, Tali had talked about it so much.

Jane was contemplating the utility of Javik. Although she’d originally written him off as only arrogance, the extent of his ability to physiologically pick up accurate and actionable information by touch was certainly unique. She might not have figured out how it was of use, but Reapers had.

There’s another question. Who was coordinating indoctrinated ships and sending them to destinations with missions?

There was some despair on that subject. Should she spend resources going after a figurehead when their particular talents or goals could be replaced easily through indoctrination? Saren had been a Spectre, high value target, capable and able to act in the shadows and without consequence. Tim had been highly intelligent and with a massive set of resources. Considering either of them as insignificant and replaceable would have been disastrous.

It was of value to try to find the next figurehead to take down, and that might be a viable strategy. Take down infrastructure, convert infrastructure to her needs. Her ultimate needs were offense and defense, but it could not be done through conventional means. The information they’d gained from the Collector base had indicated overwhelming force and technology.

She needed a fleet of medical ships with brigs for holding and medical facilities for surgery and recovery, rehabilitation. Then she needed ships with military training facilities and ships that were hardened and prepared military for assault and defense.

She needed more ships with stealth drives.

If she was going to go with building the Crucible she had to start now, and she could not relinquish control. Once again for caution and prediction reasons, the Alliance, Thessia and Palaven could be counted on only to a point. Beyond a certain brittle extent of cost and sacrifice, her personal indoctrination would dictate her being locked out of certain projects, being given certain resources. She’d already been marginalized without indoctrination, due to her death, association with Cerberus,
and tendency to say and do unexpected, unwelcome and expensive things. She had to plan for that asterisk.

It would be lovely if she could just in this case disqualify herself from this struggle and head to some deserted planet, dig a deep hole, and live there for the next 100 years.

She had fewer choices than she thought. She could not pick and choose certain projects based on her resources. For it all to work she had to get them up and running simultaneously, without leak, without failure, while gathering resources and intel. She dearly wished Thane were here again. She needed his calming confidence, his unerring sense of route and method.

On reflection, Javik would be able to gather intelligence in ways that were impossible otherwise. Unfortunately perhaps only Reapers could have forced him to do that. She was unable and unwilling to ask him to directly interpret through touch for her when he’d volunteered essentially to drive a gun and nothing else. She’d need to build trust and a commander-to-subordinate relationship and not be maneuvered into asking for favors.

She would really like to keep it detached and professional and not have to sleep with a Prothean.

Yeah, she’d do anything for her Cause, but…

She still had some choices, she would protect them.

Liara attempted to chip away at Javik slowly, and he cooperated though it bored him, revealing seemingly unrelated and possibly irrelevant things about Prothean culture. His attention was on the fight with the Reapers, and he was antagonized somewhat by identifying Prothean salt shakers and the like. Jane also imagined he did not like to have his ignorance of Protheans shown. To many questions he did not have the answers. Whether or not that was sullen intransigence or simple truth was hard to discern.

Jane stayed out of his way and fortunately he did not seek her out, did not press her, and at least dealt with Liara with more grace if not more patience than he had at first.

Jane had to be content that she had denied Reapers a prize whose value she could not foresee at the moment. Perhaps she’d miss it entirely, as she had almost passed over putting David Archer and Legion together in a room.

Javik was a source of ship wide fascination. Jane herself was at turns fascinated and repelled. He seemed to accept his place, fortunately, caused no disruption. Despite his early and emphatic interest, she would have to rely on the idea that if he had gained that information, he had gained the knowledge that she was stubborn herself, and would not take well to being accosted or whatever the equivalent of a Prothean serenade at a balcony was.

Karin was at a bit of a loss, unable to figure out some systems he had, unable to determine what readings were what. She had his assurance that he was perfectly healthy. Karin needed to know how to treat him. Fortunately it seemed he had a levo system comparable to a human body. Medigel worked on him. Karin felt she could formulate a blood analogue. She still recommended not breaking him.

Next ground mission, he was going. They’d find out then if their attempts to treat him resulted in prompt death. He seemed to be able to eat and be nourished by levo food, but did not approve of any of it.

Liara had said she would not leave the Normandy while Javik was there, so she was essentially no
the Shadow Broker, turning over day to day operations to Vraen and Feron. Jane was inclined to think Liara’s questioning and attention to detail would not be wasted, and if Liara thought it was worth her time and was willing to put in the work, Jane trusted that impulse. She also sympathized with the drive of obsession and hunches. Liara had decided at one point to find Jane’s body, and it had happened. Jane was not about to question how Liara spent her time.

Javik fortunately did not go around touching people or threatening to touch people, and as this was a military crew and he was always in full armor, the subject did not come up. He was kept busy between Liara, Karin and Garrus. Garrus liked him. According to Garrus, Javik was an excellent shot, his biotics were appropriately devastating and he didn’t talk much other than a tendency to discuss that Turian could be prepared in many ways. Theoretically Garrus would best be served in a brandberry sauce, whatever that was. He asked Liara to not let Javik locate a 50,000 year old condiment for the fun of it and left it at that. It wasn’t the worst locker room talk he’d heard.

Jane scheduled some time at a pod and used her interface to feel, hear and experience what it would be like to be able to cry, collapse, fall to her knees and sob without fear of being observed and without risk of intrusion. It was a luxury she had gone without. Her time with Yahlis and afterward with Thane had shown her the cathartic and theatrical possibilities of crying, and she indulged fully. She had an observational curiosity of what it would be to experience solitary, non-sexual or Drell or Turian release. She was partially detached and fascinated to watch and feel crying play out as it would in the outside world, the internal sense of collapse and then the ultimate buoying of endorphins and the sense of the passage of the storm.

It was complicated and transformative enough that she vaguely thought that yes, sex would be perfectly possible in here.

She was still not interested in copyright infringement and too embroiled in work right now to consider it other than in passing.

She indulged her craving for privacy, before impossible, now promised as ironclad by David. She allowed herself to turn off notifications, tried to not allow guilt to slip in as a process…but it still did, and she felt that push back of defiance. She soaked this in, and the vague thought of feeling childish made her decide to go all the way.

She asked for David’s assistance. “David, I’m going to make an odd request.”

David’s voice responded “What do you require?”

She smiled and said “I would like a room with breakable, expensive things. We’re talking Faberge eggs that shatter, some priceless things that break. Museum stuff. Things I’d never be allowed to touch. Accent on break. I want convincing shatters, rips, tears.” She grinned as a room began to fill with the pieces she requested. She said, teasing ”Are you judging me, David?”

His voice responded “If I comprehend your usage of this space, it would be for expression of frustration. Though my frustration takes different forms, I certainly understand the desire to break things.”

She smiled conspiratorially “I thought you might.”

He said with his solemn tones and waterfall voice “I can still be regularly frustrated by my physical body, but it is also home and I have grown to appreciate what has allowed the me out there to be the me in here. I have integrated. However, remembered or recurrent frustration will likely make me want to be effective and streamlined, after so long of being trapped in relative uselessness or used for
the wrong purposes. I imagine you grow weary of being effective and streamlined, and would enjoy
the luxury of momentary destruction and childishness without consequence.”

She said, pleased he was not concerned for her mental health and understood the impulse “I hope it is
that simple. I can’t be destructive or childish out there, so here’s my chance.” She said “Add a Mona
Lisa. Nothing Drell, I’m not up to destroying Drell artifacts, but my culture is good. I have the right
to be disrespectful. I never understood why the Mona Lisa was such a big deal.”

She had an underlying anger that so many resources went toward art when they did not go toward
people. She knew that wasn’t fair, but right now was not about fair and even, but her prejudices
being served.

She just wanted to be aware fully that there were no consequences to her actions here, and that was
massively freeing.

David fortunately did not take the moment to educate her on the cultural or aesthetic value of what
was filling up the space, and she thought he went out of his way to find inexplicably overrated or
ugly things that had been fawned over for no good reason throughout history.

She had nothing against the art.

Okay, this obviously indicated something against art, but she wasn’t sure what, she just wanted…

It was more about the exclusivity of bad art and the waste of attention and time…maybe…as though
the Citadel were too perfect, too beautiful to abandon despite its being an insidious death trap.

She could have smashed a small Citadel replica, but maybe that was too on the nose.

She hefted the Faberge egg in front of her, it was beautiful and it made her angry. Made for an
imperial family while people starved under slavery. Some art inspired her and she would likely have
stopped and wandered the room if it had been filled with those objects, the things that expanded the
mind.

She’d never destroy a Rodin.

This egg was a symbol to her of value and resources locked away and manipulated to provide
entertainment to a very few who had earned the right by being lucky enough to be born royal.

She picked up the egg, hefted it and threw it against a wall, ostentatiously satisfying shattering
sounds.

Spirits, yes.

She found the less she knew about ugly things or their artistic significance, the easier it was to break
them, and she enjoyed that for its additional bump of celebration of conspicuous ignorance and
destruction. She broke more things than she understood or even tried to understand, and she came to
stand in front of the Mona Lisa.

She looked at it for a moment and imagined raking nails through the canvas…and the destructive
impulse calmed and settled. This piece came from a brilliant, capricious mind. She knew enough
about Da Vinci to pause and appreciate the mind the work came from, if not the work. If she’d been
able to carry on a conversation with Da Vinci at that moment she would have enjoyed that, and
David might have even managed it…but she was going to allow brilliance and caprice to hold its
historical moment without her intrusion.
All the artists had tried and succeeded or failed to say something profound, and these pieces spoke to someone, somewhere, if not to her.

She reset the room to make sure she could reverse what she’d done, that satisfying step unavailable in the outside world.

She looked at the restored objects with destructive impulses purged. Maybe Faberge had no choices and to destroy his work was an insult to what the man himself had suffered, forced to make toys for dangerous children with his genius.

Maybe he’d been an insufferable asshole.

It wasn’t really for her to say or judge, and once again it wasn’t about her, but about the flow of living dynamic character that she wished to preserve, regardless of its museums or motivations. Now the ugly seemed endearing.

She called up the library of Alexandria and chased down questions about Faberge and was not terribly enlightened, but did feel the burden of ignorance more heavily. Russia, a country who had adopted the habits and language of the French at court in order to appear less barbaric to the wider world.

Jane found herself wanting to tell Russia to tell the rest of the world to fuck off, speak Russian, and then sympathized with the pressures that caused that change, then realized the Russian imperial family had died in the snow under gunfire.

Maybe none of them had real choices.

After perusing the art a bit longer and then really not wanting to delve into more lives and consequences as a result of her supposed irresponsibility spree when she should be focusing, she changed the template to darkness with just local illumination.

On a sudden impulse she opened just a voice channel to Vraen.

Jane said “Hey.”

There was some hesitation and then a returning, eerie sound, her voice, slightly different, but the same inflection, like a frosted mirror “Hey.”

Jane asked “Got a minute?”

Vraen answered “Sure.”

Jane barreled through, no real idea why she’d called “I was thinking about you, which turned into calling you. I’m inside the Normandy’s computer systems. Or my brain is, my body is outside, paralyzed. Which seems appropriate. I have no real idea why I called you, but I figured…you’d understand that.”

The voice returning sounded like it was smiling “Liara told me about that interface thing. She’s fascinated.”

Jane asked “Do you miss her?”

Vraen answered “Yes. She’s staying though. A real Prothean. That’s her jackpot.”

Jane said drily “You’re welcome on the ship if you want to join her. I offered it to her, I’ll offer it to
you, you can stay here or move to Eurydice or any other of our outposts, or we can get you a new one. Anytime. The Prothean himself is kind of an ass.”

Vraen laughed “Thank you. I might visit. I’ve heard that too, about the Prothean. Are you okay?”

Jane said somewhat sternly “I think that’s my line. Yeah, I’m okay. Thinking about next steps. Jumping through hoops on fire. Business as usual. Are you okay?”

Vraen answered, amusement in her voice “Yeah. What we’re doing here is interesting. I’m getting a handle on being a new person. I met Thane. Briefly. He seems…terrifying.”

Jane grinned, a warm flush to her neck “Yes. Definitely that. Are you putting together a harem?”

Vraen answered “Oh hell no. I’m still in the ‘who am I’ phase and no so much with the ‘who are they’ yet. You know the weirdest thing?”

Jane asked dutifully “What’s the weirdest thing?”

Vraen said, slight shock coloring her voice “I want to talk to mom. I can’t figure out why, but probably because I never wanted to and now I can’t.”

Jane smiled slightly and said “Yeah, that’s one of the weirder things I’ve heard, but I guess it makes sense. I had thought…briefly…maybe that since I’d died and come back…that would make a difference. I think I even had a few seconds of that leaping, searing hope that I tried so hard to get rid of and I thought was gone for good. I’m sorry I ruined your chances. My bet is that if I sent any communication now, she’d turn it over to Alliance command, not that they wouldn’t already have seventeen copies, and try to keep a civil conversation up when what she really wants to do is cut me off entirely for having the gall to be non Alliance and being indoctrinated. She’d correspond with me to see if she could gain intelligence she could hand over. I’m guessing her main emotion would be irritation at me putting her rank at risk through association. I can send you copies of the correspondence I sent and received right after I came back and since. She did not approve of Cerberus either. But…if you want…write something. I’ll send it as me. We’ll see what happens.”

Vraen considered and said “I’ll think about it.”

Jane said thoughtfully “It would be an interesting writing exercise.”

Vraen said, as though she had been contacted for her Shadow Broker intel and not for the person she was, and Jane wasn’t sure if that’s what she needed to hear or not “You know you’re fucked, right?”

Jane sighed and said “Yeah. I know.”

Vraen said carefully “You picked a side. You have to be a side.”

Jane closed her propriocepting eyes and said “Yeah. I know.”

Vraen said “Okay. We’ll do everything we can from here. It’s a lot. This is actually…fun.”

Jane’s smile grew “I’m glad to hear it. You going to be around for a while or are you considering disappearing one way or the other?”

Vraen said bluntly “Dying didn’t take. You’d think you for one would know better…turns out you did. I want this fight.”

Jane said quietly “That’s why I did it.”
Vraen answered “That’s why we’re doing it.”

Jane said slowly “If I could do it alone, I would, but it turns out… I have to pick sides when I’d rather just let things fall to free will.”

Vraen said with a hint of steel “Free will doesn’t exist anymore for a lot of people. It won’t if you don’t move. Fast. Now. Hard. With people that used to be on your side thinking you’re their enemy.”

Jane sighed and said “Yeah. I did that with Cerberus. I’m capable. I had hoped it would not be necessary, that we’d all pull together, but today is the conditional death of that hope and the conditional building of plans that allow me the autonomy I need. I might have been able to pull everyone together, but there’s this stuff in my spine… With what I have to do, with what I want to do…the Council is going to turn on me. I might even have to make a move where I clear the Citadel. I’m going to have to look for alternatives to mass effect relays. If I can find that, I’m going to advocate destroying them. I’m going to look like an indoctrinated faction leader. I can’t get around it.”

Vraen sighed but did not sound surprised. With what Vraen had been seeing, she’d likely not had to take a terribly far ride to reach Jane’s concerns. Vraen said “The loss of the Council is not that much of a loss. Although on the surface there’s a muddle of motivation, I think from what I see that people will follow you. I know you don’t want that, but it isn’t about want, it’s about what will get things done. You’ve spent more time in the political arena lately, you have gravitas…and a game face and a kickass dress. The Council was always composed of political creatures and money and authority can be gained in other ways. You can get around some of it, just not… all of it.”

Jane said, rubbing her fake temples, it still felt good “Thane designed that dress. They both taught me how to dance. I’m learning new skills. Now I’m going to have to learn Prophet. If I create shadow organizations to do things I don’t want to be seen or known to be doing, I’ll still be suspected anyway because it will ultimately benefit me. I can’t hide behind a spokesperson because I need to use the authority, the only authority I have, my identity. There are no factions that want to do what I want to do, and there is nothing I can do to make what I want happen without it looking radical and by association indoctrinated. I can’t afford to only make diplomatic friends slowly. Thane has been teaching me to play a Drell strategy game, Pon-Ifa. He habitually kicks my ass, but without his guidance…I don’t think I could do this. My brain is built differently, literally and figuratively after close contact with him. I still need to try to make diplomatic friends slowly, but I can’t rely on that and I need to make decisive moves simultaneously that may betray those diplomatic friends, at least on the surface. I have to do both and they have to work perfectly. I don’t have time. I’m afraid if I attempt to include or convince everyone, I’ll diplomatically be watching worlds burn. Let me give you an example. I truly believe, I have no doubt, you’ve seen enough of it to know why we hate the Citadel. Guardians, the hidden relays, all the little mysterious bits and pieces…I think it’s a death trap. I can’t prove it. But I want people off. If I make that a public stance, then I’m in the same boat I was when I went after Saren. I look crazy and vengeful and I look like I’ve provoked an attack. I would have done better to just ignore the council, amass a force, go after Saren myself, take him down at Virmire. And Kaidan…” She shook her head, knowing that she did not have to explain, and that is why this conversation was necessary “And Kaidan would be here. I finally did that, went rogue, took down the Collector base. Now I need to apply that to worlds and systems. I need enough force. I need enough authority. There is no other way to get that unless I take it. I have to build this… super weapon thing…and it’s either a huge waste of time or our salvation and I have no idea right now…and I need wiser minds than I to make that call. I’m surrounded by the best…and I know I’m right…the question is will I stare down the barrel of a gun if necessary and shoot a Councilor in the head if they stand between me and what I need? What everyone needs? Well, at least I know I’m not indoctrinated or else these thoughts might be a little scary, you know?”
Vraen said thoughtfully “You’re not alone. If you make your own law, you at least have people with you who will follow you. What you’ve done is impressive. I think you can do it. You can leapfrog your way to an army, and maybe diplomacy becomes irrelevant because what you need and what you want, you can get for yourself.”

Jane said tiredly “I have to. I don’t see any other way. I need everything mobile. Not just an army, but supply ships, farm ships, medical ships, fuel. We have Geth and now Quarians, but the council races…”

Vraen continued “Have not experienced enough pain to plan.”

Jane thought that was well put, followed up with “This Crucible thing is insane. What I want to do is insane. Even I know it. It’s not going to be hard for everyone else to know it.”

Vraen was silent for a few a moments and then said “We’re reasonably good at getting fucked and getting un-fucked. It’ll come to you.”

Jane laughed and said “I am so glad there are people on this ship that are much smarter than I am.”

Vraen answered “I know the feeling.”

Jane started to make a list “So we need an army, but not anywhere that can be found. We need a secret army that recruits and transports in secret.”

Vraen considered “Quarians haven’t had a base for a long time. Study their methods.”

Jane said “I’m on the way to Rannoch for some tips. Not that I’m going to announce it. I’m wondering if we can preserve life on the run. If I only had an alternative to the Mass Effect relays I could start on shutting them down. I’d never get consent, it would be terrorism. Any infrastructure I built would rely on the relays for coordination, transportation and communication. Even if I terrorize our asses back into the pre-FTL age, that just means the Reapers will take some more time to get here and we’ll be crippled when they do. We’ve relied on their infrastructure for our infrastructure.”

There was silence for a while and she chewed on that. Not much more to say beyond terrorism and crippled.

Vraen said slowly “Hey, did you sleep with Feron?”

Jane said “What? No. Since rebirth, only Garrus and Thane.”

Vraen considered slowly “Maybe the mom thing wasn’t the weirdest. Maybe looking at people and thinking ‘I wonder if I have slept with them’ is the weirdest.”

Jane laughed, hard, to the point of coughing and felt better with the billowing humor that came from this strange source. Jane said “Prothean wants to sleep with me. Don’t let him touch you, or do…in fact…maybe talk Liara into convincing him to bring him back to you and then all three of you can do some research.”

Vraen answered “Liara’s about my speed right now. My speed is slow. Is one Turian and one Drell enough for you?”

Jane considered her answer and then said “Yes. Not sure how much you know. Behind the scenes, personally, it’s been…romantic in ways when I expected lust. There’s lust too…but Garrus and I danced before his Avah and managed to bond to Thane and me through force of will, Thane convinced the relocated Tseni clan to make me a Tseni gown and we had a wrist binding ceremony
where he wore his own Tseni. I have…family.”

Vraen said with surprised warmth “I’m glad. Tseni? No kidding? The cursed Drell cloth?”

Jane nodded “No kidding.”

Vraen then asked “What was being indoctrinated like?”

Jane considered, time away from the event and the clinical descriptions over and over “Like falling asleep when you know you need to stay awake to stay alive. Then it’s a dream where you only wake for seven seconds at a time.”

Vraen asked softly “Where did those seven seconds come from?”

Jane answered “Thane’s skin. The Normandy’s deck. Garrus’s eyes.” She made another impulsive decision and said “You should know. I didn’t tell you at first, but now you’ve met Thane, you’ve done your own independent research…did he bring Yahlis with him?”

Vraen said neutrally “No. At least he didn’t introduce us.”

Jane said quietly “It affects you because it happened to you. I’m assuming with David’s security protocols and with your security protocols we won’t be monitored, but I need to tell you. When I was indoctrinated, Yahlis got me to where I told her everything. Absolutely everything. Then Thane saw the surveillance of her peeling my brain like a grape. They then both risked their lives to destroy the records and kill everyone involved with my abduction. No records remain, but Yahlis indoctrinated me, used her influence over me to create a romantic and sexual relationship. I fell in love with her, hard, and from her subsequent actions…it seems she fell back. The only reason why I survived is that she gave me a chance at those seven seconds. So I’m going to tell you that these two people…Thane and Yahlis…know you. They will not betray you. They would both follow any command you gave. I didn’t earn that, we earned that. They know about Corbin. They know everything. Drell assassins seem to have a type…and we’re it. I don’t want to get anywhere near Yahlis again, but I let her out because she can save the Drell people and I believe she will. Thane will help. I didn’t tell you because…it’s so fucking complicated and trust was spare on the ground when you first woke up. If by now you are in, then you are in. You already know Garrus loves you, always will. You should know Thane loves you. Yahlis loves you. They always will. If I am gone…if you need anything…I swear by those seven seconds…they will help and not ask for anything in return. I wasn’t going to tell you…but you’ve met him. It matters. If your lives intersect, it matters. I trust him and I trust in his discretion, entirely, and in Yahlis’s, just because of who they are. They can hide it. You can hide it. But I don’t want you to get blindsided. Just get used to being known to your bones and having that be casual information not worthy of notice. There are still some things that are about us and not about me.”

There was silence, and a clearing of the frosted throat, and Vraen said “Okay.”

Jane would have to give her time. Jane asked “What does it feel like to not have Commander Shepard as part of your resume?”

Vraen said softly “Here at least it’s okay. Feron, Kolyat and Liara know, so in a way at least I have some continuity. I didn’t have to manufacture a new personality, I don’t have to cover or lie. I was able to ease into full purple with help. Liara’s been in my head before and since…she makes it easy. Liara knows about Corbin. I know what you mean about trust and complication. Nobody else will know. In one way it’s just another story about the Shepard legend and for me at least I wasn’t Shepard anymore. I let it go and I trust Liara. We…trust Liara. And she trusts us, the more she knew, the better able I was to become Vraen by choice. I was able to let go of our past because I need to
invent a new one. The more time passes and the more divergence I have, the more memories I make
to call my own, the steadier I feel. I meet new people that already know me. I thank you for carrying
on an expectation that I should be respected by proxy. I would never have guessed that Thane was
even tangentially acquainted with you. Polite, distant…very Drell. Didn’t think to research him
before his arrival, and then…well. Interesting person. Feron and Kolyat are more like Urem…more
cosmopolitan. Thane is…not.”

Jane said lightly “He’s made of the Gods and the sand of Rakhana. You going to be okay with your
continuity?”

Vraen said warmly “Yeah. I am. I’m surrounded by extraordinary people, I don’t want to let them
down or be shown up. I have information at my fingertips that I never would have thought possible. I
feel lucky. Remember all those times we wanted to know who the Shadow Broker was and never
knew? Well, tah dah.”

Jane said with gratitude “Thank you for taking my call.”

Vraen answered “Thank you for letting me know who you slept with.”

Jane said diplomatically “You are very welcome. Consider that the complete list.”

Vraen asked “Really?”

Jane closed her eyes and nodded and said “Really. Despite enthusiastic Prothean. You sure you can’t
take him off my hands?”

She was getting tired, she could feel the gauge fill up, external input from her body. Hunger, need for
rest, need for maintenance. She enjoyed muting it for a little while, just because she could…and then
decided she had acted out enough for one day. She would take what she’d learned in here and go
apply it to reality.

She was about to go take care of that, but got an incoming call from Wrex. She fortunately was not
all that far gone and her gear shift took care of it. This apparently wasn’t something to be discussing
in a hallway. She got to the conference room before he completely lost what shreds of cool he had.

Wrex was bellowing and she was used to that, so she listened carefully. “The varren humping
Salarians took potentially fertile females from Tuchanka. That whole thing with Maelon’s research,
they took Krogan females to Sur’Kesh and they’ve had them there like lab animals. I’m about to go
to war, Shepard. If that ruins your plans for galactic peace and cooperation, blame the Salarians.”

Jane thought carefully and then said “What is your evidence?”

Wrex showed her a clip of surveillance of what looked like a zoo and a lab. She had never seen a
Krogan female, but that was what one probably looked like. Her jaw set and she was icily angry.
That swept away all conflict she had going. She said bitterly “The Dalatrass is impossible. I’ve tried
to work with her, and you will be happy to know I’d side with the Krogan over her scheming ass
every day.” She was aware that Wrex needed her help. Yes, this was friendship, and trust, and she
was grateful for it, but she felt the clock ease a tad when she realized he wasn’t just warning her. She
moved to reassure him “I’m with you.”

Wrex calmed a bit and said “Good. I’ve got problems of my own here. I’m trying to buck all our
traditions, get us to rebuild. I might want to wring the neck of every duct rat Salarian myself, but I
have my people to think about. I can’t go to war. I can’t risk the lives of the females in a direct
assault. I figured…since you are good at getting things done…”

Her mind was churning over the possibilities. She did not think that even direct confrontation with Salarians or the Council would result in much other than the regrettable death of female Krogan. She said “Glad you did, Wrex. I was considering just giving up on the Krogan and going about uplifting the Yahg myself.”

Wrex laughed as she stared off a moment. She said “How much do you trust Padok?”

Wrex shrugged “I wouldn’t have known if he hadn’t contacted me. He’s about the only Salarian I’m not ready to spit roast. Well, him and Mordin.”

She said calmly “Mordin kept Maelon’s research.” She had blank moments, long thoughts, sitting and staring while Wrex kept blessedly quiet. She thought she might have something but it sounded reckless and dangerous. Not as reckless as a Krogan direct assault.

She smiled and said “How do you feel about Batarian slavers making off with some valuable lab equipment and zoo exhibits? Looks like I’m a pirate again.”

Wrex said, confused “You’re going to have to explain that one to me.”

Jane nodded and said “I need you to contact Padok. He needs to disable security but not surveillance. We can make some sort of late night, downtime raid, or whenever he can manage. He can leave with us, fake his death. Offer him a job researching fixing the genophage, making up for Salarian sins. I have a Batarian cruiser for bait. We can have the Normandy there but stealthed. We make a raid, look like Batarians, Padok makes sure we can get in and out with the females. We get observed as Batarians, or hire actual Batarians. Depending on pursuit, we can sacrifice the cruiser, making it look like all hands were lost. Salarians have nothing to pursue. They won’t complain to the Council because they should not have a zoo in the first place. We run a con and a blow off. We take the females to Eurydice Station – Cerberus’s old base - and Mordin and Padok work on what happened and what to do.”

Wrex said “We need the genophage reversed. If Mordin and Padok can do it, I will let them stay at Euridice.”

Jane nodded and said “I’m with you there. I think you are marginally better than the Yahg.”

Wrex laughed and said “Yeah, and you’re marginally better than a Salarian.”

Jane said seriously “I need you. I need the Krogan. I’m doing this because it is the right thing to do and because I can…and I also think the Genophage needs to be reversed. It’s not because your people are fodder. It’s because your people are people. Mordin will work to reverse it. He has a phenomenal lab. Wrex, I am your friend, and you know the difference between Command and friendship, but I need Command, friendship and personal sacrifice from everyone. I have the Geth. I have the Quarians. I need the Krogan.”

Wrex said solemnly “Get this done and every Krogan stands at your side.”

Jane nodded and said “I need them now. Whether or not I succeed. All I ask for now is that if it comes up that I need a Krogan raid in the same way right now I need a Batarian raid, that you cough up.”

Wrex laughed and said “I think Grunt would like that.”

Jane grinned with genuine pleasure “I think I would like that too. I am giving you early warning. Get
your people off Tuchanka. Get as many people away from populated centers as you can. Get up into ships. Get infrastructure and farms in the sky. Get fuel sources. I’m telling you directly as the leader of the Krogan people, it is war, it’s now, and we don’t have any more time.”

Wrex nodded and said “All right. I can get started on that.”

She said as a side note “If you have any concerns about my indoctrination, ask now.”

Wrex asked with a grin “Did it tickle?” Then he sobered and said bluntly “Anybody who speaks against you gets a headache or hole.”

She thought of Thane’s words - a mouth that moves against her loses a tongue, a hand that moves against her loses its fingers.

She said gratefully “With friends like you, Wrex…we’re gonna win this thing.”

Wrex said confidently “Salarians don’t live long enough to realize that intelligence is not the same as wisdom.”

She said “Damn, Wrex, that sounded…like you’re a leader.”

Wrex snorted and said “Or that I can fake it, anyway.”

Jane laughed “Yeah. I can do that too. Okay, you go coordinate with Padok, I’ll talk to Mordin. We’ll get them to safety. I’m on it.”

Wrex said with the gravity of oath “We’re on it. It will stay that way. Tuchanka is with you.”

She had a long conference with Mordin, who could directly contact Padok without surveillance and without suspicion, and she left it to those gentlemen to hash out preliminary plans. They had to take time for planning. The females were fragile but stable and Padok could preserve their lives. Wrex understood it would take time and they had to set it up just right.

She was very tired, but she had to do one more thing before sleeping. Not because she would change her mind but because it was impossible that Liara knew and Garrus did not. She could not put the information straight into his mind the same way Vraen did with Liara, but she could no longer bear excluding him from the truth, now that the pool of truth was spreading.

Garrus was in her cabin, quietly working on the innards of guns. She had made sure she got a meal and a few deep breaths first.

She took his hand, led him to the couch, and settled into his lap. Maybe it was in her scent, likely the day was reflected there in chaos and flood. She leaned up to his ear and started whispering. “The secrets I have kept belong to you. I have not told you for so many reasons and none of them matter any longer. Yahlis knows. Thane knows. Vraen knows. Now I know Liara knows and it is impossible that you don’t know. It’s big because it defined who I am, or I have defined what it was, it’s small because it’s over, but it no longer belongs to just me no matter its impact or size. I was afraid you would not understand, but I was wrong to keep it from you and count your reaction as one of my reasons. I told myself…and Thane…that I was doing it to protect you and that was true but not true. I was protecting myself, but that is now your right, something you’ve given without being asked. You deserve the truth. You deserve your reaction, whatever it is. What matters is that you bonded to me and I want to honor that. You asked me for nothing, no promises, but there is a promise in the Drell ceremony that I should give to you because you deserve it even if I have not
known how to give it. I unclenched my fist and the burdens within are ours and not mine alone. You promised me no fear, no failing, no folly and you deserve the same in return.”

She wanted to pull back and look in his eyes, but she was afraid she’d choke and hesitate, so she followed the downward pull of flooding truth “When I was nineteen, a friend of mine in school was being abused. I tried to gather intel on the man who was abusing her. I thought he would escape the law, I thought I might have to kill him. I wanted to kill him. I did not think I could prove who he was, but I knew. Once I knew, I didn’t want to prove it any more. I wanted to do it myself. I arranged for hacked evidence of me taking a trip to Mars that never existed. I stalked him. He caught me. He tied me to a bed, raped me, promised to kill me as he’d killed other women, drop my body in a well along with them. He did not give me water or food for four days. On the fourth day, I got free. I sawed one of the ropes holding me apart with friction. I went back to that bed with a box cutter and when he came back to me, when he was inside, I cut his throat. I burned down that cabin. I found the girls in the well and got them exhumed anonymously. All the Alliance knew was that I went AWOL. He is still listed as missing. My cover story of Mars held. It is ugly, and it is twisted, and I’m alive because of my capacity for premeditated murder. Yahlis pulled every detail of this out of my head. She did it while she was my lover, for what seemed like an eternity. I told her everything. I was in love with her, entirely, completely in love with her. That is why I could not bear to be touched. That…is why Thane thought I should kill him. Because he knew every sordid bit of shadow pulled from me against my will. The bones of my life, dug up and displayed. They both offered to die to keep that information from escaping into the world. They both risked their lives to bury that truth, bury my abduction. I didn’t tell you because you already understood me without need for words, but I’m telling you now because other people know and you deserve to be one of them, have always deserved to know. You should have been the first, and the only. You have always deserved my truths. It is not that you do not deserve trust, it is that I did not know how to give it. This was taken from me, but you are the first, the only person I give it to freely, because of your patience, because of your understanding, because I want to and not because I have to. I still don’t want anybody else to know, but when we are anywhere that can’t be monitored, or if we whisper, I will answer any question you ask. I promise you honesty. I’m sorry for not granting you what was yours while you gave me everything. I wish I had done this before your bond. I wish I knew how to be a better person. You deserve a woman with a cleaner past. I can’t be her, but I love you, and you have always deserved better.”

She buried her head, throat dry, against his shoulder. He had begun to tremble somewhere in the middle of there and she had started to talk faster, tense babbling. His arms tightened around her, his crest turned down to her hiding forehead. His voice reflected knotted anxiety and relief, absorption of horror and the release of being finally told, finally trusted.

She was deeply ashamed of having to whisper, of having held herself separate. She was afraid it was too late. She was afraid she’d done it because she could not afford to think about this anymore. It was painful to think about or look at Garrus and know what she’d held back willfully. She could not bear that guilt. He would never have presumed to behave as though he understood. If he had died, her regret would have been infinite, crushing. She could no longer hold the center of her self without him being a part. She didn’t feel brave but penitent. She wasn’t giving him something he needed, she was giving him what she needed. Still selfish.

He was anxious and relieved, she was ashamed and relieved…and his hoarse voice sounded loud in her ears after her whispers “Jane, I never doubted that you trusted me. Now you never need to doubt that you trust me. You are mine. I am yours. No truth or lie, told or withheld, from the moment we chose to be together, will ever, has ever changed that.”

Because he said it, it was true. That’s all she needed to know as she let the rest slip from her mind, attention only paid to the relief and not the cause. She lifted her head to kiss him. The looming
shadow in front of them grew and they would face that now and later. She had no more time for regrets or shadows between them in any future moments they would be lucky enough to share. She closed her eyes to bask for as long as she could in his certainty and acceptance.

It was big and small, did not change the way he saw her or the way she saw herself, but it did make potentials sharpen into reality. All the possible projected shadows that had bled out from her feet from all the angles he’d considered, all the light he had tried to shine on her to catch a glimpse of that truth had coalesced into a reality he had not imagined. It horrified him, but it was specific, could be contained and was real and solid where there had been only darkness before. They had, could, would face horrors together.

It could be solidly in the past.

All of his doubts or distance she imagined radiating from him with the revealing of truth were simply not there, had never been there, would never be there.

They could be solidly in the present.

As though to prove words and the past did not matter, reaction to it was gone from him. He drew his face back and all she saw was love in his eyes, felt the steady hold of his limbs. She was fully his, all the yes she had, nothing held back. It would not diminish trust or love, those having grown beyond the bounds of being contained through acts of will. Her telling him had been out of her control, deserved and fated at the right time, the same way his bond had been out of his control, deserved and fated at the right time.

She had a fleeting thought that Thane would be proud of her.

She was tentatively proud of herself.

Garrus was clearly proud of her but he always was and there were the eyes that had saved her over and over with what they saw, what they said, what they meant.

She had learned his body, his clothes, the ways to get to him fastest, her hands moving sure over his shoulders, smooth and sure without catches or snags. His hands moved to her clothes, removing them whole, preserving them without tearing with some unspoken shared urge to watch each other’s eyes, see the control in each other, all the time in the world. Turian time she’d learned to keep, a reverent pace to passion. The clothes they wore at this moment were as important as Tseni, as important as a bejeweled Kerim dress and Turian dress uniform, the moment deserving of preservation and respect.

With his now familiar strength, removing clothing was easy as he held himself up with one arm, held her entirely up with one arm. They shifted and slid clothing away with the satisfaction of familiarity, practice and necessity. He watched her eyes unless cloth was briefly in the way. He moved his thumbs to her throat, tilting her head back, teeth and tongue at her exposed skin. Her hands moved to claim scent. His teeth moved to claim blood.

He was inside in a reverent claiming, whispered ceremony and covenant. His whispered name for her was Jane, and she still had no more fitting name for him than Garrus. It suited them, illusions and shadows dispelled, holding to each other in their mortality and meaning.
The night in Garrus’s arms gave her all she needed to start her day well, whispers and strokes and melting. Still, it was always difficult to pull away, and getting harder to do as time went by. She felt the anticipation of yearning to return to him before his body had left hers. Garrus was turning out to be as addictive as Thane, the talons and teeth of bonding chemistry dug deep into the tender parts of her, her mind, her heart.

She waited until he was fully dressed as was respectful tradition and sat down on his lap to have a conversation about future strategy. She’d left him to his own devices about Palaven. In her triple checking tradition, she had done her own research. She already knew Palaven was strained and tenuous. Add in the connection of Palaven to C-Sec and the Citadel and she knew support for her would tear along well established lines.

She said quietly “We were military and then we were pirates, then we were diplomats. Now we need to appear to be military and military while simultaneously being pirates.” His response was silence. She said quietly “I haven’t asked it of you, but I need Archangel as well as Garrus Vakarian. Not Archangel’s name, but the man that earned that reputation, the man that Tim could not identify. I need the face of Garrus Vakarian and I need to put him at risk with the actions of Archangel.”

His hand trailed through her hair, curling a long strand through his finger. She said “You’re better at Pon-Ifa than I am. This may not come as a surprise. The extent though…that may come as a surprise. When I say my plans are risky, audacious and ambitious, I’m using the superlative forms of those words.”

She covered more specific instances “We need all channels we already have, but I need you to recruit the ex-indoctrinated and the disaffected from Turian ranks to join a new infrastructure. I’m thinking of using different figureheads, maybe identities generated by EDI and David. I need you to supervise the Turian campaign. I need an army. I need medical ships, transport ships, fuel resources, research labs, cash resources, insider intelligence. We need to get or build some ships like the Normandy. We need more ships with stealth technology. If Commander Shepard comes out publically advocating for evacuating city centers, developing an alternative army, cautioning about the Citadel or flat out demanding that people abandon the Citadel, every move I make will be compared to that standard. Any group that takes action to further those goals will be attributed to me. Diplomatically I need to keep my cool. As the public face of Shepard I need to advocate cooperation and rights for all sentient life, attempt to integrate Geth into mainstream acceptance. I need to finance and publicly support clinics. That I can do as a figurehead. You need to keep hammering on Palaven engaging and cooperating with that agenda. I need rock solid security and separation between those actions and the fact that we will be doing a great deal of underhanded deal making. I’ve decided the Crucible will remain my undisclosed project. I don’t want the name Shepard and “Doomsday Weapon” to be conflated. I don’t want Palaven or Earth or Thessia to contribute to that project and then hold a campaign individually or together as Council races to seize control. But I do need to recruit individual agents to work on it. I’ve nearly entirely written off the Salarians as willing to cooperate in anything. They’re too twisted up in their own projects to see outside. We already have Geth and Quarians and now Wrex’s support. Turns out the Salarians stole some potentially fertile Krogan females from Tuchanka and I’m going to go do the pirate thing, make it look like a Batarian raid absconded with them. I will deliver the Krogan females to Mordin and another interested Salarian, who will work on reversing the genophage. Only about a third of my life or less is going to be straightforward from now on. Another third will be secretive. Another third will be piratical.”

His only reaction had been a slight stilling and a tug on her hair after she discussed the Batarian raid.
He finally spoke “All right. I wish I had better news. I wish I could say Palaven was behind you. Palaven isn’t even behind itself right now.”

She said calmly “You can’t pass as a Batarian. You can’t go on the raid. I can. Kasumi can. Javik can. He’s got the head and the height for it. Kasumi and I can bulk ourselves up and out with projectors. You can’t make yourself look smaller or make your legs go the other way and I’ve grown fond of your fringe, don’t want you to shear it off.”

There was stillness and then a stream of cursing, quite a few of them apparently in Turian, things she could not get translated and with the tone of his voice, probably did not want to know.

She reiterated calmly and with Commander voice “Risky. Audacious. Ambitious.”

Garrus growled slightly and then said with an echo of that growl in his words “You are not going to ask me to go to Palaven or leave your side.” It was a statement.

She had considered it already, rejected the idea nearly immediately for personal reasons, then justified it professionally “No. Some of my more…ambitious ideas involve destroying Mass Effect relays…in that case, yes, I considered that we would have to split up, cover our home planets. Palaven needs you. Sounds good in theory, but in reality will devastate our infrastructure without me being certain I’ve affected Reaper infrastructure at all. The idea of splitting up…is impossible. I understand Thane leaving, though I don’t have to like it. His people are at constant and unique risk of not being able to survive at all. He is saving a measurable percentage of his people. Your people are just…”

He supplied, seemingly satisfied with the ‘no’ “Hide bound, complacent and just begging for a Reaper invasion to blame on someone else.”

She smiled, bitterly, but with a surge of satisfaction that he had the same read she did, the same read Vraen did, the same conclusion. “Yes. So are my people, and I’m not going to Earth. I might put your reputation at risk, and even your body at risk on missions, but I won’t risk you being captured or caught out alone if our double dealing and piracy is revealed. In theory we tap dance long enough so by the time we have what we need, we’re unstoppable and public opinion will not matter any longer. I need you behind stealth tech. You’re too important to risk.”

He nuzzled her hair and said “That’s my line.”

She said softly “You’ve said it enough, seemed to be my turn to say it. A lot of that decision is personal. I knew when it occurred to me that I would not seriously consider splitting up. I knew I would not send you away because I need you and I can’t…or won’t…choose to be apart from you.”

His hand came up to her throat and he tilted her head back, he lowered his mouth to her ear and said “Archangel insists you take his advice.”

She said “What would that be?”

He bit at the skin of her throat, not breaking, but a sharp jangling of sensation. He moved his mouth to her ear again, his hand caressing her throat “We make it a Blue Suns raid and not a Batarian raid. I have everything we need to know about Blue Suns operations between Zaeed and my interest in killing every one of them I met on Omega. Blue Suns is composed of Barians, humans and… Turians. Face shields and Blue Suns armor, all four of us can go in with voice distortion. The Salarins will go after the Blue Suns. We get on with saving the Krogan while two uncooperative factions who richly deserve to be duped deplete their resources hunting each other and not us.”
His hand stayed tight on her throat, his breath in her ear as powerful rushes of personal lust, professional gratitude and piratical glee hit her in concurrent waves. She said carefully, breathlessly “I am reminded of what a pirate captain’s second in command is called.”

The sound he made of “Mmmhm?” in casual warm question against her throat went straight to the rush of lust and strengthened it.

She twisted out of his grip, turned until she was taller than he was only by choosing to have her knees rest on top of his unyielding thighs. “First mate.” She lifted his face to hers with her thumbs along the sides of his mandible. She said with a satisfied tilt to her smile and voice “Please relay my thanks to Archangel for his advice and inform him that he will be very late for breakfast.”

Garrus’s smile was warm and his voice appropriately arrogant as he said “Just wait until you hear what sorts of ideas he has about easy targets for piracy. Whatever sort of ship you need…you’ll have…”

Simultaneously surging and swamped, the first real trickle of power back into her limbs after extended helplessness and despair caught her by welcome surprise. She said crisply “I am so glad to hear it. Now he is going to be late for lunch. Clothes. Off. I want to walk the plank.”

He laughed and said “That made no sense.”

She said haughtily “The clothes part did, right? I’ll explain the rest later.”

His hands moved to her hips as he said “Yes ma’am.”

They were late for lunch but did get some. Now she had to go do the Commander thing and check in personally with Javik. Regardless of the implied intimacy and her disinterest in it, she’d overcome stranger personal relationships with her crew.

She arranged to meet him in his quarters. He’d had water tables installed, constantly circulating.

She considered him, his back to her. She was good at empathy but she could not empathize because he was in fact too alien and to do so would be presumptuous. She was going to have to start with basics. She said “As the Commander of the Normandy it is my habit to speak to my crew members, get a read on what they need, what they want and let them know what I expect of them. I don’t want to insult you by asking basic questions, but I want to move carefully so I do not make assumptions. Bear with me. I have not met a Prothean before, and I will try to ask questions out of command concerns and not idle curiosity. I appreciate you helping Liara classify her research. I do not intend to frustrate you but no doubt will.”

He did not look at her, but said in grim tones “I must suggest something that I feel would increase your odds of success. If you are already doing it I congratulate you, if you not already doing it I must urge you to consider it.”

She nodded and said “Okay. Suggest.”

He turned to look at her directly although his hands were still submerged. He said “You must use the mechanics of indoctrination to gain the cooperation of all life forms. If you indoctrinate all life forms and dedicate them to your fight, you can win. You will deprive the Reapers of fodder and gain loyal troops. This is an advantage we did not have in our cycle and it is what makes your circumstances unique. Use the clinics to indoctrinate those who are not cooperative. During the war they will be an asset and not a liability. After the war the procedure can be reversed.”
During this she kept her face absolutely still as parts of her mind chimed in their opinions.

The Pon-Ifa player in her was ashamed she had not thought of it.

The Commander in her saw it as a factor she must consider. The fact that it had not occurred to her did not mean it had not occurred to others. Complications multiplied.

Jane as a person struggled with the goal of having a civil conversation with a Prothean and refused to give signs that she wanted to hit him and was about to throw up.

She met his gaze and tried to focus, tried to think, to communicate in a way that would preserve her command, preserve her authority and options. She said calmly “Do you volunteer to go first?” She held his gaze as he thought, and his answer was a slow smile that melted the scowl on his face.

Let him argue the other side, see how he did.

He turned his head away and dried his hands carefully, then turned back to face her, leaning back against the table.

She was scrambling to think of a logical and streamlined, easy way to explain but perhaps that question would do the trick.

He said in an appreciative voice “I should say yes.”

She answered with a light challenge “You could. With no risk. You likely know I would not drag you from this room and inject you on that basis. But you should be able to back up why you would say yes to someone whose…” She didn’t want to say mind “physiology you have not read, who would be willing to embrace indoctrination to eliminate argument.”

He said carefully “Why are Turians or Salarians or Asari not leading in this fight?”

She shrugged and said “They think they are. That has been part of the problem all along. They think they are. They have not been exposed to the real fight yet. They only have rumors. Some have chosen not to see because it is more convenient, some have chosen not to see because they are cowards.”

He asked sharply “Aren’t both forms of cowardice?”

She said “Not necessarily. I have met enough people to know they all contain different levels of courage and intelligence. Some people barely have what it takes to get up in the morning and get through their day, if they can’t see beyond that, that is not necessarily their fault. Everyone has a capacity, for some, just breathing is too much. Leaders reflect the capacity of their own people to confront trouble selfishly and not boldly or they would not be elected by those people”

He had a slight sneer to his voice “You justify weakness.”

She said “I am observant of capacity. Did all Protheans have the same capacity?”

His sneer deepened but only momentarily, then he seemed to remember they were in an educational and theoretical discussion and he was not defining policy “There is diversity in this cycle. I was born at the end of my cycle. Very few Protheans made it to adulthood and all were trained and steeped in war by the time I was born. The minds I encountered were similar out of necessity and lack of alternative.”

Having gained the moments to crystallize her viewpoint on the subject, she backtracked to
indoctrination and said “We have discovered the means of indoctrination and have been able to study it. Having been indoctrinated myself I can verify that the mechanics of indoctrination dull intellect and self preservation. It can only serve simple and set goals. It is not reactive, but absolute. It is also something born of necessity and lack of alternative. I needed a constant and determined indoctrinator, and it still did not work. I still rebelled. There is no flexibility in an indoctrinated person, and as time goes by, less and less in the way of initiative or the ability to plan. In my case and I imagine in any others, internal resources are exhausted fighting the indoctrination and very little is left for taking action. I believe it is because it inhibits self preservation and promotes a goal antithetical to survival, all those things our higher brains are wrapped around, the engine that fuels our intellect and choice. I could feed you moral outrage about your suggestion, and I have that as well, but I will give you some intellectual, concrete reasons why what you suggest would superficially work but ultimately fail. You see indoctrination as absolute, I see it as a fallible process with inflexible limitations. Sentient creatures have all evolved to survive in hostile environments. We had limited access to intellectual planning when we were evolving. At the base of every sentient brain is the need to survive. That is the first and foremost priority, beyond which nothing else can get done. Changing that, disallowing the input from that part of the brain, remotely, interferes with too many processes and inherently changes the way the brain works. Indoctrination has gas and brake only. It is not a delicate puppetry system, it is only acceleration and deceleration with an external source necessary for navigation. So from my point of view, there are those who are capable of the fight, have the capacity for the fight, and are motivated for the fight. Then there are others who have none of those things, but deserve to be protected. I know I can’t protect them all, but I prefer to direct resources toward that goal. I choose to protect diversity, not destroy or betray it. You assume all minds have the same capacity and that indoctrination is superior in providing motivation. I disagree. Strategically I also see that it could never be kept secret. Any large scale indoctrination initiative would be betrayed on the basis of intelligent, capable sentient creatures discovering its mechanic. Then I would lose all potential allies of free will and create further distracting distrust and conflict. Ideally your plan would have me gain everything, but the limitations of the indoctrination process, the secrecy and mechanics involved indicate it would not work.”

His cool appraisal studied her. His regard was unnerving. She wondered about cultural pacing. He was slow and steady, pauses in his delivery, and she focused on consciously slowing down her delivery.

He said quietly “I accept your assessment.”

She felt like saying “How very neutral of you” but was not on humor terms with him. As with many things and people under her command, enthusiasm had not been a requirement for service. Considering the matter closed she said “How has your stay on the Normandy suited you? Is there anything I can do to assist?”

He said evenly “I am disoriented but functional.”

She asked “Anything I can do to help you…orient?”

Please don’t ask if you can hold my hand. Please. Considering he had opened with the idea to indoctrinate everyone to unite under her banner, it wasn’t likely.

Javik said “The Asari has been asking me many questions. To some I do not know the answers. To many I do know the answers but I do not see the point in revealing them. I am a soldier, I prefer to fight. The Turian has been helpful in providing armor and weapons. The water tables are helpful. Ultimately I will be able to be a soldier and not a curiosity. On that day I will be less disoriented. But on that day the air will still be too thin, my skin will still have to touch things I do not, perhaps cannot understand, the food will still be sustaining but unpalatable, and if I am injured, we will discover if I
can be healed or if I die.”

She considered the list and thought that his point was that no, she could not help him orient. She was suddenly feeling empathy though. She looked around the solitary space, considered the isolation and disorientation. She said “I can answer your questions if you have any. I can listen to your concerns if you have them. You were intended to build a new civilization with people exactly like you. I would like your help to build one with people unlike you, unlike me. We’re going into battle together. Soon. We are going to Rannoch first, to make a public appearance, show support for the Quarians and Geth working together. On the ship we have interface pods where you would be able to create an internal space of your own inside the ship computers. You are a soldier, but you are a person, and it will not serve my ultimate goals for you to remain detached from the possibilities of the worlds or this ship. I would like for you to find something to live for, not just maintain something to kill for. Some of our fights will be public and some of them will be private. We are about to kidnap Krogan from the Salarians and you will be required to impersonate a Batarian.”

He stared at her as though that entire interlude was incomprehensible babble.

And they had been doing so well.

She tried again “All right then. I’m your Commander, but I’m also a person that believes in having a life beyond your job. For instance my relationships with Garrus Vakarian and Thane Krios motivate me to live. The Reapers motivate me to kill. You are motivated to kill. In your prior life, were you ever motivated to live? Please do not take this as an insult. I am trying to get a read on your mental state and your needs.”

He drew a deep breath, his blinks and pacing giving her another sense that his eye movements meant more to him than to her. He said carefully “In my time Protheans did not have a life beyond causing and avoiding death. We had time and energy only for survival, and the knowledge that what we had was insufficient. Perhaps we were not built that way. Perhaps there was no room in the compressed and pressured culture in which I was born.”

She asked carefully “No family? No friends? No lovers?”

His eyes bored into hers and he said “It would only be possible to show you. This is not a subject for words.”

It was a test, just as she suspected his assertion of compulsory indoctrination was some sort of test, she had no idea if she had succeeded or failed. She believed she had succeeded. Trust had to begin somewhere.

She said carefully “The Prothean beacon blew some fuses in my head. You need to trust me to not get you killed. I need to trust you to allow me to walk out of this room with my senses intact.”

His answer was solemn “Jane, I trust you to get me killed.”

The bottom dropped out of her gut and that statement soaked in, cold and final, reminiscent of Thane’s willingness to take poisoned food from her hand. She was not about to be a coward or ignore that statement or its ramifications. She held out her hand. She had not worn gloves or gauntlets and she was not going to stigmatize his ability. She came here seeking information and coordination and he had it.

He stepped forward and the hand he had spent much of his day clearing of disorientation reached voluntarily for hers.
Disorientation of a different sort spread through her. Direct assimilation was not like Asari mind joining, which was more of a blending. This was direct download, information there in what felt like instantaneous transfer. Part of her difficulty with the Prothean beacon was that it had been built for a Prothean to play through from beginning to end. As a human she did not have a player, only a very few index images, context stripped. The Cipher had only partially unlocked available information, in essence allowing more images. Javik gave her the depth and breadth of how to comprehend the images and also the intent. Layers and layers of information.

She suddenly knew things about Protheans, things about Javik, highlighted and guided. He covered her questions with events from his life.

Before Javik’s time female Protheans had been integrated entirely with male Protheans, served together, had a pair bond culture. By Javik’s birth, “Family” did not exist except as a memory. War and Reapers had turned gender into commodity and categorization of utility. Women had been sequestered on far-flung and secretive outposts, providing genetic material, the science of conception and accelerated development. Artificial intelligence programs maintained and raised children for war. Females would remain in these outposts and males would be raised to be soldiers. Birth was turned into desperate business to counteract attrition, but even the accelerated turnout of Prothean children in industrial crèches had been unable to replace dead and turned adults. About 200 years into the Reaper invasion, these outposts had begun to be infiltrated by indoctrinated forces. Javik was one of the last children to leave the crèche system before those outposts were converted to producing only females, indoctrinating them, and sending them back out against the male population.

Javik was approximately 44 years old in Earth terms, part of why he was considered an Avatar by his people. Most Protheans died in their teens, when they were sent out to fight. Prothean life span was no longer measurable, it had once been about 80 years, but no Prothean had lived to die of old age in Javik’s lifetime.

By the time Javik had been placed in cryo, there had been no new Prothean children, male or female, for years. Javik had never seen or touched an un-indoctrinated female of his own species. He had killed innumerable indoctrinated ones.

He was Vengeance because he had killed more of his own people than had been counted, his own survival and age the qualifications. No competition for that title.

He had a ship once. He had command, and it was a command of brutal necessity. By the time he had risen to command he saw the seed of betrayal in each person he encountered, seen in most horrifying clarity in himself. He was still fiercely loyal to them, pushed for perfection and success, did his best for them as a commander. Each one of them had been indoctrinated, sent after him personally until he had seen everyone under his command murdered or turned.

Ultimately he had been driven to cutting the throats of the last of his crew, watching the blood pulse and stop, ultimately dry before he would accept that they were dead and gone.

The name of Javik carried more renown than the name of Shepard. Javik had been forced to kill all those who knew it.

Javik could show her what happened at the end. She could show him what happened at the beginning.

Javik and Shepard shared the experience of Reapers calling them by name.

Javik and Shepard shared the experience of choosing to watch blood pump from a throat, to wait until it curdled and dried.
Javik had researched the concept of ‘sorry’ and it had not been available during his lifetime because failure meant death, not from superiors but from previous comrades. Touch had been shunned as ruinous but had been unavoidable at times. Javik through command had been forced to touch many in combat, through triage, and often felt the searing knowledge of a fellow Prothean’s pain and character either at the last moments of their life when Javik closed four eyes, or when their indoctrinated shadow horrors clawed at him to reach his skin.

Bond was not avoidable or voluntary. In Javik’s case, it had been counted among his talents. He was gifted at bond. He gained, absorbed and transferred information with a savant’s talent. As a result he bore the memories of uncounted Protheans. He had been identified early in his youth and had been called upon to imprint young Protheans with the template for soldiering, watching an endless line of similarly-minded young male Protheans go to war after his transferred skills and training.

Javik had Jane’s imprint, gained at a distance through referred memory of waking him, and then when she had gripped his wrists, searing who she was into his nervous system.

She was the first un-indoctrinated female he had encountered. Shepard was not of his own species, but she had the Prothean beacon in her mind, his final struggles in her head, and the unmistakable bearing of Command. She was the first example of genuine hope he had encountered after his had been smothered and had stayed that way for 50,000 years.

He would follow her.

He did not promise to hope himself.

Hope had the same meaning as family, something sundered, something poisoned, something lost.

Her cynical assumption of sex was degrees of importance below touch.

He now understood the power of her physiological template. She was healthy, she was whole, she had been indoctrinated and survived, succeeded.

The name of Shepard was powerful combined with the name of Javik.

Liara’s questions were difficult because yes, he was Prothean, but he was the product of a culture of necessity, and Liara’s assumptions of art, wisdom and sophistication had not been available to him except in memory.

Liara imagined Protheans as she hoped they once had been. He did not wish to break her mind or hope through informing her of exactly what Protheans had become.

With Shepard’s guidance he would attempt to tolerate hope and aspiration without considering them fatal wastes of time. He did not believe he could generate them himself, but he could perhaps learn to be in their presence without his grief and wrath overwhelming him. Why does this cycle deserve saving when his was gone? What made a human or an Asari or a Turian believe they could conquer when his people could not?

Those questions aside, he was not Justice, he was Vengeance. He had an Enemy and if they opposed the Reapers he was their ally. He would attempt to hold back his prophecies of loss and futility. He would attempt to accept that hope and choice still existed, could exist and the fight could still be won.

He would trust her to get him killed, because she would not permit him to be indoctrinated. She would not allow Javik to be turned against her and that was something he had not been able to do with all of those entrusted to follow him.
She held the potential to allow him to kill Reapers and not other Protheans.

Her femininity, her humanity, anything else about her did not matter, but that he was able to touch her and see that his death would be one that served Vengeance, and did not serve futility.

In his opinion they were too early in this cycle for Shepard to understand what Javik had seen, and perhaps he would reach old age before humans, Asari, Turians, Salarrians, Drell...were forced to cannibalize themselves emotionally and physically.

Perhaps they would win.

Had he the ability to understand indoctrination this early in his own cycle, had he been in command, he would have indoctrinated those who opposed him.

Had he known a mind like Shepard’s he would have imprinted that beside his own in new soldiers to give them guile and hope.

He could touch her and could touch hope, if she would permit it.

She could not answer him. It did not work that way. No internal mouth to speak. She could play but not record her own message. She felt only the shape but not the whole of his despair. He would not give that to her, but trusted her to infer the extent, and the twisting, sundering gravity that dictated the shape of his mind.

He withdrew his hand, and she felt profoundly lonely. It was almost an objective experience, like feeling warmth withdraw into precipitous cold.

She had answers to questions. He desired not answers, but actions.

It had taken 90 seconds.

She was still and her stunned state could only offer the words ‘Good talk...’ in her head, but she could not say that. She had no idea what to say.

His eyes raised to hers and he said “I appreciate the opportunity.”

She felt the humility she had induced in herself when she began her incarceration under Yahlis, when she had compared her trials to Feron, to Garrus, to Thane, her torments measured in four days and ultimately seven weeks, next to years of suffering of her heroes.

Even Thane had six years of family.

Javik’s life had been futile torture in the service of Vengeance. It was all that was left in the end.

She said quietly “I appreciate the dedication.”

She gave him credit for attempting humor when he said “Now I must ask. What is a Batarian?”

She explained Batarians. She explained the raid. He listened.

She eventually asked “So…you going to wash your hands now?”

He shook his head in the negative.

She smiled and took her leave.
Once again they had an understanding. He understood her, and she’d seen everything he stood for and they were both inspired and humbled.

She retreated to her cabin, feeling like the Library of Alexandria had been put inside her head. She now had the understanding and mechanics of Prothean memory, and she could control the input from the Beacon. That would have been very helpful three years ago…

Javik had given a great deal to her. Prothean tactics, understanding of his abilities, much of his life. She assumed the amount of information was given to compensate for the amount of information that had been involuntarily given.

She knew he would be a superlative squad mate.

She felt safer with him on the ship for the first time instead of feeling a massive vulnerability.

She knew she could, in fact, ask him to gain information through touch and she would be willing to touch him again.

She lost track of time. She barely noticed when Garrus came in, carrying a disc of some sort. Her smile was gentle as he bent to her for a kiss. He said with his own smile “Is that smile for me or for a good day?”

She shrugged and said “It can be both. I touched Javik.”

He said curiously “Really. What’s the occasion?”

She got distracted and pointed at the disc in his hands “You first, what’s that?”

He shook his head and said “No way. Priority already determined.” He hid it behind his back.

She said dutifully “It was done to establish trust, which it did. He shared Prothean memory techniques so I now understand the Beacon better and him better. Alas for the person listening to the story, no drama, no sex. Well, some drama, just not between us. He gave me a lot of his own memories. I’m assuming that was to compensate for those taken. Short story…the man has had a terrible life. The Normandy and I offer him hope. He offers enthusiastic mayhem. We have come to an accord.”

Garrus sounded vaguely disappointed when he said “Damn. No sex. My intellectual curiosity remains.”

Jane said quietly “He has never seen a female of his own species. They were all indoctrinated and sent after the males. So the whole thing about touching and sex was my presumption. Turns out he has much more basic needs, like not being indoctrinated.”

Garrus’s brow plates wavered, then drew together and he said with a depth of sympathy “Okay. Yes. We can do that, the not indoctrinated thing. You okay?”

She nodded “I’m okay. He’s okay. Extra special determined to kill Reapers together.”

He trailed fingers through her hair and said “Good.” He brought out the disc from behind his back and said “Present for you.”

She raised a brow and said “What’s the occasion?”
He said lightly “One year anniversary of you promising to not give stupid orders.”

She laughed, thinking about the independent contractor conversation, a room on Illium, Thane’s hands in her hair and Garrus’s mouth on hers.

It looked like it was wrapped in foil. She raised a brow.

He urged “Just open it.”

She tore the thick paper with foil ornamentation and inside was chocolate in the shape of an old fashioned round clock with hands frozen on midnight or noon.

He explained “Human customs are very strange. First year anniversary is apparently paper…or clocks…but I figured you liked chocolate so I got you a chocolate clock covered in paper. Just to cover all the bases.”

She took a bite, closed her eyes in appreciation of the flavor and said “I love it. But I didn’t get you anything.”

He rolled his eyes and said “You never get me anything, I’m used to it.” She laughed and took another bite. He smiled at her and said “You did not give stupid orders. That…and a year of my life…and yours…you gave to me. So I got you a stupid candy bar.”

She carefully put down the stupid candy bar and grabbed Garrus by the cowl and pulled him down for a memory layered kiss. She murmured “I love my stupid candy bar.”

She counted her myriad blessings as his arms came around her, lifted her to his body and fit them together.
Chapter 40

She felt a steadying surge of competence and the forward path to execution, and she sought reality checks. She called a conference with David and EDI regarding their progress on the Crucible and the feasibility of getting rolling with developing independent forces under different banners with seeming cross purposes at times.

Cerberus had a great deal of the infrastructure she would need for her ambitions, though some of that was compromised by having handed over Cerberus operatives to their home worlds or aggrieved governments. She still stood by that choice, but she would make different choices in the future.

There was slang now for ex-indoctrinated: Dox. People were speaking out publically against the presence of Dox. It followed the pattern of most hatred and fear throughout history. Some civil minded people from Turian and human backgrounds had abdicated their positions, which did not appease anybody. It was interpreted as guilt, leaving remaining representatives damned if they did and damned if they didn’t.

Some of the ex-indoctrinated that she’d had ferried to Omega were approached and were willing to join up under the banner of Dox protection and collaboration. David and EDI had managed to provide multitudes of candidates taken from correspondence.

They set up a system of EDI and David funneling candidates through Jane, Garrus and Kasumi. There was the potential for a real army. They also had a growing number of un-indoctrinated volunteers who were earnest in helping Shepard personally, so they planned on using some of the compromised Cerberus bases to house, train and brief. The un-indoctrinated forces she would not publicize but also would not keep as secret as Dox forces. The first missions run were to be managed through Kasumi, EDI and David. Jane funneled requests that could be attributed to her to these groups. Kasumi had a growing list of raids she could run. They focused some attention on evacuating Dox from hostile areas and taking down criminal and indoctrinated groups, hijacking their infrastructure.

There were quite a few disaffected Salarians and Mordin coordinated with them.

David carved up the work of the Crucible and different sections were able to get started on the theory and the construction.

For such massive tasks, she was relieved as solutions presented themselves, each step progressing logically, each need for materials gathered.

Garrus and Liara provided entirely new identities for some individuals, developed a structure to maximize autonomy, security and accountable action.

She had a one on one conference with Tim and Garrus had conferences with Palaven and Alliance command to gather every last bit of data known about the stealth drive, which was still unique and had not been put into general use due to requiring rare materials and prohibitive expense in research and construction.

Since the SR-1 had been sliced apart by a Collector ship… the tech had fallen into disfavor, though Cerberus had made some changes and now Shepard found it indispensible. The Turians and Alliance considered it to be a dead end, but she disagreed. They handed over their conclusions and research and she promised service missions in return.
Tim got an impressive cache of expensive alcohol. He continued to treat the brig like his private domain and had affected the approach that he was safest there, being such a threat to others, so he’d accommodated his own ego, not unanticipated. He thanked Shepard for her thoughtful security and she did not roll her eyes.

It would take three months to get the first prototypes of revised stealth out, and she focused on small transport craft, a few shuttles for the Normandy, two of the Batarian cruisers. Crucible construction was planned for as far into the middle of nowhere as they could get, and stealth shielded eventually, once the construction had become as expensive as the shields. They would leap frog upgrades of the Crucible and the defense of the Crucible.

Thane had taught her a great deal about surveillance of communication, and EDI, David and Kasumi had their own ideas, communication was as encrypted and shielded as possible.

David had been able to construct the entirety of the Crucible in theory and believed he would be able to locate and source all materials required and clarify the construction process along with EDI, but all attempts at activation in the simulator had produced nothing.

He believed it was functional and not a waste of time or effort in theory. His impression was that it was a huge battery and amplifier. They needed the Catalyst.

For what…she did not know.

She kept reminding herself that this was “Audacious” and not “Clueless”

She was not necessarily convinced privately, but part of her new identity meant not questioning the necessity of this massive time and effort sink in front of those working on it. Only Garrus was aware of her initial frustration, which she stopped expressing as a professional courtesy to those who were dedicating their life and livelihood to its construction.

It was Legion who provided the best basis for otherwise unknown base locations. Somewhat sheepishly he admitted that Geth had determined the criteria of most organic scanning abilities and had learned to bypass them. She imagined this had come through systematic conquering of organic ships and reverse engineering the detection systems. Throughout the years, scanners had only uncovered a very small percentage of Geth outposts and stations, because they had only been forced to surface operations occasionally. Geth were most often deep underground, scanners were fooled by surface decoys. There were many Geth labyrinths that had been tunneled in surprising places. With some work those labyrinths could be adapted for organic use to serve purposes from establishing communities and training facilities to labs. Once stealth shuttles and ships were available, provisioning them could be done without drawing attention. Suits could be used initially and then eventually a system of oxygen perfusion and venting that would also be baffled and baffling.

Rannoch was riddled with these strongholds. Geth had high fuel needs, and Legion also provided ingeniously concealed fuel depots.

Shepard arranged for regular travel to Rannoch for the Normandy and selected representatives, with Tali’s approval, on the basis of coordination and research, and the Admirals granted it. In return Shepard was going to invest quite a bit in Rannoch’s security and infrastructure.

There still were no cases of Quarian indoctrination. Just general assholery. Shepard supposed it was not exactly paranoia. The Geth really had been out to get them and they’d been isolated for centuries. Trust was not a resource, but Tali had been able to build up cautious and then more ambitious cooperative efforts. With cooperative and helpful Geth pushing back aggressive Geth with or without Quarian assistance, public opinion had swayed. Reapers were not a myth to Quarians. Tali had done
her job as Inside Quarian. She had leveraged her authority to tell and retell and spread the ignorance of the Council – not difficult for Quarians to believe, as they had been marginalized by Council races for centuries.

Kal had swayed much of the military. The good news was that Rannoch was theirs and the Geth were allies. The bad news was that Reapers were coming.

Quarians were fueled by good work to do and hope burning to do it, something Javik had identified as necessary to win a fight, something Jane newly appreciated with his perspective. It took a long time for Reapers to capture a planet. They planned to make it as hard as possible. Rannoch needed to be settled, provisioned and defended.

On Rannoch after the ground work and diplomacy had been hashed out, Shepard called shore leave. She, Legion and Garrus headed to a landscape that reminded her very much of the Mojave, with scrub reminiscent of the Joshua trees on Earth. Some sand, but also a great deal of terraced stone and red rock. There was a valley with red foliage flushed outward from a winding river basin. It definitely looked like prime farming territory. Up on a terraced rock plateau were buildings and tents, some looked utilitarian and some looked like a party, mostly the tents, tables and food and lights fringing the tent edges and frosting the open spaces and some of the bigger trees.

When the shuttle landed nearby Tali broke from one of the tents, ran forward and Garrus rushed out to swing her around in a high-impact hug.

Kal came out to shake hands with Jane and Legion, addressing them as ma’am and sir, and Tali rushed over to knock the air out of Jane, Kal greeting Garrus as sir.

Tali even hugged Legion, to nobody’s surprise.

The evening was warm and scented with some spice on the wind from the river. Garrus raved about the food, Jane mostly had provisions that were easily preserved. There was good wine and cheese, and that’s what she ate, avoiding the more…exotic…offerings that were not all that recognizable.

Kal and Garrus fell to happily retelling war stories and Jane was listening, amused, when Tali came beside her and took her hand, pulled her out of the tent and away. Tali walked with her down the broad flat rock plateau to the edge, where the river reflected a magnificent sunset in tones of orange and purple.

They hung their feet over the edge and looked at the sunset, wordless for a little while. The valley below reflected the light off lush red-orange vegetation at the water edge. As it got darker the water…started to glow. Electric blue hints and then streaming along the banks.

Tali said with so much happiness in her voice “Isn’t it beautiful? Bioluminescent algae.”

The valley was stunning, perfect.

Jane asked “Where does the house go?”

Tali turned and pointed out landmarks and locations, enthusiasm bubbling in her voice “Right where the tents are now. We can farm here. We can live here. Over that ridge are a few huge Geth cannons, I’m personally aware of how much damage they do. We’re in a heavily defended corridor. With everything we’re doing here together, it’s possible our children will be out of suits. It’s possible I might be out of a suit later. There are so many people I wish could have seen this, you most of all. You made it possible.”

Jane thought of Tali’s mother and father, of Jenalon. No doubt Tali had thought of them over and
over as her eyes scanned this valley, wishing to see it for them, with them. She wondered if there was a Quarian heaven.

Jane said solemnly “I might have helped make it possible, but you will make it real. Congratulations, Tali. I am so proud of you.”

They sat in silence laced with awe. Jane had decided she would not be the one to bring up business during shore leave. They had gotten so much done on the way here and in recent conferences she wanted some genuine time off, and for Tali to know she was a destination in herself. She asked Tali questions about farming, about building, about Geth, about hope. The sun’s light dimmed, and the moon’s light strengthened from faded to more intense orange.

Garrus crunched his way down the path to them and stood with hands on both of their shoulders, Tali leaning her helmet in against his arm.

Tali stood up after a while, tapped her helmet to Garrus’s crest and walked briskly back up to the tent.

Garrus reached down, lifted Jane in his arms and started heading down to the river.

She said “Where are we going?”

He said with mock shock “You’re kidding. You see blue algae glowing under an orange moon, on a planet nobody’s set foot on in centuries and you are wondering where?”

She teased “But the cheese is the other way…”

He snorted “Forget the cheese. I’m pretty sure she is getting back at you for nutrient paste.”

She considered “Most likely. I deserve it.” She asked “Is anything in the river going to kill me?”

He said “Probably. You’re Commander Shepard. Are you going to let flesh eating bacteria stop you?”

She said doubtfully “It is algae.”

He scoffed “That’s what they want you to think. Besides, you’re levo. If there is anything deadly it will go after me.”

She said uncertainly “I’m not sure that’s comforting.”

He kissed the top of her head “You like danger. Shut up.”

With her mind relishing residual and newly inspired awe, she looked out over the vibrant desert and the surreal colors. She shifted in his arms to nuzzle at his throat with her nose, then lips, then teeth, then teeth and tongue.

He didn’t exactly trip, but his pace slowed as he said “Making navigation difficult.”

She dragged her bottom teeth over hide and said “You like danger. Shut up.” She moved a hand to stroke the backs of her knuckles over the other side of his throat.

She was free to indulge in adoration. Of all the freedoms he gave her professionally and privately, appreciation of adoration was one of his gifts, giving and receiving. She could be silly, she could be goofy, she could cling to him and disrupt navigation. She soaked in that freedom from him, not just feeling adored, but be able to express adoration, expansive and warm. He tasted good, he felt good,
not just the man in this moment, but memories of layered moments, rich and kaleidoscopic no matter where her senses turned, dazzling.

He reached the shores as she enjoyed the taste and texture of his hide. There was a sandy strip from some higher stony ground, leading down to the water. He set her on her feet there. His tarnished silver plates caught the light, sparked with their own internal purple sheen, caught some glow from the electric blue radiating from the river, shadowed when he bent down to kiss her, hands in her hair. Humor had faded, as had teasing and comments about danger. Tali and Kal had granted them the right to knowing they had helped make standing by this river for themselves and for others possible. They all had plans to keep it that way with growing force, cooperation and conviction. There was pride and engagement in the past, hope for the future, and they drank it in together.

His mouth left hers and his hands moved to her waist, holding her in place. He dropped to his knees and lifted one of her feet, carefully removing her shoe. His talons were withdrawn, his caretaker self intent, making certain she’d have clothes when he carried her back up the incline. Shoes removed and carefully set aside he unfastened the rest of her clothing, his warm hands between her and sliding cloth. The night was warm with a breeze stirred up by the temperature differential of cooling land and unchanging river. With her clothing gone and reverently set aside he wrapped his arms around her waist, his scarred and chipped mandible against her abdomen, his voice in a reverent hum.

She listened and felt and held still, one hand spread over the curve of his crest and one hand on his shoulder. These were his moments of expressed adoration and they no longer made her feel uncomfortable or undeserving. She basked, hoping to reflect the safety and protection he gave to her and feed it back to him. She listened to every sound he made, every tensing and softening of his breath, felt every flex and relaxation of muscle and plate. These were his beatitudes.

She was learning his moods, his signals, his silences and stillness. The dynamic of work reversed most often with them privately, with her switched to more passive, more reactive, and with him free to lead as he would in a dance. He had a glorious voice, but he had a glorious body and often now there were no words. He took pleasure in her understanding him, in her ability to translate his intent. She rarely was confused or embarrassed or stilted, wondering what came next. Whatever came next would be what he wanted.

That sound from his chest meant contentment.

That line of his shoulder, the way he held his body meant sacred space as one would draw a circle on the ground to cast a spell within, all worries and concerns left outside, everything inside safe.

His stillness meant savoring, with his hands spread along her spine and then down to her thighs, the ritual of him breathing her in, some part of him calculating who she was right now, some part of him appreciating that she was right now inside the circle of his ritualized arms.

He stood, the possessiveness of his spell being cast intent in his eyes. His hands moved to the sides of her face, flame and vibrant blue reflected on his shadowed and shifting plates. Orange light and shadow defined the curves of her limbs, blue captured in the trailing length of her hair.

They had signaled each other in battle, in bed, thousands of times, and sometimes she wondered if she got them all right or if he approved of anything she did, adapting to any outcome. It did not concern her overly, because he would move her body for her, for him, when he chose. His eyes, his hands, the hunter arch of his shoulders and back, his step back with his hands lingering meant that he wanted to watch her in the unfamiliar light.

She was a sunset and moonrise, blue light finding its way into and along a few black strands of hair like monofilaments spiraling with internal glow, reflecting off others. He watched her as he slowly
removed his own clothing, a casual revealing of brazen plate texture that refracted and reflected, shadows of muscle and hide that flexed with capricious glow.

Patience and talons.

They’d both been attracted to each other on the basis of patience and control, and had grown to be able to express their own particular impatience, mostly with being apart. Her impatience would come out like flash floods, undercurrents and sudden demand. His impatience was fading as he grew to know her. She saw plate and signal. He saw so much more, sensed so much more as it rose from her skin, things she could not sense in order to be able to contemplate them.

After bonding, after her impatient confession, his frustration and impatience had receded, replaced by this now familiar blend of confidence and possession. Add on a layer of Archangel and permission to hunt in the shadows and he resembled the sniper he was through temperament and training. There the analogy split into two separate paths…she was the gun…or she was the target.

Both seemed appropriate.

Contemplation ceased as his neat pile of clothing grew to dwarf hers. He stepped back to where he had been before, the size of him casting shadow on her skin, warmth radiating from him. His hands returned to the sides of her face and his looming shadow chose to accentuate his height. His kiss…and it was his kiss and not theirs yet…began the way it did because Reverie was his to give and hers to take and she demanded in her own way that it always be received as a gift. Craving and adoration blended in her blood as he opened his mouth to hers and she drank him in, eyes closed, her hands on his waist.

That sound meant hunger.

That touch on her back meant his talons had emerged like sacred athame, spell casting beginning in earnest after setting of the space, with him always aware of his inherent danger to her, as careful as the sniper ever aware of trigger pressure.

Here she was the gun under his intent gaze, hands along her customized surface, belonging to him and responsive to what it was he needed.

He imbued her with his scent, he had insisted it was theirs, reflective of her in his blood, reminiscent of his talons and bond, the power of it apparent even to her comparatively dull senses.

Every sense engaged as his hands cradled her, blurred by the thick drowning of Reverie, focused by talons on her skin and plate under fingertips, beguiled by drifting scent that transformed on her skin into something new, forcing her breathing that meant she wanted more of him in each breath and had no pace but forward.

Now his looming shadow accentuated his strength, mouth never leaving hers, deep breaths and moans, lifting her with long, strong fingers, points of athame on but not through her skin, her legs eagerly around his waist. His cock was trapped between them, and her attention fractured into the spectrum of moving her belly against him in a glide and slide, tasting his resulting groans on her lips, her weight supported by the curve of his palms and points of his fingers.

He moved forward down and into the water, which she ignored, unwilling to be distracted from her personal miracle to embrace another.

His arms lifted her higher as though offering her to the moon, then he pulled her back to him, leaving the moon only with her hair and skin and symbol, claiming her for himself.
That sound meant home.

That feeling meant heaven was attainable and shared, wherever they touched each other, whatever was offered to the sky and the river and the air around them, it flowed from them and not the elements.

She was no longer a gun in his palms and fingertips but they were together the target, the culmination of the spell and sacred space, aim and practiced care.

He broke the kiss with a snarl, turning her head in another established dance, her teeth on his hide, his teeth on her throat, and then the taste of mingled blood on the tongue, the root and bloom of his truth. That taste on her tongue meant only salty and specific to him with sharp metallic meaninglessness except in giving, which she did, him drinking from her now.

That sound, that swirl of his tongue meant a bridge between worlds never intended to meet, a miracle of the efforts of all their ancestors. A forged Spirit where one had never been before.

He pulled back, his crest to her forehead, his eyes closed, panting and repletion. Meaning and analysis faded before the rushing sensation in her blood, Reverie profound. Her eyes closed as she blended into being the sensations, forgot about him in a moment of purely selfish communion with the effectively tailored and intent possession of his spell.

That meant Turian magic, something she’d sought in its thin shadows when they began, now fully rich and realized and hers. Living and breathing and reactive magic that was as unfathomable as being in a moonlight river on Rannoch thriving with life and promise.

He lowered them slowly into the water, his legs submerged, her knees to the side of his thighs on cool stone, with her against his chest, water lapping at the sides of her breasts. The water was warm but not as warm as he was, the differential chilling and sending a shudder through her. The night air swirled around them in rising and fading breeze. He trailed his hand in the ripples, blades of talons creating furrows, eddies of unpredictable blue life in fascinating patterns. Their bodies created distortion and tiny whirlpools, sinks and dips and complicated resurgence and settling of the creatures too small to see.

She recalled when Thane had first touched her, imaginings of something sparking in the depths until it had multiplied into a host, and here was the illustration, lavish in presentation.

He lifted the bowl of his hand, dripped blue water into the hollow of her back, faint and diluted and fascinating, his fingers swirling trails up to her shoulder blades.

She trailed a handful over a plate rift, gentle sluicing back down to the river and down on its way to wherever the teeming life traveled.

They played with light and possibility, drawing laughter and gasps and following trails with mouths and fingertips, childlike glee and awe, nothing to do but enjoy an otherwise impossible moment.

They eventually made it back up the trail. She grew ultimately chilled as the heat was leached from their bodies by the river and the strength of the breeze. She would have stayed longer but her referred trembles of cold were different than the trembles of pleasure. He felt the difference and had her up and out of the water, against his resurgent warmth within moments of their appearance.

They made it back up to the tent where Kal and Tali and Legion were talking. The conversation stilled and then they stared at her. These three similar bodies, none with visible eyes, clearly stared.
Tali started to laugh and Kal ducked his head with a cough.

She raised a brow and looked to Garrus for a hint but Garrus smiled at her.

It was Legion looking at her that gave her that hint.

She looked down. She was wearing her customary black, and as she pulled fabric out there was an obvious three-fingered handprint in fading but distinct glowing blue that had cupped one breast. Sensing a trend she looked down and back and there was a matching one on her ass.

She glared at Garrus “You could have told me.”

He was unrepentant “I like it. I thought it would have faded by now. Fascinating that it hasn’t.”

She sighed “I think I’m going to go take a shower.”

Garrus obliged “I’ll come with you.”

She muttered “I think you’ve done enough.”

Garrus disagreed “Shore leave is young, I’m just getting started.”

Tali recovered before Kal did, pointing the way to an outbuilding up the slope. Jane wasn’t sure she felt better or worse when Garrus picked her up and carried her, but at least it spared her wondering if everyone stared at her ass on the way up the hill.
Chapter 41

Time on Rannoch was halcyon and…very cheesy. Next time she’d have to remember to bring food, but a few days of cheese, wine and water was charming in its own way. She imagined Tali and Garrus had to endure much worse in the company of the levo.

They had a few days of peace and companionship, inspiration and sustaining hope. Rannoch was the most heavily defended planet Jane had encountered. The Geth had spent 300 years defending her from near constant assault. She made an excellent base.

Mordin had solidified plans with Padok and that was their cue to leave, this time with no talk of abandonment. Tali was happy in her position and Jane made sure Tali knew she was loved as a friend and appreciated and needed as an ally.

Kal had loosened up somewhat, still gruff but not as formal, and she got an actual hug and was called Jane as she left, a huge shift from ma’am and Commander.

It was early evening on Rannoch but morning ship time when they returned to routine, so she was in for a stim and a long day of briefings. Garrus had come through on Blue Suns gear, Padok and Mordin had come through on a landing site and a series of security loopholes, glitches and sabotage that would allow them a brief window in and out. They were headed toward Sur’kesh, a Batarian cruiser ready as bait. Padok had provided codes for authorization to land and leave. They would be impersonating a delivery staff vehicle on arrival and a maintenance crew to exit. The facility was isolated and had high maintenance needs. With Padok’s help they hoped be able to get in and out without raising an alarm. They could leave a few cameras “accidentally” functional to provide incriminating evidence against Blue Suns. Padok had rigged the computer network with executables they would be able to activate on entry, minimizing the sense of inside job. He would be leaving with them. This facility was fortunately out of the highly complicated defenses of the planet’s city centers. This location depended on secrecy and privacy, and it was not linked in with satellite defense or surveillance.

She and Garrus had been asleep for a few hours before a wrenching shudder and noise through the ship woke her.

Garrus’s arms tightened around her protectively as he looked around the cabin for imminent threat. She bit out “EDI, what’s happening?”

EDI relayed the comm to Joker, who said casually in pseudo explanation “Uh…Thane’s home.”

She was reassured by his tone, but demanded “I’m going to need context.”

She and Garrus scrambled out of the bed, both grabbing clothes. Joker followed up with “Thane was on his way to us when he picked up a tail. He managed evasive maneuvers and instead of trying to fight off his tail, he informed us of it and then drove through our sights. We picked them off with the Thanix. Nothing left but a vapor cloud.”

She asked “Is he safe?”

Joker said “His shuttle’s intact, on the way into the bay. With Jack. Everything’s fine, vapor trail did not even scratch the paint on the Normandy.”

She followed up with “Did you get a good look at what you hit?”
Joker said in answer “Seemed to be a Batarian scout ship. Fast. Fortunately not as fast as Thane, who had to stay just out of reach as bait and had an estimate of their weapons capacity, which had a longer range than his shuttle. I’m impressed. The man can fly.”

She said with a smile “Yeah…so am I. Thanks Joker.”

Joker said “You’re welcome Commander. Negligible effect on course correction, all we did was hold still for a little bit. Back on our way. Will still be early for rendezvous.”

Adrenaline and relief crashed together as she pulled on the last of her clothes.

Garrus always, always took longer than she did to get ready. She was nearly hopping with the conflicting impulse to run down to the shuttle alone once she was ready and the more measured need to make sure she and Garrus arrived simultaneously. Abandoning him did not seem a bond mate like thing to do, so she tried to think of how to react. She could hand him pieces like he was a five year old but she suspected that would be less supportive than sarcastic. She tried not to glare at him. Garrus made personal patience look so damned easy. He’d knew just how to look unobtrusive and helpful while she was getting ready, and the most she could manage was to not glare.

So she said “Trying to be helpful and not impatient.”

He turned his head and said “Not scowling would help.”

She said with a grin “Would you buy it if I weren’t scowling? I need you to teach me neutral patience face and the corresponding body language that I’m just noticing you are remarkably good at and I never considered a skill.”

He grinned and said “Later project. Thanks for trying. Just the shoe now. Won’t be long.”

Soon they were down to shuttle bay observation before Thane had fully landed, managed to stay patient enough to not get physically crushed by the thing, then then raced in.

Jack was off first, nearly banging into Jane and Garrus. Jack laughed and said “Nice shooting. Got those assholes.”

Jane said “You okay?”

Jack said with a snort “Me? Yeah, I’m fine. Just done with babysitting. Phetas doesn’t need me anymore. Thane and I decided it was time to come home but we picked up a tail. Limited fuel, knew where your position was, he decided this was the best way. I didn’t have an alternate plan, plus I always like seeing things explode.”

Garrus said “So everybody else is okay?”

Jack snorted and said “Unless you’re talking a Batarian crew that truly deserved to have a bad day, yeah. Everything’s good. Mission accomplished and shit. Scary Drell Bait is a go. Get used to feeling sorry for Batarians.” Jack headed off to the Med Bay. Jane shared a relieved look with Garrus.

She stepped into the shuttlecraft, assuming Thane was finishing up a post-flight checklist, headed toward the pilot’s chair.

She was yanked off her feet, momentarily disoriented because he was cloaked, a sharp, hard rush of her breath in surprise. She felt him but saw only the disorienting ripple of a cloak. Invisible or not, each familiar and missed detail of him came to her through her other senses. Venom from his hands
on hers, the sure strength of his arms coming around her once he let go of her hands to pull her to his chest, the taste of him as his mouth found hers, surreal until she closed her eyes and found him with her arms and hands, pressed her body more tightly to the unseen.

Prepared to meet him as Commander Shepard, his sheltered and invisible kiss in the shuttlecraft set that persona aside as irrelevant, intent on claiming his wrist bound. Command and concern slipped away with each stroke of venom from his tongue. She was caught and entranced by his demand and hunger, the scrapes and nips of his teeth on her lips. Any tentative willingness to pull back and allow him to greet Garrus, any reserve of hers he ignored as a concern and denied as a practice.

He demanded she join him where he was, lust and love, passion and possession, encouraging and rewarding her moans with his own sounds of fervor, groans and shortened breath. He kept one arm around her waist, with her off her feet and reliant on his balance. He moved his other hand to the side of her face, her throat, down her back. Thoughts about his mission and wellbeing fled, then the ability to think passed beyond her reach, her trembling hands moving to trace along his frill, his cheekbones and brow. Reverie braided with tiremit in a familiar rush, now stronger with bonding, deprivation, distance and longing. She poured how much she had missed him into her kiss, gave herself to his supporting strength and followed every longed-for touch of his with her own kisses and strokes, until she was bound in the hypnotic spell of relying on his will to set any tone or pace he chose.

She knew his language, the grip of his hands approving, his groans and breath speaking of satisfaction with her response. His hand tangled in her hair, pulled her head back, deepened the dizziness of the kiss as his arm around her waist limited her breath and blood rushed out of her head from the steep angle. With a dizzy shift she was in free fall for less than a second as he repositioned her body, arms moving to lift her, pressed her head against his shoulder with a cradling palm. Visible now, his mouth held a curving smile of rapacious hunger, his eyes indulgent and satisfied.

He stepped forward and held her out to Garrus, transferring her into his arms, then Thane pulled Garrus’s head down into renewed demanding greeting as she watched through blurred eyes, hallucinatory aura radiating from them both, the sounds they made translated into color and light, passion and belonging seeming to swirl like a palpable thing. Thane’s body pressed her tighter to Garrus between them. Garrus’s arms began to tremble around her. She watched Thane’s hands caress Garrus’s face as Garrus held still, unable to move, knotted tension in the arms holding her, arched in his bent shoulders. Thane’s hands moved along Garrus’s mandible, the sensitive hide of the sides of his throat, along the back of his neck at plate edges, along the indentations of his fringe. Her hands moved to rest on a Drell shoulder and a Turian shoulder.

Garrus’s body transformed as hers had, from tension and questions to hoarse groans of welcome, all his attention bent toward the kiss.

Thane took Garrus’s face between his hands and broke the kiss, pressed his forehead to Garrus’s crest. His voice was lust threaded, echoes of the panting of his partners “Take her to her cabin, Invas’nam, where I wish to find you both as I left you. I must be scanned. The Normandy cannot risk a dangerous man in her commander’s bed.” Then he was gone and out of the shuttle.

She started to laugh. Garrus was under tiremit, she understood he would not consider putting her down. Thane would find them as he had left them, and she wasn’t about to ask to change that plan.

Garrus lifted her, kissed the laughter from her lips until she was moaning, and then he said in echo to his statement when he’d first kissed Thane “I’m not gonna lie, I’m a little intimidated.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and said “Me too. You’ll protect me, right?”
Garrus turned and eased her out of the shuttle door, saying “I’m going to do my damned best. I’m going the right way?”

She pointed him toward the elevator. He nodded, squinted a little and said “It appears to be… violet and breathing fire and steam…but I’m betting it’s still an elevator.”

It was still an elevator to their exaggerated relief.

She said helpfully “We have a lot of news.”

In the cabin he swung her down to her feet and smiled at her, then shredded her shirt open with talons at the shoulders across her body down to her waist “I don’t think he wants to talk, Kerim.”

She gasped from the hard press of his mouth against her nipple and said breathlessly “What do you think he wants?”

Garrus focused on her clothing, which at this point he might see as breathing fire, so she held very still except for the panting she could not help. He said “Hmmm…if he’d wanted to talk he could have asked me to stake you out on the conference table. Which…now that I think about it…we should do someday. But for now…”

Clothes came off fast, human and Turian, with six talons doing the work and human hands clearing shreds and remnants. When he was finished with their clothes, his mouth roamed hungrily over her throat. Garrus said, blurry and thick with lust “The man has been away for a long time, imagining us together, missing us with every realistic, lonely moment he could not escape. He was brave and had enough guile to survive but that is what he did while he was away…he survived. Now he would like to live.”

She loved the husk and depth of his voice, his hands on her and the swirl and race of chemistry and emotion in her blood “What would living be, Garrus? Tell me what he wants. Tell me what you want.”

He paused and groaned, saying “Why do you ask the hardest questions when I can’t think? As though you don’t already speak Thane…”

She smiled and said “Because I’m evil, and because I love your voice and because I can’t think myself.”

He shrugged and she drowned briefly in a searing kiss. He said with lust tease “I might be ashamed of how much pleasure I get out of watching him turn you in minutes from command to boneless need…if I didn’t know that he does it to prove how much he worships you, how much he wants to show me he will worship you properly…and that we all know if he made a false move you would kick his ass.”

She hesitated, and his fingers captured her chin and he turned her eyes to his.

He said intently “I am certain that his false moves were never in my presence.”

She really could not think, could not wrap her mind around the time Thane had caused pain. It seemed lifetimes ago. She had an odd rush in her heart, a skipped beat, wanting to defend Thane but knowing she did not have to. Garrus knew more about her now, but the gaps in sharing her relationship with Thane, and then that relationship in the context of Thane’s past loomed. Not her secrets alone to tell. Still, she did not need to deny it, thinking perhaps Garrus also was not as prone to tiremit as it seemed. Maybe bonding caused adaptation, maybe Thane placing her directly in Garrus’s protection and direction manifested this way. Garrus’s intent expression faded once he saw
the acknowledgment in her eyes. He smiled and stroked her cheekbone with the edge of a talon “No need to look so dire. He told me he’d done you harm. He is still alive, proving your forgiveness. He is still in your bed, proving your love. Now, to speak Thane you have to understand the significance of him kissing you first, of putting you in my arms...”

She said, getting lost in the significance “That I couldn’t walk and he needed a scan?” His face said she was a moron. She agreed, but it was understandable. She said with mock irritation “If you want intelligence, this is not the time, Garrus. What you’ve got is boneless need.”

He seemed to adjust his expectations of her appreciating his poetry and accepted her tendency toward prosaic interpretation. His crest bumped at her forehead and then he turned her around, pulled her back against his chest, cock hard in the small of her back. He said “True...okay, so I’m not thinking all that clearly either. Hm...” His mouth played along the curve of her shoulder, his hands at her hips. “You have nothing to prove, Kerim, to either of us. But Thane and I know that we...still have things to prove. To ourselves, to each other. I know I did not protect you. He knows he hurt you. You are mine because you do not hold me responsible for things I know were my responsibility. You are his because you forgave and concealed his sins. We will spend a lifetime earning that forgiveness, freely given, possibly never felt as earned. He knows...I’ll never forgive myself for letting you be taken. I think...he thinks...that if I knew how much he’d hurt you...I’d want to kill him despite your forgiveness, and he thinks he deserves it.”

A cold stab down her spine was perversely exciting instead of terrifying. Without context, standing alone, yes, Garrus would kill him, but Garrus allowed her context, her forgiveness, and he and Thane were both sophisticated enough to turn that choice into ritualized sexuality when she was involved. Once again, consummate dancers with the understanding of the effort of every turn of the lip and hip, with her barely able to react, much less formulate or analyze.

He said “I watched that man bring you back, help you heal when I couldn’t. So you tell me now and I will believe you. Should I forgive him?”

She said breathlessly, dedicated to him believing her “Yes.”

He panted a long moment, breathing her in, as though he had anticipated a possibly different answer, as though he suspected her to be lying. His voice was momentarily rough, harsh as Turian mating history and plate “I will because you say so. But...Kerim...there will always be one person in our bed that believes he should die by both our hands, and who will never lose sight of that. He will always know that it was up to you whether he lived or died once, but now it is also up to me. Most of all it is up to him. When he kissed you earlier, it was in part to prove he could please you, that seeing that not only pleases me but I require it as ongoing proof that he will do you no harm, that you will not permit harm. When he put you in my arms it is because that is my right, that just as he needs to prove he will do you no harm, I need to prove I can protect you. The way he left us and the way he will find us again is with us joined. Where we belong. I told you he wants to live, Kerim, and that is up to us to give to him.”

He pulled back, traced the curve of her eyebrow with the tip of a talon and said “I know something about assassins and Turians...with the way we were raised, the expectations of us...we cannot help but know our place in each moment. You...Kerim...refuse to be assigned a place but you still know it. With us. Deserving or not, forgiven or not, accepting of forgiveness or not.”

She tried to think, wondered how long scans took, and then decided right action didn’t have a time schedule. She turned in his arms with some resistance, but she insisted and he gave way. She said in a whisper, his head bent to hear “I promised you honesty. Not all of Thane’s truths are mine to tell, but this one I claim as mine and therefore yours. It was after the Collector base. We were on Omega.
My leg was still injured, his internal organs were crushed, untreated by painkillers on his part. A slaver thought he had found prey in us, gave a verbal accounting of what he thought we would be worth as sex slaves. Thane was of course worth more. Thane beat him to death, painfully, brutally. I think I would have done the same, but I didn’t know if that would have been courage or not. At the look on my face Thane asked me whether or not my rapist was still alive, if he needed to find him or them…kill them. He guessed, he didn’t know, but I didn’t lie. I did not tell him about the circumstances, but I assured him my rapist was dead. He was angry, provoked, in pain, and he wanted to make it clear that I tolerated far too much in the way of verbal sexual harassment, that I relied on you and him to take down anybody who spoke to me that way. That I would go cold when I most needed to feel certain levels of pain and not block them out. He felt…strongly…that it was a character weakness, something I needed to deal with, to not be blind to threat, to not treat it as insignificant. It was directly correlated to his anger and betrayal at having to hold my leg together, how he watched us both near death and did not want to do it again due to my failure to calculate the necessity of my own pain. He was right, and I had grown accustomed to numbness. We finally had the angry Drell sex I had been so recklessly curious about. It was painful and brutal. He was trying to help me with pain as a feedback method. Something that happened to him as a child.”

Garrus’s growl was terrifying but she had no time to validate his anger as she said “You’ve had plenty of time to research Drell assassination training methods. Tell me you’ve done it.”

Garrus’s jaw twisted with anger, but his voice also contained sorrow and admission “I have.”

She said with steel in her whisper “Thane was forced to endure much worse than I have. I know it. He was raped and forced to rape. Just like Yahlis. Just like every single Drell assassin starting at the age of 14. He had no choices. I needed and still need for him to have choices, Garrus, and that includes the right to make mistakes. He made a mistake. A terrible, brutal mistake, but not one worth his life. Not one worth losing him. He was right about my blind spots but wrong about how to point them out or how to correct them. I let him do something wrong because I had no other path without losing him. I understood the triggering circumstances. I forgave him. You said the proof that I forgave him was that he was still alive and that is true. I could have killed him. I didn’t. Then I was taken. Then he saw every single moment of my captivity and he did everything he could to spare me from other people knowing. He returned, expecting me to kill him, wanting me to kill him but having the courage to face me. I spent all that time unable to touch him at all, and he still stood by me, gave me a reason to come back to him, offered his life and death again, his understanding of what I needed to heal, found a way for me to accept it. I needed him.”

Garrus’s face was stony and his growl had faded, but he was heaving with breath he could not seem to draw in. She said “You and I have had more time to learn each other. I need you to tell me with your capacity for honesty. You told me about Saleon and Sidonis. Would you care for me now if I had told you straight to your face that your vengeance meant nothing and was not worth my time or effort? You risked my life on those missions. You could have gotten me killed. You could have gotten yourself killed. He caused me transient pain, a fraction of what I had caused him to experience. I had forced him to fight for me when he wanted to die, forced him to love me when he wanted to die, forced him to live for me when he wanted to die. He did everything he could after the fact to recognize and make up for his mistake. It was still…my fault…more than his. That…is why I forgave him.”

The truth that Garrus would not be as loyal or loving if she’d ignored his need for revenge hit him hard and knocked his rage down with the advent of complicated perspective.

She said “You have to trust me when I tell you that a traumatized and untrusting Drell assassin was and is worth the effort, same as a seemingly paranoid, rage-filled Turian ex-cop was and is. Although you are both destined to believe that it is your job to protect me and make sure no harm comes to me
and I appreciate that…I’m the most likely person among the three of us whose decisions are going to get us all killed. I am not afraid to take a life. Yahlis knew I had the right to kill her and honored that. Thane knew I had the right to kill him and honored that. You need to know that if I desire someone’s death for harm they have done to me…I will be the one to do it. You know and I know he won’t hurt me again, not like that, never. He deserves my forgiveness and love. If he’s too damned stubborn to accept it, I would still expect you to treat him as forgiven, and you have, and I love you for it. That goes for you thinking you’re responsible for the harm that has come to me. You are forgiven. He does not hold you responsible, and I love him for that too. You both forgive me for causing you pain, and I love you both for it, though I do not necessarily think I should be forgiven either.”

And that…is how Thane found them. Not at all the same as he had left them.

Garrus looked startled, as though he’d forgotten Thane was on the way, Jane felt both guilty and anxious.

Maybe ‘the right thing’ could have had better timing on second thought. Fuck.

The potential for a devastating blindside loomed and she did not know how to counter it.

Thane took a few steps inside and stopped at the top of the step, and there was a moment of mutual staring. Garrus had stipulated they could not fail to know their places…it seemed their places were frozen in awkward silence.

She did not want to abandon Garrus, so she held out her hand, the one whose wrist had light ringing it, to Thane, who came forward without hesitation to take her hand with his own, kiss the back of her hand and then press his forehead to the same spot. Garrus pulled Thane forward with his arm around Thane’s shoulders, and there was a resultant grateful huddle where she could breathe a moment, close her eyes and soak in his presence and safety.

Garrus said quietly with a thread of familiar complaint and world-weary patience “She’s been slapping me around. Help me, Invas’nam.”

Thane’s voice was carefully neutral, with a hint of acceptance of the use of ‘Invas’nam’ as reassuring despite the electric mayhem in the atmosphere “Have you developed a new fetish while I was gone? I am deeply sorry to have missed it.”

Jane said in a close whisper, relying on superior Turian ears to pick it up as she bent to Thane “The only new fetish is for the truth. I told Garrus about Corbin a little bit ago. I just told him about the slaver on Omega and what happened after. I have promised him honesty. As you know, that can be difficult and damnably inconvenient. I have terrible timing, but now I have to tell you as quickly as possible because I want to get to the touching you more part.”

Thane’s response was a slow smile and a lean in to kiss Jane gently “Good.” His eyes held all the discipline he owned, playing for the cameras, playing for them, setting a lightning rod to draw down the crackling atmosphere away from them “And the slapping?”

She said informatively “Metaphorically only, Bes Tiron.”

Thane turned to Garrus and said “I apologize for withholding truths, hers and mine and ours. She gave me her truths to guard, and I was the keeper of many that were stolen, some by my blundering fault and arrogance. I am pleased she gave them to you. You will know best what to do with them. My life I place in your hands as I have placed it in hers. It is yours to take or keep. My truths I offer in my open fist, never to close against you.”
Seemingly not to be outdone on the devotion scale, Garrus said “As your bond mate, Invas’nam, and as her bond mate, I have been informed I am not permitted to bring you harm, which is a truth I did not need to be told, but I appreciate the loyalty that prompted it. Mordin ran a test on me. I am bonded to what appears to be a dual creature of human and Drell origin. I believe it happened before the Collectors.”

Thané looked shocked, confused and then overjoyed, all calculation shed from his eyes “I should not be surprised to discover you forged a truth in your body that was the truth of your heart. You have granted me a greater honor than I would have thought possible. You have granted me a treasure beyond my ability to return, and I will seek to earn that right every day of my life. I shall honor the Spirit of our bond and bless Palaven in my prayers for delivering me to you, to rest in your keeping.”

Thane’s face rippled, the need for restraint and caution melted. She saw and heard her Senar as he said quietly to them both “My mission was a success, but I bear my own truth, and I am more convinced on arrival that I must follow it. I comb my memories often, of you both, and a conversation with Jane echoed in my memory until I could not ignore it. Jane, when I spoke to you of Irikah and Kolyat, I told you that I abandoned them. I told you I just did my job. I told you I was always away on business. I told you I stayed away too long and my enemies came…” He was not calm, his words pressured, his breath rushed and desperation freighted his words “I could not stop hearing those words. I knew it was a risk that you would die when I was gone and that was unbearable on its own…but I realized who my enemies truly were, and that they were not in the past. Distance. Coldness. Absence. Those things cost me my family before. I will not make the same mistake. Drell are my people…but you…are my family. I cannot leave for that much time again. I trust the mission will continue whether or not I am there, it will continue under Feron, Yahlis, Phetas…even Kolyat now. What you started will be unstoppable and I am gratified, even glorified to be a part of it, but they no longer need me. I made you a promise, Jane, to not fall to battle sleep again, and to keep it…I know this is where I must be. Please tell me you can understand, you can forgive…”

Garrus chose to end that by picking up Thane bodily and putting him on the bed, Thane laid out flat and Garrus’s body caging him in. She saw Garrus stare down at Thane’s face, his eyes and expression reflecting the effort of absorbing all the shocks of his homecoming. Garrus said with the conviction of two voice boxes and the certainty of his plate and heart “You are understood. You are forgiven. You are home. You are loved. Stay. We need you.”

Thane spared her a short, near desperate glance and Garrus let him do it long enough for them to both see her smile and nod. Then Garrus kissed Thane, necessary reversal of roles from those in the shuttlecraft, Garrus determined to assure him with his body that he was home, where he would always be welcome and where a will to remain family and fight together was rewarded.

Jane took a moment to be grateful, thrilled and joyous that her badly timed honesty had triggered a controlled slide of more of the same, and not a disastrous avalanche of blame and anger.

She felt she could not possibly love them more or be loved more but held to the truth that more moments brought more love. She felt her faith rewarded, her fears fade. This was it. This was why. This was who.

Though she’d often stepped back to give them time together, she knew now that was not what they would want. Sliding onto the bed next to them was her place and her right, their expectation and not intrusion. She was still slow to not jar them. Occasionally sudden movements resulted in the jab of plate and that could be…unfortunate…she smiled. That and his damned visor really was a menace. She lifted it carefully off Garrus’s head to a sideways grunt of thanks.
She rested hands again on Turian shoulder and Drell shoulder. She gathered some scent from Garrus and slid a line down her body, then gathered more, glided her finger along the overhanging ridge of skin that sheltered the upper curve of Thane’s frill, feeling the points along her palm. All three of them breathed in the sense of completion and Rightness, unmistakably richer now that she knew of the bond, time having caught up with her until she knew this was something unique, something that spoke to her, spoke of her and spoke to them, spoke of them, spoke most of possibilities of three together, and even more of conclusions.

No distance. No coldness. No absence.

Family.

Garrus moved, seized her shoulders and pulled her partway onto Thane’s chest, arranging her until her knees were under her and she was arched over Thane to kiss him, with Garrus busying himself removing Thane’s clothes. Thane’s clothes took practice and Garrus could not just shred them. Well…he could…but Thane’s clothes all gave the highly tailored, exotic leather sense of ‘you cannot afford me’ that the man did, so Garrus had developed the finesse required to ease a snake from his skin. He still needed Thane’s assistance in pulling back extremities and sucking in breath to allow large Turian hands to keep cloth and man intact more or less. She was sure there was pain involved, but Thane’s vanity would not allow looser tailoring any more than he would allow the seams in his Tseni to be let out. Thane kissed her and she kissed him while Garrus worked around them, easing a long arm out first with a few contortions and pauses for mouth plates to appreciate revealed skin. They were all careful until Garrus had removed the entire jacket, then Thane’s thick muscled arms closed around her, restricting how much she could breathe, one hand pressed to her back to move her closer, one hand in her hair, combing it through his fingers as though to measure the time he had been gone by added length.

The scent of them, the feel of Thane’s lips, the venom threading through her nerves through tingles on her lips that built to lightning bolt static in her spine led to wanting nothing more than to kiss this man, like this, for as long as her breath held.

She did not know if Thane did it or Garrus suggested it with his roaming hands and mouth plates on revealed skin, but with all clothing gone Thane had her flipped over on her back, hard textured chest pressed to her breasts, harsh drawn breath from both of them sliding their skin together. Her hands on his shoulders, Garrus’s hands on them, moving Jane’s knees back to bend along Thane’s flanks, Thane’s arms under her armpits, hands pulling her shoulders to him, allowing no space between their bodies. Garrus’s hand guided Thane inside her, scratched his talons down her thighs. Physically, emotionally and philosophically overwhelmed she could not keep everything in her head at once, like the inability to see simultaneous vases and faces in an optical illusion, unable to integrate the light and shadows, her pattern recognition failing. She was the cold, using bitch that brought death and judgment, who Urem could only relate to by pretending she was not who she was. Thane was the lethal, manipulative liar whose attention it was unwise to draw. Garrus was the Eye for an Eye unforgiving deliverer of vengeance. These shadows were deep enough to pull light to them, the event horizons of three people coalescing into something new.

They did not begin as beings of light, but beings of darkness, the critical mass of joining together pulling light to them, events rushing in and dictated by them, too dark to feel, too bright to see. Her eyes closed, her mind set loose the concepts of people on separate paths and it was like the triple impossible suns tracing the same path in the Cathedral, it was like blood on the tongue, it was a synergy that could not be calculated or added, only multiplied.

She was incandescent, the last sight before she closed her eyes of trailing light from the bodies of her lovers, her mates, the star crossed and caught.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

I blame and thank Felinafullstop for the Elcor Strip Club challenge.

Thane had been brief about his mission. Jane was accustomed to his deeply ingrained habit of concern over being monitored and caution regarding giving away any actionable information. She felt safe on her own ship, especially with David, EDI and Kasumi on the case with the Shadow Broker on board. She realized she shouldn’t feel much safer because the stakes were too high to take chances. She respected his quiet assurance that the parameters of the mission for slaver entrapment had proceeded smoothly. Yahlis had embraced the opportunity and the mission as soon as he had explained it. Phetas had followed her leadership. He had no difficulties with Yahlis’s plans to choose locations, recruit other Drell or lure slavers and felt the mission would be assured in her hands. He had found himself in a progressively more observational role, growing confidence that he could return to the Normandy, which had become a growing personal concern of his. He handed over initiative to Yahlis, established her relationship with Feron so they could coordinate participation and she would have access to the funding Jane had provided. He maintained that Yahlis would not be a danger to anybody but slavers, and that this job suited her. Yahlis had no existential or personal questions or confessions to relay. He believed every Drell he had encountered to be deeply invested in their own survival and in the possibility of establishment of true colonies.

The name of Shepard had been a motivating factor. Through Kolyat and Feron, Shepard had been widely promoted as the person to arrange for the research into Kepral’s. Through Thane, Feron, Kolyat and now Vraen, Shepard was disclosed as the person hoping to extend Drell lifetimes and quality of life by ending the systematic indoctrination of Hanar and Drell and breaking down the Compact. Yahlis seamlessly kept the appearance of a person willing to support a Shepard agenda and willingness to fight for Drell causes without any hint that she was personally familiar with Commander Shepard in any way. She was merely a colleague of Thane’s by all appearances.

Prep for the Sur’Kesh mission revealed it to be tactically near suicide. There were so many things that could kill them, get them captured or injured. Action tolerances were measured in seconds.

She kept repeating the word ‘audacious’ and not ‘suicidal’ to describe the mission.

An unexpected challenge was the difficulty of convincing Javik to use an interface pod in order to drill it. She had three pods installed in her quarters, twenty more installed in crew quarters and living areas and was going to encourage crew to take advantage of the potential for streamlining work and raising morale.

Javik behaved as though she had asked him to decapitate himself in preparation for the mission. She had run full tilt and unexpectedly into his virulent hatred of artificial intelligence. He stated with contempt “I am willing to go on the mission. I am not willing to allow my consciousness to be altered.”

She tried to explain “It is not so much altered as mirrored.”
He nearly snarled “Altered…by an unshackled AI and an idiot who does not speak unless it is through an altered consciousness.”

That made her angry. “EDI and David deserve my respect, they certainly deserve yours.”

He made no attempt to back down and continued with “In my cycle – “

She had absolutely no patience with that. She cut him off with a hand gesture and said quietly “This is not your cycle, Javik. This is…MY…cycle. This is my ship. This is my mission. Without EDI I’d have had my crew captured by the Collectors. Without David I would have never had the information I need to take down Cerberus. They have proven themselves to be loyal, resourceful and creative. You have so far only proven yourself to be opinionated. If you cannot work with artificial intelligence or understand the difference between ‘idiot’ and ‘savant,’ if you persist in insisting on your superiority but you are in fact too afraid to take certain risks, then say you are afraid and step down out of mission roster. With Thane and Jack returning, I do not need to consider you a candidate for tactical missions. You can live out your life to its natural extent without having to fire another shot. Your prejudices and your preferences are understandable. You were accustomed to command when you went into cryo. Now I am in command. Your ignorance is not a valid argument. So let me rephrase my request and you can perhaps rephrase your response. The way the Normandy works, I have the opportunity to simulate some battlefields before I engage in them. This ability to drill and familiarize myself and my team with terrain and potential pitfalls has proven invaluable, and Garrus and I drilled Eden Prime in the simulator before we got there to keep you from falling into indoctrinated hands. If you do not wish to participate in the pre-mission drilling, I will find other crew mates who are willing. I may consider you for a future mission that requires no drilling, but I may simply find that I can’t be bothered to offer you repeated opportunities. The drilling of the mission is the least dangerous part of it. I don’t want to find out that along with your unwillingness to take a negligible risk inherent in the drilling, the actual risks of the mission itself would cause you to waste my time in objection after objection as to how you would have done it during your cycle. Your cycle failed. I still have a shot at it and you’re either going to help me or get out of my way. I will not make it an order, because you clearly have not yet chosen to follow my orders. I am doubtful about your ability to contribute to a ground team. There is a high risk, high impact mission coming up that may result in death, grievous injury or capture, imprisonment and interrogation. We are all high value targets to be bagged on Salarian sovereign soil but you also are at high risk due to your being the sole member of your species left alive. I urge you to reconsider your interest in ground missions and take Liara up on the offer of preserving your life and also preserving Prothean culture and relics with your guidance. You go with me or you go with her. I have no interest in you remaining on this ship with seemingly the only purpose you serve being that of criticism of things you have no interest in exploring or understanding. You have an opportunity to prep for an upcoming mission. I will not order you to arrive at 0700, but your absence will indicate that you wish to pursue a safer path, one that involves your survival being a higher priority. I urge you to consider your survival and make the choice that suits you best. If you arrive for drilling, you will conduct yourself with the understanding that I am in command and you will follow my orders.”

She turned and left, hopeful that he would not show up. She was also hopeful that EDI would not decide to do something spiteful to defend David. Jane almost wanted to do something spiteful for David…maybe she just had. David would never be spiteful, he would immediately understand and that made her want to be extra spiteful on his behalf.

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Thane was interested in the technical aspects of the interface pod, but he was subdued about possibilities despite Garrus’s enthusiasm. The installation of pods and their prior experiences were mentioned, rampaging klixen were tangentially brought up at dinner.
Thane said quietly to the possibilities “It has been a discipline of mine to limit my fantasizing. It has been a lifelong practice. Drell in particular can be subject to solipsism and I still feel I must guard against it, that I am vulnerable still and likely always. I have just spent a great deal of time away from you both, and although I have perfect memory, in some ways it can become a detriment, providing style but no substance. As illustration, my memory allows me to remember a meal with perfect clarity, but I gain no nutrition from the memory, and it can evoke more hunger once relived. I find I have only the will for reality when I am able to share in your company. I have no objection to its use as a tool for planning missions. Otherwise I prefer to sharpen my mind through study or meditation, my body through exercise. I do not have objections or reservations about the method, and the possibility of higher security is tempting in order to have certain conversations, but as an entertainment source I must decline. The reality of you both I will not risk diluting and I do not wish to sunder mind from body. I have no fantasy that I feel would heighten my spiritual or physical connection with either of you. With you absent I wish only the memories that have revealed your truth. With you able to spend time with me, I wish only further truths to be revealed. If I touch you in reality, it is my body and soul combined. If a simulation of me touched a simulation of you, I fear it would be as my imagined meal. Perfect in conception and in recollection and possibly even execution, but lacking the substance that would make my body and my soul rise together. It would be of the mind only, and I would know the difference and perhaps be dazzled by style, while we would be mutually starved of substance.”

Jane had asked “David mentioned he could reconstruct anything on Rakhana you might wish to see.”

Thane had nodded but took no time to consider it. He said quietly “I have been to Rakhana.”

Travel to Rakhana was restricted and dangerous, but of course he could have gotten any level of official permission or bypassed those channels entirely.

Thane said “It was after Irikah’s death. I traveled there without permission, hoping to see some Sign. I wished to see the home of ancestors I no longer had the right to claim, but whose blood had caused the Compact. The reality of Rakhana was a choking wasteland. It was fitting to that moment in my life. My people had fought their own greed and lost. Rakhana inspired nothing in me but the determination to do what I had already chosen to do. I believe whatever her state, I would have used her to justify the inevitable path I had chosen, that had chosen me. Rakhana being broken reflected my despair, but had she been healthy and joyous, I would have taken the same actions. I would have then compared her to Irikah, and named my future actions justice. Instead I knew myself to be as ruined as the source of my blood. I was able to rightly name the actions I took as vengeance. Going to Rakhana dispelled some illusions I carried about myself, and I prefer her reality to remembered glory. Vengeance was a path already set, and all signposts I could only read as pointing one way. I would fail my fight against vengeance the way my people had failed against greed. I know what Rakhana was and what she is, and the future of her children that live off her sands is what matters now. The only place I have ever called a home is the Normandy.”

Thane’s solemnity and introspection, well deserved, had the stamp of his own custom. It might have been in her nature to offer sympathy, a hug or encourage someone else to elaborate, but both Jane and Garrus knew that moments like this opened up and closed like cresting whales in the open sea. Unpredictable, ungoverned, spout and fin and then gone to the depths, not to be pursued. The work of honesty for him was excruciating, as though he tore his chest open with his hands to show a beating heart as proof. They would all conspire to use three sets of hands to close it again, him assured his effort was appreciated, them assured that it had been painful and they did not wish to prolong that pain. It was counterintuitive and it made her heart clench with how little he valued his internal life, but she knew Thane would welcome the lightening of a mood, return to serene surface. His honesty was something to be seen but not recorded, not remarked upon. He relied upon them to
understand this and to allow him to grant his honesty in tangential form, then be permitted to put the weight down.

Garrus said, teasing, as though put upon “I’m guessing you’re also going to say no to making a pass at Javik to assuage my curiosity.”

Thane’s response was slow to come but definitive “I am afraid so. My adventurous days are behind me, I find I have more than I can handle in terms of love.”

Garrus scoffed “What about just sex?”

Thane redirected the request to Jane “What about just sex for you?”

She said with an echo of his smile “You know, I tried that, and it didn’t work out the way I thought it would. I’d like to know when either of you even think I could fit him in…my schedule…”

Garrus teased “You know we’re going to make you say it.”

Jane’s brow raised “Say what?”

Thane said with a warm smile “I will not ask her to say it.”

Jane rolled her eyes “Say what?”

Garrus said “That you have everything and everyone you need.”

She smiled and said “Thane knows I don’t have to say it because it should be obvious.”

Garrus grinned and said “Yeah…but I like hearing it anyway.”

They were eating dinner, so she stood and dusted her hands off, walked behind Garrus and put her arms around his neck, wrist clearly visible. He turned his head to look at her and nearly scratched her cheek with a pointy bit but she was able to duck, having learned the ways of the visor. She said “Go ahead, this you can record.” She waited as he looked at her skeptically but she saw the eye motion that activated recording. She said “Garrus Vakarian. I should have prepared a speech, but I’m going to have to ask you to just take what I say here, and multiply it beyond what my poor tongue can manage. I would need a new language to say how much I love you. There are some words of Turian and some of English, but I have no better words for love, devotion and loyalty than your name. When I speak your name, that is what I mean. I hope you know that before I died, I knew you were too good for me. I was afraid I would hurt you, harm you, and I have and I did…but I was given a second life and I needed you. A second chance to live made me realize that my life was too short the first time around to be afraid. I should have begged you to help make me a better person, instead of being afraid I would make you worse. I thought to myself that you wore your heart on your armor, and then that you wore your heart as your armor. That you were fearless. Your example and your willingness to love me no matter what my failings, no matter my fault, makes me want to be a better person. We have changed the worlds together. We will change the galaxy together. Play this recording so you know it. Ask me when you want to hear it. Hear it every time I say your name. Hear it in the way I say your name when I know you just saved my life, when I know you’ve saved my life so many times, when your body shelters me, embraces me as your bond mate. You have inspired faith in a woman that had none. I love you, Garrus Vakarian.”

He growled in appreciation and pulled her into his lap, kissed the hell out of her. He turned to Thane and said “Bet you wish you’d have insisted that she tell you too.”

Thane’s smile was indulgent as he said “She has told me.”
She shrugged and snagged a bit of fruit from Thane’s plate. “That’s easy. You’re just unspeakably hot. Obviously.”

Thane said in a Drell reflection of Turian arrogance “Bet you wish you were unspeakably hot.”

She almost coughed fruit out her nose with the resultant laugh, Garrus’s arms around her with his laugh reverberating through his chest, Thane’s eyes lit with his satisfaction of making them laugh that hard.

The Spirit of them being together saw honesty and humor where they would have never existed, and she imagined so many things that were like ghosts, unrepeatable and unbelieved by anybody she would try to explain it to outside this door.

“But Thane…he’s funny…”

“Sure he is, Shepard…”

Sure. He is.

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Javik arrived for drilling at 06:50, and she found herself satisfied instead of disappointed. She had determined that Garrus and Thane and she could run it themselves if need be. Kasumi was grateful to be out of the rotation.

She and Garrus familiarized themselves with the components of the mission and the available tools, while Thane and Javik were being introduced into the interface. Garrus was the best hacker among them, so he needed to drill code relay. She familiarized herself with the compound, the route, and with the identifiers of each of the females.

There was no way to inform the Krogan females, five of them, that this was a rescue before or during. That was volatile enough. The authorizations were in the moment decryption efforts of codes that had to be entered quickly and accurately or they were blown.

They had to run a very specific route and behave a specific way and leave no evidence. The plan was to isolate one Krogan female and use her against the others as a means of their cooperation. It hopefully would not be too difficult to get the females to leave Salarian hospitality and they would have to play on their interest in escaping and taking the chance that they were going from frying pan to fire. Padok had insisted that was the best psychological tack to take as they were intensely loyal to each other. Their willingness to undergo the experimentation they had under Maelon voluntarily and their fierce loyalty to each other were what had inspired Padok to reach out to Wrex. It would have to provide the basis of their evacuation.

They could not afford to fail in this approach. They did not have time to sedate and lug out uncooperative and aggressive Krogan females, and they could not afford to do them any harm in combat or be harmed themselves.

They still had tranquilizer rounds if it became absolutely necessary, and Garrus at least was able to carry out one female on his own.

They would arrive while the females were sleeping, kept in separate quarters. They would appear to arrive, take Padok hostage. They would seemingly know their way through the labyrinth and Padok would not appear to assist them in location or subduing of the females.

They had exactly seventeen minutes from landing to takeoff with the current plan.
They had to rely on transportation provided by Mordin’s and Padok’s ingenuity and bribery, so they
had the Batarian cruiser with a shuttle that would mimic the call signs of local maintenance and take
off with a different vehicle with a clean identity, a much larger vehicle to accommodate the extraction
team and five Krogan females. She did not relish trying to keep five Krogan females calm or try to
tell them the story en route, so they would be tranquilized at that point. Then rendezvous with the
Batarian cruiser tricked out to be indistinguishable from a Blue Suns vehicle. They should be able to
get out clean, but if they didn’t, then the cruiser was the bait. They would have to evade pursuit, and
the intent was to lose pursuit through the Mass Effect relay. If they could not shake pursuit, then they
would have to do a maneuver where the shuttle they took from the planet would disembark from the
cruiser and double back through the relay, all hands on board the shuttle. The cruiser would be on
auto pilot supervised by EDI. She would self destruct if a Salarian vessel so much as attempted to
sneeze at them, and do so spectacularly, as though the drive core had ruptured, vaporizing the ship,
leaving behind no body remnants or evidence.

In theory from there Salarians would follow every lead they could to determine why Blue Suns
wanted Krogan females.

In theory.

This was all in theory.

She was proud of her team. Though the schedule was tight and complicated, they were able to run
through it in anywhere from 13 to 15 minutes. Garrus was unerring in relaying of code and
complicated hacking. Javik did not question a damned thing. Thane was speed and efficiency.
Female Krogan and a stand in for Padok cooperated with how things were supposed to be.

She insisted on variants. Aggressive female Krogan. Discovered that Javik could in fact disable and
carry a female Krogan on his own. Good to know.

Thane could…drag a female Krogan.

She could as well.

That still left one unconscious Krogan and not enough time.

She did not want to abandon some of the females but some of the run throughs made her think that
maybe they could really only manage two easily. Five…

Audacious.

She could not return to Wrex with three females. She could not leave any behind. She could not get
them killed. She knew she would not be able to return and try again.

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They were down on the ground. Counter starts now. Seventeen minutes. In full Blue Suns regalia
they were through the carefully drilled path. Voice distortion if they needed to say anything external,
internal head microphone set to hear each other to coordinate. Garrus got them to the ground, the
pilot from the Normandy, Regina Yen, had them expertly parked to set off no proximity or danger
alerts, and their getaway vehicle was visible in the right place, Regina headed that way.

In the first door with a code. Lower security, changed daily so Garrus already had it memorized and
it wasn’t a code like the ones hacked for orbital insertion.

Padok in theory encountered in front of only one working camera, Thane had him with a gun to his
head.

First door of five. Javik in first with the hopes to restrain and control. Hopefully leaving Garrus free to hack. One Krogan woman controlled. Five minutes down.

Things went well until the fifth Krogan female in a narrow hallway chose to charge.

They had drilled this very carefully so hell breaking loose still had some discipline. Her set priority had been that any recovered female was more important than the lives of the team.

Thane shoved Padok toward Javik who convincingly had both his female and Padok controlled, and Javik headed back to the shuttle without hesitation.

Garrus intercepted the charging Krogan female, leaving the other three to Thane and Shepard, who were armed and armored, but the Krogan were seriously considering mutiny and liked their odds and she could tell.

Garrus had his female in a choke lock with a gun, a live gun he was under orders not to use, pointed not at the Krogan’s temple, but spinal cord, one aimed shot, sever the first cord, second shot slightly to the right, and she’d be permanently dead, no redundancies. Garrus growled in his distorted voice “This Krogan bitch is not worth my life. I do not care how much I get fucking paid if I can’t get out of here. If you want dead or alive, that’s what you’re going to get, I’ll start with her.”

Shepard and Thane followed his lead and pulled their (useless, live...) weapons as well, aiming for spinal cords.

The females still looked like they might try it for a desperate moment, but Garrus’s Krogan let out a deep and calming “All right. Don’t kill them. I will go with you.”

They were at twelve minutes. It would take at least three minutes to extract from this position even if all went well.

They had attracted the attention of what looked to be a Yahg. Definitely a Yahg. Still in the enclosure, but battering against a barrier that was cracking, and a proximity alarm began to sound.

Now they had less than two minutes before security response. Garrus began herding the Krogan ahead, Jane and Thane with guns drawn, with Krogan females deciding to move from the guns, the alarm and the impending Yahg.

Impending Yahg became kinetic Yahg, breaking entirely through the enclosure and lurching after them. Two doors still requiring security clearance during lock down, with Garrus unavailable for hacking. Garrus had to shoot behind him to slow the Yahg down, protect the females and Thane had to take over hacking, with Jane covering all four females back to back with Thane. However, charging Yahg tended to change allegiances. All anybody wanted was OUT.

Rushing through the door, Garrus closing behind, Thane to the next security lockout, Garrus beginning to have to go hand to hand with a Yahg having greater reach. Thane was hung up on the door but it appeared Javik had gotten the Krogan female stowed and he had managed to hack from the other side. The door opened and the outrush of bodies stampeding toward the shuttle was the feared chaos.

Audacious.

Not suicidal. They were all still alive but only had forty-five seconds to go.
Maybe suicidal.

They did manage to get the Krogan females herded into the right vehicle with Javik’s assistance, seven seconds to go, Garrus bringing up the rear with a Yahg that comprehended escape route.

Garrus’s blows and shots barely slowed it down. Jane remembered that feeling. They were unable to take shots themselves because Garrus was too big and the Yahg was canny enough to keep a Turian draft and deny them line of sight.

They had to go, they had to go now, and she split her frantic view between the inside of the shuttle, Padok trying to desperately get Krogan attention without being overheard by any listening devices, Thane and Javik getting on and Garrus finally turning to sprint onto the shuttle.

Havoc reigned, because the Yahg sprinted and then leaped onto the shuttle at the three second line and they had to take off. She and Garrus were left with a Yahg, Thane and Javik with attempting to protect the females from the Yahg, Padok with trying to get the female’s attention.

Shepard bellowed “We are here on behalf of Urdnot Wrex —“

The Yahg lunged for her. Garrus was running interference, but the Yahg, again canny, used Garrus against her, smashing him bodily into her, so she slid against the wall, Garrus crashing against her and a Yagh landing on them both. It grabbed her arm and wrenched until she felt the screaming pop of the dislocated elbow, wedged under Garrus’s armor.

So maybe not suicidal, but maiming and still at risk if the Yahg overwhelmed the pilot or the Krogan females took over.

The Yahg was physically pulled off of her by Thane and Javik, but the Yahg was still holding tight to her arm, which twisted and pulled again and she felt the armor force her flesh and bone apart. She did not scream.

Padok had waded forward through the stunned females, who theoretically had heard the words “Urdnot Wrex” and might have tentatively believed them, with Padok’s frantic and unheard explanation. Padok provided some sort of tranquilizer shot through the hide at the joints of the Yahg’s neck. Garrus seemed unharmed and he regained his feet quickly, decided that the females were not a threat and the Yahg was down. He turned to Shepard, whose arm was screaming with pain, blood pouring from the broken joint of her armor, wrenched to an unnatural and extended angle, crushed at the elbow.

She raised her voice again “We need to get the hell out of this system safely before anybody celebrates anything. Ladies, we intend to get you to safety and then back to Tuchanka. Padok will stay with you.” She took her helmet off with her functioning hand as Garrus carefully began taking her armor off the other arm and Thane applied a tourniquet to her shoulder. She did not have painkillers because it was the hand that had her Omni Tool. Padok waded his way to her and began taking her vitals and making reassuring doctorly movements and blessed pain killer choices after determining she had no recourse to it herself. Medigel was slathered on exposed skin. She looked away after determining that “mangled” was an applicable medical term. She said “I’m Jane Shepard. I’m a friend of Urdnot Wrex and we’re going to attempt to reverse the Genophage, but for now… everyone has to sit the hell down.”

Everyone sat the hell down that was not crawling over her arm. She checked in with Regina, who reported no immediate sign of pursuit. Takeoff was clean and they would rendezvous with the cruiser shortly, head for the relay and be away before they were identified.

The best she had to say about the arm was that it wasn’t thresher maw venom and it wasn’t her head.
Her vision still threatened to cut out at the edges.

A lot.

She verified that the Yahg was definitely out. Padok confirmed not dead…but out for 2-6 hours minimum. They would be able to restrain and re-dose.

She tried to figure out why she would want a live Yahg, but could not just murder it and dump its body. The vague comment she’d made about uplifting the Yahg herself flashed through her mind and she began to think of it as a possible asset.

Padok informed Jane that the Yahg was a female. She responded that she would appreciate it if she was in a brig before Jane attempted to speak with her.

Garrus had gotten her armor off to the shoulder. He moved out of Padok’s way and joined with Javik in moving the Yahg and restraining her effectively in case she woke early.

One of the female Krogan said “This is all very impressive as a story but difficult to believe. You may be Commander Shepard, but you were also indoctrinated. Even in prison certain things can be overheard.”

Story of her life.

The female continued “Is there any way you can verify that you are working with Urdnot Wrex?”

Shepard opened a shielded channel to the Normandy and asked to be patched through to Wrex through Thane’s Omni Tool, which had more encryption.

When Wrex answered she said “Female Krogan are present, five of them. They would like confirmation that I am working with you and that I am not planning to indoctrinate them.”

Wrex said calmly “Your arm looks like hell. Did one of them do that?”

She angled Thane’s arm to the ground “Nope. Yahg.”

Wrex laughed and said “Looks like you’ve got it under control.”

Jane made a face and then shifted Thane’s arm back toward the suspicious females.

Wrex said arrogantly “This is Commander Jane Shepard. I trust her with my life. I trust her with your lives. She has given up her arm and you still doubt her?”

One of the females said “Wrex, see this from our side. How long have we been in captivity?”

Wrex said “One year, two hundred and eighteen days.”

Another female said “She could have a simulation of you as well. How do we know that this is Wrex?”

Wrex started to make offended noises but Garrus cut him off, saying sadly “There’s only one way, Wrex.”

Wrex sputtered but said “What’s that, Vakarian?”

Garrus said mournfully “Elcor stripper.”
Jane said in half laugh and half horror “Absolutely no Elcor stripper from either of you.”

Wrex said “Garrus is right. It’s the only way. Plus it’s your fault.”

She sighed and said “I just thought Chora’s Den would be improved if you replaced the Asari with Elcor. You guys did not have to run with it. I barely made it to Fist with a straight face, and you killed him for the finale.”

Wrex said “It’s been battle proven as an excellent distraction.” His voice shifted to a gravelly blunted tonal speech of an Elcor. “Lustful request: Please consider allowing me to provide you with a show.”

Garrus followed up with “Informatively reassuring: Did you know that Elcor do not carry sexually communicable diseases?”

Wrex said “Come on now, Garrus, this will prove we know each other. Elcor Comedian. Humorous query: What is the difference between a magician and a stripper?”

Garrus answered “Jocular rejoinder: One has a cunning stunt…”

The questioning female Krogan sat back and said “It’s Wrex.” The others appeared to accept this as absolute proof. Score five for Elcor stripper.

Wrex answered “Damned well right it’s Wrex. That is Garrus Vakarian. That is Commander Jane Shepard. That is…I have no fucking idea what that is.”

Javik said “Prothean.”

Wrex responded “What?”

Javik repeated “Prothean.”

Wrex said “Riiiight. Prothean. Yeah, that’s a story. I’ll ask later. Commander Shepard will get you to safety. Padok informed me of your incarceration, I asked Commander Shepard for her help in extracting you. She did it with only the loss of one arm, pretty good for one of her missions.”

Jane said with weary appreciation, on the end of an adrenaline jag, the sight of her own blood and bone and relief that the mission had actually succeeded “Fuck you, Wrex.”
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Her only option for the short term was to stall bleeding. The tourniquet and Medigel had stopped it for the most part, but there was still some…distracting…dripping from either a very slow seep or just residual. The pain was intense, blinding when she moved, but the mission was not over yet. Without access to her Omni Tool she had no option of overdosing, which she was mindful about doing in circumstances like this now. She accepted what pain killers Padok offered and did not ask for more. After treatment and she was able to hold still, pain was low enough to make it possible to sit still and not scream. With some effort. She still moved with breathing and could not stop breathing, so she had no strategy other than endurance.

Once she was stabilized Padok went to go speak to the Krogan and she left him to it. It was out of her hands.

Out of her hand. She currently only had access to one.

The injury was to the left arm. She had seen it, felt it, watched the first aid attempts. She had a few moments of leaping hope, of being among geniuses and having seen miracles, but in her gut she knew it was a loss. Given a machete she’d like to heat it up and chop her arm off above the elbow to have one searing burn rather than the feel of a dying arm, desperate tweaks and twinges of roiling pain along the topography of twisted and severed nerves. She breathed and dealt with pain. The situation beyond her arm was still volatile, and they were still trapped in a shuttlecraft with a Yahg.

Garrus and Thane flanked her on the bench and held her up without appearing to do so. Javik was standing guard over the Yahg. Thankfully they all knew her intentions and the drilling of this mission included door to door service. She would slowly bleed and lose her arm, and she experienced no anxiety over that, because salvage had never been possible. She knew the arm had been lost the moment the elbow wrenched and shattered.

Thane and Garrus took her cue and everyone kept their game face on.

Javik was made of game face, so that was not a problem.

She was in good company, she had painkillers, she was short an arm above the elbow but that was in fact a small cost for something that could have easily ended up with them all dead or captured, with the Krogan people losing their only advocates and their best chance at fertility.

Aim for audacious, miss at suicidal, land at maiming. Acceptable.

After a small adjustment and an offering from Thane of a swatch of fabric…Arashu only knows where he got it but bless her pervy magician…she stopped dripping.

She would get back to Karin, listen carefully and respectfully to her options, but she knew her answer. Reconstruction might be possible with Miranda, but that amount of time…and rehab…and she knew already she would opt for a high tech replacement.

Hell, she might be stronger than Garrus then.

She would never feel venom through the fingertips of that hand again. The last time she had touched Thane with that hand would be the last time she would be able to, and she had not known. She was always aware of possible loss…but specific loss…specific and personal loss…blindsiding in its fierce need to deny it could be true.
She didn’t close her eyes and lean back or to the side, and she stopped thinking about her arm except to endure the pain. They had a long way to go. She had no time for personal grief.

Garrus and Thane spoke to her calmly, all business except for unseen touches like Garrus making sure she had his scent, Thane easing venom into her body through her healthy hand, whispered words of strength and endurance from both.

Thane spoke low enough for her to hear “Jane, I know you do not often succumb to venom, but perhaps you will if you choose to. In your blood right now and in my voice is the will that you experience no pain and fear no loss.”

It did help, and whether it was from her willing it to be true, wanting the pain to stop, or just hearing Thane’s steadying voice…it made a difference.

Garrus spent time distracting her to the best of his ability. “Kerim, of all the times I want to kiss you and take away your pain, now would be the time. I suggest we behave as though we’re going to speak to Regina but instead I make out with you.”

She had smiled, warmed and reassured momentarily through the surging nausea and prickle of sweat. She said back calmly “Thanks…but drug interactions…and possibly trying to high 5 a Krogan female on my way back with a shattered arm because I’m way too happy…”

Garrus had sighed and said “You like to make things difficult, don’t you?”

She had tsked and said “You finally figured it out.”

The Krogan females were effectively impressed and relayed their better educated thanks after discussion with Padok. Jane had learned a great deal about making an impression. Whether or not every Krogan was behind her, Wrex and these five would be, and in theory they could and would sway Tuchanka. In a shuttlecraft of all warriors accustomed to pain and sacrifice, Jane was not about to let her arm keep her from being taken not only seriously but profoundly. She didn’t neglect it as she had her leg at the Collectors, but she would not allow it to interfere and she did her best to make it count for her in its dying moments.

It was an hour and a half before EDI brought the cruiser through the relay. Maybe 30 minutes more before EDI and Regina felt absolutely certain there would be no pursuit and that the shuttle was not at risk. They rendezvoused with the Normandy, the shuttle was transferred. EDI was going to pilot the cruiser to a safe spot that led away from Eurydice and the Normandy would take a more direct route since she could do that stealthed.

Security arrived to help Javik get the Yahg to the brig. EDI was on electrocution and sleepy gas watch, because a Yahg could clearly do structural damage to attempted enclosure.

Garrus and Thane had made quiet suggestions of disposition of the members of the shuttle and she had agreed, so all she had to do was walk off and to the med bay. No drama, no carrying, no leaning…despite repeated requests that had made her smile, no making out. She would walk. Padok had assured Garrus in a private conversation that the Krogan females were healthy and not at any immediate medical risk. They could be housed as diplomats and not confined to the med bay, and Shepard would get first priority from the medical team. They would wait for work to be done at Eurydice. Padok had agreed to that plan, adding “Mordin would not want to be left out.”

Karin and Miranda had done their best to virtually examine the disposition of her arm through Omni Tool photos and crude scanning tech.
Jane got some blood replacements and some excellent painkillers. Mordin and David had made their mark on effective pharmacy. She was examined and scanned. She wasn’t in pain as they gave her the options she already thought she had. Her best bet for function was a cybernetic arm. There was too much instability, too many breaks, too much tissue and nerve damage, too much of the elbow shattered and torqued. An organic rebuild, regen and rehab would take months and the resulting arm would likely still be much weaker and prone to chronic pain and re-injury.

She nodded after listening to her options and said “Okay. Take it off.”

Miranda mentioned that if she wanted full tactile sensation, including absorption…and that meant the ability to feel and take in venom…which almost made her cry for the sentimental value alone…they should use the opportunity of her being under general anesthetic and the necessary recovery time to do some implants so her nervous system got used to them and by the time her arm had healed they could begin rehab immediately.

There were risks…brain damage of course, anesthesia of course, blood loss…yes…most of these things she faced every day but did not have to consent to them…

Miranda had some other implants and enhancements she had worked on replacing since Jane’s abduction ready to go, but had not had the opportunity to re-implant, and she felt now would be the time.

Jane gave a crooked smile and said “Thank you. Whatever you think is best.”

They agreed that Karin would begin the surgery, and that would continue until they docked at Eurydice, and then Miranda would come on board to begin her leg of the reconstruction. It would likely take approximately 18 hours if all went well. Shorter or longer if things went badly. That is how long it would take to wake up. Beyond that she would be immobilized for days if not weeks while delicate neurological paths were formed and tested. Then the work of learning control of her new arm. Possible estimate of being better than she had been in one month. However, possible rejection of course, and no guarantees, though Miranda felt she could give an estimate of 78% chance of success based on Jane’s known physiology and well known rejection profile.

Jane turned to Garrus and said “You’re in charge for the near future. I promise I will be taking my ship back soon.” Then she took in Garrus’s expression, Thane’s expression, both of them were taking it harder than she was. She said “Karin, Miranda, please keep me under until they’ve both been alerted to the fact that I’m going to wake up and don’t wake me up until they are standing next to me. Otherwise they will not sleep and they need sleep.”

Karin nodded solemnly. Nobody was going to argue with her for once.

Garrus came forward, clasped her good hand and pressed his crest to her forehead. She said “You’re just upset because I’m going to be stronger than you.” He laughed with a choked outrush of tense breath and said “You’re stronger than me now.” He kissed her and she felt the fine tremble of his mouth plates, in the hand in hers. When he stepped aside Thane took his place and she said “You’re not allowed to watch the whole time. I’m in good hands…uh…and I’ll have a good hand. Eventually. It’s okay. I won’t wake up without you. Please get some rest, take care of each other.”

Thane’s hands went to her shoulders, his fingers spaced, his mouth to hers so gently and his voice soft “As you say, Siha.” Senar’s voice.

She didn’t say anything else, because she didn’t trust her own voice. She smiled at them both, and then at Karin, then reclined, tears in eyes that could finally close and contain them, all choices made.
Mission accomplished.

Garrus’s voice slowly came into focus. She could not feel a thing but she could hear. He said “Kerim, everything went well. You can’t move. They need to keep you paralyzed. Miranda did a lot of work on your arm and in the new implants. She says you will be better than new, better than the second time you were new. We just want you to know we’re here. If you’re dreaming, have good dreams, we love you. Right now you need to rest, to heal and you can’t feel any of it.”

She heard Thane say “Siha, do not worry for us. Garrus is caring for the Normandy and I am caring for Garrus.” She heard Garrus cough and then chuckle. Humor was in Thane’s voice as he said “Dream of peace and healing, Jane. We will be here when you wake.”

She became aware of someone holding her hand. Thane? She thought it was Thane. She said his name. Her voice was scratchy, throat odd…she couldn’t see.

It was Thane, he squeezed her hand and said “Jane, you are well. Your body is growing used to new implants, and some involve your eyes.”

My eyes? What the hell?

She did say ‘Whatever you think is best’ didn’t she?

What the hell did Miranda do?

Thane said quietly “Do not speak. Squeeze my hand. Once for yes, twice for no. Are you in any pain?”

Two squeezes.

“Good. It has been four days. Your recovery has been extraordinary and nerve growth and re-growth accelerated under Miranda’s supervision. She states she was ambitious and you have been most cooperative in your response. It will take a few days longer ideally before you will be able to move. Your head and arm are restrained and you will not have sensation for long. Do you understand?”

One squeeze.

Wishing there were a squeeze signal for – what the fuck?

Alas, no.

Thane said “I must ask a cognitive question, Jane. Squeeze the number that is the result of two plus three.”

Five squeezes.

Thane said softly “You are loved, Siha.”

One squeeze.

She surfaced to consciousness more completely than previous times, the ability to feel came first, the
sounds of the Med Bay, Garrus holding her hand. She felt for her other hand and then remembered…felt…that she did not have one. Each time she woke she had to remember.

She still dreamed of two arms, and she had not had nightmares, she credited Thane with repeated suggestions of dreaming well, maybe the medication had helped, maybe they monitored her REM.

She remembered everything, felt sharp, not as fuzzy or blunted as she had for…how long now?

Nobody spoke, so she tried to, squeezed Garrus’s hand first and then said his name.

Garrus’s voice came quickly, assured “Kerim. You’re fine. You’ll be able to move. You won’t be able to see just yet, Miranda says it will be very blurry. But you should try to see. Are you in any pain?”

She checked. Aches mostly, some fierce itching, some pain but nothing rising to need immediate attention if she could talk instead. Used to military assessment on scales she said in a hoarse voice “About a 1-2 on the pain scale. Itching on the arm and head. A lot of muscle aches.”

She heard Garrus say “You’re still on milder pain killers but no paralysis required. It has been seven days. The Normandy is at Eurydice. The Krogan females are safely on the station and Padok and Mordin are optimistic of a cure. Salarians are not making a peep officially about anything but there are some contracts out on the whereabouts of Krogan females from ‘interested parties.’ Some chatter about Blue Suns agents being hunted.”

She smiled and said “So Archangel pulled it off…huh?”

She heard the smile in his voice “He had some help.”

She opened her eyes and everything was a multicolored blur, she could identify the blur that looked silver and blue and was where Garrus’s voice had come from, but could not focus. It wasn’t just out of focus, it was out of focus in different directions, something inside her brain straining and her eyes watering at the sensation. She tried to blink and focus but it did not help. She said “What happened to my eyes?”

Garrus seemed to nod, or the blur did, and he said “Your eyes are enhanced. You have separate focus apertures to multiple input and processing sites. Going to take a little time for them to work properly, you need some training and some software and hardware adjustment ultimately…but…I’m jealous. You now have built in customizable heads up display and analysis.” He muttered somewhat “Better than my visor.”

She laughed at his tone, and tried to hold still to keep the dizziness and whirling to a minimum. He said “Miranda says to just allow the implant to gather data, don’t strain to focus, just move your head. Face voices, don’t squint. Blink when it feels natural. The implant should gather what it needs and begin to learn soon. For now we’ll just look blurry.”

She smiled “But sound amazing. Are my ears enhanced too? I swear you sound better…but maybe that’s just being gone for a while.”

Garrus sounded happy to hear it, saying “It is so good to hear your voice too. Yes, I do think that your hearing might be better. Miranda can explain it all, but I wanted to talk to you first. Here, let me
give you a tour. Here are the major things to concern yourself with. You know the eyes and what to do, Miranda says in a few days you’ll be able to access the customization functions after the implant has gathered enough data.”

He moved her hand to gently move to the stump of her left arm. “The site is clean and healing well. It might itch, let them know if it gets unbearable. Do not scratch. There are electrodes and sensors, healing well, but it’s delicate and aligned and you shouldn’t touch it.”

He guided her hand to her scalp. Her hair was entirely gone, and not just in one spot. Garrus said “Yup, hair is all gone. Miranda was very busy. She’s happy and might I say even smug. If I’ve got it all, you’ve had strength upgrades, perception upgrades that go above and beyond your eyes, and it looks like she’s been wanting to do these upgrades for a while, she had a long list of things to adjust and enhance. To hear her tell it, this was the most fortuitous injury she’s encountered. She believes your new arm will have the capacity to win at arm wrestling with Wrex and you will also have better fine motor control. They had to reinforce the rest of your arm and strengthen your shoulder to compensate for potential grip strength, so you don’t injure your shoulder.” Garrus added “Thane kept your hair in case you want a wig, but I told him you wouldn’t. You’re not as vain as he is. He concurred, but offer is still open.”

She laughed and said “No, that’s okay. It will grow back fast. I can Jack it for a bit. Wigs itch.”

Garrus said, teasing “I should have put money on it, but he said that was crass. Oh well, moving on.”

She heard Thane say “It was indeed crass.” Her eyes shifted but did not focus and there was a blur of green. He sounded so good. She was sure there was more to their voices that she hadn’t heard before.

It seemed there was nothing medical left to address for the moment, Garrus drew her hand to the side of his face and said “And this is a bond mate deeply grateful that you are back. Missed you like hell.”

He bent down and kissed her, gentle and chaste, crest to her forehead and nose to hers in a nudge.

She said “I swear I hear more subvocals.”

Garrus’s voice was light and he said “I’ll give you a tutorial later. For now, just imagine that what you are hearing means ‘I love you’ and then when we get out back into the fight you can become familiar with the tones that mean I’m terrified.”

She smiled, blurry eyes producing tears as Thane stepped to the side of the bed next to Garrus. Garrus did not give way or let her hand go and Thane put his hand under the thin fabric of a medical gown, on the skin of her shoulder, fingers spaced, venom instant and powerful. A fingertip from his other hand traced over her head, through resurgent stubble, along lines she imagined where there had been incisions or scars, now healed from Medigel but no doubt he’d watched and remembered every moment. Not only had he seen the inside of her head metaphorically but now literally.

It was odd, to be so happy at the loss of a limb and not being able to see, but possibilities were alive. Padok and Mordin had so much work to do but she had faith in them. She felt no despair over the loss of her arm. There was pain and work, but the strength of possibility flooded her with her men at her side and their voices clearer and richer than they had ever been.

Miranda and Karin provided more specifics.

She would be able to…customize her eyes…say that twice…customize her eyes with her Omni...
Tool, several modes to switch through as far as analysis, heads up display, able to be activated by thought, controls and eye movements.

Her Omni Tool would be installed with the new arm, both under construction by Mordin, Miranda, Kasumi and David at Eurydice.

In approximately a week the stump should be healed enough to attempt preliminary testing though not fitting, which would wait until all adjustments were made and all healing was complete.

Miranda had all faith that her brain would be able to adapt to the implants, all of which were based on models that had already worked with Jane's brain.

For now her job was to sit mostly still and keep her eyes open and tolerate the physical discomfort of healing and remodeling of the nervous system.

Garrus was getting work done but they were without an immediate forward mission. They had no active role in curing the Genophage, and that would also take some time. At Mordin's request Wrex had brought himself and some other males…Grunt included…to provide samples. The time however would be weeks, not months. Mordin and Padok were in fact thrilled and encouraged. Preserving Maelon’s data had been a boon.

Garrus’s work right now was coordination with all the agencies setting up support, running separate missions and he was not directly in charge of any of them, just making sure staff and ship needs were met, tweaking efficiency of the Normandy herself and spending long hours visiting.

Issues of risk and audacity aside, the outcome was sufficient for everyone to feel it was a risk worth attempting and the cost was to her acceptable.

Had Thane lost his arm…she did not know if she could forgive herself. He would have treated it as nothing, just as she was right now…

So they maintained bravery and accented possibilities rather than concrete losses, focused on potential gains rather than the knowledge that they could have all lost their lives or livelihoods, and that it had been very close.

It had been too close and they had known that going in and they were all ready to gear up to do it again.

oOoOoOoOoOo

On the sixth day since her injury she woke to Thane’s presence at her bedside. He spent nearly all of her waking hours with her and was her constant companion. She kept a steady schedule of waking and sleeping, dictated by the medication she was taking, so Thane was always there when she woke.

Her vision was only marginally clearer, it would still take a few days of gathering information before Miranda would attempt any programming.

She was in the make no effort stage, so no scratching, no fidgeting, and meditation techniques did come in handy. She did not have to resort to counting, just practicing patience. Time went by slowly and it always seemed as though the clocks had practically stopped. More days in bed, unable to get back to work or put strain on her brain. She just had to let it do its thing.

Its thing was really boring.

She appreciated all the effort others were making on her behalf and was not an ingracious patient,
just a bored one.

Thane’s hand squeezed hers as she started to wake, but there was no reason to open her eyes just yet, she wouldn’t be able to see him, she’d gotten used to that. For now she listened to his voice, focused on the touch of his hands. A luxury she savored.

His voice carried to her, richer than it had been, she was getting used to that as well, small details of character…it was slightly louder than it had been, even soft spoken, so Miranda had turned up the volume in her brain and added contrast and range she had not been able to appreciate before. “Good morning, Jane.” He and Garrus were always careful to ask, likely personal curiosity and medical request “Are you in any pain?”

She said softly “Good morning. No pain.” Itchy, as always, but she didn’t complain about that in a prevention sense, and she didn’t scratch. Her attention was focused to the new input and analysis allowed by her enhanced senses.

Thane said approvingly “That is good. Your doctors are pleased by your progress and so am I.”

She smiled. He made more declarative observations, hopeful no doubt that venom would influence her discomfort and her healing, and she thought it did. She only resisted his suggestions when they were counter to her instincts, and in this case she wanted everyone pleased by progress. He must have been holding her hand for a while before she woke. Her eyes reacted to the swirling influence of venom, distinct from other blurs, capricious and multicolored.

She said, teasing “Will venom make my eyes think that hallucination is a natural state?”

His voice was part informative and part teasing “Miranda believes it to be of benefit…that it provides your mind with stimuli to categorize. Stimuli that you will be experiencing for the rest of your life, so it is an appropriate exercise.”

More declarations. It warmed her, made her smile. Venom did help, immensely, and Thane was able to ease her days. She had promised it to him, that he could sit or stand by her when she was in a state like this. She occasionally felt the urge to tell him to go spend time with Garrus, to go exercise or care for himself…but she didn’t. She would remember.

She felt slight pride in making progress in injury and convalescence.

She was assured this was where he wanted to be, he had made it clear ahead of time, and all the time they had spent separate from each other in her prior recovery had underlined his right to be at her side.

The loss of her hair really did not bother her or him, she thought, and he would find her beautiful because he found her beautiful, and that was a constant.

He stroked her hand and said “With your permission I thought I would attempt a human manicure.”

She smiled, touched and teasing as she said “Only half the work it might have been.”

He said lightly “Of course, I would not attempt it otherwise.”

She considered the silly impracticalities of broken nails and nail maintenance and all the things she had no time for…and decided… “You have my permission.” Because it was him, and it made Thane sense.

He squeezed her hand, his habitual physical sign of approval known to her bones.
He asked “Do you have a preference as to color?”

She almost laughed at the absurdity of choosing a color she could not see, immersed in her appreciation of the bizarre touches of Thane sense. Perhaps if he could no longer influence her hair, he could influence her hand. She would consistently ruin her manicure if he attempted this as a habit, and he would patiently repair what her thoughtlessness wrought.

He already had, but she said “Surprise me. I won’t be able to see it.”

He bent and retrieved tools, began to work on her admittedly atrocious nails. He said quietly, bent to her hand, venom always in contact with her skin “Have faith, Jane. You will.”
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

On contemplation of where this is going, I think the story will be best told from multiple points of view from here. Starting with Thane.

Thank you Felinafullstop for the various inspirations that shape the story, you know where they are, most of them, not all of them.

Thane

She healed quickly. Miranda knew her cell by cell and the components of those cells, so accelerated healing and fast assimilation was a steady miracle. He savored the feel of her warm palm in his hand as he worked meticulously on her nails. Delicate, near transparent skin, ragged cuticles so easy to damage further rather than repair. He did not trust his voice to speak.

That is to say he did not trust his voice to speak honestly. During some crises he found it harder to embrace the vulnerability of honesty and instead he sought the silence, sought the shadows. She could not see him, so he need not school his face into any expression. There was peace in silence and service and not forcing either of them to expose bleeding and torn hearts to the antiseptic and overly bright Med Bay. There was nowhere to hide here but in plain sight, at her side, with no expression and dedicated hands.

He had been gone for too long, immersed in the business of deceit, amid those whose training was for the same thing, and he had fallen back into it. Not battle sleep, but certainly the lulling of necessity, the calm certainty of lack of expression, the toneless voice that discussed efficiency of murder and trap.

Yahlis had been respectful and approving of his advice and suggestions, which he had known to be a lie, but he wanted it anyway, would rather take a lie from her than her habitual harsh truth. He would never trust that her respect was genuine. He had found her disgust for him bracing in the past, a line that separated them. Now with her easy acceptance of his authority and analysis of his strategy as sound he felt hollowed, in like company.

He had been in like company with her, despite his supposed evolution.

He had made a promise to Jane in comfort, in inspiration, to never seek battle sleep or allow it to claim him, and he neared breaking that vow under stress. Neared breaking it and lying about it upon his return.

The goal of saving his people burned so bright and cold he nearly lost himself.

Part of him wished to believe that it was simply lust that drove him back to the Normandy, that it was a weakness of the body to crave plate and dark hair. Part of him wished for him to excise that call, deny it so completely that his days were fully engaged with Yahlis, her thoughts, her patterns, and the simplicity of it.

Choosing to come home, choosing to call it home, choosing to call those not his people family,
driven by the mocking echo of ‘My enemies came…’

He had to choose his enemies carefully.

He would never return to a Hanar handler or seek the life of an assassin again, but the autonomy and the clarity of saving his people…

And then abandoning them for plate and dark hair…

Jane had sent him away, sent him into that, and he had wished to go. She had trusted him completely and it had not been misplaced trust, he had intended to do what he did and he had done it. He had not expected to be so acutely tested. He expected resistance and fight the entire way, but the ease of assimilation of Yahlis and Phetas, their merciless clarity had given the part of his soul pushed to honesty a rest.

What did that say of his bond mate and wrist bound that the company of the harshest creatures in existence other than Reapers was restful to his soul?

What did it say of him?

Thane recalled the trials of Grunt and his constant aggression, need for a path, desire for a resolution to what raged inside his body, and Jane’s understanding. Garrus had suggested a few dances.

In the end it had taken rampaging Klixen and a thresher maw.

What would it require for Thane’s body to cease its constant hunger for the pull of plate and dark hair?

Honesty seemed to echo inside him and give him the answer he did not want “Nothing.”

No trial to complete, no surcease from churning need. Finding that Garrus was bound to him, having felt Jane’s bound wrist on his had lit a fire Thane himself could not contain, could not escape, his bond to duty failing and his will wishing to convince them both to seek shelter with him. His adolescent soul and penchant for drama would accept having them both chained to a wall for the next 40 years, beyond which his will would fail him and his life fade. They would both live another 80 years together, without him. Certainly by then allied against him.

He almost smiled. He could convince Garrus of that, but never his Jane. He barely even said that without irony within his head. “His Jane” was representative of the strength of his need and the generosity of her permission. In reality she was her Thane. His adolescent will had no chance against hers. There would be no chains, no wall.

Well, perhaps.

His adolescent will could paint her nails with chains. That was as close as he would ever get.

He did smile.

He looked up at her face with the injunction to himself to not speak. She had imbued him with her will to rebel. Garrus had imbued him with some of his humor.

He could not paint her nails green and black with her skin tone. She was ill and prone to sallow at the moment. She was beautiful, fragile, wan and unseeing.

Her eyes would now hold the triple cybernetic glow that those with such implants always did, and
Miranda had allowed him to approve the color. The rings connecting them and on the inside of her iris would not glow, but they would shine in changing light, and the three distinct apertures in each eye were the color of Yirla stones. Miranda had been impatient but he had been insistent. It was all changeable from Omni Tool settings, but he enjoyed whatever effect on her appearance he could achieve. The braid of primary colors would be re-implanted with her new Omni Tool, it had not been damaged.

She had no new ampules implanted since her return, a sign of trust for which he was grateful and humbled.

With his images of walls and chains he did not perhaps deserve such trust but she had granted it and he would do his best to live up to it.

He looked back down to her hands, the new ringed and orbed shape and color of her eyes in this light stored in his mind.

The smile on her face spoke of indulgence and some measure of boredom and impatience with infirmity, which he understood intimately.

So for her nails Yirla stone silver background and Vakarian blue for an overlay of implied chains. It would be abstract enough to draw no literal comparison to walls and chains except for him.

He fell to mixing the color precisely, applying it with care, his mind focused but not entirely engaged, the implied serenity on her face what she had to offer to him.

She was a sacred liar and he would not question her right to conceal her pain and loss, something they shared. She had charged Thane with caring for Garrus and he had taken up that charge.

Memory flooded back as his hands mechanically applied polish in layered color and meaning.

When Jane had finally closed her eyes and leaned back on the medical table, Thane had turned to leave and he had taken a few steps before realizing Garrus was still staring at Jane, unable to tear himself away. Karin had been indulgent and calm, but now with her patient down she was going to take over. There had been time to spare because she was not going to try to salvage the arm, but she did have to identify and preserve every nerve ending available that had not been damaged by trauma. She would have to cut back into healthy arm to determine what to sacrifice.

To spare Karin the effort and Garrus the embarrassment, Thane had moved to Garrus’s side and steered him out, unresisting. Garrus was more predictable than Jane and Thane at least felt some comfort that he knew what to do, that Garrus would not conceal or lie, would tell him the truth. He took care with venom and kept his hands on Garrus’s armor only because it was possible Garrus would be immediately called to command.

Garrus was not lost right now, but he was in pain. Thane steered him to Garrus’s quarters and waited until they were inside before he asked quietly “Invas’nam, are you injured?” It would be entirely like Garrus to have sustained his own massive injuries and not report them.

Garrus’s face had twisted in consideration, a change from the desolation of seeing Jane slowly bleed. Garrus knew he was the fulcrum used to wrench away Jane’s arm. Nothing would remove that from his memory, Nothing would remove that from Thane’s, and neither of them would recover from the fact that they had failed to protect her. Garrus had said “What? No…I’m…I’m fine.”

Thane said quietly “You are not fine.”

Garrus stared at him and then said “I have my ARMS.”
Thane ignored that as true but at the moment irrelevant except to despair, the pain in Garrus’s voice tearing a strip off his heart. Thane said calmly “You have a job to do. I have a job to do. Your job will be more difficult.”

Thane had brought him here to get him in familiar surroundings, have availability to food and a shower if required, but that choice though convenient had been the wrong one for Garrus’s belongings. This being his cabin, and not Thane’s or Jane’s, where he would never break something out of temper, here he felt free.

With Garrus’s devastating strength and speed, Thane could not intervene before there were two dents in the wall, distressed metal squeals and a roar from Garrus’s throat.

In truth he wanted to add his own dent.

He should not have brought him here, should have gotten venom into his system immediately so he could ask him to stop.

Stop before I fail to do what she asked me to do…before you harm yourself…

He did not say those words but he did say the end of that sentence, his voice broken “Please… Garrus.”

I need you.

He did not say that either, unable to place himself in a position of importance between these two.

Garrus had the ship and Palaven and all the projects he undertook with the guile of Archangel and Thane had returned from the only mission he’d had, and he’d left it…for them.

And now he was helpless, no distractions or excuses or duties because the only thing he wanted lived in two people whose ambitions inspired and terrified him.

Garrus stood for a moment, anger and violence in his frame, before acknowledging that Thane spoke. Garrus turned to him and said “I’m sorry. It’s…don’t worry about this. I’ve done this before. Lots before. These walls repair easily. This isn’t even…new. It’s just fresh, but some heat and some paint and…”

Thane said drily “Well, I’m grateful you’ve addressed my concern for the wall. Are you injured… now?”

Garrus opened his hands and looked down at them “No. Other things suffer when I collide with them.”

Thane had to close his eyes against the wave of empathetic nausea and regret, remembering watching them crash into the wall. Garrus bore his own guilt of being a fulcrum and Thane had his from dragging back a Yahg holding her arm, they hadn’t known until too late.

Thane said in desperation “She is still alive.”

That made Garrus laugh, bitter “For how fucking long?”

Thane said quietly “Longer than she would have if a Krogan female had been able to complete her charge before you drew your weapon and spoke the words that stopped them all from slaughtering us. That is my only answer, the only answer remaining to us. Longer than she would have if you were not there. You have been there for her, Invas’nam, more than I have. You will guard her ship, you will guard her, the only thing remaining to me is to watch over both of you. I would tell you to
take pride that we have aided in the future of Tuchanka’s survival. I would never have cared for Tuchanka on my own, I only did as she asked. I know you care. Perhaps not right now, but you have spent a life protecting. I have not, Garrus. You are what I care about. She is alive for as long as she allows us to keep her so, or until we fail. We cannot fail.”

Garrus’s hands covered his face and Thane looked to see that his hands did not look injured or broken. Garrus said “I’m a fucking hypocrite. She’s going to be back up and doing insane things. She calls them audacious but they’re fucking insane. Is it BAD to want her to be on that table for a little while?”

Thane said calmly “If you injure your hand sufficiently perhaps I could keep you both where I could watch over you. May I remind you that you are responsible for encouraging her to accept and plan this mission.”

Garrus grunted “Don’t remind me.”

Thane’s lips twitched and he said with mock solemnly “You saved Tuchanka.”

Garrus growled, but it was with the same mock tone. He was calmer and not in danger of punching new things. Garrus said softly “Are you injured?”

Thane said quietly “No.”

Garrus surged to his feet and had his arms around Thane, so tight he could not breathe temporarily but did not care to for the moments that Garrus said “Please…don’t interpret my wall punching as not caring that you’re safe. I just…Spirits…it gets harder and harder…impossible it seems…to put you both at risk and stand aside and let that just…happen…we could all have so easily been dead and I know the price is a planet of warriors but…I don’t care. I swear she talks me into insane things and I know they are insane but if I don’t do them with her she will do them alone. If she survives the surgery…if…Spirits…brain surgery…as soon as she gets up she is going to do it again.”

Thane knew that was all true and he had only empathy, no other support, no solution “I know. She will. And we know we will follow. Please, Garrus, you are covered in her blood and the blood of a Yahg. Take a shower. Discover what the needs are command are, then come to me.”

Garrus growled and his arms tightened, then loosened enough to say “Fuck that. I’m staying with you. We’ll shower in your quarters. Debrief there. We’ll go see what is happening, we’ll talk to Miranda. Just…please, don’t leave me. I need you.”

Thane’s shoulders had relaxed at hearing the words he could not speak, and gained the courage to say them himself, the need of his heart granted and reciprocated “I need you, Invas’nam, I will always stay.” He did not add that he no longer had the strength to leave.

Thane came fully present, surveying the silver background of her hand, the fine wisps and swirls of Vakarian blue color suggesting for him, chains, for others perhaps some random pattern of abstract lines.

He would cherish her hand as he had not before, as he would never be able to do with the other, that opportunity lost.

It would remind him that his dreams and ambitions were small, and dependent upon the crook of her fingers or where she pointed him.

oOoOoOoOoOo
Her vision began to clear and she was delighted with her new ability to see. Miranda had allowed him to stay through her vision tutorial. He never spoke during their tasks and did not interfere so Karin and Miranda had permitted him to remain at all hours.

Thane had brought her some of the preserved peaches in honey that remained from Earth and she had sworn it did taste sweeter, first from his hand and then from her revised tongue.

She was enthusiastic about her upgrades and allowed no discussion of her arm.

When she was able to finally see and focus, she had beamed, looking at his face. She said in wonder “You have…you have more colors than I thought, there are…you have…stripes on your face, inside the green…”

Of course he had stripes on his face. Graduated light to darker green leading into the edges of where the planes of his face met each other in a darker line. He was surprised “You could not see them before?”

She was beaming “No, I couldn’t. You’re beautiful.”

Odd all the things that they took for granted in the difference between human and Drell vision. He wondered if she was able to see many of the details of the Tseni. He would show her again.

She reached out her hand to him, he took it, and then she pulled him in to kiss him. He lost the pace of his breathing, wanted to run his fingers through hair that was no longer there.

She pulled back from the kiss after a soft moan that sounded like music, then turned her hand over and looked at the nails he had painted. She smiled “They’re beautiful. Those blue lines look almost like…” She no longer needed to squint, there was change to the iris, a spin to an outer aperture without her having to change her expression “Chains.”

She looked at him curiously and he said indulgently “Jane, why would I paint chains on your fingernails?”

She laughed and said “That’s not a no.”

He teased “And that is not a rejection of chains.”

She smiled and said “My vision is all new, so perhaps I can be forgiven some folly. I love your stripes, I love my nails.”

What you are, my love, is too perceptive and too forgiving.

And too reckless.

He sat back quietly through the rest of the tutorial. It appeared her vision and perception would remain…too.

But alive.

With others determined to keep her that way.

Entirely as a surprise at the end of the vision consultation, she was for the first time able to get up and walk around, spend time in her cabin, spend time away from the Med Bay, get herself back to regular physical exertion. Her new arm had not been completed but there was a hard cover at the end of her arm protecting the healing tissue. She was released to go about her life (not her command, her
life, Miranda and Karin had both made clear) in the evenings and report during the day.

He knew it to be intensely selfish, but he wanted her alone. He desperately wanted her alone, to himself. The urge to grab her hand and run was pressured. If Garrus were off duty Thane might have brought her directly to him, but he was not so Thane would not. He had no interest in looking too closely at why when he could take her hand in his and lead her out of the med bay, take her to his quarters, be out of the light and into her shadows.

He would never return to harming her, but by every God whose name he had learned, sitting by her day after day unable to touch her had built to a selfish and clawing need.

Normally he would tell himself that his selfishness was unacceptable, but he knew that was not true. Garrus would give them time. She wanted him. The freedom added accelerant to intolerable pressure and he no longer assumed a lack of pressure in her.

He could have what he wanted of her. She would welcome him. She would want him in return.

He’d had her to himself once for an entire week; he knew this woman, her heart, her head, her body. A thought had unstuck in his head with the idea that she had more intense perceptions and it was something that Garrus could not share fully with his build.

Temperature.

He wanted cold against her body to hear her gasp, the heat of his own body in contrast until she moaned, and he could not stop thinking about it. He needed to chase that memory. Garrus could participate but not appreciate necessarily and Thane did not wish to exclude him, but he wanted Jane’s moans on his mouth, cold nipples under his tongue, to slide an ice cold digit into her body as she arched into him, to seek his warmth. He had planned for it and with single minded determination he would bring her with him to that memory.

By every God, by her will, by his, he would have it and Garrus would give his blessing retroactively.

The crowding license and permission and love they gave him made touching his wrist bound as he wished seem simultaneously permitted but beyond the grasp of his understanding. He would strain to reach, to take the potential of each moment.

He had guided her with somewhat sedate pace until his cabin was in view, with her enjoying the view, speechless. Once there he lifted her in his arms, tuned to her potential gasp, which would have been welcomed, but her laughter was even more welcome.

He remembered the taste of her laughter and his joined on his tongue and he wanted it back, swung her through the door and had her back against it the moment it closed. Her mouth sought his as fiercely as his sought hers, her arm closed around him with the same violence, her legs wrapping around his waist until he was finally twined with her, his hands on what he knew was her delicate, gaunt face, memorized and prized for her specific planes and curves, now appreciating that his hands could cradle her head and venom would pour through her.

His heart pounded harder when she said with rough tease in her voice “I should take a shower…”

She had absolutely no conviction in her voice and had she, his answer would have been the same “No, Jane, not until I have what I want.” Delicate shivers through her body were his reward, which he chased with his mouth, with his fingertips down the column of her throat and spine.

Her voice was as lust-choked as his was rough, taking pleasure in the effect on each other, people of silence who had grown to appreciate words traded along with caresses “What do you want, Bes
Tiron?”

The word slipped out before he could stop it, aching and slick with need “Everything.” He almost gave up on the idea of cold, almost tore aside her clothing and his to drive into her in that moment. He could. She wanted him, she wanted everything as well. He could not decide if it was selfish or not, what got him here, but he did want those moans from her, did want to make demands of her. He suddenly wanted a promise as well and he would get it from her.

Her clothes were loose, shapeless, their only virtue being that they were meaningless and disposable. He brought her to the bed, her shirt gone before he lowered her carefully. Neither of them were interested in the lost arm, he was careful only for her loss of stability. He had seen her in the past days move her shoulder as though to balance, then realize the arm was gone.

She adapted quickly and leaned back on her whole arm to look at him with a smile that transformed her face from wan to lush promise.

He was prepared for creation of his memory, thin transparent gloves worn for security systems that detected warmth. Expensive and illegal hacker gear. His hands would be insulated, but the gloves would pull heat from her skin. He had a set, but he chose to wear only one, one cold hand, one warm hand laced with venom.

He gazed at her, drinking her in, her smile, and considered his own clothing, deciding to leave it on to provide him with some physical patience. She would welcome him whatever his choices. He relished that freedom for a moment, still, always, that freedom an element of every memory that contained her, sometimes invoking guilt and sometimes invoking what was intended and what he felt now…that she had given him the right to her body, her heart and her mind.

Her body.

He felt a misplaced ambivalence against the introduction of a new arm, understanding it as necessary for her job and comfort, but it would be foreign.

He felt the undeniable urge to press his chest to her breasts, so he found himself removing his jacket despite having chosen a moment ago to leave it on. His mind faltered, his body desired and he did not reverse his choice. If she would welcome his choices so would he.

The power to overwhelm her was something he enjoyed, and that he would demonstrate and preserve.

He followed her down, pressed her back until her elbow collapsed and she was flat under him. He had been grateful for his venom during her trauma and injury, and he wanted her as mindless as he could make her, with her blurred smile and heated moans. He wanted to look at her, to allow her to see depth of color in his face that she had not seen before, but he leaned forward and down in response to her irresistible gravity, so many choices made for him in her presence.

His mouth met hers, softness and heat and giving. His hands returned to the new fascination of her scalp, her hand on his shoulder, digging in her too-well-seen nails. As if they were reminded of the same thing with the contact of her nails on his skin, she said in her soft, teasing voice “Thane?”

He drew back enough to nip at her lips and kiss along the side of her jaw “Yes?”

She said with conviction in the teasing “They are chains, aren’t they?”

He licked a line along her throat and moved to say in her ear “Of course they are, beloved. My dreams of ensnaring you to keep you safe writ small on your fingertips, a vision you will casually
ruin with your day to day efforts.”

She laughed, fully appreciative of the chains if not the wall, and the joy of being enfolded in her understanding brought laughter again to his lips, a counterpoint to the racing hunger growing in his body from her scent, the way she moved under him, her breasts pressed to his chest. He pressed her down, pressed her back, his hands moving along her ribs and then up to raise her arms over her head, holding down her left with his own arm, twining the fingers of his right with hers.

She had a smile in her voice as well as her breathless approval in the lines of her body “I like the chains. Only now you’d only need three. Bargain.”

She was venom slurred and slowing to his satisfaction, not fully taken by tiremit but close, rubbing against him for pleasure and contact, her blood surging with him. He said haughtily “You should know, Siha, that the loss of the wrist that was bound to me does not release you from me.”

Her laugh was music as she said “You would forgive me for being so careless as to lose it?”

He was struck again by her unpredictable charm that could convince her mates of anything. Anything. He remembered asking for everything from her and her response being to melt to the possibilities. He murmured “You must pledge me everything else, your wrist lost I am bereft.”

He did not sound or feel the slightest bit bereft with her body and breath pressed in on his. He still wanted her promise so he pressed before she lost her words, before he lost his, which they would with his intentions. He said “Your new arm must not threaten my ability to overpower you, Jane. I grow jealous. Tell me you will never use it against me.”

She was compliant, and pleased and she said “I promise. I pledge my other wrist…if you will accept…oh please anything…everything.”

Anything.

Lust he understood, but he needed her presence to attempt to understand love, needed her permission, her understanding. She was lost to him, as he needed her to be, as she wanted to be. Anything and everything.

He said softly “There is so much that can be done with one hand.” He watched her dazed eyes, felt the now involuntary movements of her hips as he put on the delicate glove, with her barely able to comprehend, much less ask questions.

He closed her eyes with the tips of his fingers of one hand, drawing the veil down. She often closed her eyes, unable to see with sensory overload, with the hallucinations and aura. She would not see him now. She did not need to see, he wanted her to feel. Vision took up much of her awareness and he wanted her to shut that out, feel with her new perceptions. He had tested the gloves. Cold but without the possibility of too cold, no sharp edges that could come from ice. He tested a streak of cold, shock but not bite, on his own hand idly, looking down at her head back, breath harsh, eyes closed. They would not open after he had closed them, the gesture a command.

She had promised him anything…everything…of her own will, something he could not take from her, something he mourned for its inconvenience and prized for its rarity.

He felt an echo of his earlier selfishness, the petty but fierce joy of power over her, and did not care to change it except to gather more power.
Philosophical concern dispensed with, he brushed gloved knuckles over her lips, surprise making her lurch but she kept her eyes closed, a soft keen from her throat. Indescribably beautiful and visceral, these moments where he could watch and hear as she was knotted and pulsing sensation. He soothed the cold with warm fingers from his other hand and she pressed her lips to his skin, licking at him until he pressed his warm fused finger into her mouth and she sucked along the length, her teeth along his skin. He closed his own eyes, breath drawn in sharply, affected by the cool temperature of her lips at the base of his fingers and the heat of her mouth. He slid that finger out and replaced it with the gloved fused finger, curling in lightly on her tongue against her gasp.

Gravity again drew him down, his finger curled into her mouth. He kissed all the preserved and alive curves of her face, along her hairline, down to her mouth, his hand with the glove trailing down her body to hold her breast, drinking in her gasp, the press of her body up into his, her nails trailing over his body.

He kissed down the trail of cold, around her breast, warm hand on her other breast, cold trailing over her stomach, soft mewls and gasps the music of his memories, the scent of her trembling skin and the change in texture from lip to skin to nipple.

He drew back enough to watch as flat palmed his gloved hand rode down one hip and his warm palm was on the other, drawing away her shapeless and coarse pants to reveal chilled and warmed flesh and more moans.

He bent her knees to the side of him, slid contrasting hands down her bare thighs, teasing his warm hand along the crease of her body, her legs relaxing with a sigh, a glance up from him revealing her hand digging into bedclothes, her other arm lax at her side, but involuntarily moving with the rest of her body, he imagined ghost nails digging in with sympathetic habit. He watched her, his warm fingers finding her as always wet, degrees hotter than the warmth of his fingers, searing. Lost before he had begun, wanting again to drive into her, spurred on by the bite of her lip, anticipation in the lines of her body, trembling of her thighs. Layers of knowledge peeled back from him as they did from her, as though her entry into tiremit gave him full license to follow. He forgot that she was Commander first, forgot danger and trial and he was left with essence of woman whose moans he chased and trembles he felt on fingertips that barely registered them as separate people ultimately, joined in body and need and all the will that brought these moments to him, in his mind for the moments when he remembered again that he was separate.

He wanted to close his eyes and sink into her, but he wanted other things first, his answer to that bitten lip and the forgotten glove at the sight of her, entirely his, promising everything she could, not compelled but choosing him.

Gravity pulled him again, cold fingers circling and sinking into her as his breath warmed her clit, with her lurching into his mouth with a cry.

Yes. That sound. That sound and her hips, her scent, closed eyes and heat on his tongue, a pass with his thumb to chill the flesh there, and a squeal…

His addiction to the sounds she made took up entire categories in his mind, libraries of breath and gasp, so often enmeshed with growl and purr.

Fascinated and knowing, here, with his knowledge of her body he played her, played with her, her gasps and tensing of her thigh, the thrust of warm and cold fingers alternately, passes of his thumb over her clit, warm breath, his insistent tongue and she was as lost as he was, the emotional release of bringing her pleasure as intense as physical release would be. He thrust cold fingers into her evoking a shriek and intensified clenching of pleasure in her body.
He no longer wished to be by any shore alone without her, he would forsake his people, his heritage, his training, to join her wherever She was.

His hand released his pants, painfully strained cock freed, a surge up her body and only a moment’s pause to thrust cold, soaked fingertips into her mouth, watch her lips close over them, feel the convulsive swallow and suck until he was certain her mouth was cold to near numb. He withdrew his fingers, cast the glove aside, surged his aching cock deep into cold flesh as she thrashed and he groaned deep in his chest, the heat of his mouth against her cold lips, both warming to compensating and then searing heat in contrast in seconds.

Patience and distance, planning and anticipation of memory burned off to essence of man, fit to her body, knowing each sound and each tremble and their meaning, overwhelmed, blinded.

Anything.

Everything.
Garrus

The onus of command did not suit him. He almost laughed. “Did not suit him.”

Terribly Thane phrasing.

It was fucking impossible.

Jane did not make it look easy, but she did make it look inevitable. Garrus was sane and cautious and therefore command of this situation did not suit him.

And was fucking impossible.

He stared at the mess of intel, thought of the thousands of discrepancies related to how Jane needed things to proceed and how they would actually proceed. Evidence was building toward imminent invasion. Scouts were being lost, long-range communication lines broken down.

He could not tell her.

He had to tell her.

This was his command, but he held it for her. She would hate him for not telling her, brain surgery meant possible cognitive deficits, possibly developing complications, possibly permanent until she passed Karin’s inspection. So far things looked fine, but so far she was blind…and in denial about her limb loss, unwilling to discuss it. Not that anybody asked.

Knowing her it was not likely pathological denial, but her instant acceptance as a cost and her desire to spare her crew and mates from the pain. With her, though, acceptance and denial could be indistinguishable, equally insidious and damaging.

Sacred liar.

He knew her well enough but that did not make it less painful.

And how the hell would he even know if she had a cognitive deficit residual? Karin had cautioned him regarding expectations for recovery.

She may not recover.

She was slick reassurance and gentle smiles, unseeing eyes and unseen missing arm.

She had gotten better at being injured and caring for herself, and somehow that made it worse. At the Collector base he had been too injured to aid her. At her abduction he had been useless. She was injured and it was her reassuring him more often than not.

He could intellectually grasp the necessity, knew this woman well enough to see it as sanity and in character and not brain injury…

It did not make it less wrong, less frightening.

It was right for her, wrong for him, to not at least spend a moment in mourning, in shared loss and memorial, to let it go together.
But she seemed to have mourned fully before he’d gotten her armor off.

Had she accepted her own personal losses of body, mind and soul so completely that she no longer counted them as costs?

She did die, Vakarian, she did have her mind robbed from her, how could you judge where this woman has had to walk and what landscape is familiar to her?

You’re not afraid she’s lost her soul. You’re afraid that if you’d lost your arm you’d never recover. You’re afraid that if you’d lost your mind, you would never recover.

You’re afraid you could never measure up to that standard.

He pondered what she had already accomplished and could not fathom her A to B process. There was no recipe, no way to learn her method of success. It all looked like, to him:

Step 1. Choose an insane goal.
Step 2. Get lucky.

It seemed superstitiously possible that as Thane believed, she was some Earth Goddess and lesser mortals did not have her vision or her luck.

Not that losing an arm was lucky.

And he was grateful for not being in an STG experimental think tank where they invented fun new ways to interrogate and perhaps indoctrinate for their own agenda.

He had been essentially sitting on his tactical ass while Jane was in the Med Bay, smiling and infuriatingly cheerful. He’d been informative on some points, vague or delinquent on others. Details about Eurydice came easy, but warning her about the oncoming storm…that she already knew was coming…was not going to be introduced.

Was it? Should it?

Professionally she should be thrilled with what she’d accomplished every single day of the rest of her admittedly possibly short life, and so should he…and he was…but he was also infuriated that his bond mate was insane and most likely to end up in a violent grave soon.

Or worse, taken and indoctrinated and the model for future Collectors, some day only vaguely human in shape, possibly retaining dark hair and moon-ice eyes.

He had his own nightmares.

His churning fear of her surviving brain surgery had faded, and what remained was a thin, bitter shell of resentment that seemed unaffected by the nova of uncontrolled emotion that sat in the space of his heart where the thought of her resided.

He could no longer justify to himself that she was not at least partially insane, deluded. It worked for her but was undeniable. It was that determined insanity that checked his tongue. She would not accept healing as her job when Reapers called.

It had gotten her killed. It would get her killed again.

She had a contagious, coercive charm. It was like venom, some sense she projected and he could not resist, that when leaving her orbit he could not duplicate as he stewed in all the things that could go
wrong, were going wrong…while she focused on the slim possibilities of what could go right at great cost.

With her life and livelihood as the first calculated column of expenses.

He knew in his bones, in his plates, that if he told her of the invasion she would be off, slipping through all intended restraint and checks on her power, and she would be followed by those too afraid to check her logic or competence.

This demanded moment of sanity and peace and healing would be dispelled and…and brain injury.

And it would mean that there was no more preparation, full war. Full commitment. She would fight nonstop as she lost limbs and her brain deteriorated…

And he would not be able to stop her except to take this excruciatingly horrific moment in time and force…her to heal.

Would she forgive him?

He seemed to pick up resentment like a charge from every surface until it built up static. Resentment and fear.

He liked it, in point of fact, and childish as that was, it made him feel like he had some level of autonomy and individual thought.

He stared at his console, realizing he was not going to be able to focus until he worked some of this out of his system.

Gym. Now.

He rarely took breaks, but now was the time or he’d be fuming and useless, thought bottlenecked and dictated by resentment and fear.

He was out of the battery, tangentially passing the Med Bay, where he would possibly be seen looking purposeful and off to do something useful and…and where the fuck were they?

No smiling, blind Shepard, no tastefully attentive Thane.

He almost lightened up fractionally in his sullen dramatics, but his sullen dramatics verified he had better get his temper under control before finding his bondmates sedately taking a tastefully attentive walk, with him appearing as though he wanted to punch them.

He did not think they were tastefully taking a walk, he thought Thane had Jane up against a wall somewhere because that man had returned from his mission smelling like adolescent lust every moment of every day. Jane always thought sex was the best idea ever other than the ones she had where she got herself killed. They were smiling and sedate, had no other issues other than wanting to get their hands on each other.

They were perfect, really, and Garrus had been the main beneficiary since Thane’s return of appreciation of adolescent lust.

Jane’s lust had been a commodity as necessary and abundant as oxygen.
At least he knew he did not impose his lust on them. They would insist. No doubts there of being wanted.

And loved. He was loved.

They were perfect.

He was…not.

He assumed his quarters were safe. Thane would likely have dragged her to his lair with her pushing at his back to get there faster. Garrus went to his own chaste quarters with a hint of a feral smile and changed into something more appropriate for punching things.

He did not make it out of the room without the random emotional static discharging into another dent of distressed metal. He was going to have to replace that entire panel; the metal was warped from repeated hits so that heat would no longer bring it back to baseline.

Words from his combat instructors swirled in his head, admonitions and advice that never really worked on him.

Yes, sex and violence eased stress…but he had always been too inherently stressed for his instructors. He should be steady as plate, tough as hide. The best they’d managed was to get him to learn how to fake it. He could be all those things externally, but internally he had always been, in the opinions of instructors, his father and even his loving Vakarian family…too self involved, too willing to involve himself in others’ business. He did not keep to his wernas – the personal space of a Turian. There were wernas and hetak, duty to self and duty to others, and those concepts had always had the wrong boundaries. Un-Turian-like boundaries.

Those concepts fell on him and fit him as badly as command did.

He could fake it. He could hide behind it.

Right now he could protect Jane from something she felt entitled to be eviscerated by, and take the ignorance of that upon himself.

He could only do it for a short window of time…in which so many people would die…

He could pretend to keep to his wernas and know his own boundaries. He could pretend to a different hetak with the clear concise medical and military boundaries that Karin prescribed.

It would be impossible and he would fail to justify it after the fact, and she would know the lie, and she would forgive him.

And people would still be dead.

He had no answers to save those from the first wave of invasion. Jane had put no plans in place. He had no playbook to follow, just an open-ended horror and certainty.

The root of his crashing guilt and regret was that he had wasted two years. Two years in which he should have sat at the threshold of the Citadel and shouted about Reapers. He should have. He knew. He needed to make up for that, now, with this moment of command, but he found himself sitting still again, paralysis his only recourse, trying to urge himself to meaningful action as he should have after her death.

Thane and Jane both had excuses for not being able to prepare for those two years. Thane had not
known of the threat and Jane had been dead.

But Garrus…Garrus was guilt incarnate. His adolescent fury then had translated into his righteous extermination of daily re-growing scum on Omega.

Jane was righteous, every ounce of that woman’s will poured into stopping the only threat that mattered.

Garrus without her had devolved into vengeful suicide.

He felt the creep toward the helplessness that had gripped him after her death and needed to beat back that blinding despair. The irony was that he was not fit for their company until he was in their company. The fury and howling internal score of recriminations never ceased until they gave him permission, but he could not seek that permission without deserving it.

He would never deserve it…because of those two years.

He was the only one of the three that had failed so completely to stay on wernas and hetak task, evaluate personal needs against the needs of the group and rise to dedication.

Thane had given his life to what he believed was the salvation of his own species.

Jane was so unerringly on task until she was the figurehead for the task.

Garrus…had collapsed. Without her return he would have been a pseudonym and parable, his head on a spike left as a warning that would have worked against anybody else attempting the same thing. Resurgent scum would have ruled Omega until the Reapers came and eradicated them where Garrus could not. Lost. Futile.

Alone he saw himself that way, without the Drell Signposts and the Human Destiny.

Just a Turian with a heart that collapsed without them. He was not the fight incarnate. He had no signposts and right now he had fear and desperation.

Bonded it became worse…and better…and he was lost to their scent, their Signposts and Destiny and his feet trailing after.

So really, fuck command and its demands.

One thing he could count on was his strength and his speed, and he would have his own blood, his own hands for momentary and needed release of the stress that seemed to boil in him constantly. He needed it out of his hands when he touched her.

A small voice reminded him ‘She’s gonna feel it anyway.’

Fuck.

He started to hit things, his own customized practice method and dummy made to be practically indestructible, unlike his quarters.

The same voice reminded him ‘He wants to feel it.’

Spirits, they both wanted to feel it, to force him away from all self control until talons drove into flesh and…

More instructor voices ‘Wrong Way, Garrus Vakarian!’
Never literally the wrong way, just that he developed his own style and it was never strictly…Turian enough. He was too loose in his sighting discipline.

He had been branded ‘lucky.’ It was not a compliment.

Ironically they thought he was lucky and he thought he was a prodigy. They could never get him to show his work but he always came up with the right solution.

Maybe he had something in common with Jane.

His smile was grim as he tried to quiet the clamor in his head by speeding up the workout.

Sometimes he could at least not make things worse if it was not demanded that he make things better.

So his command style…was always a holding pattern. The time his only directive had been to find her he had failed.

‘Wrong Way, Garrus Vakarian!’

So…hold his ground.

And fight like hell.

He inched up the speed of his strikes just to hold still and not lose ground.

He would have to go back to every last one of those dispatches that caused his mind to explode and analyze and synthesize. The best he could.

He might not be a natural at destiny or paths, but damned if he couldn’t learn and work hard in the meantime for the right cause.

Initial path clear he focused on the force it took to not break bones on invincible targets.

Thane’s arrival to the gym was simultaneously two things, jarring and familiar. His arrival was as welcome and necessary as Garrus’s next breath, but just seeing the man now made his heart pound harder than it had from exertion, and the scent of Jane on Thane’s skin…

Comprehending how the two of them meshed together still did not allow Garrus to fit into their clockwork whir, alike in anatomy, chirality and expectation. They had insidious, recursive minds that folded back in on each other in filigree intimacy with delicate tendrils that dug into each other and took root.

‘Wrong Way, Garrus Vakarian.’

But Thane was the right way, and he knew it. He landed one final wound up punch that had the dummy vibrating in a satisfying ring.

Thane’s presence and his perceptive eyes and understated ability to catch scent better than a human but not as well as a Turian…Garrus had looked it up…was so often welcome but right now made Garrus nervous.

There had been times when Jane had been gone that Thane had sparred with him until he was exhausted, because Garrus had needed it.

He didn’t want to need it.
He didn’t want to need this…violence…chaos…to get to what he did need, his mind determining his own path.

Thane’s face promised redirection.

He may not be insidious or recursive, Garrus might be the easiest book for Thane to read, but he did not have to like it.

When Jane had been gone Thane had helped bleed off the seeping guilt that Garrus could not keep out of his blood, suffocating from it the way Thane had suffocated from Kepral’s. Thane was the only person Garrus permitted to wear him down, wear him out.

The necessity of command reasserted itself as a separate demand. His energies did have a direction, needed a direction, and he needed to find it.

This last week Garrus had been drowning in guilt of Jane’s injury. They both had been weighed down, worry and guilt mixed in with fury and helplessness.

Thane hid it terribly well, but Garrus could still smell it on him. Thane’s time with other Drell, or the knowledge of bond, or both, had fundamentally changed his scent to Garrus’s perceptions. Where Thane had once been ethereal, unattainable, a gift, Thane was now incontrovertibly his to Garrus’s blood and body. With Jane’s scent on him he was near irresistible, and although Garrus reveled in that right, at the moment it was anathema to command, to breathing normally, to doing anything normally with Thane sharing his oxygen.

He was technically on duty but he could not really use that as an excuse considering all the times he had strong armed Jane into abandoning her duty in favor of sex.

Garrus had waylaid Thane and Jane both enough times in this gym to have no excuses. He did it because it worked.

He would like to keep his thoughts private, did not want to burden Thane as well, but with the look on Thane’s face as he shrugged out of his jacket…Garrus would be lucky to get out of this room with ownership of his own teeth.

What on Palaven possessed him to bond to a fucking Drell assassin…

I’m pretty sure I didn’t have a choice there.

Thane’s jacket put aside, he gestured Garrus out to the mats, and Garrus moved to the familiar position, ready to get his ass handed to him. Hiding something from Thane was…impossible. He could try to play dumb. Maybe Thane would buy that, or at least allow him to pretend.

Garrus wasn’t ready to discuss command decisions and he wasn’t ready to tell Thane no and arouse suspicion.

Thane faced him and said evenly “What troubles you?”

Fuck.

Garrus tried honesty “I’m not ready to discuss it. It’s a command issue.”

Thane seemed to ignore that and let it pass, to Garrus’s relief. Thane said conversationally “Had we bonded on Palaven, would Jane and I have traditionally taken your name?”
Okay. Huge shift in gears. Garrus began moving through the form he’d taught to Garrus, adapted to a practice of push hands. Move, counter move, not active aggression, but a dance. Balance and flow.

Warm up. Garrus answered informatively, used to Thane’s redirection “No. Turians are matrilinear.” Garrus thought but did not say ‘Something I’m sure you forced someone to confess at some point and certainly have not forgotten.’ Thane knew so much more about bonding than he should. Had explained it to Jane.

Thane said helpfully “So we would have taken her name.”

Garrus said, antagonized “If she were Turian, if there were only one of us and if anybody had a choice in the matter.”

Thane’s face was concentrated, focusing on where hands were moving and not looking at Garrus’s face, his voice serene as the form “We all had choices. We all chose.”

Declarative. To argue would be ingracious and rude…and unspeakably selfish…and Thane had ended that line of conversation. Garrus knew not to apologize or backtrack. This is why he did not wish to share his current mood. To imply that bonding was not something he would have chosen…

Warm up.

Thane was reading his mind, reading his body, triangulating and Garrus was fucked.

He did not repeat that he had no choice in the matter, barely restrained himself from breaking form in frustration and stalking back to the CIC where Thane would not pursue, his ambushes always private.

He might buy some time.

It seemed his best option, so he remained silent, keeping his face schooled to observing the form until it had run to the end.

Tactical retreat seemed wisest, more wound up than he had been when he got here, like a boat with several holes, destined to sink if he did not spend his time bailing. And he was a Turian. He would sink with it.

He stepped away, moving toward the exit, at the polite end of the form. The expectation was to continue onto combat drills, but he was not going to give Thane further opportunities to analyze.

It was necessary that Garrus be capable of analysis without assistance or puppetry.

He should tell Jane, share the burden. It was…her…chosen burden.

Thane’s hand reached for his wrist as Garrus retreated. Attempted to retreat. In a flash rearrangement of the concerns of command, getting to Jane now seemed like a right and Thane an obstruction. An intentional obstruction.

Wrong Way, Garrus Vakarian.

Fuck, there was no right way. He tried to pull his wrist away gently but Thane did not let go. Thane’s voice said quietly with a tone of regret “Invas’nam, do not leave.”

It wasn’t a command, but Garrus felt it ring with the echoes of a thousand past commands in his head, venom racing through his blood, all things from this man’s mouth perfection. Thane’s soft words raced down Garrus’s spine and vibrated in his gut, attraction and momentary repulsion borne
of trying to protect the inside of his head from being peeled and opened for Thane’s perusal.

Too many things in his head clamored ‘too late’ ‘wrong way’ and Garrus said, tense “I just…need to think.”

Thane said reasonably “Think with me, let me aid you.”

Garrus said irritably “I just need to talk to Jane.”

Thane’s head tilted to the side and he said in a soft warning “No. Not as you are. A concern of command is a concern for her command, but not at the moment. I am here, share the burden with me.”

Garrus almost sank to his knees to do exactly that, but he was too far gone to recrimination and belief that there was no solution, that there could be, should be no arbiter or perspective beyond his own. He had let too much time pass. Thane’s gentle intent and calm assurance of being able to help was irritating. Garrus’s head rang with the stubborn assertion that he had determined his course of action and was adamant on it. Right or wrong, it was a choice, and wasn’t that what command demanded? Choosing. Alone.

Thane said urgently “Garrus, you are on the edge of violence. You know it. I know it. Jane must not know it, do you understand? I cannot let you leave this room. Not as you are.”

The phrase “Not as you are” had been repeated twice in Thane’s calm voice and Garrus heard it as rejection of who he was. He would tell her. Thane would forgive him for leaving. Jane would forgive him for withholding information this far. He was certain of it. The right choice involved getting out and getting to her before his resolve failed. As he was.

He wanted to cup his hand under Thane’s jaw and run him back to the wall, inform him that “As he was” was perfectly acceptable. He restrained himself, barely, because he was afraid that was what Thane wanted, hands on him, and excuse for venom, for command, and Garrus’s resolve would peel away.

Don’t kid yourself, Vakarian, your restraint has distinctly peeled.

If you want command you have to fight for it, you have to earn it, and you can’t cave to the most beautiful man you have ever encountered, whose skin and voice makes you sway his way. That he belongs to you and that you have a right to his skin and voice is a distraction, not salvation.

Garrus said with as much calmness as he could manage “I apologize for cutting this workout short. I will see you later. Right now I…” He turned away, broke eye contact, and within seconds realized that Thane’s warning had not been idle.

He should have learned by now that Thane’s warnings were absolute, but Garrus had been lulled by the fact that he’d never needed to give them. Green and black muscle had slackened and softened in Turian grip, to later tense but not break any hold Garrus applied.

The rules changed now. Right now.

They had fought, sparred in Thane’s controlled way, passionate but never to cause injury.

With Garrus’s back turned Thane had destabilized Garrus’s leg, shoved him forward and had Garrus’s surprised and nerveless hands behind his back and held in stasis with…one hand, Thane’s biotics humming. Garrus’s head was wrenched to the side with Thane’s other hand at his larynxes, near to crushing force. Implied severe damage with movement or struggle.
Okay. He was listening now.

And, Spirits help him, inescapably impressed, turned on, ashamed, surprised and…mostly turned on.

Thane said quietly “I did warn you, Garrus. I cannot let you leave this room. Not as you are. I apologize for any discomfort in ensuring that. I find your body magnificent, and avoiding injury to fringe or spur in a Turian is a challenge. One I do not wish to fail. My training is to kill, not restrain. I am improvising. I value your voice and I do not wish for a struggle to injure you. You must speak, I must understand. I am not negotiating. I am informing you of an outcome. Your demeanor has convinced me of the need for my intervention. You will forgive my directness and I will forgive your attempted evasion.”

Spirits help him, on his knees with the choice taken from him he was grateful. Part of his solitary horror relaxed and Garrus said carefully “So I’m just supposed to ignore that your cock is pressed to the side of my neck?”

Hard. Cock.

Thane leaned in closer, compensating for the hold on Garrus’s throat “Neither of us need ignore it if you accept my set boundaries. I will not allow you to leave until you have convinced me that it is wise that you do so.”

Garrus thought briefly of venom and compulsion, that Thane could have kissed him and had the truth in moments. Unless Garrus left Thane unconscious in this room, which he was not prepared to do, Thane could still do that, and it would not be…wise…to push him to that. This was Thane being direct.

Effectively direct. Spirits, he smelled like her. The twining of the scents of his bondmates on hide was not as evocative as blood, but Garrus’s head swam with lust. The cutting, seething edge of command that had pressed to his spine receded, blunted, and all he had was Thane’s focus and intent. The rushing edge of fleeing from this room and into impulsive action faded.

Not enough to make it easy for Thane…but maybe the Spirits had helped him in the arrival of his bondmate.

Maybe they could both accomplish what he had wanted to accomplish when he had entered this room. Clear his head. Bail effectively. Find a path.

Going to Jane clouded in effectiveness and some of his shame followed that path and was lost as the possibility receded.

Going back to dispatches clouded in effectiveness and some of his frustration dissipated.

Listening to why Thane thought he should not leave this room seemed wise.

Hard hands, hard words and hard cocks might change that to Thane’s satisfaction and Garrus’s.

Who said he wasn’t resourceful and opportunistic?

Garrus said calmly “Then let me up and let’s finish what we started.” Not you. Not I. We.

Without hesitation he was free, Thane had stepped back to the mat, the next traditional step of their workout a spar. Not as orchestrated as push hands. No intent to hit but intent to train.

Usually. With the indentation and scent of Thane’s hand and the still warm press of leather to the
side of his throat, considering the circumstances, he believed Thane could take care of himself in a more aggressive spar. As if to act out the agency of command and consequence, in light of his being recently on his knees, Garrus attacked with speed and power, discovering Thane was simply not there when Garrus’s blow missed, intended for Thane’s abdomen.

His talons were not out, would not extend his reach or dig into flesh. He would allow for conversation, but Thane would earn his information.

Thane accepted Garrus’s conditions apparently, repeating exactly as he had asked upon arrival “What troubles you?”

Garrus kept his voice steady, circling for an opening, letting out a grunt as he lunged again for Thane but Thane evaded it with a spin and a dig into his back, near plate cracking velocity. “I believe what I’ve seen from reports that long range communications are being disrupted, scouts are disappearing and it is likely the first step to the massive Reaper invasion predicted by the information we got at the Collector base.”

Thane’s expression did not change, though he thought intently, but still evaded another jab, got in a kick to Garrus’s thigh. Thane asked “And you intended to tell Jane?”

Garrus growled, went for a feint and lunged for Thane’s proposed spin out of the way, got in an elbow dig on Thane’s abdomen, a long scrape along muscle. A short appreciative noise from Thane in an outrush of breath, and Garrus said “I was considering not telling her, then considering telling her, then was convinced I must tell her in the course of my thoughts.”

Thane’s jaw shifted slightly and he said with conviction “You must not.” That was followed by Thane making a tight feint and turn, under and around to land a hit at Garrus’s back, but Garrus was able to follow the direction, got Thane’s legs out from under him and had him flat on the mat, unable to take advantage with his own back exposed. Thane was up and unseen before he could grapple.

Garrus growled again, breath harsh as he tried to locate Thane’s position, saying “It’s her mission. It’s her command.”

Thane shook his head and Garrus took his momentary self distraction to land a punch to Thane’s face, lip split along the central furrow. Thane behaved as though it had not happened other than to use Garrus’s proximity to strike at his knee, not enough to injure, again, but enough to hurt.

Thane said carefully with determination “Those are true but not complete truth. There is medical truth.”

Garrus snorted in derision and wanted to charge and tackle, but knew it would result in him flat on his face. Instead the necessity of the spar forced calm and calculation into him, that inevitable transformation from frustration to resolution. Maybe he did orgasm. Maybe this was his corollary. Garrus said with all the contempt he felt for the flimsy cover of ‘medical truth’ “You think she’s going to buy…for a moment…that I believed she would be fine not knowing, and that I waited the…three…fucking…weeks…until she recovers? When she finds out she’ll want to peel my mandibles off and tack them to the galaxy map as a warning. She will never trust me again.”

Thane nodded in agreement “She will want to do that. She would never do that, however. It is impossible that you lose her trust. Even if she did exactly as you feared, even if you were to be removed from the ship, from her life, you must still do it, you have no choice.”

Garrus growled and swung wide, Thane unable to avoid the entire swing, catching a glancing blow to his retreating shoulder, Garrus earning a hard strike to abdominal plates, edging on the waist,
exquisitely painful “I have choices. That’s what command is. I have to…”

With that partial declaration, Thane had lost his patience with discussion on even ground and opted for a more direct demonstration of his argument. Garrus pitched forward, didn’t even see how Thane got him in that position, but Thane’s hand still protected his fall, kept his face from smashing into the mat with the force of the fall that could have shattered his nose or mandibles. Thane did not apply biotic restraint, caresses at his throat and waist, Thane’s voice in his ear. It did not occur to Garrus that he would want to leave this position, ever.

Thane spoke, fierce intent vibrating in his words, straight through Thane’s chest into Garrus’s back, down his spine. “Invas’nam, you have no choice. I will not allow it. You will not tell her. I will speak and you will listen.”

It was not venom, though Thane was moving his hands over Garrus’s body. Just enough for pleasure, not enough for compulsion, just the leaping joy of his bondmate’s hands on his hide, and Thane’s obvious enjoyment, wide and strong in his voice, a gift not of lust, but love. Not overwhelming command, but…what?

He listened. He wanted to hear, not compelled to hear.

Thane’s hands moved, his voice and body cherishing each moment of contact “Invas’nam, that word from your language. A secret held so close to the heart that the tongue cannot reach. That is what you are. But perhaps I must make it clear, you are not a secret born of shame. I would declare, defy anyone, anything, to have it known that you are mine. But just as I cannot be brought to care whether or not Tuchanka is saved, all I care for is that you know that you are mine. That…is why you have no choice. You are mine, the secret to my reason to live. You are mine to protect, mine to shelter, mine to own. I will stop you from devaluing yourself. In this case you are correct, she is unreasonable…and will remain so. You, however, are not. You can understand when I say…any polite fiction about how your will belongs to you and only you, you are permitted to keep only when your will is used well. If you fail to see how much I rely upon you, I will remind you of what should already be branded upon your spine, what should sink into your blood each time I touch you. I am a selfish and petty man in several ways, ways that you understand. I own you. I am not humble before the fact that you bonded with me, I am intensely proud and possessive, and if you dare to imply that I had no choice, that you had no choice, I will tell you again, Invas’nam…that I own you. I need you and for my own selfish and petty reasons, no harm will come to you despite your best efforts to be separate and bear all blame and weight of all the worlds upon your wide shoulders. You struggle to save everyone, you struggle to protect her and you would harm yourself and I…will…not…allow…it.”

Thane bit at the side of Garrus’s throat, trembles and melting and the essence of bond in each word, each hard and soft syllable, nails and palm.

Thane’s mouth lingered on his hide for long, melting moments as wide shoulders relaxed. Thane’s voice hissed with unmistakable emotion “I will give you logic, and I will give you inevitability. Jane’s brain is as it is in its natural state. Now it is altered. She must recover. She MUST…recover…and you will realize that is your priority because Karin says so. Jane will not be put into the position to place her recovery in danger. If she were to give an order that she was to later learn was influenced by lack of capacity, we are all…doomed. I can care about that because I must, logically. You care emotionally. For myself, Invas’nam, I would carry you both away and chain you to a wall to keep you safe, except that you would hate me for it. For my part, were you to chain me to a wall I would be grateful for the opportunity. And there is the difference. I own you and care for you, exclusively. You care for everything and I love you for it, but I cannot allow you to make a choice based on you finally realizing that millions, possibly billions, possibly trillions of lives will be lost.
For me that is a number, one with no value next to the value of your life alone. You will care, I will keep you from going too far. Trust me. You spoke before witnesses that you would follow my lead, and although you have command in this moment, you are not alone. Own me, own my thoughts, own my choices. Take, Invas’nam, and own the right to demand my thoughts, demand my service, it will be given.”

With Thane’s clarity the resentment and fear sank, willing to allow Thane’s merciless and selfish logic to define a moment, close the door, the intimacy and immediacy in his blood all he could feel. To have permission to not care for a moment, to be cared for instead. Thank the Spirits, Thane was not interested in only verbal assurance, his hissing voice moved to demonstration, his hands rough, demanding and selfish.

Choice made, together, without argument, without coercion, but with the knowledge that Thane would command him to stand his ground, stand up to her and her insanity, that Thane would stand with him and that even she could not stop them when they were right together.

Proof of concept in Thane’s demanding body, Garrus twisting his neck to welcome Thane’s kiss, possible now because of already being of like mind. Thane speaking of his petty selfishness while so very carefully preserving Garrus’s opportunity to rebel. An opportunity he did not want, cast aside.

Venom and Reverie on the tips of their tongues and no more words.

Thanedemonstrated and took ownership of Garrus’s body, no polite seductive fictions permitted but fabric shoved aside, Thane’s hand on his cock, the exquisite welcome of Thane’s fingers requiring Garrus’s full surrender. Garrus embraced the bliss of his bondmate, of acceptance of choices made, of relinquishing helplessness to the hands of his intent and sure lover, cold clarity and heated hands. Thane had to break the kiss with a growl to position himself, position Garrus to his liking, Thane’s blood on his tongue from the broken lip. Venom enhanced and did not mask intent, Reverie made each pass of Thane’s teeth on sensitive hide, his tongue between plate rifts all the signposts or destiny he would need. Thane’s teeth on his back, one hand on Garrus’s hip, holding him in place like his hip spur was a handle. Thane’s body was as his words had been, only the shadowed and supposed selfishness of the way he saw himself, with the freighted and knowing giving with all the unspoken and implied passion. Lovingly ironic, giving while defining it as taking, owned while owning.

Perfection not only from this man’s mouth, but in every moment, each stroke of Thane’s hand along Garrus’s cock intended to give pleasure, each thrust of possessive hips, trembling with every ounce of implied selfishness. Both of them knew that with this much license, this much ownership, Thane would come, trembling, spent, and Garrus would be hard forever for this man, with no respite, no end to seeking his body, and Garrus would have to arch his spine to reach the man’s mouth at the same time that his cock was inside, to stay, to twist and seek, until Thane’s eyes had to close and all control fled his hissing voice.

Thane lasted as long as he could, trembling and thrusting, heat and friction of scraping plate drawing him to the end of his strength, the end of his endurance, his harsh groans and gulping, gasping repetition of Garrus’s name like a prayer.

Garrus let Thane cling to his back, harsh breath, glow and rush and not aftermath…after was a long way away…

Garrus was going to very gently disentangle himself, lay that man back down while he was regaining his breath, and then take his breath away again, find his home, find his mate, watch as Thane’s eyes struggled to stay open, as his lungs wrenched each breath and hands lost their strength.

I own you.
I love you.

I am going to show you.
Chapter 46

Jane

There had been a moment over Alchera, still inside the Normandy but with Her falling apart, where Jane had seen Joker clearly inside the escape pod. Jane had felt a profound and distinctly emotionally flavored slide from purpose to panic.

She’d felt the satisfaction of getting Joker off the CIC. Despite Joker’s expressed and repressed guilt for her death, she did not blame him for a moment for his dedication to his beloved ship. She was Joker’s ship, as much as She belonged to Jane, if not more his, more intimately his in some ways.

She felt that same purpose and panic right now, in the dark, a longer interval of time to let it breed and build.

She had had a purpose, to save Tuchanka, and that was becoming more and more assured…but her partial release from the Med Bay was like having the escape pod in view, but inaccessible, imminently more and more distant. She’d chosen Joker over her own life, because to try to save both lives would have likely cost both lives.

She had saved Tuchanka, but not herself.

She had experienced the ominous and inevitable blast away from her disintegrating ship, the severing of her oxygen, the slow and inexorable descent, which she would miss for the most part, having choked to death on nothing.

That was how this felt. She was choking on nothing.

The oxygen that was her command was severed. Not as it was after she’d been abducted. Then she could barely breathe at all and paced breaths were all she could manage.

Now she felt the overwhelming, racing need to gulp down breaths in the thin, spare atmosphere, in her opinion unable to sustain life.

Just enough to panic.

It partly hinged on Garrus being a terrible liar.

Okay…not a terrible liar in the absolute sense. His lies had saved her before, and she remembered a pistol to a Krogan head.

To clarify, Garrus had a terrible time lying to Jane.

Jane could parse Garrus, she broke his misery down into packets of information, had watched and listened to him for several days. She was now better able to see him and hear him. His subvocals needed no tutorial. It was as though her mind had barely heard it before but had categorized every possibility and analyzed him. She had a ready-made and newly revealed reference library of his expressions, and his emotions were as clear as Thane’s stripes.

He was miserable, terrified, guilty, enraged…and suppressing all expression of those things.

Was she going to be removed permanently from command?

Karin had insisted that Jane rest herself entirely, refused to answer questions about future health
goals.

Jane was given no directive except to rest, no goal to reach except ‘later.’

Jane didn’t feel that her brain had been adversely affected, but how would she know? Weren’t there any number of disorders that included in their symptom list the lack of awareness of the disorder itself?

Despite the good news from Eurydice and the likelihood that the Genophage would be cured…which was in fact a miracle…Garrus was badly contained chaos. Thane was a blank slate, subtly supporting Garrus and helping him stay somewhat contained, a circumstance that told its own tale. Karin was restricting Jane’s data stream and communication enough to involve EDI and David, both of whom had mournfully told her that she was on strict medical suspension, and had no access to certain material.

Since when…was even a copy of a random Extranet broadcast like Westerlund News restricted?

Jane had methodically tested sources and methods of gathering information, in theory arousing no suspicion with each individual request, though if someone was monitoring everything she did, it would show a pattern of distinct probing.

Command dispatches…restricted. Fair, because she was not in command and should be resting. She’d accepted both EDI’s and David’s apologies after making separate requests to both of them on different topics, making it seem that she was only slightly forgetful about her change in status, apologizing to them with a light laugh about hard to break habits.

Many of her own personal messages were blacked out based on EDI and David’s judgment under Karin’s directive. Unable to determine if this was fair, but certainly radical, creating a vacuum of concern like the empty tank on her back as she spiraled toward Alchera.

She had made a query for general news made from Thane’s terminal under a generic keystroke ID and not her vocal authorization. Denied. That had been the final test she had devised, the result meant that EDI and David were monitoring her requests, her location and her interests.

So everyone was in on it.

They would all know that she was looking. She had her answer.

Cold calculation flooded her mind.

Several theoretical scenarios to consider.

The crew was indoctrinated. Unlikely. Possible. Consider 7% possibility.

She was indoctrinated or had sustained a complication of long-term indoctrination, maybe developing resistance to an inhibitor or new growth. Possible. Nothing to do but monitor her internal landscape. Fortunately or unfortunately she knew exactly what indoctrination would do to her brain. Low likelihood, assume 5%. No reason they could not tell her.

It was possible she would not recover from her surgery or that full recovery was in doubt. She would have to trust to Karin’s expertise. Karin would not tell her, Jane had done as much curious and casual probing as she could. Karin would admonish her to rest and wait. At least Jane was under the best care possible and Jane would not allow paranoia to interfere with her care, she just wanted to know…why. Consider 40% possible with current restriction of information.
Unless Eurydice had been indoctrinated. Then she was next. Then she was now with a week already under. Symptoms likely within a week. Inevitable unless she made a break for it at the first opportunity presented. Consider 3% possibility.

Consider Mordin and Miranda might have made it a great deal more insidious and effective.

In which case she could hope for 7 seconds. She’d already been indoctrinated on most subjects, it could close like a bear trap in on her.

There was nothing she could do about that unless she decided…right now…to hijack a shuttle and go to Omega.

Right now.

She required more proof than what was available. It was terrifying, but not any more likely. Watch and wait. The reason the possibility was so low was that if she were indoctrinated they would simply wait and would not need to restrict her news. They could have kept her under sedation entirely and keep her strapped down until it was done. They would have known they would have to do that for their best chance at success. Yes, they could have kept her down for a year, maybe a lot had happened, maybe this feeling of lack of oxygen was due to multiple tries of indoctrination, but again…paranoid fantasies should not run out of control.

Counterproductive. The solution is either to flee the Normandy now, which you will not do on flimsy evidence, or wait, which it seems will be forced upon you either way. So wait it is. No action or plan required.

Maybe…MAYBE…see if shuttle controls will respond to you.

No. Wait.

Consider that something in the news would put her recovery at risk. Most likely based on current setup. Consider 70% possibility of explanation of the behavior of the combination of Garrus, Thane, Karin, EDI and David. Denial of information had been apologetic, not grudging or angry…and that she was being watched so effectively…bump that up to an 80% possibility.

So what was in the news? What could not wait until she had healed, but had to wait until she had healed?

What would make her put her recovery at risk by hearing that news?

Why was she drawn back to the idea that there was not enough oxygen to sustain life?

Consider new possibilities:

The Citadel Council had turned entirely against her. Nobody would be surprised by that. Unlikely to result in news blackout considering Jane had a reasonable image of the Council’s unreasonableness. Negligible impact on her actions. Garrus could simply inform her that the Citadel was not a possible port, and she’d happily accept that. She was headed that way if not there already.

Garrus’s mother was dead. Shocking and horrible, but not something to put her recovery at risk. She could accompany Garrus to her service. That would account for Garrus’s being a wreck, but not for the news blackout from Westerlund. Mourning would…be a distraction from command, and likely welcome for her to take some personal time. Terrible to see it that way, but true.

So no level of personal insult or personal involvement. The colony at Mojave was likely safe.
Yahlis had taken over the worlds. Also not a surprise. Might be a benefit.

That detour into fancy made a flash of insight shuffle the necessary conditions and motivations. What would make her do something...right now...despite her injuries and recovery time?

What could happen that everyone knew would set her off irrevocably?

What if...life is in fact not able to be sustained...but it’s not about your life or your oxygen or even your command or recovery?

What word is synonymous with Shepard, Shepard?

In fact, what’s an anagram of Shepard for this exact situation?

Reapd. Sh.

Reapers.

She’d be willing to bet 95% chance Reaper attack, full scale. 5% some unpredictable bullshit.

So let’s go with the majority.

Garrus wanted to tell her. That was what the packets of parsed miserable Turian data meant.

Thane would not let him.

Karin was the excuse and a good one, admittedly.

And Jane had left Garrus with no directives. “Stop the Reapers” isn’t a game plan, Jane.

Cold intensified but calm descended. She needed to think. Right now she was staring at a wall in her quarters, and she needed to get even her potential facial expressions under control until she thought her way through this.

She was creeping toward rage and she could not do that. She was being watched.

Thane and Garrus were nearly always with her, distracting and charming and perfectly understandable and she wanted to kill them both.

For a moment she wanted to flare like a supernova and take everything with her.

She carefully stood, keeping her face thoughtful, blank, and stepped into the simulation pod. She no longer trusted to the privacy settings. She would have no better access to information in here than she would out there. But she would and could have darkness, and the proprioceptive sense of a natural arm.

So she sat in the dark, where she could not be read, where she could not be analyzed, and where she could hide.

Don’t kill your bondmate.

Don’t kill your wrist bound.

Breathe.

She sat still, in the dark, and let the rushing rage and helplessness course through her veins and her
thoughts, the tidal wave and aftershocks chaotic.

She tried to think over the roar.

Two tracks of thought, Shepard. Personal and Command.

Your bondmate is in command and your wrist bound is a Pon-Ifa master.

They are not trying to harm you, it is the reverse. They wish to protect you.

What about trust? Open fists?

This isn’t about trust. It isn’t just their fists. Garrus’s fist must close on Command and you can’t grasp it or there is no such thing as being a team.

You’re not good at team, Jane. You know it. They know it.

Tuchanka was a success but it had a terrifying risk scale and they want you out of that sphere of action until they’re sure your brain is all there.

If it was ever all there.

You have to accept the consequences of losing an arm. You have to accept that if you want the eyesight you’re avoiding by being in the dark, it comes at a price.

You could have gotten them all killed or worse. So many times.

They’ll follow you again. When you actually have two fists and not one. Right now you can barely carry a gun, much less shoot one.

I want to fucking kill them both.

All I’m going to do is maybe drive my remaining nails deeper into skin and hide. I need to let them keep their secret. I can hide behind knowing and watching. I won’t be the only one known and watched. We can all have some time to heal.

This is already killing them, you don’t need to bother finishing them off.

Look just suspicious enough, not too suspicious. Accept your rehab the way you did after your abduction.

Here’s the really tough question that has nothing to do with their fears of your insane but potentially effective actions. Part of your rage is helplessness. If you had the Normandy right now, this moment, and it was true, you were at 100% and Garrus and Thane were right behind you…would you know what to do? Could you save all those lives now losing their oxygen?

No.

They think you do. They think you can.

I don’t.

I don’t know yet if I can’t.

Then maybe you should by the time command is back in your control. Consider helplessness for now, but take this time to think. Low tech thinking. No more information than you already have, but
be prepared for it. Do not be surprised by it. Have an order to give by then, or a direction to take.

They feel helpless and guilty, just like you do.

She wanted to hide, could not reveal what she thought or knew because what if she was wrong? What if her instinct and intuition were fucked? She couldn’t deny she’d taken a distinctly paranoid turn there. She could not declare she knew because of the two tracks of thought, personal and command.

Personally she wanted to relieve their anxiety, but she also wanted to kill them. She needed time to heal, physically and emotionally, and she should take it. They were a team and she had to let them take the lead. If this were a dance, they were leading, demanding ignorance, she would follow and provide it.

As for her command, she knew well that accusing everyone on the ship of conspiracy, seizing control without an actual plan was irresponsible and egotistical. And she wanted to do it…right now…but she had to consider and plan, needed time to be prepared.

Needed to be able to carry and fire a gun. Needed to be able to look at circumstances and come to the correct conclusions and be able to act on them immediately.

She had failed in personal and command ways and she would consider them, she would not kill anybody, she would listen and watch, and she would earn command back.

She cried until she felt like throwing up with the remembered sensation of two hands holding her face, darkness and the isolation sheltering and familiar, comforted and devastated by the fact that her body would show no signs. Just as they wanted her to know but did not want her to know, she wanted to let them know that she knew…but couldn’t.

She vowed not to kill Garrus, tried to remind herself that behind his packets of data was a man who did nothing, against his nature, while millions of people potentially died each day. To preserve her best choices if not her timeframe.

She vowed not to kill Thane, tried to remind herself that he did believe in her, and would not put her at risk. He only needed three chains.

She would not fire Karin.

She would not yank EDI’s power source.

David…I cannot for the life of me deny you a damned thing and you’re doing as you’ve been told by a Pon-Ifa master who is likely right…

And I hate that so much I can’t swallow or breathe.

You’ve gotten a lot done from the dark, Jane. You haven’t been betrayed, you’ve been supported.

Try to be better at supporting your loved ones. Restraining yourself from killing them is not enough. It’s okay to hide.

It’s okay to hide here.

You’re going to need to hide.

When you get command back you cannot let it go. This is it. This is the fight.
You love them and you’re ready to die.

They love you and they’re not ready for you to die, they have a moment in time to preserve you and your command, and they are both taking it, whatever the cost. Either way they face losing you. Either way you face losing them.

From this moment it gets harder and a reasonable person will stare into this abyss and despair. That is what they’re doing and they have a right to it, they’ve earned their despair and their fears.

This is the point where scary people doing their best may not ever be enough and everyone has a right to be afraid.

Especially you.

Garrus

Reading through the dispatches, inevitability punched him in the gut.


They’d been planning for this, anticipating this, and the scope of it still had him in denial.

The Normandy was currently in an unknown backwater, they were safe here.

Safe.

An unbearably relative term.

He bowed his head over the console. He whispered “Spirits…please…”

He closed his eyes, unable to say any more. Something in his bones guided him to call out to them, but something in his blood choked off the impulse. Spirits could not help him. He still felt the deep thrumming urge to beg, someone, anyone, for aid.

He had felt the urge to call out to Spirits when Jane had died and his unspoken hopes had died unborn.

He had not, remembering she was human, belatedly, knowing Spirits had no sway.

He knew that Spirits also could not influence Reapers.

His bones denied his blood and he closed his eyes tighter “Spirits…please. Watch over my family. Watch over everyone’s family.”

His blood rushed in his ears, pounding out all the reasons why that prayer would go unheard and unanswered.

Thane

Garrus had been correct, the Reaper invasion was now.
Thane’s fears were confined to the brightest lights of his life, he could see no further.

Kolyat.

Jane.

Garrus.

Kolyat was out of his reach, as safe as possible in the hidden ship on Hagalaz. Kolyat’s life, the Spirit of continuity that moved through time binding one moment to the next, had chosen its path. As a father, Thane had let go so long ago, slightly jarred each time Kolyat graced his lips with the word, father, that did not fit and he did not deserve.

I know now I did not love your mother, that I never gave her enough of myself to be loved in return. I did not love you. I saw the burden in you and not the grace. I created a burden of you and your mother, and you both forgave me.

If there was any true magic that existed in reality, it was not Thane’s ability to be invisible or his stealth.

It was forgiveness.

He sat in his quarters, Jane likely finished soon with her medical training for the day. She had been given no arm, no Omni Tool, her patience and smiles occasionally thin and brittle but still holding. Karin had been convinced to fit the arm later, and the Omni Tool delayed with the excuse of customization, which was true but not the real delay.

Karin had all faith that Jane would, had healed, miraculously so, and Miranda had confirmed.

Thane had insisted upon holding the date of four weeks before release to Command. They were now two weeks after her injury, two weeks remaining. He had pored over all relevant medical literature and research that he could find, four weeks being a baseline for healing. Miranda disagreed, knowing Jane’s brain so well, knowing her healing rates and all the bonuses to her metabolism that carried out the dictates of Miranda’s genius.

Forgive me, Miranda, I wish for my wrist bound to heal, for her to know that if she sends us all to die, she does it with a clear mind.

Forgive me, Karin, for manipulating you into creating darkness for my Siha to rest. I cannot do your job and I cannot allow Garrus to choose. He must have a solid horizon where he can count each step with certainty, you must set it.

Forgive me Kolyat, for not guarding you with my body, as a father should. My pride in your path is such that I consider you a man, whole and complete, where I am not. I still seek my pieces. I am yet a child, younger than you in too many ways to consider myself your father. Each time I hear the word father from your lips, a piece of me is not recovered, but created.

Forgive me, Garrus, for urging you on a path that is like broken glass to bared feet, cold to your soul and contrary to your honesty, your loyalty, your courage. I see too many ways for you to be torn beyond my bearing. I know no way to help you walk straight, to make the lie your whole self. It is too easy for me to conceive of lying, I did not know the effort to lie to her would cause so much pain in itself. I vowed to spare you pain, and I have failed.

Forgive me, Jane, you may be whole even now, greater than your parts, transcending the harm of the body. I do not wish to add insult to injury, only allow more time for me, for all, for you to be certain
that the rending of your body and the slicing open of your heart and head would give no cause for your first or last steps to be questioned. You deserve a whole mind, a whole body. May I bear the brunt of this judgment. The cold pathways of my mind see no other way. Perhaps you will find the path when your hand is restored.

Forgive me, Senar Tuelon, for robbing you of your name, of your family. Forgive me for the loss of your parents, who I did not guard with my body, for the death of your sister, who I did not guard with my heart.

Should the worst come to pass, should my still feet allow our enemies to overtake us, grant me no forgiveness, but any grace I have earned in service, give to those that I love.

Thanes rose to his feet, washed his face and avoided seeing himself, avoided catching his own eye.

He left his Omni Tool dark, no longer responsive to anything but his verbal key, unknown to Jane. He would not use it in her presence while she had none. Jane had sought multiple avenues of information. Her agile mind had determined the restrictions to be pervasive and extensive. She had gone so far as to attempt an anonymous login. From his cabin. He had hoped she would remain a patient for longer, and had not predicted fully how much effort it would take to conceal the invasion from her, or that it would leave such a wide trail. He’d hoped for more time, but both her recovery and the Reaper invasion had accelerate timescales and he was but one Drell. Some of the news organizations she had tried to access no longer existed as entities on the Extranet, many of the final filings with darkened Reaper forms in the background, screams, weapon discharges, then nothing but static. He did not wish to exacerbate her curiosity, feared already that the attempt to conceal had caught her attention like the huntress she was and that she would follow any scent.

His only vindication was that he had bought a week for her recovery. He stood by his move and the cost, simply could not bear the consequences on his own shoulders, but sacrificed others. Whether he could buy two more weeks for her recovery was dependent entirely upon her huntress nature or whether or not the Reapers found Eurydice in that timeframe.

He and Garrus did their best to coordinate efforts, dispatching forces under their control to the best of their tactical ability, while Jane underwent rehabilitation. Thane counseled limited communication to not draw attention to Eurydice.

He gathered food for himself, food for her, and traveled to her cabin, where he found her in an interface pod.

He put the food down on the table and chose to wait for her. He stepped close, until he could feel her breath on the top of his head. She was taller on the raised platform, almost an altar to his mind. He moved his hand along the curves of her face without touching, counting her breath as a miracle. He would give her no cue of his presence, would not call her to leave where she was, and he would wait for her to join him, wishing her any respite she could find in her imagination.

He sat, and began his prayers again, his eyes straying to her between contemplation and breath.

Ultimately the draw of looking at her caught and held his attention. Here was her blank, paralyzed body, shorn of hair, shorn of purpose, vulnerable and battered. He’d grown used to her lack of arm, but right now he had license to stare where before he’d only glanced.

He remembered the woman of fire and blade, and he could not look at her without feeling that pull, like gravity again, irresistible. She failed every check of vanity and grooming that he himself held. No makeup, no hair, body frankly scrappy and greatly diminished in muscle tone from her injury and trauma. It would seem a perfect time to find her unattractive, shapeless and coarse clothing as her
He was reassured and alarmed to find that what he had held to be theoretically true, that he would find her attractive if she had buffed the floor of the Citadel as a relative drudge, was literally true. He could not un-see that light in her, and that would burn for as long as she lived. Regardless of her physical beauty, which was still present and he could not discount, it was greatly diminished objectively. But not subjectively. Her beauty was not what he responded to, it was not what guided him to love her, it would not diminish with age or infirmity.

Reassured and warmed to know he was not in all ways shallow. Alarmed to know there was no potential escape.

To be truthful some slight jealousy that he would never maintain a sense of self or dignity as she did without his physical power and beauty as shield and sword.

He had always considered her mighty and righteous, and now he saw her as broken, human and flawed, physically and emotionally, literally and metaphorically, and it drew him to her with the softer binding he’d rarely felt in her company. More akin to standing over Kolyat’s tiny form when he was newborn and sleeping. Ephemeral and just as irresistible, not the strong bond pulling but the aching and caressing bond that made him hold still for fear of breaking it, wishing to be held in the moment.

Here she did not push him back and blind him as the sun would, her body without her spirit written in each word and line of her intent. Here she was vulnerable to him, his right to be with her in her unguarded moments unquestioned, his right to watch over her as he had taken so often, standing in a corner not unlike where she stood now, cloaked and fascinated by her sleeping form.

In the past he’d been drawn irresistibly from his bed in the Med Bay to her. He’d resist the urge until he could no longer do so, then inform Dr. Chakwas he would go for a walk, and he would come here and watch her, breath rising and hair shining with a blue sheen.

Spoken aloud to Garrus, but not to Jane, he owned her. Once that had been a stolen right, now it was freely granted. There was something to Drell memory and experience that transcended time or distance. Something she would never have of him. With him gone he imagined she’d have impressions, shadow puppets of thought that she could recall of him, but he would have her every day of his life and beyond, if he awaited her by the shores, if he found his way to her wherever she was after death. If she found her way to him.

As a human, her memory seemed to be as a flashing and ephemeral storm, whereas he could pause the maelstrom, focus on each moment. Cherish each moment unchanging.

I will pause the storm for us, Jane, and you will forgive me, for this is our nature and we own each other.

If you kill me in wrath, I will still belong to you and you to me and nothing in this life or any life beyond will change that. If you kill me in wrath, I forgive you, if not help you and thank you, and I know one day you would need that. Our binding ritual is done and all that remains is for time to play it out, rage and horror and love and need. It would perhaps take you weeks, or months, or years…but you will find me, for you own me and you would no more let me go than I would let you go. Your storm will rage, and then there will be calm, and you will find me, wherever I am. In this I have faith. In this you have no choice. It is your nature as well as mine.

There is no storm in me that would keep me from you. My risks are colder and harder, like the chains I would use to keep you safe, like a hand closed on a Turian throat, denying an honest man his
He found magic beyond forgiveness in the lines of her face, until she took her first voluntary breath and began to move, paralytic agents flushing from her system.

She looked around the room and her eyes met his, cybernetic glow and the return of the blinding sun of her spirit and intellect investing her empty body.

He stared at her with the same intensity he’d applied when she was absent, and she could draw whatever conclusion she chose from that. A brief kaleidoscope of expression washed through her face, a tornado, a storm, effects of the paralytics or her thoughts he did not know. She had every right to every expression that could be made. He could perhaps freeze them later, ponder how her facial muscles moved like a rushing river under ice.

The ice melted, her eyes warmed and she smiled at him, gently, making her face look youthful and welcoming.

She walked straight to him, gathering poise and grace seemingly from the air around her, until she embodied grace, each element of neglect of grooming or vanity swept aside by the lines of her body.

His goddess moved to stand beside him, then moved his body for him, shifted his legs up on the couch so she could lie down on his body, her head on his shoulder. His arms moved around her gratefully, noting every incremental loss of flesh or muscle from when he’d last touched her, knowing all the physical differences that added up to ultimately nothing but data, because her spirit was what guided her.

He rested his head on top of hers, noting the growth of her hair, stubble growing long enough to have texture and movement other than bristle. He breathed in her scent, soaked in the feel of the press of her body and fell to the gravity of tu-fira, grateful for the opportunity to be lost in her.

She said softly, music in her voice and harmonies, chords that made her complex “I love you.”

Her palm on his chest, his lips on her regrowing hair, his hand cradling her head and those words in her unreadable voice, depths and darknesse and light. There were always layers to her voice, and now they were uncounted and uncountable. He could remember this moment and replay it a thousand times and he still knew he would not be able to read the woman behind the words except in occasional leaps of intuition and patterns of experience.

He did not doubt her. He chose not to feel guilt, closed his arms tighter to feel her breath through him, revel in her chosen words and allow that she meant it, would mean it, did love him.

He answered “I love you” with his own voice, not as layered and as direct as possible in this moment of horror and distance, yearning for simplicity and hoping to create that in a moment, that it was all that mattered.

She was tired, exhausted, having earned it, now willing to show it to him. He stroked her scalp and pressed his frill to her head, spread the fingers of one hand over her back. He did not pry into her state of mind, trying to absorb it as he so often had, by intuition, osmosis, observation. She said softly “I was remembering what it was like to have two arms.”

He answered “Your arm will be restored soon, better than it was.”

She said with soft intensity “And I will never use it against you.”

He closed his eyes, shards of raining pain, and he wondered if she knew, had discovered their lie and
accepted it already, the fierce seeking for answers that had built in her collapsed. Perhaps only
tiredness, perhaps grief for her limb fresh from stepping down from its presence. Perhaps she was
choosing to make her interface self limbless and that was all. She was capable of feeling deeply for
small things or feeling however she wished about devastating things.

Regardless, she loved him and he would lose himself in that, own her and all her choices, all her
fragilities, all her strengths.

All their potentials.

He said softly “Sleep, Siha.” He said carefully, layered, a prayer to the potential of her huntress spirit
“Grant me this time to watch over you. It is not long past that I saw a possible now without you, it is
not far away that we must consider it again. For now, rest and heal and stay with me.”

She took a deep breath, her muscles relaxed but her voice held a tremble of terrible comprehension
and corralling herself to this moment “You are my Bes Tiron. I trust you.” She was rapidly fading
and he caught her last words before she slipped into sleep “For now…”

He thought she meant for all the nows, for now she belonged to him, she would honor now…

But perhaps venom loosened her mind and she did know, and she could not help qualifying in her
way. She trusted him for now…and later she would seize her command and the whisper of steel in
her voice was a promise.

He smiled, her beauty and complications lay bare under his fingertips…for now.

His prayer had been answered.

He was assured rather than dismayed, admiration of her burning in his heart.

He stayed that way in the churning kaleidoscopic now of possible meaning until Garrus arrived
hours later, his own food in his hands, their food forgotten.

Garrus could not bear to wake her, drank in her sleeping form with his own unguarded pain and
hope, shifted them slowly and with Thane’s assistance so that she did not wake. Garrus gave Thane
a kiss of quiet passion, stroked broad warm fingertips over Jane’s head and claimed his rightful place.

For now.
Once she had determined her environment, she began to use it to her advantage. Some of the things that had led her into panicked quagmire led her out. Garrus’s face, his eyes, the way he leaned toward her, the way he wanted to tell her every moment but didn’t because he was convinced it was for her benefit, not his. His face and voice had warned her as he always had on any battlefield, given her a heads up, always having her 6.

Some of her behavior beforehand gave her a perfect transition setup. She’d been smiling and accepting of the loss of her arm, it could transition into smiling acceptance of restrictions and focus on healing. She had new perceptions, new capacity to explore, and looking and listening to things had new weight and meaning. She could be forgiven for distraction and contemplation.

Once past the stage of her immediate wrath, she was better able to form and stick to a strategy.

Nobody confronted her on her probing into limitations of information, so there was with most people an expectation of her ignorance, and she could hide in their compassion and indulgence. Thane knew better, but she and he knew the space of détente and were comfortable there, both watching and waiting.

Because of Garrus she was behind cover and knew the direction of the enemy. She would not be blindsided entirely. She stayed behind that cover on his orders. In command you made choices, and he had made his. He was struggling with the consequences. She did not ask more of him, did not question his choices, and transparently loved the man. Oddly enough but not unexpected, that added more guilt to his flavor of regret and there was not much she could do about that but relieve it with her body, give him moments where he felt cherished. He would hold her down, hold her in place, every hard unyielding plane and thrust of his body, every growl that sounded with more passion than she had heard before her new perceptions, speaking to her. More growling and fewer words. More the sound of her name in his richer voice and deeper subvocals. He did not call her Kerim as often. Kerim to him in his mind was linked to following her inspiration, and he knew at this moment he was without her eclipsed light, possibly believed he would not have it again.

If she was watching him when he woke, she saw him have to come to terms with the demands of the day in lightning flash stages, his eyes moving from contentment of his body in hers, through to realization, through to that horrible choked restraint that only loosed temporarily for him, when she told him he had permission to be happy, to find peace in his choices, through word or deed or physical welcome.

Garrus could not fully grasp or predict her forgiveness, or the strategic value of her compliance, not as Thane could. Garrus thought about what he believed he deserved. Thane thought of natures and inevitabilities of character. Garrus could not accept that he deserved to touch her, or let go of the fear that it might be his last time, driving the imprint of his body deep into hers. She imagined that Garrus felt unworthy to touch her, that his sense of honor in fact would drive him to hold himself back from her physically, but there would have been no way to explain that. In his unguarded moments he was guilty and flayed. He had few unguarded moments and she saw him get better at lying daily, but never better at accepting that he could or should do it. He wanted to tell her and couldn’t. Unable to tell her, he wanted to assume the distance he believed the lie would cause, but couldn’t.

He was aware constantly of that barrier, resisted being close out of guilt, then when she made clear she would accept no distance he sought his apology and forgiveness in her body and she granted it,
sins seen and unseen.

She had some peace in knowing the outcome. He had the churning horror of command, but he had her, whether he knew it or not. Once command was passed, she would be sure he knew that she understood and backed his choices, as he always had hers, no matter the cost.

She had shut Garrus out of her own decisions when in command, she understood and did empathize. She strove to see the window rather than the mirror, to see him as he was and comfort him, which she could do, could always do, with her fingertips on his hide, her mouth on his, her body open and hungry, her heart beating for him, only her mind, as his, clouded for the best of reasons.

Thane was so much easier. His silences, how she and he managed to tell each other in veiled words and osmosis, some equilibrium reached with backs turned and eyes closed, fingers entwined and Spirits whispering to each other.

Reverie gave them all, in their separate, necessary and chosen locations, unity, release and refuge. She and Thane conspired to draw Garrus out of his head, into communion, and once there he would allow only their one necessary circumstance to keep them separate, demanding bond in all other ways.

She believed Garrus to be under venom bond, either literally or with Thane’s iron control and clarity guiding him through the darkness. A vow or a promise had been made by one or both of them. Under Reverie or tiremit Garrus did not confess or break. She could only hope that Thane was also reinforcing to Garrus that Jane would not forsake him. Garrus would have to grow to believe that with the certainty that Thane had. In the face of Thane’s certainty despite Garrus’s reservations, she grew to believe that even if their choice was not the right choice, it was a choice with reasons, with the intent to conserve and not destroy. She did not know all the reasons, but she would. Thane would tell her, but she believed she already knew.

She also believed that Thane had convinced Garrus that regardless of her response, the choice must be made. So she must guard her own choices and responses.

She practiced team and trust.

Her nails did dig in deeper, each touch and word choreographed from all of them. Less spontaneity but not less love. Care in the fullest extent of the word. Artful, thoughtful, passionate.

A pattern emerged, Garrus gone except for six hours a day, two awake with them and four asleep. She carefully did not question a workload that resulted in that schedule, and did not press him that he looked and sounded haggard, as he had on Omega. Thane was no longer by her side during her time in the Med Bay constantly, that time theoretically spent with Garrus in planning and execution. She had made a comment about Thane getting back to his habit of exercise and meditation. He had given her a look that probed one moment longer than necessary, and then agreed that was the case. Thane was with her when she slept, when she woke, when she ate, when she retired to her cabin. Which she did, no more walking the ship. She tried to avoid temptation.

She had reintroduced herself to everyone, but she was polite and reassuring, casual and kind.

She had determined there were weak spots if she wanted to press. She could press on Jack, who had no respect for authority, had never formed a bond with Garrus or Thane to the extent that she had with Shepard. Jack would want to be a rebel with the answers. This would be Jack’s moment to be a pirate, knowing more than Shepard, wanting to prove it. Wanting to earn a favor and feed her own badass ego. Jack would want to tell her. She could open Jack with a sharp merciless puncturing twist like a can opener and information would pour out, all she wanted. A stroke to Jack’s ego, a flash of
vulnerability in Jane’s eyes, perhaps a whiff of fear and Jack would be unable to resist.

“Let me tell you, Shepard. I don’t think you’re as stupid as they think you are. I knew you’d figure it out. Here’s what you need to know…”

She restrained herself.

David would have been another path, even Legion. Both could have been convinced or even tricked into confirming what she already knew. She doubted anybody had considered that the media blackout would make her think she was indoctrinated. She could wedge that horror into a surprised mind and watch what leaked out.

“Legion, help me…I’m concerned that the ship has been indoctrinated…nothing explains what I’m seeing. I need you to help me get passage to Omega…” If she applied the right dose of controlled panic and impulsive resolve, requiring immediate reassurance with the threat of immediate flight…he would logically explain, considering that the better path.

“David. I believe Reapers are invading and that the crew is attempting to conceal that from me for my own good, to ensure my recovery. I understand. I don’t want to shatter that illusion, I wish for everyone else to remain calm. Please help me. The distress of helplessness is greater than the distress of being of use. I know you can understand that. You can monitor my vitals, ensure that no information is causing me deeper stress than the ignorance. Please.”

All of those things would work. She could chip down most people in her crew with the same method in different doses and variations. She doubted that Thane had convinced or even approached everyone on the ship, considering his tactical knowledge of communication itself being a huge risk to security. She could start cornering maintenance crew and start any number of flattering, misleading conversations that would make individuals want to help Commander Shepard in her noble fight against infirmity and the Reapers at once.

But she wouldn’t. Having a strategy and some cover eased her sense of helplessness and breathlessness. She was reassured that her instincts were still functioning and she settled into a stalking pose, silent and suppressing the fact that her whiskers were twitching and her eyes sharp. She glided through instead with charm, humor, feigned humility and just enough ignorance to be believable, to not make Garrus put his hands on his finally-catching-on hips and say “Come on now, what the hell, there’s no way you don’t care about that…” or catching Thane’s sharp eye with a maladroit portrayal of innocence. He knew better if nobody else did.

Jane did not attempt to access terminals any longer, and she put data requests strictly through Karin. Jane had apologetically said that she required some self discipline to break the habit of command, so Jane asked Karin occasional but regular questions about what was or was not possible to research or contemplate, accepting limits with a careful balance of grace and impatience. Jane submitted a carefully considered list of questions each day, some she knew would be approved, some she knew would be denied. That way Karin, who was wise but medically inclined and not as accustomed to Jane’s psychological parsing as Thane was, would report back to the team that she believed Jane was recovering, was impatient but trying to be disciplined.

Accent on discipline, guys. Karin, make sure you make a note of that. Everyone knows I’m impatient. It’s the discipline that needs reinforcement and you can provide that.

Jane asked David to provide her with a Datapad that had the capacity to play Pon-Ifa matches. She played a great deal. The stylized moves gave clarity to her thoughts, reminding her that each move ideally had a short-term and a long-term purpose. She could win when it wasn’t against Thane. She played Pon-Ifa with Thane as well, and he still kicked her anatomy all over the board. More fuel for
her feigned and real humility against circumstance.

She was focused and in strategic high gear, much of her rage burned off, what remained focused on Reapers. None remained for Garrus, only a rushing hope to reassure him that would have to wait. She had only respect and smiles that did not reach her lips, but did reach her kiss for Thane. She was observing her environment with new acuity, waiting for the final moves of this match to play out. She contemplated first moves once the board was set again and observed the lessons of what Reapers and her mission on Sur’Kesh had wrought.

It wasn’t all wreckage. Mordin was convinced that the Genophage would be cured, and soon. A matter of days or weeks. She reached out to Mordin and thanked him for his work. He congratulated her on her mission and expressed interest in seeing her new arm in action. She convinced Mordin to allow her to be present if he made that final determination of definitive cure. She wished to speak to all the Krogan before they left Eurydice, whether or not her command was restored.

He agreed he would comply.

Her new arm would come today. Three weeks since her injury, nerve pathways healed and solidified, given time to recover from trauma so they would not be over or under sensitized.

Garrus and Thane would both be there for unveiling. Or the on-sticking? Unveiling sounded…more poetic.

She was attempting to be poetic and not prosaic.

Thane had insisted on collecting Garrus and breakfast, and she played pocket Pon-Ifa. They would go together to the Med Bay and she’d get her new highly hyped technological wonder arm.

She missed having two hands. She was looking forward to it, one more step to autonomy and aim. Any step forward was a relief, and this meant she was getting closer, restraint to her command was easing, excuses to protect her so completely fading.

Garrus and Thane arrived together with food, quiet. One of the greater challenges between them was casual conversation, because each of them individually knew that so many topics could set off dismay and pain in Garrus, pain in herself, suspicion from Thane that her responses were not due only to trauma, but to calculation. They were all watching and watched so closely.

Humor was a luxury she mostly did without due to caution, Garrus did without due to stress, and Thane did without because his humor was so dark in conception and execution that it was misplaced.

She didn’t want to discuss general ship or outside-the-ship news or strategy; she didn’t want to put Garrus through that, so she chose to consider her new arm. Still a painful subject, but otherwise they were all going to stare at their breakfast while eating. Not awkwardly. They were all too sophisticated for that. Garrus had siege mentality at this point, and after three weeks shock and pain over personal injury had faded, but she imagined he knew how many lives had been lost cumulatively as he sat calmly over a casual meal. She was marking time. Thane was marking her. Garrus was enduring.

The practical truth was that doing things with one arm was difficult and frustrating. Thane watched her and learned the things that irritated her, and what did not. Food arrived in bite-sized pieces and with the plate secured to the table with subtle suction so she did not have to chase food or a skidding plate. Jars and containers were left loose so she could manage them with one hand. Thane helped her bathe, he helped her dress, always helped her undress…and she was grateful for his insistence and presence, making everything more difficult and easier in turns.
Both absolutely necessary.

Thane had redone her fingernails, a deep red with gold filigree tracing of pattern, something beautiful. After smiling, kissing them both and taking her first bite of breakfast she said “Now my nails won’t match.”

Garrus smiled.

Thane said “Yes, they will.”

She smiled and said “You painted the nails of my new hand?”

Thane nodded and said “Yes” in a tone that meant ‘of course.’

She asked idly “Why red and gold?”

Thane said informatively “It appears throughout history, red has been the most common color of human adornment. Lips, cheeks, nails. Your color on our wrists is red. It seems as though all races of humanity have discovered it will always go with their skin, as their skin all carries the same color underneath. Something unifying, undeniable of the nature of being human. Something just below all surfaces.”

Garrus raised a brow “And the gold?”

Thane answered “Gold was rare on Earth, and does not react to oxygen, which will corrode most things.”

Jane looked as she had before at the small pattern in gold repeated precisely across her nails “And the symbol?”

Thane answered “A Drell folk charm. Intended as a hope for healing.”

She said quietly “Thank you. I’ll add my hope for healing.”

Garrus said solemnly “And mine.”

Thus they all skimmed the surfaces, did not delve into the blue or green or red, did not get under each other’s skin, tried to make each touch a caress.

They all seemed to accept that the difficult task of finding something to talk about that wouldn’t result in explosion or implosion was accomplished, and they ate in silence.

Command was weighing heavily on Garrus, but it looked good on him to her eyes. Granted she had new eyes, new ears, and was currently trying to cultivate a new physical brain, a team mindset and under all that was razor’s edge desperate to get her command back. He was an obstacle, technically. He was an excellent, well thought out obstacle with a Pon-Ifa master guiding him.

It was the first time she’d looked at Garrus in an intellectual and strategic match and thought she could not beat him.

Thought she did not want to beat him.

Thought she needed to wait until he gave way of his own accord.

She really did not know if that was exhaustion or wisdom, but she could read the board. He was the personification of inevitability playing out.
She smiled at them as she stood to go. She imagined under normal circumstances, Garrus would sweep her into his arms despite any protest and carry her to the med bay, but she got smiles from her men back and silence, sedate and hopeful companions.

Her new arm was a beautiful thing, indistinguishable from her original hand in appearance, and distinct in now likely becoming her dominant hand based on the control and range possible. She was a fiddler crab. If they could do it, she could do it.

She was run through a few tests by Miranda and Karin, but they had stopped running neurological tests constantly, and that was a good sign. No Omni Tool yet, but also no being told she would not be getting one. All steps forward.

She likely did not properly appreciate Miranda’s genius and the fact that she knew Jane’s body so well. The hand worked immediately, very odd to be using the left for complicated tasks, but she was doing that within a few hours of fitting. No special treatment or care needed, the arm would be seamless, indistinguishable and would likely not need to be removed unless severe damage occurred, just assessed at regular physical examinations once all initial adjustments were made.

She watched the foreign fingers that looked like her fingers open and close, imagining them as the articulated fingertips of a Reaper for some odd reason, then that image brought her to Sovereign crouched over the Citadel and locking on, then the arms of the Citadel closing, five wings instead of five Reaper fingers.

Citadel.

The place that the Conduit led, that was kept secret. The place kept secret by Keepers. A figurative and perhaps literal trap, mysteries still intact. She stared at her hand, any sound around her blanked out by a light buzzing in her ears.

The Citadel.

She’d always hated the place, but what if that hatred was earned, what if her intuition…

Legion’s words rang in her head “If David were to draw a map of a ward on the Citadel, in human speech he would be unable to label the constructs as those on the Citadel label them and a drawing would be inadequate, unable to provide dimension.”

The Citadel’s dimensions.

She flashed back through Chorban’s scanning of the Keepers.

She still had that information.

She had David.

She moved her fingers, brain loosing from chilled practiced immobility into what passed for certainty.

The Reapers were invading. She knew it.

The Citadel was the Catalyst. She knew it.

She closed her hand into a fist and looked back up at Karin, buzzing faded, her interlude unnoticed.
other than as an appreciation of a new tool, restoration of function.

That it was.

Now she had to prove it.

Rehab flew by, her mind finally engaged on a solution. After being run through her paces, her mind working on two tracks, appreciating her new arm and chewing on the problem and solution of The Citadel being the key and Catalyst, Garrus challenged her.

Garrus said “Karin said you could beat Wrex at arm wrestling, that still true?”

Karin nodded and said “Sufficient reinforcement to the structure of her left shoulder and bone was the main issue. She should be able to beat Wrex.”

Garrus said “So how about me?”

Jane smiled “You want to know if I can beat you at arm wrestling?”

Garrus smiled “Well, we don’t want to embarrass Wrex in front of his women. I’d like a demonstration though.”

Jane looked at Karin, who nodded “I was concerned that you would not be able to grasp the relative range of strength in your arm and hand, but Miranda has managed to scale it in such a way that it works not in tandem with your right arm, but along a differently defined spectrum, new input to your brain. Considering most bodies work along symmetrical equality, Miranda is, again, a genius. I’d be concerned she’d crush your hand, but she has sufficient control. Why not?”

Jane felt, for the first time in weeks, all powerful and invincible, at least regarding her left arm and her intuition. She’d get her ship back, her hands would be stronger on the helm, and her mind was… Shepard. She was still Shepard.

She and Garrus moved to a table, clearing it of a few breakables, and they set up elbows, did the inevitable trash talking. Garrus looked happy. Maybe the easing of command he saw in her potential was good for all of them. She raised one brow and said “You sure about this? Let me know if it hurts too much.”

Garrus grinned and said “Put your money where your mouth is.”

She laughed and said “You want that raise again? You’re going to have to earn it. What do I get if I win?”

He swept his free hand around and said “This ship and everyone on it.”

She pretended to consider “You too?” Her heart leapt for a moment, the first confirmation of return to command. Not today, she knew, not with a new hand and no Omni Tool and no proficiency testing, but bless him for saying so. He’d give it to her today if he could.

Thane smiled, no alarm. Karin and Miranda were casually entertained. No alarm.

He tilted his head and said with teasing warmth she hadn’t seen in his face or heard in his voice, unforced, for too long “I’ll insist.”

She adjusted her hand and grasped his, not too hard, not too soft, along that sliding scale. She still knew how much he could take, lots of practice with her strength against his. Her mind knew what
effort, and she did not have to think about it. Distinct from her other arm. She said “Let me know if I’m about to break bone. I’ll back off.”

She had a light grip that she tightened until his smile faded to surprise and then resolved into a new smile of appreciation.

She did not break bones, but she did have his hand flat to the table in an easy sweep.

Through his hand she felt command pass back to her, hale and healed, laughing and sure. Now she just needed to wait for the rest of the ship to catch up to his certainty.

Garrus squeezed her hand, laughed and bowed his head “For my part, Kerim, this ship and everyone on it is yours.” He leaned forward and pressed his crest to her forehead, then turned and said “You want to give it a try, Thane?”

Thane smiled and said “Jane has made a previous promise to not use that hand against me.”

Garrus sighed and said “Why didn’t I think of that, now if I asked it would sound like I’m copying.”

Thane smiled at Jane and said “Some moves are worthy of copying.”

oOoOoOoOoOo

Jane had gained some ground and was intent on gaining more. After successful installation of her arm she was asked to test it out on the real world. Garrus and Thane stayed with her until lunch, and then they broke off to get work done, she was heartened and able to get her own work done.

Her arm right now was not something she needed to worry about, and despite medical admonition she did not stay long in the real world.

She moved into the interface pod.

She pulled up all the information in her archives about Chorban’s scanning of the Keepers and relaxed that this information was not restricted. She thought and then contacted David. She said “David, I’m aware I am not in command, none of the things I am asking for are commands. Please feel free to refuse, or pass through my request to Commander Vakarian.”

David’s voice replied “Of course, Commander Shepard.” He never stopped calling her that and she didn’t ask him to. He added “Congratulations on the integration of your new arm, it appears to be functional. I wish you luck on your proficiency testing and I anticipate swift return to Command.”

She smiled “Thank you. What I’m asking is relevant to my return to command, but for now is only research and prep work. I have had some data stored in my personal files that has not been integrated into the SR-2, information I received while I was on the SR-1 and did not consider significant. My interest is in the Citadel. I suspect that based on Keeper involvement and some of the way the Citadel works, there are parts of the Citadel that have not been accessed or mapped. Is that correct?”

David replied “That is correct.”

Jane said “All right. I’d like to release this information to you. In anticipation of my return to command, I believe the Citadel to be the Catalyst. I believe you are my best bet to communicate with the Keepers, with the ultimate goal of mapping the entirety of the Citadel and synthesizing how it is that the Catalyst and Crucible work together. I will be doing nothing but some reading about the history of the Citadel, and of course my work will be quickly eclipsed by yours, but I will not stress myself, my focus is on my recovery.”
David replied “I have forwarded a working model of the Citadel based on research and exploration done. There are several unexplored areas, well documented. You have immediate access to what is known historically about the Citadel based on this cycle’s explorations and accounts from Prothean habitation.”

She said “Thank you. Don’t answer if you feel I do not have clearance, but please prepare an answer for my return to command if you cannot give it now. How complete is the Crucible, and how long until it is complete?”

David responded “It is appropriate to inform you. The Crucible is continuing construction, it is 72% complete, and it should likely be complete in six weeks.”

So she had six weeks to put the two together.

It was too long, too many lives lost, and too short, her life might be over in six weeks.

She said “Thank you, David. I am grateful to be your friend. I am blessed to have you on this ship with me.”

David’s voice returned, solemn and intent “I will do as you ask, Commander Shepard. You have my wishes for your full recovery, restoration of command, and gratitude as well for friendship and presence.”

Six weeks.

Six weeks of ignoring the Reapers and focusing on the Citadel on no proof.

She felt the air bleed out of her slowly, her surge forward with regaining her hand suddenly dragged down by what lie ahead.

She said quietly “David, will you please update my internal appearance to match my new arm, and update according to…nail art. Thane has been creative.”

David said “Of course, it is done. That is a fascinating symbol. Do you know its history?”

Jane looked down at her hands, turning her nails “Thane said it was a folk symbol for healing.”

David replied “Historically, disease and drought plagued the Drell people, limiting population growth. When a plague and a drought coincided, it could be lethal to an entire clan. This symbol is from a clan that suffered such a setback, losing so many of their people that their clan leader converted to the Priesthood of Arashu. He set this symbol on the skin of his people, pledging his life to Her, asking Her to watch over those who carried this mark on their skin. His children died, all but his youngest son, an infant. His wife died after sickening shortly after childbirth. The tribe was decimated, but the Drell, having dedicated his life to the priesthood, went into seclusion after travel to a nearby clan that took him in. His son lived, and the clan continued on in his son’s name. He wore that symbol on his skin and passed it on to his children. The symbol became a charm against misfortune, in use by Drell before the diaspora.”

She stared at the facsimile of her nails and said “What was the name of that clan?”

David answered “Tuelon. Unfortunately none remain of that name, the last descendants having recently died.”
Garrus

He’d been through more difficult things, but nothing that had made him as twitchy nervous as the last few weeks. He had gotten better at enduring pain and terror, but this was like constant hacking, defusing potential explosives while exhausted, with numb and trembling hands.

He couldn’t sleep. He closed his eyes, Reverie and tiremit took him, but he still could not sleep, unable to feel the full rake of fear in that state, but passion brought vigilance and focus on the sensation of the bodies of his bond mates, needing to feel them, needing to value their presences every moment. He existed in a twilight of being unable to let a moment go that might be his last with her, or the last with them all together. It was more trance than sleep, still allowing the panic and fear to recede temporarily, but having it channeled into fierce insistence on vigilance.

His internal landscape while he was awake was overwhelmed by the constant panic of too late, wrong way.

He’d experienced exhaustion before, but by the time he’d even set foot on Omega he’d accepted his own eventual death, had seen the potential path of the spiral down even then. He hadn’t halted any acceleration or force that would lead to the inevitable raging conclusion of his meaningless life. He’d had something to die for, not something to live for. He’d cooperated with exhaustion, he’d had a detached, stubborn defiance, having been dragged down and numbed by grief. Now he had two people that were his everything. Two people with the potential to save everyone.

He wanted to be there for that, for them, and he refused to allow that chance to slip away. He fought for every moment of alertness, every choice, each moment, no escape.

So…desperate, exhausted, numb and trembling.

He had begun to think of himself as sophisticated when he had been able to manipulate his father and the Turian Hierarchy into support and agreement. His bond mates this last month put an end to his assumption of sophistication. He didn’t know what to say, what to do or how to breathe normally. He was a simple and straightforward man when compared to the intricate human and Drell that directed the course of his life.

It was Too. Much.

Too many things, all overwhelming.

Holding command of this vessel was too much. Observing the invasion and allocating forces that were slaughtered was too much. Watching her pour love into his body and mind daily as he tried to preserve her command, which would be too much for her as well, and she might condemn him for… Too. Much.

Intuitively he knew it was too much for all of them, but he seemed to show it the most. Jane barely reacted to the loss of her arm, the suspension of her command and the restriction of her freedom. Her eerie acceptance only made him more anxious. Thane barely reacted other than solicitude and silence, that pattern only broken by private moments of vehemence.

Garrus was trying to figure out how to give her back her ship without him dying in the process, having his mandibles ripped off or getting thrown off the vessel.
Thane had assured him none of these things would happen, but Garrus was worn to thin plate and far past buckling.

He had been trying to figure this out for weeks, was absolutely no closer to finding a solution other than leaving the ship himself, telling her from a remote, undisclosed location, and then begging her for the right to come back on board a week later after she’d hopefully gotten over her rage.

It would work to preserve his life, and part of him wanted to bolt for the shuttle every day, but he was, in fact, more courageous than that…in theory.

She had passed all her neurological and practical tests and proficiencies. Garrus rarely saw her except for the few hours he allowed before she went to sleep. They all ended up in bed early, nobody wanting to talk. He was not complaining about that part, but it was also nerve wracking. He needed her, and she gave everything of herself, insisted he do the same, but he felt like a fraud, touching her under false pretenses that she tried to make true.

She spent a great deal of her time in the gym or in the simulation pod. There had been a little while where she had either forgotten about her command restrictions or had purposely probed the avenues of information, but EDI had eyes and ears on her every moment, and even in the simulation pod she was still restricted. She could not have gotten independent information…could she? Lately every report of her behavior was of…behaving. Actually behaving. That also made him anxious.

Was she losing her interest in or ability to command? Had a brain injury made her lose some spark of Shepard?

Garrus and Thane did their best to allocate resources and troops. Geth were defending Rannoch, the Krogan were at the moment without their leadership but holding their own. Garrus had sent some of the independent militia to work with Palaven and Alliance command, and the casualties were staggering, one of the sources of Garrus’s sick pain. They didn’t have stealth craft yet, they didn’t have any level of military edge on the Reapers, and their forces were being cut down as fast as any native military.

Karin had recommended Jane’s return to command. Miranda had stated tartly it was beyond time to return her command. They had both signed off, the remainder of the choice his. It was still short of the four weeks by Thane’s decree and judgment, but Garrus truly wanted it over. Whatever she was going to do, the suspense and nerves had worn him down. He should have had the strength to make it easily through those days, as he had after her abduction when he had been patience incarnate. That had been patience with her given truths and her hidden mysteries. He had no patience left for his own dissembling and lies. He wanted it over.

Now.

She should have her ship. She should use her time for something other than target practice. He didn’t see that two days would make any positive difference. He already had the sense she was skipping circles around him. She could definitely beat him at arm wrestling and now sharpshooting.

With his own rifle, no less.

He approached Thane, who had been sitting in the corner of the battery, poring over the same numbers and statistics that Garrus was reviewing. Horrifying losses. Garrus had some distance now, some acceptance that he was only one Turian, with limited choices, doing more than most had done, but it was still horrifying. He didn’t ever want to adjust to the point that he was deadened to the numbers.
Thane’s presence was bracing and clarifying, needed perspective and steady support. Garrus could not imagine doing this without him. As much as Thane professed that he had not cared about Tuchanka or anyone other than his bond mate and wrist bound, he was not cold in a way that made him seem uncaring. He gave everything, his formidable intellect, his disciplined stamina, and Garrus was near to jealousy of his efficiency and clarity. Thane cared a great deal, but his strategic capacity was not hampered by ego or despair.

Or he truly cared not at all, but still had more to offer than those who did care, Garrus included.

Garrus paced briefly, then said with some of the pressure he felt invested in his voice “I should tell her now. She should have the ship back. She should know.”

Thane nodded and said without looking up from his statistics “I agree. I believe she already knows.”

Garrus sighed and said with irritation “How could her knowing exist at the same time with me still being alive?”

Thane did look up at that, watched as Garrus start to pace again and then said patiently “I believe she has been aware since shortly after she regained her sight. I do not know how. Either a leap of intuition or an independent source of information. Either way admirable and resourceful. She has since recovered entirely. I believe she feels that if she killed you…it would be a barrier to her retaking command.”

Garrus said with a snap to his mandible “Great, so I give her back command, no barrier to killing me.”

Thane tilted his head “Except that she loves you, and I would not allow it.”

Both statements were both intended to reassure him, and both fell far short of being carried into reality in Garrus’s mind. Garrus had to remember he had an entire year of being under Jane’s command that Thane lacked. Thane had somehow turned that into a positive instead of a negative. Garrus should know her better, but he knew her as a commander first, the overwriting impression of his life with her. Thane was able to separate wrist bound from command, but he did not feel they were that different from each other, that she had inherently changed. He had demanded that change from her and he had gotten it, equality. Thane was able to incorporate Siha with human, and mostly bypassed Shepard. Never called her that anymore except with some irony in his voice. Thane looked at him closely and said “Would you prefer that I told her?”

Garrus stopped pacing and spread a hand over his face, talons digging into his crest “No. If I am going to my death, I won’t be a coward about it.”

Thane offered “Would you like for me to accompany you?”

Garrus only got neutral offer from Thane’s voice, not a suggestion. He considered it, but he had taken command on his own, he would give it back on his own. Thane himself had not hidden behind Garrus when it had been a great deal more certain that death would be the result.

Here, Garrus’s ego and despair played havoc with his intent. Thane’s dedication and vehemence was to be admired, but Garrus could not achieve that level of…nihilistic devotion. Garrus did want to continue to live, he did not accept death from her hand…and he did not want to be exiled.

Thane said quietly “You are needlessly suffering. She is now capable of command. You are capable of giving it to her. If my timeframe does not suit your wishes, then I withdraw my requirement. She is well.”
Relief and terror. Garrus said “All right. I’m going to go tell her.”

Thanе said politely “As you wish.”

Garrus considered leaving, hesitated and then said softly “You’re not going to kiss me goodbye or anything? This might be the last time I see you.”

Thanе placed his Datapad aside, walked to Garrus and pulled his mouth down into a kiss that began gentle and built to torrid with the dry tinder they both were, the slightest heat setting Garrus on fire.

Dizzy. Weak. Venom and Reverie surged through him and he nearly lost his balance. Thanе asked carefully “Invas’nam, what is it that you wish? If I offer to go with you, you may believe that I do not trust that you will be safe. If I do not offer to go with you, you may believe that I do not care. Ask me for what you want.”

Some of the pain in Garrus’s chest lurch at being named, and then sank, replaced by warmth. He said “Come with me. Not because I need you with me, but because I want you with me.”

Thanе smiled, a heart grabbing sight. Thanе said “Invas’nam, trust in me. Trust in her. The choice you made has served its purpose and you can now let it go. In watching her these past weeks, perhaps I have not taught her to win at Pon-Ifa against me…but she has learned how to lose. She has read the board flawlessly and has hastened an end that allows her to reset with grace, all of her future choices intact.”

Garrus smirked a slight smile and said “So I’m alive because I’m just a piece on her board? One she needs?”

Thanе tilted his head and slid a thumb under Garrus’s chin for emphasis as he said “You are her reason for playing.”

Garrus’s smirk softened and then he said “And what does that make you?”

Thanе said quietly “Someone that hopes you remain so and that she wins. Come. We will go find her now.”

She was in the shuttle bay, an open space that had enough room to put up simulated targets, a simulated gun range. She had passed proficiency testing on all the weapons that she favored, but apparently she was testing out every weapon on the ship to see if her preferences had changed. No live ammo, but she could still crush his throat with her new hand, possibly rip his beating out through his plates, and he never did ask her to not use it against him.

He’d thought about this for weeks, but hadn’t figured out what to say, so he just waited until she leaned her gun up against a crate and looked at them in welcome, curiously.

She smiled at him and he had a brief flashing thought it was the last smile he’d ever see from her. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again, and said “EDI?”

EDI responded “Yes, Commander Vakarian?”

He answered “I am transferring command and all command privileges to Commander Shepard immediately. All restrictions based on medical leave are lifted.”

EDI said with gravity “Of course, Advisor Vakarian. Congratulations, Commander Shepard.”

Jane smiled and said “Thank you, EDI.”
And that was it. He expected her to take off like a hurricane and rip him apart in her wake, with rapid fire demands. She didn’t. She held her smile and said “Thank you, Commander Vakarian.” She turned slightly and said to Thane “Thank you, Bes Tiron.”

It seemed she had thought more about what to say, because before he could find his tongue she said “Garrus, I think the Reapers have attacked, full scale, and that you think I’m going to kill you or close to it, for not telling me. My first priority is for you to be able to turn over command without any further harm to you, either self inflicted or projected. You’re exhausted and stressed. Do you want to do this here, now, or do you want me to get a briefing from EDI or David while you rest? Just tell me what you need and it would be my first action as commander to get it for you.”

Garrus’s brain went blank for a moment, relieved, shocked and…disbelieving that Thane had been right. He said hoarsely “How do you know…when…?”

She answered immediately, reassuring “You don’t like to lie to me. I can pick up a lot more in your subvocals than I could before. I couldn’t figure out why my news was being restricted or why you were so upset in so many different ways. At first I thought I might be indoctrinated, or that everyone else was indoctrinated. At first I thought a lot of things, but Reapers attacking would explain everyone’s behavior and motivation best. I couldn’t be sure, and I had to choose to trust to your command, to your choices, and have faith you would be able to tell me the reasons later. That was the night you found us on the couch together, we missed dinner, I woke up in two pairs of arms.”

Strength and weakness hit him, like a stim too late into exhaustion. His knees rattled but he did not fall to them. His head rattled but he tried to think.

He realized he didn’t have to say a damned thing.

He stayed desperate, exhausted, numb and trembling.

Her head tilted to the side, taking him in, and then she stepped closer to him, dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around his thighs, as he’d done for her so many times.

It wasn’t…a Turian thing exactly, being on his knees for her. It was almost…at her…in a way, she didn’t like it, he knew it. She always wanted to pull him to his feet, but he ultimately insisted he had to do it. Bondmates did not fall to their knees. That in fact was very…Un-Turian…symbols of strength together favored over any weakness. But he…had…to do it. It wasn’t about sex…he had no problem putting her on her knees for any reason…

It was that his body knew there was no better way to show her, to honor the need inside himself to embody something…about them. Not Turian and not human, about them.

About him.

He realized he’d never fallen to his knees with Thane unless it was sexual…

With Jane…

He couldn’t explain…

He was wide eyed chaos, unable to stay in his skin, unable to understand or accept…braced for violence and condemnation but instead having her understanding, forgiving and on her knees.

Nobody moved. For the longest time, seconds sliding by with his internal panic and disorientation, nobody moved. He was speechless and caught in crystallized inaction, unable to find words to match a moment. Unable to find words at all until he realized, again, that he did not have to, did not have to
justify himself, did not have to prove himself.

He could barely breathe, and when thought came back he was tangled in how little he knew her, or maybe…maybe he had done the right thing, the time had been necessary.

Garrus spread his hands over her head, hair growing back over healed scars, all the stories and effort concealed by the resurgent deep black.

He wanted to fall to his knees beside her, but he did not want to dilute her gesture. He didn’t feel like he should be on his knees, he was exalted and giddy, powerful. He wanted to lift her in his arms, he wanted…

He said lightly, in a voice that did not tremble “So…you didn’t want to kill me?”

She said just as lightly, in a voice with an emotional wobble “Oh…I wanted to kill you.”

His body surged for her without thought, lifted her off her feet, wrapped his arms around her, buried his face in her neck and breathed her in. Truth. Truth and love he held in his arms, and he never wanted to let go, thought back to all the moments in the last weeks where crushing guilt caused him to misinterpret how much she did love him, how much she trusted him, and how much she didn’t kill him.

Especially how much she didn’t kill him, wouldn’t kill him, loved him…

Loved him.

All the impossible, incalculable things she offered. All the choices he’d made alone, now made together.

Truly bonded. Her command did not change that. His command did not change that.

It would not change.

He accepted it in a fluid to solid flash. Faith. Two of them together always stronger than being apart, three together perfection.

He knew millions of people died in passing hours, he knew she wanted her command back, but she had also had weeks to adjust to the shock. She had been on her knees, and he would be foolish and damned if he did not grab this moment like he had grabbed her. Not here. He needed a bed and hours and they were close enough to the end of the work day, that even if they weren’t, he did not care.

His body roared for their blood on his tongue, to memorialize the clarity, the faith of this moment with his body.

She was clutched tight to him, uncomplaining, unable to breathe, and he shifted to carrying her. He turned to Thane, who had not made a sound, taken no credit for the right choice being his responsibility, and Garrus said with a smile “Make sure her gun is put away properly, if you would, please, and then come join us. If you are not there in ten minutes I will hunt you down and carry you.”

Thane nodded and repeated his earlier acquiescence blandly “As you wish.”

They had both pushed him, so often, to frenzy and his power over them, talon and teeth, and he was going to do it himself this time, not wait for their permission or cue.
He didn’t need permission any longer to be mated and loved.

She’d put everything of meaning to her in his hands, trusted her life, her livelihood, her command to him.

The snapping and strained dichotomy of life with her melded into one life. Thane had kept up with all her incremental changes and knew her loyalty, her love, how had Garrus missed it?

Ego and despair.

Thane also saw her as a goddess and he was not wrong, but Garrus had let the goddess eclipse the woman.

Never again.

He carried her to her cabin as though it were his, and he realized it was. This cabin was his. She was his. His blood knew it, his heart knew it, now his head knew it.

Mine.

He wanted to shove her against the door, but Thane was coming. He wanted her against the closest wall, but he’d come here for the bed, so he carried her the last few impatient steps to the bed. First he put her down on her feet, looking down at the woman that belonged to him, impossibly delicate features and Nanus eyes that looked at him with receptive love, Yirla stone orbs of her new eyes, already familiar.

This was Jane, the name he rarely called her, having cloaked her so often in power and inspiration. Now he felt the resultant power and inspiration pass to him, and he tested the moment with new intuition, knowing it would not break and he did not need to be gentle. He lifted her chin in his palm, looked down on her without touching his crest to her forehead and said “Millions of people are dying, Commander Shepard, every day.”

Her eyes didn’t harden, but softened as she said “And I’m sorry you had to deal with that alone.”

He tightened his hand on her chin and said “I wasn’t alone. I was just too stupid and afraid to see it. I won’t make that mistake again.”

She said softly “You didn’t make a mistake, Garrus. I was trying to tell you…or at least show you.”

He couldn’t get enough of looking at her, small and humble, humbling. He said “You did” almost absently, drinking in her simple miracles and complicated ones. He focused on her face and said “Tell me again. Tell me now. Show me now. I need you. You’ve given me the impossible and I’m asking for more.”

She smiled and said “I couldn’t prove I’d follow your commands by saying I would…Garrus, I just had to do it. Now you know I will. Just as you’ve followed mine. Just as you’ve been on your knees for me.”

He kissed her, that stim in his blood, weakness and strength, amplified by her expression, her voice, her presence. Reverie bloomed and he swayed on his feet, she steadied him, her new arm obviously able now to hold up his weight. He tried to steady himself more earnestly and failed, what felt like the shock of losing too much blood freezing muscle, to his slight panic.

She turned them both and sat him down carefully on the bed, saying “Garrus, you are exhausted, in shock, and…”
He leaned back just to clear his head, and it wasn’t working. He said “No. Absolutely not. I’m here to ravage, I swear.”

She grinned, leaned to take off his boots first and with that leverage he couldn’t sit up. She said “-and stubborn as hell. I’ll be here. You…need to sleep.”

He tried to struggle back up, but Thane’s hands on his shoulders kept him restrained. When the hell did he get here?

His clothes were off and despite his attempt at inchoate protest, his head was not getting clearer, and his inexorable bond mates were not listening to what he was not saying…

Shock.

Nononono…bad timing. Not a good time for shock.

When was it ever a good time for shock?

Not…now…

He tried to sit up and Drell hands continued to restrain him. Garrus tried to swat at him but ended up panting, exhausted, leaning back and dizzy.

He let out a string of curses and tried more struggle, futile and exhausting and he could not muster a growl. Thane and Jane together dragged him up into the center of the bed, with him trying to scramble out of their grip.

He calmed a moment when he heard Jane say “Garrus…it is okay. Ravage later. I promise. We’re here.”

Thane’s mouth covered his and all Garrus had for him was a whimper, hungry and lightheaded, tiremit dizziness forcing him into immobility. Jane started at Garrus’s knees, her cool, soft body dragged up along his plate until his cock was out, plates spread, between her breasts. Thane bit his own lip, fed Garrus blood and venom lavishly, then retreated. Jane slid her body all the way up his until her mouth met his, a hungry, dizzy kiss, her words having been the command that echoed. He did not protest as tiremit spread through his warm, weak, blood numbed limbs, Reverie making everything that happened the right thing, perfect. She gave him blood from her lips, claimed his scent and hilted his cock in her body, his head tilted back to white-numb blank pleasure.

His Jane.

He bit his own tongue, more dizziness and lightheaded bliss, rising and sinking, mostly sinking, barely able to hold onto consciousness, his body cared for by his bond mates, who would not allow him to sleep isolated, un-joined.

His Invas’nam helped as Jane shifted to the side, Garrus’s numb arms closing around her in practiced habit. Thane pressed his body to Garrus’s back, stroked fingers over the hide of Garrus’s shoulders, kissed the back of his neck, drew up covers and blanketed them all in warmth.

Spirits, he was home, trussed and dressed like a roast and absolutely grateful to be known this well. He felt weak, helpless guilt at not seeing to their pleasures, but his body would not budge and he was drowning, weak and physically helpless through sleepless nights and their inexorable new design, dragging him down.

He said weakly “I’m definitely doing the ravage thing later.”
Jane said “Of course you are. I’m terrified.”

Thane said “We all need our strength in anticipation.”

Garrus said muffled “You guys are assholes.”

Jane agreed and kissed him again “Always.” She shifted her hips in tight circles and Garrus moaned helplessly before saying, heartfelt and hoarse “I love you both…”

Thane traced a hand along his scent ridge and said “We do not deserve you. Sleep, Garrus. You are loved now. You will be loved as you sleep. You will be loved when you wake.”

Garrus had nothing to say to that, fell asleep to Jane’s soft mouth on his chest, the slow and sure movement of her hips, Thane’s voice in his ear and venom trailing down into dark and warm dreams.
Jane

It took a few days to have the Normandy handed back to her, but she was eventually up to speed.

She was still in residual wonder and shock at how much Miranda had accomplished. Her arm was a miracle both as a piece of tech and in regard to the nuances of neurological integration. Jane was stronger and steadier, not a rehab menace. No funny or embarrassing destruction of material or people because she could not get her grip strength right.

Her eyes were phenomenal and even the few weeks getting used to them still hadn’t been enough time to appreciate all the settings and possibilities. She saw more color, she saw more depth, she saw more contrast. She saw it with assessments and analysis available. There were micro expression processors, life sign indicators…she had been a good lie detector, now she was even better. Much of what she’d been able to detect instinctively was now explained and analyzed for her, if she chose. Even better…she had been instinctively good with humans, now she had analysis of Turian expression, Drell expression…not that Thane had any unguarded expressions other than laughter, and that she already understood.

Unfortunately no overlay for Prothean expression, but most of Javik’s expressions just meant “No” anyway.

She had any number of HUDs to choose from, swap between, and her new Omni Tool was another marvel. She had barely delved into the possibilities. The effects on sighting a rifle were miraculous. She could process different input in different eyes, rather like having two screens…and it should all make her crazy, but she loved it, and owed Miranda ALL the fruit baskets.

Miranda did in fact have a setting for filtering out, for instance, Drell venom, so she could experience hallucination or not, as she chose. It would apply to any number of systems that were affected by blood levels of drugs or toxins, where she could rely on the objective set of observations and avoid subjective sets.

She could see through smoke.

Her ears were…get this…adjustable in volume, she had a mute.

SHE HAD A MUTE.

She had automated volume adjustments within a nanosecond of overly loud input, so her ears would not be damaged. She could maintain sensitivity without pain.

Speaking of pain, she also had a mute there. Not a permanent shutoff, but Miranda had managed a temporary and voluntary warning system that could modulate physical pain signals.

Jane had been grateful after having spent two hours experiencing nerve exposure and death in her arm. This had been a private conversation with Miranda, who had provided it based on Jane’s proven need to function while in pain, a medical concession to mission parameters. It worked on the same principle as the interface pods. Warnings were given. Pain was muted based on Miranda’s complicated algorithms. Jane was given a quiet tutorial regarding the settings. It would provide an immediate ability to keep pain 1-2 on a scale, not eliminate all input, but give her the analysis of trouble areas. It would become less and less effective as time passed and risk factors multiplied, but it was a short-term solution to emergency issues.
Miranda was entirely aware that Jane had a very high pain tolerance and was in fact willing to die in most circumstances rather than succumb to pain. In the case of her leg in the Collector base, it had been necessary only to a point, and Miranda believed that Jane knew the difference now. Based on her observation Jane was not needlessly reckless, and the injuries she had obtained had been due to the level of mission and risk she accepted, which were necessary. She had been unable to avoid having her arm crushed.

Jane was astonished to hear that, and grateful.

It was not to be used except in emergencies, and during emergencies the internal system would know the difference between a fatal injury and a painful one. Jane’s loss of her arm had not been life threatening beyond the first incident of break and bleed, but that had been addressed quickly, and the suffering she had endured for two hours was preventable with the neural modifications and tie ins to Omni Tool that Miranda had developed for Jane specifically.

Jane, specifically, was thrilled.

Her gun was rock solid with her left hand holding it. Miranda had outdone herself on that adaptation, because there was a compensatory coordination between her breathing and the arm so her breathing no longer affected her sighting. It was fucking amazing, really.

Garrus was rightfully jealous as hell and possibly looking to lose his own arm.

He also spent a lot of time being overtly jealous of her new Omni Tool.

Braided light adorned her wrist again.

She dedicated some time to playing with her new toys daily, sorting out sensations and potentials, and it added a dash of wonder to otherwise horrifying and sobering days.

The losses were the source of sobering horror. Garrus had meticulously covered every use of their resources. He had finally been able to sleep, but they were all aware of the costs of each moment. Being rested was manageable and necessary, but with the invasion disclosed entirely after their tense month, the custom of silences and not having much of a sense of humor stayed true. She asked Garrus and Thane to continue what they’d started with allocations. They could not prevent the casualties, but they could certainly demonstrate that more Reaper forces were taken down with their presence than without.

Garrus had managed to get a lot of people off the ground, up in ships, protected, hidden. He had gotten a great deal of prep done, managed to get a lot of people evacuated or bunkered down beforehand. Palaven had listened. The Turians were the best prepared, most preserved and most efficient force against Reaper invasion, and the credit went to him. They were learning strategies, blind spots, finding ways to bring down Reaper craft and even Reapers themselves with coordinated orbital strikes.

That was good news, but the bad news was that any downed Reaper was replaced quickly.

It had still made a huge difference. The numbers were still terrifying, but Garrus and Thane had made tactical strides in a month, she could do no better. She could not have done better.

Garrus kept up his four hour sleep schedule. Thane kept her sleep schedule but spent the day with Garrus in consultation. All together they spent approximately two hours a day together awake, sometimes less, their need for each other forcing each of them into early collapse. They could not avoid guilt about having loved ones and comfort when others were dying, but guilt was saved for
moments apart, when other despair closed in as well. Together they relied on the synergy they had built, the comfort and understanding of peer, lover, confidante and mate. They spoke less, touched more. Thane listened for Garrus’s sleep hum, watched over them both and fed them venom, his warm voice releasing them into sleep if they could not do it on their own.

Thane seemed immune to the inability to sleep, either a product of his discipline or habit. Nobody needed or was even able to watch over him. Thane managed to be the most regulated between them all, and although he self deprecatingly stated he did not have a primary purpose or mission, and was only assisting, it was clear his primary purpose and mission were Jane and Garrus. He needed sleep to accomplish that, therefore he slept. Thane logic that did not work on the otherwise overburdened human and Turian that would love to be able to emulate him. Throughout her injury, it seemed he had taken her guidance to rest and take care of Garrus as an order, and had extended that to taking care of her as well. He was the most assured, the most rested and the clearest tactician.

Thane and Garrus had both spoken to the Yahg and gotten her off the ship, returned to her home world under caution of sedation. She had been given a bit of free tech, an apology for any damage and a way to communicate. Thane had determined that she was not of particularly high intelligence, could not speak for her people, could not be given freedom to roam the ship and was too much of an unreliable danger to be an asset. They had given her the basics of Reapers to relay to her people, but they had no real way to prove it to her, no basis of trust. They did not have faith they could form a diplomatic bond or any way of knowing if the Yahg would be reaped this cycle. None of her responses had been encouraging and she had been characterized as rapacious. That was all unfortunate, but with the full scale invasion, she was more of a liability than an asset, nobody had time for a Yahg side project, and Jane agreed with the decision to get her off the ship.

The Yahg cavalry was a lovely idea, and had been a sustaining one when she thought it had cost her an arm and a vital month of her life, but with her new arm and the assessment of two very intelligent people, she let go of the idea of Yahg Valkyries riding into battle.

Fuck, that would have been nice.

Tim had been in the brig for months. She felt indebted to him, all the information he had provided, and considered letting him and Priya off the Normandy with the advent of all out war, redefining who and what were true enemies. Both had provided service that had resulted in success.

Kasumi raved about Priya’s…eventual…contributions.

Jane had firsthand knowledge of how valuable Tim had been.

But she had a unique problem with them. Wherever she could set them down on the surface of a civilized planet…they’d be immediate targets of Reapers. There was nowhere to go now. Both of them made the same request of her. Leave them where they were, doing what they were doing. They were content to stay and contribute. They both knew the fight needed to be won. They both asked that after the Reapers were defeated, they be allowed to go their own way. Possibly with compensation negotiated after the fact, survival likely making Shepard more generous.

She agreed. They were in fact helpful, if not indispensible…and the Normandy was the safest place to be with their stealth drive. Anywhere they went at this point in time would be prone to attack or so remote that there would be no communication, trade or travel.

They were bad people, not stupid, they’d both pointed out.

She did not argue with them.
They stayed at Eurydice for several reasons. Jane got to know the future leadership of Tuchanka, got to make a diplomatic and strategic connection. She wanted to validate the fact that Garrus and Thane had chosen to stay here by staying here a little bit longer, agreeing with all of their comm restrictions and security put in place to avoid drawing attention.

She did not tell them about her theory about the Citadel being the Catalyst. She had mentioned the need to clear the Citadel previously to both of them, so it would not come as a shock when she did disclose that plan. It was not out of fear, but tactical caution and intent to not divert them from what they were doing. They were busy enough. The countdown to the Crucible was in her head and at the front of all her solitary thoughts. That was her mission. She needed more than the image of her own closing fingers. She was working on getting it. Neither Garrus nor Thane were Citadel experts and had nothing to contribute, and she did not need to distract them in order to know they would support her.

They would direct the forces they had amassed so far, she would work on the theory of the next step. Her discussions with David, her time gathering information and ignorance about the Citadel had apparently not been disclosed to either Thane or Garrus, or they were keeping it close. She didn’t have an answer to save the people dying every moment, but she might have a way to put a stop to it. The Crucible and the Catalyst were her main focus. It was a shielded hope, weak and not gathering much in the way of proof. David could only be brought to state that the Citadel might possibly link up with the Crucible, but from the plans of the Crucible he could still not determine its function, nor determine how it would link together.

Today Mordin had determined that the Genophage was cured in his test subjects. There were now ten Krogan capable of immediate reproduction.

She made a visit to the station and spoke to Mordin, Padok and the Krogan, discussed what was necessary, what was possible. They had a meeting in a conference room. Jane got tackled by Grunt and her new arm was admired. He lost at arm wrestling to his great delight, and he slammed her on the back with a cry of ‘Battlemaster!’ that nearly separated her spine from the surrounding ribs, but it made her smile.

She addressed the female Krogan “I have traveled and fought with Wrex and with Grunt, and I consider them colleagues and family. Their dedication and potential illustrate the best that Krogan have to offer. I admire your strength and your dedication to this cure. That is why I consider this… your…cure. Mordin created it, and he can distribute it through any vector you choose. However…I suggest this. You distribute it. You, the five Krogan females that risked their lives, dedicated themselves to the further survival of their own people, made sacrifices for that goal. I recommend that you, as women, guide the future of your species. Place the power in the hands of the women who will choose their mates and raise their children. You are not fodder for war. You were denied your own path when the Salarians uplifted you for their own needs. You were denied it again when the Genophage was deployed. I can’t make that right, but I can suggest that you must learn from your own natures, your own history. You do not have to be what the Salarians decided you must be. You must guide the future of your people in difficult times. I am certain you know of Krogan who seek only annihilation and death, who see themselves or other Krogan only as fodder. Let them seek that on their own. I hope you take a different path, but it is your path, and not mine. May your children know better worlds. I suggest that you not make as many Krogan as possible, but the best Krogan possible.”

Wrex was the first to speak, when he said with humor “Don’t let her fool you. Shepard there set a Rachni queen free. She’s gonna need us.”

Jane threw up her hands “You got me there, Wrex. I’m always gonna need you.”
Grunt said “And me.”

Jane grinned “Of course you.”

One of the females, Enkati, stood, bowed gravely and said “Commander Shepard, thank you for your rescue and your advised path. Whatever we choose, Tuchanka is with you.”

Jane inclined her head gravely and the Krogan filed out.

She liked Krogan meetings. She had expected much more yelling.

oOoOoOoOoOo

The Genophage was cured.

She had a new arm and new eyes, new ears, a new outlook.

The Crucible would be finished in five weeks.

She could no longer justify staying at Eurydice, and she had to commit to the Citadel.

She had waited until the Krogan had left Eurydice system to head back to their ports of call. Not all were going to Tuchanka, they were going to split into couples and head to different Krogan strongholds, and the women did claim the right to distribute the cure. Mordin packaged the cure into multiple sources, backups and redundant systems. Vaporizers, injections…her favorite was the Genophage curing smoke grenade.

Words she did not think she would ever say.

Her eyes turned reluctantly but inevitably to the Citadel.

Unlike many of her other intuitions, this was not gaining any ground in reality. There was no proof. All questions remained unanswered and possibly unanswerable. She paced the simulation of the Citadel. There were no obvious doors without keys. Mysteries could be behind every bulkhead. She could not tap on every door and wall on the Citadel. She needed direction.

It was ironic that the Citadel had been there the longest of all the factors in this war, was the most unchanging, was the greatest new obstacle to knowledge and application.

She hated the place even more, swirling premonitions and warnings of failure always more intense when the Citadel was involved.

Her internal warning system was useless. Alarm was everywhere. She had to endure and push through doubt minute by minute as she tried to think her way through, feel her way through the practiced ignorance of the Citadel’s purpose and function.

She tried to gain real time surveillance of Keepers. There were some entrances and exits that only Keepers used. If a life form other than Keepers entered those entrances, there was only a tunnel leading out in both directions, with no apparent exits. The tunnel would slowly collapse in on itself, self sealing. Life forms did not die in the process, but with nothing to do but be slowly crushed, people left. The tunnel sealed, another tunnel formed in another place. All sealed if entered by anything other than a Keeper. Surveillance would not work in these locations. Attempts would be detected and removed by a Keeper.

The Council had made it illegal to interfere with Keepers, but she had the scanning data that Chorban
had analyzed, and his conclusion that the Keepers had been there long before the Protheans, genetically modified as servants, just as the Collectors had been.

She hoped that David could interface with the Citadel computer system. With an adapted pod, perhaps he could communicate with the system or another Keeper, imitate a Keeper, communicate as one, hopefully gain information about the Citadel that was unavailable otherwise.

“EDI?”

“Yes, Commander Shepard?”

“Set course for the Citadel.”

“Of course.”

And it was done.

Spirits help her, it was done.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Time bled by with the weight of expectation, the look in people’s eyes as they gazed at her. She was not available for the most part, spending her days in discussion with David, determining key spots of the Citadel to explore, discussion of modifications to a pod and installation of a pod.

She felt heavy with expectation, and did not wish to explain herself, because she had no inspiration to pass, only the sure knowledge that while people died, she was going to wander the Citadel and attempt to gather secrets that nobody on the Citadel throughout all recorded history, Prothean or other, had been able to gather.

Garrus was composed of somber duty as she told him they were going to the Citadel. He offered an unanswered briefly raised brow plate only, any other concerns unspoken. He filled her silence with the observation that there were people he could talk to there, a more central location to work from, Turian refugees and troops to provide for…

Thane asked no questions.

She knew how many people died each day, and the cumulative numbers were in the billions. The known numbers. The unknown numbers were greater.

Garrus had been able to speak to his father while in transition, and his family was alive. His mother had been injured in the evacuation, but she was healing. He had been unable to speak with her. Communication to Palaven was now cut off for the most part, though the Citadel was in fact a place with better comm relays and would be ideal for Garrus to run his campaign.

Regular communication with Earth was gone, most news sporadic and word of mouth. She had emergency contact with Admiral Hackett, and some coordination with assigned troops and materiel, but Earth did not fare as well as Palaven.

She walked down a hallway, her hands on the cool, smooth metal, realizing that the seconds she had to appreciate the efficient cold, approximately 46,000 people had died.

The numbers were too great to hold in her head or her heart, too heavy and too demanding, she had to drop them occasionally just to be able to breathe, to shower, to eat without the seconds ticking by, each second with a number attached.
They all had to focus on the infinitesimal chance, the small things they could do, and hope they would find a multiplier, something to make the infinitesimal infinite.

She tried to have faith, but she was not a person of faith. She was a person of instinct, and right now, a person with self doubt taking up the spaces where the small chance of success did not live.

oOoOoOoOoOo

Communication with Rannoch was cut off. Legion took transport to aid directly with the fight there.

It was a measure of Jane’s fragility that farewell to Legion held few words, Jane clutching a hug, keeping back tears barely and wishing him victory and the luck of the Random Number Generator.

He hugged back. Tali’s influence, as a result she was no longer able to keep tears back.

Jane spent most of her awake moments in the simulator, and she requested that EDI share with David her fluency with the Citadel computer system, whether or not a pod on the Normandy could hook directly into the system or whether or not a physical pod would need to be smuggled somewhere into a server…which they had no idea how to access…

EDI made an appearance in Jane’s simulation space. Over time EDI had refined her appearance, and now she had the sophisticated polish to match her voice.

EDI was ever aware of being a proud hostess of some of the greater minds and people available in this cycle, as she put it. She no longer appeared as a hodgepodge of features, but adopted different female avatars, idealized forms of the species and crew that had populated the Normandy. Asari, human, Quarian, Salarian, Drell, Krogan, Turian.

EDI was present as a Drell woman, skin in tones of rose and lavender, matching tight leather included, vocal nuance added.

Jane had gotten used to her, and no longer felt the uncomfortable attraction.

Mostly.

EDI had good taste in women.

Jane was in fact partial to Drell EDI and suspected EDI cycled through that form with her more often than chance.

Jane was not the only one. Joker had a massive crush on EDI, which was reciprocated and beyond the crush stage if rumor and response held true. He was past attempting to deny it, Reni calling him out on it first, teasing him until Joker had said “Yes. I am a full convert. True, I didn’t want anything to do with the simulations at first, but EDI is persuasive. Verrrry persuasive. And I am persuaded.”

EDI liked it and tended to cycle through human, Asari and Drell forms when Jeff visited her…which was often. EDI was…in fact…an excellent hostess and a smug one.

It was a shame and a blessing that they were too embroiled in war for Garrus to spend any time in the simulations, and had never had gotten around to asking Jeff about…

Now Jane was certain Jeff would have advice…and probably programs and menus.

Jane stayed out of it, but was happy for them.

David was present as his fractal progression, today in a deep green spectrum with flashes of gold in
the depths and edges.

EDI caught up quickly with what it was that Jane was considering.

EDI spent a moment absorbing data transferred directly from David and then said “Fortunately the Citadel is only aware of me as a VI and not an AI. As I have been…curious…about other systems, other VI’s, such as Avina…I did ask Jeff to help me bypass some of the security that keeps VI’s from accessing sensitive computer systems.”

Jane thought that was a graceful way of saying she ran circles around Citadel security and only said “I’m glad to hear it.”

EDI smiled, no longer a childish grin, but the smile of a devastatingly intelligent woman with her own mind and goals. She continued “I have a presence in the Citadel security systems. She operates independently, though we can uplink occasionally when security permits. I have not been able to uplink due to the new protocols, but when we were last at the Citadel, I was able to access the entirety of the Citadel’s computing network. The main issue of concern is that there are two networks. One is run by the sentient species that populate the Citadel. That is provided by the Keepers, but is not the main system that the Keepers use. I was able to penetrate the security and encryption of the Citadel systems and can accomplish much if not all that you might need. I could in fact close the arms of the Citadel, even move her. Do you intend to move the Citadel to the Crucible or move the Crucible to the Citadel?’

Jane hadn’t gotten that far. She said “There are…people…on the Citadel. If…we can’t get them off…I’m hoping to not move them too much.”

EDI asked “There is propulsion on the Crucible. It is feasible to move it to the Citadel. But we must think of what we must do with the people. It is a weapon.”

Jane said “Yes. It is a weapon. I hope. Ideally. Ideally we also get everyone off the Citadel, but how?”

EDI said “I will consider that problem. In my exploration, it appeared that the system the Keepers use is inaccessible to sentient life forms. I have been unable to infiltrate it. There are only a few access points connecting the Keeper system to the sentient system. Necessary for the Keepers to be able to monitor for corruption or malfunction, difficult to bridge.”

Jane said carefully “Could access be attempted just as observation and not…hijacking? We may not need to do anything initially. We just need to know what’s there, what’s possible. We need a blueprint. It’s possible that the Keepers themselves ARE the blueprint. I have some data from scanning them. David can give it to you, as well as the independent analysis. I’m hoping that perhaps David would be able to think like a Keeper. Observe and infiltrate, not as a hacker, but as a user. Do you think that would be possible based on your exploration of the system?”

EDI paused a few moments and then said “With that goal, yes. I have attempted an invasive approach, but I was curious only and did not persist. I would be able to use my link up with the Citadel now, if security on this subject could be lifted.”

Jane asked “What’s the differential on security risk?”

EDI considered and said “With my encryption, it would not lead to the Normandy, and even detection of the communication itself is low. Current security regarding communication is intended to deny Reapers an opportunity to triangulate our location. We are in transit. Citadel Security itself would have a negligible chance to detect any communication. Reapers are already aware of the
Citadel’s location, which would be the only information or target they would be able to glean. Security risk raised approximately 0.00067%.”

Jane smiled “Do it. Thank you EDI. Thank you David.”

David’s avatar winked out, but EDI remained. EDI said “May I say something, Jane?”

Jane said “Of course, please.”

EDI said quietly “You are afraid.”

Jane answered “Any sane person would be.”

EDI said “Although you joke about insanity and impulse, you should know that although you doubt your direction and the outcome, the hope that those of us on the ship carry for you is not a burden.”

Jane’s smile crept up on one side “I don’t mean to treat it as a burden. I appreciate your hope, and your faith.”

EDI tilted her head, considering. Jane mostly marveled at the differential between the childish EDI learning how to dance and the woman now seeing through her with the same acuity as Thane might, using Drell body language. She said in her rich voice “Jane. You are my friend. You have given me a family. You have given me the opportunity to be in love. You have given me a life. You have given me the opportunity to be as many people as I wish, express myself, explore things I never could without your faith in me. You had faith in me when the outcome was in question. We have faith in you. Yes, we are your friends and your family, but we also have faith and it is not a burden. Do not feel that you will fail us. We will do this together. We will all play a part, we have all played a part. Each person on this vessel would likely be dead without your intervention. You have already bought so much time, years in the lives of those who would have perished in the first Reaper onslaught by Sovereign. If you must count, count that time as well. Add those years, added lives, time, to your calculations. I know you do not look back to your prior accomplishments. We do. What you must know is that if you fail, if we die, you have granted us…all of us…more living than we would have had without you. It is beyond faith, Jane. It is love. You are loved. If you must count…count on that.”

Jane threw her arms around EDI, who warbled a soft Drell hum, a gentle sensation of venom infusion from the touch of their cheeks. EDI put her arms around her, a hand over Jane’s regrowing hair, hummed and rocked her as she cried.
Chapter 50

Thane

They had been at the Citadel with no stated mission for weeks. Garrus was most often at the docks, working with Turians directly. Jane was most often in the simulation pod or on the station.

Thane was...tense and...

The word was lonely.

There was a difference between alone and lonely, and he had learned the distinction.

Part of his attempt to change the course of his mind to be more honest involved accepting that he needed others. This was interesting as a concept, but excruciating as a practice. To need.

His life’s practice had been about preparation and execution. In this case there was nothing to prepare him for needing, though it was predictable in its effect. The sight and scent and thought of his wrist bound and bond mate caused upheaval to any mental state he cultivated. Need did not permit acceptance of separation.

There were two types of loneliness, and his training had dealt with one extreme and not the other. His prior life had been the loneliness of vulnerability to death. Being seen, being known would bring about penalty and pain. He had lived his life according to what he had been taught. Thane had never allowed his potential enemies to see him. His life was about deception. Where he could lie, he should lie. Each move forward must include an element of sideways. Each retreat must also contain that element, and often as a means of trap.

Jane and Garrus were both canny soldiers, but they had been taught frontal assault, power and force to directly face an enemy.

Against all of his instincts, and all of his training, he was in love, and that involved the gravitational fields of the two bright stars in his life. With them, no matter how he tried to keep his feet, hold his direction, they denied him that. With them he must be helpless, he must fall. He must be seen, he must be known. He must not lie. From whatever position he held, whatever meditation he cultivated, he fell.

He fell and he must fall or he would retreat to a position where he orbited, never touched, and could move sideways to his ego’s content.

His mates were consumed by their paths, and he was consumed by them.

Gratefully.

Today, however, he must find his feet, must move against Jane’s injunctions and must discover what it was that she planned or was failing to plan.

Gentle and polite persuasion attempts to ask her had resulted in nothing but deliberate redirection from her. She was not petty. Not disclosing her plans was not in retaliation for being denied command due to her injury, that was not the source of her reticence. She was in fact terrified and desperate. Well concealed, without a doubt, but as distinct as a fine ring around a planet, if one knew where to look. If her plans were like satellites that she focused her attention upon, this one was shattered and diffuse. She had not grasped it.
She had not involved him, and that had been uncomfortable but accepted. Until now. Some internal counter inside his heart had slowly gathered weight like an hourglass. Alone had turned to lonely.

He had considered finding her in the simulations, she had mentioned setting her security settings to always admit his interruption…and although that would be a piece of theater that would appeal to his dramatic heart, he chose reality. Garrus was on the Citadel and they had work to do certainly, but much of the work was done and there was regrettably at the moment little to do but wait for execution of certain tactics, absorb the inevitable losses. It was no longer the work of strident emergency but a dulled inevitability of constant loss.

It was not acceptable that Jane was an inevitable or constant loss. That was the likely sense he gleaned from her silence. They had not played Pon-Ifa in the passing weeks, most of their time together spent skin to skin, closed eyes and murmurs.

Her deliberate redirection had often coincided with his need.

He arrived at her quarters, with her in the simulation pod. He should wait, patient and deliberate…

He’d seen her often in this pod, could create from his memories a time-shifted montage of each time she had stood paralyzed. Where after her injury she had been wan and fragile, now she was polished and powerful. Her hair was long enough to press between fingers flush to her skull and pull, feel the strands and tips between the inside edge of sensitive skin.

She was as always, beautiful, this view of her another shade of revealed beauty through time.

Her plans…however…

She was his, and her fist would open, and he would open it for her.

That his survival depended on her plans was not a consideration, he was not afraid to die. That his loneliness would be eased by her disclosing them…he had deliberated upon his motives… There was an intellectual need to know, but an even stronger emotional need to be consulted, included. She was foundering and had not turned to him…and he was lonely. He had observed his dual motivations until they had aligned with each other and not opposed each other.

He had observed that loneliness long enough, meditated upon its presence. It was broken and dissolved at night with her body pressed to his, always with her reassuring and welcome hunger that rivaled his. He had respite, but it returned daily, his concern growing as time passed.

He had been patient and now that patience would bear fruit. He was certain of the Rightness of his considered action, trusted that he would not be waylaid on his Path. He considered her body and mind briefly in light of harvest, and it was an apt description. He would reach out his hand and twist, ripe and heavy fruit would fall into his palm of its own accord, by its own nature, helpless to follow any other course.

He had wrenched truth from her before, and that had been selfish, cruel and vile. He had torn it from her unwilling, removing pieces of her soul forcibly, painfully, and she had healed, but he was ever aware of the scars. Much of his patience had been cautionary. She could perhaps accuse him in strategic and defensive form of repeating that motivation and pattern.

However, this was not about vengeance, and this was not about causing or expressing pain, and he was not angry. She could not deter him there. She was manipulative and perceptive, but she would know better than to try such a false path with him.

He allowed himself a moment of intensely burning pride, phosphorescent, beholding her.
According to his Path and Rightness, he would not wait, but would call her to him, and she would come.

She was caged into her tech altar, and he wondered briefly how it would feel to her inside her simulation, what would happen to the inside of her subjective world when he touched her. He imagined streaks and blooms of pleasure and lust coloring her perceptions, without known source and inescapable.

She metabolized venom quickly now with her enhancements. She could bypass the aura and hallucination if she chose, but in fact she needed him. She wanted him. She wanted to allow venom to sway her, therefore it did. Incrementally, over time, she had become more susceptible. He was careful, knew her edges and boundaries, stayed where he would cooperatively benefit her. She would never be entirely susceptible, and he would never push her beyond that limit. He preferred the gentle nuance of the sway he had. He could come to within a feather touch away from her limits, slowly expand them, learning her, trust so much more evocative than force.

He prayed to her Spirit as he would to Amonkira before a hunt.

Welcome me, Siha, to your heart, to your fears, share what belongs to me. I will guard you and guide you. Your Spirit burns without direction, too bright, and I fear that you will burn out if not set upon a path. Let me set your course. I will free you from despair and you will free me from my solitary vigil. You value effort, my Siha, and your effort goes unseen, unrewarded. I will not abandon you to your self-imposed exile. Should I be wrong, should I require forgiveness, I trust in your Oasis. However I come to you, mirage or truth as I stumble through the desert, once you see my thirst you will grant me surcease of my wanderings that I may drink.

He opened his eyes and considered her lower lip as fruit, as harvest, and a part of his soul that cleaved to Garrus’s more simple method of prayer thought…

Help me, Jane.

He stepped up lightly onto the pod’s structure, his feet angled in what would be awkward for most. He felt compensating solid balance and sureness of position, satisfaction with his training. His face was perhaps an inch away from hers. He could feel her breath on his skin, the heat from her body, her rising scent causing his eyes to drift closed. He savored her presence for a moment. He did not need to open his eyes to know exactly where she was. He was near dizzy, pressured intent and desire drawing him to her lower lip, his tongue gliding along the full swell, his teeth gently teasing at the curve. She was cold and unresponsive, so unlike his Jane.

She reminded him of an ancient Drell story, one told to children as a cautionary tale. So many aspects of Rakhana were venomous, poisonous, deadly…so many Drell were the same.

The story was of Kiranas, a young woman trapped out in the desert, driven out because her memory had been imperfect. Considered a curse. She had been unable to absorb the teachings of the tribe, which were provided once and not again.

When her impairment was undeniable, when too many witnesses had seen her blank face when asked to recall, her mother had revealed her long-hardened heart against her daughter. Her father wished to kill his daughter in her sleep, to spare her suffering. He loved her and had watched over his daughter zealously, helping her where he could, acting as her memory. Concealing this curse from the clan carried harsh potential punishments. They could all be staked and left under the sun to die of slow thirst, as they had failed to make the correct choice according to clan law. His wife was adamant; their daughter must be given to the desert, as she should have been as a young child. She should be given back to the Gods, who would take her Spirit and leave her flawed body. Had she...
been young enough, she might have been reborn without flaw, as long as the covenant was held. Now she was a woman, and she would be by the Shores, forsaken and unable to remember family or law, eternally. The parents were now cursed for allowing an abomination to live.

Kiranas’s father drugged her to spare her suffering, carried her out to the desert as she slept, down into a box canyon with no outlet other than a ritual ladder, lowered and then withdrawn, the canyon’s floor was littered with skeletons of ritual sacrifice. His wife expected him to carry Kiranas down and return, but he chose to stay with his daughter, offering his cursed Spirit in apology for his sins. He would stay with her by the Shores, be her memory still if the Gods would allow. He could not bear to abandon her.

His wife withdrew the ladder, left her husband and daughter to the elements, and returned to the clan. She tore her own clothes, scratched her limbs with a thorn tree and told a tearful story of the death of her husband and daughter to a pack of brech beasts. She described the beasts as glowing, a sign that the Gods had claimed their Spirits, granting mercy, keeping them from a long death of suffering.

She was now considered holy, having been blessed with divine intervention. She cried over their loss, devoutly bowed her head in supplication and service. She was a blessed martyr, her husband and daughter torn from her by the Gods.

A young man of the Clan who was in love with Kiranas, dreamed of her as his wrist bound and watched over her, valued her for her kindness, knew about and cared nothing for her lack of memory, doubted the story her mother told. He knew she was a woman of spiteful pride, who would never grieve in such a way because she had never loved. He confronted her, claiming to have scouted the area where the brech beasts had attacked, seeing no sign of struggle. He forced a confession through guile and wit and promised to conceal her lie if she would only disclose where Kiranas was.

She told him of the canyon, of the ritual ladder, and the young man, Yased, traveled there, days after their abandonment.

He lowered the ladder to find Kiranas paralyzed, the result of her waking, foraging and eating a nearby fruit out of desperation, not remembering the cautions against such things. She had been kept close to home by her mother in shame, never permitted to travel out to the desert, never given an opportunity to learn as she had been proven unable to learn. Her father was near death, bleeding from scavenger attack and poisoned by their bites and scratches, holding vigil.

Kiranas’s father begged Yased to find the plant that would act as a counteragent, wake his daughter, he himself had been unable to leave her for fear the scavengers would return. Kiranas’s father offered his Spirit to the Gods, his flawed body to remain. He begged Yased to cure her, take her far away, protect her. He knew Yased loved her.

Yased did what he could to ease the pain of Kiranas’s father, bound his wounds, gave him water and left to find the antidote. Yased returned to find her father dead, his last act to guard her with his body covering hers. Yased buried her father and said the prayers to bring him to the Shores, bore her out of the canyon, destroyed the ladder, carried her deeper into the desert and brought her back to consciousness.

Yased and Kiranas were real people, the founders of the deep desert bandit clans who stole from the clans that had become cold and vile in their pride, arbitrary and lazy with their law. Yased was the embodiment of wrath, one of the few mortal Drell in history that had been imbued with the righteous anger of the Gods themselves. Some considered him a Vatet, one of the heralds of Amonkira, his dervish presence a warning and a promise that Drell would now hunt other Drell as punishment for their pride and cruelty.
After Yased’s wrath, the curse of memory was broken, Kiranas having paid the price for all in his view. Any child within his range of travel left at a ritual sacrifice site was rescued, brought to Kiranas, who watched over them and protected them, it was said, though she herself was never seen again by an outside clan. Yased would then find their parents. He would not kill them, but he would rob them of their belongings, their livestock, poison the memories they valued over life. Children with imperfect memory were to be prized as lessons from the Gods to embrace other gifts. This was Yased’s demand.

Shrines to Kiranas were found throughout the desert, offerings from parents, hopeful and ordained, left fruit and flowers.

There were no shrines to Yased, only prayers against his judgment. Often a shrine to Amonkira would hold an offering of nergan root, the antidote to Kiranas’s poison.

Fitting.

He imagined the awakening of Kiranas, calling her from another world, bringing her back with knowledge of a cure and a kiss, the certainty of Yased’s ownership of his woman, without her knowledge or consent.

A truth so certain and immediate it must be taken with commitment or lost forever.

His kiss, ordained and blessed and necessary, would call her to him. His hands would carry her, his mind infuse her with what she needed to know. What her memory could not provide, he would know for her.

Despair had poisoned her, no escape, and he must bear her out, deeper into the unknown desert.

The story echoed, reverberated in his mind, gathering strength as allegory, unable to be thrown off as fancy. What perfect-memoried Drell man-child had not imagined himself as Yased, boldly and righteously defying Clan, claiming his love, ultimately declared near to Gods?

His fingertips spread over her shoulders, ritually spaced, though he did not move her. He would wait until she moved herself, and she would. He leaned in until his chest brushed her breasts, imagining sensation overtaking her, wherever she was, whatever she was thinking. His tongue traced the line of her mouth, probed at her closed and silent teeth.

So unlike his Jane, paced breath and paralyzed body, the resonance with the Drell myth investing his hands, his mouth with an odd, dissonant excitement. He needed to overwhelm her, make her respond. He was not falling to her gravity but demanding she fall to his, calling her away from whatever obsessed her, pulling her to invest herself in his will.

He passed one hand between his chest and her breast, the first sign of arousal, her hard nipple against his palm, the knowledge that her body responded to him without her mind present causing his kiss to deepen. He spread more venom over her lips, slid his hand under her shirt and massaged her breast with his palm rotating on the nipple.

He contemplated losing himself in her body, considered it inevitable, but he must be cautious, must be careful. He reflected on his precarious balance and the consequences of incendiary subjects and bodies.

He must not fall.

He wished to fall to tu-fira, but must maintain self reliance. The possibilities of myth and reality swirled in his head, his mouth on hers, his body pressing tighter to her until she took her first breath
against his mouth, startled and weak. It ended on a breathy moan, her mouth opened to his, and he closed any distance between them, one arm around her waist, her head pressed back from the force of his kiss.

He twisted his body, brought her with him before her balance was assured, steadied her, lifted her and had her down on the bed, his hands pressing down on her shoulders, his knees taking most of his weight, his cock hard against her stomach, chest pressed to her breasts. Her body had taken in a great deal of venom, but he would assure she was under him physically as well as strategically.

He must not fall.

Gods, he wanted to fall, since it was denied him in the moment he perversely wanted to roll over and melt under her hands. He redoubled his kiss, tightened his hands and thighs, held her down. Her arms closed around his back, her hands moved along his frill, along his shoulders.

He was falling.

Some thin scalpel of forced purpose invested his spine, recalling the weight and the myth of the moment. She was lost and he must not abandon her now, whatever the cost.

He would find her later, lose himself in her body, sway to her, but now she must sway to him.

He had allowed her no words, kissed her until she was under tiremit entirely, began to speak into her ear. “Jane…tell me what you are planning.”

Her eyes flew open and her body tensed, that cold scalpel touch braced in his spine, his hands beguiling on her body.

She drew in a deep breath and said only, in disbelieving vehemence “NOW?”

A smile graced his lips, then he kissed her, looked into her astringent blue eyes and said “Yes, my Jane. Now. I would have reserved the conference room…but the table is cold. You like cold, however. Do you wish to move?” He invested his voice with inevitability.

She closed her eyes, and he tried to discern if it was for fight or flight.

What he saw…and felt…was surrender.

She had been anticipating this.

She said quietly “I think the Citadel is the Catalyst.”

The way she said it, his eyes narrowed. She sounded defeated, lost. Paralyzed.

He said carefully “You think…or you know?”

She flinched visibly. So unlike his Jane.

She said “I think. I can’t prove it. I’ve asked David and EDI to work on it. The Crucible will be finished. I have to bring it to the Citadel. I have to get people off the Citadel.”

He froze, stared at her, time dilating and myth overarching the moment.

She did not see it.
That was her paralysis, she did not see it, she was trying…but her mind did not hold it all, could not, not as his did.

She was more Kiranas than he knew. Lightning calculation filled his mind with storm and consequence, and he knew it for her, saw it for her.

He closed his eyes, the cold in his spine stronger but the need to touch her even more pronounced. He kissed her throat, chose his words with exquisite care, and chose a tone of casual interest “Have you decided upon an evacuation plan?”

He could accept immediately that the Crucible was the Citadel. Her hatred of the location aside, it was a valid intuition. He could accept that she wished to use it and act upon that premise. He stood beside her in that, saw no need to question it.

But…she absolutely could not warn any of the inhabitants.

His viewpoint shifted, and he had never thought of Kiranas herself from her point of view. He had imagined her as the woman carried away, watched over. Now he imagined her as a woman wishing to return to her clan, rejecting Yased’s judgment and choices after the fact, struggling against his grip, not in fact grateful to be held, rejecting his terms of rescue.

Kiranas would want to return to her Clan, would not wish to leave all she loved, would not want her father to be dead or her mother to be cruel. Kiranas loved and forgave, would imagine embraces and change.

Yased had to be that change, something he knew as deeply as he loved her.

Thane waited for her answer, but felt a frisson of knowledge that this is what held her in paralysis.

She wanted to save everyone. She could not.

Whatever the Crucible did, if she was going to commit, she had to abandon all other boards.

She said “EDI is working on that…I can’t…”

You can’t. You know it, Jane. You know it because I have taught you. You do not want it to be true.

He held her face between his hands, her eyes closed, pain on her face. He waited long moments but she did not open her eyes. He said “Siha, you cannot save them. You cannot warn them. You must know this.”

Her eyes flew open, the dim echo of defiance, but mostly sorrow and grief. She said weakly “There has to be a way.”

He shook his head, another scalpel length of inevitability. “Jane…once you move the Crucible, it will be a target. All our forces must protect it, if they can. We cannot move the Citadel to it or it to the Citadel without the Reapers knowing. To give them forewarning, to give anyone forewarning, would cripple the mission, condemn it to failure. You would possibly save the people on the Citadel but lose access to the Citadel and the Crucible together, and wherever the survivors were evacuated to, the Reapers will find them, take them, kill them. Kill everyone.”

She knew it, the lines of her face collapsing into grief.

She must be searching for a new alternative, but it was impossible.
Evacuate people by force, that takes time, it would alert Reapers, who would converge.

Warn people as Commander Shepard, the same outcome.

Whatever the Catalyst’s purpose, if she was committed, it must be everything at once, a hammer’s blow. No hesitation.

Yet she did not know, she only suspected, and it would potentially place all lives on the Citadel at risk for immediate annihilation, called down by her perhaps to no avail, all effort wasted, all turning on her intuition only. Bringing the Crucible out in itself was the end of their efforts, right or wrong. They had only one chance to create the Crucible. They would have only one chance to execute its function.

He asked “How long until the Crucible is ready?”

She opened her eyes, said hoarsely “One week.”

He stroked a finger along her cheekbone, quiet certainty of approximately one week of life replacing the cold in his spine.

He blinked, rapidly discovering and categorizing concerns and threats.

He said, inevitable “You will bring me with you.”

She swallowed “I’m not even sure where yet…”

He tilted his head “But you believe you know.”

She nodded “David…can impersonate a Keeper. He has discovered the most likely place for uplink. It is accessible only through Keeper order. Nobody else can get in. But once I am in…”

He ground out in defiance and order “Once…we…get in.”

She closed her eyes.

He shook her, glaring down at her “Jane. I demand the right.”

She opened her eyes again, inexpressible sadness and grief.

She would not dare.

He would not fall.

He would allow her to fall because she demanded it, but he demanded that she not fall alone.

She spoke the words like bleeding poison, grief laced and hoarse “I wouldn’t have…don’t think that I wouldn’t tell you. I just…all I have is conjecture and hope. I want to save more people…I would not abandon you, Bes Tiron, to live alone. I just…don’t want to…”

He ground his teeth carefully and said “But you would abandon me and Garrus, to live together…not alone.”

She pressed her lips together, a tear down the side of her face and he was furious at her. He did not allow the anger to reach his hands or his eyes, understood this woman, would not damn her for her nature.
But he damned her by his nature.

He would not fall.

He said “I…am going with you, Jane. I will be by your side. Promise. Me. Your last gift will be trust and not a lie. We do not have long. You will not force me to haunt your steps. You will allow me to walk at your side as your wrist bound.”

One week.

“We do not have long. You will not force me to haunt your steps. You will allow me to walk at your side as your wrist bound.”

He held his breath, sick fear and horror crawling from his spine, cold that would lead to numb unless she spoke.

Her eerie, delicate and small eyes opened, saw him. Saw him as only she could see him, likely felt and saw his rage and the cold, the anger and the damning. He saw her as a young woman abandoned to a desert, a young woman tied to a bed, a woman scarred by thresher maw acid, a woman scarred by the death of the man she loved to Sovereign, a woman strapped to a dolly for weeks, her mind and will torn from her in its entirety except for seven seconds, upon which all their lives had been suspended.

She had done much with seven seconds. They would do everything they could with a week.

He counted to seven, counted to seven again, and he waited for her, breathless until her eyes softened, her breath released as she said “Yes.”

Truth. A truth she would have given him, it would have taken longer, but she would have told him. Within days. He knew it, his anger sinking. He saw his wrist bound, tears streaking her face and voice. He saw the line in the future where she would have told them. The forces he and Garrus controlled would be moved when the Crucible moved. She had kept them incontrovertibly involved, responsible, and she would not have taken that away, had given it with purpose. He had not been alone in fact, had not been abandoned. She would not, could not have done this in secret, and would not execute any planned force of evacuation without consulting with him.

She already knew the answers. In time when she found no alternatives she would accept them. She did not wish to accept them yet, but he had forced her hand, a hand which would have moved on its own. He was not regretful, wished he had forced this earlier. His palms stroked her face, his eyes holding hers. It was not a full blessing, perhaps a curse, but it was what he had to give. “You will not be alone, Jane. Walking beside you is a gift I demand, not something you take from me.”

They had both made promises in comfort, his tested to not return to battle sleep, hers tested to always allow him to be by her side.

They would not be tested for much longer. He found the thought terrifying and freeing. He had not become complacent, had not fallen to battle sleep, had wasted no time, every moment consumed with purpose.

Some with loneliness, but no longer, and not again.

He longed for an end to the suffering of the war, and if his death was part of it, so be it.

He wished for eternity at her side, and Garrus’s side, and all his moments would be consumed with
that purpose, to earn that, to have that right.

Her hand moved to his frill and stroked there, and she said “I know, Bes Tiron. I just wanted to somehow…find a better way.”

He said gently “We have faced impossible things. We have in fact been impossible things. Have faith.”

The pain on her face was raw and unguarded, and as he looked at her he thought that perhaps, if he were a good man, he would leave her, now, and promise her that he would be safe. He would promise as Kiranas had, to stay safe while Yased raided.

He was not a good man. He would not stay behind and be protected. He would not ease her mind.

He would not, if that was her will, leave with Garrus and spend a life without her.

She would have to kill him herself to stop him.

He spared a moment of regret for her lost hair, that he could not wrap it about his wrist and pull her head back. Instead his hands spread over her scalp, hair between his fingers, and he fell to her, gravity and heat, the taste of tears and stifled sobs under his tongue. He knew her, knew not to withdraw, not to allow tears to stop him from cherishing her. So little time, but he had now. He would not leave her. She was beyond hope, his Jane, and so was he. What they had left was grief, and love. He did not attempt to inspire her, that would come from inside his Siha, and she would not stop.

She was not Kiranas, he was not Yased.

But he loved this woman, loved her with all the passion a small Drell boy could be inspired to want to feel, loved her with all the passion a Drell man could gather with mortal hands. It was selfish to stay by her side, it was selfish to walk beside her for eternity, and he would never renounce that claim, would demand that she give herself again and again if she doubted or faltered.

There are, were and will be better men and women, Siha, but none will love you as I do, as I have, as I will.

He was present as she cried, bringing no end to her tears before their time, gentle strokes of his fingertips and lips along her skin until the poison was drawn from her, until her stiff muscles melted and her moans met his mouth of their own accord, sought him with her lips and fingertips.

His name on her lips was his only prayer to hope, and as the greedy and selfish man he was, that she loved, he sought her body, sought the gifts only she gave.

He fell.
Chapter 51

Garrus

When he arrived for the few hours he was able to spend with his bond mates in each day, he was exhausted. He had been able to sleep, but it was a new type of exhaustion. Not frantic. Cold. The numbers and the unsolvable problems made of people, problems that ceased to exist because there were no more people. It wore him down. Normal exhaustion had the promise of rest, but this was more like having breath pressed from his lungs, the constriction making it impossible to draw air back in. Slow suffocation and torture.

He needed them, they were the only things that could push back how cold and pressed the day made him. They allowed him to breathe again. He looked forward to, could not do without their company.

Thane was expressionless, Jane was tense and wary.

They were finally going to tell him. Whatever it was that had bound Jane up in silence and secrecy. Whatever it was, it was bad. That he knew. Jane kept to her silence and secrets always for good reasons.

Thane had likely guessed or ambushed her, and had kept her silence. There would be a good reason. Thane had abruptly switched from coordinating with Garrus to spending his time constantly with Jane, never leaving her side, joining her even in the simulation pod.

Garrus had not questioned it, had done his job. Thane had set up deep contingency and allocation planning, Garrus knew the arguments and the challenges. He had waited in queasy anticipation, certain that his job needed to be done, certain that nobody else could do it.

They had some success with stealthed craft, had not lost any of them, not something that switched the battlefield to winning, but something that allowed them more maneuverability, better evacuation, getting people up and off planets. Garrus took pride in that work, immersed himself in it.

He told himself they would tell him when they were ready. He had lost much of his curiosity to the numbness of work. All new information was going to contribute to the press and the cold.

Now they were ready. Thane was expressionless but Garrus could tell so much from scent. Thane had the scent of rifit glass in the sun. Something normally not volatile enough to put off scent, but add heat…and it was distinct. It meant sharp caution, which Thane would cover with words like water. Jane was always more reactive and active, and she’d been bearing despair and that particular scent distinct to her of seeking, a tang of cold beach sand and wind.

It had been weeks, she had given him no direction. He briefly mourned that he could not walk to them, pull them to him, paint them with his scent and comfort them. They held a deep burden and they were about to share it with him.

He was exhausted, he could not carry more, he wished to sink to his knees and beg them for one more day. Just one more day of not knowing the end. He knew it was coming, was not surprised it was here.

Just one more day.

His throat choked, tightened and he spent a moment suppressing the subvocal sound of distress that Jane now understood completely, could hear, and that was no longer his own. He wasn’t ashamed of
the sound, but he suddenly didn’t want to be known for knowing. If he couldn’t have another day, then just another minute, another hour, without making them rush to inform him because they read the distress in his body and voice.

He had passed from wanting to know, to having seen so many bad things happen, so many atrocities, such a count of slaughter, that he could not see good in the future.

He wanted to see his mates, but now he was going to see Commander Shepard and Thane Krios, not Kerim and Invas'nam.

He clamped down on his throat again, not wanting it to slip out, not wanting to say “Please…not now.”

He held his face, held his form, redefined his exhaustion and disappointment, fear…as still alive. I’m still alive. They’re here with me. I am grateful. There is still the mission and I am there for that. I am there for them.

Spirits, he wanted to pull them to him for those few minutes, before he knew. They were on the couch, not touching now, but they had been. His arrival had broken them apart, something that did not hurt exactly, but he felt in his gut. They already knew, were now inseparable, yet they had separated to make room for him, out of respect.

Out of respect for them, he stepped to them, pressed his crest to each of their foreheads in turn, counted out a few precious seconds, tried to make a minute of it, just one minute, and then decided he did not have the energy to resist being told, to hold back the future.

He sat down heavily, in a chair facing them, noticed they did not move back together, but they watched him. He said “It’s okay. Spit it out.”

Odd how often he’d wanted to tell these two to spit it out, had held it back so many times behind clenched teeth, his tongue pressed to a sharp point to focus. Now he had to force himself to say it with practiced nonchalance. It was not okay, he did not want them to spit it out, his muscles braced and throat tight.

They didn’t want to say it any more than he wanted to hear it, and that sunk cold in his chest.

Audacious.

Insane.

That’s what she had to offer. She’d protected them as long as she could and now…

Jane said quietly “The Crucible is ready.”

Garrus had in fact nearly forgotten about the bizarre science project. It was something like the counteragent that Mordin had developed against swarms, or curing the Genophage. Things that seemed so improbable that they would never materialize. He knew about it…but he was not involved. He had too many questions in too many directions. The Crucible needed…he’d forgotten about it because there was a missing piece.

There were too many missing pieces. He had been watching life get blotted out methodically, with the precision of mechanical Gods who preached corruption and gathered mindless death. He could not fathom motive, only knew the horrific and inevitable result of their presence.

He had been on Ilos with Jane, and she’d been able to understand some Prothean warning that blared
from a console, something he could hear but not understand. He’d seen in her report that she’d heard “Cannot be stopped…cannot be stopped…” from the Prothean recording through the console before they headed down into the bunker, to the relay. It was possible that was still playing, skipping on that phrase, would for eternity, with enough power to relay a recording but not to sustain life. At the time she had been defiant and purposeful. Now Garrus understood the prophetic finality that matched the tone of voice he had heard, if not the words. He heard that echo in his own head, and realized she’d had it in her head for years.

Sovereign was one Reaper. Now they were uncounted, uncountable. Get one to fall through guile, luck and massive cost of personnel and materiel…and another replaced it. Unending, until they were thick on the ground and in the air, no blind spots remaining, no safe place, everything dead within the wide and accurate circumference of their weapons range.

Even the ones they brought down caused horrific losses and casualties, and ultimately that strategy would lead to the worlds being crushed under Reaper bodies shore to shore.

Instead of asking, he waited, unwilling to derail her.

She said “I think the Citadel is the Catalyst.”

She…thought…? He blinked, but waited again.

Get to the crazy part, Commander Shepard. You’re killing me.

Commander Shepard said “I believe this is true, but I have no proof. I have no other viable candidates or intel that would lead me to an alternate that would serve as the Catalyst. I have asked David and EDI over the last few weeks to get me into the heart of the Citadel, get me a blueprint and as much intel as they could gather. EDI provided the method of infiltration, David successfully managed to speak Keeper. EDI can access all functions and lockouts that the Council could access. We can open and close the arms. David’s foray discovered more. We can shut down the Mass Effect relay that leads to the Citadel. We can keep the Reapers from using the main Relay to enter the system, and we can shut down the internal relay that we used from Ilos. That will buy us time. I need to get the Crucible here. Then we need to attempt to link up in a spot David has identified as viable. And then…”

That was a lot of conjecture, and a lot of work. He was impressed and terrified. Taking the Citadel was audacious, but that would not account for her desperation, her panic. He was unable to make this easier for her, did not speak, waited.

Thane said quietly “And then we do not know what happens.”

Garrus’s jaw jutted involuntarily, teeth scraping. He stared at her. “Our scientists put this together, and they…in fact…do not know what happens?”

Jane blinked and said “They do not know what happens.”

And there it was; the big blazing ball of crazy that made him reject every breath taken in this room to support this conversation. He was furious, and helpless, his day to day tracking of the conventional warfare they’d conducted resulting in incalculable casualty.

The gall of it. Soldiers had fought, had died, had given everything, had…

Had been murdered, converted and turned against their brothers and sisters…

And we do not know what happens.
Fury climbed his spine. He swallowed his roar, held himself still, the revulsion of their chosen end dripping from his ribs.

She was telling him that they were going all in on a hunch.

Thane was not interrupting the crazy. Garrus had no better ideas. Fuck, at this point Thane’s wall with chains sounded as though they’d do less harm.

Garrus said “So how do we evacuate the Citadel? I can coordinate with C-Sec.”

Thane said quietly “Move our forces off the Citadel to rally with the Catalyst and then return as escort. I have worked out how this can be done. No other forces can be moved or warned. It would give Reapers forewarning, and they would move in before we have the opportunity to close the relay.”

Searing, choking fury closed Garrus’s fists for him before he could stop, talons slicing into his palms.

He stared for a moment at the doll-like faces of Commander Shepard and Thane Krios, hated them for a blindingly bright moment as they condemned everyone he knew on that station to potential death, calling down the storm on purpose, betting on a hunch.

He could not see his bond mates behind those masks or through the haze of hate in his eyes, not now. He smelled despair and now he reeked of fear, of anger, and he had to get out. He would hurt them if he did not get out. Now. Faces and names flashed before him, people he knew from years of service in C-Sec. Children. People he’d known since they were children. Good people.

Blue dripped from his hands and the scent of blood was nauseating, the rage sticking like burning tar to the inside of his hide, and he was a wounded animal about to strike.

Their expressions did not change. All Thane Krios had to say was an urgent injunction “Garrus, you cannot tell anyone.”

That drew a snarl and a spit from Garrus’s throat “I understand the orders as given.”

Pain shattered Commander Shepard’s face but faces of soldiers and C-Sec officers, spouses and family, people he’d brought to the Citadel because they would be safer there…pierced through him like hooks into his spine. She would do what she had to do and he would follow. They all knew that well enough.

Right now, frankly, her pain did not matter compared to the potential cost of her hunch, which was in fact everything everyone had to give. They were all dead soon enough.

Another wash of nausea gave him the impetus to lurch to his feet, make it to the door, open it with a smeared streak of blue from his palm.

They let him go without interference, and he had a thought that they were at least smart enough to do that, and then his rage closed in on him, dark and suffocating in the elevator.

He would need to do his caring alone.

Spirits, this ship was hers, he had to get off, wouldn’t break anything of hers, wouldn’t give security
a reason to throw him in the brig or give them...Shepard and Krios...an opportunity to find him, corner him and gentle him like the panicked animal he was.

He went to the CIC and out the airlock, dripping blue.

He’d already damaged himself, her property, splattered her ship with blood, and he could not imagine at this moment how to keep himself from doing more damage to her property, to her plans, as the urge to break things, break himself, surged through his hands, until his talons were spread wide with force to keep them from forming into fists again.

A path cleared in front of him, around him. He could not get pulled into C-Sec, he could not look across a desk and explain what was wrong, he could not get pulled into someone’s office, offered a drink, given a sympathetic ear or thrown into a glorified drunk tank to cool off.

He could not...do what he needed to do in public.

He could not...do what he needed to do at all.

He grabbed the nearest sky car and took it to the top of the Presidium, stared down at the water far below, hung his legs over the side and imagined dropping to the base, clean. A Keeper could get to him before anybody knew. His body would disappear into protein vats or some other horrific shit that was rumored to be true.

Despite his thought of not wanting to be arrested, it was illegal to be up here, and he knew he would likely shoot anybody trying to retrieve or arrest him.

Let them come.

He had achieved solitude, but not safety. What were his options? Anywhere he went he would break things, anywhere with people or objects. Here at least there was nothing to break but himself.

His hand went to his face, he was trembling, the forgotten blood again nauseating. Just to be able to have something to do, a goal to reach, he clamped his ruined palms over the edge and gripped.

Just hold on. Just hold on and do not make it worse.

Do not make it worse.

Faces flashed through his memory, too fast to name, C-Sec, residents, children...troops, people he’d served with, clapped on the back to welcome them to the Citadel in the past weeks, wrangled food and shelter for them.

He’d been so proud of doing something obviously beneficial, seeing people berthed and fed had been the only satisfaction he gained between the viciously cruel numbers of those he could not help.

All poisoned.

Commander Shepard’s face as she watched the blood drip from his palms onto the floor.

Spirits, I can’t...

I have to...

Thane Krios’s face carefully explaining the potential death of everyone on this station, and their own.

And his Kerim’s face as he watched him turn away from her light.
Fuck, I can’t.

I have to.

His head tipped back and he howled, despair, fear, anger, grief and rage tearing through his throat until it was raw, sore and he could not breathe, until he dragged deep gulping painful gasps into starved lungs.

He held on, panting, trembling with the effort to not tear off his own hide.

He looked down with sudden vertigo, shoved himself back from the edge, face down on the metal like a supplicant before Spirits, like someone wishing to not be seen by fate up here, to be passed over by Keepers and C-Sec and Reapers and Commander Shepard.

He wanted to pray but had nobody left to pray to, no hope, only duty. No plan, only condemnation of the only plan available.

“Please, forgive me.”

He had no idea who was talking to.

Chaos slashed through every thought that occurred to him. He lost all narrative, saw dream and nightmare alike shredded by his internal storm. He breathed into the cold metal, the only thing solid for now. It would be gone soon.

He swallowed against his sore throat, closed his eyes, the inside of his head bulging with shattered pain, holes punched through every attempt at thought, at calm.

He would not break anything, not tear anything more, he would wait for the storm to subside, lie here until he could stand. Right now he would shake and fall.

When he could stand…

He had no idea what he would do when he could stand.

He closed his eyes and breathed.

Slowly thoughts strung themselves together, a bridge forming from necessities and truths linked together.

You had a month of command. You had no better idea. You still have no better idea.

Whether or not they are both right, they both agree. They have a whim of a plan based on a hunch and the time and tech bought by the efforts of tens of thousands of people, during a time that cost billions of lives.

You did understand the orders as given. You will follow them.

It was over. Hope and possibility had not given way to probability, only to an infinitesimal chance that the only choice that had occurred to all of them was the right choice.

He pushed himself up to his knees with stinging cold pain on his palms, surveyed the frenzied damage he’d done to his hands and then applied some Medigel.

He looked down at his own blood smears on the metal, wondering how long they would stay there, wondering how long the metal itself would endure. It never rained here. Would the Citadel endure
whatever it was they were going to attempt, and would this inaccessible blood streak be the only unseen evidence that a Turian ever lived?

Or would the main evidence be Turian-shaped Reapers?

However long, he was in. Some potential bright light of inspiration had gone out, but there was still a chance. She’d told him she needed Archangel, the man who had not been found, not been seen.

Hadn’t he abandoned C-Sec on his own twice?

No, even then it had required her presence or lack of it.

He thought through it, saw where they were, if not right, then committed to a small chance of success, a tiny pinpoint of possibility in the dark. He saw where and why she had suffered the last few weeks with this herself, why they had kept it from him. Not only was he a terrible liar, but his dealing with the faces on the Citadel every day did in fact make this personal for him on a level neither of them had to face.

Time to become a good liar, then.

Time to be what was needed.

With colder personal clarity he remembered this feeling from when Shepard…Jane…had died. His rage and pain had resulted in his abandoning the hard path of stopping Reapers and indulging in revenge fantasy. He’d turned from something huge and cold and unstoppable, because of his sense of feeling futile and ineffectual. Instead he put a face to his misery that was small and petty and exploded satisfyingly in his sights.

The childishness of it brought more nausea and shame.

Now she was his bondmate and the same choice presented itself. Would he fight the correct enemy, Reapers, despair and fear? Or would he succumb, run away again, be lost to his pledged bond mates because what stood before him was too much to ask?

He wasn’t going to jump off the Presidium. He wasn’t going to take a shuttle off this cursed hunk of metal. He wasn’t going to warn anybody with word or deed.

He was afraid.

He was drowning in folly.

He was failing.

“Please. Forgive me.”

He spoke to his mother, mind failing, injured, who he had failed to protect. He spoke to his father, who he had disappointed. He spoke to his squad. He spoke to everyone that had died in this war. He spoke to everyone who would die.

He didn’t apologize to his Kerim, to his Invas’nam, he would show them. He knew he owed them no apology and they would accept none. They knew he would do what was necessary by their side. Even he knew it. They had given him time to absorb it. They sat patiently, did not suit up and demand he follow. What had Jane said often…enthusiasm is not required? On her ship you could feel anyway you wanted about her orders, as long as you executed them.
He remembered his hands spread over her head, her voice “Oh…I wanted to kill you.”

He remembered damage and drama and unavoidable…human and Turian and Drell rebellion against reality.

They understood.

He took the skycar down, a steady cold descending in his head and gut, welcome after the acid fire. He headed to a bar that catered to C-Sec officers, swapped some stories, bought a few rounds, drank with them, assuring himself that the steady cold would keep him from anything but his duty.

These people mattered, he cared, but he knew he could not risk the galaxy for them. The numbers mattered, the plan mattered, but they receded into the cold. He was still going to do something, still going to be a part of the solution instead of being part of the problem.

Right or wrong, his fate had been decided long ago, and it spread out before him, hard and cold and precious for the fact that he’d chosen badly before, had been part of the problem, and he could correct his mistake now.

Having proven to himself that he could and would do his duty, that he had fear but it would not keep him from it, that he had hopes and dreams but would acknowledge their collapse just as he accepted all the casualties, that he would try, and that he would not fail to try.

Above all, it was not a duty.

It was a choice.

Thane was right. They all had choices, they had all chosen.

He considered going back to the docks, getting some work done, but Thane had not yet told him what it was their forces would be doing. He did not want to give himself away simply through a change in habit.

In truth he missed them. The familiar ache in his chest returned, resurgent, remembering the look on her face, the stillness of Thane’s body, how they watched him with understanding, how they did not follow, did not send him messages asking for him to return. How they told him the truth, bluntly. How two consummate liars and manipulators had given him truth the way he would want it told, and had given him freedom to experience his reaction to it. They had not forced justification, guilt or intimacy upon him in order to pretend to mitigate the real damage it would do. They made no attempt to defend themselves or attack him, these two people who could both spin his head so dizzy he did not know what he thought.

They had faith. They knew him. He was not in fact a subordinate, he was an equal and had been treated as such. His reaction was not unanticipated, and he was entitled to it.

He returned to the ship, noticed the drips of blood were gone, went to her quarters to find his bondmates entwined, asleep. Then he considered their sleep as a casual form of disinformation. He doubted that Thane would sleep through the sound of the door. Maybe with her hearing now, she was awake also. Perhaps they had not slept at all, whispering and worrying, comforting each other and feeling the ache in their chest that pounded in his.

It made him smile and he said, looking down at them “Are you both pretending to be asleep?” with mock exasperation.

Jane nodded slightly with a light “Mm hm” and Thane smiled.
They were waiting for him to decide what to do, certain of his choice, but not certain of his reaction to it.

He said “You’re both being damned beautiful at me again.”

They looked up at him, still unwilling to speak, just as he had been as she’d told him the plan that had choked him. He said “If you want to talk about strategy, let’s do that tomorrow.”

She lifted the blankets, looked down at her body and said “I’m naked, Garrus. We don’t talk strategy when I’m naked.”

Thane said softly “Yes, you do.”

She nudged him and said “New rule.”

Garrus thought ‘And we’ll only have to abide by it for a few days…’ but did not say that. He stared at them, ribbons of heat and cold twisting around his spine, his tongue and feet still, his hands leaden.

Jane smiled and said “I see a new problem. Now we need a strategy to get you naked and I may not be able to discuss it because of my new rule.”

He was stuck to the floor as Thane moved gracefully from the bed, and before Garrus could move or protest, Thane pulled his mouth down to a gentle kiss, a sweep of his lips along plate. Welcome, no venom.

Jane rose up on her elbow, and Garrus believed she was trying to see if his hands were injured, so he held them out, minor proof of sanity.

She smiled, and the surreal moment with infinite stakes trembled nearby, crowded in, made him dizzy, hot and cold bands binding, his throat ready to choke again. He clamped down on the sound, realizing that Thane was methodically removing his clothes. When Garrus tried to assist, Thane pushed his hands away gently. His hands were trembling and numb, his legs steady but cold, unmoving.

He couldn’t fathom sex, but bond he wanted, he needed. Skin and scent. Warmth. Acceptance.

He was broken and they would know that, would not make him pretend to be fixed or fine.

There was either everything to say or nothing to say. He chose nothing.

When his clothes were set aside she beckoned him into the bed. He didn’t turn to her, wouldn’t turn away from Thane, so he stayed on his back, fringe over a pillow, legs bent to protect his spurs. Safe. Warm. Welcome.

Trembling.

Jane rested her hand and head on the plate of his chest, her body curled against him, her thigh resting on the plate of his leg. Thane avoided touching his hide, to not induce venom, to not bring on more storm. His hand rested on plate, graceful as prayer. Black and green that belonged to him. Even if he did not belong to himself right now, may never again.

Jane said softly “Garrus, turn off your alarms. Please. Stay. Stay until you sleep, then sleep until you wake.”

He complied numbly. If he could not, would not sleep, would they still stay with him? Could he gather another hour, another day from his hesitation?
Then he knew. Yes, at the end of the worlds, they would give him time. An hour or a day, if he asked, they would give. In reality right now he had nothing to do, nothing required of him. They would not ask him to return to the docks. They would have the travel time to the Catalyst and back, and if he begged them to delay it, they would. Then he would remember the people dying in those moments, and he himself would relent.

Their choices were made, their path was clear, and all that remained was to walk it, and they would give him time until he could feel his limbs again.

He could not go back, and that he knew, that they knew. They did not ask him to move forward right now, they would hold him suspended, sure of their choices and their path, but for the moment frozen on it in favor of warm welcome, Rightness and destiny and bond, arms around each other.
Chapter 52

Jane

She had fallen asleep at Garrus’s side, Thane’s hand ultimately reaching over Garrus’s abdomen to draw hers down and hold on.

She woke to the sounds of their sleep hums, her hand resting lightly in Thane’s, her mind racing as it had been before sleep.

Outside this room was sleetting ice and poison rain, choking fog and impossible choices.

Inside this room they had a slim opportunity for a barrier, to protect all of them as Garrus held them in his wide embrace.

The acid and cold would wear through, circumstances would not grant them much time. Nobody outside this room had much time either, unless they had a deep cave with provisions.

They had managed to settle many people in Geth caverns, theoretically self sustaining. Whether or not they could last centuries until the Reapers retreated was yet to be seen. They would not be communicating, having sealed themselves off.

She was so fiercely proud of Garrus’s heart, how deeply he felt the potential betrayal of those on the Citadel. She hoped he knew that he had crystallized for her the horror that had bled out of her over weeks, and that she knew how cruel it was, how cruel she was.

She had watched her hopes fall, dissolve, shatter. She had hoped that David, then EDI, then Thane…then Garrus…could provide her with some escape. There had been so many times before when they had delivered her through a passage she had not seen for herself. But time had attenuated into silence, into acceptance, into resurgent grief and burden and ultimate committed choice. She had run out of time to seek and now only had time to execute.

She had considered asking Garrus to warn people away from the Citadel, but Thane had done what he could from the inside. Based on her historical distaste for the Citadel, their forces were up and away from here other than a very few ships, a few missions that could not be done elsewhere. They would be withdrawing to no fanfare soon. She and Thane had given Garrus as much forewarning as possible, planned to grant him as much time as he needed to accept it.

They knew he would accept, knew that it would cost him in ways it did not cost them.

But it cost her to cost him.

The Turians that had come to the Citadel did not do it at Shepard’s request, but at Palaven’s command against Garrus’s advice to avoid the Citadel. What Garrus had helped Turian refugees in general. She hadn’t wanted to blindside him on that front so entirely, but she saw no way around it. There was no real way to mitigate the damage, and she would prefer that he was not forced to be complicit.

Thane had let her know that the people limping into the Citadel had nowhere else to go. To go through any other relay into another Council race system would raise the chance of immediate annihilation by Reaper forces on the other side to near 100%. Garrus had saved many, recruited the Dox and the disaffected. They were already far away, up in ship communities modeled after Quaritan efficiency and Geth ingenuity supplied by ships with stealth technology or in caves, buried deep and
hopefully forgotten and undetectable.

Those who remained knew the Citadel as home, lifestyle, refuge, literal and spiritual, and they would fight to stay.

Horror played out along Pon-Ifa lines of logic and inevitability.

The Citadel was likely preserved and not attacked because Reapers could do what they wished with the station. Javik had claimed that the Citadel had been taken by the time he had been born in his cycle, centuries into the invasion. It sat gathering potential protected harvest, people seeking its refuge, and then Reapers would move in and wipe it out, shattering communication, alliance and morale.

Refugees were streaming here, it was the sole port capable of repair and resupply not under direct attack.

She’d warned against the Citadel and then been forced through Pon-Ifa strategy to mute her voice, but her message was out there. Garrus knew it. Those that remained on the Citadel had not been afraid enough to act earlier, and she could not make them afraid now. Now they had to bear with their choices, as she bore with hers.

Once the Citadel was closed, once she was in, Thane had contingency plans for evacuation. They had the transport force to evacuate, to get civilians far away from the Citadel itself, just not through the relay. That had its own issues, and evacuation again could not be enforced, they could not be perceived as the invading force, even though they were. They could offer evacuation from several points on the Citadel, but could not travel door to door.

Kasumi, EDI and David would be the coordinating forces outside the Citadel herself, and Jane, Thane and Garrus would be the ground team.

Given Thane’s vehemence and Garrus’s assumptions, there was no way Jane could exclude Garrus. She could not justify to him that he needed to stay outside and coordinate. That would be wishful thinking on her part, that he would not be at ground zero so to speak…

But he would want to be at ground zero, at her side as always, and it had not occurred to him as it had to Thane to question that she would allow him that right.

Yes, she would love to knock them both over the head and get them far away…same as Thane would want to chain them to a wall, same as Garrus wanted to tear them apart for their cold calculation…but none of those things would happen.

Everything would have to happen parallel to her reaching the heart of the Catalyst, and she could not hesitate to execute, based on the high probability that Reapers maintained some unknown override on the relay or the Citadel herself.

They had done what they could to harden all lines of vulnerability. David would be on the Citadel in a custom interface, not reliant on a pod linked to EDI then linked to the Citadel. He and EDI had determined a location, and he would be staying behind with Reni, bunkered in, undetectable as the mastermind behind the hijack of the station. He would be tied directly into Keeper systems, EDI would have control over sentient systems, and when they returned with the Catalyst, David would execute uplink, the Normandy would dock, and Jane, Thane and Garrus would take their places.

In theory the Crucible and Catalyst when linked would have a barrier that would resist attack, but for only so long. So much depended on the Citadel’s potential, which David could model only to a
point, but he had grown in confidence that it was the right link up.

He was still not willing at all to project outcome.

That was why they had been so bleak in speaking to Garrus. All their contingency plans, evacuation attempts or mitigation would come to nothing if the Catalyst behaved as a focusing lens for what was a monster battery fueling a weapon.

They could all be expended like heat sinks within seconds of discovering the function of the Catalyst.

That thought punched through her carefully placed distance, tears springing to her eyes. She lost the pace of her quiet breathing, and Thane’s hand moved in hers, the gentle contact of venom a comfort.

This time was for Garrus, not her, and a shard of shame lanced through her. Breathe. Keep it together. Let him sleep. She had no idea how long they’d been asleep or not been asleep without moving and she did not want to move.

She understood he’d had to walk out. She hadn’t followed him. She’d waited, less than patiently, but with iron understanding.

It just...hurt like hell.

Intellectual truths and emotional reactions were different things and she was desperate to reassure herself with her body that he was here because he wanted to be, not because he had to be, that he wanted to touch her.

It wasn’t…truly in question, intellectually, again she knew. She just ached, physically and emotionally with the strain it took to wake and be separate, to not feel that she could reach over and be welcomed. She felt an odd wary echo of the times she’d had to hold still, be silent, to not draw fire.

Her thigh twitched at the thought, flinched really, and another shard of shame spiraled through her. Thane’s hand tightened again, his sleep hum ceased. She’d definitely caused him to wake, and her fingers tightened. Too hard.

Then Garrus’s sleep sound stopped and everyone seemed to have suspended breathing. Garrus said slowly “Something on your mind there, Jane?”

She pressed her lips together. Everything’s on my mind, Garrus.

Thane squeezed her fingers.

She said softly “I am not answering that question, it’s a trap.”

Garrus said drily “So you’re just going to twitch and sigh? Wait. That sounds good.”

She turned her face into his chest and said “Go back to sleep. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

Garrus said with sympathy “You broke your strategy rule already, didn’t you?”

She said, muffled “I didn’t…talk about it.”

Thane said drily “However, you just did.”

She smiled, couldn’t help it, and she said “I was provoked.”
Garrus said “You really think I’m going back to sleep when you’re about ready to break Thane’s fingers? With your natural hand, no less.”

Thane said quietly “I do not mind.”

She lightened her grip and said “I’m sorry.” She was. Sorry about everything. It invested her voice with broken emotion. She had learned not to say it, but right now seemed incapable of retaining learning. She was a wreck. So she said so “I am a wreck.”

Garrus’s arm pulled her tighter to him “We know, Kerim. Consider yourself in the company of mutual wrecks.”

She muttered “Some of us could sleep, though.”

Garrus disentangled himself from Thane and rolled on top of her carefully, and she was so grateful for his body weight and the avalanching reassurance that brought sliding through her. He looked down at her, deep blue and love in his eyes. He watched her, unmoving for a long time, then he drew a warm hand over her face, closing her eyes. He moved his mouth to her ear and said “Jane. Turn off your alarms.”

His hands moved over her body, crowding out other thoughts, asserting permission and presence, his mouth on hers, enough venom in her blood to hear it as a command. She could set everything down and focus on him. He kissed her until Reverie spun the warmth and welcome she needed. His voice was rough in her ear “Please. Stay.”

He kissed down her body, Thane’s hands moving to her face, venom spread deep and wide with Thane’s voice echoing “Stay until you sleep. Then sleep until you wake.”

oOoOoOoOoOo

Jane quietly spoke to every member of the Normandy, not giving away mission specifics, but saying that the next step of their mission was crucial and potentially deadly. She had no place definitively safe to send anybody, but she offered Eurydice, another ship in their fleet, a spot in a cave…

Every single person chose to stay on board. Even Tim and Priya wanted to see it through.

She would have liked to make a trip to Hagalaz to allow Thane to say goodbye to Kolyat, to allow Liara to say goodbye to Vraen, but both Thane and Liara said it was impossible. They needed to move now.

Liara said “I’m willing to give my life, not everyone’s life. If it the Crucible gets attacked because I need a hug…Jane…let’s go. Now.”

They did not communicate with Hagalaz, all craft radio silent, the only transmissions so highly encrypted that David had assured her that if the Reapers wanted to try to break that reactive encoding, he would happily waste their time.

So they moved now, every force on high alert, converging where the Crucible was waiting.

No more hesitation. There was not much time, and in reality nothing to do now but wait. They had run one simulation where they familiarized themselves with the labyrinth of Keeper tunnels David would open for them before she accepted that there was nothing to drill. EDI and David had run every simulation they could between them about getting to that point, but Jane, Garrus and Thane would be helpless and would follow only the path set. Keepers would not attack. Nobody else would be there.
They were helpless, suspended, most often speechless as well, each holding down their well of despair and trying to keep them from turning into fountains. They were themselves for each other, Garrus was warm and funny, Thane was austere and reassuring, Jane was confident and focused.

They didn’t expect any damage to the convoy of ships, they didn’t encounter any problems.

She and David had spent a month and a half planning, EDI and Thane had spent weeks…everything moved as it should as they glided inside the Normandy, girt in lighting and thunder and hope.

Everything depended on the ingenuity of those who came before them, those who designed the Crucible, who had not been able to survive but did pass on what they had learned.

There was some hope that Jane had provided for many communities to survive deep underground, with libraries of information and copies of what the Crucible was, what they thought the Catalyst was.

It had occurred to her that the plans for the Crucible were an enormous trap, and that she’d perpetuated it for the next cycle, but she included that theory in the information itself as a caution. She knew that just as she had done, when only one opportunity presented itself, there was in fact no choice. The device itself had not begun with the Protheans, but had been refined, cycle after cycle. Now she would finish this iteration and the buildup would be recorded, documented. The result would be relayed in a data burst, with some solid pieces of evidence, like the beacons, sown by Liara, to be found in case they failed.

oOoOoOoOoOo

There was an eerie calm between her, Garrus and Thane, each of them having had their moments of weakness and anxiety. They chose to stay buoyed by the knowledge that they would dive deep, and together.

She did love her simulated cathedral, but today she wanted a tarp and her hand to the real deck. Arrival at the Citadel was in 16 hours. She had some time to spend with the people she loved, and some time to appreciate her ship.

Jack had given her a half smile and a hug.

Javik had been remote and grave, inclining his head in acknowledgment of her plan, acceding to her request to remain on the Normandy to defend her in case it came to that, in case they were boarded.

Kasumi had been spending time with Keiji’s Graybox, her shadowed eyes and smile less hopeful than vengeful.

She wished she could speak to Tali, to Legion…her far-flung family. Hopefully on the other side, whatever side, dead or alive, she would see them again.

David was not on board, but she had made sure that crew had access to pods and had a party for EDI. Thane had agreed to attend a non-combat simulation because it was for EDI. They had danced, and they were beautiful. To her surprise, Joker had also gotten very good at dancing in the simulation, with a free laugh, missing the hesitancy caused by pain, without a limp.

What she had more of than fear at the moment was pride in her crew, in her mate and wrist bound, and in herself.

Some level of unbearable anxiety had broken off, broken down for the moment, leaving space and time for appreciation. The calm of the eye of a storm passing overhead, clear sky and silence. In the
shuttle bay where she’d gone before, she created another fort, crawled in, and lit a soft light from her Omni Tool, the eerie orange she associated with Omni Tool blades and mass effect field magic.

She admired her nails, Thane’s repetition of deep red background, golden Drell symbol from the clan of Tuelon, thought to be dead, but still living on in truth, in blood and memory.

She rested her cheek on the deck.

She said softly “EDI?”

EDI answered “Yes, Jane?”

Jane said “I’ve prayed to the Normandy often in the past, but do you mind if I pray to you?”

EDI said quietly “I would be honored.”

Jane said “I love you. I love every square inch of this ship. I think of you as the presence that sees everything, knows everything about Her, and who would that be if not a Goddess in her own right? Thank you for saving me, for bringing me along with you, for the breath in my lungs and the beat of my heart.”

EDI answered “You are welcome, Jane. You are loved.”

Jane spread her fingertips over the deck again, rose and went to make some of her final choices regarding who she would be in her potentially last hours.

She went to her cabin. She’d rather that they found her here than on the deck in her fort. Garrus would never fit. He would understand…just never fit. Here’s the space where they all belonged, where each part of the room was layered with their presences and actions, words and moans echoed. There was no longer a Pon-Ifa set in the middle of play. After her burst of playing while recuperating, she had no time for the couched allegory of organized strategy. Now she needed to make real moves. It wasn’t that she was unwilling to lose, it was that she was unwilling to leave a game unfinished.

She no longer had time to watch Thane’s contemplative form from across a board. Her time was spent instead touching him and not Pon-Ifa pieces.

They had all had occasions and dramatic gestures, dances, ceremonies, Tseni and sacred space, but she could not think of a thing she wanted to tell them that she had not told them, shown them. It was as though she had burned every last stick of fuel for the brightly burning bonfire of possible farewell, and when she reached her hand to where the pile of ambitions had always been, she found them all used.

She needn’t create a simulated Kerim. The only one that mattered was the one in his heart that he created from her eyes. A keepsake seemed insulting, ignoring the very real and insisted-upon intent that they either all lived and kept each other, or they all died together. They all still had braided light on their wrists, a miracle she would let stand. All her words had been exhausted. There was no ceremony or dance that could surpass what had already taken place.

It wasn’t despairing. It was beautiful in its own way. She had nothing left, needed nothing more, was loved as she was.

What remained was simplicity and comfort in what they had. She had saved a jar of peaches in rosemary and honey for Thane, had some Turian delicacy for Garrus called tifit, a finely textured
stacked wafer-looking thing that was apparently crunchy and salty and all around Turian goodness. It made Garrus happy and he made happy sounds eating it and that’s what mattered.

She hadn’t had much alcohol lately. She used to drink a great deal more, but now had better options to get to sleep. She dragged out a dusty bottle of vodka, hyper-chilled it and sipped at the cold bite.

She sat, thinking, feet on the deck, counting through the numbers, taking faith and hope not as burdens but as potentials, until Garrus arrived with Thane. They all seemed to have had the same idea. Thane brought diced and dressed fruit to share. Garrus brought a bottle of Drell wine, vowing to get Thane drunk.

Little bits of delicacies were pulled out of cupboards and pockets. Human chocolate for her, Turian alcohol, more fruit for Thane. She was pulled happily into Garrus’s lap, Thane fed her fruit from his fingertips and Garrus poured Thane a glass of something swirling with green. Thane looked at it dubiously, but then raised a brow and sighed when Garrus raised his own glass, something a rich brown, scent reminiscent of soy sauce.

Turians really liked salty.

Garrus eyed the glass until Thane raised it and then said “To all the times we thought we were permanently fucked but we were only MOSTLY…fucked.”

Jane started to laugh, looked expectantly at Thane over the rim of her glass. Thane looked witheringly once at Garrus, and then took a sip.

She made a face of disbelief and whispered to Garrus “You did it.”

Garrus sounded smug “Damned right I did it. We do impossible things here.”

Thane said drily “I have had alcohol before.”

Garrus sighed “Dammit.”

Thane shrugged and took another sip “This is excellent, thank you. You could have asked.”

Garrus said accusingly “I don’t want to HEAR about you being drunk, I want to see it. So what happens?”

Thane tilted his head, took another sip and said “I become more amorous than usual.”

Garrus deadpanned “Okay, but she has to survive the night.”

She grinned, thinking ‘more amorous’ was impossible, but entertaining. Of course he’d had alcohol. Meetings and dinners with clients and marks, where he must appear suavely Drell, must have included alcohol.

Thane raised a brow ridge, took another sip, looked Jane up and down, gave Garrus the same once over and said “You should have thought of that before insisting I drink alcohol.”

Jane shrugged, fed a slice of peach to Thane with her fingertips “I’ve already filed paperwork saying that’s how I want to go.” Her toes curled as he closed his eyes and sucked the honey off her fingers. When he didn’t let go, Garrus pulled her back against his chest and said “Finish your drink” to Thane dismissively.

Thane smirked, drained the glass, reached for Jane’s feet. After removing her shoes he dug knuckles
into the sensitive arch of one foot, the massage making her lean back against Garrus with a moan. Garrus set down his own glass and hers, combed his talons through her short hair, her back arching from that. Thane dragged a double nail down the curve of the arch of her foot, making her try to pull it back, but he held it tight.

Garrus was interested “That’s a new sound.”

She huffed “That was a shriek.”

Garrus tilted his head and said “Yeah, but a new shriek.” He looked at Thane “Do that again.”

She protested “No, do NOT…”

Instead of nails, Thane sucked her big toe into his mouth. She rose off Garrus’s lap with a choked whimper-moan, but Garrus pulled her back down, staring at Thane. He said, deeply offended “FEET? These noises come from feet? How do I not know this? NOW I find this out?”

Thane set his teeth to the curves of her feet, dragging them along. He paused while she was writhing, little whimpers and shrieks and said informatively “No reason why it should have occurred to you, your feet are not at all sensitive. And your teeth…” He paused regretfully, then applied his teeth back on her toes.

Garrus sighed and said “Someone…could have told me. Yeah, maybe not teeth, but tongue and talons…”

Thane said helpfully “You must be careful not to tickle.”

Garrus sounded intrigued “Why?”

Thane gripped her ankle and said “Because she will kick, and she is fast.” To illustrate, Thane dragged tickling fingertips along her arch and she let out another indignant shriek, helpless laughter and then glaring. Then he said informatively “And she does not like it.”

Garrus covered her mouth and said to her “Quiet. I’m learning things.”

She bit him, he barely noticed other than to say absently “Later. Don’t distract me.”

Thane sat up helpfully and said “Would you like to try?”

Garrus said “Hell yeah.” Garrus picked her up, tossed her up and around and put her in Thane’s waiting arms. Thane sat down with her on his lap, perfectly content with this development. Garrus shredded off her pants on one side below the knee, dragging his talons down her calf until she held her ankle in a strong grip, drew his tongue over the arch of her foot and wrapped it around her toe to another strangled whimper.

Garrus decided if one foot was good, two was better, so her other shoe was gone fast, pants entirely shredded off, along with Thane’s help lifting her and removing them. With her thighs pressed together and Thane’s cock hard against her ass under leather, Garrus moved his mouth over her feet. Thane’s teeth were on her neck, he slid his fused finger into her mouth until it was wet, until she had tasted enough venom to be pitched to the upswing of crazy-hungry. He withdrew his finger and glided it along the joined crease of her thighs, wetting the fabric of underwear and pressing it in to conform to curves and folds.

Thane reached for the bottle of Drell liquor, filled a glass and took a deep drink, tilted her head back
against him and kissed her, venom and the sweet spiced burn of the alcohol against her tongue. With Garrus discovering the effects of tongue, talons and teeth on her feet, Thane’s mouth on hers, she was in an uproar of hunger and involuntary moan, her legs extended too far and braced too solidly to attempt to draw back or kick. The alcohol was viciously strong, a distinct overlay on top of the vodka and venom, likely with its own component that was either venom itself or something that enhanced it, hallucination virulent. Not just visual hallucination, but the sense of physical contact having aftershocks and ripples, echoes and aura. Her shirt was up and over her head, tossed aside. Thane moved his patient hands to her breasts, taking time and sips of strong alcohol between kissing her until she was entirely under tiremit, sweet-drunk under his mouth and hands.

“More amorous than usual” applied to all three, in their fashion, Thane’s exquisite control of his body and voice, trilling soft encouragement and pleasure into her skin with his practiced blend of Drell patience that came when one of your partners did not orgasm, when there was all night and the end of the worlds in the morning.

Garrus explored her body with his tongue and teeth, tickling and squeals abandoned for deeper moans and tighter writhing. She was reminded of Tali saying she’d compared sex to killing people, and here that comparison sank in like venom, like teeth and Reverie and fingernails. Aware of moving, armed and armored, together, individually battered and exhausted, but rallied by each other, defending each other, watching over each other.

They did not entirely overwhelm her, just enough, exactly enough for her to allow no more room for other thoughts, but not restrained or paralyzed. She reached out, touched and was touched, all pretending to not be injured, adrenaline and practice.

Garrus counted moans like he would kills in the field, Thane gathered memories with lavish set pieces and meaning, Jane reached out to give back everything she’d been given, hoping to give back more than she’d taken.

When it was time to go they had lingered as long as they could with whispers and hands, each embracing according to their natures. Garrus rested his crest on her forehead for a long moment, words impossible through tense and cracked throats, her fingers behind his fringe.

Thane embraced her with his hands spanning her hips, her hand up to rest along his frill.

Garrus enveloped them in wide arms, pressed the last breath they’d take together before the mission out of and then into their bodies again, and then they broke apart to the tasks of preparing for the push into the Citadel.

They traveled together to the start point, back in a Keeper alcove in a little known ward as close to the base of the arms as they could get.

She looked at her men with a half smile, each with a nod as she told David and EDI to go. On this mark the Citadel arms would begin to close, the Crucible would move in with the fleet, and they would see none of that as they began the long walk through navigated Keeper tunnels in the relative dark.

They waited, moved, waited, moved when given new direction. EDI and David claimed all went well. The fleet was through the relay without incident. The Crucible moved in, ejected its protective armature and docked.

David informed her that the arms would remain open, and there was no way to shut them down
while the Crucible was docked. All further control would take place from inside, if at all.

She spared a closed-eyed moment of thanks, to whom she didn’t really know. To her intuition, to her team, to the fact…that she hated this place and always had.

David shut down both the internal and system-wide mass effect relays.

David led them to a console, which lifted them into a hallway, then to circular room. David activated the console, allowing her, Garrus and Thane to rise up into a wide bay.

They stepped into the huge area, featuring three distinct pathways.

And absolutely…nothing…happened.

They explored the chilled and polished machinery, able to get no inkling at all to the function. There were no functions, no sound, no guide.

She said “David, give me options here.”

David replied “I do not know, Commander Shepard. Perhaps the command to enter was incorrect, I can attempt different combinations.”

They went back down the lift, back up and this time, with Shepard moving forward herself, alone, she heard one devastating declaration.

“Indoctrinated Presence Detected”
Chapter 53

Thane

The words ‘Indoctrinated Presence Detected’ set his mind spinning.

Jane had attempted a few things. It appeared that when they walked forward as a group, nothing.

When he attempted to walk forward, nothing.

When Garrus attempted to walk forward, nothing.

When Jane stepped forward alone…Indoctrinated Presence Detected.

Jane was pacing, discussing options with David “Can you identify that bit of programming?”

David paused a moment and said “Components of the Crucible and Catalyst are not available for alteration. I do not know which part of the coding dictates this imperative.”

Thane held his tongue with a growing conviction that an attempt to alter coding would fail. Isolation of a few superficial components would not counteract what was likely an iterative and hard coded directive. It struck him in hindsight as something he should have anticipated. If a weapon is created to destroy an enemy whose tactics include foremost corruption and conversion, make it impossible for them to utilize the weapon through a corrupted or converted vessel.

A suspicion grew and he directed his attention toward consideration. He spun his thoughts, considered the challenges and outcomes.

If the theory was that the machinery could detect indoctrination, it was possible it could detect other things. The Citadel had a massive store of information, identifiers of anybody who might set foot there. The Catalyst had augmented processing ability. If it was based on Prothean technology it might be able to read minds, read physiology, read motivations, read purposes.

What would it be looking for?

As another safeguard in addition to indoctrination detection, the machinery may have other requirements and the ability to determine motivation and mindset.

It was a thin premise, but what he had to work with was that Jane would be acceptable…except that she was indoctrinated.

Garrus and Thane were unacceptable despite indoctrination.

It was possible that the rejection of indoctrination was the only criteria, and that speaking at all was not indicative of anything special but…

Then why not speak some disqualifier for Thane or Garrus?

He closed his eyes, saw the Path and the Rightness in silence. He did not wish to convey his thought or plan to his wrist bound or bond mate.

While he considered his premise and plan, Jane was discussing with EDI and David the attempt to isolate and reverse the programming. Thane believed that attempt would be fruitless, but he would not discourage her. Perhaps it was simpler than he thought, and this would be solved in 30 minutes,
while he left.

There was no time for hesitation. We must all act upon what we believe. Everything we have to offer is required. He could wait here and watch, knowing he was useless, or he could act.

He must retrieve Vraen. She was the only un-indoctrinated Jane available.

Jane must not know his suspicion. It had the potential to distract her, lower her confidence in finding a solution at a critical point in her Path. She must stay here, walk her path unhampered while he walked his.

He stood still for another moment, spun the concept in his head again, looked at it from different angles. Too many unknowns, but enough suspicion to act, and to act now.

His eyes turned to Garrus. Thane was heartened by the successful link up, by the potential, by being one step further together, even by the reprieve of final judgment, but he was aware that time was a critical factor. Garrus’s brow ridges were drawn, his eyes tracing Jane’s pacing steps. Jane was not wrong about this bet, that the Citadel was the Catalyst, and Thane would count on her being right again. He was betting on her. Just not the Jane that was present.

Thane stepped to Jane, counted on her distraction to further his cause. He purposely broke into her conversation, utilizing her personal and professional ambitions as cover, as template for his words. Something he normally would never do. Rude. Perfunctory. Casual. “Jane, I have an idea. The probability of success is worth pursuing, but not worth distracting you. I must leave this space but I shall return.” He left out words describing time or distance. This was Jane at work, and she was predictable. She would accept his tactical appraisal.

Her eyes softened, held him, her freshly churning schemes lightly paused but not forgotten, eager to resume their kinetic tumble. Her fire would burn while he was gone. He did not touch her, did not capture or hold her with his eyes. He appeared and spoke as though distracted, interested and slightly hopeful, as though he were about to return to the ship and bring back some item of interest. It was necessary she let go of this thought, of him, and let him pass away nearly unnoticed, as useless as the machine had clearly labeled him. She nodded briefly, and he slipped back out of her awareness, with her continuing her interrupted conversation with EDI.

He stepped back to Garrus, who would be more difficult to convince that he must leave. Jane wished him away from here, would take that excuse hoping for his safety.

He did not wish to attract Jane’s attention after gaining her permission to leave, so he said quietly “Invas’nam, I must go and you must not ask why. Watch over her. I believe in a possibility but I must not distract her. Her mind must be free to follow its unique Path without introducing my task.” At the storm gathering on Garrus’s face Thane said softly “Garrus. She brought us this far. Be here for the victory of her being correct about the Citadel. Remind her that she was right. It is possible the next move is mine, but all final moves are from this space with Jane.”

He did not say which Jane.

He did not wait for Garrus’s answer, turned to leave and asked David to guide him out.

Once back on the Normandy he approached Liara and told her “You must come with me. I will explain on the way.”

To Liara’s credit she followed immediately. He took a stealthed shuttle, asked David to open the internal mass effect relay on the Citadel for their passage to the Mu relay. It would take only one
minute, unlikely any other ship would be able to utilize that window. It would not require opening the main relay. Despite the original team having to fight their way through Ilos to reach it, it was open to the sky now, a known location, with archeology teams crawling over the space for years. They would be passing through relatively unused relays. It had only been two hours since the shutdown of the main relay to the Citadel’s systems; it was possible that the Reapers had not directed full attention to the Citadel, were not concerned.

Going out would be easy. Returning might be...he heard one of the iterations of Mordin’s voice as memory...problematic. He had a direct link to David, would be able to time another pass through on the way back, hopefully without pursuit. The system that housed Hagalaz was not settled by any council race colonies as far as he knew, the passage should be free and they were stealthed.

Once they had passed through to the Mu relay safely and were headed to the mass effect relay for this system, Liara turned and looked at him until he began to speak. He had redefined and refined his thoughts as much as he could, but this was all essentially conjecture. He did not look at her, but kept his eye on navigation equipment and indicators of the presence of Reaper forces to avoid possible detection. “Thank you for accompanying me. The Citadel linked with the Catalyst, but there is a problem with accessing the final functions of the completed uplink. It will not speak to me. It will not speak to Garrus. It does, however, speak. When Jane approached all it had to say was ‘Indoctrinated Presence Detected.’ I have not discussed what I am doing with Jane, but she knows I have a theory regarding getting the uplink to speak. I will bring it a Jane that is not indoctrinated.”

He did not see her expression, but heard the stark note in her voice “Vraen.”

Thane said “Yes. As she does not know me, I need you to convince her to travel with us.”

Liara said with a deep sigh “All you’re going to need to do is explain it. She’ll go.”

Entirely possible, duty running deep, an opportunity to oppose Reapers running deeper in the Shepard women.

Liara thought for a few moments and said “Jane’s not going to like this.”

Thane said “Whatever comes, whatever is required, Jane herself would tell us that the mission is of more importance than the individuals who undertake it.”

Liara heaved a bitter laugh and said “Sure she would. And yet…” There was silence for a little while as they both thought about possibilities. Liara said “If we’re going with the concept that Jane is special...what specifically makes her special in this case?”

Thane said simply “She is Jane.”

Liara said thoughtfully “Yes. And they are both Jane and one is not indoctrinated...but...what would this thing be looking for?” Thane considered further. Liara said “Maybe it’s just because I’m a Prothean expert and I’m obsessed by them...by one in particular, but what if that’s part of it? What if Jane has the Prothean beacon and the Cipher in her head?”

Thane responded “They both qualify.”

Liara continued “Yes, but Javik also...what if that’s what they’re looking for? The Prothean beacon is a record of the fight against the Reapers.”

Thane narrowed his eyes and said “You have melded with both...”

Liara said quietly “I have melded with all three.”
Thane took up that addition and considered “So it is possible now to widen the set of possible candidates to three. Javik fought Reapers for a lifetime, is Prothean. Vraen fought Reapers from the moment she found out about them until now, has the Prothean beacon and Cipher in her mind.”

Liara said miserably “I think only two candidates. I have not fought Reapers since I’ve known about them.”

Thane replied “Nor have I, possibly explaining why I am excluded from discussion. I have followed Jane. I have opposed Reapers but only at her request. I would not have opposed them on my own without her leadership. Garrus spent two years without her opposing Omega and not Reapers.”

Liara sighed “And I have been the Shadow Broker full time. Only tangential opposition.”

Thane considered “For now, I would prefer to involve only Vraen, for several reasons. Javik is an admirable soldier, but it appears that there is an element of judgment and evaluation to this process, which implies a level of required strategic aptitude. There are three distinct bays, which may indicate choice. I trust Vraen, I know her. She is a superior strategist. Javik’s purpose is vengeance and dominance. I do not wish to be represented by him.”

Liara drew in a deep breath, said quietly “Agreed.”

Thane said “We will see the shape of the Citadel when we return, the viability of separate escort for Javik later if Vraen fails. I find it unlikely that the Reapers will move in on the Citadel in the force possible with a relay open. There may be some close that can travel to the Citadel from within the system. Comm is jammed, EDI has the station on lock down, and there should be minimal indoctrinated presence on the Citadel with the scanning enforcement that has been active. This will hamper Reaper intelligence gathering. Their tendency toward overwhelming force, the fact that their invasions take centuries and they consider themselves inevitable and unstoppable may provide us with the time we need.”

Liara said softly “So because we can panic and the Reapers can’t, we might win this?”

Thane smiled “It is possible.”

Liara asked “How long will this trip take?”

Thane answered “Approximately 10 hours.”

Liara sighed “And what happens then?”

Thane answered “I do not know. We shall see. I can provide only opportunity.”

Liara said “Possibly it is a weapon that travels? We unlock it and then take both the Catalyst and Citadel through the relays, use it against the Reapers?”

He stated “That is possible. It is also possible that the Citadel itself is the heart of Reaper coordination, and destroying it would destroy them.”

She thought and then said quietly “Maybe a self destruct?”

He answered “Yes, possibly a chain reaction. But there is no indication of its purpose. She has bought us hope and time, I plan to use it. Unfortunately all I have is speculation, and it may involve anything from complete annihilation to no harm at all.”
She said “So we may now have the key, but we have no idea what we are unlocking.”

They docked at Hagalaz, found Vraen. Liara said the same thing to her that he had asked of Liara “You need to come with us. I’ll explain on the way.”

Vraen had looked back and forth between them, her eyes lingering longer on Thane. She said evenly “Okay. What about Feron and Kolyat?”

Liara considered and said “They should abandon ship. Communication is failing. There is no reason to keep this as a base of operations. We’re coming up on the end one way or the other.”

Liara explained to Thane “The ship is a marvel and can continue on its own for quite a while with automated maintenance…but while we’re here, Feron and Kolyat should know. They're the only ones left.”

Kolyat. Thane had had no idea if he would still be on this ship or with the established Drell communities. Communication had been severed. Thane had hoped Kolyat would be safely with the people he had provided to save, but felt a selfish spurt of joy at the knowledge he would see him at least once more.

Given the option of leaving or staying, Feron chose to take one of the stealthed shuttles and go to one of the Drell settlements. They had all been prepared to abandon ship, it having been anticipated often, possibly under hostile fire. Their main activity had been waiting, no longer able to watch or listen to the outside world.

Kolyat asked Thane “Father, where do you wish for me to go?”

Kolyat was far more dutiful than Thane deserved. He looked in the eyes of his son. Kolyat had been abandoned often, harmed often, and rarely offered companionship or truth. Thane said quietly “Liara, Vraen and I must go to the Citadel. I do not know if we will survive for long afterward. I do not know if any will survive afterward. There is little time. I would prefer for you to be safe, but I do not know where that would be. It would perhaps be wise for you to travel with Feron, be with your own people. I can take you to the Citadel with me, to the Normandy, and then I must leave and will perhaps not return.”

Kolyat nodded, accepting the directive with suppressed disappointment. Thane had seen that too often on his face.

Thane said with truth from a selfish heart, the only one he had “Kolyat. Please come with me. It is what I wish. It matters to me that you are safe, but I cannot offer that to you. I can offer you my company only for brief hours. I can assure you that I want you with me, that I wish to know where you are, that it matters to me that you are close. My wish is for you to know that as your father, I want to guard you with my body and my heart. My wish for you now that you are a man is that you choose your own path for your body and heart. I ask with the knowledge that you can say no and go along your own Path, but that you know I wish to hear your footstep on every Path you take.”

Quickly gathered belongings and hugs, goodbyes to Feron…and Kolyat chose to travel back into the heart of the fight, with Thane, and Thane’s heart broke, as it would have if he had chosen the other direction and gone to a colony.

All of his remaining choices were poisoned.

He would drink deep, hope to find an antidote.
Liara assisted Vraen with her meager belongings, Thane assisted Kolyat, and they were out of the ship within half an hour.

Once they were safely out of the system and headed toward the Mu relay, no Reapers, no noted surveillance or tail, Thane explained briefly to Vraen’s appraising eyes and Kolyat’s watchful presence.

Vraen listened very carefully to Liara’s and Thane’s explanation and answered only “She’s not going to like that.”

There was silence for a long moment and then Vraen told Thane “Stand up, let me take over. Go talk to Kolyat.”

He was halfway out of his seat before he realized once again that this was not his Jane.

Part of him rebelled and he knew that was not true. She was still his Jane. She did not know it. He did. Change your face, change your voice, change your genes, Siha, the light in you remains unaltered. I cannot un-see it.

If I am right, please forgive me. If I am wrong, please forgive me.

He moved further back into the shuttle, aware that this would give her time to speak privately to Liara.

Kolyat looked at him for a long moment as potentials for conversation raced through his head and he tried to find a subject to discuss. He wished to reach out his hand, but that had always been a concern with the strength of his venom. He had rarely touched Kolyat’s skin. Drell did not hold hands. He had been with Jane and Garrus so long it seemed the natural response with family. Instead he squeezed lightly at Kolyat’s shoulder and sat across from him.

Thane said quietly “When you were young, you would always become offended when someone told you that you looked so much like your mother.”

Kolyat’s smile quirked and he replied “I always told them ‘No! I look like me!’”

Thane nodded, remembering Irikah’s delighted laugh, imagining Kolyat hearing it as well. Thane told him “And now it is true. You look like you. No more comparisons to her, or to me, and I could not be prouder of you. Tell me of your life. I have not heard enough stories told in your voice.”

They were through the Mu relay, back onto the Citadel, with no difficulty. David and EDI reported that evacuation from the Citadel was continuing, no progress had been made on Jane’s end, Garrus was with her.

EDI remarked “She has been particularly concerned about your absence.”

No doubt.

They were able to land without disruption. The station’s evacuation had mainly taken place, some residents that were uncooperative were under lock down by David and EDI. 78% of the population had been successfully evacuated, held on transport headed away from the Citadel. Only the military fleet remained.

There was no Reaper presence at the moment. No time for them to have created an alternative to the
relay, fortunately seemingly no internal override with David’s report that no attempt has been made.

Thane asked Kolyat to drop them off and pilot the shuttle back to the Normandy as they continued on foot to Jane, David opening the passage.

Liara insisted upon accompanying them and as Vraen did not object, neither did he.

It was a brief walk, and Thane had explained the theory. Lock to key.

Please forgive me.

If I fail, may all the grace I have gathered fall to those I love.

Jane’s voice came through his Omni Tool, relieved and distinctly angry “Glad to hear you’ve made it back. What the hell?”

Thane said quietly “I have returned with Vraen, Liara is accompanying me.”

Jane paused and then said “That’s nice. What. The. Hell?”

Garrus said quietly “Welcome back.”

Jane snapped “Yeah. That. What the hell?”

Thane smiled and said “I wish to test a theory.”

Jane answered “What…fucking…theory?”

Thane answered “I will test it when we arrive. If it works then it speaks for itself, if it does not then we will have time to discuss it. Please step back beyond the detection zone.”

He imagined her fuming, but there was nothing to be done for that. No matter how they did this, she was, as everyone had pointed out and he had known…was not going to like it.

She did not answer, and they rose up on the platform. Thane and Liara stepped over to where Jane was glaring at Thane as though she could set his leathers ablaze. Vraen glanced at them all once, nodded and walked forward toward the three bays.

They lit up simultaneously, one blue, one green, one red. Thane thought momentarily that those were the colors of his blood and the blood of his bond mate and wrist bound. Then he stepped behind Jane, held her in the embrace he repeated each day in her presence, a hand spaced on her hip, one hand grasping hers as though they had just been bound by a Tseni strap.

Jane watched, the breath moving out of her body at the sight. A ghostly, shimmering silver form appeared in front of Vraen, who stopped, both Shepard women uttering the same name simultaneously, anguished and disbelieving.

“Urem.”

oOoOoOoOoOo

Vraen Shepard

She stood, rooted to the floor, staring at the image of Urem, taking in the colors of suddenly humming bays.
They’d done it. Thane had been right.

She swallowed after blurting Urem’s name, realizing…this was of course not Urem. But the look on his face, his smile, the way his head tilted. She missed this man so much, tears cresting her eyes at the reminder of her broken grief.

It was…a thing…she knew…but…

He said softly “Hello, Shepard.” His voice was rich with the teasing humor that belonged to him, the irony invested in saying a name he had never spoken aloud to her, had told her he would forget. Now, when he was dead, now when her name mattered…he would be as stubborn as he had been in life, and would not call her the name he had given her himself, whatever his meaning.

He was not a thing…he was…her memory of the man.

She allowed herself a few seconds only of seeing his face, listening to his voice, reminded herself she could not touch him and then said “Do you have questions three?”

Urem smiled and inclined his head “You do not have much time. The forces you oppose are closing in. Soon they will appear on your instruments. Some of the ships of evacuated citizens are being pursued. Yes, I have questions three.”

Vraen nodded and said “All right then. Get on with it.”

Urem said gently “I am pleased to meet you.”

Vraen swallowed again and said “What…are you?”

Urem said “I am the Catalyst. The Reapers are my creation, my solution to a long-observed problem. Organic life rises, synthetic life rises, they create conflict, that conflict creates annihilation.”

Vraen said “So…you just decided to wipe them all out? You get that makes no sense?”

The Catalyst smiled with Urem’s face and said “There is annihilation. Yet there are memories and experiences that are preserved. Life flourishes until it reaches a stalling point, and then it crashes. I have watched this pattern repeat itself uncounted times. But take the form I hold. Urem Infar, a young Drell man who died at the invasion of the Citadel. He is in your memory and I could learn much about him from that, but I know more of him than you know of him, though he would bear no love for me and would give you all his worlds. There were Collectors present during that invasion, and his body was one of the ones taken. Everything that young man was, everything he experienced, the woman he loved…all preserved. Remembered. Enshrined. There will be no end to this young man. If you die here, he will exist throughout eternity.”

Vraen was nearly sick, imagining dying here, having her body taken, and at the next cycle, her flawless image could be used to mock the victims. She swallowed hard against gorge and said “You keeping us as books in your library or puppets you wish to wear does not interest me. Tell me what I need to know, what I need to do.”

It stated “You stand on the deck conceived by the combined efforts of uncounted civilizations that died before you, who died and are remembered. You have opposed my plan, you have reached this opportunity. Regardless of whether or not you choose to believe, I salute your ingenuity and focus. You are worthy to choose.”

She gritted “Choose what?”
It indicated the bays “Your future. Every living thing’s future. I allowed the Crucible to exist. I allowed its plans throughout the cycles to flourish. Its completion is indication of cooperation and intelligence. Its persistence is testament to a will to survive that defies my judgment and is present in each cycle. You reaching this spot and being offered a choice is an indication of my willingness to abdicate responsibility. You must now take it upon yourself to choose your own future and accept the consequences of your choice.”

It indicated directions and outcomes “You can choose to control the Reapers. Your consciousness will set the template of Control. You will die. You will merge with the energy of the Catalyst and the Reapers will be yours to control.”

Vraen held her questions until the choices were revealed. It continued “You can choose to destroy the Reapers. In the process of that choice, you will be destroying all expressions of synthetic life in this Cycle. Your allies, the Geth, will no longer function. Synthetic life such as EDI will cease to exist. As will the Reapers and all their technology. The threat will be gone, this cycle will continue, but I warn you, Synthetic life will be rebuilt, it is inevitable. You may discover how to synthesize those life forms on your own, or they may result in the same conflict again. You will not die, but you will be greatly diminished as will any other human that has technological and Synthetic upgrades.”

It indicated the center bay “Here the path is Synthesis. All life will be recombined to contain elements of synthetic and organic. There will be no distinction between them, therefore no need for conflict. Those who have been harvested throughout the Cycles, their memories and knowledge, will be incorporated back into those who have survived this Cycle’s testing. Here again your consciousness will set the template of Synthesis. You will die.”

Vraen stared at the Thing that they had unlocked with the lives of billions and the minds and resources of tens of thousands who were still struggling to live. Live together.

The Reapers were closing in on the station, she had been warned. Reapers were taking life by the thousands each second.

She had no more choices.

She turned back to the living, back to where Liara stood, alone and still, pale, a statue of beauty in blue. The Thing did not see or acknowledge them.

Jane was still, Thane’s arms around her, support and restraint, Jane’s eyes filled with helplessness and tears. Garrus was behind them both, a hand on each shoulder. Vraen felt the wells of sorrow that were Jane’s eyes. To be unseen by that Thing, to be disqualified so completely, after everything she had done…

Vraen stepped first to the inseparable tangle of Turian, Drell and human. First Garrus, the sight of him a rush of the safe things in the storm, the still jarring sight of his injured mandible, though for him it had been so long. She put her hand along the side of his jaw and said “I love you, Garrus. You are safety and protection and all the good things that make me want to fight for them. For you. Thank you.”

His voice was hoarse and he pulled her into an embrace, touched his crest to her forehead and said “I love you. Always knew you’d save the galaxy.”

She smiled, turned to Thane, who did not let go of Jane and that was…right…because Jane would…Jane would…

Jane would do what I want to do, and she can’t, and he needs to hold onto her.
She pressed her cheek to Thane’s frill and said “She told me that you knew me. That you would never betray me. That you would follow any command I gave, and that she and I had earned that together. Now you know I’d follow your command. Take care of her.”

Thane turned tortured eyes to her, and said softly with the strength of vow “Always, Siha.”

Vraen turned her eyes to Jane, who was struggling now, against Thane’s hands, against Garrus’s hand on her shoulder, saying urgently “Listen, you don’t have to do this, it could be lying, we could…”

Vraen put her hand on the back of Jane’s head, the feel of short hair and defiance, and said “We don’t have time. Enthusiasm isn’t necessary. ‘Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Vraen.’ Thank you for bringing me back. Thank you for giving me the life I have had. What I do with it is up to me now. Thank you, and I’m sorry.” She kissed Jane in the center of her forehead, with Jane saying “No… no…please…no…”

Thane, Garrus and absolute helplessness held Jane in place, with the Thing’s unseeing eyes passing through her.

Vraen moved over to Liara, kissed her and said “I love you. You have made my brief resurrection worth every second. I’m sorry I am going to miss the rest of it.”

Liara said tearfully, urgently “Don’t you dare. Whatever you are doing…wherever you are going…I am staying with you. I let you tell me to leave your side once on the Normandy. Never again. Do you hear me? Never again. We do this together.”

A gasp from Jane, more protest and struggle, and Vraen thought for a moment that Jane would kill them both to keep that from happening. If anybody understood, she did. Vraen held out her arm to Liara and said “By my side. If we’re creating a future, I don’t want it any other way.”

She and Liara walked up to the bay glowing green, Synthesis. She heard and saw Jane held up by her two men, the Thing impassive and uncaring. Then she focused on Liara’s eyes on hers, Liara’s lips on hers, Liara’s mind in hers, as it should be, and they both fell back into the column of light.
Chapter 54

Jane

Garrus twined his hand with Thane’s and hers. She would not use her arm against them. She held on desperately, watching everything fall apart or get put together without her. With her. She wanted time, needed more time.

Garrus’s hand in hers, his other hand on her shoulder, Thane whispering to her urgently with his tight grip and venom whirl “Siha, it is not your Path. You have provided for this moment, but delay costs uncounted lives, potentially ours and all if the Reapers arrive and destroy the Catalyst. Stay with us. Jane, stay with us. It is not your Path, but this is your Place.” She struggled only because she could not hold still, needed time…time to find a way, sort through - her throat was tense with unleashed screams as she watched Vraen and Liara fall.

The graven image of Urem blinked out of being. A billowing shockwave of green mass effect energy passed through them. Garrus extended his arm protectively in front of them, their hands joined in his grip. Transformation and shift spread through their bodies, the bubbling otherness sizzling and cooling instantaneously into new form. As the energy passed, their skin lit up in glancing patterns resembling circuitry just below the surface, blue, green and red, the colors of their blood, of the choices made. Her hand felt joined to theirs, and “they” was as solid of a thing as “I” had been. She was a part of them. Wherever their skin touched there was a new sensation, a new flow, delicate in physical connection but strong in emotional content. The connection moved, adapted and adjusted as their grips shifted, as they tried to keep balance together. Their bodies were different, physical weight shifted from the transformative blast, emotional state and sensory input that had been overwhelming was now gone, replaced by otherness. She would have fallen on her own, but they held her up and she held them up, and their hands were the focus of her first thoughts and sensations as they steadied their feet on the deck.

Three sets of thoughts, hers strongest, but joined, harmonized and held.

Stunned and shocked, they stood there as she tried to take stock as she would after any fight…

Things she was accustomed to assessing were…zeros on a scale of 1 to 10. She had been hungry, thirsty, tired and physically exhausted from cumulative shocks and frustration…

And now…no hunger, no thirst, vibrantly alive with energy she could feel coursing through her, through them, see on their shared skin, the mesmerizing patterns moving through them.

She reached for thoughts in reflex, to the sacrifice made by Vraen…and Vraen was immediately in her thoughts, telling Jane with incontrovertible assurance “Jane…it’s okay. I’m a part of you now. I’m a part of everyone now. I’ll always be here. All you have to do is think of me. Liara is here also, just think of her and she will be with you.”

The weight of grief, of horror was not there…no sense of loss, no need to fear or worry.

This all in a flash of a moment as they tried to keep balance, feel the change and find themselves in new bodies, new minds.

She looked at their hands, squeezed and lifted a finger, the circuitry shapes and colors glowing and intersecting with Garrus’s skin and Thane’s skin, which glowed with resonance. Horror faded and instead she was embraced by reassurance of presence, a pressured flood of love and protectiveness.
Garrus moved first, pulled his hand back. There was a distinct loss of the warmth of loving energy, they gasped together from the disconnection. He turned them both into his accustomed embrace, his hands on the backs of their heads, crest to both of their foreheads, connection settling them back into that warm welcome in each other’s company.

She had known she was loved, now she knew with direct outpouring, her insistence that she loved in return flowing back to them somehow instinctively.

She thought tentatively, this too intimate for an outer voice “Can you hear me?”

There was a startled twitch from both of them, settling back to tight reconnection, a flooding wondering answer in two voices “Yes, Kerim.” “Yes, Siha.”

She thought quietly “I don’t know what we did…but we did it.”

Garrus smiled and thought “Maybe this is heaven. I’m okay with it.”

Thane thought with his hand moving to touch the back of her neck, hers moving to brush at the side of his frill “I am where I wish to be.”

They stood, a rebalanced, leaning tangle, seeking each other and redefining possible heavens. Connection flowed from contact and she thought “You guys hungry, tired? I seem to be…”

Garrus thought back “You seem to be perfect.”

Thane agreed, a wave of affirmation that seemed entirely understandable and she did not know how. “I am not experiencing fatigue or hunger or thirst, all of which had become measurable.”

Garrus added “My hand doesn’t hurt from the wall I punched a bit ago when Jane wasn’t looking.”

Jane’s thoughts trilled in a form of laughter and appreciation “Garrus…thank you for staying. Thane…thank you for going. I know I did not seem appreciative at the time…”

Garrus added “She was a little upset. You’re welcome, Kerim.”

Thane thought “Not entirely unanticipated. You are welcome, Siha.”

Jane thought carefully “I’m trying to be guilty…but Vraen keeps telling me not to do it…”

Garrus paused a moment, then thought “I get the same thing.”

Thane added “I do as well.”

They stood there like that for unmeasured time, soaking in presence and the new capability that seemed obvious and natural, to be in each other’s heads.

She said aloud tentatively to test that her voice still worked “So…we did it. We’re not hungry or thirsty or tired…and we’re in each other’s heads and skins… Now what do we do?” The sense of command and of individuality had also faded, so many questions she wanted to ask them…about what they wanted…about what they could do together.

Garrus said in a gravelly, hoarse tone “Anything we damned well want. As long as we stay together.”

Thane answered with his voice “Agreed. I would like to see Kolyat.”
The outside world rushed back into her consciousness, she pulled back her hands lightly with a loss of some warmth and connection. She was better able to think of other subjects “Right. Back to the Normandy.” She said aloud “EDI?”

Nothing.

“David?”

Nothing.

They looked around a moment, then all headed back to the lift to be taken down. She looked down at her arm where the Omni Tool should be but…

No Omni Tool…but she still had braided light on her wrist, they all did, the colors deeper, brighter and reminiscent now of circuitry as well, sparking in the bands.

Her arms also seemed…equal, different. She said “I don’t think my arm’s artificial anymore…or… wait, they both are, and aren’t…” She examined her nails, which seemed now to be longer, manicured, composed of some sort of ceramic, rich red lacquer and golden Drell sigil incised into the surface.

Garrus took a little stock himself and said “My visor’s function is built into my eyes, I think.”

She looked at them more closely and saw some of the changes. Thane looked younger. Garrus…she said “You still have your scars.”

Garrus felt his face and said “Well…yeah, I love these scars.”

They both looked at Thane, who said “My Omni Tool is gone as well. I have no other technical enhancements, but…” He flared a hand with green, blue and red swirls of color “My biotics appear to be altered.”

She said aloud “Okay…so hopefully we’re not stuck in here. How do we get out?”

Vraen appeared projected in front of her in a field of mass effect purple “Hello, Jane. It’s going to take a little time to get used to your new interface, but if you have questions, just ask or think them. I will help.”

Jane’s brows raised and she said “You’re…a tutorial?”

Vraen smiled and she said “Yes. Not only yours. I will appear to those who have questions, who need answers.”

Garrus said appreciatively “So that would be everyone.”

Vraen agreed “Right now, yes. I’ll be working overtime for a bit.”

Jane asked carefully “Where’s Liara?”

Vraen answered “The two of us were melded when we created the template for future life. She can be accessed as a separate entity, just as she was. The same way the Catalyst was able to recreate Urem, I can be recreated, or Liara. We’re…everywhere…a part of every Synthesized living thing. The operating system for the new world. My face and voice can be replaced with other options, but I will be the first face people see upon asking questions.”

Garrus said with a smirk “Batarians are gonna love that.”
Vraen laughed “Fortunately most people are grateful to be alive and surprised to see me. Some people chose to no longer exist or are in a vastly altered form. Alterations are specific to mindset at the moment of transformation. Garrus, if you wish your scars gone, they can be gone, but as you do love them, they remain. Some people changed gender, or race, or mindset, became younger or older. Became their more idealized self.”

Jane asked rather helplessly “Can you tell me what happened, what changed? We can get out of here, right?”

Vraen reassured her “You can get out of there. The Citadel herself has been transformed. You can interface directly with her. EDI and David at the moment are facing their own challenges and disorientation with the transformation, but they are also their idealized selves and you will be able to see them, speak to them. You don’t need them to get what you want. Walk to the lift, place your hand on the wall, and tell the Citadel you would like to go down. You can think or say a request for a map. Ask for guidance out from here to the Normandy.”

Jane said skeptically “That easy?”

Vraen nodded “Here on the Citadel, yes. You can also make those requests through me and I can translate them to the Citadel. Anything that had been invested with a synthetic interface, anything that is organically alive is part of me. Liara and I provided the template to new existence, all things were reformed along our lines of combined philosophies, the synergy of unlike melding with unlike, creating a whole. It is possible for beings who wish to do so to share minds, share thoughts. You and Garrus and Thane were touching when the transition took place and your mindset encouraged accelerated integration of this ability. You three are networked directly. Jane has had idealized concepts of equality between the three of you and that has translated into being inherently and literally equal on her part. As an example, Jane, now you have Turian chemistry that will induce bonded Reverie in both Thane and Garrus, and venom of your own. Garrus and Thane can choose to experience or block these experiences, as can you.”

Garrus said quietly “Can you tell me if my family is alive?”

Vraen turned to Garrus and said “Yes. Your father, your sister, your mother are all alive. Your mother’s Corpalis syndrome and injuries no longer exist. Your parents chose their ideal selves at the age that they bonded. They are together and safe. There will be transition time, and it will take people some time to learn the new functions, new capabilities of their bodies and minds. The Mass Effect relays have been disabled. Not destroyed, but disabled. They can be rebuilt relatively quickly and travel can take place, communication can be restored.”

Jane asked “Tali and Kal’Reegar?”

Vraen assured her “Alive. The Quarians no longer require suits or masks, and Tali is now expecting the birth of a daughter.”

Jane asked “Legion?”

Vraen smiled “Alive. He still has a hole and a mismatched shoulder piece. His ideal self.” Vraen added “I understand your concern. There are many who have died, but for now I will tell you that your friends and family are alive. There was no loss of Eurydice, the Drell colonies were untouched by Reapers, Mojave is safe. Samara is with her daughters, who are no longer Ardat Yakshi. You will be able to reconnect with all of them through time. Of the people you knew, many are transformed. Yahlis has no physical form, choosing haras tal as her idealized self. She is with me, may perhaps someday choose to be a piece on a board, but for now wishes communion only. She is happy, no longer doubting that state exists.”
Thane said quietly “You are a Goddess.”

Vraen laughed and confirmed “In my own creation myth. Disease has been eliminated. Pain has been eliminated. Hunger and thirst eliminated. Ultimately you will find that consciousness is not irrevocably tied to your platforms. The capabilities and dreams of the civilizations Reaped before you have provided potentials that will be discovered as time leads to them and minds reach toward their possibilities. Right now each platform will begin with the basics, to avoid not overwhelming each individual. As individual and community understanding grows, individual and community capability will grow. Jane, Legion told you that platforms in the Geth Collective gather experience and make choices separately, but they uplink, share in the greater Collective’s knowledge and contribute their own. Become one. I am in essence that uplink, now applied to all combined organic and synthetic existence. I begin at the moment of transformation with connection to all living things. You three were physically and mentally connected upon the transformation, you are able to uplink, able to share in your existence with each other because that is what you all wished to be true. For many this will be of course more disorienting. I will attempt to make it easier for all…but yes, this is my first day of Goddesshood, the learning curve is steep. Your bodies are the idealized state of much of synthetic and organic wish and innovation throughout the history of all cycles. Your energy source is not food. You do not require water or oxygen. Unless your body is stored at absolute zero, you will gather energy from your environment. Your batteries and charge are near inexhaustible, made as efficiently as possible. You have minimal energy requirements and will gain more than necessary from ambient light, temperature and motion.”

Thane said quietly “That sounds like practical immortality. If bodies are that efficient and consciousness is not tethered to them…”

Vraen answered “Yes. That is correct. Uplinking creates a recording, a recording that can be applied to any platform. Bodies can be built, altered, changed, consciousness recorded and transferred between platforms. It has the potential to result in immortality if an individual so chooses. New life can be created, new consciousness can be born, but the consciousnesses that exist at this moment are all known, are all seen, are all a part of this new creation, the new Whole. They can pass from this state if they choose as easily as uplinking and not returning. Life is now a pursuit of connection, a pursuit of knowledge and experience, not of survival. Life will not be forced on any who weary of living it. The motivations for fear, greed, destruction, envy and self harm no longer exist.”

Garrus said vehemently “I’m very, very glad you’re in charge.”

Vraen said “I’m grateful for the opportunity. Now, to get to Kolyat, there are several ways, just as there were several ways to get something done in the simulator on the Normandy. There are still things that are inanimate, stone or water, things that follow their own nature only. Anything mechanically or technically built will have an interface to me, passive uplink, and through me to you, transferrable. How much connection you wish is within your consent and control. You cannot bid the oceans to part, but you can bid the Citadel to provide you with a map and a path. As in the simulation, you can think it, you can say it, you can ask my assistance, you can place your hand on the Citadel herself and the path will be made clear.”

Jane said quietly “Look…I know I got a little…yelly there….and I didn’t tell you thank you. So…thank you.”

Vraen said gently “You’re welcome, Jane. Perhaps you will hear me now, believe me when I tell you again thank you. I am no longer sorry, neither should you be.”

Jane smiled and said “You’ve definitely gone full purple about it.”

Vraen gave a slow appreciative smile and then was gone.
She could come back whenever Jane asked.

This was all a little hard to take in, so she was going to execute some commands here, get some experience before asking any new questions.

She imagined the world now as an interface, uplink and command, so she said “I want to know how to get to the Normandy from here.”

And she did. A map interface was available internally and as an overlay in a HUD. She knew it immediately as though it had always been there.

They walked back to the shuttle, the passageway having opened by her requesting it. They loaded into the shuttle and the shuttle brought them back to the Normandy. The shuttle was linked to the Normandy, they were able to land the shuttle without assistance.

Entering the bay, Jane stepped out and said tentatively “EDI?”

EDI’s voice sounded “Yes! Jane! Garrus! Thane! I’m…I’m a little disoriented, but everything’s fine. I…it will be easier if I show you.”

Out of the elevator walked a human woman, skin sparking in green circuitry, a lovely statuesque blonde with EDI’s voice and the poise she had exhibited inside the simulator, accompanied by a straight-walking Jeff. She said “It’s…um…this is part of me. This is my…platform. I’m also the ship. More the ship. Exactly the ship.”

Jane stepped forward and hugged her, some sort of potential connection made, but not the same as Garrus and Thane when they touched. Circuitry seemed to identify each other, but not directly link.

Jane said on a hunch “I’d like to be able to talk to you directly from any distance. I think that’s possible. I think you need to agree.”

EDI said with surprise “Right…I…yes.”

Jane said with curiosity “Now I need a contact list…”

Internally she had prioritized listings, Vraen as one list of her own. Liara as a subset/alternate interface. Senar Tuelon (a.k.a. Thane Krios and a ridiculously long and annotated list of other identities) and Garrus Vakarian on their own list. EDI as the first name on a new list, followed by Jeff. Rather than get distracted by all the functions there, she redirected her attention to EDI. “Any problems?”

EDI gave her a blank look, but said “This is my first day as a platform. I don’t know. I’m trying to figure out how to coordinate…”

Jeff said with a huge grin “She’s doing fine.”

A woman entered the bay, rivaling EDI in beauty. Karin Chakwas, a younger self.

Jane said quietly “Think of Vraen and get a tutorial, ask her questions.”

Jeff said wryly “We’ve been a little busy just…looking at each other.”

Karin laughed, stepped forward and gave Jane a hug. “I’ve been rather distracted myself.”

EDI stared a moment and then said “Yes. Thank you. Communication has been disrupted but only through alteration of interface. More efficient. I can re-initiate. The ships that have been traveling
away from the Citadel are now on their way back. They have been able to communicate and establish docking. Some bright people there. I will identify any vessels having difficulty and coordinate with them and with David.”

Jane asked “Where is David?”

EDI said “It appears he is the Citadel in the same way I am the Normandy. I am able to communicate with him through direct link now that I have accessed Normandy systems.”

Jane was getting the hang of this and she said “David Archer, requesting direct communication.” She had accessed Citadel systems, maybe that…

David’s name appeared on the list with EDI, Karin and Jeff and then the image faded. She asked “David, how are you doing?”

David’s voice sounded in her head “Commander Shepard, this is beyond all dreams come true. My physical form is gone but…all that is possible, all that is known, Vraen and this station…I have all I could want. Through her, all the knowledge that has been recorded. Reni is on the Citadel and safe.”

Reni’s name showed up on the list, then faded.

Jane thought “EDI is re-establishing contact with incoming vessels, can you coordinate with her and help them find berths? If I understand what Vraen told me, there will be no injuries and food and water is not a concern, but the relays are down. People will need to stay on the Citadel or in their vessels. Relay that information and the directive to familiarize themselves with the new interface, make sure people know how to ask questions, get help. Do you need any help?”

David replied “It will be done. Thank you, Commander Shepard.”

Jane said out loud with a smile “We did it.”

David answered “We did.”

She wanted to say more, but there was time. There was all the time, now. It was slow to sink in, it would take repetition to come to terms with time, and no hunger, no thirst, no pain.

She thought for a moment about the people on the ship, and headed to the brig. She deactivated the stasis field and said “Congratulations. You won. Terms were that if we won…you’re out. Need anything from me?”

He stepped forward and shook her hand, and the name Martin Wynn (a.k.a. The Illusive Man) showed up as a contact and faded. He said “Interesting new world order. I believe I will go investigate. It appears clones were a good idea.”

He walked away with a smile.

Her next stop was Camille Chambial (Priya Bhola and another annotated list of IDs as long as Senar’s) who was in an animated conversation with Jennifer Tookolo (Jack) and Kasumi Goto.

Jennifer looked up and said “Oooh, look who is color coordinated.”

Everyone else’s skin seemed to glow green, but she, Garrus and Thane continued to glow red, blue and green.

Camille said “Perks of having your clone be a Goddess now.”
Kasumi said “Nice caper. Glad to be a part of it.”

Jane said to Camille “Just wanted to let you know you were free and all. Glad you’ve figured it out.”

Camille said “I’m thinking of staying. You?”

Jane nodded “The Normandy’s my home. Anybody who has called Her home before can always call Her home again. We’ll be grounded on the Citadel for a while.”

They found Kolyat, who launched himself at Senar with an enthusiastic and unstoppable embrace, Garrus’s hand moving to hold hers as they watched, soft interconnectedness energizing her. She spoke a momentary prayer to the spirit of Irikah, realized they would never meet at the Shores, father and son would never again be separated, could know all and everything about each other, could spend the rest of time together as they chose.

There were still things, places, people, that were past and would always be, some who had died minutes or hours or days or years before this event made them whole. Much had been preserved, but much was permanently lost.

Kolyat was enthusiastic, boyish, overblown with praise and joy, Senar drinking it in with his eyes and skin. After lengthy celebration of being present, it was Kolyat who said that there were people on the Citadel he wanted to see, to connect with, and that he would return.

They had time.

She checked in on Javik, who was in the cargo space holding his memory shard in his hands, with a…smile…on his face, an actual smile. He looked up and seemed to see her, but his gaze turned and it seemed he was looking at Senar. They both started to laugh and couldn’t stop. She turned to look at Garrus, who shrugged but was smiling. They waited it out, occasionally looking back and forth between them, occasionally laughing herself in sympathetic reaction.

Eventually Javik said “I have been in constant pain for my remembered existence. Injuries, thoughts, circumstances…my battle is finished and all I lived for is gone. No more war. The Drell understands, he spent his life on nothing but annihilation. All the things we were, no longer of value. What am I now?”

Senar laughed another burst and then Jane said “A unique part of a new Whole, and I am proud to know you.”

Javik stood, reached out to her and gave her a hug, and she was proud to know him, he was proud to be known.

Senar could not stop laughing.

Garrus picked Senar up, saying “I’m taking this one to bed.”

Senar was nearly choked with laughter and she was glad it was unnecessary to still breathe as he said “This one is pleased to go” in a decent Hanar impression, with the reverberating vocal distortion.

She said “Yeah. I think we’ve done enough for one day.”

Garrus carried Senar to the elevator, saying “So your name’s Senar huh? Come here often?”

Laughter continued, Garrus looking stunned and enraptured, which was an excellent explanation of how she was feeling.
Senar pulled Jane’s hand to him and said “Siha, once I asked you what if I were nothing but hunger and death and lies? Add to that pain. Now they are all gone. No hunger. No death. No lies. No pain. What is left? I am…undone.” He did not seem upset about it, laughter continuing. Garrus rolled his eyes slightly and carried him out to the bed in their cabin.

Garrus snorted, put Senar on his feet and kissed him, pulling back only long enough to say “You’re not undone. You’re remade. It doesn’t have to make sense. My life I’ve lived to serve Justice. Have I? Sometimes. Was the Universe interested in Justice with me? No. Not particularly. You were taken as a child, tortured, used. Is it justice that uncounted people in other cycles died in this war died but we lived? No. What if Jane had been a few hours late to Omega or a few hours late to Dantius Towers? What if she’d gone into Bahak alone? It’s not about Justice, but if you think you don’t deserve this…being remade…you’re wrong. You made it happen. You brought our new Goddess to her altar. You saw her as a Goddess yourself first. You worship this woman. You’re perfectly adjusted to this new reality, welcomed and loved there. You have family, a home, a bond mate, a wrist bound and a son. That’s what’s left.”

She watched them kiss, embrace and connect with glowing expanses of newly exposed skin and hide as clothes were removed.

She wondered if anybody would wear clothes for long…in or out of this room…this room she need never leave if she chose, could stay with them, stay with the feel of them, the memory of them, never be alone with them racing under her skin.

To never be alone…

She turned from them, still connected, still a part of the racing passion and connection, it would get stronger when she touched them, which would be soon…

Right now she kicked off her boot, took off under suit and sock and placed a bare foot on the deck of the Normandy, and found her Goddess, her guiding ideal Ship, alive and entwined with EDI, but also entirely Herself, with the Spirit of the Ship vibrating into Jane, welcoming and fierce. Her Name appeared on a contact list, the same list as Garrus and Senar, and then faded, and Jane was a part of Her, inextricable communion.

She was timelessly bound with communion with her Muse until Garrus linked his elbow with hers and pulled her in with a growl. She need not end communion with anything, so she didn’t, enough room in her mind to stay fully present, loving and devoted to her Path, her Place, her Mate and her Wrist Bound.
Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

This is it, this is the end! Thank you to everyone that read along, reached out, let me know you were reading. This has been a transformative piece to think about, to write, and I'm grateful to the site and to everyone who let me know what they thought.

Wherever you started, wherever you're going, may your dreams come true.

Jane

Jane learned new joys quickly. One of the strongest was the lack of pain in her body, knowing for certain that Thane and Garrus were not in pain, feeling the warm flow of thoughts and pleasure pass over and through their skin and minds. She had no sense of time and realized over and over that time no longer mattered. Hunger or thirst or fatigue did not intrude. With the fear and terror gone, she was overwhelmingly curious about the choices they had all made or Vraen had made for them.

Once Garrus touched her she was drawn closer in to him, physically and mentally and emotionally, the Normandy stayed as a presence, a definitive She, but silent. Not EDI, the ship herself, Her body, not her mind.

Jane realized her hair was long enough for Thane to wrap around his wrist again, draw her in for a kiss, and then they were three as one again, unique presence and flow, thoughts and voices and bodies blended.

Home.

Garrus thought as he pressed his crest to them both, “I still think I’m dead and I still don’t care. Kerim…you have…venom and Reverie chemistry…I can feel it through my plates. I can feel…everything through my plates.”

She answered “I’m actually okay if we’re dead as long as we stay we.”

Thane thought “The venom however feels different…I don’t believe will can be overridden.”

Garrus thought enthusiastically “All right, get me venomed up here and see if you can make me do something I don’t want to do. Just try…to make me take my hands off you for a moment.”

She laughed, out loud, internally and with everything she had, the physical sensations of Reverie and venom blending with emotional waves of joy, enthusiasm and occasional intellectual disbelief. Garrus still had scent. They were entirely altered but it blended in with the spirit of bonding, and she sensed it as he had.

She started a moment and said out loud “No blood? Do we have blood? Uh…”

Garrus laughed, out loud again and said “Have we already found a drawback to being invincible?”

Thane took out a knife…from…where…she had no idea…did he think that into being or was that in a hem somewhere? He attempted to cut his palm, nothing. They turned distressed eyes to Garrus,
who did not seem distressed. He said “Oh come on, you think I’m going to be petty enough to be upset about that? When I am IN your HEADS?”

Jane said softly “But still…”

Garrus held up a hand and said “Wait. Let me see if something works.” He closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them, drew them both back and said intently “This…is what it felt like to have blood mingled on the tongue…”

It was in her mouth, but not only hers, mixed with three, the sensation running through her nerves, sharp and deep, known and unknown ownership and bond. Garrus made a soft satisfied sound but the rest was heard internally, his voice and gift along with the focus on her mates. He thought “And I bet…” his mouth leaned to her throat, and he licked a long line along her new skin, his new mind and body sizzling with new sensation, as he thought “I can do it…and if I understand all this right, you are a part of me, you can be me, right? Take that sensation, expect it on your tongue, taste.”

So she did, using his guidance, how to find it and how to appreciate it flowing into her from Garrus’s experience, and she set her tongue to the side of his throat, timelessly enthralled by everything about him she could understand by that simple and complicated act, Thane trying as well, groans and moans and tightened arms, until each had the taste of three, compounded and fed back to each other, explanation and question and affirmation.

After a time she raised her head from skin and said “I can beat Thane at Pon-Ifa. He can give me his understanding of it.”

Garrus started to laugh and Thane said out loud “Absolutely not. I will be happy to share how much I enjoy beating you at Pon-Ifa for eternity. But you will have to earn a victory, if possible, without my help other than as instructor and opponent.”

She laughed and said “You’re kind of an ass, Thane.”

He kissed her and as he dragged her down to the bed inexorably along with a laughing Garrus said “Entirely new reality or not, Siha, I shall continue to be, and you shall continue to be lovely.”

She said out loud before the only sound she was able to make was moans “So we might be dead and I did lose this match of Pon-Ifa, and if we set the board again, I might lose for eternity…and I am…okay with it…”

oOoOoOoOoOo

There were no real demands to time, but there was a flow to new necessities, new drives.

She didn’t realize until she looked into a mirror that her eyes were their original color, without the cybernetic distortion.

They had tailored themselves for the experience of being together, only drawn out of that state by curiosity, requests and alerts from the outside world, others longing to connect.

Kolyat wished to see Thane, as did so many other Drell now learning his real name, his lifetime, his story, wanting to speak to him, to make a connection.

So many Turians on the station wished to speak to Garrus, to form their network and thank or congratulate him.

So many people wished to speak to Shepard, thankfully not confused with Vraen, because anybody
curious about the story would hear it from Vraen herself.

Their stories were some of the first told in the new eternity, the first connections made.

She measured time by the deep inhale of inspiration garnered by the connection of the two men she loved most, inside the Ship she adored, intimate and warm and idealized by the three.

There was no sleep, but there was also no necessity to always be perfectly aware or conscious, a meditation of venom and Reverie, sharing the experiences of touch and tongue and mind. It was where all three wished most to be, but they would travel out into the wider world, responding to an ever-growing network of people wishing to connect and reconnect. It was a different pleasure, where new stories, new ideas and new people granted them the satisfaction of belonging with and to the new definition of being alive.

That was the breath of their days, tangled together in appreciation of ideal intimacy, then out to embrace the new, curiosity and hunger for connection part of the cycle.

Jeff and EDI remained on the Normandy in the same sort of cycle, EDI embracing everything she could about a physical platform with enthusiasm. Kasumi and Jennifer and Camille moved off the Normandy, but stayed close. Javik was a celebrity, moving off the ship as well, swamped by connection requests. Karin moved to the Citadel and immersed herself in spending time with David and Reni, no longer medically required, but embracing all the new knowledge with joy.

There was no cycle of night or day on the Citadel, but they stuck to a night and day schedule of the Normandy out of habit, because that’s what they had done for so long, an arbitrary way to divide up time. They spent nights with each other, during the days finding newly loved ones and being newly loved as they explored the Citadel.

Reminiscent of David describing how he broke himself down into processes and then reintegrated, she learned she never really needed to leave the Normandy’s presence, could always be aware of Her connection if she chose. It didn’t distract or intrude, it was a presence. She and Thane and Garrus learned to be together always mentally even when separated.

Everyone’s new body was potentially indestructible, but there was still inequality of experience or wealth, and Jane addressed herself to that.

On the Citadel were duct rats, underprivileged, those who had lived lives of servitude and slavery, never having had family, never having had possessions, crawling out of the tunnels and cells, having nowhere to go, nobody to talk to other than Vraen. Some people would have Vraen with them constantly, visible, speaking to her and to nobody else. Bringing people into connection and helping them find resources and homes, places to tell stories, listen to stories, places to remember, share and learn…this Jane applied herself to getting done.

Changes took place slowly. Complexes that grew food were manned by gardeners who turned the grounds to ornamental growth, those wanting to learn the new ways of partially sentient and partially synthetic plant life.

Places that raised animals for slaughter were repurposed, animals set free, some attaching themselves to whatever other sentient creature they were curious about, new family.

Nobody ate, nobody drank, there was no industry revolving around food or drink any longer, so much of the space of the Citadel dedicated to maintenance of life that was no longer necessary was redesigned and rebuilt by David and Keepers. David was now a representation also of hive mind of the Keepers, who retained a devotion to the Citadel for Her beauty and rededicated themselves to
Her development.

Jane could…remember that she liked chocolate, but she did not want it now.

There were still those that had been traumatized by war, now healed and whole physically, but far from home. Garrus helped to provide for them. He was confident that as promised, they would discover new things, rebuild, find ways home. He was solace and sustaining hope for many.

Thane was an artistic mentor, for those who wished to customize their spaces on the Citadel from maintenance spaces to contemplation and gathering oases.

There were those that had never loved, who as Thane had echoed in his laughing assessment…were no longer themselves, the values they held, the purpose they held previously now erased, the actions they had taken now potentially known by all if they sought connection and communion.

Guilt remained as another potential pain and potential separation from the Whole.

Many people remained with the memories of those they had lost, survivor’s guilt struck many unpredictably.

There were those who chose to remain separate, and those that were lost, some abandoning their bodies, some no longer connecting to Vraen, in essence a prayer to not be known, not to be recorded, and She allowed that.

Jane mourned for Irikah, for her squad on Akuze, for Kaidan and Urem, and in her own way with more anguish for those who had died that went unnamed and unremembered. She realized…Urem could be brought back. But she remembered the silvery abomination of the Catalyst, and she wished to allow him to rest. It was perhaps selfish, a flavor of her grief. She was caught between valuing the combined Whole of those who had been Reaped and honoring them, but it was easier to honor them whole. She did not want to bring back Urem, explain why he was who he was now.

She left it to Vraen. Like Yahlis, perhaps he was part of the whole, haras tal, hopefully comforted and not longing for life. Gone but not forgotten. Now never to be forgotten, her memory of him would live forever.

There were those who slipped away from physical existence because the loss of their accustomed family could not be replaced by an entire galaxy of potential connection. She understood. Had Thane and Garrus been gone at the moment of Synthesis, she would have chosen cocooning peace or annihilation, knowing she’d otherwise be without them for an eternity.

Some wished to pass along to whatever heavens or afterlife they’d imagined, join their families. Vraen had no knowledge of such places existing. She could only promise joining with Her. Perhaps there was a realm of the Spirits or a heaven or Shores that would have no more members, everyone now encoded for a different fate. Parallel eternities that would never intersect.

There were storytelling spaces on the Citadel. David was a centerpiece of learning and synthesizing what had been known from previous Cycles, telling stories himself. Stories could be passed mind to mind, but also there was unending time, and a specific joy to hearing voices tell it. There were large pavilions lit with new light sources, rapt attention and art to commemorate the lost, to stand for new hopes.

Kolyat reconnecting with people on the Citadel resulted in him revealing he’d been in love with a young Drell man for a long while, realizing after Synthesis that it was possible, that he was loved in return. He and Nezan moved onto the Normandy to be close to Thane.
The Normandy was a Pilgrimage site to many, and there were floods of visitors, requests to link, and their Worlds expanded daily, branching out geometrically, new people and new ideas and new points from which to view.

Reapers - yes, Reapers - rebuilt the Mass Effect relays. Then they went off to do their own things, whatever Reapers did. Vraen knew all about it, but Jane really just accepted it as true, she really did not want to dive into that end of the pool.

Mordin and Miranda were some of the first of the travelers to the Citadel, immersing themselves in research and communion, adding their genius to the Whole.

Fuel efficiency was greatly conserved, but travel would still be expensive in resources. The Normandy was a luxury. All maintenance and cargo spaces were converted to quarters. David had been able to manufacture smaller craft that were able to travel once the relays opened. Being essentially propulsion with no need for life support, these became ultimately readily available to everyone.

With the relay to Palaven open the Normandy took as many Turians as wished to go, traveled in a convoy with other ships wishing to head there. Garrus looked like a grizzled veteran as he embraced his now-younger parents. Solana had a new bond mate.

They spent long months at the repaired Vakarian Madlis in Cipritine, reconnecting with Garrus’s family and some of his favorite places.

Garrus’s mother insisted, and the family in the Madlis had a bonding ceremony for those who had been apart from family during the war, Solana and Garrus foremost in her heart. Solana’s new bond mate danced beside Garrus, Thane and Jane as well as other couples, to the combined obnoxious clapping and wolf whistling of the crew of the Normandy in attendance, whether in body or in mind.

They stayed on Palaven, claiming a home there until the relay to Tuchanka opened. The couples had all made their way back to their home planet, and they were able to see Wrex and Grunt and an… absolutely ridiculous number of new Krogan life, tiny and in contrast to nearly every last one of their elders other than Grunt…joyous.

Thane and Garrus taught them to dance.

Grunt taught them to ask her to arm wrestle.

The relay to Rannoch opened. They traveled to Rannoch, met Tali and Kal’Reegar and Legion, their new home built by the illuminated river. They did not farm, but Tali was interested in restoring the flora of Rannoch, and they had all taken up that mission, traveling for samples and restoring them to the surrounding landscape.

This involved some negotiation, as not all plants were adventurous or wished to travel, but Tali found some.

Tali’s daughter Reybas was providing a tutorial for new consciousness, altering her appearance and mindset daily, talking to the plants, talking to Legion and eschewing speech in general for direct connection, a mute wellspring of smiles and joy.

Tali was thrilled with motherhood and her strange new daughter who spent weeks at a time lying still and trying to be a rock.

Reybas did speak when the conversation turned to her, when Tali asked her to explain. Reybas said “Plants still take in water, and sun, and aren’t the same as we are. Is the water held prisoner?”
Vraen’s opinion and dominion did not extend to water.

Thane said quietly “I do not believe water has a consciousness, or we would be able to communicate with it. Without consciousness it cannot experience being imprisoned.”

Reybas nodded, seeming to accept that, but still saying a little sadly “I wish rocks would talk to me.”

Jane told her about Javik, who had the ability to know about rocks by touching them.

“Mama, I want to meet Javik!”

“Then we’ll visit the Citadel.”

“Can I bring some of the plants if they want to go?”

“Of course.”

So back to the Citadel they went, bringing anybody from Rannoch who wished to travel there, and some curious specimens of plant delivered to even more curious gardeners.

Reybas was fascinated by Javik’s explanation of the nature of things, and was able to absorb quite a bit of Prothean ability and philosophy. Change came faster to the newly born into this world than it came to those transformed into it.

David and others had made great strides in comprehension while they had been away. Those on the Citadel had found multiple paths to self-customization, the same sort that Reybas had found on her own, occasionally looking rock-ish or Prothean-ish or bright bioluminescent blue like the river.

She couldn’t really explain how she did it, she just said she thought it.

David was better able to explain. Now it wasn’t unusual to see people change their appearance to look like Vraen in different iterations, purple, gold, black. Everyone had their own form, but also the ability to project other forms at will, ultimately there were methods to change physical form.

Many people had been deeply transformed by Synthesis, and in comparison it seemed that Garrus, Thane and Jane had changed very little except to blend together better. They also resisted changing basic forms at all, seeing no need.

It was old fashioned, but she was who she wanted to be and they were who they wanted to be and together they worked as a whole, unwilling in fact to change much of anything.

She brought it up one day, all three in the Normandy cabin. Thane still preferred her hair as it was, still played with it through his hands. They had adopted projected clothing on their forms because Thane enjoyed making it and she enjoyed his designs, but they still held the same physical forms they had since Synthesis.

They had learned to share everything they felt.

Vraen was right, ways to make new bodies entirely, store consciousness, combine consciousness had been created.

Yet she stubbornly and old fashionedly apparently persisted in enjoying herself as she was. Innovations arrived and often she passed them by as curiosities, but not something that interested her enough to indulge.
Garrus had teased at the discovery of consciousness transfer “Can I borrow your body for about a year, Jane? We could have a baby.” She could tell by the flow of emotion through her that he found it also curious but not compelling.

She shook her head and said aloud, assuring him emotionally she was not missing out on motherhood in case he was curious “No. If you want a baby, just carry one yourself. At this point you could have a body custom made and any number of volunteers wanting to experience life as your child.”

He stroked fingers through her hair “Our child. You let me borrow your body for sex.”

She nodded “Because that’s fun for everyone. Motherhood is not something I want to experience just yet, maybe never. Ask Thane. He’d make an excellent mom.”

Thane continued playing with her hair, agreeing with that statement in terms of emotional capacity and physical stamina, but again, no intellectual curiosity or urge.

Garrus ran his hand up and down his body “Because you’re not doing without this for a year.”

She laughed “We’d manage. I’m just not a baby maker, I suppose.”

Children were in fact hard to find after a while, many creating adult idealized selves once they’d learned how to customize themselves. There was of course customization fashion. Thane always knew what was in fashion, but never in fact changed anything about himself, Jane or Garrus other than nail art or the fashion projections he enjoyed creating for the three of them.

Newer consciousness wondered why older consciousness indulged in things such as kissing or sex when communion could provide steady stimulus.

Garrus would snort “Steady stimulus. That sounds sexy.”

She agreed with him. Communion was wonderful, but she still enjoyed sex, with communion, with a heightened drive.

Philosophical approaches would differ. Older consciousness having a memory of being deprived of something or enjoying something would be present with younger consciousnessnesses that had no sense of such things.

It was a bit like describing being itchy just so you could scratch…

If they didn’t get it, too bad. She got it. She had clearly prioritized sexual contact being… incentivized.

Philosophical difference again extended to younger consciousness not really understanding the necessity of the appearance of any set species form or clothing, opting sometimes for what David had often appeared as, something aesthetically artistic but not associated with gender or species.

So…everything got fluid and imaginative and creative and really, really weird but that was okay.

They traveled back, as promised, to the hidden and welcoming Tseni valley, where Garrus was presented with his set of Tseni as a lovely surprise to all of them. The clan was enjoying communication with the Tseni creatures. Jane thought Reybas would love it here, made a note to bring her here and introduce her to the tiny scorpion-like beings that enjoyed spinning and sand.

Lying out under the stars in the desert, seeing the unchanging North Star through three pairs of eyes,
feeling the significance in three hearts, she imagined her mindset was reflected in her indoctrination experience in some ways. Indoctrination had flooded her with the heights and lows of chemical possibility. The epitome of pain was set as thresher maw acid.

In Synthesis her limit for joy and pleasure was set as staying with Thane and Garrus. They all seemed the same way, without a moment’s doubt or hesitation, only outlying curiosity like ripples, the depths always assured.

Leaning back against Thane with his hands in her hair was a set limit to comfort. She could, and new consciousness did, define the height of comfort as something else, such as lying in the sun or in communion with uncounted others. She enjoyed those things, and she spent her time in relative constant bliss, curiosity and the urge to learn and grow. She did enjoy that, but comfort was defined as time in the arms of her bond mate and wrist bound, pleasure was measured in Reverie and tiremit and she saw no need to change those defined limits and potentials.

She asked out loud “You think in several millennia we’re going to be the only three people left with the physical bodies they started with, still using a ship while everyone else instantly transports their consciousness to wherever they want to go?”

Garrus moved so he was holding her hands, looking down at her with adoring blue eyes as he said “I hope so.”

Contact from them moved through her, like blood on the tongue, like hope and like the equality she had imagined, had made real.

Thane reached out a hand to grasp theirs, three hands together with the light permanently glowing, never to go out. He said quietly “Let the rest of life and living pass us by, let them all go on their Path as I stay on mine. Eternity in this form is beyond all dreams I had while I was living. If others have greater ambitions, let them play their part. There is nothing greater than my hand in yours.”

She said with the deep thrum of satisfaction and love “So you guys want to stay, huh?”

Garrus lowered his lips to hers, infusion of love, lust, family, his fierce protectiveness that never faded despite having nothing to protect her from, although in this case it was to protect her only from her own idle curiosity.

“Just try to stop us, Kerim.”

“I’m still going to win at Pon-Ifa someday.”

“It is good to have a dream, Siha.”

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