# A Matter of Race and Character

by XenoSapian

**Summary**

2183 – Before Shepard became a Spectre, before the Battle of the Citadel, Alliance engineers Gabriella Daniels and Kenneth Donnelly volunteered to join an exchange programme with the Turian Fleet. Transferred from the SSV Perugia to the Hierarchy cruiser Arcadias, the engineering duo experience life first-hand aboard a turian ship.

As they get to know the crew, Kenneth develops a burgeoning attraction to a turian woman and enters into a secret affair that could have dire consequences for the couple. For Gabby,
however, love is the furthest thing from her mind when she finds herself fighting for her life on a hostile world. But romance can blossom in the unlikeliest of places…

Amorous aliens; interspecies love; secret liaisons; brutal mercenaries; lethal creatures; political schemes; warfare; saunas; tangos! Who knew the life of an engineer was this exciting?

With illustrations by the fantastic artist, Bayzee, on DeviantArt. Find more of Bayzee’s artwork at: http://bayzee.deviantart.com/

Notes

This story is set directly before the first Mass Effect game in early 2183 and follows the experiences of Kenneth Donnelly and Gabriella Daniels as they embark on an exchange programme with the turians. As a result, this will follow accepted canon established in the games, with a few unique ideas along the way.

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I make no money from this story.
Arrival
Dramatis personae

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<td>Gabriella Daniels</td>
<td>Human female</td>
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<td>Kenneth Donnelly</td>
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<td>Valni Severan</td>
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This was the first time Valni had met a human.

Her orders had been clear: Rendezvous with the humans on Cyone, take them back to the ship, and oversee their conduct for the duration of the Programme – Seemed simple enough. She'd been killing time by watching the mingling crowds of asari. In her professional career she rarely got a chance to interact with aliens. Most of her time had been spent off world, serving the fleet, with only occasional shore-leave on the Citadel. Newly promoted, Valni had suddenly been thrust into unfamiliar territory. Humans, she understood, were gaining greater prominence in the galactic community. She'd seen a few wandering around Tayseri Ward, and had come across them briefly on a colony world, but she'd never had the chance to speak to one – Let alone two of them. Not that the advancing humans were providing much in the way of opportunity to talk. To most turians first impressions were everything; they set the tone of future relationships; determined how you could roughly predict that person would behave, and Valni's impression of the two humans approaching her was this: They were loud.

"…A hell of a lot of damage for a single person – One might even suspect that someone in your room put on a biotic display."
"You're barking up the wrong tree, Kenneth."

"I'm just saying: An asari colony; plenty of time to kill; I wouldn't blame you for feeling lonely…"

"Yeah, and whose fault is that?"

"Something must have made you go all 'vanguard' on the hotels arse. You have a fit of pique? You must have been pretty pissed to demolish the shower divider!"

"That was an accident. The management were fine about it."

"Oh aye, they probably see damage like that all the time. All those passionate blue women seeking comfort in each other's arms; not knowing their own strength... Are you sure you didn't have a little asari company? Or two?"

"Just drop it, Kenneth!"

"All right, I'll be quiet. You won't hear another peep out of me. Happy?"

"No. I can still hear you breathing."

Noticing a natural lull in the conversation, Valni took the opportunity to introduce herself – Firing off a crisp salute she launched into her presentation:

"Alliance personnel: Welcome to the Interspecies Engineering Programme. I'm the Liaison Officer with the Turian Engineering Corps, Logistics, Exploration and Research team on Arcadias. For the next six-weeks you can rely on me as guide and escort while you serve the Meritocracy and advance your knowledge of turian scientific developments. I hope we will be worthy of your consociation and that you will make valuable additions to the crew."

Both humans saluted her. "That's an impressive title," the male human commented. He sounded amused.

"Hi, I'm Gabriella Daniels. Nice to meet you." The female extended her hand – Ah, she'd been briefed about this.

"Valni Severan," she said gripping the offered hand in what she hoped was the proper protocol.

"Kenneth Donnelly." The male shook her hand. He had a strong grip. "Engineer extraordinaire. A pleasure."

"Stop flirting," the female warned.

"Who's flirting? I'm just being friendly."

"Did you enjoy your stay on Cyone?" Valni asked, attempting to steer the conversation back on track.

"Aye, it's a nice place. Much larger than I thought it was gonna be. We got a chance to see some of the sights."

"From behind a deck of cards," Daniels muttered.

"I hear Polos is a very friendly city. Have you been here long?"

"The Perugia's shuttle dropped us off four days ago," Daniels continued. "I imagine they'll have
picked up the two engineers from your ship by now?" Valni nodded. Artificers Garroll and Winger had been billeted at the asari hotel Azure (much to Winger's delight), since Illium was along the SSV Perugia's patrol route. That was the only difficulty with these Programmes, the logistics of organizing where everyone was supposed to be was a nightmare; unless the exchange ships were able to rendezvous at a central location, like the Citadel, individual crew-members had to stay close to the patrol routes of their surrogate vessels.

"Where's the ship we'll be serving on?" Donnelly asked.

"The Arcadias is currently on patrol. But, the Captain's waiting for us. We should probably start out now," Valni indicated the shuttle sitting on the runway behind her.

"Lead the way, Officer Severan."

Making their way onto the runway, they clambered aboard the contragravatic shuttle. Valni watched as the humans took their seats and signalled to the pilot that they were ready to leave. The doors shut and the shuttle lifted off, rising gracefully into the air as it navigated its way through the dense traffic of ships. Cyone was a busy world. Not as popular as other asari colonies like Illium, but it was developing quickly.

It was going to be a relatively short flight but Valni endeavoured to put her new crewmates at ease.

"You should like it on Arcadias. We're primarily a training and research vessel, but we have been called upon to conduct search-and-rescue; patrol work; colony reformation; and most recently engaged in an all-out assault."

"Who were you fighting?" Daniels asked. "I mean, if it isn't classified."

"Batarian pirates – They'd attacked a human colony out near the Terminus System and we were the closest vessel to respond. Their ship took heavy damage and we chased them away before they could abduct anyone."

"Impressive," Donnelly commented. "A ship of humanitarian turians. Humaniturians! We should fit right in." Valni mentally rolled her eyes at the pun but still smiled. "So, Officer Severan, what do you do for fun?"

"Arcadias has a full range of recreational facilities: A gym, mess hall, games room, even a sparring ring, if you'd like to try that. Most resources you could think of really."

"Do you play poker?"

"I play Skyllian-Five on occasion. I'm considered fairly good."

"We'll have to arrange a few games," Kenneth insisted. "I've never played against a turian before. I imagine you have a good poker face."

"Kenneth!" Gabriella exclaimed, appalled by his apparent lack of tact.

"What? It's a compliment. If she's that good a player she'll have control over her reactions."

Valni smiled. "Well, if you insist, I'll play you. Assuming you don't mind losing? But we usually play for high stakes. Do you have anything worth putting up?"

"I think I have just the thing," Kenneth stated, reaching into his duffel bag and retrieving a large, cream-coloured tube with strange symbols on it.
"What is that?" Valni asked.

"That, my girl, is a bottle of 31-year old Islay Scotch, shipped all the way from Port Ellen, Scotland. Eight-hundred credits of the finest single malt."

"We're on assignment, travelling with the bare essentials, and you're bringing that with you?" Gabriella asked incredulously.

"What is life without its little luxuries?" Kenneth replied; pulling back his lips and showing his blunt teeth. "Besides, did you stop to consider that with this I might further interplanetary relations with our turian cousins? Peace and cooperation are achieved through the completion of mutual goals. Sharing a wee dram together could help that."

"Actually," Valni chimed in, "no-one on the ship could drink that. We can't digest levo-amino based foods or drink. And you couldn't eat our food. All your rations are being shipped over in the cargo hold."

"Ah. Well, all the more for me then," Kenneth replied, placing the tube back in his duffel bag.

"And just what did you leave behind to make sure you're kit-bag was underweight?" Gabriella asked.

"Dinna worry, girl. I'm sure I can do without my dipole spanner." Kenneth glanced at Valni and briefly closed one eye. She frowned. Perhaps he had a nervous tick?

The Liaison Officer could only watch as another argument broke out between the bizarre pair of aliens. They'd made a memorable first impression on her and, she had to admit, she was looking forward to working with them. This might prove to be an interesting assignment, she reflected. If nothing else, she wasn't going to lack for entertainment.

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**Combat Information Centre, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 07:30 Zulu**

"You are on Arcadias! I am Captain Verress. You will address me as Sir or Captain at all times. On Alliance vessels you may have been permitted an indulgent amount of professional liberty. That will not be the case here. Two of my crew have given up their places so you could be on this ship. They will, if they know what's good for them, make a worthy addition to the SSV Perugia, but while you are on Arcadias I expect you to maintain their exacting standards. No fall in efficiency will be tolerated. While you serve on this ship you will conduct yourselves in the manner and self-discipline expected by the Hierarchy; expected of all turians. Do you understand me?"

"Yes sir," Kenneth and Gabby answered together.

"I sincerely hope so. Your conduct directly influences the Hierarchy's opinion of future exchange programmes with the Alliance. You are humanity's representatives, so do your race proud." She turned to Valni. "Officer Severan: Continue with the orientation."

"Yes Captain." All three officers saluted and spun on their heels, leaving Verress who had already turned back to the CIC's holo-display, her mind on other matters.

Verress could best be described as a taciturn captain. Struggling on the wrong side of fifty, Verress had expected to be General by now. The fact that she was still a Captain was, to her, a clear snub by the Meritocracy. The perceived injustice of this obvious slight to her leadership style was one she bore with dignity, resolve, and no little resentment. She ran the crew hard, and expected results. Arcadias was governed with the precision of a Hierarchy State Ship. The dedication she instilled in
the cadets from the moment they set foot on-board had become infamous amongst the fleet, leading to an unwritten but widely used maxim: 'Train on Arcadias - relax on the frontline.' It was a philosophy Verress fully embraced.

Orientation came in three stages. Firstly, they were shown their quarters – Two small but comfortable cabins towards the stern of the ship. Kenneth's room still had a lingering odour of the 'Flaked Carapace' salve that Winger used to treat his condition; while Garroll's quarters were clean and fresh, much to Gabriella's delight. The communal showers were just down the corridor. Valni explained that was standard practice aboard turian vessels and Gabriella was anxious to know if they were single-sex showers, appearing relieved when she was told they were.

Next, came a tour of the ship. Valni escorted them around showing the various facilities. The gym and sparring room elicited little interest, while the games room, and specifically the poker table, was a source of great joy. Kenneth in particular seemed happy, announcing he might move in.

Their visit to the mess hall drew a reasonably large crowd, the crew itching to meet and greet the visiting aliens. But, it was the visit to the infirmary that proved a real eye-opener. The humans were hailed by Arcadias' friendly giant of a doctor. He loomed over them, extending a welcoming hand which was grasped tentatively by each of the visitors. The doctor tried to contain his enthusiasm but Valni could see the offered hands straining under his tremendous grip and vigorous shake.

Lastly, there was a visit to the Engine Room and the area with which they would become most familiar. They were welcomed by a large group of artificers who each shook their hands and expressed great interest in working with the humans. Valni directed them down to their workstations which were located in the Core Monitor on tier one of the Engine Room. The pair seemed keen to start work and Valni was impressed with their zeal. As representatives of humanity they weren't doing badly.

The fighters circled each other, searching for any weakness in their opponents' defences. A small crowd had gathered in the sparring hall, eagerly watching the two novice fighters demonstrate their skills. Valni sat at the back of the hall, watching the match with interest, coolly noting at least three openings that the fighter in red could have exploited.

Valni had left the humans in the capable hands of the artificers. They'd had a productive first day. Valni felt it was important to ease them in gently but they'd surprised everyone and exceeded expectations. The artificers were pleased with their performance. Time would tell if they'd be able to maintain that level of ability and Valni, as per her orders, would check up on them regularly, but right now, this was her down-time.

She was so focused on the ring that she didn't at first notice the voices behind her. A group of cadets were milling about in the doorway of the sparring hall, their voices hushed just enough so they could be heard by everyone within a six-metre radius.

"I heard the ship boasts the highest number of martial arts champions in the fleet," the first one stated.

"Wouldn't think to look at it," a second cadet muttered. He had an obnoxious voice. "It looks like it's been in service for generations."

"Forty-eight years now," a young female added.

"Yeah, and only about seven of those years were useful."

"It's probably due for decommissioning soon."
"Why they keep it in service is beyond me."

"Probably saving the tired old bird out of loyalty to her service to the fleet."

"Are you talking about the ship or the Captain?" the obnoxious one asked to the sound of general laughter.

Valni stood up, ready to tear into them when the voice of the obnoxious one called out to her.

"Hey, you there. Boy! Does this tub have any worthwhile fighters?"

Valni turned slowly, enjoying the sight of their faces dropping as they realised they were addressing a superior officer.

"Yes, boy! Arcadias has trained some of the best. A fact you would know if you'd bothered to look it up on the damn extranet. Are you a fighter?"

"Yes, sir - Ma'am - Sir! Yes, I am," the cadet stammered.

"A soldier needs to be an excellent observer, so explain to me how a rookie who claims to be a fighter fails to recognise both a ship with an illustrious history and a superior officer?"

"I'm very sorry, sir," he quavered.

"Sixteen of Palaven's most celebrated martial warriors have served aboard Arcadias. Thanks to your friend here, you will each list their names and accomplishments by zero-nine-hundred tomorrow or you will be explaining to the Captain why you are so patently unprepared to serve aboard this vessel!"

"Yes, sir!" the group intoned.

"And by the way," Valni added quietly, "talk about the Captain like that again and I'll personally rip you a new cloaca!"

Several seconds passed while the cadets stood at attention, no-one daring to move.

"You can skedaddle now," Valni told them. The cadets saluted before turning and scurrying down the corridor. She watched them until they'd disappeared around the corner. It was good to keep the cadets on their toes; and yet, as much as it was a part of the job Valni didn't actually enjoy chewing out new recruits (well, other than that obnoxious prat - that she did enjoy!); but they'd called attention to her appearance and that was a sensitive topic.

Valni knew she looked different. While she'd inherited her mothers' delicate, facial bone structure and soft carapace, Valni had not acquired her height. She was shorter than her contemporaries, and her vestigial head horns were much larger and more developed than was normal for women. This, combined with her naturally slim frame, gave her a slightly androgynous look. She was constantly mistaken for an adolescent male. Unfortunately, it also meant that she was occasionally approached by men with specific tastes – Tastes that she never reciprocated. Their disappointment at discovering she was female was nothing compared to the pain of the wrist locks, kicks and throws she employed if they became violent. As those men discovered to their cost, she knew how to handle herself. Aside from basic combat training, she was adept in several martial arts; the consequence of having a seven-time World Champion for a father, and growing up with three brothers plus one unusually masculine sister.

She figured that ran in the family.
Valni strolled between the busy crew as she headed for the stairwell to the Core Monitor. Artificer First Class Djamil Leptis was busy testing one of the humans on the engineering controls. Engineer Daniels stood at her console recounting the function of each mechanism in turn as Leptis pointed at it.

"Primary power levels – Attenuator relay monitors – Capacitor diagnostics."

"And the attenuator relays are dampened by the…?" Leptis asked.

"Electrostatic array," Daniels replied promptly.

"Leptis," Valni strode up to them. "How are our newest crew members doing?"

"Excellently, sir. Settling in very well. I wish all our artificers were as knowledgeable. And enthusiastic – Gabby… sorry, Engineer Daniels especially seems to have a particular affinity with our propulsion control systems."

"I just do what I enjoy, ma'am," the human said as she saluted her.

"With your permission, I'd like Daniels to begin studying the field core harmonics systems at the main trunk on the second tier."

"Already?" Valni frowned. "That seems a little fast, Leptis."

"I'm confident Daniels can handle it."

"Well, if you're certain." She turned to Gabriella. "You up for that Daniels?"

"Yes, ma'am. Just point me at it and I'll make it dance."

Valni grinned – She was starting to really like the human's enthusiasm.

"You would know best, Leptis."

"Thanks Chief."

Valni watched the pair bustle off up the stairwell before she turned and approached the remaining human who was crouched by an open panel. "How are you coping, Donnelly? Not feeling left behind I hope?"

"Not at all, sir. I like seeing Gabby enjoy herself with a new engine. Better watch her though. She gets rather attached to them. Very soon she'll be giving them names."

"Well, if Leptis and the other artificers don't mind, who am I to argue?"

"You say that now, but wait till she starts calling the drive core 'Blue-shift Bethany'."

"I can think of worse names." Valni smiled at the human. "Is there a problem?" she asked, referring to the open panel.

"No. Just a few minor adjustments. Could you do me a favour and read the data off my console?"

"Sure." Valni strode over to his console and glanced at the data on the screen. "The signal from the
electrostatic array is fluctuating," she stated.

"No problem." Donnelly reached into his jacket a produced a small, black device that he placed against the exposed array. "A quick adjustment with the old dipole spanner and the signal should be back in alignment."

"It is," Valni confirmed. "I thought you'd left that behind?" she asked, indicating the dipole spanner.

"No, that was a ruse to wind Gabby up." He stepped back from the open panel. "Hence the wink."

"Oh," Valni understood. "That was a wink? I thought you had an eye infection or a nervous tick."

The human raised his eyebrows. "I suspect something's been lost in translation." Donnelly wandered forward; Valni moved aside to let him take up position at his console.

"So, you two seem to get on well. Are you and Daniels… together?" she asked.

"You mean as a couple? Gabby and me? No. We've been friends for years. I like her because she's dependable, whip-smart – But don't tell her I said that – And easy on the eyes. And she hangs around so she can tell everyone that they're doing it wrong, and, most importantly, to keep me out of trouble."

"You talk as if that's a full time job."

"Aye, it's a big commitment. She puts a lot of hours in."

"And does she keep you out of trouble, Donnelly?"

"Well, she needs more practice."

Valni grinned and shook her head. *Alliance humour!*

The intercom on Donnelly's console suddenly sprung to life: "Engineers Donnelly and Daniels please respond," a voice intoned.

"This is Donnelly, go ahead."

"You have an incoming transmission from a salarian exploration vessel, the *Auroto*. It's from an engineer on-board. Only gave his name as 'Chaill'."

"Odd name for a salarian," Valni commented.

"There's a very good reason for that," Donnelly replied. He turned to the upper tier. "Hey, Gabby," he yelled, "we've got a vid-link from Chaill."

"Really?" Daniels' voice replied. "I'll be right there."

"Who's Chaill?" Valni asked.

"Krogan engineer," Kenneth explained. "We met him, what is it, two years ago now?"

"Yeah, two years," Gabriella confirmed as she wandered down the stairwell. "He was part of the Citadel engineering exchange team on the *Perugia* back in '80 - '81. He's a great guy. Brilliant engineer. Terrific dancer, actually."

"No kidding," Kenneth put in. "We kinda got him hooked on Latin ballroom. Believe it or not, he
and Gabby once performed an American Tango at the Perugia's Hogmanay hootenanny!"

Suffering a comprehension breakdown, Valni turned to Daniels; a bewildered expression on her face.

"We danced at the new year party," Gabriella translated. Valni nodded in understanding.

"Aye, it was crazy," Kenneth continued, "you wouldn't think a krogan could do a pirouette!" The turian stared, her mind boggling at the notion. "Also, a huge rugby fan," he added.

Valni narrowed her eyes in confusion. She seemed to remember hearing rugby mentioned on the Citadel. "That's a human game, isn't it?" she asked.

"Absolutely," Daniels put in. "Another little interest that was passed on. Like an infection! Chaill loves the All Blacks."

Valni had no idea what 'All Blacks' were, and at this point wasn't about to ask. Too many strange krogan based images were swirling around her head. She was only vaguely aware of Daniels switching on the comm-screen. The display sprang to life: The distinctive red frontal plate and pale squat face of the turians once mortal enemy filled the monitor.

"Gabriella!" The krogan's deep voice boomed over the speakers. "Looking radiant as always. How's the Alliances' most valuable propulsion specialist? Those turians treating you right?"

Gabriella smiled affectionately at the krogan's beaming face. "Feeling fine, Chaill – No problems. And very happy to see you. How are you?"

"Ecstatic! 34-11! It was a walk-over! I'm thinking it would have been better if Scotland hadn't shown up."

"Aye, right," Kenneth interrupted, "it was just the first round ya overgrown iguana. They'll bounce back for qualifying."

"Unlikely. They couldn't even muster up a win against Eden Prime. Hell, the Armali squad could pound them right now."

"Armali is a good team, Chaill," Gabriella put in, glancing slyly at Kenneth, "don't knock them by comparing them to Scotland!"

"Taking sides now are we, Gabby? Since when do you watch rugby? Besides, it's a bit different when you're playing asari, no matter how butch they get. Though, I wouldn't mind being part of that scrum!"

"They'd stomp you into the ground and bury you alive, Donnelly."

"Aye, but what a way to go."

Gabriella was grinning broadly at the banter between her two friends. Valni looked on in astonishment – She had once been told by an asari on the Citadel that all men were the same, regardless of species. Seeing how this disparate trio interacted, she could well believe it. Chaill and Kenneth were behaving very much like her male friends on Arcadias.

"How's your new crew?" Gabriella asked, changing the subject.

"They're a good bunch of engineers. Even for salarians! Almost as knowledgeable as I am."
"Play nice, Chaill," Daniels warned.

"They know I'm joking." He waved to someone off screen. "Hey, Madik." A salarian moved across the screen behind him, waving cheerfully. The krogan looked back to Daniels. "Honestly, I'm glad to be here. These salarians know their stuff. I've seen quantum entanglement specs I never thought I'd get clearance for. And their drive systems are state of the art. There's a lot I can learn from them. And plenty more they can learn from me."

"I'm not sure salarians would enjoy krogan drinking games, Chaill," Kenneth asserted.

"You're just sore because you lost the bet," the krogan replied.

"That and most of my lunch."

Gabriella and Valni shared a brief look universal amongst their gender: Men! Daniels turned back to the screen. "Chaill, I'm glad you're settling in. It's good to see your talents aren't going to waste."

"Well, my genius had to be recognised some time, didn't it?" Gabriella beamed warmly at the krogan. Suddenly, a disembodied voice sounded over the speakers: "Je'Ata team, report to the shuttle bay. Je'Ata team to the shuttle bay." Chaill straightened up. "Oh, that's us. Have to go rebuild society."

"It's wonderful to see you," Gabriella assured him, "keep us posted."

"Bye, gecko," Kenneth said as he waved at the camera.

"Later, Donnelly."

"Take care, Chaill."

"You too, Gabriella. You look after yourself."

Daniels nodded cheerfully and waved at the screen; the feed died. Valni was left shaking her head in disbelief.

"I never thought I'd see a krogan getting along with the salarians!" she said in awe.

"As I said, he's a great guy. His work caught their attention and he was offered this assignment. How could he pass it up?"

"Incredible," Valni muttered.

"That's the beauty of these interspecies programmes," Kenneth added. "You're constantly surprised by new developments. And sometimes it's even related to engineering!"

"Not with you around, Kenneth."
Chapter Summary

An ship-wide emergency leads to an unexpected conversation between Valni Severan and Kenneth Donnelly.
Recreation Deck, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 18:20 Zulu – 26th January 2183 CE

Crewmen were bustling up and down the passageway; the recreation decks' corridor heaved with the dozens of Arcadias service personnel who'd recently finished their shifts. Liaison Officer Valni Severan and Artificer Djamil Leptis walked between them, chatting animatedly as they strode in the direction of the training area.

"You've had them a couple of days now, what do you honestly think of the humans?" she asked the artificer.

"Sir?" Leptis seemed confused. "I gave you my opinion of our guests."

"You gave me an evaluation based on merit. I'd like to know how you feel about the humans muscling in on your turf." She flashed him a brief grin.

"Oh, those pesky humans coming in and taking our jobs!" Djamil smiled back at her. "What on Palaven makes you think I didn't give an honest opinion before?"

"Because I've known you too long. You're not exactly forthcoming, Djamil. That time I was an envoy meeting the dalatrass on Sur'Kesh – I had to wear formal salarian robes. You said I looked striking."

"Yes, you did," Djamil insisted.

"I looked like I'd been shrink-wrapped in a frame tent!"

"A particularly striking frame tent!" Leptis smirked.

"Those suits are not flattering."

"Yeah, but you made it work."

"Thank you." Valni looked sideways at him. "But, forgive me for thinking you have a tendency to obfuscate."

"I prefer to think of it as constructive prevarication," Djamil replied.

"Uh-huh. So, what do you really think of the humans?"

Leptis came to a halt as he considered the question. "Donnelly is extremely conversant with star-ship design. He's remarkably diligent, quick-witted, calm-under-pressure, and articulate to the point of
telling him to shut up! A valuable asset to have in a crisis... It's just..."

"Yes?"

"He has an odd sense of humour."

"In what way?"

"It's... peculiar. Kinda reminds me of yours."

"Again, thank you. Women appreciate being compared to strange, hairy aliens!" Valni grinned at the artificer. "And Daniels?" she asked.

"I meant what I said – I wish all our artificers were as knowledgeable. She's astonishing! On her first day she undertook a complete manual diagnostic of our port-side antiproton thruster and identified six separate faults that previous artificers had missed using, what is from her perspective, alien tech."

"You seem impressed."

"I'm stunned. Any chance we can keep her?"

"Alliance Command might complain."

"Offer them four of ours," he suggested. "She's worth that."

Valni folded her arms and regarded Leptis. "Bartering for her probably isn't the best idea. And if I didn't know better, I'd swear you were smitten."

"Good thing you do know me better."

"You joining Antoni and me for drinks tomorrow evening?"

"Sure," he agreed heartily. He turned to head off. "I'll see you later, Chief."

Djamil moved down the corridor as Valni made her way to the exercise room.

Valni loved the smell of a gym. She had done ever since she was young. Her father had encouraged her interest in martial arts, coaxing her, training with her, helping to improve her skills. She adored spending time with him and had fond memories of his kind voice and reassuring laugh. She always associated the smell of a gym with the warmth of his smile – with his memory. And memory was all she had now. It had been three years since his death. She imagined the pain would diminish after such a time, but every so often she would find herself unexpectedly filled with grief, the anguish hitting her like a blow to the lungs, leaving her breathless. It was disconcerting to say the least. She'd wondered if there was something wrong with her, but had been assured by the few professionals she'd visited that this was perfectly normal. She just had to live with it.

Walking into the changing area Valni quickly dressed into her training civvies and took up her favoured spot by the punching bag.

Arcadias' training facilities had only recently been improved. Latest additions included essential repairs to the full size sparring ring, which Valni had appealed to the Captain repeatedly about. It had become a firm favourite of hers, and one she used avidly, until certain recent events meant she had effectively been banned from the ring, and had to settle on training in the gym, except as part of her normal duties. She still felt bitter about that.

The punching bag was dancing on its rope under her blows; Valni enjoyed the way it swung around,
allowing her to pivot and sway, constantly changing form. It kept her on her toes. Not as good as training with a real opponent, but she made do.

Out of the corner of her vision she could see a familiar figure moving towards her. Trajan. She groaned inwardly and tried to avoid eye-contact. Trajan and Valni were similar ranks, but where Valni was a seasoned specialist commanding her own detachment, Trajan, as Chief Petty Officer, oversaw the training of new recruits. She had never liked him. He was a bully and constantly harassed the female cadets. He passed it off as 'personal motivation', and although there were no official complaints, she always wondered about the other female officers under his command.

"Hey, Severan. You're looking sharp," he commented as he walked around her. Valni concentrated on her form, trying to drown out the jarring sound of his voice. "A thought crossed my mind," he continued.

"That must have been a long and lonely journey," she muttered.

Trajan walked behind the punching-bag and braced himself against its weight, steadying it against Valni's fierce punches. "I think we should meet up sometime," he insisted, "get to know each other better. After all, we have so much in common. We're both ambitious. We both know what we want."

"I know we're equivalent ranking Officers, Trajan. But your rank… is just plain rank!" The Chief Petty Officer frowned, not fully comprehending the insult. Valni kicked the bag close to his head for emphasis. "I'm a little busy with my duties right now," she added, "got a bit too much on my plate for further distractions."

"I'd gladly help you lick the plate clean."

He grunted as Valni spun and delivered a powerful kick that vibrated through the bag, winding him.

"I have to congratulate you, Trajan. I'm impressed you haven't let your position get in the way of your ineptitude."

"Harsh words, Severan. You don't think I can rise through the Meritocracy?"

"No, I'd like to see you go far. There's a shuttle in Bay Two, you could use that."

She resumed her barrage on the punching-bag, taking great pleasure in imagining Trajan's face on it. He grinned as she pummelled the bag.

"How about we have dinner sometime?"

"I'd rather pass a gizzard stone!"

"Ha! Oh, I do like women with spirit."

"No doubt they prefer to be drunk when they meet you!"

"Alright, Severan," he said, releasing the bag and holding up his hands. "I surrender. I can take a hint. You are a fascinating woman." He dodged as Valni kicked the bag, sending it swinging towards him. "But, you obviously prefer more feminine company."

Valni glared at him as he slunk off, passing Antoni as he made his way out of the gym. "Speaking of which…" Trajan muttered, glancing sidelong at the Marine. Her friend approached, a frown creasing his forehead as he saw her expression.
"What are you looking at?" he asked.

"Just a minor nuisance." Valni nodded towards the Chief Petty Officer.

"Trajan? He causing trouble?"

Valni shook her head. He wasn't worth her time. "No. But he's probably the only man I know who if told to go screw himself, could actually do it!"

Antoni laughed as he took up his position behind the bag. Valni unleashed another series of blows that shook the punching-bag, staggering the Marine behind it. It wasn't fair on Antoni she realised, but somehow her friend had a habit of being on the receiving end of her displeasure.

"You want to tone it down a bit, maybe?"

"Sorry," Valni muttered, easing off slightly.

Valni shouldn't have let Trajan rattle her so much. He was just a pompous, self-satisfied ass. One of the reasons she came to the gym was to unwind from work, let the stresses out. She wanted to relax; forget the new arrivals she'd suddenly been lumbered with in Engineering.

All she needed was a good workout and a restful night's sleep.

The call to General Quarters came after 3am.

Valni was on her feet by the second alarm bell, grabbing the regulation jacket of her uniform and dashing out of her cabin. Emergency lighting lit up the halls, the eerie red glow casting dark shadows over the other crew members who ran hurriedly into the corridor, dressed in underwear and sleeping clothes.

"To your stations!" Valni bellowed.

"Yes, Chief," came the united reply.

Valni was already donning her jacket (trousers were too awkward to be clad during an emergency); the long leggings of her pyjama bottoms complimenting the colour of her top. She zipped up her jacket as she ran, the extra weight of the built-in kinetic shields not slowing her down. Valni made for the stairwell leading to the CIC; she had to find out what was happening.

Suddenly, the Captain's voice sounded over the speakers: "Condition Blue. All crew report to your stations. Condition Blue."

Valni's expression hardened. 'Condition Blue' was a sign of imminent attack. She quickened her pace.

"Grab masks and armour!" she yelled to a group of young recruits milling about in the corridor. The recruits immediately sprang into action, seemingly glad to be told what to do. Soldiers armed themselves, Technicians closed bulkheads and stowed gear in textbook precision. Valni couldn't help but feel a twinge of pride at the professional and efficient manner in which the crew handled themselves. It was like a well-oiled machine; there was no sign of any panic and everyone knew where they should be.

She bolted up the stairwell, the talons of her bare feet raking against the metal steps. Bursting into the main corridor to the CIC, Valni pulled up by the entrance and flipped open a section of the wall to
reveal a code pad. The door of the CIC glowed red (all vital areas automatically sealed in an emergency); Valni punched in the code to manually open the lock. The doors slid open to reveal the Captain, fully clothed, bending over the main holo-display. Valni ran towards her.

"Orders Captain?" she asked, saluting smartly as she stood to attention.

"Five ships just dropped out from FTL. They're approaching at high speed and not responding to hails. We've identified them as batarian raiding vessels."

"Slavers?" Valni asked.

"Marauders, more likely. They'll try and outflank the ship, then attempt to disable our engines and board us. They won't destroy us. Nothing of value to be had in a crispy wreck!"

"The crew are already preparing to repel boarders, Captain."

"I'd expect nothing less. How are the humans preparing?"

"Haven't seen them, sir. I expect they're at their stations in Engineering."

"Go and check. Make sure their armed, or at the very least awake."

"Yes, sir!"

Valni turned and ran out of the CIC, the sirens still wailing incessantly. She made her way to the Engine Room, hoping that the humans had taken the initiative and got to their posts. She wasn't sure what Alliance protocol was in an emergency. You should know that, she chided herself.

Passing the armoury, Valni shouldered three assault rifles and continued down the stairwell towards the lower decks.

Leptis had already opened the door to Engineering. Valni found him at his station, running the eezo core numbers on the console. The place was a hive of activity; artificers busied themselves checking and rechecking vital systems.

"Status?" she said as she walked up to him.

"All systems nominal. Everyone accounted for and ready for action."

"Have the humans arrived at their posts?" Valni asked him.

"Yes, Chief," he replied. "They were already at the door before I unlocked it."

"We're expecting company. Arm yourselves and guard the main doors," she ordered.

"Yes, Chief." Djamil moved away; he opened the emergency gun cabinet in the corner of the room and began issuing rifles to the other artificers. Valni made her way down to the humans' stations in the Core Monitor.

Daniels and Donnelly were at their consoles. Daniels had managed to put on her uniform – She must have changed into it at record speed – while Donnelly wore a thin Alliance shirt and underwear; evidently he wasn't as quick at dressing as his partner.

"We're about to be attacked," Valni announced without ceremony, raising her voice to be heard above the sirens. "Grab a rifle and defend the Core if you have to."
"Yes sir," Donnelly replied, grabbing the offered weapon. Daniels took the second rifle.

"Who's attacking us?" she asked.

"Aye, it'd be nice to know who to shoot at," Donnelly added.

"Batarians as far as we know," Valni replied. "But if in doubt just shoot the people who are trying to kill you! Have you ever fired the Haliat Thunder before?"

"No ma'am. Just the Ariake Tsunami," Daniels stated.

"The Thunder is very similar. Safety's off. Just point and shoot. Watch the kick-back; it's a bit more aggressive than the Tsunami."

"Aye, aye sir," Donnelly added.

"If we need extra speed to outrun the bastards I think I can give the engines a bit more juice." Daniels shouldered her weapon and turned to her console. "I noticed it yesterday. The power transfer system is running below standard Alliance specifications."

"That's for safety reasons, Daniels," Valni replied.

"Yes ma'am. But in an emergency we could channel the core field bleed back into the eezo capacitors to create a feedback loop and increase the static charge."

"Gabby's right," Donnelly put in. "It would work with the kinetic barrier, too. All we'd need to do is recalibrate the attenuators to a one-hundred per cent duty cycle then bring the main core and kinetic modulators into congruence. It'd give us a few more minutes of protection in a fire-fight."

"You could do that?" Valni asked dubiously. "How long would it take?"

"Just a couple of minutes, ma'am."

It didn't take long for Valni to make a decision. She realised they needed every advantage they could get against an attacker. This was one of the reasons for the Engineering Programme after all: to provoke new ideas and learn from each other.

"Do it!" she ordered. "I'm authorising you. Give us any advantage you can."

"Yes ma'am!" Daniels yelled, turning back to her station with an excited expression on her face. She seemed to be actively enjoying this.

"Hey, Gabby, if the batarians invade do you want me to take your gun and defend the Core?"

"Not likely! If you had gun in both hands it'd be safer to stand right in front of you," Daniels replied.

"I think I'd look daring. Like a movie star – Only poorer."

"Kenneth, the only thing you'd have in common with a movie star is that both of you would be faking it!"

Their heads were bowed, their eyes concentrating on the data scrolling across their screens. The banter didn't seem to slow them down; if anything it improved their output. Valni smiled at the efficiency, and indeed, the eloquence of the pair.

The Liaison Officer was startled from her thoughts when the alarm stopped abruptly, the familiar
hum of the eezo core suddenly thrown into sharp relief. After a few seconds the Captain's voice sounded over the speakers:

"All stations report condition of readiness." Valni made her way over to the communications station as the Captain listed the various departments.

"Gunnery."

"Ready, Captain," came the reply over the intercom.

"Magazine."

"Ready."

"Navigation."

"Ready."

"Communications."

"We're ready, Captain."

"Medical."

"Ready, sir."

"Engine Room."

"Ready, Captain," Valni replied through the comm.

Emergency lighting went out, to be replaced by the cooling blue-white illumination of standard operations.

"All stations stand down," the Captain intoned. "Condition normal, I repeat: Condition normal. Resume standard shifts. Senior officers log reports on service personnel. Full debrief for duty officers at zero-eight-hundred." Then, presumably feeling that some sort of recognition was in order, she added: "Good job, people."

"That was a drill?" Gabriella asked incredulously.

"The Captain knows how to get our attention," Kenneth added. "That was one hell of a wakeup call!"

Valni flipped the safety on her weapon and collapsed it, holstering it onto the back of her jacket. "To be an effective drill, the crew has to think it's real. That's the best way to assess how they'd handle a genuine emergency." She unzipped her jacket, grateful for the opportunity to ease the stifling material.

Kenneth collapsed his rifle and then glanced up at her, his eyes lowering to take in the distinctive illustration on Valni's undershirt. A mischievous grin spread across his face.

"Is that a baby krogan?" he asked, pointing at her shirt.

Valni looked down at her PJ's. The smiling, lively face of 'Krogi the Whelp™, rolling happily on his back, grinned up at her.
She looked back at him. "They were a gift," she replied. Her mother had bought them for her. "They're very comfortable," she added, sounding more defensive than she'd meant.

"It's very nice," Gabriella assured her. "I like the pattern. Do they make them for humans?"

"I'm not sure mocking the ranking officer is a wise career move," Valni teased, folding her arms.

"I'm not, honestly – It's a cute picture. I'd like to get one."

Valni grudgingly relented. "The brand's called 'Hello Krogi'. You can get them from Chasm or TopQuad on the Citadel – So I've heard," she added hastily.

"I'm just glad someone has a sense of style," Gabriella stated before turning to her colleague. "And that Kenneth actually put some clothes on for once."

"Didn't think I should be scuddy running around the ship, Gabby," Kenneth said with a wide grin, "wouldn't want to make the new crew jealous." He noted their expressions, before clarifying: "I like to sleep in the nude."

"That's more than I needed to know!" Valni muttered.

"Well, that was all very exciting but frankly I'm famished," Kenneth stated firmly.

"It's three-thirty in the morning!" Gabriella protested.

"I've got a five-am shift. No point going to back to bed now, girl."

"Well, I'm going to get some shut-eye," Gabriella insisted.

Djamil wandered down the stairwell. "Permission to return to sleep, Chief?" he asked.

"Granted," Valni said wryly. "Daniels and Leptis head on back to your quarters. Donnelly, the messdeck will most likely be closed but I'll get one of the catering staff to serve us something."

"Us?" Kenneth asked.

"Yeah, I've got an evaluation to write and an 8am debrief. Might as well get a bite to eat. Leptis, stow the guns away. I'll return mine to the armoury later."

"Yes Chief." Djamil retrieved the two assault rifles from Donnelly and Daniels before placing them in the gun cabinet. Gabriella, Djamil and the rest of the staff wandered back to their own beds while Valni and Donnelly made their way to the Open Mess. Valni caught one of the catering staff as he was about to lock the doors, asking him to retrieve a levo-amino ration from supply.

Having been served by the slightly sullen staff, the pair sat opposite each other in the empty hall, eating quietly. Kenneth was the first to break the silence.

"So, I noticed Leptis calls you 'Chief'. But being an LNO I wouldn't expect you to have that title. Is that something unique to the Meritocracy?" he asked.

"Hierarchy ranks are fairly similar to the Alliance. But, my current title is more symbolic. My technical rank is Chief Warrant Officer."

Kenneth was impressed. "Well, you definitely out rank me and Gabby," he stated. "How'd you become 'Liaison Officer'?"
Valni glanced down at her tray, shifting uneasily in her seat. "I had a little disagreement with the Captain," she admitted.

"A row?"

"No, I knocked her on her ass!"

"I'm surprised you didn't get court-martialled."

"Well, she asked me to try and knock her on her ass. She just didn't expect that I could."

"Turians do things differently, don't they?" Kenneth noted, a little confused by it all.

The pair lapsed into silence while they chewed their breakfast until Valni finally voiced something that had been bothering her.

"So, what is it with the hair on your face?"

"My beard? Do you like it?"

"It's different. I can sort of understand the hair on your head, but why the face too?"

"Personal choice. It makes me look dashing." He flashed his most debonair smile, which was completely lost on the turian. "And the ladies love a goatee," he insisted.

Valni tilted her head, assessing his claim. "If you say so." A thought occurred to her. "Gabriella must not like a 'goatee'. I notice she doesn't have one."

Kenneth's furrowed his brow. "Human women don't grow beards," he replied steadily. "Well, most of them don't."

"Oh," Valni uttered quietly.

"I thought you'd know about this stuff, being Liaison Officer."

"It's the job I was allocated," she conceded, "I didn't say I was any good at it! Hand-to-hand fighting is more my thing."

"That's your expertise?"

"It's why I was promoted." And punished, she added silently. "I'm a combat specialist assigned to train detachments in six major forms of martial art."

Kenneth's eyes widened in surprise. "Remind me never to piss you off."

Valni grinned and took a bite of her food.

A short, low whistle escaped the human's lips. "Six different martial arts," he repeated. "So, you probably know at least fifty ways to kill me! How many of my bones could you break?"

Valni shrugged. "How many you got?" she asked with her mouth full.

"I must confess: I'm not that adept at combat. I've been in a few barnies, but my skills as a soldier are a wee bit lacking."

"Even with a rifle?" she asked incredulously.
"I've had training, certainly. But, the instructors confiscated my gun after I tried to make some adjustments to the rifle and the barrel flew off!"

Valni laughed, almost spitting her food over Kenneth. "I'm sorry." She swallowed carefully, suddenly feeling guilty. "But, I would've loved to have seen that."

Kenneth grinned. "It's on the extranet somewhere. You'll probably find it next to the training footage of me blowing up a drone Alliance Mako with a rocket launcher."

Valni was still smirking. "You hit something. Surely that's an improvement?"

"I was aiming at the dropship."

Valni covered her mouth as her laughter echoed around the mess. Kenneth gently chuckled along with her. Eventually, she recovered enough to talk normally again and they started gossiping about their ships.

She hadn't expected to get on so well with the human. He was easy-going; talked to her like an old friend; didn't judge her for her looks; and despite the fact he lacked the darker carapace she usually found attractive, she thought he looked kind-of-cute in an odd pinky-white sort of way. She also liked his accent. It was different from Gabriella's; somehow his voice was more… soothing.

They chatted for a further hour before Kenneth had to begin his shift. Valni walked him out of the Mess Hall and watched as he sauntered back to his own cabin. That was an eye-opening meal! She returned to the privacy of her quarters and immediately logged on to the extranet. Not to search for his infamous training footage, but to read up on human psychology. Something you should have done long ago, she reminded herself. Her search narrowed to male-centric behaviour and by zero-six-hundred she found herself scrutinizing the numerous romantic customs of Earth. Focusing on Kenneth's home country of Scotland, she typed in 'Culture', and was suddenly bombarded by myriad alien concepts: Kilts! Bagpipes! Scotch! Hogmanay! Ceilidhs! Shinty! Golf! Cabers! Haggis! What's haggis? – Oh, Spirits! That's what haggis is?!

Valni sat back and stared into space, trying to absorb this glut of new information. She felt somewhat overwhelmed by it all. But, also intrigued. And excited. She had never entertained the possibility of finding a non-turian attractive, but Kenneth was unlike anyone she had met. He was charming to be around, had nice eyes, a pleasant smell, and he was funny – In every sense of the word. She hadn't had such an enjoyable conversation in a long time. A smile graced her lips. The sound of his mellow voice was still playing in her mind.

Bottom line: She was interested.
Field Work

Chapter Summary

Gabby joins a turian mission to help make the planet Gellix habitable, and Valni recruits Kenneth for a dangerous assignment.

CIC, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 09:03 Zulu – 31st January 2183 CE

There was quite a crowd in the Command Centre. Apart from Captain Verress and regular CIC Officers, four visiting turians were milling around the holo-display, their colouring and uniforms different from Arcadias' crew. Gabby and Kenneth stood next to each other, eyes front, backs straight, gaze distant, as they waited for the Captain to address them. They were still standing at attention; the Captain having neglected to tell them to stand easy. While Verress' back was turned, Kenneth took the opportunity to surreptitiously appraise the other people in the room.

The scarily tall ships doctor took up one corner of the room to himself, his head brushing against the hanging monitoring equipment he'd decided to settle under (presumably trying to be unobtrusive). To Kenneth's right stood another artificer – Pella, I think her name is – He'd seen her around the Engine Room but had only spoken to her casually. While to Gabby and Kenneth's left was an asari, freshly arrived this morning with the visiting turians. Her uniform was unfamiliar; most likely from Thessia or one of the larger colonies. The asari had always struck him as an odd species: An all-female race and human in appearance (apart from the blue skin and sculpted head crests), they were undeniably attractive, but he found it curious that another species would evolve to resemble humans so closely. He tried to gauge her age, always tricky with asari. Outwardly she looked young. If she were human he would guess she was in her mid-twenties. But, knowing how slowly asari matured she could be anything upwards of 250 years old. Kenneth's mind boggled at the notion of living to such an old age.

Their Liaison Officer stood a little apart from the others, waiting in respectful silence for the Captain to address them. In his brief time on Arcadias Kenneth had come to recognise various physical nuances of turians, and specifically the distinction between males and females. The majority of women on board had little or no head horns that were common amongst males, while Officer Severan's crest was quite pronounced, almost reaching the back of her head. He wondered if it was a sign of social standing, or rank, but had yet to bring the subject up. Looking around, Kenneth suddenly realised that apart from himself and the doctor, everyone in the room was female. He was starting to feel a little outnumbered!

"Crewmen," the Captain announced, suddenly turning towards them. "Stand at ease. We have a surprise for you. This is Commander Joric, "she indicated the turian standing next to her. "She'll be leading some of you – an elite few – on Gellix. As most of you will know the planet has a colourful history. There are a number of ex-penal colonies, unexploded ordnance, and unoccupied residential centres on the planet, and Arcadias has been honoured to help make the garden world fit for habitation. It is our privilege as representatives of the Citadel races, and its newest member species, to commence that task. Those crewmembers selected are the leaders in their field. Representatives like our colleague from the Asari Republic." She tipped her head to the asari. "Erata D'Ceni is an unparalleled engineer and will doubtless prove invaluable to our Gellix team." Verress turned towards Pella. "From our own company Artificer First Class Pella Vettiiill has been honoured to
represent the *Arcadias* crew and will, I'm certain, do her ship proud."

The Captain moved forward towards the two humans.

"Our newest member race will be represented by Engineer Gabriella Daniels." Gabby's eyes widened in surprise, she glanced across at Kenneth. "Her skill was assessed to be immaculate; almost turian in her discipline and efficiency."

"Thank you, sir," Gabby blurted out, "I'm not sure what I've done to warrant this…"

"*Everything* you've done has warranted this, Engineer," the Captain interrupted her, "I don't want to hear protestations of modesty. Accept the honour that's been handed you and move on." The Captain's gaze roamed over the assembled crew. "The shuttle to the capital Anadondus will leave tomorrow morning. Until that time you are to make the Gellix team feel as welcome and comfortable as I make my own crew. Consider yourselves dismissed. And by all means feel free to mingle."

The group relaxed as the Captain turned away from them and moved to converse with Commander Joric. Kenneth turned to Gabby.

"As welcome as her own crew?" he repeated in a hushed voice. "Are we meant to scare them awake at three-in-the-morning and yell 'fooled you'?"


"Are you okay, Pella?" Severan's voice suddenly asked. Kenneth glanced up at the Liaison Officer, then turned to the artificer.

"Gellix," Pella moaned, a pained expression on her face. "It's gonna be cold. I hate the cold. Of all the worlds we have to recolonize it has to be a levo-amino ex-prison planet. I couldn't have been honoured with say, a trip to Oma Ker. The beaches there are beautiful!"

"The work is its own reward, Artificer," Severan reminded her, a wry smile creeping across her face.

Pella gave her a long-suffering smile. "And it is my privilege to serve. But, a nice massage, pleasurable company and a glass or two of Cipritine hooch is a better reward to my mind!"

"My thoughts exactly," a new voice piped up, "especially the pleasurable company!"

Kenneth turned to address the amiable face of the asari. She extended her hand.

"Erata D'Ceni," she stated, shaking Kenneth's hand. "Structural Engineer from the Order of Serrice on Thessia."

"D'Ceni is part of Engineers Without Frontiers," Severan explained.

"And equally proud to serve," Erata added with a wide grin. "As long as drinks are still in the offing."

"Kenneth Donnelly," Kenneth introduced himself. "This is Gabriella."

"I heard the Captain," Erata reminded him. "We'll be spending a lot of time together. And I have quite a bit of experience working with humans." She shook her hand, her eyes roaming up and down Gabby's figure. "I'm certain we shall be firm friends," the asari assured her.

Kenneth's eyes widened slightly; a sly smile creeping across his face. He leaned in to whisper to Gabby as the asari shook hands with Pella.
"Looks like you're a hit with our newest crewmate." Gabby glared at him, an expression he'd become so used to, and one he would miss he had to admit. "You will tell me *everything* that happens, won't you?"

"In your dreams, Kenneth."

"Aye, a man can dream."

There was a rare atmosphere of levity on-board *Arcadias*. The visiting engineers' presence had led to a momentary relaxation of the rules. And not just during the shifts in the Engine Room. While Pella was congratulated, ragged on or generally ribbed cheerfully by the other artificers, Erata's presence seemed to enliven the rest of the ship. The cadets especially regaled her with stories of their exploits in combat. Of course, most of those stories were based on the histories of previous *Arcadias'* crew, but if she secretly realised the deception she didn't show it. She listened politely and made all the right impressed noises at appropriate moments.

While Kenneth enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere he was surprisingly troubled by the thought of Gabby being sent away without him. In all the time he'd known her they'd always worked together. Ever since graduating from tech academy they'd formed a close team and now it was being split, if only for a short period. He was going to miss her playful teasing and occasional earnest demeanour. He tried to dismiss the feelings; writing them off as the fact he was going to be the only human on-board a turian vessel.

The next morning came way too quickly for his liking. Various provisions had to be loaded onto the waiting shuttle for the visiting crew. Levo-amino rations for Gabby and Erata and a large quantity of dextro rations for Pella and the Gellix crew (Commander Joric had taken the opportunity to restock from *Arcadias*' supplies).

Erata and Pella were already clambering aboard the shuttle when Kenneth waylaid Gabby as she waited for the cargo to be loaded.

"Now, you're sure you have everything you need?" he asked.

"For the fifth time, Kenneth, yes! Would you like to repack my kit-bag?"

"No, customs don't like you doing that," he joked. She rolled her eyes and turned away from him. "Safe journey, Engineer," he persisted, "be sure to wrap up warm, it's gonna be cold down there. Do you have thermal underwear?"

"Like I'm gonna tell you what underwear I'm wearing," Gabby retorted.

"Well, if you won't indulge me, at least give a call when you get there. You will remember to write, won't you?"

"Kenneth…"

"And play nice with the other kids. I don't want to hear from their parents while you're away."

Gabby shot him a withering glance. "You are such a dick!"

"I'm merely playing to the crowd." Exasperated, Gabby shook her head and turned to get on the shuttle. She paused as Kenneth grabbed her arm. "In all seriousness, Gabby, be safe. Just… Take care of yourself. I don't know how I'm gonna cope without you..."
Touched by his sincerity, Gabriella was a little taken aback by this display of genuine concern. "Don't worry, Kenneth," she reassured him, "I'll be back before you know it."

"And try to get friendly with Erata – I think she likes you…"

There was a pause in the embarkation as Gabby punched Kenneth on the arm. "Ass!" she said with feeling, before turning and stomping onto the shuttle. She took her seat next to Pella and watched Kenneth wave them off.

"Be sure to take pictures!" he yelled cheerfully as she was swallowed by the doors.

The shuttle lifted from its rails and gracefully slipped out of the shuttle bay, gliding towards the blue-white exosphere of the planet below. He watched it until the long bright flare of atmospheric re-entry obscured the vehicle.

Feeling unexpectedly hollow, Kenneth wandered back to the Engine Room to begin his shift.

The day passed slowly. Without someone to talk to Kenneth found the work increasingly monotonous. He'd become used to a routine, a certain way of working, and this new development had thrown him off his game. The absence of Gabby proved a difficult hurdle to overcome. He hadn't expected to miss his friend quite so much – Kenneth found he was interacting with the crew less.

Relief came when Officer Severan made one of her regular visits to the Engine Room. He'd developed quite a rapport with her this past week. She'd acquired an interest in Scotland (he had no idea where that had come from) and would often ask to be entertained with stories from his childhood. They were stories he loved to tell because she loved to hear them.

"I think there's something wrong with the acoustics in here," she stated as she wandered down the stairwell. "There is definitely something off… I can't quite put my finger on what's missing… Oh, wait, yep. I can hear the Core humming. Normally there's a constant barrage of discussion down here. It's just way too quiet now." She smiled at him. "How are you doing, Donnelly?"

"Tolerably well, sir," he replied agreeably. "Getting used to the quiet."

"It won't be for long, Donnelly. Couple of weeks - three at the outside - and Daniels should be back from Gellix."

"Just unusual being the only human on-board, sir. Not that I begrudge the company. Leptis and the other artificers have been very polite. Damn respectful in fact. I'm proud to call them work-mates."

"They appreciate a fellow artificer, no matter the species. I can sympathise being alone though. I once spent a week by myself at a recruitment desk on Tayseri Ward right next-door to very raucous group from Iruna. Some sort of end-of-trade-deal celebration I gathered."

"A bit uncomfortable, sir?" he asked.

"Not unless you enjoy getting hit on by drunk volus!"

"Aye, well, I can honestly say that's never been a problem for me," Kenneth stated.

"I'm wondering: How's your work schedule looking for the next few days, Donnelly?"

"Consistent, sir. My schedule involves monitoring the core followed by many days of core monitoring."
"I may be able to help there," she said, smiling. "You don't have to spend all your time alone down here."

"No sir?"

"It's possible I could use someone with your know-how. Would you like to get out and stretch your legs, Donnelly?"

"If you need me, sir."

"It would add an extra shift to your day. I was thinking of a little field trip. What would you say to a quick shuttle ride to a planet with a warm climate? Interesting fauna… Pleasant views."

"I'd say it sounds like fun," Kenneth replied firmly. "Should I bring shorts?"

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19°34′34″ N 51°28′38″ W, Erros – 00:23 Zulu – 2nd February

The temperature bottomed out at 127°C. And it was mid-night!

Their shuttle was surprisingly spacious and comfortable; designed, as it was, for field-work and scientific surveys rather than the troop transports Kenneth had become used to. Artificer Leptis sat on the opposite side of the cabin, watching the port-side monitoring device that was set to record all geological data – While Officer Severan, sporting a figure-hugging blue exo-suit, stood at the front of the shuttle scrutinising the data scrolling across her screen. It had been weeks since Kenneth had conducted field work and his Alliance armour felt heavy and uncomfortable after so many days of inactivity.

"When you mentioned a warm climate, this isna exactly what I had in mind," Kenneth complained.

"Haven't you had terrestrial extra-vehicular or exothermic training before?" Valni asked, turning from her monitor.

"Aye, Mars and Venus. At least on Venus all you have to worry about is being cooked alive, not eaten alive."

They'd been watching the thresher maw for a little over an hour now, observing the massive, millipede-like creature as it circled a downed probe on the red, arid surface. Valni had assured them that the mountain range they were monitoring it from was a safe haven from the creature that preferred open terrain. The worrying part of that sentence, Kenneth felt, was the word 'preferred'. What if this thresher maw positively loved the mountains? In the end his fears remained private and he resolved to trust his commanding officer.

Kenneth glanced across at the Liaison Officer. Her head was turned away from him, her eyes never wavering from the view screen and the image of the thresher maw she was concentrating on. Kenneth had to admire her dedication. He'd noticed over the last few days of working together that when she put her mind to something she devoted every ounce of effort seeing it accomplished, her focus and resolve fixed on that one goal. If she was the exemplar of turian womanhood Kenneth was more than happy to take orders from her. And from this angle, he couldn't fail to admire her fine, shapely legs and pert… Oh Lord, I'm eyeing up my alien CO – He shook his head – You don't have to ogle every woman you see! he told himself. I'm not into turians!

Valni, though, differed from the other turians on the ship. Physically, she appeared diminutive compared to the other woman, even though she was approximately the same height as Gabby; and her colouring made her stand out. The majority of Arcadias' crew had silver or dark carapaces (like
Leptis, whose skin was almost black in colour, his vivid yellow colony markings accentuating his face), whereas her tan carapace seemed uncommon; the only other turian he'd seen with a similar colouring was Pella. Her facial markings were different too. Coloured lines of dark blue and red, they coated the middle of her face like a mask, highlighting the ridges above her eyes and creating the illusion of eyebrows. She could be quite expressive with them when she talked. The markings didn't completely cover the faint mottling of her skin. Darker pigments dotted her nose and cheeks, almost like freckles (perhaps, inevitably, Kenneth had begun comparing her features to things he found familiar).

But, her most attractive feature was definitely her smile. She had what Kenneth had come to think of as 'a petawatt grin'. When she was happy, or laughed at one of Kenneth's jokes (which he told frequently now), the smile was truly a sight to see.

"What are we doing here, Chief?" Leptis asked suddenly. "What am I doing here? I'm no xenobiologist."

"Retrieval of technology." Valni replied. "There is something that the creature finds appealing about that downed probe and we're going to find out what. It could be a pheromone, or ground vibrations or a frequency that the maw is attracted to. Whatever the answer is, it'll be found in that soft-landed pod. That's where you two come in. If we could understand what attracts the monster, maybe we could better protect new colonies from attack – Keep the creature at bay or lure it into an ambush."

Kenneth nodded approvingly. "That would certainly be something I'd be proud to have on my record."

"So, we just have to wait for the thing to get bored and slink off." Leptis turned back to his monitor – Adjusting the sensors to compensate for the volcanic gases sweeping down the valley. "We're on the dark side of the planet, how did we even discover the probe?"

"The thresher led us to it," Valni replied. "Life signs were detected after we broke orbit from Gellix. Erros is supposed to be uninhabitable, but there it is: The most dangerous predator in the Galaxy existing quite happily in temperatures way beyond the boiling point of water. They are remarkable creatures."

"And utterly lethal," Kenneth muttered.

"Don't worry, we're safe here," Valni promised him.

They continued to observe the creature for a few more minutes, watching as it maintained a constant perimeter of the crashed tech, until, abruptly, it attacked the satellite, its mouth engulfing the probe. A bright flash consumed the monster's head and suddenly it had no head! An explosion had ripped the creature apart sending its body sprawling on the ground.

The shuttles' occupants were silent for several seconds as what they'd just witnessed sank in.

"What the bloody hell just happened?" Valni exclaimed.

"Maybe… Maybe the core was breached when the thresher attacked it?" Leptis suggested.

"No. No, I didn't register any static discharge," Kenneth stated. "There was no feedback on my sensors. That was a chemical explosion."

"The thruster module?" Valni suggested.

"I wouldn't think so," Leptis said, "thrusters are designed to withstand much worse than that."
"So, what the hell just happened?"

"Most likely... An intentional detonation. The probe was rigged to explode, Chief. Someone just blew up that thresher."

"Sir!" Kenneth shouted. He was scanning the starboard camera monitor. "I thought I saw another vehicle taking off. Are there any other turian vessels here?"

"No, we're the only ones," she replied moving beside him and glancing over his shoulder at the screen.

"Then we have company."

The tell-tale signature of directional thrusters flared on the screen. A large shuttle was lifting off from the mountain range opposite. The distance and haze of volcanic gases made it hard to identify the make.

"I see it. Keep recording." Valni flicked on her communicator. "Arcadias, this is Team One, request you track a shuttle taking off approximately five-clicks from our position."

There was a pause as the communicator flared with static, before the voice of Arcadias' comm-officer replied: "Negative, Team One. No shuttles detected in your area."

"Check your scanners, Arcadias. A shuttle is in the atmosphere and heading towards you. I need you to tell me where it's going."

"Still not seeing anything, Team One."

"It was right in front of us, Arcadias. Visual confirmation. Are your scanners faulty?"

"Negative Team One – The shuttle is not registering on our sensors."

"Not to add to our problems, Chief," Leptis almost sounded apologetic, "but that shuttle didn't show up on any of my sensors either."

Valni and Kenneth exchanged a glance.

"They must have some form of stealth systems," he said.

"How? Have you heard of this before?"

Kenneth nodded. "If it is what I think it is, then this is troubling."

"Why?"

"Because I know of only one vehicle that has stealth systems and it's a joint Alliance/Hierarchy project."

"He's right, Chief," Djalim put in. "The ship's in dry-dock at the moment awaiting its shakedown run. It's a well-publicised venture. And an expensive one. Whoever has access to that technology would need serious investment."

"So, it's either a turian or human shuttle?"

"Or a third party," Kenneth suggested. "It's possible the plans were leaked somehow."
"Yeah, that is troubling. Spirits only knows what would happen if the batarians got hold of it. If this went onto the black market…" She flicked the communicator back on. "Arcadias – Team One. Reporting a potential breach in security. Have observed a vessel with probable illegal stealth systems. Most likely stolen proprietary technology. Advise immediate alert warning to both the Hierarchy and Alliance Command. Suspect the vessel may be responsible for the intentional detonation of the probe. Will retrieve fragments from the blast site for analysis." Valni addressed the pilot. "Put us down in that gully, I want whatever's left of that technology." She turned back. "Helmets on people. We're going litter picking!"

The shuttle rose. Kenneth grabbed his helmet but stopped short of putting it on when the familiar, disorientating sense of dizziness hit him as the shuttle's inertial dampeners kicked in. He glanced across the cabin; Leptis donned his helmet, obscuring his face behind a reflective mask.

Severan was distracted from her preparations when the voice of Captain Verress echoed over the intercom. "Team One. Negative on technology retrieval." Valni waved at the pilot, ordering him to halt the shuttle. The pilot quickly complied; the shuttle drifting to hover above the gully. "Return to the ship immediately," Verress continued, "I want a full debrief on what you observed. Back-up and collate all video evidence for transmission to the Hierarchy. Under no circumstances approach that blast site. There's already been one detonation; there could be further…"

The second explosion was enormous. Blinding light flooded the cabin, forcing everyone to throw their hands and arms over their heads to shield their eyes. The shockwave hit and suddenly they were weightless, tumbling together as the seated pilot struggled for control.

They crashed against the bulkhead and each other, smashing equipment and monitors. Shards of glass and plastic floated between the flailing bodies. Kenneth had the dubious honour of being elbowed in the stomach by both of his turian commanding officers. Limbs thrashed uselessly, and painfully, around the cabin until gravity reasserted itself and the trio hit the deck. Hard!

Valni fell and found her descent cushioned by Leptis and Donnelly – The human was softer! The crewman exhaled sharply as she collapsed face-first onto him. They tumbled against the bulkhead; torsos and heads colliding as they slithered into a pile at the rear of the cabin.

The pilot yelled something she couldn't make out, and then, gradually, the shuttle rose, climbing into the atmosphere away from the fiery detonation. When he was satisfied they were out of danger the pilot switched on the comm-link.

"Elevation, ten thousand metres and climbing. Radiation levels are high but the shield is holding, sir," the pilot stated. "Looks like we've been spared the worst of it." He turned his head to take in the tangled heap of limbs that were his passengers. "Everyone OK back there?"

"I'm not sure," Valni muttered. "I may have just crushed my team."

"We are here to support you, Chief," Leptis gasped.

"Donnelly? You still breathing?" Valni asked.

"No," Kenneth wheezed. "Give me a minute, sir… And oxygen, if possible."

"Take your time, Donnelly."

"The things I do for you, Chief."

"I think I may need a new pair of ribs," Kenneth stated.
"You broke your monitor, by the way," Valni pointed out, glancing at what remained of Donnelly's station.

"That was you, Chief," Leptis said.

"You sure?"

"Yes. Just before you kicked me in the face."

"That must have hurt."

"Not as much as you elbowing me in the groin."

"Aye, that was me. Sorry."

"At least you hit something soft," Valni joked, trying to make light of the situation.

"'Somewhere warm', you said. Are all your fieldtrips like this, sir?" Kenneth asked. "And is there any chance we could vote on your next outing? 'Cause a trip to the beach sounds fantastic right about now."

Valni smiled broadly at the human. The grin lit up her face, her magenta pupils twinkling with delight. Kenneth smiled in reply; the pair chuckling together until the voice of Leptis interrupted them:

"You can get off me anytime."
After a hard day, Kenneth helps Valni unwind with a card game.

"Not your finest hour, Severan." The Captain's voice cut through the air as she paced up and down the CIC.

The four crewmen stood at attention; Severan, Donnelly, Leptis and the pilot waiting dutifully for Captain Verress to finish her interrogation.

It had been a long day. Following the explosion on Erros, a drone had been sent down to salvage whatever tech it could find from the blast site. What it had brought back could fit into a small box. The assignment had been surprisingly complex; their job complicated by the fact that Verress had ordered a blackout on the incident and only allowed the four of them to analyse the components. Not being a natural engineer, Valni quickly found herself drowning in a sea of technical terminology. Leptis completely lost her when he started talking about spatial-grammetric probes, so she was especially grateful when Kenneth came over to assist; the human kindly offering his own customised neutron scanner for her to use. It vastly improved her work-rate.

"I expected your team to conduct their search more thoroughly," Verress continued, "what happened?"

"We were lucky to get anything at all, sir. Most of the tech we retrieved was blast debris from the first explosion," Valni stated.

The Captain turned to Leptis. "What do we know about the remains of the probe?"

"That it's a mess, sir!" he replied. Verress fixed him with an icy glare. Leptis continued briskly. "No atomic signature; no idea who built it. But, we have managed to identify some of the constituent parts. The components have been sourced from all over the Galaxy. We've retrieved turian detonation components, human made capacitors, fused asari hull fragments, and even bits of a hanar field modulator. But, as I said, we have no idea who built it."

"And the intention of the probe, Artificer?" Verress asked. "I take it was no weather balloon?"

"No sir." Leptis smiled briefly at the Captain's comment. "The components have been damaged beyond repair, but I'm fairly certain its objective was to lure the thresher maw."

"For what purpose?" the Captain demanded of Leptis.

"We're still working on that, sir," he replied.

"And in the meantime, we have an unknown group gallivanting around with classified stealth systems." The Captain's gaze wandered over them, coming to linger on Kenneth. "I'm not ruling out human interference in this incident. There are no turian splinter groups currently operating with these kinds of resources. However, humanity has proven to be quite troublesome. The Terra Firma
political faction has been making considerable noise on the Citadel pushing their isolationist agenda."

"From what I know of Terra Firma, sir," Kenneth volunteered, "they appear to be a fringe group. They don't have the funding for something like this."

"Their funding has long been a matter of speculation! But, you're right, according to the last Council report they don't have the capital to finance a covert vessel. Do you know of any other human groups that have these resources?" she asked him.

"No sir, none that I'm aware of."

Verress stared at Donnelly for a few seconds, silently assessing his claim to ignorance. "Hmm," she said finally. "The fragments will be despatched to the Citadel for further analysis. This matter is not for open discussion. It is to remain classified until we have explicit orders from the Hierarchy... And from Alliance Command," she added grudgingly. "I'm not comfortable having an outsider privy to this knowledge." She rounded on Valni. "You're the one who recommended Donnelly for this mission.

"I thought we could use his expertise, Captain. And I didn't anticipate a routine field assignment becoming a political issue."

"No, you didn't, Severan," the Captain stated emphatically, her tone accusing. Her gaze continued to linger on Valni until, with small shake of her head, she turned around. "You will discuss this with no-one," she ordered, walking back to the holo-display, "dismissed."

The quartet saluted and turned, striding out of the CIC into the hall. The doors shut behind them and the group relaxed, breathing a sigh of relief.

"I think she's starting to like you, Chief," Leptis commented.

"Aye, there was definite warmth and affection there," Kenneth agreed.

"I'll head off to the shuttle bay now, if you don't need me, sir?" the pilot enquired. "Still got a few repairs on the old girl." Valni nodded at the pilot and he wandered off. The turian pulled up at the sound of Leptis yelling after him.

"Just make sure you're ready for the league tournament."

The pilot nodded and turned away, continuing down the corridor.

"Tournament?" Kenneth asked.

"The Arcadias poker league," Valni explained. "They have competitions at the start of every month. There's a game tonight."

"Arcadias has a poker league? Why was I not informed?" Kenneth demanded, mock offended.

"It's a turian only league," Leptis explained, "for competitions on the Citadel." Kenneth nodded resignedly, trying to hide his disappointment. "But, there are no rules against a human joining us for a friendly game after the tournament," Leptis added. "I could set something up between the three of us and Antoni." He turned to Valni. "How about it, Chief? You fancy a game?"

"I know I could do with some relaxation," she replied.

Kenneth agreed emphatically. "Now you're speaking my language."
Most of the activity had died down in the games room. The majority of the crew had long since gone, with only a few lounging around the seating area, chatting amiably with their co-workers. Kenneth sat at the poker table, in the seat recently vacated by the winner of the tournament (he'd hoped it might prove lucky), as he dealt out the cards to Valni, Djamil and Antoni. The trio of turians were togged out in casual outfits, the attire accentuating their thin frames. Kenneth had to marvel at the difference in their appearance out of uniform. Their work clothes were padded and armoured, bulking up their otherwise slim forms, but their casual clothes hugged their bodies, making them look half the size. The contrast in appearance out of uniform almost made them look vulnerable.

He'd been introduced to the fourth member of the group just a few hours earlier; a Marine by the name of Antoni Cressoni. Demonstrably friendly and talkative, Kenneth had taken an instant liking to him. He was an old friend of Valni's. Upon being introduced he immediately pronounced Kenneth a lifelong comrade and proceeded to demonstrate his unnatural gift for poker.

The game had been going for a couple of hours. Antoni was winning, but Valni was making a concerted effort to catch up. Leptis and Kenneth were struggling to remain in the game and, he conceded, there was a distinct possibility he could lose his chips altogether.

As the night wore on the friendly conversation had moved on to the physical differences between turians and humans.

"Does your hair move about, Donnelly?" Leptis asked.

"Aye." Kenneth smiled at the question. "Hair generally moves about."

"I only ask because I've noticed Gab... Daniels' hair is longer and more... flexible, I suppose," Djamil clarified.

"It's just a different style. Plenty of humans like to style their hair in various shapes, cut it to different lengths, colour it. It's fairly versatile. Does your crest move?"

"My head horns? Not really, they're pretty rigid."

"So, you can't style them to shape? You know, perm them or something?"

"I've no idea what 'perming' is, but body modification is quite popular on some colonies."

"Too right," Antoni put in. "Some kids like to make individual statements and get their horns curved upwards at the tip, or outwards. It always seemed a little too personal for me. It was popular where I grew up. I saw one kid with his horns flared up vertically. It was quite impressive. The sensible ones, if you can call them that, curve them downwards."

"If they curl them into hooks wouldn't they get stuck on things? You know - hats?"

"Yeah, these are pubescent kids; I don't think they've really thought it through."

"Does it hurt?" Kenneth asked. "When they curl them?"

"Yeah," Antoni replied, "but that's part of the thrill of doing it."

Kenneth thought he understood. It was like getting a tattoo or some of the more extreme body modification that humans indulged in.

As the night wore on, Valni slowly began to fall behind while Kenneth's chips were replenished by a few wins – But, not as much as Antoni. He had an almost preternatural winning streak and took
every opportunity he could to remind Valni she was struggling.

"You look like you need all the luck you can get," Antoni commented.

"I'm fine, Cressoni. Worry about your own hand," Valni replied.

"If I raise the stakes could you afford to stay in the game?" he needled her.

"Tell you what, let's find out, shall we?" Valni pushed all her remaining chips into the pot. "All in. You got the quad for this Cressoni?"

Antoni appraised Valni for a long time until he finally came to a decision.

"You're bluffing."

"I'm not bluffing," she replied.

"I've known you long enough. You're bluffing."

"It'll cost you 200 credits to find out."

"Okay. I'll meet you there." Antoni pushed his chips into the pot.

"You sure about this?" Djamil asked Antoni.

"She's bluffing." Antoni patted Djamil's hand reassuringly before folding his arms and leaning back in his chair.

Both Djamil and Kenneth exchanged a glance. Djamil slowly shook his head and discarded his cards into the muck.

"I fold," he muttered tersely, while Kenneth eagerly added 200 credits to the pot.

"You're gonna need a whole lotta luck to win this, Severan," Antoni goaded.

Kenneth leant towards Valni. "If you need a bit of extra luck you could always rub my head," he proposed.

Valni stared back at him, a shocked expression on her face. "I could do what now?"

"I'm offering - It's considered lucky," Kenneth said.

"I don't need to," she protested.

"No, go on you can touch it."

"Seriously, it's not necessary."

"It's no trouble…"

"That's a matter of opinion!"

"It's a tradition."

"That's a pretty weird tradition!"

"Last chance. I won't offer again."
Valni threw up her hands defensively. "I am not touching your head!"

Antoni and Djamil had been watching the bizarre exchange bounce back and forth. "Are all humans so forward?" Antoni asked.

"Only when they're winning," Kenneth insisted. "I'm calling it." He laid his cards on the table. "Kings full of Nines. Hope you enjoy losing, lad."

Antoni threw down his cards in frustration. Kenneth turned to Valni. "Your call, Officer Severan."

"Kings are good," Valni conceded. "I only have Tens." Kenneth grinned wildly and moved to gather his chips. "Of course, I have all the Tens. And an Ace." She laid the cards out. "How does four-of-a-kind stack up against a full house, would you say?"

Antoni laughed and clapped his hands together.

"Oh, nicely done, Severan."

"You do have a good poker face," Kenneth said, impressed. "Guess you didn't need to rub the head after all."

Valni glanced slyly across at him as she gathered up her winnings. "Maybe later," she said, smirking.

__Arcadias__ seemed eerily quiet at this time during the night-shift. Only a few solitary crewmembers had been encountered so far as Valni and Kenneth strolled together, back to their own cabins from the games room; their fellow poker players having recently retired to the crew quarters.

"How long have you known Djamil and Antoni?" Kenneth asked.

"Djamil, only about two years; but I've known Antoni since before we graduated from military college together. He was a visiting student from Taetrus. I got involved in a fight with some of the other cadets and that's how we met. We've been practically conjoined ever since."

"He helped you out in a fight?" Kenneth asked.

"No, I helped him. It was tradition to 'initiate' the new guy; which usually involved the inventive use of wooden clubs; and some of the other students took it too far. I defended him."

"And by 'defended him' you mean you…?"

"I beat the living crap out of his tormentors," Valni clarified.

"Wow! That's deeply impressive and a tad scary."

"Yeah, I have that effect on people," Valni added, a wry grin spreading across her face.

"Well, Antoni seems like a fun guy and a good friend."

"He's always been there for me – I'm very lucky to have him," Valni said firmly.

"Oh." Kenneth's smile seemed to falter as he considered her words. "So, does that mean… are you and Antoni… um… you know, close?" he asked. Valni's eyes widened. Kenneth had voiced the question and immediately regretted it. What if she took offence? Assuaging his concerns, the turian shook her head and chuckled softly.
"As much as we enjoy spending time together, Antoni has certain requirements that I don't meet," she replied.

"Oh." Kenneth looked genuinely affronted for her. "That seems a little harsh. What is it? The place you were born? Too strong a woman for him? The colour of your fringe?"

"Too female."

Kenneth's eyebrows arched in surprise. "What, really?"

"You didn't notice him stroking Djamil's arm?"

"I thought that was part of the game. I thought it was a good luck charm."

"I'm sure it brings Antoni repeated luck!"

"I guess the Universe really does love diversity!" Kenneth exclaimed. "Well, I hope Antoni is planning to make an honest turian out of Djamil?"

"Eh, as honest as possible on a soldier's pay."

"They seem happy." Kenneth smiled warmly.

"They are. Annoyingly happy. It does tend to highlight my own lack of a partner, so I just wish they wouldn't flaunt it in front of me, the adorable pair of gits!"

"Well, I'm glad for them. Everyone deserves to find the right person."

Valni nodded. "Yeah," she agreed, glancing at Kenneth. "Yeah, they do."

The pair came to a halt at a split in the corridor.

"That was a fun night. Any chance Djamil could arrange more games?"

"I'll be sure to ask him," Valni agreed. "And, if you're having trouble scaring up more cash for me to win, you could always put up that bottle of Scotch of yours as collateral."

Kenneth grinned broadly at the smiling turian. "You keep playing you way you did tonight and you'll be having the shirt off my back!" Valni's eyes widened, she tilted her head in confusion. "Oh, just an expression," Kenneth assured her. "It means you'll be taking everything I own." Valni nodded in understanding.

"Oh, that reminds me," she said reaching into her trouser pocket and pulling out a slim, white device, "I still have your neutron scanner. It's a handy piece of kit."

"Thank you. I thought it'd prove useful."

"Invaluable," she agreed, handing it back to him.

Her fingers grazed against his as she passed the tool back, her thumb trailing softly over his index finger. The contact lingered; the smooth skin of her fingertips feathering across his hand. For an instant, Kenneth's fingers enfolded her palm, clinching the textured but pliable skin. Eventually, Kenneth pulled away, letting his arm drop to his side. The hairs had risen up on the back of his hand.

The couple were silent for a long moment. Kenneth licked his dry lips.
"Well. Goodnight, sir," he said finally.

"Night, Donnelly."

The human turned and walked back to his cabin. She watched him wander down the corridor until he'd disappeared from view.
Valni suggests Kenneth should experience more ship culture.
"Sounds grand. What do you have in mind?" Kenneth asked.
These are words he might regret saying...

Corridor E24, Cargo Deck, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 14:25pm Zulu – 5th February 2183 CE

The name of the cadet she'd been told to find was 'Bron'. To help vary his routine Leptis had asked Donnelly if he would mentor one of the trainee artificers (a fact Valni found both surprising and admirable). As a result, Kenneth was being shadowed by Bron today. It wasn't a name she recognised, but that wasn't surprising; practically a quarter of the crew were green recruits, arriving irregularly by shuttle from the various military colleges – Hardly enough time to get to know them all.

The last thing Leptis said before she left the Engine Room was to warn her to expect some disruption – The Cargo Deck was running a training sim.

Stepping out of the elevator, Valni found herself walking into a world of organised chaos!

The emergency simulation was in full swing. Controlled fires burned across numerous walls while cadets dragged 'wounded' colleagues down the corridor to safety. She could hear small explosions in the distance, plus the wail of sirens blaring out a continuous stream of noise, accompanied by the shrill voice of the Chief Petty Officer as he barked out orders.

"Make a hole!" a voice called out behind her. A troop of four cadets rushed past her carrying a stretcher with another trainee groaning theatrically on top. There was always a serious point to these training simulations but, Valni suspected, some of the more dramatically inclined cadets probably enjoyed themselves a little too much.

In the midst of all this activity was a single, solitary figure, holding a short length of cable in her hands and staring up into a hole in the ceiling at the far end of the corridor. Being the only one who wasn't pretending to be rescuer or hamming it up as victim, Valni strode towards her.

"Cadet – Have you seen Engineer Donnelly?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am." The cadet almost dropped the cable as she tried to salute and point at the same time. "He's up there," she said, indicating the vent.

"Good. You're the trainee?" The cadet nodded. "Donnelly keeping you on your toes, is he?" She nodded vigorously, her expression apprehensive. Valni's air softened as she recognised the demeanour of someone completely out of their depth.

"Bron? That's right, isn't it?" she enquired, trying to sound as casual as possible.

"Yes, ma'am," the cadet replied. She was tall; probably a head taller than Valni.
"Given name or family name?" Valni asked.

"Given name, sir."

*Unusual choice for a girl*, Valni thought. Not that she could talk: 'Valni' was a name more traditionally associated with men than women, even if it was supposed to be unisex. She was named after 'Valni the Ascendant'; great General of Palaven from the time of the Unification War. Valni briefly reflected on the way the cards of her life had been dealt. *What with my name and a genetic disposition for controlled violence, my parents really did a number on me, didn't they?* she ruminated. That was partly the reason she liked the *Hello Krogi* line of clothing so much: An Insipid attempt to be a shade more feminine.

Or at least, that's what she told herself.

"Officer Severan, welcome!" a cheerful voice hailed her. Valni looked up to see the torso of Donnelly, dangling upside-down from the hole in the ceiling. "Have you come to join our little party?" he asked happily.

Valni winced as a small scale explosion blew the doors off the room behind her. "I'm conducting drills with the cadets later, but I merely wanted to make sure my charge hadn't been blown up!" She glanced around at the ruined deck. "Sorry about the working environment, Donnelly."

"Oh, we're enjoying it, aren't we Bron?" The cadet nodded mutely, her eyes wide with barely suppressed alarm. "Makes for an interesting change of pace!" Kenneth added.

"I don't doubt it," Valni agreed as Kenneth disappeared back into the ceiling. Valni glanced across at the cadet. She looked a little overwhelmed by everything happening around her. This was probably the first time she'd even seen a human, let alone worked with one. The Liaison Officer wondered what the cadet found scarier, the explosions or the fact her mentor was an alien? Valni attempted to distract her from the whirligig of activity. "This your first week on Arcadias, Bron?"

"First day, ma'am," the cadet replied.

"I think this is what's termed a 'baptism of fire'," Valni observed. Another blast shattered a small crate sitting a little way down the corridor. The cadet flinched. "Don't worry, the explosions are mainly flash-bangs and smoke grenades; this is as rough as it gets on training sims. The real stress comes during your combat instruction."

"I haven't met my combat instructor, ma'am," Bron stated.

"Yes, you have. That would be me." If it was possible for the cadet's eyes to widen further, then Bron found a way. "Of course, you realise that as a trainee artificer your role isn't just to learn from the senior staff, don't you?"

"Ma'am?"

"Part your job is also to be alert to the threat from alien visitors."

"It is… Ma'am?"

"Certainly." She glanced up at the hole in the ceiling. "Humans especially. Keep an eye on the Engineer." Valni lowered her voice conspiratorially. "It's not unknown for humans to hoard shiny objects and use them to build nests!"

"Is that true?" the cadet asked, a look of panic in her eye.
"Aye, that's right." Donnelly's head poked through the hatch. "We also like pina coladas and getting caught in the rain!"

Valni felt a little guilty at the sheer level of bewilderment on the cadet's face. But, at least she didn't appear to be worried about the explosions anymore! Valni smiled reassuringly and winked at the cadet.

Bron frowned. "Is something wrong with your eye, ma'am?"

"Doesn't matter," Valni muttered. "Tell me about your work. What are you here to repair?"

Her answer came in the form of the jet of ice-water hitting her. The sprinklers had suddenly sprung to life, drenching every occupant of the Cargo Deck. 

Arcadias did have modern fire suppression systems, but the Captain had insisted on keeping the older (some would say archaic) sprinkler systems so they could be used in combat drills.

Donnelly's feet emerged through the hole in the ceiling as he slithered out of the vent, dropping nimbly to the floor.

"That got it going," he stated; his head and shoulders quickly saturated by the water. "Not really my area of expertise but it's good to get out of the Engine Room now and then. Thank you, Bron."

Taking the cable from the trainee, Kenneth knelt down and pulled up a section of the floor, before reinserting the cable into its fixings.

Both turians watched him work – Bron in particular – The trainee's eyes lowered, her gaze seemingly fixed on Kenneth's posterior. Valni stared at her for a long moment, amazed at the cadet's blatant ogling.

"Eyes front, cadet," Valni told her sternly.

"Ma'am," Bron mumbled, her head snapping forward, "just… keeping an eye on the human."

Valni allowed herself a brief smile at the cadet's expense. She wasn't sure if she should be jealous or relieved that someone other than herself was showing an interest in Kenneth; but still, she couldn't blame the cadet really; Engineer Donnelly did have a particularly nice posterior! And, she especially liked the way his wet trousers clung to his legs, emphasising his curvaceous firm…

"Well, that shouldn't be any more of a problem," Kenneth rose to his feet. Valni looked up hurriedly. "You've done a fine job today, Bron," he told the cadet. "Head off and change. Meet back in the Engine Room in thirty minutes."

"Yes, sir," Bron assented. She turned and made her way through the chaos of the amateur dramatics; passing a cadet who tried to divert her with his cries of: "Oh, the pain! The pain! The pain of it all!"

The pair turned and wandered down the corridor. "How's she getting on?" Valni asked.

"She's a bright one. Promising engineer – Bit shy – Needs to be a bit more assertive; more forward, perhaps?"

"Oh, I think she was being plenty forward."

"I need to towel off," Kenneth stated, shivering under the icy spray. "God, it's freezing…"

"I thought you liked getting caught in the rain?" Valni teased.
They reached the elevator and stepped inside, relishing the warm recirculated air and relative humidity; their clothes started to steam. Valni unzipped her jacket and rolled it off her shoulders, leaving her in a regulation Hierarchy undershirt.

"What's your plan? Hitting the showers then getting into a dry uniform? I assume you won't be training the recruits like that?" Kenneth asked indicating her waterlogged garb.

"No, I'll put on a fresh jumpsuit," she said glancing down at the dripping clothes.

Kenneth quickly regarded her. He was struck by the fact that she didn't look half-bad soaking wet. Small water droplets spilled down her face into her eyes. Kenneth had to fight back the urge to wipe away the water from her forehead. He ran his hand through his own saturated hair.

"Um… Will the usual suspects be joining us tonight?" he asked casually. Valni nodded. The four of them had become something of a fixture in the games room; both Djamil and Antoni seemed to really enjoy the human's company. Valni was pleased that their partnership had come alive. She and Kenneth found themselves in-synch, both in the work place and in their off-duty hours.

"You know, you're very informal," Kenneth noted smiling. "Your visits hardly feel like supervisory appointments, more like social calls."

"Speaking of which: Leptis suggested you might like to get away from the poker table tonight – maybe experience a bit more of ship culture?"

"Sounds grand," Kenneth agreed heartily, "I'm all for cultural exchanges. What did he have in mind?"

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**Sparring Hall, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 20:25pm Zulu**

"I canna believe you talked me into this!"

Finding sparring gloves that fitted him had proven difficult. The fact that humans had five fingers compared to a turian's three was trouble enough, but Valni had to scout around to find gloves that were sufficiently wide so Kenneth could fit his hand inside. The pair she'd found that did fit were constricting; the gloves splitting his fingers painfully in the middle.

Kenneth was a little uncomfortable with the fact that such a large crowd had gathered to watch the match. He hadn't planned on doing this, but Antoni had suggested it a little while after they'd entered the hall. Two of the fighters who had arranged to spar were unexpectedly placed on assignment, so Cressoni volunteered himself and Kenneth. When word got out that a turian marine was going to fight a human the hall was soon overwhelmed with off-duty personnel eager to see the match. Kenneth was rapidly regretting his decision to agree to the bout.

"Don't worry, Donnelly, I'll go easy on you," Antoni smacked him good-naturedly on the back and wandered over to his own corner.

Djamil stood at the other side of the ring, waiting to assist Antoni. Valni had offered to be Kenneth's second and was helping him as he struggled into his gloves.

"I thought we were here to watch a sparring match?" he complained.

"Must be a snafu with the translator," Valni replied, grinning. She pointed to the assembled crowd.
"They are here to watch a sparring match. You're here to protect the honour of the Alliance."

"Perhaps we could discuss my general lack of honour? And fighting skills." Severan wound the straps of the glove carefully around his wrist and secured them. "And, by the way, 'snafu'?" Kenneth added, "I don't think there's anything wrong with the translator."

Valni patted Kenneth reassuringly on the shoulder. "It's just a bit of fun, Kenneth. You'll be fine. He's not going to hurt you. Not if he knows what's good for him."

Kenneth suddenly realised this was the first time Valni had called him by his first name. The idea of a practice match hadn't seemed that reckless when Antoni first suggested it. The initially small crowd and the interested expression on Valni's face had convinced him to accept the challenge. Perhaps a few rounds against a turian marine would impress her? And, for some reason, he wanted her to be impressed with more than just his engineering skills.

"What are the rules?" he asked nervously. "Is he allowed to kick as well as punch?"

"Sure. Isn't that how the Alliance does it?"

"Frankly, I wish I knew how the Alliance does it!" He squared his shoulders. "Couldn't you show me a few moves first?" he asked hopefully.

"I would, but… I'm not allowed to do that right now - Orders." Valni looked down fleetingly, refusing to make eye contact. Was she embarrassed?

"Any last words of advice?" he pressed.

Valni glanced up. "Yeah. Hit your opponent and try not to fall over."

"You're a wonderful teacher."

"It's a gift."

Kenneth took a deep breath. "Okay. I'm ready."

The human turned to face his opponent who was already poised in an attacking stance. The match started immediately it seemed. He crouched into what he hoped was a good fighting posture. He tried to recall anything from basic training, but all the knowledge from all his years of Alliance combat exercises momentarily eluded him.

The first round was fairly brief. Kenneth threw a few wild punches which Antoni dodged easily, and then responded with a gentle (by Antoni's standards) one-two punch to Kenneth's ribs. The human staggered back and tried to defend himself from another couple of hits to his torso. Antoni caught Kenneth a glancing blow to the side of the face that sent the human reeling. Disorientated, Kenneth went on the attack; throwing a left, and then a right at the turian which struck nothing but air. Antoni's speed was incredible! He, like all turians, had a wiry strength ideal for manoeuvrability and power. Kenneth quickly realised he was completely outmatched and resolved to simply defend himself. After all, the sparring match only lasted three rounds.

The end of the round couldn't have come quickly enough for Kenneth. He moved back to his corner and let Valni inspect her battered brawler. She delicately cupped his face in her hands, turning his head left and right as she examined his injury. The skin was already starting to discolour around his eye.

"Humans bruise easily, don't they?" Valni observed.
"I put it down to my fine skin and delicate bone structure."

"You weren't kidding about your fighting skills."

"Yeah, but in a competition changing a plug I bet I could thrash his arse!"

She let her hands drop away from his face; the scent from her fingers was still lingering on his cheeks. "No argument there. Fair play to you though – You may not have the ability but you're still going one-on-one with a Recon-Marine."

Kenneth's eyes roamed over the assembled crowd, coming to rest on the face of his CO. "Well, I couldn't disappoint my fans, now could I?" he said.

She smiled at him. "Colour me impressed. When this is over I'll buy you a drink."

"Make sure it has a straw," he chuckled.

"We're not all fighters, Kenneth. But, you're doing well; I think you almost touched him that one time."

"You're not helping."

"Okay, a little secret for you." Valni placed her hand on his elbow and leaned in close to his ear. Kenneth found himself inhaling her pleasing fragrance. It was actually quite… distracting. "Antoni has trouble with a minor peripheral vision defect on his left hand side," she whispered. "It's an old injury from when he detached a retina during a sparring match at military college."

"Who was he fighting?"

"Me," she admitted, "but that's not important. Just remember to stay on his left and lead with your right."

"And exploit the injury you caused?"

"Exactly!"

"I'm getting a little concerned right now."

"Stick with me, kid. I'll make you a fighter yet." She squeezed his arm affectionately and released him. Kenneth was surprised that he felt disappointed she was no longer so close.

"Okay, let's do this," he said firmly.

Turning around, Kenneth approached the turian with a lot more caution, keeping his guard up and watching his footing. Stay on his left, stay on his left, Kenneth intoned. Deciding on a course of action, Kenneth moved forward hoping to provoke Antoni into attacking. The plan worked. With his customary speed, Antoni sprung forward and struck Kenneth in the ribs. One-two, one-two; the same pattern. Kenneth waited for Antoni to attack again, looking for an opening. The turian moved and Kenneth dodged to his right, swinging his arm around and planting a fierce right-hook to the side of Antoni's head.

The turian staggered. The crowd hollered. Kenneth felt a surge of elation.

His victory was short lived. Kenneth blinked and the Marine moved so fast he seemed to vanish. Kenneth didn't even notice the blow to his head. The world suddenly took on an odd dream-like quality as his body flew backwards in what felt like slow-motion; the vaulting of the sparring hall coming into view. The last thought to cross his mind was: *That is a nicely designed ceiling*; before he fell into blissful darkness...

The human hit the canvas and remained motionless. The crowd were suddenly silenced, an awful stillness settling over the hall. For a moment, Valni stared in shock at the sight in front of her.

"Antoni!" Valni berated as she jumped into the ring.

The Marine dashed towards the prone human, quickly followed by the Chief Warrant Officer who elbowed Cressoni out of the way and checked for a pulse.

"Is he breathing?" Djaml asked behind her. He must have rushed into the ring as well. Valni didn't answer but simply crouched by Kenneth's side, holding his neck and feeling his pulse beat strongly against her fingers.

The crowd waited mutely for the human to recover. Antoni hovered anxiously next to Djamil, silently envisaging the conversation he'd be having with the Captain about this. The match had been his idea. If anything happened to Kenneth he'd never be able to forgive himself. And he didn't dare imagine what Valni would do to him. He swallowed nervously.

Mercifully, the human stirred and opened his eyes.

"How are you feeling, Donnelly?" Antoni asked.

Valni shot him what was possibly the coldest look he'd ever seen in his life.

"I'm gonna guess I didn't win?" Kenneth surmised.

"It was a close match, but no…" Djamil put in.

Valni helped Kenneth rise unsteadily to his feet. The crowd clapped politely; applauding the human's valiant effort. Kenneth waved vaguely at the crowd and allowed himself to be escorted out of the ring by his CO – The engineer comforted by her reassuring embrace. He turned to whisper in her ear:

"Couldn't we just go bowling next time?"
Chapter Summary

The fallout from Valni and Kenneth's sparring session leads to a moment of unexpected intimacy, and embarrassment.

Chapter Notes

Image: "So Soft" - created by Bayzee.
To say there had been hell to pay was an understatement! A little while after she'd wheeled Donnelly into the infirmary, the Captain had stormed through the doors. That was unusual enough in itself; the Captain rarely left the CIC if she could help it.

'The rumours were true, then!' the Captain had stated, seeing the bloodied human sitting on the examination bed with the doctor. Verress then turned towards Valni and wasted no time interrogating her: 'What did you think you were doing? He was your charge! This will not reflect well on the ship!'

The doctor came to her rescue when he stated that Kenneth's injuries were only superficial, but the Captain would have none of it. Again, Verress brought up the political angle, stating they needed good relations with the humans. 'Dealings with the Alliance must not be compromised!' This continued for quite some time; and throughout her tirade she never once spoke to Kenneth, treating him like an immobile object; deaf to his protestations and defence of his Liaison Officer. Despite the grilling, Valni didn't give Antoni up; repeatedly saying that what had happened was a regrettable accident. Verress eventually left, stalking out of the infirmary and leaving a palpable tension in her wake. Valni smiled wanly at Kenneth who looked decidedly uncomfortable. It wasn't the ideal end to their evening.

The doctor had cleared Kenneth for duty by the following morning. Valni advised him to take the day off but Kenneth had insisted that if he'd been cleared by the doc he was fit for duty.

She couldn't remain cross with Antoni for much longer. He'd been in dis-favour for most of the day (not to mention doing his damnedest to avoid her), but Valni resolved to have a chat with him later and smooth things over. Having had the night to think on it, she realised that she couldn't justify her anger at what was a genuine mistake. It would have felt hypocritical, especially having done the same thing herself. After speaking with Kenneth, she would take Antoni a peace offering and they would laugh about this. But, only when she was sure Kenneth had recovered.

Valni strode into the Engine Room for her official duty visit, waving cheerfully at Leptis as she passed through. Voices were drifting up from the Core Monitor – Valni lingered at the top of the stairs hoping not to disturb the conversation. Donnelly was standing before his monitor chatting with
Daniels via vid-link.

"...Feeling lonely, Kenneth?"

"Not in the least, girl. I've got plenty to occupy me."

"I can see that. That's quite a shiner you've got."

"You should see the other guy."

"Why? Break a nail when you collided with his fist, did he?"

"Oh, ye of little faith! I'll have you know he'll be remembering our match for quite some time."

*That's true,* Valni thought, *I eventually found Antoni skulking in the missile silo!*

"Though, I'll admit something isna quite right here," Kenneth continued, "I'm not getting yelled at anymore, there's no shrill sound of protest from the console opposite. I canna put my finger on what's missing."

"Stuff it, Kenneth!"

"Aye, there it is. Like music to my ears. It's all coming back to me."

The image on Kenneth's screen was odd. Daniels appeared to be sitting in a small comm-room, but she was wrapped in a thick orange coat lined with some indeterminate fur, occasionally shivering against the cold. Valni could see Daniels' breath condensing in the air. The heating must have failed in the building. The Liaison Officer moved silently down the steps, hoping to hover on the side-lines, but her intention of remaining inconspicuous was dashed when Daniels noticed her.

"Hello ma'am," Gabriella offered happily. Kenneth turned around, a bright smile spreading across his discoloured face. His nose looked a little swollen and the skin around his left eye had turned a remarkable shade of purple. "How are you coping with this one?" Gabby jabbed her thumb towards Kenneth.

"He's exceptional, Daniels," Valni said, walking up to join him at the console. "I'm very impressed with him." Kenneth practically glowed at the compliment.

"He's feeling lonely," Daniels said.

"I am not feeling lonely," Kenneth insisted.

"He's bruised, battered and a bloody martyr for trouble. Keep an eye on him, would you ma'am?"

"Consider it done," Valni assented. "Though I did have a hand in getting him into trouble in the first place," she confessed.

"You wouldn't be the first, and I'm sure you won't be the last," Gabby stated. "It's all fun and games 'til someone gets hurt."

"Now you're starting to sound like my mum!" Kenneth spat.

"You know what the best way to control him is? If he gets out of line just threaten to shave his beard."

"Um..." Valni started uncertainly.
"I mean it, if he won't do what he's told just take a razor and go to town on that peach fuzz. That'll bring him round."

Valni glanced at Kenneth's full head of hair and beard, as if seeing it for the first time. "I can't say I have any experience using a razor," she admitted.

"Well, there's a first time for everything. Don't worry, ma'am, just the threat of it should be enough…"

"I'm…" Kenneth started.

"You know, actually," Gabby interrupted, "I don't think I've ever seen his face in the nude. Could you shave him anyway and send me the pictures?"

"What, just the beard?" Valni asked a little worried.

"I am standing right here, Gabby," Kenneth stated.

"Why do you think I said it?" she replied, grinning.

"I'm hanging up now," Kenneth stated firmly.

"I think I left a lady-shave in my cabin, ma'am; it's there if you need it…"

"Duly noted," Valni stated, smiling across at Kenneth. "You're being missed on Arcadias. And Leptis needs you at your station, so come back safe." The Engineer grinned and shivered a little, her eyes darting across to glance at something off-screen. "Stay warm, Daniels," Valni added.

"Doing my best, ma'am."

"See you in a fortnight, Gabby."

Daniels waved and Kenneth killed the feed. Valni turned to address the black-and-blue engineer.

"I like her." Valni smiled broadly. "She's fun."

"Gabby'll appreciate that. I don't think she's thought of as 'fun' by many people."

"You busy?"

"Got a few more hours on my shift, but most of the maintenance jobs are done. I'm just crunching core numbers at the moment." Kenneth was suddenly suspicious. "Why? You haven't entered me for another barney, have you sir? 'Cause my advice would be to put your money on the other guy!" He grinned but his smile didn't quite reach his eyes. Kenneth paused as he looked at her with something approaching shame on his face. "Sir, it wasn't my intention to get you in trouble with the Captain. That was the furthest thing from my mind."

Valni nodded. "True, I imagine the closest thing on your mind was Antoni's fist!"

"Aye, sir. I'm sorry."

"You can relax, Kenneth. Wasn't your fault."

This time the smile did extend to his eyes. "So, you have any more fieldtrips planned?"

"No. Just checking up on you."
"I'm fit-as-a-fiddle, sir. Do you wanna hear more about Scotland?"

"Not just at the moment. But… going back to what Daniels mentioned, I am a little curious about your hair."

"Really?" Kenneth looked confused. "It's not that interesting."

"Depends on your perspective. I would even go so far as to say that you're probably unique."

"I am considered one-of-a-kind," he grinned.

Valni rolled her eyes and smiled. "You know, there are currently nine Citadel races, including yours and mine, plus an extra five space-faring species outside Citadel controlled territory, and I personally don't know of any other one of them that have hair on their head and face like that."

"It's all over, actually; to a greater or lesser extent."

"All over your body?" she exclaimed. Kenneth nodded. "You don't have to style all of it, do you?"

Kenneth laughed. "Only the bits that show," he replied, indicating his head.

"I imagine that'd get itchy? What with your clothes covering it all the time."

"It's not that thick. Not as much as on my head. Just in patches. You know; legs, chest and… other areas," he added vaguely.

Valni made a mental note to further her research on the extranet. "So, what does it feel like?"

"Like… hair. I mean, I can't really describe it to you." He tilted his head slightly as he offered her the opportunity to find out. "You're welcome to try it."

Valni recoiled slightly at the offer. "No, I couldn't do that."

"It's not a problem. It's perfectly safe. I washed it. I'm not infectious or anything."

"That's not what I'm worried about…"

Kenneth shrugged and turned back to his console. "You were asking what it felt like," he pointed out.

Valni glanced across at him, her eyes shifting up to linger on his head. Her curiosity was getting the better of her.

"I wasn't sure if it was presumptuous… or not," she muttered. Kenneth glanced at her quizzically. "You, er… It wouldn't hurt you, would it?"

"Hardly," he stated, running his own hand through his hair.

Valni moved towards him. "Look… you sure you don't mind?"

"No, not at all."

"I mean, I don't want to appear forward or anything."

"Nothing could make me think that."

She reached her hand out. "You're absolutely certain?"
"Knock yourself out."

"What?" Valni pulled up short at the odd human expression.

Kenneth let out a sigh and grabbed Valni's wrist, placing her hand on top of his head. Valni stilled herself. The sensation was utterly alien; Kenneth's supple pelt pressed lightly against her skin. She blinked. This was somewhat outside her realm of experience. Valni bit her lip involuntarily; a sign of nervousness she'd taught herself to conceal, not always successfully. Tentatively, she ran her fingers through his short crop of hair. The strands flowed between her fingers, tickling her. She smiled, marvelling at the texture.

"It's so soft!" she exclaimed.

"I use conditioner," Kenneth admitted. "And a little Aloe vera goes a long way."

"Aloe vera?" Valni frowned. "What is that, some sort of grooming product? You put that on your hair?"

"Aye, 'cause I'm worth it."

"It's not going to react with my skin is it?"

"No more than the hand cream you use will react with mine."

Valni quickly withdrew her hand. "You can smell that?"

"Aye. You come in smelling of it every day." Valni backed away slightly. "It's very nice, dinna misunderstand me. But, if I havna reacted to your hand cream by now, I doubt you'd react to the stuff I put on my hair."

"It's body lotion. I have dry skin," Valni said somewhat oversensitively.

"Oh. Well, it doesn't look dry and you smell lovely." Valni's eyes widened. Kenneth quickly reviewed what he'd just said. His mind froze. "Um, what I meant was… Sir, I think that… um… You have…nice… Oh, bugger it! I'm sorry; I'm being a glaikit numpty."

Valni's mouth broke into a lopsided grin. She folded her arms, leaning back into a relaxed stance. 
"Glaikit numpty?" she repeated. "Why is the translator having so much trouble understanding you?"

"Dinna worry, it happens back home, too. The number of times Gabby's had to explain what I've just said."

"That happens a lot, does it?"

"More often than you'd think."

"You two make a good double act."

"Aye, that we do."

Valni accepted his compliment with modesty. "Well, thank you for noticing I smell 'lovely'."

"I try to do my bit establishing amicable interplanetary relations," he replied. Both of them broke into broad grins.

"And for the record," Valni continued, "your hair smells nice, too."
"I should damn well hope so; the amount of credits I spend on it!"

"Yeah, I wouldn't spread that around."

There was an insistent beep at Kenneth's console. He turned back to adjust the clamorous coolant sensors. "Frankly, I'm surprised the stuff hasna run down my face with the heat in here," he stated. "Why do they have to keep it so damn hot?"

"It's only slightly warmer than the temperature on Palaven," Valni said. He turned sharply towards her, a surprised expression on his face. "This is normal for me," she added, "it's not our fault Earth is colder than Palaven - That's probably the reason you need so much hair - Especially at the poles. All that snow. I wouldn't like it."

"So, not big on skiing then?" Kenneth noted dryly. "Well, I feel sorry for Pella. There's quite a bit of snow on Gellix. I'm not surprised you don't like the ice. In those temperatures all that metal around you must get freezing."

"What do you mean?" Valni queried; her brow furrowing.

"Well, I read that turians have metal dermal plates." Kenneth explained. "Having cold metal on your skin it's no wonder you prefer the warm."

"Our plates aren't cold!" Valni protested. "We're warm blooded. They're lined with capillaries to increase circulation."

"Really?" Kenneth asked incredulously.

"What, you don't believe me?" she asked, frowning. She shifting forward, indicating her mandible. "Look, feel them."

Kenneth glanced at her warily. "Aye, now that seems a little personal. I wouldn't wanna be hauled before the Captain for harassment."

Now it was Valni's turn to grab Kenneth's hand, forcing his palm against the carapace of her face. What he expected to be cold metal turned out to be surprisingly warm. The skin flexed under his touch, the carapace pliable and smooth. He ran his hand gingerly along its surface; it was thicker in places, thinner where it needed greater flexibility.

"That's amazing," he breathed.

Valni grinned. "You're constantly surprised by new developments on these programmes," she teased.

"True. I tended to think turians were a little too serious, too disciplined, no sense of humour."

Kenneth's hand progressed to her forehead. "But, this programme really has opened my eyes…” His fingers moved up to caress the top of her head. She gasped. "Even your crest is warm – what?"

Valni had grabbed his wrist and moved his hand away.

"Touching someone's crest is quite intimate," she said earnestly, still holding his arm.

"Oh, my God! I'm so sorry…"

"I should have explained…"

"I didn't mean… I just assumed, with the hair…"

"It's fine…"
"That's not what I was trying…"

"I understand – It was a mistake."

"That was unforgivable…"

Valni finally released Kenneth's wrist and the couple stared at each other, an uncomfortable silence building between them.

"I… should go," Valni said hesitantly. She rapidly exited the deck, disappearing up the stairwell.

She was gone before Kenneth could react.

"Numpty!" Kenneth whacked the palm of his hand against his forehead. He couldn't believe it: He had just groped a crewmate. Admittedly it was a mistake but that didn't make him feel any better.

Kenneth leaned towards the bulkhead and listened to the resounding clangs as and rapped his head repeatedly against the wall.

Valni didn't return to the engine room for the rest of the day. Kenneth worried that he's gone too far; that he'd irreparably damaged their burgeoning friendship. He half expected to be called to the CIC to explain his actions. That would have looked good on his record! Here he was, an Alliance representative on an alien vessel, and he'd behaved in conduct unbecoming of an officer. Although, he realised, not speaking to Valni again worried him more. He sweated out his concerns and impatiently waited for his shift to end.

By the time the night-shift had arrived Kenneth's anxiety had almost overwhelmed him. He barely acknowledged the artificer relieving him and practically ran out of the Core Monitor.

Where would Valni be now? Striding through the second-tier of Engineering he resolved to start his search in the mess hall.

The Engine Room doors opened and he almost bowled into the Liaison Officer.

"Hi," she began, stepping away from the doors.

"Hi. Sir… I was just coming to find you."

"Yeah, I was waylaid by the Captain. Look, I think we need to clear the air a bit."

"Of course, sir! I wanted to apologise again…"

Valni cut him off: "You don't need to. It was a mistake. Don't feel bad about it." Kenneth opened his mouth to protest but she persevered. "I held your hand against my face. It was my job to define turian comfort zones. You couldn't have…"

"I crossed the line, sir," Kenneth said firmly. "When all-is-said-and-done I invaded your privacy. I… groped my commanding officer, someone I respect deeply and don't wish to insult. It was totally unacceptable. As much as I may joke about other women I do respect their authority and abilities. I apologise, sir. And I shouldn't have touched your fringe."

"Hellloo?" a voice piped in. The pair turned to face Djamil who was standing in the Engine Room doorway, eyes wide. "Might I point out this is a public corridor. Perhaps you'd like to take this conversation elsewhere? Just a thought…" He moved away down the passageway.

The human and turian stared at each other for a moment, silently assessing Djamil's line of reasoning.
"Apology accepted, Donnelly," she said eventually. "This will stay between the two of us."

"The three of us!" a voice yelled from the far end of the corridor.

"Shut up, Leptis!" Valni called over her shoulder. She turned back to the visiting engineer. "Well, I don't know about you but I'm famished. Fancy a bite to eat?"

"Aye, I'm starving."

"Walk with me. Just… keep your hands to yourself," she added, grinning.

The visiting engineer smiled back; gazing with respect and admiration at the turian woman as she led him towards the mess hall, chatting pleasantly.

Kenneth had never considered any member of another species attractive before – Well, apart from the asari, that was a no-brainer – But, a turian? Valni, though, had a definite quality. She looked typically turian, at least to his eyes, but Kenneth could see individual elements that made her… beautiful. Her eyes sparkled when she smiled; her voice was lilting and melodic; he especially admired her sense of humour and even found beauty in the way her mandibles twitched when she was happy. She was a joy to work with: Her personality was exuberant and she had an infectious laugh. But, despite all of this he was still finding it difficult to overcome his own preconceptions regarding physical attraction. While he could admire her elegant athletic figure – the thin waist and wide hips – turian women had no breasts, although Valni's chest was slightly more prominent than the males. Kenneth shook his head, chiding himself. He wondered if it was wrong to find someone alluring when they lacked the sexual dimorphism that, as a human, he'd been programmed to like.

Plus, she was a friend and a crewmate; he shouldn't be objectifying her like this!

_Hang on a minute, I do that all the time!_

Aye! But, when he did it on Alliance vessels he had no real _affection_ for the women he talked about…

Kenneth almost stopped dead in his tracks. This sudden admission stunned him. He really did have feelings for Valni. How could this have happened?

_What the hell are you going to do now, Ken?_
Cultural Exchange

Chapter Summary

Valni decides to take the bull by the horns (or the human by the hair) and approaches Kenneth to tell him how she feels... in her own inimitable fashion!


The punching bag strained under the fierce volley of blows; each punch and kick highlighted by little puffs of dust escaping from the bag. It was late; the gym was empty as Valni worked off the frustrations of the day. How could she be so careless? First she gets the human sent to Medical with head injuries, and now this! It was her responsibility to recognize the alien's private boundaries, and to explicitly clarify turian personal boundaries to the visitors.

Spirits damn it! Why was this role proving so difficult?

She fully understood why she'd been given the job. It was punishment. No-one else wanted to be 'Liaison Officer' so it was given to her. And what did she know about humans? Nothing! This was all because of that sparring match with the Captain – A martial arts champion herself, Verress had wanted someone experienced to train with. She just under-estimated Valni's abilities, thought she could show-off with a subordinate. In retrospect, Valni should probably have gone easy on her. But the Captain's instructions had been clear, 'Show me what you can do. Don't hold back.'

So, Valni didn't.

Oh, Spirits, that was dumb!

Twenty seconds into the match the Captain was knocked unconscious.

Valni honestly thought she'd block that spinning kick, or duck, or do something. She telegraphed the spin early enough. But, no – The Captain's head went straight to the canvas and she didn't get up. Valni was mortified. The doctor dashed into the ring to treat the Captain promptly, but Verress still had to wear an eye patch for a week!

It had caused quite a stir when they'd carried the Captain to the infirmary; the crew staring; Valni's name whispered in passing; rumours flying about. To add insult to injury (literally) Valni got a 'reputation': 'Cap Killer'; 'One-kick'; 'Avenging Valni'; 'The Severnator' – All terribly amusing nicknames. The Captain even began voicing concerns about how seriously Valni might injure a less skilled partner during sparring and the crew were actively discouraged from challenging her.

Eventually, she couldn't find anyone to spar with.

The crowning injustice was the directive that came from Verress: 'unless part of your detachment training, or a challenge match, the ring is off-limits to you, Severan'.

And then she was given this role.

So far she wasn't doing a terribly good job. She realised that part of the problem was that she liked Kenneth. She liked him a lot. And that was affecting her judgement. She was becoming sloppy.
Valni ceased her relentless attack on the bag.

Well, it's time to put this problem to bed (so to speak).

She now had a choice: Either she could continue to suppress her feelings and keep brooding over Kenneth like some cloyingly irritating adolescent for the next four weeks. Or, she could confront him head on, and see how far Kenneth was willing to take their 'relationship'.

But whatever she decided to do she would have to go about it the right way.

She would have to be subtle.

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**Engine Room, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 14:02 Zulu – 7th February**

Kenneth wandered silently with the group of artificers as they returned from the Mess; the human unconsciously rubbing his cheek for the third time that day, scratching at the unshaved bristles with his fingers.

*This isn't like me at all.*

He normally took such pride in his appearance; he was so well groomed and smart back on the Perugia. But he hadn't shaved since yesterday morning, letting his 'peach fuzz', as Gabby liked to call it, grow freely on his cheeks. He was consciously trying to develop a full beard.

And he knew why, he knew exactly what he was doing. He was becoming even hairier. Because he could. Because *someone* he'd met recently seemed to like a bit of hair, and he was trying to impress her. Like some youngster trying to prove he was becoming an adult by growing a wispy moustache. It was all so… *juvenile*.

He had just entered the second tier on his way to the Core Monitor, still carrying a cup of coffee in his hand, when a voice called out to him.

"Engineer Donnelly. Could I speak to you for a moment?"

He turned at the sound. Valni was standing behind him, her expression serious, and a computer pad was grasped between her fingers.

"Yes, sir," Kenneth agreed, adopting the official tone that she'd used. She motioned for him to follow her and the pair walked back through Engineering towards the main doors. Once in the corridor, Valni turned to the controls and sealed the Engine Room. She glanced around the long connecting passageway, making certain no-one else was present.

"The orders came in from the Hierarchy," she stated in a low voice. "They've officially classified all information relating to the salvage and have sealed the file on the incident. We're not to talk about it, and it doesn't go in any log. The Captain has already given the orders to Leptis and the pilot."

"How does that relate to me? I'm not part of the Hierarchy."

"This came in too." She handed him the pad. "Alliance Command wants a complete black-out on this until they can verify how the info got out. They're launching an investigation into where that tech came from."

Kenneth placed his thumb on the security scanner to open the file, and read through the orders carefully; scrutinizing the document for the official Alliance insignia and confirmation codes:
'Start of Transcription -

Confidential – For the eyes only of Crewman Kenneth Donnelly AEC AERENG First Class.

In accordance with the articles of the Systems Alliance Navy, all information pertaining to the survey of the crashed probe and explosion on the Arrae system planet 'Erros' (on Alliance date: February 2nd 2183) is restricted and designated Classified Level One. The theft of the stealth technology reported by the 'Arcadias' Commanding Officer is not to be disseminated under any circumstances until the official report is released at a time designated by Alliance Command.

You are under strict instructions not to release this information to any person(s), human or non-human, in any form, up to and including verbal, non-verbal, written, and video communique. Failure to comply with these orders will result in your expulsion from the Systems Alliance Engineering Corp, and immediate arrest on espionage charges.

The investigation into the theft of the allied Alliance and Hierarchy stealth technology is ongoing and must not be compromised.

The Systems Alliance thanks you for your cooperation in this matter. I thank you.

End of Transcription -'

It was signed and co-signed: Admiral Steven Hackett and Captain David Anderson.

"I don't imagine it'll do much good," Kenneth muttered as he closed the document. "The information could have come from any number of channels. And once the it's in the public domain then its common knowledge; could be exploited by any group. No way of knowing who else has it."

"True, but until they've completed their investigation, they want this kept under wraps," Valni replied.

"I can do that." He handed the pad back to her. "Something like covert affairs, eh? To be kept hush, hush; under the ladar."

"Exactly," Valni relaxed her posture slightly. "No spilling this to Daniels when she gets back," she added playfully.

"I don't tell her everything," Kenneth assured her.

Valni smiled and turned to open the lock. Making their way through engineering the couple settled back into their normal casual and comfortable banter.

"This assignment certainly has been more interesting than I thought it would be," Kenneth stated.

"You thought we'd be dull?" Valni asked.

"No, I imagined you'd be reticent. You know, not wanting to share valuable new data or restricting the tech we'd be allowed to work with."

"Arcadias isn't exactly top-of-the-line anymore. As much as I like the old bird, she's an aging cruiser. No hidden secrets or delimited technology to be found here."

They padded down the stairwell to the Core Monitor.

"She's a good ship," Kenneth stated in her defence, "with a good crew. I'm glad to be serving aboard. The advantages of these Programmes far outweigh any problems we might encounter."
"What kind of problems?" Valni asked.

"Well, cultural ones specifically. I mean, there are similarities and differences between turians and humans. Programmes like this help you appreciate each other's ideas and opinions a bit more."

"I thought to get along most species had to celebrate the things that they had in common? You know, champion the things that brought them together?"

"Aye, but that doesna mean we can't celebrate the differences, too."

"I couldn't agree more," Valni stated firmly. Kenneth grinned and took a swig from his cup. After a moment's thought the turian casually added, "So, you know we don't have nipples, right?"

He choked. A mouthful of Americano suddenly erupted through his nose and mouth. Kenneth coughed several times as he tried to clear the liquid from his sinuses. Valni winced in sympathy. She'd had a similar reaction when she'd researched human physiology on the extranet last night – Their bodies could be quite squishy in places!

The Liaison Officer waited quietly for her companion to compose himself. Her delivery had been timed to perfection. Who says we don't have a sense of humour? she thought, smiling.

"You may have to run that by me one more time," Kenneth wheezed; he had tears in his eyes.

"Part of my role is to become familiar with certain aspects of human society," Valni explained, "including your biology. Being mammals, humans have nipples, don't you? And culturally they seem quite important."

"We have been known to like them," Kenneth confirmed, thumping his chest.

"Turians don't have them."

"Aye, I had heard that."

"I'm wondering if that would be an issue?" Valni asked.

"An issue? I don't quite… Um… Come again?"

"Well, a barrier preventing the formation of human/turian relationships?"

Kenneth blinked several times as he tried to absorb the question. Was he hearing this correctly? He stared at her wondering how on Earth to reply before finally settling on the most tried and tested response:

"What?"

"Social interaction between species is a normal consequence of living in Citadel controlled space," Valni explained patiently. "But, as the new race in the mix, I've been wondering how humanity would react to different communal, cultural and biological cues."

"Oooh… kay?" Kenneth frowned in confusion.

"So if, for example," Valni continued, "a human was interested in a turian for a romantic encounter, would the deficiency of areola on the turian prohibit the furthering of any kind of relationship? You know, hypothetically."

Kenneth realised his mouth was open and promptly shut it. He briefly wondered if she was having
him on; whether this was part of some elaborate joke. "The prevention of relationships?" he asked steadily.

"Yes," Valni confirmed.

"Due to nipple deficiency?"

"Quite possibly."

Kenneth mulled the query over. Several seconds passed before the most pertinent response he could imagine came to mind, "How'd we get onto this subject?"

"I asked you it."

"Fair enough. Um… well… hypothetically, I would have to say that it depended very much on the human involved. Some humans might be uncomfortable with the, um… absenteeism of nipple based body parts…" His voice petered out as his mind did some rapid calculations. "Using myself as an example, since I am the only human in the vicinity…"

"Naturally," Valni nodded in agreement.

Kenneth continued: "…I personally would be happy to cultivate a relationship with a turian, despite the obvious absence of areola activity. I like to think that I am open-minded enough to, um, see beyond the non-mammalian, de-nipped turian, to fully appreciate the personality and unique physical attributes of the aforementioned turian underneath – So to speak." He took a deep breath. "Of course, that's just my opinion; I canna speak for all humans."

Valni nodded appreciatively. "Well, that's good to know." She turned to the work station opposite, appearing to read off the data on the screen, apparently satisfied with his answer.

Kenneth stared at her, open mouthed, before slowly turning back to his console and attempting to seem busy. His mind was racing.

"Annd how about you?" he asked eventually.

"Pardon me?"

"Do you think the presence of nipples would deter any turian from a possible relationship with a human?"

Valni considered the question carefully. "Yeah, I think nipples would just be too weird!"

"Oh! Fine… Okay… Well, of course, that's perfectly valid. I mean, everyone has a different opinion on the…"

"Kenneth. I'm joking, of course. I feel the same way as you."

"Really? Well, that's good."

"Yes, it is."

"Good."

"Absolutely."

There was a slight pause as the pair stared straight ahead, wondering where the next few seconds
would take them. Valni stepped away from the console.

"Listen, I'm heading up to the messdeck for some lunch – Can I get you anything, at all?"

"No, I'm good."

"You sure?"

"Aye, you head off." Valni turned to leave. "But, one thing before you go…" Valni stopped. "In the interests of interplanetary relations – If you dinna mind me asking, of course…"

"Yes?" Valni smiled sweetly.

"…If you… don't… have nipples, what do you have? – I mean turians!" he clarified hurriedly. "What do turians have?"

Valni sidled a little closer to Kenneth, folding her arms nonchalantly. "We have pretty much the same things humans have," she explained, "except, instead of areolae, turian women have **epicormica**."

"Right… Well, that's… aye. That's what I figured. Good for you…" Kenneth was quiet again, his finger tapping rapidly on his console. The silence dragged on for a few moments. He had to ask, "What are they?"

"Well, play your cards right, you might find out."

Valni turned away, striding up the stairwell as she listened to the sound of Kenneth trying frantically to wipe away the coffee he'd just spilt on his console.

"Just alter the transfer rate by zero-point-six per cent… Kenneth? Kenneth! You listening to me?"

Kenneth snapped back into the present at the sound of Djamil's voice.

"Aye, sure," Kenneth said absently. He placed his dipole spanner over the power transfer relay and attuned the settings to Djamil's directions. The hum from the component changed in pitch slightly as the new adjustments took effect.

The environment was hot and cramped. Kenneth's breathing was laboured as he lay on his side in the duct. There appeared to be little oxygen passing through the access tube, adding to the already problematic working conditions. He glanced at his omni-tool, checking the time. He'd expected to be finished by now but the awkward, obstinate components had proved difficult to disentangle.

"Are you okay?" Leptis asked, lying on his side next to Kenneth. "You seem distracted."

"I'm fine." Kenneth stated. "Just thinking about a conversation I had earlier."

"Not more political BS, I hope? I had a very pointed chat with the Captain myself."

"No, I'm happy to take orders. Obeying a superior isn't a problem. The conversation I had after that was quite…" his voice tailed off.

"What?" Leptis asked.

"Nothing… Personal matter."
He shook his head and tried to concentrate on the job at hand. The hours dragged on as they continued to struggle with the stubborn equipment. Crawling through the ducts of the ship replacing power couplings proved particularly tiring and meant, when they finally finished the job well after 8pm, Kenneth had to return to his quarters to shower and change into a fresh uniform before he went for the evening meal.

The mess was relatively quiet as he wandered in. He took his food from the levo-amino cubicle and sat at an empty table away from the few groups. Despite the tough assignment he'd just completed Kenneth found he had no appetite. He idly prodded the food around his plate with his fork hoping it would provoke some reaction.

He was so unfocused that he didn't notice Valni walk into the hall until she suddenly sat down in the chair opposite him.

"I thought I'd find you here." She smiled warmly.

"Hi." Kenneth grinned at her. "Just got off work."

"I heard Leptis dragged you off into the bowels of the ship," she said.

"Aye. Leptis and I had to replace and realign the power couplings. Really long job; you'd think the designers would make it easier to get at the couplings. Not like on Alliance vessels. You just open a hatch near the heat exchange egress port and you're pretty much there. But then, Arcadias is an older design. Suppose they didn't think that other species might be serving on-board one day. Of course, it's easier once you've killed power to the conduit and recalibrated the ECS array. You don't want a power surge going through the main core when you're stuck in a duct next to a live…"

"Kenneth," Valni interrupted him, "you're babbling."

"Right, sorry. I was a bit preoccupied… I've been thinking about what you said."

"I hope you didn't take offence?"

"Oh no," he assured her. "No, not at all, no. I appreciate a bit of ribald humour. I've delivered my fair share of jokes over the years. I suppose it was just a surprise to be on the receiving end of one."

The expression on Valni's face froze.

"All part of the learning curve, you know?" Kenneth continued. "Being on a new ship, I'm still finding my feet. And I certainly dinna expect to find someone who tells better jokes than me."

Valni's eyes glazed over slightly. "Yeah… Yeah. A joke, definitely."

"You crack me up. You're a damn sight more fun than the XO on the Perugia."

"Oh? Well, that's good." She smiled faintly.

"I really like your sense of humour."

"Yeah." Her shoulders seemed to sag. Perhaps it was too much to hope for that he'd think she was being serious?

"I hope you don't mind me saying this, but you're different from anyone I've ever met before."

Valni stiffened in her seat, recalling all the men who'd approached her in the past assuming she was 'different', 'unusual' or 'not like the others' – Perhaps even open to certain activities.
"You're not the first person to say that," she said, all sign of humour vanishing from her face. "I've heard it many times from other people. Crewmates. Martial fighters. Men in bars. And on one memorable occasion from a group of school-girls! It gets old very quickly. Coming from you I'd like to assume that's not a bad thing?" she asked hopefully.

"No!" Kenneth stated quickly. "No, definitely not. No, I didn't mean it as a…” Kenneth backtracked hurriedly. "Let me start over. What I meant was you're not like the other women on the ship…”

"Yeah, that's what I figured," Valni replied and stood up. She turned and quickly exited the Mess. Kenneth was on his feet in a moment, chasing after her.

He caught her as she was on the cusp of the service corridors.

"Valni, wait!" he entreated quietly. She turned to face him, folding her arms. "The way you look to me, what I think of you, it's by no means derogatory. Not at all. Quite the reverse in fact. I really like you. It's strange, we only met a fortnight ago, but it's almost like I've known you for years. You're like someone from my past I've reconnected with after so long apart – Someone I never knew I missed until now. I'm very glad to have met you, and I look forward to your visits to Engineering. The day doesna seem right if you're not there. In fact, knowing you're going to visit, it makes we want to do a better job! Just ask the crew. You're an extremely popular CO. Aye, I've overheard a few of the cadets talk shop about how you look compared with some of the other officers, but I mean, even as a human I can see you're beautiful. Plus, you're intelligent, you're talented, you're funny, and you're someone I can laugh with; chat to for hours about nothing in particular and be happy just to hear the sound of your voice… I love to see you smile. It really does light up your face. And when you frown it's like the sun has darkened. Putting it simply, you make my day brighter."

There was a long pause. Valni was gazing at him, her expression unreadable. The smile on Kenneth's face fell away.

"Oh, bugger!" He swallowed as he realised he might have gone too far. "I'm being a numpty again, ain't I? Listen, forget I said anything… I'm a visitor here and we're team-mates, I shouldn't have said that just now. I was out-of-order. It doesn't reflect well on the Alliance. It was totally unprofessional and I don't want you to think less of…” Valni suddenly reached forward and cupped his left cheek; her face lingering centimetres from his own. "…Me," Kenneth finished lamely, riveted by her stare.

"You honestly think that?" Valni asked quietly.

He nodded mutely.

She stared at him for a long time…

… Then she smiled.

Her hand caressed his cheek.

"This feels different to the hair on your head," she declared, indicating the stubble beneath her fingers.

"I was trying to grow it out," Kenneth mumbled. Her hand trailed down to his chin.

"I don't know, I sort of like the contrast," she said, toying with the bristles. "The way it varies between rough and smooth. It's an interesting sensation."

"Well, I could shave it off?"
"Maybe just on the sides?" Valni suggested. "The hairs around your mouth… They're kinda growing on me."

"They're not meant to do that!" Kenneth grinned. "I'll… go back to my quarters and shave."

Valni removed her hand and regarded him thoughtfully.

"Why don't I have a go?" she suggested. "How hard can it be? And Daniels did say she wanted a picture…"

Kenneth didn't answer. He was finding it difficult to find his voice. She continued to gaze at him before leaning in and whispering four brief words.

"My cabin. Ten minutes."

Turning away, Valni strode down the corridor at speed. Kenneth stared after her, his heart rate increasing rapidly; his breathing heavy. Was this what he thought it was? Had she just invited him to…?

He'd been warned by his CO back on the *Perugia* that turians do things differently. That they sometimes treated sex casually, using it for stress relief. Having been trained in the rigid discipline of the Alliance Kenneth had laughed at the idea, not imagining for one moment that he would be involved in any turian based activity. This was all new to him. 'Fraternization with the enemy' his father would have called it. Of course, that was ancient history; they were all friends now. And one turian had just invited him to get very friendly. It was unaccountably exciting. Kenneth took in a deep breath and glanced downward.

*Aye,* I may need a moment before I try walking anywhere!

Using his omni-tool proved useful. He'd familiarised himself with the ship's layout prior to coming on-board, but up until now he's never set foot on the officer's quarterdeck. Unsure exactly where Valni's cabin was, Kenneth relied on the internal schematic displayed on his screen as he wandered down the corridor. Almost straight after their talk, Kenneth had rushed back to his quarters to grab his wet shave razor, before tucking the blade into his jacket pocket and walking in the direction of the quarterdeck, his pace brisk.

Taking a right turn, Kenneth almost walked into a couple of Bridge Staff on their way to the recreation deck. They hailed him cheerfully and he smiled in response, pretending to be on official business. The other advantage of the omni-tool was that if any of the crew happened to see him they would assume he was conducting repairs. Kenneth made his way through the mostly empty passageway towards Valni's room.

Each cabin door was marked with unique turian lettering. Glancing at the strange writing, Kenneth quickly scanned the symbols with his omni-tool, feeling unbridled relief when the inscription on the far cabin was translated as: 'Chief Warrant Officer'. He switched off the device and knocked on the door.

Waiting anxiously on the threshold, Kenneth desperately hoped that no-one else came down the corridor. He wasn't sure if what they were doing was against regulations, but was fairly confident that Valni didn't want it advertised that she was meeting a human. All he did know for certain was that he wanted to be out of sight.

It was several agonising seconds before the door slid open to reveal the smiling Liaison Officer. She had changed out of her regulation uniform and was sporting a scarlet, figure-hugging long-sleeved
Kenneth gazed fervently at the turian woman in front of him.

"Hi. Come on in," she invited.

He crossed the threshold.
Valni and Kenneth face the consequences of their first night together.

Valni was lost in reminiscence, increasingly oblivious to the activity around her. Every perception felt as though they were heightened; her mind recalling events with such clarity she could almost feel his supple hair caressing her fingers. She took a deep breath. Despite showering, her skin was still redolent of him. She tried to concentrate, to focus on a single remembered moment, but each evocative sensation blended into the next: the warmth of Kenneth's body; his curious but welcoming scent; the gentle touch of his hands; the alien texture of his skin…

Wrenching her hands at the fastener of his uniform she neatly unzipped the jacket and pushed it off his shoulders, letting it fall at his feet. Kenneth pulled his undershirt up over his head, baring his chest. She ran her fingers through his chest hair, her talons leaving narrow red welts along his skin. Kenneth didn't seem to mind. He enveloped her in his arms; the warmth of his dry palms caressing her spinal plates, gliding restlessly across her carapace…

Valni's eyes glazed over. Reality and memory intertwined to create an abstract composition of the previous night; both insubstantial and startlingly real… Kenneth moved forward and cupped her mandibles, giving her a brief, tender kiss. He lowered himself, kneeling before her, almost in reverence, and took the slip of material in his hands. Slowly, he undid the clasps at the waist, prising the delicate fabric away from her…

She was vaguely aware of the other voices in the room, but they were distant, separate; unimportant now as the miasma of remembered experience flashed haphazardly in her mind's eye: his soft skin; his heady aroma; his calming voice – Such a nice voice… "You look stunning"…. "Would you like a drink?"…. "That's a beautiful scent you're wearing"…. "Turians don't kiss?"…. "Severan"…. "I'm beginning to appreciate the advantages of beards"…. "So, they react to touch?"…. "It depends on who's doing the touching"…. "You're a vision"…. "Officer Severan?"…. "Do that again"…. "Guess I need to curb my enthusiasm"…. "That was beautiful"…. "Don't stop"…. "OH, SPIRITS!"…. "Officer Severan, do you intend to contribute to this discussion?"

Pulled back to reality by the sound of the Captain's voice, Valni glanced around the silent room. She was struck by the inquisitive gaze of all the duty officers in the CIC, and the expectant hush around her. The meeting had rambled on for half an hour and her mind had wandered. She suddenly realised that she hadn't the faintest clue what they'd been discussing. Her mind hastily flashed back to the last coherent part of the meeting.

"Certainly, Captain… I would stress the seriousness of the situation to all concerned and warn of reprisals if measures to curb the attacks are not taken quickly."

There was a pregnant pause.

"Reprisals?" the Captain asked poker-faced.

"Yes sir," Valni replied, a little uncertain now.
"Against an asari art Colonnade?"

"Sir?" Valni asked somewhat bewildered.

"Deliberations regarding the batarian raids were the previous topic of discussion. Now we're planning our part of the relief efforts in the Monoi entertainment district following the seismic quakes on the planet Lusia in the Tomaros System."

"Understood sir."

"Good, because I'd hate to think you were proposing to carpet-bomb the Monoi Art Gallery! It wouldn't look good on your resume."

"No sir," Valni agreed.

The Captain turned her attention back to the other officers. "Severan's murderous hatred of asari art installations aside, is there anything else I should be concerned about?"

"Nothing else, Captain," another officer supplied.

"That'll be all." The officers began to disperse; Verress turned her attention back towards the Liaison Officer. "Severan: A word please…"

Valni approached the Captain, feeling a little like a naughty school-girl going to see the headmistress. The Captain stepped a little away from the holo-display and fixed Valni with a penetrating stare.

"Is there a problem, Severan? You seemed to zone out for a moment there. Was I boring you?"

"No, sir, not at all, I was merely… planning out my duties with our guest."

"The human they've sent us certainly has a habit of getting into trouble. I hope you're keeping him occupied, Severan?"

"To the best of my abilities, Captain," Valni replied, trying to keep her expression neutral.

"I need you to focus, Severan; now more than ever. While the human is on-board you will display total commitment and dedication."

"Yes sir."

"The Hierarchy doesn't wholly trust the Alliance, but we have to preserve some semblance of support for this confederacy. The brass expects every member of the crew to carry out their assignments to the letter. Artificer Vettiil is keeping a close eye on Daniels, and her reports of the human are favourable so far. It's your job to maintain friendly relations with the engineer. No distractions."

"Just as you say, Captain."

"Get it together, Severan."

Saluting, Valni nodded and turned away from the Captain, following the rest of the staff as they exited the room. Once outside, Valni let the Captain's words sink in: '…Vettiil is keeping a close eye on Daniels…' She knew she shouldn't be surprised; Pella had most likely been instructed to observe Daniels' activities, just as she was monitoring Kenneth's movements in the Engine Room, but the fact Verress had kept her in the dark about Pella's orders was troubling. She outranked Pella, and all of the other artificers in engineering; as the liaison Officer, she should have been informed if a lower-
ranking crewman was taking on some of her duties…

Further musings were interrupted when Valni's omni-tool fired up, the soft orange glow lighting up her face as the friendly voice of the doctor sounded through the speakers: "Officer Severan, please report to the infirmary."

"On my way," she replied, switching off the comm-link and making her way to Medical.

The infirmary was just one deck up from Engineering – Maybe on the way back from seeing the doctor she should make a quick inspection of the Core Monitor and steal a moment to thank Kenneth? Or, maybe something more if he had time…

Their evening together had been wonderful. Valni was initially worried that her invitation might be declined (she realised later the wording of her offer may have sounded a little aggressive to a human), but Kenneth had duly appeared at her door and proved to be a perfect gentleman, if a little nervous. A grin played on her lips as she remembered the previous night. Kenneth had been kind, loving and… enthusiastic. She'd felt a little apprehensive and awkward at first. They'd chatted for a bit; Valni had provided him with a drink (a bottle of levo-amino Scotch from supplies); they'd talked about her quarters; she'd teased him, he'd laughed, and, when they'd relaxed, she asked if she could practice shaving. Kenneth, it seemed, was a more than willing volunteer.

She'd taken him into her bathroom, washed his face as he directed, applied some foam, and then slowly cut away the hairs on his cheeks. It had been weirdly... therapeutic. Just the simple act of cutting the hairs away until his skin was as smooth as her carapace was very satisfying.

From there they started discussing human culture. Gradually, the subject had moved to how humans kiss, until, finally, Valni asked him to demonstrate. Kenneth eagerly obliged. That had been fun. And very educational! It proved to be the start of an extremely enjoyable evening – One filled with tentative exploration, and the odd surprise. Some of the details were a little hazy now, but by the end a few cultural stereotypes and several blood vessels had been thoroughly broken.

Although, Valni still felt guilty about how the evening had ended. She had apologised to Kenneth – several times in fact – but their time together had been so passionate that, to her shame, she'd lost control; become a little over-excited. Kenneth had assured her that he was okay, and she'd made judicious use of her own supply of bandages, but they'd agreed it would probably be wise to make separate trips to the infirmary. Valni had gone first, feeling unexpectedly lethargic and her skin slightly inflamed. She'd hoped the doctor wouldn't realise what the symptoms meant, but now she worried that the test results had revealed something more serious.

Arriving on D-Deck, Valni made her way to the infirmary and hovered briefly by the entrance before pressing the lock. The door slid open with a hiss to reveal the surgeon hunkered down with his patient.

In his service to the crew, Dr Dacian Tessarius had been nothing less than a highly skilled professional: caring, understanding, discreet, and, quite possibly, the tallest turian she'd ever met. At well over 2.3 metres he towered above the rest of the crew, never mind the shorter human sitting in front of him. The doctor was crouched over the examination bed with Kenneth, who sat, bare-chested, the evidence of her excitement still livid and raw on his shoulder.

"Officer Severan," the doctor's face split into a sardonic grin as he looked up. "Please come and join us. Don't be shy; I believe you and Donnelly have already become very well-acquainted?"

She glanced across at Kenneth.
"I swear, I never say a word," he stated hotly, feeling her accusing eyes on him.

"You didn't have to," the doctor assured him. "Officer Severan came in earlier with symptoms of mild levo-amino induced anaphylaxis, and you have a bite wound on your clavicle! It doesn't take a genius to work this one out – Even if I am over qualified for the position."

"Such modesty, doctor," Valni smirked, slinking alongside Kenneth.

"Modesty is overrated. Give me a man proud of his actions any day." The doctor turned to his patient; a stern look of reproach on his face. "However, in your case Donnelly, a little more tact might be advisable. First a blow to the head and now teeth marks! I sincerely hope you won't be making a habit of getting injured?"

"Neither injury was exactly planned, doctor," Kenneth replied sheepishly.

"They never are," Dacian muttered, turning to retrieve something from the medical table opposite. He moved towards his patient, a pad of gauze smothered in a strange smelling liquid held between his fingers. "Now, this is going to sting, I'm afraid."

Kenneth was typically cocksure. "I'm ready. Do your worst, do - ." His words froze in the air as the gauze touched him. The liquid seared into him like acid, burning him down to the bone. Kenneth gritted his teeth, sucking in a breath against the pain. The doctor held onto his shoulder as Kenneth subconsciously tried to pull away. He glanced at the pad; small white bubbles were frothing up at the edge of the gauze, oxygenating the blood and surrounding tissue.

"Sorry about this Donnelly. We don't have any supplies of levo-amino medigel on-board. It's been requisitioned."

"Not a problem," Kenneth rasped. He could feel Valni placing a comforting hand on his arm. The pad was held down and gradually the pain subsided, to be replaced by a tingling ache. Eventually the doctor removed the pad and placed a square bandage over the wound.

"Well, you won't need stitches, at least. Keep that in place for the next few days. I'll check up on it regularly. You can get dressed now." The doctor turned to Valni. "Severan; over here, please."

The doctor took her to one side and glanced back at Kenneth who was shrugging himself painfully into his shirt, then leaned in to Valni, his voice lowering almost to a whisper.

"What you two did isn't exactly advisable, Chief. There is always an underlying danger in interspecies contact – Especially when it involves intimate contact. Your health is my main concern, so as your doctor and, I hope, your friend, I have to ask: Are you absolutely certain this is what you want?" he enquired.

Valni frowned. This is obviously the day for me to be lectured at, she thought. "My choices are my own, doctor," she replied, a little brusquer than he probably deserved. It was his job to look out for her after all.

He regarded her coolly for a long moment and then nodded gently. "Well, I have to respect your wishes, but I'd ask you to be careful; try not to take any unnecessary risks. I don't mean to lecture; I just care about your well-being." Valni opened her mouth to retort but Tesserius shot her down: "Let me give you another shot." Dacian picked up a hypo-spray from the bed-side table and filled it with a vial containing a blue liquid.

"This is an immuno-booster. It will ease discomfort and reduce swelling from any… future contact." Valni pulled down the collar of her uniform and allowed the doctor to probe her neck with the
nozzle. He placed it against her skin and injected her.

"There." He patted Valni on the shoulder. "That should do it; though you will need to come in for another booster for it to take full effect. This is a very mild case. You're lucky you haven't reacted more severely. The allergy inflames the soft tissue of the face and abdomen. I've seen some reactions that lay the patient up for months."

"It's not that serious?" Valni asked.

"Spirits, no. Your eyes haven't swollen shut, your mandibles are the right size, and you're still breathing. I'd call that a win." The doctor chuckled happily. "Just promise me you'll be safe," he added, placing a reassuring hand on Valni's arm. "Don't rush into anything, and make sure what you do you do for the right reasons – That goes for both of you," he added, turning back to the human. "Try not to make a habit of this, Donnelly. Understand?"

"Thank you, doctor," Kenneth said, wincing slightly as he zipped up his jacket.

"My pleasure – And if you have any further symptoms, like shortness of breath or you feel faint, be sure to let me know. We can't let self-inflicted illness affect the efficiency of the ship – The Captain wouldn't like that."

The couple thanked the doctor again and made for the exit; the door slid open just as Dacian's voice pulled them up.

"Oh, and Severan – No more biting."

Valni glanced between the doctor and Kenneth, a sly smile creeping across her lips. "I can't promise that, doctor," she said, turning and striding off before anyone could reply. Kenneth's eyes widened in panic; he looked across pleadingly at the doctor.

"Be seeing you again, Donnelly." Dacian could only smirk at the startled human.

Kenneth caught up with Valni as she waited for him by the elevator.

"Valni, um, you didn't mean what you said about the biting, did you…?"

In reply Valni took hold of his shoulders and placed her forehead lovingly against his, her eyes closing in delight. After a brief few moments they separated.

"What was that?" Kenneth asked.

"Something I didn't get to do last night," Valni explained. "It's a sign of affection."

"Thank you," he said with feeling.

"Do you have something similar on Earth?"

"Oh aye, many different varieties – There's a greeting in New Zealand where you rub noses."

Valni's finger ran playfully down his face. "No doubt the traditional Scottish greeting is expressed with great love and caressing of the nose?"

"No. Usually it's done with greater speed and more violence – And normally proceeded by the query: 'Ya ever had a Glasgow Kiss?'"

"Glasgow Kiss? That's a cute name."
"It's an informal greeting where you break the face of the person opposite."

"Ah." Valni seemed less keen on that tradition. "So not one to try then?"

"I wouldn't recommend it."

There was a ping as the elevator arrived. Valni stepped lightly through the doors as Kenneth sidled up beside her.

"So, no more biting?" he asked hopefully.

"We'll see," Valni teased.

The doors closed.

Kenneth's memory of the next few days became a blur.

Contrary to the Dacian's instructions, Valni could hardly keep her hands off him. Kenneth felt as though he were caught up in a whirlwind, barely having time to catch his breath. As far as they knew Tessarius had kept their relationship private. That was fine by them; they preferred it that way. While the doctor appeared to be liberal in his views, there was no guarantee the rest of the crew would be as tolerant and understanding.

They endeavoured to spend as much time together as they could; Valni relished sneaking Kenneth into her cabin – Being an engineer, and having the location of all the ship's security cameras, he was getting quite good at avoiding detection – Kenneth joked he had the makings of a master burglar.

The couple were surprised to discover they were compatible; not simply physically, but emotionally, intellectually. The fact their bodies were different shapes (admittedly a concern for Kenneth at first) quickly stopped being an issue – their first few nights of tentative exploration saw to that. Kenneth soon discovered a definite thrill in seeing her naked in the shower, and he even took the initiative and joined her in the cubicle, much to her delight. During their off-duty hours Kenneth struggled to keep the grin off his face, especially when they were with Djamil and Antoni at the poker table. On one occasion he even slipped off his shoe and daringly rubbed his toe against her shin under the table. She hardly reacted at all, sharing only a flirtatious smile with him as he gently caressed her leg right there in the games room.

One unexpected effect of their relationship was the build-up of static electricity. Any lively skin-to-skin contact induced a mild electrical current that occasionally discharged at certain moments. It was never painful, but certainly strong enough to be noticeable, and after a while Valni grew to love the sensation; even exaggerating her movements to increase the charge. Whatever this was for her; a fling, a curiosity, or the beginning of a genuine relationship (which he sincerely hoped), he was more than happy to be led by this exciting turian woman.

They barely got any sleep. Valni seemed quite taken with the amount of hair on his body and she loved to stroke a hand over his head, chest and arms. At one point, Kenneth awoke to catch Valni brushing a finger lightly over his eyebrows, apparently fascinated by the variation of thickness and colour.

But, it wasn't just a sexual attraction (any other turian and he probably wouldn't have given them a second glance), Valni was different. Kenneth felt a definite attachment developing between them. They discussed art; literature; history; technology; religion; their planet's geography; their experiences as children. They listened to music together (Kenneth liked the rock band *The Navigators*, while Valni was a fan of the asari singer *Maya*); watched vids off the extranet; played poker with Antoni
and Djamil, and, when they could, stole moments in the Engine Room – the illicit nature of their relationship adding to the excitement. Valni flirted shamelessly when they were alone in the Core Monitor, but was careful to avoid areas with monitoring devices; striving to maintain the fiction of professional workmates.

Only once were they almost discovered. The couple were locked in an enthusiastic embrace, with Valni busily running her hands over his head, when Leptis nearly walked in on them. Valni quickly feigned an interest in the Drive Core, while Djamil handed Kenneth a computer pad; the only reaction from Leptis being a bewildered expression as he stared at Kenneth's dishevelled hair.

They laughed about it afterwards, and decided to be more discreet in the future, but considering the number of crew aboard, also wondered how long they'd be able to keep their relationship private…
Awaking naked in each others arms, Kenneth and Valni's blissful moment together is rudely interrupted.

This chapter features nudity and interspecies sexual themes.

Kenneth awoke slowly, his senses gradually returning as he emerged from the cocoon of sleep. Opening his eyes, he took in the slightly unfamiliar surroundings of Valni's cabin. He wasn't quite used to it yet. It was still a surprise to wake up and be lying in someone else's bed, with another person's scent filling his nostrils – and a turian's exotic aroma at that. This went against nearly everything he'd been taught at school. From an early age, he'd been told that humans and turians were biologically incompatible; even susceptible to allergic reactions if they came into contact. So it had surprised him to find that Valni's scent was not only pleasant, but curiously intoxicating.

Kenneth tried to assess what state he was in. He knew he was naked; the tangled bed sheets draped untidily over his waist, barely covering his nudity. It hardly mattered, Kenneth rarely wore bedclothes except in the coldest temperatures, and Arcadia's average temperature was so high it was actually uncomfortable to wear bed clothes.

He was conscious of a weight pressing on his right arm and glanced over at the equally naked woman lying next to him. Valni was snuggled up close, her right hand splayed across his front, and her chest rhythmically rising and falling against his side. Lying face down, her head was turned towards him, the tip of her mandible resting on the crook of his shoulder, and the heat from her body warming him further. It was such a comforting feeling. He sighed contentedly and lightly held her hand.

He found it hard to drag his eyes away from her face. Her breathing was steady and regular; little puffs of air making the hairs on his chest dance. Every exhale caused her mandibles to flutter softly, the charming facial tremor accompanied by a muffled snore rumbling in her throat. The snore wasn't loud or off-putting, but rather a gentle background noise, and a constant reminder of her presence, which, in itself, was actually reassuring. He felt extremely lucky that he'd found someone so funny, so captivating, so willing to accept him as a partner. She wasn't human (and he wasn't turian, what did it matter?), but he felt a connection to her that he couldn't explain, and frankly didn't care to. Kenneth had actually taken to pinching himself occasionally, amazed that he'd become this fortunate.

The hand he was holding twitched as she whispered something in her sleep; a soft, unintelligible utterance that settled into a subdued murmur. He smiled. She looked so peaceful there, so relaxed.
These were the moments he cherished. The last two nights he'd woken up a little while before her – despite turians not needing as much sleep as humans – and just whiled away the minutes watching her doze.

He glanced across at the bedside chronometer. The alarm was set for zero-five-thirty (practically a lie-in!); there was still plenty of time to enjoy the moment.

Letting go of her hand, he reached across and gently stroked her mandible.

She stirred then, her eyes blinking open as she looked up at him sleepily. A grin spread across her face.

"Hi," she said, her fingers curling through his chest hairs.

"Morning, gorgeous. Didn't mean to wake you."

"Oh, I don't mind. It's a nice view to wake up to."

"What were you dreaming about?"

"It's fading now, but you were in there…"

Kenneth tightened his grip on her hand. He grinned. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah." Valni stretched her back languidly. "You were being chased in a jungle and you were calling me a 'clever girl' for some reason, but you were there."

Kenneth decided it was probably best not to watch 'Jurassic Park' again before going to bed.

Their foreheads touched in the manner Kenneth had become accustomed to. He enjoyed any physical contact with her, but her response to this greeting cheered him. She actually sighed as they touched. He closed his eyes and savoured the sensation.

"I didn't think you'd take to that so well," Valni said as she pulled away from him.

"Oh, I enjoy our 'kisses'," Kenneth replied, grinning.

She leant forward and delivered the traditional human and asari kiss to his lips, then settled down and hugged his body closer, her right leg curling over to entwine with his.

The human responded by pulling her into a tighter embrace.

"You seem to like cuddling," he observed.

"Hmm-mmm," she replied contentedly, "it's strangely relaxing. You're warm, soft and furry – Like a giant, partly shaved, comfort blanket."

Kenneth's body shook with laughter. "That's a first! I've never been called that before."

"Better get used to it."

"Oh, I'm not complaining. Getting regular bosies from a bad-ass turian warrior is no bad thing."

Valni shut her eyes as she nuzzled his neck. "Well, this bad-ass needs her snuggle-time!"

Kenneth kissed the exposed crest of her head, resting so close to his lips. "Do you think the
Hierarchy should make this mandatory therapy? For prompt stress relief, just hug a human."

"I'll be sure to suggest it to them," Valni agreed.

Suddenly, Kenneth cried out: "Ow, ow! Pins and needles!"

"What?" Valni pulled away in concern.

"The blood's rushing back to my hand." Kenneth shook the hand Valni had been lying on and carefully flexed the fingers, waiting for the uncomfortable sensation to ease.

"Pins and needles?" Valni repeated.

"Just a saying. It describes the sensation."

"Oh, like 'ice and fire'?" Kenneth frowned in confusion. "When you've been sitting for too long, or have poor circulation, your legs can feel hot and cold at the same time: 'ice and fire'."

"I can see I've got a lot to learn," Kenneth admitted.

"I'm a patient teacher," Valni assured him, settling down and resuming her embrace. Her hand grazed over the skin on his chest, letting her fingers to brush through the hairs. "To be honest, I never imagined I'd find myself in this position with someone like you."

"You mean with an alien?"

"No, an engineer," she replied. Kenneth grinned again. "I always thought I'd be with another officer, or I'd meet some proud warrior at one of the martial competitions – someone with similar interests."

"I don't know, I think what we're doing right now counts as a similar interest."

"You know what I mean. We couldn't be more dissimilar if we tried: Different backgrounds, different training, different species…"

"And yet, here we are: the lowly grease monkey and the brilliant combat specialist. I should be the one marvelling at the way my life turned out. And thankful for the fact you haven't snapped my neck in the night!"

Valni smiled. "You can thank my father for that. He's the one who taught me – Inspired me. Instilled the ideas of duty; restraint; discipline. And believe me; I needed reigning in. I was a little precocious as a child."

"Aye, I bet you were a wee terror," Kenneth said wryly.

"A tiny bit rowdy, yeah," she admitted, "and a late bloomer. I liked to play *Krogans and Hierarchy* with the local children when I was younger. The other kids… well, let's just say they learned quickly not to make fun of my height – or lack of it. I always wanted to join the military; get out there and defend the Hierarchy like the heroes in my dad's vids. It was his dream for me to join up, too; you know, following in his footsteps – but he never pushed. He wanted me to make up my own mind. It almost didn't happen; if I'd been just a couple of centimetres shorter I would have failed the entry requirements. But luckily I had my final growth spurt a few weeks before.

"I don't think I'd ever seen him happier then when I enlisted. What I've achieved; the rank and responsibilities I've gained; it's what he would have wanted. And it's not like anyone else in my family showed any interest."
She lifted her head and shifted across, supporting herself on his chest. "You know, out of a military family, I'm the only one still serving the Fleet?" Kenneth's eyebrows rose in surprise, but he remained silent, waiting for her to continue. "My two eldest brothers are in construction; while Alfren, the youngest, wants to be a surgeon; and my sister, Vereen, works as a flight technician on the Citadel – She loves it; says it allows her to meet lots of different people."

"Your father would be proud of you, then?"

"'Proud' probably isn't the word for it. Quite honestly, if everyone didn't know Verress' reputation he'd have sworn blind I was captaining Arcadias now." She adopted a deeper, gruff male voice. "My little girl, out there, protecting Palaven; leading our troops into battle; defending our colonies from invaders."

"Aye, but that's all true, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but in his version there'd be more space monsters and explosions involved! And I'd probably be wearing a superhero costume!" Kenneth laughed quietly at the mental image. "Oh, there'd be bouncing, too. He'd be doing lots of bouncing."

"I would've loved to have met him," he said. Valni didn't reply; her expression subtly changing at the suggestion of Kenneth meeting her father. She nodded slowly and lowered her head, resting it against Kenneth's shoulder as she lapsed into silence. She'd already told him that he'd passed away a few years ago, and now he mentally kicked himself for bringing the subject up. Kenneth caressed her hand, searching for something to fill the awkward silence.

"Are you going to tell anyone?" he asked, hoping to change the subject. "About us?"

"I'd prefer not to," Valni confessed, "you never know how they're gonna react."

"Relationships amongst the crew can't be that uncommon. What about Djamil and Antoni? We're not the only ones seeing each other."

"No, but we're certainly the only interspecies couple on-board. Not everyone was overjoyed at the thought of a human working on Arcadias. There's still a lot of bad feeling over the Relay 314 Incident," she admitted, referring to the disastrous first contact between humans and turians that had led to a bloody 3-month conflict, and near full-scale interstellar war, before the Council had stepped in and brokered a peace.

"That was 26 years ago," Kenneth pointed out, "I was just a wee bairn, and you weren't even born. You'd think attitudes might've changed by now?"

"Trust me: if there's one thing turians can do its hold a grudge," she muttered, "I'd like to keep them in the dark for now. It's not that I'm ashamed of us," she added, caressing his neck.

"I dinna think you were…"

"But, things are going well now. No-one's interfering, or trying to give advice, or offering their objection… Or asking what positions we like…"

"Yeah, well you get scunners asking things like that on human ships, too," he confessed; ruefully omitting the fact that, under different circumstance, one of those scunners would most likely be him.

"Do you know what Daniels would say?"

"I… hadn't really thought about it… I mean, she's my friend, I trust her like she was… like…” He
faltered, suddenly unsure. What would she say? For as long as he'd known her, Gabby had been the most open-minded, tolerant and compassionate person he'd met. She wouldn't object to this, whatever this was (he still hadn't figured out where this was going), she'd never be opposed to it, would she? No! That wouldn't be like her. He nodded decisively. "Aye, Gabby'll be supportive. She'll be happy for me…"

"I'm glad." She reached across to give him another kiss and then pulled away, a mischievous expression on her face. "You know, we still have fifteen minutes before I have to get dressed. Just how frisky are you feeling?"

"Hey, I've been awake for a while; been waiting on you."

Valni kissed him again, a deep, insistent caress that lingered, even as she slid herself across his front, her light frame pressing down on his chest. Two taloned hands slid up across his shoulders and neck, working their way up towards his head and savouring the sensation of soft human skin.

Kenneth settled into her embrace, feeling her long fingers curl through his crop of hair, and her exciting scent filling his head. He rose to the occasion, his hands brushing up along her outer thighs towards her slim waist; the ridged skin yielding under his touch. She pressed their bodies closer. Valni's lips parted; her tongue brushing against Kenneth's lips, urging entry. Kenneth needed no persuasion and their tongues met.

He sighed into the kiss. His hands slid slowly along her ribcage, his fingers pausing only to tickle her sides. She flinched and giggled. He knew she was ticklish there.

"No fair!" she protested, her voice muffled by their kiss.

Valni pushed away and supported herself against Kenneth's shoulders as she rose from his chest.

"So you wanna play?" she asked, grinning.

Kenneth gazed up at her, his reply catching in his throat and his breath quickening as he stared at the beguiling sight of her straddling his stomach. He nodded slowly, his excitement growing as she traced one clawed finger softly down his chest towards his centre, making every hair on his body stand to attention. He desperately wanted more time – he didn't want to be listening out for the alarm, but just wanted to prolong this experience; to make it last longer than their duties dictated. He reached up and moved to caress her mandible.

But he never got the chance…

The moment was shattered by the loud blare of the GQ alarm. Valni instantly rolled off his front.

The Captain's slightly strained voice echoed over the intercom: "Condition Blue! Condition Blue!"

Kenneth shut his eyes and silently cursed the Captain's sense of timing: Oh, damn you Verress, not another dri…

The sudden lurch of the ship pitched him out of the bed, followed by the sound of a thunderous explosion, and a deep tremor from some impact which resounded through the ship, momentarily disorientating him, and leaving him in a crumpled heap on the floor.

He lifted his head to see where Valni was – Somehow, in those brief few seconds, she'd slipped into her pyjamas and was making for the door – She turned back momentarily as she grabbed her jacket.

"Get to Engineering," she ordered, her demeanour and tone all business.
Kenneth nodded and she was gone. He got to his feet and dressed quickly, throwing on his shirt before scrabbling into his underwear. His struggle to dress was interrupted when, as he hopped unceremoniously into his boxers, they caught around his ankles and, with a small yelp, he fell, disappearing behind the bed.

By the time he emerged from her room, the corridor was deserted; not that it would have mattered, he wasn't going to jeopardise the ship's safety by trying to keep their relationship secret.

Kenneth bounded down the passageway, navigating his way through the warren of hallways before suddenly turning left and darting into a service corridor. It was a route he'd only recently discovered that provided a short-cut to engineering, and, crucially, bypassed many of Arcadias' monitoring devices. He emerged on the Observation Deck – a long hallway dominated by a wide transparent screen offering a magnificent view of the stars – and paused briefly by the window, staring out into the inky blackness. The external blast shutters were already closing, but he was able to make out at least three ships buzzing around Arcadias. He instantly recognised their profile as batarian.

*Slaver ships! Definitely not a drill…*

Another impact sent him staggering against the wall. Regaining his balance, he ran for the stairwell and virtually leapt down the stairs to the Engine Room, taking four steps at a time. It was only as he emerged onto the Engineering Deck that he regretted not putting anything on his feet!

The corridor leading to Engineering was on fire. A direct hit had set the insulation on the superconductive sensor arrays ablaze, allowing acrid black smoke to leak out into the ceiling. Shielding his face against the heat he ducked past the flames and dived through the Engine Room doors.

The place was chaos! An electrical fire was burning on the far wall with several artificers trying valiantly to extinguish the burning consoles. Emergency lighting gave everything a vivid red hue, accentuating the flames and darkening shadows. In this light, Kenneth could only really identify the features of one or two of his crewmates – The most obvious being Djamil.

Leptis was directing the scurrying artificers (most of them only half-dressed) with as much calm as he could muster. The turian whipped his head around as he noticed Kenneth.

"Donnelly!" Leptis yelled, turning towards him. "Get down to the Core Monitor. Shut off the power to the Heat Diffusers and divert everything we can use to the barriers." He pointed at someone behind Kenneth. "Bron, get on the console next to Donnelly! Monitor the electro-static array and keep the signal strength level."

The cadet nodded silently and followed Kenneth down the stairwell.

They took up their positions and set to work. The core was fluctuating as it struggled to keep up with the changes in power – The Arcadias GARDIAN laser battery was using the majority of the available energy – Kenneth quickly rerouted emergency power from several minor systems, hoping to stabilize the flux. He glanced across at Bron. She looked terrified but stayed at her post, her hands visibly shaking as she manipulating the console's controls. He could sympathise; the cadet's first week on-board had really thrown her in at the deep end.

Kenneth braced himself against the console as further collisions pitched the deck. The core fluctuated and a small explosion blew out the power converter by Bron's feet. Tendrils of fire whipped towards her legs and she yelped, backing away from the heat. Luckily, the flames died before they could reach her and she quickly regained her composure.
"I'm ok," she stated, her voice wavering slightly. "But I've lost my screen." Her console had gone blank. She stared back at Kenneth, uncertain how to proceed.

Kenneth ducked down below her console and assessed the damage. It was a simple fix; a power coupling had become detached from the consoles' central column. He quickly reinserted the component, receiving a mild shock for his troubles as the power surged back to the display.

Job done, he glanced up at Bron's bare legs, only now realising that she was practically naked below the waist, with just a pair of light blue knickers preserving her modesty. She must have been interrupted as she dressed. Kenneth's immediate reaction confused him: he could feel his face reddening; a reaction that just three days previously would have been unthinkable – After all, she was a turian – Before joining Arcadias, he'd never thought about them that way.

Guess I'm learning something from this Programme, after all, he mused wryly.

Fully armoured, turians cut imposing figures: tall and lithe, with sinewy muscles that made them incredibly fast (Kenneth's bout with Antoni could attest to that!); but if they had a disadvantage it was their leg-spurs – Vertical lengths of cartilage and bone about twenty centimetres in length, they stuck out from the top of the thighs behind the knees. Unique to turians, the leg-spurs evolutionary advantage was lost on Kenneth, but meant it was difficult to put on trousers quickly – A hole had to be cut into the fabric to accommodate the spurs – And made it especially difficult donning armoured trousers. As a result, it was fairly common to see turians in light fabric leggings, or no leggings at all, during emergency drills.

Kenneth stood up and moved back to his own console, directing his attention to the stream of numbers scrolling across his screen. He tried to drown out the wail of alarms sounding around him and instead focused on the voices of the other artificers; each yelling out orders, information, and vital data that revealed the state of the ship.

From this cacophony came one clear anchoring voice cajoling and fussing over the crew like a mother-hen: Leptis.

"Donnelly!" Djamal called out behind him as he stood at the top of the stairs. "Now would be a great time to strengthen the kinetic barriers"

"Way ahead of you, sir. Give me two minutes."

Another impact rocked the Engine Room, almost bowling Kenneth off his feet. A voice from the intercom cut through the air: "Direct hit to Gunnery – Minor damage only."

"You've got thirty seconds!" Leptis yelled back at the human.

"Like I said: thirty seconds," Kenneth agreed.

The human's focus narrowed as his hands flew over the console, modulating capacitors, diverting power flows, recalibrating attenuators; he was functioning solely on instinct now, his fingers moving across the display without any conscious thought. Battle situation were always a threat, but it was how you reacted to the dangers that determined how you would cope with military life; and he was more angry then scared. There was one constant thought lodged at the back of his mind that fuelled his rage: How dare they attack my ship! He wasn't about to let those slaver arseholes board Arcadias – His ship. Not while he had anything to say about it.

"That's it!" he yelled finally; looking up at the Main Core as the familiar hum increased in pitch and the blue glow surrounding the huge sphere brightened in intensity. "But it won't last long in a fight of
"attrition," he added, turning from his station to address Leptis. "Hope the Captain's feeling trigger happy."

"You have no idea," Djamil muttered before hitting the comm button on his omni-tool. "Engine Room to Command – Shields at peak draw. But it won't last forever, Captain. I advise a swift resolution to this, sir."

"Noted," the Captain's voice replied. "Gunnery, give those little shits hell!"

The reply from Gunnery was the muffled sound of the disrupter torpedo tubes firing, and the almost constant thunder of the main GARDIAN battery. The ship's hull resonated from the impacts of several energy waves; the only evidence of the silent battle happening out in the vacuum of space. The crew had no way to judge who was winning, how many ships were out there, whether reinforcements were arriving for the slavers, or if Arcadias' firepower would be enough to defeat these attackers.

Every artificer silently waited, their heads raised instinctively to take in the discordant sound that reverberated around the ship. Some were echoing thuds, but most were quiet pops that could have signified anything from weapons fire to an enemy ship exploding.

Ship-wide communications was kept to a minimum during a battle, except to warn the crew of emergencies, and that's exactly what was now alerted by the CIC.

"A vessel's breaking off from the pack; on a collision course!"

The gun battery wailed in response, but to no avail. "Weapons control unresponsive. It's coming in too fast!" another voice screamed.

"Incoming fighter," the CIC officer warned. "All hands, brace for imp…"

The explosion was deafening.

Kenneth watched in horror as the second tier array exploded, tearing away part of the wall; and a wave of heat and light scrambled his senses. Two of the artificers were hurled onto the air by the blast; their bodies cartwheeling across the room before hitting the deck and skidding to a halt at the far end of the Engine Room, unmoving.

Several artificers, knocked down by the impact, picked themselves up and instinctively grabbed fire extinguishers, rushing over to control the flames. The explosion had damaged the bulkhead. Micro fractures formed around the hull, most of which were immediately closed by the emergency vacuum seals, but a few cracks remained, and it was enough to trigger the environmental warning alarms.

"We're venting atmosphere!" Leptis yelled. "Masks!"

There was a moment of panic as a high-pitched whistle could be heard signifying the release of precious air into space – A single artificer (Kenneth couldn't remember his name) took it upon himself to start issuing face-masks from the emergency cabinet. Kenneth instructed Bron to go and get a mask, but she shook her head, refusing to leave her post. Leptis punched his omni-tool on and made a ship wide broadcast:

"Direct hit to Engine Room – Artificers down! Infirmary, prepare to receive casualties."

"Understood," the doctor replied promptly over the comm.

The few crewmembers not sealing the fractures stooped to check on their downed comrades. Life
signs were checked and stretchers quickly brought over, before they eased the limp and bloody bodies onto them, and then were gently lifted them so they could be manoeuvred to the infirmary.

Kenneth was so distracted by the activities, and the constant ringing in his ears, that he hardly noticed the guns abruptly fall silent and an eerie stillness fall over the ship. There were no more impacts hitting the hull, not even the GQ alarm piercing the quiet. Just the heavy breathing of shocked and dazed turians silently praying that that was the end of the battle. He looked over at Bron. Her face was unnaturally calm, her eyes closed and breathing stable. The silence was so encompassing that half the crew (including Bron) jumped when the Captain's voice sounded over the speakers.

"All enemy ships neutralised. Seven destroyed, one badly damaged. Stand by for further instructions."

Valni appeared through the main doors, assault rifle in hand. She took in the scene of devastation in an instant and spotted Leptis as he was tending to some of the wounded.

"Any fatalities?" she asked as she strode up to him, trying to keep her voice level.

"Not so far," he replied, securing a bandage around the arm of an artificer. "Fanthe and Torrickus were badly hurt; they're in the infirmary." He turned towards the crewman standing next to him. "Granus! Go up to Medical and check on them."

"Yes sir," the artificer replied, moving out through the broken doors. Djamil finished attending to his crew and turned to stare at the Chief Warrant Officer, as if seeing her for the first time.

"You okay?" Leptis asked wearily.

"Been better," Valni declared.

There followed several anxious minutes as the crew waited for more news of their injured comrades or any hints of further attacks. The tension in the room was palpable, everyone letting the adrenaline pulse through their systems and desperately hoping that this would be the end of it. Djamil's omni-tool suddenly glowed to life, the voice of artificer Granus coming through.

"Sir, Fanthe is conscious and stable. She has a few burns but is otherwise OK. Torrickus is being monitoring, but has head injuries. The doc had to induce a coma – He'll be out of it for a few days; though Tesserius is confident he'll make a recovery."

"Good news; thanks Granus. Get back down here, it's gonna be a long day." Djamil turned to Valni. "I'll inform the team."

Leptis moved away from her to consult with the remaining artificers.

Finally, the Captain's voice sounded over the intercom: "Secure from General Quarters, secure from General Quarters. All hands set Condition Yellow; I repeat Condition Yellow. There are confirmed direct hits to Engineering, Bridge, and Gunnery: Damage-control parties to those areas. Casualties are still en-route to Medical; auxiliary medical staff report to the infirmary immediately." A couple of the artificers downed tools and quickly exited the Engine Room, making their way up to the infirmary. "The lead enemy ship is listing. Flight-crew and boarding parties to the shuttles – I want every surviving bastard slaver brought on-board. Security officers to the shuttle-bay; prepare to receive prisoners. The time on deck is zero-five-fifty. All Department Heads will muster in the CIC by zero-six-twenty." There was a slight pause as the Captain caught her breath. "We're not out of the woods yet, people. But, I doubt any other crew in the fleet could have shown such grace under pressure. Carry on."
Verress' compliment was perfunctory and brief, but the artificers responded to it as if they'd just won the highest turian navy citation. Leptis turned to his crew and began barking out orders.

"Alright, you heard the Captain." He pointed at various artificers. "I want you three up on the Bridge. Contain fires if fire-suppression has failed, and begin repairs. Any problems, inform me immediately. Bron, you're with them. Second team – you three – allocated to Gunnery; your priority is to get weapons control operational. The rest of you start repairs here. Seal all ruptures and maintain ship atmosphere. Emergency shift patterns; eight-hour rotation. Let's move!"

Several of the artificers, upon receiving their orders, hastily left the Engine Room, or began repairs to affected areas. Valni wandered away from the rapidly dwindling crowd and made her way down to the Core Monitor.

Kenneth was at her post, his shirt black from the smoke and legs bloody from several minor cuts.

"Status?" she asked casually.

"Slight damage to the forward capacitors," he replied without turning round, relieved to hear her voice, but also anxious to show the situation in the Core Monitor was under control. "I'll have them replaced in two-hours, we won't lose core efficiency. The attenuators took more of a beating. I'll have those jury rigged within half-a-day; full repair by tomorrow."

"Good. And how are you?"

"Well, aside from nearly pissing myself, pretty good all things considered." He turned to face her, the smile on his face dropping away and his eyes widening as he noticed, for the first time, the blue blood oozing from a cut to the side of her head. "You're injured!" he said, stepping forward to cup her face in his hands.

"I… hadn't even noticed – I fell against the bulkhead on B-Deck."

"You've gotta get that seen to. Head injuries can be nasty."

"The doctor has his hands full with more important cases. I'll see him later."

Kenneth looked closer at the wound, tilting her head gently to one side, his body so very close to hers. "At least get one of the auxiliary medics put a bandage on it," he insisted. "Or ask them to give you some pain killers – that must sting."

"It doesn't," she insisted.

"Well, it needs cleaning – If we go back to your cabin we could use some of your medi-gel, clean it up properly; and you have those sterile bandages and…"

Any further ramblings became impossible as Valni fastened her lips to his, silencing his protests. The kiss was fleeting but no less welcoming to him; more a result of the pent-up emotions they were both feeling, and the release of stress from the intense action of the last few minutes. When it was over they stared at each other, breathing hard.

"Nothing like a little death dodging to make you realise what's important," he said.

Valni clinched his neck, leaning in to rest her forehead against his. "When I heard the Engine Room had been hit…" she began.

"You do care, woman!" Kenneth joked. That got him a sharp jab in the ribs.
"'Course I care, you daft ass!" Valni scolded him. "Just don't scare me like that again."

"In future I'll try to keep the batarian attacks to a minimum," Kenneth agreed.

She glanced up at the second tier to make sure they weren't being observed, and then leaned back from him, cupping his face in her hand.

"You better sleep in your own cabin tonight. The ship will be on heightened alert, probably for the next few days; no way you'll be able to make it onto the quarterdeck."

"Understood," Kenneth said, lamenting the thought of not being in her arms for the foreseeable future.

"And you may need a shower, too," she added.

"Oh," Kenneth glanced down at his dirt-ridden shirt. "Do I stink?"

"No," Valni admitted, "but… you know how I smell of that body lotion?"

"Yeah?"

"So do you."
Valni, Kenneth and the crew of Arcadias cope with the fallout from the slaver attack. While Valni deflects unwanted attention from Chief Petty Officer Trajan, Gabby calls Kenneth on the link.

_Cargo Deck, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 15:35 Zulu – 13th February 2183 CE_

The elcor ambassador, resplendent in full dress uniform (which, for an elcor, still left little to the imagination), stood on the catwalk suspended several metres above the cargo deck, as his gaze swept over the assembled ranks of Arcadias' crew. The only incongruent element to the formation of turian uniforms was the odd sight of a human in Alliance colours, standing out like a broken talon, amongst the gathered artificers.

Quite a few of the injured crew were lined up for inspection. The Captain had given them all special dispensation from the event, but many of them, despite the doctor's advice, had insisted on being present. Artificer Fanthe was there. She seemed to be responding well to treatment; her burns healing nicely, and her face partially obscured by a white hydrocolloid bandage. The rest of the other walking-wounded had been observing the proceedings on Arcadias' internal monitors. Considering their guest was an elcor (and famous for his long speeches), the doctor had advised his patients to only stand for short periods of time. He didn't want any of them collapsing and breaking their wounds open.

The alien ambassador spoke, like all elcor, in a flat monotone; his face betraying no hint of emotion, and each sentence predicated by a description of the emotional state he was experiencing at that moment.

"...Proudly: The turians have once again proven their worth as warriors. Your victory against the escaping pirate ships, and capture of its crew, has ensured the continued security of Thunawanuro colony, as well as delivered justice for the deaths of many elcor at the hands of these criminals. With great exultation: I am honoured to call you all brothers-in-arms. This coalition between our two great nations is one that has endured many centuries, and I hope, will continue for millennia. From the heart: You have the sincere thanks of the Courts of Dekuuna and, more importantly, you have our friendship. Thank you all."

Luckily, the ambassador had chosen to keep his speech fairly brief (some of his speeches could last three hours or more), and had only spoken for twenty minutes, mindful of his audiences' need to return to duty. The applause that swept through the cargo bay was sincere and courteous, but mostly relieved that he hadn't talked for longer.

Valni, standing with the other senior officers on the gangway, glanced across at Captain Verress, who was standing ram-rod straight next to the elcor. The Captain was never one to give out compliments lightly, but the recent battle had unexpectedly brought out the cheerful side of her personality. The commendations for Arcadias' crew that had flooded in from Thunawanuro, and the Courts of Dekuuna, were glowing. Then, they received word that the Citadel representative, Ambassador Calyn, wanted to personally thank the crew, and hastily made preparations for his
arrival. The Captain later recited the commendations over the intercom, and Valni couldn't remember when Verress had looking more proud. Maybe it was a trick of the light, but Valni could have sworn she almost saw her smiling at one point during that speech. Almost...

The Captain stepped forward and raised her hands to quieten the applause.

"We thank the ambassador for making the trip to visit us and dutifully recognise the honours from the Courts of Dekuuna. It is with great pride that we know our efforts to maintain stability in this sector benefit all Citadel species; not just Palaven or the outer colonies, but all races, all allies, all friends."

A fresh wave of applause broke through the cargo-deck.

"And to those who would seek to harm our allies, or enslave our people, and deny any of them the rights the Hierarchy and Council has lawfully bestowed, then they should know that we have the finest crew in the fleet waiting to show them the true meaning of the phrase 'extreme prejudice'. Palaven is proud of you. And you should be proud of yourselves. Carry on."

With synchronised efficiency, the assembled ranks saluted before dispersing through the various exits. Verress turned to face her guest.

"Ambassador, will you join me at the Captain's table? I've instructed the chef to prepare an assortment of delicacies from Dekuuna."

"With regret: Unfortunately, I have urgent business back on the Citadel. Appreciative: Thank you Captain. The tour of your ship was most informative. It was a privilege to address your crew and honour their bravery."

"The honour was ours, Ambassador," the Captain relied courteously. She nodded towards Valni. "Our Liaison Officer will show you to the shuttle bay. Severan, please escort the Ambassador."

"Yes Captain." Valni saluted and turned towards Calyn. "Follow me, Ambassador."

Nodding, Calyn trailed after Valni as they exited the cargo-bay, closely followed by Verress.

The Captain had received the official report directly from the elcor embassy on the Citadel – The batarians were raiders that had attacked a transport ship from Thunawanuro in the Omega Nebula. The damage to the transport was extensive, and nearly all of the crew had been cold-bloodedly executed (traditionally, the raiders always left one person alive to recount what had happened). Luckily for the colony, a small patrol of elcor hired Eclipse merc ships had engaged the pirates in a brief exchange of fire, ultimately chasing them away to the Mass Relay before giving up pursuit. Thinking they had escaped, the pirates had set a course through several systems to their home base, which, unfortunately for them, led the ships straight into the path of Arcadias.

Out of a reported eight marauder ships, seven were destroyed in the battle, and the one left intact wasn't salvageable; it was only good for scrap. Fifteen of the surviving pirates, including their leader, were taken and interrogated, before being extradited to Dekuuna to face trial.

Awaiting sentencing on the elcor home-world wasn't a punishment Valni would wish on anyone. The Dekuuna legal system was notoriously slow, often taking years just to set a court date. The batarians would have a long, arduous wait to face justice; and all while being subjected to the planets' crushing gravity. Regardless of the final verdict, their punishment would begin as soon as they landed on Dekuuna.

But, they were slavers and mass murderers; pirates who had raided a transport, killed its crew, and then tried to pick a fight with the wrong turian cruiser. Oh yes, she thought with a hint of satisfaction,
The corridors were barely wide enough to accommodate the Ambassador. Elcor were as tall as krogan and so broad in the shoulder they took up the space of two soldiers. Valni walked on ahead, the other corridors occupants quickly stepping aside in the face of Calyn.

Elcor were certainly unique: grey-skinned, elephantine quadrupeds used to the high gravity of their home-world, they were typically conservative and, amongst themselves, spoke in a mixture of scents and sub-vocal infrasound that made their native language untranslatable.

Valni escorted Calyn to the elevator and allowed him to step inside before joining him. He’d appeared attentive during the tour of the ship, although it was always hard to tell what an elcor was feeling. Their faces were an expressionless mask, making them incredibly difficult to read. On the other hand, she reflected, it also made them excellent poker players.

The Ambassador had been quick to engage Valni in conversation; he was surprisingly garrulous for an elcor, and now chatted with her cordially in the elevator.

"Informally: How long have you served with the Fleet?"

"Two years on Arcadias," she replied. "Seven years with other units and, before that, one year of basic training."

"Friendly: Have you always been the Liaison Officer?"

"No, I'm also the combat instructor."

"Mildly surprised: You look young. Do you have much combat experience, Officer?"

"More than I care to admit," she declared, smiling wryly. "I started training as a child, and at fifteen I'd amassed a sizable number of trophies. That got me noticed by Spec Ops when I enlisted. Afterwards, I was assigned to the 43rd Marine Division, and did a few months training with Blackwatch some years later."

"With interest: You trained with Blackwatch?" he asked, tilting his head slightly. Valni recognised the small movement as a sign Calyn was intrigued. Blackwatch and the 43rd were well known amongst most other militaries in Citadel space: The 43rd for their joint interspecies combat exercises (although Valni was only occasionally selected for those), and Blackwatch for their exceptionally high success rate and classified operations. Valni realised the ambassador would likely have had some contact with these organisations; and from the minute subtle facial clues she was able to read, he seemed to be genuinely impressed.

The elevator opened on the shuttle-bay corridor and they both exited.

"Attentive: Were you ever considered for Spectre candidacy?" Calyn continued.

"I got passed over twice – The Council tends to prefer candidates with biotic abilities. But, I'm happy with my current position. It may not be the front line, but I'm training the next generation; ensuring the cadets can benefit from my knowledge. And it's not like I didn't have a variety of different duties with the 43rd before joining Arcadias," she added, shrugging her shoulders. "Even spent a couple of years as a Havoc shock trooper."

The elcor stopped in his tracks, and turned his head to look Valni up and down.

"Incredulously: Aren't you a little short for a shock trooper?"
"I may be small but I hit hard," Valni assured him.

"With remorse: I meant no offence."

"None taken. The advantage of being this height is that I'm rarely perceived as a threat. That is until I've infiltrated an enemy's HQ, sabotaged their communications, destroyed their transports, and kicked the proverbial crap out of them!"

"Sincerely: I am glad we are not enemies."

Valni smiled in response. "As am I," she said quietly. "I've seen how elcor fight. When your marines charge an enemy, the ground shakes. It's a terrifying sight."

The elcor nodded silently in agreement. Conventional wisdom held that elcor were slow, heavy and ponderous; an image that the Courts of Dekuuna were happy to perpetuate. But, Valni had seen the other side of them. Their soldiers weren't ponderous. They were much slower than other species definitely, but elcor warriors received years of special training and could move surprisingly quickly when they needed to, especially on worlds with a lower gravity. At full sprint, their soldiers had a relentless momentum, and their immense strength made them virtually unstoppable; almost as powerful as krogan. It was truly something to behold. In large numbers, they could easily storm an opponent's defences before the enemy had realised what had happened. That, combined with the powerful kinetic barriers and VI controlled coaxial machine-guns and rocket launchers mounted on their backs, made them formidable opponents; ones she wouldn't want to meet in battle.

Their soldiers certainly lived up to the nickname 'living tanks'.

Arriving in Bay-One, Calyn turned around and inclined his head respectfully, before saying: "With great appreciation: Thank you, Officer Severan," and then turned to board the shuttle.

"Good day, Ambassador."

Valni watched the doors shut and the elcor craft rise from the rails to power its way out into space. She moved back to the main entrance. Before she could reach them, the doors opened and she was surprised to be greeted by a familiar face.

It wasn't a pleasant surprise.

"Trajan," Valni muttered.

"Severan, fancy meeting you here," the Chief Petty Officer smiled cheerfully, leaning against the doorframe. "You do scrub up nice," he offered, his eye roaming over her smart, full dress uniform. "Spirits, but I love a woman in uniform. Are you done playing with your monotone friend?"

"Ambassador Calyn just left. You're welcome to join him, Trajan."

"Ah, don't be like that, Severan. I'm here to brighten your day. Looks like you need it, too. Every time we meet you seem to be scowling."

"One of life's great mysteries..." she muttered.

"Hey, not your fault. You didn't ask to be Liaison Officer. It must be exhausting working with all these different species."

"It's my job. I do it because I enjoy it," she stated firmly, striding away from him towards the elevator.
"And, because you're ordered to," he replied, following her down the corridor. "This kind of work doesn't suit you. Collaborating with aliens is demeaning. You should be off fighting threats to our security, not being forced to cozy up to our enemies."

"They're our allies. We fought the humans once! Not everyone is stuck in the past." She punched the elevator call button with a little more force than was necessary.

"You look tense. Maybe I can help you relax? The offer of dinner still stands. And I know your schedule must be a little freer now. You can't be that busy with only one of your pets to house and feed."

"What makes you think my answer is going to be any different from last time?" Valni asked. "My duties haven't changed just because Engineer Daniels left for Gellix." The doors opened and Valni stepped inside.

"Granted, it is the male of the species that is messier," Trajan put in, grinning. "Does it take much cleaning out?"

Valni glared at the smug face of the Chief Petty Officer. You are a condescending little turd, aren't you? she thought. Out loud she said: "Unlike you, Donnelly doesn't spread his crap all over the ship!"

The elevator began to close, but his hand grabbed the doors and he forced them open again, before sliding inside.

"Sarcasm doesn't become you. You need to relax more. Looking after this human must be tiring you out. What was Verress thinking allowing an unqualified alien on board?"

"That's Captain Verress to you," Valni reminded him. "And do you really think Engineer Donnelly would have been selected for this Programme if he wasn't qualified? He's a damn sight better skilled than you know."

"Really? Has Leptis taught it a few tricks, then? Sit up? Beg? Roll over? That would be fun to see. I must come down and visit sometime. Perhaps you could show me what he's been taught?"

Valni shook her head in frustration. "You're persistent, Trajan. I'll give you that."

"I have a plenty of other skills; a man of many talents. I'm athletic, ambitious, a great cook, a sensitive lover – though I don't like to blow my own horn…" Valni grimaced, and quietly sought out a corner she could throw up in. "Respected leader; great communicator…"

"Yelling loudly so people can hear you at the back is not a skill," Valni interrupted. "You have no idea how to work a crowd, let alone charm a woman." Thankfully, the elevator doors opened on the Command Deck. Valni moved to get off but Trajan leaned against the wall in front of her, blocking her path.

"Oh, my skills in a group are very well regarded, Severan," he said; his grin much closer to a leer now. Valni could almost feel her flesh start to crawl. He leaned in closer. "And I think you'll find I'm a cunning linguist."

Valni rolled her eyes. "Oh, just bugger off and have a mass debate!" she snapped back. "I'm sure you've had plenty of practice!"

She pushed past him and strode along the corridor to the CIC, feeling like she needed a shower. Valni kept her emotions in check and wasn't quick to anger, but whenever she saw him she toyed
Kenneth stood at his console, vainly going through the core numbers for the fifth time. The figures hadn't changed, and his actions were simply mechanical, his mind looking for something to pass the time. He paused as he looked impatiently over his shoulder at Artificer Granus up on the 2nd tier, chatting with his family via vid-link on Taetrus. They'd been gossiping away for a good half-hour; mainly discussing the attack and the defence of the ship. *Oh come on, Kenneth thought, the way he boasts about his part in the battle you'd think he'd defeated the batarians single-handedly!*

He checked his omni-tool again – *Any time now; assuming I've got the time zones right*, he surmised. The local time on Gellix was several hours ahead of the Coordinated Universal Time *Arcadias* relied on, so Kenneth quickly gauged what period of rotation the planet would be in: *Late evening there, most likely.*

After the attack, communications to and from *Arcadias* had been restricted to priority calls only, and all contact with the Hierarchy, the Alliance, and Gellix, was severely limited. Those restrictions were slowly being eased now, and Kenneth had been informed that he would be able to contact the ground team this afternoon. Throughout the morning, he'd been champing at the bit waiting to speak to Gabby and relate what had happened, and was now waiting for the call from the CIC communications officer, granting him access to the network of comm buoys.

After an impatient few minutes of waiting, a voice finally piped through his intercom: "Engineer Donnelly – You have been granted permission to contact the *Arcadias* ground team."

Kenneth thanked the comm-officer and eagerly punched in his code to access the tightbeam laser transmitter.

He'd been rehearsing what he was going to say for a while; he needed to phrase it correctly to give his role in the ship's defence the proper grandeur without sounding pompous, or needlessly verbose – *But still paint him in an appropriately heroic light, naturally.* The final draft had pleased him and he was now eager to see the look on Gabby's face when he told her the news…

His view screen flared briefly with static, then the display cleared and Gabby's face came into focus – She leaned forward and spoke immediately:

"Are you alright? Did the batarians get on-board? Did you catch them? Are you injured? Was anyone hurt? Is the ship OK? Were you afraid?"

Kenneth's brow creased in frustration. *Well, someone likes to steal my thunder!* He half expected her to add 'do you have a hanky?' to that list.

His shoulders slumped in disappointment. Taking a deep breath, Kenneth replied in one sentence: "Yes; no; yes; hardly; some of them; it's fine; and dinna talk pish, girl!"

"Who was injured, then? Leptis? Severan? How are they?"

"No, they're both safe; minor injuries all round. Eleven of the crew were hurt – No fatalities; everyone's fine. The surviving batarian slavers are on their way to a trial."

"But, you're sure you're okay?"

Kenneth nodded reassuringly and smiled. "Of course I am. Do you honestly think I'd let a slaver get through the kinetic barriers? Everything's ticking over nicely."
Gabby folded her arms. "Well, as long as you're safe" she huffed. "I just can't leave you alone for a minute, can I?"

He sighed. Aye, you're definitely sounding like my mum! "How did you find out?" he asked.

"Commander Joric received an automated emergency transmission from Arcadias during the attack. She instigated a total comm blackout while you engaged the marauders and gathered intel. It's standard procedure in case any other hostile forces came fishing for the ground team. We're not too defensible at the moment."

"So, you knew about the attack, but you couldn't contact us to find out how we were?" he asked, suddenly realising what she must have been going through.

"It's been torture," Gabby stated. Kenneth smiled affectionately; despite their almost constant verbal sparring, Kenneth knew Gabby had a soft spot for him really. He swore he could feel a warm sensation bubbling up in his chest. "I couldn't find out if the Bruins won!" she added. The sensation evaporated.

"I'm out here being shot at and you're worried about the ice hockey scores?" he goggled.

"Well, that, and concerned that if something happened to you your replacement wouldn't be up to scratch," she replied with a wink.

"You're all heart, Gabby."

He looked at her properly now. She wasn't shivering inside a blanket anymore; in fact, she was wearing considerably less than when he last saw her. She was kitted out in a sleeveless top, emblazoned with an Alliance symbol, exposing her slim arms. Her hair was tied back away from her face, and she actually seemed to be sweating in the dry air. The muffled sound of a major storm blowing outside the base could be heard over the speakers.

"I see you've got the heating working," he added.

"Finally! We've been freezing here from day one. I went to bed the last few nights dreaming about luxuriating in the temperate climate of a working heating system – Even started to miss the warmth of Arcadias." She turned around to make sure no-one else was listening. "Truthfully, though" Gabby confessed, "it's just way too hot now."

Women! There's just no pleasing them is there?

"Don't you have control of the thermostat?" he asked.

"I'm just the one who repaired it; the rest of the crew choose the temperature. And someone – thank you Pella – has decided to set it to blast furnace levels of heat! I'm wilting here!"

"Welcome to the Hierarchy," Kenneth said, grinning. "Weren't you the one who was excited about working with our turian brothers and sisters?"

"I was interested in their technology, not their love of saunas!"

"You gotta take the rough with the smooth, Gabby."

"Yeah. Everyone's friendly enough, though. In some cases a little too friendly."

"Oh aye? Have you been propositioned, then?"
"It's not what you think, Kenneth," Gabby added peevishly. "So, how's Beatrice?"

"Beatrice?"

"The Arcadias drive core."

"Oh, damn it all girl, you named it? he exclaimed. "Why am I not surprised? Any little piece of interesting tech an' you gotta anthropomorphise it – It's bad enough you named the Perugia's main thrusters Hatfield and McCoy!"

"They don't get along," Gabby smirked. "Hey, you should see the tech they've got down here – It's pretty wicked stuff. You'd have a field day with the main core on the base."

"Aye, well, Bea… Arcadias' drive core isn't to be sneezed at, either."

"Ken, you wouldn't believe what we found just before the storm rolled in," she began, clearly excited by her news. "Scanners detected what Joric believes is an abandoned underground power plant – Krogan we think, and still functioning. The output from the main core alone is supposedly larger than the one on the Perugia!"

"You're talking mince," Kenneth replied. "Where would the krogan get the credits for something that large? You'd need an economy like the asari to be able to afford it! And why would they just abandon it?"

"I'm just telling you what the sensors picked up – A huge power spike; gotta be twenty terajoules at least. Enough to power a dreadnought."

"Aye, for a year!" Kenneth exclaimed. "Why would they need that much power and, more importantly, how did they get that on the surface without anyone noticing? They must have had help, extra funding; resources; logistical support – Krogan are not normally that organised."

"Chaill could have done it," Gabby replied.

"Ok, fine he could have done it," Kenneth conceded. "Assuming they had a hundred like Chaill to hand." He frowned, considering the conundrum. A power source of that size on an abandoned planet didn't make any sense. Technically Gellix belonged to the Hierarchy, so if it wasn't turian, who would have the resources for something like that? Alliance? Asari? Hanar? Kenneth shook his head. "No, something's not right."

"What are you thinking? Power source for some underground weapons silo?"

"Possibly. Gellix was a war zone. Maybe it's from the krogan rebellions?" Kenneth suggested.

"1500 years old and still functioning?" Gabby exclaimed. "Who's talking mince now?"

"Aye, you're right. When are you scheduled to check it out?"

"As soon as the storm clears."

"Just be careful," he insisted.

"Dinna worry, man," Gabby replied smirking. "I'm the sensible one, remember? Besides, we've been in a few explosions down here already. I'll tell you all about it when I return. Shouldn't be too long now – Be back before you know it."

"You've been in explosions?" Kenneth asked quietly.
"One or two," Gabby replied lightly. "It's nothing we can't handle – I think my ears have stopped ringing now."

"And you complain about my antics? I worry too, you know! You'll be the death of me, girl," he stated.

"Right back at you, Kenneth!"

Gabby suddenly turned her head when the door behind her opened and a feminine voice interrupted them: "There you are. I've got some more… Oh! Sorry, didn't mean to butt in."

Artificer Vettiill stood in the doorway, looking apologetic and backing out of the room. Gabby beckoned her over.

"No, don't be daft. Come and say hello," Gabby offered.

Pella seemed reluctant, but relented under the human's gentle haranguing. Kenneth could feel a small lump of disappointment settling in his throat. Telling Gabby about the attack was just one part of his news. Part of him had also hoped to reveal…

Pella took a seat next to Gabby and waved diffidently at Kenneth. He swallowed away his frustration and gave the pair on screen a warm smile. Pella, like Gabby, was wearing a skimpy top and leggings, revealing more of her tan skin – so similar to Valni's, he thought – and clearly relishing the recirculated heat.

"Are you enjoying the Palaven summer?" he asked the turian.

"Too right," Pella stated firmly. "We were freezing for almost a full week before the heating was fixed." She reached across and squeezed Gabby's hand. "But, this little genius got the whole thing working again – We couldn't have done it without her. She's a real life-saver. And the base is just so comfortable now!"

Gabby turned to the screen and mouthed: Too hot! 

Kenneth grinned, though he noticed Pella hadn't let go of Gabby's hand.

"Hey, where's Erata?" he asked; a wicked twinkle in his eye. "Have you two worn her out?"

"Kenneth," Gabby began, "you've got a one-track mind."

"I'm a bit worried about Erata, to be honest," Pella stated. "She's slightly… off – Not sure what's wrong with her. We try to cheer her up, but she's just been a bit distant recently."

"She probably missing home – And her family. I understand she's very tight with her sisters," Gabby pointed out.

"Well, it won't be long now. You'll be back in a few days, right?" he asked hopefully.

The pair on screen shared a look.

"Actually, Joric says there's a chance me may have to be here for an extra ten days," Gabby admitted. "Or longer, possibly. Storms are coming in all the time, hampering our efforts. It's been a nightmare, really."

"Ten days?" Kenneth exclaimed.
"Yeah. A few more days in this frozen climate – Won't that be fun?" Pella spat.

"But, Joric keeps us busy," Gabby shrugged in resignation. "What about you? Aside from the attack, what've you been up to?" Gabby asked.

Kenneth's eyes darted between Pella and Gabby – He'd been debating whether to reveal his other news via vid-link, or tell Gabby in person when she returned. The turian's presence quickly decided that for him.

"Oh, you know – A few vids; poker nights; the odd sparring match; a bit of rough and tumble; couple of trips to the doc…"

"I thought you said you were OK?"Gabby accused. "Anything you want to tell me?"

"Nothing that can't wait." He waved his hand dismissively. Gabby's eyes narrowed slightly. "So, are you bored with snow-days yet, girls?" he asked, changing the subject. Gabby made a face at Kenneth, which momentarily reminded him of their first encounter at Tech Academy. "You three haven't been making mischief, have you?" he asked with a suggestive grin.

Gabby glanced across at the turian sitting next to her. "Well, there was the small difficulty when we arrived at Entarus Station…" she began.

"I'm not sure we should be discussing that right now…" Pella said, waving her hand anxiously.

"It wasn't that embarrassing," Gabby argued.

"Maybe you didn't think so, but I really don't want to talk about it," the turian replied, crossing her arms.


"There was a tiny, tiny error…" Gabby started, before Pella glared at her petulantly.

"Hey! You promised you wouldn't say anything…"

"…And some innocent nudity…"

"I'm warning you," the turian admonished. "Not another word!"

"Pella, please, let the woman finish…" Kenneth insisted.

"A slight towel mishap…" Gabby added with a wink.

Pella was incensed. "Gabby! This is revenge, isn't it?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," she replied innocently. "But we can trust Kenneth. He's not going to spread it around. He's a lot more trustworthy than he looks, actually."

"Aye, that's right… Hang on…"

"Yeah, but you don't know who else might be listening!" Pella hissed.

At that moment, the distinctive blue skinned head of an asari poked through the open doorway behind them. Erata was dressed in a similar outfit to Gabby, a black, sleeveless top and short cargo pants; her skin sheened with a thin layer of sweat. Kenneth supposed it was too hot for asari as well. Contrary to her cheerful demeanour when they first met on Arcadia, there was no hint of humour on
her striking face. In fact, she looked positively miserable.

"Gabby! Pella! Joric's expecting us." She looked over at Kenneth and gave a curt nod. "Donnelly – Good to see you're okay."

"Thanks," Kenneth replied. "You too."

"I'll speak to you again, Kenneth," Gabby assured him, "when I know more about the base; and our schedule." She rose quickly, leaving Pella seated at the comm station. The turian reached over to switch the display off but was halted by Kenneth.

"Hang on!" he said. Pella paused to hover over the display. "Just so I'm clear… Who exactly was naked?"

Pella killed the feed.

Kenneth stared at the blank screen for a few seconds, trying to digest what had been said. There was a knot of discomfort building in his gut. Until now, he hadn't realised how much he missed Gabby; but now the ground teams' tour of duty had been extended he recognised the growing feeling of loneliness. He felt isolated. He needed company. The continuing repairs to Arcadias was keeping everyone busy, so he'd didn't have time to be bored, but he'd hardly seen Valni, and certainly hadn't spoken to her – Not since the attack. Returning at the end of his shift to the empty cabin he'd been assigned was startlingly lonely. He missed Valni; he missed Gabby. Damn those bastard slaver arseholes! They did nothing but bring misery and despair wherever they went – From the people they kidnapped, to the ones they killed – All they did was wreck lives. Even when the slavers were captured, they still managed to separate people.

Anger briefly overwhelmed the feeling of loneliness and he wondered if that particular group had been taken care of, or if those slavers were just part of a larger unit? Would reprisals be likely? Arcadias was becoming a real thorn in the slavers sides, and that, Kenneth reflected, wasn't necessarily a good thing because it put the ship and its crew firmly on the batarian's radar…
Arcadias responds to the distress call from a damaged salarian freighter. While Kenneth conducts repairs, Valni interviews the crew and discovers the freighter was carrying a very special passenger...

Engineer Donnelly's Cabin, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 23:45pm Zulu – 14th February 2183 CE

The cabin still hadn't lost the odour of that cream. Whatever the previous occupant of his cabin was using to combat what had been described to him as a mildly virulent, scabrous skin condition (fortunately not infectious to humans), it was certainly pungent. He'd drenched the room several times with various body sprays in a vain attempt to try and mask the smell, but the odour remained, lingering around the room like an unwanted visitor. He'd even started to catch the scent around various parts of the Engine Room; wherever the artificer had regularly worked, the scent remained.

The light came on automatically as soon as he entered the cabin. Kenneth shuffled into the room and slumped down onto the bed, gazing unseeing at the floor. After a few seconds, he wearily attempted to extricate his feet from his shoes. Repairs to Arcadias were still on-going. Every artificer was working double shifts in an effort to repair the damage. Kenneth himself had just finished an 18-hour rotation and now undressed mechanically, hoping to get a few hours' sleep before the next exhausting round of repairs.

Stripped nude, Kenneth left his clothes where they fell and clambered onto the bed. He lay face up, staring at the ceiling, feeling almost too tired to sleep. The endless rounds of shifts were beginning to take their toll. He was used to heavy shifts while serving aboard Alliance vessels, and ordinarily, he'd use humour as a coping mechanism, playfully shooting the breeze with Gabby and enjoying their on-going battle of wits.

But Gabby wasn't there. And anyone he could talk to: Valni, Leptis, even Bron, were busy with their duties. To cope, Kenneth had thrown himself into his work, hoping to exhaust himself through sheer physical exertion, and trying vainly to avoid becoming introspective. It hadn't been wholly successful. While he'd been receiving praise from Leptis and the other artificers for his efforts, Kenneth's mind was elsewhere; reflecting on the unexpected events of the last week. He hadn't expected to find comfort in the arms of an alien on this assignment, let alone a turian. Climbing, alone, into an empty bed simply felt wrong now. He missed the warmth of Valni's body; the scent of her bed clothes; her easy smile and laugh that was so relaxing. And just recently he'd even started to make plans for the future…

Kenneth shut his eyes and took a deep breath, hoping to fall quickly into a needful sleep. Just then the voice of Leptis echoed around the room: "Donnelly! Your presence is required. Report to Shuttle Bay One immediately."

Kenneth grunted an obscenity and thumped the intercom button, not bothering to open his eyes.

"Sir, I've just gone to bed. Isn't there anyone on the Night Shift who can sort this out?"
"It's zero-six-thirty Mister!" Djamil barked. Kenneth's eyes snapped open and he sat bolt upright, staring in disbelief at the chronometer. It was indeed 06:30am.

Where the Hell had the last six hours gone?

He ran his hand over his face and through his hair, still not quite believing he'd slept through the night; then he stopped as Djamil's words filtered through his brain. He was scheduled to maintain the Drive Core today.

"Wait, why the shuttle-bay? What's going on?"

"We've responded to a distress call. Salarian transport vessel. It was attacked and needs repairs. Get yourself showered, get dressed, and get to the shuttle-bay in fifteen. Bring your exo-suit, we're doing an EVA."

The intercom blinked off.

Kenneth stared into space for a few seconds, allowing his mind to catch up with events. He was late for his shift, and was now performing an unscheduled EVA. He rose unsteadily from the bed and padded across the room to retrieve a towel from the locker, before wrapping it around his waist and making his way out of the cabin to the shower room down the corridor. That was another thing he missed about not seeing Valni – her room was en suite.

Ten minutes later, Kenneth entered Shuttle Bay One, dressed, showered, shaved and kitted out in his Alliance issue armoured suit. He'd learnt to organize himself promptly on Alliance ships, and had even received commendations from his superiors for his punctuality. Tardiness was rarely an issue for him – Assuming he'd had his shower, and preferably a strong cup of coffee, to properly wake up beforehand.

Leptis was on the far side of the Bay, kitted out in his turian exo-suit and standing by a maintenance shuttle; its slender robotic limbs folded into the fuselage.

"Slept through your alarm?" Djamil asked as Kenneth approached.

"Aye, sir. Sorry about that."

"Not a problem. You're here now," Leptis stated. "But, in future, always be on time for my shifts."

"Yes sir," Kenneth replied.

The turian's shoulders relaxed and he smiled at the human. "I shouldn't worry; the crew's being run ragged. You're by no means the slowest artificer this week." Leptis shook his head. He looked exhausted himself. "Come on, the sooner we get this done, the sooner we can collapse into bed."

"Was that an invitation, sir?" Kenneth asked, a wide grin spreading across his face.

"If it was I'd bring you flowers," Leptis snapped. "Get in the damn shuttle."

Kenneth quickly hopped into the shuttle, closely followed by Leptis. The Artificer First Class manoeuvred the craft out into space and approached the stricken salarian ship, drifting just a few hundred metres away from Arcadias. It was a standard Kowloon class transporter. Unusually, the salarians were employing a human made freighter, but then the Kowloon had become the most commonly used transporter. Most of the visible damage was towards the rear where the pirates had targeted the main thrusters, attempting to disable the ship but not destroy it.
Kenneth turned to his commanding officer. "What's the story with the salarians?" he asked.

"Batarian attackers stormed the ship," Leptis replied. "Unusual for this sector. Suppose their branching out; hoping to score some easier marks, perhaps? Doesn't matter now. They're all dead."

"What? All of them? Was the ship carrying marines? Automated defences? We're not gonna have trouble on-board, are we?"

"No, scanners show minimal automated defence systems – Certainly nothing that would account for so many dead batarians."

"How the hell did they take them out?"

"Not our problem," Leptis replied. "Severan's handling that part of the puzzle."

Valni glanced over the computer pad detailing the salarians' account of the attack. A lone transport vessel, minimally armed, and travelling to the Omega Nebula, had suffered an ambush by pirates. Attacks are becoming more commonplace in this sector, she mused.

Unusually for salarians, the surviving crew's reports had been quite vague; only specifying the deaths of their own comrades (six of them) at the hands of their batarian attackers, and none of them going into detail on how the batarians (ten of them) were killed. Valni was intrigued to know how a transport crew, with no military training, had managed to kill ten heavily armed batarian pirates.

The call had come in late last night – Arcadias received a distress call from the transport vessel Mannovai, stating they'd been attacked and successfully repelled the invaders but had suffered severe damage. Several crewmembers, including their chief engineer, were dead. Arcadias was just two hours away and quickly sped to her aid, coming across the lone vessel drifting in space.

A pile of dead batarians had greeted the Arcadias boarding crew. All heavily armoured raiders who had stormed the ship presumably thinking the ship would be an easy score.

The surviving crew and one passenger were taken aboard Arcadias for debriefing. As the Liaison Officer, it was her task to discover why they were so reluctant to cooperate.

The youngest of the Mannovai's crew now sat in the interrogation room, shifting nervously in his seat as he waited for his interrogator. Valni studied him carefully via the internal monitors. Salarian were noted for espionage, not something she'd typically expect from the crew of a transport vessel. But then, it wasn't unheard of for commercial freighters to undertake covert drop-offs for the salarian Special Tasks Group. Perhaps the transport was attacked specifically because it was ferrying secrets? If anyone was going to reveal what had happened, it was going to be the youngest, and most likely inexperienced, crewman sat in the interrogation room.

Valni entered the room, sitting down in the chair opposite and smiling warmly at the fidgeting adolescent. His colouring and height suggested he was comparatively young, perhaps no more than fourteen years of age.

"Mister Kaleran, isn't it?" she asked, referring to her pad. The salarian nodded. You're the deck-hand assigned to the Mannovai?" He nodded again. "I'm Officer Severan. Firstly, this isn't an interrogation. You're not under arrest. We merely want to clarify a few facts. Specifically your involvement in the raid."

"Was never involved in the raid," Kaleran protested. "Didn't kill anyone, didn't see anything."
Valni held up her hand to silence his protests. "I'm sure you didn't. But, when our boarding party docked with the Mannovai they discovered you and the navigation officer helping to stack the bodies of ten dead batarians in the airlock."

"You don't understand…"

"Arcadias was attacked four days ago – we're still picking up the pieces. I do understand. No-one's blaming you for the deaths. We simply need to know some details. That's why I came to you. You look like an intelligent young man. I knew you'd help me."

"No! Don't want trouble," the salarian insisted. "Not looking for political involvement. Situation out of my experience. Never wanted that life."

"I understand. You've been through a great trauma. Would you like the doctor to be present?" Kaleran shook his head. "Marauders can be ruthless. And their attacks are vicious," Valni added, attempting to calm the youth.

"Didn't see anything!" he said again. "Was pushed into storage-room by supply officer – Warrit – dead now. Locked in there, heard shots, screaming, running. Didn't see anything."

"But, you survived. That's got to count for something. You can make it count for something. I'm just trying to fill in the blanks." Valni picked up her pad. "For instance: There's listing of a passenger, but no name was recorded, and the crew are surprisingly reticent on the subject. Your navigation officer even tried to suggest the records had been destroyed. Can you help me, Kaleran?" The salarian knotted his hands together. "Do you know how many passengers the Mannovai was actually carrying?"

"One."

"Good. What was the passenger's name?"

"He was a doctor. I only spoke to him briefly."

Valni nodded. "And did he tell you his name?"

"It was unusual… Dr Wivarii."

Valni added the name to the file. "There isn't a report of you docking anywhere. When did you take on the passenger?"

"We rendezvoused with another shuttle. He boarded then."

"You're light years from any Mass Relay. That craft must have come from somewhere. Do you know where the shuttle came from?"

"I'm not sure…"

She leant back in her chair, feigning disappointment. "I'm sorry. My mistake. You looked like an observant man. I'm just surprised you weren't able to spot any details at all. I understand though. It was a stressful situation. Maybe my instincts about you were wrong."

"I wasn't told what ship the shuttle was from," Kaleran protested.

"Of course not. I don't suppose they bothered to inform you. Guess you weren't important enough for that. But then, how does anyone get promoted except through demonstration of initiative?" Valni
leaned in and locked eyes with him. "Did you show any initiative, Kaleran?"

"We sometimes pick up lone passengers. Captain's orders – I'm not told why. Not important enough."

"Can you show me you will be important enough, Kaleran?" The salarian hung his head, his eyes darting around the room. "Was there anything you noticed about that shuttle? Something they didn't tell you? Or something they didn't want you to know?"

"I… was watching it on the security monitor. I like to keep an eye out. I noticed a name on the shuttle."

"That's good. That's showing initiative. Do you remember the name?"

He paused, and then nodded slowly. "…Veshok-16."

"Excellent. Thank you, Kaleran."

He looked up nervously. "I'm not under arrest?"

"No, not at all. And you've done very well. Our engineers are patching up your ship and you are free to leave with it when repairs are completed. You've been extremely helpful, Kaleran. Thank you."

The salarian nodded again, and Valni rose, exiting the room. She pondered this new development. The Mannovai regularly picks up lone passengers, Kaleran had said, and none of the other crew had mentioned the name of the doctor. Interesting... She looked down at the name on her pad: 'Dr Wivarii' – most likely an alias.

On a hunch she tapped the name 'Wivarii' into the translator. Unusually, it took several seconds before it came back with a result. The word was from an obscure salarian dialect, no longer used, and roughly translated meant 'who' or 'what'.

Valni smiled. This passenger was travelling under the pseudonym 'Doctor Who'.

The manoeuvring arms of the maintenance shuttle craned the section of emergency bulkhead plate into position, covering the gaping blast hole left by the batarians attack and exposing part of the Mannovai's main thruster housing to the vacuum of space.

Kenneth positioned the sheet of ablative armour over the hole and set about using the shuttles' external arc welder to unite the metal with the fuselage.

It was a patchwork repair at best and would have to be replaced and fixed properly in dry-dock when they returned to Sur'Kesh, but the repair would get them to their destination. The fact the Mannovai had no chief engineer was more of a worry, however an automated VI programme would take care of that in the short term until they found a replacement CHENG. Kenneth and Djamil had assured Captain Verress that they'd be able to complete repairs to the transport in twenty-four hours, allowing Arcadias to make it to the planet Sanves in time for their rendezvous – Although, Kenneth hadn't been told exactly why they were going to that planet in question, but then he wasn't going to complain about the chance to visit another asari colony.

The light from the arc welder flared one last time as the repair was completed. Kenneth allowed himself a smile of satisfaction at the finished job; glancing briefly over at Djamil who sat next to him, impassively scrutinising his handiwork. The turian nodded in approval.
"Good job. That should last 'til they return to port."

"Depends on what they're first port of call is," Kenneth pointed out. "They can make it back to Sur'Kesh, no worries there."

"They're not going to Sur'Kesh, from what I understand – They're heading to Omega."

"Omega?" Kenneth asked, puzzled. "Why'd they want to go to that dump? They won't be able to fix the damage there."

"Don't ask me – Apparently they're insisting on dropping off their passenger first and then returning to Sur'Kesh."

"Salarians," Kenneth muttered. "I feel like I'm playing some weird card game that I don't know the rules to when I speak to one – They're always thinking ten-moves ahead."

Leptis nodded in agreement. "Let's move on to the next damaged section."

The repairs continued steadily, gradually more of the burned away armour was replaced and Kenneth found himself relaxing in Djamil's pleasant company. Despite being his boss, and a turian, Djamil had always made him feel welcome in the Engine Room; a part of the crew – One of the artificers.

"How are you and Antoni getting along?" Kenneth asked casually.

Djamil glanced briefly in his direction. "I see Severan's been gossiping again."

"Oh. You mean she was kidding?"

"Not at all; it's true," Djamil admitted. "Antoni and I are getting along very nicely together. But, apart from the artificers and a few of the other crew, it's not common knowledge. I haven't even told most of my family yet."

"Oh. Sorry. Didn't mean to pry. Not my business. And I won't spread it around. No-one will hear it from me. Last thing I want to do is get you into trouble."

"That has nothing to do with it," Djamil explained. "It's not against regs. We're not breaking any rules, but… we like our privacy."

Kenneth nodded. "Aye, that's understandable. You don't want everyone to keep asking how you're doing; offering advice; asking when the big day is… Or what positions you like…" Djamil's hand froze as he was about to activate the arc welder. He turned very slowly towards the human, a markedly quizzical look on his face. "I'm just giving examples, I mean, I'm not asking," Kenneth added hastily.

"Is this a human thing?" the turian asked. "This desire to injure or embarrass yourself on a regular basis?"

"No, I've patented it and made it my own," Kenneth replied, smiling.

Djamil sniggered. "And to think I was taught that all humans were amoral, sneaky and violent," he commented. "Shows what the teachers at my colony knew about you lot."

"Aye, sadly some of us are," Kenneth admitted. "But, I like to think most of us are fairly accepting, caring, tolerant, wonderful people – Like the turians I've met."
"If you're trying to kiss-ass with me you should be aware of two things. Firstly, I'm only susceptible to dinner invitations, and secondly, I'm already taken." He grinned at Kenneth.

"I'll bear that in mind," Kenneth grinned back. "Do you mind if I ask you a question, though?"

"Positions?" Djamil enquired wryly, glancing sidelong at Kenneth.

"No, how did you know he was the one?" The turian frowned in confusion. "I mean, how quickly did you know?" Kenneth clarified.

"About two hours after I met him," Djamil confessed.

"Two hours? Really?"

"Yeah. He'd been eyeing me up in the mess hall, and sent Severan over to ask me my name. That's how she and I met. Antoni comes over and starts chatting and we found we hit it off. Next thing I know he's asking me if I like military parades – Invites me to watch the 79th Flotilla Tattoo. I say I'm working. So, you know what he did?" Kenneth shrugged his shoulders. "He got togged out in full dress uniform, walked into the Engine Room, and in front of all the other artificers, he picked me up and carried me out. Daft bastard always likes to make big statements."

"What did the rest of the crew do?"

"They cheered; the applauded; they sniggered; then they clapped him on his back with their filthy, greasy claws so that by the time he reached the door his uniform was more brown than white!" Djamil clicked his teeth together, his mandibles twitching disapprovingly. "Told you he was a daft bastard. Didn't think of that, did he?"

"Maybe not. Grand gesture, though."

"Yeah – Silly git! But, I had my revenge later on; gave all the artificers extra shifts. There were a lot of very clean toilets that month!"

Kenneth laughed. "He sounds like a keeper," he declared. "But, does it usually happen so fast."

"Well, yeah – Never thought of it as being unusual. Is it slower for humans?"

"Aye, well, slower perhaps… In some cases, maybe faster. But, you know, there's a ritual. Traditionally it should be three dates, as Gabby keeps telling me. You've got to get to know someone and see if you like them."

"The tradition at home, and certainly here, is once you know someone's interested, and if you're interested yourself, then what's the point of waiting? Admittedly, it's stronger in the military. You're not sure what's going to happen one day to the next. Service to the Meritocracy takes up most of our time, so free time is precious and deeply personal. There's very little waiting or ritualised behaviour. 'Get on and enjoy yourself, for tomorrow you may be promoted', is the motto. And, in a long term relationship, anything you find out about the person afterwards you adapt to, accept, or, assuming your feelings are strong enough, just stick it out. My parents were like that; a chance meeting on a colony, they took a shine to each other and now they've been together for thirty years – Through thick and thin. It just works."

"There must be relationships that don't work that way," Kenneth pointed out.

"All the time – People meet, they try to make it work but don't always succeed. There's no hard or fast rule. It's like any other relationship."
"Aye… that makes sense."

Djamil stopped his work and focused on Kenneth. "Why the sudden interest?"

"Just… curious – I wanted to know more about turian culture, that's all."

"Uh-huh," Djamil replied, scrutinizing the human, his gaze lingering on Kenneth for rather longer than was comfortable. Finally turning away, Djamil flicked on the intercom. "Arcadies, this is the repair crew. External damage to Mannovai is patched, we're proceeding on-board to complete repairs to the power systems."

"Acknowledged," Captain Verress replied. "You have a little over sixteen hours before we have to aweigh. Keep us apprised."

"Aye aye, sir." Djamil carefully manoeuvred the shuttle away from the ship towards the shuttle-bay. He glanced back at Kenneth. "Reverse-Spectre, by the way."

"What?" Kenneth frowned, confused.

"You were asking about positions…"

Kenneth's eyes widened in surprise – The next, and most obvious, question suddenly popped into his head: What on Earth is 'Reverse-Spectre'? But he was reluctant to ask – He might have been pushing his luck. Maybe I should ask Valni when I see her…?

Kenneth paused as his mind darted back to Valni. It was only since he'd had time to reflect on their relationship that he'd realised how quickly it was moving – And, inevitably, his thoughts had strayed to the future: Where was this going?

When he'd been selected for this Programme, he never thought he'd find himself in this position. To say her invitation had surprised him was putting it mildly; he'd even fleetingly considered turning her down, but she'd seemed so sincere – And, he'd never heard of offers like that being casually tossed about. In the end, curiosity had got the better of him.

Kenneth had been incredibly nervous approaching her door that first time; he was stepping into the unknown world; one filled with alien practices. As it turned out, he needn't have worried; the whole evening and especially their love-making was surprisingly conventional by human standards (albeit with a greater incidence of flesh-wounds!). But, what had truly surprised him were the budding emotions he'd felt afterwards. As they lay there, naked, Valni contentedly hugging his body, Kenneth caressing her slim arms, he had felt comfortable, at home. There were none of the awkward, empty feelings of regret, or even shame, which often came after casual sex. He'd simply felt relaxed, at peace – he could have stayed that way for the rest of the night – so he did. And in the morning the feeling hadn't gone away. He was happy – Happy to see her smile; happy that he could make her laugh; happy just to hear her voice. During his shift, he pictured her face until she visited. Every time he looked at her now, it was like he was looking at an old friend. They were relaxed with each other. It was so very satisfying.

But, during the repairs to the ship – his mind had become contemplative. Their enforced break had caused him to realise how fleeting this was. He was being transferred back to the Perugia in just a few weeks – What was he going to do then? The thought had actually induced a moment of panic. He'd been so caught up in the excitement of the last few days that he hadn't thought, hadn't considered where this was going. He'd been happy to be led. But now… He realised he wanted to see her again, but he didn't know how she felt. And even if she felt that way about him, how would they make it work? They were on different ships, patrolling different parts of the Galaxy with
different militaries for crying out loud! He'd heard of long-distance relationships working, but couldn't see how meeting once every six-months on the Citadel would be practical. It couldn't possibly work. This was insane!

He shook his head. If there was no future to their relationship it'd be better to stop it before it went any further; before it became too painful to end it. It would be difficult but if he became attached it would only hurt further. If this was just a fling for her, then… well, she'd had her curiosity. He'd have to talk to her and end it. But, he didn't want to hurt her… No! More specifically, he didn't want to see the hurt on her face.

And, he admitted reluctantly, I don't want to be hurt myself.

Valni entered the room the Mannovai's passenger had been assigned and stared over at the tall salarian gazing out of the window. His back was to her, but Valni kept her distance. A couple of security officers were stationed outside if she needed assistance (or if the passenger needed assistance), should he decide to make trouble. Valni wasn't sure how the man would react at being caught travelling under a false name. She wondered how she should handle this, and finally decided on the direct approach. She stepped forward and cleared her throat.

"Am I interrupting you?" she asked politely.


"I just need to ask you a few questions, doctor," she began. "Firstly, there seems to be some error here with your travel details."

"Error? What error?" the doctor asked. His voice was quite high pitched. "Not possible. Have travel documents. Filled out all forms, completed all necessary transactions. No errors."

"True, but then you are travelling under an alias, 'Doctor Who'." Valni pointed out.

"Ah, yes. Understand now." His manner was still relaxed; he didn't seem concerned that his cover had been blown. "Deception necessary. Expediency necessitates false name for my line of work. Usually travel this way. Incognito. Have many enemies. Prefer to remain," the salarian took a deep breath, "anonymous."

His voice pattern was strange, like his mouth was constantly playing catch-up with the thoughts in his head.

"There are no enemies here, Doctor," she assured him. "This is a Hierarchy vessel. But, I will need you to answer my questions – In particular the details of the attack. Perhaps, for the sake of courtesy, you could tell me your real name?"

The salarian turned towards her. There was a fresh criss-cross scar on one side of his face, and his right cranial horn was severely damaged; the bandage wrapped neatly over it showing a hint of green blood seeping through the fabric – It was evidently a very recent wound.

He nodded in agreement. "Yes, of course. Simple courtesy. All friends here. Didn't mean to antagonise."

"Then, how may I address you, Doctor?"

"Professor, actually," the salarian corrected her. "Must get titles correct. Point of pride." He extended
his hand. "Professor Mordin Solus."
Valni's interview with professor Mordin Solus does not go quite as smoothly she expects.

Airlock, MSV 'Mannovai' – 15:12pm Zulu – 15th February 2183 CE

"Stand by shore party. Decontamination in progress."

The order came in a clear, slightly electronic sounding female voice that appeared to be human in origin. Not surprising considering the freighter was of human design. Kenneth stood impassively in the poky confines of the airlock, squinting as the intense white light of the decontamination protocols swept over him. Cadet Bron and a couple of the artificers were fidgeting anxiously beside him, privately speculating on what they might encounter on the freighter. A total of sixteen bodies were reported to be on-board Mannovai (both salarians and batarians), and despite their training, the crew weren't overly keen to be working in such close proximity of several corpses. Luckily, the bodies of the dead batarians had been moved from the cramped airlock; the only evidence of their former presence being dark patches of congealed alien blood, sticky underfoot.

"Don't worry, they've moved the bodies to a couple of the empty storage rooms," Leptis promised the maintenance crew.

"Close to the area we'll be working in, sir?" Bron asked.

"No," Leptis stated firmly. "Not anywhere near where we'll be working."

"Good," Bron mumbled. "Not that working next to bodies would stop me doing my job, sir," she added quickly.

Kenneth glanced back at her and smiled. Since taking her under his wing (so to speak), and despite the fact she was probably several centimetres taller than him, Kenneth had come to think of Bron as his 'little' sister – Someone whose duty it was to protect, guide and nurture. He'd never been a mentor before, and there'd been a real sense of satisfaction in seeing how confident she'd become since the batarian attack. According to one notable Alliance hero turians were 'made of steel', and Kenneth had seen evidence of this first hand, both in how the crew had operated as one unit during the assault, and in the way Bron had really come out of her shell... Ok, I really must stop with the bird metaphors! he chided.

Kenneth took the opportunity to quickly appraise the group: Leptis, Bron, Granus, and another female artificer that Kenneth hadn't worked with before. His eyes gravitated back to Granus and the odd transparent gloves the turian was wearing. Very obviously tailored for him, the thin material adhered closely to his hands like a second skin.

"Why are you wearing those gloves?" he queried.

"They're prescription," Granus replied.
"He has to wear them, don't you, Rusty," the female artificer said.

"You have some sort of allergy?" Kenneth asked.

"No, I have a genetic condition," Granus explained. "The sweat on my hands is acidic. Any metal that I touch eventually rusts."

"Really? And you still decided to become an engineer?"


Kenneth nodded in admiration. "You're preaching to the choir. No need to convince me," he replied.

The airlock doors opened with a hiss and Leptis led the group into the adjoining room. Like all freighters Mannovai was a modular construction: with every plain, light coloured room looking much like the last.

"We'll split into two teams," Leptis said as they turned right into a long corridor. "Donnelly and Bron with me; Granus and Jorrin on the bridge. You'll be handling the installation of the engineering VI. Meanwhile, we'll reseal power conduits in the adjoining rooms, then head back and do a warm restart of the drive core – Shouldn't take us more than a couple of hours, max."

"Aye aye, sir," they all chorused.

The group moved into the main cargo area and through a maze of dark blue crates, stacked three containers high. There was damage to a few of the crates, and significant evidence of a fire fight. A few of the containers had tumbled onto the floor, while bullet holes, carbon scoring and bloodstains peppered the area. Kenneth privately wondered how the salarian crew had survived, let alone managed to kill their attackers. The group looked around apprehensively, half expecting another batarian to come leaping around the next corner.

"I saw your little sparring demonstration against that marine, Donnelly," Jorrin, the female artificer, said to Kenneth, presumably trying to keep the tone light.

"Jorrin thought you were very impressive," Granus needled, elbowing the woman in the ribs.

"Oh, I wouldn't use the term impressive," Jorrin clarified. "But your performance was certainly… enthusiastic."

"Aye, enthusiasm was what I was going for," Kenneth agreed wryly.

"Like you could have done any better, Jorrin," Granus snorted.

"Hey, I took lessons," the woman stated in her defence. "I got to Second Dah in Temka-kata. Still have my certificate. I could take you down, Rusty."

"That practically makes you an expert then, doesn't it, Jorrin?" The woman glared back at Granus and spread her arms aggressively. "Donnelly was a little outclassed," Granus continued. "Now don't get me wrong, you're good. But if it was a match between you and someone like Severan, I know who I'd bet on."

Jorrin baulked slightly at the suggestion. "Yeah, that fight might be a little one-sided," she admitted.

Reaching the other side of the cargo bay Bron added her tuppence worth. "My first combat lesson
with Officer Severan, she floored a cadet twice her size. It was quite funny."

"You've got an odd sense of humour, newbie." Jorrin commented.

"He'd been talking back in class, and for the rest of the lesson she used him to demonstrate various throws," Bron explained. "There wasn't any back-chat after that."

"Aye, I can imagine," Kenneth murmured, recalling Valni's rather energetic bedroom play. She tended to prefer being on top and Kenneth wasn't inclined to argue…

"Are you planning to step back into the ring, sir?" the cadet queried eagerly.

"If I ever want cheap facial reconstruction, Bron, the sparring ring would be my first port of call," Kenneth replied, smiling. "I dinna think boxing is my thing."

"I can vouch for that," Leptis stated, sporting a wolfish grin. "But, at least you make up for it with other skills, Donnelly."

"Oh, stop it sir, you'll make me blush," he replied, grinning likewise.

"Because you're so shy and retiring," Granus added.

"Aye, I'm a delicate flower!" Kenneth agreed.

"Ok. Enough now," Leptis ordered. "You two on the Bridge." He gestured at Granus and Jorrin. The pair nodded and made for the door and the end of the corridor, while Leptis led Bron and Kenneth into a side room. A power conduit ran the length of the far wall; part of the housing had been blown off and the cooling systems exposed after they'd overheated due to a feedback pulse during the raider's attack.

They set to work, Djamil allowing Kenneth, for the most part, to aid Bron, while he began repairs to the second junction box.

But, Kenneth's mind was elsewhere. In truth, the repairs was fairly simple, something he'd done a million times before, and his thoughts kept flashing back to Valni; wondering when he'd be able to speak to her again; what she was up to at the moment; and how she'd react to his suggestion to slow their relationship down …

Valni gripped the offered hand of the salarian and shook it, her eyes furtively roaming over the alien's features. The man was typically tall and slender, his face tapering from two large, wide set eyes down to thin, human like lips. Salarians didn't have noses, but rather two nostrils spaced widely apart on the middle of their face. The uninjured left cranial horn jutted up vertically and curved inward slightly, adding to his already impressive height. His skin colouring – which is actually quite attractive, she admitted– blended from pale white around his mouth to darker orange patches on his scalp, and contrasted sharply with the vivid blue and yellow bruise blossoming on his left cheek. Looking closer, Valni now noticed the criss-cross wound was covered by a transparent, film-like bandage.

"Severan," Valni said, releasing his hand. "Arcadias Liaison Officer."

"Happy to be aboard," the salarian stated cheerfully.

"That looks like a nasty wound," she observed, gesturing to his face. "Were you injured in the raid, professor?"
"No. Not a scratch. Injuries… were present before I boarded Mannovai."

"I could call the doctor to take a look at you?" she offered, but the salarian shook his head, declining politely.


"Can you tell me how you were injured?"

"No," he said simply.

"Do you remember how you were injured?"

"Could not tell you," the salarian replied vaguely.

"I see. So, you have no memory of those events?"

"Didn't say that," Mordin pointed out. "Just couldn't tell you."

Valni folded her arms. "I hope you're not going to make my life difficult, professor? My job is merely to establish what happened on the Mannovai. I'm not really concerned with your activities beforehand… Unless they pertain to the attack?"


"Ten of them?" Valni asked. "By yourself?"


"That's still impressive," Valni said. She took a small step back, regarding him in a new light. His attitude was calm and his air relaxed, but looking again into his eyes Valni recognized the piercingly intelligent gaze that returned. She'd seen eyes like that during her time as a Marine – They were the eyes of a predator – This was evidently not a man to be trifled with. "What exactly did you say you're a professor of?"

"Didn't say. You didn't ask. Have many doctorates, many degrees, certificates, qualifications. Would take too long to list them all. Trained principally in medicine, genetics, xenobiology."

"You appear to have no trouble handling yourself. Why were you on Mannovai?"

"Just passing through. Heading to Omega."

"Yes, that was mentioned." Valni referred to her computer pad. "The crew seemed quite insistent on dropping you off before going back to Sur'Kesh. There was, in fact, the suggestion that Mannovai regularly ferries lone passengers."

"Interesting. Learned that from Kaleran?"
Valni kept her expression neutral, but glanced up at the salarian guest, locking eyes with him. "Why would you think that?" she asked casually.

Mordin smiled and gestured dismissively with his hand. "Most likely candidate. Young, untested, apprehensive. Figured you would interrogate him first. Unaccustomed to maintaining secrecy. Bright kid though. Promising crewman. He'll learn. Expect that from a nine-year old."

"He's nine?" Valni exclaimed. "I knew the deck-hand looked young, but nine?"


"Understood. I have limited experience working with aliens, professor," she said by way of explanation. "I'm still playing catch-up."

"Hmm. Curious. Liaison Officer usually selected based on experience working with alien species. Interact with aliens but have limited knowledge of non-turians?"

"Ironic, isn't it?" she replied with a sardonic grin.

"Intriguing. Suggests promotion to role based on other skills. Or for other reasons… Shouldn't speculate."

Valni raised her hand to silence him. "Perhaps you could tell me why are you heading to Omega?"

"Live there. More specifically, work there. Have clinic in Gozu District. Personally devoted to healing local community."

"A clinic? On Omega?"

"Yes. Omega needs clinic. More so than most space stations. Omega community fractured, violent. Can provide safe haven for patients. Sanctuary. Wished to help."

"That's very commendable of you, professor."

"Hoped to help crew of Mannovai," Mordin continued. "Some wounded by attack. Others dead." He shook his head sadly. "Couldn't save them all."

Valni couldn't make the man out. He was conversely, almost perversely, both healer and assassin – A man utterly devoted to his patients, yet totally without mercy to his enemies. He was a dichotomy and Valni privately wondered how he rationalized this philosophy.

"The survivors are being cared for," Valni assured him. "Our doctor is with them and the ship is currently being repaired. I'll be sure to ask our supply officer to supplement your food rations from Arcadias' stores."

The professor frowned and rested his hand against his chin. "Have levo-amino rations on-board?"
He sniffed deeply again. "Unexpected."

"Not at all. Arcadias is part of the Engineering Exchange Programme."

"I see…" Abruptly the salarian looked down, distractedly muttering to himself. "Exchange Programme rarely used between Council races. Asari, salarians, turians all have similar technologies, maintain regular trade routes. Exchange Programme largely superfluous. Used mostly to highlight new technology. Not hanar or elcor, food unlikely to be palatable to salarians. Only one option."
He looked back at Valni. "You have humans on-board."
"Exactly right, professor."

"Ah. Yes. Commendable. Cooperation between species, most useful. Can study different technologies. Singular methods of working. Also, can keep closer eye on potential enemies."

"The Alliance is our ally," she reminded him.

"For the moment. Tensions between species fresh even now. Turian antagonism towards humans from Relay 314 Incident still strong. Human political factions calling for isolationist policy. Unless find common denominator pleasing to both species, future rift possible. Turians must extend olive-branch – clumsy metaphor – to Systems Alliance, and vice versa. Hope Exchange Programme works. Would hate for Salarian Union to have to choose sides."

"Sides?"


That gave Valni pause. "Well… let's hope it never comes to that, professor."

"Of course. Remain optimistic. Naïve view. Personally prefer to plan for the worst. If worst happens, then have strategy. If not, then am pleasantly surprised."

"You seem unusually well informed on the subject," she observed.

"Salarian Union considered problem extensively. Have mapped contingencies, run simulations. Like to plan for all eventualities."

"And would the Salarian Union have any idea how we'd avoid such a conflict?"

"As I said, must find common-ground. Each species has unique abilities. Should exploit talents to strengthen place in galactic community. Peace between salarians, asari, turians, hanar, drell, volus, all bolstered by singular talents or mutual interests. Sometimes love of sport; in other cases art, music, popular entertainment, trade of services. Most recent example: brief fad for recipes based on hanar cuisine – Personally sampled their Vassla calamari jambalaya. Don't recommend, quite gassy – But, point is all races made stronger by positive social and cultural interaction." The salarian paused as he rested his hand in front of his mouth again, and took a deep breath, adding thoughtfully: "Shared sexual activity a possibility."

Valni almost dropped her pad. "I beg your pardon?" she asked, wondering if she'd heard him correctly.

"Physical intimacy amongst asari considered symbiotic union. Turian/asari relationships quite common. Turian/human liaisons comparatively rare. Recognize most galactic species enjoy sexual behaviour beyond mere reproduction."

"…You would… support such liaisons?" Valni queried in surprise.

"Yes," the professor replied. "Have no experience of activities myself. Salarian physiology – Lack of hormone based reproductive urges. But hypothetically could be mutually beneficial endeavour. Turian sexuality holds important social functions: creates physical intimacy, forms hierarchical bonds, increases hormone levels. Also sexual activity pleasurable. Sex often used as recreation."
Relieves stress. Same with asari. Same with humans. Species should be free to mingle, interact, share ideas, experiences, sensations, motivations, stimulations. Would be good place to find common-ground." Mordin stopped as he regarded Valni's astonished expression. "Trust you're not offended by opinion?"

"No!" Valni replied hastily. "No. Just surprised. I didn't think anyone el… I mean, I never imagined anyone from your species would hold such a view."


"And yet salarians were instrumental in creating the genophage," Valni pointed out. "A disease that we unleashed on the krogan. Our two races helped suppress an entire culture."

"Aware of irony." He coughed discretely into his hand. "However, genophage solution best answer to krogan aggression. Genophage didn't eliminate species, merely affected fertility rates. Krogan expansion necessitated use of controlled infection. Stabilised population. Only logical course of action. Better than killing them. Could have done so quite easily. But salarians… chose not to. Genocide… unthinkable. Would hate to see that."

Valni shook her head. "Sounds like a double standard to me," she argued. "On the one hand you're advocating the subjugation of the krogan, while on the other encouraging unity with the other races through conjugal relations!"

"Situation complex. Few easy answers. Didn't mean to suggest interspecies relationships forcibly imposed. Tastes vary between individuals. Inclinations wide-ranging. Some not interested. Others more amenable. Should be free to make own decisions. But still… good way to work off stress."

"Either that or a cold shower," Valni muttered, rubbing her fringe. "We seem to have got a little off topic here," she pointed out, attempting to steer him back to her original questions.

"Yes. Must focus on matter-in-hand. Interested in what you will be writing in your report."

"My report will be unbiased. I'll only be recording the facts."

"Merely curious about your conclusions."

"Well, if I had to make an observation…" She folded her arms again and looked him in the eye. "Your casual attitude in your ability to take out ten…"

"Seven," Mordin corrected her.

"...Seven, sorry, heavily armed raiders would suggest advanced military training, making you a highly proficient and experienced agent. So, by extension, whatever gave you those injuries before the raid was a damn sight better skilled than a group of marauders."

"Reasonable assumption, based on available data."

"Also, your injuries would suggest they're very recent. There's extensive bruising around your face. Even with a salarian's advanced metabolism, I would guess those injuries were no more than twenty-four hours old. Now, you could conceivably have come from any number of neighbouring systems,
but based on the nature of your injuries, when they occurred, the Mannovai's flight-path, and our proximity to the Krogan DMZ, I might speculate you were traveling from the Aralakh System."

"Supposition. Have no evidence."

"True. Logs have been deleted and the crew are claiming convenient amnesia."

"Attack likely shocking to Mannovai crew – Would cause temporary memory loss. Suggest you won't learn anything from them."

"No… I don't imagine I will," she sighed. The salarian's inclination towards secrecy meant that the crew probably wouldn't give up any more information, even under duress. "I did make some enquiries about the shuttle you arrived on. The craft was from Veshok-16. I ran that name through the Hierarchy database and was denied access – only Level One clearance permitted – which would imply salarian Special Tasks Group involvement."

"Couldn't say. Not surprised by your conclusions though."

"You've put me in an awkward situation, professor. I can't prove it, but I strongly suspect Arcadias is carrying an active STG operative and medical expert. I can only speculate as to why the STG would want someone with experience in xenobiology."

"Again, couldn't say, nature of work clandestine. Apologies for reticence but can offer no further assistance. Deductions commendable, nonetheless."

"Why, thank you." Valni smiled sweetly. "It's nice to know ones talents are appreciated."

"Predilection for sarcasm, noted," Mordin replied, bowing slightly; a sly half-smile playing on his lips. "If permissible, can make similar observations. Am discreet."

Valni narrowed her eyes. "You have something you wish to add to your statement?"

Mordin nodded. "Observations pertinent to you. Example." The professor breathed in once more. "Fragrance on your skin, unusual."

"Fragrance?" she asked, her eyes darting down self-consciously.

"Detected it when you came in. Foreign aroma. Human in origin. Only noticed it once before. Assistant on Omega, Daniel, uses same hair product."

"Oh." She breathed a small sigh of relief; at least that was easy to explain away. "Well… As the Liaison Officer I do work closely with our human exchange candidate."

"Indeed." Mordin nodded in agreement. "Quite closely. Surprised to detect trace amounts on your hand." He raised his own hand by way of explanation.

Valni couldn't prevent her eyes widening slightly in surprise. She suddenly realised she'd shaken hands with Mordin and must have transferred the scent across. But, how can that be? I haven't had any contact with Kenneth in four days.

"Also, hint of human sebaceous and exocrine gland secretions: sweat, saliva," Mordin continued. "Odorants not airborne. Only one method of transmission. Expect you were caressing human's skin, running fingers through hair, exchanging cross-species fluid through intimate sensual contact. All evidence suggests high erotic plasticity. Indulging human-centric tastes, perhaps?"
Valni's mouth dropped open. "I don't… How?" she stammered, a small well of panic bubbling in her chest. She'd been careful: washed all her clothes and herself thoroughly. Everything except… the pillow Kenneth had used. She'd kept that. She liked the smell of it.

Mordin tapped his right nostril with his finger. "Odour detection threshold more acute in salarians. Greater number of olfactory receptors – Approximately twenty million more than turians. No doubt washed hands frequently, but odour molecules on skin lingers several days. Would probably deceive most species." He sniffed again; closing his eyes briefly as he took in a deep, lingering breath. "Not salarians."

"I'll certainly bear that in mind the next time I deal with salarians, professor," Valni said pointedly.

Mordin raised his hands almost apologetically. "Not passing judgement. Don't mean to imply immorality. Hierarchy has fewer personal restrictions than Alliance, understand this. As I say: am discreet. Your privacy of paramount concern. Rest assured, relationship with human will stay off the record."

"Appreciate it," Valni replied curtly, still a little shaken by his rapid deduction.

"Must ask favour though – Request likely enforced by Hierarchy and Salarian Union, but will ask anyway. Simple courtesy."

Valni sighed resignedly. "What is it, professor?"

"Prefer real name to be omitted from report. Officially not here. Have taken brief leave of absence from clinic. Transfer to Mannovai must remain confidential. No record of transit."

"I'll have to run that by the Captain. And we'll need to get confirmation from the Hierarchy. The Salarian Union will probably become involved, too."

"Highly likely. Union always monitoring open frequencies. Have undoubtedly intercepted distress call from Mannovai. Know about response from Arcadias. Will be contacting Captain directly."

"This is a little above my pay-grade. I can't promise anything."

"Understand. Anticipate your return with interest. Will be here enjoying the view."

And with that, the salarian turned back to his window. The conversation was over it seemed. Valni had the distinct impression she'd just been dismissed. She stared at the back of his head for a long moment, then turned on her heel and exited the room; still slightly troubled by that conversation. She wasn't entirely sure who had been interviewing whom.
Emotional Flux

Chapter Summary

Valni supervises Kenneth and his team on the salarian freighter. But when they manage to steal a moment alone, their one-on-one reaches an unexpected climax.

Chapter Notes

Warning: contains nudity and sexual themes.

CIC, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 17:03 Zulu – 15th February 2183 CE

The CIC was remarkably empty when Valni entered. She glanced around the seemingly vacant room and caught the eye of the Comm-officer hunched over his console, a pair of monitoring headphones glued to his head. The man noticed her and looked up abruptly, then stood and saluted.

"Sorry sir. Didn't hear you come in," he stated apprehensively, the headphones still wrapped around his head.

"At ease," she replied. "Has the Captain retired?" she asked, realizing how absurd that question sounded as soon as she'd asked it.

"The Captain's in her ready-room," he replied, pulling the phones off his head. "She gave orders that you see her immediately."

Valni nodded at the man, and then made her way to a door set into the wall on the far side of the CIC. A small panel protruded outwards next to the door. She pressed the call button and the door slid open, allowing her access. Valni entered, spotting Captain Verress sat at her desk before a holographic monitor, which resembled a miniaturised version of the one in the CIC.

"Severan!" she barked, standing and turning to address her Liaison Officer. "I just had a rather interesting chat with Primarch Fedorian and Dalatrass Linron. It has been 'suggested' to me, in no uncertain terms, that we give one of our guests from this freighter preferential treatment. We have, in fact, been instructed to omit his name from transit – Ordered to falsify our records. I do hope you can shed some light on this situation?"

Valni saluted. "Yes Captain. I believe he's an STG operative."

"Well, I already guessed that from the political hurricane that just breezed over the comms," Verress snapped. "Did you ascertain this operative's name?"

"Professor Mordin Solus."

"I seem to have heard of him. Geneticist – Very well regarded by the salarians. What's your take on him? Any idea where he'd come from?"
"He's very polite, sir. If a little… chatty. And I've definitely learnt not to underestimate him. He was personally responsible for dispatching seven of the dead raiders, then helped patch up the injured freighter crew. Transferred to the Mannovai by shuttle from the Veshok-16, which, I suspect, may have been travelling from the Aralakh System, but I can't prove anything…"

"It doesn't matter," Verress interrupted. "If it involves the krogan then it's out of our jurisdiction. Do I want to know how you extracted this information?"

"I asked him," Valni replied.

"Oh." Verress looked nonplussed. "He just volunteered all that?"

"Pretty much, sir."

"Right… I see… Well, to be honest, none of that is relevant. My only concern is the security of Arcadias, not the political machinations of the salarians." The Captain lapsed into silence as she considered the problem, absently rubbing her left mandible with her finger. "Bury the name," she said finally. "And get those aliens off my ship ASAP."

Valni nodded; her reply cut off by the voice of the Comm-officer: "Captain, you have another call from Hierarchy HQ on secure channels."

"I'll take it here." Verress stated. She turned back to Valni. "Find out how the repairs are going."

"Right away, sir,"

"Dismissed." Verress ordered. Valni saluted and turned. As she reached the door Verress punched on her monitor and sat back down to address the stern face of the turian on-screen. "Primarch! We really must stop meeting like this…"

Valni's mind was racing as she navigated her way through the throng of Arcadias crew flocking towards the mess hall. She was still troubled by the interview with that salarian. How the hell had he done it? The man had been on the ship five-minutes and already worked out that she and Kenneth were in a physical relationship. It was a little unnerving.

Valni prided herself on being a pretty good judge of character, and despite his little bit of detective work, she found that she'd actually warmed to the man – Trusted him almost. The professor was a calculating killer there was no doubt of that; but Valni recognised the difference between a psychopath and a warrior. He would happily bind a wound and risk his own life to save a group of strangers, but then execute his enemies without a second thought. Valni just couldn't reconcile his altruism with the consequentialist attitude he displayed. The two seemed mutually exclusive. Maybe I simply have a lot to learn, she mused.

Plus, his conclusions regarding the Hierarchy and humanity were accurate – A conflict was possible in the future. Relations between turians and humans had never been cordial. Given the right set of circumstances, another war could breakout. And yet, the two species had so much in common: They were both highly organised and disciplined, they were both technologically minded, and they were both warlike… It was this realisation that had disturbed her the most. She was certain there were parties on both sides that would welcome, if not actively encourage, a conflict.

Finding common-ground between turians and humans was easy, their two races were very similar, that was the problem. The trick was finding likenesses that didn't lead to an armed engagement.

Valni was so absorbed in her thoughts that she almost walked past the airlock. With a small shake of
her head she opened the pressure door and entered the docking tube leading to the *Mannovai*. The passageway connecting *Arcadias* to the freighter was cylindrical with transparent screens giving a clear view of the two linked ships. Ignoring the view, Valni strode towards the *Mannovai* airlock, her footsteps echoing down the long corridor.

The trip through decontamination was brief and she was surprised to find artificers Granus and Jorrin standing on the other side of the doors. The two crewmen stepped back as they saw her and saluted smartly.

"Sir!" they said in unison.

"Finished already?" Valni asked, returning the gesture.

"Yes, sir," Granus explained. "We completed installation of the engineering VI so Leptis let us go. They're just conducting a warm restart of the drive core."

Valni nodded. "Well done. You both heading back to the Engine Room?"

"No, to the Mess, ma'am," Jorrin offered, "haven't eaten all day." She jabbed her thumb at Granus. "I don't know about Rusty, but I could eat a baby klixen. Hope chef's got some louza wings on the go."

"Yeah, I could smell them cooking down the corridor. Better be quick, though. It looked like half the crew were just finishing their shift," Valni pointed out.

"With your permission, ma'am?" Jorrin asked. Valni stepped aside just as the woman broke into a run down the umbilical, pursued closely by Granus.

"Hey! Don't even think about hoarding all the louza again!" he yelled.

"Then try to catch me, Rusty!" Jorrin snorted in reply.

Valni grinned and watched the couple until their footsteps and laughter had died away. *When are those two just gonna find a room?* she wondered. Scuttlebutt had it that Jorrin and Granus had been dancing around each other for nearly three-months; neither one willing or brave enough to approach the other directly. She'd been debating whether to tell Leptis to just seal them on the cargo hold together until they sorted themselves out…

The sound of raised voices led her to the Engine Room; a dark, drab and cramped chamber towards the stern of the freighter. The drive core was probably a quarter of the size of the one of *Arcadias* and capable of only a third of the power output, at a pinch.

Walking through the open doors, Valni spotted Kenneth lying flat on the ground; his upper torso ducked under the deck plating beneath the drive core, while Leptis and Bron stood to one side by the main console. The noise coming from the aging core was relatively quiet, but voices were raised and Valni was surprised to find she'd wandered into the middle of what sounded like a full blown argument.

"I'm telling you the drive core canna take the stress at high FTL speeds."

"I don't know how they do it on Alliance ships, Donnelly, but around here crewmen generally obey the instructions of a superior officer."

"Aye, well, when that superior comes up with a solution that doesn't involve a drive core breach then I'll listen to him."
"Seriously, Donnelly? You know this could be interpreted as insubordination. I could order Bron to tackle you to the ground and restrain you!"

"I've… never done that before, sir," Bron stated hesitantly.

"One of many firsts, I'm sure," Leptis said. "Just follow what you've been taught by your combat instructor and you'll be fine." Leptis gestured towards Kenneth offering Bron the chance to find out. The cadet hesitated, her eyes darting between the pair; an anxious look on her face. "You've gotta seek new horizons in order to grow, Bron," Leptis added, grinning.

"I'm sure it'll do wonders for wee Bron's education," Kenneth agreed. "But, before you sick your attack cadet on me, would you care to join me down here?" Leptis sighed and lay down to join Kenneth on the floor. "Now, if you'll direct your attention to your right you'll notice a minor but important crack just here in the ventral shielding. Push this baby past a terajoule and the whole housing would shatter. Make a nasty mess of the freighter."

"Huh! I did not see that," Leptis admitted.

"We should programme the VI to limit the core to low FTL speeds. I've laid a vacuum splint down to strengthen the shielding, but like all these repairs they're only patchwork. The ship needs a full overhaul in dry-dock."

"Well done for spotting that, Donnelly."

"All part of the service," Kenneth grinned. "You see, sir? I'm handy to have around."

"Oh, so now it's 'sir'? A minute ago it was 'Commander Butterclaws'."

"A term of endearment, sir. Every great leader needs a nickname."

"And you chose 'Butterclaws'?"

"Aye, it seemed appropriate."

Throughout this exchange Valni had been discreetly observing Bron as the trainee's eyes roamed unashamedly over Kenneth's posterior. Valni was surprised to realise she'd been glaring at the young woman; several decidedly unprofessional thoughts coursing through her head – The most insistent being, 'Talons off, cadet. That's mine!'

"Enjoying the show, Bron?"

The cadet jumped and practically levitated on the spot as she turned to the source of the query. "No ma'am!" she squeaked, saluting hurriedly. "I mean, yes ma'am. … I mean, I've been keeping an eye on the human. Watching him work… Assisting him, ma'am! You know, studying under him. Like I was told to. Wasn't looking at his butt!"

Bron's expression froze as what she'd said filtered through to her ears. Propped up on their elbows, Kenneth and Leptis exchanged a glance with each other; three pairs of eyes staring at the now cringing cadet. Bron seemed to shrink several inches, doubtless hoping the ground would swallow her up. There was an awkward silence, punctuated only by a stifled chuckle from Leptis, who, clambering to his feet, smiled good naturedly at the young woman.

"I… think I'll take the cadet down to the Mess and get her a bite to eat," he announced. "Some fresh air might do you some good, Bron." Djamil patted her, not unkindly, on the shoulder, and ushered the mortified youngster from the room, nodding at Valni's as he went. "And maybe a bucket of
water…” he added to her under his breath. Leptis called back over his shoulder to address the visiting engineer. "Just finish up here, Donnelly. Lights off when you're done." The door hissed shut behind them.

"What the hell was that?" Kenneth asked when they were alone.

"I think she has a little crush on you," Valni replied.

Kenneth's eyebrows arched in astonishment. "Really? Wow!" Supporting himself on both arms, Kenneth crossed his legs nonchalantly. "Well, I canna help it if women on this ship find me irresistible. And who can blame her when she's got this as a mentor? She's only hu… well, turian, rather."

Rolling her eyes, Valni stepped forward and offered her hand; Kenneth took it and was hauled to his feet. He stumbled slightly and braced himself against her shoulder, smiling at her. "You know, I like these exchange programmes," he admitted. "Think I'll volunteer for more of them."

"Careful, engineer – I'm the one who writes your evaluation, remember?"

"Yeah, but I don't want to be accused of influencing my examiner. Will this affect my review?"

"Depends which performance I'm evaluating you on," she breathed. Kenneth grinned and actually reddened at the comment. Valni's eyes suddenly darted to the small security device recessed into the far corner of the room. "Are we being monitored?"

"No. All non-vital systems are offline – Standard procedure during repairs. Life support, gravity and lighting only."

Valni wrapped her arms around him. "Good. Don't want anyone watching us… Unless we invite them to, of course." Kenneth's smile faltered and he glanced down. "I was joking," Valni added.

"Listen… I need to ask you something. Or, tell you… rather. Well… there's something I need to… get your opinion on. I..." His voice petered out. "Oh. I'm bad at this."

Frowning, Valni stepped back from him and folded her arms. "If you have something to say, then say it. I want us to be honest with each other."

"Aye… you're right." He cleared his throat. "I was thinking… Look, maybe this is all happening too quickly? Perhaps our relationship is moving too fast – We barely know each other; I've been on Arcadia for a little over three weeks. We haven't even discussed what's going to happen at the end of the Programme. Honestly, I don't want to be responsible for hurting you… Or for you to hurt me."

"I would never hurt you," Valni insisted. Kenneth tilted his head and gave her a lopsided glance. "Well, not intentionally, anyway," she added.

"That's very comforting."

"Where'd this come from? Seems like you have something you want to ask me."

Kenneth nodded slowly. "Where do you see this going? I mean… what is this between us? At the end of this Programme I'll be shipped back to the Perugia. What's going to happen then? We won't be on the same ship, we both have duties with different militaries, so how often are we gonna see each other? It's not like we can pop over to each other's cabin. And, if we did want to try an' make this work, then what about accommodation? Where'd we live? Or, if we wanted a family? Or…”
"Whoa! I think someone's getting a little ahead of themselves!"

Kenneth screwed his eyes up. He couldn't believe he'd said that. "Oh, God! That all came out wrong... I canna believe... I'm such a numpty! Told you I was bad... It's just... Is it so bad to want something more from this?"

"Are you already planning our future together?" Valni chanced a wry half-smile at his expense. "Aren't I supposed to be the woman here?"

Kenneth took a deep breath. "I've seen this before. I dinna want what we have to move too quickly and risk destroying a good thing."

"You worry too much, Kenneth. We'll figure something out. It's not like we're the first people to be contemplating a long-distance relationship. It's actually fairly common in the Fleet. The Hierarchy have support groups set up for this kind of thing. We can get advice... But, it almost sounds like you want us to be exclusive."

"Aye, well... I'm a one turian kind of guy." Kenneth replied almost bashfully. "Plus, in my experience if you're lucky enough to find someone you care about – and in my case, someone who'll put up with me – then you hang onto them for dear life."

"So, what's the problem? All these questions, all this worry... Is this a human thing?"

"That's the second time I've been asked that. Aye, I suppose so. I canna talk to Gabby about it; she gives me a right bollocking if she thinks I'm rushing into a relationship. Always says I should take the time to get to know someone first – Preferably over several years!"

"That's not the way I was brought up. I like you, you like me, once we've established those basic facts the rest generally takes care of itself. Besides, you'll be redeployed in a few weeks; we hardly have the luxury of a long drawn out romance. Can I assume all humans like to take it slow?"

"Depends on the human," Kenneth admitted. "It was just a wee bit unexpected, jumping into bed with you so quickly. You caught me a little off guard. That first evening in your cabin was just so..." He struggled for the right words.

"Painful?" Valni suggested ruefully.

"Memorable. Intense. Exquisite. Take your pick."

Valni seemed to brighten at that. A coy smile spread across her face. "Well, believe it or not, I didn't exactly plan that. Yeah, that's where I'd have liked it to have gone eventually, but originally I simply wanted to invite you somewhere private to relax, have a chat, have a drink, and get to know you better. I was as surprised as you were."

"But, you... liked where it went, right?"

"Oh yes!" Valni assured him. "...Several times, in fact."

Kenneth grinned in return. "So, that 'my cabin. Ten minutes' invitation was just...?"

"Uh, yeah..." Valni flashed a guilty grin. She rubbed the back of her neck. "Put it down to cultural misconstruction?"

"I'll have to update my translator," Kenneth agreed. "Though as misconstructions go, it was very pleasant."
"Sweet-talker," Valni grinned, reaching up to run her thumb over his beard. Kenneth found himself inhaling her scent, the fragrance rousing strong memories of their first night in her cabin. He shifted slightly as the reminiscences roused something else.

"So, what would Daniels advise we do to get to know each other?" she asked.

Kenneth cleared his throat, distracted by the sudden rush of blood to his face, and other areas. "Three dates, usually."

"By my count, we've been on more than that."

"How do you figure?"

"Well, we had breakfast together," she explained.

"The one after the GQ drill? That was three-thirty in the morning."

"An early breakfast. And then we took in a nice tour of Erros – saw some interesting wildlife."

"We nearly got incinerated!" Kenneth pointed out. "And, I wouldn't exactly call watching a thresher maw interesting … Hazardous to your health, certainly! Besides, Djamil was there, too."

"He was your chaperone," Valni replied promptly. "Then later we played poker and had a wonderful time at the sparring arena."

"Again, with Antoni and Djamil."

"So, we double-dated," Valni said, shrugging. "That was a memorable evening, you have to admit."

"Aye, I got my arse handed to me by a Recon-Marine! Who's also dating my boss! Admittedly not something I'm likely to forget in a hurry. But, is this a common theme with you? Do most of your evenings end with your date getting injured or his life threatened?"

"I like to show a man a good time."

Kenneth grinned and shook his head in delight.

"I do like it when you smile," Valni moved closer to him, letting her leg touch his.

"Is it… Is it getting close in here, or is that just me?" Kenneth stuttered.

"Probably the humidity," Valni proposed, her other hand curling around Kenneth's back. "I understand salarians tend to prefer tropical climates."

"That would certainly account for the sweating."

Valni stroked her right hand slowly along Kenneth's cheek and up through his hair. The human swallowed and closed his eyes briefly, his breath quickening under her touch.

"This is… You… Oh, what are you doing to me, woman?"

"I'm flirting with you, Kenneth; I'd hoped you'd have recognised that by now."

"Aye, I had noticed…" He swallowed again. "But, we're senior staff. This isn't the best example to set for wee Bron, now is it?"
"Oh, wee Bron has a lot to learn," she replied, leaning in close, "the most important lesson being…" Her left hand slid down and cupped his right buttock, squeezing the flesh unashamedly. "I was here first!"

That did it!

In one swift movement, Kenneth’s lips met hers. Her arms enveloped his body, pulling him into a tight embrace. The kiss was long and passionate, their lips parting only when Valni coiled a leg around his waist and jumped up; her light frame braced in his arms. She bent her head and their foreheads touched, her fingers curling through his hair.

Kenneth was losing himself. His skin was tingling, nerve endings aflame under her touch; the feel of hot breath against his cheek. Valni’s scent was swamping him again. Their lips joined and Kenneth hugged her closer, as if trying to draw all the heat from her body. Despite the distracting sensations a small, traitorous voice rudely piped up at the back of his mind: *We shouldn't be doing this! Leptis could come in at any moment. What if the monitoring camera didn't disconnect?* But, then he realised... he didn't care. Not anymore.

Valni’s hands dropped from his head down to his shirt; her fingers clawing at the material. She put her feet down on the floor and they separated. Valni unzipped his jacket, while Kenneth unsnapped the fasteners to her top. Then Valni’s hand was on his belt – The fervent glint in her eye unmistakable. Zips and catches were undone; outfits unfastened; clothing cast-off, exposing the tan and pink skin beneath. She jumped up and once again she was wrapped around him; holding him; smothering him; the frustration of the last few days forgotten. Kenneth spun around and propped her on top of the console; his lips brushing down her neck, trailing insistent kisses along the soft, unplated skin to her shoulder. Valni wriggled against his chest, rubbing her chin through his hair; hugging his back. They were utterly lost now; absorbed entirely in the taste, scent, and texture of each other's bodies…

Djamil watched the young cadet pick away at the food on her plate. He'd had to practically drag her into the Mess and sit her down; the young woman hardly wanting to eat, such was her embarrassment. He'd tried to encourage her all the same, stating the artificers required every crewman at peak efficiency and that she needed to keep her strength up if the crew wanted to remain in the Captain's good graces. Appealing to her sense of duty seemed to work and the cadet had agreed, albeit reluctantly, to eat.

"Feeling better, Bron?" he asked as he watched her polish off half the food from her plate.

"Beffer, shur," she agreed, her mouth full.

Leptis chuckled, but covered it with a small cough. "I have to say, I'm impressed with your work so far cadet. Engineer Donnelly is obviously having a positive influence on you."

Bron swallowed her food carefully.

"Will Engineer Donnelly still want to work with me?" she asked, a little fretfully.

"I imagine so, Cadet. But, here's a tip: If you want to compliment him, try to concentrate more on his tech knowledge and less on his fulsome ass. No matter how much you might be tempted."

And with that the cadet dropped her knife onto the plate. "Lost my appetite, sir."

"Then here's another word of wisdom for you: Expect a little bit of ribbing about this, Bron. It helps unit cohesion no end if you can laugh and joke with your crewmates. My team are always ragging
on each other, but it's all in good fun and it's actually good for morale. Plus you'll be honouring the
Spirits of *Arcadia*. That goes a long way to making a stronger unit. Just remember, when they do
start teasing you, be sure to give as good as you get."

Bron thought about that for a little while, and then nodded. "Understood, sir," she said, before
picking up her cutlery again and tucking back into her food.

Leptis smiled, noting with a hint of satisfaction that the cadet had the potential to be a great artificer.

He was just about to start on his own food when his omni-tool lit up, the speakers broadcasting the
voice of the CIC comm-officer: "Sir, are you still conducting repairs to the salarian ship?"

"We've nearly finished," Leptis replied. "The ship will be able to depart shortly. Well ahead of
schedule. Has the Captain been requesting an update?"

"No, sir. But we've been monitoring odd readings from that freighter. Getting regular bursts of
energy from the drive core; like someone was revving the engines."

"It's probably nothing," Leptis suggested. "Most likely feedback from the eezo capacitors whilst
Donnelly adjusts the anterior intakes. Give it a little while to stabilize."

Only a few short minutes later the comm-officer called back.

"Has the flux stabilized?" Leptis asked.

"No, sir," the voice replied. "If anything it's faster now."

"Ah."

"Shall I send someone down to monitor the situation?"

"No. No need. The human's on board. I'm sure he can manage." Leptis paused while he considered
the issue. "Better yet, I'll check on it. Expect a report in the next few minutes." He switched off his
omni-tool.

"I think we can call that a day, Bron. You go and unwind when you've finished your dinner. We
need you rested for the morning."

"Thank you, sir," the cadet said happily.

Leptis stood and left the Mess, heading for the airlock.

*Mannovai*'s Engine Room was peaceful again; the only sounds punctuating the quiet were the gentle
hum of the drive core, and the steady pants of heavy breathing. Kenneth and Valni were sitting
against the wall, the couple content to rest on the floor and recover from their exertions. After a
while, Kenneth gazed across at the smiling woman cuddled up to him.

"Well, so much for taking it slow."

"I prefer the turian method," Valni declared.

"Aye, it does have its advantages," he conceded.

"And here you were worried this was moving too fast," she stated wryly. Valni looked up at him.
"Though, I'll admit, I do like it when we slow things down a bit." Kenneth leant across and captured
her forehead in a lingering kiss. "But, you know what? When you were arguing that we should put the brakes on our relationship, you never once mentioned the fact that we’re not even the same race."

Smiling warmly, Kenneth gently caressed her mandible.

"Dinna talk mince, woman," was his characteristic reply.

Valni grinned and hugged him closer, savouring the feel of his heart beating rapidly against her chest. Sadly, they both knew this brief moment of peace wouldn't last and Valni wasn't surprised when Kenneth's omni-tool glowed orange and the voice of Leptis pierced the calm.

"Donnelly? Are you there?"

Kenneth sighed. "Here, sir," he replied.

"CIC just called me. Ship's sensors were indicating strange readings from the Mannovai drive core – Like it was fluctuating rapidly…" The couple exchanged a look; their eyes drawn to the console Kenneth had propped Valni on. Their comprehension was swift and simultaneous. "Is everything OK at your end? Do you need a hand?" Leptis continued.


"Okay, I'm just leaving the Mess now. I'll wait for you on the other side of the docking tube."

Kenneth switched off his omni-tool. Valni was already on her feet and dressing hastily; throwing on clothes and refastening catches. Kenneth stood and hopped into his trousers, then pulled on his discarded shirt. They found his jacket on the other side of the Engine Room – In her haste, Valni had tossed his clothes haphazardly around the drive core.

"Sorry," she said sheepishly, handing him his uniform.

"Dinna worry. You head off first. Leptis better not catch us leaving together."

Valni nodded but couldn't resist stealing one last kiss before she turned and exited, leaving Kenneth to finalise the Mannovai drive operations.

It only took a minute for Kenneth to finish up. As a precaution, he set the decontamination protocols to run as soon as he'd left the Engine Room. He thought for a moment that he was being overly cautious, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Exiting the freighter's airlock, Kenneth walked hurriedly along the umbilical, spotting Leptis at the far end of the docking tube. He raised a hand and hailed him cheerfully.

"All finished," he announced to the turian. "Safety protocols are engaged; the Mannovai is now spaceworthy. The salarians are free to leave whenever they choose."

"That's a great job, well done," Leptis replied, though the turian's eyes weren't looking at Kenneth's face, but rather they were focused on his head. Leptis frowned in confusion and tilted his head to one side. "Are you trying out a new hairstyle, Donnelly?" he quizzed.

Kenneth grinned sheepishly as he flattened down his dishevelled hair.

Most of the surviving crew had boarded the Mannovai, with only a couple of the walking wounded delayed from boarding due to their treatments. Doctor Tesserius personally escorted his charges
along the umbilical towards the freighter, followed closely by Professor Solus and Officer Severan.

"I didn't get a chance to congratulate you on your handiwork patching up the crew, Doctor Wivarii," Tesserius stated. Other than the Captain and Valni, no-one was aware of the professor's real name. "The salarians are recovering nicely, thanks to you. It's fortunate you were aboard. Some of them wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you."

"Duty of care, inviolable." Mordin replied, acknowledging the doctor's compliment. "Always appreciate feedback from fellow practitioner."

"I was impressed with your level of care, and with so few resources. I just wish we had more time to chat. I'd love to swap notes with you." Tesserius said hopefully.

"Some other time perhaps," Mordin stated. "Quite busy. Must return to Omega. Clinic understaffed. Have limited resources."

"I understand," the doctor acknowledged, somewhat disappointed. "I'll get the crew settled in before you depart. I do hope we'll meet again, doctor."

"A pleasure." Mordin shook Dacian's hand.

As Tesserius herded the crew back into Mannovai, Mordin stepped aside to gaze out at the stars, while Valni hovered discreetly nearby. The salarian waited until the airlock doors had shut then glanced around the docking tube, making sure they were alone. "Before ship leaves, have matter to discuss. Pertinent to your situation. Regarding turian/human relations."

"What?" Valni frowned. "Look, you're not my doctor. I don't think it's appropriate for you to try and give me any kind of recommendations…" she started.

"Understand hesitancy, but fitness of crew vital on turian ships. Efficiency of Arcadias compromised if crew's health deteriorates."

"Listen, professor, seriously, I know you mean well…" Valni began, but Mordin cut her off.

"Free advice offered from experienced medical professional. Counsel relevant to human visitor as well."

Realising he wasn't going to let this go, Valni nodded reluctantly, allowing him to continue. "Turian and human sexual mores analogous, however both species exhibit significant physical differences. Human skin thinner than turian's. Greater chance of abrasions, lacerations. Suggest caution. Talons and teeth might easily puncture skin." Valni cleared her throat and shifted uncomfortably. "Note, chirality in humans based on levo-amino acids. Often incompatible with turian physiology. Allergic reactions possible. Try to minimise cross-species fluid contact."

"A little late for that," Valni muttered quietly.

"Also, skin prone to chafing. Recommend use of lubricants to reduce irritation…" Valni raised her hand to prevent Mordin going into too much detail. "Okay, I think I have the gist of it, professor. I will take your advice seriously into consideration."

"Glad to be of assistance," he stated.

"And… thank you. For keeping this to yourself."
The salarian smiled. "Confidentiality a sacred trust – Must uphold standards of care for all patients."
He extended his hand which was shaken heartily by Valni. "Good luck with relationship. Do try to
enjoy yourself when possible."

"Thank you. And good luck on Omega. They have a surplus of violent groups looking to shake
down residents there."

"Luck rarely needed. Have mechs. Plus weapons training. Will be vigilant for extortion attempts."

"I'm sure you'll do good work. But, it still seems an odd place to live. With your skills I imagine you
could have any posting on Sur'Kesh."

"Wanted simpler challenge. Prefer healing people. Future with Salarian Union uncertain. Can always
find something to occupy time. Reputation amongst military groups conspicuous. Often recruited to
perform sensitive operations. Will be interested in seeing what happens."

Valni nodded. "It was a pleasure meeting you, professor," she confessed.

"Likewise." Smiling graciously, Mordin Solus bowed low, then turned to board the freighter.
Valni takes part in a series of military manoeuvres on an asari world.

Warning: contains nudity.

The security lock-down on Arcadias was gradually reduced the closer they got to the Athena Nebula. Only the most reckless or suicidal marauders operated in asari space, especially when turian vessels were known to patrol the region, and Arcadias had demonstrated its formidable military power by destroying an entire battalion of batarian ships.

Barely eighteen hours after sending the MSV Mannovai on its way, Captain Verres made a ship-wide broadcast: "All hands, this is the Captain. Secure from Condition Yellow. Secure from Condition Yellow. Arcadias is cleared from Darkened Ship. Condition Normal is now in effect. All hands resume standard shifts…And try to relax for a bit, dammit! I think you've earned a little down-time, people."

There was an acute sense of relief on-board, and the entire crew celebrated their new found free time by treating themselves to various personal pursuits. Some crewmembers simply planned their routine for the next day, while others exercised or indulged in group activities with their crewmates – Most of them enjoyed playing an assortment of different games, while others sparred in the arena, or simply watched vids with friends. A select few, however, took the opportunity to enthusiastically renew personal relationships… Valni and Kenneth were the latter.

They both finished their shifts early that day, and with the security cordon relaxed, Valni wasted no time smuggling Kenneth back to her cabin, officially under the pretence of needing an engineer to repair the minor damage to her shower facilities from the batarians' attack.

The couple eased themselves back in gently and whiled away their time watching an assortment of turian and human vids. Valni had developed a taste in comedy films, and discovered she loved to watch old recordings from Earth... There was one in particular they both enjoyed, a disaster vid set on one of Earth's early mass conveyance vehicles. An odd one that, but no-less entertaining, it featured a former fighter pilot who had this terrible inability to drink liquids, and a physician who wasn't enamoured of being called 'Shirley'...

As the evening sped into the wee small hours the couple gradually lost themselves in playful banter, teasing and, eventually, quiet exploration. They were blissfully relaxed in each other's company, and the next two nights practically flew by; the lovers indulging in a fair amount of physical activity which brought no little joy; while the sound of laughter, combined with certain other noises, made Valni thankful her cabin was sound-proofed!

Despite the long working hours and general lack of sleep, both Valni and Kenneth found they awoke
fresh and bright in the mornings, while, in the evenings, were often content to simply lie together wrapped in each other's limbs.

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**CWO's Cabin, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 04:04 Zulu – 18th February 2183 CE**

The water trickled down her head and chest like a soothing balm, easing the mild prickling sensation on her skin. Valni had only started to notice it the night before and made up her mind to make a return visit to Medical for another immune-booster injection. It had been ten-days since her last check-up. She was probably long overdue for another one, and Doctor Tesserius had reminded her to make a repeat appointment. He wouldn't be happy she'd neglected to go back. As far as he was concerned, health was everything.

Reluctantly turning off the comforting spray of water, she stepped lightly out from the shower cubicle, then gathered up a towel and wrapped it around her dripping torso. Kenneth nonchalantly watched her through the open bathroom door as he sat on her bed, pulling on his socks, having already clambered into his trousers.

"So, you're not gonna be on-board Arcadias today?" he called out, picking up his crumpled Alliance shirt.

"I've received new orders from the Hierarchy," Valni's voice answered from the depths of the shower room. "My old detachment's conducting manoeuvres at the training grounds on Sanves, near the capital Etheai, from zero-five-hundred today – Guerrilla exercises; jungle survival training; interspecies combat drills; nothing too strenuous."

"When will you be back?"

"I can't tell you that. It's classified," Valni teased, quoting a line from that old human vid they'd enjoyed so much.

Kenneth laughed heartily. "Should you be revealing all that to a former enemy alien?" he asked. "Even one as handsome as myself?"

"If it were that big a secret, I doubt the Alliance 103rd Marines would be involved in the manoeuvres."

"Even so, I could be a spy for all you know." Kenneth struggled into his shirt. "Sent by Alliance Command to seduce you for intel."

Valni poked her head into the room, brandishing a toothbrush between her fingers. "Well, apart from my mother's recipe for brandy-squash crumble you haven't got anything out of me!"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Kenneth murmured quietly.

"I still have responsibilities beyond my role as 'Liaison Officer'." She disappeared back inside the bathroom.

"I always said women were the best at multitasking," he stated, slipping on his jacket.

"Yeah, and then we get more of the work."

"Oh, aye! Everyone should play to their strengths," he teased. That got a non-committal huff from the room opposite. Kenneth rose from the bed and wandered over to the bathroom, leaning casually against the doorframe as he watched Valni brush her teeth over the sink. A warm smile spread across
his face.

"So, what time can I expect you home for tea, dear?" he pressed.

Having a brush in her mouth her reply was distinctly indistinct. "Wenny-onnn hunrah. Issh a shikshiteen aaah ootashan."

"You may need subtitles, ma wee blossom."

Valni grinned and spat into the basin, cleaning her mouth with a hand towel. "Twenty-one-hundred. It's a sixteen-hour rotation."

"I'll have the brandy on stand-by. Along with a nice hot shower – Plus a little company if you're so inclined?"

"I sometimes wonder if you're just using me for my body," she said drily.

"Not true. I also like your shower facilities," he replied with a mischievous grin.

Valni pressed herself against him, wrapping her damp arms around his back. "It's going to look suspicious if I spend all my time in my cabin, and you're nowhere to be found."

He returned her embrace, his hands clinging to her wet towel. "Aye, then we should probably have dinner together this evening, playing the roles of respectful but chaste co-workers for the benefit of the crew." Kenneth leaned in to give her a quick kiss; then pulled away and added: "And then spend all night in your cabin!"

She smacked him playfully on his backside. "You're incorrigible!"

"And you're beautiful," he countered.

"Flatterer." She kissed him back. "Sycophant." She kissed him again, longer this time. "Fawning lick-spittle." The third kiss lingered, her hands gliding up his back and pulling Kenneth into a deep embrace. The couple were quiet as they were clinched together, until, finally, their lips parted and Valni rested her forehead against his. She let out a contended sigh of pleasure.

"You just listed my best qualities," he said, coming up for air.

Valni laughed as she steered him towards the door. "Go on. Out! Back to your cabin before someone sees you."

"Och, am I nought but your kept-man?"

"I'll be back at twenty-one-hundred," Valni promised. "Can I see you then?"

"Aye, I'll clean the house, pop the roast in the oven and put the kids to bed!"

She gave him another quick kiss. "Hang on." Valni opened the door and stuck her head out to make sure the corridor was empty before sending him on his way. Cautiously, he moved out from her cabin.

"Kenneth," she whispered.

He turned his head back just in time to see her whip off the towel and stand naked in the doorway, an elfin grin playing on her lips. Kenneth's mouth dropped open in surprise, gaping at her brazen flash of nudity.
"Don't be late," she warned, before quickly shutting the door.

It took a moment for Kenneth to calm himself. He took a deep breath and reflected on Valni's sense of decorum, or lack thereof. *That woman is a wicked tease!* he decided, before silently adding: *And I'm okay with that.*

Smiling, he made his way back to his own cabin, replaying their conversation in his head. They were starting to sound like a married couple!

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**Asari Commando training grounds (location redacted), Sanves – 11:20 LT**

The third battle exercise of the day had been going for 90 minutes now.

The terrain was similar (in colour at least) to the few remaining tropical rainforests on Earth, apart from the unusually bulbous, almost spherical shape of the trees. The two Alliance marines crept cautiously through the undergrowth making their way out into a clearing, and scanning the ground for trip-wires, motion sensors or anything that would give away their position to the turian forces. Clad in camouflage gear, no kinetic barriers and infrared equipped helmets, the scouts were part of an advance guard, seeking a safe path to the main turian base for the main strike force that was hot on their trail.

There was a rustle from the bushes in front of them. The point man went down on one knee and raised his fist, halting his companion immediately. The Ariake made rifle of the man behind was raised to his shoulder and he scanned the tree line, looking for possible enemies. His head-up display ran through the various spectrums, ultraviolet, infrared, and microwave radiation; seeking out all potential threats. Finding nothing, he leant forward and tapped his companion on the shoulder indicating the coast was clear. The pair moved forward again towards the trees. It was their misfortune that they were so intent on the tree-line they failed to scan the tree's canopy.

Valni watched the two men stalk beneath the branch she was perched upon, and then, with a deft skill honed by many years of practice, silently dropped to the ground behind the back-marker.

Catching the whisper of movement, the man whipped his head around and yelled out a warning. Valni grabbed his rifle and pushed it away. Muzzle flash lanced out, the first few rounds impacting harmlessly to her side. Her free hand snaked forward and grabbed the rifle butt. She twisted the weapon, spinning it out of his hands. Disarmed, he reached forward to grab her by the neck, but Valni easily twisted out of his grip and pushed his right elbow up and around, forcing his arm into a painful lock. The man's body stiffened and he was spun around so he was facing his companion who was aiming his weapon directly at him.

Using him as an impromptu shield, Valni pushed the man forward, quickly covering the distance between the soldiers. The second marine rolled to his left and came up firing, hoping to catch her on the flank. Valni dodged around behind his companion and waited for him to attack. He crouched low and leapt forward, throwing a powerful right hook which she dodged easily. Getting in close, her left elbow snapped up into his chin and then down onto his chest. She drove her other elbow deep into his gut, winding him. The man staggered back.
His companion, despite the glistening spots of liquid on his hip, rose from the ground and lunged at her. She spun out his reach, grabbing the back of his collar as the man stumbled and letting his momentum carry him forward and around so he was propelled into his compatriot. The two men collided heavily and went down in a tangled heap.

The man who'd been shot was a dead weight and his companion hurriedly pitched him off his front, hoping to struggle back to his feet and tackle her again. Instead, Valni's foot came down hard on the man's torso, pushing him back to the ground. She coolly detached her own rifle from its holster and swung it around, levelling the muzzle at the chest of the defeated man…

And then fired!

The man gasped and a crimson smear blossomed on his chest.

"You're dead," she stated casually.

His head slumped back against the earth.

"Oh, man!" he replied, offering a brief but sharp expletive as a follow-up.

Removing her foot, Valni lifted her helmet's visor to stare down at the 'deceased' enemy. "Don't feel so bad. At least now you can get some chow and a coffee."

"Yeah," the marine agreed. "But this is the third time I've been killed today! And it's not even lunchtime." After a few moments, he rose unsteadily to his feet, clutching his chest, and moved over to his downed companion. The other man weakly lifted his hand which the first marine gripped and helped him up off the ground.

The man she'd shot turned back to Valni. "Any more of your troops around?" he asked casually.

"I don't reveal troop numbers," Valni stated, "not even to corpses."

"I just don't wanna be shot again is all. That bastard dye stuff is freezing."

"Smart-dye. A mixture of colouring, local anaesthetic, micro-transponder and medi-gel. It simulates injuries and tracks troop losses."

"Yeah, I had the briefing," the man muttered, "and I've felt its effects often enough," he added escorting his companion out of the clearing.

No sooner had they disappeared from view than Valni noticed a movement to her right and swung around, her rifle levelled at a figure emerging from the treeline. It was Antoni; a Haliat Thunder assault rifle cradled in his arms.

"Having fun with the locals?" he asked happily.

"Oh, now you show up?" Valni accused, lowering her weapon.

"I was watching your six. Making sure this wasn't an ambush. As it happens it wasn't. You're welcome, by the way."

"You're so good to me."

"I do what I can. Whatever would you do without me looking out for you?"

"Maybe someday I'll get the chance to find out?"
Antoni clutched his chest and staggered theatrically. "Oh, you wound me, Chief!"

"Don't tempt me…” Valni warned, though she couldn't keep the small smirk betraying her feelings.

Antoni grinned in reply and, without another word, moved along the trail the two humans had come from. Valni followed, knowing they had to assess the strength of the remaining enemy forces.

Exercises like this had been started sometime after first contact with the humans. At the Council's request, and to facilitate the beginnings of reconciliation between species, the MCECT programme had been expanded to include humans. Multiracial Combined Exchange Combat Training, to give it its official title, was publicly known as 'Lancers' by the Systems Alliance and varied from simple combat drills to disaster management, and interspecies colonial affairs. Today's exercise was martial training.

The drills had gone ahead despite some formal protests from members of the Turian Hierarchy and the Asari Republics who were concerned that training human military groups could lead to destabilisation of democratic regimes. There was particular worry among the turian leadership that, due to the high number of former Alliance personnel becoming mercenaries, 'Human led militias strengthened by the Hierarchy could purposefully topple democratically elected governments the Citadel Council policy makers want kept in power'.

In the end, it was decided that the benefits of training potential allies outweighed the risk of individuals going rogue.

Making their way through the dense undergrowth, the pair emerged in the sunlight; a vast green meadow spread out before them. In the distance, Valni could make out several Alliance M35 Mako infantry vehicles scything through the tall grass towards the turian camp. They dived down and settled on the grassy bank leading up to the meadow.

Antoni checked his rifle, then turned to Valni.

"What have you been getting up to then?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've hardly seen you lately. Except when we're playing cards, of course. Then you just vanish for the rest of the evening."

"Been busy," Valni replied dismissively, peeking out to survey the battle-ground.

Prostrate on the ground, Antoni propped his head up on fist. "So, how are you doing these days? You good?"

"This really isn't the time for small talk," she insisted, a slight edge creeping into her voice.

Unconcerned, Antoni leaned back against the grass, lazily resting his head on his hands and crossing his legs. "Yeah, but how often do we get the chance to unwind like this? And in such a picturesque setting?" The sound of distant gunfire floated across the meadow. Antoni sighed dreamily. "You know, I could have sworn I heard you humming at the poker table the other day," he stated.

"Observant as ever, Cressoni," Valni replied. A few human marines suddenly rose up from the long grass and pointed at her position. They opened fire. Valni cursed quietly and ducked back into cover.

"And the way you downed those two soldiers in the clearing," Antoni continued, "there was a definite spring in your step. I hardly needed to lift a finger to help."
"As I recall, you didn't," Valni muttered.

"Well, you were obviously enjoying yourself so much. I didn't want to interrupt."

The Chief Warrant Officer glared at the Recon-Marine. "How scintillating for you. I'm so glad I could provide entertainment."

A small flash-bang grenade tumbled over the side of the bank and exploded about ten metres from their position. Antoni ignored it. "It's one of the reasons I enjoy hanging out with you so much," he commented happily. "But, I have to say there's something different about you just recently. You seem… happier. More lively. Smilier even."

"'Smilier' isn't a word, Cressoni," Valni reminded him, checking her rifle.

"Well, if it was it would describe you."

A rocket suddenly flew over their heads and exploded against a tree, coating the bark in a thick blue liquid.

"I think the neighbours are getting rowdy," Antoni joked, raising his voice to be heard over the approaching thunder of swarming enemy tanks.

"Perhaps we could resume this when we're not being shot at? Valni yelled.

"Aye ma'am," Antoni replied, casting a cocky eye in her direction and saluting theatrically, "to be continued, ma'am."

Ducking behind the grass embankment, the pair made their way along the ridge to the cover of the wood beyond. Now the enemy had their location, she expected they would coordinate mortar fire on their position. As it happens, she was right.

The path was suddenly alive with heat and fire. Explosions and bits of foliage rained down on her helmet, accompanied by broken flora gusting around her feet like discarded confetti. She guessed the season on Sanves was autumn, judging by the colour of the shrivelled leaves still falling. The pair dashed through the maelstrom, narrowly avoiding getting hit by any of the smart dye that would signify grievous injury.

Making the safety of the denser forest, Valni chanced a glance over the rise and sighted the remnants of the human forces making a charge towards the turian camp. The humans seemed to be making one last push on the base, despite the losses they'd sustained from their last futile charge.

The training ground had extensive camera coverage for post-battle analysis, and she expected that most of the human 'dead' were probably hunkered down in their base-camp, clustered around the observation screens, drinking coffee and nursing the lingering effects of the smart-dye while they cheered on the few surviving attackers. Being dead has never been so easy, she observed.

Valni and Antoni emerged in a clearing a few dozen metres from the final pincer movement the humans were deploying against the turian base-camp. It was an all or out move from the human marines; a final mad dash that would either see them victorious, or utterly destroyed.

Valni glanced to her left and saw the tell-tale glimpse of turian helmets, following the human forces. She smiled. It was a classic flanking manoeuvre that would demolish the remaining human forces.

"I can see the 43rd lining up for an attack. From this position we can flank them."
"When do we go?" Antoni quizzed. The answer coming just a few seconds later when a great battle-cry sounded from the turian forces and the cacophony of gunfire echoed across the plain.

"Well, now's a good a time as any," she stated wryly.

Breaking cover, the pair slipped out from the foliage and ran towards the fray.

The battle was brief and decidedly one-sided. The human forces quickly finding themselves out-flanked and out-gunned by the superior turian attackers.

Valni and Antoni had sprinted across the field to find the 43rd Division quite literally decimating the human 103rd Division. One tenth of the force was on the ground, suffering the unpleasant numbing effects of the smart-dye, while the remaining forces were quickly routed by turian shoot-and-scoot tactics. The pair emerged on the scene to find the human forces in disarray. Very soon their entire division was overwhelmed and the turian marines quickly moved in to take prisoners. The human commander ordered the few men still standing to surrender, and the clatter of gunfire soon died to be replaced by the sound of cheering from some of the younger members of the 43rd.

Valni walked among the troops, observing both human and turian soldiers help comrades to their feet or recuperate from the exertion of battle.

A few asari commandos, who had been supervising the latest war-game, watched the crowds impassively, their leader talking quietly to the turian and human commanders. Valni and Antoni approached the group as everyone gathered together for a briefing.

"Attention!" the turian commander of the 43rd yelled. The whole training ground fell silent as everybody went rigid. "Stand at ease." The crowd relaxed and he turned his attention to the human marines.

"Well, that was interesting… Ninety-six minutes! I think that's a new record. Your commander and I agree we doubtless have some work to do here. The fastest assault and capture of a base recorded on this training ground is still held by elcor Special Forces at a phenomenal twenty-three minutes. But, you'll be pleased to know, the 103rd now holds the fastest recorded defeat of any force whilst assaulting a base. Kudos."

The human forces glanced around at their fellow soldiers – The men and women not quite meeting each other's gaze.

"However… Without defeat there can be no victory. Without mistakes owned and learned from there can be no progress. You have set the bar. Now, we will help you surpass it. Our intention is to help you raise your game until this defeat is nothing but a myth whispered in passing, and your combined future achievements obliterate all memory of today. We will help you do this because we too have suffered failure. Just like you, we have tasted defeat."

"Just not so comprehensively," Antoni whispered to Valni.

"Our combat specialist can brief you further." The commander pointed vaguely at the two turians standing next to him.

All eyes turned expectantly to Antoni, the tallest of the pair, assuming he would present himself… There were a few raised eyebrows when the shorter, thinner turian stepped forward and removed her helmet. Valni gazed out at the incredulous faces and caught a few snatches of whispered conversation, 'That's the specialist?'; 'You've gotta be kidding!'; 'Is that a female?' Ever the professional, she smiled and let the comments wash over her.
"Thank you, commander. Well, if there's one thing we can take away from this it's that there is certainly room for improvement. But, having seen how passionately you fight, and knowing the little I do about humans, I can honestly say that I'd be honoured to fight alongside any one of you. However, make no mistake; your defeat was born of ignorance. You took what little of turian strategy you knew, in this case our use of overwhelming force, and tried to use that against us. It failed because that isn't all we are. Knowledge is your weapon here – Knowledge of your enemy's weaknesses and fighting style. When faced with a physically superior opponent, identifying the appropriate strategy is vital…"

"But turians regularly use overwhelming force as a tactic," a human marine pointed out. Valni glanced at him. The man had much paler skin than the other humans around him, but was very broad in the shoulder and heavily muscled. He looked angry and his face was flushed red, which contrasted sharply with his blond hair. Valni noticed several smart-dye stains on his jacket. He was probably still aching from the last battle. "Isn't that how you turians beat us?"

"No, you tried to use overwhelming force in a hard-and-fast strike and failed because you didn't know the terrain and hadn't bothered to fully understand our strategies."

The marine snorted in derision. "We're supposed to take advice on 'overwhelming force' from a svelte, 90-pound turian cheerleader?"

There was a murmur of discontent from the *Arcadias* crew.

Valni smiled sweetly at the man. "Firstly, thank you for noticing my trim figure…" A chuckle rippled through the group. "Secondly, turians don't have many cheerleaders; we prefer to just enjoy a sporting event. And thirdly, overwhelming force is not the be-all and end-all. Take our asari hosts." She indicated the group of black-clad commandos standing to her right. "It's well known that asari aren't the strongest galactic species, especially compared to krogan, and yet their commandos regularly take on enemies that would give most Spectres pause. In fact, asari commandos are one of the most respected enemies a krogan battlemaster can face."

"They have biotics," the human pointed out.

"True, but even without their biotic abilities, they would still be formidable opponents. Experience and knowledge are their weapons. That's the point of these exercises. Physical superiority is no measure of success. Take you for example: Physically you're much stronger than I am. With the right application of force you could easily overpower me…"

"Damn skippy!" the Marine replied.

"So, try it," Valni offered.

The Marines' eyes widened in surprise. Valni emphasised her challenge by unzipping her jacket and slipping it off her shoulders. The crowd clustered together a little closer, the people at the back craning their heads to see what was happening.

"You want me to fight you?" the human asked.

"Unless you've got something better to do? Perhaps you want to stay in a wash your hair?" she goaded, indicating his tightly curled blond mop. The sound of laughter spread out among the crowd. The man bristled slightly.

"Fine. Just don't blame me if your ship needs a new cheerleader!" he snapped, yanking his own jacket off his shoulders.
A few humans called out to him, showing their support for their fighter. Valni walked back to Antoni and handed the jacket over to her grinning friend.

"Try not to break him," he advised. "We want these people to like us."

Valni smiled in reply. "Have a little faith, Cressoni."

Moving back to the centre of the crowd, Valni took up position opposite the human. Curiously, he seemed to eye the crowd warily, his expression anxious. It looked as if he was regretting his decision to agree to the fight. Valni wondered if it his sudden hesitancy was because she was a turian, or a woman.

"No hard feelings about this, right?" he asked her hopefully.

"None what-so-ever," she confirmed.

"Your friends won't try to lynch me when I beat you, will they?"

Ah! Valni thought. She tilted her head to one side and smiled. "No chance of that."

"So, is there a bell or something?" he queried.

Valni casually punched him in the face. "Ding-ding," she said matter-of-factly.

The man staggered back, clutching his face in shock. She knew he wasn't hurt. It hadn't been a hard punch by any means, but it got his attention, and more importantly, it would make him angry. She turned back to the crowd.

"As I was saying: A weaker challenger can regularly defeat a stronger one by reapplying their strength against them – By using their power and momentum to your own advantage. Observe."

Valni took up a fighting stance. The man followed suit, the two combatants sizing each other up as the crowd started to yell encouragement.

Uncertain how hard he could punch without injuring her, the man delivered a half-hearted blow to her face. With catlike grace, Valni caught his fist in both hands and responded by driving her right knee into his gut.

He exhaled sharply and backed away holding his stomach.

"Amazing what they teach cheerleaders nowadays, isn't it?" she said with a wolfish grin.

Scowling, the man crouched down and circled around her. Valni followed his movements, keeping him in check. Dashing forward, the Marine feigned a punch, then quickly spun on his heal and kicked out, his right foot curling around in a graceful arc towards Valni's head. She ducked underneath and swiftly delivered a one-two punch to his nose. The man's strength was colossal and the only visible damage was a thin trickle of blood oozing from his left nostril. His expression hardened; she realised that he wasn't going make the mistake of underestimating her. Valni quickly reassessed her strategy and began commentating to the crowd as if she was giving a combat lesson.

"Now, in a situation like this..." She dodged a powerful punch."...Against a stronger foe..." A fist whipped past her face. "...Straight-up punches are largely superfluous." Another blow was narrowly avoided. "Instead..." He punched again, his left arm fully extended. Valni dodged right, delivering a sharp blow to his armpit. He cried out. She ducked under his wild right-hook and grabbed his wrist, spinning away and letting his momentum carry him around before twisting his arm over and flipping
his whole body onto the grass. "Use their momentum against them," she finished.

The man practically growled with rage and rolled to his feet. He lunged forward suddenly, tackling her around the waist and hoping to bear her to the ground with his greater mass. Leaning forward, Valni drove her elbow into his back and applied all her weight to that point. The man grunted, collapsing face-down under the sudden pressure to his shoulder. Valni quickly rolled off his back and danced away. Her opponent stood up warily. He raised his hands into a boxer's stance, keeping both feet planted firmly on the floor. He wasn't going to take any chances now.

The crowd jostled around the fighters, the people at the back eager to see the action. Some of them even started to take bets. Odds were yelled out to anyone who would listen. But those cries were drowned out by the cheers and hollers of encouragement from the crowd. Valni could make out her own name being called, and she couldn't help the smile forming on her face. The adrenaline was coursing through her now; she was losing herself in the moment. All the memories of training with her father came flooding back. To her, this was like an elegant freestyle dance, and she loved it.

The man was changing stances now, hoping from foot to foot; trying to confuse her. His left fist snaked out, but she swatted it away. He responded by delivering a straight blow to her head. Unexpectedly, she moved in and parried the blow, grabbing his arm and pivoting on her right foot before sliding underneath him. Moving incredibly fast, Valni spun and whipped his arm down, throwing him headfirst onto the ground. He landed heavily, but rose quickly. Valni guessed a few more throws would tire him out.

But, he wasn't done yet. Swinging wildly, he lashed out in a clumsy attack. A flailing fist caught a glancing blow to the shoulder and a cheer went up from the humans. The punch had stung; he was powerful. Valni covered her discomfort with a smile. It was time to wrap this up.

"Against uncoordinated attacks," she announced loudly, as the man flailed again, "twist the joints into a lock." A circular blow to her head was deflected and Valni grabbed his arm; then caught his other elbow as it swung towards her. Pushing his elbow up, Valni spun around again and went down on one knee, pulling him with her. The man landed on his back and struggled to his feet.

His face was almost purple with anger. Valni could see what he was going to try next. He kicked out, attempting to catch her in the head. But, he overextended himself. She caught his leg and held him there, hopping ungainly on one foot. She turned her head and raised her voice to be heard above the crowd. This lesson was over.

"And, in a pinch…” her fist connected sharply with the man's groin, "…target the vulnerable areas.”

The Marine, whilst clutching his 'vulnerable areas', went over like a felled tree. There was a groan of sympathy from the humans in the crowd. Valni turned her gaze on them.

"Are there any further challenges?"

The response was swift and fairly unanimous. "Hell, no!", "We're good, thanks." "Ain't gonna happen!"

"Any questions at all?"

No-one raised their hands.

"That's disappointing – Warriors should never be too proud to ask advice. I cannot stress enough how important these training sessions are to you. Council figures estimate that in the Omega Nebula alone there are currently 30,000 human mercenaries, 250,000 batarian slavers, 150,000 biotic asari
mercs, 20,000 salarian eclipse members and a further 90,000 professional turian separatist affiliates. And I haven't even covered the number of krogan or vorcha Bloodpack members that are out there – They are a whole different training programme. The point is that each race, each enemy has their weaknesses and strengths. And these training sessions are vital. Knowledge of the tactics of your enemies, and of your allies, no matter what the species, is the key to your survival." She gazed out over the sea of multi-coloured faces. "We are allies ladies and gentlemen. And there is strength in that. Let's make sure we keep each other alive."

Turian, human and asari heads nodded in agreement. Smiling at the general murmur of consensus, Valni turned her attention back to the one person who hadn't been listening to her speech (most likely focusing his attentions elsewhere).

"No hard feelings, Marine?" She almost hated herself for asking that question.

"I just need me a minute here," he replied in a strained, and slightly falsetto, voice.

"Some ice might be needed," Valni suggested, turning back to his squad mates.

"I'm on it," a blue-eyed, brown skinned human agreed hurrying over with a medical kit.

The Marine was slowly helped to his feet and an ice-pack applied to the affected area.

"Hey! Off limits, Cortez," the Marine muttered, taking the ice from the man. "Robert wouldn't be happy if he caught you with your hand down my pants!"

"You've got to learn to pick your fights more carefully," Cortez chided.

"Yeah, yeah," the man replied as he limped from the field.

They were quickly swallowed by the crowd and Valni turned back to Antoni.

"Loved the speech. That was a nice touch," he said, handing the jacket back. Valni grinned and slipped it on. "Though I am a little curious about something…"

"What?"

"Well, in all the years I've known you, you've never been particularly good at biology."

"Yeah? So?"

"So, how is it you know so much about human anatomy all of a sudden?"

Valni paused and met the searching expression on her friend's face. There was definitely a smirk there. Finally, she replied: "Antoni, please… I'm the Liaison Officer; I'm expected to conduct lots of research."
Chapter Summary

Kenneth helps Valni to relax after she's left exhausted from the war games. Then a message from Gabby leads to a surprising encounter.

Chapter Notes

Caution: contains nudity and interspecies sexual themes.

Mess Hall, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 21:12 Zulu – 18th February 2183 CE

Valni was tired from the exercises. Actually, no, it would be fair to say she was exhausted. Almost sixteen solid hours of war games and military manoeuvres had left her physically drained and her muscles aching. She felt run-down and had a mild tickle in her throat. Valni put on a cheerful front, though. There was no way she was going to look weak in front of the crew. I just need to rest, she told herself. There was still another day of war games to get through, and she was confident that Kenneth wouldn't mind an early night. He was very accommodating.

The Mess Hall was packed; almost a third of the crew had been on rotation and they were now ravenous from the day's activities. Taking their trays of dextro and levo-amino food, Kenneth and Valni made their way to a metallic table, set slightly apart from the other groups, and sat facing each other.

"This isn't exactly the romantic venue I had in mind when you mentioned having dinner this morning," Valni whispered, smiling across at her secret lover.

"I can make it up to you when we're on the Citadel," Kenneth promised, "I know a terrific little restaurant on the Presidium. Great choice of levo and dextro cuisine. Really fancy. Table cloths and everything."

"Table cloths? Mr Donnelly, you're spoiling me. Next you'll be telling me they have breadsticks."

"Three different kinds! And I've heard tell of doilies, but I think that's a myth!" Valni laughed quietly while Kenneth enjoyed the scene before him. "Doesna seem fair we can't enjoy the same food, though," he continued. "One of the pleasures of dining out is being able to sample each other's meal."

"Yeah, I must confess, I occasionally steal food off Antoni's plate."

"Well, I guess some things are universal," Kenneth noted wryly. "You know, I've just realised, I don't even know what you like to eat," he added, looking over the multi-coloured cuisine on her plate. The only item of food he could identify was a dark, slightly purplish coloured meat that he'd come to know as 'louza'. It was extremely popular among the crew, and he wondered if it was the turian equivalent of chicken.
"You know what I like to drink, though," Valni pointed out.

"Don't I just," Kenneth agreed, recalling the bottle of brandy he'd snuck into her room to thank her for the Scotch she'd provided on their first night. "It's getting harder to convince the supply officer that the bottles are just for poker games." He nodded towards Valni's plate. "So, I couldna eat anything there?"

Valni shook her head. "And your food would probably do me a lot of no good. What is it?"

Kenneth pointed to each item with his knife as he listed them. "Aberdeen angus – medium rare – tatties, fried tomato, and mushrooms." He pointed to a cream-coloured concoction on Valni's plate. "That looks like mashed potato."

"This is minced tarzogourd," she said, scooping a little onto her finger. "It's a sweet, creamy, trisected marrow traditionally referred to as 'Maiden's Fingers.'" She smiled and licked the food off the digit. Kenneth grinned as Valni slid her finger between her lips and sucked on it. He glanced around the hall, slightly taken aback at her obvious display of flirting. No-one gave any indication that they'd seen her.

"So, what's that?" he asked pointing to a bright turquoise fruit sitting forlornly on a separate plate.

"That's a rho'dainberry," she replied. "It's a delicacy."

"Can I try a bite?"

"It'll make you sick. It's rather strong."

"Then I won't swallow," he said, shrugging.

Valni relented and passed the fruit over to him. He held it up to the light, iridescent colours shimmering across its surface. Leaning forward, Kenneth bit into the strange fruit, mulling the flesh around his mouth.

"That's not bad," he stated after a while. "Not overly sweet. A bit savoury to be honest… There's a hint of spice, too – More of a meaty flavour than a fruit."

"Big surprise it's a favourite on Palaven," Valni commented.

Kenneth nodded and continued to chew the berry. His expression subtly changed as the heat gradually took hold. The spiciness of the berry actually made him cough. "Oh, wow, that is strong. It's got a real bite to it. Almost reminds me of a tarka dahl."

"Tarka dahl?" Valni repeated.

"A human delicacy," Kenneth explained, beads of sweat already starting to form on his brow. Valiantly, Kenneth kept chewing, refusing to be beaten and stubbornly tried to ignore the growing discomfort. But, the heat didn't subside. After a while, Kenneth opened his mouth and waved frantically. "Okay. Hot! Hot! That is bloody hot now!"

Valni giggled at Kenneth's odd display as he struggled with the fiery berry. A few of the other crew glanced over at the spectacle, Kenneth gagged slightly and spat it into his napkin, a thick smear of juice still clinging to his burning lips.

"How can you eat that?" he exclaimed. "It's like chewing molten plastic!"
"You just have to develop a taste for it," she replied, reaching over and taking the other half of the uneaten berry from his tray before popping it into her mouth.

A few of the crew who'd been watching the scene in amusement suddenly grimaced at the sight of a turian and a human sharing food. Valni caught the expression of the crewman sitting with his friends closest to her.

"Oh, shut up, Winkleman! I've seen you eat live grubs before now!"

"That was part of survival training," the crewman argued.

"No, it was last month for breakfast!"

"Yeah, but they were… surprisingly tasty," he mumbled back, trying to ignore the bemused expressions on his friend's faces.

Kenneth wiped his mouth again and guzzled his glass of water down in one gulp. "Is the burning sensation normal?"

"Yeah, but the rash around the mouth isn't," Valni stated a little worried now. Kenneth's lips looked pink and raw. "Maybe you better see the doc?"

"Again? Oh, he's gonna be pissed."

"Don't care. Come on," she insisted, rising and walking around the table to drag Kenneth from his seat. For such a slight woman it always surprised him how strong she was. "On your feet, engineer! You're my responsibility; now let's get you patched up."

Protesting futilely, Kenneth was dragged through the amused crowds of onlookers towards the exit.

"Okay, but just answer me one thing…" Kenneth began.

"What?"

"Is that guy really called 'Winkleman'?"

The doctor had his hands full when they walked in. A couple of young soldiers, shirtless and bandaged around the torso, were sat on the examination bed, while a woman stood in one corner of the room, nursing her left elbow which appeared to be severely swollen. Tesserius noticed the pair enter and quickly moved over to intercept them.

"More injuries from the war games?" he asked. "I've had ten cases already. It's always the same during manoeuvres. Some people just won't listen to my advice." Kenneth and Valni exchanged a guilty glance between them.

Valni hastily explained the situation. Upon examining the human's inflamed mouth, the doctor had merely sighed resignedly.

"Perhaps I should get you a season ticket, Donnelly?" he admonished. Kenneth tried to answer but his mouth was too sore. Instead, Tesserius handed him a glass containing a worryingly familiar smelling liquid.

"Here, swill this around your mouth, but don't swallow it."

Kenneth took a tentative sniff. It smelt like that antiseptic the doc had seared Kenneth's shoulder
"It's diluted," the doc assured him. "But, seriously, don't swallow."

Taking a deep breath, Kenneth put the cup to his lips and took a swig of the revolting concoction. He doubled over almost immediately, breathing hard through the pain while he methodically rinsed the stuff around his mouth.

Eventually, he gagged the vile liquid back into the cup and sagged back against the wall. Valni moved to check on him, but the doctor took her arm and moved her to one side.

"He'll be fine. It's only temporary. But, listen; am I right in assuming you've had a skin rash recently?" Valni nodded softly, not bothering to ask how he knew. "Thought as much." He reached into a drawer and pulled out a small tub of cream. "This will ease the discomfort. Pop back once the manoeuvres are over and I'll give you another shot."

Only when he was sure Kenneth had regained the power of speech did the doctor let them leave in order to receive more injured crewman from the day's activities.

The pair walked back to her quarters. Neither of them were in the mood now for anything remotely physical, but Valni invited Kenneth into her cabin anyway. He hesitantly accepted.

She told him to lie on the bed, while she retreated into the shower room; reappearing a few minutes later, slathered in cream and wearing her 'Hello Krogi' nightwear.

She crawled onto the bed beside him. He hadn't bothered to undress and had only removed his jacket and shoes.

"How are you feeling?" Kenneth asked as he gathered her up in his arms.

"Very tired, to be honest," she admitted.

"Just close your eyes for a bit," Kenneth insisted. She did as she was bid and rested her forehead against his.

With their heads touching, and their arms entwined, the couple quickly fell into a deep, undisturbed sleep.

The next day was dominated by a further twenty hours of war-games. The human forces had taken the previous day's humiliating defeat to heart and fought back against the turian troops with renewed vigour. The two sides alternated between attacking and defending their bases, both forces gaining equal victories against the other, until the final deciding battle late in the evening which turned into a down-and-dirty grudge-match. The sun had long since set beneath the Sanves horizon and a persistent deluge of rain saturated the ground. The dark and wet conditions forced the combatants to rely on infrared detectors to hunt their enemy down.

The humans, whilst defending their compound, had unexpectedly changed tactics and moved almost the entire garrison out of the base to attack the turian compound, leaving only a token force in reserve. A couple of turian scouts intercepted the main bulk of humans and quickly alerted their own squad before being captured. Converging on the human's last reported position, the turians launched an all-out assault; the two forces clashing and taking heavy losses on both sides, until finally battling themselves to a standstill with neither side making headway.

After three hours of gruelling fighting, a truce was finally called to proceedings.
The asari commandoes moved across the field to congratulate the troops and later proclaimed the manoeuvres a triumph of strategy, guile and resourcefulness. The soldiers of the 43rd came away from the exercises with a healthy respect for human discipline and tactics; while Antoni and Valni both agreed that it was much better to have the Alliance as an ally then as an enemy.

Verress had unexpectedly given all Arcadias crew taking part in the manoeuvres the next morning off, which, she suspected, most of them would use to catch up on some sleep.

Arriving back on Arcadias, Valni didn't even bother stopping for food but simply snuck back to her cabin to meet Kenneth (she'd provided him with a passkey). Upon seeing her sopping wet form in the doorway, Kenneth quickly helped her strip off her mud-splattered combat gear and told her to hit the shower. She invited him to join her, and very soon Kenneth's wonderful five-fingered hands were gently massaging away the aches and cares of the day. It wasn't long before she'd relaxed so much her eyelids started to droop. She was too exhausted for anything else and, after towelling off, the couple simply lay down on her bed together. Valni was asleep a few seconds after her head hit the pillow.

She awoke feeling incredibly relaxed.

Valni opened her eyes and let out a small sigh as she stretched out on top of her mattress, or more specifically, on top of Kenneth, and marvelled at how comfortable he was to lie on. Compared to turians, human bodies were suppler, smoother. They hadn't evolved on a planet with a weak magnetic core; they didn't need the metallic carapace that protected turians from excess radiation. And that made them softer; their skin less rigid. Result: They made wonderful cushions!

Valni was lying on Kenneth's back, sliding her hands between his chest and the mattress as her eyes roamed over his human face. He wasn't classically attractive by turian standards. There were no mandibles; he had no colony markings on his face; no long sensual crest of horns. And, despite the glorious feel of his softer skin, she had to admit, she sometimes missed the harder carapace. Seeing him naked was like seeing a plus-sized turian with his plates removed – It was an odd sight to say the least.

Plus his pigmentation was far too pale – completely the wrong colour – and his talons (or nails, rather) were too short and brittle. He had hair! Right now his nose, already three times as big as an average turian's, was squished against the pillow bending it out at right angles. And his feet were, quite frankly, weird! Humans had five toes on each foot, and they walked on their ankles. What with his oddly shaped feet and the way his legs bent, it was a wonder he could stand up at all!

Logically, she shouldn't find him attractive. Everything about him was wrong. And yet… All of those elements combined with his laugh; his sense of humour; his voice; his fragrance; everything together made him work. She liked him, and for some inexplicable, wonderful reason, he liked her, too. In the end, that was all that mattered.

Tearing her eyes away from his face, she glanced around the room. The place was a mess! Their clothes were strewn all over the floor and the bed covers had long since been discarded. Valni lay across his naked back, relishing the delicious heat from his body and his foreign scent. She nuzzled the back of his neck, her nose poking through the thick hair and she inhaled deeply. Aliens should not smell this good, surely? she reflected. The biology is all wrong. Their chemistry is different. Isn't that what I was taught at military college?

The alien in question stirred beneath her; his eyes opening and his low voice muffled by the fact he was face down in the pillow.
"Oooh… Am I nothing but a cushion to you, woman?"

Woman! It was a phrase he'd started using ever since their first night together. The first time she'd heard it, she wondered briefly if it was meant to be derogatory, but, knowing Kenneth a lot better now, she was sure he used it as a term of affection. And, to be honest, she actually liked it – It reminded her that at least one person didn't think she looked like a teenage boy.

Valni shifted her weight a little, letting him turn his head enough to be able to see her, and get some air.

"If you're as comfy as other humans, then the Alliance should send us more personnel – I'd be happy to act as quality controller."

"So, did I pass? Did you sleep well on me?" he asked.

"Dead to the world!" she replied, leaning back against the pillow.

Kenneth rolled onto his side so that he was facing her. There were odd indentations on his left cheek from the pillow. Valni laughed quietly at the red-streaked pattern on his face.

"What?"

"You do have colony markings," she said, tracing the pattern with her finger.

Kenneth touched the indentations on his cheek. "It's wrong to mock the afflicted," he chided.

"Couldn't help it," Valni admitted. "And, it almost suits you. A little asymmetric, perhaps. But, if you had the same pattern the other side…"

"I'd look even more ridiculous!" Kenneth finished.

"Yeah, but cute." She stroked his neck. "Ridiculously cute."

They kissed in greeting.

Pulling away, Kenneth examined her face, his eyes following the intricate red and blue colony markings accentuating her features. "It's beautiful, by the way," he commented, running a finger across the blue 'eyebrow' over her right eye. "Never really noticed just how elaborate some of them are. And each pattern is unique." He didn't recall seeing any member of the crew with the same markings. Turian culture was evidently very diverse.

"We have a lot of different dependencies, districts and autonomous regions back home," Valni confirmed, "each with its own diverse background, customs and language – Which, unfortunately, can lead to conflict. When the asari first made contact with us we were still recovering from a war."

Kenneth nodded, recalling the history lessons from school. "And then we turn up on the scene and it starts a new war."

"Something we seem to have in common."

"Can't we all just get along?" he asked wryly.

"Well, it's not for wont of trying," Valni smirked, pulled him into an embrace and kissing him again. "You just have to get over the language barrier," she added, toying idly with his hair.

"Are there many languages on Palaven?"
She nodded. "Somewhere in the region of three hundred, I think. With even more on the colonies. We rely on translators most of the time. But, there are compulsory courses on the common language… And xenolinguistics. I spent two months learning simple phrases in Mandarin – Along with the most commonly spoken asari and salarian dialects."

"We don't have those compulsory courses," Kenneth admitted, "not for grunts like me. Only the Communication Specialists study languages."

Valni nodded again. "Your language is English, right?"

"Yeah," he confirmed, "it's probably the second most widely used language on Earth. But it's the official language of the Alliance. What's yours?"

"Tarqui'ilet," she replied. "It's a northern dialect, not commonly spoken back home."

"Aye, well I do seem to have a thing for northern women," he joked. Valni grinned back. "Not commonly spoken?"

"It's more complex, placing greater emphasis on the sub-harmonics."

Kenneth's hand brushed up and down her arm. He seemed to be considering something. "Can I hear it?" he asked. "Without the translator?"

For a moment it looked like Valni might say no but, after a few seconds of thought, she pulled away from him and sat up in a kneeling position. "You're sure you want to hear it?" she asked cautiously.

"Indulge a man's curiosity."

Valni hesitated briefly and then lifted her arm; the soft orange glow of her omni-tool lit up her face as her fingers danced over the display, recalibrating the language settings.

"You'll have to turn yours off, too," she pointed out.

Kenneth quickly made the same adjustments to his omni-tool and sat back expectantly, staring at her. He was suddenly apprehensive – Wondering how she'd react to his unadulterated voice. Would she still like it? Would he like her voice? He realised that she was probably thinking the same thing.

The couple were silent for several seconds, until, finally, Valni opened her mouth and spoke…

The sound that came out caused Kenneth's eyebrows to arch in surprise. He hadn't really known what to expect, but the pitch of her native tongue was well outside the normal vocal range of humans. Her inflections flowed from her mouth like water across harp strings; the notes blending into one another; pitches and tones rising and falling into an unintelligible whole that almost resembled free-form jazz played on a flute. There was a suggestion of birdsong to the language, and, very occasionally, sharp clicks would enter a sentence. The strange flanging effect in turian speech meant that it sounded like she was trying to harmonise with herself. Kenneth knew he had a tin ear when it came to music, but this language, this melody that was coming out of Valni's mouth was fresh and mellifluous. He could honestly listen to it all day… He had no idea what she was saying, but it was wonderful to hear.

"You should make a recording of this – There are markets on Earth where you'd make a fortune…"

Valni started in surprise and covered her mouth with both hands, stifling a laugh.

*Oh Spirits, that's what human's sound like?*
It was like he had something stuck in his mouth! His warm Scottish accent was still there, soft and sweet to her ear, but the words were totally incomprehensible. There was a rich plummy texture to the tones, and, periodically, a few pleasant sounding trills would enter a phrase. Occasionally, it would shift into what sounded like a deep hiss. Other noises were more tuneful, some of them appearing to fuse together while others had a staccato quality; each syllable punched from his mouth like Kenneth was hammering them out on a drum.

Valni goggled at the human; grinning as he continued to talk enthusiastically about... something.

With a small shake of her head, she reactivated her omni-tool and turned the translator back on. Kenneth's meaningless ramblings suddenly became clear: "...And I canna imagine how many fans you'd have. They'd be beating down your door."

"Can I assume you liked my dialect, then?" she asked.


"'Aye'," she mimicked, "well, English has its plus points, too."

"That's good to hear," Kenneth mumbled, his response slightly muffled by the presence of Valni's lips. The kiss was deep and sensual, her warm breath sweet on his tongue. Eventually, they parted.

"So, what exactly were you saying?" Kenneth asked.

"Oh, that was an ancient family secret my dad taught me." She lowered her voice conspiratorially. "I was describing how to make Sticky Louza Flatbread with Blue Bean sauce."

Kenneth chuckled in delight, his laughter silenced only when she kissed him again. Kenneth eagerly drew her closer, caressing her supple spinal plates as she pressed into him, forcing herself atop his chest and slowly running her hands over his head, letting the soft hair flow between her fingers...

While Valni had the morning off, Kenneth's duties obliged him to report to the Engine Room by zero-nine-hundred. When he'd showered, dressed, and picked up her clothes from the floor, Kenneth gently tucked Valni back under the covers, and then, somewhat reluctantly, left her snoring softly on her bed, before sauntering through the quiet corridors to engineering.

He was surprised to walk into the Engine Room to find only a skeleton crew monitoring ship functions. Inquiring with a passing artificer, Kenneth was told that Arcadias was remaining in Sanves' orbit for a little while longer, allowing the crew some much needed downtime. They hadn't been given shore leave, but Kenneth still thought that it was an uncharacteristically generous gesture from the Captain.

The crew seemed none the worse-for-wear from the events of the past week, and even artificers Fanthe and Torrickus, so grievously injured during the batarian attack, had sufficiently recovered from their wounds to take on light duty. Kenneth had to marvel at the turian resolve to carry on no matter what the circumstances.

Operating in a nearly empty Engine Room was an eerie experience. After working in such a crowded environment for so long, it was strange to see only two or three people in such a large open space. Moving down to the Core Monitor, Kenneth tried to ignore the echoing sounds of his footsteps and took up position at his console, spending the rest of the day on general maintenance and system monitoring.

He only saw cadet Bron for an hour that day, as her duties and drills took her elsewhere; though
Kenneth was never told where. After she'd been recalled by her supervising officer, he noticed she'd left a data-pad behind on her console and hoped it wouldn't prove important.

The day slowly wore on into the evening, and as Kenneth prepared for the end of his shift he checked all the monitoring stations set up around the Drive core. The most remote station was down a level and around the back of the Core, at the end of darkly lit circular catwalk. It was this area that Valni and Kenneth had occasionally retreated to in order to steal moments together – The lack of monitoring devices and the fact it was so isolated meant there was little chance of anyone walking in on them.

Kenneth quickly ran the core numbers on the console, cross-referencing them against the previous day's figures. Everything checked out. He was just resetting and closing down the control panel when he perceived someone else in the corridor…

"You left so quietly this morning, I never got a chance to thank you for tucking me in," a voice behind him stated.

Kenneth smiled and turned around to face her; gazing at Valni's amused face. "Aye, well you looked so peaceful there, I dinna want to wake you," he replied. "Besides, it looked like you needed the rest." He glanced down at her feet. "And speaking of being quiet – How'd you sneak up on me?"

"Years of practice," she replied simply, leaning in to feather her forehead against his, and squeezing his arms in her hands.

"You know, it's customary to ask how your day was first," Kenneth said drolly.

Valni pulled away. "Well, I went to the doctor again…" she started.

"Nothing wrong is there?" Kenneth asked frowning.

Valni shook her head. "Just a general check-up after the war games; and I was scheduled for another booster. Plus, he likes to good chinwag with the crew… But, he keeps trying to persuade me to re-join the Marine Corp."

"Why?"

"Oh, he thinks I'm wasted here. Thinks I'd be better off in the field – Been trying to persuade me for six-months."

"Why don't you do it?"

"I'm happy here," she insisted, wrapping her arms around him. "Really quite happy."

Kenneth grinned and eagerly returned her embrace when his omni-tool flared to life and the comm-link chirped insistently. "Engineer Donnelly, please respond," a voice interrupted.

Exchanging a glance, the couple parted – Duty called.

"Donnelly here," Kenneth replied.

"I've been trying to contact you at your station in engineering, but I couldn't get an answer," the voice explained. "You have a priority vid-link from Gellix. It's from Senior Engineer D'Ceni."

"Really?" Kenneth was slightly taken aback. "Okay. I'm at the lower monitoring station. Put her through here." His omni-tool faded.
"You weren't expecting her call?" Valni asked.

"No, nothing was scheduled. Why would she be calling me?" he asked. His mind started racing. Was Gabby OK?

Kenneth quickly turned on the display and waited for the connection to stabilize. Slowly, an image started to take shape… A face appeared on the screen. And it wasn’t asari.

"Gabby!" Kenneth exclaimed, staring at the slightly weather-beaten aspect of his friend. She was wearing a thick orange coat, padded with fur, and her face was flushed. It looked like she’d been running outside. There were still patches of snow on her shoulders. "Hi. What's happening? Are you okay?"

"We're fine," Gabby confirmed slightly breathlessly. There was a lot of breakup on the picture. "I had to use Erata's clearance code. They wouldn't let me call out."

The face of the asari in question homed into view and smiled warmly at Kenneth. "Donnelly – And Officer Severan, good to see you both," she commented happily.

The asari certainly looked happier then when he'd last seen her. She must be over whatever was troubling her. Kenneth returned the smile, and then concentrated on Gabby. "Why couldn't you call?" he asked.

"We've had some problems here…" The signal disappeared intermitantly. "…call out… …Level 4 clearance only."

"Guess that explains why you never got back to me after our last chat," Kenneth offered cheerfully. But Gabby's face showed no sign of amusement; in fact, she seemed worried. "Okay seriously, what happened?" he demanded. "You alright?"

"We're fine, but… things have been a bit hectic here."

"Bad weather coming in again?"

"No… Well, yeah… But, we've also had company."

"What kind of company?"

Erata placed a warning hand on Gabby's arm and gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. The expression on Gabby's face seemed torn.

"I'll… have to tell you all about it when I get back," she admitted reluctantly.

Kenneth frowned. "Well, alright… But listen: any update on when…” Gabby raised her hand and cut him off.

"I know what you're gonna ask Kenneth, and all I can tell you is I'll see you when I see you. But… something more important to ask. Can… do something for me?"

"Sure. Name it."

"I've been trying to get a message to Chaill."

"Chaill? Why?" Kenneth asked, suddenly realising he hadn't heard from the krogan since their third day on-board Arcadias.
"His ship's not far from Gelli… I've been speaking to him quite a bit," Gabby admitted. "He's been involved in combat." The image started to become increasingly distorted. "The Auroto was attacked… They lost a few of the crew… his last message… said he was fine… assured me he was okay, but I haven't heard any more recently." The picture briefly dissolved into static. "…Weather patterns are interfering with our systems… can't establish a clear link."

Valni leaned toward the screen. "Give us the Auroto's last known position. I'll get the comm-officer to put a lead out; find out what's going on," she assured her.

"Sending coordinates," Gabby said as she tapped away on her omni-tool.

"But you're sure you're okay?" Kenneth insisted.

"Yeah, but a super-cell's moving i… …can't move from the base for a f… days…. …plenty of rations, though. Trust me, we're safely bunkered down."

"Do you need evacuation?" Kenneth asked. That last statement had worried him. He could feel his heart-rate increase sharply.

"No, nothing like that," Gabby replied. "We've got a job to do and we're gonna do it. Don't worry Kenneth. We've got a good squad here. Joric's as tough as they come."

"And it'll be a hot summers day on Gellix before I'd let anything happen to my team," Erata added, gesturing to Gabby. "Trust me; kitten here is in safe hands."

"'Kitten'?!" Kenneth repeated – Gabby's odd nickname almost making him forget his fear. "What's that all about?"

Gabby rolled her eyes. "I'm not going into that right now…” The picture died, and Kenneth thought they'd lost the feed entirely before the image stabilised and her face reappeared on the screen. "…ack before you know it, Ken. Have a wee dram ready for me."

"It'll have to be life-or-death before I share my stash to you, Gabby," he replied in jest, trying his best to sound calm.

But the signal had gone. The forced smile on his face fell away. He stared at the blank screen for a few seconds until Valni placed a comforting hand on his arm.

"They're OK," she stated firmly. "Trust me on this. The Gellix team won't let anything happen to them."

Kenneth nodded slowly. "Chaill can certainly handle himself in a fight. I'm certain he's fine. And Gabby is pretty much surrounded by armed soldiers, but…” He turned to face her. "I still worry, though," he admitted. "When I can see someone standing next to me, when I can hear their voice, and reach out and touch them… That's when I know they're safe. Like here, now, with you."

"I know… that's one of the reasons I like you," Valni assured him. "But she's in good hands. Commander Joric is one of the best. Her reputation is almost as infamous as the Captain's."

"Well, if she's anything like Verress, then she'd be too scary for anyone to risk attacking her," he joked. But Valni could tell his heart wasn't in it.

She smiled reassuringly; her hand brushing across his cheek and up through his hair. She leant forward and their foreheads touched. He smiled in response, properly this time. Valni gave him a brief, tender kiss; then simply hugged him. Kenneth returned the embrace, feeling her heart increase
in tempo through her clothing. He exhaled steadily, seeking comfort in her arms, while guiltily
enjoying the warmth of her body, and savouring this stolen moment of tranquillity…

Unfortunately, neither of them had noticed that they were no longer alone.

"Is that what you've been teaching him?" a voice suddenly accused.

The couple broke apart hurriedly and stared down the catwalk, seeking out the source of the
question. A tall figure was standing in the shadows at the far end of the corridor, appearing to glare at
them in contempt. Obscured in shadow, Kenneth couldn't identify the turian figure, but Valni's
stomach had twisted when she'd heard the voice.

It was Trajan!
Provocateur: Part One

Chapter Summary

Valni and Kenneth's relationship is exposed. The crew know. The Captain knows. It's just the start of their troubles...

Trajan strode down the corridor towards engineering; the trainee artificer who had been working so closely with the human nipping at his heels.

*Trust a green recruit to forget her notes for my training session.* He hadn't been angry though, it gave him an excuse to escort her to the Engine Room and drop in on that alien visitor skulking down in the lower depths. Trajan had only ever seen the human from a distance and was curious to see what it would be like up-close. He'd been told they smell quite strongly.

Plus, he wasn't sure of her schedule but he hoped Officer Severan might be there to supervise it. *Now that* would be fun; he always enjoyed shooting the breeze with the combat instructor. He smiled as he remembered their past conversations. She put up such a wall against him, made such a show of outrage whenever they talked, the little tease. But, it was all part of the dance. He'd win her over eventually and they'd soon settle into a relationship. He could wait, though; he was patient. Besides, he liked a challenge, and the more a woman protested the greater the challenge.

He'd had relationships with some of the crew before; nothing serious of course, he had certain standards, and wasn't about to be tied down – Though, he had tied down others on occasion…

Unlike the Alliance, fraternization with team-mates wasn't prohibited, provided it didn't impact on your work. Some of his previous partners had been younger than him; actually all of them were younger if he was honest. Trajan glanced back and gave the young cadet an appraising look. She was by no means unattractive – a bit tall, perhaps – and her red colony markings were striking, but he'd never seriously entertained the idea of bedding her. He'd always had some lingering concerns over her genetic heritage. According to her file the cadet had an older sibling who was a bionic. That 'disorder' was rare among turians, but the thought that the cadet had the genetic predisposition for such abilities didn't exactly endear him to the idea of a relationship with her.

*'Never trust anyone who can assault you with their mind',* his father had once told him (which was probably the only lesson from his parents that he'd taken to heart). He rarely mixed with those kinds of people, or their families – He had standards, after all.

The Engine Room was practically empty when they entered. The cadet brushed past him and conducted a quick search of some of the areas she'd been working in last, while Trajan caught a passing crewman and asked where the human worked. Informed that his station was in the Core Monitor, he made his way down there.

There was no-one around but, after wandering towards the rear of the area, he could just make out voices coming from the lower depths. Recognising the voice of Severan, Trajan smiled and ducked down the stairwell. He snuck around the circular corridor, softening his approach and hoping to slyly eavesdrop on the conversation, but what he saw next stopped him dead in his tracks… Severan and the human were facing each other at the far end of the catwalk and she was *stroking* him; running her hand through his hair. Trajan frowned in disgust. *Spirits! How can she even think of doing that?*
Then, to add to his revulsion, their foreheads touched and she pressed her mouth against his! He inhaled sharply, utterly staggered by this display of intimacy. The couple were embracing now, holding one another. Trajan's mouth dropped open in shock. *What the Hell is she doing?* Then suddenly, understanding hit him like a punch in the gut. They were lovers!

Trajan actually took a step back. His hands shook, his stomach turned, and the bile threatened to rise from his gizzard. He almost retched; his mind rebelling at the thought of a human *debasing* a turian woman.

The feeling of shock was quickly overtaken by anger and, as Trajan took in the sight of this sickening perversion, he set his jaw and let all the hate settle in the pit of his stomach before calling out to the disgusting, treacherous couple…

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**Core Monitor, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 18:15 Zulu – 20th February 2183 CE**

Valni and Kenneth broke apart at the sound of the voice and stared at the figure in the corridor. Kenneth couldn't be sure, but he thought he heard the quietest 'Oh, no' from Valni. The silence lingered on for several seconds until the turian figure finally stepped forward into the light. He was taller than Kenneth, very broad in the chest and wearing the familiar blue and silver *Arcadias* uniform. His skin colour was a muted grey; the white colony markings on his face splashed with a line of green that was daubed on each mandible. It actually looked quite plain compared with other markings he'd seen. His expression, though, was one of undisguised loathing. He was scowling at them. Kenneth wondered how much he'd seen.

"What, no introductions?" the turian sneered.

Valni glowered at the man in obvious hatred. "Kenneth, this is…"

"Chief Petty Officer Trajan," the turian proclaimed, cutting her off. He walked smoothly up to Kenneth and regarded him with cool disdain. "And you would be Donnelly? From the Alliance?"

"Aye sir," Kenneth replied, meeting the hostile gaze of the turian. "I guess the lack of mandibles is kind-of a giveaway, sir?"

Trajan's eyes roamed up and down Kenneth's Alliance uniform as he quietly assessed him. He didn't appear to be impressed. "So, what brings you to *Arcadias*, human? Business or *pleasure*?"

Kenneth seemed unmoved by the turian's question and smiled. "Systems Alliance thought I'd do more good here than on one of our own ships," he replied happily. "So they packed me off to Cyone."

"You didn't volunteer for the exchange?" Trajan asked.

"Wasn't given the option, sir. Some guys from security just showed up one day and hauled me to the shuttle. Told me I'd be taking a wee cruise for my health; and theirs, strangely enough. My CO seemed happy to be rid of me, to-be-honest…"

Valni grinned at the obvious lie. According to the files it was Daniels who had been chosen to represent the *Perugia*, after she had reportedly jumped at the chance to serve aboard a turian ship. Kenneth, as her long-time partner and the second best engineer the *Perugia* had to offer, had eagerly agreed to accompany her. Being selected to join the IEP was an honour. Those engineers nominated for the exchange were the most technically skilled operators that species had to offer – And, to impress the other races, each species only sent the very best.
Trajan frowned. "What an endorsement! I hope you're qualified to be here, Alliance."

"Engineer Donnelly is highly skilled and very capable," Valni offered in his defence.

Trajan turned to Valni. "Are you speaking from personal experience, Chief?"

Valni stilled herself, her right hand curling into a fist.

"I have no problems with humans individually," Trajan continued, speaking as if Kenneth wasn't in the room, "provided they keep to their own territory, and their habits don't interfere with the smooth running of the ship. I certainly don't resent us having to teach them how to use a spanner; though I do wonder what *exactly* it is he's being taught…"

Valni's stare became flint-edged. "I'd be very careful where you're going with this, petty-officer," she warned.

Trajan seemed unmoved by her not-so-veiled threat. "As a Council race it is our burden to restrict access to knowledge or technology the lesser species aren't ready for. No-one wants a repeat of the krogan rebellions, so we have to be extremely careful which race we choose to uplift.

"They're like children, really. Let's face it, Alliance ranks and training hardly compare to the Hierarchy's. I imagine *our* representatives are showing the humans how it should be done. My concern is about his performance back with his own kind, and how humans rate technical proficiency. The last thing we need is some untrained alien blundering around our systems like a klixen in a nursery."

He turned back to address Kenneth. "So… Donnelly." The name was expelled from his mouth like a bad taste. "Back in the Alliance, what are you exactly?"

Kenneth saluted smartly. "I'm a human being, sir… What are you?"

Trajan's sneer quickly disappeared. "I'm not sure I like your tone, engineer."

"It's the only one I have, sir," Kenneth replied innocently. "I blame my parents. They never could get my complexion right. You know, I've always had a hankering for mauve!"

"Are all your kind as flippant to their superiors?"

"It depends how *superior* they act, sir."

Trajan snorted derisively. "Don't try to draw me into a battle of wits."

"Aye, now that would hardly be fair – You'd be unarmed."

The turian's expression hardened. "You trying to be funny, crewman?"

"No, it just comes naturally, sir."

"Let me give you fair warning; I've broken aliens twice your size and three times as ugly. I regularly tackle creatures you humans would run screaming from."

"Well, everyone needs a hobby," Kenneth replied affably.

Anger flared in Trajan's eyes. "You do not want me as an enemy. If I wanted to I could snap your spine with one finger!"
"Aye, would you, sir? That'd do wonders for my sciatica!"

Trajan glared and stepped in closer to the insolent alien. "You got a real mouth on you, you know that? Got a smart-ass reply for everything, human?"

Kenneth returned the stare, his eyes never wavering from Trajan's face. "Well, this isn't my first barbeque… sir," he said calmly.

Trajan took a deep breath, and lowered his voice. "You people should stick to your own kind. You've got no business on a Hierarchy vessel." He leaned in closer. "If it were up to me I wouldn't let your species within hundred light-years of Council space."

"Engineer Donnelly is here at the Captain's discretion," Valni reminded him, stepping in closer to Kenneth; her voice now dangerously quiet. "I do hope you're not planning on defying her orders, petty-officer?"

For a moment only Trajan hesitated, the thought of flouting orders from Verress was not one he wanted to contemplate.

At that moment, Bron rounded the corner.

"Sir, the pad was on my console, I…" She stopped dead as she took in the tense scene.

Without turning his head, Trajan called out to her. "Cadet Kandros – Report to the training room immediately!"

"Yes, sir," Bron replied, "but I wanted to ask…"

"I said immediately!" Trajan thundered.

Bron didn't move – Her gaze flashed uncertainly to her combat instructor, instinctively seeking approval from the most senior authority in the room.

Valni smiled ever so slightly. "You go ahead, Bron," she said softly, "I'll be there in a minute to help supervise." Trajan glared at her. He seemed to deeply resent the suggestion that his training sessions needed supervision.

"Yes, ma'am," Bron replied. She gave one last glance at the group then turned on her heel and marched out of the corridor.

"Spirits forbid I should ever question the Captain's orders, Chief," Trajan agreed through clenched teeth. He hadn't moved from his position.

"Don't you have a training session to get to?" Valni pointed out.

Trajan looked like he was resisting the urge to tear Kenneth's face off. Finally, he snorted once, and then turned sharply, stomping down the catwalk.

They both watched him leave, listening to his footsteps recede into the distance. Valni slowly unclenched her fist and took a soothing breath. Being around Trajan always put her on edge. At least Kenneth was a calming influence. She smiled approvingly at her human paramour.

"There's a very good chance of you getting lucky tonight," she stated.

"You should invite him down here more often, then," Kenneth replied with a grin. "There's plenty more where that came from." He stared into her eyes, the grin slowly falling from his face. "There's
Valni shook her head. "Not that one," she replied. "I suppose I knew it had to come out sometime… But, I was hoping we'd have more time just between… us."

Kenneth held her hand; the simple gesture was enough to calm her mind further. She beamed warmly and wrapped her fingers around his.

"I never even told Antoni," she confessed, "I'll have to find him and tell him before the rumour mill does."

Kenneth nodded thoughtfully.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"I'm thinking scuttlebutt's gonna be a bugger."

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He was right.

Trajan must have blurted it out to everyone he met the moment he left the Engine Room. Very soon rumours of their relationship were spreading across the ship. It started as a few sly glances in the corridors as he went for the evening meal, then a few inquiries were directed his way when he was eating asking how he was getting on with Officer Severan. By the following morning, artificers who he'd hardly spoken to started to visit the Core Monitor more often, craftily trying to work questions about human sexual practices into the conversation. Kenneth evaded them as best he could. Very soon he couldn't go anywhere without inquisitive demands about what humans did in the bedroom. The most common query was, 'So, Donnelly, what positions do humans like?'

It was worse for Valni. Not long after delivering the last known coordinates of the *Auroto* to the CIC, and sitting through Trajan's decidedly dull training session, rumours about her and Kenneth started to spread like wildfire. Wherever she went on the ship – the Mess, the sparring hall, the games room, or simply walking the ship – crewmen would glance in her direction; some with knowing expressions, while others looked slightly shocked or disturbed. Whispered conversations would start, and often stop abruptly, when she entered a room. The next day, bolder crewmembers started to approach her with 'innocent' queries about how the human was; whether she'd seen much of him lately; or how skilled he was. There was no pretence from the senior staff however, and she was soon besieged by questions: 'What makes humans so different?'; 'Aren't turian men enough for you?'; 'Got a thing for multiple fingers, eh?'; 'What's next for you, a batarian?'

By mid-afternoon, Valni got the call she'd been dreading: The Captain wanted to speak to her. *That* was a conversation she hadn't been looking forward to.

Valni strode into the CIC and approached Verress, who was standing with a comm-officer, pouring over sensor data together. Verress looked up and gave her a cool glance before she escorted her to the privacy of her ready-room, away from prying eyes. *Oh, this isn't good, Valni thought.*

Leaving Valni standing at attention; the Captain sat at her desk, and continued to read from the computer pad. The silence dragged on as Valni waited for the inevitable.

"Is it true?" the Captain finally asked, not bothering to look up.

"Yes, sir," Valni replied.

"How long?"
"I assume you mean the relationship, ma'am?"

The look that the Captain gave her made Valni instantly regret her ill-advised joke. Verress never found anything funny. Valni cleared her throat. "Since the 7th of this month."

The Captain's finger tapped rhythmically against the desk. It was a sign of irritation. Valni braced herself.

"The details of your private life don't concern me, Severan." Verress declared gently, putting down the pad and fixing her with a penetrating stare. "Nor do I have a problem with your… orientation. You are a dedicated Marine and an accomplished martial artist. I was very pleased when you were assigned to my command and your teaching style has been well received – You inspire the cadets to do better, and have the potential to become one of the best martial warriors in the fleet." Valni blinked rapidly in confusion. Of all the things she was expecting from this meeting, compliments weren't one of them. "However," the Captain continued, "I would hate to see your obvious proficiencies and that potential jeopardised by a flirtation."

Verress rose from her seat and stepped in closer to her.

"Your skills are not in question, merely your choices. Your decision to remain in a teaching position frankly baffles me sometimes. By rights, you should be serving with Blackwatch now, or, at the very least, working for the Council." Verress scowled and turned away from her. "You wouldn't believe how short-sighted the Spectre selection committee can be. I had some very choice words for them when they turned you down that second time. But, it's because of their ill-judged decision that I consider Arcadias fortunate to have you. Don't waste that."

"I have no intention of doing so, Captain."

Verress nodded. "I'm glad. You have proven to be a headstrong individual; but, your relationship with the human and our somewhat one-sided sparring match notwithstanding, you are also a consummate professional. You can and should go far in the Meritocracy. I'm not surprised by your choices, Severan – Merely… disappointed."

Valni nodded mutely. She'd expected a severe chewing out by the Captain, not a series of backhanded compliments. And yet, somehow, Verress' quiet talk had stung more than if she'd been yelled at…

Valni left the CIC and walked quickly back to the training area, still a little shaken by the meeting. She ignored the sidelong glances from the crew – She was too preoccupied by the Captain's words to notice.

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For Kenneth, his most awkward conversation started when Bron arrived for her afternoon shift. The cadet had snuck into the Core Monitor, flatly refusing to meet his gaze, and silently taken up position at her console.

"Morning' Bron," Kenneth said happily.

Bron had mumbled a reply that sounded like 'Modlin sir'.

"You alright, cadet?" She paused and then nodded hesitantly. "I… suppose you've heard the rumours?" Bron didn't reply; her gaze fixed on the screen in-front of her. She tapped away at her console for a little while. The silence seemed to drag on for an age. "Is there anything you want to talk about? Or ask me… at all?"
The cadet shook her head; then, after giving it a little thought, ever so slowly nodded.

"What do you want to know?"

"How… how long have you and Officer Severan been…?"

"Dating?" Kenneth finished for her. Bron nodded again, not daring to look at him.

"Technically, two weeks after I arrived."

Bron glanced in his direction; a frown creasing her brow-plates. "Do you like turians?"

"If I didn't I wouldn't have volunteered for the exchange," Kenneth admitted. That answer didn't seem to make Bron any happier. She focused on her console again, appearing to lean away from him slightly.

"I'm very proud to be one of the first humans serving aboard Arcadias, if that's what you mean Bron," he clarified. "And as for what happened between me and Val… Officer Severan… I wasn't expecting it – And I certainly wasn't looking for it. It just… happened."

Bron nodded dully. "Are you happy… sir?"

Kenneth smiled. "…Aye, Bron. I'm happy."

There was the quietest "Good" from the cadet.

"Sooo, when did you find out?"

"Officer Trajan told me."

"Of course he did."

"He's quite strict but he's been very polite to me recently; even offered to tutor me privately," Bron admitted.

"Oh aye?" Kenneth narrowed his eyes. "What exactly did he say?"

"That I need to show greater flexibility during training drills. But, he also said I had great potential in the military and revealed some of the things that drive him. Mentioned that he loves nature like I do; that he's ambitious and wants to go into politics; and that he believes I'll gain a great deal from individual tuition, just as he has."

"It hasn't helped him gain a personality!" a voice declared. The pair turned to see Leptis wandering down the stairwell.

Bron saluted smartly. "Morning, sir!" Her reaction to Leptis was much more enthusiastic.

"Carry on with your story, Bron. I'm keen to hear this…"

"I wasn't saying anything against a superior officer, sir," she pointed out. "I wouldn't do that."

"You wouldn't? Really?" Bron shook her head firmly. "Whatever's stopping you? Most of the conversations we have are about the half-assed things 'superior' officers get up to." Bron stared uncertainly. "You must have heard some rumours about me, surely? I'd feel affronted if you hadn't!"

"No, sir! Well, I mean… nothing offensive… I mean, not that I'm saying…" the poor cadet
stammered.

"You're obviously out of practice, Cadet. Well, let me start you off. Let's use Officer Trajan as an example, he won't mind." Leptis cleared his throat theatrically. "I always felt that Officer Trajan was a man of rare intelligence – It's rare when he shows any!"

"I… um, sir?" Bron looked bewildered.

"Of course, everyone has the right to be thick-headed sometimes, but I've always felt he abuses the privilege! Now, Donnelly tells me there's a saying on Earth: 'Ignorance is bliss', which must make Trajan the happiest man on the ship! Certain people on this this ship are the cause of great joy wherever they go, but for Trajan it's whenever he goes. You know, I once heard that when he was a child, his mother wanted to hire a babysitter, but the Bloodpack wanted too much for the job!"

The cadet hadn't moved, uncertain what she should be doing. "Did he tell you anything of his home life, Bron?"

"He told me he started out from nothing, sir."

"And I imagine he still has most of it left!" Leptis smiled warmly at the bemused cadet. "Remember, Bron, I personally don't think he's stupid – But what is my opinion against the rest of the crews'?" Leptis stopped and turned to Kenneth. "What do you say, Donnelly?"

"Aye, it's good to know he loves nature, sir… despite what it did to him. At least he harbours no ill will."

Bron stared at the two conspirators for a long moment; then an odd strangled noise suddenly escaped her throat as she suppressed a giggle. Her hand went up to her mouth, covering a guilty smile.

"That's what I like to see, Cadet," Leptis said. Bron seemed to relax and let her hand drop from her face. She was grinning. "Are you OK?"

"Yes sir," she replied, regaining her composure.

"Do me a favour. Granus and Jorrin need help calibrating the intercooler matrix. Give them a hand, would you?"

Bron nodded and darted up the stairwell. She turned back only briefly to address Kenneth. "Don't get hurt, sir," she insisted.


"Thought you might need a hand with young Kandros today."

"I suppose you and Antoni have already h…"

"We worked it out ages ago," Leptis declared, cutting him off.

"You did?"

"Why do you think I gave you two space on the Mannovai?"

"Oh! Well, thanks…" Kenneth stared at Leptis with a new found respect. "You don't miss a trick, do you? When did you start to suspect?"
"About eleven day ago. At the poker table."

"You're kidding?" Kenneth couldn't believe it. "I'm sure I was careful to not say or do anything to give it away…"

"Not careful enough. My suspicions were first aroused when you started playing footsie under the table. You'd slipped off your shoe and were trying to caress her leg with your toe."

"And how could you possibly know that?"

"It wasn't her leg," he replied pointedly – The human's eyes widened at Djamil's words. "You have a very gentle touch, by the way."

For a few seconds, Kenneth's mouth made a creditable impression of a goldfish. "Oh… Right… Well… Thank you?"

"No, thank you, Donnelly!" Leptis grinned and patted Kenneth's hand.

Kenneth's face coloured with embarrassment. "Nae bother, sir. Glad I was gentle. You know, this kind of thing almost never gets mentioned in the Alliance briefings!"

"You could advise them for their next exchange," Djamil suggested. The grin on his face could best be described as 'mischievous'. "First-hand accounts are always useful!"

"Why the hell didn't you say anything at the time?"

"Well, to be honest, I thought it was Antoni," he replied sheepishly.

"Aye, 'cause we're always getting mistaken for each other!"

"He denied it, of course, and that got us thinking you either had a thing for me or for Severan. We had a bet on it. I won."

Kenneth swallowed and tried to select his next words very carefully. "Okay, well… That wasn't what… Isnae quite how… I dinna want you to get the wrong impression. This whole exchange has been very… surprising. Never imagined I'd be in this situation. Seriously, I did not see this coming! And I'm flattered of course, but I really canna see how it would… um, I mean that really isn't my scene, if you catch my drift, sir? Not that you're not a handsome man…"

"I'd stop talking now if I were you!" Djamil warned.

"Aye, good advice, sir."
Provocateur: Part Two

Chapter Summary

An encounter with Trajan leads to a violent argument.

Chapter Notes

Warning: contains nudity and interspecies sexual themes.

CWO's Cabin, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 06:30 Zulu – 22nd February 2183 CE

Kenneth awoke and took a deep breath, stretching out his limbs contentedly as Valni's scent filled his nostrils. He smiled; his hand stealing across the mattress to embrace the other occupant and draw her closer to him. But she wasn't there. Only the residual warmth from Valni's side of the bed hinted at her former presence. Kenneth opened his eyes and lifted his head from the pillow, searching for her. He didn't have to look far. Valni was sitting on the edge of the bed, dressing quietly.

Kenneth leant on his elbow. His eyes roamed over her silhouetted form as she slid her leg into the armoured leggings of her uniform, her right spur flexing as she manoeuvred the limb inside. He'd never paid much attention to that particular trait of turian anatomy before. And neither had he realised until recently just how important they were in turian society. During one of their vid-nights, Valni had insisted they watch a classic turian sci-fi film that predated first contact with the asari. All the 'aliens' in the vid were, naturally, played by turian actors, but painted green and with larger head-horns and extra spurs on each leg. Evidently, spurs were a very attractive trait in turian culture.

However, Kenneth had been surprised (and a little concerned) to discover that just recently he was becoming excited every time she exposed them before undressing – The simple act of baring that part of her leg left him feeling roused in anticipation. Kenneth frowned as the rational part of his mind squirmed with guilt and confusion: he was fairly certain he shouldn't be finding turian leg spurs arousing!

But, they were a part of her, as much as her head horns and mandibles. And he was finding that the more time he spent in her company, the sexier almost every part of her body was becoming.

Oh God, is that wrong?

"You don't have to watch me dress, you know."

"A man canna help it if he likes watching a beautiful woman," Kenneth declared, propping up his head on his fist. "If you were changing a light fitting I'd be watching you do that."

"Doesn't take much to entertain you, does it?" Valni snickered. "I think you really need to get out more! Next shore leave I'll be sure to expand your viewing habits. And if I was changing a light fitting I'd hope you'd come and help me," she added.
"Sorry, I know you get self-conscious when you're being watched."

Valni shrugged as nonchalantly as she could. "It's not that I mind being watched, it's just that... people tend to think of me as unusual,"

"Personally, I don't know how they could possibly think that."

"Well, I do keep a naked alien in my bed!"

"Aye, there is that," he conceded. Kenneth glanced down at the tangled bedclothes. "Though, it might get a wee bit crowded with the three of us in here," he joked. "Is this naked alien someone I know?"

"Intimately." She leaned in to feather her forehead against his. "As do I," she added brazenly. Their lips met in a brief but adoring kiss.

"Do you have to go to work now?" he pleaded. "What if we told the Captain you were sick? Or, there was an emergency here that needed your attention?"

"The only emergency would be if I didn't get dressed in time for the officers meeting." She lifted the sheets, hunting for a missing item of clothing. "Hard to find my clothes the way you throw them around."

"I learned that from you," he smirked. "And I dinna want Krogi staring at me again last night. Especially considering what we were doing; that would have just felt wrong."

"A gift from my mother," she explained, retrieving her pyjama bottoms from under the bed. "I think she wants me to be more girly."

Kenneth lay forward across the bed and reached out to retrieve Valni's pyjama top from the floor. As he leant down Valni caught sight of the dark-red scratch marks on his back. She hadn't noticed before but there were blood-stains on the bed-clothes where he'd been lying.

"You're bleeding again," she said placing her hand tenderly on his injured back. "Did I hurt you?"

"'Tis but a scratch," he replied with his usual bravado. It did nothing to ease the concerned expression on Valni's face. Kenneth reached across and held her other hand tightly in his own. "I'm fine. I promise you, woman."

"Your skin's so thin, so soft..."

"Hey, I'm tougher than I look," he reassured her. "There's a reason the Scottish emblem is a thistle!"

That seemed to cheer her up. She grinned hesitantly, still eyeing the wounds on his back.

Kenneth gazed at the smiling face of 'Krogi' and then passed the shirt back to her. "Do you think your mother would like me as much?"

Valni hesitated and moved the shirt onto her lap, staring down at the printed top as she considered the question carefully – She hadn't really considered introducing Kenneth to her family yet.

"I... believe she would want me to be happy," she replied steadily. "She's supported every decision I've made in the past, even if she hasn't always agreed with them... Quite honestly, I really do think she'd like you. You'd probably appeal to her sense of whimsy.

"Can't say the same for the rest of my family, though. A couple of my brothers might object. Vereen
would be jealous, truth-be-told. She's always had a thing for alien men – Salarians mostly."
Kenneth's eyes widened in surprise. "She likes their skin tone," she explained shrugging.

"Whatever makes her happy… Hey, if we ever get the chance to meet up with her on the Citadel maybe we could double date?"

"What, two turians, a salarian and a human walk into a bar? Isn't that how most jokes start?" The couple smiled at each other. "But, now that you mention it; shore-leave on the Citadel together, dinner, taking in a few martial tournaments, walks through the Presidium… A bit of shopping?"
Kenneth rolled his eyes but grinned. Valni cupped his cheek in her palm. "I'd like that."

Kenneth squeezed her other hand and brought it up to his lips, kissing it tenderly.

"Would your parents approve of me?" she asked.

"Oh, I would think so," he stated, glancing away and grinning. "But then, they'd approve of anyone who kept me in line."

Valni cupped his face and turned his head, looking him in the eye. "Honestly?"

Kenneth's smile faltered as he met her gaze. "My dad might have a problem with us…" he confessed. "He was wounded in the First Contact War; never been particularly keen on non-humans. But, my mum would make sure he doesn't throw a tizzy. That's the way it goes in the Donnelly household. The women hold all the power."

Valni toyed with his hair. "I like that custom," she stated, "having all the power over you. Just imagine what I could do…" She leaned in slowly to give him a kiss, but then suddenly whisked back the sheets and smacked him once on his bare rump.

"Don't be late for your shift; I'd never hear the end of it from Leptis."

"You're shameless, woman!" Kenneth blurted out as she stood up and made for the door, leaving him stark-naked on the bed.

"Oh, aye," she turned back, a wicked smile spreading across her face, "it's your own fault for having such a mighty fine ass!"

"Well, this mighty fine arse will be here whenever you need it,"

"Now who's being shameless?" she put in as she exited the cabin.

Valni grinned wildly as she set off down the corridor; the memory of Kenneth's surprised expression still fresh in her mind. And yet, she was a little troubled. She really liked him there was no doubt about that, but ever since their first night together Valni had found that she couldn't stop stroking his hair. The memory of that first gentle caress; the soft strands flowing between her fingers; the alien scent mingling with the pleasure she'd felt their first night – and on many occasions since – meant that she wanted to recapture that feeling every moment they were together. She recognized that probably wasn't normal and worried that she may be developing a fetish; but the desire was so strong that, just recently, she'd started to become excited every time she touched his head.

_Oh Spirits, is that wrong?_

The break in orbit from Sanves occurred after lunch. The thrusters were increased to one-quarter power and escape velocity was easily achieved within two minutes. Leptis didn't want to push the
engines unnecessarily, not while they were in asari space.

With everyone on-board either fully aware of their relationship or suspecting that something was going on, neither Valni or Kenneth felt they had to hide the fact they were an item any longer. Whenever Valni stepped into the Engine Room and made her way through the groups of artificers, many of them would smile knowingly as she passed by; and she would grin back. The secret was out and they were released from the burden of having to pretend to be just workmates. Although… she had to admit, she kind of missed the furtive side of it all.

She made her way to the Core Monitor, calling out to Kenneth who was lying flat on his back conducting repairs as she strolled down the steps.

"So, I was in the CIC with the duty-officers when a call comes through for me from Hierarchy HQ. It seems the brass was contacted by some reporters who want to know how I felt about giving my story to a journal."

"What story?" Kenneth asked poking his head from under the console.

"Our relationship."

"You're kidding?"

"Apparently, you and I are an example of interspecies cooperation and mutually agreeable fellowship." Kenneth rose to his feet and looked at her sceptically. "We are quote, 'the ideal example of peaceful unification between turians and humans', unquote."

"Pull the other one."

"Well, that does sound like fun, but I'm actually here to ask you how you'd feel about giving your side of the story to the journalists and maybe posing for a few pictures?"

"What? Pictures of the two of us?"

"Certainly."

"Wow! Aye, well… if you're happy to. What's the publication?"

"Fornax."

"Fornax!? So… nude pictures?"

"Tastefully done, I'm assured. They'll probably want a few snaps of us together, looking forward; you standing behind me and embracing me; your hands covering all the… vital areas." Kenneth frowned, looking a little worried now. "They are offering a substantial reward for the shoot, and probably won't ask us to do anything too intimate – Well, not immediately, anyway."

He stared at her wondering if she was serious, when a slight smirk crept onto her face. Kenneth shook his head and smiled.

"You're a big tease, woman!"

"I couldn't keep that up for much longer," she said, the grin now plastered across her face. She embraced him; Kenneth eagerly holding her body and receiving a small kiss.

"No ill effects from last night?" he asked.
Valni shook her head. "Nothing I can't handle."

Kenneth frowned and lowered his voice. "Go back to the doc," he insisted.

"We've been over this – It's not a problem," she told him, slightly more tersely than she intended.

He nodded reluctantly. "Okay, I won't push."

"Are you okay? After…?" she asked, placing a hand on his tender back.

"Nothing I can't handle," he repeated smiling.

"Hope it didn't ruin the mood."

"It was a wonderful evening," he stated firmly, then leaned in to whisper in her ear. "And I can guarantee 'Wee Jock' enjoyed it!"

Valni glanced down. "Don't sell him short. I'd hardly call him 'wee'!"

The couple kissed again, little realising they'd gained a small but enthusiastic group of spectators at the top of the stairs who squawked in delight at the clinch. Turning to face them, the couple watched as the group were quickly shooed away by Leptis.

Valni was surprised at how comfortable the other artificers were with Kenneth now. He laughed and joked with the rest of the crew so easily that you almost forgot he wasn't turian. Valni's conclusion was that engineers all over the Galaxy had the same attitude, the same philosophy and, most certainly, a similar sense of humour. Mechanics, no matter the species, had a geeky affection for engines. Name an obscure component in the Drive Core and invariably, all of them could tell you its function, where it was located, and how long it would take to repair. It was this shared enthusiasm that galvanised them into such an efficient unit. The mood in the Engine Room was relaxed – Leptis liked to maintain a convivial atmosphere and actively encouraged his staff to laugh and josh with each other, inspiring them to do better. As a consequence, Valni loved spending time with the whole passionate, nerdy lot of them.

On the whole, she was very happy on Arcadias.

However, if there was an annoyance (besides Trajan spreading rumours), it was the maddening skin-rash.

She'd tried to ignore it at first – It would come and go periodically, appearing on her chest as a minor prickling sensation, and occasionally develop into a mild form of asthma. Despite her last immuno-booster, Valni had noticed the problem increasing in frequency. The most recent attack had almost robbed her of breath, and was similar to the sudden feelings of grief she thought she had under control.

The skin irritation she could cope with, but the difficulty breathing had her concerned. She didn't want to schedule another appointment with the doc just yet, though. It might be reported back to the Captain, and there was no way she was going to have her efficiency questioned.

Once the Programme is over, she promised herself, I'll make an appointment then, and get it sorted.

Valni had a system though; whenever the irritation became too distracting she would retreat to the crowded gym and find relief in the simple act of strenuous exercise and the company of friends – Even if one of those friends was possibly the most interfering blabbermouth in the known universe!
"Oh, come on, Valni…" Antoni pleaded, holding the punching bag steady.

Valni focused on her form.

"Nothing? Not even a hint? An inkling of what he's like?"

She stubbornly continued to pummel the bag.

"I thought we were friends?"

She grunted softly and delivered a couple of powerful kicks to the bag.

"You're not gonna tell me, are you? After everything we've been through together. And when I think of how often I've confided in you – What do I get? Not even a smidge of info on human habits…"

Valni paused for a moment. "You see, this is exactly why I didn't tell you; you're as bad as everyone else."

"But you could have mentioned something. Divulged a snippet to me – I mean, seriously, how long have we been friends?"

"The entire crew has asked me exactly the same question and I'm sick of it!"

"Yeah, but if you'd told me, I wouldn't have to ask you, now would I?" Antoni pointed out. "Me and Djamil, we suspected something, you know? You're pretty crap at keeping secrets and you've been practically dancing with joy ever since you two did the deed."

"I never told you when the first time was," Valni reminded him.

"Didn't have to, it was written all over your face!" Antoni retorted. "Poker night, fifteen days ago, you had a grin the size of a brown dwarf! We both knew you'd had a tumble between the sheets, but we, being your friends – the ones who care about you – were waiting politely for you to tell us who it was. Never occurred to me he'd be from a different species."

"You couldn't tell from Kenneth's expression?"

"Humans are harder to read," he admitted. "And I didn't imagine for one second you were into the whole… xenosexual scene."

Valni grinned bashfully. "Neither did I," she confessed.

Antoni's face lit up with salacious glee. "My straitlaced friend has a kinky side!" he crowed happily.

"Shut it, Marine!"

"Order up. Yes, she'll have the tall, mammalian redhead to go, please!"

"I'll nail your mandibles together!"

"So, what was he like?"

"Antoni!" she yelled in exasperation. Several of the other gym occupants turned their heads in her direction.
Antoni held up his hands. "Sorry, sorry – I thought you might be ready to share. You know, since we confide so much…"

Valni gave him her sternest look of reproach before turning her attention back to the bag.

They worked in silence for a little while longer until the tumultuous sound of raised voices could be heard, rising even above the general noise of the crowded training room.

"…I prefer plating, as any turian in their right mind should," a familiar voice proclaimed loudly.

A large group of cadets bustled into the room, wearing loose fitting work-out gear, and led by the imposing form of Trajan. Cadet Bron was just behind him. It looked like they’d all just come from a run. Valni didn't recall seeing his training session arranged for tonight. He must have rescheduled.

Trajan stopped a few metres from the punching bag and told the cadets to settle around him. He glanced once in her direction then turned back to the cadets.

"Take a load off and rest for a few minutes," Trajan ordered.

The cadets hunkered down and either sat on the floor or on any bench and piece of equipment that wasn't being used.

"Right! While your muscles rest let's get that other organ working, shall we? A sharp mind is a soldier's best friend."

"Might explain why he's so alone," Antoni whispered. Valni grinned slightly.

If Trajan heard the comment he didn't give any indication of it.

"We're all here en masse, so as someone advised me to do a while back, we're gonna have a debate! We've covered strategies and tactics in previous lessons, but what about ethics and morality? A good soldier needs to know where the boundaries of acceptable behaviour lie – Especially in relation to the other species."

Valni knew exactly where this was going. The bastard was going to try and goad her into a response.

"This is an argument that's raged since before we made contact with the asari. The aliens needed our help fighting a grave threat: the krogan. We met that challenge head on and defeated them, proving our martial dominance over all other life in the Galaxy. But, the important question is: what level of interaction with other species should we find acceptable? They are a different species after all – They're not the same as us. They have different values. A different biology. We can't have children with them. And even if we could, would we really want to accept the monstrosity that resulting from that… well, let's call it a 'union'?"

The cadets looked at each other, casting wary glances around the room.

"We already have a prime example on-board – That mammal down in the Engine Room… So, let's get your opinions." Trajan pointed at Bron. "You, Kandros: You work with the human, don't you?" Bron nodded. "What do you think of interspecies intimacy? Would you want a human touching you?"

"Couldn't say, sir," she replied, "I've only met one human so far."

"If he's anything to go by, I wouldn't bother with the rest. They're filthy and stink of their secretions. I don't know how the other artificers stand it."
"Actually, sir, I quite like Engineer Donnelly's scent," Bron stated defiantly.

Valni's rhythm faltered momentarily, surprised by the trainee's words. She didn't think Bron would defy Trajan so openly, or that she would be so blatant in her attraction to Kenneth. Her opinion of the cadet just went up by several notches. Valni covered the momentary lapse by adjusting her weight to her other leg and renewing her attack on the bag.

Trajan rounded on Bron, making her the focal point of the discussion. "Oh, don't tell me you're one of those people?" he accused. "You can't possibly find them attractive?"

"I like to keep an open mind, sir," she replied calmly. "As do they – Apparently, the humans respond well to asari."

"Every species responds well to asari, Bron," Trajan spat back, "and frankly, the best of luck to them. It's fine as long as they leave us out of it. Let the humans and asari rut like animals. It'll only lead to more asari and fewer humans."

"My uncle is with an asari," a young corporal running on one of the treadmills stated, and failing, in the heat of the moment, to add 'sir' to the end of his sentence.

"Then he's a bloody fool!" Trajan erupted as he confronted the young crewman. "What he's doing won't benefit Palaven. We need turians leading the galaxy, not asari. And coupling with those blue freaks simply ensures more troops for Thessia. They're breeding us out! I'll never understand the draw of other species, or the weirdos who lie with them." The corporal clenched his jaw, it was evident he was trying to control his temper. "Alien bodies just aren't attractive," Trajan finished.

"No leg spurs," a young male cadet volunteered, agreeing with Trajan. The sound of his voice was familiar; obnoxiously so.

"Exactly," Trajan nodded at him. "No mandibles. No carapace. And the thought of different races screwing each other..." his face twisted into a disgusted grimace.

"Their shape, their colouring is all wrong," the loathsome cadet declared. "In fact, possibly the most disturbing thing about aliens is the fact they look so different from us." He beamed proudly at the remark, as if he'd just made the most profound statement in the world.

The room had fallen into a bemused silence following his declaration.

"Coming from a different planet might be a contributing factor there, quad-for-brains!" Bron retorted.

"Yeah, but I wouldn't mind aliens so much if they only looked like us, is what I'm saying," he replied defiantly, "you know, like in the old sci-fi vids."

Valni began to mentally prepare a series of drills for her detachment using him as the punching-bag.

"You mean actors?" Bron goggled at him. "You'd prefer aliens to look like actors in green body paint?"

"With sexy double leg spurs, yeah," the cadet insisted.

"It amazes me you can walk and talk at the same time!" Bron snapped.

"It's probably not so bad when it's just humans and asari," Trajan interjected again, dragging the topic back to his obsessive theme. "At least they have a passing resemblance... Apart from that revolting hair."
"I thought Engineer Daniels' hair was very appealing, sir," a young male offered boldly, his opinion gaining a short, derisive laugh from the Chief Petty Officer. "At home we're taught that physical variations on different races can be unique and attractive," the cadet persisted.

Trajan regarded him with the same pity he reserved for a dying man. "Don't worry lad, you're not the only one here with those delusions."

He turned his attention to the Liaison Officer and called out.

"So, what's your inclination, One-kick? You got a thing for hairy primates, is that it? Or you've just been around the human so long you've contracted a little mammal fever?"

"Go screw yourself, Trajan!" Antoni spat.

"Mind your rank, soldier!" He glared at Antoni before turning back to Valni. "I've seen the vids. Humans kiss before they start breeding – That's what I caught you practising with the ape down in the Core Monitor." He paused, savouring the moment as a hushed murmur went around the training room. "Would you two have started if I hadn't stepped in?"

Valni finally ceased her attack on the bag. Using her teeth she tore off the strap of her right boxing glove and turned towards him. "Trajan, for the sake of future generations: learn from your parent's mistake and use birth control!"

Antoni and a few of the younger crew laughed openly at the insult. Trajan's expression hardened; he leaned in closer to Valni.

"I thought you'd have better taste. How could you possibly want to choose that thing over your own race? What you're doing with that alien, it's disgusting."

"It's fairly basic biology – And one of these days, when you're old enough, your parents are gonna have a chat with you about it!"

She removed her glove and flexed her fingers. "What is it with you, Trajan, huh? You honestly believe this little act of yours is attractive? You think sniffing around me like some dunghill cock is charming? You're outta luck. I prefer my men with a little backbone."

"You and me both!" Antoni put in, chuckling.

Trajan ignored him, his stare never wavering from Valni's face. He lowered his voice almost to a hiss. "Why you, Severan? I just don't understand why you fascinate me. If I wanted anyone else I'd simply have them."

"And if I wanted crap outta you I'd squeeze your head!"

"I'm wondering if you need a real man to practice with!"

Valni grabbed his wrist and bent his arm, twisting it around his back into a painful lock. She kicked out at his leg, pushing him to his knee and pulled back forcefully on his thick collar.

"I doubt you'd even qualify as male," she hissed into his ear. "The way I hear it, you had to pay for your last woman!"

"Nothing wrong with that," he insisted. Valni twisted his arm further. Trajan gritted his teeth. "If it's a matter of price we can negotiate."
Antoni kicked out, hitting Trajan in the shoulder and sending him sprawling facedown onto the floor. The room had fallen silent; the crew watching the tense scene play out.

"Filthy varren!" Antoni spat. Trajan pushed himself slowly to his feet. "Go climb back under whatever turd you crawled out from!"

Trajan turned to face the Marine; the look on his face was now strangely calm. "It seems fitting that you two should be friends," he sneered, his eyes flicking between Antoni and Valni. "The rent-boy and the deviant!"

Antoni's fist thundered against Trajan's head. The blow staggered him against the wall. Antoni leapt forward, ready to follow up his initial punch, but Trajan blocked the second blow expertly and hammered Antoni in the face. A second punch across the mandible almost lifted Antoni's feet off the ground. Trajan stepped forward and, seemingly without effort, delivered a crunching blow to Antoni's gut. The Marine fell back and landed heavily, winded and bleeding.

"Antoni!" Valni yelled, twisting and sending a sinning kick in Trajan's direction. Her foot raked across Trajan's chest, pushing him back. "Get away from him!"

Trajan recovered quickly and glowered down at the floored turian. "Watch yourself soldier! I've got ten years and a hundred challenge matches on you. You don't want to be taking the advice of this one." He jabbed his thumb at Valni who was busy helping Antoni to his feet. "She's barely tall enough to look the cadets in the knees!"

*That* Valni would not take. She rounded on him furiously.

"I could take you down if you had an army of mechs to hide behind, you greasy asshole! And just because I've found a good man doesn't mean you **EVER** get to call me a 'deviant'!"

Trajan grinned nastily; blue blood shining on his pointed teeth. "No, you're the 'rent-boy'."

Antoni snarled and lunged forward. He caught Trajan around the throat and pushed him backwards. A ringing crash echoed around the room as the pair collapsed against the gym equipment; weights and pulleys scattering across the floor. For a brief moment there was chaos as they struggled on the ground; the younger cadets fleeing to avoid the fight. Antoni locked his arm around Trajan's neck and bore down while Trajan struggled against him. Several of the older crew jumped into the fray, separating the two as they clawed at each other.

Trajan was pulled upright by half-a-dozen crew members, still struggling to tear into Antoni who was being dragged away to the other side of the room.

Valni knew what she had to do. Antoni would be on report unless she intervened. She strode forward and delivered a strong right hook to the side of Trajan's face.

Trajan glowered at her, his expression like thunder. "Need me held down so you can fight?" he roared, still being restrained.

"I don't need any help to fight a shit like you!"

"**You're a coward, Severan!**"

"You've threatened and harassed an Officer!"

"I'll take you all!" Trajan strained against the crew holding him. "Your bodyguard first!"
"This is between us! You wanna fight? I'm happy to oblige. In the ring, Trajan! Tomorrow. Nineteen-hundred."

An awful silence settled around the room; no-one daring to breathe. Trajan glowered at Valni, his chest heaving as he gradually calmed down. Slowly, he smiled at her – an expression almost like victory in his eyes. Glancing around at the many witnesses in the room, he relaxed his body and then shook off the hands restraining him, before calmly straightening his clothing.

"Well, since I am the offended party… Done," he agreed, then turned and pushed his way through the stunned crowd.

Valni watched him leave. The rest of the crowd hadn't moved; everyone seeming to be in a state of shock. Antoni was released and sidled up to her, nursing his swelling right mandible.

"You sure that was a good idea?" he enquired.

When she was certain Trajan was out of sight, Valni winced and shook her injured hand.

"Ask me that tomorrow evening."
Challenge Match

Chapter Summary

All bets are off as Valni and Trajan lock horns in the arena.

Chapter Notes

Warning: contains sexual themes and depictions of violence.

CWO's Cabin, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 21:45 Zulu – 23rd February

Kenneth was not happy. Valni had explained the situation to him at length, but it was not one he fully understood, or was comfortable with. They were sat on the edge of her bed, Kenneth holding her right hand, palm up, examining the two fresh puncture marks leaking dark blood onto his fingers.

"You impaled your own hand when you punched him?" he asked as he smeared medi-gel into the wounds.

"It happens occasionally if you haven't clenched your fist properly. And my talons are quite sharp," Valni admitted.

"Aye, I know that. I've got the route-map on my back to prove it!"

"Yeah, sorry about that."

"Honestly, woman, it's like you've never heard of nail files."

"I do use them, they just grow back quickly."

"Any chance you'd be allowed to scratch his eyes out?"

Valni chuckled. "Not in the rules, I'm afraid."

"When I took the job as your boyfriend I dinna think I'd be acting as nursemaid, too. Not that I don't appreciate the extra responsibility. I just hope you can beat him quickly tomorrow and won't need the ministrations of Nurse Donnelly."

"It's in the fine print. It states that all boyfriends must support the irresponsible decisions of their partners." She grinned as a thought struck her. "And I don't know, 'Nurse Donnelly' sounds like he could be fun!"

Kenneth smiled fleetingly before sealing the punctures with a bandage. He looked up, suddenly serious.

"Anyone die in these fights?"
"Not for a few years," she confessed. "It's supervised, so it rarely goes that far. The doctor will be there, and the Captain; she won't allow anyone to get injured to such a degree that they can't do their duty."

"Wonderful! So, if you die, you'll only get a reprimand!"

Valni cupped Kenneth's face in her hands, locking eyes with him. "I am not going to die," she stated firmly. "I'm going to be fine. And I'm going to beat the bastard! Trust me: This isn't my first fight."

Kenneth nodded reluctantly. "As long as you're sure about this."

"Very sure," Valni said, leaning in to give him a reassuring kiss. "Very, very sure." They kissed again, longer this time. Valni's tongue slowly sneaked forward to probe Kenneth's mouth. Gradually, she shifted over so that she was straddling him. Kenneth embraced her, revelling in the feel of her warm, comforting body pressed against his. She bore down and her weight pushed him back onto the bed. They lay together for a long while until Kenneth felt her hand moving to his chest; she dragged the zip of his jacket down his front and parted the fabric.

Suddenly, he grabbed her wrists and pushed her away.

"Wait! Wait. Can you do this? I mean, is this allowed before a fight?"


"Not as such. It's more of a recommendation. Not before a fight."

"Well, assuming you're in a relationship, back home it's practically a tradition before a fight."

"Oh, I love tradition!"

Her hands were released and she forced their mouths back together, her fingers clawing at his undershirt, seeking contact with the human skin beneath.

Valni didn't stay in her cabin for long. Just an hour after the confrontation in the training room she was called over the intercom – Verress wanted to see her in the CIC.

Valni strode through the Command Centre doors. The Captain was waiting for her, smartly clad in her uniform and waiting impatiently by the holo-display as if she'd never left. Valni cast an admiring glance in her direction. She knew for a fact the Captain had been on duty since five in the morning.

_Doesn't that woman ever sleep?_

"I understand one of my senior officers was assaulted!" she yelled at Valni before she'd even managed to fire off a salute. "Several crew members have reported Officer Trajan fighting with an unidentified crewman in the Training Room."

Valni silently thanked the Spirits that Antoni was popular amongst the crew and decided she'd have to make it up his fellow marines who regularly frequented the gym.

"You were witnessed by a cadet punching the officer as he was restrained. You will explain your behaviour now!"

"Yes Captain. Officer Trajan made several disparaging remarks about my relationship with Engineer Donnelly and then verbally abused myself and the 'unidentified' crewman standing next to me."
"And that warrants an assault?"

"It was an official challenge, ma'am. Officer Trajan accepted. We agreed on a time and are settling the dispute in the traditional manner."

"You were expressly forbidden from entering that arena, Severan."

"Except as part of my normal duties or as a Challenge Match, ma'am," Valni pointed out. "I believe I am within my rights to challenge officers of a similar rank. Those were your instructions."

"True enough," Verress conceded. "But, this could be interpreted as a gross dereliction of discipline – Under most circumstances I would consider having both of you purged from my ship!

"However, the challenge was made and duly accepted. Under the articles of combat I am duty bound to allow it... And it will doubtless provide ample entertainment and stress relief for the crew. But this one time only, Severan. There will be no other challenges after this, you understand me?"

"Perfectly, Captain."

"You and Officer Trajan have a painful few days ahead of you. Your duties will not be shirked just because you were involved in a challenge match."

"And the other crewman, sir? Will they be disciplined?"

There was a hard glint in Verress' eyes. Her gaze shifted briefly to a young male CIC officer who was desperately trying to avoid the Captain's scrutiny and remain inconspicuous on the other side of the room. "It would appear the Training Room security cameras mysteriously malfunctioned for that time period." She glared at the young officer who was suddenly fascinated by the computer monitor behind him. "Unless further witnesses come forward to verify the identity I may have to simply drop the matter. Did you happen to recognise this 'unidentified' crewman?"

Valni returned the gaze. "I doubt anything would be gained by dragging a third party into a private Challenge Match, sir," she replied.

Verress stepped closer to Valni.

"Evasive – and presumptuous… But at least you didn't lie to me and try to deny you knew him, Severan."

"I never mentioned it was a man, sir."

"Yes, I noticed..." The Captain let out a long, slow breathe, as if deciding what punishment to impose, then her eyes darted down to the bandage on Valni's right palm.

"Report to the infirmary," she said finally. "All combatants must be in good shape before a challenge match. We don't want poor health to affect the outcome, do we?"

Valni saluted and spun around to move out of the room.

"And Severan!" Valni stopped in her tracks and waited as the Captain walked up and leaned in close. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Should the chance present itself... you have my permission to vasectomize the son-of-a-bitch!"

It was all anyone could talk about the next morning.
There was a palpable sense of excited tension in the air. Bets were already being made and the ship's crew seemed to be overcome by a whirlwind of gossip and speculation. Kenneth found himself at the centre of a frenzied, and some might say unhealthy, interest in martial combat, as what felt like the entire crew approached him eagerly fishing for details. The visiting human had no idea turians took such an avid interest in full-contact combat matches.

Just walking down the corridors to the Engine Room was a chore as he found his path blocked by a scrum of mostly younger crew asking insistent questions. He deflected most of the queries, or repeated answers he'd already given and stubbornly continued on his way.

But, there was no respite in Engineering. Artificers quickly gathered around him asking exactly the same questions and sniffing for clues as to Valni's health to better help them place bets.

Leptis took it upon himself to shadow Kenneth for the rest of the day, fielding any unwanted questions away from the human. The Head Artificer stood guard at the console opposite Kenneth's, seething at the thought of what Trajan had done to Antoni.

"Like to punch the bastard in the face myself!" he declared firmly that afternoon. "Did you see the state he left Antoni in? He can barely chew his food! Hardly touched the meal I prepared for him."

"What's he gonna do to Valni?"

"The man's a snake! He's a controlling, perverted asshole! He thinks he can beat her and wants to humiliate her in-front of the crew – No wonder he wants to go into politics! The sooner he starts his new career the better."

"Can he actually beat her?"

"He's arrogant enough to think he can. And… well, he's certainly skilled enough."

"Do you think he can beat her?"

Djamil hesitated before answering. "We're taught at military college that you have to assume there's always someone better out there at what you do – It keeps you on your toes. Makes you aim higher. And if you have someone to challenge you then it pushes you to achieve."

"Aye, I definitely know someone like that. Her name's Gabby! But, me and her, we've still got plenty to learn. I mean, look at us, we're being taught by turians. We're still learning from you."

"Don't flatter me, Donnelly! I do my job as a matter of pride and don't care if there's someone better than me out there. All I've ever wanted to do is keep my team safe! And protect the ones I care about…"

"Aye, me too," Kenneth replied quietly. "Both of them. But I can't even do that right now… One of them is on another planet and the other is about to go into the ring to fight a bastard, bloody scunner! And I can't do anything to protect either of them! I've never felt so useless before."

Having nothing to say to offer comfort, Djamil reached over and simply held the back of Kenneth's hand, squeezing the skin in sympathy…

The human didn't pull away.

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Sparring Ring, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 18:56 Zulu – 24th February
A sea of faces ringed the circular arena. Valni had fought plenty of challenge matches in her time so she knew what to expect, but the sheer number of people crowding into Arcadias' small arena still surprised her. It looked like half the crew were jammed in. No doubt the other half were watching the match via the on-board security monitors.

Clad in her customary long blue top and short leggings, she strode purposefully into the room, shadowed closely by Kenneth and Antoni – her seconds for this fight – and glanced around at the multitude staring back at her expectantly. She knew the majority had come to support her. She could see a lot of friendly faces, but there were always some of the crew who would be cheering Trajan. It was inevitable. She was popular with the crew, but Trajan had his supporters, too. A shiver of anticipation shot up her spine, the familiar tingle of adrenaline already coursing through her veins; the thrill of pre-match tension tempered by a twinge of anxiety. All these people scrutinising her; placing their hopes on her; expecting her to win – She didn't want to let them down.

The Captain was standing at the centre of the raised fighting arena. Trajan was already there at the front of the crowd, bare-chested and dressed in a pair of simple red leggings. He was powerfully built for a turian and looked threatening even standing next to the towering frame of Tesserius, who had a pinched expression on his face.

The doctor had been remarkably worried when she went to see him last night, almost going so far as to try and talk her out of the match. She'd been surprised by his strength of feeling but she assured him she would be careful. The doctor had nodded reluctantly and complimented her on the application of the bandage over her hand. Valni then explained it had been Kenneth who had applied the bandage, to which the doctor simply commented that maybe Donnelly had missed his calling.

"Perhaps she should have gone into medicine instead of engineering?" he suggested.

Valni laughed that she wouldn't have met Kenneth then, but apparently Tesserius had temporarily lost his sense of humour.

She regretted not reporting her other symptoms to the doctor, but it might have given him an excuse to postpone the match, and she dearly wanted to fight Trajan.

She was still feeling strangely lethargic; she'd had difficulty breathing that morning and a constant irritation plagued her chest. Not that she was about to tell Kenneth that. He'd only worry.

Once Valni had taken up her place by the ring, the Captain raised her hands to silence the crowds.

"Palaven's greatest martial champion served aboard Arcadias. He was a man who never compromised, never wavered from his duty, and never backed down from a challenge. You are now his legacy – The men and women of Arcadias. He once said that there is nothing better in the practice of the combative art than free-style sparring. And there is nothing that upholds that ideal more than the Challenge Match…"

Valni wasn't really listening to the speech; she'd heard it many times before. She glanced over at Antoni, her eyes lingering on his alarmingly swollen right mandible, and then leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"You have no idea how lucky you are!" she hissed at him. "No one's come forward to identify you – Not even Trajan mentioned your name!"

"I wasn't the target," Antoni mumbled back. "He got what he wanted when you challenged him. It's a classic divide and conquer tactic. He just pushed our buttons enough so that you stepped in and challenged him. He had plenty of witnesses to verify it."
"I guess he's not as dumb as I thought."

"Sure he is. He picked a fight with you!"

Valni was flattered by Antoni's vote of confidence, but seeing Trajan now, she couldn't stop the doubts from forming in her mind.

"…Fight well, and may your skill in battle honour the Spirits of Arcadias," the Captain finished.

A great cheer went up around the room as Verress exited the ring. Valni watched Trajan's seconds prepare him for the fight on the other side of the ring and turned to Kenneth.

"Help me tie my gloves," she said.

Kenneth held the thin boxing gloves as she forced her hand inside the left one. There was the minimal amount of padding; most of the protection seemed to be at the tip of the fingers, encasing the talons in weaves of material so they couldn't be used as a weapon. Kenneth was worried.

"It's still not too late to back out," he suggested, securing the straps around her wrist. "You could challenge him to a quick draw of Skyllian-Five, maybe? Or, we could swap and I could give him a wee pasting?"

"He's a fully trained, close-quarter expert, you idiot," she stated, sliding her hand into the second glove. "He'd tear you apart."

"All the more reason to back out."

"I'm not some defenceless wee bairn!" she hissed. Kenneth smiled, noting the human vernacular creeping into her language. "I have some skills of my own, you know."

"Good enough to beat him?" He secured the straps around her other wrist.

"…And then some. Wait and see."

"Frankly, this all seems crazy," he said haltingly, "but if this is important to you…" Kenneth cupped her mandibles in his hands. "Just promise me you'll gie that wankpiece a gid skelp!"

"I have no idea what you just said."


"That I can do."

He released her and she turned towards the ring. Trajan was already waiting for her.

Valni ducked through the bright blue ropes surrounding the large octagonal ring. For today's match, the arena's polymorphous canvas was split into red and blue halves, but could accommodate up to four fighters at any one time. Sparring and martial arts were so inherently important in turian society that a great deal of research and development had been given to how combat matches were gaged. The traditional 'canvas' in all sparring arenas had long since been replaced by a computer controlled polymorphous nanostructured composite that changed colour to denote a fighter's corner of the ring; but also tracked foot movements, fighter blood-loss, sweat excretion and a hundred different other variables that allowed trainers to analyse matches post-fight. This effectively did away with referees and judges, but, traditionally, the commanding officer remained the definitive advocate.

The two fighters faced each other; Valni and Trajan sizing each other up as they waited for the start
of the bout.

"Begin!" the Captain bellowed.

Valni fist snapped forward and struck Trajan on the mandible. He'd been unprepared for her surprise assault, but he was strong and simply shrugged off the punch. Valni immediately went on the attack. She leapt towards him, driving her left fist into his gut, then snapped her right elbow into his face. Her blows were hard and full-force; she hoped to finish him off quickly.

Trajan responded with an incredibly swift punch that caught her on the shoulder; his speed belying his size. She knew he was strong but hadn't expected him to be quite so fast. She leapt away, barely deflecting a powerful kick that pushed her backwards.

Valni regained her balance and let Trajan move in to attack again. He kicked out. At the last second, she swayed back, letting his foot whip harmlessly past her face, and threw all her weight behind a punch to his vulnerable back. He arched in pain and swung around to catch her, but Valni had rolled out of his reach.

He crouched down and edged towards her.

Valni flexed her hands. Her fighting style favoured throws and parrying, but the sparring gloves offered little chance of grabbing hold of an opponent. She would have to rely on cunning and a few well-placed blows.

Suddenly, Trajan charged forward, his arms stretched wide. He seemed to aiming for her legs, but at the last moment reared up and grabbed her around the waist pinning her arms to her side. He leant in and hissed in her ear as he hugged her close, "We're going for a little ride, Severan".

As Trajan spread his legs, Valni instantly realised what he was planning to do – He was going to pitch back and slam her into the canvas. Valni twisted her body and managed to slip out of his grip just before he lifted her off the ground.

Stepping back, Valni levelled her foot directly at Trajan's groin, eager to take the Captain's advice. Her shin smashed against something hard and unyielding; she could have sworn she heard a metallic chink as her leg connected. The kick hammered Trajan onto the floor, but he rolled quickly to his feet. Valni hopped away, nursing her bruised leg.

"Trying to hobble me?" Trajan mocked. He tapped his armoured groin with his fist. "I'm made of steel!"

Bastard's wearing a protective box, she realised.

Angered now, Trajan swung at her. Valni ducked under the blow and dived to the other side of the ring just as Trajan stepped back and brought his leg around in a wide arc. Valni saw the move just in time and blocked the kick with her arms. The strength of the blow actually threw her back against the ropes. She rebounded and used her momentum to leap up and off the ropes and propel herself at him. Her fist slammed into his head. The punch stunned him momentarily, but the blow still wasn't enough to do much damage to her much stronger opponent. He staggered to his right and shook his head, recovering all too quickly.

Time to get creative, she thought.

The crowds were cheering fiercely now, buoyed up by her spectacular punch. The rest of the crew had hoped for a good show and they weren't being disappointed.
Valni ducked and dived to avoid two more powerful punches. This was totally different from fighting the human in the training grounds. Trajan was certainly as strong as the human, but had the speed of a turian marine. It was a deadly combination.

Trajan feinted with his right, and then drove his left foot into her right knee. Valni cursed herself for not seeing the move and backed away, narrowly dodging a wild punch and falling back against the ropes. She was on the defensive now and tried to sidestep, but Trajan went on the attack again. Cornering her, he delivered a series of powerful blows to her chest. Valni lowered her guard to protect her vulnerable centre and braced herself against the relentless onslaught, riding every punch. The air was being steadily knocked out of her chest; he was trying to exhaust her.

Three more solid blows connected with Valni's torso, staggering her. Strangely, he seemed to be avoiding her head. Trajan ducked down and spun on his heel, sweeping his leg out and knocking her off her feet. Valni rolled and jumped up quickly, moving away to the other side of the ring and favouring the injured knee.

Trajan tracked her movements carefully, but before he could move in again, the bell rang, signalling the end of the round.

Both fighters moved back to their corners.

Valni almost collapsed against the ropes, breathing hard and trying to draw air into her battered lungs.

"He's faster than I thought," she exclaimed.

"Don't try to talk," Antoni advised. "Save your breath for the fight."

She nodded silently in reply, closing her eyes.

Kenneth applied a towel carefully to her head, tenderly wiping away some of the grime from the fight, then placed it over her shoulders whilst trying to avoid touching any part of her that might be wounded.

Valni seemed to listen intently to Antoni's advice but the Marine's words hardly registered in Kenneth's mind. He was staring at her pained expression and trying vainly to offer comfort, but this was killing him! Seeing Valni voluntarily take a beating and knowing he couldn't interfere was torture.

The bell rang again all too quickly. Valni brushed away the towel and turned to face her opponent, quietly reassessing her strategy. She wasn't going to go on the defensive again.

The combatants threw themselves back into the fray, neither one willing to yield to their opponent.

Forced to watch helplessly on the side-lines, Kenneth picked her discarded towel up off the canvas and stared in alarm at the specks of blue blood staining the fabric.

The match continued for what felt like hours, although when Kenneth looked at the scoreboard he realised it was only been a further four rounds.

Trajan's speed was astonishing and he didn't pull his punches. He was relentless but Valni countered with her superior agility and skill, dodging or riding his blows in an effort to exhaust him. It was only marginally successful. He had considerable stamina and was very powerful. On several occasions, Trajan's punches found their target. Against anyone else the blows would have ended the match, but Valni shrewdly redirected their power by parrying and spinning away from them, even managing to
deflect his arm and throw him onto his back several times.

But Kenneth knew she was tiring. She couldn't continue indefinitely under this level of abuse.

At one point, she forced him back into her own corner and delivered a series of rapid punches to his mouth. They lacked the power of her earlier performance, and he responded by kicking her in the torso, forcing her to retreat. He grinned and spat blood onto the canvas. Trajan was so close now that Kenneth could hear his taunts.

"Don't want to damage your pretty face. I have plans for it," he jeered.

Kenneth had a hand and foot on the ropes before he knew what he was doing. Suddenly, a strong hand clamped down on his shoulder. He turned his head to see Antoni restraining him. If it hadn't been for the Marine Kenneth would have jumped into the ring himself.

If anyone saw the move, they didn't comment. The crew's focus was on the two combatants as they continued to trade blows.

By the start of the sixth round, they were both showing signs of exhaustion. Trajan's movements were noticeably sluggish and Valni was attacking less frequently, relying more on countering Trajan's assaults.

Then, Valni unexpectedly lowered her guard and doubled over as if too exhausted to continue. Trajan saw his chance and dashed forward. Instead of dodging away, she ducked down low and slid in under his legs. He tripped, going face down into the canvas. Her ruse had worked.

She leapt up and landed heavily on his chest, trapping his arms as she straddled him and pounded her fists into his head. She got in at least five good punches before he lifted his legs and wrapped them around her body, pushing her off. It had now become a wrestling match.

Locking his neck in a scissor grip, Valni bore down on his throat.

Trajan grunted and grabbed her left spur in desperation, twisting it savagely.

Valni screamed in pain and fury – Kenneth had to be restrained again, and the crowd responded by barracking the petty-officer; several of them leaping up from their seats in disgust. Evidently, that was not an honourable move.

Trajan released his grip and Valni rolled away, nursing her injured spur. As she bent down he grabbed her around the throat and lifted her from her feet, slamming her against the canvas. She exhaled sharply as the air was driven from her chest. Despite this, she pushed his elbow up and over, breaking his grip and rising to twist his arm around his back.

But, with the gloves on she couldn't get a firm hold. Trajan roared and wrenched himself free of her slack grip, then spun around and clawed at her blue top. He somehow managed to hook his glove under the fabric and wrenched his hand back. His other arm went round her neck.

"It's been a real pleasure breaking you, Severan, but it's time to end this..." he said.

He kicked the back of her leg, forcing her down on one knee and leaned in so close she could smell his stinking breath.

"You still owe me that kiss," he hissed into her ear.

He drove his knee into her belly and she collapsed, rolling away quickly to avoid his foot slamming
into the ground where her chest had been.

Rising to her feet, Valni clutched her stomach and tried to control her breathing, but the blow to her
gut had winded her. She backed away to her corner, hoping to buy some time to recover. Trajan
hadn't followed her, and merely stood with his guard up, breathing heavily. Valni smiled inwardly as
she recognized that he was most likely as exhausted as she was.

But before she could do anything else, her vision blurred. The room started swimming before her
eyes. She felt light-headed and opened her mouth to try and steady her breathing, but nothing
happened – She couldn't catch her breathe.

She gasped and went down on one knee, desperately trying to draw air into her lungs. With awful
clarity, Valni recognised the debilitating symptoms. She was having another attack!

*Oh, not now!* she pleaded.

Trajan watched her stumble and lowered his guard. "Need a minute, Severan?" he asked casually.

Valni managed to glare at him defiantly, but that was little consolation when she was gasping for air.

*Damn it! What the hell is wrong with me?*

She concentrated on her breathing, trying to suppress the attack through sheer will and keep the
panic from consuming her. If Trajan tackled her now, it'd be all over. But he hesitated. Either he
thought it was another ruse or merely wanted to prolong her humiliation and simply waved his hands
at the crowd, spurring on their shouts.

Slowly, the suffocating sensation eased to the point where she could almost breathe normally, and
she grabbed the rope, hauling herself to her feet.

Trajan dropped into a fighting stance and moved in for the kill.

She circled around him, keeping her guard up, but she knew she couldn't last much longer.

Trajan's right fist snaked out again swiftly followed by a kick that she easily dodged. He was tiring
now and hoped to finish her off quickly.

Valni's breathing was laboured as she ducked under his blows. Her own fist lanced towards his head,
but he blocked it with both hands and twisted her arm into a painful lock; he caught her other hand as
she lashed out and held her there, his eyes gleaming in victory.

"You just don't know when to quit," he scoffed, leaning in close.

Valni couldn't break his grip.

The crowd were yelling loudly now, almost swamping her senses, when she suddenly heard
Kenneth's voice roar above them all.

"*Just nut the bastard!*"

Valni swung her head back and drove it forward with all her strength. Her brow-fringe smashed
against Trajan's nose. There was a sickening crunch as the cartilage shattered and his face deformed;
the impact accompanied by a loud groan from the crowd. Trajan staggered back, disorientated, dark
blood suddenly streaming down his face.

"There's your 'kiss', wankpiece!" she yelled.
Moving in, Valni delivered a series of blistering punches to his torso, forcing him to lower his guard. She followed it up with three sharp lefts to the side of his injured face, the stinging blows driving him back. A final ferocious right square on the nose staggered him and he went down on one knee.

In the space of a few seconds, Valni had turned the match around. She stared at her bewildered opponent as he struggled to rise to his feet. He was vulnerable now. Perhaps she could show mercy?

She didn't.

"Ain't that a kick in the head, ya scunner?" she taunted, then leapt up and delivered a final spinning kick that sent his head crashing to the canvas. He lay prone on the ground and didn't get up.

The doctor moved quickly into the ring, waving Valni away and assessing the damage to his broken, bleeding patient.

Trajan was down for the count. Valni hovered at the side, watching the doctor fuss over him. The Captain rose from her seat and officially announced Valni the winner, but everyone in the arena already knew the result. The crowd were on their feet now, yelling her name, a great wave of sound resonating around the hall. She scanned the horde, seeking out faces she knew. Kenneth was looking shell-shocked, while Antoni and Djamil were cheering wildly, as were all of the artificers; even Granus and Jorrin were hugging each other (maybe it was her imagination, but she could have sworn she saw the couple touching brows). Shaking her head, Valni turned and exited the ring, the adrenaline still coursing through her body, inhibiting the pain of her injuries.

Kenneth couldn't quite believe what he'd just witnessed. *That woman is a powerhouse!* As if in a daze, he watched the doctor clean the wound on Trajan's bloody face before placing strips of bandages over his nose. A grin slowly spread across his face.

"Oh, the poor wee lamb," he said, with no little satisfaction.

Suddenly, Valni was in-front of him; breathing heavily as she locked her eyes with his. Without a word, she abruptly grabbed his jacket and pulled him into an urgent kiss, her mandibles flaring with excitement.

The crowd were silenced briefly as they took in the embrace, and then the volume gradually rose again; shouts and hollers congratulating the champion. A few crewmembers threw up their hands in revulsion at the scene before them, while others cheered the victor and her partner. Credits and agreements exchanged hands around the room. There were plenty of happy betters there – And a few disgruntled ones. The crowd quickly swarmed around them. Numerous taloned hands patted Valni and Kenneth on their backs. But all the action was lost on the interspecies couple embracing by the side of the ring. There was no hiding their relationship now, but Valni didn't care – her lips were still locked against Kenneth's.

She had claimed him.
The memory of those days still haunted him.

It wasn't a time that Kenneth looked back at with any fondness, though he replayed the events in his mind often enough; constantly wondering if he could have done anything differently and mentally seeking out a better outcome. It usually happened very early in the morning after he'd woken from some pleasurable dream he'd been having; the reverie still clouding his senses until, slowly, harsh reality took hold as the icy memory of what happened crept over him and he shivered involuntarily upon realising he was alone in the bed. Then, a grim despair would set in and his happiness would be replaced by numb acceptance.

As had happened so often in the past, his thoughts flashed back to that moment, the *nexus point*. It was the day when everything changed – The day when all the plans he'd dared to secretly make for the future had been rudely shattered.

It was a Tuesday.

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*Engineering, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 14:40 Zulu – 25th February 2183 CE*

The celebrations had gone long into the night. From what Valni had heard, some of the crew hadn't even bothered to retire to bed. If it was true, as the humans maintained, that 'turians were made of steel', then so too was the old human adage that they 'worked hard and played hard'.

Or, as Leptis would put it: *'Any excuse for a piss-up!'*

Valni didn't begrudge the crew using her victory as a pretext to enjoy themselves. They were a fine body of men and women, a team she was proud to serve with, and more than deserved the chance to blow off some steam.

Valni’s skin felt unnaturally tight as she made her way into the Engine Room, limping slightly from the pain in her left spur. It was bent out of shape and ached constantly. One of the vertebrae was most likely cracked, or at the very least dislocated, and would need setting properly. But that wasn't a priority at the moment. She'd had much worse injuries from challenge matches than that in the past. The medi-gel had numbed the worst of the pain and she'd promised herself a visit to the infirmary once her duties were completed. According to the senior staff, Trajan was still convalescing in his
cabin, and nothing cemented a victory better than showing that you had recovered quicker than your opponent. Taking a tour of the ship, conducting your duties directly after a fight proved your tenacity, your invincibility. And it certainly wouldn't hurt her reputation with the cadets.

But she'd be lying if she said she wasn't struggling. Aside from her injuries from the match, she was still finding breathing difficult. The 'asthma attack' (for want of a better word) during the fight had startled her, but she'd managed to suppress it and knew the doc could prescribe something to help her. All she needed to do was get through her shift. Unfortunately, as the day had worn on, it had become increasingly difficult to think clearly. The discomfort in her chest had grown steadily to the point where, upon entering the Engine Room, she hardly noticed the cheers of welcome from the artificers.

She duly smiled and waved vaguely at the enthusiastic crowd as some of the younger trainees came forward to offer their congratulations, the older artificers knowing to stay at their posts.

Valni waved away the young crew and moved towards Kenneth's station in the Core Monitor.

The couple had retreated to Valni's cabin directly after the fight, despite Kenneth's objections and insistence that she go to Medical first, but she was too pumped from the match to listen. Instead, she physically dragged him (fully clothed) into the shower and eagerly stripped off her sparring gear, letting him wash away the nauseating feel of Trajan's touch from her body. The excitement of the fight had left her in a natural high and, once he'd undressed too, they worked off the adrenaline in the best way she knew how.

Kenneth didn't seem to object to that.

Their lovemaking was passionate and primal. It was as if Kenneth was worshiping her body. Valni quickly slipped into state of joyful bliss, her senses focused solely on the feel of the soft yet firm human body writhing against her. Their lips crashed together in an ardent kiss and her skin tingled as the water cascaded down onto them. She loved the feeling of his wet skin and the way his hair would darken and change texture under the shower. Kenneth held her comfortably in his arms; strong hands squeezing her naked rump. Her legs had completely left the floor and her toes curled in unashamed bliss as she wrapped her long limbs around him, her fingers gliding through soaking wet head hair. Kenneth's groans echoed around the small shower cubicle. He broke the kiss and lowered his lips to her neck to taste her skin and inhale her sweet scent.

They were in ecstacy.

But it wasn't long before the familiar rush receded and the pain began. Valni hardly noticed it at first; it was nothing more than a dull ache in her lower body. Then, the throbbing intensified into flaring pain. It started in her legs, and quickly spread to her injured spur, then her stomach, and finally to her chest, shoulders and knuckles. Eventually, she admitted defeat and doubled over in pain as she nursed her injuries. Kenneth, leaving droplets of water in his wake, stole across the room to raid her medical cabinet, and then ordered her to sit on the bed before he carefully slathered her whole body in medi-gel.

Their joyous evening had been cut cruelly short. With her body bruised and battered, Valni had been resigned to simply lie on her bed, entwined in Kenneth's comforting embrace while she allowed herself a brief moment of self-pity. It was only after a few minutes of thought, however, that another method of release occurred to her…

Valni was greeted by the smiling face of Leptis as he walked up the stairwell to intercept her.

"The conquering hero comes!" he proclaimed happily.
"It's been a long day – Please tell me you're not gonna shower me with platitudes?"

"It's more of a song, actually," he replied grinning. "Antoni came up with the tune!"

"Have I mentioned what a bad influence he is on you?"

"No more than I am on him. Together we are unsurpassed in the art of piss-taking!"

"Why did I ever introduce you two?"

"Kismet, my dear! It was meant to be."

Valni glanced down the stairwell and spied Kenneth chatting away with someone on his console monitor.

"What's Kenneth up to?"

"He's on the link with a krogan. Some engineer friend of his from what I understand."

She thanked him and made her way down the steps behind Kenneth just as he exclaimed: "…They just cut and run?"

"Batarians took one look at me and turned tail and ran. Didn't think I was that ugly!" the krogan chuckled. Valni recognised him as 'Chaill'; Kenneth's krogan friend from the *Auroto*. He seemed to be in good spirits, despite the orange blood seeping through the bandage on his right shoulder.

"We traded a couple of shots," Chaill continued. "Bastards were probably expecting an easy score – A lone salarian engineering vessel out in space; minimal defences – Damn, were they wrong! Not many of their boarding party returned to their ship afterwards, I can tell you. Cowards killed three of the crew before they left, though! Somin, Chanda and Bouqis. Good engineers, all of them. Damn shame. They'll be missed."

"You're really are one of a kind, Chaill. It's not every day you hear a krogan mourning salarians."

"I'm not mourning salarians I'm mourning team-mates, Donnelly! Thought you of all people would understand that?"

"Aye, I do understand, Chaill, trust me" Kenneth said quietly. "Good to see they only grazed you," he added, indicating Chaill's wound.

"Ah, bloody pyjaks couldn't shoot straight anyway!"

Kenneth grinned at his friend. "You heard from Gabby, at all?"

"Was gonna ask you the same question. Gellix station's on lock-down for some reason. The *Auroto*'s been warned not to approach. I was hoping you'd know what was going on?"

"Haven't a clue," Kenneth confessed. "But I'm sure the Gellix crew will look after her. She's always been able to make friends easily."

"That's true! Remember the time we had to replace the irrigation systems on that human colony – Terra Nova, was it? – And that colonist took a shine to her? Started chatting her up. Even gave her an asari semiconductor as a gift. I still remember the look on your face when they started talking."

"Aye, I was so jealous…" Kenneth admitted wistfully. "It was a Silaris-made TH-4 thermoelectric generator. The surface patina from the chemical vapour deposition was beautiful!"
"You always were a romantic, Donnelly."

Chaill glanced across as Valni slowly snuck up behind Kenneth; the krogan frowning at her pained expression and limping gait.

"What the Void happened to you?" Chaill asked

"Been in a bit of a barney," Valni answered wryly.

The krogan glared at Kenneth. "I'd heard you'd had the crap kicked out of you, Donnelly," he admonished sternly. "Didn't I warn you not to pick fights with the crew? Gabby told me you couldn't be trusted on your own!" He turned back to Valni. "I hope you came out on top?"

"In a manner of speaking," Valni admitted.

"She went to town on a bigmouth scunner. Took him to school on how to show proper respect for women. It's a shame you missed it, you would have loved it."

"So, the pyjak deserved it, then?"

"Hell yes!" Kenneth said firmly.

"Damn! You turians sure know how to have fun." Chaill gave Valni an admiring nod. "Hope you recorded it?"

"Aye. I can send you a highlights reel if you'd like?"

"Sure. Little enough entertainment on the Auroto as it is."

"What, salarians not into rugby?" Kenneth asked drolly.

"You'd be surprised. One of them is a Red Dragons fan!" Kenneth's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Chaill shrugged his shoulders. "Hey, living in a galactic community just gives a larger fan-base to all sports. And it gives me a better chance to butt-heads with them! Word of warning though: don't get into a quarrel with a salarian. Nothing they love more than a good argument. Not so much with me, though…"

"Because you're a krogan?"

"No, 'cause I always win!"

Kenneth and Chaill chuckled happily together, but Chaill was interrupted by a sound from his left. A green skinned salarian walked behind Chaill, whacking the krogan casually on his injured shoulder as he went.

"Tool up Kiwi-lover! You're back on active duty. That bug-bite better not slow you down."

Chaill winced slightly, but grinned broadly at the crewman. "Speak of the devil. Gotta go, Donnelly. Stay safe."

"I'd say the same to you, Chaill, but you'd just ignore it."

"True enough!"

The feed died and Kenneth turned to Valni.
"Hey." His cheerful expression was replaced by concern. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Valni said wearily. "Just need to rest."

"You look a wee bit wobbly on your feet."

"You should see the other guy!" She kissed him on the mouth. "You worry too much."

Her hand went around his waist. Kenneth eagerly embraced her and kissed her back.

After a few moments of respectful silence, Leptis approached the couple and cleared his throat loudly.

"You think I could have my engineer back?"

"I was keeping him warm for you," Valni teased, breaking the clinch.

"Like he needs it!" Leptis retorted. "You can pick up where you left off at the end of his shift. Right now, I need him."

"It's nice to feel wanted," Kenneth said, smiling.

Valni edged away from the pair as they deliberated. Kenneth was right; she did feel unsteady on her feet. She secretly expected her legs to give out from under her and sought out a console she could casually lean against. She could feel an odd tingling in her hands. Standing before Kenneth’s console, Valni stared at his steaming cup of coffee while she listened to Leptis outlining Kenneth’s next assignment.

"There's a situation on the asari world Niacal. The colony there has an overabundance of plant life and without seals for their buildings the colonists suffer from oxygen toxicity. Niacal's government has requested new hyperbaric chambers and the Hierarchy have stepped up with a joint turian/asari designed equipment to prevent hyperoxia. We're to assist with the installation. We're gonna need breathers for everyone assigned to the project…"

But his words were gradually becoming more distant. Valni gently shook her head. There was a roaring growing in her ears. She could hear Kenneth and Leptis talking but it was muffled, as if they were in another room. She reached up to rub the back of her neck and felt dampness – She was breaking out in a cold sweat. Her vision swam. Her peripheral vision seemed to narrow. Valni tried to focus on the energy readings on the screen, but couldn't make any sense of it, could barely see the display now. The voices around her had become meaningless white noise.

Suddenly dizzy, Valni pitched forward, her hands steadying herself against the console. She leant down and almost retched. Weirdly, all the other discomfort seemed to vanish. She hardly registered the pain in her spur now. Ever so slowly, her vision started to clear. She looked again at the console and realised she'd knocked over Kenneth's cup of coffee, though she didn't remember doing it. She looked at her hand: it was shaking and wet. She was only now registering the pain from the scalding liquid on her fingers.

A hand touched her arm, but it was several seconds before she noticed.

"Valni? Do you need to sit down?" a concerned voice asked.

"I just need to… I just need…” she mumbled. Thinking was becoming increasingly difficult.

Another hand held her left arm. Valni looked up, vaguely surprised to see Kenneth's face, but
something was wrong. His features were distorted, like patches of his skin had been erased. Even through the fog of confusion clouding her mind, she could tell he was concerned.

She gripped the fabric of his uniform on his chest, squeezing the material with all her strength (which was rapidly failing) and tried to speak, but her words were whispered, barely audible as they escaped her mouth.

"Get… to Medical!" she slurred before she collapsed against him.

Kenneth supported her limp body and turned to Leptis in alarm. "A little help here!"

Leptis was by his side in an instant. He checked the pulse in her neck.

"She's out. Get her to the doc." Leptis turned on his omni-tool and spoke into the receiver: "Engine Room to Infirmary – Medical emergency, prepare to receive casualty."

"Acknowledged," the clipped tones of the doctor replied.

Kenneth, cradling her head against his shoulder, lifted her light frame into his arms and tore up the stairwell, followed closely by Leptis.

He could feel every eye on him as he darted through the Engine Room, the artificers staring in shock at the sight of a human holding the lifeless form of their combat instructor.

That mad dash to the infirmary was one Kenneth would long remember. For ages afterwards he had vivid dreams of running through the bowls of Arcadias. The endless corridors seeming to stretch on forever as time appeared to slow down to a crawl; Valni's weight steadily increasing until she was like lead in his arms.

Eventually, they emerged onto the infirmary corridor and bolted towards the Medical bay, Kenneth kicking the door lock to gain access. The doctor looked up as they entered, his brow fringe creasing as he saw Valni hanging in Kenneth's arms. He marched forward to intercept them.

"I thought you were bringing one of the artificers!" he exclaimed.

"She just collapsed against me," Kenneth stated breathlessly.

"Get her on the table."

Kenneth laid her gently on the examination table. The doctor immediately checked her pulse rate, oxygen levels and pupil response.

"Could it be internal bleeding from the fight?" Leptis asked, hovering at the end of the table.

The doctor didn't reply immediately and continued to analyse her readings as he ran his omni-tool over her chest.

"She's going into circulatory shock," he announced eventually. "Officer Severan is showing early signs of angioedema and bradycardia."

He undid the clasps on her uniform and stripped off her jacket. Her grey undershirt came off next. Kenneth had to fight the urge to turn around to preserve her decency. The doctor carefully probed the bare skin of her chest.

"How long has she had this inflammation?" Tesserius demanded, pointing to the raw looking swellings peppering her skin.
"I'm… not sure. A few days at most. She said it wasn't a problem."

Tesserius was silent for a long moment as he gradually came to a decision.

"Alright, you out!"

"Me?" Kenneth asked.

"Both of you!"

"I'd like to stay with her," the human insisted.

Without another word, Tesserius grabbed Kenneth by the collar of his uniform and physically hauled him off the ground, leaving his feet dangling. Kenneth was shocked by the doctor's display of strength and could do nothing but protest feebly, squirming in the turian's vice-like grip. Tesserius hustled Leptis through the door and dumped Kenneth outside.

"Stay out 'til I call you!" the doctor ordered. He retreated back inside and the door shut, the glow of the lock changing from green to red, sealing it tight.

Kenneth stared blankly at the door for several seconds until Leptis placed a comforting but firm hand on his shoulder and gradually led him away.

He escorted the dazed human back through the corridors, Kenneth allowing himself to be led towards the Engine Room.

None of the artificers approached him asking for news about Severan as they re-entered engineering; all of them warned off by the ominous expression on Leptis' face. Kenneth was escorted back to his console and simply stood there, staring unseeing at the display, while his hands mechanically typed away at the holographic interface as if following some invisible script. Throughout all this, his mind was dwelling on how quickly Valni's health had deteriorated. Everything had all been going so well just a few minutes earlier.

Kenneth was uncharacteristically quiet for the rest of the day. His shift ended and there was still no word from the doctor concerning Valni's condition. Kenneth waited outside the infirmary in vain for several hours, until Antoni and Djamil dragged him away to the Mess Hall.

He ate very little that evening. The atmosphere was unusually subdued in the mess; the crew casting sidelong glances in his direction when they thought they weren't being observed. Word had got around about Valni's dramatic collapse and the crew seemed reluctant to discuss the matter while Kenneth was in earshot.

There was still no word from the doctor the following morning. Again, Kenneth was left tapping his heels as he waited outside the locked infirmary before his shift started. It wasn't until Antoni approached, hoping to make a visit on his friend, that the door unexpectedly opened to reveal the towering form of Tesserius carrying a computer pad..

"Still here, then?" Tesserius asked Kenneth somewhat coldly.

Kenneth stared up at the doctor. "How is she?"

"Recovering, thankfully," the doctor replied. "She's a fine soldier. It's… unsettling to see her like this."

"What's the prognosis?" Antoni put in.
"It was touch and go, but I managed to stabilize her. It's lucky you got her here as quickly as you did, Donnelly. Receiving prompt treatment for anaphylactic shock is vitally important to a patient's survival."


The doctor didn't answer, but merely glared at Kenneth for a long moment. The human's eyes widened as the understanding hit him.

"It's me?" he exclaimed. "She's allergic to me?"

Tesserius nodded. "This has been building for a while. All it needed was a suitable trigger. Her immune system has been compromised. The recent challenge match certainly hasn't helped. And, of course, there have been other… mitigating factors." He glanced briefly at Valni's medical chart. "This is a severe reaction. Her blood pressure's bottomed out and the swelling's partially closed her oesophagus. It's affected everything from the crop alimentary tract to the nares operculum. My guess… she's reacting to something she ingested."

The doctor stared pointedly at the engineer. Kenneth flinched slightly under his accusing gaze.

"Can I see her?" Kenneth asked.

The doctor tilted his head back and stared off into the distance, as if weighing up his options. Finally, he nodded reluctantly. "Five minutes. No longer."

Kenneth moved past the doctor into the infirmary.

A large screen separated the last bed at the far end of the room from the rest of the sickbay. Kenneth approached slowly, edging his way around the screen until the bed's occupant came into view.

Valni was lying flat on the bed, eyes shut, tucked under the covers and wearing a pale green medical gown; her bare arms resting above the sheet on either side of her body. Several wires and diodes were taped to her neck, and an IV line was inserted into her right arm, while a transparent breathing mask covered her face.

Kenneth tried to suppress a shudder. Seeing her in this condition: Weakened, vulnerable, and knowing he was responsible was like a dagger between the ribs.

Valni slowly opened her eyes.

"Hey," she said, her voice was surprisingly cheerful, if a bit weak. "I would get up but the doc wants me to stick around. I think he's nailed me to the equipment."

Kenneth nodded and gladly sat next to the bed, careful not to disturb any of the wires.

"I'm not sure the ensemble suits you," Kenneth answered, forcing a smile. "I prefer you in your silver and blue uniform."

"As I recall, you mostly preferred me out of it." Valni grinned cheekily.

Kenneth's smile faltered and he glanced away from her. "This shouldn't have happened. It wouldn't have happened if I hadn't... If we..." Kenneth hung his head. "I'm not sure how I can make it up to
"You'll just have to buy me something nice," Valni suggested, her eyes twinkling. "How about a kilt?"

Kenneth didn't laugh at the comment, but simply nodded approvingly, his mind's eye painting Valni in traditional dress. "Aye, I think you'd be bonnie in a kilt. A proper Donnelly tartan: emerald green, red, blue and golden yellow. You'd look beautiful, woman."

"Aren't there restrictions on who's allowed to wear certain tartans?" Valni asked.

Kenneth nodded again, obviously impressed. "You have been doing your homework," he stated approvingly. "Like I'd let a few rules stop you from wearing it!"

Valni reached across and took his hand, gripping the soft skin tightly. She loved the sensation: strong muscles flexing under a supple surface. Kenneth was tempted to pull away, fearing he would infect her again; harm her further.

He didn't pull away.

"And I wanted to show you Scotland," he continued. "I wanted you to see the lochs, travel the highlands – Maybe take you horseback riding."

"That… might be interesting?" Valni started, not entirely sure how a turian riding a horse would work. She was quite certain the horse might have something to say about that! "Well, I do have the spurs for it!" she joked. Kenneth gave her a genuine grin. Her smile dropped as she suddenly realised something: "Wait. You said 'wanted to' – past-tense. Don't you still want to?"

"Aye, damn straight I do! But, if this is how you react just to me, then I don't know if taking you to Earth is gonna… I don't want to make you sick. You're such a strong woman. I canna be the person taking that away from you."

"You won't be," she assured him. "This is just temporary. We'll figure this out. I'm in great hands here."

"That's right. Here! On board *Arcadias*. Where there's food you can eat, an' good turian doctors, an'… warmth! Do you know how cold it gets in Scotland? Even in the summer? It'd freeze ya briskets, woman!"

Valni laughed. "I believe they've invented these wonderful things called 'clothes'. I'd just wrap up warm. Besides, do you know how lonely I'd be if you went without me?"

"I wasna thinking of leaving either. I was hoping to stay on longer. It's just an idea at the moment but… I don't know, maybe the ship could use another engineer?"

Valni's eyes widened. Her grip on his hand faltered as the full realisation of what he was saying sunk in.

"Kenneth, you can't give up your career," she protested.

Kenneth shook his head and smiled. "I don't know if you've noticed but I'm pretty handy with a spanner. I get about twenty job offers a year from different corporations, and could pretty-much write my own ticket with any other organisation out there if I decided to leave. My career isn't necessarily with the Alliance."
"I will go wherever I'm needed, wherever I can be most useful. And if I can find a good ship and a
good crew then I'll make my home there, no matter who I serve with." Kenneth leaned in closer.
"What we have; this thing between us, I'd like the chance to make it work, and… well, I hope you
feel the same way." She nodded, gripping his hand tighter.

"I don't know if it's possible, but, if the Hierarchy and Captain will allow it, I would be proud to
make Arcadias my home."

Valni reached up and removed the mask. Kenneth leant forward to replace it but she grabbed his
hand and pulled him towards her. Their lips met briefly as she rose from the bed.

"You bloody stupid bugger!" she chided. "We've only known each other a few weeks and you're
already talking about moving in together!"

Kenneth laughed. "I imagine it'll be on a trial basis. We would be sharing Arcadias with about three
hundred crew."

Grinning broadly, Valni rose from the bed and embraced him, the bed cover dropping around her
waist.

"Donnelly!"

The doctor's voice startled him. He looked up; Tesserius was standing by the screen, an expression
like thunder on his face. He signalled for Kenneth to follow him.

Settling the smiling woman back under the covers, Kenneth reluctantly followed the scowling
doctor. Tesserius led him to the other end of the infirmary and leaned in close.

"Do you think that's helping?" he hissed. "Removing her mask? Intimate contact?"

"No. No, I wasn't trying to..."

"Control yourself. For her sake."

Suitably chastised, Kenneth was escorted out of the infirmary, making room for Antoni to spend time
with Valni.

He made his way back to the Engine Room and spent the next few hours preparing the engineering
ground team for their trip to the asari colony of Niacal. Following the tension of the previous day,
and Valni's encouraging signs of recovery (not to mention her enthusiastic response to his proposal
of staying on Arcadias) he was in surprisingly good spirits, and chatted enthusiastically with Leptis
and the rest of the team.

He retired to his cabin that night full of optimism for the future. If he could persuade the Captain of
his worth, prove to her that he'd be a valuable asset to the ship, then maybe there was a shot at being
able to join the crew? And even if it wasn't possible, at least he was in a relationship with someone
he'd really come to care about. It was all happening so quickly, but that didn't seem to matter – That
was the turian method after all.

Stripping off his clothes, Kenneth clambered into the bed and closed his eyes, dreaming of the
woman who had brought such happiness into his life.

It wasn't until the next morning that he heard the news.

Valni's condition had deteriorated.
The full consequences of Valni's illness hits hard as a fateful decision is made.

"Take off your clothes, Donnelly."

Kenneth blinked at the doctor's instruction. "All of them, sir?" he asked carefully.

"Yes, all of them!" Tesserius replied brusquely. "The Captain's ordered me to verify that whatever's affecting Officer Severan isn't communicable to others on-board. And if it is then I need to know how to combat it."

"I thought it was an allergy, sir?"

"It is. But in my experience, cross-species allergies usually affect levo-amino subjects, such as humans and asari. It's unusual for an allergy to target the turian integumentary system so aggressively. Clothes off!"

As he was talking, Tesserius donned a pair of thick rubber gloves, and then moved over to the sterile equipment table and picked up a vicious looking surgical instrument with a blunt, bulbous tip.

Eyeing the instrument warily, Kenneth reluctantly started to disrobe.

The examination by Tesserius was extensive and decidedly unpleasant. Dacian was nothing if not thorough and employed several different probes to examine areas of Kenneth even he wasn't aware it was possible to reach!

After what felt like an age, Tesserius finally rose from a squatting position and told Kenneth he could get dressed. Kenneth, bent over the examination bed, unclenched his fingers and gratefully started to put his clothes back on.

He had hoped the doctor's call to the infirmary was an invitation to see Valni. He'd sent several requests to see her again, but Tesserius had refused him on every occasion, implying, but not stating explicitly, that his presence had aggravated her symptoms.

Dacian had moved Valni into a room adjoining the infirmary, apparently in an attempt to isolate any chance of further contamination. The fact he hadn't been able to see her had riled Kenneth but he accepted it, hoping-against-hope that she would recover quickly and he'd soon be able to visit her again. Coming up against the brick wall that was Tesserius, Kenneth made his way out of the infirmary and floated down to Bay One.

He felt like he was stumbling in the dark. There was little information about Valni's condition from the doctor, and despite repeatedly petitioning the Captain to see her, permission for visits had not been forthcoming. At least the majority of the artificers were supportive of his situation. Valni was a popular crew member and no-one wanted to see her work suffer. But the doctor had been somewhat short with him. Whether he blamed Kenneth personally for what happened he wasn't sure. It didn't
matter; Kenneth already blamed himself for what happened.

Bay One was packed when he exited the elevator. He moved through the crowds of four-dozen cadets and artificers chatting animatedly as they waited for the order to board the shuttles.

Kenneth weaved silently between them, hardly noticing a few scurry away from him, out of reach. He strode up to the tall figures of Leptis and Bron, standing in-front of the service shuttle. It was Bron who made the first enquiry.

"Any word on Officer Severan, sir?"

Kenneth shook his head. "Couldn't even see her," he replied grimly.

Bron nodded in sympathy.

Since Valni's collapse her duties had been taken up by Antoni and a few of the other marines, given that the next most experienced combat instructor, Trajan, was still restricted to light duty owing to injuries sustained in their fight. Antoni and his team did their best to maintain Valni's high standard of instruction, but, there was no two-ways about it, they just weren't as skilled as her. To make matters worse, training the cadets took Antoni away from his own duties, and to make up the shortfall he was working extra shifts. Kenneth hadn't seen or spoken to the marine for the last two days. The knowledge that, because of him, other peoples work was suffering didn't sit well with Kenneth.

"Alright!" Leptis called out to the assembled ranks of artificers. "Gear up! We're moving out. On the shuttles now!"

All conversation ceased immediately as the crew moved obediently onto the shuttles.

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*Borivali Agribusiness District, City of Aurolis, Niacal – 08:58 LT*

The shuttle lurched and shuddered as it powered through the planet's thick atmosphere. Kenneth tightened his grip on the safety rails hanging from the ceiling. The choppy conditions pitched the team around the cabin so that Kenneth and the few cadets who were standing were left struggling to find their feet.

"It's hot on the surface already!" one of the cadets complained as she glanced at the temperature gauge next to her seat. "And it's not even midday."

"You expect that on tropical worlds, Weenha," Leptis stated. "Get used to it."

"Yes, sir," the cadet replied diffidently.

Despite the turbulence, Kenneth realized he wasn't being jostled. He glanced around, noting that the cadets were giving him a wide berth, as if trying to avoid touching him.

Gradually, the turbulence eased as the shuttle descended towards the surface. Leptis, who had been speaking to the pilot, turned back to address his team. "We're about to land. Masks on," he ordered. The group obediently donned their transparent breathers. "Now, remember, without breathers you have about three hours before hyperoxia becomes a concern. If for any reason you lose your mask, retire into the main building and the staff there will provide you with a new one."

The shuttle settled onto the landing pad with little drama. The locks snapped back and the doors swung open. Kenneth shielded his eyes against the sunlight flooding into the cabin and stepped out from the relative cool of the atmospheric conditioned shuttle into what felt like a steam bath. The heat
and humidity of the lush jungle world was intense; the extreme conditions not helped by the planet's slightly heavier gravity. Kenneth could feel himself start to sweat immediately and quickly removed his jacket. Most of the cadets were eagerly following suit when the group was hailed by a voice: "Welcome to Niacal!"

A violet skinned asari clad in cargo shorts, hiking boots, and what looked like a sleeveless, white sports shirt that hugged her slim figure was approaching them across the landing pad, a transparent mask covering her mouth and nose. Leptis approached the youthful looking alien and bowed low to the woman, who returned the gesture.

"I'm Maven T'Zaano. I'll be facilitating your team's installation of the hyperbaric chambers and helping with any problems or queries you might have. The colony is very informal and we want you to be comfortable so, please, feel free to make yourselves at home. There will be a period of transition until your physiology adapts to the local conditions, so let us know if you have any problems and either myself or a member of my team will do our best to alleviate them. Think of me as a conciliator for the duration of your stay."

Leptis shook hands with the woman and immediately started to discuss the job at hand.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, Kenneth took in the planet's landscape. It was a vast rainforest. They appeared to have landed on the side of a mountain; the forest canopy below them partially shrouded by low-lying cloud. The shape of the vegetation reminded him of palm trees on Earth, but much larger, and the leaves were a vivid shade of crimson. In fact, there was no green to be found anywhere. The entire jungle was tinted in varying shades of red and yellow – a massive fuchsia-coloured landscape stretching as far as the eye could see. It was truly spectacular. Kenneth was slightly taken aback by how alien it looked.

Well, what did you expect on an alien planet, ya daft numpty? he chided.

The landing pad appeared to be the only structure visible. He couldn't see any buildings of note, but then noticed several figures moving amongst the trees. Looking closer, Kenneth realised that he was looking at a window. There was a building behind those trees; several buildings in fact. The entire colony was built into the hill side. It made sense to him. Building underground helped to regulate temperature in hot and humid environments. And Niacal's conditions most certainly qualified.

The lack of buildings on the surface momentarily duped him into thinking the job might be completed quickly. But Aurolis was a surprisingly large colony. Almost one-hundred hyperbaric chambers had to be replaced or repaired. Enough work to keep the crew busy for several days.

Leptis and the asari had finally stopped talking and he indicated where the crew should start. Following Djamil's lead, Kenneth and the rest of the team set to work.

It was around the time of the eighth chamber replacement that Kenneth could feel himself start to flag. The heat was sapping his energy; despite the mask his breathing had become laboured in the humid conditions. Kenneth knew turians preferred the heat but even they were suffering under the planet's punishing troposphere.

They were working in a huge courtyard. It was one of the few communal structures on the surface and, like most asari architecture, was a marvel of elegant design. Great spire-like columns rose up on all sides of the grey-blue plaza, while several statues commemorating the lives of great Matriarchs lined the centre of the huge open space. Mingling crowds of asari strolled between them. Most of the colony's residents seemed perfectly attuned to the conditions, and happily wandered amongst the Arcadias crew, chatting excitedly. Kenneth was surprised by the generous amount of blue flesh on
display. Many of the colonists were wearing thin tops and skimpy shorts, diverting more than a few of the younger crewmen from their work.

For Kenneth, however, even the sight of scantily clad asari wasn't enough to distract him from his own thoughts. His mind was elsewhere, contemplating a certain person on Arcadius, and brooding on the future.

But he didn't forget his duties. Supervising the cadets turned out to be more challenging than he thought. While Bron was polite and deferent in his company, the other cadets seemed reluctant to approach him for advice. He spent most of the time apart from the group, occasionally catching patches of whispered conversation:

"... You saw what happened to Officer Severan. I don't want to be infected, too!" one of them said.

"We should get hazard pay for this!" the cadet Weenha muttered.

"Pipe down!" Leptis yelled.

Kenneth jerked his head around. He hadn't even noticed Djamil standing there. The two cadets shrank back from the Chief Artificer's glare. Leptis walked past them, patting the human reassuringly on the arm as he went.

As the day wore on, Kenneth honestly thought he was going to melt. His shirt was saturated with sweat. Drinks were provided regularly by Maven T'Zaano's staff which came as a welcome relief from the stifling heat. Kenneth looked up from his work to see an indigo-coloured asari hovering beside him, wearing only slightly less than T'Zaano had worn, and brandishing a glass of water in her hands. She offered it over.

"Thank you," Kenneth said gratefully before downing the liquid in one go.

"We don't see many humans here. Especially in the company of turians. Are you part of the exchange programme?" she asked. Kenneth's translator had trouble deciphering her heavy accent; she almost sounded French.

"Aye. Are you an engineer?" he asked.

The asari nodded. "I've been part of T'Zaano's team for almost forty years."

"How'd you cope with the humidity here?"

"It's not so bad, really. You get used to it. It's fine as long as you don't spend too long outside. All the buildings have more than adequate atmospheric regulation."

"Still, it must get uncomfortable out in the field."

"We have dress down days during the summer months," she stated casually. "Clothing is really only compulsory during meetings, in the internal communal areas, or when we have alien visitors."

"That would explain the skimpy attire." Kenneth remarked, glancing at the underdressed asari roaming the streets. "This is what you normally wear?"

"No, usually it's much less, but we have to be considerate. It's a sign of professionalism. We can hardly expect visitors to adopt our way of working if it makes them uncomfortable. Other cultures have different attitudes to working free and unfettered."
"I'm sorry, 'unfettered'?" a male cadet behind Kenneth asked.

"She means naked, dumbass!" Weenha interjected.

There was a clang as the male cadet dropped his toolkit.

The asari shrugged nonchalantly. "Aurolis colony is mostly asari; we don't have as conservative an attitude to nudity as other races. Well, except maybe hanar," she added with a cheeky smile. "And it is much more comfortable working unclothed in these conditions."

The cadets were silent for a few seconds as each turian mentally processed this new information. Finally, the cadet who'd dropped his toolkit turned to Leptis.

"Sir, can I say, I'm fine with adopting the local customs and methods of working!"

"No-one wants to see you 'unfettered', perv!" Bron said firmly.

"That's your opinion. As visitors we shouldn't be afraid to sample the local flavour… I mean techniques! Of working! With alien customs. I'm just saying…” His voice petered out. "It just slipped out, sir."

"That's exactly what I'm hoping to avoid, cadet!" Leptis snapped. "You will follow orders. This job will be completed in accordance with Hierarchy regulations. No adopting local customs. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, sir!"

Leptis nodded and moved away to supervise one of the other groups while Bron glared at the male cadet. "Moron!" she muttered under her breath.

The small team resumed their work, although a few of the (mostly male) cadets were somewhat distracted when a group of joggers bounded past.

"I love my job!" 'Cadet Toolkit' stated with a lewd grin.

Kenneth turned back to hyperbaric chamber suspended several metres off the ground and noticed one of the cables dangling from the mass effect powered hoist had come loose from its fixings. He turned to the cadet operating the crane and yelled a warning: "The cables are free!"

One cable snagged; the chamber suddenly swung downward. Unbalanced, it swayed towards Weenha. Instinctively, Kenneth grabbed the cadet by the arm and dragged her clear of the falling apparatus. The chamber hit the ground with a resounding crash, silencing all conversation in the courtyard. Leptis and several asari rushed over to see what the commotion was.

Kenneth was still holding onto Weenha's arm. She looked down at his hand and flinched out of his grasp.

"Are you okay?" Kenneth asked.

"I'm fine," she muttered, absently rubbing at where Kenneth had touched her. She seemed none the worse for wear, but then, without bothering to thank then human, turned to Leptis in mild alarm.

"Sir, can I go and… use the restroom?"

The Chief Artificer's eyes narrowed. He glanced down at her arm, scrutinizing her as she anxiously wiped the bare skin with her hand. "Be quick, we need you back here," he said. Weenha nodded
gratefully and then dashed towards the main building's entrance. Kenneth watched the young cadet leave, knowing she was likely going to scrub her arm raw; cleansing herself of the 'infectious' human's touch.

Leptis pointed at another cadet. "Harrin, take over." The cadet nodded reluctantly and moved over to take Weenha's place by Kenneth's side.

With the drama over, the crowds slowly dispersed, allowing the team to complete the rest of the work in silence.

Bay One, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 07:00 Zulu – 1st March

There was a strange atmosphere on the ship that morning. Kenneth could sense it as he was walking through the corridors. The air felt heavy, almost as if a lightning storm was building. He hadn't bothered with breakfast, instead intending to work through until lunch and try the Niacal cuisine. Food rations were only palatable for so long. The shuttle bay was uncharacteristically silent as Kenneth entered. He could hear subdued voices as he left the elevator, but all conversation abruptly ceased as he walked in. The cadets stared at him, shifting nervously on their feet.

Leptis approached Kenneth and quickly took him to one side, out of earshot of the cadets.

"What's going on?" Kenneth asked.

"I just got a call from Verress," he explained in a low voice. "Captain's pulled you off the mission today. You're to report to the CIC immediately."

"Any idea why?" Kenneth probed, a little concerned now.

"I think it might have something to do with Severan," he replied heavily, pausing to allow Kenneth a moment to digest that. "Verress didn't sound happy. You'd better get up there."

He squeezed Kenneth's arm reassuringly. But Kenneth didn't feel reassured. A well of anxiety had settled in the pit of his stomach. He stared at the turian's worried expression and let out a shaky breath. What had happened? Was Valni okay?

Glancing over Djamil's shoulder, he noted the cadets were milling around, looking at each other but not meeting his gaze. Evidently the crew had heard something he hadn't.

"You'd better go," Djamil advised.

Wordlessly, Kenneth nodded, and exited the shuttle bay at speed. He boarded the elevator and punched the control for the command deck. The ride to the CIC seemed to move achingly slowly; Kenneth tapped his foot impatiently. Half way through the ride he was tempted to stop at the next floor and simply run up the stairs.

Eventually, the elevator arrived on the command deck. Kenneth rushed down the CIC corridor. The doors opened automatically for him and he scanned the room. Captain Verress was waiting at the holo-display, her back to the door, reading from a pad in her hand. A further two CIC officers were waiting patiently behind the holo-display.

"Sir!" he said, saluting briskly. "You wanted to see…"

"Just stand there and be quiet!" Verress barked sharply, not bothering to turn round. "And speak when you're spoken to! Proceedings will begin on my order."
Kenneth swallowed and let his hand drop to his side.

He remained silently at attention for several minutes, staring obediently at the far wall as he listened to his own heart hammering against his chest. Time seemed to slow to a crawl, his mind free to conjure up various scenarios as to why he'd been summoned to the CIC – none of them good.

By the start of the fifth minute he was tempted to enquire after Valni's health, when he heard the main door open behind him. A familiar scent wafted in his direction; the aroma an evocative fusion reminiscent of cinnamon and bergamot. Only one person he knew smelled like that. He turned his head.

It was Valni!

Smartly clad in her blue and silver Arcadias uniform, she had been escorted into the room by the doctor. Her face lit up when she saw him and Kenneth smiled back. The doctor directed her to stand alongside him, making certain there was a gap of at least two metres between the pair. Tesserius then walked past the couple and moved to the Captain's side.

Kenneth hadn't taken his eyes off her. She still looked wobbly on her feet but the fact she was standing was a vast improvement to how she'd been just a few days ago. He let out a deep breath. The sense of relief was profound, like the cabin pressure had suddenly normalized. Kenneth felt like he was breathing naturally again.

He risked mouthing a question to her: You okay?

Valni smiled reassuringly and nodded. Then she winked.

Kenneth's delight peaked. For a brief, wonderful moment nothing else in the room mattered. After the fevered imaginings he'd been torturing himself with, seeing her standing there was a blessed relief. He was so preoccupied he hadn't noticed the Captain had turned around.

"Start recording," Verress instructed the CIC officer. Kenneth whipped his head around to face her. "Set time and date," she added, then she stepped forward and stared at Kenneth, inclining her head slightly.

"Donnelly." She turned to Valni. "Cap Killer." Valni recoiled slightly at the nickname. "Well, this is an interesting situation, wouldn't you say? It is what might be termed a 'grey area'. The Alliance appears to have few precedents for this, and their regulations on the subject are somewhat vague. An ambiguity that I'm sure will soon be rectified.

"Maybe you two were simply trying to advance turian/human interpersonal relations? Or encourage esprit de corps? Now, I'm all for enhancing unit morale, but the pair of you seem to have taken social interaction a little too far!"

Verress glared at them for a moment and then indicated the pad in her hand. "I have the doctor's report. It makes for absorbing reading. It would appear that two members of my crew are conducting a possibly illicit sexual liaison – You weren't supposed to take your job title quite so literally, Severan! – And are now intent on causing themselves grievous bodily injury." She referred to the pad. "Namely: An open laceration of the clavicle; first and second-degree abrasions to the chest and back; evidence of repeated chafing to the lower extremities; severe oral chemical burns from the intake of dextro-amino food; contusions and deep puncture wounds to the right palm; and a potentially life-threatening case of anaphylaxis. And that's not counting Severan's injuries from the challenge match. All in the space of three weeks… Spirits only knows what state you two would be in after six months. You make quite the masochistic couple, don't you?"
"With respect, sir, that isn't…"

"I do not recall giving you permission to speak, Donnelly!" The Captain's anger practically radiated out from her. "You are here to listen, crewman! Because of your actions the efficiency of this ship has been compromised. Due to your negligent and irresponsible behaviour we have lost valuable cadet training sessions. The health of my combat instructor has been damaged, and we're in real danger of severely injuring a visiting alien on my watch. This will not be tolerated!

"Your actions reflect badly on me; on the good name of this ship." She turned to address Valni directly. "I trusted you, Severan. Your promotion demonstrated my confidence in your abilities. And this is how you repay the fidelity of the meritocracy?" She pointed at Kenneth. "This human is a danger to you. He is quite literally bad for your health. As your commander I must strongly advise against further contact with him. Think you can do that?"

"Might I remind you, Captain: Our government does not forbid relationships with non-turians. The broad freedoms we as citizens enjoy are one of our inalienable rights."

"So, you intend to see him again? Are you aware how badly this will affect your work? How badly it'll affect your career? Your condition is cumulative – further contact with the human will only worsen the symptoms. Every time you come back from shore leave you will be useless to me! And I will not tolerate any disruption to this ship's efficacy or my crew's health!"

"This decision is mine to own, ma'am. I would never shirk my responsibilities to the Fleet, but equally I will not be dictated to about who I may or may not see. I am accountable for my own actions and I will continue to serve with honour, but my private decisions must remain just that: private!"

"No, Severan. This isn't the way. Not when your duty to the Hierarchy is affected. You know what'll happen," Verress entreated, softening her voice. "I am giving you one last chance to see reason…"

"Respectfully Captain, the meritocracy does not control my personal life, and neither do you," Valni said defiantly.

"It does when your personal life affects the efficiency of Arcadias!" Verres snapped. "The way you conduct yourselves out of uniform is entirely your own affair, but while you serve the Hierarchy you are subject to its regulations. If this was simply a brief flirtation your case would be done-and-dusted by now, but as you've made your intentions clear you've forced my hand. If you choose to defy me then what good are you, Severan?

"Now, ordinarily I would simply order you two apart, but short of asking the Alliance to confine Donnelly to their brig for the next few years I'm not sure that would do much good… My choices, therefore, are severely limited."

The Captain strode smoothly forward to stand before Valni. "Severan: Under executive order 472 you are hereby expelled from Arcadias and reassigned to the Seventh Fleet frigate PFS Vistoffia – There to serve with the 43rd Marine Corps as Warrant Officer. Your shuttle leaves in 30 minutes. I expect you to be on it."

She moved over to Kenneth. "Donnelly: An official reprimand has been sent to Alliance Command informing them of your transgression. No doubt they will select an appropriate punishment. But, if it were up to me and you were a member of my crew, I'd simply tear off the offending part of you" – she glanced down – "And beat you to death with it!"

Her voice rose steadily in volume as she leaned in closer. "I am done playing nice with the Alliance!"
There will be no further reprimands for you, Donnelly. From this moment on you so much as 
breathe in the wrong direction and I'll bounce your case straight to the Council – Make you the 
figurehead of everything that's wrong with the Alliance. I will drown your sorry ass in a political 
shit-storm! Do you understand me, Donnelly?"

"Yes Captain."

"Are both of you clear on my orders?"

"Yes sir!" they answered in unison.

"Dismissed."

Saluting, the pair turned smoothly and marched out. Only when the doors to the CIC shut behind 
them did Valni stumble. She leant against the wall for support; one hand covered her mouth and her 
eyes closed tight. There were no tears, no sobs, just a painful stillness as she came to terms with what 
had just happened.

"Valni?" Kenneth began, reaching for her arm. She pulled away and, without a word, staggered 
rapidly down the corridor. Kenneth watched her until she'd disappeared from view, feeling retched; 
helpless; numb with shock.

He'd been waiting by the lift for the last twenty minutes.

Kenneth knew she had to pass this way to get to the shuttle bay. He'd intended to follow her to her 
cabin; try and talk to her, or at the very least, help her pack, but security had been instructed to keep 
him off the quarter-deck. Suddenly finding his movements restricted had come as a shock, despite 
having expected it. He needed to talk to her privately and the shuttle bay was way too public. This 
whole situation was a mess and he needed to try and make it right. Somehow…

Soft footfalls heralded her arrival. She came round the corner, carrying two large kit-bags on her 
shoulders and stopped as she saw him. Glancing down, she continued walking, not meeting his gaze. 
Kenneth feared she'd ignore him completely. She walked past the human, but her footsteps slowed as 
she reached the elevator.

She hesitated. Then both kit-bags were slowly lowered to the floor.

Valni turned to face him. Kenneth held his breath. He wanted to reach out and hold her; apologise; 
seek forgiveness; tell her it would be alright, but he couldn't find his voice.

The expression on her face told him all he needed to know: That this was his fault; that she should 
never have chosen him. He half expected her to slap his face. He would have accepted that. Instead, 
she moved towards him. She gripped his right hand tightly. Her other hand rose and brushed past his 
cheek, moving upwards to his head. She ran her fingers through his hair; her eyes closing as if she 
was trying to cement the memory of his touch in her mind. Her hand moved down to his cheek, the 
thumb toying at the corner of his mouth.

"I'm so sorry," Kenneth mumbled.

Silently, Valni touched her brow to his. She exhaled steadily; her warm breath ruffling his beard. She 
pressed her mandible against his cheek; Kenneth desperately wanted to embrace her; to never let her 
go. She leant closer to his ear and whispered: "My wee lamb."

Kenneth reached up to hold the hand at his cheek, but she pulled away and stepped back. Retrieving
her bags, she walked onto the elevator, turning around to face him one more time.

Kenneth's eyes widened in alarm: the skin on her fringe and mandible had already started to flush: A reaction to the virulent human she'd just touched.

They stared at one another in silence, waiting for the inevitable. With a small ping, the elevator doors finally slid shut, obscuring her from view.

And like that, she was gone.
It All Comes Crashing Down

Chapter Summary

Ostracised from the turian crew, Kenneth is faced with a terrible choice when the truth is revealed.

Core Monitor, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 08:57 Zulu – 5th March 2183 CE

His console had been vandalised again.

He noticed it as he was about to start his shift. It was hard not to spot. Graffiti was splashed across the terminal's surface; the abusive scrawl written in turian script. He didn't need it translated, he'd seen the writing often enough. It read: 'Danger – Human biohazard'. To add to the effect, a crudely made human doll in an Alliance uniform was perched on his console with a vicious looking military-issue 'talon' knife stuck through its chest. This wasn't the first time he'd seen something like it. Kenneth sighed inwardly, then reached into his toolkit for a rag and set about cleaning away the paint.

It was practically a ritual now, cleaning his workstation of graffiti and trash. Nothing that prevented him from doing his job, but enough to send a clear message: 'You're not welcome here, Donnelly'.

He had no idea which member of the crew was doing it. Could be any number of them, they all had access to the Core Monitor. But whoever it was he couldn't really blame them. He'd sent away one of their own. Through his influence, a well-loved member of the crew had been transferred. And it was his fault. He understood that. He endured it.

The last few days had not been pleasant. Kenneth had been removed from the mission to Niacal ever since Valni's expulsion from the ship, and the regular sorties to the asari colony was keeping Leptis and Bron out of the picture, leaving Kenneth alone to weather the abuse that was becoming increasingly malicious. At the start of every shift he would find new 'gifts' left by his tormentors. In the communal areas the crew would give him a wide berth, except when the corridors were deserted and a few of the younger crew would follow him to purposefully walk into him. They'd shove him back against the wall hoping to provoke him into a fight. Kenneth would simply stare them down, until, realising they weren't going to get a reaction, their mates finally dragged them away. They never challenged him on their own. Even the other artificers tended to avoid him. Most of them were still characteristically polite, but when their duties obliged them to work with Kenneth the artificers were distant and reserved, the hours dragging on and the shifts accompanied by long, uncomfortable silences.

In the mess hall he was ostracized. The room fell silent whenever he entered; every turian face glaring at him in open hostility, while low voices verbally abused him, the atmosphere heavy with threat. Sitting alone, away from the main groups, he would catch snippets of muttered exchanges. The words, 'human', 'poisoned' and 'bleed-out' often came up. Occasionally, dextro-amino food would find its way onto his plate. In the worst case, he'd unwittingly eaten a whole rho'dainberry that someone had grated into his curry. The majority of that night was spent with his head in the toilet vomiting his guts out.

But he endured it. After all, it was his fault.
While he couldn't place their names, Kenneth actually recognised a few of his tormentor's colony markings: They were the same people who had been cheering Trajan during the fight. The Chief Petty Officer hadn't shown his face anywhere near the Engine Room (his nose was still covered in bandages, so Kenneth felt certain he would have seen him), but Kenneth suspected that Trajan was somehow orchestrating the attacks. Not that he could prove anything.

Despite his exclusion from the crew, Kenneth kept himself busy. In a vain attempt to try and challenge Verress' decision to expel Valni, Kenneth had attempted to research the turian legal system. What he'd found was not encouraging. While turians enjoyed fewer personal restrictions than the Alliance, their punitive sentences were much harsher. There were numerous examples of turians being sentenced to several years' hard labour due to recreational drug use interfering with their work. Privately turians were free to do what they pleased, but an iron-clad discipline was rigidly imposed during working hours. This meant that the turian code-of-conduct essentially boiled down to one cardinal rule: 'Let nothing affect your duties' – A rule that Kenneth had comprehensively shattered – In comparison, Valni's punishment was almost lenient.

Perhaps what had stunned Kenneth the most about the exchange was the fact that he'd become so comfortable working with the artificers, he'd laughed and joked with them so readily, that he hardly noticed they were aliens and could happily see himself working on Arcadias permanently. This had been a reality check. They were aliens. Their methods of working were different; they had values distinct from humans. It made him realise that he didn't really understand turians… But he would have welcomed the chance to try. There was still so much he could learn from them. He so wanted to be welcomed – to be a part of the team. To regain everything he'd lost...

The evening of the fifth day brought its own little brand of hell. The day had passed without incident and his shift was almost over when a young artificer approached him announcing the flux compression generator had to be realigned. As the senior officer on duty, Kenneth ushered him to the work hatch at the far end of the Core Monitor. He turned the power off to that compression conduit and opened the hatch. Several conductive metallic doughnut shaped tori were stacked vertically in the conduit. There were four identical compression generators like this one surrounding the drive core; each used to create an electromagnetic pulse that boosted the power output of the core in times of emergency. One torus had shifted position and was now askew.

"Monitor the energy flow – Redirect any power surges through the adjacent conduit," he told the artificer. The turian nodded and faced the command touchscreen that was set into the wall.

Reaching into the hatch, Kenneth unlocked the misaligned torus from its stack and removed the component, turning it over in his hands. It looked like a simple fix. Kenneth ran his dipole spanner over its frame, recalibrating the torus' induction field. Finally satisfied, he placed it back into the middle of the stack, then began to lock it down. "Alright, give it a little while to stabilize and we can turn the flow back on."

The turian nodded and powered up the compression generator, with Kenneth's arm still in the machine.

"Not yet!" Kenneth warned.

But the crewman turned the power on.

Kenneth cried out in pain as energy flashed through the conduit. The stack instantly compressed as the electromagnetic forces took hold. A sudden pulse of heat surged through the tori, searing his skin and zapping his omni-tool. He wrenched his arm free. A ten-centimetre burn had charred his uniform and scorched his forearm, leaving the skin puckered and raw. He clutched the wound with his free hand, trying to stem the fresh blood seeping between his fingers.
The turian quickly shut off the power and raised his arms apologetically. "Sorry, sir. My translator glitched. I misunderstood what you were saying," he declared poker-faced. Kenneth glared at him, desperately wanting to cuff the incompetent pillock across what passed for his ears. "Won't happen again, sir." The turian promised, his eyes flicking down to the wound on Kenneth's forearm. "That looks painful… I'd get that seen to if I were you, sir," was the helpful advice.

Biting back his retort, Kenneth turned his back on the crewman and trudged up the stairs to the second-tier.

He was half-way across the room when the Engine Room doors opened and the cadets returning from Niacal filed into the room, closely followed by Leptis and Bron. They all looked dishevelled; sweat was dripping freely down their bodies and their clothes were saturated with moisture. Despite their exhaustion, the cadets parted like the Red Sea as Kenneth advanced. Djamil cast a tired eye over Donnelly and his expression instantly changed to one of concern. He approached the wounded human.

"Donnelly. What happened?" he asked.

"Accident," Kenneth replied gravely, still clutching his arm.

Djamil's eyes narrowed. He stared at the grinning crewman hovering behind Kenneth and his mind quickly put two-and-two together. He nodded in understanding.

"Go get that cleaned up," he said, nudging Kenneth gently on the shoulder.

Wordlessly, Kenneth exited engineering and made his way towards D-Deck. He was halfway along the hallway when the voice of Leptis loudly berating the crewman echoed down the corridor.

This wasn't how he imagined working on a turian ship was going to be. He thought he'd be part of a team, but hadn't felt so alone in his life. The isolation was weighing heavily on him. There hadn't been any connection with Gellix for the last few days. According to the Arcadias comm-officers, weather conditions were disrupting communications on the planet. He wasn't sure how that worked in this day-and-age, and part of him wondered if that was just an excuse. Maybe they were deliberately restricting his calls as punishment?

He had tried to send a message to Valni, without success. All contact between him and the Seventh Fleet had been restricted; censored. Not that he would have known what to say to her: 'Hey there, remember me? Sorry for ruining your career, do you wanna meet up sometime?'

You deserve this, he decided. All of it.

Kenneth entered the Infirmary to see Dacian Tesserius stood in-front of his desk with his back to the door; the tall doctor speaking briskly into his intercom:

"... As soon as the files arrive. Maven T'Zaano promised full access their medical records. I'd like to give the Niacal team a full check-up once they're off-world. Don't want any nasty surprises from the surface affecting the crew."

"I'll bring it to you personally, sir," a voice replied.

Dacian switched off the intercom and turned to face the newcomer at his door. Kenneth was so used to the hostile reception from the crew that he half expected a cold rebuke from the doctor. Instead, Dacian stepped forward and examined the burn on Kenneth's forearm.

"Looks bad," he observed. "Take a seat." He motioned for Kenneth to sit on the examination bed.
Dacian sat opposite him and reached for a pair of trauma shears. "Industrial accident was it?" the doctor queried as he carefully cut away the sleeve of Kenneth's uniform. His damaged omni-tool came off next. Kenneth merely inclined his head slightly. "So… I don't suppose you want to tell me how it really happened?"

Kenneth didn't quite meet the doctor's gaze and remained silent.

Dacian reached for the infamous gauze from the sterile equipment table and applied it to the human's arm. Kenneth didn't react. Even the pain of that strange antiseptic felt numb to him now. He embraced the burning sensation like an old friend, deciding it was little more than he deserved and almost regretted the fact it didn't hurt more. He looked up vaguely at the doctor; from his expression he thought for a moment that the turian almost looked… disappointed.

Having cleaned his arm, Dacian applied a square bandage to the wound and then moved back to sit behind his desk.

"So, how are you, Donnelly? I don't mean physically."

Kenneth decided the truth was the best answer; he was sick of hiding his feelings. "Like refried shit," he replied grimly. "Like someone ripped my heart out and stuffed a lump of tainted eezo in there."

"Well, I'm not sure I have a remedy for that," Dacian chuckled.

"If I screw up on an Alliance ship, I only have myself to blame. The punishment is mine to endure. I can handle that. But here… knowing that I've jeopardised someone else's career; that the consequences have affected someone I care deeply about…" Kenneth shook his head in resignation. "I've let Valni down badly, and I'm not sure I can live with that."

The doctor's eyes widened in concern. "Donnelly, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that it would have been better if I'd never been selected for this Programme," Kenneth said firmly. "That Valni would probably have been happier if she'd never met me… And that I hadn't l…" He stopped and stared down at his hands. "That I hadn't… liked her so much."

"That sounds serious," the doctor observed.

Kenneth gave a dull nod. "And now she's God-knows where in the Galaxy, removed from all her friends, and her career has taken a step backwards… All because of me."

Dacian silently regarded the human for a long moment. "Perhaps," he conceded. "But, believe it or not, this may be the best thing that's happened to her. She's with the Seventh Fleet, Donnelly. On the frontlines. The chances for promotion are much better there. I should know, the Vistaffia was my old ship. So, I called in a few favours from my old CO Captain Miklaius to help her out. Yes, her career has taken a step back, but it's nothing she won't recover from. She'll still have a detachment under her command. Before you know it she'll be making Commander. Maybe even captaining her own vessel. She can do it. She has that fire inside her."

"Oh, aye," Kenneth agreed vehemently, "that she does."

Dacian grimaced, as if trying to expel a bad taste from his mouth. "It's probably for the best, Donnelly. I don't think you would have made her happy. She would have needed a lifetime of antihistamines and medication if you'd stayed together. Her career would have suffered because of her condition. Maybe it's healthier to forget about her – Move on with your life. And in the future, perhaps just stick to your own kind."
Kenneth tensed at the phrase. "My own kind?" he asked.

"Or an asari, if your tastes go that way." The doctor smiled knowingly. "It's not like I haven't seen this before: You wouldn't be the first alien to find our women attractive."

Kenneth's hands curled involuntarily. He couldn't believe he was hearing this. "You think I have a turian fetish?"

"I try not to judge," Dacian said, not unkindly. "We all have our kinks. And I'm more than willing to tolerate them. But I have to put the welfare of the crew first. I've recommended to the Captain that until the end of the Programme all your shifts are with male crew members only." A thought occurred to him. "Unless your proclivities extend beyond females?"

"I do not have a fetish," Kenneth said through gritted teeth, struggling to keep his temper under control. "Valni made the first move; she initiated everything. I was only interested in her. It was a mutual attraction!"

"Well, she's a confused individual, and it's my job to look out for her. If you still have these appetites there are plenty of professionals willing to indulge you."

"It wasna like that!" Kenneth exploded, storming to his feet. "Our relationship was no-one else's concern!"

"Your relationship?!" the doctor exclaimed, all friendliness vanishing from his face. "It wasn't a relationship, it was a tryst! An affair which you initiated. And I will not have my officers violated or their proficiency reduced – Especially not by some over-amorous alien with a penchant for turians!"

This was too much. He couldn't let the memory of their time together be sullied like this. After all the abuse he'd suffered over the last few days Kenneth was ready to hit someone and the doctor was right in his firing line.

"You're talking bullshit! That's not how it was. Valni isna some random fling. She's important! And I dinna care who you are, no-one talks about her like that. If you think you're turian enough we can settle this in the ring."

"Donnelly!" The turian surged from his desk, mandibles flaring. "While you serve on this ship I am your superior officer. You will respect the chain of command."

"With all due respect, sir, bite me!"

"How dare you! How dare you lure one of my crew into your sick alien fantasy!"

"Tell me, ya scunner: Do you just despise aliens or is it the fact Valni chose one that winds you up?"

The doctor strode forward, closing the gap between them in a heartbeat, and towered above the human. Kenneth stood his ground, staring up defiantly at his accuser.

"You disgust me!" Dacian spat, venom dripping from every syllable. "It's enough that we're allies, we shouldn't have to mix any further. Your kind does nothing but spread disease and triggers anaphylaxis. And I'm the one who has to treat the effects of your depraved actions. I couldn't let it continue."

"Couldn't let it continue?" Kenneth repeated; his mind racing. "Did you even treat her allergy?"

"Don't question my abilities! I remedied her symptoms the first time she visited me. But when you
came in I realised it was only a matter of time before you started pawing at her again."

The meaning of his words hit Kenneth like a slap in the face. "You put something in those injections!"

"It exacerbates the symptoms," Dacian said almost proudly. "She was in no real danger under my care. But she responded a little too well to the treatment. I had to separate the pair of you – make sure there was a reason for the transfer! You won't debase her anymore by dragging her into this perversion!"

"YOU BASTARD!"

"She deserves better than you, human. I was protecting her!"

"Sir?" The sound made them both turn. An ensign was hovering in the doorway, a look of confusion on his face and a pad in hand. How long had he been there?

"What is it?" Dacian barked.

The ensign saluted. "Case files from Maven T'Zaano," he announced holding out the pad.

"On my desk," the doctor snapped. He glared down at Kenneth. "Get out of my lab, human."

The human didn't move. He was still staring at Dacian in a state of shock. "She trusted you. How the hell could you do this?"

"Her trust was well placed. My actions probably saved her career. And kept her safe from the likes of you. Now get out!"

Kenneth was surprised to find that he was actually shaking with rage. He swallowed, realising he couldn't win this battle just yet. "This isnae over, Dacian," Kenneth stated hotly. "I promise you. Not by a long shot. You better watch your back!" he added and stomped towards the door. Unconcerned, the doctor went back to his desk and took the pad from the ensign.

"I know what's best for her," he called out as the human reached the door. Kenneth stopped and wheeled around.

"And I know that your life's gonna serve as a warning to others! I've met varren with better morals than you, doctor! You've got yer head so far up yer own arse you could examine the contents of your own gizzard ya swick, mawkit FU-GITBLOODYGOBSHITEBASTIRT!"

Kenneth stormed out. The delivery had been made with such passion that the doctor didn't need a translation; he bristled with rage, singularly failing to come up with a retort.

There was a loud crack. Dacian glanced across at the ensign who was staring at the doctor's hand. Looking down, Tesserius realised he'd snapped the pad between his fingers.

"Shall I get another pad, doctor?" the ensign enquired.

The expression on Dacian's face could have melted ice.

The doctor had dominated Kenneth's thoughts all evening. His first instinct was to report Dacian's actions to the Captain, but he was conflicted. He had no idea who else he could trust now. Was this part of a larger scheme? Was it political, to discredit the Alliance? The Captain had seemed eager to
get rid of Valni, as far as Kenneth knew Verress might have been part of the plan. Kenneth couldn't risk dragging anyone else into this until he knew what was going on.

He was still brainstorming ways to punish the doctor when he went for the evening meal. The Mess fell silent as he strode into the hall, every face turning towards him. It would have been so much easier to have taken his food in his cabin. But he was stubborn; he'd be damned if he was going to allow anyone the satisfaction of knowing he was intimidated.

Kenneth took a tray and retrieved his food from the separate levo-amino cubicle, checking it briefly for signs of tampering.

"Donnelly!" a voice called out to him. Kenneth tensed, expecting another round of insults. He turned around. Djamil and Antoni were sitting at a table along with half-a-dozen other officers. "Would you like to join us?" Antoni offered.

Kenneth's eyebrows rose in surprise. He scanned the table's occupants as he approached: They were mainly senior staff; none that had insulted him outright in the past, including crewmen Granus and Jorrin, who he noticed were now holding hands on the table for some reason. They were artificers. All except one. There was one out of place. It was the ensign who'd delivered the doctor's pad. He raised his drink to Donnelly in salute. Kenneth sat down in the offered seat.

"How's the arm?" Antoni asked, noticing the bandage.

"Sore," Kenneth replied quietly. Leptis shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

Antoni leaned forward. "Have you heard from Valni at all?" he enquired. Kenneth shook his head. "I have," Antoni continued. "Received a message from her this morning. She asked after you. At the time I didn't know how to word a reply. She's doing well; settling in with the crew; being given extra responsibilities."

Kenneth gave a dull nod. "That's good. I'm glad she's happy."

"I wouldn't say she was happy. But she's doing well."

Kenneth looked back at his plate. "Any… Any news on where she is?" he asked hopefully. Maybe, just maybe, if she forgave him they could meet up on the Citadel; maybe talk this through…

Antoni's expression was strained. "I'm not sure exactly… last I heard the Vistoffia was heading towards the Hades Nexus." Kenneth's resolve seemed to wither. That bastard Dacian really was thorough.

Djamil cleared his throat. "Listen, Donnelly, sorry about everything that's been happening recently. It's… been really hard on all of us to lose her."

"I'm not a man to hold a grudge. I blamed myself as much as anyone else."

"Not anymore though." Antoni said, indicating the Ensign sitting next to Kenneth. "Word's got around…"

Kenneth glanced around the mess. Some of the officers on the other tables were watching him; they too raised a glass in salute as he looked up. Others nodded at him or leaned in to whisper to one another. Some looked embarrassed. A few simply refused to look at him or still regarded him with an air of suspicion. However, none of them held the openly hostile expressions he'd become so used to.
He hadn't noticed it when he'd walked in, but the atmosphere in the Mess had changed.

"At least I can reply to Valni with some positive news," Antoni stated.

Kenneth nodded. "Aye, I'd appreciate that."

"And, when she's ready, I can relay a few messages you might have…" the turian offered. Kenneth held his breath, hardly daring to believe Valni might want to speak to him again. He nodded hesitantly. "Give her time, though," Antoni suggested. "Maybe once we've got to the bottom of the good doctor's part in all this? And I think Dacian's position in the crew is about to become very uncomfortable."

Kenneth let out the breath he'd been holding. There was still hope; still a chance he'd be able to contact her. And he had allies now…

Antoni smiled and leaned back in his chair. "So, Kenneth," he began, "tell us about Scotland."

Kenneth ventured his first tentative smile in days. At last, something he could enthuse about.

"Engineer Donnelly: Report to the Command Centre immediately."

His cabin intercom blinked off, not giving him a chance to reply. Kenneth switched off his computer monitor and rose from his desk. He knew the peace couldn't last. The doctor had probably reported their little disagreement to the Captain. But that had been over three-hours ago. Frankly, he was surprised it had taken so long.

He sighed. It was time to face the music. How serious were the Captain's threats anyway? Kenneth didn't exactly relish the prospect of being beaten to death with Wee Jock!

Arriving in the corridor to the Command Centre, Kenneth marched up to the entrance. The doors slid apart and he strode into the room.

The Captain was standing before the main holo-display, her back towards the door. The CIC was packed with the senior duty staff. Many were waiting patiently for Verress to address them while others talked animatedly over the holo-display. Kenneth's first impression was that it looked ominously like a war summit; a gabble of different conversations assualted his senses:

"Can we rule out batarian involvement?"

"…Assistance needed…"

"…Closest vessel…"

"…Tried to contact the Vistoffia?"

"…Not sure on numbers…"

"…The Indomitable is en-route."

"…Won't know until they're in range…"

But Kenneth's attention wasn't on the group. The imposing form of Dacian stood a little away from the holo-display. Kenneth locked eyes with the doctor, an expression of undisguised hatred burnt into the turian's face. He held him in check for a moment until, with a small snort, Dacian turned his hostile gaze away, as if it was too much effort to acknowledge the human's presence. Two armed
security officers were standing next to him, one on either side. It took a few moments for Kenneth to register the fact that Dacian was being flanked by the guards.

*What is going on?*

Kenneth took a deep breath. "Captain," he said, saluting smartly.

All conversation ceased. The Captain turned and regarded him dispassionately. "Donnelly. You're late," she said gruffly, she was never one for pleasantries. "At ease. Something wrong?" She must have noticed Kenneth's expression.

"No, sir," he replied, his eyes flicking to the doctor. "I was hoping for the opportunity to face my accuser, sir."

The Captain gave Dacian a sidelong glance. "He isn't your accuser, Donnelly," she replied cryptically.

"The *Indomitable* will be in range shortly, ma'am," one of the staff announced.

"How long?" Verress asked the officer.

"About fifteen minutes."

"Enough time to resolve this," she said brusquely. Verress quietly scrutinized Kenneth, glancing down at the red stained bandage on the human's arm. "You're bleeding. Haven't you applied any medi-gel to that, Donnelly?"

"I was told we didn't have any levo-amino medi-gel on board, sir."

Verress shook her head. "Who told you that?" she asked.

For a moment Kenneth didn't move, then, slowly, he dragged his eyes across to meet the doctor's gaze. Dacian returned a little self-satisfied smile. Kenneth let out a breath and shook his head at his own foolishness.

*All that pain he put me through. He was playing me right from the bloody start!*

"An allegation has come to my attention, Tesserius" the Captain said turning her attention back to Dacian. "It's been suggested you were injecting Officer Severan with an unauthorized chemical that adversely affected her health." Kenneth steeled himself to fight his corner. This was going to be his word against Dacian's. "Is this true, doctor?"

"Yes, Captain," Dacian replied calmly.

Kenneth stared open-mouthed. He never expected the doctor to admit it so willingly. It wasn't until later he learned that even turians accused of murder would readily admit to their crimes – The turian code of conduct taught them to own *all* their actions, good or bad.

"It was for the good of the Fleet, ma'am," Dacian continued. "Officer Severan was wasted here. With her skills she should be on the frontlines; not teaching wet-nose cadets barely old enough to be citizens."

"That was never your call to make, *doctor!*" Verress snapped, livid that her authority had been usurped.

"With all due respect, Captain, it wasn't being made by anyone else!" he fired back, staring pointedly
at Verress. "We have a responsibility to ensure all our officer's skills are correctly applied in the appropriate areas – Not to let those skills go to waste. And certainly not letting them fall into the arms of an enemy alien."

"Former enemy, doctor," Verress corrected him. "The Alliance, for better or worse, is our ally. You would do well to remember that."

"Their liaison was an affront to everything the Hierarchy stands for. The human was just using her!"

"Lying scunner!" Kenneth replied furiously.

Verress ignored Dacian and turned to Kenneth. "It would seem your involvement in Officer Severan's illness has been greatly exaggerated, Donnelly. I'm ashamed to see one of my own officers conspiring to supersede my orders. The Hierarchy and Alliance will be informed of this. Your blame in this matter appears to be minimal."

Kenneth felt a surge of hope. This could still be resolved in Valni's favour.

"Then, you can reverse your decision, Captain? Recall Valni back to Arcadias?"

Verress shook her head. "That is no longer within my authority. I took responsibility for Severan's actions. As her superior, the onus and consequences for her decisions were passed to me, not to her. As it should be." The Captain's expression changed as her mind made a connection. She turned to the doctor. "And you knew that," she accused Dacian. "No, you counted on that!"

Dacian inclined his head respectfully. "Your predictable overprotectiveness towards the crew is one of your more admirable virtues, ma'am. I had confidence Officer Severan's career would not suffer unduly. She will go on to make a significant contribution to the Fleet, I'm sure. Quite honestly Captain, if you weren't so willing to throw yourself on your sword every time one of your officers made an error of judgement you'd be a general by now, sir."

"You can be sure I won't make the same mistake with you!" Verress countered. "I imagine you think yourself very clever? Injecting a toxic substance into my Combat Specialist. Making me believe a visiting human was the reason for her condition. An ingenious strategy."

Dacian smiled and shook his head. "No, Captain. Officer Severan was already mildly allergic to Donnelly, the injections were merely to suppress her adaptive immune system. The real ingenuity was in the somatic hypermutation cream I supplied to her."

"What?" The Captain's voice was now dangerously quiet.

"It was astonishingly easy to grow cultures of Donnelly's cells in the lab and then integrate them with a DNA polymerase enzyme. It's a common treatment to relieve chronic hives, but it always takes a few days for the body's receptor genes to adapt to the new antigen. I simply reversed the process; engineered a suitable pathogen from his cells, suppressed her lymphocytes, and made her hypersensitive to Donnelly's body chemistry. Just his chemistry!" The pride in his voice at his accomplishment staggered Kenneth. The man was actually boasting about it! Dacian turned to the human. "And the concentrated dose I gave her is more than enough to ensure you'll never be able to touch her again!"

"BASTARD ARSEHOLE!" Kenneth exploded, taking three running steps at Dacian before security dashed forward to restrain him.

Verress didn't rebuke his outburst. She seemed to be frozen, her eyes fixed on her ship's doctor in incredulous rage.
"Check his records, Tobestik," she ordered the young officer standing beside to her. "Override his command codes. Verify his claims." The officer nodded and quickly accessed the doctor's medical files from the CIC console. "If you wanted to separate them why target Severan, doctor? Why not Donnelly?" Verress demanded. "He was only going to be here for a few weeks."

"My expertise is in turian physiology, sir. Not humans. I briefly toyed with the idea of infecting Donnelly but couldn't risk the possibility of killing an Alliance crewman on Arcadias. Besides, that wouldn't be enough to send Officer Severan to the front-line."

"Yes, and you were the one who advised Severan's reassignment," Verress pointed out, her anger now barely controlled. "You seemed quite intent on expelling her from this ship. Were you working with Officer Trajan?"

For once Dacian looked shocked. "Trajan?" he asked in disgust. "You couldn't offer me the role of Primarch to work with him! My relationship with that officer has been limited solely to the treatment of his STIs! Trajan is detrimental to the smooth running of this ship and her crew. All he thinks about is sleeping with the cadets. And I've had to treat more than a few of them for the same infections as him. He's a disgrace to the uniform, Captain!" It was the first time Dacian had shown anger, as if the very idea of someone else affecting the crew's health was offensive to him. *Bloody hypocrite*, Kenneth silently accused. Then Dacian's expression softened and he glanced away from the Captain's scowl. "Though I confess, I was worried when Officer Severan challenged Trajan to that fight. I feared in her weakened state he may do her serious harm."

"How touching you suddenly find a conscience."

"My first duty has always been to the crew's health, ma'am!"

"Don't you dare try to paint your actions as noble. You were poisoning a member of my crew!"

"I prevented a young officer from making a terrible error of judgement, and helped strengthen our front-line forces! You should be thanking me!"

"Thank you?!" Verres snapped, slamming her fist down on the holo-display. "I should be lining you up in-front of a wall to be shot! You went over my head, doctor. You broke the chain of command and disrupted the efficiency of Arcadias. Your warped sense of duty has no place on my ship!"

There was a terrible silence in the room, punctuated by the Captain trying to calm her breathing. The young officer, Tobestik, looked up from his console.

"The doctor's claims are accurate, sir," Tobestik confirmed. "He documented all his results and catalogued the progression of the hypermutation cream on Officer Severan's physiology."

"Of course I did," Dacian said smugly.

"Hypermutation creams are extremely powerful, Captain," Tobestik added. "They're a last resort remedy. The effects are specifically designed to be permanent."

The Captain directed her attention towards Kenneth. "Then this only leaves the question of you, Donnelly. Is it still your intention to resume your relationship with Severan?"

"Only if Valni wants to," he replied. "And as long as no-one else sticks their claws into our business!"

"In light of this new evidence, there is serious cause for concern. If her health should suffer from further contact with you…"
"Oh, it will," Dacian interrupted. "I was very thorough!"

"One more outburst from you, doctor, and I will personally shoot you!" Verress growled in a low voice. "Should her health suffer, her position in the Hierarchy will be called into question. She will almost certainly lose rank and privilege – be invalided out of the armed services.

"She is still free to pursue a relationship with you, Donnelly, should she wish, but it will likely cost her dearly. I no longer have any say in the decision. If you both feel that is a price you are willing to pay, then the choice is yours to make."

For a moment, Kenneth's hope and joy eclipsed all other sensations. He was filled with excitement – there was still a chance to see Valni again. Then, slowly, the Captain's words filtered through to his brain. The memory of Valni's enticing smile flooded his head. She had so much strength and vitality, but if he tried to see her again that vitality might be lost. He closed his eyes and recalled seeing her in that infirmary bed; IV lines and monitors taped to her body. Is that what would happen if he continued seeing her? Is that what the consequences would be? Would she become an invalid, confined to a medical bay and strapped up to life-support machines while her immune system violently reacted to his body chemistry?

He'd had such high hopes for their future together. He'd even pictured living with her in an apartment on the Citadel. But now…

Kenneth tried to imagine what her life would be like. He pictured her health deteriorating, the light in her eyes fading. Everything that he loved about her, everything that she was: a skilled fighter; a respected officer; a beloved teacher; a spirited lover, all that would be extinguished – snuffed out by his selfish desire to be with her. He remembered her description of the look of joy on her father's face when she'd enlisted; recalled the pride in her voice at being able to join the Turian Fleet. It was her whole life; a life he'd be taking away. How would she feel about that? How would her father feel? He wouldn't be doing her any justice. That enticing smile would soon fade…

*And how would you live with yourself, Ken?* he asked himself. *How would you feel watching her deteriorate day-by-day and knowing you were responsible?*

She would become an invalid civilian – would she be happy with that? Hell, no! And he'd be the one responsible for taking that happiness away from her. He couldn't do that.

The choice, it seemed, was simple: it was either her or her career…

A cold inevitability settled in his gut as he realised what he had to do.

Kenneth eventually opened his eyes and raised his voice. "I…" The words seemed to stick in his mouth. "I…won't… try to contact her." He almost retched as the sentence came out.

Dacian Tesserius grinned in triumph – the expression was not attractive.

Kenneth wanted to punch him, hurt him, drive his fist into the man's face until his carapace smashed, but the anger wouldn't come. He suddenly felt numb; empty. Like every sensation, all emotion had been ruthlessly stripped from him. He was a hollow shell. He closed his eyes, trying desperately to recall Valni's bright smile, the memory of her warm embrace, the sweet sound of her voice. But there wasn't the familiar pleasure in recalling her face now, only an icy numbness. Instead of joy in her memory, there was now merely regret. And grief at the loss of what could have been. Something snapped inside.

*This is all your fault, Ken,* he accused. *Because you took it too fast! If you'd taken your time, if you
haidn't been so eager to sleep with her this would never have happened!

Kenneth bowed his head and silently vowed to never rush into another relationship. He couldn't risk letting the same thing happen again – Not if meant losing someone so dear to him; someone he really cared about. Not if it meant feeling like this …

The Captain turned back to the treacherous doctor. "You've left me in an untenable position – Especially considering what we're now facing – How am I supposed to trust anything you do or say? Effective immediately, the auxiliary medical staff will assume all your duties and you will remain in the brig until we can send you back to Palaven to answer for your actions."

Dacian accepted the judgement with his usual calm demeanour, as if he'd just been ordered to write-up a patient's medical files. He bowed to Verress. "My duty, first and foremost, has been to serve the Hierarchy and protect the crew, Captain. Given the opportunity, I would do exactly the same thing again."

The Captain's anger finally broke. "Get him out of my sight!" she raged.

The two guards saluted and escorted Dacian from the room. Dacian held himself proudly as he passed through the open doors. Kenneth watched him leave then hung his head. This in no way felt like a victory. Valni's face kept dancing in his mind's eye. He was still so lost in his own memories that it took him a moment to notice the Captain was talking to him; her voice seemingly growing louder in his head.

"… Assured the Alliance will be given all the facts to this case. It's bad enough to face that without our present crisis hanging over us. But you needn't concern yourself further with Tesserius, Donnelly. That isn't why you're here."

"No sir?" Kenneth replied mechanically, barely acknowledging anyone else's presence.

"I have some grave news," Verress continued solemnly, "We've received a distress call from the engineering team on Gellix." Kenneth baulked; that got his attention. "There's garbled reports of an attack, although we don't know all the details. Regrettably our communications are being disrupted. We've been able to confirm multiple casualties; some fatalities. Donnelly… D'Ceni, Vettiill and Daniels are listed as MIA. We're en-route now. You might want to prepare yourself for the worst."

Kenneth's blood ran cold. The Captain's words had cut him to the core. Gellix was a routine assignment. How could this be happening? First he'd lost Valni and now… The breath caught in his throat. His mind reeled. For a moment he thought his legs might actually give way. Kenneth opened his mouth and spluttered the first word that flashed into his head:

"Gabby!"
Gabby's curled fists felt like blocks of ice. Her hands shook; her teeth rattled, and her whole body was shaking uncontrollably. She opened her eyes to get an idea of where she was; it didn't seem to do any good. Darkness surrounded her. There were no lights or shadows, no contrast to the all-encompassing black shroud. For a moment, she was afraid she'd gone blind. Slowly, her other senses took up the slack. She could feel something covering her; a coarse fabric pressed down on her front and around her body, making her back itch – *A blanket of some kind?*

The ground was uncomfortable beneath her (at least she now knew she was lying down). She shifted position slightly and a jagged pain flared in her side. She cried out; the raw shout echoing in the dark. She could feel something pulling around her abdomen. Something was wrapped around her chest, beneath her clothing. Her breathing was laboured in the chill air. A sharp pain dug into her ribs.

Are they broken?

Gingerly, she moved her hand across her torso to check. She could feel under-garments: thermal leggings, a thin shirt. There were holes in the garments. Patches of her shirt had been torn away while the edges of other holes felt smooth, like they'd been burnt. Confusion engulfed her mind; she was too groggy from the cold to remember what had happened.

Something else stirred beneath the blanket. She could hear a faint rustling coming from her right. Suddenly wary, Gabby snuck a tentative hand across the cold ground sheet. It had barely left her side when her hand brushed against an arm wrapped in fabric. She moved her hand down, along the material until her fingers touched the bare skin of someone lying next to her. The skin was scaled and ridged under her fingers, yet supple to touch. She recognised it as a carapace – It was the exposed hand of a turian.

Gabby exhaled sharply and remained still.

Unbidden, it all came flooding back to her – All the memories of the attack whirléd around her head; the shouts and confusion; the harsh chatter of gunfire; the snow stained blue with blood; the awful shrieks of pain… She suddenly remembered where she was, what this place was. She was imprisoned; confined! There was no way out and no way of contacting the ship or anyone left alive on Gellix. She had a moment of panic as the crushing feeling of claustrophobia threatened to chase away all reason from her mind. She had no clue what time it was; no idea how many hours or days had passed. It felt like she'd been here for weeks, although, as her mind calmed, she realised it had probably only been a few hours.

Gabby shut her eyes tight and, despite the stabbing flare of pain, turned over on her side. She drew
her legs up and curled instinctively into a protective foetal position. The feeling of seclusion almost overwhelmed her and, for the first time since she was fourteen, she silently prayed.

*Oh God, please don't let me die here! Let me see the sun again.*

She recited the Traveller's Prayer in the hope of quashing the unrelenting sounds in her head. She didn't want to remember. She didn't want to be here in the confinement of this freezing prison. There was glorious, wonderful heat back on *Arcadias*. She wanted to see her family again – She wanted to see her parents. And Kenneth's stupid, smug grin; or the friendly face of Officer Severan, and also…

She retreated into herself, her mind seeking out happier memories; from a time before the attack, before the bitter chill of Gellix. She mentally sought out the warmth of *Arcadias*, when she was back amongst friends, before she'd become trapped in this frozen hell…

*Shuttle Bay Two, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 07:30 Zulu – 1st February 2183 CE*

Gabby watched the *Arcadias* cadets hover around the visiting asari as she struggled to get to the shuttle, while two of the cadets were arguing like errant children over who should carry her bags. Gabby shook her head at the absurdity of it all. *No matter the species, men never change, do they?* The crew Commander Joric had assembled for the mission to Gellix seemed to have come from several different turian ships and, Gabby noticed, a few of the male passengers in the shuttle suddenly perked up when they spied Erata approaching.

If there was one thing she had learned over the past couple of days, it was that turians were just as interested in asari as some humans were. *Strange really considering they look nothing like turians,* she observed. Physically asari were closer to humans, but despite the passing likeness Gabby always felt slightly uncomfortable being near them. She never knew what to say to an asari. They were always so poised, so glamorous and self-assured that Gabby felt distinctly plain and dowdy in their company. During shore-leave, whenever she was at some trendy bar on the Citadel trying to fit in with the stunningly exotic women around her, she always felt like an outsider. It was like being in a clique in high school. At least the *Arcadias* engineer – Pella – had been friendly. They'd hardly worked together at all over the last week, but after speaking to each other in the CIC had hit it off immediately, mostly, it appeared, because the turian seemed as apprehensive about the coming assignment as Gabby was.

Kenneth, on the other hand, was being typically puerile. He hadn't appeared to show much interest in the asari (which she found surprising), but Gabby was so preoccupied with the mission that she was only half-listening to his verbal diarrhoea.

"Safe journey, Engineer," Kenneth said behind her, "be sure to wrap up warm, it's gonna be cold down there. Do you have thermal underwear?"

Gabby turned to face him. "Like I'm gonna tell you what underwear I'm wearing."

"Well, if you won't indulge me, at least give a call when you get there. You will remember to write, won't you?"

"Kenneth…"

"And play nice with the other kids. I don't want to hear from their parents while you're away."

This was exactly what she expected from him: *typical juvenile behaviour!* He could never take anything seriously.
"You are such a dick!" she spat with disdain.

"I'm merely playing to the crowd." Gabby turned to get on the shuttle but was held up as Kenneth suddenly grabbed her arm. She was half-tempted to turn and yell in his face, but stopped when she saw his sombre and earnest expression. "In all seriousness, Gabby, be safe. Just… Take care of yourself. I don't know how I'm gonna cope without you..."

Gabby blinked. She was a little taken aback by his display of genuine concern. This wasn't like him at all. "Don't worry, Kenneth, I'll be back before you know it."

"And try to get friendly with Erata – I think she likes you..."

_That_ was more like him. Gabby punched Kenneth on the arm with as much force as she could muster. "Ass!" she spat, then turned and stomped onto the shuttle.

Pella had been watching the pair's odd exchange and looked up as Gabby approached, a knowing smirk spreading across her face. "Trouble in paradise?" she asked.

"We are _not_ a couple," Gabby hissed as she stowed her bag below the tilt seats lining the shuttle's inner hull. "Kenneth only wanted to know what kind of underwear I'm wearing. He's a motor-mouthed chowdahead at the best of times; I couldn't be dealing with him as my other half. And it's not like he thinks of me _that_ way."

Pella stole a glance at the human standing in the shuttle bay. "I don't know, he seems to care a great deal for you."

"You should get your eyes checked," Gabby muttered, taking her seat next to Pella. "Trust me; the only thing he's interested in is whether or not I've seen Erata naked in the shower room." They both turned to watch Kenneth wave them off. "I bet you even money he asks me to record something."

"Be sure to take pictures!" Kenneth yelled cheerfully.

"There we go," Gabby muttered as the closing doors obscured him from view.

The shuttle's passengers swayed in their seats as the vehicle lifted from its rails and accelerated out into the cold depths of space. Gabby turned and peered out of the small viewing window, watching _Arcadias_ shrink in size as the shuttle powered away. She'd hadn't seen the alien cruiser from the outside when they'd first arrived (she'd been too busy arguing with Kenneth), and now savoured the exterior view of the turian designed vessel. The ship was elegantly simple: interlocking leaves of gleaming white armour plate covered a long, cylindrical-like hull housing the main gun in its bow; powerful thrusters jutted out like turian horns at the stern, while heavily armed variable geometry 'wings' could be unfurled on either side of the ship during combat. The ship's design resembled the turians to a degree, and Gabby couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness as _Arcadias_ dwindled to a mere speck against the black horizon. She wasn't certain if the feeling of sadness was because she was going to miss working on the ship, or miss working with Kenneth...

_Arcadias_ was finally hidden by red flames as the shuttle hit the upper atmosphere of Gellix. The shuttle bucked in the turbulent air. Gabby turned away from the viewing port to see Commander Joric, her earnest expression framed by stark white colony markings against a dark brown carapace, standing at the front of the cabin to address her new crew.

"How many of you have worked on an alien world before?"

Everyone raised their hands.
"How many have worked for prolonged periods in sub-zero conditions?"

Only Gabby and Erata kept their hands up.

"I see most of you are in for a shock, then!" Joric stated without humour. "It's no surprise the asari and the human are the only ones with any experience in this matter." 'The human?' Gabby repeated silently. She could tell immediately that this was going to be fun assignment. "Both species have similar ecosystems on their own planets, so the conditions will be familiar to them," Joric continued. "The Hierarchy does not actively encourage prolonged work in the environment you'll be facing. But I know you will all rise to the challenge and accomplish everything expected of you. That is assuming you follow all my orders to the letter. You'll be living practically on top of each other; getting to know each other's habits, so some tension is inevitable. However, as long as I have your complete obedience during this assignment you'll be fine. But be warned, the environment on Gellix is hostile. Not simply physically, but mentally. The cold affects emotions, personalities. It impairs your judgement to the extent that you will start to hate each other.

"And that hate is very real, make no mistake. I've seen life-long friends reduced to assaulting and very nearly murdering each another in this kind of environment. Some have even succeeded. Last year, two Hierarchy scouts were convicted of involuntary manslaughter after killing their colleagues on planets similar to Gellix. I guarantee that after a few days trudging through the snow you will start to fantasize about driving your ice-axe into your comrade's head."

"Not exactly the pep-talk I was expecting, ma'am," Pella half-joked.

"I'm being honest with you, crewman. This is hazardous work, and I take the safety of my crew very seriously. There's no room for doubters or shirkers who won't pull their weight here. If you have any concerns about this assignment we can power out of the atmosphere right now and return you to Arcadias. I'm sure your captain would understand."

'Yeah, right!' Gabby thought.

"No, ma'am!" Pella said firmly. "Wouldn't dream of it, ma'am! I'm looking forward to this assignment."

"Well, you'd be the first," Joric muttered.

The shuttle descended onto the landing pad, fighting against the strong cross-wind that blew chunks of ice horizontally into the path of the craft.

Two of the Gellix ground-crew, encased in thick protective armour, crouched low as they moved out to intercept the incoming transporter. The shuttle doors opened and Gabby's world was suddenly dominated by the howl of the wind and the sharp sting of ice on her face. The snow blew around the cabin, coating everything it touched in a fine powder. Gabby pulled the fleece she'd been given tighter around her as Commander Joric led from the front, stepping out from the craft and standing resolute against the onslaught as if it was nothing more than a light breeze. Lifting her hand to protect her head, Gabby struggled out onto the planet's surface. It was only a short distance from the shuttle to the main building but she found she could hardly stand up against the wind. The other passengers reluctantly followed her out and the group made their way quickly across the open pad to the safety of the main building.

"What a wonderful climate!" Pella said with a wide grin as they made it into a small auditorium. "I must remember this place for my summer vacation!"
"Reminds me of home," Gabby moaned. "It's a freakin' wind tunnel back there, too!"

It was only marginally warmer in the auditorium. The groups settled into the room and the main doors shut automatically behind them, muffling but not completely eliminating the sound of the storm outside.

Joric was busy talking to a small detachment of her troops. "What happened to the heating?" she demanded of a shorter male underling.

"The storm may have knocked out the generator, sir," the man replied.

"Not unless the storm can rip up underground power lines," Joric countered. "Get the generators back online," She turned back to her new team as the subordinate scurried away. "This is the Anapondus Velarus headquarters, main base of operations for the turian Hierarchy on Gellix. Jerash here will show you to your billets," she announced, indicating the turian woman standing next to her. "Get settled and then familiarize yourself with the layout of the base. Your assigned squad and duties will be allocated tomorrow. We can't do much until the storm clears, so I advise you to acquaint yourself with the planet's history and read up on the local fauna. It's not just the cold you'll be coming up against. I would prefer my perfect record of zero casualties to remain unbroken and not have some incompetent crewman blunder into a nest of hungry nathak!"

With Joric's stirring words still ringing in their ears, the group were shown to their rooms. The base was surprisingly large and comfortable by turian standards, despite the freezing temperatures. Gabby's quarters was a sparsely furnished room with a large cot set against one wall. Gabby set down her kit-bags on the cot. She didn't bother to take off her coat and set about unpacking various essentials from her bag, including several pairs of thermal underwear, which she had a feeling she was going to need more than ever on this assignment.

Gellix was an odd place. It was owned (grudgingly) by the turian Hierarchy, who had gained possession of the planet following the defeat of the krogans at the end of the rebellions. But, despite being a levo-amino world and unsuitable for turian habitation, they were unwilling to part with it.

Local time was seven hours ahead of the time on Arcadias, and the planet's rotation period didn't help matters. Having a day that lasted less than 20 hours played havoc with Gabby's body clock. As far as her mind was concerned, it was zero-eight-hundred, but according to the local time, it was three in the afternoon and already nearing sunset. But, if the situation was tough for her, it was worse for the turian crew.

'Turians don't like the cold', Pella had warned Gabby the night before, and now she was finding out why. It wasn't that their bodies suffered in the cold – On the contrary, turian physiology adapted extremely well to icy conditions, in some cases even better than most humans – No, it was their psychological response that was the issue. As it turned out, 'don't like the cold' was putting it mildly. They absolutely loathed the cold! Turians got extremely ornery (for want of a better word) in chilled climates. Where most turian officers were friendly and welcoming back on Arcadias, the resident Gellix team were surly, brusque and irritable.

Gabby knew humans became cranky to icy conditions, but it was much more pronounced in turians. Within three hours of arriving, Gabby saw her first fight break out. It was between two service-men who'd already been on active duty for the last month, and whose tolerance was stretched to breaking point. One crewman had simply nudged the other accidentally with a piece of equipment as he walked past. That had been enough to start an argument; an argument that quickly descended into a brawl as simmering tensions rose to the surface.

Security quickly stepped in to break it up and the two crewmen were hauled off to the Commander
to explain their actions.

"Had to happen eventually," a Gellix officer standing nearby muttered. "Those two have been at each other's throats for days."

"Is a breakdown in discipline like that normal?" Gabby asked.

"Not usually. We have one of the best commanders in the fleet. All disputes are normally handled in the sparring ring, but just recently some of the crew have started fights without official challenges. I blame the conditions. We, umm, well... we don't like the cold."

"Yeah, I'm beginning to see that."
In the Deep End

Chapter Summary

Gabby's first assignment on Gellix is unexpectedly more dangerous than she ever expected...

Chapter Notes

Warning: contains violent scenes.

Engineer Daniels Quarters, Anapondus, Gellix – 06:00 UTC – 2nd February 2183 CE

Gabby didn't get much sleep that night. The light shining into her room through the photochromic smart glass was almost constant. Gabby tried burying her head under the duvet but that did little good. She tossed fitfully in the chilled room as she listened to the sound of the storm raging away outside. When at last the storm abated and she finally drifted off, her slumber was interrupted by a buzzing sound. After a few seconds, her brain finally registered it as a door bell. Someone was outside her room. The bell rang again, becoming more insistent. Reluctantly, she crawled out from under the duvet. The heating was still off and she pulled the bedding tightly around her shoulders as she padded towards the door, her feet swaddled in thick bed-socks, and quietly grumbled to herself, wondering who would dare disturb her at whatever-the-hell time her body was telling her it was!

Gabby punched the red lock and the door slid open. A tall female turian with a silver-grey carapace and delicate yellow colony lines on her face was standing in the doorway. She was wearing the dark blue and yellow Thermal Armour that the rest of the Gellix crew wore, and Gabby recognised her as the turian who'd shown her to her quarters yesterday.

"Morning, sleepyhead!" the woman said in a bright sing-song voice.

"Whasisnow…?" Gabby responded vaguely.

"Didn't catch many zzz's then, I guess?" the turian surmised as she took in Gabby's dishevelled appearance. "I can sympathise. So, I thought you might need a friendly wake-up call this morning. Visitors sometimes have trouble acclimatizing to the planet's rotation. The feeling of disorientation can take a while to dispel. I brought you something. Can I come in?"

Gabby ran a hand through her tousled hair. "I suppose…" She stepped back from the door and the turian flounced into the room. Now Gabby noticed she was carrying a folded orange coat lined with fur and a collapsed suit of white and blue Explorer Armour.

The turian placed the gear on Gabby's cot and turned to face her. "Survival equipment for your stay," she explained, "to help guard against the extreme conditions. I picked out the size from the measurements in your file. Hope they fit. If they don't, just let me know. I'll be happy to change them."
"What time is it?" Gabby asked.

"About an hour after midday, local time."

"What?" Gabby almost dropped her blanket in surprise. "My shift started six hours ago! Why didn't anyone wake me?"

"The base operates on Universal Co-ordinated Time, rather than the planet's local rotation. We find it much easier acclimatizing that way. Our position in the hemisphere and the axial tilt of the planet means that at this time of year we get nearly constant daylight. Night-time only lasts fifty-minutes on Gellix. It's actually only zero-six-hundred."

"Ah, only six-in-the-morning…" Gabby muttered.

"You'll feel better after something to eat," the woman declared, taking a step towards Gabby. "We didn't have a chance to talk yesterday what with all the excitement. I'm the Gellix Liaison Officer, Jerash." She thrust her arm out towards the human. Gabby tentatively held the offered hand and suddenly her entire arm was vibrating in the turian's vigorous shake. "You can call me Jeri, or 'Rash' if you'd prefer – it's what everyone calls me – I'm so thrilled to be working with a human. I read your file; you seem to come highly recommended. I'm sure you'll be an asset to the team."

"Oh, well, that's… good," Gabby replied, politely attempting to reclaim her hand.

"I know we'll have a great time working together. I'm really stoked about it!"

"You're 'stoked'?" Gabby repeated in bewilderment. She briefly wondered if there was something wrong with her translator. Turians don't talk like that, surely?

"Yes." The turian grinned toothily. "Now, Commander Joric has ordered you to report to the CIC, so I'm just gonna wake up your colleagues and then escort you across to the Command Centre. I'll leave you to get changed. Be back in ten minutes, 'kay?" The turian finally let go of Gabby's hand and was already powering towards the door. She turned back as she reached the doorway. "And by the way, since it hasn't been said yet, welcome to Gellix!" Jerash was practically bouncing with excitement.

Gabby glared at the back of the woman's head – no-one had any right to be that chipper so early in the morning!

As soon as the door closed, Gabby dumped the blanket back on the bed, then grabbed her towel and hurried down to the frigid shower rooms at the far end of the corridor. To her dismay, she discovered there was no hot water. After enduring a brief icy rinse, which most certainly woke her up, she returned to her quarters and dressed swiftly in the Explorer Armour (which, she admitted, did seem to fit perfectly), before joining Pella, who was waiting out in the corridor. The turian was dressed in the same blue and yellow Thermal Armour as Jerash, and had an all-too-familiar bleary-eyed expression. Evidently she didn't get much sleep either.

They both watched the Liaison Officer disappear into the room that Erata had been assigned. Once Jerash was out of sight, Pella leaned in to mutter in Gabby's ear. "So, you've met Little Miss Sunshine?"

"You mean the bubbly whirlwind of sunbeams and rainbows? Yeah!"

"The last time I saw enthusiasm like that a pit varren was swinging the severed spine of its latest kill around its head! Before we left Arcadias, I was warned that 'Rash' could be a bit of a handful."

The 'Rash' in question reappeared in the corridor, closely followed by Erata as she emerged from her
cabin. The asari turned and gave Gabby and Pella a dazzling smile and a friendly wave in greeting. Erata, looking effortlessly glamorous in a suit of form-fitting white and pink Phoenix Armour, led the group down the hall towards the CIC. Jerash instantly deferred to Erata, who seemed to convey a natural air of authority, which, Gabby was surprised to realise she instantly resented the asari for.

After a brief wander through the corridors, the main doors to the CIC loomed before them. The doors split open as they approached and the group marched inside. The CIC was nothing like Arcadias' Command Centre. Everything in the room was temporary. Several portable computer and monitoring stations had been placed along the walls, while a basic white-metal desk was at the far end of the room overlooked the rest of the active Centre, with Commander Joric sat behind it as she poured over reports with a subordinate. The group marched between the bustling CIC staff towards her desk.

Jerash saluted. "Sir! Artificer Vettiill and engineers D'Ceni and Daniels are here as you requested," the beaming Liaison Officer announced.

Commander Joric gave the woman a brief nod of acknowledgment and waved her away as she continued talking with her XO.

"Anything else?" Joric asked the man.

"Just one thing, sir," the officer replied. "There was an odd EM spike on the sensors this morning at zero-dark-forty – a sudden burst of radiation out by Erros."

"That's not unusual. It could be a solar-flare," Joric suggested. "Stellar radiation plays havoc with some of the older systems."

"Possibly, sir. But according to the sensors the radiation spike was actually on the surface of the planet."

"Most likely a meteor strike, then."

"Arcadias is still in the solar system. Should I contact them to verify it, sir?"

"No, they were undoubtedly monitoring the explosion; they don't need us breathing down their necks. We're supposed to be an autonomous station. I'm fairly certain Captain Verress wouldn't appreciate us jumping and running to them at every cosmological collision. If Arcadias haven't reported a problem then it's not something to worry about."

"Very well, sir." The man nodded and stepped away from the desk. Joric cast her gaze over the three engineers standing at attention before her.

"I trust you all slept well and are feeling fit for duty?" she enquired.

"Never better, ma'am!" Pella replied firmly. "I feel very refreshed."

"Went off like a light, Commander," Erata announced, "and now raring to go!"

"Like death warmed up, sir!" Gabby stated recklessly; and promptly kicked herself for speaking her mind.

Not recognising the human idiom, Joric simply nodded and picked up a pad on her desk. "Glad to hear it. The weather is due to clear for the next couple of days. We're to make every effort to complete our task while we have the chance. And I have something special planned for you three." She handed the pad over to Pella. "A little light relief, so to speak."
"What is it, ma'am?" Pella asked.

"Something to help boost morale – both at home and on the Citadel."

"Oh? Have they republished my spread in Fornax?" Erata put in with a grin. Gabby and Pella glanced at the asari – They weren't sure if she was joking.

Joric didn't smile; her disposition was as warm as the planet. "Nothing quite so laissez-faire," she assured them. "You three are to be the official face of our little endeavour here – Demonstrating to the Council representatives and our leaders how well our three species can co-operate, and the suitability of the Alliance's role in future exchange programmes. A reporter from the Citadel will be recording your views and getting your reactions on this multi-species endeavour, so do please try and make yourselves sound reasonably enthusiastic. Remember, this article is disseminated to the general public, and popular opinion does tend to influence the future success of Programmes like this." Commander Joric wore a thin smile that didn't reach her eyes. "So, no pressure!"

The Gellix sky was a clear blue; the sunlight shimmered across the newly-fallen powder of snow; the air was crisp and the wind had dropped to nothing. In short, it was a beautiful day. However, despite the glorious sunshine, it was still bitterly cold. Or, as Kenneth would say, 'It was bloody baltic!'

Gabby shivered beneath her armour and tugged the fur-lined coat Jerash had given her tighter around her. She checked the temperature on her armour's environmental monitor. It was minus 15°C.

They'd met the human reporter out on the hillside overlooking the Anapondus station, as he'd requested. Looking at the vista, Gabby could understand why he'd wanted to meet there. It was a stunning view. A vast plateau stretched out beneath her. From here Gabby could make out the whole capital of Anapondus set against the stark white background. It was a surprisingly small capital, made up as it was of bio-domes and modular shelters, with a few makeshift shanties dotted around, and each building covered in snow. The low-lying structures were nestled close to one-another, as if the houses and research stations were huddling together for warmth, like some immense group of penguins. Gellix's strong cross-winds limited the height of the buildings and meant that the tallest structure was no more than four-stories high. Gabby knew her turian hosts coped better in temperate climates so she wouldn't have imagined they would ever want to settle on such a desolate world, especially given how cold it was. But what turians lacked in adaptability they more than made up for in stubbornness. They would never let a little thing like opposing chirality or hostile environments stop them from settling on an inhospitable planet.

Gabby turned away from the vista when the reporter called out to her, asking her to pose next to her colleagues. Gabby had wondered why she'd been selected for the Gellix mission. She was a Propulsion Engineer after all; there was very little propulsion technology to be found planet-side. Then it became obvious… They were here for a photo-shoot – to demonstrate how well two of the council races, and the newest Citadel member species, could cooperate.

"Just arrange yourself on that outcrop, if you would? With Anapondus in the background?" the human reporter asked, pointing at the cliff-edge. The man's automated camera hovered over his right shoulder as it focused on the three engineers dutifully lining-up. "That's right, all girls together," he added, somewhat condescendingly. Erata then patiently explained to him that being asari she wasn't technically a woman by human or turian standards, but it had fallen on deaf ears.

Gabby resented the fact that she had been chosen not for her abilities, but her gender. All her years of training and experience had been quantified in this moment: Standing on an ice-bucket of a planet and pretending to be friends with people she hardly knew.
If this is fame, you can have it!

Judging by their equally pissed-off expressions, her colleagues felt the same way.

"Can I get some smiles, please?" the reporter enquired.

Three toothy grimaces answered his request.

"Okaay…" The reporter took a step backwards. "And again, please. But maybe this time with a little less teeth – and perhaps you could give the impression you don't want to rip my throat out!"

"Well, that would involve some acting!" Pella retorted. "Do we get paid for that?"

Returning to Anapondus, the small group were met by Commander Joric's XO in the station's auditorium.

"Did the interviews go well?" the austere-looking turian with ruddy colony markings asked the human reporter.

The reporter nodded vigorously. "I think I have everything I need," he replied, "I won't need to ask any follow-up questions. If you don't mind, my shuttle's waiting. I should probably go. Ladies." He inclined his head respectfully to his interviewees and then took his leave, looking somewhat grateful to be out of the hostile scrutiny of the three engineers.

"Seems like you made an impression," the XO commented as the man retreated towards the landing-pad. "I imagine you gave an appropriate account of yourselves and what your thoughts were on the exchange?"

"Oh, I think we made our feelings clear," Erata stated firmly.

The man recognised sarcasm as well as Joric, and simply smiled sparingly, then motioned for them to follow him. He escorted them through the bleached metal corridors down to the station's main garage. It was a huge concrete underground bunker. A collection of different all-terrain vehicles, including the Alliance M35 Mako and the older M29 'Grizzly', were parked in neat rows by the large garage doors. The XO led them past what looked like a krogan-made Tomkah and over to a black six-wheeled C77 Tyrus APC, armed with what looked like a heavy calibre co-axial machine gun and rail cannon.

"Since it's your first day, we're breaking you in gently," the XO said. "The abandoned krogan anchorage of New Veles is about a hundred clicks west of here. After it was made derelict it became a breeding ground for harvesters and other assorted wildlife. We've bombed the creatures back to the Unification War – our sensors detect no signs of life – and now we need a small team to go in and survey the area. It's a simple scout and sweep of the district. Determine the state of the infrastructure, what technology if any is salvageable, the regions viability for colonial development, and just generally have a drive around. The on-board computer will map the area for you. The destination is all programmed in." He turned and patted the black hull of the Tyrus behind him. "This is yours. Try to bring it back in one piece."

Without waiting for questions, the man tossed the starter key into Pella's hands and strode back the way they'd come in.

"Well, shall I drive?" Pella offered.

"I wouldn't mind taking it for a spin," Erata replied eagerly. "It's been a while since I had a chance to
drive one of these."

Pella offered the keys over. "In that case, I'll sit in the back. I like my space."

The asari nodded at Gabby. "You can ride shotgun with me, Kitten."

"Kitten?!" Gabby repeated indignantly.

"Yeah. You're small, pleasantly fluffy up-top, and quite cute. Human hair's rather attractive in its own way. I can see the appeal...""

For a moment, Gabby thought she ought to be offended. "Thanks... I think." She frowned. Erata's deconstruction of Gabby's appearance didn't exactly endear the asari to her.

At first, Erata drove the Tyrus surprisingly sedately between the low-lying buildings and down the narrow streets. But once they'd cleared the outskirts of Anapondus' the asari put her foot down and let the vehicle practically fly over the snow drifts. She grinned wildly as the Tyrus jumped a particularly large drift and powered forwards across the frozen expanse. She was obviously enjoying herself. The turian transporter was larger than the standard Alliance Mako, but, like all military vehicles, it lacked basic luxuries and still felt cramped; despite the fact it only had three passengers.

Pella, sitting in the rear cabin, chatted away with Erata about her driving skills and previous experiences. The turian seized the opportunity to learn more about her colleagues and Erata seemed eager to regale her with stories of her past jobs, while Gabby was content to sit and listen as the pair happily chewed the fat.

Eventually, Erata glanced over at the quiet human sitting next to her. "Cat got you tongue, Kitten?"

"Just 'Gabby' is fine," she replied a little tersely. "But, yeah, this is all a bit of a departure for me. I've never worked so far from an Alliance world before. And... well, I don't have much experience working with asari," she admitted.

"Most of the humans I encountered on your home world were like that: shy and retiring to begin with, but they soon opened up."

"You've visited Earth, then?" Gabby asked.

Erata nodded. "I spent five years working there – mostly in an advisory role – getting the Alliance affiliated countries up to speed with modern advances in mass effect technology."

"You were there for five years?" Gabby exclaimed. "Where were you stationed?"

"All over – Edinburgh, London, Hong Kong, Kyoto, New Delhi, Toronto, Cape Town... Oh! And Iraq. I loved Iraq! Beautiful place! Actually, it reminded me of Usaru, where I grew up on Thessia. I tend to prefer desert environments anyway. And the people in Iraq were so friendly."

"You were working in the Middle East?"

"No, I'd taken three weeks paid leave and got tickets to the 2180 Baghdad Olympics. Fantastic event. Opening ceremony was stunning! I had no idea humans were interested in so many different physical activities. You've literally got a sport for everything! Running, rowing, weight lifting, martial arts, archery, swimming, gymnastics... Tests of strength, tests of skill. And the use of those indigenous animals – The horses – That was something else."

Gabby smiled. "Jealous! I was hoping to go to Baghdad that year but never got the time off."
"Yeah. The atmosphere was electric. And you'd think being an alien visitor someone might have objected to me being there, but the event was so inclusive. I never heard a bad word spoken. In fact, people went out of their way to approach me and say hello. Even got to meet the parkour medal finalists. They were also... very friendly. The French team especially!" she added with a wicked twinkle in her eye.

"How friendly?" Pella asked cautiously.

"Oh, quite approachable really!" Erata said. "I got talking to a group of them; they seemed surprised by what I do, then they invited me out for drinks and the next thing I know we're going back to my hotel room to... get further acquainted."

"What, the whole French team?" Gabby enquired.

"Well, at least two of them... If memory serves."

Gabby and Pella exchanged a glance. Gabby cleared her throat. "You must really enjoy sporting events, then?"

"Oh, I enjoy most physical activities," Erata replied with a smirk. "How about you? Do you follow a sport?"

"Ice hockey," Gabby confirmed with a brief nod. "The Bruins are my team. And I try to follow the Braves in biotiball."

"Yep, they're playing the Maestros next quarter -- should be a good game," Erata said happily.

Gabby turned to the artificer sitting behind her. "Do you play any sports, Pella?"

The turian nodded. "Badminton."

With Erata at the helm, the journey to New Veles didn't take long. The ancient krogan anchorage appeared on their map as a red blob and slowly homed into view on the horizon. They could make out more details as the Tyrus approached the ruins. A vast reinforced stone wall surrounded the town. They drove through the ruined main gates and on into the compound. The parts of the anchorage that weren't covered in snow were a mass of twisted metal and rubble; some of it blast damage from the turian bombardment, but most was natural decay. The vehicle scrambled slowly over the remains of buildings and between frozen market squares and statues of krogan warriors. At the town's centre was a huge structure that resembled an old mayan pyramid.

"The seat of power for krogan warlord Moro," Erata explained, pointing at the pyramid. "But the settlement fell into decay shortly after the krogan rebellions."

"And they want us to see if it's fit for habitation?" Gabby asked.

"The place doesn't exactly scream 'ready to move in','" Pella observed.

"It just needs a little TLC," Erata said smiling. "The property has character and potential. It's amazing what a lick of paint can do!"

The Tyrus' on-board computer was already mapping out the town's layout as they drove down the wide streets, but it took a further hour of driving for the computer to fully map the large town. When at last the computer signalled it had completed its task, Erata turned the vehicle towards the central pyramid.
Gabby gazed out apprehensively at the abandoned dwellings as they wafted past her window. The town was so unnaturally quiet that Gabby couldn't shake the unsettling feeling she'd been having ever since they'd arrived. "God, this is eerie!" she exclaimed, staring at the deserted streets. "Seeing a town in this state… It's like it's been frozen in time. Wonder what it was like in its heyday."

"Not a place I'd have been welcomed, that's for damn sure!" Pella said firmly.

Erata pulled up outside the entrance to the pyramid and frowned at the beeping cartography computer. It was flashing blue in warning. "Our scans aren't penetrating the structure," she said. "We'll have to map it on foot."

Gabby promptly reset her omni-tool for cartographic imaging, while Pella grabbed two assault rifles from the armoury locker in the cabin. Handing one weapon to Erata, the three engineers adjusted their hoods and exited the vehicle.

It was relatively warm out in the open – the surrounding defences funneled the wind away from the pyramid's entrance – seeing the structure up close, Gabby could now see the building shared only a passing similarity with the ancient mayan pyramids of Earth. It had three layered tiers and a flat roof, with large gun emplacements situated at every corner. The outer surface wasn't stone but rather a tarnished layer of copper. Patches of it had turned varying shades of brown and green over the years, but parts of it still retained its original lustre. It must have looked quite spectacular when it was new. Looking closer, Gabby could see evidence of battle damage – several gaping circular holes defaced the metal surface, making the structure look like a giant hornet's nest.

The main doors were wide open. Two stone statues of fierce krogan warriors stood guard on either side of the entrance, both of them clutching the severed heads of defeated turians and salarians in their fists. Pella took one look at the figures and shuddered in revulsion.

"Well, that's disgusting! But then Krogan always had such discriminating taste," she added caustically. "Do you think the new tenants will want to keep the décor?"

"Depends on whether the new tenants are fond of classical krogan art," Erata replied.

"This is what passes for krogan art?"

"Well, at least it isn't Third Era krogan sculpture," Erata said.

"Why? How would that be different?" Pella asked with suspicion.

"The krogan would be nude!"

Pella glanced back at the statues, her mind suddenly filled with alarming images of naked krogan. She shuddered again, now regretting having asked the question in the first place. "Spirits! Thank you for the nightmares!"

"All part of the service." Erata patted the turian on the shoulder as she walked past.

The trio entered the structure. Pella and Erata flicked on the flash-lights on their rifles, while Gabby scanned the interior with her omni-tool. They appeared to be in a massive reception hall. Little detail could be made out, but the hall was at least seven metres high and long enough that they couldn't make out the other end of the room, even with the flashlights.

"Maybe the hall runs the length of the pyramid?" Pella suggested.

Gabby didn't answer right away; she was too busy scanning the interior. "It runs underground, too,"

"All part of the service." Erata patted the turian on the shoulder as she walked past.

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she said. "There's a network of tunnels beneath our feet."

Pella peeked over Gabby's shoulder and glanced at the readings on the human's omni-tool. "No wonder the scans couldn't penetrate the structure," she said. "The walls are reinforced with chromium and the surface is lined with copper and a nickel-iron alloy."


"Warlord Moro was known to be paranoid," Erata put in. "He probably had his base shielded against clandestine surveillance."

Pella wandered over to a decorated vestibule on the left side of the antechamber. She pointed her rifle down the corridor, piercing the darkness with her flashlight. "This pathway leads down," she called out. She stepped tentatively forward, but as she crossed the wide doorway her omni-tool suddenly chimed repeatedly. A holographic screen appeared over her left arm. Pella paused and looked at the readings on her screen. "Um, guys, I'm detecting life signs!"

"Where?"

"That direction," Pella said pointing down the dark corridor in-front of her. "About two hundred metres away."

Gabby and Erata looked at each other. "The XO did say New Veles was a haven for wildlife," Gabby pointed out. "A few might have taken refuge in here."

"It'd make sense," Erata agreed. "This building's shielded – Velarus Station wouldn't be able to detect life signs. I think we've stumbled into some kind of nest!"

"Well, whatever's down there its moving!" Pella said, backing away from the vestibule. "And it's heading towards us!"

Gabby opened her mouth to speak but was stopped by a shrill wraithlike scream that shattered the darkness and echoed around the hall. Pella and Erata both brought the rifles to bear on the vestibule. From the darkness they could hear what sounded like several dozen creatures skittering towards them.

"Back to the vehicle!" Erata ordered. "Right now!"

No-one had to be told twice. They sprinted towards the light. Gabby shielded her eyes as she came out into the open. She ran towards the Tyrus but paused when a sound from her left startled her. She looked up. A mass of brown limbs was squeezing itself out from a hole in the pyramid's upper level. The monster had an impossible long segmented neck, thin legs and six leathery wings that unfurled once it had emerged from its hole. She didn't recognise the winged creature, but Pella helpfully provided its name as she ran past.

"Harvester!" the turian warned. "Damn, I thought he said they were all dead?"

"They're tough to kill," Erata replied, taking aim at the monstrosity.

A sudden shriek from the dark entrance behind caused her to whip around to face the pyramid and she instinctively lay down a barrage of suppressing fire. There was a deafening screech of rage. The rifle's muzzle-flash briefly illuminated the entrance; Gabby could make out several large shapes that looked like the legs of a gigantic spider.

Lowering the rifle, Erata turned and ran, physically hauling Gabby by the arm as she went.
There was another screech. Gabby turned back for a second and immediately wished she hadn't! Several two-metre tall horrors had burst from the pyramid, scuttling forwards on red crab-like legs. In that fleeting glance she caught sight of a contorted red body and great appendages that looked like horns just above glowing yellow eyes. Its distorted black maw opened in a loud screech of rage and a geyser of flame erupted from the lead creature's mouth. Gabby almost stopped dead in her tracks out of shock. *They breathe fire?!*

"What are those things?" she exclaimed.

"Klixen!" Erata yelled by way of explanation, dragging Gabby towards the vehicle. "Pella, get on the gun!" she bellowed at the turian clambering into the Tyrus' rear cabin.

Erata tugged open the passenger door to allow Gabby inside and then turned smoothly on her heel to face the klixen. Her whole body suddenly blazed under a shimmering blue aura. She flung up her arm as if bowling under-arm and a bright light appeared between the two monstrosities. The effect was immediate and spectacular. It was as if a mini tornado had hit the ground. Large chunks of ice and snow were whipped up into the air. The klixen, caught in the centre of the maelstrom, screamed in surprise as they were pitched from their feet; sucked upwards into the path of light Erata had created. They whirled about in the air, caught in invisible eddies as they helplessly orbited the strange ball of light. The occupants of the Tyrus stared at the sight in amazement – it was the first time either Gabby or Pella had seen what an asari was truly capable of.

The asari clambered back into the driver's seat and started the engine.

"What the hell did you do?" Pella asked breathlessly.

"I projected a singularity!" Erata replied. "Now, get on the bloody cannon!"

The Tyrus shot forward as Erata gunned the engine and the vehicle accelerated across the icy ground, away from the screaming creatures.

Pella looked back to see a horde of klixen emerge from the pyramid's entrance like swarming fire ants. "A heavier boot might be nice!" she suggested, but the asari had her hands full negotiating her way through the maze of streets.

"Get me out of this rat-run, Kitten!" Erata ordered.

Gabby had already called up the layout of the town on her omni-tool. "That path is blocked!" she warned, pointing to the street Erata was aiming for. "There's no way through. Bang a left here!"

"What?" Erata yelled back.

"Turn left now!"

Erata glanced momentarily at Gabby's map to confirm the route and then made a hard left down the side street.

Gabby peeked back at the pyramid to see the klixen spreading out into the streets. The flying harvester screeched a challenge as it flew above them. Pella struggled to her feet and grabbed the controls to the rail gun. An operator seat automatically extended itself from the inner hull and Pella settled down before flicking on the power switch; a heads-up display appeared before her eyes, the targeting computer already locking on to the flying hostile.

In the front, Gabby switched on the comm. "Anapondus Station, come in. This is the New Veles Survey Team. We have hostiles at New Veles. I repeat: Hostiles at New Veles. A harvester and a
There was a hiss of static that seemed to last an age until an answering voice replied, "We read you Survey Team. Confirm your report. It sounded like you said there were harvesters?"

"Affirmative," Gabby said. "That is confirmed – a harvester and lots of klixen at New Veles – they're swarming the town. We need immediate assistance, over."

"Acknowledged, Survey Team. We're sending fire support to your location now."

The voice signed off and Gabby looked up. Erata was powering down a long straight road that appeared to be a cul-de-sac.

"Which way now?" Erata demanded. "Do I turn back?"

Gabby referred to her map. "Head straight on," she ordered.

"That's a wall, Kitten! It's a dead end!"

"I know! But the wall's very thin. We can break through it and out the other side, closer to the exit. Trust me," Gabby entreated.

The asari gave the human a considered look, then glanced away. "If you're sure," she muttered. Erata put her foot down, accelerating towards the solid looking barrier. Gabby checked her map again, sincerely hoping that the computer's scans were accurate. The wall loomed ever closer as they advanced at speed. At the last second Gabby braced her hands against the console and shut her eyes as the Tyrus smashed headfirst into the wall. The occupants were thrown forward by the impact, but the wall gave way and dissolved into rubble under the Tyrus' wheels. The vehicle powered through an old krogan dwelling, smashing tables and beds as it went before finally crashing out onto the main street.

They could see the exit now. It looked clear of wildlife and Erata turned hard towards the broken main gates; the wheels scrabbling for grip on the icy street.

At that moment, the harvester dived towards them. It screeched a challenge just as Pella brought the main cannon to bear.

The rail gun thundered and a mass of explosive rounds impacted the harvester's chest and wings, making short work of the flying creature. It has strength enough to scream in pain, and then dropped like a stone, ploughing a furrow in the ice as it impacted the ground.

Pella gave the creature a few parting rounds to ensure it was dead, and then scanned for any other movement as they retreated out of the blighted town.

Once they were clear of the walls, Erata accelerated the Tyrus up to full speed. It was only after they'd put a significant distance between themselves and the town that anyone spoke.

"Is everyone okay?" the asari asked.

Gabby and Pella nodded breathlessly. "Just a little shaken," Gabby said. "But what you did back there… That light you created. That was impressive. Can all asari do that?"

"Most can, yeah. But the level of ability varies from person to person. Some are much more advanced, while a few possess only rudimentary skills. I'm about average, really."
"That was average?" Pella exclaimed.

"That move took a lot out of me," the asari admitted.

"I'm impressed," Gabby said. "I've only ever seen the biotiball players in action. They never did anything like that."

"Not surprising – moves like that are illegal in biotiball."

About halfway back to Anapondus, the team were surprised to be met by a convoy of infantry vehicles. Erata pulled the Tyrus up and the team watched as a contingent of thirty turian soldiers in Thermal Armour and armed with assault rifles, jumped out of the vehicles. The soldiers, led by Commander Joric's XO, approached the Tyrus. Pella and Gabby exited the vehicle to greet them.

"Any casualties?" the XO demanded.

"No. We're all fine," Pella replied.

"Good to see you're in one piece," the XO replied and sounded like he meant it. "We were afraid the assignment had gone south."

Erata emerged from the vehicle just as three turian fighter craft sped overhead. The group watched the fighters make a bee-line for New Veles.

"Seems like a lot of backup for a rescue attempt," Erata commented. "What's with all the firepower?"

"Commander Joric takes the security of her crew very seriously," the XO replied. "Particularly when non-turians are involved."

"With all the klixen there will the Hierarchy still want to occupy the town?" Gabby asked the XO.

The boom of a far-off detonation answered her question. On the horizon, New Veles was being lit up by a series of gigantic explosions. The outer walls shattered under the blasts and the pyramid disappeared in a blinding white light.

"No. It's proven to be too dangerous. We're not taking any more chances," the XO stated as they watched the anchorage evaporate into fiery dust.

"Spirits!" Pella exclaimed. "This is a Hell of a way to end our second day!"

The XO turned back to face the three engineers and grinned wolfishly. "Welcome to Gellix!"
Following their first mission on Gellix, Gabby, the asari Erata D'Ceni, and turian engineer Pella Vettiill are assigned bodyguards for their own protection. Whether this protection will be effective remains to be seen.

Not for the first time during this exchange, Gabby wished she'd packed an evening dress. Something long, red and backless, like that asari number she'd bought on the Citadel to treat herself. Not that she'd have been able to wear it now, of course – the whole base was still too cold for that – but it would have been nice to have something in her closet a little more glamorous than her dress blues.

Gabby stood before the full-length mirror in her room, casting a critical eye over her appearance. The Alliance uniform was a double-breasted navy blue jacket over blue trousers, lined with gold trim and a high collar framed by her dark red shoulder-length bob cut. It had wide epaulettes on both shoulders and tapering leather suppressors at the waist that hugged her figure. She gazed at her reflection and allowed herself an approving smile. "It's no evening gown, but it'll do," she decided, wondering what the turians would think of it. The fact turians had a militaristic culture meant that the soldiers in the base would probably appreciate her full dress uniform. But she was a little nervous. She'd never been to a turian party before and wondered what to expect. She exhaled somewhat unsteadily, her breath condensing in the chill air. Despite the cold, she was quite warm. The two layers of thermals she had under her uniform certainly helped. Gabby fiddled absent-mindedly with the jacket's gold chain clasp on her left breast before taking another deep breath and then exiting the cabin.

Erata was waiting in the corridor. The asari's face lit up when she saw Gabby; the dark tribal-like facial markings around her eyes wrinkling in delight and blending subtly with her teal blue skin. She was wearing a simple white full-length dress with long sleeves and no apparent adornments, yet, somehow, she still managed to make the conservative dress look effortlessly glamorous.

"You look very stylish," Gabby said.

"Just something I tossed into my kit-bag," Erata replied modestly. She fidgeted at her collar. "But it's a lot more comfortable when I'm not wearing long johns underneath!"

"Same here," Gabby answered, indicating her uniform.

"You clean up very nicely." Erata glanced admiringly at Gabby's waist. "Who knew there was such an attractive figure under all that armour? You should show it off more often."

Suddenly very self-conscious under Erata's scrutiny, Gabby coughed into her hand and shifted uncomfortably. Luckily, Pella chose that moment to emerge from her cabin. The turian had changed out of her Thermal Armour and was clad in what appeared to be a functional, but surprisingly elegant, short-sleeved black wrap-over dress with a high split in the front over thick black leggings.
She was wearing long gloves that swept up to her elbow, and a large belt emphasized her slim waist. The whole ensemble was topped off with a high and wide collar accentuating her neck ridge. From her brief time on *Arcadia*, Gabby had come to appreciate that turian women were physically different from human women – they were flat-chested, with no bust to speak of, but Pella now seemed to have gained some significant enhancement on her chest.

"What are you wearing?" Gabby asked.

"My formal wear," Pella explained, adjusting the belt around her waist. "It's double-breasted. What? Don't you like it?"

"It's very nice," Gabby admitted. "But… it does make you look like you've got boobs."

"Well, yeah, that's the point," Pella replied as if it was obvious.

"I don't follow. Why would you want that?"

"It's power dressing," Erata stated.

Gabby frowned in confusion "What do you mean?"

Pella smiled and nodded at Erata. "Well, asari are the most powerful race in the Galaxy, this style is trending their physique." Gabby shrugged, still not quite getting the idea. Pella gestured to her new dress in an attempt to spell it out. "It's well known that you don't mess with either asari commandos or the asari Matriarchs, and they're this basic shape, so you walk into a room wearing this dress and everyone knows you mean business and won't take any crap! You know, 'power dressing'."

"Oh, right! So, a bit like wearing kilts or something?"

"No, in human terms it's more like wearing a shoulder padded suit," Erata clarified. Gabby nodded in understanding.

"Plus the asari and salarians seem to like it…" Pella added. She reached up and adjusted the 'padding' on her chest. Gabby found she was following the turian's hands with horrified fascination. "And some humans like it, too, I've noticed. When I wore it on the Citadel last I got quite a few admiring looks from human men and women directed my way, I can tell you. One human even bought me a drink! He was quite friendly. Though he did seem to spend most of our conversation staring at my chest!"

"You don't say?" Gabby stated wryly.

"This is the latest style, very popular in the Wards. But it doesn't work so well when turian men wear it – they tend to get funny looks. Somehow it just looks wrong on them."

"The mind boggles!"

"We can discuss turian sartorial trends later," Erata interrupted. "We have a function to attend."

Erata and Pella led the way down to the mess hall, while Gabby trailed behind, trying to shake the mental image of turian men with breasts!

Gabby was mingling.

She'd been told by Commander Joric to introduce herself to the other Gellix officers, so she was circulating; walking around the various groups in the mess hall and trying to start conversations with
the crew. So far she'd shaken hands with several dozen crewmembers, bowed stiffly to the higher ranking officers, exchanged pleasantries with a few of the women (most of whom were also wearing similar versions of Pella's dress), and, in one memorable incident, been accidently head-butted by the overexcited Liaison Officer, Jerash.

After their chaotic mission to New Veles, Commander Joric – in an effort to keep the visiting team of engineers alive – had decided that Gabby, Pella and Erata should be accompanied by a security squad at all times. As a result, the trio had to get to know their new support crew. At the moment, Gabby was wandering between the groups of turians, trying to remember the names of people she'd met while nursing a lingering headache and gently massaging the red mark on her brow. She was sure it was going to come out in a lump.

*Turian heads are hard!* she grumbled to herself. Well, the 'Rash's' certainly is!

Spotting Pella sitting alone on the other side of the room, Gabby quickly wandered over and sat next to her at the table.

Pella's eyes flicked up at Gabby's forehead; her mandibles twitched with amusement as she caught sight of the red mark, and she leaned in close. "Jerash?" she asked. Gabby nodded resignedly. "She did the same to me." Pella rubbed her brow. "Clocked me one right on the fringe! I think our Liaison Officer is a tad over-affectionate."

"Your bump doesn't show so much," Gabby protested.

"Still hurts, though! She's a little odd that one." Pella nodded towards Jerash who was apologising to the male soldier she'd just head-butted. "I'm not sure she knows how to show restraint. But could be worse, I suppose. Imagine what she'd do if she really liked you! I pity anyone who sleeps with her. They'd have a permanent concussion!"

"Well, at least we seem to be making friends," Gabby said.

"Not as much as our asari team-mate." Pella indicated Erata surrounded by half-a-dozen turian men. Most of them were still wearing their blue and yellow armour, but one stood out. A tall crewman in blue and white colours – which looked like a turian version of Gabby's Explorer Armour – was laughing enthusiastically beside Erata. "Especially that barefaced poseur in the shiny suit. Look at him, fawning over her, trying to get in her pants! He's so brazen!"

"He could be genuine? Maybe he's just being friendly and isn't a shameless flirt?"

"Yeah, and maybe I'm Primarch of Palaven!" Pella scowled; the blue colony markings on her brow creasing together as she glowered at the group. She shook her head and turned back to Gabby. "Is this your first exchange working with other races?"

"No, I've worked with a few salarian physicists before now, and did a six week stint with a krogan engineer on the SSV Perugia."

"A krogan?" Pella exclaimed. "On an Alliance ship? I didn't even know they were allowed on Alliance ships! He wasn't staying in the crew quarters, was he?"

"He couldn't very well stay in the cargo hold."

"It's where I'd have put him," Pella muttered. "That must have been difficult for you, sharing the crew deck with a krogan. Weren't you nervous?"

"At first, sure. We'd only heard stories about krogan; never actually met one before. We didn't know
what to expect. Our CO warned us to be on our guard for aggressive behaviour, so… that put our minds at ease!

"Actually, Chaill turned out to be the complete opposite of what we'd feared. First thing that came out of his mouth was a joke about a hanar and a volus." Gabby smiled at the memory. "He's a good laugh. And surprisingly light on his feet. He really helped us relax. We eventually became good friends. And, yeah, he knows exactly what the rest of the galaxy thinks about krogan – even said he could relate to our anxiety."

"Relate?" Pella repeated with a hint of scepticism. "What, he didn't like sharing with krogan, either?"

Gabby shook her head. "He said that the majority of krogan he'd met were a bunch of selfish jerks who spent too much time wielding a gun and not enough time wielding a hammer!"

"An anti-krogan krogan," Pella snorted grudgingly. "He may start to grow on me."

The pair looked up as Erata and her enthusiastic entourage approached their table.

"Looks like the networking is going well?" Gabby observed.

"Everyone's very friendly," Erata replied with glee.

"Especially with you," Pella muttered quietly.

Erata gestured to the turian in blue and white armour standing next to her. "Khoris here was just telling me about the time his obituary was published on the extranet. He was working undercover with an army of slaver pirates and he had to pretend to have been KIA and lie low for a full solar year while evidence against the slaver's leader was assembled by the Council."

"That's unusual. Were they turian pirates?" Gabby asked.

"No, the leader was asari, in fact," Khoris explained. "It's a sensitive case because the slaver's sister is a prominent diplomat on the Citadel."

"One of Nassana Dantius' sisters!" Erata blurted out. "Always thought the Dantius family was a bit shady." Erata placed her hand on Khoris' arm. "He had quite the hero's welcome from three female Havoc Shock Troopers when he came out of hiding, apparently."

Pella glared at the turian grinning coyly next to Erata. "Is that so? I know someone on my ship who's into that kind of thing; he's a narcissist, too."

Khoris held up his hands. "Guilty as charged," he admitted. "I've been told I love myself too much. Got to share the love around occasionally."

"I think you're overestimating how much people are interested in you," Pella replied scathingly. "Though, may I just say, you are rockin' that armour!" She gave his suit an approving once-over.

Khoris preened with delight. "Thank you. It's by Devlon Industries; from chief designer Lui's Vuittani's latest collection. I just polished it."

"Does it come in men's sizes?" Pella asked innocently.

The next morning, after showering and changing into her Explorer Armour, Gabby wandered down to the mess hall and was surprised to be greeted by a troop of her own personal bodyguards. They were soon joined by Pella and Erata, and, following a brisk breakfast, the trio were escorted down to
the Garage for the morning's de-briefing.

The Garage doors opened into the large hanger-like area to reveal possibly the most bustling flurry of movement Gabby had ever witnessed. It was like Grand Central Station. Several hundred tonnes of pre-fabricated buildings were being lifted by crane onto large multi-wheeled transporters. Armies of mechanics scurried about like ants around the vast hall, while armed commanding officers barked out orders to sappers. There were so many armed personnel roaming about that it looked like the base had been put on a war footing!

Commander Joric formally greeted the three engineers and the group was escorted to an overhanging balcony at the front of the Garage. Joric stood overlooking the turian workers and barked out an order to her troops. The whole room immediately fell silent as the battalion turned to face her; the soldiers and engineers quickly forming up into neat rows.

*Say what you like about militaristic cultures, Gabby thought, but turians are damned well organised!*

"Gellix Company, atten-shun!" Joric yelled. As one the turians snapped their heels together, standing ramrod straight. "Your assignment today is the regeneration of the ancient settlement of Dhazig. As most of you will know, we have some new faces joining our happy company." She gestured to Erata. "Firstly, I present Order of Serrice Engineer Erata D'Ceni from the Asari Republic – de facto senior officer and our civil engineering expert. Any queries you have about the pre-fabs she will happily answer."

"Well, I'm not sure about 'happily'," Erata murmured.

The Commander nodded at Pella. "Secondly, our colleague from Arcadias, Artificer First Class Pella Vettiill, is the resident authority on all electromechanical systems. Her knowledge is considerable, so I want all sappers to take the opportunity to learn from her."

Joric then pointed at Gabby. "And finally, to further promote reconciliation between our two races, I am honoured to welcome Alliance Engineer Gabriella Daniels to our crew. She is the energy and power systems specialist. Approach her with any queries relating to the operation of the mass effect cores.

"Your orders are to keep these three engineers safe and obey all of their instructions as if they were my own. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir!" the entire company boomed in response.

"Very good. Make me proud, troopers. Carry on."

Saluting, Joric turned and walked back to the exit, leaving the three engineers under the quiet scrutiny of the entire battalion. The three women stared down apprehensively at the rows of turian faces.

"Wow!" Erata exclaimed in a hushed tone. "A whole legion to do my bidding. And it's not even my birthday!"

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The colony of Dhazig was an old town set into the mountains north of Anapondus. Located near an ancient natural water source in a prime defensive position, the plan was to build on top of the old ruins flattened long ago to make room for a human penal colony.

The prison itself had been abandoned many years earlier (following some of the worst safety violations in Alliance history), but the infrastructure remained, and all it needed to make it habitable
again were appropriate facilities. On the face of it, the assignment seemed simple.

There was little conversation on the journey. Gabby was travelling in a crowded Tyrus infantry vehicle. She glanced around at her personal bodyguards, who sat silently contemplating their new assignment. She made a few attempts to start up conversations with them, but the crew were non-committal in their response, only giving short answers or curt nods to her queries. She gave up trying to talk to them after a while, but was actually glad of the company, even if they weren't very chatty. With such a large group protecting her she reasoned she was safe from another attack by wildlife.

It took four hours to reach the settlement. The convoy of trucks and infantry vehicles pulled up at the base of the prison complex and the troops disembarked. Gabby stepped out from the Tyrus' claustrophobic interior to be greeted by temperatures slightly above zero °C. Pella and Erata both exited their vehicles and wandered over to join their human colleague.

"Another beautiful day in paradise!" Pella spat, pulling her orange coat tighter around her armoured body.

Erata was grinning as she approached. "Look on the bright side, at least the view has improved since last time." The asari turned to watch the army of turian engineers unload the trucks.

Three of the sappers were attempting to override the lock on the prison's garage doors with their omni-tools. A few seconds later the main doors snapped open with a loud crunch and the massive gates rolled down into the ground. The troops levelled their weapons into the dark garage, but there was no movement – the place was dead.

Pella approached the sappers. "You got that open quickly," she congratulated.

"The door wasn't locked, ma'am," one of them replied.

The troops filed in cautiously, keeping their weapons drawn as they moved into the building. Bit by bit, they swept the room until they were satisfied the main hanger was clean.

The rest of the group moved into the hanger and started unpacking the equipment. The sappers were so efficient that Gabby, Erata and Pella had little to do but watch as the pre-fabs were being unloaded. The trio moved to a catwalk overlooking the hanger and observed the turians at work.

"They are a fine body of soldiers," Erata commented, as she ogled a turian bent over one of the pre-fabs. The asari smiled cheekily. "Yes, very fine bodies they are too!"

"Oh, don't you start," Gabby protested. "I thought I'd get away from comments like that here."

"Am I making you uncomfortable, Kitten?"

"No, I'm used to it, actually. It's like déjà vu. You sound just like Kenneth."

"Oh, you mean that other Alliance engineer back on Arcadias? I knew there was a reason I liked him. He was quite eager that you should 'get friendly' with me, as I recall."

"For which I will probably kill him when I get back!" Gabby replied hotly. "Can't believe you heard that."

"My hearing isn't the only exceptional thing about me."

Gabby rolled her eyes and folded her arms. "The species may change but I keep hearing the same old chestnuts! What do I have to do to get away from it?"
"You're just playing hard to get, Kitten."

"Should I leave you two alone?" Pella smirked.

"Preferably not," Gabby said hastily.

"Relax, I'm just kidding around with you," Erata assured Gabby, and turned her attention back to the troops. "But I still wouldn't mind checking out the indigenous population in more intimate detail… And in a warmer environment!"

"Oy! I think I preferred when Kenneth was saying it!"

Erata was watching Khoris, in his blue and white armour, carrying a three-metre divider across the garage. "What I wouldn't give to be in those arms. Look at him hugging that partition. Wish I was that wall!"

"You pretty much are, Ke… Erata," Gabby hastily corrected herself.

The asari turned and stared at Gabby for a long moment. "Are you sassing me, Kitten?"

"It certainly looks that way," Pella observed wryly.

Erata nodded approvingly at the human. "I like it. Keep it up."

The conversation was interrupted when two female soldiers approached them. They both fired off a salute.

"Sir," the first said, "we've completed a sweep of the upper levels. They're clean. We'd like permission to restore power to the base."

"Granted," Erata replied. "That's Engineer Daniels' area of expertise. She can get it operational." She exchanged a look with Pella. "Mind if we tag along?"

"The more the merrier," Gabby replied.

The main generator was a simple Hydrogen power unit fuelled by a polymer electrolyte membrane (PEM) electrolyzer set two floors down in the sub-basement of the facility. Gabby led the way through the faded brown corridors, reading from the map on her omni-tool and flanked by the two guards.

The generator doors opened to a large room, with catwalks leading to the large inactive metal sphere at the centre. Several dozen hydrogen storage containers lined the walls of the room. The two guards swept down the catwalks first, levelling their assault rifles and moving in a standard search pattern. After a while, the engineers got the all clear and they approached the generator.

Gabby scanned the sphere with her omni-tool. "Been powered down for a few years… H2 and O2 reserves look good. No degradation. This shouldn't take long."

She set about powering up the primary systems. The main console before her sprang to life and she tapped away at the holographic display.

"Initialising start-up procedure – generator is coming online… Now!"

Light flooded the room. The generator hummed to itself as the power surged back to the core. Gabby looked around at the drab generator room and felt a surge of satisfaction. The base was powering up; she could hear the heating systems starting to run. Very soon everyone in complex would be
luxuriating in glorious heat. She allowed herself a smile of satisfaction at a job well done.

Just then a panel below the console popped open and what looked like a hemisphere on a narrow table extended itself outwards. There was a small holographic display on the top with a set of symbols in a language Gabby didn't recognise. The black object beeped quietly.

"What's that?" Pella demanded.

"That looks very much like an explosive device!" Erata said.

"Oh, Spirits! The core was rigged?" Pella exclaimed, taking a step away from it.

As if detecting the movement, the device suddenly beeped insistently and glowed red. The display activated. The symbols changed, reforming into new shapes at regular intervals. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the symbols were counting down.

"And that looks like the bomb arming itself," Erata added.

Everyone held their breath. Gabby felt she should say something useful to help, but the only thing that popped into her head was an expletive… So she voiced it.

"Oh, shit!"
Disarming Candour

Chapter Summary

Trapped with a bomb in an alien base on a freezing planet; could life get any worse for Gabby?

Main Hanger, Dhazig Penal Colony, Gellix – 13:05 UTC – 4th February 2183 CE

Security Chief Trasus was busy supervising his troops when he heard about the bomb.

The asari engineer contacted him on his omni-tool and informed him in a firm but anxious voice that herself, the visiting human, and that turian artificer from Arcadias, plus two of his security personnel, had accidently triggered a booby-trap when trying to reactivate the main generator. Officer Trasus listened intently to what the alien had to say, interrupting her once when he asked her to confirm their status, then he calmly reassured the asari, turned off his omni-tool and hesitated only momentarily before barking out an order.

"Emergency two-zero-niner! Code Blue! Blue! Blue! Evac is in effect, so move it! Assholes and elbows, people!"

The direction of the world changed.

The platoon of sappers, that moments ago had been assembling equipment, abruptly downed tools and hastily made for the exit. Support staff bustled towards the vehicles outside, while armed officers ran between them to gather swiftly in the middle of the hanger. Within seconds the garage was cleared of all non-essential personnel. Trasus hurried over to his assembled security officers and spelled out the situation.

"We have a serious problem. The main generator was rigged. Five personnel are trapped in the lower levels with a possible explosive device. We don't know what kind. We don't know who left it there. We do know it's active and likely counting down to detonation." He pointed at the group to his left. "Team One, escort all non-critical bodies away from ground-zero; get as far away from this site as possible." Half the group dispersed, already intent on their orders. He gestured for the remaining members of his team to follow him as he turned towards the generator room. "Team Two with me. Double-time it. We have possibly seconds before the device goes off. I want Officer Abrudas suited up for bomb-disposal. He's going in first."

The two groups were running now, powering away in opposite directions through the main doors at either end of the room. Moments later both groups had left the garage, leaving the area eerily empty and silent.

No-one had moved in the generator room.

Erata's omni-tool was still active – she hadn't even bothered lowering her arm. Everyone was staring down at the weapon, exhaling in short shallow gasps as if afraid the very act of breathing might trigger the device. The symbols were still changing on the display atop the device, but they were indecipherable.
"Should we try and make it to the door?" Pella breathed.

"You saw how it reacted when we tried to move, "Erata replied. "It's almost certainly rigged with motion sensors."

"How long do you think we have?" Gabby asked quietly.

"Not sure," Pella murmured. "I don't recognise the language."

"You could scan it with the translator?" one of the guards suggested to Pella.

"Not a good idea," she replied. "The bomb might react to the scan and accelerate the countdown further. Or simply detonate."

"Assuming it is counting down," Erata pointed out. "And assuming it is a bomb."

"Well, what else could it be? A novelty egg timer?" Pella hissed.

"I don't think it's that sophisticated," Gabby said. "If it was designed to react to passive scans or narrow beam wavelengths it would have exploded when D'Ceni used her omni-tool to call it in, surely?"

"It's worth a shot," Erata agreed. "I hate being kept in the dark." She tapped away at her omni-tool's haptic interface as she set about scanning the device.

"No, wait!" Pella said in hushed protest, but it was too late. Erata swept her omni-tool slowly over the device. Everyone held their breath. "Well?" the turian asked after a few moments.

"Yeah, it's a bomb!"

"Oh, Spirits!" the first guard exclaimed.

"I don't suppose there's any good news?" Pella asked.

"Well, it's not thermonuclear, sooo… our remains won't glow if they find us!"

"Jokes? Really? Is this the best time?"

"Yeah, I think it's the perfect time!" Erata replied.

"How long before it blows?" the second guard asked.

"About ten minutes."

"Well, then, maybe we should risk it? Just run for our lives and try and get to a safe distance?" Pella suggested.

"It has motion sensors. We wouldn't get two metres away before it blew!" Erata said firmly. "And if it ruptures the H-fuel tanks around the core there won't be a safe distance."

"The H-Tanks will be fine," Gabby assured her, "they're designed to withstand planetary re-entry."

"Yeah, the asari-made Silaris ones certainly, but these Earth-made Alliance ones look distinctly low grade," Erata replied. "Probably put together on some boondock settlement like Boston!"

"Excuse me?!" Gabby said heatedly. "Alliance H-Tanks are built to the same specs as the Asari
Republic's, actually. If anything we've improved the design."

"No, you've simply made it cheaper, and sacrificed the integrity of the case by using sub-standard materials."

"There is nothing wrong with the alloys we use. They're just as good as the asari models."

"We use the Earth-made H-Tanks on freighters!" Erata insisted.

"When you two have quite finished," Pella squawked. "Can we please focus on the bomb?"

There was a movement in the entrance and a voice called out to them, "Am I interrupting the party, ladies?"

Several pairs of eyes darted to where the voice had come from. Khoris, swathed in the thick padded layers of a black bomb suit, was standing in the doorway, a transparent visor shielding his face.

"Oh, it would be him, wouldn't it," Pella grumbled.

Khoris activated his omni-tool and edged himself forward along the catwalk. "I'll have you out of this very shortly. Please don't anyone move."

"Well, we never thought of that! How lucky for us you're here to remind us of the frickin' obvious!"

"Pella," Erata warned. "I don't think that's helpful."

"I'm joking. Didn't you say this was the perfect time for jokes?"

Khoris continued to edge forwards. He paused a short distance from the group when his omni-tool beeped insistently. "That's good. You'll be pleased to know the tomographic field is limited to a two metre radius around the device."

"Yes, we're ecstatic," Pella said flatly.

Khoris pointed to the guard next to him. "You're not in the field. You can retreat to the exit. My team is just outside the door."

"I'd prefer not to leave my partner," the guard insisted.

"That wasn't a request," Khoris replied. "Chief Trasus ordered a full evac. Get out of here!"

The guard looked across at her friend. Her colleague gave her a slight nod. "Don't disobey an order," she warned.

The young guard nodded reluctantly, then turned and made for the exit. Khoris was now tapping away at his omni-tool as he talked. "Looks like a VM-90 model with integrated anti-handling devices – vibration switch and infrared sensors. Batarian made. Hence the batarian counter."

"So, the batarian's put it here?" Gabby asked.

"Not necessarily. It's a batarian model. Doesn't mean they actually planted it here. It could have been left by the departing human prison guards."

"And how likely is that?"

"Not very," Khoris admitted. "The good news is that anti-personnel mines like this are ten-a-credit."
They're very inexpensive to make."

"Yeah? How does that help us?" Pella put in.

"They're cheap and not very sophisticated. The tomographic sensors on a VM-90 are limited to magnetic and light sensitive. They only detect movement on the horizontal plane. They're deployed mostly in urban environments to ensnare and kill enemy troops. But, all too often, it's children who activate the bombs."

"Charming!" Gabby spat.

"No-one said conflict had to be nice." Khoris suddenly held his right arm in front of him. His omni-tool emitted a gentle hum. "Now, I'm afraid I do have some bad news, too."

"You mean other than the unexploded ordnance about to kill us?" Pella said in an acerbic tone. "You're not going to sing to us, are you?"

"No, I wouldn't inflict that on you," Khoris replied, a slight smile creeping onto his face. "I'm going to have to try and deactivate the sensors and neutralise the main trigger to make the bomb safe."

"That sounds like a good thing. What's the problem?" Erata asked.

"Well, ordinarily I'd simply burn the trigger with a 10KW laser, but that tends to cause a low-level explosion…"

"Yeah, don't do that!" Pella insisted.

"So, I'm gonna have to interrupt its sensors to get you out of here one at a time. Unfortunately, it has countermeasures, and disrupting the sensors more than once automatically accelerates the countdown. We'll only have seconds to evacuate. There's barely three minutes left on the counter so you're gonna have to do what I tell you when I tell you. Understand?"

"Hang on! I thought D'Ceni said we had ten minutes?" Pella protested.

Erata fixed Pella with a grim smile. "I lied!"

"When we get out of this you and I are going to have a talk!"

"I'm surprised the countdown is so long," Gabby said.

Khoris snorted. "That's the batarians for you. Nothing lowers troop morale faster than having to watch your friend trapped and killed by one of these things. But lucky for you, compared to me, the VM-90 is a pile of crap! A little magnetic pulse, and…" His omni-tool emitted a short, sharp beep. There was a click from the device. The counter flickered. Khoris moved forward and grabbed the other guard by the arm, pulling her gently towards him. "We don't have long, ease towards me, I'm gonna take your place." The guard obediently allowed herself to be manoeuvred out of the way, until Khoris had moved into the space she'd vacated. "Okay, now evacuate the area," he ordered. This time the guard didn't argue and quickly retreated up the catwalk without so much as a backward glance. Khoris didn't watch her leave; he was still focussed on the beeping device.

"Alright, when I tell you to move, you move," Khoris ordered. He didn't wait for a response. Khoris extended his arm over the centre of the changing symbols and slowly lowered it until it hovered barely a centimetre above the device.

There was another beep from his omni-tool.
The top of the device rotated a quarter-circle anticlockwise. Gabby almost jumped as the bomb emitted a loud hiss and a cylinder below the counter suddenly rose up ten centimetres, exposing a series of small silver blocks. A few seconds passed while Khoris tapped away on his haptic interface.

"I can only remove one sensor switch at a time," he said as he reached for the block facing Pella. "When I pull this away, you step out of the field."

Pella nodded.

Khoris prised the first block away from the cylinder.

"Move!" he ordered. Pella stepped back several paces. The symbols on the counter started to speed up. "You can make it to the door now," Khoris said, replacing the block back into place.

"No, I think I'll stick around," Pella replied.

"It would be better if you left."

"Someone's gotta keep an eye on you," Pella said.

"Why don't you join the Chief, ma'am?" Khoris insisted.

"Why don't you bite me?"

Gabby caught Erata's eye. "Is that a universal phrase?" she asked quietly. "Or does it mean something else here?"

"No, it definitely means something else to turians," Erata replied. "Something a little more explicit!"

Khoris craned his hand over the device and settled his fingers next to the sensor block opposite Erata. "You're gonna have to clear the area, ma'am," he said forcefully.

"That's not gonna hap…"

"This is not open for discussion!" Khoris snapped. "In this matter I outrank you. And I'm ordering you get the hell out! Ma'am!"

Pella stared at the man in silent protest. It almost looked like she was going to retort, but then her training got the better of her and she reluctantly withdrew.

"Ooh, I do like a dominant personality," Erata muttered just loud enough for Khoris to hear.

Khoris didn't react to the comment, but instead removed the second sensor block. "Step out of the field and get to the door," he ordered Erata.

"By your command," Erata said as she moved across the catwalk.

Suddenly the device flashed red. There was a loud click and the symbols started changing rapidly.

"Wait! Wait! Wait!" Khoris yelled at the asari. Erata froze. "Keep your position! Damn it!"

Six smaller cylinders unexpectedly rose from the body of the device. They looked like the triggers on a sea-mine.

"This is new," Khoris muttered.
"Problem?" Gabby asked wryly.

Khoris looked up to meet Gabby's eye. He looked worried. He glanced back down at the rapidly changing counter. A second passed. Khoris appeared to reach a decision. He tapped the communicator on his omni-tool.

"Chief, this is Abrudas. Evacuate the area. Code six-three-six. I can't disable the device in time. I'm gonna try and freeze the trigger with LN2."

"Acknowledged," the voice of Chief Trasus replied. Khoris reached over his shoulder and retrieved a small silver canister from his back holster. The sound of several pairs of feet retreating into the distance could be heard coming from the main doors.

"Will freezing it work?" Erata asked.

"It does in thirty percent of cases," he replied.

"And the rest of the time?" Gabby asked.

Khoris didn't answer. He took a deep breath and held the nozzle of the liquid nitrogen canister over the central column. He hesitated, his eyes darted up and he looked at Gabby.

"How are your legs?" he asked her.

"My legs? What…?"

"Do you exercise?"

"…Yeah, I try and stay in shape. Why do you…?"

Khoris opened the nozzle of the canister. A jet of sub-zero nitrogen gushed over the device. The counter flickered and the metal groaned as the freezing liquid contracted the bomb's outer casing. Within seconds it was coated in a layer of sparkling ice. The counter faltered and it froze on a single oblique symbol. Erata and Gabby each let out a sigh of relief. They hadn't realised they'd been holding their breath…

Then the counter started flashing again; the symbols changing at increased speed.

Khoris dropped the canister. "'Cause I'm gonna need a demonstration!" he exclaimed as he grabbed Gabby's arm. "Run!"

Erata was already on the move. Khoris yanked Gabby past the device and the three of them sprinted up the catwalk.

Gabby ran on ahead of Khoris in his bulkier armour, but Erata dashed ahead of them all, glancing back only when she reached the main doors. Khoris waved frantically at her.

"Keep running!" he ordered.

She turned and ran. They turned the corner into the drab brown corridor and sprinted for the exit, leaving the generator room behind them.

Gabby could literally see the light at the end of the circular tunnel when the bomb went off.

It was an odd experience to be blown up. The explosion could be felt rather than heard and sent the three of them hurtling forward as the shockwave hit. They hit the catwalk in an shattering heap.
Gabby could feel heat from the flames being funneled up the corridor.

Khoris threw himself (or was thrown, rather) over Gabby, shielding her from the worst of the blast, while Erata shielded her head with her hands. The heat washed up the corridor, the flames writhing and churning above them until it finally burnt itself out, leaving only ash and the stink of stale air in its wake.

Khoris slowly rose from Gabby's prostrate form, coughing away the vestiges of smoke and burnt air. "Any injuries? Any broken bones?" he croaked.

Gabby shook her head, her ears still ringing from the blast. Erata moved her hands from her head and coughed fitfully.

"Just a few burns," she said, looking at the back of her singed hands. "But nothing medi-gel can't fix."

Gabby sat up and looked over at Khoris. "You're back's on fire," she said helpfully.

Khoris glanced over his shoulder at the dwindling flames on his burnt bomb suit. "Occupational hazard," he said, smirking.

Khoris offered his hand and Gabby was hauled unsteadily to her feet. None of them noticed the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps, and Gabby yelped when a strong hand grabbed her arm.

"Are you alright?" someone asked; the voice was muffled by the constant whistling in her ears. Gabby looked up. A stern looking turian was staring down at her. It took a few seconds for her to recognise the face as Security Chief Trasus. His team was swarming around them. She nodded, barely noticing when someone else placed a silver blanket around her shoulders. She glanced over her shoulder. The turian with the blanket was Pella. Gabby smiled gratefully. A medic was already seeing to the burns of Erata's hands.

Gabby looked over at Khoris as another turian used a fire extinguisher to douse the flames on his bomb suit. She met his gaze and he smiled across at her.

"I guess we're not gonna be firing up the generator anytime soon!" he said.

Commander Joric's Ready Room, Anapondus, Gellix – 18:10 UTC

"What am I going to do with you three?"

Commander Joric was sat behind her desk, glaring up at the trio of visiting engineers who stood rigidly at attention, their gaze fixed on a point several centimetres above the Commander's head.

"First New Veles and now this! You are supposed to be engineers. But two missions in and you're starting to resemble a demolition team!" The Commander turned to Erata. "I'm starting to wonder if I made a mistake putting you in charge, D'Ceni. The Asari Republic recommended you highly. Matriarch Lidanya herself vouched for your competency."

"Yeah, I can't understand that either, Commander," Erata joked.

"Is it possible you could conduct yourself out in the field without high explosives becoming involved?"

"Well, one can always hope, sir," she responded.
"The mission to regenerate Dhazig will be delayed until we receive the necessary components to rebuild the colony's power unit. Chief Trasus informs me the generator room was completely destroyed. The only things salvageable from this debacle were the H-Tanks!"

"Told you," Gabby uttered just loud enough for Erata to hear.

"I'm putting you all on light duty until I'm satisfied you've recovered fully from this little setback." The Commander rose from her seat. "And please, for my health if no-one else's, do try and stop getting yourselves into life-threatening situations!"

"We'll do our best, sir," Pella stated.

"You're dismissed." The trio saluted and turned to leave. Joric called out to Pella. "You stick around, Vettiill. I want you to clarify a few details on your report."

Pella nodded without enthusiasm and stepped aside to let the human and asari leave the office.

As the door closed behind the visiting aliens, Joric fixed Pella with an expression of undisguised hostility, as if she resented her very presence in the room.

"When they told me an agent had been assigned to watch over the aliens I was expecting someone a little more qualified. Is this your first assignment, artificer?"

Pella nodded. "Yes, Commander. It wasn't my choice. I didn't volunteer for th…"

"I insisted a member of my own company could take care of it," Joric interrupted her, "but I was overruled… and like all good soldiers, I don't question my superiors. I have to trust that the Primarch knows what he's doing," Joric added grudgingly, though she didn't sound at all convinced. The Commander glared accusingly at Pella for a few seconds, then snorted and sat down in her chair. "Alright, let's have your report. What have you learned about the aliens? – and that human especially – is there anything I should be worried about?"

Pella took a deep breath and then gave a faltering account of her interactions with the two aliens so far.

Eventually, when Joric was satisfied, she dismissed the artificer with a curt nod.

Pella left the meeting with Commander Joric feeling decidedly uncomfortable. Joric's formidable character intimidated her, but that wasn't the source of her discomfort. No, it was the unreasonable position she'd been put in… It was how cold this bloody planet was… It was those damn aliens she had to keep an eye on!

She wished she'd never been given this task, but then, it had come from Primarch Fedorian himself…

Unbidden, her mind flashed back to the meeting she'd had with Captain Verress before she'd left Arcadias. The Captain had called her into her ready-room for a vid-link with the Primarch. Fedorian had ordered her to 'observe the alien's activities', and give regular reports to the Commander and Captain. The Primarch used phrases like 'security of the fleet' and 'duty towards the Hierarchy' so many times that she felt like she was being inducted into the Intelligence Services! She had little choice but to follow his commands – she never disobeyed an order – but she couldn't understand why the Captain had selected her to keep tabs on the aliens? That wasn't what she was trained for. She was an artificer, an engineer, that's where her talents lay. She felt distinctly uncomfortable being forced to work under-cover like this…

After all, she was no spy!
Gabby and Erata wandered back to the crew quarters in absolute silence, both of them lost in their own thoughts and Erata in particular still smarting from her injuries. She was trying to resist the urge to scratch the hydrocolloid bandages on her hands.

It wasn't until Erata reached her cabin door that Gabby finally broke the silence as she rounded on the asari.

"Alright, so what was that crack about Boston?" she demanded.

"That was psychology," Erata replied simply. "I needed you focused. Anger is a great modifier against fear and I was trying to keep your mind off the bomb and focused on staying alive."

"Is that so? You're a psychologist now, too?" Gabby said scathingly.

Erata turned from her door and stared at Gabby. "Tell me: when I bad-mouthed Boston, what were you thinking about?"

"Honestly?" Gabby asked, her eyes hardening. "Actually, I was thinking about how much I wanted to pin you down on the ground and beat you with a two-by-four!" she said firmly.

Erata held Gabby's gaze far longer than was comfortable, then, slowly, the asari smiled, her face lit up by a brazen grin. "Great minds think alike, eh, Kitten?"

Gabby tossed fitfully on her bed as she tried in vain to drift off to sleep.

The day's activities had drained her, the rush she'd felt from the adrenaline high after the explosion at Dhazig had long since dissipated. But, despite her exhaustion, sleep still eluded her. It was sometime after two-in-the-morning when she finally admitted defeat and rose from her frigid bed. Pulling the thick duvet around her shoulders, she shuffled out of her room down the corridor's cold floor, her feet swaddled in a pair of soft fluffy bed socks embellished with that pink feline logo she professed to hating – Well, kind-of hating. They were a gag present from Kenneth; a gift she never imagined she'd wear. The only problem was... they were actually really warm.

Gabby wandered down the corridor towards the mess. A mug of hot chocolate was calling her. If she was already cold and awake she might as well be wrapped around a sizzling cup of sweet, sweet chocolate.

Evidently she wasn't the only one who couldn't sleep.

About twenty sappers and security staff were sat around the Mess Hall in small groups, swathed in blankets and each holding steaming mugs of something hot. Gabby wandered over to the drinks dispenser and retrieved a cup of levo-amino hot chocolate. She cradled the steaming mug in her hands and retreated to the communal area in the next room, seeking out a comfy chair she could curl up in.

But her plan to find a seat was quickly scuppered.

The room was littered with turian bodies. With so many personnel operating on the station Gabby had difficulty putting names to faces. Fortunately there was one person she did recognise.

"Officer Khoris," Gabby hailed cheerfully, looking down at the unmarked silver carapace of the man who'd saved her life.
"Engineer Daniels," Khoris replied, rising from his seat. "Good to see you. And it's Officer Abrudas, actually. My given name is Khoris." He held out his hand, which Gabby shook. "Can't sleep?" Khoris asked.

Gabby shook her head. "Guess I'm still wired from yesterday," she confessed. "I didn't get a chance to thank you for what you did…"

"It's my job," Khoris replied with a shrug. "And my pleasure. I'm not usually a first responder, but the Chief made an exception for me yesterday."

"Why?"

"Well, compared with most other people here, I'm considered something of an expert on humans."

"Really?" Gabby said with a grin. "I've heard a few turians have something of an interest in humans."

"No, nothing like that!" Khoris said hastily. "My mom was involved in the Relay 314 Incident. She was a lieutenant with the 49th Flotilla recon team twenty-odd years ago. She told me what happened at Shanxi colony."

"That hardly qualifies you as an expert."

"No. But my mom told me all about first contact with your species, and her experiences in particular. She wanted to prepare me for further contact with humans. But, the stories she told of the war… I have to admit, your species was something of a… oh, what do you call it? – a bogeyman? – you were a bogeyman to me growing up. I had a lot of sleepless nights imagining some scary human was going to break into my room and carry me off."

"Do I really look like a 'bogeyman' to you?"

Khoris' eyes dropped to take in her choice of footwear. "Not in those socks!" he admitted.

Gabby glanced down and smiled, saying nothing. A comfortable silence built up between them as Gabby sipped at her chocolate. She glanced over at the groups of turians scattered around the room; a few of them were casting furtive glances in her direction, while one or two of the bolder sappers were staring at her in unashamed curiosity. Khoris caught the stares directed at her.

"You know what fascinates them, don't you," he said, gesturing at the group.

"What?"

"It's your hair."

"My hair? What's so special about my hair?"

"To be honest, some of them are wondering what it feels like."

"And here I was worried it was going to be something creepy!"

Khoris grinned. "You can't blame them for being curious about your species. We don't have hair."

"Nor do asari," Gabby pointed out. "I would have thought they'd be less interested in me because of that."

"Well, usually they are, but there's always a minority that have a… fixation on certain aspects of
alien physiology.

"You mean a fetish?" Gabby exclaimed.

"Most would prefer to think of it as 'being open to new experiences'."

"Uh-huh." Gabby pulled her duvet protectively around her body. "And where do you stand?"

"I'm amenable – I wouldn't turn the opportunity down, but then I wouldn't go looking for it specifically." Khoris gestured to his seat. "Would you like to sit down?"

Gabby shook her head. "No, you go ahead. I'm gonna... head back to my room and try and get some sleep."

Khoris sat down in the chair. "I'm surprised you can. The temperature's far too low to get comfortable."

"Yeah, I'm having trouble sleeping, too."

"Well, if you feeling cold..." Khoris lifted the blanket and opened his arms wide. He was wearing a casual blue outfit with white strips that hugged his frame. "Space enough for two," he offered. "Shared body heat is the best way to stay warm."

Gabby instinctively took a step back. "I'm really not sure about that. I hardly know you from Adam."

"I've no idea who this 'Adam' is, but the offer wasn't meant for him! And it's not like we'd be the only ones sharing a blanket." He nodded towards the couple nestled together on the far side of the room. "I'm simply offering a proven method to stay warm. I swear my intentions are entirely honourable," he assured her. "I will make no advances towards you, provided you promise to do the same."

Gabby smiled; the thought of being warm again, if only fleetingly, was very tempting. Then she hesitated, suddenly torn. I can't really be considering this, can I?

She glanced around at the alien bodies nestling together for warmth. She really did feel like a stranger in a strange land.

She looked back at Khoris and, somewhat reluctantly, shook her head. "Thank you, but no. It was a kind offer, but I'll be fine."

Khoris shrugged and closed the blanket around his body. "As you wish. But if you ever change your mind, you know where to find me."

Gabby nodded; giving the turian a shy smile, then she turned and retreated back to the solitude of her cold room.
Rising Tensions

Chapter Summary

The cold of Gellix is taking its toll on the turian crew. Will the conditions affect Gabby? And will a call from Gabby's krogan friend, Chaill, affect the team?

Velarus Station Outer Compound, Anapondus, Gellix– 17:05 UTC – 5th February 2183 CE

It was shortly before the storm hit that Pella decided she hated snow.

It had been a hard day. Pella was by the Anapondus forward logistics facility examining the raised structure's five supporting legs for metal fatigue - Alone, thanks to D'Ceni and Daniels being placed on light duty. No such luck for her though.

She glanced over at the main base, past the group of sappers wrestling to secure the damaged weather station, and spotted the two aliens through the garage window, working in the relative comfort of the main hanger.

Pella scowled and shivered as the wind whipped up her coat's hood. She deeply resented this assignment. She was supposed to be keeping the aliens under surveillance, but in the last few days she'd been chased by walking flame throwers, dive-bombed by a worm-neck, and nearly blown up by a batarian booby trap! And, despite the fact the base was crewed by engineers, no-one knew how to fix the bloody heating in this place!

She closed her eyes, trying to calm her mind and fight back the growing feeling of rage. It had been building for a while now, and she was shocked by just how angry she was getting. It was becoming an effort just to keep it contained. She'd read up on the effects of cold temperatures on turian physiology, but she'd never experienced it first-hand until now. It was frightening!

The cold penetrated into her very being until it was all she could think about – It was like a cancer eating away at her insides. She prided herself on how controlled and reserved she was, but right now all she could think about was how much she hated this place and everyone in it!

Every morning she would meditate in an effort to suppress the feelings of hate and rage. But it was becoming increasingly difficult. She was struggling to find a reason not to blame those visiting aliens for this.

If it hadn't been for them I wouldn't have been chosen for this stupid mission to this wretched world. I'd be warm and comfortable on Arcadias right now. Bloody asari! Bloody human!

Pella scanned the structure's casing with her ultrasonic transducer, testing the metal's integrity, when a gust of wind almost blew her off her feet. She looked at the black clouds looming from the west. Another storm was coming in. Deciding her work was done, she started towards the base, only to come upon a couple of sappers, their backs towards her, who were brazenly gawking at D'Ceni and Daniels.

"...There are better ways to keep warm," the first one grumbled. "Just need to find a willing body to curl up with."
"She's not bad to look at," the other said, nodding his head towards the two alien engineers.

"Yeah, the asari's attractive, I'll grant you," the first sapper agreed. "Especially with those colony markings. Skin colourings not bad, either."

"No, I meant the human," the second man said.

The first sapper stared at Daniels, and then turned to his friend, leaning away from him. "Spirits, I didn't know you were into that! You got mammal fever or something?"

"Shut up! She happens to be very pleasing to the eye," his friend insisted.

"So is my rifle, but I don't wanna sleep with it!"

"Why not? It's probably the only action you're gonna see!"

"Gentlemen!" Pella interjected. The two men stiffened at the sound of her voice. "Am I interrupting?"

"No, ma'am!" they answered together, turning towards her.

"Is the view to your liking?" Her tone was almost as icy as the planet.

"We were… admiring the alien's work ethic…" the first sapper began in a misguided attempt to explain himself.

"Save it!" Pella cut him off. "I know what you were admiring."

"We just think it's good to be working with different species, ma'am," the second man said.

"You get this through your thick crests – Stop fantasising about sex with aliens! You focus on your job or I'll make sure you don't get to 'curl up' with any warm body for a very long time! You get me?"

"Yes, ma'am!" The pair saluted, and bustled off to assist the other sappers.

Scowling, Pella continued back to the main hangar. A howl was building in the air. She pulled her coat tighter around her armour.

"Get down!" a voice suddenly yelled behind her.

Pella turned just in time to see the loose cover of the weather station whirl through the air and fly at her. She threw herself flat into a snowdrift and the silver metal sheet whizzed overhead, to be whipped back up into the atmosphere and then fall again, landing with a distant crash on the far side of the compound.

Pella lifted her head from the drift, spluttering, her face caked in snow. She spat out a chunk of freezing ice and blinked away the flakes stinging her eyes. The wind had risen to a shriek now, but she could make out the crunch of several pairs of feet hurrying towards her across the snow.

"Artificer Vettiill! Are you alright?" someone called out.

She coughed and nodded... then she noticed the broken component in her hand. Her ultrasonic transducer had snapped in two.

Pella let out a sharp, fierce obscenity.
"Daniels! You have a vid-link. In the comm-room."

Gabby looked up from the portable generator she was repairing to see Commander Joric's XO approaching. The man motioned for her to follow him. Gabby replaced her tools into her pocket and left Erata to repair the generator while she trailed after the sour-faced turian.

The atmosphere in the hanger was tense. The turians had been jittery all day and were noticeably strung out. Several arguments had already erupted amongst the crew. The XO was just escorting Gabby through the main doors when a screech exploded from their left. A scuffle had broken out. Two female sappers were locked in a death grip, seemingly intent on trying to twist off each other's mandibles.

"Belay that crap!" the XO bellowed. But the pair were too occupied to listen. He waved vaguely in Gabby's direction, "Down the corridor, door to the left," he told her brusquely, then hurried over to break up the fight.

Gabby left him to it and walked along the corridor, the sounds of the fight receding into the distance. She was speculating who was calling her. Only Kenneth and the Alliance knew she was on Gellix, and she wasn't expecting either of them to contact her today. Certainly, Kenneth wasn't scheduled to call her on the link until tomorrow. Maybe there was some sort of emergency? Gabby quickened her pace.

The comm-room was a plain, modular chamber attached to main hanger corridor. Managed by a single comm-officer, the turian looked up from his computer screen and glared at her as she entered, as if her very presence was an inconvenience.

"All communiqués must be arranged in advance," he announced officiously.

"The XO informed me I had a vid-link. It wasn't scheduled. I don't even know who's calling," Gabby pointed out.

"Oh! Well, just for future reference, then." The man closed down his computer. "I suppose you'll want some privacy?"

"If it's no trouble?"

The turian grumbled as he stood up and bustled towards his private office at the back of the room behind the main comm-screen, slamming the door shut behind him. Gabby shook her head. She moved over to the vid-screen and clicked on the flashing incoming signal. The link opened.

A pair of slitted, cobalt blue eyes under a red frontal head plate stared back at her.

"Chaill!" Gabby exclaimed, her brows arcing in astonishment. "This is a surprise."

"A pleasant one, I hope?" the krogan asked.

"Yes! Like you wouldn't believe." Gabby eagerly sat down in the vacant chair. "It's been so cold here; the turians are all on edge, everyone's at each other's throats… I've really needed to talk to a friendly face."

"That's the first time anyone's described my face as being 'friendly'. Or any krogan's face for that matter," Chaill reflected. "Guess my smouldering good looks are finally working their magic. Either
that or you've got a concussion!" He chuckled heartily.

Gabby smiled at the grinning krogan. "I'd describe your features as 'well-worn', Chaill."

"Well, that just makes me sound like a pair of old boots! You know how to charm a krogan, don't you, Gabby?"

"As I recall you had no trouble attracting more than a few admirers after our last dance together."

Chaill looked doubtful. "You didn't see me dance the rumba with the elcor ambassador's wife… It did not end well!"

"I don't know; you certainly impressed me with your talents. Any chance you'd be interested in an encore?"

"Speak to my agent!"

Gabby laughed. "Are you checking up on me?"

"Now what kind of message would it send if I didn't make sure you were safe? I contacted Arcadias and they said you'd been reassigned. Bloody pyjak answering my call wouldn't tell me where you were. He didn't take to my sunny disposition."

"Then how did you find me?"

"I'm on a ship crewed by the most meddlesome race in the Galaxy! I mentioned the turians refused to tell me where you were and the crew almost fell over themselves trying to figure out where you'd been sent. Took the winner all of forty-seconds to trace you to Gellix. Damned impressive. I tell ya, you don't want to get into a pissing contest with a salarian!"

"That's never actually been an ambition of mine, Chaill."

"Glad to hear it!"

They laughed again, the chuckles slowly subsiding. Gabby stared at Chaill for a long moment, her expression thoughtful "You know the Hierarchy is likely monitoring this call?"

Chaill's grin faded. He nodded. "Yeah. And the Salarian Union too, probably. One of the benefits of being a krogan, I guess. And a krogan engineer, at that. That's practically an oxymoron. I'm a freak of nature, Gabby."

"I wouldn't change you for the world," Gabby assured him.

Chaill smiled, regaining his good humour. "So, how's the winter retreat?"

"Oh, Gellix is a paradise, Chaill. You'd love it. You should swing by sometime."

"I hear the sub-zero blizzards are so nice this time of year! Sounds like you're in a similar situation to me, though - working alone with a different species?"

"Yeah, but it's not just me and the turians, there's an asari engineer here too."

"An asari? How are you getting on with her?"

As if on cue, Erata strode through the door, wielding a slim device in her hand. "Hey, Kitten, any chance I could borrow your neutron scanner? Mine's buggered!"
Gabby hadn't bothered turning round. She was still looking at Chaill. "She's a character, that's for sure!" she confessed to him.

"Stupid Elkoss model... Lifetime guarantee, my blue ass!" Erata muttered as she approached Gabby. "Never should have trusted that volus. Oh!" Erata looked up at the screen and saw Chaill – Krogan were hard to miss. Her demeanour changed instantly. "Why, hello there, handsome," she preened. Gabby rolled her eyes. "Kitten, you didn't tell me you knew such a strapping specimen of kroganghood! I don't believe I've had the pleasure."


"Available!" Erata stated with a grin.

"Erata, we were in the middle of something, actually. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least." The asari drew up a chair and sat close to the screen. "So, tell me about yourself..."

"That wasn't an invitation, Erata."

"I'm just making conversation," the asari replied. Gabby folded her arms; her expression like thunder. Erata actually pouted like a naughty schoolgirl. "Alright, you can't blame a maiden for trying!"

A low snigger escaped Chaill's throat. "Asari maidens. Always so bracingly candid and self-assured. Always so single-minded in the pursuit of what you want, until the next big passion comes along."

"Sounds like you've had lots of experience with asari. Am I right?"

Chaill smiled, but shook his head. "Oh, I've been approached by asari many times, but I'm afraid I've rarely been tempted by your species many obvious charms. My tastes are more specific and my affections lie elsewhere."

"Oh, that is a shame," Erata said with a sly grin. "Sooo disappointing."

"I'm sure you'll bounce back," Gabby muttered.

"Unusual to see a krogan engineer, though. And a volunteer..."

"Yeah, we were just talking about that before being interrupted," Gabby pointed out.

"Aaah! I know a subtle hint when I hear one," Erata said.

"Good. I was worried I'd have to give a blatant one!"

Erata stood up. "Nice to meet you, Chaill. Always a pleasure to greet a fellow engineer." She patted Gabby on the shoulder and winked. "I'll leave you two alone. But if there's anything else I can do..."

"Just a little privacy will be fine..."

Pella burst into the room.

"Spirits, that's cold! How the hell did it get in there?" The turian was tearing frantically at her armour. She unsnapped the fasteners and started stripping right there in the comm-room.

"Pella, what's...?" Gabby began.
"Huge chunk of ice! Right down my back," Pella yelled as she tore off her breastplate. She shrugged the remaining body armour off her shoulders, the metal hitting the ground with a dull clang, and jumped up and down, trying to dislodge the ice from her white undershirt. A fist sized chunk of frozen snow dropped to the floor from beneath her shirt. Pella let out a sigh of relief and turned to the other occupants of the room, finally noticing the three pairs of eyes gazing at her – And one of them belonged to a krogan! She froze.

"Afternoon," the krogan offered cheerfully.

Pella squeaked and quickly covered her chest with her arms.

"Interesting company you keep, Gabby. Wasn't expecting a turian striptease! Maybe I should call more often?"

"I'd be happy to show an asari routine…"

"No!" Gabby said firmly.

"Only as part of a cultural exchange," Erata added. "Maybe he could even show us a few moves?"

"Run while you can, Chaill!"

Chaill was laughing with enthusiasm now. "I'll let you get on, Gabby."

"Call again, Chaill."

"Count on it."

The screen went black.

Gabby turned to her colleagues. "Doesn't anyone knock on this planet?"

"Was that him?" Pella enquired.

"That was Chaill," Gabby confirmed.

Pella reached down for her breastplate. "Wow, you were brave," she said grudgingly.

Erata's eyes flitted between them. "Okay, what am I missing?"

"They danced together!" Pella declared as she slipped her armour over her head. "At a human party…"

Gabby rounded on her. "Thank you, Pella! That's the last time I trust you with any personal information. What part of 'in confidence' didn't you understand?"

"She's an asari, she doesn't mind," Pella fired back, refastening the straps. She turned to Erata. "You've probably done the same thing yourself, haven't you?"

"Not with a krogan, no," Erata admitted, "never really had the opportunity myself." The asari suddenly grinned like the proverbial Cheshire Cat. "But, I'm a little delighted by this; it seems that our little Kitten has a wild streak. Tell me, you two just danced, right?" Her face was a picture of leering innocence. "That isn't a euphemism for something else?"

"Ewww!" Pella exclaimed, screwing up her face in disgust. "Don't put me off my lunch!"
"Actually, Chaill happens to be a dear friend," Gabby stated in his defence. "It was a while ago on the Perugia at the Hogmanay hootenanny – That's a…" she began to explain, but Erata interrupted her.

"I spent nine months in Edinburgh. I know what a hootenanny is. What kind of dance was it?"

"The tango," Gabby replied.

"That sounds a little improbable, to be honest. A krogan knew a human dance just like that?"

"Of course not. Chaill, believe-it-or-not, has an interest in dancing, and was keen to pick up some local moves. So I taught him what I knew from dancing back home. We practiced in secret for a few days before the party and then we surprised everyone at the hootenanny."

"I bet that really did surprise everyone!" Pella stated.

"It was very successful, actually. It helped him bond with the crew. I think that's why he likes dancing. He works with so many different species I guess he wants to gain some cultural perspective – And dancing helps to break the ice."

"I don't imagine he'll learn much from the salarians," Pella added.

"Don't be so sure," Erata put in. "Some salarian dances are so energetic they can cause cardiovascular stress!"

"Guess its lucky Chaill's got two hearts, then," Gabby said, grinning.

"And speaking of cardio workouts…" the asari probed obsessively, "He's a charming guy. Dancing can lead to something more in my experience. After your performance you weren't tempted to take it further with him? Perhaps get a little new year bedroom action?"

Gabby was slightly distracted by the sound of Pella making retching noises behind her. "We just danced on the Perugia, okay?" she answered truthfully. "There was no 'new year bedroom action'," she said, air-quoting with her fingers. "Besides, the Alliance doesn't exactly encourage that kind of thing."

"Oh, Goddess, don't I know it! The number of rules you humans have prohibiting fraternization. The Alliance certainly has an aversion to the Beast with Two Backs! That's a shame." She sighed theatrically. "Well, I think you missed a trick there. My sister tells me krogan can be energetic lovers. They have plenty of stamina, apparently."

"Your sister is with a krogan?" Pella asked quietly, her expression registering something akin to shock.

"Thalia, yeah. She's a comedienne back in Armali. They've been together for a decade now. They're very happy. She's expecting her first child in a few months. I've met him, he's a nice guy; respectful, just not very talkative." She turned back to Gabby, an expression that could be termed 'sympathetic' on her face. "It might have been for the best, Kitten. A krogan in a confined space can be dangerous. From what Thalia tells me they can get so excited there's a good chance he'd have taken out a bulkhead!"

Gabby reddened at the comment, a little uncomfortable with her personal life being scrutinised so openly, and with relative strangers at that. The asari attitudes towards sex were well documented, and their open-mindedness with other species was commendable, but Gabby still felt that certain things should remain private, if only to respect the privacy of your partner.
Pella's face twisted up in obvious distaste. "I don't want to be insulting to your sister's choice of bond-mate, but… doing it with a *krogan*? Yuck!"

"It's not the race, it's the individual…"

"…Says the woman who can procreate with anyone," Pella interrupted. "Look, I've got no problem with turians and asari together, or asari and hanar, humans with asari, or even turians and humans for that matter, within reason, but krogan is where I draw the line! They're nothing but ugly, hulking, barbaric, callous animals. They've got no place in Citadel society, and certainly not in the bedroom!"

"You can't generalise like that, Pella," Gabby stated firmly. "Chaill's one of the good guys. I've known humans who were more monstrous than a rabid varren, and there are certainly turians out there who are complete jerks. Don't condemn the whole species because of the actions of a few."

"Too late," Erata muttered, "the genophage saw to that. Reduced an entire civilisation to the level of scavengers!"

"Oh please, krogan were little better than vorcha to start with! No offence to your friend, I'm sure he's very polite, but he's still a *krogan*. You were brave just dancing with him. At least you were on an Alliance ship. Who knows what he might have done otherwise!"

"He isn't like that!" Gabby said hotly. "I've known him for years and he's been nothing but entirely respectful and a consummate professional. Don't judge him just because he's…"

Pella cut her off. "I don't want or need a lecture on why we should all get along. The krogan proved they're dangerous and had to be controlled. That's why they were expelled from the Citadel. Until they learn some restraint, which doesn't look like it'll happen any time soon, they won't be accepted back in." Both Gabby and Erata fixed her with accusing glares. "Alright, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe in the future attitudes will be different and we'll all live together in one harmonious federation of planets, but I doubt it. The history of the galaxy is one of conflict. The first time our two species met it started a war."

"I thought turians referred to it as a 'police action'?!" Gabby retorted, raising her voice.

"It was a damned war!" Pella snapped; the level of her voice elevating to match Gabby's. "And we were mobilising for full scale invasion towards the end. Earth was *this close* to becoming just another occupied colony before the Council stepped in. But what you won't hear from the Hierarchy is how much that war scared us. Your military comprised, what, 3% of the population? And you still managed to hold us off. You'd be surprised how much of a threat to galactic security humans are seen as."

"Pella!" Erata warned.

"It's true, why deny it?" The turian was practically shouting now. "At least here we can keep an eye on you."

"So, Programmes like this, they're just for show?" Gabby's voice rose to match Pella's.

"No. The Republics began these Programmes," Erata stated, trying to calm the situation. "They're a genuine attempt to interact and cooperate; with *everyone*, krogan included." But the turian and human were on their feet now.

"The krogan broke away from the Citadel first. They started the rebellions!"

"And who started the war between us?" Gabby fired back.
"That… was a misunderstanding," Pella admitted.

"That led to the death of 1,300 people and three decades of animosity. We could do without those misunderstandings."

"Humans are expansionist! Look at how you kicked out the batarians. And now we're busy sorting out the attacks from that mess. A human mess!"

"That's not the Alliance's fault!" Gabby protested.

"No, it's never the fault of you humans, is it?! But it's always grunts like us who have to clean up your bloody mistakes!"

"That's enough!" Erata yelled. Her voice held such unexpected authority that the argument was immediately silenced. The human and the turian were glaring at each other, their noses mere centimetres apart. Gabby's fingers had clenched into a fist. She exhaled unsteadily, her breath condensing into vapour; she hadn't realised just how close she'd come to nearly hitting Pella.

The awful silence lingered, until, without another word, Pella turned on her heel and stormed through the open door.

Gabby rocked back on her heels, not meeting Erata's gaze. It had been a while since she'd felt quite so angry. Maybe the cold was getting to her too?

She finally noticed the howl of a full-on blizzard raging away outside the base.

The storm had arrived.
Lines of Communication

Chapter Summary

Everyone has secrets. Gabby talks to Kenneth and Valni on the link; Erata reconnects with her imprisoned sister; and Pella has a revealing conversation with her father...

Engineer D'Ceni's Quarters, Anapondus, Gellix – 13:59 UTC – 6th February 2183 CE

One of the hardest things the crew had trouble getting used to working on Gellix was the almost constant daylight. On most starships and bases there were clear delineations between night and day shifts. But on Gellix, night-time lasted a mere 51-minutes and the planet's 20-hour rotation made it impractical following Gellix local time. The turians' body clocks had a hard time adjusting and insomnia was a common problem amongst the crew. As a result, Velarus Station operated on Universal Co-ordinated Time, which unfortunately, did lead to certain contradictions.

It was midnight on Gellix. Lunch was being served.

Erata stared absently out of her cabin window into the murky blackness, absorbed in the howl of the blizzard besieging the base.

Behind her, Erata's console beeped quietly. The asari sighed; it was a call she was expecting but was hesitant to take. Speaking to the person on the other end always provoked strong emotions – the strongest of which was guilt.

The console beeped again. Erata turned to answer it. She sat at the desk, shaking her head slightly in an attempt to clear her thoughts.

Putting on a bright smile, she answered the call.

The youthful face of an asari materialized on the screen.

"Hey, sis," Erata said cheerfully. "How's my favourite shut-in?"

"I love you, too, Erata," the asari on the other end replied, smirking slightly. "Though I hardly see you these days. Where were you on the last visit?"

"Working," Erata explained quickly. "You know how the Republic likes to keep me busy. I'm a popular engineer."

"I can imagine they are keeping you busy," her sister agreed, "especially after what happened on Illium."

"Ah! You heard about that, then?"

"We do get extranet news feeds here, Erata."

"Yeeah." Erata shifted in her seat. "I had to clear up the wreckage from that fiasco with Lidanya."

"Matriarch Lidanya," the asari corrected hastily, her eyes darting to something off-screen. "Due
respect must always be given to those in authority," she intoned mechanically, as if she was reading from some invisible script.

Erata nodded, more from habit than agreement, and looked a little closer at the younger maiden staring back at her. Her sister was wearing a rather old-fashioned, full-length white dress with a high-collar and darker highlights running down the front. It was a traditional outfit intended to cover the wearer from head-to-toe, and clearly not designed with style (or comfort) in mind. Erata could make out a few other asari, each wearing identical dresses, mingling in the background of the airy, white-blue communal hall her sister was calling from.

"I sometimes wonder if you get into trouble simply to avoid seeing me," her sister said, a hint of accusation in her voice.

"You know that's not true," Erata assured her.

"Yeah, I do, Erata," her sister replied, smiling. "It's just… I miss seeing you. I was hoping you'd be here for the Feast of Athame, but Thalia tells me you're going to be away for that too."

Erata nodded, trying to keep the disappointment from showing on her face. "Yeah, I'm kinda tied up in the Minos Wasteland. Not a place I want to be, that's for sure!" Erata gave a pained expression, her cheerful façade starting to slip. "I'm sorry I won't be there. Honestly, I don't cause trouble to avoid you…" Erata shook her head sadly. "I do it because I'm a screw-up!"

"You know that's not true," her sister assured her quietly.

Erata suddenly brightened up. "I got the copy of your latest book," she said excitedly. "Another triumph. I did not see the twist at the end coming. Though, like your first two, the whole tone was a little bit gloomy – you know, what with everyone dying! You ever thought of writing a comedy?"

"We have Thalia for that," her sister replied with a grin. "I have some news for you, though…" She leaned closer to the screen. "I'm making a trip to the Citadel!"

"Really? When?"

"In two months – pending further evaluations, of course."

Errata grinned freely. "That's fantastic news! I know you'll sail through the assessments. That means we can meet up with everyone. Have a proper reunion… Oh, I could organise a party. Get Mom, Dad and the whole family together…"

"Well, it's… supervised," her sister replied, looking away. "Limited contact only. So, I won't be able to see everyone at once… But I might be allowed to visit the Presidium."

"It'll be so good to see you."

"You promise you'll be there?"

"Try and stop me!"

A broad smile lit up her sister's face. "Where are you working this time?"

"Gellix."

"There for a summer vacation, no doubt!" She grinned again. "How are you getting on with the turians?"
"They're suffering a bit with the cold, as you can imagine. Tempers are frayed and snow-storms are
making work difficult. But they're all professionals. And it's not like I'm bored. There are some
interesting characters here."

"Interesting? How so?"

"Well, there is this one engineer I'm working with… Human. She's highly intelligent. A little
inexperienced working with other species, perhaps; and a bit shy, but very likeable. Quite attractive,
really…"

Someone cleared their throat loudly off-screen, interrupting Erata's train of thought. "This is not an
appropriate topic of conversation, adherent D'Ceni," a stern disembodied voice declared.

Erata's sister turned at the sound of the voice. "My apologies, Matriarch."

Another person appeared on-screen. An asari in a scarlet robe homed into view from the right and
stood looming over Erata's sister – the newcomer's head was just out of shot.

"You are aware of the rules. There will be ample opportunity to discuss more acceptable subjects on
another occasion. And in more regulated circumstances." The newcomer gestured to the groups of
asari mingling in the background. "It is almost time for evening meditation. Please re-join the other
students."

"As you wish, Matriarch Gallae." Her sister turned back to the screen. "I have to go."

"I'll see you on the Citadel," Erata promised.

Her sister nodded. "Missing you, Erata."

The screen went black, leaving only a small block of white computer typescript visible in the bottom-
left corner. It read, Disconnected from Lesuss comm-buoy.

Erata stared into the middle distance and continued to sit there, lost in thought, for Goddess knows
how long. Her thoughts often dwelt on her youngest sister, despite the pain it brought. She wasn't
ashamed of her family's situation – on the contrary, she was proud of her sister's resolve and the
dignity she captured in the face of her condition.

After a time, her console chirped again. Erata sniffed and wiped her eye before opening the display.
The face of Commander Joric appeared before her.

"Yes?" Erata said curtly.

"Am I catching you at a bad time?" Joric asked, frowning.

"No," Erata replied. "What do you need?"

"Regulations demand I keep all senior or visiting personnel in-the-loop if anything unusual is
discovered near the base. Their expertise might prove useful," Joric explained. "And one of our
automated probes just picked up something unusual ten-clicks from here…"

Pella was preparing for bed when the call came through. She had already undressed, hoping against
hope to get some much needed sleep before her 'morning' shift started in six hours. Her armour was
discarded in an untidy heap on the floor, and her body wrapped in two pairs of warm, form-fitting
pyjamas. Despite the layers, she was still cold. She was just wrapping the duvet around herself when
the console on her desk beeped. Pella moved to answer it. The holographic display opened and face of the comm-officer appeared before her.

"My apologies if I've woken you, ma'am. You have a secure communiqué from the Hierarchy on encrypted channels. Shall I feed it to your quarters?"

"Well, I'm not really dressed for it, but sure. Thanks. Who's the call from?"

"Praetor Narrius."

Pella became stone-faced. She sat down in the chair.

The image of the comm-officer disappeared, to be replaced by the face of a dour, tan-coloured turian man, his brow fringe lined with blue colony markings. He bowed almost imperceptibly in greeting.

"Artificer Vettiill," the turian said stiffly. "It is agreeable to see you in good health."

"Hi, Dad," Pella replied.

Narrius didn't react to the title. He seemed to be eyeing the duvet Pella was wrapped in. "I trust the cold is not proving too much of an inconvenience for you?"

"Well, I'm…" Pella began tentatively, "…this weather isn't quite what I'm used to."

"Is your work suffering because of it?"

"No, of course not."

"Then there is no cause for concern."

Pella frowned. "I haven't heard from you in a while. Is everything OK? Is Mom alright?"

"Your mother is well, I believe. She certainly was the last time I heard from her. Her duties have taken her back to Digeris. I understand she recently elected to take a new lover!"

"Daaad!"

"A sub-commander from the 79th Flotilla some twenty-years her junior, my sources inform me. Your mother's choices are her own, of course, and I try to no longer concern myself with them, but that doesn't mean I still don't care for her in my own way. Though I do despair of her consistently poor judgement in sexual partners."

Pella was holding her head in her hands. "Why are you calling, Dad?"

"I don't believe a father needs a reason to call his daughter," Narrius replied.

"That's not been my experience. You've generally only ever called to deliver bad news. Or to give a new assignment… Or to stick your talons in," she added quietly.

"Very well," Narrius conceded. "I have been instructed by the leadership to collect your assessment of the Human System Alliance's representative – and specifically the human's knowledge of element zero technology. The Hierarchy is trying to evaluate the alien's potential level of threat. So, in your professional opinion, is the human a competent engineer?"

"Yes," Pella admitted. "She's actually really good." Pella was surprised to find herself nodding vigorously. "Probably one of the finest engineers I've worked with, in fact. Her knowledge of mass
effect technology is extensive. Even in regards to turian systems. She's calm and extremely adaptable in hostile situations. She can give Artificer Leptis a run for his money, and he's the best engineer I know."

"Sounds like you admire this human? That's not the attitude I would have expected. I remind you your mission is to observe. Not to be in awe."

Something occurred to Pella. "Wait. You knew I'd been ordered to spy on the aliens?"

"Certainly I knew. I endorsed you for the assignment."

Pella gaped. "You recommended me?" she exclaimed. "How could you do that? You know I'm not trained for this!"

"Which is exactly why I recommended you. It's time you started living up to your responsibilities." Narrius glowered, his face showing emotion for the first time. "Our family has a proud tradition of protecting the security of the Fleet. Something you should be honoured to continue, even in your limited capacity…"

"I'm good at my job!" Pella fired back. "I can do a lot more in the Engine Room on Arcadias then I ever could on this frozen armpit of a world!"

"That is not for you to decide. What you are doing on Gellix is for the good of the Hierarchy – Don't make the mistake of getting friendly with this human; she's the enemy, remember that. Have some pride in what you're doing."

"I do have pride, Dad," Pella assured him. "I do have pride."

"Good. Now, I shall let you get your rest. But I will expect your full report in the next solar day." He paused. "It was… pleasant talking with you again, daughter."

Pella gave him a thin smile.

"I will speak to you again when I am able."

"Bye, Dad," Pella said, but the screen had gone black.

Pella kicked out, smashing her foot against the desk leg in frustration.

Damn him! Why does he always have to interfere?

She leant back in her chair, her mind racing. It all made sense to her now – the reason she'd been chosen for this mission. Trust her father to use the security of the Hierarchy as a pretext to wheedle his way into her life; using her like she was just some instrument to be used for his purposes. That's exactly why her mother had left… It was all about what he wanted, with never a thought about anyone else's wishes.

Pella shook her head. Spirits, what a family!

She stood up suddenly, letting the chair crash to the floor behind her, and paced up and down the room. She wasn't going to be able to sleep now, not with this running around her head. She needed time to process this. She needed a hot drink. She needed to get warm.

Pulling the duvet tighter around herself, she wrenched her cabin door open and stomped down to the Mess.
"Refresh my memory, why can't I access the comm-buoy from my quarters?"

Gabby was stood in the communications room, glaring ominously at the comm-officer who at least had the good grace to look suitably embarrassed. "My apologies Engineer Daniels, but I'm not permitted to grant you access to the communications network except directly from the comm-room."

"Let me guess, on Commander Joric's orders?"

"In point of fact, no, the order came from Hierarchy central command."

Gabby blinked, slightly taken aback by that revelation. "Wow, they must really be suspicious of humans."

"Well, to be fair, the Hierarchy is suspicious of everyone." His statement didn't appear to make Gabby any happier. "Would you like me to leave you alone?"

"Very much!" Gabby agreed, nodding.

The man retreated to the seclusion of his office. Gabby sat at the desk and accessed the Gellix comm-buoy, now eager to contact Arcadias. She was actually surprised by how much she'd been missing speaking with Kenneth. Her work didn't feel as fulfilling without him by her side. Somehow it just wasn't the same working on any kind of machinery without his distinct voice resounding in her ear.

The link to Arcadias opened and the smiling face of her long-time friend appeared. But something was wrong. Gabby frowned. For a moment she thought the picture colour needed adjusting. Kenneth's face was purple! Then she looked a little closer; his left eye was sporting a spectacular bruise and his nose was swollen – Kenneth had been in a fight. Her frown became a scowl.

"I'm away for a few days and this is what happens?!

"What, this?" Kenneth asked, gesturing casually to his face. "No, this is just a bit of playful male posturing – a wee test of each other's mettle."

"Do you have mettle to speak of, Kenneth?"

"Aye, of course I do, Gabby. I'm humanity's representative. Gotta do the Alliance proud."

"Having the crap kicked out of you is not 'doing the Alliance proud', Kenneth!"

"It wasna like I was brawling in the corridors. It was all official. We were in the sparring ring. I had a second and everything. Oh, it was a grand match – shame you missed it." Kenneth looked away, and started waxing lyrical. "You woulda been proud, Gabby … I stood in the centre of the ring, my enormous opponent facing me, towering above me, but I took him on anyway. The crowds lined the arena, cheering an' hollering. I've never felt anything like it. An' you know what I did?"

"Bricked your pants?"

"No!" Kenneth raised his clenched fingers. "I took ma fist an' I panned his head like he'd impugned your honour!"

"And then he punched your lights out?"

"My memory is a little hazy on that part, to be honest."
"Brian damage will do that to you, Ken."

"I'll admit the fight was a wee bit one-sided. But I still got in a memorable punch an' then…"

"…Then you graciously allowed him to win because he was one of our hosts?" Gabby finished for him.

"Certainly," Kenneth agreed. "Well, that and he was bigger than me." Gabby couldn't help but smile at that. Kenneth grinned in reply. "Dinna worry though, it was all friendly."

"God help you if it was hostile!"

"Anyway, never mind me, Gabby, what's with you and the get-up?" He waved vaguely at Gabby's orange, fur-lined coat. "You auditioning for a part in Eskimo Nell?"

"Trouble with the heating," Gabby replied, pulling the coat tighter around her. "No-one seems to be able to get the generator working properly."

"That's strange. Surprised you havna gone down and fixed it yourself.

"Well, maybe I will, Kenneth." She shivered. "This field trip is rapidly losing its novelty value!"

"You don't wanna stay on permanently, then?" Kenneth teased.

"Right now all I want is to be back on Arcadias."

"I knew it! You're missing me, girl."

"I'm missing a hot bath!"

"A distinct lack of baths on turian vessels. You may have to wait until we're back on the Citadel."

"If I have to I'll fill-up one of Arcadias' empty cargo-crates and dunk myself in that!"

"Well, I'd hope you'd take it out of the cargo deck first. You might get a few funny looks from the crew!" Kenneth was grinning at her, but slowly the smile faded and his expression became slightly despondent. "But, I can't say I blame you for wanting to come back. It must be tough being so far away from everyone you know. Working with complete strangers in an alien environment. I can see how you might start to get a wee bit homesick…"

Gabby's brow creased. She couldn't decide whether he was talking about her situation or his.

"What's the matter? Are you feeling lonely, Kenneth?"

"Not in the least, girl." Kenneth bristled at the suggestion. "I've got plenty to occupy me."

"I can see that. That's quite a shiner you've got."

"You should see the other guy."

"Why? Break a nail when you collided with his fist, did he?"

"Oh, ye of little faith! I'll have you know he'll be remembering our match for quite some time." He glanced away, his frown softening as he failed to meet her eye. "Though, I'll admit something isna quite right. I'm not getting yelled at anymore, there's no shrill sound of protest from the console opposite. I canna put my finger on what's missing."
"Stuff it, Kenneth."

"Aye, there it is. Like music to my ears. It's all coming back to me."

Just then Gabby noticed a subtle movement on the stairs behind Kenneth. A figure was creeping down the Core Monitor stairwell. Gabby smiled as she recognised the tan-coloured face of Officer Severan, smartly dressed, as always, in her fetching blue and silver uniform.

In the days before she'd left for Gellix, Gabby had noticed that Severan was spending an inordinate amount of time in Kenneth's company; chatting with him while he repaired equipment, sitting with him during meals, laughing at his bad jokes, and doggedly asking him to relate stories of his early years growing up in Scotland. She thought it was laudable that a turian was taking such an avid interest in human culture, but Gabby still feel a little peeved that Severan had never asked for stories about her childhood.

"Hello ma'am," Gabriella offered happily. Sevaran froze; her expression reminiscent of a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Gabby quickly stifled a laugh at the expression of embarrassment on the turian's wide-eyed face. Kenneth turned around to see where Gabby was looking. "How are you coping with this one?" Gabby indicated Kenneth.

Severan quickly regained her composure and walked up to join Kenneth at his console. "He's exceptional, Daniels," she replied cheerfully, "I'm very impressed with him."

Kenneth beamed eagerly at the compliment; in fact, he had a distinctly smug look on his stupid face. *Any little praise from a woman! Doesn't take much to sway you, does it, Kenneth?*

"He's feeling lonely," Gabby said, goading her friend.

"I am not feeling lonely," Kenneth fired back.

"He's bruised, battered and a bloody martyr for trouble. Keep an eye on him, would you ma'am?"

"Consider it done," Severan eagerly agreed. "Though, I did have a hand in getting him into trouble in the first place."

Gabby cast a withering glance at her facially injured friend. *Typical! Kenneth has to drag someone else into his shenanigans.*

"You wouldn't be the first and I'm sure you won't be the last. It's all fun and games 'til someone gets hurt."

"Now you're starting to sound like my mum!" Kenneth said petulantly.

"You know what the best way to control him is?" Gabby asked the turian, pointedly ignoring the discoloured engineer. "If he gets out of line just threaten to shave his beard."

"Um..." Severan's eyes darted towards Kenneth.

"I mean it, if he won't do what he's told just take a razor and go to town on that peach fuzz. That'll bring him round."

"I can't say I have any experience using a razor," Severan confessed; she looked a little worried now.

"Well, there's a first time for everything. Don't worry, ma'am, just the threat of it should be enough..."
"I'm…" Kenneth began.

"You know, actually," Gabby interrupted, "I don't think I've ever seen his face in the nude. Could you shave him anyway and send me the pictures?"

"What, just the beard?" Severan asked anxiously.

"I am standing right here, Gabby," Kenneth reminded her.

"Why do you think I said it?" she replied, grinning.

"I'm hanging up now," Kenneth stated firmly.

"I think I left a lady-shave in my cabin, ma'am; it's there if you need it…"

"Duly noted," Valni replied, grinning at Kenneth. The turian's gaze lingered on his face; her eyes flicked up to his hair. In the brief time she'd spent in their company, Gabby had learned to read turian facial cues quite well, and for one fleeting instant she thought Valni was looking at Kenneth with almost an expression of longing. The moment passed and Severan glanced back at the screen, fixing Gabby with a warm smile. "You're being missed on Arcadias. And Leptis needs you at your station, so come back safe."

Gabby beamed in response, and then shivered. *God, it's cold! Maybe I should have taken Khoris up on his offer?*

She glanced up when the comm-officer re-emerged from his office, his expression serious; he was holding a computer pad in his hands.

"Stay warm, Daniels," Severan added.

"Doing my best, ma'am," she replied.

"See you in a fortnight, Gabby," Kenneth said quietly.

Gabby waved and the signal died.

She sat there for a moment, still a little preoccupied by Valni's curious expression. *Maybe human hair is just as fascinating to turian women as it is for men?* she speculated. *No reason why it shouldn't be the same for females.*

She made a mental note to ask Officer Severan about it when she was back on Arcadias.

The comm-officer coughed into his hand, interrupting her chain of thought.

"Pardon me, but Commander Joric wants to speak to you," he said. "She's on the link."

Gabby opened the call and the brown facial carapace of Commander Joric appeared. "Daniels. There's a situation that I'm obliged to notify you of," she said formally.

"What is it, sir?" Gabby asked.

"Twenty minutes ago one of our automated probes found a body ten-kilometres from the base. It was buried in the snow. The storm may have exhumed it."

Gabby frowned. "Is it one of the crew?"
"No." Joric shook her head. "Everyone's accounted for. Besides, the armour's all wrong. I've sent a team out to retrieve it. The body is pretty messed up but preliminary scans suggest it's a batarian!"
Chapter Summary

The dead batarian points towards a rogue mercenary group. Gabby, meanwhile, manages to repair the heating and is promptly sent to regenerate another station located far away from the capital...

Chapter Notes

There won't be another update on this story for a few day. Obviously, with Christmas almost upon us, I won't be adding new chapters until after the holiday - most likely around the 28th December.

Velarus Station Morgue, Anapondus, Gellix – 06:43 UTC – 7th February 2183 CE

There wasn't much left of the corpse.

The body had been salvaged from its resting place and brought to the base some ten hours previously, at great risk personal to the crew Commander Joric had sent out. The blizzard had grown in intensity to the point where she had seriously begun to fear for the crew's safety. Fortunately, the team were professionals and veterans of environments such as Gellix. They'd brought the mummified remains into the morgue and placed it on the examination table, waiting for the body to thaw out sufficiently before the medical examiner could perform an autopsy.

Commander Joric stared down at the naked cadaver. It was certainly male, and there was no doubt that it was a batarian – the four sunken eyes on its bloated head confirmed the race. Most of the skin was burnt black, but Joric could see patches of mottled yellow, with darker brown covering the bare scalp. Four of its eight nostrils had been burned away and there was extensive trauma to one side of its face; the left cheek was almost completely absent, allowing a clear view of the batarian's needle-like teeth. One arm was gone leaving just a charred stump, and both legs were missing below the knee. Whatever had happened to the man, Joric sincerely hoped he'd died quickly.

She glanced up at the doctor, who was turned away from her, focused on the readings on his omni-tool. The doctor – an old friend of her father's – was one of the few people in the Hierarchy she trusted implicitly. The man was renowned for being slightly unconventional and fond of telling a good story. He was also privy to information the Commander liked to keep to herself. Joric's parents were unusually keen on alliteration and had named their three children, 'Jansan', 'Jynha', and 'Jhi'im'; traditionally masculine names all. But Joric respected the doctor sufficiently to permit him to call her by her first name. In private, at least.

She cleared her throat. "So, what's the story with our guest, doctor?"

The man closed his omni-tool with a flourish and then turned to the Commander, ready to present his preliminary findings.
"He's dead, Jhi'im!" he said with a grin.

Joric closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose between her fingers. She really wasn't in the mood. "Spirits, doctor! I hope there's more to your diagnosis?"

"Certainly, Commander." He gestured at the corpse. "Allow me to introduce to you Erund Ran'perah, or certainly what's left of him. According to his DNA profile, a thirty-three year old former chemistry teacher from Khar'shan. Fortunately he was listed in the Citadel educational database. Judging by his armour and the new tattoos on his right shoulder he spent the last few weeks of his life working for the Ion Storm mercenary group as an explosive ordnance specialist – there's extensive chemical residue left on his skin. Bit of a departure from his previous profession."

"I'll say! How do you go from teaching chemistry to being a merc?"

"Mercenary groups are always on the lookout for individuals with the ability to make explosives. However, his questionable skill with chemicals may have contributed to his change in profession. He wasn't very good at it."

"How can you tell?"

The doctor pointed at the missing arm. "See the blast damage around his shoulder and torso? It was a low level explosion, but he was leaning towards the blast when he died, no doubt hunched over a device that detonated prematurely. Mercs don't usually bother trying to disarm bombs, so the only likely explanation is that he was carrying it and the detonator activated. This suggests it was self-inflicted. He was blown up by his own bomb."

"Can't say I've heard of this Ion Storm group," Joric admitted. "But then new merc and slaver groups are always popping up. Are we in danger from these mercs?"

"Well, there's always a danger of that here. This is Gellix, after all. But if you're asking if this particular group is still around? I'd say, probably not. Erund had been in the ice for about five years – we would most likely have found their base of operations before now."

"I'll make Arcadias aware of the discovery."

"If our frozen friend's level of skill is anything to go by I doubt the rest of the mercs would have posed much of a threat. But… it's a shame the batarians aren't still around, to be honest, Commander." The doctor grinned. "It would make an interesting change of pace, and would have given the crew something to focus on other than the cold. Especially after the Dhazig setback. A little fire-fight would have added a bit of variety to proceedings."

Joric nodded. She'd been giving this problem a great deal of thought. Half the crew had already been diagnosed with winter-tour syndrome, the disorder consisting of insomnia, depression, extreme mood swings and cognitive impairment. And with the heating out those symptoms were only going to get worse. One half of the base was ready to lynch the other half. Something had to give.

"Maybe we need to widen our field of operations…" Joric mused.

"Jhi'im?"

"I think it's time we regenered Entarus Station. Set up a regular exchange schedule. We have the man-power to get it operational and still maintain normal base functions here. The crew needs the chance to unwind."

The doctor nodded approvingly. "Good idea. We haven't had any orders in that regard but I suppose
the Hierarchy does allow for a certain degree of latitude and initiative.

Joric turned and called out for her XO. The man appeared in the doorway. "Begin preparations to regenerate Entarus," she ordered. "We're sending a team out to man the station." Her XO actually smiled, showing his support for the plan. "It might be an opportunity to get our visitors off our hands, too. Where are the human and the asari?"

"They're both down to the generator room, ma'am," he replied. "Engineer Daniels was complaining about the cold. She seemed determined to try and repair the heating system herself. But I think there was a glitch in my translator, sir. The human used a phrase I didn't quite understand."

"What was it?"

"She mentioned something about being 'sick of living in a frickin' fudgical!!'

Gabby and Erata stood half-way down the flight of steps leading to the generator room (although 'cavern' would be a better description), both staring in astonishment at the view before them. It was difficult to say who was more taken aback by the turian's choice of power generator for Anapondus.

"That's a geothermal plant!" Erata exclaimed.

"I know," Gabby replied, her eyes wide with excitement. "This is pretty wicked!"

The generator rose from the brown earth like some weird skyscraper, most of it buried underground in the centre of the immense natural cavern that Velarus Station was built upon. The structure's copper-like exterior was illuminated from all sides by powerful arc lamps, the light bouncing off its surface and lighting up the cave. Despite the lack of windows, Gabby knew what was inside the structure: A liquid-dominated plant powering several massive turbines linked to a heat exchanger and a series of injection wells stretching several kilometres underground.

To the far left of the structure were two consoles and a large crowd of engineers with a single turian man at the centre trying to relay orders. He looked strung out and was being harried by the other engineers. This was obviously not his day.

The crowd began to disperse as Gabby and Erata approached him.

"Are you the engineer in charge?" Gabby asked.

"Yes," the harassed man replied. "And you don't need to tell me the heating isn't working – I'm perfectly aware of that!" The turian threw his toolkit onto the floor next to the console. "Everything should be functioning normally, but we're barely getting enough energy to power the lights, communications, emergency reserves, and only intermittent heating."

Gabby glanced off to the left, her attention drawn to a familiar spherical construction built into the bedrock of the cavern. A mid-sized element zero core was humming quietly to itself behind the geothermal plant.

"You've got an eezo core installed?" Gabby asked the man.

"That's right. It stabilizes the local electromagnetic field. Operating on Gellix is a nightmare! This world has more gravitational anomalies than any planet I've worked on. Building the base here was ideal because the thermal vents mean we have a sustainable power source, but there are also vast heavy metal and magnetite deposits beneath Anapondus. It causes gravity wells; fluctuations in the electromagnetism of the crust. The eezo core lowers the mass of the local strata and counters the
effects of the gravity well. Without it we wouldn't be able to extract the heated water and none of the
generators would function properly."

"They're not functioning properly now," Erata pointed out.

"Don't you think I know that?" he yelled back. The strain really looked like it was getting to him. "I
have spent the last week checking and rechecking every millimetre of power lines and machinery in
this plant, and I cannot find the fault."

Gabby had wandered over to the core's monitor. "Have you checked the eezo core?"

"That's operating within normal parameters." He waved his hand dismissively and turned away,
muttering to himself. "This simply should not be happening…"

"Are you sure about that?" Gabby asked. She leaned down and stared at the monitor. "These
readings are slightly off…" If there was one thing she prided herself on, it was her knowledge of
mass effect physics.

"Only by a small amount!" the man snapped. "The core is fully operational, as you can plainly see.
I've allowed for minor discrepancies. Whatever's causing the fault shouldn't be affecting the heating."

"I remember this…” Gabby said. She was staring at the core's readings on the screen, lost in thought.
After a while, Erata wandered over to stand by her side.

"What are you thinking?" the asari asked.

There was a long pause before Gabby murmured, "The Morse potential."

The turian engineer frowned. "I'm… not familiar with that," he confessed.

"You probably know it by a different name. It has to do with the potential energy function between
atoms. All element zero cores have a sympathetic resonance – their atoms vibrate at the same
frequency - so two cores in close proximity can start to echo one another."

"Yeah, I know about that. We call it, the Vitaron effect."

Gabby nodded. "Ordinarily the influence is barely noticeable. But on rare occasions another more
powerful element zero core can start to affect a weaker one. I've only heard about it third-hand from
a salarian physicist, but these readings are very similar to what he described. And based on what
you've said, I would bet all the credits in my pockets against all the credits in your pockets that there's
a powerful mass effect engine nearby that's influencing this one. An eezo core powerful enough to
override this core and prevent it from fully countering the gravity well. This, in turn, would prevent
the generators from operating properly and affect multiple base functions, including heating."

"A nice theory," the man conceded. "What do we do about it?"

"Well, if I'm right, the resonance could be countered if we take the core signal out of alignment by
maybe two or three microns, that way the dissonant phase shift should be enough to disrupt the other
core's influence. In theory…"

"At this point anything's worth a shot," the man agreed. Gabby turned back to the controls and set
about altering the eezo core's phase alignment. A minute passed before Gabby stepped away from
the controls and looked up at the geothermal plant. Gradually, a deep rumble could be heard coming
from the plant as the turbines wailed in protest and began to spin up to maximum rotation. The lights
around the cavern brightened in intensity. Every dial on the board suddenly rose to maximum and the
The generators hummed with renewed vigour. The poor engineer stepped closer to the console and stared at his board in astonishment. " Spirits, you are kidding me?!" he exclaimed.


Just then a voice called out to them, "You got it working, I see? Congratulations."

They looked up: Commander Joric and her XO were approaching them, shadowed by a small entourage of officers, including Khoris.

"It wasn't me, Commander," the engineer confessed. He gestured towards Gabby. "Our visiting engineer solved the problem."

Joric turned to Gabby who explained how she'd repaired the generators. Joric listened carefully, nodding occasionally as the human repeated her theory of a second eezo core.

"Is it deliberate?" Joric asked eventually.

"I very much doubt it, sir," Gabby replied. "I don't believe anyone would waste billions of credits building such a powerful eezo core just to knock out our heating."

"Point taken."

"My guess is the core's a remnant of the last war. Possibly in some old abandoned krogan base – Maybe it's simply discharging its last quantity of eezo and flaring as it burns itself out? It could have affected any one of our systems."

"Can you pinpoint the source?"

"I could if we had a quantum harmonic oscillator," Gabby said.

Joric rounded on the engineer. "Why haven't we detected this rogue core before?"

"The natural deposits of magnetite in the planet's crust would make it difficult to locate, sir. Unless the power spikes we wouldn't be able to detect it on the base sensors… We could try sweeping the area one square kilometre at a time using the APC's, but that could take weeks…"

Joric shook her head. "No. Our assets are limited. That's not a priority right now. If an ancient krogan eezo core is still active we can't waste resources searching for it. I'll worry about it if it becomes a problem. Just as long as we can return all base systems to normal and counter its effects."

Joric turned to Gabby and Erata. "Very well done. I'll make sure this goes in my report to the Alliance. I also have a new assignment for you both, assuming you're fit for duty?"

"Yes, ma'am," they replied.

"Be in the main hanger by zero-nine hundred."

Gabby and Erata saluted smartly. Joric nodded and turned, leading her followers back up the staircase. Only Khoris stayed behind, smiling down at Gabby.

"Our engineers have been trying to repair the heating for the past week. You come in and within a few minutes it's fixed?" he asked.

"It just needed a fresh pair of eyes," Gabby replied, shrugging modestly.

Khoris stared at Gabby with undisguised admiration. "That is damned impressive. Just how large a
brain are you carrying in that head of yours?"

The human returned a bashful smile.

Gabby had never been so popular before.

Her part in the restoration of the base's heating was rapidly disseminated amongst the crew and very soon complete strangers were rushing up to shake her hand and thank her personally. Gabby found her new found celebrity a little daunting, but Erata positively lapped up the attention, shadowing Gabby throughout the day and making every effort to introduce herself to the grateful troops.

Within an hour, the base was so well heated that the crew had dispensed with their coats altogether. Some of them had even gone so far as to remove the breastplates of their Thermal Armour. Considering it was part of their uniform, Commander Joric soon put a stop to that and ordered that armour must be worn on duty. The change in the turian's behaviour was remarkable. Engineers who had been ready to kill each other just a few days previously, now smiled freely in the corridors. Jokes and laughter could be heard, and Gabby was offered hot drinks or assistance with work at regular intervals, most of which she politely declined.

To add to their delight, Commander Joric had assembled the crew in the hanger and announced that a large team of engineers, including Gabby and Erata, were being sent to Entarus Station as soon as the storm cleared. Everyone reacted enthusiastically to the news and eagerly set about preparing for the trip. Gabby assumed their excitement was simply the chance to get out of the base and was too wrapped up in her own work to think any more of it.

The storm lingered for another forty-hours. Gabby spent her time on general repairs or packing for the relocation. She saw little of Pella, but when she finally spotted her in the mess hall she noticed that the turian had cheered up considerably, even laughing freely with a group of female sappers. Evidently the repair of the heating had restored her good humour, too. Gabby hoped that was a good sign and a chance to patch up their shaky relationship. Despite the hostility of their last exchange, Gabby did want to give her the benefit of the doubt and at least try to clear the air.

Eventually, the storm cleared and Gabby was given the opportunity to find out.

**Tyrus APC, Ninety-Four Kilometres East of Anapondus, Gellix – 13:05 UTC – 9th February**

The convoy of six Tyrus APC's crested the ice-covered hill, moving in formation across the frozen wasteland towards Entarus Station. They were the advance party; the custodians of the base, who would make the initial approach to reopen and regenerate Entarus and prepare it for the main company of troops to arrive later in the day. Turians always sent an advance guard to assess a fortified position first, and preferred (like the human idiom) not to put all their eggs in one basket.

Gabby sat at the controls of the third Tyrus from the front, enjoying the fact she'd actually had the chance to pilot it much more than she thought she would. She grinned as the Tyrus launched over a particularly large drift, the wheels scrabbling as it hit the snow again and jolting everyone in the cabin. Erata was in the now cramped rear cabin, jammed in with crates of equipment and already regretting her decision to allow the human to drive. Pella, meanwhile, sat silently next to Gabby, enjoying a bit more space, if not the conversation.

The dialogue so far had been forced and overly polite, the human and turian making stilted, awkward exchanges. Erata, however, wasn't nearly as reticent and, as they were nearing Entarus Station, finally broached the proverbial elephant in the room.
"So, anyone want to talk about what happened the other day?"

"Spirits! Not even a little bit."

"It might be good to get everything out in the open – air your dirty laundry, as the humans say?"

"Well, I'm not human, and why on Palaven would I want to show you my laundry?"

"Come on, having a good chat about your feelings, it'll make you feel better," the asari insisted.

"No it won't," Pella muttered.

"I'm willing to talk, Pella," Gabby offered.

"Me, too. I love me a good heart-to-heart."

"You want me to admit I was wrong, is that it?" Pella asked.

"I just want us to clear the air…" Gabby began.

"But sure, admitting you were wrong is a positive first step," Erata interrupted. "It'll be good for the soul, Pella."

"Good for the soul? Really? I…" The turian snorted and shook her head in frustration. "Alright, you know what, I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry I can't be as open-minded as you asari. I'm sorry turians can't all view the universe from your lofty perspective. I'm sorry that other species might possibly have different opinions to you. But, most of all, I'm sorry that asari haven't realised that not everyone wants to sleep with every sentient race in the Galaxy!"

"You think that's what asari are like?" Erata asked, there was a slight edge to her voice.

"Well, isn't that how asari have always acted? Jumping into bed with anything that's got a pulse?"

"You don't know as much as you think," Erata said. "It certainly wasn't like that in the years after we encountered the salarians. Those kinds of relationship don't happen overnight. You want to know what happened the very first time an asari and salarian slept together?"

"Well, I'm sure lots of 'embracing eternity' was involved!" Pella retorted, the comment going completely over Gabby's head.

Erata shook her head. "Scandal. Outcry. The news swept through the Republics and the Salarian Union and was met with revulsion by the ruling classes. The couple had broken an unspoken and previously unthinkable taboo and were branded pariahs by both governments. Then, in response to mounting pressure from the Matriarchs, any bonding or melding between species was officially banned throughout the Republics for over a century."

"Is that true?" Gabby asked. "I always thought asari had been more open-minded."

"It was a different time, and the past is another country – they do things differently there."

"Hang on, a century isn't very long for asari," Pella pointed out, "how did attitudes change so quickly?"

"Trust me: the best way to encourage asari maidens to want to try something is by banning it! Just a few years after the prohibition there were secret clubs, safe houses and speakeasies set up for assignations with like-minded salarians. And not just on the Citadel; visiting salarians could meet up
in secret with their lovers on Thessia, too. The Matriarchs were used to rebellion from the younger generation, but this response from the Maidens was unprecedented – they’d basically set up a sophisticated underground network right under the noses of the authorities."

"There were salarians who went for that?" Pella asked incredulously.

"Are you kidding me? Salarians absolutely love secrets and drama; half the time it was them doing the organising. It was an exciting, hedonistic time full of danger, romance and intrigue. Well, at least that's how the classic vids portray it – I'm sure they've romanticised it a bit… By the end of the first hundred years the practice was so widespread the Republics had no choice but to lift the ban. Of course, attitudes were slow to change in the governments. You still had the old guard who thought the practice repulsive, but over time that generation was replaced and so were the attitudes. Eventually it became not only acceptable, but preferable. Bonding with an alien species increases the genetic potential of asari children – or so conventional wisdom would have us believe."

"A race of xenophiles," Gabby observed. "But now you all get along with everyone?"

"No. The attitudes have simply been reversed. Now it's actually socially unacceptable for us to have asari bond-mates. And those that do are ostracised. We're the most advanced race in the galaxy," Erata drawled, her voice laced with irony, "just look at how sophisticated we've become." The asari unexpectedly broke into song: "For the times, they are a-changin'."

"Bob Dylan," Gabby said, recognising the tune.

"One of my favourite human songs," Erata replied, smiling.

"So, who was your father?" Pella asked. "A salarian? Turian?"

"No, I'm one of the few to bare the stigma of growing up a pureblood." She hawked loudly as she spat on the floor. "My father was asari, so my sisters and I had the taunts, and the changing of schools, and the loss of friends. Oh, and the occasional physical threats that makes for such a pleasant childhood."

"You got threatened?" Pella asked quietly.

"A few times – mostly by 'friends' who'd found out about my heritage."

Gabby shook her head. "I hadn't realised that asari could be so…"

"Cruel?" Erata suggested.

"Blinkered."

"Every species has a prejudice against something."

"It still doesn't explain why salarians, who have practically no sex drive, would want to bond with asari," Gabby pointed out. "Your two species aren't even physically comparable. Aren't you a mammal, like me?"

"Not precisely, but close enough," Erata admitted.

"I have a theory about that," Pella interjected. "It's because you can give them children. The fact that you can procreate with them means that you're seen as desirable. It's a basic biological need; the need to propagate the next generation. One that doesn't work for turians and humans. It's okay for asari, you can have children with anyone. But for us lowly species that have to get by on biological
compatibility, there's no incentive to want to sleep with other races except for sexual pleasure. And that just makes it a kink! One I don't share."

"No," Gabby stated, shaking her head, "what about love, and tenderness, and companionship? What about single-sex couples, or mixed race families? The ones that have to adopt? There are plenty of multispecies couples that have children of a different race. They seem to get by."

"Alright, that's their choice, but it doesn't change the fact that they can't have children together. That's my point."

"There's more to a relationship than having children together," Erata muttered. "Some choose not to. Others can't have them… even with their own species…"

"Well, that's… not what I was taught…" Pella confessed, but her reply lacked conviction; doubt was creeping into her voice.

The convoy suddenly crested the hill ahead of them and Entarus Station homed into view. The station design was almost identical to Velarus, with the same white-grey modular low-lying constructions and enclosed gangways connecting the numerous smaller buildings branching out from the main structure. The stations' main entrance was a pair of large armoured doors with a small air-lock next to it. The convoy pulled up by the main entrance. Khoris and a few of the sappers exiting their vehicles and began milling about in front of the base. They looked puzzled.

"I'll… find out what's going on," Pella offered. She exited the Tyrus hastily; most likely glad to be out of the alien's company. Erata and Gabby watched her approach the other turians.

"Digeris colony," Erata said by way of explanation.

"What do you mean?" Gabby asked.

"Digeris – Pella's home world. They were hit hard during the krogan rebellions and they never forgot or forgave them for it. Even today the colony is surprisingly xenophobic, which, for most turian colonies is saying something! They make sure they teach their kids accordingly. She can't help the way she was raised."

The batarian had observed the visitors' arrival from his vantage point high on the ridge overlooking Entarus Station. A large group of soldiers were assembling in front of the main entrance and a tanned coloured turian was now moving across the compound. He trained the cross-hairs of his sniper scope, tracking what he recognised to be a female in orange and black thermal armour as she walked from the APC towards the other crowd of turians. The familiar rush of excitement started to flood his system – that prickly sense of power. It would be so easy to end her life right now. The smallest amount of pressure on the trigger and everything she was would be extinguished. The man smiled. Of course, it would also give away his position...

"Might be worth it just to remove one more damned Hierarchy trooper from Gellix."

His partner shifted slightly beside him and lowered the binoculars from his face.

"Don't get any ideas," he warned.

The man snorted in reply. "Like she's worth the bullet."

"Wasn't expecting the turians back here. I thought the base was abandoned?"
"It was… We'll keep an eye on them. It'll make our transports harder to conceal."

"Looks like the turians aren't alone." His partner was looking off to the left. "There's an asari and human with them!"

The sniper drew his attention to the pair of aliens exiting the turian APC, and focused his scope on the human in an orange coat. He smiled again, revealing jagged yellow teeth. "A female judging by the hair. Rare stock on Gellix. Looks slightly older than the buyers usually prefer, but they still go for a large asking price back in the markets…"

Down in the compound, Gabby and Erata were advancing on Pella. The rest of the turians were starting to split up into groups and moving around the back of the base.

"What's going on?" Erata asked.

"All the doors are jammed. The teams are going to conduct a sweep of the buildings to see if they can find another way in."

"They're not likely to find a window open," Gabby said. She glanced around at the ominous clouds building on the horizon. "We don't want to be left exposed like this. I'd rather get inside."

Pella nodded. "I agree. Not to worry; I can sort this one out." She moved to the first Tyrus and opened the rear cabin before rifling through one of the cargo containers.

"Um, what are you doing?" Erata asked.

Pella retrieved a concussion grenade and remote detonator from the crate. "It's an old trick I learned," she announced, already walking past the two, slightly concerned engineers and powering towards the secondary air-lock next to the hanger doors. "We set the grenade to a minimum yield, and place it against the iced-up lock to detonate it and clear the blockage," she explained. "I've done this before on colony worlds. The lock should withstand the explosion. Any damage will be superficial. This is a controlled, focused detonation."

Pella pinned the grenade against the frozen door, but then she frowned as she tried to adjust the yield. "They've changed the interface since I used one of these last," she muttered.

The human and asari exchanged a anxious glance. A few seconds passed. Eventually, Pella turned and ushered them both to the safety of a low concrete barricade some distance from the entrance. They crouched down behind the wall.

"Look, maybe we should wait for the rest of the team to come back?" Gabby suggested.

"I'm not a complete novice. I have used blasting caps to clear blockages like this before," Pella insisted, wielding the detonator. "These grenades are basically the same thing."

"Those caps were low yield explosives for the construction industry," Erata pointed out. "This is military grade."

"Yeah, but there can't be that much of a difference." Pella replied.

She pressed the button.

The heat from the blast could be felt by the two batarians high on the ridge. They watched the ball of flame expand, then rapidly whither to nothing, the splinters of the base entrance falling in chunks around the compound. There was a pause. The two scouts stared at each other in bemusement.
"Just whose side are they on?" the sniper asked.

When she felt it was safe, Gabby carefully lifted her head from behind the makeshift shield she'd been crouching behind and blinked at the devastation Pella's calculation had wrought on the base. Most of the entrance was intact. The bits that weren't were spread out (in varying sized chunks) over a twenty metre radius around the open terrain, or had embedded itself in the side of the transport vehicles. She coughed fitfully, clearing away the particles of dust from her lungs.

Pella poked her head out and surveyed the devastation.

"There's a possibility I may have gotten my sums wrong," she admitted quietly.

Gabby fixed her with a piercing glare. Her ears were still ringing from the explosion. Erata slowly stood up, her right hand brushing away bits of debris from her scalp crest. She sighed resignedly and turned to the sheepish turian. "Pella..." she began.

"Yeah?"

"...You were only supposed to blow the bloody doors off!"

Pella was in the doghouse. After her little 'mishap' she'd refused to speak to anyone and kept herself busy repairing the damage to the air-lock. Surprisingly, only Khoris had managed to get more than two words out of her. Gabby recognised a bruised ego when she saw one and decided to keep a respectful distance.

Despite her obvious embarrassment, the crew were grateful Pella had able to access the base. Entarus Station was also powered by a geothermal plant, and using the technique Gabby had demonstrated back in Anapondus, the engineers were soon able to get the base up to temperature.

The crew were thrilled, and very soon Gabby noticed excited talk about that evening's 'session'. It wasn't until much later when talking to Khoris in the observation lounge that Gabby finally discovered what all the excitement was about.

"Oh, that's easy," he said casually, and pointed out of the main window. "They want to try out that,"

he pointed to a large domed structure connecting from the rear of the main building.

"Is it some sort of training area?"

"That is the Entarus Thermæ. The first one built on Gellix. There were supposed to be others but they never got around to it. Apparently, it's almost as large as the ones you'd find on Tayseri Ward on the Citadel."

"A thermæ?" Gabby asked. "The name kinda rings a bell. What is it?"

"You've never been to a thermae?" Gabby shook her head. "Oh, you've missed out. It is the best way to unwind – for a lot of different species, not just turians. Salarians and asari love it. And I've seen plenty of elcor wandering around the ones on the Citadel. Trust me; there is nothing more relaxing then a long naked soak in the heat of a turian steam bath."
The Thermae Reaction

Chapter Summary

Gabby has her first experience in a turian steam bath... and discovers turians are much less inhibited than she realised.

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains scenes of nudity, and includes detailed descriptions of turian anatomy.

Entarus Thermae Changing Room, Gellix – 18:14 UTC – 10th February 2183 CE

Gabby was stalling. She'd been loitering in the changing room for about five-minutes, anxiously pacing back-and-forth, or sitting on the cold, metal bench and staring at the rivulets of condensation trickling down the transparent doors of the thermae. It wasn't the doors that intimidated her, but rather what was behind them... She had been around other nude women before, naturally. After all, communal shower areas were a common practice in the Alliance. But before now, every woman she'd worked with or had seen naked in the shower room had been human.

Even back on Arcadias she hadn't really seen any of the crew in the nude. The communal showers stalls on the ship faced away from each other and were large enough that the crew could shower and change there before their shift without anyone else catching a glimpse of them. But this thermae, she'd been told, was open-plan.

The crew had been enthusing about the thermae all day. Gabby hadn't tried it yet, but after hearing the turians talking about how relaxing it was – a few of them had been practically counting the hours before the next session began. It had, needless to say, aroused her curiosity, and she was almost champing-at-the-bit herself waiting for the chance to try the thermae out. But now the moment had arrived and she was hesitant.

Gabby continued to stare at the doors leading to the main bath house, wondering if she'd made a mistake deciding to try out the turian steam baths. She'd been assured that this session was for women only, but she still had a niggling anxiety at the back of her mind. She attempted to rationalise it away as simple inhibition, arguing that one of the reasons she'd joined the Alliance was to meet new species, to study new technologies, and to experience new cultures, and, after all, hadn't she volunteered for this Programme specifically to learn about the turians?

Steeling herself, Gabby quickly peeled off her Alliance fatigues before she could change her mind, then stored them in a nearby locker, wrapped herself in a warm bathrobe, grabbed her towel, and, after taking a deep breath, made her way through the sliding doors.

The atmosphere was hot and humid. Gabby walked down the connecting corridor through clouds of steam that drifted around the room, the mist illuminated by soft blue lights. As her eyes adjusted to
the haze a couple of figures homed into view. Two engineers, clad in loose fitting robes, hailed her as they walked past. She waved back. The rising chatter of flanging voices could be heard, accompanied by a silky rhythmic melody, which sounded like a female turian's voice, being piped through speakers. Gabby emerged from the corridor into the main area to be greeted by the sight of multiple bodies clustered around the thermae.

They were all turian. They were all women. They were all naked.

The turian 'bath house' (if that was the correct term – there were no plunge pools), was a terracotta coloured domed chamber adorned with elegantly curved tiled benches, a series of open showers stalls, raised stone massage beds padded with towels, and several alcoves leading to smaller steam rooms.

Gabby stole a glance at a group chatting happily together on a bench against the wall, totally indifferent to each other's nudity. It was her first proper glimpse of a naked turian woman and Gabby tried not to look like she was staring. She suspected that they'd be staring at her soon enough.

Turian bodies were very different from humans. However despite their alien physiques, there were certain similarities to humans. Belly-buttons were visible - small indentations poked between the flexible protective plates on their stomachs - and superficially everything looked very much alike below the waist, at least from what Gabby could gather from surreptitious peeks (she certainly wasn't going to look closely!). The women very clearly lacked breasts; the carapace covered their flat chests, except for one of them. One woman in particular caught her attention, it was a turian engineer chatting in the group on the bench. As Gabby passed her, the turian rubbed her chest and pulled back a flap of her carapace. Beneath the carapace were two thin strips of enflamed blue flesh, about a finger in length, angled obliquely on her chest. Much darker in colour to the rest of her skin, almost like scar tissue, the flesh was ridged and lined with three distinct nodes.

Gabby weaved through the crowds of naked or nearly-naked aliens, seeking out a secluded shower cubicle she could retreat to, when her attention was drawn to a figure at the centre of the bath house. Erata, standing out from the turians as only a blue-skinned asari could, was talking with the Liaison Officer, Jerash. Gabby felt slightly relieved that Jerash at least was preserving her modesty with a towel.

Erata, however, was not.

Other than their odd scalp crest, complete lack of hair and lightly scaled skin, asari, of all the alien species Gabby had met, bore possibly the closest physical resemblance to humans, and Erata was now giving a rather explicit demonstration of just how similar she was.

The asari turned and spotted Gabby, a warm smile lighting up her face. She broke away from her conversation and sashayed across the wet floor. Gabby tensed as she watched the alien approach, trying her best to appear aloof while her mind squealed incessantly at her: Naked asari! Naked asari!

"Kitten!" Erata greeted in a loud voice, drawing the gaze of a few curious turians. "I wasn't sure you'd show up." The asari stood directly in front of Gabby and seemed to be bouncing, somewhat distractingly, on the balls of her feet.

Gabby cleared her throat and looked Erata firmly in the eye. "Why not? I enjoy a good soak as much as the next asari."

Erata stopped bouncing and put her hand on her hip. "So, is this your first visit to a turian bath house?" she probed.
Gabby nodded. "I think it's important to gain new experiences when travelling. Especially in regards to other cultures. It helps you see the Galaxy from a different perspective."

"That's always been my philosophy," Erata agreed cheerfully. "It's worked for me so far." She leaned in closer. "And I do enjoy seeing so many different perspectives!"

Gabby was tempted to roll her eyes, but had to grudgingly admire Erata's ability to turn almost anything into an innuendo.

Jerash tottered over to them. "Engineer Daniels! Welcome to the Entarus Thermae." She grabbed Gabby by the shoulders and leaned in to greet the human in her inimitable manner. Gabby's face fell.

_Oh no!_

Clonk!

"Ow!"

Jerash pulled away and Gabby's hand went up to her forehead. She swore she could see stars dancing in her vision.

"This is the best thermae on the planet," Jerash announced, completely oblivious to the human's discomfort.

"And the only thermae on the planet!" Erata added. "Not much in the way of competition."

"Yeah, thanks," Gabby mumbled, rubbing her head. She looked down and spotted her towel on the floor. She must have dropped it when Jerash head-butted her. "Damn it!"

"What?" Erata asked.

"My towel's soaked." She bent down to retrieve it.

"Oh, that's okay, you can use mine." Jerash whipped off her towel and stood nude before the visiting human while she offered the sheet of cloth over. Gabby froze, her eyes fixed on Jerash's amiable expression as she tried desperately not to look at the rest of her.

"Umm, thanks, but… I'll manage."

Jerash nodded happily, and then turned and pottered away from them.

"Well, our Liaison Officer is very… considerate," Erata observed, smirking.

"That's one word for her."

Gabby knotted her towel as she tried to wring out some of the water from the fabric. When she looked up, Erata had folded her arms and was staring expectantly at her.

"Well?" the asari asked.

"Well, what?"

Erata gestured at Gabby's robe. "When in Rome…" she said unhurriedly, leaving the rest of the sentence hanging as she waited for the human to undress.

Gabby's eyes widened slightly. She looked around at the groups of naked aliens, a few of them
casting curious glances in her direction. Gabby suddenly felt like she was on display. *Am I about to become the first human they see naked?* she wondered. The thought didn't exactly inspire confidence. She looked back at Erata, unsure how she should handle this. As humanity's representative she didn't want to give a bad impression.

"Yeah, well, um… okay…" she agreed hesitantly, her hand toying with the belt of her robe.

But before she could untie it, Erata grinned and placed a comforting hand on Gabby's shoulder. "If you want, there are a few private stalls towards the back," she whispered. "You can go there."

Gabby visibly relaxed. She thanked Erata, who winked and turned towards another group of women, the asari still happily carefree in her nakedness. Gabby wondered if this was the normal asari attitude to nudity, or just Erata's personal viewpoint.

At the rear of the thermae were five opaque glass doors screening the private stalls from view. Gabby checked the middle stall. It was unoccupied. She placed her towel on the hook next to the door.

With her back to the crowds, Gabby stripped off her robe, hooked it on the wall and darted inside the stall.

The stall was a relatively large circular cubicle with a crescent shaped bench and a single faucet on the opposite wall. Gabby turned the faucet to the left; instead of the jet of water she was expecting, a fine mist of heated vapour enveloped her from all sides, turning the shower stall into her own private sauna. Strangely, the water was actually scented – a curious aroma reminiscent of lemons and vanilla filled her nostrils. Without the constant chattering of the crowds the hypnotic recorded song was clearer in the stall. She sat down; even the bench was heated. The warmth gradually slithered into her skin, easing away tension from her muscles. Gabby closed her eyes in contented bliss. This was just what she needed. It wasn't quite the hot bath she'd been craving but she wasn't complaining. She sat there, in the seclusion of the shower stall, luxuriating under the dense cloud of gloriously hot water until her fingertips had wrinkled. Khoris had been right about the thermae. It was so relaxing that she actually dozed off for a moment.

Time passed. She wasn't sure how long she'd been in there, and honestly didn't care. She could have spent the rest of the night there. It was only after she remembered that the men's session followed the women's that she decided it was probably time to leave. She really didn't fancy the idea of walking out of her stall and coming face-to-fringe with a crowd of naked turian men!

Reluctantly, she turned off the spray of water, then rose to her feet, and opened the door… to be met by the face of Erata.

"Oh, hi!" the asari said brightly.

"Were you waiting out there?"

"Don't get paranoid. Pella's in the next stall but one, I was making sure she didn't walk in on you."

"Oh, right." Gabby lowered her voice. "She still not talking to us?"

"She's monosyllabic. Which I guess is an improvement. But she came into the thermae dressed like a frumpy matron. She's a little shy when it comes to showing a bit of skin."

"I can sympathise," Gabby said wryly. "Could you pass my robe?"

"Sure. Here you go," Erata said handing the bathrobe over. Her eyes darted up and down as Gabby opened the door wider. "Ooh, collars match the cuffs, I see!" Gabby snatched the robe away, then
pulled the door shut and threw it over her shoulders. "Was that the right expression?" Erata called innocently through the door.

Gabby emerged from the stall, swathed protectively in her robe. "Yeah! You got it right," she conceded. "How do you know all these idioms?"

"I take an interest in other cultures, so I listen..." the asari explained. "And you'd be surprised what humans mutter in their sleep!" she added cheekily.

Erata sat down on a bench set against the wall and drew her right leg up, clasping her hands around her knee to hold it in place. "You know, it's not compulsory to be naked in a thermae. You could have worn a swimsuit.

"Yeah, well, sufficiently enough, beachwear wasn't the first thing I thought of packing when visiting a turian ship."

Erata shrugged. "You know for next time." She leaned back and closed her eyes, obviously relishing the warmth and peace of her surroundings.

Gabby ran the damp towel through her hair. She gazed at the milling crowds of turians and a frown creased her brow. There was one strange characteristic of her turian hosts that piqued her curiosity – one aspect of their biology that she needed an answer to. After a moment's thought, she turned back and approached the asari.

"Erata?" she began in a hushed tone. The asari opened her eyes. "What's the deal with those marks on that turian's chest?" She inclined her head towards the turian with the enflamed marks to illustrate the point. "They look like scars."

Erata glanced at the turian in the corner. Then she smiled. "Well, isn't it obvious? She's a woman. How else is she going to feed her children?"

"Oh!" Gabby started in surprise. "You mean they're..."

Erata nodded and gestured at her breasts. "...The turian equivalent of these puppies!" She grinned. "I believe the technical term for them is coenotergeminal epicormica. Only women have them. Turian biology keeps everything protected under the carapace. The glands lie dormant beneath the skin until hormone changes during pregnancy force them to grow beneath the carapace. They're epicormic. Hence the name."

"I didn't think turians had that. I just thought they fed their babies a different way."

"What, like regurgitating meat or something? Nah! Their mouths aren't built for that, they'd get their mandibles entangled, it wouldn't be practical. And a little bit disgusting, too. No, turians may not have breasts but they're still perfectly capable of nursing their kids."

"Wow!" Gabby exclaimed as she stared at the crowd. "It never ceases to amaze me... Nature is bizarrely beautiful."

"Tell me about it. I mean, look at us. What are the chances that two species from two different planets separated by thousands of light-years would evolve to sentience at around the same time and look so similar?"

"Maybe it's evolution's idea of a joke?" Gabby suggested.

"Or maybe it's simply the will of the Goddess?" Erata said ruefully.
"I know my mom would almost certainly want to argue with you on that score."

"Bring it on! I love me a good argument!"

They laughed; the human and asari grinning at one another. Erata regarded the human for a second, then looked away and ran her hand across her scalp. "Yeah, I think I should probably go and dry off. My crest is starting to wrinkle."

Gabby followed Erata out of the thermae to the changing area. Erata retrieved a towel and bathrobe from her locker and covered herself, running her towel over her scalp crest to dry each 'head tentacle' carefully, while Gabby fought a losing battle with her hair.

They were soon joined by Pella; her robe drawn tightly around her body. The turian nodded silently at the pair, before sitting on the bench and dry off her leg spurs.

The session was coming to an end. The groups of women were starting to disperse. A few turians, dressed in identical bathrobes, wandered through the changing area closely followed by Jerash, who was not dressed at all. Jerash dropped her towel on the bench and stood a little too close to Pella.

"Oh, Officer Vettiill, I forgot to tell you, the engineers have managed to scrounge up a replacement ultrasonic transducer for you. I can drop it off at your quarters, if you'd like?"

Pella leaned away from the over-eager Liaison Officer, clearly uncomfortable at seeing so much of Jerash in such close proximity.

"Thanks, I'd er… I'd appreciate that," Pella said hesitantly.

"I'm always happy to assist," Jerash replied. Then she turned and made for the door.

"Rash, wait!" Pella called after her.

"What?"

"Your towel!"

"Oh, yeah. Forget my own head next." Jerash retrieved her towel and folded it casually under her arm before she exited through the main doors, still sopping wet and naked.

The three remaining occupants stared wordlessly after her as they listened to the yells of shock and surprise from the trainee sappers stationed in the next room.

It was Erata who finally broke the stunned silence. "So, what exactly is wrong with her?" she asked Pella. "I mean, does it have a name?"

When Gabby saw Jerash again later that evening the turian was, thankfully, wearing a lot more clothing.

She found the Liaison Officer wandering up and down the halls of the crew quarters, holding a long but slim device in her hand, and a vague expression on her face. Well, looking vaguer than she normally does, Gabby thought.

"Are you alright?" Gabby asked.

Jerash turned and didn't quite look at Gabby. "No," she said, "not really. I'm… I'm a bit lost. Got myself turned around here. I was looking for Officer Vettiill's quarters to deliver the ultrasonic
transducer. It's just… the layout of this base is different from Anapondus. It's a bit confusing…"

"It's pretty much the same layout," Gabby pointed out.

"No. The colour of the walls here are a different shade of green. I'm not used to it."

"Right, well, Pella's quarters are just down the hall." She indicated Pella's room at the far end of the corridor.

"Ah, no, I tried down there, the light fixings threw me."

"I see… Um, would you like me to take it then?" Gabby offered.

"Oh, no, no, no… yes. If you wouldn't mind. Um, yes?"

"Not a problem." Gabby held out her hand for the device. Jerash didn't move. "Can I have the transducer?" Jerash looked at her, as if seeing Gabby for the first time.

"Yes… You'll need this, won't you?" She handed the device over. "Thank you. I need to get back to the CIC."

"You're welcome," Gabby said, smiling. Jerash turned to leave. "Rash! The CIC is that way." Gabby jabbed her thumb behind her.

"Oh, thanks," Jerash replied, finally walking in the right direction.

Gabby watched her until she was happy Jerash wasn't going to get lost, then walked towards Pella's quarters.

Pella had kept to herself these last couple of days. Gabby was fairly certain she was still smarting from the argument they'd had. It had taken Pella twelve solid hours of work to restore the entrance to the base. She'd refused all offers of assistance and was determined she would repair the damage by herself, as if she was performing some weird penance. By the time the second convoy from Anapondus arrived later that day Pella had finished her repairs. But she had declined any kind of social contact, even preferring to take her meals in her quarters. It appeared that Khoris was the only one she would interact with and listen to, which, given their verbal sparring in the past, was fairly unexpected. Gabby felt sure Pella would come around at some point, and, as she looked at the transducer, realised that this may be the perfect opportunity to try and make peace.

Reaching the end of the corridor, Gabby knocked on Pella's door. Pause. There was no answer. She knocked again. Still no answer. Gabby looked at the device in her hand; she didn't want to just leave it outside Pella's quarters. The lock on the door was green. She pressed her hand against the seal in the centre. The door slid open and Gabby snuck inside.

Pella's quarters were considerably larger than the one Gabby had been given back in Anapondus. It was divided into three sections, with the entrance leading to a small reception room, a refresher off to the far left, and another door to the right that Gabby could only assume was a bedroom. The reception room was sparsely furnished, with only a couple of chairs and a low metal table. There didn't appear to be anyone home.

Gabby sighed with disappointment; resigned to the fact she probably wouldn't be able to patch things up with Pella today. She moved to the low table, intending to drop off the device when the refresher door opened. Pella walked in; a white towel wrapped high around her torso. She froze when she saw Gabby.
"What are you doing here?" she demanded. "How'd you get in?"

"The door was unlocked. I offered to drop off your transducer," Gabby explained.

"Oh… That's good of you, thanks."

Gabby put the device on the table. "I was hoping we could talk… about what happened?"

"Now's not a good time," Pella insisted.

"I get why you might still be mad, but I just wanted to apologise for my part in our little bust-up the other day…"

"Yeah, alright, but can we talk about it later? I'm in a towel here!" Pella moved forward and started to usher Gabby to the door. Gabby made a weak protest, but then stopped when she noticed a blue, ring-shaped scratch on the turian's shoulder.

"Wait! Are you alright?"

Pella frowned. "What? Yes, of course. Why'd you ask?"

"You've got a mark on your shoulder," Gabby replied, pointing. She looked a little closer. "It almost… it almost looks like a bite."

"I'm fine," Pella insisted, covering the wound with her hand. "Now, can you please leav…?"

But all protestations were abruptly silenced when the bedroom door opened. A turian emerged wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. Gabby stared, open mouthed. She hardly recognised him without his Explorer Armour on.

"Khoris!?"

"Engineer Daniels!" Khoris jumped in surprise, staring at her in shock. "I didn't know you were… How'd you…?" he stammered, lifting his hands almost apologetically. That was a mistake. His towel dropped. Gabby's eyes went wide. She couldn't help but notice that a certain part of Khoris' anatomy seemed quite excited! He reached down frantically to pick up the towel and cover his nudity. In those brief seconds, Gabby was faced with the awkward predicament of looking without seeming to look. Khoris regained his towel (if not his dignity) and backed awkwardly into the bedroom before slamming the door shut.

Gabby blushed, but smiled. He wasn't the first turian man she'd seen naked, and despite her embarrassment, she couldn't help compare Khoris to her last encounter with a nude male turian – but, of course, that had been under somewhat different circumstances…

Pella quickly manoeuvred Gabby out of the room and joined her in the deserted corridor, her expression anxious.

"It's not what you think!" she insisted.

"There's another way to interpret this?" Gabby asked.

Pella stared at her silently for a few seconds, her mind racing to come up with an answer. "Alright, it is what you think," she admitted, settling for honesty.

"I thought you hated him? A few days ago you couldn't stand the sight of him, and now he's naked..."
in your bedroom?! What's going on?"

"Keep your voice down!" Pella remonstrated. "I don't want it broadcast to the whole station."

"I had no idea you two were… involved." Gabby grinned for the first time. "You're not breaking any Hierarchy regs here, are you?" she teased. "Cause I don't want to be party to anything illicit…"

Pella suddenly looked terrified. "Please don't tell anyone!" she pleaded, the words tripping over themselves in their eagerness to tumble from her mouth. "Some of the others wouldn't understand. It's bad enough half the crew here are from Taetrus, but Khoris is from Oma Ker colony, and I'm a Digeris kid! I mean, things are getting better now, but relations between them aren't that good that they'd really accept us yet. I don't want to get Khoris in trouble with his CO on Oma Ker, and I can't let anyone from Digeris know; or my dad find out… Oh, Spirits! If my dad knew about this…" She paused as she looked at Gabby's confused expression. "You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"Only vague notions," Gabby admitted. "Look, I don't pretend to understand turian… customs. I'm struggling to get my head round this, so I have to ask: When did this happen?"

Pella glanced down bashfully. "It started during the power outage. I'd had a message from my dad. We don't talk usually… I went to the Mess, feeling a bit low. I was freezing… Khoris… He offered to share his blanket with me."

"Oh, yeah?" Gabby nodded sagely. "It was… nice." Pella gave a shy smile. "Seemed like a good way to keep warm at the time. Then we started talking; I was telling him about my family. It all sort-of flowed out. He was really understanding… Nice to have someone to confide in, really. Then we talked about his colony, and then my colony, and my ship, and… one thing led to another…"

Gabby gave the turian a warm smile. "Star-crossed lovers," she observed, ribbing her gently. "Literally in your case." Pella didn't seem to get the joke. "You have been busy. Now I know why we haven't seen much of you."

"Are you sure we're not just 'bizarrely beautiful'?'" Pella asked, air quoting with her fingers. "We were standing outside your stall, weren't we?"

Pella nodded. "It was hard not to hear you."

Gabby looked down. "Yeah. Sorry. I'd never seen a nude turian woman before. I was surprised by your anatomy. Guess it's been a day of surprises. I certainly wasn't expecting to see so much of Khoris!"

Now Pella looked uncomfortable. "I hope you weren't too embarrassed? I hear it's often a shock for aliens when they see a turian man naked for the first time."

"He's not my first…" Gabby replied without thinking. Her mouth snapped shut.

"Oh?" Pella stared in confusion. Then her brow plates shot up as she deciphered what the human was saying. "Oh! Really? Wow!" She blinked; her expression a mixture of surprise and admiration. "Who? When?"
"Pella!"

The turian held up her hands. "Sorry. What I meant was: I didn't know you liked turians that way."

"It's not what you think…" Gabby mumbled.

"Where have I heard that before?" It was Pella's turn to smirk. "Does Erata know about this?"

"I suspect she's about to," Gabby huffed, crossing her arms.

The two engineers stared at each other for a long moment. Slowly, a smile crept onto the human's face. Then they grinned together. It was Pella who finally broke eye contact as she glanced down at the floor.

"I've been fairly unpleasant to you, haven't I?" the turian asked.

"I won't lie: you've been a bit of a cock!"

Pella nodded, not meeting the human's gaze. "I shouldn't have said what I… It was the cold; I didn't know what I was saying… I was just so angry…"

"The cold was getting to everyone. I understand," Gabby assured her.

The turian suddenly looked up sharply. "I'm still not crazy about krogan…"

"Well, I'm not asking you to kiss one!"

Pella nodded, blinking rapidly; then she hugged her body, as if finally noticing she was wearing only a thin towel in a drafty corridor. "I'm… sorry…" she said hesitantly, slightly surprised that she meant it.

Gabby stared, disarmed by her sincerity. A moment passed before she leant forward and embraced the turian. Pella's shoulders stiffened; uncertain how she should react (this had most definitely never happened to her before!). After a while, she returned the awkward hug. Not knowing what to do with her hands she patted the human's back, wondering what the protocol was in this situation.

Then something was tickling her face. Pella wrinkled her nose as the human's hair dangled in front of her eyes. She puffed a couple of times, trying to blow the loose strands out of her eyes. How do humans manage with hair?

Gabby laughed and pulled away.

"You should get back to Khoris," she advised. "He'll be wondering what we're doing."

"You'll keep this to yourself?"

"I won't tell a soul, I swear," Gabby said. "Especially not your dad!"

"Yeah, well dad… he's…" Pella's face darkened. "You know what? Spirits take him! I don't care if he finds out!"

"Do I sense a little rebellion here?" Gabby asked, smiling.

Pella grinned. "There's a distinct possibility…" she offered. Then she turned and disappeared inside her room.
Gabby slept better that night than she ever had since first arriving on Gellix; since before she'd arrived on Arcadias in fact. The Entarus Station futon she'd been given was softer by far than any on Arcadias or Anapondus. The base was now so warm she could sleep with the minimum of coverings, and her mind was calm and collected thanks to her frank talk with Pella.

The room she'd been allocated was still small and cramped, but as far as she was concerned, this was now the height of luxury. She'd had a long hot soak in a turian thermae and she now faced the prospect of a blessedly undisturbed night's sleep…

She was only mildly surprised when the GQ alarms sounded at zero-five-twenty!

Gabby's eyes snapped open. She rolled out of bed in an instant, blurry eyed and tousle-haired. She instinctively reached for her clothes and dressed swiftly; the insistent, piercing siren wailing in her ears.

Exiting her quarters, Gabby dashed into the corridor and was almost trampled by half-a-dozen sappers, most of them clad in pyjamas or underwear. She chased after them, trailing behind the half-naked turians as they tore through the hallways.

They emerged in the main hanger, the combat engineers lining up between the parked Tyrus'. One of the sappers was handing out rifles and thrust a weapon into her hands. Now armed, Gabby turned and spotted a distinctive figure to her right. Erata was standing with Pella and Khoris just off to one side of the room. She made a bee-line for the asari.

"What is it? What's going on?" Gabby demanded.

Erata turned to face her and Gabby stopped dead. The asari's jaw was set, her expression grim. She spoke and Gabby's breathe caught in her throat as a chill settled in the pit of her stomach.

"Arcadias has been attacked!"

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is all part of my personal head-canon regarding turians, so I wanted to take a moment and explain my thought processes, and specifically my reasoning for giving turian women lactating glands.

Turians are often described as being avian in origin, but are viviparous (they give birth to live young), just like humans. As such, they would need to feed their children somehow...

I'm no ornithologist, so I was surprised to discover that not all bird species feed their young by catching or regurgitating meat. Three species of birds actually lactate: The pigeon, the flamingo, and the emperor penguin (although, strangely, it's only the male emperor penguin that lactates). They have a gland that secretes what's called 'crop milk', a curd-like substance very high in protein and fats that's ideal for nursing new-borns. This seemed the most efficient and plausible way turians would feed their offspring. But, the question remained as to where the glands would be located on the turian body.

The 'crop' where the 'milk' is secreted lies at the end of the alimentary tract, which, in turian anatomy, would be in the upper chest. Since turian mouths aren't really designed
to feed infants (they’d risk getting their mandibles entangled), it seemed unlikely that turians would secrete the milk via the throat. They probably weaned their baby by passing pre-chewed food at an early stage in their evolution, but, as their mandibles grew larger and more elaborate, it became impractical to feed mouth-to-mouth, so an alternative was needed. Incidentally, this would also explain why turians enjoy the act of kissing – It’s an evolved response to ‘kiss feeding’, when parents would pass pre-chewed food to their offspring, just as scientists believe early humans used to.

Evolutionary scientists think that the development of breasts on humans may be the result of bipedalism (the human breast is unique in that it’s permanently full-form when a woman is not pregnant). All primate species, including humans, cradle their young to their chest to allow them to feed, and since turians evolved to walk upright in much the same way as humans, it seemed logical that they would have cradled their children the same way and that the ‘epicormica’ gland would have formed in a similar position to nipples. But, because of their carapace, turian women wouldn’t develop breasts; instead, the glands would have to grow through the skin at puberty.

Finally, as you’ve probably guessed, ‘coenotergeminal epicormica’ are made up words, but based on Latin and botanical phrases. ‘Coeno’ in Latin means community; ‘tergeminal’ means thrice-twin (hence the “three nodes” on the gland); and ‘epicormica’ is an extension of the word epicormic, meaning a bud that commonly grows beneath the surface of a tree.

Looking at this chapter again, it’s obvious I spend waaay too long thinking about this stuff.
Interesting Times: Chronicle of an Asari

Chapter Summary

Erata is shocked by the news she may have a condition that could seriously affect her future and everyone around her.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is written in the first person and taken from Erata's personal journal.

Hierarchy Entarus Station (Gellix) computer terminal accessed. User profile: Order of Serrice Engineer, Erata D'Ceni.

Personal log enabled. Please select file to view.

Attention. Access to selected document is restricted — Password required.

Password: ******

Access granted.

Personal log timestamped: 20.30 UTC, February 13th 2183 CE (Galactic Standard), 3rd Day of the Feast of Athame.

Audio recording starts …

"The humans, I understand from my travels, have a curse: *May you live in interesting times.* Well, that can definitely be applied to the current situation here on Gellix. I am most certainly living in interesting times…

I have three passions in my life (not counting my family). My first passion, engineering, I've happily turned into my profession. This is often seen as strange by non-asari. I guess we're written off as either commandos, dancers or diplomats. And yet where would the asari be without engineers? We pride ourselves on our intellectual and technological superiority. But that superiority would be nothing without the skilled engineers to create the wonderful ships and magnificent architecture that are the envy of the Galaxy. We, the asari, lead the field in scientific advancement. Our technology drives the other races forward. It has always been this way, and it constantly surprises me that so few of the other races understand or appreciate this. There is power in creation. To shape a machine; give it life; turn it into a true work of art. There is such poetry in the interlocking mechanisms of an engine; an almost lyrical quality to the subtle vibration of thrusters at full power.

Secondly, I love to travel. This is *not* seen as strange. Travel for a young maiden is quite natural and actively encouraged. Travel brings you into contact with other races and generates fresh new experiences. It encourages new ideas, different ways of thinking, and with that comes an
understanding of the other races. And my wanderlust is insatiable!

Finally, and I make no apologies for this, I love sex!

I love the heat of another person's body against my skin. I adore the varying textures of the different races, some soft; some harder; some smooth; some scaled; all beautiful. I relish their different scents and tastes, the magnificent variety of skin colours. And, it goes without saying, I love the heady rush of the meld. To touch another person's mind, to lose myself in another's spirit and perceive their memories as if I had lived them makes me thank the Goddess I'm asari. I cannot imagine how the other races cope never having experienced the exquisite joy of melding… It is a gift for which I am eternally grateful.

Which might go some way to explaining just how terrified I am right now!

How the hell can I function properly with this hanging over me?

It all started two days ago. Entarus Station was in lockdown. Ordinarily I'd jump at the opportunity to be locked in an enclosed space with a squad of attractive turians, but during that lockdown I'm afraid I was openly moping around the base. It was a difficult time. The Feast of Athame is not a time for any asari to be away from home. The Feast of Athame is for family, and I was desperately missing mine. But, as it turned out, things were only going to get worse.

I have three passions in my life, and I'm in serious danger of losing all of them…

"Arcadias has been attacked!" I told Gabby, perhaps a little too bluntly.

The human's face blanched. "How badly? Was anyone killed?"

"We don't know," Pella replied, her voice strained. "Our orders are to maintain radio silence."

Gabby simply stood there, staring at us mutely. She looked lost. My first instinct was to step forward and embrace her. Assure her it'd be okay. But I resisted the temptation. She'd never responded to any of my flirtations and I feared I'd be crossing the line.

We followed the XO onto the upper catwalk above the maelstrom of swarming turian bodies. The place had become the epicentre of activity. Soldiers and sappers bustled up and down the hanger. The sirens were pounding relentlessly in my ear, making it hard to concentrate. I wondered how the turians coped with it.

Despite the clamour, the XO's voice rose above it all as he bellowed out orders, "Lock down the base! Issue rifles to all personnel. I want constant scans of the area. Extend sensor scans all the way to Anapondus – If anything moves out there you are to report it immediately. If a nathak lifts its leg to take a piss I want to know about it!"

The XO then separated the groups and issued commands. I looked at my colleagues. They were taking news of the attack hard. Gabby held her rifle to her chest, her jaw set and her eyes unfocused, staring at nothing. For a moment I don't think she was even aware anyone else was in the room. Pella didn't look much better. They both had friends on Arcadias. People they cared for. To my surprise Pella placed a comforting hand on Gabby's arm. Gabby looked up and nodded vaguely at Pella.

As they received their orders the troops dispersed. Snipers and lookouts were stationed at every possible defensible position. Every member of the base, including Gabby and Pella, kept vigilant watch on the horizon, constantly scanning the surface and sky for any sign of movement or the merest hint of assault. The engineering base had become, to all intents and purposes, a military
fortress. I think it actually helped them. The responsibility probably kept their minds focused, 
distracting them from dwelling too much on what was happening back on Arcadias. It was only 
during their down time that the strain started to tell. My own assignment kept me separated from 
Gabby, but when I saw the human again in the mess hall the next day she looked like she hadn't slept 
for twenty-four hours. Later, she told me she hadn't.

The lock-down was not without incident.

Not long after nightfall on the second day (just after breakfast), shots rang out. One of the cadets had 
had started firing at shadows. He swore he'd downed a mercenary scout, but when the sun rose the only 
thing that could be seen was the fur-covered body of a nathak juvenile that had become separated 
from its pack.

Just two hours later every alarm in the base suddenly went off.

Everyone tensed ready for a fight. Then the XO called us up to the CIC. Gabby, Pella and I 
assembled around the central holo-display and were surprised by the readings coming from the 
scanner. A massive energy signal had flared to life in the mountains some thirty kilometres from our 
position.

"The readings are off the scale," the XO said as he stared at the display. "Over twenty terajoules. 
That's orders of magnitude above anything the Hierarchy has built on Gellix. The electromagnetic 
signature is colossal; even against the background gravity wells of the planet."

"A signal that large could power a medium-sized colony for over ten years," I observed. "What's in 
that region?"

"Nothing of note," the XO replied. "This area was occupied by the krogan. Geothermal vents make 
it ideal for colonization. In fact, Anapondus was built on the ruins of an old krogan settlement."

"An ancient krogan generator that we're only just discovering now?" Pella said incredulously. "It's 
dwarfing even the annual power output of Arcadias. That's huge! We'd have registered it on the 
sensors before now, surely?"

"Not if it was lying dormant," Gabby put in. "It could be it was activated recently and been steadily 
building in power."

"Could it be what's been affecting the heating?" I suggested. "Maybe it's driving an eezo core 
powerful enough to override the one at Anapondus, and the Entarus Station core?"

"That would certainly account for all the systems that had gone awry," Gabby agreed after a 
moment's thought.

"Looks like we found Gabby's rogue mass effect core," Pella said. "The question is: what do we do 
about it?"

"Leave that with me," the XO replied. "I'll speak to the commander when COMSEC is lifted. She'll 
decide whether it's something we should pursue."

After that we went back to guarding the base, although, other than a major storm rolling in from the 
west, little else occurred.

Commander Joric finally broke radio silence by late evening. Arcadias had made contact with 
Anapondus and verified it had engaged and destroyed several batarian slaver ships. The turian 
cruiser had taken damage and was now conducting repairs. There were no reported casualties.
The feeling of relief amongst the crew was palpable. After the tension of the last few days Joric permitted a slight relaxation of the dress code. Armour was no longer mandatory, and to help the crew unwind further, Entarus Station's heating system was raised to well above normal so that very soon everyone was positively basking in the sweltering temperature… Well, the turians were anyway. I found it rather uncomfortable, and I'm not sure Gabby was wholly enjoying it.

I found Gabby in the mess hall the next day, eating alone; a rare event. Pella had stuck to Gabby like glue throughout the lockdown, and I'd often catch her comforting the human. It seemed the pair had resolved their dispute, perhaps bonding over the current crisis.

Curiously, Pella had earlier been gossiping that Gabby had admitted she'd seen a turian man in the nude prior to joining the exchange programme; although Pella never revealed how they'd gotten onto that particular topic of conversation.

Sitting opposite her, I scanned Gabby's face. She looked flushed, her skin gleaming with a thin layer of sweat despite the thin sleeveless top she was wearing. Her expression was downcast and I tried to engage her in conversation.

"I hear we're going to be investigating this mysterious power source when the skies clear."

"Hmm-mmm," Gabby replied absently.

"And Joric says that we may have to add a further ten days to the mission because of the storms."

The human nodded. "I heard," she confirmed, not looking up.

"Guess we won't be getting off this rock anytime soon."

"That's a comforting thought," she muttered.

"You should be able to contact the ship today," Gabby simply nodded again. "I'm sure you'll feel better once you've talked to Donnelly. Then you can see he's okay…"

"Well, he won't be when I'm finished with him!" Gabby said firmly. "What was he thinking? First he starts a brawl with the crew and then he lets the ship get attacked by bloody slavers. He's a born troublemaker that one."

"I very much doubt he was responsible for the attack, Gabby," I tried to reassure her, but she didn't respond, instead simply moving her food around with her fork. She still looked despondent.

I tried a different tack.

"You must really care for him," I observed.

"We've been friends for a long time. We've had each other's back all these years, why wouldn't I care for him?" She took a sip from her glass.

"You two ever get frisky?"

Gabby swallowed and glared at me as she slammed her cup down on the table, her eyes wide. She did at least have the self-control not to choke on her drink. "What? No! That's… no! And even if we had that wouldn't be any of your business."

"I'm simply trying to gauge the state of your relationship. In my experience being friends and being intimate are not necessarily mutual exclusive."
"You want to know if we're friends with benefits?" Gabby scowled; the worry lines on her face evaporating. "No, we're not. Contrary to what you may think not everyone jumps into bed with the first person they meet! And why are you so interested in my sex life?"

"Because it would be nice to know you have one," I replied, a well-practiced smile curling my lips. "I hate to think of you missing out on one of the fundamental joys of life."

"I'm not a nun, Erata!" she retorted, pouting. "It's not like I've never been approached by another person … Or taken an interest in someone. But, that stuff is private…"

"Well, you could do worse than Donnelly. Though, of course, if he's available, I might even be interested in him myself," I suggested, goading her. The expression on her face subtly changed. "He comes across as a bit of a ladies man…"

"I wouldn't bet on it. I doubt he'd know one end of a woman from the other. He's had girlfriends in the past, of course," – Was there a hint of antagonism in her voice? – "but nothing serious. I'm not even sure he knows how to commit to a grown-up relationship. He's too immature when it comes to women. He'd probably run a mile at the thought of moving in with someone. I don't think he's relationship material, frankly…" She suddenly narrowed her eyes, looking at me with suspicion. "Wait; is this another wind-up to keep me distracted?"

I smiled and held my hands up. "Guilty, I'm afraid." Gabby shook her head in frustration. I admit my strategy may have been crude but it did appear to have the desired effect. I leaned in closer to her. "For what it's worth, the way Donnelly was fussing over you before we left Arcadias, he obviously does care for you… And I apologise for making assumptions about you two just because you happen to be the same species. But humans are new to the galactic scene. You have to admit it's rare to see you guys hooking up with anyone outside your own race." I grinned, suddenly remembering what Pella had told me. "Although, from what a little bird tells me, it sounds like you might have some prior experience with turians?"

Gabby didn't appear to see the funny side of it. "You can tell that 'little bird' that right now I'd settle for someone with half-a-brain or an ounce of self-respect. And that doesn't appear to be present here!"

I shrugged. "You have high standards, I can respect that." We lapsed into silence while Gabby consumed her meal. I'm afraid curiosity got the better of me and after a while I voiced the question I'd been dying to ask: "So, you and this naked turian…?"

"I'm not getting into that!" she snapped, ending the conversation.

The comm-officer chose that moment to approach our table. He stopped beside us and looked at Gabby. "Engineer Daniels – we've re-established communications with Arcadias. Commander Joric has given you permission to access the comm-buoy. You can contact Engineer Donnelly in two hours."

Gabby's face flushed, her body language radiating unbridled relief. "Thank you."

Then the man turned to face me. "And there's also a message pending for you, Engineer D'Ceni. I'm still trying to sort through the logjam of vid-link messages. All our comm-channels are busy at the moment but I will put your call through to your quarters once we have sufficient bandwidth."

"Who's the call from?"

"I'm not certain – It was marked as a private message from Thessia."
I nodded at him. "Cheers."

Gabby was quiet for a long time, though she seemed to be breathing easier now. Eventually, she looked up and actually smiled at me. "You've got an odd way of comforting people… but I appreciate what you were trying to do, Erata."

"That's what I'm here for, Kitten."

The call didn't come through to my quarters for another two hours. It was odd that the comm-officer didn't know who it was from. It meant that it was sensitive enough to supersede the Hierarchy's filtering policy, despite being flagged as simply 'private'. And the fact it was from Thessia led me to believe it could only have come from my superiors back in the Order.

Goddess, how wrong was I?

The face of the asari that eventually appeared on the screen was familiar to me, but not one I was glad to see. It belonged to a rather elderly asari Matron who I'd known since I was young. Almost six-hundred years old, she looked aged even compared to most Matriarchs. Her brow was lined with frown marks and her yellow facial markings looked dull and faded next to her pale mottled skin. The overriding memory I have of her is the pain she inflicts whenever she draws my blood.

"Doctor." I inclined my head just enough to show respect. "It's been a while."

"Erata," the doctor greeted me. Her eyes darted left-to-right, examining my quarters. "Are you alone? Is it safe to talk?"

"Yes, I'm alone," I confirmed. "I take it this isn't a social call?"

The doctor shook her head. "No. I'm afraid I have some bad news regarding your latest blood work… Your results show unusually low T cell and NK cell production…"

"Genetics was never my strongest subject, doctor."

The doctor hesitated before she continued in a solemn tone, "There may be a correlation between your test results and Melpomena's situation."

I scowled, glaring at the doctor. Any reference to Mel, especially coming from a doctor, made me uncomfortable. "My sister's condition is well known to me, doctor!" I fumed. "I fail to see what that's got to do…" Then I stopped, a cold feeling of dread seeping into my gut. "Wait… What are you saying?"

"This deficiency is only found in purebloods."

It's not often I'm shocked to silence, but at that precise moment I was slack-jawed. "No. That can't… Are you telling me that I could be…? That's ridiculous! I've melded before; there's never been any
"problem." I could hear my own voice rising steadily in pitch. "It's happened many times, they were all successful!"

"The condition has varying degrees of severity. And I can't confirm what this is until we conduct more tests. As you know, this... disorder is incredibly hard to diagnose. There have been reports of the symptoms appearing as late as the Matron stage, but those are extremely rare cases. I'm not ruling anything out yet. This could simply be a case of x-linked immunodeficiency, which is entirely treatable."

"That's got to be it, then," I muttered, grasping at any scrap of hope. "That's what it is. You've got to be wrong."

"However, there is also a chance, albeit a remote chance, of what is known as epistatic quiescence – of latent genes suddenly becoming active," the doctor explained.

"I was rr...ruled out as a carrier," I insisted, my childhood stutter rearing its ugly head under the stress. "The tests were negative."

"That was a while ago. Science has moved on since then. The tests have become more sophisticated."

I stared at the screen in shock; my heart thumping rapidly in my chest. A thousand different questions were fighting for attention in my mind. None of which I really wanted to know the answer to. I let the silence drag on until finally, I voiced her fears.

"Worst case scenario?"

The doctor hesitated again before answering. "I couldn't say with any certainty. We're not at that stage yet. We need to run more tests."

"Will you... Will you be informing the Justicars?" My voice sounded very small.

"The Justicars have been involved since your sister was diagnosed. Your family have been under close observation ever since. That's standard procedure, I can't change that. But it's also the reason you have such a dedicated medical team here to support you and your family. You're not alone in this. We will do everything we can, I assure you."

I wasn't convinced. I'd seen what 'doing everything we can' usually entailed. The breath caught in my throat. The thought of a Justicar suddenly showing up and carting me off to that place... That I might be forced to make the choice – 'choice', yeah right! – between self-imposed imprisonment and isolation or summary execution was more than I could bear.

My eyes stung with the first hints of excess moisture, but I blinked them back rapidly, turning away from the screen.

Don't let anyone see you like this. You have to be strong.

The doctor was silent as she gave me time to process this. Eventually, I turned back to face the screen. "What do you recommend?"

"I'd ask you to refrain from melding for the time being. For your sake and the sake of others..."

"I'm no danger to anyone!" I blurted out.

"Just until we know more," the doctor insisted. "We can take your case further, together. You've
been extremely cooperative throughout this whole ordeal. That will surely count in your favour should the Justicars make a judgement."

I couldn't believe this, the way the doctor talked you'd think she'd already made a diagnosis. The face on the screen smiled at me. "You're not alone in this, Ms D'Ceni," she repeated.

_And now she starts calling me by my family name. That's exactly what happened before they came for Mel._

I cut the transmission.

"I'm sick of your platitudes!" I spat at the empty screen.

I was still sitting there in shock when the voice of the XO filtered through my omni-tool.

"Engineer D'Ceni. Please report to the CIC. Commander Joric wants to speak to you on vid-comm. If you see Artificer Vettiill and Engineer Daniels please inform them that their presence is required. I believe Daniels may be in the comm-room."

There was a long pause while I tried to collect my thoughts. "...Yeah. Sure," I finally replied.

I stood up and left my quarters, my mind reeling. I was numb. This didn't feel real. My legs steered me through the corridors with no conscious thought. I was still in a daze when I heard voices drifting from the comm-room. Pella's voice could be heard down the corridor, unusually high and shrill, "I'm warning you, not another word!"

Then the voice of that other human, Donnelly, interrupted her, "Pella, please, let the woman finish..."

"A slight towel mishap..." Gabby's voice chimed in.

Pella's reply was a screech. "Gabby! This is revenge, isn't it?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean. But we can trust Kenneth. He's not going to spread it around. He's a lot more trustworthy than he looks, actually." Gabby replied. The human sounded playful. Normally, I would have joined in the fun without hesitation, but I wasn't in the best frame of mind right now.

"Aye, that's right..." the voice of Donnelly replied. "Hang on..."

"Yeah, but you don't know who else might be listening!" Pella hissed.

I poked my head into the room and called out to the pair sitting before the view-screen. "Gabby! Pella! Joric's expecting us." The image of Donnelly smiled at me and waved. "Donnelly," I said, nodding. "Good to see you're okay."

"Thanks. You too."

I turned away, not wanting to engage in a long conversation and powered to the CIC. My colleagues trailed behind. The face of Commander Joric was on the vid-screen when we entered. She greeted us and then started talking about the plan to investigate this rogue power signal. She wanted us to be the survey team on point and began asking Pella's advice.

Hardly any of what they said sank in. My mind was still elsewhere. Eventually, we were dismissed and I rushed out, retreating back to my quarters, when Gabby called out behind me, "Erata? Are you
"okay?"

"I'm fine!" I called back, my head down, my pace never slowing. I couldn't bring myself to even look at anyone else in the corridors. I think some part of me was actually ashamed by the possibility I might be…

I slammed my room door behind me, sealing myself off from the rest of the base. My hands were shaking. My mouth was dry. I was scared! I still am scared. If the results come back positive, it'll be the end of everything I've worked for – My career, my life, I'd lose it all, one way or another.

Am I really such a danger to the turians? To Gabby? To other asari? I'd never fully appreciated what my sister had gone through until now. She seems so much stronger than me.

I prayed. I implored. I entreated to Athame: *Oh, Goddess, please don't let it be true!* But, as always, the reply was silence. No answers for me.

Finally alone, I curled up on the bed, dragged my pillow into my arms, and wept…"

**Recording ends...**
Gabby and her team investigate an unusual power reading several kilometres from the capital. But it brings them into contact with a very powerful figure...

Entarus Station Main Hanger, Gellix – 18:14 UTC – 14th February 2183 CE

"Do we really need so many bodyguards?"

Gabby, Pella and Erata stood beside the grim form of First Lieutenant Aelius, Commander Joric's XO, as they stared at the line of a dozen turian men and women assigned as their protection detail.

Lieutenant Aelius' one good eye scrutinized Gabby, his cold yellow pupil narrowing to a pin-point. He never bothered wearing an eye patch to cover his dead right eye; the exposed pearly-white orb adding to his already intimidating appearance. Russet mandibles twitched as his dark brow plates creased in irritation. "We're not taking any chances. I've been ordered to protect you, and so-help-me-Spirits, that's what I'm going to do!"

"You don't think a squad of soldiers following our every move might interfere with our work?" Pella suggested.

"They're professionals. They know not to get in the way." Aelius let out a sigh and turned to the crew loading up the three black Tyrus APCs. "Get that equipment loaded. I want munitions and rifles prepped. We move in five! We have no idea what we're going to encounter out there."

"It's simply a fact-finding recce, sir," Pella pointed out. "It's not like we're going into battle or anything."

"I remind you that your last 'fact-finding' recce ended in several million credits worth of damage," Aelius snapped. "Yes, my men have better things to do than escort you on this little boondoggle, but you three have proven to be troublesome. I repeat: we're not taking any chances."

The man turned his back and stalked away from them.

Pella and Gabby exchanged a glance. The man's demeanour hadn't improved even after the heating had been fixed. In fact, he gave the distinct impression that he deeply resented the assignment he'd been given. Erata, meanwhile, stood slightly apart from everyone else, remaining as silent and as distant as she had been ever since Gabby had spoken to Kenneth just yesterday.

"Come on," Pella said, nodding her head in the Tyrus' direction, "let's get on-board."

The trio moved onto the turian transport.

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The silence in the Tyrus was growing uncomfortable.

Thirty-minutes out from Entarus Station and no-one had said a word. Aelius sat opposite the three engineers in the rear cabin, his arms folded, appearing to openly glare at them – although, Gabby
admitted, she had never actually seen him smile; it was hard to tell whether that was a glare or his normal expression.

Gabby stole a quick glance at Erata. The asari was sat away from them, her arms and legs tucked in close to her body as if she was afraid to touch anyone. She'd hardly said a word all day and had remained withdrawn, showing no enthusiasm for any kind of social activity. Even Gabby's suggestion of going to the thermae again had elicited a muted response. It was obvious something had happened to prompt this sudden depression and Gabby was starting to get a little worried.

Pella cleared her throat to break the uneasy silence. "Are there any structures or bases in the area that might be giving off this signal, Lieutenant?" she asked Aelius.

The man raised his arm and switched on his omni-tool. A holographic map of the local terrain materialised above his wrist. "There's an abandoned prison complex high in the mountains a few clicks to the east," he said, "and a small water pumping station just north of us. But neither of them should be able to give off this amount of energy. Besides, the signal doesn't appear to be emanating from any nearby structure. It's in the middle of nowhere."

"No other unusual activity?" Gabby asked.

"We've been monitoring a boatload of unauthorised air-traffic over the last few days. But that's not unusual, really. We know at least one merc group have a base of operations on Gellix, but we haven't been able to locate their stronghold. Commander Joric decided that monitoring the activities of their aircraft would eventually show a pattern of behaviour that would indicate the location of their base. Then we can make a final push against them. My men are itching to test themselves in combat, believe me. Just as I am."

Gabby nodded at him. "Well, we're grateful that you've assigned a squad to keep us safe, Lieutenant. I know this isn't the mission you would have preferred…"

"You three have something of a reputation," Aelius said, cutting her off. "Of the operations you've been assigned, the New Veles and Dhazig colonies have been devastated, and the Entarus Station entrance was destroyed because you couldn't find the key! Some of the crew have started calling you as the 'bomb-squad'. You even have a codename."

"What kind of codename?"

"You've been designated 'Triple-A'."

Gabby's mouth dropped open.

Before she could comment further, the driver turned in his seat and called over his shoulder. The turian convoy had been hugging the craggy ridge of a mountain range jutting up from the snowy plain. As they rounded a towering outcrop a small group of all-terrain vehicles came into view, seemingly parked out in the open.

"We have some activity up ahead, sir. Looks like a couple of abandoned APC's." Aelius glanced at the vehicles via the cabin's security screens and quickly assessed the situation. He activated the intercom. "All vehicles form up. Approach the derelicts with caution. Might be an ambush. Keep an eagle eye on that mountain range. There could be lookouts posted. Be ready to respond with lethal force if necessary. I don't want any surprises here. Alpha Team, with me. We're going to investigate on foot."

As he sat back, Gabby found her voice.
"Sir. Why are we called 'Triple-A'?"

Aelius retrieved his rifle and checked it automatically. "Well, it was going to be 'Triple-threat', but the tradition of the squad is to incorporate some unique aspect of your names into your moniker so we can identify you."

"Our names?" Pella asked, frowning.

"Yes." The man pointed at each of them in turn. "Erat. Pella. Gabriella. AAA. Though, personally I would have chosen 'Triple-threat'. If there was a problem somewhere on the planet I could pretty much guarantee you three would be involved."

The vehicle came to a halt and Aelius stood and exited the Tyrus, leaving the three engineers staring wordlessly after him.

"I hate that guy," Pella said after a moment's thought.

"He is such an ass," Gabby agreed.

"What a cunt!" Erata unexpectedly piped up.

"Is that really what the rest of the crew says about us?" Gabby asked with concern.

"I didn't think we were that bad," Pella said.

"You did blow up the Entarus airlock, honey," Erata pointed out.

"I repaired it," the turian insisted. "And I'd already been evacuated from the generator room when that bomb went off in Dhazig."

"Doesn't matter if we're already thought of as troublemakers," Gabby muttered. She gestured at Pella. "First there's you with your pyromaniac tendencies. And Erata ogling anything with a pulse. And me being…" She thought about it for a moment. "The hairy one, I guess." Her hand suddenly flew up to her forehead. "Oh God! We've got the same reputation as Kenneth!"

"Could be worse," Erata murmured.

"Yeah? Well I don't see how," Gabby replied.

"Pray you never have to," the asari whispered.

There was a deafening silence in the Tyrus as each engineer brooded over their own thoughts, until the quiet was broken by three voices talking at once.

"I quite like the name, though…"

"Yeah, me too."

"It's catchy."

"Has a nice ring to it."

"Easy to remember…"

"Would look good on a t-shirt, actually."
Pella suddenly stood up and grabbed a rifle. "Well, we might as well get our hands dirty. We've a reputation to uphold, after all."

And she was gone. Erata shrugged and followed her out.

But Gabby was still distracted. "I'm sure I've heard that name before somewhere…"

Gabby trailed after her colleagues, exiting the vehicle to be greeted by the familiar biting wind howling across the plain.

It was then that they saw the bodies…

Lieutenant Aelius crouched down next to the closest corpse, a thin film of snow covering the armoured body. It was stretched out on its side facing away from him. After performing a quick scan with his omni-tool, making sure the body wasn't rigged to explode, the Lieutenant reached out and turned it over. It was a batarian. A male by the looks of it – But Aelius always did have trouble distinguishing batarian males from females. The only visible wound was a small hole set dead centre between the aliens' upper eyes.


A member of Alpha Team approached him. "There are five more bodies, sir. They're all heavily armed. Weapons haven't been taken. No visible tracks leading away from here. Looks like they were ambushed."

"Yeah, but by whom?" Aelius regarded the corpse. "He's a merc, definitely. Gang tattoos on the neck."

"The other bodies all had single shots to the head. Like they were executed. But there are no tracks to indicate anyone else was nearby. Possibly a smuggling deal gone south, sir?"

"Possibly…" Aelius agreed. "But whoever did this didn't bother to search the APC's for cargo or retrieve weapons." He stood up. "Maybe this was a power-play? An internal dispute between the mercs."

"No honour among thieves, eh, sir?"

"Either that or we disturbed the attackers before they could finish the job. Download the data drives from their omni-tools and the maps from the APCs. It might give us their bases' location." He looked up at the flat tor of the mountain range to his right, suddenly thoughtful. "What is the distance to that plateau, would you say? About 900 metres?"

"Maybe more, sir," the man replied. "Our scans are being reflected back. Something to do with the composition of the rocks in the area."

Aelius didn't reply. He was still staring at the mountain range. "If there was a sniper's nest up there… That's a hell of a shot to make in these conditions. Not something I would have expected from some obscure merc group. This is more like Special Forces."

"What do we do now, sir?" the man asked.

Aelius brought his rifle up. "We call it in and proceed with caution," he replied. "A few dead batarians aren't going to prevent us from completing our mission."
"It's not the dead batarian that concern me, sir," the man replied quietly.

"GET BACK IN THAT VEHICLE!" Aelius suddenly yelled, his focus directed at the trio of troublesome engineers leaving the safety of the Tyrus. The Arcadias engineer seemed unmoved by the corpses, but the human and asari were eyeing them warily. "I did not give you permission to exit the Tyrus," he barked, stomping towards them.

"Technically, you didn't order us to stay in the vehicle either, sir," Pella replied.

The Lieutenant stopped and regarded the three women for a long moment. "You know every-now-and-then I wonder if the Spirits are punishing me for something. Why else would I be saddled with you three?"

"Perhaps we're actually a gift, sir?" Gabby suggested, tearing her eyes away from the closest dead batarian. "It's not like it's been boring since we arrived. The bases' heating was repaired. Your troops have been very active performing bomb disposal and battling the local wildlife. We've helped revive Entarus Station, thereby extending Hierarchy control over the region. And you have found a few batarians." She gestured at the bodies. "Maybe this attack will draw the mercenaries out of hiding and you'll finally be able to meet them in combat? And then we can get out of your hair – figuratively speaking, sir."

"I should be so lucky!" Aelius snorted.

Two pairs of eyes gazed down from the tor of the mountain range, watching the group of turians investigate the sight of the batarian massacre.

A sniper lay flat on the ground beneath a sheet of tactical cloak camouflage netting, the warm body of her spotter lying next to her. The sniper lined up her shot on what she took to be the turian commander with an almost indifferent professionalism, her curiosity raised only slightly by the incongruous sight of an asari, female human and female turian arguing with their commander. He appeared to be ordering them back into their vehicle.

The sniper's spotter, friend and occasional lover watched the scene through a powerful spotting scope, while quietly relaying everything that was happening into the active comm-link of her omni-tool.

"What are our orders?" her spotter asked the person on the other end of the comm.

There was a long pause while the spotter listened intently to the reply.

The sniper's finger hovered over the trigger.

"Acknowledged," the spotter finally said, then turned to the sniper. "We're to let them go. Killing them will only bring more Hierarchy troops. And they may prove to be useful."

The sniper removed her finger from the trigger.

Having returned to the Tyrus, the convoy pulled away to resume its journey. Aelius contacted Commander Joric over the comm and detailed what they'd found. Joric ordered that they proceed with extreme caution and put a small fighter wing on standby in case the convoy needed air support.

They continued for a further thirty minutes, the convoy tracking the energy signal to its source.
Gabby sat quietly in the cabin, lost in thought. She couldn't get the image of those dead batarians out of her head. She'd encountered corpses in her career before. But they were mostly accidental deaths on Alliance worlds, after some unwitting colonist had crossed wires on a power-line or fallen from scaffolding. She'd rarely been in combat, though she'd been trained for it and was prepared for whatever lay ahead.

Seeing those bodies slain in anger, though… Whoever had done that was evidently very skilled and was still out there somewhere.

Gabby shook her head, trying not to dwell on the corpses.

Pella looked up from the topographic scanner she'd been scrutinising and spoke to Aelius. "We're close now, sir. The signal is within 200 metres. We need to go slow so we can scan the area to pinpoint its location."

Aelius turned to the driver. "Reduce speed and get closer to that outcrop." He pointed to a small, innocuous-looking bluff rising some thirty metres out of the snow. "When Artificer Vettiill orders you to stop, you stop."

The convoy slowed to a crawl as Pella extended the sensitivity of the scanner.

After several minutes of searching, Pella finally ordered the convoy to halt.

"We're directly above the energy signal, sir. Whatever's putting out these readings is about twenty metres below us."

"Alright, let's investigate," Aelius ordered.

They exited the vehicle accompanied by a flock by turian troops from the adjacent Tyrus'. Pella bent down to scan the ice beneath her feet.

"I can just about make out a network of tunnels. Can't tell if they're artificial. There's a lot of interference from the strata here."

Gabby scanned the ground with her omni-tool and began to wander over to the side of the bluff. She activated a sub-program she'd recently developed, recalibrating her scanner to filter out most of the interference from the magnetite in the surface and narrowing the focus of the scans.

"Looks like there's an entrance through here," she called out. Pella and Aelius followed her over and the turian engineer gave a protrusion in the bluff a quick scan with her omni-tool. It appeared to be hollow.

"If it's an artificial structure it's well hidden," Pella observed. "Doesn't look as ostentatious as most krogan buildings. Some sort of tomb, perhaps?"

"Have the krogan been known to deliberately conceal something like this before?" Gabby asked.

"Not in my experience," Aelius said. He turned to Erata who seemed to be keeping her distance from everyone else. "D'Ceni! You ever hear about the krogan deliberately disguising their buildings?"

Erata shook her head. "Not that I know of. But then, I can't claim to be an expert on the Krogan Rebellions."

Aelius turned back and stared thoughtfully at the cliff face.
"A doorway… With another frozen lock," he observed. Then he turned to Pella. "Good thing we brought our resident locksmith. You fancy demonstrating that little trick of yours again, Vettiill?"

A wry grin spread across Pella's face as she realised what he was asking. "I thought you'd never ask, sir!"

Pella directed the team of soldier as they placed six concussion grenades at key points against the cliff face (apparently, Aelius didn't trust Pella quite enough to set the grenades herself). Once the team had finished, and had retired to a safe distance, Aelius, in a rare act of magnanimity, handed the slim detonator to Pella, and then quickly retreated behind the convoy of Tyrus'.

Pella joined Gabby and Erata sheltering behind their vehicle and instructed them to cover their ears.

"Fire in the hole!"

She pressed the button.

The explosion, while just as loud as before, was more focused than Pella's original attempt, and blew a neat rectangle shaped fissure into the bluff.

As the smoke and dust quickly cleared, the Lieutenant rushed over to inspect the teams' handiwork. He shone the light on his rifle into the darkness.

"There are steps leading down. It's definitely an artificial structure." He pointed at two of the bodyguards. "Alright, Tarfun and Gabelus on point. Vettiill, Daniels and D'Ceni with me. The rest of the team, cover our six. Keep comms open at all times. Watch your footing and stay alert."

They moved into the darkness. Aelius ordered two of his squad to remain behind and guard the entrance.

Tight beams of light pierced the gloom; particles of dust reflecting in the glow of their torches. The group moved down the steps carefully, the three engineers constantly scanning the area ahead. The stairway descended for about three stories, then levelled out into what appeared to be an antechamber, about the size of a large hotel lobby. The walls were totally devoid of any decoration and were simply flat and functional surfaces.

"Large deposits of magnetite in the rocks here," Gabby commented. "I'm only able to scan about twenty metres ahead of us."

"Makes our job a little harder, but shouldn't be anything to worry about," Pella said.

Gabby approached the wall and ran her omni-tool over it.

"This entire structure has been carved out by mining laser. The walls are perfectly smooth. No imperfections of any kind. Even by today's standards that's incredible!"

"You starting to doubt the theory that krogan made this?" Pella asked.

"I like to keep an open mind," Gabby replied.

Pella indicated a passageway off to their left. "The energy signature is coming from that direction."

Aelius ordered a group of four to guard the antechamber, and then followed the point men down the path Pella had specified.
On the surface, the two guards scanned the frozen wasteland. Lieutenant Aelius' orders were to keep a weather eye out for anything out of the ordinary, while maintaining an open comm-link. And like the professionals they were, they were focused solely on that task.

Unfortunately, the planet's local strata had been interfering with their sensors, and their scanners didn't alert them to the fact that something was stalking them from above the cliff.

Suddenly, their omni-tools beeped urgently. The first guards eyes flickered down at his wrist then immediately looked up to where the signal had indicated. A dark shadow moved across his vision. The first guard tried to cry out but his shout was silenced as something dropped nimbly onto his shoulders. A sharp blow to his throat stifled any attempt to speak and he clutched desperately at his neck, gasping for breath.

The second guard immediately brought his weapon to bear, but it was knocked from his grasp and a roundhouse kick almost took his head off. He fell heavily in the snow, struggling to get to his feet, but another powerful blow to his temple floored him.

His last memory was of something forcing his helmet off, and an acrid chemical being sprayed into his face. His vision swam and he quickly fell into unconsciousness.

The passageway meandered ever downwards occasionally intersecting with other paths. Pella directed the group forwards until the corridor split into a junction.

Pella and Gabby waved their omni-tools left and right, trying to get a fix on the energy signal.

"I'm not sure, sir," Gabby said shaking her head. "I can't seem to localize the source. I can't be certain which path we should take."

"Then we'll split up." Aelius separated the remaining squad into two fireteams. Gabby, Pella and Erata took the left path supported by the two heavily armed point men, while Aelius led his team of four off to the right.

One soldier led the way, while the other brought up the rear; the engineers continuing to scan the region ahead. They moved through the passageways for a couple of minutes, until Gabby noticed an increase in signal intensity.

"Looks like we picked the right path. Whatever's producing this energy signature is just up ahead."

"Confirmed," Pella agreed looking at her omni-tool. "It's within fifteen metres."

Gabby could feel a faint hum in the air, like the deep vibration of a set of loudspeakers, and a taste like ozone settling on her tongue. The corridor emerged into another larger antechamber, plain and unadorned like the first, bar one notable exception.

A glowing monolith stood at the far end of the room.

The two guards swept into the chamber, searching left and right for any sign of danger, but the engineers' focus was solely on the monolith.

It was long and thin; the blade-like edges facing outward and the topmost surface flat and sharp. The whole structure was supported by a sloping base. Narrow green lines curved downwards from the top, running the length of the flat sides, and the entire monolith seemed to radiate with an eerie green light.
It was the first time any of them had seen something like that with their own eyes, but each person in the room knew exactly what it was.

"That is not krogan," Pella said.

Gabby shook her head. "No. This is… This is Prothean!"

The four guards paced up and down the first antechamber, constantly scanning the room and waiting for the Lieutenant to return. Like all good turian soldiers, they were well-trained and extremely disciplined. They ignored the chill of the room and focused on the task they’d been given, fully prepared for anything this world could throw at them.

However, despite all their training, despite their vigilance, they were still surprised by the swiftness of the attack.

It came from behind them.

Something had slipped through the room unnoticed and had attacked from the passageway opposite the entrance. There was no warning, just the distinctive crack of metal against flesh and suddenly two of the guards were down, slumped on the floor, breathing but unconscious.

The two remaining guards barely had time to raise their weapons.

The male guard opened his mouth to call it in, when something struck the woman to his left. A soft cry escaped her throat. He turned, momentarily distracted, and that was all the time his attacker needed as his rifle was expertly knocked from his hands and a gun muzzle thrust into his face.

The group stared at the structure for what seemed like an age. It was Pella who finally spoke.

"I can't believe it. We've found a Prothean data cache."

"Like the one on Mars?" Gabby asked.

"Similar," Erata agreed. "Smaller, perhaps. But still… I mean, you hear of discoveries like this but you never imagine for one moment that you'd be part of a team that uncovered a new one." The asari suddenly grinned like a giddy schoolgirl.

"There are no records of Gellix being a former Prothean world," Pella exclaimed. "When the Hierarchy gets wind of this… It'll certainly put the planet's regeneration back on track. And I could probably have my pick of assignments."

"If only Kenneth could see this," Gabby lamented. "A fifty-thousand year old piece of alien technology. He'd be in hog heaven."

"You can show it to him when Arcadias returns," Pella said. "I know Artificer Leptis would kill for the chance to examine a Prothean device."

"This is the kind of thing that makes reputations," Erata said quietly. "Or goes towards saving them…" she added under her breath.

Gabby approached the structure slowly, almost reverently, and set her omni-tool to record. Everyone's attention was so focused on the device that the first guard didn't notice something was wrong with his colleague until the second guard stiffened as he stood in the doorway and slowly
raised his arms. The first guard, Tarfun, turned towards his comrade.

"Gabelus? What's wrong."

"Drop the weapons!" a feminine voice ordered from behind the man.

Tarfun brought his weapon to bear, training it on his comrade.

"Show yourself!" he ordered. "Hiding behind a turian shield is no way to fight."

A figure stepped out from behind the helpless soldier, lithe and graceful, a rifle still trained against the man's head.

It was an asari!

Clad in the famous black leathers of a commando, the asari's purple face was practically the only thing visible against the background darkness.

The three engineers brought their weapons up, every light now shining directly at the intruder's attractive face. The asari didn't even squint against the light, but continued to stare at the guard threatening her.

"I repeat: Drop the weapons and kick them over to me," the intruder said calmly.

"You're hardly in a position to make demands!" Tarfun growled. "You're outnumbered and outgunned. Even if you kill him, you will die. I guarantee it."

"You think so?" the purple-skinned asari asked, a small grin curling her lips.

Seven more fully armed commandos suddenly emerged from the darkness, their weapons trained expertly on the small engineering team.

For a tense few seconds no-one moved, no-one even dared to breathe. Guns were aimed in a tense stalemate, multiple eyes darting back and forth between the two sides.

"Drop your weapons and save the life of your charges," the purple-skinned asari suggested to Tarfun. "Your orders are to protect them, yes? If you attack I promise that you won't survive, and through your death you will fail to defend the engineers' lives."

Tarfun didn't move.

"It's a simple choice," the asari continued in an oddly reasonable voice, as if they were having nothing more than a friendly debate. "I personally don't want to see any deaths here today, but you know you can't win. Better to hand over your weapon and save the lives of the people you are sworn to protect," she finished, appealing to the turian's sense of duty.

"You killed the rest of my squad to get in here," Tarfun accused.

"No. I swear no-one died," the asari replied. "The other members of your squad are unconscious or under guard. We don't kill unless ordered to do so, and we certainly won't kill our allies without provocation. Please don't give us any."

Tarfun hesitated, his eyes darting between the commandos and the three engineers. Then, slowly, he lowered his weapon. Another commando stepped forward to collect it, while Gabby, Pella and Erata were quickly disarmed.
Gabelus was shoved forward to join his team.

"On your knees!" one of the asari ordered, still training her weapon on them.

"You said no-one would die here," Tarfun protested.

"So I did," the purple asari replied. "On your knees and hands on your head."

The team complied and crouched down on their knees, raising their hands to their heads.

Four of the commandos stood guard, while the rest began to sweep the room, ensuring it was secure.

One of the commandos prodded the top of Erata's crest with her gun muzzle.

"What do we do with this one? She's a citizen of the Republics."

"Not our call to make," one of her colleagues replied. "Acolytes should always accede to the higher authority."

"But they've seen the beacon," the first asari muttered.

"It is of no consequence," another voice echoed from the entrance, the newcomer's voice reverberating around the room, instantly silencing all chatter.

Gabby couldn't identify who the new speaker was at first. The voice was feminine; slightly deeper than Gabby had expected coming from an asari, but rich in authority and intensely cultured. It had an almost hypnotic quality that suggested the speaker was well versed in influencing others.

A tall figure stepped forward, her face partially obscured by an ornate black headpiece. Clad in a fur-lined robe, the asari strode past the kneeling engineers and stopped before the Prothean device. The commandos instantly deferred to her, a few of them forming an honour guard behind her.

There was a sharp intake of breath from Erata as she recognised the figure. "By the Goddess!" she exclaimed in a hushed whisper. "What's she doing here?"

"You know her?" Gabby whispered back.

"Only by reputation," Erata replied. "She's one of our most respected leaders."

The newcomer stared at the Prothean device for a long time. After a while, she turned her gaze upon the kneeling prisoners, as if noticing them for the first time, and Gabby suddenly understood why she commanded such authority.

The asari had a regal bearing, radiating an almost innate power, and her eyes were piercingly intelligent. Her brooding expression seemed to bore into Gabby's head making the human almost feel unfit to look upon her – she actually shied away a little under her scrutiny, but then caught herself and defiantly returned the asari's gaze.

The newcomer's fur-lined robe hung open in the front revealing a long high-neck black gown beneath. Cut low to expose as much of her blue skin as possible, the gown quite blatantly highlighted the cleavage of her already impressive bosom. The alien's proud face was strangely absent of markings, except for two simple dark lines on her forehead that any human casual observer might have mistaken for eyebrows.

Erata held her breath; she was still staring at the newcomer in awe.
"That's Matriarch Benezia!"
Long Buried Secrets: Part Two

Chapter Summary

Gabby has a fateful encounter with Matriarch Benezia.

Prothean Beacon Antechamber, Gellix – 19:56 UTC – 14th February 2183 CE

Before coming to Gellix, Gabby could have counted the number of times her life had been threatened on the fingers of one hand. But since she'd landed on the frozen world, it seemed like she'd found herself in jeopardy on an almost daily basis.

Never, though, had she ever felt closer to death than when she stared into the cold blue eyes of that Matriarch.

They were on their knees. Guns were trained on them. The quintet of engineers and turian soldiers were trapped underground with a squad of fellow turians who were either under guard or unconscious. Asari commandos surrounded them; a company of trained killers, each with possibly centuries of experience in the art of death between them.

They were wholly at the mercy of this one statuesque alien Matriarch.

Gabby chanced another glance at the asari; the Matriarch was gazing at the kneeling captives with an air of mild detachment.

Abruptly, the asari turned to her left and approached the turian soldiers.

She spoke to them, called them by their full names; chatted with them pleasantly, formally, as if she were some visiting dignitary attending a social function. It was a bizarre sight.

Then she faced Pella.

"Pella Vettiill. Artificer First Class from the Hierarchy vessel Arcadias. Captain Verress speaks very highly of you, artificer. You are a credit to your ship and to the turian fleet."

"I… Well… I try and do my best to serve the Hierarchy, ma'am…" Pella began, but the Matriarch had turned to Gabby.

"Gabriella Daniels. Earth-born Aerospace Engineer from the Systems Alliance. You must be a very skilled individual indeed to have been selected for the Interspecies Engineering Programme." The asari’s rich voice was like silk, her timbre and inflections not dissimilar to a cultured British accent.

"Thank you, Matriarch," Gabby replied graciously. "Can I put my hands down?"

Benezia didn't answer; her gaze fell on Erata.

"And finally we have Erata, of the family D'Ceni." It was a statement, not a question. Erata nodded mutely. "Order of Serrice Engineer born in the city Usaru. You are known to me. I understand you recently completed an assignment for my compatriot Matriarch Lidanya on Illium? Although 'completed' may be rather an optimistic term." Erata's eyes darted guiltily around the room. "I find it
curious that you chose to pursue engineering as a profession, D'Ceni, especially considering your family's lineage…"

Erata looked up. "I wanted to walk my own path, Matriarch. Not be bound by tradition."

"Ah, yes. Rebellion. The epitome of a Maiden. That is to be expected. Your actions are by no means unique. My daughter is also known to disregard my council. Such is the relationship between a maiden and her family."

"My family is important to me, Matriarch," Erata said, a hint of resentment creeping into her voice.

"Indeed. And such a large family it is, too. With so many celebrated and accomplished individuals. Even you are known to be…” She stopped mid-sentence, her eyes glazing over for a brief moment, like she was listening to some invisible voice muttering in her head. The moment passed and Benezia regarded Erata with a new found interest.


Turning away, the Matriarch bent her head to whisper in the purple-skinned commando's ear. A second later, the commando looked sharply at Erata. Then she raised her weapon and placed herself protectively between the Matriarch and D'Cени.

Benezia looked at the beacon again. "Are you aware of the provenance of this device, Engineer Daniels?"

Gabby cleared her throat. "It's a Prothean relic, ma'am," she replied promptly. "An example of fifty-thousand year old paleo-technology that appears to be still powered and active – that's rare enough on its own. One of your commandos called it a 'beacon', so I'm assuming it's something you've either seen before or been looking for. Seriously, may I put my hands down?"

The Matriarch granted Gabby a cold smile. "Very observant. And no, you may not." She looked at Pella. "What is the significance of this find, Artificer Vettiill?"

Pella glanced anxiously at the guns being trained on her. "The discovery of any new Prothean relics could potentially advance Galactic civilization as a whole through the implementation of new technologies, medical techniques or historical erudition," Pella intoned, reciting verbatim the Hierarchy textbooks she'd studied as a child. "But it often takes years to decipher the information."

"Quite correct," the Matriarch said. "A fascinating race the Protheans. They left so little of their own culture for us to study, and yet their technology has permeated every aspect of our society. Influencing the facets of so many lives. They are the reason we are here on this planet now. Without them we would not be conversing. We would be isolated – locked in our own solar systems with little knowledge of the wider Galaxy, or of the other races. There would be no Citadel Council, no interspecies alliance, no sharing of ideas, or coalition of planets. And there would certainly be none of the more intimate interactions enjoyed between so many of the different races. What an insular existence it would be." Benezia turned to admire the Prothean device once more.

"That is, of course, the received wisdom. But the history of the Protheans is the key to a greater Truth – one that will lead us down a more enlightened path. And that Truth will make us stronger, changing Galactic society beyond our recognition and our comprehension. We will become united under a common purpose and achieve so much more than we can possibly conceive. In that new dawn we will want for nothing and accomplish everything."

It was at that point that a sliver of genuine fear spread down Gabby's spine. There was something in
the Matriarch's voice that was made every hair on the back of Gabby's neck stand up.

"Are… are you talking about a Utopia, Matriarch?" Gabby asked. "Would this relic lead to some form of Cornucopia Technology?"

"It is a means to an end." The Matriarch turned and looked directly at Gabby; her expression hard and a fervent glint in her eye. "And a new beginning."

"We don't have very long, Matriarch," the purple-skinned commando said softly. "Time is against us."

Benezia didn't look at the commando, but approached the kneeling human. "You have my sincere thanks for leading us to this discovery, child. But it is well outside your realm of experience. Time to let steadier hands take the reins. My team will be more than adept stewards of this technology."

"You can't do that!" Pella exclaimed. "This is a Hierarchy controlled world. This is our find. You're outside your jurisdiction."

Benezia's expression hardened. "My jurisdiction, especially in relation to any Prothean technology of significant historical relevance to the asari, encompasses whichever planet the Republic leadership deems necessary. As a Matriarch I have the right to assume control of any project on a disputed planet with no elected government. This structure is now sovereign asari territory."


"We shall see," Benezia said quietly. "It depends on the veracity of the people making the claim to the relic."

The Matriarch regarded the engineers once more, an expression of regret clouding her features. "A shame, really… You three hold such promise." She glanced at Erata. "Some more than most."

Benezia stepped away.

The commandos moved in.

Gabby blinked and held her breath, staring in shock at the commandos as they readied their weapons, aiming directly at her face.

_Are they actually going to…?_

The unreality of the situation stunned Gabby into silence, and beyond all reason, the memory of Kenneth's grinning face flashed into her head.

*Of everyone important in my life, I think of that smug Scottish chowderhead!*

Gabby almost laughed at the absurdity of it all.

A gun muzzle was inches from her face.

Gabby shut her eyes…

… Then a flanging voice sounded from the darkness.

"…The structure was carved out by a mining laser. Technology the krogan have no access to, so I think we can rule them out as the architects. And I've no doubt the monolith at the back of the chamber is of Prothean design…"
Gabby looked up.

Lieutenant Aelius had walked into the room – unarmed, and heedless of the guns suddenly being trained on him by the asari. His omni-tool was active and an image of Commander Joric was hovering above his wrist. Aelius continued to talk to the image of Joric as if he was giving a guided lecture tour of the ruins.

"I'm glad this direct feed to the Citadel is being received, Commander. I hope the Primarch and the Council find this little tour interesting. As you can plainly see, my soldiers and the engineers are keeping our asari visitors entertained. And it seems we have a Matriarch visiting Gellix. Her acolytes appear to be very keen to protect her. Such dedication. I will continue to reconnoitre the area and establish if there are any further Prothean relics. My men have recorded everything on their omni-tools for further analysis, as per your orders. Expect a full report in the next hour, Commander."

"Very good, Lieutenant. I will speak to you again very soon. Joric out."

"My comm-link will remain open, Commander."

The image of Joric faded and Aelius looked up at the armed commandos. He saluted the Matriarch, then casually clasped his hands behind his back and smiled.

"Not interrupting anything, am I?"

Benezia was very still, her face like granite.

For a long time no-one moved, then the Matriarch spoke to Aelius.

"I was under the impression my acolytes had accounted for all the turian troops?"

"Forgive me, Matriarch," Aelius replied, bowing politely. "This place is larger than it appears. My fireteam and I got lost down one of the side passages. We've only just found our way back."

"Indeed." Benezia still hadn't moved. "And how thoughtful of you to establish a vid-link with your superiors."

"Oh, and the Citadel Council, Matriarch," Aelius added. "I'm sure they were as surprised by your presence on Gellix as we were."

The Matriarch continued to stare at Aelius until she took a deep breath. Then, ever so slowly, a smile spread across Benezia's face, or at least, she showed her teeth.

She turned to address her commandos.

"The legs of our allies must be getting tired from squatting on the ground. Kindly help them to stand."

Gabby was hauled to her feet by a commando. The engineers lowered their hands from their heads.

And as quickly as it started, the situation was over. The only person not helped to her feet was Erata; none of the commandos seemed inclined to touch her. Pella tugged out of an asari's grip and glared at the black-clad asari surrounding her.

"Well, now we've all become acquainted, I must ask you to accompany us back to the base. Commander Joric will want to personally speak to such a distinguished diplomat as yourself, Matriarch." Lieutenant Aelius' voice was so sharp it could have cut glass.
Benezia didn't reply, but certainly didn't argue either. She moved through the room and exited the antechamber, leading her troops through the passageways.

When she was sure the asari were out of earshot, Gabby sidled up to Aelius and whispered to him.

"Sir, there's twenty metres of magnetite between us and the surface. How did you establish a live-link with Commander Joric through all that interference?"

In reply, Aelius flicked on his omni-tool and played back the recording of Commander Joric. "Very good, Lieutenant. I will speak to you again very soon. Joric out," the image repeated. Gabby looked closer at the timestamp on the recording.

It was from two days ago.

Aelius smiled grimly. "It wasn't a live-link!"

The crowd of turians and asari exited the bluff; sixteen of the Gellix crew glaring in open hostility at the squad of eleven asari. Having already been overpowered by the commandos, the turians didn't much fancy their chances if violence erupted again.

They separated quickly once outside, the turians cradling weapons in their hands while nursing their injuries and keeping their distance from the asari.

"Where are your vehicles, Matriarch?" Lieutenant Aelius demanded of Benezia.

"On the other side of the bluff, hidden from view. I felt it prudent considering the mercenary units that operate in this area."

"Those dead batarians we encountered on our way here. That was your commandos, wasn't it, Matriarch?" Aelius accused. Benezia merely smiled. "Please return to your vehicles, we will escort you back to Entarus Station."

"I am not bound by Hierarchy rules," Benezia replied haughtily. "I go where I choose. It would take a very compelling argument to persuade me to be led by you, Lieutenant. Exactly what can you offer?"

The tell-tale shriek of thrusters at full power could be heard across the plain. Benezia turned just in time to see three turian gunships fly overhead. The craft banked in mid-air, decelerated as they approached the group again, and finally drifted to a halt and hovered some thirty metres above their position.

The turians stared up at the fighter wing Commander Joric had scrambled for them, now very glad of the extra firepower.

"A fighter escort, Matriarch," Aelius explained, pointing at the heavily armed gunships. "I advised Commander Joric she should send back-up if she hadn't heard from us within twenty minutes after we entered the structure."

"How very judicious of you," Benezia replied. She wasn't smiling this time.

Commander Joric was furious.

She had flown in from Anapondus directly; arriving at Entarus Station shortly before the convoy of
vehicles and its fighter escort had arrived.

Not only had the asari failed to inform her that they were in the region, but the commandos had attacked turian troops – *Her* troops. And to top it all off, it seemed that when Lieutenant Aelius had discovered them in that antechamber, the asari commandos were preparing to *execute* the visiting engineers!

Matriarch Benezia assured Commander Joric that this was merely a dreadful misunderstanding; that she wasn't in the habit of even *considering* harming their allies, especially a fellow *asari*. Benezia was, after all, a spiritual leader, dedicated to the preservation of life. To execute an ally in cold blood was unthinkable! Such a violent action would be a gross betrayal of every belief she held dear. The engineers had simply misinterpreted her bodyguards' intentions – "Perhaps their anxieties were heightened by their close proximity to Prothean technology? The relics have been known to occasional cause hallucinations and heightened emotional states," the Matriarch explained calmly.

"My crew is convinced your commandos were arranging to shoot them."

"I can assure you I spoke no such order, Commander," Benezia replied. "Your own soldiers will verify that. And my acolytes would not kill except to defend themselves. Why would I jeopardise the relationship between our two great nations and attack an ally, a fellow Council race no less, risking war for one Prothean relic? The argument makes no sense."

"I will be seeking an audience with our representative on the Citadel, Matriarch."

Benezia tilted her head, listening to the storm raging outside the base. "Not immediately, I suspect. Storms on Gellix are notorious for interfering with communications."

"I have already informed my superiors of this development and will demand a meeting with the Council," Joric repeated.

"Then all we can do is wait, Commander. I will meditate on today's events."

"Your retinue will be given billets and food will be provided in the Mess, but their weapons will not be returned until this matter is put to bed."

Benezia bowed slightly. "I will inform my acolytes they may sate their appetites, Commander."

The conversation in the mess hall was muted; whispered asides danced back and forth between the turians as the Gellix crew kept a close eye on the asari, ever alert for the first sign of further trouble.

The asari commandos kept to themselves, separated from the rest of the crew and remaining in one corner of the hall.

Gabby and Erata sat on the opposite side of the Mess, their conversation low and heated.

"How the hell did Benezia know who we were? I mean, I've heard that Matriarchs could perform incredible feats of recall but never imagined one of them would know *everything* about us."

"I'm sure the Matriarchs would like us to believe it was all through mental discipline, but it's most likely a neural implant," Erata muttered. "It's the only way they could possibly recall so many details. We're not infallible, Gabby. Matriarchs *embody* our culture and are the face of the asari to the rest of the galaxy. They meet thousands of individuals from dozens of worlds. They *have* to have an edge over the other races, especially when they're dealing with the eidetic memories of salarians. My guess is her implant receives updates from the database on Thessia at regular intervals."
"She seemed to know a lot about you."

Erata scowled. "As a Matriarch, she would have access to privileged information."

Gabby glanced back at the group of commandos. Their leader, the purple-skinned asari, was quite openly staring at their table.

After a moment, the commando turned and whispered to her fellow soldiers.

"The human has no idea how much danger she's in just by sitting next to that freak!"

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**Entarus Station CIC, Gellix – 17.05 UTC – 15th February**

The room was packed.

Gabby, Pella and Erata kept their distance from Matriarch Benezia, the poised asari flanked by three of her commandos.

Commander Joric stood close to the holo-display, Lieutenant Aelius on her six and a large retinue of armed turian troops standing guard on the perimeter of the room – never before had a simple conference call been more heavily defended.

A large screen ran the length of the far wall. Joric activated the display and the face of Primarch Fedorian, his stern silver-grey carapace festooned with bright green colony markings, stared down on the room. He spoke immediately.

"Before we start, I believe Captain Verress should be part of this discussion."

"I would prefer to keep the people aware of this situation to a minimum, Primarch," Matriarch Benezia insisted.

"You are on Gellix, Matriarch. Get used to disappointment!" the Primarch replied. He punched away at his console. The screen split in half and the image of Captain Verress sitting down in her chair appeared on one side of the screen, her face turned to her right as if she'd been addressing someone else in her room. She faced forward. "Primarch! We really must stop meeting like this. People will talk. If this is about that salarian freighter…"

"This is a separate matter," Fedorian said stiffly, cutting her off. "There's an issue on Gellix you need to be made aware of. I'm linking you in to a roundtable with the Citadel Council and Commander Joric."

Captain Verress' face went very still, though she sat slightly straighter in her chair. Her eyes darted left and right as the live feed from the Entarus CIC appeared on her screen.

"Commander Joric, if you would," the Primarch ordered. Joric activated the holo-display and image of three figures materialised in mid-air. The Citadel Council members, Sparatus in a sharp blue and black turian suit, Tevos looking typically elegant in a long red and white asari gown, and the salarian Councillor Valern who was covered almost head-to-foot in formal dark blue robes.

Councillor Tevos gave a slight bow of acknowledgment. "This session has begun," she announced jumping straight in. "We are here to mediate the recent discovery of Prothean relics on the turian occupied world of Gellix."

There was a slight intake of breath from Captain Verress. "Prothean ruins, Councillor?" She stared
accusingly at Commander Joric. "A little warning would have been nice."

"My apologies, Captain," Joric replied, "but calling it in wasn't an option. We couldn't link to the comm-buoy until recently."

"If I may continue?" Tevos interrupted. "The dispute relates to the discovery of a Prothean relic by members of the IEP and Matriarch Benezia's acolytes. Both parties lay claim to the find. There has also been a formal complaint from Commander Joric who asserts that asari commandos assaulted turian troops."

"The claim is not in dispute," Benezia said. "My acolytes subdued what they took to be enemy forces. Only later did we discover they were Hierarchy troops."

"You think that will fly, Matriarch?" the Primarch asked. "According to the reports your commandos attacked and captured turian soldiers on a Hierarchy owned world. How do you defend that?"

"Were there any lasting injuries?" Benezia asked, concern radiating from her features.

"Well, a member of my team almost had his trachea collapsed," Lieutenant Aelius protested.

"How careless," Benezia said calmly, "my instructions were specifically that injuries be superficial. I will ensure that the acolyte responsible is punished. But, as you pointed out Lieutenant, none of your team were actually killed. My acolytes have been, if nothing else, simply overzealous in the execution of their duty."

"Overzealous?" Joric exclaimed. "Is that what you call assaulting turian troops?"

"I, for one, would like to know why Matriarch Benezia never informed Commander Joric that she and her acolytes were in the area," Captain Verress pointed out.

"The Captain makes a good point, Matriarch," Councillor Valern piped up. "You have yet to explain what you are doing on a turian controlled world."

"And without proper authorisation!" Councillor Sparatus stated, his mandibles twitching with displeasure. "You made no attempt to inform the Hierarchy of the finding."

"Merely an unfortunate oversight, Councillor," Benezia replied. "Once we realised a batarian mercenary group was also tracking the energy signal we rushed to defend it."

"An admirable response," Tevos said. "But what made you suspect there was a Prothean device on the planet at all?"

"A recent translation from the writings of Matriarch Dilinaga. During her great odyssey she reported detecting a power signature on the planet, but couldn't locate its exact source; although further study indicated it resembled the signal recorded from other known Prothean sites. As a student of the great Matriarch's writings I felt it was my duty to investigate personally and confirm the discovery."

"This is a new development," Sparatus said. "I was not aware the Protheans had ever occupied Gellix."

"It would fit with our recent findings on the planet," Valern interjected. "Our researchers have determined that Gellix was a verdant world fifty thousand years ago. The regular pulses of cold climate indicate the planet is currently in the midst of a natural glacial period – an ice age."

"Yeah, we're aware of that!" Pella muttered.
Councillor Sparatus turned on the three engineers. "You have something you wish to say, Artificer?"

"I… was simply agreeing with Councillor Valern, sir," Pella replied.

"I don't doubt it!" Sparatus agreed. "Operating in arctic conditions is hazardous for turian troops at the best of times. Winter-tour syndrome can result in impaired judgement. And often makes witness statements unreliable. Have you had any trouble adjusting to the environment, Artificer?"

Pella opened her mouth to defend herself, but was saved by Captain Verress. "I can vouch for Artificer Vettiill in this matter, Councillor. I would not have selected her for this mission if I didn't have complete confidence in her abilities."

Valern frowned at Benezia, apparently dissatisfied with her answer. "I am concerned that you did not inform the Council of this discovery, Matriarch. May I remind you that failing to disclose the location of Prothean paleo-technology is a severe offense punishable by sanctions aimed at…"

"I am well aware of the regulations, Councillor," Benezia said, her face suddenly like flint. "I am also aware of the scandal that would ensue should any asari be foolish enough to not inform the Council about discoveries like this. It would be a heavy price for such small gain.

"The suggestion that any member of the asari government would be involved in the concealment of Prothean technology is incredible," the Matriarch said slowly. Benezia turned her attention to Tevos and seemed to address her directly. "Such an action would be reprehensible, and a betrayal of everything this Council stands for. If such a thing ever came to light the asari reputation and economy would suffer. It would lead to a destabilization of every carefully cultivated relationship we have achieved with the Galactic community. Would we really be willing to risk such severe sanctions just for the sake of one Prothean site? Let us be rational. There is no logic to this argument."

For a moment it looked like the asari Councillor's face had paled from her natural azure to a lighter shade of blue. She was staring silently at Benezia.

"The Matriarch's words ring true," Councillor Tevos agreed finally.

Councillor Sparatus nodded firmly. "Then the only course of action is a Hierarchy led expedition, as the find is in Hierarchy territory."

"I agree, Councillor," Captain Verress said, directing her attention to the three engineers. "But since it was unearthed by members of the IEP, it seems fitting that the individuals who discovered the relic remain a part of the research team…"

"I have no objection," Sparatus replied, glancing admiringly at Pella. "It wouldn't hurt to have more turian eyes on this project."

"That is certainly agreeable," Valern said.

The asari Councillor hesitated briefly as she glanced at Erata, then she nodded. "Granted… However, in deference to the Hierarchy, I feel the asari presence could be seen as overly provocative. Commandos are somewhat redundant on archaeological dig-sites. To help smooth over this little misunderstanding, perhaps Matriarch Benezia would consider relinquishing her claim to the site? Merely as a sign of good faith, of course. To demonstrate her commitment to maintaining cordial relations with our allies…"

"The Council would look favourably on such a magnanimous gesture, Matriarch" the salarian Councillor agreed.
Benezia's expression threatened to betray her feelings, but, after a moment's thought, she bowed in deference. "Of course, I will assent to the Council's request. But might I suggest leaving a small retinue of my personal guard to work with your team? They are not without skill in scientific research." Without waiting for a reply, Benezia turned to the purple-skinned commando standing next to her. "Shiala, you will remain to assist the turian engineering team. Tana and Berina will also serve as excellent support crew."

The Council exchanged a glance; an unspoken verdict passed between them. They each gave a slight nod. Councillor Valern turned to Benezia. "We will agree to this. However, if this is to be a joint venture, I must insist that the Salarian Union also be represented."

"It would take time to gather a suitable team from Sur'Kesh," Benezia protested. "In my considered opinion we should not delay research on this device. Despite being a turian controlled world, Gellix is lawless. The batarians may attack again at any time."

"Fortunately, there is a salarian research vessel traversing the Minos Wasteland not far from Gellix. They can be with you in a few hours."

"An excellent suggestion, Councillor," Tevos agreed. "Arrangements will be made to accommodate the salarian team at the Gellix base."

For a second Benezia's mouth was a tight line and her eyes were flint edged. She was being boxed into a corner by the Council. Just as quickly as it appeared the expression faded and she smiled brightly, giving the Councillors another slight bow of acceptance.

"A satisfactory arrangement. I am privileged to assist the Council in any way possible."

"We are pleased to hear that, Matriarch," Councillor Tevos agreed, her expression radiating well-practised sincerity. "I'm sure with so many eyes on this project the team will be able to observe and report on everything that happens there."

Gabby glanced at Benezia. From her angle, it looked like the Matriarch was staring daggers at Tevos.

"This council is concluded," Tevos proclaimed.

The image faded.

The sun had set just ten minutes previously.

Gabby, Pella and the Liaison Officer Jerash watched the salarian shuttle descend onto the Entarus Station landing pad.

Its thrusters powered down and the compartment doors slid open to reveal five salarian scientists in white and red lab coats. They stepped onto the surface, shivering slightly under the planet's chill temperature.

As visitors to the turian occupied world, Gabby and Pella had been assigned to help escort the alien researchers around the base. They moved forward to intercept the salarians.

"Welcome to Gellix," Gabby said, shaking hands with the closest salarian. "I wish it could have been a warmer welcome."

"Thank you. Agreed," the alien replied, his voice typically high pitched. "Hoped climate would be
more palatable but cannot choose where one works."

"We'll show you to your quarters and the research area you'll be working in," Jerash said, smiling amiably. "I thought there were six of you?"

"There are," a green-skinned salarian grumbled and jerked his thumb in the direction of the shuttle. "Our associate is retrieving his gear. He carries a lot of bags. And takes up more than enough space back on our ship."

"What ship are you from?" Pella asked.

Her query was answered by a deep voice rumbling from the depths of the shuttle. "The Auroto."

Gabby turned.

A hulking figure emerged from the shadows, bowing slightly to allow his red armoured crest to fit under the shuttle's doorway. A pair of massive, tri-toed boots stomped onto the planet's surface; the boots' owner savouring the astonished expressions on the alien faces in front of him – all except one face.

"Chaill!" Gabby exclaimed in delight.

The krogan smiled happily, the grin lighting up his blue eyes.

"Well, you did say I should swing by sometime."
Getting to Know You

Chapter Summary

How will the turian crew react to a krogan engineer walking around the base? As Chaill gets to know the crew, the asari commandos plan their next move...

Chapter Notes

Warning: contains sexual themes and mild nudity.

Entarus Station Landing Pad, Gellix – 23:15 UTC – 15th February 2183 CE

Pella watched in surprise and only a mild sense of revulsion as Gabby rushed forward and embraced the krogan. The former enemy of the Hierarchy, the alien menace that she'd been taught to despise since she was a child, lifted the human bodily off the ground and gave a rumbling laugh as he hugged her like a drowning man clinging to driftwood, before eventually returning her feet gently to the floor.

Gabby slapped the krogan on his chest plate and asked him why he hadn't told her he was coming.

"What? And ruin the surprise?" the krogan replied, grinning widely.

Pella glanced at her fellow turians on the landing pad. They looked as astonished to see the krogan as she was; all of them raising their weapons slightly. She glared critically at the salarians. She couldn't understand why they had even considered bringing a krogan to work on a Prothean dig-site. Surely he couldn't make any contribution to this venture?

What's his job going to be? Carrying their bags?

Lieutenant Aelius stepped forward to confront the salarians. "We weren't informed to expect a krogan on Gellix. This is a breach of protocol. He'll have to be cleared through security."

"Not at all," the salarian leader replied. "Informed your commander our team would include engineers and scientists proficient in analysis of working paleo-technology."

"Then, how does that explain him?" Aelius demanded, pointing at the krogan.

"Engineer Chaill a valued teammate. One of few crew members experienced in examination of Prothean relics."

"I… What? Really?" He turned to Chaill. "You've studied them before?"

"Nail on the head, Lieutenant," Chaill confirmed. He fired off a quick salute. "Citadel Reservist. Aralakh System Volunteers. I often work with interspecies organisations and was part of the Sirta Foundation led Alliance team developing the human colony of Fehl Prime last year. Did a recce of the old Prothean ruins near the colony; it's not every day I get to see an ancient interstellar comm-
device. I got talking with the asari anthropologist there and she eventually allowed me to assist in the survey during my downtime. Spent a good four weeks out in the field. That site has some excellent examples of pre-cataclysm Prothean megaliths."

"Chaill also served on the SSV Perugia and helped regenerate Terra Nova colony," Gabby added. "I can definitely vouch for his skills."

"That's… not what I would have expected," Aelius admitted, staring open-mouthed at the krogan.

"Yeah, I get that a lot!" Chaill grinned without humour.

Aelius turned back to the salarians. "We may have trouble finding suitable accommodation for him…"

"I don't take up that much space, Lieutenant," Chaill assured him. "Whatever digs you've organized for the Auroto crew is fine."

"Very well… But we'll still need to run a security check. In the meantime, I'll show you to the quarters you've been assigned. If you'd like to come this way?" Aelius motioned for them to follow him.

Pella watched Aelius lead the salarians and krogan from the landing pad, Gabby still smiling happily as she walked beside her vicious-looking friend. Pella gave an involuntary shudder, partly from the cold and partly from the thought of working in such close proximity to a krogan.

The new survey team, flanked by armed guards, certainly gained lots of attention as they walked through the corridors, although most of the attention was directed at Chaill.

Several turians did double-takes when they saw the krogan or started in surprise. One or two even glared in open hostility.

"I think you're being given the evil eye," Gabby muttered.

"Hardly surprising," Chaill granted. "The last time someone like me was on Gellix he was shooting at turians! Feels strange knowing I'm probably the first krogan to set foot on the planet in centuries – like I'm reopening old wounds with the Hierarchy."

"You'd have thought the last fifteen-hundred years since the Rebellions might've helped smooth over relations between you two."

"If only the galaxy worked that way, Gabby."

The accommodation for the salarian team was in separate barracks away from the main buildings on the other side of the compound. Joric had worked with salarians before and knew their high metabolism meant they only required one hour of sleep a night. The Commander wanted to try and minimize any disruption to her own troop's routine and had decided to give the salarians as much space as possible. In hindsight, her precautions seemed especially prescient considering the Auroto team included a krogan – keeping the two teams separate now appeared to be a necessity.

It didn't take long to verify Chaill's credentials with the Citadel Security archive, and Joric had to admit that the krogan's resume was impressive. She even contacted the Citadel again to double-check his astonishingly high IQ, wondering if it was a typo – it wasn't.

Despite verifying his abilities, the Commander still had some niggling concerns about a krogan
mixing with her crew, but those worries were soon assuaged by his easy-going manner and professional attitude, to say nothing of the incident at breakfast the next morning.

The krogan and the human wandered into the Mess at zero-six-thirty, chattering away like the old friends they were. The salarians had taken up one table to themselves, having already eaten an hour earlier and busy discussing the plans for the day. After collecting their rations from the dispensers, the human and krogan took their trays and made their way to a table, only to be waylaid by the Liaison Officer.

"Good morning, engineers," Jerash said brightly. "I hope you slept well?"

"Like a varren drunk on ryncol," Chaill replied, putting his tray down.

"Yeah, he snores like one too!" a green-skinned salarian called out from the table opposite.

"Surprised you could hear me over that argument you were having last night," Chaill fired back.

"Well, forgive us for being passionate about science," the salarian replied.

"You were arguing about the biology of Consort Sha'ira!" Chaill reminded them.

"Biology is a science!" the salarian said defensively.

"I'm pleased you found the accommodation comfortable," Jerash said happily. "If you have any problems please let me know and I'll be happy to assist you. May I welcome you to our base, Engineer Chaill?"

"Sure."

Too late, Gabby realised where this was going.

Jerash clasped Chaill by his shoulders and leaned in with her usual tact and delicacy.

There was a sound like two rocks crashing together, followed by an awful silence in the mess.

The turians and salarians stared open mouthed at the scene.

Chaill looked slightly surprised.

Jerash looked slightly dizzy.

No-one had moved a muscle.

Eventually, Chaill cleared his throat.

"Well, thank you," he said. "That was a pleasant reminder of Tuchanka!"

The turians released the collective breath they'd been holding.

"My pleasure," Jerash replied vaguely. "I think I may need to sit down."

"That might be advisable," Chaill agreed.

He guided the mildly concussed Liaison Officer to her seat, making certain she was settled and comfortable before returning to sit by his friend.

Taking one last curious glance at Jerash, Chaill turned to Gabby.
"She's very friendly!" he observed.

Gabby nodded vigorously.

As per the Council's request, Benezia's private shuttle lifted off from the base later that morning (much to the relief of the Gellix crew), the Matriarch accompanied by the majority of her acolytes. Only three of her commandos, Shiala, Tana and Berina, remained, officially to assist the other engineers on Gellix, but hardly anyone on the base was convinced they there solely for that purpose. There was still animosity from the way the commandos had assaulted and incapacitated Lieutenant Aelius' team, and the acolytes would undoubtedly keep in close contact with the Matriarch, reporting back on every development. As a consequence, Commander Joric had refused to return the asari’s weapons and the turians were watching them like hawks.

Now they knew the exact location of the relic, the journey to the dig-site took a little under thirty minutes.

The security at the site was exceptionally tight and a temporary shelter had been erected outside the entrance. The team disembarked from the convoy of Tyrus'; the commandos shadowing the salarian team down into the catacombs, closely followed by the members of the IEP and a squad of turian soldiers. It struck Gabby that the relic had become such a political hot potato that there were more guards at the dig-site than scientists.

Flood lights illuminated the warren of tunnels. In the antechamber, probes and monitoring devices had been set up around the beacon.

Despite the number of engineers on the project there was very little information that could be gathered from the relic. It had powered itself down the night before and was now emitting only minor radiation. Recording devices had been attached in the hope of downloading the Prothean data, but so far nothing had been documented. The team were reduced to visual recordings and scans from their omni-tools.

Erata kept to herself as she had done these past few days, hardly talking to anyone except to report her findings on the Prothean device, which were very thin on the ground.

As the day wore on, Gabby noticed that Pella was deliberately keeping her distance from Chaill.

By late afternoon Gabby decided to confront her. She found Pella in the forward chamber, the area now rammed full of boxes and scanning equipment, and cornered the turian as she was talking to Khoris and a small group of the female guards.

"Pella. I want to introduce you to someone."

"I wonder who that could be?" Pella replied caustically. "I'm rather busy right now."

"It won't take long. Come and speak to him," Gabby appealed.

"I'd rather not," the turian muttered.

"Why? It's not like you two haven't met before." Gabby's lips curled into a cheeky grin. "I mean, he's already watched you do a striptease over the link, now you can be formally introduced!"

"Err… You did what now?" Khoris asked Pella.

Pella glowered at the human. "I'd prefer you didn't advertise the fact I flashed my skivvies at a
"krogan!" she hissed quietly. "I wouldn't live it down."

"Chaill's friendly, you'll like him. He's actually rather sweet..."

"Never thought I'd hear the word 'sweet' applied to the likes of him!"

"Pella! Be nice..." Gabby admonished, but she was cut off by Khoris.

"Hey, give the krogan a chance," Khoris said to Pella. "Just be courteous. This exchange won't be for long. We're expected to work shoulder-to-shoulder with aliens and share the facilities; the least we can do is be civil..."

Gabby turned as three of the salarian team wandered into the chamber and started rooting through the containers. They were followed by Chaill. Gabby smiled at the krogan and tried to appeal to Pella one more time.

"Look, do this for me, and we can go and have a soak in the thermae afterwards," she offered.

At the sound of that word, the salarians all looked up sharply.

"Gellix has a thermae?" their leader asked.

"Yes. Back at Entarus Station," Pella replied. "Salarians like turian steam baths?"

The salarian team leader nodded. "Have lifetime membership at Polonius Thermae and Hydrotherapy Spa on Tayseri Ward," the leader replied. "Humidity of bath house works wonders on skin. Excellent way to unwind. Even Salarian Travel Advisory recommends frequent visits as part of leisure activity. Wasn't aware Hierarchy had built one on Gellix."

"Nor was I," Gabby replied. "I'd never been to one before."

"Team would be eager to sample local thermae," the leader said; the other salarians nodded enthusiastically.

"Well, I'm... I'm certain something could be arranged," Khoris agreed hesitantly.

Gabby turned to her friend. "Have you ever visited a thermae, Chaill?"

"Me, wallowing with a load of naked turians?" The krogan shook his head and smiled. "That's not exactly in my wheelhouse, Gabby. Is it any good?"

"Oh, it's incredibly relaxing, actually. Trust me; you'll love it. I've tried it and it is a great way to chill out after a hard day's work... Khoris recommended it to me." Gabby pretended not see Khoris shaking his head slightly and mouthing 'NO!' at her.

Chaill's hand thumped down on Khoris' shoulder. "Well, with an endorsement like that how could I say no?" he agreed happily. "Count me in! I'll join you when we get back." Then, still grinning, he wandered off to help his salarian colleagues.

Khoris' eyes widened in alarm – he did not look impressed.

"They're going to be sharing our session," he muttered. "Oh Spirits!"

"Guess who's coming to the thermae," Gabby chuckled.

"What's the problem?" Pella asked Khoris sweetly. "We're expected to work shoulder-to-shoulder
"Yeah, but it's okay for you lot," he hissed at the grinning ladies around him. "You get to share the thermae with asari and a human, and what do we get? Salarians and a krogan! They're all gonna be naked with us! In our thermae… And let me tell you, staring at a nude krogan is not my idea of a relaxing evening! Not with him just… standing there… letting it all hang out!" He shivered at the mental image, trying to ignore the fits of suppressed laughter coming from the women.

The day had been disappointing.

Little data could be gathered from the relic and the teams had returned to Entarus Station frustrated and discouraged.

The women quickly separated from the rest of the team and gathered in the thermae, letting the waters melt away their troubles. Only the commandos and Erata declined to join them, the asari engineer's absence adding fuel to Gabby's concerns for her wellbeing.

The women assembled in the Mess hall later that evening waiting for the men's session to finish. As soon as the men filed into the room they were immediately inundated by inquisitive demands about the aliens bathing with them.

Pella approached Khoris and discreetly settled next to her vaguely troubled and faintly wide-eyed lover.

"So, what was the thermae session like?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Khoris mumbled.

"I'm not prying, you understand. I'm just a little curious about something… Well, four things really." Khoris shivered slightly. "Is it true about krogan having a 'quad'?"

"I really don't want to talk about it!"

Pella leaned in closer. "I just thought it might be a little detail you could reveal to your lady friend…"

"Or my therapist!" Khoris hissed.

Pella was grinning now. "My comrade-in-arms isn't feeling a little inadequate, is he?"

"Compared to other turians, no. Compared to him…" Khoris cleared his throat. "Well, I'd heard stories about how fearless krogan are in battle, but… let's just say he definitely wasn't lacking in the cojones department!"

Pella's eyes went wide. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah! Big time!"

Pella glanced at Chaill who was sitting, as expected, next to Gabby and chatting away happily with his human friend. From her vantage point, Pella noticed that Chaill was now getting quite a few curious looks from the other women in the Mess.

Gabby in turn was watching Pella, still troubled by the fact she hadn't been able to introduce Chaill to her. Her friend caught her staring and, like most krogan, decided to tackle the problem head on.

"We shouldn't sneak around this like some thieving pyjak. Let's just get over there; you said you
wanted to introduce me." He started to rise.

"Hang on!" Gabby held his arm, a wicked smile spreading across her face. "I've had an idea…"

Pella had her back to them and didn't notice them approach until she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned. Gabby and Chaill were standing behind her; although 'looming' might have been a better description for the krogan. He did a good line in looming.

"Pella," Gabby began, gesturing at her friend. "I'd like you to meet Chaill. Chaill, this is Pella – she's a turian, try to be nice!"


Pella hesitated. Only after a quick nudge from Khoris did she grudgingly stretch out her hand.

Chaill grasped it… And held on.

"Oh, and there's something else, too," Gabby added and switched on her omni-tool.

The peculiar squeal of an unfamiliar melody suddenly pealed through the Mess, the odd tune being piped over the speakers as Gabby accessed the comm-channel.

The music was strange, played on an instrument Pella had never heard before. Gabby later revealed (after some dogged persuasion) that the tune was an instrumental piece called 'El Tango de Roxanne'.

Pella frowned in suspicion. "What's that?"

"Our song," Chaill rumbled, stepping back and guiding Pella from her seat to escort her by the hand.

"What? No! No! Wait! Wait! Wait! Spirits, what are you doing?"

"Relax, Pella. It's nothing I haven't done before," Gabby assured her.

"What you do in private is your own business!"

Gabby laughed. "Don't you trust me?"

"I haven't known you that long!"

Chaill stopped in the middle of the hall. He turned to Pella, his right hand snaking around her back and pulling her into a close embrace, their chests touching. Pella stared in shock. She had never been this close to a krogan before. She could smell the lingering aroma of the thermae waters on his skin, mixed with his own peculiar spicy fragrance.

"Relax, très chère. I was dancing before I learned how to ride a varren!" His chest rumbled as he spoke, his voice vibrating through her thin plates. With apparently no effort, he lifted her from the ground and placed her feet on top of his massive boots.

"Relax, trés chère. I was dancing before I learned how to ride a varren!" His chest rumbled as he spoke, his voice vibrating through her thin plates. With apparently no effort, he lifted her from the ground and placed her feet on top of his massive boots.

The high-pitched wail of another instrument began (a violin, she discovered afterwards) and Chaill moved, taking three graceful steps before spinning and leading Pella into a sweeping planeo, his left foot circling in a wide arc as he let her 'feet walk' on his boots.

The couple twirled around the room, Chaill whipped his partner's feet about, their dance accompanied by Pella's hushed protests and mimed appeals for help. The salarians grinned in amusement, while the turians were blatantly gawking; utterly astonished at the sight in-front of them.
Chaill set Pella's feet back on the ground and broke into a quick, short rock step, the krogan practically hopping next to his partner as they promenaded down the Mess. Chaill was adding various decorations to the routine – a flick of the head here, a sensual caress of her spinal carapace there – rendering both Pella and Khoris mute in confusion (and excitement); Khoris watched his lover perform a surprisingly sensuous dance with this weird alien, and was left wondering if he should cut-in.

Looking around, Pella caught a few of her crewmates switching on their omni-tools.

"Anyone who records this is dead!" she warned.

That didn't seem to deter them. Vid-recordings were eagerly started. Gabby activated her omni-tool, but didn't film the performance; rather she seemed to be building something. The dancers sped past her table and Gabby could hear Pella's fierce promises of swift and certain revenge directed at her.

Still holding her fast, Chaill stopped in the centre of the hall and turned around Pella in a *giro*, drawing intricate patterns with his feet as he circled his partner.

Pella was trying to lean away from Chaill, her body off-axis. As the music increased in tempo, Chaill bent his legs and lowered them both down into exaggerated hip-under using his knees as a pivot.

He stood and spun her into a reverse embrace, her arms crossing her chest, and guided her forward. Chaill pirouetted and twirled her to face him again, drawing her in close. Their hips met. Pella felt something hard against her leg and glanced down at Chaill's work slacks in alarm.

"Spirits! I hope that's a spanner!"

Chaill flashed a bright smile. "Well, it's what I usually call it!"

With a dramatic flick, Chaill reeled her about, her legs spinning around in a high arc, whirling above the heads of the crowds. After two complete turns he returned her feet to his boots, and moved in a quick step between the tables.

As they passed Gabby's table the human gave something to Chaill. He turned away from Pella briefly and then whipped his head back sharply, grinning. There was *something* clenched between his teeth.

Pella's mouth dropped open.

"Where'd that flower come from?" she demanded.

Gabby was laughing as she switched off her omni-tools' minifacturing fabricator. She was quite pleased with how the facsimile of the rose had come out.

The krogan was a rampant whirlwind now, dipping and bending his partner in ever increasing spins, each move meticulous in its execution.

The music swelled... The movements became more exaggerated... And as the beat reached its crescendo, Chaill plunged her backwards into a low dip, raising his left arm in a perfectly timed dramatic flourish.

The crowd broke into spontaneous cheers and laughter; turians, salarians and a human standing to give the dancers an enthusiastic round of applause.

Chaill raised Pella back to her feet, her body shaking slightly from the dance.
Chaill removed the rose from his teeth. "Enchanté, ma chérie," he said with all due courtesy, and lifted her hand to his lips, giving the back a quick kiss.

Pella had no idea what obscure krogan dialect he was speaking, but was surprised to find she wasn't pulling away from him.

Khoris finally hurried forward to check on Pella. She was breathing heavily; her face flushed a deeper tan than usual and her heart beating rapidly against her chest. His arms slid around her waist, not caring who saw the movement and he stared into her eyes. Nothing was said. Nothing could be said above the background applause.

When the excited crowds had returned to their tables, the couple escaped from the noise and heat of the Mess. Mutely, Pella led Khoris by the hand through the deserted corridors until they reached the crew quarters.

With her hands still shaking, Pella hastily opened her door and physically dragged Khoris inside.

Almost an hour later, Khoris was staring vacantly at the ceiling as he tried to catch his breath. Still in a blissful daze, he turned to the woman lying next to him. "You should… dance with krogan more often… if that's what it does for you!" he said breathlessly.

"I can't promise anything…" Pella replied. "But I might consider it."

There was a chirp from her console.

Pella sighed. Reluctantly, she pulled away from Khoris' warm body and rolled off the narrow futon. Covering herself in her robe she padded over to the console and activated the vid-link.

The face of Praetor Narrius appeared on the screen.

Her father looked furious; his naturally tan face had turned an unusual shade of grey-blue. Pella quickly adjusted her robe.

"Hi Dad," she said weakly.

"A krogan?!" Narrius exclaimed. Pella froze. "I access the secure link from the Gellix comm-buoy and the first thing I see is footage of my daughter cavorting with a krogan?"

"Technically we were just dancing…"

"I don't care what you were just 'technically' doing!" he cut in. "It was a disgusting display! What on Palaven possessed you to do that?"

"It wasn't my choice! It was sprung on me as a prank. The rest of the crew thought it was hilarious. And I didn't ask them to record it. It's not like I had any say in the matter. Like a lot of things in my life just recently…"

"Do not change the subject! The Gellix crew were trying to upload restricted and sensitive footage to the extranet. Thank the Spirits, the firewalls flagged it up. Do you have any idea how much damage this would do to my reputation if this ever got out? I can't have it known my daughter would do anything so scandalous! I will be having serious words with Commander Joric!"

Pella looked over at Khoris, still lounging in her bed, his attractive unmarked face veiled by a troubled and faintly guilty expression. Pella turned back to her father. "Dad…"
"Did all my lessons mean nothing to you?" Narrius raged. "Did nothing sink in?"

"Dad, listen…"

"When I think of all the time and effort I spent keeping you true to our way – true to the history of Digeris… You know what those monsters are capable of and yet you still indulge in this sick and twisted display! I am disgusted! It was immoral. You couldn't have disappointed me more!"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Pella muttered. She closed her eyes, trying to calm her breathing. She had defied her father before in her youth, and been chastised by him many times, but never to this extent – and certainly not within earshot of a lover from an 'unsuitable colony' lying naked in her bed.

She opened her eyes again.

*What the hell! I'm already in trouble. It's not like I could make it worse.*

"Dad! I think you should know… I've met someone."

"I'm going to go out on a limb here and assume you mean a *turian*? I still recall your unhealthy obsession with that asari singer, 'Maya'…"

"I was fourteen, Dad! It was just a little crush."

"At least tell me this turian is male?"

"Yes, he's a man!" Pella pouted.

"Well, that doesn't excuse your recent behaviour, but at least you have *finally* chosen a suitable match for yourself. That is, of course, assuming he *is* a suitable match…? What part of Digeris is he from?"

Erata could hear the quarrel from the other end of the corridor. She was returning from a late-night solitary session in the thermae when she was greeted by voices echoing from Pella's quarters. The asari was half-tempted to knock on the door and make sure the turian was alright. But she knew a family argument when she heard one (she'd had plenty of those with her sisters over the years), and wasn't about to intrude on a private moment. She entered her quarters just as a male flanging voice boomed from the artificer's room.

"HE'S FROM WHERE?!

The three commandos observed the human and krogan from the opposite side of the room, watching as the krogan prepared to retire to the quarters he and the salarian team had been assigned.

Shiala had been devising numerous strategies all day, working out every detail until she was completely satisfied with her new plan.

Impatiently, Tana interrupted her chain of thought.

"We need a new plan of attack. With so many eyes on the project, getting close to the beacon is going to be next to impossible."

"Not necessarily," Shiala murmured. "Our shift tomorrow will be with the human and krogan…"

"How does that help us? The human will undoubtedly have told her friend what happened in the
"So, we divide and conquer," Shiala replied. "One of us focuses on the beacon, the other delays the salarian team and the third exploits the weak link." She inclined her head towards the group of aliens exiting the Mess.

Tana cast a sly glance in their direction. "The human?" she asked.

Shiala shook her head slightly.

"The krogan."
Shiala and her commandos put their plan to extract the data from the Prothean beacon into action. But their treachery puts both Gabby and her krogan friend, Chaill, in great danger.

_Tyrus Rear Cabin, Gellix – 06:56 UTC – 17th February 2183 CE_

Gabby had heard only one salarian laugh before – a salarian physicist she’d worked with on the SSV _Perugia_. His laugh had been a pleasant tuneful warble full of high-pitched trills. However, the laugh coming from the green-skinned salarian opposite her in the Tyrus was nothing like that; the one coming from _this_ salarian was shrill, and clipped, and _really_ annoying! And right now he was giving a running commentary of the recording of Chaill’s dance playing on his omni-tool.

"This is my favourite part – spin, spin, spin, dip! And the turian almost wets herself. Terrific finale, Chaill!" The green-skinned salarian laughed again. Gabby winced. "Another one to add to the collection."

"What collection is that?" Gabby asked.

"They’ve been making constant recordings of me on-board the _Auroto_ for their research archive," Chaill replied gruffly. "Or at least, they say it’s for the research archive."

"Rare to work so closely with krogan," the grey and yellow coloured salarian leader piped up. "Honoured to be part of such an endeavour. Making recordings whenever possible. Will aid in possible future exchange programmes with krogan."

"I'm making history, if nothing else," Chaill rumbled and shrugged.

Gabby ventured another look at the vid of Chaill and Pella’s performance. He was gliding across the floor, with Pella in his arms looking startled, and the light reflecting from the imitation rose in his teeth. "And turning a few heads, Chaill. You look good on film."

"What can I say? The camera loves me, Gabby" Chaill stated, his low chuckle vibrating the air. "But I never like the way my voice sounds in those recordings. It always comes out high and squeaky – Makes me sound like a salarian."

The green-skinned salarian laughed again, the piercing squeal echoing around the cabin.

"You _really_ don't, Chaill," she assured him "Any chance I could get copies of those vids from the _Auroto_? As long as the material isn't sensitive to the Union or anything."

"Will arrange for compilation of select recordings to be sent to your omni-tool," their leader replied. Gabby nodded in thanks.

Just a few minutes later, the convoy pulled up outside the dig-site and Gabby disembarked. The asari commandos and their turian escorts were already waiting patiently by the temporary shelter, one of them stooping as she adjusted her boot close to Gabby's Tyrus.
Gabby approached Pella as she exited the rear Tyrus, her entourage of bodyguards and a sullen looking Erata following her.

"You're looking cheerful, Pella," Gabby declared. The turian was positively glowing and a constant grin played on her lips.

"Why not?" Pella replied happily. "The sun is shining. It's almost four degrees above zero. The virgin snow is crisp and fresh. It's a beautiful day on Gellix. What more could anyone want?"

"A handsome boyfriend to sleep with?" Gabby suggested, nudging the turian in the ribs and earning a bruised elbow for her troubles.

"Gabby!" Pella admonished quietly. "Everyone will hear you!"

"Everyone already knows! And guess what? They really don't care that much. You don't give them enough credit."

"What?! How did they find out? You didn't say anything, did you? You promised."

"Give me a little credit. The way you two were acting after the dance didn't exactly leave much in the way of doubt. And when you'd retired, a few of the crew heard your, um, activities last night…" Pella's eyes widened; the turian looked absolutely mortified. Gabby smiled reassuringly. "You broke the news to your folks, I take it?"

"You heard about that, too?"

"Me and half the base. I'm gonna assume your dad didn't take it well?"

Pella shook her head. "Are you kidding me? He went ballistic! His face turned so grey I thought he was going to have a coronary! I've never seen him so upset before…” The turian slowly grinned. "It was so sweeet!"

"You're not daddy's little girl anymore – you're becoming a real rebel, Vettiill!"

"Well, I blame you," Pella accused, a frown creasing her brow plates. "Everything was fine before you arrived on Arcadias with your seditious influence. I was a model artificer, never had any marks on my record, and now all of a sudden, I'm dodging explosions, dancing with krogan, got a boyfriend from a prohibited colony, and my dad practically refuses to speak to me! You are such a bad influence…” The turian suddenly gave a sly grin. "Thank you!"

"A little rebellion is good for the soul."

"Yeah, but… is it wrong that I enjoyed it so much?" Pella fretted.

"In my professional opinion: Hell, no!"

Shiala watched the turians descend into the catacombs, counting the armed guards as they went down. She suspected the guards' patrol patterns (the ones who weren't keeping a close eye on her team, anyway) would be randomised, with no discernable pattern. But even if they weren't randomised and the guards were on a fixed schedule, she didn't have the time to memorise their movements and look for an opening. Time was not a luxury afforded to her. Matriarch Benezia was relying on her to provide results as soon as possible. And if she didn't get the information she needed, the consequences would be severe.
Shiala gave an involuntary shudder, quickly passing it off to the cold. While the thought of disappointing Matriarch Benezia was not something she wanted to contemplate, it was nothing compared to what would happen if she had to explain her failure to the turian Spectre Benezia worked for…

Turning her head slightly, Shiala activated her neural implant and synced it with her fellow commando’s devices, linking her securely to her comrades.

~ Tana. Berina. Are you online? ~ Shiala projected over the link.

~ Linked up and ready ~ Tana confirmed.

~ Receiving your signal ~ Berina’s voice replied. ~ I’m ready ~

~ You know what you have to do? ~ Shiala pressed.

~ Acknowledged ~ Berina replied.

~ I remember the brief ~ Tana responded somewhat petulantly. ~ Though, I don’t see why I was chosen for this mission. Not much call for a sniper when you’re underground! ~

~ Focus Tana! ~ Shiala snapped.

~ The APC is rigged ~ Tana confirmed. ~ I planted it when I pretended to adjust my boot. I can activate it via omni-tool ~

~ We go on my signal. Be ready ~

Disconnecting herself from the link, Shiala led her team down into the catacombs.

It always amused Shiala just how easy it was to deceive aliens.

As an asari (and a particularly attractive one at that, even if she did say so herself), she found it childishly simple to pull the wool over aliens' eyes. No matter how diverse or advanced the society, no matter which species or gender she was addressing, there was always a suggestion she was being talked down to when she spoke to aliens. Perhaps it was because she looked young enough to be a maiden, and as most maidens were known to be dancers in nightclubs, aliens had preconceived notions about how young asari acted? Or maybe it was a lingering trace of misogyny in their psyches that prevented them from seeing the truth? Few aliens seemed to grasp the fact that she was several centuries older than them, with literally decades worth of experience in the art of subterfuge. It wasn’t like that on the home-world. But where else could asari capitalise on those pre-conceptions except off-world, away from Thessia, amongst the company of well-meaning, but desperately naïve aliens?

The turian guards had followed them around the site throughout the day, careful never to interfere with the asari’s work as they recorded inscriptions from the walls, catalogued small Prothean artefacts, or continued to monitor the dormant beacon. The turians kept out of the way, remaining just within sight on the edge of their vision, or surreptitiously spying on them from the doorway. All the while Shiala was watching for an opening. And despite the turians’ constant vigilance, the guards never noticed the commando using her omni-tool to hack the floodlights’ controls. None of them were aware of blue hands planting a slim tactical-cloak enabled device on the salarian-made data logger monitoring the beacon.

Very soon, everything was set.
The day slowly wore on into the afternoon. Shiala finally saw her opportunity when the salarian team started to move to the surface. The three commandos were working in the forward chamber when the aliens, each cradling the small Prothean relics taken from the adjoining rooms as if they were freshly-hatched salarian infants, passed through the room to store the relics in the Tyrus and discuss their findings.

Activating her neural implant, Shiala connected with her comrades.

~ The salarian team are heading up-top. We have an opening. Berina, find the krogan and keep him away from the beacon ~

~ I'm on it ~ Berina projected in reply.

~ I need at least two minutes ~ Shiala thrummed.

~ Not a problem ~

~ Timing will be critical. You're sure you can do it? ~

~ What? Flirting with a krogan for two minutes? Give me something hard! ~

~ I'm sure he'll oblige! ~ Tana's thoughts added to the mix.

~ Tana, when I give the signal, trigger the APC ~

~ Understood ~

Shiala deactivated her link. Berina made for the second antechamber. A few seconds later, one of the turian guards started to saunter nonchalantly in her direction. Shiala smiled. Probably the biggest mistake the turians had made was to assign two guards to keep watch over three asari commandos. Not that it would have mattered if there were more guards. It's not like she couldn't have handled them…

Shiala looked across at her fellow asari. "Tana, Engineer Daniels might need assistance in the other chamber. Perhaps you could give her a hand?"

"Certainly. I'd be happy to," Tana replied, her expression radiating well-meaning helpfulness. She turned and went to find the human.

The remaining guard hesitated as he watched Tana leave, his expression torn. Quickly making a decision, he turned back to Shiala and settled into a comfortable stance, electing to remain in the forward chamber. Shiala grinned again. Aliens were so predictable.

Tana strode into the second antechamber, the area the salarians had recently removed the Prothean relics from, and glanced left and right, looking for the human. The person she found studying inscriptions on the wall, however, was not the one she was expecting.

She activated her link.

~ Shiala! I have an issue ~

~ What is it? ~ Shiala's voice replied.

~ I'm in the other chamber. The human isn't anywhere to be found, but that asari engineer is here. How'd you want me to proceed? ~
There was a brief pause before Shiala replied. ~ Even better. Don't alter the plan ~ she ordered. ~ Use her. Cause a scene ~

~ My pleasure ~

Switching off her link, Tana approached the engineer.

The asari turned around as she heard footsteps.

"Oh, hey," the engineer greeted her. "What are you doing here?"

"I was ordered to see if I could assist you in any way," Tana spat petulantly.

"You don't seem happy about it," Erata commented.

"I can't say I fancy the idea of working with a pureblood!"

Erata went rigid and stared at the commando.

In the rear antechamber, Chaill regarded the Prothean relic thoughtfully. Looking at it now, it was hard to imagine the beacon had caused so many problems for the turians on Gellix, or emitted such an inordinately high energy signature. At this moment, it was barely registering anything.

He was crouching over by the data logger when he heard the voice.

"Engineer, may I have your assistance?"

Chaill looked up. One of the asari commandos was standing in the doorway. He'd never been formally introduced to her and didn't know her name. She gave a slightly deferent bow. "What do you need?" he asked politely.

"I may have need of your skills." The asari gestured with her thumb. "There's a pre-cataclysm Prothean inscription in one of the other chambers, but I'm having trouble deciphering it. I know you have some experience in this matter. Would you mind taking a look at it?"

Chaill hesitated, then he nodded. "I'll do the best I can," he agreed and stood up.

"I've no doubt you will," Berina almost purred.

The asari turned and led Chaill from the room. Once they'd vacated the room, Berina switched on her link.

~ Beacon is clear ~ she projected to Shiala.

~ Understood ~ came the reply. ~ Keep him busy ~

In the forward chamber, Shiala waited patiently.

Timing was going to be everything.

Erata was glaring at the commando.

"Why'd you call me that?" Erata demanded.
"It's what you are, isn't it?" Tana replied calmly. "A throwback to the bad old days of the asari? A relic, almost as outdated as this place?" The commando gestured at the chamber. "And about as useful..." She took a step forward. "I mean, seriously, what do you bring to the table? How does someone like you move the asari forward? You don't make us stronger. You weaken us. You're just a sad reminder of what we should have cast off centuries ago. Maybe we should be studying your kind, eh? So we can prevent further mistakes like you and your family from happening!

"Don't talk about my family like that!" Erata warned.

"Oh, hit a sore spot, did I? Are you loyal to your inbred clan of misfits?" The black-clad asari took another step forward and lowered her voice. "Matriarch Benezia warned us about you. She told us everything!"

"Shut your mouth!"

"You're under investigation! The AY Recognition Unit is taking a very keen interest in your case."

"Nothing's been decided. There's been no ruling yet," Erata insisted.

The commando continued to approach. "But it's only a matter of time, pureblood. Sooner or later the Justicars are gonna come for you – Hopefully before you start snacking on your friends here... like that little human you're so chummy with..."

"I said: Shut. Your filthy. Mouth!" Erata hissed.

"Oh, come on, no-one's surprised. Even you have to admit you've been expecting this. It runs in the family. Blood will out... And when it does come out, when the craving claims you, and you lose yourself in the pleasure of the kill, the next thing you'll see is the body of your friend cooling at your feet."

Erata's face was rictus with fury. She drew herself up, her eyes fixed on the commando as she bunched up her fists. Tana smiled and continued to goad her, "Then, one of two things will happen. Either the Justicars will simply blow your brains out... or you'll be sent to live with that freak sister of yours!"

In a flash, a corona flared around Erata. Her body glowed blue as her biotics surged. She snarled and threw a blazing punch at the commandos' head, a pulse of raw energy erupting from her fist. Tana raised her hand and casually deflected it with a barrier, the energy dissipating harmlessly around her.

"Think you can take on a commando? You're not in my league."

Quickly recovering her stance, Erata rushed the asari, but Tana leapt out of her reach, laughing. Then she stopped and stood her ground, an arrogant sneer contorting her lips. Erata advanced on the woman, her eyes fierce and cold.

"You think I'm a threat? You don't know anything!" She made a grab for the commandos' neck but Tana smacked her hands away.

"Don't touch me, pureblood!"

Erata's voice became a growl. "If you know everything about me, then you know what my family does and who they work for!" Despite herself, Tana's eyes widened slightly, the sneer vanishing as quickly as it had appeared – that seemed to have an effect on the commando. "And you also know what those people are capable of..." Erata's face was inches away. Her voice became a whisper. "Do you really want to get on their badside, bitch?"
Tana blinked. For a brief moment, a sliver of genuine fear shivered through her chest.

"What the hell's going on?" a voice suddenly demanded.

Tana looked over. A turian guard was standing in the doorway.

"She threatened me!" Tana protested, backing away and pointing at Erata. "I was sent here to assist and she tried to attack me."

The corona around Erata's body faded away.

"Is this true, engineer?" the guard demanded. "Did you attack her?"

Erata nodded. "And she deserved it! Spend any amount of time in her company and you'll be doing the same thing!"

Three more turian guards muscled their way into the room. "This isn't the place to settle personal grudges. If you have a score to settle you will settle it while you're off-duty in the ring, or wherever asari settle grudges!"

The guards separated the pair. Tana was moved away, acting for all concerned like the injured party, though the sweat on her forehead was real enough – and it wasn't because that pureblood had almost touched her!

She was grateful of the distraction when Shiala's voice sounded in her head.

~ Okay, Tana, on my mark, trigger the APC ~

~ Acknowledged ~ Tana replied.

~ Mark! ~

Berina led Chaill away from beacon into one of the side rooms and pointed at the carved symbols on the wall. "The inscription is here," the asari said.

Chaill scanned the carving with his omni-tool. After a moment, it beeped.

"It's not pre-cataclysm, that's your problem. The language is much later than that. A little under fifty-thousand years, I'd say."

Berina gave a simpering giggle. "How could I have missed that?"

"And my omni-tool is generating a rough translation of the carving."

"What does it say?"

"It reads: 'Exclusion zone. Kindly keep all non-Prothean subjects on a leash!" Chaill paused as he frowned at his omni-tool. "But I'm not sure about the 'kindly'. The translator may have added that itself."

"Sounds charming. Do you think the Protheans had a sense of humour?"

"Based on this evidence, I very much doubt it." Chaill closed his omni-tool. "Well, if that's all you need…?"
Berina held his arm in a surprisingly tight grip. "Well, there is one more thing I need your expert opinion on..." She stepped closer.

"Yeah?"

"I've heard lots of different stories about krogan. Mainly concerning your stamina. Some of them quite are salacious. But I never really found out if they were an exaggeration or not."

"I'm sure lots of people have heard stories about krogan. We do tend to make an impression on most species."

"Well, that's kinda what I'm hoping for!" Berina stepped in, invading Chaill's personal space. Her hand went up to his chest. "I've been reading up on you. I know you've worked with humans, and salarians, and even quarians in the past... but, have you ever made an impression on asari in your travels?"

"Not really, no," Chaill replied steadily.

"Would you like to?"

The commando was leaning very close now. Chaill tried to pull away but she'd backed him up against the wall. He had nowhere to go. Her hand stroked his chin. "So, you've never experienced the meld before, engineer?"

"No. And it's not something I've ever been curious about."

"Oh, you haven't lived until you've felt the all-encompassing ecstasy of the meld. A merging of minds – a blissful fusion of personalities. But, of course, its best experienced when you're also fusing bodies."

Chaill's eyes widened in alarm; the asari caressed his plated forehead.

"I've always admired krogan plate armour." The asari grinned suggestively. "I find it so very... stimulating."

An attention-grabbing cough suddenly sounded from the door. The pair turned. Gabby was standing in the doorway, her arms folded.

"That's an odd way of studying old relics, Chaill!"

Chaill managed to disentangle himself from the asari's grip. "The commando here was just expressing her admiration for my plates," he explained. "Apparently they're quite 'stimulating'.""

"Is that so?" Gabby frowned in suspicion; her eyes darting between the asari and the krogan. "Well, your plates are quite smooth and shiny," she agreed. "It almost looks like they've been polished. Have you started some new beauty regime?"

"I try to look nice for you," Chaill deadpanned.

"What product do you use? Varnish?"

"Sandpaper!" Chaill replied. "Extra Fine grade for preference. It really brings out the graining in my crest plates!"

Anxious to regain control of the situation, Berina took a step closer to the krogan and cupped his cheek. "You haven't said 'no', engineer," she pressed. "Maybe you'd like to discuss our proposal in
"I think you were the only one who was proposing something," Chaill pointed out.

"Take the hint," Gabby said to the asari. "If someone's not interested, don't force yourself on them."

"I'd never force anyone to do something they're not comfortable with." She turned to Gabby. "And if you're concerned for his safety, maybe you'd like to join us too?"

Gabby's mouthed dropped open. "What?!"

"Well, whyever not? I'm sure it's a proposal you don't hear every day: The chance to sample the delights of an asari and a krogan… How many humans could claim to have experienced that?" Berina flashed her most lascivious smile. "I can promise you it'll be a night you'll never forget."

Gabby could only glare at the asari in mute astonishment…

…Then they heard the cries for help coming from the salarians.

It was the moment Shiala had been waiting for. She'd been monitoring the conversations Tana and Berina had been having, and, at the optimum moment, had ordered Tana to trigger the APC. At the same time, Shiala casually activated her omni-tool and accessed the floodlight controls, plunging the forward chamber into darkness.

Several things happened at once.

On the surface, the salarian team were feverishly discussing the Prothean relics they'd stored in the Tyrus, when the next thing they knew the APC had spontaneously sprung to life.

The engine revved, the alarm sounded and the vehicle suddenly sprung forward, leap-frogging across the ice and pitching the unfortunate salarians from the rear cabin. Some of them fell face-down in the snow, while other were catapulted backwards to land amongst the precious cargo.

What followed was chaos.

The rogue Tyrus collided with the lead vehicle in a crumpling smash of metal.

Turian guards and engineers, including Pella, rushed out of the catacombs to help.

Before anyone could react to even help the salarians to their feet, a fire erupted from the front-right wheel of the Tyrus. The salarians screamed.

"Fire! Fire!"

"Must save relics – of vital historical significance!"

Turians and salarians rushed to save the artifacts and fight the fire.

At the same moment in the forward chamber the lights went out. The guard reacted quickly, turning on the lamp on his rifle and scanning the room, but he wasn't quite quick enough to catch Shiala.

"Must be a power outage," Shiala's voice sounded from the darkness. "I'll check the generator."

The guard didn't reply; he didn't know where the voice had come from, or indeed where the asari was. There was no sign of her.
He had lost her.

Shiala slipped out of the shadows and manoeuvred quickly through the corridors. The guard had been easy to evade and several of the others were now busy up-top as they assisted the salarians, or were dealing with the diversions provided by Tana and Berina, effectively clearing the turians from this part of the site.

It was all going like clockwork.

She ran through the empty corridors without interference and dashed into the beacon antechamber. Not breaking her stride, she switched on her omni-tool, then crouched down in front of the data logger and synced her omni-tool with the device she'd planted earlier. It was a piece of geth-made technology, entrusted to her by the one person Shiala truly feared…

The geth device actuated, sending a surge of energy back through the cables and into the beacon.

For a few agonising moments nothing happened. Then, the Prothean relic suddenly flared to life; radiating a green glow that blazed across its surface. It was powering up. The floodlights dimmed as the energy signal grew in intensity.

Shiala stood and cautiously approached the beacon in the manner she'd been instructed to.

She wasn't sure if this was going to work…

Gabby led the way, following the sounds of commotion coming from the salarians on the surface. Chaill trailed behind her, with the asari commando and her turian guard bringing up the rear. There was a flickering light from the chamber up ahead.

As they rounded the corner, a group of turians, plus Erata and another asari commando, were having an argument.

"What the hell's going on?" Gabby demanded.

"Fire breaking out up-top and a fight breaking out down here!" one of the turians announced. He gestured at Erata and the other asari.

"Shouldn't we help with the fire?" Chaill asked.

"That's being handled. Any more hands would just get in the way. We're to stay here until the crisis has passed."

Gabby's scrutinized the group. "Has everyone been accounted for?" she asked.

Shiala was still waiting for something, anything to happen.

She'd been standing there for about thirty-seconds, anxiously glancing over her shoulder in fear that someone would catch her in the act. As far as she could tell, the only thing that was happening was the beacon was glowing brighter, the noise steadily increasing in pitch, making it even more likely that someone would walk in and discover her.

She wasn't even sure what was meant to be happ –

The energy peaked. The sound went into ultrasonic.
Shiala felt a tug on her spine – a whisper in her head. Pressure was building behind her eyes. Her vision blurred, her stomach churned, and suddenly her feet had left the ground.

She hovered, suspended in the air, her body and limbs held by an invisible force, like some puppeteer-controlled marionette.

Then the images appeared.

There was nothing coherent. Nothing she could understand or recognise – just disjointed; incomprehensible; violent; fleshy; *alien visions!*

Searing pain coursed through her brain and she opened her mouth in a silent scream.

Still connected to the neural link, Tana and Berina both held their heads in their hands, suppressing a cry as they felt the feedback from Shiala's implant. They quickly disconnected the link.

"What's wrong?" Chaill asked, jerking his head in Berina's direction.

"Nothing," Berina said. "Just a little headache." She exchanged a glance with Tana. A silent conclusion passed between them. *Something was wrong!*

"Where's the third commando?" Gabby asked, glancing around the room for Shiala.

"The lights in the forward chamber were out. She went to check on the generator," one of the guards replied.

"Alone?" another guard accused. The first guard nodded sheepishly.

There was the sound of an explosion from the surface. Everyone jerked their heads towards it. Then the floodlights flickered, the luminosity growing steadily in intensity, before they finally burnt out with a pop and pitched the chamber into complete darkness.

Tana ducked away from her guards and melted into the shadows.

The turians brought their rifles up, the lamps cutting through the dark.

"Everyone stay where they are!" one of the guards ordered. "Remain in the group."

"What the hell was that?" Gabby demanded.

"Power surge from somewhere," Chaill surmised. "Damned powerful one to knock out the lights like…" He stopped, frowning. Then he looked across at Gabby. "The beacon!"

Snatching the rifle out of one of the guards hands, Chaill turned on his heel and ran down the corridor, his rifle lamp lighting the way.

"I said stay in the group!" the guard yelled.

Gabby turned to follow Chaill but a heavy clawed hand grabbed her shoulder. Only Erata broke through the group to follow the light from Chaill's rifle at a full run.

But Tana was already ahead of them.

The commando pelted down the corridor, relying on memory to stop her from crashing headlong into
the walls in the pitch blackness.

She could see light as she approached the antechamber – a green glow emanating from the room ahead.

She turned the corner to see Shiala suspended in mid-air, her body rigid and her face contorted in agony.

Tana thrust out her hand and let her biotics surge. She reached out with a telekinetic pull and yanked Shiala free of the beacon's influence.

Shiala fell sideways, crying out as she landed heavily, almost insensible. She clutched her head, completely disoriented. Tana grabbed her arm and wrenched her to her feet, seizing her around the waist to support her.

With her arm over her shoulder, Tana steered Shiala from the chamber.

The commando could hear the sound of approaching footsteps. Backing up rapidly, she barely had time to thrust the semiconscious asari around the corner of the corridor, out of sight, just as the krogan engineer homed into view, running at full pelt down the passageway.

He passed by them, oblivious to their hiding place. Tana waited, hearing other footsteps approaching from their escape route. They were trapped!

Chaill bounded into the antechamber and quickly took in the scene before him. The beacon was alive with green energy and vibrating rapidly, its outer surface a blur.

The krogan rushed to the data logger, assessing the readings coming off the Prothean relic. All the signals were off the scale. It was going critical. There wasn't anything he could do.

Chaill backed away.

At that moment, Erata dashed through the doorway to see the krogan retreating from the device. She instantly knew that was a bad sign. A krogan retreating meant something was very wrong.

The resonance from the beacon seemed to reach its peak.

Chaill turned to the asari. The energy level spiked, and Chaill hurled himself forward, shielding Erata from the relic with his body as an ear-shattering blast roared through the chamber.

The beacon had exploded.
Fallout

Chapter Summary

With the Prothean Beacon destroyed, Gabby and her team must face the consequences...

Entarus Station Main Hanger, Gellix – 18:56 UTC – 17th February 2183 CE

The hanger echoed to the sound of armoured boots pounding across the floor. A cacophony of multiple flanging voices bounced back and forth as the turian troops relayed instructions and barked out orders.

"Casualties incoming! Get those doors open!"

"Where's the doc?" one of the auxiliary medics asked anxiously.

"He's right in-front of you!" the doctor retorted. "What are the injuries?"


"We lost a Tyrus!"

"What happened?"

"Explosion on site. It malfunctioned and crashed into another vehicle, then burst into flames. A couple of salarians were caught in the explosion."

"Any of our people injured?"

"None reported."

The thick hanger doors rolled open. Two APC's sped through the entrance, and screeched to a halt in the middle of the hanger. The vehicles were quickly swarmed by the turian support crew.

The cabin doors of the first Tyrus flew open. Two injured salarians appeared – one clutching a pad of gauze to his shoulder, the fabric stained with green blood; the other with burns to his hands and right cheek. Another medic ran his omni-tool over the injured aliens.

"Burns and fragmentation wounds. Green 1. Medi-gel has already been applied."

"Get them to the infirmary."

The walking wounded were quickly escorted away. The support medic poked his head into the vehicle.

"Priority! Red 2! Krogan with multiple lacerations!"

"Get the gurney," the doctor ordered.

"I can walk, dammit!" a deep voice insisted loudly.
Chaill emerged from the Tyrus; the krogan stoically refusing all offers of help, and instead demanding he assist the turian medics carrying the insensible asari engineer from the vehicle on a stretcher. Lieutenant Aelius, Gabby, Pella and the remaining commandos quickly emerged from the second Tyrus. Gabby rushed over to help Chaill carry their injured asari colleague, but he stubbornly shrugged off her help.

Erata had no visible injuries, but was struggling in-and-out of consciousness; her irregular breathing causing the medics some concern.

Another stretcher followed directly; the leader of the asari commandos stretched out on top, completely out cold. They hustled towards the exit, the small army of auxiliary medics running alongside the stretchers and calling out vital signs.

"Pulse o.x. is 94."

"BP 131 over 77."

"Neurological activity is erratic," another medic commented about the asari commando on the stretcher. "I'm reading some unusual Beta waves."

The doctor scanned the asari with his omni-tool. "Where were they found?" he queried.

"Just outside the beacon antechamber," Lieutenant Aelius replied. "It exploded. They were caught in the blast. The krogan bore most of it…"

"The krogan has a name!" Chaill reminded him loudly.

"… He saved D'Ceni. But engineer Chaill refused treatment," Aelius finished hastily. "He insisted the asari took priority."

"Damn right!"

The group double-timed it through the corridors towards the infirmary. As they ran, Gabby was staring in alarm at the gaping orange wound on Chaill's back.

Medics ushered the salarians into the infirmary and sat them on the examination beds. The stretchers bearing the injured asari closely followed. The doctor ordered all non-medical staff out of the room and set about assessing each patient in turn. Chaill continued to refuse help from the auxiliary medics, and it was only when the doctor was satisfied his other patients weren't in danger that he finally turned his attention on the intransigent krogan.

"Alright, you!" The doctor jabbed his finger at Chaill. "Quit stalling, wallflower! Take your clothes off and get on that bed!"

"Be gentle with me, doc. It's my first time," the krogan replied, grinning.

Chaill shrugged off his thick padded jacket, grimacing slightly as it dropped from his shoulders, the fabric sticky with orange blood. The doctor took a moment to examine him. The krogan was, quite frankly, a marvel to behold. Overlapping leaves of bright red armour-plate shielded his hump and back, contrasting sharply with the softer pale skin of his chin, neck and arms. Smaller flexible patches of toughened hide covered his chest; his formidable krogan appearance complimented by the heavily armoured head crest that flared upwards to protect his skull. In fact, there was little of his upper-body that wasn't armoured.
Sitting him on the bed, the doctor quickly surveyed the damage. Chaill's back was a mess! The plate armour on his spine had caught the brunt of the blast and two of the overlapping leaves were missing entirely. There was a yawning hollow at the base of his hump, the massive gash leaking bright fluid down his back that was fortunately already congealing into a thick clot. The doctor shook his head in admiration. If it had been any other species that wound would likely have been fatal. *So this is what happens when you evolve on a planet where you're not the alpha predator.*

"You're lucky krogan regenerate so quickly," he commented. "There's not much for me to do except patch you up. But it's going to leave a spectacular scar."

"I'll add it to my collection," Chaill joked, his chuckle rumbling painfully in his plates. The doctor began to swab away the blood from his armoured skin and clean the wound with medi-gel, injecting the patient in his hump.

"Well, this is going to be a good one to show off to the ladies," the doctor added.

Chaill laughed again. "True. Now I just have to find someone who likes scars."

"Plenty of women on Tuchanka, I would have thought?" The doctor was plugging the wound with several patches of gauze before winding a bandage around his torso.

"Not much call for an engineer on the home world, doc," Chaill replied, a hint of bitterness creeping into his voice. "They're not exactly falling over themselves to rebuild the place. Even though it needs it." Chaill released a frustrated sigh. "If ever there was a place practically begging to be rebuilt, it's Tuchanka. But will any of the clan leaders even consider looking at my plans? No! All they want to do is fight. Battle amongst themselves. And shore up clan numbers so they can have more troops to get killed in some pointless skirmish. There isn't a leader amongst them who thinks about the future of the krogan – or about our place in the Galaxy. Planet's going to the Void!"

"I wouldn't have expected a krogan to have such a philosophical viewpoint," the doctor commented.

"I work on the Citadel, doc. I see what the other species' have accomplished, what they can do if they work together. I've visited the krogan monument on the Presidium. We used to be part of something greater. And it made us greater. And the thought of what we could be if we worked with the other races; what the krogan could accomplish if we were part of that community again…" Chaill shook his head sadly. "The cold reality is that we're dying! Either through the genophage, or our own infighting. It doesn't matter. A few more generations and there won't be enough of us left. We're going extinct. And I can't do anything to stop it! I'm out here trying to make a difference. Trying to prove we can be useful, that we can be something better… That we're worthy of re-joining the Citadel. Rather than the thugs for hire we've been reduced to."

The doctor was silent for a long time, not knowing how to respond. Finally, he looked down and gently lifted Chaill's left arm in his hand. "This is recent," he observed, indicating what looked like a deep cut on Chaill's left forearm that had knitted into a slim white scar. "Looks like a knife wound. How'd you get this one?"

Chaill grunted dismissively. "I'm a krogan, doc, it goes with the territory."

"I know scars are seen as attractive in your culture…"

"It's not so much the scars themselves, but more the stories of how we got them that make us attractive." Chaill ran his finger over the scar on his arm. "It demonstrates our ability to take on and defeat any kind of adversity. *That's* the trait that makes us desirable. If we can't defend ourselves how are we expected to protect the ones we care about?"
"So, the scars maketh the man, eh? Well, to each their own. Personally, I tend to go for anyone with a silver carapace or a silver tongue… A nice firm ass is good, too!"

"Yeah, I can see the appeal," Chaill conceded.

"Carapaces or asses?" the doctor asked ruefully.

"Silver tongues!" Chaill replied, giving a half-hearted grin.

"Agreed!" the doctor chuckled, and stole a glance at the two injured asari stretched out on their examination beds. "Of course, I also prefer someone who doesn't have the ability to kill me with a single thought! Not that I have anything against asari per say. A fascinating species, but they don't really float my boat. Rather too full of themselves and not enough natural plate armour for my tastes. I like a bit of rigidity on my partner. Soft skin just doesn't do it for me. I imagine you're the same?"

"Depends on the individual," Chaill muttered, glancing over at Erata, the asari engineer lying on the bed opposite the commando leader. "What's her prognosis?" He nodded in Erata's direction.

"She'll be fine," the doctor assured him. "You shielded her from the blast. She's just concussed from the shock wave. A little bed-rest and she'll be up and about in no time."

"That's some good news at least." Chaill nodded. He looked around the infirmary. "Thought you might have let Gabby and the other one, Pella, stay and check on their friends."

"No visitors until I've finished treatment!" The doctor stated firmly. Then he smiled knowingly. "In any case, I imagine those two will likely be too busy getting the third-degree from the Commander!"

"Three days!"

Commander Joric paced up and down the CIC as she glared at the two engineers, her body almost shaking with fury.

Since receiving reports of the explosion at the dig-site, Joric had immediately informed her superiors, and for the last few hours had hardly been off the link as heated exchanges flew back and forth between the Council and the Hierarchy leadership. After talking to so many high-ranking individuals in such a short space of time, each demanding explanations, Joric was, to put it mildly, feeling rather frazzled!

"Three bloody days! We have a Prothean artefact, a piece of working paleo-technology, and it gets destroyed in three days while in your care! Swarm of Spirits! How is that remotely …? I can't even … What is it with you three? How does this keep happening? You've been on Gellix less than a month and you've already seen more action than most of my crew sees on an entire tour!"

Joric finally stopped pacing and slumped down in her chair.

"We had the opportunity to study a pristine Prothean relic and we let it slip through our fingers. Do you know how much that would have meant to the honour of the legion? That would have gone down as a high point in our historical archive. But now, thanks to happenstance, that's all been snatched away! We're officially banned from the site."

"We're being side-lined, sir?" Pella exclaimed. "But there's still plenty to record. We're not going to leave it to the mercs, are we?"

"The catacombs will be studied, but not by us… Everyone associated with this debacle has been
removed from the project." The engineers started to protest but Joric quickly silenced them. "Don't worry; the site will be cordoned off and automated defences set up around it. Nothing will be going in. The Council assure me that you three will still get credit for the find… eventually."

"Eventually, ma'am?" Gabby queried.

"This is a Hierarchy led expedition with Council backing and a multispecies crew. But the leadership is deeply concerned that a turian led team was involved in the destruction of such valuable technology. The situation was politically sensitive before, but now, after being destroyed, it's become downright embarrassing."

"Is the Hierarchy blaming us, sir?" Pella asked.

"Let me be clear: This will not affect you personally. Your careers are not going to be damaged by this… But the Hierarchy takes a very dim view of what happened and are very aware of who was involved. They will be taking a more active interest in what you do from now on. But they don't hold you responsible for what happened. No, if a sword is going to fall on anyone's head, it's going to be mine! I'm the only one accountable for this."

"That doesn't seem right, ma'am," Gabby remarked.

"It is perfectly right! This is all part of the responsibility of command, and if I couldn't handle it I wouldn't have been promoted to the role." Joric rose to feet and resumed pacing. "With so many species working on the project it's not like it could remain confidential – the information has to come out sometime. But while you remain on Gellix, or until the Council decide to disclose the details, we've been told to keep it an open secret."

Gabby frowned in concern. "I can't contact the Alliance about this, ma'am?"

"The Alliance has already been informed. Your human representative, Ambassador Udina I believe, appears to agree with the Council. And once you return to the SSV Perugia you are no longer under Hierarchy command and control – you can inform whoever you like. But until such time as you do return to your ship you will obey my orders. All evidence suggests Gellix is a former Prothean world and there may be other sites to be found. Unfortunately, I'm the closest thing to a government official here, and without a larger military presence I can't guarantee protecting those sites. And the Hierarchy certainly can't commit more forces at the moment. Not to this region. If the council announce the truth about Gellix it'll be an invitation to every merc group in this sector to come snooping and open the floodgates to speculators looking for other sites."

"Besides, Matriarch Benezia is already putting pressure on Councillor Tevos."

"The asari are backbiting, sir?" Pella looked startled.

Joric nodded. "Benezia is suggesting that an asari led team, specifically her team, would have done," – Joric air-quoted with her finger – "a 'more competent job' than we mere turians, and even hinted that Tevos is no longer fit for the role of Councillor. I've heard Dalatrss Linron is also throwing her weight around, demanding a full investigation into the destruction of the beacon and specifically the krogan's involvement. She's really got an axe to grind about krogan that one." Joric shook her head. "This is a right mess. Spirits, I hate politics!"

Commander Joric burnt the midnight oil that night as she continued to field messages from the Council and Primarch Fedorian.

Erata was eventually coaxed back to consciousness by the doctor, who continued to monitor all his
patients, including the fast-healing salarians, in the infirmary, making sure there were no lingering after-effects from the explosion.

Chaill fared well, retaining his good humour and even asked if he could assist the doctor, to which the turian physician politely declined and had to practically order the krogan back to his bed and rest.

His other patients also made good progress. The doctor discharged the salarians the next day, their accelerated metabolism healing the burns and lacerations quickly.

It wasn't until late-morning that the commando leader, Shiala, awoke from her coma. According to Lieutenant Aelius, the asari had been found outside the beacon antechamber, just a few metres away from D'Ceni and Chaill – the krogan lying protectively over the asari engineer's body. From her position, Aelius reported that it looked like Shiala had been running towards the beacon when it exploded.

The doctor found this news surprising – Shiala's injuries had been superficial. He had expected the commando to recover much quicker than the others.

Visitors were finally permitted after lunch, and the asari commandos immediately clustered around Shiala, talking in hushed tones, or sitting together in long silences, which Chaill found particularly odd behaviour.

They noticed him watching and the asari who'd tried to seduce him turned and gave him a cold glare. Chaill scowled in return.

To his surprise, orders for their release came just a few minutes later. The doctor was thunderstruck when he received notification that the commandos were being recalled and tried to make a formal protest but was overruled by the Primarch.

Chaill later found out that some Matriarch had put pressure on the asari Councillor to ensure their swift release from Entarus Station. Within thirty-minutes an asari shuttle was landing and the commandos had left Gellix entirely. Chaill shook his head at the bewildering state of aliens affairs.

*Asari are nothing but trouble!*

The day picked up considerably when Gabby and Pella popped in to visit. The pair greeting Erata first, exchanging a few encouraging words with the sleepy engineer. Then Gabby went to greet her krogan friend.

Chaill broke into a broad grin as he eagerly hugged the human engineer, trying not to wince as she gripped his bandages a little too tightly. Eventually, she pulled away.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm fine, Gabby. Never better. Fit and ready for action."

"Apart from that gaping hole in your back!"

"Oh, does it show? I was worried you wouldn't notice."

"It does kinda catch the eye."

"You should see it when it scars over!"

"Thanks, but I'll pass," Gabby insisted. She sat down in the seat next to Chaill. Her expression
became serious. "We haven't had a chance to properly discuss everything that happened."

Chaill grinned again and nodded in agreement. "Yeah. It's been a busy time. Certainly hasn't been boring, though."

"So… what happens now?"

"That's not for me to decide, Gabby. Never has been... I know me and the boys are being shipped back to the Auroto. The Council is backpedalling rapidly, trying to distance itself from this mess and calling for an investigation. Some of them have even suggested I'm responsible."

Gabby frowned and nodded. "Yeah, I heard."

"Wouldn't be the first time I've been falsely accused of something. I heard some dalatrass has expressed doubts about me being on a salarian ship. She wants me expelled from the crew."

"After everything you've accomplished, Chaill? That's varren dung!"

Chail let out a short laugh. "I knew I'd regret teaching you krogan curses."

"Didn't I get it right?"

"Just strange to hear it coming from you."

"They can't be allowed to get away with this, Chaill. I won't let them. I've already pleaded your case. Told them how good an engineer you are. And the salarian crew is behind you. I made sure of it. They promised to put in a good word for you. I asked them to send those vids they made of you working on the Auroto to the Council to prove what great work you've been doing. And they're even forwarding the vids back to your clan on Tuchanka… Your clan deserves to know about this injustice."

Chaill looked at her sharply, the smile on his face falling away. "You did what?"

"I asked them to send the vids to Tuchanka," Gabby replied again, frowning. "Why? It just shows the kind of work you've been doing. What you've accomplished working with all these different species. It shows you in a good light."

Chaill shook his head. "No, it shows me working with salarians, and likely as not dancing with a turian. That wouldn't go down well back on the homeworld, believe me! We might all get along here but attitudes are very different on Tuchanka. Krogans are not well known for their hospitality towards salarians."

"But you're willing to work with them…"

"Only 'cause I'm a freak of nature, Gabby. I haven't been back to Tuchanka in years. I've grown accustomed to working with non-krogan. It's normal for me. But when you're living in the ruins of a radioactive wasteland, surrounded by hostile animals – some of them your own species – it's a little harder to engender trust. Most of the clan-leaders still blame the salarians and turians for what they did to us with the genophage. They're the enemy!" Chaill stated hotly. "And for me to be working with them, let alone socialising with them, is going to make me the worst kind of traitor."

"Then why do you work for them?"

"Because I'm not a backwards looking idiot! What happened with the genophage was over a thousand years ago. The people responsible for it are long dead. The Galaxy has moved on. 
Everyone's moved on… except the krogan. And the only way of securing a cure for the genophage or any kind of future for us is to show that we can be trusted, that we can be regarded as equals again. And the only way to do that is to appeal directly to the people who created it.

"The salarians…” Gabby muttered, her eyes going wide in understanding. "That's why you agreed to work with them on the Auroto."

"I wasn't… completely honest with you, Gabby. I wasn't given the offer. It took a lot of persuasion on my part; multiple request; I don't know how many petitions to Councillor Valern, and an endorsement from a sympathetic Matriarch to secure my position."

"A Matriarch?" Gabby asked.

Chaill nodded and smiled. "Met her at a bar on the Citadel. Said she knew where I was coming from as her dad was a krogan. Greeted me by smashing her head against my crest!” He chuckled. "I liked her! But even then I didn't think I'd be given as much freedom on the Auroto as I have been; or be accepted by the crew; or even enjoy it as much as I have…” Chaill leant back against the seat, then grunted and winced, immediately regretting putting pressure on his back. "They're not the enemy, Gabby. Yeah, salarians can be myopic, close-minded idiots sometimes, but they can learn. I can educate them. At least, that's what I hoped to do with this programme…”

"I'm sorry, Chaill… I was just trying to help."

"I know. I'm not mad at you, Gabby – couldn't be if I tried. I'm frustrated with this whole damn mess. And right now, I'm seriously considering going all Krogan Rebellion on someone's ass! Know anyone I can butt-heads with?"

"I would suggest the commandos but they've been shipped back to Benezia," Gabby gave a tentative grin. "Honestly, I think the rest of the crew were glad to see the back of them."

"Don't blame them," Chaill rumbled. He carefully encircled her tiny looking hand in his own. "There's always something, isn't there!"

Shiala sat in the shuttle's rear compartment as the craft prepared for the jump to FTL. She anxiously knotted her hands together as she waited for the message from Matriarch Benezia to come through on the secure channel. This was not a call she was looking forward to.

Eventually, the screen on the wall sprung to life and the image of Benezia appeared.

Shiala rose to her feet and answered the call.

"Matriarch." She bowed at the screen in greeting.

"Shiala – was your mission successful?"

"The beacon has been destroyed, Matriarch," Shiala confirmed. "We left no evidence of our involvement or the nature of the relic, and the blame for its destruction has been diverted to the salarian team."

"So I understand," Benezia replied. "You have done well, my acolyte."

"Tana must take most of the credit. After the beacon exploded she placed me outside the antechamber so the turians could find us. I was almost unconscious at the time. The turians mistook me as one of those injured in the blast. The krogan was closest to the detonation."
Benezia inclined her head very slightly. "That krogan made the perfect scapegoat. The Dalatrass didn't have far to look to find a suitable culprit. Linron is already crowing to anyone who'll listen that she was right all along to distrust krogan, and demanding to know why she wasn't consulted on his assignment to a salarian vessel. No doubt this will strengthen her position in the salarian government – much good will it do her." Benezia gave a rare smile. "But what of you, child? Did you recover the information?"

Shiala hesitated before she spoke. "Only part of it, Matriarch," she confessed. "I didn't have enough time to gather the full message. It was unclear and incomplete. I only caught fragments, but couldn't make any sense of it." Shiala bowed her head in contrition. "My apologies, Matriarch. I failed you."

Benezia was silent for a long moment. "I see," she said quietly. "That is most unfortunate. In nearly two centuries of service, I believe this is the first time you have disappointed me, Shiala. You know what is at stake…" Benezia lapsed into silence again while she considered the problem. "However, we may be able to salvage something from this setback. You said the message was incomplete. Is there anything you can discern from these fragments? Anything that you remember?"

"I caught glimpses of vistas, feelings, great anger and control. But nothing complete."

"Were you able to identify those vistas?"

"Yes! I went through the database and think I've found a match to the visions in my head. I think I recognised Feros!"

Benezia frowned. "Another Prothean world. Picked clean by scavengers and colonised by opportunistic humans. It is worthless. There is nothing of value there."

"I'm convinced that there's something else…" Shiala insisted. "Something missed by the other races. Buried deep underground. Something… alive. Possibly another beacon… Or something else we haven't encountered before. If the Protheans concealed a relic as well as they did the one on Gellix… It could be waiting for us to find it, or even activating as we speak…"

Benezia considered her words carefully. It was several long moments before she finally nodded. "Then that is where you shall go, my acolyte," she said. "Find redemption in this mission. Prove yourself to me. Report your findings to Spectre Saren. He will be leading you and your team for the foreseeable future."

Shiala's blood ran cold. "I am sworn to your service, Matriarch. My place is by your side."

"We must all make sacrifices for the cause… And I cannot lead you this time. Other matters demand my attention. But I know you will not disappoint me again, Shiala."

"No, Matriarch. I promise."

Benezia smiled once more, the skin above her cheek wrinkling in a way Shiala had not seen in years, though her eyes were tinged with sadness.

"I have faith in you, child."

The screen went blank, and Shiala returned to her seat as the shuttle jumped to FTL.

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**Batarian massacre site, Twenty-kilometres north of Entarus Station – 21:50 UTC**

The storm was building in intensity, forming a convenient shroud over the region when a black
armoured transport rolled across the snow and ground to a halt, settling a few metres from the first batarian corpse.

A figure emerged, swathed in thick protective armour, and pulled his hood up against the winds. He stomped through the snow before crouching down next to the dead body of his former second-in-command – and his brother.

The man brushed away the drifted snow and let out a small grunt as he examined the bullet wound in his brother's forehead. It was a perfect headshot. Very professionally done; from a high calibre weapon, wielded by a highly-trained military sniper. And there was only one military group in the region with the resources and capabilities to do this. There was only one group who would have any reason to do this.

The merc stood and gazed over the other batarian bodies, the remains of what was once his crew; his team – This massacre would not go unanswered.

One of his soldiers emerged from the transport and approached him cautiously. The subordinate's keen survival instincts had taught him to recognise when his leader was upset.

"What do you think, sir?" the subordinate asked.

"Turians did this!" the merc growled, and ground his needle-like teeth together. "This is their handiwork."

"We can't go up against the Hierarchy, sir," the subordinate reminded him, somewhat recklessly. "There's no way we could beat them."

His leader turned and in one swift movement brought his rifle up and shot the man in the stomach.

"Maybe not," the leader agreed, watching the blood of his subordinate staining the ice. "But we can make them bleed!"

A second underling stepped out from the armoured transport, rifle in hand just in case he needed to protect himself. But his leader's blood thirst appeared to have temporarily abated.

"Mass the troops!" the batarian leader ordered. "Call in our ships from the other bases and prep them for combat." He paused, knowing it would take time to amass the full complement of ships and troops, but that merely gave him time to plan his strategy properly. He knew how formidable turian troops could be and he needed to be prepared – So well prepared that they'd never see him coming. He was going to hit them hard and fast.

"If the turians want a war, we'll give them one!"
Chapter Summary

As Chaill and Erata recover in the infirmary, Gabby tries to contact Kenneth. But when Entarus Station is put into lock-down, the turians amuse themselves with a unique game. Elsewhere on the planet, a batarian mercenary force is slowly gathering strength...

Chapter Notes

Warning: contains nudity and detailed descriptions of turian anatomy.

Entarus Station Infirmary, Gellix – 15:40 UTC – 18th February 2183 CE

Erata stood watching the display of nature through the infirmary observation window. A green curtain of light hung against the dark blue glow of the night sky; ribbons of ethereal energy danced slowly through the air, accompanied by the distant crackle of electrical discharges exciting the atmosphere.

"You know what causes it, don't you?" a deep voice asked from her left.

She turned to face the only other occupant in the infirmary: the krogan, Chaill, wearing a pair of grey work trousers (the only garment that would fit him), and very little else! His bare torso was covered in bandages. She'd never seen a bare-chested krogan before. He was certainly muscular.

"Hausos-Yakshi I believe you asari call it," he continued, "or 'Dawn of the Night Winds'. Very poetic. To the humans it's known as Aurora. Can't decide which name I prefer…"

"What do krogan call it?"

"If we could see it at all through Tuchanka's thick cloud cover we'd probably call it a bloody nuisance!" He chuckled. Erata flashed a brief smile. "It's caused by charged particles from the solar wind focused by the magnetosphere colliding with stratospheric atoms. It's lucky we can see it at all, to be honest. Entarus Station must be at just the right latitude and longitude from the planet's geomagnetic poles." Chaill stared up at the natural phenomenon. "Of course, knowing what causes it doesn't make it any less beautiful."

Erata frowned as she studied the unusual alien.

"You're not what I expected from a krogan."

The krogan rolled his eyes. "If I had a glass of ryncol every time I've heard that… I'd have one hell of a hangover right now!"

Despite her mood, she couldn't help but smile again.

"Quite frankly, you're not what I expected," Chaill commented.
"I think you'll find that plenty of asari are engineers."

"Not what I meant. When we first spoke over the link you were quite prepared to show me an asari striptease! But since I've been here... you've hardly said a word to anyone. You've kept mostly to yourself. And I haven't seen you shake hands or let anyone touch you. It's like you're a completely different person."

"A lot's happened in the past few days," she said airily.

"That's an understatement! There have been Prothean artefacts, explosions and uninvited guest. Salarians and commandos and krogan, oh my! And from what Gabby tells me that asari Matriarch the commandos work for was about to execute you guys."

"That's the impression I got. The Matriarch certainly had that look in her eyes."

"Well, I'm very glad she didn't. She wouldn't have wanted me as an enemy if she'd hurt Gabby!"

Erata studied him carefully. His expression suddenly looked very... krogan.

"You've known Gabby a long time?" she asked.

"A little over two years. Not many people in the Galaxy can impress me, but she's definitely one of them."

"She does have a certain quality," Erata agreed. And a spectacular pair of legs! she added silently.

"I think you should know, after I was told about the assignment to work on Gellix, I did a little background check on you..."

Erata rounded furiously on the krogan. "Why does everyone want to pry into my private life?!"

"Just past jobs, nothing personal," Chaill assured her. "I run background checks on everyone I work with. I like to know how capable they are. Not that I could actually access your records; your files were restricted for some reason."

"And you're wondering why that is?"

"Only two possibilities come to mind: The first is that you're a spy working for the Asari Government... not terribly likely, to be honest. Why would the Republics advertise the fact you're an agent by restricting your file? That's just asking for someone to get suspicious. They could just as easily have given you a false identity. No!" Chaill shook his head. "The other explanation is that there's something sensitive in your files that the Republics don't want advertised, and you have some influential contacts within your government who are protecting you for some reason..."

Erata shrugged dismissively and turned away. "Asari are mysterious. Who knows why we do anything?"

"Very true!" Chaill laughed quietly. "I've only ever encountered that once before – files I couldn't access. It was on the Citadel. On one of those rare occasions when I worked with an asari – a Justicar, my supervisors informed me."

Erata's eyes involuntarily widened. She straightened her back, turning slowly towards him with renewed interest. Chaill smiled slightly.

"I'd never met a Justicar before," he continued. "Heard about them, of course. Even caught an action
vid on the extranet that was supposed to be based on their lives. Interesting characters. They act like bounty hunters but have the authority of a Spectre.

"The job itself was fairly mundane. It was a simple repair of the heating in one of the studio apartments on the top floor of this tenement building. The top three floors had been reserved for just one asari. Tiny little thing she was. Barely a Maiden by the look of her. Looked like a strong breeze would knock her over. I assumed she must have been a visiting dignitary guarded by this fierce-looking Justicar." Chaill shook his head. "In reality, the Justicar was there to protect everyone else from this asari. I only found that out afterwards, of course. They'd sent me on the job because, well... I'm a krogan. They assumed I could look after myself.

"The tiny asari was courteous; asked me a few questions about my work. Justicar never left her side – hovered over her like an over-protective mother. I asked the asari if she'd seen much of the Citadel while she was there.

"She said, and I quote, 'Only areas deemed appropriate by the Republic Judiciary and the Justicar Order'"

Erata glanced away, blinking away unexpected moisture from her eyes. If Chaill saw her reaction he didn't comment on it.

"Long story short, the asari was on leave from some monastery she was… residing in. They make very good asari honey mead there, apparently – young thing even wanted to give me a bottle as a thank you, but the Justicar wouldn't allow it. Wouldn't even let me get close. This was a rare supervised visit as a reward for fifty years 'good behaviour'. Said she couldn't remember what life was like before the Monastery.

"I asked her how she coped living in seclusion for such a long period of time, knowing she couldn't experience what others could.

"'Full acceptance of the present', she replied. 'Offer no resistance. Accept the present the way it is, from your behaviour, to the people you meet in life, to your thoughts, to what people say, everything'. Then she quoted your Goddess, Athame: 'A true way to change things is to offer no resistance to the flow of life. All that transpires, all that you go through, you cannot resist it. If you really want to live life to the fullest, accept yourself, be true to yourself, and don't judge yourself. This is the first step you must take. Because if you're judging yourself or thinking you're wrong in some way, you'll limit yourself. And if you limit yourself you can't live life to the fullest. Consider your victories. Be grateful for life. Accept it and always remember that life goes on...' And I have to say, it all sounded... like a right load of bollocks!"

Erata looked sharply at him, at once frowning and smiling. She wasn't sure she should be amused or outraged.

"I don't know, maybe it's the krogan in me, but one piece of advice did sink in... seize the moment! The future hasn't happened yet, so stop worrying about what might be. Embrace the present and live life to the fullest."

He flicked on his omni-tool and tapped away at the interface.

A smooth, warm melody drifted across the room from the infirmary's comm-link.

Chaill extended his hand. "Come with me," he offered.

"I'd prefer it if we kept our distance."
"You really want to talk 'distance' with the wounded krogan who shielded you with his body and carried you out of the fire?" Chaill hadn't withdrawn his hand. "I think I can handle myself."

"I see your point."

Tentatively, Erata reached out her hand. Chaill took it and led her across the room. He stopped between the beds and gathered her up, easing into a slow rhythmic dance.

"I can certainly chalk this up as a new experience," she admitted, "dancing with a krogan in a turian medical bay. You do this kind of thing often?"

"First time for me. But I like to travel and gain new experiences. I don't think much of the décor here, though. It's a little sterile."

She smiled again. "I'll have a word with the doctor about it."

"Hey, you hear the one about the hanar and the volus?" Chaill asked. Erata shook her head. "A hanar and a volus are on the Citadel each driving their skycars when they have a crash. The two vehicles collide and hit a hotel. Miraculously, both drivers survive.

"The hanar emerges from his car, waving his tentacles in the air and praising his gods, 'This One believes the Enkindlers saved us from death,' he says. 'Praise the Enkindlers! They are telling us there should be no recriminations between us.'"

"'I agree, Kahje-clan,' the volus replies, happy just to be alive.

"As they inspect the wreckage a bottle of hanar liquor rolls out from under the hanar's seat. 'Clearly the Enkindlers saved this bottle to allow us to commemorate our survival,' the hanar says and passes the bottle over. The volus nods and opens his suit's emergency induction port, downing half the liquor in one gulp. Then the volus hands the bottle back to the hanar, but the hanar stops the bottle.

"'Aren't you drinking?' the volus asks.

"'This One must decline. This One will wait for Citadel Security!!'"

That had her chuckling. She relaxed into a comfortable rhythm.

"Not bad. Okay, my turn... How'd you stop a batarian from drowning?" she asked. Chaill shrugged. "Shoot him before he hits the water!"

"Nice!" Chaill nodded approvingly. "And true, funnily enough. Not that I've tried it. You hear about the hanar that went to war...?"

"... He went well armed!" she finished.

"Yeah. That's almost as old as the Rebellions."

"An asari commando walks into a club, and the club owner looks at her and says, "Why so blue?"

"That's terrible!"

"Well, it's in good company then!"

That was how the doctor found them when he walked in: dancing and telling bad jokes. It wasn't the therapy he'd prescribed, but it appeared to have a positive effect.
By the end of the dance, Erata was laughing.

The salarians received their orders to return to the *Auroto* some ten hours later.

Chaill dressed carefully, the krogan stubbornly refusing all offers of help from Erata or the doctor as he slipped on a spare jacket, concealing the wound on his back. Even with his krogan metabolism, Chaill hadn't fully recovered from his injuries and the doctor had been reluctant to discharge him, but the salarian commander assured the doctor that Chaill would receive good palliative care on the *Auroto*.

Despite the briefness of his stay, Chaill seemed to have had a quiet influence on the Gellix crew and a large crowd had gathered on the landing pad to bid farewell to the salarian team.

Clad in their protective armour, the three engineers stood in the crisp Gellix air like an honour guard. Very soon, the vapour trails of the salarian shuttle entered the atmosphere. Gabby stepped forward to hug her friend goodbye and the krogan eagerly responded in kind.

"Short visit, huh?" Chaill murmured.

"Too short," Gabby agreed. "Don't be a stranger, Chaill. You visit us soon. This place can get pretty boring."

"Sounds like you were doing alright without me," Chaill laughed. "But, yeah, we must do this again sometime."

"Hopefully next time with fewer explosions and not so many life-threatening injuries!"

"Where's the fun in that?"

The friends parted, and Pella and Erata approached the krogan to shake his hand.

"Keep her out of mischief," Chaill said, indicating Gabby.

"Easier said than done," Pella replied cheerfully grasping the krogan by the hand – even *she* seemed to have warmed to him.

"Yeah, Gabby's a right troublemaker!" Erata added and shook Chaill's hand. "Come back to Gellix anytime, engineer. You really liven up the place."

"Like it needs it!" Chaill rumbled.

The shuttle descended and settled on the landing-pad.

The salarians bid their final farewells before they boarded the vehicle. Chaill clambered into the vehicle and lingered in the shuttle's doorway as he waved at them.

The doors slid shut and the shuttle rose into the air.

Gabby watched the shuttle ascend and continued to gaze into the sky long after it had faded from view. She didn't notice Lieutenant Aelius standing behind her until he tapped her on the shoulder

"Commander Joric wants to speak to you in the CIC." He looked at Erata and Pella. "All of you. And I wouldn't keep her waiting, *Triple-A*."

Leaving the chill of the landing pad, they moved inside.
Commander Joric was busy reading from a datapad when they entered. They lined up by the holoscreen and saluted smartly.

"At ease," Joric ordered. "Been a rough few days. I was hoping this would be a nice boring exchange. An assault by commandos, aliens getting injured and a Prothean relic exploding certainly put paid to that! All we need now is the Primarch to declare the outbreak of another Unification War and my day will be complete! Never thought my leadership would be under investigation because of an archaeological dig!"

"I'm surprised you allowed the salarians to leave, sir," Pella commented. "Isn't the investigation still ongoing?"

"Councillor Valern insisted we let them leave. He thought the krogan would be better observed in a more controlled environment while the investigation is underway. And Councillor Sparatus was keen to remove a krogan from a Hierarchy base."

"Especially on Gellix, I imagine?" Erata put in.

"Yes," Joric admitted, "especially on Gellix. But that's not the half of it. The Council has suggested the base be placed on lockdown."

Pella frowned. "They can't do that, surely? They don't have the authority."

"I sometimes wonder who's running the Hierarchy these days," Joric muttered. "Councillor Sparatus assured me it's to allow the Council time to consider their options, but I'm not entirely convinced. I don't think the Council trusts us! They don't want any of the crew jumping the gun and revealing the truth about Gellix."

"You mean they don't trust me, ma'am?" Gabby asked.

"A little on the nose, but that seems to be the gist of it, yeah," Joric admitted. "You're considered an unknown quantity. And they want to make sure the Alliance doesn't get the chance to reveal Gellix is a former Prothean world before they do."

"So much for interspecies unity," Erata murmured to Gabby.

"I won't reveal anything unless I'm ordered to do so, ma'am," Gabby insisted. "And I'm certainly not about to betray your confidence or the confidence of the Gellix crew."

Joric looked at Gabby for a long moment. "Admirable of you, Daniels. But it's out of my hands now. The Primarch has already been persuaded and made his decision. For the next few days, Entarus Station is in lockdown."

"Yes, ma'am," Gabby said.

"Dismissed."

They filed out.

All at once Erata's breathing was easier. Her head and shoulders felt lighter.

The overwhelming emotion flooding her chest was relief. With the station in lockdown she had a few days respite from any contact with Thessia... and specifically the doctors who were still investigating her. For the next few days she was wonderfully, blissfully ignorant.
This was still *her* life to live.

*I might just take the krogan's advice!* she decided.

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*CIC, Entarus Station, Gellix – 17.05 UTC – 20 th February*

Gabby heard about the attack as she was finishing her shift.

Lieutenant Aelius contacted her via omni-tool, summoning her to the CIC. The Lieutenant was now the senior officer on the base ever since Commander Joric had returned to Anapondus earlier in the day.

Gabby entered the Command room to see Aelius standing next to the comm-officer and staring up at the main view-screen. The grainy image of a salarian in a Captain's uniform was on the monitor; his lips were moving rapidly but the only sound was the hiss of static.

"We're receiving a distress signal from the *Auroto!*" Aelius said before she'd even saluted. "It came in a few minutes ago. They've been boarded!"

"Batarians?" she asked.

"They think so," Aelius confirmed and turned back to the screen. "Can you clean that up?" he said to the comm-officer.

"I'll try, sir," the man replied.

He started to adjust the signal. Gabby's eyes instinctively roamed over the data scrolling across the screen, memorising the coordinates the signal was originating from. A few seconds later the salarian's voice rang through the speakers.

"... Gency. Emergency. This is *USV Auroto*. We have been boarded... ...are under attack by marauders... ...lost members of the crew. Request immediate assistance..."

The salarian turned sharply as the sound of gunfire boomed from the corridor behind him.

Chaill appeared in the doorway, a shotgun in his hand. He turned and pointed it down the corridor.

More shots were heard. A fountain of orange blood spurted from Chaill's shoulder.

Rather than going down, Chaill bellowed a war cry and charged his attackers.

The screen went blank.

The signal had died.

Gabby opened her mouth to yell at the screen, but stopped herself.

*Stupid waste of time!*

"What's disrupting communications?" Aelius demanded.

The comm-officer shook his head. "I'm not sure, sir... It's possibly interference from the diurnal phase shift in the ionosphere."

"Just try to re-establish a link before the storm hits!" the Lieutenant snapped.
"Sir, we have to alert the Hierarchy and the Union," Gabby insisted. "And Arcadias! Perhaps they can mount a rescue mission?"

"The message was sent out on emergency channels. If we're receiving this you can be damn sure the salarians and Hierarchy know about it! I'm not disobeying Joric's orders. We are not breaking radio silence."

Gabby started to protest, but Aelius shot her down.

"That's my final word on the matter, Daniels. I'll keep you in the loop. If we receive any further reports you'll be the first to know."

Gabby left the CIC and stumbled to the Mess Hall in a daze. She knew Chaill could handle himself in a fight, but seeing him getting shot had been markedly disturbing.

Kenneth had once explained – in one of his more lucid ramblings – his theory of '8 Degrees of Separation'. He postulated that only 8 people separated you from everyone in the Galaxy… apparently it used to be 6 people but the universe has gotten larger since then!

_Funny how I keep running into the same people in my life, even when we're separated by millions of light-years_, Gabby reflected.

Seeing Chaill again had been an unexpected delight; even if he could be an obstinate, impulsive chowderhead sometimes! Trouble seemed to follow him around – very much like Kenneth in that regard…

_I certainly know how to pick 'em, don't I?_

At least, what Chaill lacked in any discernable survival instinct, he more than made up for in sheer bloody joie de vivre! That was one reptile who knew how to have a good time.

_And, Gabby noted, he genuinely cares about others, which is rare enough to find in my own species, never mind a krogan!_

Erata was sipping a cup of hot asari _conchol_ when Gabby stumbled into the Mess. The asari looked up, her forehead creasing at the human's disconsolate expression. She quickly rose from her seat to intercept her colleague and guide her to a table.

_Hurriedly, Gabby related what she'd seen._

"I just don't know what to do!" Gabby declared as she finished her account. "All the comms are restricted. We're in lockdown. Level 4 clearance only. There's no way to contact the Auroto."

Erata was silent for a moment as she looked down thoughtfully, swirling the last dregs of _conchol_ around her cup. "Well, I still have access to the comms," she said finally.

Gabby stared at her. "How do _you_ have level 4 clearance?"

"Probably best not to ask," she replied, that smug all-knowing smile on her lips.

Gabby stood up. "Okay, so what are we waiting for? Let's go down to the comm-room and make the call."

"Cool your thrusters, Kitten. I can access the comm, but we're still locked down. Aelius won't allow us to break radio silence."
Gabby sat down again. Her expression torn.

"Of course, we don't have to tell him…” Erata finished, and took a sip from her cup.

Gabby narrowed her eyes. "What are you suggesting?"

"I happen to know the comm-officer's shift ends at eighteen-hundred hours. The room should be clear for a few minutes. We sneak in, access the comm, send the message, and get out."

"You're proposing we put one over on the Hierarchy?"

"That's the plan," Erata said cheerfully. "You in?"

Gabby didn't answer. She was staring at the asari in astonishment. "I don't believe it. The last few days you've been a shrinking violet. And now you're planning break-ins and defying orders? What's gotten into you?"

"I've had a change of heart," the asari replied casually. "Decided not to worry about what I can't change. As you humans say, 'life's too short'. Who knows what's gonna happen in the future? Are you in?"

"You bet your blue ass I'm in!"

Their plan hit its first snag when they encountered the sealed blast-doors.

The corridor leading to the hanger and the comm-room had been cordoned off, a consequence, it appeared, of the lock-down.

"Damn turian security," Erata muttered. "Guess they're serious about lock-downs."

"They're serious about most things," Gabby stated. "Well, I'm not giving up. What about the hanger airlock? We could go outside, hack the lock and enter on the other side of the blast-door."

Erata caught the sound of the storm blowing outside. "You want to walk through a blizzard?"

"If it helps my friends, I'd fight through a nest of klixen!" was Gabby's fierce reply.

Erata's eyes widened. "You've got a scary side, Kitten," she said approvingly. "It's kinda hot!"

Retreating to Airlock Three, they quickly suited up, dragging on their coats.

"You know as soon as we open the outer door the alarms or gonna sound?" Erata pointed out.

"Yeah, they will. Unless I bypass the sensors," Gabby replied as she flicked on her omni-tool.

"Ah! One of the benefits of working on a turian base they don't tell you about… Having access to the airlock schematics."

The bypass took less than a minute.

The doors opened to a howling maelstrom of white. They swept out; shielding their heads against the storm and groping for the illuminated safety line leading to the other entrances of the base. It was impossible to see more than a metre ahead, and if it hadn't been for the safety lines they would have quickly become disorientated and frozen in the storm.
But even following the lines, their progress was achingly slow.

After what felt like an age, they reached the hanger airlock.

Gabby set about performing the same bypass on the door sensors and activated the lock.

The doors slid open and they hustled inside – the blizzard followed them in, caking the walls in freezing ice. The outer doors sealed shut.

Gabby glanced at Erata. The asari’s face was lit up by a shameless grin. Her blue eyes shone with excitement despite the freezing conditions… or maybe, because of them.

"You're enjoying this!" Gabby accused.

"Damn straight!" Erata exclaimed. "If I'm gonna be arrested it might as well be for something I've done!"

Gabby stared back, her reply dying in her throat as the inner doors opened.

They emerged in the main hanger. The comm-room was down the corridor. They ran down the hall and eased themselves inside. The comm-room was still deserted.

Moving to the monitor, Erata typed in her security clearance and set about accessing the Hierarchy comm-buoy.

"I've established a link," she said a few moments later.

"Try to contact the Auroto," Gabby said.

Erata continued to tap away at the computer's haptic interface. A minute later she shook her head in frustration. "Damn salarian encrypted channels! It's not letting me access any of the Union bandwidths."

"Well, we've come this far, I'm not about to give up… Okay, new plan. See if you can get Kenneth on the link. Maybe he'll have better luck getting a message to Chaill."

Erata nodded and set to work, quickly establishing a connection.

A flanging turian voice filtered through the comm.

"This is Hierarchy Vessel Arcadias. We read you Entraus Station. This isn't a scheduled call. Is there some kind of emergency?"

"This is Order of Serrice Engineer Erata D'Ceni. Clearance code: Handy-maiden six-two-epsilon-zero-gamma. I have a priority message for Engineer Donnelly."

"Confirmed, Engineer D'Ceni. I'll patch you through right now."

"Handy-maiden"? Gabby asked.

"We can pick our own handles," Erata explained. "I liked the sound of it."

After a short time, the image on the monitor flickered, the picture settled and two figures appeared: Kenneth, looking worried and Officer Severan looking inquisitive.

Gabby frowned as she realised they weren't at Kenneth's console, but rather they were down in the
isolated lower monitoring station behind the Drive Core.

Why is Severan always beside Kenneth when I contact him?

"Gabby!" Kenneth started in surprise. "Hi. What's happening? Are you okay?"

"We're fine," she replied. "I had to use Erata's clearance code. They wouldn't let me call out."

Erata leaned across to join Gabby at the console and grinned at the pair on-screen. "Donnelly. And Officer Severan, good to see you both." She sounded positively buoyant.

Kenneth returned the smile, then turned to Gabby. "Why … … ouldn't you call?" he asked, signal interference disrupting his reply.

"We've had some problems here. I didn't have authorization to call out. Commander Joric ordered a full lock-down, restricting the comms to Level 4 clearance only."

"Guess that explains … … never got back to me after our last chat," Kenneth joked, trying to lighten the mood. When Gabby didn't smile, he frowned and leaned in closer to the monitor. "Okay, serious … … what happened? You alright?"

"We're fine, but things have been a bit hectic here."

"Bad weather coming in again?"

"No… Well, yeah, but, we've also had company."

"What kind of company?"

Erata touched Gabby's arm and gave a small warning shake of her head.

"I'll… have to tell you all about it when I get back," Gabby said finally.

Kenneth frowned. "Well, alright… But listen: any update on when…" Gabby raised her hand and cut him off.

"I know what you're gonna ask Kenneth, and all I can tell you is I'll see you when I see you. But I've got something more important to ask. Can you do something for me?"

Kenneth nodded. "Sure. Name it."

"I've been trying to get a message to Chaill."

"Chaill … Why?" he asked, frowning.

"His ship's not far from Gellix. I've been speaking to him quite a bit. He's been involved in combat. The Auroto was attacked by marauders. The Captain said they lost a few of the crew in his last message. Chaill's been injured. Stubborn krogan said he was fine after his accident here – he assured me he was okay, but I haven't heard any more recently. Weather patterns' interfering with our systems. We can't establish a clear link."

Officer Severan gave a comforting smile and leaned towards the screen. "Give us the Auroto's last kno … … positi … … I'll get the comm-officer to put a lead o … … find out what's going on."

Gabby activated her omni-tool. "Sending coordinates."
"But … … sure you're … … kay?" Kenneth insisted.

"Yeah, but a super-cell's moving in. We're locked down and can't move from the base for a few days. We've got plenty of rations, though. Trust me, we're safely bunkered down."

"Do you ne … … evacuation?" Kenneth demanded.

"No, nothing like that. We've got a job to do and we're gonna do it. Don't worry Kenneth. We've got a good squad here. Joric's as tough as they come."

"And it'll be a hot summers day on Gellix before I'd let anything happen to my team," Erata added, jabbing her thumb at Gabby. "Trust me: Kitten here is in safe hands."

"Kitten?!" Kenneth's face was a picture of confusion. "What's all th … … bout?"

"I'm not going into that right now!" Gabby said waving her hand. "Just get the lead out and find that krogan. We'll be back before you know it, Ken. Have a wee dram ready for me."

"It … … life-or-death … … stash …" The picture dissolved into static.

"Kenneth?" Gabby yelled. "Can you read me?"

But the signal had gone.

Gabby continued to stare at the monitor.

"The message got through. We did everything we could. All we can do now is wait," Erata said.

"I guess so," Gabby replied without enthusiasm.

"Chaill will be fine. Kenneth and Severan are on the case." She placed a hand on Gabby's shoulder. "Come on. We still have to make it back to the base. And after a trudging through that blizzard, I think it's high time you and I hit the thermae!"

Gabby didn't have to wait long for a reply.

Two hours later, Aelius received the news that a salarian cruiser had intercepted the Auroto and boarded the vessel. They found the bodies of several batarians, plus three of the salarian crew who were confirmed dead, but, crucially for Gabby, Chaill was reported to be alive and had been commended for his fierce counter attack that had turned the tide against the marauders.

"It's fortunate the salarians had a krogan on-board, it seems," Aelius said grudgingly.

Gabby didn't reply, just knowing Chaill was safe was a huge weight from her shoulders, and, after she repeated the news to Erata, Gabby finally began to relax and even enjoy the daily routine…

The next few days passed without incident.

With the lockdown in place, the crew had resigned themselves to the fact the exchange programme was winding down. There was little to do during their shifts except general maintenance of the Station, engage in practice drills, or go out on the occasional patrol.

Aelius monitored an increase in unauthorised air-traffic and duly relayed all reports back to Anapondus.
At least in their leisure time, the crew could retreat to the one area they found truly relaxing…

"Thank the Goddess for the thermae!" Erata exclaimed as she lounged on a bench opposite the massage beds.

"Definitely! And thank the Spirits," Pella agreed. The turian was lying face down on one of the raised beds, letting her muscles be slowly kneaded by one of the auxiliary medics who'd offered her services as a thermae attendant. "I think I'll have to take out a membership here," Pella mumbled in bliss.

Gabby watched the exchange in amusement, as she sat on the bench next to Erata and savoured the glorious heat and scented vapour enveloping her body.

It was one of the few moments she could believe that everything was right with the galaxy. The fact Pella had finally joined them was an added bonus. Her shoulder had healed sufficiently that Khoris' teeth marks didn't show anymore. Not that it mattered. Everyone on the base was fully aware of their relationship now.

Gabby turned to look at the naked turians wandering about the room, all of them unconcerned by the human's presence.

*I must have been quite the novelty for them when I first arrived,* she mused.

As she'd gotten to know them the team had been surprisingly open and friendly, and so accepting that she'd become quite oblivious to the fact they were all naked together… even around Erata.

Gabby cast a quick glance at the asari. Erata still wasn't quite her old self and she hadn't confided what was troubling her, but Gabby was simply glad Erata was smiling again. The other day, they'd sat in the baths for over an hour talking about Erata's experiences in South Africa. It had been so pleasant that Gabby had almost forgotten they were both completely nude.

Gabby had had her doubts when they'd first been assigned together, but they made a good team and Gabby was going to be sad to see them go.

Erata suddenly caught her staring. "Hey, Kitten. What would Kenneth say if he could see you now?" she asked.

"Here? Right now? In the thermae? He'd probably have a fit!" Gabby laughed.

"If you tell him, be sure to record it!" Erata insisted. "I would love to see his face."

"That might be fun!" Gabby laughed.

"That *would* be entertaining," Pella agreed from her massage bed. "But I think we can go one better. You guys up for a little wager tomorrow?"

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*Entarus Station Recreation Area – 11:00 UTC – 25th February*

"What are we betting on?" Gabby asked.

"Who'll last the longest," Pella replied cryptically.

And with that, Gabby was introduced to a most peculiar turian ritual.
"It's called, 'Spirit of Ice'," Pella explained, as they walked towards the thermae. To test their endurance in extreme conditions, a select group of the Gellix crew would retreat to the steam room, strip down to their underwear, turn up the temperature to maximum, and then see how long each of them could last in the punishing heat.

Pella led Gabby and Erata to the thermae changing area where a large group of all female staff had already assembled, chattering excitedly as they placed bets.

Gabby looked worriedly around at the crowd of women and turned to Pella. "Wait, no-one expects me and Erata to take part, do they?" she asked.

"I don't think the women are here for us," Erata said, pointing at the crowd of men approaching behind them. Twenty of the male staff, including Khoris, were wandering down the hallway, barefoot and clad in Hierarchy issue dressing gowns. The excited crowd of women parted to allow them through.

"Ladies," one of the men called out as they filed past, "please enjoy the show."

They continued onwards, assembling before the entrance to the thermae with their backs to the audience. One of the men recalibrated the thermae setting, turning the heat up to unbearable levels.

Then the gowns came off. Beneath the robes, the men were dressed in form-fitting briefs and the turian equivalent of boxer shorts.

But they weren't done yet.

"Sappers! Dress down!" the leader yelled.

As one, the men pulled off their underwear.

Twenty pairs of pert turian buttocks – in assorted colours – stood proudly before the audience. The turian women cheered enthusiastically, while Gabby covered her mouth at the sight of so much turian skin on display.

The group trooped inside the thermae.

In those sweltering temperatures, even turians struggled to cope. Within five minutes the heat claimed its first casualty as a young cadet dashed out from the thermae and into the airlock. One-by-one the competitors continued to fall by the wayside until only khoris remained. When the last but one turian had left the thermae, Khoris quickly followed him out into the cold and joined his comrades who were gleefully rolling about in the snow.

Gabby stared in amazement as twenty nude turian men covered their bodies in ice with abandon. It was a common ritual, apparently: A test of endurance that the men (and women) willingly participated in to help break the monotony and provide entertainment for the crew.

It certainly seemed to be a hit with the women (and a few of the men).

The group stayed outside for several minutes. Vapour quickly rose from their exposed skin and soon the group was obscured in their own private cloud of fog, eliciting groans of disappointment from the crowd of onlookers struggling to see the action. Their body temperatures were so high they hardly noticed the cold at first. But after a short while, the crowd started to shiver uncontrollably. Agreeing the contest was over, they eagerly made their way back into the airlock.

Gabby watched the parade of naked bodies file into the recreation area. Gabby found her eyes
unconsciously slide downwards to fully appreciate the naked men. The turian carapace protected
every part of their anatomy. Nothing was left on display. Instead, the men all sported a simple
vertical slit set a few centimetres below their belly buttons that completely concealed their genitalia
from view. Gabby was surprised to feel a twinge of disappointment.

"What's a man gotta do to get some clothes around here?" Khoris yelled.

"Ask Vettiill! I'm sure she can think of something!" one of the women yelled back.

Pella covered her head in embarrassment.

"At least you won the bet, Pella," Erata said.

The morning of the next day Joric announced that the Primarch was finally lifting the lock-down. All
communications were restored and messages that had been pending were now free to be read.

The trio were eating breakfast in the Mess when the comm-officer approached them.

Erata was told that she had received a priority message from Thessia.

The asari took the news as if she'd been told of a bereavement, and quickly retired to her cabin to
read the message in private.

Meanwhile, Gabby and Pella received word that they'd been placed on a routine patrol and repaired
to the main hanger to join the convoy of Tyrus'.

It was, to all intents and purposes, a sunny and routine day on Gellix.

The attack came without warning…
First Strike

Chapter Summary

The station comes under attack as the batarians launch a major offensive.

Chapter Notes

Warning: contains strong violence.

_Engineer D'Ceni's Quarters, Entarus Station, Gellix – 09:50 UTC – 26th February 2183 CE_

The day started with a call.

Erata hovered by her console, warily eying the bleeping red light indicating that someone was on the link ready to talk to her. Erata was letting them wait.

She turned away from the computer, trying to delay taking the call for as long as possible and gazed out through her quarters' observation window.

The storm had finally blown itself out. The blazing sunlight glistened off the fresh covering of glacial snow and ice Entarus Station was built upon. The sky was a rich azure-cyan; the firmament uninterrupted by clouds and the air so crisp and clear that Erata could see all the way to the Atrullian Mountains on the far horizon, the high peaks glowing orange in the dawn light. It was a perfect day, and never had Erata been so unhappy to see such a stunning vista.

In its own way Gellix was a staggeringly beautiful world.

_Will this be the last planet I ever visit_? she wondered.

The soft beep from her console sounded again, a constant reminder of the inevitable reality she had to face.

Erata closed her eyes, letting the view settle into her mind's eye, then straightened her back and finally turned to her monitor.

She activated the call waiting button.

The familiar (but unwelcome) face of the Government appointed D'Ceni family doctor appeared on the screen, the Matron's pale mottled face creased with frown lines.

"Doctor." Erata inclined her head as she slipped into her seat, worried her legs might not support her if the news was bad.

"Ms. D'Ceni…" The doctor replied officiously.

'Ms.' D'Ceni, Erata silently noted. _Is that a bad sign?_
The doctor paused. "I am calling to inform you that we have made a ruling in your case."

Erata gave a mute nod.

"Before we start, let me apologise for the delay. The Unit and the Matriarchs demand irrefutable evidence before any judgement can be made – our decisions impact the lives of thousands of citizens, after all – and your case has been complicated by your circumstances."

Erata licked her lips, trying to stir some moisture around her dry mouth. "I am prepared to accept whatever verdict the Unit has reached."

Erata made a silent prayer to Athame, *Oh Goddess, help me!*

"On behalf of the Unit, please allow me to express our appreciation for your patience and cooperation in this matter. These assessments are difficult for everyone concerned; not least the individual under investigation."

The doctor, ever the sadist, paused for a long moment as she made a deliberate show of picking up her computer tablet before studiously examining its contents.

"I have your results here." She paused again.

Erata was gripping her chair's armrests so hard her knuckles had gone white.

The doctor cleared her throat. "In the investigation of Republic citizen, Order of Serrice Engineer Erata D'Ceni, on suspicion of suffering from active Ardat-Yakshi genomes, the City of Usaru AY Recognition Unit has determin…"

The screen clicked to black.

The link had gone.

Momentarily stunned, Erata stared unblinking at the monitor.

A small block of typescript appeared. It read, *Disconnected from Gellix comm-buoy.*

Erata leaned forward and hurriedly tapped away at the interface, becoming more and more frantic when she couldn't re-establish the link.

"NOO!"

Erata surged to her feet and practically screamed at her console.

"No, not now! Don't crash on me now, you piece of cü GMT!"

Then she heard the explosion.

Her head snapped towards the sound.

She glanced out of the window and saw a ball of orange flame where the communications array had been.

Then something long and bright flashed past her window. She recognised it as a missile!

Another explosion resonated through the base. Erata barely had time to throw herself flat before the shockwave blew out the windows.
Erata shielded her head against the spray of glass and the sudden gust of freezing air blowing into her room.

She was still lying on the floor when the GQ alarm sounded and Lieutenant Aelius' voice boomed over the intercom.

"Man your stations! Man your stations! This is not a drill!"

Erata rose and bolted for the door. She rushed into the corridor, the hallway already bustling with turian staff running towards the main hanger. Erata could hear the clipped sound of bullets ricocheting off the base's armoured exterior.

"Arm yourselves! Prepare for battle! We are under attack!" Aelius' voice advised.

Erata frowned at the Lieutenant's gift for understatement.

No kidding!

_Tyrus Rear Cabin, 7 Kilometres South-West of Entarus Station – 09:51 UTC_

As far as Gabby could tell, the only benefit of going out on patrol was to break the monotony of working on the base. It was a well-known fact that Gellix was so sparsely populated you could drive from Entarus Station in any direction and rarely encounter another soul for hundreds of kilometres.

Gabby sat in the lead vehicle's cabin, somewhat removed from the four soldiers, officially there as her protectors – although 'wardens' might have been a better description – the human's attention focused on the engineer sat on the bench opposite. Gabby couldn't help but smile in amusement as she watched Pella gently massaging her bruised forehead.

"Jerash again?" Gabby asked, indicating Pella's fringe.

"Yeah," Pella replied, letting her hand drop. "She cornered me just outside the Mess to say hello. But I don't mind so much really."

"Oh? The other day you were complaining that she wanted to give you a back rub."

"That was before…" Pella stopped herself.

"Before what?"

Pella looked slightly guilty. She leaned in close and lowered her voice so the guards wouldn't overhear. "Well… I thought there was something wrong with her behaviour, so the other day I… I snuck a peek at her personnel file…"

"And?"

"… She has Folgar syndrome."

Gabby frowned. "What's that?"

"A neurodevelopmental disorder. It affects a person's ability to interact with the world around them, especially in social situations. I did some checking on the extranet and the human equivalent is a condition you call Asperger's."

"Oh!" Gabby's eyes widened. "Well, I'm surprised the Hierarchy would send her out to a planet like
"That's the thing. She volunteered."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. The barren environment, the daily routine on the base – she actually prefers it. According to her file she has a genius level IQ and her knowledge of alien species is encyclopaedic. That's why she was selected to be Liaison Officer."

"Wow!" Gabby smiled in admiration. "Well, she's serving the Hierarchy and making a difference doing what she loves. Good for her."

Their conversation was interrupted by the driver turning in his seat and calling out to the group leader.

"Sir, we just lost contact with Entarus Station!"

"Are we in a signal black-zone?" the leader asked.

"No, sir. I'm not getting the tone from the Entarus navigation beacon. It's like the station just dropped off the map."

"Contact Anapondus and see if they can get through to Entarus. It might be a technical issue at the base." He turned to his fellow guards. "Weapons check," he ordered. The guards obediently gave their rifles the once over. "Better to be prepared than be caught napping."

The driver turned his head again. "Sir, I can't raise Anapondus either."

The leader frowned. He rose to his feet and approached the driver.

"Contact the other vehicles, inform them we have an issue…"

"Sir!" the driver shouted, pointing out the window.

Gabby craned her head to see where he was pointing.

An armoured vehicle had risen over the crest of a hill to their left, followed quickly by three more vehicles. They were heavily armed, although Gabby couldn't identify the make.

The group leader, however, could identify the make. He leaned forward and punched the comm button.

"Enemy tanks, ten O'clock! Ready cannons!" he ordered. "Delta formation. Don't show them your flank!"

The convoy of three Tyrus' turned to face the new vehicles and formed into a line, the two trailing vehicles forming up either side of the lead Tyrus to meet the newcomers head-on.

One of the guards shoved Pella aside to access the cannon controls behind her seat. The rail gun's operator station unfolded and the guard settled into the chair. A holographic HUD appeared around his head.

Pella glanced at the six-wheeled vehicles on the hill, immediately recognizing the hard, slightly asymmetric lines unique to Batarian State Arms manufacturing.
"Those are batarian APC's," she exclaimed. "They're a merc gang!"

"Are you sure?" Gabby asked. "Maybe they're simply mapping the area?"

Flashes erupted from the APCs. They'd opened fire. The Tyrus was rocked back-and-forth as hundreds of heavy-calibre rounds exploded against its shields.

"They're not here for a survey!" The group leader said. He barked into the comm. "Return fire. Wipe those bastards out!"

The three Tyrus' accelerated towards the enemy and launched their offensive.

All hell broke loose.

Gabby covered her ears as the deafening roar of cannon-fire echoed around the cabin.

The C77 Tyrus was a formidable presence on any battlefield, and despite being outnumbered the turian vehicles were more than a match for the enemy. The Armax Arsenal rails guns fired round after round at the underpowered batarian tanks, making short work of their kinetic barriers.

In just a few seconds, the APC on the far right had exploded in a spectacular fireball.

The group leader cast an admiring glance at the cannon operator. "Nice shooting!"

But the crew had little time to celebrate.

Two A-61 Mantis Gunships, identical to the gunships back at Anapondus, suddenly emerged from behind the ridge. The two gunships separated, flying left and right to flank the row of Tyrus'.

They opened fire. A volley of missiles exploded against the row of turian vehicles.

Gabby and Pella hit the deck.

The vehicles were thrown back and forth. A blast close to their left almost tipped them over.

"Barriers down to 30 percent!" the driver yelled.

The group leader regained his balance. "Break formation!" he ordered over the comm. "We're sitting ducks here. Target those gunships. We'll concentrate on the APCs." He turned to the driver. "Head straight through those bastards! Try to scatter them."

"Aye, aye, sir," the driver agreed.

The Tyrus accelerated away from the other two turian vehicles which had now engaged the gunships.

"Covering fire!" the leader bellowed at the cannon operator.

As the Tyrus sped towards the batarian vehicles, the cannon operator let rip, firing the rail cannon and machine guns simultaneously.

The barrage was too much for the enemy tanks and a second APC was quickly blasted to pieces. The two remaining APCs were barely holding together; black smoke was pouring from one of the surviving vehicles. The enemy forces suddenly veered away, splitting either side of the Tyrus to flank them, desperately firing everything they had at the Tyrus.
Caught in the crossfire, the effect on the Tyrus was devastating.

A missile exploded under its rear wheels, lifting it from the ground. The driver yelled out a warning, but his voice was drowned out by the sound of explosions and tearing metal.

The world spun. Gabby felt the floor of the Tyrus lurch beneath her.

The vehicle rolled, throwing the crew painfully around the cabin. Gabby had the odd sensation of falling upwards as she was hurled against the bulkhead. They had finally succumbed to the onslaught.

Momentum drove the Tyrus forward, and after tumbling several times the vehicle finally landed belly-up in the ice.

There was silence.

Gabby's eyes shot open. She gasped, realising she must have blacked-out. She looked around. Her turian crewmates were strewn about the cabin in the chaotic tangle.

Instinctively, Gabby checked for injuries. Her legs and arms were sore but unbroken and her armour seemed to have protected her torso from harm. Only her head was stinging. She probed the skin above the left eye and winced; her fingers came away wet. She was bleeding. Probably only a minor cut but she was likely going to have a serious headache later.

Something gripped her shoulder.

Gabby jumped and looked up. Pella was stooped over her.

"Can you stand?" the turian asked.

Gabby nodded. "I think so."

"The batarians are still out there. We need to get out of the Tyrus. Now!"

Gabby suddenly noticed she couldn't hear the sound of gunfire coming from outside.

Pella looked up at the cannon operator, still fastened to his seat and hanging limp and unmoving upside down. She checked for a pulse.

"He's dead. His neck's broken," she said.

The group leader emerged from the cockpit; the injured driver slumped over his shoulders. "Grab your gear and evacuate before they decide to finish us off," he ordered.

Gabby got to her feet and moved to the exit. But before she'd even touched the door it was wrenched open.

Another turian, armed and in Gellix colours, stood in the doorway. He looked past Gabby towards the group leader.

"Sir!" he yelled with relief. "We were afraid you'd been killed. The enemy's been destroyed. But we're picking up more gunships on the scanners."

The group leader pointed at the dead cannon operator. "Cut him down. We're not leaving him here."

The soldier stepped aside to allow Gabby to exit the wrecked Tyrus and then darted inside the cabin.
Gabby looked at the battlefield, the sunlight glaring off the snow making her squint. The remains of four batarian APCs and two gunships were strewn across the landscape. The two surviving Tyrus' were parked up close, their black armour plating dented and battle-scarred.

Pella emerged from the upturned vehicle, quickly followed by the group leader and the surviving crew of the Tyrus. Within seconds, everyone, including the dead operator, had been evacuated.

"Regroup!" The group leader hustled his team towards the remaining Tyrus'. "We lost contact with Entarus Station. They may be under attack. We're heading back."

The team separated and squeezed themselves into the vehicles. Gabby noticed that the Tyrus' cabin suddenly felt markedly cramped.

The remnants of the convoy set off through the snow. Despite the battle damage, the drivers didn't spare the vehicles and both tanks bounded across the tundra, the Tyrus' reaching well over 140 KPH on the flat.

The journey back to Entarus took barely more than five minutes.

The scanners alerted them to the battle before they saw it.

Gabby craned her head over the driver's shoulder and glanced at the holographic map. A massive cluster of red enemy markers were swarming around the diagram of the base.

"Looks like the mercs have ground and air support. They're trying to find a soft spot," the leader observed.

"What do you want to do, sir?" the driver asked.

"We're gonna give them something else to shoot at!" He turned to his crew. "Weapons hot! Use the cannons to punch a hole through their defences! We're going all the way to the hanger."

"Aye, sir!"

The crew armed themselves. The rail-guns were brought to bear, and the two vehicles accelerated.

Gabby checked the assault rifle she'd been given, a Haliat Armoury model. She was familiar with it, and was surprised to find her hands weren't shaking as she flicked the safety off. The attack had been too sudden for her to feel scared, and the adrenaline flowing through her veins kept her focused. Her mind was strangely calm, and she found she was actually relishing the prospect of taking the fight to the batarians, rather than passively observing the fight from inside a Tyrus.

"In visual range of Entarus," the driver announced.

Gabby looked through the front view screen.

A great plume of smoke was rising into the atmosphere directly above Entarus Station. Gabby could make out at least eight enemy APCs crawling around the base, firing at it from all sides, the tanks supported by a further six Mantis Gunships.

Despite the pounding Entarus Station was taking, the turians were making a spirited defence. The base's automated cannons had taken out at least three enemy tanks and two of the APCs were belching black smoke.

"Delta formation," the leader ordered over the comm. The rear Tyrus accelerated until the two
vehicles were driving side-by-side.

The group leader waited until they were within two-hundred metres of the enemy before he gave the order to attack.

"Light 'em up!"

---

Erata was mad as hell!

She was in the hanger, standing ready behind a concrete barricade with a rifle grasped between her fingers as she listened to the explosions pounding the outer doors. A troop of turian soldiers were spread out around the hanger, ready and waiting in case the enemy breached the base. And at this point, Erata sincerely hoped they did break through into the hanger, because she was ready to kill someone!

*Those assholes disrupted my call! I was so close to finding out the truth.*

Never in her life had she felt such an overwhelming desire to tear an enemy apart with her biotics. It was a powerful impulse, made all the stronger by the knowledge that both Gabby and Pella were still out there on patrol, most likely being fired upon by these scum-sucking mercenary bastards, their convoy overwhelmed by enemy forces and the survivors probably being taken captive to be sold as slaves... or worse.

*If those cüems have hurt Gabby or Pella...*

Her whole body flared blue at the thought.

"We've got more vehicles incoming!" a voice suddenly yelled.

Erata looked up. Lieutenant Aelius was at the monitoring station by the main doors. He was watching the battle play out on the bases' active topographic VDU – the enemy highlighted as red dots while friendlies registered as blue thanks to the signal from the Tyrus' IFF (Identify Friend/Foe) device.

Two blue specks were approaching the base at considerable speed.

"It's our patrol!" he announced. With communications down, Aelius quickly scanned the convoy, the scanners registering only turian and human life-signs on-board.

"I'll open the hanger doors when they're outside," Aelius called out. "We've got enemy forces on foot. Be ready to repel them."

*Oh, I'm ready*, Erata silently agreed.

The army of turian sappers brought their weapons up, forming a defiant *thin blue line*.

Aelius waited, scrutinising his monitor as he watched the two blue dots attack the enemy. Several red dots disappeared, destroyed under the Tyrus' onslaught. Then the blue dots broke through the enemy line. They came to a halt just outside the hanger doors. Aelius could hear the tell-tale boom of the Tyrus' rail cannons firing.

Aelius hit the switch.

The hanger doors rolled open ponderously slowly.
Two Tyrus’ appeared, accompanied by a hail of gunfire.

Erata and the sappers ducked behind the barricades to avoid the bullets. The two vehicles careened into the hanger and drew to a halt. The cabin doors burst open, releasing a squad of adrenaline pumped turian soldiers.

Gabby and Pella followed them out.

Erata turned, watching her friends emerge from the vehicles, the asari thanking Athame that they appeared to be unharmed.

But then her attention snapped back to the hanger doors.

The batarians were invading.

The sappers lay down a barrage of suppressive fire as a swarm of mercs flooded through the slowly – too slowly – closing hanger doors.

Gabby saw the approaching batarians, and, as if in a dream, brought her rifle up to her shoulder and fired.

She remembered only fragments from the battle.

She remembered the voice of the batarian commander as he barked at his troops: "Take the women alive, if you can!"

She recalled the look on Erata’s face when the asari projected that singularity into the midst of the enemy forces. The batarians were sucked into the air and flew helplessly around the hanger, becoming easy targets for the turians as they picked them off. Erata was glowing blue and yelling at the top of her lungs. It was the angriest Gabby had ever seen her.

The memory of Khoris getting stabbed was strong. A batarian had got close enough to pull him over the barricade and tackle him to the ground, the merc driving his combat knife into Khoris' neck.

Pella shouted as she jumped into the fray, firing her gun repeatedly at the merc’s helmet and reducing his head to pulp.

The engineer then dragged her lover to safety, Khoris clutching his neck to stem the blood gushing between his fingers.

But, most of all, Gabby remembered the moment Jerash was shot.

A merc had somehow managed to vault the barricade on the far side of the hanger and gunned down the Liaison Officer. Jerash was hit in the leg. She cried out and dropped her rifle, blood streaming from the bullet wound in her thigh.

Gabby saw Jerash fall and started running towards her without any conscious thought.

The batarian merc loomed over Jerash. He brought his rifle to bear, aiming the barrel directly at the young woman's head.

The man stared at Jerash and leered …

It was the last time he ever smiled.

A salvo of high-powered rounds hit him square in the chest, destroying his kinetic barrier and turning
his armour to Swiss cheese.

Gabby was running and screaming as she fired. She thought it curious how loud her voice was.

"Get away from her, you bastard!"

The man went down under the volley.

Gabby ran to the injured woman and slid her arm underneath Jerash's shoulder. She hauled the turian to her feet, her assault rifle still trained of the dead batarian.

Only then did Gabby register the silence in the room…

Breathing heavily, she gazed around the hanger. A score of bodies lay strewn haphazardly across the floor, the vast majority wearing the black armour of the mercs.

The invaders were dead.

Entarus Station CIC, Gellix – 15:30 UTC

The attackers had withdrawn as quickly as they'd arrived.

Gabby, Erata and Pella stood by holo-display in the crowded CIC – the Command Centre teeming with senior staff – waiting in respectful silence while Lieutenant Aelius scrutinised the damage report he’d been given. Entarus Station had taken a real pounding in the assault, but the base was still standing, which the Lieutenant considered a victory in itself.

Attempts to re-establish the link with Anapondus were still on-going. It had taken four hours to get the long-range scanners back online, and the visiting engineers estimated it would be several days before the comm-link was operational. Entarus Station was cut off from Anapondus, with no way of requesting reinforcements.

Not that Aelius was prepared to wait for reinforcements. Staying bunkered down and licking his wounds was not his style. His strategy in any battle was simple: Take the fight to the enemy! The batarians had caught him off-guard, true, but Aelius wasn't prepared to let that happen again. As soon as his team regrouped he was going on the offensive.

A subordinate approached him and handed him another computer pad.

"Revised casualty report, sir," the man said as he saluted. "Thranfir didn't make it. She passed away a few minutes ago. The doctor couldn't save her."

"Damn! I thought she'd pull through." Aelius scrutinised the pad. Thranfir's gunshot wounds had appeared to be superficial and she was in good spirits when they wheeled her into Medical. There must have been a complication.

"Any word on Officer Abrudas?" Pella asked, real anxiety creeping into her voice.

"Khoris is doing fine, Artificer," Aelius replied, softening his tone. "You saved his life pulling him out of the crossfire. The knife missed the carotid artery. He should make a full recovery."

"Yes, sir. Thank you," Pella said gratefully.

"Just don't expect him to be giving any speeches in the next few days."
"What's the total number of casualties, sir?" Gabby enquired.

"Five KIA. We lost five…" Aelius scowled as he looked at the pad. "That's five too many. But the batarian's fared much worse. We've counted forty-eight dead out there. Twenty in the hanger alone." His expression darkened. "We paid them back tenfold."

"Any idea why they attacked us?" Gabby asked.

"No clear motive yet. But it's evident this was a well-coordinated raid."

"I did hear one of them order the others to 'Take the women alive,'" Gabby piped up.

"That's not unusual," Aelius confirmed. "Women of most species tend to command a high price in the slaver markets. The batarian 'caste system' is deeply ingrained in their culture and slavery is an integral part of that." Aelius grunted in disgust. "Misogynistic four-eyed dag-of-dicks! Callous little shits must have been observing the base for a while, planning to hit us when they thought we were most vulnerable. Guess they didn't expect such heavy resistance."

"Could that be why they retreated?" Erata asked.

"I don't believe so." Aelius tapped at the holo-display interface. A topographic graphical overview of Anapondus appeared in mid-air. The capital of Gellix, a compact, densely populated series of modular buildings and low-lying structures housing nearly 8,000 turians had evidently been attacked. Several buildings were in ruins and smoke was pouring from the command centre.

"This is a live relay from our scanners," Aelius explained. "Anapondus was almost certainly hit at the same time as us. They've taken heavy damage." He flicked a switch and the image changed, flowing across the landscape to rest on a throng of about forty armoured tanks and gunships congregating on a hillside not far from the Capital. "I believe the bulk of the forces attacked the Capital. Judging by the feed from the scanners some of the damage to Anapondus may have been caused by orbital bombardment. This was a major offensive. It must have taken a long time to organise so many vehicles."

"Do you think Anapondus have been able to call for help?"

Aelius shook his head. "It looks like their comm-relay has been destroyed, too."

"Our comms were the first to be hit, too," Erata confirmed.

"The batarians have assembled a strong army, but they've suffered heavy losses. By splitting their forces to attack us on all fronts I think they've stretched themselves too thin. Their APCs withdrew from Entarus, but it wasn't because we offered such heavy resistance… It was because Commander Joric was decimating them." Aelius permitted himself a smile. He turned to address his crew.

"Now we keep up the pressure. Now we bring the fight to them. We hit them before they can repair and re-group. We are going to fortify Commander Joric's forces. No more playing the defensive. It's time we met the enemy head-on and fight them on our terms. We're done hiding. There will be no retreat today. They will not see our backs. They will not see us yield one centimetre of ground. The only thing those batarian slâctrüs will see is the flare of muzzle-fire as we send them to meet their ancestors."

There were more than a few bellows of approval from the turians.

"Assemble any able bodies that can hold a rifle in the hanger. We move with every Tyrus and every gunship we can spare and march on Anapondus."
The turian soldiers started to file out of the room, the crew now focused on carrying out the Lieutenant's orders.

Gabby, Erata and Pella started to follow the team but Aelius stopped them and called the three engineers over.

"I have an assignment for you," he announced. "You won't be travelling to Anapondus."

"Sir, we may not be soldiers but we can still fight for the Hierarchy…” Pella started to protest. Aelius waved her to silence.

"We need to get a message to the Hierarchy immediately. We certainly can't wait for the comms to be repaired. That's where you three come in. I'm giving you a Mantis Gunship and three guards, that's all I can spare. Your task is to find a working communication-array and link with the comm-buoy; inform the Hierarchy what's happened here and bring reinforcements."

"If we're using one of the gunships, couldn't we simply fly to the edge of space and try to connect with the comm-buoy using the link on the craft?"

"In theory, a sound strategy," Aelius agreed, "but the scans indicate there are four mercenary frigates in low orbit. The Mantis is fine against ground forces but it's no match for a fully-armed merc ship. You'd be destroyed before you could link with the comm-buoy. It'd be suicide."

Aelius flicked a switch on the interface and the perspective changed again. The map scrolled across the landscape, coming to rest on a diagram of the Atrullian Mountains to the north of Entarus Station.

"There's a prison complex built high in the mountains fifty kilometres to the north, not far from the Prothean dig site. The Dytane Penal Colony. It's been abandoned for the last four years. Its walls are lined with the same metal in the planet's crust so our scans haven't been able to penetrate it, but if our luck holds it should still have a working comm-array."

"Our luck hasn't been that great so far, sir," Gabby pointed out.

"Then it's about time we damn well changed it!" Aelius snapped. "Your job is to get to that facility and get the communication array operational. Reconnect with the Gellix comm-buoy and send out a general distress signal. We can have reinforcements from the Hierarchy here within twenty-four hours."

"When do we leave?" Gabby asked.

"Immediately!"
Siege: Part One

Chapter Summary

Gabby, Erata, and Pella travel to an abandoned science lab located far away in the tundra in an attempt to access the facility's communication device. But the science lab isn't as abandoned as they thought...

Chapter Notes

Warning: contains scenes of violence and interspecies sexual themes.

A-61 Mantis Gunship, 3 Kilometres AGL, Gellix – 16:05 UTC – 26 th February 2183 CE

After just ten-minutes of flying, Gabby had come to the conclusion that the A-61 Mantis Gunship, as a mode of transport, was altogether too loud, too hot and way too uncomfortable.

The human engineer was attempting to settle in her seat, but it was a losing battle. She felt wedged in. The 15-kilo field pack that had been unceremoniously strapped to her armour before she left Entarus Station didn't help matters. The Mantis' cabin – a standard troop carrier configuration with three aisle-facing seats on either side of the cabin, and the pilot's seat facing forward in the open cockpit – was supposed to be able to transport six ground troops in full weapons and armour, which, technically it did, but the designers seemed to have placed a premium on comfort.

Gabby was sat at the rear of the cabin, her left shoulder jammed up against the bulkhead and her right arm digging awkwardly into Erata's body armour, pressing against a spot that she would really rather not be touching!

The asari next to her shifted her weight to try and relieve the pressure on her chest plate. She eyed the human and smiled, then leaned in slightly. "Snug fit, eh, Kitten?" she said ruefully, having to raise her voice to be heard over the noise in the cabin.

Gabby gave a perfunctory nod and turned her attention to the other occupants. Pella was sat next to Erata, while two of their bodyguards were strapped onto the bench opposite, and the third soldier piloting the gunship. Gabby noted that neither Pella nor any of the slender turian guards appeared to have any trouble fitting into their seats.

*Obviously, the gunship is specifically tailored to fit turians,* she noted.

Pella turned in her seat – *something she can do way too easily!* Gabby silently complained – and called out to the soldier sitting directly in front of the human.

"Does the prison complex have helipads, or are we going to have to land on the roof somewhere?"

The soldier nodded. "There are landing pads," he replied, the man also raising his voice. "The facility is built two kilometres AGL, above ground level. But there is also a road leading up to it, I
believe. Like most of the prisons here, it was built in remote locations to deter escape attempts."

"Unless the convicts had outside help," Erata commented.

"The prisoners would need a coordinated effort to break out of most of these facilities."

"The last prison we visited was booby-trapped," Gabby pointed out, thinking back to their experiences at Dhazig Penal Colony. "Are we likely to run into the same thing again?"

"It's possible," the leader conceded. "We'll sweep for traps and unexploded ordnance, but our main priority is getting the comms operational."

The pilot turned his head and called out. "Two minutes to target."

The lead turian nodded; he turned to the three engineers. "Alright, when we land, Vranus and I will sweep forward and clear the area ahead. We'll then escort you three to the main doors. Your job is to hack the lock and access the facility. If we're lucky the comm array should still be active and it'll be a simple case of linking with the Gellix comm-buoy."

"And if we're unlucky?" Pella asked. "If the comm is damaged?"

"Then we'll assess the situation and adapt. Maybe the array can be fixed…"

A sudden loud beep from the cockpit caught his attention.

The pilot turned and called out. "We have company! Two gunships just entered the sector. On an intercept course."

"Dare I ask if they're ours?" the leader asked.

"You can ask, but you know what the answer's gonna be!" the pilot replied. Another beep sounded – this one more insistent. "We're being targeted!"

"Evasive manoeuvres!" the leader ordered.

"Buckle up!" the pilot yelled. "It's going to get bumpy."

Gabby barely had time to tighten her shoulder straps before the gunship pitched violently and dived, gaining speed as it plummeted towards the mountains.

The dizzying feeling of vertigo almost overtook her, and her stomach heaved in protest. Gabby covered her mouth.

"Stupid, poorly designed Mantis Gunships!"

The Mantis descended rapidly. The pilot levelled out and skimmed the tops of the mountains, jinking the craft left and right over and between peaks in an effort to evade the pursuing enemy.

The Mantis crested a low-lying peak, its left wing kissing the top of the mountain and removing a souvenir of snow-capped ice.

"Target in visual range," the pilot announced. Gabby craned her head to see through the windscren. The Dytane Penal Colony appeared on the far horizon. The massive facility looked like it had been carved into the mountain, its circular outer buildings fronted by a series of landing pads and elevated walkways.
"Are the gunships still following us?" the leader asked.

Tracer-fire strafed the Mantis' kinetic barriers. Then an explosion rocked the cabin; the flak from enemy missiles threatening to tear extra ventilation holes in the hull.

"That would be an affirmative!" the pilot confirmed.

"We're almost to the colony. Stay low."

"If we can get close enough to the landing pad I can put this baby down, drop you off, and then try to draw them away," the pilot suggested.

Another impact jolted the cabin. The craft lurched away from the explosion.

"Could you please shoot those bastards!" the leader ordered.

"I have missile lock!" the pilot said. "Firing!"

The pilot launched the missiles. Six high-yield Inferno Precision Kill Rockets burst outward from the Mantis' weapons bay above the wings. The missiles separated and curved around, flying directly towards the enemy gunships.

The enemy craft broke formation, banking away in an effort to evade the incoming projectiles. One veered off to the right, far too slowly to avoid the rockets. Four missiles found their target, impacting against the craft's kinetic barriers and disrupting its flight pattern. The rockets didn't penetrate the armour but they were enough to send it spinning off course. The gunship was too close to the mountains and it impacted against a rocky outcrop, exploding in a twisted mass of flame and metal.

Of the other gunship, there was no sign...

Until the high pitched tone of missile lock sounded from the Mantis' cockpit.

The enemy craft appeared from behind a mountaintop and fired all of its remaining rockets at once.

The pilot saw the incoming missiles on his screen. He pitched the Mantis violently as he tried to avoid the barrage, but it was no use. Multiple detonations destroyed their shields. Shrapnel embedded itself in the hull, the blasts taking out one of the vectored-thrusters.

Alarms echoed around the compartment. A red warning light flashed insistently. Smoke started to fill the cabin.

"We lost thruster 2!" the pilot yelled. "I can't maintain altitude. We're going in! Brace for impact!"

"Get down!" Erata yelled as she pushed Gabby and Pella into crash positions.

The Mantis dropped, its one remaining thruster struggling to keep it in the air. The circular landing pad of the Penal Colony honed into view, getting rapidly larger in the cockpit window.

At the last second the pilot increased power to the thruster, spinning the craft to bring it in rearwards first, hoping to soften the landing.

It wasn't a soft landing.

The impact shook Gabby to her core, threatening to pitch her from her seat.

There was a sudden feeling of weightlessness as the Mantis skimmed off the raised landing pad and
crashed belly-down onto a skywalk. Sparks flew off the metal surface. The craft squealed down a
long staging area, eventually grinding to a halt a few metres from the colossal prison doors.

Gabby raised her head stiffly; every muscle in her body was aching. It was the second time that day
she'd been in a crash.

"Anyone hurt?" the leader asked.

Gabby didn't reply; she'd just spotted the second enemy gunship through the cockpit canopy, the
craft hovering above the landing pad, its weapons trained on them. Smoke was drifting out of its
portside thruster.

*Good to see some of our missiles hit home,* Gabby noted with grim satisfaction.

No-one moved. They were all waiting for the inevitable final attack.

Then the comm suddenly sprang to life and a harsh male voice snarled through the speakers, "You
are defenceless! Surrender now or be destroyed. Do not try to be heroes. If you fight, you will die.
Surrender and you live. Under the edicts of subjugation you are now the property of the Batarian
Hegemony. We *own* you now! Punishments for resisting your masters are harsh. But life as a slave is
infinitely preferable to being massacred. And if you're lucky you might make a good profit in the
marke…"

But his speech was interrupted.

The enemy craft exploded in a massive fireball as six Inferno PKRs erupted from the Mantis'
weapons bay, demolishing the craft's armour and cutting him off midsentence.

The flaming wreckage fell from the sky and crashed onto the edge of the landing pad. It toppled
backwards and disappeared from view, the debris falling into the canyon below.

"I think that's quite enough of that," the pilot said, taking his finger off the trigger.

"He liked the sound of his own voice, didn't he?" Erata commented.

"Not anymore," Gabby said.

"Good riddance to slaver assholes," Pella spat.

"Alright, evacuate!" the leader ordered. He rose from his seat and popped the rear hatch, ushering his
team out of the craft.

Gabby unfastened her straps and ducked down to exit the cramped cabin. She felt the chill of the
wind as soon as she emerged. The team followed her, quickly moving away from the downed
Mantis.

"I'm getting really tired of crashing!" Pella growled.

"That was a first for me!" Erata said. "It's quite invigorating."

"It loses its novelty value *very* quickly!" Gabby assured her. "Trust me."

"Not one of your better landings, Piette," the leader said to the pilot.

"We walked away from it. I'd call it a good one," the man retorted.
They hustled down the staging area towards the entrance.

The main building was at least six stories high – much taller than the two flat-topped circular edifices that flanked the central structure – its massive double doors delineated by a vertical yellow and black chevron that stretched up its entire length.

The group stopped at the foot of the gates. Gabby moved across to the right of the doors, popping open a small access panel set into the wall and studying the readings.

She frowned. "Strange… the doors aren't locked," she said. "Looks like the base is powered down, but I might be able to give it enough juice to manually open the doors."

An orange hologram appeared around her left arm. Gabby quietly synced her omni-tool with the door controls; adjusting the settings on the panel. "The doors have been opened recently. There's still some residual energy in the servos. I think I can get the doors partially open… hang on… there!"

A ringing clunk echoed from the mechanism. Gabby stepped back as the massive doors slid apart, the chevron splitting in two. Slowly, the gate opened. The leader brought his weapon up and made a quick scan of the interior. He slipped between the gaps, closely followed by the other soldiers.

There was a grating crunch as the doors abruptly stopped.

Then they started to close.

"Power's dying. It's resetting to standby. Get inside, quickly!" Erata ordered.

The asari, the turian, and the human rushed through the closing gap.

It was dark. Emergency lighting flickered on-and-off, bathing the area in shadowy red gloom. The doors banged shut behind them, sealing them in.

They were in a massive hanger; a wide Take-Off and Vertical Landing area stretched out before them. A white unadorned UT-47 Kodiak drop shuttle (informally known as the 'combat cockroach' due to its squat, insect-like shape) lay abandoned on the landing rails, its rear service hatch open and parts removed. The three soldiers swept up the broad stairs to the left of the L-shaped gangway leaving the engineers to examine the lower area.

Pella walked up to the transparent safety barrier and wrinkled her nose. "What is that? Smells like scorched metal."

Gabby glanced around. An industrial-standard flame heat gun was on the floor by the main doors, next to a half-eaten silver ration packet of 'FieryChili Verde'. Glancing at the walls Gabby noticed that the old symbol of the Dytane Penal Colony, a circular emblem with the picture of a fierce looking eagle, had been partially burned away. Someone had tried to remove it, but the job wasn't finished, as if they'd been interrupted in the task.

"There's a ration pack on the floor and someone's tried to burn off this logo. We're not alone here," she said.

Erata brought her rifle up. "Be ready," she advised. "This could be a merc base."

"Since when do mercenaries redecorate?" Pella asked.

Erata grinned. "Everyone needs a place to call home," she said. "Perhaps they've found themselves a nice fixer-upper and want to do some stencilling!"
"That's all we need… a gang of house-proud mercs!" Pella muttered.

They moved onwards, following the soldiers up the wide stairway that led to a long observation platform with a computer console set against the left wall and a security door barring the way.

"This might have been the main security cordon, where they brought prisoners in for processing," Pella observed.

Erata examined the doors with her omni-tool. "No power going to them," she said. "But they're not locked either."

The soldiers prised the doors apart.

Behind the doors was a second staircase; the steps leading up to another security door. After forcing their way though, the group emerged on the bottom level of an airy mezzanine security room with a third staircase off to the right leading up. On the top deck, a bank of monitors and computer desks were arranged in front of an expansive observation window that took up the far side of the room. Directly opposite the window was another heavy security door, with a large side area to the right of the stairs, which Gabby guessed was an interrogation room.

Gabby poked her head inside the room. It was littered with various expensive looking monitors and scanning equipment; some of the makes she didn't recognise, but she could make out one Serrice Council medical scanner and a few Alliance-made examination beds.

"What is all this?" Pella asked.

Erata shrugged. "Doesn't look like standard equipment for a prison…"

"No," Gabby concurred, "looks more like a science lab."

The colony was deserted.

It was clear there had been visitors to the base recently, but other than their attempt to burn off the old prison logos, and the collection of brand new equipment in the science lab, there was no sign of anyone.

The team split into three groups of two, each engineer accompanied by a bodyguard. Gabby volunteered to check out the power plant in the lower levels, while Pella ventured outside to assess the status of the comm-tower. Meanwhile, Erata began a full accounting of every file in the colony's archive, trying to discover who had been there before them; a job that, as it turned out, didn't take her very long.

At eighteen-hundred, exactly one hour after they'd split up, Gabby, Pella, and their turian shadows walked into the monitor room that had become the team's temporary base of operations. Erata looked up from the console she was stooped over.

"What's the word?" Gabby asked the asari.

"Pretty much what you see here. The database has been wiped. The records are gone, security cameras disabled. Apart from the food and the heat gun, you wouldn't know anyone else had been here," Erata looked at Pella. "What's the status of the comm?"

"The satellite dish is offline; a few components have been removed – deliberately disabled, by the looks of it. But it shouldn't take too-long to get it operational. If we can scrounge parts from the
"comm in the crashed Mantis and bits we find around the base, I think we might be able to do it. Then it'll need a quick reboot and circuit diagnostic. But I can't do anything until we get the power up and running."

"That's our real problem," Gabby piped up. "The power plant is out of action. The base is running off minimal emergency reserves – not enough to power the comms. Most of the circuits and mechanisms in the generator are burnt out"

"Sabotage?" Erata asked.

"No, looks like normal wear-and-tear. The power plant hasn't been maintained properly. The components should have been replaced every six months, but as far as I can tell it still retains all its original parts. I reckon the prison staff ran the core into the ground, presumably trying to cut corners and save credits."

"You mean there's no chance of getting it operational?" the turian beside Erata asked.

Gabby thought about it. "Well… we could create temporary components using our omni-tools' fabrication modules if we found enough spare alloys to use as base materials."

Pietta, their turian pilot, was sceptical. "You really think that'll work?"

"Yeah, we should be able to MacGyver something together," she declared with confidence. The turians and the asari frowned in confusion at the obscure human expression.

"Mac-what…?" the leader asked.

"I mean, the generator could be jury rigged, but it's a major job," Gabby clarified.

"How long would it take?" the leader standing next to Pella demanded.

"With the three of us? Limited resources? Possibly forty hours."

"Then you'd better get to work."

For the next day-and-a-half the team worked around the clock, resting only when their bodies threatened to drop from fatigue. But even when they did sleep, no-one got their head down for more than a few hours.

In an effort to keep their minds sharp, the three engineers divided their time between the comm-tower and the main generator, swapping jobs only when they'd completed a task. The soldiers supported the team when they could, but not being engineers their assistance was invariably more of a hindrance than a help.

As the work dragged on, the team's attention narrowed to a laser point, the engineers becoming so focused that all other concerns, including personal safety, fell away.

They worked feverishly; the exposed skin of their hands and face turning numb from the cold or through sheer exhaustion. Gabby lost count of how many times she sliced her knuckles open on bare metal.

She was in the generator room, working with Erata, and so close to finishing, when exhaustion finally overtook her.

Gabby was leaning against the generator, squinting in the dull red light as her omni-tool slowly
constructed its hundredth component of the day, when she momentarily dozed off, her head colliding with the generator's housing. The impact jerked her awake. Then something trickled into her eyes. Irritated, she wiped it away, thinking it was just sweat. She hadn't realise she'd been injured until her fingers came away red and slick with blood.

Gabby gazed down at her hand in mild surprise.

"Oh, damn!" she muttered vaguely, suddenly feeling dizzy.

Her legs betrayed her; her muscles rapidly turning to jello. Gabby tried to grab the generator and almost toppled over, but was saved when two hands grasped her under the armpits and hauled her away, sitting her down on a workbench against the cold, grey wall.

The face of Erata swam in Gabby's vision – the asari's brow knitted with concern. A pad of gauze materialized in her hand and she began to wipe away the blood from Gabby's face.

Gabby stared up at the blue alien gratefully. "Thank you… I guess I didn't realise how tired I was," she admitted.

"You've been up nearly two days straight," Erata pointed out. "I'm surprised you lasted this long. I shouldn't worry though; you're not the only one strung out thin. I almost welded my own thumb to the comm-tower before Pella stopped me."

Gabby glanced down at her hands – they were shaking. "How long before we finish?"

"Not long now. We just have to install a couple more components."

"We need to get back to it, then." Gabby started to rise from the bench, but a pair of strong hands held her down.

"You need sit there and let me deal with this cut," Erata insisted. "You don't want blood loss or a possible concussion making you pass out."

"Medi-gel will take care of it," Gabby said dismissively. "Besides, you're not a doctor, and I'm not asari. Just 'cause you've got a medi-pack doesn't make you an expert on my biology."

Erata fished a tube of medi-gel out of her field pack and leaned in close to the human, smearing the salve into the cut. "Oh, I've become quite familiar with human anatomy over the years," she replied smirking.

Gabby smiled. "Yeah, I don't doubt it. Well, as long as you don't ask me strip off, or anything. I haven't had a proper wash since leaving Entarus! I'm pretty ripe under this suit."

Erata tapped her own breastplate. "I don't exactly smell of flowers myself, Kitten!"

"I would kill for a shower, actually."

"As good a reason as any to get the job done quickly… tell you what, you can be first in the thermae once we're back at Entarus Station…" she promised.

"Now that's a plan I like," Gabby admitted.

Erata smiled as she brushed Gabby's hair away from her forehead, tucking the loose strands behind her left ear. She let her fingers whisper over Gabby's soft cheek, delicately caressing the almost invisible cloud of downy hair common to all humans.
The contact lingered; the asari enjoying the sensation of velvety alien skin, at once so familiar and yet so unique.

Erata smiled; more to herself than anyone else. This was the closest physical contact she'd had with another person since landing on this wretched world, and, potentially, could be the most intimate encounter she would have with anyone for a very long time.

Why shouldn't I saviour the moment? Why not prolong the experience?

Her palm cupped Gabby's cheek in a warm embrace.

Erata glanced up and locked eyes with the alien.

The human was very still, her eyebrows arched upwards, and eyelids blinking rapidly in confusion. Heat started to build beneath Erata's palm as colour blossomed on Gabby's cheeks. Erata watched Gabby's face flush a deeper shade of pink. She knew from experience this was a sign of embarrassment in humans, but more often, a sign of passion; of need.

A familiar craving started to build in Erata's chest; that yearning desire to open her mind and meld with another's thoughts. She could feel her own face start to flush, her teal skin deepening to cerulean blue.

She leaned in slowly, her face hovering so close that she could feel the human's hot breath on her lips.

"Erata…?" Gabby whispered, breathing in shallow, anxious exhales.

The asari's other hand rose to stroke Gabby's right cheek, the smoothness and warmth of the human's skin sending a shiver of delight down her arm. Erata spoke – her voice no louder than a murmur.

"Such deep brown eyes, Kitten… a person could drown in them."

Dazed, dumbstruck, and caught off-guard to say the least, Gabby simply stared back.

Erata tilted her head. The human's lips looked so inviting…

"Status report! How's the work coming?" a flanging voice cut through the air.

The spell broken, Erata jerked away as if she'd received an electric shock.

Gabby's omni-tool was glowing orange. The turian leader was demanding an update.

Neither the human nor the asari replied immediately. It took them a moment to gather their thoughts. Erata's gaze was still locked on Gabby.

Eventually, Gabby lifted her arm and spoke into her omni-tool.

"Daniels here. We were… we are close to finishing…"

"We need that generator online now!" the turian insisted.

"What's happened?"

"A couple of gunships just did a flyby. They weren't ours! Colony defences are offline, so we need the generator working. Failing that, I need you up here in case we need to bug out fast."

"Understood," Gabby confirmed.
Erata was already on the move, striding towards the generator, her omni-tool building another component.

"You head up to the command centre. I'll finish off here," Erata said.

"Don't you need help?"

"I got this!" the asari insisted. She had her back to Gabby, refusing to look at her. "Head up there and redirect the power once I get the generator working. This won't take long."

"Okay…” Gabby agreed hesitantly, and bustled away, making for the upper levels.
Siege: Part Two

Chapter Summary

Besieged by batarian gunships, Gabby and her team try to escape the mercs. But their actions only lead them into even greater danger...

Chapter Notes

Warning: contains graphic violence and gore.

Science Lab, Dytane Penal Colony, Gellix – 06:50 UTC – 28 th February 2183 CE

Gabby hurried through the open security doors at the rear of the room, emerging from the dark red-lit tunnels into the bright command centre.

Pella and the three turian soldiers were by the computer monitors. Pella turned to intercept her as soon as she appeared.

"Where's Erata?" Pella demanded.

"Just finishing off," Gabby explained. "She'll be with us soon."

"We may have to evacuate," the turian leader announced. Gabby frowned. She felt slightly uncomfortable that she still didn't know his name. "The batarians are sniffing around. They've been doing visual recons, investigating the wreckage of our gunship."

"How are we supposed to evacuate?" Gabby asked. "That Mantis is toast! There's no way off this rock."

"Not necessarily," Pella said. She was smiling.

"While you were working on the generator, I ordered Vettiill to take a look at that abandoned shuttle on the TOVL rails," the leader explained.

"Its element zero core was depleted. But everything else, including atmospheric thrusters and navigation was working. I managed to extract the element zero canister from the Mantis' core, and rig it up to the shuttle. It's not pretty, the eezo containment cylinder isn't an exact match, and the mass effect field won't get us very far – certainly not into space – but it works. We've got transport!"

"That's excellent!" Gabby exclaimed. "You did all that and fixed the comm-tower?"

Pella shrugged nonchalantly. "Turns out, the comm-tower didn't need as much work as the generator."

At that moment, the lights in the room brightened. Several monitors, including the scanners in the science lab that weren't running off emergency reserves suddenly sprung to life. The generator was
fixed. The colony was powering up.

"Let there be light!" the voice of Erata sounded through the comm.

The leader spoke into his omni-tool. "Great work, D'Ceni. Get up here!"

"On my way," Erata confirmed.

Looking through the window, Gabby noticed three gunships reconnoitre the colony.

"Here they come again," the turian pilot muttered.

Gabby moved instinctively towards the bank of computers, checking the status of the satellite dish.

"The comm-tower is online."

"Connect with the Gellix comm-buoy," the leader ordered. He turned to Pella. "Vettiill, prep the shuttle for evac."

Pella nodded and withdrew down the stairs to the hanger.

"We may have to fight our way through them. Are the colony AA Towers operational?" the leader asked Gabby.

It took Gabby only a moment to check. She shook her head. "No, the guns aren't powering up. Doesn't look like we can fix them this end. They might have to be reconnected manually. We'd have to go outside."

"I'm not sending anyone into the firing line of a gunship. Transmitting that distress signal is top priority. Just connect with the comm-buoy."

"I'm trying."

Erata materialized from the red-hued corridor at the rear of the command centre and rushed towards them.

"You have power, I see," she said. "Have you made contact with the Hierarchy?"

Gabby shook her head.

"I can't get a lock. The satellite dish won't connect with the comm-buoy. I think the gunships might be trying to jam us. The only thing I'm getting is a distress signal. It's clogging up every frequency."

"Is the signal from Anapondus?" the leader asked. "They might have got their comms working."

"Localising," Gabby was quiet as she set the scanner to focus in on the signals' origin. "It's originating about twenty clicks from our position. A distress beacon… let me put it on speakers."

Gabby flipped a switch. A distorted flanging voice oscillated over the comms, the signal drifting in-and-out of audible range, interspersed by the hiss of static.

"…Gency… …Anapondu… …attacked by batarians. We need assist… …Hierarchy… …Tyrus damaged… …lease respond…" After a few seconds the message repeated.

"An automated beacon. From one of our convoys," the leader said. He stepped up to the console to verify the authorisation codes embedded in the message. "These check out. We have troops in need of an airlift."
The turian pilot pointed at the gunships hovering over the landing pads. "Looks like those gunships are preparing for an airdrop." Erata joined him by the window.

"Can you override the signal from the gunships?" the leader asked Gabby. "Cut through the interference to access the comm-buoy?"

"Maybe… if I had more time…” Gabby began.

Erata pointed out the window and called out urgently. "Time's up! They're dropping troops."

Gabby and the leader looked up. The rear hatches of the three gunships had opened and batarians were spilling out onto the landing pads. Gabby counted eighteen heavily armed mercenaries doggedly moving towards the remains of their Mantis.

"Enemy troops incoming," the pilot called out. "They know we're here."

"We're outnumbered and outgunned. Suggestions?" the leader asked.

"It'll take them a while to hack their way in. But, even if the main doors do keep the troops out, without those AA Towers their gunships could still reduce this command centre to rubble. We won't stand much of a chance in a fire-fight," the pilot said. "On the other hand, a shuttle can outrun a gunship."

Erata looked around in surprise. "What? The shuttle's working?" she asked.

"You're suggesting we retreat?" the third turian soldier – Vranus – asked the pilot in disgust. "I've never shown my back to an enemy!"

"We're closer to the distress beacon than anyone else. We can rescue the troops, thereby bolstering our numbers to even the odds in our favour," the pilot reasoned. "We can come back with greater numbers and retake this place."

"Unless they get the AA guns working, in which case we've handed them a fortress!" Gabby pointed out.

"We can code-lock the controls," Erata said. "They won't be able to access the computer."

The leader was silent for a few moments. "I agree with Piette. We need reinforcements, and there are Hierarchy troops in need of rescue. I'm ordering a full evac!"

"But we just got this thing working!" Gabby protested. "It's taken hours to repair! And now we're handing it over to the batarians?"

"Until we come back and kick them out, yeah," the leader said. Gabby was not convinced. "Look, we can stand here arguing about it and let them take the base over our dead bodies, or we can come back in greater numbers and let them do the dying!"

"When you put it like that…” Gabby began.

An explosion echoed from the hanger as the mercs reached the main door.

"They're attempting to blast their way in!" Erata said.

"This isn't a democracy! We're moving!" the leader bellowed.

There were no more arguments.
Gabby hastily typed away at the interface, locking out the controls with a code-lock.

"Come on!" Erata yelled at her.

The team hurried down the stairway. With the power restored the security doors had reset in their
default closed status. The first set of doors opened automatically as the group approached, but they
encountered a problem when they tried to access the hanger. The team gathered by the security
cordon, anxiously waiting for them to open.

"Low power. Please wait," a recorded voice stated helpfully. Several agonising seconds passed until,
finally, the doors parted. "Reset complete. Access enabled."

The shuttle had moved off the landing rails and was now resting on the walkway directly in front of
the doors. Pella emerged from the shuttle's cabin as they entered the hanger.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Batarians!" the leader explained, running down the steps. "Is the shuttle prepped?"

"She's ready," Pella confirmed.

"We're leaving. Now!"

The team piled into the shuttle. The pilot took the helm beside Pella, while Gabby and Erata settled
into passenger seats on opposite sides of the cabin.

The leader moved over to an access panel by the main doors. He recalibrated the controls,
programing them to open after a twenty second interval. Turning on his heel, he ran and leapt into
the shuttle. Gabby slammed her hand against the lock, shutting the cabin doors.

The squat, wedge-shaped shuttle powered up and lifted a couple of metres off the ground, its fore
and aft directional thrusters twitching like insect antennae.

The team waited. The seconds counted down. They were relying on the element of surprise.

"They won't be expecting us to have another aircraft. When the doors open, fly straight past those
gunships," the leader ordered.

The pilot nodded. "Yes, sir."

The whine in the cabin changed pitch as the pilot built the core up to full power.

The doors slid open. Batarians swarmed through the gap – only to stop dead when they saw the
craft. A few of the mercs actually did double takes at the craft hovering in front of them.

The gap opened wider, and the pilot sent the power surging to the thrusters. The shuttle burst out
between the doors, its thruster reheat igniting the mercs unfortunate enough to be caught in the wake.

The shuttle raced between the unprepared gunships at high speed, quickly disappearing out of visual
range between two mountain peaks.

Gabby was gripping her seat. The cabin shuddered and groaned in protest. If anything, this was more
uncomfortable than the Mantis. And in such a cramped compartment she was now very aware of the
time battle-weary and unwashed aliens sitting beside her. The air in the cabin suddenly felt very
close.
Erata, being shaken on the bench, glanced across the cabin and caught Gabby's eye. She flashed a sheepish grin.

Gabby blinked and looked away. She was worn-out, smarting from numerous cuts, and in no fit state to process what had almost happened between them in the generator room. Instead, Gabby stood up and moved over to the cockpit.

"They're not following us," the pilot said as he checked his scanner.

"Huh! You'd think with so many eyes in their heads they'd be able to see us," Pella joked.

Gabby didn't reply; she'd just spotted something unusual on the shuttle's console.

"What the hell is that?" She pointed at a separate monitor that had just activated.

"What is it?" Pella asked.

"This readout says there's a bank of lithium cells lining the hull. They're storing the shuttle's heat to mask our energy signature. It's an internal emission sink… we wouldn't show up on sensors."

"What? Like a stealth system?" Pella asked.

"Exactly like a stealth system!" Gabby confirmed. She turned to Pella. "This can't be what I think it is, can it…?"

"I think it is," Pella agreed.

"What are you talking about?" the leader asked.

"It's an open secret amongst engineers," Pella explained. "A joint Hierarchy/Alliance project to develop a craft capable of remaining undetected by sinking the ship's heat into the hull. But it's supposed to be restricted technology… no-one else should have access to it."

"Obviously someone else does! Spirits, who built this shuttle?" the leader demanded.

"I have no idea," Gabby muttered.

Erata approached them, craning over Gabby's shoulder to look at the panel. "Whoever it is, they don't exactly have a license for it!"

"Well, if it's stolen technology, we were right to seize it," the leader declared. "Commander Joric will be very interested in this."

"Assuming she's still alive…" the pilot muttered. "The batarians are out in force. We don't know if they've taken Anadonpus."

"You don't know the Commander. She's alive!" the leader said firmly.

"How far to the distress beacon?" Pella asked.

"We're almost there. It's just a click away."

"Pop the hatch," the leader ordered. The cabin doors opened. Lifting his rifle the leader moved to the starboard gull wing hatch and stared out at the icy landscape. The shuttle drifted over a barren plain stretching off far into the distance.
"There it is!" the leader called out, pointing at a minute blinking flare in the centre of the snowy lowlands. "Take us in," he ordered the pilot.

The shuttle descended, slowing as it approached the beacon, until it finally came to rest a couple of dozen metres from the distress signal.

The pilot turned in his seat. "We have another storm coming in. Looks like a big one judging by the scanners. We have to be quick."

"Piette, stay on the shuttle." The leader turned to Pella. "Vettiill, you too. I don't want all our asses left hanging out there. If something should happen to us, get back to Entarus."

"...Yes, sir," Pella reluctantly agreed.

The team of four exited the shuttle, trudging towards the source of the signal. Pella moved into the cabin, watching them through the open hatch. Black storm clouds were billowing on the horizon.

A snow covered vehicle lay on its side, with a small, flashing emergency beacon set beside it.

The team approached the vehicle cautiously. The leader frowned. Something about this wasn't quite right.

They were just a few metres away from the vehicle when they heard the whine of vectored engines. "Thrusters!" Gabby called out. "Those are gunships!"

The group turned. Sure enough, two gunships crested the mountain top, making a beeline straight for them. They all recognised them as mercenary ships.

"Back to the shuttle!" the leader ordered.

But the ships opened fire. Warning shots strafed between the shuttle and the team. They froze. A deep voice boomed across the plain, carried by the gunships' loudspeakers. "You think you can screw with Ion Storm!?"

The ships flanked left and right, their weapons bearing down on the group.

They were trapped!

One of the gunships settled on the ice and six armour clad batarians emerged, their rifles levelled at the turian team. Two of the batarians headed for the shuttle, pointing their weapons menacingly at Pella and the pilot.

"Drop your weapons! Don't even think of fighting!" One of the batarians yelled. He nodded towards Erata as he directed his troops. "If that one starts to glow, kill her!"

The team were surrounded; their weapons confiscated or discarded in the snow. The other gunship landed and batarians swarmed out. The merc leader, his green and orange hued face sporting a thin pencil moustache on his upper lip, approached them to inspect his captives. "You gave us the run-around there. I thought turians never showed anyone their backs unless they died?" he sneered.

The turian leader stared back defiantly, his mandibles twitching in revulsion. "Why did you attack Anapondus?" he demanded. "That could be construed as an act of war by the Hegemony! You had to know there's no way you could win against us."
"That wasn't my strategy!" the merc objected. "There's no profit in taking on the Hierarchy. I just want to make a bit of money. Our leader promised us a big score – enough credits and slaves to set us up for life. Revenge was never a part of that. If his brother is stupid enough to get himself killed by you turians, that's his own damn fault. Hazards of the job. We lost more men in that one attack than we have in five years of raids…"

"So what happened to your leader?" Erata asked, a slight smirk gilding her lips.

"He's dead. Back at Anapondus. He overstretched himself – took on an enemy he thought he could catch off-guard… you can see how that turned out. I'm not hanging around to end up like him."

"The energy signature of our shuttle was masked" Gabby pointed out. "How'd you track us here?"

"We didn't," the merc replied. "We were following the distress signal. We're bugging out! This world is too hot for us now. But two of our ships disappeared in this area. When we flew over that facility we saw the crashed Mantis and investigated. We need to salvage something from this fiasco." He pointed at the distress beacon. "A bunch of stranded turians. That's easy pickings. Weapons, armour, salvaged APCs, slaves… they all bring in credits. But it looks like we've found ourselves an even better prize. A working shuttle and saleable merchandise. You'll do well in the markets." He pointed at Gabby. "That one especially!"

"Touch her and I promise I'll rip your heart out!" Erata growled.

"Passionate! I like that. It makes breaking you in all the more satisfying!" The merc brought his weapon up. "Enough talk." He called to his men. "Get the control chips! We'll implant the females first. The men can watch what we do to – what the…?"

The mercenaries looked down. Something had caught his attention.

The ground was shaking!

A muffled roar vibrated through the ice.

The batarians looked around in alarm, searching for the source of the noise, when a geyser of ice exploded behind them. The shuttle shot upwards, tossing Pella from the cabin. She landed heavily, hitting the snow hard and lying still. She was the lucky one. Piette was still in the shuttle. He yelled sharply as the craft was sent hurtling twenty metres into the air, spinning and twisting before it crashed down to earth, rolling several times and finally settling upside down in the snow, battered and broken.

Gabby stared in shock as a creature from her nightmares erupted from the earth.

Standing three-stories tall on a massive grey segmented body, the monster rose from the ground, multiple insect-like 'legs' wriggling like a centipede. Two long fore-limbs extended from either side of its head, the folded appendages resembling those of a praying mantis. It opened its mouth, revealing a vast four-sided maw.

The batarians froze, not believing their own manifold eyes.

Only the turian leader had the presence of mind to grab his weapon and scream a warning.

"Thresher maw!"

The creature let out a deafening roar. The batarians brought their weapons up and fired, peppering it with multiple anti-personnel rounds.
It attacked.

The thresher maw's head crashed down with terrifying speed for something its size.

Three mercs died in a second, crushed by the monster's massive frame.

The remaining batarians fanned out, trying to distance themselves from the creature. Others tried to run for their gunships. One of the gunships rose into the air, the pilot abandoning his troops. It launched several rockets at the thresher, but the only effect it had was to make the creature angry.

A single swipe from its long limbs sent the craft spinning out of control. It hit the ground and exploded.

At that point Gabby ran. Inexplicably, she found herself running towards the thresher maw. Pella was still lying on the ground, close to the monster's writhing body, the turian engineer struggling to rise to her feet.

Gabby managed to reach her and hauled the turian upright. Placing one arm over her shoulder, Gabby dragged her away. Something else grabbed Pella. Gabby looked up. Erata was supporting the turian's other arm.

They ran. The direction didn't matter; they were at the centre of the chaos.

In that flight from the monster, Gabby saw sights that would haunt her dreams.

The turian leader fell to the thresher maw. He was impaled on one of its limbs as he ran towards them – his body lifted into the air and disappearing in a spray of blue mist.

To her left, a group of surviving mercs were firing relentlessly at the creature. It expelled something from its mouth, engulfing the mercs in the fluid. They collapsed, howling in agony as the thresher acid ate through their armour.

Gabby turned away from the screaming organic mess that used to be sentient beings.

*That's no way for anyone to die.*

"This way!" someone yelled. Their one surviving turian ally, Vranus, was ushering them away from the battle. "I'll cover you!"

They ran past him. Vranus fired up at the creature.

Suddenly, the thresher maw's head impacted into the ground beside them. Then its massive body rose back into the air.

Gabby glanced back. Vranus was gone. There was no body, just a blue stain in the ice where he'd once stood.

Turning away, Gabby, Pella and Erata picked up the pace, their legs pounding into the snow, ignoring the burning sensation in their lungs.

Something hit Gabby's back, but she paid no attention. The trio were still sprinting across the plain, towards the base of the mountains. Behind them the rattle of gunfire ceased. This time, Gabby didn't look back.

The grey clouds loomed ever closer, threatening to consume them before they reached the safety of the foothills.
"There!" Erata yelled, pointing towards the edge of a scree slope. A cave mouth was visible. They ran towards it, their lungs practically bursting from the exertion.

A howl sounded from their right. The wind picked up, gusting past them. Gabby could feel the sting of ice crystals on her face.

By some miracle, they reached the cave. Erata shoved her friends through the entrance and turned to the rocks hanging over the cave mouth. Her body flared blue. She reached up and pulled. The rocks, caught in her telekinetic pulse, quaked against the crag; then they fell. Erata quickly dodged out of the way, directing the falling debris as best she could.

The rocks crashed down, sealing the entrance.

They were plunged into darkness. Gabby activated the flashlight on her omni-tool, the light cutting through the gloom. She felt something grab her back and turned her head.

Erata was tearing at her armour.

"What the hell are you doing?" Gabby shrieked.

"Your armour's breached! You've been hit by thresher acid!"

Gabby looked over her shoulder in alarm. Her armour was discoloured and a patch of liquid was rapidly eating its way through her suit. Gabby yelled and unfastened her breastplate with shaking hands. The armour came away, hitting the ground, the acid still dissolving the metal.

Her armoured leggings came off, leaving Gabby in her thermals. But Erata was still tearing at her clothes.

"It's gone through!" She tore away a piece of fabric from her vest.

Gabby screamed in pain, only now aware of the burning liquid searing her skin.

Erata grabbed a tube of medi-gel and injected it into Gabby's back.

Gabby crumpled to the ground, holding herself as Erata cleaned the wound and placed a field bandage around her torso. The pain slowly subsided, dwindling to a tight ache.

She didn't know how long she lay on the floor. Exhaustion finally claimed her and she passed out. When she opened her eyes, Erata had wrapped her in a silver thermal blanket from her field pack, and was now hovering over Pella's unconscious form.

Gabby tried to rise, but her legs wouldn't support her and she slumped against the cold wall, the awful reality of their situation finally hitting home.

Their turian comrades were dead; a thresher maw had destroyed their transport, and they had no way of contacting the outside world.

And now they were trapped in an ice cave…

… Imprisoned; confined!
Survivor Confessions

Chapter Summary

Injured, freezing and trapped in an ice cave. No-one knows they're there. Could their day get any worse?

Chapter Notes

Warning: contains nudity and sexual themes.

Memory is a funny thing, Gabby mused.

She had once read about something called the 'memory enhancement effect’, a phenomena where the more emotionally charged an experience was, the more it was likely to be remembered. Yet, in extremely stressful situations, the brain released hormones that affected memory. It meant that retention of certain events was selective; discriminating. Memory defined a person's identity; but it could also be suppressed, inhibiting distressing events and allowing respite from the trauma of past mistakes or actions.

The memory of the last day was a blur.

While Gabby could recall every detail of their flight from the thresher maw with almost perfect clarity (far too much clarity, actually!), what had happened after they'd reached the cave was hazy at best.

After Erata had dressed the wound on her back, Gabby knew she'd passed out; her body's response to her injuries and that gruelling mad dash across the frozen wastes.

When she'd awoken, she'd found Erata stooped over Pella's prone body.

The turian was slipping in and out of consciousness. Erata suspected Pella had a concussion and possible internal bleeding. Medi-gel stabilised her condition, but there was a limited supply, and it was crucial they conserved what little they had left. Pella needed proper medical care.

Unable to keep her eyes open, Gabby slept again, awakening to find the cave noticeably warmer and bathed in a soft orange glow. In addition, she was tucked into a thin but warm arctic-condition bedroll… and her thermal underwear had been removed.

Gabby glanced under the covers in alarm. She was as naked as the day she was born.

She stared at Erata – the asari was sat on a rock on the other side of the cave, wrapped in a silver blanket, and drying out three sets of clothes over a pile of stones heated by what looked like fusion control rods. To Gabby's left, Pella was also tucked into a bedroll.

"What…!? Why'd you take my thermals?" Gabby accused Erata, pulling the sleeping bag protectively across her chest.
Erata turned her gaze on the human. She looked exhausted. "They were soaked in your sweat," the asari explained. "It would have frozen to you. I needed to get you out of them and dry your clothes properly so you didn't suffer from hypothermia."

"You could have waited until I was awake!" Gabby protested.

"No I couldn't," Erata replied sharply. "You've been unconscious for nearly five hours!" Erata leant forward to warm her hands over the rocks, her bare blue arms reaching out from beneath the silver blanket.

*She must have undressed, too,* Gabby thought.

"You were crying out in your sleep," the asari added.

"I think I have a damn good reason," Gabby replied tersely.

"You want to talk about it, Kitten?" Erata asked.

Gabby scowled, still upset that Erata had taken it upon herself to undress her, *and* the fact the asari had very nearly kissed her just a few hours earlier.

"Don't call me that," Gabby warned softly.

They lapsed into silence.

When she was sure they were dry, Erata returned Gabby's thermals – what little was left – and Gabby wriggled into them under the bedroll. The long underwear stank to high heaven, but they were warm and dry. Erata, however, had no such inhibitions and casually stripped naked, before slipping into her thermals and donning her Phoenix Armour.

Next, Gabby helped Erata dress Pella in her turian underclothes, and then she examined what was left of her discarded Explorer Armour. The back plate and cuisses were all but destroyed, and the back-mounted field pack had been eaten away by thresher acid.

"The extra layers on your back likely prevented the acid from injuring you further," Erata surmised, and then turned her attention back to the small group of supplies she'd arranged on the floor.

While Gabby was asleep, Erata had conducted a quick account of the remaining provisions from their field packs and what was left included: two arctic-resistant bedrolls, seven tubes of medi-gel, two folding ice axes, a couple of one-man tents with ground sheets, three waterproof containers, two lines of cord, a few emergency exothermic fusion rods for camp fires, four canteens full of water, and three packs of 72-hour combat rations – which they could stretch out to six-days if they stayed on half-rations. All other essential items, such as comms, navigation tools and signal flares, were traditionally managed by omni-tools.

Despite the warmth provided by the heated stones, the temperature in the cave had barely risen above 2°C.

"There are only two sleeping bags," Erata began. "Yours was destroyed. I suggest we lay the ground-sheets beneath Pella, then tie the two bedrolls together and all get underneath the covers. Shared body heat will help keep us alive."

"Figures you'd want us to sleep in a pile like a bunch of hamsters," Gabby muttered.

"Or we can stay on opposite sides of the cave and freeze to death, if you'd prefer?" Erata retorted.
She pointed to the far end of the cave, opposite the blocked entrance. "If you need to relieve yourself, that corner of the cave is the latrine. There's a narrow fissure in the floor going down about three metres."

Gabby frowned. "Oh, terrific! So we squat over a hole?"

"Well, what did you expect? A bidet and room service?!" Erata snapped.

The asari turned her back on the human. Despite the growing feelings of anger, Gabby checked herself and looked away in shame; the all-pervading cold and the throbbing pain in her back were making her short-tempered.

She knew that Erata was trying to help, and she did appreciate the asari getting her out of her wet clothes, but she couldn't shake the irrational feeling she'd been violated.

A little while later, they placed the ground sheet under Pella and arranged the bedrolls around her, then they settled themselves down beneath the warm sheets on either side of the turian. Gabby turned on her side, facing away from the alien bodies. She was trying to calm herself but the freezing conditions, the memory of her almost kiss with Erata in the generator room, and the growing feelings of claustrophobia had left her confused and irascible.

In short, she was cold, she was hurting, and she was taking her frustration out on the one person who was doing her best to keep them alive…

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**Ice Cave, 53°32' N, 13°30' W, Gellix – 16:20 UTC – 1st March 2183 CE**

Gabby paced back and forth, scanning the comm-frequencies with her omni-tool, urgently trying to find a live signal while her stomach grumbled in protest.

*Oh God, I'm starving!*

She'd gotten little in the way of sleep and had awoken freezing, bewildered and in pain; with the events of yesterday still playing in her head.

Gabby had rolled away from Pella's body and risen from the sleeping bag, gently massaging her wounded back. The ground was uncomfortable, twisting her spine and making her muscles ache. The howl of the raging storm outside was a muffled but ever present noise in the cave.

Erata was already up and going over the rations once more in an effort to keep her mind occupied. She reached across and handed Gabby a small packet of nutrient paste.

"There you go, Kitten." She tried to keep her tone light. "Breakfast of champions."

The human took the packet. "Just call me 'Gabby', okay?" Then, after a long pause, she nodded at the blue alien, mumbling a word of thanks.

"You've gotta keep your strength up," Erata said. "We need to wake Pella and get her to eat something, too."

After consuming their meagre breakfast, and coaxing Pella to swallow a few spoonfuls of nutrient paste, they spent the rest of the day resting to conserve energy, their minds dwelling on their own thoughts.

It wasn't until the afternoon that the crushing boredom finally got to her and Gabby began to pace
restlessly around the cave like a caged animal.

Erata, distracted from another stock take of their inventories, looked up at the agitated human – Gabby was using up valuable calories that they didn't have the rations to replenish.

The asari scowled. The human's actions were really starting to irritate her.

"Don't waste your time," Erata advised. "We can't do anything till that storm dies down. There's enough silica flying around out there to scramble communications. And these rocks are ultramafic – veined with magnetite – no way a signals' getting through that."

"Then why the hell did you bury us alive in here?" Gabby snapped.

"Because it was either that or have our asses frozen in the storm. We'll be safe in here. We're alive; we have rations, shelter and relative warmth. And we'll stay that way till help arrives."

"Without an active comm-link they won't know where to look, or even know if we're alive to bother mounting a rescue. By blocking the signal you've effectively buried us in our own tomb! I thought you knew what you were doing?"

"I do know what I'm doing! Ultramafic rocks don't inhibit all signals, just high-band communication frequencies. They'll still be able to scan for life-signs." Assuming they get close enough, Erata added to herself – no need to worry the human with that. "Now sit down, shut up and try to look pretty, Kitten."

"Stop calling me 'Kitten'!"

"Make me!" Erata challenged.

A sound caught their attention. Pella shifted under the bedroll. "If you two don't stop fighting… I'll bang your heads together."

The human and the asari hurried to her side.

"Hey, you're awake. How are you feeling?" Gabby asked.

"Like I got attacked by a thresher maw," Pella chuckled. Her voice was very weak.

"Stupid question. Sorry."

"So thirsty, actually."

Erata grabbed one of Pella's canteens and dribbled a few drops between the turian's lips. Pella coughed but swallowed the water gratefully.

"Now, no more arguing… or I will turn this cave around! Understand?" Pella tried to wag her finger at them. Her eyes closed.

Gabby tenderly stroked Pella's forehead until the turian had drifted off.

"She needs a proper medic" Erata said. "There's not much more I can do except stabilise her with the medi-gel. But it won't last forever."

Gabby was still looking down at Pella, watching her until she was certain she was asleep. "Magnetite scrambles scanning equipment. They won't know we're here unless they get within fifteen metres of us." Gabby glared at Erata. "If you're trying to bullshit someone, don't bullshit an engineer."
Neither of them spoke for the rest of the day.

Time passed strangely in the cave. Gabby's circadian rhythm was out of synch. She awoke in darkness, never knowing if it was afternoon, midnight or morning.

Gabby quickly checked the chronometer on her omni-tool. It had been 48-hours since the thresher maw attack; two-days since they'd lost their turian comrades, leaving them entombed. Of course, Gabby knew people were out looking for them. Commander Joric – assuming she was still alive – was probably leading the search-and-rescue herself. And if any of the turian engineers back at Anapondus had managed to fix the comms, they would undoubtedly have signalled for help. The Alliance, the Hierarchy, and Arcadias, of course, were on their way, she was sure of it. Someone was bound to find them…

_They have to find us!_

Gabby sat warming herself by the small pile of glowing stones and looked across at the serene face of Erata, the asari sat on a rock opposite, her eyes closed as if she was meditating.

"How are you so calm?" Gabby accused.

"Every species reacts differently to stress," Erata replied, opening her eyes. "We all have our ways of coping. And who says I am calm? How'd you know I'm not freaking out?"

"You look so composed; not worried at all."

"I've just had more practice hiding it than you." Her eyes darted off to Gabby's right. "I'm sure the Hierarchy won't abandon us. Someone's gonna find us."

"Yeah, and in the meantime, _we_ get to play the helpless women waiting for rescue. Oh, Kenneth is just gonna love this!" Suddenly, her voice changed, her accent adopting a Scottish brogue. "What's the matter, Gabby? Did ya get yourself trapped in a wee cave?" She changed back to her American twang. "He's going to milk this for weeks; constantly reminding me about how we needed saving… Like I don't get enough grief from him." Gabby pulled the silver blanket tighter around her shoulders and scowled. "Didn't like this role even as a kid! In all the games I played, I never fancied being the damsels in distress!"

As Gabby was talking, Erata casually reached over and seized one of the ice axes, its head folded into the handle. The asari flipped a catch and the axe head snapped into place like the blade of a flick knife. Gabby's brow puckered in concern.

"Erata? What are you doin…" In one smooth movement, the asari rose to her feet and swung the axe against the wall next to Gabby's head.

Gabby leapt out of the way, scrambling across to the wall on the other side of the cave, her heart pounding.

"_Are you insane?_" she screamed.

Erata turned, the axe still in her hand, and a large, red, insect-like _something_ impaled on the spike.

"What the…?" Gabby began as she stared at the wriggling creature.
"Klixen larva," Erata explained. "Introduced by the krogan as a food source. Must have wandered away from its nest and come up through the fissure. They have a nasty bite. Mildly venomous too. They're attracted to warmth; check the sleeping bag before you get in." Erata brought the axe down against the rocks, putting an end to the creature's struggles. "Well, at least we won't starve." Gabby screwed up her face at the thought of eating that. "Yeah, they taste like crap," Erata agreed, "but they make up one of your five-a-day! Oh, and for your information: I'm not sure Torrell, Quentis and Kapagan would agree with you."

"What?" Gabby frowned in confusion.

"The security officers – the ones who died so we could get away. The least you could do is honour their memories. We're alive thanks to them. Don't throw that back in their faces just because you feel helpless!"

Her back to the wall, Gabby slowly slithered to the ground.

Of course, Erata was right. She did feel helpless, and that made her angry. But she also felt remorse. Three officers had sacrificed themselves to save them and she hadn't even known their names; had hardly spoken to them. Her stomach churned; her insides knotted with guilt – not simply because she hadn't known their names, but because she was alive. She'd survived… and they were dead.

In that moment, a decision crystallised in her mind: she resolved she would contact their families. As soon as she got out of there, she would write the letters of condolences.

Gabby shut her eyes tight. "Thank you," she said quietly.

"Don't mention it," Erata replied.

"I wasn't talking to you."

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"Well, this isn't… embarrassing at all!"

Pella's voice was strained; her body crouched inelegantly as she was supported on either side by Erata and Gabby.

"Bet you… didn't think you'd be doing this when you signed up for the Programme," Pella rasped to Gabby.

"The subject wasn't touched upon, no," Gabby replied.

"This is nothing new! You'd be surprised how often I've done this for one of my sisters after a night out!" Erata joked.

When she'd finished, Gabby readjusted Pella's undergarments and helped move her away from the fissure. Gabby tightened her grip on Pella's waist. Even through the thick fabric of her thermals, Gabby could tell the turian's body was hot and feverish. Pella shook fitfully as they helped her across the cave to the bedroll.

Gabby settled the agitated turian down between the blankets while Erata grabbed another tube of medi-gel.

"I need… to tell you something…" Pella insisted. "In case… I don't…"

"You can tell us after we're out of here," Gabby said. She squeezed Pella's hand, trying to calm her
Pella shook her head. "No… My orders… the Primarch told me to… to keep an eye on the aliens."

"Hush, now. Hush. That's not important right now."

"I was spying on you!" Pella moaned.

Not knowing what to say, Gabby blurted out the first thing that popped into her head: "I know."

"What?"

"Alliance Command briefed me on turian protocol," Gabby lied. "I knew you were likely told to keep an eye on me. That didn't mean I didn't enjoy your company, Pella. I've got nothing to hide and neither have you." Erata leant over and injected Pella with another tube of medi-gel. "It's the game our governments play," Gabby continued, stroking Pella's head. "You were following an order, that's all. Don't worry about it."

The turian's expression softened. Pella smiled and her eyes closed. Gabby stayed by her side, holding her hand until the turian had drifted off into a needful sleep.

Erata hovered beside them, frowning in concern at the empty tube of medi-gel she held. Their supply was getting low.

"Was that true?" Erata asked Gabby. "Did you really know she was spying on us?"

"What do you think?"

"I think you lied to her." Erata nodded approvingly. "And I would've done the same thing…"

The next morning brought no respite from the storm.

Erata watched the human as she sat shivering by the heated stones, a silver blanket wrapped around her shoulders. It was the third day of seeing the human stubbornly endure the chilled conditions, rejecting all offers of help or relief from the cold, and the asari had decided she needed to help the human somehow. There was one tactic she hadn't tried yet…

"You know… there are other ways of distracting from the cold…"

Gabby sat up and stared at Erata, suddenly very concerned. She'd heard stories about the asari.

"What is she proposing?"

"Oh, now don't get any ideas!" Erata must have read her expression.

"I wasn't about to," Gabby replied. "I just thought you were suggesting something."

"Worried about the hot asari coming on to you?"

Gabby scowled. "Don't flatter yourself."

"That would not be a good idea. Asari and humans sweat. I know I sweat like a volus with a suit rupture when I'm horny!"

"Too much information," Gabby muttered.
"You sweat in this environment and you're dead," Erata continued. "It freezes to your skin, lowers your core temperature. Very soon you're a walking Popsicle. Trust me, If you and I ever *embraced eternity* together…" – *Asari have such weird euphemisms*, Gabby decided – "this cave would be the worst possible place for it."

"Does everything have to be about sex with you?"

"I prefer to stick to what I'm good at."

"There'll be no 'embracing eternity' thank you very much," Gabby stated firmly.

"Oh, relax, Ki… Gabby, I'm not about to jump your bones."

"Oh?" Gabby was surprised to feel a twinge of disappointment. *Hell of a time to get a bruised ego!* she chided herself.

The human shivered. "You had no qualms about trying to kiss me in the generator room. So, what am I now, chopped liver? What's wrong with me?" she demanded.

"Nothing at all," Erata assured her. "I'm just not certain it's entirely… safe."

"Well, what if we weren't stuck in this freezing pit?" Gabby asked.

"Even then…"

"You think you're that good you'd do me some mischief."

"Oh, I have ample evidence to prove I am that good!"

Gabby shot her a scathing look. "Well, *someone* has a high opinion of themselves!"

Erata grinned. "I can provide testimonials, if you'd like?"

"I'll take your word for it."

"I was talking about stories, as a matter of fact," Erata explained. "We tell each other something personal to help pass the time. I promise you that whatever's said won't leave this cave."

Gabby didn't look convinced.

"Let me start…" Erata offered. "It might surprise you to know that in the republic I'm considered something of a prodigy. You see before you the *youngest* alumnus from the Association of Structural Engineers and one of the most talented apprentices to join the Order of Serrice. I'm in great demand across Republic space. Mostly because of my virtuoso rep…"

"So how come you're stuck here in nature's frozen ass?"

"There was a slight issue when I crashed Matriarch Lidanya's skycar into her Illium apartment!"

"That doesn't sound very talented."

"Au contraire. I was out test driving it when the mass effect core failed. I kept her skycar airborne long enough to avoid a heavily populated area and made an emergency landing in Lidanya's bedroom. My actions saved the lives of dozens of residents. Do I ask for recognition? I do not."

"How come it was faulty?"
"I may have installed the wrong component," Erata confessed.

"So, you averted a disaster that you caused?"

"Technically, yes, but I cleaned up after myself. I was taught from a young age that if you break something then you're duty bound to fix it! Of course, the Matriarch didn't quite see it the same way…"

"Yeah, I'm guessing it didn't sit well with her?"

"There was a gaping hole in her apartment and pictures of her bedroom were posted all over extranet news sites. She was less than pleased!"

"Well, no-one wants to find their private life exposed like that," Gabby agreed.

"Particularly the manacles and whips I discovered hidden in her closet. Matriarch Lidanya has some interesting tastes!"

Gabby covered her mouth, stifling a laugh. "Did it cost much to repair?"

"Yeah, but the Order offered Lidanya a discount," Erata replied.

"Maybe that should be your new slogan? D'Ceni engineering: I can wreck-it for you wholesale!"

Erata snickered heartily. "You're pretty sharp for a youngster, Kitten…” She held up her hands in contrition. "Sorry, force of habit."

Gabby smiled ruefully. "It's OK… I've been kinda missing you calling me Kitten, actually," she confessed. Erata grinned; the smile lighting up her face and making her look like a cheeky teenager. Gabby regarded the blue alien thoughtfully. She knew asari could live long lives. "If you don't mind me asking, just how old are you?"


"Wow! That's incredible."

"And I don't look a day over sixty. Want to know how I maintain my wunderkind reputation and command such knowledge and respect beyond my tender years?"

Gabby thought about it for a moment. "You lie about your age?"

"Damn straight! I've been hundred-and-six for the past century."

Gabby laughed. Despite the cold, she could feel herself relaxing in the asari's company. "Somehow, I think you'll have more stories than I do…"

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Four days in and Gabby had almost settled into a routine.

When she awoke, she rose from the bedroll; checked on Pella's condition (still unchanged); ate a little nutrient paste; helped Pella to the bathroom; made sure the turian was comfortable; rested; scanned for signals with her omni-tool; and then listened to Erata regale her with another tale of her adventures while she pictured herself wallowing in the luxuriant heat of a sweltering bath.

Gabby still hated being in a situation she couldn't control. They were now entirely reliant on whether Commander Joric's team would reach them in time, and, privately, Gabby couldn't deny the growing
feelings of dread.

At the moment, Gabby lay in the bedroll, nestled beside Pella's sleeping form as she hugged the turian's body in an effort to keep her warm. She gently stroked Pella's head as it rested on Gabby's shoulder. The turian's condition worried Gabby. She was rarely conscious, and their supply of medi-gel was dwindling.

Gabby turned to Erata, the asari warming herself by the hot stones.

"I didn't thank you," Gabby began, "for everything you've done. Just so, you know, in case we don't…" Her voice petered out.

"Don't get fatalistic on me, Kitten," Erata scolded. "We're going to make it. You've got to stay positive."

"We've got food for two more days. Water, if we ration it, for maybe three… then we're reduced to melting the ice in the cave. But it's levo-amino. That won't help Pella. I'm under no illusions about our chances. It's just… thanks anyway. You've kept us alive. And I know things haven't been easy between us. Not since… what happened in the generator room…"

Erata did have the good grace to look embarrassed. "Yeah… I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I just needed… Oh, I don't know what I needed." Erata hung her head.

"Would it help to talk about it? It might take our minds off this."

Erata slowly shook her head. "It's personal," she confessed. "It's just… for a moment I thought I had… the same thing as my sister."

Gabby frowned. "I don't understand. You mean Thalia? What about her?"

"No, my younger sister, Mel. She… she has a condition."

"Your sister's ill?" Gabby asked.

"Not exactly. She can't have kids with anyone. And she has to live in isolation."

"Is it infectious?"

Erata shook her head again. "No, she's…" Erata paused, struggling to find the words. "She's… in an institution. I suppose you could call it a monastery."

Gabby tried to keep her expression neutral and simply nodded in understanding. "But she's very comfortable," Erata continued. "She's well cared for and she seems to be happy enough. My sisters visit regularly. I go when I can; bring her all the gossip and news from Thessia. We always take gifts. Even smuggle in a few vids that aren't on the approved list. And she sometimes goes on supervised trips…" The asari slipped briefly into silence, staring absently down at her hands. "They're very good to her…"

Gabby didn't press for further details about the Monastery. For Erata to divulge this much personal information about her sister was, to her, a sign of trust. She felt honoured that the asari had chosen to tell her as much as she had.

"You say your other sisters visit her? You've more than two?"

Erata looked up and nodded. "Thalia travels out from Armali's entertainment district about twice a year. But Clia makes more regular trips – she's forever excavating some new archaeological site in the area. Euterpa visits Mel when she's not on tour – she's a singer. You might know her by her stage
"name, 'Maya'."

"Oh!" Gabby started in surprise. "Yeah. I downloaded her latest album. She's your sister?"

"Yeah." Erata nodded again. "Polyhymnia is often at the monastery; she works at the Temple of Athame in Serrice and teaches regular classes in theology – knows all the sutras off by heart. Urania visits when she's not out studying different stellar phenomena for the Republic Science Directorate."

"Sounds like a family of highfliers," Gabby commented.

"Well, not quite," Erata admitted. "I'm just an itinerant engineer. And Terpsichora is a dancer at the Afterlife Club on Omega. She mostly chats with Mel via the link… Of all my sisters, Calliopa is the only one who claims she's too busy to visit the Monastery."

"And what does she do?"

Erata's expression darkened. "Calliopa is the eldest. She works for the Matriarchs. Sort of inherited the family business. And controls a network of… operatives."

"What kind of family business?"

"Oh, it's sort of like an information brokers," Erata said airily, waving her hand. "Trading in the buying and selling of… sensitive information. Except the Matriarchs are the only clients… We were all expected to contribute to the business at some point. I tried my hand at it for a while but didn't enjoy it very much. I was never really interested in that kind of work." Erata shook her head. "But Calliopa seems to think that just because she's the eldest she gets to have the final word on what the rest of us do. She's forever sticking her nose into other people's business!"

"How many sisters do you have?" Gabby asked quietly, attempting to steer the conversation to a less sensitive subject.

"Eight." Erata pouted, rolling her eyes. "Each one an expert in their chosen field. Goddess, even Melpomena is a celebrated writer!"

"Nine children?" Gabby exclaimed. "Same father?" Erata nodded. "And all by the same mother?"

Erata nodded again. "Our dad couldn't have kids of her own," she explained.

"How'd your mom feel about that?"

"About as well as you'd expect under the circumstances. Having said that, I was young when Thalia was born but I vividly remember my mom screaming at my dad in the birthing chamber."

"What was she saying?"

"It was something like, 'Look what you've done to me! This is all your fault! If you ever come near me again, I'll drop you with a singularity!' Of course, the language was a tad fruitier at the time."

Gabby grinned knowingly. "Yeah, that sounds familiar."

"What's the wildest thing you've ever done?"

Gabby paused in mid-chew, the ration packet hovering by her lips. She narrowed her eyes and scrutinized the asari with suspicion. She put down the empty pack by her feet, shuffled so she could get comfy on the rock she was using as a seat close to the hot stones, and pulled her blanket tighter
around her shoulders. After five days staring at the cave's cold walls she was happy for any
distraction.

"Okay, I'll bite," she agreed. "But you first. What's the wildest thing you've done?"

"Oh, too many to mention, Kitten. But let me see if I can recall something a little more your
speed..." The asari closed her eyes for a moment. "When I was stationed in London, I had the
privilege of meeting a very nice Alliance representative from the Jon Grissom Academy orbiting
Elysium colony..."

"This is going to be about sex, isn't it?" Gabby interrupted.

Erata gave Gabby a withering look. "You know, contrary to popular belief, sex isn't always on the
table for maidens."

"Alright. My mistake. This Alliance representative was a soldier?"

"No, a civilian – a member of the Ascension Project board of directors, in fact. We met at a 'wetting
down' party thrown for an Alliance crewman who was being promoted. She was on vacation and
keen to see the capital. We got chatting and I agreed to show her around the city. From what I
understand, a friend of hers was born was in London...

"Anyway, after about a week of showing her the sights, we decided to visit the British Museum. We
wander around and find an exhibition of early asari artefacts. You'll never guess what they had on
display... an original manuscript of Matriarch Dilinaga's writings! Just sitting there, bold as you
like."

Gabby shrugged in confusion. "So?"

"An artefact like that belongs on Thessia," Erata explained. "I checked, and the manuscript wasn't on
loan, it was a new find made by an Alliance archaeological team. Of course, I could have made a
formal complaint to the museum, or contacted the Asari Embassy about it. But I didn't. I was
impulsive. I talked to my friend and we hatched a plot. We stayed there until the museum was about
to close, then when we were sure there weren't any witnesses, she hacked security in the room –
luckily, she was formerly a top computer systems specialist in the Alliance – and when security was
down, I swiped the manuscript!"

"You stole it?"

"Yep," Erata said proudly. "Hid it under my coat and walked it right through the front door.
Afterwards, we took a black skycab to my apartment in Hammersmith and arranged to get it shipped
back to Thessia on the very next transport..." Erata paused as a coy smile spread across her face.
"Then we had sex!" Gabby groaned and buried her head in her hands. "Ooh, the things that human
could do with her mouth."

"I don't need to know everything!" Gabby insisted.

"Every few minutes she'd roll me over and off we'd go again..."

Gabby looked up. "I thought you said sex wasn't on the table?"

"It wasn't. We were in bed!" Erata flashed a mischievous grin. "And she was blond, Kitten. How
was I gonna pass that up?"

"Oh, you are such a guy!" Gabby said in exasperation.
Erata regarded Gabby for a long moment. "Your turn."

"Oh… Yeah, I'm not sure…"

"Don't back out on me now. There must have been something vaguely exciting you've done in your
time?"

Gabby nodded to herself. One thing did spring to mind… Just the memory of it made her blush. Gabby smiled, only now grasping how long she’d been keeping it bottled up. She realised that she needed to tell someone about this. Maybe an asari would understand?

"It's more what almost happened…" she began.

"Almost? Well, that's not good enough."

"It was embarrassing… There was blood on the floor, property damage, nudity, local security was involved, I nearly got arrested, and a couple of people threatened a civil case against me. It was a right mess!"

Erata was impressed. She didn't think the human would be involved in something so interesting. "Donnelly's blood, was it?"

"No, Kenneth wasn't involved," Gabby confessed. "Actually, he doesn't even know about it."

Erata suddenly recalled the conversation she’d had with Gabby just a few weeks prior. "Hang on; this story wouldn't include a naked turian, by any chance?" Gabby gave a hesitant nod. Erata preened with delight. "Ooooh, well, someone has a juicy story! Come on, Kitten, what you do?"

"If I tell you… this stays between us, right?"

"You already know about my little indiscretion. I swear: Not one word."

"Alright… Okay… Well, um… have you ever heard of a place called Pandemonium?" Erata shook her head. "It's the name of a club… and a hotel. Well, it's a whole complex, really. Me and Kenneth were billeted there while furloughed on Cyone."

That peaked Erata's interest. "An asari colony… Sounds like a certain human was trying to get up close and personal with the locals…"

"It wasn't like that! We were on the planet and I was interested in asari culture."

Erata nodded sagely. "Of course, there's nothing more cultural than performing the horizontal tango!"

"Not everyone's interested in that aspect of asari, Erata."

"You wanted to trip the light-blue fantastic!"

"Okay, stop it now…"

"Cheer up a blue asari!"

"I'm not listening…"

"Indulge in a little blueshifting!"
"Erata! Is this gonna take long? How many more have you got?"

"Hey, with over two centuries of life-experience, I could go all night."

"Yeah, so I've heard!" Gabby was feeling spiteful.

"Ouch! Kitten has claws."

"Look, do you want to hear this story or not?"

"I'm sorry." Erata said, suddenly looking earnest. "You were talking about Pandemonium…"
Pandemonium

Chapter Summary

Gabby narrates one wild night she experienced on an asari colony.

Chapter Notes

Another chapter written in first-person. Enjoy.

Pandemonium Club, City of Polos, Cyone – 20:10 LT – 22nd January 2183 CE

"People love a woman in uniform", Kenneth declared, adding to the long list of clichés he regularly vomited up. Now I'd find out if the old adage was true.

I couldn't believe his attitude. We were on an alien planet – furloughed on a colony that had been established while humans were entering the dark ages! It was an amazing opportunity to explore an alien culture. And what did Kenneth want to do? Join a poker game! Of course, Kenneth being Kenneth, it didn't take him long to find a game with the staff in the hotel. Idiot! That wasn't for me. I wanted to explore!

On vacations, I'd normally have packed more suitable clothing (like my asari evening dress) to go out on the town. But the only things I had in my kitbag were my spare Alliance uniforms, dress blues, and a few civvies, and the dress blues were a tad extravagant for going out – I didn't want to look like I'd just come off a parade ground.

So I slipped into my lucky underwear (not that I went out with the intention of ending up in bed with someone, but, no harm in being prepared), dressed in the second smartest thing I had – my uniform – then left Kenneth to his cards and went out to explore the city…

I didn't want to go too far. After all, it was night-time, and I was by myself in an unfamiliar city. Plus I was a human on a colony populated almost exclusively by asari. I suspected I was going to attract attention.

Yeah right, I should be so lucky!

As it happened, it didn't take long to find some action. There was a street party just outside the complex. And I needn't have worried about standing out; hardly anyone noticed me in that crowd.

God, it was mayhem!

It was a street carnival – a festival celebrating one of the Athame traditions. Asari were everywhere; performers in multi-coloured costumes paraded down the street, while scantily clad bystanders danced on the sidewalks, drinking, laughing, singing, kissing. It easily rivalled the carnivals of Rio de Janeiro.
Unable to get through the dense crowds, I decided to retreat to one of the nightclubs in the hotel grounds. That's how I ended up at the hotel's main club, Pandemonium – the name seemed appropriate.

I could feel the music before I'd even gone through the doors. The deep base vibrated the air around me. I edged my way in through the red-hued entrance and took in the sight of the dance hall.

The chamber was vast!

I'd never seen so many different aliens in one room before, not even on my infrequent trips to the Citadel. The room heaved with writhing dancing forms – mostly asari; some turians; a few salarians; there were even one or two elcor strutting their stuff on the vibrantly hued dance floor. No humans, though, apart from me. Nearly all of them were wearing smartly cut, figure hugging clothing. In contrast, my blue uniform looked distinctly drab.

I had never felt so out of place. I briefly considered leaving but that would have felt like I was being chased away, like I'd given up. I don't do that.

So, I sucked it up, and strode up to the bar. It was slightly quieter there.

The asari behind the bar gave me an appraising look. She was dressed surprisingly conservatively in a pale green dress. "What can I get for you, hon?"

I realised that I didn't have a clue what asari drank. "What do you have?"

"Depends on your mood," the bartender replied. "We have drinks for every occasion and every temperament. It you're looking for an interesting evening I'd recommend the 'Weeping Heart'. It's martini mixed and drell-skin toxin."

"I think I'd prefer something fairly light." Getting drunk on exotic spirits in a room full of strangers probably wasn't gonna give the best impression of the Alliance.

The asari reached behind the counter and produced a bottle filled with a dark liquid.

"What is it?" I asked cautiously.

"Sarsaparilla."

"Huh?"

"Well, we do see a lot of Alliance personnel in here, hon."

I suddenly felt very foolish. Cyone was a major hub, not some backwater colony. "Maybe something a bit stronger, then. Something from Thessia."

"Easy enough." The bartender smiled happily and poured a frothing red concoction in a straight glass.

"Should I ask what it is?" I queried.

"Only if you want more of it."

I took a tentative sip. It had a tangy yet oddly subtle flavour; the closest thing I could compare it to was a mixture of kiwi and rhubarb. It was a strange taste, but not at all unpleasant.

"It's good," I said firmly.
"Just come back and ask for the same again. I'll remember you."

Being the only human in the place I didn't doubt it. I settled up and moved away to watch the crowds.

I spent the next ten minutes just watching the dancers while I sipped my drink, trying to work up enough courage, or drink enough, to go out on the dance floor.

"Are you a soldier?" a voice behind me asked.

I turned. A turian in an expensive-looking red and black suit was staring at me.

"Alliance engineer," I replied.

"Well, I got the Alliance part," the turian said. "I like your uniform. It's very… blue."

"Thank you." I smiled at him.

"I'm Roscius." He extended a hand.

"Gabriella." I shook it.

"A beautiful name. Now, I'm going to guess that you're part of the Interspecies Engineering Programme, correct?"

"Yes, how'd you know?"

"Polos is something of a hub for the exchange programmes, and often used as a muster point for rendezvous. We get members of lots of different species making fleeting visits. Just ships that pass in the night."

"Or strangers in the night?" I suggested.

"If you'd prefer…" He smiled. It was a nice smile.

"Hey, Roscius!" someone called out. A giggling asari in a skimpy red dress dashed over and grabbed the turian by the arm. "Junia is here. She really wants to meet you!"

Roscius gave me an apologetic grin. "Will you be staying in the club?"

"I might stick around, yeah."

"I'll be sure to look out for you," he promised.

I watched as he was dragged away by the enthusiastic asari.

Emboldened by the encounter, I decided to mingle, and approached a group of asari.

But my new-found confidence was short lived. I tried to engage the asari in conversation, but they just stared at me, scrutinizing my clothes as if it had offended their sensibilities. All my questions were snubbed until, finally, one of them hissed at me in an imperious tone, "What makes you think we'd possibly be interested in your kind, human?"

The words stung. It was like high school all over again. They were acting like they were in a clique. That was all I needed: a room full of alpha female, prom-queens.
But I was damned if I was going to let them ruin my evening.

As luck would have it, I was distracted by a commotion on the dance floor. Cheers were sounding from the centre of the crowd; the throng was parting to allow two dancers more space. I stared, hardly believing my eyes: A large krogan in red and grey patterned coveralls was dancing with a glamorous asari. And he was really moving.

Even with his back towards me, I could tell who it was – there was only one krogan who moved like that…

"Hey, Chaill," I yelled fruitlessly. There was no way he could hear me over the music.

I grinned. Of everyone I'd met in my life, Chaill was possibly the most unusual set of contradictions I'd ever encountered.

Where most krogan were selfish or mercenary, Chaill's creative; an engineer. Where others strove toward violence and aggression, he actually helped bolster colony defences that were being threatened by pirates. Practically everything you expected a krogan to be, he wasn't. That isn't to say he was entirely altruistic; he's a krogan after all. He still loved violence. But those urges were channelled into a fanatical enthusiasm for different sports: Rugby, kowla, ice hockey, wrestling, biotiball, and, for some reason, ping pong… I still haven't figured out why.

There was one particular away mission I'll always remember. Chaill he'd been serving on the SSV *Perugia* for about two-weeks when we were ordered to help repair the irrigation system of Terra Nova colony out in the Exodus Cluster. The colonists weren't that keen on Alliance personnel, although, one of them did give me a very nice asari-made semiconductor as a gift. Actually, looking back, I pretty sure she was flirting with me!

The *Perugia*'s shuttle descended onto the colony's landing pad, and this ten-year old kid rushed up to the shuttle doors to greet us.

I vividly recall the look of terror on the kid's face when, instead of the humans he'd been expecting, a two-metre tall alien monster stepped out of the shuttle in front of him. The child was frozen rigid, staring bug-eyed at the wide smile of this massive bogeyman. There hadn't been any screams, the kid was too frightened for that, but his mom eventually hurried over to drag him away after he'd wet his pants. This hadn't gone unnoticed by the colonists and Chaill was met with more than a few hostile glares directed his way. Chaill took it in his stride, preferring to simply get on with the job. The next week of solid maintenance and repair of the colony’s irrigation system helped thaw the resident's attitudes and even the kid, after he'd gotten over his initial fears, began to follow us around wherever we went.

He seemed fascinated by Chaill, but it was several days before he plucked up the courage to talk to us. At first, Chaill merely tolerated his company, but, when he started asking questions about our work, Chaill found he was keen, intelligent, and a good listener. He was interested in engineering and Chaill spent many hours teaching him the function of each device from the colony. Eventually, they became inseparable.

There was very little work done on our final day; most of the time was spent playing tag and giving piggyback rides, which Chaill submitted to wholeheartedly. It was quite a sight to see a human kid squealing with delight as he was carried around on a krogan's hump!

Tears were shed when we eventually left; the kid was devastated that his new found friend was leaving. Apparently, Chaill still gets messages from him, and the last I'd heard he was dead set on becoming an engineer, following in his big, scaly friend's footsteps. In one of our chats over the link,
Chaill grumbled that the kid was still pestering him with questions, but I could tell he was secretly thrilled he'd had such a positive influence…

Chaill finished his dance and bowed low to his asari partner before moving to join a group of salarians. I called out to him and he turned at the sound of my voice.

"Gabriella!" he roared, and rushed forward, sending several asari skittering out of the way. Having a krogan charge towards you is an interesting experience! The krogan pulled me into a bear hug. "If it isn't the best damned engineer in Citadel space! And next to me that's saying something! It's so good to see you. How are you?"

"All the better for seeing you, Chaill. You can put me down now." Chaill glanced at my feet. He'd lifted me clean off the ground. "Not that I don't enjoy our hugs," I added.

"Me too," Chaill said happily, returning me to the floor. "So, you're here for the exchange programme, too?" I nodded. "They've chosen an excellent place for the rendezvous. I've had nothing but compliments from everyone I've met." Chaill then paused and glanced around the club, he seemed to be confused. "Where's the hairy Scottish one? I thought you two came as a set?"

I rolled my eyes at the mention of my 'other half'. "The 'Scottish one' is playing poker."

Chaill spread his arms wide and gestured at the room. "And missing out on all this culture?"

"Oh please. The only culture he cares about is printed on the back of a playing card!" Chaill laughed. "Those were some moves you were pulling," I added.

"A little thing I learned on the Migrant Fleet," Chaill replied.

"You're kidding! When did you work with the quarians? I didn't think they'd be very accepting of help from outsiders?"

"I spent a couple of weeks with them last year. Fixing the eezo core on one of the ships they'd acquired. Blood Pack vultures had practically gutted the cruiser; installing their own static charge regulators. They needed someone familiar with that hardware. I was happy to help. Excellent dancers those quarians, and very sociable once you get to know them."

"So, what's next for you? Working on another Alliance ship?"

"Not this time," Chaill replied. He turned to the Salarian beside him. "Gabby, this is Madik." He placed his hand gently on the orange-skinned salarian's shoulder. "He's the head researcher on the ship I'll be serving on." I was surprised to say the least. I never imagined a krogan would ever be welcomed on a salarian vessel. Madik was visibly trembling. But not from fear it seemed. I extended my hand which was eagerly shaken by the salarian.

"Chaill's told me so much about you." His speech was unusually rapid, even for a salarian. "So nice to be here love these interspecies programmes learn so many new things great chance to interact Chaill's friendly not what I expected his work is impeccable glad to have him on-board never been to Cyone before what do you think of the place so many aliens here mostly asari really like them not sure why have you got a drink yes you have I'm all out must get another one lovely to meet you goodbye."

And he was gone, scooting back to the bar as I stared after him.

"I think he's discovered the energy drinks," Chaill stated wryly.
"For God's sake, keep him away from espresso!"

"Too late – he had three before we came here! Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on him."

"It's great to see you, Chaill."

"And you Gabby. Oh, gotta dash." Chaill wandered off after Madik. The last thing I heard before he was swallowed by the crowd was: "No! Not the Irish coffee!"

With my friend gone, I went back to watching the crowds, waiting for an opportunity to strike up a conversation. After Chaill's enthusiastic greeting, I noticed a few asari glance at me with renewed interest. I caught one of them smiling my way, and smiled back.

Truth be told, I wasn't really interested in asari. Not in that way. They looked too much like human women for me to be attracted to them. But, a little interest in me might have been nice. I'd read about asari; heard stories about how they could bond with anyone, and I'd have liked it if at least one of them had shown me some attention. I would have politely refused, of course, but it would have been an ego boost. Then, at least, I wouldn't have felt so hopelessly unattractive in this club filled with glamorous aliens.

As it happened, I didn't have to wait long to be approached again – and I recognised the voice.

"Interesting company you keep," a flanging voice said behind me.

I turned. Roscius was standing with a drink in his hand, looking casually dashing. The asari in the red dress was nowhere to be seen.

"An old friend," I explained, gesturing in the direction Chaill had gone.

"I'm intrigued," Roscius said. "Any woman who can tame a krogan is obviously quite the adventurer."

I think I mumbled something about just being an engineer, trying to brush his compliment aside.

"Would you like to join me at my table?" he offered. "You could tell me how you met your alien friend."

"Chaill. His name's Chaill. And, yes, I'd love too."

He offered his arm, which I accepted, leaning in close to him (oh, he did smell nice!), and he escorted me to one of the private booths off to the side of the chamber.

I must admit, I was basking in the attention. Having a stranger show any kind of interest in me almost never happened, and I was secretly relishing the envious glances directed my way by some of the asari.

His private booth was a wide curved upholstered seat with a table set slightly away from the dance floor. It was secluded enough to allow for conversation without having to shout, but still offered a clear view of the club patrons. We sat opposite each other and talked for about fifteen minutes, mostly about each other's work; our exchanges interspersed by sporadic observations of Chaill's footwork as he gyrated with a succession of enthusiastic asari dance partners.

It was turning into a surprisingly pleasant evening… Well, up to a point.

"So, just how adventurous are you?" Roscius asked, during a brief lull in the conversation.
"I like to think I'm open to different experiences," I replied. "Travel is really quite liberating. You can see and do things other people could only dream of."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more." Roscius pointed at the dance floor and the asari in the red dress who'd dragged him away when we'd first met. "Flavia is also quite adventurous. Open to all manner of new experiences. Maybe you two should meet?"

"Well, I'm always happy to meet new people," I replied hesitantly.

"That's the spirit. And, if you two hit it off, perhaps you might like to get better acquainted with her?"

I frowned. "I'm… not quite sure what you mean."

"As I said, Flavia is really quite adventurous. Even for a maiden. She wants to experience as much as the galaxy has to offer. But she's yet to meet a human in the flesh, so to speak. I'm certain it's an encounter she would enjoy immensely. And I'm thinking maybe, if the mood takes us, we three might go somewhere more private?"

My heart sank. I leaned away from him. "That really isn't my thing," I insisted. "I don't do that with people I hardly know."

"Now, that's not what I'd have expected from an adventurous alien such as yourself."

"That's my position, and I stick to it."

Roscius frowned. "Such a shame. And we were getting along so well… If it makes you feel more comfortable, I could just watch?"

"Are you kidding me?!"

"You humans are fascinating. Like asari, but softer around the edges. And your skin colour is so exotic. I'm curious to see how it would look next to an asari."

That was the last straw. I grunted in disgust and moved to get up, but Roscius held my wrist in a tight grip.

"I'm not in the habit of taking 'no' for an answer." His friendly manner had vanished, his warm smile replaced by a steely grimace. "Ask anyone around here, ask anyone in Polos… you'll find I always get what I w…”

A large hand descended forcefully onto his shoulder.

"I believe the lady made her decision, pyjak!" a familiar voice rumbled.

Roscius looked up into Chaill's baleful glare. Chaill was standing over him, still gripping Roscius' shoulder. The krogan parted his wide lips to show his teeth. It could have been described as a smile.

"Know when to walk away," Chaill warned.

"This doesn't concern you, krogan…” Roscius fired back.

"I beg to differ!"

Chaill hauled him from his seat and embraced him, as if he was an old friend, then bent his head to whisper something in Roscius' ear that I couldn't make out. The turian's eyes gradually widened in
alarm; his mouth dropped open. He tried to pull away but Chaill's arms were inescapable. Finally, Chaill released him and clapped him hard on both shoulders.

"And I meant every word," he growled happily. Turning smoothly, Chaill forcibly ushered Roscius away from the table. "Off you go. Do try to be a stranger."

The turian left at speed, disappearing into the crowd. Chaill turned to me. He looked concerned.

"My hero?" I asked quizzically.

"Would you mind if I joined you?" he enquired politely.

"By all means." Chaill sat down in the seat Roscius had vacated. "What did you say to him?"

"I merely reminded him that it was his duty as a turian to maintain his dignity," Chaill explained, "and warned him how close he was to having that dignity forcibly removed!"

"He left in quite a hurry. Was that in so many words?"

"I may be paraphrasing a bit," Chaill admitted.

I smiled despite my recent experience. Chaill was turning out to be something of a guardian angel—though I couldn't imagine anyone less looking the part.

"Excuse me?" a shy voice uttered. We looked up to see an asari in a long cream dress hovering by our table and staring at Chaill. "Would you like to dance?" she asked him.

Chaill exchanged a glance with me.

"You're in demand," I said. "Don't disappoint your fans." Chaill smiled and looked up at the asari.

"I would behonoured," he said firmly, rising to take his new dance partner by the hand. "I'll be back," he assured me. I watched them go, feeling surprisingly relieved that Chaill was close by.

Their dance wasn't very long, and soon enough Chaill had returned. We talked for a bit, our conversation interrupted only when Chaill spotted the salarian head researcher, Madak being carried from the club by two other salarians, one supporting each arm.

After talking to the salarians, Chaill returned to the booth.

"How's Madik?" I asked.

"He crashed. Too much of a sugar rush for him. But he'll recover. The crew are taking him back to his hotel room. He'll be fine."

"I'm glad. He seemed friendly, but he was a man in dire need of punctuation!"

Chaill laughed. "Salarians and stimulants—not a good combination."

"I surprised you've even managed to get permission to step aboard a salarian vessel. They aren't the most trusting species."

Chaill nodded. "Yeah… and I realise some people will think this is just a gimmick. 'Look at how well the salarians and krogan can work together.' I know I'll be watched constantly. The number of files that'll be restricted; the firewalls that are going to be in place because they have a krogan on board their ship… But if I can show the salarians my worth; demonstrate how useful krogan can be, then
maybe I can do some good. Perhaps even improve our standing with the council… I've got to try, Gabby, even if I fail."

A shadow fell across the table. Chaill looked up to see a muscular asari in a shimmering opal dress looming over him.

"Why, hello there, krogan!" Her voice was deep and husky. "You. Me. Dance. Now!"

Without waiting for a reply, she'd grabbed Chaill and pulled him to his feet. He leant down to whisper to me. "At this rate, I'll be the one needing the energy drinks!"

"A big strapping krogan like you? Never!"

Chaill grinned as he was dragged onto the dance floor.

This became something of a habit. On three occasions Chaill was intercepted by asari, his partners insisting they dance close, which Chaill graciously permitted. This puzzled me. The asari were undeniably attractive, but ever since I'd known him, Chaill had never shown any romantic interest in asari, or, indeed, in anyone as far as I could tell. He had, however, talked many times about his burning desire to return to his home planet, Tuchanka. And from the way he talked, I always suspected he had someone waiting for him there…

Eventually, he managed to disentangle himself from their clutches and made it back to our table, looking none the worse for wear. I shook my head in amazement.

"What is your secret, Chaill?"

"What do you mean?"

"The asari are practically forming a line to dance with you!" I pointed out.

"Maybe it's down to skillsets?" he suggested cheerfully. "When you can retrofit a thruster manifold, strip a static charge regulator and perform a pasodoble, then you suddenly find yourself in demand."

"Yeah, you're the whole damned package! I just wish…"

"What?" Chaill asked.

"I just wish they'd show a little love my way. It's alright for you, Chaill. You're like asari catnip! All you gotta do is flex a bicep and they come running. I mean, seriously, are you giving off a pheromone or something?"

"Probably my cologne," Chaill suggested, a smile creasing his lips. "Guess they like to see someone fill out a uniform."

"Doesn't seem to have helped me any."

"I didn't know you were interested in asari."

"I'm not. Not really. But being asked to dance would be nice."

Chaill cursed, shaking his head. "Damn! Stupid of me." Chaill looked thoughtfully at the crowd of aliens. Then he abruptly stood up. "I won't be long," he promised.

Despite his size, he quickly disappeared into the crowd, heading in the direction of the bar. About a minute later the music in the club changed to the distinctive strains of 'Época', the same music we'd
danced to on the *Perugia*. I grinned as I realised what he had planned.

Chaill emerged through the throng and strode towards me.

He stood at attention before the table and offered his hand. "Would you, Gabriella Daniels, do me the honour of joining me for this dance?"

I gave a wry smirk. "Seriously, Chaill? What's with the pomp and chivalry?"

"I'm old school." He grinned. "And a little drunk!"

"It suits you," I chuckled as I took his hand. Chaill led me onto the dance floor.

The crowd knew Chaill's past form and parted to give us more room.

Chaill gathered me up in his arms. As he drew me in close I couldn't help but take in his familiar scent; a potent blend of spices and cut grass. And something else I'd never been able to identify: Something foreign and musky.

Chaill broke into a promenade and we glided across the floor. He remembered all the moves I'd taught him back on the *Perugia* and we fell naturally into a comfortable rhythm. He manoeuvred me up and down the hall, our stances constantly changing from a sensual cradle promenade, to Spanish drag, and into a series of energetic twirls, swivels, and dips.

Our tango wasn't anywhere near as energetic as Chaill's dances with his asari partners so we didn't exactly set the room on-fire, but the unusual sight of a human and a krogan dancing together was enough to turn a few heads. It was exciting to be the centre of attention, and the crowd broke into an enthusiastic round of applause when Chaill finally pulled me into a climactic open leg stance.

I was grinning wildly as Chaill escorted me back to the table. I'd finally shown that I could mix it up with the best of them, and hoped it had earned me a few points. And it didn't take long before someone did approach our table.

It was the bartender in the green dress. And she'd brought us another round of drinks.

"I thought you might want to try something different." She put down two glasses. The first, she said, was krogan ryncol, but the second was filled with a pale green liquid that matched her clothes. "It's called elasa," she explained. "It's a Thessian speciality." I put my hand in my pocket to get my credit chit. "It's on the house," she insisted.

"Didn't think the house normally served complimentary drinks," Chaill observed.

"We don't usually." The bartender's eyes darted between me and Chaill. "But I always try to make an exception for our more talented guests. Are you staying at the hotel?"

"Yes," we answered in unison.

"Just let me know if I can make your visit more… comfortable."

She actually winked, and then strode away, leaving us frowning in confusion.

"Was that meant for me or for you?" I asked Chaill.

"You can never tell with asari," Chaill replied.

"At least we're getting noticed," I chuckled and sipped the elasa. It was quite bitter but had a sweet
tangy aftertaste, and I could feel a curious warmth spreading through my chest. "Wonder why she brought me this drink…"

"Well, elasa does have another name," Chaill said. "It's also called Sorrow's Companion," He took a swig from his glass.

"Okay, now I'm really confused. Do you think this is a coded message?"

"In my experience, asari aren't usually that subtle."

"You have a lot of experience with asari, Chaill?"

"Not much," he conceded. "Mostly what I've gathered from tonight's encounters. And in my professional opinion... they're a bunch of ravenous predators!"

"They've certainly been sniffing around you like a fresh kill! Notice anything else?"

"They sometimes hunt in packs." Chaill nodded at the group of asari eyeing our table. I turned to where Chaill was looking and preened with subdued excitement. Perhaps my technique on the dance floor had earned me a few admirers? I smiled broadly as the alien women sidled up to us.

But, typically, the adventurous asari were wholly interested in Chaill.

One of them bent down to whisper in Chaill's ear. After a moment, he frowned. Chaill politely declined their advances and they moved off.

It left me shaking my head in frustration. Typical. Now I'm a krogan's damned wingman! It was difficult to see how the evening could get any worse. At least Chaill was good company.

"You know, actually Gabby, there is something I'd like your opinion on," Chaill said, swirling the ryncol around his glass.

"Fire away." I took another gulp of my drink – it really wasn't that bad.

"I've been writing some poetry…"

I froze, my glass poised on my lips, and my mouth full of the asari liquor. I'd almost choked on the damn stuff. I swallowed carefully.

"Poetry?" I asked.

"Yes. If you don't mind, I'd like to hear what you think."

I was finding it hard to imagine rugby loving, ryncol swigging Chaill sitting down and conjuring up a sonnet.

*Oh Lord, what on Earth is krogan poetry like? Is there a great poetry tradition on Tuchanka? Some krogan equivalent of Shakespeare, perhaps?*

And then that was all I could think about. I suddenly had a vision of Chaill performing on stage in full Shakespearean costume, as he boomed out verse in iambic pentameter: *"Shall I compare thee to a nuclear winter..."*

I shook my head, trying to clear the strange image, and realised that this, sadly, was probably going to be the highlight of my evening.
"OK," I relented. "Let me have it."

Chaill cleared his throat, fidgeting slightly in his seat. If I didn't know better, I would have sworn he was nervous.

"Baked dry to dust, this land of extremes,
Borne down by shattered stones and broken dreams,
Where stood towering cities once proud and taut,
And the promise of new life cut cruelly short.
Against the galaxy we fired the first volley,
Hubris and pride our greatest folly,
Damned by infection, corrupting young souls,
Only vengeance and hatred old grudges extol.
Yet from the ashes, hope still springs,
Of a world rebuilt so the young may sing,
A dream of green shoots reclaiming arid plains,
To reconquer our land with seeds and grains.
Though laid low, are we, by blight and war,
Together, as one, new life we can restore,
Our future, not lost, we need not mourn,
For that which once was, can be reborn."

I think it was a few seconds before I realised my mouth was open.

"Chaill, that was… nice…” I admitted. "No, actually, that was lovely." I couldn't believe it; I was using the word 'lovely' to describe Chaill! This was bizarre.

"When did you develop an interest in poetry?" I demanded.

"From my brood-brother," Chaill explained. "I met up with him on a recent visit to Illium. He'd been writing some love poetry for a local asari he'd been courting. His verse is far superior to mine though: Great stanza construction; beautiful narrative imagery."

My eyes widened in astonished. Of all the things I thought Chaill would be interested in, this certainly wasn't one of them.

I chuckled. "You're full of surprises, Chaill." He beamed cheerfully. "That was certainly an unexpected poem. And I'm sure whoever you have in mind will appreciate it."

"Whoever I have in mind?" he repeated, frowning. "I…"

But something caught his eye. He was staring over my shoulder. I turned to see where he was
looking. Six turians were approaching our table, with Roscius at the head. They walked up to us and fanned out around the booth, blocking us in.

"You're in my seat, krogan," Roscius spat.

"That so? Funny, 'cause you seemed to vacate it quickly enough," Chaill pointed out.

"And now I'm here to reclaim it." Roscius sneered as he looked down at Chaill. "This place isn't for the likes of you. You made a big mistake walking in here, krogan. We're here to escort you out."

Chaill gave the turian a wide grin. I recognised the smile. It was the same grin he had whenever we watched an ice hockey match together; that joyous anticipation at the prospect of violence breaking out between the players.

"You know what your biggest mistake was?" Chaill asked quietly. "Only bringing five guys!"

I glanced between Chaill and the lynch mob, suddenly feeling very sober.

The evening had just got worse.
Ka Mate Ka Ora

Chapter Summary

Gabby reveals a very personal and guarded secret to Erata...

Chapter Notes

Warning: contains violence, nudity and sexual themes.

_Ice Cave, Gellix – 21:05 UTC – 5 th March 2183 CE_

"Ah, finally! I thought you'd never get to the meat of the story."

"I was setting the mood for you, Erata – you know, building up the atmosphere of the club. It's a little thing called narrative."

"Well, not to sound churlish but I was starting to wonder if your story had a narrative. For a while there I thought it was just going to be about dancing."

"I like to think my story has a little more depth than that. I have had my fair share of interesting experiences over the years, actually."

"I don't doubt it. But none of _my_ stories were this long. Is there a payoff at some point?"

"I'm getting there. I'm getting there."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm enjoying the picture you're painting, Kitten. But, frankly, I'd prefer to hear more about your yummy krogan friend!"

"I'm not sure Chaill would appreciate being objectified like that, Erata."

"Oh, riight. Because, unlike we asari, krogan so often have to endure the indignity of being reduced to mere sex-objects!"

"Alright, point taken… Now, where did I leave off?"

"I believe Chaill was about to kick some turian ass!"

"Yeah… Yeah, that's what I thought, too…"

_Pandemonium Club, City of Polos, Cyone – 22:38 LT – 22 nd January_

Chaill smiled as he calmly scrutinized the group of turians surrounding our table.

"I hope you've brought enough credits with you, pyjak," Chaill said to Roscius.
"Is that a threat?" Roscius raised his voice so the other patrons in the club could hear. "Are you threatening me, krogan?"

"There's an old human expression: *Your mouth's writing cheques that your body can't cash!* You should turn around and leave. Unless you can afford to pay for all the damage in here after I've redecorated the club with your heads?" Chaill said in a friendly tone. "By the way, *that* was a threat."

Roscius glanced back at his friends. "Trust a krogan to start trouble…" he began, but Chaill cut him off.

"Of the two of us, which one's enjoying a quiet drink with a friend, and which one brought a gang in here to ruin everyone's evening?" he asked.

"Then why don't we head outside and you can show us your moves?"

Chaill laughed. "You don't want me to show you *those kinds* of moves, pyjak!" He casually lifted his drink to take a swig.

Roscius sneered. "Well, ain't that a first? Never thought I'd meet a spineless krogan!" Chaill froze. His glass poised by his lips. He was glaring at Roscius in undisguised hatred. "But I guess you're like the rest of your kind," Roscius continued. "For all your bravado, krogan are just cowards. It's how we eventually ended the Krogan Rebellions. You lot were quick enough to run from a fight when you were outnumbered!"

Chaill slammed his glass down on the table.

I weighed in hurriedly, trying to calm the situation and appealing directly to Roscius. "Maybe we could all just calm down before you say something you'll regret?" I suggested.

"You shut your mouth, human!" Roscius snapped.

"Do **NOT** talk to her like that!" Chaill thundered.

"Not good enough for you, was I, human? Prefer his savage nature, do you? Were you more interested in hearing about the krogan 'blood-rage'?"

"If this was a personality contest we wouldn't be able to find yours!" I retorted.

"You know what *their* kind does to women?" He jabbed his thumb at Chaill. "They share them around. They farm them out to other males, like cattle. Their women are just things to them – the females have no rights, beyond choosing which male to rut with!"

"Take Gabby's advice and don't say anything you'll regret," Chaill warned in a low growl.

Roscius turned to Chaill. "I think she'll be safer with us, krogan. Your kind doesn't have the best track record of looking out for women. Spirits only knows what you'd do if you got your hands on her. You'd probably sell her off to some plantation ready for breeding!"

Chaill stormed to his feet. The turians took a step back.

"Don't **presume** to know me! **I don't ever harm women!**" Chaill roared, furious at the suggestion. "One of the first things a krogan learns is respect for females. Our women aren't anyone's slaves. They're revered! To even consider injuring a female is totally unforgivable! And any men that do are not true krogan, but little more that *varren*!" He paused, fuming. "Only weak men abuse females."
He gave Roscius a pointed glare. "You should know that…"

Roscius bristled at the slight. I glanced around the club. Unsurprisingly, Chaill's outburst had attracted a great deal of attention. Everyone was staring at us. Roscius was still struggling to come up with a retort when a voice sounded from his left.

"What's going on here?"

Four smartly dressed asari bouncers were standing on either side of our booth.

"This krogan's causing a scene," Roscius accused.

"No, he's with me." I pointed at Chaill. "These turians are harassing us!"

It took a few minutes, but after the bouncers had spoken with some of the clientele, and reviewed the club's security footage on their omni-tools, we managed to square things away and the turians were ordered to leave.

Chaill sat down again, looking vaguely troubled. I must admit, I thought it was because he'd been denied the opportunity to pound his fist into their carapaces… I should have known better.

"An evening out with you is never dull, Chaill," I joked.

Chaill simply shook his head. "It never changes," he muttered. "Aliens assume my idea of romance is to beat a woman over the head and drag her into a cave."

"Well, that's subtler than some men I've met. But I'm assuming that's not how krogan do it?"

"Ha! No, generally we don't have as much finesse." The expression on Chaill's face fell as he seemed to become absorbed in his glass. "You've never been to Tuchanka, have you?" I shook my head. "He was right… partly, at least. It's a breeding ground, Gabby. And a cemetery. Everything is geared towards propagating the next generation. Assuming the children survive, of course. Out of a thousand births only one child lives. Doesn't leave much room for stable relationships, or romance. Those men who are skilled enough to be selected by the female clan are privileged. Blessed. They have an obligation to ensure the future of us all. All krogan are taught to strive towards that. There is no higher calling…"

I was silent for a long moment. "I had no idea."

"That's what the disease has reduced us to: breeding by numbers. Men standing on the corpses of their brothers to prove themselves to the females, while the rights of fertile women are bought, traded or fought over like they were chattel. It's brutal, Gabby. Savage! We've become the barbarians of legend."

I reached across and squeezed his hand.

"There's not…" I began, but I was interrupted.

"Excuse me," a feminine voice asked Chaill, "would you like to d…"

"No, he wouldn't! He's busy! BACK OFF!"

The startled asari jumped and almost ran into the crowd.

Chaill chuckled softly at my outburst. "That was almost krogan," he commented.
"There's nothing barbaric about you, Chaill. You're a good man. One day you'll go back and rebuild Tuchanka."

He nodded softly. "Yeah, I hope you're right. I want to go back someday. I have the skills to rebuild. It's my duty to help… But I definitely understand people like my brother – people who just want a family. Like in the old times; before the genophage; before Tuchanka became a production line."

"That's your brother dating the asari?" I asked.

Chaill nodded. "He wants children; a bondmate. He can't have them any other way."

"He realises they'll be asari children, right?"

"I'm not certain. I don't think he's asked."

"So, the women on Tuchanka have no say in running things?"

"On the contrary; everything is decided by the women," Chaill corrected. "It's the men who must prove themselves worthy. And only the best of us are selected: The strongest; the wisest; the most creative. The women are protected above all else. The men are expendable."

"You had no trouble proving yourself to everyone in here, Chaill," I pointed out, trying to lighten the mood. "Even now they're still lining up to meet you."

Chaill smiled. "To be honest, I'm probably something of a novelty. Not many krogan even bother to learn how to mix it up on the dance floor. It's not considered an important skill. I must be rare fish to asari."

"Speaking of which: what exactly did that one asari whisper to you?"

Chaill looked slightly uncomfortable. "You know, in all this excitement I think it's slipped my memory…"

I gave him a stern glare. "Chaill!"

He let out a long sigh. "She said 'Ditch the human and maybe we can have ourselves a party.'"

"Figures," I muttered. "Story of my life…" I stared at the statuesque aliens still eyeing our table. They looked so elegant, so poised, so sophisticated. And, all of them, to an asari, were regarding me with unbridled disdain, as if I was something unpleasant that had to be scrapped off the sole of their shoes. I'd had enough of the club. "I think I'll head back to the hotel, Chaill."

"I'll walk with you," he offered.

"You don't have to."

"Yeah, I do. Those turian idiots are probably getting drunk in a bar someplace, but you can never be too careful. No harm in having a little backup. In any case…" He lowered his voice and inclined his head towards the asari. "Do you know how pissed off they'd be if they saw you leaving with the one man they've been chasing all night?"

I cast a sly glance at the asari. Chaill's plan did have a certain appeal, but I was still uncertain. The decision was made for me when one of the asari whispered something to her friends, then the group looked at me and laughed… A wicked smile spread across my face.

Finding my resolve, I downed my drink in one gulp, then reached over and grabbed Chaill's hand.
before asking him in a loud voice, "Do you wanna get out of here?"

Chaill gave a cheeky grin as his reply thundered through the club, "Hell, yeah!"

I rose to my feet and dragged Chaill across the dance floor. The crowd parted before us, our exit attracting no little interest from the asari (who were probably surprised by the sight of a krogan being willingly piloted through the club by a small human), and, I noted with satisfaction, a lot of envious glares from the women at the bar. I could feel myself grinning like an idiot, but I didn't care.

Yeah, I thought, suck it, prom-queens!

We exited the club and threaded through the crowded streets. The carnival was still in full swing. We weaved between the crush of dancing asari. I turned to Chaill. He was smiling happily.

"Wish I'd taken a picture of their faces," he said.

"I could've made it my screen saver!" I replied.

Laughing, we continued through the crowds towards the hotel complex. Gradually, the noise of the carnival faded to a dull buzz.

_Pandemonium_ was famous on Cyone as a historic resort hotel offering everything its guests required, and a little more if you asked the right people. Like most colony settlements, it had started small but expanded considerably over the centuries. My apartment room was on the ground floor of an ornate complex block set apart from the main hotel and illuminated by floodlights.

There were still a few asari dancing on the fringes of the carnival when we arrived at the complex. We pulled up at my apartment door.

"That was an evening I'll long remember, Chaill. Thanks for that."

"Hey, what are dancing krogan for?" he replied with a grin and a shrug. "Besides, you were the one turning heads. I was just being carried along in your wake."

"You were doing plenty more than that," I assured him. "When's your ship leaving?"

"Tomorrow. Zero eight hundred hours."

I nodded, silently debating whether to invite him in for a drink, when I noticed a figure materialize from the shadows behind him.

Roscius and his team of goons stepped into the light and spread themselves out around us. Chaill caught the movement and turned to face them.

"Nice apartment," Roscius said conversationally. "The Alliance must have credits to burn if they're able to put you up here."

"You sneaking around behind us, pyjak?" Chaill scoffed.

"It's not like you were hard to follow, krogan," Roscius replied.

I looked around at the turians. "Guys, it's late. Don't you think you've had enough fun for the evening?" I appealed.

"But the night's still young!" Roscius barked. He reached under his jacket and unsheathed a Hierarchy-issue 'Sabre-tooth' machete – half-a-metre of polished turian durasteel. "What do you say,
krogan? Ready to show us your moves?"

Chaill stepped protectively in front of me. "You really want to do this?" His eyes flicked between the turians and the asari still dancing on the edge of the complex. "In front of witnesses?"

"We're going up against a krogan. That could easily be justified as self-defence." He grinned, his mandibles flaring outward. In the light, his once handsome face resembled a death mask. "Tell you what: how about we have a little contest?" He pointed the blade at me. "And to the winner the spoils."

Chaill didn't reply immediately. He glanced around at the turians, before slowly smiling again. "You know anything about human traditions, pyjak?" he asked. Roscius frowned in confusion. "There's one I love. Human warriors used to do it on the eve of great battles. They still do it now, in fact. But mostly for sporting events. Let me demonstrate…"

Without waiting for a reply, Chaill opened his mouth and roared.

The sound was deafening!

He bounded forward… but, instead of tackling them, he crouched down and slapped his hands against his thighs. I stared, open mouthed, as I was treated to one of the most bizarre (and terrifying) sights I'd ever witnessed: A krogan doing a haka!

" Ringa pakia! Uma tiraha!
Turi whatia! Hope whai ake!
Waewae takahia kia kino!
Ka mate! Ka mate! Ka ora! Ka ora!
Ka mate! Ka mate! Ka ora! Ka ora!
Tenei te tangata puhuru huru,
Nana nei i tiki mai,
Whakawhiti te ra,
A upa… ne! Ka upa… ne!
A upane kaupane whiti te ra!"

It was a performance I'll never forget. Chaill beat his chest, stomped his feet, slapped his elbows with his hands. The turians looked at each other in alarm. I imagine they'd never seen anything like it before. If Chaill had done that on a rugby pitch, the opposition would have fled in terror. His roars and shouts quickly attracted the attention of the asari dancing on the edge of the complex.

At the last, Chaill leapt forward, extended his huge tongue in a final defiant challenge. "HI!"

The asari broke into a round of applause. The turians looked round; only now noticing that they'd gained an audience.

Roscius's 'friends' glanced at each other, their resolve wavering. Then, one of them turned and walked away. The others quickly followed.
"You're leaving?" Roscius exclaimed. "Just like that?"

"You didn't pay us enough for this!" one of them protested.

"Call yourself hired muscle!??" Roscius shouted at their retreating backs.

Alone against a krogan, Roscius raised his blade. Chaill strode towards him. Roscius instinctively backed away and swung his machete at Chaill's head. Chaill raised his left arm.

The blade bit deeply into Chaill's forearm and wedged itself there. Ignoring the pain, Chaill pulled back, wrenching the machete out of the turian's grip. His right hand swept up, grabbing Roscius by the throat, and hauling him off the ground.

Roscius clawed at Chaill's wrist, his feet kicking uselessly in the air. "Please don't kill me!" he squealed piteously.

Chaill grunted in disgust. "Oh, please, like you're worth the effort!"

He gripped the front of the turian's expensive looking suit and pulled. There was a massive tearing sound as the outfit parted like tissue paper. Chaill continued to tear away huge chunks of fabric until only rags remained. Eventually, he dropped the naked turian to the ground. Roscius yelped and tried to cover himself with his hands.

Chaill was still holding what remained of the turian's shirt in his fist. "Call that spoils of war, whelp!"

With a humiliated squeak, Roscius turned and dashed through the cheering crowds of asari; running as if his dignity depended on it.

A pair of asari security officers emerged from the crowd. "There were reports of a disturbance," the lead officer said. "Something to do with a krogan." Their eyes fell on Chaill and the blade sticking out of his arm. "Alright, no-one leaves until we sort this out!"

For the second time that evening, I was in trouble with the authorities. Chaill grunted as he pulled the blade clear and threw it casually away, trying valiantly to ignore the pain and the spots of bright orange blood splashing onto the ground. The officers bagged the discarded machete and the shredded remains of Roscius' suit, and documented Chaill's injuries with their omni-tools. They threatened us with arrest; told us they'd report this back to our superiors. It was only after they'd taken witness statements that they let us go with a warning, as if we were the criminals. I protested, told them about Roscius' attempted assault, but was brushed off with 'We'll look into it'. I never saw Roscius again, but I did hear on the news the next day that a naked turian had been arrested for gross indecency!

When they finally let us leave, I accessed my room and had to order Chaill to sit down while I found some medi-gel from the pack in my bedroom.

"It's not necessary, Gabby," he insisted as he hovered in my bedroom doorway.

"Don't argue with me, Chaill. That cut needs treating, if only to prevent you from bleeding all over the hotel carpet! Now, for the love of God, would you stop being a baby and sit down!"

Reluctantly, he did as he was bid. He wandered towards the bed and sat down, the frame groaning under his weight.

"…Call me a baby," Chaill muttered under his breath.
Finding the medi-gel, I sat beside him. "Let's roll up your sleeve..." I began, but Chaill simply grabbed the fabric and tore away the entire sleeve, leaving his arm bare. "Or you could do that," I conceded. Removing the sleeve did give me an unobstructed view. I cleaned his arm and smeared gel into the knife wound. It was a deep cut. The flesh around the wound was puckered and yellow. "He might have killed you."

"Unlikely; that crap-slinger didn't know one end of the blade from the other. It was hardly a fight at all." He suddenly smiled and chuckled. "At least I know I can still intimidate my enemies with my moves."

"That you can, Chaill," I agreed. "You know, despite the unwanted turian advances, I did enjoy the party tonight."

"It was fairly tame by krogan standards. But, I've got this to remember it by." He nodded at his arm. "It's not a proper party unless you have a few scars to show afterwards."

"Well, I'm glad you were there, Chaill."

"Me too, Gabby. Ow!" He flinched as I set a pad of gauze against the cut and wrapped a bandage tightly around his arm.

"Yeah, you're no baby." I smiled, and tied the bandage off. When I'd finished I looked up at his face. "Thank you."

He bowed slightly. "Anytime, Gabby." We were silent for a long moment. I could feel the ridged skin of his arm beneath my fingers; the heat from his body through my clothing. It was so strange. I was sitting beside a colossally strong, naturally armoured alien; a member of a species that, if you believed conventional wisdom, were nothing but violent thugs; and a man who could probably snap me in half using just two fingers, and yet... I felt totally safe. We'd been friends for two years and I'd never once been nervous or uncomfortable in his presence. I trusted him. Just being near him was a comfort.

After a while, he looked down, breaking eye contact. "I'll... let you alone, Gabby..."

He stood, making for the door.

As I watched him go, something twisted in my stomach. In that instant, I realised that I didn't want him to leave.

He reached the door.

I got to my feet.

"Stay?" I offered. "I mean... if you want to. I'd feel safer knowing you were here..."

He turned to face me. "I... Well, only if you want to."

"Just for a while," I said. "We can talk for a bit."

Chaill nodded. "Sure."

He moved back to the bed and settled down on the edge of the mattress. The bed pinged and creaked in protest. I sat beside him, looping my arm around his.

"Huh! Guess my lucky underwear worked," I mumbled.
"What?"
"Nothing."

We were quiet for a time. I rested my head on his shoulder.

"What would you like to talk about?" he asked.

"Know anymore poetry?" I suggested.

Chaill smiled. "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, so long lives this and gives life to thee," he quoted.

I looked at him in surprise. "So, you have studied Shakespeare?"

Chaill nodded. "That line always reminds me of Tuchanka."

"I like your choice of rhyming couplets."

"A few more verses?" he suggested.

"I could be very tempted…"

CRASH!

Our conversation was rudely interrupted as, in a strained crack, the bed collapsed! We fell flat on our backs. I was suddenly confronted with 600 pounds of krogan splayed beside me. Attempting to disentangle ourselves from the wreckage, I pushed against his shoulder. He moved aside.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine." I lifted my head, trying to gauge the damage to the furniture. The bed frame had snapped in the middle, and the legs were crushed. "But I can't say the same for the bed. Look what happened."

"Yeah, I think I killed it!" he said. "That was not a sturdy construction."

"I don't think it was designed with krogan in mind, Chaill."

"Clearly a failing on the hotel's part. I shall definitely put in a complaint." I started to chuckle. "Explaining this to the management is gonna be interesting."

"You just know they're going to bill me for this."

"Well, I could offer to repair it?" Chaill suggested.

I giggled helplessly at the absurdity of it all. My body convulsed with laughter; the exertions from our dance, the tension from Chaill's fight, my churning emotions, all liberated in that release. Chaill rumbled a deep laugh in reply.

I leant across and planted a kiss on his weathered cheek. "Never change, Chaill." He grinned happily. Still lying down, I slipped my fingers between his and regarded him for a long moment. "What a combination: Engineer, dancer, fighter, poet… honestly, you'd be the ideal guy if you weren't…"

"…A krogan?" Chaill finished, a wry smile creasing his face.
"No, don't be daft!" I chided. "No, I meant if you weren't already taken."

"Who says I am?"

"What? But... you're always talking about Tuchanka and how you want to go back there... I just thought you had someone waiting for you?"

Chaill shook his head. "It's my home planet, Gabby. I've no family living there, no-one waiting for me, but I've never stopped thinking about returning home to help rebuild it someday. And... I always believed that the right person was out there for me. Someone gifted... Someone courageous... Someone truly impressive..." He smiled warmly at me.

My eyes went wide. "Oh!"

I stared up at the ceiling.

We were quiet again, lost in our own thoughts. The silence dragged on until Chaill turned towards me.

"Would you... care for another dance?" he asked. "I promise to at least try not to break anything else!"

I looked at his slightly apprehensive expression and smiled, nodding slowly in agreement, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze.

"This time..." I began, "I'll lead!"
Seeing the Light

Chapter Summary

Secrets are revealed, Erata discovers the truth and a final decision is made that will have lasting effect on the future.

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Apologies for the delay getting this chapter published, they were caused by problems outside my control.

A Matter of Race and Character

SEEING THE LIGHT

Ice Cave, Gellix – 21:25 UTC – 5th March 2183 CE

Erata was smirking, a mischievous grin directed at the human sitting opposite was plastered across her face.

What was that human expression? she wondered.

"It's always the quiet ones," Erata recited. Gabby blushed furiously.

The asari smiled knowingly at the human, then she suddenly leaned forward, her eyes wide. "You little minx! You lied to me," she accused. "Our first week in Anapondus when Chaill called you over the link, you told me there wasn't anything going on between you two."

"I never lied!" Gabby protested. "I told you the truth. I said we just danced on the Perugia. And there wasn't any 'bedroom action' at New Year… which is true."

"So you did," Erata conceded. "A crafty choice of words. You also said the Alliance doesn't encourage that kind of thing."

"Yeah… but we weren't on an Alliance world then," Gabby replied.

"A human and a krogan…" Erata muttered. "How in Athame's name did I miss that? I'm usually good at seeing the signs."

"I told you that stuff is private, Erata. I hardly knew you. And besides, Pella wasn't exactly enamoured with Chaill. It didn't seem the ideal moment to bring the subject up."

"So was there bedroom action on Cyone?"

"That is none of your damn business!"
"Oh, come on. You can't leave it there! Let's hear all the sordid details."

"That is definitely none of your damn business!" Gabby snapped. "Not that there are necessarily any details to tell..." she added hastily.

"Right, sure," Erata drawled and knowingly tapped the side of her nose with her finger. "Having met him, I can see what attracted you to him."

"He's a good guy..." Gabby agreed.

"...With some fine-ass muscles!" Erata said. "You two can't have had much in the way of privacy back on Entarus with all those salarians watching him?"

"Not exactly..." Gabby admitted.

"And being a krogan, I imagine he must have been fairly protective?"

Gabby nodded. "Chaill called regularly over the link, checking up on me, making sure I was okay. Not in so many words, of course. He was careful how he phrased the question. Neither of us had told anyone else; even Kenneth doesn't know..."

"Keeping it secret from Donnelly must have been hard."

"It was. I don't like hiding things from Kenneth. And he did start to get suspicious when he saw the damage to my shower stall..."

"I'm sorry, you broke the room?" Erata exclaimed.

"It wasn't designed for krogan!" Gabby protested. "That damned stall was too slim. It couldn't accommodate him. First time he takes a shower the divider shatters! There was glass everywhere. Stupid, poorly designed piece of crap!"

"Are you sure it wasn't because you were both trying to fit in there?" Erata smirked.

"That isn't... What makes you think anything like that happened? I'm not... Not everything has to lead to that kind of thing. At least some of us have a certain amount of restraint, thank you!"

"I'm not the one who goes around trashing hotel rooms!" Erata pointed out. "At least it was only the bed and shower."

"And the sofa... And the desk -- still not entirely sure how that happened," Gabby mumbled, staring at her feet. "A little over 8,000 credits worth of damage."

That got an impressed whistle from the asari. "Well, thank the Goddess it wasn't excessive," Erata murmured, stifling a chuckle. "I still don't see where the 'civil-case' comes in."

"Oh, the couple in the apartment room above me threatened to sue. There was a gaping hole in their bedroom floor after my ceiling fan got ripped down."

Erata doubled over in a fit of giggles. Her laughter was sharp and piercing, punctuated by deep intakes of breath. Gabby was finding it difficult to look her in the eye.

"Chaill insisted on paying for the damages," Gabby said over the laughter. "But we argued and finally he agreed we'd split the difference."

Erata calmed down enough to say, "He sounds like a great guy." She wiped a tear from her eye. "I
can see I'm going to have to work hard to top that."

"I'd appreciate you not telling anyone about this."

"You worried what other humans might think?"

"I honestly couldn't give a damn what strangers think," Gabby stated defiantly. "But I do care what the… people closest to me might say. I'm waiting for the right time…"

Erata raised her hand to her chest. "On my honour – if I had any honour! – I swear I won't tell a soul."

"Especially Kenneth…"

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Cause he's a loud-mouthed blowhard."

"Got it."

"And he'd probably have a heart attack if he found out."

"Wouldn't that be an incentive?"

"Erata, please!" Gabby implored.

"Easy there, Tiger. Your secret is safe with me."

Gabby let out a small sigh of relief. "Thank you," she said gratefully.

"I know from past experience how judgmental some people can be, even in this day and age," Erata added. "You know, while I was on Earth, I must have heard the phrase almost human directed at me at least a dozen times. I took it as a compliment. The people I was working with were projecting their own values and ways of thinking onto me… What you did on Cyone was almost asari."

The 'almost asari' grinned bashfully at the accolade. She suddenly realised that in the past few weeks she'd been compared to a turian and a krogan. She was starting to feel like a Citadel council all to herself.

"Don't worry yourself, Tiger. Humans are still newcomers to the galactic melting pot. Most need time to get a handle on new ideas. Whereas you seem to judge people for who they are, not what they are. With that in mind, answer me one thing… thinking back to that night, do you actually regret anything that happened?"

Gabby didn't need time to think about it. Almost immediately, a grin spread across her face. Of course she knew the answer:

"Hell, no!" was the firm reply.

Erata gave the human a warm smile. "There may be hope for your species yet, Tiger."

The wind had grown silent. The storm that had trapped them for five days had finally blown itself out.

Gabby slowly stirred beside Pella, her arm draped protectively over the turian's chest, warmed by her
friend's embrace. It wasn't the cessation of noise from outside that had woken Gabby from her slumber, but rather the prickling sensation crawling across her arm.

Gabby moaned and blinked. She half-expected to see Erata stroking her arm and opened her mouth to rebuke the asari.

The sight that greeted her wasn't Erata.

A fiery red klixen larva was crawling up the bed roll.

Gabby yelped and lashed out with her arm sending the klixen flying across the cave. It hit the wall and slithered down to the ground before scuttling away.

Erata was awake in an instant.

"Whas…?" the asari murmured. Then she stared around the cave in alarm.

The walls and floor were alive with small scuttling red bodies.

"Klixen!" she screamed. "They're swarming."

Gabby frantically tried to untangle herself from the bedroll. She grabbed her pistol and stood up, dragging her eyes over the mass of scuttling creatures that seemed to be concentrated around the latrine. "They're coming up through the fissure!"

Erata's body glowed blue as she projected a barrier around herself and her friends.

Gabby fired a shot into the mass of klixen crawling closest to her. The bullet exploded in the ground, leaving a small impact crater and sending the creatures scurrying away. Gabby peeled off another shot, then another. Each shot sent the alien insects scurrying away.

But more creatures were pouring out of the fissure.

Gabby fired into the mass but the sea of red was increasing rapidly.

"We've got to get out of here."

Erata sent a wave of energy into the creatures. The wave backed them into the corner, but they soon regrouped and once again grew in number. Erata was about to grab her own pistol when something caught her ear.

At first faint and heavily muffled, the first voices they'd heard in six days that weren't their own slowly grew in intensity.

Gabby turned to face the cavern entrance. "In here," she yelled, waving her arms as if they could see her. "We're in here. Can you hear us? Damn it!" Shaking her head at her rookie mistake, she flicked on her omni-tool, searching for any live signal.

"They can probably read our body heat through their scanners," Erata said projecting a barrier, though it was noticeably weaker than before. In her malnourished state, Erata's biotics weren't nearly as powerful. "They know we're here."

The bright orange glow of Gabby's omni-tool suddenly sprung to life. A screen appeared above her forearm and the welcome face of Commander Joric stared back at her.

"Vettiill? D'C… …Daniels? Can you hear… …do you read?" Joric demanded. Static disrupted the
signal. "…please respond."

"We read you, Commander," Gabby answered, hoping she could hear her over the gunfire. "It's good to see you made it."

"You too," Joric replied. "We're right outside. What's y... status?"

"Three survivors, one badly wounded," Erata interjected; her omni-tool had also picked up the signal. "Artificer Vettiill is unconscious but stable. She needs immediate medical attention." She fired off three rounds at the klixen.

"Why are you shootin...? What's going on?" Joric demanded.

"Pest control!" Gabby yelled back and blew apart a larva that had gotten too close.

"Stand back fro... the entrance," Joric ordered. "We're coming through."

Gabby stepped away from the fallen rocks, continuing to fire round after round into the mass of red bodies. Despite the attacking creatures into the cave, relief flooded through her body. She was already imagining herself back on Arcadias and the one thing she truly wanted: a steaming hot bath!

Suddenly there was a crash behind her. Gabby shielded her eyes against the dust that suddenly surged inward. Daylight flooded the cavern as the sweet scent of fresh air filled her nostrils.

An armoured figure appeared in the entrance. It was a man bathed in light, his body silhouetted dramatically against the sun's rays shimmering off the cloud of dust in shining bands of light. The moment would have been slightly more impressive if he hadn't suddenly coughed fitfully at the dust surrounding him. Gabby blinked. She would recognize that cough anywhere…

"Kenneth!"

"Ga... {cough}... Gabby?" Kenneth peered into the gloom, his eyes adjusting to the dark. After a moment, he saw his friend and rushed forward to embrace her.

Gabby opened her arms to catch him. He wrapped his arms around her and she buried her head in Kenneth's shoulder, hugging the cold metal of his armoured back.

Just holding him.

Neither of them were aware of the crowd of shadowy forms emerging from the light. Turian troopers flocked into the cave to beat back the klixen larva with boots and weapons. They were followed by a group of medics.

After a long moment Kenneth finally spoke, his voice thick with emotion. "Can I no leave you alone for five minutes, girl? You had me worried sick!"

Gabby suppressed a quiet sob of relief. She hastily wiped her eye. "Yeah, so worried you didn't even try and contact me on my omni-tool!" she fired back.

Kenneth broke away from their embrace. He looked embarrassed. "Aye, well, I couldn't... my omni-tool's broken... long story..."

Behind him, Commander Joric materialized in the entrance, her stern gaze scouring the cave. She looked battle weary. There was a fresh cut healing above her right eye. Two guards trailed behind her, followed by Khoris, the turian sporting a bandage around his neck. Khoris spotted Pella being
examined by a medic and rushed to her side.

Erata was being helped unsteadily to the entrance by a medic.

Joric turned to Gabby. "The three officers with you?" she asked.


"You can thank Donnelly for that," Joric replied. "After we retraced your gunship's flight to the Dytane Colony, we picked up a distress signal as we entered the region. It was a fake! All my troops have been accounted for apart from the three officers I assigned to protect you. Donnelly realised that if you'd followed the signal too and then crashed, or been caught in the storm, then you would need to get to shelter. He reconfigured our scanners to lock onto your omni-tool's wavelength and we picked up your life signs once we got within range."

"So is Arcadias in orbit?" Gabby asked Kenneth.

"Arcadias, plus another pair of cruisers and a dreadnought!" Kenneth replied. "The Hierarchy doesn't mess around when it comes to rescue missions."

"Especially where our allies are concerned," Joric put in. "It took a few days but we managed to get communications back online and sent out a distress signal. The leadership dispatched as many ships as it could spare."

Gabby shook her head in amazement. "Did you land at Entarus Station?"

"Aye, but they're a funny lot there, Gabby. After we landed, some crazy woman with a leg wound greeted me by giving me a Glasgow kiss."

"Jerash!" Gabby laughed, relieved the Liaison Officer had survived and seemed to have lost none of her restraint. "You learn to love it, Ken."

The medic examining Pella turned to Joric. "We can move Officer Vettiill onto the shuttle, ma'am."

"Take them to Arcadias," Joric ordered.

Exhausted and starving, Gabby finally succumbed to all the excitement. Her body threatened to keel over and she staggered against Kenneth. He caught her and propped her arm over his shoulder.

"Lean on me," he insisted.

"Thanks," Gabby whispered gratefully. They waited as Pella was stretchered from the cave.

Kenneth helped his friend to the entrance. "You know, you could really use a shower," he said quietly.

"Yeah? Well, I've been trapped in a hole in the ground for the past week. What's your excuse?"

She squinted as they emerged from the cave, her eyes stinging in the light. She shielded her eyes to see eight hovering turian shuttles and a dozen Tyrus APCs. In the distance, a squad of troops were examining the wreckage of the snow-covered shuttle they'd used to escape in.

"This is all for us?" she asked in amazement.

"Did the thresher maw give you any trouble?"

Kenneth looked sharply at her. "What thresher maw?"

As if in reply, the ground started to shake. A great roar reverberated through the rocks and a fountain of ice exploded near to the ground troops.

The vast bulk of a thresher maw emerged from the ground, roaring a challenge to the interlopers in its territory.

The turians responded in kind.

Before Gabby and Ken knew what was happening, the hovering shuttles and the convoy of Tyrus’ opened fire. The thresher maw was hit from all sides by a barrage of missiles. The creature roared in fury and pain, its armoured body wracked by a hail of gunfire.

Gabby could feel the heat and shockwaves from the blasts all the way across the plain. A tsunami of missiles hit the creature. Under such heavy bombardment even thresher maws couldn't survive. The creature twisted and turned, seeking out the source its attackers until it finally succumbed to the volleys and fell to the ground, its lifeless body pockmarked with the wounds of dozens of missiles.

Gabby and Ken stared at the scene open-mouthed. The attack had lasted barely a minute. They couldn't have asked for a clearer demonstration of the Hierarchy’s military prowess.

The cavalry had arrived.

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**Infirmary, Hierarchy Vessel 'Arcadias' – 20:30 Zulu – 8th March**

Gabby lay on her bed reflecting on the last few days. Kenneth casually leant against the wall, while Pella lay up in the room next door, still recovering from her injuries. Two drams of Scotch were by her bedside. Kenneth hadn't forgotten her request, and religiously brought her a glass from his special reserve every evening to help raise her spirits. He never commented on the fact the scotch remained untouched and Gabby was too polite to tell him she really couldn't actually stand the stuff!

While the rescue on Gellix had been considered a triumph, it was curious how each race spun the story. In the Asari Republics it was reported that, 'Noted Order of Serrice engineer Erata D’Ceni, successfully led a small group of multi-species personnel through the frozen wastes of Gellix to safety, having miraculously survived the deadly attack of a thresher maw.'

The Turian Hierarchy, meanwhile, had officially commended Artificer First Class Pella Vettiill on her bravery in the face of adversity, overcoming grievous injury and the tragic loss of her fellow officers to selflessly support her non-turian crewmates.

While the Systems Alliance Networks ran with, 'Three rescued from thresher maw attack on Gellix. Alliance engineer Gabriella Daniels among the survivors. Miss Daniels is said to be well and escaped with minor injuries.'

**Bloody typical!**

Erata had been shipped back to Thessia only the day before and Gabby was taking the absence of her blue-skinned friend hard. In many ways, Erata reminded Gabby of Kenneth. They'd been through so much together that she was going to miss her easy smile and witty demeanour. Although, just before she’d left, the asari had been behaving very oddly.
Erata had been wringing her hands and pacing back and forth in the infirmary for most of the day, apparently nervous about a call she was expecting from Thessia. When the link finally connected, Erata, somewhat hesitantly, answered it.

Another asari appeared on the monitor; a doctor Gabby gathered.

Erata swallowed nervously and sat down. The doctor gave Gabby an appraising glance, but Erata said it was fine to talk in front of her.

A few seconds passed. Erata listened gravely to what the doctor had to say.

Then…

"Thank the Goddess!"

A few seconds into the call Erata had leapt up and began, quite literally, dancing around the room screaming, "I'm not! I'm not! Tiger, I'm not!"

"You're not what?" Gabby called back in exasperation.

Erata's response was to kiss her…

Ardently. Passionately. On the lips!

Gabby had been too shocked to do anything but sit there, her cheeks searing with embarrassment as Erata's soft lips locked against hers. Blue fingers curled through dark auburn hair, entwining them both. Overwhelmed, Gabby took a quick breath. Erata's fragrance engulfed her senses; the alien's alluring scent and gentle but firm touch quickly overwhelming her. Gabby suddenly felt light-headed, utterly dumbfounded and weirdly turned on at the same time. After the confusing feelings she'd had for Chaill, and now her reaction to Erata's kiss, Gabby began to have serious concerns about her proclivities.

Am I becoming a xenophile?

After what felt like an eternity, Erata finally broke the adoring kiss. The asari brushed a few loose strands of Gabby's hair away from her face, her lips curled into a euphoric smile.

"I'm just… not," she clarified unhelpfully.

Gabby stared back in astonishment.

That was one experience she definitely wasn't telling Kenneth about!

Erata swore to keep in touch, and since she'd left Gabby had kept herself busy replying to the various correspondence and video calls that had flooded in from her parents, Chaill, Alliance Command and the families of the turian security officers. All of them had expressed either their relief in her safety or gratitude in her letters. But she was getting bored of being cooped up. In truth, Captain Verress had probably given her more time to recover than she needed. She wondered if the Captain was concerned about how it would look if the Hierarchy lost an Alliance crewman on a turian vessel. Gabby was grateful for the downtime, but after spending several days trapped in an ice cave, and a further two recovering in the infirmary, she was starting to get a little stir-crazy. Thank God for Kenneth. He'd kept her entertained with his customary lewd humour and mild sexism. She'd never admit it to him, but she had missed the sight of his conceited, Scottish mug. He was probably the only man she knew who could keep her sane while simultaneously driving her up-the-wall!
Gabby was looking forward to getting back on an Alliance vessel. After the events of the last six weeks, she was relishing the chance for a little peace and normality…

Arcadias was due to rendezvous with the Perugia's shuttle tomorrow. Overall, the exchange could not be judged to be a success. Eight crewmen from Gellix were dead, while two senior officers from Arcadias had been transferred, and a third was on light duty due to injuries sustained in a fight. Meanwhile, Gabby was being sent home to convalesce and Kenneth was facing a non-judicial inquiry into his conduct.

There would be serious questions to answer when they got back to the Alliance…

Initially, she was surprised not to be treated by Dr. Tesserius; instead she had been greeted by a small army of auxiliary medics. Later, she learned Tesserius had been sent to Palavan in disgrace. And then, later still, she learned the reason why… Not from Kenneth of course. He never mentioned a thing. Nor what had happened between himself and Severan. She'd been privately debating whether to bring the subject up.

"Wherever have you been hiding Officer Severan?" she asked innocently, "I haven't seen her around."

"She left," Kenneth replied curtly. "Re-assigned to another ship. Orders from above. You know how it is."

"That's a shame. I liked her."

Kenneth looked away from Gabby and nodded. "Aye, me too," he muttered quietly.

Gabby studied his expression. After so many years of working together she could read him like an open book. He looked crestfallen; depressed, and utterly lost.

*Enough was enough; surely he needed to talk to someone about it?*

"I'm sorry she's gone. She was nice… and from what I hear, you two made a great couple. You must miss her, Ken."

Kenneth stared at her in astonishment. She'd been in isolation for most of her recovery, how had she found out?

"Who mentioned it?" he demanded.

"Pella told me."

"She's only been awake a few hours; how did she find out?"

"From about half the crew who visited her. Scuttlebutt's all over it. You didn't exactly keep it a secret, Ken. Except from me."

Kenneth's face fell. He looked away from her. "Aye, Gabby… I was gonna tell you… It just never seemed like the right time. There was so much I had planned… So much I wanted to do. But I canna do that now. 'Cause she's gone… And it's my fault," he said gravely. "She'd still be here if it wasn't for me. I didn't have to go to the infirmary, Gabby. My shoulder wasn't that bad. I could have stuck it out. It would have healed. No-one else needed to know, but I… I went to that traitorous scunner. Trusted him. 'Cause he was a doctor. And now she's gone. Because of me. So it's my fault. I ruined everything. I ruined her career. I ruined a chance for… To have…" he stopped abruptly, blinking as he stared at his feet.
Gabby sat up, suddenly concerned. This was a side of him she rarely saw. Kenneth hid his emotions well and he was never usually one for self-pity, but this incident had really hit him hard. He genuinely blamed himself. She hadn't realised his feelings for Valni were that strong. The last thing she wanted was to see him fall apart over this.

"It wasn't your fault, Ken," she said, trying to reassure him. He looked up at her, a frown creasing his brow, his eyes brighter than normal. "It wasn't. You couldn't have known what that asshole doctor would do. Neither could Valni. He poisoned her, not you. It wasn't your fault." He nodded slowly. She wasn't sure if he was agreeing with her or not. "You going to be okay?" she asked, worry seeping into her voice. "You know I'm always here for you, right?"

Kenneth sniffed and nodded vigorously. "Oh aye. Dinha fret, girl," he assured her, forcing a cheerful grin. "I'll be fine… An' besides, if I ever feel lonely I'll just think of you, Erata and Pella trapped in that ice cave together… The three of you huddled close against the freezing temperatures; your arms and legs entwined, nourishing each other with heat…"

"Kenneth..."

"Blue, tan, and pink skin pressed tightly together…"

"Stop it, Kenneth."

"…Desperately trying to keep the blood flowing!"

"Kenneth!"

"Tell me: Was there stroking involved? Did you need lots of shared bodily warmth?"

"Damn it, Kenneth, I will drop you right now if you don't shut the hell up!"

"Oh, you're no fun, girl." Gabby turned back to her message board, pointedly ignoring the lounge lizard in the corner. "That paperwork has you engrossed," he commented.

"It's a private matter."

"Not a message from Erata, is it?" Ken's tone was ever hopeful.

"No, it's from Chaill."

"Oh." Evidently there was no fun to be had there. "Spare us from more bloody rugby scores."

"Actually, Kenneth, he and I…," Gabby hesitated; how much should she tell him? How much could she tell him? "We're… setting up a temporary joint account to help pay for some essential equipment."

"Like what?"

"Just some stuff that needs repairing."

"Sounds tedious," Kenneth remarked sagely. "Still, a joint account – that's a lot of trust you're putting in him."

Gabby was silent as she mulled the comment over for a few seconds before responding from her heart:

"I trust him as much as I trust you, Ken."
Kenneth stared back at Gabby, a playful half-smile on his lips. "And does he know you hold him in such low esteem?" he asked eventually.

He expected the pillow and didn't bother to duck as it struck him in the face. He grinned. Gabby's aim had improved. She must be feeling better. "I will take that as you asking me to leave. If you'd like I can pop in tomorrow and you can practice your throw?"

"Don't let the door hit you on the way out, jackass."

"G'night, Gabby." He opened the lock and hovered in the doorway before turning back. "You know, since we're sharing, it's only fair you tell me what you three did to pass the time in that cave."

"See you tomorrow, Kenneth." The door hissed shut. Alone again, Gabby played Chaill's vid-message for a second time.

"My dear Gabriella – I've attached account details to this vid to help with the repairs to the hotel room. I know the management have been patient, and you did insist on sharing the responsibility, even though I claim most of the liability for the damage – Well, apart from that ceiling fan!

"I have some news… I've been working with the scientists here and I've developed a new method of energy distribution: A new type of solar collector to convert radiation into heat. Into energy for dwellings. We seem to have a surplus of radiation on Tuchanka! I've named it 'Gabriella', in your honour. I hope you don't mind.

"There something else: It turns out… turns out you were right to send that vid footage of me to Tuchanka. Torsk saw me dancing with Pella and pretty much flew into a blind rage as I expected – he even started ranting about how he was going to throw me into a varren pit!" Chaill chuckled at the memory. "But more importantly, the vids got through the female clan. Seems my work has gained me greater standing with them. Apparently their shaman appreciates my efforts to establish relations with the salarians." He laughed heartily. "Would you believe it they've even offered me breeding rights? I've had five requests in the last week! She even wants to see the schemata I'd made for new structures for Tuchanka. She wants new buildings for the female clan! I'm in demand again. And all thanks to you, Gabby. You've given me a chance to help restore my clan; to help rebuild my planet. It's an offer I can't ignore… At the end of my tour on the Auroto, I've decided to move back to Tuchanka."

The krogan glanced down at the floor, his expression troubled. "I've been wondering how to phrase this properly… If you hate me for doing this, if you never want to see me again because of this decision, then… I'll understand, Gabby. But, know that I don't want to lose you from my life… I don't choose my friends lightly, and it has been a continual honour and pleasure knowing you.

I named it 'Gabriella', in your honour. I hope you don't mind.

There will always be a place for you here at my dwelling if you visit – you could even bring the Scottish one with you! I think he needs to be dragged out of that Engine Room now-and-then. Some sun might even do him some good. Ha! And… I would love the chance to show you Tuchanka, to show you what it can become; what we can make it. It was so beautiful once. It will be again.

"And when Tuchanka is restored, a brick and town and city at a time, I'll remember, and I'll make sure everyone remembers, that you made it possible, Gabby.

Chaill broke into verse.

"To restore the splendour of a broken home,
"So weary travellers need no longer roam,
Though we may develop in fits and starts,
They will know your name, the possessor of my hearts."

Chaill looked at something over his shoulder.
"I've gotta go now, Gabby. You take care of yourself." Chaill touched his hand to the screen. "Your friend – Urdnot Chaill."

The screen went black, leaving only a final signatory message in bold text. Gabby read it and grinned with delight.

That sweet corny, romantic, lovable krogan.

He'd signed off with: We'll always have Pandemonium.

Gabby leaned back and reflected on what Kenneth had said… He claimed he was fine, but she knew him too well. He was covering; trying to bury the hurt. He needed the time to heal, time to move on. The one thing he didn't need was further separation. He needed stability.

I can provide that, she thought.

She couldn't leave him alone. Not now, not when he was vulnerable… Chaill… Chaill had a planet to rebuild; he had a mission; Gabby wasn't sure she could be a part of that, she didn't know whether she could make a difference on Tuchanka… but she could make a difference to Kenneth.

Decision made, Gabby started to draft a reply to Chaill.

She was going to face the future with Kenneth. Help him through this.

And maybe, sometime in the future, when she was certain Kenneth was ready, she would tell him what she and Erata had talked about in that cave…

…If only to see the look on his face!
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

On Cronos Station, the Illusive Man takes an interest in two Alliance engineers...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Inner Sanctum, Cronos Station – 10:05 UTC – 11th November 2183 CE

It was Veterans Day, otherwise known as Armistice Day. Not the more recent armistice, commemorating both the ceasefire of the First Contact War and humanity's violent and disturbing discovery that they were not alone in the Universe (that was earlier in the year), but the traditional Armistice: The one recognised on Earth for centuries honouring every human veteran in every war. In a little under an hour the requisite two-minute silence would be observed by every member of Cerberus personnel on-board the station, without exception.

The lights in the room were dimmed. The Illusive Man, leader of Cerberus, sat with a cigarette in his hand, surveying the numerous news feeds and images projected by the main holographic display; the myriad moving images emblazoned against the magnificent view of the red giant Cronos station was currently orbiting.

He was focused on the reports filtering in from the major news agencies. It had been several months since the turian traitor Saren, and Sovereign, the massive 'Reaper' dreadnought leading the geth fleet, had attacked the Citadel, and the alien races were still picking up the pieces from the devastation wrought by just one 'Reaper' ship. If the reports from Commander Shepard were accurate, there were potentially thousands of similar ships out there, all intent on the absolute destruction of every race in the galaxy.

The 'Reapers' were now the single greatest threat in the history of mankind. And humanity needed a champion.

Officially, Sovereign was a geth construction, and both the Citadel Council and the Systems Alliance had publicly dismissed Shepard's claims of 'Reaper forces threatening the Galaxy' as deluded nonsense, despite significant evidence to the contrary.

But the Illusive Man knew better.

He prided himself on his ability to multi-task. The main screen displayed three different holographic images. To his left were the remains of Commander Shepard – a sickening mass of meat and tubes that barely retained any human features – recovered by Cerberus (with a little help from Shepard's asari friend) following the surprise attack on the Normandy some weeks earlier. Resurrecting Shepard was going to be a significant undertaking, but the Illusive Man had ploughed several billion credits into Project Lazarus, and was assured of a return on his investment.

The central image was a kaleidoscope of different news reports covering reactions and opinions from the galactic community following the death of the first human Spectre – some mourning, others vilifying, and a few claiming 'The Shepard' was still alive and would soon return.
Which is mostly true, the Illusive Man agreed.

He glanced to his right and the projection of the new and improved frigate based on the original SSV Normandy design currently being constructed by Cerberus engineers out in the Voyager Cluster. Work had only just begun on the ship but estimates for its completion were good: 16 months until it was spaceworthy. That too was a significant investment, but if humanity was to have any future, any chance against the threat that was looming on the horizon, they needed any edge over the other species that they could get.

The sound of footsteps heralded the return of his assistant. He lifted his hand and a computer pad containing a list of dossiers for potential crewmembers was slipped between his fingers. He didn't bother to look at the female subordinate and dismissed her with a slight nod. The dark-haired assistant withdrew again without saying a word – having worked for Cerberus for several years now, the woman had become familiar with her boss's habits.

The Illusive Man scrutinized the pad. The preliminary list of five names provided by the capable Agent Rasa was, at first glance, satisfactory, but needed a greater diversity of talent. At present, the dossiers mostly consisted of human candidates: the thief Kasumi Goto; mercenary Zaeed Massani; the biotic criminal known as 'Jack' – a curious choice considering the damage to various Cerberus facilities 'Jack' had wrought on the organisation. But the convict was also the most powerful human biotic in existence, and needs must in times of crisis. That was assuming Shepard could control such a violent individual, of course.

The names on the list weren't exactly the kind of people Shepard was used to working with, but this first draft did at least include one of the Commander's former SR-1 crew: the quarian Tali'Zorah vas Neema, formerly nar Rayya.

The Illusive Man frowned as he considered the alien engineer. The quarian's technical skills would certainly be beneficial on the new ship, and it couldn't hurt to have a familiar face (metaphorically speaking) that Shepard trusted, even if she wasn't human. However, Cerberus' past-history with the quarians was a definite stumbling block. After the high-profile failure of one of their snatch-and-grab operations against the Migrant Fleet, he had serious doubts she could be convinced to join the crew. To the quarians, Cerberus was little more than a terrorist organisation. Recruiting her might prove prohibitively difficult.

Taking a long drag of the cigarette, the Illusive Man let the warm tendrils of smoke curl around his mouth before he finally exhaled and let his mind come to a decision. He placed Tali'Zorah's name aside in a separate folder and then resumed reading. The list of candidates was far from complete.

He made a mental note to instruct Agent Rasa to research other possible non-humans. Commander Shepard's previous crew was a veritable smorgasbord of Council and non-Council races. If they had any hope of getting the once resurrected Shepard to trust Cerberus, then the Illusive Man needed to demonstrate he was at least open to diversity and willing to seek the help of aliens, even if the idea sickened him to his very core. But that was a minor sacrifice if it convinced Shepard to work with Cerberus.

At least the last name on the list shows promise, he decided.

The Illusive Man began to read through the profile of the STG operative and geneticist, Professor Mordin Solus (suspected of collaborating in a secret project to modify the genophage), when his attention was drawn back to the activities on the main screen: An Alliance crewman was being asked by a reporter what he thought of the Council's treatment of Commander Shepard.

"...It's a load of blue bollocks is what it is!" the man practically yelled back. "It shows what our
leaders think of our servicemen. How can we have any faith in our representatives when they have no respect for our war-heroes? Especially today! Shepard was the first human Spectre. Someone we should have listened to. Someone who deserved our respect. And what do they do? Dismiss everything the Commander said! What Shepard did was nothing short of a miracle. Defeating Saren! Destroying Sovereign! I saw that monstrosity first-hand and I'm telling ya there's no way that was a geth ship. And for the Council to just brush it all under the carpet is a slap in the face of every hero who died in that battle. Aye, turian heroes as well. Thousands of turian and human lives were lost that day, an' for what? So a few politicians could forget them a few months down the line? And tear apart everything Shepard worked for? If you ask me, the Council have their heads jammed firmly up their arses!"

The engineer would have continued his diatribe, but was dragged away by another Alliance crewman, a woman who remonstrated with him as they walked. The on-screen graphic had listed the crewman as 'Alliance Engineer Kenneth Donnelly'.

The Illusive Man frowned.

Donnelly? That name was familiar. Where have I heard it before?

Keying the name into the archive, the Illusive Man initiated a quick search. It came back with a hit. The records showed the name 'Kenneth Donnelly' had been mentioned in a restricted communique that Cerberus Intelligence had intercepted between Alliance Command and a turian cruiser.

Digging a little deeper revealed an incident report filed earlier in the year. Turian scouts had witnessed seeing a shuttle that they thought was using experimental stealth technology over the Cerberus thresher maw control test site on Erros – and one of the witnesses was Kenneth Donnelly.

The Illusive Man recalled the incident now; it had been simple bad luck that their shuttle had been detected, despite the use of stealth technology from the original Normandy. He nodded gently, remembering his surprise at the time that of all the people to witness the shuttle it had been an Alliance engineer.

With a few keystrokes, the Illusive Man entered the Alliance database and accessed Donnelly's file. According to his records, he had been part of the Interspecies Engineering Programme – That would explain why he was on a turian ship – but further reading revealed something more interesting: an official reprimand. Donnelly had started a clandestine relationship with his turian Liaison Officer.

The Illusive Man's eyebrows rose slightly in surprise.

Intriguing; disgusting, but intriguing.

It was evident Donnelly was no xenophobe, a fact that under different circumstances would have made the Illusive Man reject him in a heartbeat, but, in this case, the engineer's naïve open-mindedness was useful; it made him a potential candidate for the latest Cerberus operation.

The Illusive Man quickly skimmed over Donnelly's service record.

It was a laundry list of minor infractions and petty contraventions; the most recent requiring strict non-judicial punishment, including three-weeks suspension of pay, after he was involved in a brawl with a fellow shipmate. According to the report a scuffle had erupted when a drunken crewman confronted the engineer and yelled 'Hey, Dirty Donnelly! Is it true 'bout your sex life? Did you really get so desperate you shagged a freaky dinosaur bird?'

Donnelly had broken the crewman's nose.
Beyond the reprimands there were numerous commendations for his work. Cited as one of the most technically skilled engineers in the fleet, he was second in proficiency only to… his team-mate Gabriella Daniels.

The Illusive Man called up her file. It was the woman who had pulled Donnelly away. And her technical scores were exemplary. Possibly the best he’d seen, in fact.

Another potential candidate, perhaps?

Reading through her file revealed she had also been selected for the IEP, and her records showed she’d been one of the few to survive the thresher maw massacre on Gellix. The Illusive Man remembered that incident well. Only three survivors had been rescued from that attack: an asari, a turian and a human. He’d paid little thought to the survivors at the time. His attention was focused on the destruction of the prototype stealth shuttle that was being tested in the Arrae System.

One of the Cerberus Cells was conducting experiments to see if they could control thresher maws.

They couldn’t. And The Illusive Man's disappointment at that failure had motivated him to seek an alternative route to studying thresher maws. As it turned out, the neighbouring planet of Gellix was a perfect testing ground.

Cerberus was in the process of setting up a base of operations on Gellix. A thresher maw nest had been detected close to one of the old abandoned prisons – its location remote enough that they wouldn’t attract unwanted attention. Or, at least, that was the plan.

Unfortunately, a batarian mercenary group had been operating in the region, jumping from prison to prison to, constantly on the move to avoid detection. In order to neutralise this threat, Cerberus operatives planted a bomb in one of the prisons the batarians were expected to use. They thought it amusing to rig the main generator with a batarian-made mine.

The plan failed when a group of turian engineers unexpectedly showed up and triggered the device.

But this new development was not without benefit. Where others saw problems, the Illusive Man saw opportunities. Cerberus Intelligence had already broken Hierarchy encryptions, and was adept at faking turian authorisation codes. Of the two groups, the turians were most likely to be duped into the thresher maw nest.

But then the batarians attacked the turians.

Only two Cerberus operatives were on site when the turians approached in a gunship. The operatives barely had time to evacuate in their only working shuttle before the turians arrived. Eventually, the turians managed to repair and commandeer the second prototype shuttle and pilot it directly towards a false distress beacon that the operatives had set. It was mere luck that a squad of batarian mercs had followed the turians into the nest.

The prototype was destroyed by the thresher maw in the ensuing battle.

Yet, the data gathered had been invaluable – the death of so many aliens was of little consequence, and the destruction of the shuttle could be judged an acceptable loss. The Cerberus base, however, had been compromised. The region was still too hot. There was a possibility the base would have to be mothballed.

However, the fact Daniels had survived demonstrated a certain degree of resourcefulness in the engineer.
Well, isn't that interesting? Two of the most highly rated and talented engineers in the Alliance beginning to grow disillusioned with the organisation.

The Illusive Man was an expert at reading people's motivations. From their service record it was evident these two were used to working as a team, and an incredibly efficient unit at that. All top-rated Alliance personnel, in every field, were screened for consideration to join Cerberus. According to their notes, the pair had never been considered because of their pro-alien sympathies – their past associations with turians, krogan, asari and salarians, had invalidated their recruitment. They were officially considered 'undesirable'.

But then, so was Kelly Chambers, he reflected.

After a few moments of thought The Illusive Man reached a decision. Spinning his chair, he turned to face the circular communication pad in the centre of the room, and let his fingers dance over the controls on his armrest. The holographic display behind him disappeared, leaving only the view of the red giant as a suitably dramatic backdrop. A second later, the image of the bald and pale face of Dr Shalinar, chief researcher at the Voyager Cluster base, appeared on the communication pad.

"Yes sir," Shalinar said, turning to face his boss. "I wasn't expecting your call."

"I may have some new recruits for you. I'm sending you the profiles of two Alliance engineers."

"Alliance?" Shalinar exclaimed, clearly troubled by the news. "Sir, we already have a full quota of former Alliance operatives. We don't need another pair of dishonourable discharges clogging up our books."

"They're not. At the moment they're still employed by the Alliance. I want them co-opted for the Lazarus Cell. This is a sensitive operation, it needs sympathetic personalities."

"Are they any good?"

"The best, doctor," the Illusive Man assured him, a little coldly.

Shalinar received the data on his omni-tool and quickly skimmed through Donnelly's file, his frown deepening the more he read. After a brief pause the man looked up at his superior.

"With a turian?" he exclaimed, an expression of revulsion on his face.

"As I said: sympathetic personalities."

"We are employing a great deal of pro-alien crewmen for this project, sir," Shalinar protested. His objections to the selection of Kelly Chambers as Yeoman had been quite vocal, despite her qualifications and experience in psychology. Chambers' previous associations with aliens (and infrequent lascivious interactions with some of them), had set her apart from other Cerberus recruits. But these were exceptional circumstances, and the Illusive Man had judged her appointment necessary. "I worry the crew may lose sight of their ultimate goal," Shalinar finished.

The Illusive Man nodded in agreement. "A necessary risk, but I have confidence in Operative Lawson's ability to keep the Cell loyal. And there are other means of control. The modified Hannibal AI recovered from the base on Luna will ensure we retain command of all ship functions. Even if the crew should forget where their allegiance lies, we can still recall the ship. Our investment will remain intact."

"Very well, I'll recruit them immediately, sir."
"No. Not yet. Wait until we start to see results from Project Lazarus. Commander Shepard is a valuable resource and will need a crew to match. Keep their names on file but be sure to maintain our ambiguity. As far as they should know, we're a private military contractor with a humanitarian agenda. Be sure to offer Donnelly a substantial bonus for his services."

"And Daniels?" Shalinar asked as he glanced down at her file. "With her service record she seems the more desirable candidate. Should I recruit them separately, or both together?"

"Just Donnelly initially – we don't want the Alliance to think we're poaching their best engineers. Send him some non-classified schemata on the ships' main core, along with details of the propulsion system and expected working conditions, just as a taster. Those two are used to operating as a team. If we employ Donnelly first, then Daniels' recruitment should take care of itself."

"Yes sir."

The Illusive Man killed the transmission.

He spun back to the view of the red giant and took another drag of his cigarette, his mind still dwelling on Shepard's new crew.

Shepard would never knowingly work with a 'terrorist' organisation. And the majority of Cerberus recruits were loath to cooperate with aliens. Most Cerberus operatives harboured a deep distrust of the other galactic species. But these two engineers, like Kelly Chambers, were ideal candidates for what the Illusive Man had planned. They would be the official 'face' of Cerberus for Commander Shepard – a smokescreen to conceal the organisations' true beating heart. It was a charade, yes, but a necessary one given the circumstances.

What was that phrase Chambers had used during her interview?

'Character matters. Not race or gender.'

The Illusive Man shook his head. Such childlike naïveté.

Those people were too idealistic to accept the truth about how the Galaxy worked. Only the strongest held authority and it was Mankind's destiny to dominate and control all other forms of life. Because only through control could there be peace…

A beep from his console distracted him from his thoughts. Another link was coming in. The Illusive Man turned back to the pad and accepted the call from Operative Leng, his mind now on other matters.

There was still much to do…

FIN

Valni Severan (and other major characters) will return in

'A Matter of Time and Space'

An original action thriller set in 2185, during the events of Mass Effect 2.

Chapter End Notes
Author's Note: My sincere thanks to everyone who has read, and/or reviewed the story. You guys are awesome!

For the next one, I can promise a few things: Firstly, Valni is going to be the star of the story. I think she deserves to take centre stage and will be returning with a real bang. Secondly, the tone of the story will be different from AMoRaC. While it'll still contain its fair share of comedy and banter, the sequel will be more action orientated, with a hint of spy thriller thrown into the mix. I shan't reveal exactly where it's set but, rest assured, it will be a well-known location, and the story will include a host of new characters, plus a few familiar faces.

And just to warn you, the sequel will be rated 'Explicit' due to violence (I'm pulling out all the stops with the action scenes), some strong language, and a wee bit more (cough) sexual content.

AMoRaC does have its fair share of amorous activities, but I've decided to up the ante slightly and include some more risqué love scenes. I'm not talking anything explicit like '50 Shades of Severan' or something – I will try, to the best of my meagre abilities, to keep the love scenes tasteful and attempt to make them relevant to the story, which can is quite difficult to do (I hope I'm not setting myself up for a fall here).

By the way, as to the question of why I chose Erata's name specifically, simply go onto google or Wikipedia and do a search for: 'Greek muses'…

Once again, thank you all for reading – I hope you enjoyed my scribbles as much as I enjoyed scribbling them down, and I'm delighted you joined me for the ride. :-)

Cheers guys.

Xeno Sapian

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