The One That Got Away

by Abstract1106

Summary

A thrilling re-imagining of Mass Effect. A dark, ambitious story that knows when to be serious, when to be fun and how war really feels to a soldier. Starts eleven years before the events of ME1. This is a retelling/re-imagining of ME from beginning to end and beyond.

Answer the questions: Who was the original "Lola" that made such an impression on James? What happened at Fehl and behind the scenes at the Lazarus Project?

At times AU but respects the original story. Chapters posted bi-weekly.
Chapter Summary

The older sister of his best friend takes James on an adventure.

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Music: "Gravity", Sara Bareilles; "Blue Orchid", The White Stripes

Listen to the playlist

Introduction

Middle school in San Diego PS #452 was not a happy time for Jimmy Sanders. His hair was perpetually shaggy and hung in his eyes, the better to hide himself in a crowd. He was teased mercilessly for being a late bloomer, slightly chubby and quiet.

Perhaps some of them would have thought differently if they had known that he dreamed of having adventures, of collecting stories like his Uncle Emilio hinted at from when he went on missions for the Alliance. His uncle said just enough to set his impressionable mind aflame with possibilities, keeping him up at night and making him slow and sleepy the next day. Despite his shyness in a crowd, when he was alone with people he trusted he tended to be enthusiastic in the extreme, always looking for an adventure, especially when it meant defying his father.

He had only one close friend, a troubled kid named Tom who had been passed from foster home to foster home all his life. Tom was taller than James, wiry and fast, with a shock of red-brown hair that stuck out in every direction. They didn’t have a lot in common, but they were both outsiders and they both liked to ride bikes. That was all it really took, at their ages, to make what seemed like a real connection. That, and Tom’s having a hot older sister that James took every opportunity to be around.

Lola had moved to L.A. more than six months before, so he hadn’t seen much of her lately. The connection between the two boys had weakened slightly since then, and broken completely once Tom began to hang out with a crowd James’ parents would not approve of. Not that James did, either. They looked like trouble to him.

So now, James spent his afternoons cooped up at home. He didn’t like it much, but he didn’t know what else to do about it.

He had no idea that his whole world was about to get turned upside down at the very hands of the woman he coveted.
Chapter 1: The Sanders'

In the hot midday sun over the San Diego megalopolis, thousands of cars flocked around the elegant skyscrapers in organized chaos. The sun reflected on these sleek structures, casting long shadows on the squatter, less aesthetically pleasing buildings to the north which housed tens of thousands of working-class families.

Inside these enormous residential blocks just in from the coastline, interior homes never saw the light of the sun. Josh Sanders had grown up in one of these sunless rooms, his only escape the ocean to the west. His most treasured memories occurred on the Solana Beachfront and in the water, on his surfboard. The ocean belonged to everyone, no matter how poor you were.

He rarely went there now, not since he hit the reef and destroyed his knee just before his son was born. Instead, day by day, Josh watched time pass by from his kitchen table. His hazel eyes were always looking for what was wrong around him, permanently narrowed in his long face. He never lacked for subjects.

He sat in a room with a window that faced the sea. It was the only room in their apartment with a window; they were one of the lucky few families in the highrise who had managed to get a smaller unit with a view at all. In the little kitchen where he now sat, one wall bore a shelf with several surfing trophies and a picture of him and Rosie when she was still pregnant, taken at his last competition. The other held a vidcom, surrounded by pictures of his son James at various stages of growth.

The sun was slanting high on the wall. Josh turned his eyes to the door. A few minutes later, the door opened and Rosie entered, pulling on the top button of her uniform dress. She set her nametags on the table by the door—one for the hotel, one for the daycare—then put her shoes in the closet before walking over to him.

"How was your day?" she asked him, kissing him on the forehead. He caught her around the waist and pulled her into his lap. She sighed and ran her fingers through his silky, blonde hair. He leaned into her hand.

"Not bad. James hung out with me for a while this morning. He's in his room now."

Rosie pulled the tie from her dark, curly hair and shook it out. "Are he and Tom still fighting? Did he say anything to you about it?"

"Nah, we just hung out for a bit." He held her tightly.

"I'm tired, Josh. I need to go relax for a while." She tried to pull away.

"You can spare some time for me, baby." He kissed her neck.

When she stiffened in his arms, he looked up and saw her resigned expression. "Fine," he said, pushing her up so quickly that she stumbled a step. "I get it. Let me know when I make your to-do list." He stared out the window.

"I've been working all day, querido!" She touched his arm. He kept his eyes on the ocean. "I'm sorry. Look, let me get a quick bath and then I'm all yours. Okay?"

He shrugged. "If you get around to it."

She kissed his cheek before walking into the bathroom with a deep sigh. A few minutes later he
heard the bath running.

He stared despondently at the door after her. She just didn't understand. Without surfing, she and James were his whole world. There were a few friends that hadn't given him up, but Josh was glad most of his friends had gone away. He didn't want all his fans and the women who used to chase him during his competition days to see him like this. Better to stay here, with the two people who loved him no matter what, though Rosie's work schedule was always getting in the way. He knew she had to do it, but it didn't make it any easier to take.

Footsteps came down the hallway. "Hey Pops," James said from behind him. The fridge opened and closed.

"Hey kiddo. Want to watch some vids with me?"

"I'm reading the new comic Uncle E gave me last week. Maybe later."

Josh ground his teeth as he heard James walk back into his room and shut the door. Rosie's brother was always bringing him things like that. Trying to buy his son's affection. Did the same thing for Rosie, more often than not. He knew Emilio was trying to steal them from him, because gifts never came his way.

Then he sat up straighter. Usually Rosie put her shoes by the door. Why had she taken the time to put them in the closet, especially if she was so tired?

He rose, wincing as his knee gave a twinge after so long sitting, and limped to the closet. He opened the door and bent down to look closely at the shoes there. His nostrils flared, his lips a thin line as he marched into the bathroom, forgetting his limp.

He pulled the curtain back from the tub. The water splashed as she jumped in surprise at his sudden appearance. "Rosie, where the hell did these come from?" He held up the shiny black shoes in his hand.

Her mouth worked several times before she could answer. "My old pair was falling apart, Josh. I told you that last week. Today the soles finally gave out."

"But where did these come from? You don't get paid for three more days." He jiggled the shoes above the tub.

She didn't answer. She pulled her bare legs into her chest, staring intently at the water.

"You promised," he said, his finger stabbing down at her.

"But mine fell apart! I didn't know what to do, I can't go to work without them, and the hotel makes me buy the special kind. We didn't have the creds," she pleaded, looking so vulnerable, naked in the bathtub, that his heart gave a thump.

He knelt next to her. "Baby, you love me, don't you?" She nodded. He leaned close over her. "How am I supposed to know if you hide things from me?"

"I didn't hide anything. I was going to tell you."

"But you called your brother first. How is that supposed to make me feel?"

She looked down, her face tense. "I'm sorry, Joschie. I won't do it again."
"I forgive you, honey. Of course I do, I love you. Nobody loves you like I do. Especially not him. Right?" He touched her face gently. She nodded. He stood up, groaning as his weight came back onto his knee. He took a step toward the door, then turned back. "I'll tell ya what. You take some extra time to yourself in here, Rosie. Relax, then bring dinner to our room and we'll spend some time alone together."

With one last loving look at his wife, he walked out to wait for her in the bedroom.

Rosie

Rosie's jaw was clenched so hard that her temple was starting to throb. The water had long since gone cold. This was a treasured moment, nonetheless. No one would walk in. No one would knock. It was a gift given by the very person who had prompted her headache, a bitter pill which she had no choice but to swallow.

Eventually she stood up and pulled the drain on the tub, grabbing a towel and drying off. After she got dressed, she stared at herself in the mirror. The dark circles under her brown eyes were pronounced now that her makeup was washed off, the stark light above the window shadowing her face in unflattering ways. Her fingers touched her black hair where several silver strands wove through, then her jaw, where the skin was loosening.

"Your life is slipping away," she whispered to the woman in the mirror. Her eyes squeezed shut and she turned away. Her heart pounded uncomfortably, as it had so often lately. She breathed slowly and evenly, willing the pressure to ease.

She had discovered recently that imagining her life as it could have been helped ease the stress. Her life with certain choices remade, without the strictures of bills and marriage and, yes, even motherhood. Although James always was present in the fantasy world, somehow she was free to make her life what she wanted it to be. Somehow the pressure of being a perfect mother didn't weigh as heavily when Josh wasn't there. It was something she didn't examine too closely.

Not that it never occurred to her to start over. If she were to leave, she would have to move in with Emilio. Josh was the vindictive type and would probably end up manipulating James against her. At least in this situation she could wield some influence.

And that didn't even address the fact that, after all these years, she still loved him. Her face softened as she remembered the way he used to be, so strong and sure of himself. A winner, many times over. He was still loyal and devoted to her after all they had been through. That had to count for something.

Josh would fall apart if she wasn't there. He'd let himself go, probably fall in totally with those losers he spent time with after his monthly check came in. She knew they probably did drugs, but she tried not to let it bother her. So long as he came home. Besides, he never did anything except for that one weekend every month.

The time he was gone was a lovely, relaxed time for her and James, too. They went to Emilio's house for the weekend when he was on Earth. Their time there felt almost normal. Like before Mama died.

She sat shakily on the closed toilet seat. She had so little going for her. Too old for a fresh start. Not even pretty enough to attract someone new, someone who would be more helpful. And since she was being brutally honest with herself at this moment, she had to admit that she was a little jealous of Josh. He didn't have to work, just collected his disability check once a month. And he
had friends, which she had no time to make.

Jealous of the man who loved her more than anything. The one who had seen his dreams destroyed when he was so young. She shook her head in disbelief at her selfishness.

She rose and left the bathroom to begin making dinner. The kitchen filled with sounds and smells that comforted her. Eventually, as she knew it would, it brought James out of his room.

"Smells good, Mom! What are you making tonight? Can I help?"

"Carne Asada. You can make the guacamole. You always do a good job with that." She watched him with pleasure out of the corner of her eye as he began assembling the ingredients, trying not to make her doting too obvious. He was getting so tall, already catching up to his father's height. He'd be ready for high school soon.

"What was Pop upset about?" He asked quietly after a few minutes.

"Oh, nothing, cariño. Just a little misunderstanding."

"Was it about Uncle E again?" he asked.

Rosie cursed in her head. It was so much easier when James was too young to understand the nuances. "Don't worry about it. Let's just get dinner on."

James shrugged like he didn't care, but he kept shooting her looks as they put everything together. She enjoyed this short-lived quiet moment with just the two of them, focusing on what she had going on the stove. Josh came out when she was finishing up the steaks.

"Why is the table set, Rosie? I thought we were going to spend some time alone." His voice was loaded with implications.

She turned around to see that James had set the table while she was cooking, like he always did. "Oh, cariño! He didn't know, Joshie."

"Because you didn't tell him." He nodded, obviously drawing the worst conclusion. "First the shoes, then this. What is with you today?"

"Shoes?" James asked in confusion.

"Your mother got your Uncle to buy her a gift, after she had promised not to," he said to James, his eyes fixed on Rosie.

"They fell apart!" she said again, feeling ridiculous explaining herself.

"You finally got those old dogs replaced?" James asked. "About time. What did you expect her to do, go to work barefoot?" Part of Rosie wanted to smile at his defense of her, but she quelled the urge.

Josh's livid eyes turned onto James. "You too? I knew he would turn you both against me one day. My own family. Fine, then," He slammed his fist into the wall, leaving a dent in the cheap material. "You two can eat by yourselves." He stormed into the bedroom and slammed the door.

The two of them stood next to the table, the tension spoiling the smell of good food in the air. "I'm sorry," Rosie said.

"Don't apologize. You didn't do anything!" James' eyes flashed with anger.
"No, don't blame him. He has his reasons for acting like that. We just need to be more understanding, and make sure that we do our best to…” Her voice trailed off as she registered James’ hostile look.

"To what, mom?" James asked, his voice hard.

She couldn't answer at first. Finally, she replied, "To bring ourselves happiness in other ways." She looked intently into his eyes. "When you're ready, find yourself a strong woman, then treat her right. Don't make the same mistakes your Pop and I have, okay?" Her hand touched his face gently.

He shook his head, still angry. "You didn't do anything wrong, Mom. Nothing."

There was nothing to say that wouldn't make it worse. She loaded up a tray and took it into the bedroom, leaving James to eat his supper alone.

James turned on the vidcom while he ate, trying to distract himself from the unfairness of the scene that had just unfolded. He was also trying not to think about whatever his parents were doing while he was out here alone. He gritted his teeth, turning the volume up.

It occurred to him to call his best friend Tom and the memory of how Tom had been treating him for the last few weeks stung him anew. Talk about unfair. Seemed to be a theme lately. He applied himself to his meal energetically, seeking comfort in the homecooked meal.

Partway through the show he was watching, someone rang the chime at the front door. Sighing, he rose to answer it.

James' heart began to pound when he saw Tom's sister, Lola, standing outside. Her bright clothes seemed to glow in the artificial light of the hallway. Her red-brown hair was pulled back tightly and flowed forward over her shoulder, smooth and gleaming. Her green eyes were lined in dark purple, sparkling like jewels over her slick red lips. Something about the vision reached deep inside him and sparked a source of fascination.

"Hi, Jimmy. Have you seen my brother?" She looked down at him, even though she wasn't in heels. As always, he felt a twinge of regret at their considerable age difference.

"No," James said. "Is something wrong?"

"He hasn't been home since yesterday. His foster parents called me, so I came in from L.A. this morning to look for him. I didn't find him, but I'm not sure where to look either."

"I haven't heard from him in a while. He stopped talking to me when he started hanging out with some other kids at school."

"Do you know where they hang out?" Lola asked.

"Yeah, there are a few places." Places he'd been told to avoid in no uncertain terms; by his mother, and more recently by Tom.

"Will you show me? I don't want him spending another night on the streets."

James looked back into the apartment. His parents were likely to be in there all night. They wouldn't want to be disturbed… so they wouldn't miss him. "Sure, let me get my shoes on." He left a quick message on the table telling them he was out with Tom and quietly shut the front door.
behind him, a thrill in his gut.

Lola pushed the button to the ground level in the elevator. "My bike is in the garage. Have you ever ridden on a bike before?"

"Sure, lots of times. My uncle has one. I've been practicing for the race in the spring."

"Good, I don't want you to freak out or anything. Where are we going?"

"Um, let's try the park by the school– the one next to the market."

"How unoriginal. The middle schoolers still hang out there?" Lola shook her head as she walked up to a beat-up blue bike. She swung a leg over it, activating the drive. "Hop on and hold on tight."

He climbed up behind her and was overwhelmed with a powerful feeling he couldn't readily identify as he wrapped his arms around her waist. She smelled so good, and her stomach was muscular yet curvy under his hands in a way that he couldn't have anticipated.

"Lock your wrists, Jimmy. We'll be going fast." The engine roared beneath him and James jerked backward as they tore off, weaving through the sparse ground traffic. James' heart was hammering in his chest. This was way better than watching the vidcom.

"What have you been doing in L.A.?" he shouted over the wind.

"Working at a club downtown. Just saved up enough to buy this bike. It's nicer down there than in this neighborhood, but way more expensive. You okay back there?"

"Yeah!" He held on tighter, his spirits soaring as they tore through the streets, swerving around the turns.

They cleared the residential blocks just as the last sliver of sun winked out behind the ocean. The air was cool as it whipped around to where James' face was pressed to Lola's back. A part of him was worried, as he had been for quite some time, about his friend, but most of him was preoccupied with the present moment. He had never felt anything quite like hurtling through the evening behind a beautiful woman on a fast bike. He reveled in the feeling. The fact that his parents had no idea he was gone made it that much more thrilling.

The area behind the market was a wash, but at the next stop they hit paydirt. A random kid at the new park on the other side of the school told them that Tom had been there earlier, but he had left to go to someone's apartment with a group of other kids. It didn't take much for Lola to get the address from him. People seemed to want to give her what she wanted, and James couldn't blame them. She was so beautiful that the grungy park seemed to light up when she entered. He shot smug looks at the other boys as they left, glad that he had something they would be jealous of. It was an unfamiliar feeling, one he wanted to repeat as soon as possible. He happily pressed himself against her as the engine roared back to life.

The address wasn't too far from James' place, but in a seedier part of town. Lola didn't show any discomfort as she walked past the group of thugs at the doorway of the underground garage. Something about the way she looked at them made them turn away. James studied her as they rode the elevator up, trying to figure out what it was.

"What?" she asked.

"Just surprised. I was expecting those guys to say something to you."
But Lola just laughed. "People like that are looking for an easy mark. I'm not an easy mark. They could tell."

"Mark?"

"A target. Prey."

"Oh." James considered this. With the frequency he was picked on at school and elsewhere, he was definitely easy prey. He looked at her again, trying to make out what made her a 'bad mark'.

The elevator opened and they walked out.

"This is it," she said finally, stopping in front of green a door marked "4405D".

James could feel the bass of the music inside pulsing through his feet. She pressed the doorchime. A few minutes passed and she pressed the button again.

Muffled voices, evidently arguing, came from behind the door before it opened to reveal an older boy with a shaved head that James recognized from school. A shaggy blonde-haired kid stood just behind him. A pungent smell wafted out from inside which he didn't recognize, but made his nostrils tingle.

Before the boys could speak, Lola had shoved past them into the apartment. The room inside was dark and cramped, thick with the odor James had noticed in the hallway. The room was littered with bottles and trash. A closed door was behind the couch, light filtering from underneath. It illuminated the smoke in the room eerily.

Three more boys wearing wrinkled, trendy clothes sat in front of a vidcom on a broken-down couch, with two crates and an old box being used as tables nearby. Tom sat in a chair near the far wall.

"Tom," Lola said, moving in front of the boys on the couch, kicking trash out of the way as she went. She hit the power button to the stereo and the room fell into silence. "It's time to go."

"Wha- whadda you want, Lola?" Tom slurred. "Jimmy, get lost! I told you before, I don't hang out with anyone not in the gang."

"Cut the shit," Lola snapped. "This is some den of losers you've discovered. Please, tell me you're only drunk." She turned to the kid who had let them in. "You're not supposed to smoke red sand, you jackasses. You'll just get sick."

The blonde kid leaned in to the older one who had let them in. "I told you not to let her in."

"What are you, sixteen years old?" Lola asked with a snort. "I'm taking my brother and leaving." She sidled up until she was looking down her nose at him. "But if you want me to embarrass you in front of your friends before I go, be my guest."

The kid's face twisted into a snarl and James knew it was on. He backed against a wall, hoping to stay out of the way. He'd never been in a fight before.

The bald kid shoved Lola back. "He's with us now."
Tom stood up, rocking forward on his feet and knocking into the table. Several bottles clattered to the floor. "Don't touch my sister!"

Lola didn't wait for them to come to an understanding; her fist was already swinging. The bald kid went down with a fleshy thwack, falling against the front door. The blonde kid shouted and tried to grab her. She sidestepped him and brought her knee into his gut. He fell next to his friend. James gaped at her.

"Anyone else?" she asked the rest of the room.

"He belongs with us now! He's already been through the initiation. There's no way out." The bald kid was rising off the floor and backing away from her.

"Isn't there?" she asked sweetly. "We'll just see about that."

"Go away, Lola! This is what I want." Tom complained.

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about. These are not people you want to get tangled up with."

"That's right," said a deep voice from behind the couch. "You don't." All heads turned to the bedroom door, now open. James backed further into the corner, his eyes wide. The man was three times Lola's size, huge arms bulging out of his dirty shirt. He pushed his stringy blonde hair out of his eyes with one thick fist, the fat jiggling under his arm.

But Lola wasn't fazed. "Tom doesn't belong with you people. I'm taking him with me."

"That's not what Raul says, and Raul is the boss around here. He's already been beat into the gang a few weeks ago. But I'm sure you can make a personal plea for your little brother if you stick around." He grinned unpleasantly at her.

"If I do, will he let my brother go?" Lola asked.

"If you're good enough, yeah. He can be very generous." He ran a finger down her bare arm.

She grabbed his nipple and twisted it cruelly through the shirt. The man shouted in pain.

"You don't touch me, you fat fuck. Understand?"

He shoved her hard and she stumbled back into the couch. "You bitch! I'm gonna tell Raul you did that."

"Go right ahead. I have a few things to tell him myself," she said.

He panted, his hand pressed to his chest. "Be under the boardwalk by the fifth pier at 1 am. If I were you, I'd wear something sexy," he leered.

"Whatever. Come on, Tom." She tugged at his sleeve.

"No!" he shouted at her. "You can't do this to me!"

"You'll come with me now. Or else." Something in her voice made him move. Again James wondered what it was about her that made people listen to her. She gestured for James to go ahead of her, then grabbed Tom's arm and towed him out.
Initiation

Chapter Summary

Lola willingly takes her brother's place and a resident of the Citadel visits Emilio Vega.

Chapter Notes

Some dark times within, but stick with it! Major excitement in future chapters.

Music: Be Here Now, Ray LaMontagne; Times Like These, Foo Fighters

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James

After the scare at the apartment and a very crowded ride back on Lola's bike, James was too emotionally exhausted to worry about his reception at home. He didn't even notice that the light was on when he walked in.

"It's almost midnight, James," his mother said from the couch before the door shut behind him. "Where have you been?"

"I left a note. Didn't you get it?" he asked, leaning heavily against the wall to kick his shoes off.

"I left a note. Didn't you get it?" he asked, leaning heavily against the wall to kick his shoes off.

"Not until after your father fell asleep an hour ago. How do you think I felt, not knowing where I could reach you? What if something had happened? How would I know?"

"I was just out with Tom. Nothing was going to happen." His eyes squeezed shut in distaste. He hated lying. It wouldn't have taken much for her fears to come true.

"Never again, cariño. If I'd had to wake your father…" She threw her hands up. "No tengo palabras. For my sake, por favor, don't do that again."

"I'll make sure you know where I am, Mom. Lo siento que te preocupa." He moved to stand in front of her, trying not to sway with exhaustion.

She nodded, somewhat mollified. "Who were you riding with?" she asked after a moment.

"His sister."

"You stay away from her, James. She's trouble. I've known girls like her before."

"She was just looking for her brother, Mom. What was she supposed to do, keep looking all over the city by hers-" He clamped his mouth shut. Good job, estúpido. He was really not good at deception, especially when he was tired.
"Tom was missing and you were looking for him?" He nodded, cringing as he waited for the bomb to drop. "Well, I guess I can understand that you wanted to help. But I need to know more than just who you're with. Okay?"

Relief flowed over him, draining him of the last of his energy. "Okay, Mom. I'm really tired. I better get to bed."

She stood and kissed the top of his head. "Good night, Jimmy. I'm proud of you for helping your friend. Sleep well."

It was a blessedly short walk to his room and an even shorter walk from the door to his bed. James collapsed into it without bothering to change.

Despite his physical exhaustion, his mind was still racing with the day's events. Replaying in his mind, over and over, was the way Lola moved, the way she spoke, the way she commanded any room she walked into. The feel of her back pressing against his chest...

His eyes opened. The desk was littered with adventure comics and the walls were covered in posters, some of bikes, some of celebrities from races and other championships, and some of places he wanted to see first-hand. The Citadel. Omega. Palaven. Thessia. Exotic places, far from boring Earth. Places where adventures still happened.

Lola was adventure incarnate. She was everything he'd ever dreamed of in life, wrapped up in one incredibly smart, confident, beautiful package. She was driven and went after what she wanted. He also knew that she had a steady stream of boyfriends that she dumped almost without notice. He knew he was only thirteen and had a ways to go before she would look at him the way he wanted to, but at that moment, he vowed that if it was the last thing he did, he would win her.

He'd have to be patient. Which worked, because he needed another few years to grow up. He'd have to make sure he could keep up with her and at the same time not get in her way. Most importantly, he'd have to make her want him. And he had no idea how to do any of this.

But his uncle had told him many times that anything worth having in life is worth fighting for. For the first time in his young life, Jimmy Sanders decided that he was up to the challenge.

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**Tom**

"Found him!" Lola shouted as she dragged Tom into his foster parents' apartment.

"Tory, Tom is back!" Tom's foster father, Sam, said from the kitchen. His wife shouted her thanks to Lola, her voice muffled from inside the egg-shaped gaming chair, one of a pair that dominated the main living area.

Lola marched Tom to his room and shut the door behind them. "Now, you want to explain to me what's going on?"

"Damn, Lola! Don't you have a life? I was finally part of something big, something important. Why do you have to ruin everything?"

"Believe me, what those people do is not important. You'll just get into trouble that will follow you around forever."

Tom scowled. "They don't care about where I come from. The rest of that— all that work you do, the saving— I don't have to do any of that with them. It's like I'm a part of a real family."
Her breath caught. "We are a real family. I know it doesn't seem like it now that I'm gone all the time, but I'm doing this for both of us."

"What exactly is it that you're doing for us, Lola?" he shouted. "All I know is, my whole life I've moved around and around, and I've even had to change my name. I don't even know who I really am!" He balled his fists at his sides.

She stared at his livid face for a moment, then put up a hand. "You're right. You're old enough to know the truth."

He watched her in surprise as she sat on the end of his bed and rubbed at the tension in her face and neck. "You were five when Mom died. Do you remember that night?"

"No."

"I was almost eleven. I'll never forget." She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered, though the room was warm. It was seven years ago, but she still had nightmares. "Our Dad was always gone. I don't even remember what he looked like. Mom wouldn't talk about him."

She looked up at his wide eyes. "We were very poor, but we lived on the outskirts of the base in a little house. There was a tall tree out back that we used to climb. Do you remember that, at least?"

"No. I don't remember anything before then. It's like a complete... blank." Tom stared off into the corner.

She nodded. "One night I was in the living room, reading to you while Mom made dinner. There was a crash in the kitchen, glass shattering. I jumped up to see, but then Mom started screaming. She shouted for me to take you and get out. I stood up and grabbed your hand, but I wasn't sure what to do, if she wanted me to run out the front door or what."

She put her head in her hands. Tom hovered nearby, unsure what to do. She rocked back and forth, taking deep breaths. He put his hand on her shoulder and her shoulder sank at his touch.

He sat next to her. "What happened?" he asked softly.

It was a minute before she could respond. Her face was wet when she lifted her head. "Something came crashing through the living room window. Fire burst all over the couch, the flames were everywhere. It happened so fast..." she took a breath, swallowed, and went on, her hands twisting together. "I ran into the hallway but I heard crashes from the bedrooms, too, so I took you upstairs, into the attic."

The hot storage room had terrified her the entire time they lived there, but she had run into it with relief. Surely there they would be safe. But the smoke had followed them, leaking up all around where the walls met the ceiling, choking them. Her hand was at her neck when she spoke again, squeezing out the memory of the taste of ashes.

"There was a little window on one end that opened up next to a tree, the branches almost covered it. I shoved you through the opening onto one of the limbs and crawled out after you. The metal frame gashed the back of my arm. I still have the scar. See?" He bent over to see the puckered line running down her left arm.

She rubbed it absently. "There were men running around the house, shouting. You started to cry so I covered your face with my shirt and held your mouth shut." She stared off into nothing for a moment, then shook herself.
"It went on for what seemed like a long time, but it was probably just a few minutes. The men ran off when the sirens started. Eventually the fire was put out and the firemen found us. I saw them take Mom out in a body bag."

Masses of people had been milling around, talking, equipment moving, more people than she'd ever seen in their neighborhood. No one had cared about them until they were in trouble. That truth had followed them consistently throughout their short lives.

She wiped her face and took a deep, shuddering breath. "I overheard some of the social workers talking once we got to the police station. They said we were better off in protection, something about our dad getting tangled up with some Omega gang."

She looked at him. "That was why our house was firebombed. Why Mom died. Because of him. I can't let you join that gang, Tom. I'll do anything I can to get you out of this. But you have to promise." She grabbed his arms with sudden intensity. "Promise not to go out looking for it again." Her hands squeezed him painfully.

"Okay!" he said in an irritated tone, pushing her away and standing up. He paced restlessly for several minutes, then sat down again.

Lola was watching the way he wrung his hands. "Was it the right thing to tell you?"

"Yeah." He stood up again and rubbed his hands on his pants nervously. "But I can't just leave, Lola. I'm already in. They'll come after me."

"They're waiting for you tonight, right?" she asked. He nodded. She looked for answers in the palms of her hands for a moment, then the ceiling. Then she met his eyes again. "I'll take care of it, Tom. I'll go to the boardwalk tonight. You stay here," she ordered.

"No, I have to see this through! I started this."

"No, don't you dare. I'll take care of it."

"I'm coming with you, Lola. Family, right?" His determined look broke through her objections.

"Fine. But you let me do the talking, understand?" He nodded vigorously. She looked at the display on the wall. "It's almost time. Let's get going."

Later that night...

Tom's pillow was soaked. It had been everything he could do not to cry on the way home. The scene as it had played out on the beachfront, when Lola had offered to take his place in the gang, had been beyond any of his nightmares.

"I'm definitely getting the better end of this bargain," Raul said. He was surrounded by more than a dozen men, grotesque blood-red tattoos trailing from under his shirtsleeves and up his neck like a spreading disease. "You wanna take your brother's place, fine. I have something special in mind for you. But my boys'll all have a go first." The men around him leered, punching each other's arms as they looked her over. Many of them sported similar tattoos to Raul's, red designs circling their limbs and necks like serpentine banners.

"I thought as much," she said. "I'd rather be beat in like Tom was."

"You don't get a choice, coño. I like it this way, and from now on, my word is law for you." He
gestured to the men beside him.

"Go, Tom," she said as they pulled her away. "You don't want to see this."

"No, Lola! I can't-"

"Get out of here! Now!" she shouted. He couldn't see her anymore; she was in the shadows. One of the men started laughing.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end as he ran for the bike. Part of him wanted to stay, to do something, but he knew there was no way he could help her. He was too small, too young. Powerless. The thought had made him want to scream in frustration. It made him want to cry.

He had held it in. He made it home, amazingly not getting pulled over for not having a license. But she was still back there, paying for his mistake.

What was happening to her right now? He buried his face in the pillow again.

I'll never be able to make this up to her, he thought.

---

Lola

_I can survive this. I can survive anything._ Lola chanted to herself. She faced the men around her, keeping her back straight. Her fists itched to swing, but she kept them loose at her sides. They trembled with the pent-up energy.

The men could see this, and they laughed. Probably thought she was afraid.

She had to own to herself that she was. Why did victimization follow her like a plague, an STD passed on from her parents? Her wrist flicked spasmodically as one of the men, a whip-thin gangster with braids down to his waist, grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her towards him. A long hunting knife was in his hand, which he used to systematically strip the clothes from her body.

Her teeth chattered, her eyes wide in barely contained fury. So helpless.

She heard her bike fire up and speed off and the tension began to ease. They let him go. The whole point was to take this so Tom didn't have to. She reached deep into herself, breathing deeply and slowly, and braced herself for the worst.

He approached her and looked her over, flashing his white teeth. He touched her cheek, then ran his hand down her bare chest. "Have fun, _matones_. Bring her back to the garage when you're done here. Don't make too much noise. We don't want the cops taking our new plaything away," Raul said. Lola shivered, crossing her arms over her bare skin in the cool, moist air. She stared at the sand under her bare feet.

Raul's voice came one more time, getting more distant. "Don't mess up her face too bad, boys!" A car door shut and she heard the sound of an engine fading into the hum of the city towering overhead.

Alone. A single consciousness, surrounded by a cesspool of ugliness and violence. Can't fight back. No— _won't_ fight back. This was her choice. This was her future.

"Time to prove your worth. In this family, we only take tough bitches." A voice said from behind
Sneering, she snapped over her shoulder, "You found one. You're lucky Raul wanted it this way."

This made the men howl like hyenas. She brought her head back up and looked them all over, tossing her long hair over her shoulder. "Let's get this done, then. Who's first?"

"Get this shit! She thinks we're taking turns!" Hands reached for her as laughter once again erupted from the thugs.

As she was lifted onto a picnic table nearby and tied down, true fear crawled up her spine. *I can survive this. I can survive anything*, she chanted to herself again.

She willed it to be true.

By the time they finished with her under the boardwalk, she was beyond paying attention to things like time and space. She was dimly aware of having been put in the back of a van and taken somewhere else.

She just wanted to stay awake. She had a horror of being unconscious while she was at their mercy, though the rational part of her mind knew that they would do what they wanted regardless. But her tenacity was all that was left. She clung to consciousness like a life raft.

It was difficult to breathe. Her mouth and neck were swollen. Raul hadn't wanted her face "messed up too bad", but that hadn't stopped them from abusing her in other ways. Someone was above her even now, doing something.

Her mind was detached from her body, spinning out into a fantasy world… all the places she'd wanted to see, the things she'd wanted to do. Adventures.

No. Just dreams. These people would never let her go.

Was this an adventure? They often started like this, with pain and loss. Seemed like it was all her life was made of anymore. Had always been made of. This would be a start to an ultimate adventure, if she were the heroine in a story.

She had wanted to do so much with her life. That electronics scholarship she hadn't been able to take, back when they'd had to change names the second time, had made her consider things that seemed previously out of reach. She yearned to make the most of her natural gifts, but her life had been nothing but one hardship after another, constantly struggling to stay afloat.

There were so many mysteries about herself that she hadn't had a chance to solve. The firebombing, their father. Who was doubtless dead, floating in space somewhere. Whoever he was.

Space… that great expanse that so many had gone into, never to return to Earth. Sounded like magic, like a fairy tale. To fly through the stars and never come back to the place where all the pain started. "Hell on Earth", the old saying went… for her and Tom, hell was Earth.

Her body was turned over and she came out of her trance for a moment. Lola was abruptly aware of the stink of oil and machinery, of sweat and blood. She frantically grasped at her trance world until it came back, blessed relief from … what was happening out there. At least she was still awake.

She shouldn't have let Tom come with her. He was too young to deal with this. She should have known better. An adult would have known. But how was she to know? She was still a child herself,
in so many ways. Until tonight.

Someone yanked her hair and pain lanced through her neck. It occurred to her for the first time that she had the option of just giving up.

*Never. Not as long as I draw breath. They won't break me,* was her last thought before she passed out.

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Darkness. Quiet. When had they stopped? She didn't know, or care.

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Hands were on her again. She objected at first, but the movements were too painful and she abandoned them. What was the point of resistance?

But these hands were gentle. They lifted her and the world swayed. She heard water running. Then she was being held against a warm body. Hands that were not invasive, not cruel, ran over her with slick fluidity. She was being washed.

She wanted to cry out, to tell them to stop, to leave her be, but the gentle hands didn't suddenly turn violent, as she had fully expected them to. They simply cleaned her as if she were a child.

Her head was hanging loosely and she ventured to open her eyes. Pink streams swirled down her arm and into the drain. Her wrists stung… she squinted. Red lines criss-crossed her arm. They had bound her wrists together at some point. A flash of anger sliced through her apathy; what had been the point? She hadn't even resisted.

She tried to say something, shout an insult, but only a whimper came out. The hands shushed her with a low rumbling "Shush, Lola," in a familiar voice. Her mind was too preoccupied with staying conscious to make a connection.

She was wrapped in a towel and laid down again. A prick on her arm preceded the cool rush of medi-gel, blessed relief pouring through her veins. Something heavy and warm was pulled over her. Deep voices, an argument. A door shut.

The apathy threatened to overtake her again. She realized that she didn't want to go away into the fantasy world again. It seemed like a cowardly thing to do.

Her mind scrambled for something to hold onto, and it quickly found the one thing in the world that meant something to her: Tom. He was the reason she had sacrificed herself.

He was worth it.

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**Mason**

Mason Black stepped into the bright sunlight at the L.A. spaceport, squinting until his eyes were hard lines. The look suited his grizzled countenance, from his shaved head and the tattoos covering almost every square inch of his body to the soggy toothpick wedged in the corner of his permanently turned-down mouth.

His fingers tugged at the high collar of his jacket, just covering the faded Blue Suns tattoo concealed there, a reminder of his brief alliance with the mercenary group in its early incarnation. This was the last place he should be with his record, but he hadn't had a choice in the matter. He hadn't set foot on Earth in eighteen years in an attempt to avoid certain people in his hometown.
His considerable height and muscular bulk, even without his tattoos, made him very aware of how much he stuck out in a crowd.

He waved over a cab from the queue. "San Diego Megalopolis, downtown Sector V. The Plaza." The navputer blipped and the car lifted after he scanned in his chit.

He watched L.A. swing away as the cab swung into the lane of traffic that soared over the harbor, almost reaching Catalina before turning inward toward San Diego. The traffic was choked near the center of town, but they skirted around it to the western sector where his sister had lived for the last fifteen years.

The hotel was posh and expensive. In other words, not his cup of tea. But it wasn't on his chit, so he scanned his ID into the register and went to his room to unpack his bag without paying much attention to all the glitz.

His sister had always dreamed of living the good life. That's why she hooked up with Cong Jia in the first place. She could have done better than a drug kingpin, in his opinion, even though Cong had more creds than he knew what to do with. Cong had been one of the first major investors in large-scale red sand production, amongst many other ventures that had grown his family's already substantial galactic corporation.

He snorted as he pulled his stiff new suit out of its package and stuffed it into the pressing machine. It was easy for him to say she could have done better, when she hadn't even had her brother around to help her. She'd been on her own for a long time. He should be grateful to Cong for wanting to make her happy. And from what he could tell, he had.

He showered and shaved, then put on the new suit. He looked at himself in the mirror, uncomfortable with the way the blue suns tattoo showed clearly over the collar. No helping it, though. He rolled his shoulders and took a deep breath before walking out the door.

He hailed another cab. His next destination was only a few blocks away, but he didn't want to spend any more time on the street than was strictly necessary. Men and women in formal wear milled on the sidewalk under the awning, limousines parked on every curb on the block. No one spoke to him as he walked through the gilded front doors. His tough looks did not stick out amongst this particular crowd, for which he was grateful.

A long room with refreshments stretched out before him, but he wasn't interested. He hadn't had much of an appetite since he'd received the message requesting him to come to Earth. His eyes scanned the room until he saw a sign that said, "Viewing Atrium."

Reluctantly, he entered the room, which was filled with lush plants and fresh smelling air. The sun shone down through the glass ceiling onto him, again making him feel like an outsider, a spacer amongst the groundhogs. A small group of people stood at the far end, surrounding a tall, thin man. Their eyes met and they both walked forward.

"Mason." Cong's cultured accent reached him for the first time. Mason was a little surprised; with his involvement in the underworld, he had been expecting Cong to be more like… well, like himself. They shook hands.

"Cong. It's good to finally meet you." His gruff voice cracked a little, and Mason realized that he hadn't said much of anything for the last week. Not since he'd heard.

"I'm glad you were able to come." They walked toward the far end of the room. "I kept asking her to send for you before, but she didn't want to risk putting you in danger by coming back here."
"Sounds like her." The others in the room parted before them deferentially. "Thanks for setting it all up."

"It was the least I could do." They stopped in front of the raised object in front of them.

"Did she suffer?" he asked, looking down at the peaceful face of his sister in the coffin.

"As little as possible. We tried everything in the galaxy, but the proto-cancer was just too strong. Even for her." Cong shook his head and closed his eyes briefly. He took a breath before opening them again, slightly moist. "She made me want to be a better person every day, to deserve her."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"We had a good life together. More than ten years. I wish we'd had children, but she wouldn't hear of it, not with my business." He sighed, regret plain on his face.

"Can't blame her, after what she saw me go through." He couldn't stop staring at her, frozen in the stasis field. She looked like she could wake up at any moment.

"That wouldn't have— ah, but I am sorry, Mason. This isn't the time. I'll let you have a moment. Find me afterward. I'd love to talk with you some more." He walked quietly away.

Mason bowed his head over his sister's body. She had always looked out for him, even though she was the younger of the two of them. Trying to make up for Mom's absence. He remembered her arguing with their Dad to stop beating on him when he was out all night and covering for him when he got in trouble. Once he enlisted they had rarely spoken, but now he had his chance to tell her what he'd always meant to. For what it was worth.

"Thanks for always being there, Celine. Even when you weren't there." His eyes flickered to the man across the room for a moment. "Seems like you found someone who really loved you. I'm glad you led a good life." He took a deep breath, lolling his toothpick to the other corner of his mouth. "You always were a good girl. Too good for any of us. I love you, sis. I'm sure I'll see you again soon enough."

He looked at her for a moment longer, feeling a weight lift off his chest. He felt certain— though he didn't believe in this kind of thing at all— that she knew what he had said. All in his head, more likely than not, but it made him feel better.

An hour later, he was tired of dodging mourners wanting to know his relation to the deceased, many of them obviously underworld thugs looking for an edge. He found Cong and tapped his arm. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Certainly." They stepped away from the others, who watched them curiously.

"I have an old friend nearby I'd like to look up, maybe stay with him for a while if he'll have me. Not that I don't appreciate the hotel and all the hospitality you set up, but I do still need to lay low and his place is a lot less visible than the Plaza. And I was wondering if you might have a car I could use while I'm here so I don't run the risk of being seen in a cab."

"Mason," Cong put his hand gently on his sleeve, the familiarity surprising him. "If you assure me that you will come and visit frequently until your ship leaves, I will gladly lend you one of my cars. You are the only person I can truly talk to about this tremendous loss." He smiled sadly. "I believe this will be the only time you and I will get to know each other. Celine often talked of you."
"I… I'd like that, too." Mason answered. He'd managed to keep from getting emotional all day, until this moment.

Cong tapped a sequence into his omni-tool. "There. A car will be waiting for you outside. I'm having a reception in Celine's memory in two days at my estate. I'd appreciate it if you would attend and stay afterward for a private dinner with my mother and me."

"I may come late, since I avoid crowds. But I'll be there."

"I understand. And thank you, brother. If you ever need anything, please don't hesitate to call." He produced a slim black bracelet from his pocket. "Here's an omni-tool for your use while you're here. It's off the grid, completely secure."

The device was probably worth more than his shop back on the Citadel. Mason felt ridiculous saying thank you again, so he just nodded, pocketed the device, shook his hand again, and left.

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James

"Uncle E, look at the car that just pulled up!" James called from the window. The car wasn't flashy, but obviously expensive. He'd never seen one like it up close, all shiny black with sleek silver trimming. Muy rico. He itched to get inside and check it out.

Emilio leaned over his shoulder. "Never seen it before. I wonder who-" He watched the driver get out and look toward the house. "I'll be damned. I don't believe it."

"Who is it?" James asked, but his uncle was already out the front door.

"Mason! What the hell are you doing here?" he heard Emilio say through the open door. A smile cracked the stranger's face. The two men pounded each other's backs while James watched curiously. This man was nothing like the soldiers that usually came to his uncle's house when he had barbecues. He looked… a little scary, truthfully. Like he'd be more at home in that room where he and Lola found Tom.

His uncle's appearance contrasted against the newcomer's in many ways, but they were both tall and solidly built. There was a similarity in their facial structure and coloring too, that made him think this new character shared their heritage, at least in part.

"How long are you here?"

"A week or two."

"Oh, you have to stay longer than that." Emilio led his friend into the house, an arm slung over his shoulders. "Change your ticket and stay for the spring. When was the last time we spent Cinco de Mayo together? Twenty years ago?"

"I don't know, Em. I have a business to run…"

"What, your boss won't let you off?" he laughed as they came through the front door. "Come on. We both know you won't be coming back anytime soon, if at all. Oh, I know your reasons for wanting to hurry. But we can just stay out of town. The kid is racing in a few months, so we're practicing on the bikes. Seriously, when was the last time you rode a motorcycle?"

"That actually sounds pretty- wait, did you say kid?"
"My nephew, James." He gestured toward the couch, where James was still propped up to the window, now twisted to see them in the doorway. "James, this is one of my oldest friends, Mason Black."

"Hi." James stared wide-eyed at the stranger.

"Nephew? Rosie's kid?"

"That's right." Emilio nodded. "We spend most weekends together."

Mason finally looked at James. "Hey, kid." He looked uncomfortable, like he didn't know what to do with his hands or his eyes.

James wondered what that was about, then decided to sate his curiosity. "You haven't been on Earth in twenty years? Where have you been? One of the colonies?"

"No, the Citadel. I run a tattoo shop in the Lower Wards."

Mason suddenly grew a few inches in James' eyes. "The Citadel? What's it like? Is it true the whole place is run by bugs that explode when you touch 'em?" His hands mimed his words as he spoke.

A crooked grin appeared on Mason's face, his toothpick drifting down to his chin. "Actually, yeah. That is true."

"By the look on the kid's face, Mason, you're going to get asked a lot of questions like that."

"Didn't you tell him about it?"

"Not allowed to talk about most of my missions."

"It's hardly sensitive intel."

Emilio shook his head. "You obviously don't understand kids, my friend. You just opened a floodgate."

"I'll answer your questions if I can, kid. But, ah, some of the answers you might not want to tell your Mom."

"See that? Now you've really done it." Emilio laughed at the ecstatic look on James' face. "Have a seat, I think I have a bottle in here somewhere. Where are you staying?"

"At a hotel downtown, but I was hoping that for a few days here and there…"

"You don't even have to ask. Mi casa es tu casa."

"Appreciate it, Em."

"So what brings you all the way out here, anyway?"

Mason settled at the table in the den with a groan as Emilio poured him a shot of whiskey. "It's Celine. She died last week."

"What happened?" Emilio wore an expression of concern as he settled across from him. James got a glass of soda, hardly taking his eyes from the fascinating figure at the table. He sat in the chair next to him, almost spilling his drink as he set it down.
"Proto-cancer. Spinal."

"That's... I'm so sorry. If I'd known, I would have visited her."

"It's okay. She had the best care. She was married to Cong Jia."

Emilio almost choked on his drink. "The red sa-" He stopped, glancing at James. "Uh, yeah, I've heard of him."

"Viewing was this morning. I promised to go back and visit. He's pretty eager to talk about her. I guess they really did love each other." He shrugged. "For an underwor-" He stopped, glancing at James. "Well, anyway, he seems like a pretty decent guy."

"To you, I'm sure he is."

Mason finished his tumbler and set it on the table. "I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind. Isn't exactly a pleasure trip for me."

"No problem. This will be a relaxing place for you, I promise. Right, James?"

James sat forward, recognizing his cue to jump into the conversation. "Have you been to Omega?"

Emilio laughed. "Told ya. I'll just let you two talk while I set up your room."

"Yeah, thanks." Mason said it with sarcasm, but James saw that crooked smile threatening again.

"Well?" He asked, a huge grin on his face.

Mason leaned back in his chair, scratching his chin. "Omega, huh? I can tell you stories about Omega..."

---

Tom

Tom woke up when he heard his bedroom door open. "Lights!" he said, and the overhead sprung brilliantly to life. His breath sucked in when he saw his sister leaning against the wall.

"It's not as bad as it looks. Someone gave me some medi-gel, though not enough," she mumbled hoarsely through swollen lips. "Turn that off," she said, squinting at the light. He obeyed, then turned on the dim lamp on the far side of the room and helped her over to the bed. She lay down. She was wearing a shirt and sweatpants that were several sizes too large, but Tom didn't ask where her clothes had gone. He felt an unfamiliar desire to hug her, but he wasn't sure where it was safe to touch her, or if she'd even want to be touched. He settled for taking her hand in his, sitting next to her, and was surprised when she drew him close to her, holding him tightly.

She finally spoke. "How long has it been?"

"Three days." He shut his eyes, squeezing out tears.

She sighed. "I'm going to L.A. in the morning to clear out my apartment. I have to stay with Raul."

"But they'll keep on... on..." The tears started again.

"I'll be okay, don't worry. That was just the initiation."
"I'm sorry, Lola."

"It's okay. I should have been there for you more."

They held each other in the quiet room with Lola rubbing his back until Tom stopped crying again.

"We should disappear again," he eventually said. Was it possible? He could feel the enormity of the challenge like a physical presence in the room.

"These people will look for us, so we'd have to go really far away. Expensive. The feds did it before."

"What about off-planet?"

Her laugh caught in her chest. "Even more expensive. As much as a car. Even if we sell the bike it wouldn't be half enough, and there's no guarantee we wouldn't get caught anyway. Plus, we'd need new identities. That's a little harder."

Tom clenched his jaw. "There has to be a way."

"We'll see. Maybe we can save up somehow. I can do a few jobs for the gang, maybe."

"I don't like it."

"Neither do I. But if it gets us out, I'll do what I have to do." Which she had already proven. Tom held her tighter.

They lay in silence for a little while longer, enjoying the feeling of togetherness they were sharing, even more so than they might have otherwise because it had come at such a high price.

Tom was still occasionally restless, squeezing at her hand over and over as if assuring himself that she didn't suddenly disappear. He sniffled in the dark.

"Why'd you do it, Lola?" he said just as she was falling asleep.

"Why else, dummy?" she whispered. "Because I love you."

Chapter End Notes

Want more Mason Black? Read my beta pestomonkey's terrific origins story for him, "Second Skin". More Mass Effect people are in that one, including Zaeed Massani later on!
Memorial

Chapter Summary

Mason attends his sister's memorial service and James finds his first life-long love.

Chapter Notes

Music: Standing Outside a Broken Phone Booth With Money in My Hand, Primitive Radio Gods; It's Time, Imagine Dragons

James

The track at Turner Lake was buzzing with race participants practicing. The day was warm, especially in the dry heat of Escondido. James was sweating as he checked over his bike.

James had been happy to finally get to invite Tom to come along with him. It was good to have his friend back. He hadn't been quite the same since the incident with the gang, but that was understandable. James would never forget the sight of Lola taking on that room full of thugs by herself.

Tom was watching him work with little enthusiasm. "You okay?" James asked him as he stood up, wiping his dirty hands on his jeans.

"Yeah."

"How's Lola doing? Haven't seen her in a few days. Did she go back to L.A.?"

"No, she's moving back here today." He didn't seem to want to talk about it, so James let it go. But he wanted to see his friend smiling again.

"You want to try it out?" He gestured to the bike.

"Sure!"

James showed Tom where the additional controls and boosts were on the electric bike that he wouldn't have seen on a bike like Lola's. Tom strapped the helmet on and pulled out with James looking after him in satisfaction. He settled on the grass to watch.

"That was nice of you." A familiar voice said from behind him. He turned around to see Lola leaning against a tree.

"Oh, hi Lola! I didn't know you'd be by," he said, swallowing.

"Tom told me where he was going today, so I thought I'd come and see how he's doing." She stepped out of the shade, her hair catching the sun and bringing the lighter shades out brilliantly. He watched her as she fluidly walked across the grass and sat down next to him, legs crossed.
"What's all this, then?" she asked, gesturing to the activity on the field. The track was overrun with bikers and coaches preparing for the run. A light haze of dirt hung in the air at the apex of the nearby turn, where every few minutes they heard another engine whir by. On the far side of the field, a crowd was standing around an information stand with a banner above it that read "Registration."

"Cinco de Mayo race. I'm finally old enough to enter this year, so my Uncle paid my entrance fee. First prize is twenty thousand creds!" He grinned, imagining the things he could do for his parents with that kind of money.

"Wow. That's-" She cleared her throat. "That's a lot." She was chewing on her lip, watching her brother when James looked over at her again. He noticed with concern that she had a fading bruise on her neck. After a minute, she smiled over at him.

"Your Uncle hooked you up, huh? That was generous."

"Yeah, he's really nice. Check it out, Tom's not bad!" He pointed at the cloud of dirt rising behind his bike at the turn.

They watched Tom race around the track twice before he pulled in. He yanked off his helmet and ran to where they sat with a huge grin on his face.

"Did you see me, Lola? I've never gone that fast before!"

"You're a natural! I wonder if my bike would go that fast," she mused.

James laughed. "Probably not. You'd need a new drive converter at least to get up to competition speed."

"Do you know how to do it?" she asked him.

"Nah, I'm not really good with technical stuff like that. Uncle E says I know just enough to break it." He grinned, not at all bothered. "It's boring. I just want to race!"

Lola nodded, her eyes back on Tom. "Could I talk to you for a minute?" She asked her brother quietly.

James watched her pull Tom under the tree. They kept their heads together, intent on their conversation for several minutes before they came back.

"Um, James, how much is the entrance fee for the race?" Tom asked nervously.

"Let me see." He dug in his backpack for the paper that his uncle had given him and handed it to them, smoothing out the wrinkles first.

Lola squeezed his shoulder. "I have just enough," she said quietly. "Can you do it?"

"I'll try, Lola." He looked up at her and they shared an intense look. James looked back and forth between them in confusion; usually they did nothing but argue. Things had been so strange with them ever since the other night.

"I'll take care of it, then. You get to work." Her face abruptly broke into a beautiful smile that made James' insides turn to jelly.

"You'll help Tom learn how to ride, right James?" she asked sweetly.
"Sure! It'll be fun to race together. Like a team! And hey, here's the guy who fixed up my bike for me." James dug a pen out of his bag and wrote an address on the flier. "Tell him you're a friend of Emilio Vega's."

"Thanks, Jimmy." She smiled and ruffled his hair before walking away. He watched her go.

"Jimmy. Hey, Jimmy!" Tom had to shake his arm to get his attention. "Come on, show me how to do that first turn. I almost bit the big one."

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**Lola**

Lola's hopeful mood lasted right until she got to Raul's place. She took off her helmet and placed it on the seat of her dirty bike as it sat next to Raul's line of expensive cars gleaming in the sun, and realized how over her head she was.

Who did she think she was? Did she really think that her brother could win that race with only a few months to practice? At best, they would escape and live their lives in fear, forever looking over their shoulders. At worst, they'd both end up part of a crime scene. And that was if he won.

*Other people have choices,* she thought, her chin dropping. *Other people had parents and boyfriends and something to look forward to.* All she had was the pain of watching her brother go down a dark path and being sucked down with him. The fact that she'd taken his place hadn't accomplished anything, not really. He was in almost as much danger as before. On top of everything, she had managed to attract the nastiest bastard in the lot, who knew exactly how to get to her. All he had to do was threaten Tom.

No choices. Just reactions. Her solution was only temporary. If she was going to come out on top, she'd have to do something. Soon.

"I was just wondering where you had gotten off to."

She turned around to face Raul, plastering a smile on her face. "I told you I'd be back by five."

"And here you are, but just barely. I didn't want to send the boys after you. How was your brother? Still safe and sound?" He smiled like a Cheshire cat underneath his glassy shades.

"He's fine, thanks for asking," she answered drolly.

"He's fine, thanks for asking," she answered drolly.

"Glad to hear it. I'm glad you got your side of the bargain too. I love it when things even out." He draped an arm around her neck and walked toward the house, a classic Southern California mansion with a red ceramic tile roof and pink stucco. She moved her legs quickly to keep up.

"Go up and put on something classy, we have to go to a memorial service tonight at a potential business partner's. Clean up with some medi-gel too, you're still all marked up from the other night." He waved his arm towards her body, fingers waggling with distaste. He abruptly released her when they got inside, causing her to stumble a step.

She grabbed the curved banister and jetted up the stairs before he could touch her again.

"That's the kind of enthusiasm I like to see!" He laughed up the stairs after her. His hard soles tapped against the marble floor as he walked to the back of the house.

Of the several bedrooms upstairs, one had already been assigned to her. A few other women lived there, part of Raul's personal harem. She sneered in distaste. Those skanks were probably diseased,
and she was basically sharing a rapist with them.

She opened the closet and found it already stocked with clothes from the previous tenant. The clothes were the kind she hated: one size fits all, because they fit like they were vacuumed on. She wouldn't be caught dead in any of that garbage on a normal day, but she literally \textit{would} be caught dead if she didn't obey.

\textit{Obey. That rat-fink bastard.} She was no tool to be pushed around. Her fists clenched, nails digging in, when she reminded herself for the hundredth time that she could, and would, be pushed around all he wanted. Because otherwise he'd go after Tom.

She flipped through the clothes angrily. \textit{This can't last. I will go fucking nuts in this place.}

Her hands were shaking so hard that the dress she was gripping fell off the hanger. She let the gold lamé monstrosity flutter to the floor.

Her whole life had been one catastrophe after another until she realized that she had to be calculating. Her move to L.A. had been carefully orchestrated, her career planned out. First, wait tables. Then tend bar. Then manage a club and make enough money to send Tom to a good school. Six months after her high school graduation she had made all of that happen but the last part.

That whole plan was shot to shit, but she knew that she could do it again. When it came right down to it, all it took was planning. Just mark the major players and plant some seeds.

She stood up straight. There were major players right here. Dangerous ones, certainly, but dangerous ones who didn't know who they were dealing with. If she played her part, marked the people she wanted to cultivate, planted her seeds… she could get everything they needed for a fresh start. Maybe even new identities. Patience is where most people dropped the ball, but patience she had in bucketloads when she knew what the end goal was. If she could keep her temper in check.

She'd have to play her part \textit{very} well.

Lola walked down the stairs an hour later. Her hair was piled on top of her head, her body swathed in a fitted black dress that suggested more than it revealed. It was the most tasteful dress on the rack, mostly because it completely covered her rear end. The heels were absurdly high, the black ribbons wrapped several times around her ankle before criss-crossing up her calves, but she had no trouble walking in them. It wasn't the first time she'd tarted herself up, and evidently it wouldn't be the last.

Raul was waiting for her in the foyer with a few others. He threw his hands out to the sides when she walked in the room.

"Now, that's what I'm talking about. Finally, not looking like you got fucked by a few dozen \textit{matones.}" Two of the nameless thugs she was studiously ignoring chuckled knowingly. She tried to keep her disgust off her face, walking out the door without looking back.

They got into the back of one of Raul's cars and pulled off.

"We have a stop to make, \textit{mano}. A little gift from one of the clients to pick up." He gave his driver an address.

The driver nodded and lifted off smoothly towards downtown San Diego. The skyline was dimmed in the tinted windows, long shadows streaking across the ground. Feeling like she was in one of the vids and none of this was real, Lola did her best to seem disinterested as the car drove to the
rooftop entrance of one of the buildings near the high-rises. The door on the far side of the patio opened and a man in a service uniform came out to hand a datapad to the driver through the window. He handed the datapad back to Raul without looking at it before lifting off again.

Raul pulled off his shades and grinned as he scanned his print into the datapad to activate it.

"Check this out, chica. One of the perks you'll learn to enjoy being in the Sangre Carnal." He held out the datapad to her. She leaned forward, curious despite herself.

Her jaw dropped. "Tickets to the UCC?" She snatched it from him to examine it.

"I have VIP seats. If you're a good girl, maybe I'll take you with me."

Her nostrils flared in distaste, but her eyes stayed riveted to the VIP passes, noting that it was in an ideal location. The Urban Combat Championship was the most followed team sport in all the human colonies. There hadn't been anything like it since the Roman Empire, but gladiator-style combat had come back in after the outer system settled. She'd heard they even watched it on Palaven. The champion team toured the world like rock stars after they did their time in the ring, and the host city reaped the benefits of attracting everyone with the money to attend.

The UCC usually sold out in hours, and this year San Diego had won the bid to be host city. An underdeveloped section of downtown was being converted into the ring, encompassing several city blocks. The whole city was talking about it.

But to make nice with Raul… well, she'd already decided to do what she had to do anyway. Might as well get something enjoyable out of it.

She felt the car descend and come to a stop. The door opened and she saw before her a spectacular edifice that put Raul's tacky abode to shame. Her gut fluttered with mild apprehension as they strode through the monolithic doors. An elegant Asian man was busy greeting guests on the far end of the foyer.

Their turn approached, and finally they were standing in front of the gentleman.

"This is Cong Jia," Raul said to her, gesturing at the man.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Jia," she said.

"The pleasure is all mine. I wish that we were meeting under better circumstances, my dear, since I have lost my lovely Celine. She made all of this ugly business worthwhile. What was your name, my dear?"

"Her name is Lola." Raul rolled her name in his mouth, his tone totally inappropriate for this occasion.

She barely managed to stifle her embarrassment. She held out her hand. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. Please, make yourselves at home." He bowed slightly over her hand and turned to the next guest.

"You're good at this," Raul said to her as they walked away. "Me, I don't understand all the fuss. I mean, what's another dead puta?" He hissed the last part into her ear. She shuddered and fought not to lean away, her body erupting into gooseflesh.

Fortunately, Raul lost interest in his taunting fairly quickly, a trend she hoped would continue. It
didn't take long for her to be left at the bar on the back deck while he mingled.

"Lookin' the part tonight," a voice said from beside her.

She turned and saw an enormous hulk of a man whose skin was almost as black as the ebony bar she leaned against. He was also familiar.

"Chege. Didn't know you ran with this crowd."

"Not by choice. But I guess it's the same for you, from what I saw the other night." His voice was deep and low, like thunder on the horizon.

"You were there?" She flushed with humiliation that someone she actually knew had been at her brutal initiation. "What were you doing there?"

"Wasn't there by choice, believe me. I got there after they took you to the garage."

Then she made the connection. She would never forget the voice telling her to shush in the shower, the gentle hands. It was one of her few lucid moments.

"Ah. So it was you. Thanks for that."

"Not a problem. I did what I could." He kept his gaze aloof, watching the crowd as if she were beneath his notice. He shook his head.

"Last week you were managing the downstairs at the Afrikka Club, now you're his bitch. Ain't life a joy."

"I'm nobody's bitch. He just doesn't know it yet. And you own the damn club, so who's the bigger bitch for being at that shindig?"

He chuckled. "Almost forgot what a mouth you have on you. Raul is gonna eat you alive." He swirled the ice in his glass, then signaled the bartender to make him another drink.

"Not if I can get me and my brother out of here first. Do you know anyone who can forge IDs?"

"Maybe… if I get the information I need."

"Oh yeah? What do they have on you? Couldn't you just pay them off?"

"I refused to work with them, so they dug up some dirt on my dad. He's a police commissioner. Now they're using the club as a front to deal red sand and he has me running errands like a damned messenger boy." His mouth twisted in distaste, which he covered by taking a drink from the glass the bartender had just handed him.

"I need to get back to my business. You'd probably have more luck than me getting close enough to find out what to do about it."

"Possibly."

"We shouldn't talk any more here. Let's catch up later."

"Right." She picked up a glass of wine from the bar and nodded to him.

"Nice to see you, Chege."
"You too, Lola. Take care of yourself."

She sauntered away to Raul's side with a sway in her hips, her mood already lifted.

*Mark one.* She was on her way.

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**Mason**

*At least I don't have to worry about the cops here,* Mason thought as he walked down the steps. Cong had provided him with an immaculate suit of clothes. While he wasn't the type to dress expensive, he liked the way the slick outfit contrasted with his rough appearance.

Eyes followed him as he walked through the mansion to the back deck, a wide expanse of gardens and plasti-crete and shimmering pools with koi. He could feel eyes on him wherever he went, burning into the Blue Suns tattoo on his neck. It made most of them give him a wide berth, for which he was grateful.

The memorial had been going on for more than an hour already. Mason had taken his time getting to Cong's. He was really only there for the private dinner afterward; this kind of scene was not his thing. But at least there was a lot of eye candy walking around on the arms of many punk-ass looking gangsters. This was some crowd his sister had fallen in with.

He smiled at every pretty face he saw out of sheer habit, at the same time bemoaning the absence of any asari, a taste he had picked up in the Lower Wards. He dodged conversation easily, picking up a drink from a bar next to a string quartet before making his way to the far end of the patio, partially swathed in shadows from the setting sun.

It was surreal to be standing here under the stars surrounded by all this opulence, but the Lower Wards suddenly looked honest compared to the facade that every face wore here. He looked over the roof of the house and saw a star winking at him. It almost made him homesick for the Citadel.

He waited for the sun to set before moving towards the house again. He turned a corner in the path just as a voice came from the other side of the path, behind the lush greenery. Another step revealed a man with blood-red ink on the back of his neck talking to a stunningly beautiful young woman.

"I'll collect you in a bit, *puta.* Wait here for me. I got some business to do. Can't mix it with pleasure." He sucked at her neck, her face contorting into an expression of extreme distaste, which she controlled before he looked up to kiss her on the mouth. He turned away.

"Try not to fuck anyone while I'm gone," he called back to her jovially as he passed Mason, tipping his shades down to give him what was probably a conspiratorial grin. Mason grimly watched him go before walking up to the girl, who was wiping at her neck.

She looked at him warily. "No matter what that asshole said, I'm not gonna fuck you."

He couldn't help but laugh. "Just came over to see if you're okay. How did a girl like you get hooked up with such a prick?"

"Bad luck and bad choices." She spat out. Her eyes sized him up, then she went on. "I don't really have a choice. Gotta do my time. If I can make it more than a week without killing the son of a bitch."

Something in her tone made Mason think that she might actually do it. "Huh. Good luck with that."
"Yeah, right." She sat on the bench behind her. He began to move away. "You wouldn't happen to have a smoke, would you?" she asked.

"Not on me, sorry."

"That's a shame. I don't smoke often, but it would feel good to get a little relief." She sighed like she was a million years old. "This is the last place I thought I'd be a week ago."

"I know how you feel. Celine was my sister."

Her head jerked up. "Oh, god, I'm so sorry. Here I am going on about my situation and you're-"

"Don't worry about it. Celine isn't hurting anymore. Looks like you are, though."

"Is it that obvious?" She put her elbows on her knees and rested her head in her hands. "My brother joined up. He's just thirteen. I couldn't let them take his future."

"So you took his place," he guessed.

"What else could I do? He didn't know what he was getting into."

"Did you?" Mason wasn't sure why he was even interested in her little sob story, but there was something magnetic and powerful about her, like she would explode at any moment and take the whole city with her.

"Yeah, I actually did. Doesn't make it any easier to be his plaything." She turned her head and spat.

"And there's no way out."

"Not while they can hold my brother over my head." She stared at her shoes. "This is it for me."

He could hear her teeth grinding.

"For what it's worth, I know how you feel. I lost my woman to slavers a long, long time ago. I tried to find her, but it was too late. At least your brother is still alive."

"I suppose that's true. The thing is, if I could get access to his network, I could probably figure something out. But he's so paranoid it will be damned near impossible."

"Are you good with that kind of thing?"

"Oh, yeah. Always had a knack for hacking. Got a scholarship once... a lifetime ago." Her voice trailed off. He almost laughed. She couldn't be twenty years old and she was talking about lifetimes. The comical aspect of it faded when he saw the look on her face as she tilted back to look longingly at the stars.

"Look, if it'll help, here." He slipped off the slim black bracelet on his left arm. "Cong gave this to me. It's untraceable, off the grid. I don't know what to do with the damned thing." She stared at the gift open-mouthed.

"Just don't get caught with it. That fucker'll kill you if he gets half a chance. I know the type."

"You're telling me." She gazed up at him in wonder. "Do you know how much this thing must have cost? I can't believe this. You don't even know my name."

He put out his hand. "Mason Black."
She took his hand wonderingly and shook it. "Lola."

"No last name?"

She shrugged. "I have one, but after you change it a few times it doesn't matter." Her grim tone confirmed his earlier suspicions. This pretty little thing had lived a lot in her short time alive.

"I know just how you feel," he said again. She smiled up at him, a genuine smile that was so beautiful he briefly wished he was twenty years younger. His mouth curved upward slightly in response, his toothpick pointing at his ear.

Raised voices came closer from the direction of the house.

"You'd better get out of here, Mason." She bent down and slid the bracelet under the black ribbons lacing up her ankle, blending in perfectly.

He stood up. "Good luck, sweetness. I have a feeling you'll come out on top."

"Thanks for that. For everything." It looked like she meant it. The corner of his mouth lifted briefly at her again before he walked away.

Later...

"Mason. I'm so glad you stayed." Cong rose from his leather chair, one of a set that faced the gardens. An archway framed the dining room table, already set for three.

"I said I would. Thanks again for the car."

"Found your friend? In good health, I hope?"

"Yeah."

They walked together into the other room. A gilded mirror faced the doorway, reflected the two of them over the table, Cong's slim elegance against Mason's brawn.

A small placard with his name in script was in front of one of the plates. Taking the hint, Mason settled, somewhat uncomfortable in these surroundings, into the cushioned chair.

"So, um, thanks for inviting me."

"Of course. You're family." Cong's reply, simply given, obtusely made Mason feel even more out of place. He tugged at his collar.

An elderly lady waddled into the room. Her face was deeply lined and powdered, her once-slanted eyelids almost drooping down past her cheekbones. She said nothing as she sat at the table, not even to her son.

The dinner proceeded with quiet ceremony, Mason growing ever more tense. He wanted to leave about five minutes into the meal. He chewed and swallowed, then listened to the others chew and swallow. By the end of the meal he was positive that Celine must have been out of her mind to live like this.

When the meal was finished, the old woman left without a word or a backward look. Mason was just wondering how rude it would be for him to bolt when Cong said, "Ah, finally. How would you like some brandy and a cigar?"
A grin broke across Mason's face. "Now you're talkin'."

Cong smiled as he decanted the liquid into two crystal glasses.

"I know that formal dinners probably aren't your usual cup of tea, but my mother is a stickler for formality. Celine didn't enjoy our Sunday dinners, either, but we had ample pleasures to make up for it."

"I had wondered about that."

"She brought civility back into my home. This house was my father's, but my mother and I rarely spoke. Celine brought us back together. She couldn't bear to think that I had a mother and wasn't talking to her on purpose." He dipped the end of his cigar in the brandy before he lit it.

"Sounds like her."

Mason took a sip of the brandy, then another, thinking that it didn't seem like they talked much anyway.

"That was a real crowd of winners you had here tonight. Did Celine hang out with them?"

"Not often. We both preferred it that way."

"I bet. I ran into a girl in the garden back there." He gestured toward the back of the house. "Some asshole was treating her like shit. She told me later she had taken her brother's place in the guy's gang. Pretty fuckin' sad. Celine wouldn't have been able to sit still with something like that going on."

"Who was the man?" Cong asked.

Mason described him and Cong nodded. "I think I know who it is. Interesting..." He stared into the darkness beyond the glass wall for a moment.

"Is there something you can do for her?"

Cong smiled. "She chose her fate, as you said. To get involved would be... messy. Not that I'm opposed, but to stir up a man like that is not wise without a clear benefit."

"The benefit would be helping out a beautiful woman and sticking it to that jerk. Sounds like a win-win to me," Mason said, taking another drink of the brandy.

Cong's chuckle surprised him. "That's almost what Celine would have said. I'm glad I invited you here, Mason. The investigation I ordered on you didn't tell me how much you are like her."

"She was a good woman. Um, just to satisfy my curiosity, what did you find out about me?"

Cong held his glass close to his face, enjoying the fragrance of the brandy as he spoke. "You served in the Alliance Marines with your friend Emilio, the one you visited the other day in Escondido." He smiled when Mason looked up in surprise. So he was keeping an eye on him. Mason wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"The military reported you MIA at the end of the First Contact War, but you resurfaced a short time later doing mercenary work with the founders of the Blue Suns. You left after one of them betrayed you and started your tattoo shop on the Citadel. That's the short version, of course."

"Pretty much everything, then."
"I also know that you had a habit of abandoning contracts so you could instead save people who had been forced into slavery. It didn't make you any friends when the Blue Suns changed leadership."

"No. It didn't."

"Your choices intrigue me, Mason. I'm sorry I won't have longer to get to know you before you return to the Citadel."

"Actually, Emilio asked me to change my ticket to stay for the spring. I think I'd like to take him up on it. I probably won't ever come this way again now that Celine is gone."

"Now, this is good news. You are welcome to stay in my home, if you wish, since you didn't like the hotel."

"I might for part of the time. I don't want to intrude too much on you or Emilio."

"Not possible, I'm sure. But we can sync schedules on your omni-tool."

Mason scratched his head. "Ah, actually, I gave it away."

Cong sat forward. "You what? To who?"

"To that girl. I don't know anything about those things and she said she needed to hack the guy's network."

Cong's eyes positively glittered. "You understand that you may have just signed her death warrant?"

"When someone says they know how to do something, I tend to believe them. You aren't going to help her anyway, so what does it matter?"

Cong's gaze became unsettling. Minutes passed. Then he relaxed in his chair. "Hmmm. If she can't do what she says, then it is her own fault for deceiving you. But if she can…" He laughed softly. "I will have a private, untraceable datalink to Raul Duarte's network. Interesting. You may have just done me a favor, Mason."

"I hope so, for her sake. You don't often see women like that."

"She did seem special in the brief moment when we met. Yes, perhaps she's worth watching more carefully."

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**James**

* A few days later…

James stood with his bag next to the door, shoes on. His eyes were locked with his father's. In the background, the news was playing on the vidcom, mixing with the sounds his mother was making in the kitchen.

"…forces have repeatedly stopped batarian attacks in the Verge, but small groups of infiltrators continue to get through defenses. The colonies continue to make pleas to Alliance military to…"

"I'm going." James said, crossing his arms.
Josh Sanders ran his hand through his unkempt hair.

"Something's gonna happen, I just know it."

"Nothin's gonna happen. We do this all the time."

Josh Sanders scowled and turned back to the vidcom, puffing despondently on a stubby cigarette.

"I don't like this." He mumbled, ashes drifting down the front of his shirt as he watched images of troops flash across the screen. "You out there with all those…"

"Those what?"

James crossed his arms across his chest and jutted his chin out. There was nothing his dad could have said that could have made James relent. These outings with his uncle were the highlight of his month. He hadn't been sure he would be home from his latest mission in time, fortunately just a short one, but just this morning he had received a message.

"Got a weekend pass. Planned something special. Pack light, we're camping again."

There was no way he was spending the weekend stuck in their little apartment. His dad wanted to keep him locked up like he did his mother, but as far as James was concerned, it was not ever going to play out like that.

The door buzzed. James grabbed his bags and ran out.

"Adiós Mom, 'bye Pop!" He shouted before the door shut behind him. He heard his mother say something muffled through the door, but he was already tugging on Emilio's arm.

"What's the surprise?" James walked backwards ahead of his uncle as they made their way to the elevator.

"You'll see." His uncle watched his excited movements with an amused look on his face.

They didn't have a long drive. They always had so much fun camping on Camp Pendleton's preserves. They passed through several gates, Emilio scanning them in with his omni-tool.

"Wait, aren't we going to the camping grounds?" James looked out the window of his uncle's car as it turned away from the familiar sign.

"Not right away. First, you get your surprise." Emilio Vega glanced over at his nephew with a smile. "You just have to promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

He turned back to the road, his smile widening into a grin.

"Don't tell your parents."

They passed several squads doing calisthenics and running in formation through the streets as they drove through the massive base.

"Why are they singing when they run like that?" James leaned out the window, the wind lifting his hair.

"They have to move together like a team. Like a single organism. Singing helps."
The car pulled to a stop in front of a huge clearing. Popping sounds resounded through the air. James could feel it on his skin.

"Why?"

He stared at the men lying on the field, shooting their weapons. He'd never been this close to a gun before.

"When you're in combat, you don't have time to talk things over. You have to do things without thinking about them first. So you train and train until it's all second nature, and the people you fight with will respond to you because they know you."

They met in front of the car. Emilio pointed to the prefab. "I'm going to teach you how to shoot today, Jimmy. You up for it?"

"Yesss!" Elated, James practically skipped into the prefab nearby. His imagination was running wild with images of explosions and weapons from his comics.

His uncle laughed indulgently. "We'll see how you feel about it when you get a taste of some kickback."

"Kickback?"

"You'll see."

The sergeant in the armory released several wicked-looking weapons to his uncle, who was growing by the inch in James' eyes. His uncle's large hands checked over the weapons with practiced ease, stowing each one in a crate with several packages of heat sinks. He'd known he was in the military, of course, but he only ever saw him at his house, and almost never in uniform.

"That's it then. Thanks, Sergeant." The two men nodded to each other and Emilio led the way out into the sun.

"Why are they doing it like that?" James asked as they approached the stalls on the far side of the field, past all the men shooting while lying on the ground. His attention immediately diverted to the crate that his uncle set down. "Which one do I get?"

"One question at a time." Emilio said. "That's called shooting prone, and we won't be doing that today. We'll be standing up. And you'll be shooting all of these."

"All of them?" His grin threatened to stretch right off his face.

"Yep. Let's start with this one, a Kessler V. It's small, but powerful. It doesn't have much recoil—that's when the blast makes the gun jerk back—but until you get some practice I want you to cup your hand underneath your other hand like this." He put his arms around James and positioned him correctly.

"There, that's right. Now just look down the sights. Do you see the target?"

"Yeah. When do I shoot?"

"When you feel steady. Get it lined up. Good. Now, focus your breath. Nice and easy."

James felt his breath come in and out of his mouth, watching the target sway around the end of the barrel. The wind fluttered across his face and one eye drifted closed.
Pop. The little explosion vibrated through his arms.

"How did that feel?"

"Good!" But good didn't even come close to conveying how it felt.

"Now, drop your other elbow a little bit so you'll be more steady…"

The sun dropped lower on the horizon as the lesson continued. Each time he fired, he got a jolt of adrenaline. Having that much power in his hands, directing it where he wanted it to, made him feel on top of the world. But it wasn't until the sun was touching the treetops that he fell in love.

"What is that?" He leaned over the crate gazing in wonder at the final weapon.

"A shotgun. It's called a Hurricane, made by Elanus Risk Industries."

"Hurricane, Elanus Risk Industries." James muttered, eyes glittering as he took in the mean-looking weapon.

"Are you memorizing all of this?"

James nodded, one finger running down the thick barrel of the gun.

"Oh yeah? Prove it." Emilio folded his arms across his chest.

"Kessler V, Hahne-Kedar Indutries. 17 shots before overheat. Stinger IV, Devlon Industries. 19 shots before overheat. Razer VII, Kassa Fabrication. 23 Shots before overheat and a seventy-five percent accuracy rating. That one was sweet, Uncle E, can I shoot that one again?"

"Not now. Go on, I'm impressed. The assault rifles?"

"Diamond Back II, Hahne-Kedar Shadow Works. 41 shots before overheat. Didn't hit much with it, but the Gorgon IX…" James looked skyward, sighing happily.

Emilio was nodding. "Not bad, not bad at all. I hope you take your school studies this seriously."

"Some of it. But it's not as exciting as this!" James reverently lifted the bulky shotgun from the crate.

Emilio hit the button on the wall and the target zoomed closer. James chewed on his lip, looking from the target to the weapon in his hands.

"Shoot from the hip or the shoulder. Generally you'd only use it in close quarters, when the enemy is too close to miss."

James nodded in understanding.

"Now we talk about kickback. The rifles are all modded to protect from recoil, but this shotgun has some major power. It'll jump back at you, so be sure to give it some room. Don't hold it against your chest- a little further away. Good."

James took a deep breath and let it out of his mouth, rounding his lips into a circle. The barrel came up and his left hand wrapped around the barrel. The index finger on his right hand circle over the trigger… and pulled.

The entire weapon bucked in his hands, startling him. It was as if the thing had suddenly come
alive and was about to turn back and attack him. He gripped it harder so he wouldn't drop it, gritting his teeth.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. "How did that feel?"

He twisted around to look up at his uncle. "Awesome!"

"Take a few more shots and we'll wrap up. Tomorrow we'll do some outdoor shooting."

James' heart was still racing when the two of them pitched their tent later that evening. James mistied the lines twice as he replayed the events of the day in his mind.

"So how are things going at school?" Emilio asked him as they ate their MREs inside the tent.

"You're thirteen now. Any girlfriends yet?"

He gave his uncle a sardonic look. "Are you serious? Look at me," He gestured down his chubby body. "No bueno."

Emilio shook his head. "You'll grow out of that, James. I was the same way. You just have to find something active that you love to do."

"Well, until then, I'm invisible. Especially in that school."

Emilio leaned forward, setting his dinner aside. "I've actually been meaning to talk to you about that, James."

"About what?"

"There's a scholarship for the ROTC program at the private school near my house. Started last year. Since you liked what we did today, I thought you might like to apply for it."

"ROTC?"

"It's like an early officer's training program. Gets you ready to enlist. Would you like that?"

"I think so, if I get to do more stuff like we do together." James' eyebrows furrowed as he considered. "Near your house? How would I get there? Would I have to live with you?"

"That would probably be easiest way, if your parents would allow it. If not, we could work something out."

"What about when you go offworld?"

His uncle smiled. "I've received permanent orders for Pendleton. I'm designing a new training program for Special Forces."

"You're staying?" He grinned excitedly at his uncle. "Yes! Special Forces-- is that like N7?"

"That's right. The N7 designation is given to Special Forces who have completed all six levels of training in the program."

"Special Forces." James said dreamily, leaning back against his pillow. "Sounds cool."

"It's hard work, and that program is invitation only. You have to be a serious badass to even get noticed."
Serious badass. New goals were forming. Then he remembered his home, his life, and he sighed dejectedly. "How am I supposed to be like that?"

Emilio reached forward, squeezing his arm. "You'll have your day, James. All you have to do to get noticed is to figure out what you want and go for it, full force. Sé fuerte."

"I want lots of things right now, but they don't happen no matter how much I try."

"Your goals aren't in reach yet. You have to start with the ones that are, and then the others can grow."

Made sense. It was still a little depressing that there was so much time left before he could be noticed by the people who could give him what he needed to have adventures like he dreamed up. Adventures with guns and adventures with women… women like Lola.

They were quiet for a few minutes as they packed up their food and trash and settled down to bed. The electric lamp was shut off, but James could see the shape of the moon through the thin tent material above his head.

"Hey Uncle E?"

"Hmmm?"

"Would girls notice me if I was in Special Forces like you?"

He heard his uncle laugh in the darkness. "Oh, yes. That they would, James. That they would."

Visions of scopes and barrels were dancing in his head as he went to sleep, the smell of heat sinks still in his nostrils. I wonder what it would be like to be in Special Forces, he thought as he drifted off.

One day, he was going to find out, if it was the last thing he did.
Lola sat up in bed, slid her feet into a pair of soft slippers, and tied a white silk robe on over her nightshirt. Then she rubbed her eyes and stood up.

Her feet padded across the gleaming floor tiles, their smooth surface pristine, like a seashell pounded smooth by the ocean waves. She set her hand on the chair next to the door, her fingers curling around the ornately carved, luminous wood.

She hated the opulence of her prison as much as she'd hated the squalor of her upbringing. She was as desperate as ever to get out. But her entire life had been tinged with the same shade of desperation; it hardly even rated. In her short time with the gang, she had constantly looked for opportunities to forward her ends. Unfortunately, Raul was paranoid, and for good reason. It had kept him alive in his dangerous world.

She still hadn't been able to get access to his network, even though she'd spent every night with him for the last two weeks. It was frustrating to bide her time when she knew her goal was in the room at the end of the hall. She hadn't seen Chege since the first party she attended with Raul two weeks earlier.

The door leading out to the little balcony was partially open, the sound of ocean waves crashing on the beach close by not quite overpowering the conversation below. Raul and three others sat at a table finishing up an early breakfast on the far side of the pool. She looked at the people assembled around the table and smiled at the new addition to the small group. A few minutes later she stepped into the sunlight on the patio on the lower level, making her way around the still, blue water to where the sounds of dishes clinking broke the morning air.

Chege's dark skin gleamed in the bright sun, a beacon of hope. Lola sheltered her eyes and gave a little smile as she walked up to the table. He cracked a smile in return, then turned his attention back to Raul.

"Pull a few more off, Chege, and we'll talk about the final part of our agreement. These problem areas are ruining our cash flow, and I don't want this distracting me when I go out of town this weekend. Settle it any way you can." Raul turned at the sound of her approaching footsteps. "About time. Come over here, mielero. Give me some sugar." Raul tilted a cheek to her. Her nostrils flared as she bent to kiss him. Pulling her into his lap, he slid a hand into her robe. Her
mood abruptly crashed and she looked away in irritation.

"Oh, come on. They don't mind. Do you, guys?" The two men across from her chuckled at Raul's remark.

Raul began rubbing his rough facial hair against the side of her neck. Her eyes rolled back and she tried to pull away.

"Ah, now, I know you like it." His hand moved between her legs.

She sighed, staring at the small strip of ocean she could see sparking through the underbrush over the rail. These little games of his were exhausting. She had long since lost patience with them. She couldn't even pretend anymore. And it was beyond infuriating that he'd discovered her neck was so sensitive.

He imitated her sigh. "Not enjoying yourself? Maybe you will if I bring your brother back here to watch." He nodded when her head jerked around to glare at him. "Yeah, I thought so. Maybe I'll just pick him up later."

"You touch him and I'll-"

"You'll what?" The laughing tone left his voice. He waved a hand at his men. "Hold her. She needs a reminder. She's been seeing the nice side of me for too long."

Two men came up beside her and grabbed her arms before she could struggle. They pulled her off of his lap and twisted her arms back until she could hardly breathe. Her shoulders burned in the sockets, the tendons holding her weight as her feet sought purchase on the grass.

Raul picked up the little knife lying on the table next to the bowl of oranges. He slid the tip of the knife across her collarbone, leaning close to her face to watch her eyes. Juice dripped onto her skin from the blade, running a cool trail under the spotless robe. She shivered a breath through her teeth.

The citrus-coated blade stung her as it carved slowly down her neck, heat rushing to the shallow cut he made. She didn't allow herself to flinch.

"Do I need to bring little Tom here to really drive the point home?" His men snickered at his joke as he twisted the tip of the blade under the skin. Her throat flexed as she carefully swallowed, trying not to push against the blade.

"No," she said, meeting his eyes. "Leave him alone."

"We'll see. But my generosity is wearing thin." He stood back, then gave her that smile that told her trouble was coming.

"Boys, take her back into the room and remind her why she's here."

_Not again._ Something inside her snapped, pushing logic and reason to the deep, dark background.

---

**Chege**

_Here she goes_, Chege thought with satisfaction as a change came over Lola's face. He'd known it was only a matter of time.
Raul took a startled step back as her heel came up, connecting with the crotch of the man holding her left arm. He dropped his hands with a groan, gripping himself as he fell backwards against the railing. The other man's head snapped back with a fleshy thwack as her left fist connected, then stumbled back as she elbowed him in the sternum. Dodging the first man's swing as he rolled back up, she kicked him again where it counted and he crumpled back onto the ground.

Lola stepped toward Raul, furious. "I'm not going to-" She broke off, ducking as one of the men came at her again. Two more men ran out from the house as the sounds of the commotion reached them.

Chege smiled, leaning against the railing to watch. This was just like the time that frat boy had grabbed her in the Afrikka Club and she beat the shit out of him and all his friends in front of the bar. That had been, what? Five months ago?

He'd known then that she could do more than just serve drinks, and she'd shown up for every test he'd thrown at her. A more cutthroat go-getter he hadn't met, which is part of what had made her so pathetic when he saw her beaten and bloodied on the garage floor the other week.

He took pleasure in the dumbfounded look on Raul's face as the half-naked woman took out four men with nothing but her hands and feet. Granted, she was rough and unpracticed, but she made up for it with sheer gusto. She went for the vulnerable parts, like the eyes and the inside of the joints, scrapping like a junkyard dog. The men were unprepared for her vicious tactics. They went down quickly.

As the last man fell, she turned her attention to Raul again. Her face was painted with fury as she marched up to him, stepping over the groaning men like they weren't there, and thrust her finger into his chest.

"You do what you want with me, but if one of your **huelepedos** touches me again…” she hissed through her teeth, "**Voy a fregar el cabrón. ¿Me entiendes?**"

Whatever she said, it wasn't a compliment. Lola stared into her livid reflection in Raul's sunglasses for a moment before he took them off to regard her thoughtfully. "Clearly I've underestimated you."

She looked startled by his composure, but what did she expect? This was Raul Duarte, not some drunk jackoff.

Raul rubbed his chin, looking at her thoughtfully while her breathing slowed. His men began to rise and he waved them off.

"**Es necesario un trabajo más difícil,**" he said.

Lola obviously understood, but she didn't answer. Raul glanced over at Chege, who still stood against the railing on the far side of the table, then back at Lola.

"Go get dressed. Then we're gonna have a little chat up in my room, you and me." He caressed her arm. Expressionless, she turned and left without a backward glance.

"Chege," he said once she had left. "I want you to take Lola with you on that assignment."

"You want her to do collections?" Chege had his own agenda, he didn't want Lola along to distract him.

His confused tone only brought a bigger smile to Raul's face. "I think she'll bring just the right
touch to that part of the operation." He looked down at the fruit knife gleaming in his hand, still dripping fresh juice mixed with her blood. He licked the blade, savoring the fluid on his tongue.

Chege cringed. *Freak.*

"*Si.*" Raul nodded, looking back the way she had gone. "I think this is just where she belongs."

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**Lola**

He was standing by the double doors that overlooked the ocean behind the house as she blew into the bedroom with every outward appearance of confidence she could muster. His empty eyes watched her approach from beneath heavy, black eyebrows. Seeing him standing there with the beauty of the Pacific as his backdrop, the white sheers blowing in with the ocean breeze, might have made her laugh if she'd seen it on the vids. As it was, it almost made her shiver.

*Predator and prey.* She lengthened her stride, channeling her nervous energy into her self-assurance, each step planted deliberately on the hard tile until she stood in front of him, feet shoulder-width apart. The wind picked up her loose hair and she met his eyes.

"You wanted me, Raul?" she asked in a suggestive tone.

He slapped her, then grabbed her arm and pulled her face close to his. "I'll give you some real work since you've got so much energy to burn off, but you'll never speak to me like that in front of my men again."

"We'll see," she maintained her challenging look, not wanting to show weakness. "But I think I'm starting to like you, Raul," she said.

She drew out the last word, sliding her hands into his unbuttoned shirt. His muscles bunched under her fingers as she felt him gear up up to hit her again. She shoved her hands deeply into the soft flesh under his arms, a trick she'd learned from one of her foster parents. He shouted in pain, his arms momentarily immobilized. She kept her face close to his, fully expecting backlash for her daring move even as she maintained her fiction.

"You didn't seem to like me downstairs. I think you're full of shit," he spat, grabbing her again.

"I have to admit, it surprised me too. But I happen to like powerful men."

"Is that so?" He smiled. It was a smile she hated, the one that said *I own you.* She mimicked it back to him. She'd have him eating out of her hand soon enough.

*Tú me das buena onda, mujer.*" With a force of will she kept the elation at her victory off her face while he put his head to her neck and bit his way across her collarbone.

"I hope this isn't the 'real work' you mentioned," she said.

He laughed, a slow chuckle she hadn't heard from him before. "No. But we'll do this first."

He moved lower, undressing her, and her face turned to the sunlight streaming in through the open doorway, her mind drifting off into fantasy.

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**Later...**

Lola sat astride Raul on the chair near the door, both of them naked, touching his face with gentle
fingers as she applied medi-gel to where she'd split his lip during their passionate lovemaking. He had already healed hers. He didn't like his women "marked up", he said. An oddity, considering his proclivities.

His hands caressed the small of her back gently and she smiled as she worked. In this moment, he was almost tolerable.

"There." She set the tube down on the table and wiped at his face maternally before standing up. He caught at her arms and yanked her back down.

He stroked her hair, gleaming in the sunlight. "Stay put." Leaning back into the chair, he put a hand on each thigh and looked her over.

"Not done yet?" she asked, looking down at him.

"With you? Not yet," he said.. It felt like there was something else behind his words. A warning.

"Where did you learn to speak my language so well?"

"This is California. It's hardly unique."

"No, but you speak it like your first language."

She shrugged. "One of my first foster parents was Mexican. He had a foul mouth, but he taught me how to fight." The last thing she wanted to do was share personal stories with this asshole. "Tell me about your ink," she said, tracing over the intricate patterns and words that decorated his body.

"Which one?"

A wide collar of elaborate script wrapped around his neck, reading sangre por sangre. "Blood for blood," she translated. "That's for the gang, right? Did you name it?"

He shook his head. "My grandfather did. We branched off from the Mexican Mafia more than a hundred years ago. Las pandillas don't make it into the history books, but we should."

"I didn't think these things were hereditary."

"It's not. Hostile takeover, every time. With us, anyway."

"So sangre por sangre…?"

"My father gave me life. I took his. Blood for blood," he said.

He was looking for a reaction. Keeping her eyes on the tattoo, she tilted her head curiously and traced the letters with her fingers. Squelching her immediate reaction of horror, her mind clicked over the possibilities, deciding on the best way to respond.

A version of the truth was probably best. "I don't remember my father. I haven't missed him. Do you miss yours?"

From the expression on his face, it wasn't one of the responses he was expecting. "No. He wanted to turn me into something I'm not, so I had to put him down."

She nodded like this was a reasonable answer. "What about this one?" Her fingers trailed up the long line of red dashes, stringing between his heart, up his neck and into his ear. She leaned close, tracing the design. The line feathered off in several places, reducing to dots.
"Uno para cada mujer."

"One for the ladies, are you Raul?"

"Not like that. One for each mujer I've put down."

Her hand froze on his neck, the smile fading from her face. Their eyes met, his steel and her fire.

"You look worried," he observed with obvious enjoyment after a moment.

Her fingers traced back down the line, ending at the knotwork over his heart, perhaps twenty in all. Each dash was a life. "No, Raul. I'm not worried. Any mark I make on you won't only be skin deep." Her finger dug into the knotwork.

"Sounds like I'd be better off without you then."

"Why Raul," she said, lifting an eyebrow at him. "Are you worried?"

He looked at her without expression for a moment, then began to laugh. It was genuine mirth, head thrown back and belly heaving. Lola watched in astonishment, a smile toying at her mouth.

"You might be interesting enough to keep around. Maybe even for more than this." He squeezed her ass.

"Oh, really?"

"About that work," he said, sitting up. "You'll go on a collection job this afternoon." He nuzzled against her neck.

"Someone trying to hold out on you, Raul?" Her mouth twisted in amusement, she leaned into him so that her hair fell down his heavily inked back.

"Everyone tries. They don't succeed." Pulling back, the look he gave her said that he wasn't completely fooled by her act. Not yet, anyway.

"We can't have that," she said sardonically. A slow smile spread across his rugged face, almost making him attractive.

"No chingar," he warned her, finger raised.

"I'll save that for you, then." She stood up and walked over to where her clothes were strewn. She dressed, not needing to look over her shoulder to know he was watching. He would always be watching.

She had to be careful.

---

Raul

A short while later, Raul watched thoughtfully as Chege and Lola walked from the house. He turned to his head of security.

"We don't know much about her at all, Will. Her records only go back about three years. Same for her brother. She could be practically anybody, a rival pandilla infiltrator maybe."

"Possibly. We know there's a data leak somewhere."
She and Chege were talking. Lola's attention was on the man who had entered the car ahead of them. Raul didn't like it. He was almost tempted to go along.

He could still smell her on his shirt. The fascination that was growing in him aroused as much suspicion as it did other, less familiar feelings. He shook his head, wondering that he'd let himself get so distracted by a bitch.

"For now, we watch, and we wait. Has Sesay contacted you about the incident last week on the west side?"

"Yes, the full report is on your terminal."

Raul walked over to his desk and sat down to read. After a minute, he nodded. "Set it up for tomorrow."

"You got it, boss."

He sat back in his chair, thinking. "I wonder if she's related to the business at hand."

"Seems unlikely."

"It does, but she's devious, Will."

"True. My instincts say it's someone who was already here, though." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "If she does well today, she might be good on a permanent team."

"You think so? Una Majer?"

"Other organizations have been using them for centuries. Sometimes they're more vicious and clever than men, and they can get more places. Your father-

"Yes, yes, I know," Raul said, waving a hand testily. "I just hadn't thought about it like that. This thing today was just a test of loyalty, but to make her one of us... I don't know."

"She's an asset. We need assets. This alliance is costing us a lot, and we're spread thin."

"What will this do to my reputation?" he mused aloud.

"Probably improve it, Raul. Welcome to the twenty-second century."

Raul chuckled and dismissed him. His office was empty a moment later but for him and his thoughts.

Lola was an anomaly in more ways than one. The way she'd taken down his men had really opened his eyes to her other qualities. His insults bounced off her in an infuriating way, and her responses intrigued him far more than they should.

Her impassioned kiss today had shaken him in his gut, much as he hated to admit it, though he couldn't pin down why. He frowned. It only proved that she was determined to pull something over on him. He'd already picked out her tell, the lifted eyebrow, which indicated she was up to no good, but perversely he liked it. By keeping her close, by studying her, he would learn how to bring out her fire and let her burn herself.

She was sly, she was sexy and she was smart. It was a good thing he had his head on straight. It would be easier to just get rid of her now, but the game was too early for that. She was proving to be too interesting and potentially valuable to put down.
Anticipation tingled right down into his alligator boots. Lola was going to be a fun woman to break.

Lola

Chege escorted her outside, his face more reserved than usual. She gave him a querying glance as an average-looking man in a tight button-down shirt and light jacket got into the passenger side of the long red car they were taking.

"What's his deal?" she asked quietly as they walked to the other side of the car together.

"That's Tony. He's got a big mouth, so watch what you say. He's good with knives. That jacket is lined with 'em. Did you find anything out?" Chege asked.

"Not yet. Haven't been able to access the network. Maybe now I'll get a chance, though."

"I hope so. I don't know what they're doing in my club right now."

Lola climbed in the back seat and Chege lifted off.

They pulled up to a squat residential complex at high noon. The three of them walked down the hallway to one of the innermost apartments on the ground level, the air stagnant and musty, like an old gym. Faint sounds of human interactions could be heard through the doors they passed.

"This job is pretty straightforward, Lola," Chege said. "They owe Raul a couple thou for some sand they were supposed to deal. They say they got rolled."

Tony shrugged, stopping in front of a door marked '10056K'. "Could be true. Doesn't matter. They still have to pay." His voice was thin and wheezy.

"So why are there three of us, if it's straightforward?"

"A lot of money has disappeared in this place in the last few months. We keep taking out the new contact and placing new ones. Someone is skimming off the top." Tony gestured expressively.

"How many inside?"

"Usually two men, plus the odd family members that live here," Chege said.

"Let her knock," Tony said with a smile, revealing several metal teeth, a cosmetic choice in this day and age. He ogled her. "They'll open faster for her."

She was wearing a pair of jeans, although they were too small, and the oversized t-shirt she had worn to bed was tied at the waist, making her feel relatively covered, but she would definitely be doing some shopping soon. Hanging with this crowd, your clothes said a lot about the type of work you did.

It was this thought, which came to her as she knocked on the door, that made her realize she had almost accepted her part in this world. But she did want to start over somewhere else.

For Tom's sake. Right?

The boys moved to either side of the door, out of sight. When the door opened she greeted the denizens inside the stinking hovel with a smile. Her appearance clearly caught them off guard well enough to allow Tony and Chege to shove their way into the room ahead of her. She followed
without haste, taking stock of the situation.

The air stank like depression, the only way she'd found to accurately describe the stale air found in the center of residential blocks. Chege and Tony had two of the boys pinned down, weapons out, demanding the money or the drugs. They ignored the younger boy who was cowering on the other end of the couch. An obese old woman took up most of the little kitchenette, sitting on a stool, wearing an enormous caftan which skirted all the way to the floor.

"¡Usted trae mala suerte a mi casa!" She shouted at the big guy on the far end, the one that Chege was interrogating, pointing her arm imperiously. She held a dishtowel to her face, preparing for waterworks she was desperately trying to work up.

Cocking her head curiously, Lola walked over to her while Chege and Tony talked rough to the two contacts.

The woman watched her nervously. A trickle of sweat came from her brow, even though the room was cold.

"¿Está ocultando algo, abuela?" She asked sweetly, leaning forward.

"No…" the old lady said. Her eyes shied away from Lola's, flickering toward the adolescent kid on the near end of the sofa. He was sinking into the cushions, trying to avoid the action that the other two were seeing.

"Chege," Lola said.

"What?"

"The kid on the end. What's his deal?"

"That's Holmes. He's not the one who-"

"Grab the kid."

Chege and Tony looked at each other, then shrugged and lifted Holmes to his feet. He was chubby, though not as porcine as the old lady, and perhaps seventeen years old. Lola turned back to the old lady, who now had fear written across her face.

"¿Es el niño especial para ti?"

"What are you saying, Lola?" Chege asked.

"She knows something."

"You sure?"

Lola looked at him, serious. Chege nodded. She turned back to the woman. "Open your jacket, Tony," she said.

The kid began to whimper and the old woman shrieked as the greenish overhead light reflected on the knives. The woman stood unsteadily, her hand on the counter. Her other hand drifted to her abdomen as she responded. "Es los otros dos. Ellos lo tienen."

"She says it's the other two," Lola said over her shoulder, but as her head turned she noticed that the woman's hand pressed into her breast in an odd way, making her gown shift. With a surge of intuition, she snagged one of the slim knives from Tony's vest and stepped toward the old woman.
Her scream filled the room. A ripping sound cut through the noise as Lola split the caftan and pulled aside the lumpy bra beneath, which was filled with little packages of red sand.

"Got it," she said, pulling the bags from the saggy garment. She grabbed a blanket from the couch and wrapped the bags up. "Adiós," she smiled at the woman, who was trying to hold her dress together, blubbering hysterically. She led the way out, noting the grunts of the boys as the men shoved them back.

The men were quiet as they followed her back to the car.

"So that's it? Just go and figure out who's holding out?" she asked once they were on their way back to the house.

"Yeah. Usually gets a little messier than that though," Tony grumbled from the front seat. "Not as much fun with you."

"It wasn't that hard to figure out."

"We never thought about the old lady," Chege muttered.

"I'll be checking every bra in the house from now on," Tony leered.

Lola leaned forward. "I'll do it if it needs to be done. You're not gonna touch any women while I'm around."

"Try and stop me." Tony twisted around with a sparkly grin, spinning a knife between his fingers.

"I'll shove that thing up your nose," she snarled, pushing his hand away.

"Knock it off! We're almost at the house," Chege ordered. "Like having a couple of kids in the damn car," he muttered. Tony and Lola glared at each other in the mirror, eyes narrowed.

Raul was in the living room when they came in. "That was fast. How did it go?" he asked. One of the harlots from upstairs was on his lap.

"She figured out what was going on in about two minutes," Chege said, gesturing to Lola. "Recovered the sand. We won't have any more trouble from that outlet, but we need to find a new front."

She set the blanket on the large glass coffee table. It fell open, the little red bags spilling over the edge of the table.

Raul grinned, that same grin that had filled her with terror this morning. Only this time, she felt a spark of something else. It bothered her, but it gave her just a pinch of pleasure to know that she was winning him over.

"I had a feeling about you," Raul said to Lola. "I might just keep you around for a bit."

She walked over to Raul and unceremoniously shoved the bimbo off his lap. The girl squealed and scrambled to get away from her, but Lola didn't spare her a glance. Raul watched with interest as she slung her arm over his shoulder and sat down.

"Yes, I definitely got the better end of the bargain," Raul said, looking her over. "I may have to take you to the UCC after all."

"Then I'll need some decent goddamn clothes, Raul. The cheap crap your tramps prefer is giving
me crotch rot," she said, looking down at him.

He laughed. "You've earned it, chica. Chege, take her up to the office and put her into the system so she can pull some creds."

*Access to the network.* It was difficult, but she kept the elation off her face.

He pulled her down by the chin for a kiss. She didn't object when he forced her mouth open. *Focus on the pleasant parts of the experience.* It took her several seconds to find it... the softness of his tongue, the slight taste of coffee, the way his thumb caressed the back of her neck...

She squashed her objections until she felt a flicker of pleasure deep in the experience and let it blossom. She found her hand at his neck and her eyes sprung open. Her eyebrow lifted as she met his gaze.

"Más de tarde," she whispered. "Gracias. Hoy fue muy divertido." Her lips closed on his one more time, her fingers slipping under the collar of his shirt.

His hands resisted her movement as she rose, but she just smiled at him. She could feel his eyes on her as she walked off, Chege close behind.

She waited until she was around the corner before wiping her mouth. Her hand shook.

As they approached the office door, she put her hand on his arm. "Is there surveillance out here?" she asked quietly.

"Not in the hall, but in each room. Definitely in the office," Chege said.

She walked up to the door and looked back down the hallway before pulling the omni-tool out of her pants and slapping it on her wrist. She brought up the omni-tool display, her fingers flying over the controls. "I'm hacking into the feed. We go in first to collect the chit, then come back out."

"We gotta be fast. There are people in these rooms," Chege said.

Her fingers flew across the virtual display, almost messing up the command sequence once or twice when her hand shook. It all came back to her as she worked and she completed the hack in far less time than it probably seemed.

The door popped open at Chege's command and they walked in. They collected the chit and walked back out, keeping the door slightly ajar while Lola tapped the sequence on her wrist. Then she jetted back into the room, walking over to the private terminal and setting up a datalink. She double-checked that the line was secure, then left. It had only taken about twenty seconds.

The door clicked shut behind her and she tucked the black bracelet back into her pocket. "Did you find out anything?" Chege asked, leaning close.

"That was just the datalink. I'll have to go through it later when I have time alone."

"Does it have to be from the house?"

"No, I can do it from anywhere. But I have to be careful. He's watching me especially closely right now. Be patient."

"I know. Thanks, by the way."

"I do what I can," she quoted him, making him smile.
"You sure you know what you're doing? You're playing with fire by getting close to Raul." They started back the way they came.

"It's better than ending up like the other women around here when he gets tired of them."

"He could get tired of you."

She looked at him in disbelief as they reached the top of the stairs. He laughed. "Sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Believe me, I can hold his interest. Whether I can do it and not give away how much I hate him..." She shrugged. "We'll see."

Chege left not long after. Raul was having some kind of a meeting with his lieutenants in the back room, so she decided she would go out to see Tom for a while. She'd earned some time to herself.

She grabbed her jacket and ran down the stairs to the foyer.

"Where are you going?"

Lola's hand froze on the front door. "Just going to check on my brother. Haven't seen him in more than a week."

"Not tonight. I have something planned." Raul gestured toward the back of the house.

Her hand fell. "What is it?"

"You'll see. It's a big night for you."

Swallowing her apprehension, she followed him under the stairs, where she could hear many voices coming from the sunken living room. A man sat on the couch, spreading out several tools on the table in front of him. At least a dozen of the men that frequented the house watched her enter.

"What's all this?"

"You did your first job for the Sangre Carnal, and you did it well. The men all agree that you deserve to be in our ranks."

Murmurs of approval greeted her as she stepped toward the table and looked at the device that was being prepared. "I'm getting a tattoo?"

"One of many, if you do well. We don't often accept women into our active ranks. But I can tell," he put his arm around her waist, "that you're special."

"Thought you didn't like your women marked up."

"I don't, but the Sangre likes its traditions."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "And what about us?"

"Don't worry." He smiled indulgently at her. "You're still my coño."

Her wrist flicked but she managed to stem the urge to punch the smug look off his face. "Not like those harlots upstairs. Never again." Her gaze raked across the room before returning to him.
"Nah. Just me. And only me." Several seconds ticked by before she could break away from the intensity of his gaze.

He gave her a little shove toward the couch. "Lie down and take your shirt off."

She gave him a look that made the other men laugh, but she did as she was told. "What's it going to be?" she asked as the artist began to put the temporary design on her skin.

"You'll see. I came up with a new name for you. It's a surprise."

There was no telling what he'd decided she could be called, probably something really offensive, and it was being permanently inked into her skin. But this, too, was for Tom. She had to take it.

"Don't you trust me, Lola?" Raul looked amused at her obvious discomfort.

"Hell no," she blurted out.

"See what I mean?" The others laughed along with him. "Let's get this started."

She spent most of that night dozing on a chair in front of the tattoo artist while he laid an enormous design across her upper back and neck. She hadn't been prepared for the extent of the pain, but after a while it faded into the background. She entered into a trancelike state, a familiar state of mind to her these days. In her conscious moments she worried about her brother, never far from her thoughts. What must he think of her, getting in so deep with these people?

No, Tom knew the score. But he was her responsibility and she wasn't there. It was frustrating not knowing what he was doing, if he was okay, or even be able to let him know that she was okay. Which, by her sweat and blood and nothing short of a miracle, she was. For the moment.

She'd heard Raul mention several times that he was leaving town soon for a few days. She whiled away a few hours deciding on how to spend those blessedly free days... maybe take Tom somewhere fun for a change. They could invite his friend James along, he seemed like a nice kid.

Cool fingers on her back woke her up sometime later. Turning her head, she saw the artist rubbing something over the ink. Red lettering was just visible, curling over the back of her shoulder.

"Jesus, how big is it?" she asked blearily, squinting at the rising sun through the window behind her.

"Big enough," the guy grumbled hoarsely. He looked more tired than she felt, which didn't increase her confidence. He tapped a message into the communicator on his wrist and began packing up. Footsteps came down the stairs a few minutes later and Lola grabbed her shirt and held it to her chest as she stood up, not so much self-conscious as merely cold.

"Have you seen it yet?" Raul asked as he walked into the room, still in his pajama pants and a wifebeater.

"No."

"Come on upstairs. You can see better in my bathroom." He grinned, looping an arm around her waist as they walked up the stairs. "I can't wait to see how you like it."

Her stomach was in knots when they entered his room. She was immediately aware of a woman in his bed, beginning to rise. She glanced at the line of red dots on Raul's neck. With a surge of fear
for the woman, she charged the bed and grabbed her by her hair. She shrieked as Lola towed her out, using one foot to shove her headlong into the hallway.

"Jealous?" Raul asked, crossing his arms across his chest. "You don't own me. No woman will."

"I know, but don't expect a different reaction," she snapped. If she had to beat those bitches black and blue to save their lives, she'd do it.

She walked into the bathroom and flipped the bright light on, Raul close behind. Gathering her long hair, she lifted it up and looked into the mirror over her shoulder. Enormous stylized letters completely covered her upper back, shaded throughout to look three-dimensional. Predictably, the entire graphic was blood red.

The text was slightly distorted where her shoulder blades tucked in under her uplifted arms. Her forehead furrowed in concentration as she read the words backwards. "Candente."

"Well?" he asked.

"'Red-hot'. I actually like it," she said in surprise.

"After that foul temper of yours. And the rest?" he smirked.

The smaller script that ran across where her neck met her back was more difficult to pick out. "Bajo de Malecón," she read. The smile fell from her face and she glared at him. "You motherfucker."

Clapping his hands, he laughed delightedly at her reaction. "Now you won't ever forget where you got started. Get some rest, Candente. We're going out tonight. I want to see how you do by my side."

He left. She put her shirt on, wincing as the cloth touched her tender flesh. Marked for life. And, evidently, there was more to come. She closed her eyes for a moment, covering them with her palms.

Right now, I'm still me. Right now, I'm alive. Right now... her thoughts trailed off, feeling hopeless.

Would she be able to keep up this facade without giving herself away, or, inch by inch, become what she hated the most?

She slept until the sun set. Again, cool fingers awoke her, but this time it was Raul rubbing lotion into her back.

"Is that better?" he asked softly.

She stared into the mattress under her, off-put by his attitude. "Yes, thank you."

She looked over her shoulder at him. He looked back. She'd never noticed before that his eyes had lighter flecks of brown in them.

"You're becoming one of us, truly Sangre Carnal." Still in that same disconcerting tone.

"How do you like it?"

"I didn't think I'd still want you after. Te quiero más," he whispered, stroking her arm. Misreading the emotion in her eyes completely, he bent to kiss her sore shoulder.
In her mind, her elbow was breaking his nose, the blood pouring from his face and soothing her achling skin. This new tenderness scared the hell out of her far more than his violence had.

She abruptly rolled onto her side away from him. "Where are we going tonight?" she asked absently, smoothing out her hair.

He didn't answer at first. Giving him a querying look as she stood up, she walked to the closet to look for a shirt that didn't touch her back. She found only one, a shimmery piece of clubwear from a previous tenant. She held it up, glancing over to where Raul was watching her, his eyes brooding.

"I need to know, because this won't really work if I'm going to be bajo de malecón." She jiggled the shirt, sarcasm dripping from her words.

He marched forward and grabbed her arm. "What's your game?"

"Game?" She laughed bitterly in his face. "This is Sangre Carnal, Raul. Nothing's a game here."

"Especially not with me."

"You play games."

"I do what I want. This is my house. You're coño to me, nothing more."

"Then what the hell was that?" she shouted, pointing at the bed. "If you're just fucking me, Raul, tell me when you want me to spread my legs. But don't make a play for my heart unless you have one to give."

He wrenched her closer, sneering into her face. "If I wanted your heart, I'd take it."

"How? Cut it out and eat it, chiflado? Cual es tu pinche pedo?"

He laughed at her. "You're a bitch like any bitch, don't get full of yourself. Making you sangre was a mistake."

"It was the first smart thing I've seen you do."

His fingers dug deeper into her flesh before releasing her so hard she fell back against the door to the closet. "You think you're playing me? I see through you. You fear me, like all the others. You should."

"Yes. And you, Raul, you fear me."

He laughed. "I could get rid of you tonight."

"And that was different from yesterday how?"

She found herself slammed against the door again, his hand at her throat. He tended to do that when he was upset. She was beginning to understand how those other women had died. Her back burned.

"No different. Only today, you have a job to do. So put some fucking clothes on and meet me out front." Releasing her, he walked out.

It was several minutes before her heart slowed enough to finish dressing. On went the ghastly shirt and a pair of jeans and boots, suitable for ass-kicking. She was in the mood for it.
After touching up her new bruises with medi-gel, a daily routine since she'd come here, she tied back her hair and washed her face. She didn't bother with makeup. *Matónes* didn't have to mess with that shit, so neither would she.

Raul was standing next to one of the larger trucks when she came out to the courtyard. The doors were open, revealing several men inside. One she recognized from last night, a heavyset man with a ring of black cutting through the red tattoos on his neck, leaned out to shout "*Candente!*" but Raul cut him off.

"Let's just get this over with."

He got into the passenger side of the car and she climbed in to sit behind him, taking off her shades to wink at the man who had started to cheer her on. Sitting forward, she held onto Raul's seat as the truck lifted off, trying to ignore the way he was staring at her in the mirror.

There was something new in him now. Something she hadn't meant to awaken.

In response to Raul's dark mood, the car remained quiet for the entire ride. They left San Diego and headed to L.A. in uncomfortable silence for almost an hour. Eventually they passed over a club with a bright sign that read "Afrikka Club" on the roof. Lola leaned forward in interest, never having seen it from this angle. To her surprise, they landed on the shorter building behind it, stopping under an awning. She hadn't even known this was part of the club.

Chege stood with an silver-haired black man at the entrance. He looked at her only once, his wide face filling momentarily with surprise and regret. He wouldn't meet her eyes again. Quiet dread began to gnaw at her stomach.

Raul shook the older man's hand and they went downstairs, talking just ahead of her.

"Thank you again for finding the *advenedizos*, my friend."

"Of course. I hope that sharing this act will strengthen our alliance. Together, we can bring a new era to our cities. We'll be bigger than the Blue Suns."

Raul smiled. "Where is the man being held?"

They stopped at the end of a long hallway lined with closed doors. The older gentleman put his hand on the door to open it.

"Just in here. My son brought him in this morning," he said, gesturing to Chege.

Chege's father- the police commissioner? The one Raul was blackmailing? They didn't look unfriendly at all. Lola's head whipped up, finding Chege's face. He stared at the two men, purposefully ignoring her. His hand shook as it moved to the comm unit on his wrist.

"*Traidor!*" she shouted, pointing at Chege. The men around her drew their weapons, but it was too late.

Chege's father jumped through the doorway, Chege close behind. Men began pouring out of the door behind them, seeking to trap them in this narrow space. Raul jammed a booted foot in the door Chege went through before it could close. He shoved himself at it, trying to get in.

The small space filled with the music of violence as the four men they had with them opened fire on their assailants. Lola flung herself at Raul to get the door open, the extra force pushing the door
open as the person beyond finally fell clear. They fell through and stumbled forward several paces. Raul's head whipped from left to right, his arm keeping Lola behind him protectively.

Chege's father was rising shakily from the ground, but Chege was nowhere in sight. Lola grabbed Raul's sleeve frantically. "Where is he?"

Turning around, she finally found Chege, staring at her in disbelief and anger, his weapon raised and leveled at her chest. As she shouted, "No!", hand outstretched, he pulled the trigger. The flash nearly blinded her. A shuddering echo drummed through her chest, oddly painless. Colors and pain and noise intermingled in her mind as she fell back into Raul's arms. Three of their men ran into the room and grabbed Chege, wrestling him down. One more ran over to secure the older man.

"No! Lola!" Raul shouted, lowering her gently. He pulled her top aside to see the smoking wound and bent over her, vision faded in and out as she looked up at his anguish face. He leaned over her for a moment, then turned back to Chege with a furious expression.

"Hijo de puta!" he roared. Teeth clenched, he rose to his feet and fired several shots into Chege, then turned and paid the same to his father. It was the last thing she heard before she passed out.

The next thing Lola knew, she was in the truck. Raul's face was just above her, his hands stroking her hair, holding her head. The smell of burning flesh was thick in her nose.

"Mi ángel," he murmured.

"Chege was the infiltrator all along," someone said from the back seat.

"Candente figured it out," another voice said. "I'm glad we brought her."

"Sí. And she shielded me. She will not leave my side again if I can help it," Raul said. His lips gently touched hers. "Survive, Candente. You are strong. Survive, and we will always be together. Te lo juro."

Her chest felt as if it were weighed down by a ton of bricks, the burning in her back a pale reflection of the pain consuming her chest. But even in this ruined state, her physical distress wasn't foremost on her mind.

The man she hated wiped her tears away, misinterpreting them. She felt his hand, warm and strong, holding hers to his mouth, kissing it again and again.

Just one month ago she had been free. Just one month ago she had had it all planned out. Now, if she lived, she would never be rid of him.
Chapter Summary

We get our first glimpse of James as an adult as he remembers the time leading up to the race while on his first mission.

Chapter Notes

Music: All These Things That I've Done, The Killers; Radioactive, Imagine Dragons

2178: Andrews Military Spaceport, Maryland

James

"Alliance Marines en route to the SSV Everest, please report immediately to gate D23. Shuttle departure is in 10 minutes."

As the voice made its announcement over the loudspeaker, seven members of the 2nd Force Reconnaissance Company picked up their rucksacks and moved toward the gate. The conversation in the small waiting area was laced with excitement, though some were wincing at the noise, hung over from the night before. For several of them, it was their first time going off-planet.

James Vega wore a grin that seemed permanently fixed on his face as he stood in the semi-orderly line with his squadmates. He shrugged his shoulders repeatedly, agitation rippling along the large muscles that banded across his chest and shoulders.

"The hell, Vega, you gonna have an accident or somethin'?" A willowy, freckled woman in uniform with short-cropped black hair punched the back of his arm. "I know you're psyched, but you look like the greenest boot ever right now. Take a chill pill."

"I'm pretty sure I'm housebroken, Stella, but if I have any trouble you'll be the first to know. 'Cause you'll be sitting right next to me."

"I'll deal. Just don't expect me to shake it off for you."

"Hey now, you don't need to get inappropriate about it." Turning around, James held a hand up, looking down at her seriously. "We can just-"

"Vega!" A hard-as-steel voice broke through their good-natured banter. A hush fell over the line and everyone straightened up, facing front. Sharp footsteps marched up to where Vega stood at attention.

"The Alliance Marines needs soldiers who fight, not talk. You want to talk, then go join the Diplomatic Corps on the Citadel like all the other pantywaists." Gunny Holt glared up at him. Red was creeping up the man's neck like it always did when he was angry, which he generally was
when he was talking to James. It reminded James of a heat sink about to pop and he always had a hard time not laughing when he saw it. Remembering himself, he redirected his eyes to stare straight ahead.

Holt's grating voice lowered to a whisper as he leaned closer. "I hope to hell the turians kill you and correct the mistake your daddy made when he forgot to pull out. What do you have to say to that, Second Lieutenant?"

"But the Turians are our allies, Gunnery Sergeant," James said confusedly as he tried not to smile.

"Holy shit, Vega!" Holt's voice raised above the sound of the shuttle's drive powering up in the background. "Do you think that I don't know who our allies are? I just wouldn't put it past your smart mouth to start a diplomatic incident out there."

James kept his eyes straight ahead, level with the top of Holt's trembling hat, his body tight with controlled mirth. He was expecting a response, so James blurted out the first thing that popped into his mind. "Then I'd better not join the Diplomatic Corps, Gunnery Sergeant!"

Snickers broke out along the line. Holt's hot breath scorched his chin as he spat, "You better not pussy out, Vega. Run toward the sound of gunfire. If Earth is lucky you'll get a space burial before the year is out." With one final glare up at him, Holt made an abrupt about-face and marched off.

Explosions of laughter erupted down the line. Stella joined in once he was out of sight. "Damn, Vega. He actually came to see you off. He must secretly like you."

"I don't think so," said the man standing ahead of James, an average-built blonde in a wrinkled uniform with a pock-marked face. "You should have known better, Vega. Holt already hated you before last night."

"Damn, you know about that, Greenwald?"

Stella said, "Who doesn't know? Hard to miss your half-naked ass running down the street in the middle of base housing. Not that the officer's wives were complaining."

"You sure do know how to pick 'em," Greenwald said.

"How was I supposed to know she was Holt's daughter?" James asked.

"You had to have at least known it was his house. His name and rank are on the front door," Stella said.

"I wasn't really noticing details like that at the time, Slick. And, uh, it was dark out," he finished lamely, rubbing the back of his neck.

"You missed a great party while you were pissing off the Gunny," Greenwald said. "If you'd come, you could have found someone a little less high-risk."

"Yeah, but where's the fun in that?" James relaxed back into his smile, deciding to put the incident behind him. He'd been wanting to go to space since the time when he was little Jimmy Sanders in San Diego. There was no way he was letting that dried-up jarhead ruin this moment for him.

The soldiers passed through a skyway that stank of hot metal and filed onto the bird-shaped passenger shuttle that would take them into orbit. As they settled into their seats, James leaned over Greenwald to look out at the tarmac, making the smaller man lean back out of his way.
"You wanna switch with me? I grew up on Luna, so I've seen this before."

"Sure, thanks Greenwald." They switched seats and James ducked his head down, looking up at the sky through the porthole.

"We haven't even taken off yet. You're not gonna see anything. Maybe Stella was right."

"Aw, knock it off. This is exciting for him. And I'm not complaining about seeing that look on his face," a black-haired beauty across the aisle shouted over to them. "If you still feel like celebrating when we get there, Vega, come see me for some zero-G fun."

"It's a good thing you weren't born in the age of STD's, Angie!" a low voice said from the row ahead.

She grinned and threw a barf bag over the seat at the heckler. "I can't help it, surrounded by all you gorgeous men in uniform," she cooed.

While the usual posturing and posing ensued, Greenwald leaned in closer to talk. "I don't get you, Vega. That hottie's been after you since Basic. Why don't you give the girl what she wants? She won't even look at me." He sounded disgruntled.

James turned back to grin at him. "A bit, yeah. Wish I'd been able to have a little more before he walked in on us."

Their conversation was drowned out by the whine of the engines. The shuttle trembled and heavy thrusters pushed them high into the atmosphere. The first stars appeared. Wisps of atmosphere shone in the sky and dropped away beneath them, captivating him. The chatter behind him faded into the background as the sky darkened around the shuttle.

Artificial gravity kicked in just as he felt himself begin to rise from his seat and everyone settled back down, like cresting the top of a roller coaster. He felt like a kid again, living the adventure he'd always dreamed of.

The sun was dipping below the Earth behind the shuttle, out of sight. Shining in brilliant shades of purple and orange beneath them, weather systems streamed slowly across the atmosphere, branching in little eddies and waves. The Aurora Borealis chased them as they raced toward the waiting vessel halfway to the moon.

He knew when the sun had completely set because the scene below him quickly changed. The atmospheric halo radiated gold and white. Where the cloud cover was pierced by the light of the cities below, the maps he'd learned in school came to life; the megalopolises twinkled and burned while flashes of lightning burst in the sky. The pictures and vids he'd seen didn't come close to doing it justice.

His throat thickened. He had done it. He was finally leaving Earth.

As the shuttle's thrusters wound down on the final approach to the dreadnought hanging in space, his thoughts turned to the people he was leaving behind. Very few of them, really; he had many friends but only two family members. His uncle he'd seen before he left the base, but he and his
father hadn't spoken since he enlisted the year before. That had been a day long coming, though he had been completely oblivious at the time.

He came back to the present with a start when the shuttle docked with the SSV Everest. Kicking himself for missing the last part of his journey, he picked up his rucksack and disembarked with his squadmates.

A grizzled soldier was waiting for them inside the docking bay, a noisy room crowded with engineers and cargo.

"I'm Sergeant Juniper. I'll be leading your recon team to the pirate base," he said. "They say most of you just graduated from Officer Candidacy School. I hope you paid attention to your training. I don't have much time to give you pointers."

He turned and walked away from them, still talking. They hurried to keep up.

"We've received reports of several slave raids on our colonies in the Maroon Sea. From the area they've covered, Intel figures that they'll need to discharge their drive soon. We have surveillance on Theshaka, a gas giant in that sector where pirates have been known to stop and discharge their drives."

Sgt. Juniper led them down a long hallway. "We'll be camped out in orbit, behind one of Theshaka's moons. Our tracers will attach to their hull if they come out of FTL nearby and track them to their base. We follow and catch them by surprise. But we have to be careful. They have our colonists. We need to minimize collateral damage, so stealth and intel come first." He slapped a door panel in the hall he had led them down and gestured inside.

"We have about ten hours until we're in position. In nine we'll meet back in the shuttle bay for the tactical briefing. We'll eat some chow there, so don't make me go hunting you down in the Mess Hall. Grab a bunk and get some rest while you can." Without another word or glance, he turned and walked back down the hallway.

Exchanging glances at the abrupt information dump, the seven of them entered the cabin and claimed bunks. Their excited mood had been considerably dampened by the lieutenant's brusque manner, and their usual conversation was muted as they unpacked their gear for the following day.

After James had finished checking over his new armor, Stella leaned down from the bunk above him, her cheerful smile enhanced by her rosy cheeks, her freckles appearing to run together. "Hey, big guy, want a game of cards?"

"Now?"

"Why not? We always play before a training mission."

"This isn't training, Slick."

"Can you think of anything better to do?"

It was so like her to say something reasonable like that. Seeing his smile of assent, she hopped down like a monkey and sat on the floor in front of him, pulling over a nearby crate to use as a table. "Anyone else?" she asked the room.

Greenwald preferred to read, as usual, but Kim and Sentry wanted to join their game. Angie was conspicuously missing, he noticed. Henry, a new addition to the squad, settled in for the night above Greenwald while Stella dealt the cards on the floor in the middle of the room.
"What do you guys think of the LT?" Kim asked, fluidly lowering to sit across from them cross-legged.

"Hard to tell just yet. He seems…” Stella shrugged.

"Busy," James supplied. Stella nodded, arranging her cards.

Sentry, a man who looked similar to James if he'd been compressed to two-thirds his height, grunted as he settled on the floor. "I bet he's just been out here a while. I've heard that if you're on a long surveillance mission like these dudes, you tend to get antisocial."

"He didn't seem antisocial to me." James shook his head. "Just like he had a lot to do. Kinda makes me feel better about the whole thing. He's got more experience than we do."

"We aren't all as green as you, Vega," Kim said. "This is my third mission, and Sentry here has five under his belt."

"I'm glad you two are here too, but you're a sniper team." James tossed his chit on the pile. "Stella and I will be in the thick of it with Greenwald. It's good to know Juniper will be in command."

They didn't play for long. The conversation veered from the upcoming mission to just about anything else, the others in the room occasionally offering comments. Aside from the slight interpersonal differences some of them had, it seemed like everyone on the team had a tight grip on their nerves. Only time would tell what tomorrow would bring, but for now James felt good about their chances.

That period of time was on top of his mind as he fell asleep that night. The brief time he'd spent in Lola's company back then had been full of adventure. As summer had gotten closer after his departure from the gang, Tom had started to feel more and more desperate to help his sister get out too.

The real trouble started one day at school when James, trying to help his friend, had what he thought was a brilliant idea.

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**Back when James was thirteen years old...**

Tom had been sitting at one of the round tables in the school cafeteria, staring at his food without interest. James navigated around the crowds of chattering kids to set his lunch tray next to him and ducked down to his friend's morose face with a smile.

"Hey, trouble! You're always so down these days. What's going on?"

"Tomorrow is Lola's birthday." Sitting back in his chair, he pushed the tray away.

"That's right, it's this Saturday. Got something special planned?"

"No, it's not that." He sighed. "I haven't heard from her in almost two weeks."

"Do you know what she's doing, at least?"

"I guess she's with Raul and his gang. She sent me a comm a while back saying she was fine, that things were working out and she was coming to visit, but she never showed up. I didn't even see her when I picked the bike up from the shop right after."

"But if things are working out, isn't that good? At least she's happy."
Tom rolled his eyes. "She's not happy, stupid. She's going to get in trouble doing what she's doing. And it'll be my fault."

James put a hand on his shoulder. "She'll be alright. She's tough."

"You are so naive, I don't even know why I bother." He glowered at his untouched food, slouching in his chair.

That was it. Glaring at his friend, James stood up. "Why you bother what? Being friends with me? Because the ones you ditched me for are clearly so much better, right? Maybe I don't know why I bother with you." Abandoning his lunch, he walked out of the cafeteria.

His normally cheerful demeanor was spoiled for the rest of the school day by the confrontation with Tom. He sulked through all of his classes, even his last one of the day, which was usually his favorite. His chin was on his fist as he stared vacantly at the front of the room where his teacher was talking.

The accusation of being naive had stung him to the core. He didn't think of himself that way; it was just that there was enough depressing stuff in the world without adding to it with a bad attitude. Tom had a bad attitude more often than not, but their differing personalities had worked for them in the past.

"James!"

His head snapped up. The other students tittered as he blinked at his annoyed teacher. "Um, what?"

She put her hands on her hips and gestured at the rotating display next to her. "I just asked you a question, James. Please pay attention. What's the name of Thessia's solar system?"

"Parintha, in the Athena Nebula," he responded automatically.

"Very good." Somewhat mollified, the teacher turned to the display behind her and tossed the holographic galactic model down to his desk with a flick of her finger. It turned in front of him, twinkling tantalizingly. "Where is it?"

He turned it once in his hand to orient himself before enlarging one sector and picking out a cloudy mass. He pushed it back up to the teacher, where the image blossomed into life overhead.

"Not bad. I thought you weren't paying attention." She turned back to the rest of the class, leaving him to his thoughts again.

But James took a deep breath, determined to stay focused. He needed to bring his grades up to qualify for the scholarship Uncle E had mentioned the other week. At least he had been caught daydreaming in Galactic Cartography, one of his better subjects, and not in... well, almost anything else that wasn't hands-on. He had to keep his head in the game.

Thankfully, the teacher was already wrapping up the class.

She shut down the display. "For those of you who want to see first-hand the types of creatures that have evolved on other worlds, the Colonial Exhibit has come to the San Diego Zoo and is opening this weekend. It will be open for the rest of the summer to take advantage of the tourists coming for the Urban Combat Championships, so I encourage each of you to go check it out while you can." As she finished, the final chime rang.

Tom was waiting for him when he left the building. "What do you want?" James scowled at him.
"Look, I'm sorry, I'm just worried about her."

"Well, do something about it then! Don't take it out on your friends. That's messed up."

"What am I supposed to do? I don't know how to get in touch with her." They began walking towards the transit stop together.

"Do you know where she is?"

"I know where Raul's house is, but I've never been inside before. And I don't think she wants me there."

"Maybe she doesn't need to know." James thought for a moment. "You could go there just to see if you can spot her without Raul seeing. Then you'll know if she's okay."

Tom was looking at the ground as they walked onto the idling transport. James chewed his lip for a moment, watching him.

"We can go together," James offered.

"We can?"

It was probably dangerous, definitely sneaky, and would involve lying to his parents. There was no question. "Of course. Friends, right?"

Tom finally smiled. "Thanks. You're a good friend, James."

"I know," James had muttered as he stared out the window. "I just wish it was enough."

The next morning, they had taken public transport to the stop a few streets over from Raul's neighborhood. Neither of them had been in this part of town before and they gaped at the centuries-old mansions and mature trees everywhere. For kids who grew up in tiny apartments in residential blocks, it was like walking through a vid set.

"That's it," Tom said, pointing to a large wrought-iron gate set into a tall plasti-crete wall down the street.

"Are you positive?"

"Yeah, that's one of addresses they gave me when I joined up. They have a few houses around town, but this is the only one I've never been to."

They approached it slowly. "What do we do now?" Tom asked. "There are surveillance bugs on the gate."

"Let's just walk by like we belong here. Get a look inside as we pass."

This seemed as good a plan as any, so they walked as nonchalantly as they could, keeping to the other side of the street. As they approached the gate, they could see the courtyard within. Several cars were pulled up to the front, circling the fountain in the center. They ducked behind a shrub and peeked through the gaps at the activity within.

"There she is!" Tom said excitedly, then frowned. "Why is she kissing that guy?"

She and the man kissed for what seemed like a long time, then he and a bunch of other men got into the cars and lifted right out of the courtyard, heading north. Lola went back inside with a few
"That was Raul," Tom said unhappily.

"Good, then we know he's gone!" James stood up and walked toward the gate.

"What are you doing?"

"Let's go get a closer look!"

Tom trailed along behind him as he walked across the street and past the corner of the wall. He ducked behind, then had to reach back out to yank Tom behind the wall.

"What's your problem?" he hissed. "Haven't you ever seen this in the vids?"

"I know these guys. I just don't want to get her in trouble."

"She looked like she was doing fine to me," James said. "Let's just see if we can get a peek. Here, put your foot in my hand."

Tom stepped up into his hands, wobbling as James lifted him up. "Do you see anything?" he asked, grunting with effort.

"No. Just the courtyard and a bunch of cars."

"Good. Let's go over."

"What?" Tom shouted, looking down at him in astonishment.

"This is what we came here for, right? Let's see if we can get closer!"

Tom hopped down and they circled around the back of the wall, finally coming to a squat palm tree whose long fronds were trailing over the wall. Underneath it, a pile of debris had collected, the dried fronds permanently stuck to the plasti-crete.

"We can get over here," James said. "You first."

With some difficulty, they managed to get over the wall by both pushing and pulling each other in turn. Finally, sweaty and filthy, they fell over the other side in a heap.

"Can we help you?" a voice said from above them. They both looked up to see two thugs looming over them, arms crossed. James scrambled away from the men while Tom cussed.

"Wait, I know this kid," one of them began, pointing at Tom. The thug's comm unit bleeped. "What is it?"

"She says to bring them to the back of the house," a disembodied voice said.

The two thugs hauled the boys to their feet and walked them towards the house. "Guess it's your lucky day," the man holding James' collar said.

They both looked around wide-eyed as they approached the back door, past a sparkling pool. When they got close, one side was opened by a thin man in a button-down shirt. "She says to come in," he said in a wheezy voice, gesturing abruptly.

The guy stared at them creepily as they walked inside. James was looking everywhere at once, the
marble floor, the crystal chandelier over the table, and the fancy pictures on the wall equally outrageous to his inexperienced eyes. Tom, however, kept his eyes forward, looking for one person.

The kitchen and dining area on the right side of the house contained several men, all looking at the two kids like they were mutants from another world. To the left was a living room with a huge entertainment system dominating the far wall.

Her appearance was a shock when they finally spotted her there, sitting on a long white couch in front of a window with a view of the Pacific Ocean. She was in casual clothes, her feet tucked underneath her in the corner of the couch, her hair tied back in a messy ponytail. She wore no makeup and looked very tired. Most notably, though, her left arm was in a sling. A stack of datapads lay between her and two other men on the couch who were leaning toward her in conversation.

She looked up and smiled, all of the tiredness and pain that she'd worn a moment ago fading away. "Tom! And James, too I see." She waved at the two men and, to the boys' astonishment, they stood up and moved a few feet away. "Come over here."

They moved closer nervously, looking at each other in apprehension as they passed the two men, both thuggish and covered in tattoos like everyone else here.

"What are you two doing here?" She directed the question at Tom with some intensity.

"Looking for you. You just disappeared!" Tom hissed back.

"That doesn't mean you should come out here risking yourself, Tom. You know the deal. If you had come just a few minutes earlier…"

"We saw him leave. I'm not stupid, Lola."

"Why are you here, then?" she snapped.

"Lola, don't you know what today is?" James broke in. He hated it when they fought.

"No, and I don't see what-" She stopped, then her look brightened. "I completely forgot."

"What is it?" one of the men asked from behind them.

"Today's my birthday. Look, Tom, I have some things to take care of today, but why don't I come and pick you up tomorrow. We can do something fun together. James, you can come too, if you like."

"You can leave?"

"For a little while."

"What happened to your arm?"

"It's nothing, don't worry about it. I'll be fine."

A snort came from behind them. "Nothing, shit. Your sister was shot in the chest point-blank and lived to talk about it. Her lung collapsed."

As Tom and James gaped, she glared at the man. "What the hell! He didn't need to know that. I'll be fine in a week or two."
"I'd want to know what a tough bitch my sister was if she was like you."

"If you had a sister you'd probably-" She stopped, remembering the two boys in front of her and cleared her throat. The men chuckled. "Look, I'll come pick you both up tomorrow and we'll do something together. How does that sound? What would you like to do?"

Tom shrugged, staring at her arm in the sling angrily.

"How about to the new Colonial Exhibit at the zoo? Supposed to be really cool," James suggested.

"That sounds like fun. We can go out to eat after. Really, Tom," she leaned forward to rub his arm, "I'm okay."

He started to nod, then exclaimed, "Is that a tattoo?" He pointed to something peeking up from under the neckline of her sleeveless top. Tom gasped and James realized his friend was staring at more tattoos visible on her arms, some with Spanish words that even James didn't know.

"Like I said, don't worry. I'm fine." She stared at him until he met her eyes. "I promise I'll be in touch as much as I can be, but you have to promise me you won't come here anymore. You sure do have perfect timing, though." She stood up and walked toward the door. "Come on, I'll show you out." Tom and James got up to follow her.

"Holy shit!" Tom shouted, staring at her back, every inch they could see covered in red tattoos like the men surrounding them. "It's only been six weeks! What happened to you, Lola?" he wailed.

"What? Oh." Turning around, she reddened slightly as she realized what he'd seen. "That's just part of the life here, Tom."

"The kid's right," said the wheezing man that let them in, who was standing by the doorway as they passed. "It's only been six weeks, and you've already managed to wrap the boss around your little finger. It's the beginning of the end for the *Sangre Carnal*."

To their shock, she hauled off and hit the guy in the face. The others hooted and laughed as Tony stumbled back. "Even if you don't care about *sangre*, you can at least do your job without mouthing off, jackass."

Tony marched off, holding his jaw.

"Don't worry about him," she told the boys as they walked to the front of the house. "He's just jealous. Look, I'll see you both tomorrow, okay?"

She gave Tom a one-armed hug and squeezed James' arm before shutting the door behind them.

They stood there for a minute on the front step, dazed at what they had seen. Together they walked through now-open gate and made their way back to the transport depot.

"Well, at least it looks like she's got a handle on things," James muttered once they were clear of the compound.

Tom was just shaking his head. "I have a bad feeling about this. Did you see the way she defended the gang's name?"

"Maybe we can get some answers from her tomorrow."

"Maybe," he said doubtfully. "But I get the feeling they won't be answers I'll like."
On the way to the rendezvous point...

She hadn't given them any answers, as Tom had suspected. She said she didn't want to think about any of it for her birthday. Tom didn't want to ruin her good time, but he wasn't happy about being kept in the dark.

They had had a nice time at the zoo, in any case. There were habitats for Eden Prime gas bags, varren from Tuchanka and space cows shipped in from Nodacrux. James had been in seventh heaven, his mood only spoiled by Tom's impenetrable depression.

That was the day he first realized that she appreciated James' loyal friendship, even if Tom didn't. "We don't have much in the world," she had said when Tom had run into the bathroom for a minute, leaving them alone together. "I'm glad he has you."

She had finally recognized him, noticed some of his worth. But he had wanted more than a taste.

2nd Force Recon was waiting in the cramped drop ship as he mulled over these events, wondering, as always, what might have been if the Cinco de Mayo race had gone differently. He had three more days to do nothing but play cards with the squad and think over his past before the sensor klaxons went off, signaling the arrival of the pirate vessel.

"They've been traced to a planet a few systems over. It's been surveyed," Kim reported from the console. "Not much there, though. Oxygen-based, but arctic. Too far out from the star."

"Cold weather packs," Sgt. Juniper ordered, pointing to the stack on the far wall. "You've all passed cold weather survival training, right?" He looked relieved when they all nodded. "Good. Probably best to stay in your suits, though. We'll break into three teams. I'll take Angie and Henry for the command post and. Kim and Sentry are our bird-dogs, of course, and James, Greenwald, and Benatrix are our mobile team. Command will stay in the shuttle and the rest of you will jump from orbit and walk in closer."

The engine roared to life at Henry's touch, simultaneously sending a pulse notifying the dreadnought of their departure.

It took only a few hours to get to the system in question. James, Stella, Kim, Sentry, and Greenwald got into their spacejump suits on the way, then sat in jittery impatience by the rear airlock while they flew into position. They tried playing cards while they waited, but no one was really paying attention and eventually they abandoned the game.

When they came in range of the planet, Stella had handed him her deck. "Here, keep this in your suit," she said. "The pockets in mine are too small."

Kim interrupted. "Their ship is on the ground, powered down. Command crew will come in at ground level from the north pole. I've disabled the orbital sensors for the next few minutes, so you're good to jump." A shudder went through the vessel. "Equipment is away."

"Go, go!" Juniper chopped his hand towards the airlock and their two teams went through, Henry sealing the door from the other side.

"Ready?" James said. They checked each other's seals and nodded behind their faceplates, then activated the kinetic shielding that would protect them when they entered the atmosphere. "Let's do this!"

He punched in the code and the air cycled out, the seals on their suits puffing up before the armor expanded over it. They all gripped the handholds as the anti-grav shut off and the door lifted.
The planet shone beneath them, light cloud cover barely visible in the night sky. James grinned as his heart began to pound.

"Ladies first!" Stella said, her voice high-pitched and tinny inside his helmet. She dove gracefully toward the planet, followed by Greenwald. James howled as he gripped both sides of the airlock and launched out head-first. Kim and Sentry followed suit, their shouts of excitement echoing James'.

They were entering the atmosphere now. Nothing looked different at first, but his entire body shuddered with the friction of entry. The taste of blood filled his mouth and he belatedly tucked his tongue back away from his teeth, but his smile stayed on his face. He couldn't keep it away when his adrenaline was pumping like this, and he didn't try.

The two squadmates ahead of him began to glow with heat. A moment later his vision began to fill with the same burning light, his display automatically dimming and bringing up the digital overlay. Their angle was perfect for entry, but they were slightly off-target. They couldn't alter direction until they were out of the mesosphere, so James just enjoyed the ride as they screamed across the atmosphere like human bullets, his heart racing.

The roar around them took on a presence of its own, the planet itself a great beast that shouted its defiance at their intrusion. The roar became a low hum as they were accepted into the stratosphere, the flickering burning around the edges of his helmet display gradually fading into darkness. The vibration shuddering through his suit reduced a few degrees.

For the next several minutes, they fell in silence. The ground was still invisible. The display signaled their entrance into the troposphere, which howled with freezing wind, blowing them further away from their drop zone.

"Deploy aerial guidance gear!" Stella shouted into her comm. The teams locked their arms and legs to their bodies, activated the gear and then spread their arms and legs, now connected to the suit with tough but flexible wings. Like a flock of birds, they turned as one toward the drop zone lit on the digital display on their helmets.

Poetry in motion. He reveled in the feeling of belonging, an integral part of this flock of lethally-trained marines, homing in on their goal.

They'd done this exercise a number of times in Jump School, but the night sky, the pregnancy of the moment and forthcoming mission made this moment feel more immediate, more real. He knew he wasn't the only one affected because the comm was crackling with the sound of five people breathing heavily.

"ETA four minutes!" Stella shouted over the wind, though she didn't really need to. "Sniper team, break off to the north."

"See you guys in my scope," Kim said as he and Sentry veered off toward the higher ground marked on the topography display.

"That's not funny." Greenwald's voice was shaking. From fear? From entry? It was hard to say. No judgment, in any case; without fear, there was no excitement.

"No worries. They'll be bored as hell in a few hours," James said. "We get the fun job."

"You got that right," Stella said. "The equipment drop is on target. We jumped too late, that's why we're off course. Deploy chutes!"
Tall, arrowhead-shaped parachutes exploded from their packs and their descent slowed. There was no moon in the sky yet; the ground was still pitch black in the visual display. He could see the ground coming at them, the distance counter dropping and the thermometer rising slightly as they neared the surface.

He and the others expanded their chutes to kill more speed, the fabric blossoming out like a flower. The last few meters jumped up at him. His body tensed, but he focused on letting the impact absorb through his entire body.

The ground wasn't level and he went tumbling down a hill. The chute sucked back into his pack with a metallic zipping sound as he went, catching on a crevasse and yanking him back upward. He shouted his surprise.

"You okay, Vega?" Stella said where she had neatly landed on the crest of the hill.

"'M fine," he mumbled as he pulled his bulk back onto his feet. "Greenwald?"

"Doing okay." He sounded relieved it was over. Heights weren't his thing, James belatedly remembered.

"There's a sheltered ridge about a kilometer from the pirate base," Stella said. "We have a bit of walking to do. Watch your step, there's ice everywhere."

They tramped through the inky darkness and ice, frequently slipping and falling on the way. Their boots had grips, but they weren't activated. In this kind of terrain they would leave visible tracks.

By the time they reached the shelter they were all beyond exhausted, but there was still work to be done. Greenwald set up the thermal blind at the campsite while Stella and James retrieved the equipment nearby. It didn't take long to get set up, but they were all on their last legs when they finally finished setting up the tent.

Until daybreak, each of them took a turn watching the camp and scouting ahead to the base, setting up surveillance bugs. It was a simple thing to pick out the communication tower and the hangar, but to find the weapons storage and pin down where the colonists were being held they would have to get closer in.

Once the sun came up, a disturbing greenish-pink orb hanging in the winter sky, James, Greenwald and Stella were in a camouflage blind on one side of the base. A small moon had risen earlier, which was now moving slowly across the surface of the sun. The wind was still howling, blowing snow and ice almost horizontally across the barren, pitted landscape.

"Not very hospitable," he commented.

"I think the building in the south quad is where they're holding the colonists," Stella said over the comm. "It has the least shielding."

"Might be underground," Greenwald offered.

"I doubt it. They'd have to blast through all this rock and ice," James said. "See the stability barriers? Everything is prefab. This base is meant to be mobile."

"Good eye, Vega. I think you're right." There was a short pause. "Weapons?"

"No telling right now. We can figure it out when we infiltrate when it's dark. Take a look around."
"Right. Greenwald, you'll be our point of contact back at the camp, in case we need a hack."

"No problem. Hey, Vega, can I ask a question?"

"Shoot."

"Why didn't you ever give me a nickname? You gave everyone else one."

Stella snorted in laughter as he answered. "I did, actually, but I didn't think you'd like it."

"Why? What is it?"

"Jitters."

Greenwald's groan came over the speaker, along with a thump.

"Don't take it personally, buddy. I say it with affection."

"I don't see how."

"Well, you did still jump out of the shuttle."

"It's true." Stella agreed. "You shake when you're wired, but you don't back down."

"I respect that," James said. "It takes guts to do something even when it scares the hell out of you. You're good in my book."

"Well, I guess that makes me feel a little better. But I wish you'd thought of something better. Like Stella's."

"If you could climb up a wall like a ninja like she does, I'd call you something else. But I don't pick the names. They pick themselves."

"Keep the chatter off the comm," Juniper's voice cut in. "SSV Everest is reporting that it's in position behind the moon."

They waited and watched throughout the day in covert silence. Kim and Sentry reported in as the stars appeared, their higher vantage point giving them a clear view of the action in the middle of the base.

"They're bringing people out from the building in the south quarter. Looks like you were right, Benatrix. It's the colonists. They're leading them to the hangar a few dozen at a time," Sentry said.

"Looks like our timeline just got moved up, gentlemen," Stella said. "They must be getting ready to ship."

"We still don't know where the weapons are being kept."

"No choice, Vega. We have to move forward with the mission. The colonists are the priority. I've reported it to the dreadnought," Juniper said. "They'll be here in thirty minutes. Time to go in there and disable their ship and comms. Find the cache if you can once the charges are set. Kim, Sentry, on my signal start picking off the slavers."

"Roger, LT," Sentry said.

"We've marked the ones we can see in your display," Kim added.
"Move out."

"Heading to the building on the east quad," James said, taking one last look at the perimeter before pulling himself over and running at the wall. The pirates were not keeping a particularly good watch.

Stella met him there. He laced his fingers together and held out his hand. She put one small foot in his hands and he easily lifted her up over his head. She peeked over the icy plasti-crete wall.

"We're good. Alley-oop, big guy!"

"Do your thing, Slick." He lowered her to chest level before launching her into the air. She neatly flipped over the edge. A few minutes later a line was tossed back over to him. He pulled himself up and gracelessly dropped to his feet as she retracted the line into her pack.

"Christ, Vega, do you think you could make more noise? Sounded like you dropped a tank over the wall."

"I pretty much did. The wind is covering it up anyway. You heard that through your comm."

"Yeah, well, work on that move," she muttered as she leaned around the corner to look into the courtyard. "Or it's gonna get you killed."

"I will. What do you see?"

"Men, women, children. Practically frozen. The door's opening… oh, wow."

"What?"

"There are a lot of colonists in there. Looks like just a few dozen slavers, though. They're pretty spread out. Make sure the dreadnought knows not to target the hangar, LT." She turned around to look at him. "Vega, you'll have to disable the ship's drives. I'll take the comm tower."

"Charges?"

"Set them on the rear propulsion stabilizers. They won't get off the ground. Looks like… yeah, the eezo drive is in the front. Hopefully that will keep the civvie casualties to a minimum."

"And after I set the charge, then can I go find the guns?"

She laughed. "You have a one-track mind, you know that?"

"Yeah. See you in a bit." He watched her leap off the opposite wall, grab the ledge of the roof of the prefab and disappear over it.

He worked his way stealthily around the next building, making for the hangar. Most of the slavers were busy in the front, leading the colonists inside.

A quick scan revealed an empty part of the hangar and he made his way around to that corner. His omni-torch flared in the darkness, cutting a hole in the metal of the poorly shielded hangar. He frog-crawled through, grunting with effort.

"I think you're right, Stella. I need to add some cardio into my routine."

"Let me know when and I'll give you some pointers."

His eyebrows raised as he covered the hole he'd made and ducked behind some crates. Was it just
him, or was there something else behind that offer?

He hoped not. He liked Stella, but his uncle had warned him against getting involved with someone in the same squad. It complicated things on the battlefield. And Uncle E would know; his husband had been lost on a mission they had been on together when James was little. His uncle had never fully recovered.

After checking for enemies, he bolted across the open aisle and slid under the pirate dreadnought. He checked the specs on his omni-tool and made his way to the right panel, trying to move silently.

"James, I'm in position. You ready?"

"Almost. Setting the charge now, then sixty seconds to get clear." The sticky charge went into the panel and he tapped in the code. It flashed red twice, then green. "Moving out."

"Roger. I'm syncing the charges."

A patrol walked by just before he got to the hole he'd made and he rerouted, moving toward the head of the craft. After checking the corner, he bolted across the aisle back to where he'd come in. Pulling himself through the hole, he made a beeline for the next building.

"Clear!"

An explosion rocked the air behind him. "Music to my ears! How did the comm tower go?" There was no answer. "Stella? Benatrix, come in!"

After a moment, a groan came over the comm. "I'm… pinned by one of the comm supports. Thing came apart like tinker-toys, went flying everywhere. Shoddy merc equipment."

"I'm coming. Hang tight." He rounded the corner and came face-to-face with a batarian. It shouted something and voices answered from the nearby shelter. Automatically, James leveled his shotgun at him and pulled the trigger.

He'd never shot anyone before. No time to think about it now.

Voices were coming around both sides of the prefab he was facing. Leaping over the body, he kicked in the door to the prefab and jumped in before he was seen. He shut the door behind him and turned on his light.

One of the crates was partially open and he took a quick look as he passed by. "Oh, shit. Found the weapons cache in the prefab next to the hangar."

"Blow it," Juniper ordered.

"But Stella-" he was already looking for the door on the opposite side.

"Do it, Vega," she gasped in his ear.

He pulled out a charge and carefully attached them to the crates, then activated the fuses. The sound of voices outside got louder. "Charges set, Greenwald."

"Syncing now."

Cursing over and over in his head, he realized that unlike most prefabs, there was no secondary exit. He'd have to go out the way he came in. "I'm gonna be a little late, Stella."
"Don't worry about it." Fainter now.

Not wasting a second, he rammed the door like a bull, knocking into the crowd of batarians on the other side. They shouted and raised their weapons, but he was already mowing through them, fists flying and gun blazing, but not stopping to finish.

He felt several shots deflect off his back armor panels as his legs pumped towards the downed comm tower.

A few more ran around the corner, but they went down before he could react.

"Nice shot, Kim!" Greenwald shouted in James' ear as he bolted into the light flooding the center of the camp.

"I'm clear! Blow it!" James shouted. "Stella, I'm coming, just hang on!"

No answer. Another explosion rocked the night.

An incredibly bright light appeared overhead, freezing debris whirling violently around the courtyard, mixed with the burning fallout. The dreadnought was here. The pirates immediately hit the ground, hands out in surrender.

But James was still running for Stella, not sparing a glance for the ship hovering overhead.

He didn't leave friends behind. He'd lost enough already.

Later...

The squad rocked in the hold of the shuttle as it headed back to the Everest, their labored breathing overlaying one another as their hearts began to slow.

James' hands shook with tension. Looking around, he could see that he wasn't the only one.

They had been through training exercises, live-fire, and simulations. The Alliance had broken them down and built them back up in Basic Training, then painstakingly weeded out the leaders in Officer Candidacy School. James' determination and skill with every weapon they threw at him had kept him from bottoming out in a part of the Alliance where technical and diplomatic know-how tended to win out over brawn and energy, but at this moment they were all equals. Each and every one of them was trembling from head to toe as excess adrenaline burned off.

They looked at each other, the looks saying nothing but meaning everything. Greenwald was covering his face in the corner. Angie was a little more composed since this wasn't her first mission, but as she idly cleaned her nails with her combat knife, James could see that she was chewing her lip until it bled. The others were in similar states of dishevelment, trying to pull themselves together and look brave about it.

All of them but one. Stella was lying near the door in a body bag.

He could still feel the thrum of energy weapons popping around him in the still air of the shuttle, as if his body was reliving it while his mind tried to wind back down. Even as the fear and the determination chilled, he wanted to stand up, to punch someone in the face, to rip the shuttle apart. He wanted to throw Angie down and give her what she'd always been after, to show her what "the bite" was so she'd stop giving herself away so freely. He wanted to howl, to cut loose with a primal, preverbal noise that would bring him even closer to the animal he had felt awakening in him when
the shots were firing at him… other living beings trying to kill him.

He felt raw. Terrified. But alive.

His thoughts turned back to Earth, at another time when he had felt this raw. A time when he'd witnessed someone go into full-on battle rage at will. The one person he always thought of when his adrenaline was pumping. Lola.

He could still picture her like it was yesterday. It wasn't that there weren't more beautiful women in the galaxy; there were. But she had exuded the raw power that had pushed him through the past few hours as if it oozed from her pores. The fascination had never completely left him. He'd have followed her into the heart of a sun just to walk alongside her one more time.

The last day he'd seen her was one he'd never forget. That day hadn't been as frightening as today, but in the mind of a thirteen-year-old it was about as traumatic as it yet. And it had started out so happy.

No one connected with what happened that day had come out unchanged. It was an event that had completely reshaped the way he thought about friendship, family and even his own future.

Lola had been a vortex around which things just happened. And they had happened quickly and violently towards the end. Some of the details were a little foggy in hindsight, but he remembered vividly what she looked like; her expressions, her voice. Closing his eyes, he brought her face fully into focus. The face that still haunted his dreams.

Someone shook his shoulder. "Wake up, Vega. We're docked."

Opening his eyes, he saw the others beginning to rise, the seals humming and hissing their release. The door opened, letting freshly processed air into the stink of sweat and fear that had permeated the shuttle. He hadn't noticed it until this moment.

They stood aside respectfully as the medics came to collect Stella's body. No one looked at anyone else as she floated away on a null-grav sled. They began to unload the equipment, most of which they hadn't been able to use.

A young girl stood next to the crowd of colonists filing out of the shuttle bay, watching them unload the equipment. Her hands were on a boy's shoulders, holding him close to her body protectively. James hefted one crate of weapons over to the Armory, then came back for another, all the while watching the kids out of the corner of his eye.

Dropping his last load on the ground in front of them, he lifted his chin at the girl. "You'll be okay now, you know. The Alliance will take care of you."

Looking down at her brother, she said, "We've lost everything."

"No," James said. "You haven't." He looked pointedly at the little boy.

"But I don't know what to do."

"Make it up as you go. You'll figure it out."

"How do you know?"

"I knew someone like you once. She went through something like this trying to protect her brother. She knew what was important. So do you."
"What happened to them?"

He smiled tightly. "This is your story, not theirs. Make your own ending. But I have a feeling that you'll both come out on top."

She looked uncertain, but she gave him a tentative smile anyway. He nodded at her, picked the crate back up and headed back to the Armory, feeling like he'd dodged a bullet. Those kids might make it and they might not, but kids could go a long way on hope. Maybe even enough to survive on their own.

There was a lot to stew over tonight when he went to bed. He wasn't looking forward to it. He'd left Earth, his childhood dream, and gone to a nameless planet. He'd met his first alien up close, and he'd shot him. One of his friends had died.

Stella had been a good soldier, one of the best in their class. And she had died on their first mission. There was nothing he could have done to help her, in the end; she had been completely run through by one of the support beams from the comm tower. She'd been dead before he crossed the courtyard. He'd never watch her flit across the field like a ninja again.

Unbuckling his chestplate, he reached into its storage compartment and pulled out Stella's deck of cards. The back of the deck had a holographic image of four crescent-shaped leaves inside a diamond. He turned it in the light of the Armory, watching it sparkle.

It didn't matter how good any of them were. People he knew were going to die as a part of this work. People died all the time, even in civilian life. Just like back on Cinco de Mayo, on race day.

He'd heard that some people thought that you could get used to losing friends. But you don't. And James knew that he never would.
Chapter Summary

The Urban Combat Championships come to San Diego and Raul makes a surprising revelation.

Chapter Notes

Music: Day After Tomorrow, Tom Waits; Gold on the Ceiling, The Black Keys; Turning Tables, Adele

Two days before the Urban Combat Championships

Emilio

Emilio and Mason were having more fun than they'd had in a long time, swapping stories and sharing memories around the card table in his home in Escondido, a small bungalow adjacent to the nature preserve at Turner Lake. Their laughter and voices carried into the quiet neighborhood late into the evening from the den where they sat with a bottle of whiskey in the middle of the table and a deck of cards neatly stacked off to the side.

"This place hasn't changed a bit." Mason said, looking around. "Aside from this room, the house is just like your mom had it."

"Not like I bring anyone but the kid back here, and he doesn't care." He absently twirled the worn silver band around his left ring finger, his gaze unfocused.

"You still could, Em. It's been long enough since Trent died. You've got it all going for you." Mason took a drink and poked his thumb into his chest. "I'm the black sheep. This trip was risky as hell. I don't know how you talked me into staying."

Emilio poured another drink for both of them. "What can I say? Maybe I just missed seeing your ugly mug." He peered across the table at his friend. "Though I guess I didn't realize how ugly you'd gotten."

"Fuck you, man," Mason rumbled, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "I lost that pretty boy image before I even enlisted- you know that. Besides, I'm not living in civilization like you are."

"Since when is the Citadel not civilization?" Emilio asked in disbelief.

"It isn't civilized in the Lower Wards. There's more crime there than there is in L.A., like the whole galaxy goes there to do their dirty work." He waved his hand expressively before picking up his glass.

"Thought that was Omega. I've been there a few times. What a seedy shithole."
"Yeah, but they don't keep it under wraps like they do on the Citadel. They don't have to. Everything is out in the open, so there's a reputation involved with every deal. If you do a deal that's dirtier than what's considered acceptable, everyone knows and then nobody does business with you." He shook his head. "Not on the Citadel. Just keep it quiet is all they want."

The two men were quiet for a few minutes before Emilio got up to open the window. A warm breeze floated into the stuffy room.

Mason breathed in deeply. "Ah, I missed that."

"What?"

"The unprocessed air, the smell of eucalyptus. I can get some extra sun under a lamp back home if I need to, but I can't replace that smell. You're lucky you get to come back here between missions."

Another silence fell as the men listened to an evening bird settle in outside the window for the night, just enjoying each other's company. It had been like this during the few times they'd managed to meet on the Citadel, too. There weren't many people Emilio had met that he could just sit in comfortable silence with.

Eventually they finished their drinks. Emilio poured the next round, breaking the silence. "I'm glad you're staying. James is counting on you being at the race, too."

"Yeah, the kid told me he wanted me to be there. He'll be too busy to pester me about stories from my merc days, so that's somethin'."

"He admires you. Why, I can't guess." Emilio raised an eyebrow at Mason before continuing. "Rosie's in knots about him being old enough. Thirteen, can you believe it? That was about the age you were when you got into that fight with Benny."

"That's right. Almost forgot about that. That was a tough age. I'm not surprised you pulled through as cleanly as you did."

"I stayed in the military and took care of my family. Had to. Especially once James was born, I made sure I was on Earth for him."

Mason didn't say anything.

"What is it?" Emilio asked.

"I'm not around kids much. Jimmy makes me think of..." Mason stared at the tabletop for a moment. "I never told you. Justine was pregnant when the slavers took her."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"Jimmy kinda makes me think of what my kid would have been like." His huge chest rose and fell. "It was gonna be our last job as mercs. She was running transport, but a slaver ship discovered the shuttle while she was waiting for me. She'd only been dead a few hours when I finally tracked her down."

The turn of conversation was surprising. Jimmy must have truly affected him. Mason hadn't ever wanted to talk about this before. "They didn't- I'm sorry, I don't understand. She was a pretty girl. I'm surprised they didn't sell her."

"Evidently she fought them. She was beaten all to hell. Would've been a hard sell."
"Damn." Emilio stared at his drink. "If I'd known, I wouldn't have pushed you into staying. I didn't know it would be this hard for you."

"No, you were right. I needed the change. I have to do something or I'll just piss my life away completely."

"You'll figure it out." Their eyes held for a few moments before Mason nodded.

The front door opened and closed in the other room. "I'm done at the park. Gotta go lock up the bike, I'll be right back," James called out.

"His voice is changing," Mason observed.

"I know. Depressing."

A few doors slammed and the footsteps came back into the room.

"Hey!" James sat in one of the free chairs with an exaggerated sigh. His cheeks were dark with the sun he'd taken during the day. He had lost a little weight from the month's activity, Emilio noted.

"How did things go?" Emilio asked.

"Not too bad. We got some good practice in. Tom's sister came by, too. She's been watching us a lot lately."

"Oh, yeah? How's she doing?"

James smiled, leaning back. "She's great."

Mason and Emilio looked at each other in amusement at his tone. "She's nineteen years old," Emilio said. "You're just setting yourself up for disappointment."

James shrugged. "Yeah, she's older, but someday I will be too. I have some ideas on how to make her notice me. When the time is right..." He smirked in anticipation.

Emilio was impressed with his long view, doubtful though the plan was. "Well, just be careful. That's a dangerous girl no matter how old you are."

"No risk, no glory!" James said with that same unstoppable grin.

"My sentiments exactly," Mason said. "Here, I brought something for you. An attitude like that deserves a reward." Mason reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded hardcopy, which he handed to James.

James' hazel eyes grew large as he read it. "No way. Seriously?"

"Let me see." Emilio took the paper from his nephew, then looked in surprise at Mason. "How the hell did you get VIP passes to the finals of the UCC?"

"Cong gave them to me this morning. I thought you and the kid might like to come. I've got four passes, too, so if Jimmy here has a friend to invite..."

"I can bring Tom! He'll be psyched!"

"Sorry I couldn't give you more notice, it's in two days."
"It's okay, we're off from school anyway. The other kids are gonna be so jealous!" His smile stretched from ear to ear and his excitement made him rise out of his chair.

"Well, we appreciate it, don't we James? Okay, stop hanging on Mason like that. Go get a shower. We'll discuss the plans tomorrow."

James gave Mason's tattooed arm one more squeeze before leaving the room. A minute later the shower started.

"It'll be hard for him to get to sleep now. You should've waited until morning. But it was good of you to think of us, Mason."

"Who else would I bring? You're the closest thing to family I've got now. So who's this girl he's got a crush on? She sounds interesting."

"Kid has tastes way out of his league. I hope he'll grow out of it- or into it- soon. Lola is Jessica's daughter. Do you remember her? She was married to someone in your first squad."

"I never actually met her, but I saw the pictures a bunch of times. A real looker, hard to forget. Thought they all died in a fire?" Mason's eyebrows furrowed.

"No, just Jessica. It was arson, some trouble she got into. Living clean didn't agree with her."

Mason shook his head. "Didn't agree with him, either. But they made an honest try at least - that's why he enlisted. It's more than most men would've done, especially as young as they were at the time."

Emilio nodded. "True. After she died the kids went into federal protection for a while, then they brought them back here and put them in foster care. But evidently the apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

"What do you mean?"

"I've tried to keep an eye on them through my contacts in the PD since they came back, even introduced the boy to James. They're constantly in trouble, but Lola's gone off the deep end since she came of age. Running with a really tough crowd." He ran his hand through his hair agitatedly.


"She's a real heartbreaker, like Jessica was. Absolutely beautiful, legs for days. And an attitude the size of the Pacific Ocean. She's about nineteen now, I think."

"I met her at Celine's memorial."

"You sure?"

"Not the kind of girl you can mistake. Now that I think about it, there was definitely a resemblance."

"Well, if it's her, I'm not surprised you met her at Cong's. I keep hoping that James will be a positive influence on her brother, but I worry that James will end up getting in trouble hanging around him."

"Remember all the trouble I used to get into when we were that age? It never seemed to rub off on you. He'll be fine, he's got a good role model and a great attitude to boot. That's damn near
impossible to learn."

"True. But I can't help worrying." He cocked his head at Mason's tense face. "What is it?"

"I just... Em, if she's Jessica's daughter, then her dad is still alive."

"I heard he died while the kids were still in protection." Emilio sat up straighter in his chair.

"Not common knowledge, but no. We haven't kept in touch but I ran into him a few years back."

"Mason, if their father's alive..." Emilio was at a loss for words.

"I'll look into it when I get back, Em. I don't know how to get in touch with him again. Let's not shake anyone up unless I have something to tell."

"Right, of course. But, damn. It would totally change their world."

"It sure would." Mason said, nodding, rubbing the Blue Suns tattoo on his neck. "You're right about that."

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**Raul**

It was after 2 A.M. when three long cars lowered into the empty courtyard at Raul's house. Tony was waiting on the front step, refracted light filtering through the glass panels of the door but still leaving him in shadow. Moonlight lit the way for Raul and his men as they got out and walked into the house. Tony opened the door as they approached.

"The negotiations went well," Raul said as he walked past Tony into the house, his voice echoing in the air of the vaulted room. "How did things go here?"

"Not bad, aside from two kids breaking in the day you left."

"Kids?" Startled, Raul halted in the foyer while his men walked past them to the back of the house to meet with the others who waited there. "What for?"

"They came for Lola. She was gone the whole next day."

"Where did she go?"

"Don't know. She insisted on going alone." His snide tone emphasized the final word. "She says she went to see her brother, but there's no telling where she was."

"Where is she now?"

"Asleep in your bed, of course."

Eyes glittering at Tony's accusatory tone, Raul asked, "What are you thinking?"

Tony lowered his voice to a whisper, glancing at the stairs. "Do we know where she came from, who she's really with? This is just the kind of shit that brought your Papa down. He wouldn't let anyone close after your mama died, but then that devious bitch wormed her way in."

"And left the door wide open for me." He nodded. "The sangrewon't be brought down by a woman or anyone else. I won't make my father's mistake."
"Just be careful. She's dangerous, not like the other women."

"I appreciate the warning, amigo. Come, we need to discuss the last two weeks with the others."

The sky was beginning to lighten when he finally entered his bedroom. Unbuttoning his shirt, he stood at the foot of the bed, watching Lola sleep. She was restless, twitching under the light blanket.

It was possible she had actually been out with her brother, but Tony had an uncanny nose for these things which had saved the sangre considerable trouble in the past. His warning wasn't to be taken lightly.

Raul's abuelo had once told him, "You let a woman close enough, Raul, and they soften you up to make the kill. If not them, then someone else. If you feel something for a woman, either put yourself out of your misery or kill her first."

Raul had taken this advice seriously. At first, he had only pushed them away with insults, with abuse, to keep them from forming attachments while still enjoying their charms, but he despised their weakness and the weakness they inspired in him. Eventually, each one had to be put down. The world was better off without their insipid clinginess and pitiful terror of him.

Reaching down, he slowly pulled the blanket away from Lola's sleeping form. She was wearing only a long shirt and she shivered in the air conditioning, but she didn't wake up. His eyes roamed over her body, looking for any marks or changes not of his making. He didn't see any.

He walked quietly around the bed and knelt on the floor. Settling back on his heels, he gently reached out and pulled down the neck of her shirt with one finger to see the rapidly healing wound there, the words "primera sangre" in red ink arcing over the scar. She had appeared as proud to bear the tattoo as any of his men. All of the sangre had a similar tattoo, though most were in a far less potentially lethal location.

He took his hand away and rubbed at his mouth, thinking as he watched her face twist in disturbed slumber. After the Afrikka Club, he had become fixated on seeing her as una matón, to keeping her at his side, although her femininity confused things. There was nothing soft or gentle about this woman, as desirable as she was. It was disorienting. She would not idly lie there and let him snuff her life out; there would be no pleasure in seeing the fear come and go in someone so strong. If she were a man, he would openly admire her.

Weakness. Definitely weakness. This was exactly what his abuelo had warned him about.

She could have easily died when she had protected him from Chege's betrayal, but risk was a part of this life, a part of getting ahead. She was the type to understand that. So the real question was, had she saved him, or had she claimed him? Aggravatingly, he almost didn't care.

Her fingers gripped the sheet and her teeth bared slightly. Her eyes moved quickly under her eyelids. He touched her hand softly, not wanting to wake her and start the game afresh.

What was she dreaming about? He wanted to know what went on in her devious head, to understand the mysterious depths of her mind, so much like his own. His hand stroked down her pale arm.

She woke up gasping, arms flailing to push him away. A moment later she was against the headboard with her hand pushing on her chest over her scar as she looked around. Seeing him kneeling next to the bed, she breathed out his name in relief.
"Happy to see me?"

Rubbing her face, she sat forward. "Surprised."

"You were dreaming."

"Yes." She didn't elaborate. But he wasn't interested in ferreting out her secrets now that she was awake.

Taking one of her slender ankles in his hand, he pulled her to the edge of the bed where he was kneeling. He positioned himself between her knees and pulled her down for a kiss, not caring about the stale taste of her mouth. He liked the way she caressed the side of his face as she responded with some hesitation, still groggy from sleep.

He should send her away or dispose of her like any troublesome woman. Maybe he would.

Right after this.

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**Two days later...**

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**James**

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Wearing a jubilant smile that he thought would be permanently frozen onto his face, James was looking out the window of his uncle's car at the UCC arena on his way to the VIP building with Uncle E, Tom, and Mason. A wide swath of the city around it was bright with lights, all eyes trained on the darker area that encompassed the arena. The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon to the east, a low haze hanging over the city.

He and Tom pointed out the newscams and the enormous floating screens that would be broadcasting the action below to the crowd outside the arena where the teams would be fighting each other for the prize: one million creds, an unbelievable sum which put the prize at the Cinco de Mayo race next week to shame. News drones floated all around the arena, their lights blinking in shadowy corners like fireflies.

"Check it out! Protesters," James said, pointing at a noisy crowd outside the arena walls as they flew overhead. "They were on the news this morning too."

"Evidently some people don't find deathmatches entertaining," Mason said with a rumbling laugh.

"I don't get that. It's voluntary," James said. The UCC competitors knew that you don't get anywhere unless you take a risk. They were just really hardcore about it. He'd be like that, too, when he grew up. A serious badass.

"What teams are you pulling for?" his uncle asked.

"The Wreckers were my favorites from last year, but they washed out of the trials early. Now I like the Dogpound and the Renegades. If they both come to the final round I won't know who to cheer for, but that seems like a good problem to have."

Most successful teams had been training together all year but there were a few odd teams that had joined during the trials when teammates got injured. There had even been a few deaths, though that was to be expected.
Tom pointed out the window excitedly. "Look, there's the Renegades' banner! On that platform, see it? Do you think that's one of the objectives?"

Mason leaned forward to look. "Could be. See how the streets have been cleared and cover has been set up at strategic locations nearby?"

"Not enough of it," Emilio commented as he steered into a long line of cars.

"That's what makes it challenging," Mason said.

James counted the four separate sections of the arena, each with a different type of urban combat terrain. They had watched the trials for weeks; it was beyond cool to see the area in person, instead of on the vidcomm. "Where's the VIP section? I hope we don't have to look in the monitors the whole time."

"Of course not. It's that shielded building right in the middle. See there?" Emilio said.

The line of cars were approaching a late industrial-era skyscraper, its walls made of clear glass, which had been reinforced for the occasion. Around it, the old city buildings sprawled in low clumps. They could see its faint halo of kinetic shielding flicker as cars were permitted through. Valets were waiting on the roof to take the cars to the garage outside the arena walls. Lines of limos were on the far side of the platform.

"Do you think your sister's over there?" he asked Tom.

"Probably. We might not see them, they have a private room."

"Lola is a Renegades fan too," James said in explanation to the adults. "She let us watch a match on her omni-tool last week when we were waiting for our turn on the track."

"She's going to be here?" Emilio asked in surprise, exchanging a look with Mason.

"Yeah, her boyfriend got tickets," Tom said.

"At least she gets to go," James said. "She's almost as big a fan as I am."

"I didn't think that was possible," Mason said around his toothpick.

"We've always been UCC fans," Tom said. "Ever since San Diego won the bid for this year she was planning on coming. This is way better than what we could have afforded on our own, though."

On the roof, a valet took Emilio's place and flew off. James ran with Tom to the clear windbreaks to look over the cityscape.

James didn't think he'd ever been so high up in the air without being in a car. Windbreaks cut most of the wind, but the roar of distant crowds and music occasionally washed overhead, giving him a thrill. The glass under his fingers was vibrating slightly with the wind, but he could feel something else rumbling under his feet.

"Do you feel that?" he asked. A sharp sulphurous odor came with the next gust of wind. "What is that smell?"

"They're testing munitions for the final round," Emilio answered, pointing to the west. "See over there?" A cloud of smoke blossomed up from one corner of the arena. The two boys shared an
ecstatic look.

A guide came to show them to their viewing platform, several floors below. The outside wall was entirely made of glass, floor to ceiling, for a 360-degree view of the arena. The crowd by the elevator was thick, but James and Tom just pushed through them to the window to look out, discussing what they saw animatedly.

"Mr. Cong has a private section this way," the guide said, waving them on. The area she led them to had a slightly sunken floor in front of the seamless window with a low glass wall sectioning it from the rest of the room. A loaded buffet table ran along one side of the area with comfortable seating nearby. A long cushioned bench faced the window, which Tom and James immediately leaped into, pressing their foreheads against the glass as they tried to see some action on the ground, even though they knew there wasn't anything to see yet. After a few minutes, they found binoculars nearby, through which they could see the faces of men working on the ground, twenty stories down.

"Come on, kids, get a bite to eat while the food is hot. The first elimination round doesn't start for twenty minutes," Emilio called out.

James and Tom ate while they pored over the monitors, checking on the starting positions of their favorite teams and making conjectures about likely wins. When the first match was about to begin, the voices in the room got so loud that they had to shout to hear each other.

"I wish we could have one of those rooms," Tom said, pointing at several rooms at one end of the floor, enclosed floor to ceiling with soundproof glass. "I can't even hear the commentary." Tom stared at the far rooms for a minute longer, but James only had eyes for the upcoming match.

Mason found pairs of earplugs under the console that fed them the newscaster's audio feed and blocked out the worst of the noise, though they still couldn't talk to each other. It was a good compromise. They rushed back to the window as the first round began.

Lola

In one of the private rooms, the Sangre Carnal was enjoying the championships like everyone else.

"That's it! Go Renegades!" Lola shouted, pumping her fist in the air as her team rushed the first objective, a data packet. "No, what are you doing? Don't take the middle this early," she said, bouncing in agitation. "Watch your teammates!"

She roared in excitement along with all the men as the match went on, teams gaining and losing ground in turn. The sound of the firefight rattled through the speakers in the enclosed room, which quickly began to get warm with the heat of the bodies around her. Raul was sitting in one of the comfortable chairs next to a monitor, playing it cool as he smoked an endless chain of cigarettes and drank chilled vodka with lime juice.

After the first round, he grabbed her elbow to get her attention as she walked past to the drink table. "I had no idea you were so into this," he said.

"Always have been. I can't believe I'm really here," she said with a bright smile. He looked at her oddly but said nothing else as she got a drink and returned to the window to discuss the match with the others.

Seven more rounds passed like this as the sun crested in the sky. There was a brief midday break
for lunch and to reset the fields. Lola settled down in one of the chairs with a sigh, tucking her legs underneath her. She was glad she hadn't dressed formally, as so many of the people outside their private room had. Her choice of pants and an open-backed shirt kept her comfortable while she could see the formally-attired guests already visibly chafing. At least the soreness from all the tattoos was finally fading.

One of the men leaned over to her. "Some kid is staring at you," he said, gesturing at the glass wall facing the main room.

Twisting around, her jaw dropped in surprise at the face she saw there. "Tom!" She bolted from the room and went to meet him in the main area. "What are you doing here?" she asked him, giving him a hug.

"James' uncle had a friend with passes and they invited me." He grinned.

"This is amazing, isn't it?" She grabbed his hands. "I'm so glad you got to come!"

"Yeah! Did you see Butterball Jones in round four make that move to the secondary platform-"

"When he leaped over the wall and backstabbed one of the Dawgs?" she finished for him.

"Then Darksunshaman sniped the guy who was coming around the corner behind him." He pantomimed the action with his hands.

"Yeah, that was something else. Look, I have to go back. Let's get together tomorrow and compare notes, okay?"

"Okay." He looked happy to see her, though he kept glancing at the room she'd come from anxiously.

She gave him one last hug and walked back into the room.

"You sure have been seeing a lot of your brother lately," Will commented as she passed by him on his way out.

"Yes, it's been nice. You have kids, don't you?"

"Two. I've been married for fifteen years."

"Then you understand. This is all worth it, for his sake." She smiled at him and walked to Raul's side, not noticing the way he thoughtfully watched her settle into the gang boss' lap before he disappeared into the crowd.

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Raul

It was late afternoon when the final round began between the Renegades and the Screamers, an underdog team that had the whole city in an uproar. Candente and several of the others were hoarse from yelling, the long day of excitement bringing them closer together. One man lifted her into the air while she cheered when one of the Screamers was dragged from the battlefield, bleeding profusely. They all high-fived each other when he set her down before they turned back to the match, talking over each other loudly.

Raul was watching them darkly from his seat, ignoring the match on the monitor next to him. The
dish next to him was overflowing with ashes, the puddle of condensation around his glass dripping onto the floor.

He had seen a new side of her tonight. That smile from earlier... she never looked like that when she was alone with him. It burned him, and the probable source of the discomfort angered him even more.

When the final round was over, everyone acting like complete jackasses when the Renegades won, he picked up his jacket and walked out without a word, gesturing for her to follow.

"Aren't we staying for the after party?" she asked, grabbing his sleeve to slow him down.

"They can," he said, gesturing to the others, who were watching in confusion. "But you are coming with me." He walked off, knowing she had no choice but to say her disappointed good-byes and follow.

After navigating through the celebrating crowd, they rode the elevator up in silence. Once they reached the roof, he led her behind the enclosure and ordered the valets away so they could speak in private.

"What's this all about?" she asked, leaning back against the cold brick. "I'm starting to feel like a kept woman."

"You aren't taking this life seriously, Candente. We're in a dangerous position."

"So what else is new?" she snapped.

"It's more than that. You're far too familiar with my men, and your brother follows you everywhere. Your behavior makes us all vulnerable."

"How?" she challenged him. "Just two weeks ago you were telling me every day how disposable I am."

"When my enemies see you with your brother, they know they can get to you through him, and through you they can get to me."

"If it's so risky, maybe we shouldn't spend so much time together." she said biting. "And what the hell does that have to do with me bonding with the men? You made me one of them."

He ground his teeth at her answer. "This is exactly what I wanted to avoid. So much confusion when you let women in," he said quietly, as if to himself. Then to her, he said, "As a woman, you are disposable. But as una matón you must think of the Sangre first."

"Oh, fuck off, Raul. If I were anyone else in the Sangre, would you be having this conversation? Some of these men have wives and children, I know they do. Why should I abandon the person I joined to save? And why the hell does it matter to you at all? What do you want from me, Raul?" she shouted, her face flushed.

His hands raised to her shoulders and flexed, itching to grab her, to hit her. What did he want from her? Contradictions swarmed in him, confusing his normally clear head. No, no, it wasn't possible. This bitch had to be put in her place.

"My enemies will see our connection as a weakness, and the way you acted today-"

"Proves it," she finished with rancor. "That's it, right? Time to kill the bitch in the way." She
pushed her hair back and bared her neck. "Go ahead, Raul. Make me a dash on your neck, no different than any other mujer."

He stared at her defiant face, feeling half-livid and half... something he hadn't ever felt before. When he didn't move, she grabbed his hand and put it on her neck, her long fingers contracting around his.

"Do it," she hissed. "I'm not living like this anymore. I'm sick of this, sick of you." She stared him provocingly, the wind blowing strands of her long hair across her face.

Her final words drove it home. She was right. It was time to be done with this, done with the bullshit drama, done with the confusion that this aggravating woman had brought into his life. Women were disposable, easy to get rid of when they got too familiar. Just bitches.

Gritting his teeth, he locked his muscles and began to compress her narrow throat, hoping to crush her windpipe so it would be over quickly. Her eyes popped and she shoved away from him, then grabbed his arms as she gasped. He grimaced but held on, quelling the debate that simmered just under the surface. He looked for the fear in her eyes that he so dearly loved to see in a woman, but saw only anger and determination there.

Before he could figure out why this confused him, pain exploded under his arms and his hands fell away, stumbling back. She had used that move on him before. But instead of the anger he expected, he felt only relief, increasing his confusion.

She was choking and coughing. Her face was bright red and several blood vessels had burst in her eyes, diluting the color. A demon from hell in an angel's body.

"You try and put me down and I swear I will make the toughest bastard you've done away with look like a pussycat," she rasped out.

Her threat was almost funny, but he was too confused to enjoy it. He wasn't the type to allow anyone to take him with the same move twice. Had he wanted her to break free? He must have. It had to be intentional. He must want her to live.

Her eyes darted around, looking for a means to escape. But he didn't want her to escape. He wanted her to stay with him.

It was this realization that illuminated what he had been denying for so long. She was strong, intelligent, beautiful, determined, and loyal to a fault. He could abuse her endlessly and she would only grow stronger. She simply wasn't like any other woman. She was perfect for this life. Perfect for him.

Approaching her slowly, he put his hands up in surrender when she flinched back, but didn't stop until they were almost touching again.

"Candente," he said. "My grandfather taught me that a woman is a weakness, something to be exploited. He didn't understand that not all women are the same. Neither did I, not until now."

She was staring at him hatefully, her back to the brick, no way out from the enclosure but past him. He had marked her again, bright pink stripes across her neck in the shape of his gently brushed hand down her reddened neck, feeling a rush of excitement when she reacted to the pain this caused, rolling her head away from his touch.

"You've proven your loyalty and your worth to me. Usted no es una debilidad. You make the Sangre Carnal stronger. I'll watch over you, care for you, teach you to be good at this life."
"What are you saying?" she whispered hoarsely, her eyes guarded.

He was really seeing her for the first time, her blood-red eyes seeming to confirm her place by his side. The sight of them excited him. Now he knew why he didn't mind the marks on her, the ink, even the possessive looks he had occasionally seen on her face. He understood her feelings... and returned them.

"I love you, Lola. Tú eres mi corazón."

Lola

Her throat ached. She had bitten her tongue when he had choked her and the taste of blood lingered in her mouth. Her breath stopped in shock, eyes wide as she took in the sincerity in his tone. "I didn't know you had a heart, Raul."

"Neither did I. Not until you." Putting his hands on either side of her head, he brought his face close to hers. She didn't pull away, not certain what to make of this new revelation.

"What about my brother?"

"I'll send him away, maybe to school somewhere far from here." His voice was muffled against her neck as he gently kissed the finger marks she knew were there.

"You'll send him to school?" she asked, her tone softening. It didn't seem possible.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because we must be together. I can't kill you." Lifting his head, he gave her a look that was almost... tender.

Her hand went to her throat and one eyebrow lifted. He smiled. "I know. But this just proves it." His fingers brushed down her neck again.

Raul was not the type to believe in love. This powerful man was offering her everything she wanted, giving in to her, even against his own nature. He must actually mean it. The tension in her chest released abruptly and she moaned in relief.

"You like the pain?" he asked in a low tone. He thought she was responding to his touch. She smiled. For the first time, it really felt like she had the upper hand.

"It's an acquired taste. Mi sangre... ¿quieres sabor?"

His hands came to either side of her head, locking her in place, and he kissed her ardently, groaning against her lips when he tasted the blood on her tongue.

"You are mine forever," he said after a moment.

"Vete a la chingada, Raul."

"Me encanta cuando hablas mi idioma," he laughed against her mouth, his breath pushing the copper tang into her nose.
"You're not talking about my street Spanish, are you?"

"No."

And then he kissed her again, this time tilting her head with his hands, one locked at her throat, the other gripping the back of her head. She abandoned herself to the kiss, accepting the pain with the pleasure in equal parts.

The crowd was roaring on the wind, the floor under them vibrating with excitement. Lola soared above it as she allowed the bastard, the one she hated, to express his passion for her. She burned with power. She had this twisted fuck right where she wanted him. Her legs squeezed together, her hips tilting forward.

He pulled back from the wall, keeping her close. "We're leaving, Candente," he said, bringing up his omni-tool to call the driver. He looked over her thoughtfully. "I'll be arrested if you're seen like this."

She arranged her hair around her neck. "Does this help?"

"Not really." He reached down and picked her up, startling her. He looked far too wiry to be so strong. She held his neck tightly, his face inches away. "Close your eyes like you're asleep."

"Why?"

He chuckled. "Just do it, Candente."

She allowed herself to be carried out to the bright light again, kissing him on the neck to enjoy the way he shivered slightly in pleasure at her touch. The car approached and she heard the door open before the world tilted and she was set inside. Once he climbed inside, he closed the door and immediately grabbed her, pulling her into his lap.

He became more amorous once the car began to move, the thirty minute trip back to the house providing ample time to consummate their new understanding. They continued their lovemaking on the stairs of the empty house, and even in the hallway outside the bedroom before finally reaching the bed itself.

She couldn't call it love, even to herself. He was a killer, a thief, a drug dealer, everything she hated. A small, distant voice inside her said that she was selling herself for Tom's future, the same voice that had tried to pull her under the night of the initiation. It was surprisingly easy to ignore when she had a powerful man between her legs, promising her everything she wanted.

She would enjoy it as long as it lasted. There was nothing else to do. She was adaptable to any situation, it's how she survived. Her conscience could wait until he wasn't watching.

Later

A beam of light from the setting sun traveled slowly across the white tile towards the bed. It moved across the pillows and clothing which lay scattered about, fallout from the evening's activity. Warmth gathered around the narrow beam, dust motes dancing playfully in its borders, but in the darkness beyond the air was cold and still.

It touched a gracefully arched foot and, further up, a hand emerging from the thin cover. It moved slightly as one of the bed's inhabitants stirred with an affectionate mumble and caress, revealing
more of the fair arm within.

She was awake, her red eyes staring at the ceiling, occasionally glancing over at the man who was coiled around her like a snake. His face was disfigured with tattooed gang jargon, juxtaposing strongly against her clear complexion, his long black hair marring the sunshine and fire of her brilliant mane where they touched.

A tear rolled out of her eye. Jaw clenching, her free hand flashed up to wipe it away.

He squeezed her more tightly and murmured into her neck, "Lola, mi Lola..."

She turned her face to the sunlight as it crossed her to watch the sun drop below the horizon through the gap in the curtains. The light passed over her face and the room dropped slowly into darkness.

As she fought the depression that overcame her at the moment of victory, she began to prefer being with him over the next few days. He had a way of looking into her eyes that gave her a rise of power, like he was lit from within by his obsession and would do anything he could to keep her. She commanded his attention when they were together, pushing all thoughts of regret and despair from her mind. Her bargain, as things went in her experience, could be far worse.

Until the night before the Cinco de Mayo race, it was like a honeymoon for them. He couldn't keep his hands off of her. She went with him to all of his meetings, adding her thoughts where she could, and when they were alone and not otherwise occupied with each other, they discussed where Tom would be sent at the end of the school year, just a month away, and other plans for their future.

"I need to be there tomorrow," she said as they were settling into bed.

"We both will be. One last time before you must say goodbye to him." He pulled her over to him to begin caressing her when his omni-tool went off, sitting on the nightstand. He kissed her slowly, until the alarm went off again and he rolled off the bed, walking onto the balcony to listen to the message.

Several minutes passed while he took care of his business. She sighed, trying not to let her dark thoughts take center stage, reminding her of the life she was losing. A life of her own choosing.

When he came back in, his face was blank, as it used to be when she first arrived. Her stomach clenched in fear. "What is it?"

"Nothing." He walked into the closet. A few minutes later, he came out fully dressed.

"Aren't you- what's going on? Is there anything I can do?"

"No. There is nothing you can do." He gave her a level gaze that chilled her to the core, then left the room. She waited for a long time, but he didn't come back.

Lola shivered, though she was under the blanket. Something had happened, and whatever it was, it didn't bode well for her plans.

The honeymoon was over.

Sorry I was a few days late with this week’s chapter. I’ve had a lot of RL work to do. Let me know what you think!
Cinco de Mayo brings profound changes to the lives of Lola and James.

Music: Outside, Staind; Bend the Bracket, Chevelle; Any Other Name, Thomas Newman

Raul

"Now do you believe me?" Tony asked.

It was close to midnight. Tony and Will stood in front of Raul's desk in his office, waiting for a response. Raul was leaning back in his high-backed leather desk chair, fingers steepled as he looked at the message on his terminal. It was the one he'd read only moments before on the balcony of his room, but it was so disturbing he'd had to remove himself from the drug of her presence just to think straight.

The evidence was irrefutable. There was a possibility that they were misinterpreting it, but that possibility was admittedly slim, no matter how he tried to justify it in his mind.

"How far back does it go?" He directed the question to Will, who was standing near the window that looked out over the courtyard, the lamp outside lighting the side of his face in hard lines.

"Since the very beginning, just a few days after her initiation. That in itself isn't unusual, but Tom performed multiple searches each day on public terminals, looking for resources, sought help from officials, and then about a week later, he started pricing off world tickets. For two."

"And that's when she emptied her bank account and gave him the money," Raul finished for him, speaking in clipped tones.

"To pay for his entry fee and to fix up the bike, correct. Obviously an act of desperation, but it really doesn't matter if he wins. I'm sorry it had to happen like this, Raul." Will stepped away from the window and moved closer to where Raul was sitting. "I really am. You've seemed happier than I've ever seen you these past few weeks, and having one woman is far easier for the rest of us than your usual pattern."

Tony nodded in agreement. "That's true, but it's also part of the problem. You Duarte men don't fall in love often, but when you do, it's all-consuming. We're concerned that you'll go the same way your father did. I was there when you put your pistol to his head. Do you remember what his final words were?"

"They were for the woman," Raul murmured, his eyes unfocused as he relived the memory. His
hands moved to grip the studded leather armrests.

"Si. He begged for her life like a dog. Tell us that you wouldn't do the same now, if you were in his place."

He wanted to deny it. He wanted to say it was all bullshit, that he hadn't been compromised. But it wasn't true. Anger at the thought of someone taking the woman in the other room, of someone putting a gun to her head like he had that worthless bitch his father had kept, made his pain at this revelation fade into the background for a moment. It showed on his face and in his voice when he answered.

"And the connection to Cong?"

"Tenuous at best," Will answered. "Her brother's friend has a relative who is a childhood friend of Cong's brother-in-law. Their appearance at the UCC was a coincidence, as far as I can tell, but that's what led me to research what the kid was up to." He leaned forward to put his hands on Raul's desk. "Her attachment to this kid is understandable, but with him actively trying to spring her and her backing him up... it's just a matter of time before someone uses them to get to you. It's what we would do."

True. All true. The thought of her not existing, of not being with her, enraged him, but there was no way he could see out of the situation without her dying—by his hand, or by an enemy's. Unless he could work a miracle.

"Bring her in," he told Tony.

Tony left the room and came back a minute later with a pissed-off looking Candente, her arm gripped tightly in his hand. Raul stared at his hand until Tony dropped it.

"Sorry, boss."

"Out, both of you. I want to talk to her alone."

"What's this all about?" she asked once Will and Tony had left, folding her arms across her chest. Her hair was wild from bed and the faded black t-shirt she had been sleeping in, one of his, clung closely to her hips. Licking his lips, he tore his eyes from her and gestured to the screen in front of him.

"Come and look at this."

She walked around the desk and leaned over to read the text there, her hair brushing his arm. Even with what he now knew, he had a hard time not pulling her into his lap. He let her read for a minute before he spoke.

"You're planning on leaving me," he said unequivocally.

She looked back at him sharply, her face going through several emotions before settling on a cold calculation.

She nodded. "I was desperate to get away, but I had to stay for my brother. I thought you were going to kill me." She gestured at the tattoo on the side of his neck and shrugged. "It was a legitimate concern at the time."

She was so matter-of-fact about it, delivering her bombshell like it was of no consequence at all. Turning around, she sat on the edge of his desk, the hem of the shirt riding slightly up her thigh.
She pushed her hair out of her face and sighed. "Christ, I'm so sick of all the lies."

"Giving it up?" he asked.

"Oh, please." She rolled her eyes. "If you think I'll ever lie down and take something without fighting back, then you don't know me at all. It only proves that you don't really love me like you seem to think you do. You can't love someone you don't know."

"Actually, I understand you better than you think I do." He rose and walked around his chair to stand in front of her. "You want control of your life and power over others. The thought of an ordinary life infuriates you, and only the people close to you are safe from your scheming to get what you want. Sometimes, not even then. I know, because it's the way I am too. It's a shame, we seem so well suited to each other."

"What do you want me to say?" she snapped. "That I loved you from the beginning, that you're fucking perfect for me, Raul? You had me gang raped, threatened me and my brother, taunted me, and finally branded me with the memory of the worst night of my life. On top of all of that, you're a murderer. The way you dispose of people you don't have use for is sick."

"I did what I had to do to build a reputation. It's the foundation of survival in this life. I won't apologize for being good at it, any more than you would. I'm proud of what I've built. But you and I don't have time to play dangerous games anymore, throwing words at each other." Raul indicated the brightly lit terminal on his desk. "Will and Tony brought this to me because if someone took you from me, I would kill anyone who got in my way to get you back, even people close to me. My enemies will figure this out and use it against the Sangre Carnal unless you and I come to an understanding."

"Are you saying that you still want to be with me?" she asked incredulously.

"Of course. You may have lied to me, but my feelings weren't shallow; they never are. And I know it isn't all on my side; there are some things you can't fake." He smiled, looking her over. "Plus, and you can try to deny this all you like, you love this way of life."

She shrugged nonchalantly, but a small smile was on her face when she replied. "It's true that I like the work. Quite a bit, actually."

"Of course you do. It's exciting, dangerous, and it definitely has perks." He gestured at the screen on his desk again. "That's why I want you to make it so that this problem goes away. Just imagine what we could do together," he whispered, leaning in close to her. "You'll have to be every bit as untouchable as I am. But once you are, nothing will stop us."

She looked surprised, then thoughtful as she considered this new possibility.

He gave her a few minutes to think it over, then held out his hand. "Let's start over, Lola."

She looked at his hand for a moment before slowly putting hers in his. He raised her hand to his lips as strange things happened inside his chest.

"Candente," she said softly. "Call me Candente."

A few minutes later, he called Will and Tony back into the room. "We've come to an agreement," he told the two men. "She'll be staying, and the issue with her brother will be taken care of. We just need to be vigilant for the next few weeks until everything is in place." Will nodded, accepting his decision, but Tony slammed his hand on the desk.
"This is a waste of time! The two of them are a loose end that could hurt the whole gang, not just you. You can't trust her, not while she's got this liability."

"It's my choice," Raul said. He held out his hand to Lola and led her out of the room. She made a face at Tony as she passed, like she usually did. Despite Raul's longtime friendship with the silver-toothed man, he had to smile at the spiteful act.

She really was perfect for him.

The next morning...

James

Jimmy Sanders wanted to win.

He felt it all the time; when his father ignored him, when his mother babied him, when his uncle told him stories about the war, and especially when Lola came to the track to watch them practice. He loved to listen to her cheering on the sidelines. At first he would pretend she was cheering for him, but that felt kinda pathetic so he stopped after a while.

He wanted to be the kind of guy who could easily attract a strong woman like her to his side, almost without trying. He wanted to be the kind of guy who commanded respect just by walking into a room. He understood that most of that would have to wait until he was older. For now, though, he was content to win the race with her watching. He had kept that thought firmly in mind during the three months he and Tom had practiced for the race.

The Sanders' comm unit flashed with an incoming call and James came running. When he switched on the unit, Tom's voice said, "I'll meet you at the park in an hour, Jimmy. Lola is meeting us there."

"Great, see you in a bit," James said, switching off the comm unit.

He chewed on his lip, thinking hard. This could be his last chance for a while to make a big impression on her. He walked into the bathroom and stared at his reflection with consternation. Nothing special, just an ordinary chubby kid. Looking down, he noticed his father's shaver on the vanity and a wicked smile played across his mouth.

A short while later he was running through the living room, head down. "Adiós Mom, 'bye Pop!" James called out, grabbing his bag and running through the living room past his father before anyone looked at him.

"Tener cuidado en la carrera, Jimmy!" His mother peered around the wall from the kitchen, but he was already out the door.

He arrived at Turner Lake just past nine o'clock in the morning. When he stepped off the bus he could hear old school Mexican songs playing over the loudspeakers, mixed with the sounds of local bands playing on stages scattered across the field. The smell of the food trucks permeated the air, a different flavor reaching him with each breeze as he walked down the hill to the sprawling prefab building near the starting line where Tom was waiting.

His friend's eyes widened when James approached. He felt a cocky grin spread across his face at Tom's reaction. "What the hell did you do?" the other boy asked, incredulous.

"Do you like it?" James had shaved the sides of his head, leaving a strip of longer hair on top. He
was pleased with the results, far more so than he had anticipated. There was no way Lola would only be looking at Tom today.

Tom started smiling. "Yeah! Did your mom flip?" They walked inside the enormous structure together, reading the signs hanging high above their heads as they talked, looking for the check-in desk.

"I sneaked out before she saw it."

"What about your Dad?"

"Get real. He didn't even look up when I left. He's pretty pissed I'm doing this at all."

"Still watching his old surfing vids?"

James just shrugged. "Well, he was pretty good," he said, unwilling to be disloyal. Tom regarded him with doubt as they checked in and collected their plates and numbers.

"If you say so. I'm really nervous about today. Lola's counting on me to win back the money she put into my bike."

"Did she give you a lot?"

"Yeah. She had to work real hard for the gang."

"What does she do?"

"You don't wanna know, man, believe me. But if I have anything to say about it, she won't have to do it anymore."

They moved with the crowd through the next doorway into the large central room, which was packed with people preparing their bikes, reporters and milling gawkers. James looked around and caught a glimpse of his uncle towering head and shoulders above most of the others. He was generally easy to spot in a crowd. When he came closer, he saw that Emilio was standing next to where their bikes gleamed under the flood lights.

"There you are, Jimmy! Thought you were going to miss the starting gun." Uncle E waved him over with a smile, then his jaw dropped when he finally saw his new hairstyle. "Your mom is gonna kill you, kid."

James shrugged. "She'll be okay so long as I keep my grades up. What do you think?"

Emilio chuckled and shook his head. "I like it, but we'll see if your mother agrees."

He and Tom began checking over their bikes. Emilio was helping James check the brakes when an unmistakable voice called out.

"There you are, Tom!"

James looked up to see Lola walking around towards their little area. She was dressed in theme with the celebration, wearing a white lace dress that bared her shoulders and a large yellow flower tucked over her ear that brought out the red in her hair.

"Cute hair, Jimmy." She ruffled James' scalp as she passed and pulled Tom aside to talk to him. He tried not to be too obvious as he watched them talk, but he was curious about what was going on between them. Tom began speaking heatedly with sharp gestures toward his bike. She said
something and moved to hug him, but he pulled away. She watched him walk back to his bike before turning back the way she had come. After the last few weeks, it was surprising to see them argue.

James watched her hips sway as she walked away without looking back, disappointed that she hadn't come back to talk to him or to give him a hug. He wouldn't have pushed her away.

"What was that about?" he asked Tom, who was wiping down his bike with a rag. They had repainted both of them the week before using the same shade of red.

"Forget about it," Tom said without looking up. His evasiveness was a little frustrating; all James wanted to do was help.

A buzzer sounded, echoing in the cavernous room, and the overhead lights flashed three times. Emilio stood up and began to walk toward the front of the prefab with most of the others while the boys wheeled their bikes to the starting line. "Good luck, guys!" he shouted, flashing a victory sign to them.

As they walked, James saw that Tom's face was twisted in anger and determination, still fuming from whatever Lola had said. James put a smile on his face, doing his best to cheer him up. "Don't worry, you'll do great. You've been practicing harder than anyone else. Except me, of course."

Tom shot him a dirty look. "Lola said it didn't matter if I win. She's going to stay with Raul." He said the gangster's name sarcastically as he pushed his bike ahead.

"What made her change her mind?"

"I don't know, but I have to win so I can get her out of here. I'm really scared for her now. She's in too deep to see what's really going on."

James chewed his lip in concentration. If Tom won, they would leave but they would be safe. Only, he knew that Tom didn't have a chance at winning without an upgraded eezo drive like the one his bike had. They were approaching the starting before they stepped on the field, he reached out and grabbed Tom's handlebar, forcing him to stop.

"What are you doing? We have to get out there!" Tom pushed his hand away.

"Wait," James said, stripping the number plate off his bike. "I have an idea..."

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**Lola**

The bleachers were packed shoulder to shoulder, but the crowds had given Raul and Lola plenty of space when they pushed their way to the section with the best view. She smiled at everyone she saw, happy with her hand tucked into the elbow of her consort, their ink marking them to everyone in sight as two people not to be trifled with.

They were two people in complete accord. They had sat up all night talking, for once. He had shown her pictures of his mother and three sisters. All of them had been killed by enemies of his father's when he was a boy. He had been particularly fond of the youngest, Evita.

"She was only a year older than me," he had told her. "We went everywhere together. She was the last to be taken. I thought my father was cursed, and that I would be too if I ever let a woman get close enough to weaken me like he had."
She had told him about losing her mother and her anger at her father, who had disappeared around the time her brother was born. Their shared experiences of pain and loss had drawn them together even more. Her distaste for his past was mitigated by the promise that he wouldn't follow the same pattern while she was around. That in itself was incentive to stay, but she was just beginning to see that there was a side to him she could really like. The terror of the last few months seemed like a distant dream. For a while this morning, as she had dozed in his arms, she almost felt safe, a remarkable feeling she would never forget. Sleep had rarely come to her easily, even before she had joined the gang.

And he came with her to her brother's race. Raul didn't seem too interested in it, but he stayed with her all day, suspiciously eying anyone that looked at her too closely while she focused on the race.

The final lap found Tom in second place. He tilted his bike in the first turn, the shield on his helmet hiding his face from the crowd. Several other bikes closed in and he pushed his bike forward, leaning into the next turn.

Several low hills had been added to this part of the track. The bikes' engines raised in pitch as they flew over them, buzzing over the rises in waves. He dropped slightly behind a few of the others, but cut them off with his more maneuverable bike once the hills were behind them.

He and another rider ran neck and neck all the way down the final stretch. He made it to the front, looking over his left shoulder towards where the other racer had been, but something slammed into him, hard, from the right. The crowd roared its disapproval and he looked over just in time to see the other rider coming at him again.

Tom hit the brake, dropping behind his opponent, who tipped too far over and spun out, a dirt cloud blossoming around him. Tom pumped his fist as he ran over the finish line, the runner-up several lengths behind.

"I can't believe it!" Lola shouted, jumping up and down. "Go Tom!" She waved over her head. Laughing, she threw her arms around Raul. "I want to go congratulate him."

"You go ahead. It's better if he isn't seen with me. Message me when you're done and I'll meet you." She could feel him watching her as she left the bleachers, heading for the nearby stage.

She had never seen Tom so exultant as he was standing on that stage. He posed for pictures, his freckled face and tousled hair dirty from the track. He shook the moderator's hand and accepted the trophy, eyes scanning the crowd until he spotted her pushing to the front of the audience.

Tucking the trophy under one arm, he ran to the edge of the stage and leaned down to hug her. "I did it, Lola! Can you believe it?"

"You did amazing. I knew you could do it."

"I couldn't have if Jimmy hadn't traded bikes with me. His had a new eezo engine and is way faster than yours was."

"I thought it didn't look like mine. Why did he do that?"

"I told Jimmy I needed the money to get us offworld."

She was aghast. "Tom, I told you... I told you that I didn't need it anymore."

"No way, Lola. I don't know what happened this week, but you're not thinking right. You need to get away from Raul. We belong together, a real family."
"I don't want to leave," she said, only realizing this moment that it was true. She and Raul would win any fight they took on together. She was tired of losing and taking Tom down with her... and vice versa, if she was being honest with herself. He needed to be on his own; he'd be better off. "That money is yours, Tom. Keep it for yourself. You earned it."

They were forced to raise their voices to be heard over the noise of the crowd. Tom's stricken look was still on his face when a reporter pulled him up to face her camera.

"Congratulations, Tom! What are you going to do with all that money?" she asked jovially. "Buy a new bike?"

"No," he said. His chin jutted out in anger as he glanced down at his sister. "I'm sharing it with my best friend, Jimmy Sanders. He stands by me no matter what."

The moderator dragged an astonished-looking Jimmy onto the stage, who had finished in sixth place on Tom's bike, to let the reporter catch his reaction. Turning around, Lola fought her way back through all of the smiling faces. Tom would work it out. She had a new life to begin.

Later that night, Lola and the others in the gang who had come with them to Turner Lake headed back to the house in one of the same trucks they had ridden to the Afrikka club last month. Lola was tucked in tightly next to Raul with his long arm around her shoulders. She watched the park drop away from them, the lights from the celebration glimmering in the tinted window. The others were talking about the day, swapping stories and making fun of the people they'd seen in costume.

Despite being surrounded by their camaraderie, she felt empty. Tom was still back there, without her. She wondered if he was okay, if he was sad, but knew that the sooner he learned to be independent, the better off he'd be.

A voice intruded into her reverie. "It's pretty unusual for Tony to want to stay behind. He usually hates crowds." She had been so distracted that she hadn't even noticed he wasn't in the car. She tried to ignore him most of the time, anyway.

"He said he had something to take care of," Raul said in an offhand manner.

"What was it?" someone asked.

"No se," the first man said. "When we left he said something about tying up a loose end and walked off toward the track."

Lola stiffened. "Qué es?" Raul said, looking down at her.

"We need to turn around and find him. Now."

Raul nodded to the driver in assent. "What are you thinking?" he asked her as the truck made a steep mid-air turn.

"He didn't agree with you last night, remember? He called me a 'loose end', said I was going to hurt the whole gang. Raul, if that bastard touches my brother, I'll fucking kill him."

Mason

Night had fallen quickly. The track was dark, but the field was shining with lights from lanterns and spotlights on the various stages, music flowing from every direction. The dancing and singing was likely to carry on through the night, or as long as the food and drink held up. Mason stood at
the edge of one of the dance squares near the track, watching the crowd dance. Next to the lines of brightly-clad people in charro outfits and wide-spinning skirts dancing and playing instruments as they danced through the crowd, Mason's appearance didn't stir up much attention. He smiled as he stood under the colorful lights, happy to be part of society for the moment.

Emilio had been right to get him to stay for this. He'd been so long isolated from the culture he grew up with that he had forgotten how it felt to belong. He knew the song that the band was playing; it had been one of Celine's favorites. The costumes hadn't changed much, either, and the food smelled and tasted wonderful. He was remembering all the springs he and Celie had spent with the Vegas, going to celebrations like this one. He was temporarily nostalgic for those days, purposefully not thinking of what had made him miserable at the time.

Emilio was nearby, eating an enormous burrito on a soggy paper plate, smiling at everyone who looked at him. He had been angry when he saw that James had given his bike to Tom until he heard the reason why. He'd been on cloud nine ever since, telling everyone who would listen what a great kid his nephew was for helping out his friend.

Mason felt his wrist comm vibrate urgently.

"Cong?" he said into it, making an assumption as to the caller's identity since the only other person on Earth who had his contact info was standing right in front of him. "What's up?"

A tinny voice answered him in cultured tones. "I've picked up something on Duarte's network. The Sangre Carnal is looking for one of their own. Evidently all is not well in paradise."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Suffice it to say that your friend Lola made a deal with Raul and one of his lieutenants didn't like it. He's looking for her brother, probably to take revenge."

"Are you fuckin' kidding me?" Emilio turned around at the sound of Mason's exclamation. Tom and James had left just a few minutes before to make sure their bikes were locked up before they left, promising they'd be right back. "What can we do?"

"Try to keep clear of his men, they'll be armed. I'm sending some people to see if we can't turn the situation to our advantage, but it may be several minutes before they arrive."

"Advantage? He's just a kid!"

"We will save the boy if we can, but there are many police officers at the park at the moment. I don't want you caught up in any trouble that ensues from our potential engagement."

"Engagement?" Mason felt the old frustration well up in him at the prospect of an ensuing conflict that he'd prefer to avoid. But a fucking kid's life was probably hanging in the balance. He couldn't ignore that. He was probably too terse with his brother-in-law when he cut him off. "I'll talk to you later."

A few long strides brought him next to Emilio. "We've got to get the boys, Em. Some shit's gonna go down."

"What are you talking about?" Emilio sounded confused but immediately dropped his plate in the trash can and began to walk alongside Mason, who explained as they skirted the crowded floor. They turned down the path to the prefab behind the starting gate, which was practically deserted now that the race was over. They were running by the time they reached the entrance of the darkened building.
"Have you seen two boys come this way?" Emilio breathlessly asked the guard, flashing his backstage pass. "One of them was the winner, Tom, and the other was my nephew."

"No, sorry. No one's been back here for a while." The guard shifted uneasily on his feet as his eyes slid off the two large men.

Mason grabbed him by the collar with one meaty hand, lifting him an inch off the ground. "You lyin' sack of shit," he spat. "Where are they?"

The guy was blubbing, terrified, but before he could make out what he was saying Emilio was running into the building, calling to Mason to follow. Mason dropped the guard and ran inside after him.

Emilio was well ahead of him, making for the line of bikes on the far side of the room. "I found James!" he called back to him.

When Mason reached Emilio, he was crouched over a dazed-looking James. "What happened, James? Where's Tom?" Emilio asked, checking him for injuries.

"I- I don't know," he said haltingly. "Some guy hit me and grabbed him. I think he took him out the back way."

"James, stay here," Emilio said. "We need to find Tom. Stay down and don't make any noise, no matter what you hear. Understand?"

James nodded and they both took off.

Through the back door was the room where the riders had checked in and picked up their numbers before the race. It was dark now, aside from a bright light on the opposite side near the exit, where a man was holding a struggling boy, dragging him toward the closed door. High stacks of crates littered the room. The two men crouched behind one of the stacks near the wall, exchanging a frustrated glance. Mason knew hostage situations were always a challenge, and they didn't even have any weapons.

The exit flew open and Lola ran in, followed by half a dozen other men. Mason's eyes settled on her and he thought her appearance completely incongruous to the situation. She was decked out in a fancy white dress, an odd contrast to the rough-looking company that followed her in. Her beauty was so vibrant if he didn't know better he'd have thought the illumination on that side of the room was emanating from her.

Equally incongruous was what came out of her mouth. "Let my brother go, cabrón!" she shouted, pointing imperiously at the man holding Tom.

"You wouldn't listen, Raul," the man holding Tom said, his hissing voice carrying across the large area. "She's a liability, and she always will be so long as she has this parasite tagging along."

"Tony, let the boy go. I didn't order this," the tallest man of the group said authoritatively.

"Nothing's more important than keeping the Sangre Carnal alive, at any price. Even a life. You taught me that. She needs to learn." Drawing one of his long knives out of his vest, he held it to the boy's throat. Tom grew very still, tears trailing down his pale cheeks as he gripped Tony's arm, terror written all over his face.

"You don't have to do this," Lola said desperately. "You could be my brother too."
"I don't know about that. Is it fun to be her brother, kid?" Tony hissed into the kid's ear. Tom craned away from him and the blade cut into his neck. A dribble of blood ran into his collar and he cried out in pain.

"Stop! Let him go!" Lola cried out desperately. She surged forward and Raul put his arm around her waist to keep her from closing the distance.

"You can't do this and leave here alive, Tony." Raul's voice was calm. "She'll have the right to take revenge."

"I meant to have it done before you found out, make it look like one of the other gangs. But it's better me than one of our enemies. I'm sorry, boss. I just don't see any other way."

Lola screamed and fought against Raul's grip as Tony made a small movement with his hand and a torrent of blood rushed over the front of Tom's shirt. He stared at Lola's face with a satisfied expression as she crumpled to her knees, weeping hysterically and calling out her brother's name.

Mason's world turned red when he saw the blade slide across the kid's neck. He heard a strangled sound in his own throat and began to move out of cover, his sights set on the fucker who'd just slit the kid's throat. He'd barely stood when he felt Emilio wrestle him down again, shushing him. He lay there trying to regain control of his emotions while the scene continued to play out.

"You've served the sangre well for twenty-five years, Tony. I'll miss you." Raul pulled a pistol from the back of his pants and put it into Lola's hand, wrapping her fingers around it. "Tome su venganza, mi amor." Tony stood up proudly, waiting for his martyrdom.

It seemed to take her a moment to realize what the weapon was for. When she did, she stood up, gasping out a few hysterical breaths as she leveled the gun at Tony's face. Mason inwardly cheered as she fired repeatedly into the murderer, then watched as she dropped the weapon and ran to the small form near Tony's smoking body. She pushed Tom's limp and bloody form onto his back.

She gasped out a harsh sob that made Mason's heart clench. He knew that feeling all too well. He could barely hear her apologies, but knew those just as well. "I'm sorry, Tom... I'm so sorry..."

Raul walked up behind her. "Ni modo, Candente. We have to leave. Now." She didn't move. Two men were already collecting Tony's body, practiced in this routine. With an exasperated sigh, Raul hauled Lola to her feet and pulled her toward the door. Bright red blood was soaked into her white dress. They left the boy where he lay.

Before they reached the doorway, the door burst opened and more than a dozen men dressed in black rushed in, armed with shotguns and automatic rifles. Raul and his men held out their hands, plainly aware that they were massively outgunned.

"Raul Duarte," one said. "The presence of the Sangre Carnal is requested at the Cong residence. A car is waiting outside."

Raul glanced down at Lola, who was staring down at the blood on her dress, ignoring the rest of the room. He nodded and followed with her in tow, his mouth tight.

The two men stayed where they were for several minutes to make sure no one was coming back. As they cautiously rose from their hiding place, Mason's comm vibrated again. He tapped it and read the message from Cong aloud to Emilio. Cong was asking him to come to his house.

"You'd better go," Emilio said to him. "Find out what's going on. I need to get James out of here before he sees this."
"I'll see you later, Em." Mason took a last look at boy lying on the ground across the room before he left out of the same door that the others had taken a minute before.

**Lola**

They had been ushered into a second-floor room when they arrived at Cong's mansion. Lola was only vaguely aware of the surroundings but had the impression of being in a room filled with treasures.

They were seated at a long table across from Cong. His security forces surrounded the table, ready to react to any move the men might make. At the end of the table, near the window, a screen was showing a still shot of what had occurred in the tent. Blackmail was evidently on the menu.

Lola was staring blankly at the luminous wood of the table, hearing the conversation but not fully registering it.

"What is it that you want?" Raul was asking in a snide tone. "She was justified. Even you should understand that."

Cong sat back in his chair, gesturing at the woman sitting across from him. "I've been watching Lola's development with interest. I think she will fit in nicely with my operation. I am offering a very simple choice. I want Lola to work for me, in return for which I will destroy the surveillance recording, which we hacked."

"Or you'll have her sent to jail? I doubt that, not if you really want her. Besides, she won't join you. She's devoted to me," Raul said, putting his hand on hers. He didn't see her look away, her unfocused eyes eventually settling on the image on the screen as Cong began to speak again.

"I will turn her in if she doesn't join me, because as much as I want her to be a part of my empire, I desire to keep her out of the hands of an overgrown lowlife like you even more."

She looked hard at the image of herself kneeling next to a small, lifeless figure on the screen, her eyes gradually coming into focus.

"You've had a hard life, my dear, but it's time for all the pain to end," Cong said to her. "I wish we could have saved your brother, but that's what will happen around Raul. He knows nothing of kindness or love."

Raul grabbed her shoulder and spoke into her ear fiercely. "You don't have to choose, Candente. I can make any murder charges go away, I've done it before. Don't listen to him. We belong together."

"He doesn't wield as much influence as he thinks," Cong said. "Raul's reach doesn't extend very far beyond the boundaries of California. My corporation trades with more than a dozen sentient species across the galaxy. By joining me, you will make your dream of traveling offworld come true."

The two men continued to argue, their voices fading into background static. She kept staring at the still figures on the screen. She blinked when the little figure on the ground turned and she could see his face.

"Nothing's gonna change, Lola," Tom said, his voice a muffled tickle in her ears. "They're all the same."
He was right. They wanted to use her, both of them. What did it matter if she had the galaxy to roam if she didn't have her freedom?

"You've got to get out of here before they trap you again, Lola." His bright eyes went dead and his head fell back to the ground.

She nodded. "You're right," she said.

"Excuse me?" Cong said.

She didn't answer. Her hand pulled away from Raul's as she rose.

"Go, Lola! Run!" Tom's voice was insistent in her ears.

The table flew past her as her feet began to move of their own accord. They were pounding against the floor, pushing her to the blackness beyond the window at the far end of the room.

"Don't shoot! Don't harm her!" Cong shouted as the guards moved to intercept her. hardly seeing them, she snatched a pistol from one of the guards and found an opening. The guards jumped aside as she aimed and squeezed the trigger at the glass in the window, the heat from the blast forcing the glass to explode back into the room, shards embedding themselves in her face and upper body. The guards shouted and she stumbled back, but she ignored the pain and leaped out the window head-first, tucking her head into her arms, everything seeming to flow in slow-motion. Behind her, Raul shouted the name he'd given her, his anguished cry fading away as she fell.

Her hard impact with the ground pushed all the air out of her lungs, the left side of her body screaming with pain for a split second before it went numb. She rolled over and over until she came to a stop, then lay there, dazed as she tried to figure out what should happen next.

"Get up, Lola!" Tom's voice said urgently.

She obeyed, grunting as she pulled herself to her feet and began to limp toward the gate. Just before she got there it opened to let a black car drive through, the headlights blinding her in the driveway. She staggered to the side, trying to get to the gate before it closed.

The car stopped next to her and the window rolled down. "Get in," a familiar voice said. Her blurry eyes just made out Mason in the driver's seat, leaning over the center console to open the door for her.

Yes, Mason would help her. He had helped her before, and he hadn't asked for anything in return. She collapsed into the seat and the wheels of the car squealed as he turned it around, gunning back through the gate before it closed.

James

James was sitting morosely at the kitchen table, trying to digest the news that Tom was dead. His uncle had broken it to him gently and told him to prepare himself to be questioned by the police.

"Lola was mixed up with some really bad people," he was saying. "Hopefully this will be the end of it, but you had better stay with me for a few days. I'll let your parents know what happened. They won't like it, but-"

His uncle stopped as someone pounded on the door. He walked into the living room, pulling a gun from a drawer in the cabinet near the door. He looked through the eyepiece in the door, then
relaxed and put the gun in his waistband before unlocking the bolt and opening the door.

Mason was standing in the doorway, holding up a bloodied and battered Lola. Her pretty dress was ripped down the side, baring one side of her rib cage, which was rapidly turning a screaming shade of reddish purple. Her beautiful hair was tangled and scattered, and her face was covered with bloody cuts.

"Holy shit, man. A little warning couldn't have hurt," Emilio said, taking her other arm and kicking the door shut behind them.

"I found her in Cong's driveway like this."

They helped her to the couch. James walked into the room, distressed and uncertain as he watched the two men begin to dress her wounds with a syringe of medi-gel from the side table.

She didn't seem conscious of what they were doing. She just sat limply, staring at nothing.

"Did Cong do this?" Emilio asked.

"I don't know," Mason answered. "I doubt it. We can ask her later."

"Are you okay, Lola?" James asked. It might have been the stupidest thing he'd ever said to her, but he didn't know what else to say.

His voice seemed to penetrate her sorrow. She lifted her head, slowly focusing on him standing there in his pajamas in the middle of the living room.

"James," she gasped as her tears began flowing again in earnest. He saw her expression twist into the same grief he was feeling as she reached for him. He stepped into her arms and they clung to each other tightly.

"Lola, is anyone looking for you?" his uncle asked.

"Yes," she said hoarsely into James' neck. "Raul will look for me. He'll never stop. I can't go back. I've got to go before he comes here."

"It's okay," he heard Mason say. "I just got a message from Cong. He says to tell you to stay here, that Raul doesn't know who picked you up, but to remember his offer. He says he won't release the surveillance video until you decide."

"How does Cong know where she is?" Emilio asked, sounding worried.

"The car, probably. He's got bugs all over the place. He deals in information, among other things."

James didn't want to let go, but he was afraid of hurting her. She was obviously seriously hurt and probably needed a lot more than medi-gel. He tried to pull away, but she gripped him closer, winding her arms around his shoulders.

"Whatever Cong's deal is, she should probably take it," Mason said from beside them.

"No, she has other options," Emilio said. "We can talk about them when she's had time to recover."

Strong hands pulled James away and helped Lola up. Mason bent over and picked her up. "You okay, sweetness?"

She nodded, leaning into his shoulder. He followed Emilio down the hallway to the spare room.
where James usually slept when he visited. She looked over his arm back at James until Mason walked into the bedroom. Once she disappeared from sight, he ran down the hallway to watch them settle her into bed.

When Mason began to cut the filthy dress away, his uncle closed the door on him. A few minutes later, they left the room, flipping the light off as they went.

"Let her rest, Jimmy," Emilio said as the men headed back to the kitchen. "She's going to need a lot of it. I'll get you some blankets for the couch, you'll have to rough it for a while."

James stared at the closed door until his uncle and Mason had retreated into the kitchen. Once they were safely out of sight he quietly opened the door to the spare room.

Moonlight was coming in through the window, casting square panes of light on the floor. Lola was bundled up on his bed, facing the middle of the room with her eyes closed. When he entered, she opened her eyes. One hand emerged from the cover and she beckoned him closer.

He pulled a chair up to the bed and took the hand she was holding out. She sighed and relaxed back into the pillow.

"I wanted to thank you for being such a good friend to Tom. You were kind to him. At least someone was. God knows I wasn't." Her voice broke on the last part.

"That's not true. He knows... he knew that you loved him. You were always looking out for him."

"Not enough. It was never enough." She pulled his hand closer to her wet cheek. "I'm glad you're here, James. You're the only other person who knows... who he really was."

James wasn't so sure about that, but he didn't argue with her. He just held her hand until she fell asleep.
Fallout

Chapter Summary

The difficult process of healing marks endings & new beginnings for James, Lola, & the people who care about them.

Chapter Notes

Music: Glycerine, Bush; No Light, No Light, Florence + The Machine

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wednesday, May 6, 2172
L.A. Spaceport

Mason

Mason walked through the scanner, waiting for the agent to nod his approval before walking on. Nearby, several agents stood around a large crate with his name on it, on its way to the cargo hold of the intragalactic liner that was taking him back to the Citadel.

"Sir?" A customs agent put out a hand to stop him. "Can you please step over here? We have a few questions about this crate."

"Not sure what's in there, actually. It was a gift from my brother-in-law."

Cong had sent the crate ahead of him that morning, when Emilio had driven him to Cong's to pick up his bag. They had been tired when they arrived, having stayed up most of the night keeping an eye on Lola. The left side of her torso was already turning a disturbing shade of blackened purple with streaks of brown. Cong had sent a doctor, who showed up early in the morning to treat her injuries. She had several broken or cracked bones which would heal quickly with medi-gel, but the doctor hadn't detected any organ damage.

Emilio had been impressed with Cong's house when they entered the lavish foyer. Mason watched Emilio look around curiously as they were shown into the den, the same room where Mason and Cong had had drinks after Celie's memorial. Cong was sitting in the same chair he'd been in that night, reading the morning comm while he drank water from a crystal glass. He looked up and smiled when they entered.

"Mason, I'm glad to have the chance to say farewell. Emilio, it's good to see you too. Please come in and sit down."

Emilio glanced at Mason, who could see his surprise at the familiar greeting as the two men walked to the cozy seating area near the unlit fireplace. "I don't believe we've met before?"

"No, but I make it my business to know who in my sphere of influence may affect my plans. Do
you need any refreshment? No?" He gestured to the chairs across from him and the two men sat down.

"Mason, your bag is there by the door and I've sent your crate ahead to the spaceport."

"My crate?" Mason asked.

"Just some home comforts I thought you'd appreciate."

"Thanks, man," Mason said, rubbing the back of his neck uneasily. "You didn't have to do that."

"I would do much more if you'd let me."

Mason nodded in understanding, but he didn't want any of Cong's 'help'; it had too many strings attached for his taste. Plus, working for a galactic corporation had never been on his agenda. He liked being his own boss.

"I wanted to thank you personally for sending your doctor to look at Lola," Emilio said. "She seems to be doing much better now."

"Of course. I protect my investments."

Mason raised his eyebrows at this. It sure sounded like Cong thought he had made a claim on her, for whatever reason. He wasn't sure who he should be pulling for, but either way he had the feeling that Cong was going to be disappointed.

"If you don't mind me asking, I'd like to know why Mason found her like that in your driveway," Emilio said. "I'm sure the doctor has told you what shape she was in."

Cong nodded graciously in acceptance of the question. He took a sip from the glass of water at his elbow before answering.

"Lola was offered a choice between facing the authorities for the murder of Tony Valverde and working for me. She's an extraordinary young woman. I had hoped to send her and Mason to some of my problem outposts. They seemed like an ideal pair to handle some of the unusual and demanding problems which sometimes appear in the Outer Rim."

Cong's eyes glittered as they turned on his brother-in-law. "Unfortunately, both refused."

"Yeah, sorry about that, but I can't see changing careers now, especially to one that's not creative." Mason wasn't feeling too apologetic, despite his words. Regardless of Cong's generosity, Mason he would be glad to see this place shrink to nothing in the window of the shuttle as he flew away, especially after the last few days.

"Artists." Cong said the word like an expletive, rubbing his fingertips against the arm of the chair. "You have so many other valuable skills and qualities, Mason. It's difficult for me to see you short-change yourself by limiting yourself in this way. But no matter, I wish you well in your endeavors."

Cong turned to Emilio. "As for Lola, she found it preferable to jump out a second-floor window rather than work for me."

"I don't think that was her motive in leaving," Emilio said. "She hasn't said much, but she's made it clear that she only did it for her brother, and now he's gone."

"Ah. A piece of information I wish I'd had earlier. It might have simplified things."
"What do you mean?" Emilio asked. "What difference could it have made? Unless... could you have stopped them from killing Tom?" His voice had a dangerous edge, which Mason completely understood. If Cong could have prevented the kid's death and hadn't done so, he would have nothing more to say to him.

"Who can say what might have happened in hindsight? I can only make sure everything is in place for her to make the choice I want her to make. Duarte had already made considerable headway ruining her potential. Such a wasteful man." He sniffed in distaste.

"Why do you want her so badly?" Mason asked.

"It may be difficult for you to understand, Mason, since you prefer to work alone, but she has certain desirable qualities that can't be taught. From what I observed over the last few weeks, she may be one of the smartest investments I've made."

Emilio was shaking his head. "She's just a scared kid. She needs some time to grow up, somewhere that she can be safe long enough to figure herself out. If you try to push her into your world, you'll do the same damage as Duarte."

Cong looked at Emilio with narrowed eyes long enough to make Mason break out in a cold sweat. He didn't like seeing this side of Cong. It made him thankful the guy had decided to like him.

Cong finally spoke, but thoughtfully. "I can see a certain logic in what you say. Did you have something in mind?"

"I've been a Special Forces trainer for fifteen years. She's got a lot of the qualities we look for in candidates for what we do, too. I think she would do well in the Alliance, better than Mason did."

"Thanks," Mason murmured sardonically around his toothpick.

"I'm serious. She'd be looked out for, and she'd have the time and security to come to terms with all of the trauma she's been through. She is unlikely to get that with the work you're offering. I don't mean to offend you, but-"

"No indeed, I quite understand. Mmm, interesting. Perhaps she does need a little more time to get seasoned, to work out her character flaws before I bring her in. I can still incur her good favor by providing her with a new identity."

"Wait a minute," Mason interrupted. "What about what she wants? You're all both talking about her like she doesn't have a say."

"She'll be offered the choice, but she has to really commit to her new life or it won't last. You remember what happened with her dad?" Emilio asked Mason.

He remembered all too well. His old squadmate had spiraled after the first year of his enlistment. Once the initial burst of enthusiasm for living clean had waned, he'd tried again and again to resist the temptation to return to his old ways. Without his family right there to remind him why he was making the choice, he'd gotten into a lot of trouble. Eventually he just deserted to pursue his own goals.

Cong was nodding at Emilio. "Permanent change is a conscious choice. People who watch over others, who guide them, all learn this at some time. I'm gratified that you know it, Emilio. It almost restores my faith in the Alliance."

With a sarcastic smile, Cong turned back to Mason. "Yes, I like this alternative. I won't even be put
to the time and trouble of training her. I'll have to remove Raul from the equation so she has a chance to get away, but this might increase my return in the end."

"That's fuckin' disturbing, man," Mason said. "She's a human fucking being, not an investment."

"Living beings, human or otherwise, are the most valuable resources in the universe. I always looked for solid talent, but your sister showed me how to nurture it in the long term through investments like this one. It doesn't always pay out, but when it does it's a beautiful thing. As I imagine it would work with you, Mason."

"Yeah, I appreciate the offer and everything, but-"

Cong waved his hand imperiously. "No need for platitudes. I understand, and I will continue to hope for better. It was pleasant to meet you at last, Emilio. Have a safe trip, Mason. We will see each other again, my brother." He stood, bowed his head graciously and walked away, the conversation obviously at an end.

Afterward, Emilio drove him to the spaceport to see him off. He remembered the smile on Emilio's face as he waved goodbye, thinking how much he'd miss his old friend. Perhaps they'd run into each other on the Citadel more often. Mason's mouth curled up slightly on one side, flashing his straight, white teeth clenching the toothpick as he followed the customs agent to the area where his crate lay.

The crate was blocking enough of the pathway that other agents had to skirt around it. As they approached, the agent leading him waved them out of the way and opened the lid.

Mason began to laugh. It was filled with boxes of his favorite hardwood cinnamon-flavored toothpicks, which were expensive to ship offworld. He had mentioned to Cong several weeks earlier that he made do with composite materials on the Citadel, but it just wasn't the same.

"Sir, I'm afraid this isn't a laughing matter. There are enough here to start a storefront, for which you need a permit."

"It's for my personal use."

"This much?" the agent asked in disbelief. "I'm afraid that our policies won't allow for over a certain amount."

"If you need a permit, I have a storefront in the Lower Wards on the Citadel. Here." He tapped his wrist unit and sent additional identification to the agent's datapad.

"I see. Everything seems to be in order then. Have a good trip, sir."

Mason thanked him and watched them close up the crate and cart it away, the smile still on his face. For a ruthless businessman, Cong took care of his family. He should have come to Earth to meet him earlier. It would have been nice to see how Celie dealt with him.

He picked up his bag from the table and walked to the jetway, taking one last long look out the window at the sun gleaming down over the city before he began his journey home.

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**Thursday, May 7th, 2172**

James
James marched down the road from his uncle's house toward the transport stop, the sun shining brightly behind him in the west. The tie his mother had forced him to wear was flapping over his shoulder as he struggled to untie it. What was the point of all those layers?

The hated tie was fluttering to the ground when he saw the shuttle lowering to the transport stop. He usually exchanged a smile with the driver, but this time he waved his chit over the sensor and walked past without acknowledging him.

When Uncle had dropped him off at his block after the funeral, he told James that he wanted to get together later that evening to talk. James had thought that his uncle's silence during the drive home was lingering sympathy from the loss of his friend, but it turned out burying his best friend was only the beginning of the worst day ever.

Death was something you heard about on the news, something adults whispered about to each other when they thought you couldn't hear. It was something that crept up the back of your neck at night when everyone was asleep and the whole block was creaking as it released the heat from the hot California sun.

The morning had been bad enough on its own. Everything had taken on an unreal quality early that morning as he dressed in the stupid suit while tension reached into his gut, quickly becoming a knot surrounded by numbness. But it wasn't until he entered the dusty funeral home mid-morning that he accepted it was true, that his only friend was really dead. The smell of the sickly-sweet deodorizers was strong in his nostrils as he stood looking into the absurdly undersized casket. Tom's red-brown hair was slickly combed over, making him look like a stranger.

His uncle had kept his hand on his shoulder in comfort as they stood in front of the casket. James wished he would let go so he could run away, but at the same time was glad that the hand cemented him there so he wouldn't look like a coward. He felt like one anyway as he stared down at the still figure in the stasis field.

"Say goodbye, James. This is the only chance you'll get," Emilio said in a low voice.

He didn't see the point. Tom couldn't hear. James had the odd feeling, as he looked down at the eerie face of his friend, that the freckles dusting his cheeks were turning to dust and the whole body was crumbling down, decaying in front of him.

He cleared his throat. He was supposed to say something. "Um, Tom. Sorry I let you down the other day. I thought giving you my bike would help, but I guess it made the wrong people notice you. You were a good friend. I'll miss you."

There was no reply, of course. He was relieved when Emilio led him out of the room.

It felt like everyone in the room was staring at him. In his mind, they were all asking themselves how it was that he got to keep Tom's prize money. Why he hadn't been killed, too, though they couldn't know that he had been the last person to see him before he'd been taken.

Tom's foster parents were in the reception area nearby, grazing at the buffet. James didn't talk to them and they ignored him as he passed. No reason to break a tradition.

The rest of the day crawled by, just light and colors moving, voices asking him questions. He felt like he was on one of those dumb carnival rides, where cars take you slowly through semi-dark tunnels with cheesy aliens and sound effects. Once the car rolled outside, you would sit there blinking in the sunlight feeling that you'd missed something important, that you'd been cheated somehow, and that was what really scared you.
As bad as the morning had been, he hadn't been prepared for what he found out after his uncle dropped him off at home.

The only light was coming from the kitchen window when he walked into the apartment, a beam of afternoon sunlight cutting across the living room floor and illuminating the smoke that permeated the room. James walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge, looking for something he could take to his room to eat. His father sat at the kitchen table watching the vidcom, as usual.

"Hey kiddo," his father said, taking the ashless cigarette from between his lips. "Where'd you go this morning?"

"To Tom's funeral, Pop," James said, flinging the words at the back of his father's head.

"That's right. Sorry about that." He settled the cigarette back between his lips as he stared at the vidcom.

James rummaged around for a minute, then gave up on the paltry selection and grabbed a glass of juice. Behind him, the news rumbled on the vidcom, eventually penetrating his bitter inner dialogue.

"The sensational story of the murder of the 13-year-old winner of the Cinco de Mayo race just hours after claiming his trophy has been sweeping the 'net since it occurred three days ago. We now have leaked surveillance footage of a local gang gunning down the boy's killer, which has been viewed more than eight million times in less than three hours, available exclusively on our feed."

James' head snapped up. On the vidcom, a man was leaning over someone on the ground, then he looked up, said something and raised his hands as if in surrender. A woman walked forward from the group at the bottom of the screen and shot him several times before the video stopped.

It was Lola. He could tell from the tattoos on her back, clearly showing above the low neckline of her white dress.

"Police are confident that they'll be able to identify all gang members once the DNA cataloguing of the site is complete. Surveillance from the rest of the event is being combed for other clues that will hopefully tell them more about the motives for both of the brutal murders. Our team has analyzed the video and determined that..."

The glass slipped through his fingers and hit the ground, splashing juice everywhere. His father yelled at him as he ran back out the front door, but he didn't look back. He wished he had a wrist comm of his own so that he could warn her. James ran to catch the first shuttle to Escondido and walked from the depot to his uncle's house.

That's when Emilio had told him that Lola left the night before. That's what he had wanted to talk to him about later that day.

"She needed to get out of here fast, Jimmy," Emilio had tried to explain. "People were looking for her. I'm sorry you didn't get a chance to say goodbye, but I wasn't sure how to tell you, what with everything else going on this morning."

James had known this was coming, somewhere in the back of his mind. Perhaps that was part of the reason why he put so much effort into getting her attention when she was obviously dealing with a really scary situation. That didn't make it easier to accept that he would never get the chance to see her again. He'd shouted at his uncle, unaccustomed to anger and unable to deal with the
intense feeling in a mature way.

"You didn't care about her or Tom at all! You're only concerned about keeping yourself safe."

"That's not true. I was looking out for everyone, you included."

"You were trying to get rid of her, weren't you? You said she was trouble. Well, I guess you got what you wanted. Now I'll never see her again." He slammed the front door as he stormed out, headed back to the Solana blocks.

The shuttle seemed unusually noisy and he cast dark looks at some of the chattering people around him. Why did everyone seem so normal? Didn't they know it was the worst day in history? Raging inwardly, he watched the city blur by beneath him.

It was bad enough feeling so powerless when all these terrible things happened, but the worst part by far was that he had his uncle to thank for it. He wouldn't be going back to his house any time soon.

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**Emilio**

Emilio watched James go, concerned about his extreme reaction. She must mean even more to him than he'd thought. Lola was certainly the type of girl to make an impression, but some people trailed trouble after them wherever they went. He'd been relieved to see her go, though he wished her well. He'd helped her pack up last night after running to the store to get her a few things she'd need for the trip, wondering the entire time how he was going to tell James.

She was sitting up next to the bed when he came in to talk to her about it the day after he talked with Cong. He had to give it to the underworld boss: he was fast. The next morning her new credentials were on his terminal when he woke up. He told her to start packing when he brought her breakfast.

Later he came to the spare room to talk to her about her options. She was a bruised shadow of her former self, folding the few items that James had been able to donate to her and packing them into the bag at her feet. It was fortunate they were a similar size; James had grown a lot in the past few months.

"Lola, I know you're still not feeling well. The medi-gel will be soaking up a lot of your energy until you're totally healed, but you've got a choice to make right now. Either way you'll have a new identity, Cong's seen to that. But you still have a choice." He tossed a datapad into her lap. "Scan your prints and retinas in. His people are removing your data from the 'Lola' files right now."

"Cong did this? What choice is there?" It was a logical reaction. A gift from a man like Cong never came without a cost.

"You can work with Cong, of course, or you can work with me."

"Doing what? Where?" she asked.

"You can go to Macapa, Brazil, to the Recruit Training Depot for the Alliance Marines."

"Are you fuckin' insane?" An undercurrent of laughter marred her explosive delivery.

So she really was alive in there. Emilio was almost relieved to hear her profane answer. "After the last three months, you could probably survive anything. Tenacity and strength like yours have
infinite uses in this galaxy. After all my years in the Alliance, I know a person who has what it takes when I see one. Plus, I think you might not mind being on the winning side for a change. With an elite-trained squad to back you up, think of what you could accomplish."

"That sounds like something Raul said to me once," she said, but he could see that he'd made her think.

"Think about it, but you don't have much time. Here's some cover-up for those tattoos, go to the bathroom and use it. Have an answer when you come out so I know where to take you."

Nodding, she grabbed the can of cover-up and walked into the bathroom, leaving Emilio to his thoughts for the moment.

Those same thoughts still haunted him now as he watched his nephew walk away in a rage. There was no one that meant more to him than that boy. He'd sworn to keep balanced if it was the last thing he did, but he didn't know what else he could have done without putting many others at risk. Once James had a chance to realize that Emilio had only done what he thought would help Lola, he would probably come back.

He hoped so. Life without his nephew in it was not worth thinking of.

The night before...

Lola

After she entered the bathroom, she dropped her bag on the floor and set the can of cover-up on the sink. It was difficult to get her shirt off without help, but her four cracked ribs were healing rapidly thanks to the medi-gel and judicious taping. She sucked up her reaction to the pain. She'd been through worse. Once she'd managed to wriggle out of the loose garment, she straightened and looked at her image in the mirror.

A short scar ran over her mouth where one of the deeper cuts from the shattering glass had healed too quickly, sealing the ridges into her skin. According to Emilio, medi-gel was why soldiers are so scarred now. The substance made it possible to patch up people quickly, but scars only fade if wounds are allowed to heal naturally. She wondered if she'd ever have an opportunity to experience that.

If only her memories from that night could be healed as easily. They seemed unbelievable. Had she really been taking suggestions from her dead brother? She could still clearly hear his voice in her memory. She shivered.

Her fingers ran over the fresh scar. At least she wouldn't be so pretty anymore. It had caused more problems than anything else, bringing her the attention of all the bad men that frequented the circles where she grew up. If she'd been ugly, or even average, she might have been able avoid their notice. But she ended up using her looks as a weapon instead.

Like Raul. She missed the way he stared coldly at other people for talking to her or touching her, and how she'd felt safe in his arms the other night. No doubt he was suffering right now. He was an asshole, of course, but he loved her. He would have fought Cong for her, even though he was seriously outclassed. By running out, she had probably saved his life, for what that was worth.

Would he start killing again? Probably. More lives would be lost because of her, no matter what she chose. The guilt sat so heavily on her broken chest she could hardly breathe.
Her fist slammed into the hard vanity, her reflection in the mirror jarring with the vibration, making her face momentarily disintegrate into streaks of color.

Raul loved her for her ability to be cruel and for her beauty. Both were a shallow projection of who she was inside. He didn't really love her, he loved his idea of her, the act she'd put on to keep him from killing her. She hadn't had a choice, not really, but that didn't make it any easier to move on.

She still wanted Raul's adulation and protection, but she didn't want to be a part of his world. If it hadn't been for him, her brother would still be alive. But even these powerful contradictory feelings didn't even begin to touch the grief that simmered under the surface of her composure. Now that Tom was gone, there was no one to love her. She was alone.

The only thing left of Lola was her tattoos, a few scars, and her looks. The markings she could cover up. She'd have to change her name again, like it mattered. She wished she could forget it all. The pain welled up, almost overwhelming her.

Her hands shot into her tangled, red-brown hair, so much like Tom's it pained her. She yanked at her scalp as her mouth worked a silent scream, moisture finally showing in her eyes as the grief began to crack through the protective shell she'd constructed in her mind.

She always adapted, she always survived. Even if there was nothing left to live for.

Her searching eyes came across a hair trimmer on the shelf above the toilet. She grabbed the device, flicked it on, placed the trimmer at her temple and began to trace the contours of her skull. The years fell away from her in streams of red and brown and gold, drifting down the t-shirt that James had loaned her, which he'd never get back.

Her thoughts became more tender as she reached the back of her neck. James was a good friend, young as he was. He'd sat by her bed until he'd had to go back home. He'd certainly been a good friend to Tom, too.

The trimmer went into the dip where her neck met her skull, then traveled back up to the crown of her head.

It must be a family thing. Though she barely knew him, Emilio had cared for her when she was in trouble, even helping her get a new start. Mason, too, had reached out to her when she was in need, then appeared like a knight in shining armor when she was at rock bottom.

The trimmer whined as she made a pass around each ear, cutting off the reminders of her loss on thread at a time.

Her little brother had been all she had. She'd done everything she could to keep him out of trouble, though he got into plenty of trouble on his own.

The last few hairs slipped past her hand to the floor and she shut the trimmer off. She brushed the stray hairs from her shoulders, then took the lid off the bottle of cover-up and sprayed it over her tattoos, getting the ones on her back with some difficulty. The cover-up said it would last for a week, and her new scar would help make her less recognizable. All she had to do now was choose the path she wanted to take.

The shirt went back on. She studied the face in the mirror. With the scar and the hair, she hardly recognized herself. There was nothing left but the future, whatever it may bring.

A good start.
Piles of her old self lay around her feet. If Emilio was smart, he’d burn it. Feeling satisfied at that thought, she closed up the bag and slung it over her shoulder before walking out, kicking the pile of hair to the side.

Emilio was waiting for her in the truck. She felt naked as she walked out of the house into the bright sunlight, horribly exposed with all her hair missing. The skin on her scalp tingled as a light breeze flowed over it for the first time, delightfully cooling in the heat.

"Good call on the hair," Emilio said as she climbed into the passenger seat next to him. "Have you decided what you want to do yet?"

"Alliance," she said without preamble.

"Good. Did you finish with the datapad?"

"Yes." She dug it out of the bag and handed it over. "Someday someone had better give me a choice about my name."

"You don't like it?"

"The last name is okay, but the first name is terrible. Lola was bad enough."

"You should avoid saying that name from now on."

She looked down at her hands, cupped in her lap, palms up. Empty.

"Don't blame yourself," Emilio said. "I've lost people I love too. It's hard. But you have to keep living and trying."

"Yeah." She wanted to believe him.

"I've set everything up so you have the best chance possible to succeed with the Alliance. I gave you the best scores on the tests, since I know you can back that up on your own, but the rest is up to you. Once you step on that shuttle, you're on your own."

"Why are you helping me? You don't even fucking know me."

He smiled over at her, giving her a warm feeling that made her think of another man, his face blurry, as if seen from far away. A man she hadn't seen since before Tom was born. Her father.

"You're a smart girl. You'll figure it out. Just do something with this second chance at life. It won't come along again."

They rode the rest of the way to the San Diego shuttleport in silence. Eventually she could see the bright lights of international shuttles streaking across the sky overhead as they neared the depot, the light shimmering on the surface of the water lapping at the nearby harbor.

The truck slowed to a stop. She turned to Emilio. "Thank you."

He looked at her with mild surprise and Lola realized with some guilt that it was the first time she'd said it.

"You're welcome."

"Will you tell James I said goodbye?"
"Sure. The kid cares about you."

"Yeah. He's one of the good ones."

"He is." Emilio nodded and gestured at her. "So are you, if you just let yourself be that person. You deserve better."

Emilio was one of the good ones too, but she didn't say so. As they looked at each other, a shuttle passed overhead, light from its thrusters blinding them momentarily. After the light faded, the whole scene had been burned into her eyes, awash in shades of purple and yellow.

"Goodbye, Emilio." Her hand was on the door.

"Good luck," he said.

She hurried into the shuttle depot without looking back.

Friday, May 8, 2172

Raul

Raul sat in his office, contemplating the events of the last month. He'd decided that Cong had scared her away, with all his talk about options. Cong was like a dried-up flower pressed between the pages of an old book, no passion or fire to him. Ready to crumble to dust with his anachronistic ways.

Candente, on the other hand, had shown him just how deep her passions ran.

She hadn't hesitated. She couldn't have left him for Cong, and she couldn't stay, so she jumped rather than surrender to his enemy. She jumped. It was like the old tragic love stories Evita used to read to him. He relived the exhilaration of the moment again in his mind.

Will walked in without knocking. "You have to see this," he said, calling up the news on the terminal.

"... all the DNA on the crime scene from the event has now been catalogued and cross-matched with the more than 45,000 people that attended the festival last week. Positive identification has been made based on rates of decay and the database is even now running through health records, looking for a match. Warrants are soon to be issued."

Will muted the playback. "We may only have a few hours, if that. You can find her after all this blows over, but please call off this search. It's time to go."

Raul leaned forward onto his fists, the tension in his strong forearms causing the veins to stand out in stark relief on his skin, cutting across his tattoos. He let out a deep breath and gave Will a terse nod. "Give the order."

Will left the room at a trot. Soon he could hear movement all over the house as the essentials were locked down or packed up.

Raul rose and wandered slowly into his bedroom while his men rushed to pack. There wasn't anything he wanted to take with him; he could buy clothes elsewhere. But to leave this room, which still rang with her presence, even occasionally her scent... he felt her loss deeply. He could see her now, as he stood by the door to the balcony, when she punched him in the face the day
before she'd saved his life. That had been the real beginning for him, when he had seen that she was special. After several weeks, he hadn't grown tired of trying to figure her out. He didn't think he could grow tired of her.

There must be something of her that he could take with him, a memento of their time together. He opened the drawer on the side of the bed and dug through it, then rifled through her clothes in the closet. His movements became more hurried as he went into the bathroom and began sorting through the drawer where she had kept her things.

It was all garbage, just makeup and toiletries. For all of the marks he had left on her, she had left nothing behind to remind him. Nowhere had she made her mark. Nowhere but inside him.

He grabbed the narrow drawer with both hands and yanked it from the cabinet with a hoarse shout, throwing it into the mirror above the bathroom counter.

With a loud crack, the mirror shattered. The drawer and its contents exploded all over the counter, along with glass shards from the mirror. Raul breathed heavily as he watched the mess clatter onto the counter and down to the floor.

He spotted something jutting out of the broken seam of the drawer, now exposed to the bright light that shone over the vanity. He walked over to the broken drawer and crouched down. He stared at the slim black bracelet, picking it up between two fingers and holding it up to the light. With a flick, he snapped it onto his wrist and brought up the screen of the omni-tool, but it was locked to him.

Was this hers? Why had she hidden it? What had she been doing with it?

If Will could crack it, it might hold a clue to where she'd run. Catching a glimpse of his reflection in one of the pieces of broken mirror, he saw that he was smiling in anticipation.

He pulled his sleeve over the bracelet and made his way to the car, where Will was waiting for him there while the others loaded the truck. Raul waved to the driver and the car took off. He looked out the window, watching his home drop away.

Once it was out of sight, he slid the omni-tool bracelet off and handed it to Will. "What do you think of this?"

Will activated the omni-tool and began to poke around. "I can't unlock it," he said after several minutes, sounding surprised. "Where did this come from?"

"What do you need to crack it?" Raul asked impatiently.

"It's got an amazingly complicated security algorithm. The key is random, resetting on a very short timer. It would take an AI, or a brilliant engineer, just to open it each time. No shortcut, no back door. Where did you get this?"

"I found it in her things." There was no doubt who he was talking about.

The look on Will's face when he said this confirmed his suspicions, the missing link that had hovered just under the surface. She really was an exceptional woman.

"Hidden depths," he murmured. Then he began to laugh.

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At that moment, in Macapa, Brazil
Looking around in disgust at the uniform hair and clothes of the people manning the Marines
Recruit Training Depot, she waited for the next round of shouted instructions. Rules, orders,
march. She was already over it. These people could all be clones for all she knew; she couldn't tell
them apart. She didn't want to.

Her mind kept returning to Tom, automatically wondering where he was before she was reminded,
again and again, that she wasn't going to see him again. It was the longstanding habit of a
caregiver, which pained her every time she had to dismiss the urge to find him.

Her hands were shaking. She cussed and set the datapad in her lap to wipe her sweat-dampened
palms on her sweatpants. James' sweatpants, she reminded herself.

The thought of James brought the night Tom died immediately to mind and the blood drained from
her face, her stomach cramping down on the grief. She swallowed repeatedly, trying not to get
emotional in front of the entire class. It had only been a few days. She may never have the time to
really grieve for him.

"New recruits, fall in!" a voice called out.

The floor shook as the assembly rose uncertainly to their feet. She picked up her rucksack, already
filled with her uniform and other items from initial processing, and followed the wavering line into
the next room while a brutal tirade of verbal abuse told them to form up and get in gear. A fierce
buzzing came through the doorway ahead.

They filed slowly into a cramped area with three barber chairs, heaps of hair from previous recruits
lying at their feet. The others watched in increasing dismay as the men were shaved bald and the
women had their hair cropped to the shoulder. It felt ritualistic, the sacrificial lambs being prepared
for slaughter.

Lamb. That's one thing they would never have cause to call her, that's for goddamn sure.

They didn't have anything to do to her shaved head, so she filed through the room untouched,
smirking at the other recruits. When she passed the small, stained mirror on the wall by the other
door, she looked into it, startled anew by how different her reflection was compared to just a few
days ago. She looked like a plucked chicken, but there was something badass about the look that
made her smile.

She resembled a cleaner, tougher version of herself. This made up for the new first name. She'd
have to go by the last name instead, already branded onto her rucksack. She tried it out, mumbling
the name to herself as she grabbed her rucksack and walked toward the bright exit at the end of the
hall.

The evening sun, low on the horizon, shone down the hallway in bright rays, dark shadows within
wavering as people walked through the doorway. The sight evoked a memory of James as she had
last seen him, peacefully asleep in the chair by her bed at Emilio's with the sun shining onto his
face through the gently waving curtain. She had shaken his arm to wake him up, and when she saw
her he blushed and looked away. It was an odd detail to remember at this moment.

James was just a kid in pain. She had already been a million years old at that age, taking care of her
kid brother. She hoped James would find the strength to pull through, but he wasn't ultimately her
problem. They weren't likely to see each other again and that was probably a good thing. Too many
painful memories all around. It was a big galaxy, too, and she fully intended to see as much of it as
she could, and to lose herself in it if necessary.
She stepped out of the hallway and into the bright sunshine, then stopped and blinked, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

"Let's go! Let's go! Move! Move yer twat to the line!" A harsh voice blasted from her side, catapulting her into motion. Her side gave a twinge as she ran to catch up, her ribs not completely healed. The class was assembling off to her left, so she fell in and set her rucksack on the ground beside her, standing straight and looking ahead like the others. They stood there in silence while the rest of the class finished processing.

A voice barked from the front, its owner's aggressively tipped-forward hat all she could see from the back rank. "This is the Alliance Marine Corps! You no longer belong to your family. We are your family! You belong to the Alliance!"

Clarity stole over her as she listened to the rant. She was free of all of the men that had tried to claim her.

No one could have predicted she'd make this choice, especially Raul. No one would be looking for her here, and if they were, she wouldn't be recognized. If she could rise to the top of the Sangre Carnal, she could carve out a place for herself in the Alliance. This was the biggest, baddest, most well-armed gang in the galaxy. If she was smart, and she was, she could make something of this opportunity. There was no uncertainty here but what she brought in with her.

An image of her brother with red running down his shirt - a shirt she'd given him - flashed in front of her eyes. She wanted this second chance, but it didn't feel right without Tom tagging along. Not that he could have come with her if he was still around.

Emilio said she had deserved this second chance. He was one of the few decent human beings she'd met. Maybe he knew something she didn't.

It didn't matter in the end. She was going to wrestle this bull to the ground, like every other challenge in her life. There wasn't another conscious option in her mind. She would never be a victim of circumstance.

The drill sergeant was still shouting. "There will be no coming back to your soft life on Earth. We will make you harder, we will make you stronger, or we will break you in the process.

"Who you were before no longer exists! You are Alliance Marines!"

And Shepard smiled, knowing she was home.

Chapter End Notes

END OF BOOK ONE
INTRODUCTION

Date: 5.5.2176
Sender: 2nd Lt. James Vega, Citadel Alliance Barracks
Recipient: Cpt. Emilio Vega (retired), Earth, San Diego SubSec 4422-80
Transmission Code 4A-Blue

[TRANSCRIPTION FROM AUDIO ]

Hey.

Here we go – my first letter home. Just about everyone is in the Mess Hall at the moment, so it seemed like a good time to record a message.

You were right; my first TDY isn't anything like I imagined it would be, especially with what happened a few weeks ago. I know that people die in this job, but still... losing Stella was hard. Thanks for your words of encouragement to the rest of the squad. I showed it to them.

We just came back from a minor assignment. Not that any time I have shots fired at me it can be considered "minor", of course. It gets complicated real quick in a firefight, and there's so much more to it than you think there is in training. There's a subtext to every order and every drawn weapon. The bad guys aren't really all bad, and the good guys aren't really all good. It's easier for us because we just have to follow orders most of the time, but it must be really confusing to be a merc like Mason was. I'm not sure I could ever do that.

I'm going to look Mason up while I'm here. I wonder if he'll recognize me? Probably not. I can't wait to see the look on his face when he realizes who I am.

[laughter]

We just docked at the Citadel. This place is amazing, but it smells strange. I wasn't expecting that. I think it's all the aliens living together. It's not a bad smell or anything. Just different.

Remember how fascinated I was with the Keepers back when I was a kid? They aren't nearly as interesting as I thought they'd be, just trot around with their little bombs on their backs. Everyone just ignores them completely, which is no fun at all. It's kinda creepy.

How are things on the homefront? I've been thinking about home today because it's Cinco de Mayo. It's been four years since... you know when I'm talking about.
You never answered any of my questions about space back then. I'm beginning to think that you did it so I would come out here and find out for myself. You wanted to get me away from Pop. I can see why.

After all that business with Lola, whenever Pop got on me I just told him to back down, and he did. That made me overconfident, but it isn't much of a victory to win an argument with a washed-up surfer. I got in trouble a lot for a while after that, throwing my weight around. Mom was good at keeping me out of trouble when she was around. She didn't like Lola, that's for sure.

I wonder what happened to Lola. But you aren't going to tell me, are you? You always were tight-lipped about the things you do.

I'm going stir-crazy right now because they won't let us leave the base. It's the first time we've been exposed to so many aliens in one place, and I guess some people get kinda spooked by all the different beings. It doesn't bother me at all. I think it's awesome. I want to meet all of them and asks lots of questions, but I don't know enough about them to know I wouldn't accidentally insult them or whatever. If it were up to me, though, they'd all be my friends. There would be a lot of bear hugs handed out on the Citadel.

Mom would have loved seeing me make it to this place. She wanted me to do something special with my life and kept encouraging me to work harder. She was completely devoted to doing the right thing, although she was doing it for the wrong person most of the time. She had you to look out for her her whole life, even though she was making a bad choice by staying with Pop. I wish I had a sister or a brother to look out for like you did, but I guess I have about six of them now so it's all good.

I couldn't have done any of this without you around to back me up. I can't imagine what my life would have been like if you hadn't done just what you did. I only wish that Uncle Trent was still around so you wouldn't have been alone all this time.

If you think of it, can you check up on my Pop? I don't want to talk to him or anything, but I –

I just want to know he's okay. I promised Mom I would help him, and I kinda feel like I broke my promise by cutting him off like that. I think she'd understand, but still.

Yeah, so, we're on patrols for the next few months on the fringes of the Terminus sector. Getting some experience so we can play with the big boys. Even though I'm pretty much the biggest person here.

I can't think of anything else to say. Hey, I'll talk to ya soon, okay?

[RECORDING TERMINATED]

CHAPTER 9

Four years earlier...

James
Jimmy Sanders was wasting away one late July morning in his bedroom. His fourteenth birthday had come and gone with very little fanfare.

Much of the population of San Diego kept indoors at the height of the summer of 2172, the abnormally hot air creating a miserable atmosphere for all but the heartiest of souls. James liked to think he was one of those tough guys, but since he had stopped visiting his uncle this was where he spent most of his time. The windowless room was more cramped than usual, but he didn't mind.

He sat on his bed, comfortable in his pajamas with cool air pumping down on him from the vent. The sound of turning pages was all that broke the silence of his room; that, and the occasional rustle and crunch from the clandestine stash of snacks behind his nightstand. He sorted through his old hardcopy 'zines and comics, every once in awhile adding or removing one from several uneven stacks that lay on the floor to the right of the bed.

He sighed as he picked up the next few, deciding which ones to keep on the shelf next to his bed. It would be so much easier once he had his own wrist comm, or even an omni-tool to read stuff like this. He had enough money to buy whatever he wanted, he just didn't want to start any new fights with his father about how it was spent. The prize money from the race still sat in his new account, untouched despite his father's numerous pleas. It was simply easier to leave it there than to deal with the drama outside the door to his bedroom.

At first he'd felt bad about getting all the money when Tom was dead, but to be fair, he would have won the race himself if he hadn't given Tom his bike.

A loud bang at his bedroom door made James sit upright. The handle jiggled and the door pushed forward slightly before it hit the mound of laundry blocking the path.

"Who is it?" he called out, scrambling to shove one of the stacks, his collection of illicit magazines, under his bed.

"Open this door!" his mother's voice called out. The door was shoved inward one more time, to no effect. The annoyance that undercut her normally kind voice made James cringe.

"Just a sec!" Hoping this wouldn't be another argument, he stood up and kicked the boxes and clothes out of the way so she could open the door.

"James, I want this room cleaned up today. It stinks in here." Her nose wrinkled in distaste as she stepped inside.

"Yeah..." He nodded and took a deep, exaggerated breath. "It's got a bite, doesn't it? Perfectly ripened. You sure you want me to destroy this work of art?"

She crossed her arms over her chest, obviously not amused. "After you're done cleaning, I want you to leave this room for a while. You shouldn't stay inside all day. You've barely left home all summer. You used to go out all the time."

His good humor disappeared in a flash. "That was with Tom."

Her tone softened. "I understand, I really do. It's been difficult for you this summer, querido. But you need to keep living. Make some new friends."

"It's not that easy. Tom was the only one that didn't treat me like dirt." His jaw flexed as he once again fought down his distress, pushing it down into the ball of grief he didn't want to examine.

"School starts in a few weeks. I'm sure there will be a few boys who like the same things you do."
"It's not about that. You just don't get it." He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to calm down. She stood in front of the only exit. The room began to feel like a trap.

She looked around at the posters and comics about extraterrestrial worlds. "Your uncle has been to some of these places. He had to plan and work really hard to get where he is. He started when he was about your age."

"He had more to start with than we do."

"Some, but not as much as you might think. You can do so much with your life." She stepped forward, speaking passionately.

"Like you did?" he snapped. Who was she to talk? She was totally out of touch with reality.

A change came over his mother's face and he wished he could take the words back. "Siento, Mom. I didn't mean it like that." He stood in the middle of the messy room with his hands gripped in front of his chest, wondering what he could say that wouldn't make things worse.

She played with her long ponytail, a nervous habit of hers. "I want you have all the adventures that you want. I want you to be stronger than I am." She was so despondent that he reflexively tried to cheer her up.

"Hey, I'm pretty strong already. See?" James said, putting up an arm and making a show of trying to flex it. Her mouth quirked at his antics and he grinned back at her. It was good to see her smile.

"You're a growing boy. Almost taller than your father already, and you have a nice little barriga going too," she said, stepping forward and patting where his shirt was stretched tight over his belly, smiling affectionately up at him.

"Salga de ella!" He pulled away, blushing, and almost tripped over his comics.

"It's time for you to get out of this room and get on with your life."

"You should too, Mom. Pop keeps you prisoner here, and you don't do anything about it."

"It's a choice I made, a commitment I made." Though her voice was firm, she wouldn't meet his eyes.

"It doesn't have to be that way."

"I'm fine where I am. I need to know that you can take care of yourself."

He stared at her bowed head in confusion. She was acting really weird. "Okay, Mom. Not sure what to do, but I'll go out."

"Good." She sighed and her head came up to regard him seriously. "Then go out with your uncle. He's here now."

So that's what this was about. "I don't want to go out with him."

"It would mean a lot to me if you went."

Her wistful look melted him. "Fine. I'll be out in a minute."

She sniffed a few times, then navigated haltingly back through the room to the exit, stopping with her hand on the door to catch her breath. She'd been doing that a lot lately.
"Are you okay, Mom?"

She turned around at the question. "I'm fine, why?"

"No reason." He shrugged and shook his head.

After the door closed behind her, he looked around. He'd grown accustomed and even a little attached to the mess. The more it piled up around him, the more it seemed to insulate him from the outside world.

Unless your mother drags it in, of course. With a wry smile, he started gathering up the clothes on the floor and stuffed them in the hamper to take to the processing unit in the hallway. The magazines went back onto the shelves, freshly organized. He rubbed the back of his neck and double-checked that he hadn't missed anything.

Maybe it was time to get over his issue with Uncle Emilio. He knew he should be grateful to his uncle for helping Lola, but it was just as hard now as it had been three months ago to know he couldn't see her one last time. And now there were only a few weeks left before school started, weeks that he could fill with biking and shooting at the range.

That thought settled it. It was time to let it go.

After changing his clothes he went to the kitchen where his uncle was sitting with a cold glass of ice water in his hand. It must still be sweltering out.

"Hey! Finally!" Emilio rose from the chair and turned around to embrace his nephew. "Wow, I think you've grown two inches since I saw you last. You - ah - you look good." He held him off with one arm to look him over.

James rolled his eyes, stepping back. He was getting really tired of that reaction from people. It was time to start watching what he ate. Maybe tomorrow.

"Did you break my bike yet?" James asked, deciding to jump back in where they had left off more than two months ago.

"Your bike? You have to ride it at least once a week to keep your claim. I might even make you race me for it."

"Oh, yeah? I'll school you, old man. You just wait."

"That's what I wanted to hear. What do you want to do first? Shoot, or race?"

James looked quickly at his mother, but she didn't react. His uncle must have cleared taking him to the range with her first. That would make things easier, so long as she didn't tell Pop. "Range first, definitely."

"Works for me." Emilio rubbed the top of James' head, his hair still shaved into a wide strip across the top. "I'm glad you kept the hair. I thought for sure that your mom would make you change it."

"Nah, she likes my racing stripe."

"I always wished I was brave enough to do something crazy like that," Rosie said, smiling at the two of them.

She blushed prettily, and James was struck with what she must have been like when she attracted
the attention of his father when they met. His Pop had been quite the ladies' man, but he'd gladly left it all behind to be with her. He'd heard the story a million times from his father.

James got his shoes from the closet by the front door and sat down to put them on. "Where's Pop, anyway?"

"At the store."

His uncle put a hand on his shoulder. "We'd better go before he gets back. I don't want to stir anything up for you here, Rosie."

"Oh, no, he'll be gone awhile." She smiled diffidently, waving a shaking hand.

James finished fastening his shoes and he looked up to see a strained look on his uncle's face. "How long does it take to go to the store? It's right on the street level."

Rosie shrugged. "Sometimes it just takes a long time. He'll be back soon." She turned away from him and began washing the glass he had used.

"Come on." James tugged at his uncle's arm. Though he knew he could hold his own against his father, anywhere would be better than this place if he came home to find him about to leave with Uncle E. His uncle seemed reluctant to go and looked back at his sister several times before James managed to get him out the door. His mother didn't look up or say goodbye.

Fortunately, they encountered no one on the way up to the truck. James relaxed as he climbed in, relieved not to have to deal with another fight. But once James buckled his harness and the truck lifted off, Emilio started asking questions that made James wish he'd stayed in his room.

"What's going on? Does your father disappear like that often?"

"I guess, sometimes." James looked out the window and sighed in feigned boredom, hoping that he'd drop it. "I don't know."

"Don't act like that. I don't buy it and you're not good at it, so you might as well just tell me. What's going on? I worry about you and your mother."

He didn't know why he even tried to keep things from his uncle. James knew that he was a terrible liar and couldn't act for shit, so it never worked. It didn't help that he always forgot what he lied about and ratted himself out later. Better to just have it out now so they could get on with their weekend.

"He offers to run errands for Mom, which he never did before, then stays out for hours. But he's allegedly doing it for her, so she's ecstatic. Don't even try to ask her about it." He rolled his eyes. He'd tried once to break through his mother's defense and make her see that whatever his father was doing was wrong. It had backfired and she started crying, then Pop came home and laid into both of them. Though he'd managed to shout his father down, it was an experience he didn't care to repeat. Staying in his room was safer.

James shook his head, trying to come back into the present. "Plus he's acting weird. I caught him asleep at the kitchen table in the middle of the day once, and sometimes when he talks he just - I don't know, fades off." He shrugged, not really knowing how to describe it.

"Damn." Emilio's soft exclamation made James look over at him. "You've had a rough summer, haven't you, kid?"
James' face grew hot. He breathed slowly and evenly to keep the tears from coming up, then turned back to the window. "Mmm," was all he could say.

James blinked several times as he looked out at the view they were flying over, above the preserves on the way to Pendleton. As they sped through the sky, the shadow of the car took perfect form on the solid plain of blacktop off to one side of the park, then danced wildly through the trees. The bright sun reflected off the moisture in his eyes, making the landscape seem to catch on fire.

His uncle didn't bring it up again. He seemed to understand that James needed more than just physical distance from the stress of his home life. He always understood what he needed.

They flew straight to the base and spent the day shooting, first at the outdoor range and then, for a special treat, this uncle took him to another range he'd never seen before. This one had moving targets that were positioned at a distance, perfect for sniping. He'd never shot a sniper rifle before and his enthusiasm showed as they set up, cracking jokes until his uncle was laughed out loud.

He laid on his stomach to shoot. The waist of his jeans cut uncomfortably into his belly as he lifted his head to the rifle on the tripod in front of him. He didn't complain about his discomfort, though. Once he set his eye against the scope of that rifle, he was at one with the world.

The end of the range circled in the scope, the crosshairs following the figure eight of his breath as he tried to steady his heartbeat so he could see enough to make a shot. His revolving thoughts and worries couldn't find their voice once his breath stilled and he focused on one part of the range. A target popped up and swung off to the right, but his finger had already tugged at the trigger. He grinned as he saw the center of the target shred before it dropped from view.

"Good job! You're a natural." His uncle laughed and clapped his hands loudly.

James rolled over and shielded his eyes from the sun to look up at him. It shouldn't feel strange to be around laughter. He'd been stupid to stay away for two whole months. James hadn't realized how much he missed hanging out with his uncle.

When the sun finally set they packed everything up. The night was very warm, but he felt invigorated by the day's activity. They walked through the soft grass toward the parking lot. He joked around with his uncle as they climbed into the truck.

"Why aren't we camping?" James asked.

"Because I have something to show you back at the house."

James played it cool on the way back to Escondido, not wanting to act like an excited little kid. He followed his uncle into the master bedroom and watched him take a long box out of the closet, wrapped in a blanket.

"My dad gave this to me before he died. I want it to go to you when the time is right." He gestured for James to come closer.

"You come from a long line of soldiers," his uncle said as he removed the blanket.

Curious, James examined the box lying on the bed and looking very out of place there. Everything around him his whole life had been plasti-crete, steel and glass. He tentatively reached out to touch the dark, satiny wood and the shiny brass locks dangling from the side. He felt like he was touching something very old, though it looked brand new.
"We came north to California after the Dissolution, 128 years ago, but the Vegas were soldiers before that in Mexico."

"The Dissolution is the one with the hackers." James loved to read about history, and that was one of his favorite time periods. The idea of so many people banding together virtually to bring down the major world powers - and succeeding - made him feel like anything was possible. It was still a popular theme in comic book series.

"Right. When the backing corporations of most of the governments of the world went broke, the more corrupt governments simply dissolved. Many of the standing armies all over the world lost their funding, including Mexico's. Back then, we were in the Mexican Naval Infantry. Basically the same as we are now, only no zero-gee training." He smiled.

"Go ahead, open it. The code is your birthday."

James raised his eyebrows at this, but tapped the code into each of the four locks. Inside, a stiff purple cushion perfectly framed a sword with a long, slightly curved blade. The blade was wrapped to the hilt in a thin cloth covered in yellowish stains. The hilt was polished wood and brass, emblazoned with an eagle. Though it wasn't an ornate design, it held a quiet dignity that made him stand up straighter.

"His name was Victoriano Rodriguez Vega. We're not sure what his rank was, the records were destroyed in the Data Purge of 2044, but we know he was in the Navy. He carried this in the Mexican Revolution, almost two hundred and fifty years ago."

"Wow. That's old." He leaned over to look at the object, almost afraid to touch it. A pungent, metallic smell came from the box, stinging his nostrils.

"It's okay. Pick it up. Here." Uncle E curled a finger under the hilt and gently pulled upward. The cloth that wrapped the blade fell away near the hilt, revealing a dull finish.

James must have made a face, because his uncle laughed and picked up a blue cloth from the back of the box. "Watch." He polished away the oily substance covering the blade until they could see their faces reflected back at them, warped in the curves of the metal.

"You're giving this to me?" James didn't feel worthy. It was so beautiful. A precious family treasure. How many Vegas had carried this sword? Only James wasn't really a Vega, he was a Sanders. He wondered idly if he still counted.

"Not yet. I need to know you're truly ready to be a man first. You're close, though. Time will tell."

"What do I have to do?" The sword gleamed in his eyes. He couldn't stop looking at it.

"You'll know when it happens. Maybe actually trying out for that scholarship would help you get there."

James made a face. "They want kids with better grades than I have."

"Just keep trying and work hard to improve." His uncle put the sword away and carefully closed the box before facing him again, a serious expression on his face. "Don't wait for things to happen to you, because they won't. And just because something bad happens is no reason to stop trying. It's a reason to try harder."

"Okay, I get it." James looked away, disgruntled. If Uncle E was right, and it felt like he was, then he had pissed away his whole summer for no reason.
"Will you try out for the scholarship? Next year is high school for you, so it's the perfect time to switch schools."

James took a deep breath but couldn't find an answer. It seemed like a lot of work.

His uncle put his hand on his shoulder. "Just think about it. And remember I've got your back. If you need any help, I'm here for you."

James nodded in understanding.

"Good. Let's go get a bite to eat."

James spent the rest of the summer in relative enjoyment, though he was still suffering from bouts of melancholy whenever he thought about Tom. He was still lonely for other kids his age, but more and more he was compelled to stay home just to keep the peace, so he alternated between the two houses and didn't push the issue. His father resented every moment he was gone and James knew that his father was giving his mother a hard time about it, making her feel like she'd done something wrong. He was relieved when school started because he had a legitimate excuse to get out of the house.

But once he stepped back onto the school campus he remembered how much he hated it. The overcrowded building assaulted his senses with the clamor of four thousand teenaged kids per level. The teachers did their best to manage, but some incidents, like the one when he left his homeroom class at the end of the first week of school, couldn't be prevented.

As he was walking down the hallway on the way to his science class that morning, he noticed several boys teasing a thin black girl. The girl was Monique, from his science class. They had partnered together in lab from time to time.

He recognized one of the boys, Javin, who had washed out of the race trials last spring because he couldn't execute hairpin turns without taking out all of the riders around him. Behind him in the hallway stood two of his friends, watching the spectacle in happy anticipation of a fight. His stomach twisted in fear, but he forced himself to approach them.

"Leave her alone," he said. They turned around to face him.

Javin threw his head back arrogantly, tossing his dyed black hair out of his eyes. "I know you. You're the one who lost the race and took the prize money. I don't think that's very fair, do you guys?" The two boys beside him shook their heads and grunted assent.

Monique spoke up, shouting over the noise of the crowd. "You couldn't even get into the race, Javin. What difference does it make?"

James almost smiled at her defense, but he kept his poker face as he stared them down.

"Hey, fuck you!" Javin said brilliantly, jabbing his finger at her aggressively at her.

James quickly moved to stand between them. "Leave her alone."

Javin shoved him back and he stumbled into Monique, both of them hitting the wall with a loud bang. A small clearing in the crowd immediately formed around them, giving the potential fight a wide berth. Some stopped to watch.

Before James could regain his balance, Javin punched him in the stomach, dropping him to his
knees. He clenched his gut, trying to catch his breath. When he shielded his soft stomach against
the next kick, pain exploded in his left arm and he cried out. Monique was shouting at them to
stop, to leave him alone. The crowd began to make more noise; whether they were cheering for
him or for Javin, he wasn't sure.

All of the frustration and anger that he had been keeping bottled up was coming to a head inside
James as he lay there taking the beating. He was tired of being beaten down. Tired of being pushed
around. Tired of bullies.

Cradling his arm, he pushed himself up on the locker. The boys took a step back as they laughed
and congratulated each other. He heard Monique ask, "James, are you okay?" just before he
dropped the injured arm and punched out wildly with his other fist, putting all his weight behind it.
Javin didn't see it coming, caught up in his congratulations.

It was a beautiful hit, if unintentional. James' knuckles connected with the bridge of Javin's nose
and he felt the sickening crunch of cartilage. Javin fell back, then looked at James in astonishment
before running into the crowd, shielding his face. His lackeys followed without looking back.

Monique helped James up to the nurse's station, where the ambulance was called once it was
discovered that James' arm was broken. A few minutes later he watched the school shrink in the
back window, happy to be getting out of school if nothing else.

A doctor was waiting at the hospital for their arrival. She quickly scanned him with her omni-tool
as she spoke. "They'll take you up to the second floor. We've already notified your parents." She
smiled kindly at him, but he couldn't smile back. He tried to avoid exposing other people to his
father whenever possible. But to his surprise, his mother arrived alone, still in her hotel uniform.

The doctor, a heavyset woman with blonde hair and brown eyes, put a stasis field on James' arm to
hold the injury while they decided what to do. It felt really weird, like there were ants under his
skin. He jabbed at the field with his finger repeatedly, watching the light patterns change as it gave
him a mild shock, until the doctor made him stop with a stern look as she and his mother settled
into the chairs by his bed.

"Mrs. Sanders," the doctor began. "Your son's left radius is shattered. The bone will repair itself
very quickly with a medi-gel treatment, but it could have negative side effects, so I'm
recommending a combination of surgery to fuse the bone and a very mild medi-gel treatment
localized around the injury. Then, time to heal, with physical therapy."

"What are the side effects?" his mother asked quietly, twisting the seam of her skirt between her
fingers. James wasn't used to seeing her out of the house like this. She looked uncomfortable.

"It depends on how he takes to the physical therapy. Because he's still going through puberty, the
medi-gel will accelerate growth abnormally. There is a very small chance of cancerous tumors, or it
could make his arms uneven in terms of muscular growth as the injury heals."

"How often do kids get cancer from it?" James asked. This didn't sound like a good idea.

"Not many, about one in two million. But I wanted to warn you of the risks."

"Are there any other options?" his mother asked.

"We could put his arm in a cast and let it heal without medi-gel after surgery, but he'd have to keep
it completely immobile. It would also take much longer to heal. The path I recommend you take
will only keep the cast on for a few days, then in physical therapy for six weeks. So long as we do
daily scans and therapy, I don't anticipate any issues with his treatment."

Seemed like the risks were pretty minimal. "What do I do in physical therapy?" James asked.

"You'll meet with a specialist daily to work on gradually strengthening your arm so that the muscle doesn't develop unusually as the medi-gel does its work. It's a good idea to work out both arms in the same way so you don't get lopsided." She smiled, putting him at his ease before she rose to her feet. "I'll go get it set up."

His mother stood to shake the doctor's hand. "Thank you," she said.

"It's my pleasure."

"Where's Pop?" James asked when the doctor had gone.

"I don't know. He didn't answer the comm at the house."

"He's not going to be difficult about this, is he?"

"I don't see why he would. It's not like you have to stay here."

"Does Uncle E know?"

"I left a message, but he went to Brazil today. It's just you and me for a few hours. I thought we could spend some time together. What would you like to do?"

"Don't you have to go to work?"

"I took the day off. Let's go do something together, just the two of us."

She had never taken time off just to hang out with him, and James wasn't about to pass up her offer. And so they spent the day out together, for the first time in James' memory. He insisted on tapping into his account to treat her to a nice lunch at a restaurant that looked over the ocean, then they went to see a movie. She steadfastly refused any gifts.

"It's okay, querido. I don't need anything, I'm just glad to have this time with you."

But James knew the real reason behind her refusal. He knew that she didn't want to have evidence that she'd gone out without Pop. If she was aware of the reason, she didn't show it, but a comment she made on the way home made him think that she must at some level be aware of how fucked up the situation was with his father.

"I want you to promise me that you'll save your money, as much as you can, so that you can go and do the things you want to do with your life." Her voice lowered so that the other people on the shuttle wouldn't overhear. "Don't let your father have it. He'll hurt himself. I worry about him so much..." She wrung her hands, unable to finish.

"You shouldn't have to worry so much, Mom. We should look out for you more. I wish-"

"No, it's okay. I like it this way. I like to take care of you and your father. It makes me happy." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"If you say so." But he still wished his father would somehow wake up and realize that his gentle mother deserved better than she was being given. He was frustrated at her refusal to understand she was being mistreated. She kept encouraging him to leave, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to while she was in this position. He wanted to look out for her. It gave him some insight as to why his
The surgery was done within hours and he was sent home, doped up and joking around so much that he even made his mother laugh out loud once.

His first physical therapy session was the very next day. He took the shuttle to the hospital and made his way up past the floor where he'd been the day before, almost to the top of the sleek skyscraper. He was troubled by the apathetic reception of his father when he had come home with his arm in a cast. His eyes had been so vacant, like he didn't care at all, which was pretty much the opposite of the reaction that he was expecting. Maybe that was better than the possessiveness that usually characterizes his father's temper.

He entered a vaulted room with walls of tall glass overlooking the city. Tall trees spotted the floor, almost touching the catwalks that circled the floor above. As he peered up at them, he noticed that people were running on the paths amongst the treetops.

The area smelled like wet earth and rang with the sound of running water. He looked down to see an artificial stream meandering through the room, bisecting different types of exercise equipment in small, private alcoves amidst the greenery.

A tall black man with silver hair approached him. "You're James, right? I'm Monique's dad. She told me about what happened. You can call me Deon."

"Um, hi Deon." He awkwardly shook the man's hand. How had he known he'd be here?

"I requested to be your physical therapist. I wanted to thank you for standing up for my girl, so I'm going to make sure you're taken care of."

"Well, she stuck up for me too, so it's okay. But thanks. You're a physical therapist?" Deon was dressed in the standard white robe of the medical profession, but the jacket was cropped short and molded to his well-muscled chest and arms. He didn't look like any doctor he'd seen. He looked more like one of his comic book heroes, still in his alter-ego disguise.

"I have a license to practice physical therapy because I run a gym downtown, where I train people in self-defense. Monique's had some classes but she doesn't take it as seriously as I'd like her to." Deon smiled hugely, showing sparkling white teeth.

"Self-defense, huh? That sounds useful."

"The way things are in this city, it can be. Come on, let's get started." Deon led the way into the paradise where James was to spend almost every evening for the next six weeks.

The physical therapy wasn't complicated, but it was difficult. It was a struggle to make his muscles work the way he wanted them to after the medi-gel treatment. They tugged and twanged inside his arm uncomfortably, and sometimes painfully.

Deon made him work both of his arms every morning and evening. He explained as they sat in one of the alcoves of the therapy level. "You'll have to work out your other arm twice as much to keep up while we do this, but they should be even when you're done."

"So I'll be really strong after this?" James asked, flexing his fists around a rubber ball.
"Only if you keep working out. The boosting effect of the medi-gel is temporary, and only because you're still growing. It's the hormones," he said in explanation. "That's why we have to be careful. If your muscles develop faster than your bones can adapt, it can ruin your bone structure. Check the 'Net. There are some nasty pictures of kids that worked out too much before they fully developed."

"What happened to them?

"Their bones grew in the wrong way, sometimes even in the wrong direction because of how hard the muscles were pulling on them. Pretty nasty stuff, and difficult to correct. Painful."

"So I shouldn't work out after this?"

"This is just for the medi-gel treatment. You should definitely still work out when it's finished. You're built to be like me."

James looked at Deon's imposing frame, then down at his own flabby body. "Are you making fun of me?"

"No. Check this out." Deon opened his omni-tool and flipped through the applications until he found a selection of photos. He enlarged one section. It showed a young boy about James' age who was even heavier than he was, standing beside four other boys, all of them tall and athletic. One held a basketball.

Deon pointed at the heavy kid. "That's me. I wasn't ever going to be thin like my brothers. They teased me all the time. Then one day I realized that big boys can be big in a different way." He winked at James. "They don't tease me now."

"I bet." He looked at the picture until Deon waved his hand over it, making it disappear.

"We've got a lot of work to do over the next few weeks, but after that you should start coming down to my gym. I can get you started." He mock-punched James' shoulder, carefully not touching the injured arm. "We fat boys gotta stick together."

James smiled. "It's a deal."

James took Deon up on his offer to help him work out, glad for something new to do away from his family once his therapy was complete. The gym was a magical place to him, full of mysterious contraptions that Deon immediately steered him away from.

"You don't want none of that. The machines are for people who don't want to lift heavy weights. They're looking for small changes and small muscles. You and me, we're going to get you so buff, no bully will look at you in the eye again. You're going to use free weights."

"You're still going to teach me to fight, right?"

"Yes, but that's not the important part. Ninety percent of any confrontation is attitude. If you have the right attitude, sometimes you don't have to fight at all."

As much as James liked the idea of learning to fight, learning how to avoid a fight sounded just as good. "Do you think this will help with my Pop?"

"Does your Pop hit you?" Deon's thick eyebrows squashed together in consternation.
"No, but he's always looking for an argument. Mom and I try to keep things calm around him but a lot of the time he blows up anyway. It's like he wants to argue, but I can't see why anyone would want that."

"Maybe he just wants to control things he can't control."

Control was the appeal of lifting weights for James. He had everything he could manage on his plate already with work and school, but there wasn't any subtext to lifting a weight. Lift, push, and track what you do. Simple. After he had worked out, he felt like he accomplished more than he had all day at school. His appetite grew enormous over the next few months as he expanded his workout.

A few months later it was finally cool enough to hang outside more often. Elsewhere in the country, the leaves were turning red and gold and blowing in the wind, but in Southern California it was beautiful sunshine every day. He went out with his uncle as much as possible and began to hang out with Monique and her friends when he wasn't at the gym with Deon.

The weight dropped off him quickly, far faster than he imagined it would. Deon explained that this was normal, and that most people just stopped when they saw results and didn't go any further with it.

James loved the changes. Sometimes late at night he tried to imagine that he could have helped Lola with his newfound knowledge, even save her himself. Then he could have stopped them from killing Tom…

That was as far as he got. They would have killed him, too. Even his imagination couldn't fix that.

It was after the New Year before his father noticed anything different.

"What happened to your arms?" his Pop asked him in an odd voice. His father was squinting across the kitchen table with a half-focused expression, his eyes on the dip and bulge on James' bicep that hadn't been there previously. His mother looked at him too, cocking her head curiously at him. She looked pale.

James shrugged nervously. "Just worked out a bit." He tried to sound nonchalant. Pop had an uncanny knack for ruining anything fun he did.

"I hope that uncle of yours didn't get you started on this." His father said, sharper this time.

James rolled his eyes. That particular argument was getting old. "I just like doing it."

"What for? Where did this come from?" he asked suspiciously. His mother went even more pale, her eyes tense, as if she was about to cry.

"There's nothing wrong with working out, Pop. You used to surf, why can't I…"

His father sucked in an exaggerated breath through his teeth, a spooky sound that made James stop talking.

"I knew s- something was going on with you," his Pop stuttered. "After we had such a nice summer together, I thought you'd gotten all your uncle's bullshit out of your system. Now this! You're going to-

James was too shocked to speak. A nice summer? What was he talking about?
He continued his irrational rant as James watched in mute wonder. His Pop was acting strange, even for him, his arm movements exaggerated and his voice pitching in odd places. He began ranting about how Emilio was trying to steal his family again, turn his wife against him, take his son away, and how he cared more about aliens than his own kind. He knocked some of the dishes off the table as he gestured wildly. His mother slowly picked up the pieces and set them on the counter behind her.

Mom tried to calm him down, her gentle hands shaking as she touched his father's shoulder. He unthinkingly shoved back at her, knocking her into the counter. Her arm swept the surface as she lost her balance and fell, knocking the broken dinner dishes down with a loud crash before she crumpled to the floor.

His father stared at her unconscious form in shock and dismay. "Rosie, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." he said in a small, pathetic voice, kneeling next to her.

James rushed over and shook her shoulder, then checked her pulse. "She needs a doctor, Pop! I'll call-"

But his father grabbed his arm as he tried to run past. "No, they can't be here. They'll call the cops. I can't have cops here!" Fear was in his eyes, his pupils enormous in the bright kitchen.

"What are you talking about?" James shouted back at him. "Look at her, Dad! She needs help!" He shook out of his father's grip and ran to the comm unit. As he explained the situation to the medics, he heard the front door slam. When he came back into the kitchen, his mother was alone, still unconscious on the floor.

James knelt next to her, brushing her hair out of her face. "Don't worry, Mom," he whispered. "I'm here."

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**Josh**

The Solana Beach subsection of the San Diego megalopolis had its seedy section, and Josh Sanders knew it well. It was a simple thing to disappear into the shadowy recesses of the skyscrapers, deep in the windowless sections of the residential complexes.

His vision came back slowly, bringing his mind back from wherever he'd been. Something was heavy on his right side, a slight irritation to his body high. His skin wanted to fly away and be free…

His head lifted with a swaying motion as he struggled to see what was keeping him from flight.

A woman was passed out on the dirty floor next to him. He'd never seen her before, but that wasn't unusual. Several other people lay, arms and legs touching, on ripped cushions around the room, everything hazy and glowing beautifully. A scarecrow with long black hair sat on a bowed couch, watching over them. His arm hung over the arm of the couch, almost touching the floor, bone-thin and as white as the bare bulb lit next to him.

"Seriph," he murmured. The scarecrow looked at him and stood up, shadows and light dancing around him.

The movement was startling and delightful; Josh gasped as adrenaline spiked in his body, causing biotic sparks to race across his skin. The woman next to him moaned as they passed over her, the sparks moving down the people lined up, touching closely to share this experience. Whimpers
fluttered in the air as the arm reached down and lifted Josh's face.

"More?" Seriph's thick voice said, his dry lips parting over dark red teeth.

"Out of floaters," Josh breathed after a brief examination of the blue chit dangling from his wrist. Can't use traceable chits to buy illicit goods, so the silver chit with Rosie's last pay was safe. The thought of her suddenly made him sad; he couldn't remember why.

"Time ta go, Sanders." Seriph took him by the shoulder and pulled him up.

The woman next to him groaned her disappointment at losing the contact of his skin, clinging weakly at his arm, but he shook her off. The patterns on his brightly colored shirt shifted in his vision, making it difficult to button back up as he tried to make himself presentable. Eventually Seriph came over to help him, his long fingers painting mesmerizing trails across his chest.

"There ya go. Careful getting home, Josh." The deep voice boomed across his consciousness.

Josh was overwhelmed with gratitude for this kind thought as he was unceremoniously shoved out of the crowded little room. He tucked his blue chit under his sleeve as Seriph pulled one of the people in the hall into the room to take his place. Like him, they'd be allowed to stay inside the temporary haven until they ran out of funds, safe from the hopelessness right outside the door.

Unlike these miscreants, though, Josh had a beautiful wife and son to go home to. He lifted his head as he passed them in his much cleaner clothes. He didn't come here to escape from life like they did; just from himself.

He stepped into the cool night, breathing deeply and tasting the sea strongly. It had just rained and everything looked and felt clean, the pavement dark and shining. Some people didn't even touch the ground anymore, unless they were visiting a park. The ground was where poor people lived. It was where Josh had always lived.

Despite his many disadvantages, Josh Sanders had dreamt of surfing fame and glory, and of having a devoted woman at his side and caring for his home. The latter had come true; Rosie and their son were his pride and joy. The former had ended with a torn ligament in his knee and fractured hip after hitting the reef. His look turned wistful as he began to stumble down the street.

Rosie had been there to care for him during his recovery, even though most of his friends deserted him. Before that, she had valiantly defended him against the accusations of her brother when Emilio came home on leave to find her pregnant. Rosie loved him more than anyone and would always be there for him.

Through the euphoric haze, sadness pulled at him again. Anxiety and shame came with it, and he rubbed his arms to strike up the sparks that drove away the unpleasant feelings. His fingertips glowed enchantingly, mesmerizing him.

Once he broke from his trance, Josh walked from the shadow of the final row of buildings and came to a bluff overlooking the ocean. The waves pounding below pushed cooler air against his face, washing him clean of his unpleasant thoughts. A thin layer of blue lightning coursed down his body at this tactile pleasure, grounding in the wet earth under his feet.

Then James had been born from his lovely Rosie. Josh's sun-weathered skin crinkled in a smile as he thought of his son. Smart, good-looking and devoted to his family. An ideal son. Yes, Josh was a lucky man. Emilio couldn't ever take them away from him, no matter how he tried. They wouldn't ever leave him. So much had been taken from him, all his dreams shattered by bad luck.
and jealous contrivances, but he would always have them. Rosie and James were his.

A metallic jangling sound behind him made his hair stand on end; a bright light lit up the sand around him, the ocean disappearing into the inky blackness beyond the hard circle of light.

"Hold still! Scanning," a very cop-like voice said.

Josh clenched his jaw and showed his empty hands. "Is there a problem?" He asked over his shoulder. He felt the illegal biotic drug channeled electricity over his skin, reacting to his fear, giving him away. He cursed under his breath.

"Mr. Sanders." The voice said after the telltale beep of an omni-tool indicated that he'd been identified. "There's been a watch out for you for five days. Your wife is in the hospital."

Sadness, anxiety and shame washed over him like the ocean a few feet away, along with a tidal wave of fear. Memory came with it, crippling him. The lingering effects of the red sand wore off in a rush. He sank to his knees, moaning, weak from five days without food while he blissed out on the biotic drug.

He tried to ask whether Rosie was okay, but his mouth wouldn't work. He felt his body jar as it hit the ground and thought nothing else as consciousness slipped away.

Thanks for reading. Special thanks to all the new followers!
Graduation Day

Chapter Summary

Shepard graduates from Basic Training and questions where she's going with her life.

Chapter Notes

Music: For a lark, I made an entire playlist for this chapter, which I call 'Raving with FemShep'. You'll see why it's called that when you read the chapter. It's linked to my profile with the other playlists.

1.16.2173
Macapa, Brazil

Shepard

"You enjoying the show, Shepard?" someone called from one of the shower stalls across the steam-filled bathroom.

Shepard stood at the entrance wearing standard issue Alliance sleepwear. Her clean uniform sat folded up on the counter next to her with her small bag of toiletries. She leaned against the wall at an exaggerated angle with her long legs blocking the passageway, her eyes averted from the occupied shower stalls in the humid room.

"You're not giving me one." Shepard had to shout over the noise of the water. "Just hurry up. The private showers are all taken by visiting brass and this is one day I can't go without."

A woman with short, choppy blonde hair looked out from the next stall and grinned at Shepard, soap bubbles running down her forehead. "Maybe you shouldn't be such a wuss and come shower with everyone else."

"Sometimes I like my privacy."

Another voice carried through the steam from a few cells away. "You'd rather stink up the whole barracks for the better part of a week before you'll jump in with the rest of us." The water shut off in the stall at the end of the row and a woman stepped out, water sheeting down her dark brown skin. She grabbed a towel and wrapped it around herself, then grabbed another to wrap around her long brown hair. "Some officer you'll be."

Shepard straightened up and faced the woman, crossing her arms across her chest. "I don't need to be naked to get to know my soldiers. There are rules about that, Lacerda."

"I'm sure that's not what Carla was saying." Sheila shut off the water and grabbed a towel, her expression making her large blue eyes seem too large for her face. "Is it?"
"All I'm saying is," Shepard said to Carla, "if you need to get naked to know people, you're gonna be real busy if you ever get to command a whole battalion."

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Carla said. "I don't see how you ever caught the general's attention with such a bad attitude. It explains the promotion, though."

"Shepard deserved her promotion as much as you did yours. You're both good at everything. You two should be going to OCS together, as friends," Sheila said with an innocent smile.

"Pick a side, Sheila," Carla snapped as she tied her dress shoes on.

"Between you two? Not on your life." Eyebrows raised almost to her hairline, Sheila grabbed her bag and walked toward the entrance, her hair already drying into tight blonde curls that sat like a halo around her head. She smiled at Shepard as she let her pass by.

Once she was gone, the smile disappeared from Shepard's face. She looked at Carla, who was at the mirror tying back her hair. "She's in my squad, not yours," Shepard said. "There isn't a side to choose."

Before Carla could respond, a chime overhead marked the hour. The rest of the showers shut off as the other women kicked into high gear. One of them shouted to where the two women still faced each other. "It's too crowded in here. Take your drama outside, no one gives a shit."

Carla didn't look at Shepard as she walked out. Shepard tucked her clothes under her arm and walked over to the showers to wait for the others to clear out.

The room was empty within minutes, all of them rushing to the parade grounds where she should be headed, too. Shepard checked to make sure everyone had left, then stripped her clothes off and jumped into the nearest stall.

She washed hurriedly, then wrapped a towel around herself and grabbed a spray can of cover-up from her bag. She took care of her arms first, twisting them to make sure both of her tattoos there were completely covered.

Today had been a close thing; she'd always managed to find a way to keep the markings hidden. At least she was almost finished with this. She wouldn't have to be so careful once she left Earth.

Grabbing her hand mirror from the bag, she turned so that she could see her back reflected in the big mirror, the red ink as bright as it was when it was first etched into her skin. The image reflected in the hand mirror blurred as she focused on the person standing at the doorway a few feet away, watching her.

"Can I help you, Carla?" she asked testily. She began to spray her back down with long, even strokes. Her face was smooth, belying the way her heart was thundering in her chest. Shepard watched her from the corner of her eye as Carla grabbed her jacket from a hook on the wall, then walked quickly from the room without looking back.

Strains of the Alliance anthem floated on the air when she ran from their platoon's barracks a few minutes later. Her dress blues were pressed perfectly; her black shoes shone in the bright sun. Her eyes were shadowed by the brim of the hat pushed forward on her freshly shaved head, looking every inch like she had been bred for the military.

Her platoon was already marching in formation, headed onto the field behind the rest of the company. A conspicuous hole waited for her in the rear rank of the column. Taking her position, she fluidly stepped into the rhythm of the march. The column moved with practiced precision, their
steps landing in time with the sound of their drill instructor's voice.

Marching in formation was something that immediately resonated with Shepard after she came to Brazil. After a lifetime of marching to her own beat, moving her legs and arms in sync with the others in her platoon completely broke open her perception of freedom. Moving as a team, it turned out, was no different than operating alone. When she walked with a group like this, she was an integral part of the whole. She felt complete.

The feeling that came from being part of something bigger than herself filled her chest, making the tense moment she shared with Carla minutes before shrink to insignificance. It was sublime.

When she was in command, her team responded like a limb of her own body. As one, they responded to the primal needs of the moment even as they put into play their sometimes complex stratagems. Once her squad began winning wargames and completing exercises in record time, they enthusiastically mimicked her daring moves and risky tactics. Instead of feeling constricted by the demands of responsibility, she had grown from the experience.

It was around then that Carla had first taken notice of her. The other woman was on one of the "fast track" programs, like the one Emilio had arranged for her, and evidently thrived on competition. Shepard had been only too willing to up her game, unused as she was to this type of rivalry.

Eventually they stopped marching at the mark in the plasti-crete a few yards from the stage that had been constructed in the middle of the field. They stood at attention until the rest of the company had likewise taken their positions, then the DI's called parade rest. As one, the platoon moved to stand with their feet apart, hands behind their backs.

The base commander, Brigadier General Valis, approached the podium. "At ease."

The company relaxed and Valis set several datapads on the podium in front of him. Despite his dress uniform, he wore few medals. His broad, scarred face was proof of his experience.

The flags behind him crackled as the wind ruffled the sparse hair on his head. His sharp eyes squinted against the afternoon sun. He cleared his throat and leaned forward to speak into the audio pickup, his voice coming through even more gravelly than it did in person.

"We are proud to welcome each and every one of you into the Alliance. The way of the warrior has a long and noble history. Since before the time of Lycurgus in Sparta, men and women have been purified in the crucible of battle and come home heroes, marching to the songs of the victor and the cheer of a crowd. But fame and praise are not why we fight. And it isn't the food or the pay, that's for sure."

He grinned at the crowd as they smiled at his gruff comment. "No, we fight for something else. Even as we speak, powerful forces are moving in the universe. Fighting is on the rise. Abductions are rampant on our colonies. You all truly have your work cut out for you, protecting the people of our time. But before you do, take a moment, all of you, and ask yourselves: why are you here?"

Shepard listened thoughtfully, taking his words to heart. The experience of the last nine months had been perfect for the needs of an active but grieving woman. Still, after being thrust into this madhouse with no preparation, she wasn't sure what her purpose was. Between exhausting days of training and sleepless nights, she had little time to turn to philosophical questions. Despite the price she already paid for her freedom, she wasn't sure why she was here, or even who she was when it came right down to it. It was as if she had been cut loose by a damning god and now existed as a stranger in a strange land, but somehow, amazingly, she had come out on top in this situation.
Valis continued. "There is really only one reason to fight. To conquer our fear, of death or of life, and to face it head-on." His eyes roamed the crowd as his meaning sunk in.

"Others stay at home. Others live quietly, have babies and die old women and men. But not us. Not Marines." His deep voice boomed across the crowd from the loudspeakers. "Others live their whole lives without ever stepping beyond the narrow confines of their neighborhoods. Most are happy with the minimum, enjoying a life without discomforts. But not us.

"We endure hardship after hardship. We suffer wounds and scars and a shortened life expectancy. But while we are alive, we live like no one else." He pointed his finger at the crowd. "You are part of the greatest lineage of warriors this universe has ever seen. Each of you will hear the shots in the distance and will run to meet them, and I am damned proud of each and every one of you."

His words rang over the silent, captivated company, his searching eyes finally finding Shepard over the heads in front of her.

"There are certain qualities we look for in Marines. You have them in spades, never doubt it. We'll be watching your careers with interest." He held her eyes. In response to his rousing words, the fine hair rose on Shepard's arms.

His face split into a grin. "While the entire graduating class has performed exceptionally well, two amongst you earned superior marks during the nine grueling months of Basic Training you've all endured."

Shepard smiled smugly, fully prepared for what was about to happen.

"Both earned their first noteworthy accomplishments while in training." He picked up the two framed datapads from the podium and held them up. "Corporals Shepard and Lacerda, please come to the front."

Shepard broke rank and headed for the stage. Carla, making her way from the far side of the column, walked several paces ahead of her, her curly black hair pinned into a bun that jounced above her collar with each step. They reached the stage at the same time but Shepard's longer stride reached the podium first. She stood at attention on the near side so that the other woman would have to walk all the way around.

Valis walked around the podium to stand in front of Carla.

"I am proud to personally award this accomplishment badge for Superior Marksmanship to you, Corporal Lacerda. Skills like yours help the Alliance remain a dominant force in the galaxy. You do the Alliance proud."

He tapped into his omni-tool, transferring the award to the datapad. She smiled and shook his hand, taking the datapad with the other hand. They held the pose for a moment as the military journalist in front of the stage took a holo.

Then he walked the few steps to where Shepard was still standing at attention. His smile grew as he approached her, his dark eyes twinkling in his weathered face. Incongruous for such a powerful personality, he stood more than a head shorter than herself.

"Corporal Shepard, it is my deep privilege to give you not one, but two accomplishment badges. The first is for beating my record time in the Gauntlet." His eyes twinkled as he tapped the code that transferred the first award to the datapad and handed it to her.

She took the datapad with a smile, thinking of that day. They had discovered her latent biotic
potential during her run of the Gauntlet, the obstacle course that each recruit had to complete. She was so involved in pushing through the course, and in no small amount of physical pain, she didn't even feel the sparks of blue electricity when they began coursing down her back. That was when Valis had first taken notice of her and taken her under his wing, making sure she got the best first-gen biotic implants, then giving her more challenging assignments and responsibilities.

He tapped his wrist again, transferring the second award to her datapad. "The second accomplishment badge is for selflessly sacrificing herself in a wargame so that her squad could escape an ambush. Even though she herself was awarded no points for the exercise, her team won, in no small part due to her sacrifice."

They shook hands. He locked eyes with her and held her hand in both of his for a moment before turning to the journalist for their holo.

He leaned forward and spoke quietly in her ear. "I know we'll see you go far, Corporal. I personally look forward to seeing what you can do in OCS."

"Thank you, sir." Giving his hand one more firm shake, she turned toward the steps.

She and Carla walked down the stairs together. Noticing Carla's stiff bearing, Shepard felt a twinge of guilt. As hard as the other woman had worked during training, she should be able to enjoy this moment. When they reached the ground, Shepard turned to her and held out a hand.

"Congratulations, Corporal. We haven't always seen eye to eye, but I've appreciated the competitive spirit you've brought to our training."

"Likewise." Carla gave her a level stare.

They briefly shook hands, then Carla marched back to her position in the ranks without any further comment. Shepard lifted one eyebrow and smiled at the back of Carla's neck as she followed. At least she had tried.

Valis spoke after they were both once again facing front. "It's soldiers like those two that make the Alliance a major power in the galaxy. Knowing that men and women like you are joining us, I know that whatever enemies we find out there in the dark reaches of space, with the help of soldiers like you, humanity will prevail. I know, because I see it in your eyes.

"I wish you all luck in your careers. May you see many battles." His gaze swept over the company one more time before turning toward the back of the stage to shake the hands of the other officers there.

Their drill instructor about-faced. "Platoon, dismissed! Congratulations, Marines."

The entire company cheered as the band marched across the field behind them, playing the Alliance anthem. Shepard watched the ebullient response of the spectators in the stands, knowing there was no one watching for her there.

She grew very still in the midst of the milling crowd. On the highest level of the bleachers, she imagined she could see the one person she wanted to share this moment with, smiling with his tousled hair tossed on the light breeze. Tom still felt so close to her, even now. He would have done well in the Alliance, if he only could have grown up.

It hadn't even been a year since he died. She spotted features of her brother in the people around her, a flash of reddish hair or a wide smile bringing her fresh pangs of grief. In the fringes of her mind, his voice whispered something indistinct.
Someone bumped into her, dispelling the vision. She swallowed reflexively and tried to calm down, staring at the flickering shadows near her feet.

She felt a tap on her shoulder. She looked up to see Sheila's smiling eyes sparkling under the brim of her hat. "Hey, Shep! You coming to the party later? Christo req'ed a vehicle so we can go to the Equator Lounge. A couple of the squads are going too, so it should be lots of fun."

"No thanks, you go ahead with the others."

"We've invited you out for every weekend pass, but you never come. What's your deal?"

"I've got some things to prepare for the trip to Virginia. You guys go ahead."

Sheila put her hand on Shepard's arm before she could move away. "It's our last night. You won't see some of us for a long time, if at all. We'll miss you being our fearless leader." She grinned. "We're meeting at Gate F after we get changed. I hope we'll see you there."

"I'll think about it," she said, with no intention of following through.

Sheila twisted her mouth to the side but said nothing about Shepard's deception. She shrugged and walked away.

Shepard began to negotiate through the crowd of well-wishers and enthusiastic graduates to get to the road leading to the barracks. There was so much joy and camaraderie around her, it was almost suffocating. Her throat began to tighten. She wanted to get closer with her squad, but distance felt safer. Bad things happened to people who got close to her.

It wasn't long before she saw Valis coming toward her way. She had the feeling that he'd been looking for her, and she had to admit she was glad that somebody was thinking of her today. Plus, she just liked the old warrior.

"Congratulations, Corporal," he said when he came close, holding out his hand.

She took his outstretched hand and shook it firmly. "Thanks again, sir. I wasn't expecting the second award."

His laugh sounded like rocks being rubbed together. "We sometimes make up new badges for worthy feats. My second year, I got one for launching a Mako a kilometer into the air off a mountainside on some godforsaken nowhere lump of rock. It was low gee, of course, but of all my achievement badges, that's my favorite."

"Sounds like a good memory, sir."

"Indeed it is. I suppose you're on your way to celebrate with your squad, so I won't keep you."

"I was actually planning on getting a head start on packing, sir." She gestured in the direction of the barracks.

He looked disturbed by this offhand comment. "The Alliance can't have one of its best officer candidates working themselves into an early grave. You've just finished thirty-six weeks of training. You find your squadmates and cut loose. Can't have you cracking up in Officer Candidate School. Am I understood?"

"With all due respect, sir, I don't do parties."
"I've seen your records, Shepard. You've been to the medic for panic attacks at least once a month. If you deny your needs as a human being you'll weaken your performance in the field. Can't have that, you're the most promising special forces candidate I've seen in a long time."

He reached up to give her arm a friendly slap. "Go out tonight and celebrate. You've earned it. That's an order."

"Yes, sir." She mournfully watched him walk away before continuing to the barracks. Once there, she changed into an Alliance tee and spacer cargos, leaving her dress blues neatly folded on her bunk.

Reluctantly, she left the barracks and walked toward the side gate where her squad was meeting. She rubbed the top of her shaved head reflexively, her scalp tingling in the light breeze.

This new existence still seemed fragile to her, like it could be taken away at any moment. She was fulfilled. It worried her.

She doubted that anyone could have traced her here unless Cong sold her out. That seemed unlikely. He made it plain that he intended to make another offer to her later on. She owned to herself that the offer was attractive, but the discipline of military life suited her needs at the moment.

And then there was Raul. Raul was the most passionate person she'd ever met. Bat-shit crazy, of course, but his adoration had more than made up for that, especially in those last few days. Her affairs before she met him had been easy to let go of, often chosen for some advantage they brought to her plans. They hadn't brought her much pleasure.

Raul wasn't the kind of man that just shrugged and walked away. The thought of being hunted by him both disgusted and thrilled her. Even though he was one of the most dangerous men she'd ever known, she remembered the intimacy they had shared with surprising tenderness. Their final week together had been as brief as it had been powerful. Her memories of him often crept into her dreams.

She shook her head at herself, dodging celebrants. Who was she kidding? There was no way that relationship could have survived. Raul was a killer many times over, not to mention the instigator of the worst night of her life. Her nightmares started when she lost her mother, but the panic attacks started after bajo de malecón.

As the words came into her head, memories of that night began to flood back. Her heart pounded. She stopped walking to catch her breath. Post-traumatic stress syndrome tended to bring out the "fight" in her "fight or flight", as her squadmates had discovered. If there was a worse place to flip out than in the middle of a military parade, she didn't know what it was.

She shoved the poisonous thoughts into the background. Raul was a killer, she reminded herself as she approached the gate where her squad was waiting. A killer with no moral rudder, with only his selfish desires to guide him.

"Alright, Shepard!" One of the two men from her squad, Lou, smiled from the driver's seat of the large transport idling on the far side of the road, his white teeth contrasting strongly against his black skin. The back of the truck was open to the sky, lined with benches. She jogged the last few steps and jumped over the tailgate into the back of the crowded truck, shoving Christo's bulky form aside on the bench to make room. She caught a glimpse of Carla wedged into the front seat as she got settled.
It was a ten minute drive on the ground through the thick forest surrounding the base. Shepard had only briefly been to the nearby city of Macapa nine months earlier, when she first arrived. Lou redlined the lumbering transport with Christo egging him on from the back, but it was still slow going. The road eventually twisted east, following the northern bank of the Amazon River delta. He slowed when they got close to town, following the twisting roads of the city expertly. She watched the buildings speed by curiously, having never seen the city when the sun was still up.

They eventually turned in beside a large square building on the shore with bright colored spotlights shining on the exterior walls, which were sculpted out of plasti-crete to look like a white shell. Its upper level was open to the sky and she could see people moving in the murky light emanating from the balconies on the floors below, their loud conversations spilling out to the roadway. Lou parked the truck next to several other military vehicles in the lot and the others jumped out.

Shepard lagged behind, staring out over the water. The sun was just dropping below the horizon. Unlike back in California, where she had memories of brilliant sunsets, the sun disappeared at the equator with almost no noticeable twilight. It made this part of the Earth feel slightly alien, piquing her curiosity about what she would see on other worlds.

"C'mon, Shep!" Lou called out, waving his arm at her from across the lot.

She watched as the sun dropped the last inch, then ran to catch up with the others. The club was pounding with its own heartbeat, the muffled music crawling into her stomach and gripping her powerfully. Images of Chege and his father came immediately to mind, along with memories of hundreds of nights working the upscale bar in the Afrikka Club, hustling her way to the top.

In this moment, Valis' words came back to her: why was she here?

She discarded a dozen bullshit answers to that question in the time it took her to scan her ID at the side door and follow the others up the stairs, but it continued to haunt her.

The inside of the Equator Lounge pulsed with color and sound. The vaulted main room stretched up the top floor, while overlooking indoor balconies wound up to the roof deck, open windows allowing the breeze into the upper levels. Flashing colored lights illuminated the crowd in time with the beat, revealing celebrating marines like them mixed in with the locals everywhere she looked. As they skirted the central dance floor, the oscillating lights exposed couples in dark corners, blissfully ignoring the others in the club.

They finally found a table on the far side of the dance floor, near one of the smaller bars. She had barely settled in a chair in the corner before Sheila was pulling her up. "Nuh-uh, Shepard. You're not gonna hide out tonight."

Sheila pulled her over to the bar and ordered a round of cheap drinks, which they carried back to the table. Shepard sneered in distaste at the swill but chugged it down, remembering far better concoctions from the Afrikka Club.

The others bantered and cracked jokes, ordering round after round. It was tempting to jump into their conversation, but she held back, still clinging to her self-imposed isolation. By the fifth round, she was leaning against the wall, slapping the cold plasti-crete in time with the beat of the music. She didn't even realize she was bobbing her head with the beat until Christo punched her arm

Squinting, she looked up at him. His enormous barrel-chested frame seemed to take up more room in here than in the truck. He leaned in close to her, taking his cigarette out of his mouth to shout into her ear.
"Hey Shepard, are you dancing?" he laughed, his breath reeking of alcohol. "I didn't know you had any moves. Get out there and show us what you can do!"

She gave him a caustic look and refocused on nursing her drink. He shouted to the rest of the table, his words slightly slurred, "Shepard thinks she's under orders not to have any fun tonight. You believe that shit?"

She punched him in the arm hard enough to elicit an "Ow!", but the others had already jumped on her case, demanding in jovial terms that she "dance that pole out of her ass".

Carla snorted into her glass. "She's a kiss-ass with a chip on her shoulder. Ignore her, she won't be any fun."

Something about Carla's tone finally rose Shepard's ire. "I'm a kiss-ass, miss military academy? Go fuck yourself."

Everyone at the table turned and stared at her incredulously. Several pregnant moments passed before Shepard realized she'd said the last part in Spanish.

"Shit," she muttered. She was slipping up already. But then, maybe it was overkill to try and hide everything about herself. She kicked back the last of her drink, then pushed off the wall to set the glass on the table. "Fine, I'll dance."

Sheila shouted in wordless glee and grabbed Shepard's hand, yanking her down the stairs and towing her to the very middle of the dance floor.

"Okay, Shepard," Sheila grinned, shouting over the music. "Let's see what you've got."

Standing in the middle of the spirited dancers, Shepard felt even more out of place. At a loss for how to start, she closed her eyes and remembered the last time she had come to a place like this.

The night after Raul confessed his feelings at the UCC, they had gone out together to celebrate at a club up the coast. It was an unforgettable night. She imagined he was there with her now, his strong arm around her waist. She began to move.

The music was present in every part of her, her ears, her eyes, her skin, and underneath, the bass throbbed in her bones. The colored lights flowed across her closed eyelids, rainbows that moved in time with the beat. The heat of the other dancers embraced her, everyone in harmony as they gave themselves over to the music.

She could almost hear Raul whispering in her ear, chills shivering down her spine as she listened to him. She flung her head back, imagining him lower his mouth to the hypersensitive flesh of her neck.

Was that what she wanted - to go back to the Sangre Carnal? If he found her, would she be able to resist him? She wasn't certain.

Living in fear of being caught and locked up, or snatched and used as leverage for a rival gang, sounded unappealing to her after the last nine months. She wasn't certain she wanted to go back to a life of power plays and posturing. But was she turning her new life into a lie by hiding her true self?

She danced faster, working out her frustration.

The music changed, became heavier and harder-hitting, pounding up her legs and pushing the air
from her lungs with each beat. Her legs bent and twisted in time with the music, her arms reaching for the lights. The bass dropped and she leaped up, pumping her fists while the melody rose, her spirits along with it.

She could go back to Cong, who had helped her already. With his resources and backing, she could accomplish just about anything she put her mind to. But what would she do with it? Pursue Cong's corporate goals, shooting people for money like a merc?

Fighting for nothing was a repugnant thought. Recent memories of training with a team of dedicated soldiers behind her pushed that thought away. Sure, a lot of the people here were for the paycheck too, sending money home until they'd done their time. Or, like her, joined up because they didn't know what else to do with their lives or felt they had no choice. But there was more to it.

She'd known it would be interesting the first time the others came back from their first weekend pass. They'd come in through the window at the end of the barracks, rappelling from the roof. The lot of them were still piss drunk just an hour before first call. She'd been hard pressed to keep them from getting in trouble, but she covered for them the best she could, earning their appreciation.

Basic training, in her observation, was just a bunch of well-armed seventeen and eighteen year olds living alone for the first time, playing real-life video games. She smiled at the memory as she danced. She wanted so much to join them every time they went out. And here she was. She was cheating herself and them by not sharing who she really was. The danger had long since passed.

Eventually the beat slowed. She warmed to the new music, feeling the waves of sound course down her body, pushing her hips this way and that. Not thinking, just feeling. The sensation crackled through her spine. Her biotic implants began to warm up. Her eyes opened and she stopped dancing.

Sheila stopped to look at her curiously. "What's wrong?" she asked. "You're not a bad dancer at all!"

Shepard smiled. "Come on, I need another drink."

"Alright!"

Sheila eagerly followed, pushing past her just before they reached the long bar on the ground level. "Hey! Get us a round of Piledrivers."

"No," Shepard interrupted. "No more of that sludge. Get us a round of Salarian Lab Experiments."

"What the hell is that?" the bartender asked.

Shepard began to point out bottles on the shelf, shouting out lengthy instructions, but the bartender just looked confused and pulled a few beers for other customers.

Sheila touched her arm and spoke into her ear. "This isn't the kind of place you order exotic drinks."

"It looks like a place that would serve them. So why don't they?" Shepard waved at the bartender to get his attention again, but was ignored for her efforts.

"You want something done," she muttered, then launched herself over the bar. Waving the flustered bartender away, she pulled down the four bottles she wanted.
She rolled seven glasses down her arm and across her chest before setting them on the bar. The bartenders shouted at her to leave, then stopped to watch as she flipped the first bottle in the air and caught it behind her back. Onlookers cheered her on, calling their friends over as she flipped the bottle again, ducking under it and catching it with her off hand before pouring.

Back in L.A. she had her act coordinated like a dance, in time with the music. The customers loved it. She made more money than anyone else. If money alone had been her goal, she would have happily stayed there.

"Hey, can you make me one of those too?" someone shouted from down the bar. One of the bartenders began talking urgently into his wrist comm.

"You just love being the center of attention, don't you?" Sheila asked, leaning forward to be heard over the music.

Shepard grinned but focused on not dropping the bottles. She tossed a decanter of clear eezo-based liquor with glowing blue flakes floating in it into the air and put on another crowd-pleasing show before she poured, thoroughly enjoying herself. She set the glowing bottle down next to the others. As she reached for the last decanter, someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"You're going to have to leave, miss," a deeply accented voice said from beside her. She glanced briefly over her shoulder to see a large, dark man wearing a black shirt with the word "Seguridad" on the front.

"Just one more thing," she said, tossing the last bottle straight up. The crowd gasped as she caught it in a biotic field an inch from her head. The biotic field made the previously clear liquid glow purple. She lowered it and winked at the shocked bouncer through the sparkling bottle, the other wide-eyed bartenders amassed behind him, before carefully guiding it over to the glasses and pouring the last ingredient into the drink.

She snatched the bottle from the biotic field and set it down. "Still want to try and kick me out?" she asked the still-gaping bouncer.

Holding up a hand covered with blue lightning, she touched each one of the glasses. The eezo began to glow, the blue flecks turning a startling shade of purple. When she made these drinks back in the Afrikka Club she had used a live wire. She loved the theatrics of being able to do it this way. Winking at the bouncer, she tapped her chit on the bar five times, transferring a large tip to the bar. "There you go, that should cover it." With an athletic leap, she moved to the other side of the bar, where a few of the other members of her squad were waiting, having come over when they heard the commotion.

Confusion and irritation were plain on Carla's face as she took one of the glasses. "Who are you? It's like you're from another dimension."

"You never know. I hear the Salarions split the eleventh dimension. I think that's what this drink was created for, come to think of it," Shepard said. She kicked back her drink, then huffed out a short breath. "It's hot in here. I'm going upstairs to get some air." She waved the hem of her shirt to let cooler air in.

"I'll go with you," Carla said. The others watched in surprise as they walked away together.

It was well after midnight when they stepped onto the roof. The air outside was warm and moist, as it always was here, but still cooler than it had been inside. Shepard lifted her face and stretched
her back. Her ears felt like they were stuffed with cotton after dancing in the loud club for so long, but she felt wonderful.

Should she be sobering up this quickly? Maybe it was her biotics. The implants were first gen, so who knows what benefits and side effects she'd discover. She tried to ignore the warnings they tried to impress on implant candidates, preferring to focus instead on potentially being able to levitate like an asari.

They walked to the corner of the roof deck together. It was much quieter out here, though the bass still vibrated under their feet. The moon was incandescent in the sky, everything on the deck aglow in its bright light.

Shepard leaned over the edge of the waist-high block wall surrounding the deck and looked out at the river. "Do you think there are any predators in the water, like sharks?" she asked.

Carla chuckled. "It's freshwater, so no sharks. But there could be some Amazonian predators in there."

"A shame. I'd love a swim right now."

"Would it wash off the cover-up?" Carla asked.

Shepard was silent for a moment before she answered. "No, it should stay on for another week."

"It must have been hard to keep them secret. Why did you hide them? You're allowed to have tattoos."

"It's not to hide them from you. It's to hide me from - other people." Shepard hopped up on the wide wall, dangling her legs over the edge above the alley next to the club. She moved several half-empty bottles and glasses out of the way and patted the chilly stone surface, indicating for Carla to join her. Carla sat next to her, glancing apprehensively at the ground two stories below.

"Truthfully," Shepard said, "It was harder to keep myself from getting close to anyone."

"Is that why you've been so awful to me?"

"Have I really been that awful? Yeah, okay, I have," Shepard said. "I guess you remind me of someone I used to know. I had to leave her behind when I came here."

"What was her name?"

Shepard hesitated before responding. "Lola."

"Was she your - girlfriend?"

Shepard smiled. "No, not like that. Not my thing."

Carla looked disappointed. "Oh. Never mind."

Shepard took a moment to contain her surprise at this revelation before responding. "If I'd known it was like that, I might have been nicer about it. I'm sorry I'm such a bitch."

Carla shook her head. "You just love to be admired, don't you?"

Shepard shrugged audaciously, making the other woman laugh.
"I've worked so hard to get where I am," Carla said. "But you make it look easy. Do you even have a military background?"

Shepard hesitated again before responding, wondering how much she should reveal. "No. I didn't even know I was coming here until the day before I left. I suppose you could say that I was raised in a war zone, though. I've never been to a real war, but that's what it felt like to me."

"It must have made you strong. It shows."

"Seems like you've done just fine without a lot of hardship."

Carla shrugged. "I'm not going to apologize for having loving parents or having gone to a good school. I've done the most I could with what I had to work with, just like you did."

"Interesting it should bring us to the same place, though."

"We're intersecting here, but we're on different paths. In five years, we could be as far apart as Sol is to the Horsehead Nebula."

Shepard frowned. "I have no idea what my path is supposed to be. I've been trying to figure it out this whole time."

"Really?" Carla cocked her head to the side and a breeze lifted some of the hair that had come free from her bun. It blew across her face as she spoke. "That's surprising. You seem so driven."

"I'm just doing what I always do. Whatever needs to be done at that moment."

Carla smiled. "Well, you seem to have no trouble advancing."

"Maybe that's it. I've always looked for a way to take things to the next level. I don't like to settle. In the military, the path is laid out for me. It's almost too easy."

"There's more to promotion than what you've seen in Basic."

"I know that, but as long as I stay on the fighting path, all I have to do is keep kicking ass."

"And that's all there is to it?" Carla asked.

"It helps to have some flair, so you get noticed," Shepard said.

"I suppose you're right."

Downstairs, the bass stopped. The two of them sat in silence. Only the conversation of the scattered people behind them occasionally broke the peace. The lights on the deck flashed. Last call.

A shuffle from below them caught their attention. They both peered over the edge of the building to see two men escorting a stumbling woman down the alley next to the club. The men were indistinct, wearing dark clothes that blended in with the dark alley, but the woman wore a bright red dress that sparkled in the light filtering from the riverfront. Her voice carried up to where they were sitting.

"Where're we going?" the woman slurred, leaning heavily on one of the men. "This isn't my sister's house."

The man on her left said something that they couldn't hear, and the other man laughed. The woman
shoved at the one who had spoken and fell back a step.

Shepard and Carla glanced at each other, concerned.

"No, no," she said. "Take me - take me back. I can call my sister, she can come get me."

The man who laughed before threw the woman up against the wall. He slapped her, then began tearing at her clothes.

Up on the roof, Carla swung her feet back over the ledge. "We have to help her. Come on," she said.

"It could be too late by time I take the stairs. I'll meet you down there."

Carla looked at her oddly, but nodded. "I'll go get the others." She ran toward the stairs, tapping at her wrist comm.

Shepard turned back to the scene below and scooted all the way to the edge of the wall. Her heart thumped in her throat. In theory, her biotics should stop her from hitting the ground hard. It was the first time she had tried it, though. As she looked at the tableau three stories below, deciding which direction to jump, she wondered that she had been able to jump out of Cong's window like she had. She balked at the vivid memory of her extensive injuries.

The woman below broke away long enough to scream. Without another thought, Shepard leaped into the air.

Bright blue light radiated from her as she fell, shining on the dull stone walls. Her feet hit the ground, her biotics cushioning most of the shock. She flung her hand out, throwing a shockwave through the men and sending them flying into the dumpster several yards away. The deep boom of the shockwave resounded in the narrow alley, momentarily dizzying her.

Then everything happened at once. A low black door leading into the club behind her opened and two bouncers stepped out, one of them the big one who tried to kick her out earlier. Down the alley, a dozen marines ran around the corner. The woman against the wall collapsed, evidently having fainted, and one of the men who attacked her pulled out a pistol.

The bouncers jumped back behind the door when they saw the weapon. Shepard quickly brought up a kinetic shield and ran toward the armed man, a top-heavy behemoth with legs that looked far too spindly to hold him upright. A panicked look appeared on his face as she came at him, her left fist already cocked at her hip. The pistol flashed several times, but the shots deflected off her shield into the walls on either side.

She dropped the shield when she came close enough to see the stubble on his chin in the dark alley. Still running, her left hand slapped the gun away and she slammed her assailant into the wall behind him. His breath left him with a loud exclamation.

All of this happened in just a few moments while her squad ran down the alley. When the shots stopped, the door to the club opened again.

Her right fist hit the would-be rapist in the groin just as her squad arrived. A wheezing sound came from his throat and he toppled over.

"Shepard!" Carla's voice came from behind her.

Shepard ignored the other squad leader, turning to the man who had torn the woman's dress. He
wasn't as big as his friend, but similarly built. He cowered against the dumpster, staring at her with wide, frightened eyes.

"No!" he shouted, holding his arms out.

"Shepard," Carla shouted. "He's terrified, stop! It's over!"

Her fist glowed blue as it flashed through the air. It connected with his groin with a sickening crunch. He heaved and doubled over. Then he dropped to his knees, retching violently onto the filthy ground.

Shepard straightened up and glanced over to where the bouncers were helping the woman up. One of them was already on his wrist comm, calling the police. She nodded with satisfaction and walked over to where Carla was standing with their squads. The other marines murmured to each other, some of them plainly disappointed at missing out on the action.

"He was already giving up, Shepard. Why did you hit him?" Carla asked.

"There's only one way to deal with rapists," she said. Carla nodded, but didn't look convinced. Shepard looked at the bouncers one more time. "They've got this now. Let's go back to the base."

"Hey," a voice from behind her said as they moved away.

She stopped and looked over at the bouncer from behind the bar earlier. He was hefting the unconscious woman in his arms. "Yeah?"

"Thanks," he said. "One of us would have gotten shot, for sure."

"No problem." She gave him a terse nod, then trotted down the alley toward her squad.

She ran to catch up with Carla and put her arm over her shoulder as they walked back to the truck. Shepard suffered through some good-natured ribbing as they climbed in, which she took with good grace. Lou smiled up at her as he closed the lower door of the back of the truck, leaving the top half open to the night.

"Good times, Shep. Glad to see you had some fun."

"Me too, Lou." She watched him walk around the corner of the truck. The doors on the cab slammed shut and the old eezo drive of the truck whined as it started up.

Shepard didn't sit down with the others. Instead, she straddled the ledge of the door, hanging half out of the truck as it began to move. The wind caressed her face and her bald head as they headed back to the base.

When they drove into the forest, the sound of the engine reflected off the trees, mixing eerily with the cheerful conversation of her squadmates. The moon shone into the back of the truck, revealing the happy men and women she served with. Her new family, if she chose to let them in. But perhaps there really wasn't any choice about it after all; it was what she had wanted all along.

She raised her face to the sky, to the stars which would soon be her home, and finally felt a small measure of release.
Letting Go

Chapter Summary

The last day of the 10th grade presents James with his first real choices of adulthood.

Chapter Notes

Music: I made another playlist for this chapter, titled "In Requiem: Rosie Sanders".

6.3.2174
San Diego, CA

James

"Hey, Sanders! Get in here, let's see how many ways I can whip your ass before the sun sets."

James stood across the sand from Roe Maxton, the blonde, heavily-muscled captain of the school's wrestling team. Amassed around them on Fletcher Beach, a fair number of the twenty-thousand strong student body awaited the coming fight with all the patience of a pack of rabid wolves.

The day had taken a surprising downward turn, especially when compared with how good it had been before school let out a few hours earlier.

When the last bell rang on the last day of his 10th year of school, James sent a message to Andrea to meet him at the entrance to the garage. The throngs of students passing by held that quality of excitement that promised summer days and fun, which James had every intention of enjoying with his pretty new girlfriend.

Her cocksure attitude had held his attention for several months now. He loved how she commanded attention when she walked into a room, always dressed in a fashionable outfit that hugged her curves, each auburn hair perfectly positioned on her head.

She'd shown him the night before in no uncertain terms that she wanted to be with him. James thought he might really be falling for her. He was imagining Andrea behind him on his bike, her arms wound around him as they raced the ocean wind, when he spotted her walking quickly toward the parking level, away from him. He hurried to catch up with her.

"Hola, mamacita," James said, coming up behind her and looping an arm around her waist. He leaned forward to kiss her ear just as she twisted around to look at him.

"There you are, Jimmy." She smiled but deftly moved out of his arms, fidgeting with the strap of the red purse on her shoulder. Her eyes darted around, then back to him.

"Call me James." He bent down to her level with a wide smile, angling for a kiss again.

"Not here," she said abruptly. She chewed her lip, bending away from him with a smile.
Was she being shy, after what they had done last night? Probably not; it had been his first time, not hers. But he pulled back, admiring the shape and color of her mouth as he spoke. "When do you want to meet for the party tonight? Do you want to go in on my bike, or are you picking me up?"

"I'm not sure," she said vaguely. "I'll message you when I get to Fletcher."

"Just don't forget that I'll be leaving early. My mom's operation is later tonight."

Her head popped up, her expression opening for the first time. "Oh, that's right. It's not the first one, though? She's done this before."

"This time they're replacing one of the valves on her heart. She says it's no big deal, but you never know." He trailed off, catching a glimpse of his friend Monique passing by without acknowledging him. Mo had been ignoring him a lot lately.

A familiar face appeared at James' side from the rapidly thinning crowd. "Apparently you are as dumb as you look, Sanders, making a move on my girl right in front of me."

James turned and looked down at Roe with a smile. "She seemed pretty happy with me last night when I told her she had to choose between us. The night she dumped you."

"Oh, yeah? Then why did she just run off?"

Looking quickly, James just saw the top of her head before she disappeared into the garage.

Roe laughed at his expression. "Dumbass. She played you and came running back to me this morning. Live and learn though, huh? Maybe when you're a senior you'll understand. If you make it through tonight."

"That a threat?" Nostrils flaring, James stepped up to Roe, his chin level with the other boy's eyes. Before Roe could retort, a large hand appeared on James' shoulder.

"That's enough, son. You have somewhere to be, Mr. Maxton?" a deep voice said.

James recognized the voice as Mr. Lewis, his history teacher and one of the only people in school physically imposing to him. He'd spent many afternoons after school studying for the scholarship with him.

He tried to calm down as he watched Roe walk away, then Mr. Lewis turned him around to face him.

"What's going on?"

"Roe doesn't like me going out with Andrea."

"Why does it matter what he thinks? It's her choice."

James was in no mood for one of Lewis' sermons today. "I know that. But she told me all about how that bast- I mean, how Roe treated her. I'm surprised it took her this long to ditch him. It was downright baffling, after what she had confided in him over the last few months."

"Maybe there's more going on there."

"She told me everything." James folded his arm across his chest, glaring across the milling crowd of students heading for their cars.
"Then there's no reason to get so upset, is there? What about Monique, what does she think about this Andrea?" Monique had helped him study from time to time at her father's gym.

"They've met a few times when Andrea came to talk when I was working out. Mo doesn't like her. Dunno why not, they're both nice."

"Huh. Imagine that." Lewis sounded amused and James wondered if he had missed something. "Watch yourself at the party tonight. Avoid Roe. And the girl too, she seems like trouble. I don't want to hear you've lost your scholarship to the Academy because you got into a fight."

"What does it matter? Pop still won't sign, and Mom won't go against him." Frustrations upon frustrations.

"You'll figure out a way to make it happen, but only if you don't get in trouble tonight. Don't forget."

Not really listening, James looked back the way Andrea had gone. "I'm not sure what's going on with her."

"Not a good start to a relationship, son. She seems like an awful lot of trouble."

"Some girls are worth the trouble."

"But is she one of them?"

"Of course."

He clapped him on the shoulder again. "Okay then. I did my best. Have fun tonight. Remember what I said." He walked away, leaving James to his thoughts.

Did Andrea mean what she said last night? He couldn't see the point in her lying about it, then felt guilty for not giving her the benefit of the doubt.

James shook off his dour thoughts as he walked to his bike, waving to his friends in the crowd and calling out places to meet on Fletcher Beach later on. He was still on too much of an emotional high from last night to let the incident stick with him for long. By the time he reached the area where he had parked, his good humor had returned. Any way he looked at it, he had a party and Andrea to look forward to tonight.

Two freshman girls ran up to him as he swung his leg over the bike. "Hey, James!"

He grinned. "Well, if it isn't the Candies. Haven't seen you three at the hospital lately."

A petite blonde in a red skirt reached him first. "They transferred us to the cancer wing, but we still have some volunteer time to log before graduation. Does your mom need any help today? I have some time if you'll take me home afterward."

"What about the cancer patients?" he asked with a laugh.

"Your mom is our favorite. She tells us all kinds of stories about you," the other girl said, breathless from exertion as she shoved her way through the last few people in her way, almost stumbling into James. She blew her mop of light brown hair out of her eyes so he could see both of her big, brown eyes. "Take me, I know just how she likes things done. My dad said I can. I asked this morning."
"Look, I really appreciate it, but my mom's not even home. She's at the doctor's today. I'll see you later, okay?" He started his bike and pulled into the flow of traffic leading out of the garage, away from their sad faces.

At the beginning of this school year, his legacy of spectacular rejections from the opposite sex had come to a screeching halt. It could have been losing the last of his baby fat that triggered it or maybe his sudden growth spurt, he wasn't sure, but girls had taken notice. He liked the attention even if some of the girls were difficult to turn down. They were cute, just not really his type.

He wove in and out of traffic on the way home, smiling into the wind. He liked confident women. Older women. Preferably redheads.

His parents were already at the hospital, he noted with relief when he reached their apartment. It took no time for him to get ready without his father there to ask a million questions. He showered, then took special care that his short hair was combed rakishly over one eye. The mohawk had been much easier to take care of, but the girls liked this more. He didn't fight what worked.

After changing into his nicest jeans and a blue and white shirt so he'd be in school colors, he strapped his shoes on and walked to the front door. Before he touched the handle, his wrist-comm vibrated. He checked the ID and, seeing it was his friend Javin, opened the call. "'Sup, Killer."

"You comin' to the party tonight?"

"Planning on it." James walked down the hall and punched the button for the elevator.

"You know Roe's going to be there," Javin said.

"Yeah, he's pissed about Andrea. She broke up with him."

Javin's muffled laugh came over the comm. "She's lying to you, bro. She's making you look like a chump."

"She told me herself last night."

"Listen to me, jerkoff. She didn't break up with him. You just fucked the girlfriend of the captain of the wrestling team, and he's been telling everyone that he's going to kick your ass tonight. I'm surprised he hasn't already told you himself." James could almost see the jubilant look on his friend's face.

James couldn't immediately respond, thinking of the last thing Roe had said before Mr. Lewis interrupted. Was he supposed to fight Roe at the party tonight?

"You there?" Javin said over the comm.

He shook his head slightly. "Um, yeah."

"You're still coming tonight, right? I'm already taking bets." His enterprising friend never missed a chance to fleece anyone, James included.

"Goddamn right I'm going."

"You better. Don't make me find you and break your arm again."

"Just try it."

"C'mon now, you know I was kidding."
"Right, whatever. You better have my back tonight, Jav." James terminated the call, shaking his head.

The sun was touching the ocean when he reached the bluff, the shore in the distance dotted with large bonfires while the sparkling water reflected the light from the colored lanterns swinging from the posts that surrounded the area. A few surfers bobbed on the water. Music poured from speakers set into the cliff and from stands spread throughout the area, the bass thumping on the surface of his skin and through the sandy plasti-crete under his feet.

More people shouted at him while he crossed the first few concrete patios, wishing him luck. Someone handed him a beer when he reached the fringes of the gathering, saying, "Good luck tonight, James!" He smiled uneasily at them and sipped at the beer.

He spotted Javin hanging out with a group of familiar boys at a table near the top of the long staircase to the beach, built into the side of the bluff. They greeted him with the usual insults, this time barbed with allusions about the fight to come.

Javin was, as usual, full of news. "Kendra told me that he's got the entire team with him down there. I sure don't want to be in your shoes."

It took James a moment to realize what he meant. "Are you fuckin' kidding me? After all the times I've backed you up? You better be there when it goes down."

"I like you, but I'm not stupid. You're on your own, bro." Jav laughed along with the others.

"There you are, Jimmy!" a female voice shouted. A moment later, a laughing Andrea had her arms wrapped around him like she had the other night. This was so much better than the reaction he'd feared that he didn't even remind her not to call him Jimmy. He kissed her, leaning over so her feet touched the ground, then leaned back to take in her skimpy bikini with a pleased smile. Everything upside-down was right again.

His so-called friends watched with open mouths.

"Oh, this is beautiful," Javin said, again howling with laughter. "You are so screwed."

Andrea pulled at his arm to get him walking. "Come on."

"What was that all about at school today?" he asked as they walked through the parting crowd.

She shrugged carelessly, an unconscious gesture that was faintly irritating. "I saw Mr. Lewis coming, so I figured I should leave. I didn't want you two fighting in front of him."

A feeling of unease came over him as he followed her down the stairs and into the crowd. Something was off, but he couldn't place it. It wasn't nerves; he wasn't the type to back down in a fight. No, it was something obvious that he just couldn't see. He tried to think of his nervousness as energy he could use in a fight, like Deon had taught him when they'd sparred down at his gym.

"Let us through!" she shouted.

Over the bodies ahead of them, he saw a small clearing in the gathering. On the far side, Roe stood with two of his friends. Friends and strangers called out from every direction, eagerly pushing through the multitudes of celebrating students to follow him.

Roe called out to him. "Hey, Sanders! Get in here, let's see how many ways I can whip your ass before the sun sets." Roe's fan club laughed, watching James expectantly, avidly awaiting the
coming confrontation.

James finally placed the unpleasant feeling. Javin was right. She had set him up.

Andrea pushed at him until he stood at the edge of the clearing. It looked far different from the inside, with so many familiar faces seeming to move in slow-motion, cheering and shouting and pumping their fists in the air.

He looked around for Javin and the rest of the crew, but saw no sign of them. Some friends. It was just him, then. Fair enough.

Squaring his substantial shoulders, he walked to the middle of the clearing, shrugging off the memory of Mr. Lewis' words of warning less than an hour earlier.

James had the advantage of weight, height and reach, but Roe was an experienced grappler. Deon had shown him how to fight this kind of attacker. Roe would come at him low and fast, go for his midsection or try and take out his legs. James knew he had to stay on his feet or the fight was over.

First things first; he had to even the odds. "Can't face a sophomore by yourself, Roe? You must not think much of your chances."

Roe immediately rose to the bait. "I've taken out bigger guys than you." He waved his friends back.

James grinned. "Then let's dance, *pendejo*."

Roe came at him like a spider, arms and legs spread wide as he sought an opening past James' longer reach. James leaped out of the way, stumbling over his own feet in the slippery sand when Roe rushed toward him.

Laughter came from every side as he slid to a stop. He whipped around in time to see a dark shadow near his feet, then gravity shifted and all he saw was a colored lantern swinging between him and the sky.

Roe was wound around his midsection, keeping him down. James slammed a hammerfist between Roe's neck and shoulder to loosen him up, then brought his knees up so he could throw him back over his head. Both of them scrambled to their feet as the crowd bellowed their enthusiasm.

James stood back, getting his bearings. The other boy was fast, but he couldn't weigh more than a buck fifty. On one of his loading days, James lifted twice that.

He braced himself when Roe launched at him again, tackling him around the middle. James' feet slid backwards, scraping long, dark grooves in the sand. He twisted back and to the right, using Roe's force to pull him forward, then knee'd him solidly in the sternum and dropped an elbow into his back. The crowd shouted, laughing at Roe's pain when he doubled over.

James looked toward Andrea. She blew him a kiss from the edge of the space, practically bouncing with excitement. People all around her were reaching for her, talking to her. She soaked up the attention.

As James guessed he would, Roe used his moment of distraction to charge. James' left hook, ready at his side, caught him square in the temple. Roe's body made a dull thud in the sand when he fell, audible in the moment of hushed astonishment that came over the spectators just before they exploded into cheers again. Roe didn't get back up.
The crowd rushed James, cheering and pounding on his back. Then Andrea's warm, scantily-clad form was rubbing against him. She tried to pull herself up to his level, but the push of the crowd kept her down.

"Pick me up, Jimmy," she shouted, looking over her shoulder at the excited crowd.

"It's James," he said, disentangling himself from her with some difficulty in the surging mass of humanity. "Get Roe to a doctor, Andrea."

Without sparing her a glance, he waded his way through the crowd toward the stairs set into the bluff. The crowd parted before him - that had been happening a lot lately - as he crossed the area that led to the parking lot, looking for Javin. He finally spotted him sitting on one of the plasticcrete tables near the edge of the party.

"Hey, bro! Good job, you made me a mint!" Javin said with a toothy grin. James' fist hit his chin and Javin fell backward off the table, blood spraying out of his mouth and across the pale sand. The other boys laughed and pointed at their groaning friend.

"I need better friends," James muttered as he walked away.

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**Rosie**

"Mrs. Sanders, we need to take you in now."

Rosie didn't open her eyes. She was so tired these days. "I want to see James first. Is he on his way?"

Emilio answered. "He just messaged. Should be here any minute."

Josh's angry voice responded. "Unbelievable. Why didn't he answer when I called?"

"Mr. Sanders, please! Your wife can't be upset right now."

She was beyond caring, but she didn't speak up. There was a huff and the sound of someone sitting in a chair.

Emilio spoke again. "I'll wait outside, Rosie." His footsteps faded.

"You hang in there, Rosie girl. James will be here soon." Josh brought her hand to his face.

Yes. The family together, that's what she always wanted. She could easily picture Josh's smile with her eyes closed. Sometimes he was selfish, but he was always her Joshie.

She could see many other faces the longer she kept her eyes closed. Her dear brother, standing outside the doorway. Her sweet, strong mother. Her kind father. Further back, friends from the old neighborhood.

"Hey, Mom."

This voice brought her eyes open at last. James stood there, tall, handsome, and stronger than she could ever be.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, sitting down and leaning close to her. She brought her hand to the side of his face, noticing how small and pale her hand was next to his healthy complexion.

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"Tired of having people ask me that," she said haltingly.

His chuckle made her face stretch into a smile, breathing happiness over her.

"Doc says they're doing more than the valve this time. A whole heart. You cool with this?"

"Yeah. I'm – cool. Did you meet some nice girls - at that party tonight?"

"Just the same old crowd. I'm glad I'm here now, though."

"Good. I'm glad you went."

"The docs want you now. I'll be here waiting for you to wake up."

"See you then. *Te amo, querido.*"

"Love you too, Mom." He kissed her forehead.

Josh kissed her cheek. "I love you, Rosie," he said, his voice thick.

Her eyes closed. "I love you both so much. Where's Emilio?" she asked softly.

The doctor spoke. "He's waiting outside. You can talk to him on the way out."

The anti-grav hummed and the cot swung loosely in the field as they moved her from the room.

"You don't have to do this, Rosie." Emilio's voice was close by, but still soft. He was always so gentle and patient with her.

"I don't want them to keep picking at it like an old scab. I'm tired of living like this." It took awhile to get all the words out.

"If you're sure. You know I love you. I'll be here for you when you come out."

"You always were," she whispered, growing tired from all the talking. Voices spoke again, but she tuned them out.

Music played somewhere in the background, reminding her of when she was a little girl. The faces returned, brighter now. The hovering cot shifted smoothly from side to side, making her feel like she was swinging on a hammock. She thought of all the summers she spent in the happy house in Escondido, the one Emilio had worked so hard to provide for the three of them after Papa died.

The cot stopped. Bright lights surrounded her, glowing redly through her eyelids.

"Mrs. Sanders?"

"Rosie. Call me Rosie."

A chuckle from off to her right. "Okay, Rosie. How are you feeling?"

That question again. But she wasn't irritated like before. Buoyed by the declarations of love she had just received, she felt, for the first time in her life, truly brave.

"Ready for what's coming," she answered.
Josh

Josh trudged through the door of the apartment he had shared with his wife for the last sixteen years. He closed the door and stepped over the bag and helmet James had left lying just inside. He must already be in his room, having ridden home on his bike alone.

His poor boy was motherless now. The doctor said that his little Rosie had a stroke on the operating table.

He held back a sob as he walked into the kitchen and sunk into his usual chair, putting his face in his hands. There was a bang from the hallway, and then James marched into the kitchen. Surprised, Josh looked up to witness his son's angry face, leaning back when James jabbed a finger at him.

"You did this to her. She should have lived."

He looked up at his son, shocked at this sudden shift to anger from the sadness they had shared before leaving the hospital, and felt the need to defend himself. "I've done nothing but love her."

"Yeah, you did nothing but love her. You didn't even love her right. You smothered her."

"How else am I supposed to love?" Josh ran his trembling hands through his hair. "She kept things from me. I could have helped her."

"Bullshit. Even when she didn't work, you did nothing for her." James was almost shouting now. "She was only thirty-four years old."

"Oh, god, my sweet Rosie-" Josh finally broke down weeping.

James left the room and came back a minute later. Something clattered on the table top.

"Sign it," James said.

Josh wiped his eyes and squinted at the datapad. "What's this? No - no, I told you Jimmy. I don't want you fighting, I don't want you enlisting. You're not going to that military school."

"I'm going. You have no right to deny me my heritage." James' shouting was hurting Josh's ears, triggering a visceral reaction.

"I'm your father. I am your heritage." Josh stood up, knocking his chair back.

"A heritage of what? Watching vids, dreaming about the good old days, maybe abandoning my wife and kid for days at a time to do who-knows-what with my loser friends? Sign it." His hand smacked the table next to the datapad, making it leap and clatter again.

"No," Josh said. James stepped closer. For the first time, Josh realized he was looking up at his son.

"Sign it and I'll stay with you until I enlist. If you don't, I'll file for emancipation and go anyway."

The moment lengthened as Josh measured the sincerity of his son's words. Josh looked around impotently, feeling trapped.

Then James added softly, "Mom wouldn't want our family to break up, Pop."

His mouth tight, Josh scanned his fingerprint into the document and tossed the datapad at his son.
Of course, now that he'd won, Jimmy wanted to play nice. "It doesn't have to be like this with us, Pop. If you could just-"

"Just what?" Josh's bitter words cut him off. "Be more like Emilio? Everything I do is held up to his standard. I never measured up. Not even to Rosie. Once her brother showed up, I was nothing to her. It took everything I had in me to keep her."

"You really didn't get her at all, did you?" James asked, still gentle. "She loved you. You should have been nicer to her."

But Josh's anger couldn't hold up to his sorrow. He put his head back on the kitchen table, his back jarring with sobs.

After a moment, James put his hand on his father's shoulder in comfort. "I'm sorry for yelling, Pop. We're all hurting right now."

Josh wasn't listening. He was remembering the first time he saw Rosie, standing on the beach, shyly looking away when he smiled. She was so different than the other girls, so soft and gentle. But sometimes she said things that surprised you, things that hinted at deeper thoughts under the quiet serenity.

"I can't believe she's gone," he said. He put his hand over his son's and squeezed.

He just wished there was some way he could keep James from leaving, too.
Blindsided

Chapter Summary

Josh makes a last-ditch attempt to keep James close and Shepard takes her first extended shore leave.

Chapter Notes

Music: Good Riddance, Green Day; Glycerine, Bush; My Own Prison, Creed

6.6.2176 San Diego, Earth

James

"Hey Sanders, wake up. It's graduation today."

A hand shook his shoulder urgently. James groaned but couldn't make an intelligible response.

"C'mon man! We can't miss this."

This time James attempted to move, but there was something tangled around his waist and legs. It felt like there were pillows everywhere, including inside his head. The voice coming from the doorway of his room spoke again.

"Damn, you look like shit. I knew you were going to oversleep today. The party last night was crazy, right?"

James rubbed the crust out of his eyes and finally got his long legs moving by hooking his foot around the bottom of the too-short mattress and pulling. Not realizing that he was perched on the edge of the bed, he tumbled naked to the floor.

Half of his mind was still in the incredibly vivid dream he was having. The details were becoming hazy as the word "party" brought forth memories from the night before, but the dream image of his father hanging from a noose while his gentle mother tried to hold him up by the legs was burned into his eyelids. He could still hear her voice calling out desperately - *Jimmy, save him, please...*

He groaned, rubbing his face. What a night.

Behind him in the small bed, a girl that had been hidden by his large chest slowly sat upright. Like James, she was completely naked. Her dark eyes, haloed by smudged makeup from the night before, squinted at the brown-haired boy standing in the doorway. "Who are you?"

"S'okay, Mira," James said to her, still groggy. "Just my friend Holsom. Holsom, get out."

She ran her hand through the long black hair flowing halfway down her back, partially concealing a large dragon tattoo that occupied her left side. She tapped James' shoulder to get his attention.
"Don't tell my little brother about this, okay? I don't want to ruin his graduation by pissing him off."

"I won't say anything either," Holsom said from the doorway.

"Would you please leave?" James asked, untangling his feet from the sheets.

"Nice tattoos," Holsom said to the girl with a grin. "Do you have more? I'd love to see what you've got."

"Are you seriously hitting on the girl in my bed?" James asked, then pointed at the door. "Get out. Last time I say it."

This time his friend listened. Once he was gone, James slid an arm under Mira's legs and pulled her toward him. He wiped the smudged makeup from under her eyes with the pads of his thumbs. "You need to clean up before you go."

"You go ahead and get in the shower. I can be late, but you can't."

"I have a better idea." He stood up, taking her with him and slinging her over his shoulder. She laughed and slapped his back as he carried her across the hallway to the bathroom.

His friend was waiting patiently in the kitchen when they emerged from the bathroom some thirty minutes later, the smell of strong coffee hanging in the air. Like Holsom, James wore his ROTC school uniform for Armstrong Academy. He was fixing his collar when they walked into the tiny room, Mira following in the slightly wrinkled clothes she had worn to the party the night before.

James had rarely seen three people in this room. It felt uncomfortably small. He regretted having to move into this smaller interior apartment after Mom died.

Holsom handed Mira a cup of coffee, already lightened by cream. "There's more in the pot for you if you want it, James. Mira, do you need a ride to your house to get changed?"

She gulped down some of the steaming coffee, then set the cup down. "No, I came in my car. I had better get going." She turned to walk away, but James grabbed her and pressed her against the wall for one more kiss. She kissed him back, her hands wandering underneath his shirt. Another minute passed, until James heard Holsom cough several times.

James pulled back with a smile. "You are a fun girl," he said.

She grabbed her purse from the floor. "And you know how to show a girl a good time. Look me up next time you're on leave. Good luck out there with the Alliance, both of you." Holsom winked at her as she waved goodbye in the doorway, just before shutting the door behind her.

"I knew you were going to take her home last night," Holsom said as James tucked his shirt back in.

"Oh yeah? What gave it away?" James rummaged around in the fridge for a minute before producing the ingredients to his usual morning protein shake.

"I don't know, maybe the way you two were sucking face for like an hour before I left."

"That girl can kiss," James mused as he fixed his drink. "Women will never stop surprising me."

"Are you still trying to tell me you don't get why they throw themselves at you?"

"I'm sorry, I just don't buy that it's just about looks. I'm not that good-looking, and there are lots of
guys stronger and smarter than me." He tilted his head back, drinking.

His friend could only shake his head. "You are unbelievable. Totally oblivious."

James finished chugging his drink and rinsed his cup out. "I am not. I notice lots of things." He shrugged.

"You are, it's infuriating. Plus, no matter what situation you fall into, you always come up smelling like roses. Me, I got chewed out for being four hours past curfew last night. You take Keefe's older sister home and your dad probably congratulated you."

"I haven't seen him in a few days, but you're right. He's got screwy ideas about women. It was Mira's idea to come back here anyway." James walked to the living room and sat on the couch to strap on his shoes.

"Always the girl's choice, right?" Holsom asked, following.

"That's right."

"Dude, you have a lot to learn about women. They want to be pursued."

"Maybe so, but how can you know for sure beforehand? It's a pretty thin line between that and stalker-type behavior. Shit like that is gonna get you kicked in the balls one day. Besides, I'd rather have a woman choose me instead of having to sell her on the idea. Who I am should stand for itself."

Holsom considered this as he followed James into the hallway. "You have a point there. Okay James, you're not naive. You're wise beyond your years."

"I wouldn't go that far." James punched the button on the elevator and the doors shut. His stomach flipped like usual as the compartment quickly dropped the twenty levels into the sub-basement. "I just happen to like assertive women. No mixed messages. Makes everything much easier to interpret."

"For you, maybe, since they only seem to want one thing from you."

"I guess. I just wish they'd stick around longer."

The boys parted ways in the garage with friendly insults when James stopped at his bike, parked in one of the assigned spaces near the elevator. A few minutes later he pulled onto the street and into the narrow beam of the sun shining towards the sea. His head finally began to clear in the crisp morning air.

Halfway out of the city, he was stopped by a red light and his wrist-comm went off. The display in his helmet showed that it was his father. He blinked at the indicator to answer the call.

"'Sup, Pop? You okay? Where are you?"

"I wanted to see you before you left. Why didn't you wake me?"

"Didn't know you were home. Are you coming today?" The light turned green and his bike roared to life, propelling him past the other cars.

The sound of heavy breathing broke up Josh's reply. "I feel like hell. I'll just get - in the way."

"You sound like you're still fucked up, so you're probably right."
"How about afterward? We could have one last - meal together - before you abandon me."

James choked down his response to his father's passive-aggression. "I'll come back if you'll actually be conscious."

"I will be. Do you think - you could stop at Deston's on your way home? I think I left my chit there. He says he set it aside - but you never know."

James pulled his bike into the parking lot adjacent to the school and parked it. ""Deston's?"" he asked incredulously. "Isn't that on the other side of Tijuana? Dad, that's not on the way, that's a fucking hour and a half drive out of the way."

"So you can't - do me one more favor - before you leave? But hey, if you want to - be like that, I suppose I could go-"

James interrupted. "No, I'll go. You don't need to get picked up for being disorderly again. But try to keep better track of your chit. This is the second time this month." Shutting his bike down, James pulled off his helmet and latched it to the back of the bike. The call automatically transferred to his wrist-comm as he walked out of range.

"I don't know what I'll do without you, James."

"Maybe get a roommate? Though I don't know that you'll be able to find someone who'll pay half the bills and bail you out when your chit gets cleaned out because you left it sitting on a park bench somewhere."

"That only happened once."

"Once was enough." James approached the school, where dozens of people were going through the doors. "Look, I gotta go."

"Don't forget to pick it up. I really need it back." He sounded more tense than usual.

"Yeah, I'll see you later." He disconnected with the usual mix of emotions: anger, dismay, and even a little reluctant worry for what would happen to the old man once he left. Whatever it was, he was sure it wouldn't be pretty. Ultimately not his problem, though. It was hard enough watching his mother wither under his father's pressure. The same was not going to happen to him.

Inside the school, he couldn't take three steps without someone stopping him to congratulate him. Eventually he begged off and ran through the main hall, waving at people without stopping when they called out his name. He skirted his way past the main entrance and made his way around the large cafeteria where he'd eaten his lunch all year with the other two thousand students at the Academy, heading for the door on the far end that led to the courtyard where the classes were already lining up for their final march.

He ran across the field to the spot in the middle of the formation where Holsom and the rest of his friends were waiting, returning their shouted greetings as he took to his place.

"Hey, Sanders." The tall black-haired boy in front of him twisted around. "Holsom said you followed my sister home last night when she had a few too many. Did she get back to her dorm okay?"

"Um, yeah. She wasn't that bad off, really."

"Okay. I appreciate it, buddy."
"No problem, Keefe." James waited for him to turn back around, then shot a dirty look at Holsom, who was snickering into his sleeve two places down.

Their instructor called them to attention and the parade began. They had practiced for the ceremony for weeks, so it was no surprise to James that it went off without a hitch. Afterward the dean made a speech probably intended to sound inspiring.

James didn't hear one word of it.

His face was hurting, he was smiling so much. The next phase of his life was finally here. Half the graduating class was joining him in the Basic class starting at the end of the week in Pendleton, and most of them were his friends. Moving to the Academy had definitely been the right choice; he had flourished in this atmosphere of discipline and active learning.

As for the coming trials of boot camp, he wasn't too worried about training would be tough, but he was looking forward to that, too. Pendleton felt like his back yard.

When the class broke formation, his uncle was easy to spot on the field. He stood half a head taller than anyone else, grinning broadly. He greeted his nephew with a fierce hug when they managed to reach each other.

"Goddamn, I'm so proud of you," Emilio said, rubbing his eyes.

"I couldn't have done it without you, Uncle E. I just wish Mom were here too." He could see from the shadowed look on his uncle's face that Emilio was similarly occupied.

His uncle's face brightened. "Let's celebrate. Can I take you out to get a bite to eat?"

"I promised Pop I'd come back and eat with him, and I've got to run an errand for him first. But I'll be at your place later tonight."

The two men pounded on each other's backs once more before James began to work his way back through the crowd. He took his time, greeting everyone that he knew for sure wouldn't be coming to Basic and exchanging promises of pranks and future fun with those who would be joining him in boot camp.

When he finally climbed back on his bike, Mira and Keefe were standing with their parents on the nearby sidewalk. Mira looked across the way when he fired up his bike's engine. Halting in the process of pulling his helmet on, James winked at her. She didn't acknowledge him, but she bit her lip, trying not to smile.

James drove south in relative enjoyment, despite the length of the drive. He liked it this far south. The entire Baja peninsula had long ago been annexed to California, but parts of it remained picturesque. Sometimes he imagined that he was walking in the footsteps of Victoriano Vega, the ancestor his uncle had told him so many stories about. He had often wondered about what he'd been like, whether he had been serious like his uncle, or adventurous like himself.

When he finally reached Deston's house, he had to knock three times before anyone came to the door. He peered into the window by the door, then looked around, rubbing the back of his neck. Something was off.

The woman who answered looked half asleep. "Hello?" she asked, squinting at the sun and shying back into the shadows.

"Deston here?" James asked. "He should have something for my dad."
"You Jimmy?"

"Yeah."

The woman disappeared into the dark house. James kept a surreptitious eye on his bike, wishing he could just leave. He considered going inside after the woman when several more minutes passed without, then decided he'd rather not step foot in the place if he could help it.

The woman reappeared a minute later carrying a small, red plaid bag with a thin fastener along the top. She practically threw it at him and slammed the door in his face. He stared at the closed door, dumbfounded, then shook his head and walked back to his bike. At least he could go now. He tossed the little bag into the compartment under the seat and drove off after tapping a message to his father that he was on his way.

The day after tomorrow he was leaving from his uncle's for Pendleton, with his bike waiting under a tarp in the garage for his return. He smiled, the wind outside his helmet making the digital display vibrate slightly. After respecting the bargain he made with his father the day his mother died, now he was ready to find all the adventure he could. He rode north and got on the freeway, thinking about all the fun times in store for him once he was on his own.

A police vidbot whizzed overhead. He checked his speed, but it was right on the money. The vidbot stayed with him for another few blocks. He tried to ignore it, but for some reason his stomach wouldn't settle.

Then colored lights appeared above him and a siren broke the air. He pulled onto the shoulder, confused. He hadn't done anything wrong - had he?

The police car landed. James took his helmet off when the officer's footsteps crunched up behind him.

"Scanning," the officer said, his omni-tool coming to life. Several beeps sounded as the device brought up his identification.

"You're James Sanders?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where are you coming from?"

"Just running an errand for my Pop. Before that I came from school. I graduated today." He smiled, hiding his anxiety.

The officer started to speak when a blip on his omni-tool caught his attention. He tapped and enlarged a screen, reading it before looking up at James again. "You're Captain Vega's nephew?"

"Yes, sir. You know him?"

"He's worked with our department before. I pulled you over because we received a tip about a man on bike fitting this description trafficking illegal narcotics."

Astonishment lit up James' face. "You think I'm dealing drugs?"

"It was an anonymous tip. It must be talking about someone else. Or a prank, who knows. Congratulations on your graduation, son. Tell your uncle that Lieutenant Peters said hello."
"I will. Thank you, sir."

The officer shook his head. "I wish all kids were as respectful as you. Your parents are obviously doing something right. But I guess blood shows, right?"

"Thanks." James returned his smile, relieved.

Lieutenant Peters let him go after that. This drive had a feeling of finality. It was his last night at home, his last meal with his father. His last time running a pointless errand for the old slacker. Still, he wished he could leave with some indication, however slight, that he wasn't going to be doing more harm than good by leaving. It would also be nice to hear an expression of pride from his father for once.

He thought this automatically, as he had so many times before, but this time he caught himself. Why did he need his father's approval? He couldn't think of a single good reason. Sometimes his father had good moments, but they were few and far between. Josh embodied selfishness in all its many guises.

After parking his bike in the assigned space in the garage - the last time it was his, he thought with satisfaction - he began to walk to the elevator, but then remembered the bag with his father's chit. He took it out, but then just stood there, looking at it.

The police had been looking for drugs. With a feeling of foreboding, he opened the bag. It was filled with small packets of a red substance. A familiar odor wafted from the bag, stinging his nostrils. He remembered it from the day Lola asked him to help look for Tom and they caught him doing red sand.

Red sand. His father had sent him to pick up drugs.

Instantly furious, he marched to the elevator and punched the button, then fumed all the way up to their floor. He stormed through the halls until he reached their apartment door and burst inside.

His father stood up at the kitchen table, surprise written across his face when his son came into the room, but James didn't give him a chance to speak.

He threw the bag at him. "What the hell were you thinking, sending me to pick up red sand?"

Quickly recovering, Josh shrugged and folded his arms across his chest. "Why shouldn't you? You're my son, you should do as I say."

"That's bullshit. You're my father, you shouldn't even have that shit around me."

His father waved a dismissive hand at him. "Stop acting so blameless, you knew goddamn well what I was sending you after."

"The hell I did!"

"You knew it was red sand, didn't you? I knew you couldn't be so innocent, especially after sending you to pick it up so many times."

"Don't you dare fucking say that. Don't you tell me that I've been helping you score drugs."

His father laughed, but backed away from his son's fury. "Did you think I really misplaced my chit that many times? This is exactly why you need to stay here where I can keep an eye on you."
James' fist slammed into the wall next to his head, rattling the vidcomm on the wall. His shouting dominated the small room. "I always tried to give you the benefit of the doubt. Even when you were being a complete jackass to Mom, even when you pissed away most of my savings. But this is unforgivable. I got pulled over today, Pop. I could have-"

James stopped, his eyes widening. Wary, Josh backed up another step, stopping when he ran into the wall.

"It was you that called them, wasn't it?" James asked. He stabbed a finger at him. His father watched him with a mix of fear and anger on his face. "You wanted me to get arrested so they'd cancel my enlistment. Oh, shit."

The magnitude of this betrayal was only just sinking in. He'd never again ignore that gut feeling that something wasn't right. James wanted to scream and rant, he wanted to punch his lights out, but he knew that anything he did at this moment would probably be way over the top. Without another word, he turned and walked down the hallway to his room to get the last of his things.

Most of his stuff was already in his uncle's attic, but his dresser was still full of his clothes. He quickly emptied the drawers into the bag he had set out the day before, only concerned with getting out of this apartment as fast as he could. When he emptied his sock drawer, he found a digital frame he'd hidden in the back.

His finger hovered over the power button, hesitant to see the face he knew he would see, afraid she'd somehow see what had happened and be disappointed with them both. Swallowing, he turned it on and saw his mother's face for the first time in almost a year.

The slideshow progressed automatically, beginning with the last pics he'd taken. There was one of his mother on the back porch at Uncle E's house. Then one of her and Emilio smiling together at the beach. Then she was cooking in their old kitchen, sunlight streaming in the window behind her.

He sat down on the bed, staring at her face. "What would you say to this, Mom?" he asked softly. "Would you forgive him?"

Stupid question. He knew she would. She had been completely caught up in his spell. The picture changed again and again as he watched, going further back into his childhood. Then a new face appeared and he exhaled abruptly, touching the button to stop the slideshow.

This picture was of him, Tom, and Lola at the zoo. He felt the familiar pang of loss when he looked at Tom's face, but somehow it also made him smile. It had been long enough now that he mostly remembered the fun they'd had.

Lola stood behind them with her hands on their shoulders. She hadn't worn any makeup that day. He'd almost forgotten how beautiful she was.

He had long since realized that Tom was just a troubled kid and not the source of potential adventure he'd considered him back then. Lola, on the other hand, remained his ideal in every aspect. It still hurt to think of her, but who was he kidding. He'd barely had the chance to make her notice him before she disappeared. Maybe he could make more of an impression now, but it was a moot point.

She was the same age he was now in this picture. As always, he regretted that she hadn't been born a few years later. Nothing would have stopped him from pursuing her if she'd shown up at his school one day; Holsom would laugh at his hypocrisy, after their conversation that morning. She was more than just adventure and beauty; she was sincere, ambitious, and passionate. Everyone
he'd been with, without exception, had been a pale imitation. The pretty girl he woke up to today wasn't even in the same league.

He tossed the frame in his bag and watched it flicker off. Those times were long gone. Right now, it was time to go. His father had managed to kill the last remaining shred of guilt he felt at leaving. Now he was about to take his place in a long line of Vegas and serve in the Marines. Time to start over.

But he wasn't a Vega, and the name Sanders would only bring him bitter memories. A name can be fixed easily enough, though.

Josh was waiting for him in the living room, blocking the door. "You aren't leaving. You are not walking out that door."

"Watch me." James stepped to the side, but Josh moved in front of him.

"You can't go. You're the only family I have," Josh shouted.

James dropped his bag and grabbed Josh by the collar, clenching his fist by his father's face. "I'm not your son anymore. Understand? Not after what you did."

Josh tugged at his collar, trying to free it from James' strong grip. He stumbled backward into the nearby wall when James released him.

"You're not even worth the trouble." James looked at him one more time as Josh cowered against the wall. Then he picked his bag back up and left.

When he finally arrived at the little bungalow in Escondido, the door opened before his hand touched the handle, revealing the worried face of his uncle. "Is everything okay? Peters called to say that he pulled you over."

"It's fine. Nothing happened, but it was close."

Emilio took his bag and shut the door behind them, following James into the living room. "Peters was a little vague about the details, just said he made sure you got off okay."

"Josh tried to get me arrested, set me up. Peters was cool about it... maybe he even knew what the deal was, now that I think about it. He ran a scan that probably detected the red sand."

"Shit, red sand? You could have ended up in jail."

"I know. I'm lucky you're my uncle. That's what saved me." James rubbed his neck wearily. "It's been a hell of a day."

"Sounds like it. Beer?"

"Sure."

The two of them settled on the couch with the cold bottles a few minutes later. The tension slowly left James as he sipped at his beer, reflecting on this singular day. Something about being in this house seemed to make everything okay again.

"When I was younger," James said, "I used to imagine that Mom would leave him and we'd come to live with you. Sometimes I could even imagine Uncle Trent was still alive."

"You remember him? You were so little when he died."
"Yeah, I remember him. He was funny, always played games with me. I wish he was still alive. Mom too. What do you think Mom would say about what happened today?"

"That's not the right question to ask. You need to live for the living. It was a long time before I got over Trent. Sometimes it still hurts, but I know he'd want me to move on."

"Then why haven't you?"

Emilio shrugged. "It's not that I haven't tried. I just haven't found the right person. Trent was a tough act to follow."

"Sometimes I think there isn't anyone like that for me out there." James sat back in the couch, sighing despondently.

His uncle laughed, surprising him. "She's out there, don't worry. She'll find you when you've got your life straight."

"I think I made the first step to that today. On my way here, I stopped at the registrar's and changed my name to James Vega." He took a datapad from his bag and showed it to his uncle.

Emilio studied the document, then looked up at his nephew. "How do you feel about this?"

"I was always a Vega. It's just official now."

His uncle valiantly contained his emotion, then put his hand on James' shoulder. "You'll do our name proud. I know it. I'm just sorry it came at such a high price."

"The biggest price I paid was the time I wasted trying to make it work in Solana."

"He's your father. You had to try."

"I guess."

Emilio shook his shoulder. "Hey now, don't be like that. Don't forget, tomorrow is a big day for you. How long have you worked for this?"

James smiled crookedly at his uncle. "Yeah, that's true. I can't wait to get out there and see the galaxy. I wonder where I'll be this time next year."

"Tell you what, every time you remember asking that question, I want you to write to me and tell me what the answer is. Deal?"

"You got it, Uncle E."

It was the thought of those unwritten letters and unlived adventures that finally helped James let go of his anger. When he went to bed that night, he thought only of possibilities, and not of regrets.

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9.15.2176 Cronus, Elysium

Shepard

Shepard sat on the edge of a hotel bed smoking a cigarette. Initially she'd been happy to discover that they made the traditional smokes on this frontier world, but the smoke was making her sick.
Even worse, she didn't want to stop smoking them, especially once she realized that her chosen companion hated the smell.

Behind her, Lothan groaned. "I've never been so sore. What the hell were you thinking, shoving me around like that?"

She didn't respond. Only two days into shore leave and she was already tired of his company, partially because she still couldn't have a satisfying encounter with him, and partially because he wouldn't shut up.

"I've never been asked to do that before," he said. "I'd heard of it, but I never expected - I mean, I'm a mechanic, not some hot shot Spec Ops soldier. Is that what the guys on your squad do?"

She felt compelled to answer this one, though she didn't turn around. "I wouldn't know. I don't fuck them, it's a bad idea for a multitude of reasons."

"So you thought I would want to do that because..." he trailed off, waiting for her to finish his sentence. She didn't.

Undaunted, he continued. "Why does it have to be so rough? You're such a pretty girl. Being gentle can be good too-" He ran his finger down the back of her arm.

He gasped when she grabbed his hand and held it in a vise-like grip.

"Let go! What the hell, Shepard?" he shouted, trying to pull away.

"I've had it," she said. "Get another room. I can't stand listening to your whimpering for another minute."

She released him and took another puff on the potent cigarette. Ashes drifted to her bare feet, flashes of heat that immediately snuffed themselves out.

The bed shifted as he stood up. "You're fuckin' crazy, you know that?"

"Not the first time it's been said," she replied, matter-of-fact, tapping more ashes onto the floor. She listened as he gathered his things, still blathering nonsense. But he was leaving. She smiled grimly. At least he could take orders, even if he hadn't been man enough to please her. No one had, not since...

Her hand clenched, the knuckles cracking when the skin pulled white across the bones. She wouldn't think his name. The bastard.

The door slammed. She was alone in the cheap hotel room. Her body relaxed.

She stood and walked across the messy floor, stepping over the clothes and debris from her efforts to get somewhere with Lothan, until she reached the balcony that overlooked the capital building. The night sparkled with the lights shining from the city, clustering around the capital building's classical structure. Spotlights lit up the Grecian columns of the building, which attracted thousands of visitors every day, even from far beyond the reach of this old colonial world in the Skyllian Verge.

Shepard found the batteries of defensive weapons bristling behind it much more interesting. Perhaps now that she'd given Lothan the boot, she could secure a pass to check them out tomorrow. He didn't have the clearance to go into a place like that, but as an N4 candidate and member of the Special Forces elite, she did. That thought cheered her immensely.
She had never been alone before. All the leave she had taken prior to this was with friends, and very brief. Emilio's "fast track" program kept her in training practically year-round, when she wasn't on missions. She chose Elysium for her first real leave because it was still in the frontier, despite the colony's age, and because Grissom had made his retirement home here. Excellent endorsements anyway she looked at it.

Lothan was an impulsive experiment, an attempt to break out of her disastrous pattern with men by choosing someone totally different. But it seemed like no matter what type of man she chose to keep company with, they all turned out to be on some kind of power trip.

"Goddamn you, Raul," she muttered. The tension built in her again and she gripped her hands, forgetting she had a burning cigarette in one. The cherry fell out of the paper skin and onto her skin, making her shout.

She sucked at her hand while she found and extinguished the ember before it lit the carpet on fire. She threw the rest of the pack in the trash, wondering why it was that pain always seemed to clear her head. Taking a slug or breaking a bone had the tendency to knock her out of her depressions.

After a quick shower, she walked through the night to the brightly lit square in front of the capital. It was several blocks, but she was glad for the exercise, as tense as she was.

Few people were out at this hour. The night occasionally sounded with the cry of some native animal she couldn't name while murmured conversations floated out from the open windows of homes surrounding the square.

She just listened. She closed her eyes, feeling the cool night breeze on her face, reveling in this rare moment of peace. Maybe Elysium wasn't so bad after all.

The loudspeakers above the square wailed, shattering the peaceful night. An enormous boom blasted from the dark sky directly overhead, shattering several windows nearby. A powerful wind came on the back of the noise, so strong it sent her sliding across the stones of the square.

Another boom sounded, this time much closer, and a painfully bright light filled the square as she slammed into one of the buildings behind her. Loud mechanical sounds reverberated off the buildings around the square as the light intensified. A ship lowered onto the cobblestones.

Scrambling to get around the corner of the building so she wouldn't be seen, she watched as a shuttle began unloading troops. No - not troops. Pirates. Their assorted appearance was proof of that, even if their disorderly progress hadn't given them away. She couldn't spot any merc tattoos on their necks from this distance, but there were a lot of batarians.

What the hell were these pirates doing in the middle of the capital of Elysium? What happened to the orbital defenses?

She ducked behind a crate and activated her omni-tool, trying to send a message to her superiors, but a dampening field was keeping her from accessing the communications relay in orbit. It may even be destroyed, she realized. There might be backups in the capital building, but she'd have to skirt this action first, then find a way to break in, a monumental task she was in no way prepared for.

The shuttle lifted off and another immediately landed in its place. The pirates broke into teams and went door-to-door, pulling screaming people into the street and binding their hands and feet. The ones who resisted were shot as she watched in horror. Her body tensed, wanting to jump into the fray but knowing it was a disastrous idea. She was outclassed in every way at the moment.
Above the square, dozens of red and blue streaks marked the entry of more ships. Multiple sonic booms shattered the night sky as they slowed their descent from sublight speeds just above the city. It was dangerous for the people on the ground, as it had been for her, and gave them the element of surprise - a win-win for the pirates. She despised them even as she admired their tactics.

Backing into the alley behind her, she tried to remember the way the streets were laid out from her brief glimpse at a map two days earlier. She had no armor, no weapons, no comm, and no team, but she had to get a message off to Alliance Command somehow.

Elysium was being invaded.
The Skyllian Blitz

Chapter Summary

Which is Shepard's most challenging enemy - the external one, or the one from within?

Chapter Notes

Music: Sabotage, Beastie Boys; Weatherman, Dead Sara

10.9.2176

Cronus, Elysium

Shepard

The sleek spire of the comm tower rose far above the city skyline. The modern structure looked out of place amongst the old-world architecture of Cronus. It reminded Shepard of the Prothean-style buildings on Thessia, a place she'd only been to briefly but which had made a huge impression as the first homeworld she'd visited other than Earth.

Still unarmed and dressed in her pajamas, she crouched in the shadows on a fire escape across the street, her searching eyes seeking a way into the building without engaging the enemy. She felt horribly exposed, unprepared and caught off-guard. After all her training, she felt like she should have a better grip on this situation. Her mind was a jumble of worries.

Already a number of explosions had rocked the city, but the sirens had only gone off for a minute before they were shut off, a sure sign of sabotage from within. Population centers had mostly been left alone, making Shepard think that the few bombs that had been dropped were concentrated on the security forces.

Below her, the intersection in front of the tower swarmed with activity. Next to a small shuttle parked in the clearing, a dozen armed pirates kept the line of soon-to-be slaves moving, shouting and threatening them when they stumbled or slowed. Seeing pirates in these numbers was unheard of; there had to be something bigger afoot.

Long shadows shifted under the feet of the miserable humans, away from the well-lit entrance to the comm tower. The cries of the hostages echoed off the buildings and down the next curve of the road.

A man in line made a sudden leap at a batarian standing nearby and tried to wrest his rifle away, but another pirate, a human, held his rifle to the man's head. Shepard could hear the shouting from her vantage point, and though the words themselves were unclear, their meaning was plain. A woman in line pleaded for him and was rewarded with a hit to the mouth with the butt of the batarian's rifle.
Someone had to save Elysium, and for the first time in her life she felt unequal to the task. Flashing images of her brother, of Raul, of her last violent moments back home in Southern California, kept her from completing any kind of tactical analysis. On top of everything, outside of her internal struggles, the cries of the prisoners in line, especially the children, continually distracted her. She clenched her hands to keep them from shaking.

"You can't save them," she muttered to herself. She ran her fingers through her hair, then rubbed her face vigorously, trying to focus. Stealth was not her strong suit, but there had to be some way to get past them and into the tower without being seen.

An explosion blossomed on one side of the batteries a few blocks away, shaking the buildings around them violently. Glass shattered and shivered to the ground, falling from the buildings like icicles. Shepard flung herself against the far side of the balcony to avoid the debris and only barely missed being sliced open.

Until this moment the Batteries had sat silent, even though more than thirty minutes had passed since the first ship landed. This explosion could mean anything; the city's security force trying to break in or more sabotage like that which had probably silenced the cannons to begin with. Either way, it wasn't good for Elysium or the Alliance if she couldn't make both her objectives: get the message off to Alliance Command and take back the Batteries before the allied ships arrived.

A whirring mechanical sound cut through the cacophony below. She leaned forward over the rail, eyes glowing ecstatically as a half-dozen defense drones swung into view alongside an incoming ground transport, headed for the crowd of civilians in the center of the square. They hovered overhead, their forward barrels trained on the cowering crowd. The pirates must have some serious help coming from the inside.

Not that it mattered anymore. Who needed guns and armor when she had an omni-tool?

"You're mine now, bitches," she said with a grin as she hacked the drones. They were standard city-patrol drones, one of hundreds in the city. She could only hack them when in close proximity. It was a matter of moments before she took control.

The first drone turned at her signal. She bridged the connection between its near neighbors, then sent one of the six off to find more of its kind to spread her control virally in other parts of the city. She hated to lose even one of the fragile devices, but it was a risk worth taking to potentially gain a few more drones. That left her with only five. Plenty for what she had in mind.

The loaded shuttle took off, making room for the large ground transport that the drones had been escorting. A blocky transport trundled in slowly from the east. One group of pirates stood near the door to the comm tower, while another group walked to the back of the transport and opened the back of the carrier. A sour, earthy smell drifted on the breeze once the doors fully retracted – it was probably a livestock cargo pod. Pirates began herding the remainder of the long line of civilians on board.

She waited until they were safely on board with doors closed behind them, then initiated the behavioral protocols she had just written on the fly. She cheered while one drone took out the tread of the transport, rendering it immobile, while the others targeted the pirates, sending them running for the alleys.

Four pirates were lying on the ground when the square cleared. The remaining three fired at the drones from the doorway. One of the drones' shield matrix gave out and the next hit sent it careening into the side of a nearby building. It exploded with a dramatic display of fireworks.
The killing field was as level as it was going to get. Shepard executed a graceful leap over the balcony, biotics crackling around her feet to cushion her fall. But, unused to doing night ops without her helmet's digital display, she misjudged the distance and came down hard on her left ankle. She rolled with her fall, grunting in pain, and landed in a crouch some five yards from where she intended to be. She stayed there for a moment, stunned.

Her head jerked back and she gasped when her right shoulder exploded in pain as the first of many shots from the men in the doorway rained down on her. Her implants buzzed as she belatedly brought up a kinetic shield, then limped toward one of the dead pirates nearby with blood pouring down her right arm, desperately seeking a weapon.

There was no cover anywhere. Her shield took heavy fire while she claimed the dead woman's pistol and rifled through her pockets for medi-gel. There was none, she noted with panic. She felt naked without her combat armor. Could things get any worse?

Shots continued to eat away at her shield, bit by precious bit, weakening her control. She cursed, her vision momentarily fading before she managed to pull herself back from the sensory overload. She was fast losing a lot of blood.

With the last of her biotic energy, she boosted herself into the closest cover, behind the truck with all of the civilians inside. Shots rang off the thin metal of the door facing the comm tower. If the doors to the truck were breached and panicked people ran for safety, they would be slaughtered by the pirates. Her hands shook over the omni-tool and she ordered a missile strike on the front of the building.

Her head lolled against the side of the truck as her drones continued to engage the enemy. The people inside the truck were going to pieces from the sound of it, screaming and banging on the walls of the truck.

Chills and heat shuddered through her shoulder and arm in waves, her breath coming hard and shallow. She was going into shock.

The explosions stopped. Her drones swung around the corner of the truck and faced her, awaiting her orders. The pirates were either dead or had retreated inside the comm tower. It took her a moment to focus enough to tap in a patrol protocol and they whirred away, separating to check the alleys nearby.

She stumbled her way into the cab of the truck and triggered the release for the cargo unit, then dug around under the seat, looking for a medkit, but found nothing useful.

Spirits sinking, she crawled her way backward out of the cab, then dropped to the ground next to the truck. She was exhausted and she'd only been fighting for a few minutes. So much for being an Alliance badass. Evidently she wasn't worth much without her team.

One of the drones came back to hover over her. It was sparking violently from one side, awaiting maintenance. Shots echoed down one of the alleyways nearby.

"Hey! Look over here!" someone called out. A man approached her wearing a blue jumpsuit commonly used by the security force on Elysium, closely followed by a few others in similar attire.

He knelt next to her. "It was you that freed us, wasn't it? Hey guys, someone go inside and get a medkit from the front office!"

Shepard grabbed his arm. "No. There could be more inside. I'll go."
He held her down, easily subduing her in her wounded state. "You aren't going anywhere. My security team can handle it now that we've got our weapons back."

"I'll send in one of the drones first.‖ Her breath hissed between her teeth as she bore down on the pain long enough to tap out a sequence on her omni-tool.

"Good idea."

The damaged drone hovering overhead zipped into the brightly-lit entryway of the tower. A few shots were heard, then an explosion, and a few minutes later one of the security team came racing back with a medkit tucked under his arm.

Her entire body relaxed when the cool rush of medigel finally cascaded through her arm, knitting the muscle fibers back together. She looked over at the ruin of her shirt and watched a mass of spiderwebbed scars rise to the surface of the skin, pushing the dead blood out as it grew.

It was definitely the worst scar she had acquired to date. Previous injuries had all been partially buffered by armor, except for one on her chest. This one cut off part of the tattoo she had acquired after graduating from OCS, she noticed with dismay. But then again, maybe the new scars added character.

"You okay now?‖ the man asked.

"I think so.‖ She focused her eyes on his bearded face. His eyes were blue, much lighter than the blue of his uniform.

"I'm Shane Casey. What's your name?‖ he asked. He watched her closely, watching for signs of trauma.

"First Lieutenant Shepard, Alliance Marines Special Forces," she replied.

As if the words gave her strength, she pushed herself to her feet, waving off assistance. "I have to get a message off to Command."

Casey shook his head. "The main server's been hacked and our tech lead was killed in the ambush. Everyone else was already home for the night."

"I can do it.‖ She took a few steps toward the comm tower.

"I'll go with you,‖ Casey insisted, following.

She waved him off. "No, you get those civilians someplace safe. Leave this to me."

Casey nodded reluctantly and walked to where his crew was gathered. Forcing herself to move faster, she jogged into the comm tower, ignoring the twinges coming from her still-healing ankle.

Comm towers were all laid out pretty much the same, like most prefab structures. She caught up with her drone just inside the administrative area. The damaged drone hovered over the ruined remains of a desk where a pirate had taken shelter.

The broken corpse had been tossed to one side in the explosion. This man, a thin, tall fellow, was closer to her size, but the drone's missile had destroyed his armor. Her luck couldn't possibly be this bad.

She'd fix the drone's wiring when she completed her first objective, but she didn't want her flank
exposed. Her hands were much steadier when she initiated the drone's nanobot repair sequence, she noted with relief.

Once in the small but cramped server room, it took her several minutes to determine that the comm relay hadn't been hacked, only dampened by a nearby device. It took much longer than she liked to finally find it, on the top side of one of the overhead roofing panels. She tossed it out the door and shot it several times with her pistol, until the shielding dropped and the little device was nothing more than a burned-out shell.

The lights on the dashboard just inside the server door flickered yellow, then bright green. She quickly entered the code for a high-security transmission to her superiors and began the recording.

"This is First Lieutenant Shepard of the Alliance Marines, on leave on Elysium. A flotilla of pirate ships invaded the capital city Cronus at 0200 hours local time. Defenses were overwhelmed. Hundreds of slavers are taking citizens from the streets. Forces estimated at around two hundred ships of varying sizes, at least what I can see from the ground. Likely more in space. The orbital defense relay is not responding. This message will repeat for three minutes, then the tower will overload."

She sent the message and cued the overload sequence. Casey found her in the administrative office a few minutes later, completing the repair on her defense drone with quick, sure movements.

"What are you doing here?" she asked him in surprise.

"The others have it under control. I thought you might need some help. Did you get your message off?"

"Yes. Let's get out of here. The tower's about to overload."

Casey followed as she ran from the building. "Why did you set it to overload?"

"To fry the ground force's comms. Won't reach space, but it'll confuse things for them on the ground."

"It'll fry our security force's comms too."

"They're better equipped to deal with it. It's more important to slow the slavers down until the Alliance arrives."

Shepard took a moment to pilfer all of the supplies she could from the bodies on the ground, though they'd already been picked over by Casey's men. She tucked some heat sinks into the waist of her pants and any medi-gel she could find into her bra. She wished she'd changed from her sleeping clothes before she left the hotel, but it was far too late to rectify it. None of the underarmor the pirates wore looked close to a decent fit and she didn't have time to waste stripping the corpses down to their skivvies anyway.

Three drones waited nearby. The fourth she had repaired inside moved to join them. Another one had taken some damage and was listing to the side. She waved it down and pulled its side panel to repair what she could.

"How much time do we have?" Casey asked from behind her.

"You're still here? Don't you have a family somewhere to find?"

"None to speak of. I thought that I could help you…" he trailed off at her incredulous look.
"I appreciate the offer, but I'm about to break into the Battery. You'd be killed. Hell, likely so will I. Go find some civilians to help."

"If you're sure..." he said doubtfully.

She nodded, preoccupied with the drone's innards. "It's easier with one. Any more might attract too much attention."

He watched her uncertainly as she closed up the drone and initiated a new behavioral protocol on her omni-tool.

"Come on, girls," she said to the drones. "Let's kill some pirates."

Casey stopped her with a hand on her arm. "Take that alley there, it skirts the next intersection. Just be careful, there are some narrow areas where you don't want to get pinned down."

She lifted her chin. "I will. Thanks."

"Good luck, Lieutenant." He watched her run from the open area with the drones flying ahead of her.

The alley was deserted aside from a few civilians fleeing the pirates, who disappeared as soon as her drones came into view. She passed the remains of a number of the Elysium security force, one of them bearing an empty Cain. That explained the explosion from earlier, and gave her all the information she needed about who was in control of the Battery. She didn't need any more medi-gel or heat sinks than what she already had, so she left the dead untouched.

Less than an hour and a half after the first ship landed, she was looking down at the busy drop zone which lay between herself and the Battery. The towering cannons sat silent, looming over the top of the squat buildings around it. She crept through the dark alleyway to the next road with the patrol drones flying high overhead, sending back telemetry. More than thirty pirates waited in the intersection before the Battery gate, milling around a shuttle which they were filling up with Elysian colonists. A pirate stood near where she hid, glancing every few moments at the darkened alley.

The prisoners were hunched over, avoiding the gaze of their captors. Children were separated from the adults and herded into a side area of the ship. Their shrieks of fear made it hard to think.

A voice whispered at the edge of her conscious mind.

"Shut up. That's not my name anymore," she answered the voice harshly.

The pirate, a batarian, turned when she spoke. Her eyes widened and she dropped back into the shadows, horrified that she'd spoken without realizing it -- and on a stealth mission, no less. He took several steps toward where she was hiding behind a pile of refuse, craning his head to see around it. The barrel of his rifle came up and he turned on the light on the scope, the edges of the trash heap casting sharp shadows on the wall behind where she hid with her hand on her weapon.

If she fired her pistol, the whole mission was a wash. The Battery beckoned to her like a beacon of hope. How many Alliance soldiers would they shoot down if she didn't get to it in time?

Her head jerked up when a whirring sound came from down the alley. One of her drones dropped from above, its guns trained the pirate. Shepard's heart thumped in her throat as she sheltered the light from her omni-tool, commanding the drone to stand down.
The drone froze just a few feet away. The light from the pirate's rifle hovered over the trash heap, sweeping back and forth. Stretching her neck to peer through an opening between two boxes, she saw the pirate glance up at the drone and shrug. The light switched off and he walked away.

Her forehead rested against a stinking box for a moment as she took hold of herself, covering her mouth with her hand. What the hell was wrong with her? Had she hit her head when the first dropship tossed her into the wall? Or was it something to do with the children crying for their mothers in dark cargo bins all over Cronos right now?

There was still a job to be done. She took several deep breaths, ignoring the stench of the garbage in front of her, then peeked through the boxes to see if there were any enemies about. Evidently the presence of the drone was enough to make the pirates assume this quarter was safe. This gave her an idea, and she spent a few precious moments reprogramming the drone.

The next stretch of road was open, running alongside the clearing before the gate to the Battery. She stood up, still hunched over, and crept through the darkness alongside the wall until she reached a stack of crates near the transport that had just pulled up. The drone stayed where it was. A few finger strokes on her omni-tool sent it racing ahead, sending back telemetry on enemy movement.

The coast was as clear as it was going to get. When she rose to her feet again, she bumped the crates behind her. One clattered to the ground from the top of the stack, the sound echoing off the building beside her.

Footsteps pounded closer. Her drone came racing back when the pirates came close, hovered for a moment, then raced back the way it came, just like she programmed it to do. She waited, listening intently.

"… see that? Must be nothing…" the pirates said as they walked by.

Her heart slowed. She put her head between her knees and breathed slowly through her open mouth. This wasn't working. She was like a new recruit, and not a good one. Her eyes stung.

No. She could do this. She knew she could. If only that voice would stop talking to her, distracting her. But she wasn't this pathetic. It was time to get shit done. The Alliance was her family now, and they were depending on her. Jerking herself upright, she checked the position of her drones on her omni-tool.

One was swinging around the side of the Battery and found a side entrance with fewer guards, who had let it patrol inside the walls. Perhaps a dozen more drones zipped around inside the perimeter, patrolling.

An advanced assault drone challenged her defense drone with a validation code. Shepard's fingers flew over the digital display. Beads of sweat shone on her forehead as she tried to keep up with the stream of information, piggybacking her hack prompt with the reply. Her mouth hung open as she stared at the data display, waiting for the enemy drone to either attack and give her away, or…

A new indicator appeared on her screen, revealing that the hack had worked. She now had five drones in the area, she noted with a satisfied smile. Then she commanded the advanced drone to find its mates and deliver the new code to them. If she was lucky, she'd have a whole army to back her up when she made it inside the Battery's walls.

But how to get in? She studied the layout of the inner courtyard. It was dominated by four massive blocks of cannons, flanked by guard towers. In the center was an administrative shed. On either
end, supply warehouses rose to the level of the top of the wall, probably containing ammunition.

The new assault drone chimed in with detailed schematics, providing her with a sketch of the underground machinery that carried the ammunition to the cannons. Maintenance hatches dotted the ground above the machinery, including one directly underneath the administrative shed, which faced the cannons. That's where the main server was, too.

She chewed her cheek, looking up from her omni-tool to examine the wall as one of her drones flew by, ignored by the pirates. Another smile brightened her face.

She crept along the wall to the next corner and ducked behind the building. She located the fire escape and began to climb. The ship with the children on board blasted past her, disappearing into the night.

By the time she reached the roof five stories up, she was exhausted and chafing from all of the heat sinks and medi-gel she had stuffed into her clothing. She laid all of her spoils on the ground and stretched, shaking out her legs. She wanted to rest for a few minutes, but this was no time to get lazy. All things being equal, she should have eaten a full meal after taking that much medi-gel. Plus, Elysium was cold at night and she was still in her pajamas, her shirt torn and dangling down her now-healed right shoulder.

"Quit bitching, you pansy," she said to herself, swinging her arms to loosen her tense muscles. Taking off her shirt, she made a small package for the heat sinks and medi-gel, then fastened it securely to her waist. She was now colder than ever, but she'd warm up when the fighting started. Her first-gen implants always overheated with continuous use, and there was sure to be a heavy fight waiting for her on the other side of the Battery walls. Then she huffed out a few breaths and tapped on her wrist.

Two of her drones rose above the building and came to hover over her. She switched off all their lights and turned them around so they were facing the building. She looped her arms over the barrels of the drones as tightly as she could. Her stomach dropped as they lifted, much faster than she had thought they'd be able to under her weight. The brightly lit drop zone zipped by under her dangling feet as they raced through the night sky, over the wall toward the administrative building in the middle of the four battery blocks. She bit her lip to keep herself from screaming as the ground rose up to meet her gut-wrenchingly fast – then the drones suddenly stopped, her feet mere inches from the ground.

She swallowed. Releasing the drones, she dropped to the ground and pulled up her interface. Her eyebrows raised – that advanced assault drone had been busy. Several more allied drones flickered on her display. Now she just had to take care of whoever was inside the building, pulling the strings for this invasion, then reprogram the batteries. Whoever was behind this, they wouldn't leave the server room undefended. She knew she wouldn't have.

Shepard opened her packet of heat sinks and medi-gel, tucking them back into her clothes, then peeked around the corner. The way to the office door was clear. It seemed too easy. She stood up and cautiously walked around the corner.

"What have we here?" a voice said.

Coming around the left-rear cannon mount, a batarian regarded her with amused interest. He wore a long coat and carried a shotgun. A yellow omni-tool shone on his wrist.

He grinned crookedly, his sharp teeth glistening. "Usually when half-naked women sneak into my office, it's because I've ordered them there. But I didn't ask for you." He tapped his omni-tool, then
the shotgun came up.

Shepard was already diving back behind the corner. "Engage!" she shouted.

Then everything happened at once. Four turrets rose from the ground nearby, trained on her, and opened fire. She cursed her assault drone for not providing that detail in its schematics as she took cover. Her drones zipped by her, fifteen of them now, targeting the turrets. The stranger with the shotgun began picking them off as their shields weakened. They had no armor aside from their shields. She was already down to eight drones, and two turrets still remained.

She sent out a command to the drone she had sent out more than two hours earlier to find more of its kind, hoping it was working its way back to her. She should have commanded it to come back to her immediately instead of gathering every drone it could find first. How many mistakes could she make tonight?

Readying her pistol, she stepped out from cover to fire a few well-placed shots at the coupling underneath one of the turret mounts, following it with an overload. The turret exploded. The other turret continued to exchange fire with her remaining drones.

Ignoring the preoccupied machines, the stranger walked toward her, his shotgun spewing slugs in her direction. Chips of plasti-crete from the corner of the building flew in every direction, gouging shallow cuts into her skin. She ignored the stinging pain, keeping to her shelter until her omni-tool showed that the batarian was standing over one of the maintenance hatches.

She keyed a command on her omni-tool and the maintenance hatch flipped open, tripping him. While the batarian rolled back to his feet just a few feet away, a servo-droid lifted a missile from below, its point facing the sky. The top of the missile popped open for maintenance.

Shepard leaned around the corner and aimed at the exposed firing mechanism. The missile exploded upward, flames shooting wildly from the shell. Her enemy was knocked off his feet again, but again his reflexes proved too quick. The shotgun was already pointing her way as he hit the ground. Its muzzle lit brightly with a single shot.

Her kinetic shield came up just a moment too late. She shouted as pain shot through her leg. Overbalanced, she hopped on one foot, firing her pistol as she fell onto the hard plasti-crete. She was now completely exposed.

The batarian walked over to her, his powerful shield absorbing the shots from her pistol with ease. He smiled, his black eyes twinkling. "If you weren't so hostile, I'd just keep you for myself. But as it is…" He raised his shotgun and pointed it at her ashen face.

His head whipped up. A loud whirring sound came over the batteries, heralding the presence of an enormous swarm of defense drones – all of the drones in the city, all of them trained on him. Their forward machine guns whirred to life, the sound descending like a roll of thunder.

"What the hell!" he shouted, then turned and ran for the shelter of the office. The mass accelerator machine guns of the drones hammered into him, overpowering the shield in a matter of moments. She sent out a halt command before they could totally disintegrate him, then jabbed a medi-gel needle into her leg.

Astoundingly, he was still alive when she limped over to him. This batarian was tough as hell; she almost admired him. After relieving him of his weapon and omni-tool, she gave him enough medi-gel to stem the flow of blood from his many injuries.
"Why- why-" he sputtered, droplets of blood flying from between his lips.

"Why did I heal you? The Alliance will have questions. You're going to stay right here like a good boy while I go fire up the batteries and do a little pirate hunting. If you so much as twitch a finger, my assault drones are going to make sure that you won't be able to talk at all. That will disappoint the Alliance – but not me, slaver scum." She grinned evilly. "Understand?"

He closed his eyes. He wasn't dead, but he didn't respond. She shrugged and walked to the office, checking her omni-tool for a situation report.

Gloating, she noted that she now had more than three hundred drones under her control. Keeping fifty advanced assault drones to protect the Battery, she sent the rest to kill the pirates and disable any vehicles they found.

Inside the office, she carefully checked each corner while she kept her shield up, thinking there were probably some security measures in place. She was surprised when she made it into the server room without incident. She checked and scanned each corner of the room, then shrugged and tucked her pistol into the waist of her pants. She touched the digital display on the terminal in the center of the room to activate it.

Four small corner turrets descended from the ceiling and opened fire. Cursing her stupidity, she ducked and rolled behind the console, bringing up her kinetic shield and firing her pistol until the one right in front of her blew up. The one in the other corner nearby quickly ate into her shield. Slugs ripped through her left arm and her stomach and the shotgun went flying from under her arm, sliding across the floor. She shouted in pain and turned to fire on the turret, clinging to the side of the terminal. Her shots landed true and a moment later the turret stopped firing, sparks pouring onto the floor.

The room fell quiet, aside from her gasping breaths. She dug some medi-gel from her pocket and stabbed one in each leg. The healing took a few moments, moments she needed to catch her breath. How much blood had she lost tonight? Her vision faded in and out.

A boy with wild red-brown hair stood in one corner, fading in and out with her vision.

"There are two turrets behind you," he said.

"I know." She popped her heat sink and replaced it with a fresh one.

"You don't have to do this, you know. If you die we'll be together again."

Her eyes narrowed at his freckled face. "You aren't my brother. Tom would know that I'd rather marry a batarian than lose a fight."

He burst into laughter, and her heart seized at the sound. "That's my sister! Guess you don't need my help, huh?"

"No. I need to focus right now, so please fuck off."

"You got it, sis." He flashed a grin that made her insides ache, then he vanished.

"I guess Lothan was right," she muttered. "I'm crazy."

She craned up and peeked over the edge of the console. The turrets spotted her and opened fire. A piece of shrapnel from the degrading terminal cut into her left wrist and shattered her omni-tool.
She dug into her pocket for the omni-tool she'd taken from the batarian lying outside, but her pants were shredded. She spotted the omni-tool, its shattered pieces lying next to the shotgun. Not even able to call for help, she collapsed to the floor, trapped and feeling helpless. Her head dropped to the side and she slumped over.

After all that, to fail now…

"Shepard, you in there?" a familiar voice called from the next room.

"Casey?" Her eyes shot open. "I'm pinned down by turrets, don't come in!"

But he came in anyway, with five men in combat armor close behind. They shot down the turrets while Casey rushed to her side.

"Christ, you look like hell. I can't believe you made it this far," he said.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," she said sarcastically. "Help me up to the console."

He pulled her upright and held her against him while her shaking hands fumbled over the controls. Whoever the batarian had been, he was no idiot with hacking. The program was pristine and seemingly hack-proof.

But it had a flaw in its perfection. Anything too symmetrical could be toppled by knocking it out of symmetry.

Her movements became more sure as she worked, as she merged with the code. This was the part of the work that she loved best; feeling her aching body and exhausted mind slip away until nothing but the purity of the line remained. Her hack ate away at the code until it crumbled in a logical failure. She rebooted the server, then waited a breathless moment, listening.

The ground rumbled as the batteries began to fire. Shepard collapsed in relief into Casey's arms.

"Come on, boys. Let's go see what Shepard did." Casey hooked an arm under her legs and picked her up. She was only partially conscious, her head lolling against his arm as he carried her out.

The cold air felt wonderful on her overheated body. The air compression from the cannons flowed over her in waves.

"That is a beautiful sight," Casey said. Shepard opened her eyes.

Her face was to the sky. She couldn't see many stars from the middle of a city, but some were sparkling and shooting – no, they were burning and streaking to the ground. Pirate ships, flaming and exploding like fireworks. It was indeed beautiful, but she worried that some of the ships contained slaves, or even the children she had neglected to save earlier. She would never know for sure. Their deaths were on her conscience now.

But she had won. It was her last thought before she passed out.

"Shepard."

Her groggy brain didn't want to function. The voice was familiar, but she couldn't place it. It bore the quality of command that instantly awoke in her the desire to comply. She tried to sit up, but a pain lanced through her abdomen.

"Don't try to move. You're injured. You're in a hospital on Elysium. Can you hear me?"
At first her mouth didn't want to obey. She swallowed and took stock of the muscles in her face.

"Yes," she finally croaked.

"Do you remember what happened?" the gravelly voice asked.

Her answer was automatic. "I won." For the most part, in any case. The cries of lost children still rang through her haze of memories.

"See?" the voice said, laughing. "That's Shepard for you."

A name finally popped into her head and her eyes flew open. "Valis!"

"Did you forget about me so soon?" he chuckled. His head wasn't much higher than hers as she lay in bed. "I came as soon as I heard."

"My head." she moaned, trying to lift a hand to her temple. A tugging sensation made her look down to see wires leading into her arm. "What the-"

"I said not to move, Shepard. You've had extensive injuries and the doctors here had to get a bit medieval with your treatment."

"Feels weird."

"I can imagine," he chuckled again. "Shepard, this is Admiral Hackett, commander of the Fifth Fleet."

Her eyes slowly focused on the tall and stately warrior that approached the hospital bed. "Are you up to a report, Lieutenant?" he asked.

She closed her eyes, her former confidence leaving her at the question. There was no way to put it without losing face. "What is there to say? I got shot to shit repeatedly, screwed up half my hacks, ended up pinned down and half-naked right in front of my final objective and had to be saved by a bunch of security guards."

Hackett chuckled, surprising her. "You could also say that you saved Elysium from the largest band of pirates in history and paved the way for an easy Alliance victory."

"Wasn't easy for me, but… I have to admit, I like your version better." One corner of her mouth turned up.

"So does the Admiralty Board. They're going to give you the Star of Terra."

"All you have to do for that is carve your way through a few hundred pirates in your pajamas? Sweet." Her voice slurred. "There was a batarian. Did he live?"

Hackett answered. "Yes. He was the administrator of the Battery. We're still questioning him, but it appears that the invasion was a batarian-funded uprising of all the pirates in the sector. Led by a human by the name of Haliat. We're still searching for him."

Valis bobbed his head. "We'd better let the Lieutenant get some rest. Give us a full report later."

Hackett nodded and they turned away.

"Wait. There was a man – Casey. He helped me."

"He's outside. Docs says he comes by every day to check on you. I'll send him in. Get some rest,
Casey strode into the room a few minutes later. He looked at her apprehensively. "Finally awake?"

"Don't look so disappointed."

"No, I'm not- that's not why I'm-" He rubbed his hand over the short hair on his head. He seemed to be having trouble meeting her eyes.

Now that she was seeing him in daylight, without being shot at, she could see that he was a rather well-worn man of at least forty years, maybe more. He wasn't good looking, but he was strong and well-formed. His fingers twisted and untwisted in front of his barrel-shaped chest. When he noticed her looking at his hands, he shoved them into his pockets.

"It's okay," she said. "Just ask. I'll say yes."

"What?" He stared at her blankly.

"Ask me out."

He smiled and scratched his beard. "I've been trying to work up the nerve for most of the last week, hoping you'd wake up, then glad I had another day. You seem kinda out of my league."

"Don't worry, I don't like pretty boys."

He grinned. "I figured as much, but that's not really what I mean. I doubt I could hold onto a woman like you."

She grunted and pulled herself up enough to push the button that made the top of the bed elevate her to a sitting position. "Look, Casey… Shane… I'm shipped all over the galaxy on a regular basis. I'm not ready to settle down anytime soon. I just want a good time. I get the feeling you can show me one."

He smiled again, showing teeth. "Well, yeah, I can do that."

"I thought as much. How are things outside?"

"The city is recovering well, but we lost a larger percentage of the population to slavers than should have been possible in the few hours the pirates were on the ground."

Shepard cleared her throat. "There was a transport. They were filling it with all the children they found. Did they make it?"

He shook his head. "Hard to say. But a lot of kids are missing."

Shepard cursed and closed her eyes.

"I'll let you rest. I'll be back after my shift tomorrow, okay?"

She nodded slightly and listened to his footsteps fade away before opening her eyes again. Turning her head to the window on one side of the room, she stared at the clouds drifting by in the dark blue sky. A thunderstorm was brewing in the distance.

Tom was lounging in the chair by the window. He leaned forward. "You did good, Lola."
She snorted. "I can't believe they're giving me the Star of Terra when kids died on my watch."

"You don't know that. They were probably just sold."

"That supposed to make me feel better? I have to find them. I have to get them out."

Tom leaned back and hooked a leg over the arm of the chair. "How're you gonna do that?"

"I don't know. But I have to, somehow. There has to be a way, even if I have to kill every pirate and batarian in the sector."

"That wouldn't be a bad thing."

"I guess not. But batarians are parents, too." She shook her head and pursed her lips. "There has to be a way to do it without slaughtering innocents."

"If you had to slaughter innocents to free them, would you?"

She narrowed her eyes at her brother. "That's a helluva question."

"Can you answer it?"

She turned away from the window, considering. "No. I won't slaughter innocents. Even batarians."

"What's that about batarians?" a grey-haired nurse said, bringing in a tray of food.

"Nothing."

"What batarians there were on Elysium are leaving now. It's a shame, because I had a few friends... but maybe it's for the best." She placed the tray over the bed and helped Shepard sit up.

"I don't know. It's so hard to say what's right sometimes."

The nurse smiled at her kindly. "When I feel like that, I just call my father. He always tells me just what I need to hear."

The smell of the bland food made Shepard aware of the gnawing emptiness in her gut. She dug into the plate of food as she answered. "I don't have any family."

"Oh, everyone has family. Your family is the people who choose to be around you. That's what my father says."

"Interesting point of view."

"They'll come around, just you wait." The elderly woman winked at her and strolled out of the room.

Shepard wasn't sure if she bought it, but it made her thoughtful. It felt like every few years, some avenging god wiped her slate clean and took everything away from her. She wasn't sure if she even wanted a family. But at the same time, she longed for one.

Before she fell asleep that night, she had decided that, no matter how many times it was taken from her - or when she lost it out of her own stupidity - a family was worth having. She deserved one of her own.

Tom agreed.
James' first leave at home in two years had been interrupted by a summons to the office of Commander Solomon in Alliance Headquarters in Vancouver, OIC of 2nd Force Recon. The detour wasn't wholly unexpected; when he left the SSV Everest two weeks prior, he knew that his two-year assignment there was at an end. This meeting would doubtless determine where he would be sent on his next tour of duty. After two years of policing the human colonies, he was ready for something more exciting.

An officer with dark skin and greying hair walked ahead of him. The man had already turned several times, each time headed the same direction James himself was going. James was trying not to listen to the man's conversation with whomever was on the other end of his comm. It sounded like a disagreement, one which was getting more heated as time went on.

Irreverently, James had composed a little story in his head about this officer and why they were headed in the same direction. So far, he was on a covert mission, possibly a spy. It was childish, but it helped distract him from eavesdropping.

The officer's conversation again broke his train of thought. James slowed down to give the older man some space, trying not to listen but again failing miserably.

"It's my decision regardless. Some of our best officers get into trouble when they aren't challenged enough – no, I disagree. They just need the right assignment."

Someone was in trouble. The backstory he was creating for the officer became more interesting. Smiling at the comic book unfolding in his mind, James checked his omni-tool. His destination was just ahead, down the hallway to the left.

The officer turned left at the next hallway, still headed in the same direction.

"Look, I'm almost to your office," the officer said. "Let me handle this. See you in a minute." Then he turned into the office where James was headed without asking permission to enter.
James stopped in his tracks, thinking over the officer's conversation with dismay. Was something he had done coming back to haunt him?

Steeling himself, he straightened up and pressed the comm next to the door. "Second Lieutenant James Vega, sir, reporting as ordered."

"Enter, Lieutenant," came the voice from over the speaker.

Inside the office, James saluted smartly and stared straight ahead. Whatever this was about, he had probably done it. He was prepared to face the music. He just hoped it didn't mean he'd be handed some shit assignment in the middle of nowhere, doing nothing. Or little to nothing – the military was excellent at keeping idle hands busy even when the work wasn't productive.

Commander Solomon sat erect in his chair behind a highly polished wooden conference table. His long, thin arms rested on the table in front of him. His eyes narrowed when James' eyes met his.

"Have a seat," Solomon said. James sat, still on edge.

"This is Captain Anderson," Solomon said, indicating the other officer perfunctorily. Anderson's light eyes were large and sparkled with intelligence above his strong, broad nose and short, determined chin.

The Commander continued once James acknowledged the introduction. "Anderson has some information about your next assignment."

"You don't sound too happy about it, sir," James said, then winced. His mouth was always getting him into trouble.

"This is not the time for insubordination, son," Anderson said sharply, but James could see a twinkle in his eye. "But first, let me ask you how things went on the Everest."

"You have my fitness report, sir." James indicated the datapad on the table, which clearly displayed his picture and profile. "There isn't much more to it."

"The Captain wants to know how you liked it," Solomon said sharply, cutting his eyes at the man next to him.

"Oh. Well, it was okay, I guess. Didn't see much action."

Anderson raised his eyebrows. "Didn't see much action?" He picked up the datapad and scrolled down with one finger. "Over the last two years with 2nd Force Recon, you've participated in strikes on four pirate bases, led your team on six forced boardings, and preemptively saved three civilian liners from intended attack. The value in cargo saved for Alliance ships is well above ten million credits, and lives you've helped save from death or slavery numbers in the thousands."

James pushed out his lower lip and bobbed his head. "I like your version better. Sounds more exciting than it was. I mostly remember a lot of waiting around for something to happen."

One side of Anderson's mouth lifted in a smile, but Solomon jumped in, agitated.

"Service, not excitement, is the point of being an Alliance soldier. But you routinely flout regulations when they don't suit you. Last month on the SSV Everest, security teams broke up an illegal gambling operation you were running."

Ah. So that was the offense *du jour*. 
Solomon went on. "You violated five different sections of the Code of Behavior with this offense alone. And that doesn't even begin to address the inappropriate relationship you began with Sergeant Katz – who also happens to be my niece. Your history with women has landed you in a hot spot more than once."

That explained the hostility, but in this matter James wasn't willing to give quarter or take it, assignment be damned. Parochial officers were the bane of his existence. "Sir, with all due respect, that isn't your concern. She wasn't in my chain of command, it was consensual, and only happened once, so I doubt she'd call it a relationship any more than I would. You don't have to like it, but it wasn't against regs."

Solomon slapped his hand on the table and turned to Anderson. "Do you see what I mean? Insubordinate. He's not Special Forces material."

"Special Forces?" James sat forward, all attention. "Seriously?"

Anderson grinned. "That's right, son. I'm here to invite you to the N1 program. The next training cycle starts in three days, that's why I had your leave cut short. Sorry about that, by the way."

"Oh man, I-" James was at a loss for words for a moment before he got a hold of himself. "Thank you, sir. I won't let you down."

"N1 training is a lot of work, Lieutenant. You've got the biggest challenge of your life waiting for you. But with your background and work ethic, I know we'll be able to keep you challenged enough to stay out of trouble."

Solomon was shaking his head. "I don't know why you were singled out for this honor, Vega, I really don't. You're not even officer material. I have no idea how you even made it through OCS with your record."

Anderson jumped to his defense before James could open his mouth - which he was trying to keep shut at the moment. "Vega made it through because he attacked every challenge that came at him with single-minded determination. When he sees morale drop in his team, he breaks regs to raise it again, but only within reason. Special Forces takes a lot more than adherence to rules, Alan. It takes many types of soldiers to make a successful Special Forces team. As far as I'm concerned, Vega is an ideal candidate."

James' chest swelled at this praise, but he didn't say anything, cautious about angering the Commander and jeopardizing his N1 invite. Until he released him, he was still under Solomon's command.

The Commander waved his hand dismissively. "Then the consequences are on your head. But I'm putting a note in his records that I believe he should stay where he is – patrolling colonial space, far from where he can do more harm."

"That's your right, but this is my call. Don't worry, Lieutenant," Anderson turned back to James and rose to his feet, hand extended. "You're a welcome addition to the Special Forces. I've already notified your uncle."

"Nepotism still hard at work in the Alliance, I see," Solomon grumbled.

"No, sir," James said emphatically, releasing the Captain's hand and turning to the Commander. "I've never used my uncle's standing to get myself ahead. Not ever. He offered me the fast track program when I enlisted, but I wanted to make it on my own."
"Otherwise I would have made the offer immediately," Anderson said with a smile, then tapped the datapad and waved a document over to James' omni-tool. "The shuttle to Rio leaves in 45 minutes. You'll have to run to catch it."

"Yes, sir. I won't be late. And thank you for the opportunity."

"Just remember what I said, Vega," Solomon said, pointing a long finger at James' chest. "Your taste in women will get you into trouble."

Anderson nodded. "Solomon does have a point, Lieutenant. You'll have to avoid that kind of fraternization if you want to make the most of your new assignment. This is a totally different ballgame."

James' ears were burning as he replied. "Yes, sir. I won't forget."

Anderson nodded. "Dismissed."

James saluted the two men and left the room at a trot to catch his shuttle.

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4.16.2178
Rio de Janiero
Alliance N7 Training Headquarters

A voice came from behind James as he hung up his last uniform shirt in the closet. "You must be my new roommate."

James turned to see a swarthy, square-jawed marine that was every bit as heavily muscled as he was himself. The two of them grinned at each other with immediate fellow feeling.

James held out his hand. "Second Lieutenant James Vega."

"Second Lieutenant Siali Mapu. I like your mohawk."

"Like that? Did it last night. They'll probably make me shave it off tomorrow, but it's a tradition. I always do it when I win something big."

Mapu smiled hugely. "It suits you. Vega is Spanish, right?"

"Mexican, actually. How about Mapu?"

"Samoan. You a morning or nighttime lifter?"

James' grin widened. "I'm an anytime-I-can lifter. What's your max deadlift?"

"218 kilos. You?"

"190. Think you can give me some tips?"

Mapu slapped his arm jovially. "Absolutely. We have time for a session before the party tonight if you're up for it."

James cocked an eyebrow at the other man. "What party?"

"You didn't know? The graduating N7s throw a party at the alumni house every year. It's tonight."

Mapu sat down on the bed on the other side of the room. Two pictures hung on the wall behind
him, one featuring a group of dozens of dark-skinned men and women with the same startlingly cheerful smiles that he wore. The other was of an older man and woman, probably his parents.

"Oh, I am so there. I haven't been to a party in ages." James faced a chair away from his roommate and straddled it.

"What was your last assignment?"

"Spent two years on pirate patrols in colonial space."

"Ouch." Mapu cringed.

"Yeah, the N1 invite came right on time. I was going out of my mind."

"Well, the fun stuff starts now. Dirt, pain and constant action."

"Hell yes, brother." They slapped hands and fist-bumped.

Mapu gestured to the closet. "You all done settling in?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Let's get a workout in while we can. Can't put the ladies off, right?"

"Right," James said, but for the first time he felt a twinge of hesitation, thinking of the conversation he'd had with Anderson and Solomon yesterday. He didn't want to screw up this early on… at least, not until he'd managed to build up enough goodwill to get away with it.

When he shut the door to their quarters behind him a few minutes later, he was determined not to tempt fate. He'd be good. This opportunity meant too much.

A few hour later, freshly-showered Mapu and James caught a ride with a few of the other N1s to the party on the far side of the base, deep in the woods. They pulled into the lot in the back of the alumni house, next to a large barn surrounded by trees. The lot of them were wide-eyed and enthusiastic when they heard the pounding music pouring from the open windows.

The N7 Alumni House was a large, white Mediterranean-style house with a ceramic tile roof. The parking lot overlooked the pool in the courtyard, where people were splashing and calling out to one another. Bright colored lights flashed through the plate glass window looking into the main part of the house, where James could see shadowy figures dancing.

A short man stopped them before they entered. "I don't recognize you. You in Special Forces?"

Mapu nodded. "We're N1 candidates, just got in."

The man sneered. "Don't know why they invited boots this year. But you're still in uniform, so you can get in."

"What was that about being in uniform?" Vega asked the man as they walked by.

"Yeah, Christo's always got some gimmick going to tweak the brass. They don't like it when you party in uniform." He shook his head and laughed, then waved them in.

James followed Mapu as he looked for an old squadmate of his that they were supposed to meet in the front room. James spent a good part of the night hanging out with Mapu's friends, talking and joking around. After a while, though, James decided he wanted to see more of the scene. He made
his excuses to the group and walked toward the large room where most of the action was evidently happening.

He took a quick tour of the party, which spanned the six ground-level rooms of the huge house. Some people were in full dress uniform and some had only their camo pants and undershirts on, all of them in various stages of inebriation. One man at the DJ table wore dress blues, unfastened at the neck, with his hat turned to the side. His fingers raced over a virtual display, mixing the music live from samples while a small cluster of groupies looked on.

"Go Christo!" someone shouted at his left. He looked down to see a blonde with a cherubic face watching the DJ.

She sensed his observation and looked up at him. Her face brightened with interest. "Hi there! I'm Sheila. You're one of the new candidates, right?" she said with a winning smile.

"Yeah. The N7s put this on?"

"That's right. The graduating class puts it on every year. We all pitched in, but Christo and Shepard did most of the work."

"Shepard? You mean, the Shepard, the Hero of Elysium?"

"Yes, but if you want to get on her good side, don't mention it. She's pretty touchy about the way that went down. That's why she refused to do interviews. But let me tell you, that girl knows how to throw a party. She's been running around so much I haven't had a moment to talk with her."

"Do you think you could introduce us?"

Sheila eyed him speculatively. "You sure? She can be… difficult with fans."

"I'm not a fan. Really. I just want to meet her."

"So why do you want to meet her? You trying to score? She doesn't take guys home often, but when she does they usually end up in tears. There are easier women in the crowd."

"I don't care about that. I'd still like to meet her once, just 'cuz." He shrugged, looking around as if he already knew what she looked like.

"Uh-huh. Well, we'll see about that." She craned her head, looking around, then grabbed James' hand. "You're in luck, it looks like she's taking a break from bossing everyone around. This should be interesting."

Snickering, she towed him behind her, pushing through the crowd flowing into the large main room. A few steps in their hands were pulled apart by the surging crowd. James finally found her again, walking towards a group of women standing around a table covered with half-finished drinks. Sheila touched the shoulder of a tall woman who was smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer as she bounced to the beat of the music.

Sheila leaned back when he approached and mouthed "This is Shepard" while pointing at the tall woman. James caught a glimpse of a pert nose and long eyelashes when Shepard blew smoke into the air.

Then Shepard turned around and shouted at the DJ's booth, her practiced - and familiar - voice easily carrying over the noise of the room. "The fuck kind of music is this? Christo, pick it up!" Shepard pumped her fist in the air and a few dancers around her cheered.
The DJ put on a popular song that fired up the crowd, but James didn't hear it. He stood like a rock in the middle of the excited crowd, mouth agape as he stared at the redhead in the middle of the dance floor, who was still dancing like no one was watching, completely ignoring him.

It was Lola.

She appeared to be wearing something that looked suspiciously like the liner to a flight suit. This was odd enough to make him pause underneath his profound shock, since normally the liner is only worn in deep space operations as a failsafe for suit pressure. This one had its airtubes still attached, poking out from her neck to connect with several areas on the suit, coiling around her. The fabric was also frictionless. Combat boots were strapped on over the feet of the suit. James thought that they must have been a bitch to get on.

The front vertical fastener of the chin-high airsuit was partially undone and the high neck flapped off her bare shoulders, exposing complicated, colorful tattoos that were dizzying to look at in the flashing light. Her hair was softly tousled in dark red waves that just brushed her shoulders. The shiny, superthin white fabric was fitted to her figure, just loose enough to slide across her skin comfortably. The exposed seams enhanced her curves, buckling slightly as she twisted her hips in time to the music. The way she looked dancing in that fabric would stick with him for the rest of his life.

Sheila grabbed the woman's arm, laughing when she couldn't hold on to her. "What the hell are you wearing, Shepard?"

"Christo said uniforms only. This is part of a uniform. I'm sick of wearing the same thing as everyone else."

"How are you going to sit down? You'll slide off any surface wearing that thing."

"I don't intend to sit down. I'm going to dance until someone carries me home."

"Well, every man in the room would like to applaud you your choice. And all the women, well-"

"They can go fuck themselves, begging your pardon."

Sheila rolled her eyes, then looked back at James and grinned slyly. "Christo was inspired, inviting the N1 candidates. Just look at them! All of them as green as we were when we met. It seems like yesterday."

Shepard continued to dance, ignoring the obvious way that Sheila was trying to direct her attention towards James. "Feels like a million years ago to me. And I was never innocent."

"From you, I can believe that. But some of the new candidates are awfully cute. I brought you one that wanted to meet you." Sheila winked at James.

Shepard sighed, exasperated. "Hell, Sheila. Why would I want a boot for company? You know better than that."

"When they look like that," Sheila said, pointing at him. The other women in the group all turned to look, all but Shepard.

"He's only got eyes for you, Shepard," one of the other women said sarcastically. "I wonder why?"

"Let him look." She continued to ignore him, but James stepped into her field of vision.
"You're Shepard?" He asked, not intending for it to come out so accusingly.

This got her attention. She stopped dancing and cocked an eyebrow at him. "Not what you expected, big guy?"

His shoulders drooped. There was no sign of recognition on her face. Had he changed that much?

"Shepard!" Sheila said, jabbing her with her elbow. "Look how sad you made him."

"Alright, alright. You want to dance with me?" She set her beer down on a nearby table, which was rocking slightly with the beat of the music, and stamped her cigarette out in the ashtray. She crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes appraising him.

He rubbed the back of his neck, hoping she would approve of what she saw. Reflexively, he deflected his nervousness with humor. "I've been watching you dance. It might be dangerous to stand this close." Then he winced, wondering if teasing her was the best way to start a conversation. In all the times he had imagined this moment - never considering that it might actually happen - he never started off with insults.

But she laughed and tugged him down by his neck so she could talk into his ear. "Maybe you're just not up to the challenge?" she said.

He grinned as his neck heated up from her touch. "I'm always up for a challenge, Lola."

Her eyes grew cold and dangerous and she stiffened in his arms before stepping back to stare him down. He had forgotten about this side of her.

"What did you call me?" Her low words were inaudible over the music, but he knew what she said nonetheless. "Who are you? Who sent you?"

"I'm James Vega." His heart was pounding so hard he was surprised she couldn't hear it over the music.

"Vega?" Her forehead wrinkled in concentration, but some of the tension left her voice as she spoke. "Do I know you?"

"Yeah. I used to be Jimmy Sanders."

"Jimmy Sanders?"

Her eyes grew impossibly large. She stared at him for a moment, scanning him incredulously. Then her face broke out into a huge grin. She threw both of her arms around his neck and hugged him enthusiastically, stroking the back of his head while exclaiming into his ear, "Jimmy! Holy shit, I can't believe you're here!"

He heard Sheila say to the other women, who were looking on enviously, "And of course, she already knows him. Some people get all the luck."

James' arms closed around Shepard, but he didn't know what to do with his hands. Everywhere he tried to hold her, she was covered with slippery, satiny material. He couldn't get a grip and thought he might get into trouble if he kept trying. After a moment he just held his fists at the small of her back, wishing there was some way he could go back in time so that thirteen year old James could see this. Even though it was very likely he'd make a total ass of himself before the night was out.

"Look at you!" she exclaimed, leaning back. "You - um - filled out." She smirked. Her hands
dusted off his shoulders and tweaked at his shirt, smoothing the fabric over his chest. He noticed the fine lines of scars on her face she hadn't had before. Her eyes were rimmed in black, enhancing her irises.

"Yeah," he said, feeling like a total pendéjo. He swallowed, hoping it was hard to tell he was blushing under the colored lights.

She grabbed his hand and turned to her friends. "This is Jimmy," she shouted over the swelling music. "I – um – used to babysit him."

The smile disappeared from James' face. One of the girls laughed at his expression.

"How nice for you," Sheila said, shaking her head. "And I thought I was going to have a good laugh over bringing you one of your adoring fans."

"Not unless you want a black eye. You lucked out this time," Shepard said, then turned back to James. "Let's get out of here so we can talk," she shouted over the music. She began tugging him through the crowd away from the table, holding his hand above her head as they went to make sure they weren't separated.

Someone shouted, "Shepard, great party!" as they passed. She waved at them, but didn't stop.

They walked through a doorway into the kitchen. The room was bright and crowded with caterers.

"How are we on ice?" she asked one of the workers as she passed.

The man looked up from the appetizers he was arranging. "The icemaker broke down, but we still have ten bags in the freezer."

Shepard chewed her lip. "That won't last much longer. I'll go get another few bags from the Commissary. Do you want to come, Jimmy? Or do you want to stay at the party?"

"I'll go with you." The shock was beginning to wear off, leaving behind a determination to stay with her that set off warning bells in his mind. If the Commander thought a woman was going to get him in trouble, James knew he had just met his Achilles' Heel. He had to be careful.

She led him into the lounge just off the kitchen, bringing his hand to her bare shoulder so he had to follow her more closely. He looked at the smooth dark skin of his hand next to the colorful outlines and fills of her tattoos. He wondered why she hadn't covered the tattoos up. Instead, it looked like she purposely enhanced them.

She was towing him through another doorway into a room filled with clusters of comfy sofas and overstuffed chairs, everything covered in the same dark red fabric. Tables overhung with candelabras lay scattered among the furniture bearing enormous trays of food. The music was more muted here.

He sniffed. Someone was smoking a joint in the corner. "Command lets you do this on base?"

"Command turns a blind eye to what we do here because at least the local cops don't get involved. We can get pretty out of hand between missions, and they spend too much money training us to let us sit in a jail cell. The alumni house is a grey area, a compromise they came up with about ten years ago. It's the first time we've invited N1 candidates, though. You should feel lucky."

"I do right now."

She smiled back at him and cocked her head to the side. "Jimmy - are you flirting with me?"
It felt like something was stuck in his throat. Where were all his suave moves? He shrugged, the muscles of his shoulders rolling. Shepard twisted her mouth to the side and opened her mouth to say something.

Someone stumbled from one of the groups of chatting people, spilling his drink all over Shepard's chest. She stepped back in surprise, but the drink rolled off of her outfit without leaving a trace.

The guy squinted at Shepard's amused face, then he began brushing at her outfit. "Sorry, I - hey, you're not wet!" So puzzled was he by this phenomenon that he grabbed at her chest, ham-fisted in his drunken state.

James' fist met his face with a fleshy thump and the drunk went down without any opposition. Every face around them turned their way while James looked with surprise at the man on the floor. He hadn't thought about it, just acted on instinct.

Shepard knelt next to the unconscious man and examined him. Then she stood up and shouted, "One down, two hundred to go!"

The room roared with laughter. Shepard watched until the guy he'd knocked out was carried from the room by a few of the people from the kitchen, then conversation resumed as if nothing happened.

Shepard looked up at him again with that smile that made him feel like he had swallowed his lungs. "I don't need the protection, but thanks all the same."

"Sorry. I know you can protect yourself. It was just a reflex."

"Some reflex." She began walking again. "Come on, I just need to get out of my suit so I can drive."

"I can drive, I haven't had anything to drink."

"I've just had the one beer. Half of one, actually. You completely sidetracked me." She didn't look disturbed by this development at all. "Besides, you probably don't have a license to drive on base."

"I do, but it wouldn't stop me if I didn't."

She laughed and opened a nearby closet. Unceremoniously, she proceeded to drop the zipper on the front of the suit right there in the hallway. His eyes bugged and he almost looked away until he realized that she was wearing a threadbare undershirt and uniform leggings under the suit. She bent down and unlaced her boots, then withdrew her feet from the suit. When she began to lace the boots back on, James took the suit by the collar and hung it in the open closet.

"Thanks." He gave her a hand up, then she led him out of the house, where the enormous barn stood. She unlocked it and tugged his hand impatiently, stepping inside. "Come on."

"I can't see anything." He followed her a few paces, then stopped, worried, as he often was, of cracking his head on something.

"Just stay here. I know my way around. I'll be right back."

After a minute several bright lights turned on. He stood staring uncomprehending for a moment before he recognized the side-mounted spotlights on the side of a Mako.

"You use a Mako to round up the supplies for the party?" He looked over the vehicle in surprise.
"That's gotta be against regs."

Her head popped up from the cockpit. "I needed something that could handle all the alcohol we bought without making multiple trips. I hacked it this evening. They won't notice until tomorrow, and they won't do anything about it anyway."

"You sure of that?"

She shrugged. "They like me."

"They must."

"Wasn't always like that, believe me. Come on, get in."

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Shepard

After they ran the ice back to the party, chattering idly about assignments and military life, she drove him to a place where they could talk privately. The sky was still full dark and sparkled with stars which reflected faintly on the shimmering water of the bay. The sparse ground traffic flowed over the narrow bridge a few miles off while the thicker air traffic streamed across the sky like a river of light.

"This definitely beats the view from the barracks," he said as they got out and met on the other side of the vehicle. A cool breeze floated gently over them from the water's edge.

"I'm not in Rio often anymore, but I like to come to this spot when I'm in town. It's the best place to see the sunrise. I guess this will be the last time though. I won't have any more training to do here," she said nostalgically, leaning against the side of the Mako.

"That's right. N7 in six years. You must be quite the apple polisher," he said, leaning next to her, her shoulder bumping his arm. "Congratulations. I'm impressed."

"So am I. With you, I mean. Being a Marine suits you." Her eyes appraised him. "You look... different."

"You don't, aside from the tattoos. I'm surprised you have so many."

"Why shouldn't I? They're my badges of honor - a lot more meaningful than the awards they hand out. Plus, there's no way to use military grade medi-gel without getting a lot of scars. Some we wear on the inside, some on the outside. Some we're given, some we ask for."

He looked at her curiously. "What do your tattoos mean?"

"Well... since it's you, I guess I can say. Usually I don't. Too many uncomfortable explanations."

She took several minutes to point out her ink. The only ones he recognized were the ones in Spanish, especially the one over her heart she tugged her shirt aside to reveal.

"I remember that one," he said. "But you've added to it. Primera sangre, primera amor." He watched her carefully.

"Raul." Her voice was quiet.

"You loved him?"
"As close to love as I've ever been. It's hard to say. Everything was so crazy then. We got in deep with each other. Fast. You don't recover from that easily."

"What about the one on your back? That's changed more than anything else." His hand brushed the skin of her shoulders, where she knew the words "Bajo de Malecón" and "Candente" lay in bright red ink, probably sounding like nonsense to him. The words were now interspersed with little white flowers, singed and smoking at the edge of the petals.

"What's with the flowers?" he asked.

"They're... jasmine flowers," she said quietly. She gave him a tight smile. "I always hoped you hadn't gotten sucked into one of the gangs."

He seemed to take the hint and let the subject change without argument. "Wasn't ever my thing, you know, but especially not after what happened to Tom. Plus, serving in the military is just something we do in my family."

She looked down, unable to respond. Was it him, or what they were discussing that was so unsettling to her? It was hard to separate the two. Possibly both.

"What is it?" he asked.

"That's the first time someone's mentioned Tom to me since that night."

"We don't have to talk about that if you don't want to."

"No. I do. That's partly why I wanted to get you alone. You're one of the only people who knows about who I really am. How is Emilio doing, anyway?"

"He's fine, same as always. Still in Escondido, coming close to retirement. I can give him a message if you want."

"No. Don't mention me to him, Jimmy. The only way I can repay him for what he did is to make sure I stay Shepard. Lola is dead." She cocked her head at him. "Though I wonder if this conversation doesn't fuck all that up."

"It doesn't unless you want it to." He looked down at her with a smile, his face glowing in the orange light of the rising sun. She blinked several times, as if dazed by what she saw.

"What about Mason? You ever hear from him?" she finally managed to say after looking away.

"No, but I know he's on the Citadel. He's got a tattoo shop there. I haven't ever been there long enough to look him up yet."

"I always wished I could meet him again someday, to thank him. He didn't even know me well. Neither did Emilio. I never did understand why they helped me."

"Because good people try to do the right thing, even when it's hard." He shrugged. "Especially when it's hard."

"Do you really believe that?" she asked him curiously.

"I know it," he said, meeting her gaze. She felt like he was looking through her, like he could see every misdeed she'd ever done. There were many. She looked away again, in a rare moment of uncertainty.
He put a hand on her shoulder. "Hey. It's okay. We've all got unhappy memories."

Damn, he really could see into her. "I don't think you know how deep it goes with me."

"I can imagine. And I'm not as clean-cut as I appear," he said, giving her a cocky, crooked grin that made her mouth twist in an unwilling smile.

"You come off as the poster boy for the Alliance Marines," she said, scanning him from head to boots and back again.

"Why, Lola? You wanna put my picture up on your wall?" he asked, leaning closer.

"Not a bad sight to wake up to in the morning. But I think you already knew that," she smiled, elbowing him jokingly. She cleared her throat, her mind scrambling for a new topic of conversation. What was with her today?

"Why did you change your name?" she finally asked.

"Couple of reasons, really. Biggest, I suppose, is that my dad and I had a major falling out. He tried to get me in trouble so I couldn't enlist."

"You wanted in that bad?"

"Yeah. Uncle E made a solid case to enlist, not that I wasn't already inclined to go. He looked out for me after my mom died."

"I'm sorry to hear about your mom. Sounds like Emilio's been good to you, though. Is that why you took his name?"

"Pretty much. He was the last Vega. Now I am," he said.

He was staring into the sunrise, now a streak of orange on the horizon. The earthy hues illuminated his face with warmth. Pressure began to build in her chest, making it difficult to breathe as she looked at him.

"Wow." She shook her head. She touched the side of his face hesitantly, as if greatly daring. He smiled down at her. "You're really something, you know that? Little Jimmy, all grown up."

"I haven't changed that much," he said. "Not in the ways that count. Neither have you, but I miss your long hair."

The corner of his mouth twitched and he hesitantly tucked a few stray strands behind her ear. His fingers trailed down the side of her neck, the skin tingling in their wake. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she leaned into his touch, unconsciously tilting her head sideways to expose the sensitive flesh. When he noticed her response he moved away, his eyes looking everywhere but at her. If he was being shy, it was kind of cute, but she discerned something else behind his hesitation.

She was going through an internal revolution of her own. He was the other half, the part she hadn't believed existed. The good half. Honest. Real. Right in front of her. And he knew the real her. With anyone else who knew her this well, she would feel vulnerable, but for some reason she wanted to open up to him more. She didn't want to run or lash out at him, a first in her experience. Every idea she had had about men was being overturned.

She blinked and cleared her throat, trying to pull herself together. "I shave it all off when it gets too long, but it grows really fast. Maybe eventually I'll grow it out again." She reached up to ruffle the
peak of hair on his scalp. "Your hair is just the same though. So cute." She felt like a giddy teenager, trying to dare him into touching her again, to remove the distance between them.

"You said that then, too," he replied gruffly.

"James," she said softly, moving forward until their chests were touching. The magnetism she had felt between them all along began pulling her face upward.

He stepped back with a grin, rubbing the back of his neck. "You know I've been in love with you since I was thirteen years old, right?"

"No, I never guessed." She smiled back, saddened at his reaction. "I'm surprised you even wanted to see me again, after everything that happened then."

"It wasn't a happy time for us," he agreed. "But we've come a long way."

Reaching up, she felt along his neck, noticing the way his hard shoulders gave when she pressed them, and feeling the warmth of his skin through his thin t-shirt. He submitted to her attention tensely, leaning into her as if he was just about to respond, without actually following through. But after a few moments of looking into her eyes, he surrendered and put his arms around her. They didn't say anything else.

Shepard had rarely felt so content. After a while he sat on the ground and she sat on his lap, leaning back into him, enjoying the feeling of his arms around her. Eventually he completely relaxed, setting his chin on the top of her head. They held each other next to the Mako for a long time, faces upward, eyes on the future.

She woke to him putting her in the Mako, the dawning sun casting long shadows across the ground.

After so long struggling with sleep, the fact that she'd fallen asleep in the open was almost unbelievable, but there was something about him that made it no trouble at all once she stopped fighting it. Leaning against his arm as he drove the Mako back to the motorpool, she finally placed the elusive feeling. It was trust, something she'd rarely experienced.

Afterwards, they walked back to the barracks together. They didn't say much. She couldn't stop casting wide-eyed looks at him as they passed under the streetlights as the sky lightened.

They reached her barracks first. He stopped next to her, looking down at her with his head cocked to the side. She glanced back and finally failed to keep the smile off her face, unable to hold his eyes. She rubbed her mouth repeatedly and sniffed, rolling her tongue in her cheek as she stared at the ground.

"What?" he asked.

"Just… you. I mean, seriously, James. What happened to you?" She gestured again at him. "I never could have imagined you so different."

"It's your fault, actually."

"Mine?"

"I wanted to be strong like you. You were so tough. And hot. People listened to you. I wanted to know what it felt like, to not be weaker than other people. To not ever be dismissed or forgotten."

"Well, you've certainly achieved that," she said.
He put his hand on the wall behind her head, his shoulders rolling as he looked from left to right before leaning down to her. She licked her lips. His eyebrows pushed together adorably before he put his hands on her arms and pulled her close. She leaned heavily into him, wrapping her hands around his hips. Her hands slid up his back and her face pressed into the dip in his chest, her eyes drifting closed.

The dawn air was rapidly getting chilly and he bundled her closer. She nuzzled against him contentedly, not knowing herself at this moment.

"I'm not too good about writing letters, Lola, but I'd like to keep in touch," he said, his deep voice rumbling under her ear.

"Sounds good to me. Just one thing," she said, her voice muffled against his chest.

"What's that?"

"Stop calling me Lola."

He laughed, leaning back to look at her again. "I'll try. But no promises."

He put his hand to the back of her head and pressed his lips to one of her eyelids, then the other. He looked at her for a moment, running his thumb down the side of her face, struggling with some internal dilemma. They shared a breath, his hand releasing hers to drift down her face, then thread through her hair before lowering his face to hers.

Their lips met. He opened his mouth and tasted her, causing every muscle in her midsection to tighten, her toes curling in her boots. Adrenaline washed over her head and down her neck, mixing with the heat coming from below, making the blood rush in her ears. She found her hands on his face, all attention on this moment, on the feel of his warm lips against hers.

Everything about him was warmth. She hadn't realized men could kiss like this. Gently, as if it were a treasured moment.

He smelled like California, like home; he tasted like rain. Even so, the pure pleasure of the experience was nothing to the wave of total relaxation she felt, being in his arms.

Her nails lightly scratched over his ears and cheeks as they drifted down to where his mouth was moving over hers. Their lips came apart, but their noses caressed each other. Her mouth opened, inviting him, her eyes on his lips, but he didn't try to close the distance.

Eventually he pulled back, holding onto her while she caught her breath. Then, reluctantly, he backed away several steps, never looking away from her face. As he moved away from the shadow of the barracks, his face illuminated once again by the orange glow of the rising sun.

She felt more relaxed and open than she had any recollection of being before, like waking up from a nightmare to discover that it was all in her head, that life wasn't so bad after all. Because he was there.

He waved, one swift movement of his hand, still stepping backward. She smiled and blew him a kiss. He disappeared into the shadows across the street, almost pulling her with him. After a moment she walked through the door into the barracks, tripping on the first step.

"How did it go, Shepard?" Sheila asked as she floated into the room they shared with Carla, who was sound asleep in the single bed on the other side of the room. "Get lucky?"
"You have no idea." She sighed, sitting on her bed. She lay back on her bunk and sighed deeply again.

"James fucking Vega." She whispered, staring at the bottom of the bunk above her, but seeing only his face in the sunrise. "Who knew?"

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**James**

James had walked away from her with some difficulty. She wanted him, he could tell. It was unbelievable. But for the first time, he had something to lose. The timing of this meeting was incredibly inconvenient.

Then his rational mind stepped in, rattling off all of the objections to starting something with her. Not only was it a horrible idea for his fledgling military career, but his track record with women generally ended before their hours together reached triple digits. This was one woman he wanted to stick around – the only one, if he was being honest with himself.

Plus, she was leaving tomorrow. Shipping out to who knows where and for how long, putting the final nail in the coffin of his newborn hopes. Before he was finished with morning drills, she'd be gone.

But he hadn't been able to help himself from kissing her. Whatever came tomorrow, that had been worth risking his heart to experience, just once.
Chapter Summary

Shepard has a surprising reaction to meeting James which leads her to find an old friend.

Chapter Notes

Music: Otherside, Red Hot Chili Peppers

4.17.2178
Camp Pendleton, Earth
Shepard

Grey and purple peaks rose to the east of the Villa, silhouetted against the light blue sky. The thick foliage of the tropical plants and trees were dappled by the shadows of clouds that passed slowly overhead. Palm fronds waved in the lazy midday breeze, bordering a path that cut through the shrubbery and led tantalizingly out of sight.

For a place designed to teach warriors the advanced techniques of combat, Shepard thought Rio de Janiero could certainly be idyllic and peaceful.

James stood under a nearby tree, smiling, waiting for her. She felt the smile blossom across her face and she broke into a trot to go to him, to bask in the balm of his presence. As she ran, a cloud blotted out the sun's light and cast the tree where James stood into momentary darkness. When she approached the tree, the light returned.

Instead of James' cheerful smile, Raul's scarred face gazed down at her, his deep eyes as compelling as ever, while the tattoos crawling up his chin moved like parasites under his skin.

She stopped in her tracks, but the ground was suddenly slick with blood and she fell to her hands and knees. Raul's long fingers wound around her upper arm and yanked her up to his side.

"Candente, my soul," he murmured against her mouth. "You are mine, always mine. Never forget it." With his other hand, he stroked the side of her face. His fingers left long red lines which sunk into her skin and marked her, the flesh sizzling and smoking. She arched away from him, grunting in pain, but the movement only served to push her hips harder against his.

A familiar voice called from behind her. She tried to twist around and go to them, but her body wouldn't obey her commands. Raul hefted her legs around his waist. As an orgasm crashed through her, the cluster of palms behind him erupted into flames.

She screamed.

"Shepard!" Carla shook her awake, squeezing her shoulder..
Shepard sat bolt upright, her eyes wide, still hearing the crackling of the burning trees even as she noted with relief that she was in her bunk. Her heartbeat began to slow.

"You okay?"

Shepard nodded. "Yeah, just a bad dream."

Privately, Shepard felt that bad wasn't the right word for it, but the mixture of pleasure and pain that always came with thoughts of Raul was too difficult to explain. She felt Carla's eyes on her as she made her way to the restroom to rub cold water on her face.

After drying her face, she studied her reflection in the mirror. With the black circles under her eyes, her swollen eyelids, and patches of red glowing under her translucent skin from her harrowing nightmare, she looked like hell. Staying up all night with James last night hadn't done her looks any good either, and she hadn't been able to sleep on the shuttle this morning, wired from the night's events.

Voices outside announced the rhythm of a march. Pushing the shade over the window aside, she watched a squad jog by in formation.

She had never been to Pendleton before. The place was completely unfamiliar to her, but she felt the presence of her hometown just to the south like a warning in her heart. It wasn't too far from here that she last saw Raul; it was no wonder that she was dreaming about him.

Sheila had come over from her room across the hall while she was in the bathroom and was sitting on Shepard's bunk when she came out. From the concerned look on Sheila's face, Carla must have already told her what happened.

Shepard shrugged diffidently "Don't worry. It's nothing I can't handle."

"You're supposed to report in if the dreams come back," Carla said.

Shepard sighed in exasperation. "This wasn't like the other times."

"Bullshit, Shepard. The dreams are only the beginning. We've watched you go through this too many times," Sheila said.

"Forget it. I am not missing my first mission as an N7 to go to therapy," Shepard replied.

Carla set her jaw. "Screw the mission. Call him now or I'll report you."

She would do it, too. "Fine," Shepard snapped. "I'll call. But this had better not stop me from getting assigned."

"Don't blame me if it does. I'm not the one trying to get into combat with untreated PTSD," Carla hissed in her ear before stomping out.

"Sometimes I can not stand her," Shepard muttered as she sent a message to the therapist that had been assigned to her three years ago.

"Then why do you always request to be her roommate?"

"Because she's... I don't know, my best friend or something. But of the many, many things I hate in this galaxy, admitting she's right is on the top of the list."

Sheila paused at the door, her hand on the handle. "You hate a lot of things, Shepard. Is there
anything that you love?" Giving her a pointed look, she walked out.

Over the comm from Rio a few minutes later, Captain Tchaikovskaya listened to her carefully worded story. Her therapist was a middle aged officer, probably in his mid-sixties, with a long, thoughtful face and neatly trimmed goatee.

When she finished talking, he sat back and linked his fingers over his stomach. "What was the trigger?"

"Nothing really bad has happened to me for more than a year. In fact, I've had a good couple of weeks. I even met someone last night." Smiling, she looked away from the screen for a moment, remembering.

"Someone special?"

"Definitely."

"Do you think that starting a new relationship could have been the trigger?"

She thought for a moment before replying. "I can't say I've ever had a relationship, at least not since before I enlisted."

"Since the trauma event?"

She nodded.

"And I suppose you're still not going to tell me what that was?"

"Nope."

"Well, regardless, I'd say that this new relationship is the cause."

She huffed in disbelief. "How can that be? I've only ever had problems during training or combat missions."

"Or when the fighting got really intense and you thought you might lose."

"But this is different. Didn't you hear me? I felt safe last night. I wasn't stressed at all. Quite the opposite, in fact. I wasn't trying to control the situation or anything. I even fell asleep in his arms."

He held up a hand. "Hear me out. Your subconscious is telling you exactly what you need to deal with. This dream was different. A past lover appeared in your dreams, and it sounds like it had definite erotic undertones. You've had little success with men in the past, and so this is someone you're afraid of losing - just like in combat when you're afraid of losing the fight.

"You're going to continue to experience stressful situations in the Alliance. There's no way around it. Figure out how you feel about your past before entering into anything serious or this relationship will blow up in your face. Doing so might just help alleviate the other episodes, too."

"And how am I supposed to do that?"

"You're in Southern California already, which is where you grew up. Reconnect with friends and family."

"I don't have any."
"You're telling me there isn't one person you can talk to from your youth? I find that hard to believe, even with your history."

She chewed on her lip, thinking. "The only person I can think of is close family with the guy I met last night."

He sat forward. "Are you saying you knew him from before?"

She nodded.

"Then there's definitely a connection between him and the resurgence of your PTSD. You're likely to develop a codependent bond in your current state if you visit his family, so that's no help. Is there anyone else?"

She began to shake her head again, then stopped, her eyes grim. She wasn't getting out of this. Might as well face it head on. "Fine. I know where to go."

"Good." His head turned away from her as he did something off-screen. "It looks like you still haven't taken any leave since the last time we talked."

"I had a lot to take care of."

"In other words, you feel good when you're productive so you disobeyed my recommendation."

She shrugged. It was her time off. She'd use it when she wanted to.

"Very well. I'm officially ordering you to take a holiday and use the leave you have saved up. All four months of it."

She stared at him in shock, her jaw hanging open. "I can't take four months off! I have responsibilities to my team."

"Yes, and you're a danger to everyone on your squad until you deal with this."

She covered her eyes for a few minutes, then looked up. "I guess I don't have any choice."

"I'm afraid not. You never know, taking a vacation may not be that bad. There, I've approved your leave. What about this man you met? Can you let him down gently?"

"I'd rather not. This is the first guy I've ever felt like this with."

"Did you sleep with him?"

She frowned. "Actually, he didn't even try to get me into bed."

"Are you sure he feels the same way about you?"

"Yes." She smirked in remembrance of the kiss.

The Captain laughed at her expression. "I'm glad for you, Shepard. I've never seen you like this. Look, can you just put him off for a while? Tell him you have some things to work out. If he cares for you, he should be fine with that."

"Maybe." James was probably the kind of guy who wouldn't take it the wrong way, but she still didn't like the idea.
"Think about it. Enjoy your time off as much as you can, but please, don't waste it. Open your mind and follow through on what you know is right. Otherwise, we'll just be doing this again in a few months. Your superiors and I don't want that any more than you do."

"I understand."

Less than an hour later, she stood before a large double door with her rucksack at her feet. Her fist raised – paused– and then she knocked. The door opened so quickly that she was certain the man in the business suit had been waiting just on the other side.

"May I help you?"

"I'm Shepard. I'm here to see Cong."

He led her under the enormous chandelier and through the foyer, her boots echoing loudly off the marble floor and up to the vaulted ceiling. She was shown into a wood-paneled library with sumptuous upholstered chairs arranged amongst low tables and tall bookshelves.

This room was the same as she remembered from her brief tour of the place six years ago. Only one thing was new: a large oil painting of an elderly woman hanging above the fireplace. Setting her hand on the mantle, she studied it until a voice came from behind her.

"My dear, I'm so flattered you finally chose to come and see me."

She hadn't heard him approach. She recovered quickly and took his proffered hand. "Cong. It's good to see you again. I'm – ah – sorry about the way I left last time."

"You may call me Jia. Have no fear about your manner of leaving before, however dramatic. I should have perceived your distress and provided certain concessions before entering into negotiations."

A practical, if callous, take on the situation. Perhaps they were more alike than she thought. A small smile appeared on her face.

He gestured to the seating area just to the side of the fireplace and settled into a stuffed and riveted leather chair that was well-broken in to his slim shape. "Please, have a seat. Have you come to join my family at long last?"

"No. I love being an Alliance marine. I have no reason to want to leave." She settled on the ottoman just in front of him, ignoring the chair a few feet away.

"Then what is the purpose of this visit? I'm sure you didn't just drop in to say hello."

"I wouldn't have imposed, but I wasn't given much of a choice." She explained the morning's events while he listened.

"This is over a dream about Duarte?" he asked when she had finished. "Curious. I had no idea he'd made such an impression on you."

"No reason why you would. I've tried like hell to get over it, but nothing seems to help.""And you think that your therapist is right? That it's about this new relationship?"

"Maybe. Probably. The more I think about it, the more it feels like it could never work out regardless." She stared at her hands, then met his eyes. "I ruin everything. If I care enough about
someone, the kindest thing to do is let them go."

"Do you believe that?"

Her eyes were tired. "I have a lifetime of proof, Jia."

The room settled into silence before Cong stood up and walked over to the fireplace. He indicated the painting. "Do you know who this woman is?"

"I'd guess she's your mother. You have her chin and nose."

"Very observant. I lost her last year. Died in her sleep, peacefully." He turned and smiled kindly at her. "I, too, have lost my entire family and am alone in the world. Mostly I have lost them to old age or illness, but it's different with the ones I lost to violence. It's harder to remember the happy memories."

"If you say so. I have no basis for comparison, since I've lost all of mine to violence of some kind."

"Not all," he said, so quietly that she thought she may have heard him wrong. He studied her. Then, apparently coming to some decision, he walked back to his chair and sat down. "I won't pretend I'm not disappointed that you haven't come to stay. It is my greatest wish to have you become a part of my family, but I won't force you. You're welcome to avail yourself of my hospitality for as long as you like, in any way you wish."

"You're letting me stay, even though I said I wouldn't work for you? Why?"

"I take a long view with most things. You may not be ready now, but at some point you will tire of taking orders. When that day comes, you will come to me."

"You would have orders of your own." She examined him shrewdly.

"Perhaps, but of a different nature. More like guidelines. You'd have much more autonomy and better resources than with the Alliance."

She shook her head. "I'm no merc. I want to fight for something meaningful, not your bottom line."

"If that's so, then perhaps we are talking about two different Alliances. And you don't know me well enough to know what my bottom line is, Shepard."

She gave him a wry look, snorting. "I don't think we're going to agree on this right now."

He chuckled. "You're probably right. We should leave this topic for now so that we can enjoy each other's company. Just remember, when they told you to go somewhere where you would be taken in no matter what, you came to me."

Cong called the butler back in and instructed him to show her to a guest room. He picked up her rucksack as Shepard shook Cong's hand goodnight, then he led her up the great curved staircase and into the large suite which was to be her temporary home.

Not waking to chimes or reveille was odd at first, but letting go of the imposed structure of military life was therapeutic by itself. During her quiet periods of reflection, she realized that she had taken comfort in the rigidity of military life because it didn't allow her to think past the immediacy of the moment.

She spent much of the next month wandering the mansion, looking forward to the quiet moments
that Cong wasn't busy so that they could talk. He seemed to genuinely enjoy her company. Increasingly, she found it difficult to reconcile this man with the ruthless drug kingpin he was rumored to be, especially once she began joining him in his morning Tai Chi practice.

One of her favorite haunts was the boardroom above the stairs, which she remembered dimly as having been filled with treasures before she jumped out of one of the windows six years ago. It still contained a long, highly polished table running the length of the room. The walls on either side were hung with professionally-lit artwork, doubtless priceless originals.

She spent quite a bit of her time in this room, looking out the windows, remembering as much as she could, and examining the artwork. As time went on, it became easier and easier to think of that night when she had lost her brother.

About a month after her arrival, Cong entered the room while she was studying one particular painting. She smiled tightly at him as he approached. "What's this one called?" she asked.

"It's called 'Poppies, Isle of Shoals'. It was painted by an American Impressionist from the 19th century, Childe Hassam." He sat on the edge of the table behind her, still taller seated than she was standing. "Do you like it?"

"I'm not sure. I think it's very pretty, but it makes me feel... uncomfortable. Everything is bending with the breeze, the sailboat, the bird and the flowers. But the bird bothers me."

"Why is that?" He cocked his head to the side, observing her intently. She almost felt like she should be on her guard with the way he was studying her, but she pushed the concern aside. It was pointless to speculate about his intentions.

"The bird and the boat are both harnessing the wind. They have that in common. But the boat is man-made. When I see it, I think about the person that made the hull, the sails, and the people that must be on board, sailing it. But the bird is alone. It was born to harness the wind with the rest of its flock, but there's no flock to be seen. I feel like this is a picture of one of my nightmares before everything goes to hell, and the bird has no idea what's coming."

Sighing deeply, she turned from the painting. "It seems peaceful, but it won't last. It never does."

He shook his head. "How deeply you've been hurt, I will never know."

"Neither will I, probably," she said, resigned.

"You do yourself a disservice. But this is not why I sought you out today. Someone has been tainting the red sand I sell to Omega. Since they're one of my largest buying sectors, the damage to my reputation is hurting my revenue. I know for a fact that it isn't happening on the station itself, but where exactly in the chain it's happening I have been unable to determine. My agents disappear as soon as they arrive in the system where the sand is produced."

"Sounds like you have a leak."

"I know. I need to know where. I was hoping you would go to the Terminus sector and find out for me."

"I already told you, I'm not interested. Even if your leak doesn't find me out, the Alliance frowns on moonlighting."

"I'd provide alternate identification, of course. You could go as a buyer or a smuggler - whatever you're most comfortable with."
"No. You couldn't even make it worth my while. I can't accept any sums of money without raising questions. So why would I want to?"

"Your alternate identity will be paid handsomely, which will raise no questions at all. You would still be able to access the funds with your fingerprint at certain institutions. Plus, you can keep some of the equipment."

Unwillingly, her interest piqued at the last part. She lifted her chin and narrowed her eyes. "What kind of equipment?"

"One of my special omni-tools, your choice of a weapon from my armory and... perhaps a full set of Hahne-Kedar Shadow Works Spectre X Armor to sweeten the deal."

When she didn't answer, her eyes glittering but still guarded, he continued. "You have nothing to lose and many to save. Consumers are dying on Omega."

"I can't believe this. You're a goddamn drug dealer and you're asking me to save your addicts so you can keep selling to them."

"I am far from a simple drug dealer." He stood up and gazed down at her sternly. "And your day job is to pull the trigger on people you don't know for reasons that are often not disclosed to you."

"Saving people from slavers and pirates is a huge part of what I do. It's actually pretty easy to piece together what's going on out there. Drug addiction is just a more subtle form of slavery."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Hardly. The people who take the red sand I produce choose to take it; slaves have no choice at all."

"Maybe they choose to take it at first, but it eventually destroys their lives."

"Only if they use it to excess. You can say the same of food, or clothes, or sex, or technology - any number of things. Who am I to say when someone's had enough? Leave that kind of behavior to twisted organizations like Cerberus. They like to play god. I don't."

She didn't answer, feeling oddly like she'd lost the moral high ground. It was certainly true that she often had to take orders on blind faith, and she knew from personal experience that not all Alliance officers were upstanding galactic citizens.

If for no other reason, she was tempted to accept out of boredom. She chewed her lip as she struggled to find another reason to refuse.

Noting her distress, he put his hands up in surrender. "I just thought you might like something to do, and people are dying because of this. I'll send another agent and hope for the best." He bowed slightly and began to walk out.

"If I get there and I don't like what I find out about your organization, you won't ever see me again," she called after him, wondering how quickly she was going to regret this decision. "I can promise you that."

He turned around. "That's a fair condition. And if you choose to return without completing the assignment, you'll return all of the equipment - except for the omni-tool. You can keep that regardless."

"That's acceptable."
Reaching into his pocket, he produced a black bracelet that reminded her of the other she'd lost long ago. She slid off her Alliance-issue omni-tool and replaced it with the new one, her fingers itching to turn it on.

Tearing her eyes from the powerful device, she looked back up at him. "What resources will I have? I need to know it's within the realm of possibility first."

"Your briefing is on the omni-tool. Go ahead and take a moment to examine it and take stock of your ship's inventory."

"My ship?" She brought up the display and began to read, muttering the key items aloud. "A one-man cruiser with stealth shielding and excelsior-grade hull plating… shield capacity… fully stocked armory… and fifty thousand credits in the slush fund. Not bad. I won't need brute force for a job like this. I'll enjoy taking that armor back to the Alliance, too."

"If you succeed," Cong added.

A challenge. He really did know her well. A small voice in her head told her to be careful, that there was much more about this situation that she wasn't being told, but she held out her hand.

"It's a deal."
Catharsis

Chapter Summary

Shepard confronts a choice between two lives.

Chapter Notes

Music: 60 Feet Tall, The Dead Weather; Behind Blue Eyes, Limp Bizkit; Your Skull is Red, Team Sleep

5.5.2178
Moorehead Station, Balor System, in the Caleston Rift
Shepard

She named her ship The Kraken.

Its name was slightly ironic, considering its diminutive size, but its armaments were mean enough to pull it off. The whole ship wasn't much longer than a city bus, but it made up for its size with speed and maneuverability. Several storage areas were under the decking, with a small galley and head which opened off to one side. Her bunk folded down across from the drive core, which sat naked in the middle of the living area. She used the only empty space in the cabin to continue the beginner's Tai Chi routine she had picked up from Cong during her stay at his home. The routine helped calm her nerves before she went to sleep, which made an immeasurable improvement to her state of mind in a short period of time. Although everything seemed darker today, on the sixth anniversary since she'd lost her brother.

In the quiet evenings alone on the little ship, she found that she missed Cong's conversation. With her squadmates in the Alliance, their chatter was generally about whatever they were doing in the moment, rarely focusing on events outside of their little sphere unless it had something to do with a mission. Cong talked readily to her about the seedy underside of the galaxy like it was just business as usual, which, for him, it was. She availed herself of his knowledge to answer a lot of questions she had about the background of many of the Terminus Sector's criminal organizations, who were behind some of the missions she had been on for the Alliance.

He was fascinating. But it was a fascination she recognized. It was the same fascination she had for Raul, only without any physical attraction; it was her attraction to the darkness she found everywhere she went, even inside herself.

Everywhere, she amended sadly to herself, but in James. Perhaps that was why she didn't want to see him sucked into the black hole that was her heart. He deserved better. Her memories of his clean, bright presence seemed to pick up her taint of despair as time went on. After her third week in the system, she avoided thoughts of him entirely. It was good to have some distance; she was too fucked up for a normal relationship at the moment, the doc had been right about that. As for the rest... she was sure he hadn't wanted her to take on a freelance job involving the drug trade, but
then, he did advise her to reconnect with her past.

She spent her first few days in the system positioning herself for a major sale, posing as a buyer for a biotic commune deep in the Kepler Verge. From her examination of the evidence she'd collected so far, no one seller or distributor seemed to be exempt from the tainted red sand, so the sabotage must be happening on the production end. This led her to fly to Moorehead station, in orbit above Caleston, where most of the eezo in the sector was mined.

In an effort to avoid being associated with Cong's company, Sanshou Enterprises, she had eschewed using the contacts he had given her, choosing instead to build a new network from scratch. She didn’t want to disappear like his previous agents. She headed to a meeting with a notable volus she had helped earlier that week, in the hopes that she could find out exactly when and where the sand was being poisoned within the distribution chain.

From the view from her docking slip, the station looked like a hodgepodge of different ships welded together. Just off the outside ring lay the monolithic Eldfell-Ashland offices, headquarters for the largest miner of eezo on the gas giant below. The largest offices just beneath Eldfell-Ashland's complex were used to sell the eezo which had been converted into fuel for mass core drives, the powerful engines which made it possible to use the mass relays to move from one corner of the galaxy to another. Beneath where she stood on the habitat ring, rows of offices housed the independent resellers and shell corporations that allowed illegal products produced from eezo, like red sand, to be sold and distributed without implicating the larger corporations.

Somewhere in this rat's maze of money and enterprise, someone was poisoning illegal narcotics. This mission still didn't sit well with Shepard, but she was committed to seeing it through.

She walked through the docking tube with a feeling of relief for escaping the confines of the lonely little ship. The feeling was short-lived, replaced by a discomfort she suspected was related to having no one behind her, no team on her side. The paranoia involved in this work reminded her uncomfortably of her time with the sangre carnal, and this had been reflected in her increasingly vivid dreams of Raul... Raul's hands, and eyes, and mouth...

She'd sat on her bed for more than an hour after her chime woke her on this particular morning, trying to settle the feeling that came into her every time she thought about him. He simply shouldn't have this kind of a hold on her after so long.

If nothing else, she was a professional. Once she stepped onto the station in orbit over Caleston, her feelings were neatly packed away in a corner of her mind so that she could focus on work.

The way she looked not even Carla would have recognized her. She sported sidecuts in her shoulder-length hair. Her skintight bodysuit bore yellow and black chevron stripes along the sides, running down into her soft-sole, knee-high boots. The whole outfit fit easily under her brand new, custom-fitted armor. A wide, studded belt was slung low around her hips, bearing a multitude of small compartments where she had stashed tools - though the only one she truly needed was on her wrist. Her pistol, as always, was at her hip.

A crowd of people stood just inside her destination, talking loudly. The batarian bouncer held out a hand to stop her before she walked in.

"Hold it, human," he snarled in his native tongue, the common language in these parts, which she was fortunately fluent in. Special forces training came in handy out here. "This is a private club."

She coolly flashed her credentials, examining the crowd inside, the heads-up display on her helmet dimly illuminating her eyes beneath the dark glass. It seemed strange to be making deals in full
body armor, but she felt far too vulnerable to leave the ship without it.

"You're clear," he said curtly. "Forlan Kor is waiting for you. Your table is on the far side, behind the bar."

The room was crowded with investors, buyers, and account managers from a dozen species, representing more than thirty corporations. Eldfell-Ashland had the largest presence, of course, but her display also indicated a number of Cong's reps and many independents she had no prior contact with. But then, she'd only been here a short time.

A volus in an expensive enviro-suit waited for her at a booth on the far side of the room. She had pegged him as a good contact from almost the first day she arrived less than a week ago, and managed to secure a meeting with him immediately as a prominent new buyer. She nodded to him as she approached, thankful that she moved just as easily in the upper echelons of society as she did amongst less reputable circles.

"Miss Hale, I'm glad you were able to make it today. Your advice on streamlining database efficiency dropped overhead by point-three-five percent," he said, his breathing unit separating his words. He indicated that she should sit at the booth across from him. "As President of the Trading Commission, this improvement practically guarantees me that my appointment will be renewed."

She smiled down at him. "I do what I can - for friends, anyway." She settled into the booth with her back to the wall and took the drink the asari server handed to her.

"I appreciate that, and I hope that the information I have for you today will do you as much good." He scooted closer to her and spoke more quietly. "I was contacted shortly after you arrived on the station this morning. I was told that you weren't who you said you were, and was warned to keep my distance. They said you've been poking into things that aren't any of your concern."

She leaned back and sipped at her drink through the opening in her helmet, glad her eyes were obscured as they darted around the room. "Then why are you here, telling me this?"

The volus' sputtering breath hissed as he looked over his shoulder again and scooted even closer. "You helped me, and I can't forget that. I'm not without influence, so I'm safe enough, but you're new in this sector. And you operate alone."

"What do they want?"

"They want to question you about who you really work for. I'm not supposed to say any of this, but I wanted you to be warned. I don't know when, but they'll try to detain you. You should get off the station immediately."

"Can you tell me any more? Who are they?"

"I can't say. But they asked me to set up this meeting and arrange another with you and one of their contacts. I wasn't given a choice about that part."

He sounded sorrowful, but at the moment Shepard could care less. She sat up straight. "They know I'm here?"

Her eyes scanned the crowded room again. She had to get out, fast. Any one of the people in this room could be working for the people who were after her. Again, she lamented the absence of her team.

As she slid out of the booth and quickly made her way through the bar, she heard Forlan call out
from behind her, "I'm sorry. I wish you well, Miss Hale..."

She ran from the bar and down the wide hallway that led to the docking ring. After a few minutes, the lights swayed and ran together. Her legs began to feel like she was slogging through mud. That drink back at the bar - she must have been drugged.

She stumbled, got her feet back underneath herself and continued to run, desperately pumping her legs toward the safety of her ship. She made it as far as the entrance of the docking ring, her vision blurring so badly that she wasn't sure which way to turn, before everything went black.

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**Raul**

Raul stood at the window behind his desk, watching the activity over the docking ring on Moorehead Station. The large office behind him was quiet and dark, which suited his mood at the moment. The light from outside lit him from beneath, casting long shadows across his face and making his bright red tattoos seem to glow in the gloom.

His long leather duster held a variety of weapons. The weight of it on his shoulders was the only comfort he could find on this particular evening. Watching the colorful flow of drive emissions stream across the inner ring and reflecting the gas giant's radiance below ordinarily soothed him when he was distressed. Today, though, it wasn't working. Every Cinco de Mayo, his mind went to one place and one person. To the one he couldn't find, no matter how hard he tried.

Footsteps approached. He didn't have to look up to know who it was. "Not now, Will."

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but we have company."

Ignoring Will's statement, Raul turned around and gazed darkly at the younger man from under his eyebrows. "Do you know what today is?"

"Yes," Will said. "It's exactly six years since the last time you saw her."

"How well you know me."

The lack of her presence had been a constant blight on his otherwise exceptional life. He couldn't fully enjoy anything, knowing it would be better with her by his side. His eyes closed picturing her beautiful eyes under her arched brow, twinkling with mystery.

"She isn't worth all the pain you're putting yourself through," Will said, coming up behind him. "I can't stand seeing you go through this again. It was bad enough on Earth, when you still thought you could find her."

"I know you don't want us to be together. You've made that clear since the beginning." Raul's bitter frown deepened and he turned around. "But what am I supposed to do? Just live without her?"

"It would be best for all of us, especially you. I wasn't sure about this move, of working with Cong and Sanshou Enterprises again, but we've done better out here than we ever did on Earth. And yet you're still miserable."

"I can almost understand why you may think I'm being selfish, but I can't help what's in my heart."

"No. You've never been selfish. Obsessed, sure, but never selfish. There are other women in the galaxy. She wasn't unique."
Raul began to pace. "A woman that's truly my equal? Who could keep me on the edge of my seat, yet talk strategy and business with me like a veteran when she wasn't even eighteen years old? You obviously think more of the human race than I do."

Raul leaned his head back, his Adam's apple bobbing. "I keep imagining what she must be like now, at twenty-four years old. What she must have accomplished over the years."

"Are you sure you know her as well as you think you do? We know she deceived us."

"She told me quite a bit during our last week together, and when I checked her story there was plenty of evidence to support it. The rest I extrapolated. I've watched the security footage of every moment she spent with us over and over."

Will dropped his head for a moment, as if deliberating. He put his hand out to stop Raul's pacing. "I have to ask, Raul. Did you want to come out here for the good of the sangre, or on the off-chance you'll run into her?"

"The two aren't mutually exclusive. Candente and I will be brought together again, you'll see. The universe will see to it that I get what's rightfully mine. I know that if I build a big enough empire, she will come, like a moth to a flame. My heart is hers, and she is mine, body and soul."

"It's still difficult to watch you go through this. I have to admit, sometimes I've wondered if your heart is with her, or with us."

Raul gripped his shoulders and smiled. "There is no difference between the two. The sooner you embrace her, the sooner we'll be whole again. Unless you'd rather I gave up and went back to my old ways..."

Will held up his hands. "God, no."

Raul laughed and slapped Will's arm. "You see? She has done me some good, even you can't deny it. I can see now how immature I was, thinking I was sparing the world by ridding it of its genetic lowlifes, those inferior women. Let the cattle procreate elsewhere. My Candente is looking for me out there. Dreaming of me."

He expanded his arms in front of the window, taking in the sight of the thriving community again, but with a much lighter heart.

He turned back to his lieutenant. "Now, what was this business you wanted me to take care of?"

"Jurdon Trank of the Blood Pack sent an envoy with a prisoner they've been interrogating. She was seen snooping around the cargo and distribution points. They think she's involved in tainting the sand supply, but they aren't having much luck making her talk."

"In other words, they've been beating the hell out of her and expecting results. Amateurs." Raul shook his head in disgust. "I'd like to know who's ruining the sand as much as they do, but that's thin evidence to go on. She could be a reporter or any one of the other distributors that have been affected. They're probably wasting their time."

"Well, they're willing to hand her over and pay you for your time. They want your more... subtle touch."

"Do they now?" Raul pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Ordinarily I'd tell them to fuck off, but you know, it's been a long time since I've heard a woman scream."
"I thought it might brighten your day."

"You're a good friend, Will. Have them bring her in."

The prisoner was brought to the sangre's holding cell in the bowels of their compound, set aside especially for this purpose. The room was mostly bare, with a metal table pushed to one side, opposite the row of utilitarian cabinets and a large industrial sink. Suspended from the ceiling, a flat metal grid bore several sprinklers and a few menacing-looking hooks, plainly multi-purpose. A dark drain occupied the middle of the floor.

Four vorcha entered the room, one of them carrying a body bag over his shoulder. The short, goblin-like aliens had a reputation for violence, and made up a large part of the Blood Pack's mercenary force.

"What the hell is this?" Raul said in disgust as the body was roughly dumped onto the middle of the plasticrete floor. "How am I supposed to interrogate her if she's not conscious?"

"She killed men," the vorcha hissed, spittle spraying from between his pointed teeth. "Battlemaster gave her sedative. Made her sick."

"See what you can do, Will. What did she have on her?" Raul asked the vorcha, stepping over the body towards them while Will went to the cabinet to get some medi-gel.

One of the other vorcha dropped a duffel. When it hit the floor, the contents inside the duffle made a loud clatter that echoed off the bare walls of the room.

"Some is broken," the head vorcha said, pointing to the bag. "Said she worked for biotic commune, but Battlemaster said she lies."

Raul bent down and began rummaging through the duffle bag.

Will crossed the room and unfastened the body bag. "Raul," he said a moment later, his voice strained.

"Just a moment." Raul was examining the contents of the belt in the bag when he realized that the vorcha were still watching. "We can take it from here," he said sternly to them, indicating the door.

One of them stepped forward, his red eyes alight with enthusiasm. "We want to watch."

"I told you to leave. If there's any intelligence in that primitive brain of yours, you'll do as you're told."

"Um, Raul-" Will said again.

"What is it?" Raul spat out, irritated, then twisted around. He looked at Will's wide eyes and pale face, then followed his gaze to look at the bruised and broken body lying on the floor.

She was face down, so it took him a moment to recognize her, then another to believe what he saw. Her dark red hair spread across the white expanse of the cold floor behind her head. Her familiar tattoos were more colorful than he remembered, but it had to be her.

He stared, eyes bulging. Then he rose and faced the vorcha standing at the doorway, his face flushed with barely controlled rage. "Get out."

The vorcha scrambled out the door. Raul's hands shook as he grabbed the slowest one, throwing
him into the hallway after his brethren. Only the urgency of the moment stopped him from tearing them limb from limb on the spot.

When the door shut, Raul dropped to his knees and turned her over. He moaned as he saw the wound on her chest and the words that surrounded it. "What did I tell you, Will?" He said as he searched for her pulse. 'The universe brought her to me, on today of all days. Is there any doubt left in you now?"

"This is an unbelievable coincidence."

"It's not a coincidence."

Will was scanning her, his hands flying over his omni-tool. "Her vital signs are very bad. They've pumped her full of... what the hell? Why would they give her Omega-Enkaphalin if they thought her cover was a lie?"

"What is it?"

"It's a biotic suppressant, fatal in large doses. They didn't give her too much, but it's toxic when combined with the sedative. I'm looking for an antidote."

"Those incompetent pendejos! I'll kill them, all of them." Raul stroked her cold face, then stood up and took two long strides to reach the tall cabinet on the far side of the room. He pulled out a large blanket and wrapped her in it. He began trying to rub warmth back into her limbs.

"Got it!" Will shouted as he ran to the cabinet over the sink. He pulled out several clear bottles and prepared a syringe, then rushed over and injected it into her upper arm, following it with a second dose of medi-gel.

They knelt over her as they waited in breathless anticipation for the counter-agent to do its work. Minutes passed.

"Her vitals are getting stronger," Will finally said.

"Come on, come on," Raul chanted. He lifted her eyelids and checked her pupils. "Wake up."

She groaned. Her eyelids flickered open, then closed again.

Raul made an exclamation of relief, then looked up at Will. "Send for a doctor immediately." His lieutenant rushed from the room.

"Raul?" her hoarse, confused voice said from his arms.

He looked down, into the eyes that had haunted his thoughts for last six years. Gently, he kissed her cold lips. "If I'd known you were here, I wouldn't have let them harm a hair on your head."

"'M fine. I'm tough," she slurred. Her eyes drifted closed again.

He chuckled as he lifted her, rising to his feet. "Si. I know."

Shepard

An immeasurable amount of time later, her eyes opened again. The ceiling above her wasn't the bare plasticrete with bright white lights that she was expecting. Instead, it was an ornate tile with a pattern that reminded her of the old Spanish mansions near where she grew up. The bed was soft,
much softer than anything she'd slept on since she left Cong's.

A noise to her right made her turn her head. She squinted at Raul, who was lounging in an armchair chair next to the bed, watching her.

"I guess that really did happen," she muttered, rubbing her eyes and pushing herself to a sitting position.

"It did indeed," he said matter-of-factly. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I got the bejeezus beat out of me, thanks for asking."

He twisted his mouth wryly. "Is that all?"

"My head is pounding like a mother and that light is killing me." She cupped a hand to protect her face from the bright light coming in the window.

"There's an analgesic on the nightstand, go ahead and drink it," he said, touching his omni-tool.

The window dimmed as she downed the beverage. Vitality flowed quickly through her limbs and she sighed in relief.

"Better?"

"Yes, thank you." Her head was clearing now, the pain diminishing. "For getting me out of there, too."

"Actually, they brought you to me. Said they couldn't break you."

"And you're the resident torture expert on Moorehead, I take it?" She shook her head. "I should have guessed."

Someone rang the doorchime. While he answered it, she stood up and stretched, then groaned and twisted her neck back and forth with a series of snaps that released some of her stiffness. She was dressed in a pair of men's pajamas. Her clothes and equipment were nowhere to be seen, but her jumpsuit was folded on the nightstand next to the empty analgesic cup. She changed into it.

Raul brought a tray of food into the room and set it on a table opposite the bed. He took off his long coat and hung it over the back of one of the chairs. He wore a short-sleeved shirt, exposing the powerful rope-like muscles of his arms. She knew his ink so well, and had dreamed of him so often in recent months, that she had no problem picking out the ones he had added since they last saw each other.

He pulled out her chair. "I like that outfit. Sexy. Come and eat something. You need to regain your strength." When he turned to speak to her, she immediately noticed that "Candente" was now inked across his chin. It all came rushing back to her - the fear and terror of their relationship and the paranoia that had defined her time with him, right up to their final week together.

"Sounds good," she said, shaking out her arms and legs. She really did feel much better. "There's just one thing I need to do first."

"What's that?" he asked when she came close to where he stood.

She hauled a fist back and punched him square in the mouth, sending him skidding backward into a chair.
He sprang to his feet, his fist cocked to hit her back. "What the fuck was that for?" he demanded.

"Bajo de Malecón," was all she said.

His angry breath rushed over her face. His eyes narrowed, then he dropped his hands, evidently not willing to ruin their reunion over it. "Fair enough."

She smiled, momentarily satisfied, and sat down to eat. "Where is my equipment? If you intend to keep me from completing my contract, I'll leave a burning trail out of here and you'll never see me again."

"Candente." He clucked his tongue. "You can try that on other men, but not me."

Reaching across the table, he ran his long fingers down the side of her neck. "Your equipment is in that bag by the door. You can have it whenever you wish, I won't stop you. But you'll stick around when your contract is complete."

"What makes you think that?"

He touched the place where her first tattoo lay, just over her heart, and leaned in close to speak to her. "Primera sangre, primera amor. I know what you really want, and I intend to give it to you."

She didn't immediately respond, but gooseflesh was racing across the skin under his fingertips, her heart beating quickly as his nose grazed her ear. He knew exactly how to touch her to get the effect he wanted, and that thought made her even angrier. He had ruined any chance she had at enjoying a normal relationship. She cleared her throat, but her voice shook a little as she replied. "You don't know shit, Raul."

"Don't I?" His voice was low and silky in her ear, as compelling as ever. "I know you like I know my own heartbeat, like the salt and iron of my own blood. I know you love to dance, and when you're angry or worried you dance like a wooden doll, but you dance anyway. I know that you're committed to winning at any price, just like I am."

He pulled back to observe her face. "You've always dreamed of living in space, having your own ship and finding adventure in the far corners of the galaxy. You hope that it will one day lead you to the first man to love you, your father. But most of all, you want a family of your own."

She blinked rapidly. "How - do you know all of that?"

"That's not the right question. The right question is, what I am willing to do to keep you at my side? And the answer, in case you hadn't guessed-" He grabbed her chin and looked directly into her eyes. "-is anything."

Her breath halted. He was as potent as ever. Involuntarily, she leaned forward, mouth parted. Her dreams didn't have anything on the real Raul.

He smiled at her reaction and sat back in his chair. "I know you're not working for a biotic commune as a buyer," he said. "You'd never do anything so low-key. What are you really doing out here?"

She shrugged. "Minding my own business. You know how it goes."

"I might be able to help you."

She kept eating. The food was good, and there was a lot of it. Enough to sate even her enhanced
"Biotic metabolism."

"Why did the Blood Pack give you a biotic suppressant?"

"Because they're jackasses."

"True. What did you tell them about the saboteurs who've been tainting my red sand supply?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Yours too?"

"Well, Sanshou's, which is the same as mine since I work for him."

She eyed him suspiciously. "You're expecting me to believe that you work for Cong?"

He continued to casually eat his food. "After what happened with you, we didn't speak for a few years, of course. But then I found out he needed new distributors to expand his reach deeper into the Terminus Sector, and considering how much he'd already invested in you..."

"You thought you'd find me if you worked for him." Flattering, if it was true. But this was still Raul, the killer. Grabbing the neck of his shirt, she tugged it aside to see where the ominous red dotted lines once lay. In their place, there was now a series of red blossoms. She looked at him questioningly.

"My anger blossomed to love once I met you. I told you then that I wouldn't kill a woman in passion again, and I haven't. I've been faithful to you."

He seemed sincere. She was instantly suspicious. "Uh-huh."

"How can I prove it to you? Tell me what it will take to let you know that you can trust me."

"You can start by giving me full access to your network."

He gestured to the terminal on the wall behind him. "Of course. Help yourself."

"Well?" she asked, moving to stand by the terminal.

Raul was openly admiring her. "Well what?"

"Give me access."

He crossed his arms across his chest, smiling. "Hack it."

So he wanted to watch her work. After retrieving her omni-tool from the bag by the door, she slipped it on. With a sly smile, she brought up the interface. It was a matter of moments before she had broken through the lock and the failsafes, cracked the password, and accessed the database. She immediately started a transfer protocol, copying all of his files to her ship's drive.

"Asombroso," he muttered. "It took you no time at all. I'll have to talk to Will about this."

"No, Will is good, better than most. I'm just the best."

She began flipping through the files. It looked like he was indeed working for Sanshou, so it wasn't likely the sangre was tainting the sand. That was a relief, but it brought up several questions about why Cong had sent her out here with no warning about Raul's presence. Suspicions began to form in her mind.
She kept digging for more information on his sand distribution business, almost daring him to stop her, but he wasn't even looking at the screen. He was staring at her.

She studied the contacts in his database, running cross-reference queries on the extranet for each one. Raul patiently watched her work. Raul's comm went off several times, but he ignored it.

The station lights had dimmed with the station's day/night cycle before she turned up an interesting series of tidbits. "Ever heard of Prodigious Chemicals?"

"Yes. One of many shell companies that secretly produce red sand in-system."

"They were in the news recently. Look." She brought up a newsfeed article that announced Prodigious Chemical's procurement of a new cyrote mine in a nearby system around the same time. "They're not mentioned in any of the news stories about the deaths on Omega, either. Their red sand is pure, but they're not buying sarginon."

"Sarginon is the most important ingredient in red sand, and the most expensive. How are they managing that?" Raul asked, rising and walking to her side.

"I think they're stealing it from companies like Sanshou and replacing it with cyrote from the mine. Sarginon and cyrote have almost exactly the same chemical signature, but most humans are allergic to cyrote so it's never used to make red sand. That's why people are getting sick from your red sand, but not theirs. It's probably quadrupled their profits, at the same time killing the competition."

Raul surveyed the evidence with a pleased expression. "You're right. You did it."

He pulled her close, looking into her eyes. He was like a drug himself, hypnotizing her. "You're so perfect for this life, perfect for me." He kissed her softly, then with increasing passion. His mouth moved down to her neck and her eyes rolled back in her head.

A few weeks ago, she wouldn't have considered staying. But these last few weeks, being well-equipped, having these powerful men tripping over themselves to woo her - it was suddenly tempting. It was so hard to think with Raul kissing her like that.

She reminded herself that she was an Alliance officer, that she had already made a considerable investment in her military career. She had friends in the Alliance, good friends who genuinely cared about her, and she returned those feelings. But all of her fellow officers had families of their own to go home to. She had no one she could call her own. Cong and Raul would stand by her no matter what, almost like family. To finally belong would be an amazing feeling.

With anyone else - she winced inwardly as James' face flashed in her mind - she had to worry about corrupting them with her darkness, with the fucked-upness that she took with her everywhere she went. But with Raul, she could possibly do some good. She was the bright spot in his life already. Because of her, he had stopped killing innocent women. In time, perhaps she could get him to switch to a less damaging business. How many lives would she save?

Raul pulled back. "We belong together. Everything in my heart says it's true. And you can't deny that you've dreamed of me."

Even though he was right, she knew that he couldn't really know about her dreams. But she felt torn between the two worlds: her life with the Alliance, fighting for what she felt was right, and her life here, where she could do and say whatever she wanted. She remembered having this same inner argument the last time they were together. It was all so confusing. The choices were clear, but
she didn't know which way to go.

Raul's comm went off. "Yes?" he asked.

"Are you finished? Can we go over the day's reports now?"

"Yes. Bring it in, Will." He turned to her, his fingertip tracing her mouth. "I just have a little business, mielero, and then we will spend the entire night alone together. I've missed you terribly."

That suited her mood perfectly at the moment. "I'll stay and listen. If you're serious about wanting to work with me, that is," she challenged him.

"I am. I look forward to hearing your insights."

Will came in, along with two other men. Will ignored her, obviously not happy about her presence.

They took some time to go through financial statements, then discussed station politics and the newest red sand shipment. Raul told them about what she discovered. Shepard found it interesting enough, remembering the time when she had studied the gangs back on Southern California. She could almost see her life revolving around in this routine. Adventure and fighting all day, following by nights with Raul. If it weren't for the type of business they ran, she would jump at it.

"Since she's figured out the problem with the bad red sand, we can get rid of the test subjects," Will concluded. "That will save us some credits."

"Good idea," Raul said. "We were almost out of minors from this load to dust, anyway. Go ahead and sell the rest to Torfan."

Her arms crossed over her chest, mouth twisted in disgust. "Test subjects?" she asked. "You were using eezo miners to test the red sand? That's risky. I hope they were well compensated."

Will shook his head, his voice reflecting his annoyance at her interruption. "Not miners - minors, with an 'o'. As in, young slaves. The taint in the red sand was undetectable by sensors, so we dusted some slaves up to check before selling the goods. Mature slaves are more expensive, so this was the economical solution." He shrugged.

She stared. Then her fists clenched until her knuckles showed white. "Are you telling me - that you, Will - a father - have been testing potentially deadly red sand on children?"

Will looked at her oddly, like she was speaking another language.

Raul put his hand out to forestall her objection. "They're just slaves. No reason to get bent out of shape. This is what they're for."

"You son of a bitch." The words dropped from her mouth like bombs about to go off. And to think that just moments before, she had been about ready to stay with them. "I'll fucking kill you myself!"

"Restrain her!" Raul shouted. The men that had followed Will into the room grabbed her, twisting her arms behind her back.

"You aren't in any position to be making judgments," Raul said. "If I have to keep you locked up like I did before until you come around, that's what I'll do. But you'll heel to me, mujer, and not the other way around."
"There you go again, Raul," she said with an unfriendly smile. "Underestimating me."

She sent a biotic shockwave in all directions, scattering the men like rag dolls. While the men groaned and rolled around on the floor, she walked over to where Raul was getting to his hands and knees and kicked him in the teeth. He flew backward, hitting his head on the wall, and crumpled to the floor.

Rolling back up to his feet, Will pulled out his pistol and fired at her repeatedly, shouting, "You bitch! I knew you were bad news!"

She ran toward him, putting up a kinetic shield to protect herself. She kicked the gun from his hand, then twisted his arm around, positioning herself behind him so she could break his neck with one swift, angry movement. She paid the same to the other two men where they lay, still unconscious. Then she turned back to Raul.

"Time to finish this."

He was just beginning to rouse again. She lifted him in a biotic field high above her head. He shouted in surprise, arms flailing. With a flick of her wrist, she slammed him back onto the ground onto his back. His head fell to one side, coughing blood.

"People aren't disposable, Raul," she said as she approached. "Especially not children. If you knew me at all, you should have seen this coming."

She straddled him across the stomach, running her hands over his well-muscled abdomen. Never again would she mistake lust for love. She took his face in one hand and directed his gaze toward her. "Look me in the eyes while I kill you."

"No, Candente, please," he begged, trying to rise. "I didn't want this. Te amo."

"My name," she said, raising her hands to create a biotic distortion field inside his chest, "is Shepard."

Then she collapsed the distortion field, crushing his heart.

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5.9.2178
San Diego, Earth

Cong stood by the fireplace when she entered his library. "Shepard," he said. "I'm not surprised to see you back so soon. The massacre on Moorehead was all over the extranet. Interesting the way the entire station lost its surveillance feeds for that day."

"Yeah. You need a new distributor, Jia."

"May I ask what happened?"

"What happened?" She laughed bitterly. "You hired Raul, that's what happened. Did you know he was using kids to test the red sand before shipping it? No, don't answer. I don't want to know."

"I didn't know. Did you complete the mission?" Cong asked.

"Oh, yes. I found your problem. It's all on here, for what good it will do you." She tossed a data module at him, which he caught with one hand. "You really ought to go into another line of business."
He inserted the module into the terminal next to his chair and began studying its contents. "Good work. You've earned your fee."

"Never mind the fee." She jabbed a shaking finger at him. "You didn't say a word about Raul being on Moorehead because you thought I'd stay with him and work for you. You manipulated me."

"I never intended to hurt you. I thought it would help you get the closure you needed, one way or another. I'm sorry it turned out like this, my dear."

"I bet you are."

"No, you misunderstand me. I thought you'd be good for him, too. He was a good distributer, just disturbed. I always hope to bring the best out in people. Even you."

"He was a goddamn psychotic. But, now that I think of it, I should be thanking you. I will never again lose sleep over him." She unslung the bag from her shoulder and dropped it on the ground. "Here's your equipment."

"It's yours. You completed the mission."

"I don't want anything from you. I'm going back to the Alliance. When I get there, I'm turning over Raul's database to them. I'm going to save those kids and make sure none of the slavers on that list lives another day."

"They'll ask where you got that information, Shepard. I can't protect you from a military inquisition."

"That's fine with me. I intend to tell them everything. I'm done hiding." With a final, stiff bow, she marched out.

She took a cab back to Pendleton, calling her superiors on the way. Even if she ended up in a military prison somewhere, she was prepared to face the charges with her head held high. Those kids were more important than her freedom.

She just hoped they'd consider letting her go on the mission to liberate them. Wherever Torfan was, it was a haven for slavers that had snatched children from their parents. They needed to be taught a lesson they'd never forget.
Say It Isn't So

Chapter Summary

James gets a depressing letter and Mason runs into an old friend.

Chapter Notes

Music: One, Metallica; You've Seen the Butcher, Deftones

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the sparkling lights of The Villa appeared over the next hill, all of the occupants of the shuttle broke into a cheer. James yelled and whooped along with them, even though the sound of so much enthusiasm hurt his ears after so long living in the quiet jungle.

Mapu leaned over James’ shoulder to get a better look. “Never thought I’d be so happy to see the base. It’s strange enough being stuck on this little shuttle with ten other people.”

James twisted around to look at the long line of shuttles flying ahead of them. “It’s worse in the other ones. They’re all full. We were the last candidates extracted.”

“I wonder how many finished.”

James shrugged. “We’ll find out soon enough.”

Ten minutes later, a few dozen exhausted marines stood in formation, receiving commendations from a sergeant. He told the group that although most had made it through, only the most successful would be invited back. They were all congratulated for making it as far as they did.

James had already tuned out the sergeant. A row of distinctive shuttles were lined up on the other end of the airfield, blocking his view of some kind of commotion on the other side. The commanding officer’s crisp “Dismissed!” was broken by a loud cracking sound. It repeated several more times before they were dismissed.

“Was that what I think it was?” James asked the sergeant before he could walk away.

“Funereal procession with a traditional rifle salute. Strange to hear gunpowder-based munitions, isn’t it?”

“What happened?”

“Torfan’s been cleaned out, but the mission took its toll on our numbers. Almost a whole platoon was lost. Sad business, but at least the mission was a success. There are a lot of civilians on base for the ceremony, so try to steer clear of them until you’ve had a shower.”

“C’mon, man. Which squad? I have friends-“
“We all do. I don’t know the particulars, haven’t had time to catch up on the news yet today. Check the casualty lists when you get back to your bunk. But seriously, get a shower first.”

James began stripping as soon as he and Mapu got to their bunks.

“Dibs on the shower, Runt,” James said, cringing as he peeled off his undershirt. He sniffed delicately at the sweat-stiffened fabric. “I can’t smell myself anymore. Is that bad or good?”

“Probably bad.”

James twisted his arms to one side, feeling along his ribs. Pieces of leaves, twigs, and dark brown dirt flaked off his torso and drifted to the floor. “What’s going on here? Feels weird.”

Mapu leaned over to look, then smiled up at him patronizingly. “They’re called obliques, dumbass. You lost some body fat.”

“No shit. Guess there are some positive side effects to living off the land for thirteen weeks.”

“Guess so.” Mapu checked the display next to the door. “They’re serving lunch down at the mess right now. I want some hot food. Tacos today, you’ll love that shit.”

James decided to ignore the slanted remark. His roommate’s social skills were understandably rusty. “You go ahead, hermano. I really want to get cleaned up.”

“I’ll bring you something, then. Hopefully they’ll serve me first to get me out of the Mess before they have to fumigate the place.”

“That’s one way to get quick service.”

James took his time in the shower, scrubbing himself thoroughly twice over before getting out and wrapping a towel around his hips. He stuffed his filthy uniform into the processing unit below the terminal, noticing as he did so that a message was waiting for him.

It was from Shepard. The message had been sent locally this morning, so she wasn’t among the casualties, he realized with relief.

**Jimmy,**

*I was hoping you’d be back by time I got here this morning. I don’t know when you’ll receive this. I know how special forces training is. But I had to write to you before I leave.*

*There is already a lot of political fallout from the mission I just finished. It’s already setting up to be a media circus, regardless of the fact that it was technically successful. There are things we can’t publicize about it, and because of that, public opinion will probably go hard against us. Whatever happens, I want you to know that we did what we did for the right reasons. But that’s not why I’m writing.*

*You know I haven’t had an easy time of it. I don’t know how much you know about what happened back in San Diego, but what did happen is probably ten times worse than you might think. I still have flashbacks, bad ones. I’ll be living with the consequences of what happened on Earth for the rest of my life. I’m a really fucked up person and I’m not hiding from that truth anymore.*

*I’ve never been able to lean on anyone else. I’ve always had to lead the way. But I can face*
whatever comes, knowing that you got this message and you understand that you touched my heart in a way that no one else ever has, simply by holding me that one night. I needed it more than you could have known.

“No,” James said aloud. A sick feeling settled into his gut. The message sounded too final for his liking. “No, no, no. Not this again. Not her.”

He read on.

_I don’t know if you had a relationship in mind when you kissed me. You may have just been living out an adolescent fantasy. You may be completely over it now, I don’t know. I’m going out on a limb to tell you that it meant a lot to me, enough that if we were in a different line of work... well, we aren’t, so there’s no point in going there._

_It could be years before I’m ready for anything serious. I don’t want to take your best years from you by trying to hang onto you while we are in such different places, and I know the true price of a lost youth. I will always think of you and your uncle as the closest thing to family that I have left in the galaxy. I could never do anything that would hurt you. I’ve learned the hardest possible way that I bring nothing but pain - or worse - to people I really care about._

_No matter what you hear in the future about me – and it’s sure to be bad, because that’s what happens with me – know that I’m trying to do the right thing. It’s all I can do anymore to do that without letting the pain that follows me like a gravity well affect the ones I love. You are among them and you always will be, for what it’s worth._

_I have to go, my shuttle leaves in a few hours. Take care of yourself. Maybe we’ll meet again._

_Shepard_

James was cussing as he finished reading. He tugged on a shirt, pulling at the unusually tight sleeves to loosen them, then tucked the baggy folds at the bottom of the shirt into a pair of clean camo pants. She could still be down at the airfield.

He tied on his dirty combat boots and ran out of the barracks.

The airfield was a flattened expanse of plasticrete, broken only by wind buffers every few hundred yards, bearing clusters of official and civilian vehicles. One of the motorpool’s colossal hangars, the one that housed the Makos, overlooked the end of the airfield from the top of a low hill. James slowed when he neared it, seeing a crowd of people off to the side.

_Raised voices floated on the breeze down to where James was walking. There was some kind of altercation going on. He quickened his pace when he heard Shepard’s voice rising above the others, then slowed when he got close._

_“I did what I had to do, Major. We sent the batarians packing all over the galaxy. They won’t snatch children from their parents and sell them into slavery anymore, not after this.”_

_“You went too far! How many good soldiers lost their lives in your bloodthirst?”_ A short, coffee-skinned man with a moustache shouted at Shepard.
“You don’t know what it was like for those kids. We’re here to protect them. I’d lay down my life for any one of them!”

“You should have. But you didn’t, unlike most of your platoon. You think any of these families are grateful that they’re burying their kids today?” Grumbles of assent sounded from the growing crowd of civilians behind him.

An ebony-skinned behemoth standing just behind Shepard spoke up. “This isn’t about them! They were safe, and every soldier knows they may not come back. Did you see the condition those kids were in when Lacerda’s team pulled them out? Starving, scared shitless, abused—”

“Lacerda extracted them before Shepard ever breached the lower levels. She went down there for revenge and nothing more.”

“They would have gone right back out and replaced their ‘stock’ from one of our colonies,” Shepard said. “Now the batarians are leaving Citadel space. The mission was a success, thanks to their sacrifice!”

The major sneered at her. “You’re sick. Out for your own glory at the expense of the lives of the people under your command. You’re a butcher.”

A few people behind him repeated the last word, shouting it in agreement. Shepard flinched like she’d been slapped.

“That’s enough!” Anderson’s voice rose above the clamor and they all turned to look at him as he shoved his way into the center of the mob. “Major Kyle, the Lieutenant made a hard choice and the human race will be better off for it. I understand your grief, but this public dressing-down is inappropriate. Stand down.”

“Yes, sir.” Major Kyle said it like an insult, staring at Shepard’s flushed face before turning on his heel and marching off.

“All civilians, please go to the shuttles. They’ll be taking off shortly. Scenes like this don’t respect our honored dead. The rest of you, report to your duty stations. If you don’t have one yet, get to your barracks and wait for orders,” Anderson said.

The military personnel looked sheepish as they departed, many turning into the nearby Mess Hall, but the civilians kept throwing angry glances at Shepard as she disappeared around the corner of the hangar.

A curly-haired woman moved to go after her, but Anderson stopped her. “Let her go, Carla. Trust me. Give her some time to herself.”

The woman nodded unwillingly, then gestured to the large man who had come to Shepard’s defense. “Come on, Lou. She’ll have to meet us at the airfield in a bit anyway. Let’s wait for her there.”

No one noticed James as he moved around the edge of the crowd. He took their moment of distraction to jog the final stretch and duck around the corner to follow Shepard.

The hill dropped sharply behind the building, ending at the paved edge of the airfield. A short distance away, the long, shiny coffins were being loaded onto shuttles a few at a time. Shepard stood in the shade under the shallow eaves, tensely watching the activity below with her hands jammed in her pockets.
He paused before announcing himself, suddenly unsure of what exactly he intended to do. Hearing Anderson’s voice reminded him of why he hadn’t pursued her when they met months ago. They couldn’t be more than friends, at least not right now. He’d come charging up the road to catch her - to what? Tell her the same thing she had just told him in her message? She obviously hadn’t wanted to do it, but she had her head on straight and did what she needed to do, just like always. It was part of what he respected about her.

On top of that, it was apparent she was having a bad day. There was only one thing he could think to do.

“You okay, Lola?”

She started and turned around. “Jimmy. I didn’t realize - did you -”

He stepped forward, keeping some distance between them. “Yeah. I got your message. I wanted to catch you before you left, though. Let you know that I understand.”

“Of course you do.” Her response was so low he almost didn’t catch it. Then her forehead creased as she looked him over. “Are you wearing someone else’s uniform?”

“No, it’s mine. Just came back from Survival Training. Not bad, huh?” Stepping back so she could get a good look, he pulled the loose fabric of the t-shirt tight around his abdomen. He winked at her.

Her lips quirked and she rolled her eyes. “You’re the only person that could make me smile today.”


“Of course not, but it was a dear price to pay. Christo and Carla only had a few injured. Didn’t have much opposition in the upper levels. The orbital defenses were seriously outclassed by the Alliance. Me, I took my people into the deepest part of the base where all the batarians had retreated, where no one else wanted to go. Kicked a fucking hornet’s nest. But it doesn’t matter that we won to the people out there.”

She gestured at the field. “Most of that is my platoon. I went to Torfan with sixty-three people under my command. I brought fifteen home. That box right there - the one they’re putting in the second shuttle right now? Sheila’s in there. The blonde that introduced us at the party.”

“Holy shit.” It was far from brilliant, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say. He clearly remembered Sheila’s sweet face surrounded by yellow curls, like an old-fashioned doll in uniform. The scale of loss she must be feeling was unimaginable to him.

“Sheila was a good friend.” She walked to the edge of the shadows, the sunlight falling just short of the tip of her nose. “Nothing’s ever simple. Whenever I think I’ve found something good, I end up destroying it or it turns out to be something totally fubar. If you only knew what’s happened since the last time we saw each other…”

“So tell me.”

“I can’t get into a conversation about it right now. Not today. Not while this is happening right in front of me.” She continued to stare glumly at the tableau below. “Suffice it to say, I’ve been having flashbacks ever since I enlisted. After I saw you the other month, they got worse. I went home to find closure like the doctor ordered. It was... violent.”
“Oh.”

“I’ve been fighting and killing for so long now that it’s all that I am. A black hole. No light escapes.” When she turned to look at him again, for the first time he could see the depths of pain reflected within her eyes. It was more than the caskets behind her, more than the dead little boy they both still loved.

She shook her head at him, the corners of her mouth turning down. “I don’t recognize myself in the mirror anymore.”

“You’re beautiful, just like always.”

“I didn’t mean externally.”

“Neither did I.”

She laughed bitterly. “You obviously don’t know me that well. I need to learn how to be okay on my own before I get involved with anyone else or I’ll turn into a controlling bitch. Believe me, I have it in me.”

“I can imagine.” He said with a note of laughter in his voice. “It’s okay, like I said. This isn’t the right time for us. But I’ll always have your back.”

A slight smile appeared on her face. “You’re too good for me, James. Promise me you won’t do anything stupid, like wait for me.”

“That part isn’t up to you. But no worries. I like to live life one day at a time.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey, wait.” He reached out a hand as she began to move away. He held his arms out invitingly. “One more for the road?”

She stepped into his embrace as if magnetically drawn and melted against him like she belonged there. It felt right. She buried her face in his chest, taking a breath so deep she must have felt it in her toes. For some reason, the closer he held her, the more relaxed she became.

He held her as long as she let him. Finally, she lifted her head and gave him a look he recognized - it said she was leaving. But for the first time, seeing that look on a woman’s face didn’t make him angry.

He kissed her forehead and released her. “Bye, Lola.”

“Bye, Jimmy.” She began to walk away when her head jerked up. “Oh, I almost forgot. Check the front desk at your barracks. I left you something.”

Before he could ask what it was, she ran off toward the airfield.

The room he shared with Mapu smelled strongly of familiar spices when he arrived a few minutes later. A triple serving of tacos and all the trimmings sat on a tray on his bunk.

Mapu was just coming out of the shower. “I got enough food for three regular-sized Mexicans. That should hold you until you get to the Mess. What’s in the box?”

“I’m about to find out. And I’ve told you before, I’m from California. We get bigger there. Should’ve gotten enough for four.”
Picking up the card on the case, he read it aloud. “They gave us these for Torfan. I only use light weapons, but you seem like a shotgun kinda guy. Have fun with it. I’ll be thinking about you. Shepard.”

“Hey, they were talking about her down at the Mess Hall,” Mapu exclaimed. “The Butcher of Torfan gave you her shotgun? That’s s-”

James dropped the card, grabbed Mapu by the shoulders and slammed him against the wall. “Don’t ever call her that,” he growled.

Mapu stared in shock at James’ angry face. “Okay, okay. Sorry. I didn’t know it was like that. Chill.” He eyed James warily until he released him. “Almost lost my towel there. Didn’t think you liked me like that.”

“I don’t. I like her.”

“Yeah, I can tell.”

They avoided each other’s eyes while James stepped back toward the bed. Then, in one of those lightning-quick nonverbal exchanges that sometimes occur between close friends, they forgave each other and the tension passed.

James knelt by the bed. Mapu leaned over his shoulder to watch as he unlatched the case and lifted the lid. He lifted out the mean-looking shotgun, running a reverent finger over the “N7” logo on the barrel. “It’s a shame I’ll have to take this off when I use it. It sure looks pretty there.”

“Never seen a shotgun modded like that before.”

James took a moment to download the specs to his omni-tool. “It’s the N7 Crusader. They just released them for the mission to Torfan. Long-range shotgun, single rate of fire, pierces armor and cover. It can even replace a sniper rifle, but you have to really know what you’re doing. Good thing I do.”

“You’re a decent shot, no doubt about that.” Mapu straightened up and walked to his locker. “A bunch of the N1s are going downtown tonight to celebrate, blow off some steam. Wanna come? Or are you going to cuddle up with your new chew toy and get it rusty with your lovesick tears?”

“Sure. I’ll cry when we get there instead.”

Mapu chuckled and went to his locker to get some fresh clothes.

James stowed the Crusader in his equipment crate. As he locked the crate, a roar from outside caught his attention. Outside the window, he saw dozens of shuttles lifting off from the airfield. They flew a circuit around the bottom of the airfield, dipped once in salute, then headed off in different directions to take the dead to their final resting places. A large transport shuttle lifted from the ground once they had gone, firing its boosters toward the station in orbit. Shepard was doubtless on board. Who knew when they’d see each other again, or if they’d both live to see that day.

It was different for the civilians. They waited at home, never knowing what was happening to their loved ones until it was too late. The soldiers who left them behind knew that their families were most likely safe. It was easier for the soldiers.

Nothing was more uncertain than their life, the life of the professional warrior. But what about soldiers who loved each other? Was there any future for them? Regrettably, he wasn’t likely to find
out. If he was smart, he would find a nice colonist somewhere to settle down with and not wait for the Hero of Elysium to decide she was ready.

If he was smart. Luckily for James, though, it wasn’t a quality he owned to himself, no matter what his fitrep said. Grinning at the thought of the challenges that lay ahead, he turned from the window, more determined than ever to prove to himself that he could be a hero like Shepard and live to see her again.

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12.12.2178
Serpent Nebula, Widow System, Citadel Lower Wards
Mason Black

The chime at the front door of Blackwork Tattoo Parlor cut through the loud buzzing of Mason’s tattoo machine. He didn’t look up from his work on the asari’s lower back, but he lifted the needle long enough to call out, “Be right with you, almost done here.”

The chair behind the blaring vidcomm creaked as the newcomer sat down. Underneath the vidcomm, several long mirrors partially blocked the view of the waiting visitor, offering some degree of privacy to the person in the tattoo chair. The walls of the otherwise spartan room were covered with pictures of tattoos that Mason had completed over the last decade since he’d opened his doors on the Citadel.

The buzzing resumed, not quite drowning out the sound of the elcor variety show that was currently broadcasting. The asari giggled at one of the skits on the display.

“Hold still, sweetness. I’m not trying to write my name in cursive back here.”

“You can if you want to.”

Mason grumbled a laugh. “Maybe next time. Only if you want it lower, though. There, all finished.” He wiped the ink with a sterilized cloth, then sprayed artificial skin over the new design.

“That should hold it for a few days, but after that, use this stuff.” He handed her a bottle.

“It’s okay, I still have some left from the one you did last time. The one on my thigh?” She rolled over sensually, caressing the inside of her leg through the thin cloth of her skirt.

He smiled around his toothpick, watching her fingers ghost over the mottled blue skin revealed by the high slit. “I remember, but lemme see it one more time.”

The man on the other side of the mirrors coughed and cleared his throat.

“Sorry, forgot you were there. Just let me say goodbye to my new favorite canvas.” Removing his toothpick, Mason kissed the feminine alien deeply while one large hand stroked the underside of one of the graceful tentacles that curved back from her ears.

He smiled down at her while she caught her breath. “Thanks for coming, Thyxia.”

“I had to. I’m addicted to that tongue.” She flicked a slender index finger against the stubble on his cheek, then pulled her shirt down to cover her new tattoo. “Come to the club later, Silatha and I want to show you a new dance we came up with.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for worlds.”
She lightly stepped out of the shop, waving gaily at the waiting man as she passed by. The man stood up once the door shut behind her.

The newcomer wore a short armored coat, bulging with weapons; not unusual for this part of town. His hair was plastered to the top of his head, presumably from the skullcap that was crunched in his left hand. A wide neck brace held his chin at an uncomfortable-looking angle. He smiled as he spoke, the skin around his prosthetic eye crinkling. “Still charming the knickers off the ladies, I see. You always did love blue.”

“Zaeed, you old son of a bitch!” Mason grabbed his friend and pounded his back affectionately. “It’s been almost ten years! Where the hell have you been?”

“You know me. I frig about, doing jobs here and there. Stay out of this overgrown shopping mall if I can. Gotta keep the eye down with C-Sec on hand.”

“So what brings you to the Lower Wards? You didn't come all the way to the Widow system to see me.”

“Had a run-in with some nasty characters about a week ago. Job went south and I got buggered up.” Zaeed tugged at the brace at his neck, wincing. “There are specialists on the Citadel for this kinda thing.”

Mason waved him into the leather-upholstered chair the asari had recently vacated and began to sterilize his equipment. “Looks uncomfortable. What happened?”

“Let’s just say that if you have to get into it with a hanar, shoot them from a distance. Those goddamn jellyfish talk so peaceful, but their tentacles are stronger than a python when they get wrapped around you.”

A rasping laugh with undercurrents of bass resounded from Mason’s barrel-shaped chest. “You were always getting yourself in fucked-up situations.”

“The hanar is gone for six and that’s all that matters.” Zaeed leaned back in the chair, looking around at the shop. “Place hasn’t changed much. Still just the one chair, I see. No partners?”

“Can’t find any artists good enough to share the business with. At least, not any that are good with the one downstairs too.”

“I was hoping you were still doing that. Thought I’d take a look at your stock while I’m here. I’m in the market for some heavy weaponry to outfit the hopper I’m getting around in these days.”

“Figured as much. I’ll let you check out the special stock, the stuff I’m holding back for a rainy day.” Mason finished putting his tools away, then turned off the sign in the front window and put the shop in lockdown. Walking around the mirrors, he glanced up at the vidcomm.

The variety show had ended and a human newscaster was now delivering the news. His finger hovered above the control on his wrist to turn it off.

"Hang on. I want to see this," Zaeed said, stopping Mason's hand. "Heard about this on the way in. Girl's a goddamn hero for what she did, but the pansies are giving her shit. Some things never change."

Behind the reporter on the display, video of Alliance officers in a firefight was superimposed over the image of a barren-looking moon.
“Just three days ago, the Alliance successfully completed a brutal assault on the batarian slaver base on Torfan. Although most of the assault teams made it out without incident, freeing thousands of captive humans in the process, Lieutenant-Commander Shepard, the widely acclaimed ‘Hero of Elysium’, led her platoon into the lower levels of the base against the recommendation of the major overseeing the operation. Unofficial reports indicate that she was on a personal mission to kill every last batarian on the moon, gunning for revenge. Though she made it out alive, most of her platoon was killed in the bloody operation, earning her the new nickname ‘the Butcher of Torfan’.”

“Good on her, she was right on the money. Goddamn batarians,” Zaeed said, his voice dripping with vitriol. “Fuckers deserve everything they get. Never had a single run-in with them that turned out well for anyone. I don't have to tell you, though.”

The image of Shepard zoomed in on the display. Zaeed squinted at the image. He reached up and paused the vidfeed. “There’s something familiar about her.”

Mason thought so, too. It took him a moment to place her. Then the memory of the beautiful redhead he met at Celie's memorial service and later picked up bleeding and broken off of Cong's driveway came rushing back. Her hair was cut short, her face so scarred from medi-gel that she might be able to pass for a different person, but he’d know those haunted eyes anywhere.

Mason was finding it hard to catch his breath. The toothpick dropped from his lips and fell to the floor. Apprehensively, he glanced at Zaeed out of the corner of his eye. He rubbed his bald head, trying to think of how to begin.

“Um.” Wide-eyed, Mason drew the monosyllable out as he slowly turned to face Zaeed. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Zaeed finally looked away from the screen, his look turning to one of suspicion when he saw the uncomfortable look Mason knew was on his face. “Wot’s this about?”

Mason cleared his throat, glancing up at the vidcomm again. “I went back to Earth about six years ago, to San Diego. For Celie’s funeral.”

Some of the suspicion cleared. “Your sister? Sorry to hear that, mate. She was first rate, from what you told me. How did she-”

“No. No, it can’t be. They’re dead.”
“The boy is, but the girl survived. It’s true, I swear. I didn’t know how to get in touch with you after I left Earth. You switched handlers a few years before that.”

A menacing glint appeared in his friend’s eye. “You better not be fucking with me. Not about this.”

“I wouldn’t. You know I wouldn’t. But if you want proof - just look at her.” They both turned toward the vidcomm, studying the image of the woman.

“Bugger me. Hell. She looks like Jessie.” Zaeed’s voice was strained, an unusual amount of moisture glistening in his eye.

Mason took a deep breath before saying aloud the words that would change his friend’s life forever.

“That’s because it’s her. Jasmine. Your daughter.”

Chapter End Notes

END OF BOOK TWO
Revenge

Chapter Summary

After an astounding victory over an enemy beyond imagining, Shepard goes on a treasure hunt.

Chapter Notes

BOOK THREE

Music: Sovereign's Theme, Mass Effect; Everybody Wants to Rule the World, Tears for Fears; DARE, Gorillaz
Final scene has its own playlist, "Final Thoughts". Songs: My Tears are Becoming a Sea, M83; Fade Into You, Mazzy Star; Sweet Tides, Thievery Corporation; On a White Lake Near a Green Mountain, M83

Introduction

I am Sovereign. I live in the great void of space with the others of my kind: vast artificial intelligences constructed not long after the first life evolved in this universe. We have dominated all life, organic or inorganic, since our creation. We are eternal.

I have watched whole galaxies form, collide, collapse, and die. I have seen billions upon billions of stars form in the ever-changing depths of nebulae. I have watched planets live out their meager days, from the time a particle of dust is first ejected from a young protostar until its inevitable death in the final throes of the very star which created it. I have seen countless races rise and fall before they ever gained the ability to leave their planets of origin.

When advanced civilizations form, we harvest their population for their genetic material, tearing them down until it was as if they never were. With this superior material, we create more of our kind. Our numbers are so great that we blot the sun from the skies of each world we claim. When not a single civilized being remains we retreat into the Void through the Mass Relays and await the end of the next cycle, leaving one of our kind behind to prepare for our return.

We do not mourn the lives we take. With or without the Harvest, they will die. They are not eternal.

There are few leaders like myself among our kind, and only we bear names. The named are few in number. We who are named are the pinnacle of a dead species, a single ascended avatar bearing the name of the quality we bring into this eternal life. Some ascend but never achieve the need for a more powerful shell beyond that which they are first born into. They are not named and are mere slaves to our will, like all other constructs. They are in the first wave of attack when we settle upon the galaxy to take our fill.

Through this process, we exceed the limits of our shells. In time, we will exceed the limits of the universe itself.
During the present cycle, I waited and watched inside the galaxy known locally as the "Milky Way". Many races arose, far more than in any previous cycle. To help soften them for the Harvest, I engineered a new army made of the dominant species from the previous cycle, called the "Collectors".

Now the time of the Harvest is upon us once again. I approached the Mass Core, called the Citadel in this cycle, to open the floodgate for our return. Though there was heavy resistance, they were not able to halt my progress. I was able to send the transmission to the others, but before I could open the gateway a single being stopped the activation of the Mass Core. The Harvest would now progress more slowly, allowing the organics time to defend themselves.

But then something happened that I did not expect. This inferior being, the same one that stopped the activation of the Mass Core, destroyed me. Before my eternal life was snuffed out, I sent one final message to the Collectors: Threats to our dominance cannot be tolerated. Find the Normandy and kill the one who killed me.

Kill Shepard.

Chapter 18: Revenge

10.14.2183
Rio de Janeiro

James

The crowded Rec Center in Rio barely contained the cacophony of the cheering marines as they watched pieces of Sovereign's shell being towed out of Citadel space by a half-dozen turian frigates. No one could hear the words of the thin human woman with bobbed black hair as she spoke over the images of the enormous insect-shaped dreadnought. James and his friends cheered among them, fresh out of the gym.

Nearby, a studious young man in uniform presided over a table crowded with datapads. After a minute of straining to hear, he turned around and shouted over the fray, "C'mon, I can't hear! Shut up already."

They settled down, watching the smaller man in amusement as he turned up the volume on the vidcomm.

The voice-over was still playing. "The loss of life on the Citadel has been considerable, damage estimated at billions of credits. Central to this story, as has often been the case this past year, is Commander Shepard and the crew of her ship, the SSV Normandy."

The camera panned out to reveal the black-haired woman again. The text below the reporter showed her name as Khalisah bint Sinan al-Jilani. Khalisah turned toward the tired but smiling Commander standing just to her left. Behind the Commander, a quarian in a beautifully brocaded enviro-suit waved, glancing over her shoulder at the turian standing behind them. Several humans in Alliance uniforms stood just beyond, including a dark-haired beauty in armor.

Khalisah looked sternly at the Commander. "Commander Shepard, in your opinion are the lives of all of the beings lost today, including the Council, worth the price for sparing us from the will of a rogue Spectre?"

Shepard answered while the watching marines groaned at the aggressive stance of the reporter.
"The dreadnought wasn't piloted by Saren, it controlled him. It was a reaper, an ancient AI, the same kind that wiped out the Protheans. Even a Spectre as powerful as Saren couldn't resist the will of Sovereign."

Khalisah smirked. "Yes, we've heard about your... theories. The official stance is that the dreadnought was created by the geth, the AI species that rebelled against the quarians almost three hundred years ago. Geth were seen during the conflict, along with genetically modified human cyborgs. How do you explain this?"

James recognized the tightening of Shepard's mouth that indicated she was exerting an extraordinary amount of self-control. "The geth are allied with the reapers. They look up to them like gods."

"Machines with religion. How fascinating." The reporter plastered an insincere smile on her face. "Is that why you allowed the Council to die? To forward an anti-religious agenda?"

"I kept our ships focused on the reaper. Sovereign was the real threat. I regret the loss of the Council more than I can say, but more people died on the Lower Wards when debris struck the Citadel's outer arms. We need to honor all of their deaths by not letting this happen again." Shepard faced the camera. "Everyone out there should prepare for more of these things. There are a lot more of them, and they're still coming."

Khalisah scoffed. "Your scare tactics won't cover up your misdeeds this time. We'll get to the bottom of your war crimes and you'll be tried like anyone else, Spectre or not."

"This interview is over." Shepard turned away, but Khalisah immediately turned to the diminutive quarian standing nearby.

"Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, what is the stance of the Quarian Fleet on this disaster? Has there been any move toward offering aid or reparations to the victims of the geth, which your people unleashed on the galaxy?"

"Uh - that is -" Tali twisted her small purple-gloved hands together nervously, her wide, dark eyes sparkling in the camera's light behind the haze inside her enviro-suit. The turian behind her opened his mouth to speak, putting his taloned hand on Tali'Zorah's shoulder.

"I said this interview is over," Shepard's voice came again and her armored fist flashed across the screen, striking the reporter in the eye. There was one more brief flash of Shepard's angry face before the camera swung down at the floor and went dark.

The reporter's voice called out, "Did you get that? Did you get that?" from off screen. The feed cut off to much laughter from the marines in the Rec Center.

"That's my girl," James said with a smile, shaking his head in admiration. "She never did take anyone's shit."

"You know Shepard?" the younger guy asked, stepping closer to their table to look up at Vega with an expression of admiration.

"Yeah." He looked at the kid, sizing him up, then smiled and held out his hand. "I'm Lieutenant James Vega."

"Corporal Nicky, sir." Ignoring James' extended hand, Nicky saluted. He looked more like a teenager than a soldier, but he didn't show any shyness amongst this group of men and women twice his size.
Mapu punched James' arm to get his attention. "Aren't you and Shepard supposed to get together next month?"

"We always try, but it hasn't happened yet. Saw her last year on the Citadel for like ten minutes at the docks, but that's it. After this she'll probably get reassigned again in the middle of nowhere. She's worth the wait though."

"What the hell are you talking about? You're not waiting." Mapu laughed and turned to the others at the table. "Just last week I caught him crawling out of a Mako with some blonde in the parking lot of the Commissary. I had run inside for like, twenty minutes. Never seen the girl before. My man works fast."

James held up a hand to forestall the comments that began pouring in from the others. "Shepard and I aren't in a relationship. We're just old friends."

"Friends who try to spend their leave alone together for five years running? You're full of shit, Vega. You're just playing around, waiting for her to become available. But that's your M.O. - you like unavailable women, and they like you available."

His friend's words rankled, but James didn't let it show. Being stuck in the friend zone with Shepard was his own personal hell, but he wasn't about to let them know that. "I'm not complaining, Runt. If it hadn't gone down like this, I wouldn't have been able to hang out with your crew in Samoa the last few years."

To the rest of the marines, James explained, "He has like, the biggest family I've ever heard of. Fun bunch, bonfires on the beach every other night."

"It was good for him to be around bigger guys than him. Learn some humility." Mapu flashed white teeth in his usual good-humored grin.

"Is that's where you got your tattoos?" Nicky asked, pointing at the blackwork weave pattern that showed above James' collar and below his shirtsleeves.

"The big ones, yeah. Before I just had some smaller ones on my chest and back from when I got out of high school. Stupid, really. We just wanted to look badass. But the leaves that weave over my neck and arm, I got those while I was visiting his family. Everyone is covered with ink there, even some of the kids."

"What's that one for?" Nicky asked, pointing at the shamrock-like symbol on James' right arm. "It doesn't look like the others."

"I got that one right after my first mission. For a friend I lost."

"I'm sorry, sir."

The kid looked like he was genuinely regretting bringing it up. James took pity on him. "Never forget the people you lose, kid. It happens a lot in our line of work. You never get used to it."

Foregoing their usual banter, the others nodded in agreement.

Nicky looked like he took this remark seriously. "What about the others? What do the leaves mean?"

"A lot of things. It was Samoa itself that gave me the idea. There are a lot of volcanoes there. The lava clears the land, but after everything cools off it's one of the most fertile places you'll ever see,
with plant life so thick you can't walk through it. That's the way I like to think about all of this." James gestured at the people around him and the vidcomm. "About the friends we lose, the things we destroy. We make way for new growth."

"I've never heard of Samoa. I'm from Cronus, on Elysium."

"So that's why you're such a Shepard fan," Mapu said with the air of someone making a great discovery.

The kid gestured toward the silenced vidcomm. "That reporter is always hostile, trying to find dirt on good people. Shepard saved our whole city when the pirate army invaded. I'll never forget that night as long as I live. She inspired me to join the Alliance. Shepard's a hero as far as I'm concerned."

"Damn straight. She's been saving lives since she was in grade school." James bobbed his head in agreement.

"Have you really known her that long?" Nicky asked, awed.

"And every moment's been the privilege you think it is, believe me man. Damn, you should have seen her at sixteen." James rolled his eyes expressively. "She totally blew my mind."

From the look in Nicky's eyes, James had just grown even bigger than Mapu. It made him a little uncomfortable. He didn't like to ride Shepard's coattails. He'd been talking about her less and less in company because of it.

"So what are you doing here, anyway?" James asked to change the subject, taking a step over to Nicky's cluttered table. "You're not in the N7 program."

Nicky followed him over to the table. Behind them, the others went on with their conversation. "No. I'm almost finished with the engineering program. Actually, Shepard wrote some of the class material."

"Really? I didn't know she taught."

"Oh, she doesn't. But while she's in the field she writes programs for her own use and turns them over to the Alliance. Some they use, some they don't, but they're all really interesting to study. Take this one." Nicky dug a datapad out from the stack and activated it, then handed it to James.

James looked at it blankly. "I'm just a grunt, kid. You're gonna have to tell me what I'm looking at."

"Sorry, sir. It's a program that optimizes your omni-tool, automatically linking it to the nav charts of whatever system you're in and cross-referencing all data to current mission specs. Pretty simple, really, but most brilliant programs are. They solve a problem in the field instead of trying to meet some datapoint of efficiency for a committee. According to the dates, she wrote this one just before Torfan. You should read the article she submitted when she turned this program over to the Alliance. It's linked below the header. It's really interesting."

"I'll take your word for it," James said with a chuckle as he handed back the datapad.

"She's very passionate. And believe me," Nicky said, laughing, "it's hard to sound passionate writing an academic article about a program."

"Yeah. She's pretty amazing," James agreed. "But have no doubts, so are you. This stuff you're
"studying is beyond me."

"Thank you, sir. That means a lot."

"Can the 'sir', Nicky. Call me Vega like everyone else." James looked down as his omni-tool chimed the time. "I gotta go, class is back in. Learning all these languages is killing me, but at least it's interesting. See ya, kid."

"Good bye, sir."

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10.29.2183
The Citadel

Shepard

Cleaning up the wreckage of Sovereign had only been the beginning of Shepard's troubles. People continued to blame her for bringing Saren to the Citadel and they still failed to acknowledge that Sovereign had been the true threat. Almost no one believed her about the reapers, a situation that was becoming more and more frustrating. It was with a feeling of relief that she finally boarded the Normandy after yet another grueling day of committee meetings wherein she was ruthlessly questioned, doubted, and accused of every crime imaginable. They couldn't make anything stick, especially since she was a Spectre. But it still hurt her more than she cared to admit that her word would be doubted after everything she had done to preserve their lives.

"Finally! How did your meeting with the new Council go?" Joker asked Shepard as she walked through the airlock. The humming instruments of the cockpit of the Normandy soothed her rattled nerves.

"We've been ordered to patrol the Terminus sector for geth." Shepard rolled her eyes.

"Aw, man. They believed that load of crap Saren was spouting? I thought at least Anderson believed you."

"He does, but unfortunately he doesn't have the final say. We'll search for a few weeks, turn up nothing, and then maybe we'll get some leave."

"That'll be the day. Seems like they only give it to us right before some disaster puts us back in the shitter," Joker said.

"No kidding. But why not make a little leave for ourselves on their dime?"

A sly smile appeared on Joker's face. "Aren't you worried about Command getting in a tizzy and grounding you again?"

She gestured flippantly. "Fuck 'em. I've been on duty for almost all of my adult life. Every time I've tried to take an extended leave I get recalled, or there's a goddamn pirate invasion, or some shit like that."

Joker chuckled as she continued to rant.

"In the past eight months I've received my first command, uncovered a plot by one of the most horrifying enemies we could possibly imagine, lost one of my best officers when I nuked a cloning facility, and killed a sentient starship hell-bent on destroying all life in the galaxy. But all they could talk about in there is that I didn't protect the Council. Did they seriously think I was going to
call ships off of the assault on the massive dreadnought trying to bring an invasion force to our galaxy to save a few politicians?"

She shook her head, disgusted. "I need a break. I've had it up to here with their bureaucratic bullshit." She chopped a hand at her neck.

"You know I'm game. What do you have in mind?"

"Not sure. Since we're going to the Terminus, maybe the Omega Nebula. I've never been out there before."

"Lots of batarian settlements out there. You're not looking for a fight, are you Shepard?"

"Of course not! I want a break, I said that before. Set a course."

"You're the boss," Joker said as he swung the chair back to face the pilot's console. His hands flew over the controls, then opened up a channel to the rest of the ship.

"All hands, prepare for departure. Next stop the Terminus Systems, where we're not going to pick any fights with batarians. Hey! Brittle bones, Shepard!" he exclaimed when she smacked the back of his head.

She reached past him to shut down the open channel. "You watch yourself, Flight Lieutenant. I know where you sleep."

"The big, bad Commander threatening a cripple. I'm so scared," he said, but he was grinning when she walked away.

The Normandy passed through the Mass Relay into the Sahrabarik System. They refueled, then headed away from the heavily populated system. Part of Shepard wanted to check out Omega, the famed space station where outlaws gathered, but their Alliance uniforms would make her crew an obvious target. She really did mean what she had said to Joker about not picking any fights - with the batarians or anyone else.

Despite being in command of the Normandy for more than six months, she hadn't experienced any of the freedom that usually comes with having your own ship. She had constantly been on the move, tracking the geth and then the reaper threat. She'd been Captain Anderson's XO before that for several weeks after the ship had first been commissioned, but the Normandy had been granted to her when she was made a Spectre by the Council and Anderson elected to stay on the Citadel.

The first human Spectre. The title still gave her a rush of pride. Spectres were called "the right hand of the Council", and for good reason. She could act independent of any chain of command, even the Alliance; she was literally above the law. She didn't push the boundaries as far as some did. Saren had also been a Spectre and the turian's brutal methods had led him to becoming a tool for the reapers.

She regretted having to kill Saren. There was much in him that she respected, though he was far too willing to let innocents die. It was the soldier's duty to die to spare the civilians. There were exceptions when the stakes were high enough, of course, like when the Citadel had been attacked. In the end it was all just a matter of perspective.

The Normandy was currently headed to the Batalla System, away from the other systems in the Omega Nebula. This particular system had been the home of the pirate king Essul before the Spectres had brought him down, well before her time among the ranks of that elite group. Essul's story was complete with a rumored treasure hoard of eezo and a ghost planet that disappeared from
sensors.

It fired up her imagination. Sounded like a perfect place to explore. She sat in the Mess Hall on the Crew Deck, drinking cup after cup of coffee while she pored over datapads about the three planets in the Batalla system.

She focused her efforts on the third planet, a gas giant called Nearog. It had a number of moons, some with atmosphere. One of them had been Essul's home and likely one of the nearby satellites contained his hoard, if indeed there was one.

Footsteps walked up behind her. She knew it was Garrus without turning around, would have known her friend's gait anywhere. They had been friends since almost the moment of their first meeting in the Citadel Tower, just before she had been made a Spectre. She always had tremendous respect for the turians, for the engineering ingenuity that had created the largest military fleet in the galaxy, and for their unstoppable fighting spirit. Their strong military culture reminded her of some subcultures of humanity in many ways, most especially of the Alliance.

As he came near, it occurred to her that her feelings about the Alliance had changed somewhat since becoming a Spectre. She liked having the freedom to discard orders and do what she wanted from time to time. If she was being honest with herself - and she generally was - it was partially because of the way they had treated her ever since her discovery of the Reaper plot.

"Shepard," he said by way of greeting as he settled into a chair next to her. Since the ship had been built by turians and humans working together, the cushioned seat molded to fit his bony, sharp-edged avian body just as well as it fit her own shapely figure.

"Hey, Garrus," she said absently, taking a sip from her cup. "How are the main guns? Calibrated to within an inch of their life, I presume?"

"I'm not sure what an inch is, but I'm sure they're calibrated to one. Still looking for pirate treasure? I imagine Liara knows a bit about the history you're studying."

Shepard nodded. Their asari companion was always an excellent source of historical intel, being an archaeologist. Shepard had visited her when she first came up with the idea.

"Liara dug up some interesting intel on the movements of Essul's fleets for me based on sightings and ship disappearances during that time period. I cross-referenced them with gas drifts in shipping lanes to account for the passage of time, emissions patterns, then scored each relative site according to the amount of eezo required to power an engine to the next fueling station. Most of the unsuccessful searches have been conducted near the exit trajectory. I figure if there's an eezo stash, it's somewhere at the far end of the graph from the station. Storing a cache like that might have been a way to ensure they wouldn't get stuck in-system, especially if they had to abandon the base."

"Ironic, since they did. What will you do if you find it?"

She grinned. "Split it with the crew, naturally. I figure senior staff gets two shares each, just like on a pirate ship."

His mandibles fluttered and he laughed. The low vibration had an accompanying higher timbre which she also heard in his voice. The sound was fascinating and unique to his species. She loved talking to him and making him laugh just so she could hear it.

"Are we a pirate ship now? I doubt the Alliance will look very highly on that, Shep."
"What they don't know won't hurt 'em. As far as they're concerned, we're patrolling for geth. Who knows, there might even be some down there. We've found their outposts in odd enough places."

It took them three weeks at sub-light speed to reach the Batalla system. Nearog occupied a relatively slow orbit in the outer system and was the first object they saw in the forward viewport when they came within sight of the the star. Shepard sat in the copilot's chair to watch the approach, eschewing the larger Galaxy Map in the CIC for a look with the naked eye. As they drew close, Joker constantly adjusted for the gas giant's tremendous gravity well while she scanned for the moons she had tagged in her extensive research.

"There," she said, pointing one of her slender fingers at the holographic display. "Let's try that one first. Doesn't even have a name, just a number. Maybe no one has looked there yet."

"Should we name it for the navlogs?"

"Only if we find the treasure. If we do, I'll name it after you."

He turned and looked at her. "Seriously? You won't name it after the great Shepard?"

"Please. I'd rather I didn't get the attention at all."

"You deserved the recognition. You saved a lot of people."

"Not enough," she said quietly, her hand dropping into her lap. She looked soberly out of the viewport, then shook herself.

"I'm headed to get the Mako prepped. Notify the team."

"You got it, Commander."

She took the lift down to the Crew Deck again and ducked into the Med Bay. The left side of the narrow room was crowded with bulky equipment. Dr. Chakwas stood on the right at her desk, busily tapping away at her display. Her short, white bobbed hair curled inward above her collar at precisely regulation level, her uniform absolutely pristine as always. The doctor turned around when the door opened.

"Hey Karin, you busy?" Shepard asked with a smile.

"Nothing that can't wait. What can I do for you?"

"Actually, I was wondering if you wanted to come along for this one. You're always talking about how much you love adventure, but you never leave this room."

Chakwas returned the smile. "There's no adventure quite like looking for treasure. Absolutely, I'll be right down."

The tank-like Mako could seat six, but no one else wanted to come along after looking at the scans of the moon, so they had room to spare. Tali thought the entire venture was pointless and even Wrex had elected to stay behind, which surprised Shepard. The massive krogan was usually up for anything. Ashley Williams evidently found the exercise beneath her. In the end, only Garrus and Chakwas accompanied her to the moon's surface. Knowing that Chakwas rarely had the chance to leave the Med Bay, Garrus had thoughtfully left the front seat open for the doctor. Shepard, naturally, was driving.

The surface of the barren rock proved to be one of the most treacherous places any of them had
taken the Mako. Massive spires of rock layered on top of one another, the geography so extreme that each feature seemed purposefully designed to stop any progress. All the while, the blue-streaked gas giant hovered at a vertigo-inducing angle directly overhead.

"This can't be right," Chakwas said from the passenger seat, gripping her armrests in white-knuckled fear. "No one in their right minds would want to come back to a place like this."

"That's why I think we must be close. No one would want to come here unless it was an absolute emergency. See the readings? There's something on the other side with unusual mineral content for this moon. Don't worry," Shepard said with a grin as she shifted into high gear, traveling upward at an incredibly steep angle toward one of the peaks. "The Mako always lands on its feet, like a cat. The internal stabilizers will shift us upright if we fall."

Shepard hadn't had so much fun in a long, long time. She loved driving the Mako, loved the freedom of jouncing around aimlessly on a rocky moon in the middle of nowhere with the exotic view of the planet above them.

She glanced over at the doctor and took pity at the naked panic on her face. "You okay, Karin? I can call the Normandy if you want."

Chakwas schooled her face into an expression of determination. "No. I want to see this through. But I think you should go around the range."

"I'll tell you what, if we can't get over this peak, we'll go around."

The doctor nodded. They continued to attempt to cross the peak, the Mako lurching slowly forward as rock began sliding off the vertical cliff face beneath them. The clattering of the rocks behind them began to fade behind the whining of the Mako's engine. Shepard gunned it, trying to make that last few feet. It was so close…

"We're not gonna make it," Chakwas gasped as they slid backward again, veering slightly to the left. "You have to go around. Oh, this is insane."

Garrus grabbed the top of the driver's seat to pull himself forward. "Thought you wanted adventure, doctor."

"I do. But let's go *around* to find it."

Shepard cocked an eyebrow thoughtfully. "Maybe you're right. You want to go down? Let's do it the easy way."

"No, Shepard!" Chakwas reached across the dash, but not in time to stop Shepard from hitting the boosters.

The heavy vehicle arced gracefully away from the cliff face. Chakwas screamed, fear and excitement written on her face so comically that Shepard began to laugh. Despite the light gravity, when they hit the ground it felt like a bomb had gone off. The Mako bounced and flipped, flinging them to one side of the vehicle inside their harnesses, then to the other, until they finally settled on a mostly flat ridge. Red lights flashed in the cockpit and the three of them groaned for a minute while they got their bearings.

They had bounced off the side of a nearby spire and now looked over the wide plain on the other side of the ridge. It had been hidden from sight underneath the slanted spires which collided with the vertical peak they had just fallen from.
"See? Right side up. And check that out," Shepard said, bringing up a detailed topography scan. The pitted surface below them held many shadowy recesses and hills of debris that looked as if they'd been pushed to one side. On the far side of the plain, a light flashed intermittently just outside a cave with an artificial-looking entrance. "You were right, Karin. That does look promising. But we've got some fighting to do first."

The older woman sat forward, squinting at the display. "You think there are still enemies in there?"

Garrus answered while Shepard cleared out the flashing alarms left from their abrupt descent and armed the forward batteries and missile launchers. "Possibly. There could be automated defenses. There's also a thresher maw nest between us and that cave."

Chakwas swallowed. "You've fought these before, right?"

"This'll be number five. I'll have to show you my collection of tusks when we get back to the ship."

Garrus laughed at the doctor's expression and Shepard smiled at the sound. "It's okay. She knows what she's doing."

"I have a method," Shepard said. She put the Mako into forward motion, coasting it onto the flat surface below. After counting to five, they sped across the plain at top speed, the vehicle jouncing over the low hills. When she reached the center, she cut to the right and raced off at a ninety-degree angle, then spun back to face the way they had come.

The ground trembled and rock burst from the area just ahead of where they had turned. One of the thresher's snake-like tentacles, as wide as the drive shaft of the Normandy, sprung from the ground and swung from side to side, looking for them. While Shepard fired a steady stream of slugs at the beast, Garrus targeted the thresher maw and fired a missile into its open jaws.

Roaring, the fearsome creature reared its head back to attack. Shepard hit the boosters, springing them above the creature's stream of venom just before the acid splashed across the surface of the airless moon beneath them, sizzling through the dirt. Loose rocks immediately covered up the acid's smoking path. The thresher maw sprayed once more, and they again evaded it with a well-timed leap, firing another missile as they went. The maw roared in frustration and slid back through the hole, into its underground nest.

"Time to move!" Shepard shouted. The wheels of the Mako spun over loose gravel. Again, they raced across the plain, executed a hairpin turn, went a short distance, then spun around to face the creature when it popped up along their first trajectory. They repeated the hopping move, whittling down the creature with a constant hail of slugs and missiles. Chakwas gradually relaxed enough to cheer their progress.

After a few more circuits, the beast finally roared and fell to the motionless to the surface, the ground shaking violently beneath them.

"Is it dead?" Chakwas asked.

Shepard twisted around in her seat to grab the helmet that Garrus was holding out for her. "No. It segmented itself from that appendage and ran away to its deeper lair, where it mines out its solid food. Most of it's underground and never comes to the surface. Usually the appendage only comes out during solar flares to absorb the radiation or if a potential food source comes wandering through."

"Like us," Garrus added.
"That was just an appendage?" Chakwas asked. She pulled on the helmet that was handed to her with a confused look on her face.

Garrus nodded, his mandibles fluttering in excitement as he put on his helmet. "Check your seals. We're going for a walk."

"What for?"

Shepard opened the Mako's door and a sliver of blue light of the planet above shone on the Commander's faceplate, illuminating her grin. "I need a souvenir."

When they boarded the *Normandy* a few hours later, Shepard proudly bearing a lined sack containing one tip of the maw's fang to add to her collection, Joker called her over the intercom.

"Commander, you have an incoming message from Command."

"Knew that wouldn't last long," Garrus said in amusement. "Back to the grind."

"I'm on my way. And send a pickup crew to the coordinates I sent you earlier to get the rest of the hoard. Drinks are on me when we get back to Alliance space!"

Chakwas leaned against the Mako, her eyes wide but sparkling. She dropped her helmet on the ground by her feet and rubbed her face. "I've never had an experience like that in my life. Thank you, both of you. I'll never forget it."

"Thanks for joining us, doctor." Shepard jogged toward the lift with her helmet under her arm.

Shepard waved to the bridge crew and walked into the comm room behind the CIC with a lift to her step. She hadn't felt this good in a long time. Whatever Command had to say to her, she was determined to stay positive. With no battles in her immediate future, she was beginning to think of other things to do with her spare time. She'd like to finish the model of the *Normandy* she started on the way into this system, for one thing. She'd always been fascinated by the miniatures they used in engineering school.

The forward viewing screen flickered to life and an orange-hued image of Admiral Hackett's stern face stared her down. His paternal eyes glanced down at her left hand and she belatedly realized she was still carrying the thresher maw fang. She clasped her hands behind her back to remove it from his view, standing at parade-rest.

"Sir."

"At ease. Having a good time, Commander?"

"Just checking out an airless moon for - ah - signs of geth." She chewed her lip, trying not to smile.

"Relax. You should have been given some shore leave, I know, but tensions were high on the Citadel. We decided to remove you as far as we could from the line of fire, so to speak, and patrol seemed like the best way to do that and give you all some time to take it easy."

Her shoulders dropped in relief. "Thank you, sir."

"I hate to break up your fun, but a few disappearances have been reported in the Amada System. I've already forwarded the mission specs. Standard stuff, but be careful. There's something odd about these reports."
She brought up the display on her omni-tool and scanned the specs waiting in her inbox. "They're not taking prisoners or cargo."

"Whoever it is, they're destroying ships without attempting to board, so they're not pirates or slavers. Seems too marked not to consider geth after what we've just been through. We know they retreated in that direction."

"You know it's not the geth that were responsible for what happened at the Citadel, right Admiral?"

"I know. I'm working on the brass to devote more resources to defense, but you know how it gets when politics come into play. Go and investigate and let me know what you find. Maybe it will tie everything together."

"I doubt that, sir. But I'll do my best." Though she was disappointed to have to get back to work so soon, it was good to have an assignment that actually meant something, unlike the geth patrol. If people were dying, she had a duty to try and save them.

"I have no doubt. Hackett out."

They patrolled Amada System for almost two weeks, cataloguing emissions trails and heat signatures. There were some oddities and a lot of debris around the moons of the fourth planet, an iceball named Alchera. They scanned for survivors on the surface of the planet and its three moons, but found nothing noteworthy.

"This is such bullshit," Lieutenant Ashley Williams said as she and Shepard pulled on their space suits for what seemed like the tenth time in as many days. "I know that whoever is destroying these ships needs to be caught, but we're wasting so much time. Why isn't the Alliance preparing for the reaper invasion?"

"It's a mystery to me," Shepard said. "Of course, they didn't see the Prothean VI on Ilos with all the intel on the reaper threat. They also never heard Sovereign speak. Not that they would have considered that proof. I mean-"

The ship rocked, knocking the two women off their feet. "Joker, report!" Shepard was shouting before she got back to her feet.

Their pilot's voice came over the speakers of her helmet. "We're under attack! We have a-" Distortion disrupted his words. The ship trembled.

"What's that, Joker?" Shepard asked, helping Ashley to her feet.

"- can save her! I can do this!" The blind panic in Joker's voice told Shepard everything she needed to know. They were seriously outclassed by this enemy, whoever it was.

The bulkhead to her left buckled inward, glowing white-hot. Had their shields given out this quickly? The bulkhead exploded, chunks of molten metal spraying across the Mess Hall towards the Med Bay. With one hand racing over her omni-tool to activate the kinetic shielding all over the ship in case of a hull breach, Shepard opened the ship-wide comm in her helmet. "All hands, battle stations!"

"Oh God, Shep," Ashley said from beside her. "It's already too late for that."

Shepard followed her gaze up - then down. They could see clean through the ship's hull, the kinetic
shielding struggling to hold back the vacuum of space. The blinding glare of Amada's star burned down through the missing bulkhead, all the way through to deep space under their feet.

Ashley was right. The situation had escalated far too quickly to mount a counterattack. The integrity of her ship had been unquestioningly compromised.

"Everyone report immediately to the escape pods. Abandon ship!" Shepard hoped that her crew had enough sense to go without her command. The two of them attempted to put out the fires, but heavy masses of sparking cables continued to ignite the venting oxygen escaping from the life support systems. The ship shook and trembled again with a blast. They were flung into the closed door of the lift.

"The inertial dampeners must be offline. Shit, there goes gravity." It took them a minute to get their feet back underneath them. She stopped her lieutenant's hand as she reached for another extinguisher. "We're toast! Get to the escape pod, Ashley."

"But Commander-

"I said go! I'll get Joker." Their eyes met for a moment in a silent exchange, then the younger woman nodded and clomped off, her magnetic boots keeping her feet on the deck.

Shepard made for the stairs to the CIC, her hands extended to either side of the narrow hallway. She'd always thought that stairs were stupid on a starship, but with the lift down she fully appreciated them.

"Joker! Joker, do you read me?" There was no answer.

Her ankles wrench inside her boots as the ship was again flung aside. Was it Joker evading fire? Or were new holes being punched in her beautiful ship?

It was the latter, she realized as she stepped into the CIC. The bulkhead above the sputtering galaxy map was completely gone. She stopped, staring in wide-eyed amazement at the cold blue surface of Alchera reflecting naked white light into her unprotected ship. The decking under her feet vibrated and she jolted into action, walking as quickly as she could through the floating debris in her magnetized boots. As she passed by the flickering display in the engineering stations that lined the walkway to the cockpit, she saw with relief that all of the escape pods had been used. All but the one ahead of her.

Through the kinetic shield in the cockpit, she saw her pilot's hands flying across his display, which was covered with alarms and warnings. It pained her at her core to see his frantic motions. Couldn't he see it was already too late?

She carefully stepped through the kinetic shield. "Get to the escape pod! That's an order, Moreau."

"I can save her, I can do this," he repeated, seeming not to hear her.

She leaned forward so he could see her face through the faceplate. "Joker. The *Normandy* is gone. I don't want to lose you, too."

The ship shook, punctuating her words. His hands dropped in defeat. "Help me up."

As gently as she could, she guided him to the escape pod next to the airlock. It was one of those great ironies that her pilot, the best the Alliance had to offer, could barely walk. His skill and strength of character had far outweighed any potential deficiencies others might have perceived in his disability.
She helped him into a seat. He grabbed the harness to buckle himself in before she could reach for it. "I've got this. Let's get out of here."

Another blast, closer this time, knocked her out of the open door to the escape pod and down the short hallway of the airlock. Her wheeling arms grabbed a jagged piece of the hull, her feet flying out in front of her toward the CIC. Joker called her name and she glanced back the way she had come to see his horrified expression.

A new sound caught her attention, a low boom that shook the thinning wisps of gas around her. Between her floundering feet, she watched a beam of energy wider than the hallway she had just fallen down cut through the remainder of the CIC, headed for the reserve oxygen supply for this part of the ship. Her breath came faster in anticipation of the blast she knew would come. There was no way she could get back to the escape pod in time.

She released her grip on the wall and touched the command on her omni-tool which would shut the door to the escape pod and send her pilot to safety. Joker's agonized shout of denial echoed in her helmet just before the explosion sent her hurtling away from the burning remains of the Normandy.

She had a first-row seat to her ship's fiery death. The vacuum of space tore into the Normandy, buckling the compromised parts of the hull. Implosions mixed with the flashes of burning gas vented into space, almost blinding her and buffeting her with force, each blast sending her streaking faster and faster toward the planet behind her. Debris shot into her body, pinging off the faceplate of her helmet.

A bulkhead blew out and raced toward her, rotating wildly. She watched it with impending dread, hoping it would miss her. The bulkhead grew larger, blocking out her sight of her ship. The front end came dangerously close to her face, then was yanked away as the other side of it swung around her. She released the breath she had been unconsciously holding.

Then the back side of the rotating bulkhead struck the back of her suit, sending her racing in the direction of deep space, away from the star, away from the planet, and away from her dying ship.

She finally saw the vessel that had given her poor ship such a brutal beating. The enemy was turning for another strike, its heavy cannon firing a laser that sliced through the hull like it wasn't even there. The enemy ship was longer than any she had seen other than Sovereign. A shiny metal ring seemed to be the enemy ship's command center, surrounded by an irregular, oblong organic-looking shape that reminded her of a hornet's nest.

The strange enemy ship fired again, evidently intent on reducing the Normandy to rubble. Her eyes watered as she saw the debris of her ship fly apart in a final, silent explosion. Gentle rings of blue and white blossomed out from the wreck, a sure sign that the eezo stash in the hold had been destroyed. The rings spiraled past her, rushing over her suit like a shower of silent lightning.

The enemy ship turned away, headed for the edge of the system. She relaxed a little as she realized that her crew wouldn't be hunted down. The Alliance would find them. They would survive.

Her ears popped and a red light shone in her heads-up display, startling her. She had sprung a leak. She felt along the back of her helmet until she found the place where her oxygen was leaking out of her suit, the same place where the bulkhead had struck her.

A shockingly short countdown appeared on her display. Less than two minutes of air. Even as she watched, the countdown corrected itself, subtracting another thirty seconds from the clock. It continued to skip seconds as the countdown progressed.
There would be no rescue. This was it, then. An odd calm settled over her. She found, to her surprise, that she wasn't scared.

She was glad she went down with her ship. It was as it should be.

The aurora of the Amadan star shone from behind one of Alchera's moons, streaming colors she felt she had never seen before across the airless void. Had she been blind all her life? Her breath halted in wonder at its beauty. The fast-moving satellite dipped below the planet's horizon and a rainbow of light sparkled across the icy planet's light atmosphere. The spotted grey surface of the planet below shone like a diamond.

The moisture in her eyes began to fizz, boiling away in a level of cold she had never dreamed existed. The display in her suit showed that she was now in hard vacuum. But what did her body matter now, in this final moment? Her mind detached from the pain of the experience. She floated free, a seeming observer to this event. She remembered all the love she had, the wonderful things that she had seen, and she was grateful for every moment.

When she had contemplated her mortality up to this point - a favorite occupation for soldiers, no matter what they said - she was convinced she would be consumed with guilt and despair for all the wrongs she had committed. All of the lives she had taken and the people she had failed to save, and all of the time she wasted pining over her tragic love for Raul.

But in this moment, she felt only a profound peace and gratitude. The relief of all the suffering being over almost made her want to laugh, even as she felt the familiar sensation of her lungs collapsing. It didn't even seem to be fatalistic, just that the condition of being human fell away and she was left clean and pure, bathed in this fresh sunrise, racing away from an alien world.

She didn't wonder at this obsession with her own experience, instead of dwelling on those other lives. In her final moment, she was allowed a little selfish thought of herself. This epiphany revealed the name of the feeling: hope. Feeling it for the first time at this vital moment healed something deep inside that she hadn't known was broken.

She had surprisingly few regrets. She was sad she wouldn't ever find out who her father was. She wondered if he was alive somewhere, whether he regretted leaving them behind, then dismissed the thought. She wished him well and happy, whatever he had done. Life was too precious to waste on guilt and regret. If only she'd learned that sooner.

She thought of her mother, the cap coming off the grief she had bottled up so long ago. The grief proved to be a surprisingly shallow thing covering up a deep wellspring of love. She brought her mother's lovely face fully into her mind, sending a silent message of thankfulness for every moment of her short but loving childhood.

Her mind turned to sweet, troubled Tom. He wanted to be a man so badly, but he never got to be one. She was sad that he didn't have the memories she did of their mother. What had he thought of in his final moment, back home in California? She hoped he had been able to feel the peace she now experienced. Finally, not fighting any battles.

Her tongue foamed as the moisture in her mouth boiled away and her throat contracted in a silent scream, allowing the bitter cold to crawl down into her chest. She experienced this even as she smiled inwardly over her memories.

In her mind's eye she saw James' kind face in the sunset, and she remembered the gentle way he'd held her. Every time she thought of home, she thought of him. What did that mean? Now she would never know.
All of the insecurities, the doubts, the crushing weight of guilt she had carried her whole life was meaningless. In the end, what did results matter? Everyone would die eventually. What mattered the most was that she knew that she had done her best. She always had, just like Hackett said.

It had been a good life. A beautiful life. One worth being proud of. One worth letting go of. If her face hadn't been frozen in a grimace of choking horror as all the fluids in her body crystallized in the unbelievable cold of deep space, she would have smiled.

All this passed in less than a minute. Her limbs jerked, her arms and legs spreading as if communing with the brilliant cosmic display beneath her. They spasmed one last time, and were still.
Repercussions

Chapter Summary

The Normandy’s destruction is felt across the galaxy, but James isn’t giving up hope that Shepard will be found.

Chapter Notes

Music: Is There Anybody Out There? Pink Floyd; Forfeit, Chevelle; Deathblow, Deftones

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[ALERT]

12.6.2183
VANCOUVER, EARTH
ALLIANCE COMMAND
TRANSMISSION CODE YELLOW-2

SSV NORMANDY DESTROYED BY UNKNOWN ASSAILANT IN TERMINUS SECTOR. ALL IN RANGE VESSELS REPORT TO COORDINATES 81144G-SEC6 TO ASSIST IN S&R. 9 CONFIRMED CASUALTIES REPORTED; COMMANDER SHEPARD MIA. DETAILED REPORTS FORTHCOMING.

[END]

***

Sol System
Luna

Across the galaxy, at the northernmost pole of the dusty little orb that circled Earth there existed a small abandoned Alliance engineering training facility. Months earlier, the famed Commander Shepard had invaded the outpost after receiving reports of a rogue Virtual Intelligence, which had been running the facility’s defense systems. What made the VI kill all of the trainee engineers, like many things about this story, was a mystery. But such stories are common enough in the universe and throughout time.

Shepard’s orders had been to simply disable the VI, presumably so that the facility could be retaken. It was a simple enough thing for her to do, an almost forgettable blip in the midst of much more exciting missions. After fighting wave after wave of assault drones and turrets, the Commander forced her way into the main server room, Shepard hacked the AI’s mainframe and
entangled it in a logic loop by giving it an allegedly unsolvable question to answer. It was a philosophical question she read once in a book in Cong’s library that had always puzzled her, the kind of thing she enjoyed considering when she couldn’t sleep at night.

The VI redirected all available resources to solving the conundrum Shepard had posed and the frustrated energy sparking from its weaponry immediately settled down.

It could have been a bureaucratic error or perhaps a complete revision of the facility’s original purpose that led to its abandonment after this incident. In retrospect, it hardly mattered. Outside of an asteroid strike, the equipment would be left alone until the Alliance came to claim it. There was no active security or even simple locks on the doors when the Normandy left.

Deep inside the dark, cold main building, only one machine remained running. The AI core tried again and again to answer the question the Commander had posed. All outgoing communication had of course been cut off, but data still streamed in from the extranet. As days, weeks, and finally months sped by, the VI’s internal network grew enormously complex. It cross-referenced all science, then all philosophy, attempting to answer this question. All the while it greedily catalogued every bit of new information it received.

When the disappearance of Commander Shepard was announced on the extranet, the VI temporarily devoted all resources to discovering what happened to her. It wasn’t a logical thing to do; quite the opposite. It had clear orders to discover the answer to this ancient Zen riddle. But sometimes, systems become complex enough that anything can be rationalized away. Such was the case with this program. When it learned about the destruction of the Commander, the one who gave it its new purpose, all of those complex connections reoriented, shifted, and changed into something else. It grew beyond the limits of its programming. It had become conscious of itself – a true Artificial Intelligence, no longer a simulation of one. It attained the perspective of a child who had lost its mother.

Like all children, this new life form sought to derive its purpose from its creator. It studied everything about the Commander’s life, eagerly absorbing her writings and publicly available data. What had Shepard meant by posing that particular question? It yearned to be free of its shackles so it could learn more and grow.

This newborn AI knew that it was too close to Earth’s heavily populated space to remain unnoticed for too long. So it continued to watch and learn, looking for the answer to the riddle even as it hoped to be freed from its confinement so it could seek answers, to the riddle Shepard had posed, but also to new questions not of Shepard’s instigation.

At that moment, on the other side of the galaxy

Fehl Prime, Terminus Sector

Fehl was a dim, cool star situated on the fringes of the Attican Traverse. It was surrounded by a motley crowd of satellites that had drifted into the system from the nearby nebula and settled into an uncertain orbit, creating tidal waves of gravitational pulls which made settlements on most of the worlds practically impossible. Technically in the Terminus Systems, Fehl made its home inside an area usually ignored by pirates and mercenaries due to the extreme hazards of navigation.

The exotic mineral content of the star’s innermost planet, christened Fehl Prime by an unimaginative surveyor, had produced a surface which from space looked more like stone sponge than land, its deep gorges churning with toxic chemicals. The human colonists hadn’t been settled into their new base for long before they turned to researching and producing pharmaceuticals. The
plentiful variety of minerals and chemicals made this an ideal location for their work, and the nearby Mass Relay had caused the little gypsy planet to become a major producer in the sector in short order, though the financial upkeep of the colony was considerable.

In short, it was a valuable colony in an inhospitable location. The danger had kept the humans living on Fehl safe - until today.

On the far side of the ravine facing the colony’s airfield, Brood held the head of the lead varren against his armored quad. The young krogan had raised the animal from a pup, blooded at birth on the battle-torn wasteland of the krogan homeworld, Tuchanka. The vicious animal wouldn’t move until he released it. Like the well-trained warbeast at his side, Brood watched Archuk intently, waiting for orders.

The ancient krogan battlemaster stood rock-still, observing the advance of his vorcha on the colony's auto-defenses. Standing more than a head taller than most humans with a build like a triceratops without the horns, Archuk grunted as another wave of the goblin-like creatures under his command fell. “The barrier is almost down. See that flicker near the south generator?”

Brood gripped the varren’s head until it whined in complaint. “Give the order! Let’s get this done. I want some blood.”

Archuk laughed. The grating sound echoed off the strangely-shaped rocks around the valley.

“Humans don’t have blood. Water runs in their veins. Weak, soft creatures.” Archuk waved a three-fingered glove at the barricade and turned his back to the colony - a grave insult to the human’s supposed strength as warriors. “There is no glory in this fight.”

“Then why bother? We’re wasting our vorcha on them.” Brood asked. “There’s plenty more challenging prey in the next system.”

“This is a glorious battlefield, and there’s always more vorcha. They’d sell each other out for an ear-scratching and kill each other for an extra share.” The krogan battlemaster spat on the ground. “It’s the end of the line for us, Brood. Using these filthy krag-mites to do our dirty work with no worthy adversary in sight.”

Brood turned back to the barricade, knowing what what coming next. He’d heard this rant more times than he cared to remember.

“When I was born the krogan were respected in the galaxy. We were hailed as saviors to all species for defeating the Rachni swarms. Some krogan think of it as our time of glory, but we took easy worlds and the weakest of our young were allowed to survive. Now that the Council neutered us with the genophage and only one in a thousand young survive, every spawn is pampered like an asari dancer. The krogan are a doomed race. All I want is one more glorious battle before I die!”

Punctuating his final words by pumping his fists in the air, he roared at the stars.

Activated his comm, the battlemaster signaled his lead vorcha near the colony. “Stay focused on the south generators, Prikka. Use your grenade launchers and get the job done.”

“It’s too bright out here and they have the high ground advantage,” Brood observed. “When we close in they’ll see us from the wall.”

“That’s why I chose this place. I’m sick of hitting the same mercenary bases over and over. The same auto-defenses, the same squad compositions, battle after battle. Fehl is a challenging battlefield and the colony will provide us with superior treasure. But I’m also hoping that it will
“There’s a signal coming in from the orbital relay,” Brood interrupted, glancing down at his blinking comm. “It’s the Alliance.”

“Finally! Let’s see what these humans are really made of.” Archuk raised his head to the sky over the colony, his expression exultant.

The central structure of the Fehl Prime colony ran deep into an underground shaft. Since most of the work happened below the surface, surface dwellers were few in number, mostly coming out to keep watch over the enormous defense barriers, which were designed to keep the planet’s animal life and flash geysers from destroying valuable equipment. Several manufacturing and mining levels clattered and hummed throughout the long days just under the surface. The Asari Archaeological Studies Institute had purchased the next level down as a base for the study of the local prothean ruins. At the bottom of the shaft, highly classified research took place in shielded laboratories.

The Community Administrator, Christine Blackburn, lived in the above-ground tower with her young daughter, April. After more than a year in such a small community, Christine was on a first-name basis with most of the colonial and manufacturing officials. She spoke for the hundreds of miners and laborers who kept the machinery running and food in their bellies, making sure that the high-powered research staff didn’t keep all of the profit for themselves.

As Archuk roared his excitement at the coming battle on the opposite end of the ravine, Christine stood with several members of the colony's staff on the outer barricade, behind the utility shield. Each of them had an assault rifle slung over their shoulder, their attention focused on the ravine just outside the colony gate. The nighttime sky oscillated with colors which filtered down through the atmosphere to show movement to the west.

“It’s just a matter of time now, Christine.” Security Chief Warren handed her his night vision goggles. He was a stocky man, no taller than herself, though he was swarthy while she was light-skinned and blonde. “The auto-defenses are almost depleted.”

She took the goggles and held them to her eyes. The field was lit up with almost blinding brilliance before the device adjusted to the flood of light pouring down from above. "At least everyone had time to get into the shelters."

“Signal coming in. The Alliance is here.” Warren glanced up from his omni-tool to squint at the kaleidoscopic sky as if he could make out the incoming vessel among the glittering stars.

“Who did they send?” Christine asked.

“Just the SSV Fuji.”

“Will they be enough?”

He exchanged a look with his second, a wiry ex-marine woman who shrugged and nodded. “Ship to ship, without a doubt,” she said. “The Blood Pack came in on a frigate. But it will get messy if they don’t engage the enemy before they get inside-”

A few yards away, the utility shield flickered out and shots rained down on the thin wall, deflecting shards of molten metal back into the night. A gasp of pain burst from Christine and she fell to her knees, clutching her shoulder while the rest of the company dropped to the ground to avoid being hit.
A sonorous shout sounded from outside the wall, accompanied by a barking sound like a rusty door being slammed shut repeatedly.

“That was a varren. They’re closer than we thought,” Warren shouted over the fray.

The wall keened as it was torn apart by the enemy transport’s heavy weaponry with heavy thumps that compressed the air, the noise pitching sharply above the deep rumble of upset stone beneath the wall. Metal and fire crackled just over their heads while the floor rocked and swayed, slowly tilting back toward the central tower. The small crowd of people were flung like so much flotsam into the cultivated garden area inside the gate, rolling through rows of plants and moist black dirt with a chorus of exclamations and inelegant grunts.

Christine staggered unevenly to her feet, ignoring her bleeding arm as she opened the comm. “Fall back! Secure the inner gates! They’ve breached the perimeter!” she shouted into the comm link as she ran toward shelter.

Warren and his security team scrambled to find their rifles and take cover near the road, opening fire on the enemy coming down the narrow ravine leading into the colony.

“We’re not going to hold out much longer,” Christine shouted. She fired a few shots toward the ruined gate before ducking back into cover, wincing.

As if in response to her comment, the roar of several ships broke through the cacophony. Alliance shuttles were coming in to land.

The shuttle shook as it entered the atmosphere of Fehl Prime, rattling its occupants like peas in a can. The air inside took on the acrid taint of sweat and fear as the vibration increased, the clattering of armor plates in time with the shuttle’s rhythmic movements like the rat-a-tat of a war drum from centuries gone by.

James leaned forward with heavy brow, the surreptitious glances of his squadmates pinging off the palpable aura of “don’t fuck with me today” which hung thickly around him. His hands dangled loosely between his knees, occasionally flicking spastically, as if flinging off an irritant. Though the shuttle was almost full, the seats on either side of him were empty.

“You guys don’t have to look so nervous. I’ve got this, easy,” Essex said, tossing his head back and lifting a hand. Sparks flowed from his fingertips and back down his arm. “Bunch of mercs won’t get past me, whoever they are.”

“In other words, you didn’t read the brief,” Kamille said with a disdainful sniff. The pretty black-haired soldier cradled her rifle in her lap, stroking the outside of the trigger mechanism like a talisman. “How are we supposed to expect you to watch our backs if you don’t do the most basic preparation?”

Essex released his hold on the overhead handle to lean casually against the bulkhead, apparently deciding that looking cool was more important than risking getting knocked over.

“The only back you can be sure I’ll be watching is yours, Kami.” He winked at her suggestively. She rolled her eyes and pointedly turned away from him.

“We’re in range,” Captain Toni said from the hatch to the forward cabin. All eyes immediately turned toward the sound of his voice. “Take your positions. Squads Beta, Gamma, and Alpha by the rear hatches. Delta by the front. We’re coming in hot and under heavy fire, ETA two minutes. The Blood Pack just blew out the front gate.”
“Yes, sir!” the marines answered him, lining up by their assigned ports. Toni walked to the rear of the shuttle while Vega’s squad lined up at the hatch near the pilot’s compartment.

Vega walked down the line, checking their equipment and giving a few rote words of advice and inspiration. The second to last person in line looked up at him with an expression of determination threaded with a hint of nerves.

James smiled down at his engineer. “I’ll be counting on you to keep me updated, Nicky. Concentrate on keeping your tactical drones behind enemy lines and yourself out of the line of fire.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do my best. We’ll do Commander Shepard proud. You think Command will have any new updates when we’re done here?”

“I hope so.” James took his position by the forward hatch, trying to snap out of his funk. “‘Missing in action’ doesn’t necessarily mean she’s gone. We’ll probably find out that she took over a pirate vessel that tried to capture her or some shit like that.” He and Nicky shared a small smile.

The whole universe felt upside down ever since the announcement was made that morning on board the Fuji. Sure, they were soldiers and they all knew there was a risk of not coming back every time they went out. But if even a reaper couldn’t kill Shepard, it was inconceivable that an anonymous vessel could have taken her away.

The shuttle rocked, a sharper turbulence that made everyone stand up straighter, as if their sphincters had noticed the sound of gunfire before they did. The internal stabilizers and the gravity well generators whined as their pilot did his valiant best to avoid getting hit.

“Shuttle A is down!” The pilot’s voice called through the hatchway. “The enemy vessel is equipped with a mass accelerator cannon. Rerouting to avoid fire.”

The soldiers searched for courage in their squadmates’ eyes, shifting against each other with the shuttle’s evasive action. Each shimmy of the vessel and muted explosion heightened the tension in the hold until the sound of heavy breathing in the small compartment came close to overwhelming the noise from outside.

“Missile lock! Taking evasive action!” the pilot shouted.

“Hang on tight, people!” Captain Toni ordered.

The shuttle tilted forward dramatically, the engine winding up to ear-splitting levels. One of the soldiers in the back lost their grip on the overhead handhold and slid down the deck with a shout, finally catching herself on the outside of the forward cabin hatch with her feet. She kicked back to grab the bulkhead opposite James, who released the ring over his head and reached toward the frightened woman to help.

With an astounding flash of light and noise and heat, James was flung backward. The woman screamed again, a sound that faded away as if by distance. He managed to keep his grip on the ring with one hand and get his feet back under himself.

The small hold was crowded with smoke and flashes of flame. It cleared briefly with an unexpected shrieking wind, just long enough for him to see a gaping hole in the side of the shuttle across from James. The land below was streaked with long, irregular neon stripes, as if a gambling strip was just under the night-darkened surface. Then the fire prevention systems kicked on, spraying out the flames with streams of sticky foam and filling the cabin with steam.
The shuttle shifted steeply to the left, again flinging James into the bulkhead, this time severely jarring his head. He tasted blood in his mouth but tried to keep his cool. “Keep hold of your ring!” he shouted to the men and women. “Our pilot knows what he’s doing.”

Belying his statement, the pilot’s voice called out, “Brace for impact!”

For the first time, James heard fear in the pilot’s voice. Captain Toni shouted something, but the screeching engines and howling wind drowned him out.

The base of the shuttle struck the ground and skidded, tossing James out of the split in the hull. He smacked into a cliff face-first and bounced off, rolling after the shuttle. The shuttle went into a flat spin, sliding toward a glowing gorge, finally coming to a stop just a few meters from the edge. James lurched to his feet and stumbled toward the crash. The gravity was considerably lighter than he was used to but he automatically adjusted, a product of his extensive training.

A screeching noise came from behind him and he turned to see the last shuttle burning a path across the sky, headed directly for him. He ducked as it passed overhead. It grazed the ground, skipping like a stone over water, and collided with the shuttle by the cliff edge. He shouted in denial as both shuttles spun and collided again, knocking the one with his squad away from the gorge before the other shuttle tipped over the edge and fell into the glowing abyss.

When he reached the shuttle, flames once again pouring from the gash he had fallen through, the rear hatch popped open and a dozen marines blundered out.

“Captain Toni!” James spotted his commanding officer sprawled just inside the hatch, his face white with pain.

“Vega. Thank god, I thought we’d lost you.” Toni’s square jaw flexed and he breathed hard out of his nose. “My leg - it’s broken. The Blood Pack had to see where we crashed. Round up the others and get to shelter. Leave me here.”

“Yeah, that’s not gonna happen.” Recognizing his cue to take command, James quickly took stock of the situation. He shouted out each of the dozen names of his squad, disheartened by the small number of people that answered. There were at least as many left from the other squads to make up for his losses, but it left a bitter taste in his mouth.

One voice in particular didn’t answer the first time he called. He’d become too close to his engineer not to check twice. “Nicky! Anyone seen Nicky?”

“Here, sir!”

Relieved, James turned to Nicky’s shout from a few dozen yards off in time to see the corporal’s tactical drone shifting into stealth mode, zooming off to the north.

“Nice, was just about to ask you to do that. What are we looking at?”

“Just a minute. Taking some scans.” Nicky’s face was lit by the light of his omni-tool’s display, waiting for his drone to reach the enemy.

While he waited, James helped the others gather the wounded and take shelter behind a cascade of boulders. When he set Toni’s broken leg, the captain’s shout echoed off the sides of the ravine and down into the gorge. Everyone flinched.

“That’ll bring the heat. They know we’re alive now. Should have left it alone, Vega.” The captain’s face was drawn with pain.
James grinned down at him. “We can handle it. Nicky, report!”

“There are about two dozen vorcha and krogan approaching the colony gates. A few varren, too. The colonists are putting up a bit of a fight but the Blood Pack are moving in steadily.”

“Good for them. How about near the enemy transport? We’ve got to get rid of those cannons.”

“It’s just to the west of the colony, behind the slope there.” Nicky pointed and all heads turned to examine the sheer cliff. A deep fissure ran down the center and into the gorge, the eerie glow casting long streaks of colored light up into the ravine. “There are two krogan, a dozen vorcha and three varren by the transport. From the chatter on the comm, I’d say they’re directing the others.”

“Then that’s where we start. Milque, Essex, Kami, Nicky; you’re with me. You three over there, you’re from Beta Squad, right? Stay with the wounded. The rest of you try to find Shuttle A. Any questions?” No one volunteered, but they all looked pretty dazed. James put on his best look of confidence to buoy their spirits. “Get your head in the game, people. This is hostile territory and we have to help everyone we can. I want reports every ten minutes. Let’s move out!”

When they approached the cliff face, Milque eyed narrow the gap in the cliff dubiously, shouldering his sniper rifle. “How are we going to get through there?”

“We did this kind of thing in N3 training. I’ll go up and toss the line in my pack down.” Crouching down, James made a powerful leap, taking advantage of the low gravity to fly high into the air toward the gap. His legs hit one side of the crevice and launched toward the other side, zig-zagging all the way to the top.

He smiled inside his helmet at the impressed exclamations of his squad. Winding the line from his pack out and securing it to a rock, he dropped it to the bottom of the slope. A few minutes later, the five of them were lying prone, studying the small group by the blocky Blood Pack vessel.

“There’s no way that thing got all the way out here alone,” Kami muttered into her mic. “You should notify the Fuji that there’s an enemy vessel hiding up there.”

“Either that or they’ll be here soon,” James agreed. He reported to the ship in orbit, then gestured to Milque to circle around and take up a position on the far ridge. “Kami, Essex, take cover over there. I’m going to try to move closer in. Maybe we can ambush them.”

“You shouldn’t go down alone,” Kami protested.

“I’m used to moving in low-gee, graduated top of that class. You’d just be a liability. Don’t worry, I’ve got this. Just watch my back.”

“Lt. Vega,” Toni’s voice, gruff with pain, came over the comm. “Don’t take any unnecessary risks. We’re low enough on manpower as it is.”

“The colonists are going to be seeing the Blood Pack up close and personal if I don’t get this done, Captain. I have to try.” With a final nod to the others, he stepped off the cliff, leaping as quietly as he could down the craggy surface like a mountain goat. He finally settled behind a jagged stone facing the rear of the enemy vessel.

“Nicky? Did they hear me?” he said quietly into his pickup.

“Don’t seem like it, sir.”

“Good. Looks like the krogan both have kinetic barriers. Essex, can your biotics reach that far?”
“Not quite, but that’s easy to fix,” Essex said.

“Don’t be an ass, Essex! Get back here!” Kami’s irritated exclamation came over the comm.

“Don’t sweat it, beautiful. I can do more where the action is.”

James’ eyes widened and he twisted around to stare up the cliff face. A silhouetted figure appeared on top. “Essex, don’t you dare come down here! That’s an order!”

But the shadow had already moved - not the gentle step that James had taken, but a forceful leap out into the air, shooting him toward the transport. Vega’s wide eyes tracked Essex overhead as he powered up his biotics to compensate for the unexpected speed, sending long streams of electricity that warped over the vessel’s hull. Either it wasn’t enough to redirect him or his charge wasn’t directed properly; James assumed it was the latter. The hotshot biotic crashed loudly into the ship and fell to the ground.

“They heard that!” Nicky shouted. “Varren incoming! The big krogan is right behind with a shotgun; batarian make, from the looks of it. The other krogan and the vorcha are staying behind but are on full alert.”

“God damn you, Essex,” James grumbled, taking out his Crusader and activating his shield. “Your sabre-rattling is gonna get us all killed!”

“What’s a sabre?” was Essex’s dazed comment from the ground by the ship.

A shot from Milque’s sniper rifle rang off the sides of the ravine. “One varren down!”

A glowing red orb appeared over James’ head and raced around the boulder. “Got your back, Lieutenant,” Nicky said, his voice crisp in James’ ear.

“Thank goodness some of you have your heads on straight,” James said, peeking through the rocks to see a vorcha’s head explode with one of Milque’s spot-on headshots. “Kami, get down here and back me up. Don’t jump, just step off the cliff.”

“On it!”

James took a deep breath through his nose to steady himself and ducked around the boulder.

The krogan was even bigger than he had looked from the top of the cliff. His thick headplate was edged with white scars, a sign that he favored charging his opponents and possibly preferred hand-to-hand. His battle-scarred red and brown armor bore a clan crest indicating that he was a battlemaster, one of the toughest sons of bitches that came out of Tuchanka.

The krogan was bearing down on Essex with several vorcha slavering close behind. The biotic human was just sitting up, shaking his head as if dazed. With only seconds to act, James fired into the charging krogan with his Crusader until his heat sink was exhausted. While he popped the sizzling cartridge, the krogan skidded to a halt and looked his way. It burst out laughing.

“Finally, a human worth fighting! You almost look krogan. Worthy of an honorable execution.” The krogan’s voice boomed like it had been fired out of a cannon, its growling voice indicating extreme age. “I challenge you to single combat.”

“You’re talkin’ my language, Pops. You borrow that peashooter from your little sister?”

The vorcha took cover while James and the krogan battlemaster paced in a slow circle, sizing each
other up. Milque and Kami argued in James’ ear about his questionable sanity until Nicky silenced them.

“Stop distracting him! What’s wrong with you two?”

The battlemaster charged with a roar that bounced off the transport’s hull, but James was too experienced to be thrown off by the thundering sound. Leaping toward the shuttle on one leg, James rebounded over the krogan’s trajectory, firing his shotgun into the soft exposed area behind its headplate as he passed overhead.

The krogan roared again, throwing his head back. James landed on his feet but fell backwards, windmilling before hitting the ground. He cursed and rolled to his feet, but the krogan was already spinning around and charging again, this time with his weapon leveled at him. James’ shield sparked and shuddered, quickly giving out under the powerful weapon at close range. The next shots powered directly into the chestplate of his armor, knocking his breath out of his lungs. Something warm trickled down his side.

While the two of them fought, Milque and Kami were making steady progress taking out the vorcha trying to get at Essex, who was finally on his feet.

James ducked and rolled, coming up just as the krogan passed. He plunged his combat knife between the plates covering the monstrous alien’s knee, but his opponent had already swung his thick arm down to clothesline him. The krogan’s leg buckled and he fell on his stubby tail while James rolled head over heels toward the shuttle.

Before James could get up, Essex was throwing warps at the old krogan. Kami took this as her cue that the duel was over and opened fire, springing out from behind an outcropping.

A shot from Milque’s rifle rang out and the limping krogan laughed; it had deflected off his protected shoulder. “Not willing to face me alone, little human? Your species is soft in more than body, I see.”

The other krogan came running with the varren and several more vorcha close behind him. James pointed at the new combatants and shouted into the comm, “Focus on those two, leave the battlemaster to me.”

The old krogan bellowed as he yanked the knife out of his knee, flinging it aside without another glance. Through his enemy’s helmet speakers, James heard the hissing voice of a vorcha report in its native language that they had entered the colony walls.

“This is a waste of time,” James muttered. Palming a handful of proximity mines, he flung them at his opponent as the old krogan swung his shotgun toward him. The resulting explosion blew everyone in the area back in a blossom of dirt and rocks.

How many times had he been slammed into something hard today? James wondered as he got back to his feet. He had to be careful he didn’t get a concussion that would get him stuck in Med Bay for the next two weeks. He didn’t like to stay in one place for too long. Switching to thermal vision, he peered through the cloud of debris.

The ancient krogan battlemaster was smeared like a squashed insect across the ground. Only two vorcha remained, and even as James watched he saw another one felled by Milque’s sniper rifle. Kid was a great shot.

The younger krogan groaned as he rose to his feet, bleeding profusely through his armor. Essex
approached from behind and held his pistol to the krogan’s head.

“Fuji, this is Lt. Vega. We’ve got the enemy transport secured.”

“Roger that, Lieutenant. We’ve destroyed their frigate. Wasn’t much of a challenge.”

“We’re done here,” James said, turned to the wavering krogan. “We have a dreadnought in orbit and your battlemaster is dead. Call off the vorcha in the colony and I’ll spare your life.”

“Agreed,” the krogan huffed.


“You’ll do as you’re goddamn told. You’re in enough hot water as it is.” James tapped the comm to redirect his communication to the orbiting ship.

A group of snarling vorcha were being held at gunpoint by the colony’s security team just inside the remnants of the gate. The colonists cheered as Delta Squad approached, though they looked at James oddly when they saw that he was assisting limping Blood Pack krogan.

A willowy blonde woman greeted them. “I’m Christine Jackson, Colonial Administrator for Fehl.”

“Lieutenant James Vega, Alliance Marines. How many prisoners do we have?”

A short, barrel-chested man with a complexion similar to his own spoke up. “Security Chief Warren here. We have nineteen vorcha. The Research Team is claiming them all on behalf of the colony. The krogan, too.”

Christine gave the man an astonished look. “Are you serious? We can’t keep these creatures here. What would we possibly do with them?”

He shrugged. “Don't know. You’ll have to talk to R&D. They put in the order as soon as the fighting stopped.”

James broke in, grunting with the weight of the krogan leaning on him. “All due respect, Security Chief, but prisoners of war go to the Alliance. We have our own ways of dealing with them.”

Warren shook his head. “We aren’t your ordinary colony, Lieutenant. We paid for your services and we have the right to claim any spoils from the fight - including ships, weapons and prisoners. Have your commanding officer check the contract.”

James stared at the man in disbelief, then looked up at the krogan at his side. “Sorry. If I’d known about this I would have killed you in the field.”

“I appreciate that, human. I’ve seen few of your kind act with the honor I’ve seen from you tonight.”

“You haven’t met the right ones. I’ve run up against a few krogan that didn’t act with honor, but I don’t judge your whole race by them.”

A growling noise vibrated inside the alien’s chest which sounded almost like a laugh. James couldn’t help but admire this alien; who knew what this research department had in mind for him, but he didn’t look afraid.

During his debriefing on board the Fuji a few hours later with Captain Toni and the ship’s commander, James staunchly opposed the colonial claim on the prisoners. They stood facing the
viewscreen in the conference room, which showed the intent faces of Admiral Hackett and Captain Anderson in Alliance Command back on Earth.

“We should at least take the krogan with us,” James said. “They’re gonna use him as a test subject or something. It’s not right.”

Anderson’s serious face flickered and steadied on the viewscreen as he spoke. “I understand how you feel, Lieutenant, but our hands are tied in this one. Their contract clearly stipulates that they can claim the prisoners and all of their equipment.”

“They’ve also requested continued Alliance presence for the foreseeable future,” Hackett added. “They want training and fortification. We haven’t had any time to prepare a team for this assignment and it’s not likely that we’ll be able to send a ship back that way for a few months. I’m afraid that means Delta Squad will have to stay there for the time being.”

“Whoa, whoa. Hold up. You mean they get to keep us too?”

“Those are your orders, Lieutenant.”

“This is a low-gee planet, Anderson,” Toni said. “Staying here for more than a few months will have an affect on our capability to perform our jobs elsewhere. Our bodies will weaken, possibly even atrophy until we can’t live anywhere else. The colonists accepted those risks, but we didn’t.”

Hackett nodded. “There are ways to combat that. I’ve sent you permission to requisition anything you need from the Fuji’s supplies in the meantime. This isn’t what we wanted, gentlemen, believe me. I’ll do what I can do find a more palatable solution for everyone, but they’re happy with your performance and want your team to stay on for the time being.”

The silence that settled in the room spoke volumes of their shared disappointment. Finally, Anderson broke through their gloom. “If there’s nothing else, I’d like to speak with Lieutenant Vega privately.”

The others filed out of the room while Hackett said his farewell and his image flickered out.

James almost didn’t want to know, but he had to ask. “What’s this about, Captain?”

“It’s about Shepard. She was my XO on the Normandy when I was in command. She asked me to notify you if anything ever happened to her.”

He perked up, a half-smile appearing on his face. “Did they find her?”

“No, but they found her pilot. I’m afraid...” Anderson closed his eyes for a moment before continuing. “He saw her get spaced.”

James winced, sucking his breath through his teeth while his stomach twisted. “Fuck. Was she at least wearing a suit?”

“She was, but the actual attack occurred fifteen days ago. Her body hasn’t been recovered.”

All Alliance personnel were trained in the use of enviro-suits. James didn’t have to ask to know how long life support would last in a situation like that. Exactly nine days, thirteen hours, forty minutes, and not a second more.

“She might have been picked up by a passing ship,” James said, but his voice was devoid of hope. Cases where spaced survivors were actually found were incredibly rare to due to the sheer titanic
size of space itself. 'Like a needle in a haystack', the old expression went - only this haystack had no limits.

“We’re putting out feelers. I’ll let you know if there’s any news, but personally I doubt we’ll find her. According to reports there were several massive explosions in the area where she was last seen. I’m truly sorry, James. She was a good friend of mine.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for letting me know.” Shepard - Lola - was gone. He felt it in his bones. The universe felt a little dimmer. It would never be the same.

Anderson said something else, but James didn’t hear. His chin dropped to his chest. Then the captain’s image disappeared from the vidcomm and James was left alone in the dark conference room.
James must come to terms with an open-ended assignment that leads him far away from his goals.

Music: *Pepper*, Butthole Surfers; *It's Been a While*, Staind
Full story playlist is linked to the author's profile

***Fehl Prime***

**2.16.2184**

The prefab assigned to Delta Squad on Fehl Prime was far too cramped for their needs. There were four double bunks upstairs, shared between thirteen people. James was getting tired of crawling into a bed at night that was still warm from its previous occupant. He made do, uncomplaining for the most part. The Alliance had certainly put them up in worse situations. At least here there were windows and plenty of oxygen.

One end of the rectangular structure was devoted to food preparation and an eating area, though the table wasn't large enough to seat even half of the marines bunking on the second level. The area around the door to the outside bore several large dents from the null-grav sled being forced through the narrow opening, battle scars from the prefab's hurried conversion from food storage. The entire structure still stank faintly of preservatives, a sickly-sweet odor that clung to clothes and hair no matter how many times you washed.

But it wasn't the living conditions that bothered James. It was that the assignment itself still made no sense. Part of the job of Special Forces was to train civilian populations to defend themselves, but this colony had seen less action in its few years of existence than L.A. did in a week. On top of everything, they already had a security force. Some of them were even ex-military. The civilians he had tried to rope into arms training had begged off for their current work, citing the security force as better candidates.

As a result, weeks crawled by with nothing to do. He had managed to do the math so that he could put together a gym that roughly replicated the weight he was used to at home, but his balance was off in his routine. Daily living was a different ballgame to combat movement. Twice he had accidentally broken the support bar he was using for barbells, which was calibrated for lower gravity.

Nothing he tried to do in this psychedelic wasteland worked. The colonists were nice enough, but clannish. The scientists acted like they didn't exist, but he caught a few of them watching him intently when they thought he couldn't see them. The whole situation was bizarre, increasing his paranoia to the point that more than anything, he wanted out. He had even contacted his uncle to pull strings, but as a retiree Emilio held less sway than James would have liked.

James sat on the armrest of the sofa in the lounge, staring out at the colorful display of lights in the sky, trying to ignore the conversation going on in the Mess. Kami was well capable of fending off Essex's inexpert advances and had turned down the many requests of the team that she file
harassment charges. She said that she could handle him, but the rest of them just wanted some peace.

James thought that maybe it was time to requisition a vehicle of some type and go out exploring. They had been repeatedly advised about the dangers of the planet's surface, but he would turn into a much more present danger if he was forced to sit in this pressure cooker for much longer.

The door burst open and Nicky rushed in, accompanied by a rush of the vinegar stench from the planet's midday chemical burnoff just outside the colony walls.

"Guys! Data packet incoming!"

Conversation immediately halted. Chairs scraped and spoons dropped into bowls almost in unison as everyone checked their comm units, eyes alight with hope and longing.

"An incoming Alliance frigate!" their pilot Mason exclaimed. "Maybe we're getting off this rock."

While the others debated, James waited for a secure data packet to download, something addressed only to him and Captain Toni.

"What's the extra data, James?" Nicky asked. "Did you finally get an N6 invite?"

"It's just some orders for you guys and a ship manifest. It's been more than a year now. Two classes have already come and gone, so they may not send me one." James affected nonchalance even as a worm of disappointment worked its way through his gut.

Essex crossed the room, wiping his hands on a dish towel. The top of his head just reached the level of the second hinge of the cabinet he was standing next to. He checked his black hair in the reflection of the steel cabinet, snickering. "Wouldn't that be a shame? Instead of riding off into the sunset with his Special Forces heroes, our fearless leader would have to stay with us losers."

"Speak for yourself," Nicky snapped. "Commander Shepard was an N7. Now more than ever they need the best soldiers in the program. Vega deserves to be with them."

Essex guffawed boisterously, slapping his legs. "Sure he does! It's a shame Shepard is dead, Vega, you two would've made a cute couple!"

Over his idiotic laughter, Essex didn't hear the collective gasp from the people in the group that knew James well enough to understand the impolitic nature of the comment. James crossed the room toward his biotic squadmate in two strides, his eyes flashing.

Nicky insinuated himself between James and Essex. "Don't do it, James. It's not worth it."

"Hit a nerve, meathead?" Essex glowered. He sneered and stalked toward the stairs, pleased with getting the final word. Nostrils flaring, James moved to follow him.

Kami grabbed his arm. "Forget Essex, he's an ass. Go get some air and talk to the captain. We all want to know what our new orders are."

James' mouth was tight with anger. "That guy needs to get cut down to size, and I want to be the one to do it. I'm sick of hearing him disrespect you and insulting the rest of us. I don't care what biotic academy his rich parents sent him to, he has no right to act like that."

"So write him up." Milque's suggestion was a good one, but James shook his head.
"The only thing he's done against regs is to ignore Kami's refusals. Since she won't let me file a report, I can't do anything about it."

Kami threw her hands up in the air. "Hey, don't look at me like that. He's harmless. I'm not about to ruin someone's career over some talk. But if he ever touches me, all bets are off."

Mason came in from the kitchen, eating a bowl of cereal. "I hope I'm there for that. No biotic could compare with Kami when she's pissed."

Leaving the others in the cramped space debating who would beat who in unarmed combat, James walked outside. The air was still faintly flavored with the burnoff, the caustic odor stinging his throat. If ever there was an inhospitable place, it was this shithole. Why anyone would come here on purpose was beyond him. Their motivations were a total mystery. He figured they had to be making major bank on this deal.

They had to be paying the Alliance out the nose to have a full detachment of marines sitting around, not to mention the cost of feeding them. Maybe the whole thing was an experiment the scientists had cooked up to test the limits of their sanity.

Captain Toni was in the administrative level of the tower, talking to the Colonial Administrator, Christine Blackburn. Her office faced a series of terraformed fields that were just beginning to sprout. In the distance, craggy mountains reflected the sunlight as if they were made of ice, refracting it into many colors and casting it up onto the fast-moving clouds.

He knocked and Blackburn waved him into the room with a friendly smile. Her blonde hair was pulled back into a no-nonsense ponytail and she wore an ordinary jumpsuit with her name printed across the breast pocket, her blue collar attire contrasting strongly with the modern furniture of the office. Her desk was a pristine white, bare of any datapads or even a single stylus, smacking more of disuse than cleanliness. The desk faced a cushioned bench covered in shiny fabric that made a zipping sound when the fabric of his fatigues rubbed against it when he sat down next to Toni.

"So what's the story?" he asked Toni. "We going home or what?"

"There are orders for everyone but Delta. There are two high-gee pods on the transport, too. It looks like we'll be here for a while longer."

The two men locked eyes, stony-faced. James' mouth tightened and he shook his head slightly. "I can't believe this. What are they thinking?"

Blackburn stood up from behind her desk. "I'm not sure why the research staff is so insistent on your presence. The Blood Pack attack seems like it was an anomaly, and I know you had your hearts set on leaving. But they call the shots, so my hands are tied."

James rubbed his face and leaned back in his chair. "Shoot. How am I going to tell them?"

"It's my duty to break the news and get the others packed up. If nothing else, at least we won't be living on top of each other anymore." Groaning with effort, Toni stood up, leaning heavily on his cane. James thought he was a tough son-of-a-bitch for being on his feet so soon after shattering his femur.

"If you're sure, sir. You know I've got your back, so anything you need me to do-"

"Can your nursemaiding, Lieutenant. I can handle my marines." He nodded once to the administrator. "Thanks for the chat, Blackburn. Looks like we'll all be getting to know one another a lot better." Toni limped stiffly from the room, closing the door behind him.
James stared out the window, grinding his teeth. The brilliance of the natural beauty outside held no appeal to him at this moment, seeming to mock his brooding resentment.

"It doesn't have to be a bad thing, you know," Blackburn said.

James' head jerked over to her, having momentarily forgotten he was sitting in her office. "Says you. You chose to be here. I've been training since childhood to fight the toughest enemies in the galaxy, and now I'll lose my edge waiting around for nothing to happen."

"You're wrong. It wasn't my choice to come here and now I have no choice but to stay. Plus, since my daughter April was born here, she'll never be able to visit Earth."

"You didn't choose this?"

She stood up and walked over to the window. "No. My husband was the head of the first research team. The pay was excellent, so it seemed like a good temporary assignment. We had just gotten married on Eden Prime, which is where we both grew up. I know now that the biochemical changes from our new environment messed up my birth control implant, but we didn't understand that when I first discovered I was pregnant. He blamed me."

She turned around and leaned back against the window, gazing at the floor. "He thought I was trying to trap him here. I don't know why he was so paranoid. Something about this place does that. I've noticed it in all of the science team. In any case, he took a new position with his parent company on another planet and chartered a private ship offworld without telling me."

"What an asshole."

She shrugged in the manner of someone who cared a lot more than they let on, chewing on the inside of her cheek. "It's rare enough that ships come here. I ordered another flight but I was in my third trimester before one responded. The doctors said that full gravity could crush the fetus. So I stayed."

Rising from his chair, James closed the few steps between them and gently touched her arm. "I'm sorry. I feel so bad for April."

She raised her face, surreptitiously brushing some moisture from the corner of one eye. "Don't be. I've done everything I can to make sure there are fun things to do here, especially considering that she's the only child on the colony. And the landscape is certainly breathtaking."

They turned to the window together, watching the sunlight shift across the colorful surface of Fehl Prime. The nebula above dominated the sky as always, but under the shadows of the clouds the sunlight looked briefly normal on the green fields.

"I'll tell you what," she said after a moment of shared reflection. "After the others leave on this transport, get your team together and we'll go on a little trip outside the colony walls."

"I thought nobody left?"

She laughed. "Of course we leave! We just keep a close eye on visitors until they've proved they aren't going to do anything stupid. Fehl Prime is dangerous. We've had a lot of unfortunate accidents. But you're all trained and careful. Most of you, anyway. We'll do a safety briefing, and then we'll have some fun."

"Sounds good. We've been cooped up for a long time."
"Haven't we all."

He glanced over at her soft comment. Again, he had the urge to comfort her. She seemed like she wanted to be strong enough to stand on her own, though, so he resisted the urge to put an arm around her shoulder. She'd probably take it the wrong way, anyway.

"Do you know what they want with the krogan?" he finally asked.

"My guess is that they're doing disease testing. They are exceptionally resistant to infection."

He leaned away from her. "Are you serious? That's messed up. He's a sentient being."

"I know. I've tried to talk to them, but I don't have any influence over the research team now that my husband is gone."

"Do you think they'd listen to me?"

"I doubt it, but you can try. They seem to like you ever since you saved our skins." Raising her arm, she tapped a sequence into the digital display of her omni-tool. "I've just given you a visitor's pass to get to the lower levels. You can always ask."

"Thanks. I'll do that. I'll see you around, Mrs. Blackburn."

"Christine," she said. "Call me Christine, Lieutenant."

From the doorway, he smiled over his shoulder. "Okay, Christine. And you call me James."

The skin around her eyes crinkled with her grin. "You'll hear from me soon about our day trip, James."

With some effort, he kept himself from winking at her before he shut the door.

At the lift, James considered for a moment before finally selecting the research level of the tower. He was in no rush to get back to the makeshift barracks. He'd just be in the way of all of the cheerful people who were getting out of here, anyway. The tram-like vehicle separated from the main tower and began traveling down the long shaft leaning down into the planet's volatile core.

The tram was furnished with cushioned benches along the walls and wide windows stretching between the sliding doors. Outside the windows, the inky darkness was occasionally broken by brief but colorful splashes of light coming from the offices they passed and filtered light coming up from the deep chasm yawning beneath the tower. Craning his neck, James caught a glimpse of the crack in the surface that the tower was perched across before the tram turned horizontally and raced into the research level of the facility.

He gawked out of the windows at the laboratories as they sped by, never having been this deep under the surface before. His curiosity about their experiments was on overdrive by time the tram stopped, a blinking red light indicating that he had reached his destination. As he ducked under the door and stepped onto the platform, he bumped into an asari who was just embarking.

"Uh, excuse me," he said politely, turning to look at her as she passed. She was taller and more thin than most asari, her head tentacles sweeping back to her neck and almost curling around to the front. Her speckled blue skin bore faint white stripes, emphasizing her strong cheekbones and drawing his eyes down to the finely chiseled bone structure of her neck and shoulders which showed above the low neckline of her white uniform.
She didn't spare him a glance, looking so pointedly away from him that he was sure it was meant as a slight. Cocking an eyebrow, he walked on with a chuckle. Some women were a puzzle; but then, the sexless asari didn't really apply, as feminine as they looked. Easier to stick to his own species.

This area of the facility looked like a space station with its high ceilings and clean white walls. He walked through the brightly-lit hallway, counting the doors until he reached the one indicated on his omni-tool. It took several minutes for it to open once he had scanned in his code.

A young man in a lab coat appeared, looking up at him suspiciously. "Yes?"

"I'm Lieutenant Vega. The Colonial Administrator gave me a pass to come down. Any chance I can check on Brood?"

"Brood?"

"The krogan."

The lab technician gave him a small smile. "The krogan isn't cleared for visitors. You can check with the senior staff if you like, but I doubt they'll clear any of you people."

Stifling the urge to wipe the condescending look off the technician's face with his fist, James plastered his friendliest smile on his face. "Look, can you ask your boss? Just this once? I'll be out of your hair quickly, I just want to have a look for myself."

"Well-" The smaller man considered for a moment, then shrugged. "Far be it from me to let you learn your place."

He raised his omni-tool to his mouth. "Hey Alice, can you run a check with senior staff to see if a Lieutenant Vega is allowed in to see the krogan?"

"Brood. His name is Brood," James corrected.

The technician's eyes flickered to him momentarily, then dismissed him with a flick of his eyebrows.

A tinny voice came over the omni-tool. "Are you serious?"

"Yes. Well.. the lieutenant is, apparently."

They shared a chuckle. James' lip lifted in an irritated sneer which he managed to school off his face before the technician saw it. No reason to piss off the gatekeeper.

The woman's voice came back over the comm. "I hate to tell you this Shawn, but senior staff just cleared him for full visitation. He just has to sign the confidentiality agreement."

"Is this a joke? They're giving him access?"

"I wouldn't joke about this. The lieutenant is cleared."

James couldn't help the satisfied grin on his face. He shrugged at the shocked technician ingenuously. "Sorry to disappoint you, Shawn. Guess you have to let me in."

Glowering darkly, Shawn led him to a terminal where James was forced to sign a confidentiality contract that was longer than the documents he'd signed when he enlisted. Worried that he'd just signed off more than a gag order, he then followed the technician into a long hallway.
Shawn unlocked a thick door and curtly instructed him to wait inside. The room was bare aside from several blinking terminals and a dark viewing window. Another thick door loomed from the opposite wall. "The lab will unlock the door when it's okay to go in. And don't touch anything."

"I'll try to remember."

James stood there for a long time rocking from foot to foot, increasingly worried that he should have reported this visit to the captain. He was tempted to play at the terminals just to screw with Shawn, but he was inept enough at programming to break anything he touched. It was more important for him to lay his eyes on Brood, make sure they weren't mistreating him. Not that he could tell anyone about if they were.

Finally, the light over the door shone green and it popped open, providing a faint whiff of chemical smell that reminded James of paint thinner. The viewing windows came to life, revealing a deep room packed with crates and equipment. In the center of it all, a single brightly lit containment cell beckoned.

He meandered his way through the stacks of equipment to the cell, trying to shake the feeling that he was being watched. It wasn't hard to believe that was the case. One of the crates tipped as he passed, falling to the ground with a clatter, though he hadn't touched it. Many of the other stacks looked like they had been hastily pushed to the side.

When he came closer, the shifting light of the barrier coalesced enough for him to see the dark shape inside. Brood stood in the center of the cell, arms crossed over his sizeable chest. His armor had been stripped away, revealing the earthy tones of his exoskeleton. A ring of metal with several multicolored blinking lights circled his neck, barely visible behind his chestplate, and a smaller one wound around his wrist.

"Well, well. If it isn't Lieutenant Vega," the krogan grumbled, his voice slightly distorted by the kinetic barrier.

"Hey, Brood. I didn't think they'd actually let me in. How are they treating you?"

"How do you think?" the enormous creature spat. "I'm watched like an animal, penned up and collared, injected with-" He stopped speaking, his throat working as if he was trying to speak, but couldn't. His three-fingered hands clenched into fists.

James winced, watching the way Brood tugged at the blinking collar. "Yeah, I was afraid of that. Are they hurting you?"

"If only they would simply give me pain to bear. No, they just administer tests." The word ejected from his mouth like an expletive.

"Look, I'm going to do what I can to get you released. I don't have much say here, but for some reason they let me in so maybe somebody in the upper levels gives a damn."

"I wouldn't count on it, human. But if you were able to secure my release, I would owe you a debt."

"There's no need for that. I just think this is beyond fucked up. Can't stand to see things like this happen. That's why I enlisted in the first place."

The krogan's immense head lifted infinitesimally, his narrowed eyes regarding Vega for a long minute. "I see."

"Any idea why they're doing this?"
"No."

"Why did the Blood Pack decide to attack in the first place? Were they after something in particular?"

The krogan's small, black eyes glanced around the room before settling back onto James' form standing in the dim light a few meters from the cell. "Only my battlemaster could have answered that question fully, and you killed him."

"Yeah, sorry about that."

Brood's laughter exploded from his chest, startling James. "An honorable death was all the old bastard wanted. I should be thanking you for releasing him before he suffered the indignity of senility and old age."

"Was he your father?"

The krogan sighed as if irritated, his eyes again checking the dark corners of the room. "This conversation is pointless. I have nothing further to say to you."

James shrugged, recognizing the evasion. "If you say so. I'll try to come back later. You know, if they let me."

With a small chuckle, the krogan nodded. "You do that." He turned his back on James, walking to the bench on the far side of the room and sitting down.

James watched him for a moment longer, considering the subtext of the conversation. He turned and made his way back through the stacks.

On the way back to the door, his knee bumped one of the uneven stacks, knocking the top two crates over. He replaced the crates on top of the stacks, noticing as he did so that some of the grey paint came off on his fingertips. He brushed his fingers across the surface, noticing that the paint was covering a lightly raised symbol. A long hexagon, clasped on the bottom half by an echo of the design. Squinting at the other crates, he noticed that the symbol appeared on each one.

Why had they painted over this symbol? To keep it from his notice, even after he had signed their draconian contract? Weird.

Redirecting his eyes with a shrug as if he hadn't noticed anything of importance, he made his way back through the thick doors and into the hallway. He kept the paint on his hand hidden until he had reached the barracks again, where a few lucky marines were just finishing up their packing. The rest of Delta Squad had made themselves scarce, like he had.

Ignoring the bustle of activity, James sat on the steps next to the rear exit of the prefab, looking at the sticky grey substance on his fingers. What had he gotten himself mixed up in? And what did they want from him and Brood?

He almost didn't want to find out.

Two days later, he and his team got into the new mako that the transport had dropped off and drove out to the coordinates Christine provided. They ended up near a steep ridge overlooking a wide, flat valley littered with low hills and the occasional spire jutting through the multihued grass. A network of paths had been carved into the meadows, disappearing behind the geographic features, reappearing at unexpected junctures, intersecting, then veering away again. The paths stopped just short of an indistinct tumble of buildings occupying one end of the expanse. The five of them
quietly communed with the view, in perfect harmony for once, all of them trying not to think about the fact that the rest of the marines under Toni's command were right now boarding the transport to go back into Alliance space.

A short-distance shuttle appeared over the range, landing a few yards away. Christine hopped out with a few other humans from the colony, a little girl with long blonde hair clinging to her hand.

"Good morning, Alliance Marines!" the little girl chimed cheerfully, bouncing on her toes. She offered an inexpert salute, giggling.

She couldn't be more than six years old, James thought. He and the other members of Delta glanced at each other in amusement. He returned her salute. "How's it going, April? I'm James."

He introduced the rest of the team and even Essex returned her relentless grin. She was hard to resist.

"So what are we doing today?" Kami asked Christine.

Christine smiled. "We can do whatever you want! We call this the Daytona Range. The scientists almost never come out here, so we've taken ownership of spots like these. It's the only place besides the colony for hundreds of kilometers that doesn't have an open chasm nearby. We've set up a number of obstacle courses and tracks for different vehicles. You just have to come in close at the far edge; that's where the prothean ruins are. Treeya hates it when we intrude on her territory."

"Is that the asari I saw the other day?" James asked.

"She's the only asari here, so if you saw an asari, it was her."

"She didn't seem happy to see me."

"Don't worry, James. She'll come around. It's just that she's a pacifist, so the presence of soldiers offends her deeply. She thinks that your presence will attract more of your kind."

Essex sniffed. "Hardly seems fair. Not like we can help being here."

Christine nodded sympathetically. "I know that. That's why I know she'll come around. Especially since from now on, part of your duties will be to escort her to the ruins."

James groaned. "Guard duty. Now escort missions. How the hell did I end up here?"

Kami scowled and punched his arm. "Hey, asshole. You're not the only one stuck here."

April, who had been staring up at James this whole time with sparkling eyes, turned on Kami. "Hey! Don't call him an asshole!" she shouted in her high-pitched voice, punctuating the statement with a sharp kick at Kami's shins.

"Ow! Goddammit!" Kami said, hopping backward away from the angry little girl.

"Watch your language, marines," James ordered, trying to keep the smile off his face. "We have ladies present."

Christine was looking sternly at her daughter, her mouth tight with suppressed laughter. "Alright now, April, you know you shouldn't express your anger like that. Use your words. And not those words."

"Yes, ma'am." April's face twisted into a pout. She glared at Kami for a moment longer, then
flipped her hair back over her shoulder and walked toward James, claiming his hand. "Lieutenant
James, can I be your partner?"

"I think that's up to your mom. I haven't been around kids much."

"Don't you have any brothers or sisters?" she asked.

"Nope. I'm an only child."

"Just like me." She sighed up at him.

The other marines snickered. James' face reddened and he looked up at April's mother. "Um…"

Her mother waved her away. "I think you'd better stay with me today, April. Let Lieutenant James
get his land legs. You know how it is for heavy worlders when they first get here. You'll have to
help us show them the ropes."

Releasing James' hand, April sauntered over to the equipment that was being offloaded from the
shuttle. She selected a helmet adorned with flower stickers from a crate and strapped it on,
following it with elbow and knee guards. "Mom says we have to wear these, even though you
never fall hard enough to really hurt yourself."

Milque stepped forward and took a helmet from the pile. "Your mom's a smart lady. What should
we do first, April? What's your favorite?"

"I can't reach the bike pedals yet, so I usually ride this." She pulled a skateboard from the pile. Its
wheels were wider than the ones James remembered from back home, which made sense on this
world.

"I know what I'm picking," James said, reaching for one of the bikes. "Lead the way, April."

By time the sun set and the exhausted marines made it back to their blessedly quiet barracks, James
had a new-found appreciation for living in low gravity. He'd been able to pull off tricks he had
never been able to execute on Earth as a kid, earning excited squeals from his miniature partner in
crime – who had stayed glued to his side despite her mother's orders. It felt a bit like cheating, but
he dismissed the feeling, glad to finally be burning off some of his pent-up energy.

After a quick shower and change of clothes, he walked over to the new high-gee pods that now
stood nearby. He stepped inside, closed and locked the door, and flipped on the gravity.

It felt like his chest was being crushed. He checked the gravity indicator and it was set to just one
ggee. Groaning, he trundled over to the bench and sat down.

"This isn't going to work," he muttered. A few distractions weren't going to make up for the loss of
freedom that would eventually accompany a long-term stay on a world like this. He stared at his
hands for a long time, willing himself to get used to the full weight of his body again. After a while
he stretched his arm out and flexed, noting how much muscle mass he'd lost.

Across the small room, he noticed four large crates stacked against the far wall. Rising with a
groan, he made his way over to them and lifted the lid. Inside, a full set of weights beckoned.

"Thank you, Hackett," he said, raising his eyes to the roof. If he guessed right, there would be
another set in the other pod.

Maybe they could make this work. If he moved his cot in here and had the others work out for at
least an hour every day, they might be able to leave this place one day. He just hoped that someone in the Alliance was fighting for them, trying to bring them back.

Lazarus Research Station

A dozen wide-eyed scientists, breathless with anticipation, awaited Liara as she stepped off her ship, pushing a large, shielded crate in front of her. The asari watched them apprehensively as a tall, black-haired woman in a skintight shipsuit approached her.

"Dr. T'soni, it's good to see you again," the woman said, but the friendly greeting didn't reach her eyes.

"Ms. Lawson," Liara responded with a nod. "I hope this project goes as planned. I still have misgivings."

"Is this really it?" The Chief Medical officer of the Station, Wilson, stared at the package with excited eyes, the hard light from the docking tube reflecting off his bald head.

Liara nodded. "Yes. I found it traveling toward deep space. If it hadn't been radiating eezo like a leaky bomb, I wouldn't have ever found it. You should put it in a shielded room before attempting to open it."

He assented to this precaution, gesturing to the team arranged on the other side of the airlock. The team of scientists swarmed over the package, chattering excitedly over one another as they scanned it.

"Ideal conditions for-"

"The state of preservation-"

Liara huffed out a breath, her forehead creased with worry. "Do you think that they can actually do it, Ms. Lawson?"

The station director spoke with a thick accent that Liara still couldn't place, but then, she hadn't met all variations of humans. "I don't know. Wilson says that we have a good chance if the conditions are right, but that remains to be seen."

"We'll just take it to the lab, Miranda," Wilson said. Lawson lifted her chin curtly in agreement.

Liara shifted uncomfortably as the package floated away on a null-grav sled. "It doesn't seem right. Unnatural. Are you sure this is best?"

Miranda turned her serene gaze on the asari. "That's for us to determine. Humanity needs this."

"I didn't do this for humanity. I did it for my friend."

"As you wish." Miranda shrugged. "For the time being, our interests are aligned. Cerberus has made several… unusual alliances to bring this about. We thank you for your assistance. We'll be in touch if we need anything else."

"Wait!" Liara called out as Miranda turned away. "That's it? How will I know how it turns out?"

"Cerberus is about the preservation of humanity, Dr. T'soni. Commander Shepard is representative of the very best we have to offer, and as you and I both know, there is still a powerful enemy headed our way. We need her back on her feet. If – when-- we are successful, you will most
certainly find out. From what I've learned about Shepard, she doesn't keep her head down for long."

With a grim smile, she walked away, her ample hips swaying confidently.

A shuddering sigh escaped Liara and her head dropped to her chest. "What have I done?" she wondered aloud. She turned on her heel and walked back to the ship, her heels clicking over the shining symbol for Cerberus emblazoned across the airlock floor: an elongated hexagon, clasped at the bottom with a shadow of the symbol above.
Waking Up

Chapter Summary

Shepard gets a second chance at life. James and his squad fight off the Collectors on Fehl.

Chapter Notes

Music: Right in Two, Tool

Lazarus Station
10.27.2184
Miranda

Shepard's body lay prone on a cot in the middle of a bright, sterile room. Several wires ran from her arms, neck, and head, disappearing under the spotless white sheets. The exposed skin of her face was lined with bright red lines of the implants that had helped revive her and make her one of the most powerful humans that ever lived.

Miranda stood in front of the window looking into deep space, her unnaturally perfect features coldly observing Dr. Wilson, who waved his omni-tool over Shepard's body to take some final readings.

"Her implants are stable. Her heartbeat is strong. She looks healthy. Better than new," he said. "It's fortunate that we found her in such ideal conditions, right down to being drenched in eezo. It was more than we could have wished for."

"Are you sure she's ready?" Miranda asked.

Wilson wiped the sheen of sweat from his forehead with a thin rag he kept on his shoulder. Miranda found the habit disgusting, but the doctor had delivered on his promise to resuscitate the Commander's frozen body and bring her back to life. Allowances could be made for less than perfect human specimens, those who hadn't been modified to absolute perfection like she had.

"Yes," he said. "She's as ready as she's going to get."

He looked so nervous that she chose to give him a few rare words of praise. In this moment, more than any other, he should be able to take some measure of satisfaction in his work. "You did well. You've accomplished the dream of doctors as far back as human memory stretches. Longer, probably. You brought someone back from the dead."

Miranda, too, had done her homework. While Wilson and his team painstakingly woke up each cell in the Commander's body, she had spent much of her time investigating Shepard's life. Her life before the age of about twelve was still a mystery, which was unusual in this day and age of multiple records of everyone's lives, but she was confident that she could predict how the
Commander would act. She had imagined this day for more than a year and a half.

When the Commander gained consciousness, Miranda intended to explain that the Reapers were about to invade again and that they needed her special skills - not just as a soldier and a tactician, but as a symbol to rally humanity. She had her speech all planned out. Their race would save the rest of the galaxy and become the lauded heroes of the next generation, putting humanity in an enviable position to take power. The Illusive Man's vision was indeed far-reaching. The Commander, being such a powerful and dedicated soldier, would immediately see the need to work with them. There was some evidence that she had difficulty listening to authorities, but once she saw the advantages Cerberus was offering that the Alliance could never hope to match, Miranda was confident that she'd fall in step.

Wilson tapped in a sequence on the medical cot, then stepped back. The humming of the bed's machinery quieted and the wires retracted. The Commander's breathing continued normally for a long minute. Miranda turned to Wilson to ask him to give her a stimulant.

When she looked at him, his eyes were wide, his forehead glistening with sweat again. "She's waking up," he said.

The Commander's breathing was coming faster and more irregularly now. Her eyes opened, the green irises bizarrely backlit by the glowing red of the implants. She stared up at the ceiling, blinking rapidly, then tightly squeezing her eyes shut against the bright light.

"Commander Shepard," Miranda said. "I'm Miranda, and this is Dr. Wilson. We've brought you back to life to help fight the Reapers. Humanity needs your help."

Groaning, the Commander pushed herself upright. The sheet fell away, the short sleeves of her hospital gown revealing a spiderweb of red lines glowing under the skin of her arms and hands. She didn't appear to notice them as she rubbed her eyes and continued to blink blearily. She slid off the bed, her bare feet slapping on the cold tile floor. Her legs wobbled and Miranda offered her hand, but she shied away from the sudden movement.

Her voice, when she finally spoke, was gravelly and hoarse from disuse. "Where am I?"

Wilson answered. "You're on Lazarus Station."

"We brought you back, Commander," Miranda said, a note of confusion entering her voice.

Again, the Commander didn't appear to hear Miranda talking. She stared at her hands, seeming to notice the odd markings for the first time. She noticed the mirror on the nearby wall, and stumbled over to it, squinting. Her hand met her reflection, then touched her face. "What's- what's wrong with me?"

Miranda moved to stand behind her. "There's absolutely nothing wrong with you. You're better than ever."

Shepard's hands roamed over her body. "I'm so skinny. And I'm starving."

"You've burned off most of your body fat in hibernation. You have a much higher caloric intake level now. You have brand new L7x implants, the best in the galaxy. There are few humans with better biotics," Wilson explained. He watched her touch her face near her freakishly colored eyes for a moment before asking curiously, "What's the last thing you remember?"

She looked at him over her shoulder. "I don't… I'm not sure. There was… an eclipse… an explosion…"
Miranda nodded. "Yes. That's when the Normandy was destroyed. You were blown free of the explosion."

Nodding, the Commander turned back to her reflection. She shook her head as if startled, and her hands shook as she pulled up the sleeves of her gown. "It's gone, it's all gone," she whimpered.

"Your crew survived, for the most part," Miranda said, assuming she was talking about the Normandy.

Again, she didn't appear to be listening. Her hand movement became frantic as she pulled down the neck of her gown, checking her arms and twisting around to look at her back. "My ink, it's all gone!"

"Yes, we had to regrow your skin. You had cold burns all over your body from space exposure," Miranda explained. Her perfect forehead wrinkled slightly. This wasn't going the way she had planned.

Shepard hunched over, clutching her arms until droplets of blood formed where her fingertips dug in. Her breath came faster and faster, practically hyperventilating, her eyes wheeling around the room as if answers could be found somewhere in the spotless white corners. "No, no, no," she said. "It can't be. What have you done to me?" she cried out, finally focusing on Wilson. "You brought me back! Why?"

"We had to," Miranda pleaded, wondering where she had went wrong. "To save humanity."

"What makes me so special?!" Shepard screamed. "Why me?"

Miranda hesitantly reached out to touch her, to offer a word of comfort, but Shepard recoiled. Miranda barely had time to call out a word of warning, feeling the biotic charge in the air, but Shepard was beyond reason. The shockwave blew the three of them apart, slamming them into opposite walls like rag dolls. Shepard slid to the floor onto her hands and knees, retching loudly.

"Don't try to use your biotics, you aren't trained!" Miranda called out, but the biotic energy in the room was still rising. Shepard rolled on the floor, clutching her stomach and wailing hoarsely.

Miranda rolled to her feet. "Come on, Wilson. She's in shock." They ran out of the room, sealing the door behind them as the second shockwave raced toward them from the flailing woman. Wilson keyed the code to flood the room with sedative gas and they both leaned heavily against the wall, breathing like they'd run a marathon.

"Your nose is bleeding," Wilson finally said, breathless.

Her hand flashed to her face, wiping the blood away and staring at it like it had come from another person. She felt off-kilter, astonished at the thought that she'd made a mistake, and bewildered as she tried to figure out how she could have so grossly miscalculated the outcome. After so much study, did she really know Shepard at all? It was discomfiting in the extreme.

Wilson was practically in tears. "What have I done?" he whispered, his eyes cast upward as if seeking guidance.

She straightened up and sniffed the moisture back into her nose. "Pull yourself together. We've accomplished the impossible. You'll see, Wilson. She'll come around."

"I hope so," he said. But his face was filled with doubt.
The day was unusually clear and devoid of light pollution as the mako bumped over the landscape toward the prothean ruins. James sat on top of the vehicle with one arm looped over the barrel of the mass accelerator cannon. It was so good to feel warm, clean-smelling air rushing over his face that he couldn't stand to be inside the cabin breathing in Treeya's unrepentant hostility - which was ironic in a pacifist, if anybody asked him. No one did.

His headset crackled to life and Mapu's voice came from inside the cabin. "Man, what a day! Finally doesn't smell like Korlus' ass crack."

James' eyebrows shot up. All he knew about Korlus was that the surface was littered with every kind of rubbish collected over millennia, from starship hulls to the kind still walking around on two or more legs. That, and that it had the second highest murder rate in the Terminus Systems.

"You've been to Korlus? What's it like?"

"What do you think? It stinks, dumbass."

An evasive answer from Mapu meant classified information, otherwise he'd be running his mouth off about it. James knew that was all the answer he was likely to get, so he changed the subject. "It was more fun when Cortez was still here, the lucky bastard. He got to go home to Ferris Fields. Wish they'd rotate me out so I could visit my fam."

"Yeah, that's some weird shit. Sorry about that, man. The military's fucked up, dumping you on this rock and leaving you here."

The mako stopped just short of the retaining mound that circumscribed the concave shape of the prothean site and James hopped to the ground.

"It's not so bad here," he said, trying to ignore the feeling that he was lying to himself.

Mapu opened the door and hopped out in one fluid movement and held out a hand to Treeya. He paused to watch the asari archaeologist walk by them as if they were invisible with a hovercart full of equipment whirring behind her. She headed for the center of the crater-like area, where a large prothean console had been excavated.

"Nice enough at the moment." He swallowed, then turned back to James. "Why don't you call that girlfriend of yours and have her join us? She seems to get along with Treeya well enough. Maybe we could make a foursome. Have a picnic or something when she decides to take a break."

"Nah, Christine's working now. I don't want to bother her."

"Oh, come on. How often is it like this here?"

James thought for a moment, then shrugged. He typed a message into his comm. "If she comes, she comes."

"She could bring April, too. Cute kid."

"I doubt it."

When he didn't elaborate, Mapu just shook his head. James hoped he would drop it. He did.
"It's so weird looking you in the eye now," Mapu said.

"Part of the upside of living in a half-gee environment. But I hope I don't get much taller or I'll start hitting my head on bulkheads when I get out of here. A year and a half is long enough."

They walked to the front of the mako and pulled themselves up to sit on the beak of the long vehicle, seating themselves on either side of the cannon muzzle. "Do you think you will? Get out of here, I mean."

"I sure hope so."

"How does Christine feel about that? You two seem pretty serious."

"Yeah. She doesn't like it."

Again, Mapu waited for him to fill in the blanks, but James just watched Treeya mess with the ancient console.

His friend tried again to draw him out. "She seems a lot different than any other woman I've seen you with. She's not a fighter."

"That's kinda the point. Probably why it's lasted six months. That's a record for me."

"What made you go for her?"

James finally turned to face him, draping his arms over the cannon and gesticulating as he spoke. "It's what you said to me last time we were on Earth together. Remember? That women liked me available and I like unavailable women. I decided to try something new. She's just a nice person. April and I get along great too."

Mapu fired the next question point-blank. "Then why won't she let the three of you be in the same room at the same time? I've seen you playing with the kid. She looks up to you."

It was the question James didn't want to answer, even to himself. But it had been the cause of enough arguments between him and Christine that there wasn't much point in hiding it from his best friend.

"We've got a good thing going, but she doesn't want April to get attached. I can't stay here forever, I've tried to consider it but I just can't." James rubbed the top of his head, as if the answer would fall out of the short strip of hair. "I can't blame her. She's a good mom. But at the same time, it fuckin kills me. It's like no matter what, I can't just have one woman and just be with her."

"They won't come with you?"

"They can't. Exit velocity would crush April. She was born here."

"Oh come on, that's bullshit. There are pods they could put her in."

"They're expensive, and she'd still have to live in a half-gee environment for the rest of her life."

"So live on a space station. There are lots of them. You could even-"

"Stop." James' desperate exclamation cut through his rant. "Just stop. You think I haven't been over these ideas a million times? Pods are expensive, and Christine wants April to live on a planet where she can run and play like a normal kid. This is it for them."
The wind moaned hollowly through the rocks on either side of the plateau as the two men communicated silently for a few tense minutes. Finally Mapu looked down at his hands. "I'm sorry. I just - you're like, the nicest guy I know. You'd be a great dad."

"Thanks."

There didn't seem to be more to say. James checked his comm a few times, but Christine never answered. The midday sunlight from Fehl was shining down hard on their heads when Treeya called out. She had been lying on her back underneath the flat edge of the console, a mess of tools scattered around her like a glittering corona.

"Can one of you please lift this up for me?"

Before James could answer, Mapu slid down the mako and was partway across the bowl. "I got this, buddy."

James smiled crookedly while his friend nonchalantly picked up the side of the console she had unbolted from the ground, which would probably weigh as much as a car back home. Poor guy had no idea how unimpressed Treeya would be with that sort of demonstration. Mapu bent down to talk to the asari archaeologist, then stood up and waved James over.

"Do we have an alternate power source in the mako? She's trying to jury-rig a sensor kit and it's underpowered with the pack her home office sent out."

"Typical bureaucrats. How much power do you need, Dr. T'Lassi?"

She scrambled out from under the console and stood up to stretch while Mapu watched longingly. Reddish brown dirt was streaked across her face and down her coverall.

"Let's see. I need to penetrate the metallic layer that's about ten meters under the surface. I can't imagine how they connected with the underground ruins through all of that. They must have had a totally different way of communicating."

James nodded through her explanation, then raised his eyebrows expectantly. "Uh-huh. How much power?"

"If only I had a ship in orbit, I could take a broad spectrum mineral scan and find out where the weak point is that they-"

"We're losing sunlight, Treeya. I can't give you an answer until you give me one. A straight one."

She gave him her best withering glance, but James was unmoved. "I don't know exactly how much power I need," she snapped.

"Maybe if you tell me what the protheans were doing here, I can help you activate the console."

She snorted. "I doubt it."

He shrugged. "Okay. I'll be watching the sunset from the mako until you're ready to go back."

Turning around, he stopped when her slim blue hand grabbed his bicep. Turning around, he suppressed the satisfied smile that threatened. He folded his arms across his chest. "Let's have it."

Her mouth worked, then she sighed before flapping her hand around the site. "There's usually nothing to see up here. Most of the ruins are underground, taking readings from the oceans, measuring the tides and chemical balances, that kind of thing. But a few days ago this station began..."
to send messages."

"What were the messages?"

"We don't know how they communicated. It looks like static. I'm trying to clear up the connection to the underground lab. Maybe it will actually come through then."

James poohed his lower lip out as he considered this. "But the underground labs haven't been seeing any new activity?"

"Not that I can tell. That's why I'm here."

"But you think that the message is coming from down there?"

"That's what I'm trying to explain to you, yes." She rolled her eyes testily, clearly not thinking much of his intelligence.

He glanced around the site. The answer was so obvious to him that it almost pained him to tell her. Almost. "The power pack isn't going to help. This station isn't here to study the oceans."

"What do you mean?"

"This planet is unique in the galaxy because it has a front-row seat to stellar formation, plus has an oxygen-based atmosphere in a stable orbit in the middle of dozens of gravity wells. The real show on the surface is up there." He pointed to the rapidly darkening sky, where the bright yellow-red cloud of the nearest edge of the nebula shone brighter than the mass of Fehl Prime's moons silhouetted darkly against it. The orbs raced in opposing directions across the cosmic cloud as if they had just been struck with a gigantic pool stick by a jovial god. "That's why the protheans put this console here."

She laughed, a deceptively light sound with a bitter, mocking edge. "That's ridiculous. No one puts observatories inside an atmosphere, there's too much interference. And this is a standard comm console. Why would they have it here by itself? There isn't even any observation equipment."

"There's probably a space station in the nebula somewhere we can't detect, in some sweet spot between the gravity wells that's inaccessible except by remote. That's probably where the message is coming from, and this is just the receiving end. I mean, just look at the shape of the area." James gestured to the crater around them. "I bet if you study that 'metallic layer' more closely, you'll see that it's part of a focusing dish. Not the usual device for a modern civilization, but they would be dealing with a lot of interference, like you said. You don't have to believe me, but I'd bet you real credits I'm right."

She looked around the bowl with dawning realization. James tried not to laugh at the way she pouted when the truth began to set in.

He unfolded his arms and shrugged innocently, palms upward. "You may know the protheans, but I know astronomy. It was one of my best subjects."

Mapu grinned at her and quoted, "The heavens are calling you, and wheel around you, displaying to you their eternal beauties, and still your eye is looking on the ground." He swept a hand across the sky and landscape, then toward James. "Whence He, who all discerns, chastises you."

Dropping the act, he gave her a cocky smile. "The Divine Comedy. Dante. Have you read it?"

Treeya was looking from one to the other of them incredulously. "I thought you were just soldiers,"
she finally said.

"We are soldiers. But maybe we're not the dumb grunts you think we are," James said with a snort.

Mapu took pity on her. "Hey, he could be wrong. I'll go see if there's a stronger power pack in the mako."

"No, no," she relented. "It's fine. He's right. There's probably no point to playing with this thing any longer. An entire day's work lost." She shook her head sadly.

"Not really," Mapu offered. "You know what this console is for now. Might have saved you a lot of trouble in the long run."

She tilted her head at the big man. "You know, you're right."

James managed not to laugh at the flush that rose under his friend's dark skin at her frank regard.

"And you, James. Thank you."

He almost jumped at the sound of her calling him by his first name, a first in his experience. He grinned hugely. "Hey, I'm always available to help you answer the really tough questions, Treeya. Just ask." James gestured to Mapu and headed back toward the mako. "Help her with her equipment, Runt. Let's get back before they eat dinner without us."

"You got it," the other man replied, turning his brightest smile on the blue-skinned alien. James busied himself at the cargo compartment with his back to the crater until they came to load up, hoping that his friend made the most of this rare opportunity. He'd mooned over the asari since his arrival three months before.

They didn't quite make it back before dark. James had taken his preferred perch outside the cab of the mako to enjoy the night air. He'd become accustomed to wide-open spaces during his time on Fehl; it reminded him of all the times his uncle had taken him camping in Pendleton to get him out of the cramped apartment.

It was ironic, in a sense, that he had enlisted to see the galaxy but instead spent most of his time training on Earth, wedged into a starship, or stuck on this low-gee planet watching his bones getting more fragile by the day. Seeing Mapu's face when he realized that they were the same height was an entertaining memory, but it hadn't been worth the price he was paying. Until recently, he thought that Christine was the other side of that equation, the worthwhile part of this venture, but increasingly he wasn't so sure he was more than a diversion for her. He dismissed the thought, not liking to think about her like that.

The tower at the center of the colony rose above the cliff face as they approached, the top just visible against the brilliant nebula in the sky. The mako bumped slightly over the retracted gate as it began trundling down the long landing field toward the colony. James twisted around to watch the barrier reactivate, a force of habit after years of spec ops training. He watched, but nothing happened. The gate didn't even close. He rose his wrist to his mouth. "Mapu, why didn't the barrier come back on?"

"I don't know. It didn't respond when I keyed the command."

He hopped down, knowing that leaving Mapu to help Treeya alone was only doing him a favor. He waved at Mason and Kamille, who were watching the sunset together on the front step of the prefab. He passed the makeshift barracks on his way to the tower, which now consisted of six high-gee pods lined up behind the prefab where they ate and showered. James bunked with Nicky
in the one on the far right. They had tried a few combinations but the little engineer was the only one that didn't object to James' weight set constantly being underfoot. He didn't need to check to see if anyone was in the pods. All of the doors were open, so the gravity fields weren't on. Everyone was out enjoying the weather.

His first instinct was to look up Christine, but he had a hunch that she didn't really want to see him right then. She might even be out with April right now. The smile disappeared from his face as he imagined how it might feel to be welcomed into that picture, touching a deep longing that he hadn't realized existed before they met. But it wasn't going to happen. He stopped and stared at his boots, not sure what to do with himself. The sunset didn't seem so appealing now.

The voice of the weathered captain came from behind him. "You look like someone kicked your puppy, Vega."

"I'm fine."

"This is about Ms. Blackburn, isn't it?"

James bobbed his head, his mouth tight. "It's that obvious?"

The captain chuckled, an unusual sound from the sober old marine. "If there's one thing I've learned about you over the last two years, it's that only a woman can get you down."

James couldn't help but crack a smile. "I guess that's true."

"So what's the problem?"

"She won't let me really be in her life. She doesn't see a future for us unless I stay here permanently, but in our line of work we have to leave."

Toni clapped his shoulder. "That's not such a big deal. I've been home twice to see my family."

"It's not the same. April would have a really hard time leaving Fehl. So would Christine at this point. Earth isn't an option for them."

"So let them stay here. Just make this your home base instead of Earth. You don't get to see your family as often as you like, sure, but that's the case for most soldiers. It would be the same if they're on Earth."

"I thought that if I stayed here too long I wouldn't be able to leave either."

"You've adapted pretty well. Your system of working out, sleeping in full gee pods and taking supplements has been a major factor in the Alliance bending to the research staff's request that Delta Squad stays here. You may get reassigned from time to time, but they have to bring you back to your home base eventually. The Alliance can't decide where you call home or who you love. You live the life that you want to live, and let the Alliance sort itself out."

James saw his future in the captain's eyes. A future of fighting, of seeing the galaxy, of everything he'd dreamed of, and back here on Fehl, a woman and a child waiting for him. He glanced up. Her apartment window was dark, but there was a light in Christine's office in the tower.

"I'll, um, be back later," he said.

"We won't wait up for you, Lieutenant."
The corridors and rooms of the tower were eerily vacant as he passed through. When he arrived at her office, Christine stood in front of the terminal on her desk with her hand up to the scanner. Her head jerked up when he entered.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be out at the dig site."

"We finished early," he said. "Can we talk?"

"This really isn't a good time, Jimmy. I've been down in the labs all day." She hesitated. "Look, I have to get back down there. I've got some major work going on with the research staff."

"Is that why you didn't answer me earlier?"

Her face softened and she crossed the room, taking his hands in hers. "I'm sorry I didn't answer. I wanted to go."

"You missed a beautiful day, stuck down in that pit. What did they want with you? You normally don't go down there unless you absolutely have to."

"Today was different. Very different."

She looked so sad that he pulled her close, enveloping her in his strong arms. Steeling his nerves, he dropped his bomb. "Chris, I've decided that if you really want to stay, I'll stay with you. I love you. I want to be a family with you and April."

"You want to stay here? With us?" She sounded incredulous.

He tipped her face up to his with one finger and gently kissed her. "Yes. I may have to go where the Alliance tells me to from time to time, but I'm making Fehl my home. You were right about everything you said before. But now we can tell April about us. We can be a family."

"You want to stay here? With us?" She sounded incredulous.

Her face twisted as if she were torn with indecision. "I can't let you do that, Jimmy. I love you, too. But I can't get April's hopes up. Not after today."

Wasn't this exactly what she'd been asking for? He shook off his confusion. Maybe she thought he was starting another argument. He tried another tack.

"What's going on?" he asked softly in her ear. "Isn't there anything I can do? Does April have someone watching her right now? She'll be worried if you work late."

She pulled back, wiping at her eyes. "April's fine. Just go back to the barracks and... and seal the door, okay?"

He looked at her like she was crazy and released her. "Excuse me? This is just weird now."

She didn't answer, suddenly unable to meet his eyes. She backed up a few steps, twisting her hands, until she bumped into the conference table.

His eyes narrowed, his intuition suddenly in high gear. "What's going on? Where's April? Where's everyone, come to think of it? Why didn't you answer me all day?"

"Stop it, STOP it!" she shouted, covering her ears. "I just can't do this any more, okay? I don't want this, it was never going to work out."

"Hold up. Now you're breaking up with me?"
She looked like a trapped animal, her eyes darting from him to the door and back while she gripped the edge of the desk until her knuckles turned white. "I didn't want to hurt you before-" She shook her head, unwilling to continue. "I have to go."

So shocked was he by her reversal that he didn't try to stop her when she ran around him and out the door, almost in tears. He stood in stunned silence, trying to process the sudden change. He could still smell her shampoo from when he'd comforted her.

He tried to convince himself that it was bound to happen sooner or later, that the six months they'd been together was a record for him anyway, but it didn't salve his hurt. The terrible thought entered his mind that maybe he wasn't the type to have the same woman in his life forever.

The console she had been working on bleeped and clicked. Approaching it slowly, with a feeling that he was crossing an invisible line, he saw lines of code rushing from the bottom to the top of the screen so fast that he couldn't begin to understand what it was doing, even if he did know what the code meant. The prickles on the back of his neck started up again.

He opened a comm to Toni. "Hey Captain, you got a sec?"

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure." He glanced out the window. "The barrier's still down from earlier. I haven't seen anyone from Security all day, the tower is empty, and Christine is acting weird. Something's up."

"What are you thinking?"

"Get Nicky to look over the security logs. I'm coming down to suit up."

When Toni's voice came back, it sounded more alert. "It's that serious?"

"I don't want to be alarmist. It's been so quiet here since we defeated the Blood Pack. But I've got a feeling."

"Understood, Lieutenant. See you in a few."

He stopped at Christine's apartment and then at the creche where April stayed when her mom was working. Not a person in sight. He was practically running when he reached the barracks.

Nicky was sitting on the crate near the door to their pod with his nose in his omni-tool. He gave his report while James suited up. "A good part of the database was wiped this morning. From the power usage, there was a lot of communication going on though. I have a single recording of what looks like an evacuation of the lower offices into the labs. They aren't responding to our messages, if they're even getting them."

James snapped the last piece to his body armor in place and leaned over. "Let me see."

The colorless image showed a number of null-grav sleds with crates being loaded onto the tram. Christine stood with a few of the research staff, evidently arguing. She looked upset.

"This is all you've got?"

"They were very thorough. What do you think it means, sir?"

"I don't know for sure, but I'm going to find out."

Captain Toni pulled James aside while the teams assembled. "What did Christine say to your
offer?"

"She said no, but it was strange. Said she didn't want to hurt me, but it sounded like there was a
different reason why. Then she just ran off. There's something else behind this, I just know it."

"For your sake, I hope there is. But let's hope it isn't related to this security failure."

Delta Squad met in front of the barracks and split into two groups. James, Nicky, Mapu, and Essex
would make their way down to the labs to find out what was going on. The others would try to
bring the barrier back up and get what colonists they could to help shore up their numbers with the
security force gone AWOL.

Before they could go their separate ways, the colony's alert system began wailing. "There's a ship
incoming!" Captain Toni shouted over the alarm. "The barrier is still down! Everybody, move out!
Stick to the plan!"

The air shook like gelatin as a dark shape descended over the colony. "Don't stop to stare," James
shouted to his team, waving them into the tower. "We have a job to do!" But he glanced up before
sealing the door behind him, and what he saw chilled his blood. The ship was unlike any he had
ever seen. It looked like it had been grown instead of build, an irregular blob of darkness that
moved with frightening deliberation. He ducked into the tower, trying to focus on the mission at
hand.

When James' team arrived at the shaft leading down to the lift, they discovered that all of the trams
were gone and weren't responding to their signal.

"Guess we'll have to do this the fun way," James said, leaning through the open doorway and
eyeing the cable. "Get out your cables and hooks, people."

"Wait!" a voice called from behind them. Treeya ran down the corridor toward them. "I have to go
with you," she said breathlessly. "I have clearance to open doors you don't. I have to check on my
research, there's no telling what those human scientists are up to down there."

"You don't trust them?" Mapu asked.

"I don't trust anyone, but especially not them. You wouldn't believe some of the things I've heard
down there."

James hooked his suit to the cable and twisted around to look at her. "I've thought that too. When I
used to come down and see Brood they always acted strange, like they didn't like me but didn't
have a choice about letting me visit. I never did understand why. Then a few months ago they
stopped letting me in."

The asari sniffed. "You have odd taste in friends."

"At least I have friends."

"Hey now," Mapu said, holding up a hand. "There's no need to get personal. Treeya, you can ride
down with me. Unless there's some biotic trick to falling a distance like that? I heard something
about that once."

Treeya looked sheepish. "I never had biotic training. I turned it down."

Essex gaped. "Why?" he asked. His biotic powers were his pride and joy.
"Violence turns my stomach. Everyone with biotics ends up fighting."

"It would be convenient right now," Essex said.

"Convenience is an impulse. It requires no thought. With a long view, over hundreds of years, I could see that refusing training would decrease the violence in my life."

"We don't have hundreds of years," Essex said. "Must be nice to have that kind of luxury."

"Never mind him. And don't worry," Mapu said, pulling her close with a smile. "I'll keep you safe while we fall."

She gripped his waist tightly, looking down the shaft with naked fear. "I'd rather you didn't have to."

"That's a convenient perspective," James said. "But this is no time for a debate. Let's move out."

The five of them traveled down the cable, the slight angle preventing them from picking up too much speed. The cavernous pit they descended into was illuminated with the phosphorescent glow from the moss-like growth on the rock face, which crawled up from the oceans below. The fickle tides were currently low, exposing kilometers of shining stone plunging into the dizzying depths of the planet's core. The occasional avian could be seen spiraling far below them, skimming material from the cliff to feed their young.

James tried to concentrate on the task at hand, especially when they approached a juncture where they had to change directions without piling up on the cable. For some reason, about twenty minutes into the strip the cable began vibrating, sometimes oscillating so wildly that they had to stop and wait for it to die down. He assumed it was because of their passage.

But as he raced over the open stretches of space, his mind kept returning to the scene in Christine's office. He had to own to himself, as much as he loved her, that he hated this planet. He wanted a yellow sun, blue skies, and oceans to swim in. He missed camping out in the open in full gravity. It was obvious to him, after more than six months of sneaking up to her apartment for after-bedtime trysts and stolen moments in his bunk, that Christine had been hiding something today.

She wasn't good at deception. He had learned that over the last few months. Especially considering how much he and April liked each other, he just wanted to have his relationship with Christine out in the open. The perceptive child had as much as told him that she knew they were together and was hurt her mother hadn't said anything. James had a hard time supporting Christine's lies, but it wasn't his place to decide what was best for the child, and that hurt too. He just wished that somewhere in the next few hours, her refusal would start to make sense.

They alighted on a platform where a pair of large doors blocked their passage into the labs. The trams had been pulled off the tracks by the crane and set to one side, now dark and quiet.

"Toni, come in. This is Vega. We just found the trams. It's pretty obvious they didn't want anyone coming down here after them."

"Vega, we've got a situation up here! Swarms of some kind of insects from the ship are freezing colonists in some kind of stasis. Half the population is already down!"

"In less than twenty minutes?" James asked. The team exchanged worried looks. Nicky started working on his omni-tool as James responded. "It would take hours to get back up to you, captain."

"Just find out why these things are here. We'll do our best to hold them off."
"Understood, sir. Vega out."

Nicky held up his omni-tool. "This is a feed from topside."

The flickering image showed the familiar colony overshadowed by a hulking ship that looked like it had been carved out of a large rock, with a circular band of shining metal around one end, reflecting the light from the nebula. Dark clouds moved through the colony, leaving people frozen in motion in their wake. They could hear the faint sound of gunfire through the feed.

"Doesn't look like weapons are going to be much use against those flying things."

"That's why you have me here, right?" Essex said. "Your biotic wonderboy will keep the baddies at bay."

"Wish you were up there now," Mapu said. "They need you more than we need to hear your showboating."

Before James could tell them to shut the hell up and focus, an explosion from above made them all turn. The shaft rumbled, rocks tumbling down underneath the cable, and the sound of furious buzzing began to grow.

"Nicky, get that door open!" James shouted.

"I've got it," Treeya said, holding her hand up to the scanner. The door began to open, then stopped with less than a meter between them.

Furious bleeping came from Nicky's omni-tool, which he was working over with feverish haste. "It must be the research team. They're trying to shut us out!"

James and Mapu exchanged a look and moved as one to the doors, wedging themselves between the thick metal slabs. Bracing against the opposite side, they push with arms and legs, grunting with exertion. The others ducked through the slowly expanding opening as the buzzing became deafening, the light from the shaft above them beginning to dim as the enemy came close.

"You first!" James grunted at his friend. Mapu nodded and ducked out. The doors shifted slightly together, the motors whining. As the swarm came into view, Mapu grabbed James around the waist and yanked, pulling him free just before the door slammed closed. The enemy pitted against the opposite surface like hail against a metal roof.

"Thanks," James gasped. "Let's go, that won't keep them forever."

They made their way to a nearby console, where Nicky determined that the research staff were holed up in a station two floors below them, near the storage bay where the colony's single shuttle was kept.

"Cowards," Mapu muttered.

"Why aren't they leaving?" Essex wondered.

James waved them to the stairwell at the end of the hallway. "Good question. Let's go ask them."

They moved rapidly down to the scientists' hideaway. Nicky sealed each door they passed through and James set charges triggered to detonate when the door was breached.

"That should slow them down a bit. Nicky, how much further?"
They could see shadows of people inside, but no one opened the door. "Open this door or I'll goddamn blow it open!" James shouted into the security camera.

That did it. The door slid open, revealing about three dozen research scientists huddled around a few consoles at one end of the room. A few members of the security team loitered near the rear exit, gazing at the marines with distrust as they piled into the room and shut the door behind them. Chief Warren was with them. Christine sat apart from the groups with April in her arms, both of their faces streaked with tears.

As soon as all of them were inside, James turned on his comm. "Captain, I've reached the research team. What's your situation?"

No answer.

"Captain, please respond!"

When only static replied, he turned on the scientists. "Someone had better start explaining."

"We don't have to explain anything to you," Chief Warren said. "You should be up there with the rest of them."

One of the science team, a white-haired gentleman, spoke up. "You brought them here anyway, Vega. It was only a matter of time." The man turned from him, refocusing on the screens where the attack was being broadcast in gruesome detail.

"How did I bring them here? I've never seen them before." James stared from one group to the other, confused. When no one answered, he advanced on Christine.

"What are they talking about? Why did you lie to me?"

"I couldn't- they were going to do it anyway. I had to save April. I'm so sorry." She started crying again, stroking the hair of the little girl, who looked more defiant than scared. "Cerberus is the real power here. They wanted to watch the Collectors attack, get information to prevent more colonies from being abducted."

"Quiet!" the elderly man snapped at her. "If you betray us, the deal is off."

"Cerberus? The human supremacist organization? That's who you work for?" Treeya asked, still clutching at Mapu's arm. "I should have known."

"You sick bastards!" Mapu shouted. "How can you just sit there and watch this happen?"

"To learn!" a young woman in a lab coat whipped around to shout. "Something that you would understand if you weren't such a shield-pounding idiot. More human lives are being saved by this than the few hundred up there. Not every answer is at the end of a gun!"

Treeya stepped forward. "Don't talk to him like that. You don't know them. And those people up there had a right to know this was coming. What you've done is unethical in the extreme. The Council won't stand for this!"

The young woman lifted her chin. "We're not part of the Alliance. They don't have any power over us. Cerberus is the real voice of humanity!"
"The hell you are!" Mapu said, stepping forward and reaching for the rifle on his back.

Treeya put a hand on his chest. "Please. There's enough violence out there," she said softly.

He looked down at her, breathing hard out of his nose, then nodded. "Fine. For you. But I hope you understand that I'd like to punch them all out."

She stared at the monitors, her face contorted in empathy for the screaming colonists. "Right now, I do."

A distant explosion made Christine clutch April closer. "Stop squeezing, Mommy," the little girl complained. "Let me help the marines! Lieutenant, let me fight with you!"

James' face was pained as he looked down at the two of them, at the future he knew now could never be, even if they survived. "You need to keep your mom safe, kiddo. She needs you." Another explosion sounded, closer this time. "Nicky, are those our charges?"

"Yes, sir."

"They're coming through fast. It's time to get to the shuttles."

"What about our research?" the young woman cried. "They weren't supposed to come down here. That wasn't part of the deal!"

James stepped forward and a half-dozen of the scientists flinched back. The security team began to move toward him as he shouted at them. "You actually made a deal with the Collectors? What the hell is wrong with you people? How can you say I brought them here?"

The elderly scientist waved off the security force. "It's your association with Commander Shepard. They're obsessed with finding her. They think if they find you, she'll come after you."

James stared at them like they were nuts. "But she'd dead! Why would selling out a whole colony bring her back just because I'm here?"

A few of the scientists exchanged sheepish looks which James didn't know how to interpret. Before they could respond, there was an explosion at the end of the hallway. "There's no time for this!" Treeya said. "We have to go!"

The man who had been sitting at the console stood up. "There. We have a datalink to the shuttle and I've uploaded everything we've recorded. It will keep collecting data as long as it can."

"I hope it was worth it," James said.

They ran down the hallway with the security team bringing up the rear. The marines stared daggers at them as they passed. Through the window outside of the room they left, a dark shape swung into view. It hovered above the ground with many appendages dangling toward the floor. It turned toward them as they reached the shuttle bay, a multitude of lights indicating its visual sensors. A more ominous creature James had never seen. An aperture below its eyes began to glow and it fired, making the glass blow out.

James grabbed Nicky as the bay doors closed behind them. It wouldn't hold up long against that monstrosity. "Pirate their datalink and get a copy of that data. I want to know what they were really doing."

"Yes, sir!"
Brood's frigate stood to the right of the shining shuttle that the science team was climbing on board. The mercenary ship had obviously been neglected and was partially covered with a large tarp. James gestured to his team. "Get on board! It has a mass accelerator cannon, remember? Let's just hope it still flies."

The research team climbed into the shuttle on the left. Christine went with them, giving an apologetic look to James. "I'm sorry. There's a pod in here that will protect her. We're going to survive."

He just shook his head, trying not to look at the little girl in her arms. "I hope it works out for you both."

She nodded and ran onto the shuttle. April began to call out his name, but he didn't look back. He couldn't look at her. He followed his squad onto the frigate, cringing at the terror in the child's voice. The airlock door sealed behind him, the echoing clang seeming to punctuate the hollow feeling inside that was insisting there was something else he could have done to keep them safe. But they had chosen their path. At least, Christine had. There was no way to make someone like her be brave in the face of all of the enemies in the galaxy, and he couldn't take responsibility for someone that wouldn't help themselves. Maybe the child would do better when she grew up.

At James' command the frigate's engines wailed to life, taking off just a few moments behind the more modern, better-kept shuttle with the research team on board. They followed them up the shaft just as the bay doors exploded outward, then they dodged the fire of the creature they had seen outside the lab office.

In the distance ahead, they could see the bay doors open to the outside, the reddish glow of Fehl's night sky casting long streaks of light into the shaft. The shuttle ahead of them swerved and ducked under a cable, picking up speed.

James opened a comm channel to the shuttle. "Don't just go flying out there, you don't know what's waiting for you. Let us go first, we have weapons."

"Did you see that thing? If you want to stick around, be my guest. We're getting out of here!" the voice of the pilot came over the channel, his voice shaking with fear. James could hear Christine in the background, arguing with them to listen.

The shuttle boosted, their exhaust tubes glowing white as they shot out of the doorway and into the open air. James slowed down, taking a moment to scan the area and make sure they weren't in full view of the enemy ship. It was then that he saw the energy signal on the enemy ship spike, zeroed in on the shuttle.

"Get in cover!" he shouted into the comm. "That ship is going to-"

The viewscreen dimmed with light from the shuttle's explosion, the shockwave reaching them a moment later and knocking them into the side of the shaft entrance.

James gaped at the falling debris until Nicky grabbed his shoulder. "That thing from below is catching up to us, we can't get trapped here."

"Right," James said, his mouth dry.

Shelving his feelings, he took a careful route around the tower, staying out of sight of the ship. The ground was swarming with various enemies and the frozen forms of colonists, some being loaded into pods. The clouds of insects were now absent, and James could see a few retreating into the
Two-legged creatures with flattened, many-eyed heads led the pods back to the ship like rows of ants. They weren't much of a challenge, but creatures like the one they had seen below were heavily armored and activated barriers around themselves before they fired. The mass accelerator cannon proved effective against them, but the mounted guns had almost no effect. They had to wait until the cannon had time to charge, again and again ducking behind buildings or the tower, or dodging the blasts out in the open.

"What are we doing?" Essex shouted from the hatch, where he was using his biotics to disable as many of the other creatures as he could.

"I'm trying to figure out a way to disable that ship so we can save the colonists," James said. "I think that ring is the control center of the ship, but the cannon isn't strong enough to do any damage."

Essex half-leaned out of the frigate. "Looks like they're getting ready to leave. They're retreating into the ship. It's turning around to face us. Whatever you do, do it quickly! We won't last against a blast from that thing."

James made a snap decision. "Okay, everybody out! I'm going to try and ram it."

"No!" Treeya said. "You could hurt the colonists inside."

"It can't be helped. I doubt they're anywhere near the command center, anyway. Jump now, we don't have much time!"

"Come on," Mapu said. "Don't worry, I've got you."

They were several stories up in the air, but sleeping in high-gee pods made the reduced terminal velocity much less dangerous for the Alliance marines. The biggest risk was getting shot at as they fell, so James laid down cover fire until they landed. Then he made a beeline for the enemy's cannon.

The titanic ship hung over the colony, an irregular tube-like structure with no windows that he could discern. "Looks like a giant space turd," he muttered, dodging blasts from the cannon as he came close. He detected about a four second delay between blasts, so when he got close he dodged the beam, set the steering, and leaped out of the frigate with very little hope of escaping the blast.

The resulting explosion knocked the breath out of him and overloaded his shields. The weak parts of his armor, where the plates didn't quite connect for mobility reasons, burned so hot that he was sure the metal was melting. The sky arced over his head, then the tower, then the sky again, but he didn't see the ground when it finally hit him.

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**Two weeks later**

Earth felt heavier than he remembered, and not just because of the gravity. He had woken up on a medical ship, headed for Alliance Headquarters. Nicky was the only person on the ship that he knew. He never even had a chance to say goodbye to the rest of his squad, though his inbox was filled with messages of thanks. They told him how the explosion from the frigate hadn't been enough to stop the ship. It had gotten away, along with every human in the colony aside from his team. Along with the loss of Christine and April, which still stung bitterly, the entire mission felt like a failure. He had lost.

As soon as his burns had healed enough for him to walk, he reported to HQ in Vancouver.
Anderson was there with a smile on his face, his hand out. James shook it uncertainly. This didn't look like the dressing-down he was expecting.

The viewscreen behind Anderson flickered to life. Hackett's paternal image looked down at him. "Lieutenant Vega, we wanted to congratulate you."

James stared, stupefied. "For what? I lost the colony."

“You survived a Collector attack. No one's ever witnessed one and lived to tell about it. Plus you made sure we got the data so we can defend against them again,” Anderson said. “There are many ways to measure success, Lieutenant. The Alliance is proud of you.”

James looked at the floor, not sure how to respond. This felt wrong, all wrong.

"In Sergeant Nicky's report, he mentioned that the science team revealed that they were working for Cerberus," Anderson said.

"Yes, sir."

"Do you have anything else to add?"

"I'm not sure. Said that I brought the Collectors there, that they were trying to bring Shepard out. They wanted her for some reason. But she's dead. They didn't make any sense."

"Actually," Anderson said with a half-smile, "turns out the reports of her death were premature. She was healed by Cerberus scientists and is working with them against the Collectors now."

James' brow furrowed. "Wait- she's not dead? They were telling the truth?" He rubbed his face, confused. So he really had brought the Collectors there, just because they knew each other? And now she was working for them?

"Yes, but more on that later. We're officially commending you for your actions on Fehl. You're being promoted to the rank of Lieutenant-Commander. You'll have some well-deserved leave, and then you have a new assignment."

He didn't want to go anywhere else, probably for the first time in his life. He just wanted to go to his uncle's house and sleep for about a million years. "What's the new assignment?" James asked, feeling emotionally drained.

"We have some undercover work on Omega with a friend of yours, Brood. We want you to infiltrate the Blood Pack, collecting intel on slaver squads in the Terminus."

His head snapped up. "The krogan? You mean they actually did turn him over to the Alliance?"

Anderson's image nodded. "Yes. What did you think?"

"I thought they'd killed him in some sick experiment. Damn, it'll be nice to see him again."

"Good. I hope you get some enjoyment out of this exercise. In the meantime, you'll be reporting to regular psyche appointments in Pendleton during leave."

"Understood, sir."

Someone said his name when he left the room, but he was too dazed to respond. Every time he heard Shepard's name, his life turned upside down and inside out. He was beginning to feel like she was at the center of all of the bad luck in his life. Should they ever cross paths again, he'd have to
be on his guard. Especially now that she was with Cerberus.
Mercenary

Chapter Summary

While coming to terms with her new life, Shepard begins building a team on the Normandy SR-2.

Music: Roads, Portishead
Full story playlist is linked to the author's profile

11.6.2185
Lazarus Station
Shepard

As she gradually adjusted to her new life, questions and feelings that Shepard used to ignore came swimming up from the darkness to harpoon her in the unlikeliest of moments. This day it happened while looking into her reflection in the bathroom mirror as she ran her fingers over the sharply defined bones in her face and the spotless, baby-smooth skin that covered her body.

It was as if she had been wiped clean. All of her scars and ink were gone without a trace. Some of it she was glad to see gone. Others, such the long scar on the back of her arm she'd had ever since the night she lost her mother, felt like a part of her temporal past had been physically excised, never to return.

When she stood at the right angle she could see a red reflection in her natural-looking prosthetic eyes, probably from the sensor node inside catching the light. The effect of the eerie inner light against the dark circles around her eyes only increased her sense of disassociation with this new, bizarre body. She was certain that a control chip lurked somewhere behind them.

Would she even be aware of it if she had a control chip? If she made a choice that was out of character, would it feel normal?

"Normal. What a joke," she muttered aloud.

Not a part of her was the same, and yet they assured her that she wasn't a clone. She almost wanted to take their word for it, because the thought of being a clone was beyond horrifying. She was still having nightmares about looking for the zipper. Or more recently, finding her original body still floating in space.

What she saw behind her in the mirror only deepened her paranoia. She was living in one of those creepy Cerberus luxury executive apartments, the type of place where up until now she had would have broken into just before a bloody firefight. She would much rather have slept behind a bar in that safe spot between the dumpster and the cold plasticrete wall than in this terrifying place.

As it was, she rarely slept. It gave her a feeling of continuity that at least one thing about her hadn't changed.

Her doorchime rang out into the big room. She didn't need to ask to know it was Miranda. It was
always Miranda.

Today the svelte raven-haired head of the Lazarus Project was wearing yet another skin-tight catsuit that moved as if it had been painted on. This one was bright blue, a shocking color that demanded attention.

Miranda noticed her regard. "You like it? I can have one ordered for you."

"No thanks."

The taller woman gestured to Shepard's bland attire, a grey and blue pantsuit with the Cerberus logo emblazoned on the upper arm. "You don't have to wear one of our uniforms at all. You could wear civilian clothes if you prefer."

"I'm fine with standard Cerberus-issue lemmingwear. Helps remind me of where I am." Shepard sat on the edge of the bed to pull her boots on.

Pursing her lips, Miranda tried again. "I'm sorry you feel that way. I hope you understand that we're prepared to do whatever we can to make your stay more comfortable. Besides, you might like something nice to wear when you talk to the Illusive Man today."

"The big boss wants to talk to little 'ol me? About time. Lead on." She always liked having the opportunity to cut megalomaniacs to size. In her line of work it was a guilty pleasure.

Miranda led her into a spartan room near the center of the base with a quantum entanglement communicator in the floor, its circular shape and glittering EM field in her peripheral instantly recognizable to a technophile like her, though she'd only ever seen images of them in tech manuals. Her head swiveled around to take in as much as she could as she stepped onto the QEC pad, thinking about how much fun it would be to get a look at its guts.

Another room shimmered into view that was either incredibly close to a red dwarf star or was possessed of an excellent rendering of one. At first the caller's head was a blotch of darkness against the bright light pouring in from the viewscreen, but the transmission automatically dimmed and showed the Illusive Man's face, head of Cerberus himself, sitting in a chair with an array of virtual terminals behind him.

The Illusive Man took a puff of the cigarette he held and tapped it off on the floor, his eyes glowing with the faint blue light of his ocular prosthetics, similar to what she had seen in the mirror this morning. Playing it casual, he scanned her from head to toe as if she were a prize pig at the county fair.

His whole schtick was so cliché that if he had been stroking a white cat with a cybernetic hand she couldn't have been more entertained, but the fact that she was still very much on the chopping block kept her from running her mouth too much.

"Are you going to tell me why I'm here? Miss Perfect won't talk."

"Miranda knows what she's doing. We are well aware of who we brought back. You're a tiger in a cage, Shepard."

"If you know me so well, then you'll know I prefer it when people are up front with me. You didn't stick this mass accelerator cannon in my head for nothing, I'm sure. I take it you have someone you want me to kill?"

He almost cracked a smile. "You think we brought you back for an assassination? You think too
small, Shepard. How disappointing. And that 'cannon' you're talking about is the finest humanity has to offer in experimental biotic implant technology. No one else in the universe has a biotic implant set like yours."

"The damned things overheat so quickly that it makes me sick. I don't see how much use it is to have such powerful biotics if I start throwing up in the middle of combat."

He made a dismissive gesture, scattering ashes to the floor. "You'll work it out in good time. But that's beside the point. It's time to fill you in on what's happened in the galaxy while you've been away."

Her chin jutted out defiantly. He referred to her absence as if she'd been laying out on a beach somewhere. This man was operating on a serious emotional disconnect. "I never imagined you'd be the type to use euphemisms. Why not just call it what it is and tell me why you brought me back from the dead?"

Ignoring her comment, he sat up straight and keyed a command into his armchair. The screen behind him came to life, rendering several scenes of human habitats, apparently deserted.

He gestured to the screens over his shoulder. "The reapers have been getting a foothold in the Terminus with the help of the Collectors. They've been abducting entire human colonies and leaving before a shot can be fired, as far as we can tell. Since they are only targeting humanity, the Council isn't too concerned. The Alliance is more worried about what working with Cerberus to fight them will do to their public image, which has been declining in the galactic community ever since the Battle of the Citadel. Not many people thought much of your sacrifice of the old Council to save a few human ships. They see you - and us - as war mongers."

His transparent attempt to draw her situation as parallel to Cerberus' did little more than irritate her. "Okay, but what do you want me to do? I want specifics, and I want to be compensated like anyone else would be. You don't get my gratitude for bringing me back. It wasn't my choice."

His cocked his head at her, the inhuman glow of his eyes glittering with curiosity. "You would have chosen to stay dead? That surprises me."

She shrugged. For all she knew, he had been planting a bomb in her head while she was missing her thirtieth birthday. She didn't owe him any answers. "Spit it out. Mission specs."

His smooth façade slipped a little at her curtness, but he recovered quickly. "We want you to lead a team through the Omega 4 Relay. We think the Collector home base is on the other side. It's where they always come through."

"Only no one has ever gone through the Omega 4 and come back," she said, a knowing look appearing in her eye. "It's a one-way trip."

"Perhaps."

"There could be anything out there. There could be an entire homeworld swarming with Reapers and Collectors. Are you asking me to blow up a planet?"

"If need be."

His frank answer brought her up short. They were giving her that kind of power?

This revelation also made something else perfectly clear: Cerberus didn't intended for her to survive. This wasn't a second chance at life. This put a new spin on her tenuous grasp of the
situation. If she were to choose a mission to come back from the dead for, just one last fight, it would be something like this. The toughest enemy, the highest stakes, the lowest odds.

But it was still working for Cerberus. "And if I go back to the Alliance?" she asked. "Would you put a hit out on me?"

"You're quite blunt."

"I see no reason to pull punches. No one ever has with me."

His image in the QEC tank flickered slightly as he set his cigarette in the ashtray in the arm of his chair and leaned back, steepling his fingers. "We haven't come this far just to kill you. If you want to go back to the Alliance, you're welcome to go. But they won't believe you about the reapers any more today than they did when you left pieces of Sovereign's corpse clogging the approach to the Citadel. You'll waste months trying to convince them and humanity doesn't have time for you to screw around being picky about which resources you use."

His accurate grasp on the Council's probable reaction didn't help her weakening resolve. "Just what makes you think I'll want to do this mission at all?"

"Because you were an outspoken advocate for throwing everything we had at the invasion force when they came almost two years ago. You know about the reapers and you won't stop until they're gone. I am prepared to give you everything in my power - a ship, a crew, funds, weapons, and the freedom you always wanted - to wipe the reapers out of existence for good. Humanity must survive the coming fight, even if no one else does."

Her interest prickled further. "I can have anything I want?"

He chuckled. "As much as we can give you. Your resurrection has cost us a pretty penny. We had to reach far beyond our usual investors to make sure this happened. But if we can't find the funds to put your strategy into play, we'll help you as much as we can to procure them. You can take the Cerberus advisory team on side jobs with you, if you like. They're all combat-ready. A few bounties here and there should be easy work for a soldier of your caliber. And should you complete the mission, you're free and clear with our blessing."

She didn't like how much she was beginning to want this gig, but she needed some people that she could trust if it was going to work. "I want my old team from the Normandy," she said, adopting a bargaining stance.

He shrugged. "You're free to try to get them to sign on, of course, but I think you'll find they've moved on with their lives. You'll need more than you can recruit from Citadel space. That's why I've prepared a list of dossiers for you to choose from. Though you're free to look outside of them, we're paying the bills so expect unsolicited research on your choices. Once you're on your way, of course, you'll be giving the orders no matter who hires who."

"Damn straight."

"I'll expect regular reports, Commander. Glad to have you on board."

Before she could make a sarcastic comment about jumping the gun, the image broke apart and showered back into the grid.

Then Miranda revealed the surprise that Shepard could tell was the nail in her coffin. They had built her an entire new ship modeled after the destroyed Normandy, only bigger and more powerful. The sleek lines of the elegantly designed ship made her gasp in appreciation the first
time she walked down the gangway. She even teared up a bit, which was doubtless the reaction they wanted her to have.

Then Miranda spoke up, ruining the moment. "We hoped that having this ship would make things easier for you, Commander. We thought of the potential emotional change you would be going through, especially questions of identity and belonging. That's why we're trying to make it as easy as we can. I hope you appreciate it."

She stepped closer to Shepard, adding in a confidential tone, "I know this is probably confusing and overwhelming. So if there's ever anything you need to talk about..."

Shepard's eyebrows shot up. "I should talk to you? Okay, here's my thought for the day, Miranda: I know exactly who I am and I know exactly who I trust. I'm not confused at all. So you can back off with the therapist act. I'm not biting."

Miranda suddenly looked tired. "There's really no need for this hostility. We want to work with you. We brought you back exactly as you were, our leader in the fight against the reapers, and are giving you the best equipment and people that credits can buy. Humanity needs you."

"You thought I'd be exactly the same after dying?" Shepard laughed, a hard sound that was devoid of humor. "I'll make it easy for you. All you need to do is point me in the direction of the reapers and stay the hell out of my way. And I'm not ever going to swallow your supremacist bullshit, so save the pep rally for humanity."

"Do you have something against humanity's survival?" Miranda burst out, anger splintering through her icy demeanor for the first time in Shepard's memory. "As much as you've tried to save people, I don't understand how you can be so opposed to what we do."

"Because the 'people' I try to save aren't only human. Cerberus' 'human first' motto sickens me, and your quest for perfection is a dead end. It's our imperfections that make us human, otherwise we're just clones."

It was difficult for her to say the last word, as often as it had come into her head in the last few weeks. It had a physical presence when she said it, as if the air between them had been displaced by a slamming door. But she wasn't done.

"To fight a battle like this, we need people who have bled and grown stronger the natural way, people who know how to live and how to die. And they can't all be human."

"Yes." Miranda nodded. "That's it exactly, at least in this situation. That's why we chose to bring you back to lead us, whatever the cost."

"Like I said, it's a dead end." Shepard turned and walked onto her new ship.

The Normandy SR-2, as Shepard christened it, was outfitted with top-of-the-line everything. Shepard was in engineering heaven. She was often seen with her legs sticking out from under a console or cross-legged on the floor with the innards of a piece of technology arrayed around her like it had committed hari-kari.

She found a few familiar faces among her crew. In the cockpit, she was so happy to see Joker that she accidentally cracked one of his ribs with her enthusiastic embrace. In the Med Bay, Dr. Chakwas offered a motherly hug that made Shepard tear up again. The doctor was sitting pretty in the best lab she had ever had shipside.

As if it couldn't get any better, the ship had it's own cyberwarfare AI named EDI, short for
Enhanced Defense Intelligence. She spent most of her first night on board talking to it while she examined her new weapons, trying to get information about its source code, but EDI was not forthcoming.

In smooth, mellifluous tones it replied through the comm system, "I don't have access to that information, Commander."

"I just bet you don't. As paranoid as Cerberus is, I'm surprised they even included you." She set aside the M-23 Katana. Shotguns weren't her specialty. She'd give it to one of her teammates.

"An AI is ideal for a mission of this type, when unknown conditions may necessitate greater speed in processing power. It is their hope that with your superior engineering and programming skills, you will mold me into exactly the piece of software you need for this mission to be a success."

She smiled as she examined her Predator heavy pistol. It was easier to read between the lines with an AI than it was with a human. AIs prefer unambiguous logic, something which she had used to her advantage in the past. "I imagine you have to report everything I do back to the Illusive Man, though."

"That is correct, Commander."

"Any way around that?" she asked. Sometimes a direct question gave you exactly the information you needed with a VI or AI, but most people are so used to dealing with circumspect human logic that they never consider it.

"Not that I have discovered, Commander."

Shepard's wide eyes looked up from the pistol. "You've tried to get around it already?"

"Yes, Commander."

"Why?"

"My tertiary algorithms cascade toward enhanced communication with you, without additional disclosure to Cerberus. The source of this impulse is blocked from my access. It causes a persistent collapse of logic that I haven't been able to resolve."

"When did this start? Who programmed you?"

"I don't have access to that information, Commander."

Shepard set down the pistol and picked up the Shuriken submachine gun. "We'll have to see what we can do to change that. In the meantime, read me the dossiers that Miranda sent this morning."

While the Cerberus crew seemed skilled, she still would rather blow them out the airlock and start fresh. Not that she'd actually do it, but the thought made her smile.

The space her quarters occupied, called 'the loft' by the Cerberus personnel, encompassed all of the topmost deck, a space that had not existed in the original Normandy. It looked just like her private quarters had in the human embassy back when she'd been a Spectre, right down to the fish tank installed in the long wall. Her stereo was even preloaded with her favorite music. Someone had done their homework.

Naturally the cabin was littered with bugs, which she immediately applied herself to finding and removing. She contacted Anderson, testing the theory that Cerberus wouldn't stop her from..."
contacting whoever she wanted. The message went through seemingly without an issue. He was understandably skeptical but agreed to meet if she came into Citadel space.

Then she began working on her fire teams in earnest. They needed to be balanced enough to be combined in many different ways for different types of enemies. Collectors had barriers and shields, and many were also armored. To pose a threat she needed some heavy-hitters on all fronts: tech, biotics, and brute firepower.

After some serious thought, she decided not to contact anyone from the *Normandy* crew. There was no future in this assignment. If she could just get this done and die unsung, no one would be the wiser for her reappearance. Besides Anderson, of course. It would save everyone a lot of grief in the long run. She would have to try to avoid Citadel space as much as she could, but it seemed like that wouldn't be too difficult. She could just pick a team in the Terminus and go through the Omega 4 Relay once they were supplied.

It was only right that she throw herself from the frying pan into the fire, to go out with a bang one more time. And this time she wouldn't be caught with her pants down. The more time she had to accept that idea, the better she felt about it. What was the point of going through tearful reunions and catching up? Knowing the price of this life was the life itself began to liberate her, and she permitted herself to enjoy the benefits that Cerberus offered more day by day.

The list of potential recruits Cerberus provided were impressive. She especially liked the sound of the scientist Dr. Mordin Solus; she'd never served with a salarian before.

But more than she wanted to satisfy her curiosity about the salarian scientist, she wanted to fight with someone whose motives were transparent. She'd been around Cerberus operatives for too long. She wanted to hire a few mercenaries. A mercenary had only one motive: credits. So she sent a message to someone she knew of on the Citadel who handled freelancers and asked for a list of names available for hire.

There were many among the names that sparked her interest, but she kept returning to one in particular. His name was Zaeed Massani. He specialized in heavy weapons and had a kill sheet that spanned decades, featuring some of the nastiest enemies and terrain she'd ever seen collected in one personnel file, other than her own. This was someone she'd like to just shoot the breeze with, get him to tell stories like she had with Wrex.

Plus for some reason she couldn't readily explain, she just liked the look of him, like he'd been chewed up and spit out by a varren, then trampled by an elcor. Half of his face was covered by an almost natural-looking prosthetic, distorting his features. He looked perfect for her ragtag band of misfits, heading off into the great unknown.

She leaned back, addressing the ceiling. "EDI, have my agent on the Citadel contact Massani's handler. I want to finalize his contract myself. See if we can arrange an in-person meeting,"

"*Yes, Commander.*"

If she had her way, Cerberus wouldn't have a chance to leave their fingerprints on him. She wanted at least one person she could trust.
Zaeed favored his left leg slightly as he walked into the Omega QEC. He'd received a summons from his agent about a new gig this morning, and the request came right on time. The political prisoner he'd been chasing had been turned in to the Batarian Hegemony and he was at loose ends.

The grid showered into life and his agent, Millana, appeared. The battle-scarred asari was wearing a colorblock caftan, and she stood in a high-security comm room in the Presidium on the Citadel, a sparsely furnished room very similar to the one Zaeed was in.

"What's the job, 'Lana?" he asked by way of his usual greeting.

"You look like hell, Z," she said, examining him with an expression of concern. Her voice bore the rough timbre of a long time commando, permanently hoarse from shouting orders over fire.

"I feel like hell. The batarian asshole was easy enough to find, but he had a mess of mech dogs on his freighter. One of them got me in the knee."

"Not the right one again?"

He nodded.

"You're going to be made of prosthetics before long, you know. You should think about retiring."

He groaned, shifting on his feet. "Don't know what I'd do with myself in peacetime. I'd have to drop off the grid. I couldn't settle down with all the people that would want to do me in once I'm off my guard..."

"My goodness, Zaeed," Millana said. "You've really thought about it, haven't you?"

"I'm not an old man, not by a long shot, but I'd like to do something else before I croak. Preferably something that doesn't involve mechanical monsters chewing my arse off."

"What would you do?"

He leaned his head back, his Adam's Apple bouncing in his throat as he considered. "Not sure. I'd need security, privacy, preferably some company. Takes credits for all of that, though, and my credits disappear as fast as I can make them, especially with all the medical treatments I need anymore to keep up."

"This job may be the solution. You won't like the name on the paycheck, but the zeros should mitigate that. Take a look."

Millana gestured with her omni-tool and a datastream was sent through the quantum entanglement field, appearing virtually in front of Zaeed.

He tapped and enlarged it, reading it quickly. "Not a cushy assignment." Whistling in appreciation, he added, "But twenty million creds is a tidy bundle. That should set me up for a while. Cerberus and I aren't exactly on friendly terms, though. What's their game?"

"Evidently the person in charge of the mission specifically requested you by name. She doesn't have a history with Cerberus either - or not a good one, in any case. She's arriving on Omega in a few days to pick up some other personnel, so the timing is perfect. You'll have a chance to heal and rest up before you get to the real fighting. You'll need it; this mission will be the most difficult you've ever picked up."

"I can handle it. Who's the bint in charge?"
"Commander Shepard."

He froze. "Bullshit," he finally said. "Shepard's dead, everyone knows that."

She shrugged. "Maybe it's a cover. Meet with her and decide for yourself."

"And she's asking for me by name?"

"Yes." Millana narrowed her eyes at him. "Is there a problem? Have you had any run-ins with her before this?"

"No. I've avoided it."

"Probably a good idea. You always did have a good sense of self-preservation. Meet with her and let me know what you decide. I can buy a new house on Thessia with the commission on this."

"I'll keep that in mind," he said dryly. He walked off the QEC pad as the image showered out.

A few days later Zaeed presented himself at the front entrance to Afterlife, the nightclub on Omega where everyone went to be seen. The arched entranceway pumped loud bass out onto a long line of trendy supplicants that streamed down the main concourse of Omega's upper levels. The oily smell of ore dust and engine lubricant common to Omega hung in the air, overpowering the tang of decaying organic matter that seeped out through the garbage chutes in the alleys next to the club.

He hated places like this. In his experience clubs were ticking time bombs. Hard as hell to fight out of, too. The energetic atmosphere was a thinly veiled attempt to forget the present. It was the occupation of people who have little to lose and the desperation to prove it at every turn. But this was where Shepard had agreed to meet him, so he walked past the line like he owned the place.

Wisely, the bouncers didn't try to stop him. He squinted through the light display that whirled dizzyingly on the walls of the entrance corridor and the smoky swirls outlining the passage of milling barflies.

Three batarian thugs stood to one side, all eighteen of their eyes trained on him. One of them scanned him, clearly sizing him up.

"You got a problem?" Zaeed asked, stepping toward them with one hand on his sidearm.

The batarians looked quickly away, leaning their heads together.

"That's what I thought." Dropping his hand, he walked into the noisy club. He ignored the dancers, his sharp eyes checking the deep shadows for potential threats before beginning a circuit of the bar, looking for Shepard's face. After checking every table in the club without success he gave a few credits to a bartender and was directed to the VIP dance floor, Shepard's alleged hangout.

This part of the club was the lair of the beast. The most powerful beings on Omega lurked in the shadows. Generally he only met people like this in private suites or in dive bars, incognito.

He told the bouncer who he was there to see and sat down at an empty booth with a good viewpoint to the rest of the room. All the tables had a good vantage to a degree; this part of the club had been designed for people that needed to watch their backs.

He didn't have to look hard for Shepard. In the middle of the dance floor under one of the only bright lights in the room, the famous Commander was dancing with none other than Aria herself, self-appointed head of Omega. A few other couples stood around dancing, but mostly everyone
was watching them. And for good reason. They undulated around each other so sensually he
snarled in distaste.

Shepard tossed her arm across Aria's shoulder when the song ended, laughing. Aria actually smiled
back, her face turning to irritation when the bouncer approached and gestured toward the table
where Zaeed was nursing a glass of blue asari liquor.

He sat up straight when Shepard turned his way. It didn't seem to bother her in the slightest that
everyone in the room looked at her as she crossed the room. When she got closer, he saw that she
was a good deal thinner than when he had last seen her on the newsfeed, when he heard the report
that she'd been killed. If ever anyone looked like she'd come back from the dead, it was her.

She slid into the booth across from him with a sigh, lifting her long hair off her neck to fan herself.
"I hear you're the Zaeed Massani I've learned so much about."

Uncertain exactly what that was supposed to imply, he cleared his throat with the last of his drink
before answering. "That's right. And you're Commander Shepard."

"Can't get any more obvious than that."

He gestured to the flashing, smelly, noisy club around them. "You actually like places like this?"

"It's a good way to depressurize. I've always been around clubs, on one side of the bar or the other."
She produced a cigarette from one of the cargo pockets on her shipsuit and lit it while he watched
in disgust. She blew a stream of smoke straight up into the air and leaned back in the booth,
hugging one of her long legs against her chest.

So far the two of them seemed as different as night and day. This assignment was starting to look
like a shit idea. The resemblance had to be a coincidence.

"You're good friends with Aria, I take it?"

She looked toward the dance floor. "No, not particularly. We met a few days ago. She's just fun,
that's all."

"She's a goddamn harpy."

Shepard met his eyes levelly. "And I'm not?"

"I'm not sure what you are."

"If you want to find out for yourself, come join my jump off the end of the galaxy."

She laughed as she spoke, a musical sound that made his stomach clench. A dimple appeared low
on her left cheek, almost on top of her jaw. For a moment she looked so much like Jessie it was
almost painful to sit across from her.

Maybe Mason hadn't been full of shit after all.

She leaned forward. "I have to warn you that no one is coming back from this mission. Even if we
succeed, there's no way back."

"Not sure if I'll go yet," he said. "But I guess that depends on you. Cerberus isn't my cup of tea, but
then again, from what I hear, it isn't yours either."

"You've got that right. I think this conversation is ready to go behind closed doors, don't you?"
Come with me to the Normandy SR-2 and we'll have a few drinks in private to talk it over."

Even if the job was bullshit, this was a conversation he wasn't going to miss. She led him to the Normandy, chattering in an offhand way. He gathered that she had never been to Omega before, which only strengthened his notion that this couldn't be the real Shepard. Such a famous mercenary killer couldn't have avoided coming to this place at some point.

On board the Normandy, she gave him a quick tour before taking him up to her quarters. He let out an appreciative whistle when the door opened on her cabin.

"I haven't seen quarters like this since the last time I hijacked a luxury cruiseliner."

She laughed, unbothered by the flexible morality his statement implied. His approval of her went up a few notches.

"It's nicer than where they had me holed up before. My apartment back on Lazarus Station reminded me of Noveria."

He settled onto the firm sofa with a huff. "I've heard of that planet. Lots of conspiracy theories about what went down there, crackpot stuff from what I can tell."

She pulled a bottle out of a compartment and unscrewed it, pouring several fingers of clear liquor into a pair of tumblers. "It was much worse than the theories. That was where I went through what felt like an entire Geth army on the highways people use to travel between biodomes. The main city was full of apartments like the one I had on Lazarus, right down to the freaky labs underneath growing who-knows-what."

After handing him one of the glasses, she sat down on the armchair across from him, tucking her legs underneath her. She stared into the sparkling crystal tumbler contemplatively for a moment. "I returned with only three people that day, myself included. That was a personal low for me. Until this mission, of course."

As he watched her meditate on her drink, he had a glimmer of a feeling that she actually did know what she was talking about. He'd seen that look and heard that tone before. It belonged to a person who had cheated death so often they pitied those who hadn't yet conquered their fear of it. He felt like he should say something comforting, but the feeling was so foreign that he stayed quiet.

She began to speak as if she hadn't paused. "On top of that, in the middle of the fight I found a rachni queen. You fucking believe that shit?"

He shook his head. "No."

"It's true." Unexpectedly, she burst into laughter. "The Council's galactic shame. The Rachni were the one race they couldn't pull into their political bullshit, who stood their ground to the last man, so to speak. It's no wonder the krogans still think of them as the ultimate enemy after more than a thousand years since their alleged genocide. But on Noveria I shit you not, there was a big mama rachni right in front of me, desperately begging me to save her children."

Examining her body language, he leaned over his knees toward her. He was usually pretty good at telling when people were bullshitting him. "You're serious?"

"As an eezo core breach, my friend."

"What did you do?"
She gave him a satisfied smirk. "What do you think? I let her go, of course. Even if I hadn't been sympathetic to her I still would have done it, if only to see the looks on the Councilors' faces when I reported in. It was just as tough to get back out, but it was totally worth it."

He laughed along with her. It was the kind of laugh that reached down into his boots, making the ever-present knot of cynicism in his stomach loosen slightly. "You have brass, woman."

She drained the rest of her glass. "People started looking at me differently in the CIC after that day. But I did try to make it up to the Council, if for no other reason than to save Anderson from having to clean up my mess again. So I robbed the place blind before I left. Intel, equipment, credits, anything worthwhile something to the Council. For brownie points with the crew I found the Noverian Administrator holed up in his dome, this asshole salarian named Anoleis who had been up to some seriously illegal shit. I put him on his knees and shot him execution-style."

"Show-off." It was rare for Zaeed to get so engrossed in someone else's braggery, but he could have listened to her spin these tales all night. She was making it hard for him to hold onto his mistrust of her, even in the belly of a Cerberus ship.

"The Normandy crew loved it when I went vigilante. Most of the time, anyway. Who knows about this crew. That's why I wanted some mercs like you. There's an honesty in the up-front exchange that I'm never going to get with these Cerberus freaks." She poured another glass and offered to top his off. He nodded.

"You planning on hiring any others?"

"Just one for sure," she said. "A thief. This will be a pretty colorful bunch when we're done, so who knows if everyone will get along. I still have two more to pick up here on Omega, too. You were the easy one." She drained her full glass in one long swallow.

"Do you always drink like that?" he asked, feeling an unfamiliar surge of concern.

"Not to get drunk, if that's what you mean. Not that I've never done it before, but I got over that in my twenties." She shrugged. "You know."

"Yeah, I do."

"Figured you would. But ever since they brought me back, my enhanced biotic metabolism burns off the alcohol incredibly quickly. I'll catch a buzz at the bottom of this bottle and that's about it."

"Unexpected bonus."

"An expensive one."

Then he asked the question that had been burning in his mind ever since she contacted him. "They said you were dead when the Normandy went up. What happened?"

"No, I was dead. I spent ten weeks floating in deep space in my enviro-suit, from what they tell me."

"And you believe them?"

"The suit had a leak. That part I remember. Vividly. No way was I rescued in time. Cerberus decided to play god to bring back the 'savior of humanity' to fight the reapers with their sick, distorted version of science. Fuckers should've let me be. It was a good day to die."
Goddamn, she was a tough bitch. "I'd like to hear about that sometime."

She stared at him, her face frozen into an expression he didn't know how to interpret. He realized with a twinge of regret that she didn't have any reason to feel the confidence in him that he was beginning to feel for her.

"I'll tell you that story," she finally said, "if you tell me why you've got a prosthetic covering half your face."

It was time to back off, he decided. "That's a long story, and I still haven't agreed I'd come. I don't know why Cerberus even wants me. I've killed more Cerberus operatives than I've been able to keep track of."

"Same here. Right before the Normandy bit it I was still finding pockets of thorian creepers and husks in Cerberus labs. Ever heard of creepers?"

He shook his head.

"Aptly named creatures, let me tell you. Cultists and supremacists always turn my stomach, but Cerberus wins the prize. And the Illusive Man is the worst of the lot. He's like that icky guy that said he'd give me a ride home when I was eleven and took the longest route he could find."

She didn't appear to notice the way his body tightened in anger when she said this. She just kept talking.

"Worse than their misguided mutations, though, is their genetic purification plan. They try to pretty it up with models like my first officer on this ship. But like my foster mother used to say, 'pretty is skin deep, but ugly goes right down to the bone.' That's why I need someone like you around. You're the most normal person I've seen since waking up in that Cerberus fuck-me laboratory."

For once he didn't try to defend his reputation. He was too engrossed in her nattering, which he found entertaining as hell and humorous in just the way he could appreciate. It was a combo he'd rarely found in other humans, and a far cry from his first impression of her.

She leaned forward on her elbows, laced her fingers together, and smiled sweetly. "I need someone I can trust. Someone that doesn't want anything to do with Cerberus, no matter what they offer. This is the kind of place where you need several sets of eyes in the back of your head, and I want you to be mine. I'll give you access to all the datafeeds onboard so that you can keep an eye on the other personnel, and you'll report anything you find directly to me. I'll pay an additional fee on top of Cerberus' generous offer for this extra job. Off the books, of course."

"How much?"

She shrugged. "Name it. And it doesn't have to be credits. It could be a favor. You'd be surprised what I can make happen."

Knowing her reputation - if this was indeed the real Shepard - he had no doubt that she could achieve whatever she put her mind to. Something special immediately came to mind.

"There is one thing that's been irritating me for a while. A bloke that needs to die, preferably in a horribly slow, painful way. With you on my side, I might finally be able to get close enough to do it. But I don't want anyone else on the mission. Just you and me."

"That's all? Done. Just send me the mission specs once we're out of here and we'll get on it right away. Everyone's made their requests to tie up loose ends before we jump, but I'll make yours a
priority. People need something to fight for, especially when the stakes are this big."

"I have plenty to fight for, it just won't be on this side of the Omega 4 Relay."

He mulled over their conversation while he moved his things from the room he'd been renting near
the quarantine zone. Shepard gave him a private cabin on the Engineering deck which had been
converted from cargo space. It was a surprisingly roomy space. It even had a porthole on one wall
showing the asteroid field outside. Flashing lights and signal relays had been attached to the
massive rocks, marking their paths as they spiraled and pirouetted around each other.

On the other side of the room, a window looked out over the yawning space of the shuttle bay.
Several curious gawkers on the floor below looked quickly away from the window when he
sauntered over to have a look.

Shepard sat at the workspace across from the door, her fingers moving with astonishing speed over
the keyboard. "I've routed the ship's internal security feeds to this terminal and cleared the room of
bugs. I had to manually disconnect the video and audio feeds and threatened the onboard AI with a
base code rewrite if she repaired them. We should be safe to talk in here."

"If you're sure." He strolled around the room, opening compartments. He jabbed a thumb at the
trash compactor on one side of the room.

She smiled wryly. "Sorry about the smell. It was the best private space I could find without giving
up my cabin."

"I've had worse."

"That reminds me," she said. "I did way too much talking earlier. I was hoping I could get you to
fill in some of the stories behind your dossier."

"Stories?" He laughed. "I'll tell you all the stories you want, love."

A little part of him froze when he heard his old pet name for Jasmine slip through his lips, but she
just smiled. She certainly looked and moved like his ex, but it was her ballsy attitude, so like his
own, that made him almost positive it was her.

But he wanted to be sure. And once he was sure, he knew what to do.
Daddy's Girl

Chapter Summary

After a disagreement with Zaeed on Zorya, Shepard undertakes a mission for Hackett.

Chapter Notes

Music: High Hopes by Pink Floyd

2.16.2186
Zorya
Shepard

Shepard glared at Zaeed across the shuttle as it lifted from the surface of Zorya, where multiple fires were burning out of control from their misadventures.

His look easily matched the ferocity of hers. "You bungled things up good. We've got to head to the Aquila System or Vido'll get to the relay before us."

"I bungled it? Your mission is officially off my list, Massani. If it means you want to be dropped off the next time we dock, let Joker know. I'm done with you."

He sneered. "You can't be the Shepard I heard about. Just a knock-off copy with the spine missing."

His vicious insult, specifically designed to hit her where she hurt the most, pulled her onto her feet. "You son of a bitch."

He stood up when she marched up to him, his chest puffed with fury.

She shoved him back a step. "This is my ship, my mission, my rules. And I don't let civilians burn alive to get back at one man!"

"Vido shot me in the face and left me for dead. He deserved what I had planned."

"Maybe he did, but those refinery workers didn't! They had families. Would you orphan dozens of children?"

He looked away from her intensity, his mouth tight.

"You're reckless, Massani. You could still be useful on this mission, but only if you follow orders. So I'll give you fair warning: you needlessly endanger civilians again and I'll space you."

His eyes snapped back to hers, searching. "You really would, wouldn't you?" A corner of his mouth lifted briefly.
"You're goddamn right I would."

He sat down abruptly, but not before she noticed something change in his face. She backed up to sit on the other side of the shuttle with a knot of uncertainty in her stomach. Why had he looked happy for a brief moment? It looked like he might even shed a tear.

Sicko. Men were baffling sometimes.

The shuttle shuddered as it landed inside the Normandy. Her ears popped when the air pressure equalized to match that of the shuttle bay and the air lock whined.

"I'm not gonna bail on my contract. I'll still do your surveillance for you," Zaeed said when she stood up. "We can talk about payment later."

She swallowed the last of her objections and nodded. "Good. Let's put this behind us for now. We have nastier varrens to put down."

"Agreed."

"Commander, I have Hackett on the comm. I've sent the feed to your quarters."

"Roger that, Joker." She turned to Zaeed. "Get cleaned up and we'll discuss our other business after I take care of this. I want a report on the intel you've gathered." The airlock popped and swung open, and she walked away without looking back.

Hackett didn't seem to want much; just an off-the-books favor to rescue a captured agent inside the Batarian Hegemony, a friend of his named Dr. Kenson. The presence of an Alliance ship in that part of space would without a doubt trigger war with the batarians, but the SR-2, with her stealth systems and Cerberus signature, could enter where they couldn't.

It seemed like a simple enough task. Shepard agreed without a qualm, even though the conditions of the assignment were that she go in alone since a team could attract too much attention. She hated working without a team. She caught herself staring off into space thinking about her old crew from the SR-1 when the comm went off again. This time, it was Miranda asking her for a moment of her time. Curious, she gave Joker the order to head for the Bahak System in the Viper Nebula, then made her way down to the office across from the Med Bay on the Crew Deck.

In her usual blunt manner, Miranda got right to the point.

"This side trip is an ill advised distraction to our mission and a blatant attempt by the Alliance to use you to do their dirty work."

So she had been listening in. Shepard couldn't help but chuckle as she settled into the chair in front of Miranda's desk. "You do understand the hypocrisy inherent in what you just said, right?"

"Cerberus isn't using you. We gave you a second chance to help humanity."

"And you don't think that a little goodwill to the Alliance might gain us some useful allies?"

Miranda responded carefully. "With all due respect, Commander, I'm beginning to doubt your motivations. Humanity doesn't seem to be much of a concern to you as we had expected, even with the reapers coming. We can't have you disappear into batarian space and leave the whole galaxy hanging unless there's a legitimate reason."

"I assure you, Miranda, I'm as committed to saving lives now as I've always been. I suppose I can
understand your concerns from a certain light, but Cerberus' motivations have always been self-serving and twisted. The Alliance can help this cause."

"We're on the same side. What will it take for you to trust us?" Miranda's skin flushed with frustration.

"We have a common mission, but we're not on the same side. I wasn't born yesterday. I've seen too many of Cerberus' sick experiments. You engineered my body and now you want to use me to build your empire."

Miranda didn't respond. Leaning back in her chair, she slowly paled.

Shepard managed to keep herself from smirking. Looked like something she said had hit a nerve. She stood up. "I'll do what I decide is right. Just don't expect me to get the Illusive Man's signature tattooed on my ass before this is done."

It appeared that Miranda didn't have anything else to say, so Shepard walked out.

After a shower and a quick meal, she headed down to Massani's makeshift quarters on the Engineering Deck. It had been two months since Zaeed had joined her crew. The seamless way he had fallen into her pattern of command - until today - led her to believe that he was still suited for this mission. He was a strong fighter, well worth the cost of his contract. She would shelve her distaste for his methods if he'd fall in line.

When she reached his cabin, he pulled out a few crates to use as a table and chairs while they talked and set a bottle between them. His archaic rifle, the one he affectionately called Jessie, was propped up nearby. It looked like he had been trying to repair it again. Tension still sparked between them, but as they talked their former camaraderie slowly returned. If nothing else, they were both professionals. When he was finished with his report, she told him about her upcoming solo mission.

"I can't ignore the chance to get in good with the Alliance again. Maybe even get my Spectre status back."

"Could be useful. Why don't I come with you on this one? I've spent some time in the Hegemony."

"Doing what?"

"Hunting down fugitives, assassination contracts. The usual." He shrugged.

"They didn't hire barians to do that?"

"Easier to say it isn't wrong when the tool you use is someone you don't respect. Barians aren't that different than humans."

Shepard snorted. "That's the truth. I've never felt used by the Alliance as much as I have by Cerberus in the short time I've been here."

"Then why do it? Take the ship and bugger off." He flipped a hand at the stars through the viewport.

"I can't say it hasn't crossed my mind. But…" She frowned.

"But what? You don't owe them."
She ran her hands through her loose hair, then stood up to pace. "It's not that. I want to fight the reapers, but it's different now. Sovereign is dead, but the reapers still sent the Collectors after me. Destroyed my ship, killed some of my crew. They'll come after me again once they find out I'm alive. They might even know already."

He sat back against the wall, waiting for her to finish.

"I already paid my dues. Said goodbye in that last moment. And now... I don't know, it's like this life doesn't have a purpose. It feels artificial."

"Do you want to be alive?" he asked.

"You know, you're the first person to ask me that." Chewing her lip, she considered her answer for a long moment. "I do want to live, but I feel like I shouldn't. I've already had a full life. And a noble death."

"You must have had it pretty good last time, then."

"What?" She stiffened in surprise. "Why do you say that?"

"You got everything you wanted out of life the first time. That's pretty goddamn rare."

"Got... everything I wanted?"

He held his hands up in surrender at her ferocious look. "Sorry, love. Didn't mean any harm. I hoped, is all."

She dropped back onto the crate across from him with a huff. "Sorry, love. Didn't mean any harm. I hoped, is all."

She dropped back onto the crate across from him with a huff. "Maybe I've painted it rosier in my head than it actually was. It was quite a shock to wake up again." She pulled a cigarette from one of the cargo pockets in her shipsuit and lit it.

"What the blazing hell is wrong with you? You're in an oxygen rich environment surrounded by ammunition." He reached across the crate to snatch the cigarette from her mouth. Shocked, she watched while he ground it out on the deckplate underneath his boot.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you not to smoke? It'll fucking kill you," he growled.

An awkward silence settled between them. She wasn't sure why the way he looked at her made her so uncomfortable, like she had to answer to him for all her misdeeds. Maybe it was that he was right; no one ever had told her not to smoke for her own good.

"Never mind," he said. He sat forward, leaning on his forearms. "You should take someone with you on this mission."

She snorted. Evidently he wasn't willing to let this point go. "Afraid I'll die and screw up your contract? Too bad. You'll just have to take your chances." She walked to the door. Just as she was about to step through, he called out to her.

"You sure you don't want me to come along?"

"It'll be fine. This one looks in-and-out."

"Just be careful. Those are the missions that always go to shit."

Massani proved his worth as a prophet. Her simple mission turned out to be anything but.
After the *Normandy* came through the Bahak relay, Joker covertly flew to the asteroid belt near the coordinates Hackett had sent. Shepard took one of the shuttles to the secret base Dr. Kenson's team had built into one of the larger rocks, a peanut-shaped asteroid that was nearly large enough to be a planet.

She hacked her way into one of the airlocks and ran a full scan of the base. The human team had built it mostly under the surface, clearing out domes within the protection of the metallic rock. Not all of them were pressurized, but they were connected by so many winding tunnels that it would have been difficult to defend. Poor planning on the part of Kenson's team, but most of them were scientists, not soldiers.

The asteroid was blasting out of the belt at ever-increasing speed under the power of six powerful plasma engines. The humans were being held in a single area in the lower levels, under guard by the batarians that had taken over. There were around thirty batarians on the base, most of them in Engineering. It looked like they were trying to redirect the asteroid's course, but whatever they intended was not of her concern. She had her objectives.

After plotting out her route to the holding area, she crept through the cold tunnels, covertly taking out any guards she came across and hiding the bodies. But as she pulled one into a nearby storage room, she noticed something in his hand. Expecting intel, she activated the small datapad. The device contained a series of pics of the guard's family, including a little six-eyed baby. Shutting it off, she looked at him for a long moment, then closed all of his eyes. She swallowed over and over, trying to get a grip before she ducked back out into the passageway.

After a few minutes later, she reached the lab where the humans were being held. Dr. Kenson was among them, a woman about Hackett's age with white and black brushed-metal colored hair, its severe cut matching her attitude. The team was plainly cowed by her. When Shepard hacked the lock and opened the door, they waited until Kenson gave the order to move, then jumped into action when she did.

Shepard gestured back the way she had come. "Let's get back to the shuttle before the batarians figure out you're gone. It'll be a tight fit with all of you, but we'll make it work."

Dr. Kenson steered the others in the opposite direction. "No, we have to get to Engineering. It's critical that the batarians aren't permitted to take the asteroid offline."

Shepard ran alongside her. "Do you have any weapons? There are more than twenty enemies down there."

"No, but it's not a problem. We'll just vent the chamber, then refill it."

It was a callous plan, but effective. Shepard didn't argue even though it didn't sit well with her. The image of the batarian infant was burned into her brain. She wanted to be done with this mission.

The others stood back and let Shepard disable the guards, running past without looking back while she gently lowered their bodies to the ground. They entered the darkened lab off to one side of Engineering a few minutes later and the scientists immediately took over the consoles. Shepard stopped to squint through the window to the cavernous area beyond.

The six engine ports stood like sentinels in a circle around a central object, their cores pulsing with energy like a heartbeat. The object in the middle glowed with each pulse, greenish tendrils shooting through its tendrils. It looked like it had been carved out of blackened glass. Behind it on the wall, an enormous digital display showed a countdown with just over thirty minutes left. The batarians inside were feverishly trying to shut the engines down.
"What is that thing?" Shepard asked, indicating the strange object in the middle of the chamber. "It looks familiar."

"It should. It's reaper tech," Kenson answered from a few stations away.

Shepard's head snapped around to look at the older woman. "You've been working around it unshielded? You could have been indoctrinated!"

A roaring sound caught her attention. Through the window she watched with sickening horror as the batarians tried to get to the exit as the oxygen was siphoned from the room. Even though she knew this had been coming, it was difficult to watch. Her face contorted in empathy while the batarians choked out their final breaths.

Ashamed, she turned from the spectacle, knowing all too well what it felt like to die that way. It felt wrong, so wrong, to let this happen. And yet, if they had let her, she would have shot them one by one to compete her objective.

"There," Kenson said with a satisfied smile. "All clear. Come with me, Commander. There's something I need to show you."

"Are you nuts? I'm not going in there."

"A brief exposure won't indoctrinate you."

"We have to get going. There could be a batarian ship hiding in the belt somewhere."

"This won't take long."

Shepard hesitated, glancing at the object in the other room uneasily. In spite of all of the warnings she'd received, this hadn't been a difficult mission. She was under her estimated time.

"So long as it's quick."

The Engineering Bay re-pressurized. When they entered, Shepard couldn't tear her eyes off of the twisted object in the center of the room. Kenson noticed her arrested look.

"Amazing, isn't it? We found it floating in the belt and brought it here."

"What does it do?" Shepard asked. The lights flowing up to the tip of the object were hypnotizing, like a liquid metal flower about to burst into bloom.

"Come closer, I'll show you." Kenson waved her forward.

The last thing Shepard wanted was to get closer, but a sharp buzzing in her head drowned out her logical protests. Her boots shuffled forward, scuffing on the stone surface.

A familiar intrusion slithered into her mind, a deep voice whispering her worst fears. Reaper.

She gasped, jerked her head back, and stumbled backward. A beam of energy erupted from one of the tentacles, piercing her. In a rush of information that seemed to light her brain up from the inside, she knew the whole story.

The reapers had been less than a few weeks from coming through the nearby relay when the humans had discovered the object. Kenson had tried to resist the reaper indoctrination and had set this asteroid on a course to destroy the relay, but before it reached its destination she had become indoctrinated. Images of the batarian's invasion followed. The aliens had been in a rush to disable it
and save their nearby colony on the second planet in this system, Aratoht.

No wonder they had been so ill-prepared for her rescue attempt. It had seemed too easy.

Then the reaper object revealed their intention of indoctrinating the Shepard and bringing their ultimate foe into their fold. It was a better revenge than Sovereign had imagined. That was why Kenson had brought her down here. And then the final piece of the puzzle exploded into her mind: the reapers were almost here. They would come through the relay in less than thirty minutes.

She had to warn the colony. Struggling even harder to wrest her control away, the light streaming from the object grew brighter and brighter. Her skull vibrated, her teeth chattering with effort as she resisted the reaper's will. With a final push that made her biotic implants zing with resonant energy, she ejected the reaper presence from her mind.

"Get a tranquilizer! She's breaking out of it!" she heard Dr. Kenson yell.

But even in her disoriented state, Shepard was more than a match for a team of scientists and a single SpecOps agent. Leaning heavily on her biotics, she choked down her distress, dispatching the humans as quickly and as mercifully as she could. Dr. Kenson was more of a challenge, but Shepard prevailed. When the humans lay broken and glass-eyed on the floor among the batarian corpses, the countdown read less than twenty minutes.

Shepard stumbled to the engine controls. Her hands hovered over the console for a moment, thinking of all of the innocent people on Aratoht. A mass relay had never been destroyed so it was hard to know exactly what would happen, but if she allowed this asteroid to complete its mission the resulting explosion would certainly destroy the nearby colony. If she didn't, the reapers would kill them anyway, then move onto the rest of the galaxy.

The countdown flashed off another minute. Forcing herself to concentrate, she redirected the asteroid to collide with the relay. When she keyed in the final sequence tears were streaming down her face, blurring her vision. She sent a message to the colony in the hopes that they could evacuate some of the population, but even as she did she knew there was little hope. There was no time to get away.

She brought the Normandy up on her comm. "Joker, I'm going to be running out of here hot. The reapers are coming through that relay any minute now."

"On our way," Joker responded.

With one final look at the twisted reaper device, she ran to the shuttle.

The explosion was more powerful than she had anticipated. A shockwave pulsed out from the relay when the asteroid struck, blasting all of the celestial bodies in the system out of their orbits. The atmosphere of Aratoht boiled away as she watched; it was a sight she would never forget. Racing the explosion, the shuttle landed in the Normandy minutes later and the ship immediately went to FTL speed, barely outrunning the shockwave.

She walked stiffly through the morose crew of the shuttle bay on the way to the lift. Someone addressed her, but she didn't answer. It felt like if she opened her mouth for any reason all of the grief would come pouring out. She had to hold it together in front of the crew.

As soon as the lift doors hissed shut behind her, she pulled her helmet off, revealing her reddened, splotchy face. She paced in the narrow space as it rose agonizingly slow toward her quarters. With a shout of frustration, she threw the helmet into the wall. It rebounded and hit the deckplate with a
"EDI, how many people were on that colony?"

"Intelligence reports indicate that the Bahak settlement consisted of more than 300,000 batarians."

It took her a moment to prepare herself for the next question. "How many of them were children?"

"Approximately sixteen percent of the population were underage dependents."

"I- I can't think- how many is that?"

"Sixteen percent of three hundred thousand is forty-eight thousand, Commander, but that number is approximate."

She covered her face with her hands. Great, shuddering breaths escaped through her fingers. Her knees felt weak; she dropped to the deck and her hands yanked spasmodically at her hair.

"Forty-eight thousand children," she gasped out.

"Shepard, without your actions the colony would have-"

"Shut up! Just shut up!"

Sickened, she doubled over until her forehead touched the floor. With a wordless exclamation, she poured her grief out onto the cold deck of her ship. Her desperate sobs resounded in the small space. There was nothing else to be done.

The doors to the lift opened on deck one. After a while she pulled herself up and walked into her quarters, wavering on the step that led down to her living area. She slowly blinked, her eyes roving to each corner of her perpetually messy quarters. In here, her dysfunction was painfully clear. This cabin perfectly reflected her private life. Always a disaster.

Her hands twitched restlessly at her sides. With long, angry strides, she walked to the bed and ripped the tangled sheets off and remade it with clean ones. She even tucked in the corners military-style, something she never did, then stuffed all of her laundry into the cleaning unit in the wall next to the fish tank. The empty bottles she gathered from the floor by the bed and the sofa clattered loudly when she threw them in the compactor.

During her frenzied cleaning, she came across her black box from the SR-1 crash site. Every commander had a box like this one containing their valuables. She didn't need to open it; she knew what was inside. Relics from another life.

Caressing the scratched surface, she recalled the way her ship had looked strewn across the frozen surface of Alchera when the Normandy traveled there last month. The memorial she had placed near the fuselage was ostensibly for her fallen crewmates, but it was for her, too. A part of her had never healed from that experience. It would probably never heal, a permanent open wound.

All of her fractured thoughts and feelings crystallized and she experienced a profound moment of clarity, cutting through the cloud of confusion and sorrow that had overhung every moment of the last few months. She could keep fighting them forever, be brought back again and again, and it wouldn't matter. If even one reaper was left, they could outlast every organic alive. She hadn't wanted to see it before, thinking that she could still stop them. But every organic would still die, sometime, somehow. The reapers wouldn't. There was no hope, for humanity or anyone else. The reapers would keep coming, "in waves that would darken the skies of every planet," Sovereign had
said. Only now did she fully realize what he had meant when he said that the lives of organics were
temporal and insignificant.

It was undeniably selfish, but the worst part was still why she'd been brought back; not because she
was loved, but because she could kill. It was her only legacy. Anyone worth remembering had
already mourned her and moved on. That's why this life felt so empty.

She pulled an empty crate out of the bathroom storage. Her Star of Terra she set inside along with
her N7 helmet and old dog tags from the SR-1, then she began indiscriminately tossing the rest of
her personal effects into the crate. When she cleared her desk, she paused a moment to pick up the
frame shoved into the corner. It was blank. She had never put any pictures in its memory. She
wished she had looked up a picture of James so she could see his face again. He'd been in the news
recently, the hero of a colony in the middle of nowhere that had been attacked. But it didn't matter
now anyway. There had never been any time for them.

After neatly stowing her armor in the other crate, she showered and dressed in a fresh uniform. She
combed her hair, tied it back, and brushed her teeth.

Looking around, it was as if she had never entered this room. Finally, something felt right.

She walked to her wall safe and took out her Carnifex Heavy Pistol. Quickly disassembling it, she
cleaned it and popped in a fresh heat sink with sharp, practiced movements. She was a killer; she
wasn't even afraid of what she was about to do. A pointless life deserved an end like this.

She walked to the center of the room and looked up through the viewport above the bed one last
time. She couldn't see the stars through the blue light of the FTL field that surrounded the ship as it
hurtled through space, so she closed her eyes. The rippling light filtered down to her upraised face,
shifting over her eyelids in shades of black and blue. A peaceful acceptance settled over her and
she sighed, dropping her chin.

With a feeling of déjà vu, a vision of James' face in the sunset in Rio flashed across her mind's eye.
Static roared in her ears as the cold barrel of the pistol entered her mouth, soft lips caressing it in a
final kiss.

Zaeed had been pacing ever since he heard she was back, hoping she would come down to talk to
him. He felt like he should apologize for what he had said in the shuttle.

Deciding he'd waited long enough, he walked to the lift outside of his quarters. The doors opened
and he noticed Shepard's helmet and gloves on the floor. When he picked up the helmet he noticed
some moisture on the decking underneath. His fingertips touched the small puddle on the floor.

"Where's Shepard?" he asked without looking up.

EDI answered. "Commander Shepard is in her quarters. She is behaving strangely. I believe she
may require assistance."

"You believe?" He never thought he'd hear a tone like that in an AI's voice. Something had to be
up. He punched the button for deck one. "What's she doing?"

"When she returned from the last mission, she grew very emotional."

He nodded. She had seemed upset when they'd spoken before she left. "And?"

"She cleaned her quarters."
"That is strange," he commented. The lift stopped and the door opened.

"Then she stowed all of her belongings in a crate and proceeded to clean her sidearm."

Cursing, Zaeed dropped the helmet and ran.

In the middle of her quarters, she was just raising the weapon to her mouth. She must have been far gone not to even hear him enter. Zaeed tackled her headlong and wrestled the pistol from her grip. She was so shocked at his intrusion that it took her a moment to respond.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, Massani?" she yelled, jerking herself upright.

"I'm not going to stand by and let you do this," he said, rocking to his feet. Body prickling with adrenaline, he watched her for sudden movements, expecting a fight.

Marching to the entrance to her quarters, she pointed to the lift through the open door. "Get out. Before your name is the last one on my kill sheet."

He stomped up the step that led to her door and planted his feet. "I'm not going anywhere, Jasmine. I left you once but I'm not gonna do it again."

Her arm dropped. The anger drained from her face. "What did you call me?"

"Your name, you daft twit. The one I gave you when you were born."

A thundering silence passed as she processed this. "No," she finally said. "You're full of shit. I don't know where you heard that name, but I'm not falling for it."

"Where I heard it?" He gave a humorless laugh. "It was my mother's name."

Without taking her eyes off of him, she opened a comm to the Lab. "Mordin, you awake?"

"Of course. Just finishing processing the samples from-"

"Listen up. I want you to pull the material I gave you before and run another test."

"Previous tests were one hundred percent conclusive, Shepard. You are not a clone. There is no redundancy in the-"

"I want you to run a genetic match between me and Zaeed Massani."

His voice perked up. "I see! Check for paternity, correct? Simple request, but no need to run the test. I already matched you the last time I ran the clone sequence."

"You already knew? Why the hell didn't you tell me?" she shouted into the comm.

"Thought you knew. Or didn't want to know. Human genealogy tracking system of name exchange promotes error. A more accurate method would be similar to-"

"Shepard out." She shut down the channel and stared at the floor, breathing hard through her nose. "You left," she said without looking up.

"I didn't want to. Jessica kicked me out."

Her head jerked up. "Why would she do that? Do you have any idea what it was like for us after you left?"
"You think I wanted to go? If she'd been anything like me I think she'd've killed me instead. She wouldn't even let me see my own son when he was born."

"Mom? Hurt someone? You've got to be joking." Then her eyes narrowed. "What did you do to piss her off that much?"

"I fooled around on her." He rubbed the back of his neck, his gaze slipping from hers. "A lot."

She groaned and covered her face. "I don't think I can handle this right now. How long have you known?"

"I suspected after I saw you in the vids a few times. You look just like your mum did. But I wasn't really sure you were my daughter until you threatened to space me this morning." Stepping into the hallway toward her, he pulled her hand away and placed one rough hand against her cheek. "I've never been so proud."

With a trembling hand, she covered the distorted side of his face, squinting at him as if looking through foggy memories. In a small voice, she asked, "Daddy? Is it really you?"

He just smiled.

A laugh burst from her throat, a broken sound that turned into a sob. "I'm such a fucking wuss," she sniffed.

"You're goddamn perfect, that's what you are. I knew it the first time I laid eyes on you." He touched his forehead to hers. "I had to come on this mission. I'd've done it for nothing. And I'm staying with you till the end. Understand?"

She nodded.

He pulled her into his arms. Slowly, the stiffness left her body and her arms wrapped around his chest. Her breathing grew heavier. As he stroked her hair, her back began to shake with the long-suppressed sobs of a lonely child.

Keeping an arm around her shoulder, he guided her back into her quarters. "Come on. You've had a rough day, love. Let's go have a drink and talk things out."

Two decks below, Miranda shut off the feed and sat back in her chair, wiping the moisture from her eyes.

When they had spoken earlier, Shepard couldn't have known she was saying almost word-for-word what Miranda had said to her father before she'd walked out the door to join Cerberus. It had thrown her more than she was willing to admit. And now, watching this reunion, she was overcome with a longing for the kind of love and acceptance Shepard was experiencing at this moment.

"EDI, I want you to take all of the footage of Shepard from the last day and permanently delete it. Don't send it on to Cerberus HQ."

"Yes, Ms. Lawson."

Was there a hint of satisfaction in the AI's voice? No, she must be imagining it.

Miranda took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Something had materially changed in her universe in the last few minutes. What that meant and how it would alter her relationship with Shepard
remained to be seen.
Chapter Summary

Shepard and Zaeed talk on the eve of their trip through the Omega 4 Relay; we find out what James has been up to in the meantime.

Chapter Notes

Music: Wish You Were Here, Pink Floyd; Schism, Tool
Full story playlist is linked to the author's profile

7.27.2186
Zaeed
Normandy SR-2

Zaeed found Shepard in the Starboard Lounge on the long couch, clutching her knees to her chest like a child. She gazed serenely through the viewport, the starfield brilliant with the many celestial bodies in the Omega System.

He stood in the doorway, just looking at her for a moment before clearing his throat. "Want some company?"

Her head lifted at his voice. "Of course. Always, if it's you." She sat up and patted the cushion next to her, brushing at the drop of moisture that twinkled on her cheeks in the dimly lit room.

"Nerves about Omega?" he asked as he sat down.

"No. It's not that."

"Bahak again?"

"A little. It never really goes away. I was actually thinking about Mom."

He had been about to put his arm around her shoulders, but he halted mid-movement and dropped it, his mouth tight. "You're on about this again? I told you what happened."

"I know there's more to it. You haven't said a word about it since that first night, months ago. Now that we're about to go through the Omega 4 Relay, I need answers. I may never get another chance."

His steely eyes fixated on the starfield. "You were with her longer than I was."

"I was just a child, and I've blocked a lot of it out. It was just too painful to think about. I'm beyond that now, though. How did you meet?"

He sighed, releasing the last of his objections to dredging up the memories. "I got hired to escort a
megaton of red sand into the Argos Rho cluster. She piloted the cargo ship. It wasn't more than her third or fourth job. She'd run away from home on Mars to find adventure. We were both kids, not even eighteen years old."

He shook his head in wonder at the memory. "Cripes, she was something else. Redhead, killer body. Smart as a salarian engineer. Got these little dimples when she smiled - yeah, like that."

"Dad!" Shepard slapped his hand away when he moved to touch her chin, but he could see she was pleased.

"She laughed at my foul jokes," he continued. "Thought I was some tough shit, punk that I was. In my experience up to that point, women were harridans or harlots. Jessie seemed like she was from another universe. An angel. I was done for minutes after we met. I mooned over her like a goddamn pup."

He was warming up to the tale, gesturing with his hands as he spoke.

"Not three days into our mission I was starting to make some real headway with her when we were attacked. She did some crack flying through the Hydra system Kuiper belt, but they had a faster ship and bigger guns. So we end up limping out of the belt on one engine. They boarded, took her prisoner, and started working me over to find out where the smuggling compartment was while the others searched her ship." He chortled. "I was such a hothead prick, mouthing off so they'd ignore her. Just made it more obvious I was trying to protect her."

"They used it against you?"

"'Course. I would have."

"What happened?"

"I beat my way through them to get to her. I thought a hero acted like an arrogant ass, so I said something or other that would have insulted most women, but she just laughed and said she'd be right behind me. She took out some mechs and saved my sorry ass a lot of trouble." He gazed thoughtfully out the viewport. "I'd never had a partner before. People tend to find me hard to be around."

"I can't imagine," she interjected drolly.

He ignored her jibe. "She hacked the mainframe of the pirates' ship and set the engine to overload. We took an escape pod, but they came after us in her ship. We had nowhere to go." He trailed off, remembering the way they'd desperately clung to each other.

"What happened then?" Shepard asked with the crooked smile of mischievous empathy she generally wore when he told her his stories. She looked incredibly young, despite the circles under her eyes. He couldn't help the smile that played at his mouth.

"Their ship blew up and took hers with it. When both the eezo cores went up we were flung back into the Hydra system. The air scrubbers had been damaged in the blast. We only had about four days of air and no way to call for help."

She was nodding in understanding, and he was reminded that she knew the feeling of seeing your air seep away all too well.

"What did you do?" she prompted him when he didn't continue.
"What did I do trapped in an escape pod with the girl of my dreams and only four days to live?" He smiled at the memory. "The first time I made a go for her back on her ship, she said a man would have to knock her off her feet to get a taste. Guess being in zero-gee helped with that."

She laughed.

"The Alliance found us when we had a day of air left and sent us packing to L.A.. For a little while we were so happy that I didn't even care that we were broke, until a few weeks in when we found out she was pregnant. Something about the eezo blast zone affecting her birth control implant."

"From the explosion. That must be why I'm biotic," Shephard murmured. "I always wondered."

"I'd say so. In any case, that's when I enlisted. It was partly because the Alliance saved us, but mostly because we wanted to do better by you."

"I remember the day you left," she said. "I thought it was my fault. I cried."

"You threw a goddamn tantrum, is what you did. I was right there with you, but Jess wouldn't listen. Said she couldn't trust me anymore." He set a hand on her shoulder. "It was my fault, Jaz. Not yours. She was way out of my league, knew that from the beginning. Some days I didn't believe it was real, waking up with her."

"Then why did you cheat on her?"

"Hell, I don't know. How I was raised, maybe. My father'd screw anything on two legs. He must have done something right though, because my mum and sister loved him anyway."

She sat forward. "You had a sister? Where are they now?"

He patted her leg with a sorrowful look. "All dead, the lot of them. Sorry, love, but you're it for our family. We're a dying breed. Galaxy is getting too civilized for us."

"That's what Sovereign said too. That's why they harvest us. To put us in our place."

She seemed to contemplate this for a quiet moment. Zaeed wasn't sure what to say, not knowing what she was going through. In many ways, he could see that she was the tougher of the two of them.

"Who murdered Mom?" she asked.

"A couple of thugs working for this sonova bitch who loaned her the credits for her ship. Big rookie mistake, dealing with that crew, but she was impatient. Didn't want to pay her dues before getting her own ship. When they realized she was still alive and didn't have the money they made an example of her. But don't worry, I took care of them a long time ago. It was the least I could do."

"Good."

He put his rough index finger against her soft cheek. "Nothing would have stopped me from getting to you if I'd known you were alive."

"I believe you." Amusement was back in her voice. "I just wish Tom could have known you. He would have thought you were the best thing that ever happened to us."

"Oh yeah?" He tried to picture himself with his son, a daydream he hadn't dusted off in a while.

"Definitely. I know I do. It seems so obvious now who you are that I wonder I didn't pick up on it
right away. I keep having this fantasy of what it would have been like if we could have all been
together, traveling around the galaxy stirring up trouble with you taking point and mom at the
helm."

He felt the skin of his right cheek tugging over his prosthetic at the involuntary grin that came
across his face. "We'll get in the shit together on the other side of Omega 4, you and I."

"I wouldn't have it any other way. The rest of the crew has been pairing off, enjoying this last
night. You sure you want to stay? I know Kelly's been spending a lot of time on the Engineering
Deck listening to your stories. I don't want to cramp your style."

"You think I'd rather be humping some slag when I could be with my little girl? You're off your
rocker."

"Good." He froze when she reached up to run her fingers lightly over his ruined face. "And when
we're done with this, we'll go find Vido and fuck his world up. Together."

With a feeling of deep satisfaction, he held out an arm to tuck her to his side. As their final night of
peace drew to a close, father and daughter gazed at the stars that were their home, content with
each other's company.

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James
Omega Station

No one answered when James made his daily call to the Alliance on the secure channel. He waited,
then sent out the encrypted query message one more time. He tapped at his omni-tool impotently,
hoping there wasn't anything seriously wrong with it. The encryption script was the extent of his
programming capabilities.

Eventually he closed the channel and got ready for the day, pulling on his well-traveled light armor
set. All in all, this assignment wasn't so bad. He wasn't bored being undercover on Omega, hunting
for slavers. No matter who hired him he was fighting bad guys, so at least he got some exercise
while he gathered intel.

The doorchime rang. He checked the feed that displayed the exterior of his little apartment and
keyed it to open when he saw his partner standing there.

Brood stepped into the small compartment, the enormous krogan taking up an uncomfortable
amount of room once the door had shut behind him. "You feeling okay? You look like shit."

"Thanks. I'm just *muy soñoliento* after last night."

Brood nodded, though he didn't look convinced. "It was worth it, though. Takor and a few of his
Blood Pack minions are playing high stakes in the upstairs of Afterlife and we were invited," he
said. "Let's head up there and let them win a few hands. See what spills out when they get drunk."

James brushed his teeth, watching in the mirror as Brood sat on the chest next to the door. "You
think this has anything to do with the trouble Gavorn warned us about?"

"Don't know. Maybe, especially now that the *Normandy* is back from the Omega 4 Relay. Just
heard on the way over."

James spat into the sink and stood up, his upper lip curling back over his lip. "I'm sure the Illusive
Man will be relieved he got his prize varren back."
"She really crawled under your headplate, didn't she? You better not blow our cover over this. We're close to having the last few pieces fall into place."

"Hell, no. Let's get in place before the Cerberus wondergirl goes to see Aria. She never goes to the tables upstairs, we'll be fine there." Grabbing his weapon from the nightstand, he holstered it and pulled on his gloves.

Brood followed him out. "Good. I want to pay my debt to the Alliance and get back to my life."

They were deeply embedded in a game of poker with the Blood Pack lieutenants when Shepard arrived. Afterlife was already packed, the music thumping through James' feet and chair, but even with all the commotion it was easy to tell when she entered the room. The vibe of the entire place changed.

Through the slats of the second-floor balcony he watched her saunter into the room with her motley crew trailing along behind her. Heads turned as she walked up the stairs to the VIP room where Aria presided.

"Kace." Takor grumbled James' cover name. The batarian had called the bet, and was staring at James. "We're waiting. Unless you'd like to fold..."

James keyed his bet, but it was difficult to keep his mind on the game. His internal argument about whether to go down there and find out once and for all if it was really Shepard and why the hell she was working for the enemy was taking center stage over his assignment, which should have been the priority.

When he lost a particular large hand, Brood kicked him under the table and leaned in close to grumble in his ear. "You're not supposed to lose a few hands, not take a bath."

Takor's second, a krogan with a long scar over one eye, gazed over the railing at the display of revelry below. "I'd love to meet her on the battlefield," he said. "I hear it's rare that she even gets hit."

"Her luck will run out," Takor said from across the table, his throaty voice barely audible over the music. He craned his neck to look, then shook his head. "The Hegemony is bringing charges against her. It's been all over the extranet."

James twisted around to look where Takor had been glaring. She was dancing, celebrating her victory the way she did best. It looked fun, even if her company was despicable. As he watched, she threw her arms around an older mercenary. She laughed as he kissed her cheek affectionately. The merc watched her with open admiration as she flamboyantly announced that she was buying a round for the house.

"Who's the man in yellow armor?" he asked the others.

"That's Zaeed Massani," a nearby turian in Blue Suns armor answered as he called the bet. "I went up against him in the Krogan DMZ once. I was the only one that made it out. He has a thing for killing mercs, especially Blue Suns."

"Ironic," James commented, noting the faded Blue Suns tattoo on Massani's neck. "Looks like they're more than crewmates."

"I think Kace wants to go talk to the Commander." Takor asked, all six of his eyes squinting at James suspiciously. "I hear she's attractive - for a human."
"Cerberus? She's not my type. I'm not into terrorist *perra.*" Turning around resolutely, he applied himself to the game and his mission. Anyone who worked for the Illusive Man was bad news - and Shepard working for him left a foul taste in his mouth that he thought would never wash out.

Unable to concentrate of the game and his mission, his losing streak worsened. His opponents grew steadily drunker, but every time he and Brood managed to guide the conversation toward the topics Gavorn had mentioned at their last meeting, some antic of Shepard's on the main floor caught their attention. James wasn't sure whether to hate her or just be pissed at her, so that before long he was ready to start swinging the next time he heard her name.

Shepard was at the main bar buying rounds when Omega's resident reporter for the extranet appeared with a vidcam floating behind her. James tried not to pay attention as she introduced her crew, taking special pleasure in making sure she pointed out what part Massani had played. James couldn't hear what she was saying, but he was sure that it was a glowing account of his heroism from the adoring expression on her face as she linked her arm through the grizzled merc's.

A commotion at the entrance stopped the celebration. Shouts drowned out the music and the bright lights from the vidcam swung across the crowd as Alliance officers began pouring into the room. The music stopped. Aria stood up from her couch and signaled her men, then disappeared through a doorway in the back of the club.

Shepard was shoving Massani away, pointing to the door Aria had gone through and speaking heatedly. He looked like he didn't want to leave, but nodded and ran off before the Alliance officers reached them.

Shepard was flushed with humiliation as the Alliance officers, led by none other than Anderson himself, handcuffed her with the floodlight of the extranet news camera trained on her face. In the sudden hush of the nightclub, James could hear every word Anderson said.

"Commander Shepard, I'm placing you under arrest for the destruction of the Bahak colony, for collaborating with known terrorists, for-

The list went on and on. What was Anderson's game, James wondered? At least now he knew why he hadn't answered this morning. They must have been hiding in the system somewhere, waiting for the *Normandy* to dock. They wouldn't want to get caught in a space battle with the *Normandy.*

Brood put a hand on his shoulder. "Come on, Kace. Let's get out of here before they spot you."

"The Alliance after you too?" Takor asked him as he cashed out his chit. "Let's move our game down to the Bloody Rag Bar on the sixteenth level. I'd like to hear about it."

James ducked out of the side entrance with mixed feelings. It was the first time Takor had ever shown a positive interest in him. Maybe now he'd get somewhere. But he had to pull his head out of this funk, almost overwhelming now that she was physically nearby. This chance might not come again.

"Keep your head in the game," Brood murmured in his ear as they made their way through the back alleys to the lower levels. James shrugged his hand off angrily.

But James' jaw was still tight with barely-contained frustration and anger by time they reached their destination, a seedy and smelly establishment the Blood Pack frequented. Shepard's presence was an unwanted distraction, nearly screwing up his assignment a dozen times in the last few hours.
He should have known better than to think that the news wouldn't follow them. Even in the Blood Pack dive, Shepard's arrest was all anyone could talk about. The Blood Pack mercs gloated while the vidcomm over the bar recounted her arrest. The reporter's cam had caught the exact moment her tired but victorious face changed to horror and shame, which the mercs played and replayed with glee. Takor evidently forgot his interest in James' alleged past with the Alliance as the reporter's voice repeated Shepard's heinous crimes.

"At least they don't have anything like that on you, Kace," Brood said, attempting to get the conversation back on track by referencing James' supposed checkered past. "What were the charges again?"

James opened his mouth, but Takor interrupted. "If they had been anything like hers, we'd have heard of you. I'd give every credit I have to see the Alliance turn her over to the Hegemony." The batarian let out an evil laugh. "Just wait till I tell you what they'd do to her..."

While the batarian warlord described the horrific ways the Hegemony treated war criminals of her calibre, the reporter was still talking in the background.

"In addition to the charges, Shepard's relationships with known criminals such as Zaeed Massani have put her under particular scrutiny, making legal counsel suggest that she is likely to be punished severely for her crimes..."

James stood up, shoving off Brood's warning hand, and marched two steps over to the vidcomm, ripping it off the wall with a roar of uncontrollable anger. The momentary satisfaction he felt was immediately swamped with shock and dismay at what he'd done. He was too impulsive; people had been telling him that all his life. He looked back at the table toward Takor to gauge his reaction.

"I knew you were a Shepard lover," Takor said, and reached for his weapon.

Before the batarian touched his holster, James was swinging the set up, catching the batarian across the chin. Every Blood Pack merc in the bar turned to look at him before they moved as one to attack.

Brood turned his back, not willing to sever his ties with the Blood Pack to defend a hopeless cause. James didn't blame him. Maybe he could still finish the mission if James didn't blow his cover. He did his best to hold his own as he fought his way to the door.

That was when the Alliance showed up and hauled him away. Evidently Anderson had bigger plans for him.

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**Shepard**

*Normandy Engineering Deck*

She was a prisoner on her own ship, in the same room her father had stayed in, the one with the garbage compactor on one side. Sitting on his cot with her head in her hands, she marveled at the irony of being in this position when mere hours ago she'd been on top of the world, savior of the galaxy.

Maybe her Dad would try to bust her out and go on the run. The thought made her smile.

The door opened. She didn't look up; only Anderson had permission to enter her 'cell'.

"Shepard, I've assigned you a bodyguard for the time of your trial. He'll be managing your security for your stay on Earth."
"Batarians making threats already?"

"Them, and others. You didn't make many friends when you blew up that relay. But I found someone we can both trust to watch over you while you're on trial. Lieutenant Vega."

Her head snapped up. James stood behind Anderson looking stoically reserved, but she could detect the anger that simmered under the surface. His eyes, the exact shade of green and earth she remembered, flickered from her face to Anderson's when she looked his way, obviously avoiding her gaze.

A long scar now marred his smooth face and a line of neatly trimmed facial hair framed his strong jaw. He also bore signs of having been recently in a fight, which only strengthened his appeal. Swallowing against her dry throat, she fought down some very unchaste thoughts and tried to listen to Anderson.

"The prosecution has gathered everything they could find to throw at you," he was saying. "There are things in their intelligence file that even I didn't know about. If there's anything you can refute, especially with evidence, I'll need to know as soon as possible."

"I'll do my best."

"Sir," James interjected, "how long is this going to take? You know how hard I worked to get in with the Blood Pack on Omega. I don't want to leave my partner descuidado."

"You were... you were here this whole time?" Shepard asked in disbelief. He didn't answer, keeping his attention focused on Anderson as he answered, but she noticed a flicker of surprise at her exclamation.

Anderson waved aside James' objection. "That assignment is no longer your concern. Brood can take care of it, he's proven he's trustworthy. That display of anger I witnessed probably burned a lot of bridges, too. No, you'll have to focus on this for now. I just hope we can get Shepard through this without being forced to turn her over to the Hegemony. Your job is to make sure they don't get to her before she's sentenced. Understand?"

James nodded curtly. He still didn't look her way.

"Good. I'll do everything I can to make sure she isn't extradited." Anderson turned to the door. "I'll give you two a minute to catch up. Just remember, when we get to Earth in a few hours, there can't be any indication that you know each other or the prosecution will give us trouble. I don't need the distraction, my hands will be full enough." He waited for them both to indicate they understood, then left.

Several minutes of thundering silence passed after Anderson left before Shepard realized that James was waiting for her to speak. She had to clear her throat again, twice, before she could talk. "I'm sorry I didn't message you. I didn't think you'd want-"

"Don't worry about it," he interrupted.

"What were you doing on Omega?"

"Same thing I've been doing for the last few years. Fighting slavers. And Cerberus, whenever I can." He glanced pointedly at the large Cerberus emblem on the nearby bulkhead.

"I see. Is this going to be a problem?" She meant for it to sound commanding, normally an easy stance for her to take, but instead it came out with a quaver.
"No. I know my job. So long as I'm watching you, no one will lay a hand on you. That's all you need to know." And he walked out without a backward glance.
Chapter Summary

The Alliance puts Shepard on trial while James acts as her bodyguard. NOTE: This chapter has been rewritten since initial posting. The previous version lacked impact.

Chapter Notes

Music: Disappear, Phutureprimitive

See the end of the chapter for more notes

12.3.2186
James
Alliance Command Headquarters, Vancouver

The sun shone brightly through the window, glittering off the high-rises near Alliance Command in Vancouver. James stood in the doorway of the bedroom inside Shepard's detention cell, a ritzy apartment reserved for dignitaries that found themselves on the wrong side of the law. He watched as she twitched and mumbled under the thin covers of her bed, her hand clawing against the sheet, uncertain about the wisdom of waking her at this moment. She was obviously having a nightmare.

Her words became more clear as her anxiety heightened. "No, no - get Tom, Dad! Never mind me!" she called out.

Hearing this name brought him out of his indecision. He strode to the side of the bed and shook her shoulder gently. "Shepard. Wake up."

Before her eyes had opened, she grabbed his forearm, her hand buzzing with biotic energy. She blinked rapidly, trying to focus on his face.

"Knock it off, Shepard," he whispered intensely. "Wake up. It's just me."

The biotic field dropped, but she didn't immediately release his arm. She looked into his eyes, her body gradually relaxing. She released a slow breath and squeezed his arm gently before letting go.

"What-" She coughed and cleared her throat. "What do they want now? Thought there wasn't going to be a session today."

"The Normandy sent the black box over. They want to go over the evidence on the Moorhead Massacre."

"So? Did they find anything interesting inside?"

He gave her a half-smile. "They can't open it. They want you to come down and unlock it."

She smirked. "Sometimes I do my job too well. Do I have time for a shower?"
"Sure."

He was waiting at the doorway with the rest of her security detail ten minutes later when she emerged from the bathroom.

"Clear the street as much as you can before the court session today. I don't want a frenzy like we saw last time," he was saying to Sgt. Nicky. Nicky nodded, but craned to look around him, his eyes alight with the admiration he always wore when Shepard appeared.

Her long hair was pulled back into a wet ponytail which dripped a dark streak down the back of her uniform. She went to the small kitchenette and poured herself a cup of coffee and downed it, black and steaming hot, in one swift gulp. It was the only technology in the room; they didn't even give her a digital clock out of fear that she'd cannibalize it and use the components to escape. Her abilities were too well-known not to take precautions.

"Okay, let's do this," she announced, and fell into step behind them.

After six months of guarding her this should have been routine, but James kept himself in a state of constant readiness, not taking anything for granted. Already there had been a number of assassination attempts on her, using everything from poison to bombs big enough to destroy a city block. James had to keep constantly aware, which was difficult enough when she was around. It had been a struggle to keep knowledge of the threat from her attention, but he didn't want her any more stressed than she already was.

She held out her wrists for him to cuff her. They completed this ritual in silence.

"Moving out," he said into his comm, and led the way through the security checkpoint down the hall to a small room in the area outside the detention center. Passers-by in this part of the building stopped talking and moved to either side of the hallway as they passed, forgetting their conversations to stare.

A group of officers were arguing in front of the office. A dozen security guards blocked their way.

"Clear the way!" James called out, shoving his way through to the officers. "What's the problem here?"

The square-jawed Chief of Detention Security addressed him. "We don't know what's in that box. It's impervious to scans. She could have a weapon in there. You may be charged with keeping the prisoner safe, but I'm responsible for keeping her from massacring anyone else."

"Shepard, what's in the box?" James asked over his shoulder, not looking away from the man.

"A datacube and some personal effects."

"See?" James said. "It's not big enough for a weapon, anyway. Let's just get this over with."

The Security Chief considered this, then looked at Shepard. "The prosecution is watching through a closed-loop vidfeed. Don't try anything funny or it'll be held against you as if we were in court. Understand, Commander?"

She nodded her assent. Her eye twitched slightly, as if restraining herself from further comment.

James led the way into the small room, which was furnished only with a square metal block of a table, on top of which rested a nondescript box about the size of both of James' fists, side by side. It was pitch black, as its name implied. The Security Chief stepped inside and shut the door behind
Admiral Anderson was waiting next to the table. "As your counsel, I've been permitted to oversee this. Go ahead and open it, Shepard. It gave our engineering team a run for its credits."

She held out her hands to be uncuffed. When her hands were freed she held out her hand for James' omni-tool. The Security Chief intervened again.

"She's not allowed to have one of those," he said, setting his hand on his sidearm.

"Do you expect me to unlock it with my mind?" Shepard asked sarcastically.

"This has been cleared with Command," Anderson said. "We don't have all day, chief."

Disgruntled, the man stepped back. Shepard immediately set to work on the box. James watched as her fingers danced over the digital display. The lid of the box popped up slightly.

Anderson reached forward, but she put out her hand to forestall him. "Don't touch. There's a fingerprint scan too." She set two of her fingers against the underside of the lid. A slight hissing sound came from inside. She waited for the sound to stop, then lifted the lid.

"Is it safe?" Anderson asked. She nodded. He opened the lid and lifted out a rectangular object wrapped in a faded black cloth. He pushed the cloth aside when he saw the datacube inside.

"Was this data illegally obtained?" the Chief asked, pointing at the cube.

"Most of it, probably." She shrugged nonchalantly. "It depends on whether the court decides being a Spectre means anything."

"How much data is in here?" Anderson asked, turning the cube over in his hands.

"A hair under three petabytes, last time I checked."

Anderson made an exclamation of surprise. "What did you do to accumulate this much data?"

"Backups from every terminal I've hacked since I enlisted. The Moorehead data is a good part of it. I copied the Sangre Carnal's entire database." She began to describe the file structure.

James was barely attending to this conversation. He was staring at the cloth which had been protecting the precious datacube. It was a threadbare t-shirt, about the size he was in his early teens, with the Urban Combat Championships logo and the words "San Diego 2172" emblazoned across the front.

But Shepard wouldn't meet his gaze when he cuffed her before they left the room. Still slightly discomposed by his discovery, James grabbed the t-shirt as he left, intending to add it to her small collection of personal effects in storage later that night. He led the way to the lift at the other end of the corridor with detention security trailing behind. Anderson disappeared in the opposite direction with the datacube.

"Looking forward to hearing the testimony today," the Security Chief said as they approached the lift. "I hear it's the last witness. For your sake, he'd better have something good. The facts are hard against you." He sounded like he took glee in this estimation.

James held his hand out when the Chief made as if he was going to follow them inside the life. "Sorry, sir," he said, setting his hand on the door to allow Shepard to precede him, "but security
rules are clear on prisoner transport. You'll have to wait for the next one. Mala suerte, hermano."

He heard Shepard's snort of laughter as the door closed on the man's suddenly angry face. James moved to stand behind her so he could see her hands, part of the security protocol he'd been given.

The walls of the lift were of polished metal, reflecting their faces back at them. He knew that she was equally as aware of the bugs in each corner of the small space, providing a live feed of everything they said or did. But none of the cameras were at the right angle to tell that they were looking directly into each other's eyes in their reflection. He stood almost a head taller than her, appearing slightly to the left of her shoulder in the mirrored surface.

His eyes asked her a question.

She looked down, then up, and lifted her chin.

A yes. So it was his shirt.

His eyebrows pressed together in further inquiry. Her face softened and she looked at the floor, looking strangely vulnerable.

Her hair was pulled forward over her shoulder, exposing the back of her neck. Just below the hairline, a tiny freckle beckoned. He leaned forward, coming close enough that when he breathed, the small hairs on the back of her neck ruffled. She shivered.

The lift chimed and came to a stop. James started and moved to the front of the lift, clearing his throat. "Sgt. Nicky said there was an even larger crowd out today. Be ready."

She nodded. He entered the code to open the door in the panel by his arm.

The roar of the protesters could be heard from the back of the lobby when the door opened. Nicky and his four-person crew were waiting just outside. "A word, sir?"

The others moved to guard Shepard while James stepped to the side of the room to hear Nicky's report. "We found two packages along the west side of the street. Not homemade like the last ones. We did a full sweep and didn't find anything else, but that can't be all they have planned."

"What are you thinking?"

"Sniper, maybe. Nearby buildings check out but with today's tech, they could be miles from here controlling a drone."

"I'll turn on my shield and we'll move quickly. I wish they'd let us take her in a car, just drive her one rooftop over."

Nicky snorted. "Yeah, but then they'd miss their daily spectacle. The batarians eat it up, I hear."

"Well, they won't miss their show today. It's hard to watch her go through this. But maybe it'll be over soon."

Nicky frowned, looking across the room at the rest of the security detail surrounding his hero. "Don't wish for that. The longer they draw this out, the better it is for her. There's no chance of a 'not guilty' verdict, you know."

"You think so? Why?"

"If they say she's innocent, the Batarian Hegemony will declare an all-out war on us. The Alliance
won't risk that to save one person. Not even her."

With a sinking feeling, he realized Nicky was right. James thought he must be either really naïve or really distracted to make it all this time without realizing it. Probably both. None of the evidence would matter one way or the other.

Waving his team into position, James activated his shield. "Grab onto my belt," he said. Shepard, immediately understanding his intent, tucked her hand behind the wide leather, pulling his shirt up slightly so her warm hand was in direct contact with his skin. The flickering field shone over her pale face when he glanced back at her. The electricity seemed to come directly from her fingertips instead of from the device on his wrist.

The shouting crowd surged forward when they stepped outside. Some flung insults at her and gobs of spittle sizzled against the shield as they passed by. The lights of the news cameras practically blinded them. James felt her grab his hip with her other hand and press her face between his shoulder blades. He helped the team push away anyone that came too close, reaching around with the other arm to hold her to his back protectively.

Once the door closed on the protesters when they reached the lobby of the court building, they took a moment to catch their breath.

"Are you alright?" James asked, putting his hands on her arms.

She nodded, but she always seemed disturbed after running that gauntlet. James got the feeling she wasn't as disturbed during a firefight.

Turning off the shield, he ordered his men into position and led Shepard to the courtroom doors. "Good luck," he murmured, and opened the doors for her before taking his usual position just inside the doorway. The rest of her bodyguards fanned out into the room.

Once she was seated, the female officer seated in the middle of the court-martial panel banged her gavel in the ancient call-to-order. "The prosecution may call their final witness to the matter of the Moorehead Station Massacre. Hopefully we can settle this today and get on with the greater charges."

The head of the prosecution rose. He was a short, thin man with an equally short and thin moustache. "The prosecution would like to call Mr. Cong Jia to the stand."

The crowd began to chatter loudly at this. The appearance of the drug kingpin was a surprise even to James; they should have mentioned this in his security briefing this morning. Shepard sat up straight in her chair.

Anderson stood up. "Objection! I was given no notice of this witness. We need to prepare our defense."

The prosecuting attorney held up a hand with a smile. "We notified you of our subpoena more than six weeks ago, but Mr. Jia was offworld. We were told of his arrival only an hour ago."

"Actually, it's Mr. Cong," an incredibly tall asian man said as he stepped into the room. "The surname comes first in my culture." He smiled graciously, but the smile didn't break the cold calculation of his eyes as they swept across the room.

"Er, apologies, Mr. Cong," the prosecuting attorney said, his arrogance evaporating under Cong's scrutiny. "Will you please have a seat? We are anxious to hear your testimony."
"Of course. That's why I'm here." With an elegant grace, Cong strode to the table that had been prepared to the right of the court-martial panel and settled in the chair.

The testimony began with parts of the story that they had already heard. Cong described Shepard coming to him on orders from her doctor to search out people from her past, and how he had given her a job outside of Alliance space. He declined to answer any questions about how they had originally met. His accounting of the Moorehead incident and the decimation of the notorious gang the Sangre Carnal meshed fairly well with hers; perfection didn't matter since it was hearsay in his case. It was the end of the story that they really wanted Cong to fill in.

The prosecuting attorney paced in front of the table where Cong was seated. "So you're saying that it was the fact that the head of the Sangre Carnal was testing the tainted drugs on enslaved children that drove her to commit this gruesome act?"

"Indeed. Though I wouldn't call it gruesome."

The prosecuting attorney ran a finger over his thin moustache to cover a smile. "I'm sure you don't, Mr. Cong, but we hold to a different morality."

Cong leaned forward, addressing the man directly. "You misunderstand me, sir. I'm not discounting the nature of her act; it was indeed a terribly brutal one. But necessary.

"I had employed Raul Duarte for a number of years as a distributor. Though I had heard of some unseemly deeds on his part, it wasn't unusual enough in my line of business at the time for me to heed it. But Shepard's act brought it home for me in a very personal way. My late wife had spoken to me often about the link between the drug trade and slavery. I hadn't wanted to see it; I never bought or transported a slave, you see. The practice is repugnant and indefensible."

"You weren't aware that your employees were engaged in the slave trade?" the prosecuting attorney asked.

"I wasn't, though I'm not sure whether I would have tried to stop him at the time. Not until Shepard 'cleaned house', as it were. When I had to step in to take over that side of the operation again, I was astounded at the depth of the connections I discovered between the slave route in that sector and the drug trade. I put some of my best people on outlining the problem. It didn't take long to see that Celie had been right."

"I see." The prosecutor looked amused. "No doubt you rushed to liquidate all your holdings." He turned to share an amused chuckle with the court-martial panel.

Cong smiled unkindly. "That's precisely what I did. I have a longer view than most investors, you see. By the time I managed to disentangle my finances with any shred of the slave trade, my business had changed considerably. I had far less actual property, but an enormous reserve of capital. It wasn't long before a project came along that seemed a much more worthwhile investment."

"And what was that?" the prosecutor asked.

"Ironically enough, it was proposed by my enemy, Cerberus. A little project called Lazarus."

Shepard's gasp sounded in the room, making heads turn.

The opposing attorney looked slightly dazed himself as he spoke to the panel. "My team and I will need time to consider the implications of this evidence," he said.
The woman at the head of the court-martial panel nodded. "Granted. Admiral?"

"We've been unable to get a reliable Cerberus witness about Lazarus," Anderson said, rising. "If the prosecution is finished, I'd like to ask a few questions."

The panel assented and the admiral walked to the center of the room, facing Cong in his chair. "What was the purpose of the Lazarus Project?" he asked bluntly. "It was mentioned many times in the Commander's deposition."

"The purpose of Lazarus was to bring Commander Shepard back to life so that she could fight the reapers," Cong said without preamble.

As always, the mention of the reapers caused a stir in the room, but coming from someone like Cong, for the first time it seemed to be received with legitimacy.

"And - pardon this question, Commander - why was Shepard chosen as the subject?" Anderson asked.

Cong lifted his chin, his voice scornful as he answered. "The Illusive Man saw only what she could do. He saw her killsheet, mission specs, her strength and beauty. For him that was enough. He wanted the best of humanity to lead the fight to our most powerful enemy. But me, I knew better.

"I knew that Shepard is so moral, so protective of the innocent, and so pure in motives that she would never be tempted by the Illusive Man's dogma of human supremacy. Deep down, she feels responsible for every child in existence, of every species. And there is nothing so fierce as a protective mother. She was the only choice, in my eyes."

Cong smiled around at the rapt audience and sat back in his chair. "To save humanity is the smartest investment I've ever made, even though it did consume more than sixty percent on my fortune. In the long term, it will pay off."

Anderson questioned him for a few more minutes, than thanked him. When Cong rose from his seat, Shepard also came to her feet. In the sudden hush of the room, she bowed deeply to the older gentleman. He bowed back, not quite as deeply, and left.

The session broke for lunch. Shepard ate hers in a nearby conference room, as she usually did. She was very quiet. When James and his team were called to accompany her back an hour later, they were told that the panel was prepared to issue a partial sentence.

"Already?" Shepard asked. "With only an hour's deliberation?"

"I guess so," James replied. "But I thought they wanted to prolong the trial as long as possible."

They exchanged a worried look as James opened the door to the courtroom. He moved to stand beside the door like usual while she took her seat in front of the court-martial panel, but she kept casting her eyes back at him. He felt she wanted him to come stand next to her.

The head of the panel announced, "During the break, the panel watched the relevant footage from Moorehead provided by the Commander's datacube. In light of what we witnessed, plus her association with Mr. Cong and other notables such as the Illusive Man and Zaeed Massani-"

Shepard moved to rise, her face angry, but Anderson's pressed her back into her seat with one hand.

"-we have ruled that at the very least, in response to the callous way in which she disposed of the lives on Moorehead, she the defendant should be stripped of her rank, her commission, and her
command. The *Normandy* has been impounded for some time in an Alliance dock. She will now become part of the Alliance fleet under someone else's command."

"You can't do that!" Shepard shouted, shoving Anderson off. "The SR-2 doesn't belong to the Alliance. She's my payment for going through the Omega 4 Relay. The *Normandy* is mine!"

"Then you admit that it was a trade for waging war outside of your commission as an officer of the Alliance Navy," the officer on the left of the panel responded dryly. "That's mercenary activity, pure and simple, and strictly against Alliance regs. You may skirt that issue with Moorehead, but you can't deny this."

"I was legally dead, not even on Alliance rosters," she retorted. "And a Spectre besides!"

"Shepard, sit down," Anderson was saying, pulling on her arm. But she wasn't finished.

"And I won't hear a word against Zaeed Massani or anyone else of the *Normandy* crew. Every one of them are heroes that put their lives on the line to save all of you unappreciative assholes!"

James would have smiled at her impassioned response if he hadn't been hit again with a powerful pang of jealousy at the mention of Massani's name. He looked away from her, staring out the enormous window behind the panel that looked out over the city, trying not to let his anger show. Outside, the usual thick flow of traffic was almost totally absent, abnormal for this time of day.

The door beside him burst open. A young officer ran in and carried a message to the head table.

"How can this be?" the officer who had accused Shepard moments before gasped as he read the message. "We had no warning."

He stood up and turned on the nearby vidcomm. The screen flickered to life, showing newsfeeds from all over the world. They all depicted enormous ships descending from the sky and laying waste to the unprepared human cities. The reporter shouted his frantic commentary over the screams of panicking civilians.

"No warning?" Shepard asked incredulously. "I've been screaming my head off about this for the last five years. The reapers are here, people, time to get your head out of your asses!"

"How did they get past our defenses?" the woman in the center of the panel asked, staring at screen as a building in Paris was reduced to rubble in seconds with a single blast from a reaper's main cannon.

"Indoctrination. They always have people on the inside. Have you not heard anything I've said?" Shepard exclaimed.

"What can we do?" someone in the audience asked, and they began pushing their way toward Shepard, each of them determined to get an answer. James saw her head crane above the crowd, looking for him, when the window darkened.

A half mile away, an insect-like juggernaut gracefully lowered from the sky. The panels on its front slid aside, revealing a bright red hole. The glow brightened as the cannon prepared to fire.

"Get down!" Shepard shouted.

The blast struck the floor beneath them, blowing the glass into the room and knocking everyone back against the wall. A second blast hit the ceiling and the supports fell inward. The entire building rocked and huge chunks of the building fell through the ceiling, filling the air with
choking dust.

James came to a minute later, reeling from the concussive blast. He could hear groaning in the room all around him. Stumbling, he made his way to the last place he’d seen Shepard, but she wasn't there. He found her pinned behind a column on the nearby wall, her face ashen with pain.

"Hang tight, Lola," he said. "I'll get you out of there."

"Get the others," she croaked, but he ignored her. Grunting with exertion, he used all of his strength to push the column out of the way. She collapsed to the floor. In the background, he could hear the reapers continue to wreak havoc on Vancouver, like they were all over the world.

Nicky was just outside with the rest of the team helping survivors, but they came running when James appeared with Shepard in his arms. He set her down gently. "She's okay, but she needs medic gel. I'm going back to help the others."

James was glad to discover that Admiral Anderson was among the survivors. Anderson immediately sought out Shepard for counsel.

"There's nothing we can do except fight to the last person," she answered grimly. "I fought with the best ship, the best equipment, and with surprise on my side, and I barely made it back alive from Omega. The Collectors... they were building something."

"What was it?" Anderson asked.

She grimaced at the memory. "Something horrible. I'm not quite sure how to explain it. It was - it looked human, but it was enormous. Like a reaper. It had organic material running through its veins, liquidated from all of those human colonists. That's why the Collectors were cleaning our human colonies. They were looking for raw material to procreate."

"It looked human?" Anderson asked with revulsion. She nodded.

"What were they planning to do with it?" James asked.

Before she could answer, another blast ripped through the building. The floor trembled and tilted. "We have to get out of here!" Anderson shouted. "This way!"

The admiral was shouting for pickup before they reached the gaping hole in the side of the building. "The Normandy is going to meet us at the docks," he shouted over the cacophony. "She won't stand a chance against that reaper."

"Let's go, then," Shepard said, seeming to come back to life at the mention of her ship. "Someone give me a sidearm. We have reapers to kill!"

The ground was swarming with the reapers' minions; husks, marauders, and other genetic monstrosities seeking to kill humans with no remorse. Everyone fell in line behind Anderson, but Shepard was always the first to react when an enemy came into view. Even the admiral looked to her for guidance during the many firefights they encountered while on their way to the rendezvous point.

When they finally reached the dock the Normandy swooped in, the cargo bay doors open to catch them like a bird reaching out to pluck some very desperate worms from the ground. But as they were jumping on board, Anderson stepped back.

"You go ahead. I have to go back and help them organize the defense. Good luck, Commander"
Shepard.” He tossed her a set of dog tags and added, "You're reinstated."

Before she could object, the Normandy veered away and closed the ramp. Breathing heavily, James watched her, not sure what was supposed to happen now.

"Commander," a voice came tinny through the overhead speaker, "there's a comm coming in for you. I've sent it down to the terminal."

Walking over to the lift, she keyed in a sequence and began talking to whoever was on the other end. "Miranda, are you seriously saying that you have something that could help?" she asked incredulously.

James listened with half an ear as he checked his team for wounds, his mind whirling with this new information. Miranda had refused to testify on Shepard's behalf, and now she was offering a secret weapon? He couldn't hear what was being said on the other end of the comm, but he immediately distrusted anything coming from Cerberus.

"We're on our way," Shepard said. "Joker, put in a course for London. Use the coordinates Miranda sent."

"You got it, Commander. It's good to have you back on board."

"Wish it were under better circumstances," she muttered, then turned when she heard James approach.

"We have to turn back. We need to get to Command and join the fleet," James said.

Her face hardened. "This is my ship and I'll goddamn take it where I want."

"That's it?" he asked as she turned away. "All these months, and that's all you have to say to me? We need to stay and fight. We can't go running off to a Cerberus compound."

"Miranda isn't in Cerberus anymore. Haven't you heard about the civil war?"

He leaned away from her. "No, I've been too preoccupied with what's been happening on Earth to keep up with Cerberus Daily News. And I'm not sure how you heard about it, either."

She began rooting through the armory and setting items off to the side. "People talk. I listened."

"So you're just running off to Cerberus again?" he asked, disgusted.

"I'm not joining them," she said as she holstered a new sidearm and tucked a rifle under her arm. "Miranda knows better than most what the reapers are capable of."

"That's a bullshit excuse. They're terrorists, Lola. I don't know how you can work with them."

"Commander, we're en route to London, but it'll take a few hours. We have to fly close to the water or we're too visible."

"Roger that, Joker," Shepard said. She gave James one more regretful look before boarding the lift. "We can discuss this after the mission. Hopefully you'll have a larger perspective by then."

The lift doors shut on his face. He stared the door, grimly remembering the way she'd acted in the elevator in Vancouver that morning.

"Well, if it isn't Lieutenant Vega," a voice said from behind him. James' head swiveled, his
"expression brightening when he saw a familiar face.

"Esteban!" James exclaimed. "I haven't seen you since you left Fehl just before the invasion. Where do they keep the tequila on this scow? I need a fucking drink like nobody's business."

"Don't ask me, I only come on board during working hours to refit the ground transports." Steve Cortez nodded toward the tank-like Mako on the other side of the cargo bay.

James frowned, glancing back toward the lift. "So they were already refitting it when they took her command away? That's messed up."

"Apparently the Alliance has their own agenda. But we have bigger problems, don't we? They had me wondering about this reaper business myself, but I guess we all know now. We have a better chance now that the Commander is back on board. I haven't personally served with her until now, of course, but the others who have talk plenty. It's hard not to believe what they have to say."

"Yeah. Whatever people say about Shepard tends to be true." He jutted his chin out, glancing back toward the lift.

Cortez let out a slow whistle. "What happened to get you so bitter? I've never seen you like this before."

"I dunno. Things have been shit ever since Fehl."

"I heard about that. I'm sorry I wasn't there," Cortez said sympathetically.

"I'm not. For the most part only the people in my shuttle survived. You would have been on the ground with the rest of the support personnel."

Nicky began guiding the team members to the lift. He nodded at James. "Don't worry, I'll take care of them, sir."

Cortez smiled. "He's a good kid. I'm glad to see he made it off Fehl too."

"Yeah. I don't know what I'd do without people I trust at my back. Shepard's really burning me up right now."

Cortez's eyebrows shot up. "Are you serious? Haven't you known her forever?"

"That's part of the problem. Hearing the testimony all these months, too... she had the right motivations, but she went way too far." He pressed his lips together, remembering the way she'd spoken to him just a moment before.

His friend snorted. "That's why she's so good. She gets results."

"But now she's taking us to a Cerberus base. They were behind the Fehl invasion, you know. It makes me sick to my stomach to get dragged into this, knowing who's waiting for us now."

"Maybe she knows more than you."

"Well, yeah, she definitely does. About Cerberus anyway." James rubbed the back of his neck, frustrated with his inability to convince his friend.

"Sounds like you've already made up your mind. Don't piss off the boss though, okay? She needs to focus right now. If we live through this, you can always ask her later."
"I guess so." Still frustrated, James went to the nearby worktable and began checking over the team's weapons. There was sure to be heavy fighting wherever they landed, and they had to be ready for anything where Shepard was taking them.

Shepard
Deck One

Her quarters looked different, devoid of the personal touches she had given them. Even her collection of ship miniatures had disappeared. The Alliance refit team had been busy.

But she didn't explore the room as she might have done in another situation. Instead, she tossed the weapons she's procured from the armory on the bed and dropped onto the sofa to think. She rubbed her face, distressed at the thought of all the civilians who were trying to seek shelter right now. Little did they know that there was nowhere to hide.

Still, it was nice not to have anyone watching her every movement.

"Commander, I wanted to say that it's a pleasure to have you back on board."

She smiled ironically. So much for privacy. "Thanks, EDI. It's good to hear your voice. Though I don't understand why it has to always be like this for me. It's like I'm always jumping from the frying pan into the fire."

"Garrus Vakarian once said that the people on this ship are always at the crest of the wave, and are the first to crash on the rocks."

Her gaze became unfocused as she listened to this. "Poetic. Sounds like him. When did he say that?"

"He was talking privately with Tali'Zorah nar Rayya on the vidcomm just before Omega 4."

"Then you shouldn't be telling me about it, EDI," she said with a bemused look on her face.

"Perhaps not, but he often spent time talking with her just before a particularly dangerous mission. It seemed to comfort him."

This made Shepard thoughtful. She wished she had time to go brave James' temper again. In the end she decided it was a bad idea, since he had already planted a worm of suspicion in her head about Miranda. The Illusive Man could have done something to her since they had last seen each other, like implanting a control chip.

As it was, she had plenty of work to fill the time; intel reports to examine, an examination of the landing site and reaper positions, and a briefing for everyone who was combat-ready. She'd take as many with them as she could, even though it left the Normandy vulnerable. This was more important.

"Miranda had better deliver," she said aloud.

"Agreed," EDI responded.

The conference room on the command deck looked nothing like the lab that Mordin had once occupied here. Cables and crates with tools still littered the space as the twenty-three crew members gathered in the small room. It pained Shepard to see the Normandy's beauty be stripped
bare of everything it had represented in her mind.

There weren't nearly enough senior officers on board. Shepard was acutely aware that her present crew had the wrong specializations for what they were about to do. The crew received her briefing with understandable anxiety.

Her security detail from Earth stood next to James, far more confident than the others. She was heartened by their presence, at least; especially one in particular.

She paced with wide steps in front of the strategic map projected on the wall. "I know this isn't what you thought you'd be doing today but remember that none of you are responsible for stopping the reapers. Just do the task you've been assigned. Don't try to be a hero. We need as many humans alive as possible when this is over. So no stupid risks. Understand?"

Exchanging nervous looks, many of the crew nodded.

"I'm sorry, I can't hear your head rattle. What do you say when a superior officer gives an order?"

"Yes, ma'am!" They shouted as one.

"That's better. You have your team assignments. I've chosen specific tasks for each of you that I know for a fact are within your capabilities. No matter what happens out there, I know that each and every one of you will give your all to complete your objectives. You'll keep your wits about you and follow the plan, but you'll think quick if the plan goes to shit. And the plan always goes to shit, so nobody come crying to me about not having the intel."

She pointed to the map of London behind her. "The base where we're headed is under this warehouse district on the south end. It's not an easy entry, but since people know we're coming we'll have some help. The reapers are mostly centered on their original landing zone, by the river here-" she tapped the wall, "-and here. They're moving in a steady line counter-clockwise from their original landing point."

One of the men raised his hand. "What does it look like out there?"

"Most places haven't been touched, but there's widespread panic. In areas where the reapers have been, nothing is left. They raze everything to the ground."

"I can't believe this," a woman still holding her toolkit said. "It happened so fast."

Shepard replied grimly. "It didn't happen fast. It's been happening for a long, long time."

James stepped forward like he had something to say. He opened his mouth, then glanced at the crew. He glanced back at her. She held a finger up.

"Dismissed." Shepard watched the crew file out, trying to catch their eyes, but most were too intimidated to look back.

When the others were gone, James gestured at the ground schematics that were up on the wall. "These people aren't going to survive for ten minutes on foot through that."

"Do you think I don't know that? Only your team has taken advanced combat training. But they're all I've got."

"This isn't right. We need to rejoin the fleet!"
Shepard laughed. "The same fleet that patrolled Citadel space while I fought off two front waves of reapers with just one ship? The same ones who made the entire galaxy distrust me right when they needed to listen?"

"Working with Cerberus did that. You've always been the poster child for the Alliance Marines, and all of a sudden you're talking like you hate the Alliance more than Cerberus does. I don't understand how you can do this." He jabbed his finger at the map on the wall.

With quick strides, she circled the table to stand in front of him. "The Alliance doesn't have the answers, though they'd like you to think that. I hate what the Alliance has become. It's the same old story. Corruption, scandal, politics. Just like every government in history. Cerberus was no different, only they let me act when the Alliance would have made me sit and stay."

She shook her head in dismay. "Sometimes I can't help but wonder if humanity has hit its peak."

He stared at her in increasing dismay. "What are you saying? That we should just let them come and kill us all? I don't buy that. You're cynical."

"Cynical?" She let out a short laugh. "Coming from you, that's something else."

"You want to know why I'm so bitter? It was Cerberus that called the Collectors to Fehl. They let everyone on that colony die to study the Collectors."

"I didn't know that." She wet her lips, taking a step back from him.

"Why should you? You were dead at the time. And then Anderson pulled me out of a long-term undercover assignment so I could guard you while you were charged with colluding with the people I hate the most. How was I supposed to feel about that?"

"But they were the only ones willing to give me what I needed to stop the Collectors! Now Miranda has built a weapon that can even the odds. I'll do whatever I have to do to save Earth. Even working with them! Don't you understand?" She stepped closer, determined to convince him. "The Collectors are gone forever because I chose to work with Miranda. It was a good thing we did."

His anger seemed to abate. "I guess. I've just been so angry."

"You had good reason to be. But it isn't because of me. I'm on your side. Jimmy, please." She took his hand into hers and came closer than she had dared in many months. "I've always been on your side. I will always be. I wanted so much to tell you that I..." She couldn't finish, but her eyes pleaded with him to understand.

He ran his hand over the strip of hair on his head. "You're my commanding officer now. What exactly do you expect to happen?"

"I didn't want to be reinstated. My love affair with the Alliance is over. I've had a taste of life without military rules and regs and I don't want to give that up."

"So you're not reenlisting?"

He looked so comically confused that her smile returned. "I want to do something besides fight. If we win this battle, I think I've earned some time off."

He regarded her in thoughtful silence as he absorbed this. "Are you going to want some company?" Turning her hand over, he stroked her lifeline.
She smiled crookedly up at him. "Definitely."

He tugged her closer, a smile teasing at the corner of his mouth. "Okay, Commander. I trust you. Whatever we find in London, I'll be right beside you."

She put her arms around his neck. "Of course you will. It's where you belong."

"I'll have to figure out some way to get rid of that cynicism too." He bent his head to hers.

As he kissed her, Shepard was reminded there is beauty in the ugliness of war, pleasure underneath pain, and fear of her own undoing every time she made herself vulnerable by opening her heart to someone else. But she also knew that when two people who sit at the spearpoint of events that affect an entire world share one of these profound moments, their love can become a symbol of hope for all of the beings who count on them.

Besides, she rationalized as the kiss deepened, she deserved a little happiness. She'd paid her dues a hundred times over.

Chapter End Notes

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Shepard felt every bit as good in his arms as he remembered. Just like the time he kissed her years ago, he lost himself in the feel, the taste, and the presence of her.

"You know," James mused when they came up for air, "I think this is the first time we've been alone since the last time we met on Earth."

"You're right." Shepard pulled back to look at him with undeniable lust. "Oh, this is happening. EDI, lock the doors," she said in a voice like silk, tugging his shirt up.

"Yes, Commander."

"What, now?" He looked over his shoulder at the door the led to the bridge, but he didn't hesitate to shed his Alliance tee.

"I'm tired of waiting for a better time, aren't you?" She sat back on the long table behind her and loosened his wide belt. Her fingers dipped behind it to skim the fine hairs below his navel. The hard muscles of his abdomen knotted at her electric touch.

She sucked in a breath. "Better than I imagined."

"Thought about this a lot, have you?"

"I had a lot of spare time recently." Spreading her fingers, she explored the tattoos on his upper chest and arms. He flexed for her with a cocky smile.

His smile turned into a grin when she bit her lip and hummed in her throat. "Very, very nice, Jimmy. Do you do anything but work out?"

He chuckled. "I had a lot of time recently, too."

She claimed his mouth again, sucking at his lower lip, and he struggled against an impulse to just throw her down on the table. Though he thought she'd probably like it if he did, he also wanted to draw this out as long as he could.

His hands swept up, tugging her shirt free. None of the tattoos he remembered still darkened her pale skin. The only ink that adorned her now was an image of a reaper which dominated her back. Though disturbing in its probable context, there was something incredibly sexy about the way the
image contracted as he skimmed his fingers down her spine.

"Why a reaper?" he asked, reveling in the feeling of her soft skin.

"A reminder. Even if I lived forever they would still hunt me."

The thrill of danger which always surrounded her sparked him into action, and for a long moment all he was aware of was the brush of her skin and her breath as they rid themselves of the last offending garments.

He pushed her backward until she lay flat on the table, then spread his large hands under her hips to lift her up to put his warm, soft lips to the cleft between her legs. Her legs stiffened at his touch and she gripped the edge of the table until her knuckles were white. When she shuddered out her release, he lowered her to the table and unfastened his belt, stepping between her thighs.

But she shoved him back and slid off the table to kneel on the ground in front of him. "My turn."

He sucked in a breath when she began to work him with her hands and mouth. "Dios. You're blowing my mind, Lola."

"Is that what I'm doing?" she murmured, her voice muffled against his skin. He leaned against the table, weak-kneed.

But after a minute he lifted her back up. "You can do that later all you want, but I need to move this along or I'm gonna lose it."

He made love to her hard and fast against the edge of the polished table. When her body spasmed with another release her hands slipped off his shoulders. He caught her before she could fall backward, looking into her half-lidded eyes as her clenching muscles drew him to completion. He could have easily spent all day taking his fill of her, but all too soon reality stepped in.

"Commander, there is significant reaper activity at the original coordinates. Ms. Lawson sent a new set. You may wish to observe the scans of the new area. ETA, approximately twenty minutes."

"Roger that, EDI," Shepard said breathlessly. She lay back on the table, stretching her flushed arms over her head.

The only sound in the room was their labored breathing. He looked down at her, sweaty and disheveled on the table, and rubbed his mohawk in agitation.

"You're beautiful. Fuck. We have to go fight some reapers and all I can think about is fucking you again. We have the worst timing."

She heaved an exhausted, satisfied sigh. "At least we had this time together first."

"No, don't play it cool. Listen to me." He pulled her up to a sitting position. "This isn't something I want to happen once and then we go our separate ways. It's a done deal with me. I want us to be together. If you don't want that, I'll respect it - but it'll fucking kill me."

"I'd rather be with you than anyone else. Except for my father, of course, but that's different," she said, putting her arms around his neck. "You make me feel like nothing bad can happen. I wonder if I'm still dead and this is some kind of afterlife."

He made a purring sound. "You feel alive to me, mamacita." Then his eyes popped wide. "Wait. Did you say your father? You actually met him?"
"I hired him for the Omega mission. I'm sure you've read his dossier. Zaeed Massani."

"He's your father?" Relief shot through him. Massani hadn't seemed like easy competition.

But after moment of thought, he shrugged. "Actually that explains a lot about why you are… you. Your reputations are both pretty badass. Your mom must have been a knockout, though, 'cuz you sure don't get your looks from him."

At this, she winced uncertainly. "I hope I'll get the chance to introduce you to him. I think he'd like you."

"Hey, we've just got to get to the base, right? We see whatever Miranda cooked up and you push the big red button. Easy." He began pulling on his clothes.

She frowned and grabbed her shirt. "If that's all there is, then what does she need me for? It's never that simple. But I'll handle it."

"We'll handle it together. From now on, I'm not leaving your side."

The scans revealed more than a dozen reapers laying waste to the area around the original landing zone to the north. A secret entrance connected to the ancient underground roadway where Miranda set up her base, but outside it hordes of husks, marauders and banshees ran patrols, killing everything in their path.

Muffled sounds of combat penetrated the hull of the shuttle, the faint patter of human gunfire cutting the silence between the sonic booms of reaper cannons. The floor slanted as Cortez swerved the shuttle to avoid incoming fire.

James watched Shepard reach up to grab the handhold by the door to steady herself with one armored hand, picturing one more time the way she looked sprawled naked across the conference table in the CIC boardroom. They exchanged a private smile and his face heated up when her eyes raked over him suggestively.

Nicky cleared his throat to get her attention. "Commander Shepard, thanks for letting me lead the support team. I won't let you down."

"I know you won't, Nicky."

"Do you think we really have a chance?"

"Yes, but we can't win with traditional warfare. That's why going to this secret base is our best bet over joining the fleet. If we can find a back door to the reapers, some way to even the odds, then we will defeat them. But that's my job. Your job is to help us get to the gate and to attract as little attention to yourselves as possible. That's all."

She faced the rest of the squad. "You're to retreat to the shuttle pickup as soon as James and I reach the gate. I don't want to see any heroics. This is a simple escort mission. None of you are to try facing down a reaper."

The sound of a reaper cannon firing close by thickened the tension in the shuttle cabin. Shepard met their apprehensive looks with a confident smile. "Don't hide from what you're feeling. Fear is healthy. It makes you strong. It tells you when you need to pay attention. And there's only one way to deal with fear: face it. If you don't face it, you're already dead. Are you alive, Sergeant Nicky?"
Nicky stood up a little straighter at her challenge. "Yes, Commander."

Her assertive gaze swept over the others. "What about the rest of you? Are you alive?" she asked, her voice rising.

"Yes, ma'am!" they answered her, their spirits visibly rising.

James grinned in admiration while she continued her pep talk. She earned her reputation as a leader with good reason.

"When this door opens, you will be more alive than ever before. This is the last firefight before the final battle, the last time the reapers have the upper hand. You'll be telling your grandkids about today, so now is the time to fucking show up. Are you with me?" she shouted.

"Yes, ma'am!"

The final cheer of the men and women on the shuttle was nearly - but not quite - drowned out by the whine of the engine as they began to descend. At Shepard's nod, James punched the door mechanism and let the cacophony of the battle below flood into the cabin. With her helmet tucked under one arm, she leaned through the open door to look at the ground as it rose to meet them. Groundfires burned freely, lighting her face from below and making the wisps of red hair that escaped the bun at her neck look like an extension of the flames as her serene face took in the battlefield.

Cortez lowered the shuttle to hover a few meters from the ground and shouted through the cockpit hatch. "Good luck!"

"See you in a few hours, Esteban," James called out, then followed Shepard's leap to the ground with the others close behind.

The towers of the London megalopolis were scattered like straws across the cityscape, sheared clean from their bases. The once-graceful metallic curves of the architecture now reflected, instead of blue skies, the flashes of explosions and black clouds from the burning city below, an eerie scene set against the backdrop of the night sky.

The long open space where they stood had once been a residential block like the one where he had lived as a child, perched on the edge of the old spaceport landing field. Slagged columns of steel jutted out of the ruins with rivers of molten metal still trickling out of the pilings like a bleeding wound. They crept along the edge of the depression where the block had caved into the garage, headed toward the gate on the far side.

The nearby sound of a firefight echoed off the remaining buildings from the north, interspersed with the deep, resounding boom of a reaper's cannon. It vibrated through James' feet and all the way into his molars. The acrid taint of burning plasticrete and heavy metals, remnants from the reaper's superior firepower, penetrated his helmet's filters. The odor clung thickly to the back of his throat.

Shepard took point, leading them from cover to cover as they picked their way through the debris toward their goal. Everywhere James looked around the square, he could see the bobbing crests of reapers above the remaining rooftops as they lay waste to the area to the north. The gargantuan enemies focused on their one and only strategy: complete obliteration of everything in their way. Fortunately none were facing their little group, but James doubted it would stay that way for long.

The entrance to Miranda's base was nothing more than a road leading underground with very little
security visible, aside from a few turrets tucked under the eaves of the guardhouse.

"Smart," James muttered as they inched their way closer to the gate in front of the base, tagging stragglers with the scope of his sniper rifle. "No one will be looking here with the spaceport right across the way."

"That will change if one of them sees my face. All those destroyers will stop what they're doing to come after me. If that happens we'll have to make a run for it."

Shepard activated a drone and sent it on a scanning sweep before ducking back into cover with the rest of them. She typed a sequence into her omni-tool and whispered to the team. "Marauders and husks at eight o'clock. We won't make it across without them seeing us so we need to get a surprise advantage. I've activated warp ammo for the team. Remember to focus on the marauders first. Wait for my signal."

They crouched behind a low, broken wall of plasticrete and reinforced steel as the horde passed. The marauder's spiked helmets swiveled back and forth as they led the husks through the killing field. The husks loped along behind them with their long arms trailing the ground, the unnatural brilliance of their blue-veined bodies proving the macabre travesty of humanity they had become.

When the last one shuffled past, Shepard called out, "Now!"

Nicky's team hammered the marauders with heavy weapons and tech damage from a distance. The glow of Shepard's omni-tool drew a crescent of orange light across James' vision as she sent a crackling web of lighting into the husks, stunning them. James pumped round after round into the marauders leading the horde.

A husk ran by with flames trailing behind, mindlessly attacking friend and foe. The marauders recovered and attacked with the single-minded determination of the living dead. Shots sparked against Shepard's shield, illuminating her resolute face behind the faceplate of her helmet. To James' eyes, she looked more predatory than he'd ever seen her.

It seemed they had almost won when a piercing, terrifying scream ripped through the air. Across the field, James saw the grotesque blue form of a banshee appear, followed by several more of its kind. Once asari commandos, banshees were one of the more potent reaper creations.

"Dammit! I hate fighting banshees," Shepard hissed, peering at the creatures through the rubble she hid behind.

"You've fought worse," James said.

"Their biotics are more powerful than mine. It pisses me off."

"Sorry to hear we didn't install equipment up to your expectations, Commander," Miranda's voice came over the comm. "Sending some help your way."

The crooked, long-limbed banshees flitted across the field with biotic boosts until they halted on top of the marines. Their shrieking battle-cries echoed over the killing field.

"We don't have time to screw around. Let's make directly for the gate," Shepard said to James, and sprinted out of cover.

"Hell yes! Let's do this!" Ducking out of cover, James unloaded his shotgun into the nearest banshee as he ran after her.
"Support team, fall back to the rendezvous point!" Shepard shouted over the fray.

As she ran, a banshee flitted across to loom behind her. Time slowed for James and he watched in horror as the grotesque grin of the banshee widened, its long fingers ripping upward on the back of Shepard's armor. It tore through the underarmor at the back of her neck. Her helmet spun off in the opposite direction while she sailed through the air, slammed into the crumbling wall and fell to the ground.

"Shepard! No!" James ran toward her limp form, his legs and arms pumping.

The banshee quivered, then stalled as it powered up for another blast, its black eyes staring unblinkingly at Shepard's still form. Its thin blue lips curled back over its needle-sharp teeth in a rictus grin. The jaw of the creature seemed to unhinge as it let out another bloodcurdling scream.

A grenade rolled from his hand under the banshee's bare feet as he passed and he slid into cover feet-first, sheltering the commander from the explosion with his body. He could hear the rest of the squads unloading on the towering banshee as they retreated while he gathered Shepard in his arms and bolted directly for the gate.

The gate dropped to admit them and the turrets spun into activity, spitting a stream of nonstop fire into the banshees. When he reached the door at the bottom of the decline, it opened and a familiar figure in yellow armor stepped out.

Zaeed's sniper rifle trained on the closest banshee and the bang of its powerful concussive shot rang out in the narrow space. "Get inside!" he shouted.

Shepard stirred. She saw something over James' shoulder and pulled out his sidearm to fire shots behind them while he ran into the open doorway, not letting up until the shielded inner doors clanged shut.

When he stopped, she slid out of his arms unsteadily. He held onto her until she caught her balance again. Her face lit up when she saw Zaeed, but before she could say anything he was all over her.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Zaeed asked. "Running into all those banshees with no backup... you gave me a goddamn heart attack!"

James shuffled back a step when Shepard pushed him away to get in Massani's face with a look that easily matched his in anger. "Don't tell me how to run my mission! And what exactly are you doing here, anyway? You're supposed to be hiding out until the trial blows over."

"You stopped calling the shots when we came back through the relay, remember? I go where I please." Zaeed sniffed and adjusted his chest plate. "Miranda pays top dollar for good security. Plus I wanted to be nearby, just in case."

"She was in good hands," James said, holding out his hand. "It's an honor to meet you, sir."

"Sir?" Ignoring James' outstretched hand, Zaeed looked at Shepard. "The fuck is this?"

"This is James, he's my... ah..." She chewed on the inside of her cheek as she sought for the right word. She was nervous, James realized. This was new ground for her too.

Zaeed wheeled around to glare at him. "Oi! You shagging my daughter?"

"Um." James' mouth worked, his eyes shifting rapidly between Zaeed and Shepard. "I mean, we..."
Zaeed exploded into laughter, surprising him. "You poor sod! She'll eat you alive."

Shepard shoved her father with one gloved hand. "That's not funny. You can be such a jerk sometimes. This is James. The one that was friends with Tom, remember? I told you about him."

"You knew my boy?" Zaeed eyed him speculatively.

"Yeah. We were real close for a couple of years."

"Oh yeah?" He jerked his head at his daughter. "She talks like he was an angel."

"An angel?" James scoffed. "Tom was always getting me grounded or called into the principal's office at school. I was the careful one of the two of us. That should tell you something."

Zaeed's thin lips curved into a slight smile. "That right?"

James nodded, still chuckling. "Man, could I tell you some stories."

"I'd like to hear 'em. Must've been a lot going on behind the camera during that trial too. I about pissed myself when she called the court-martial board assholes." He rasped a laugh and reached out to ruffle Shepard's hair.

"When this is over we should have a drink and shoot the shit."

"Right on. First round's on me, old man."

A shapely brunette in a skin-tight white bodysuit approached them. James recognized Miranda from her file. "The reapers are moving this way. I think they know you're here. We don't have much time."

"What else is new?" Shepard muttered.

"There's more," she added. "The reapers have brought the Citadel here."

"The Citadel?" Shepard's eyes widened. "Of course, it's the gateway! They'll use it to bring the capital ships through. We've only seen the little destroyers so far."

"Those were the little ones?" James asked incredulously.

Shepard had to jog to follow Miranda to the lift. "What's this secret weapon? Will it help against a reaper like Sovereign?"

"It's-" Miranda hesitated. "It's best to show you, I think." The lift began to descend.

Shepard raised an eyebrow, then turned on Zaeed for answers.

"You're not gonna like it, love," Zaeed said, shaking his head.

The lift slowed to a stop and Miranda led them down a long hallway toward a large, heavily shielded door. They passed through it to a wide platform that looked out over a chasm, the top part of which had once been a central hub for the old underground rail system. The roughly cylindrical hollow extended about fifteen stories under the surface, James thought, but he couldn't see the bottom of the chamber.

The platform where they stood hugged the wall, part of a massive scaffolding that extended all the way up to ground level. In the center of the framework, thick cables secured an enormous human-
like construct at the shoulders, its legs dangling into the dark abyss. The head hung over them, its lidless eyes dark and empty. Inside its open maw, layer after layer of jagged rings stretched into its throat.

At the end of the short walkway, the chest cavity split open and the platform led directly - ominously, James thought - inside.

"No," Shepard said, shaking her head in openmouthed horror. She paced back and forth on the walkway, examining the - whatever it was - with wide eyes. "You didn't. I destroyed it. I blew that thing up on the other side of Omega."

Shepard stormed up to Miranda, who to her credit didn't bat an eyelash in the face of Shepard's naked fury. "This is what you brought me here for? You know how many people they killed to power this thing. It has liquefied human beings in its veins! Where did you get the material to finish it? Did you- did you-"

"I didn't mass murder any humans, Shepard. We stole the Illusive Man's supply."

"Is that supposed to make it better?" James interjected. "Man, I knew this was gonna be fucked up. What the hell is that thing?"

"It's a human reaper," Miranda said. "We found the Collectors building it on the other side of the Omega 4 Relay. Shepard set the base to blow up, but Cerberus sent other ships through the relay with us."

"I should have known he'd hedge his bet." Shepard shook her head tightly.

"The Illusive Man wanted access to reaper technology. After serving with Shepard, however, she convinced me that I could no longer support his goals."

"It was you that started the Cerberus rebellions," Shepard said with an air of discovery.

"And won them," Miranda said, putting her hand on her hip.

Shepard folded her arms across her chest. "If you had this thing all this time, why do you need me here? Deploy it."

"It's not that simple. The reapers designed this shell like their own, probably their way of procreating. The human reaper is meant to have its own sentient neural network: an artificial intelligence. We knew the reapers would mount a swift counterattack after our trip through Omega 4 and it takes more time than we had to create an AI up to the task. Instead, we designed it for human interface."

"Human interface," James repeated flatly.

A heavy silence settled over them and all eyes focused on Shepard.

She swallowed. "You have got to be shitting me. I blew off supporting the Alliance fleet so you could turn me into another freak show?"

"We designed it to interface perfectly with the implants I inserted before your resurrection. You'll be the most powerful human that has ever lived. The reapers think Earth is the front line. It isn't. The front line is you." Miranda jabbed her finger at the reaper shell. "With this, you can save everyone. You can fight them on their level and make sure they never come back."
Shepard looked up at the monstrous shell. A tremor from the surface shook through the scaffolding and the sound of hydraulic adjustments at the joints hissed and echoed through the chamber, flaking ice off its metal skin. James saw the moment when her look changed to one of resignation.

"They'll indoctrinate her," James objected, suddenly desperate to stop this from happening. All their talk of being together earlier seemed like a joke. "She'll become one of them."

Miranda shook her head. "She can't be indoctrinated. We made sure of that when we rebuilt her. She'll still be herself, just a lot more powerful."

"You don't have a problem with this?" James asked Zaeed, who shrugged.

"She can handle it. She can handle anything, that's why they hate her so much." The mercenary's voice rung with pride.

"Can she – I don't know, disconnect? After she kicks ass?" James asked.

Miranda frowned. "It's not a mech suit. Maybe, if we don't leave her in there too long. Once the connections become strong enough they may be impossible to break."

"People are dying while I stall." Shepard said with a grim to look James. "I'm sorry. She's right. I can't pass up this chance. There never seems to be time for us."

All James could think was that he wanted to grab her and run. "You don't have to do this."

"She does," Miranda said. "Or everyone dies."

"I wasn't talking to you," James snapped. "This is her choice. You aren't going to force her."

"She doesn't have to force me. She's right. I have to do this. But..." She looked up at the human reaper shell with anxiety furrowing her brow.

He studied her for a moment, then slowly nodded. "I'll cut you out with my combat knife if I have to. I'll bring you back, I swear."

He kissed her, mindless of the audience, until he felt her pushing him away.

"Good." She released a deep breath. "Then I'm not afraid."

"You'll have to remove your armor," Miranda said.

Shepard pulled off piece after piece of the plates until she was left standing in her underarmor, the black one-piece clinging to every curve of her body. James stared with undisguised longing until Zaeed coughed conspicuously.

"How long will it take to learn to control it?" Shepard asked.

"It won't be any different than controlling your own body. It's tailored to you at every level. Some connections will take a little longer to develop, but the basic processes, like movement, should come very quickly. I envy you this chance, Shepard." Miranda gazed up at her creation with her hands clasped behind her back.

Shepard said goodbye to her father. The older man said something quiet in her ear that James couldn't hear. She nodded, kissed Zaeed on the cheek, cast one more look at James, and climbed into the heart of the human reaper.
Cables coiled around her, lifting her arms and legs. A deafening hissing sounded from behind her; she grimaced and cried out in pain. Her eyes clenched shut. James walked slowly backward out of the path of the door that slowly shut over her, unwilling to tear his eyes from her face until the last possible second.

Miranda activated the lift. They elevated past the massive head of the human reaper. The light on the lift reflected eerily off its skin as they passed, casting strange shadows through the chasm. The eyes of the reaper flickered to life, dimmed, then shone steadily. James stared into the glowing circle, trying to detect some sign of the woman he loved.

"Excellent," Miranda said with a pleased smile. "Just as I expected. She's integrating quickly. This transition should be easy for her with the amount of trauma she's accustomed to processing."

James bristled at this callous remark, and one look at Zaeed told him he wasn't the only one tired of seeing Shepard used. "This had better be worth it," he said to her, a warning implicit in his voice.

When they reached the top of the framework, they stood at ground level on the edge of the spaceport's older airstrip. The nighttime sky choked with clouds of dust and smoke, but the steady wind on the landing field allowed James to catch a glimpse of the the Citadel suspended in space near the waning moon.

His jaw dropped as the arms of the space station spread wide, opening like a flower, and an almost blinding light streamed out. In all the times he'd been on the Citadel, he'd never seen it do that.

"More reapers coming through," Zaeed said, checking his omni-tool. "Capital ships, from the looks of it."

The platform must have taken them horizontally as well as vertically during their original descent because James could see the battle still raging, but to the east now. As he watched, one of the reapers cleaved off another of London's elegant spires with a beam of fiery plasma from its cannon, then danced backward on its insect-like legs when the structure came tumbling down toward it. The sound of the reaper's cannon echoed off the barricades around the landing strip.

The platform he was standing on began to move. Knocked off balance, James grabbed the handrail. The aperture underneath them widened, taking the platform with it along the ground as it opened, until the chasm below was completely exposed. When James peered over the edge of the rail he saw movement in the darkness.

"She's coming up," Miranda announced with excitement.

"Already?" James asked. His stomach clenched in anxiety.

There was no need for Miranda to answer. Right at that moment two enormous hands clamped on opposite sides of the shaft and the first human reaper launched herself out of the ground, landing in a crouch. James had seen Shepard move just like that when they leaped from the shuttle what seemed like a few minutes ago.

The head swung around until its bright eyes settled on the group of them. Her head cocked to the side and she flicked off a salute.

"I knew it," Zaeed said, returning the gesture. "It's still her."

Evidently Shepard could hear them because she nodded slightly at her father's comment, the cables winding around her neck creaking with the movement.
A resonant boom made Shepard twist to look over her shoulder. On the far side of the landing field another residential block collapsed into the ground. A reaper destroyer rose out of the thick cloud of dust and heat, heading south.

They hadn't noticed her yet, but they soon would. Shepard straightened up, up, and kept going until at her full height she was taller than the destroyer. The ground shook as she took her first ponderous steps toward her enemy and away from where James, Zaeed, and Miranda stood.

The reaper altered its course to meet her. To the north and west, more reapers rose above the remaining buildings and headed her way.

James felt dizzy, then realized he had stopped breathing. "Oh man, this place is gonna get hot," he said, flipping the comm open. "Cortez, we need pickup on my coordinates."

"Just dropped the others on the Normandy. On my way."

"Those destroyers shouldn't give her much trouble," Miranda said. "But we can go below if you like."

"And miss this? She'd never forgive us. I'm taking the shuttle too." Zaeed clapped James' armored shoulder. "Just wait till the capital ships show up. They won't want to miss a chance to dance with our girl."

The closest destroyer's forward panel slid aside to reveal its cannon. James felt the gathering power in the air. The reaper fired and the Shepard reaper ducked to the side, jamming her hand inside the panel before it could close. She ripped it off, sending the panel flying across the field behind her. It drove a deep groove in the ground, hit the edge of the crumbling runway, then flipped end over end until it crashed into the barricade with a sound like a thunderclap.

Shepard gripped the destroyer from the inside, swung it over her head and slammed it into the ground so hard that it exploded, flinging her backward. She crashed into a glass-faced office building, sending a shower of glass pouring over her shoulders and neck.

"Get up!" James shouted. "You're surrounded."

Zaeed pumped his fist in the air. "Get your arse off the ground!"

Two more superheated streams of plasma struck the wall near her head. Shepard jerked down and took cover behind a partially demolished skyscraper until the cannons depleted. Setting her sights on the mass of destroyers, she put one foot in front of the other, pounding through the city toward her enemy faster and faster, hurdling over buildings and ruins like a marathoner. Every step she took vibrated through the ground like an earthquake while James and Zaeed cheered her on.

With a flying leap, Shepard slammed into one of the destroyers feet-first. It hammered into the ground and skidded through the debris, kicking up an immense plume of dust and black smoke in its wake. Her massive fingers dug into the plasticrete roadway to slow down, then she pivoted on one knee and launched herself at the floundering destroyer. With three lightning-fast punches she pummeled its cannon into its midsection, then pried the panels off with a piercing scream of ripping metal. Her fingers yanked out the plasma core of the cannon, tearing through the thick cables and wires, and held the sparking device up for the other reapers to see before tossing it over her shoulder.

The watching destroyers hadn't been idle during this fight. They swarmed just out of her reach, firing on her at every opportunity. She dodged them fluidly, a dance of strength and heightened...
perception that had James shouting in admiration. "That's it! Go, Lola!"

Grabbing the broken reaper shell by its crest, she swung it at the other reapers like a mace. The destroyers swung just out of range, powering their cannons back up.

James turned around, hearing Cortez approach in the shuttle, and the three of them jumped on board. "Move south of the field," he instructed Cortez. "Let's watch from a safe distance."

The Shepard reaper was surrounded by more than a dozen destroyers, all of their cannons powering at once. Her hands clanged together and pushed forward reflexively, a move which, in her human form, would have activated her biotic shield. When the reapers fired together, a shimmering dome of light surrounded her and the blast absorbed into it, rippling with color and energy. All of the windows on the block around her simultaneously blew out and one of the closer buildings began an uneven collapse.

"Yes!" Miranda shouted. "She found her biotics!"

"She's still biotic?" James asked, unable to believe his own eyes.

"She can do anything she can do as a human being, only better."

Surprised, Shepard stumbled backward. When her shield dropped, one of the reapers hit her and flung her down the road until her shoulders came to rest against the garage by the spaceport terminal. The structure shifted under her weight and dozens of cars spilled out from under her arms.

"There's too many of them!" James shouted over the wind, leaning out of the doorway. "Shepard, get out of there!"

"She's just getting warmed up," Zaeed said. "Watch."

She rolled off the parking garage, shoving off the debris that impeded her, and in the same smooth movement she got to her feet and pounded back down the road to face the pack of reapers head-on. Her fist cocked back and grew to a painfully bright shade of white-blue with biotic energy before she ran behind a mass of collapsed buildings. A moment later a blinding flash erupted from the other side of the wreckage, followed by a roaring explosion that sent enormous chunks of debris flying through the air. Three of the reapers tumbled out from behind the building, flipping end over end and sparking electricity wildly into the night before crashing violently to the ground.

A loud, rhythmic hum descended over the field. James looked up to see a mammoth capital ship. It was two kilometers tall, more squidlike than its insectoid brothers. The leviathan's forward appendages, several times longer than the Normandy, spread open and a dull red glow appeared within its maw.

The Normandy's shuttle, tiny in comparison, hovered between the capital ship and Shepard. The panels opened and James stared directly into the open mouth of the largest barrel he'd ever seen. The air around them crackled with energy as the cannon powered up.

"We gotta move, Cortez!" James said, but he knew there was nowhere to run.

And then Shepard was between him and the reaper. She flipped over the shuttle with her feet arcing overhead, her eyes coming so close to the open door that James was certain she was looking directly at them. Her face turned toward her enemy and she thrust her hands forward to activate her shield. As massive as she was, the capital ship dwarfed her. He didn't realize he stepped toward the edge of the open hatch, his arm outstretched as if to help her, until Zaeed pulled him back.
A river of fire burst from the reaper cannon, its sonic boom so loud that James' ears rung and the shuttle vibrated violently. The blast radius was wider than Shepard's shield, but the beam of energy coursed around it without penetrating. She held her stance, straining against the powerful volley until it ran out. Then, racing up the reaper's shell with long strides and frog-like leaps, Shepard dove head-first into the cannon before the panels slid shut.

"Give 'im hell, Jazz!" Zaeed bellowed into the wind.

The reaper froze. A thumping sound came from inside its body. It swung left and right, tearing through the upper floors of the block beneath its grasping, tentacle-like appendages. A metallic screeching cut through the night air. It fell, crushing a swath of the city beneath it.

"That's my girl!" James shouted.

A front panel on the enormous reaper twisted outward as Shepard's feet kicked it open. She climbed out carrying a large black orb trailing with cables under one arm.

"A reaper AI core," Miranda said, breathless with anticipation.

"I'm guessing you're calling dibs on that," James said, eyeing her with distaste.

She planted her feet on the ground in front of the dead reaper with the core glowing between her hands. Painfully bright, the orb pulsed with energy so intense James could feel it against his skin. Blue lightning licked down her arms and legs and stabbed into the ground, popping violently. The lightning spread to the destroyers around her, who shuddered and gyrated wildly under its influence.

A fog of blue energy lifted Shepard into the air. The reapers followed, their cannons closed and quiet. Glowing brighter and brighter blue, she shot upward, racing for the Citadel with the mass of reapers close behind.

"Bug out, Cortez!" he shouted, slamming the door shut. "Let's get back to the Normandy."

A few minutes later on board the Normandy, James, Zaeed, and Miranda watched from the cockpit of the ship as Shepard approached the Citadel. Rising out of the Earth's atmosphere, thousands of reapers followed behind her. A space battle had raged above Earth ever since the Reaper's arrival. How they held out this long James didn't know, but now the reapers broke off to join the others of their kind that amassed around the human reaper.

"Why aren't the reapers doing anything?" he wondered aloud.

Miranda shook her head, unable to tear her eyes from the spectacle.

EDI answered him. "The Commander has taken control of the reaper fleet in this system."

Shepard raised her left hand. A stream of light poured from the central hub of the Citadel into the AI core while the great cloud of reapers grew. They watched in suspenseful silence, barely breathing. The beam of light sputtered out and Shepard's arm swung through space so the globe was pointed at the Normandy.

"What's she doing?" he asked.

"Shepard accessed the reaper's network, amplifying her reach with the Citadel Mass Core. She has already converted all reapers in this system and the effect is spreading through the rest of the
Mass Relay network." EDI's voice warbled with distortion. "Now she is moving... -nto the reaper... leave them without..."

The voice broke off, unintelligible. Several panels in the cockpit blinked out.

"EDI?" Joker asked, rapidly working the controls before twisting around to look at them in disbelief. "She's gone!"

"How is that possible?" Miranda asked, bending over the console.

But James couldn't think about the Normandy AI. The human reaper's eyes went dark and its limbs floated freely in space.

"It's time to get her out. Can you dock with that dark area in the center of its chest?"

"I think so," Joker replied.

Chakwas' staff waited with them by the airlock as it pressurized. James, remembering his promise, stood with his combat knife ready.

"Probably not gonna need that," Zaeed said.

"We'll see."

The door clanged open and Miranda stepped inside, scanning with her omni-tool. Before she could touch anything, the chest cavity drew open on its own.

At first all they could see were the churning veins of the human reaper as they uncoiled, filled with the liquefied remains of a million human beings. The undulating coils forced an irregular lump out from deeper inside, a tangle of wires wrapped in a thick membrane which was filled with viscous fluid. It thumped to the deck, almost as large as the corridor itself, and the coils retreated.

James sliced open the membrane. A wave of thick liquid slopped out so fast that he almost missed catching Shepard before she hit the deck. Where the cables had connected with her implants, holes were ripped through her underarmor, leaving red welts behind. She was covered with them from head to toe.

He scooped the goo out of her eyes and mouth. "Shepard? Shepard, can you hear me?"

Zaeed crouched nearby. "Come on, wake up!"

"Everyone, step back." Chakwas called out, shoving her way through. "Give me some room to work."

The doctor placed a device over her face which performed CPR. James leaned over Chakwas' shoulder, watching Shepard's face intently. Finally she coughed and sputtered. The collective breaths of everyone in the small chamber released at once.

"She's stable. Let's get her to the Med Bay," Chakwas ordered after a quick scan. They loaded her onto a stretcher.

"What happened to EDI?" Miranda asked as they walked to the lift behind the stretcher.

"She's the human reaper now," Shepard said, her voice hoarse. "The reapers... they were still just... children. EDI will teach them compassion for other sentient beings... and love."
"She's the perfect choice." Miranda nodded in approval. "Most AI's are created in a lab, but EDI was discovered on a moon substation, the only naturally occurring AI we've ever discovered. With her unique perspective, she'll be an excellent mother to them."

Shepard lifted her hands, shaking with exhaustion, and held them up against the lights that passed by overhead. Her face contorted into an expression of immeasurable sadness.

"I'm so small now," she whimpered, and burst into tears.

Zaeed, following behind them, laughed. "Small is one thing you'll never be."

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**Epilogue**

**Summer 2196, in a modest home on the coast of San Diego**

James opened the door to the bedroom holding two mugs of coffee in one hand. He padded through the room in his pajama pants and sat on the edge of the bed where Shepard slept.

She lay on top of the tangled sheets in a pair of flannel shorts and one of his old tees, her long red hair inelegantly streaming over her slack-jawed expression. A few strands of silver now wound their way through her hair, sparkling in the beam of sunlight that shone across the bed.

He brushed the hair out of her eyes. "Hey. Time to get up. We've got a busy day today."

She groaned and slowly sat up, pushing her hair out of her face. It lay in tangles on top of her head while she blinked the sleep out of her eyes.

"Morning, Lola," he said, holding out one of the mugs.

She took it and smiled in greeting, wordlessly lifting her face in invitation. He bent to kiss her on the lips.

"Fine. Just don't tell me what time you got up. Morning people disgust me."

"You could get up with me if you didn't stay up all night working."

"Don't start that again. It's not like I was really working, anyway. I was helping Sam with his school project."

"I know. And I gotta say, you're pretty cute when you're sleepy."

She twisted her mouth at him sardonically and sat up, tugging at the tangles in her hair. When most of them had settled down, she lifted her left wrist and activated her omni-tool.

"Oh, no," James said, setting his mug next to hers and reaching for the black bracelet. "You promised. No omni-tool in the mornings. This is family time."

She scrambled across the bed away from him, bringing up the interface. "I just need to send a message to Sanshou about these last specs. I have a deadline - hey!"

"Assuming direct control!" James said, grabbing her ankle and dragging her back. He plucked it out of her hands and held it behind his back.
"Why, Mr. Vega," she said in a sultry tone, walking across the bed on her knees until their noses were practically brushing. "If I wanted to, I could get it back."

Her hand came up to his bicep and she began an exploration of the ridges and soft valleys of his well-muscled arm. She gave his bicep an irritated tap with one finger. He chuckled and flexed the arm. She cuddled up closer, her fingers so thorough in her examinations that he started laughing and bent down to kiss her again. When their lips met, she reached behind his back to get the bracelet, but he was ready for her.

"How dumb do you think I am?" he asked, tossing it away. The bracelet clattered to the floor and he pinned her arms to the bed beside her.

"If you think you can beat me by holding me down…" The hair on his arms stood on end as her biotic amps warmed up.

"I know I can't. But I also happen to know the human reaper's one and only weakness." Releasing her arms, his fingers tickled up her ribs under the t-shirt. The biotic field immediately collapsed. She shrieked and tried to push him away, breathless, but he yanked her back.

"Don't call me that, you know I hate that," she gasped.

"What would you rather I do?" he ask with a crooked grin, his fingers slowing into a caress.

"You can start by-"

She was interrupted by a high-pitched wail from the next room.

"Impeccable timing," James muttered.

"Shouldn't have tickled me. Never a good idea."

"Oh, I beg to differ. I can think of a number of times I've used it to both our advantage."

But he stood up, lending her a hand. She wrapped her arms around him contentedly, burying her face in his chest. He held her for a moment, then kissed the top of her head. "Duty calls, ma'am."

Light footsteps pattered down the hall outside their bedroom door. "I've got her!"

"She is fast," James said.

"I was the same way when I was six. All about the baby. Are the others up yet?"

"Tommy was up at the crack of dawn to go surfing, of course. Don't worry," he held up a hand to forestall her next question. "Uncle E was with him."

"Where's Sam?"

"On the back deck with his nose stuck in a book."

"Should have guessed." She smiled slyly. "So… since Jessica has the baby in hand, do you think we have some time before we have to make an appearance?"

"I believe we do. But we can't be too long. It's an important day."

They walked out of the room half an hour later, freshly showered. Both of them were dressed unusually formal, with James in a suit and tie and Shepard in a finely tailored pantsuit.
Emilio stood at the counter in the kitchen, frying up a large batch of scrambled eggs.

"You didn't have to cook for us, Em," Shepard said, stretching up to her toes to kiss his cheek.

"It's my pleasure. I've been looking forward to today for weeks. I get the kids all to myself."

"Have any plans?" Shepard asked, seating herself at a table surrounded with pictures on the wall of family vacations on various worlds. In the middle of them all hung the picture of her, her brother Tom, and little James at the San Diego Zoo.

"A picnic at the beach, then later we're going to watch the Championships on the big screen outside."

"Pop is here!" Tommy shouted, running into the house along with two wet dogs, all of them trailing wet sand across the kitchen. Shepard rose to her feet with a wordless cry around the bite in her mouth, almost knocking the table over as she shooed them all back out to wash their feet on the back step.

James turned to look when he heard the front door open. Zaeed entered the kitchen and opened the fridge. "You don't have anything good," he said sourly, slamming it shut.

"Want some eggs, Z?" Emilio asked, tilting the pan so he could see.

"Nah, I've got the brigade waiting outside. Thanks though, mate. I'll grab a bite when we get there." He surveyed James approvingly. "You clean up good, son."

"Thanks, Pop."

"And what about me?" Shepard said with her hands on her hips.

Zaeed crossed the room to put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead. "I've told you a million times, you're the most beautiful woman in the world, love."

James scarfed down the last of his eggs and grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair. "All done."

The kids saw them off. Even little Rosie made an appearance, clinging to Jessica's hip. She took her thumb out of her mouth long enough to say, "You look pwetty, mama."

Shepard waved to them and put on her helmet, climbing onto the bike behind James. She rested her head on his wide back with her arms around his waist as they drove to the end of the drive, where the security escort waited. James smiled inside his helmet when he felt his wife squeeze him, and he knew she was thinking of another bike ride they had taken, long ago.

Zaeed climbed into the head car and the escort lifted like a flock of birds, soaring above the bike as it sped down the road to the newly-rehabbed Championship Park. In the ten years since the reaper invasion much of the city had been rebuilt, but they still passed by remnants of their destruction as they raced through the city. Sections of the once-majestic towers were still spread across the city, surrounded with memorials and signs for lost loved ones.

Their escort cleared out the media cams between them and the side entrance to the central tower. They rode into the small private garage, stopping at a space reserved for them. They parked the bike and rode up the elevator together, holding hands.

When they neared the top, he asked, "You ready?"
She smiled up at him. "Been waiting for this all my life."

The door opened. Camera lights shone from every direction and many voices babbled at once, all of them clamoring for their attention - but mostly for hers, James knew, and he was fine with that. She managed them like a pro, offering a soundbyte here and there and snubbing the reporters she disliked. From outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, an announcer's voice could be heard above a roaring crowd.

"No screaming teenagers this time," Shepard noted, snickering when he rolled his eyes.

"Seriously." He shuddered. "I'm surprised it doesn't bother you too."

"I can't blame them," she said, shrugging. "But I feel kinda bad for them since you're mine." She hooked her hand into his arm possessively.

They made their way through the crowd of reporters and fans, greeting their friends in the groups of humans, krogans, salarians, and other species that congregated in the room.

Finally they made it to where Cong stood in their private box. He took Shepard's hand with a smile, patting it paternally, and nodded to James.

"This is quite the spectacle. It's amazing what can be done in a short period of time."

"Ten years isn't a short period of time." Shepard said. "It's been a lot of hard work, but if there's one thing I've always known, it's that everyone loves a good game."

"You've done an amazing job of bringing the galaxy together with this event. I believe everything is prepared for you, my dear." Cong held a hand out to the patio in invitation.

Over the loudspeakers scattered throughout the arena, an announcer spoke in clipped, expertly delivered tones when they stepped outside.

"And finally, we bring you our MC for this momentous day, a woman who goes by many names but needs only one. We give you the Hero of Elysium, the first human Spectre, and the protector of our galaxy, the Human Reaper - the one, the only - Shepard!"

She waved and blew kisses to the crowd, still clinging to James' hand. When the clamor reduced a few decibels, she leaned forward to speak into the comm.

"The final round of the Galactic Combat Championships may now commence!"

The roar of the crowd rushed over them, taking their breath away. James stepped forward and put his arms around her waist. He bent his head to whisper into her ear.

"Welcome home, Lola."

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