Broken Thing

by Recidiva

Summary

My version of Thane with one critical alteration to his timeline. He’s evil. Non-consent AU using the characters and plot from my story “Of Kittens and Broken Things.” Who would Thane be with all his energy directed toward selfish pursuit? Who would Thane be if he had a moment of seeing Shepard as Siha and did not follow her, but took her for himself? Portrayal of a brilliant Shepard not only challenged by the greater problems of the galaxy but by Thane intent on keeping her.

Spoiler alert for “Kittens.” Concept in the notes.

All Thanes were hurt in the making of this story.

"Broken Thing" narrated on YouTube

Notes

Here’s the prompt and the setup. This story takes place at approximately Chapter 14 in the timeline of "Of Kittens and Broken Things" and uses an idea brought up in Chapter 33 where Thane proposes an alternative setup for Kasumi’s loyalty mission. Thane has an alternate identity; Hock knows that identity and extends an invitation. Thane describes his alter ego as “a vicious killer with no morals.” When Shepard is resistant Thane makes a
comment to goad/convince her to do things his way:

“If you are not up to it, we can dispense with the Gunn identity and I will present you as a mute pet. Perhaps with a control chip. Perhaps with her translator removed.”

So the prompt from Artificial Stupidity is: “Part of me really, really wants to see Thane at a villain party with a chipped pet. That's the same part of me that wants to climb him like a tree for saying he has no morals. I'm just saying, if you ever feel like writing some AU smut... I would read the hell out of it. :D”
Chapter 1

His name was Senar Tuelon but he had not been called that since he was six years old, given to the Hanar by his parents and community to be trained to kill. That name had been taken from him, but others given, 84 separate identities in the course of his career. One name became known and was repeatedly on wanted bulletins due to a security error he had made. He had been seen, a picture of part of his shoulder and head had been taken. His skin colors and patterns had been partially revealed and he was linked permanently to the biometric data representative of the name Thane Krios.

He thought of himself as Thane Krios. It represented his failure to anticipate exposure. Each time he heard it or thought that name it was a reminder of critical failure. It was a caution against making another error of that magnitude. He should have been nameless until his death.

He sighted his current target, judged the shot favorable. He led slightly forward and pulled the trigger. A woman stepped in the way of his already loosed shot. He believed she did it on purpose. She said ‘How...’ and then her face was gone.

It had been a beautiful face.

He completed his mission and claimed his legitimate target later yet never reported back to his handler. He had taken innocent life for the first time. He should have felt guilt and failure, and he did, but those were old and scarred sensations. What he felt most strongly was that she was beautiful, he wanted her, and he had killed her. Her face, her expression and the power of her last word made him choose to chase desire for its own sake. After a lifetime of monastic self denial he wanted to want. He often contemplated her and her last word. He never sought to learn more of her or discover her name. He preferred that in the clarity of recalling her face she was his. She was shorn of prior existence and personality beyond that moment. She was without future potential. He considered ‘how’ he could achieve another moment of potential transformation, of searing unexpected perfection.

He abandoned his life of service. He began a calculated path of service to self, obtaining what self denial and isolation had not allowed him in terms of reward. He maintained the discipline of craft, but dispensed with Drell Gods and traditions, debts and bonds. He embraced contracts, opportunities and what he could take for himself. He chose a careful path of desire and indulgence with practical limits on excess. He did not lose his edge but sharpened it for personally chosen kills that brought him status and reward. The greater good became a myth of conditioned delusion he had outgrown as a concept. In the worlds he was no longer solitary. He was counted among the venal, selfish, rapacious and cruel. He had found his community.

His ironically retained name of Thane Krios was sought after. Women and men sought him out yet he found them unsatisfying. Sex was physically satisfying but lacking in further depth. The delusion of his early life was difficult to eclipse in its power. He could not find inspiration in the eyes or bodies of mere people when he was accustomed to being the Chosen of the Gods. He still defied being Chosen. He embraced being able to choose.

His new path was mundane and no longer invested with the significance that granted him a Path lit by Gods and Signposts. He had abandoned Rightness as it had abandoned him. However petty his new life was as a destiny, it was more satisfying than his previous life, which had consisted of duty and torture. He sought to regain the depth of his previous life without the delusion inherent in it, wondering if it were possible or if disillusion was a preferred state for clarity’s sake.

As an experiment he slowly added the unwilling to his sexual targets while still indulging in those
who were willing and available readily. They were easy to twist with the venom the Hanar had surgically altered him to produce. With his hands on a target his venom created a mild suggestibility. With his mouth delivering venom to them directly they were situational slaves. They did whatever he asked until he grew bored of asking. That was more satisfying but had unfulfilled potential. He was disappointed to find he was often uninspired. Killing them seemed something they had not earned. Killing was not something he did idly but for reward, and they were unrewarding. He left them with various physical and mental scars. They lost time and had no memory of him, the hypnotic effect of venom aiding him in not encountering them again after they had been used.

He had a stirring of inspiration and desire from an unexpected source, a human female. There was a contract to take Commander Shepard’s life. He was surprised to discover she was alive and that this was theoretically her second life. He was inspired by her eyes, the color and depth of a green sea. In a life no longer touched by Drell Gods, she seemed perhaps a conduit to other Gods, other sources of meaning. Her rebirth was rumored to be worth four billion credits. Her death would deliver to him one billion. He did not need the money but it would be a tragic loss for her eyes to close and open no more. He wondered what she had seen with them, if she remembered death.

The decision was a whim but he took the contract and invested himself in planning. She was worthy of death, worthy of the fee, worthy of his attention.

It might seem a difficult thing to kill a woman of that renown, but that mantra was the prized hope of naïve storybook and the verbal equivalent of whistling in the dark. It was at times easy to kill people. People were fragile and not only prone to death but occasionally hurtling toward it before he could reach them. As he researched her life it seemed possible she had a higher chance of dying to her choices than to him. It took some time to track her through the movements of the Normandy but he discovered a brief window of vulnerability to exploit when the Normandy put in at Illium. She walked alone as she would on the Citadel, but Illium was not the Citadel. There was no public security force such as C-Sec, Asari looked after their own and only if they were contracted to do so. The wise hired bodyguards. She seemed anecdotally a brave woman yet not a wise one. Illium was conveniently for sale in many ways. Lal Shepard was small and she was no challenge. She did not see him, she was easy to drug, take and transport from her ill-advised venture down a deserted corridor. Through the use of service access, a few bribes and hacked recordings she ceased to be, as did the evidence of what had happened to her.

He killed her in the sense that she was reported dead and he intended for her to remain in that theoretical state. He provided proof of her body and DNA profile, collected his fee. Beyond this point she was no longer Commander Shepard. She was his Drala’fa, which translated to ‘ignored’ but in this case to him it meant unseen, unknown by those who would try to find her.

She deserved an ironic name as well for her failure in security.

He had taken one beautiful life unintentionally; he would attempt preserving a beautiful life intentionally and see what gifts that brought.

There was preparation to accomplish before he took her to Beckenstein, his home. Beckenstein had been taken from Donovan Hock who had found himself under envenomed duress willing to deed the location to Thane. The story was that Hock had bet the estate while drunk and had lost it to Thane over cards at one of his gatherings. The match had no witnesses. Hock shortly after committed suicide spectacularly before witnesses in another system. Thane’s venom was tailored to compel, and often compulsion was more useful than coercion. Donovan Hock had no friends. The same people or the same caliber of people who had graced Hock’s gatherings graced Thane’s with a titillated aside to the ‘unfortunate’ demise of the previous owner. No one believed Hock had lost the estate at cards. No one cared. They wished to show their sharp powers of deductive reasoning by telling the real
story to the uninformed. It added to Thane’s popularity. Death as a subject among the dissolute was not a cause for grief unless it was their own. The admission of selfish fear of death would betray weakness, so death was transmuted in the telling to laughter and schadenfreude. Speaking ill of the dead was a treasured defense and pleasure with the company he kept.

Thane deserved far worse in terms of death. He welcomed anybody to try. He had neither grief nor fear on the subject and expected a spectacular end to his own life, anything less would be disappointing. He had various ways to commit suicide secreted on or in his body. He had an appreciation of the macabre as well as experience with the whims of mundane or Chosen destiny.

Taking possession of Lal Shepard required removal of her customized hardware. He arranged at the same time for surgical alteration of her appearance. He took her in a shielded shuttle to a safe house off Illium. Any alarm or signal she would emit that might aid others in locating her was blocked while her Omni Tool and all transmitters were removed or disabled. There were some unknown components. An expensive and talented surgeon informed him some components could not be removed, but they could be scrambled remotely, fused and destroyed of potential function. The surgeon said she’d never seen anything like Shepard and that maybe the rumors of her being brought back to life were true. What had been removed from Shepard had been beyond the surgeon’s technical comprehension. Valuable or not the components were distinct and therefore destroyed, as were the surgeon, the shuttle and the safe house.

Lal Shepard had been a compelling but not a beautiful woman, certainly not as beautiful as his slain Drell with sunset eyes. He made her beautiful. She no longer resembled Shepard. His Drala’fa was small and that suited him. Her body required no alteration. Her face demanded it for security and aesthetic purposes, her contouring and coloring changed. If she survived she would be seen by those who frequented Beckenstein, possibly by many and often, but he would not risk having her identified as or associated with Commander Shepard. Her skin was cleared of melanin discoloration. He was warned that the ‘freckles’ would reappear if she were exposed to sunlight, therefore she would not see the light of day except at a distance. The terrace in Beckenstein would be off limits to her, the glass set to filter out rays damaging to impractically fragile skin. Her skin was refined to porcelain, her features altered to his specifications with a flair for the dramatic. Her hair to suit her new coloring was midnight black and her eyes a deep violet in a newly sculpted face.

He regretted the loss of the green of her eyes, but he had to change every aspect of her appearance. As her height and size were not negotiable, her hair and her eyes, red and green respectively would be too evocative of her former identity had they remained. Violet did not go as well with his skin as her green eyes would have, but he consoled himself with the choice of black hair, which would. She became classically beautiful as well as compelling.

There was no ripple of publicity involving her disappearance that he could find in media reports. She had only been briefly and allegedly back from death, no public appearances, only announcements from Councilors Vakarian and Anderson. She had rarely given interviews before her resurrection and none after. In the interviews she had given during her career she was soft spoken and unimpressive. She was much more impressive as a list of accomplishments than she was as a person. Whatever search was conducted for her was done privately. She was not a person of public appearance so it made sense that the public was not alerted or questioned. Perhaps they hoped to recover her before her absence became known in more legitimate circles. He did not know who had contracted for her life and they made no announcement of their own.

His venom was hypnotic, addictive and virulent, effective for his purposes, but she had been Commander Shepard once and although it was at times easy to kill people, it was not necessarily easy to break them. That was his hope, that she would prove unbreakable. He would like to test her Destiny against his will, her Gods against his desires and see what came. He had a control chip
implanted in her as a failsafe, transported her to Beckenstein under sedation for recovery and acclimation. Beckenstein was for now nearly deserted other than security and serving staff.

He would take time off for his new project, he had earned a vacation and hoped for it to be rewarding. Perhaps he would retire with a new hobby if she survived long enough to be entertaining.

The control chip dictated her behavior as advertised. She ate, she slept, she followed simple commands and she dressed in what she was asked to wear. She was docile and dull and he was her sole caretaker as he observed her, learned the use of the chip and wondered what lucidity she would regain. It was difficult to see in this altered and suppressed woman what use she could be to any Destiny other than as decoration. Satisfying to his curiosity, disappointing to his greater ambitions. He learned the care and feeding and maintenance of a human, fascinated by her hair as she stood unseeing and near unblinking. Without being given a command she had no awareness, no will and the specifications of the extraordinarily expensive chip guaranteed control over all voluntary impulses. She would starve to death if left in a room alone without someone to care for her maintenance. The chip could be set to different levels of potential lucidity and awareness, but he anticipated only using the full suppression setting. His venom and methods of coercion could provide him with what he needed to control her behavior otherwise. He had the remote controls to her chip implanted into his hand. She was metaphorically and literally under his thumb.

After he chose to wake her fully he positioned her in front of a full length mirror where he could see her and he positioned himself behind her. His fingers traced again remembered curves and lines of now vanished scar and missing original features. He had learned her body, the texture of her skin, the shape of her hips and the small fill of her breasts in his palms as she stood mindless over the course of several days. He had made sure that extremity of thirst, hunger or exhaustion would not counteract the chip’s control over her. He looked for any sign of lucidity. She did not respond to pain or sound or light or movement. He was convinced it worked. She wore a thin fall of black fabric, inset panels of violet tailored to her. He had abandoned many ways of his people, he had left the Gods, the Hanar and Rakhana’s myths and troubles behind him, but he favored their fabric and design. He wore black loose pants of the same cloth, his eyes on hers, head and shoulders above her. Her skin smelled of vanisfruit, something that went well with her natural scent.

She was fully healed, the chip worked as promised and he had grown curious to meet her. He wished to see her eyes, their new color and shape and whatever she brought to them. He released the hold of the control chip and said softly to her “You have ten minutes to try to kill me, Drala’fa.”

She did not understand. He watched her in the mirror and said nothing more, watched confusion in her eyes and tension in her body that leaned to horror. Her eyes did not meet his as she tried to reconcile who she had been with what she looked like now. She struggled to discover or perhaps remember where she was. He had hope that her mind had survived the surgery, the removal of components and all the time spent sedated and controlled. The horror cleared partly from her expression. She attempted to step away from him calmly but he did not allow it, an arm around her waist and his hand around her throat.

She stood still, her eyes meeting his in the glass. He expected more horror or panic, but what she gave him instead was rewarding. Intelligence. She asked calmly “What do you want?”

He smiled and said “To see if you can kill me in the next eight minutes and thirty-four seconds.”

Her smile reflected his lightly and she said with his tone “Why would I want to kill you?”

“That you will have more time to discover.”

“Why don’t you tell me now?”
It was a fair use of her time. He would allow it. “Commander Shepard is gone from the worlds. She is assumed dead, believed dead by many because I reported her as such. Rather than end your life I chose to keep you, slightly altered, for my own. I’m certain you know the horrors of a control chip as a survivor of Mindoir. I had one placed here.” He ran the thumb of the hand that was around her throat down the back of her neck, no scar remaining.

Her eyes echoed the horror of the words Mindoir and chip. She did not speak. Instead, she thought. She said reasonably “People… many people… are going to die if I am not out in the fight.”

An appeal to greater good was lost on him, she would learn. “People die every day.”

“All your people. Drell will die.”

“So they should, and the Hanar. My people are capable of terrible things. They destroyed their own world. They give their children into celebrated slavery to the Hanar. They sell their bodies as intoxicants and toys. Perhaps it is time for their lives to end. Not mine. Not yours. Not yet.”

She shook her head, more despair than horror in her eyes “You… want me to kill you?”

“I want you to try.”

“Then… why would I do that? You could order me to try to kill you.”

“Your opportunity slips away, Drala’fa.”

“What does Drala’fa mean?”

“It is the name for the ignored of my people, the unseen, the insignificant.”

“Like you?”

“Not like me.”

“What do you want?”

“You.”

“You have me. You have a control chip.”

“That is not you.”

“Then take it out if it isn’t what you want.”

“There is want and there is need, Drala’fa. I want you. I need for you to have a control chip until you give me yourself.”

“That… is not going to happen.” He looked at her eyes, the same defiance whether in deep green or deep violet. Directed at him it was glorious, inspiring.

He smiled at her and said “You give me hope.”

Her eyes churned but she said nothing. No begging, no pleading. Each of her words had become more and more carefully chosen and she did not repeat an appeal, babble or beg. She looked around the wider room and to the door but she did not move. Despite her horror and her fear, she did not panic and was not driven to it by his expectant eyes or timed taunt.
She asked calmly “What happens when my ten minutes are up?” She had a steady voice, difficult no doubt with the adrenaline making her limbs tremble. A pleasing voice, lacking the depth of a Drell voice but exotic and melodic.

“I have not yet decided. I expected you to fight.”

“And what happens if I fight?”

“Me dead or your body under mine wherever you land, dead or alive.”

“And if I get out of this room?”

“Commander Shepard is dead. She will not be returning. There are fail safes in place that will ensure that if I die, you will not leave, but you can choose your end and try to choose mine.”

“I don’t want to kill you. I want to do my job.”

“Admirable and possible now that your job has changed.” Two minutes.

“Why give me the chance to kill you?”

“A whim. I have many.”

“If this is a game, then what are the rules?”

“Kill me or lose the opportunity.”

“Or try and provoke you to violence…rape.”

“That as well. Lack of provocation on your part will not result in lack of potential violence or rape on mine.”

She closed her newly horrified eyes and her exposed skin flushed pink, his eyes following the bloom of color, the arm at her waist moved to stroke along the distinct patch of deep pink on her upper thigh. She flinched but did not attempt to run, did not try to strike. She wished to learn the rules.

She had one minute remaining but it appeared she forfeited that opportunity in favor of attempting to reason with him. She was perfectly unwilling in so many ways.

His fingertips followed the flood path of color along her skin, unexpected and exotic, as though her body sought camouflage useful only against a wall of flesh and blood. Poetically fitting.

He bent his head, eyes on hers in the mirror, watching her body and feeling for the betraying tension that would come before she attempted a strike. He felt only trembles and warm smooth skin under his lips at her throat, on his fingers gliding along her thigh. Venom through his hands and mouth into her skin would have any effect he wanted. He could frighten her, terrify her, cause her pain or cause compliance and melting pleasure. She could be driven to fight or driven to yield. She stiffened and her eyes betrayed further shattering chaos with the addition of venom. She sought to understand. She had not appealed to him on her behalf, but on behalf of others; those who would die as a result of her absence. The admiration and inspiration she gave him along with the indulgence bought by her not wasting his time and effort in the past weeks sharpened the fact that he wanted her. The simple pleasure of her body with her lucent and struggling eyes was enough for this moment. His elaborately constructed fantasy had bought him the ability to indulge in what appeared to be simple without experiencing boredom. His hands roamed over her body, along warmed paths of flushed skin.

He explained to her, his hands grasping her hips and pulling her back against his cock, pressing into
the small of her back with his hips pressed forward. He moved one hand to the side of her throat and
with a palm over her small face, turned her to face him. “That is venom, Drala’fa. You will do
anything I say with enough in your system from my mouth, from my hands, from your mouth on my
skin and your tongue. Do as I ask the first time, do your best to please me. Your ten minutes are
gone. I will give you opportunities to fight or die in the future. I will not give you an opportunity to
leave. If you create an opportunity you will die. If you succeed in killing me expensive and effective
security is under orders to not permit you to leave or live if found outside the bounds I set. You can
ask me to kill you. I will oblige you eventually. I will be disappointed but when I am through with
you I will not make you suffer further. Do you wish to die?”

She seemed to understand and that was a small miracle. Most people would be begging, screaming,
incoherent panic. Instead she whispered a soft and emphatic “No. I do not wish to die.”

“Welcome to your new home, your new life, your new expectations.”

She stared at him. He knew she was frightened, even terrified, but looking in her eyes was like
gazing at impossible suns, suns he could reach and hold in the palm of his hand. He was inspired. He
had Beckenstein and the collected dead and potentially dusty treasures there, but he had not
resonated with the impulse to collect something of value until now. Possession and contemplation
was now understood as a glorious thing. He had only failed to appreciate it because he had not found
the right thing to value. He was now a convert, a dedicated collector with a gallery of one item.

He wanted her badly. Wanting something had been sensation he craved so he reveled in it for its
own sake. He deferred lust, which he could and would have at any time. He was patient and
methodical and wished for her to comprehend exactly what was expected. He wished to comprehend
what to expect from her.

He did not want to use the control chip, though he would have to dim her eyes at times, remove her
edge, shut her down to a non-lethal baseline. If she wished to kill him it would not be in his sleep,
and he decided she would be sleeping with him. An odd impulse, something that under all
circumstances with another person was repellant, but in her case he wanted her close. A favored,
pampered pet to watch while sleeping and keep in his lap for the absent pleasure of his hands
stroking through her hair.

Had she attacked him he would have brutally raped her without a second thought, gladly. If she was
a woman of subtleties and intelligence he could adapt to that also gladly. Anticipation of her attack at
any moment was constant and one of the more subtle pleasures of her presence. She would hope and
wait and look for her chance. He approved. His mouth moved to hers, his eyes closing. He had
pressed his lips to hers when she was insensate, slack and lifeless. Now she was tense and resisting,
an improvement to texture and taste, a near electrical crackle of impedance investing her muscles.

He anticipated a great deal of tense and resisting, a small curve to the lips that pressed to hers.
Venom would deliver whatever she lacked in the moment, enthusiasm or outrage as he chose. For
the moment she lacked for nothing and he chose nothing but the simple pleasure of touching her,
spreading venom into her resisting mouth with his tongue. Her teeth were tightly closed. Physically
moving her from this position would create opportunities for her to take that transition and turn it into
assault, but he risked it with only the whispered warning of “If you bare your teeth or bite, if you
attack, Drala’fa, someone else will suffer for your sins.” He brought up his Omni Tool and cycled
through security footage of the estate. “I have hostages. Lovely women and dedicated men doing
their jobs, security and staff. If you attempt to hurt me outside of the brief opportunities I give you
they will pay. Your life is of value to me, your behavior of interest, but they are expendable,
replaceable and hostage to any debt you incur. Whatever you refuse to do I will wring from them
while you watch. Whatever harm you attempt to do to me I will do to them while you watch. Seek
my death as you choose, strike well and I wish you luck. If it results in only injury, if I survive your attempts, they will not, one by one used and replaced with another hostage. If you have a job and that job is to preserve life, you have much to do. They are counting on you to make it home alive each day to their families and homes. You remember all the names of those lost on the ships that assaulted the Citadel at your order. You will learn their names if you are not careful.”

Her eyes closed and she nodded briefly, told him a dignified “I understand.”

Principles were lovely things, the pleasure of her capitulation for the sake of others a potential lie but a potential beauty. He turned and lifted her, told her against the skin of her throat “Wrap your arms and your legs around me, Drala’fa.”

She did, stiff and tense, his cock throbbing against the fabric pressed to her flushed thigh. He sat down on the bed and took her face between his hands. She had no venom of her own and not enough of his, her arms and legs tense and tight, her lips under his still with the electricity of defiance, an implied fence. He contented himself with her lips, the inner curves and taste, slowly spreading venom. With no verbal command she would be waiting, suspended and unable to take action until he gave it to her.

After the company he had kept for a lifetime, his curiosity about other people had been scoured down to the bedrock of the assumption that people were venal and selfish, including himself. She had the potential to be different. Wisps of curiosity about her curled up into fog embracing this Collected woman. He moved one hand to her ass and pulled her in more tightly against the press of his cock, another hand to the back of her head, twined in fine filament. He murmured in her ear “Show me how you kiss, Drala’fa.”

He moved his mouth back to hers but she was still. He asked in a voice as slick with warning as his lips were with venom “I thought you understood to do as I asked?”

Her eyes met his and she said with faint and helpless panic “I do… I… am. I don’t kiss. This… is… this is how I kiss. I don’t. That’s what you asked.”

He pulled back and looked at her to assess a seemingly incongruous and impossible statement. The look in her eyes was earnest. She was trying to comply, afraid someone else would suffer if she didn’t.

He resisted the impulse to repeat back to her the words she’d spoken as though he had not heard them correctly but he knew the look of confused honesty. His questions had to be phrased more carefully, his assumptions analyzed. But it was as though she did not know how to breathe. How had she achieved adulthood? He slipped his thumbs along her jaw line and tipped her head to look in deep violet. He considered his question, knowing that if he was not meticulous in questioning her it would be easy to make assumptions and misapprehend the distinct landscape of her thoughts “Is this your first kiss?”

“No.”

“When was your first kiss?”

She calculated earnestly and said “Five weeks ago.”

“But you did not kiss them?”

“No.”

“They kissed you?”
“Yes.”

“Who was it, Drala’fa?”

Panic lit her face and she swallowed. She did not wish to tell him. She would. Allowances would be made for her first day, her first venom, her first painfully taken truth. Her mind housed so many potential secrets and he wished to own them all. His voice was soft, indulgent, teeth tugging at her earlobe. “Tell me who it was that kissed you. Tell me what I want to know, what I need to know.”

He barely heard her. Her words were soft, as though she could speak them and keep to the letter of his law yet escape detection. “Garrus Vakarian.”

The Turian Councilor. Her prior squad mate. She had wonderful secrets. So many new things to ask. He pulled back and smiled at her, massaged the back of her tense neck with gentle fingertips. “Good. Speak to me, Drala’fa; tell me what you are afraid to tell me. I wish to know. Trust me.”

She was trembling with her electricity and resistance, brows drawn against saying anything but her tongue was unable to resist speaking tumbling words under compulsion. “It was a kiss and he bonded to me and I told him he couldn’t, shouldn’t, but it was too late.”

He held the twin suns, Savior of the Citadel and the bond mate of the Turian Councilor in his lap, earnest confession on her face. He smiled at her and smoothed his fingers over her brows to reassure her. She had not kissed the Councilor back? It did not sound like rejection but regret. Once again the echoed tone of protection in her voice, in her eyes, the undercurrent of her compliance even without venom. For a moment he was shocked into being unable to find his way forward and asked with some self deprecation “Are you certain your name is Lal Shepard?”

She said “No. That isn’t my name.”

He had a blurring moment of potential wrong target, incomplete revenant, body double, then the matched DNA, the accepted proof of her body. He could not find it in himself to care. Whoever she was, he fully enjoyed her company. Had he told her yet she had no right to her name? No. This was not mistaken. “What is your name?”

“Cara Fanning.”

“Your name is Drala’fa. Those other names no longer belong to you, they belong to me. If I tell you that you may speak of them, then you may. You will answer only to Drala’fa. If someone other than me asks you your name, you will look to me and I will choose what to say. You will not speak to them.”

She nodded, clear innocence and expectation of obedience.

So many questions. He felt near foolish asking them, believing a woman back from the dead, a fire breathing legend was likely playing him somehow with earnest innocence.

He considered her words: One kiss. She did not kiss back. He couldn’t, shouldn’t. The original question had evoked something unexpected, perhaps it would again rephrased. “Show me how you touch a lover, Drala’fa.” He smiled when she did not move. He carried that further, spurred by the innocence in her eyes. “Show me how you touch yourself.”

She did not move.

He had his moment of searing unexpected perfection.
He had her, the click of virtual manacles final and near audible in their metaphoric hold. “Do you love Garrus Vakarian?”

Whispered and weak “Yes.”

“I will let you keep that, Drala’fa. A treasured memory for you to hold close. A treasured love. Beyond his kiss, beyond his bond, he did not touch you?”

“I wouldn’t let him.”

“Good. Remember. If you do not do as I ask, I will bring him here and make him suffer for your lack of obedience. He will die as you watch. I may do it if you are not sufficiently inspiring. I may do it because I am jealous. You do not wish for me to be jealous, do you?”

“No. Please.”

“He will look for you every day.”

“He won’t stop.”

“You do not want him to find you here, do you? With me here watching for him, waiting for him?”

“No.”

“Then always do as I ask.”

“Always.”

“What is your name?”

“Drala’fa.”

“Who owns your other names?”

“You do.”

“Who owns you, Drala’fa?”

“You do.”

In a short span of time she had earned not being killed immediately, she had earned not being painfully raped and now she had earned the affection of assured loyalty. A pet who had successfully learned her first trick. She would demonstrate it at his whim. She would do as he asked without question in order to protect someone she loved. She was gentle and trusting under venom. His hands glided over her face with the delicacy of strokes along flower petals.

It might be most merciful to rape and kill her quickly, but he wanted her, he wanted her for a long time, and he was not a merciful man. “This is how I kiss a lover. My mouth, my words, the only ones that will concern you. Learn how to kiss. You will have no bad habits to unlearn, which is good. Let only my habits guide you. Don’t resist the venom, don’t resist my voice, and if you are inspired to kiss me, inspired to touch me to earn my favor, that is what I wish.”

He had never had lovers, only victims, and she was the same, but he found no reason to hurt her overtly when she was so cooperative, her mouth light and bubbling sweet with compliance. He had no need to cause her pain beyond what was necessary, all he required was control. She was sensitive and responsive, given over to venom. She moaned and that made for a harder throb against her thigh,
his arms coming around her and the breath squeezed out of her momentarily, evoking what sounded like a squeak. He felt a warm slide of affection and appreciation for her as he might for art or dance, something of grace.

Without warning her he activated her chip. He pulled back as she remained in place, tense arms and legs relaxing and losing their hold, her chin held between his fingertips. Instant dull eyes and mindlessness. Possessiveness was new and fierce, his breath coming faster as hers was paced to no emotion and no sensation. She was an exquisite doll, newly appreciated. Possessiveness was new and fierce, his breath coming faster as hers was paced to no emotion and no sensation. She was missing the watchful intelligence of her fully alert state and the innocent trust of her envenomed state. There was no recognition or intelligence in her eyes, the new scent of her with his venom in her blood sharpening his newly possessive edge. Blunt possession invested his hands without need for pretense or compulsion or delicacy, though he still enjoyed the appreciation of the freedom to touch her with reverence and the texture of her skin like flower petals. There were flowers such as orchids that bruised when touched, but he saw no need to bruise her at the moment. He considered the challenge of keeping her bloom without allowing the sun to touch her, unleashing growing and powerful lust on her body while keeping her mind intact. He had hope for the impossible.

He potentially possessed his destiny and hers. The image of having his Drala'fa pampered and pleased in his lap held the smoky, cloying allure of Simfeh bark incense. Gatherings at Beckenstein had been interrupted but would continue with her at his side, metaphorically leashed in and attentive. He wished no literal leash, no collar. They were symbols of lack of control in his mind. A leash could be held by anyone. She was unquestionably his and he had no need to present a leash someone else might covet and control. How he kept her need not be known. That he kept her would be. A raw throb of his cock against her thigh emphasized how much he wanted that image to be made real, a moment claimed and felt through the satisfying drip of his seed down her thigh.

He briefly considered presenting her masked or veiled but he wanted to see her face so he dispensed with that idea. He briefly considered allowing her to be taken by others but chose to keep her for himself. In fact, he decided if someone else dared touch her he would kill them. He would move forward on that premise and if he grew tired of her he would reconsider.

He wished to move slowly and savor each moment for its greatest potential. He carefully undressed her, her breasts in his palms, recalling tight nipples against his chest where there was now smooth skin, her tongue tentative on his and her moan reverberating.

She was small, weighed little as he laid her out unresisting with her head on his chest, hard cock nestled against her thigh with her legs spread. He listened to her breathe. He whispered to her to close her eyes and rest and she did that instantly, obediently. He sifted one hand through her hair and kept one hand at the small of her back, cock hard and hungry at the rub of her thigh until he followed her to sleep.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

She was much more work than he’d anticipated. He added new goals based on his questions and her answers. He wished for her to learn to speak Drell. It was possible that she may see Garrus Vakarian again in a broadcast on someone else’s Omni Tool in company, and he did not want her to comprehend his speech. A significant cruelty and a boundary set. As Shepard she had been capable of ruling the Council. As Drala’fa she would be unable to comprehend any but the human Councilor. He intended for her to not see Vakarian’s image again. If she did manage by chance to see him, the divide between them would be emphasized by her lack of control and comprehension. For now he limited her translator to interpret only the Drell language and at times took that away as well, teaching her nonverbal gestures and signals. She would not speak unless spoken to by him. She
would not speak to anybody else in company, and the less she understood unless it was from him the better. She was at this stage a student and an expensive asset and potential liability. With investment of time and effort he would ensure that she understood her circumstances under duress as well as when calm, that she understood her duties and boundaries in envenomed and lucid states. For that she required time, repetition, priming and conditioning under different circumstances. Ideally he wished for her to be aware of herself, her surroundings and him whenever possible.

Garrus Vakarian was looking for her through several private yet emphatic channels. The Shadow Broker was seeking her. The Council was seeking her. The Alliance was seeking her. Cerberus was seeking her. None of them had found her and that was reassuring. A sideline of research into Vakarian and some of the story from her account and he had a picture of a dedicated if not obsessed bond mate, holding to her legacy. There was no public outcry for her return, but Vakarian grew more and more haggard. Thane did not allow her any access to technology, she did not see and she did not ask.

His Drala’fa when she was entirely cogent displayed an ease of comprehension of threat and consequence, never made a misstep, never misspoke, and studied as he asked. He asked her in passing curiosity “Do you recall everything that happens to you when your control chip is activated fully?”

“Some of it. Unclear images without a sense of time, significance or sequence of events.”

“Do you feel pain or hunger?”

“No.”

“Do you think in that state?”

“No.”

“Would you prefer that I activated that state more often to spare you horror?”

“No.”

“Why?”

She hesitated until his smile indicated he could ask her another way, allowing her only enough time to gather her thoughts but not long enough to prevaricate “I am a dangerous person. I would prefer to have my wits if not my will. I can’t control what you ask me to do, but if I can be aware of what I’m doing, I prefer that. It’s one thing for you to keep me as a toy, another if you decide to use me to kill.”

That had not occurred to him as a useful application of her assets and it still did not “That would be redundant. If I decide someone will die, I will do it myself.”

“With me you could kill more people.”

“Granted you have likely killed more people than I have, but from what I have seen you are lacking in subtlety in that regard and require a team. I do not require a team, nor do I want one. Do you prefer being a toy or being of more use?”

“I would prefer to be of use, but of what use could I be from here?”

“To anyone other than me? Little. Perhaps you could choose from my associates when you make your debut. I could kill the most vile at your whim.”
“No.”

“Why?”

“Because you’d enjoy that.”

“So you’d allow evil to linger in the world, evil I could end, only to spite me?”

“It would not be only to spite you.”

“To spare yourself collusion with me.”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps I will kill them anyway, Drala’fa. For you, if they catch your eye and your silent disdain.”

“That would be your action. It would not be with me.”

“There are worse things than collusion with me, Drala’fa. I can content myself with being engaged in other things with you. You have learned to bring me things I need only ask for once. I can do the same for you if it suits me.”

She came to him whenever he asked, did exactly as he asked if not more, no need to repeat threats. She sought to be useful and to be perceived as harmless. He enjoyed the fact that venom made her want him mindlessly, only her inexperience keeping her from moving further. She was learning to kiss. He brought her to the edge of begging for more and then often shut her off, pleased that she’d remember his hands on her as a caretaker, as a curious owner, verifying his effect on her with hands along her thighs, grazing provoked heat and wet response with his fingertips and soft praise for her cooperation.

He had a gift for petty cruelty and he enjoyed it, he enjoyed her, and he enjoyed the look in her eye when she likely wondered each time he asked her to come to him or took hold of her mind and body if it would be this time she would be violated after she begged for it. He did not wish to let go of that anticipation just yet. He enjoyed her always precipitous fall from cool grace into enthusiastic compliance.

He gave her ten minutes to try to kill him occasionally. She never indulged in the opportunity.

“Do you believe you will escape someday, Drala’fa?”

“It isn’t a moment to moment hope but it is a possibility.”

“Not from my perspective.”

“Would you prefer I gave up?”

“Never.”

“Eventually Reapers will make their way here.”

“Is that your hope? Ironic. Fitting. We will be gone before then.”

“To where?”

He ignored the question but began to consider an answer in earnest. He also considered the flaws in his precautions she revealed when he asked her if she had escape plans. She had no hard plans but
thoughts about power failures, rescue, serendipitous discoveries and opportunities that required only the chaos and entropy of reality and him missing something she was able to find and exploit. She had many, many ideas, and he patched security and protocol according to the potential weaknesses she postulated. “Are you so important, Drala’fa, that all will fall without you leading?”

She did not answer the direct question but said “What do you think?” The question was polite but her smile was feral, beautiful, breathtaking.

“I think the worlds can burn before I will permit you to consider any opponent, any danger other than me. If you cannot escape me or my precautious, if you cannot bring yourself to kill me, what hope do you have? Consider what damage you could do if the Reapers gained access to your control chip. Perhaps I serve a greater good. You are not a reasonable woman.”

“And you are not a reasonable man. I am in danger here.”

“I make more sense. You are in no danger of dying unless you cause it or ask it of me. Remain here with me, remain safe, soak in what remaining pleasures belong to species that deserve death at the end of their time. Trust to the wiser judgment of those who have seen this cycle repeat itself.”

“I don’t deserve death.”

“You earned death once. I will keep you from it again. You wish to save all, and you cannot. You failed at your chosen, unreasonable duty. The galaxy has your example and you are twice a martyr. If they do not rise up and fight for their own sakes they deserve death. If you embody the greatest good, you should not be cast into the fire twice but preserved beyond your appointed end. I have done that. Vakarian was willing to risk you and he lost you.”

She said softly “He was not willing to risk me.”

“Then why was he not by your side every moment?”

She didn’t answer and he looked sharply at her “You stopped him?” He waited until she confirmed, a brief nod, head cast down, an anguished twist to her lips. “So what allowed me to take you was… solely your lack of sense? The judgment and strategy that would save a galaxy, taken in an alleyway? Consider hubris a factor in your ambitions, Drala’fa. That contract should have taken you permanently. The way you ran your command you were not likely to survive long in your own care. You are not a reasonable woman and you wish to repeat the insanity that caused your death. I will not allow it.”

“If I were reasonable, I’d have stayed dead.”

“Or you would have not died in the first place. You would have escaped my notice. I will make my luck, take my opportunity, and may the rest of the galaxy that relies upon you to save them learn their own lessons or die.”

“Do you believe you protect me?”

“From everyone but me, Drala’fa. I do not seek to attempt to convince you that I protect you for your own good, that is only a side effect of preserving you for my use. I could have taken your life, I preserved it. Not for you, but for myself. You still have your potential for improbable escape because I allow you lucid moments and I enjoy your company. You are worth all the risks and precautions taken to ensure you remain at my side. I am aware that I am selfish and venal and I am not reasonable. I am practical.”

“You’re a horror.”
“A practical horror, at least grant me my due.”

“You are a practical horror.”

“You are an unreasonable martyr and that is your due.”

“You expound on the benefits of living your chosen life but try to justify that mine is stolen for my own good?”

“There are benefits of logic to being a practical horror. Fairness is not a trait I value. My life was stolen and a new one created for me to inhabit. I left that life and created a new one that suited me better. I doubt you could find anybody whose life and dreams were not at some point stolen. They brought you back and threw you at what killed you the first time. Someone chose to pay handsomely for you to die. I chose for you to die and then to live. You forfeited your choices when you failed to stop me from taking you. You can still be an unreasonable martyr from here, Drala’fa.”

She returned to her studies and he allowed her to do so in peace, spiked tears on her lashes from the moment of the mention of her bond mate’s name.

She was a lovely martyr, excellent at her job wherever she was.

Vakarian was a politically blinded obedient fool, which was synonymous with ‘Turian.’ Duty, galaxy or her wishes should have been nothing compared to keeping her safe by his side. Thane felt pity for the man but not guilt. Let him fight the Reapers, let her be his martyr as she demanded, as she still sought to demand. Thane was content to allow him to suffer with unconsummated bond and regret. Let him look for her every day. Thane would allow him to remain alive as a control to her behavior. They would not see each other again. The idea of their personal heroics and what it had cost them in each other was anathema. If she could not see it as an obvious mistake he need not correct her, only continue to exploit the fact, as he did each day, that her behavior was hostage to his willingness to do harm if he did not get what he wished from her. The threat to Vakarian was something he knew he need not repeat and a threat she knew she would not risk.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

She learned broken and then conversational Drell, had a good ear and improved her accent. She studied alone but he insisted she practice with him to gauge her progress, venom dripping through her beginning with strokes of his thumbs at her throat and through her hair, turning her mouth to his and dragging her into his lap. She said she enjoyed studying and he believed her, finding another subtle control to bring to bear. Boredom. She was bored when he was otherwise occupied and she was lucent and that stalked her. She requested materials to learn to speak his language, requested data pads disconnected from Ethernet and downloaded with Drell art and history as study aids. She was still deeply inferior to Drell absorption of information but she was exceptional in the application of that information once absorbed. She sat sedately in whatever he requested she wear, out of the sun and legs curled beneath her, studying. She learned her boundaries according to his decrees, she was always under surveillance, and she did not stray or probe at the limits he set.

He took opportunities to extend her contentment with pure information into venom haze, asking her questions with translators turned off. She did not speak unless spoken to, she had learned when to keep her eyes on him and when to look away according to his signal and whim. Under venom she would embrace drilling language, asking questions about what she’d learned, until her curiosity slipped out with the carefree enthusiasm she achieved with his priming and her inexplicable natural state of a personality that grasped galactic politics and consequence with serious gravity but found joy in found treasures of Drell history and myth.
Now she asked in struggling accent “What is your name?” It was a practice phrase without immediate significance other than asking what was the weather or what was the time. His mouth was at her throat, her head was tipped back with her hair a fall down her back just out of reach of the sun. Without thought he told her “Senar.”

She used the new word in a sentence, her habit. “Your name is…Senar.”

He had taken her names. He would give her this one. “That name belongs to you, Drala’fa. Speak it only to me, never before or to another.” He did not believe she grasped the language enough for the nuances of that command to take hold, but he would tell her again later with her translator on.

She was pleased that he answered her, pleased with her hoard of information, pleased with him and his hands with venom in her blood. She misheard him, misunderstood, smiling and saying “My name is not Senar” formally with a shake of her head as though he had said it to trap her.

He had considered moments of ceremony and significance, when to get her used to sex, how to do it. His introduction to sex during his training had been brutal, an endurance trial of being instructed by four people of different gender and species, orders given and received and executed. He had thanked them. He had volunteered, coercion in the guise of consent. He could not in reality do better for her, it would all be coercion, but it need not be brutal physically, only brutal in her inherent loss of will as she smiled and embraced his desires as hers.

He knew once he began he would not stop and he would violate his Drala’fa often, intended to do so before a crowd. Whether he took her defiance from her with a chip or his voice and venom or with her knowing and electrically charged consent, he enjoyed taking it and her and never once considered giving up that pleasure, only extending it. Now. Before she spoke Drell fully, when she had his name but did not know it. Subjugation took delicate form in the moment and he chose again. He had spent days and nights hungry, savoring anticipation and now he would demand the same from her. Her mind would wish to remain remote but could not, her body would turn traitor.

She had achieved obedience, her first trick, now she would sit up and beg. Not at first. He estimated she needed a few more weeks to learn to speak his language fluently. He would take that time to condition her response to him. She was addicted and hungry for venom already. She embraced him out of duty when lucid; he never took her memories of her slow inevitable descent into carefully stoked desire. He would add pleasure to that until she did not care who watched, obedience and abandonment a possibility in her otherwise controlled and solitary person. He would teach her to experience her own pleasure as a debt to be returned to him tenfold. She believed in fairness. He did not believe in fairness, but he could use her tendency to believe in it. She would find it fair to serve his whims, to repay the care he took for her, the care he provided to protect her and every stroke of his tongue on her body was to be repaid with her willingness to serve fairness as a moral imperative. Duty turned to venom turned to debt.

That would be crafted slowly and with words and demonstration, for now he needed no words to teach her to come, abandoned and greedy for more, her body seeking pleasure the way her mind sought new information. He would follow the path of her inclinations.

He had verified to his vague shock that she had never had sex, never touched herself, considered sex to be a drug, something she did not want to indulge in, something she considered a drug habit at worst and an idealized once-and-forever gift tied to love at best. He would provide envenomed pleasure-strained drug habit and she would provide the urge to give herself as a gift, her inspiration true and unexpected once again. He had toyed with the idea and now he was inspired.

Her clothes were constructed for access and beauty, veils and falls. Her breasts were small, always visible in profile, no bra required or permitted. No underwear provided. She attempted modesty with
elaborate draping and positioning, but there was never enough cloth to cover entirely and the more she adjusted the more she revealed the changing light and shade of her body. Cloth was for enhancement and not cover, access guaranteed, essentially always undressed enough for any act or caress that tempted him. Her feet and his feet were bare. He left her for his exercise routine and maintenance of a neglected life and career, but she was his main focus in a day. He wore loose black pants suitable for exercise and combat.

She was the embodiment of exercise and combat. At the end of a day with her he was tired, another new experience preferable to the restless boredom that had often been his lot.

She wore earrings, new pairs he designed and commissioned often enough to add a jeweler to the tailor kept at the estate. He often took one to keep in a pocket or in a newly treasured urge to collect, memories of the taste and texture of metal and gems, black and violet and silver under his tongue, a new tactile experience and unique, coated like her in iridescent venom.

Now he tasted her earring and carefully removed it for safe keeping, his hands on her breasts and then mouth on hers. No more words, she would not speak further unless prompted. He moved her small body back to recline on the wide chaise, the echo of ‘Senar’ in his mind. She’d had delicate tattooing of black eyeliner, thick black lashes, her lips darkened in pigment to human sanguine in tone, but no blush because her habitual flush was inevitable and kaleidoscopic. Although he enjoyed her hair there was none on the rest of her body, inhibited permanently. She was lovely without potential for smudge or flaw at every moment and if he chose to learn human makeup and hair design he would over time. Now after great effort taken she looked effortlessly flawless, a perfect setting for twin suns and Destiny.

She was fully in tiremit, the state of maximum venom and suggestibility; he cultivated her receptivity and sensitivity with each repetition of that state. Later he would withhold venom and accustom her to sex without the veil of pleasure-rich compliance, and she would learn to do without pleasure or venom if he chose. For now he would feed her pleasure and venom and touch her as he expected to be touched by her and see how well she learned and applied the lessons. He demanded devotion and exquisite care to detail so he would give it to her, for how else would she learn? She would witness and be witnessed, but touch was his alone.

He spread her thighs with gentle hands, lips on the inside of her thighs and the line of her tense and trembling muscles, the drape of fabric followed by the path of his hand over her, pressing wisps of fabric into folds and damp heat and gliding them out and over, imagining her gentle hands on his cock, an exquisitely guided tongue and instincts to please. Building that potential he combed away all wet fabric with slow fingers, breathed in her expression of helpless desire and touched his tongue to her clit, tasting her for the first time from the source and not his fingers, electricity and helpless, confused mewling from the mouth of his arching, seeking pet. He closed his eyes and defined the lines of her with his tongue, dewed petals and the mindless desire of her body arching into his mouth if he pulled back from exploring her to test her enthusiasm.

He expected her to come quickly and she did, abandoned, a sound of surprised ecstatic pleasure coming from her throat as he barely slid his smallest finger into her and stroked, anticipating opening her with twisted fingers and his fused middle finger and eventually his cock. For now she was slick and panting and he would teach her to speak his name when she came, only when they were alone. His finger inside her body stayed, a reassuringly slight invasion and soothing, feeling the clench and heat and wet.

She would become used to invasion and his tongue, his fingers, that was the last time she would come so quickly. He’d make it harder and harder for her to reach that peak because he would demand it often. She had a moment of clear bliss, all hers, all given seemingly freely, but the ripples
of her body and the ripples of the act would widen and deepen until she was writhing and begging and knew exactly why she was begging.

Her studies were interrupted for the day, he kept her envenomed, bliss soaked and wrung until she’d come so many times her last took almost 45 minutes of her thighs outright shaking and running with sweat, her moment of surprise transmuted to learned study on variations, his fingers dipped into wet heat and twisting into her ass, more surprise each time until she knew the possibilities of his hands and his mouth and his fingers. He toyed with driving her into passing out but he would save that for later if necessary. He was certain it would be necessary at some point, if not for her, then for his satisfaction in doing it.

He carried her to the main suite, a deep bath drawn and her exhausted while he soaped her hair and her skin, watched her to see the awareness come sobering back into her expression. He fussed over her hair and removed the other earring, brought her to the bed and repeated the lesson once more before he turned her off and ordered sleep, basic commands something she had learned first in Drell.

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She developed in her waking moments a more haunted and hungry edge to her features, subtle and endearing. She developed in her envenomed state frank expression of that hunger, learned to say his name in endless varieties of bliss.

When she developed full mastery over his language he deemed her ready. She earned what partnership she could forge from that, what pleasures she could secure for herself and beyond those opportunities he began taking his own pleasures from her body one by one.

He had demonstrated and explained carefully what his cock would mean to her in her new life, whim and pleasure and possession. On the day he believed she knew what pleasure she was expected to give he pressed her to her knees, looked at her with patient expectation until she understood it was now his turn, always his turn, the moves defined and explained. She knew not to close her eyes, she learned the fastening of his pants blindly and clumsily but carefully, and he watched her exquisite tongue explore his cock with devotion. His hands tightened and slackened their grip in her hair, grown longer and more lush. He anticipated being able to wrap her hair around his wrists and control her movement in a new way soon.

He had his own moment of earned clear bliss, so long in coming, and he doubted he’d come that quickly ever again, wondering if he would need to adjust her gag reflex with practice or surgically or if he enjoyed it, the convulsive rejection somehow better than deep throat expertise. She would have to practice often before he made up his mind.

He brought her to bed and teased her to the point of wrung out oversensitive pain, left her suspended, unable to come, writhing and frustrated and with her endearing squeak of suppressed envenomed helplessness.

“You may not touch yourself, Drala’fa. Ever. Your body is mine. Your pleasures are mine and always to be demanded or witnessed, never taken by you without my permission.”

He did not have to ask her if she understood. He enjoyed holding her in silence; his body drained of tension and filled with satisfaction. He enjoyed rebuilding her to near orgasm and then letting her down over and over until he chose to shut her down, her hoarse cries abruptly interrupted. The tension collapsed from her, sweat slowly cooled and evaporated, his fingers through the droplets spreading in a lazy caress on her shoulder. He pulled her to him and arranged her as he wished on her side, his hand on her hip and one under her throat, his face in her hair, murmurs of praise and pleasure and her name. Promises and demands she would hear and could not help hearing.
The next day was spent in bed after waking to the scent of her hair and the press of the skin of her back on his chest, his cock already hard against the small of her back. Having begun and having no further goal or ceremony to fulfill he chose to teach her position and variation. He’d toyed with the idea of taking her first before a crowd but he wanted to present her less as a plaything and more as a prize, and a prize should have skill, value.

A prize should not squeak.

He smiled at the impulsive choice and decision and acted out every idle fantasy of the moment. She was newly awoken, likely stiff from the night in one position, no venom except what had soaked into her from his skin during the night. He had no need or interest in foreplay or priming, rolled her to her back and drove into her in resisted electrical, tight stages, his nails digging into her shoulders, his eyes on her breasts and then his eyes on her face. Her eyes were open and expectant now of his whims, no doubt having imagined this from her first day and much worse, wondering where she was on the scale of depravity.

We are not far on that scale, Drala’fa. Not far at all.

With his hand under her ass he tilted her hips to better take him, a give in the angle of her body and her lip bitten as he forced his way inside, with her still wet from the hours before when he’d left her writhing and then limp. She was small and not resistant physically in any way that could be interpreted as trying to reject him. She was aware he would rape the staff if she resisted, and he would, but she was resistant inherently. Virginity was an inconvenience and an oversight on her part, not something he prized or valued on its own, but his cock, his body loved the sensation of hers, and if that was due to virginity he would blissfully be grateful for that state. He had his inspiration and his bliss, the transcendent layers he’d sought, depth and breadth to lust with her attendant significance. A harsh groan escaped his throat, his hand on her ass lifting her in a way she would learn to do herself, but for now he was happy to do it for her, the first few strokes were near stuttering and fitful until he found the course of her body with his cock, found the pressure, angle, friction and rhythm he needed with the motion of his hand. After those strokes she was far gone in whatever gripped her, unable to meet his eyes as he might have wanted. He would teach her that as well, again in new context, but this moment was given to the purity of the mechanics of sex with her. He didn’t care about her face or her reaction. He focused on the feel of his cock plunging into her, her body giving way over and over, resistance and the reflexive caress of her body’s give on demand. He hammered into her, the sensation of bottoming out and reaching her limits, her cervix giving way like the tight embrace of her throat, her sounds as she lost control over herself and he lost his. She let out choked scream-wails at the end of each stroke as he gripped her ass tighter, slammed into her faster until the moment of near-numb suspended and then stunningly powerful orgasm gripped him, shudders and shivers and heated spurts into her, until she overflowed, the feel of his seed rushing backward along the length of his cock, squeezed out by her body’s reaction to his presence, simultaneously pulling him in deeper and seemingly trying to expel him.

He collapsed on her, hands in her hair and mouth devoted to hers, gasps of breath and heaving chest against her breasts, her moans and whimpers. Biotics had risen on his skin, random patches of discharge and tingle factored back into the experience as he became aware of it, as involuntary as her blush.

He kissed down her body, her venom-slurred voice soft with moans, her fingertips on his shoulders where she had learned he wanted them often, his mouth and hands on her breasts. He drew her nipples tight with his tongue. He cherished the moment of primal violation and would not take it from her, would not allow or force her to forget it. It was theirs and she would know him for what
and who he was. He chose to ease her pain and granted her his voice in a way that would drape and
soothe and would also encourage her to respond. She was spattered with sweat, blood spread on her
skin with an underlying rush of her habitual blush, the remains of virginity and his seed on speckled
and smeared thighs. His cock was slick with it and he made his lips and hands slick as well, smearing
her further, tasting and holding her thighs apart so he could see, so he would remember. He made her
come, demanded it from her with his mouth and voice, his arms around her thighs, holding her
down. He slipped venom-blood-seed slick fingers into her mouth until she sucked. He pulled her
head to the side of the bed, stood and drove into her mouth and throat with his semi-hard cock until
he was ragingly hard down her throat, until he was about to come again. He pulled out, flipped her
up and around until her thighs were open wide, feet on the outside of his, pressed her head down
with her ass against his cock. He gathered more slick on his fingers and drove them into feminine-
human-virgin ass while he played with her clit until she was moaning, her fists gathering blankets,
her knuckles white.

He worked his cock inside her ass with near painful constriction that bled into tight bliss, uncaring
again if she was in pain or would be, pleased if that’s what caused her to grip like that, to tighten like
that. He was a convert with religious fervor, belief and faith in her body delivering pleasure to him in
unthinking frenzy, biotics again blooming in his hands, over her skin, his thighs against hers. His
hands, digging in his nails and gripping her ass made her tighten and twist around him, then he
dragged his nails down her back for the pleasure of seeing white tracks through pink flush.

He used her for hours, which led to using her for days, endless venom and then activated chip when
he rested, bathed her and fed her, discovering he did not need her eyes at all for inspiration.

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After a time he was better able to control how to make her respond without causing her pain. He did
not always bother, but he wished to know. There were involuntary movements she could not learn to
make on demand and the pain he inflicted on her itself did not interest him, but the effect on her body
and then on him, tightening and tensing, twitching when she did not expect a pinch or a dig of the
nail or a sharp slap to a sensitive spot was spectacular.

She was just as polite, just as pointedly and carefully obedient as she had always been no matter
what he did to her. She spoke frankly and honestly, argued with him when he encouraged it. He
asked some questions under venom, he saved others for when she was fully lucent because truth in
twin suns was breathtaking. His goals progressed yet nothing in her seemed to change. He was
transformed and inspired by her; she remained inherently unimpressed with him. She had caution
within the bounds he set but no fear for herself. He grew to believe she had crystallized her approach
in the first ten minutes he had given her to try to kill him.

In her mind, those minutes had never ended. They had been redefined to every minute directed
toward succeeding in killing him while not being provoked into trying blind. She was biding her
time, and the sense of threat from her direction intensified rather than dimmed. She was the same
three women she had always been, one dormant, one compliant and charming, and one waiting
patiently until her opportunity arose. He would never see it coming. She would never take her
chance unless she had everything; his death, security defeated and an escape plan. He never
considered trusting her or considered her lulled. She remained unconvincing. He believed he could
allow her to remain alert while he slept and she would do nothing to harm him until the day she had
everything in place. He saw no reason to widen her odds of getting those things in place and
therefore she remained dormant. He asked frequent questions under venom about her plans and
theories, her impressions and conclusions. His respect for her grew and that fed into wanting her
more. He never considered letting her go based on her compliance, charm or innocent joy in
minutiae, never considered letting her go because he knew she was needed in the fight or because
she deserved freedom. They were all excellent and even strong motivations but meaningless next to his desire to keep her close.

She absorbed the knowledge of what pleased him and used it to make herself indispensible. If he grew tired of her he might kill her and she would not allow that. Pleasing him was her job. Being an unreasonable martyr was her calling. She would do her job and do it well because if she did that she lived. If she lived she could kill him and escape. If she could kill him and escape then she had opportunity to return to her calling. Whatever he did to her was in essence insignificant to her goals as long as she survived it. He was not a person of mercy, therefore she made no attempt to appeal to the nonexistent impulses she might wish he had. She dealt with him as he was, with a politeness and respect he believed genuine and distinct to her. He would not provoke her into lowering herself to his level.

Beckenstein became subtly influenced by her theoretically insignificant presence. He began conducting meetings and kept her at hand in the room but not at the table. She was often engaged in study of whatever she chose. She did not request further instruction in other languages. She provided him with lists of what she wished to learn, he provided information in a form she could not technologically subvert. She was an expert hacker. He checked components before and after any device was given and then taken from her. He decided Beckenstein could accommodate a library. He would rather arrange for reams of printed and bound material as well as whatever she chose of published works to reduce security risk in the form of her boredom and technological genius. Those plans had not been executed, but would be. She now had an assistant curating and printing her idle curiosities, though she did not know it. The estate had strict biometrics and monitoring, encryption on all locks, Ethernet access, personal Omni Tools of staff were locked on the property and even appliances with technical capacity were guarded with limited access code keys to a degree he had once believed was excessive and now he suspected if she had access would be easy for her to exploit.

She watched. She listened. At least to him. Unfortunately for her it was most often one sided conversations, many of his associates Turian or Asari. When she first heard Turian speech from a guest and did not comprehend it, he watched her. She lifted her head and looked at him, comprehension of a different sort in her eyes. She smiled at him and a chill passed through his spine as well as the warmth of his cruelty being effective enough to generate that smile.

The sense of her being a threat was a constant trill in his nervous system, and he enjoyed that. If he expected a captive tiger to roar, she would not. If he expected her to pace and look hungry, she would not. She would watch him and wait, missing nothing. He admired her, coveted her attention, was fascinated by her.

As for her resourcefulness he began to wonder if she would develop a new recipe for an explosive he could not predict made from food scraps, Drell cloth and extracted elements from toiletries. He could predict what was already known to be possible, he could not predict what inspiration would strike her in order to achieve her relentless goal of escape.

Staff did not speak to her and she did not speak to them but she was unfailingly gracious to them. He had threatened her with their wellbeing, but she subtly extended that to them being not only hostage to her behavior, but her responsibility.

Her crew.

Thane found himself glaring at guests who attempted to mistreat his staff because his Drala’fa had noticed a brusque tone or demand and then turned her eyes to him as though he could not keep discipline in his own home.
It worked.

She would permit him to rape her, use her, and he would have to ask her under venom if she was in pain and scold her to care for her body while not being used, yet if a harsh word was spoken to her people, he would know it and she expected him to care for them. Her look at times bore the disdain of one accusing him of not being Drell at all since he seemed to forget simple concepts. She seemed to know exactly what he would or would not allow, what his own sense of morals or dignity or dissolution would or would not allow, and if he failed his own standards and hers, her smile. The smile of the tiger that watches a keeper day after day and believes that there will be an escape route and that watching the keeper will deliver it into their mouth along with the keeper’s hands.

One does not keep tigers in order to feel safe. He did not keep her in order to feel safe. She delivered on everything he had hoped or expected of a myth and he appreciated her for who she was. He would not see his own end if it came at her hands. She was brilliant.

If he found himself massaging the feet of his valet at her unspoken suggestion, he would worry further. For now he intimidated guests into respecting her people. They were her people, he knew it. He had told her this was her home facetiously but she made it so. He hired an assistant and planned a library. He was her people also, in an inverse fashion. He was her job and now her responsibility. She would selflessly direct his destructive impulses at her to spare others, capable of distracting him at her whim. He believed without having to ask her that she counted minutes in his presence as not only opportunities to watch and wait for her chance, but opportunities to spare others his attention. She knew he existed. He would not survive her full unleashed regard. She had no control over what she ate, did not place orders or plan menus, but she would smile at her favorite foods and he would stock them. She had preferences and disappointments in the dignity of a household in which she abided and he agreed with her.

He saw why people followed her, why she was worth four billion credits and more. He understood more keenly why the search was still on and would be every day. With her twin suns came gravity. The bond mate of a Councilor would not be abandoned, not only because that was also the definition of Turian but because the bond mate was her. The investment and hope of billions of people would not be set aside. He considered that if they had been in a different world, he would have followed her and taken her orders. He was taking her orders now from wherever she found solid ground. She never lost an inch of it.

He asked her “Drala’fa, these moments are mine and I treasure each one and hope to keep you just as you are, just where you are. When your moment arrives, will you kill me quickly?”

“Yes. Only one of us believes torture is of value.”

“Only one of us has reaped the benefits of torture. Without a goodbye?”

“Anything I may have had to say to you, if you’d wished to hear it, you would have told me to say it.”

“My thanks for your mercy.”

“You’re welcome.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Arranging gatherings was a security nightmare now for more reasons than there had been before, and he paid careful attention. He must keep her close because her greatest opportunity for escape that he could conceive would arise from her subduing a guest without his knowledge and using their
biometrics to leave. She would still have to disable every alarm that would trigger from an implant she did not know she had and overcome all the careful priming and precaution he had placed in her mind, but he did not consider either of those feats beyond her means. It would have been obvious to her by the time she gained any level of autonomy or solitude that she was exhaustively monitored and tracked. He had hired extra security analysis on her surveillance so he need not be aware every moment of her activity. He still had his Omni Tool or a screen in the room he occupied without her often and then always tuned to her, his eyes moving to her in an increasingly more frequent interval like a breath taken and exhaled, anxiety increasing as he looked away. She had never had a phase of her captivity where she had appeared anything other than docile and compliant; indicating that she had deduced immediately that she was monitored and tracked, watched carefully for suspicious behavior. He put nothing beyond her skill to comprehend. Ideas that would seem paranoid when applied to others somehow in her presence shrank to something she could hold in her palm.

He began to wonder if she told him more and more of her intellectual yet dormant ideas about escape and strategy to fascinate him. If so, yet again, it had worked.

Keeping intoxicated criminals from getting out of the estate had never been a problem. Keeping someone from assaulting another guest, in this case her, had not been an issue. That was one of the reasons why the parties were popular. An evening without a mortal wound or a sexual exhibition would be dull.

They had unfortunately still been dull at the time for Thane, but now he embraced the idea of attending gatherings with her with more enthusiasm than he had had at the idea’s inception and for subtly different reasons and motivations. Business and pleasure took place during these gatherings. He had held them once a month on the same schedule as Hock. Why criminals would all gather together was an odd artifact of the practicalities of the nature of their business. Communication and meeting arrangements were always problematic in criminal dealings. Electronic records and recorded conversations were prone to being inconveniently targeted by law enforcement. If there were a standing social gathering with the apparent draw of debauchery it could be seen as simply that, the lowest common denominator of the criminal tendency to excess. The gatherings were mundanely practical horrors, just like him. Yes, there was debauchery of all sorts. There was even murder and mayhem. What kept people coming back despite the risk of death and what kept him carrying on this odd tradition was what was to be gained. Business required business contacts and criminals in a herd felt more secure in this setting. A predator would be flushed out and signaled by the other members of the herd in order to keep the herd alert and healthy. The loss of the young or the infirm was expected, but those that considered themselves fleet and wily had the best chance of survival. Entry to the gathering meant sufficient vetting and a reasonable guarantee that the attendee was not undercover law enforcement or in the habit of murdering or swindling business associates. Business meetings required privacy and security. There was an alarming turnover and death rate in the set of experienced and expert criminals. A network was required. Even with abundant work, options were traditionally left open and explored as one might find oneself suddenly without associates due to the common occurrences of gunfire, explosions or raid from authorities. An isolated criminal with no track record and no expectation of the ability to deliver what they promised would have to find an honest job or work freelance, which had an even higher mortality rate. It was a mating call like the full moon, calling deep sea creatures into the strongest light of night but not the light of day. It drew out those who required ongoing opportunity. Matches and deals were made here amid the excuse to see and be seen, counted among the solid and reliable criminals who could be expected to make and keep a deal. Thane’s security assured no recordings of plans would find their way to law enforcement.

Thane benefited not through direct surveillance but through observing the patterns, the alliances, the deals being made and the deals being broken. Attendees shifted, waxed and waned according to mortality statistics. Thane was ironically a trusted source of security and even a potential alibi. Plan a
heist for that evening and a hundred people would be willing to testify that of course the regular attendee who was out stealing Prothean artifacts was in fact present, covered in gainfully employed Asari dancers and red sand. Thane would produce biometric proof of attendance as a courtesy to law enforcement.

He had interrupted the pattern of the gatherings for the last few months while he devoted himself to her capture and training, but she was now trained and so was he. He feared for her not at all, but he might be forced to kill his guests one by one if they did not respect the distinction between plaything and prize. Killing his guests was within the bounds of the expected general behavior of the attendees, but in bad taste. Nuances that she grasped immediately were lost on the drunken and venal who were also accustomed to license. She had been so effectively threatened early on because she had been able to grasp complicated and shifting consequences even with diminished mental capacity. His guests were not that subtle or that interested in consequence other than to prove they were immune to it. All of his guests were business acquaintances, none were friends. Thane, like Donovan Hock, had no friends. Thane’s personal reputation was one of detached disdain and occasional indulgence in offered sex, a certain reputation for leaving partners reeling in panting venom haze and not repeating the experience. He did not drink. He did not indulge in drugs, though he provided drugs and alcohol.

He did not hire Asari dancers or procure sex workers or slaves. His policy was one of license again. A guest could bring whomever they chose, do whatever they chose in the room assigned the function as long as they were willing to be viewed by other guests. Donovan Hock had begun the tradition and Thane extended it, maintaining a room with one overcompensatingly obnoxious throne that Hock had treasured and Thane kept as a remembrance of the man’s hubris. The throne had stayed in place, a marble monstrosity and so far had anyone cared to use it they were welcome to it. Now he cherished the idea of the throne, the name Thane Krios and the name Drala’fa in a setting where nothing was as it appeared except for the lust.

Hock had lost his estate while on that throne, begging to be fucked and begging for the right to give away everything he had, his estate and his life. It was a treasured memory and Thane planned on making more there now that he had the proper inspiration and partner.

He doubted his Drala’fa would manifest any shock or exhibit lack of compliance. She would not smile at him as she did when there were no witnesses. That was a loss, though he did not tell her so. He would have relished a moment when her otherwise demure smile turned feral and caused every spine in the vicinity to signal alert. She would be docile and gracious, beautiful and remote. She would be beyond question his prize. If a few people died before word spread not to touch her, so be it. Her pace would be at his side and not behind. Her hand would be on his arm. Her eyes would be on him or downcast. She would not speak to any but him, and only at his request. If that did not signal to those who should be wary that he and she were exceptions to expectations, so be it.

The young and the infirm were fair game. The pack would remain and the stories of the dramatic deaths of those who had stumbled and miscalculated would be repeated with glee at the next call of the criminal moon.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

He collected her for the evening with no special preparation because she had achieved the stage of flawless maintenance of her own beauty. He chose to keep her in bare feet, accentuating the height difference he enjoyed in her, unwilling to raise her higher. She was in draped panels of fabric that lay like feathers, sleek and inviting, the familiar and evocative scent of her and vanisfruit, black and silver and violet. He wore black and silver, choosing his clothing after she had chosen hers.

She had asked no questions about caterers and security firewalls, more people in her home, her
potential crew expanding for the evening. She was now kaleidoscopic art in the way she moved, the way she looked at him, and he experienced a warm flush of blood and tingle of provoked biotics just under the skin close to his spine when he looked at her.

“Come, Drala’fa. We have guests.”

She smiled and nodded, her hand on his forearm as expected, eyes downcast as signaled, perfect in the gloss of her hair and arch of her neck.

He had learned something effective from her, the power of her smile. He used it during the evening as he greeted guests, as she drew interested and avid glances, as they asked who she was. His only answer was “She is mine” delivered with the smile inspired by her possession of self. The topic of conversation would change or he would move on to greet another guest, excusing them politely.

He need not have worried that anyone would touch her. She was her own force in that regard. She had learned so well what he expected of her that she inspired in him the knowledge that he had no right to touch her himself, but he would. He asked her questions that were polite and he knew the answers, but there was a call and response to the evening he would enjoy. Beginning and ending with “She is mine” in every expression and action.

“Do you wish to eat?”

“No, thank you.”

“Do you wish to drink?”

“No, thank you.”

“Do you wish to sit?”

“No, thank you.”

“Do you wish to speak to any of the guests?”

“No, thank you.”

“As you wish, Drala’fa.”

He made the rounds of known and new, shared in the feigned grief over the loss of some prior guests and did not indulge in explanation of why the gatherings had been interrupted. Bringing her up the sweeping staircase to the room with the throne, some were already engaged in their indulgences. She did not look, did not react to sound or spectacle. The throne was unoccupied. Perhaps there had been a projected hope or warning that it would be and by them in his smile and her downcast eyes.

Approaching it he paused and asked her “The throne. A practical horror if there ever was one.”

She looked at it, tilted her head and smiled. “I agree.”

He stepped up on the overly elaborate centerpiece of no known artistic value or ancestor and she followed, feet on cold stone. “Do you wish to sit?”

“No, thank you.”

“Sit.”

She did, without hesitation, bare feet on cold marble and ass down on same without a shiver or
betrayal. She had a clear view of the room but kept her eyes on him. There were mirrors and the room was filling with spectators and participants.

He knelt down in front of her, hands on her knees. “Do you want to spread your thighs for me, Drala’fa?”

“No, thank you.”

“Spread your thighs.”

She did, and his hands glided along her thighs. He kissed along the inner path of her thigh and asked her “Do you want to come for me, Drala’fa?”

“No, thank you.”

“Put your hands on the armrests, your fingers over the edge.” She did that, and that meant she had to pull herself forward so she was sitting up and balanced with her thighs open, to do that her ass was halfway off the edge of the seat.

“Come for me. Let them see what I see. Let them hear what I hear. Make them want you, Drala’fa, as much as I do.” She did that, all of that, while his tongue and fingers traced her clit, glided inside her, made her wet while she moaned and thrashed with him on his knees. The louder slapping of flesh in the room stopped and then began again with more intensity, the pressing in of dozens of avid eyes, rustles of cloth and hands on bodies, mouths on bodies inspired by the sight of his Drala’fa wide open to him, moaning with a heave to her breasts and tightening of her nails on the armrests. Her moans were orchestrated music and every motion of her body was a blend of practiced artifice layered in veneer on a base of thrumming pleasure. He had never detected her feigning pleasure, but she had learned how to mold its expression into sculptured lines and graceful gestures. He gave her his own inspiration of knowing her body, knowing the slow infusion of venom and the light strokes of tongue and fingertips until she shattered magnificently for the gasping or breathless crowd. She panted and mewled and remembered she did not own his name here among the observers.

He kissed back a line along her thigh to her knee, rose to stand before her gracefully limp and replete form, properly appreciative, adoring eyes and submission. He extended his hand and she took it, stood like a dancer in improvisation to his music.

He turned her and she stood in front of him, his posture exactly that of the moment she had first awakened in his arms, hand at her throat and arm at her waist.

Sex was frenzied on available surfaces in the room. He said “I will give you the evening to decide if you wish for someone in this room to die. Not you. Not me.”

“No, thank you.”

“As you wish, Drala’fa. I will know if you change your mind. The evening is young. Do you wish to watch them?”

“No, thank you.”

“Watch them.”

He could not see her face except in profile, though he could see her doll’s expression of attentive interest as he asked of her. She was not moved but he was. The room was transformed by her presence, consecrated and judged, the Throne exalted from cheap to sanctified by the touch of her body. The familiar flare of biotics just under his skin felt like a reward of his ambition and vision.
She created a perfect moment, worth every risk. He no longer regretted not dying nameless or any moment in his life as it had led to this. She owned his name. He owned hers. She had venom but he would make her take more until her answers changed and melted.

“Do you want my cock, Drala’fa?”

“No, thank you.”

“Find my cock with your hand and release me.”

She did. He did not have to tell her to adjust her pace or grip, she was perfect, exactly as he wanted, drips of seed and venom making her hand slick. Trembling with need he shifted the fabric feathered over her ass, gripped her hips and told her “Do you want me inside?”

“No, thank you.”

“Take me inside.”

She was small and that was difficult for her at the angle, with one hand, guiding him with as much expertise as limited range of motion and height difference would allow until he was inside her enough to qualify for her obedience. He lifted her with her knees over his forearms, seated himself inside her and glided in and out of her body, slowly, rocking her, his teeth at her throat in gentle bites. He shifted his thumb to her clit and stroked at her, soft sounds of encouragement, venom taking hold and her long slide down into pleasure starting to drag at her. He waited for that moment, where her voluntary and involuntary, conditioned and predispositioned impulses faltered and blended.

He rocked into her until she began to buck to take him deeper, started to mewl at the stroke of his thumb, started with her lip bitten and her eyes struggling to take in what she needed to see in opposition of what she wanted to feel.

“Do you want to come for me?”

“Yes, please.” She was gasping, breathless.

“As you wish, Drala’fa.”

She was as always exquisite, abandoned and clenching around him until his seed dripped down across his abdomen, her legs held up and opened, green and black against white and black, silver shared, his teeth on her earring and his tongue finding the moment.

He sat back on the throne, hooking her thighs on the armrests, still semi-hard inside her and throbbing, watching her watch.

It did not take long, she noticed and her softened gaze and sensibilities lacking caution or editing of her natural impulses saw what he wished for her to see.

There was among the guests a Batarian with a human slave, a young boy, offered to any who wanted him. He spoke with his voice warm against her ear “I invited him for you, Drala’fa. Batarians live long lives. I believe he was present on Mindoir. He wished to find a new market for his slaves, hoping I would provide it.”

She was silent and staring, not her feral stare but her open and vulnerable look of pain she could not hide when she was weakest.

“Would you like me to set his slaves free?”
“Yes, please.”

“Would you like for me to kill him for you, Drala’fa?”

“Yes, please.”

She turned her head to kiss him, dedication and devotion on each trace of her fingertips on his frill and each stroke of her tongue on his lips.

As he had told her, there were worse things than collusion with him. He would invite them one by one to his gatherings, take her every way he chose and then allow his unreasonable martyr to remove them from the world with him as her weapon.

OoOoOoOoOoOooOoO

He had been gone for two days, the longest span of time alone she had spent since being here. He was out tracking a Batarian that he would not kill on the estate, finding that unsporting. It would make it harder for him to find new people willing to venture to his gatherings if they inevitably turned out dead before the night was out.

Cara waited for her opportunity, far back beyond the lines of caution and warning he had built. She did not test them. Ironically she waited for the Reapers to save her, and she had faith that they would, either through changing her environment or killing her. She waited for her chance.

She waited for his inevitable words to come endlessly before that time. “Come, Drala’fa. We have guests.”
Chapter 2

Cara had a lot of time to think. Thane had been gone for a week and a half. That was Beckenstein time and she believed the days were shorter here than on Earth or the Normandy, about the same as the Citadel. She had no stable sleep schedule that conformed to the circadian rhythm here. She tried not to think because any thought she had would then belong to him if he asked the right question. He always asked the right question, or the question that led to the right question. If she managed to avoid telling him while lucid he would always ask under venom: ‘What is it that you do not wish to tell me today, Drala’fa?’

She always had something. It would pour out of her in earnest explanation, helpfully telling him exactly how to ensure she remained exactly where she was, exactly who she was.

He had politely informed her before he left that she would be able to research whatever she chose from the lists of subjects he had already approved. Leave a handwritten list on her bureau and bound reference material would be delivered. No tech. Her reputation and his careful inquisition regarding her hacking ability assured that. She’d only ever been given data pads without Ethernet access, now only stylus and paper. Food was also delivered.

She was autonomous for the first time. No chip. No demands. No requests in his absence other than that for her own safety she abide by the limits he had set and knew she understood in themselves and in regard to the potential consequences of violating them.

She had no idea why he did not just shut her down via the chip and have her fed or bathed by staff. Possibly because that would mean someone else would touch her, possibly abuse her, and he wished to avoid that, her lucidity being the best guard against that outcome. She could be counted upon to maintain discipline while it would put the staff she valued at risk of perceived or overt mistreatment or neglect according to Thane’s judgment.

Thoughtful. He was ever thoughtful.

She had developed a mental discipline much like what someone might do to survive being forced to exist on a bed of nails. Don’t put too much pressure in one place. Distribute the weight. Try hard not to think of the fact that if he did not return, she might be killed in her sleep or shut down to die of insensate dehydration. Though if she knew him, nobody else had control of her chip and he took the controls with him. She still had not determined the mechanism, he never seemed to hold controls and she never saw them used. Through some discipline of her mind, the pain of captivity could not be ended, but it could be mitigated if she were careful.

Try hard not to think.

She mechanically bathed, dressed, ate, studied. Study was a blessing and it kept her busy, kept her mind from spinning on what she did not want to tell him.

Sleep…

Sleep did not come easily, but that was not a major concern. She had no real schedule. None of his demands required that she exhaust herself. She had spent most of her sleep time shut completely off with the chip. He had encouraged her to rest when she wished, even excusing her from public display at times if she were tired. It gave her some freedom and some rest and also doubled as a vulnerable state where he would often wake her, venom already deep in her blood, and she was always joyous about the gift of his presence.
He didn’t trust her to not kill him in his sleep, but he also hadn’t asked whether or not that was an ambition of hers. Maybe he had and she didn’t remember. Maybe she’d had a plan and he asked her to forget it. What she believed to be true was that if his life was in danger and she saw a threat to him she would protect him. She hadn’t volunteered to tell him that, those circumstances being unlikely, although certainly amusing and entertaining in his eyes.

Why would she alert him, protect him?

Because she believed him when he told her she would die if he died.

He disagreed idly with her logic, career choices and life path as an intellectual exercise, but that was counterbalanced by his insistence on her value to him, on her being all things precious to him. He was not a man who admired only logic and she knew he was the devil quoting scripture incarnate, tongue in cheek baiting and then blunt moments of admiration or approval. It was narcissistically dictated, that he believe she was perfect because she was his, but he did express that sentiment often. She had not always been in that state, she had learned to create and maintain it, but his corrections and demands had turned to approval and praise.

She was an intelligent, well trained and valued pet. Something he knew he would never be able to be himself. He knew he would have died in the first ten minutes of captivity or shortly after. Her ability to survive was something he admired. Her logic, career choices and life path still fascinated him regardless of the personal expense and difficulty they presented to them both. Prices he never would have paid himself, choices he could not conceive of as logical.

What he could not entirely dismiss was that they worked. They had worked out in the real world, they did work under his roof, and he could not predict them.

He was afraid of her and that was interesting. She thought he enjoyed that aspect of her as well. No matter how many times he laughed at the things she did not wish to tell him and appeared surface amused, he listened. He compensated. He changed his home, changed his questions, changed himself to conform if she found a weakness. He was intellectually condescending because that was his style of speech. She was genuinely condescending and if anything he encouraged that in her. His envenomed devotion drew out expressions on his face and voice, in the lines of his body and the gestures he made, where darkness, twilight and blur created the image of a man who shed irony and enjoyed complicated and simple moments, the effects of her inviolate nature and his admiration.

What those moments meant to him was revealed through pattern and request, repetition and expression. He wanted her to know that he found her charming, intelligent and beautiful. He told her often enough to be effusively complimentary. He forced lip service from her in many ways, but he never deluded himself into believing that service to be her will or demanded that she agree with him while lucid. As long as she maintained the discipline of respect and dignity, she could disagree as much as she wished, which she did.

She’d come to appreciate the irony of the name he had chosen for her. It was not an insult. She had heard it enough whispered with affection, with awe, with passion and devotion to know the word meant what he’d said at the gathering. ‘She is mine.’ Others may not see her or know her, but he did, and it mattered to him, and he would go to great lengths and expense to maintain her highly stylized anonymity, carefully created to be something he enjoyed. She was now something and someone who was not who she seemed, just as he was not who he seemed. Only he was allowed to see her revealed personality, only she was allowed to see his. Something she could enjoy with him if she chose, that she to him was the most important person in a room, in his mind in many ways more important than he was.

It was not because she had been Shepard. This he had made clear. That she had been Shepard had
drawn her to his attention, but who she was in each moment was of value regardless of name or position. He discussed her prior life and learned everything about it that he could, came to his own conclusions and informed her of such. He had interest in that only as an intellectual exercise and a way to relieve curiosity and gain more power over her, but he did not value her because she had once been Commander Shepard.

He valued her because she was who she was. He had not robbed her of self. He enjoyed that she possessed herself fully, that trauma, death, resurrection and captivity left her unbroken. She was Whole in the Drell sense. A vessel that could hold many things. He could choose to fill her with whatever he wished; her will, her self, her opinions or his idealized version of her where she would not only allow, but want him to touch her.

He did not hide his admiration, did not attempt to insult her. Drala’fa was a term of endearment and devotion, and if she chose to hear it as an insult she would be wrong. He would enjoy it if she were wrong, correct her politely. If she took insult where compliment was intended only because she chose to see everything he did as a lie to make her view of him simpler than it should be that would be missing the subtlety, the joke, the point, the artistry, the craft.

He could not help but care about her opinion. The more she studied him the more apparent that became. Respect for her steadily grew in his expressions and gestures. They lasted longer on his face, his words less stringent. He was less mocking of her and more often of himself. As insignificant as he strove to make her appear to others, as ornamental, she had found function and relevance. Thankfully he seemed to admire that ability and not wish to take it from her.

For now. All rules, all outcomes potentially subject to whimsical change.

She gave him no lucid thanks unless it was a ritual exchange, choreographed as a dance.

She no longer slept for very long, discovering this pattern in the time he had been gone. She could only sleep for maybe an hour at a time. She closed her eyes. She kept them closed. There was withdrawal from venom. There was addiction to sex. There was missing him. Sleep came with nightmares, where she heard her parents and heard Garrus. Where she saw and heard Senar. Where she saw and felt Alchera. Where she saw and heard Thane. Where there was smoke and Batarians. She was always up with the morning sun, which was a boundary elsewhere but in this enclosed room could come through the shielded window and was safe, would not cause freckles. She chose what to wear from the ever-changing options. That was one of the more subtle tortures. No way to tell time other than changing external light or darkness. No way to rely on her memories or try to keep a surreptitious calendar. He’d find it as part of what she did not want to tell him. He could choose to take it from her or observe, alter the information. Trying to establish one was too much of a risk. Most tools she could try to maintain or build were useless and theoretically subverted at inception. There were days and nights, and she believed it had been at least weeks, possibly months. How many of those days had been spent with her entirely shut down and timeless due to the chip? How long between her abduction and her awareness? If she were to make a guess it would be near three months that she had been here.

While he was gone, since it was not required that she be in a public spot to be observed by him or a guest, she remained in her room. His room.

Their room.

Not too much weight in one spot. There is no ‘their’ anything.

That was a lie.
There were many things that were theirs. But don’t put too much weight in one spot. Don’t put too much thought in one place. As much as those ideas were lovely attempted disciplines, they were impossible. He…as intended…was everywhere, of import in relation to everything, foremost in her thoughts whether it was engagement or avoidance.

‘They’ were a stream of lucid and venom-drugged conversations and experiences that blotted out cleaner, clearer things that had once been her life. ‘They’ were an always-changing and ever-the-same kaleidoscopic measure of sex at any moment, for no reason and every reason.

She remembered being a child and having her first loose tooth, excited about it. Her tongue would press against it and it would wiggle. It moved, and that was wonderful, something was happening and something was changing and she wondered when. When the tooth was gone her tongue still went to go find the empty spot, surprised to not find a tooth, moving or otherwise, her body slower to accept changing truths than her mind.

This was the same behavior experienced as horrific compulsion, a measure of stress felt while theoretically at rest. She missed him. She missed the structure and the expectation. She missed venom and was in withdrawal. She missed sex and experienced it as a gnawing aching hunger. He had made her constantly aware of him, always checking in, always needing to know what was expected, like a tongue seeking malignant movement she’d learned to read. Now she had nothing to gauge. Now that he wasn’t there, she should be able to relax but time became even more suspenseful, more unpredictable without him to read, nothing to occupy her, nothing to make her tired or help her sleep. If he were here she would know what to expect and she could provide it. With him gone there was only an empty space she compulsively checked minute to minute, unable to take an action to prevent whether or not she died in her sleep or keep her from wondering what changed when he came back from his hunt.

He had granted her a sense of control over him and now with him gone, her environment was uncontrollable. For all she knew he was in another room on the compound enjoying the idea of her suspense and forced collusion. She had told him exactly what she did not want while lucid - collusion with him. She had said it with dignity, confidence and condescension. He had turned and twisted it in on her and he enjoyed that she had handed a vow to him and had not anticipated how he could turn that into a weapon. It made her stomach want to heave, but she had become expert at not expressing that, ever.

So he had his way. He got to kill someone, kill at her request despite her wish to be remote from any reason related to his actions.

She had thanked him for it.

She had meant it.

She always meant it.

He would have his kill and the smile that came with knowing her protests or contempt were self-protective lies which he might let her keep or might dispel with a few carefully chosen words. Her thoughts and his carefully chosen words resulted in her mind being as intentionally revealing as the clothing she wore, shifting and alluring to him, the way he wanted her, with him able to slide his hand or his thought inside through the exposed rents and gaps whenever he chose.

She wondered if she were still amusing enough to keep alive. She was expensive, she knew it. There would come a day when expensive and deadly hobbies must be jettisoned for more practical and horrific concerns. She had no control over when that day was, or if it was today.
If she were to rely on her intuition, she believed he would not kill her without explicit provocation from her. She believed he would go to great lengths to keep her alive. She could not trust her intuition in the face of someone who made himself brutally whimsical on purpose. All things were subject to change and she was very careful about choosing to believe something, testing it and resting on her conclusions.

Keeping her alive and contained for the status of it, for the challenge of it, for the resultant sex and even argument and insight he would have difficulty getting from another living creature had value to him. It was now the game of his life and he was devoted to it and to her fully. Whatever her audition process, whether or not his whims would have killed her in the first ten minutes, he’d become more devoted as she had become more competent at comprehending the rules of the game, making her own rules that applied to him.

He had told her once that her life was of more subjective and objective value than his own. She believed he believed that. Though there was constant and maintained threat and he had never expressed regret for that, he consistently encouraged her to make the most of her life, enjoy her studies, take what pleasures or satisfaction she could from his company and in essence find ways to appreciate what benefits she could secure from the gilded cage.

That was earnest and she believed well meaning advice from a practical horror who had spent his childhood in a barbed and envenomed cage, his contact with any surface invoking pain. From his perspective she had it easy. He certainly saw her spending a great deal of time moaning and begging for more.

From what she’d seen from Batarian slavers, from what she’d witnessed in the room upstairs while made to watch, it would be naïve to think herself the most wretched creature in existence.

A slave, yes, but alive, granted her mind on occasion and valued.

She was forced to appreciate those distinctions, but he knew she considered herself his judge and that he had to die. Quickly, quietly, without glee or triumph, an end to his potential malignant effect on the galaxy, an end to his elaborate whims that carried suffering as part and parcel of execution. She wondered if there had been slaves before her, would be others after her. He said there had not been another slave. She had been a whim, and considering all the trouble she had been, a whim that he would not repeat. She was unique and worth the time and expense. He did not regret taking her, would not consider letting her go and he would mourn her loss if it became a necessity she brought on herself, but he would not attempt to replace her. That would be a futile effort. They both understood that she knew he had to die. There would be no looking away or clemency, no listening to an argument or giving him a moment to trigger venom suggestion.

He understood this and was only vaguely troubled not by his death but by her insistence that if she managed to escape, she would forget him. He wished for her to remember him passionately or with hatred, both would be ideal. He enjoyed the idea that he would be her only sexual partner for her lifetime, that he had ruined her in so many ways psychologically and physically.

‘Just imagine it, Drala’fa, in your quieter moments. I’ll be dead, but not gone, never gone. All the whispers you would hear in my voice. Some because you know what I would say, some because you heard what I already said and remember, some because you do not know the difference. Will you tell people that I might have planted trigger after trigger in your mind? Perhaps to kill a lover in their sleep as you wished to be able to kill me? That one day you wake, see them as me, and you’re suddenly back here, to right now, as horrified as you are and you feel no restrictions on all the murder in your heart? Think carefully about what I could do with that, what I may have already done with that. Think of the way you moan and your fingernails dig into scale. Will you be honest enough
to tell another lover that you miss me? When you wake from a dream and decide it must be a nightmare because your captivity should have been only screams of pain, not the screams you give me? Will you tell someone they are disappointing you when they are not the man who captured and kept you? When love pales next to possession? You would be forced to lie in so many ways, Drala’fa. At least I bear truth with dignity. You will never know the crafted danger you’ve become until you see your Turian bond mate emotionally broken or physically bleeding, possibly dead because you could not control yourself. It would be best that you stayed far from potential lovers.’

That was the least, if one of the ugliest of her problems. She did not bring Garrus here but he arrived on his own in her mind in dreams or Senar called him forth for trial and questioning. Garrus still might end up at the door and die trying to find her. He might already be dead. Thane would follow her out into the world, her experience of freedom might be exactly as he stated.

That did not matter because she intended to fight Reapers, not bemoan her twisted sexual identity. She should have had enough sex to last a lifetime. She could not allow Garrus to deal with that level of insidious perverse on top of what it meant to his career to be part of a Turian-human bond pair. She loved him and that would be a clean, if potentially pale thing. Whatever life she led outside these walls would be in one direction, it would likely be shorter and more brutal in some ways than her life here. Dreams and nightmares, longing and revulsion would be experienced alone.

No Asari would be in her head ever again. Nobody… would be in her head ever again.

Her expectations for survival outside these walls had been low to begin with. This ironic reprieve from death would not alter her already existing goals.

She had theoretically earned Thane a billion credits for her death, and she imagined he had spent that on her upkeep so far.

She was still difficult and expensive.

She had assumed she was monitored every moment and had at least one tracker implanted. She could not find the cameras and she could not find the tracker but she had to behave as though she was watched every moment, likely by multiple people, and that the tracker would set off alarms if she was beyond his set boundaries. He spent fortunes on clothing and jewelry she wore once. Security was already in place here, he would not balk at the expense of keeping her entirely caged in, monitored and analyzed in his absence.

She wondered if the ‘collusion’ of him killing on her invoked command was an intended trap to gain her confidence or push her to despair or both, something to distract her and make her intention slip. Something to make her panic. Either would work for him. For each outcome he would have a counter plan. He would watch and see whether or not she would try to talk to staff or gain their confidence.

She tried to keep her thoughts disciplined. She tried to hold her shape but she felt like origami being unfolded and denied all structure unless he allowed it. Reduced to a plane smoothed out with Drell fingertips and venom. Bones broken, muscles slit from moorings, puppetry complete.

What would he try to fold her into?

What would he succeed in folding her into?

She was folded into a ‘they.’

She was not a person who hated. She would not allow that to change. She did not hate him. That he
would not get. Whether it was a missing component in her head or really was her own choice, she did not hate him.

Part of her admired him. That was sick, and she knew it. That was also why she did not think of Garrus, did not think of her parents, and spoke only to herself. She tried to forgive herself for feeling that way. He was good at what he did.

She…was now what he did, and he excelled in that endeavor.

She did not think she would ever speak aloud to an imagined presence again. She had learned silence and solitude. Her spoken voice was too vulnerable. The inside of her head was too toxic. That part of her life was over, regardless of whether she was here or restored to the Normandy by some miracle.

Part of her was perpetually cast into unwilling illusion where she was in love with him, his induced venom pull of soft words, gentle hands, his ardent expressions and gestures. He had learned of her childhood spent partly romanticizing everything Drell and he extended it into fantasy. Her imaginings of starlight and sand, beautiful people and graceful lives had been discovered. He had been delighted by that, used that as a foundation to build upon. He embodied everything that was ancient Rakhana, all her images of the mythically framed planet before her fall. Her art and traditions were reflected in the cloth they wore, the impeccable décor and the motifs of jewelry.

The fact that he embodied that planet as it was now, poisonous, toxic and void of sustainable life was only an image for her lucid state, something to helpfully contrast with how effectively deluded he made her. Knowledge of both states of existence was required for her continued survival. If she was unaware of the danger she might stumble out into death unknowing and unheeding. If she were unable to indulge in the beauty of a tent pitched in starlight and sand…she would be no fun.

He appreciated the distinction, how could she not?

He made her forget the outlying death and traps, everything that kept her here. He made her forget she was a prisoner and she only remembered that he adored her, wanted the best for her, wanted her to be safe. Wanted her to know she was precious. Wanted her to express to him what that meant to her romantic heart.

It…he…they…meant everything to her in those moments. She was loving, giving and…grateful. So very grateful to be adored, to be known, to be appreciated. To be wanted so much. She had spent her young life adored and appreciated, loved and supported. She had spent the rest of her life alone, isolated and scrabbling for purpose to replace that loss.

To be adored and appreciated and supported again was apparently the price of her soul, one he would pay gladly.

That he surpassed the love she’d felt on Mindoir from her parents, expanded on it and tailored it to her was horrific and beautiful.

He made her forget that she was being raped in front of a crowd. He didn’t just make her beg…she wanted…to beg until she had to, until it was a pressured imperative, to where withholding herself, her truth, her thoughts from him was a crime. Everything was right because he was with her, and if he was with her and their bodies were touching, nothing could be wrong.

Those were the rules, the impressions, the illusions he cast. There was a tightly bound spell that held back the poison of Rakhana, that allowed her to breathe, everything outside meaningless. Like the
pentacle of lore that summoned a demon, the pentacle was her body, her mind, her expressed love. He moved with her, cast the spell, and the lines were never broken. Reinforced by her because if she broke that spell and expelled the demon, she would not survive alone.

He was ambivalent to his own survival. If she killed him that was how he wished to go. If she chose to devalue her own life so much by choosing to end it by ending his, what greater compliment could he receive?

One of the worst parts was not knowing what was real other than the rules. The rules could change at any time but fortunately or unfortunately had not for better or worse. They were the only stability she had, which meant this suspended isolation of his absence was a new flavor of torture. The rules had remained the same from his first few minutes: ‘Lack of provocation on your part will not result in lack of potential violence or rape on mine.’

She could never tell if he was disappointed or approving that she did not try to kill him. He stopped giving her the chance after she had turned it down definitively enough times. She was sure if she lifted her head, asked him for the opportunity…he would grant her an exception and would enjoy seeing what it was she wished to try. Her forte had never been hand to hand combat.

Those that came to his gatherings had no idea he was assassin trained, that he wasn’t simply a thief in a stolen den, a bored peacock influence trader comparable to Donovan Hock. They had no idea he preyed upon them month after month, that alter egos took contracts unseen.

She had no doubt he could beat her in hand to hand easily in seconds. It would be disappointing to him, potentially deadly to her. He had never asked her to demonstrate any of the skills she had been known for as Shepard. He was not interested in her maintaining fitness, combat discipline or weapons skills or displaying his own. If she found herself inadequate, and she did, he need not test further. From the way she had seen him move, his speed and his observational capacity, she was not interested in testing him.

There had been no violence unconnected to sex, and then only pain that was connected to a response in her or a reaction he wished to get that if he could get another way, he would. He made allowances for her forgetting his direction if it was something like keeping her eyes on him. He gave her leeway. He never hit her to get his way. He was patient with her as an adult might be with a somewhat forgetful child, which was, she imagined, a common attitude of Drell toward humans. She did not know if his disinterest in pain as a goal in itself was real or if he beat her every night, asked her kindly to forget and applied Medigel, but she didn’t think so. He didn’t need to cause pain to get his way because all he needed for that was her understanding of avoidable consequence, his venom and time. She believed his cruelty could and would extend to others to the point of torture or death, but she also believed that he granted her the right to make mistakes, the right to forget and did not, in fact, wish to inflict pain on her or another. He would be disappointed if it came to that.

He did not care about the pain. He also did not care about the people who might have it inflicted on them on her behalf. He preferred more subtle methods, brutality reserved for those who could not understand any other way. He believed her capable of thought, of cooperation, and that…made it worse.

She did not doubt he would cause pain, just that he as a personal preference would rather that it were unnecessary. If he came back and she had attempted to speak to someone from the maintenance staff or pass a message, she had no doubts he would kill them. Possibly all of them without remorse while making sure she knew it had been her choice to bring it about. He would kill their children in front of her if it struck him as a necessary lesson so she would not repeat her mistake.

Absolutely nothing she said would alter that course of action if he chose it after warning her it would
take place. There was nothing left for her to promise that he could not secure for himself. She had no leverage. He did not trust any of her promises nor would she trust him if he made one. There was no bargaining to be had in any direction.

She knew the memories that were created or that she was permitted to keep did not involve physical pain so much as psychological cruelty, and every cruelty was intended to set a boundary indelibly so she would remember it under duress. He would enjoy crafting effective cruelties if she did not understand verbal warnings and intellectual intent.

Even pain during sex had become something folded into ‘their’ in such a way that he was always certain she had enough pleasure to compensate for any pain he might cause, did it in such a way that the pain itself heightened sensation. He had learned her body, learned what she wanted, asked her what she wanted and gave her those things so a pull on her hair was something that caused her to moan and arch into him, not wince or draw back. She never drew back through force of training but more and more…never wanted to, only wanted to press closer, ask for more, beg, and take the opportunity to give him back anything he wished as something that relieved pressure and anxiety in her, like a dam breaking, something she had to give.

He preferred collusion, agreement, seeing things his way.

She did see things his way out of necessity and also because they were, much as she would like for it to not be true, like minded in many ways. There were things he did not need to force, places they agreed.

His moments of venom…she had no words that would properly describe the potential flood of what felt like genuine love in response to his smile, his whisper, the way he touched her, the way he responded when she touched him.

It was a lie, and a perfectly crafted, beautiful lie, with just enough truth in it to make her lucid moments properly cowed and ashamed and very, very cautious about the sanctity of her dignified truth and distance.

She felt gratitude that he could not bring her to hate him, because the next and more virulent step would be hating herself.

If she studied or thought only about him the bed of nails restriction did not apply as much. Thinking about him was okay. Like any narcissist he’d enjoy asking her opinion of him, ensuring she had one, watching it change and slide and split into a spectrum based on whether she was lucid or envenomed. He would enjoy hearing about her conflicted opinion.

‘What did you decide about me today, Drala’fa?’

‘That I do not hate you, which fortunately means I do not hate myself.’

He would enjoy that, she was sure. What would he say? If his voice was in her head and she could hear it so clearly, what would be his answer?

‘I am worthy of hate, you are not. I am grateful that you cannot bring yourself to hate me, which would drive you to foolish action that would damage others or yourself. You do not deserve hate. Put it from your mind. Any burden of sin to be borne is mine. Take none for yourself. Your captivity has earned you the right to not have to be responsible for the outcome.’

As slavery went, it could be so much worse.

As a life went, it could be so much better.
She tried very hard not to think about her earlier life because she believed he had primed her to have all thoughts turn his way, all comparisons to him be inevitable and subtly influenced. Her only encouraging voices were her own. She did not want to hear her parents’ voices morph into acceptance and encouraging her to make the best of her life here, as he’d told her, to find her pleasures in safety and be protected, spend her days studying what she wished and her nights adored.

When she tried to think of Garrus the thoughts would turn and twist and she did not know if that was the result of trauma, distance, priming…venom…or just her memory shifting and spinning.

She could think of the safety of Garrus’s arms, but…Senar…or Thane…or whatever his name was…had provided her with a depth of experience regarding the safety of arms as either an illusion or an excellent example worthy of preserving as memory. He had asked her in excruciating detail about how she felt about Garrus’s kiss, how she felt about his bonding, how she had been conflicted, wary, nervous and avoided him.

How Garrus had, in effect, trapped her in a tower and not permitted her to escape. How communication with her had included threats to get her to respond to him.

The difference between them in Thane’s opinion was that Thane had the honesty and conviction to place her presence and safety above all other concerns, something the Councilor lacked.

‘If you do not believe that he wished to do as I have done, that he would want to have access to your truths, your body and your Spirit as I do, Drala’fa, you delude yourself. You maintained yourself in a state of idealistic childhood, for which I thank you. You had one kiss, forcibly taken. Bond without consent. He is a rapist by Turian definition and a deviant to have bonded to a human. He created a bond and you chose to carry it forward because you believed yourself in love. He gave you no choice. The Hierarchy, his family, other Turians would destroy him if you were to be involved. You were prudent and wise to distance yourself. I do not blame the man for potentially destroying his career for you. I can blame him for failing to protect you, for failing to follow his own desires to follow the weak and failing wishes of a woman who did not understand desire. His loss is my gain and I will not repeat his mistakes.’

Those words set up echoes in her head, self inflicted or induced by venom…or both did not matter.

That Thane echoed her analysis independently was of course disturbing. Now…now Garrus was…she had no idea, she knew better than to ask or to try to find out. With the added cruel detail of being unable to understand Turian speech, she’d potentially never know. If she expressed interest or begged for news, he would likely lie to her, use that as another temptation and control point to exploit in her.

But she believed Thane. She believed her return could in fact destroy Garrus’s Councilorship and that as an unreasonable martyr…she had always been of more value than perhaps her inconvenient and potentially destructive resurrection.

She had accomplished nothing since her return except potentially ruining Garrus’s power base. Thane’s analysis of her mission at Omega had been ‘What you needed most was for people to believe that Collectors and Reapers were a threat and yet you minimized the threat they presented. That plague released might have galvanized people to spontaneous action if managed properly. Proving it might have been difficult but not beyond your capability. In the short term more people dead, in the long term more people wary and warned and willing to fight. Is it necessary that they all follow you, and that you save them all, or might you consider allowing people to fight for themselves, as they should?’

Did Garrus think she had left him, disappeared on purpose? She had to admit she had been ready to
flee. Did he think she was dead? Was he still looking? Had he given up, accepting her death as he had with Alchera, only this time he had a bond to haunt him for his lifetime?

For her lifetime, however long that was, as Drala’fa?

So when Senar asked her how she felt...she said...because he would get it out of her later, would ask the same questions under venom with that warm slide of trust, his hands on her body and confidences flowing his way as though gravity demanded it...“I am in love with Garrus Vakarian.”

“That is a lovely sentiment, Drala’fa, and I wish for you to hold onto it, it assures that the safety of his arms remains far away and mine remain here, with you in them.”

He hadn’t given her a name to call him. He’d never called himself Thane. Calling him Senar came long after captivity. She had attempted to only identify him as ‘The Drell’ in her mind. That had made him laugh.

“My name is Senar, Drala’fa. If you take any truth from me, take that, well earned. A name that had not been spoken aloud since I was six years old. A name stolen from me. A name I only reclaimed because it could have value belonging to you. ‘The Drell’ is far too cumbersome and formal. I suppose it has a certain gravitas.”

She had not begun a conversation with him, had never asked a question without being prompted or attempted to get his attention. She had no real use for a name for him. Saying or thinking ‘Senar’ was tied to all the times she had said it blurred with venom and pleasure and believing herself in love. ‘Thane’ was better associated with the man in company, the name he was called by others.

‘The Drell’ was... an attempt at cumbersome and formal, but had not worked as a device to refer to him. Speaking it had amused him and the conversation did not go beyond the word ‘gravitas.’ He had decided there would be no more words on that subject, only words whispered about her beauty, her skin, the way she made him feel, murmured praise and desire. The only words from her were those he pulled from her and the name she called him when she had no doubts that she loved him and nothing outside the spell they cast together mattered.

She imagined he enjoyed moments of surveillance like this when she was still and silent and then a deep flush washed through her skin. He could pinpoint the moments she could not avoid thinking about ‘The Drell’ or his hands or his mouth or his words.

She could not think of Garrus, his kiss or arms without a deep flush of personal shame at her inexperience, naïveté and foolishness, and how Senar brought up Garrus’s name to assure himself that she still believed she loved him despite all his logical arguments. He was never angry because that was one of his main controls on her behavior. If she still loved Garrus then that was wonderful.

‘The Drell’ would then slide his hand to cup her breast, kiss at her neck and murmur the benefits of ownership over love and then demonstrate them.

He never told her he loved her.

She...told him she loved him. He never asked her to say it. When she said it he always thanked her for an undeserved gift and kissed her. He never mocked the moment or made her feel uneasy or abandoned, some suggestion or alchemy he must have provided that filled that space with sustained reverence, something he wanted her to have rather than pain. She could not decide if that was a place of decency in him, one place where he would not lie, or whether or not the fact he did it again and again and never told her not to say it was more evidence of his depth of cruelty or somehow
ironically the new synergistic dichotomy of her life, devoted ardent cruelty that meant more than devotion alone or the reason for the cruelty alone. Both necessary and intended to reinforce boundaries, keep her inside, keep her his.

The fact that she was not lying was what mattered.

He would mock that she chose to love Garrus based on distance, inexperience and dreams. He would not mock that she chose to love him unasked. He didn’t doubt the power of either choice on her inner life.

She…could not stop saying it.

So she did not think about Garrus or her parents, that would only bring pain and the assumption that every thought about them pulled from her would be mocked and twisted with words and venom until they were no longer resources. She could not help the thoughts she had already formed. She could try to stay away from forming new land she wanted to be holy that he would discover and delightedly defile with a twist of his mind, a helpful suggestion and venom-slick persuasion.

So her thoughts spiraled in on themselves until…as he knew…the only safe thing to think about was him and his rules.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Thane returned to the estate but did not approach her immediately. He received security reports, reviewed surveillance. He watched her. She had been sedately obedient and he was not surprised by that. He waited until she slept. Her sleep had been fitful while he had been gone.

He had done much of his preparation for killing the Batarian in the time prior to the gathering. That had been easy and had taken two days, slaves freed, dossiers on contacts turned over to the authorities to handle, assets transferred into anonymity and then under Thane’s aliases.

The rest of the time had been spent on the Citadel and tracking the Normandy’s progress, now under the command of Hemorus Orbestan, barefaced Turian Spectre. Orbestan had accomplished little in her absence, much of the three months taken up with searching for her no doubt.

His Drala’fa was right and Reapers were coming and they must be away from Beckenstein. It could come at any time. From what she had told him and what he had recently learned he had no doubts.

Another colony had been taken, this time Trireme, a Turian stronghold that was now abandoned.

His Drala’fa would not remember certain things she had disclosed to him. She had given him the back door code to the Citadel she had put in place and he was able to determine the rest independently. Reports of activity. Councilor Vakarian’s insistence on readiness.

She was in truth an excellent unreasonable martyr from a distance, and she was unfortunately right, verification clear in his independent research.

He had also asked her if she had ever saved Drell from slavery. Fortunately, she had, and she had been helpful in providing where and when. She would not remember telling him that either. Although he would prefer to keep her memory intact, there were places and times when that was impossible. Much of her career before Saren had been spent opposing slavers in the outer systems. He began his plans with her as his inspiration and would need her help in formulating them further. She would again not remember helping him. She was ironically the best asset available to help solve difficult problems. The problem of what to do with her. The problem of what to do with him. The problem of whether or not her Destiny took precedent over his destiny and her Purpose overrode his
whim.

How he could provide for both her Destiny and his whim to take place without her killing him.

The problem that if he wished to survive for more than the next five years with her at his side, he could not do it here.

He had considered letting her go and rejected that option. He had considered killing her and also could not bring himself to do that.

He certainly would not sit and wait on a metaphorically sanctified marble throne to be slaughtered. If he would not let her go and would not kill her, could not keep her in isolation somewhere with stockpiled canned food and coveralls and a control chip that bored him, he must be creative.

He had her mind, and with that much could be done. Miracles.

He watched her sleep, decided that for now he wanted her body, her warmth, her other miracles. There were a thousand choices to be made, those choices spawning thousands more, but he had missed her and wished to know that she had missed him.

Memories of violet eyes and black hair would become more precious because they were limited now in duration and potential.

She slept on her stomach at the moment, sleep ruffled and chewing on the gripped edge of a blanket. He shifted her hair aside with his hand, brushed his knuckles along the side of her throat and followed with his lips, breathing in vanisfruit and her. He wanted her deep in venom haze before she became aware of him, soft strokes of his hands along her skin and then his finger slipped into her mouth as she gripped his hand as she had the blanket.

She was gratifyingly hungry in her sleep, sucking and licking at his fingertip. He straddled her hips, putting no weight on her, strokes of his hand over her back, careful not to tickle. She was sensitive. Strokes of his nails down her spine, his bent head to again kiss the back of her throat, his hand around her waist. She roused slowly, pulled his finger deeper into her mouth, twisted her hips up against his thighs and moaned vibrations into his hand. He had thought about her in the past weeks, remembering everything he wanted to remember, but had not come, let his hunger build as hers did.

He imagined she thought of him also.

He leaned into her, cock against the crack of her ass and gliding there, both of them trembling with need. He spoke against her ear “Did you miss me, Drala’fa?”

Fervently “Yes.”

“Did you think of me while I was gone?”

“Yes.” She could barely stop licking at his finger in order to answer. He pulled his finger from her and rolled her over, hands buried in her hair and mouth on hers, her arms and legs coming around his shoulders and hips, clinging to him and trembling.

“Do you want me, beautiful woman?”

“Yes, please.”

“Do you want me to stay with you, protect you, let you know you are mine and always will be?”
“Yes, please.”

“As you wish, Drala’fa.”
He studied, developed a new voice, a new set of mannerisms, a new profession. He developed an identity, created a timeline, created evidence.

Odds were low that he would survive his ambitions. If he survived what he planned, odds were lower that either of them would survive whatever she planned from that point forward.

That was acceptable, they would be fighting. They would be eventually together. He could endure until her fight was ended. Separation for days, weeks and possibly months might be necessary. Risking it all being discovered by Liara T’Soni from mental contact was a concern he must prevent. He must research Asari techniques, possible dampeners or defenses, prepare her for the possibility.

Using his new voice he spoke to her about their future. His name was already decided. He would accustom her to his new voice and commands from that voice.

With her under venom he sat with her on his lap, watching her face, listening to her voice, asking questions and developing answers. “You have held several names in this lifetime, several roles. You have been Cara Fanning, Lal Shepard, Drala’fa. You can choose some of what to remember or to forget of your time as Drala’fa. For now I speak to all of you, all your experiences, all your memories, suppressed or revealed. I will give you back the names of Cara Fanning and Lal Shepard. Not now, but soon enough. I have problems and I wish for you to give me your advice, the best advice you can provide. You will not remember your advice. You will not remember these conversations with this voice or this name. They are cherished things, your advice and your voice. Forgotten by you because they must be for my own survival, not because I wish for it to be so. When you hear this voice, know you are cherished. Know you are of value. If you are to be restored to power as Shepard, how would you go about it? How best to explain your absence and change in appearance to those who have been looking for you? Do you wish to have it revealed that you were kept as an enslaved pet to a Drell? Do you wish to remember Thane Krios? He will cease to exist. Shall we create a new past for you? Do you wish to forget it all? Remember that if you forget it all that can be explained by the chip, but then greater suspicion of your state of mind must be overcome. Time passed mindless may indicate potential destruction of your personality and capability. They will not suspect my venom, but they will suspect inherent damage.”

“I died. Cerberus could have done anything with my mind. If I speak to Liara, if I speak to Garrus, EDI, Kaidan they will know I am myself.”

“You will not be yourself. You will be a new person, whatever person you choose within the limits I set. Liara cannot touch your mind ever, Cara. Neither can another Asari or anyone with the gift of telepathic ability. There is something I must ask you to do. If Garrus Vakarian attempts to touch you, if Liara T’Soni wishes to verify the state of your mind, you must say something in a certain way and then explain as you are able to explain. Convince as you are able to convince. Remember who Thane Krios was, the circumstances of your captivity. You must say ‘Please, don’t touch me’ with all the fervor you wished you could use when he touched you without your consent. You will not be insane. You will be free to kill Reapers as you choose. You will be traumatized but not beyond recovery. You will improve and heal rapidly with time and you will insist upon doing your job and not dwelling upon the past. Your future will be fighting Reapers, not explaining or reliving your enslavement. You will be adamant about the sanctity of your mind and your body and that they will not be violated without your consent ever again, except by me of course. Say that now. Say ‘Please, don’t touch me’ in the way that you wish you could have said it to Thane Krios these months past, the way you would have said it if you believed he cared and would listen to you.”
“Please, don’t touch me.” It was dignified, and potentially heartrending to those who were prone to such things. Convincing. “Please, you can’t. I had a control chip in my head and I can’t stand it. I can’t…please. I have a job to do and I am going to do it, but I’m not going to explain what it was like for me when I was on Mindoir, or what resurrection felt like. I recovered from those experiences, I’ll recover from this. I’m in the fight. Follow me or don’t follow me but do not expect me to explain…to you…to anyone…who or what I am. Just let me be who I am. Let me prove myself through action, not explanation, like I’ve always done.”

“Exactly right, Cara. Just like that. Be convincing. Keep people away from you. Find solace in your own mind, in solitude as you always have. Be at peace. Focus on the fight. Know that you will always be a danger to Garrus Vakarian. You love him but he cannot touch you and you cannot touch him, ever. That opportunity, that hope is past for all the reasons Thane Krios has given you, all the reasons you gave yourself before being taken captive. You will be free to be who you are as a commanding officer otherwise. You do not need to convince anyone. You are Shepard and that is enough. Their need will be great and your inspiration will be true. You will be patient with your recovery and when you hear my voice you will know you are cherished and you can trust me. You will have faith that you will be restored to command. You have options, Cara. For our story together you can decide whether or not Thane Krios is alive or dead, whether or not you killed him, how you escaped or were rescued. You will have the assistance in this story of the owner of this voice. You will have a story to tell. A story that can be investigated and confirmed. You will be believed, you will be convincing. Our story must include the surgery that changed your appearance and the removal of your hardware as well as the addition of the chip. It will be a terrible story and if you tell it and remember your captivity, that will be awful enough. People who care for you will not probe further. Vakarian will know why you do not wish to be touched. T’Soni will know why you do not wish to join minds. It is plausible cover, Cara. Consider. For my part in our story, we have more options. I am a former Drell slave that you rescued from Darfeh eight years ago. My name is Kegirin Itran. Shepard will not remember him, but Kegirin Itran will remember Shepard’s eyes, her voice and her height. Kegirin Itran will suspect that Drala’fa is Commander Shepard and will investigate on his own. He is a Drell doctor who began to work on his own to free slaves. He developed criminal contacts, he is a doctor employed by criminals and he uses that cover to effect as many rescues or purchases as he can arrange. He can infiltrate the estate or he can find you in a market and buy you or any other cover you wish to construct.”

“If we want to stick to the verifiable truth as much as possible he should infiltrate the estate. Creating a sales trail with me passing from owner to owner would be more difficult to create as evidence and suspicious. No eyewitnesses. Thane Krios would not want me to be placed in the custody of a slave trader for any amount of time to create a reliable cover. Neither would I.”

“Yes. So you wish to remember who you were as Drala’fa?”

“I always wish to remember. I told you that before. Are you certain you are Drell?”

He smiled “I have not forgotten. You are a brave woman, Cara.”

“Yeah, so I’ve heard. It’s expensive and difficult.”

“That it is. Shall Kegirin Itran rescue you or pass information to the Councilor? If so, how?”

“How does he get past Thane Krios’s security is the first question.” He was silent while she thought. She said “If he’s a doctor it could work that Drala’fa gets sick. Sick enough for Thane Krios to call in outside aid. With his bias for things Drell he would rely on another Drell and a criminally inclined doctor as he would not trust a human to remember all things that need to be known and he would not wish someone with actual medical ethics to touch, see or speak to her. Kegirin Itran suspects her
identity from personal experience with eyes and height, hears her voice and knows she is missing. He draws blood intended for testing but passes some along to the Councilor as comparison for Commander Shepard’s DNA.”

He laughed “And how is it that this was never disclosed as one of your plans?”

“It was a thought but not a plan. Too risky. I would have avoided putting someone else in danger that way. I would have avoided putting Garrus into the position of wanting to charge in after DNA. I could have faked or induced being sick in many ways, but I didn’t. I also would have warned you not to allow my blood to leave the estate if it came to that. Thane Krios’s security setup would get them both killed. The chain of evidence would be shaky, it would be hard to get Garrus’s attention. It would be hard to imagine someone that invested in my survival on such low odds and high risk. If Kegirin is willing to face scrutiny and interrogation from an infuriated and suspicious Councilor then it’s plausible.”

“He is.”

“He’s going to have to be. So what method does Kegirin propose to Councilor Vakarian to rescue her?”

“Does she wish to rescue herself? Does Thane Krios live or die, take a stand or flee?”

Her jaw worked for a moment before saying flatly “It doesn’t really matter, but probably alive, having fled.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“It doesn’t matter. Not to me. For the story it could be helpful. Thane Krios would be still a danger to her in theory but not in reality. That could add to potential trauma as a perceived threat and a potential strength if she looks beyond it and isn’t afraid, but is cautious, remains sequestered as is her habit. She’d be safe if she stays on the Normandy. Even Thane Krios would have difficulty bypassing EDI and the Normandy’s security checks. She would not be drawn out onto the Citadel or Illium. It would mean she would not be visiting Councilor Vakarian after her release to command and she would not be compelled to allow him on her ship. It would mean the same with Liara T’Soni. Commander Shepard would not be visiting Illium or extending an invitation for her to board. It would provide Garrus with an alternative target rather than suspecting Kegirin. Thane Krios alive is an effective distraction. Thane Krios dead provides no strategic or distraction value in the future. If Drala’fa can rescue herself, Kegirin Itran loses much of his utility and her gratitude. I imagine you wish for him to remain of high if serendipitous value.”

“You are a perceptive woman.”

“So they tell me. So Kegirin must have a plan. Medical follow up, something like a vitamin shot. Something minor and easily corrected but requiring a blood test. Arrange for a diagnosis of vitamin deficiency. Vitamin D from lack of sunlight. Medical devices can be introduced and then subverted. Kegirin’s Omni Tool can be a resource. Thane Krios would never fall for that…but nobody else knows that. Security doesn’t need to know how it happened. No witnesses, only their accounts. Drala’fa is gone. Thane Krios never returns to the estate. The house staff has no hint as to why, maintenance continues on as usual until her rescue and testimony and enough pressure is brought to bear from the Councilor to have the estate seized and searched. Kegirin will want to distance himself as soon as possible after helping to rescue her considering the Councilor’s treatment…provoked or inherent. He will certainly fear for his life and Thane Krios’s vengeance.”

“I agree. She must be witnessed as asking for his ongoing help and being told no. However,
Commander Shepard is in need of crew she can trust and she could certainly use a doctor who has a proven past of public service, successful navigation of the criminal world and private crusade against slavery. Someone who took selfless risks to assure her rescue. Someone with the experience of being a slave himself. Someone with a history of counseling those who are traumatized. To throw off suspicion he must turn her down."

“For this to work, it has to be witnessed that he says no for his own self preservation and it has to be witnessed that she continues to ask.”

“Yes. He will relent ultimately, then Kegirin Itran is on the Normandy, with you in command. You will have a doctor specializing in human and Drell medicine and a man who is trained in combat and counseling. Not trained as an assassin, but certainly adequate for your needs in a squad mate and companion. Effective and useful tactically and with hand to hand, weapons, stealth and biotics.”

“Handy.”

“At your side, always. Eventually you will insist and I will relent.”

“And then we save the galaxy?”

“In theory, yes.”

“Liking this plan.”

“I had hoped you would.”

“When does this happen?”

“The plan is still in its infancy, still months away from final execution of your engineered escape. We will refine and prepare and I must become Kegirin Itran and put him out in the world.”

“And the real Kegirin Itran?”

“Dead, I am afraid. A doctor in the past yet for many years reclusive, no longer practicing. Plausible that he had spent that time on personal crusades the likes of which I will construct. No associates remaining to speak to his character. There has been and will be a tragic loss of several people due to illness and accident. Possibly what drove him to the extremes of his vigilante actions, watching his comrades die as is the fate of many Drell in the galaxy.”

“And potential witnesses?”

“That you can decide. A plausible escape consistent with loopholes in security you have pointed out that remain fluid and opportunistically vulnerable. You will need to have a tracker cut out of you I am afraid but as a doctor Kegirin can minimize that pain and assist with removal. I can also arrange for Beckenstein to be a smoking crater with no witnesses remaining.”

“No. No crater. No unnecessary deaths. It doesn’t matter who says what about Drala’fa after the fact. The gallery holds cultural artifacts that should be returned to museums. Thane Krios can’t have a crisis of conscience and do it himself. Thane Krios has to appear to be Thane Krios up to the moment of his abandonment of the estate, after her escape however that is managed or again Kegirin Itran loses his utility. Thane Krios can also leave behind dossiers on associates that can be helpful to Council and C-Sec. Thane Krios can also afford to be generous and leave each staff member with enough money to live on comfortably through the next generation after his disappearance. No collateral damage, no murdered security, no murdered staff. Not on a gathering night, not involving others.”
“And if newspapers run stories about how Commander Shepard was a sex slave because witnesses remain?”

“It doesn’t matter. It means people will leave me alone and I have further reason for my habitual isolation. That’s what you want, right?”

“It is.”

“Me too. It’s to my advantage and I can use it. My personal pain has been on public display since I was sixteen. Nobody cared then. People care now only as a result of my fame and that makes it meaningless to me. Do you think you can discover who chose to take out a contract on my life? I’d prefer it did not happen again.”

“I will endeavor to determine who and monitor future contract opportunities and guard against that possibility. Remaining on the Normandy would be wise for several reasons. If I were to hazard a guess I would suggest it was from Salarian sources who did not wish to see Commander Shepard’s influence over the Council come to full potential fruition. Do you wish a return to your natural coloring and appearance?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Truly?”

“It would take time and effort that I don’t want to expend. I have never been my appearance. If I am objectively improved now, why bother?”

“You are…”

“Objectively improved.”

“I still find myself nostalgic for green eyes.”

“Then maybe Thane Krios should not have changed them. It will provide a line in the sand. I was one woman before the experience, I processed the experience, I am another woman after the experience. I am not my appearance and not defined by it. Whoever Garrus Vakarian believed himself bonded to, she is no longer the same person and never will be.”

“As you wish. I will be a doctor. I will be removing your chip.”

“That’s good. Have you been a doctor before?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good too. Much practice with neurosurgery?”

“No, but it seems easy enough.”

They both laughed. She said “Same with killing Reapers. Try not to do permanent damage.”

“It seems I have failed at that entirely. As that wasn’t my intent, I am gratified.”

“We’ll see. Will Kegirin Itran follow Commander Shepard’s orders?”

“Yes, he will. Unless she is critically foolish as is occasionally her wont and then he will point out her error as politely and discreetly as possible to maintain her life and her command.”
“And will Kegirin Itran and Commander Shepard be lovers?”

“Of course. Not at first. They will grow close, keep confidences, bond over shared experience. They will be friends. She will be inclined to trust him and he will give her no reason to believe he would ever betray her. He will glow for her shortly after meeting him. She will have a positive impression of him early on and that potential will grow. He will always be blessed by her synesthesia.

Unfortunately Councilor Vakarian will lose that attribute. She will choose Kegirin’s company over her solitude and he will be forever grateful and devoted to her. He will secretly mourn the loss of her green eyes and welcome the return of her freckles and inherent joy in life. He will be wary and careful of her trauma and she must convince him that she has overcome her fears before he ever agrees to touch her. He will be an understanding, empathetic man who only wishes the best for her, star struck at her insistence that he include himself in her crew. She will have someone to talk to at all times, someone she trusts and who wishes the best for her. She will no longer be alone. He will be intimidated when asked to share her bed, but ultimately will find her irresistible and hope to please her to the best of his ability."

“Of course he would be. If Commander Shepard manages Councilor Vakarian well and convinces him there is no future together, there will be no need to kill him.”

“He is needed in the fight against Reapers. Commander Shepard with the Turian Councilor and the human Councilor in her pocket, with the Asari Councilor under their influence will be a formidable woman. We can do what we do best. Fight. Why waste those abilities fighting each other when they can be put to better use?”

“Looking forward to it. I will give you my best advice on one detail.”

“I will consider it.”

“The word love never passes Thane Krios’s or Kegirin Itran’s lips and I never use the word to address any Drell of any name or origin. Starting now. You will make sure of it. I don’t want to be a person who learns to hate as much as you deserve to be hated. Let me do my job, spare me and you that. I need to be focused and life expectancy for everyone goes down the more distracted I get.”

He was silent for a moment, watching her twin suns with cores of gravity and flares of arcing purpose “You wound me and deprive me of one of the greater potential pleasures of my life.”

“Good. You have stolen memories. You’re a Drell, rely on those. I look forward to getting you killed in the line of duty and not in your sleep. I look forward to doing the same. I do not wish to die in my sleep.”

“So be it. Did you fear that while I was gone? That you would die in your sleep? Is that why you could not sleep in my absence?”

“Thank you. Yes, of course I feared for that. You intended that.”

“I strove to stay alive, to return to you. I had no plans of you dying if I did not return. Would you believe me if I told you that if I died based on my own choices and not yours, you would have been set free?”

“No, and convincing me of that would not matter. I don’t care. I don’t care how many Reapers you kill. I don’t care if you save the galaxy single handed. I don’t need you. I don’t want you. The illusions you spin will always be that, cheap and vile. You deserve no trust and you deserve death. Although you would prefer it, I don’t want to kill you with extreme prejudice. I want it clean. Remember this moment. If you wish to see the look in my eyes if you potentially died at my hand
without warning, imagine me looking at you with all the contempt I hold for you now. You are a
distraction and I do not have time to concern myself with your narcissistic fantasies of direct or
backhanded domination or gestures of attendant devotion. You are not that important, Senar. In the
long run, I will heal and you will not. You can content yourself with digging yourself in deeper, I’ll
content myself with digging myself out and leaving you behind. I will always know you deserve to
die. You can always ask me. The answer will always be the same. Maybe there comes a day when
you give me ten minutes to kill you and you stand down and do not fight back because you’ve dug
yourself in so deep you know you will never get out, and I deserve to be free of you. Don’t make me
hate you. I advise you not to grow a conscience for your own good, you would choke on it.”

“I will not need to ask. I will content myself with memories made and memories yet to come. It is in
neither of our natures to simply give up, is it?”

“It is not. I do hope we kill a lot of them.”

“As do I. We will speak later. For now, close your eyes.”

She did, and he stroked fingers through her hair, changed his voice back to Thane Krios. He would
return her names to her and she would keep his names, all of them she knew. “It does matter,
Drala’fa, that you cannot sleep, that you fear death when you should not. You will not kill me in my
sleep, you never intended to, did you?”

“No.”

“Then I will not use the chip again. I have not asked it of you, but now we have plans within plans
and that will sustain you. You will have hope, Drala’fa. Hope of escape. It will come to you. You
will not need to kill me. Thane Krios will be gone from your life and you will know you are safe
from him. You need never fear death in your sleep from me, from any names I answer to. As long as
you keep Garrus Vakarian from touching you, which you know you will, he is safe. You believe
Thane Krios will leave you to your fight. Your life is fated, charmed from this moment forward. You
will know your bondage is temporary, you will sleep without nightmares. Take some of the fierce
protection you have and use it for yourself. Save your strength. Save your intellect. Do not waste it
on fears that you know will not come to pass. Help will come to you. When you were dead and had
no will, others brought you back. It will be the same here. Hands will lift you from bondage and you
will be free.”

She said softly “What if I don’t want to go?”

“You will want to go, Drala’fa. That will also come to you.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“I will miss you as well, Drala’fa. And the way you damage my pride.”

She laughed and he asked “What is a word you would use that is not love, not the love you have for
your parents, not the love you carry for Garrus Vakarian. What is a word you would use for me and
for not wishing to go?”

“Adored is good.”

“Am I adored?”

“Yes.”

“You are adored, Drala’fa. Do you wish to try wine this evening?”
“I don’t drink.”
“You could.”
“No, I couldn’t.”
“All right. Even though it hurts my pride? It is excellent wine.”
“Sorry. Still no.”
“Are you hungry?”
“No. Comfortable here.”
“Tired?”
“Yes.”
“Sleep then. No nightmares.”
“I never have them with you here.”
“Then I will stay with you.”

She lifted her head and kissed him, lingering and gentle. He asked “Would you like for me to spend tomorrow with you?”

“Yes, please. I missed you. Can I paint your toenails?”

“Of course.”
“Can I choose the color?”
“No, you have terrible taste in colors, Drala’fa.”
“I do not, I’m awesome. Better than you.”
“Then you have a terrible sense of humor.”
“Orange could grow on you.”
“It could not, and you have none. I would burn it.”
“We’ll see.”
“We will not.”
“Fine. Green then. Black stripes like lightning.”
“As you wish.”
“Might take me a while.”
“We will have all day.”

She said softly “Yay” and snuggled closer, a smile on her lips and his hands in her hair and on her back.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

These guys now have theme songs.

**Thane** - [Counting Bodies Like Sheep To The Rhythm Of The War Drums - A Perfect Circle](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4w5gFVzgOU)

**Cara** - [Ruins - Melissa Etheridge](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4w5gFVzgOU)

They spoke often with her under venom, Whole. They refined plans, discussed details of workability and flexibility, options and misdirection. Thane crafted the personalities, pasts and potential paths of Kegirin and Cara with her assistance.

Cara would no longer experience social or physical shyness to the extremes that she had previously, but would still wish to preserve modesty and dignity through seeking solitude as her refuge and study as her strength.

At his insistence and as a minor detail she would obtain a wardrobe not of great expense but of taste and as an expression of her personal aesthetics, which he would properly appreciate. She unfortunately did not care about her clothing despite all his attempts to induce that in her. Her aesthetics were his aesthetics and that would do. Feathers and fringe and skin would not do on the Normandy, unfortunately, but he would not tolerate rags.

She would not have nightmares. She would not lose sleep. Her anxiety levels would be normalized, not eliminated. He believed her empathetic nature and intellectual engagement would be more than sufficient to maintain her gift for command. Her personality need not be tied so deeply to pain. Those were involuntary goals on her part. To achieve those goals he took his time and primed her, making good use of her no longer being under the influence of the chip. He watched over her awake, asleep, envenomed and lucid. She reported better rest, no nightmares and lessened anxiety. As predicted she lost none of the edge required for the ability to plan her own rescue and aid him in the advice required to patch any holes in his plan the same way she had been helpful in patching his security.

If anything, again a blessing and a curse, she became sharper and more focused on what might otherwise have been a blurry detail, often chiding him for missing something that was genius in its simplicity and construction.

That was the hallmark of genius, it seemed the obvious solution all along. She excelled at that.

The medical and surgical necessity of being transformed into Kegirin permanently would require that he be gone from the estate for the final days of preparation before her rescue. He would have to undergo several excruciatingly painful medical ordeals, some already begun. He would need to recover quickly and return while in severe pain he could not afford to dull. Unfortunate but necessary. She would undergo withdrawal as painlessly as could be managed. Kegirin would ideally be a buffer and bolster to her story, possibly embraced as a hero but in all likelihood only a minimal help to her once she was delivered to Vakarian. It was unlikely Councilor Vakarian would want or permit a Drell chaperone. Kegirin would be lucky to avoid a black ops interrogation. Cara felt the Councilor would not go that far.
He had responded that had the Councilor known exactly how far to go to achieve his goals, had he the judgment required he would never have lost her. Thane’s only choice would have been to kill her at a distance. He would have been unable to take her captive. Perhaps Vakarian had grown a spine under his plates after her abduction. She must ask after Kegirin’s welfare and make certain he was not left to rendition for extended periods of time. Kegirin would be able to provide whatever story was required under torture. He would already be in pain. He was immune to pharmaceuticals intended for interrogation due to constant exposure to the effects of his own venom. An Asari interrogator would be a concern, but there were methods effective there as well.

Asari were vulnerable to pure emotional backlash and that was a method usable by him and Cara. He would prefer to test the phenomena but would not permit an Asari near either of them for that purpose. The theory would have to do. An Asari attempting contact with either of them would ideally experience so much emotional pain that all future forays would be abandoned. Both he and Cara had natural and inexhaustible resources of remembered pain of overwhelming and visceral intensity, prohibitive to repeated attempts. In theory they could hold off conscious interrogation via Asari contact indefinitely and harm quite a few Asari in the process.

The rescue and transport would be painful for her as well. They devised a way to exploit security as it stood now so there was no obvious pattern of vigilance and then laxity to later interrogation. Only minimal and understandable lapses could be created. It could not have any hallmarks of an inside job.

Cara had advised him that Garrus Vakarian had been an excellent C-Sec detective, capable of deciding Saren Arterius should be a target of investigation on very little hard evidence. He did it on his own. He did it against the orders of his Executor. He had been willing and eager to defy the Council, even gleeful. He had left his family, career, clan and status and had found a way to prove it. He had demanded to be a squad member under her command. He had not asked. She had stressed that he was not a typical Turian, he was not in the habit of giving up and underestimating his ability to find a crack in a story would be potentially fatal to all of them.

Monitoring would be active. Rescue had to be something she could not have done on her own. It would be harrowing and difficult, with risks of injury to both of them. There was also the removal of the chip and tracker to be accomplished.

After delivery she would be on her own with only what mental and motivational framework he would be able to put in place by then to help them achieve their goals. She would need to gradually work her way toward solutions to problems that had been determined ahead of time, slowly coming to conclusions and appearing to have a thought process rather than priming and suggestion. Immediate goals such as managing her personal relationships with Liara T’Soni and Garrus Vakarian must be achieved first in tandem with assuring herself of Kegirin’s safety and release if necessary. Attempts to persuade him to join or aid her must be witnessed. Issues of autonomy would be secondary, final acquisition of Kegirin as a companion tertiary while developing her mission.

When she was questioned regarding Thane Krios she would be concerned about what he knew about her but dismissive of his ability to recapture her if she remained on the Normandy or any other vessel on which she might serve. She would be worried only about achieving her goals of maintaining the autonomy of her mind, body and command. She would express intellectual concern and emphasis, but not feel fear or anxiety. There would be no unnecessary drag upon her performance or ability to think clearly and execute.

She would not be dissociated from her instincts or thoughts, but she would experience minimized pain and anxiety.

It was vital that Thane Krios be minimized as an ongoing threat to her command. She would describe
him as a petty and unimaginative man who would covet her as a prize he had lost but who lacked the resources and courage to re-obtain her with her on guard. Of the details of abduction she would know she had been drugged on Illium and had later woken up at his estate with the surgery done and the chip in place.

The main value of Thane Krios as an ongoing threat would not be to her person but to her relationship with Vakarian. Thane Krios had obtained the information that they were bond mates, information she had been forced to confess under the influence of the control chip. He could only use that information to harm them if their relationship continued. They must end all contact other than minimal and professional.

There would be no valid trail for Vakarian to follow to Krios. Several false leads. Krios will have left the estate, never having returned after being alerted to her escape. All security contacts tracing to him and Omni Tool codes would be dead. Shepard would encourage Vakarian to forget about Krios. That would be her best and most honest advice to him and they all knew Vakarian would not do it. She would prefer he not waste his time and Council resources on pursuit on a man who bought and sold identities as a matter of business, but here neither of them thought Vakarian would be denied his bond, left at his desk and then give up pursuit without the urge to exact vengeance as his remaining reason to live.

She would not be persuasive, but she would try. Cara was not a woman of vengeance. Thane was assured Vakarian would be a man of vengeance. Even if Cara were to secure a promise from Vakarian to forget about Thane Krios and focus on the fight against Reapers, Vakarian would be lying to her. Every resource he had would be turned toward finding and killing Krios.

You are lucky you are immune to hate, Drala’fa. I promise you he is not. Based upon Vakarian’s behavior up to this point, the man is capable of passion and hatred and will burn himself out on that search with his path to you denied.

It would be a beautiful thing to watch and it was unfortunate he could not see the day to day deterioration. Cara’s contact with him would be absolutely minimal and professional.

Sacrifices must be made.

She had been given intellectual, emotional and visceral prohibition against the physical touch of Asari and priming on the theory of causing emotional pain upon attempted contact. Asari touch was to be avoided at all costs, up to and including physical violence. Trafficking survivors were known to react unpredictably to unanticipated and unwanted touch. This was a consistent and understandable reaction, above all a normal reaction to trauma. She was asked to study the behavior and emulate it. She was to give verbal warnings first, provide body language and signals that should be heeded or there would be consequences. She could not accept squad members that were Asari and she was to manage that on her own. Folded into her motivations was the given but forgotten knowledge that if she did not, he would. No Asari that successfully touched her would be permitted to live. She would have strong opinions on the subject. She would not point out that it was because they were Asari. She would find independent reasons to reject their aid. Commander Shepard would make it known that she did not wish to be touched by anyone, blame the trauma of her captivity and that would most likely be respected by all.

Cara had emphasized T’Soni’s and Vakarian’s strong instincts of protective compassion and that was excellent, easily exploited. Commander Shepard had always been capable of shutting down lines of questioning she did not wish to answer. She would maintain that skill with the use of tears and silence as she often had in the past, not with violence or anger.

Thane was convinced of its effectiveness as an approach.
She must be reasonably and typically traumatized but not insane. She must become more predictable in her responses as time went by and her needs were met. They would be graduated according to escalation and de-escalation. She must be deemed capable of command as long as she was left to heal according to her defined boundaries, boundaries that were consistent with her prior personality.

Ideally she would never be touched by another person, although other medical personnel would be necessary. Dr. Chakwas would be the most likely consultant on her health as well as Miranda Lawson. They should find her to be healthy and unaltered mentally or physically other than removal of her prior hardware, tracker and chip. The chip was as expensive as it was in part because insertion and removal would be less traumatic than methods employed by Batarians on general slave stock. He would be able to remove it himself and she would be able to demonstrate intact cerebral function.

Kegirin ideally would become entrusted with her care exclusively at her request. She was a healthy woman other than the occupational hazard of being shot at often. She would be encouraged to remain healthy. He would insist.

Her natural temper was still mild to nonexistent. Her captivity...he...had no effect on her temperament. As Drala’fa she had remained kind, charming, achingly if not painfully sweet and endearing. That had not dimmed in her, and her moments of generosity brought him low.

What had grown in her was comprehension of strategy from what he had exposed her to and her comprehension of him, which was disarming and at times terrifying. She would not need to lose her temper. She would minimize all private relationships except for the one with Kegirin. She would be saving their lives, protecting them, and she would be effective. Potentially Kegirin could gain the confidence of the crew with his counselor’s manner and insight and provide a conduit to the Commander’s attention as well as access to information on her crew. It appeared that she had neglected personal relationships entirely on board her ship, which would serve his interest in isolating her, but not his interest in maintaining intelligence on crew members.

She would no longer speak to the inanimate. She would have animated internal conversations addressing different voices, not as whimsical but necessary to her process of formulation of strategy. Eventually she would speak to him as they did now, devising strategy and patching flaws to theory. They made an excellent and effective team. She would need no other voices.

At her insistence she would no longer speak to her parents and he granted that, a loss the magnitude of the color of her eyes. The color of their eyes. She was still their daughter just as she would always love Garrus Vakarian, but the new woman of raven hair and violet eyes was determined that she would no longer whistle in the dark.

He had taught her what he knew on the subject. Those who were in the dark should be silent so as to not attract the attention of the creatures of the deeper dark who called it their home. She would always be in the dark to a greater or lesser degree and she would carry that knowledge and caution with her always.

Upon further probing of the strategic reason for not wishing to converse with her parents, there was an emotional need she wished to honor. Knowing she was under his influence, she did not wish to lie to them. She did not wish to ask them to counsel her on problems with no real solution. She did not wish to cause them despair. She would remember that she found comfort in speaking to them once, she would find comfort in their silent presences but she would not hear their voices.

Even he recognized that as a deeper price to pay than should have ever been asked. Of all the things he had brought about in her, that was something that caused him true regret. It was something he had not managed to preserve for her, something he had broken in her, something priceless. Something he could not compensate for or replace. That her compassion, care and protection extended to the
deceased and imaginary convinced him she remained unbroken in her motivation to protect others.

It extended miraculously to him, her willingness to take on pain and burden as insignificant if another was spared. He approached the closest he had ever come to feeling guilt with that realization. Of all the things he had thoughtfully destroyed, this was something he had not anticipated, something of beauty he had crushed without need. It was a sacrifice his practicality would not demand but her martyrdom would.

Her protective instincts were beautiful to watch, fragile to experience directed at him, a precious thing to know potentially he would at some point in the future replace all other voices in her head. His touch and thought would be her only refuge. Her love for family and bond mate would be set aside so she would not touch them with hands and thought she knew were irrevocably corrupted by his presence and influence.

She could only preserve them by abandoning them. She chose to enshrine them and only visit silently at their graves, dead and gone, their otherwise constant voices now still. Voices that had survived their own deaths and had been there for her, survived her own death. They had not survived him.

He arranged for it after determining she had not spoken to them since her arrival at Beckenstein.

Kegirin would understand her detachment and mourn with her if she chose to confide in him about her parents. He would not force her to, this pain not something he savored. He was not equipped to parse why, except to know he had failed to anticipate who she would become, what she would need and what she had at her disposal before he placed a chip in her spine and destroyed something precious.

She earned concessions to personnel, to conservation of life, to conservation of what she termed soul and he termed trouble and potential loose ends best severed. She insisted on economy of force and wherever possible application of guile to accomplish a practical goal. He eliminated some but not all of his cruel flourishes to which he was accustomed, more willing to make concessions because of the losses she had sustained and was willing to sustain indefinitely. He had enjoyed his cruel flourishes the same way a painter enjoyed signing their works, consistent and distinct. It was something to which he considered himself entitled, but he would have a lifetime of potential cruel flourishes to indulge in and did not find himself objecting as strenuously as he might, did not find himself dismissing her arguments as he might have otherwise. She insisted upon mitigating potential horror where possible. He insisted upon minimizing her overt martyrdom in terms of anxiety but would extend her martyrdom in theory indefinitely. She was cooperative, encouraging him to take out his need for cruelty on her and not others.

As you wish, Drala’fa.

He felt pity for the Reapers at times. She felt no need to sign anything consistently or distinctly. She applied pure strategic thought to a problem without investing her ego or expecting a payout to benefit her personally. Her guile in breathtaking clarity was a thing to behold and he planned to exploit every opportunity to continue to behold her.

The things he could do with his motivations and her helpful advice.

He could likely save a galaxy while not caring about it in the least.

He could care for her, a combination of debt, desire and the gravity of twin suns.

She had said something about lines in the sand, something that was a human idiom. It translated well
to Drell thought and they were able to determine boundaries and freedoms with as much of her mind left intact as possible and at her disposal. She would be back in her fight and was consumed only by that eventuality. She felt that even had she been entirely free of Thane Krios for a lifetime with no fear, she would not risk a relationship with Garrus Vakarian for too many reasons, many of which had existed before Thane Krios had taken her. Those reasons were unchanged and would serve for her base motivation, though she would give other reasons as well. The idea of love or romance was meaningless to her if it did not involve Vakarian. If it was forced on her that she include Kegirin in her life, in her bed, she would pay that price because she had no choice and without it she would not be given the chance to pursue her Destiny.

She accepted her fate with grace and occasional bravado in the form of crafted defiance and contempt. That was understandable, clothed in understated wit, entertaining. He let it pass most often with feigned self-deprecating acceptance of being the only monster in the room.

She was afraid.

She should be.

He did not mention that he was afraid of her now for many reasons. They both knew.

He assured her that he would aid her in fighting the Reapers and she believed him because his own survival was at stake. Their motivations were aligned along opposite poles toward achieving that one goal together. Beyond that he told her he wished to enjoy his chosen pet for as long as possible. She understood she had no choice about that, no control over the direction he took. Given that information, she wished to be as far from other people as possible and infused with sufficient motivation to minimize their horror and spare them contact with her and therefore his influence.

Her expectations of survival were minimal. She was willing to be a sexual and emotional martyr as long as she could save other people in the process.

He promised her that if she witnessed the verified death of Kegirin Itran, all her memories would return to her, along with the tools to survive the shock and gain perspective, spare herself pain while providing herself with information. He then took that memory from her.

Certain unstable fears that he had induced in her intentionally or unintentionally such as her being compelled to kill a lover as they slept or her being murdered in her sleep by him or his agents would be removed. As he would be her lover, it would be an unwise trigger to leave in place. He had to undo much of what was solidly in place in a relative short amount of time. She would not remember much of their time together and that was a loss as well. Much of the craft of a day was intended to be paid forward to the future and the days themselves would be forgotten. Thane Krios as a person to her would be shorn of character and subtler menaces.

It was a shame that only he would remember his subtler menaces. Investment in Thane Krios and Drala’fa faded, and Cara and Sheppard became more real, Kegirin became closer to fruition.

Her distinctions of personality must be blended into a whole she had not been even before her captivity. She would not fear triggers, would not mention or remember them. Dread must be removed as an underpinning he had firmly placed with the intent that it remain. She would attribute all loss of mental and physical control she had experienced with Thane Krios to the effects of the control chip and not venom. She would forget about the added effects of his venom entirely, remember it only as something mildly hallucinatory.

A delicate mental balance of his identities would take place with puppetry and capacity taken into account. She would not be able to compare his alter egos except in superficial terms. Thane Krios
would be reduced to traits and impressions, pre-chosen adjectives and images. Thane Krios would not be able to be juxtaposed with Kegirin Itran. Senar would cease to exist and would not surface. Her mental focus on one of his identities would cause the other to disappear in a way so that she would have only vague impressions such as being able to retain that they were different colors, one was cruel and one was kind. For instance, she would remember sexual objectification in stark detail. She would not remember that she enjoyed it.

Kegirin Itran’s venom would not remind her of Thane Krios, his body would not be familiar. She would not draw parallels of experience between the two men or fear having them. Kegirin Itran’s adept touch would be perceived as a gift from an empathic man who cared for her and knew exactly how to put hands on her body, maintaining Senar’s legacy but not his process or past. His venom would be experienced by her as comforting, joyous and something that brought her pleasure by its presence. She would be primed to enjoy it, and it would not produce the same receptive state as it might otherwise. She would pass beyond receptive in general to being receptive to experiencing his presence as pleasure. It would induce the state of Drala’fa translated to Cara, her most carefree and charming. She would gain peace of mind, gratitude for being the right person in the right place and time as Shepard. She would experience herself as a finally integrated personality, someone who had overcome traumas that would break others. She would experience herself as Whole, as fully committed to her fight. She would be gifted by fate with a lover who adored her, a man she had pursued on her own, not someone who had taken her metaphorically or physically captive. He would be a man who prized her autonomy and revered her inspiration.

He would be a strategic and military asset because he wished to survive.

They could cooperate. She would belong to him, he would be unopposed and she would not know she was unwilling. He would never allow her a fully lucid state where she knew who he was or what she truly thought about him. He must be wary of constant surveillance, but venom and whispers could accomplish much. Either he would die and she would belong to herself again or they would both live and she would belong to him for as long as he could maintain the illusion that she adored him. He would know her contempt for the idea, that her stated and always true goal under the glamour would be to cut him down and step over his body, speak to her parents and return to her bond mate with a free heart and mind.

As much as she considered herself untouched at the soul and in theory free without him, the trouble of her soul was again expensive and difficult. They both knew the idea that she was untouched and unbroken as a person was a lie. He could rehabilitate and even improve her command. He could not restore or improve Cara.

She could maintain her real contempt and theoretical detachment only in a suppressed and silent corner of her mind, only awoken on his death. He could maintain the fact that her desires and involvement with him had its own power and truth. Regardless of how they came about as a team, it was about how well they worked together. She could despise the maker of the illusion as much as she wished, but she wanted the created illusion with all of her extraordinary heart and grateful body. Addiction to venom and sex built its own reality, something with power, something that she respected and could only defy with increasingly veiled protest because each repetition invoked a counterargument where her only remaining response was panting moans and effusive thanks, joy on her face and her lips on his body with all the gratitude for his efforts he could wish.

She would never return to Garrus Vakarian. She belonged to Senar by any name and that was what he chose. She might live without him, but she would do so alone, always. Human memory was flawed but he would not fade in her mind. After his death she would be free in some ways and more burdened in others. She would have horror and cruelty enough to keep her company along with panting moans and effusive thanks. She would maintain her personal prohibition against
masturbation along with his insistence that she never touch herself, never allow another to touch her. If she tested or defied this prohibition she would never be able to come without the name of Senar slipping from her mouth, her mind flooded with layered images of thrones and begging, some of his most favored memories left as an insistent gift if a certain line in the sand was crossed.

If she did not wish this to come to pass she should do her best to keep him alive.

He was and would be her only sexual partner for her lifetime. All her priming about not being touched by anyone other than him would haunt her and she would be unable to overcome it. She would cause others ever-escalating violent harm if she tried, loosing anger and pain from the deep wells she left unexpressed. He could make her express it from beyond the grave if she pushed for autonomy he would never grant. He had given her warnings and motivations enough regarding this, then taken the memories. He had left her with the knowledge that she was a danger to self and others, unless the other was him.

She had made her request about the word ‘love’ and he would grant it. Unfortunately for her it had been a mistake, a weakness to ask. She had hoped they would not have love, the word or the deed. They would not, he was incapable. But he would have her love, and every association with sex belonged to him.

Ideally he would gain his survival and regain full access to her body and mind over time with her primed to trust and insistent upon including him in her life despite any of his protests. If his plans worked and she found no escape she would find him indispensible, find him worthy of adoration and love. She would not speak the word and neither would he, but she would not find this an odd thing. He would teach her Drell words, hear her moans, feel her nails down his back.

If he’d had feelings, he would have sworn they were injured, as was his pride.

That never went unanswered.

She would achieve her goals as he achieved his. Her Destiny fulfilled, Reapers defeated, he would choose then what to do with her. She said she did not care beyond that eventuality. That was a lie but her only dignified answer to the question. Her fight would be over. She would have no love to pursue, no people to cherish if he insisted on keeping her, which he would. If Kegirin Itran survived and managed to bring her that far, what was left would belong to him. He could do what he wished. She could not stop him and knew it, asked for no mercy or guarantees.

She was wise, his Drala’fa. Still insistently vulnerable and unwilling to guard herself or attempt to, but wise in the application of what she knew of him.

He did not know yet what he would do with her, that depended on the satisfaction he gained from gentler persuasions and confidences, in the joys of being pursued by her. He would potentially have years to decide, goals to set, identities to create, endless opportunities to influence her behavior and responses and tailor her to any whim he chose.

Something she had grasped without him having to explain it to her, something that most others did not grasp to their detriment was that he had no base personality, only sets of behaviors that could align around personal goals. He was a cipher. His personal goals of survival and possession could be fulfilled by any personality he chose. Kegirin Itran would be gentle, kind and compassionate because she needed those things to feel safe. She would not be safe. He would get what he wanted of her. He was no more Thane Krios than he was Kegirin Itran. Thane Krios had needed her to feel threatened. She had felt threatened. He had gotten what he wanted of her.

He had proven he could own her as a goal, that need not be demonstrated further. She was right, he
was Drell, he could remember. He would miss the look on her face when she realized it over and over, but he had enough to sustain himself.

He did not relish isolation, pain and the inability to cross a room and have her body and obedience on demand, but he would endure it because he must if he wished to have years of freedom to do exactly that without threat of it being denied by Reapers, by her, by anyone.

She understood his whims and goals were not given to alteration due to sentiment, though she came closer than any ever had to inducing guilt in him. She certainly earned concessions and uncustomed leniency simply by breathing and smiling at him. She was prized and he would not give her up. He enjoyed her wit, her status, utility and accomplishments and he found her body exquisite. She elevated the acts of conversation, inspiration and sex to glorious things. If she was naturally charming and he was charmed, it was best for both of them. She had been expensive and he was far too possessive and wrathful in disappointment to ever let her go. If she became disappointing and lost all entertainment value he could correct that eventually. The more she inspired him to fall to his knees and worship her Whole, the better for both of them. She did it easily, without trying. She had that ability through her smile, her laugh, even her contempt.

He in turn would give her what she wanted, what she needed. He had learned her needs. She had confessed every desire, every need, had given him a map to her body, drawn with flourishes and care and invitation to explore. All paths to satisfaction in any other direction denied, she would drink from his hand, eat from his hand and thank him for the right to do it. Under any name in any direction. Senar, Thane, Kegirin would please Cara, Lal and Drala’fa as he chose and regardless of whether it was named love or not, that did not matter.

Save the word, Cara, spare your speech, I will allow it.

Keep that one word while I take everything else.

Keep that one word while I redefine it.

He had learned his own lessons of captivity. She had not yet learned them all but she would live the practice. When one is captive, one is still hungry, thirsty and has needs. Those needs and their fulfillment and lack of fulfillment were what was most vital. Puppetry became possible at those entry points. It was not a fault or flaw in her. It was her nature as a living thing that wished to continue to live. He informed her honestly and not as mockery that in the end she had fewer choices than she believed because she was alive, she wished to stay alive, and she cared about a goal beyond herself.

Now…now he was the same.

Now she knew it, would know it, and threats would be of no value, he must have her loyalty and her love or he would not survive. He still would likely not survive due to her predilection for running at gunfire.

Now he had diminishing choices and a potential future requiring sacrifice of everything else he had gained and maintained. There was only a small chance his plan would work, and he was diligently pursuing her Destiny and not his whim, something he had not done before, something vital to him he had not known he needed.

Water from his hand would ease her thirst. Food from his hand will ease her hunger. His lips on her body would ease their invoked and summoned need for sex. Her lips on his body would ease her invoked need for venom. Her lips on his body would ease his invoked, summoned need for her.

I cannot poison the water or the food, your lips or mine, they must serve vital need in both of us.
From what he understood, if he loved her he would place her needs before his. That was according to her definition. He could grasp that intellectually but not in practice. He could understand not wishing to be overtly cruel to her...at times...depending on how infuriating she chose to be in a given moment, but he could not see his way clear to placing her needs before his own except momentarily, as a concession, as a gift or as a strategy with potential payout. Why he would do that as common practice or promise to, why she did that herself was inexplicable. He would identify and fulfill her needs with care because it served a purpose. His needs would remain constant, his patience with her assured until the deferred future.

Perhaps humans forgot earlier gestures, did not have a running total of debt and payment available to them. He could understand that. He could forgive and accommodate that. Perhaps humans were more loving due to being forgetful.

It made as much sense as any theory.

It still did not explain her, but he would try to understand and at least emulate the appearance.

As to what his future whim would be, all possibilities besides true love were available. It may be that she had already chosen her own smaller destiny by denying him the word. Never tell me, Drala’fa, but say it, show it with every breath and in every other way. She would put his needs before her own and that would be the only love required. He would have it of her because it was in her nature to love, she could not withhold it if he wished to call it from her, and he would.

There was a human story she had told him which had made less sense than her definition of love. Pandora’s box. All the evils loosed in the world, but hope remained in the box.

‘That makes no sense, Drala’fa. Why not let hope out into the world to combat the evils set loose? Is that not what hope is for?’ Not that he believed that. She put great store in the power of hope. He had found hope to be the most devastating thing that could be used against a person, infinitely more powerful than blades. Denial of promised pleasure and subsequent demoralization was much more powerful than inflicted pain, which could build rather than erode morale by enduring it successfully.

She was a prime example of both.

Manipulation of hope had been his childhood. He was Chosen, he was Blessed, the Gods smiled on his success and frowned upon his failure.

Hope was the greatest weapon available to him to bring about demolition or fruition in her case and would remain so for as long as he could use it, as long as she produced it as an inexhaustible natural resource. Perhaps that was the point to the story, of all the evils in the galaxy, the most powerful and dangerous one was hope. Lock it away and do not allow it to escape.

Never let the Gods or the galaxy find it.

Never let someone with designs upon your will know your hope.

She had not been able to explain. ‘I…well, now I don’t know when you put it that way.’

‘Has nobody asked this question? Are all human stories so nonsensical?’

So for his nonsensical human, let her keep her box with her one word, let her hold it close. Let her tongue be tied as she wishes. He was all the evil out of the box, and she was denied the thing she embodied.

I would pity you, Drala’fa, if you were not so formidable or if I could afford pity as an expense.
Only one of us invests in such things.

For now if they survived together, they had potentially years together in the fight, it might never end for them while they lived out their lives and died in the ongoing struggle. The previous cycle’s fight had lasted at least a century. He had at most 40 years of life remaining. Her life expectancy by her own estimation did not extend that long. He had time for patience with possibility and choices regarding what memories he wished to create or set aside. He knew he would not return to Thane Krios. His time was past, a greater Destiny embraced and a whim set aside as unsustainable in terms of civilization collapsing and her mind possibly being the only path toward fending off failure.

He did not care for civilization on the whole but he did appreciate infrastructure sufficient to secure supply lines of whatever he wished.

For now gatherings would continue until they executed their plan. There were idle plans to create images and memories of his Drala’fa he might savor at leaner times, but they paled next to his greater plans. She would not remember. She would retain only the crudest details of sexual objectification devoid of his and her inspirations. He had moved on to wishing to see Shepard in action.

After the fight was over it might be enough that he attained the coup of a constant and devoted, persuasive and protective lover in Cara Fanning, a woman who felt responsible for his presence in a fight that was theoretically not his own. That should be entertaining enough. She would have her life of solitude and study, no need for security, no visitors. High payoff, low investment. He would have, again, a deceptively simple irony of domesticity. She could explore her enthusiasm for cooking. She had no opportunity to exercise that at Beckenstein as he would never permit her near the technical bonanza that was the kitchen or allow her to interact with staff.

He could fall asleep each night after exercising any whim he chose, wondering if his extraordinary unreasonable martyr would slip his hold and kill him in his sleep. Perhaps enough danger for him to savor, his free-range and willing tigress who chose him, a stove, supply lines, infrastructure and an Extranet connection as her ideal world. She would leave behind everyone she had saved, everyone she had loved before as irrelevant. She would have left behind herself and become a set of personality traits surrounding his goal. She would wish only to express the love she felt for a man who had reluctantly and then devotedly stood at her side during her most difficult fight.

Perhaps he would learn from her and find the source of his pleasures to be derived from a sense of accomplishment and self possession. Not exactly the self she intended, but it technically applied. Her Destiny fulfilled, his whim would rule, his appetites sated, possibilities open. He need not decide now what their potential future would be. Asking him to promise her any mercy or freedom beyond that she knew would be meaningless.

She had advised him to re-implant the control chip at the end of her Destiny, to never attempt to invoke her as a Whole woman again, to never speak to her other than as Kegirin Itran. Beyond her Destiny she would not be controlled by him threatening others. She would have no need to escape or survive him. Her only purpose would be to remove him from the galaxy if she had a moment’s lucidity. Whoever’s welfare he thought he could threaten her with would be acceptable as collateral damage. He would have no reason to limit his cruelty and she would not trust him or his declarations. She would choose to end him no matter what his safeguards were. He would finally have the wrathful death he sought at her hands and she would be free of Senar’s schemes, attentions and fulcrums of control. Her purpose in the outer galaxy completed, her next goal would be to take him from it.

They could only meet where their needs coincided, there was no trust. There would be no trust. There would be coinciding or individual goals. There was bargaining along those sharply drawn
lines, appeals to argument and elegance and concession, not morality.

She convinced him not to kill any more associates of Kegirin Itran, but to alter their memories and learn their stories, dictate what they would say to those who came asking questions. If he was as good as he thought he was, it would be flawless and they would have a bolster to his story, verifiable by Shadow Broker and Councilor.

Issued as a challenge to his capability, how could he deny her?

Although a smoking crater at Beckenstein and dead comrades of Kegirin Itran might be cleaner and easier, it would also be unnecessarily suspicious and he conceded that point. He would work harder for verisimilitude that was not wreathed with his standard signature. There must be plausible evidence. A lack of evidence or live witnesses could cause intuition to tick over into suspicion. Any story they contrived would be open to interpretation and doubt if it could not be verified independently. Vakarian would be prone to being suspicious of anyone and anything, paranoid and enraged at her rejection and reasons.

Ironically she considered his venom an unsuspected asset that he should use liberally. Not on Vakarian, but in her opinion it could and should be used to preserve lives that would provide corroboration.

When he balked at the timeframe and construction of the illusion for the benefit of her bond mate she had waved a hand and said dismissively ‘Kiss a few more frogs, Senar.’

She had to explain that reference and it had made him smile. She was beautifully vicious when it suited her. She reminded him often that she was expensive and difficult and if he wished to spend a lifetime with her, he had best become used to her style.

‘I have gone to a great deal of trouble, Drala’fa, to avoid kissing the unworthy.’

‘Oh, to be unworthy.’

At that he had kissed her until his relative worthiness in her eyes, hands and lips was well demonstrated.

Opportunities to interrupt and dominate her would fade temporarily, then only be restored conditionally. He would count them down, and then save them up, each impulse acted out one by one in the future they created.

Thane Krios would become a verifiable quantity, a petty criminal of mean debauchery. How he had obtained her would remain a mystery. That he was assassin trained was unknown to anyone still breathing. The well-cultivated surface appearance of Thane Krios would hold true, shorn of subtleties and sidelines of any depth. He would be a cruel man who had engaged in cruel pastimes, nothing more. Ultimately Beckenstein would be seized and they would leave evidence to be found, conclusions to be drawn, witnesses to interrogate, some of whom would have their memories altered, some of whom would not.

He need not line up the populace of Beckenstein and kiss them one by one, but he could employ selective drugging and then priming.

Time on the Normandy would be more difficult. He would need to rely on building relationships and gaining confidences. He imagined it would be problematic to attempt to kiss Spectre Orbestan. EDI was a concern, every moment would be observed. His main control would be over Cara, and that would have to be sufficient.
It was possible that she would remain a person outside of public speculation, but that had never been true before. The story of a woman who had survived a slavery assault, died and been resurrected, inspired a Councilor of another species to bond with her, disappeared and returned unrepentantly ravishing and determined would not be a story that would go untold. With her insistence upon certain lines in the sand including retaining her new appearance and having her story remain consistent with witness verification, the story of her captivity would be uncovered and spread with the speed of mass effect relays in its full horror if not its full practicality. If she were retained as a Spectre there would be pictures and identity revisions, with a chain of personnel that would see the new visage of Commander Shepard and speculate.

Even if Councilor Vakarian wished to protect her from such speculation, it would be unlikely that he would be able to gather every witness from every gathering and silence them. Rumor would begin insidiously from unknown sources and spread far and fast, unable to be called back. Thane Krios had constructed his Drala’fa to be distinct and unforgettable. Commander Shepard’s bearing and eyes would also be distinct and unforgettable when she was filmed as she would be on the Citadel, on any major planet where she traveled, through any mission she accomplished that resulted in interaction with the public.

She would remain on the Normandy should she regain command, but it would be impossible to keep her from the Council tower when she was recovered. Kegirin Itran must gain the attention of Councilor Vakarian, who would be anxiously awaiting her return and must be convinced to allow Kegirin to complete his mission without interference. It could possibly result in Kegirin imprisoned and the compound raided, but Kegirin would attempt to impress upon the Councilor that it was likely she would die to internal security in the attempt, or that her control chip could be used to force her to fight rescuers.

Cara would be brought bleeding and traumatized to the Councilor. Kegirin Itran would explain to the Councilor her state of mind and provide caution regarding ensuring she was not touched, that she would potentially react violently, that it would certainly damage her psychologically. He would leave as soon as possible to flee Thane Krios’s potential wrath, wishing only his anonymity to be returned to him.

She would have to find her way through constructed shadow and priming to ending her personal relationship with Vakarian and convince the Council to retain her as Spectre. Whatever the outcome, the compulsion to obtain Kegirin Itran as a squad mate and ultimately partner would build until she could not resist it, regardless of whether or not her ship was the Normandy or a rented shuttle with a crew of one. She must never appear obsessed but determined. She must never lose her place in the dark.

Neither of them could afford to whistle.

Regardless of whether or not the Council would place faith in a Spectre that had been held against her will, he had faith that whatever resources she had, she would make the most of them. Kegirin was not a rich man on the surface, but if there was no assistance from Council or Alliance, Thane Krios’s resources would become available to them. Should the Council and the Normandy no longer be an option, should Spectre Orbestan be unwilling to accept her command or tentative service with a goal of restoration to command, should a rejected Councilor be unwilling to accept her as the same woman he loved and lost, she would find Kegirin and they would use their combined guile and determination to begin the fight from whatever humble spot they found themselves. He would appreciate this outcome for certain advantages, difficult as it might be to otherwise gather influence and resources. He would have greater autonomy earlier on, no fear for competition of influence over her and no fear for being monitored. Kegirin and Cara would build a fleet, gather comrades and followers, be in the fight in whatever capacity possible according to their combined inspiration and
resourcefulness. They could gain ships by overcoming slavery strongholds, an excellent motivation and starting point for both of them.

He looked forward to seeing each detail unfold.

He did not intend to send his unreasonable martyr into the fight disarmed. She would need at her disposal every instinct he had suppressed in her. Ideally he would manage to reverse a great deal of what he had done to her mind. She would be free of the priming of Drala’fa as an identity unless he used the voice of Thane Krios and specific command phrases in Drell. She would be able to process much of what had occurred based on her intense stubborn unwillingness to acknowledge that he could have any effect upon her, and that would benefit them both. If he required her immediate obedience he could have it with a change in voice, a phrase and a suggestion, but that was a last resort and he must instead rely on planning ahead, alternate explanations to behaviors, plausible motivations and the backdrop of a captivity that was not as it appeared. She would believe and justify her false existence with all the strength of her intellect and creativity, defend it with the dedication of her heart.

Ideally if she died within the next forty years before he did it would most likely be due to giving her life defending him.

He would miss her.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

“Come, Drala’fa, we have guests.”

She heard it and took his arm, having anticipated this with the introduction of the same crews of caterers and security as before. She tried not to feel any way about it in particular. She tried, but not feeling was really his strength, not hers. She was good at showing not feeling now, not good at doing it.

If she didn’t want to become like him, and she didn’t, she had to keep it that way. Curiosity bit deep with the desire for control of consequences, but she could not ask what the evening held. The question alone would give him opportunities to taunt her. She had to bear with the anticipation of shock and immersed depravity.

His hand was over hers but he was wearing gloves. There was no venom in her system. She was withdrawing, hungry and tired. He hadn’t touched her today but had spent last night delivering venom every way he wanted, Drala’fa in full bloom, anxious to please. No sleep. He had required her attentive but un-envenomed presence during the day. She wasn’t starved but was hungry.

She would not ask to eat. He had not told her but she knew instinctively that perfect pets did not eat or drink in front of others. Too humanizing, too mundane. She might be seen as someone with personal needs and not as a possession. She would not be embodying a fantasy if she were satisfying a demand of her own and not fulfilling a requirement of his. He never ate or drank in front of guests, she followed his lead. He provided food he did not eat, alcohol he did not drink, drugs he did not take.

So there was a fine tremble of fatigue and withdrawal she had to suppress, yawns to duck her head to hide. Thinking of yawning unfortunately triggered one, which made him ask politely “Are you bored, Drala’fa, do you require entertainment?”

She did not want to be entertained. “No, thank you.”
“As you wish.”

It seemed word had circulated and the image they created had been effective. With his attitude toward her and her downcast eyes, people stared but did not ask her name or who she was to him as they had last month or whatever time frame she was permitted to believe had taken place. Some group determination had been made. ‘She is mine’ was not repeated. She did not understand the majority of the conversations and his responses were most often a simple yes or a no, moving on, greeting and continuing the uninformative flow of meaningless words in obsequious and bored tones. She wondered if he limited the attendance of humans on purpose so she could not learn anything or if his guest list was short of humans coincidentally and she did not matter that much in his calculations. He didn’t encourage her to question the difference between a cruel whim of his and an iron determination. Both were beyond her influence.

Her stomach growled.

“Do you wish to eat?”

“No, thank you.”

“As you wish.”

“Do you wish to learn to dance, Drala’fa?” He had turned to her, addressed her directly, cutting off any conversation he was having with surrounding people, who fell silent and watched in the obscene fascination that hung around them.

She was not the only one with anticipation of horror in his presence.

She had no answer and she was supposed to have answers. She chose the path of least engagement. “No, thank you.”

“Are you certain? We could have an addition built. Dancing seems a cleaner occupation than most under this roof, you do not approve?”

She still had no answer. The ‘we’ instead of ‘I’ was alarming for its misplaced context as though she had some sway here, after he’d gone so far out of his way to assure she had none. She lifted her head and smiled at him with inspired adoration “I had not considered learning to dance before, but you make it sound charming. If it would please you and entertain your guests, that would be enough reason to wish to learn.”

“Have you danced before?”

Unwelcome flashes of the moon of Mindoir, hand crafted and hand played instruments, her parents laughing. A memory he knew of hers, the only memory with dancing she had mentioned to him.

Not here. Not now. Never here, never now. She smiled again, rueful and chagrined, lowered her head for a moment to be able to blink once and clear gathering moisture, adrenaline rushing and the tremor harder to suppress only now in a different direction. She laughed and squeezed his arm with affection. “As a child.” She said confidentially “With a child’s enthusiasm for music. No partner and I am afraid…I was not very good. Enthusiastic, but no gift for dance.”

“I believe you could develop any required gift if aided by your enthusiasm.”

“I would enjoy that.”

“As would I.” His smile was doting and she was freshly terrified.
She focused on suppressing the tremble she was certain he could feel, that he had invoked on purpose for what reason she did not know. Eventually again she was escorted upstairs, to the throne, the room more full than before, the throne just as empty, ominous and tasteless, a vacuous idle expression of ego and importance.

He sat, pulled her into his lap and kissed carefully only along bands of cloth on her shoulders and hair. His lips did not touch her skin. No venom. He kept his gloves, hands at her hips, cock hard under her ass, his hands setting a rhythm of slow movement against her body.

“Look around the room, Drala’fa. Tell me what you see.”

She had a moment of disorientation again, no context. Her impression of depravity? Line item description? When in doubt be entertaining. “I see a large room with more people in it than the last time I was in it. Our presence is allowing me to see that we are being seen.”

“You value your judgment and your memories, Drala’fa. We can see how they serve you. They are hopeful you will be entertaining. Will you?”

“It is a gift I have acquired with enthusiasm.”

“Can they tell that you are not at all enthusiastic? Can you tell?”

“I can tell you are enthusiastic.”

He laughed and rocked her hips harder once, then back to the slower rhythm. “I am, but that is beside the observable point. What do you see?”

While they were not being all that entertaining, attention in the room was drawn to someone that apparently was more so. “There’s an Asari being held down on one of the tables by a Turian male and another Asari. She’s being whipped by a third person. Onlookers are taking turns.”

“Taking turns doing what?”

“Taking turns violating her.”

“Is she violated? Is that what you see?”

She almost bit out “Of course” but the question made her look again.

“Watch. See how the Turian has his hand on her breast? Put your own hand on your breast, like that. Just like that.”

She closed her eyes momentarily, still able to experience fresh shock when she shouldn’t, when she should be numb. Then she did as he asked.

“Does it hurt?”

“No, but he has talons.”

“Is he using them? Drawing blood?”

“No.”

“Look carefully, Drala’fa. You value your judgment and your memory. Think and watch. Is she being violated?”
“I’m sensing the answer is no regardless of my observations?”

He laughed again, his gloved hand drawing hers down between her thighs. “Watch her mouth on the other Asari. Stroke like that. I know you’re a novice but this is easy. You know how it should feel.”

“Like I’m being violated?”

“Oh yes. Definitely that. Watch. Can you tell me, do you think she has a collar or a chip? Or could it be that she comes here month after month, enjoys her work and is more highly paid than the consort on the Citadel? Do you know that woman? Can she tell by looking at you that you’re Commander Shepard?”

He never used that name. Never. She didn’t even want to say it herself to deny that she was Commander Shepard. Her lips sealed, she had no venom but ample fear and doubt and wondering what changed right now.

“Should I tell them what you think is real and right, that you are Commander Shepard, that she is being violated? Do you want to see the reaction to your perceived truth on this room?”

“No, thank you.”

“So tell me. Who is she? Does she choose to be here, well paid and compensated, something she enjoys, even if talons draw blood, or is she a slave?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you do know that you…are being violated.”

“Yes.”

“So some known facts will not change.”

“Yes.”

“And for the others…Drala’fa…you should ask me. Always ask me. Would you like to trade places with her?”

“No, thank you.”

“I could give you to them.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Really? You’re so certain? I did decide to kill anyone who touched you, but that could still hold. I could give you to them and then kill them. I could ask you to kill them. They could discover your relative truth.”

“No, thank you.”

“So only me touching you?”

“Yes, please.”

“And no Asari touching either of us. Her loss. If you watch you will see her try to get my attention if she can. Without a collar, without a chip, Drala’fa, she could flay their minds if she chose. Instead she grants them pleasure, just as my venom does, and without it, you are violated.”
“With it I am violated.”

“Yes. But you want your judgment. You want your choice. You want to remember being violated as it happened. So remember her not being violated, that she is in the same room, doing the same thing, only on a better pay scale and with more finesse. She is paid whereas you are merely expensive. It’s going to be hard to come, Drala’fa, but you will. We’ll stay here until you do. You’re tired, and hungry, trying hard to keep your parents from this room. You’re withdrawing from venom and your brain does not have the chemistry remaining to grant pleasure after being depleted for hours and hours. I would have to give you that. Your hand is unskilled and not working for you, but it is working for the people in this room. Eyes turn your way. Eventually, maybe hours, without venom you’ll draw an orgasm from yourself because you have to, because we won’t leave until you do. You do that or I kill her. We can invite her back tomorrow, she will be enthusiastic. We can practice seeing if we can keep her from flaying our minds. I can see if I can flay hers, then I can see if I can flay her. Do you want me to do that?”

“No, thank you.”

“What if I’m lying and death would be a release from slavery for her? Do you know? Can you tell? Do you want to ask her over right now? If her answers do not match yours she can die tomorrow.”

“No, thank you.”

“Do you want my help or do you want to come alone?”

“I do not want your help.”

“As you wish. I can always make your life easier or harder, Drala’fa. All you have to do is ask. All you have to do is give the wrong answer.”

“You…can decide that every answer I give is the wrong one.”

His teeth tugged at her earring. “You’re so hard to threaten, Drala’fa, and so easy. You won’t sleep again tonight. It will end the same way, you’ll ask me to help you because you’re tired, hungry and you can’t come again without my help. You’ll be wet and shaking. If I keep asking you questions someone is going to die from it if you answer the wrong way just once. Just like last time, someone died because of your judgment and truth. Or am I lying, Drala’fa and I would admire you and let you rest if you answer every question I ask with courage and wit? What do I want?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. It’s your job to know, Drala’fa, your job as Commander Shepard and you can’t make what seems like an obvious decision in a room full of criminals that all deserve to die, me first, with your wits intact and no venom.”

“But I do know that I’m being violated and that you deserve to die.”

“And that you can’t do it, and that you will need to ask me for my opinion and for my help.”

“That’s part of the being violated package you have provided.”

“I’ll forgive the reductionist argument because you are impaired at the moment.”

She couldn’t help it, she laughed. Too tense and too incompetent, too confused and after being told exactly what to do and doing it apparently flawlessly, now nearly unwilling to state definitively that she ever had been Commander Shepard in case that answer was wrong. She said “So…I’m
impaired, helpless, incompetent, exhausted, my judgment can’t be trusted and someone is going to
die if I get it wrong.”

“Someone who is not me, that would also be getting it wrong.”

“Yes, that’s established.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

“What do you want?”

“Distract me, Dral’fa. Ask for my help. We will take off my gloves and I will set my lips to your
skin, whisper words to you that you will eventually want to hear. Venom will let you know you are
adored. Either way I’ll have what I want. You’ll be bent over the side of this throne, right here, over
this armrest, screaming. Pain or pleasure, your choice. Pain for everyone or only to your pride, your
choice. If we do it your way possibly you do not sleep for three days and an Asari dies, or I ask you
questions about that human in the corner and he dies, or the Turian with the gentle hand and rapt
expression dies. I did not sleep either, Dral’a. I have been losing sleep on concerns that weigh on
me and I can make them weigh on you or we can both rest. Of free mind and will, Commander
Shepard, ask me to violate you and only you, for the rest of the night, and let these people go. I will
ask you no more questions, you will not rely on your judgment or your truth, and tonight you choose
my lies and my pleasures. Either three people potentially suffer from truth and judgment or nobody
suffers because lies and pleasure will keep me here, with you. Your charming gratitude will save a
life rather than take one tonight. Entertain me with finesse. Yield, Cara.”

“It isn’t my way.”

“Semantics and reductionism. I am tired, Cara.”

“I don’t think I want to see that.”

“I might even get a headache. Me tired and with a headache, Cara, is a bad thing.”

“You are a bad thing to begin with.”

“True. Yield.”

“Did you just admit to physical failing and potential weakness?”

“Yes. Yield.”

“Did you just grant me a real choice?”

“Yes. Of limited duration in the choosing.”

“I don’t think so. I think you’re bluffing. What if I get good at this?”

“You won’t. Pathetic attempt. Yield.”

“I don’t like it when you make me think of my parents in front of witnesses.”

“So do not provoke it. Yield.”

“I didn’t provoke it.”

“You did, you just do not know how at the moment.”
“How will I learn if you don’t correct me?”

“It does not matter, Drala’fa, you will not remember this either, which is a loss I mourn. You learning terrifies me.”

“Good. Help me. I yield.”

“Enthusiastic music to my ears. Take off my gloves. Use your teeth.”

“As you wish.”

“As every God is my witness, Cara, I hope you are the one that kills me.”

“You say the sweetest things.”
Chapter 5

She was studying. Thane was gone and had been for several days. On days like this she stayed in her room, books delivered, food delivered. Time went by quickly. The reprieve was welcome and she found solace and sustenance as she always had in pure information. It was as close to escape as she came, data soothing her mind, providing structure to her time and the cherished fizzing feeling of her brain being alive and making new connections. She had the feeling she was on to something. Something had slipped, something had changed and something about draconian security along with his absence would hopefully provide inspiration for escape. The feeling was like sensing water running underground. She couldn’t see it, she couldn’t drink it or touch it…but she could hear it. It was getting louder. It was real and it would happen. She had faith that if she sat and thought long enough, something would spark, something would ring true, and she would be free.

She had always been able to count on information. Stacks of books next to her bed as a child had helped her learn everything she could. Now she had a customized bookcase next to her reading chair.

She had a customized book case because Thane Krios was afraid of her and would not allow her a data pad.

As her mother had said, someone forced into ignorance need never stay there, given ingenuity and will.

She had ingenuity.

She had will.

She would not stay here.

She had granted these moments of free reflection some of the gloss and warm blur of her childhood, and although she knew better, knew she could not go outside or to the kitchen, this room with its chair and bookcase in the sun was in some ways a refuge, a comfort. The weather had always been beautiful on Mindoir and it was comparable to Beckenstein, clear sunshine or glorious storms that swept through and left rainbows. Although on Mindoir she had been outside a lot, there were many days she had chosen to stay inside, wrapped up in research and not willing to take the minutes necessary to put down a book long enough to take a walk. When she did take a walk it was always with not just one, but a few books. Wherever she’d ended up, opening the book was the satisfying moment. Now she could carefully resonate with those moments in her life and avoid a lot of the forced dissonance of her captivity. Whether she’d been on an idyllic planet or in a cabin on the Normandy or on the Citadel…she had chosen more often than not to sit and read.

Her father had brought her gifts from the kitchen or the fields. Here brownies, cookies and fruit were delivered, her favorites. She even had new favorites, some of the Drell fruit recipes were amazing.

It could be so much worse.

With Thane off the property she could be as much herself physically as she could manage while dressed in what he wanted. Even if he was gone, he was watching now or would be later when he reviewed the feed. He would not miss the opportunity to at least see clothing that would be only worn once and was likely worth a day’s running of the Normandy. Discipline must be maintained, but inside that discipline there were open spaces, clean spaces in her mind she could visit. He was gone now and she did not know why, but it wasn’t to murder someone he had forced her to choose.
Maybe he was getting tired of her.

Maybe he’d let her go.

She could be herself mentally here when she was alone, sure that cameras were running but no longer caring about that, or not caring in the sense that somewhere multiple people were watching. It would not stop her from doing what she needed to get done. Think. Plan.

Here and now she could sit in a comfortable chair, pull a thick, warm and soft blanket up to her shoulders without Drell hands to pull it back down. She was free of his sick fumbling and she could wash him off and leave him behind.

Just like the sunshine on her hair these moments were filtered and deliberate, but still precious in that she wasn’t chained somewhere in the dark with no hope.

A knock on the door startled her, a mental jangle but no physical reaction because she didn’t have physical reactions anymore to being startled or violated.

But…nobody knocked here. Staff arrived and left according to the schedule he set. She had no clock but by the light there was no normally scheduled visit for this time of day. Thane certainly never knocked.

She did not answer.

There was another knock. Not louder. Exactly the same knock. Quiet.

She did not say anything but she did stand up and open the door.

A man. A Drell man. She was more curious than afraid. Afraid for him would be her greater concern. His colors were blues and reds, blending to purples. She was used to overt aggression and pride in stance, but he was softer, retiring, not like the usual guest. The same species, but not like Thane at all. Not dressed to make a forceful impression in any way, only a professional one.

They stared at each other for a moment until he said “Excuse the intrusion please, my name is Dr. Itran. Sere Krios contacted me and informed me he had a ward in his care that required medical evaluation.”

She blinked. Ward. Sure.

She considered her choices, panic having been eliminated from all decision trees. The fact that he was in the house at all knocking at her door meant that security was aware and if security was aware, Thane was aware, so she was afraid for him. She was not to speak to staff and Thane had said nothing about this visit. That in itself was normal; he didn’t consult her about his decisions. She adapted to his decisions and that was what was expected. This man was not estate staff, so there was a potential loophole regarding speaking to him. If he was knocking on her door to talk to her about medical care, she could present herself as mute, which would be foolish as that was a medical concern in its own. If he was a doctor he needed to be able to do his job and she should perhaps be grateful that Thane was not supervising except remotely.

Maybe he was the person that was supposed to die this month because she let him talk to her, because she let him touch her. She couldn’t do anything about that. She had to adapt and hope to make the right choice. “Please, come in.”

“Thank you, Lirya.” Lirya – an honorific Drell address for a young woman. Formal. Respectful, indicating she was of higher caste, different clan. Suitable for a ward. Sure. A small blessing. He did
not ask her name. She wondered if Thane had told him she had none and he wasn’t to ask. That rule
was clear. She was not to give a name. That had no loophole. At least this way Dr. Itran would not
be forced to address her as Drala’fa and she would not have to answer to it.

Beyond that she really did not know what to do or say, stood looking at him with no movement other
than a blink. He looked at her with some level of intensity and thought but not an expression she’d
become used to in company, salacious staring. His eyes remained on her face, then swept the room.
It was reasonable that Thane would have a doctor look at her. She wasn’t sick, but he would of
course want to be assured that his property stayed that way. He would schedule maintenance on his
pet the same way one would schedule a veterinarian visit, without the animal’s knowledge or opinion
being sought, expecting obedience. How long had it been now that she had been here? Six months?

He indicated the chair with a sweep of his arm “Please, sit.”

Small mercy that he did not indicate the bed.

They both behaved as though wards were always appropriately dressed in the equivalent of chiffon
straps and veils. She sat and he retrieved the blanket, spread it over her lap without touching her.
Instead of standing or pulling over a chair he knelt down until he was lower than her height,
nonthreatening. Kind eyes. Warm voice. His markings were…pretty. She was used to acid and
virulent green, skin and scale that looked like it would burn on contact, and it did in many ways, but
Dr. Itran looked like a sunrise, darker purples like dawn and the red and blue blush of new light
breaking through.

“Thank you, Lirya. Sere Krios did not indicate that you were ill. Are you ill? Have you any
complaints?”

She shook her head.

“That is good. May I examine you? A scan only.” He produced a portable scanner from his bag, a
wand and an analysis dock. She could do a lot with that scanner…but she wouldn’t.

She nodded. As always now she had no physical reaction but there was an echo of the same shock
of sensing something different in the setting of what had been her uniform life, where a knock on the
door is unusual and frightening, not because her space is going to be invaded, but because someone
wishes to inform her they’d be in her space at all. Asking permission. Something that had not
happened in…well…six months or thereabouts.

He busied himself with the noninvasive scan, stayed kneeling, asked soft questions about her health,
all negatives. Nothing wrong. She was healthy. He had an array of analytic medical instruments that
again could be very useful. He also had an Omni Tool.

“It appears you are in good health. I would like to draw blood in order to test for something that may
be hidden.”

She didn’t move, but she nodded slowly after a moment. The way he was looking at her, the way he
said that…

She was now alarmed about the presence of kindness in this building, about her potential role in
impeding or abetting kindness. It was as though a bird with blended blue and red iridescent plumage
had flown in through an open window and she wanted to get him out, keep him from breaking wings
against glass, let something that did not belong here go and never come back.

She couldn’t refuse to give blood because then she’d have to explain. She hoped security would stop
him and confiscate it as contraband and let him go.

She held out her arm with only a moment’s hesitation. He leaned in and grasped her elbow, a deep
flush instantly rushing to the surface of her skin. His hand and arm in her vision sputtered and faded
with sparking light and then resolved into a glow, something she hadn’t seen in…

He had his sample painlessly, gently, put her arm down on the blanket and let go. “Thank you,
Lirya. If you find you are in need of assistance, please inform Sere Krios. I am available at any hour
for any complaint.” No polite fictions about her being able to directly contact him. His voice was
cautious. Very likely Dr. Itran had a loved one who had been threatened with death and torture if he
did not follow house rules while providing her with the best medical care and absolutely no curiosity
about her circumstances.

They shared circumstances. It seemed he would regret walking out of here with only blood, unable
to take the rest of her, but he would do it just as everyone else had done, whether or not they wished
to take her away to keep her themselves, let her go, or ask a week’s worth of questions to satisfy
insatiable curiosity about her bizarre plumage and broken wings.

He probably wouldn’t make it far with the blood anyway, he hopefully walked out with nothing,
submitted a report of excellent health and he got to live for another six months without threat.

She was very careful to not get sick. He could count on her.

He was a doctor, and wild patches of red on skin was a possible medical concern. He did spend a
few moments looking at her skin but did not reach for her arm again. He looked pointedly at the
flaring blush and then at her. She met his eyes and smiled at him without comment. If he was a good
doctor he’d know what a blush was. Hopefully her face told him she did not want to get him killed
for having produced it on her skin by touching her. She hoped he was a good doctor. She hoped he
was at least a technically good doctor. It would be difficult to be in this house and be a good person.

He nodded with a reassuring smile and then he was gone, patches of iridescent purple on the back of
his head augmented by warm golden glow.

What she appreciated most was that his hands had not followed his kindness, that he’d given her the
blanket but had not used the excuse to touch her or touch her hair. Even though now most people
reacted to her with horror and shock and the lust had leached from most expressions because Thane
might see it and take issue with another person finding her fascinating when she was strictly his, she
was accustomed to horror, shock and lust.

Not kindness.

For once in a very long time someone had talked to her and at the end of the conversation she was
the one that decided the blanket went where it did, stayed where it did, and she did not have to stand
or explain or avoid flinching…

An almost normal interaction with someone else living. Something to treasure.

Something that had been missing.

She hoped he made it out alive.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Garrus lifted his head and stared at sunlight on apple juice behind glass, something he’d never
explained to her, something he’d been too embarrassed to admit even with her declaration of saving a
brownie for posterity as a relic.

Once again she’d been braver than he’d managed. He’d had an opportunity to be like her and he’d opted for silence.

Now silence was all he had.

There was a disease among Turians, when he’d heard about it he’d been horrified. As evil as people could sometimes be, it seemed there was nothing worse than nature for really setting a high bar for suffering, something that even if people could conceive of it as torture, they didn’t have the knowledge or technology to execute it in such a horrific fashion. Not like nature could. It was called simply ‘Bridging’ and that in itself for a Turian was an ominous word. Turians not being good with water, bridges as a necessity were things that made most Turians hold their breath as they crossed.

With bridging, every injury, minor or major a person experienced, every tiny insult to a body where so many take place in a day that would normally heal, all injured tissue is replaced with plate. Then the plate grows. Only one of the hundreds of thousands of daily upkeep tasks for a body gone wrong, and a person moving through life eventually becomes stabbed, choked, killed by their own plate growing into and through organs, muscle, blood vessels and brain.

That’s how this felt. Adult onset bridging. Most sufferers do not live long. He would. Nothing like nature, nothing like denied bond, nothing like bridging to make every breath sharply painful, every beat of his heart dully weak. Nothing like knowing it was only going to get worse.

He’d been looking for months and he had no leads. He’d never had a lead. She had disappeared on Illium and that was all there was to know. All his raging, all his power, all his longing and fear had resulted in exactly nothing but progressive bridging.

Witnesses to his suffering were ultimately given a choice; ask him to stop injuring himself so he did not die to the stabbing resurgence of existential plate in his psyche each time he thought….or watch him slowly devolve and know that they were as helpless to save him as he was to save her.

Liara was looking for her.

Russ kept his well-practiced expression from veering as tortured as Garrus’s own, sat with him, talked to him, drank with him, kept up hope, kept up the mission.

They both always had a look on their face before they finished a conversation with him as though today was going to be the day they tell him to let her go, that they have to face some facts, deal with the Reapers and the Council, do their jobs. They never said it. He heard it every time but there’s a difference between hearing and listening and they all knew he would not listen.

Garrus had plans to look for her with the manic energy behind it of self injury and the guilt of the idea that she had left voluntarily because he had driven her to it. Garrus demanded of Liara and Russ that every subject turn to her, every resource went her way…and they both told him of course.

They were as helpless as he was and he was inchoate pain, only a thin band of focus on the task she had given him to be Councilor. It was a thin, fraying, patched and squealing band under stress like a belt in an engine about to fly off in spectacular shreds of sparking uselessness, embedding like growing plate in the flesh of bystanders.

If she was still alive he had to find her. If she was dead he had to find her. If she had left…and didn’t want to be found…he had to find her, fix it.

He didn’t have any choices, only bridging and bond.
Birgon’s voice sounded on the intercom “Councilor, there’s a man who wishes to see you. He says it’s about Commander Shepard.”

There had been thousands of these meetings, sometimes people who meant well and thought they knew something, someone drunk at Eternity that was sure they saw red hair, sometimes someone looking for a shakedown and hoping the grieving Councilor would invest hope and credits into finding out more. He had no discernible hope at hearing her name, but he heard her name. That was an injury and a surge, that was bridging, and he couldn’t stop. He had told his staff to refer all concerns of Commander Shepard to him, and he addressed them with the patience and stoicism he had employed to complete C-Sec paperwork. The assumption was that it was a waste of time and effort. However, in the context of the greater waste of time and effort that was his life now, it was at least something to be done.

In essence, dying of bridging slowly was better than dying suddenly from realizing he served no purpose whatsoever and never would.

His office was now the Center for Useless Wastes of Time in Her Name.

That’s how he wanted it.

“Send him in.”

Moments later a red and blue Drell entered his office, calm but wary. He stood at the doorway, unsure how to progress. Garrus stood and indicated a chair on the other side of his desk “Please, sit.”

“Thank you Councilor.” The man gave the impression of fear and not the accustomed looking around the office, an expression he’d seen often in curiosity or avarice. With the lagging and useless search, he thought word got around that you could show up at the tower and get a tour if you knew the password was “Shepard.” It seemed people took a day out of their life and decided to jerk a Councilor around because they could, a gold star on their calendar, as he sat helpless and frustrated, learning quickly there was nothing to learn.

Garrus asked evenly “How can I help you?” The Drell hesitated. No eye contact. Garrus felt the faintest frisson of interest and recognition this was not like other visits. This man had something to lose from coming here, not something to gain.

The Drell’s jaw set for a fragile moment and then he said “My name is Kegirin Itran. I am aware that your office has asked repeatedly for any evidence that may lead toward locating Commander Shepard. I cannot promise you that the information I have will lead to her, but I…” He seemed to be making a decision, more about losing than gaining again. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a blood sample cartridge, set it on the edge of the desk. “I was asked to examine a young woman. Threatened into it, in fact. I am a doctor that has taken work in unsavory environments and by reputation I was located by a man named Thane Krios who informed me I would examine a young human woman, not ask her name, ensure she was healthy and move on with my life, which I would be able to keep if I did my job as he specified. Upon meeting this young woman I was struck by her appearance. She does not look like Commander Shepard, or more specifically she would not except for two things; her eyes and her height. The color of her eyes has changed but not the expression in them. I believe she had surgery to alter her appearance. Her hair and skin, her face are now all distinctly different from her original appearance. Her height remains the same. I do not think she remembers me but she saved me from slavery years ago. I remember her. It is possible Commander Shepard is being held captive. It is possible this is her blood. I have no DNA sample to compare, but I thought if I brought it to you, you might be able to confirm.”

Garrus held still, seeing parallels to earlier ‘witnesses’ who had seen her and wished for the
Councilor to exert something, credits or influence, to get something in return for their information. Running a DNA sample was not that much of a hook or an investment. That he had been rescued by her would be verifiable. Garrus could confirm later.

Garrus stood, moved carefully and deliberately to the case that held her old Omni Tool and gingerly picked it up. He asked Birgon to run a test of epithelial cells on the Omni Tool, human only, isolate from Turian, and compare to the blood. If the Omni Tool wasn’t enough he could get a sample from Miranda or Karin, but that should be enough to at least exclude and do it quickly. Confirmation might be more difficult depending on how degraded samples were or exactly how much of a scam was being run here.

“Thank you, Dr. Itran. I appreciate any and all attempts to locate her. Would you please describe her physical condition? Were you asked to treat injury?”

“She is healthy, she is well. I believe captive but not mistreated or more specifically not physically mistreated to the point of overt injury. I believe she is under psychological stress the likes of which were applied to me in order to compel my service. No evidence of untreated injury or badly healed injury. I did locate a control chip and there is a tracker the sort employed by slave owners. She is lucid, kind, polite. When she spoke I recognized her voice. I believe she is under pressure to conceal her identity and I gather she does not speak often. She did not ask me for any help and wished to avoid contact. I was told she had no name, I was not to ask what it was, I did not.”

Control chip. She was…slow down…not was…might be…control chip. He tried to avoid the surge of hope, particularly a surge of hope that meant she’d spent the last six months chipped. “And what psychological stress was applied to you to compel your service?”

“If you will forgive my reticence Councilor, my life and livelihood are at stake here in several ways. I have a medical practice, I have associates and friends. I operate not on the full side of the light of the law for my own reasons. I do not consider myself a criminal but I believe criminals perceive me as one. Should law enforcement investigate me, they would perceive me as criminal. Thane Krios could turn me in to authorities based on service I had provided to slave owners in the past. He could torture and kill me. He could torture and kill many of my friends, who he identified by name as potential casualties should I not fulfill service as required. That seemed sufficient reason to do my job as asked. I had every intention of providing care and leaving, getting on with my life as he had promised I would be able to do. If she is Commander Shepard, there is no reason why he would think I would recognize her, and I would not have if I did not owe her my life. Should you choose to look into my life, it is likely you would wish to imprison me. Should Thane Krios suspect I brought you a blood sample, he would wish to ruin and then kill me as well as my friends. Should she not be Commander Shepard, I have drawn your attention and potential wrath for wasting your time, and his. Likely my life and her life are forfeit with nothing being done if that DNA does not match hers. Should she be Commander Shepard I have placed her in further jeopardy based on my understanding of Thane Krios’s caution and security. Attempting to rescue her would be difficult and I have only minimal insight. Moving forward in any direction in my life has become impossible without a crisis of conscience, a crisis of survival, or both. My life from this point forward may swiftly become my death no matter what path I choose. Under all circumstances that result from my coming here, I cannot return to my life and I cannot save my associates as well as saving her. I believe there is no way to protect myself except to ask for your help. I offer my services to help recover her if possible. My hesitation stems from those circumstances. This is a level of intrigue to which I am unaccustomed and unprepared.”

“Where is she being held?”

“An estate on Beckenstein.”
Beckenstein was a nightmare of legal precedent intended to provide an expensive sanctuary for criminals to live and conduct business. If he was telling any level of the truth there, he was not wrong about rescue being difficult. Council or C-Sec vehicles would be vaporized if they attempted unauthorized entry into the atmosphere. “Were you able to get a recording of her, a picture, a voice print?”

“No. I was given medical equipment upon my arrival and it was confiscated when I left. The blood was something I stated I needed to run standard medical tests on to check for any occult malady. It was permitted. Otherwise my Omni Tool was locked, no recording or transmission possible on the estate grounds. The only voice print evidence I can provide is that I am Drell and I have heard her voice in person in the past. A picture of her would not be helpful.”

“What does that mean?”

“If that is her she has undergone extensive surgery and I would not wish to create evidence of her appearance. It would be best that recording not take place. If that is her, she is being held captive by a ruthless if not evil man who wishes to go to extremes to conceal her identity. She appears to have been kept in isolation with a control chip in clothing consistent with sexual slavery. If it is not her, Councilor, a young woman is still suffering. She is one of the endless stream of slaves, living as I did under that yoke. Now that I have seen her I wish to change her circumstances whoever she is. That is why I am here. Regardless of whether or not she is Commander Shepard, she should be freed. The reason I appear to be criminal is that I have used my medical career to infiltrate slave rings and provide medical care. Wherever possible, which is unfortunately not often, I have provided for escape or rescue. I use the money I am given to provide medical care to slaves to purchase them and set them free. I do not have the resources or opportunity to save more than a few people and unfortunately my cover means that I often treat horrific injuries and then release slaves back to their captors for them to experience torture anew on freshly healed skin and bone. She has a control chip. It is possible she does not know she is Commander Shepard at all. It is possible she would resist assistance. It is possible she would try to kill anybody attempting to remove her from where she has been ordered to stay. It is possible that the tracker and the chip present a difficult extraction challenge and I do not believe her owner would be amenable to sale.”

Garrus was sickened, horrified, angry and nearly joyous, and it was all wrong. His talons had extended and dug into the armrests of his chair until the scrape made him consciously retract them. He had imagined her taken by Collectors, taken by Reapers, cloned by a Thorian, thrall to a Rachni…”

Not once had it occurred to him that she could be someone’s slave.

He still did not want it to occur to him.

He bit his tongue to avoid asking what clothing consistent with sexual slavery was, blood fresh and sudden, something potentially alive. She was potentially alive.

“Where exactly on Beckenstein?”

Before the man could answer Birgon’s voice sounded through the intercom. “Councilor?”

His voice sounded calm but he was trembling with rage and potential anticipation, fearing a trap and fearing the truth. “Yes?”

“Those samples, sir, that you provided. They match. 97% accuracy.”

“And that 3% discrepancy?”
“Within error parameters for the test. None more accurate. It is essentially a 100% match statistically.”

“Thank you, please return the samples to me.”

“Immediately, sir.”

The Drell looked at him with transformative shock, realizing he was potentially going to realize all that risk that he took walking through that door.

Garrus asked calmly “When did you see her?”

“Two days ago.”

“Think carefully. Were you followed?”

Dr. Itran’s face bloomed from thought into doubt. “I have no idea. I don’t…”

“Here is what you are going to do, Dr. Itran. You are going to take that blood sample and take it to a lab here on the Citadel and you are going to run some tests. You are not going to return to the tower, you are going to stay in touch.” Garrus reached into his desk and retrieved paired transmitters. “These are secure. Is there any reason why you would have business on the tower?”

Dr. Itran’s face looked panicked, confused, like he was feeling death’s shadow reach out and travel up his spine.

“Not…not that I can conceive.”

“All right. You have a new old friend. Her name is Kecin Troalin and you are going out to lunch with her. She works in my front office.”

The Drell nodded, numbly, head down. Garrus felt sorry for him briefly and then all he could think was that she was out there and she was alive and this man, sorry and shaking, was his best bet at getting her back.

“Dr. Itran, thank you. Please go to lunch, go to the lab, act as normally as you can manage. Do not look as frightened as you look right now. Get yourself together and take a few deep breaths. I’ll do everything I can to protect you and to get her out of there with the minimum of life lost, including yours, including your associates. If you would compose a list of names, please send it to me as your tasks are completed, I will move to have them watched. I will send you the address of a place where you can stay where there will be no monitoring and where if you are being followed, we will know. Speak to me later this evening and we can devise a plan, all right?”

The Drell swallowed, closed both sets of lids and then opened them, tilted his head down and then looked up with what might look like determination if he weren’t shaking. “Yes, sir. I will do my best.”

“You want my advice?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don’t stop and play poker.”

The Drell’s brow ridges drew together in confusion and Garrus said “Never mind. Breathe. We’ll get it done. You’ll have the full support of this office.”
“Yes, sir.”
Chapter 6

Kegirin had known that immediately upon leaving the tower he would be under constant surveillance from that point forward. The delicate shell game of being both Thane Krios and Kegirin Itran had been and potentially would still be a painful and time-consuming process of painstaking DNA implants, cosmetic and medical interventions. If he were granted liberty he could employ body doubles but that was a lower priority than execution of mission. If he were to be permanently Kegirin from this point forward with no opportunity to temporarily revert to Krios he was prepared, the estate was prepared, all things in place for that contingency.

She was prepared.

At the moment he was in a medical state of recovery and potential chaos if immunosuppressant therapy went badly. Krios’s immune system had been eradicated and his bone marrow had been replaced with the marrow of Itran on an accelerated schedule, risking toxic shock and rejection. These and other complications were still concerns. He had recovered enough to be encouraged that the medications would work to adjust to his new immune system. Drell were compatible with each other in metabolism and composition, much more than many other species, making this transformation possible and a secret of the Hanar’s Compact. Itran’s body was in cryo suspension and there was an abundance of banked genetic material that had been extracted to establish and maintain the Krios identity.

He did not trust surgeons. He remained conscious during all procedures, an educational practice as he was to be a doctor. All excruciating but necessary. He would only permit local anesthesia and even then that was limited. No mind altering or paralytic potential. He provided the medical agents and components, he supervised. Studying medicine had been effective in helping him select procedures for his transformation that he had always undergone with a handler supervising. Itran had an active prescription license, which would be useful in the future potentially. He arranged for theft and purchase of agents and independent testing before use. The surgeons were all threatened effectively but it was never wise to be at anyone’s mercy, particularly people who had reasons to kill him due to those threats. They were all dead now. It would not do to be recognized at any point in the future as a suspicious and threatening green Drell who had transformed to a blue and red Drell that resembled one on Commander Shepard’s squad.

Itran’s coloring, contour and markings were now permanent. Only a deep biopsy of tissue would reveal a differential in DNA and then only for a diminishing window in time, possibly one more month if someone were to acquire lung or heart tissue and test it. Injury and rejection were still high risks but must be taken as Krios being absent from the estate for months at a time would be suspicious and it had been necessary to function as both entities to prepare for the future and rearrange the past to his liking. He had retroactively hacked and replaced Itran’s identifiers to conform to his current body scan, arranged and studied his digital life and real life and had passed as Itran for the previous months selectively. He had created the potential trail of evidence for his double life as a doctor who arranged for slaves to be freed or purchased selectively. He could not afford to waste time. If Vakarian attempted to detain Krios before retrieving Cara, Krios would be gone. Suspicion would be transferred to someone in Vakarian’s office informing Krios of investigation, evidence of such had been created and could be released as necessary. Itran could trigger a crash of the estate’s systems and security remotely at any point and an outside source attempting to break in would result in the same, making tracking and investigation difficult and reliant upon physical evidence and testimony.

There were many ways on Beckenstein that Krios could access the estate without using any known
transport method that could be monitored by law enforcement. Authorized vehicles could enter the system, law enforcement could not. Krios’s biometrics, appearance and DNA profile could be reproduced with approximately 12 hours of preparation. The most common samples for testing were saliva, epidermis, blood or venom for Drell and from this point forward they would all hold true to the Itran identity. He must now rely on prosthetics and cosmetics with samples of Krios’s DNA and biometrics to access the estate. As he set and supervised those settings, it would not be an insurmountable obstacle to alter or override them as he chose, but he preferred rising to the challenge of authenticity rather than hacking.

Authenticity took commitment and although he was exhausted and in pain, authenticity would ensure that he might someday be in the position he wished to be, therefore it was worth the effort.

Casual contact with anything as he was now would read genetically Itran, but he was not expecting the Councilor to stick to casual. Vakarian had been canny and reactive to the situation and not suspicious of Kegirin outwardly but Kegirin expected to be under surveillance constantly from the moment of entering the tower. Providing the cover of lunch, having the transmitters and the added touch of having a safe house provided was reassuring that he was in fact dealing with an intelligent if potentially honest man who was only devious up to a certain point.

Cara’s assessment of him would hopefully hold true and Vakarian would provide the necessary civility and trust required to proceed on the fastest and safest route for her rescue. Delay would be unfortunate for the Councilor.

Now Kegirin was under the Councilor’s control and surveillance and needed to do what the Councilor planned, hopefully having impressed upon Vakarian that his cooperation was key and the situation delicate. It was encouraging he had been given the transmitters but that could of course be a feint. If Vakarian chose to blindly assault the estate with only the information he had so far Cara would still be safe. She would not be happy because staff would not be safe, and ideally she wished to escape with only the risks absorbed by the two of them. She had kept her bargain with him. She had not tried to escape. Kegirin would preserve the lives of staff at her request as her due. If Vakarian did not follow his guidelines then likely staff would die, and she would know loss of life resulted from Vakarian’s judgment call. She would side with Kegirin’s plan as the safer course should Vakarian bypass his recommendations.

Kegirin would not mind meditating for a few days or weeks until Cara came to find him and ask him about his welfare, but they had gone to so much trouble, he would also like to thread the needle of his own security with her. It would be a treasured memory for both of them, much more suitable than meeting her at the door of his holding cell. It would be more difficult to present Itran as a potential squad mate if his only role in her rescue was to deliver blood, but they would overcome that obstacle if necessary.

She would have an inspiration to include Kegirin in her life. That was the moment where Vakarian would become the most suspicious. Beyond that when they became lovers, he would move beyond suspicion to accusation. Vakarian might possibly accept temporarily and superficially that she did not wish to be touched, and she would declare continued love for Vakarian until her death, but they must not allow Vakarian to separate them. The role of preventing that belonged soley to Cara. If necessary she would fight for Kegirin under all circumstances. If Vakarian forced her to fight him, so be it.

It was acceptable and even preferable that Vakarian was ultimately suspicious of the Drell in her life. It would never be acceptable that he had proof at any stage.

He wished to return to Cara once more as Krios, but that may not be possible with potential surveillance or if Vakarian did not ask him to go about his business and be in touch as a plan was
constructed. Ideally Itran should be off the Citadel and able to shake surveillance at several points, substituting a body double under compulsion. It would be better if Krios returned to the estate and then left again for the story’s sake, but that may not be possible. Krios in many ways no longer functionally existed, and visiting her unsatisfying in some ways. Sexual liberty to which he was accustomed with her was now problematic. Upon her rescue it was likely she would undergo extraordinary medical evaluation and discovering the DNA of Kegirin Itran in her body would ruin all their work.

She had undergone a transformation of personality as part of his preparation. Krios and Drala’fa barely existed in their original forms, intentionally obliterated and only produced with great effort with little to recommend them in terms of created memory. To attempt to invoke them would be counterproductive. Krios had already bid goodbye to her. She would not remember. He would.

At the moment Vakarian was likely reviewing Itran’s life story. In the future Vakarian would have reasons to become suspicious, confused, enraged and likely irretrievably paranoid to observers.

Krios had promised her he would save the lives of staff, not necessarily their sanity. He had promised to save Vakarian’s life, not necessarily his sanity.

She had insisted upon the use of venom, he obliged her in his own way as to the method and motive of kissing frogs. It was possible many people would be driven to suicide or flight on the basis of relative truths shifting through different perspectives. Thane Krios had a life of his own regardless of his physical presence, his reach and influence could still be felt if necessary. Sparing their lives was up to her, sparing their minds was up to him and to their past and future behavior.

She could not have it all her way with the prices she demanded of him. She would pay as well, but others would pay if he were inconvenienced and impeded in accomplishing his goals.

Some were chosen to pay regardless of future circumstance based on their past choices.

Unfortunately for Vakarian the more clever and persistent he was, the more difficult it would be to maintain any standard of sanity. If he was very clever he might uncover the suspicion that Kegirin Itran was in fact Thane Krios while being unable to prove it, unable to speak to or convince Cara. He would hold the Councilorship without doubt as that was the only way he had any control over contacting her. He was an excellent Councilor, the war would be best served by his remaining in place, but Kegirin was unconvinced that he was irreplaceable.

Vakarian experiencing the permanent loss of potential bond and suspicion of continued captivity of his bond mate without the authority or capacity to prove it or rescue her might take hold of his psyche if he was not extraordinarily careful. If he lost the Councilorship it was unfortunate but not catastrophic. Kegirin’s faith was in Cara, not in Vakarian, and she had functioned without Council support and even with Council impedance. With Itran at her side, they would do what must be done.

Knowing that much of Vakarian’s success was due to Cara’s hacking ability at the outset of his rise to power and to T’Soni’s maintenance of intel, that route could be used to bolster or manipulate any Turian replacement to the office.

Cara would advise Vakarian to not look for Krios. Vakarian in all likelihood would not oblige her, unfortunate in a Turian who had claimed he would follow her commands and honor her as his Avah. Predictable and exploitable for Kegirin’s needs. It would all be self inflicted if Vakarian did not do as she asked and drop the search.

Her will should be paramount, Vakarian had pledged so. Would he have the integrity to keep to his word, a bond he had chosen, if she chose differently?
Cara would have integrity. Itran believed Vakarian would not choose the path of integrity and obedience. They would see what came of it. Call it a price exacted for bonding to her without her consent and failing to protect her after making that choice. Unforgivably arrogant. The punishment of biology alone was insufficient to that crime. Anguish had been caused. Anguish would be exacted. She would not suffer alone, and she would not know she was suffering.

Kegirin and Cara had needed to predict worst case and best case scenarios and strategies to adapt to all approaches from an ideal set starting point. He had needed to think like a Councilor with a bond and a motive for heroic recovery on his own terms. If Kegirin were in the Councilor’s place and making his choices for him, Kegirin would be under polite house arrest and then would be interrogated and placed in protective custody with an identification change imminent. If the interrogation yielded anything suspicious it would be less in the way of protective custody and more in the way of permanent imprisonment leading to torture and execution once the man’s life story had been extracted, verified and analyzed.

Kegirin could adapt to that and it would be restful in comparison to the last few months if disappointing for the future narrative he was attempting to build.

One of the concerns was being able to pick up communication with her beyond Vakarian’s utilization of Kegirin’s expertise, which had been necessarily downplayed to give no sense of inside job.

She had no Omni Tool, no contact frequencies, those must be provided. Kegirin obviously could not keep his Omni Tool frequencies after escape if he wished to evade Krios, and therefore it would be difficult to locate one another. Depending on how long they were both detained, he for ‘protection and questioning’ and her for ‘recovery’ it might be a very long time before he saw the outside of this room or any other restrictive locale. If Vakarian did as he had done with her before, locked her in the Tower with only him as her company, that would not go well for him. If Vakarian placed Kegirin under protective custody and would not tell Cara where he was, they would have to be creative. They must take certain risks, they were unavoidable, the same way his physical transformation created physical vulnerabilities that must be overcome.

He was assured of their creative capacity and that Cara would be convincing.

Surveillance of Kegirin would be appropriately boring. They would observe meditation and sleep. A great deal of sleep would be required for medical recovery. He had rarely slept in the past months. He had a store of immune suppressants and mild pain control, all he would risk, again nothing that would impact concentration and strategic maneuverability. Sleep would be welcome if permitted.

For the moment in his new home he chose to give the appearance of restless exhaustion, the image of a man who had made a difficult choice and faced the potential gallows in the near future. A man whose conscience had weighed upon him. A man who had found his courage wanting and wished to gather more.

Upon reflection he chose to relive his last night with her as Krios, with her as his Whole woman and then his transformed Drala’fa. He would miss those women, grieved as though a favorite song would never be sung. He was consoled that he was able to choose to create chords of her, harmonious and without a ripple of her inherent dissonance, but he would miss her dissonance. He would remember all her tones, all her music.

Her dissonance would find outlet and he would see it, not directed at him but outward toward the greater threat. He looked forward to that woman.
He sat on the bed, center, posed, hands with palms up, one cradled upon the other, the symbolic state of mind and hands open to inspiration of the Gods.

He found his inspiration.

He moves behind the woman with no name as she is. She is not Cara. She is not Lal. She is not Drala’fa. She is all of them and none of them, those women all dressed in Drell fabric, his lies she makes truth. She has made many of his choices hers, adopted like starving animals sent after her in hunger. They, like he, unable in some ways to bite as intended, now loyal to her. She is in black, his favorite color against her pale skin, contrast and texture and the soft flutter of grace in the movement of her limbs. She no longer pulls at the fabric but always finds herself perfect in their setting, skin and shade. He anticipates the temperature of each revealed point, crest, swell of her skin, tactile memory and prediction of what he would find if he were to touch her. Soft hair at the back of her neck, warmer under the fall of dark strands. The cooler curve of her waist, the warmer air under the curve of her breasts. She stands before the mirror where he first saw his Whole woman.

He must say goodbye to her soon, perhaps now, in the place where she first woke, where he first saw vibrant violet eyes.

He chooses now. ‘Now’ is a gift and privilege he must soon defer, at best to gain it in altered form in the distant future, at worst to lose her. To experience ‘now’ with all of her would not be a choice he could make, perhaps never again. She would try to kill him. He would rather she killed him than to risk hurting her physically. If he had his voice he could always subdue her and begin again.

He would always have his voice.

Perhaps someday she overcomes the challenge of Reapers and his whim of ownership weakens and he sets her free. He imagines she has her own fear of weakness. The fear that someday she might look at him and choose to stand at his side Whole because it is what she wishes to do.

For either of them these are not fears that will likely come to pass. She loves him but only because she knows him and she is composed of love. She cannot hate him any more than he can love her, but they can come close to those states, they can both be tempted. She might hesitate in killing him. He might hesitate in subduing her because he wishes to see twin suns in full wrath, to bring that out in her, to grant her the moment of seeing him, to see her again Whole.

The potential would always be there, whatever her Name.

He steps behind her, one hand around her throat, another sliding under fluttering black around her waist. She has venom but it is fading, she has bathed and dressed; a matter of lingering hours. He has addressed business while she enjoyed a long bath, one with bubbles, one of her small whimsies clad in vanisfruit. He did not join her and did not watch, he can do so later if he chooses. Surveillance is ever present until he erases it all, after it is unnecessary because he holds it in his mind.

His mouth at the back of her neck sends tremors through her body, the treasured flush to her skin and the rising of the hair making textured memory under his fingertips. He closes his eyes, mourning the end of liberties such as this, his hands and body able to capture hers whenever he wishes.

It is necessary and unfortunate, and his liberty is a fading thing, turning to vapor as new plans become more solid. Krios will be gone, beyond this point his color will change, his DNA will alter, the insides of his bones and blood filling with someone new. Someone who looks different but would be the same. He asks her “I once gave you ten minutes to try to kill me. Do you wish to try now?”
“No.”

“Do you wish to succeed in killing me?”

“Yes.”

“I have not told you enough that I appreciate your wisdom and your honesty. You are human and will perhaps forget. Thane Krios will be gone soon. Will you miss him?”

She hesitates, the words wisdom and honesty no doubt wreathed in challenge in her mind. She says “Yes.” His hand splays flat on her stomach and pulls her back against his body; cock hard against her upper back as though her spine were a grooved channel built to hold him in place against her, memories of nights spent with her pulled back against him, venom along her skin with him an inescapable fact of her life.

She says softly “I know you won’t hear it, you won’t listen, but I have to say it. I have to try at least. You don’t have to do this.”

“I know. I choose to do this. We…chose to do this.”

“I did not choose.”

“You chose to live. You chose to fight. It is the same for me, in that if in nothing else we are in accord.”

“You want me to argue with the nothing else, don’t you?”

“Of course. I enjoy arguing with you. I am going to miss it.”

“I’m not going to give you the ‘you can be a good guy’ speech. It’s wasted on you.”

“And I am not going to attempt to convince you that what I am doing is for anything other than…” He stops speaking, unable to define what it is, and his eyes meet hers.

She looks at him, and it is with near pity. She says “Senar. You can’t be a good guy. You can be an extraordinary man. You can make different choices. I don’t have to kill you, you can turn yourself in.”

His smile is gentle “Would you visit me?”

Her eyes change from pity to the communion, the resolution she is capable of, somehow turning his dissonance into a symphony with her added notes. “Yes.”

“Even with that, I find my course set, but I thank you for your words. None of your words are wasted. I will remember them.”

“Walk away. Don’t touch me. Don’t do this.” Tears crest her eyes and she says “You could have been an extraordinary man. You could still be…an extraordinary man. Don’t destroy…”

She means it, she means every word and it is from her heart she says this. Not against her will, not because she wants him to die. She wants him to live and be an extraordinary man as she is an extraordinary woman. She sees potential yet she cannot see her way clear to that ever happening and neither can he. “It is not your fault, Cara, who I am. I have made my choices, you cannot change them.”

She cannot accept that. “What they did to you…what you’re doing to me…it could end.”
“I know, and I will work to prevent that.”

Her eyes do not close and her love does not fade. She knows the answer, it is as she says; she must say it for herself. She turns in his arms and her lips reach for his willingly, a hunger of her own, her last opportunity to speak to him, touch him, possibly inspire him. She is grace not in defeat, but in hope. She will fight every moment of her life for her mind, for her future, and she is not afraid for herself. He will watch over her. Between them they will fight together. They will win. She knows she will not remember. It does not matter if he remembers. This is something she must do.

She must forgive, she must be who she is, she must be wise and tell the truth, make her judgment. She must move on from who he could have been; his potential that haunts and holds her. She must move on from who she could have been, a woman who had died and been reborn, had been killed and would be reborn, starting a new life and doing what was best as he continued his old one and his bones and blood filled with the old, the unchanging and the thing she pities but would never hate.

To her he is a broken animal, and he does not disagree. If she could in this moment she would end what she sees as his suffering and she is bereft that she must leave him in pain because she has a greater calling and cannot spare him mercy. This is her apology. This is her counting his suffering less than the galaxy’s survival. She will use him as he uses her; he will force it to be so. She will rule him as he rules her and that is what she knows in this moment. Her pain, her suffering in comparison counted as nothing…as it always was and always would be. This moment is about what was done to him, about what she cannot do for him. She is visiting his grave, the small stone of a six-year-old boy given and taken and used. That is who she touches, the extraordinary man he might have become had he, like her, risen above.

No way of knowing if he ever could, but in this moment his suffering is inevitable, something Destined, not something in her own Path she could overcome for him or with him. She mourns.

The only way he can have her is to sink below, but he will take her gift as he has taken and will take everything of value to her and make it his. The way she has taken everything of value to him and made it hers.

He has been several extraordinary men but none of that matters if it is done without her seeing.

She is his choice.

She is grace but of a different sort than required at other times. She is solemn, tears down her face and against his scale, her mouth on his, her hands on his face until he lifts her and raises her body to his, her head above his so she bows her head down to kiss him.

Her last conscious Whole act will be to give, to understand, to absolve.

To condemn, to destroy, to end.

On the scale of depravity, beyond this point of preparation to execution, what he has done, what he plans to do is beyond forgiveness and she has passed beyond her ability to save him by killing him, save him by turning him toward true light and not only toward her eyes.

He does not wish to be saved.

He wishes her lips and she grants them, solemnity and the gravity of twin suns, unable to see that it is her that has done this thing to them both, or perhaps she does understand somehow in her wisdom and tears, responsible and grieving.

She is the grace of the passing beyond grief into final judgment, acceptance of unbearable loss.
without potential recovery.

Possession of her shadow would be enough for him, like the hungry animals that come to bite and stay because the world outside her door is a bitter place once her threshold has been crossed.

He murmurs against her lips “It is the will of the sand, Cara.” A Drell prayer. Surrender to fate, surrender to Gods, the myriad choices of the Gods distilled into mystic sand, shifting and willful, patient and cruel. Unending. Uncaring of thirst or hunger or hope.

She answers against his lips “My will joins the sand and the Path, Senar.” The ritual call and response of surrender and of struggle.

They were as they were. The sand would work its will and so would he.

And so would she.

Her hands move on his clothes, Cara and nobody else, not Shepard and not Drala’fa, but a young girl who witnessed murder and loss, a young girl who is now a woman of her own shape and sculpture, unaffected by his influence for this free moment that was her last, his last. What he has done to her is stripped away through the miracle of honest hands and generous heart, lips with tears and fingers that have learned everything there is to know of him of importance.

The image in the mirror is not him with his hand at her throat, but of her facing him with her hands on him, as he wished but not as he wished. As he desired but more than he could bear. She is small and clad in black wisps, biotics flaring on his skin as blood rises to the surface of hers. Her blood, always her blood, her bone, her marrow where his entire body and mind had passed in owner and identity so often that now the only meaning he has is that his blood, his bone and his marrow are hers.

His eyes in the mirror are changed, hers are the same. His body under the now false green is blue and red, the violet in her eyes made true and owned by her, the lie of Krios soon to be shed like a skin so he can stalk her in camouflage, the violet of Itran, a serendipitous gift of the sand that his false skin matches her now true eyes.

Her clothes are nothing, as he intended, no barrier to entry at any time, his arms around her body as her mouth covers his, her hand frees his cock and then she is against the mirror, her hand guiding him inside and now the truth will end, venom will take her and he will never see her again, but he will remember.

He tastes her mouth, tastes her skin, his arms crackling with pain and passion, weary and resolved and she is all things, death and life, choice and servitude, hope and dread. She has taken him, learned him, surpassed him, this small fey creature with her head against the glass, neck arched as an invitation to kiss, to bite, and he must.

For a strained and choking moment he wishes to pull from her body before venom takes hold, to keep her here, the woman who understands the mirror and why it matters. The straining and choking does not end, but his body is the sand, she is the Path and he will not stop.

He will never stop, he will not hesitate, he has lost her but will gain another her, as many hers as he can find, as many hers as she can produce, if she sees him as she does now.

She is moaning, her dark and husky sounds he will always find in her because her body is a simpler thing than her soul and he will always have her body. He will never have her Whole, but he will have every un-shrouded piece he can claim. She passes from Whole to her of any Name, venom now
making Krios the past and Itran her future, receptive in joy and pleasure, she is transformed, made of replete pleasure and welcome, coming for him in tight wails and clenches as he murmurs to her of sand and fate and devotion, strokes her body and bites and licks at her until she is clinging and weak, his seed down her thigh the constant theme that will tie all hers to him.

He kisses her and she is moans and welcome, reduced or exalted, he can never tell, ignorant and knowing as he shakes and biotics crawl out of him to reach her.

He whispers his other call and response, words of meaning, words of prayer. “She is mine.”

Her laugh is soft, panting breath and renewed passion of her lips against his. “She is yours.”

“Spend the day in bed with me. I must leave you soon and I will miss you.” He does not give her a name.

“Yes, please.”
Kegirin was focused and inspired while appearing to be cowed and faltering. He composed as requested the list of Itran’s associates at theoretical risk of retaliation for Vakarian and relayed them as asked. He listened when the Councilor contacted him and did not speak a great deal even when prompted, voice respectful, tentative and intimidated. Vakarian noticed and responded, became more and more solicitous of the frightened Drell until they reached a level where Vakarian was reassuring in his manner and Kegirin was successfully reassured. True to Cara’s assessments, Vakarian preferred a peer to peer relationship with those he worked with, at least in appearance and on the surface. Vakarian was civil and respectful by nature and inclination. He even attempted humor though Kegirin did not respond to it as such. Vakarian did not wish to exert his authority overtly but he did wish to establish it and maintain it. Comrades and confidence was his tone, although Cara had warned him Vakarian would use that parallel to other lines of thought. He had the easy manner of a friendly officer interviewing rather than interrogating a witness and not a criminal ‘just to straighten this all out.’ He was possibly suspicious and angling for information that might not be granted any other way unless confidence and lull was established.

Kegirin would accommodate the Councilor’s style with the studied and customized creation of Kegirin’s personality. People in authority would obtain obedience and assistance from him. Kegirin would be of value, be of use. Kegirin would be quiet and retiring, somewhat lost in the unaccustomed dark and deep significance of his potential actions. Once convinced he would be determined to try to help despite his shortcomings of experience and intellect compared to the larger than life personalities of those that inhabited the Council and the Normandy. Kegirin crafted an equilibrium of stability of tone where Vakarian likely felt he had manipulated Kegirin into being calmer and more forthcoming, bolstered the Drell’s courage and assured him of the mission being an ultimate success. Vakarian asked questions, repeated and verified much of what he had already been told, an odd habit of non-Drell species that invoked in all Drell a sense of pity and made them cautious of and disappointed in fragile memory.

Vakarian hopefully would have a memory that retained a great deal and made connections and came to conclusions only possible with a certain level of intellect and capacity if he were to be an asset in the war and if he were to discover some of Thane Krios’s more cruel flourishes. The repetition of facts that was Vakarian’s habit and strategic approach was something only done by species such as Turians or humans who had members statistically incapable of ‘keeping a story straight’ and might slip up due to forgetting a detail. Obviously it was not true that Drell were not liars. What was true is that if a Drell were lying, it was statistically impossible that they would ‘slip up’ and forget a detail. Comparing renditions of truth a Drell produced for discrepancy was a waste of time. It was unlikely Vakarian had dealt with many Drell in his lifetime. Inferior memory was a taboo to discuss with other species, something that inspired in Drell universal pity. Unless Vakarian had had an extraordinarily close Drell associate or excellent diplomatic advisor who had informed him despite Drell tendency toward pity of the memory failing and insularity, he was not being purposely insulting. He was only ignorant. Any lower status and culturally conservative and polite Drell would understand this was not intended as insult, would not expect an apology, draw attention to the behavior or attempt to correct the habit.

Any other Drell of reasonable dignity given free rein in a theoretically peer-to-peer business relationship might ask the Councilor if he needed to be reminded of the identity of the woman they sought to rescue or if time was so much in abundance that it could be wasted so flagrantly. Business dealings with Drell and non-Drell always took place in contracts, straightforward in Drell, but with other species something they astonishingly did not read, recall or comprehend as a matter of course. He was somewhat disappointed at the ease of establishing rapport, hoped Vakarian was wiser than
he appeared, but at this point his script must be followed and anticipation of further planning playing out must be deferred.

Yet another thing he adored about Cara that was lacking in other people. She was always capable of appreciating his preparation and authenticity of craft. Her ability to see would be missed, and he mourned having to opt for her ignorance rather than risk her capacity to be lethal in her comprehension.

Contact with other people and the dull impression of boredom they induced paradoxically sharpened his interest in speaking to her Whole again and likely always would. He wondered how he would manage that interest if someday the Reapers were gone. He could keep her far from surveillance, pull her out of venom haze with her small body under his, restrained. He could tell her and then take it away. He could have some part of a day in her company. He could watch the realization over and over.

She had at the moment and potentially forever some aspect of buried treasure he would wish to uncover and sift with his hands.

Something to consider.

He would not recreate Beckenstein, past wishing to display her to others. He would prefer to avoid Vakarian in favor of Cara’s company. He would prefer to avoid everyone in favor of Cara’s company. He wished for her to be displayed to him always.

They moved on to discussing the specifics of Beckenstein the planet and the exact location of the estate, to which Kegirin replied “Sir, if I may, I am aware of the security requirements, capabilities and the expectations of the host. I believe if I am able to remove her chip and tracker without alerting security, there is a possible way that I may arrange for her escape.”

“I’m hoping to take care of that from here, I’d rather a professional agent managed the extraction.”

“Sir, I understand and I sympathize with that ambition. I am aware I am not a professional and that I do not inspire confidence. Substitution of another in my place will not work, they will not gain entry.”

“The Council can do an awful lot about a captive citizen.”

“With respect, sir, on Beckenstein the Council as an entity is not recognized to have any legal authority and incursion would be answered with deadly force. Each estate is imbued with the rights equivalent to those of a sovereign nation, granted not in perpetuity but as long as fees are paid. Thane Krios through his payment of those fees is guaranteed no interference in his business by other recognized legal entities or invaders while on his estate and a strong defense of his estate if he invokes the need. The escape must take place quickly and risk only triggering local estate security and then only at the last few moments. To alert the planetary defense system would be lethal to any vehicle attempting extraction.”

“So if the Council can’t do anything, who can?”

“The planet of Beckenstein has created a system of law that provides individual impenetrable sanctuaries, defense and arbitration for owners of estates. These owners are not citizens of Beckenstein. They create their own law on their estates, unquestioned. According to the corporation that manages Beckenstein’s bureaucracy, Commander Shepard is anything from visitor to property of Thane Krios, as am I when I am there. He can choose what he does with us while we are on his estate. We have no legal rights as individuals. If we are outside the domain or contract of a single
estate owner, we belong to Beckenstein and they can choose to treat us as visitor or property. Before entering the atmosphere of Beckenstein each vehicle and each vehicle’s passenger is provided with a contract to sign that informs visitors of these conditions. They authorize this agreement or they leave. If they do not authorize and persist in incursion, they are shot down or taken and claimed as property. Beckenstein will then open up negotiations to return any property to estate owners that claim interest. I accepted a contract under duress as my other option was to die. Commander Shepard either accepted a similar contract under duress or one was created without her knowledge and is on file authorized by her biometrics stating that she arrived on Beckenstein and Thane Krios’s estate of her own free will and will abide by his law. As part of my recruitment I was informed politely of many of the security capabilities and the planet’s policies in order to intimidate me. I was successfully intimidated. I was informed of her disposition as property, of my disposition as situational property who would be released upon delivering satisfactory services as required by my contract. If I did well I would live and be asked to return likely in another six months for a maintenance check or in cases of her having a health emergency. If I did not perform according to my contract I would be killed. If I attempted to sabotage the process of my contract by not making myself available, disclosing the terms of my contract or attempting to rescue or assist my charge other than medically, the consequence would be torture before death and torture and death of my friends and associates, their names given to me as I have given them to you. I did not expect that I would be permitted to leave, but I believe I was allowed to leave as a result of the situation Krios faces dealing with her as property and his wish for her identity to remain concealed. Health care is available from providers on Beckenstein but I doubt he wished to expose her to that process. There she would be off his estate and he would have contracted to Beckenstein that she would be their property while they cared for her. This is a formality under normal circumstances, such as caring for any of the number of security and service staff that the estates employ. In her case, her identity is concealed but she is worth a great deal of money to many people and the information that Commander Shepard is held by Thane Krios on Beckenstein is also worth a great deal of money. He would open himself to extortion or ransom by Beckenstein’s rapacious bureaucratic civil servants and potential rescue if her disposition were sold. The conditions of my arrival and departure were arranged with the understanding that if I were to find her ill, I was not to attempt to remove her from the site or call in additional medical assistance. The consequences of attempting to do so would be death for both of us if I triggered automated security responses by crossing certain boundaries. I was escorted to her door and escorted away, given no opportunity to deviate. I am alive because I can be of potential use to him in the future. He would have medical assistance readily available without risk of exposure. If I can provide a blood test that indicates she requires a vitamin D supplement for lack of sunlight and a scan whose analysis suggests mild nephrolithiasis, I can return to the estate and deliver the suggested outpatient appropriate maintenance care, producing the cover required to lull internal security until the last moment.”

“And how would you get her out without either of you being executed?”

“I had considered that before coming to you. I hope to offer a solution and not merely a problem that would likely result in her death. Under the guise of the injection and lithotripsy I should be able to extract the control chip. At that point she would no longer be compelled, though she would likely be disoriented and in pain. I cannot sedate her. She must be lucid to cooperate in her own escape. She must cooperate through the removal of the tracker. It is possible an escape route could be created from the room in which I examined her previously.”

“How so?”

“I will have access to compact ultrasound equipment, such as might be used to locate and break up a small forming stone in a kidney. I believe the glass in her room is reinforced but not alarmed except for her tracker, which I can remove. If the ultrasound component were set to overloaded output augmented through the use of other components in the equipment I was given prior, the glass may
shatter and escape could be facilitated through that route. Unfortunately she and I also run the risk of potential rupture of ear drums or other sensitive tissue if the directionality of the overloaded ultrasound is not precise. That will be difficult to predict but hopefully if it results in injury it can be treated immediately after and should be nonlethal. She will need to be treated immediately. She will have a recently open wound directly to her spine with attendant risk of infection and residual injury. Her tracker is embedded in her iliac crest – her hip. Extraction may be difficult and it will be painful. Her room is on the third story of the building overlooking the second story and the cliff. She cannot go down to the terrace without activating the sentient and automatic security that surrounds the estate. We can briefly escape to the roof of the second story. It is a precarious position and dangerous with no escape route on foot. If airborne extraction is not provided, we will die there. There is an outer perimeter of weaponry, it is intended to shoot out and not in. If the glass breaks and her tracker and chip are removed successfully, it is possible we could be extracted without harm with the use of a locally authorized vehicle. Not C-Sec, not Council affiliated, it must have legal access to estate rights and privileges. That vehicle must take refuge in another estate, must not attempt to exit the planetary system with the property of another. Once recovered property is on their own estate they may dispose of it as they choose.”

“All right. I’ll see what I can do about that.”

“Much of the security potential of estates on Beckenstein is not a secret but a boast. They advertise and provide blueprints and security options to potential buyers. They are not an illegal operation. They are highly structured, defended and capitalist. I looked into the law and the estate planning when I was pressured into the contract. You can find all you need to know about external security systems and options for an estate of his composition as well as customizable alarms and response systems. These can be programmed to detect tracker implants. The location for extraction is advantageous only briefly and only due to its cover from automated turrets. Airships if given time to launch would result in death. I do not believe anybody other than I would be able to accomplish this. I have limited license through contract to touch, examine and provide care for her, and we will be monitored but not accompanied. Outer transportation is something I cannot arrange. That is something you must provide. If diversionary vehicles are employed to draw fire, that would be helpful. Those vehicles can be unmanned and activated remotely. If you cannot guarantee that the owner of that vehicle and destination estate is willing to relinquish us, all you will accomplish would be to have us taken into their personal custody and a ‘finder’s fee’ clause can be invoked. Once filed that clause will make us property in escrow. As escrow property we would be remanded to the custody of the bureaucratic civil servants Thane Krios so wishes to avoid in her case. We will be killed if we attempt to evade the law or our ultimate owner. We would most likely be sold back to Thane Krios but it is possible that she may be identified in the process. We might both undergo Asari interrogation while in escrow as circumstances would invoke curiosity. They would wish to know if there was any way they could raise the price of ransom higher. In her case certainly yes, in mine, no. I am convinced he would be anxious to buy her back. In my case he might abandon me or purchase me in order to fulfill the promise regarding my breaking the contract he provided. Future attempts to rescue her would be exponentially more difficult in planning or execution. I believe she would be immediately relocated to elsewhere on Beckenstein for eventual transfer to another anonymous secure harbor for criminal license. We must have false papers and passage to escape the planet itself after we have escaped the estate.”

“That’s a lot of maybe.”

“Indeed it is, sir, but I have access, I have opportunity and with assistance I believe it is a viable option. I would need your assistance with the authenticated lab results from a lab here on the Citadel, the transportation and identity transfer.”

“All right, let me talk to my team, see what I can do. Thank you, Dr. Itran.”
“You are welcome, Councilor Vakarian. May Amonkira bless this Path. May Arashu watch over her.”

“How many times have you failed to rescue a slave you intended to rescue?”

“Of those I had plans to rescue, seven failed. Of those I had the desire to rescue, thousands failed.”

“And the number of successful extractions?”

“Thirty four.”

“Let’s work on thirty five and not eight.”

“Agreed, Councilor.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Russ was called in on a conference with Garrus and Liara, all of them exhausted and tense. Russ was unable to see how this insane and suspicious plan that Garrus had quickly written up and transferred to him to ask for advice could possibly result in anything good.

The Normandy had just finished helping Dr. Solus locate and execute one of his protégés, Maelon. He’d been running sick, insane experiments in an old hospital on Tuchanka, the smell indicative of how much medicine was going on versus torture. Bloody bodies and mangled minds. Mordin had shot Maelon and the twisted information about reversing the Genophage had been destroyed.

Like the galaxy needed more Krogan. Talking to Wrex had only been possible through Kaidan, because the Urdnot Clan Leader had been livid about Russ allowing Shepard to be taken or killed while Russ was on deck. “You know what, Turian? When I was on that ship she never disappeared. Seems I get off the Normandy and everything goes down Kalroth’s gullet. Where the hell was Vakarian? Where the hell were you? Turians looking out for only their own is why Tuchanka is the way she is, why I’d happily snap your mandibles off and shove them down your throat for letting whatever happened to Shepard happen.”

Kaidan had said calmly “Wrex. We need to work together. You know she wouldn’t want this.”

Wrex had glared at Kaidan and said “Yeah, I know. That’s why you’re not dead. That’s why I didn’t shoot you down. But I don’t have to take shit from a barefaced Turian about what I owe him. I don’t know him. I don’t like him. He’s only alive because she probably wouldn’t like me blowing his shuttle out of the air.”

Russ had glared and Wrex had glared and Kaidan had talked his way into courtesy permission to go find Maelon while Urdnot sniped “Try not to lose Kaidan too on the way. Maybe tag him so you can track him. He always kinda looked like a pyjack.”

Kaidan had smiled “Good seeing you too, Wrex. Thanks.”

“Why the hell did you guys give up looking for her?”

“We haven’t.”

“You’d better not, human. Find her. Don’t come back until you do.”

They hadn’t tried to see the clan leader again on their way out.

He didn’t lose Kaidan at least.
Most of their missions had been busy work, but he had gotten back to the mission of the Collectors and not just trying to track Shepard with no leads.

He hadn’t liked her much but he hadn’t wanted her gone.

Okay, he’d wanted her gone.

He’d wanted her gone and for Garrus to be okay, but that was not an option. Garrus was a wreck. Worse now. They’d gotten to a point where the pure rage and helplessness had dulled at least in its expression and now he was manic. Russ had visited Garrus every time he could, sat with him, got drunk with him, heard more Shepard stories and had been alternately guilty and pissed off and horrified and angry.

And grieving for the real loss and waste taking place in front of him in the form of Garrus Vakarian’s diminishing body and mind.

He was never, ever going to tell Garrus that he thought maybe the war effort would be better served without her. He couldn’t tell Liara. Hell, they could all barely talk to each other honestly, just supportively.

“We’ll get her back.”

“We won’t give up.”

He didn’t say things like “It took two years last time…? It’s only been a few months?”

Garrus’s perspective and sense of humor was gone and Russ was not going to test it. Hero worship was his only option, listening to Garrus like he had for years. He was supportively there while Garrus lost his sanity and will to live in bulk, managed to hold onto only the bag they came in.

It all sounded like a ridiculous trap to let the planet of Beckenstein declare war on the Citadel and the Turian Councilor in particular. Garrus had to be restrained from flying straight in. He had to be convinced to slow down and listen. But listen to what?

Listen to ANYTHING other than ‘This is Commander Shepard’s blood’?

Not likely.

No proof of life, nothing but the word of a very shaky Drell.

All Russ could see happening is that if it was her, she was going to die. If she died as a result of Garrus’s actions it was the end for him. If he didn’t recover her Garrus would make it his life’s mission to raze Beckenstein to the ground.

Unfortunately that was impossible. Beckenstein was armed with every bit of military hardware that Council Races had treaties to prevent, wasn’t interested in being involved in the trade agreements and civil rights concerns of the Council Races. Garrus had zero leverage and a lot of animosity.


Garrus could not accept that he could not go in rifle blazing and take down the planet single handed. He’d done it with Shepard, now he wanted to do it for Shepard, ideally he thought if a squad of Liara, Russ and Garrus went in…

That was frankly ignorant and crazy and not Shepard crazy, shooting for a low chance of success,
but just an expression of an insane Turian who had mainlined helplessness for six months and now had a lead, yanking at a leash that wasn’t there because he was a Councilor.

Garrus was used to having legal authority and could not accept that authority meant exactly nothing once they left the Citadel. Garrus wanted to bring down the most entrenched redoubt of criminal activity in existence and could not grasp because he did not want to grasp that Beckenstein had endless funding and Krios was highly motivated to keep his hive of illegality working for him.

He was treating it like a normal extraction raid and that would not work. He could not be brought to see how. Liara had asked Russ to help her convince Garrus that they absolutely could not do it his way. Russ was worried about Garrus taking off in a shuttle, signing a contract and ending up property of Thane Krios or Beckenstein’s government who would be perfectly happy to incarcerate, interrogate, extort and then ransom him back with 1% of his mind left in order to qualify for returning him alive.

Hell, there might not be enough money to even get him back dead.

Even attempting to do anything the way the Drell suggested was going to take every credit Garrus had potentially if they could not stop him. He was willing to fund raise and try to buy an estate himself. That was upward of two billion credits. Garrus didn’t have that but he was determined to use Vakarian funds, Council funds, personal funds, everything the Shadow Broker could produce.

Russ listened while Garrus paced and Liara said “Garrus, we can’t do that. Escrow would take months. I have a contact…”

Garrus head snapped up “Someone we can trust to hand over Commander Shepard?”

“They won’t know she’s Commander Shepard.”

“And if they found out?”

“Garrus. We can’t buy an estate. We just can’t. Time constraints…we’d be leaving her there for months and there’s no guarantee she’d be there still in six months if they call Dr. Itran back.”

“No, not six months, I know that. Now. Get it done now. I’ve got to be able to ~”

Russ said calmly “Garrus. You can’t.”

Garrus growled “Not you too.”

Russ answered “Absolutely me. Garrus. What if it’s a trap? What if someone just had some of her blood on ice and decided they could get a lot of money or influence out of you?”

Garrus’s eyes closed “It can’t be that, Russ. It’s her. It’s got to be her.”

Russ replied “I know, Garrus. We’re going to do everything we can. Together. Minimal crazy.”

Liara said softly “Minimal crazy? Doesn’t really sound like us, does it?”

Garrus gave a soft bark of a laugh and then rubbed his crest. “It’s got to be her.”

“We’re going to find out. We’re going to do it. But you cannot go off on your own, Garrus. None of us can go there. We’re all recognizable and associated immediately with Commander Shepard. If you get involved, we have to rescue or ransom you AND deal with the fact that Krios is tipped off to the idea that you know she’s there. You can’t.”
There was a crash, a now familiar crash and shatter, and something hopefully replaceable in Garrus’s office was broken. Probably something replaced multiple times in the past six months. Garrus stood still, moved his hand from his crest to the back of his neck and said “Yeah, that doesn’t really sound like me, does it?”

Liara said “Garrus, please. It’s risky, I know. You can’t go there. We can’t go. I can get the estate set up. It’s…look, a lot of business happens on Beckenstein and I do have an agent who is an estate holder. They are risking one vehicle and will be well compensated for any damage. The reason why this is viable is that they were retiring. Only two weeks left on their fee contract. They have already extracted personally and won’t be at risk, will only collect a huge fee. They can manage remote contracting through me, I’ve done it before. I can cover that, I promise. I trust them. One good thing about Beckenstein is that extraction once they get there will be easy, he’s not wrong about that. Let me handle the Beckenstein end.”

Garrus said softly “What if we tell them and then… hell, I don’t know, use Beckenstein rules. Do what Krios does? Threaten their family?”

Liara said “No, Garrus. That’s not the way information works. Once you let it out…”

Garrus said with bleak finality “Thank you Liara. I’m sorry. I’m…Spirits I am not accustomed to feeling so useless.”

Russ said in a way that should have been gruff but was instead a little strangled “It’s okay, Vakarian, you got the job ’cause you’re pretty.”

Garrus huffed a laugh “Yeah, so I’ll just sit here and look pretty and…and clean up some glass. Okay. How long do you think it will take to set up, Liara?”

“Four days. Get the blood test and the scan done.”

Russ said “So I’m just moral support?”

Garrus nodded “And comedy relief.”

“Glad I’m good for something.”
Chapter 8

The plan had been drawn up and Kegirin was able to go in six days after arrival on the Citadel. Sufficient time for testing and planning for follow up for non-emergent medical care dependent on Citadel lab analysis.

Thane Krios no longer existed, no longer would exist except in shadows and feints. Although Kegirin would miss certain aspects of Thane Krios and particularly his Drala’fa, the mind of Itran was not an unfamiliar place. Much of Senar’s training had been geared toward creating a creature of duty and humility. He had spent more time being someone of Itran’s presentation than he had being someone of Krios’s presentation.

That creature of duty and humility had served until he had seen and killed his beautiful Drell woman of sunset eyes. That moment had created the urge to chase desire, and he had done that. That had been satisfying in exertion of power and freedom, but had been unsatisfying for what it lacked in meaning. Excess had not been a temptation that snared him. Seeing the effects of drugs on others he had been unwilling to try them. He was not fascinated. He was repelled and did not have to resist an urge to satisfy curiosity, remote viewing of the endless volunteers sufficient to the task. Loss of control, inhibition and dignity was something he was not tempted to experience or incur as an expense. He valued his mind, dignity and discipline. He did not understand the mind that wished to lose itself in lies.

He had created enough lies to know where that path led. Nowhere he wished to go.

Regardless of Thane Krios’s personality and presentation, regardless of how Beckenstein functioned as a necessity, he as a man had always considered the slaves brought to Beckenstein to be inherently better people than those who held the leash or the collar or the controls. The nuances of slavery and the need to exert power over the powerless was not something that was a mystery. The Hanar had used him because they needed him, not because he was useless. He was a resource. Slaves at least provided something, produced something of value. The criminals that populated Beckenstein were nothing but endless hunger in a bloated bubble of ego. Exploration of desire in its iterations had revealed in others and in himself small hungers that fed until they were ravenous beasts, things that tore the mind and reason from the afflicted. All voluntary, self inflicted. Watching the purportedly powerful kill themselves and each other at an accelerated rate to feed those hungers had been educational.

Most of the estate owners at Beckenstein, like him, had become powerful in an effort to counteract the inherent helplessness that had invested some part of their lives or some part of their psyches, inherent or created by nature or nurture or both.

Senar’s main desire had been freedom. He would always hunger for freedom. That was his endless desire, the thing that was ravenous. Nobody, Cara least of all, could heal that in him, change that small hunger that he had fed until it had become endless. He needed her. He was like the Hanar, she was the resource, he was the consumer. She was the better person. Seeing her twin suns had created the urge to chase an inspired Destiny along with meaningful desire, something he was willing to incur as an expense.

He had to sacrifice fleeting and temporary freedom for potential Freedom as he had abandoned a temporary and fleeting whim for a potential Destiny.

Rightness was not something he answered to, but she did. He would follow her.
He would never trade access to more or less of her for his own freedom, that was the true reason why love was not a temptation for him.

She would never trade more or less of him for her own freedom, that was the true reason why hate was not a temptation for her.

They were thoughts, concerns, fears… and fleeting images of other worlds, other possibilities. She could imagine Senar without his rapacious hunger for absolute freedom, instead fulfilling a Destiny of cooperation and care with the gifts he embodied.

He could imagine her comprehending all he’d done and wanting him for herself, coveting him and giving herself to him as he’d told her he wished her to do in the mirror.

In the end they would play out what began with his hand at her throat and must continue that way, set at the moment her eyes opened.

‘There is want and there is need, Drala’fa. I want you. I need for you to have a control chip until you give me yourself.’

‘That… is not going to happen.’

It would not happen. They both knew that. He would have what he needed. He would never have what he wanted unless it was a lie.

She would have what she needed. She would never have what she wanted unless it was a lie.

He was the only one that would know the difference and he wondered if he would wake her to show her, tell her, or would allow her to believe she had what she wanted and needed in him.

He did not know which was more or less cruel, which was a strength or a weakness or for whom.

There was a word he might have traded with her. ‘I will not speak of love, Cara, if you do not speak of trust.’

Love might be a temptation to imagine, trust was something he would never indulge in, any more than he would indulge in drugs. He provided for her to want him, protect him in ways that served her own induced self interest, but he would never ask to be trusted. He would lose respect for her if she fell so far in intellectual comprehension of circumstances that she considered trusting him or offering trust in exchange for anything else she needed.

Her offer of allowing him to turn himself in had been her only concession to that line of reasoning, and it would be the last. She had done that for herself, so she could tell herself she had tried, she had offered.

He would never trust her, his Whole stolen woman.

He knew himself too well and she knew that as abundant as she was in potential trust or love, as much as she might want to believe he could be Senar, ‘trust’ was the word most missing from his lexicon. If love was occasionally bewildering, trust was too well understood to make him think twice or question the concept.

Kegirin Itran was another iteration of the same man he had always been, whatever his bones or blood held. He kept his craft, he kept his desire and now he would follow her inspiration.

He was pleased, the surrender to Fate a familiar thing. Everything that could be anticipated had been
and had he or she missed something, they would die. Together. At this point, he must preserve her life before his own. If possible, if anybody survived extraction from Beckenstein it would be her. Not only did it serve Kegirin’s purposes, it served Senar’s. He would not have her if her need was not fulfilled. She needed to end the Reapers. For him to have wished to escape in a dangerous piece of theater and to have failed her in execution would not be something he wished to survive.

To be Kegirin he must follow his impulses to serve, impulses that had never been removed from him, only suppressed, finding nothing worthy to serve other than the path of understanding desire. Through pretending to pray he found himself praying, one of the odd influences of costume and care and craft.

His instincts in these new colors would follow the map they had drawn. He must not be self serving, it must not reach his eyes or his hands. He must be careful even of his thoughts, of whistling in the dark.

Fortunately he did wish to follow her, that was genuine. Not for the motivations ascribed to him, but his actions would be true, unassailable service. Service to freedom, surely. She would see that, hear that, know that. He fought for freedom. Obtaining freedom for others was the only path to freedom for himself in this case, from Reapers, from being killed, from being caught by someone he could not touch, someone who would not listen.

She would never think of it that way. She couldn’t. She was blind to that level of selfishness, thankfully. She would create a thousand other reasons for his motivations because of her priming and the way her mind worked before she would suspect him of ulterior motive.

There were a few things he must do that would appear to serve her, things that set up echoes, ripples and bore fruit later. The one thing he must establish and retain at all costs early on is that he was the only one permitted to touch her, one of a few select medical personnel including Dr. Chakwas and Miranda Lawson. That would serve his purposes, infuriate the Councilor, and create in her a sense of a choice already made. In her mind buried under all the priming and justification, everyone else’s touch would potentially harm her, she would potentially harm them. Kegirin would glow and she would know she was safe with him.

A flourish, and one that was necessary, pleasure and cruelty folded in on each other and hammered into a cutting edge that severed past from future.

He must tell her goodbye.

She must ask him to stay.

Vakarian would insist upon seeing. Vakarian would perceive Kegirin as the only obstacle to the one thing he wanted, her. Sooner or later suspicion would grow even had Itran been exactly as he appeared. Suspicion would be Vakarian’s only potential escape route, his only way to reclaim bond and defeat the dragon.

Cara would hear angel’s wings in the beats on the wind and Vakarian would smell brimstone and imagine a different creature entirely, and they would both be right in their own ways.

You wished for my cruelty to be focused upon you, Cara. You should have wished for a crater at Beckenstein and quickly vaporized staff, but you asked me to arrange for them to live. You chose to ask for me to arrange for Vakarian to live.

As you wish, Drala’fa.
Krios had kissed all his frogs, engaged in interviews of his staff, chosen stories and setups. Krios would let them and her go without appearing to want to do so. Krios would have to abandon his estate.

Pandora’s box had been inspiring in its backward, inexplicably human way.

Allowing the staff to live had been inspiring in another way.

Vakarian would find himself inspired and upon the path of Wrongness, unable to deviate from that path because he would find no other path to follow and he was a man of forward motion, following the increasingly distant beat of wings only he could hear.

You are a good man, Councilor. A good and passionate man and I would pity you if I invested in such things.

It is a shame you did not learn to Listen to your Avah as I learned to Listen to her.

OoOoOoOoOoO

She heard the quiet knock at her door again, less surprised this time, about the same time of day, about what she might believe was eight days later if the chip hadn’t taken time from her, always a possibility. Thane had been gone for that timeframe, and she had been able to relax.

She answered the door again. Dr. Itran. Glowing. She smiled, couldn’t help it. She was glad to see him. Glad to see anyone who knocked and asked permission to enter. “Dr. Itran. It is lovely to see you, please come in.”

He bowed his head and said “Blessings of Arashu upon you, Lirya, my thanks.”

“How can I be of service?”

“I discovered two things upon my previous visit. Neither are alarming and both are easily remedied. You lack for vitamin D and that can be supplemented. You are developing a kidney stone and I can remove that as a potential risk, aid you in preventing further stones from developing.”

“Thank you for your vigilance.”

“You are welcome, Lirya. Please, sit.” He indicated the chair again, by the window. She obliged him. Again he spread the blanket and kept his eyes on her face. He took a few long moments and busied himself with equipment, once again full of potential. She tried not to think about what she could do with it. Unfortunately her mind did not really cooperate and she had visions of that rushing water underground, the approaching moment of her escape. He was glowing and he had mentioned something hidden. Whoever he was, he was a good omen in the sense that her health mattered and she was able to speak to someone kind. Something, anything civil as they both ignored violet ribbons over her breasts. She did not look down any longer as she once had to see if her nipples were in view because they always were or would be sometime soon as breathing shifted the fabric. He did not look.

He began explaining the mechanics of vitamin D, a booster now of supplementation, an addition of a supplement to her diet. It was unlikely the sun of Beckenstein would help her create D as it was missing UVB radiation.

“Forgive me Lirya, this will be painful and this will take a moment.” He leaned in with the shot intended for her back, his voice at her ear and supplement poised at the back of her neck. She closed her eyes, and the anticipated pain was quickly eclipsed by the real and tearing pain of her spine and
nerve endings. She didn’t react.

Not vitamin D. Her chip. Her chip was being removed. She did not shift her jaw to bite down on anything, didn’t tighten her hands, sat limp and quiescent as her spine was opened and torn, the bite deep and radiating down her arms and legs, needles and knives and the feeling of nerves being yanked out of her whole, leaving empty trails of vibrating cold that filled with heated pain. Something, Medigel likely spread over the expanding and collapsing sinkhole of suffering. Blood stopped and the pain was stoppered in her spine like a genie in a bottle, rattling and railing to get out.

He said quietly in her ear “Commander Shepard, I need your assistance in achieving your escape. I will hand you equipment. Please remove the safeguards on the ultrasound equipment, augment its output with the components I hand you. We will attempt to break the glass and then we will need to move together as quickly as possible. I am attaching a probe to your hip. It will remove your tracker. It will tunnel in and tunnel out and I am afraid I can do nothing for your pain other than minimal local anesthetic the probe will release.”

His hand slid down, finding her hip under the blanket, a cold and hard intrusion between warm fingers, his venom barely registering because the pain and shock made her hold still, waiting for the equipment, the most important thing, her hip and spine forgotten, collateral damage. The probe began to tunnel, the sensation like a bladed drill. She did not react, could not risk blood from her nose as a result of strain or from her mouth as a result of biting down. She forced herself to relax as she had every time Drell hands had been on her before, every time her body had been invaded painfully.

She said with a smile “Thank you, Dr. Itran. I am lucky to have your service. Is there anything I can do to minimize forming another kidney stone?”

He drew back, calmly removing the instrumentation from his bag, explaining its function and helpfully suggesting dietary changes that may assist in prevention of stones.

Blood trickled down her hip, the hole left open for the return voyage, the right side of her body radiating fireworks of sensation in the wake of nerve damage and perforation.

She saw what he intended for the equipment, her mind putting together what he’d suggested. Her hands were shaking and she couldn’t stop that, though she tried. The overload of pain and adrenaline made it impossible to manage fine motor control. She tried to look at it curiously and turn it in her hands, accessing controls and insetting smaller pieces from the array he presented her with.

The forward motion of the probe stopped and pressure started. Oh…the tracker was embedded in bone, not muscle. Hip bone. Not the encasing muscle. Oh. She couldn’t help closing her eyes once and then reopening them, vision blurred as the tearing pressure built, the probe shearing into bone, shards and granulated shattered bits driven into torn muscle, ground spinning glass deep in her body that needed to be pulled out, sharp edges and calcification ridges dragging along the tract.

“Should I be drinking more water or is that a myth?”

“How much water do you drink in a day?”

She answered, her hands shaking and fumbling and tunnel vision becoming a problem. She focused on keeping the scream out of her voice and the tremble out of her limbs, sweat making her grip slippery on the ultrasound wand that was quickly becoming an unpredictable hazard to hearing and glass…hopefully. She might lose her ears anywhere near this thing.

In theory she’d be bleeding from mouth, nose, ears, potentially eyes, hip and spine by the time they were done.
But they’d be done.

She’d be out.

That thought gave her a counter surge of purpose and steady hands, even though the tunnel vision did not fade and her mind tried to tell her what that would all feel like on top of what she was already experiencing.

She thought she could hear it as well as feel it, that the sound of her bone shearing would be heard down on the basement security level from here. Her hand clenched on the wand for a moment as the probe finished its job and began backing out, dragging its payload behind it.

It felt like it was digging a new tract, was stuck, was unmoving, but that might just be the dilation of time that pain created. Now she waited. She waited to be told what to do. Don’t use the wand, don’t grab your hip and press in, don’t look at the blood you’re sure is soaking the blanket.

“Thank you, Dr. Itran. Hopefully I can put all your good advice into practice.”

“I am certain you can, Lirya. You are a healthy woman and capable of healing much on your own.”

She handed the wand back to him, slick with sweat, and he examined it critically, his hands steady. The blanket was sodden with blood by her hip, she could feel it. His hand traveled back down the curve of her waist to her hip, his fingers quickly slick with blood, crucial seconds remaining before the probe pulled out the tracker with attendant bone shards. His hand traveled down further as he leaned in as though to prepare to apply the ultrasound wand. If he did turn on that thing now it would scramble her insides and she’d be bleeding from everywhere.

His hand retrieved the tracker, pressed it and the probe down into the space between the cushion of the chair and the arm. His hand coming back up applied MediGel as he had to her spine, another plugged rush of blood and pain.

She’d fainted before, when Garrus had carried her off Noveria and she was afraid it was going to happen again, right now. She was about to empty her stomach of everything there, empty her mind of screams and go limp, and she couldn’t.

Dr. Itran asked gently “Is the sun in your eyes? You will need to remain in this position for an extended period of time, perhaps I should close the shade?”

“Yes, please, if you would. Thank you.”

He crossed the few steps to the glass and she watched, fascinated, hanging on the next few seconds. She could hold on for the next few seconds, she had to see if it worked, she had to get out of here, she couldn’t leave him to die. She couldn’t die here either. She had work to do.

He turned and activated the ultrasound, now a feedback screech that vibrated along her spine and ears, more pain in a new layer, cold and vicious and jangling. Nothing happened to the glass and she was terrified for a moment that they would come this far, she’d be an inexplicably bleeding mess and he’d be dead, she’d be the cause of it.

The sound of the feedback of the overloaded wand meant she didn’t hear, but she did see that there was vibration of the thick glass blurring the plane into subtle and then chaotic motion, hairline cracks that widened and bulged and bloomed outward in a destructive burst, some fragments at the outer edges of the hole rushing back into the room from the backlash, shards embedding into his face and the forearm he raised to shield his eyes, into his arms. He wrapped the curtain around his arm and widened the hole as much as he could, some pieces falling away but not enough it seemed. He
reached sharp edges of glass that would not give way, and he only had a few seconds to try that, barely enough room to move through. A punch at the edges did nothing.

That was it, that’s all they had, they had to go. He turned off the wand, screeching ending but ringing continued, and she thought she was bleeding from one nostril, one ear, and she couldn’t hear anything through one ear, minimal through the other, and the overlay of tinnitus.

He picked her up, wrapped her in the blanket and shoved her through feet first, glass along her back and not her belly, embedded shards dragging along her back and then she slid down, unable to get purchase on the other side, disoriented, weak and now on a sharp downturn of the roof, trying to cling to the edge of the windowsill with sweating, cramping hands. He held onto her hand after she’d gone through to give her the opportunity to gain whatever balance she could, until she was crouched down in a corner, holding on to the side of the window and not the edge he’d need to clear himself through.

He didn’t have the same advantage of being lifted and supported through. He grabbed the blanket from the bed and tried to protect himself as much from the shards of glass and slicing edges as he went through, but he was much worse off than she had been, he had to attempt to jump through as much as he could from the edge of the chair like a seal through a hoop on fire, the hoop and the edges catching and sinking into the falling weight of his upper thighs. The glass tore at his legs and his feet as he tried to stop forward motion with hands bleeding from trying to bash open the glass.

She had no idea how to get down from here, no glowing path, only him glowing, bleeding, determined. She stood from where she was to free his legs from the glass, wind whipping over them, an up gust from the cliff making balance difficult. Her feet were bare on slippery and curved tile. When he got his bleeding legs under him she heard the whine of a vehicle overhead, lowering itself down to them.

House security, Beckenstein security or rescue she had no idea. Only one path forward. Into that vehicle. She heard shots fired, automated turrets activated and terrifying.

A hand was extended from the vehicle and she was lifted by the doctor and thrown up and in, caught. Dr. Itran attempted to leap onto the vehicle but he missed his aim with another gust of wind, slammed his hip on the edge of the open bay and slid down until he was holding on with one hand, slippery with blood.

Adrenaline in full bloom she struggled out of whoever’s grip was holding her, on her knees because her hip wouldn’t hold her, grabbed at his upper arm with both of hers, sweat and slick and slipping until whoever was on board grabbed at him also, helped to pull him up and bring him inside, and then they were up and off, straight up, the sound of gunfire surrounding them. She dragged him back with her, as far back as she could, didn’t let go of glowing Drell salvation as he slid back with her, the door closing, the shifting weight of the vehicle slamming them back together in a tilted corner.

She wanted to stay awake, had to stay awake, slamming adrenaline and rattling gunfire, looking to see if holes were being punched through the vehicle, being punched through him in holes the way the glass had in planes and points. His face held embedded glass and slick trails of green. He caught her before she fell over, his hands on her shoulders so she wouldn’t slam her bleeding ear on the grated floor of the ship, and then it went dark.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

Garrus waited for the call at home, forced to stay on the Citadel because being anywhere near Beckenstein would put him at risk for abduction and interrogation.
Kegirin had gone in an hour ago.

He hadn’t done anything to celebrate or anticipate, he’d sat with his finger hovering over the answer indicator of his Omni Tool, moving his eyes from it only enough to check the slowly ticking-by time.

Spirits, please, let it be her. Watch over her. Bring her back to me. Please.

When the notification lit he saw Liara and she said “Garrus, she’s safe. It’s her. She’s on our estate.”

His heart tore something and then began to pound “Get her out of there.”

“We can’t, not yet. She needs treatment. She’s going to be okay, but I had medical crews moved in and activated. She was unconscious when she got there and Dr. Itran was not in great shape either. He had multiple glass lacerations, so does she and she needs to be treated at the sites where the tracker and chip were removed. I’m getting status reports but I waited until they did a rapid DNA test on the blood. It is definitely her.”

“Do you have pictures?”

“No, no broadcasts, everything’s in code. I’m not recording a thing. Her name is not being whispered. She can be evacuated through several methods and one is a simple shuttle from this estate and out. They weren’t pursued.”

“What?”

“They weren’t pursued from Krios’s estate and the security of the planet was not scrambled.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, but it’s good news. She’s lost a lot of blood but she’s going to be okay. Dr. Itran is going to be okay, some severe lacerations but he was conscious all through treatment, insisted on it, stayed at her side.”

“Okay. So that’s it, really? She’s…”

“She’s safe. It won’t be hard to get her back on the Citadel. Escort can meet the shuttle at the jump point if you want.”

“If I want?”

“Sorry, I’m being too polite. Get an escort.”

“Yeah, that’s a better way to put it.”

“Where’s the Normandy?”

“She’s back at the Citadel.”

“Okay. I’ll call Russ next.”

“Liara, please say the good part again, the part that it’s really her.”

“It’s really her. She’s safe. I promise you. Beekenstein will be bound to defend that shuttle out of the system and we’re going to invoke that expense.”

“What about Krios?”
“I don’t know. I will watch. It happens occasionally that people abandon their property. Beckenstein has a fig leaf in all the contracts they keep, but in this case it won’t help them. When it is known that Commander Shepard was kept captive…”

“Wait, we’re telling people?”

“I don’t know. This is new for me. I’ll give you some what ifs. If I were Thane Krios and Commander Shepard knew exactly where I lived and she wasn’t all that thrilled with me…”

“Right. Okay.”

“He’s technically safe, but here’s where the legal machine of Beckenstein can grind up an owner of an estate if the planet’s management disagrees with an estate owner. Beckenstein’s government is not happy when criminals are caught doing whatever they’re doing. Makes them look bad. Beckenstein’s habitual response to something like this is ‘We had no idea such a heinous thing could take place on our soil. We’re shocked.’”

“Of course it is.”

“It could work for us. If we bring pressure, obvious proof that Commander Shepard was chipped and held against her will, even if it isn’t made public but is only brought to Beckenstein’s attention, they would want to keep that quiet. They would not side with Krios, who is likely going to cost them quite a lot in security resources and eventually may not be able to afford them because…well, because he’s dead.”

“I kinda wish corporations were just greedy, like ExoGeni. They could only take up part of a planet.”

“Well, in this case it could work for us. I’ll watch. I’ll see what happens. Once complaints are filed and Krios can’t be located, it’s possible we could have access to his estate.”

“How?”

“Because it’s Beckenstein’s only move. They need to look appalled and cooperative, and mostly it’s because the rule is that you don’t get caught. Krios got caught. There may be honor among thieves sometimes but in this case Beckenstein has higher thief credibility to maintain and Krios to cut loose as dead weight. They want their residents to know not to get caught. They also want to know that Commander Shepard is not going to be effective in their direction, and in this case, they’re going to probably cave, it’s their only sustainable move.”

“Okay. Let me know what you need me to do.”

“All right. I’m not saying it’s easy, even with access it’s likely going to involve fees. We might not have been able to buy an estate, we might be on the hook to rent one temporarily if Krios has abandoned it…wait…let me check this. Notification from Beckenstein, local bulletin to ‘interested parties’ – Thane Krios’s estate sustained crippling shut down of all function, obligatory attempt to contact him failed. Property considered compromised and abandoned by all legal definitions according to Beckenstein. They’ll repeat trying to contact him, but that’s a formality. They want him gone. For all I know they’re the ones that cut power and are saying he did it. They want us to know they will make a deal if we move quietly and lucratively.”

“How would Krios shut it down if he’s not there? Could he have been there?”

“I don’t know. If he was I’m doubting he is now. My guess? Security on site informed Krios remotely of her escape and he wiped out everything that might be able to be discovered by a very
pissed off Commander Shepard if she returned through the front door in the next hour. Good news or bad news, his estate is burned and he won’t return. Beckenstein’s administration and Commander Shepard both coming after him for different reasons…”

“She’s never going back in through that front door.”

“Well, neither are we. We need proxies again. I’m not signing a contract.”

“I…”

“Garrus, you are not going. Absolutely not going. She’s back. You’d be a liability. We will have teams check it out but you are not going. I swear I would shoot you myself.”

“I love you too, Liara.”
A song for Garrus - "Fisherman's Song" - Carly Simon, pronouns changed to protect the guilty

In a pine forest cooler than the rest of the island
Lives a young fisherman with eyes like the sea.
She built her own boat and made her own cabin
but she's broken the hearts of the likes like me.

Now you must understand she made me a promise.
There were secrets we shared. We planted a tree.
We lived in her cabin, I fished along side of her
I fell under the spell of her sorcery.

When she cast me adrift at the end of the summer,
it was not for another but her own privacy.
I fell apart like a rose, but the scent of my longing remains and it weeps like an old willow tree.

At night when it's still, with a yellow moon rising
when her candle is snuffed and she's deep in a dream
I move like a cat, and crawl into her window
and lie down beside her in a golden moonbeam.

The smell of her skin is just like the summer
When our love was as fresh as the grass in the fields
and ever so softly I kiss her eyelids
before slipping away, my secret concealed.

Though I'm in it alone, I'm still in it, In love
and love can be lonely like a sweet melody.
But just maybe she feels me like a whisper inside her
Like an angel beside her, keeping her company.

+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

Once they had completed his medical treatment, Kegirin sat quietly while they worked on her. They appeared to be in another estate. This estate was smaller than Krios’s had been, at least partially abandoned, bereft of furnishings with packing materials strewn haphazardly in the corners of the cleared room that served as triage. He’d had several bad bleeds, one close to his femoral on the left. He’d been told he was lucky he was alive.

He was lucky.

He was alive.
So was she.

He had missed his leap onto the rescue vehicle on purpose, certain he’d be able to hold on with one hand. His blessed Drala’fa had reached for him. He’d wiped out all the estate’s retained tech commands and programming, shut off the electricity and disabled generators moments after he’d gotten a vibrating notification that Thane Krios had been informed of perimeter breech, which had been relayed to his Omni Tool.

Thane Krios would cease to be as an entity, all frequencies and contacts dead. The estate would quickly pass to the highest bidder, and that would likely be the Councilor and the Shadow Broker. They would have to pay for their evidence and witnesses.

Cara was sedated and still as the medical techs worked on her. He did not offer assistance. The less authority he took upon himself from this moment forward the better. He was now counted among the reluctant, his task completed, finding heroism not to his taste, willing to hand her over to the more competent, the more caring.

Those who had a right to her.

What he felt was pride looking at her still form. It was jarring, seeing her surrounded by larger people when he was accustomed to her on her own or next to him. She seemed smaller than ever, pale as always. The sun had touched her for the first time in months. He wished he could search her body for the first freckle making its appearance.

He would find them all later, greet them and welcome them back to her skin.

Now she must find her way back to her ship and he was certain she would.

He was offered food, which he accepted. He was offered rest, which he declined. He stated he wished to wait for her to wake before resting himself. When she was deemed stable after a few hours of blood replacement and treatment of lacerations and internal injuries caused by probe, ultrasound and glass they were loaded into a shuttle and had a Beckenstein escort to bring them to the Mass Effect gate. She was still sedated to help counteract blood loss and shock, giving her time to recover through transport. She would likely be in pain for a few weeks due to nerve damage. He had been reassured that his removal of the chip had been minimally damaging, nothing permanent, trauma that would heal with therapy. He was not informed of their final destination. He did not ask.

When they were through the gate the shuttle gave the braking whine and standard sounds and movements of docking in a bay. His Drala’fa was on a gurney, with him sitting to the side.

It seemed she had managed her assigned task while unconscious. She was back on her ship, the pilot saying clearly and enthusiastically “Normandy SR-2, permission to come aboard.”

A female voice answered “Permission granted, Jeff.”

“We’ve got her, EDI. She’s home.”

“Thank you for bringing her back, Jeff.”

The man at the shuttle controls stood and limped back to the passenger bay. Kegirin identified him as Jeff Moreau, call sign ‘Joker’ – her pilot for the Normandy through each iteration of the ship. Moreau paused by the side of the gurney and said conversationally to her “Look, Shepard, I don’t know why you think you’re allowed to run off and get your hair done, but we just don’t allow that sorta AWOL, you understand? First it’s dying and now it’s because you want to be pretty and this has just gotta stop.” He looked at her, his expression momentarily sad “For the record, you looked better
before. Welcome back… again… Commander. Let’s make this the last game of hide and seek, okay?"

Moreau walked over to Kegirin and said “I’d, uh, shake your hand but I don’t think Drell do that and I don’t because I don’t want a broken hand. I do want to thank you. My name’s Jeff. Joker to everyone else and to you if you’re in the mood. Thank you for bringing her home.”

“You are welcome, Jeff.”

Moreau smiled and turned to the opening hatch of the shuttle and Vakarian ducking through the widening opening impatiently “Hey, glad you could make it, Councilor.”

Vakarian’s eyes sought and held her. The Turian ignored Moreau and stepped over to the side of the gurney, set his hand on the top of her head, resting lightly on black hair.

Kegirin would allow it, had to allow it, would not count it against either of them that he would wish to touch her. Of course he would. Everyone would. She was particularly small and fragile against the hulking Turian in Vakarian blue Citadel finery whose talons were barely touching her, his expression loving, his face transformed from the civil servant to the bond mate. Vakarian said absently “Call me Garrus or I’ll revoke your docking rights at the Citadel, Joker. You’ll have to explain that one to her.”

Joker snorted and said “Sure thing, Garrus. Dr. Chakwas is waiting for these guys.”

Vakarian looked up as though remembering there was another person on the shuttle, having forgotten in his trance. “Dr. Itran. I owe you… I owe you everything. Thank you. Follow me.”

Kegirin thought that yes, he was owed everything of value to Vakarian. He would take it. He nodded solemn acknowledgement of the debt, of the direction.

Vakarian slit the restraining straps on the gurney open with his talons and Joker said “Oh come on, those probably cost money. Showoff.”

“I’ll reimburse you.”

“Me personally? Deal.”

Vakarian lifted her carefully and turned, Jeff indicating with a gesture of his head to follow. Kegirin stepped onto the Normandy, stood tentatively and looked around the shuttle bay. He looked suitably impressed. He was impressed, touched by Jeff’s willingness to potentially sign his life away in order to pilot her back home, by Vakarian’s definition of everything. His Drala’fa was inspiring, and he smiled at the Normandy as he would wish to smile at her.

Jeff let him spend his moment in reflection and then when Kegirin turned back to him began walking again with his limp, following Vakarian’s retreating back to the elevator. Vakarian waited for them, seeing nothing but her face.

It seemed the entire ship’s crew complement was in the mess hall. Vakarian carried her to the Med Bay and there was clapping, cheering, the sound cut off at the close of the door but the celebration was still visible through the glass.

Vakarian did not put her down on a bed but sat on the edge of it and held her. Dr. Chakwas smiled at the gesture and then turned to Kegirin, saying in a warm voice “Dr. Itran, my name is Karin Chakwas. I would like to thank you for bringing her back to us.”
“You are welcome, Dr. Chakwas.”

“Are you in any pain?”

He was, a great deal, but did not wish to be examined. “No, I was treated effectively by medical staff on Beckenstein.”

“Is there anything I can get for you?”

“My needs are met, thank you.”

“Would you like a bed or a chair?”

“Chair, please.”

She indicated a chair and he sat, forgotten by all three, unseen. He was now drala’fa and it suited the moment, he suppressed a smile. Moreau leaned against a wall, watched Vakarian hold her as Karin said “Councilor, I need to examine her, please. I do hate to ask but it is necessary.”

Garrus lifted a brow plate and said “I don’t like that plan. Call me Garrus or Joker will explain what happens.”

Dr. Chakwas’s brow rose. She turned her head to Moreau, who said “We can’t put in at the Citadel. He’s a little pushy today. Give a man a little power and his Commander back and he thinks he can do that. I mean, he can do that. He can totally do that.”

Dr. Chakwas nodded sagely and then turned to the Turian, saying more crisply “Garrus. Commander Orbestan is not here to help you. This is my Med Bay and I say put her down.”

Garrus smiled at Cara and said to her indulgently as her bond mate “Like Russ could do any better.” Then he stood up and said in his Councilor voice “Okay, Karin. Don’t lose her.”

“I shall do my best. Now, Garrus.”

He stood and Dr. Chakwas ceremoniously shifted back the blanket so Garrus could put her down. Cara was dressed in medical scrubs of pale and wrinkled green, her violet ribbons gone. Jarring in so many ways, seeing her in rough rags, in the arms of a Turian, surrounded by people who wanted more than anything to touch her to make sure she was real after having been surrounded by people unable to touch her because she was so unreal.

Dr. Chakwas busied herself with assessment. Vakarian passed his talons over Cara’s hair once more and then turned to Moreau. “Please relay to Commander Orbestan that I would appreciate it if he headed toward docking at the Citadel.”

Moreau saluted and said “Aye aye. On my way.” Moreau left the Med Bay after one last look at Cara, smiled and limped out, stopped to speak to people in the mess. They reached out to him, a proxy to touching her. He was a relic at the moment, and people gathered to pay respects.

Vakarian turned to Kegirin and said “She’s in good hands. You sure you’re not hungry? Thirsty?”

“No, sir.”

“Please, call me Garrus. Let me walk you to your cabin, you can get a shower, get some sleep.”

“Yes, sir… Garrus.”
“That’s better. Can’t stand being called sir while I’m on the Normandy, or Councilor. If I’d been smart, I’d have never left this ship.”

At least he knew it. “That would have been the loss of the Turian people and those who rely upon you for inspiration.”

“Thank you for saying so. I’m hoping it’s true.” Vakarian walked back through the sea of people, smiling and waving but moving on past Jeff, not getting waylaid. It was a short trip “Small cabin, but it should suit your needs. Please, clean up, get some rest. If you need anything, EDI is the ship’s AI, let her know if you’d like to talk to anybody or get some food, anything you need. I can’t thank you enough.”

“You are welcome and thank you for your help, Garrus. I could not have done this without your assistance. I am grateful she is home.”

“You’re welcome. We’re all grateful she’s home.”

Vakarian left him at the door, no doubt to return to the Med Bay immediately. Kegirin was exhausted and in pain, the planning of months over, an old life abandoned and a new one begun.

That they cared for her, that they treated him well was touching, and although he did not trust that they would treat him well for long, he showered with blank mind, washing off her blood and his blood. Someone had been thoughtful enough to provide clothing. Rough and harsh, but it was not splattered with blood.

He assumed he would be essentially forgotten in the celebration, except of course by her, and he decided to remain in his cabin until contacted, drala’fa embodied.

He moved to the bed. He had refused pain killers, had none of his own store here as he arrived on the Normandy with only the glass-shredded clothes on his back and a woman that no longer belonged to him until she decided it was so. He must hope the discontinuation of immune suppressants would not result in a crisis, that the blood given or the trauma would not do the same, that he would heal. Fate had chosen to allow them both to live, he gave thanks. He had little time for reflection but chose to recall the look on her face as she pulled him on board the shuttle, his determined Drala’fa, the sun on her hands and fire in her eyes while her blood poured down her arms onto his hand, green and red mingled.

OoOoOoOoOoO

Coming to consciousness, Cara first noticed two things that made her come to cold hard consciousness quickly. She didn’t smell like vanisfruit. Clothes and sheets scratched across her skin. Not Drell fabric. The scent of the Med Bay and the feel of her clothes and the blanket were physically unpleasant and alarming because it was unexpected and unexpected was bad… but they felt emotionally welcome, her heart pounding. There was a struggle while her eyes were closed, the imperative urge that she needed to present herself a certain way coming to the front of her mind, sharp and ugly. She anticipated the impulse to correct it as soon possible. She waited for the dulling compulsion of the chip to work on her.

It didn’t.

She was assured of not having given anything away through reaction. She didn’t do that anymore. No jumping, no squeaking, no flinching, no…

No Cara.
Karin was there, looking down at her. “Welcome back, Commander.”

Not-Cara had tried to consider how to act if and when she was back on the ship. It took her a moment to shuffle through all the habits she’d built, all the changes she’d made, to revert back to Lal Shepard. Not Cara. Not Drala’fa. Lal Shepard.

She smiled at Karin, half nervous and terrified she’d blow… what? She’d blow something. She’d blow being who she needed to be. She couldn’t afford to miss a step. She couldn’t be Cara. She had to remember… who she had been. She had to do it fast. She wasn’t Drala’fa but she wasn’t Cara either. Lal. She was Lal. Remember. Lal who was dead but wasn’t. Lal who was a Commander but wasn’t. She was also so very grateful to see Karin smiling at her and welcoming her home. “Thanks for saving me a bunk.”

The memory of the rescue rushed back in on her and she assumed she had been sedated, fixed, transported… back to the Normandy.

Back home.

Not kigi nut butter. Not vanisfruit.

Lal Shepard and all that meant. Military.

Karin’s eyes were lingering on her lips “Commander, are you speaking English?”

Lal blinked. “No, I’ve been speaking Drell for several months, it’s a habit. Does that matter?”

Karin smiled “No, of course not. Not medically relevant. My translator makes you sound different and I don’t want to mistake that for vocal damage or deficit.”

It didn’t matter what language she spoke, did it? She thought of English and it felt like the sheets, scratchy and binding and… wrong somehow?

Get it together, Lal. She made the mental shift and changed to English. “Okay, English then.” Karin smiled. Not the time to discuss the beauty of the language of the man that had kept her captive. The time to discuss what? “What’s the damage? Am I gonna make it?”

Karin’s smile strengthened “You’re in excellent health. Some muscle atrophy from your previous scan, but no damage. Your implants are gone. Your spine site has been repaired and will heal, though there may be some pain from peripheral nerve damage. Nothing permanent. You may experience some isolated numbness, tell me if that’s the case. Your hip is repaired and should heal well. Are you in pain right now?”

She was. Her neck was sore and shifting it sent cold and hot trails along sensitized nerves. There were tingling patches of skin and numbness, but she wasn’t going to focus on them right now. She’d been in bed and not been moving, it could be that. Her hip was burning, but everything else… “No, I’m good.”

“If you are in pain, please let me know.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Do you have any concerns or questions?”

Lal blinked, thought ‘like, what are the long-term psychological effects of control chip use and repeated sexual abuse over a period of months?’ She’d find out on her own. “How long was I
“Gone?”

“Six months and seventeen days.”

“Well, I cut my absence time to a quarter of what it was before. I’m getting better at this.”

Karin did not laugh and neither did Lal. Karin asked “Are you hungry, Commander?”

She wasn’t. But she should say she was, shouldn’t she? Appetite a good thing? “Yeah, food sounds good.”

“All right. Are you queasy? The medications or the trauma could result in that.”

She was queasy “No, I’m fine. A little sore, sure, but nothing I can’t manage.”

“Think you could eat solid food?”

“Sure.”

“Do you feel able to speak to visitors?”

Her mind immediately went to the Drell that rescued her. Dr. Itran. “Is Dr. Itran okay?”

“Yes, he is well. He is on board. His injuries were treated and he is resting.”

“I’d like to see him. How long has it been since we left the estate?”

“Eighteen hours.”

Less than a day.

Karin said with what might be careful phrasing and Lal was good with careful phrasing and listened “I will contact Dr. Itran after he has gotten some sleep, ask him to speak to you. Garrus is here. Perhaps I could ask him to bring you some food and you could speak.”

Garrus.

Garrus is here.

She blinked, a rush of tears and the beginnings of trembling in her limbs and in her voice, but she controlled them. She had plenty of practice with that. “That sounds wonderful. Please.”


Oh, Garrus.


There were too many blank places, purposely blank, too many dark places she needed to keep blank. Things taken and things given, things she had to hold and things she had to drop and she didn’t know which was which.

Be a light, but do not shine a light on anything unless it’s Reapers. Be Lal Shepard.

Remember that you love him.
Remember that it sounds wonderful. Smile.

Karin left and Lal could not let her face stay blank, could not let the dark or the blank there, had to smile. She’d gotten so good at that.

So…she’d at least learned a skill.

She’d learned a few skills. Blurred/blank/dark images of Thane Krios flashed through her mind and the queasy was worse, but she had to stay here, stay now, don’t put too much weight in one place, don’t put too much thought or light anywhere. Leave the dark where it lay.

Careful. You have to be the most careful you have ever been and make it look like it’s easy, it’s wonderful. You’re home.

Just like on Beckenstein.

When Garrus walked in with a tray she forgot most of everything she’d just told herself because she didn’t need to know it. Her face lit with a bright smile. It was wonderful. He was wonderful. She was grateful for a few moments with him and that was true.

She also kept her hands under the blankets, dug them deeper in. All she did was look at him, watched his face, watched his careful expression and how slowly he moved, as though not to startle her. Just like soft knocks on the door, having someone care about not startling her made her smile widen. She said “How’s it feel to be my hero?”

Then she realized. He didn’t glow. He didn’t glow anymore. She kept her face still. It didn’t matter. It wouldn’t matter. Tears rushed to her eyes but that was okay, that was understandable and forgivable.

His smile quirked at the side and he put the tray down, both of them knowing she wouldn’t eat. “C’mon, Shepard, I’ve always been your hero.”

“Yeah, you have.”

“Feels good.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He dragged a chair over. With her hands under the blankets he hesitated, wanting to reach for her but instead resting the talons from one hand on the edge of the bed.

She couldn’t touch him again. He didn’t glow.

But… that didn’t matter. Her parents never glowed. He was family now. He was love, like they were, and she couldn’t touch him like she couldn’t touch them. But he was alive and he was here, and he had rescued her from Beckenstein, from the blank and the dark.

The poetry of Seng-ts’an was in her mind, something she’d read while on Beckenstein: “The great way isn’t difficult for those who are unattached to their preferences. Let go of longing and aversion, and everything will be perfectly clear. When you cling to a hairbreadth of distinction, heaven and earth are set apart. If you want to realize the truth, don’t be for or against.”

I shouldn’t be for or against you, Garrus. I shouldn’t be for or against Reapers apparently according to the wise men, but I am. I am an unwise woman. I’ve never been all that good at detachment. I love you, and I shouldn’t, but I will. The great way will be difficult. I am attached. Heaven and earth are
set apart. But I’m not in hell, and that’s because of you.

She wasn’t going to recite poetry, but tears filled her eyes. Seeing that his face reflected the grief, the loss, the pain of the last six months and the fact that his hand could not reach hers.

She said carefully “I’ve had a rough few months. Looks like you have too. But we both survived me being dead. Okay, well, I didn’t survive it at first, but I got better. It will get better. I’ll tell you what happened, some of it, but I can’t and won’t tell you all of it. I won’t be upset if you ask if you’re not upset that I won’t answer. Neither of us can keep that deal but we can both look like we can. I don’t know who took me. I was on Illium and then something hit me in the neck, probably a trank dart. Someone caught me. I woke up, looking like this, with him. I had a chip. He used it. He used me. I don’t remember much of it, and what I do remember I’d like to forget. I need to ask a favor, one that I don’t understand, one you don’t understand, but if we both pretend we understand it, it’ll be okay. If we try to understand and can’t do it, can’t pretend, it won’t be okay. Please don’t touch me. I don’t want you to understand why. I don’t want you to use your imagination. I can’t explain. I want to avoid a bad day. I want to avoid all the bad days.”

Garrus’s head ducked, a bleak splash through his eyes she could see, then she couldn’t see. He was shaking. He said “Okay. I can do that. Or… don’t do that. It’s been killing me that I thought… I thought maybe you were gone because I… because…”

Now he remembered what he shouldn’t be saying but it didn’t really matter anymore. She loved him and he loved her and that couldn’t be used against them anymore because there was no future for them. She said “No. Never that. Garrus, never that. I’m not dead. I was taken, I didn’t and wouldn’t have left, I promise. Never.” She smiled and then said “That doesn’t even sound like something I’d do, Councilor Vakarian.”

“Yeah, but it did sound like something that could kill me.”

“We’re tough. We can take a lot. For now… I just want to enjoy not being in that place. I want to enjoy being in this place, with the right people. You are the right people.”

“Well, I am your hero.”

“And always will be.”

“I missed you every single moment, Lal.”

“I missed a lot of moments I’d rather have spent missing you. I’d ask about the war effort… but right now, Garrus… right now I don’t care. Right now I care that I’m in a room with you, I can see that you’re okay, and I can hear your voice.”

“I can hear your voice but I wish I could see your face. You’re…”

“This is my face now.”

He sucked in a fast breath of shock and his talons gripped the edge of the bed “Lal… you need to look like you.”

“This is me. Garrus, when have you known me to be vain?”

“This isn’t about vanity, Lal, it’s about… you being you.”

“This is me being me. I’m not taking three weeks out of my life for surgery just so I can feel pretty, Garrus.”
He stared at her, shocked and then at her tone and the flipped meaning of her words started to laugh. “Okay. Now I know you’re back. Two impossible things demanded in ten minutes.”

“Only two?”

“Maybe a few more.”

“Garrus, I was in a bad place. A really bad place. You took me out of there.”

Garrus smiled, the end point of his laughing “It was a group effort.”

“And my thanks to the group.” If she didn’t say it now maybe she never could. “Garrus, I love you.”

His head jerked up, talons tightening again on the bed, fear for EDI, fear for her, fear for… what it would mean that she said it out loud. She couldn’t blame him because she was afraid for her, afraid for him, afraid that she’d never be able to say it out loud again. She repeated “Garrus. I love you. I would never have run away from you. That isn’t what happened. If you can get one truth from the wreckage, grab that one and hold on.”

Because you can’t touch me, you can’t hold on to me. You’re agreeing to it, but you’re not going to listen, because… you’re Garrus.

“You’re my hero, Shepard.”

“Would you sit with me here, us both being all pretty and heroic, and not us at all, but kinda us, and tell me about what’s happened out in the galaxy for the last six months? I’ll tell you what happened inside one house in that galaxy if you want.”

“When you’re ready.”

“Not sure I ever will be.”

“Then everyone else will wait. You sure you’re not hungry?”

She didn’t want to risk the temptation to touch his hand or spill anything with the way her own hands were shaking. “I’m good. I just want to hear your voice.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

"See these tears so blue,
an ageless heart
that can never mend.
These tears can never dry.
A judgment made
that can never bend.
See these eyes so green,
I can stare for a thousand years.
Just be still with me.
You wouldn't believe what I've been through.

And I've been putting out the fire with gasoline.
Putting out the fire with gasoline."

- (Cat People) "Putting out Fire" - David Bowie

 Garrus stayed with Cara in the Med Bay, sleeping in a chair next to her bed. He was frantic and jittery but didn’t look that way. Being in a room with her scent made him calmer, but set other parts of him off, wanting to be closer. Russ had come down to see her after setting course, assured that there was no pursuit from Beckenstein. They set in a few hours later at the Citadel, where they were now docked.

Liara was coordinating the negotiations to take over the site at Beckenstein. He left the Med Bay briefly for that discussion. He warned her not to touch Cara. Liara nodded, seemed to understand, said that was something to be expected. Garrus had enough experience with sexual abuse and slavery survivors at C-Sec to know this was true. They didn’t discuss it.

That Lal was even relatively sound of body and mind was a miracle.

He counted that miracle in bold and held it close. Everything else would wait.

Please let there be an ‘everything else.’

No sign of Thane Krios. All frequencies and contacts dead, confirmed by Beckenstein, who considered that a termination of contract. They would not provide those frequencies or any way to track him, but they did confirm that whatever they had been, they were unresponsive.

Cara was… not Cara. She was Lal. Of course she was. She was Lal and he could not touch her. She hadn’t said for how long, she had told him not to ask, he didn’t ask.

Garrus would not leave the Med Bay for long and Cara didn’t ask him to leave. She had eventually accepted food and had eaten. He’d watched her swallow before he left to get some food himself and to give some status reports on her to others that he did not want her to overhear. Nobody asked him
to leave. Karin worked around him. Cara didn’t really need all that much in the way of medical care, but with nerve damage Karin wanted to be cautious and give Cara extra time to rest, just in case her leg muscles were affected, weakness or numbness causing a fall if they gave way suddenly.

Just in case delayed shock manifested itself. It did not appear that Cara would be succumbing to shock. She was poised, polished and busy trying to reassure others as always.

Normal for her. Normal for her after she’d died. Her attitude was that if she could shake off death, she could shake this off.

He didn’t want her to be wrong. Didn’t think she’d be wrong.

He and Karin had both assumed Cara was lying about how much pain she was in. Karin didn’t give her more pain killers but did choose to keep her under observation for 2 days. By then Russ would be out of the Commander’s cabin, her things moved back in. Garrus had supervised breaking down her belongings and removing them, he’d supervise that everything went back exactly as it had been. Russ had done it and reported it done to Garrus, without comment, without complaint, handing the ship back over.

Now Russ had no command. The Ferox had been lost two months ago to a geth ambush the Normandy had escaped with her stealth.

Cara’s return to life, Spectre status and command was something Garrus had insisted upon every time her name had come up. Garrus once again in this case WAS the Council and everyone knew it. Anderson would not argue. Tevos would not argue. Valern would exact a price and Garrus would pay it.

She was alive and she was as stubborn as she had ever been.

So was he. Russ had done well in command, but they needed Shepard.

Dr. Itran did stop by to speak to Cara, stood politely at the door of the Med Bay until she noticed him, which was quickly. She had been dozing and Garrus had quietly moved his chair against the wall to stay out of Karin’s way.

Cara smiled at him when he entered, Kegirin’s face solemn. He stepped forward tentatively “You wished to see me, Commander Shepard?”

Her smile was bright. “Yes, please. Would you like a seat?”

“I will stand, thank you.”

“I wanted to thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

There was a moment when they both looked at each other and Garrus saw that awkwardness in her, Cara’s inability to engage in small talk. Lal always funny or blunt, looking at the face of a Drell that was not receptive to either. He imagined her decision tree…

Had they met socially or professionally?

_____?

Should they discuss sexual slavery?
Her hesitancy was oddly reflected in Itran, two lost souls without a path of words around a roiling volcano of circumstance.

Garrus realized when he and Cara had spoken he had kept to what she’d asked. He’d told her about the last six months. He hadn’t asked her any questions, she hadn’t asked about Itran. She knew nothing about Itran. Itran seemed to have nothing more to say. Garrus thought he might just turn and leave, but Cara rushed in to fill the silence. “Please, Dr. Itran.” Her hand reached out and rested on the Drell’s forearm and Garrus was inappropriately jealous, his fingers and thighs tightening at watching his bond mate touch another male voluntarily when she would not touch him. He tried to relax. Okay, it’s an adjustment. She’s alive. He’s a doctor that saved her life and Dr. Chakwas touches her and it’s not okay for me because she cares, not because she doesn’t. Itran stepped closer to the bed so she did not have to reach for him, a gesture of accommodation and politeness, but she didn’t let go of his forearm in response and he looked uncomfortable. Cara said “I don’t know how you ended up in that room. Would you please tell me?”

“I was contracted by Thane Krios to care for you.”

“How did you know who I was?”

“Commander Shepard, you saved my life on Darfeh eight years ago. I recognized your voice and your height.” He smiled and said softly, even shyly “Your eyes are memorable no matter the face.” There was a pause and then he said more formally “I secured your blood and I brought it to the Councilor.” Itran stood to the side, indicating Garrus, who leaned in and smiled. “He arranged for your rescue.”

Garrus said “Team effort. I did less bleeding.”

Itran did not respond to that but did ask tentatively “Has Sere Krios been apprehended?”

Garrus shook his head “No, he hasn’t been seen. His estate will be secured and searched.”

Itran asked Garrus “And my associates?”

“Safe.”

Cara asked “Associates? Safe how?”

Garrus explained “Krios arranged for the contract by threatening Kegirin’s life and the lives of those he works and lives with.”

This did not surprise Cara in the least. “I am so sorry, Dr. Itran. So you… you can’t return to your old life.”

“It is worth it, Commander Shepard, to see you restored to your ship.”

She asked him “Is there anything I can do?”

“The Councilor has offered an identity change. I am considering it.”

Garrus prompted seriously “You need to take it. You need to swap out your Omni Tool.”

“As you requested, it has been off since suppression on the estate.”

Cara asked speculatively “Would you consider staying on the Normandy, Dr. Itran?”
Both Garrus and Itran stared at her. She said “You’re brave and lacking in options. The least I can do is offer you an option.”

Garrus was busy thinking ‘in what capacity’? but it appeared Itran wasn’t thinking anything but ‘no.’

“I thank you, Commander Shepard, but I believe I am unsuitable to heroics.”

“You and I disagree on that point.”

“That is kind.”

“If there’s anything I can do for you…”

“You saved my life, Commander Shepard, the last eight years of my life were what you could do for me, what you did for me.”

She hesitated, both of them awkward again, her face with the particular blankness she had when she was thinking hard. She said thoughtfully “So we both need new Omni Tools,” and then asked “EDI?”

“Yes, Commander Shepard?”

“Do we still have Omni Tools on board, spares I worked on? They should have been in my cabin.”

“Yes. They are in inventory.”

“Great. Please assign one to Dr. Kegirin Itran before he leaves the ship. He’s in need of a new one. Assign the other to me, ask Dr. Chakwas to implant it. Make sure they’re linked. He’s leaving us and that is a shame.”

“I will do that, Commander. Dr. Itran, you have my thanks, the thanks of everyone on board. I will give you my contact as well. If you need anything, please let me know.”

Cara smiled and Itran looked haunted, his new Omni Tool casually given a direct line to a Spectre and a ‘helpful’ AI. Garrus thought Kegirin looked like he had been given a brand new sky car, one with a load of Eezo in the trunk after having been asked how did he feel about biotics. Kegirin looked like he was trying to calculate the long-term costs of not having a life and having Commander Shepard know where he was at all times and what that meant to his future life expectancy. Poor guy.

Kegirin replied “That is most generous and kind of you both. Thank you for your concern.”

Garrus was not going to laugh at him, but he was tempted to give him his contact as well and invite him to a poker game. Joker would like that.

Don’t be mean, Vakarian, the guy’s trying.

Cara squeezed the Drell’s forearm and said “We’re at the Citadel. Please take the Councilor up on the offer to have a new identity.”

“As you wish, Commander Shepard.”

Garrus said “I’ll get that started. New identity, new Omni Tool, and you can begin a new life. You didn’t have much in the way of money but I can take care of that. You’re a gentleman of independent means as of now. If you want any job on the Citadel, ask me.” He wouldn’t invite him to poker, but he would be available. “EDI, please ensure Dr. Itran’s Omni Tool is also linked to mine.”
EDI responded “Of course, Councilor.”

Itran, having blanched further, more Eezo loaded into the trunk, said “Thank you, sir. Yes, sir.”

Garrus smiled at Cara, who smiled back. Garrus looked at her and said to Itran “Maybe take a little time off.”

Itran bowed, detached and excused himself.

Cara watched him leave, smiling.

Garrus said “Take it easy on the guy, Lal. He’s not cut out for this.”

She shrugged and said “You didn’t see him. He was good. Really good. Whose idea was the ultrasound?”

He dragged his chair back over to her “That was his. We refined it, and he tested it several times. We couldn’t be sure which components he would be given.”

“It was a good idea. He executed.”

“Yeah, he did. I’m grateful. I just think maybe give the guy a break.”

She looked innocent and said “I just gave him an Omni Tool.”

“So you can always find him. He’s terrified.”

“Yeah, well, so am I most of the time.”

“But not all of the time?”

She smiled at him. “Not all of the time. Not now. Now I’m here.”

OoOooOooOooOoOoOo

Liara was negotiating the line item and overall disposition of Beckenstein. No competitive bidders. She was directly involved with Beckenstein’s agents dealing with asset security and dispersal.

Krios had been paid up in fees and in good standing. They informed her normally they would keep the estate for him in perpetuity as long as it was paid for, but long-term contracts of that sort were more difficult when there was staff to be considered after a shut down and no authorization for restart when he could not be consulted. Reactive communication was a part of his contract, the time frame of contact having expired. His authorization for pay and disposition of staff in emergency was not available, his authorization for several things was not available. With Liara’s evidence of foul play they were willing to make an exception in this case and accommodate her needs.

It would of course cost her.

Commander Shepard’s name was not mentioned by anyone. At the moment this was an investigation into an Alliance official who had been abducted, held captive and then successfully rescued from the estate by another estate owner who had been concerned for her welfare.

Beckenstein was officially grateful for the upstanding behavior of their rescuing citizen, the sort of private citizen to make Beckenstein a wonderful place to live and conduct business.

Liara managed the line item contract, they had waivers for personnel and shuttles that would be able
to enter and leave the air space of the estate without claiming citizenship. Of course for the security of all involved, they would remain in the escorted corridor to avoid inconveniencing other residents. Collision was a risk and all air traffic direction must be obeyed.

Right, collision, not being shot out of the sky.

Liara was careful regarding anything about disposition of property, because that could mean people. Beckenstein originally would accept 250,000 credits for the contractor’s presence and proxies on Krios’s estate for collection of evidence. The contract originally did not allow for removal of evidence from the site. It took another 250,000 credits for evidence and property to be defined.

So half a million credits and they could go in, people would be able to leave, the disposition of the ‘evidence’ collected was negotiated.

Liara sent in agents, having gotten a floor plan and the knowledge that staff had been trapped on site for two days, unable to obtain transportation off the site without… collision risk.

So she had witnesses and evidence theoretically. Beckenstein released the lockdown on the property and then charged another 100,000 credits for ‘courtesy’ utility and tech access. They informed her helpfully that with the type of shutdown activated by Krios, his agents or potentially a saboteur, it was unlikely any technical records remained intact on the site.

Liara sent agents in that were familiar with the law of Beckenstein. Staff had been trapped but were not in physical distress. They’d had food and water, had been able to rest. They had not been able to communicate. On interviewing them, they were meek, polite and… terrified.

Liara’s first concern being the room that Cara had been kept in, they were told that staff had gone upstairs after the lock down to check to see if ‘Drala’fa’ had been in her room, but the hole in the window had explained why she was not.

Nobody had spoken to ‘Drala’fa’ for her entire captivity according to them, only Sere Krios.

Recording crews got in that room and Liara watched the feed, seeing beautiful Drell appointments, a blood stained chair and a blown-out window. The chair had a book case next to it, stacked with a neat row of books in English, in Drell. An abandoned plate of cookies and a spilled glass of what might have been milk.

As dungeons went it was…lovely. Dr. Itran had implied she had been dressed in clothing appropriate for a sex worker. She asked the agent to check the closet.

Two closets. One filled with clothing for a male Drell, leathers and Drell fabric.

The next closet was for Cara and the horror hit Liara hard. Sweet, modest and entirely sexually inexperienced Cara, who had blushed and flushed if “Fleet and Flotilla” was mentioned… had worn these clothes for six months.

Just like the dungeon, they were lovely. They were beautifully crafted, without a doubt expensive, studded with precious gems and metals. Combine six of those outfits and she might have had enough cloth to cover herself in any meaningful way.

Oh, Goddess, Cara.

Liara started to cry, the first independent confirmation of Dr. Itran’s quietly stated unwillingness to attempt to obtain a picture of Commander Shepard.
Liara closed her eyes and realized she... oh Goddess. She had to ask now. She had to ask if people had seen a black haired, violet eyed woman at the estate of Thane Krios on Beckenstein in the last six months.

Testimony was trickling in and forming patterns. Her horror began to leak out like blood dripping from a numbed wound, something too deep to feel, something deadly.

“Yes, I saw her. No, I never spoke to her. We were not to speak to her. She and Sere Krios seemed happy together. No, I did not think she was here against her will. He called her Drala’fa, or so I had heard. Drell house staff might know more, I worked at the security check point at the front of house.”

Drell house staff very carefully did not know more.

“The lady of the house was always quiet, gracious and nafisi.”

Nafisi – a Drell word meaning style and substance combined, an ideal ascribed to a master of art and craft as applied to living.

He called her only Drala’fa. The Drell staff rushed to clarify. “Sere Krios teases his lady by calling her that. It means ‘the ignored’ but she was never ignored. She held his thoughts and his heart each moment she blessed us with her presence.”

DNA samples taken, staff granted sanctuary and offered passage to the Citadel, haunted eyes and pressed-together lips.

By the way, there was a museum in the basement.

There was a library under construction for the lady of the house, rumors of a ballroom being built for her. Sere Krios enjoyed making his lady happy. She had seemed happy with him.

Everyone hoped she was well, such a lovely and kind woman.

Nobody asked where Sere Krios was, but very carefully all asked if he was alive, if he would be returning, if they were to be expected to continue with their jobs, which of course they enjoyed as an enriching employment, living in such a beautiful place and serving such wonderful people.

There was a healing hole in the back of Cara’s neck where a chip had been, and a closet full of...

Oh Goddess.

Hours passed with the details of the horror being broken down to repeated sentences and ignorance. Sere Krios cast a long shadow and nobody was going to speak against him. These people were trauma victims in their own right and Liara authorized passage to the Citadel one by one, protective custody with the assistance of C-Sec.

The first hit on a woman matching Cara’s description came in, a video.

Liara closed her eyes, prayed to the Goddess and hit play.

One of her agents asked “Tell me what you saw at Thane Krios’s estate regarding the woman I asked about?”

The camera was focused on a sleek Asari in a Beckenstein-looking environment. the panorama and architecture familiar now to Liara. “Everyone’s been wondering who she was. We were waiting for Krios to get tired of her and offer to sell. Nobody had asked him yet, though. He’s not all that chatty
and with her… he was worse than usual. Never let anyone touch her or talk to her. You know who she is?"

“Right now, please, just tell me what you saw.”

“Right. Your money. You’ll find a few hundred people willing to tell the story for free, but for now, sure. We’ll do it your way. Now that Krios is gone there’s no harm in telling. I’m sure he won’t mind. Krios had parties, once a month. Hundreds of people. He suspended them for two months but for the last four months he threw them, and she was with him.”

“Did he tell you her name?”

“No. All the wretch would say was ‘She is mine’ and that’s all anybody ever got out of him about her identity. We stopped asking. He called her some horrid Drell nick name I can’t remember. That wasn’t the draw anyway. Lovely girl. Krios has exquisite taste. I suppose it’s ‘had’ but I can hope he’s still alive. Life’s more interesting with him alive. His parties will be missed. I wonder if I should take up the tradition. He’d like that. Beautiful estate, like a Drell museum. She was always on his arm, she rarely spoke. I know other people heard her talk but I never had the pleasure, and she only ever answered him. He did take her upstairs.” She paused with a smile, clearly leading the witness.

“And what was upstairs?”

“She was. He was. Sex upstairs. Slaves, servants, guests, and this atrocious throne that the former occupant of that estate, Donovan Hock, kept there. Krios ignored and avoided it for years, hardly ever went there, unfortunately. No fun. But with her, couldn’t keep him out of the throne room. He’s uncooperative and very… Drell… but I will give the man this; he knows how to put on a show. He’d watch, she’d watch, he’d fuck her for hours on that throne. Very enthusiastic man where she was concerned. He’d walk in with her on his arm, push aside whatever bits of nothing - very expensive nothing, mind, that she was wearing, and enjoyed himself very much. Brightened up the place, to see him happy."

Liara didn’t have time to cry. A few hundred people? Eager to tell the story? She fumbled with the contact list, called Garrus. He was in the Med Bay with her, of course, and… and she didn’t have time again.

“Garrus, please let me speak to Shepard.”

Garrus tilted the camera to Shepard, who smiled. They’d exchanged a few words of greeting and tearful congratulations, and now Liara saw again the eyes and the… lovely girl… that people had hoped would go up for auction. “Shepard. I’m at the Krios estate. There are… there are hundreds… of witnesses. Witnesses we can’t control.”

Cara looked at her with her new face, sympathy and empathy and a conclusion Liara did not want. No, please, Cara, please, don’t…

Cara said “I know, Liara. There’s nothing I can do about it. I won’t have to tell my story. It will be told.”

Liara begged “Please, it’s not too late. You should get surgery, go back to…”

Cara held up her hand “Liara, it was too late months ago. You have to think about this. Think clearly. Hundreds, if not thousands know. Rescue workers know. Staff know. Guests know. He knows. There’s no keeping this quiet.”

“No… Lal. You can’t.”
“I have to, Liara. Think. You can’t put this genie back in the bottle. She’s out. If I tried to hide it, if I don’t own it, he… anybody could decide to blackmail me at any point. They could decide to blackmail you. They could decide to blackmail Garrus. I can’t do that. My name was Drala’fa and thousands of people know it. What are you going to do, Liara? Kill everyone that saw me? Ask already traumatized staff to lie? Find a surgeon and then kill them when their job is done? That’s what he did. I’m not going to be like him. Even if you could, none of that would stop the stories. That won’t stop… him… from deciding when to release anonymous video.”

Liara wanted to tell this woman what her real name was and then… she couldn’t. She couldn’t tell her “Your name is Cara Fanning” because even Garrus didn’t know that. Oh Goddess, please.

The camera was wobbly. Garrus’s arm with the Omni Tool was shaking. Cara turned her face to him and said like a mother speaking to a child “It’s okay. I know what I’m doing. You guys… as usual… are not going to like it and I’m sorry about that. I can’t risk other people’s lives over my privacy. I survived Mindoir. I survived death. I will survive Thane Krios. I’m home and the people on this ship know my name is Lal Shepard. You’re both going to hear a lot. I don’t need to hear it. I don’t need to say it. I need to get back to being Lal Shepard. I’ve got work to do, the work I’ve wanted to do, the work I chose, and I’m not wasting another moment on Thane Krios. That’s what he wanted me to do and he failed. I’m not taking time to have my face changed back. I’m not taking time to answer questions. I’m getting back in the fight.”

Cara didn’t reach out to steady the camera, didn’t reach out to Garrus at all.

Now. Now the pain of the cut started to be felt, mortal and deep, the end of things Liara couldn’t count or calculate, but she’d have the rest of her life to count them. A thousand years to remember if she lived a long life, the life Shepard was determined to give her.

Cara said “Both of you, step out of the way of the flood. Don’t try to stop it. Don’t try to change it. Just let it go. I’m not going to change my mind and I can’t change what happened. I had a chip and I don’t remember all of it but I do remember enough. Don’t ask me. Don’t think about it. Get back in the real fight as soon as possible, that’s what I’m doing. I’ll be okay. I want you to be okay.”

It was like hearing Cara give her own eulogy. She was dead and gone, and Shepard was all that was left, and she was asking them not to mourn the woman they’d loved. The woman they loved.

Oh Goddess, please.

Please what she didn’t know.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Spike: The last time I looked in on you two, you were fightin’ to the death. Now you’re back making googly eyes at each other like nothing happened. Makes me want to heave.

Buffy: I don’t know what you’re talking about.

Spike: Oh, yeah. You’re just friends.

Angel: That’s right.

Spike: You’re not friends. You’ll never be friends. You’ll be in love ‘till it kills you both. You’ll fight and you’ll shag and you’ll hate each other till it makes you quiver, but you’ll never be friends. Love isn’t brains, children, it’s blood. Blood screaming inside you to work its will. I may be love’s bitch, but at least I’m man enough to admit it.

“Lovers Walk” – “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”

So it was all settled. By the time Cara was out of the Med Bay she was discharged back to the Commander’s quarters as though nothing had changed. Her Spectre status and authority had never been revoked. Garrus had not allowed it. Her identity codes and authorization codes were changed but all privileges intact. Her continuing mission was the same and the Council trusted that she would dispose of assets assigned as she had in the past.

Right. Treasonously and unreasonably and effectively. Check.

With Thane Krios still alive and publicity on the subject of her person boiling and seamy, she was not going to walk around on the Citadel and would make reports to the Council remotely. She’d done that in the past. None of the Councilors demanded to see her in person. She was sure everyone was concerned that if she were to be out in person and recognizable she’d be asked to autograph some Drell drawings from memory of what she’d worn, what she and Krios looked like together. She’d spawned a new fad in fashion and eyewitness-style art.

Pass.

At this point she might sign them. She certainly wouldn’t shoot anybody. She didn’t think it would hurt to be offered evidence of her captivity. It had hurt enough, it could not hurt anymore, she was out and that’s all she needed. She felt so much distance from Drala’fa that she was insulated somehow. Liara and Garrus were not. Garrus would have demanded to see her if he could, but now the subjects of ‘demand’ and ‘see’ in relationship to her were both poisoned permanently. He looked like every drop of blood had been drained from him.

She knew that feeling.

We may not have blood but we have bone and can still stand upright. Maybe nothing flows, but
something in us still resists gravity.

Without our hearts, our spines rule.

Russ spoke not a word to her about her return to command. Garrus had informed her that it was done. She had some new crew members to meet. She assumed Russ was again her babysitter and that was fine. He’d lost the Ferox and his crew. Now he’d lost the Normandy. But he hadn’t lost Garrus and Shepard would do her best to make sure every sacrifice Russ made for the greater good had a commensurate if not surpassing sacrifice she would make. She had time to make up for and debts to pay.

She would finally have some privacy and she could close her eyes and even hide under covers if she felt like it, which she would.

She had six months of studying to catch up on, just like after she’d been dead when she’d had two years to catch up on. For now she could hide in her quarters while the storm raged outside.

While she was on the subject of hiding and not admitting to things, she missed the Drell language. She missed Drell food. She missed Drell poetry.

She missed Drell fabric at least in the form of bedding. Everything was scratchy and harsh, the food was terrible.

No, she was not going to tell anyone “Man, do I miss brunch on the estate.”

No.

No she wouldn’t.

For now she was not going to do a thing except educate herself. She was not going to look at the news other than to take in damage at colony sites that were now abandoned.

Garrus had not been happy when she had left him in the Med Bay and not returned. He’d known it was coming, of course. He was not going to be invited up to Commander Shepard’s quarters. He did not attempt to contact her via Omni Tool this time, to her deep relief. She would have played them once, only answered them if they were business related.

Now she was Shepard and a Spectre, would no longer answer to Cara in the same way that she would not answer to Drala’fa. They had both been true, might even remain true in some ways, but she would choose now what to answer to and what not. Garrus’s voice and his heart and his… his everything would always make her heart leap but she’d had six months to process the loss. She’d been chipped but she’d been able to have time alone, time to think, time to plan, time to know. He was just beginning his grieving, a fresh cut on top of her death. A numbing and then killing slice.

I’m so sorry, Garrus.

Russ had recruited some people she couldn’t fathom, people she’d already rejected. Subject Zero – Jack. Criminal. Samara the Justicar – lacking in personal morality, tied to an unexplained code that made Cara very nervous. She did not want these people on her squad. She’d even said so to Spectre Orbestan and he’d countermanded her judgment, which was fine when he was in charge… but he was no longer in charge. Mordin was best suited to the lab, Russ was excellent for field work, but she did not want Jack or Samara… she didn’t… and would never have Garrus… She had Kaidan still, that was a bonus, but she needed better people and fast, now that her mission was further away and the losses piling up, odds turning against her every day.
She paced her quarters, a luxury. She didn’t speak aloud, never would again, but pacing… pacing she could do at no cost. Kinetic expression of her potential will.

Speaking of potential will, she’d suppressed the urge a hundred times but she finally contacted Dr. Itran. She’d set her translator to not filter the Drell language. She wanted to hear it, she wanted to speak it, she wanted to thank the man again and not from a Med Bay bed. She’d done some research on his life and she was more and more convinced that he’d be an asset.

He was the last thing in her world that glowed.

She was used to text and usually would have done that, but she wanted to hear him, wanted to be able to speak Drell.

Months of not being able to talk to anybody except her captor could do that to a person.

“Hello, Dr. Itran? Is this a bad time?”

“Commander Shepard. My time is yours.”

He was glowing… and handsome… and he sounded so good. “Thank you. I wanted to say thank you again. I also wanted to ask if you had reconsidered my offer.”

“You are ever welcome, Commander Shepard.”

“Please call me Lal.”

“I’m certain I could not.”

“I’m certain you could, both in terms of calling me Lal and reconsidering my offer.”

He blinked at her and she smiled. She said “If you will forgive the intrusion. Please. I’m afraid I did some research on your background. You’re not only a medical doctor but you provided counseling for slavery survivors.”

He was silent.

She said “I… am a slavery survivor.”

He said quietly “As am I… Lal.”

Her smile softened from determined to grateful “You’re the only person that knows my circumstances, the only person I feel I could… trust… talk to about it. I… please. It seems it’s not metaphoric that I can’t thank you enough. I don’t seem to be able to thank you enough. My freedom keeps recurring to me as a new thing, a precious thing and I want to give thanks… I feel like hanging up and calling you again and saying it again… and that is obnoxious…”

“Had I been able to tell you that every day for eight years, I would have.”

“Okay, so you do understand. That’s… that’s what I need right now. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to stop saying it. If you could give me your schedule I’ll try not to interrupt too much, just a daily call where I say ‘Thank you for saving my life and my sanity and my purpose’ and then I’ll… wait until I can call you again.”

He almost smiled, almost. Maybe someday she’d get him to smile. He said “If that is the form your affirmation of life wishes to take, I will certainly support that, if you would permit me to give my own thanks.”
“You know, I’ve always found affirmations to be mostly useless except when they aren’t.”

“Perhaps prayer then.”

“I don’t know who to pray to.”

“Then perhaps we will speak to each other. Perhaps I will listen. Perhaps I will understand.”

“That sounds a little crazy, huh?”

“Lal… it is not crazy. If you wish to be heard, if you wish to speak to me, I will be here for you.”

“Would you consider being… here… for me? On the Normandy? I don’t… I don’t want to travel to the Citadel.”

He said solemnly “Of course. Is there anything from the Citadel that I can bring to you? Other than my presence and the willingness to listen to your affirmations that are not affirmations and your prayers that are not prayers, to your words that are useless except when they are not?”

She smiled “You know… I think you can. Do you know of a good Drell bakery?”

“I do.”

“Please, please, please bring me some galifen tarts.”

“As you wish.”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

It took a little while, a day, but Kegirin did show up. She’d authorized his arrival but hadn’t been able to get a commitment on when. She’d… just call him again. Instead he was there, exactly 24 hours after she’d called him. Presenting himself to her cabin he said “Thank you for your invitation. I thought I would spare you calling me.” It wasn’t a smile, exactly, but it was… welcome. He was welcome. She gestured him inside. He brought in two packages. He unpacked galifen tarts and a carafe of silifeh juice. Then he solemnly presented her with a blanket of Drell cloth, soft and warm, the equal of the one he’d set across her lap. It was a shade of green the color of Cara’s eyes.

Then he did smile and said “To replace the one I ruined.”

The one she ruined by bleeding all over it after he’d looked only at her face, after his hand had slid down from her waist to her hip, after his hand had cradled the back of her neck, while he was setting her free. She felt like crying but didn’t. Instead she sat, spread the cloth over her lap with fingertips on the rich fabric, ceremoniously took a tart and a sip of juice and said “I shouldn’t… really, I should not love these so much but there are some things…”

He took his own tart and finished her sentence “Some things we love despite the context. One of my owners took me to Thessia. I’m afraid there I developed some bad habits.” She tilted her head and he said as though reluctant to disclose such a crime “There is a stew. Wheri stew.”

She gasped “You ate meat?”

He shook his head and said sadly “I did, my heritage and guidance lost with one bite.”
She said “Even I don’t eat meat.”

“You are not Drell.”

She laughed “True. It’s possible I also don’t make a very good human. Was the stew worth it?”

“Oh yes. If I were to lose my heritage and guidance in one bowl, that would be the bowl.”

She took another bite of delicate pastry and fruit in a gel texture and nodded “As someone who has lost her own heritage and guidance, I salute you.”

“You do not seem lost.”

“I’m good at seeming.”

“As am I. What did you lose that you miss, but you would not seek again?”

“Hm.” She should lie to him but she didn’t want to. Remembering her parents… remembering Mindoir… Commander Shepard shouldn’t, but Commander Shepard was sick of what she should and shouldn’t remember. She should probably say since her Shepard was sick of what she should not remember it, but instead she said “I miss insulation.” She smiled at the blanket, made sure there was no fruit gel on her fingers and pulled it up higher. She laughed and said “Metaphorical and literal… in the case of the blanket that I would seek and thank you again, it’s lovely. Metaphorical insulation meant that I got to pick and choose what I drew into my heart, what I drew into my reality. I found the beautiful things and some of the shadows of the ugly but that was knowledge, not experience. I could filter and interpret all of my knowledge, categorize and combine…and I loved that so much. I wasn’t even hungry for experience enough to reach for it, I’d imagine going to Thessia or the Citadel but I hadn’t any plans, just dreams. And that’s what they were, dreams. Then I began a phase of my life that was less about knowledge and more about experience. I wasn’t insulated anymore. Life was cold and harsh and lonely. That experience connected me to others that were living with cold and harsh and lonely, all the other people that had lost their insulation, lost their protection. Many who had never had it in the first place. I recognized my blessings. I’m sure I sound like a hypocrite here under a lovely blanket eating pastry… saying that I don’t seek insulation… but I value experience now and can’t go back to who I was. I don’t seek insulation to the extent I once did, not knowing the difference.”

“And what did you lose that you miss and you would seek again?”

“The company of those who know the cold and harsh and lonely.”

“And you wish to insulate them.”

“Yes. I didn’t say it made sense. I’d prefer just enough insulation, just enough experience. Some experiences once gained dictate the pursuit of other experiences.”

“Yes. There is no definite formula for recovery. Some never stumble upon their own. Some require retreat into full insulation and must remain there until they wish to venture out. Some never choose to venture out.”

“I’m going to be venturing. What did you do?”

“I am not certain I have discovered what my formula for recovery would ultimately be. I was trained while I was captive. I was trained to be a medic. I was trained as a bodyguard. I was trained for pleasure. I had several owners over a series of years, some who treated me well, some who did not. I have tried to take what positive gains I could take with me. I can listen. I can fight. I can protect. My
other training I found not as useful in recovery. I extended training as a medic to training as a doctor. I extended training as a bodyguard to training in combat. I attempted to learn to apply what I could reclaim as my own, separating as you would define them, pure knowledge from pure experience. In the end however, I am not a self-made man, and I cling to my training as a medic because it cost me years of my life, I cling to being a doctor as an extension. I cling to much of my training because to abandon it… would be to abandon the man who suffered. I wish to reach back into the past and reassure that man that what he endured was worth it.”

She said softly “But it wasn’t.”

“No, it was not. But what remains is that I did not abandon myself. I carry that man each day. To set aside healing… would be to set aside healing. Some people embrace healing as a calling because they wish to reach out and save others. I embraced healing as something selfish. If I spend enough time, enough experience helping and healing, perhaps I will one day be helped and healed.”

“You sound like you don’t think you will be.”

“I was a broken man in many ways. I am still, in many ways. Different ways, ways that I did not anticipate and could not halt. Perhaps I carry my suffering and those of others in the way you speak of experience connecting you to others. In my case, I fear it is more selfish and I connect in most cases to myself and not to others.”

“I feel I should apologize for… uh… pressuring you to connect.”

“Please do not. I feel I should apologize for being so very bad at it.”

“Please do not.”

“We have established that I am a terrible counselor and you have no intention of enacting any of the advice that I may potentially give you as your course of action and trajectory of your life is already determined.”

“Basically, yes.”

“Acceptable.”

“There’s juice.”

“But no stew.”

“I can fix that.”

“You do not wish to travel to the Citadel.”

“I could have them deliver.”

“I should not have told you.”

“Too late now.”

“I have not reconsidered your offer to serve as crew, I am afraid.”

“You should.”

“I am a terrible counselor, I would make an equally ineffective… whatever you intend.”
“You don’t know what I intend.”

“Forgive me, perhaps I do. I believe it is entirely possible that you will contact me each day and ask me if I have yet changed my mind.”

“Will that work?”

“You do not ask if it would be a good thing to have it work.”

“I have faith.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re the person who walked into a room that I was in and decided you would help me.”

He smiled, a real smile, and he said “And if I regret that decision, Lal?”

“Too late now.”

“As I suspected.”

“You should really stay on board the Normandy.”

“I must decline.”

“Must? Why?”

“First and foremost, Commander Shepard…”

“Lal.”

“Commander Shepard… the risks of death in your presence are very high.”

“Are you afraid of dying?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Perhaps not, but nor do I seek it full tilt.”

“Maybe half tilt? What if I offer you a half tilt position?”

He laughed and she laughed with him. He shook his head and said “I am not asking you what a half tilt position is.”

“Sounds kinda dirty now that I think about it.”

“You should cease thinking about it.”

“I don’t think I’m going to. Quarter tilt?”

“No, thank you.”

“I’ve got no zero tilt positions available.”

“Excellent, I will not accept one of those either.”
“What do you want to do with your life, Kegirin?”

“That is no longer my name.”

“What is your new name?”

“I do not believe I am going to tell you.”

“I’m a Spectre, I can find out. You didn’t answer what it was you wanted to do with your life, whatever your name is.”

“My new name is Varin.”

“Varin what?”

“Varin Celetis.”

“That sounds suspiciously Turian.”

“I thought so myself, but apparently it is of Drell origin. In any case, I can retain Rin. That is what I was most often called in my life.”

“May I call you Rin?”

“Yes, you may.”

“All right then. Rin, what do you want to do with your life?”

“I believe ‘be insulated’ would be an acceptable response.”

“Want the blanket back?”

“No, Lal. It is yours.”

“Want a bowl of stew?”

“Yes. But I would not eat it.”

“So I know what you don’t want to do with your life. You long for stew you can’t eat.”

“It is perhaps a tired and common narrative.”

She didn’t think he was tired or common. “You sure you won’t just surprise me and say yes? I’ve got a lot of stuff to do, Rin. Important stuff, I can’t be chasing after a reluctant Drell every day.”

“I am relieved to hear it.”

“That doesn’t mean I won’t.”

“That is flattering and unfortunate.”

“I’m going to go with flattering. Here’s my bottom line. Teasing aside, I found your observational skills, problem solving skills, resolve and execution to be admirable and something I could use on my side, which is selfish, I know, but I ask people to die for me a lot.”

“How many of them tell you no?”
“See, that’s the thing, you’re my first. Everyone else says yes.”

“Then ask them, Lal.”

“I don’t necessarily find their observational skills, problem solving skills, resolve and execution to be up to my standards. If it is resolve you’re lacking, I’ve got plenty of that.”

“I do not believe I needed to be told that.”

“Oh, right. Repetitive human. I apologize.”

He smiled “Do not, Lal, the fault is in me, not in you.”

“Self preservation is not a fault.”

“It is not self preservation.”

“Then what?”

“I do not believe I am going to tell you.”

“Man of mystery?”

“Man of not self preservation.”

“Tell you what. I’ll stop asking. Come back tomorrow? Please?”

“I am free to go?”

“Yes, Rin. You’ll always be free to go. Just consider being free to stay. I told you I was lonely, that I needed someone to talk to. You’ve been that person for today. Will you be that person for tomorrow?”

“I would be honored.”

“Thank you.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Under the ruins of a walled city,
crumbling towers in beams of yellow light.
No flags of truce, no cries of pity.
The siege guns had been pounding through the night.
It took a day to build the city.
We walked through its streets in the afternoon.
As I returned across the fields I'd known
I recognized the walls that I'd once made.
I had to stop in my tracks for fear
of walking on the mines I'd laid.
And if I've built this fortress around your heart,
encircled you in trenches and barbed wire,
then let me build a bridge
for I cannot fill the chasm.

Let me set the battlements on fire.

Then I went off to fight some battle
that I'd invented inside my head.
Away so long for years and years
you probably thought or even wished that I was dead.
While the armies all are sleeping
beneath the tattered flag we'd made
I had to stop in my tracks for fear
of walking on the mines I'd laid.

And if I've built this fortress around your heart,
encircled you in trenches and barbed wire
then let me build a bridge
for I cannot fill the chasm.

Let me set the battlements on fire.

This prison has now become your home.
A sentence you seem prepared to pay.
It took a day to build the city.
We walked through its streets in the afternoon.
As I returned across the lands I'd known
I recognized the fields where I'd once played.
I had to stop in my tracks for fear
of walking on the mines I'd laid.

And if I've built this fortress around your heart,
encircled you in trenches and barbed wire
then let me build a bridge
for I cannot fill the chasm.

Let me set the battlements on fire.
Rin observed her. Some things remained ever the same, the way she wanted them.

She studied.

He returned day after day, bearing gifts she needed; food and wisdom, company and reluctant but genuine humor and a depth of solemnity she craved. It calmed her and set free her thoughts. They flew off her like sparks, things she couldn’t grasp one by one due to their speed of genesis. They were set in his steady firmament like stars, and they could form constellations of them, patterns, and he could give them context.

Not too much context.

He was in fact an excellent counselor, self deprecating and modest. Effective in setting her at ease. Like the blanket, his presence was a comfort she sought.

It was an expensive blanket bought with the money Vakarian had been gracious enough to provide him with as part of his new identity. He was now a gentleman of independent means, the Council having granted him a fraction of a percentage point of his overall if presently inaccessible financial worth. In perspective considering what he was buying he counted it as generous.

He could not seek out his usual purveyors of the highest quality cloth in all cases but the blanket was an exception.

It was, as Vakarian had stated, a team effort.

The blanket was a talisman she adopted, always near her, the color of her stolen eyes. The first tangible and persistent symbol of him giving her what she had not known she had wanted. Her fingertips stroked along the fabric as she thought, as she talked, as he watched but did not focus on her hands. He imagined she slept wrapped in it. It moved around the cabin with her, the only bright patch of color other than the fish tank.

He also brought her fish and fed them.

Sheets and pillow covers and other blankets would follow, in black to highlight her skin.

The sea green Drell cloth blanket she cherished that had been bought with the Councilor’s money would always be a treasured memory of his and hopefully hers. He believed they would sleep wrapped in it, wrapped in each other, her fingers along his skin when he would be able to focus on her hands, her mouth, the way she arched off the bed, her shoulders and hips pressed down into green cloth, his hands in her hair.

He brought her tangible but not talisman in other forms. Small things. Food she enjoyed, subjects that fascinated her, someone perceptive and attentive to anchor her processing. She turned toward discussing Collectors and mission, where to go next, what to do. She spent the day in research and breathed out the essence of what she had taken in at night. Conversation with her was like holding the string to an exclusive kite she put solemnly in his hands.

She had, as he had known she would, only stopped asking him to join for that day only. She
persisted and he deferred, but she was not anxious. She knew she would succeed.

He knew she would succeed.

Her path to success presented itself one week after her standing invitation/order to visit. He always arrived on time, did not make her chase him overmuch. Enough for her to know she was chasing and wearing him down. He held the slightly stunned and star struck expression of a man holding a treasured kite that nonetheless threatened to pull him off the ground.

Abruptly she asked him “You said you’re trained in combat. Would you be willing to demonstrate?”

His brow ridge raised. He asked suspiciously and skeptically “You wish for me to demonstrate my combat skills to Commander Shepard?”

“No, nothing like that. Okay, yes, exactly like that, but my name’s Lal.”

“What does everyone on the ship call you?”

“Commander Shepard.”

“I am on the ship.”

“You’re special.”

“I am concerned.”

“Good. That means you’re paying attention. Come on. I’m going to voluntarily leave my room. This is an event.”

There was a gym on board, and she led him to it. Spectre Orbestan was the only one in attendance. He was silent, impassive, nodded a greeting but otherwise ignored them, continued with his workout, a combination of impressive biotics and combat on several beleaguered and reinforced dummies surrounding him.

This demonstration would be potentially problematic. Not impossibly so, but still a concern. For both of them.

Cara had been trained by her mother in martial arts, a distinct style. A style she concealed to avoid being asked where she had learned it.

Senar had been trained in eighteen different styles, all of which he could adopt in isolated or blended fashion. Thane Krios had sought out fifteen other disciplines.

The difficulty of physical demonstration compared to verbal demonstration of personality was that he had instincts, and he had developed those instincts to behave as muscle memory. The body of an assassin should move on its own, a separate entity from the logical mind given enough experience and training to move without thought, flow to the next right action like water following the path of gravity.

He would not benefit much in this case from Drell memory. He could remember which style did exactly what, isolate and present them, just as he was able to isolate and present facts, opinion and shading during conversation.

There the comparison and advantage ended. Conversation moved much more slowly than combat. One could always pause, craft, hedge, stall with words. In combat, there were of course feints and
ruses, but he would need to craft a style that embodied feint and ruse while being still effective. His instincts were problematic, as was his innate style that would assert itself as the most efficient in actual combat if not practice spar. He was grateful now that he had not required that she watch his daily training routines.

Several things defied the mechanics and expectations of hypnosis. So many things could confound his priming and preparation. Deep things, things unreachable, unaffected by words. Irrevocable symbols. He could tell her to forget the sun, but should the sun appear, should she have no word for it, it could resonate with all her prior experiences of ‘sun’ and speak to her in warmth, in the way her skin reacted to its presence, memories potentially vibrating with resonance, giving her the feeling of familiarity with something that should be unknown.

He had not been trained in, had not been intended to be able to control a person for potentially years on end, a person asked to forget what was most obvious and un-concealable in another.

It was beyond arrogant to think he could do it.

Just as it was beyond arrogant to think she could destroy Reapers.

They would both need to make arrogance true and not true.

It was part of his choice to not bring her vanisfruit perfume ever again, a sacrifice as it was the most fitting scent for her. To invoke scent was a deeply powerful thing, tied to memories and experiences directly, to Thane Krios and Senar in ways he needed to suppress.

Once Rin became familiar to her many of her memories could blur into familiarity and be less existentially jarring, but he could not afford to alert her to the myriad suppressed memories that could add up to mistrust, undefined and prickling. Trust was something he did not know, something he did not recognize, something he had to induce in others without the experience of it himself and he had no way of testing whether or not she had the stores of manufactured trust that he had wished to create in her to carry her through doubt and forced circumstance. He was in essence a chef creating a meal from an untested recipe for someone with ingredients to which he was allergic and could not, would not taste himself.

His most common instinct was ‘this is not going to work because it would not work on me.’ Not a single bite of trust would pass his lips.

Would it work on her?

This was all something new, something arrogant, something untested. He had never asked someone to trust him with so much of themselves for so long. He had never attempted to be someone trustworthy for such a long time.

She was entirely capable of learning to adapt to all his preparation and confound it, and this could be her path to it. Before his reinforcing venom or words sank into her skin and her mind, if her body impacted his in combat, a body she knew so well through sex and even combative sex, she could recognize him. It could begin as a doubt, a question, an instinct she would not understand. She might learn to avoid rather than seek him, to seek solving that mystery.

To ask Liara to help her.

A breath of vanisfruit, a whispered voice, an evocative touch or seeing in Rin something that was irrevocably tied to Thane Krios in manner or movement could be a lightning bolt that would sever the carefully built web of obscurity, drop the veil.
There was no way forward other than through. He needed to be a squad member and not merely a
counselor and confidante and he needed to earn that.

It had been a serendipitous thing that he had not compelled her to fight or show him what Shepard
was like in combat. He had not needed to prove himself to her. It had been true that he had never
considered once asking her to do anything for him in a tactical sense other than advise him.

He had wondered if he could convince her to stay on the ship and allow him to conduct away
missions but that was unlikely and he would not try. He needed her to advise in each moment, she
needed him to execute in each moment and they would be a team, take commensurate risks toward
the shared goal.

From her own impression of herself, her tactical capacity was her strength and he agreed. She was
capable at hand to hand, had an advantage from her mother’s training, but she was not a master and
was at some disadvantage even from that limited position due to deconditioning and loss of her
implants.

He was a master but needed to appear merely capable.

Just capable enough.

More capable than she was.

Biotics were a concern, something visceral and distinct. His biotics had been felt along her body
uncounted times. He could not change their color, sound or frequency and he never had managed to
control the patches that covered his skin and spine when she was near, any more than she had
learned to control her blush.

Because they were deep things, things unreachable, unaffected by words. Irrevocable symbols.

His solution had been to guide her toward wanting biotics on her skin while convincing her that
Thane Krios had not been a biotic.

He had primed her to want him for his biotics, something new, not something she recalled.

He recalled. He touched the memories only, full immersion might make sympathetic color hum and
patch his skin, reach for her.

He hadn’t allowed her to exercise in order to maintain what muscle she had built in the Alliance. She
had begun her stay with him small and toned, had remained small and had softened under his hands.
He had never known her with the enhanced strength, protection and reflexes the implants had
provided.

He had seen enough surveillance and footage of missions that he accepted her as competent but not
gifted.

To induce biotic trance he did not call her Drala’fa, she could not have a name. He could not be
Senar. They must both be nameless, the biotics the focus, what she could expect to get from them in
terms of promised and delivered pleasure her motivation to seek them out.

He had broken himself down into a set of unnamed traits, traits she would be primed to seek out on
their own regardless of the identity of the man who bore them. His biotics were distinct enough that
he did not fear her finding another person with the same style. Each trait he induced her to seek was
distinct to him. His venom. His biotics. His voice. The way his hands moved on her body.
The potential pleasure from venom, biotics, hands and words had been demonstrated, aided by his knowledge of her. Venom, hands and biotics were easy. Voice was difficult for many reasons. She was literal and opinionated, loyal and emphatic. He had to bypass that, resort to crafted poetry, Drell poetry of calculated stanza and meter.

If he told her she would meet a man…

She would insist she wanted only him.

That was a lovely sentiment and it would be true, but her resistance to change was not helpful to the end goal. It resulted in provoking her argumentative loyalty, not trance.

In many ways her insistence on truth and fact reordered his priming, changed its direction unpredictably to reinforce her own will, and he had been progressively challenged to prepare her for the bizarre coming of the veiled unknown by her insistence upon sense and telling him she would not lose him, would not leave him, don’t speak of such things.

Endearing and rewarding she was, but cooperative to his priming she was not, her capacity to learn and insist making the process more treacherous, two steps forward, three steps back as she would not allow herself to be led away from him. She insisted Senar would not leave, she would not leave.

She’d be anxious and ask him if he wanted her to go, she did not want to, but she wanted him to be happy…

Of course he could not tell her that he wished her to go, that he had plans to, and more often than not he was then lost in hours of reassuring her with his body, with his voice, with pleasure wrung from her along with sweat and exhaustion, that it would not be so. She would be tied more deeply to Senar, reinforced that her protests brought reassurance and results.

He would have several blissful hours indulging in his Drala’fa and then the reality that time grew short and he must find a way.

He wished to call her beloved and Drala’fa in the face of her stubborn holding of the name Senar when he wished her to let him go. When those words rushed to his lips as biotics rushed to his skin he held them back, one word held back to keep a promise to her, however tangential. He did not love her but beloved was an endearment with the potential of Drala’fa in irony. He did not say it, though the restriction chafed. Her given ironic name was held back to sever her ties to remembering who Drala’fa was, who she had been.

So he could not and did not address her changing identity or his, only drew her attention to what must remain the same.

He had found no new name for her, maintained a clearing where her new name would grow in time.

His biotics had a distinct hum and he made sure she heard them, his hands cupping the back of her head or her throat as they sounded for her.

He could not ask her to think of another man, of wanting someone else, she would not allow it. Through seeking what worked he found words “You are She and I am He and we will feel like this together, always together. If parted, seeking. She will know He through the sound, from this sight, from hands on skin and venom, only and ever this.”

True and not true, arrogance and humility, poetry and potential fate. Also potential failure, her slippery and stubborn in equal parts twisting and turning or remaining unmoved, resulting in the exhaustion of their final months.
There were combat biotics and biotics for pleasure and she had felt both from his body. He restricted the biotics to the ones of the character he knew he could not suppress. Humming and arcs of force, desirous and reaching in their nature, uncontrolled at times but also reproducible around her easily. Always leaping toward her. There was night after night of darkness except for blue biotics that hummed over his skin and his hands, his lips, racing along nerves and backlighting bones.

Every part of her was imbued with blue light, the pacing and stages of her giving way to poetry, associations of the electrical and the liquid. He spoke with Kegirin’s voice but not his name, fluid identity. Biotics on her skin and venom in her blood, entranced by blue, whispers of seeking blue and red and violet, which could be Drala’fa’s eyes or Kegirin’s skin, signposts that pointed a direction but no name she could push back against as unreal and unwanted. He’d wait until she lost the ability to speak, lost her grip on the names of things, the names of people. Not merely venom trance, because that could wear off, fade. This had to stay on her bones like blue fire, like a pleasure-soaked brand that glowed, that she could see and feel in the dark. A place she could find when her mind sought the spectrum of pleasure and found at the high mark “THIS” and could not describe it but it was a measure set, a familiar landscape.

He had driven her to unconsciousness many times, for fun, for the experience, for the pleasure of doing it, often with intentional force. Now he drove her there not for his sake but for hers, only to find out it had been for her sake all along and it had been one more thing she had taken as her own. Something she enjoyed. Whatever extremity of passion he created, she embraced, something he could not fathom and she could not explain but was true regardless of logic.

A deep thing, something unreachable, unaffected by words. An irrevocable symbol she linked to him.

She had tried to explain by saying “It’s like a sunset.”

“You make no sense, Drala’fa, as is often the case.”

“No, it’s like a sunset. It’s… out there. Separate from me. When you’re out of control…”

“I am not out of control.” His voice was mock hurt and censorious. They both knew they were out of control in turns or in tandem, reliably and often. Lack of control could be provoked on purpose by either of them through the caprice of whatever whim gripped them. Lack of control could be innate and unprovoked, the difference between inhale and exhale.

“Yes, you are. You know it. Stop arguing.”

“Never.”

“It’s like an argumentative sunset.” He had laughed and kissed her brow. “No, listen, really. You want to know… I’m trying to tell you.”

“I shall try to listen.”

“When you are out of control… and you are… and don’t deny it.”

“I shall not confirm it.”

“I’m shocked. Anyway. When one of us is aware that you are obviously out of control… it is like a sunset… or a thunderstorm… something to behold.”

“With your face pressed into the pillow I refuse to believe you can see anything at all, your eyes closed and the sounds you make…”
“It isn’t positionally sensitive.”

“Unlike you.”

“Glass houses.”

“What?”

“Never mind. Anyway… it’s something elemental. Something powerful. Something that’s separate from me…”

“If it were separate from you we would not be having this conversation.”

“We’re barely having this conversation now. Shush.”

“Proceed.”

“I can’t make a sunset, but it happens. It’s beautiful. I can’t make a thunderstorm, but it happens. It’s beautiful. I can’t… I don’t… make you feel the way you do… or sometimes I do and sometimes you do and sometimes even if you don’t want to, it happens. You touch me but you don’t always lose control. Something in your mind, something in your body changes and you’re elemental. Even with my face pressed into a pillow… I can feel the heat on my skin or hear thunder.”

“I am not certain I like the comparison. Sunsets are predictable, sedate and only occur once a day.”

She laughed “Well, you’re predictable in effect if not schedule.”

“I would prefer some other sort of phenomena, possibly a natural disaster.”

“Don’t worry, you’re a natural disaster.”

“I do not like your tone.”

“Yes you do.”

“Can I bargain my way to being compared to a tornado?”

“No, that I wouldn’t survive.”

“That would be… positionally sensitive?”

“So to speak.”

“You don’t fear that I will harm you?”

“No. Thus… sunset. How about a meteor shower? I can offer you an upgrade to meteor shower if that works for you.”

“Now you are insulting me deliberately. I wish for a meteor shower that will at least end an epoch and I believe you are describing pretty lights in the sky. I do not like your explanation.”

“I did not make the world, I just explain it.”

“Badly. Someone needs her face pressed into a pillow more often so she can describe it better.”

“Like that wasn’t going to happen anyway.”
When she described how she felt after hours of biotics, she had told him “aurora borealis.”

She had been unable to describe an aurora borealis clearly, but he had found pictures on his Omni Tool.

Still pretty lights in the sky.

He had also researched ‘glass houses’ and had laughed. He was indeed positionally sensitive in direct relationship to proximity to her.

He considered calling her Aurora, it sounded almost Drell.

He came fully present, the tangential chain of memories fading after changing into workout clothing and meeting back on the mat. He had been given standard workout fatigues and he wore them with unexpressed distaste.

Spectre Orbestan stopped his workout and prepared to watch, not curious but attentive.

Watch what would depend upon Lal Shepard’s whims at the moment. There was much to consider. He must be better than she was, but by how much? The answer lay in the fact that Kegirin Itran had apparently been a slave that had been a bodyguard. That was years of experience, years of training, and Drell were excellent students. He must gauge her ability, blunt his own, yet still exceed a certain standard and be considered elite without displaying styles he should have had no access to learning as a slave. Yet he had spent eight years extending that training and might have encountered them independently. Drell assassins were rare, but they were known, particularly to Spectres and the elite. He must avoid parallels. His venom must not be sampled or questioned. He must unquestionably qualify for squad work, enough to justify being favored exclusively.

So enough, Drala’fa, to press your face into the mat, make you feel the heat on your skin, see the aurora and not invoke a tornado.

He would be pretty lights in the sky and she must land sprawling at least once. Then he could adjust to her, obviously appear to adjust to her, and she could suspect he was holding back.

She said “Best two out of three?”

His eyes narrowed, that phrasing making no sense. “My pardon, I do not understand.”

“Three matches, match ending at a fall, whoever gets two wins.”

So two matches. “As you wish, Commander Shepard.”

She smiled and said “Lal.”

“No.”

She smiled wider. “No hits to the face, no disabling or maiming.”

“Commander Shepard, I would do none of those things during a spar even if directed to do so.”

“Lal.”

“No.”

She circled, and this was obligatory. She must have the opportunity to observe him. He matched her speed. It had been years since he had trained with anybody else, but she was not difficult to read or
adjust to as an opponent. He had to slow consciously. He made movements fluid but utilitarian, without obvious menace or overlay of intimidation. He stripped some training from his carriage, limited his extension, altered critical angles of footwork by varying degrees, blurred some of his precision and gave himself a more awkward center of gravity, altering how he landed on his feet. He allowed her to close the distance, his reach beyond hers. He believed time as Drala’fa had added poise to her movements, grace she had not possessed prior. She was nafisi. That applied to walking and granted some grace to her combat carriage, but she was still standard Alliance trained with an underpinning of the balance and form she had learned from her mother. She was potentially unexceptional in a spar and he believed that in order to show a decent capacity for combat, she must be essentially crushed.

My apologies, Drala’fa. I cannot bemoan your lack of physical prowess in a spar. I value you for other reasons. I believe this is the conclusion you have come to about yourself and therefore we are of like mind on the subject and you will not begrudge your crushing.

He had studied her leading up to capturing her, and made a study of her each day since. There were few physical mysteries about this woman he had not categorized and tested.

There was no real reason to draw it out. Her first reach for him ended with him pulling her much smaller frame off what was decent but unexceptional balance, a controlled pull beginning with her forearm and with no need for any follow up at hip or knee. There was no real point to belaboring that she was much smaller. She went sprawling easily. His arm went around her waist as her hands moved to break her fall. Fortunately she did it with enough training that she would not have landed painfully or injured herself, but he still halted her fall with his arm and delivered her to the ground with an exaggerated slide. He slid his arm out as she moved forward, sparing her knees even though there was a mat. He enjoyed leaving his hand on her stomach, allowing a slight vibration of biotics under his skin, along his arm, something she should feel, hear, sense slightly.

She looked up at him, laughed and said “One.”

He offered her a hand and she took it. He pulled her up and she took the same position, attempted the same circle, danced around uselessly until he smiled at her for stalling. He waited until she tried again, this time she feinted at his arm but lunged for his knees. They would not cooperate with her ambitions. He stepped back, which could have dragged her forward sprawling again, but rather than do the same thing, he picked her up by the waist, breaking her attempted hold on his knees, flipped her body at the waist and placed her back gently on the mat on her back, a hand behind her head and one remaining at her waist. Once it was clear she was down he kneeled next to her and smiled.

She smiled back and said “Two. I am ordering you to stay on board the Normandy.”

His hand under her waist was humming with involuntary biotics as he said “No.”

“Then I’m asking you nicely.”

“Yes, Lal. I will stay.”
A song for Russ.

Guess I wasn't the best one to ask.
Me myself with my face pressed up against love's glass.
To see the shiny toy I've been hoping for,
the one I never can afford.
The wide world spins and spits turmoil
and the nations toil for peace.
The claws of fear upon your chest,
only love can soothe that beast.
And my words are paper tigers
no match for the predator of pain inside her.

I say love will come to you.
Hoping just because I spoke the words that they're true.
As if I'd offered up a crystal ball to look through
that where there's now one there will be two.

I was born under the sign of cancer.
Like brushing cloth, I smooth the wrinkles for an answer.
I'm always closing my eyes and wishing I'm fine.
Even though I know I'm not this time.

And I say love will come to you.
Hoping just because I spoke the words that they're true.
As if I'd offered up a crystal ball to look through
that where there's now one there will be two.

Dodging your memories
in a field of knives.
Always on the outside looking in on other's lives.

I say love will come to you.
Hoping just because I spoke the words that they're true.
As if I'd offered up a crystal ball to look through
that where there's now one there will be two.

And I wish her insight to battle love's blindness.
Strength from the milk of human kindness.
A safe place for all the pieces that scattered.
Learn to pretend there's more than love that matters.

Indigo Girls – “Love Will Come To You”

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++
Russ was beginning to miss the days where he’d only had alienation and headaches to manage. Shepard was back and he still had every doubt he’d earned about her, add in six months of Garrus going crazy, add in Liara unable to speak. Add in that all Russ had to show for his time in charge on the Normandy was the loss of his Ferox and her crew, the loss of his authority.

He recalled Shepard’s pressed lips and tight nod when informed that her crew included Samara and Jack, as though she knew enough to predict and project his lapses in judgment. He couldn’t argue. His command had resulted in nothing. Granted a lot of that time was spent looking for her. Garrus wouldn’t have had it any other way. Everyone was sure that had Shepard been in charge for those six months the Collectors would be beaten by now.

Not that they’d say that to Russ’s face, it just showed on their faces when they talked to her, about her.

As for Shepard herself, she was just as committed to keeping her crew ignorant as she ever had been, and Russ was no longer Commander but Spectre in residence.

Maybe it was karma. He’d had all the information she’d had, the right to demand information from anybody, they’d given it, and he’d gotten… nothing done.

He’d moved out of the Commander’s quarters without being asked. He’d found a quiet hole and stayed in it, moving from gym to mess to hole.

He doubted she’d consult him and he doubted Garrus would ever stop asking questions about her and it took a lot of energy to keep his face straight and calm, relay over and over that Shepard did not inform him of whatever it was Garrus wanted to know.

I haven’t seen her but I bet she’s doing what she always did, she’s preparing for the next mission.

She doesn’t let me know her plans.

I don’t know how much longer we’re going to be in port.

Garrus could not stop asking and Russ could not stop answering.

The only progress they’d made on the mission since she had been taken was that they definitely had the seeker swarm counteragent. But that was Mordin’s accomplishment. Someone Shepard had recruited, a mission she’d given him. Not Russ’s area.

Russ probably would have gotten Mordin killed in a stampeding evacuation on Omega. That outcome was more in keeping with his recent command style.

Send him after slavers or mercs and he was good. Send him after… Collectors… and people got Collected. Send him after Reapers and people got Reaped.

A lot of his frustrated energy about her command had bled down to nothing. He wanted her back in command. Or… really he wanted someone else who was sane and he could make sense of, but that wasn’t on the menu. He’d tried it his way. He had not succeeded. Made him crazy to think of following her cold, insane, lying ass somewhere again… but if someone died it would be on her, not on him. That was so fucking cowardly he couldn’t really stand himself moment to moment.

He just knew this wasn’t his fight, any more than he’d be competent if they asked him to create a Drell ceremonial sand web.

Not disqualified exactly, but unqualified.
He was nostalgic for the days of blinding pain because if he’d died around age 15 then he wouldn’t have been the cause of so much tangential death or failure in the form of the Ferox, in the form of Trireme happening on his watch, in the form of not having a damned clue of what to do next.

The galaxy was a huge place and he had no way of predicting where the Collectors would be next, didn’t trust Cerberus when they tried to tell him they knew. The Geth ambush that had taken the Ferox had been in pursuit of a Cerberus lead on Geth. Well, they’d definitely found them. He still didn’t know if it was an intentional trap, just knew he would not be taking intelligence from Cerberus sources. Lawson was only still on the ship because she’d held out hope that Shepard would be back. He knew where Collectors had been, but surveying those locations only wasted their time, trying to examine the dust for evidence that was not there.

All they’d found was ignorance and desperation and they had ballast aplenty of that to begin with, couldn’t jettison it fast enough before it reformed, denser and taking up more space.

No leads, no successes, just a long string of work he wasn’t good at doing. Her work. Work Garrus demanded Russ watch or take on as a placeholder. It was the reverse of bare faced, which was no right to say he had a home. Now he had a home and no right to say ‘I do not belong here.’

Of course you don’t belong, she belongs, and just as Garrus wanted, now she was back and in place and it was thanks to Russ’s fucking suffering over the last six months. Let’s call it ‘loyalty’, shall we? Dress it up a bit? Garrus was grateful. Not sure that made it worse or better, but…

Made it better. Garrus being disappointed in him would be…

Fuck.

Garrus had been there for him after the Ferox went down, both quiet and grieving. Garrus had listened to Russ’s stories, not a word about Shepard. Garrus had assured him it wasn’t his fault, toasted to the lost, talked about Russ’s successes and projected more in the future.

Russ was a bright hope in Garrus’s heart.

Right.

What the fuck to tell Garrus about the Drell that had rescued her?

“They look like they’re having fun?”

Not that.

Fuck.

Russ had stayed out of it, did not want to know, but it was impossible to miss the cultural paradigm shift and phenomena of ‘Shepard Seraglio’ in the outside world and impossible to miss the Drell’s presence in the inside of the ship.

Russ had sympathy for her about the public spectacle, about her captivity. He did. He had been horrified. He was… horrified. He wished he could detach from it like she seemed to be able to do. His heart went out to her just because she was a person and this had happened to her. To know that Garrus was watching every feed, every interview while Russ was trying to step out of the way of the unending fascination with her now perfect face, the face she wouldn’t change, the face she wouldn’t try to deny…
Just one more decision he did not understand and could not explain to Garrus and Garrus didn’t explain to him because he didn’t ask.

He’d prefer not having to know. He’d prefer to not have to see Garrus wonder why.

None of this shit made any sense to him.

Shepard had filed a statement to try to attempt to help the news cycle move on, end the obsession, let the Councilors deal with other questions and refer back to the Commander’s answers in her own words so they would not be asked to speculate or speak for her.

She hadn’t recorded the statement, but had prepared a written report. It had been read by serious news broadcasters. It had been read by female human performers in pasties or ribbons, either intact or rewritten for more comedic or pornographic effect. The statement was now notorious for its bloodless acceptance of something… that should not be bloodless. It had helped create porn categories that began with a black screen and a soft and steady voice over, fading into scenes of small human women and Drell captors.

“Six months ago I was taken from Illium. I was held captive on a Beckenstein estate by a Drell named Thane Krios. I was kept under the influence of a control chip. I do not remember my time spent there clearly. I underwent surgery that altered my appearance. There are several witnesses to my captivity, estate staff and guests. I am barely a witness to my own captivity as I did not have my mind available to me. I cannot confirm or deny their accounts with any authority. I did not speak to anyone other than my captor, and I do not recall what was said by either of us. I was lucky enough to be rescued by someone who recognized me and arranged for Council support in my extraction. If anyone has any information regarding Thane Krios, please contact the task group set up by the Council on that subject. The subject of slavery has impacted my life every day since I was sixteen years old. I have dedicated my career to ending it. There are so many people in bondage who are faceless, voiceless, and unprotected. Please help me end the practice of keeping people as things, as servants, as slaves. To the people that risked their lives and resources to rescue me, you are my heroes. To those who can do something about slavery, please value each person’s life, whoever they are, highly enough to exalt and not denigrate their existence. We all face a challenge in our present and our near future, one I turn to now. For those who wonder what it would be like to be a slave, the next few years will give all of us that answer if we do not change it. Help me lift others from bondage, from indoctrination in all its forms, and forge a better future. For those who promote slavery, I have always opposed you and I always will. To those who consider Beckenstein an unassailable harbor for slavery, you are wrong. To those seeking work, do not consider Beckenstein as a destination. Join instead the fight against Collectors, Reapers, any agent by any name that intends to enslave and extinguish. Thank you.”

At least Shepard hadn’t turned the Normandy straight to Beckenstein and started firing. Russ wasn’t sure he would have been able to restrain himself had he been in her… shoes. Which he knew from testimony she hadn’t had. She had always been seen in bare feet. He really wished he didn’t know that.

Russ felt guilty for so many things, his main experience of his current life. He felt guilty because Urdnot Wrex held him responsible for her disappearance of all things. It was bullshit and Russ knew it, but he still felt it. He felt guilty that he’d recruited people she hadn’t wanted. He had not thought they were ever going to find her. And they hadn’t. Without Itran… Celetis… finding her, they never would have. The improbable saved her. He felt guilty for not telling Garrus that Celetis and Shepard were sparring, that Celetis was Spirits-dammed good at it and that she clearly had time in her schedule to talk to somebody… if that somebody was Drell.
That Celetis was now crew.

Russ had always been included in the video conferences involving rescuing Shepard, and Russ wished he’d get dropped out of it. He heard way too much about everything in Liara’s choked and pained voice, Garrus’s vengeful and determined voice relaying more testimony.

The estate had priceless artifacts, some on public display, some kept private. Liara had negotiated their removal and return to appropriate cultural conservators, getting Beckenstein to cave on that. She had been smart, which was a synonym for ‘Liara.’ She had told Beckenstein that provenance could not be established, there were no technical records, she had them listed as replicas out for appraisal to their cultural ancestors.

The management of Beckenstein had few choices there, or they could have all the publicity they were getting on top of being accused of knowing the artifacts were there as well as Shepard being there and doing nothing about it.

They conceded they must of course be replicas, and she could do with them as she chose. For a fee, a ridiculous fee, which she paid as she had all the other ridiculous fees, the total of their investigation having cost the Shadow Broker approximately 20 million credits.

She gave the running total to Garrus when he asked but said it didn’t matter, she could pay it.

Yeah, she could, but that money could be much better spent, and she was buying things Liara herself couldn’t use, artifacts for museums and wobbly and unreliable testimony and no physical evidence or technical leads. She gathered testimony from staff, some of whom had accepted protective custody but then fled or disappeared before or after establishing an alternate identity.

No sign of Thane Krios. Everyone knew exactly what he looked like now though. There hadn’t been any pictures or surveillance, only a file from 20+ years ago with that name attached of someone’s green arm and part of his face. There had been… so many drawings… and then those spawned vid models…

The estate was virtually clean of forensics, the only DNA they found were staff that had been there up to two days before the rescue, Shepard’s and Dr. Itran’s.

Garrus had run everything on Itran he could find, including a DNA sample. Quiet guy, sporadic medical practice, not many friends. Those friends were hustled through reassignment, many of whom had left the Citadel to resettle in far-flung Drell colonies. Most were more outraged… genteelly, in a Drell way… that they were at risk because of a tangential acquaintance, but once Thane Krios’s name had hit the news cycle they became more polite about potential transition and everyone accepted with grace and alacrity being moved off the Citadel. Itran had not asked to contact any of them, had only asked if they were safe. He was at least realistic about the fact that his prior life was absolutely over without a doubt and he was a target.

From staff testimony, the room Itran had rescued her from was monitored, but not by staff. She had been recorded and the feed sent to Krios, directly to his Omni Tool. Garrus and Liara speculated that Krios saw the rescue, knew that Itran was the responsible party and that she was gone. Then he’d cut power to the estate and wiped all records.

They couldn’t really set a trap hoping he’d return to retrieve something or return to the scene of his compounded crimes, he couldn’t be counted on to be that stupid the way Beckenstein was set up. Beckenstein was not happy with him and he could not arrange separate transport, he would become a casualty if he tried. Beckenstein did not budge in any attempt to collude with the Citadel in luring back a prior citizen. They did not want him to be captured. They wanted him to be gone.
They did not know how Krios obtained her. There were no financial records to access, but the value of the estate was estimated to be seven billion or higher, not counting the priceless things in the basement and the priceless woman upstairs. Krios had enough money to buy her. Krios had been absent from his estate for approximately a month before he’d come home with her, then had not left the estate or held a gathering… that word would be forever ruined in Russ’s head… in months, then he was sporadically absent for a few weeks a month, gatherings held monthly until her rescue. So they had a time line only of her arrival and his absences from witnesses. She had never left the estate. There were no leads to follow, his exit from the estate as clean as her arrival. They had no idea where he had gone or what he had done during his absences.

Shepard herself was ignorant of much of Krios’s plans or capacity, she’d been chipped. She didn’t answer many questions, but what she did answer, Garrus and Liara shared with Russ. He really wished they hadn’t.

Yes, she remembered sexual abuse. Yes, she remembered it being done in front of a crowd. She did not want to be touched.

Which was all completely understandable until Celetis started touching her.

What the fuck kind of sense did it make to tell Garrus she loved him and always would, but don’t touch her?

Garrus had explained that to set Liara at ease about her emotional state, that Shepard was still capable of love… which Russ doubted… either before she went or after she got back, cold and bloodless, even more so now. Garrus warned Russ not to touch her. Russ would never have touched her.

She said nothing about Krios’s personality other than describing him as brutal and vicious. Krios hadn’t wanted to talk to her, only talk at her and she didn’t remember much of it, just his tone. He stole her, like the stuff in the basement. He changed her so nobody would recognize her. He showed her off, knowing who she was. She wanted to move on, didn’t want to discuss it, and Liara and Garrus stopped pressing her and came to their own conclusions.

Estate staff was terrified and would not talk, said that they loved their jobs, it seemed he loved his lady…

Sick fucking place.

The type of person that went to the gatherings loved to play up how well Shepard and Krios went together, that she seemed so beautiful and gracious, every last one of them with the type of smirk that meant they were all so very much enjoying being one of the few thousand that were there to witness the coup of the criminal world. Krios had no friends, but he did have admirers.

Sick fucking place.

Staff was also slowly disappearing and whether that was them not wanting to answer any more questions or Thane Krios finding them… who knew?

Shepard was looking forward, not back, and it seemed she wouldn’t talk to Garrus once she’d left the Med Bay. He left the ship and had not returned. She had not left the ship.

They had descriptions, and unfortunately the allegations of sexual abuse were not exaggerated. The room, the acts, their behavior, even her clothing was repeated in hundreds of iterations from gleeful to jealous. A lot of these were anonymous Extranet accounts made as lurid as possible, but truth arrived in many of the details remaining the same.
We don’t know why or how Krios took her, or who took her. We know Krios ended up with her. We know he had the money to pay for a contract on her if he decided to have her gift wrapped. Well, not even gift wrapped. More of a bow.

She could give no insight into him.

So as Liara searched for every scrap of evidence, they ended up listening to the same accounts of what was there to be seen, not what was there to be known.

Krios had never answered questions about her to anybody. Nobody had any information about her. Absolutely nobody had known she was Commander Shepard. He had no confidantes or accomplices that came forward. They couldn’t find the surgeon who worked on her. She had been unconscious and had no information about her capture or her surgery. She had been chipped and sedated through the ordeal and after had only vague impressions.

So… discrepancies could be dismissed…but should they? Of course he was brutal and vile. Of course he was criminal and narcissistic and a collector of rare things.

So how to account for the also rare account of someone seemingly trying to be helpful who said they… looked happy. Laughed? That he was protective toward her, not just territorial? It would be fine if just staff said that, because they were terrified.

Every now and then though a guest that seemed to have the whole ‘Commander Shepard, who could stop Reapers, was having sex on a vulgar marble throne for months’ narrative straightened out in their head as a bad and not a funny thing would say “He didn’t treat her like a slave.”

“She didn’t act like she had a chip.”

“Half of the people I’ve seen give a laughing account spent the entire time jealous of her, or him, or both, and are bitter at not being asked to participate. Ever.”

By the time these little discrepancies occurred, one or two in every hundred accounts, they were statistical anomalies but… the same statistical anomaly. Garrus and Liara were pained by them but didn’t ask Shepard, her viewpoint clear. Krios was the past, Reapers were the future. She would stick to the Normandy and EDI would not allow him on the ship, problem solved. If he caught her out on a mission she was armed and armored and he could send as many teams after her as he wanted, she had a job to do. If she couldn’t manage a few bounty hunters while she was on the alert for Collectors, and if they wanted to follow her down to a hot zone, she wished them luck.

Liara got more and more anxious, unable to find anything on Krios. That in itself to her meant he was a highly disciplined, intelligent man. Which was worrying.

Garrus wavered between supporting Shepard’s wish to not talk about it anymore… and of course being Garrus and refusing to let it go.

It was obvious why. If he could find Krios, he could get some of the answers he wanted. He could know what took and kept his bond mate. He could make sure it didn’t happen again. He could maybe win her back.

As to whether or not they were still… bond mates…

Russ knew the answer was no. What was true now was what was true then. Garrus had bonded to her and she needed him as the Councilor. Who knew if she cared about him at all or ever did? She said so. She just didn’t act that way.
Russ made sure he was in his hole for the conference. He listened. Garrus looked bloodless, Liara was hoarse. They were bothragged from lack of sleep and worry.

Garrus could barely say hello before asking “How is she?”

“She’s fine.” At this point it was looking solid and not about to change and Russ had better spit it out. “Itran – Celetis has joined the crew of the Normandy.”

Garrus said “What? How? He ran away far and fast.”

Russ said deadpan “It appears she was convincing.”

Liara almost smiled at that and said “That she is. What’s he doing on the crew?”

Russ replied “A while after she got out of the Med Bay he started visiting. He’d go to her cabin so I don’t know what discussed. About a week later she asked him to spar and I was there for that. He’s good. The guy can fight.”

Liara said “He does have a history of combat training. As a slave and then independent study.”

Russ nodded “Well, he’s good.” He had to be extraordinarily careful about this phrasing and he gave himself a moment.

Do not say ‘Had her down in seconds and she was laughing.’

Do not say ‘He was nice about it, didn’t want her to take a bad fall. Made sure his hands were all over her whenever he could, very… supportive.’

Garrus, I am so sorry. This is happening and I can’t hide it.

“He’s good at sparring, he’s good at small arms.”

Garrus said slowly “Well, she did offer him a position while she was in the Med Bay.”

Russ said absolutely nothing about Drell and positions, though he would bet all three were thinking it due to the preponderance of porn in your average broadcast.

Russ said neutrally “Seems like he accepted.”

Liara said carefully “If it’s safe for her, it’s safe for him. I’ll bet she wants to protect him. I’m worried about him disappearing like our other witnesses.”

Russ was impassive. Garrus was quiet until he said “Thanks, Russ. I’ve got nothing new. Just the same… the same stories.”

Liara said “I’m moving out each item from the estate and having it tested. It will take a while. I’m hoping for a DNA match to Krios.”

Garrus said “We have nothing to compare it to.”

Liara nodded and said with stalwart faith “We will. We’ll find something. Once we can tag his biometrics…”

That was the hope, that Krios wouldn’t be able to pass through a security or medical scanner anywhere without being swarmed by security. Not that criminals didn’t already have ways around that. C-Sec had trouble chasing down smugglers and the indoctrinated and just the nut cases that
didn’t want to be scanned for indoctrination because it was an invasion of their rights.

Russ didn’t mention that if she got taken again she’d just get rescued by another man who found her fascinating and inspirational and would follow her around forever. She had a Turian and now a Drell. Kaidan probably counted as the human. Hell, she even had Liara.

Did Mordin count as a Salarian?

Russ closed his eyes and sighed.

Please find more people, Shepard, and offer me a chance to get off this… cursed fucking ship.

Russ looked at Garrus, at his posture, at his eyes, at the way his plates looked like the only support he had. Then, because Shepard couldn’t be the only person that had unreasonable and self destructive loyalty offered to her said “You guys will find him. I’m sure of it. You found her. You’ll find him. You got her out of there and that’s a miracle. Hold onto that, okay? It’s going to be okay. You’ve taken the best care of her that you can and she’s back in the fight. She’s going to get the job done just like you guys did. I know I can’t order it or anything, but how about both of you guys get some sleep. Remember sleep? That thing where you put your head down and make noise?”

Liara said with a hint of a smile “I do not make noise.”

Garrus said “Oh yes you do. You fell asleep on a shuttle once, little dainty snores.”

She laughed “What? Absolutely not. You are a liar, Vakarian.”

He teased “You were leaning on Wrex. I recorded it. I listen to it when I’m sad.”

She said “Play it for me. Audio or it never happened.”

Garrus shrugged “Nah, I’ll hold it for some day when I need it.”

She smirked “That’s your brilliant strategy, Councilor?”

Garrus smiled and looked at Russ. “Thank you. Thank both of you. I think I’m going to go lay my head down and make noise.”

More unfortunate phrasing, but Russ was glad to hear it. Until he saw in the back of Garrus’s eyes that he was not considering sleep at all. Neither was Liara.

Liara said “I’m being charged for every minute, so I’m back to work but then when the site’s processed, we can go over the analysis.”

Oh boy. More analyzed dust with no direction or evidence. “You got it, Liara. I’ll be here.”

“Thank you, Russ.”

They all signed off and Russ was of the opinion that he was the only one with sleep in his future, and that was because he was useless.
‘When The Foeman Bears His Steel’ – “Pirates of Penzance”

Sergeant:
When the foeman bares his steel,  
we uncomfortable feel,  
and we find the wisest thing  
is to slap our chests and sing.

For when threatened with emeutes  
and your heart is in your boots  
There is nothing brings it round  
like the trumpet's martial sound  
like the trumpet's martial sound.

Mabel:
Go, ye heroes, go to glory,  
though you die in combat gory,  
ye shall live in song and story.  
Go to immortality!

Go to death, and go to slaughter;  
Die, and every Cornish daughter  
with her tears your grave shall water.  
Go, ye heroes, go and die!

Stanley Sisters:  
Go, ye heroes, go and die!

Sergeant:
Though to us it's evident  
these attentions are well meant,  
such expressions don't appear  
calculated men to cheer.  
Who are going to meet their fate  
in a highly nervous state.

Still to us it's evident  
these attentions are well meant.

Mabel:
Go and do your best endeavor,  
and before all links we sever,  
we will say farewell forever!  
Go to glory and the grave!

Stanley Sisters:  
Go to glory and the grave!  
For your foes are fierce and ruthless,
false, unmerciful, and truthless;
young and tender, old and toothless,
all in vain their mercy crave!

Sergeant:
We observe too great a stress
on the risks that on us press
and of reference a lack
to our chance of coming back.

Still perhaps it would be wise
not to carp or criticize
for it's very evident
these attentions are well meant.

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Rin visited her daily. It took twelve days for Cara to find her next real step toward their mission. It began with a small step onto the Citadel. Reports of a Dr. Bryson and something called a Leviathan. The outing was more of a field trip, a shuttle ride down to a private residence.

Disturbing evidence of mind control.

As Rin wished to be the only person or entity with that capacity, he was wary of competition and invasion, but intrigued.

There was an Asari on board the Normandy, Samara, but she was reclusive. Cara was suspicious of her. That was acceptable for now and there was little he could do about it. He must find some way to end her sojourn on the Normandy but he could not do it while they were on the ship and must be cautious of Omni Tool monitoring in her case. He had control over Cara’s Omni Tool and his, proximity to her allowing him the opportunity to remotely crack her Omni Tool without her knowledge. The Omni Tools with Cara’s unique customization were beautiful technical things. He was able to study his own and observe her accessing hers, making hacking possible. No need for venom, only an exploitable remote executable transferred to hers piggybacked on a signal from his own, a trusted signal that was able to bypass much of her voluminous tailored security.

Samara’s Omni Tool was beyond his observation and reach. She might record or send distress or signal of biometrics anywhere, that was difficult to predict or prevent.

He wished to assess squad mates and they wished to assess him. Kaidan Alenko, Miranda Lawson, Mordin Solus and Hemorus Orbestan were all known quantities to Cara and he knew her opinions of their capabilities well.

Her relationship with each of those individuals was remote. Kaidan had been attracted to her at one point and she had avoided him. She did not trust Miranda. She enjoyed Solus’s company but he remained in his lab and she remained in her cabin. Orbestan was problematic and Thane Krios had done a great deal of research on him independently as a Spectre and as an installation in her life. Orbestan had a close relationship with Councilor Vakarian and Cara believed he resented her for her habit of providing squad mates with ‘bad days’ when they did not follow orders the first time. Orbestan was a loyal man, but his loyalty was to Vakarian, not to Shepard. Orbestan was in love with Vakarian and his resentment of Shepard was palpable before her abduction and after her return.
She kept Orbestan on board to allow Garrus to have a conduit to information about the Normandy without her having to speak with him. Prudent.

Orbestan in her opinion was a known quantity, executed his role as a squad mate if not with good grace then at least with efficiency.

He was excellent at killing.

Rin would watch. It appeared Orbestan would keep his distance, maintain his friendship with Vakarian, stay out of Shepard’s way and that was acceptable.

Cara had no use for Jack, but Rin could find use for her. She was a powerful biotic and if she could follow orders he would suggest she be allowed to stay. They were all intelligent and capable people, but of different calibers. Jack was just intelligent enough to be destructive but not intrusive, and that he could use regardless of Cara’s assessment. Jack wanting to be alone and not socializing was a bonus.

They located the next potential site and traveled to the asteroid belt, Mahavid. Cara chose to bring Rin and Alenko, evidence of mind control moving from the capability of one individual remotely to hundreds, an entire station trapped in time for ten years.

Next they located Dr. Bryson, Cara choosing to bring Rin and Jack. Cara had not necessarily wished to give Subject Zero the opportunity to serve as a squad mate, but he had said quietly “Unless you give her a true opportunity to prove herself, you will not know her capacity. She was kept as a slave as a child, Lirya. She has been on this ship for months with the willingness to oppose Cerberus and the Collectors. Surely that earns her the opportunity to prove herself, to serve.”

Jack had provided service… loudly but efficiently and they had located Dr. Bryson.

“The darkness must not be breeched” seemed a common theme that resonated with Rin.

They were directed through disturbing method to Despoina.

They faced indoctrination risk on any mission involving Reapers, that was a standard risk he must accept. She had often faced direct mind control risk, for example the Thorian and even the Rachni Queen potentially. It must be accepted at least in potential, he could not deny her advancement of her agenda on that basis, he must learn to adapt. Then there was standard dismemberment and explosion risks and with Subject Zero near, less than friendly fire as a possibility. Still, it was invigorating and interesting work. Rin suggested bringing Samara to Despoina, as all other squad mates were known quantities.

Being near Cara in combat was a new thing, something he enjoyed. The missions had been harrowing but not technically difficult. Watching over her, extending his senses and perception to guard her in tandem with her flawless tactical assessment was exhilarating. He found no reason to disagree with her assessment of combat and followed her orders without question.

They had intended to take the shuttle underwater but the shuttle was disabled. They were forced to land on a platform where they had attracted Reaper attention with no solutions except to continue to fight and improvise transportation.

He had led a risky lifestyle, certainly, but not this risky by design. He had been trained to minimize risks and look after himself. Looking after her while she was charging directly toward risks was a jarring if not entirely unwelcome experience. He admired her.

The shuttle disabled and a Triton enabled, there was no alternative but to permit her descent.
That would also leave him alone with Samara… and several Reaper agents, harrowing again but not a difficult fight. Samara was excellent in combat and he regretted the necessity of her death. He liked her. There was a great deal to like.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoOo

Lal descended, the pressure building and a terribly concerning hissing sound making itself known.

Troublesome.

Of course, being stranded was troublesome also.

She did come face to face… face to carapace? Face to tentacle? Face to… tiny piece… of a Leviathan.

She felt the pressure of the water and then the pressure in her mind, similar to when the chip was activated. Answers given and answers forced and a great deal learned…

And some mysterious things discussed that had no immediate answers or context.

She had their agreement to help… whatever that meant, which probably mostly meant she would be allowed to go until…

“Your mind is fractured, Shepard.”

She thought a moment about that. Cara, Lal, Drala’fa. She muttered “Understatement.”

The voice continued “Your body deteriorates and your mind as it is will struggle.”

“About that body deteriorating thing, I should go?”

“Yes. To the surface. There is another mind there, the mind within yours.”

She thought maybe they were miscounting minds, she had at least three, but she had to go, she felt the nosebleed and her ear bleeding, sharp pain. There was a moment, a twist in her mind, a rending tear and a wrenching and… and she knew.

She could barely draw a breath and she knew.

Thane Krios was Senar and Kegirin Itran and Varin Celetis… Rin…

And she… she was trapped here…

The Leviathan had been inside her head, decided she was worthy… and then stripped back the veil it had taken Senar… months to create.

She tried to speak to the Leviathan again but they were gone and wouldn’t answer. She tried to activate her Omni Tool but it wasn’t functioning. It hadn’t when she went down… and it was still offline. She couldn’t communicate with the Normandy.

She couldn’t stay here, couldn’t wait with the hiss, couldn’t contact the Leviathan…

Had to go back up there…

She took a deep breath and decided that throwing up inside this armature would be a bad idea, blocked images and realizations.
She had very little oxygen remaining, reactivated the Triton to travel back up, shaking from adrenaline, horror and shock.

He didn’t know. He didn’t know she knew. Stay calm. You can get back on the surface, get back on the Normandy. Stay calm.

She remembered. She remembered how hard it would be to kill him, why she’d never tried, but now she didn’t have a chip. Did she? Did he put it back in somewhere? No. That would have been caught on a scan.

She took a moment to speak to her parents. “I miss you. I’ll be back. I love you. He could predict Asari but couldn’t predict a Leviathan. Neither could I. But I’ll be back and I love you. I love you so much. I’ve missed you so much.”

Their voices chimed in that they loved her, that they were watching, that they believed, they knew she would be free.

All she had to do would be to behave normally… whatever was normal after a descent to the depths. Don’t say anything about mind control. Don’t make him suspicious. Get back to the Normandy. Don’t let him touch you, get him in his cabin and have EDI isolate him. Don’t let him take a hostage, don’t let him touch anybody else. Don’t let him talk to anybody other than EDI. He could execute any number of primed commands. Don’t ever talk to him again.

Okay. That could work.

Situation Normal All Messed Up.

Yes, she didn’t swear, so this was a SNAMU and not a SNAFU.

Be just traumatized enough.

She smiled, took a deep breath of thinning air and anticipated freedom. Actual freedom. Giddy from hope and… and lack of oxygen… she tried to set her story straight and blessed the Darkness being Breeched.

She’d tell him that she talked to the Leviathan. Talk, not mental contact. They would provide assistance against Reapers when called upon. They have technology that…

How to explain mind control?

He knew they could do it.

How to explain mind control?!

She didn’t know, she only had seconds, the light breaking over the dome of the Triton. Her Omni Tool still didn’t work and she was out of oxygen. She was bleeding, light headed and as the Triton cleared the deck, nobody was visible.

What if he was dead already? A huge rush of relief at the thought. She didn’t want to put him in jail, didn’t know how, wouldn’t expose anybody else to this man. But if she tried to kill him here… she could fail… and to do it in cold blood…

Was anything about that man in cold blood anymore? Wasn’t she being a bit too precious about morality in his case?
The real question was whether or not she could do it.

Heart hammering and muscles stripped weak she fell out of the Triton to the deck, sucking in deep gulps of air and fighting back the lightheadedness.

Her Omni Tool would not respond to anything.

The view to the shuttle was obscured and there was nothing on the deck. Her finger itched to pull out her gun… that would be normal, right? Prepared?

She had no idea what was normal, threw up from compounded decompression sickness, disorientation and terror.

She struggled to her knees and tried to stand.

His arm came around her waist, one around her throat, and she was assisted to her feet.

Don’t… let him touch you…

Don’t flinch.

She remembered that moment of waking up in front of a mirror, disorientation and those sick images and feelings, knowing his hands and knowing what he looked like, still trying to calmly step away from him. She tried now.

Rin would let Commander Shepard go once she was solidly on her feet.

This was not Rin. Not only Rin.

The hand around her waist disarmed her and the hand around her throat pulled her back and up against his body. He spoke in Rin’s voice “I apologize that it was necessary to kill your crew, Commander Shepard. The shuttle pilot and Samara are gone, weighted with Reaper bodies and cast over the side. Your Omni Tool is disabled until I decide otherwise.”

Her body reacted violently, though she knew not to try to fight, she couldn’t keep the flush, the shake and the nausea from hitting her hard. He held her upright until he realized she was throwing up, helped her to the edge and stroked her hair back while she was violently ill and couldn’t stop heaving long after everything was gone. Her body tried to throw him off like she tried to throw off the memories of Mindoir.

It took time and he was patient with her, let her decide when to pull back from the edge, having put her head down to the side on cold, wet metal facing away from him between bouts of retching. Her nose and eyes burned, throat burned, crying from the strength of the wind and driving rain, dammed hope set free and then halting failure.

A Reaper crashed down in the ocean within visible range, a wave cresting toward them from the impact. He picked her up and carried her back to higher decking, the platform riding over the passing waves as they watched. When the deck was stable he handed her a flask “Rinse your mouth, Drala’fa.”

It was inbires, a Drell restorative. Fruit and herbs, balanced sweet and astringent, clarifying. He said drily “I know how you do not like alcohol, I no longer carry it on my person.”

He’d never made her drink alcohol. Teased her about it nearly daily but never asked her to drink a drop. Never asked her to eat meat. She didn’t spit it out but swallowed. It helped her throat and she
wanted to throw up again. He said softly “It is the will of the sand. It is the will of the sea.”

She didn’t say anything, didn’t ask any questions, did not want to talk to him or look at him, knew better than to speak.

He held her chin between his fingertips and met her eyes “Be consoled, Commander Shepard, you are going to achieve a turning point in the war against Reapers today.”

She didn’t answer him. He smiled and said “Your eyes as always Cara give you away as a Whole woman. Had I not already been forewarned, I would have known the moment I looked at you. You do not know what is in your eyes when you are Whole and I do not believe I will tell you. You won’t remember, and that is a loss. I have missed your eyes. The Leviathan wondered who it was that was so much in the mind of Commander Shepard. They believe you can win this fight, as do I. They believe I can help you win. They do not care what I do with you otherwise. That I can control you means I am the most logical person to negotiate on your behalf. They are allies only in the war, Drala’fa, just as you and I are, and we will all do our part. That Reaper crashed at their command. We are going to go retrieve it. An idea I presented that they found intriguing. They wished to see what I would do, what you would do, and now they see. You and I are going to board and control a Reaper with their help. They believe it is possible we can control it. What you lack in their assessment in required ruthlessness I can provide. I have promised to keep you focused, support your resolve, provide you with the balance you need to win. They believe me.” He stroked her hair back with a smile “How many Reapers do you wish, Commander Shepard? We begin with one, Leviathan can lure and deliver many more. Congratulations. I will not ask you to thank me, I am certain you will feel the urge later with Rin at your side.”

“If they’d asked me I could have done that alone.”

“Perhaps. But they did not ask me to do it, I asked them to permit me to try. I informed them you were going to take me back on the Normandy and have me arrested, in essence abandoning the fight for a personal concern. Or would you have killed me? With your mind fractured, which it was before I arrived there, they feared your focus was not on the fight. As I am able to return you to the fight, they are obliged to bargain with me. Once I pledged my arm in service, now you pledge yours to mine, to theirs, and Commander Shepard has her fleet of Reapers. It is a good day.”

“I remember everything, Senar. You’re going to have to kill me to keep me quiet. You don’t have enough time, it took you months before.”

“It took me months before to arrange a transition, Drala’fa. That transition is made and this moment can be addressed differently. I would and will never kill you. A few things will change, but we will both be served, and the war will be served. You and I will have time on a Reaper together, unmonitored, your fractured mind revealed and then healed, or at least compensated for by my presence and stability I provide. I have an opportunity to begin again. We will not leave Despoina until I am assured of your obedience. Afterward I will have months, years, to refine. You remember but you are not immune to venom. I look forward to the opportunity. We will not be returning to the Normandy until my conditions are met and the Leviathan’s ambitions are served. Your Omni Tool is disabled, we can only use mine. We will send status reports, but the Normandy will remain in orbit… as bait… and the Leviathan will draw down any attackers. Commander Shepard will have cause to celebrate this day each year. I believe I will insist. Our survival odds grow exponentially. We can drink inbires, you always enjoyed that.”

“You’ve convinced me that we’re going to win. Please kill me when that happens.”

“Never, Drala’fa. You will live a long and blissful life of inbires and a man who spoke to the Darkness and was found fit to rule you.”
“I can rule myself.”

“Yes, of course you can. Your failing, if it is at all to be counted as one, Drala’fa, is that you wish to ask others to fight for greater good. That is admirable. Had we Breeched the Light I would have been obliterated in a shower of sparks and pain, no doubt. But we Breeched the Darkness, and Darkness only wants what it wants and does not care how it is achieved. I assumed you asked their help for the greater good. That is not what they wished to hear. I asked them what they wanted, thought of something I could give them immediately to prove my faith and capacity. I hope that this is the only gatekeeper of this ability. Samara is gone and is not a threat to the privacy of your mind. It is a great day.”

She didn’t speak.

“I have one thing to do and then we will begin. Be silent.”

She was already silent and knew him well enough to not have to ask what the consequences would be.

Something horrible.

“Celestin to Normandy.” His voice sounded breathless, harsh, pained.

“This is Normandy, go.”

“Status report. Commander Shepard contacted creatures of the depths, those are the Leviathan. She has arranged for truce and talks. Unfortunately not before Justicar Samara and Marquesa Guerrin were lost to Reaper attack. The Leviathan believe we will be able to board the submerged Reaper, possibly control it with their assistance.”

“What do you need from us?”

“No, Nothing at the moment. Commander Shepard is suffering from decompression sickness but it is mild, she is unconscious but stable. I am able to reactivate the shuttle. I will wait for her to recover and then make the dive to the Reaper.”

“Her Omni Tool’s offline.”

“I believe it was damaged in transit due to poor pressure regulation. I have been assured that the Leviathan will not attack our shuttle, but do not attempt to approach or land. They will draw down Reapers that attempt to attack you or us. The Normandy will be safe from Reaper attack, that is something they promised.”

“Aye aye.”

“I will check in every four hours.”

“Take care of her. Congratulations and good luck.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

He signed off and she said “You have to sleep.”

He smiled and said “I admire your hope. I do, but not yet, and perhaps I would have to resort to physical restraints. Do you think I need to tie you, Drala’fa? I never did before. You said yourself… you remember… everything. There is so much you already know, so much I do not need to tell you.”
So much I already know and do not need to ask. You know I hope it’s you that kills me. You know I will do everything I can to prevent that. I have had time to prepare, Drala’fa. The Councilor’s office is not safe. The Normandy is not safe. Think of all the time I’ve had to put checks to what might turn out to be your predictably uncooperative state. You know I had time to infiltrate your Omni Tool. Imagine the commands I could enact from there. You know I have the Citadel codes, your Spectre codes and authorizations. All you need is your imagination. Councilor Vakarian is only alive as long as Rin is, if my Omni Tool stops sending biometrics… it will trigger highly paid contracts courtesy of Thane Krios. This is a good day, Drala’fa, and I have missed you. For now I want your body. You can keep your names, keep your knowledge for as long as you can hold onto it, and I will not ask you to look at me or touch me.” His lips bent to the side of her neck and the shivering and blush swarmed along her skin. “It is cold and wet here, Drala’fa, and exactly how you are is exactly how I want you. Cold and wet.”

She was a brave woman, everyone knew it. She was even brave now, but also sufficiently scared. Just exactly scared enough to do nothing but look away and shiver, to not want to watch or feel as his hands removed clasps of armor, her sodden undersuit with her body in shock and her mind exactly scared enough. He could be bluffing, but she didn’t think so. She thought Garrus might die if she didn’t deliver cold and wet, grateful in a way that she wasn’t the one removing clothing with trembling fingers and shaking, numb hands.

He didn’t need to humiliate or hurt her, but he wouldn’t hesitate either if it got him what he wanted. He always told her what he wanted. Except when he didn’t.

She was alive because she hadn’t run straight at a Batarian cruiser when she was terrified and grieving. She was alive because she hadn’t tried to kill him when he repeatedly tried to goad her into it. Now that she’d sparred with Rin and seen him in a fight she knew she’d underestimated how good he was at combat. He’d been teaching her…

Stop thinking. Don’t put too much thought in one place. Don’t put too much feeling… anywhere.

He could always make it easier or harder on her, all she had to do was ask or give the wrong answer. If she wasn’t talking she wasn’t doing either, if he told her she didn’t need her to do anything… he wasn’t lying.

Congratulations Commander Shepard, he had a really good idea and he’s on your side in the war, it’s been confirmed by the Darkness.

Given the potential advantage… she wasn’t sure she’d take her actions back.

Would she go down in that Triton again to get a fleet of Reapers?

Yes.

He knew it.

It was raining so it didn’t matter if she cried. She’d been able to do that silently since she was 16. She kept her eyes closed and head turned away. He was wet but not as cold as she was, his hands gliding along her skin, spreading venom and warmth. He said appraisingly, finding freckles with his fingers “I rejoice at the return of your markings, Drala’fa, much like my scale, and I mourn your green eyes still. The blanket I bought with the Councilor’s money is ever at your side, on your skin, I am glad
you enjoy that. I am gratified you love and miss Drell things. I have missed you.”

She didn’t flinch at touch or being startled anymore, but this wasn’t being startled, he was warming her, the hum of biotics and relatively hot hands causing shivers, her skin wanting to move toward him, toward the source of heat. His fingers followed the random pattern of splashing rain and freckles on her skin. He stopped for a moment, offered the flask of inbires to her. She took a sip dutifully, he took a sip and put it away. He removed his jacket, spread it down on the decking and laid her back on it unresisting, rain and cold and shivers.

She closed her eyes, didn’t want to remember the sky, though she didn’t think she’d remember this anyway. It was impossible to process what she didn’t know about herself, what he’d coaxed and pried from her with charm or force. All the ways she’d helped him, all the ways they were a team because that had meant she could get out.

Well… now she was out. It had been a team effort.

She didn’t want to see or hear but through the patter of the rain she could hear him in his fastidious way removing his clothing. He’d never throw clothing aside, it was a ceremony.

She focused on cold and wet, on the discipline of the bed of nails, flinching occasionally from the cold spatter of rain, shivering and trying not to think, trying not to make it worse, it could always be worse.

She was afraid and she was brave and…

And he wouldn’t kill her. He wouldn’t even hurt her if she didn’t defy him, and she didn’t care about that anyway. It was the weight of months and years, that she could, they could… win the war… even together… and then she’d be this… every day, and she wouldn’t know it.

Wasn’t there an Earth tradition of this going on? “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” Thomas Jefferson? Or someone who actually fired a gun at some point in their life, had one fired at them? She couldn’t remember. She wasn’t Drell.

Easy for you to say, Thomas. Your tyrant wasn’t all that creative. If my issue was taxation without representation I’d consider myself lucky.

Venomization without representation? She wasn’t immune to venom and she was more of a martyr than a patriot anyway. Even he said so.

She also had some representation or she’d be on a throne still in Beckenstein and not here.

What was the other one? “Give me liberty or give me death?” She wanted to earn liberty for others… and now… now she wanted to die after and he wouldn’t allow that either. He wouldn’t kill her.

His warm hand settled on the tops of her knees and slid down between her thighs, spreading her legs so she was more open to the rain, colder, setting off more shivers. She didn’t resist. His fingertips brushed wet hair off her forehead. His hand trailed along her jaw line to her throat and down between her breasts, his palm cupping a breast and brushing venom over her cold nipple with a thumb that was hot in comparison, the involuntary shudder of knowing exactly what venom would do.

He wanted her cold so he could make her warm. He was a man who enjoyed ironic contrasts.

The ‘wet’ was self explanatory.
He was praise and heat, humming blue that brought back searing memories she’d had no idea existed and wanted to forget immediately. He told her how beautiful she was, how much he had missed her, how often he wanted to reach for her, how much he admired her in action. How grateful he was that she had given him this opportunity and how much he cherished it, and would, even if she did not remember. Especially if she did not remember.

She knew he’d smile at her some day in his doting, indulgent way, looking at her as though she were the most beautiful thing he’d ever beheld, and she’d smile back, and he would be thinking of this moment and she would not know.

He pulled back, she imagined he was looking down at her again, creating his memories, moments of length and breadth and meaning to him.

Memorizing each raindrop’s trajectory.

Of course… they might not survive controlling the Reaper at all… and she had to hope they would.

The rain was blocked by his shadow, by his heat, by humming she knew was blue in her bones, in her blood, his mouth on hers with her in panting, cold shock. She almost tried to break his neck before remembering contracts, possibilities, Marquesa and Samara overboard and weighted down. She clenched her hands into fists to keep from hitting at him in panic, pressed into the cold deck.

It didn’t take long and she could have counted, but she’d lost seconds to panic. Two minutes. Two minutes and if he decided she’d be gone. He could compel her to jump over the side herself but that wasn’t a risk.

He wouldn’t let her die.

A minute and a half, her cold lips warming under his, his tongue along the inside curve of her bottom lip, caught between his teeth, his hand on her breast pressing in more venom, making the time frame faster. Lightheadedness came back, different and wavering, not painful but disorienting. She dug her nails into the deck until she felt them crack, trying to hold onto the pain.

She wouldn’t beg, wouldn’t hit, wouldn’t remember.

Marquesa and Samara. Remember that. Marquesa and Samara. They’re dead.

Then there were no words, but blue and warm and his lips, like a dream. She was dreaming and if he spoke she would do what he asked but he didn’t ask for anything. Sparks clung to the inside of her eyelids but she didn’t blink to clear them, didn’t want to open her eyes. Hallucination, familiar and even comforting, a warm flow in contrast to the cold.

Why was she cold?

Hard deck plate under her body, leather against her back and blue, welcoming warmth, words she did not understand but followed because she wanted to. Were there words?

There was heat, a man kissing her, a man she knew somehow and didn’t and none of that mattered. He kissed along freckle paths and water trails and she was warmer where he was, arching up into where he touched her, her mouth reaching for his and her arms coming around his back, familiar and solid, safe.

She couldn’t remember his name but it didn’t matter. When his mouth left hers she moaned and he laughed, kissing a path down to her breasts, where he stayed and she moaned again and more, eyes closed, her face feeling like raindrops and sparks, her skin tingling in trails left by his fingertips and
He kissed along her stomach, his hands along her waist and then over her hips, down her thighs and then back up along the inside of her thighs. Her hands reached for him and he stopped a moment, saw she was bleeding, saw broken nails… they didn’t hurt… it didn’t matter, but he stopped and said “Give me your hands.”

She’d give him anything he asked, held out her hands, broken and bleeding nails she didn’t feel right now.

He kissed at her knuckles one by one, Medi Gel and a sharp… blade from somewhere… Omni Tool? It didn’t matter… as she watched, as he sat between her thighs in the rain, her skin tingling raindrops and sparks, her hands soaking him in… venom. It was venom. He gifted her hands back to her with kisses on her palms, set them on her stomach.

He watched her, and he was beautiful, purple iridescence and sparks, flares of color and glowing, always glowing.

His hands stroked along the insides of her thighs, light scratches from his nails and the tingling venom from his palms until she felt like twisting, then felt like bucking, his mouth bent to her clit after she arched up, his fused finger inside her and her head was bent back into wet leather with splashing water, cool rivulets along her shoulders and her hands on her stomach moving to hold his head, warm blue heat and his tongue the only thing that mattered in rushing streaks of hallucinatory rain.

They were both blue fire as he picked her up, moved to a wall and faced her toward it. She didn’t move, didn’t speak, couldn’t stand. Didn’t remember her name or his. Weakness and sparks and blue. He bent and lifted her off the ground with his arms under her thighs, his hands on her breasts with her pressed to the wall with his body, blue heat of his hands protecting her breasts from the cold metal but her knees and thighs were pressed against the cold. Her back was spread with the venom from his chest, his mouth at her throat, his cock thrust inside like home, like him, like them, only and ever.

She pressed her hands flat against the metal and met his thrusts with her hips and arms, his teeth set on the back of her neck and his familiar-true groan in her ear that meant he was well pleased. She tipped her head back against his shoulder and his mouth met hers, teeth and tongue and his harsh breath, words like names that weren’t or were, beauty and belonging and sand and sea.

She was his.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Verbal: Where's your head, Agent Kujan? Where do you think the pressure's coming from? Keyser Soze - or whatever you want to call him - he knows where I am right now. He's got the front burner under your ass to let me go so he can scoop me up ten minutes later. Immunity was just a deal with you assholes. I got a whole new problem when I post bail.

Dave Kujan: So why play into his hands? We can protect you.

Verbal: Oh, gee, thanks, Dave. Bang-up job so far. Extortion, coercion. You'll pardon me if I ask you to kiss my pucker. The same fuckers that rounded us up and sank us into this mess are gonna bail me out? Fuck you. You think you can catch Keyser Soze? You think a guy like that comes this close to getting caught and sticks his head out? If he comes up for anything, it will be to get rid of me. After that... my guess is you'll never hear from him again.

“The Usual Suspects”

Garrus was at his desk looking at a shifty male human who entered, sat, appeared immediately slouched and miserable. Short for a human, though most all humans were short to him, average build, watery eyes, average… Garrus wasn’t the best with human appearance. He bitterly thought ‘nondescript.’ That word had described Cara often before her abduction. Now she was the epitome of descript and he hated it. She seemed to be unable to be brought to care either about her appearance way, though Garrus knew better. She cared about everything. Thane Krios, a surgeon and her stubborn had reached a consensus and Garrus did not get a vote.

The human in front of him was a person to pass on the pedway, someone who would make no impression, leave not a ripple on the psyche except maybe a shadow, a blank space. Not something wholesome like shade from a tree but a void. According to the file his name was Marcus Enger. He wanted to talk to the Councilor and wouldn’t talk to anybody else. Since Garrus was helpless otherwise and Cara was at the bottom of an ocean somewhere… talking to ancient Godlike things and trying to… Reaper Wrangle… of course she was… and Garrus could not let anybody go that dropped Cara’s name without talking to them… he and Marcus had a time slot. Marcus had worked at Beckenstein as part of security. He’d already been interviewed, his story consistent with the other stories that added up to a gravity well of despair.

“How can I help you, Mr. Enger?”

“Thanks for seein’ me.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for coming forward before and now.”

Marcus shifted and tried to sit up but the persistent slouch that had likely invested his posture for a lifetime melted his shoulders in a few moments. “Look, I came in earlier and talked to some other
people when this all happened, but I seen the news and… aaah. I answered questions but I really didn’t say nothin’. But I had somethin’ like a change of heart. Change of somethin’ anyway. I got background and info, some stuff maybe you know, some stuff maybe you don’t. I just gotta get it out and not to someone who’s gonna ignore me. I wanna know that YOU know. Anyways… people don’t get a job workin’ at Beckenstein for Krios and then just up and leave. People stay there ’cause they realize anyone that tried to go is dead. People that screw up at their job… gone… prolly dead. Nobody can find ’em. After a while maybe there’s some people workin’ there know to keep their mouths shut, maybe nobody looks too close. People get used to not sayin’ nothin’. People get used to doin’ the job and part of the job is not talkin’ about the job. So you got no pictures? Just testimony?”

“Right.”

“Yeah. There was no permanent records. Camera feeds but no audio. So I’m one of those guys watchin’ a monitor for years. I seen more than most. Someone else workin’ there maybe don’t see so much. If a gardener looks in a window they don’t do it twice or there’s a new gardener who don’t look inside. My job was to watch the monitors I was told to watch and not look away. All feeds went directly to Krios. He had the only copies of surveillance. All sent to an outside server and his Omni Tool direct, nothin’ stored on grounds. So I’m bettin’ you got nothin’ ’cept uninformative people as witnesses. Mostly the same story, same as hers?”

“Yes, that’s been my experience.” Garrus didn’t know how he felt about that. ‘The Same Story’ was vile enough, but there were outliers; people like Marcus who went counter to the overarching narrative. Hints that Krios was smarter than Shepard gave him credit. Suggestions that the chip had been less than effective. Marcus could not tell if it was statistical noise or statistical significance.

Marcus nodded and his lower jaw jutted out in response, then pulled back with something that might pass for determination if it weren’t Marcus’s face making that expression. “Okay, so security’s there to tell Krios stuff, what he decides he wants to know. Alert him if somethin’ goes wrong, let him know things are goin’ right and on schedule. I seen a lotta things go wrong and right, and it wasn’t accordin’ to rules of wrong and right out here. People get used to that. Take someone outta Beckenstein and they’re still there in a lotta ways, ways that ain’t gonna change. So here’s the thing. Marcus Enger ain’t my name and I ain’t tellin’ you what it was. Part of gettin’ a job on that estate was gettin’ a new Beckenstein citizenship and identity. I got a job offer; move to Beckenstein and work, make stupid amounts of money, easy. It’s like ‘here’s a dumb rich guy, sit on your ass and make a fortune.’ So people who end up there figger they’ll move to Beckenstein, say goodbye to their family for a bit, come back in a few years rich as shit. The money’s real. The leavin’ ain’t. Once you’re on Beckenstein you’re at the estate workin’ or livin’ in a compound off the estate where you can buy anythin’ you want and now you got plenty of money. You can get drugs, women, men, your own slave, anythin’ ’cept freedom. You can’t leave. Only Krios can say where you can go. Turns out you could leave if you could maybe buy independent and not contracted citizenship, but that means you gotta have enough money to buy an estate and though you got more money than you ever seen, to get off Beckenstein without Krios’s permission you gotta have more money than you’re ever gonna make. You belong to him. Maybe you realize who you’re workin’ for ain’t so dumb. Or maybe some don’t realize it and they ain’t so alive no more.”

That was a bit of a leap… but it seemed like Marcus enjoyed leaps. If there was anything this story did not need, it was added tension, death added to denigration.

Marcus looked at Garrus’s impassive face for reaction but didn’t get one. “So your family gets money if you wanna send it, and everyone does. Everyone’s got a sick aunt or a kid they wanna put through school, and you don’t talk to your family ’cause you’re a prisoner. Krios approves some regular correspondence, but nothin’ live, only recorded in and out and all you’re really allowed to say is shit like ‘I’m glad you’re happy with the money, it’s great here, I’m gonna make a little more.
Love you.’ You can hear back that your family’s got plenty of money now, just come home, but that ain’t gonna happen and you can’t tell ’em that. You signed a contract, kinda like Illium, and you’re there and can’t do shit about it. So I get why people ain’t gonna talk, and why what I gotta say is not somethin’ I wanna say, not somethin’ he wants you to hear. Not somethin’ the people who recruit for Beckenstein want me to say. Not somethin’ Commander Shepard would want me to say prolly and now nobody’s gonna be happy with me. Not that they should be. So anyways, Krios has got expensive security on Commander Shepard, teams on surveillance, trackers and perimeters and eyes on her all the time. But she don’t never made no move, never tried nothin’… and he…”

“He what?”

“Look, this is gonna sound crazy. Just stick with me for a bit before you decide to kill me. For a guy like Krios who… I can try to explain it but you prolly won’t believe me, won’t understand. He cared about her then. He cares about her now.”

Adding a few more surges of rage to the seismic fault line Garrus was composed of at the moment made no difference in his demeanor or voice from long practice as a detective, as a squad mate of Shepard’s and as a diplomat. He did want to talk to witnesses. He couldn’t kill even this foul specimen. The next witness might not want to talk if there was a history of dying here, blood stains on the ceiling. He asked calmly “Cared how?”

“Look, a lotta weird, ugly shit went on there and most guys only heard rumors or whispered stories. We wasn’t at the estate when there was… uh… parties. I can’t tell you nothin’ about ’em, but I bet you got enough stories about that anyways. Can’t tell you none of those stories ain’t true neither, considerin’ everythin’ else went on in that place. Cameras shut down, no job, night off. Estate tech suspended. Krios was the only one had tech access anyways. Access was set up in tiers under his control. Staff had only enough tech to do their jobs, all devices provided by and kept on the estate. Guests had access on Omni Tool to only some functions, read only. No recordings, no transmissions unless Krios himself authorizes ’em. So’s they could maybe watch Emily Wong or some shit but nobody hung out to watch the game if you understand. People come to do a job or conduct business, they don’t stick around. They wasn’t invited to no barbecue. Staff couldn’t use personal Omni Tools. They was locked on arrival for work, we could unlock after shift. Automated suppression stuff. Manual restart. So I worked a monitor, that’s all I done for years. Four years. Watch. Play. Pause. Limited replay. I didn’t program shit. I done what I was told. I seen people come and go, people who slacked off. I ain’t never slacked off. I think I was the only guy been there that long. Most people last maybe an hour, maybe a day, maybe a month, maybe a year, then somethin’ happened to ’em. Krios happened to ’em for whatever reason he had. She shows up and she was… she was different. Here’s this sweet, tiny lady made of smiles in a place where ain’t nobody never smiled. Used to be before she got there, someone on staff drops a data pad, makes a noise, fumbles a carry on a dish and they’d be gone next day, prolly dead. She smiles at ’em. They ain’t dead. Krios don’t happen to ’em. She was always kind and brave and I think… ah, I think he cared about what she thought. I think he beefed up security not ’cause people was lookin’ for her, he had that shit covered before he brought her in just like with the rest of us. He done it ’cause he knew she wanted to get out. Unlike the rest of us sad morons ain’t got no choice but to work there, he’s afraid she can do it and he ain’t gonna be able to stop her. From what we could figger all his security changes after she got there affected someone tryna get out, not tryna get in.”

“She had a chip the whole time.”

“Yeah, but was it on the whole time? This is what I’m sayin’. I don’t think it was. If it was, why was he so scared and why did he go to so much trouble? He didn’t let her get near no tech. Not even a disconnected frickin’ data pad. She couldn’t even go in the kitchen. Not once. Kitchen eventually’s locked down with one-use codes keyed to staff biometrics and we think it’s ’cause she could get in
there and do some damage. She… she’d smile at us and then she’d look at him like…”

“Like what?”

“…like he’d better smile at us too. A lot of what he done after she got there, he done it ’cause she wanted him to. He even ended up makin’ sure guests wasn’t rude to staff. That never mattered shit to him, and he might have got off on it for all I know. He ain’t sadistic but he’s a cold son of a bitch and he likes things a certain way, and that way was cold. She wasn’t cold. It mattered to her if someone mistreated staff. She ain’t got no expression that’s blank eyed service like someone with a chip, and what he want her there for ain’t about just sex, and never blank eyed sex. They’d talk. He’d even laugh. I never thought his face could move that way. She’d laugh. She don’t talk much but some of the human guys could lip read and after a while couldn’t work out any of what she was sayin’, but a Drell could. Why the fuck… look, excuse my language, I’m sorry. I think you can handle it?”

“Yeah. I can. Don’t worry about it. Go on.”

“It’s all weird. We was bored and scared and we couldn’t figger neither of ’em out and we needed to in order to do our jobs. At first it’s do what he says, no problem. After she gets there now do what he says but do what she wants just like he’s doin’. Lookin’ at her we seen maybe someone like us, someone he needed or wanted and maybe he just took her off some street somewhere. Maybe he bought her. Maybe she signed a contract like us, now she can’t leave just like we can’t. Maybe he told her she was gonna have a job. But if she started out like us she don’t end up that way. She’s special. He ain’t never had nobody around that he gave a shit about. He fucked whoever whenever he felt like it. Not staff though. Not someone livin’ there, not even someone visitin’ for the night. He don’t got no social life, he’s got a job and he’s good at it. So people threw themselves at him over business deals and he’d fuck ’em and that’s how that worked. Then he was done with ’em. Not kill ’em done with ’em, just fuck ’em and now he’s bored and now they look like they want more and he ain’t gonna give it to ’em. He never fucked no slave that I seen. He never kept a slave someone tried to give him neither. He only fucked people scared of him, people who want somethin’ from him, which I’m guessin’ they didn’t get. Krios is in the habit of takin’ not givin’. He looks at everyone like he wants to kill ’em and I think he got off on thinkin’ about killin’ anybody he was fuckin’. I think they… got off on it. Sick fuckin’ people.”

Marcus looked like maybe it was Garrus’s turn to cough up some details about the ‘sick fuckin’ people’ but that was not going to happen.

Marcus continued conspiratorially “I know you ain’t got no pictures of him but I know you got descriptions and drawings. Not an ugly fuckin’ man and he don’t gotta try to get nobody’s attention. Now Commander Shepard, she ain’t sick. She ain’t scared. She ain’t nothin’ I seen in that house before and she ain’t leavin’. I seen lotsa people come and go on that estate with slaves and yeah I’m a fucked up person, granted, but I can’t unsee some of the shit I seen, but that also means I got more experience on what a chipped slave looks like than most. She’s sweet and she’s quiet and she’s dignified and he… is obsessed with her. He ain’t doin’ nothin’ but her. Shit, sorry. I mean like she’s his job. No business. Just her, for months. He don’t leave her alone ever with a guest. He’s protectin’ her. She’s there ‘cause he likes to look at her and he won’t let nobody else touch her. He don’t answer no questions about who she is to nobody. She’s just there, like a flower arrangement or some shit and he likes it that way. He likes her that way. Admire her but don’t ask
nothin’, don’t get no ideas, don’t go near her. I think he’d have killed anybody that tried. Nobody tried. We start to think even if he did ever work himself up and glare at her like he done everyone else, she’d just smile back and he’d cave. Now she don’t argue with him about everythin’, but when she does argue, she fuckin’ wins. We’re tryna figger her out, ’cause if he’s scared of her, watchin’ her that close, you bet your ass we was scared of her plus she’s our new and only hero. Here’s another sick thing. Somethin’ else ain’t nobody wanna say, somethin’ she don’t know and don’t nobody wanna tell her. We wanted her to stay. She made it a better place to work for all us expendable assholes.”

“You didn’t think she was a sex slave at the time?”

“Just like everythin’ in this fucked up mess, yes and no. He mighta bought her but she’s priceless now. He mighta took her but she’s supposed to wanna stay. He wants the girlfriend experience. Whoever she is, she’s good at her friggin’ job. She does it the way he wants, just like we do. We couldn’t figger out what she was, but your everyday slave, use ‘em and toss ‘em, no. Nowhere close. She… is the lady of the house whether she likes it or not. A house that ain’t never had no lady in it. She ain’t got no name. I wasn’t never in a room with her. Drell house staff says he calls her dralafi or some shit. That ain’t a name, it’s a description of caste. Lowest caste possible, like homeless, like nobody’s gonna see ‘em or care about ‘em. It means ‘the ignored’ and so we have no fuckin’ clue what that’s all about, but they swear he’s sayin’ it like it’s funny somehow, like a pet name, not an insult. They say the way he talks to her, he respects her. Somethin’ about the language he uses, the tenses or some shit, dunno, they say he treats her like she’s in charge in a lotta ways. Drell language has got some fuckin’ rules I don’t get, but they say he don’t mean she’s ignored. I say when he thinks somethin’ is funny, fuckin’ look out. We dunno if he made her learn to speak Drell or if she wanted him to teach her, don’t know whose idea it was first. All of the shit they done, we couldn’t never tell whether or not it was her idea or his idea, and that should be clear with a chip, right? Should be that he wanted to do what he wanted to do. Should be that she don’t give a shit about none of it or she don’t like it. But she learns Drell and… there are times they’re both lookin’ like they really wanna… whatever it is that’s goin’ on. She painted his toenails. Someone said green with little black stripes just like him. Swear to God. He paints her nails. Like some fuckin’ spa day shit. He fed her fruit, like, all day once. She sat with her head in his lap and he fed her fruit and she read to him. Weird shit like that. So she’s maybe actin’ ’cause he wants it… and maybe he’s fuckin’ courtin’ her in this sick way, but he ain’t got no reason to act. He wants this. He wants her. However she’s makin’ him want her more and do what she wants, that’s just… talent? Lies? Makin’ the best of a bad situation? All three and some other fuckin’ shit we can’t figger? All we really know is that if he’s paintin’ her fuckin’ fingernails he ain’t murderin’ nobody, and that’s good for us. It’s possible he’s approachin’ somethin’ might be called a good mood in a normal person and maybe for him that just means not lookin’ for a reason to kill nobody, but we know it’s ‘cause of her. So after she learns to speak Drell, then she wants to learn some other stuff. She’d leave a list, shit she wanted to read. He handled that himself, set up a list of subjects she can have, a list of what she can’t. He’s careful, so even fuckin’ gardening’s off the list ’cause… fertilizer and bomb? Who fuckin’ knows, but she also can’t learn about anythin’… Turian. Now in present company that makes more sense. So we think he turned off her translator so she can only understand him or other humans. She don’t understand nobody else and he won’t let her.”

“You can confirm she never talked to anybody else? That is part of everyone’s story.”

“She didn’t. Not staff, not guests, she never started a conversation with nobody, but if he asked her a question she could go off on him. Not yellin’, but uh… persuasive. Like she’s havin’ fun doin’ it. I swear he liked it. Half of the guys are thinkin’ dominatrix. Sorry. So she can learn whatever she wants about Drell whatever… ‘cept Drell tech and Drell chemistry. The lists of what she can and can’t read have grown and we can’t figger out the reasons for ’em. He’d leave the estate and still from her every day a handwritten list. If she’s chimped, why don’t he tell her to sit in a corner and
drool, or just eat food when delivered? You seen the looks on people’s faces when they’re chipped? On different settings? Dull to blank. She wasn’t never… dull. Ever. The opposite of dull. Why the trouble and expense of hirin’ people to keep her entertained so she ain’t bored when he ain’t even there and could put her to sleep? Expensive people. People that used to work in museums or library collections, given job offers they can’t refuse. Stacks and stacks of paper, actual paper, bound in leather, somethin’ she’s gonna burn through in a day and set aside and never see again, beautiful books. I hardly even seen a paper book ‘cept in a museum and he’s got ten a day made for her, even bound pamphlets if the question she got’s specific. Why? ‘Cause I think he likes to talk to her. I think he don’t want dull. I think he wants her thinkin’ about him when he’s gone.”

“She’s a hacker. He’s careful.”

“Yeah, she’s a hacker with a fuckin’ chip, that’s what I heard, and he’s beyond fuckin’ careful, don’t get me wrong there. I got no problem with that all bein’ true ‘cept what I seen ain’t that. So for us watchin’, it makes sense if he’s playin’ house with a dominatrix and he’s got issues, wants things a certain way and she’s givin’ him that. So we figger she’s the highest paid woman ever. None of us have any problem thinkin’ he’s got issues and we know he’s got money. Slaves are cheap, right? Cheap labor. This lady… is not fuckin’ cheap. He… look, he was buildin’ a library for her. Check the plans. Well, shit, you can’t, it’s all wiped. Okay, check the inventory. He was rampin’ up to buildin’ a friggin’ library for her, fortunes of books on order and bein’ delivered every day, checked to make sure there ain’t nothin’ in ’em but paper and the right kinda bindin’ materials. If a book’s got some chemicals or materials in ’em on a list he makes, take those out, put the book back together with the right shit. How’s that for a weird ass assignment? We got a buncha books, so make sure the sweet lady who sits in the corner and reads, the lady your fuckin’ evil Drell employer somehow adores and is terrified of at the same time can’t use the glue to make a neurotoxin. So he’s hirin’ chemists to look at household shit like books and shampoo and bubble bath and fuckin’ nail polish and askin’ them to not only look at what they could be used to make historically, but to get fuckin’ genius creative and try to figger out how they might be used to kill or disable or any other fuckin’ thing he decides. That’s the sorta duty people are startin’ to get. So in this library there’s gonna be rare first editions, multiple languages from multiple species, overlay translation without exploitable tech, assistants for runnin’ the place. Nothin’… Turian. He was workin’ on plans to build a ballroom. For a selfish, evil fuck, and I am a witness to his selfish, evil fuckery… and I didn’t think I’d get out of there alive and I’m glad he’s gone… really, really glad he’s gone and she’s free… we was all fascinated by her, terrified and maybe in love ourselves ’cause she’s the only one that can kick his ass… why… did he do any of that shit unless it was for her? I find out afterwards she’s Commander Shepard and she’s got a chip? If that’s true, he had a chip he could use but he don’t wanna use it. He wants her. He wants her awake.”

“So how did he keep her from killing him?”

“I ain’t sayin’ she liked bein’ there. I ain’t suggestin’ that. She wanted out and he knew it or those fuckin’ lab wonks otherwise woulda been out makin’ the next miracle drug in some Salarian lab ‘stead of spendin’ their days wonderin’ how she could kill someone with moisturizer or some shit. I think he’s an evil fuck and he found a way to threaten her. Maybe he tells her not to talk to us, that if she tries to pass a message she’ll find out and kill whoever helped, but even if he don’t find out or kill them, if the message does get out anybody that shows up at the door askin’ ‘Hey, you seen Commander Shepard anywhere ’round here?’ They are fuckin’ dead or a prisoner, Beckenstein’s a fortress and it’s her fault. Maybe an agent gets in, but she ain’t gettin’ out even if they try to rescue her. Some ignorant jackass comes in wants to drag her out through the front door, she’s gone, so are they. A C-Sec vehicle? Vaporized. A military assault? She’s dead in the crossfire. Automated security woulda killed her even if staff looked the other way, which I promise you, we wouldn’t have. He made clear if he’s dead, everyone still does their job or contingency clauses in his will mean lotsa contracts on family members. We don’t know if other staff are spyin’ on us, reportin’ on
“We’re sure he’s watchin’ us. We’re fuckin’ terrified, one and all. We could all speculate about dominatrix this, does she really want it that, but there wasn’t one fuckin’ word about rescue or tryna figure out who she was. We ain’t gonna touch her or talk to her any more than someone’s gonna spill shit on the carpet again. If she stepped foot over certain lines she was gonna die. Security was set to kill her. Not trank her, not subdue her, kill her. She had trackers, more than one. Maybe he thinks staff’s at risk of gettin’ romantical ideas of rescue or visions of assault when he’s off the grounds, though really we was mostly tryin’ not to piss our pants. That’s how they… both… wanted it. That’s why she don’t try.”

“More than one tracker? There was only one removed.”

“Yeah, that’s weird. I ain’t sayin’ I know for sure what he done to her, I’m sayin’ them makin’ a deal would make more sense than him usin’ a chip on her. Just like he made deals with everyone under that roof. That was his life, deals. Deals he made that other people took. There was more than one tracker, at least I thought so. Not that he confided in me, but he don’t seem like the kinda guy who would have a woman he was that scared of… and cost that much… with just one tracker she could prolly find and remove herself if she’s such a genius she could kill us all with her friggin’ hairbrush. The estate woulda gone on massive lockdown at a bleep from those fuckin’ trackers and she never tested ’em. Just like I never tested whether or not I should be watchin’ a screen and makin’ sure I don’t push the wrong fuckin’ button at the wrong time. So she knows her boundaries, she knows to stay inside, she believes him when he tells her… you’re gonna die if you try to make a move. They’re gonna die if you try to hurt me. If you kill me some switch somewhere detonates this estate and every estate in the vicinity ’cause he’s an evil fuck and would wanna take everyone with him. I think he wanted her to care, and she did. She’d be left on her own, sometimes for weeks at a time and the surveillance is just her gettin’ dressed and-and… and studyin’.”

Garrus looked down at his Omni Tool to avoid looking at Marcus after that stutter to avoid making a lunge across the desk and killing the… thing… on the other side. Getting dressed. Marcus whatever his name was had seen Cara naked, repeatedly, fringed and… “Fringed and Fucked” had been one lurid headline, one charming phrase from a gathering witness. Garrus experienced more seismic shifting in a fresh moment of horror and unstable mixed rage, wanting to tear the man’s eyes out and crush them. He focused on his Omni Tool and kept his talons in.

He wanted to pull those images and everything attached to them out of Marcus’s mind and leave behind only the pain she felt… the pain she feels… for him to experience as his own.

Yes, it did take some form of courage to tell Councilor Vakarian that his former Commander and rumored bond mate had been a sex slave. Repeating that information when Commander Shepard had already given it and it was public knowledge was one thing. It took something else… something that may not exactly be courage but was at least partially suicidal… to tell him she had enjoyed at least some of it and had a lot of power, did it all voluntarily with multiple witnesses and daily security whose job it was to watch without looking away, go home, shake it off, have a beer and show up on time the next day. He wasn’t at all sure of Marcus’s motivation for disclosing any of it. Marcus seemed to relish being able to relay these details, to be the one who knew them, who figured them out. His flavor of being helpful kept it from being interpreted that way. The fact that the words had passed through Marcus’s head and rolled off his tongue made whatever came out of his mouth something to be avoided, something inherently contaminated through contact.

If any of this was true, and of course Garrus couldn’t verify any of it without causing excruciating pain to Cara and other witnesses, Krios wasn’t some lucky crime boss with a lot of money who bought a slave with a chip and inherited his security setup. Just like Liara was worried about. Krios wanted to convince Cara to stay of her own accord and to behave as though she were already convinced until she arrived at that conclusion independently. Krios was someone whose whims she
was forced to indulge voluntarily, displaying her skill, grace, humor and capacity to care. If Marcus was right, the sex was secondary to having her soul on display and at his disposal. She experienced… is experiencing… will experience… active and constant vivisection, body, mind and Spirit.

Control chips shut down inhibitions and impulses and now that level of cruelty seemed like a relative mercy. She’d had to overcome every inhibition and suppress every impulse herself, against every instinct and with the result being torture and death of others if she failed. Krios had his security and conditions set well enough that it was working on her from a distance, with defined boundaries she would not cross. She would not talk to anybody about it. Nobody would get in her mind to find out about it. Nobody would touch her. She’d stay isolated and pristine until he recaptured her, and then they’d do it all over again and he’d be more convincing the next time. In the meantime any friend, lover or confidante she had might be tortured and killed, a recording of it happening sent to her.

There was no way Krios wasn’t aware of the relationship between Garrus and Cara. He wouldn’t allow her to learn to speak Turian, wouldn’t let her understand Turian speech. Krios had either ordered or convinced her to tell him. Now Garrus wondered more about her prohibition of being touched other than from a physically traumatic viewpoint, knowing Cara could handle trauma. She’d handled excruciating trauma throughout her life.

That’s why this horrific story sounded like it might be true, because that’s what she did. She protected people. Even a sick void like Marcus could see it in her. Marcus knew it because he had been unable to look away. Marcus hadn’t wanted to look away. He’d wanted her to stay there so he’d be safe and he could watch. He’d wanted what Krios had.

She had protected Marcus, someone who given the chance would have taken Krios’s place. Marcus felt some sick camaraderie with her like they were just the same, had a lot in common. Like he hadn’t gone home and thought about what it would be like to own her instead of free her.

What was the truth about Cara in all of her iterations that could always be counted upon?

Garrus remembered telling her ‘You made me a few promises right before you died. One was to see me when you were on the Citadel. One was to not protect me.’

She had answered ‘I lied about the not protecting you part. I can’t… and won’t keep that one, never intended to.’

This was closest to the truth about Cara. Some ringing note that sounded like it was possible, probable, even through all the distorted noise of Marcus’s head. It spoke under the sick babble like subharmonics from a Turian throat.

Garrus had hoped that maybe she’d recover, she just needed time… she loved him and she’d heal…

He’d felt sick and selfish thinking it and sicker again now when the surging need for that to be the truth hit him like it always did, fresh and sharp. The urge to make it the truth washed through his body. Strength and power to get something done, something vital. Because if she healed… that meant he could have her.

He, Krios and Marcus made a sick set of the iterations of being unable to control themselves on the subject of Cara.

It was so much worse than what he’d thought, worse in ways he couldn’t calculate. Garrus couldn’t do anything about it the same way he couldn’t change her eye color or hair back by hoping, the same way he couldn’t turn time back to the moment he first saw her alive again.
Turian blood on the tongue or Drell blood on the hands, he had a long and dizzying moment of tearing and then free fall. Simpler images of her healing after something in the dark happened were replaced with luridly illuminated isolation that was permanent. Corrupted injury and subverted nature. Bridging. She would try to kill Reapers before it killed her. Before Krios took her again.

It had been easier to hear about the stage-like setting of the gatherings and that had been excruciating, but he was separate from it, an observer. Like her death he had been remote from it. Now Garrus was an active player, his name used against her daily, pressed like a poisoned blade against her spine, move a millimeter and it would be Garrus whose spine would be severed by proxy.

She would never, ever stop protecting Garrus and Krios knew it.

She’d do anything for Garrus, just like she’d said.

Garrus felt the urge to slit his own throat as a way to escape just knowing about this for a few minutes and she had borne it for months, was still...

It did sound crazy and everyone would be motivated to discredit this slime of a human being. She had a chip. Couldn’t you order someone to not behave like an automaton? Order her to be grateful and kind? Order her to behave as though she were the happy lady of the house? Maybe her being kind resulted in her caring about staff and Krios allowed that because it didn’t matter to him either way. Garrus would very much like to discredit Marcus if he could, so he stated calmly, reaching for something, anything, a buffer and a shield that could turn a killing blow into glancing miss “The chips have adjustable settings.”

“Yeah. Look, I seen that. I was curious, I done some research.”

Garrus felt another surge of blistering rage. I’ll bet you did. You said you could get anything you wanted on Beckenstein, Marcus. Did you buy yourself a woman and a chip and test out all your theories? Several women, several chips? Is that how you know exactly how a chip does or doesn’t work? I think you watched Cara and Krios, and then I think you tried it yourself. I think you’re jealous you couldn’t get the same results. Garrus moved his hands to his knees to avoid displaying talons that he could not pull back in and didn’t want to. If Garrus asked that question, if he saw the answer any more clearly, he’d have to kill him.

“The best chips have settings he coulda used where he leaves it on all the time at maybe 80% and just tells her what to do. So explain why she’s doin’ what she wants to do if he could just tell her ‘You don’t wanna read no more’ or tells her ‘The staff’s disposable, stop lookin’ at me like you can do somethin’ about it.’ I think he wanted her awake ‘cause that’s worse for her and he’s an evil fuck.”

“Maybe the chip didn’t work on her?”

“Maybe. She says it did. I just… I’m sorry, I don’t believe her but I know why she’d lie. It’s ‘cause ain’t nobody can help her, and that what is fuckin’ killin’ me. That’s why I’m here. She’s out but it’s the same fuckin’ thing for her in some ways ‘cause he’s still alive or ‘cause he’s made sure somethin’ will happen if she steps out of bounds. She’s prolly supposed to go back to him if someone rescues her. No way she’s doin’ that, but he’ll make other people suffer for it. I’d tell you to watch your back, but fuck…sir, I don’t know how to tell you to be safe from this guy. If anybody knows what she’s up against it’s her. I’m bettin’ he knows whether or not she cares about you. I’m bettin’ she cares about you. I’m bettin’ he told her if she lets anybody touch her or talk to her, try to help her, they die. Even out here. Especially out here, until he gets her back. I had no idea she was Commander Shepard, and even if I did… I wouldn’t have tried to help her, and I think she was tryna avoid amateurs gettin’ caught in the crossfire. I’d a tried, I’d a been dead. My family woulda been
dead. My niece’s cat woulda been dead stacked next to my niece neatly, probably with a polite fuckin’ note and an anonymous flower arrangement to the funeral that everyone fuckin’ admires. This guy could threaten and he delivered on any promise he made.”

Garrus felt a sick lurch of hoping that chip had been used on high strength as often as possible. He changed course. “If this is all true, why aren’t I dead yet? If I’m the most logical person to kill to hurt her?”

“I think he wants her to be happy in some sick fuckin’ way, like he could prove she’s better off with him than without him. Like he’s some merciful guy ’stead of a vicious fuck. I think it worked sometimes ’cause she loves books and cookies, ’cause she knows he coulda chained her to a wall in the basement and she better be grateful about that or that’s gonna change if he don’t have no more reason to be nice. Like maybe he tells her every night Councilor Vakarian’s still alive ’cause she been a good girl that day and ’cause of that he been a good guy. It’s all sick, I ain’t sayin’ it woulda worked to convince her that he was a good guy, but he made her act all grateful and sweet no matter what he done. I think he wanted Commander Shepard and a chip would just make her a… thing. If you’re alive it’s ’cause you’re leverage. He don’t kill everyone’s family before they take the trip to Beckenstein. He made sure we knew it could happen once we got there though. She cares about you. That’s a strong thing, somethin’ he can use. He kills you and she knows it, maybe she ain’t got no reason to agree to no deal no more. He’s always gotta have someone he can take away from her, someone she don’t wanna lose. I think he wanted to dance with her. I think he’s pissed off from here to the galaxy’s edge that he can’t sit on a couch and feed her fruit all day no more. I think he’d be extra pissed he ever sees you two dancin’ and on that day the deal changes to the next phase of whatever that sick fuck promised her would happen if she broke a deal he offered, turned him from a nice guy to a bad guy. Whoever he is now, wherever he is now, he’s not the sorta guy to cut his losses. He turns other people into losses. That whole fuckin’ place was a museum but she’s the only thing he gave a shit about, the only thing he thought about, the only thing he cared about. He didn’t lose interest. He was makin’ expensive and long-term plans and the cost of her fuckin’ clothes alone… he was committed. I can’t prove it, ain’t nobody else is gonna say it ’cause they’re smarter than me. Everybody else has nieces who got cats or nephews who got dogs. Hell, you wanna kill me for sayin’ it. I wanna kill myself for seein’ it. That place made people crazy or dead. Didn’t make her crazy. Did’nt make her dead. I think she drove him crazy though, just not dead. Me, it drove me crazy and I’m gonna be dead, I definitely deserve to die.”

Garrus did not disagree.

“So I find she’s Commander Shepard… and some shit looks the same and some shit don’t make no sense with what I seen. The stuff that don’t make no sense is the stuff I don’t know if you know. I already knew he was scared of her. I already knew she was important. She kept her cool ’cause she was Commander Shepard and wasn’t chipped. She ain’t no dominatrix and he’s still got issues, but the issues make more sense. She had this evil fuck of a guy lookin’ at her like… you had to see the guy before she got there and then see the guy maybe a month after. Maybe he’s thinkin’ some “Beauty and the Beast” shit is gonna happen, you know? Maybe you don’t know. Human thing. Stockholm Syndrome’s a thing, look that up too. But she ain’t gonna budge and decide he’s really the guy for her like he wants. So why don’t I think there’s a chip? ’Cause of her face. Why do I think he wants her to wanna stay? ’Cause of his face.”

Garrus looked at Marcus as impassively as possible, suppressing contempt and anger. This was useless information. No leads, no records, just a guy with a sick voyeuristic crush and a theory. Absolutely nothing actionable, no direction. Marcus couldn’t help Garrus find Krios, couldn’t help him help Cara. He’s busy making her captivity and her potential pursuit by Krios worse by mixing in every motivation and emotion and then shaking it up until what was left was chaos, where before it had been a simpler, if bleak picture.
Fuck. If we’re being honest about sick, voyeuristic crushes, add the Turian Councilor to the list of people who feel that way about Cara.

Marcus continued “If he’s just a sick evil fuck, which he is, don’t get me wrong, who has a slave and loses her, no big deal. Slaves are cheap and can be replaced. But she wasn’t never no slave and she ain’t replaceable and he’s a sick, evil and scary smart fuck. He’s been thinkin’ she’s gonna get out some day. He’s been thinkin’ about what to do about it. He’s thought about it a lot and I can’t tell you what options he gave her, but givin’ up on gettin’ her back is not one of those options. He looked at her like he’d do anythin’ for her ‘cept let her go, and that’s pretty much what he done. She wants books, she gets the best books. She wants ice cream he’s hirin’ pastry chefs. She wants sex… and here yeah, you can fuckin’ kill me for sayin’ it, but he ain’t hurtin’ her and here’s where the dominatrix theory don’t work. She ain’t hurtin’ him. She is gettin’ the best sex he can give her and he don’t touch nobody else, don’t let nobody touch her. So I came here yeah, to tell you he cares and that’s fuckin’ horrible. This is the last guy you want givin’ a shit about you. Eventually everythin’ he was doin’? Somehow it all had somethin’ to do with her. Fortunes spent, business just stopped happenin’. He’s got the most fuckin’ expensive woman in history and he looks like maybe he’d been hopin’ for a nice pretty tchotchke to set down somewhere quiet and admire and ‘stead he’s got a time bomb who only ticks down and he can’t fuckin’ disarm her.”

That almost made Garrus smile in a grudging way. He said softly “Yeah. That’s her. Expensive and difficult.”

“Abso-fuckin’-lutely that, and we was all cheerin’ her on. Quietly anyways. Every now and then a camera would catch her lookin’ at him as like if he don’t do what she wants… whatever it was… she was disappointed in him. Then the look on his face… Let me tell you, we fuckin’ loved that. It was the best thing ever. Meant our nieces and nephews would stay alive that day and so would we. She held his attention and we was off the hook. She ain’t gonna back up my story. It’s up to me to tell you ’cause I’m maybe one outta six guys seen even some of what I seen. I don’t know if the other guys are dead. I don’t know if anybody else is alive to say. I don’t know if she told you everythin’ and told reporters somethin’ else, or if she just don’t give a shit about reporters. I don’t know if you know. I can’t ask nobody else, neither can you, they ain’t gonna say. It’s not like we went to Armex together for a drink and a laugh off shift. We was all fuckin’ terrified and didn’t want to start no runnin’ game of cards, get to know each other, make friends, and watch Bob forget to make it to a security checkpoint one day on time and then bye-bye Bob, now meet Alan. I can’t explain to Alan just how fuckin’ scared he should be if he wants to live. I can’t even tell him why he should wanna live no more. I think I should mind my own fuckin’ business and feel sorry for this dumbass who thinks he’s smart and how someday he’s gonna have a house like this of his own. Then he sees her and thinks he could buy a woman like that with all the money he’s gonna make. Usually Alan is just a greedy stupid fuck, just smart enough to do somethin’ simple. Someone like me who was hired ’cause the thing he can really do for Krios is be scared. Be scared and get sleep, stay healthy, don’t miss work, don’t hit the wrong button. Realize you’re gonna spend every day preparin’ for your next shift, scared of what you done on your last one might mean you ain’t gonna sleep through the night, but you better sleep ’cause otherwise you’re gonna be tired, and tired makes you the wrong kinda stupid, the stupid Krios don’t want and can’t use. Usually it’s bye-bye Alan, hello Dave. I think sometimes the guys that died made out better. I was just gonna be terrified every day forever and I was gonna die there one way or the other, old age, make a mistake, don’t matter, there are so many greedy, stupid fucks with the capacity to be scared in the galaxy, that’s what made every single one of us so easy to hire and so fuckin’ expendable. Just grind us up and shape us into what he wants. Someone don’t come out the way he wants, they’re dead, move on to the next expendable fuck. Wasn’t never gonna be no Krios pattin’ me on the shoulder, tellin’ me I done a good job, he was gonna let me go. I don’t think I can explain to you how fuckin’ scared you should be, how fuckin’ scared she is for you.”
“We’re on the Citadel, not Beckenstein. Commander Shepard is a Spectre, not a powerless slave. She hunts slavers.”

“Yeah, that’s true but the Citadel’s got a lot of Beckenstein on it, in it, movin’ through it. People on the Citadel ain’t immune to bein’ threatened or taken. Hell, she was on Illium, right, and just disappeared? You think that can’t happen here? Maybe she’s smart enough it never happens to her again. But you? You absolutely sure everyone you got workin’ for you is loyal, ain’t spyin’ for nobody? Yeah, I saw him obsessed, I got obsessed. I started thinkin’ what I shouldn’t, started tryna be clever and this is what it fuckin’ got me. I don’t wanna argue with Commander Shepard’s story. I don’t wanna set reporters straight. I don’t wanna… tell the Councilor… that she… yeah. Krios knew how to control his staff without chips. We just had to do it. He wanted people sharp, thinkin’.

Chipped people are less useful than scared ones. We did what he wanted or we died or someone else died. I think he figgered out how to do that to her, ’cept he don’t wanna kill her, he’s gonna kill other people if he ain’t happy. Right now… he ain’t happy. If she can she’s gonna protect us. She’s gonna protect you. Someone should know that’s what she’s doin’. If she was chipped, she don’t gotta know us. That means she don’t gotta talk to us and also we ain’t responsible ’cause we ain’t supposed to know nothin’ about her. If she don’t know Krios, he ain’t all that smart. She don’t gotta look like she’s worried. So now it’s all settled and it’s just like Krios wants and she wants, just like before. We can all say ‘nice lady, we don’t know nothin’, poor us, glad he’s gone.’ Lady like that, I figger you know when she’s protectin’ you?”

“Yeah. I do. Or I thought I did. So you’re saying she’s still doing it?”

“Yeah. If she can, and I seen she can do a lot you don’t think nobody can do. He found a way to make her smile and study and… all the shit you heard. So Krios loses her. Now… he maybe likes her more than he’s liked anythin’… I ain’t sayin’ love, evil fuck and all… but he’s obsessed. This wasn’t mindless fun for him, this was…somethin’ else. Somethin’ maybe ain’t got a name. He wanted her, all of her, and wasn’t gonna take no for an answer from nobody, definitely not her. He… liked her… and he done that to her… is doing that… to her. With the galaxy goin’ to shit and maybe she can help… maybe she’s the only one can help… he does this to her. He don’t care if the galaxy goes to shit as long as he can have her. He ain’t afraid at all of tryna get her back. Wherever he is, that’s all he’s thinkin’ about. He ain’t afraid of you. He’s afraid of her but he likes that. That’s the point. That’s… why… he likes her. So danger ain’t gonna stop him. I can’t think of nothin’ that will ’cept a bullet through his brain. I think he can bug your office. I think it’s possible he’s listenin’ right now. I seen lots of Citadel folks at Beckenstein, but I don’t owe you or them shit, I ain’t sayin’ who they was. I owe her somethin’ though. Somethin’ that ain’t got a name maybe. I owe her not havin’ to hear it from me, just givin’ you a heads up, hopin’ you understand somehow and don’t kill me. You should know who the fuck you’re tryna find. Maybe not look, but know. I think if he wants me dead I’m dead and I don’t have nothin’ to say about it. I ain’t safe on the Citadel. I ain’t safe in this office. Shit, you wanna kill me. You prolly did before I even got here and now more. I think she knows just like I did… she had… and has… a job to do. She can’t fuck it up. I fucked up in so many ways. I took the job. I did the job. I didn’t help her. I didn’t help nobody. I let her get out. I lied to C-Sec. Now I’m fuckin’ tellin’ the truth but that’s just gonna make shit worse. Her job was to stay alive and keep him from takin’ out his disappointment with her on other people. She can’t stop him from doin’ that now, but maybe she can stop Reapers and he can only kill a few people. Important people to her, yeah, but not everyone. I think I’m dead if he decides I am, but I’m a sideline to him. He’ll get around to me eventually. He’ll find me in 5 or 10 years after I feel safe, after he’s got her back. I could find a hole and crawl in it maybe and one day I’d wake up with his smile in that hole the last thing I see or maybe I just don’t wake up at all. That’s if I’m lucky and he don’t torture my family to death in front of me first ’cause we had a deal.”

“But he’s not going to kill her?”
“No way he’d kill her. Ever. Whatever this was… is… it ain’t about killin’ her, it’s about keepin’ her and gettin’ her to say thank you to him for takin’ care of her so good. Yeah, we was bored, mostly starin’ at empty rooms and we was terrified but we wasn’t blind. Scared as everyone was, we was still fascinated and even… fuck, even jealous. Everyone wants to know what it’s like to be kissed the way he kissed her or wants to know what it’s like to have her kiss back the way she done… or both. He’s a pretty son of a bitch. She’s beautiful. Not just the way they looked, the way they moved, the way they thought, the way they talked. Watch ’em laugh and look at each other and know it ain’t love, but it’s somethin’. Somethin’ he’d spend every credit and kill every person alive to keep to himself. Somethin’ she’d kill him to escape if she got a chance, but sometimes she don’t wanna escape. It’s fucked up. It’s beyond fucked up and I feel sick sayin’ what I saw. There’s a chip but there ain’t. There’s sex but… please don’t fuckin’ kill me, she liked it. There’s not sex… there’s friggin’ book club… and he likes that. So I figger most people are gonna come to the Councilor’s office and say ‘It’s like she said. He took her, there’s sex, now he’s gone, glad that’s over.’”

“But it’s not over?”

“It ain’t over for him. It ain’t over for her. She knows she ain’t safe. She knows you ain’t safe. Maybe he’s told her to tell this story about Thane Krios bein’ dumb if she does escape and he’s still alive or he kills everyone she cares about. He kills ’em bloody. He kills ’em painful and she knows it’s ’cause she didn’t keep the deal he offered. Maybe he’s got an associate do him one last well paid favor after he’s dead, take out the Turian Councilor. I’m scared she’s gonna be in the fight and have her back turned and he’s gonna be there, and he’s gonna kill her squad and take her. That’s why all this ‘glad it’s over’ shit scares the fuck outta me. I ain’t sayin’ she’s gonna die. I’m sayin’ she knows she can’t do nothin’ about him comin’ after her or the people she loves, just like in that house. I’m sayin’ she knows not to make friends and go to Armax with nobody that might draw his attention. He wants her to have a library and a ballroom and he’s gonna make fuckin’ sure she does. Not his library. Not his ballroom. Somethin’ she’d love, somethin’ just for her, somethin’ perfect for her. Somethin’ that even if she hated his guts… and I don’t think she did…”

“She doesn’t hate.”

“Yeah, one more thing that’s ‘I shoulda known’ and ‘I ain’t surprised.’ If she’s tellin’ you and everybody’s tellin’ you that she’s gonna be fine and he’s not gonna find her, they’re lyin’. Everyone’s got real good reasons to lie. I’d have good reasons to lie too, but maybe I just don’t give a shit no more. I know I’m dead. Reapers or fuckin’ Thane Krios or just a little more time or just a little less breathin’, don’t matter. Once I took that job I was fuckin’ done. Happiest day of my miserable life I got that job. Felt like I could make somethin’ of myself. Yeah, well I did. Or he did. He can threaten her ’cause she cares and has somethin’ to live for, has a purpose. I used to care. I don’t no more. Not about myself. Maybe you can help her, you know what I know, maybe you can’t. But you know at least.”

“Is it possible that people are moved off Beckenstein and when they lose their citizenship maybe they lose their name and access, those still on Beckenstein just don’t know? Maybe they’re not dead, maybe he’s not killing people? Maybe it’s all a bluff? Maybe he’s different with her because it’s her, and business is business but it isn’t as bad as it looks?”

Marcus looked at him with clear pity for the Councilor’s naiveté. Probably the same look he gave to Alan’s enthusiasm about his great new job. That expression looked like it belonged on his face, that’s how his face was usually shaped. “Yeah, you never seen the guy work. Really work. The way he looked at people durin’ meetings or the way he wasn’t never afraid in a room fulla criminals. Everyone was afraid of him. Scary people was afraid of him and for good reason. It wasn’t no bluff. He wasn’t afraid to kill. He wasn’t afraid to die. This is one of those things I ain’t talkin’ about. I don’t need to tell you who he killed, what I seen, I can tell you he killed, I seen it. Lemme ask you
somethin’. You thought Saren was a bad guy, right? Everyone told you he was fine, you was paranoid and Saren was a good guy. But you saw stuff, you thought stuff. You was doin’ your job. I was doin’ my job and yeah, I was an obsessed, sick, voyeuristic dipshit gettin’ paid too much, but I figger maybe you know what it’s like. I mean, not the obsessed, sick, voyeuristic dipshit part, the ‘comin’ to a different conclusion’ part. You seein’ about Saren… it matters. That’s why I’m tellin’ you. Everyone says to you there ain’t no Reapers and Saren’s a good guy… that’s like this. Everyone sayin’ to me there’s ain’t no Thane Krios, just some dipshit stupid coward, Commander Shepard’s back to work and it’s all okay. You didn’t know with Saren what was goin’ on, but you knew somethin’ was. That’s where I am.”

“So why didn’t Krios notice you were an obsessed, sick, voyeuristic dipshit and kill you?”

“I got a good poker face when I’m terrified. I didn’t fuck up my job until that last day. Maybe he figgers it wasn’t my fault, maybe he does. I maybe didn’t fuck up permanent until now. I didn’t follow his advice to drop it and leave it at the door. Doesn’t surprise me that her advice is to tell people to drop it and leave it at the door. That’s what she learned at Beckenstein. ’Cause if you don’t leave it alone and do what he says… Thane Krios happens. Now, Thane Krios can’t do shit about Reapers and if she goes after them and has guys at her back with guns every second, maybe she’s okay, maybe she’s just gonna get shot by somethin’ ’stead of havin’ books delivered while she eats her favorite cookies and has a man give her everythin’ he thinks she should want so she thanks him for it. My place in all this, sir, is that I don’t matter. I ain’t one of those guys people care about. I’m scared. I’m also a dead man soon one way or the other. The job drove me to obsess but also to do just a bit more drinkin’ than I already done. Cirrhosis. I ain’t gonna get a liver regen. I figger I earned an ugly death. I’m gonna die before Krios gets to me if I can, but if he kills me I deserve it, not for failin’ him, but for failin’ her. Maybe he and I are gonna agree on somethin’. I should die and painful, maybe not for what he thinks, but what the fuck. It’ll work for me. I’m gonna die before Reapers can get to me if I can. If you wanna kill me for knowin’ what I know and doin’ exactly fuckin’ nothin’ about all the shit that went on in that house ’cause I was… am… greedy and scared… you go ahead and do it. I did nothin’ but hope she’d keep it up. What I’m doin’ now is chicken shit and I should prolly get a new liver and try to qualify to go fight for the Alliance. Hell, that’d be so heroic, right? I should tell her that, right? Make it about me? ‘Gee, Commander Shepard, watchin’ you get voluntarily raped day after day so you could escape and head out to save everyone’s lives later on inspired me to stand up and be a man.’ Yeah, that’s okay. I think I’ll die in peace, spare her another person she has to protect. She done enough for me. I can’t do nothin’ for her ’cept warn you things ain’t what they seem. Then I die quiet or I die bloody. Either way I take it with me.”

Too much of this was striking new chords, a simple round of symmetrically tragic melody was morphing into something else, something like every possible note played at once, trying to reach orchestral depth. Paranoia mingled with comprehension of a kinship of a depth of obsession and desperation in Krios.

What wouldn’t Garrus do for Cara?

What wouldn’t Krios do for Cara?

He wouldn’t let her go. They both wouldn’t let her go.

Was there a different possible definition of ‘letting go’ available here?

What if Krios had acted the way Marcus described him? Willing to kill everyone. Were Reapers part of ‘everyone’? Spend every credit… abandon an estate that meant nothing to him without her in it?

What did Cara inspire people to do?
On an impulse he asked “Would you look at a picture for me?”

“Sure.”

“Is this Thane Krios?” Garrus displayed a picture of Kegirin Itran… who was now Varin Celetis… The person at the bottom of an ocean with her, inside a Reaper. Garrus felt sick asking the question, but he already felt sick. Sick was still better than dead. There had to be a way to heal. Celetis was the newest member of the Normandy crew. Someone Drell, close to Cara, someone she touched. Someone she talked to. Someone she could not thank enough. He could not help but draw parallels.

Marcus had at least made him look, if not believe, that if…if…things were not what they seemed…

Thane Krios was not as incompetent as portrayed. He sold identities as part of his business. What if Krios had effectively disappeared because he wasn’t Krios anymore?

Only Itran and Cara had said there was a chip at all… what if it had never existed?

Krios had been right about the books and the cookies… Garrus could confirm that part. What if Krios decided… or she convinced him to give her something else she’d love and would thank him for?

Now Celetis helps her get a Reaper of her own? Several Reapers? What could she possibly want more?

How much was luck and coincidence, how much was craft and misdirection, how much was inspiration, how could Garrus tell with nobody talking?

How much was Garrus’s jealousy and impotence?

What if… what if Kegirin Itran had become obsessed with Cara when he first saw her eight years ago and… had become Thane Krios? No, that was impossible. They were two separate people, timelines and…

His timelines for Krios were not validated. The only times he could be verified to be somewhere was one day a month at a gathering… They didn’t even have DNA.

What if she had run away to Beckenstein to be with him and that’s why Thane Krios wasn’t dead? It’s not as though she were incapable of lying… about anything and everything.

Cara had changed so much she was unrecognizable, at Krios’s direction. Couldn’t he do the same for himself?

Krios wanted to give her what she wanted, wanted her to thank him, was a Drell, was intelligent.

Celetis was giving her what she wanted, she was thanking him, was a Drell, was intelligent.

Why would she take a confidante that was so very much like her abuser?

Why would she take a confidante at all when she had a bond mate who desperately wanted to be that person for her?

Because Celetis rescued her and she’s trying to protect him from Krios. Celetis saw her on that estate and risked himself for her. She trusts him and can confide in him because he was a slave himself. He’s rescued and counseled slaves for years. She could have five Cara motivations at once and you don’t know her reasons. She won’t explain them.
Celetis would never earn mercy from Krios, and unlike Garrus has no independent responsibility to fulfill. She is again trying to protect him, obviously. Talking to him doesn’t matter… he’s at exactly as much risk as she is every moment.

Cara could potentially avoid attracting Krios’s full attention to Garrus if she stayed away from him.

That wasn’t possible for Cara or Celetis and all of them knew it… a few conversations here or there… or even dancing in public… would not change how much Krios’s wrath would manifest. They were as bad as it got on the fucked up vengeance scale, they couldn’t make it worse between them.

What if she’s using Celetis as bait? Would she tell him and would he agree? Were they both trying to trap Krios?

They’ve both earned the right to be exceptional to each other.

There’s no way he knew how to deliver a Reaper to her doorstep. That’s crazy.

This is all crazy.

Fuck.

You can’t be her bond mate because if Krios knows and is having you followed, and you know he is absolutely having her followed, all he needs is proof that’s anonymously leaked to destroy what she’s trying to build, to accomplish.

There’s no way being on that throne qualified as doing what she wanted. That wasn’t her… was it?

Why didn’t she change her face back?

Because she said he’d release video anyway.

Why did she say she loved me?

Because she does, you idiot.

Spirits, please help me.

Garrus had to find a way to make this all make sense somehow. He had to.

Marcus looked at the picture with little reaction “Krios was green. The Drell look a lot alike to me, but that ain’t Krios.”

“Do you recognize him?”

“Maybe that’s the doctor? The one that was on the grounds to take care of her? Is that what happened? Did he help her escape?”

Obsession and that same revolting camaraderie lit Marcus’s face, like he knew her, like he had a right to know what happened to her. It leaked through his voice, his eyes round and fascinated at the new piece of information. Garrus resisted the impulse to kill again, his helplessness and cooling ashes of grief now roaring into bonfire strength with rage, confusion and disorientation.

No. I know her. I do know her. I also have a right to know what happened to her.

I don’t know her last name. She never gave it to me… she never answered my calls…
Garrus redirected the conversation to something less lethal. “Weren’t you there?”

“Yeah, but I was watchin’ the grounds, not the house that day. I don’t decide which monitors I watch. I seen him come in but that’s all. There was cameras in that room, sure, but after a while they wasn’t monitored by us. Feeds was still live and someone made sure the cameras was workin’ but didn’t watch what was bein’ recorded. I figgered Krios didn’t want nobody watchin’ her in there but him. I don’t think nobody saw what happened that day. Any Drell could be any other Drell with a paint job I guess, but that guy don’t look like Krios. It ain’t just the colors, the markings are wrong and Krios… Krios is a scary guy. I’d cross the street to get away from him if I saw him comin’ the other way. I’d cross a few streets, go the other way, go home, lock the door, hope I ain’t been followed. This guy I wouldn’t notice.”

“Can’t all that be changed cosmetically?”

Garrus heard in her voice ‘You didn’t see him. He was good. Really good. Whose idea was the ultrasound?’

His idea. Her idea? Their idea? Whoever’s idea… someone smart. Not just someone lucky.

Someone inspired.

He heard Russ saying the Drell… whatever his name was… was very good, surprisingly good at combat for such a timid guy. If Cara was reluctant and could act dedicated to mayhem, couldn’t there be a Drell who was dedicated to mayhem that could act reluctant, knowing all along that he would succeed because he had her on his side?

Why was she on his side? When? Years ago?

But he had been afraid she’d kill him… at least at some point.

All it took was a few drops of blood. Her blood. Every time, her blood made him…

He was overtaken by the vertiginous lack of reliable perspective, of everything shaking loose at once, he couldn’t hold on to anything. Potential madness, talons out and ready to kill.

What her blood did was make him crazy. This was crazy. Don’t get sucked in.

Even Marcus agreed as he said with incredulousness investing his voice “Are you askin’ me did Thane Krios pretend to be a doctor and then break a woman out that he was plannin’ a library for? Yeah, I sound crazy, but that sounds crazi…er. Sir, um, Councilor.”

“Okay. We found this guy’s DNA in the master bedroom.”

“Yeah, well, you would. That’s where he saw her, right?”

“We didn’t find any other Drell DNA.”

“Krios had been off the estate for days. There’s DNA sweeps as part of housekeepin’ and security procedure. Every two days, room by room, special lights. I don’t understand the tech, not my area. I was on surveillance, not maintenance. Clothes was burned, surfaces scrubbed chemically and with those lights. Fortunes of clothes burned every two days. If I was to guess, sir, I’d say he don’t want samples of his DNA… or hers… to be identified by someone like… say… you.”

“Did you ever see Thane Krios and this man together?”
“No. But Krios wasn’t all that cuddly. I figger a doctor’s like maintenance staff, not a guest. Like someone he’d hire to clean the pool. He don’t meet ‘em at the door and shit goes on schedule like he says it’s gonna.”

“Did you do the vetting on this man, security checks?”

“No, nothin’ like that. Krios did that himself.”

“So… Commander Shepard is alone… and she’s not chipped… and not monitored by security… and Krios isn’t home, he lets another Drell touch her, talk to her? When she’s not allowed to talk to anybody and nobody is allowed to touch her? When he’s afraid of her trying to escape and watches her every minute? Someone she saved from slavery years ago and that’s how he recognizes her?”

“She fuckin’ what? No shit? She saved his life?”

“Sound a little weird to you?”

“It’s all fuckin’ weird if you ask me, but yeah. Small galaxy.”

“Yeah. Seems that way.”

“So you tell me somethin’. You in love with her?”

It didn’t matter anymore and he should not say it but… No. It mattered and he would. Whatever Marcus knew or was going to say to anybody, Garrus was sick of ambiguity. He was sick of lying and wanted to make one thing clear to everyone if he could, particularly to this person who had no idea what love was and couldn’t be right about what he saw. “Very much so.”

“Does she know that?”

“She does.”

“Okay. Look, this is all above my pay grade. If I can help I will, but I don’t think I can. It’s all fuckin’ insane and tryna figure out what a sick fuck wants can make you think like a sick fuck so I ain’t doin’ myself no favors here. I hope she gets on with livin’. I hope you can get on with livin’. My advice, stop lookin’ for Krios, you won’t find him. Any trail you’re gonna find is gonna be fake. You find a body, I’d bet all the money I got that it ain’t him but you’re gonna be sure it is. If he can waste your time or fuck with you, he will. She knows he’ll find her. She knows she can handle him. You… he’ll just kill. Her… he won’t hurt her. Yeah, he’ll take her, but shit, she’ll get out again. She’ll do her fuckin’ job like she done before. You do yours. She wants to do somethin’ useful with her life rather than make Krios… or you… think he’s a Drell God that nobody can stop. That’s what he wanted her to do, she wanted to stop doin’ it.”

“That’s what she told me.”

“She’s a fuckin’ smart lady. I’d listen to her. But you ain’t gonna, are you?”

“Probably not.”

“I really can’t say I understand… any of this. I’m sorry for your loss, Councilor Vakarian. I’m sorry for her loss.”

“Yeah. Me too. I can offer you protective service through C-Sec.”

“No offense, Councilor, but I don’t think that will help me. Even if I could, I wouldn’t. I shouldn’t
be helped. I’m what you call… scum. So ask whatever you want, but I’m just gonna leave after sayin’ what I come to say, and then whatever happens, happens, and I won’t cost nobody no tax money or the effort of fillin’ out a form that he can find in his sleep. It just might piss him off into bein’ insulted that I didn’t try harder.”

“A lot of former Beckenstein staff have disappeared.”

“He’s either doin’ it or they gone back to their families, used all that money and got everyone moved and safe somehow. I’d do the same, but I’ve earned my death a few times over. You gotta time machine I’d give it a try, but if I just gotta live with myself, no thanks.”

“If I had a time machine I wouldn’t be now.”
Well, here we are again
and we're looking at each other as if each other were to blame.
You think you're so smart but I've seen you naked
and I'll probably see you naked again…

If all else fails you can blame it on me…

Yes dear I love you,
but sometimes I think that love's not enough for you.
So you want to play mind games?
Well that's fine, go ahead, la, la, la I can't hear you…

“Blame It On Me” – Barenaked Ladies

++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++

Boarding the Reaper had been a staged process executed and authorized by the Leviathan. Each Reaper had a controlling consciousness. The Leviathan understood the technical aspects of the Reapers a great deal more than Rin was capable of comprehending. Rin lacked the intellectual framework of what was possible with Reaper technology and in all the ways that Reapers shaped like Leviathan were resonant in ability. He would do his best to become educated as to possibilities. The consciousness investing the Reaper used that platform to navigate and maneuver. Internally the Reaper housed indoctrinated drones. They were not necessary for the continued function of the Reaper platform, but were available for ground assault when necessary.

As had been seen through Collector agents such as accounts of Harbinger from Spectre Orbestan, Reapers were capable of isolating and projecting consciousness from platform to platform.

The Reaper’s consciousness was not an artificial intelligence, it had not been part of the Reaper when it was built, it was not born, it was not inherent. It was the ghost in the machine, like a lighting fixture that was inert on its own, once connected brilliant and functional. Regardless of its origin or distinction from Rin’s understanding of what consciousness might or might not be, the Leviathan understood it. They were able to suppress and control it as they could other consciousness. For the moment the only function it provided was to report back in the ways it was expected, that all was well as the Leviathan learned Reaper functionality and potential, what was required. Reapers had gained the ability to isolate and project consciousness from the Leviathan themselves. The Leviathan were still best suited to the task, indoctrination itself an inferior process. With the Normandy as bait it was possible to preserve both the Normandy and Leviathan anonymity, which was critical to the Leviathan’s ambitions. If the Leviathan decided that circumstances were not favorable to throw in their lot with the sentient creatures of this time, they wished to preserve their options to wait another 50,000 years without detection.

In theory, Reapers would only be potentially and tangentially aware that the sentient creatures of this cycle had come up with some way to disable their platforms temporarily, but function was regained quickly and the consciousness reported back as usual.
Reapers had multiple sources of maintained and gathered fuel and were self contained and self sufficient in that regard. According to the Leviathan fuel was not and would not be an issue, Reaper technology on the subject was so far advanced as to be approaching the mythical perpetual motion machine. Biomass, elemental mass, radiation were all capable of being converted and utilized as fuel. There was housing and food for the drones that would be suitable for Rin and Cara. Theoretically they could synthesize anything they might require with technology available on the Reaper. He was looking forward to testing that capacity.

The Leviathan, to produce the least amount of damage internally to the Reaper’s function suppressed the consciousness of the Reaper other than basic ‘all is well’ reporting as required, fortunately not much of that was required. The Leviathan then compelled each of the drones to move toward the airlocks, jettisoning them into the depths, where they were crushed. It took eighteen hours to provide a purge of the living with no damage to technical or structural systems.

Using this method with the Normandy as bait, Reapers could be lured without revealing the presence of Leviathan. Reapers were spare in this section of space and that was preferable. The Leviathan could not afford for the greater Reaper consciousness to become aware of their presence, to be classified as the highest threat.

They could do a great deal with disabled and converted Reapers and the ability to travel with escorts with Reaper capabilities.

The initial concern was which caliber of consciousness would be available that could navigate a Reaper independently. The Leviathan were capable. Rin had volunteered to try to control a Reaper as well. Being at the mercy of the Leviathan and potentially the Reaper consciousness was not something Rin relished, but his choices on the subject were few. He would not allow Cara that opportunity and he could not return to the Normandy with Cara as she was.

Rin had kept his thoughts as disciplined as possible on the subject of Reapers and Leviathan, narrowed his focus while he was within range of the Leviathan sway. Ironically he tried to think much as Cara had managed to think around him in the past months, her mantra of not putting too much thought in one place an appropriate inspiration. He did not wish to be stripped of thought himself by the Leviathan should he not prove useful. At the moment he had a truce of sorts but he had no leverage, only potential utility. His hope was that he and the Leviathan were like-minded enough to serve each other’s purposes and he had no doubt that they wished to eradicate Reapers.

They were not friends, but the enemy of my enemy is my friend would be a working model for behavior. He was very much aware of how few choices he had and how he must move with exquisite care with the ambitious and avaricious creatures.

How he must move even more carefully with Cara, who had created this opportunity without sufficient time to plan. Now she would have time.

He had been lucky and must continue to hope to be lucky. The Leviathan were perhaps humbled at being trapped for eons, but he doubted that humility would be maintained for any length of time. His hope would be that with a galactic prize to be gained, a Drell-shaped asset would not be enough of a threat in any potential direction as long as he proved useful to be considered a liability. He believed he was able to tell when the Leviathan were in his mind and he would be able to maintain discipline of thought. If he were not able to, there was nothing to be done about it, the inherent risks and required audacity something one accepts when dealing with mechanical, projected and ancient Gods that required worshippers and sacrifice.

The main failing of the Leviathan at the moment was their numbers.
They could attempt travel and could manage space travel without assistance, but their problem had also been Cara’s problem while held captive. They needed to strike once and definitively or they would be destroyed. Other than manipulation of consciousness, which required a closer range than Reaper weapons, they had no weapons and were vulnerable in space. If Reapers quarantined or blitzed Despoina they could be eradicated with conventional planet-destroying weaponry. A small population of Leviathan had traveled to this planet undetected before their species had been eradicated, having once ruled the galaxy. It was possible there were other Leviathan also taking refuge, but their locations were unknown. They must proceed as though the population of Leviathan upon Despoina, approximately 20,000 creatures, were all that remained. There were far more than 20,000 Reapers. Theoretically infinite Reapers, energy not being a concern, the raw power of the galaxy turned into these creatures as needed. 20,000 Leviathan could possibly however find a way to hijack other Reapers one by one, and by educating and appropriating other consciousnesses to be able to manage a Reaper on their own, as allies it was possible to fight Reaper technology with its only potentially successful foe –Reaper technology.

Given those numbers and the potential of Reapers being hijacked into their service, there was a tentative path to victory that had occurred to Rin. A victory for the Leviathan, a victory for Rin. Not likely something Cara would consider a victory, but that was why the Leviathan had negotiated with Rin in the first place.

It was unlikely that Cara would have remained their ally for long.

He had communicated his potential plan and thankfully small ambitions to them. He wished to survive with Cara, with her left in his care after whatever conquest took place. As Drell and Shepard were both such short lived creatures, he imagined it amounted to a kirrik beetle asking a Drell to be permitted to live for ten more minutes and die a natural death rather than being crushed under heel. The fact that he was so insignificant in their eyes was his only potential advantage, that what he wanted from them was not a cost, not a concern. Only that he be permitted to make his own way. One human woman, one Drell more or less would be nothing to them.

The Leviathan would wish to rule the galaxy again, their kind being the creatures that had begun the cycle of Reaping. Rin imagined their thoughts, this planet the center of a potential reseeding of their kind.

That would take time. There was not much that Rin needed to hide from them. He did not care if they wished to retake the galaxy. Cara’s goal was to defeat the Reapers but Rin did not owe her that. What he owed himself was to understand the needs of the Leviathan and be of use to them, which he would be. The Leviathan could oppose the Reapers and smaller creatures forewarned could perhaps retreat somewhere safe with guaranteed infrastructure. Perhaps within a Reaper.

It was possible. If he were capable of controlling one. If they were potentially infinite as a resource at the height of conflict, one Reaper more or less that presented no threat to the Leviathan with a Drell and a human inside might be permitted to escape their notice while they were distracted with greater ambitions. Galactic conquest would be a matter of epoch, and Rin wished only to survive another 40 years with her at his side.

He might reconsider that ambition considering what he had learned and what had become possible with modular consciousness. If he could fabricate, he could fabricate a body. If he could isolate and project consciousness into a ship, he could do the same with a body using Reaper capability and theoretically be immortal, and so could she.

He would have to decide whether or not that was something he desired. He could certainly extend his life expectancy until hers expired, she would theoretically live 80 years longer than he would.
In the present moment he could not imagine eternity being long enough to spend with her, and if that ended up not being true, immortality as an option was something he could always opt out of experiencing.

Theoretically relationships paled as time passed. He had never experienced a relationship and perhaps he would learn that truth eventually, at which time he would have open options.

If she ended up delivering godhood and immortality to him, he would certainly be grateful enough to at least consider the possibility.

He must take care, otherwise all the Leviathan need ask would be ironically ‘What do you not wish to tell us today, Rin?’

The main thing he did not wish to disclose was that he was incapable of trust and whatever bargain was made he would not allow himself to believe they would allow him to benefit without him exerting leverage, and he did not believe he would ever hold leverage over the Leviathan. He must be humble.

He would not ask them for a Reaper of his own. He must arrange to take one if that were an ambition he treasured.

It would be arrogance, the sort Cara had attempted, to tell these creatures what they must do for him. He was aware he must do for them and then be scarce. They would promise anything he asked for in his hubris, and then when he attempted to collect, bargain fulfilled, he doubted very much so that Gods would retain any sense of service to a minion. He had best be gone with her before any summit honoring his contributions graced his calendar.

He would still ask for something, and he had, carefully. He had asked only for her. That was expected with his avarice a known quantity.

Leviathan would wish to defeat Reapers and subjugate all life. That would always be their ambition. That was truly why working with Rin was of greater utility than working with Shepard, who might limit their diaspora or grow concerned about their ambitions.

How to keep her mind from turning in that direction was a challenge.

How to keep her mind from turning in their direction and being persuasive… also a challenge.

In the meantime Leviathan and Reapers were each other’s natural enemies. He could possibly escape wrath or attention through application of utility and guile. He need only avoid the crossfire of the Gods.

Not that those goals would be easy, but there were more possibilities today than there had been yesterday.

While he had waited for the Reaper to be purged of organic life, Rin had kept his consciousness to personal pleasures and goals, first and foremost her body. He melted her cold with his hands until she was warm and pliant, welcoming. If the Leviathan were capable of reading his mind while he was unaware, their first and main experience of him would be his experience of her as the center of his world; consistent with his stated goals and motivations.

Deceptively simple and an elegant solution to the three problems he faced: Lulling Leviathan. Lulling Cara. Wanting her until his body ached, an end to experiencing distance from her as pain. He abandoned all thoughts willingly to explore her in wind and rain.
He had counted down all his stalled impulses on her body. He had counted moments where he wished to kiss her, lined them all up in his mind and recalled them one by one. He had counted moments where he had wished to stroke his hands along her skin, he lined them up as well. He drove her into and kept her in venom haze and compliance with ease, which was gratifying in itself.

He would not ask the Leviathan to alter her mind for him, he must do that himself.

He enjoyed this aspect of his work.

He alternated his needs and desires, kissed her, touched her, whispered to her, tasted her.

She was cold, sick, soul-sick and miserable and he found himself wishing to change that in her. His desires, even those counted, were less about her on his knees for him than him on his knees for her until she was warm, moaning, whispering that she was his and digging furrows in his skin with her repaired nails. Her nails were shorter than they had been but she still enjoyed marking him with them.

Images of times he’d driven inside this woman at Beckenstein had flooded his mind. She’d screamed and scratched at him, had demanded merciless and more from him and he had given her what she wanted until his lungs burned and muscles were stripped of strength, until he could not breathe without pain, until his vision blurred. Invariably she could not walk the next day without pain. He remembered carrying her to the bath with weak legs, his hands in her tangled hair, the magnificent hint of smug in the smile on her face as she surveyed scratches she had drawn on his skin with nails he had painted for her.

He moved slowly, gently, carefully and she turned as she always did in her envenomed Drala’fa mindless moments to restless urging, her hands on his shoulders, gliding down his sides, her hips twisting against him, her moans released to the rain and her lip between her teeth until his lip were between her teeth. As always, she would scratch at him and bite and he would allow it, revel in it and her and then he would hold her down, her hands held over her head or behind her back, fingers entwined with hers or around her wrists, most often her mouth and hands occupied as she wished, with his. She demanded it. Him. Them.

Her body knew what she wanted. She grew impatient with patience. She grew frustrated with gentle. She tried to prove she did not want him for his venom and the pleasure he brought her… some part of her insisting still on love over lust, but Cara, that is a lie. I know it and you prove it again and again. You grow far too enthusiastic and I do not stop you. You ask if you demand too much of me… and you do. You always have. But I will not answer yes. You will drive me to exhaustion and death and ask sweetly if what you demand is too much, as though you asked for a book on the table to be passed to you rather than every ounce of strength and guile I own.

I tell you ‘He is yours’ and it is not a lie.

He began again the gentle and patient path that led to her nails down his back, to where her endless and hidden well of hunger and pain was expressed, a well he had found and uncovered. She was the storm, wanted to feel that she could struggle but would never be released, would always be wanted. He recalled the sting of her smug smile and light fingertips along furrows she had made in his skin, surveying her work. She enjoyed marking his skin but she would never say so except with her eyes and her smile, her fingertips close to the pain she’d wrought but not too close.

Never the same place twice. As though she had a map of his body and she filled it in furrow by furrow, plowing her field diligently.

Regardless of the loss of her overarching personality and ability to seem like Commander Shepard in
front of others, at the moment there was no need for that. He found every new mark on her body, memorized her again.

She dug new furrows in his skin, demanded and bit and scratched, counting down her own missed desires. She was not Drell, was not orderly and discrete in her moments as he might be. He might remember a patch of light when they sparred lighting her hair, something that made him reach for her. He had the luxury of gentle and measured, of responsibility for her happiness and comfort, health and vivacity.

She was none of those things, neither discrete nor responsible, her storm was not meteors or aurora but the tornado laying waste, out of control and determinedly so.

She had missed him by any name. She might not know who he was, but she knew what she wanted from him and she took it.

He had kept her in the rain until his hands could no longer warm her, until her core temperature dropped and the shivers from her skin was not in reaction to his hands, the rain or her coming in tight shudders around him any longer. Her teeth chattered uncontrollably, her skin blanched to grayish. Yet true to Cara’s nature, instead of her hands falling away, they dug in deeper to hold onto him. He drove her to exhaustion, not far from her starting point of falling to the deck after speaking to Gods that were foreign in an environment that was foreign, both willing to kill her.

He had still only counted his way through a few hundred suppressed urges and there were thousands to go.

She did not count. Her level of need was as always seemingly infinite.

He drove her to unconsciousness, the only time her hands ever fell away. She had driven him in fact to near unconsciousness. He carried her back to the shuttle and used the emergency supplies there to dry her, warm her, clothe her and yes, restrain her before retrieving what was salvageable of their gear, her armor and their weapons. Despite what he had told her, he would need to resort to restraints. Beckenstein had hostages and a perimeter and his watchful eye. Now they would both be in an unknown, easily exploitable environment with no perimeter and watchful Leviathan who might grow curious about her, might speak to her.

Assuming that she would be predictable or even effectively threatened when not directly under venom and in his arms would be a deeply foolish error. Testing her compliance was problematic. She had warned him that at a certain point she would no longer accept his threats. She might consider Vakarian to be acceptable collateral damage at a pragmatic turn to her strategically fluid personality and it would be unwise to underestimate her.

If she were to consider that he was thinking if not already at the point of foregone conclusion that ultimately the Leviathan would rule the galaxy…

All the potential trust she had in him that he had placed in her mind would not keep her from killing him as efficiently as possible and absolutely no hostage would serve against that, not even Vakarian. He must behave always as though that were true from this point forward. For her to catch a glimpse of that end game would end whatever partnership they shared or appeared to share.

Was it even possible with her mind that it would not occur to her and soon? Her capacity to learn, as he had stated often, terrified him. She had enough information to come to the correct conclusion, but not proof.

Just as Vakarian now had enough suspicion to suspect that Thane Krios was smarter than he seemed,
Cara more cooperative than a chip would allow, Varin Celetis not what he seemed. The missing piece that was undiscoverable would always be venom, and Marcus Enger knew nothing of venom and neither did Vakarian.

It had never been a possibility to allow Cara to consider Vakarian a refuge. Love him, yes, attempt to turn to him, ever, no.

If at all possible Vakarian himself would force Cara to some sort of revelatory confrontation, and Cara herself would choose beyond compulsions and beyond suggestion in a clear moment that Vakarian was only a Councilor to her and she could not see him.

It would be best for everyone involved.

Of course it also might get Rin killed but that was already a redundant risk that did not keep him from future reward.

Marcus Enger had been an unfortunately composed creature that Thane Krios allowed to live because Cara wished it to be so, but death would have been easier for the man. Marcus had watched for years, had done his job well. His mind was another avaricious, familiar place, but Marcus made the mistake, as Vakarian did, of coveting a woman that did not belong to him.

Marcus made the mistake of owning and abusing slaves of his own, chipped women he had used to try to duplicate the effect he’d seen Krios achieve with Drala’fa.

Marcus had confessed to Vakarian just exactly enough to suspect, to fear, and Vakarian would still have a path to life if he listened to her and allowed Marcus’s poison to rinse off as she advised.

As you wished, Drala’fa, I kissed a frog in your name, and that frog whispered to a Councilor and poured poison into his ear.

What would gall Vakarian most would be the suspicion that Cara was complicit and would confess to the same.

Marcus did not have cirrhosis, but would wake every day with the fresh realization that he had been recently diagnosed with it and that he would die soon. He would disappear into seclusion, live out what he thought would be a miserable and paranoid short life. His life would grow into an endless series of days of a miserable, paranoid and long life where he feared Thane Krios and cirrhosis and his hair grew gray and he was never free of the delusion, never gathered friends to correct his sense of time repeating itself or kept another slave. He would be alone with himself and the inside of his own mind. He would disappear somewhere with his delayed but also serendipitous opportunity to have a new name and keep his earned fortune. He would occasionally hallucinate the flash of iridescent green scale in the periphery of his vision and would have nightmares but would otherwise live a long and hag-ridden life as Thane had felt appropriate.

Most of the staff had been provided with equally serendipitously available exit packages of new identities, reunited with families, as Cara had wished, prosperity to the second generation. In truth beyond that, money not an obstacle to fulfillment of her wishes. Every member of staff with their planning had survived relatively intact except for Marcus.

Marcus he claimed for his own. Had she been inside Marcus’s head no doubt she would have forgiven him, imagining that his years of forced service caused him to be that way. He was born that way, Drala’fa. Alive, as you wished, yet never free.

Vakarian sets his own fate with just enough truth to choose his path.
He would allow Cara her choices or not, question her requirements as his Avah or not. Attempt to confront or kill Varin Celetis or not. Whatever he chose, Rin would be forewarned and forearmed. Vakarian had let both Itran and then Marcus Enger walk into his office without being sufficiently searched. The Councilor’s office was redundantly bugged with a separate device delivered for transportation of transmission module away from the tower, a signal never originating from his office. Comparable devices had followed him home.

Vakarian was under contract to end his life but those contracts would only be activated under certain conditions. Rin’s death alone would not trigger it. Rin risked his own life on this path and Vakarian was only subject to pain or suffering beyond what he already experienced should Cara herself make it necessary. If a swarm of husks were to take Rin out, that would be a death he earned for himself. Before they engaged in combat he suspended his dead man’s switch, reactivated it upon the end of a mission. If he were denied Omni Tool access outside of that perimeter, there was a timer of a week. He must prevent the Councilor’s death through access to his Omni Tool.

Should Cara wish to imprison him and be unwilling to speak to him due to well-earned suspicions of priming commands, that was the risk she took. She had sufficient imagination, he need only tell her possibilities, not probabilities she could prevent.

When the Reaper was available for boarding Rin was still awake. There were abundant alertness aids on the shuttle as well as food. Whatever else they needed should be able to be located or fabricated on the Reaper. Spare emergency clothing on the shuttle was utilized in the meantime. She did not have her armor or weapons though those were preserved and cleaned with the only loss being her under suit cut from her body and given to the sea.

He was not yet exhausted, though combat, mind contact with Leviathan, biotic use and sex had worn him down but it would be long before he could sleep.

He had watched her, checked her every 15 minutes, neurological checks and monitoring of decompression sickness. She recovered quickly, slept for 10 hours, having spent two hours in the rain with him, an hour while he made certain she was warm, dry, restrained, as comfortable as possible while restrained, her clever hands covered in layers of cloth to rob her of any dexterity and then secured with hand-tied cord, not trusting to mechanical or technical restraint otherwise because she was Cara Fanning and that was to be feared and respected more than the fact that she was Commander Lal Shepard. Her feet were bound, the bindings secure but not damaging to her circulation. She was on her side sleeping on a long bench, hands bound behind her back and that binding secured to the wall.

To leave her comfortable in that position he did not move her or keep her on his lap, he must think. He did what she often did. He paced the small enclosure as the rain pounded on the exterior.

He thought, he ate, he paced while she slept.

He knew she was awake because he heard her laughing.

He knelt down next to her and smiled at her. She said “At least you know you’re in trouble.”

“You deserve the utmost caution, Cara.”

“One day you’re going to screw up. I’ll be waiting.”

“That will be an interesting day. Are you in pain?”
“Of course I’m in pain. I’m tied to a wall.”

“That in itself is not painful, but perhaps causing cramping.”

“Perhaps? Definitely. Come on, let me up.”

“Absolutely not.”

“I know it doesn’t look like it, but I’m feeling better and I think you are in so much trouble. Only some of it is from me.”

“You are correct.”

“Yeah, that’s why I’m tied to a wall.”

“It’s very distracting.”

“You’re a sick man, Senar.”

“Yes.” He’d counted new desires while she slept, played some of them out, his knuckles along the side of her cheek, along her jaw, gazing into violet fire that wished to leave him a singed husk and a scorch mark. He smoothed a fingertip along her eyebrow. He said “I apologize for the lack of amenities. I cannot entertain you every moment or arrange for it to be so.”

“So I’m just going to have to sit here and think, huh? I wonder what I’m going to think about.”

“I’ll be certain to ask you.”

“Let me up.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Come ON. I have to pee. Reapers and Leviathan are important, yes, but I have to pee.”

“You’ll tell any story, won’t you?”

“No, that’s you. I can tell the truth. Occasionally.”

“This leaves me with some procedural difficulties.”

“Yes, you have it very hard. Now.”

“Don’t use the word hard, Cara. I’m distracted enough.” He leaned forward and kissed her while she fussed and squeaked and could not back away any further.

He didn’t put her under venom too quickly, enjoying her fade and falter. He pulled back and watched her face, his hand gliding along her waist to her hip.

He said gently “Voice commands have been disabled in the shuttle, I am afraid. There are at least seventeen ways I can conceive of how you could kill me here given your freedom for approximately seven seconds.”

She glared at him “There are a lot more than seventeen and I don’t need that long. Just let me up, I’ll take it from here.”

“So I imagine. I have been distracted, as I mentioned. A lovely woman reminded me how much she
missed me.” It was true and she would certainly not argue that point or attempt to deny it. Her eyes traveled to scratches along his throat. He had not asked her to forget a moment of it.

She smiled at him, the smile that always sent chills down his spine, where she was seeing exactly how he was going to die, the eighteenth and the nineteenth and all the ways she counted her desires flashing in her eyes.

He stroked her hair back “If only we were safe at the estate, Drala’fa.”

“Safe isn’t going to happen out here, Senar. Kiss me and get it over with because you’re afraid I can kill you in far more ways than you can imagine yet.”

“I am not afraid. I know you can. It will not be over soon, Cara. You deserve the utmost caution and care.”

Then, because he did not have time, he did kiss her until she kissed back, always kissing her for longer than necessary for control alone, because he wished to, because he needed to, because ‘necessary’ with her was a matter of care and caution. If she were to grow immune to venom in any way, be able to lull him in return, he was a dead man who would not know what hit him other than that he knew the source. It was her. It would be her. Always her.

He untied her carefully when she was under, when her teeth were along his lips, when she was slightly less lethal… hopefully.

They would be leaving soon, descending, and he did want her awake for that, to remember the entry into a Reaper together. Some memories he altered, but some he created and allowed to speak for themselves.

She would be recovered from her sickness, not having remembered her ascent, decompression sickness faded, Commander Shepard at the pilot’s seat, Rin as passenger.

Leviathan would be a submerged concern. The Normandy would be contacted every 4 hours, a recorded statement reflecting her wonder and enthusiasm at the coup. The purity of the moment could be created and stand alone, with her asked to keep her focus only on what was happening, that he was Rin. She would think of Reapers and not of him, not of Senar in any shade or shadow or form. She would experience that triumph with as much of herself as she could, Commander Shepard Whole.

Lal would have her moment.

Cara and Drala’fa would sleep.

All that mattered at the moment was that he would be there with her.
“A Little Night Music” - Three part fugue, musical and psychological.

Garrus - “In Praise of Women”

She wouldn't...therefore they didn't... so then it wasn't...not unless it...would she?
She doesn't...God knows she needn't...therefore it's not.
He'd never...therefore they haven't...
Which makes the question absolutely...could she?
She daren't...therefore I mustn't...what utter rot!

…

The papers...he mentioned papers…
Some legal papers which I didn't see there.
Where were they, the goddamn papers she had to sign?
What nonsense! He brought her papers.
They were important so he had to be there.
I'll kill him!
Why should I bother? The woman's mine!

…

The hip bath...about that hip bath...
How can you slip and trip into a hip bath?
The papers...where were the papers?
Of course, he might have taken back the papers.
She wouldn't...therefore they didn't...
The woman's mine!

Russ - “Every Day A Little Death”

Every day a little death.
In the parlor, in the bed.
In the curtains, in the silver,
in the buttons, in the bread.
Everyday a little sting.
In the heart and in the head.
Every move and every breath,
and you hardly feel a thing,
Brings a perfect little death.

He smiles sweetly, strokes my hair,
Says he misses me.
I would murder him right there
but first I die.
He talks softly of his wars
and his horses, and his whores.
I think love's a dirty business.

Liara - “Perpetual Anticipation”

Perpetual anticipation is good for the soul but it's bad for the heart.
It's very good for practicing self control.
It's very good for morals but bad for morale.
It's very bad. It can lead to going quite mad.
It's very good for reserve and learning to do what one should.
It's very good.

Perpetual anticipation's a delicate art.
Playing a role, aching to start.
Keeping control while falling apart.

Perpetual anticipation is good for the soul but it's bad for the heart.
It's too unnerving. It's very good though to have things to contemplate.
Perpetual anticipation's a delicate art aching to start.

+----------------------------------------+

Liara had finished the collection of testimony and evidence from the Beckenstein estate. Feron had taken over all Shadow Broker business as she focused on anything and everything that could help Cara or could help Garrus.

The reality was that the network supporting the Shadow Broker was breaking down and with the Reaper invasion business of every sort was disrupted. Being the Shadow Broker was a business, one that had begun with a network and a lot of credits and now…

The network was decimated and the credits were mostly gone. She was sure they could get more credits if they resorted to draining the accounts of those she knew deserved it… but perhaps it was time to retire. It did not look like credits would be of value for much longer.

She wouldn’t say that to Cara. Lack of hope was a high crime in her presence.

She wouldn’t say that to anybody. If she could not be inspiring she could at least be quiet in her despair.

Liara had always had issues with both the ‘Shadow’ not in terms of unseen but in terms of shady, and the ‘Broker’ part and her style had reflected that. She had used the network to gather unseen information. To make the most profit the existing business model would have been to sell the most compromising information to the highest bidder. The highest bidder was always someone with the most ‘Shadow’ invested in their shady intent, murder and avarice, power and privilege. Instead she had spent her time protecting information from the highest bidder, giving information away for free to save lives and protect military security… spending a great deal of money to obtain information and then making no commensurate profit to offset the investment cost.
She had saved lives. She had influenced politics. An excellent use of resources. She had not made a good criminal. She was proud of that. Well, she had been criminal according to many definitions.

She had not been a profitable criminal.

With the Reaper invasion it didn’t seem to matter anymore. Reapers were not subtle, they were easy to find and the threat they posed was not stealthy.

Reapers were not profitable. Agents were dying and disappearing, communication infrastructure shattered and deteriorating. With the preparation Liara and Garrus had managed to secure, readiness was high, that was what she had produced. Again, she was proud.

Cara had been brought back to life, she was proud of that too.

Right now she was not all that proud. She had been able to physically rescue Cara but emotionally and psychically, Cara was absent from their lives. She was now Shepard and would not answer any correspondence unless it had to do directly with the business of being Shepard.

She was not unfriendly, she was not unloving. She was Shepard shorn of Cara, an incalculable loss.

The effect on Garrus was profound. He’d been steady and solid though in pain after Cara had died, his eyes on the horizon of her legacy and his heart set aside. After she’d come back he’d been on fire, something that flickered around him like an aura, some internal flame that burned the fuel of the knowledge that Cara was among the living.

After Cara had been abducted he’d lost that fuel and had begun to burn himself. He burned anything and everything just to keep going until he was consumed. He seemed like a wooden building that had burned all its furniture and was pulling down support beams to feed the flames so they would not go out.

Now Cara was alive and he had burned the fuel of himself… he had nothing left, only the pain of the burns and the scorch, the ashes, the cold. Now he was left with an empty building he would not abandon and could not warm.

Somewhere Cara would not live with him. Somewhere he was ashamed to live alone.

Cara would not explain to either of them and that was her way. Liara understood, or thought she did, but Garrus… Garrus did not and could not understand… would not… understand. Liara relied on Russ to keep him as steady or balanced as possible.

Russ could say things to Garrus and he be heard. Something Liara could not accomplish. He’d listen, sure, and even agree, but he was lying more often than not when he said he’d rethink something. Maybe not exactly lying. He’d agree that his thoughts and proposed actions were short sighted, even selfish, potentially destructive, and he said he would not pursue them… then like an obsessed addict and a dedicated man in love, he could not help himself. He would be back on the same train of thought with more fervor the next day until they derailed him again.

She knew Russ was in love with Garrus, of course she did. How could she not? How could anybody… not? Garrus must know. Maybe they’d spoken about it, maybe not, she couldn’t tell, she’d never asked. They’d been close before Liara had met Russ and it had always been that way.

She did know that Russ was as dedicated to derailing Garrus from potential disaster in ways Liara couldn’t manage, and that was priceless and she was grateful.

Like an obsessed addict, a dedicated man in love.
To add to the instability of direction and lack of clarity, Garrus had spoken to a witness, Marcus Enger. Marcus had set Garrus off in too many directions to count. Russ and Liara had tried to shut Garrus down, to get him to focus, but unfortunately she thought that had driven Garrus underground, darker and deeper. They were losing their influence over him. He was losing his trust in them, becoming less and less willing to disclose what was really going on his head.

Now she maybe had something new, something inconclusive and horrifying. A box found in Thane Krios’s closet, something she’d sent for analysis because everything was sent for analysis. She thought she now had an idea of what was in the box and just like all the news she’d had to present during this investigation, it was sick and inconclusive because…

Because it was the only potential source of DNA, and it held both Drell and human DNA.

The estate had been cleaned and purged of DNA according to witnesses, but this box had been an exception.

The only way she could describe it was… a trophy case.

She had to describe this to Garrus and it would set him off.

Again.

Still.

She paced. She’d had some time for a little sleep and a little food but she couldn’t shake her exhaustion and she wasn’t hungry. She was not looking forward to the video conference, one of so many where Garrus burned and wasted from a distance while they watched helpless, trying with their voices to comfort him, help him find balance.

As if any of them had balance right now.

They all signed on and Garrus at least managed to smile, to greet them. Russ was silent and friendly, but she knew it wore on him, knew he was hyper vigilant about Garrus, but… Garrus deserved that.

Garrus asked “You had something new, Liara?”

She cleared her throat. She’d tried to think of the best way to say it… and couldn’t think of anything approaching the word ‘best.’ So she settled for analytical, as though she’d found an artifact at a site.

A horrific… artifact.

She said “There was a box found in Thane Krios’s closet. Inside was jewelry. It was catalogued as Drell ornamentation details for his clothing. When they were tested, we found samples of male Drell DNA on each one, from saliva. On further testing, there were backing posts to each piece of jewelry and Shepard’s DNA was found on those posts in the form of epithelial cells. Most of the staff is gone but a few remaining were able to clarify, and several gathering witnesses that I was able to ask revealed that Thane Krios had a habit of…” Her voice cracked and then she cleared her throat, veered away and decided to circle back “He had a habit of commissioning jewelry for her. There was a resident jeweler for the estate. He also designed her clothing and there was a tailor in residence as well. None of the clothing or jewelry in her closet had any DNA on them, and nothing else in his closet had his DNA on them. It seems he liked to…” What word? Taste? Lick? Oh Goddess please… “Put one earring she was wearing in his mouth and take that one earring from her. This is a box of…”

Garrus finished with cold fury investing his voice “Trophies.”
She nodded, her throat tight. She didn’t think she’d be able to say “Yes” without her voice cracking or starting to cry.

Russ’s face showed disgust and raw shock but he made no sound.

Liara said “There is no real precedent for a Drell to keep trophies… their memories are usually enough… it’s a risk to retain physical evidence.”

Garrus asked evenly “Did you compare that DNA to Celetis?”

She nodded and said “Yes, completely different DNA profile. If this is Thane Krios… and not an… not an obviously disgusting and unnecessary practice for a Drell… Garrus, I’m saying it’s possible it’s a plant. A trap. Something to send us off in the wrong direction.”

Garrus narrowed his eyes and said “What’s the right direction, Liara? We have DNA but we ignore the DNA because he might have thought that far ahead to mislead us? He took trophies… for months…?”

She shook her head and said “I don’t know, Garrus. I am just suspicious that a man this… fastidious… this good at eliminating DNA… would have a box of…”

Garrus repeated with a growl “Trophies.”

She swallowed “Trophies.”

Garrus said “It seemed he felt safe enough there to keep her. Why not keep her jewelry? Since he knew how important DNA was, maybe he had his own independent samples of… her. Memory couldn’t provide that for him. He had a box of her. He didn’t keep anything else of theirs, had them burned, maybe this was his small indulgence. Again, it took us this long to find it, we could have dismissed them as his. If you hadn’t tested… everything in the house we’d have missed it.”

Russ asked with granite distaste “So what if he ordered someone else to lick some earrings?”

They all recoiled a moment from how insidiously sick this case made them, everything twisting in on itself until they didn’t know which way they were facing.

She said “We have DNA profiles of all the Drell staff we could locate. This is not a match to any of them. I think it’s a trap. The only reason why I need to clarify that it might not be a trap is that he did have this habit, it was observed. Whether or not these earrings have his DNA… earrings somewhere at some point in time did, and only one of each set.”

Garrus said calmly without any visible calm “Thank you, Liara. So we keep that DNA on file and see if we get any hits, we should be aware to not over commit or over extend on any matches.”

Liara said “Yes. That’s my concern. No matches to this DNA in any system I can find. Which again… Krios was… is very careful.”

Russ muttered “And very sick.”

Garrus said carefully “Marcus Enger said he would waste our time or fuck with us any way he could, that if we believed we found Krios’s body he’d bet anything it wasn’t him.”

Russ said with more stony distance from the subject at hand “I’m not putting all that much stock into Marcus Enger’s testimony.”
Liara rushed to agree “One paranoid… and disgusting… witness who drank himself to death…”

Garrus clarified “Who is gone.”

Russ added “He said he was going to be gone for good reasons. Maybe he drank himself to death out of guilt, was obsessing about her… that’s what you’re going on?”

Garrus said “We found DNA in Krios’s closet and are considering that it isn’t his DNA because the guy’s too smart to leave his DNA in his own closet. So if we’re excluding evidence on the basis of ‘the guy’s too smart’, let’s try to define how smart is too smart. So we’ve got a guy who could be really smart, maybe he isn’t. Maybe he got lucky. Except that statistically one is never that lucky unless they’re that smart. Krios was someone with the resources to change his identity at will. Someone who could have done anything to her because she had a control chip. What about hypnosis or drugs, what about an Asari? And now she’s at the bottom of the ocean with a Drell who could be really smart, maybe he isn’t. Maybe he got lucky? Statistically it’s starting to look like he’s smarter than lucky. She won’t touch her bond mate, who she still loves, but they’re together and she’ll touch him, confide in him? A man resembling her captor? It isn’t like her.”

Liara said gently “Of course it isn’t. She’s different now. He changed her face, not her identity. He couldn’t change her height, her voice, the look in her eyes or her DNA. She was still recognizable by someone who had met her. You’ve asked a lot of people to look at, listen to Itran, and there is no recognition.”

Garrus persisted “I’m going to say it again. If he didn’t want to give her up… if he’s that smart that he has us running in circles, that he caught her and kept her for months… what if he never did give her up? Too many coincidences, too many absences in the data. They were never seen together and…”

Russ said carefully “Garrus. They are two different people. They both have witnesses to their lives, on the same dates, gathering days even, where Itran is definitely somewhere else. Even without a sample of Krios’s DNA, they are two distinct people.”

Garrus shrugged and said “We know it’s possible to fake a DNA profile with enough augmentation and preparation. Maybe that’s what he did.”

Liara asked “But Kegirin’s DNA is confirmed, he’s had his DNA on file since he was freed.”

Garrus threw up his hands and started to pace “What if he’s faking that? Can we get a blood sample from him? That’s what I’ve been asking. If we can conceive of how he’s faking the evidence, don’t we have the responsibility to try to figure out how that evidence could be faked? If you’re to the point where you think a well hidden and unlikely to be tested box is in fact a trap… then what’s crazy and what’s just excellent planning? What if it’s possible for Drell to change their DNA? Some Salarians I’ve talked to, not on record though, have led me to believe that maybe the Hanar have known how to do that for years.”

Russ muttered “Salarians think anything is possible with enough funding.”

Liara said with exasperation. “Even if it was possible …why, Garrus? He breaks out of his own security, rescues her and leaves as fast as he can because he doesn’t want to be involved? How does any of that make sense? He changes his DNA profile but leaves some behind on purpose… why?”

He answered “It makes sense if he can change his identity and if she doesn’t know it’s him because he had a control chip and an Asari. We need a blood sample from Celetis, not just some epithelials he could fake. You need to get in her head, Liara.”
Liara had been afraid it was leading to this “Garrus. Absolutely not. She’s a trauma victim and she needs to set her own boundaries. It’s absolutely essential to any recovery process she has available to her. She has to have the ability to set her limits of what she wishes to share of herself, her body or her mind.”

Garrus growled “What if her boundaries were set for her, Liara? What if on top of the chip, an Asari got in her head and told her not to let you touch her? Wouldn’t that work?”

Liara’s mind blanked at the possibility she hadn’t considered. She said “Garrus… I suppose… yes, black ops Asari could have done that. But the simpler explanation is that her mind was violated by a chip and she doesn’t want me to witness what she went through, nor does she want to relive it. She wants to move on. I have to respect that. We’re not the bad guys.”

Garrus said, pleading with both of them “What if… that’s what they expect us to say? What if by respecting her privacy she’s trapped inside her own head and we can’t get her out? What if she won’t let anybody near her because she has no choice, not because she’s making a choice of her own free will? What if she doesn’t really have any free will left, Liara? This is a case of exceptions. She’s exceptional. If we’re going to work under the assumption that Krios is also exceptional, what couldn’t he do? She inspired someone who did not know her to bring her back from the dead. What if she inspired… someone to let her go but still keep her prisoner?”

Russ said in a desperate voice “Garrus. I can understand wanting to exclude Itran’s DNA because it was found on site, but there’s a reason it was found there. If the box in Krios’s closet is different… doesn’t that exclude him?”

Garrus shook his head and said “What if the box is a piece of theater intended to make absolutely sure nobody thinks Celetis is Krios? We know the guy likes his theater. What it is… is improbable. But she is the Queen of improbable and it looks like he’s shooting for King. If something improbable isn’t happening with her or with him, it would seem the data set is wrong.”

Russ said evenly, reasonably, finally warm and not distant “Garrus. Listen to yourself. The DNA is explained the way all DNA is explained but you want there to be exceptions to exceptions because you want them, not because it makes sense. We’ve gone line by line down each of these pieces of evidence and whatever the outcome, you come back to what you don’t want to believe being a lie. I’m not someone who is an expert at what goes on in other people’s heads, obviously, but here’s maybe where that’s an advantage. Maybe I’m not Shepard or Krios genius. Maybe I’m not Vakarian genius, but if even I can see that you’ve created a scenario where Krios took her and then she convinced him to join her on the Normandy… isn’t that your dream? I may not be an authority on them… but I am damned well an authority on you. Isn’t that where you want to be? Wouldn’t you give anything to be with her right now, no matter the cost? So you’re willing to believe that as improbable as it sounds, that’s what is going on. But that’s you, Garrus, not him. You can’t imagine not following her anywhere. You are giving Krios your reasons, but you’ve still got a shot at sanity and he’ll always be a sick fuck. Marcus Enger feeds you this bullshit about Marcus being like you, like he knows that Krios is an ingenious mastermind the same way you knew something was going on with Saren. Your head’s spun so far it’s facing the wrong way. The evidence is all pointing toward the fact that she is a trauma victim with good reasons for not wanting to be touched. Nobody wants an Asari in their head to be interrogated about their stint as a sex slave just to make sure she isn’t lying. No offense Liara.”

He said it with a smile at her and she smiled back. Please, Russ, convince him.

Russ continued “You can’t ask that of Liara, you can’t ask that of Shepard. As for finding Krios, we have a DNA profile, we work that. If it gets a hit we follow that. Thane Krios is a bad guy, Garrus,
not a good guy who would come up with some insanely dangerous plan to escape his own security. Kegirin Itran and Thane Krios have two completely separate timelines, they’re two separate people. Listen to me, Vakarian. You have to get out of your own head and stop trying to get into his because you suck at it. Whoever Itran is, he was a slave. She did save him. These are facts. He deserves his own identity, not whatever you want him to be so you can get him out of the way. I changed my mind. Your head isn’t spun the wrong way, it’s just spun toward her, which I understand, that’s bond and that’s real. Its love and its history and you want her back. But it’s not fair to him to find a way to demonize him just because he’s in your way. If it weren’t for him… whether he’s Krios who let her out or Itran who rescued her, she wouldn’t be out at all. Hell, Garrus, it’s not fair to her. Whoever he is aside, she’s a trauma victim that risked her life to escape. If you’re trying to be convinced they could have both walked out the front door… because she convinced him they should… why didn’t they? If he’s so insanely fucking smart and also inexplicably noble enough to leave his estate and fight Reapers for her? If he’s that fucking smart, as smart as she is, you think you can predict what he’s done? You can’t even explain to me why if he wanted to let her go, he didn’t just pay for her to be escorted off Beckenstein and set free, sell his estate and somehow convince her that he’d make a good Drell squad mate. If he can change his identity to be anybody, why not a great Drell mercenary? She needs good people, he’d know that, he’s good. So he gets an identity change and she doesn’t know who he is. We won’t know who he is. If he’s that good, there’s no remaining evidence. If he’s that good, Garrus… good enough to capture and keep Lal Shepard for six months, and she couldn’t get out… if what you’re thinking is true, we can’t prove it. He doesn’t even need black ops Asari that can make her think anything they want, make her forget, she already has a chip and can’t remember everything. She barely remembers Krios.”

Liara cringed at that. Garrus narrowed his eyes and said “Because it makes good theater. It makes for a good story. And I’m convinced she remembers.”

Liara thought she remembered too. To be fair she said out loud “Russ, I agree with you up to that point. Maybe Marcus Enger wasn’t wrong about everything. Maybe Krios did terrify her into obedience. Or not terrify… coerce. By all accounts she was strong and brave and I believe that. But even Marcus Enger thinks it’s crazy that Thane Krios could be Kegirin Itran.”

Russ said steadily “Garrus, what if Marcus Enger was paid by Thane Krios to do exactly what he said he would do given a chance… waste your time and fuck with you?”

Garrus was silent.

Liara said “Garrus, please. You can’t just keep the pieces of the narrative that agree with what you want. Russ is right about the fact that you’re idealizing standing at her side and fighting Reapers. Krios, whoever he is, would have had enough information to know that the job of squad mate of Shepard has a very high casualty rate. It isn’t a dream job. Itran turned it down repeatedly. I think she was only able to convince him because she’s her… and because it really is safer on the Normandy than hiding behind an identity while other witnesses with those identities disappear. So not a dream job but possibly a job to help avoid an otherwise inevitable nightmare. We don’t know if Krios has been able to identify or eliminate any of the missing witnesses. We do know they are gone, and so does Shepard. She could have convinced Celetis that he’s in danger and maybe he decided if he was going to be in danger he’d do some good with it if possible. Just like me when I found out Saren was trying to locate me. I couldn’t face going to another dig alone. Ever. Even though the Normandy was dangerous, it was safer than trying to be who I’d been my entire life. If Shepard were unlike herself I would try to convince her to get some Asari therapy. I would offer myself. I have offered myself, she has refused. She is on board a Reaper. If you want to tell me that Thane Krios kidnapped her, she convinced him to let her go and now they’re fighting Reapers together and in a few weeks… obtained an alliance with an ancient race and have a Reaper of their own… aren’t we at least a little bit obligated to consider telling them ‘thank you’ and letting them get on with whatever is going on
rather than invalidating who they are and trying to invade the privacy they have earned not only as adults, as heroes, but as sentient creatures who deserve the respect of not having their minds violated as they were before, repeatedly? Garrus, even if your worst nightmares are true on this, and you’re not going to get her back… she’s free and she’s in the fight and she wants us to be focused on Reapers. She’s made it clear she doesn’t want the subject of Thane Krios distracting anybody.”

Garrus was still silent.

Russ said with a warning edge “Vakarian, you’ve had that look so many times in the past years and I usually let it go. We usually find a way to disagree amicably, but you’re not letting this go. You’re forcing what it is you want. You want answers. You want Celetis gone and you want to be there in his place. It’s a lot less complicated than you want to believe. Let me remind you she’s your Avah, she gave you a job to do and she gave you a boundary to respect and you’re contemplating abandoning your duty further and disregarding her direction regarding what she wishes to do with her own body and mind. Whatever you are thinking of doing, if you won’t listen to Liara, if you won’t listen to me, listen to the Turian Spirits that should be howling in your ears. This is war. There are casualties. I wasn’t as close to Shepard as you two, but damned if she does not gain herself a world of respect she earned by getting up out of a Med Bay bed and heading right back into as much trouble as she could find and make. Respect I am not going to violate by questioning her on whether or not she’s really sure she’s Shepard. She is your bond mate and you want all of her. I understand that and I sympathize. But this is war, Garrus. She’s back fighting Reapers. Palaven is counting on you to do your job, to protect them. People are dying every day, lots and lots of people fighting Reapers. She herself would tell you, has told you, do not let Thane Krios distract you from doing the right thing. You’d be playing into his hands and she wants to stop hearing his name.”

Garrus said miserably “If only I knew what the right thing was.”

Liara said “Garrus, the right thing is loving her, doing your job, the job you gave her, and knowing she loves you too. If she can’t give you more… you have to accept that.”

Garrus said absently “I know I’m right. I’m obsessed and trying to find a way back to her. That’s all true. That still… does not mean I’m wrong. I can’t let go not because I’m crazy… which I am… and that can be true also. But I’m not wrong. She’s still scared. She’s still trapped. She’s always…”

Garrus broke off, so much Russ did not know. Maybe Garrus would have been able to say if it was just Liara and Garrus, but Liara and Garrus could barely speak to each other without starting to cry, without his subvocals overriding what he could say aloud.

Garrus continued “What you’ve said is true, Russ. What’s also true is that she loves me. I see a way, a simple way, to get definitive answers. A blood test. An Asari interview.”

Russ asked “And how would you get those things, Garrus? From people who have given enough of their blood and enough of their minds?”

Garrus smiled “They’re heroes, right? Always able and willing to give a little more for the cause.”

Liara said “Garrus, don’t ask her to do this. You’ll lose her completely.”

Garrus shook his head “One more thing you can’t prove. She’s not like that. That’s why I’m like this. She’ll never lose me. I’ll never lose her. I don’t think I can explain but those things are true. These are my two requests. Help me find a way to make sure she isn’t still influenced. Convince me that Celetis’s blood is his own. We only have epithelials, and those can be faked with samples. Yeah, they’re fighting Reapers… I’m fighting for her, I always have, I always will. I have to try.”
He held up his hand when they were both drawing breath to interrupt.

“Listen. You are both… the best people I know. I love you both. I know you think she can shake anything and everything off, but this… this… this idea in me… this isn’t from a place of crazy. I’m not saying I’m not crazy… I’m saying this comes from a different place. This is a place of love. Liara’s been in her head, but I’m… she’s different with me, different in ways I can’t explain, shouldn’t explain. She still loves me, she always will. It wouldn’t matter if I were indoctrinated, she’d still love me. This isn’t about losing her, it’s about… the fact that I can’t. She can’t lose me either. She needs me and I can’t fail her. She’d forgive me for any stupid stunt I pulled but I promise I am not going to do anything genuinely crazy like kidnap her myself and hire my own Asari. If the best Asari I know says no… I’m going to listen. Thank you, Liara. If the best Turian I know tells me I’m not being the best Turian, I’m going to say he’s right and thank you. I won’t be the bad guy. I’ll ask her to talk to me. I’ll ask him to give blood. Then I’ll come back to my favorite best people and go from there. Liara, thank you for everything, for all the work, all the knowledge, all the credits… when I would have gone in and been the ignorant jackass trying to drag her through the front door, the ignorant jackass Marcus said would have gotten her killed. Russ, I’m sorry for relying on you so much, I can’t… I can’t tell you how much. That is also from a place of love and not crazy. I’m sorry that everyone has their own concerns, their own losses, and I’ve made it about me. I know you are worried, but I am doing my job, I am looking after Palaven. You’re right, there are some questions I won’t get the answers to, but I can still ask. So I’m fighting for Palaven. I’m fighting for her. I’m not fighting you. I promise. I will do my best. I need you both in order to be able to be at my best. I can’t do it alone. I don’t… I don’t think she should have to do it alone, though she’ll try to protect us every way she can, she always has. Thank you for being there every day. You are both inspiring company and I hope to rise to the example.”

Russ grinned “Wow, Vakarian. You almost sounded sane there for a minute. I’m all inspired.”
And a woman spoke, saying, ‘Tell us of Pain.’
And he said: Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.
Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun, so must you know pain.
And could you keep your heart in wonder at the daily miracles of your life, your pain would not seem less wondrous than your joy;
And you would accept the seasons of your heart, even as you have always accepted the seasons that pass over your fields.
And you would watch with serenity through the winters of your grief.
Much of your pain is self-chosen.
It is the bitter potion by which the physician within you heals your sick self.
Therefore trust the physician, and drink his remedy in silence and tranquility:
For his hand, though heavy and hard, is guided by the tender hand of the Unseen,
And the cup he brings, though it burn your lips, has been fashioned of the clay which the Potter has moistened with His own sacred tears.

Kahlil Gibran – “The Prophet”

“Life sucks. Get a fucking helmet.” – Denis Leary

He had to keep her under venom and bound as much as he could. There was no choice in the matter. Hours and hours he had spent thinking and choosing the potential paths and alternates he could find to freedom and license. He was under the crippling yoke of preoccupation with the Leviathan’s sporadic communication that could take him at any time, navigating the Reaper while being unable to navigate her.

All of his Named things in her mind were gone, the delicate framework of constructed identity, prohibition and control stripped off her. If he were to take her word for it she remembered everything. Whether or not she was right he had no time to verify. He did not have the time to search each of her memories for what might have remained of his influence.

He still had the ability to make her Nameless under venom because she was a deep thing, a thing unreachable, unaffected by words. An irrevocable symbol.

How to grant her access to her Names without granting her access to her will he did not yet know. He could not ask the Leviathan to help, that would be admitting to weakness, to lack of control. His authority was predicated upon his ability to control her.

He had promised to report every four hours and that would be problematic. Necessary so the Normandy did not overreact and attempt a rescue of their incapacitated Commander. She must not be
incapacitated for long. He had reported that she was sleeping, spoken to Dr. Chakwas regarding decompression sickness and the measures he took, but she must begin soon in her role as Shepard, at least for the Normandy’s sake. She need not retain those memories; he could convince her of her personal timeline. The Reaper was her triumph and must remain so. The Leviathan must remain mysterious.

He did not believe that the Leviathan would speak to her or to those on the Normandy, but he must make himself available to them at every opportunity to avoid them considering that path.

Priority I: Maintain contact with Leviathan; learn the potentials of Reaper capability.

Risks: My mind, my life, my will.

Gains: Being the exclusive conduit to their knowledge and plans, the ability to control Reapers.

Priority II: Maintain contact with the Normandy every 4 hours in organic and realistic status as Shepard would present herself. Cannot be deferred; time stamps on his Omni Tool would create a potential discrepancy, questions as to why a spontaneous report was recorded and released later. Secondary aim: Construct an organic timeline for Cara herself, stage the discovery of the Reaper when she is fully Shepard.

Risks: She could activate any number of unknown distress codes. Determine codes. When she is fully Shepard she is likely to kill me unless I am fully Rin.

Gains: Time to execute Priority I.

Priority III: Knowing Leviathan true or projected purposes, determine where to cooperate and where to deviate, how to influence if possible. Construct a translated alternate explanation for taken actions and motivations to relay to her and through her to the Normandy and the Council. Create her Names, a superior framework than that created on Beckenstein. Explore Reaper capability to assist in same.

Risks: Insufficient time to achieve goal given her resistance to suggestion and coercion. Her ability to learn. My tendency to become lost in her body, in her mind, unwilling or unable to touch her without precious time disappearing due to my lack of control where she is concerned.

Gains: Her. Compartmented as a home, rooms of her I can visit one by one, if not all of her Whole.

Priority IV: Maintain physical body. Rest.

Risks: She is likely to kill me.

Gains: Continued life.

His immediate priority was to set up a staging area. Whatever controls there were to the Reaper, she would have no real access, only simulated access. He docked and carried her, bound and envenomed to the equivalent of a mess hall for drones. It was an expansive space once cleared. Fortunately the process of creation or removal of objects was intuitive and near immediate with the help of the Leviathan who assisted him in assimilation of control. After a blindingly painful insertion of direct information that brought him to his knees and made his nose bleed, he was able to interface. He created a command chair, a useless set of controls, a series of display screens reflecting different generated views of the Reaper that did not exist. One screen displaying the Normandy in orbit.

There was no command central to a Reaper. There was a shielded location for the Reaper consciousness. Thought was the command method, direct interface. At the moment that was done through relay method, Leviathan gave information directly to Rin or Rin relayed information to the
Reaper consciousness through Leviathan by thought. Fortunately the Leviathan were patient. They accommodated the fact that his platform was deteriorating. He needed to accomplish the goal of placating the Normandy, placating her. For creatures that worked on the level of eons, Rin securing a few hours of sleep to maintain optimal function was not a concern. Enhancements and alternatives to rest as a biological recuperation method were possible but that would become more clear as part of the process of him interfacing with the Reaper and learning what was possible. For now that process would exhaust him, they would begin that after he had obtained sufficient rest and infrastructure for his control of Shepard.

He was granted autonomy over his mental connection to Leviathan, asked to optimize his strength, and they would begin again at his schedule. In the meantime he was free to accomplish his goals and maintenance tasks with their assistance as needed.

If he had had time he would have prayed to the Darkness, but he did not, so he merely relayed his thanks and focused on his priorities.

He did pray to her in his way, indulging in the risk of losing himself in her, indulging in the potential of what he could have, what he would have with her, regardless of her knowledge of it. He could not permit her Whole to think. She had developed many paths to escape while on the estate. She would again here, under new circumstances. On the estate he had had the time to ask her what her plans were and then guide her to forget and visit that path no more. Here she had all those paths available plus new spontaneous inspirations of the sort that terrified him. She must remain under.

He sat on the control chair, his new throne, retrieved her bound and sleeping form and carried her to it, woke her with his mouth and his hands, his voice.

There was always a twilight to her, where resistance and indifference warmed to interest and then fervor, and he savored those moments each time.

He had to be exquisitely careful with his words, with her Names, with his names. He tested what he already hoped was true, hoped would hold. She was still bound by venom. He looked in her eyes and ensured she looked in his, told her “Lal Shepard. Your name is Lal Shepard. You do not remember Cara Fanning. You do not remember Drala’fa. My name is Varin Celetis. You do not remember Thane Krios. You do not remember Kegirin Itran. Your name is Lal Shepard and Varin Celetis is at your side. Your Rin. You know he belongs to you. You know he has followed you. He has watched over you while you recovered from decompression sickness. You trust him with your life, with your thoughts. You hope to trust him with your heart, with your body. You will focus on these known facts. It is understandable that the past is distant and unclear. At the moment you do not remember Leviathan. You know you are on a Reaper with your Rin, who belongs to you and will follow you, protect you. This is your moment, Lal. A moment that brings you joy and hope. You are on board and potentially in command of a Reaper. You do not yet know what that means or how to do it, but you know you will. Controls of the Reaper itself must be translated. You do not yet know the language you must speak to control it, but you know you will learn, you will find all the necessary keys to unlock what you need. Be joyous, Lal. Be Shepard. Let your crew know that you are triumphant, that you are safe, that you will not transmit any information to avoid having other Reapers pick up on the signal. Only short progress reports, Lal. For security’s sake. Hope in your eyes, inspiration in your voice. Be Shepard for them, for me. Your Rin needs your inspiration, the galaxy needs you to save them, and you know you will. Show me what you will say to them.”

She did, and she asked questions he had not addressed, things she wished to say to reassure her crew.

We have food. We have shelter. We have water. We will be fine. She would record and send heavily
encrypted progress reports every eight hours and not four from this point on to permit sleep without
interruption. The Normandy should remain in geosynchronous orbit. All transmissions were the
highest of classification, secrecy and encryption. She would inform the Council separately, do not
transmit any information about location and disposition. She would use Spectre code authorization to
inform the Council.

When the final version was recorded, she was bright, enthusiastic, slightly dazed at her luck. She
conveyed all information as asked, at the end her laugh, her Shepard smile and a promise. “We’re
going to win.”

He sent the final encrypted recording and she smiled at him. “How was that?”

He crossed to her and said “Perfect, as always, Lirya.”

Because she was Lal Shepard and she knew her Rin belonged to her, had led her out of the dark and
followed her into the Darkness, she impulsively reached for him. She held his face between her
hands and smiled, then said “You look tired, Rin. Thank you for everything. Thank you for
watching over me. You should get some rest.”

Eight hours until the next report, so much to learn, so much to do. He closed his eyes and said “As
you wish, Lirya.”

He would create a dream around this moment but now must face reality, exhaustion creeping in on
the edges of his vision, making him think that it would serve the greatest purpose to lift her into his
lap and lose himself in her body, sleep and never wake.

He must sleep, judgment beginning to fracture along lines of immediate desire and need. Sleep. Her
body. Her eyes. Her voice.

With great effort he pulled from her embrace as she watched curiously, receptive. He retrieved the
cloth and the cords from beyond camera range and asked her to stand, which she did. He kissed her
and told her she was Nameless, adored, and she must forget. He turned her small body, regret but
determination in the binding of her unquestioning and unnamed hands. He knelt at her feet and
bound them as well; care taken as always to deliver no injury.

The room was huge, not far to move to allow the creation of a bed. He gained a renewed nosebleed
achieving something utilitarian, his lack of mental clarity forcing him to create something simple. No
blankets or sheets, no cloth, simply a platform with something softer than floor.

He knew all his risks, the time and the fact that he should not indulge in her body, but the idea of
sleeping without taking refuge in her seemed as improbable as opening the bay doors into the void
and being crushed.

He was denied her hands, having tied them already, and he mourned their loss on his skin, hoping
her nails would grow, he could paint them and with the colors he set on her she could find her new
furrows.

She was Nameless and panting, the only question she had the gentle strain against her bonds, the
twisting of her hands and feet. He placed her on the bed on her back and followed her down. She
was dressed as Lal and he had only limited access to her body, her rough shirt rucked up along the
forearm of his seeking hand. His mouth was on hers, his hand finding her breast, his other hand
behind her head, she was held in place, exactly her place. He held his place, tired and tenuous but
hungry for her. Faint patches of biotics flared over his skin and she groaned against his mouth,
mindless and Nameless, her hips angled up because she moved her bound hands into fists under her
hips to lift herself to him.

He counted desires, for all her skin to be open to him, to guide her hands to free his cock and stroke with her fingertips, for nails to dig along his skin, to have his Drala’fa again.

This woman was his only in patches and pieces. They were not enough but he was starved for her. He made the most of her being bound, his mouth on hers and his hand moving from her breast down to her fist-bound tilted hips, holding his body off hers to spare her his weight. Where their bodies contacted he lavished venom and strokes in and on her. Her mouth was open to his, her teeth on his lips, his seeking hand restricted by the harsh binding of cloth, but he found her, always found her in her place. His place. She was wet and aching, whimpering against his mouth as he shifted his hand to her, thumb finding her clit and his fused finger found his Path.

He pulled his mouth back until her whimpers were only slightly felt vibrations, speaking to her of the only truths he cared about “I want you. Always. Do you want me?”

Her tongue moved along his lips to lick venom from him, her hips arching into his hand, finding the rhythm that was hers, slowing time as exhaustion did not give way but the surge of biotics, desire and her breath, her wet body seeking his palm on her up thrust was all that mattered.

She said “Yes,” her skin flushed and lit in blue, purple where those patches met.

“Come for me. Come to me, whoever I am, whatever I ask.”

Her lip was between her teeth and her ‘yes’ a weak but fervent thing, her neck thrashing against his palm. He lit his palm along her neck with warmth in blue, the same between her thighs, his body on hers finding her rhythm, his mouth on hers until she bit at his lip. The skin of their abdomens was the only skin free to touch as she lifted again to roll against him, one of her thighs trapped between his, his cock riding there.

“When and someday and always, nothing between us. No bonds, your hands free to roam my skin, to mark me as yours.”

Her answer was not ‘yes’ but a weak laugh against his mouth and he knew that laugh. It called a smile to his lips as his fingers beckoned, teased, slowed and then pressed into her, around as he said “I believe that is a vote for bonds. As you wish.”

Her answer was to surge up against him, straining, the rush of wet heat as her body clenched and shook around him, her teeth on his lower lip against her mouth. She had caught his breath and lost hers, strangled keening from her throat, with him able to taste the sound on her lips, feel the rhythm on his fingers and the palms of his hands pressed to her heaving body.

With her laugh in mind and her remembered talk of storms and love of physically expressed helplessness, he could not doubt. Too many times he had held her down and she had demanded he do it. He shifted off her body, dragged her over to the edge with him and flipped her over, bound feet on the floor and ass in the air as she had been that first time, when she’d been too afraid to resist, intimidated and trained into obedience.

Now her body remembered different things, his hands sliding down her hips and moving cloth aside, slick tip of his cock teasing at her ass while she trembled, her legs straight and without balance because her feet were bound. He anchored her bound hands behind her back, twisted the bonds in one of his hands and pulled her shoulders back taut, held her feet trapped between his and rocked his body against her, along her ass but not inside. His hand played at the flesh of her ass, his thumb opening her to him with her answer a whining sound of need and straining back against him.
He twisted his fingers tightly in the bonds of her hands and pulled back as he worked inside her and her body remembered always how to take him, transform him, blinding tight fireworks along his nerves, his biotics arcing to kiss her skin and red flush along her ass and lower back. She braced her legs against his, worked her hips back against his in a way he assisted with the twist and pull back of her arms, her eyes tightly closed and bliss on her face. She had his rhythm, had him at her mercy, the tensing and rocking of her hips on his cock more than he could desire, his hand finding her clit again, sensitized and twitching until he found and she felt the jolts of pleasure arcing through her, the muscles of her back hardening and lengthening on either side of her spine under his grip. Her thighs tensed and shook between his as he built her back into coming for him, whatever she asked. Her body rocked with the pull of his hand on her bonds until her shoulders were as far back as they could go, her breasts and face pressed into the bed with the insistence of her hips and his hand defining where their bodies met and moved.

He Prayed to her, the trance of waiting for her to release him, waiting as tremors and trembles, whines and moans drew her and him in tight and slick, dizziness made him lean into her, push her back down further, drive into her deeper and pull her back against him until she screamed, the shockwave of her body tightening around him in chaotic and repeating shudders. He released the pull on her hands, leaned in and down with his hands sliding under her shoulders to clasp her to him as he came, her hips straining against his hips and against hers, unable to get close enough, frantic, his teeth at the skin exposed between her neck and shoulder. He groaned with the sudden blaze of blue and surge inside her, combined tremors, wet down their pressed-together thighs. He breathed her in, both panting, out-of-synch harsh breaths causing more sensation to rock through him. He kissed the back of her neck and whispered “He is yours.”

She laughed again, the same laugh when he told her she could look forward to her hands being free, as though he should know the answer and not need to ask or say anything so obvious or foolish.

And so he did.

He was also barely able to stand, realized he was about to lose consciousness, reluctantly detaching from the bliss of her body and the inevitable loss of his mind. He wished to curl up beside her as he so often had; his rightful place, chest to her back, hands in her hair and on her hip.

Later.

He set an alarm for four hours.

He had nothing to secure her to, belatedly coming to this realization that she would not sleep the entire time, would not be envenomed.

If he was to be a dead man, it was worth it.

That did not mean he should court death as he courted her, with so much fervor.

He pulled from her further, righted her clothing and his, stood her up, turned her and kissed her, hands in her hair.

He was tired but not yet without resources. He tipped her chin up and looked in her eyes, asked her “With what is available here in the room, how do I secure your immobility and comfort for four hours without harming you or permitting you to escape? Preferably on the bed, with me.”

She closed her eyes and considered. She asked “Do you have medications that would work for me on your Omni Tool?”
“I do.”

“Got any Nalecit?”

“Yes.”

“Exactly 15 mg. I’ll be out for five hours. You’re a light sleeper. If you’re concerned I’ll get away from you, lash me to you with your shirt. Put your arms through mine, wrap your thighs around mine. You’ll wake up if I try to move.”

He tilted his head “And if you attempt to break my nose with the back of your skull or your forehead?”

She tilted her head back and laughed “Why would I do that?”

“You have your moods.”

“You worry too much.”

“That is, under the circumstances, impossible.”

He gave her 15 mg of Nalecit and asked her to lie down on the bed, she did so obediently. The bed together was not an option given her adaptability. Unfortunately he could not impress upon her how vicious she was and he could not explain her to her at the moment. Or at any moment. There were insufficient words. He kissed her again, ruffled his hands through her hair and told her “Sleep. Sleep comfortably. I will be here when you wake, if there is anything you need, you will have it then.”

She said mournfully “You’re not staying?”

“Alas, no. I have work to do, beautiful woman.”

“But what if I need you?”

“Then you shall have me in four hours.”

“Okay.”

He focused, bliss and exhaustion racing, buoyed by the sight of her. He ensured the room was sealed. All commands were keyed to only him and she did not know how to give them. Regardless of alarms and Nalecit lasting five hours he could not risk that timeframe expiring without her being contained.

With a rending and what he feared was a physical and not psychic pop, more blood from the nose he created a post secure to the floor, tested it with his body weight, tied her bound hands and feet to it with more created fiber, strong and tough, also tested for security.

She would have a range if she woke and he should be out of it, the last shreds of consciousness fading as he crawled out of what he considered to be that range and then passed out.

OoOoOoOoOoOoO

He roused after four hours to the alarm, still exhausted, physically and mentally worn but not on the edge of losing consciousness. It appeared the Nalecit was still working, she had not moved. He checked to ensure she was breathing and comfortable, her circulation intact.

Having an hour was a luxury in context. There were things he must create, amenities and partitions.
Work space, theater space, living space. He was able to get help from the internal systems, able to summon food and water, rudimentary but promising, in theory if he were able to provide a description, and Omni Tool analysis had that available for many things, it could be created.

For now the basics. Food. Water. Clothing duplicating what they had from the shuttle. He began to study, to attempt to assimilate. Nalecit had toxicities and he could not keep her under constantly, he would need alternate solutions. He had raging headaches but was assured he would not experience permanent damage. His mind was adaptive and capable. The Leviathan were hopeful he could obtain rudimentary and ultimately independent control of navigation and manifestation, if not complicated synthesis. The Drell mind was more orderly than human. If hosts were to be procured, Drell hosts would be superior to human.

Obviously.

He fed her, he bathed her, a few cycles of learn, stage, report, envenom, feed, bathe, bind.

She sent a report to Garrus directly, encrypted and recorded.

One of the drawbacks to the circumstances was that Lal Shepard could refuse to answer Garrus Vakarian’s personal correspondence, but Varin Celetis, with no job inside the Reaper and no place in the chain of command except ‘below everyone’ did not have that luxury. All requests were filed through his Omni Tool. A direct request to confer came in from Vakarian and Varin Celetis would have no reason not to take it. Vakarian’s state of mind at the moment was in question. It appeared that T’Soni and Orbestan were keeping Vakarian’s more dangerous impulses in check. If Vakarian was telling them the truth, his solution was to ask Cara politely for an explanation and to obtain a blood sample.

Cara was now problematic, but by the time Vakarian was able to see her in person, if Rin decided that was possible or necessary, that would no longer be a concern.

The blood sample would be granted, of course, with Celetis’s compliments and understanding of the necessity without grudge. Heroic.

The DNA on the earrings was Krios’s, as Vakarian astutely intuited, exclusionary and theater, something to waste their time.

Cara had warned him and it was true, Vakarian had a talent for truth and for finding it. He knew Cara, cared for her, loved her and recognized the hallmarks of her protection.

It was, as was true with both of the bonded, admirable and disappointing. She had chosen her bond mate well and that was galling.

Vakarian’s face was impassive and supportive, giving no signs of his suspicion “Just checking in, wanted to know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“Thank you, sir, for your concern.”

“Can I talk to her?”

She was currently fading from venom influence, a few hours bound and helpless while Rin was fully conscious and able to watch her. He did not wish to damage her mind through exposure to constant drug influence. More specifically he did not want her addicted to anything but him. He could not always afford to envenom her without becoming… very distracted. Rin answered “She is not here at the moment. She has not… informed me a great deal of her actions. She is studying and… muttering. I am afraid I do not understand her often. She is learning to speak a new language, new code and her
ability outstrips my comprehension. I have faith that wherever she is at the moment, it is of optimal importance. I will ask her to contact you.”

Vakarian grinned and said “Good luck with that. How is she? Is she sleeping at all?”

Rin hesitated and said with intimidated uncertainty “I have asked her to sleep. She does not often agree with me. She does eat. There is sufficient food and water stockpiled. I attempt to set a good example with sleeping, but in point of fact, sir, I am useless here. She is not. I also am aware that offering the same advice twice to her… is not welcome.” Rin recalled her body under, over his, bound and bent, her lip between her teeth and her head thrown back and said “She is most enthusiastic, and I find that encouraging. She believes we will win, sir, and I believe her.”

Vakarian laughed and said “That’s all good news. I guess she slept enough when she was dead. Thank you for taking care of her.”

“If I have any influence at all, you are welcome.”

“If she ever lets you out of there, let me buy you a drink on the Citadel if you make it back this way.”

“Thank you, sir. I look forward to the opportunity.”

As he continued to work on interface nuances and possibilities, he was able to check on her. He faced her but did lose access to his vision at times as he learned the internal structure of interface, his own vision replaced by perspective of what he was attempting to synthesize or comprehend.

His only hint of something amiss was two muffled thumps, spaced apart. The first was directional toward her, but it might have been her testing the strength of her bonds. Perhaps a yank and a rebound. The second made him suspicious enough to investigate.

She was on the bed, seemingly quiescent. His suspicion of her was approaching 100% capacity so if he were to approach her and have her look exactly as she always did, human, small and bound, he believed her to be supernaturally capable and free.

Which was not far from the truth.

It might have worked. It should have worked.

She was bound and on her side, as always, hands and feet tethered. She watched him as he approached, and as always, something Cara in her eyes. The woman did not know how to be blank.

He did not approach but asked her “What have you done, Cara?”

She smiled at him, not her deadly smile, but a lulling smile. That on its own was enough to be suspicious, along with the eyes and the sound.

She said sweetly “I’m tied here, what exactly do you think I could do?”

“That… is the question, isn’t it? The eternal question.” One he was going to have to ask himself forever unless he found a way…

He had to analyze, be careful, test her. He absolutely should not approach her at this moment. He would be dead. Some anticipation in her limbs.

Something…

Something wrong. Something right for her. Something wrong for him.
It was the necessity and limitations of her plan that gave her away, something off for her. As he circled around her, she turned to face him, something she rarely did. She was a woman of eye contact, blessedly. Her eyes were on his face but not meeting his, and she was straining for something. He moved at a distance to examine her bonds, which were at her back. As he moved she shifted to her back, watching his face.

Not just his face, watching his lips.

His lips curved in appreciation. It was perhaps something she had not discovered before, something he had not asked her to forget because on Beckenstein it would not have benefited her. Something elegant. Something Cara.

She was… so close to his death. It trembled under her skin, in the eyes following his lips because…

He had no idea.

An hour and a half until her next check in and he had no idea.

Follow the evidence. His lips. Why would she follow his lips?

Of course she wanted his lips, but at the moment she saw them dead, not on her body. She saw him dead… how?

It is a lovely thing that in a locked room, aided by two Gods, I am terrified of you as you lay bound and trembling in all the wrong ways. However that will not help me avoid what you believe will happen. What will happen? Am I to untie you, investigate? Are you untied? Have you decided Vakarian’s death is worth it? Do you finally know he would prefer to be dead than held hostage to you as long as I wish?

Vakarian.

Lips.

Evidence.

He considered and then asked in the Palaveni language, one he had forbid her to learn, one she had not had the time to learn since “What is it you have done, Venri?”

She did not give anything away to her credit, beautiful liar she was. She did not draw her brows and did not panic, but she also could not answer the question. “I think you’re getting very paranoid, Senar. It’s okay if you keep it up.”

He asked again in Palaveni “You can read my lips if I speak Drell, but not now with a language you do not speak. You cannot hear me, can you, Venri? If you can and I am wrong and you can hear, tell me the name of the man you love who speaks this language.”

Venri, Palaveni for “Chosen Purpose” – a word for a bond mate. He wondered if Vakarian had ever called her that.

She stayed on her back, eyes hungrily on his lips but she did not speak Palaveni, could not read him, could not answer. It was very simple. If she could follow his commands without hearing his voice, he had no hypnotic sway over her at all. She would be Nameless under venom, then choose her own Name, with him lulled into believing she was obedient.

His words, her words would be meaningless.
She said “It’s about time for me to check in, isn’t it? I wonder what I’ll say.”

She had not untied herself, she was still bound. She could not hear him and her words were smoke to obscure his vision. He understood smoke. He could not compel her to tell him anything.

He approached the post, took the binding cords and pulled until she was dragged toward him. She was still effectively bound, she had not escaped that. Why she had to turn to her back was obvious. Blood down the back of her shirt, two long trails on either side of her back. Unseen because he always faced her.

If he had not trained to be a doctor he would not understand the mechanics of the human ear, but he had studied them when the risks of the ultrasound meant damage to them. He would ask her but she would not answer, not now.

She had slammed her ears one by one into the hard surface of the platform until her eardrums ruptured, stayed silent, held her shoulders to her ears one at a time, let the blood drain down her back and waited in excruciating pain until he came for her.

He could give her all the venom he wished, but none of his commands would have taken hold, and she would have a way to kill him. She would play him, lull him because he’d taught her exactly how. She would take his Omni Tool, find every program he had on it, make sure to circumvent any contracts. The fact that she was willing to risk it meant he had no leverage over her any longer.

She was at war.

He was always seven seconds from death in any direction.

She was useless to him at the moment, severed and staring at him not with hate, but with her counted desires of her own, all of them at the moment involving his death.

He checked her bindings, intact and once again not the point.

She was not a resource. The full implications of how close she’d come, how simple it was and the fact that he had always counted on having his voice, but had not anticipated what it would mean for her to not have her ears…

She could repeat this at any point in her existence, rendering herself potentially immune to him and he would never know the difference.

He was angry, at himself, at her, at the setback and the implications of losing her as an asset. He held her chin in his hand and forced her eyes to his, then touched his lips for her to look there. He spoke in clear and slow Drell “There are times, Drala’fa, when the burden of your company is not worth the burden of your upkeep.”

He was furious, considered snapping her neck and having done with the entire charade of Shepard, an end to her like an end to her hearing.

He could in this moment and his hand itched to do it, to reach lower than her chin to her throat and take all his deaths from her eyes and add her own.

Instead… he watched her eyes. He considered what to do with her as a liability only. Time passed as she counted his potential deaths and he counted the potential use of her life against all evidence to the contrary. He embraced war and burdens, his unstable fury sampled and lifted into a brazier, something she could see.
“As you wish. You are in luck. I am a doctor. I will restore your hearing. It will take some time. I am certain you are in pain in the meantime. I have work to do. I would prefer you were not in pain, but not at the moment. There is a price to damaging my property. You… are my property. If you are willing to sacrifice Vakarian, then we shall do that. There is no need to maintain your link to the man any longer. Before long, Drala'fa, you will tell me you love me and beg to hear me say it in return.”

She understood, shifting comprehension in her eyes that he was where she was. It did not change that all she saw in him was his death.

It almost changed his judgment to allow the will of his twitching hand that wished to move lower and end the threat of her, but once again he was not a merciful man. A quick end to her, if that’s what she wished to provoke, to no longer be an asset, was not something he would allow.

She was his property and he decided what became of her. If she was small, bound and helpless he would know better. If she sought death with everything she was, he would deny her that.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Like anyone would be
I am flattered by your fascination with me.
Like any hot blooded woman
I have simply wanted an object to crave.

But you, you're not allowed, you're uninvited,
an unfortunate slight.

Must be strangely exciting
to watch the stoic squirm.
Must be somewhat heartening
to watch above me, Shepard.

But you, you're not allowed, you're uninvited,
an unfortunate slight.

Like any uncharted territory
I must seem greatly intriguing.
You speak of my love like
you have experienced love like mine before.

But this is not allowed, you're uninvited,
an unfortunate slight.

I don’t think you unworthy.
I need a moment to deliberate.

Alanis Morissette – “Uninvited”

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

Cara lay on her side, trembling with pain, adrenaline, horror and anticipation of more of all the same
and the visceral probability of much worse. He can always make it worse. Trembling was what had
given her away in the first place. She had been desperate enough to try because…

Because she no longer had any guaranteed opportunities to try. She may never have opportunities to
try again. That may have been the end. She had no ability to predict what Senar would do when he
was angry, which she had not seen before, or if she had… had not remembered. She thought she
remembered it all now and she thought he believed the same. She at least remembered enough for
him to have to keep her restrained.

Senar had always had enough power to be in control, calmly and quietly threatening, and now he
had lost much of his control. Some of the anger in his eyes had been at himself, that he had given up
his perimeter, his power, his dominion and taken a risk on releasing her into the wild. She had fought
to imbalance him when she could, from laughing on the shuttle to smiling at him as though she were
counting his severed body parts for inventory. She was not afraid of consequences to her personally as much as she was afraid of how he could use her to hurt other people. She could no longer prevent him hurting other people by following simple rules. She was less afraid of him inflicting pain on her than he was inflicting pleasure on her. Much more effective in her case, as he knew. Not that pain was her favorite thing, but she could endure it much better than she endured collusion with him.

Part of her anger was with herself there because she had told him haughtily what she did not wish to do and he had made her do it. Made them do it.

Beckenstein had been hard but it had been only her at risk. She had wanted to survive.

She no longer had that as her main goal.

If he killed her he couldn’t use her, and that’s what mattered now.

She was out of time, the stakes no longer her life or Garrus’s life or a few people on an estate.

Now with the depth and breadth of Leviathan interest, with what he was doing, creating theater and progress updates that had absolutely nothing to do with any progress she was making…

The idea of hearing loss resulting in release of hypnotic compulsion had occurred to her while she was on Beckenstein, but it had been an unusable idea at the time. Her main concern had been getting off the planet, not getting off the grounds. He had explained Beckenstein’s policies and she had believed him. He had been telling the truth, one of many truths he’d told. He need not lie when the truth would serve. He told both truth and lie with exactly the same amount of conviction and she could not tell which was which. Only he could authorize exit from the estate. That was one of the reasons beyond the pleasure of her company and protection why he always kept her in sight when there were a few guests at the estate or on his arm when there were many guests. Her most successful path off the estate would have been to escape with someone who had prior authorization and they both knew it.

Forcing him in any way to authorize anything to facilitate her escape would have been impossible. There was nothing he cared about beyond her. She had no leverage, no path to persuade him to do anything he did not wish to do. His venom made him immune to most hypnotic or coercive agents, he had considered how to counteract Asari influence, and pain…

Pain meant nothing to him other than an inconvenience, a debt to be repaid tenfold and a waste of time. Attempting to inflict it on him would be an insult to his fortitude and endurance. Trying to hurt him, even succeeding in hurting him would not accomplish anything at all other than wrath directed not at her, but someone else. He would be uncooperative, counting his moments until he was in control again or dead, either an acceptable outcome if what was asked of him was something he was not willing to give.

She wasn’t afraid to hurt him, she wasn’t afraid to hurt her… it just wasn’t a path toward collusion for either of them. He had every living person in existence to hold hostage against her behavior… she had nothing. Eventually the only thing he wanted was her, and on the subject of her his practicalities deserted him.

She was his Shores, the place itself and a person to meet there. He had decided she was the embodiment of his ambitions, a Goddess in whom he had Faith. He would not recant upon his deathbed or any bed of nails.

There were two deep injuries in her, to the bone and surrounded by the unapproachable. It was not that he had taken her… it was that he had not killed her. He told her it was because the loss of her
eyes, someone else taking the contract and depriving the galaxy of her eyes would have been an incalculable loss.

The second was that she was no longer on Beckenstein. He…

He had given any number of self-deprecating and mocking reasons. He’d said he was bored. He’d said he wished to survive in a galaxy free of Reapers. Once, without the question being asked at all he had taken her chin in his hand, warm blue biotic glow in patches on his skin, and told her all his riches and theater meant nothing if her riches went unappreciated. That he had been wrong about her proper setting. That he did not care if he deprived the galaxy of her eyes, but her eyes deserved more than this room and only his creations to behold. Her eyes deserved the right to behold the galaxy as her due.

He had spared her life. He had let her out.

Neither of those choices made any sense and she imagined those were his two deepest injuries also, to the bone and unapproachable.

She could get lost there, examining those wounds from a distance, his and hers, his practicality defied by his poetry and hope. Her martyrdom defied by calm and comfort.

While captive on Beckenstein hearing loss had occurred to her, but it had been a vague curiosity and she had not known at the time if sound was processed through a translator or through ears. She had no access to her translator and was not about to waste her chance at the attempt only to find that sound was processed independently of the ears. There was no way to find out, no way to test or plan. She had not been afraid to tell him so his question about what she did not want to tell him did not trigger any response on the subject.

Upon getting control over her translator back she had not known to look specifically for the information, but had learned it as a happenstance, a side benefit of her curiosity. She had only had the default for human, she learned more about exclusive and inclusive language processing. Tangentially she’d learned that the device depended on functional ears.

He had caught her attempt at escape from compulsion because he knew her, her behavior, her motivations, her face, her eyes, her posture too well. With his Drell precision and his… his… Whatever it was, he knew her. Was he was able to pick up tension from pain she couldn’t suppress? Could he just… feel it… when she was different, having tested her in every state? The same way she could just feel… that without enough information to decide anything logically… she knew she had to kill him now or never? He knew everything about her, had spent months pulling what he wanted from her like a skein he could unravel and catalogue by the inch.

He read her eyes, he said. Every time he told her that what gave her away was her eyes, but she never remembered that part because he asked her to forget it.

So very many things he had asked her to forget, arriving in her mind as unexpected guests.

To hear him tell it his world had begun and would end in her eyes.

She didn’t know what Senar had said to her to test her, but it sounded like Turian speech. It had been a huge risk. She’d known it had a low chance of success to get far enough to kill him… but she had shown him something she could do. She had proven she could do it. She had taken away his certainty that he knew her well enough to prevent everything. She’d watched the amusement and knowledge of control slip out of his eyes to be replaced by anger and that… felt good on its own. She’d been lying in her own blood, adrenaline and pained sweat for too long, waiting for him to turn
away so she could rupture an eardrum without screaming, and then she waited in silence ringing with only pain and hope for him to turn to her.

He could probably not only see it in her eyes but smell it on her skin from a distance.

She’d been struggling not to pass out from pain and exhaustion, afraid he’d find her that way unconscious, discover her injuries and she’d miss the entire thing.

It had seemed like an eternity though it had probably only been three or four hours.

Whatever he was doing, what he wanted was time and she had to prevent that.

She didn’t remember Leviathan and that was terrifying.

She remembered everything else terrifying. She had helped him. She had been his accomplice if not mastermind. But now he had access to anything he could want and did not need her unless it was for her eyes. She did not believe that even for his own survival he wanted to save the galaxy… that would be… that would be…

She couldn’t even come up with something stupid or shortsighted enough for that to be.

Maybe Drala’fa Dumb. That was Drala’fa Dumb and that level of delusion to think that was his goal.

Maybe she knew him well also, his ambitions, the way his mind worked. Why save a galaxy if he had found an escape route? That’s what he saw now, not her path forward to ending Reapers. Now he saw his own path and she did not know what that was… but she knew it was bad.

She could not forget all the times she gave him her ‘best advice’ and other than sex, that’s what he needed her for. Wanted her for. To do it together. She was still, as she was in Beckenstein, window dressing, strategy and sex on tap.

The sick twisting of the way he knew her, the intimacy of ‘them’ was inescapable internally. She could not move or think without being reminded of him somehow, and she couldn’t tell if that was what he wanted, some compulsion he’d put in her head so everything led to him, or the fact that she couldn’t experience her ears hurting without eventually thinking of the things he’d whispered to her with her ears whole and hungry.

As he’d pointed out and had her demonstrate so many times, that hunger was a standalone thing that answered to his body and voice and not to her protestations.

That’s also why seeing his smile fade, no matter how painful, had been worth it.

It would be so much easier if every association with him were painful. She could retain her separate identity. Instead he knew her sense of humor and he respected her. He enjoyed her company. He took care assuring she was entertained or comfortable, times he was in pain, times he could have lost his temper, made her pay for whatever… instead he’d given her kindness and forbearance, and not just indulgently or when there was kindness or comfort enough for both of them. As though it belonged to her unquestioningly if he was there to provide it. When he apologized for not being able to keep her in comfort he meant that. It pained him.

He wanted to kill her, but it pained him.

That he wanted to kill her pained him.

That she wanted to kill him… he approved.
She did want to kill him and would not have stopped if he’d been helpless and she’d had her hand to his throat.

He knew that too.

His approval of her potential competence faded in face of her real competence. Or had it?

She wasn’t dead. It hadn’t faded enough for her purposes.

He wished she could care for him or his comfort. He knew in every galling moment that she cared most about ending him. He resented the lengths of coercion he had to go to in order to achieve her smiling at him.

He had inspired her to care about him, even love him, remembering now that she had asked him to not bring the word ‘love’ into it… and he’d allowed it despite…

He cared for her, it mattered. He was like a parasitic vine that climbed along her skin and mind, dug in and fed on her with her unable to tear him out for long before his patient climb and digging roots sank in again and she welcomed him home. If she did manage to tear him out there were scars shaped like him wherever she experienced herself. She couldn’t get the distance or the autonomy needed for any perspective about how she felt or what she wanted. He had defined what she wanted and how she felt for too long. She kept trying to reach back to her mind before she had seen Beckenstein and that seemed cold and remote, lacking perspective, lacking knowledge, lacking…

She had been simple. She was no longer simple. She was also no longer alone, not knowing which parts of her were grafted on by him, which sway toward or away from him was intentional or engineered by him.

All that mattered was that ‘him’ was everywhere.

She couldn’t ask him, he’d lie or be amused and she would never know. His lies were more convincing than her truths. His truths… even more devastating.

She could not go back to being the person naïve enough to walk down an alley on Illium without a thought, the person that had looked at him in the mirror and told him earnestly that he should let her go or Drell would die.

Her ears hurt, stinging, whistling with not sound but pain from stale air, the chill and burn of exposed nerve with each breath and shift in movement. She didn’t know what he had done, but he wasn’t concerned with her comfort or pain at the moment and she was immobilized without any give on her bonds, pain in her ears, cramps and trembling of her muscles from being too long in one position.

She had thought maybe he would kill her and maybe that was a good thing. It had looked like he would there for a moment and she had tried to get him to do it when it came to that by promising him, as she had before, that she would kill him if she could. If he knew her eyes, then he’d have seen that there.

Stuck in Beckenstein it was only her that was paying. She could even have a bizarre sense of humor about that, some perspective, some hope that the sick thing he was could stop… being a sick thing. The sheer waste of his potential was enough to make her ill and grieving. She had wanted to save him. She never thought she could, but she had wanted to, somehow. If she’d had that man on her side… the things she could do, could have done…

The man who was passionate and dedicated, careful and observant, the man with a strategic mind and a body built and honed to kill.
She felt the wave of flush and her heart pounding in her already painful ears, no sound, just remembered sensation, now raw and ragged.

Admit it, Cara, a body honed for sex and a voice you begged to hear more from any number of times. He said you were going to beg to hear that he loved you and sick as that makes you, he’s going to make it happen.

I’m his unbreakable toy.

He would not have made that threat without carrying it out. He’ll do it, now or later.

Before she’d said she loved him spontaneously and he had appreciated it, even protected her from the vulnerability of not having love returned. He’d made her feel loved. She never had been able to decide whether that was something kind or vile in him, or again both. He knew how to get her there, to have her say she loved him. Having his silence or scorn in return would shatter her every time.

Of course he knew it. She’d beg. She’d wait for his answer. She had no idea what it would be, shattering or his ability to lie, his appreciation of joyous irony with venom in her blood and his body on hers, in hers, her hands holding him as tightly to her as she could.

There was no preparing herself for that, only enduring it. If he made her love him, that was her seeking him every moment and isn’t that just his favorite thing ever, her eyes always looking to him. He’d already achieved that and knew he could do it again. All he needed was time to rebuild her priming. This time he was not indulgent or forgiving. This time his primary experiences of her were wrath and rejection and he would not feel that himself without sharing.

Capturing her had been a whim, keeping her would be something he considered a necessity, something that had delivered to him deep unhealed wounds.

She’d experience loving someone, unrequited. Nothing else to do but experience sexual abuse she would thank him for providing to break the monotony of her useless days. So much more painful as he counted all the things she was unaware she should be feeling, should be doing, as she sat and watched him paint her nails and felt as though she were the luckiest woman in existence.

She was in the belly of a Reaper, slowly bleeding into the bedding, ushered out for play time.

Beckenstein she had understood the playtime and here…

Here she did not understand except to know it was bad, the expressions on his face, the things he could do, the fact that he had a tether to the core of a Reaper somehow. He had the Citadel with her codes, he had the Normandy with her compliance, now… he had Reaper… Reapers… and why not just do as he’d done on the Normandy? Why not let her take charge again? Why was she tied down? It was not just that he could not control her, because he obviously could enough to provide recorded reports.

It was because he had other things he had to do and those things should terrify her whatever they were. She’d been worried before about escaping him combined with stopping him from harming another person. Now she was convinced viscerally that she had to kill him and that was her first priority. He needed her but maybe not for long. Maybe not at all. Maybe he had everything he needed and she…

She didn’t know. She did not know. She remembered when he’d questioned her on the throne, asking her was the Asari there of her own free will or a slave and did she not know the answer? What would she stake on her answer, the Asari’s life and potential torture? Her own fate if she was
traded off in her place? She did not know what he wanted then, she did not know what he wanted now. Whatever he was doing, she should be terrified. He’d said something true then: ‘You don’t know. It’s your job to know, Drala’fa, your job as Commander Shepard and you can’t make what seems like an obvious decision in a room full of criminals that all deserve to die, me first, with your wits intact and no venom.’

It’s my job to know. It’s my job as Commander Shepard not to survive, not to save Garrus, not to do anything… but to stop him. I have to stop him, whatever he is doing. I have to finally reach the point of realizing that whatever he is doing, he has enough power to do enough harm that I have to stop him and know that’s my goal.

I need to make an obvious decision while I’m tied down that in this room he is the criminal who deserves to die, somehow, make that choice in every moment while she had a choice at all.

She absolutely had to find a way.

Time passed, her wits intact as she did not know how, what… or most important at the moment, if.

Garrus, I am so sorry. I wish you could hear me. I know you haven’t given up, all the messages I read and deleted, no answer. No ripple in me. No response. All the words you’ve said in all the ways you could express that you loved me, you were there for me, you wanted to be or get for me everything and anything I needed.

The worst part is, I loved you, needed… need you. And you need me. And I am so sorry for helping him. I asked him to let you live, and now there’s no reason… maybe there was never a reason. I shouldn’t have helped him, and I don’t know that I had a choice.

I should have had a choice. I should have been able to stop helping him. You deserve a woman who could have done that for you, Garrus. I should have killed him those first 10 minutes, found my way out, found my way back to you. I was supposed to save the galaxy and I could not break out of a room. He was right, hubris is part of my calculations.

If I have a choice, Garrus, if I ever have one again, my last name is Fanning and I love you. I’m so sorry.

He’s right about some things. I should have done everything for you. I should not have stayed away. I should have let you come back on the Normandy, that’s what you wanted. I know some things about free will now that I should have known then. He’d only have been able to kill me then. You’d miss me but it would have been clean and we would have been together. There are things worse than death, Garrus, and many of those things are knowing what I decided, knowing what I’ve said and what I haven’t said, who I’ve been and what he’s done and that it happened not just to me, but to you… knowing I could have prevented it if… I’d done things your way.

If I’d been able to kill him and escape.

Now I’ve lost my chance to be yours except in the places in my mind he can make me forget and maybe now can tear out from the roots, his vines planted in the bleeding holes left behind.

Now I’m not even in the fight against Reapers.

Now he’s my only fight and I am so sorry.

I love you so much and I never deserved you and I never will.

I know if you were here, you’d smile and tell me none of that was true and I miss you so much.
She allowed herself to cry, to talk to Garrus and imagine his voice because she hadn’t in so long, to answer all the messages he’d sent her. If she was going to die or forget… she wanted her bond mate with her at her end.

Please, please let there be an afterlife… I wish I had more time. I need to tell you so many things. I need to let you know that I heard you, finally.

Garrus, I’d meet you at the bar… but I don’t drink.

I’d meet you anywhere and I would drink for you but you’d never ask me to do that for you.

Senar never asked her to drink either.

She cried silently, and if it added to the whirl of adrenaline, fear and pain, it wouldn’t give away anything new.

She didn’t hear him because of course she couldn’t hear anything. A pinch at her neck and she was paralyzed. Another pinch and everything went dark.

She didn’t know if it was cowardly or brave that she hoped she did not wake up. She did know it was wishful thinking.

OoOoOoOoOoOoOoO

She did wake up.

Compounded horror jolted her wide awake.

She was… back on Beckenstein? Had she ever been off? Had it all… was it all a dream, a lie…?

Same mirror. Same… no. He was Rin, not Thane. Something different. She remembered.

How many times had they done this?

Maybe she had not come back to life at all… maybe this was hell. Just enough time to know she loved Garrus and he loved her, enough to suffer with that, then nothing but a Drell’s doll dream.

They both wore the same clothes they had the first time. The room was exactly the same in the mirror. Same hand at her throat, only this time red and blue blending to purple and not black and green. Same hand at her waist, only this time knowing, glowing blue, caressing instead of restraining, his eyes met hers in the mirror again…

How many times had they done this?

She smelled like vanisfruit again.

Had he made her believe they had gotten out together?

There was nothing to hold onto that was true except for vanisfruit and all the ways it made her want to fall to her knees and vomit, but he held her up. Panic in huge waves hit and swamped her.

Hell. This is hell and you keep making the same mistake and looking for reason, looking for hope and he’ll give it to you if you ask. Then he’ll take it away.

The hand at her throat moved to stroke back her hair. He tilted her head to the side and nuzzled at her throat with his mouth, his nose, his tongue. “I do learn some things, Cara. Anti-emetic. You have…”
strong reactions to the sight of me. I will not give you the opportunity to kill me this time. I know your answer.”

This time. How many times had they done this? All the basic questions…

where am I?
who am I?
who is he?

She did not know except all three could be answered by ‘hell.’

Didn’t she say to herself she’d do it differently if she had a chance, that she’d try to kill him, that she’d try to get away?

What was there to lose? What was there to be gained?

It didn’t matter anymore. If this was her constant future, her eternal present, in this room…

Hell means no matter what you do, you will end up back in front of this mirror and you will do it again, and again, and again. No hesitation. No bargaining.

Her body erupted into fight and flight, kill him, out the door, security kills her, it’s over.

It’s over.

Her foot lifted to break his toes, and his foot was not there when hers landed. Her head jerked to the side, the intent to slam against his head, take out one of her ears again with the impact, clap her hand to the other side of her head, get him down.

Her foot landed on empty space, her head hit nothing, her arm was twisted behind her back and it was… over. Beyond that there wasn’t any conscious plan but there was frenzy and soon she wasn’t in front of the mirror any more but on the bed, where she was always going to be headed anyway.

Lack of provocation or provocation on her part would result in the same thing, she knew, and he could always decide whether or not her answers were right or wrong depending on his mood.

He was smiling and that meant he had all the power he needed, back to indulgent and giving. Somehow, some way, while she was sleeping, paralyzed, he’d gotten his time. He’d gotten everything he needed and she didn’t know if it was months later or minutes.

How many times had they done this?

His legs were wrapped around hers to restrain her, his hands held hers over her head. He was still so much bigger than she was, so much faster, his smile undimmed, his eyes approving as though he were proud of her resolve.

He bent his head to kiss her and she tried to bite but his lips and tongue were far from where she intended her teeth to be, as though they had done this so many times that he knew her every move.

Or only because it… she… was so very predictable in desperation.

Venom was trickling into her system from his hands and kiss, blue biotics and the close of her teeth on nothing. His mouth moved to her ear, where there was an earring, where he tasted it, where he restrained both her hands in one of his own while he took that earring. Her hands twisted in his, her
body attempted to throw him off while he held her down. He caused no pain, allowed no freedom.

He pulled back and looked down at her. She wished she saw fear or anger but there was only indulgence and even pity for her. She no longer qualified as inspiring fear. Maybe she never had and that was the hope of hell, built to be crushed.

He told her in a voice she hadn’t heard from him before… Senar’s voice? His real voice? “You deserve to know, Cara. I have decided that I love you. I have decided that you hate me. Because I love you, you are alive. I do not believe either of us had a choice. I do not believe in your definition of love, but mine. I do not believe in your definition of hate, but mine. Is that not what you always wished of life, Cara, that love triumph over hate? Then I will make it so. My love will triumph over your hatred. I sought you out for your inspiration, and that remains. You value yourself as less than nothing, only a catalyst for change for other people, never yourself. I face Gods and I ask myself what I want from them or any other God and I choose you. Above all things, my Cara, I choose you. I will keep you from dying ever again. I will keep you from those who seek or allow your death, your martyrdom. I will stop you from sacrificing yourself. If the fact that I value you over everything else in the galaxy, stand before Gods and ask only for you, if that is not love, then the word means nothing. Let the galaxy end, Cara, if it means you will live. I have found a way to keep you safe. Safe from your own willingness to die in every moment. I am willing to die to extend your life. You are willing to die to end mine. If you are willing to abandon everything you care for in order to end me, if that is not hate, then the word means nothing. I forgive your hatred. I forgive your love of another man. It is not a fault that you love him. It is not his fault that he loves you. I will not kill him because he does not matter any longer. I made a rash vow in anger and I regret it. Forgive me. I have found my Path, Cara, and my Path is you. I do not wish to see you suffer. I wish to grant you joy.”

“No, thank you.”

He laughed and kissed her again, his indulgence in fullest bloom, venom creeping in through every barrier she tried to place, cracks in the darkness where it seeped through.

He held up his free hand and it was bare and then it wasn’t, a glistening net draping his hand in the colors of the earrings he made for her, gemmed violet and black and silver. He told her “Inspiration does not always come from you, fortunately. You have been unavailable and I have found my way. I have designed many gifts for you but this is the finest and most cherished. Here is your joy, Cara. Here is freedom from hatred and sacrifice. I have been cruel and blunt. I have forced you to forget. Here is your memory Whole, your actions Right. Here is how I will love you. Here is how I need not rob you of yourself but only take one thing away and add one thing in its place. You will not hate me. You will love me and I will not make you beg. I give myself to you. We will be together always.”

With a swirl of his hand the net was on her hair and then tightening, shifting, through her skin and bone, into her head, painless and warm, like the blue glow of biotics sinking in and through, part of her.

Part of him.

His mouth bent to hers and she reached back to him, his voice inside her head, new and welcome. “You will always be able to hear me, Cara. I will always be able to hear you. He is yours.”

She remembered everything and the shift of lighting made a new landscape, one shared, never alone. He had saved her, protected her, rescued her, loved her and she wanted to love him back. She thought “She is yours” and she knew he heard her, would always hear her, would always save her, protect her, rescue her, love her.
His voice was in her mind, his biotics on her skin, his lips along her mouth, venom on her tongue. “I beg you, my Cara, tell me what it is I most long to hear, what I have missed from your lips, what I should have never forsaken because you asked. I will never forsake you because you ask. Never again ask me to leave you to suffer. I will not allow it. I love you, Cara. Tell me you love me.”

Her freed hands stroked along the sides of his frill, fingertips spread out wide to touch the edges, her palm against venom-slick texture of him. “I love you. I always have. I always will.”

She knew what he wanted, knew what he needed, his voice inside her head. She would never be alone again. Hell transformed to heaven in a blink with the addition of the only things they needed; forgiveness, understanding and love.
Chapter Notes

Feste: Will you make me believe that I am not sent for you?

Sebastian: Go to, go to, thou art a foolish fellow: Let me be clear of thee.

Feste: Well held out, i’ faith! No, I do not know you; nor I am not sent to you by my lady, to bid you come speak with her; nor your name is not Master Cesario; nor this is not my nose neither. Nothing that is so is so.

“Twelfth Night” – William Shakespeare

Garrus paced in his office. She… they… had been down in the depths of Despoina for three weeks. Fourteen Reapers had crashed into the oceans that the Normandy had seen. Casualties piled up to the Reapers on every other world. Beckenstein had been invaded by Reapers, communication with that world cut off two weeks after they’d ended their investigation.

Krios’s DNA profile, true or plant had led nowhere, gotten no hits past or present.

Cara and Celetis were now on the Citadel to make what report in person they could not make on encrypted channels. Celetis had been able to get Cara to contact Garrus… eventually… two weeks in. It had been recorded, he hadn’t been able to really talk to her, but he’d played it over and over.

“Hey. I’m so sorry I’ve been so distracted. On the other hand… Reapers. I think I’ve got a plan that I hope will turn the tide. Sorry, tide must be a touchy subject with us down here. We’re okay. A little sick of Reaper rations. No brownies to be had and I haven’t had any time to bake. Or any place to bake. I’m tired… but… Garrus… I think we’re going to win. I know we’re going to win. We’re headed back to the Normandy in a few days and we’ll go to the Citadel. I know you want to talk to me, and I’m sorry I haven’t been able to. Varin has dutifully informed me several times that I have neglected you and I know it’s true. I apologize on the behalf of humans for being such a trial to concerned Drell and Turians. I will be there. Not just for the Council. I’ll be able to see you, just you and me. Okay? I’ll be on the Citadel in one week. I promised you I’d see you when I was on the Citadel and I want to keep that promise. Not because I have to, because I want to. I want to thank you. I love you. I’ll see you soon.”

She, Celetis and Russ had come through the Citadel fully armed and armored. She was clearly no longer afraid of Krios but also taking no chances with her potential safety, which was likely for Garrus’s benefit. Garrus’s hope was that Krios had been on Beckenstein and was now an unreported casualty. They all had bigger problems than Thane Krios now. Garrus had been steadied and calmed by Liara, by Russ, cautiously hopeful from the news coming from Despoina if not the news from anywhere else. He’d focused, as they’d both asked, as his Avah had asked, on the protection of Palaven. Casualties were in numbers he could calculate but not absorb in their significance.

Russ had been right. They were at war. Everyone had to sacrifice, give everything to the fight at hand.
If she believed they were going to win, so did he. Maybe there would be an end to this.

Please let there be an end to this.

He would be able to see her alone. Celetis had taken him up on his invitation to have a drink and that would come later. She had addressed the Council and given her briefing on the subject of Leviathan and Reaper proposed leapfrog tactics. With each captured Reaper, Leviathan would take hold of it remotely and those Reapers would escort Leviathan off Despoina into systems under heaviest attack. Leviathan should be able with Reaper weapons support to subvert other Reapers. Leviathan numbers were not inexhaustible, so sentient pilots must also be trained, to have someone available to pilot each Reaper brought down.

Leviathan had not reproduced since the cycles had begun, their numbers constant and patient. They were immortal in lifespan but could be killed. They could reproduce through parthenogenesis, but that cycle took over 50 years. It would take a while before there were more Leviathan. There were 20,000 now. It was possible that there were more throughout the galaxy submerged, and they would seek their own kind, but as it stood in 50 years if they lost no Leviathan, they’d still only have 40,000 of them and theoretically infinite Reapers.

Caution and cooperation were necessary. That was Shepard’s message.

Shepard had undergone the process of isolating and projecting her consciousness, using herself as a test subject. Something that appalled Garrus but he’d had no vote in that decision, had not known about it until she had revealed it to everyone. She had been able to take control of the first Reaper down. That was proof of concept for the Leviathan and they now had faith that their allies were capable of assistance when necessary. It was possible and probable to build to fleets of combined Leviathan and hijacked Reapers piloted by Leviathan and other sentient consciousnesses.

All contact with Tuchanka was lost, the Krogan scattered and failing at last reports. Palaven was still capable of communication with the Citadel, still holding her own out of everyone due to the groundwork he’d laid to assist with the war effort.

Cara had not wasted a moment of her no doubt sleep-deprived time. Did disconnected consciousnesses need sleep? Had her body slept and her mind stayed awake for three weeks? She had a massively complicated plan she’d prepared to go with her report and he’d have to spend a week reading to understand even some of it.

Despoina was to remain deserted, the location obscured and coded, unknown to anybody outside the Normandy crew. The Normandy would no longer be required as bait. Reapers themselves would be used for that. The Leviathan did not wish to transmit their starting point to Reapers, so quarantine was necessary.

The Leviathan would take it from here until the number of hijacked Reapers became so high that they required other sentient consciousnesses. Shepard would remain in communication with them and when training was to begin she would help coordinate. Ways to contact Leviathan had also been provided in her voluminous reports should something happen to her. There would soon be Leviathan in every system, easy to find, easy to communicate with, as big as the Reapers themselves.

That sounded terrifying… and encouraging.

He paced his office and waited for her, half afraid some emergency – what wasn’t an emergency now – would call her away.

But she was there, announced and ushered in, closing the door behind her carefully. Not as carefully
as she first had when he saw her after she’d come back to life. He hadn’t been in a room with her since she had been in the Normandy Med Bay telling him he could not touch her.

She smiled at him and for once he could not hold her new face against her. He froze mid pace, felt the pain, the caution and the reckless joy of her presence, his eyes taking her in.

She took off at a run and threw her arms around him. She was still so small that it wasn’t her weight, but the shock that made him sway, his arms held out to the side to avoid touching her. She did not say anything, turned her head on his chest so her ear was pressed to be able to hear his heartbeat. She squeezed her arms around his waist. He closed his eyes and swallowed, brought his arms in and around, finally able to touch his bond mate, breathe in her scent. No fear… no… Drell… just her.

They stood like that while his subvocals went harsh and aching.

They weren’t her colors anymore, but they were his, they were theirs, the marks on his crest slowly moved to her hair, his eyes closed tightly as his arms began to tremble. She tilted her forehead up until she met his crest, brought her hands to the side of his face, her pinkies slipped under his mandibles. She said softly “Thank you. For everything. For every time you have been alone with what you knew was right. For all the times you were alone in loving, not knowing you were loved. For all the times you were willing to run directly into danger. For all the lives you have saved. For representing the best of your people. For being someone and something to believe in. I have been in love with you for so long, and I wish so many good things for you. Of all the people that deserve happiness, Garrus Vakarian, I wish it for you the most. I am proudest of being the woman you chose to love. You deserved and deserve to know that you are loved by me, that in my mind you always stood out, you always glowed with all the potential you embodied in my life.”

He held her, his legs shaking, arms trembling. That was… everything he wanted to hear… except what was missing was that they would be together… that was everything about their past… but Spirits… it sounded like goodbye. He heard it, he knew it. His voice cracked as he said “You always did know how to make an entrance.”

She laughed “I should have run away with you when I had the chance, Garrus.”

He wanted to say ‘It’s not too late’ but he knew it was. They were going to win… and she… she was going to do something Shepard… and he couldn’t stop her.

She lifted her head, her violet eyes foreign but her scent, her voice settled him, reassured him. It was her. He breathed her in deeply as she said “I need you to do something. I need you to ask for that bunk. Now.”

His heart leaped as he said what he should have said years ago, words that might have saved her life, words that would have saved his mate, given them time together “Avah, please. I need to be with you, on your ship, when you go do… whatever it is you have planned.”

“Permission granted to board. Now, Garrus. You need to go now. I wish I could explain and I wish I could avoid all the bad days… but I can’t. I’ve made a lot of mistakes and I’ve lost a lot of time and now… there isn’t much left. I wish I’d had more time. I wish I’d had more time with you. I wish all the time I’d had or will have could be spent with you.”

He thought about Asari and blood and none of that mattered now. She was here, in his arms, he had the bunk and… and they had to go.

She said “I’ve learned a few things about free will… and I haven’t asked you enough questions, I haven’t given you enough choices, I haven’t honored the choices you wanted to make and I am so
Sorry. I got you what I thought you should want, what I thought was best for you. I didn’t ask you. It was a mistake. It wasn’t wasted at least, my meaning well without doing good. My loss has been Palaven’s gain. Take the Normandy, bring her to Palaven. Let anybody from the Normandy go that wants to go to their home worlds to fight. Transportation is going to be difficult after today, infrastructure will fail. Don’t get caught out in a void with no way home. Go to your family. Tell Liara to go to Thessia. Tell only the Normandy crew, and tell them they have to go now and quietly. I know you’ll know what to do. I trust you but I can’t explain. I’m going to be gone soon. I only have time for one last question. If… if you had the choice, Garrus, when I’m gone… would you stay bonded to me or be free? If you fight for Palaven, if you’re there and you’re fighting for Turians… I will be gone and you can’t stop it and you can’t change it and I can’t explain but you have to believe me. This is the only way. But I can do something for you. I can set you free of your bond. I can give you back to yourself. Turns out ancient creatures … can work small miracles and I found one for you. I can’t manage the larger miracle I want, the one for us. Once I gave you a job I thought you wanted, but you wanted me. I can’t give you me, but I can give you back to yourself, reverse your bond to me. You’ll have a choice again. Don’t hold out hope, Garrus. I will be gone. But I won’t do it unless you ask because I’ve learned to ask you what you want… far too late… but I’ve learned. I want you to fight, but not for me. I want you to fight on Palaven, but not for Palaven. Garrus… fight for yourself.”

She was crying and he tipped up her chin, suddenly violet eyes were perfect. He asked her gently “What did I tell you about protecting me?”

She smiled “Not to do it. Bad habit. This is my last chance though. Give me a break this one last time. You should know, Garrus… you should know. If I can save you… out of everyone… just you… it is all worth it. Everything that’s happened, everything that will happen… it’s worth it. You’re worth it. Wherever I am, wherever I end up, if I’ve done that one thing… or tried with everything I have…”

He shook his head “Whatever you’re going to do, and I believe you, I can’t stop you, never could… leave me what I have of you. Leave me my bond, our bond, my marks, your mark. Your blood part of my body and mind, your color on my crest. Don’t take yourself from me. I have a right to my bad choices and habits if you do. Thank you for the choice, but I stand by what I’ve done, who I am, what I want, who I want.”

“I love you, Garrus Vakarian. I’m sorry for all the pain knowing me has brought you, but never how much I love you. All those times I didn’t answer you… I wish I had. I want the best for you. I should have been the best for you.”

“Say one more word about you not being the best and I’m going to stop being understanding and start arguing with you. We can still do the afterlife thing.”

She paused, her eyes chaotic. She let out a half laugh and said “No, we can’t. I won’t be having an afterlife. This honesty thing is hard.”

“You’re so sure? No heaven for you?”

“A life sentence and an unending life. If there’s an afterlife, you can’t wait for me there either. I won’t be arriving. I’m sure of it.”

“You’re sure but you can’t explain?”

“I can say that deals with ancient Gods have clauses I can’t escape. I had to make a deal.”

“You made a deal to save me and set me free so you could pay forever?”
“Sounds like I can explain if you’re willing to believe. You might see me die… I won’t… I won’t be dead. So don’t wait for me, wherever or whenever you are. My truths belong to you and I wish I could explain but there’s no time and all the truths I want to tell don’t only belong to me. You’re the only person I wanted to tell, when my mind, when my will was my own. Please don’t try to stop me. It will only waste the time you need to get away. Please don’t try to tell anybody else about Gods and immortality and deals… you can’t make them understand and the Gods might be listening. You know how that goes, don’t you? Where I’m concerned? When you know the truth?”

“Cara… what is the truth?”

She pressed a small case into his hand, about an inch square. She said “Inside. Dermal patch. Can reverse bonding. Keep it.”

He carefully took it and then put it into a pouch on her belt. “No. Whatever the truth is, I am your bond mate Cara. If you’re going to live forever, have something to remember me by.”

“I won’t be able to keep it.”

“Then remember that I didn’t and won’t want it.”

“My name’s Cara Fanning.”

“Then my name is Garrus Fanning.”

“Yes, it is. I love you. I’ll always love you.”

“Why does this sound like goodbye?”

“Because it is. Russ knows he is in command and that Celetis and I will not be returning. He’ll be waiting for you. You need to hurry.”

“Cara, for Spirit’s sake… take me with you.”

She laughed, her desperation laugh “Garrus… I can’t even take me with me. I’m only here to warn you.”

“I refuse to believe you can’t explain.”

“I’ll tell you a truth and then you have to let me go.”

“That didn’t work out so well last time we did this.”

“I guess that depends on your point of view… but you still get the truth you asked for… I’m still at the bottom of the ocean, Garrus, still in the belly of a Reaper. I’m probably never going to leave that Reaper and immortality is inside. I never left. Ancient Gods that can control consciousness at a distance… they can create bodies given a sample… I’m not really here. Once my link here is broken, and it will be and soon… all that will be left is a shell that looks like me. Don’t remember me like that… or even like this. I fell in love with you with green eyes and red hair and riotous freckles and all the hope I could hold. Don’t watch me die. Once you’re gone, I’m gone. Maybe sooner. It’s not under my control.”

“And Celetis?”

“He never left either.”

“He’s a… shell?”
“Yes.”

“Is when you leave and what you say under his control?”

“Yes… and no. I’m me. I love you. That’s what’s true. He knows he can’t control or change that, he never could. I can’t say some things because Leviathan won’t allow it. I can’t… go with you because he won’t allow it. You… won’t have even the shell of me. I tried but… no. That wasn’t a deal I could arrange. It’s... complicated, expensive and difficult. I wanted to save you and I earned my chance to try. I still can’t guarantee... Palaven isn’t safe... but I can get you off the Citadel. You can’t get to Despoina. You’ll die. I won’t be there for long, I might not be there now, I don’t know where my body is anymore. Don’t try to find me. Beyond this point, who I am is also not under my control. In this moment I am free to love you. In all other moments I will only be free to love him. I will not be allowed to hate. What you need to know is that I will be okay. He won’t make me suffer... or... there’s no point to certain forms of suffering anymore and he won’t allow them. I won’t experience them. I will know you love me. I will know he loves me. I will know I am loved by two... extraordinary men. I will know I love you both but that I will never see you again. I won’t be able to act on harming him or hating him. It may not occur to me at all why I might think that way. I will be safe and loved and that is the price I would have paid either way. I’ve been allowed... to do this for myself, for you.”

“If I can’t go with you, I’ll stay until you have to go.”

“I don’t want you to watch me die or to die yourself guarding a shell.”

“And I didn’t bond to you so I would miss out on any part of you that tried to find me. I’m staying. When you’re gone I’ll remember you. Red hair and green eyes and hope.”

She smiled and said conspiratorially with her Shepard smile “If it helps, he’s deeply upset by how much I love you and always will be.”

He picked her up and pressed his crest to her forehead “Yeah. Yeah, it helps. I’m proud to help upset him forever. Cara. Fight for yourself.”

“I will. I have. Some fights I have lost, but winning this one... seeing you... I won’t disappear without you knowing what happened, or some of it. You’ll know I’m gone. You’ll know you’re free. You’ll know you’re loved, you were loved, always. Even or especially if it didn’t seem that way. You’ll know I’ll be okay because I made it here, to you, and that’s all I needed, all I wanted. He... they... let me have that. That means something or it should. What I want matters, it makes and made a difference. What I want will matter... it just won’t make a difference anymore. Everything else... everything else and the war... everyone has the right to fight for themselves, that’s all I can hope for, more than I can get for myself. I can’t fight for them anymore. My fight is over. I love you.”

He leaned in to kiss her, and the moment his plate touched her lips, her body went limp in his arms. He’d thought that would happen.

Time.

Celetis.

He lifted her higher in his arms, looked around his office. He couldn’t bring anything with him but her. He did not have time, she’d made clear...

But he did have clues.
He lifted her carefully until she was resting against his shoulder, as though she were sleeping. He keyed his Omni Tool into Tower security. Biometrics. Varin Celetis. Still here. With ancient Gods in mind and deals and far too little information but her still warm in his arms he left his office, ignoring everyone watching. Ignoring everything else.

He wouldn’t waste the chance she’d given him, or maybe he would, he didn’t know.

Celetis was waiting patiently and casually in the Tower where the Council met, on a bench contemplating the flowers. He stood as Garrus approached “Councilor. I am afraid there is no time for a drink.”

“I’d kill you, but I’d have to put her down.”

“That is the essence of the problem, is it not? Putting her down? My sympathies and my condolences. You are a good man with the potential to save your people. With what she has given you, potentially all peoples if you are as she believes you to be. She is so often right.”

What she’d given him? The ability to remove bond? The chance to get off the station? What had she given him? Beyond love, beyond hope, beyond a chance to fight? Or was that what she had given him? “What did she give me?”

“Listen to her carefully as Shepard and not your bond mate. Listen to me not as someone you wish to kill, someone you wish to hate, but as someone who can say what she was unable to tell you, if only because I am in fact untrustworthy. She made a deal with Leviathan in order to save you and she will keep it. I made it in order to take her and if I must make or break any or every deal to achieve that I will. The Leviathan do not wish for you to know certain things, but there are things you could deduce for yourself as I did. Even if you knew them as I do you can only make the choice for yourself, not for all other sentient creatures. If you turn down Leviathan help you will die to Reapers and the Leviathan will wait until the fight in another cycle is more favorable. You must choose as she did, to be exterminated or to live as either a slave or a partner. Your freedom or her freedom are not possible as goals. You risk your survival and the survival of the Normandy coming to me for answers. Let me give you information you can use as you will leave with nothing else but the loss of her heavy in your arms. I will tell you some of what is planned but I do not know what will happen beyond that. That lies in the future where you will be dead and she and I will be beyond the reach of even the Gods. The Citadel will be gone soon, Councilor. As a link to Reaper technology, as a trap, it must be eliminated, broken down to its atomic components and scattered. If you do not leave here very soon, you will be a casualty and not a leader. You will have failed to be inspired by her. She could not save everyone here, but she did convince the Leviathan, convinced me… to allow her to warn you. Not the Council, you. The rest is theater. Take her reports, read them, find what you need there, know it was for you. My plan was to strike without warning. She wished to warn you because she loves you and gave no other reason but I know her mind. She has a hope. A truly slim hope but one that is possible. Her 0.1% hope. Consider in your remaining life that one cannot hope to keep a slave without becoming reliant upon that slave in some way if that slave is of unique value. Something she learned as a slave. Something I learned as a slave. Something she hopes you will not need to learn. It is unlikely you would learn it with what time remains to you, but future Turians, all future peoples might. Be of use to the Leviathan, Councilor. Be of value, as she has been, as I have been. She believes you will do that whether or not she guides you to such, your mind is its own herald. Be courageous and offer the best Turian minds in service. Offer your mind. Extend your people’s strategy to the epochal. Inspire them to seek symbiosis in order to avoid subjugation. Forge something new from the Leviathan’s limited numbers and situational humility and reliance upon you. Make the most of your exposure to Reaper technology. Once your consciousnesses are independent
of bodies, you have the gifts of the Leviathan and there is much that can be done with that. The Leviathan can defeat the Reapers, but their ultimate goal is domination of life, as it once was. That dream is however a long way away. You personally will likely be saved from slavery if you survive as the Reapers and Leviathan fight each other. There is room for hope. She believes you will see it. I believe that once the Leviathan knew her mind when she was prepared to meet them… they saw potential for partnership and may be more open to symbiosis. That is her contribution to the future. Hope and trust that if someone like her exists, someone like you exists, they are of value Whole. Their consciousness is of value in leadership roles. She believes you will inspire them as the leader of the Turian people.”

“And your hope?”

“I have only ever cared for one thing, Councilor. One thing only. Her. I will seek epochal symbiosis of my own. She is mine.”

‘She is mine.’ The only thing Thane Krios ever said about her when asked to identify her to guests.

Garrus stared at the man, unable to fathom… Krios said “This shell I speak through will die here. Take her with you to Palaven. Grant your bond mate her rites, her fire, her soil. Let her go, as she wished. I am here to grant quick death to those who remain on the Citadel with the codes she forged from the gift of Ilos. That is something she will not have to do herself, something I am good at, something I can execute in service. I will grant painless death by my hand in her name to prevent suffering. Something I offered to do for her when she accepted that the inevitable would take place and she could not stop it. You cannot kill me. You can only keep me from the task she set. You can only delay yourself, and you have more work to do than I. May your life be long, may you be the man she believes you to be. May you and your people never be slaves.”

Garrus’s hands tightened around her. He closed his eyes, his hand in her hair. The urge to kill… he kept his hands occupied with more important things.

Krios inclined his head “It is the will of the Sand. It is the will of the Sea. It is Her will. It is My will. Find a way to make peace with your allies and your enemies, Councilor, or her sacrifices are in vain.”

“Sacrifices you demanded. Let her go.”

The Drell’s face, demeanor and voice changed to menace and resolve. Garrus believed he was finally speaking to Thane Krios. Krios delivered his absolute final word on the subject of her. “Never in your lifetime or any other lifetime. Long after you are gone, she and I will be seeking our respective and oppositional hopes.”

Garrus held her tighter for a moment and defied that resolve if only momentarily. Something he could echo, something the Drell would not forget. “She said I make you deeply upset.”

“Yes. You have. You will. You and your bond mate will be at peace with each other. I will never be at peace. I accept that as the price of belonging to her.”

“Take care of her. Build her the best damned library in existence.”

“I will. Be assured I would have regardless of you asking. You have no reason to trust me, nor should you, but here I have no reason to lie to you. I have chosen to love her. I am aware this is not love by her definition or by yours, and perhaps what I bear for her has no name. I do and will honor her for who she is. She will have all the knowledge of the cycles of the Reapers to study and eternity to learn it. I know her mind. I know her desires. I stole them, but I can fulfill many and most except
those that have to do with you and those that demand she sacrifice herself in each moment for anyone or anything other than herself. I promise you her martyrdom will have no outlet or opportunity beyond my company. She will be safe from Leviathan, from Reapers, from herself. Had you taken the chance to reverse your bond, I would have perhaps asked her to forget you as you had forgotten her. Unfortunate for me but it has been that way since I first saw green eyes and changed them to my own liking… or believed I did. Believe her words when she tells you there is no cause for her to suffer beyond the loss of you. I will not ask it of her. I will remember that you asked, that as the man she loves, the man I deprived of her, I owe it to you and to her to remember care for her in each moment. She will be displeased if her sacrifice ends in your death because I cannot convince you to turn aside from fruitless vengeance. She expects more of us both and we must deliver despite our wishes on the subject. We must be extraordinary men for her, as she has always been an extraordinary woman for us. Go. Now, Garrus Fanning.”
“But what is truth?
Is truth unchanging law?
We both have truths.
Are mine the same as yours?”

Pontius Pilate – “Jesus Christ Superstar”

Russ had been told by Shepard that the Normandy was his. He’d gone back to the Normandy immediately after her address. She went to speak to Garrus to convince him to go to Palaven.

He’d told the crew that they were going to Palaven, that if anyone did not wish that as their potential final destination in the war, they should disembark, transport available immediately to whatever destination they chose. Transport they should take. Shepard would not be joining them.

He’d asked Joker, who said “What? I’ve finally gotten the pilot’s chair broken in. That took a lot of work! In fact, I’m insulted you’re asking at all. Remember what happens to Spectres when they ask me to leave my CIC when I don’t want to? I’ll let it slide this time, Russ, because you’re a newbie and maybe don’t know the rules.”

Russ swore he heard EDI giggle before she said “I believe I am staying as well.”

Joker rolled his eyes and informed the other newbie on the CIC “You don’t have any choice, EDI.”

“I like to pretend that I do.”

Dr. Chakwas would not abandon her post and said she’d always been interested in Turian medicine.

Jack said her only family was here. He wasn’t sure if she was joking or not, but she did not leave.

Mordin said his lab was where he was most comfortable.

Kaidan said the Normandy was his home but please excuse him; he needed to make a call to inform his mother of his destination.

Miranda did not look up from her current project on her data pad. “Thank you for informing me. I will be staying.”

Not a single person left the Normandy’s service anywhere along the command chain.

Russ was notified that Councilor Vakarian had been granted permission to board. Russ found Garrus on the CIC with Shepard in his arms, his hand in her hair. It looked like she was sleeping. She had seemed exhausted and who could blame her. She’d been very busy.

They were touching. Garrus must like that, and it was a hopeful sign, at least from Garrus’s point of
Garrus walked to Russ and said quietly, as though to not wake her “Russ, is everyone off that’s going?”

“Nobody wanted to go.”


“You’re staying?”

“Yes. I’m staying. Meet… us… in the Commander’s quarters, please. Once we’re away.”

“You got it.” Russ kept his voice low and moved to give the order.

He hadn’t expected to see Shepard, she’d said she wouldn’t be on board and Celetis wouldn’t return either. But plans changed with her often. They were away, cleared with Spectre codes fast. They’d be landing through a hard-fought and hard-kept corridor around Cipritine free of Reapers. Palaven had been well prepared. There were always more Reapers, but they had done well. That was due to Garrus.

Garrus said it was due to her.

When Russ made it to the Commander’s quarters, glad he hadn’t moved anything in yet since she’d be taking the space back, he found Garrus on the couch, with her in his arms just as she had been before, her head to his shoulder, his hand in her hair. Russ hesitated, not wanting to wake her.

Garrus looked at him, his eyes bleak and his subharmonics suddenly audible over the hum of the ship and the quiet after the door closed.

Grief. Pain. Sorrow. Every possible expression of those felt through Russ’s plate into his bones.

Death. Loss. In the air, in Garrus’s scent, in his subharmonics, Russ shaking his head out of denial immediately.

Spirits, no, please… not…

She wasn’t asleep.

She had been dead when he brought her on board.

Russ stumbled to the couch and fell to numbed and weak knees, Garrus looking at him as though he appreciated being able to see someone who could do it. Garrus couldn’t fall to his knees because he had to hold her and would not let go.

The sound of Garrus’s grief echoed in both of their throats. Garrus grieved for his bond mate and Russ grieved for Garrus.

The echo of near superstition of Joker’s words saying what happened when someone tried to get him off his CIC… they die.

Spirits, if I could die to give her back to him, I would.

Give me these last two hours back, let me stay with them, go with them, whatever happened, please. Let me change it.
Let me change it for him.

Russ continued with this pleading, grief in his throat and denial in his mind, his head on Garrus’s thigh and his hand on Garrus’s knee, a blue wash of uncontrolled biotics over his hide. They grieved as Turians did, the only human ears present unable to hear, wouldn’t have been able to hear or understand even had she been alive.

They stayed like that for hours, until EDI informed them that they had landed on Palaven.

Garrus said in a hoarse, dry voice “Please call the crew to the CIC.”

Russ stood and did as Garrus asked.

Garrus stood, Russ steadied him.

Garrus held her on the CIC and after everyone had arrived said quietly “Commander Shepard gave her life on the Citadel.”

Gasps and shock and crying.

Garrus said ‘I don’t claim to understand it. I can’t explain why or how she died. I think she gave all she had to prove to the Leviathan that we’re worth it as allies. I think it killed her. I think she helped the Leviathan figure out how to make sure it didn’t kill anybody else that tries to help them in the future. She held out as long as she could, physically and Spiritually exhausted herself until there was nothing left to give. Her last thoughts were to give us warning that the real fight starts now. She gave her life trying to help the Leviathan beat the Reapers. She believed in the fight, believed we can finish it. We will. She gave everything she had. We’re going to do the same. Everyone here is welcome to the home of the Vakarian Clan here in Cipritine, our Madlis. You’re all family of mine. Of hers. If you need a home beyond this ship you have one. I’m going to take her there and lay her to rest. You can all say goodbye to her. Then we go do what she did. We give everything we have and we remember she did the same.”

He stood as the river of people moved to him, moved around him, some reaching to touch her and some just looking. No words. Garrus closed his eyes and his subvocals were subdued but were still there, where others could not hear, Russ’s voice joining his.

Garrus and a small group filed out in silence, some people following, some gathering belongings, some returning to stations.

Russ followed numbly, chimes and vibrations on everyone’s Omni Tools, ignored and forgotten until some of them activated their Omni Tools long enough to turn the alerts off out of respect but still saw the messages. Grief and shock and now murmurs, voices and whispered words.

‘Gone.’

‘Mass effect…’

‘Citadel…’

‘Can’t connect…’

‘Did anybody see it?’

Russ turned his head to look at the stumbling and lost crowd of people, Garrus’s Omni Tool buzzing unattended, he didn’t have a free hand. Garrus stopped and stood, Russ angry on his behalf, but the
looks on people’s faces made him check the alert.

All contact with the Citadel had been lost one hour after they had passed through the Mass Effect gate, but that had been a minor concern as comm buoys were often Reaper targets and one would be redeployed soon.

What was not a minor concern…

“MASS EFFECT GATE FOR PALAVEN SYSTEM GONE AFTER REAPER ATTACK.”

Garrus had held her, had taken her silently to his Madlis, had told his mother that she was his bond mate and only she was to know. His mother had not been surprised, had pressed her crest to his, to hers, granted her blessing and gave her grief.

Garrus and his family, her family, burned her body with flame lit from the grass of the Madlis, sprinkled the soil of Palaven in the smoke that carried her Spirit.

Burned her empty shell, with her Spirit somewhere unknown, even unknown to her.

The shock and every question with no answer filling his mind rendered him silent.

As much as he hated listening to Krios’s words… he read her report, knowing that maybe he had been lying, but maybe he hadn’t, and if there were to be answers…

He found them. He found her. Or they found him. Embedded with time release, two days after they had left the Citadel, the report flagged for him specifically revealed attachments.

Reverse shock again as her face came into view. Her voice. He keened in his throat as he saw her, and saw her as she had been, the way she wanted him to remember her. Red hair, green eyes, riotous freckles. Her perfect, nondescript face. There was even hope in her voice and definitely in her eyes, humor in her voice.

“Hey. So… looks like I’ve got a habit of doing this. Leaving you hidden messages. This one will find you instead of you having to find it. When I see you I won’t be able to say much. I won’t have time. By the time I get to the Citadel, the Leviathan will be on their way. The faster I convince you to go the better, because as you know by now, and I can’t tell you then… the gates had to go as well as the Citadel. I’ll tell you why in a little bit.

Something up front to know, something about now and then. He’s in my head. Senar Tuelon. That’s the name of the Drell who took me. Literally and figuratively… in my head. So… what I’m telling you might just be something he’s told me because my brain… is a mess. I mean, it always was in its own way but now, yes, extra. I want to tell you things you want to know, but please forgive me if my truths do not match reality. I mean, you see me now, this is me, this is my body. I’ve been able to change back to who I was because… Reapers can do that. He says… he says he regrets having to change my appearance.

And… upgraded clothing. I get to be covered. So bonus. I get to insist on a few things.

There’s a lot of ‘he says’ so get used to it. Anyway, I can look like me because Reapers are cool. That sounds entirely counterintuitive I know. I get that being the target of Reapers is a terrible thing, but being inside one? Flat out cool. From what I’ve seen. He has control over the Reaper. I don’t, but I can ask him and… voila. If he’s in the mood anyway. But what else does the man have to do other than listen to me? He’s the one insisting on this cruise. I got a chance to talk to the Leviathan because… he’s in my head and I’m in his.
That’s a theme that’s going to develop so let that soak in. Right now I mean literally. I mean if I called him… which I won’t because why would I do that… he’d hear me. I could think it. He’d hear me.

So here’s something about me and something about him, us being inseparable at this point due to circumstance. His real name was once Senar Tuelon and he was raised in the Hanar Compact as an assassin. He was taken from his family at the age of six and trained to kill. Trained well. The Hanar are able to take Drell DNA and completely re-engineer a Drell identity inside and out with surgery and marrow transfer. So Thane Krios was a stolen identity from a dead man. Kegirin Itran was a real person once, but now his body is in storage somewhere. He replaced his DNA profile and had his body surgically modified. From what I hear it’s terribly painful. He’ll forgive me if I say ‘good’ in this moment in time.

My name, which I hope I get the chance to tell you – I didn’t know that Turians took the last name of the female bond mate. Not at all. If I had I would have told you, if you think I was holding back, don’t. He… told me that part. He told me… it would be meaningful to you if I gave you my name. I looked it up and yes, he could lie to me and he could create that data entry but… I’m going to believe him. I remember all of my childhood. My name is Cara Fanning and my parents’ names were Saoirse and Ronan Fanning. I changed my name to Lal Shepard because Lal was a nickname and Shepard was a bit of historical whimsy. I was not there when my parents died, but I saw their bodies and… I didn’t want to be reminded. I knew Mindoir was not looked upon well by the galactic community. I insisted upon anonymity. But… I know my parents would have liked you. They would have loved you.

I love you.

So Senar Tuelon has had any number of identities, beating me out because I really only had two. He’s better at it. According to him he saw a contract in my name and decided… he’d like a billion credits, sure, and also I had nice eyes. If he were here he’d frown and say something poetic and that I give myself too little credit. So let’s settle on me having poetic eyes worth credits. That was his reason. That simple. A trained assassin with a whim. He believed I would have died anyway to someone else and soon if he hadn’t taken me. He took the contract, reported me dead, decided to keep me, intending for Commander Shepard to remain dead to everyone but him. I don’t think he has much of a reason to lie about that. He said if he were to take a guess, prominent political Salarians were pretty nervous about my return and my influence and he thinks they took out the contract, would have kept trying until the job was done.

He says he believed he discovered who did it and that person is dead… but I don’t know what to believe. It doesn’t matter much now. Only that the threat was real and it’s possible… someone else less impressed with my eyes would have taken me out if he hadn’t then or soon after.

So he took me, had the chip implanted, had the surgery done… he did use the chip, but as he had Marcus Enger tell you… he didn’t need to use it for long.

He is an excellent threaten-er. It’s a gift, a talent, and something that worked.

So, here let’s blur the screen a bit and let’s not get too far into this but let me just say, sexual slavery is bad. It is. Do not apply for any job with that description. Just don’t. FYI.

But here’s where we get into the theme of him in my head and me in his. Here’s the thing you don’t know. Drell assassins are surgically altered and genetically modified by the Compact to have venom that is hypnotic. He’s not sure how it works or so he says. So there’s the bit of information you were never going to find out. That’s why he could tell you so much truth because observable truth looked one way… and what was real is another way, and what was subjective, that’s even weirder.
So he could… and can… don’t get me wrong, still can. Still… will… tell me what I think and how I feel… and I believe him.

I can’t tell you why he let me out. I don’t know why. With these things I would not suggest taking the man’s word for anything, you will get poetry regarding how my eyes should be able to behold the galaxy or hearing that he’d like to outlive Reapers and I’m his best chance, or just simply that he was bored. Or that he was inspired upon a Path.

I helped plan my own escape and I had no idea he was the same man. He made me forget Thane Krios. He made me tell you not to touch me. I wanted you to stay alive, he would only allow that… if you never touched me and I couldn’t remember that was the reason, so all I knew was that only one person’s touch was allowed.

So hopefully that clears… all that up. From the moment, every moment, that I was taken… I did not have access to my own truth, my own mind, my own choices.

I always knew that I loved you. That’s good and bad. He let me keep that so he could threaten me with your death and torture if I failed to comply.

Senar Tuelon creates his own truths. He worked me over. It was successful. He really didn’t need a chip.

I am not going to try to convince you to like or approve of the man. I do not like or approve of the man. What I can tell you is… and this is from the hypnotized heart here… he made me blissfully, absolutely and beyond happy. That’s probably one of the ugliest truths I know. Why do I tell you this? Because he says he’s going to do it again.

It’s awful and it’s terrible and… I will not know the difference. I will completely believe I am in love, blissfully and joyously in love… possibly every moment of my eternal life.

Just like many of the truths or subjective lies here, that’s terrible.

So why did it look like I was cooperating, enjoying myself on Beckenstein, participating in my own fate and making attendees ragingly jealous at my beauty, composure, wit and… um… flexibility?

Because I was.

It was very rare that he would allow me to experience pain or fear after the first few weeks. Beyond that he had found all my fears, found all my worries, found all my pleasures and pains… and eliminated the pain, accentuated the pleasure.

I had only enough fear to keep me inside his bounds. If I complied… and I did… he paid me back with lavish… everything. He would prefer that I blissfully enjoyed my tenure as his slave and thanked him for all the ways he cares for me.

I did.

I do.

I will.

So… I know you wanted the truth, that’s the closest thing to truth I have. Maybe he made me say it, maybe not. He knows me and I… I swear I know him. Another ugly truth? We’re a lot alike. He’s intelligent, he’s interesting, he’s creative, he’s brilliant.
It all changed when I spoke to the Leviathan, because they saw into my mind and saw that I was… in their words… fractured. They were concerned for my functionality. They removed the overlay of compulsion he had provided. I remembered… everything. Everything. Everything he’d told me to forget, everything I’d done, everything we… had done… all the things I’d told him, all the ways I’d helped him…

What’s the worst part of that? All the ways he’d helped me. All the ways he found me books and cookies and beautiful things I wanted. The way he made me feel safe and loved and cherished. And I can’t tell you that this man does not cherish me. He just… doesn’t love me because he can’t. He’s decided to redefine the word and he would give some poetry again here, but let me go out on a limb and say… this is not love.

But it’s something. Yes, I am and was a prisoner, but damned if he did not help me at least potentially save the galaxy and here’s how I explain that part. Since the rest is on you.

So we’re at the Leviathan and I know who he is and he has to keep me tied up because I am going to kill him if I get a moment free. I tried, and well, obviously it didn’t work, but I did try. Assassin training is good. I am just saying that for the record.

How does he get a Reaper? He convinces the Leviathan to let him try to control one. He promises them… the galaxy and everyone in it. All he asks for in return is me. Yes, he wants a Reaper too but he doesn’t tell them that part and for all I know we were both always going to die when we outlived our usefulness but he made himself useful.

He has an idea. Remember when the Alliance sent an asteroid into the Bahak system mass effect relay a few months back? Took out the relay, destroyed the entire system?

The Leviathan have been underwater for a long time and are out of the general news loop about… everything… and he asks them whether or not… destroying each and every mass effect relay would be of use to them. Turns out it would be. They now know it’s viable. All they have to do is lob asteroids, which is easy for something Reaper or Leviathan sized.

Easy to do, not easy to survive, anyway.

So they have a plan. Wipe out… every mass relay, active or inactive, which unfortunately – well, for you or me, not for Senar or the Leviathan – would wipe out each and every system and world of the space faring species in this cycle. In fact, wipe out all potential relays that could ever be opened. Which means… blow up most of the galaxy.

It does have a benefit. It means… Reapers can’t use the mass effect relays to travel to us. They’re stuck with the invasion force they’ve already gotten through the relays. It would work for the Leviathan. They’d be the dominant life force in the next cycle and all they have to do is stay out of sight and reproduce.

So the Leviathan and Senar are planning on doing this and I’m mostly… well… tied up. Because I’m a little irritated and he’s told the Leviathan I am going to be… uncooperative. Which of course he could make me because they all know he’s had my head turned any way he wants and has for months. He can control me, can ask for advice.

In the meantime I’ve made it really hard for him to control me. I’ve injured my ears. No words, no compulsion, no hypnosis and he is not terribly happy with this.

So he comes up with a thing… and here’s where the he and I are in each other’s heads literally thing comes in. He implants customized Reaper technology directly into my brain. Inhibits me from
knowing that I want to kill him. I still remember everything, I just don’t… feel angry about any of it. I forgive him. I understand. I love him. I believe that no matter what he has done or who he is, I love him and I am dedicated to him.

Now, he does this because it means we are directly linked and he can speak into my mind without the use of my ears. He has regained control over me without having to use Drell venom which was frankly revealed to have some flaws when there are Leviathan around. Don’t get me wrong, Drell venom still works. He just doesn’t need it every moment to keep me from killing him. But this choice means… I am in his head too. He has given me access to his head now that he knows I will never harm him about anything I find. Why? He’s a strange man, Garrus, don’t ask such questions. He’s just going to mess with me on the answer.

He says because he’s choosing to love. Do not believe that. But do believe… he once again chose to keep me alive. He says the eyes thing a lot. He wants me, he found a way to keep me without me being a constant threat to his life. He won’t kill me for being difficult, he won’t kill you because I love you, he’s going to let all those things slide and just keep me forever and I’ll enjoy myself like I did before, he’s sure of it.

I can’t tell you he’s wrong.

Anyway… now I’m in his head and he has to talk to Leviathan and I happen to be sitting in on the meetings and now I have opinions.

So here is my contribution to the plan and why you are not dead. You have to decide whether or not I have done a good thing or a bad thing. I will never know.

The original plan to destroy mass effect relays meant… at least the creature in range to throw the asteroid is going to die. Every system is wiped out.

This is potentially hundreds of Leviathan or Reapers. They don’t have hundreds of Reapers yet. But the plan is to use a Reaper to tear apart each relay. They have to be able to do this at the same time that they wipe out the Citadel. That means they do not have enough Reapers and they would be putting Leviathan lives at risk. The sooner the better because Reapers are coming through in force every day.

So I have Senar’s input, I have the Leviathan’s input and I ask them to give me a day or so to think about it, please give me some basics on what is available on Reaper technology, which was put directly into my brain. Which, I might add, is about as much fun as sexual slavery when I’m not hypnotized. It hurts.

Yeah, knowledge hurts, ignorance is bliss, more of a theme and one you are now a direct participant in that reality.

Anyway…

Here is my contribution. I developed a way to dismantle and not detonate the relays. With the use of Reaper capabilities and a lot of very high-tech containment fields as well as knowing how the relays were constructed, I was able to determine how to disable and dismantle the gates without detonation putting Reaper or Leviathan lives at risk. Leviathan can now utilize each and every system with no casualties.

Those gates will not be reconstructed. They’re fascinating and they’re actually anchored in the space itself and they do not move, they’re absolute and that’s very cool and I’m sure you don’t care but it’s something I’m proud of so give me a minute. I did something cool.
Senar’s great at lying and theater but he’s not all that great at preserving life. I keep asking him to save people and that’s not really his go-to position. He really wanted to steal a Reaper from the Leviathan and leave one of the mass effect gates active so he could go through it when he was supposed to destroy it which of course… kind of ruins the whole plan and he… was okay with that.

Don’t trust him, is what I’m saying here. Really. Lesson learned.

So I’m in his head and I tell the Leviathan he’s really not trustworthy, I tell him he just wants a Reaper and me. If I provide to… say… preserve all sentient life so they have allies against Reapers and can develop technology together to defeat the Reapers… when they come here all the way from dark space wondering where their mass effect relays are…?

Which may take tens of thousands of years. You won’t be around then, but that’s going to happen.

In theory they arrive and they are… tens of thousands of years of development of sentient, Reaper and Leviathan innovation behind.

And you win.

So the fight could have ended in about… one week from my time stamp here… or I could extend it to… a ridiculously long time frame, at least long enough for you to live, Garrus. Long enough for everyone to have a chance.

Look, I know trusting Leviathan is about as good for your health as trusting Senar Tuelon…

But occasionally… we have to do terribly unpleasant things, don’t we?

So here’s where you decide whether or not I’m a terrible person. I preserved sentient life, but I handed it into the potential keeping of the Leviathan, hoping you are as inspirational and innovative as I was in getting out of Beckenstein.

Could I have defeated Reapers on my own if I hadn't been taken by Senar Tuelon?

I don’t know. I’ll never know. I don’t think so. From what I’ve seen of Reaper technology… we did not have enough time and we had no idea what we were really up against, an enemy with infinite energy and infinite patience.

There’s a human philosopher who said “He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby become a monster, and if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee.” – Friedrich Nietzsche.

Well, that’s true. And you may wonder… why… did Cara bring the Abyss directly to my door?

This is where you get to figure out whether or not you are going to forgive me for what I’ve done.

My bet… Garrus… and it worked on Beckenstein is… the right person that gets the right abyss to gaze at them… can make a difference in that abyss that will not happen any other way.

The Abyss should fear certain people for their transformative effects upon said Abyss.

Senar Tuelon is afraid of me and always will be. He is not the same man who took me. He has provided to… I’m not say he intended to… but he has provided to save the galaxy. I owe him my life and this opportunity. Yes, he’s a terrible, vile abyss of a person… and the Leviathan are cold and cruel and… big enough and talented enough to beat Reapers.
And I think that leading them directly to you, Garrus… if they gaze into you… your people… your clarity and your vision… you will change the future. You will change them.

I couldn’t warn you without telling them who you were.

This all, of course, makes Senar terribly unhappy because he would prefer that you died in the same moment as every other sentient creature that inconvenienced him…

But the Leviathan… they do want to survive. They want to stop the Reapers and there is a chance and they need you.

It’s okay that I tell you now, there’s nothing you can change. The Citadel and the mass effect gates are gone and honestly… who is going to believe another weird Shepard story from you?”

She smiled and the effect was blinding and he was out of his trance for a moment, just listening to the glory of her and seeing her smile while she was trapped in a Reaper by a sick thing, making the most of her opportunities.

“So yes. I love you. That is true. He… he’s my abyss. I’ll keep him out of trouble. He won’t hurt me.

I bargained for a few things. I told the Leviathan that he and I as a team were damaged goods and he was going to ruin their plan if they gave him any level of responsibility for it. He didn’t have much response other than to shrug. Nobody was surprised. I gave them a way to disable and dismantle every gate and banish the technology. I outlined a plan for several thousand years, which is the way they like to think, not ‘next week it’s over’ and I told them… if they let me warn you specifically, you would provide a conduit toward a planet of reasonably honest, hard working and dedicated fighters that would suit their needs more than one Drell abyss and his trusty brain-impaired sidekick.

I informed them he truly only wished for one Reaper and for me, and as I had just provided them with a way to save hundreds of casualties in Leviathan and Reaper lives, let Senar take his Reaper and me and let him go in peace.

They agreed.

He was… rather upset at the risk I took of having us both turned into goo… He is not a fan of honesty and forthright trust, but he will have to be satisfied that in the end he has exactly what he wants with no fear of reprisal or pursuit, plus my cooperation in the bargain.

So. At least for now, I did it. I saved the galaxy. Sort of. The galaxy is never really going to be saved. There will be war and pain and horror and I can’t stop that. But I did… stop everything from exploding in one day. I also… am responsible for allowing Senar to get his hands on a Reaper in the first place.

But the truth is that Senar + Leviathan + Me resulted in something that will grant everyone a fighting chance and I am proud of that.

My hope is that You + Everyone Else + Leviathan – Reapers will result in what he terms epochal symbiosis.

Poetic.

I have responsibilities here. I won’t be able to kill him. I can’t let him go and it won’t occur to me to leave him. He will always, always be in my head. I can’t trust my own reality and he’s made that a permanent fact. It’s a disease and it’s contagious. He wants me to be just sick enough to rely upon him for the cure. He wants me addicted and reliant upon him. For everyone else involved it would be lethal. He would never allow you to live if there were any chance I could return to you. He would
never stop coming after me if someone rescued me, so…

We’ll go away together, I won’t know where.

In return you are going to be alive and busy and theoretically hopeful and inspired.

I love you.

I hope this works.

When I see you I know I won’t be able to kiss you and that… is a loss. He’ll be watching and he won’t let that happen. I want to kiss you. I want to be in the fight with you, I want to spend every day with you trying to find ways to take one week plans and turn them into thousand year plans and take layers of horrible and try to turn the tides.

I will be living the life I lived on Mindoir, loved and comforted, no problems, carefree, mostly wondering where my next book is going to come from. And I’ll believe it’s all my dreams come true.

What I really want, Garrus, is a reality come true with me with you every day fighting for something I believe in.

But I did manage to fight for believing in you, and that will have to be enough.

I will and have in fact thanked him for granting me the right to give you this information, your shot at freedom, to keep his sickness from weighing on you every day. To keep him from holding us hostage to each other. To make sure you are free from the need to rescue me, because you know it isn’t possible and I’ll be all right.

So it’s terrible and it isn’t. It’s objectively… awful… I’m a slave forever.

Subjectively, I won’t know it. I’ll be blissfully ignorant.

Somewhere inside me for eternity is going to be a woman who loves you, who is hoping every day that your reality, your fight made a difference, that I did the right thing, that I mattered when it counted, that I saw a way, that I gave my life…

And it will all be worth it.

I won’t see you again, but I will remember you every day.

Please forgive me.

I love you.”

The message ended, paused on her Shepard smile and he smiled back at her.

Well then. He had some work to do, huh?

“Yes ma’am. I love you too.”

He thought about the chaos of the past few days, of diverted Reapers and Leviathan swarming the skies, how the Turians on the ground stared up at battle that had Reapers turning on each other.

The cheering.

The chance.
The fact that there were no Reaper reinforcements coming from anywhere through any gate, the loss of the gate had seemed a huge tragedy and then resulted in calm on the ground as the battle took to the skies and then to deeper space, away from Palaven.

“We made it home. Your family, my family is safe. We’ll make you proud.”
I've heard there was a secret chord
That David played and it pleased the Lord.
But you don't really care for music, do you?
Well it goes like this:
The fourth, the fifth, the minor fall and the major lift
The baffled king composing Hallelujah.

Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah

Your faith was strong but you needed proof.
You saw her bathing on the roof.
Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew ya.
She tied you to her kitchen chair.
She broke your throne and she cut your hair
and from your lips she drew the Hallelujah.

Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah

Baby I've been here before.
I've seen this room and I've walked this floor.
You know I used to live alone before I knew ya.
I've seen your flag on the marble arch.
Love is not a victory march.
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah.

Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah

Well there was a time when you let me know
what's really going on below
but now you never show that to me do ya?
But remember when I moved in you
The Holy Dark was moving too
and every breath we drew was Hallelujah.

Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Maybe there's a God above  
but all I've ever learned from love  
was how to shoot somebody who outdrew ya.
It's not a cry that you hear at night.  
It's not somebody who's seen the light.  
It's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah.

Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah
Hallelujah

Jeff Buckley – “Hallelujah”

+++++++++++++

After he pulled his link from the shell of his body on the Citadel, Senar Tuelon considered his name, his names, his identities and what they had taken from him, what he had taken from them.

The galaxy was on its own now. Shepard would only be a remembered voice, recordings and moments of brief time that others would remember of her.

She had passed her guarded and flickering torch to her bond mate, a man who would carry it for her, who had done so without being asked after her first death, who would do so again. He could forge faith and trust from doom and darkness.

Senar considered her Name, her names, her identities and what she had taken from them, what they had taken from her.

What he had taken from her.

He considered the protective gentleness of Garrus Fanning’s talons in her hair, his cradling arm holding every lie and every truth. He had given up the opportunity for answers and pure defiance in order to follow the dictates of his Avah.

Senar would never have survived the first ten minutes as a captive slave under the circumstances she faced.

Senar would not have turned aside from obliterating even the shadow of a man he hated.

Inspiring.

Disappointing in ways he could not define. Exalted and defiled impressions spilled in and scattered in his mind. Some too familiar to see clearly because they were made of him, some too foreign to catalogue, but he would try.

Garrus Fanning’s eyes were now twin suns in blue and unforgettable.

If one had wished to see what love was, one need only look in his eyes.

Her captivity had begun with a test of whim and Destiny. Senar found himself tested, his victory exalted and defiled by Garrus Fanning. Kegirin Itran had been in a room alone with the man before
but seeing him through Cara’s eyes and feeling the words on her tongue as she wished to set him free, warn him, keep him safe…

Garrus Fanning had not been broken.

He also had not been able to claim anything but the shell of the woman he loved and a few minutes of painful confession.

It was clear that their bond was true, that Garrus Fanning had honored and loved her and would have regardless of anything she gave him or took away from him.

Something again that Senar could not comprehend, did not envy in its results, but envied in its grace. The Turian had carried her when she could not walk, spoken for her when she could not speak, and her fire had caught in his heart and blazed, where Senar had only coveted her warmth and brightness.

Cara herself had her own impressions of her worth to the Turian, and she had been wrong. She had as always minimized her own inspiration. Senar had failed to predict the man because Cara herself did not imagine herself that loved for that long. She considered herself to be a mistake the Turian had made. That had allowed Senar to extend that into further doubt, but he should have been able to grasp the truth and had not.

Senar did not believe in justice or Rightness… but she was in his mind now and she inspired those things in him. He had once believed and it appeared Garrus Fanning had inspired him to wish in some Universal way to measure the man against his own beliefs. Now that all prices had been paid and all choices made, what Senar had achieved was unsurpassed in audacity and creativity… and so low and petty as to rob it of glory. She was glorious. Garrus Fanning was glorious.

Senar was small and dark and upon examination, unworthy of the gifts he stole.

In the end, they had insisted upon each other and neither had been given to hate, but hope. Senar Tuelon was in that moment not a perfect foil to her as he would like to see himself, but only a determined obstacle to something that had the potential to not be a foil… but a setting.

If one wished to see the perfect setting for Cara Fanning, it was in Garrus Fanning’s arms and eyes.

Even he could see that. Could not un-see it.

This was not to say that he’d change a moment of any decision he had made. He had no regrets, he was…

He was free. He had the blessings and curses one would wish to have to lead an interesting and fulfilling life of passion, exploration, art and creativity. His methods had been, as she had told him long ago, cheap and vile… but what he had built, what he would build… it was not empty because it was filled with her.

It mattered that it had been taken from the Chosen, with his hopes that Garrus Fanning could be a historical footnote in her life and mind, something Senar could supplant and replace. Garrus Fanning had known better and now so did he.

If one sought why one would not worship Gods any longer, one need only look in Garrus Fanning’s eyes as he chose to walk away.

The Turian, a scion of justice and honesty… had been betrayed by any Rightness, any power that might have watched over him as he sought to watch over others. The Turian and the human were as
alike in hope and heart as she and Senar were alike in mind and body. Senar Tuelon had defied Rightness, Gods and her… and won. Yet his whim had not defeated her Destiny.

She had not been a channel to revealed Gods, only to dark and avaricious creatures she opposed and channeled to her use, Reapers, Leviathan and Senar.

In the end there was no fate, there was no pattern, there was only what was forged.

There was only her and what she forged.

In one way that was deeply disappointing, hoping to provoke Gods into action and failing. It was deeply satisfying because if there were no greater Gods or Rightness that could stop him in his ambitions… and they had not… then he now was God over his own realm, unquestioned, bargain sealed and her life and mind his.

With that came the knowledge that had he been capable of grace he would have given her back to Garrus Fanning when he demanded Senar let her go. It had been possible even then, sever her contact with her original body and transfer her to the shell and give them to each other. Die himself, transfer himself into the shell that destroyed all life on the Citadel.

It would have been Fitting. It would have been True.

His answer however… ‘Never’ was a Drell man’s answer, not a God’s, not a scion of Justice like Garrus Fanning or Sacrifice as Cara Fanning.

As a Pantheon they were exceptional.

As a small, petty creature he was easily replaced by the trillions just like him.

To be elevated to Godhood in that moment where they ascended to their natures would make him a God of Spite and that was not a comforting thing.

That did not mean he would reject Spite’s gifts.

He would however consider his new role as God, freed of all prior concerns. He did not wish for Spite to touch her and that he did not know how to prevent.

Had there been Fate, if there had been Gods… they should have aided that Turian in that moment, granted him a miracle, set her Spirit back in her body…

Had she been a Goddess she would have found a way… Senar had half expected for it to happen, for her head to lift from his shoulder, for her to smile at him. It would have been a Rightness.

Instead Garrus Fanning walked away with her limp body and nothing else. No vengeance, no…

What Senar would likely remember for eternity was the man’s voice and eyes as he asked Senar to build her a library. The Turian, knowing he had no time left he had to save his people, he could not put her body or her directives down, even knowing both were potentially empty and always would be. He used his voice to ask for something to make her life better, whatever her life was.

The Turian had passed each Test and the final judgment of Garrus Fanning in Senar Tuelon’s mind was that the Turian was superior, deserving and inspiring.

And in his way.

Asking for a solution to reverse bond had been Senar’s idea and Cara had embraced it, wishing to set
Vakarian free. Senar had wished to see Vakarian give up all hope of her, have her out of his blood and mind because she did not belong to him and he had no right to her.

Cara had wished her bond mate to be free of suffering in Her name.

They agreed to take that action for separate motivations and could both bear with any or either outcome, and Senar could not decide if Garrus was a fool or a hero.

In many ways it did not matter. Before his bond, the Turian had embodied her mission, her hope, had likely preserved his own people because he had been inspired, as she intended, to preserve rather than destroy.

If Senar had an eternity, and he would, he would never match that level of dedication. The Turian had already chosen her as Avah, without blood, without bond, and in some ways the physical representation mattered nothing, there or gone, with the resonance of who they were as people to each other, and how they wished to extend that strength to others.

In her eyes and heart to break bond had been the only real choice and the only miracle she could offer him, some anchor to reality to prove she had not been a mirage. A chance beyond his mere survival to prove she had come and gone, she had thought of him alone, she had offered him every choice she could in the brief moments she had.

Whatever he was, Garrus Fanning loved Cara and Senar would have eternity to decide whether or not truly loving someone meant letting them go. He already knew his answer and it would not change. If love demanded he let her go, then he did not love her.

The lesson was not in the question but in the answer, as always. Create the answer and the question no longer mattered.

Even Garrus Fanning would never have had 100% of her because she had always been aimed straight at the heart of whatever impossible problem she could cast herself toward.

The Turian had more of herself given Whole in those few moments than Senar had or potentially would ever experience.

He could however demand it, take it, own it and she would give. She was her own answer to the question. Her light would not go out, he would feed it and tend it, feed her and tend her, and she would warm and inspire him and that was not something that he would ever abandon.

He would not alter or change her unless she chose, she would remain human for as long as she wished. It was possible to forego hunger, sleep, even breathing now. They could inhabit any bodies they chose.

For now he would not give up the longed-for desire to sleep with his chest to her back, with his hand in her hair, with her soft breathing, and now with him able to touch her mind, to perhaps join her in her dreams. That was his ambition of the moment, patient exploration of her mind, her body, her delicate and vicious turns and curves.

If he were to torture her perhaps he would place all knowledge there was to be had in her mind in a blindingly painful moment, beyond which she would not be able to enjoy gathering facts like flowers in a bouquet.

He could always take it away from her.

Yet knowing her that would be like placing the knowledge of music in her mind and her composition
from that day forward would be a thing to behold in depth and breadth of Goddess-like achievement of nafisi.

For now they would retain their seeking and striving Spirits housed in bodies that would never die of thirst but would feel it. He wished to keep his hunger for her body and mind, that had been the entire purpose of her and he would not allow her sacrifice to go unappreciated. What he had to offer her was for her to know that if he asked her to give everything of herself, he would not abandon her. She desired to be desired. She wanted to be wanted. She had spent her life isolated and reaching out to the inanimate to replace the loss of the loving voices of her parents. He would provide. He would be animate, he would be her voices, he would even be her loving voices.

She did want him, she would want him, and that was a pleasure he would not deny himself or her.

He would not take from her the love of galifen tarts by depriving her of hunger. He would keep her from its ruinous edge and she would not die from it.

She would yearn and be fed, she would not starve and be abandoned to that darkness alone.

Perhaps someday they would explore having no hunger, having no desires, knowing all, being the Gods of Replete Omniscience.

If she did not desire to be that Goddess… he would not force it upon her. Or not today.

To see love given freely and not traded for value… he must admit it had been a beautiful thing and he could see why the expense could be afforded by Whole people. He was not a Whole person. Perhaps he could be, given time.

Considering her Fate however, perhaps her truest love was an impossible problem such as the one he presented. Something and someone at whom she could direct all her energy, all her thought, all her Spirit.

That is my answer to the question, answer and challenge her eyes pose.

I have eternity with her to be her problem.

He wished to be taught what love was now that he was free to experience it without fear, but perhaps love could not exist without that fear.

A question to ask her, perhaps.

Loving Garrus Fanning was something she wanted for herself, but she took so little of the world for herself that she took nothing of his though he wanted to give it all.

I will and have taken everything of hers. I will give everything back except her freedom.

Had she ever been free? He truly did not know.

She had been brave and not wise.

She has been distracted, and so have I, but now I have all the time in existence, no fear of pursuit, no fear of betrayal.

She is mine.

He would go to her and soon, but he wished to give her some privacy and respect for her grief. He had felt it with her. She was crying. She would likely cry for eternity if he did not stop her. She
would have no real needs that stopped her unless he made it so.

She would not know the outcome of her gamble, of delivering her fire into the hands of her bond mate, whether he would be burned alive or have his Path lit by that flame.

She did not know what Senar had told Garrus Fanning and he wondered if she ever would.

They shared minds but she did not wish to see into his thoughts, did not trust them, did not venture there.

Again, had he feelings… he would swear they were hurt.

They would mend, he was assured and he would not burden her with how her reaction to him hurt his nonexistent feelings that were in fact ego.

In all truth and honesty he did not know if she would hide her tears from him or step into his arms and cry while his fingers stroked through her hair and he comforted her as he knew he could, as she knew he could.

She had wanted to release Garrus from bond, but also… had wished to find a way to communicate with him. It had been possible. Shepard could be known to be dead and gone to all others, but she had wished to find a way to speak to Garrus since he knew she was still alive somewhere. She could not create it on her own, had to ask… and Senar would not permit it under any circumstances. Nothing would be in the case beyond a dermal patch that would reverse bond. Nothing would be in the messages beyond her words. Nothing would be planted or placed that would create a link between them.

The opportunity was only to sever a link cleanly.

It had been severed, but had also been strengthened. Body denied but Spirit assured without doubt. Senar had been in her mind, had been able to watch, to redirect, to warn her when she was approaching losing her link because she came too close to truths or lies or Turian hide in ways that displeased him.

So if he were to test his perspective and newfound ‘conscience’ which did not qualify he knew immediately that if she came to him now and pleaded to be permitted to go back in time and do it again and be given a way to stay in touch with her bond mate…

Her argument had been sound. Garrus would not be immortal, what was 120 more years against eternity?

Absolutely not, Cara. Never.

Senar was not a changed man, but he no longer doubted that Cara Fanning had been in love with Garrus Fanning. What he had stolen had been beyond the fate of one woman who sought her own death with each breath. He had robbed them both. He had robbed their forged Spirit in the Turian sense of its fruition, something glorious.

In Senar’s inverted world he often forgot that charm and venom blur did not in fact change objective truths. Cara had become so unable to rely on reality for her information that doubt had haunted her eyes and her thoughts. It had happened before he had reached her, before he had taken her. He had not been the sole cause.

Garrus Fanning had no doubt, now neither did Senar.
Senar had learned a great deal about puppetry lately because he had needed to create a Shepard after Cara had damaged her ears, when she was unreachable. When he had consulted Reaper capability and discovered bodies could be shaped and altered and controlled.

He had been Shepard for several reports to the Normandy, his control projected into a shell of her.

He… they… could be anybody.

Senar could be… Garrus Fanning… if he wished. A set piece of a cabin on the Normandy and the belief that she was with her bond mate and he could have everything they might have shared.

Perhaps a task for later. At the moment he did not believe that he could duplicate the expression in Garrus Fanning’s eyes and the idea of doing so was distasteful. He could not decide why he would reject an otherwise fascinating idea except that the Turian deserved respect even if he got none from Fate or Gods and perhaps Senar would grant it to him for his service and sacrifice.

In Her name. He had honored his Avah’s blessings and directives and Senar would honor the man, that choice made upon seeing the Turian’s face, his eyes and hearing his voice.

In the meantime, for the answers to the questions he asked himself perhaps he must consult her. He was the potential God of his own Freedom but only took it for himself, would never grant it to her. Before him lay every possibility of every library, of recorded lives she had struggled to preserve and wished to learn about. He would not care for them until she cared for them and she would bring them to life for him.

He would build for her new lives, new goals, new freedoms to explore.

The music of nafisi would play between them, her ears whole and her mind always open to him. He was in mental contact with her always now, the power he had over her near absolute. He could compel at a distance and she could not hide from him or disobey. She would want to answer to his call.

Can love be earned without fear? Can an infinity of time, of energy, of devotion be of value when that time, energy and devotion are all inexhaustible? Was giving of any value when there was no need?

He had little at the moment in terms of gifts or offerings to her, and he knew well enough to never build her Mindoir or ask her to share her memories of her parents. There were things she owned that were private and he would respect. Her body was not one of those things, nor was her mind.

Her parents’ voices would remain their own.

Garrus Fanning’s eyes would remain his own.

He wondered if he simply withdrew from her, would she come to him in a day, in a week, in a month, in a year, wishing his presence? Would loneliness and isolation and her boredom drive her to him to ask for a book, for a conversation, for touch?

He nearly smiled. No, not his Cara. He must provide the impetus and that was his burden and privilege.

He had not yet memorized her new body, restored in so many ways but the constellations of freckles unmapped on her skin. The larger questions of his freedom became defined by the answer of his desire to see her, knowing it would not become easier to speak to her, he could offer her no gift or understanding that would offset taking her life, taking her choices, taking her bond mate and taking
her purpose.

He could not give her love, but he could give her devotion, desire, the knowledge of her body and mind. He could spare her his Spite. He could exercise his Freedom. He could ask her the meaning of things he did not comprehend. He must forge a Path because she would sit in silence and deprivation unending if he did not care for her, just as it had been in the beginning, the woman of dead and dark eyes. He must accept that at the moment she was not of a mind to celebrate their victory, because it was his victory and her loss.

They had remained in the same room of the Reaper, sufficient space and staging areas. He had no gifts but he could spare her his cruelties. He would not wake her before a mirror again. He would not create a throne for her to occupy with him.

He must not gloat.

That would be difficult as he wished to gloat.

He deliberately removed all the staging significance of the control chair and the screens, created instead a Drell tent such as one found in the sands of Rakhana, strewn with pillows, no seat of importance, glow stone and starlight.

Control over her was subtle. He could and did suggest to her that she wished to see him. She would not know it was from him, she would experience it as her own impulse. She would know where he was, know where to seek him, find him and...

And he would be inspired by her, this he knew.

She was in the body she wished, dressed as she wished and it suited her, he did not desire a change but granted her as near to previously denied authenticity in her as could be managed. The fabric was fine and she was no longer a pet but an intended partner, no matter how long that took. He had all the time he needed.

He wished for a partner, he wished for symbiosis. He was still incapable of trust and at no point would she gain control over the Reaper in which they traveled. He suspected the test of love would be to remove the Reaper technology from her head that assured his life. That would not happen. He suspected a test of love would be to partner in direction or destination and that would not happen.

They were headed for Dark Space and there they would remain on course, a near straight line to places where nothing existed but them. If they ever encountered another source of light in the distance they would change course and stay in the Darkness, beyond all reach of other influence. Beyond reach of hers. They were both immortal as of last week, consciousness capable of independent isolation, only her body redesigned to match her natural appearance.

As always, so much difficulty to go to in order to appear natural.

The urge to see him cleared her mind of all other concerns, his call to her removing all negative associations and pain. She knew she had momentarily been caught in grief and now she wondered why she had been crying.

She was relieved to feel better, to have a purpose, to remember her blessings and her gifts, the man who loved her waiting for her patiently until she remembered him.

She knew everything, but he was and would always be her paramount concern when he chose for that to be so. With him partially reclined on the pillows she smiled at him as though she were so very clever in finding him. He did not wish to disagree. She knelt on his thighs, the position of him being
her throne possible because she was so small in comparison. Her hands rested on his shoulders, his hands on her hips as she leaned in and kissed him, and he was inspired.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Merrick: Romeo does not care for Juliet.

Mrs. Kendall: Not care?

Merrick: Does he take her pulse? Does he get a doctor? Does he make sure? No. He kills himself. The illusion fools him because he does not care for her. He only cares about himself. If I had been Romeo, we would have gotten away.

Mrs. Kendall: But then there would be no play, Mr. Merrick.

Merrick: If he did not love her, why should there be a play? Looking in a mirror and seeing nothing. That is not love. It was all an illusion. When the illusion ended he had to kill himself.

“The Elephant Man”

Garrus talked to her every day. He would walk out to the pavilion where she had been laid to rest, where he would not rest. He was what everyone else needed when he was outside this pavilion.

Well, everyone except Russ, who tried to make sure Garrus ate, tried to make sure he slept, tried to listen to him as he talked and made… no sense. Garrus would end up in a twilight of mental states and versions of the truth. He tried not to get drunk but he didn’t manage that with Russ there and he still really didn’t know what he said late at night in his rooms over ale and grief.

Garrus would apologize and say Russ had better things to do than be an assistant.

“No, Garrus, I really don’t. I’m less of an assistant and more someone who doesn’t give a damn about anything but you so I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.”

“You do bring good ale.”

“I assume that’s why you let me in every time.”

“Not for breakfast. That’d be weird. You’d just let yourself in anyway.”

“Damned right I would.”

Russ was always there with food and support the next morning, the next afternoon, the next night. Garrus didn’t really think it mattered what he said in front of Russ. It never had. What mattered is that he could say it at all.

Midday Garrus would stand at her memorial flame, something he’d insisted on by saying it was a human custom…

It was but it wasn’t. It meant to him that her Spirit was still burning and always would.
Burns were the most painful wounds.

But even there he would never say aloud… that he knew the Citadel was gone, that he knew everyone on it had died instantaneously and that the reason why it had been done that way was that evacuation was not a concern for Senar Tuelon or Leviathan, and there were not enough captive Reapers to undertake that assault. Leviathan had been in the skies as attackers and not defenders.

He would tell her the news every day:

“My mother asked about you. I couldn’t think of what to say at first, then she listened for three hours. She’s sorry she never got to meet you.”

…”

“Cara, I keep looking through your reports. Was there anything else you tried to say to me? I wonder if there’s code. I know it’s selfish, but you can’t hear me really so you can’t complain. I want to hear your voice saying new words.”

…”

“Russ thinks I’m crazy. I’m not sure he’s wrong. Worse, I’m sure he’s right sometimes. Definitely sometimes. Not all the time. The Leviathan haven’t contacted any of us. Is that a good sign or a bad sign?”

…”

“Everyone from the Normandy is at the Madlis now. There’s no role for the ship. We have a strategic fuel reserve and a ton of ships but right now they’re very expensive paperweights unless the destination is Menae.”

…”

“We’re rebuilding. There had been thousands of Reapers in the system, but I have to hand it to you and your plan… which we didn’t do anything but see from the ground… this system is cleared. Seems like the Leviathan have it under control and… is that good or bad? I don’t know. Nobody new is dying and that’s good for now. I do know nobody’s afraid at the sight of Reapers anymore, they’ve stopped destroying things and started rebuilding with us. Thank you for now. I mean thank you for the now that I have, not thank you ‘for now’ and I’ll take it back later. You know I won’t take it back.”

…”

“I love you so much.”

…”

“I think you’re full of crap, Cara. I think you lied, because if your mouth is open that’s likely to be what is happening. I think you’re suffering. I think you spent your entire life suffering and for some reason that I will never understand it was turned into eternal torment. You’re not going to be fine, you’re not fine, he is hurting you and it’s not better that you don’t know it, it’s worse… why is it that I get to be at home with our family, who are safe while you’re…? By the way, they made me Primarch. Not much call for a Councilor any more without a Citadel.”

…”
“Well, that was stupid, I just burned the hell out of my hand on this everlasting flame thing. Turns out fire is hot. You probably could have told me not to stick my hand into it and see how long I could hold it there.”

…

“I shouldn’t compare the times you were dead, but I do. You’re not dead. Would you be better off dead? I can’t… I don’t know. When you died, you had suffered for six minutes total. Six minutes, Cara. You’d think I’d get better at this ‘helpless’ thing but I’m really not managing.”

…

“The Leviathan have made contact. They found me. It’s an unpleasant process. I’m pretty sure you know that.”

OoOoOoOoOoO

Russ sat at the kitchen table in Garrus’s quarters. Primarch Vakarian needed him. That was a beautiful and terrifying thing. Russ was the only person Garrus confided in. Garrus was as focused as Russ had ever seen him, working every single day as he often had as Councilor. Russ brought him food and he ate. Russ asked him to take a break from work and he talked. Russ wouldn’t leave at night until Primarch Vakarian was sleeping.

They stayed at the Vakarian Madlis as did the rest of the Normandy crew. It was further on the outskirts of Cipritine, had avoided taking direct damage in the way more official Hierarchy buildings had not. Garrus was a comfort to the rest of the crew, helping every crew member find a home, find a job, find a family.

Russ was a comfort to Garrus and they both wanted it that way. There was no reason for Garrus to comfort Russ so he wouldn’t allow it, steering Garrus back to his own concerns, helping him work through issues from reconstruction allocation to ‘What the fuck is a Leviathan?’

The first question was easier than the second.

But Garrus lost control of his tenses… it sounded sometimes like Garrus thought Shepard was still alive. Garrus would cover for it by saying he didn’t want to change his tenses and she’d always be alive to him but it was a recurrent and flashing moment of the light in Garrus’s eyes, grief and manic energy that made Russ’s spine chill.

Russ, as always, had less of a relationship with Shepard herself than what she had done purposely or accidentally or tangentially to Garrus Vakarian.

Especially what she hadn’t done for him.

The Leviathan had spoken directly to Garrus, which… yeah… that’s gotta suck. Some nights Garrus was calm and ordered, and he gave everything for Palaven always. Leviathan and Reapers were helpful. Yeah, it took a little courage to stand still and not bolt in the opposite direction when there were Leviathan and Reapers from here to the horizon… doing the equivalent of trimming the hedges.

It was definitely better than being shot at or eaten by them.

Garrus was not behaving as though the Reapers were under control and Shepard was dead. He veered toward the… paranoid? Delusional? He seemed to lose his place in time and he was right back to where he knew Thane Krios had Lal Shepard.
Garrus was exhausted and Russ could not convince him to get some sleep, it seemed Garrus had forgotten that Russ was even in the room with him.

Garrus was faced away, looking out toward the horizon with the arched and slowly moving figures of Leviathan and Reapers trying to undo damage done. Russ wanted to be able to undo damage done as Garrus said “He has her and I could have done something… I don’t know what. Why didn’t I know to just fucking shoot him the moment I saw him? How did I not know that was what mattered? How do I know now what matters? What if it’s already too late?”

Russ walked over to him, placed his hand on Garrus’s shoulder until he stopped pacing. Russ then took the bottle out of Garrus’s hand and put it carefully on the table. Russ said calmly “Just give me a few minutes here. I’ve got something to say.” Then he picked Garrus up by the waist and shoved him against the wall, leaning in and down. Biotics streamed off Russ enough for a stasis field on its own without any further effort. Still with a calm voice, though he was shaking with anger, with lust, with helplessness “This is how it works, isn’t it? When you care about someone? This is what you did, right? To her? So let me give it a try. Let’s stop talking about Lal Shepard for a few minutes. Just a few. Let’s talk about you, Garrus. You’re crazy. You bonded to her, I understand. You’ve earned your crazy, huh? Let’s talk about me for a few minutes. I didn’t earn this crazy. But I want to. I want to earn it. I have wanted you since I was fifteen years old. Every… fucking… day of my life, since I first saw you, I have wanted you. You know it, don’t you? Don’t you dare… fucking lie to me… not right now.”

All Garrus said was “Yes.” Fuck, his voice with just that one word, blue eyes staring into his, the memory of so many Vakarian men who held themselves suspended, anticipating, lost when Russ held them still nothing compared to this moment, this man. He could let Garrus go right now and his eyes, his anticipation, his unwillingness to struggle at all would not change. Russ knew it, he wasn’t wrong.

“You still… talk about her… and think about her… every day. I am not blaming you for that. You can do that, every day. But I want you to think about something else for just a little while. Just a little while each day. Then I want you to sleep and if I have to… I swear, Garrus, you’re going to fucking die if you don’t get sleep and I am going to have to escalate here to make sure that happens. You put me on that ship. You had me watch over her and you stayed in touch with me because you wanted to know about her, but that’s not all, is it? You trust me. You need me. If you ever were going to choose another bond mate, it would have been me. Tell the truth, Garrus, it would have been me.”

“Yes.”

“Yes. She’s gone. She’s gone and you’re crazy. She ripped your heart out. I let you rip my heart out. Every… day… and I’m not running away, Garrus, I want more, not less. Just like you’d tear your own heart out of your chest and hand it to her and apologize for it being bloody and broken if she were here right now, I’ll do the same for you. Every day. So we’re going to talk about you now. We’re going to talk about me. The only thing I want to hear about Lal Shepard is that you know she’s gone. You keep saying he has her. Whoever the fuck he is, whoever the fuck you think he is, I don’t care, because what matters is that… she’s gone. You can’t have her. I don’t care if you fucked up, if you didn’t fuck up, I want to know that YOU… know… you can’t have her. I haven’t asked you before, but I’m going to ask you now and you’re going to tell me. Not some crazy bullshit about how you’re getting her back someday. Tell me that you know she’s gone.”

“She’s gone.”

“And I’m still fucking here.”

“Yes.”
“And you…” Russ leaned in and down further, his tongue along Garrus’s hide, finally, Spirits, finally close enough. He knew Garrus’s scent in every iteration from sane to crazy, passionate to impassive. Right now Garrus wouldn’t move, wouldn’t run, and Garrus needed him. Russ waited for a surge of rejection but it did not arise in Garrus’s eyes, body or scent. Every single day they would need each other and Russ would listen to crazy heart-ripped Garrus and he’d hear about Shepard and then… and then he would take this man to bed and hear different things. Russ did not give a damn if he thought about Shepard, loved her every moment but… “Garrus, you think you’re alone sometimes even when I’m in the room. You trust me, you know I won’t hurt or betray you and you’re so fucking right. You can keep on thinking you’re alone when you’re not, that’s okay, you can treat me like furniture. I just want to be in the fucking room with you. When I’m there you can think about her as much as you want. I’ll be there when you realize or when I make you realize you have to breathe, you have to drink, you have to eat, you have to sleep. I’m going to do something so maybe you’ll understand you have never been as fucking alone as you thought, if you’d just… fuck, if you’d just reached out, just once, to someone who loved you. I was right there, I am right here, and you might be crazy, Garrus, but I still want you. And you… still… fucking… want me. Don’t you?” To emphasize his point, Russ let go of the stasis and invested his hands, his mouth with warm trickling biotics, his hands at Garrus’s waist, his tongue along the plate medallions of Garrus’s throat until he let out a moan, subvocals in both of them loud enough to vibrate plate. Part pain and part pleasure and it was always going to be part pain, wasn’t it, but Spirits damn them both if Russ wasn’t going to aim for that pleasure. “Now I know how this is supposed to go. I’m supposed to just do it if I’m like you, but I’m not. I might be barefaced and I might be a biotic, but I am Turian. I will tell you, I will ask you and I will demand that you answer me because you are Turian. You are bond-wrenched and wretched and even fucking crazy, Garrus Vakarian, but I want one word from you. Tell me yes and I will bond to you, just you. Just like I’ve wanted since I was fifteen. Every… day. Tell me yes and if it’s good enough for you, it’s good enough for me. We’ll both be bonded to people who can’t bond back and it won’t fucking matter. You can love her and want her. You can need me and it’ll always be enough. Need me, Garrus. I’ll be there for you every damned day just like I always have been given a chance, just like I always will be even if you say no. But you’re not going to say no. Tell me yes.”

Russ could feel it in his body but he needed to hear it. Garrus might not love him as much as he loved Shepard but he did love him. He couldn’t have her, and Russ would not allow him to have nothing. My heart’s ripped out and it’s broken and bloody, Garrus, but it’s something. Please.

Garrus’s eyes were flickering with chaos and need, love and warning. Garrus said with subharmonics pleading for understanding “You don’t understand.”

Russ smiled at him “I don’t have to understand it, Garrus. I just have to hear it. I’ll bond to you knowing you’re crazy and broken. You can say yes knowing I don’t understand. I have never once understood so that won’t change anything. I will love you, crazy, broken and so fucking confused you can’t find yourself. I will find you. I will take care of you. Let me take care of you, and if you want me to understand some day, then tell me again. I’ll try. But fuck if I give a shit about understanding right now, Vakarian. Right now I want one word to be understood. Tell me… fucking… yes… and then I stay here, with you. You won’t be alone. You won’t be abandoned. You will always have me. I won’t leave you with nothing. You have nothing right now, Garrus. I know you’re hers. Let me be yours.”

Garrus said softly “I don’t deserve you.”

Russ smiled “Yeah, I know that but I don’t know that. It’s complicated, right? So tell me yes and we work the rest out together. Nothing or something. I don’t care about complicated. Fuck, Vakarian, I’m already the one who gets you to sleep every night, this way I get to stay. Say yes so I can cut down on my commute.” Russ knew the yes was coming. He already had him. It was done. It was in
his body, in his subharmonics, in his scent. He waited for the word. Russ moved his tongue along Garrus’s hide, the side of his throat, choosing his spot. He closed his eyes, waiting, listening to and feeling the heave of Garrus panting, not deciding, not choosing, but savoring just as Russ was. It was done. It was something already. It had been something for a good long while. Garrus’s body went slack with surrender, his hand moved to Russ’s shoulder, talons out and scraping along plate of Russ’s cowl. Garrus’s voice was rich with complication and all the worlds of something as he said “Yes.”

Russ leaned in at the word, taking up Garrus’s surrender into his hands to shelter and protect it and him, physical support and strength flooding his body along with warm biotics. Russ’s teeth sank into and through hide, his tongue following from point to point. The word ‘Ahr’ – meaning ‘Mine’ surged through him in its fullest sense, the word that had always belonged to Garrus. He had that jarring moment of not being able to say it to Garrus. Garrus did not belong to him, Garrus belonged to Shepard, but he wanted Garrus to call him that because it was true. Fuck, call me Yiansoc, Russ, Ahr… by any name, mine. Yours.

But he knew Garrus, he did, better than anybody, better than Shepard ever had. With that ‘Yes’ came everything the man had to give, wrenched and wretched and even crazy, he was Garrus Vakarian and he would give… everything. Russ could ask for the man and the word and then that given, more words, all of the man. He didn’t even need to ask. Russ’s teeth scraped over the hide of Garrus’s throat, fitting back into the marks he’d made, his tongue gathering in more of his bond mate into his body. His body did not care at all that Shepard had ever existed. His smug joy of being Turian and even his biotics flared as he asked his bond mate for a gift “Call me Ahr. Please.”

Garrus’s head was pinned back against the wall, throat arched and fringe scraping as his talons dug into Russ’s shoulder, sparks of blue cascading down their bodies “Only if you do the same, Ahr.”

Fuck if he did not know this man and everything about him worth knowing. “Every chance I get. Thank you for all my chances, Ahr. Thank you for my bond. Thank you for my life. Thank you for your voice. Thank you for your body. Thank you for your Spirit.”

Garrus was exhausted and wanting to give, always wanting to give and Russ would not let him, allowing him only the strength to keep his talons gripped on his shoulder. If there was one thing Garrus was tired of carrying, it was authority. He wanted Garrus’s surrender and his sleep, Reverie investing his body after years of not being touched, not being allowed to touch. Bond mates shared blood, shared scent, gave and took and all Russ wanted was to give. He had no right to Garrus’s scent, intended for Shepard. He did not know if Garrus would want his blood but he would not make him take it. Complicated but something. Garrus should bite but Russ wouldn’t make him do that, didn’t know if he wanted it, his stasis and warm biotics holding Garrus in place and the longer he did that, the warmer Garrus’s subvocals and scent became. He was enjoying being right where he was, suspended and helpless and wanted.

Russ cut sharp lines into his own throat with his talons, his own blood there so Garrus could reach for it or let it go. With that hand Russ offered and Garrus’s tongue licked along his talons, watching his bond mate with Russ’s blood on his tongue, gentle and warm the most erotic thing he had ever seen or felt, the blaze of biotics sudden and fierce. The idea of sex with Garrus’s rumbling moan and his voice calling him ‘Ahr’ was a series of the most temptingly erotic things he had ever imagined, and he had imagined a fucking lot with this man. Russ leaned in to touch twining tongues, Garrus’s blood still on his tongue, the blending making Russ’s eyes close, Garrus moaning and head tipped back further, throat bared.

He wanted to shred the clothes off his bond mate but they both wore cloth of the Citadel, something they may never see again, something to be respected, imagining with a smile that he’d run through
Garrus’s finery in a week if given a chance. Just put one more thing on, Primarch, I’ll make sure it’s unwearable in a few seconds. Russ kept Garrus against the wall with his thighs and cowl, both with plates spread and nearly catching on each other, Vakarian’s blissful surrender something to behold as one busy biotic-invested hand moved to shift clothing, undo fastenings and cast them aside as his other hand held Garrus by the throat, fingers smeared in blood, Garrus’s tongue gliding over his hand to taste. It took a damned long time, shrugs and shifts and eyes closed, tongues twining and Garrus’s throat always, always open to Russ. There was a long moment as Russ shifted out of his clothes long after Garrus’s were gone, and when Russ leaned back in, hips pressed in, plates grinding together, Garrus’s cock twisted against his, reaching and twining like his tongue.

Pants and moans and ‘Ahr’ and all the need Russ could ever want from his bond mate, Russ lifted Garrus up against the wall by the hip spur, unwilling to take his hand from Garrus’s throat, where the marks were, where the marks would stay, where Russ could see them every day. Both of Garrus’s hands were on his shoulders now, talons scraping on plate and digging into hide, more blood on talon tips. Russ moved his hand to Garrus’s cock, gliding along to Garrus’s bliss-projected moans, blue smearing his mouth and the sounds he made.

Russ found the marks again with his teeth, deepened and widened them as he felt the subharmonics, the keening and the biotics, Garrus trembling and Russ’s teeth on his Ahr, frantic to consummate bond before he died of bliss and heart failure. He hadn’t wasted a single fucking moment of his life fantasizing about this man, he just hadn’t been imaginative enough, reality and complication and all the nothing and something adding up to insignificant compared to the real thrust into his bond mate’s body, Reverie and possession and protection, surrender and ownership. Garrus roared and keened and Russ groaned, mouth occupied by bond mark and bliss and blood. Pulses of blue heat, surges of body and biotics washed through them both, Russ lost himself in his bond mate’s body. When he could think, which was not soon, he said “I promised you that you could sleep. I think I was lying. I’m sure I was lying.”

Garrus laughed, almost coughing, hoarse and weak, surrender and both dripping blue in so many ways. “Whatever you need, Ahr.”

“I only need you, Garrus.”

Garrus was out at her flame at the appointed time the next day, Russ absolutely true to his word, which Garrus knew he would be, that he’d honor Garrus’s bond to Shepard for his lifetime and would never begrudge his time with her.

Garrus talked to her, and it was easier than it usually was, complication and chaos and Reverie humming in his blood and the solid, stable point of an overwhelming Spectre of obstinate dedication in the form of Hemorus Yiansoc.

Hemorus Vakarian.

If there’s something that being almost exterminated as a species could do, it would be to make Turians not give a damn about barefaced, biotic, gay, broken bond or bisexual because… who the fuck cares about that now. Love who you love, life is short.

“Well… life’s short for some of us. I think… Cara, I think you’d be happy for me. How… how weird is this, how weird is all of this? Somehow, I know you’d get it. You were always more comfortable in the weird and I think you’d smile at me and say ‘Good’ and maybe kiss me on the nose or something. Something very Cara. He’s… I’m going to tell him everything. It will take a little while. He may not believe me but I’ve got… I’ve got someone who loves me… lots of people who
love me right here. I think I get what you meant now when you told me to fight for myself. This is for myself. It might be selfish and maybe even cruel to him… but I do love him. And I have to admit I need the sleep. When he lets me get any. Some day. I just… know you’d rather I was happy when I wasn’t here, and not waiting for my chance to stick my hand in the flame of your memory. I wish you two had been friends. But I’ll tell you about him, okay?”

…I told him everything. Still no sleep, of course, but… I’m happy. I know you told me not to tell anybody about Gods and deals and… well, he’s not just anybody. He’s my bond mate. I know you’d understand. I don’t think he understands… because of course neither do I, but I did show him the video of you. He’s… well, I was alone with the Leviathan decision. Do I warn my people… of course I don’t. I tell my people what is their best hope, their best chance. You know what he said to me? He volunteered to be a pilot. He said… ‘If she thought Turians would make a difference, let’s make a difference. Throw me at them. I volunteer. Hell, if they want big, dumb and obedient, I’m their guy. Let’s do this.’ You know how you told me that your parents would have loved me? Well… he loves you. He loves me. I’m going to fight for myself. I’m going to fight for you. I’m going to fight for him… and I have no idea what’s going to happen. I do know what love is though. He apologizes, by the way, for some things he thought, some things he said. He says he can’t make it up to you but he will make it up to me and… I need him. I love him. I don’t know a lot of things. I know… eventually I’ll get some sleep… and I know I’ll be back tomorrow and I’ll tell you how it’s going. I love you, Cara. Wherever you are… I love you so much.”
I know you prefer the word ‘abduction,’ but the proper word is ‘rape.’

It’s short and businesslike.

…

We’ve the obvious open schoolboy rape,
with little mandolins and perhaps a cape.
The rape by coach; it’s little in request.
The rape by day, but the rape by night is best.

Just try to see it
and you will soon agree, Senors,
Why invite regret?
When you can get the sort of rape
You’ll never, ever forget?

You can get the rape emphatic.
You can get the rape polite.
You can get the rape with Indians,
a very charming sight.
You can get the rape on horseback;
They’ll all say it’s new and gay.
So you see the sort of rape
Depends on what you pay.
It depends on what you
Pay.

…

The spectacular rape
with costumes ordered from the East
requires rehearsal
and takes a dozen men at least.
A couple of singers
and a string quartet.
A major production
requires a set.

…

The comic rape.
Perhaps it's just a trifle too unique.
Romantic rape!
Done while canoeing on a moonlit creek.

The gothic rape!
I play “Valkyrie” on a bass bassoon!
The drunken rape!
It’s done completely in a cheap saloon.

Nothing cheap!

The rape Venetian
needs a blue lagoon.
The rape with moonlight
or without a moon.
Moonlight is expensive but it’s in demand.
The military rape!
It’s done with drummers and a band.

You understand?
It’s very grand.
It’s done with drums and a great big brass band!

...

So you see the sort of rape
Depends on what you pay.

“It Depends on What You Pay” – “The Fantasticks”

Senar set first to building her the library Garrus Fanning had requested. He asked her about every preference from color to method. He had found a way to make direct implantation of information free of pain. He could even augment it with pleasure if she wished, but she chose paper books with a digital copy of each for easy searchable reference as she lacked Drell memory. For construction, space was not infinite. Illusion could be.

It took adjustment of existing technology that was not intended for aesthetics but for production. Physical books could be created and destroyed, projections cast. She would believe in the illusion when primed to do so. The finished location was warm and green and golden, wood and welcome.

She had found Beckenstein cold and soulless. That was of course why he had enjoyed it. Where she had been surrounded by white and polish, metal and glass, now she had a space of warmth and soul.

It was an enclosed space but did not appear that way, open to the sky, an infinite referential illusion of stacks of books receding into an ordered, warm distance in one cardinal direction, a space she could browse and search, the illusion adjusting with her. Upon choosing a volume the digital copy could be manufactured and provided.

From the ordered space of the books themselves the library spilled from ordered civility into ordered and then progressively more wild nature in the other three cardinal directions starting with an open pavilion with traditional seating and shade. Then it branched off into forest in one direction, sea in another, meadow with mountains in the distance for the third.

She favored the forest and the meadow, though she spent time at the shore of the ocean, usually not reading but thinking. There were flowers and fruit trees from any number of worlds. She reclined on
grass or trunk with butterflies in her hair or sitting by running water in the sun.

The first trees he had created were apple. She then expressed that it was a shame that trees did not bloom and bear fruit at the same time because that would be beautiful, therefore... he provided trees that did exactly that.

He gained his inspiration from her. She enjoyed taking her time and reading slowly, saying that having the information implanted didn’t draw a unique map to the information.

“Information that’s implanted doesn’t have time to make friends with the neighbors before it’s roped off and isolated whole. Information should have… trajectories and collisions and that’s part of the fun.”

He preferred gathering information in the friendless fashion. He preferred the cold and soulless.

This differential in temperaments and experience with each other once again drew him to consult her on method. His intent of Dark Space was proven to be metaphorically appealing but practically unwise upon further reflection.

He presented the issue to her as an intellectual issue and her answer was “Momentum in space in a straight line does not cost much, but whatever energy is consumed must be replaced. Darkness will provide no energy and the only real factor that is infinite here is time. There will come a moment where the energy consumption will overwhelm the energy stored. Power is only a theoretically infinite source in the sense that it can be infinitely gathered and recycled, but to gather it there must be an external source of power. Otherwise there is the risk of being in Darkness so long that no course can be set and the only factor is momentum that has already been built. Insufficient energy to brake, accelerate or change course. If something halts that momentum, eventually the second law of thermodynamics will have its way. Entropy will demand that energy bleeds off, structure breaks down, reduction in temperature to absolute zero. No movement, no possible action. To compensate, set a trajectory that’s sufficient to gather energy from natural sources without being pulled into gravity wells. Singular elliptical and meandering orbits from star to star can be projected, a course set and the problem of energy consumption will be managed without predictability of trajectory. Control over destination and power source is maintained with the craft having maximum energy with minimal drain and optimal maneuverability and defense whenever required.”

He took her advice in several ways. He plotted a course to keep to those guidelines.

He maintained his fear of her. Her metaphorical description matched him as well as the Reaper. Left on his own he would reach absolute zero. In her gravity well he would fall into her twin suns and burn. If he wished partnership he must achieve equilibrium and maneuverability and above all, optimal control over changing circumstance.

Her gravity was formidable and he was a God of Freedom only as long as she was a Goddess of Contentment.

Freed, she would kill him, take the Reaper and work her will and that was unacceptable under any circumstances, at any time. He could not afford entropy or gravity, only elliptical and random where he could be warmed by her and inspired by her yet not drawn from his nature.

He maintained control over the Reaper and that was His domain. She was a creature of pure information and pure experience and he shared in that, as varied in possibility as music. New composition always possible, old inspirations welcomed with closed eyes and raised voice, layers and layers of association.
She would have enjoyed pets, perhaps a cat, but he blocked her access to that impulse. She retained the memory of Hale but not the further wish to care for an animal. She did not wish for a zoo, captive animals upset her. She also expressed interest in children, but that he would not allow; too much of a potential drain upon her time. If she wished for companionship, she would find it in him.

Now that it no longer mattered she had access to all languages. There were potentially hundreds of thousands of unique languages to explore and learn, with Reaper databases, the combined databases of the Citadel and home worlds.

She was kept happily busy with her explorations of the knowledge gathered and created over endless cycles of Reaper harvest. Time was unchanging in the library, always a sunny day. Time in fact no longer mattered. On Bechenstein she had no access to timekeeping, now neither did he. It took a long time to break the habit but ultimately he embraced it as a luxury. The needs of the body could be muted or eliminated so as not to interrupt her studies. He could remove the need for sleep from her as he had done for himself, a state he could indulge in or not as he chose. But he enjoyed finding her sleeping, feeling her sleeping, a state to be celebrated.

She was sculpted by him, by her, by her choices and the ones he indulged, the ones he denied. She had no nightmares, he eased her from painful thoughts by keeping them always out of her reach. They were there, but she eventually did not touch them.

He never took Garrus Fanning from her, but did assure that they did not touch. Her bond mate was as unreachable as the mountains in the library. Seen and believed to be real, yet beyond a certain point of repetition and priming it never would it occur to her to walk there.

Senar was always in contact with her, became accustomed to the flow of her thoughts like waves crashing upon a shore in her unique patterns he learned to read, to feel, to predict. He knew when she was inspired, when she was tired, when she was contemplative, when the fast and scalding torrent engaged her in a fever of thought. When she was fully engaged in her information gathering he left her to her timelessness.

There was nowhere to be, no need to meet, he could always call her but he enjoyed seeking her out at her perfect times according to her rhythm. He waited, he watched, he hunted her, stalked her and that was according to his own rhythms. He’d find her in the sun, a book set aside and one hand on grass or bark, fingers trailing in running water. She’d have gathered new thoughts and new freckles, his fingertips along her skin. He never grew tired of the pleasure of waking her, her languorous sighs and welcome.

She wanted him to know everything she knew, gained some pleasure from resonance of thought. He had always hoarded each fact as power. She knew knowledge was power but she wished to share, to expand rather than exploit, wished to give her power away as fast as she gained it. Wished to give it to him. She enjoyed being informative, telling stories, and he was her rapt audience, her head against his chest and her near anxious energy in the telling until with enough assurance she kept the enthusiasm but lost the sense that she was taking up time. He would remind her there were no limits to time. She could and should tell him everything. That was why he sought her out. He wanted to know whatever it was she wished to say.

She was inspiring in her composition of music of living but that could not always be translated into a thing he could create for her, an illusion he could spin, but there was endless time. Her inspirations would take him much longer to create than they would take her to gather into herself.

There were days she studied history, her eyes brighter, she’d express that there was something she wished to see or wished to experience spontaneously. Then he would take that memory of discovery from her. If she wished to see the obsidian palisades on Qerna or thought a day in history of the
Protheans would have been extraordinary to witness, he would create that place, that experience for her and she would be surprised that it existed, that he brought her to it.

He gave her no explanation as to who or what they were, eventually she stopped asking, stopped wondering as to her circumstances and nature. Her previous frameworks of existence were no longer of use; she was as different from Cara Fanning now as a butterfly was from a caterpillar. He spoke to her in poetry of transformation and she was transformed, a creature of inspiration and experience, an Avatar of such things. No explanation of who had Chosen them for this, they were not elected Gods or given powers. They simply were as they were.

He blurred transition and reality for her, sculpted her in sleep and waking, kept the woman he feared and wanted until his body called him to her wherever she was, whatever her rhythm, and she welcomed him each time with her smile, with her stories, with moans on her lips.

Her stories told might end with her inspiration spent, her eyes nearly drifting closed as her breath grew heavy against his chest. He would hold her, listen to the water, admire the trees for their hybrid beauty, apple next to galifen next to korilan; a silver-barked tree with spiraling flowers in scarlet that spun to the ground in ribbons. A tree extinct for 50 million years that she had rediscovered and he had created for her.

She was unaware that the tree had been her inspiration. She had not known she wanted a library. She only knew he gave her one, modified it for her with ideas like trees that no longer existed, those who bore flower and fruit simultaneously.

Whatever he created for her was always exactly what she wanted without knowing she had wanted it that way. She grew to accept that as her due, no longer doubted she deserved it yet never lost her joy in whatever gift he presented.

He created the obsidian palisades, he created pageantry of history and they traveled through her enthusiasms and hopes. He was warmed and kept to his elliptical course, spaces between them and time for him to cool and create as she warmed and gathered her inspirations close.

He did create for her a ballroom, gowns and music. He learned every style of dance that had been recorded. In her presence he adopted the warm and the slow, enjoyed her hair through his fingertips, combed and pinned it himself with her eyes downcast and her smile warm, patient with him and his vagaries and fussing. He still enjoyed painting her nails, creating illusions in the lacquer that shifted and glowed.

He never asked her to be perfection at dancing, if shoes or clothing pained her he removed the pain, did not ask her to endure. Here he was in his element as she was in her element in her library, he always led and she always adapted. With endless practice she became her own interpretation of dance that carried through all the styles, joy and the flash of her eyes, his practice and form always magnitudes of order greater than hers and it did not matter next to the graceful touch of her hand on his sleeve except that she was unique and all he desired.

They had their Realms. He created and called her to the ballroom or the Drell naphor, a training space for martial arts. This one was a reproduction of where he had been trained for assassin work years on end. He learned everything there was to be known of combat methods and taught them to her one by one. In this Realm it was the same as dance, power rippling through his body and biotics flaring. She was grace in concession and striving to learn, ending as always with her body beneath his, flushed with her face rapt with appreciation of his ability that she would never match given an eternity to try, and she did try. Every moment this woman tried to reach the bar of physical precision he set and she never resented a moment of his easy victory, anticipated and reveled in the inevitable end of whatever dance or whatever match he wished as demonstration and foreplay. She always
ended pinned beneath his body, overwhelmed and swept away, panting with her body tired and her eyes bright and his now endless stamina and enthusiasm for her body expressed with the timeless tide he cultivated in himself, those orbits where he came closest to her, risking losing himself and finding that risk irresistible.

He learned her mind and her body, pouring lust and devotion into her and delivering blind cruelties she thanked him for, each layer like rich lacquer that shifted and glowed.

He kept his promise that she would always remember, but humans were so very prone to forgetfulness, her mind not built for eternity, not like his had been rebuilt. It was easy to suggest to her that certain things be forgotten as unimportant.

Over time Garrus Fanning was the mountains and then the haze and then the clouds and then the distant horizon and then as important as what she had for breakfast in some distant past. Relevant and life giving at the time, entirely unremarkable now. Whatever now was, he would give her life.

He would always give her life, one of his blind cruelties he enjoyed while her eyes and her nails and her hopes glowed bright enough to radiate, which he gathered as energy.

‘You are She and I am He and we will feel like this together, always together. If parted, seeking. She will know He through the sound, from this sight, from hands on skin and venom, only and ever this.’

They were most times Nameless and Speechless but there came a day where she ventured into his mind of her own accord, something he had desired, something it took him a great deal of time to discover first that she was doing it, second that she wished to do it.

Among his creations he decided to dedicate space to a Pon-Ifa table and relished the idea of teaching her how to play. He was a Pon-Ifa master, the game somewhat like human chess but much more intricate and having elements of hijacking as superior to direct assault.

He ushered her into the Pon-Ifa tent with traditional fire pots and hanging fabrics, breeze and starlight and beauty in the rich barbaric style of Rakhana. He wore a replica of his Tseni garb and created one for her in her colors, bands of woven rich fabric given to those who served Rakhana’s needs.

If ever anyone had served the children of Rakhana, it was her. She would also serve a child of Rakhana for eternity and that service should be acknowledged.

He had changed his colors to those of Senar Tuelon, and he was now as she was, as close to a reflection of his original genetics as possible. His Tseni, which had been the green and black of Thane Krios now reflected not a taken identity, but a reclaimed one. Senar had been born silver and black, blurred to iridescent grays where the colors blended. He was the night sky, nebula and stars where she was the burnished sun, pale sands and the green of the leaves that depended upon Her for their life as he did.

He ushered her to her seat and took his own and prepared to explain the game to her in her style, with the information granted slowly, allowing it its trajectories and collisions.

She smiled at him and said she knew how to play.

This seemed impossible first that she did and second that he did not know that she did. He knew of her love of Rakhana’s history. He scanned his memory as he watched her smile and he realized that yes, he knew of her knowledge of Rakhana’s history and the subject of Pon-Ifa existing had arisen, but he had not asked her if she knew how to play, assuming that of course she did not. Pon-Ifa was a Drell creation and a tightly held secret.
He had not chosen to teach it to her at Beckenstein because the fewer opportunities she had to exercise her mind toward escape the better. It had been similar to the choice to send her to sleep with a chip. It had been like the choice to exercise without her watching or not have her demonstrate her skills.

It was avoiding whistling in the dark, concealing potential as was his instinct.

He had owned a Pon-Ifa set and a chess set at the estate, but some of his choices had been dictated by concealing her identity. The Pon-Ifa set had been taken as offered tribute from the highest ranked master of the game that he had challenged years ago. This set before them was a replica of that one. He had beaten every ranked player and had not been defeated since age 17. However, had he permitted her to play chess at Beckenstein, no doubt she would have been challenged to a match by a guest if he had allowed it. His small and quiescent Drala'fa would have destroyed every contender. Although he relished watching her casually and demurely devastate the guests at Beckenstein, no doubt he would have been challenged to play her at some point and that he would not have enjoyed as much. It would also risk others seeing her eyes in their revealed glory and that was a loss but a prudent choice.

He had suspected she would win against him at Pon-Ifa perhaps… eventually… but the game would ultimately take years of dedication in anyone’s life. They had only had months, his training her had encompassed other subjects and then there had been no time to gaze at her over a Pon-Ifa table.

Now he sat back and savored her smile, the significance of this contentious Realm as kaleidoscopic as the patterns on the Tseni.

He asked her “Shall we play then, Siha?” Another ironic name. A Siha was a warrior angel of the Goddess Arashu. A tenacious protector, fierce in wrath. He no longer believed there was a Goddess named Arashu, for she certainly would have destroyed him had there been any justice in the galaxy. If there was a Goddess it was his Cara, as his elevated creation. She did not serve herself or Arashu, she served him. She protected him, fierce in wrath. It suited her.

She smiled, inclined her head and the game began.

He delved deeper into her mind, beyond the rhythm of her tides into the specifics of her thought, or tried. She seemed to see the game shattered and Whole simultaneously, beyond his ability to comprehend or follow. Her symbols and intent moved as quickly and without thought as his body did in motion, in combat, in dance. Beyond his ability or ordered sequence as Drell. Dizzying.

He suddenly had no doubt that she knew the game yet could not tell if the chaos was human or intentional, a lack of comprehension or a depth of understanding he would never reach any more than she would be able to pin him to the ground in a grapple without his cooperation.

He moved first and attempted to reach into her mind but the same chaos and potential assaulted him, the difference between physics and quantum physics, his mind ordered and predictable, hers spinning potential and capacity, impossible to measure both at the same time before one factor had changed.

He began one move ahead and lagged further and further behind as she moved. He was unable to project what she would be doing, where she would be going, and the moves in his head seemed logical and logical was no longer sufficient compared to her storm. He made his moves, convinced he was ahead and her chaos was inexperience, only to find his pieces hijacked one by one, easily and lazily, her eyes that of the assured Goddess of her Realm to which he had delivered Her.

He did not know if she suggested moves to him as he suggested actions and sculpture to her, if so it was beyond his capacity to understand in the chaotic blur she presented, the devastating storm on the
board and in her mind, transferred to his, his order pushed off its potential axis.

Had she been in his mind, was she now, would she later, how…?

He saw the spiral of the gravity well, twin suns and her smile. He saw exactly what he had always feared in her and welcomed it into his silent dark.

He gazed at her and asked her simply how without words, only the impulse to know.

The chaotic storm of the board disappeared and there was the quiet order of a young girl in her Realm, in a room in Mindoir, playing Pon-Ifa against herself because the woman that taught her to play and her parents could not provide a challenge, so she provided it to herself. She had never been beaten. She would never be beaten. He would never beat her, no matter how many moves ahead she revealed to him or how many of his own moves he attempted to conceal from her.

It was her due.

He was her due.

She was his Doom and he had embraced that fate.

Her eyes did not blaze but were calm. Garrus Fanning was not forgotten or faded in any form. Senar Tuelon was known in any color or chameleon illusion.

She knew all Inspiration as hers.

There was no hostility or hate. She was forgiveness and eternity, gravity and inevitability.

With Pon-Ifa each move must be made until the end, there was no conceding.

There would be no conceding.

He lost, his moves known, hers obscured, his pieces hijacked and turned in on his Doyenne until she was taken, his Siha ensuring each possible piece was turned to her liking. She did not go for the kill early or soon. She arrived with all strength at her back and nothing remaining to him but surrender.

Garrus Fanning and her parents stood at her shoulders, he imagined if he looked hard enough he would see them. They were long gone in body and Spirit, but not in her memory. He had not supplanted or replaced them, she had hidden them from him somehow and her allies grew. He had never had an ally.

He never would.

He smiled at her.

She would not turn the Reaper around if she gained control, she had nothing to return to and a bargain struck, an opposition to uphold, her chosen burden in him. Her eternal problem she would not allow another to bear.

He remembered an earlier conversation and echoed it, their shared memories treasured things. He did not speak, intending his mouth to be occupied with hers, which it was as the game ended and he knew he would play again, she would beat him each time and he would try to discover why and how and would not.

He could and should kill her in this moment but that would not happen. Instead he wanted her more than he had at any point in their history. Neither of them would kill the other. He was beyond it and
she would still never be free to do it. With his speed, his ardor and the full choice of playing the
game out to the end her body was under his, his mouth to hers, her hands captured in one of his, the
touch of his mind to hers rich with irony ‘Siha, these moments are mine and I treasure each one and
hope to keep you just as you are, just where you are. When your moment arrives, will you kill me
quickly?’

‘You will live forever, Senar.’

‘My thanks for your mercilessness.’

‘You are welcome.’

She was merciless, the storm, and he was lights in the sky, far away and weak. She was gravity and
suns, inescapable, all things needed and sought by him. He must circle her or die, brought to his
absolute zero.

He was her due, and she would claim him when she chose, might have already, had already, was
through and of and in his mind in every corner that he looked, no longer his own.

He would wait, trembling, for her Call and she would or would not give it according to her whim.
She had never needed him.

She had always been blinding and now she was revealing, bright and hot, searing as he fell. She had
Healed. She was Whole and he was broken. The Realms blurred and transformed from caterpillar to
butterfly. Knowledge was hers and had always been. The fight was his but she would always claim
the Match. The dance was his but she would always claim the Music.

For how long had he served Her and only Her? For how long would he wish to do only that, beg for
the right?

Her answer…

‘You will love me always.’

He did, he had, he would.

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