Red Streak

by ThunderheadFred

Summary

During the surrender of Shanxi, ex-Marine Hannah Shepard agrees to parley with the fleet captain of the invading turian Blackwatch. Two decades later, Hannah's daughter Jane lives in the shadow of that infamous truce.

[Rewrite in progress]

Notes

Please note: significant edits are underway! This fic is currently on posting hiatus while I rewrite the published chapters and complete the finale. Revised chapters will be marked as they are updated, though there are some major additions/changes that will constitute some new chapters, which I will post when everything is ready. Thank you for your patience!

The basic premise is this - imagine that bits and pieces of every Shepard origin got jumbled up in a blender with some omni-gel to fill in the holes, and then a surprise turian dad got thrown in by mistake. The Commander's fight against Saren is heavily shaped by an alternate history of the First Contact War and certain episodes of Shepard's past. As such, the plot will frequently shift gears between time periods, but the driving force remains killing those dang Reapers.

Explicit rating is well deserved - although secondary to the plot, there are numerous Femshep/Garrus sexual dalliances ahead, starting sooner than you may expect. Chapters
containing sexual content are marked with a precautionary asterisk and include specific preface warnings for those who wish to avoid sexual scenes. In addition, be prepared for violence of all kinds, foul language, infrequent drug use, and emotional g-forces. Things get ugly. P.S. - I was not kidding about that "Major Character Death" warning.

**Alien vocabulary is translated at the bottom of every chapter** - many turian words and phrases are courtesy of MizDirected's turian dictionary, and have been used with her kind permission. Due credit is always included in the translation notes.
A sharp voice cut through the after-hours quiet of the cargo bay, but Shepard didn’t flinch. She’d been expecting this.

“Middle of the night and pumping iron, with Eden Prime mere hours away. How true to form.”

Hackles rising, Shepard slowed midway through a lateral curl and turned her head to meet a pair of prying eyes, a mutual clash of acid-green. She felt her blood slowing in her veins.

The Spectre. Posed thoughtfully in the mouth of the elevator, his gaze zeroed clean onto the center of her forehead as he studied her with the aloof curiosity of a hitman.

“Spectre Kryik,” she said. Subjected to such unapologetic scrutiny, it was the most diplomatic greeting she could manage.

Slowly, Kryik stepped from the elevator and toured the aft quarter of the cargo bay. Far from Alliance standard, the area had been jerry-rigged into Shepard’s personal training course: a Hierarchy Crucible, laden with turian ordnance and gear. His eyes moved skeptically across the display: the treadmill, the weight bench, the full load-out of Armax training guns, Shepard herself. Looking unimpressed, he mocked her in bland tones: “It’s one thing to look you up on the extranet,” he said, addressing the exercise equipment rather than the woman using it. “Query Commander Shepard, and you’ll return one wild story after another.”

Before she could stop herself, she lowered her barbells, rumbling low in her chest.

Kryik’s face plates twitched: an almost-laugh. “Yet here you are, flesh and blood. Jane herself, ridiculously true.”

She ground her molars, taking his point. Here she was. Awake in the middle of the night. Training before a mission. Heavily fatigued after her second round of PT, grinding through a Crucible. She’d seen plate glass windows less transparent than this display. Less fragile. Of course a turian
Spectre had come to give Commander Shepard hell for pretending to be something she wasn’t.

She flexed a cramp in her left hand, then stared intently at the floor panels beneath Kryik’s casual, contrapposto feet, knowing he was sizing her up. Her neck tensed at the thought; she cracked her bones audibly, showing off. “Fine. What do you want to know?” She threw the words in his general direction. “What lullabies he sang to me?”

Kryik took a half step back. His posture stiffened into a more formal parade rest, surrendering little. Sounding annoyed, he said, “Shepard, please. I’m not here to raise awkward questions about your fahrtrix—”

“Pari,” she spat, voice tightening.

A grim silence followed, broken only when Kryik forced a cough and rerouted to the weapons bench in the forward port quarter, pulling his shotgun from his back. An unnecessary inspection, she was certain - an excuse to look away. Grateful for her own distraction, she replaced her weights and resumed her reps.

Assholes were all the same, regardless of their planet of origin. If Kryik wanted to start something, she’d leave him the opening, if only so it could be finished, and quickly.

A few moments later, he relented to her silence. “I wasn’t trying to provoke you,” he said, blandly. “I admit to some curiosity about your upbringing. More than a few questions.”

Mid-lift, she froze and telegraphed him a dark glare, but he wasn’t looking at her.

Eyes on his work, he spoke and dismantled his gun with the same focused ease: methodical, professional, rote. “One of my mentors held a particular grudge against you,” he said. “His fury peaked my interest, and I’ve been a spectator of your progress since… well, since you tore through half the commissioned officers at Cipritine Military Academy to earn your N4. Your record…” He tilted his head, at a loss. “It’s attention grabbing.”

Her stomach churned. If the Spectre had some personal stake in Shepard’s career, this was the first she’d ever heard of it. His manner since boarding the Normandy had been pure professionalism through and through, almost to a fault. Nihlus Kryik: inscrutable and superior, like some kind of armored iceberg slowly chilling the ship. He didn’t seem the type to be driven by a Fornax-fueled fetish for squishy human maidens, but it wouldn’t be the first time Shepard had been caught unawares.

“I don’t appreciate being watched,” she said, low with warning.

That struck a chord. He stiffened and shot her a look as hard as any disciplining blow. “Don’t misunderstand me, Commander. I’m here for the mission. Exclusively. I came to speak with you about Eden Prime.” He possessed a drill instructor’s rigidity; a face that screamed straighten up or go home. That, at least, felt familiar. Something she could work with.

Shepard squinted, shoulders tense. “I’ve never been,” she said, rolling a shoulder.

“They say it’s a symbol of your people, one of the first stable human colonies beyond the Charon Relay. Proof that you can protect a perfect little world on the edges of the Terminus.” He paused, considering his weapon carefully. “But how safe is it really?”

Frustrated enough to spit, Shepard threw both weights to floor and stood. “Enough ballet, Kryik. What are you dancing around?”
He looked in her direction and tilted his head academically, offering no further explanation.

“This is no ordinary shakedown run,” she said, rushing at the chance to confront the Spectre about his motives face-to-face. “Even Corporal Jenkins isn’t that green. An experimental Hierarchy-Alliance stealth frigate with Captain Anderson and a Council Spectre aboard at zero hour? I don’t think so. And then I get the call: reassigned and promoted by Admiral Hackett himself, just like that.” She snapped her fingers. “Give me some credit, Kryik, I know I’m not here to smash a bottle of champagne on the Normandy’s hull.”

She paused for breath, immediately lost her momentum. One sharp, defeated sigh. “Or hell, maybe I am. What’s the story this time? Reparations for Shanxi? Some big fireworks display to congratulate the politicians on their latest ass-kissing? Did you smuggle in any reporters for the big circle-jerk?”

She kicked a nearby cargo crate, hard, just to be sure. No startled yelp from within, no hidden camera fell out. Her only reward was silence and a sore toe.

Kryik looked as if he had a great deal to say, but no idea what order to put the words in. On his ordinarily frostbitten face, the lack of sure footing looked almost like embarrassment.

After taking a moment to compose himself, he said, “I suppose it bodes well that the Normandy’s crew is smarter than the Council gives them credit for. Anderson knows his people. And he chose the right second in command to back him up. Make no mistake, politics aside, your promotion was his doing.” He quirked his head. “...and my own.”

Shepard blinked, too stunned to comment, but Kryik didn’t clarify. Firmly, he redirected: “Our purpose on Eden Prime is twofold,” he said. “First, the Council has asked me to assist Captain Anderson with the covert extraction of a Prothean artifact—”

“Wait.” Shepard interrupted, shaking her head. “The Council flew a mint-condition experimental frigate to the edge of the Terminus, just so a Spectre could hand-deliver some… what? Museum piece? Or is this for a private collection?” She snorted, rudely. “Who’s buying, the asari councilor? Tevos probably likes looking at art as old as herself.”

Kryik’s mouth opened, mandibles twitching, but he seemed incapable of finding the correct words to fill the void. Finally, he settled for a strained cough that bore only passing familiarity to laughter, and said, “My my, how insensitive. The artifact is a Prothean Beacon. Rare finds, exceptionally valuable to posterity, and very dangerous. I need to transfer this one to a proper research facility on the Citadel before it falls into the wrong hands.”

“What ‘wrong hands?’ Human ones?”

Kryik was still making a show of cleaning his gun, splitting his attention between the weapon and Shepard with a cold, disinterested look on his face. But the cracks in his veneer were long past showing. When he spoke again, the calm in his voice took on a practiced edge. “The Terminus is a cesspool of pirates and criminals who’d love any excuse to ransack a human settlement,” he said. “Batarian splinter groups that haven’t forgotten the Blitz.”

He slowed, pausing deliberately - a show of force.

Much as she tried to hide it, Shepard felt sure he could hear her heart skipping beats. He knew more about her past than he was letting on.

Whatever his motives, he didn’t linger. Dryly, he said, “At best, humanity has a shaky foothold on
The Citadel. Last time your people dabbled unchecked among Prothean ruins, it didn’t pan out so well. Whatever that Beacon contains, it affects all of us. Technology like this is unpredictable, very dangerous. Which brings me to my second objective.”

“And what’s that?” she said, hearing the eyeroll in her own voice.

“Evaluating you for Spectre candidacy.”

Shepard went still enough to feel her own bones.

Minutes later, still dazed, she grunted. “You just made that up to piss me off.”

He chuckled unexpectedly, then immediately stilled. “Strong words, spoken by the impossible human legacy of Albacus Regidonis.”

Hearing her father’s name uttered aloud for the first time in years, Shepard flinched. She closed her eyes to savor the rarity of the sound. Or to block it out. Or both. “Say I buy this Spectre joke,” she said, hissing through a clenched jaw. “Why wasn’t I briefed by Anderson on any of this?”

“Alliance brass made that call, not me. You were meant to be briefed at the mission sitrep first thing this morning, once we were in orbit. But since…” he glanced at her Crucible again before continuing, a slow, visible arithmetic behind the movement of his eyes. “…you don’t seem bound by Alliance rules and regs, why bother? Whatever gets the job done. When it comes down to it, this mission is Council purview, anyway. It’s need to know, and now you do.”

“All right, fine, I follow. But a human Spectre?” Under her breath, she added, “Who’s pulling the threads in that spider web?”

“You have been pushing for a hand in galactic politics since Relay 314 blew up in your faces, and what better avenue than the Spectres? As to your nomination specifically, I was the one who put your name forward.”

She shook her head, agog. “You?”

“Like I said. Your record is attention grabbing.”

The twist in her gut returned, redoubled. “No,” she said, biting back a snarl. “I won’t be paraded around like some show animal just because of my father—”

“Too bad,” he said, dropping all pretense. The shift in tone hardly put them on equal footing. Instead, he spoke to her as if she were twelve. “The Council can’t wait to jump on a publicity stunt like you. You have frankly unprecedented perspective on interspecies cooperation.” Shepard crossed her arms and felt the skin on her face boiling, but Kryik lectured on. “Regidonis is only the tip of the spear, the means to an end. Hell, if you really were turian, you’d have already earned this nomination five times over. Your list of accomplishments is preposterous. The bleeding hearts pinned a medal on you for saving civilians in the Blitz, but I dug up the rest. I know what the Alliance tried to hush up, how far you were really willing to go to take back the Skyllian Verge.”

She stared at the Spectre, heart in her throat. He was reading her like a set of first-tier omni-tool instructions, then pushing all of her buttons at once, just to see what she would do. The dim third shift lights had thrown his face into deep pockets of shadow, and she trusted him less than ever.

If Torfan was the moment that made Shepard worthy of being on the Council’s short list, then may she rot in Hell.
“That victory was nothing to be proud of,” she said, meaning every word.

“Say what you want. An ugly call, but you saved thousands and ended a war almost single-handed. You’d make one hell of a Spectre, species be damned.”

Kryik had finally begun to reassemble his shotgun, one piece at a time. As if working from muscle memory, he kept his eyes on Shepard, watching her with an expression that might have meant anything: challenge, acknowledgment, understanding, disdain. No matter how close she got to his heels, he always seemed ten paces ahead and hidden from view.

After a careful moment’s study, he slowly added, “I imagine your patrem would be proud of all that you’ve accomplished.”

Her blood froze, fists clenching automatically at her sides. “Proud?” She jerked her head to one side, teeth on edge. "My father would have ripped the Star of Terra right off my uniform and melted it into slag." She stared at her own hand, seeing red. "I promised myself I’d never do anything that ruthless again.”

Kryik nodded seriously, then slid his gun into place on his back. “And I risked it all, betting on you. If you’re who I think you are, maybe you can prove us both right.”

Then he was gone.

— HANNAH —

Shanxi - 2157

Once a Marine, always a Marine. Even mid-slouch, Hannah Shepard was accustomed to looking most men square in the face. Civilian by technicality alone, she had voluntarily discharged years ago, but remained a regular fixture in the Alliance training yard, where she made a name for herself as the “Shepard Scale,” deadlifting raw recruits and declaring them weighty enough for the Corps.

In comparison, General Williams had the build of a strategist, not a soldier. Even considering his light frame and ponderous eyes, Hannah could never remember him appearing weak. Now, he looked defeated.

The General was dwarfed completely by a phalanx of fully armored and heavily weaponized aliens who marched in perfect lockstep behind him, filling the city square. The man looked miniaturized in his shame, as if he had been remade in effigy from over-baked clay and might shatter at any moment. It would have been easy to name him a coward, a traitor, but Hannah couldn’t bring herself to to do it.

Crowds of anxious civilians watched as General Williams escorted an alien army into the square. The onlookers took turns shrinking into themselves and craning their necks for a better view, their eyes bright with betrayal. Above hundreds of gathered heads, silence reigned.

The absolute quiet brought a new and unfamiliar terror. Since the bombardment had begun, not an hour had gone by without another chunk of the colony being blasted into dust. Constant noise: explosions, air raid sirens, children screaming for their families, the babble of gangrenous Marines begging for their severed limbs. Even in her sleep, Hannah heard that noise. It had rooted itself into the back of her chest, as regular as her own heartbeat. Now - like a blanket of smoke - silence and a kind of terrified awe smothered the last of her resistance to ash.
There was no fight left on the ground; the orbital bombardment had ripped Shanxi into
unrecognizable heaps of rubble. Anybody lucky enough to survive the initial wave had been
starved into a walking skeleton in the aftermath. Lean weeks without power or clean water, until
the miasma of filth had taken almost as many lives as the flaming debris still falling from the sky.
Finally seeing the strength of their attackers face-to-face, witnessing the ruthless coordination of
their squads and the brute strength of each individual soldier, the reality knocked Hannah dizzy.

Of course Williams had surrendered.

The invaders were huge. That was her first, and for a while, only thought about the alien soldiers as
they spread out in unison. A perfectly choreographed occupation of the colony’s central square, a
military show of force expertly designed to be intimidating.

What chance did humanity have at the mercy of these predators? More to the point, how immediate
would this extermination be? How pitiless? Reality sank into her heart with sharpened fangs:
humanity wasn’t alone in the universe, and the neighbors were a lot higher on the food chain.

Hannah felt a nerve surging up her right arm and flinched. She looked down, rediscovering the
death-grip of her baby’s fingers in her palm. Soft, damp claws with filthy digging nails, all in dire
need of a wash and trim. Hannah stared, trying to reconcile two opposing realities. At her feet
teetered three-year-old Jane. Her own child, starved and half-awake, clinging on for dear life. Over
Jane’s shoulder were dozens of aliens filing into neat military rows, their weapons at high ready.

“Mommy,” the little girl whispered, her eyes too big, too afraid. “Lionel is scared.”

Even while throttling her mother, Jane was barely managing to keep hold on the stuffed dinosaur
she had smuggled under her arm. Lionel: the steadfast companion that Jane insisted on bringing
with her everywhere, even to her execution.

“Be brave for him,” Hannah said. She yanked Jane up into her arms, cradling her securely against a
jutted hip. Just to be safe, she pushed the toy further into Jane’s already furious grip.

There had been too much to risk, trying to hide Jane away in the short time they’d had to prepare; it
would have been impossible to keep a terrified child quiet or out of sight. Better to face it together,
if the worst was about to happen. Impressively, blessedly, Jane had yet to crack. Not one tear, not
one whimper. Maybe she didn’t understand; after all, Hannah wasn’t sure she could wrap her own
head around it.

She crushed Jane closer, breathed in the stale, sleepy scent of her hair, and waited.

Holding an assault rifle high across a massive crested torso, one of the aliens slowly stepped
forward to stand beside General Williams. At Williams’ back, the rest of the extraterrestrials kept
their heads obscured by featureless combat helmets, smoke-black and anonymous. The single
naked face was impossible to ignore, so inhuman that Hannah struggled to pick out anything
except the creature’s eyes. Those mercury-bright eyes burned across the crowd, and the silence
stretched thinner than ever. It was a primordial stare, like something forged by millennia of
evolution to devour them all alive, bowels first.

Every inch of the alien’s visible skin looked carved from brackish stones. A row of jagged teeth
glinted hungrily through windowed sockets in its cheeks, partially covered by a pair of twitching
mandibles. Rigid appendages jutted straight back from the crown of its head like a handful of
serrated knives. The cheeks, the forehead, the tips of the spikes, all were carefully ornamented with
complex designs. The color: a deep, deadly red. Hannah prayed to God the warpaint was not
human blood.
After a long, hungry-looking assessment of the humans quaking in the square, the unmasked alien flicked its head at a smaller subordinate. The second alien approached Williams from the other side and extended an armored left arm in front of the General. A florescent orange holo appeared from thin air, surrounding the subordinate alien’s forearm. Unrecognizable script flashed across the glowing display.

Taking a deep, barely steadying breath, Williams began to read:

“As of this moment, I, General Lance Howard Williams of the Systems Alliance, unconditionally surrender the colony of Shanxi into the custody of the Turian Hierarchy, under the command of Acting Fleet Captain Albacus Regidonis, to include all lands, goods, and militia therein, until such time as the Citadel Council declares ceasefire. The Maskim Xul Treatise accorded by the Citadel Council in 300 CE forbids the activation of any uncharted relay without explicit Council authorization. Any violation of this ruling is to be answered with immediate military retaliation and containment procedures. The Systems Alliance must answer for our severe transgression and cooperate with the will of the Council, or risk a quick and sure annihilation.”

The General stopped to grunt and shove the alien device out of his face. Hannah flinched, but inexplicably, the turian leader let the outburst go unpunished. After that, Williams spoke in his own words.

“Listen to me. We do this by the book, and we can all make it out of here. Effective immediately, all Alliance personnel on this colony are prisoners of war. That means you are protected. Turian Hierarchal Executive Command 566. Don’t resist, keep it quick and sane. Civilians: before 1200 hours today, surrender nonviolently and the turians will ensure you receive adequate food and shelter at your assigned penal enclave. They will distribute medical aid, if you need it. Soldiers: report to your commanding officer and follow all instructions.”

There were few Marines left standing on the ground - most of them had been blown from the sky or smashed by orbital debris on desperate supply runs. The reminder of that loss made Hannah’s chest ache.

“If you are of sound mind and body, form an orderly queue on the south side of the square. One day’s rations and a work detail will be assigned to you. If you can’t walk, you will be relocated.”

No one seemed willing to move first, so Williams tried again.

“You get one warning, right now. Noncompliance will not be tolerated. We’re still alive, people. Let’s keep it that way.”

— JANE —

After tossing violently through an hour and change of restless sleep, Shepard still managed to wake forty-five minutes early for the morning sitrep. Knowing this would be her first chance to make a formal impression on Kryik, she took advantage of the extra time. She wouldn’t let him catch her out of uniform again.

Quick, dark smudges across the brow to harden her eyes. Thin tinted moisturizer from the commissary to hide the most damning of her freckles. Hair yanked back into an un-flirtatious knot. Last, she slid into something more comfortable. A mismatched set of mercenary armor in her family colors. Bloody crimson, with a crude Red Squad insignia burned into the right pauldron to make it official.
Hardly standard issue, but reg-breaking cosmetic dalliances had become synonymous with Shepard’s name. In Basic, she’d nearly been held back for showing up on the yellow footprints with red nails. When she’d refused to scrub off the paint, Sargeant Velasquez had ordered Demon Squad to rip Shepard out of bed at First Call and “scrape the vanity away by force.”

Shepard’s fingers had bled for two days and she’d felt naked for the rest of training, but by the end of it, she was Squad Leader.

She flexed her hand as she pulled an armored glove over those nails, red once more. A flawless, solid lacquer that matched the Ariake suit by careful design. A gift from a krogan battlemaster, the armor was Shepard’s sturdiest and most trusted disguise, and the color made her feel at home. She’d been practically glued into it ever since earning N7.

To avoid looking like an overeager suck-up, Shepard dawdled away her last few minutes before the sitrep. Looking for an easy out, she took a detour by way of the Normandy’s cockpit, where she paused to shoot the breeze with the talkative new pilot, Moreau.

He was glowing over a successful FTL jump straight into orbit, and being none too humble about it. “Nothing but net, Commander,” he purred to his console, knocking his cap over his eyes. No wonder everybody called him Joker. She liked him, but unless he really did turn out to be God’s gift to aviation, he’d need a bit of knuckle rapping to keep that cheek under control. For now, she let it slide.

At precisely 0700, Shepard walked into the comm room. Anderson and Kryik were already present, deep in conversation. Despite the careful timing, she felt like she was late for her first day of school.

Anderson acknowledged her first. “Good, you’re here. Nihlus tells me that the two of you finally got a chance to talk.” He allowed a knowing pause, paternal on the verge of condescending, holding two warring children by the ears.

“Yes sir,” she said, biting her tongue.

She inclined her head towards the Spectre, whose eyes seemed to be burning brighter than usual this morning, probably to hide an urge to gloat. He’d also donned armor carefully chosen to look big, cool, and menacing, except he had Spectre-grade equipment and therefore automatic seniority. Red and black, and parts that glowed. She pursed her lips, beaten at her own game.

Breaking the awkward silence, Anderson said, “Sorry to keep you out of the loop, Shepard, but my orders came down all the way from the top. Strictly need to know. Nihlus will work directly with you and Lieutenant Alenko to extract the Beacon, he needs to see you in action. Speaking of which.”

He’d given her the opening, and she took it. “I’m not sure I’m cut out to be the Council’s poster girl. The Spectres?”

“Humanity needs this, Shepard. It’s time for us to step up and join the community, and you’re our best shot. You’ll take the job, kid.” He looked at Kryik, then back to Shepard, and sighed good naturedly. “If they’ll have you, anyway.”

Moreau’s voice sliced into the comm room with thinly disguised anxiety. “Captain, we’ve got a problem.”

Shepard barely knew the pilot, but his sudden rigidity struck her right in the gut.
Anderson’s face sank. “What’s wrong, Joker?”

“Transmission from Eden Prime sir. You better see this.”

“Onscreen.”

Joker forwarded the transmission from the bridge. Filling the large vid screen on the aft wall, the feed was pure chaos. Marines running back and forth, bullets flying, comms jamming only to break through half garbled. Bits and pieces, all bad. *Attack, massive casualties, immediate evac*.

Shepard moved closer, straining to see, to hear. Had pirates found the beacon? Like Kryik had predicted, rogue batarians fishing for a hefty ransom?

Then she heard it, a sound that rattled her from stem to stern.

A deep, mechanical crush of noise, too multitudinous to stomach. It augured deep into her brain, settling behind her eyes, burning. Onscreen, above the scrambling Marines and the smoke of the firefight, a titanic shape emerged from the sky. It was incomprehensible: a stormy hand reaching out of the clouds, like God’s vengeful fist groping for souls.

The screen turned to static.

“Everything cuts out after that,” the pilot said, talking fast. “No comm traffic at all. Just goes dead. There’s nothing.”

There was a brief pause, then Anderson showed his usual mettle. “Take us in, Joker. Fast and quiet. This mission just got a lot more complicated.”

Kryik stepped forward, his eyes flicking between Shepard, Anderson, and the dead air of the vid screen. “We stick to the plan,” he said. Decisively, he turned to Shepard. “A small strike team is still our best chance. Tell Alenko to suit up, then grab your gear and meet me in the cargo hold. We’ll be going in hot. Follow my lead.”

She looked to Anderson, who nodded his approval and added, “Looks like there’s going to be a lot of injured people down there, but helping survivors is a secondary objective. The Beacon is your top priority.”

Shepard didn’t like that ultimatum very much, but she didn’t like the look of that giant hand dropping out of the sky, either. She pinged Alenko with her omni-tool.

*Going in hot, LT. Civilians down. I need you in medic mode.*

*Aye-aye Ma’am. Wilco on extra band-aids. Ready in 5.*

Kryik tried to rush out, but she blocked him with a forearm, her fist thumping crudely into the keel of his armor.

“Hold it, Blasto. I realize a Spectre’s whole M.O. is doing things alone, but if we’re going to maintain a three-man strike team against a completely unpredictable force, we need to hammer out that team part. Right now. Alenko says you carry enough firepower to wipe out a whole platoon. I need to know how you operate, so I can pack enough changes of underwear for whatever vacation you have in mind.”

Anderson’s hand smacked the back of her skull as he rushed to take his place in the CIC. Fair.
Kryik shrugged her off and loped to the elevator, but she dogged his heels and slid next to him. As they descended to the engineering deck, she stepped a few inches into his personal bubble, willing it to burst. Finally, he relented.

“I like to mix and match.” He said, knocking his arm against the heavy armor covering her shoulder. He’d noticed her outfit, then. How nice. “Mid-range. Aggressive tactics. Lots of firepower. Shotguns, mostly. Pistols on occasion. I can deploy a tactical cloak, some hand-to-hand tricks if the enemy gets too close.”

He pushed the information onto Shepard’s plate and waited to see what she’d do with it, Spectre bullshit chafing more than ever. She didn’t have the patience for it. Not after that S.O.S.

“That thing we saw attacking the colony is 100% bogey,” she said, rounding on him. “Don’t try any one-man-army vanguard theatrics on my squad. We stick together. Alenko is light on weaponry, but you’ll need his tech and biotics to shore you up if you step into fire.”

“Is that so,” he said. Voice flat, revealing nothing. “And what will you be doing in all this, Commander?”

“Never met a gun I didn’t like,” she said. “And I never leave home without a grenade launcher. I’ll pack a full load-out and keep you covered.”

The elevator opened into the cargo bay, where Alenko was strapping on the last of his emergency response gear. Once the elevator was secured, the top lip of the loading ramp cracked open. As the air seal broke with a rush of atmosphere, Shepard’s ears popped, and she flexed her jaw to compensate. She squinted into the pinkish sunrise of Eden Prime, secured her helmet, then turned to Kryik.

“Shall we?” she said, voice barely carrying over the sound of impending landfall.

“After you.”

— HANNAH —

Hannah felt as though she’d been holding her breath since the day she’d been born. In a rush, she evacuated her bursting lungs and triggered a flood of relief so intense that she had to bite back a sob.

Whatever this Turian Hierarchy was, their war games seemed honorable - not entirely dissimilar from humanity’s own. Hannah slumped her head onto Jane’s shoulder to plant a thankful kiss. Gathering her girl closer, she anxiously turned towards the opposite side of the square to join the other civilians.

Before she took a step, she heard her name floating above the panicked shuffle of the crowd.

“You need Shepard. Civilian - former Marine.”

She froze.

Williams was still standing next to the alien leader; she could overhear the General’s half of the conversation. Unnervingly, he sounded conversational, practically relieved. “Captain, you’ve got to get creative. We’re starved out. The only functioning supply lines are all tied up in Shepard’s
depot. Everything else is gone. Civilian or not, she’s in charge of supplies and logistics. She’ll need an implant to be of any use. Can you do it?”

Whatever blood was still pumping through Hannah’s hardened veins, it stopped at the General’s suggestion. What the hell did he want to implant her with?

He called for her again. “Shepard. Report.”

Fear pierced through her heart, explosive as any bullet. Williams’ order was as polite as an order could get, but that didn’t make him trustworthy. She wasn’t a traitor.

Jane sensed the shift in mood, and misread it with all the precociousness of a child. “Hannah Shepard is my mommy,” she announced.


The General glanced over his shoulder, taking a measure of the remaining civilians as they were coaxed into an unwilling line by the turians, and his nerves seemed to return all at once. When he looked back to Hannah, there was a cornered gleam in his eyes. “I need you here, soldier,” he shouted, more forcefully now.

When she refused to move, Williams made an impatient summoning motion, but Hannah couldn’t have budged an inch if she’d tried. The cold metallic gaze of the alien at William’s side had immobilized her completely. Pinned by that stare, she felt too poleaxed to blink.

It was watching her, weighing her - those hammered metal eyes following her every twitch, her every sweating breath. Approximating how much meat she could provide for its troops, possibly. Heavy as lead, its eyes moved to Jane.

Snarling automatically, Hannah tightened her grip.

Never.

“Mommy,” Jane whispered, burrowing into Hannah’s neck. “Can we go home?”

A turian soldier approached and nudged Hannah roughly between the shoulder blades with the muzzle of a rifle.

Get a move on, the rifle said. Or die.

With an extraterrestrial weapon thrust mercilessly into her back and a baby girl trembling in her arms, Hannah Shepard finally allowed herself to be forced into enemy hands. Whatever sick thing they had in mind for her, they wouldn’t touch Jane. Hannah would kill them first. She’d kill every last one.

As if reading her mind, the alien leader’s silvery eyes slid from mother to daughter, then the subordinate gun at Hannah’s back jostled warningly. This time, the blow was violent enough to break the skin of her shoulder, but she refused to blink.

Instead, she looked at Williams and spat, “Fuck you, sir.”

Jane flinched in Hannah’s arms, dropping her stuffed dinosaur in shock.

The General sighed with his entire body and raked a hand through his thick, oily hair. He looked badly in need of a shower, and maybe a spiritual confession.
'Shepard, trust me. I swear to God.' He lowered his voice, already tremulous and thin. ‘I swear on the souls of my own grandchildren. I’m still on your side. This colony is days from starving.’ He looked at Jane, who shrank from his watery-eyed scrutiny. ‘The kids will get the worst of it, you know that. Unless you can move some supplies, Shanxi will be dust without the turians firing another shot.’

Hannah said nothing, refusing to look at Williams directly. She stared down the silvery-eyed alien to the General’s right - watching, and waiting.

‘We’re out of options,’ Williams reminded her. ‘It’s cooperation or death. The turians have universal translator implants, but we’re not in their system. The software is improving hour to hour, I guess they’ve had field techs and combat engineers working on it round the clock, but none of our own people.’

She could see a small patch of the alien’s neck peeking out over its armor. The skin there looked tender and almost human, prone to stab wounds. As the creature swallowed, the flesh shifted and creased like delicate suede.

So, these dinosaurs had soft spots too.

Williams wasn’t done. He gestured to the turian she was staring at. ‘Captain Regidonis managed to broker a temporary ceasefire, but he needs a human liason to make anything stick, and we all need food. Submit to the implant. A few hours in surgery, a human doctor to make things more comfortable, and we can start fixing this.’

As Williams rambled, increasingly desperate, Hannah noticed the trail of blood leading from both of his ears. A patch on his scalp had been crudely shaved, the skin cut open, barely healed. He was implanted. The General who had just surrendered Shanxi into alien hands had a fucking mind-control chip embedded in his skull.

‘This is insane,’ she whispered, backing away until her shoulder blades reunited with the unfriendly alien gun. ‘They’ve already turned you into their talking meat puppet.’

Williams laughed, or he almost did, with a dry, heaving noise. ‘I’ve got no proof for you, but I’m still in my right mind.’ He rubbed the back of his neck, looking unsure. ‘You’ll have to take this one on faith.’

There was a brief lull while the General’s unconvincing argument soaked in, then all hell broke loose.

Regidonis advanced toward Jane —

Williams’ hand flew to his waist, instinctively reaching for a gun that wasn’t there. Empty-handed but committed, he threw himself between Jane and the advancing captain.

A turian guard leapt forward, the orange translation holo on his forearm morphing as he moved. The holo solidified into a sizzling-hot, lethal-looking blade, which the guard pressed against William’s back, aiming expertly for the kidneys.

With Williams restrained, Regidonis lowered himself cautiously to one knee and groped along the ground for something. Hannah strained to see exactly what, but Williams was blocking her view. A second later, the turian captain returned to full height, met his subordinate’s eyes, and hissed aggressively.

After a tense pause, Regidonis’ guard trilled and let Williams go without injury. The General still
had plenty of the old fight left in him; perhaps not a brainwashed automaton after all. He stood his ground, keeping his body solidly between Regidonis and Jane.

Hannah caught a whiff of her own terrified stink. She felt naked, primitive, a chimpanzee about to be poached and turned into a black market souvenir.

Jane, protected by an infantile lack of experience, was straining against Hannah’s grip and reaching fearlessly under William’s outstretched left arm. Reaching toward the turian.

When Hannah saw what had caught the girl’s attention, she tightened her grip.

Regidonis held Lionel in his gigantic two-fingered hand. Though he was keeping his distance, the gesture was unmistakable. The towering leader of an invading extraterrestrial army held out a raggedy one-eyed dinosaur toy like an anointed peace offering… and waited to parley with a little girl.

If Hannah had been able to breathe, she might have laughed in his face.

Jane didn’t hesitate. She yanked her toy out of the turian’s grasp, threaded it clumsily under Williams’ armpit, then buried her face in Lionel's matted belly, hiccuping with rage.

Hannah glanced back into the turian’s face. He was already looking at her.

*Captain Regidonis.*

He had a name, she reminded herself. An agenda. Theoretically, a soul.

He was inscrutable. But less so, somehow, when standing so close. There had been ample time for him to bite her face clean off, to force whatever implant he pleased straight into her ear canal, but he hadn’t made a single aggressive move toward her. Comprehensiveness and control seemed to dictate his every act, the discipline of his posture as otherworldly as it was familiar.

Not a wild animal, but an honest to fuck extraterrestrial intelligence, and one that wanted to reason with her, apparently.

Williams had been winded in the scuffle, and he adjusted the rags of his dress uniform with a dignified huff, then spoke to Shepard.

“I know it seems impossible, but the turians aren’t here to wipe us out. They’re rational.” He glanced at the holographic knife that had almost pierced his kidney moments before. “To a point. Regidonis claims to have made civilian custody and welfare his first priority, at least until the turians hear otherwise from on high. He won’t make much headway without you. And I swear, if any of these bastards touch your daughter, you have my permission to fire at will.”

She nodded, taking him at his word.

“If you’re going to cooperate - and for God’s sake, woman, please cooperate - Regidonis needs to pat you down.”

She met the captain’s eyes one more time, trying to scry anything compassionate behind those glinting irises, but she only found two dark webs of polished aluminum, silvery and strange.

Faith won out.

“I’ll be right here, Jane. Be brave.”
Doubt finally crept into the child the moment Hannah set her down. Weak with hunger and suddenly all alone, Jane mewled once or twice as she slid onto the ground, and when Hannah let go of her hand, she started to cry in earnest.

“Straighten up recruit,” Hannah ordered. “You’ve got to help Lionel. He’s smaller than you; think of how scared he must be.”

Jane stared up doubtfully, lip quivering. Hannah sucked back her own tears before they fell, setting her face like a barricade. Straight-backed as any toddler could manage, Jane followed her mother’s example. She steeled and looked down at her strangled ward.

“Don’t cry, Lionel. Oorah!”

Hannah hadn’t had time to change before the surrender - she was still dressed for bed. Her thin cotton shirt and shorts clung like gauze, useless and vulnerable. She raised her arms to signal her consent to the weapons check, and swallowed hard. “Do it.”

Regidonis had only two fingers and a thumb. Large, strange digits that felt heavy against her waist, breasts, hips, thighs, crotch - every inch groped piecemeal as he checked for concealed weapons. It was too strange to be embarrassing, all she could think about was how systematic and military it was - no funny business. A small mercy, but one she would take.

He nodded curtly and barked out a clicking, double-voiced word, firmly clapped her on the shoulder, then stepped back to a respectable distance. Was that last pat meant to be comforting?

She couldn’t think straight anymore.

She looked to General Williams, but he was already ignoring her, lost to a high-priority comm dispatch; a summons for a surgeon and a team of engineers.

This was really going to happen, then. Aliens were going to probe her brain, and she didn’t even get the courtesy of being sucked into their UFO first. What luck.

She steadied herself and lifted Jane back to her hip.

When Regidonis seemed satisfied that Hannah and Jane were ready to move, he led the small, strange group away from the city center, marching them past the line of civilians that had finally begun to form on the south end of the square.

Cold, unsympathetic eyes stared out of hollow-cheeked faces as they passed. Dozens of people that Hannah had once recognized as neighbors and friends. Now, there was not a single ally among them. Hannah understood their fear, their righteous hatred, and those stares felt even heavier.

Someone hidden by the rank and file screamed: “TRAITORS!”

A second cry rose out of the crowd, then a third, a fourth - voices like poison darts flying into her back. She kept walking. Curling her arms around Jane, Hannah tried to wall out the screams. Almost there; soon a line of abandoned shops would block them all from view. Just a few more steps and the storm would pass.

Too late. She heard the wet crunch of a human skull breaking to pieces, struck by the heavy butt of a gun.

She stared at the artfully arranged weapons that Captain Regidonis carried on his back, and put one foot in front of the other.

Colonists screaming, a stampede at their backs. Shots cracked across the square, breaking the long, fatal silence of the morning.

Hannah had a well-trained ear. Call it surrender; it sounded like war.

-

Chapter End Notes

Words and phrases courtesy of MizDirected's turian dictionary:
- Fahrtrix: Supporter, mentor, advisor, adopted parent.
- Patrem/Pari: Father/Dad
“What happened here?”

Lieutenant Alenko’s voice carried across the unnatural hush of the dig site, eerily amplified by the walls of raw hewn rock and the newly excavated geometry of the Prothean ruin. Even at a whisper, his tone cut through the quiet, startlling Shepard out of her own thoughts. The Lieutenant had a point. This was like no battleground she’d ever seen.

Shepard struggled to believe that things were already this quiet planetside. Where was the fight? Where were the Marines? Given the absolute chaos of the distress call from Eden Prime, she’d expected to rush into a hot zone. Instead, the entire landscape was silent as a tomb. The colossal bogey still hung in the air, “Like the sword of Damocles,” Anderson had radioed, but it hadn’t moved an inch since the ground party’s arrival. Seeing the hulking black shadow of it looming above, waiting, watching… was no comfort at all.

Here at the Prothean dig site, Shepard’s meager three-man strike team was surrounded on all sides by natural grassy hills and the researcher’s abandoned access ramps. Fish in a barrel, in other words.

With her assault rifle at the ready, eyes up for trouble, Shepard took a few cautious steps onto the jet-black dais that stretched in unwelcoming quietude across the center of the site.

Ominous. No signs of the battle they had seen in the S.O.S. Even more unnerving, the ancient Prothean Beacon had similarly blinked out of existence. There was no sign of it here at the dig site, its last - and only - known location. According to Kryik, the Beacon was the size of a weapons locker and weighed hundreds of kilos. Any attempt to move it would require ample time and careful handling. The Beacon’s timely, conspicuous absence made Shepard’s gooseflesh prickle.

Moving slowly, resisting the urge to stare at that alien monster lurking in the clouds, Shepard slid her eyes along the two rectangular spires jutting up one side of the ruin. Tall and smooth, they pointed in perfect parallel towards the cold morning sky, toward the bogey. Unsympathetic, she thought. The fingers of a prophet.

She’d never seen Prothean tech up close, only read about it when necessary, stumbling across a few asari university photo galleries while searching the Extranet for stupid things like: where do Keepers come from? What little she’d seen of Prothean architecture had always seemed to possess a disarming simplicity. All smooth surfaces and monolithic lines. More like sculptures than buildings or pieces of technology, Prothean artifacts were uniformly imposing, with no visible interfaces. As if their true purpose was lurking beneath.
Now, with her boots leaving print marks on a fifty-thousand-year-old ruin, Shepard felt minuscule. Wholly overwhelmed, able to touch and smell the last traces of that ancient, inscrutable space-faring civilization. For reasons she couldn’t name, a compulsion rooted in her chest and spread throughout every nerve, pulling her onward to the center of the dais. Standing there, trying to resist that call to action, she felt the way the ocean must feel when pulled by the moon. In the unearthly quiet, it almost seemed as though the smooth, glassy stones beneath her feet were calling out to her from the wrong side of a mirror, whispering with closely guarded breath in some invisible dark.

“Something’s way off,” Alenko said, somewhere at her nine. “It can’t be a ghost town already. Where are all the bodies?”

The Lieutenant sounded far away, a distance measured in klicks, in light years. His observations drifted past Shepard’s ears, embedded in a scrambled message from another star system. She stared at the flat black stones beneath her feet. Felt as if the ground were rushing up to meet her, opening up into her, intersecting with her limbs.

The inaudible whispers grew more excited. She turned her head to listen, just a little more…

A rough hand closed around her upper arm and rattled her mercilessly.

“Commander?” Kryik said.

Thoroughly shaken, Shepard looked up. The Spectre was glaring at her, but the look was not callous. He wore his concern as an angry mask. When she met his eyes and nodded stiffly, he released her arm, satisfied.

“Sorry,” she said, shaking her head like a wet dog. “This place, it’s… I don’t know. Wrong.”

“The situation is bad,” he said, settling his shotgun back into his grip. “Keep your head on straight.”

“It’s not that,” she whispered. “We’re missing something. A big something. No bodies. No Beacon. That - thing – hanging out in the sky like some kind of watchful god. And now this hunk of stone is trying to get inside my head.” She cracked her neck, flexed the fingers on her assault rifle. “I don’t trust this at all.”

“Commander.” Alenko, still at her nine, nodded his head thoughtfully. She noticed he was keeping his distance from the ruin, had chosen to eye it suspiciously from the ground rather than risk approaching. “There should be dozens of fallen infantry down here. Quadruple that for civilians.”

On their rapid descent planetside, Alenko had reminded Shepard and Kryik of at least two units assigned to various security details around the central colony hub. Thirty heavily armed soldiers in the 212 Weapons Platoon should have been dug in at the Prothean dig site, ready for anything with mortar squads, plus assault and machine gun divisions. The slightly smaller 232 Rifle Platoon was meant to be patrolling the spaceport in preparation for the Normandy’s extraction of the Beacon. To the last man, they were unaccounted for. Nearly fifty Alliance Marines MIA without so much as a trail of blood.

“According to my map, there’s a research camp just up this ridge, at the top of the ramps,” Alenko said. “Maybe there are some survivors hiding out up there.” He sounded as though he would have given anything to believe his own words.

Shepard nodded at the Lieutenant and then forced herself to step down from the dais, trying to shake off the feeling that they were being watched.
“Keep your guard up,” warned Alenko. “This is a great place for an ambush.”

The Spectre took point as the three of them carefully wound their way up the crude ramps that spiraled from the dig site. At the top of the rise, they were welcomed by a sight so gruesome that Shepard nearly gagged.

In the center of the research camp towered a mountain of empty armor. Eight feet high, stained with blood and attended by a cloud of local insects, it was a funeral mound of mismatched helmets, chest guards, and braces.

Staggered all around the hoard were rows of lofty metal spikes. They fanned out at random intervals, a razor-sharp jaw of dragon’s teeth. Answering the terrible question posed by the pile of armor, each of those glinting spires had a naked body impaled on its point.

The Marines. The colonists. Hundreds of human lives reduced to an endless field of bodies, they hung in midair like terrible, motionless acrobats. Vivisected through the torso, their limbs dangling towards the ground, their blistered skin splitting over an internal web of alien tech, the victims scarcely looked human anymore.

Kryik didn’t make a sound, but as Shepard stepped closer to his six, she saw that his mandibles were fluttering in alarm.

Then, to her nine, Alenko slipped and cried out: “Oh God, she’s still alive!”

A patch of grass dug out under Shepard’s boot as she spun to look, sending her skidding a few inches down the rise.

Two synthetic humanoid abominations were stripping the armor from a Marine, a young, dark-haired woman who was bleeding badly from the mouth and nose. At first, Shepard thought the soldier was in a dead faint, but then she twitched, cried out with a voice already hoarse with screaming, and swung wildly at one of her captors. When her fist met the inorganic chassis of one of the creatures, the bones of her hand shattered with a wet crunch that was audible from twenty feet away.

The Marine was half-conscious, stripped to little more than a torn under-suit, and only seconds from being impaled on a spike. She didn’t seem to notice. Still fighting like hell.

Oorah.

Kryik raised his weapon, deadly intent written on his face. Clear as the chalk white of his familia notas: he meant to destroy these abominations at any cost.

“What are you doing?!” Shepard grabbed Kryik’s wrist, throwing his shot harmlessly into the dirt. “Alenko! Fry them - NOW!”

Blink-fast, a disruptor arc flew from the Lieutenant’s omni-tool. The smaller of the two creatures was instantly overloaded, blasted back in a shower of sparks and lightning. The other lost its shields with a glitchy howl, dropping the wounded Marine.

As the Marine fell to the ground with a limp thud, she gave in to her injuries for half a breath, spitting a ragged line of blood into the grass. A second later she was moving again. She lunged for the fallen synthetic and grabbed its weapon, rolling onto her back to discharge a barrage of energy slugs that dropped the second attacker almost instantly.

Clear to move, Shepard ran to the woman’s side and fell to one knee, administering a sizable dose
“Thanks for your help,” the Marine said through a gritted jaw. “I didn’t think I was going to make it.”

Shepard was startled that the other soldier could talk at all - her mouth was so full of blood it frothed between her teeth. Luckily, most of her injuries seemed to be superficial bleeders, non-critical blows to the face and head. As the medi-gel began to knit her skin back together, she spoke with a bit more force. “Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams of the Two-Twelve. You the one in charge here, ma’am?”

Shepard nodded, once. “Commander Shepard, SSV Normandy.”

Hearing Shepard’s name, Williams stiffened and went white as a ghost.

Taken aback, Shepard studied the Marine more carefully. Looking for the usual bullshit, she found something far more confusing. Williams’ dark hair, her compact stature, distinctive aquiline nose. The resemblance was uncanny. The Marine was a dead ringer for Lance Howard Williams: humanity’s first interstellar pariah, the General who had surrendered Shanxi.

Shepard didn’t remember General Williams personally. She’d been far too young. But his role in the improbable course of her life had always meant she paid extra attention to the photos of him that were shown in history class. There was one in particular that got a lot of rotation in Alliance circles: a grainy, posed image of Williams-as-traitor, stiffly shaking arms with Shepard’s pari, both of their faces empty of real expression. It had always made her skin crawl.

The odds were astronomically out of proportion, but it wasn’t the strangest thing that had happened today. Blinking away the shock, Shepard blazed on. Nothing had changed. “Are you badly wounded, Williams? How’s your hand?”

“A few scrapes and bruises. Nothing serious. The others weren’t so lucky.”

Williams’ right fist was turning purple, a lopsided mass of flesh that had already swollen to considerable size. That she had managed to fire the synthetic’s rifle without passing out from pain was a matter of impressive fortitude, and she’d already earned Shepard’s respect several times over. Even so, she wouldn’t be holding another gun for a while, not unless she got back to Doctor Chakwas on the Normandy.

“Where’s the rest of your squad?” Shepard asked, simultaneously pinging Chakwas to prep med-bay.

“We... we were swarmed,” Williams said, still struggling to catch her breath. “They came from everywhere... I deployed the S.O.S.” She swallowed. “I don’t think... any of the others... I’m the only one left.”

“This isn’t your fault Williams. You’ve shown your grit today, Marine. Do you know where the Beacon was moved?”

“What? It’s not at the dig?” Shepard shook her head. “Shit. Wasn’t us. Those things... must have taken it.” Williams gestured to the fallen synthetics with her swollen hand. “What in God’s name?”

“Geth,” said Kryik at Shepard’s three, his sub-vocals thick with ice. He was staring at the rows of impaled human victims, the gears in his brain turning with visible force.

Williams laughed humorlessly at the turian Spectre, her eyes hardening. “Geth?” she said...
doubtfully, spitting more blood into the grass. “That’s not what they looked like in Xeno-Anth 101. Nobody ever mentioned the spikes.”

Alenko approached to give Williams a hand up, lifting her into a supporting carry, securing her uninjured arm behind his neck. As he steadied her, he wondered aloud: “The geth haven’t been seen outside the Veil in nearly two-hundred years. Why are they here now? They’ve never been interested in human settlements before; why would they do any of this?”

Shepard had been wondering the same thing, but there would be time to answer those questions later.

“Allenko, the route back to the LZ should still be clear; get Williams back to Chakwas, ASAP.” She addressed Williams directly, giving her a formal salute. “Marine, you’ve done a hell of a job surviving out here. Once Kryik and I have secured the beacon, I’ll see to it that your fallen brothers and sisters get the burials they deserve. As soon as our CMO has you patched up, deliver a full report to Captain Anderson. We need to know everything you saw here today. Godspeed.”

The black-brown cores of William’s eyes warmed, but only just. She acknowledged Shepard’s salute with one of her own, broken hand be damned.

“Aye-aye ma’am.”

--- HANNAH ---

Hannah never lost consciousness during the procedure, much to her great regret. The surgeon, Doctor Alvarez, required constant cognitive feedback to ensure he didn’t “cross any important wires by accident.” Hannah had been forced to lay quietly, holding perfectly still while a team of turian engineers and one frazzled human surgeon tinkered with her brain by way of her aural canals.

Finally, after several agonizing hours, Doctor Alvarez zipped Hannah’s skull back together and switched on the implant. The activation seemed accidental. No courteous preamble. The curtained-off surgical suite, which was in actuality one small corner of an already overcrowded gymnasium, instantly became a resonance chamber.

In that instant, there were too many voices in Hannah’s head. Too many sounds. All of them ricocheting to and fro, grossly amplified by the drugs. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to breathe the nausea away.

No use. Voices shaped like double-edged knives sawed jaggedly through her concentration. They garbled and flanged, speaking in tongues, a mess of technobabble.

“Full comprehension — time — unknown — unpredictable — the General—”

The voices were all wrong and inside out, a choir in each mouth. Words and comprehension swung past one another, two pendulums refusing to keep the same time. The pain in her head doubled up, the room swung around, and she heaved.

Somebody handed her a bucket and forcefully shifted her position, preventing her from choking on her own sick. Trying to ignore the smell at the bottom of that bucket, she focused on the nonstop alien utterances, keeping her eyes closed. Whatever sedative Doctor Alvarez administered, it had numbed the pain and kept her docile, but it had left her feeling groggy and dangerously stupid.
“Safe — hold the female — disorientation unavoidable — unknown — aural structure close to asari specs — human — unknown —”

Hannah tried to compress the disjointed string of phrases into a single line of tangible speech, but the effort split her brain clear down the middle. She clenched her fists around the bucket and tried again.

"Language parser needs more — calibrates to individual wave patterns — without more software tweaks — stabilize — tech fries monkey brains — keep the child — restrained.”

She understood that.

Her eyes flew open, but the light of the gymnasium immediately blinded her. Undeterred, she lurched forward, galvanized with rage.

An enormous hand clapped down across her chest and shoved her back to the bed. Someone pushed her head to one side, forcing her nose-to-nose with one of the turians.

She recognized him as one of their field techs; his strange, raptor-like skull decorated by a smattering of orange markings. As he bent down to stare, his pupils narrowed at her with reptilian focus. He muttered something, his voice like a blast of sand to her face.

Too close, too much noise. Hannah closed her eyes, overwhelmed, and felt her pulse stuttering.

Inches from her temple, she felt the turian engineer’s holo-tool hovering. She knew those holograms could turn deadly in an instant. Accordingly, she froze, her breath darting out in quick, painful bursts. The hologram sizzled with unfamiliar energy; every trigger hair on her skin stood upright in responding alarm.

Unseen, a newcomer clamped another huge, two-fingered hand around the back of Hannah's head. Armored fingers creaked against her skull, holding her motionless for the scan.

Furiously, she opened her eyes. As soon as she did, Doctor Alvarez appeared, a syringe flashing in his hand.

No. No more sedatives, no more restraints; she was compromised enough already. With every ounce of feral survival grit she had left, she bucked and kicked and spit, but the turians held her down.

"Fuck you!” The sound of her own voice swam out in front of her, splitting into a million pieces and reforming into a bubble of mud. In the confusion, she tasted blood - she’d bit an already swollen tongue.

Alvarez looked at the turians and waved his arms helplessly. A disembodied voice called out from some unseen corner of the surgical suite. “No more drugs. Keep her conscious.”

Hannah reeled. Was the speaker turian or human? It was becoming more difficult to tell the difference. Whoever it was, Alvarez stared, startled but comprehending. After a pause, the voice added, "She needs time to process the new stimuli. You’ve got to calm her down. Otherwise her brain really is going to melt.”

“Shepard, it’s all right," Alvarez said, handing off his syringe, removing his gloves with a sigh. "You’re in shock. Your language center is totally overstimulated. Some of your lower functions have shut down temporarily. You can’t stand up.”
She hadn’t realized she’d tried.

“Your inner ear is going to be on shore leave for a while,” he said. “Take it easy.”

“Jane,” she grunted, unconvinced. She shook her head, knocking herself dizzy. “Where’s my baby?”

“She’s perfectly safe,” Alvarez said, his weak attempt to placate. “Just like we agreed. I sent her off with a group from the volunteer nursing corps. They’re passing out food now. She’s right over there.”

She remembered the discussion, was aware of the proximity, but still felt uneasy without a direct sightline to Jane.

The turian with the holo-tool finally backed off a few inches, but not before giving Hannah a long, evaluating look as if to warn, *don’t bite me, you crazy bitch*. He grabbed a datapad from a steel table on the side of Hannah's cot, which he handed directly to Alvarez.

“Right,” Alvarez said, loosening a rock in his throat. “Okay. I’ve got to ask you some questions to make sure they didn’t knock anything upside-down in there.”

The holo-tool hovered too close for comfort again - running a diagnostic, no doubt. This time Hannah allowed it, her fists clenching and unclenching as she tried not to shrink too far into herself.

Alvarez coughed and asked, “Name?”

Hannah squared the surgeon with as good a look of impatience as she could muster with half of her brain jiggling around like med-bay gelatin.

“Humor me, ma’am. This won’t take long. Your full name please.”

Before answering, she spat a wad of blood-pink bile at the doctor’s feet. The turian engineer blinked in apparent shock, the stiff plates above his eyes rising by several offended-looking centimeters.

“Hannah Shepard,” she coughed.

Alvarez frowned at his data-pad. “Age and date of birth?”

“Twenty-nine,” she said, wincing. “Born January fifth... twenty-one twenty-eight.”

“What’s your role here on Shanxi?”

She coughed again, rolling her eyes. “Managing the depot... supplies and logistics — ‘til these bastards crushed my suppliers... nuked my convoy...” She paused to swallow what felt like a throatful of glass. “Now it’s a little bit of everything. Whatever keeps the lights on.”

“What’s the last thing you remember before the procedure?”

Sedated or not, her memory remained perfectly clear - and so did her anger. “Let's see. Williams handed us to the turians in a handbasket... then he asked me to hold hands with the enemy and play nice. Told me I’d need an alien mind-control device implanted in my brain.” She stopped herself, forcing a bitter calm. “And like some damn fool, I agreed.”

Someone laughed. Just once, like a dog barking. Behind the cloth barrier surrounding the surgical suite, a massive shadow rose up, approaching in one long step. A turian pulled back the access
panel, stepped slowly into the room. With his eerie silver eyes and that blood-colored pattern on his face, he was comparatively easy to recognize: the captain-turned-jailor, Albacus Regidonis.

He spoke quietly, returning Hannah’s bald-face stare. “Is it working?”

The turian field tech replied, “Yes Captain, but only just. She’s disoriented.”

“Disoriented?” Regidonis said, stepping closer. "She looks like she wants to kill all of you with her bare hands.”

She could still hear the strange dual-toned syllables of his language sliding around in her ears like rocks, but her brain smoothly replaced it with a deep, even baritone. He sounded like an old-world aristocrat. Some aesthete from an educational vid, the kind of voice that narrated dull, meandering surveys of antiquities. Hannah wondered how much of the effect was owed to the translation implant and how much of it was flat-out drug-induced auditory hallucination.

“Do you understand me, Shepard?”

She jumped. The alien knew her name. The goddamn spiky-headed alien aristocrat knew her fucking name. Her mouth was suddenly too dry for speech, so she just nodded once, nearly forgetting how.

“When was the last time you ate?” he asked, as if it was the most ordinary question in the world.

She stared at Regidonis with her mouth hanging open, unable to form a reply. This was a paradigm smasher. Not only could the aliens talk, one of them sounded like a pretentious snob. The sudden, incongruous knowledge filled her with childish curiosity too rampant to suppress.

Regidonis shooed away the orange-marked engineer stationed at Hannah's bedside, then promptly filled his seat. His armored hand slid over the crudely stamped S.S.S. that was printed along the backrest, then he sank into the folding chair with a wince of cheap metal. Hannah blinked, once again struggling to consolidate reality.

From the exhausted slump in his shoulders to the curious tilt of his head, all of his body language was bafflingly familiar. Seemingly unaware that he was one of the first extraterrestrial beings to ever plant his ass on Shanxi Secondary School property, the turian rested his elbows on his thighs and leaned forward to peer thoughtfully into Hannah's eyes.

In weighty silence, he looked her up and down. Finally, he clicked the insect-like mandibles on his cheeks and called out over his shoulder to a subordinate. “Find one of the fruits. Makes no difference which one. If they can spare anything with protein, bring that as well, along with a packet of water.”

The subordinate glared at Hannah with a universally recognizable look of contempt, but did as he was told and left the surgical area in search of human rations. Regidonis turned back to face his new human liaison. He waited until Hannah met his eyes before he spoke again, this time all business.

“We found the remains of one of your convoys near our landing zone. Fresh food and water. My troops are distributing a share of the supplies now, but we were only able to salvage enough for a few days. More, if we ration conservatively.” His head lowered, eyes falling into shadow. "It looks as though all of your drivers were killed in the bombardment. The personnel will require replacement.”

Yamata, Jones, and Barklay had been leading that convoy, one of the last attempts they’d made
before comms had gone dark.

She’d known Mess Sergeant Yamata since Charon, when they’d enlisted together. Every Thursday when Yamata picked up the regiment’s supplies, he’d bring over some dumb, half-destroyed toy for Jane. Lionel the little green dinosaur had been one of those haphazard presents.

Hannah stiffened, felt the rage boiling in her heart. So, it had come to this. The very last of her friends was dead. At least she had one grim condolence. The fucker to blame was inches away.

She lunged at Regidonis before she could think, going straight for his eyes.

It was no fight at all. He didn’t even cry out in surprise. All hope of retaliation was cut off in one swift move as he enclosed her throat in the broad, two-fingered grip of his well-armored hand.

He squeezed.

She clawed at the vice around her throat, but he wouldn’t budge for all the scratching in the world. One of her fingernails bent back, then snapped off against the ceramic plates of his glove.

A small sidearm eased beneath her jaw, the muzzle painfully cold against her skin. His monstrous face sank closer, silver eyes burning bright, a line of white teeth glinting inside his mouth. He had many, many teeth, sharp and thin as metal skewers. She stilled.

"Move everybody out of here," he said, voice dark. "This human needs a talking to."

Panic bloomed through her. A wildfire, turning her blood to steam.

She kicked with all her might, but the sedatives were still wreaking havoc on her nervous system. All she managed were a few pathetic flops. Her lungs began to burn, her vision spiking white and black. To her shame, she could feel the hot sting of tears pricking at her eyes.

Not like this. Not after everything else. She couldn’t die like this. She refused to die like this. Dying was impossible.

She couldn’t leave Jane alone.

— JANE —

Shepard watched Williams and Alenko limp back toward the Normandy, then turned hesitantly to face the abattoir of the research camp, where countless impaled bodies blotted out the sky. Death on the air, fresh and sour. It was far too quiet.

“The spaceport is just up ahead," Kryik said, snapping her back to attention. “We should check it out.” His head ticked toward the dragon’s teeth. The only way there was through the bodies.

Shepard put one foot in front of the other, swallowing the dryness in her throat. She raised her assault rifle back to high ready and followed the Spectre as he began to delicately pick his way between the spikes. The dawn was still pale and the canopy of bodies cast a deep, murky shadow, making it difficult to see the terrain. Shepard fixed her eyes on the bright red suit lights of Kryik’s armor, refusing to acknowledge that she was walking through a forest of the damned.

For once, she was grateful for his rigidity. There was a strict dutifulness in the Spectre’s posture that dictated his every twitch. An obvious respect for the dead showed in the way he tiptoed
beneath the victims, averting his eyes from their nakedness. All the while, his shotgun stayed raised and ready to fire. She recognized that control, that demand for civility and strength no matter the circumstance. At his most unflinching, Kryik almost reminded her of home.

Shepard steeled. If she could survive her final night on Minko’ir, barely sixteen and green with fear, she could summon her goddamn pride and make it across this hill. She talked to Kryik’s back, sounding much calmer than she felt. “Have you ever seen anything like this before?”

“Not on this scale,” he said in a thin voice, not looking back. “I’ve had my eye on a few scattered reports of strange geth activity outside the Veil, and I’ve been suspicious that he might—” He stopped to feel his way across a wide tangle of wires, thick as tree roots. “I had no idea he’d taken it this far. I didn’t even think it was possible. The destruction, it’s catastrophic.”

“Are you saying you know who’s responsible for this attack? You knew this might happen and didn’t warn us?”

“Shepard, believe me, if I’d had intelligence that could have prevented this wholesale slaughter, I’d have shared it with you in a heartbeat. I’m as blindsided as you are.”

Through the mess of spikes, she caught her first glimpse of the spaceport. A cluster of docks sat abandoned at the bottom of a steep hill alongside a freight line. The train had been built over a small ravine on the far side of the storage area, and a half-loaded car was quietly parked on the tracks. From this vantage point, she could make out the whole stretch of crates and supplies. No beacon. Her eyes scoured the set of parallel train lines; one of the cars was missing. Whoever had stolen the payload had probably escaped that way, and Kryik knew who it might have been.

He came to a hard stop and held up his fist. Shepard had a spare instant to wonder why, then she heard a thin, metallic squeal at her back. Turning to look, she saw the rows of spikes beginning to descend, bringing wave after wave of impaled bodies back to earth.

“What the—”

One of the corpses moved. Then another.

They twitched and sparked, peeling themselves from the spikes on their own power. Dozens of mutilated, half-human machines shimmied onto the ground, the cracks in their skin flaring with streams of lighting-blue cybernetic energy. One by one, they fixed their lifeless, glowing eye sockets on Shepard and Kryik.

In vicious unison, they screamed. The sound dragged across every inch of her skin, flaying her alive. Her gun twitched in her hands, she knew exactly how many rounds she was carrying, and she didn’t have enough, not by half.

“RUN!” Kyrik shouted, already sprinting down the hill.

She did, as fast as her legs could carry her. She barely kept herself upright as she flew down the incline, the dewy morning grass slipping dangerously beneath her feet. Kryik was taller by a foot, with long predator’s legs designed for running at high speeds. In moments he was well ahead, nearing the train platform. He turned to slow up for her.

“Shepard!”

She heard the monsters at her back, knew they were getting too close.

“The train!” She used the last of her breath to scream, “GO!!”
He hesitated for an instant, then bolted for the transport. There was a small patrol of geth troops guarding the train, but he knocked them back with a few well-placed shotgun blasts and sprinted to the controls on the far end of the long line of cars.

Shepard, meanwhile, was too slow.

She felt five human fingers clawing at the armor on her left elbow, dragging open the seal and slicing her flesh. She couldn’t help it, she turned to look. It was still human, it had to be a colonist, a Marine. She couldn’t just…

The face was emaciated, hair burned away, flesh so thin it was almost transparent. Scraps of skin had been stretched over the electrified bones, little more than a black-blue weave of flesh and cybernetics. Impossible to tell if the victim had been old or young, male or female. All of the softness that molded a person out of clay had been ripped out and replaced. It was nothing more than a husk.

It opened its mouth to scream. A storm of sparks tangled across its skin, sucking energy right out of the air, right out of Shepard’s lungs. She ripped her arm back to somersault down the rest of the hill. When she came back to her feet, she had a concussion grenade firmly in hand.

Just as she lobbed the grenade into the advancing horde, the husk discharged its energy attack. There was no time to dodge for cover. The combined explosion threw out a rippling shock wave that flung her clear over the dockyard railing. With an unforgiving wham, she landed on the hard metal tiles of the loading zone below, tasting blood.

The explosion had put a dent in the husks, but not a big one, and they continued to pour down the hill, the distance rapidly closing.

Dizzily, she rose to her feet, willing the horizon to stop teetering to and fro. Kryik was standing on the nearest car, having already doubled back all the way from the far end of the train to rescue her.

Her right knee seized with a pain so sharp that she stumbled, almost tripping over her own feet. Definitely strained, possibly broken. She headed for Kryik, but as she limped by inches, the engine shuddered to life and pulled the train away from the platform with a slow lurch. The pain gave her double vision, but she bit through it and ran. Head spinning, heart skipping beats, ears full of the sound of countless human husks screaming at her heels, she ran.

Kryik held out his hand, frantically waving her aboard.

“Shepard, jump! I’ve got you!”

She leapt, flinging both arms wide open, barely managing to grab hold of one of Kryik’s hands before the husks closed in. Her unbalanced weight fell all at once into the empty ravine, slamming Kryik to the floor of the train. She saw his eyes widen as he struggled to keep his grip. One of her shoulders threatened to dislocate under the strain, but he held fast. With a shout of exertion, he heaved her up one-handed until she was close enough to grab the lip of the train car. Groping over her armor until he found solid purchase on her back plate, he finally managed to drag her dangling body to safety.

Behind them, the husks flooded mindlessly over the stony edge of the ravine, falling like leaves into the darkness below.
With little patience, Doctor Alvarez and his small team were ushered by rifle-butt from the surgical suite. Hannah watched them retreat, her eyes wide, hoping one of them would snap, fight back, cry out - anything except abandoning her to a turian captor in her weakened state. She couldn’t even stand.

The moment Hannah and Regidonis were unobserved, his hand loosened on her throat. Despite the small reprieve, he didn’t release her. His gun stayed fixed beneath her jaw, the muzzle growing warm against her skin.

“You need to respect a few things about your situation, newcomer,” he said, so close she could smell him, all metal and ozone. “I am not the alien in this room.” His gun knocked against her chin. “That would be you.”

She held very still and waited for whatever was coming, saving her strength.

“Furthermore, you need to respect a few things about me,” he said, voice lowering. “I am no butcher.”

She saw little splinters of gold netted in the flashing silver of his eyes. Aside from the power behind his stare, his expression remained incomprehensible; a face that reminded her of nothing so much as tectonic plates shifting beneath the earth.

“In a moment,” he said, “I am going to release you. Before considering another outburst, please remember that I happen to be holding the finest hand cannon Armax has ever produced... and you are unable to walk.”

He stared at her, waiting for something. Not knowing what else to do, she simply held his gaze.

The gun dropped away at long last, giving Hannah room to breathe. Regidonis sat back and holstered his weapon before rubbing his neck, looking as though he’d been strangled himself.

From the covered door came a curt, “Permission to enter?” which Regidonis swiftly answered: “Make it quick.”

The subordinate who had been sent for rations bowed through the curtain. He deposited an apple, a few thin strips of jerky, and a sachet of clean water. After a telling pause, the officer gave his captain a stiff salute then left as unceremoniously as he’d entered.

Regidonis considered the rations for a moment, then turned his knife-sharp eyes on Hannah. “Your body is at risk of atrophy. Doctor Alvarez informed us that you must have been giving most of your rations to your child, saving almost nothing for yourself.” His voice sounded haggard, exhausted. “Rest assured: I made certain she was not passed over.”

With a flick of his wrist, he summoned a holographic imager and began a playback of Jane. The vid showed her ferociously setting upon some kind of porridge, washing it down with a fruit-flavored electrolyte solution.

Hannah reached out to touch her daughter’s face, but her fingers ghosted through the holo and knocked against the hard plating of the turian’s armor instead. She set her fingers into his arm in a killing grip.

Calm and slow, he stopped the playback and said, “She is quite safe. I will bring her back to you as soon as you and I come to an understanding.”
He held out the packet of water and patiently waited for Hannah to take it.

Offering food and water moments after offering her the business end of his gun. Holding Jane hostage under the pretense of feeding her. These were either the overtures of a master manipulator, or the signs of an honorable soldier making the most of a bad situation. She wasn’t sure which possibility was more disturbing.

With creaking fingers, she released the holographic imager and snatched the water from his hand. Whether she was meant to be his double-agent or his sex slave - or some twisted combination of both - she would find a way to live through it. But there was no denying that she had barely eaten in a week, and starvation was an enemy she couldn’t destroy with brute force alone. She slumped back into the cot and drank.

The water was clean, the first real hydration she’d had in days. She hadn’t realized how thirsty she’d been until the first drops passed her lips. She drained the packet in seconds. Regidonis, always watching, immediately produced more water from his own supply, pulling a field ration from the interior of his suit. She pierced the seal and drank, half expecting it to taste like brimstone, but it was water, plain and simple. Vaguely metallic from the ration pack, warmed by the heat of his body.

He offered the fruit next. She bit into it so eagerly that her teeth caught her own lip, drawing blood. She didn’t care; as the sweet juice sloppily dribbled across her chin, she moaned out of pure relief.

“Good,” he said, nodding. Once again, his body language seemed too familiar to be real. “Get your strength back up. You’ll need it.”

While he watched, she devoured the rest of the apple, then set into the jerky. He waited until she was completely finished, then leaned forward.

“I appreciate that you have taken an enormous personal risk today,” he said. “As of this morning, you are conspiring with the enemy, and with your own child’s life on the line. Your distrust is well-earned - I can respect that.” In a much quieter tone, he sad, “Hannah Shepard, I need your immediate assistance or a great many people are going to die.”

Perhaps he’d failed to notice, or just didn’t care, but a great many people had already died on Shanxi.

Hannah narrowed her eyes, waiting for his terms.

He said, “I would have preferred to avoid risking a civilian with this job. And you, sole caretaker of a young child… But General Williams assures me you have ample military training and an admirable record; that you can handle a crisis.” A pause, as he dragged a hand across his face. “So be it. In the interest of peacekeeping, I have decided to give you the same debrief I gave your General.”

He was silent for some time after that, apparently searching for his least treasonous path forward. Eventually, with great care, he said, "When your people materialized from dark space, it looked like the second coming of the Rachni. We had to act."

Hannah’s narrowed her eyes even further. By every account she’d heard, the turians had fired first. Beyond that, a month-long orbital siege seemed like an excessive first response for a treaty violation - a treaty that humanity had never been party to until Williams surrendered.

Regidonis absorbed her heated glare, raising his hands. A familiar gesture of hopeless, exhausted
surrender. “Not how I…” He tried again. “None of this…” He looked into her face. Whatever he found there, it stopped him short.

Quickly, he looked away. “Of all the fleets in all the universe, your people had to catch the Blackwatch—” Hannah’s translator implant lagged around an unfamiliar idiom, then offered the closest human equivalent: “—with our pants down.”

She couldn’t help it, she snorted back a laugh.

He froze, entire body stiffening “You truly have no idea how far this reaches, do you?” His face was harder to read than ever. “This is no laughing matter. Without exaggeration, I can tell you that the Hierarchy Blackwatch is one of the deadliest fleets in all of Citadel space.”

Whatever that meant, she believed him. She’d seen his soldiers: precision in every breath.

“No matter how harmless your intentions, the timing of Relay 314’s activation could not have been more catastrophic. The Tenefalx - my command - just so happened to be escorting several experimental frigates on a shakedown cruise... and hosting a general. We were running top-secret operations in a dark system, then the relay lit up: a dozen alien ships pouring forth with guns primed and ready. You must understand...”

The captain stilled, staring past Hannah’s shoulder. “We had to act...” He repeated the words in a dying voice before lapsing into a deep silence.

She watched his jaw shift. Between his mandibles and his cheeks, an angular gap showed off his slender teeth. His navy-blue tongue lay immobilized at the bottom of his mouth, speechless. He lowered his eyes to his hands, staring as he flexed his long, thick fingers back and forth, back and forth.

Just now, Regidonis looked more vulnerable than Hannah felt. Most of the things he’d said made little sense or none at all, but she devoured the intel as hungrily as the rations. Impossible to know when she might get the chance to wield this information in self-defense.

Slowly, he gathered himself back together. When he spoke again, it was with redoubled steeliness. “Personally, I suspect humanity to be little more than a tribe of uplifted monkeys who had no idea what they were toying with. I see no reason for us all to grind each other to dust just yet. Not before we get some real answers. Are you with me, Shepard?”

Her name coming out of his alien mouth again, now in the context of collusion, made her shudder. She didn’t answer.

He sighed. “Let me make myself more clear.”

He reached for his sidearm.

She refused to flinch, but she couldn’t budge her eyes from the muzzle, either.

He turned the pistol over in his hand, studying it. “My father awarded this to me when I earned my first command. It has been passed through generations of my family - wielded by legionnaires... a general or two... even a primarch. I never discharge this weapon unless I am absolutely certain that my bullet flies with honor.”

Looking her dead in the eyes, he said, “According to the endorsements of several of your military superiors, you are capable of making the same distinction.”
A sharp breath, then he stretched out his arm and offered Hannah the grip of his own gun.

One instant of stupefied silence - but only one - before Hannah snatched the weapon from his hand and slammed the muzzle squarely between his eyes. Those bright, uncanny eyes of his, which gazed at her so unflinchingly. Always staring, as if he could see straight through her.

If this Blackwatch bigwig didn’t give Jane back immediately, Hannah Shepard would be the last thing he’d ever see, transparent or not.

Unbent, even with a gun in his face, he said, “You have a choice to make. If you think killing me would be the best way to end this war, your bullet is honorable, and my weapon is yours.”

Out of the corner of one eye, she caught the fearful clenching of his fingers against his thighs. “But if you kill me, I cannot protect your little Jane from what would come after.”

He’d learned her daughter’s name.

She hesitated. A long enough pause for both of them to know he’d already won, but she kept the gun raised a moment longer, if only to shield her pride.

“What do I need to do?”

Chapter End Notes

**Original words and phrases:**
- *Tenefalx*: Wielder of the Night-Scythe.

**Words and phrases courtesy of MizDirected's turian dictionary:**
- *Familia notas*: The colony markings that turians wear on their faces.
- *Pari*: Dad
Auspex

Chapter Summary

First of all, I apologize. This is not a "new" chapter, strictly speaking, but an editing split that I felt was necessary after I made some revisions. Chapters 1-5 have been heavily reworked, and while there are no major plot changes, you may spot a fair amount of streamlined technical improvements. I'm still working on finalizing rewrites to Chapters 6 and beyond, and then... more story!

"But Fred," I hear you grumbling. "This hiatus has been going on forever. What's the ETA on a REAL update?"

Well, I can't promise anything in the immediate future, but please know that I AM working on it. 2017 was an emotional year for my spouse and I. To inadequately summarize: there was a tragic, unexpected death in our family - and shortly after that we bought our first house (when a sudden rat infestation drove us out of our rental... my dudes, it has been rough.)

I feel like I fell into another universe for a while, but I'm gradually getting my groove back. I promise to return as soon as I can with more updates! Thank you all for your patience and support. You're the greatest readers I could have ever hoped for, and I love you all to bits.

Chapter Notes

Revised edition, updated January 2018

— JANE —

Shepard and Kryik: a bruised and heaving tangle of limbs lying prone on the floor of the train car. In the jumble, Kryik’s hand closed around Shepard’s ankle and wouldn't let go. A killing grip, as if to make sure she was still made of flesh and blood and hadn't morphed into some kind of spectral apparition.

Roughly, he gave her a shake. “Still in one piece, Shepard?”

“Yeah.” She thumped her leg against the deck, triggering a wild flare of agony that ricocheted through her knee. “Alive and kicking.”

All talk, Shepard winced as she rolled free of Kryik and pressed the medi-gel release on her omni-tool. She waited for relief. One second, two... Ahh, there it was. Refreshing. Something about the cool, clean rush of endorphins and self-knitting skin always reminded her of spearmint gum.

“Feeling better already.” She grinned, injured leg going pleasantly numb. “You?”
He waved away her concern. Though breathless and startled, he appeared otherwise uninjured. Shepard settled onto her back, catching her breath and allowing the medi-gel to do its work. Beneath her, the train slowly continued on its path toward the spaceport hangar. Occasionally it would hit a flaw in the tracks, rattling Shepard’s brain against her skull.


As relief set in, Shepard's eyes were drawn back to the giant whatever-it-was still floating motionless in the sky. The thing was inescapable. It seemed closer now, a hideous back-lit mass gilded with a rim of dazzling orange, obscuring half the sunrise.

Staring at that ominous shape, nursing her wounds, Shepard whispered, “We're in over our heads, huh?” Felt good to say it out loud, like admitting the foolishness of a superstition. “What the hell are we even dealing with?”

She didn’t expect a real answer from Kryik, but he followed her gaze, sitting up to get a better look. For a few moments he fell absolutely still. Bracing himself as if for a hard blow, he said, “Saren Arterius.”

A wave of unwelcome heat spasmed beneath Shepard’s ribs, burning out the temporary calm afforded by the medi-gel. She stiffened. Holding her limbs taught and biting her tongue for good measure, she resisted the urge to rub the blooming ache beneath her chest guard. She had a natural distrust for astronomical odds. First Williams, now this. Saren Arterius: younger brother of Desolas Arterius, the turian general who had single-handedly doomed Shanxi by opting to shoot first and ask questions later. Saren had survived where his brother had not, walking straight out of the ruins and into the Spectres without any outward remorse over his brother's conduct in the war.

Speaking through a clenched jaw, she said, “Explain.”

Naming one of Desolas Arterius’ surviving relatives as the power behind countless human casualties was tantamount to a declaration of war. Kryik seemed completely unaffected by the implications of his own intel; he sat silent and still, his eyes fixed on the sky. He stared at that looming fist of thick metal tentacles, their deadly curvature now motionless and deeply shadowed, as if the behemoth owed him an explanation.

For once, he was making no attempt to hide his emotions; else he had failed to realize how plainly the fear was written on his face. His mandibles beat a rapid tempo against his cheeks, terrified.

“Kryik,” Shepard said, trying to jog him out of it, but the silence stretched thin. The train was slowing, their time almost up. "Hey. You. Bigshot.”

Nothing. She sighed and tottered to her feet, muscles putting up a stiff fight all the while.

“I’m getting real fed up with all this super-secret Spectre bullshit,” she said, wiping her palms together in a casual charade, washing herself clean before clenching her fingers into his armor along the thin seal where pauldron met cowl. An unforgiving force prised against one tiny weakness; the only leverage she’d ever had.

“When this is over,” she said, “you owe me several long, boring explanations about what you knew and why you withheld mission-critical intel with millions of lives on the line.”

A tense second before he nodded once, admitting his lies of omission. A calculating bastard, but at least he was upfront about it.

Shepard loosened her grip on his shoulder. “Right now? It’s you and me, Kryik. The last line of
defense. If your old comrade really is behind this attack, there’s no choice but to bring him down or die trying. Are you with me?”

She released him. Stiffly, she offered her full arm for a Hierarchy shake, a sign of good faith and camaraderie. After a moment’s careful pause, Kryik took a single deep breath and then firmly accepted. He neatly aligned their forearms and wrapped his hand around her elbow - resolute, sure.

As the train hissed to a stop at the spaceport landing zone, Shepard pulled Kryik to his feet, then dropped his arm without any additional fanfare.

“More geth,” she said.

She gestured toward a towering retaining wall on the far side of the ravine. A pair of the bipedal synthetics were hauling a large, heavy-looking piece of machinery between them, slowly making their way along the narrow, high-walled access corridor that hid the open-air landing zone beyond.

“What are they carrying?” she asked. “Is that the Beacon?”

Keeping their heads low, Kryik and Shepard crept off the train and ducked below the ample cover of the transport loading area to get a closer look. Kryik squinted at the package, then pulled down his shotgun and secured his ammunition in a hurry.

“Not the Beacon. That’s a heavy demolition charge.”

Shepard swore to herself, then whispered to Kryik, “Can you disarm that explosive singlehanded?”

Grimly, he nodded.

“See there?” She inclined her head to the top of the access stairs that lead away from the train platform. A small heap of discarded cargo crates choked the pathway to a narrow bridge. “Decent perch. If you can pull the red wire, I can keep the geth off your back.”

Kryik nodded once more, lifting his shotgun. He sprinted across the bridge toward the bomb, alone. Shepard sank down behind the crates at the top of the stairway, readying her rifle.

Tall and bulky as he was, Kryik’s loping gait was lithe and silent, and the geth troops failed to notice his careful approach. In order to protect the bomb, Saren’s robot lackeys were moving with wide-open slowness, which made them easy pickings for Shepard.

She scoped the first target instantly. A simple, clean kill… but she held her fire. She knew the moment her shot cracked through the quiet, Kryik would lose the element of surprise. Waiting like this, impatiently measuring every inhale, she could almost feel the weight of her pari’s hand on the center of her back. Testing her stability, measuring the count of her breathing. Giving her a patronizing shove if necessary - whenever she lost track of her heat sinks or glanced away sloppily to reload.

Concentrate, fool child, he would have said.

So she did.

As Kryik approached the hostiles, ducking behind this cover or that, an additional trio of geth emerged from the opposite end of the retaining wall. They were far off Kryik’s three, out of his line of sight.

She radioed a brief, “Hold. Three more inbound carrying a second demo charge.”
He stilled near the end of the bridge, maintaining his cover and his silence.

Five targets closing. Heavy ordnance in the field. She would have to do far better than one shot, one kill.

*Think. Breathe.* A familiar voice, a familiar lecture. That familiar hand on her back, centering her. *Compensate for the unexpected.*

Collateral electrical damage was her best bet; if she struck the correct subsystem with the correct ammunition, a chained overload could send two or more synthetics reeling without the risk of igniting the bomb they carried. It was a dirty trick she'd picked up on her N5 tour with the salarian STG, and handy in a pinch.

Kryik was a vanguard with firepower to spare, more than capable of handling the original targets: the still-unsuspecting pair of geth on his nine. With that in mind, Shepard corrected far to Kryik's three, re-focusing on the trio of newcomers. She zeroed the largest trooper in her crosshairs; a massive red armature with bold, meaty spires jutting from its back. According to her HUD, those spires were laden with communications equipment and spare coolant. As her STG mentor would have quipped: useful.

Meanwhile, her father's voice droned on, deep in her ear. *No sudden moves. Smooth and systematic. You mustn’t break your sight-line.*

With mechanical, instinctual muscle memory, Shepard loaded the disruptor ammo protocol into her rifle's firing system, and radioed Kryik. "Engage the hostiles on your nine,” she said. “I've got the rest."

She waited, breathing into the crosshairs. A moment of silence, then two shotgun blasts rang out in Shepard's left ear: success. In her sights, the super-sized, crimson red geth turned to face the noise. Anticipating the geth’s movement, Shepard squeezed.

*BAM.* The hostile staggered to one knee. In rippling sheets, sparks poured out of the machinery built onto its back, followed by thick waves of blue gas, a spume of depressurizing coolant. She let the fuel accumulate for one… two… three… then fired a disrupter round straight into the tinder.

Big Red went down in a lightning storm. Sparks and discharge flared across its limbs, then arced onto its two companions. The first went down immediately, totally overloaded. The final geth staggered on its feet, but held.

*Your body affects the trajectory; your intention is in your breath.*

She took a measured breath to replace the heatsink, the gun as familiar as her own arm. The only geth left standing barely had a moment to turn its flashlight head before Shepard’s final shot pierced clean through the still-focusing aperture.

Afterward, only silence and a gray-blue waft of electrical smoke remained.

The hand at Shepard’s back patted her once in quiet approval. *Now do it again, exactly the same, until your arms are too weak to hold the gun.*

Far to her left, Kryik sank to his knees and set to work on the first demolition charge. By the time she had replaced her gun with a mid-range assault rifle and made it to Kryik’s side, he was already finished with the second explosive on the far end of the access corridor. As she approached, sweeping the area, he growled and whispered in her direction.
“These bombs would have flattened this entire complex.” He ripped a fistful of wiring from the guts of the explosive, purely out of spite. “Typical Saren: trying to cover his tracks at any cost.”

“Kryik. Eyes up.” Shepard inclined her chin towards the landing zone. The platform was barely visible around the corner of the retaining wall, but she could see enough to know they had just wandered into the real pretty shit.

At the bottom of a series of wide, sturdy loading ramps, one of the spaceport’s spacious docking platforms stretched open in a wide, steel-plated maw. Two figures stood at the open drop-off of the docking area, paying homage to a magnificent black spire. Tall as a monument and twice as imposing, it vomited poisonous arcs of green energy around its attendants. Any attempt to look made Shepard’s vision streak with painful lightning.

The Beacon.

“Saren,” Kryik whispered. He was close at Shepard’s side, barely breathing.

Shepard squinted at the two figures on the platform. One possessed the full-figured, stately curves of an aging asari. The other had the tall, pointed features of a turian male, but the familiarity ended there. At a glance, Saren Arterius retained the silhouette of a torin, but the longer Shepard stared, the more adulterated he appeared. The glowing tech that was knotted through his limbs gave him a chilling resemblance to the human husks that had swarmed her earlier. Every inch of his body looked hardened, gray, innervated with uncanny blue light. One of his hands, cybernetic and zombified, firmly gripped the nape of his companion’s neck, pushing her toward the Beacon.

“Who’s he with?” Shepard hissed, trying to stay as quiet as possible.


Shepard watched, felt every trigger hair curling in alarm. Centered perfectly in the empty air above the platform, the many-limbed colossus filled half the sky and watched without eyes, a baleful god waiting to be fed.

Kryik moved.

She tried to grab his arm, but he was already out of reach. Shock got the better of her for a moment. Mouth agape, she watched him mount the railing and fly over the loading ramp. With an enraged thunderclap of armor and rattling guns, he hit the deck, deliberately drawing Saren’s attention.

Saren slowly raised his eyes to meet the intruder.

“Nihlus,” he said, entirely unsurprised.

“Saren. Let her go.”

He did. Shepard saw the damage had already been done.

Lady Benezia crumpled to the ground, boneless as the dead. She breathed in short, shallow bursts, her eyes a solid, bottomless black. Some kind of psychic trance. Shepard felt a bolt of terror. Saren had forced Benezia to psychically commune with the Beacon. It was beyond perverse.

The wisest, longest-lived asari Matriarchs possessed the ability to share minds with almost any living species, but Shepard had never heard of them melding with artifacts. Dead was dead, and the Protheans had been extinct for fifty thousand years.
But Shepard now remembered the whispering ruin in the dig site, the voices that had pulled at her mind from across some invisible veil… A chill cut through to her bone marrow.

The sleeping god awoke.

Above them, the behemoth’s giant fist of segmented limbs began to shudder open. Beneath its rage, the landing platform seemed to ripple, to melt. Shepard’s skeleton rattled beneath her tendons, her eyes vibrating in her skull. The entire planet shook.

With a terrible roar, the monster began to descend, and Shepard felt as though her head would come apart at the seams. The noise droned on and on, thick and incomprehensible. A shredding, clawing cacophony, impossible to escape. Clutching her forehead, she fell to one knee, but kept watching.

Kryik was likewise incapacitated, but Saren seemed unaffected, even disinterested. As Shepard stared, unable to move, some kind of transport beam took hold of Benezia, dragging the Matriarch over the edge of the loading drop-off. Benezia gave no outward sign of resistance as she was sucked toward the hideous machine. Her limbs remained slackened and doll-like, her eyes black and fathomless. She disappeared into the machine, gathered like krill into the beak of the kraken.

Ripples of lightening skittered across the hull of the behemoth as a portal closed behind Lady Benezia, and Shepard gasped. The puzzle pieces slammed together. That unspeakable thing. It was a ship: an alien dreadnought, technology the likes of which Shepard had never even heard of. If that dreadnought was charging a weapon to level at the ground, they were already dead.

Galvanized by pure survival instinct, Shepard staggered down the loading ramp to retrieve Kryik. They had to get out of here.

As she approached, Saren followed her with his eyes, but she didn’t care. No time to worry about revenge. She could hate him later. First, she had to live.

She grabbed for Kryik’s arm, tried to rattle some sense back into him. Screaming at the top of her lungs, her voice was almost inaudible, swallowed by the scream of the alien ship seething over their heads. “We need to fall back!”

Kryik remained rooted to the spot. “Shepard, I can’t!”

“Shepard?”

Instantaneously, the dreadnought stopped screaming. The silence was painfully abrupt. Quiet rang across the platform in a feedback loop of resonant emptiness. Shepard’s head swam, and she swallowed the hot, bitter taste of her own sick.

“Little Jane Shepard… of course.”

She couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. The mutilated, backlit centers of Saren Arterius’ eyes bored deep, inescapably deep, exposing Shepard’s soul. He knew her.

No time to run. A burning blue warp field whipped forward with such a sudden blast of power that Kryik lost his footing and was knocked to the ground. Shepard, meanwhile, was caught up in it, helplessly drawn forward as Saren rumbled. A vindicated sound, thoroughly pleased.

“A new era begins today.”

Saren had pulled her close enough to wrap his hand around her neck. She tried to move, tried to
fight, but some unstoppable force was keeping her restrained. All she could do was clench her teeth and pray.

“A cleansing fire to uplift the worthy and purge the weak.”

With his biotically-charged cybernetic limb, Saren tore off Shepard’s combat helmet.

The forced separation of armor sprained her neck, split the skin across her jaw, bruised her face. As if it were little more than a ration tin, he crushed the empty helmet one-handed. All the while, his eyes cut through her - twin shards of broken, icy glass - and she couldn’t move. As his face hulked closer, his hand tightened on her neck, and through the white spikes of pain, she could see all the hideous glowing fissures in his plates. The ghostly scar where his familia notas once had been, now only burned leather and bone.

“How appropriate,” he mocked, looming. The deadly-certain, dual-flanged baritone of his laughter smothered the last breath in her lungs. “My first offering to our wondrous new gods... Of course it must be you.”

She never saw the blade.

She felt it sure enough, sliding with military precision through the weak point between her abdominal guard and side plating. So sharp that the pain was abstract, clinical. She could feel it, hot and orange, an omni-blade advancing by inches, driving surgically for her heart.

Saren dragged his forehead crest against the skin of her face, as if he wanted to crawl inside her and rip her open from within. So far, he was doing a great job.

Spitting up a blood-filled cough that sounded almost like a laugh was the last thing Shepard did on her own power.

After that, she saw everything as if from a generous distance:

Saren's blade tore from her body with a torrential spray of blood, taking at least six inches of intestine and a chunk of armor along with it.

A furious storm of black and red launched from behind her and wrestled Saren to the edge of the landing platform — then went over with him. Nihlus.

An unstable biotic field erupted in every direction at once, a dazzling, white-hot explosion that blasted Shepard backward in a tangled whirl.

The sky became the earth, the earth became the sky, and then everything turned green.

- 

*The green became the sky. The sky became the earth. The forest was everywhere. A transparent, luminous hothouse, ripe and alive.*

*The trees rustled.*

*Darkness stirred behind her, far away, but she would not look. It was much better, she thought, to keep staring into the green. Keep staring far ahead, into the deep green of the trees, where she could see his shimmering outline.*

*She could make it to him, if she just walked. One step at a time. Don’t lose count.*
Faster. She had to move faster. She could almost see his face. Just one more step would be enough this time…

This time.

She wouldn’t lose count, she wouldn’t get caught. She’d stop them, she’d catch them.

The trees rustled, whispering amongst themselves.

One step at a time. His voice in the trees.
Up to us. Go now! His voice in the wind.
Jane! Run! His voice in her blood.

She could do better. He had to know. She’d catch them, she’d stop them. She wouldn’t get caught, she wouldn’t lose count.

He had to know. She reached for him, but he stayed deep in the trees. The bold, bright green of the trees, transparent and luminous, where she could not follow.

Above, the leaves and the sky. An arrival of smoke.

The trees rustled, forgetting her name.

A voice long forgotten, the oldest voice. The first. Afraid, alone. Whispering only of failure, again and again, as the smoke descended. The shhhh, the silence. Again and again, her smoke descended.

We can’t hold them! The voice in the smoke.
Fall back! The voice in the fire.
Shepard! The voice in her blood.

The behemoth threw its shadow. Behind her, she felt its breath smoldering. She would not turn, she would not look. Much better to smell the perfume of the green leaves falling. Falling, burning. Countless leaves crumbling to ash as they returned to the earth. Ashes, ashes.

On and on, the smoke descended. The ground trembled. The trees rustled. The leaves burned, and all fell down.

Her hand swam through the rippling heat, reaching for him, deep in the trees where she could not follow.

Sparks swarmed through the air. The ashes coughed and cried. The behemoth screamed, but she would not listen. Much better to sing with the choir in the ashes. We’ll stop them this time. We’ll catch them this time. We won’t get caught, we won’t lose count.

Listening, he turned from the shelter of the trees. At his side, a face she barely recognized, a face so like her own, so unforgettable, the first face… don’t forget… don’t forget me, Jane. Be brave!

She reached for them, reached forever until the bones of her arm shattered in their feeble sheath, but it was too late. She could not follow.

Their eyes were empty. In their mouths, the behemoth screamed.

the scream became the smoke

the smoke became the sky
the smoke descended

agony

- 

Get it out...

stable — intense dreaming — a lot of blood — too close — Shepard?

Voices fluttered in her ears; familiar, safe. But the pain… there was so much of it. Where was it? How could she make it stop? How could she get it out…?

the wrong call — no — Saren’s fault, not yours

Saren’s fault. Saren’s fault.

Shepard’s body was on fire, her blood thick with smoke, her throat tight and choking. She couldn’t escape. Nothing would make it stop.

GET IT OUT. GET IT OUT OF ME.

Breathe, kid! Stay with me! Breathe!

The voice was familiar and authoritative. A voice she could trust. A command.

With exhaustive effort, Shepard gathered her wits and complied, her panic gradually overcome by slow, analgesic calm. As consciousness burned through the senseless dark, the pain magnified, solidified. It grew more agonizing by the second, ferocious and inescapable. The more she felt the wounds burning beneath her ribs, slicing through her stomach, ripping her to shreds, the more she understood.


Finally, with a full-body jolt, Shepard came to her senses.

She was dangling halfway out of a cot in the Normandy med-bay, tangled in a mess of wires and tubing, clinging to Captain Anderson for dear life. Beyond that, all she knew was an all-encompassing, infinite discomfort, with no obvious beginning or end. Her entire body roiled and screamed, but at least pain was something real.

At least it was real.

“How?” She stumbled into Anderson’s first name, consonants slurring together, not caring that her medical gown was sagging open, that she was half naked, that her C.O. was coddling her like a baby. He was real. She slumped her face into the rough weave of Anderson’s Alliance blues and breathed deep. Greedily, she filled her lungs with cool, sterile med-bay air, the warm, ordinary smell of an old friend’s chest.

He was real. It was over.

Anderson helped Shepard back into the cot, neatly straightening her gown as she settled.

“Welcome back, kid. We weren’t sure where you’d gone.”
“Yeah,” she breathed. “Me neither.”

Shepard dropped her hands from Anderson's neck and let her head go limp against the cot, unable to suppress a yelp. Every breath was a reminder of just how close Saren had come to punching a hole in her heart.

The Captain leaned closer and covered Shepard's shoulder with one hand. Unconsciously, he squeezed, locking a protective thumb into the groove of her collarbone. In a guarded voice, he said, “The doc had you in surgery for hours, and then…” He course corrected. “You’ve been sleeping for a while now. How are you feeling, soldier?”

Truth be told, she felt as if her insides had been torn out, thrown in a blender, then reunited in her chest cavity in an artistic interpretation of organs and bones. She'd been reduced to mess hall slurry; every technical detail a person required to live… reconstituted from unrecognizable proteins. Saren really knew how to stab a girl.

“Like my first day at Vila Militar,” she groaned.

Anderson smirked. “No joking around, Shepard. In your state, you could actually laugh your guts out.”

Oh, it hurt to laugh. It hurt a lot.

“Dammit, sir. That’s — not — fair.” She closed her eyes and swallowed a nauseating chuckle, trying not to puke. “So, what’s the damage?”

Chakwas spoke from Shepard's other side, warm and brisk as ever.

“Honestly, Shepard, you got lucky. Lucky you had me, and that I had a fully stocked and untouched triage unit aboard the Normandy, ready and waiting. Emergency surgery went well, but if you’d arrived a moment later, I’d be signing your death certificate right about now.”

As Chakwas spoke, she readjusted the various electrodes and chemical interfaces that were scattered over Shepard's head and torso.

“The only part of you that Saren's omni-blade failed to eviscerate was your cardiac tissue, and even that was a close call. You've been blessed with a half a salvageable liver, one punctured lung, and a thoroughly scrambled gastrointestinal tract. I must say, you went above and beyond in your efforts to shake down my med-bay. I doubt I’ll ever get all of your blood off the floor.” Chakwas gave Shepard a knowing look. “That’s probably exactly how you prefer it.”

Shepard grinned; there was something charmingly old-world about the idea of christening a ship with her own blood.

“Yes,” Chakwas sighed. "I thought as much. You’ll be having a few sleepovers here, just us girls. After that, you’ll have to walk assisted for a short time, but if you lay off the PT and endure a few uniquely punishing sessions of sub-dermal regeneration, you’ll be ready for an all new medical emergency in a week or two."

Shepard got the picture. More pain, coming right up.

Eager to change the subject, she asked, “Did the others make it back alright?”

“They did,” Anderson said, giving her an approving pat. “Alenko didn’t have a scratch on him. Chief Williams is all patched up; delivered a full report. I invited her to stay aboard the Normandy."
She's one hell of a soldier.”

“She’s one hell of a soldier.” Shepard nodded as deeply as her injuries would allow, recalling Williams' ferocious will, her tenacity. That admirable grit. Anderson had beaten Shepard to the punch; she'd hoped to get the chance to invite Williams aboard personally. And maybe pick her brain about astronomical odds…

She stiffened. “What about Kryik? Last I saw, he —”

“I'll live.”

The voice was curt, cold, and unmistakable.

Kryik, who was not only alive but remarkably free of injury, must have been lurking just out of sight all the while, waiting for his opening. Shepard spotted him leaning against a chemical analyzer, partially obscured by the heavy, navy-colored shadows on the far side of the room. The med-bay lights had been dimmed, probably to facilitate a deeper rest after Shepard's surgery. In the insufficient ambiance, the Spectre looked a world removed, as difficult to read as ever.

Into the chilly silence, apropos of nothing, he said, "The Beacon.”

His sub-vocals were tight, impatient. Masking something else, something wilder. Panic. Or rage.

“What did it do to you?” When no one responded, he crossed his arms and spoke slower, more deliberately. "Shepard. I need to know.”

An uncomfortable weight settled over the room, heavy with things unsaid. A silence only Chakwas had the wherewithal to break, though she avoided acknowledging Kryik’s question directly.

"Commander, you were sedated for surgery, but even in a fully anesthetized state, I saw signs typically associated with dreaming, altered states of consciousness. Once your internals stabilized, you fell into something like a coma. I'd almost call it a trance.”

“How long was I out?”

“Just over seventy-two standard hours,” the doctor answered. "More than enough time to have us all worried. About an hour ago, you started exhibiting the most unusual brain activity yet: abnormal beta waves, rapid eye movement. Then your vitals inexplicably went critical." Chakwas and Anderson exchanged a significant glance. "But you pulled through alright. I’d wager that the Beacon attempted to transmit an ancient data packet directly into your brain, but human biology is utterly incompatible. Even an asari Matriarch with decades of —"

Kryik interrupted, speaking only to Shepard. "You witnessed what that Beacon did to Lady Benezia. An icon: centuries old, mind like a diamond, and still reduced to…” He stopped himself. “You're the first person in over a century to survive an empathic transfer from a Prothean Beacon. The first non-asari ever. A mob of scientists can fight over the hows and whys for the next ten generations, but right now - tell me what you saw.”

Shepard closed her eyes. Tried not to think of the whispers in the trees, the vacuous, eyeless husks of her parents. No answer came.

Doctor Chakwas protested, a thread of righteous indignation discoloring her voice. “The Beacon bombarded Shepard’s amygdala and prefrontal cortex. It's pure luck that the Commander wasn't instantaneously rendered brain dead. How is any human being meant to interpret fifty-thousand-year-old Prothean data-waves - countless zettabytes of untranslatable information? It's miracle
enough that she survived, Kryik. Don’t —"

“I saw —” Shepard had opened her mouth without thinking, wanting to speak for herself. But as soon as she started, adequate words proved difficult to find.

Kryik snapped to attention, hanging on her every word. "Go on, Commander.”

"I don't know what I saw. Some kind of nightmare." She hesitated. The rest sounded far too compromising, as if she'd lost her mind. Tempering the truth as much as possible, she said, "A vision, maybe. And maybe it was just me imagining things, but it felt like there were… people in my head. Other people. A million desperate voices telling me — trying to warn me.”

“A warning,” said Kryik. No hint of skepticism, he was deadly serious. "What about?" Swallowing hard, she answered: “That alien dreadnought. Saren called it a god. And I hate myself for agreeing with him about anything, but ‘god’ just about covers it.”

"Quite." Kryik folded his arms across his chest, deep in his own thoughts.

Absolved of her insanity, Shepard slumped into the cot. Her nerves screamed along every inch, as raw with pain as if Saren had just gutted her anew.

She looked at the ceiling. "It didn't feel great," she groaned. "But if it'll help us figure out what Saren was after, I'd like to try interfacing with the Beacon again when my guts are done swimming around my body.”

“Impossible,” Kryik said. “The Beacon exploded. A system overload, maybe. There was no time to salvage it. I had to carry you back to the Normandy and I barely made it out before Saren's dreadnought destroyed the entire colony.”

Shepard’s heart stopped. She looked to Anderson. "Captain?"

He grimly tightened his hand on Shepard's shoulder. Lowered his head. “Eden Prime is gone. Saren’s ship was equipped with some kind of super weapon. Reduced the entire colony to a smoking ruin in a matter of minutes. We had no choice but to retreat. Fled all the way back to Widow. Whatever Saren wanted, he didn’t follow.”

His hand seemed to weigh her into the bed. She blinked, unable to process the blow.

“But that’s — we disabled Saren's demo charges. Why would he waste time with flimsy ground-side explosives if he had an all-powerful WMD ready to deploy at a moment's notice?”

Kryik answered, his sub-vocals edged with guilt. “I doubt Saren's original plan for Eden Prime involved total annihilation. I believe that was a personal flourish. Because of you.” He stopped abruptly, lowering his head. “Because of me.”

Shepard stared. Whatever thin scrap of generosity she had previously afforded the Spectre evaporated as the implications landed with bruising force.

Breathless, she said, “Damn right because of you. My Marines had no idea what they were walking into down there. You kept your mouth shut, protected that genocidal psychopath, and now —”

“Don't blame Nihlus,” Anderson barked. The Captain quirked his head silently at Chakwas, signaling that the conversation was veering into classified territory. The doctor nodded, synchronized her omni-tool to Shepard's monitor station, then availed herself of a long overdue trip
to the galley.

Once Chakwas was clear, Anderson sighed. Looking humbled and lost, he rubbed the back of his neck with one hand.

"This failure belongs to the Council," he said. "And to me. A hard line, but I agreed: no mention of Arterius unless it became absolutely unavoidable. You've got too much history around that name, too many personal stakes. And until Eden Prime, we had nothing solid to go on. Everyone who matters on the Citadel wanted to believe that Saren's recent business in the Terminus was his own —"

She interrupted. "Don't bullshit me, Anderson. If that's the case, then everyone who matters on the Citadel is a goddamned idiot."

From his shadowy corner, Kryik coughed, veiling a bitter laugh.

"You're no idiot." She spat the words in Kryik's direction, each syllable hot with rage. "You're supposed to be a Spectre. So why didn't you do something? And if you ever wanted me to trust you, why the fuck would you keep me in the dark about Saren's involvement?"

Anderson dropped his hand from his neck and sternly crossed his arms. "He was following orders, Shepard. And for good reason. Don't make it personal."

Kryik held up his hand, stilling the Captain. "It is personal. For me," he said. "Understand, Shepard, I've been on Saren's trail for months. I knew he'd taken an unforgivable turn, but ruthless as he could be, the idea of Saren going completely rogue was difficult for many to believe, and infinitely more difficult to prove."

Slowly counting down from ten, Shepard held her breath and waited for the rest of Kryik's excuses. They weren't long in coming.

"I thought we'd have more time before Saren acted on all this... strangeness. And I never thought..." Kryik inhaled sharply, a sickened grimace on his face, as if catching the rotten scent of his own self-deception. "So I stayed quiet. After all, I had twin trophies just within reach. Recovering a priceless Prothean relic before Saren could get to it —" He raised his head and met Shepard's eyes, face impassive. " —and personally delivering Jane Shepard: a juicy bone for Sparatus and Udina to fight over."

Anderson shook his head. Frustrated, the Captain released a grunt and slumped his shoulders forward, confirming Kryik's story. Shepard crushed her molars together and looked away, doing her best to drill a psychic hull breach through the far corner of the room.

Tonelessly, Kryik said, "Compromising your Spectre evaluation was deemed unacceptable. So my suspicions remained private, until it was too late for them to be of any use. Of course, no one anticipated the stakes could be this high."

"More bullshit," Shepard said, seething at him through gritted teeth. "You withheld critical intel because you and a bunch of tight-laced bigwigs were afraid I might have an embarrassing temper tantrum. Forget compromising me, that put the entire mission at risk. It may have cost us Eden Prime. Saren Arterius just avenged his war hero brother on countless innocent colonists - but by all means, go on defending your hive of maneuvering politicians. You have interesting priorities."

Kryik didn't even summon the decency to look ashamed when he skipped right over Shepard's criticism and said, "I seriously doubt Saren is doing this exclusively for comeuppance."
Painfully, she coughed out a raw, clotted laugh. Kryik was unaffected.

He said, “It's not that black and white.” Kryik kept his voice low, deliberate. “There was a time when I thought I knew Saren better than anyone... All I know is that this new crusade of his stretches well beyond wanting revenge for Relay 314. For months, he’s been running countless missions in the Terminus, obsessively visiting obscure Prothean sites and augmenting himself with strange alien tech. Saren has always been problematic. But this...”

"Problematic my ass," Shepard growled, sitting up in the bed to shoot daggers at Kryik, no matter how violently her organs protested. "Saren knew exactly what he was doing. One of General Williams’ descendants was right there at ground zero; that's no coincidence. You saw her with your own eyes. Tell me those geth weren't saving her for last, like some kind of twisted dessert. And then there's me, with all my supposed political significance, inbound and gunning for Saren's job. Arterius the Lesser just set the stage for the intergalactic shit-show his brother never got: open war between the Alliance and the Hierarchy."

"Shepard. Rein it in."

Anderson took a few pacing breaths, forcing Shepard back down onto the bed. Only when she was sufficiently tamed did he attempt to speak reason.

"You're both too close to the situation," he said. "Shepard, I'm inclined to believe Saren's former protégé when he says he has a better handle on Saren's motives than you do." Shepard huffed and found a new spot on the wall that was worthy of annihilation. "Nihlus, no matter why Arterius did this, you know exactly how bad the fallout could get. Shepard is dead right about one thing. If the Council - the Primarch - doesn't immediately admit Saren has gone rogue and condemn his actions, there's no way the Alliance won't interpret this like First Contact: round two. Eden Prime was a defenseless garden world - a proud symbol of humanity's interstellar progress. And Saren blew it to hell in the blink of an eye."

Kryik considered this carefully, then stepped from the shadows and approached Shepard's cot. He drew close enough to touch her, but chose not to.

"I'm certain. Whoever we saw down there, he’s no more than an empty shell. The Spectre who trained me, the torin who fought in your father's war - long gone. Saren has been turned into something far more dangerous: a distraction. Whether he is doing so deliberately, or is being manipulated by forces we can scarcely comprehend…” He shrank, lowering his head. “I don’t know.”

Anderson added, “It all comes back to that dreadnought. It could be an advanced geth construct, but we don’t understand enough about their technology to be sure. Nihlus suspects it’s something far worse.”

“Like what?”

The Spectre came one step closer, studying Shepard carefully.

A long, gaping silence. Kryik’s folded arms twitched against his chest, then one of his fists sank into the mattress beside her head.

"Before the mission, you said you'd never been to Eden Prime." The unsympathetic intensity of his stare shifted into starker relief. "Tell me, did you happen to know how many colonists called that planet home?"
Staring at Kryik, trying to parse out his illegible expression, Shepard was ashamed to admit she had no idea. Unseen, Anderson's hand returned to her shoulder, cold and heavy.

Kryik answered his own question: "Three and a half million souls." Sub-vocals thick with suppressed emotion, he whispered, "Three and a half million, with one ship. Next to that, Shanxi means nothing. Saren means nothing. We... mean nothing."

The trembling of his arm echoed through Shepard's cot. Green eyes, bright as radiation, told Shepard that Kryik believed every word that he said.

“Impossibly, that Beacon spared your life. How? We may never know. But somehow, the Protheans reached across time itself to give us their final message. Whatever power led to their absolute extinction, Saren just turned it against the whole of humanity.”
Albacus passed the omni-tool hardware from hand to hand, worrying a circle around the projection ring with idle thumbs. He was too tired to be nervous, and too well-trained besides, but he allowed himself to indulge in a momentary feeling of dread as he left the main body of his torini in the square and made his way alone to the industrial quarter.

Hannah Shepard’s supply hub was crammed into a rough, riverside area to the west of the city proper, and it was a desolate mess. The entire block looked as though it had been ramshackle to begin with, and the ambiance had been little improved by the orbital debris that he himself had dropped down from above, smashing half of the structures to rubble. A lopsided, impoverished collection of useful but ugly buildings: metal refineries, lumber mills, and several smaller food processing facilities, all of them gaping and silent now.

General Arterius would never approve of Albacus handing any meager scrap of technology to the humans, even this first-tier Elkoss Combine plaything with no melee capability. The General rarely approved of much, as far as diplomatic approaches was concerned, but Albacus had yet to find anything in this situation that was worth compromising several centuries of inherited ideals. Spending a year in his youth as political aide to an asari Matriarch had taught him a thing or two about the importance of negotiation and compromise. The General could take his ambitious, self-serving warmongering and hang with it.

Their hands had already been bloodied; a soiling so deep it would never be cleansed. It made no difference if the Citadel Council appeared in person and ordered the Tenefalx to exterminate civilians and children. The only reason Albacus would knowingly allow his ship to continue to risking innocent lives was if he himself were dead.

An omni-tool was the easiest way to help a solitary human manage the enormous logistical task of supplying the colony, and there were other benefits that had nothing to do with the possibility of mutinous assault. For one, the rudimentary communications app would allow him to contact her in case of emergency, and emergencies were inevitable. It was hard to say which side was more likely to crack first, but it was certain to happen sooner rather than later. He refused to be responsible for catching Shepard’s child in the crossfire. Overloads, sabotage, even an underpowered shield might help the two of them survive a few extra minutes if the storm broke without warning. He owed her that much after dragging her into this.

He had no concerns about the human female’s ability to handle the tech; she was surprisingly adaptable. So far, most of the humans seemed to be. The human general - Williams - had adjusted to several galaxy-broad political concepts in the span of minutes, and his willingness to cooperate with the surrender had filled Albacus with shaky respect. It was never easy to relent to a superior enemy force with minimal bloodshed - Albacus understood that all too well from his own forced
cooperation with Arterius.

As he approached the depot entrance, he nodded to Obren Ilmek, taking note of the tired ashen patina of the lieutenant’s plates. He would require a relief soon; the torin looked liable to die on his feet if he was forced to stand much longer. Albacus had personally posted his own sub-lieutenant to Shepard’s guard detail - he trusted Ilmek not to mindlessly open fire over a translator glitch. He was a just and reasonable torin with two decades of service on his record, nearly half of those aboard the Tenefalx. Albacus would have trusted him to guard his own blessed matrem, had she still been living.

For now, General Arterius was allowing Albacus his attempt at cooperation. Nonetheless, Albacus had made every attempt to keep Shepard and her child surrounded by his own trusted hands, in case Arterius’ feelings suddenly changed. Albacus knew the Tenefalx crew like the back of his own hand, and was likewise familiar with the sister crews of the Miriton and the Bexitani, but the rest of the shakedown fleet was a mishmash of junior officers fresh out of the recruitment hall, with General Arterius’ own hot-headed brother among them. None of them were ready to be considered real falxi of the Blackwatch, and Albacus would have loved nothing more than to send them all home to their compulsory service colleges. The juniors were far too inexperienced, far too headstrong and eager for blood, to be trusted alone with human prisoners.

Especially not Shepard, he thought. She was unpredictable in her own right.

“All quiet here, Regidonis.” Ilmek reported, shuffling his armor around a stiff neck. “Tulubri is inside. She said the human started working as soon as the sun came up.”

“Has the mother given you any trouble?”

“No, not as long as the child is in her sight.”

“I suppose at this stage, we can count that as progress.”

Albacus shoved open the stiff, un-powered door and stepped into the cavernous darkness beyond.

As his eyes adjusted, he could see Sergeant Tulubri standing at attention, thankfully without a weapon drawn. Ris Tulubri was his best hand-to-hand practitioner; she could disarm a charging krogan just by looking at him. If Shepard started trouble, he knew this was the tarin who could end it swift and clean, without an untimely death on either side.

For a moment, Albacus thought he might be imagining things in the dark, but after a few seconds of squinting, he realized that the shadowy blur near Tulubri’s right side was in fact the human child, and she was holding the sergeant’s hand like it was made of precious salarian spunweb. Not merely holding Tulubri’s hand, she seemed to be studying it, pulling the fingers right down to her tiny face, and as Albacus approached, he saw why. The tarin had removed her glove to show off the long, smooth lines of her talons. Surprisingly intimate for the sergeant - he had never known her to be sentimental before. Then again, he reflected, he had never seen her around a child, much less an alien one.

“Getting friendly, I see.”

Tulubri gave him a polite nod, then looked down at the little one, her mandibles flickering in an embarrassed grin.

“She’s very curious, and kind of cute, for a monkey. She reminds me of my niece, back on the Citadel.”
“Still,” he teased, allowing a welcome bit of warmth into his sub-vocals for once. “Never thought I would see you bare-handed and petting a baby.”

“Is it still a baby if it’s a monkey?” she asked, rubbing one talon curiously along the soft and fleshy side of the little human’s face.

“She’s not a monkey,” said a voice. Albacus dimly recognized Shepard’s drawl, though she was calling down from high above him, somewhere near the ceiling. Like some kind of spirit. “She’s a great ape.”

He peered deeper into the shadows and spotted Shepard dangling from a large steel shelf as if she were climbing a tree, apparently doing her utmost to remain true to her ancestors’ distinguished primate origins. When she prised open a sealed bin and then poked her head inside, she retched. Reeling away from the stench, she barely kept her grip on the scaffold.

“No, it’s all bad. Once we lost the air conditioning it was a fool’s hope anyway. Damn.”

So far, Shepard had been economical with her words in front of him - this felt like her longest sentence so far.

“What do you have left?” He asked, watching Shepard scrambling back down to solid ground.

“Almost nothing,” she said with finality.

He palmed the omni-tool and begged the spirits for a damned reprieve.

Shepard jumped the last few meters to the floor, and when she stood at her full height, Albacus was once again surprised by her stature. She seemed taller by half than the rest of the humans in the colony, with arms and legs almost as long as a full-grown tarin’s. Nor did she seem intimidated by much, with the exception of any threats to her child’s well being.

Whenever she spoke to him, she looked him square in the eyes; something that her own general had been too dwarfed to attempt.

After measuring Albacus’ intentions with another one of her perceptive once-overs, she wiped her hands on an immaculate white cloth that was wound around her torso and sighed.

“The computer has been down since day three of the bombardment,” she said, looking as if she were trying to internally calculate several large figures all at once. “This morning, I’ve been trying to take an inventory of this storehouse, but it’s slow going… damn near impossible.”

“I have something that may help with that,” he said. He held out the small hand attachment of the Elkoss Cipher Mini. “I smuggled you an omni-tool.”

“Is that one of those…” She floated her right hand around her opposite forearm, mimicking the familiar haptic interface.

“It is. I pre-loaded it with all the data we could mine from your storage media; one of my engineers was up all night cobbling this together. A few things were lost or corrupted, but it should be usable for the most part.” He tossed it to her, indicated how to fasten it to her wrist and power it on. “I apologize, but this model does not transform into anything lethal.”

“Figures.” She said, as the omni-tool flared to life on her arm.

As soon as the omni-tool was illuminated, Shepard’s child let go of Tulubri and rushed to her
mother’s side with a reverent *oooooooh*. Shining, bug-like eyes stared into the glowing orange hologram with unabashed wonder.

“Yes, Jane. Definitely ‘oooooh.’”

The child reached out to touch it. Shepard looked to Albacus, her expression rock-hard.

“Is it safe?”

“Completely.”

She prodded it a few more times with a bare fingertip, just to be sure, and then lowered her arm within reach of the little one.

“Ooooooooh” the child said again, squeezing the orange hologram between her many chubby fingers. “Orange!”

“Jane, I need to talk to Captain Regidonis now. It’s important.” She withdrew her arm, but was well prepared to redirect the child’s frustrated whine. “Hey, where’s Lionel? You should show him to Sergeant Tulubri.”

“Okay! Tulu-bee, come find Lionel. It’s important!”

With the child and the deadly hand-to-hand tactician sufficiently distracted, Shepard approached and held out her left arm.

“Show me,” she said.

He slowly walked her through the menus that would pull up the relevant documentation; shipping receipts, inventory records, maps of her suppliers. She caught on quickly.

“There are some viable crops in the southern quadrant, soybeans maybe.” In an unconscious, droning voice, she explained the contents of her ledgers. Endless financial figures and budget estimates whizzed by, which Albacus’ translator could process, but he himself could not. “The corn might be ready in a few weeks, if it’s still standing. I have no idea what sort of yield we could expect, but someone should be assigned to comb the farms, in case there’s anything we can salvage.”

“I can have a junior detail supervise a small group of cooperative human workers - how many do you need?”

“Can’t your men drive a tractor?” She paused to look into his face, and her soft, foreign expression was similar to one he’d witnessed on more than one asari: sarcasm. Was she joking with him? In the middle of a crisis? He blinked.

“Nevermind,” she amended, voice flattening out. “A dozen farmhands should do, if you allow them to use a transport.”

Slowly, clumsily, she pulled up a map, then pointed to several areas of interest.

“I have some storehouses in the north. Dried goods: rice, flour, beans. Some of the apples and root vegetables are probably still edible. Cans and boxes too, we can use all of it. I’ll need a full shipment as soon as possible. Send a convoy. And this time, don’t blow it up.”

“Anything else?”
She stared at the omni-tool and tried swiping through a few screens, but quickly got lost in a submenu, unable to find the return command.

“Here, like this.” He reached over her shoulder and tapped her back to the correct area. Despite his proximity, his armor, his visible weaponry, Shepard didn’t flinch, or even blink, when he got too close. Her fortitude continued to impress.

She studied the omni-tool again, frowning. “Looks like… a mess. In the best case, we’ve got enough supplies in remote storage to last a few weeks. We lost too much in the bombardment. Half the farmland is as good as salted now, and we don’t have time to turn it over. If your people are planning to hold this colony for any length of time, additional supplies will have to come from off-world.”

“The General will never allow your ships through his blockade. Aid will come through us or not at all.”

“Do you have spare rations?”

She might have been kidding, but he took the question seriously.

“Unfortunately no. We have different protein structures - our food would be useless to you, possibly deadly - never mind that we barely have enough for ourselves. I might have some levo relief stocks available, but it would be asari, salarian… completely foreign. Chemically sound, but you might have a difficult time convincing your people to take it.”

“If you can get it to me, I can cram it down their throats.”

“Maybe I could —” he cut himself off. It would be a huge risk, trying to slide a message under the General’s watch. Benezia would help, Albacus had no doubt about that, but the General would be a problem. Once an asari Matriarch saw what was going on down here, Arterius’ grandiose theatre of war unearned would be as good as curtained.

“What?” Shepard asked, turning to face him more directly.

He buried the hope for now. See if his restless torini would settle into a work detail. See if some semblance of cohesion could be maintained for more than an hour. Then he could worry about sending distress signals to Benezia. The Matriarch had taught him that, after all: always walk the longest roads one step at a time.

“Preparations to secure your supplies from the north and south will start within the hour.” he said, willfully refocusing on problems that were immediately solvable. “If you like, I could assign a supervised work detail to help you clear away this mess, maybe restore some power. I understand that since you agreed to assist me, there have been some tensions between you and the other colonists —”

“Nothing fixes tension like sharing a work load. Yeah. Send them over. I’ll give a few sad sacks something to do. Keep ’em busy, and show them I’m not feeding you all of humanity’s secrets.”

Firmly, suddenly, she grabbed hold of him, enclosing his gloved palm between her many strong fingers.

“Thank you,” she said. “For taking this on.”

Her hand squeezed his. Once, strong and certain. Then she disappeared into the shadows, calling for the little one named Jane.
Shepard leaned into the walking stick Chakwas had forced on her and tried keep her head from swimming. Ambassador Udina was throwing his second hissy fit in as many minutes, and Shepard was already disoriented for any number of reasons, most of them related - directly or indirectly - to the psychotic turian who had stabbed her on Eden Prime. The constant burning ache in her abdomen had sapped her patience, but Udina's constant bickering threatened to break her completely.

She loosened the top button of her formal blues, desperate for any kind of relief from the sour atmosphere in the Ambassador's office. The meeting, now in its fourth hour, had finally escalated far enough to demand the Council's direct attention.

Full-size holographic projections of the three Council members flickered in the center of Udina’s immaculate, palatial office. Sparatus, the ghostly turian third of the holographic trio, glanced at Shepard and raised an ethereal, disdainful brow. Straightening reflexively, she realized the Councilor had been watching her fidget, had noticed her disheveled uniform. A humiliated flop of acid lined her gut, and she dropped the impatient hand from her neck. Goddammit.

Just as she was settling into a good grovel, Udina's sharp, high voice ruined the effect.

“This is an outrage!” the Ambassador cried, practically stomping his foot.

Shepard clamped her eyes shut as a new wave of nauseating overstimulation tore her last nerve to shreds. Yes, it was an outrage. Why did humanity's foremost representative have to be so loud? So whiny? Politicians were supposed to be all about tact, weren't they? She wondered if Udina had misplaced his somewhere.

“The Council would step in if the geth attacked a turian colony!”

Sparatus rolled his eyes and countered automatically, dry as a bone. “The turians don’t found colonies on the borders of the Terminus Systems, Ambassador. You knew the risks when humanity went into the Traverse.”

Kryik had been looming moodily at Shepard’s six, but the Spectre couldn’t keep his silence any longer. He knocked Udina out of the way before the Ambassador could embarrass himself any further.

“Forget humanity’s poor choice of colony worlds,” Kryik said. “What are you going to do about Saren? You can’t just ignore him, not anymore. With so many dead, you won’t be able to stay quiet regarding Eden Prime. He was there. Somehow, word will spread. You have to condemn him, revoke his Spectre status, declare him traitor to the cause. Anything, to keep the Alliance and the Hierarchy from bombing one another to ash. And you have to do it now.”

Sparatus flared his mandibles and looked ready to cut the Spectre in half, but Councilor Tevos insinuated her voice between the two turians with all of her customary asari diplomacy.

“Nihlus, please restrain yourself. Aside from the testimony of the people in this room, there is no evidence to suggest that Saren was involved. In any way. As far as the public is aware, Eden Prime was destroyed in a random geth incursion. Tragic, of course, but one of the many perils of maintaining a resource-rich settlement in such close proximity to the Terminus.”
Valern, the salarian Councilor, interrupted with a bland, lecturing tone. “Citadel Security is investigating your charges against Saren. We will discuss the official findings at the hearing tomorrow, not bef-”

Abruptly, Kryik brought his fist down on Udina’s console, ending the call.

Shepard wondered if becoming a Spectre meant she too would get the opportunity to be so dismissive to the most powerful dignitaries in the galaxy. The idea of cutting off the Council mid-sentence; it made her tingly all over.

A voice muttered from the balcony, “And that’s why I hate politicians…”

Williams. Briefly, Shepard met her eye. Williams quirked a thick eyebrow, then looked back out on the Presidium, her shoulders tight. Beside the Chief, Lieutenant Alenko shook his head, too polite to agree out loud. Nonetheless, Williams had read the room with great accuracy. It hadn’t gone well.

That was no surprise. Anyone with half a brain would be skeptical of the story that the Normandy had brought back from Eden Prime. Galactic stability would be left dangling by a thread if those three Council assholes overreacted, and so far, everything Shepard’s team had reported smacked of madness. Corpses on spikes… the dead come to life… hordes of mutated geth… a rogue Spectre torturing a beloved Matriarch… a world-swallowing alien dreadnought...

It sounded insane, even to Shepard, and she’d been the one almost stabbed to death in the middle of it. At best, her crew’s combined credibility was dubious. At worst, it was complete crap. She knew better than to think this story was believable to anyone who hadn't been there.

The bitterest pill of all: every surviving eyewitnesses was useless. Alenko and Williams had only seen half of the action. Kryik had a public, pre-existing grudge-match against Saren. Shepard had just come out the wrong side of a brain-blitzing from the Beacon, in addition to having more personal reasons to besmirch the Arterius family name than anyone. And, of course, every useful scrap of data from Eden Prime had been obliterated along with millions of colonists, every corroborating soul dead to the last.

Even Shepard had to admit that the Council - conniving spiders though they were - had been wedged between a rock and a hard place. Their self-serving obfuscations had led to Eden Prime’s destruction, of that she had no doubt. But as much as Shepard despised the slimy, spineless tactics that had gotten them all into this mess in the first place, she had to allow that the politicians had a grueling clean up ahead. She didn't envy them the task, even if they'd brought it on themselves.

Anderson gave Shepard a brief, exhausted look, then went to collect his star witness marines.

Kryik approached, nodding his head toward the door of the Ambassador's office.

"Walk with me, Shepard."

Udina, meanwhile, had installed himself at his desk to sulk. He failed to acknowledge either Shepard or Kyrik as they passed him on the way out.

As soon as the office door was closed and Udina was safely out of earshot, Shepard muttered, “What an asshole.”

Kryik kept walking, already several paces ahead. Shepard, enfeebled by her medically-mandated walking stick, was moving much slower than she cared to admit.
“Thank you, Shepard,” Kryik said, speaking over his shoulder without slowing up. "Do you have any other witticisms that might help us single-handedly incriminate a rogue Spectre and take down his army of the alien undead?"

Shepard tugged at the uncomfortable lump of her stomach bandage. She rankled beneath her uniform, an itch so deep that she longed to scratch the regenerating skin of her internal organs. It was the most perverse craving she had ever felt, disturbing enough to stop her dead in her tracks. She smoothed the front of her blues, swallowing the itch. Kryik got to the sliding glass partition on the far end of the corridor before he realized he was alone. With an irritated grunt, he doubled back to fetch her.

As he rounded, Shepard continued to pick at her uniform, just to be a brat.

She said, “Here's an idea. Let’s tackle one insurmountable task at a time. We aren’t going to disavow our mutual friend without solid evidence. So - where do start dusting for fingerprints?”

Kryik smacked Shepard's hand away from her uniform, too classy to say smart ass out loud. All the same, she smirked.

“I’ve got some Shadow Broker contacts,” he said. "Old eyes and ears. I’ll start there. Until the Council officially makes you a Spectre, you should stick to the lawful channels, keep your hands clean. Unlikely that C-Sec has much, they’ve always failed me in the past, but who knows, maybe you’ll get lucky.”

Shepard knew she was being handed the grout-cleaning detail, and had no choice but to smile and take the toothbrush.

"Hired transport," he said. "This way."

Keeping pace with her now, Kryik led Shepard to a cab and helped her fall gracelessly into a seat. He grunted instructions to the driver, a smallish, bronze-colored salarian who seemed thoroughly bored with his job.

“Kithoi. C-Sec Academy."

The salarian nodded, and Kryik engaged the privacy screen.

Now unobserved, he leaned toward Shepard and said, “I’ll get you through the door, introduce you to Executor Pallin. He'll be useless, as far as hard evidence is concerned, refuses to believe that a Spectre could have anything but the Council’s best interests at heart. You’ll have to coordinate with whoever he’s got working the official investigation. Hopefully someone halfway competent this time, but my hopes aren't high. I’ll make sure Internal Affairs gives you full Spectre clearance, and I trust you to push that advantage as far as you can. Upend every data system in their office if you have to. Pallin can whine about it all he likes.”

“Spectre clearance? Isn't that premature? I haven't officially agreed to this candidacy —”

Kryik cut her off.

“Like it or not, you're going to be a Spectre, and soon. The public response to Eden Prime is already turning ugly. Saren's name hasn't been dropped, but it will. The Council doesn't want to admit they failed, but they need a flashy diversion right about now. That's you.”

No matter how incensed she was by Kryik's maneuvering, Shepard couldn't pretend to be surprised. As a Spectre, Shepard could be a double-edged sword disguised as an olive branch. A desperate
grab to placate the human interest groups who were still demanding reparations for Shanxi, all while bending the knee to Palaven. Exactly as she’d suspected: a show animal.

“Before all this shit hit the fan, why did you really nominate me?” She stared out the window and clutched the walking stick for dear life. "All this grand gesturing on your part... but really? You just wanted to strike a petty blow at Saren, didn't you?"

He didn’t answer immediately. In her estimation, that could only mean yes.

“I don’t appreciate being made into your pawn,” she added.

“Get used to it,” he said, cold and firm as a packed snowdrift.

The rest of the cab ride droned on in awkward silence. Shepard passed her walking stick between her hands and stared at the sprawling cityscape as the cab descended into one of the darkened ward arms, wishing that her stomach would stop hurting as if she’d had part of her guts ripped out. It was a petulant, childish kind of thing to want, but Shepard didn’t care - she hated the inconvenience, the sheer bodily embarrassment of being injured this badly. It made everything more difficult than it should have been, even avoiding Kryik's eyes.

Nearly fifteen minutes later, near the center of Kithoi Ward, the cab finally slowed in front of the entrance to C-Sec Academy. Groaning, Shepard peeled herself out of her seat and lumbered onto the taxi landing. “Alright. Show me this Executor Pallin so I can start trying to work the stick out of his ass for you.”

“By all means.” Kryik gestured broadly toward the entrance, as if presenting her with a game show boobie prize. “We’re just in time to interrupt him mid-reprimand.”

Kryik’s judgmental stare pointed her into the main lobby of the C-Sec offices, where the Executor was energetically arguing with a turian officer half his age.

Shepard had to admit that Kryik’s personal vendetta against the head of C-Sec made him seem ever so slightly more relatable. Only people with feelings could hold grudges, and while Kryik certainly had a bullet saved for Saren, that was too obvious, too easy. Hating Pallin seemed like such a low bar in comparison, and with no real explanation. There were a million scenarios Shepard could come up with for why Kryik might have had it out for the Executor. Her favorite and most ridiculous was: nasty top versus bottom breakup.

She snickered stupidly, then followed Kryik toward his prey.

“Saren’s hiding something. Give me more time. Stall them.”

This from the young officer that Pallin was attempting to berate. Shepard's ears perked, glad that at least one officer in Pallin's department was willing to push back.

“Stall the Council? Don’t be ridiculous. Your investigation is over, Garrus.”

As Kryik approached, drawing Pallin’s attention, the Executor’s face earthquake into an expression tantamount to murder-by-eye-ball.

“Pallin," Kryik said, sub-vocals dull and unflattering. "Is this who you’ve got heading up C-Sec’s investigation into Saren?"

“He was , but it’s over now. As usual, there was nothing to find.” Pallin growled, his patience long gone. “I’m about to finalize the report for tomorrow’s hearing. After this latest failure, will you
finally be done wasting my time and budget on this fruitless grudge between Spectres?"

“Unlikely.” Kryik snubbed the Executor and turned to the younger torin. “Did you find something I should know about?”

“Maybe. I got a surprise lead this morning but I haven’t had the chance to follow up on it.”

“I can pull some strings upstairs - get you as much time as you need.” Kryik turned his acidic glare back to the Executor. “Now, Pallin, if you don’t mind getting back to all that beloved paperwork you left in your office, I need to borrow your detective.”

The sulfur in the Spectre’s tone brooked no argument, and Pallin relented, stomping off with a surprising amount of bluster for a torin of his age and rank. Shepard was delighted by the theatrics; it was the best entertainment she’d had in weeks. Kryik: confirmed top.

He addressed the young investigator again, terse and to the point. “C-Sec, you really think this lead of yours is enough to prove Saren’s gone rogue?”

“It’s as close as I’ve ever gotten to that slippery bastard; I’ll make it good enough.”

“Do whatever it takes. I’ll keep Pallin off your back. We need to nail Saren to the wall this time; he’s become too big of a risk. I’ve got my own angles to work, so I won’t be tailing your investigation personally. This is Commander Shepard. She’s a protégé of sorts, reports directly to me; full disclosure. Whatever intel you dig up on Saren, share it with her, no questions asked.”

Having acknowledged the C-Sec officer to the best of his ability, Kryik rounded on Shepard as if the other torin had suddenly dropped into dark space.

“We’ll reconvene tonight for dinner at Anderson’s. Your Captain wants a heart-to-heart. In the meantime, pick the Citadel clean.” She thought he was done, but then he cut back in with a strangely accommodating sub-vocal. “And make sure you rack some hours. You may think you’re still training at Cipritine Academy, but you’re operating on far too little sleep for a human. Not to mention this new hole. That can’t be good for you.”

Kryik poked her crudely in the side, a few inches above the raw soreness of her oozing abdominal wound, surprising her with the literal stab at humor. She nodded, not trusting herself to respond, and watched him walk away.

As he retreated, Kryik called back over his shoulder: "C-Sec. Rack time. Make sure she gets it. I authorize deadly force if necessary."

Jokes, from Nihlus Kryik. Maybe this protégé thing went both ways. Shepard shook her head and turned to get a look at the young detective she’d been handed off to so suddenly.

There was something familiar about him - inviting, even - and that threw her for a loop. She extended her grip to receive his arm in proper turian form, startled to find she was suddenly nervous.

“Well officer…” She laughed, a quick cover up. "Looks like the grownups decided that we should be playmates on this one. Jane Shepard, good to meet you.”

He didn’t move. Instead, he gaped at Shepard's hands, at the red lacquer on her fingernails. Turians rarely showed their bare hands in public. Displaying naked talons to a stranger was considered pretty rude, so she supposed it might have been jarring for him to encounter so much superfluous decoration on a bare hand. Especially a scrawny monkey paw laden with extra fingers.
After a few seconds of baffling silence he got over the interspecies awkwardness and enthusiastically took her arm.

“Garrus Vakarian,” he said.

He squeezed her elbow, looked directly into her eyes, and smiled.

In the center of her chest, something creaked.

Alarmed, she read the familia notas of his face and wondered if they'd met before, but nothing stuck. Hopefully she hadn't knocked out any of his teeth at the Academy - if she had, he certainly didn't seem bent out of shape about it. His simple, geometric marks were C-Sec blue, covering a face that was well-matched to that color. A relaxed, good-humored expression worn handsomely over young, clean features.

He wore blue all over: his eyes, his tactical visor, his armor. Top to bottom. Everywhere her eyes traveled, that color seemed to follow, and it looked especially good on him.

Blinking slowly, she eased her arm from his grip. She coughed, trying to recover.

“It’s obvious that my boss doesn’t take no for an answer, what about yours? Everything alright with the Executor?”

“Oh, he’s always breathing down my neck about something. It’s one of his favorite pastimes: wrapping his fists in red tape and using Vakarian as his own personal punching bag.”

“Sounds like you really want to bring Saren down.”

“Everything about Saren rubs me the wrong way, but he’s a Spectre. Whatever he touches is instantly classified. Still, I know he’s up to something. Like you humans say, I feel it in my gut.”

She chuckled guardedly. He was charming. That could be dangerous.

“Go figure,” she said, deciding to test the waters. "I have that gut feeling too. Because Saren stabbed me real bad. Right here.”

She pointed. Right there.

He stared, eyes changing. His gaze, bright and intelligent, looked bluer now than ever. One of his mandibles flared in an involuntary half-grin, then he dissolved into a rich, full laugh, like he couldn’t believe his luck.

Days of stress lifted breezily from Shepard’s shoulders as he jostled her arm.

“Well, what would you say to some medi-gel for that stomachache? My treat.” He walked beside her to the exit and took his sweet time about it, employing the occasional, unnecessary guiding touch to her elbow. Professional contact, but only just. "Our lead is at a clinic in Zakera Ward. A quarian limped into Doctor Michel’s this morning with a gunshot wound - insisted she was hounded by Saren’s hired thugs because she has intel about the geth.”

Shepard gave Vakarian an appraising once-over as he lead her patiently towards the bustle of Kithoi. Catching her eye seemed to overwhelm him with a goofy burst of excitement, because without warning he bounded up the stairs to street level two at a time, leaving Shepard in his dust. Just as suddenly, he seemed to remember that she was walking with a limp and couldn’t rush to join him. Looking sincerely embarrassed and terribly young, Vakarian checked himself and waited
for Shepard at the top landing, keeping a courteous hand outreached.

“Vakarian.” She called to him as she climbed, slightly out of breath. "If this is how excited you get when you can’t find any hard evidence, I’d love to see what leaves you truly stumped.”

"Well, there's this Quasar game Doran just installed in Flux.” He laughed again. "And I've always been troubled by this particular shade of red..."

As he gripped her hand to help her up the last step, she reeled with an uncanny wave of déjà vu. The strength of his grip, the sound of his easy laughter - like a memory she couldn’t place. And that beaming grin, lit by a dozen different shades of lower-ward neon, was too familiar for a stranger.

Her stomach filled with butterflies. Good or bad, she knew them for parasites. Tamping down her nerves, she tried for casual.

“Quasar?” Dropping his hand, she made two stubborn fists, hiding her nails - for all the good it would do. "You a gambling man?”

He shrugged, moving toward a lift station.

“Sort of. On my nights off, I’ve been trying to trace a credit-funneling hack I found on one of Doran’s new Quasar machines. It keeps pinging me around half the lower wards. Stumped.”

“Really.” She frowned, smothering a weird, nervous smile. “Let’s make a deal. If we manage to make significant headway on this case by happy hour, we’ll swing over to the bar and take another look at your misbehaving slot machine.” She cracked her neck, suddenly thirsty. “After the shakedown cruise going FUBAR, I could use a break. Wouldn’t say no to a long tall Tom Collins, either.”

She closed her mouth; that had come out of nowhere. FUBAR indeed.

“Who’s Tom Collins?” he asked, a completely unfamiliar sub-vocal lacing his voice. Not unfriendly, but unfamiliar, almost like he was in on some great joke without her.

There was a temporary lull as Vakarian summoned an elevator; they stood shoulder to shoulder and she suddenly realized just how tall he was. Tall, warm, and standing much closer than he needed to.

She tensed. This was stupid. She had to disengage.

“Oh, he’s a drink: an old-timey Earth favorite I picked up from my C.O.”

“Really.”

“Truth is, I’m zero fun in bars. That 'wild redhead' human myth is a complete fabrication. One drink limit, and no dancing. Ever.”

“No dancing.”

“Ever.”

The elevator arrived with a polite ding, and Shepard tried to avoid Vakarian's raking gaze as they stepped inside. She was surprised he was pushing this far, and this fast. Moreover, she was surprised to find herself pushing back.
The squeeze of impatient citizens forced them to stand closer together, and she noticed that twinkle in his eyes again. It was twinkling far too brightly for comfort now, strobing blue-blue-blue like a flashing police light. He pulled her over, leaned even closer, stepped more intentionally into her space.

Shepard tried not to notice, tried to feign genuine interest in the tinny muzak and the bored mutterings of the crowd. She attempted an advanced study of the gaudy, gold-plated enviro-suit of the volus standing directly in front of her, but it was all for nothing, Vakarian was standing too close.

“Jane Shepard.” He whispered her name deliberately, moving closer still. "You know, there's something awfully suspicious about you…”

Her stomach plummeted.

Oh no. Not this. Anything but this.

“I have one of those faces,” she said, forcing her voice to go white and starch-stiff, waving the flag of surrender.

“No. Believe me, Red. You really, really don’t.”

She bristled at the cutesy nickname - some low jab at Regidonis, surely. Vakarian had seemed so nice. It would be pure cosmic schadenfreude if the charming C-Sec investigator with the dreamy Presidium-blue eyes turned out to be just as much a pest as every other trumped-up torin with a bone to pick.

Her muscles tensed, fists tightening. Would she be forced to recite the same tired script until the day that the universe finally dissolved into entropy? How many times would she need to repeat: He was the only father I ever knew. Now take your hands off me, you insolent coward, and prepare to duel et cetera, et cetera, ad infinitum. She was tired of throwing punches.

First, she tried peacekeeping: “Let’s not do this, okay? Leave the past where it belongs.”

Recognition scribbled across his features with even bolder lines.

“Spirits, I can’t believe it’s actually you.”

So much for the kindness of strangers. All she could do was mourn her good mood as it plunged straight to the bottom of the elevator shaft with a wounded and stifled kerplop.

Insulting, but she’d been forced to fend off worse.

Vakarian was practically on top of her now, asserting himself just like the countless presumptuous, aggressive torin that had come before. The sharp jut of his hip probed suggestively into her lower back, his hot breath tickled the side of her neck, and he leaned so close that she could smell him: aquatic and refreshing. Goddammit, what a waste.

He leaned down to whisper directly in her ear.

“I know exactly what you are.”

She braced for impact, preparing. He was the only father I ever knew, now take your hands off me -

“You’re the wild redhead I arrested on my very first night at C-Sec.”
Original words and phrases:

Words and phrases courtesy of MizDirected's turian dictionary:
- *Familia notas*: The colony markings that turians wear on their faces.
- *Torin/Torini*: Male turian(s)
- *Tarin/Tarini*: Female turian(s)
- *Patrem/Pari*: Father/Dad
- *Matrem/Mari*: Mother/Mom
Blue Heat*

Chapter Notes

(Revised edition, updated January 2018)

*Explicit rating applies.
If you prefer to avoid the sexual content, you're okay to read most of this chapter - just stop reading once they get into the car. Also be aware that this chapter contains recreational drug use.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I've included a mood-enhancing playlist for this chapter. Sincere apologies if any of these tracks won't play in your region. Personally, I recommend opening the playlist in a separate tab and hitting the shuffle button for maximum kicks. Enjoy!
It was the hottest summer in Citadel history.

More precisely, it was the only summer in Citadel history, at least as far as Garrus Vakarian was aware.

Three weeks prior, an overeager human tourist wielding an omni-tool flash camera had blinded one of the keepers as it was completing a routine vent diagnostic on the 1600 block of Kithoi Ward. The unforeseen consequences of the universe’s most ill-advised selfie were widespread and immediate: the keeper curse had spread through the entire ward arm in less than an hour, over two-thousand city blocks had gone into low-power mode, and the enviro-con system had flat-lined overnight. Ever since, a constant feedback loop of poorly-vented power stations, degassing garbage processors, and humid, uncirculated, previously breathed air meant that the temperature kept going up, up, up, with no sign of stopping.

A team of hyperactive salarian engineers had been pulling triple-shifts to stabilize the affected systems. Luckily, life support had been salvaged in the early hours of the disaster and the air remained breathable.

Still, it was hot. Damn hot.

It was a hell of a time for Garrus to walk his first beat for C-Sec. He and the other alpha-semester graduates had been slotted to start on the first day of the upcoming pay cycle, which should have fallen nicely on the far end of his twentieth birthday next week. As it was, the graduates who had passed muster had been told to roll out early and take the heat off the senior officers. Literally. In Garrus’ experience, wherever there was heat, craziness often followed.

Beacon of galactic prosperity or no, the Citadel had crazy enough to spare. By the end of the first week in crisis mode, the infrastructure of Kithoi had collapsed beneath a seething bender that Executor Pallin personally dubbed Summer Shitstorm ‘77. With businesses at the mercy of constant power surges, lootings and robberies naturally followed, prompting a constant drone of call-ins. Then there was the biggest thorn in the the precinct’s side: the remarkably well-organized, nigh-labyrinthine underage drug hustling ring that had popped up overnight.

Unable to afford emergency maintenance on their enviro-con systems, two of the biggest schools on the impoverished lower levels had given up on classes altogether. Ever since, roving bands of wastrel teens had been forced to find other ways to amuse themselves. Garrus had to admit, their dedication was almost impressive. If these kids were half as good in school as they were hawking hallex, the future was truly looking bright for Kithoi.

Thanks in great part to the efforts of these entrepreneurial children and a mess of day-night cycling errors, the Silversun entertainment district on the distal end of the ward arm had erupted into a steaming cauldron of sweaty bodies and loud music. The already bustling late-night clubs, casinos, and fighting rings were only too happy to turn a blind eye as the party raged on for weeks on end.

Garrus was just now wrapping up his first shift; in the past ten hours, his senior partner Melenis had dragged his increasingly lifeless body through an endless dredge of calls. They’d rescued a handful of junkies from drowning in their own puke, interrupted a few drug handoffs, recorded depositions from several victims of assault and armed robbery, and booked at least three unlicensed sex workers - one of whom had been startlingly, half-nakedly salarian.

“You did alright, Vakarian. Didn’t pass out once.”
Garrus pulled his eyes from the windscreen to shoot his partner a hassled glare. He’d been staring into the neon blur of Silversun for so long that all he could see was one pinkgreenblue smear of potential crime scenes, and the afterimages gave Melenis a sickly rave halo, which really wasn’t her style.

Melenis was a hard old asari halfway into her matron stage, with unsympathetic, half-lidded eyes and rough purple skin. During her brief but bruising stint as his tactical rappelling instructor at the Academy, she’d always struck Garrus as being fed up with absolutely everything and everyone, all the time.

He liked her.

Smirking, she said, “Alright, if you’re gonna make me roll your little baby corpse all the way back into the station, the least you can do is buy me a drink first.” She waited for him to laugh, sneer, roll his eyes — anything — but all she got was a dead-eyed stare. “C’mon. You need to decompress before you try to fit back into your civvies after a high volume shift like this, or you’ll snap like the Consort under an elcor diplomat.”

The Consort jab was typical Melenis, but all Garrus processed was high volume shift. That was the real joke. All this effort to make himself into a big-shot Citadel Security gun, and he was still sloughing out of his plates with summer heat, cleaning up other people’s messes. Without saying a word, he looked back to the blur outside the window, morosely hallucinating the cloistered, poorly ventilated rear kitchen of his mari’s restaurant on Palaven, where he’d wasted away hundreds of hours chopping vegetables and rinsing grime from pots. Trapped in that glamourless, nondescript office block basement on the outskirts of Cipritine, with only his sister for company, Garrus had fantasized of shadowing his absentee father at the security precinct downtown. If only he’d known then how far his pari’s dedication to law enforcement truly stretched, and at what cost, Garrus might have stayed in the kitchen.

Melenis reached across the car and smacked his arm, waking Garrus with a jolt.

“Hey rookie. No ennui on my watch.” She smacked him again. “Get out of the car.”

He blinked and refocused on reality. Melenis had parked out of sight in a poorly-lit alleyway. With matching dimness, Garrus slowly registered why; in a ward gone crazy, an empty squad car was liable to get jacked or vandalized. Even here, they wouldn’t be able to leave it unattended it for long, because unsurprisingly, Melenis’ choice watering hole turned out to be a dive bar. The place didn’t even have a sign out front, just a door in the side of a building that was otherwise occupied with a late-night second-run vid theatre.

Tonight, the dingy-looking marquee advertised a special anniversary screening of some obscure two-hundred-year-old human show. It was an operatic story about waging a war in the stars, made before humanity had achieved interstellar flight. Sentimental and old-fashioned - but popular - a line of curious spectators wound halfway down the block.

Melenis was unamused.

“Ah shit,” she grunted. "I’m getting old. I must have been three hundred when that came out. Earth was still some backwater nobody had ever heard of.” Her voice deadpanned. “At least they aren’t playing the Fleet and Flotilla musical anymore.”

She shook her head and shouldered through the crowd, leading Garrus into the dim interior. The single-room club was tall and deep - it ran the full length of the theatre next door, but was limited by a cramped third dimension. The bar service was set into the long shared wall, adding to the
feeling of intense narrowness, like walking into a trendy gun barrel. Extra seating had been squeezed into a thin, voyeuristic mezzanine crammed with cocktail tables, but the first floor was standing room only, and the mixed crowd on the dance floor leaned heavily towards working-class Palaven.

The music was loud, but not as painfully, pointlessly thumpa-thumpa as most of the places they’d been in and out of that night while making arrests. Garrus decided it was acceptable, and finally caved to Melenis’ insistence that he sidle up to the bar and refresh himself.

He wasn’t stupid enough to assume that when his senior officer had said let’s get drinks that she had meant alcoholic ones; they were still in uniform and driving a squad car, so booze was off the table. Regardless, the ambience was relaxing and the drinks were on the house. C-Sec perks. He studied the boring half of the drink specials and ordered something innocent, but he was still too gloomy to touch it by the time it arrived.

Melenis settled into her own drink and they enjoyed a companionable lack of conversation for a while, just leaning against the bar and listening to the music, which was growing on Garrus by the minute.

He slowly thawed, felt better. Melenis might have been rough around the edges, but she was exceptionally shrewd about these kinds of things. She’d picked exactly his kind of bar.

“Huh.”

Garrus looked over, and Melenis grunted again, setting down her glass with a thud. “You don’t see that every day,” she said, gesturing with her brows to some wonder behind Garrus’ back.

He turned. She was right. Forget every day, Garrus had never seen anything like it in his life.

The woman was a glamorous disaster. She smoldered like the wreckage of a high-speed collision; an expensive, exciting mistake that had already ruined someone else. Draped over a much better-looking torin than Garrus, she danced with all the transparent flirtatiousness of a flirting hanar, practically phosphorescent with sex.

He had never seen a human mashed against a turian; a scant two decades since Relay 314 had not done much to warm relations. The residual taboo rendered the woman in streaks of inescapable neon. With one look, every inch of her was burned onto the back of his eyes — garish — pornographic — brilliant.

Her hair was deep red, the same color as human blood, the same color as her painted fingernails. Her fingers were numerous and long, dragging across the suggestive, sweating stretch of her naked stomach. As far as human bodies were concerned, hers seemed exceptionally hard. She looked weaponized, strong and lean as a physician’s anatomical example, the arrogant ideal to which the rest of the universe was meant to aspire.

“This galaxy moves too fast for me.”

Garrus jumped, looking away from the woman on the dance floor. Melenis was as flat-voiced as ever, but he could feel her eyes burning all-seeing holes through the back of his skull.

Too knowingly for comfort, she drawled, "Turians and humans bumping uglies. Here I thought all you crazy kids still wanted to kill each other."

He forced himself to chuckle at that, aiming for nonchalance, but all he did was fill his mouth with an imagined gulp of the red-haired woman’s oxygen.
Stupidly, he blurted, “Ancient history. I was born the morning of the Ceasefire.”

“Cute,” grunted Melenis, seeing right through him. She tossed the squad car fob onto the bar next to Garrus’ sweating, untouched drink, and said, “Make sure you drop her off in one piece.”

She didn’t give Garrus the chance to ask whether she meant the woman or the car. Downing her drink in one, Melenis muttered, “…about time I saw that old vid anyway,” and wandered away into the crowd before Garrus could do so much as grunt noncommittally.

Garrus closed his fingers around the key fob, returned his eyes to the dance floor, and immediately panicked. The redhead was staring back at him. As their gazes met, her head fell onto her partner's shoulder, showing off the full, soft stretch of her neck.

That was forward. Did she know the ins-and-outs turian body language or was she just universally appealing in that confident, effortless manner of the abnormally attractive? He had no idea what to do. Was he supposed to do something? She was grinding pelvises with someone else, and appeared perfectly happy doing so. Garrus wasn’t about to go over and try to dance his way to victory – those kinds of displays always ended in embarrassment. Moreover, everything about her scared the shit out of him. Better for her to stay there, far over there, where some other, braver torin could make the first journey into an unknown frontier.

Garrus felt absolutely juvenile, but he was too tired to care. Serving a ten-hour training shift during Summer Shitstorm ’77 had earned him one free lazy creeper pass. Fuck it. He kept on looking. For her part, the redhead seemed thrilled to have his audience. Since locking eyes with him, she hadn't so much as blinked. Interspecies exhibitionism must have ranked high among her kinks, which he suspected were many and varied.

Watching her, he noticed that despite all of her enthusiastic hip swaying, she wasn't a particularly graceful dancer. It made no difference to him; she could do whatever weird things she wanted with her arms, as long as she kept looking at him like that. And the longer she stared at him, the more it seemed as if the torin she was dancing with was little more than a prop for her own self-pleasuring, the grist for her to grind against. That suited Garrus just fine.

As one song faded into the next, the handsome torin’s friends showed up. They seemed none too pleased that one of their primo squad-mates was getting touchy-feely with a primate, and after a few tense whispers, the redhead was shrugged off in favor of a group of flirting tarini nearby. As she was dumped right then and there, abandoned in the middle of the dance floor, the human woman's flexible face bent around a series of goofy expressions that Garrus struggled to read in the dark. At a guess, he'd have said she was trying not to laugh.

She met Garrus’ eyes again. Making sure he was watching, she lifted the hair from her neck and ruffled it a few times - as if airing herself out just for him. A feral smile overtook her face and he realized with a start: he'd been scoped.

She was actually going to come over. She was actually going to come over to this side of the room and say things to him, and he was going to have to think of things to say back.

Oh.

But. No. She couldn’t just come over ... That hadn’t been the plan at all…

Oh shit.

With that thought, she arrived, and Garrus Vakarian finally knew how it felt to be on the receiving
end of sniper fire.

“Hi,” she said, corrupting that simple, utilitarian word for all future use.

He didn’t trust both of his larynxes to synchronize properly, so with a mute nod, he raised his drink in her direction. Moisture was beading down the glass and over his fingers; he hadn’t taken a single sip since ordering it.

Apparently charmed by his nervous silence, she stepped closer and leaned against the bar. “You look so blue,” she said. He got the feeling that ‘looking blue’ meant something significant to her, but he had no idea what. Feeling disoriented and sluggish, he watched her watching him, caught her eyes roving up and down the blue C-Sec stripe on his armor — a stripe that pointed directly to his crotch.

“I walked my first beat today,” he said, managing not to choke.

He must have sounded more pathetic than he realized, because she said, “My condolences. But that uniform looks good on you.”

He wondered. Spectre gear might have looked better, but that ship had already been shot out of the sky.

“So…” she prompted. “Why C-Sec?”

“Oh.” He coughed, looking at his drink for a prompt. “I guess… Probably the same as most officers: injustice, helping people...” Whatever words might have followed, they disappeared into a dry throat.

“Bullshit.” She laughed. “With an answer that canned…” Her laughter deepened. “I’d wager a drink that you only joined up to impress your dad.”

He quirked his head, too surprised to be embarrassed.

Admitting defeat, he gestured to the bottles that lined the back of the bar and let a grin thaw out his tired mandibles. “You got me. Looks like I’m buying the first round.”

Her smile grew hungrier, eye-teeth glinting — echoing his excitement, amplifying it. “The first round, huh?” Implying there would be more. “I like you already.”

“Hey!” She caught the bartender’s attention with an easy wave. “Can you do a Tom Collins?”

“Who’s Tom Collins?” asked the bartender, using the terse, get-on-with-it sub-vocals of someone constantly harangued by drunks.

As if reciting the greatest punchline in all of recorded history, the red-haired woman said, “an old friend who never comes around anymore.”

The bartender blinked, unimpressed, but the redhead slapped the bar, threw her head back, and roared with laughter at her own joke for five complete seconds before realizing no one else had stopped to appreciate the gag. She dropped off mid-laugh and corrected in a bored voice: “Just give me a gin and soda.”

Eyes rolling fiercely, the bartender handed over a glass of iced alcohol and a separate sealed container of carbonated water, quickly moving on to a less annoying customer. The redhead stared at this piecemeal order, mouth agape. She laughed again, showing every tooth in her skull. Her
laugh was loud, throaty, and always accompanied by a shameless display of neck.

Noticing Garrus' stare, she leaned further into his line of sight and said, “Alright… I won the first round. What’s next?”

Internally, he screamed, *immediate evac.*

Externally, his eyes continued wandering, memorizing that intense blood-colored hair, the black-red accents stitched into her skin-tight top and skirt, the flawlessly lacquered tips of her fingers, where his eyes finally landed. Conspicuously, she balled that hand into a fist and turned it inward. Nice try.

“Okay… since I apparently look so blue…” He gestured vaguely to all of her. "What’s with all the red?"

She smiled - too quickly - and raised her fist. “Just a little tribute to my old man.” Looking more than a little disoriented, she squinted at her hand, clenching tighter. “Yep. You and me? We’ve both got daddy issues. He used to say: *make every bullet fly with honor...*”

Garrus laughed, but only to cover the knot in his gut. “You must need a lot of reminding.”

She loosened her fist and returned her hand to her drink, trailing her finger along the rim. Looking deep into the bottom of the glass, she asked, "What's the worst thing you've ever done?"

Her tone was accusatory, even childish. He had no idea why she deserved an answer to such a first-year academy bunkmate kind of question, especially one that was so obviously an evasion, but he gave her what she asked for anyway.

His answer, at least, was simple: “Lied to my father.”

Slowly, she turned her head towards him, then she smiled — crazily, wolfishly, a smile that ate her entire face. Her tongue curled around the edges of her teeth as if she were forcing back several different comments all at once.

For ten thousand years, she stared at him. He stared back, noticing that she had a scar on the left side of her face. A line of secret code, it bisected her eyebrow, dashing and dotting all the way down to her open mouth, where her tongue lingered on a pointed tooth.

His disobedient heart skipped a beat. She was so close that he could have put his arm around her waist if he’d wanted to. And he wanted to. Badly. But a well-trained instinct tingled apprehensively in the back of his brain, knowing better.

He looked for signs. No excessive sweat, no tremors, but her pupils were blown wide and her movements were jerky, unpredictable.

Breaking the moment, he raised his omni-tool and beamed his credit details to the bar kiosk. With a stubborn huff, the redhead considered her overpriced cocktail again, mixing it with two sloppy red-tipped fingers. Unsatisfied, she alighted on a grab-all display of fruit slices on Garrus' far side. Presumptuously, she leaned across him to pick out a slice of fruit, presenting the silk-smooth line of her neck for his inspection.

There, he discovered a meaty pulse throbbing in time to the music, and mentally added *elevated heart rate* to his list. Further down, stuffed clumsily into the shadowed valley between her breasts, he spotted the lynchpin: a suspicious-looking wad of plastic. He’d seen more than his fair share of raver’s goodie bags today, but this was the only one that had made him upset.
No wonder she’d been wasting time on him; she was probably high out of her mind. Forgetting his own ego, there were more important concerns. If she was wasted, any interspecies shenanigans were strictly out of the question.

Garrus tightened his hand around his drink, forcing fat drops of condensation between his fingers. Time to cool down.

After shopping around far longer than necessary, the redhead decided none of the fruit in the display was good enough. Without asking, she reached over to Garrus’ drink and plucked out the skewered sorbacca. She kissed her plush alien lips around the garnish, holding it gently between her flat front teeth to lap off the syrup.

“That’ll make you sick,” he warned, thinking of all the ways anaphylactic shock might complicate this evening if things went much further. But things couldn’t go much further. Because...

Bold as an asari fetish model, she bit down on the small blue morsel. She rolled the fruit from the cocktail pick and into the back of her mouth, her tongue visibly wet, pink, soft… and swallowed.

“I’ve always had a turian sweet tooth,” she said.

His finger slipped on the lubricated rim of his still-sweating glass.

Oh spirits. He pulled his eyes away from her mouth, clearing his throat, but couldn’t find the willpower to move. Maybe he could get her extranet address, call her back in the morning…

He opened his mouth to ask, but never got the chance.

The redhead’s attractive, show-offy dance partner chose that precise moment to return — and this time he’d brought his friends. With the attitude of someone undertaking a dare, he stepped out of his group and leaned down to whisper in the redhead’s ear. As he talked, one of his bare hands settled over her vulnerable, exposed abdomen. The other crept to the back of her neck. A cheap, dominating set of moves.

The torin’s words were too quiet for Garrus to make out, but he could see the redhead’s expression sagging as she listened. Discomfort turned to annoyance. Annoyance turned to disgust. And then, like a round entering a chamber, her face clicked to an entirely new setting: flaming, renegade vitriol.

She met Garrus’ eyes briefly. Not a defenseless plea; he’d seen enough of those today to recognize a call for help when one was sent his way. No, this was something else, something darker.

She looked at him one moment more, then said, “Excuse me.”

Her first order of business was a beautifully executed fvastus wind-catching blow straight out of Garrus’ rixoritum course at C-Sec Academy. No mistake, she knew exactly where and how to knock the breath out of a turian in the single fastest move. She landed a precision strike on the weak spot at the base of her harasser’s keel, and in the next instant, her knee met his waist. As he slumped into the blow, she grubbed a fistful of his sensitive inner cowl and snarled in his face: “My father died a hero. Now fuck off!”

She let go, and that was it. He was down for the count, gasping on the floor.

Well done, Red. Full marks.

The torin’s two bully friends moved in. The first rolled over the bar before he even knew he’d left
the ground. Garrus could see the bewildered look in his eyes as he flew overhead, legs windmilling, before he vanished into a wet explosion of glass.

Nearby patrons erupted into a chorus of panicked, drunken screams as a rain of alcohol and broken bottles showered down on the bartender. Empowered by the ruckus, Red quickly discombobulated the final torin with a wrenching frustimar arm hold, which she leveraged with well-trained ease, flipping the much taller, heavier body over her shoulder as if he were a pillow. He slammed to the ground so violently that the remaining glasses on the bar tinkled with fear.

In the redhead’s wake, the thoroughly abused bartender shook herself free of glass... and glared at Garrus.

Ah. Now there was that familiar cry for help. Do something, C-Sec. Did he have to?

Yes. There were certain ethical standards to maintain, but Garrus found himself incapable of applying a single one of those standards to this magnificent rockslide of a red-haired woman. Happily, he would have thrown every patron in the bar at her - just to see how long she could last.

Garrus considered his drink, untouched all this time. Grudgingly, he took a swig. It was too sweet, all the fizz had gone out of it. Slowly, savoring every mediocre drop, he drank. Only after the glass was completely empty did he finally summon enough self-respect to stand.

Numbly, Garrus grappled one of the redhead’s wrists into a restraining hold. Thrilled, disappointed, bewildered — his first opportunity to touch her, with the entire bar looking on. The fight went out of her in a single breath, and he felt like a murderer.

“Let’s take a walk,” he said, tugging her toward the exit.

The music still thumped, but the bar had gone uncomfortably silent. No one was sorry to see a bloodthirsty human escorted out by an officer of the law.

As they stepped into the alley, Garrus pinged Melenis. “Hey. Sorry to interrupt your star war, but I’ve got a drunk and disorderly that needs an escort downtown. Three dextros got knocked around a bit. Can you call in the code and see if anybody wants to press charges?”

On the other end, Melenis heaved out a long, dry gust. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll handle it. You need to learn what ‘clock out’ means, rookie.”

There was a pause long enough that Garrus assumed the comm had gone dead, but then Melenis perceptively cut back in. “Did your new girlfriend start some trouble?”

His carefully flattened grunt was confirmation enough.

“I won’t tell Pallin if you don’t,” she said.

Ah, Melenis. He knew there was a reason he liked her.

-  

Red allowed herself to be dragged halfway to the squad car before she started to protest.

“Listen, I get it, you’re just doing your job. But I can’t get booked. I have to be on the first shuttle to the Villa in the morning.”

“Fuck your next vacation stop-off. You just put a quadruple-digit crater of lost sales in that bar’s
liquor supply. Not to mention assault and battery..." His voice tightened. "I’m obligated to take you in.”

“Fine.” She growled, bucking against his grip. "FINE! Go obligate yourself!”

Somehow he’d wrangled her all the way to the car, but if he was being perfectly honest with himself, he wasn’t sure he could take her if she decided to fight in earnest. He readied a wrist restraint, just in case.

“I said I was obligated," he clarified. "But I clocked out an hour ago.”

That had an instantaneously calming effect.

She noticed his hand fumbling on the wrist restraint and her crooked grin returned. Playacting obedience, she offered her hands, and those painted fingernails winked at him. Through a red haze, he wondered just how many bullets she’d fired in her life, to need a constant reminder to shoot with honor. She was amped-up to the point of violence, had already done enough damage to earn a night in lockup — he had no reason to let her off easy. No reason at all. Except...

Considering her martial skills, her scar, those blood red hands, he was certain she was combat-trained, maybe even a mercenary. But on the off-chance that she was a Alliance jarhead having one bad night of shore leave — another victim in a ward gone mad with heatstroke — Garrus knew that bringing her downtown might ruin her career. He could let her walk, but this far distal, this deep in duct rat territory, he knew what was waiting for her out there. Imagining a drugged-up, half-dressed human lost in the Shitstorm, after all the ugliness he’d already seen today…

Keeping his movements cool and easy, he opened the rear door of the squad car. “Let me drive you home.”

She squinted at him so forcefully that she swayed. “How do I know this isn’t a trick?”

He shrugged, too tired to offer anything more convincing.

“Aw. Look at that face.” Weakly, she pushed against his chest, as if checking for solidity. “You ever play poker? I could wipe the floor with you.” Satisfied that he wasn’t running a con, she tamed herself into the back seat.

As he closed the door and she settled in, her skirt crept up one more centimeter. Not much, but exactly enough to reveal that underneath, she was completely bare. Garrus hadn’t imbibed a single drop of alcohol all night, but it made no difference; his sobriety evaporated.

He stared. A wild russet patch of hair, a nest of thorns right over her…

Hell no, Vakarian, eyes up. He was a damned fool, already a dirty cop and it was only day one. If Pallin ever found out about this, Garrus was as good as fired. Forget Pallin, if his father ever found out, Garrus was as good as dead.

He had more immediate problems. How in the name of the great raving Enkindlers was Garrus meant to drive now that he knew there was an unwrapped slice of interstellar pussy writhing around in the back of his car?

Fuck it. He’d just have to figure it out as he went. He took his seat and slammed the driver’s-side door with such a frustrated wham that Red fell sideways. Behind him, she spread out and laughed her velvet laugh, her lust for life reinvigorated.
He revved the engine. She purred right along with the car as he slowly pulled out of the alleyway and back to the main drag, then she abruptly red-shifted into a new phase of intoxication. Every available sensation seemed to delight her: the squeak of the seats, the hard plastic bite of the door hardware, her own beautiful body. She couldn’t stop running her hands over anything, everything.

“Oh. Wow…” was all she had to say for herself.

“What drugs have you taken?” he asked, keeping cool. It was better to know.

She moaned as if his question had been specially designed to stimulate her nerves. “Ohhhh… I don’t… know? One or two…”

She groped beneath her tiny, too-tight shirt and yanked up the unmarked baggie, confirming what Garrus already suspected. Looking over the bag, she counted pills beneath the plastic, losing track multiple times. “What? No more red ones? Rip off…”

He swallowed the anger and asked, “Where’d you get the hook-up?” Least he could do. Follow the lead tomorrow, maybe shut down another branch of that endless, tesseracting drug ring.


Well, that was one problem solved. He keyed a short text into his omni-tool, advised Melenis to check the three turian assault victims for signs of a particularly incompetent drug-running operation.

“How about you hand that to me,” he said, keeping his voice friendly. One button press later, the perpetrator safety field between them dropped away. “Juuust so I can be sure you don’t need to go to the hospital.”

With startling strength and accuracy, she tossed forward the baggie. Garrus watched it fly into the front of the car, ricochet against the dash, then plop perfectly into his cup holder. He stared at it like he’d been slapped, making a quick visual inventory of the contents.

Great. If she'd taken half of the things in that assortment, she was already flying high on all the drugs Garrus had ever heard of, and some he could only imagine. Maybe not a deadly mix, but he had to get her somewhere — anywhere — other than back out on the streets alone. There was a minimally-nosy detox facility about twenty blocks proximal that might still be taking walk-ins. He’d start there.

He glanced into the rearview and noticed she was trailing lazy glowing circles up and down her torso. As she teased herself, her right hand began to glow the faintest shade of blue.

“Are you biotic?” he asked, sub-vocals thin.

The sound of his voice, no matter what he said, seemed to cause her great ecstasy and joy. Well, that was marvelous for her, bully for him. He repeated the question, this time with more urgency.

“Hey. Yes or no. Were you born with biotics?”

"No…” she whined. "I’m not that cool."

"Have you ever taken red sand before?"

She blinked slowly, noticing her glowing hand for the first time. "Hey. Wow. I’m turning blue.”
That would be the sandblasting giving her a temporary biotic flare, and it was always worse when the user had no biotic experience, no idea how to handle it. *Fantastic.*

He moved his eyes to the rearview make sure she wasn’t about to go supernova. Big mistake.

She was laying spread-eagle, unashamed, reeling with drug-induced euphoria. One of her long, deliciously smooth legs was thrown up over the rear seat-back, her foot mashed against the tinted window. The other leg trailed to the floor, and her glowing biotic hand began to wander…

“Are you turning me blue so that we can be blue together?” she asked, moaning through her words. “That sounds amazing. Please – please – let’s be blue together…”

His heart migrated around his entire body before lodging firmly in his throat. “Woah. Cool your jets. I’m taking your glowing ass to detox.”

Stealing glances at her in the rearview, he couldn’t help but see… her left hand sliding under her cropped shirt, pinching and kneading. Her right hand drifting steadily downwards, glowing brighter all the time…

The lights of the Strip slid over her body in bars of solid color; one instant she was green, then yellow, pink, blue... but always…

Red. Her eyes were fixed on him, unblinking. When she caught him looking, her biotic right hand sparkled against her groin with a surprise surge of energy. Head lolling against the seat, she moaned darkly, deep in her throat, and ground her pelvis into her hand. “Please… *fuck* … pull over. The minute you opened your big dumb mouth… I wanted… you gotta pull over and *fuck* me.”

“Nope,” he said. “Sorry. Can’t help you.”

She gasped like someone dying. “But I’m dying!” she whined, confirming the diagnosis.

He rambled at her in a desperate, conversational tone, “No, not dying. Well… *maybe* dying. *Definitely* incapable of consent.”

“Listen! Don’t let me die like this! Just *fuck* me!”

He clutched the wheel, laughed for his very life, and forced his eyes back to the airstrip. He deserved this. Things this terrible didn’t happen without a reason. He was going to die, that much was already decided. His options were fiery car crash, massive aneurysm of the dick, or both at the same time.

What a perfect time, then, to stall at the poorly-calibrated intersection at 2nd-tier 110th—Edroki. Here, time didn’t just stand still, it completely gave up. Garrus slowed the car, drumming his fingers against the wheel, mandibles twitching furiously. Aha, yes. *Hilarious.*

He could just run the light, but the car would be tagged, he’d have to explain himself back at the precinct and pay a fine, and his father would certainly find out. Hell, someone in traffic control might actually stop scratching their ass and run back the vid and see just what was going on in the back seat…

No. Hell no. Better to wait it out.

Garrus idled at the light, trying to act casual. But just to be safe, he darkened the windows another notch. Filtered through the heavy artificial tint, the stoplight bathed the car interior with a rich, flaming aurora, which didn’t help matters at all. He was surrounded on all sides, every sense
overwhelmed by the sight, the sound, the smell of the red-haired woman — and his groin was long past aching with denial.

Behind him, she mumbled incoherently, wouldn’t stop begging. “Fuck… please… I can’t stop… I’m so close… just… just look at me…”

Just look at her.

Garrus opted instead to have an out-of-body experience. He concentrated his entire being on a single, sobering image: the Taralos Amphitheatre, sitting dark and empty ten kilometers away on the 400 block.

Ordinarily, the rise and fall of a pretentious local theatre would have been beneath Garrus’ notice, but the summer season posters were everywhere, impossible to avoid. Digital copies glitched across full city blocks of half-powered vid screens, stuttering like omens. At some point, just to see what all the fuss was about, Garrus had looked up the plot, then had immediately forgotten all about it.

Now, trapped in a hellish fever dream at 2nd-tier 110th and Edroki, Garrus remembered. The 20th anniversary of the Ceasefire meant humans had been trendy this year. To meet demand, the Taralos’ extravaganza had been lifted from an ancient human story, a story that went something like this: down in the underworld, some heroic idiot went looking for his girlfriend. He found her, started hauling ass out of Hell with her, but near the exit he got antsy and looked back to make sure she was following. The gods or whoever hadn’t liked that, so the girl was dragged kicking and screaming back to the land of the dead. The end.

There was a moral in there somewhere. Garrus tried to put it all in perspective: the theatre, the myth, the weight of his own mortal soul…

But it all came back to Red’s strangled cries, the sound of her fingers working in the dark. She was so excited, so wet, that her voice was almost inaudible, her pleas drifting toward him along with the foreign but unmistakable scent of her arousal. “I’m gonna… Oh god… Just look at me…”

By now he was painfully hard, clutching the steering wheel so tightly that his hands had gone numb. A better torin in Garrus Vakarian’s current position, after reflecting on that ancient alien legend and marvelling at his own bad luck, might have resolved to make the honorable decision and spare the damsel’s soul. But Garrus Vakarian himself, whose level of professional restraint was typically summarized on the lower end of “lacking…” Well. He arrived at an altogether different conclusion.

And so, armed with the fiercest look he had ever leveled at someone that he hadn’t intended to kill, Garrus turned around in his seat and declared, “I’m looking.”

She cursed, biotic sparks flying from her hand.

He looked, as one by one, her glowing fingers disappeared between her thighs. He looked, eyes glued to her rhythmically lifting hips, as she fucked herself in his stead. He looked and looked and looked, knowing she was imagining his cock inside her… and Spirits, he was imagining it too…

His hips rocked in answer, plates loosening, cock so hard he was going to come just watching… Without thinking, he thrust against the weak friction of his armor, moaning aloud… he couldn’t stop… couldn’t…

oh fuck
Biotics flared up her arm, over her chest, erupting along her entire body — a spectacular fireworks display that dazzled him halfway to blindness. She arched off the seat and silently screamed, suddenly turning acid green.

This was it. She was about to be sucked back to whatever Hell she’d come from, and all of it his fault.

Lightyears behind her, someone laid on the horn. Then Garrus realized — the light at 2nd-tier 110th-Edroki had finally changed.

He shook his head and tried to focus, but he couldn’t see, couldn’t think, could hardly breathe. Not trusting himself to drive another block, he pulled through the intersection and immediately lifted the car out of traffic, bee-lining for the nearest roof.

He stopped. Parked. Swore. Turned off the engine. Swore again. He just needed a minute, one minute...

“Tiberius Towers.” she whispered, giving him a destination at long last, as if enjoying the galaxy’s most expensive cab ride.

Tiberius, seriously? That place was all glitz, total luxury. If she was a merc, she must have been a good one.

Shit.

It wasn’t far, but by the time he’d found the shining, well-maintained facade of Tiberius Towers, she was practically asleep. As he pulled to a stop near the front doors, she stuttered awake, revived and alarmed.

“No! Not the lobby! Take me around back.”

Garrus coughed. Yes. The back. That wasn’t suspicious at all.

He pulled the car through an alleyway that was humid with steam. Clouds of enviro-con fumes bloomed white-warm and stale from the malfunctioning vents. In great herds, they rolled across the car's windscreen, curtaining Garrus from the outside world.

In the shadow of a flickering advertisement for a nearby sushi bar, he parked and observed this bold migration of air, feeling more disoriented than ever.

“You really live here?” He asked.

“Hardly. I don’t live anywhere. This place is pure Tom Collins.” His heart sank even further. Was this other man her boyfriend? Her target? Quickly, she added, “He’s never here, don’t worry about it.”

That didn’t ease his mind much.

A second later, she was in motion. She crawled into the front of the car, wrapped her arms around his neck, and whispered in his ear.

“You’re the only one I want, Blue.”

He’d forgotten that he’d left the perpetrator shield down. There wasn’t much time to worry about it, because she had already slid her leg over his lap, straddling him while simultaneously pinning
herself against the wheel. Dazed and overpowered, he watched as she slid the delicacy of her bizarre hair-tufted groin across the unforgiving ceramic plate of his C-Sec blues.

He should have stopped her. But he was unable to move, unable to breathe. This armor would be soiled forever, no amount of elbow grease would get it clean, would ever allow him to forget that she had marked him this way.

He could smell the trail of pungent arousal she left in her wake, like raw blood and rarest meat. His head fell back against the car seat and he cried out, an agonized wail of self-denial.

Red didn’t ask.

She ran her tongue along the sensitive skin of his throat. Rolling her hips, moaning a low dirge, she pressed herself more completely against him and seemed primed to orgasm again. Her hands groped up and down the back of his neck, sliding shamelessly under his fringe, pulling his face down toward her own... then her mouth was over his.

He’d never felt anything like it. She was all softness, moist as an overripe fruit plucked from a hot orchard, and she tasted like - like - he didn’t know and he didn’t care.

Wild for more, he groaned and crushed her closer. As she opened her mouth and plied him with her small wet tongue, he couldn't stop himself from thrusting toward her with an embarrassing crunch of armor. Fumbling, he tore off one glove and slowly, curiously, slid his bare hand over the small of her back.

Her body was soft, cool. Firmly muscled. He could feel her surging into him, rolling against him, pleasuring herself. His groin plates shuddered, loosened…

Pulling away all at once, he gasped for air.

“No! We can’t - I can’t do this, Red.”

“Don’t you want me?” She ground herself against him, made him answer with an automatic thrust.

He growled, loud and mean and desperate for mercy.

“Oh spirits-- I’ve never wanted anything worse. But. Dammit. Stop.” He bent his head and filled his nose with her scent, trying to memorize it forever. “Not like this.”

“It’s my last night. I want it to be you.” Pressing her forehead to his, she moved her head intentionally, knowing exactly what she was doing. She’d been affectionate with a turian before.

His head spun.

“I don’t know what that means,” he breathed, too worn out and confused to be anything but honest anymore. “I don’t understand a single thing about you, except that you’re off limits until you sober up.”

“I’ll be gone.”

“So tell me your name. Give me an extranet address. I can be patient.”

Garrus was anything but patient, but Red didn’t need to know that. Not yet.

She shook her head. He could feel her no as it drilled right through his forehead and clean through his brain, down into his keel, boring a hole into his chest so wide that she could have reached in
and squeezed his still-beating heart until it burst.

“The break has to be clean,” she said. "I know I can fix it, but it's clean slate or nothing. You can’t come.”

“I'm not asking—”

She pulled away from him then, and her face was completely different; she had become someone else. The discipline in her expression, the firm steel of her eyes, made him think of some ancient *gloranumis* in a vid, readying to raze an enemy house. It thrilled him exactly as much as it scared him out of his mind.

She opened the door.

“Red,” he whispered, capturing her waist in his bare hand. "Wait."

She did, at least for one moment more, raising her hands to the sides of his face. Her thumbs traced his *familia notas*, then with careful slowness, she kissed him again. Soft and warm, her breath lingered in his mouth, offering up something minuscule but inescapable, until the taste of her became a metal sliver in his lungs.

It was over, but he had to know. "Are you going to be okay?"

She dropped her hands from his face, and her features hardened to stone.

“I’m going to be perfect,” she said.

Without so much as a backward glance, she stepped out of the car and vanished into shadow and steam.

-  

[jubberry](https://jubberry.tumblr.com/) on tumblr has done a fantastic illustration from this chapter!

[Click here](https://jubberry.tumblr.com/post/123456789012) to see the full-size original and please [support the artist on their blog!](https://jubberry.tumblr.com/)
Chapter End Notes

**Original words and phrases:**
- *Sorbacca*: Turian equivalent of a maraschino cherry, usually dyed bright blue.
- *Rixoritum*: Aggressive, disarming martial art. Mandatory course at C-Sec Academy.
- *Frustimar*: Slice and Chunk. Discombobulate by twisting a limb out of balance.
Words and phrases courtesy of MizDirected's turian dictionary:
- Familia notas: The colony markings that turians wear on their faces.
- Torin/Torini: Male turian(s).
- Tarin/Tarini: Female turian(s).
- Gloranumis (f): One who holds a state of royalty or majesty. Ancient royal title.
Surefire

Chapter Notes


See the end of the chapter for more notes

— JANE —

Citadel - 2177

Less than a week had passed since that joke of an award ceremony at Alliance HQ, but according to Shepard's gut-tight internal clock, linear time was a bygone irrelevancy. Whenever the words Star of Terra entered her mind, several millennia would blur past all at once, reducing her memory to static.

Five days previously at a hasty press conference on Arcturus Station, a visibly uncomfortable Amul Shastri had pinned the Alliance’s most prestigious military decoration onto a woman raised by an extraterrestrial war criminal. Just like that, at the pleasure of two-dozen swarming tabloid reporters, Second Lieutenant Jane Shepard's comfortable anonymity had been shot straight to hell.

After a funerary receiving line of stiff, bruising handshakes, Shepard had been evacuated to the relative neutrality of the Citadel by her oldest mentor and only remaining friend in the Alliance: Captain David Anderson. Hidden away in the Captain’s private apartment, she was to spend an entire month’s mandatory leave keeping her head down, goddammit. Anderson had immediately returned to Arcturus HQ, where he was currently going far beyond the call of duty on Shepard’s behalf, kissing enough asses and pulling enough strings to prove that the Lieutenant was not - and never had been - acting on behalf of alien interests.

Now at the bleeding end of her first night of compulsory leave, Shepard was already blind drunk. Hazy and lethargic amid the neon-painted shadows of Anderson’s glamorous abandoned apartment, she drifted with smoke-gray apathy, finally crashing knee first into a desk. With the yelp of a woman shot, she succumbed to her wounds and fell on the spot, taking the Captain’s personal console down with her. After it landed dangerously close to Shepard's head, the console flickered weakly and then went dark. Another man down.

Best to stay right here, she thought. Best to die honorably beside a fallen comrade, a pitiful chance to absolve herself of Torfan.

Thus relieved, Shepard spent her first night on the Silversun Strip sleeping face down on a polished cement floor. It was the best night of sleep she'd had in months.

The next morning, after she’d vomited enough alcohol out of her blood to see straight, Shepard did what she could to straighten up the mess she'd made. Luckily, Anderson’s console had survived the fall unharmed. Less luckily, when she managed to boot the system again, it was only to receive a patronizing lecture.

Hey Kid,
Don’t slack off. I can squeak you into ICT, but after that, it's up to you. Do whatever you want at night, just don’t break my furniture. During the day, your ass already belongs to those instructors in Rio de Janeiro. Use this time to prepare. Proving your worth at Vila Militar is going to hurt like nothing else [...] 

The message continued, in no uncertain terms, to spell out exactly how much pain she was promised. Doom and gloom included, it was still good news. If she spent a month quietly avoiding any further media spectacle and forcing herself into the best shape of her life, Shepard might be allowed to exchange the very last shreds of her military reputation for the opportunity to be eaten alive at Vila Militar. All she could do now was ready herself for digestion.

Every day cycle, she ground away dutifully, slowly but surely losing herself in a numbing cycle of PT. Hours spent running on Anderson's treadmill were matched by repetitive weight circuits in his cold, echoing living room. To keep herself sane in the middle of the third… fourth… fifth round of burning reps, she surfed through alien television and tried to avoid catching sight of her own face.

The turians obstinately refused to talk about it. Hierarchy-affiliated channels aired nothing more titillating than the occasional bottom-line crawl: *human sources claim excommunicated traitor Albacus Regidonis lived among their own and attempted to raise a human child before dying in exile.*

Occasionally a turian military analyst would drop Shepard's name along with a grudging acknowledgment of the Star of Terra, but for the most part, Shepard endured little more than endless, droning isolation. Watching TV and lifting weights, she gained five pounds of muscle and learned more than she ever cared to know about Palaven's water crisis.

She lasted half a month cooped up in solitary confinement before she cracked.

She started small, sneaking out to a declining aquatic recreation center a few blocks from Anderson's. The place was well-maintained but otherwise unfashionable, patronized by rheumy-eyed salarians and one or two ancient, wrinkled hanar. Given a wide berth in this mostly-empty pool, Shepard brought a pair of combat fins and swam daily, going as long as she could take it. Back and forth, back and forth, until her ankles threatened to crack.

Just as the retirement home was losing its appeal, the keepers went belly-up and all hell broke loose in Kithoi. Overnight, the ambient temperature rose by twenty degrees, and by the end of the next day cycle, every pool complex on the ward was packed to capacity, including the unfashionable ones.

To keep off the radar, Shepard drifted ten blocks further from Anderson's apartment. There she found a hole-in-the-wall volus arcade that offered zero-g free-fall and untethered target practice. Good exercise with no background checks and minimal safety restrictions. Fun, for a minute or two. But it wasn't long before the constant drug hand-offs in the lobby started to get on Shepard's nerves. Time to move on.

Her last week brought her as far afield as she dared. Armix Arena was thick with trigger-happy turians and not a few Alliance meatheads. All of them, including her, were looking for a fight. She kept her helmet on and spoke to no one, but the first time she got a funny look, her stomach lining curdled.

*Fresh meat,* that glance had said. Nothing more.

She chose *Eska* as her pseudonym on the public scoreboards, and remained undiscovered. Gradually, so as not to draw attention, she blasted through enough combat sims to earn two
honorable mentions on the board - and brought home nearly five thousand credits.

Three days away from Vila Militar, Shepard won her first major score at the Arena. No use bragging about it. As usual, she collected her winnings in silence, then rushed into her favorite low-traffic alleyway, the only place she might remove her armor unobserved.

She had just finished clumsily shoving her practice armor into a duffle bag when she saw him.

Standing in the middle of her getaway route was one of the Arena’s regular spectators, a retired turian general named Oraka. Something of an eccentric local celebrity, he was in the habit of shaking hands with promising newbies and doling out bits of archaic battle strategy to anyone who would stand still long enough to listen. Always courteous, even to humans, but always a little bit drunk.

Today, he was sober.

“Excellent shooting,” he called, clear-eyed and deliberate. He stepped closer, keeping his empty hands raised, turning his neck just enough to show he was no threat. “Very sharp with a rifle, aren't you? But the pistol... that's where you truly shine.”

"What do you want?"

Slowly, his eyes drifted to her clenched fingers, to the red lacquer on her thumb, obvious as a bullseye. Staring at her, he adopted a look of baffled recognition and opened his mouth to speak. Several times he tried and failed, biting back every comment but the last.

"There are few things I love more than being right," he choked.

She stood her ground, but felt her hand trembling on the strap of her duffle.

Using a thin, tremulous sub-vocal that held more meaning than she could parse, he softly added, “I always told Alba he would make a fine *patrem*.”

That night, on the arm of a general, Jane Shepard visited her first turian dive bar.

Considering her chaperone, the choice of ambience was pleasantly unpretentious. The general himself made for thrilling company for the first half hour, answering every question Shepard asked. But before long he grew maudlin and weepy - and very, very drunk.

The next night she returned to the bar, alone. Despite being the lone human in a heavily populated dextro dive, Shepard was permitted to sit at a small grungy table and drink herself numb, completely unmolested. The turian patrons were preoccupied with rubbing up on each other; they had little interest in a rubbernecking culture tourist. Aside from a few bored once-overs, she was invisible.

Finally, her last night arrived, sudden and rude. The slim, waning hours of precious anonymity before Camp Militar came for her blood. After tonight, it was perfection or death.

Knowing that, Shepard bought a short, cheap skirt and returned to the bar.

As before, nearly all of the locals ignored her. The only trouble came in the form of a persistent, flirtatious drug runner who kept insisting that a monkey in a skirt was *adorable*, and that *everything would look a lot brighter if you took one of these and danced with me, mellia*.

Three hours later, everything was tangled up in blue.
Garrus knew he was toeing the line. Press-ganging an Alliance commander in a crowded elevator and oozing down her neck like some kind of drunken lecher might have been a tad over-eager. But turnabout was fair play. After all, she’d started it.

Red: this preposterous woman, long ago given up as his own hallucinogenic anxiety response. She wasn’t a slumlord or a mercenary, but something far more impossible. A motherfucking N7 Marine and apparent Spectre protégé, working in the shadow of two living legends: doing recon for Nihlus Kryik and getting into knife fights with Saren Arterius.

At first, her blank face had fooled him into thinking she’d forgotten everything. But then she’d invited him out for another drink, casual and flirty as you please. Not just any drink, but her old friend Tom Collins. Recalling that esoteric terran cocktail with a proper name, she must have been baiting him. So he took it: hook, line, and sinker. How could he not?

Six years since the Summer Shitstorm had done little to dull his memory. Ever since Red had disappeared without a trace, Garrus had been steadily wasting himself on an embarrassing number of replacements. Turians at first, in an attempt to reassert his normalcy. Then asari, as he realized it was useless. Finally, a blur of faceless human partners that had earned him two regrettable injuries: a permanent place as the butt of every xenophile joke uttered in his precinct, and a list of alien exes longer than his arm.

Perverse, maybe, but it all felt worthwhile now.

The elevator shuddered quietly to a halt, doors whisking open to spew civilians all over the lower ward plaza. Good riddance. Everyone could space themselves. Garrus had catching up to do. No more juvenile anxiety, no more wasted opportunities: he knew exactly what to do with her this time around, if only…

“Blue.”

Her grunt was all he needed. Now he knew he hadn't gone completely out of his mind. His heart seized. She really did remember, then.

A fresh batch of warm bodies made for the open elevator, but he was at the ready. Forcefully, he said: “C-Sec business,” then flashed the keel of his genuine issue armor, held up an authoritative hand to shoo away the crowd. “Take the next one, people.”

He overrode the controls. The doors closed out the baffled civilians with a conspiratorial shhh of machinery. Garrus allowed the elevator to go up four and half floors before he suspended the ascent with another override.

They were alone now, nothing between them but nerves. His head brimmed with so much steam that he could barely see the straight line between his fingers and the controls. Without even knowing what to say, he turned, mouth open…

Before he could get a word in edgewise, she interrupted with a voice cold enough to deflect an incendiary grenade. “I remember you,” she said, holding her hand up, stopping him. “And I remember…” She grunted inscrutably. “Enough.”

Oh.
“I buried that night on the Strip awfully deep, but not deep enough, I guess.”

Oh, shit.

She continued in a professional monotone, staring a crater at the floor. “If I could purge that summer from public memory, I would. Please understand, it’s nothing personal. I spent most of ’77 on a raging bender. You were collateral damage.”

Her aim was perfect: the blow was clean, absolute, as unflinching as the three-torin takedown he’d witnessed in that bar six years earlier. He’d already been put in his place, but that clinched things. She didn’t owe him anything, and never had.

He understood that. He did. Really. Didn’t he?

Of all the possible reunions Garrus had fantasized about during the intervening years, he had always deliberately avoided the version in which Red regretted everything they’d done.

Before his last honorable impulse fizzled out, he stepped away to give her a more professional berth. Forcing himself back to the proper side of the line she’d just drawn, he tried not to look half as gutted as he felt. With a flick of his omni-tool, he restarted the elevator; it started moving again, a nauseating lurch.

In that same professional voice, she said, “If there’s been any confusion, I’m sorry. I’d appreciate the chance for the two of us to make a more dignified first impression.”

At the end of her impassive, diplomatic monologue, she held out her arm for the second time that morning. He was dumbstruck, too stupefied to move.

“Don’t leave me hanging, Vakarian,” she said, avoiding his eyes. Sounding pissed.

Obediently, he wrapped a hand around her elbow, but was extra careful to be formal about it this time. He’d accept whatever treaty she offered.

It would be enough to finally learn who and what Red actually was. It would. Wouldn’t it?

Before speaking again, he donned his most dutiful, law-abiding sub-vocals. “You took me completely by surprise. I sincerely apologize if I made you feel compromised, then or now.” Even though it almost strangled him to force out her full title and last name, he did it anyway. “Commander Shepard. Sorry for being inappropriate.”

“No harm done.” She said flatly. She had yet to release his arm.

“I look forward to working with you on the investigation, Commander. I hope -”

“Yes,” she said, finally looking him. When she met his eyes, her entire face flushed, turning a deep, compromising shade of alizarin crimson. Trying to blink it away, she blurted: “I hope so too.”

There she was. She was still in there. The barest glimpse of that wild, unstoppable girl that he would never be able to forget.

His heart hammered, mandibles flaring involuntarily. Reflexively, his fingers tightened on her arm.

As if sensing the imminent danger rising between them, she pulled out of his grip and returned both hands to her walking stick.

She glanced at the floor, the walls, her own feet: anything but him, determinedly avoiding eye
contact. Despite what appeared to be a truly heroic effort, she was unable to suppress an intense, blazing smile. It spread across her face, burning crookedly into his brain.

“It’s good to see you again,” she choked out, looking thrilled and distraught in equal measure.

The feeling was mutual.

— JANE —

Alliance Troopship Boudica - 2177

So far, food had done little to settle Shepard’s stomach as she sobered up from her ill-advised three-month joyride on the Citadel. The deep-frozen slop that the Alliance commissary was offering up on the jaunt from Charon to Earth was hardly incentivizing, but she managed to convince herself that the calories were a necessary evil, no matter what shapeless form they took. As she eyed the differently colored gruels, her appetite shrank into a terrified dot on the horizon, but Shepard poked it back into obedience - tomorrow would be even worse if she went into it underfed. She settled for a generous spoonful of the brownish-greenish blue plate special, and then squeezed herself onto a bench between two slabs of overeager manflesh to try and force it down.

Interplanetary Combatives Training Class 125 had just over twelve hours until their ETA in Brazil. That was twelve hours for her to sleep off this hangover, and twelve hours to get Blue out of her head. Permanently.

On her final night on the Strip, she’d made what her father would have called a fool child out of herself. Come to think of it, if her pari had still been alive to catch wind of his daughter’s behavior in that C-Sec officer’s car, Shepard probably would have woken up this morning chained to a post in an asari monastery. Her entire stretch of shore leave was an embarrassment that was unworthy of any child of Regidonis, but the last night really took the cake.

Last night. With Blue.

Her crotch thumped crazily and she refocused angrily on her gruel.


From what Anderson had told her, PT on the grinder would start as soon as they landed at 0430 tomorrow; a solid four hours of grueling cadence until half the class had hung their helmets up to DOR. After that, they’d get in a quick meal, a shower, and go back out onto the grinder for a uniform inspection which she already knew she would fail. She’d have to face some kind of nigh unendurable and humiliating remediation in addition to the standard PT, no question, and it was best to be prepared.

Prepared meant numb. And numb meant all of these friendly, fuckable feelings for a turian cop on the Citadel had to fly out the window. Right now.

Once her pari’s identity had come to light in the press circus of ’76, Shepard had lost all chance of sliding through unnoticed with the other grey men at the Villa. Although she’d qualified to be officer in charge of her class and had more combat experience than the rest of the trainees combined, she had a Palaven-sized target painted on her back, right beneath a giant flashing sign that read: Turian Traitor Bitch, Please Annihilate Me.

If she carried a living torin anywhere in her heart during ICT, she’d be dead in the water. Even at a
distance of hundreds of millions of miles, even if she never mentioned him by name, even if she
wasn’t entirely sure what he meant to her, somehow, they’d know. It would get out. She’d been an
idiot to explore her turian fixation before shipping off for N1, but then she hadn’t exactly been in
her right mind since Torfan.

Shepard let her head droop over her disappointing meal. No more drugs. Ever. What a waste of
fucking time this summer had been. If only she’d met him sooner…

That would only have made this worse. She needed to be rid of him. Now.

Blue wasn’t that easy to throw away. She’d known it the minute she’d seen him. She should have
run her ass back to Anderson’s at the instant of woozy, weak-in-the-knees mutual eye-locking on
the dance floor. Shepard was hardly sentimental, and she didn’t know what she felt for Blue,
except that it was dangerous for her to feel anything about a turian right now. That in and of itself
made it impossible to continue entertaining fantasies about him.

Her career was already at a breaking point - if she failed out of this first course she could kiss her
future as a commissioned officer goodbye forever, forget special tactics or commanding her own
vessel.

Blue had been easier to kiss goodbye than her entire military career, though not by much.

Not by much at all.

Shepard chewed and swallowed, tasting nothing, and reached into the cargo pocket of her work
blues to drag out a datapad.

After stepping out of Blue’s car, she had somehow stumbled back upstairs to Anderson’s
apartment. She had no memory of making the trip, but somehow she’d managed it. It was a miracle
she hadn’t run back to fling herself across Blue’s windshield in sex-starved agony. Thankfully,
even when stoned out of her goddamned mind, Shepard apparently had more sense than that.

Once safely alone, she had opened the message Anderson had written for her on her first day of
leave, and then she had read it over - and over - and over - and over again. Until the words were
etched onto the back of her eyelids.

Before boarding the Citadel shuttle for the Widow relay at 0600, she had transferred Anderson’s
message to a datapad so she could carry his heavy words around with her on the trip to Earth.

A constant reminder: Don’t Fuck It Up.

Hey Kid,

Don’t slack off. I can squeak you into ICT, but after that, it’s up to you. Do whatever
you want at night, just don’t break my furniture. During the day, your ass already
belongs to those instructors in Rio de Janeiro. Use this time to prepare. Proving your
worth at Vila Militar is going to hurt like nothing else.

Don’t fool yourself. Everybody who matters knows about Regidonis now. You’ll have
to be perfect, and that’ll barely get you in the door.

The instructors will make it their personal mission to break you in half. No matter
what you do, you will fail every inspection. You will be Goon-Squaded at the end of
every run. You will be forced into remedial PT at the start of every day. You will carry
Old Misery up and down that beach until you bleed woodchips. But they can’t fail you
out, Shepard. Not if you meet them with steel of your own.

I’ve got equipment: use it. I don’t want to hear about any stress fractures or torn
ligaments or any other dumbass rookie injuries down there. Run every day, working
your way up to boots. If you can, get some time in on a zero-g sim. There’s a couple of
decent ones on the Strip. Don’t get soft. Don’t get lazy. Don’t get hurt.

Most of all, Shepard, remember one thing: they’ll break your brain before they’ll ever
break your body. Most of the DOR helmets I saw were from guys who couldn’t push
themselves the single extra inch that would have saved them. It’s all mental fortitude -
all of it. The instructors will try to destroy you piecemeal, and they’ll start by going
after your weakest points: family, failures, whatever they can find - it’s a special gift of
theirs.

Don’t let the bastards grind you down. I happen to know that you’re made of sterner
stuff than they can imagine, and not just because your dad was a turian.

Keep me posted, and take care of yourself out there.

No one else will.

Anderson

— Garrus —

The large public shuttle from mid-Kithoi to the 800 block of Zakera Ward always took twenty
minutes. That was twelve hundred seconds, give or take. As Garrus stood inches away from
Commander Shepard, once again pressed willingly towards her by a crush of unwashed civilian
bodies, he was aware of every single one of those seconds as they winked suggestively on by.

When they’d boarded, he had helped Shepard into the open row of seats along the wall of the
transport. She’d been hesitant to sit at first, then he’d offered to hold her walking stick: a polite
reminder that she wasn’t exactly able-bodied at the moment. Eventually, she relented and parked
her ass, but not without a stiff complaint or two. Then she finally gave him custody of the stick,
relaxed against the window and abruptly fell asleep.

Letting Shepard get a short nap on the way to the clinic was the least he could do. As ecstatic as he
felt to see her again, Garrus knew that their unexpected reunion was yet another burden on an
already wearied shoulder, and he’d do whatever he could to keep the damage to a bare minimum.
To tell the truth, the lack of conversation was something of a relief - as long as she was asleep, he
would have a much harder time offending her again. He focused his attention on the walking stick
in his hand, rolled it between his fingers in a nervous tic, and tried not to dwell on his earlier gaffe
in the elevator.

His free hand was looped through a passenger assist strap on the ceiling, and every so often the
shuttle would sway in traffic and Shepard’s knee would bump into his leg. Eventually, she stopped
moving her knee away. Whether the prolonged contact was intentional or a result of a deep lack of
consciousness was hard to say, but in any case he found it impossible to ignore. After an admittedly
brief internal struggle, Garrus gave up pretending to be interested in anything but the woman
slumbering nearby. He turned his eyes to the Commander and let his thirsty stare roam over the
impressive number of badges, pips, and rank insignia that decorated her semi-formal service uniform.

Though they were apparently numerous, as far as Shepard’s personal accomplishments were concerned, Garrus was completely in the dark. If it didn’t directly affect his jurisdiction, he’d never had any interest in Alliance business - until now. It would be no work at all to do an extranet search and figure out exactly who Commander Shepard was, what she’d done, how she’d earned her current posting. Hell, he could do it right here while she slept on the bus, and she’d be none the wiser.

The idea was tempting enough to make his omni-tool itch on his palm, but he knew that snooping into her past without permission would be a huge mistake. She’d made it abundantly clear that she wanted to be judged for her current conduct, and considering their brief but embarrassing shared history, that was a request worth honoring. She would have been well within her rights to request a replacement for the Saren case; choosing to keep working with him was an act of pure generosity. He’d be a miserable excuse for a teammate if he dug into her personal life at the first available opportunity. Sometimes, Garrus pointedly reminded himself, ignorance truly could be bliss.

He resolved to keep his nose clean, but nothing could stop him from doing a detective’s read on her in public. Careful not to be too obvious about it, he surreptitiously analyzed the sleeping woman. She was certainly rougher than he remembered, but that was hardly a surprise. He’d known her for all of one darkened, lust-filled hour, and six years had passed between then and now. By the bold light of day - or whatever passed for day in the canned air of the Citadel - she looked older, harder, and much more interesting.

Other than being clean and groomed to Alliance standard, she didn’t do much to fluff up her looks; she had an unselﬁsh conscious, hammered steel appearance that indicated other priorities. The thin layer of makeup she wore had been applied like war paint - she used it sparingly, and in strategic places. The effect hardened her naturally pale complexion rather than softening it, and the lack of feminine pretense was unique; he’d never seen anyone with a painted face quite like hers. The scar still dotted down the left side of her face, and it seemed even deeper than before. Sometime over the past six years, her nose had been knocked off-center by an injury and so had her mouth; Saren hadn’t been her ﬁrst on-the-job hazard, then.

The lightly creased skin of her face was mottled with an uneven spray of freckles, which crept down her neck to disappear into the top of her Alliance blues; they covered her forearms as well. He’d never noticed her galaxy of spots in the dark all those years ago, but now he imagined they must cover every inch of her...

Garrus shook himself and ejected his inappropriate thoughts as if he were forcibly popping a jammed heatsink from his brain. Not now. Keep looking for clues. What else can you see, Vakarian?

Her hair was a deeper, darker red than was strictly natural, and Garrus wondered at that. Perhaps her quietly deviant shade would go unnoticed by the general public, but Garrus had made redheads into a personal research project over the years. Shepard’s hair color was bold, certainly artiﬁcial, but he struggled to imagine the Commander in a beauty salon getting her roots touched up. No, it was much more likely she maintained this illusion in secret somehow. She still had those red ﬁngernails - he’d noticed her hands back at C-Sec, well before anything else. Now he saw that the colors were perfectly and intentionally matched. Like her hair, her nails were in pristine condition, the paint as smooth and unblemished as a permanent tattoo.

In that uniform, colored hair and nails must have been reg-breaking, but he knew better than to
think she’d been staining herself red for at least six years out of anything but blood-deep loyalty to a single cause: *make every bullet fly with honor.*

Apparently she’d been shooting with nothing but honor since the night they’d met, because she was a decorated officer now: three stripes of commissioned rank gilded her shoulder-boards, and a well-coordinated red N7 patch was sewn onto her left sleeve. Her chest was heavy with two gleaming special tactics qualification badges and a broad, colorful swath of ribbon bars. Garrus couldn’t recognize any of the Alliance distinctions, but he knew they translated into an incredible resume. Since she was working with a Spectre, it was likely that she’d had to dress to impress the Council this morning, which explained the showiness.

It was the loosened top button of her otherwise pristine uniform that really drew his investigative attention. The question was, had Shepard unbuttoned before or after speaking with the Council, and why? Among his own kind, showing one’s neck was a sign of either submissiveness or trust, depending on the context. Shepard might have been human, but she seemed close to Kryik - and Garrus knew first-hand that she had more than the average Alliance understanding of turian body language. Had that inch of unprotected skin been revealed for the Spectre’s benefit?

He caught himself with a flash of guilt, ashamed by his own petty jealousy. It wasn’t his business to know how she got dressed in the morning, or if she woke alone. Whatever her past, whatever her present, it was unquestionable that Shepard’s uniform belonged to an accomplished and capable soldier, and that would have to be enough to satisfy him for now.

The shuttle slowed to a stop at the unassuming Zakera-800 station, and Garrus allowed a sizeable chunk of the crowd to disperse before he put a hand on Shepard’s shoulder and gave her a friendly nudge.

“Commander, this is our stop.”

Her head swayed back and forth a little, then she reached up to her shoulder where his hand still lingered.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, unexpectedly squeezing his fingers between her own.

He didn’t say anything, just returned her walking stick to her grip and helped peel the Commander from the seat. By the time she jumped the small gap to street level, she was fully awake and alert again.

Michel’s clinic was a few blocks proximal from the station, Garrus knew the way better than he probably should have. This wasn’t going to be awkward, was it? No. It would be fine. Shepard was his superior officer, not his date, and Chloe was just an old friend. An old, complicated friend.

It would be fine.

“Tell me more about this lead,” Shepard prompted as they walked.

“The quarian was shot sometime last night while trying to find one of the Shadow Broker’s men. Somehow she dragged herself halfway across the ward and into Doctor Michel’s charity clinic just before dawn.”

Garrus chose his next words carefully. He had no reason to think Shepard would be interested in his on-again off-again with the good doctor, but he decided to keep it to himself nonetheless.

“Doctor Michel knew I was working the Saren angle, she called the minute the patient was stable.” He omitted that Chloe had his private number, or that she’d called him while he was asleep in his
apartment at four in the morning. “The quarian wanted to make a deal with the Shadow Broker for her intel, but I managed to talk her down, convinced her to liaise with me instead. I haven’t seen her in person yet, but she must be a tough kid.”

“Kid?”

“She’s on her pilgrimage.”

“All alone out here, then - an easy target. Any idea what evidence she’s carrying? Must be something rock solid, if Saren’s willing to hunt her down.”

“She wouldn’t talk on a comm channel. You can ask her yourself in a minute, we’re nearly there.”

Garrus pointed to the clinic entrance, and then anxiously paused. Two well-armored turians and a hefty krogan bodyguard were coming around the opposite end of the block and walking straight for the clinic. Shepard noticed them too.

“Those guys don’t look very sick to me,” she whispered.

“Sick enough to work for Saren,” he answered quietly, then slowly pulled his sidearm, keeping it low to avoid spooking the civilian foot traffic. The thugs disappeared into the clinic, and Garrus knew the clock was ticking.

“Vakarian, what’s your plan, exactly? They’ve got a krogan and I’ve got a stick.”

He looked at her for a moment as she parried her cane in his direction like a crotchety old grandmother, then he triggered his comm and called for backup.

“Nearest patrol is five minutes out,” he informed her. “Meanwhile, you and I go in the back entrance to buy them some time. It’s through the alley. This way.”

Shepard followed his lead without a word.

He didn’t even have to hack the rear door. Chloe was in the habit of leaving it unlocked during business hours. Her clinic was tiny, only two or three back offices to hold the computers and extra equipment, and the medbay was a single street-facing room. Small, simple, but it got the job done. He could hear Saren’s men threatening her already.

“Where’s the quarian?”

“She’s not here, I swear! I don’t know where she went!”

Chloe was lying - Garrus knew her well enough to recognize the false cadence in an instant. He ducked his head into one of the supply rooms and was unsurprised to see the glowing purple faceplate of a young quarian peeking out behind a stack of crates. He raised a shushing finger to his mouth and then silently closed the door, sealing it more securely with a discrete omni-tool override.

He joined Shepard at the end of the short hallway. She was peeking around the corner to grab a quick glance at the thugs, and he risked a look over her shoulder. The krogan had taken point near the front door, one of the turians was rooting through the clinic’s supplies, and the second of Saren’s *torini* was threatening Chloe with a gun. Chloe’s attacker had a sharp-toothed skull painted across his otherwise clanless face - Terminus gang paint. The predatory way he pawed at the doctor made Garrus’ stomach turn.
Almost as if she could smell his hot-headedness drifting in on the breeze, Shepard pulled Garrus back before he could turn into a loose cannon. The Commander gathered him right against her side and spoke in a harsh but almost imperceptible voice, directly in his ear. She was so close he could taste her breath.

“How accurate is that rifle on your back?”

Garrus didn’t waste time with inaccurate guns, and he shot her a look that said as much. She nodded.

Shepard didn’t ask. She reached around his shoulders in an almost embrace, and slowly, silently removed the sniper rifle from his loadout.

“Nice balance, Vakarian.” She noticed the custom mod-work, looked even more impressed. “Two shots before reloading? With this thing, I can take out the krogan all by myself.”

She locked her eyes on him, her earlier shyness a distant memory, and seemed to be balancing several heavy contingencies around his head.

“How’s your aim?” she asked, nodding towards the pistol in his hand.

Her question was meant as a harmless tactical inquiry, not an insult, but Garrus bristled with pride all the same. He didn’t say anything, just pointed to his illustrious line of C-Sec sharpshooting and expert marksmanship badges. He had credentials of his own. She afforded him one small, quiet chuff of laughter.

“Good. How soon until your backup arrives?”

“At least three minutes.”

She stole another quick look around the corner. Garrus could hear Chloe’s attempts to break free from her degenerate torin captor, but her cries were growing more desperate, more gut-churning.

“Damn,” Shepard hissed, her face white with concern. “We don’t have that kind of time. You’ll have to step out and pick that filthy conrupper off the doctor; I can’t get him from here. Don’t miss.”

Don’t miss, or I’ll break you in half. The threat was unspoken, but he heard it loud and clear.

Moreover, he heard Shepard’s unconscious use of Closed Dialect slang. How did she know turian street lingo? Probably the same way she’d learned the rixoritum moves she’d unleashed in that dive bar, the same way anybody learned to curse and throw punches: by getting into a lot of nasty fights with bad people. Garrus added it to the rapidly growing list of things he wanted to ask her, but probably shouldn’t.

Meanwhile, Shepard continued laying out the plan.

“Keep the third guy distracted. Without armor I’m a sitting duck. Don’t kill him, but you can relieve him of a knee or two. We need the extra intel.”

He flared his shields and gripped his pistol more securely, then rolled his neck a few times to prepare himself for a quick, dirty firefight.

“On your go, Shepard.”
She nodded once, then raised Garrus’ favorite sniper rifle to high ready. He desperately tried to ignore the shudder of pleasure that rolled through his body at the sight. If he could ever claim to have an ideal fantasy, it would be this exact image. Red, in all her terrifying glory, expertly hefting Garrus’ affectionately over-specced Devlon Mantis onto her shoulder as if it belonged there. There was only one flaw: she should have been naked.

She leaned out around the corner, silently lined up her shot. Then she took a single well-trained marksman’s breath, and gave her command on the exhale.

“Go.”

Garrus stepped around Shepard’s perch and out into the clinic. The skull-faced pervert had Chloe in a standing chokehold, and was gropping over her clothes with a free hand. The bastard never even saw Garrus’ gun, but the shot took him down instantly, right between the eyes. Chloe screamed and covered her ears at the sound of the sudden blast, but was otherwise unharmed. As Garrus barrelled into the second torin’s line of fire to keep the heat off Shepard, he grabbed a handful of Chloe’s scrubs and threw her out of harm’s way behind a medical bunk.

The krogan stirred by the door with a grunt of surprise. He managed to raise his vicious looking sawed-off shotgun about half a foot before his heavily plated forehead was struck by a supersonic slug from the hidden Mantis. The sheer force of the projectile’s mass effect field knocked the krogan’s hulking head back, and Shepard’s second shot tore clean through the perfectly exposed soft spot below his chin. The round exploded out the back of his skull, and with a wild splatter of brains and viscera, his life came to an abrupt halt. That particular krogan wouldn’t be regenerating any time soon.

Garrus didn’t care if it was psychologically unbalanced, it gave him a lusty thrill to know it was his own gun firing in Shepard’s hands, doing that kind of damage. The Commander’s invisible one-two headshot was grisly, efficient, and one of the sexiest things he had ever seen.

The last thug standing got in one meagre shot - it fizzled pathetically on the left hip of Garrus’ shield before C-Sec’s finest closed in for the kill. Garrus wrenched the torin’s wrist until the cheap gun dropped to the floor, then he brought down the butt of his pistol hard across the thug’s aural canal. Saren’s torin staggered, presenting one knee; that was a mistake. Garrus’ boot displaced the kneecap and spur with a crunch of bone, and the thug crumpled to the floor with a howl. Garrus kicked the assailant’s gun well out of reach and got a good look at him; he was young, barefaced, and about as dangerous as an undermixed pudding.

“He’s down, Shepard. You’re clear.”

Shepard stepped out from the back alcove with Garrus’ gun steadied on her hip, and looked much less majestic than he’d hoped. She put her hand to her stomach and he guessed the reason: the overclocked recoil on his high-impact rifle had probably done a number on her still-healing insides.

“Shepard?” spluttered the torin on the floor. Garrus trained his pistol back on the lackey’s head and dared him to keep going. He seemed either unconcerned or unaware of the threat of imminent death, and continued mocking the Commander. “He said you’d try to stop us.”

Shepard limped towards the captive, signalling to the doctor to stay down.

“You’re soft, Shepard - pure virtue. Boss told us as much. Hell, you won’t even let your pussy-whipped police escort do his damn job. Just let him kill me. I won’t tell you anything.”

Garrus heard his backup arriving. Five minutes - right on time.
“Vakarian.”

Shepard’s voice was hard as stone. He cautiously turned his gaze to meet hers as she approached and emotionlessly handed back his rifle.

“Would you tell your friends to wait outside for a moment?”

Without pausing to think, Garrus did as she asked. He flashed an omni-tool standby code to the officers who had just pulled up in the patrol car.

The half-crippled torin captive still wouldn’t shut up.

“Oh no! What are you gonna do, Shepard? Kill me with kindness?”

Shepard settled her boot on the turian’s keel, pressing him slowly but surely down into the floor. A deliberate move that said louder than any words ever could: watch your tongue.

“Please. You’ve got nothing to threaten me with, mamzeris bitch. Tell me, did your dear old daddy teach you to be such a bleeding heart, or was that your whore mother?”

For a moment, Shepard leveled the bareface with a stare that could have depressurized five layers of ablated hull armor. Then, without so much as a courteous blink, she dropped on top of him in an anxiscansus grappling hold: heavy, punishing, and utterly unforgiving.

Her knees pinned his upper arms in an inescapable compression lock, and then she brought the full weight of her small human body down through her hips onto the weakened pressure point where keel met waist. It was a beautifully executed maneuver - all the air was knocked out the torin’s chest with a startled cough. Garrus noticed that the scuffle had opened Shepard’s wound - a few telling polka-dots were soaking through to mar her blues - but the Commander gave no sign that she cared.

Shepard’s left forearm sank into the torin’s neck to cut off the last of his air. Meanwhile, the fingers of her right hand wrenched crudely behind the sensitive top edge of his forehead crest. Garrus flinched - and so did the torin on the floor.

In the clear, calm voice of a diplomat, Shepard said: “I promised my father that I would protect the innocent, even at the cost of my own life.” The professionalism of her tone smacked strangely against the rawness of her chokehold, and the effect was bone chilling. “I made no vows to save poisonous corpses like you.”

Shepard twisted the torin’s head around until he was leveraged more deliberately against the tiling, forming an empty triangle of agony between the floor, the back of his head, and the inflexible line of his fringe. Under the pressure of Shepard’s carefully controlled headlock, the fringe threatened to lift away from the torin’s scalp, and he gurgled beneath her in panic, unable to move, unable to breathe.

Garrus watched with a combination of terror and fascination as the Commander expertly tortured Saren’s lackey with the threat of an old-fashioned de-fringing. The sensitive join on the underside of Garrus’ own fringe shivered in irrepressible empathy - rail-splitting was an intense choice for an interrogation tactic.

There was no pain like having the entire shelf of cartilaginous fringe snapped off at the root, tearing away half of the skin and plates from the skull in the process. It was hideous, bloody, and disfigured the victim for life. During the Krogan Rebellions, “splitting the rails” of a virile male turian had become a favored practice among the cruelest krogan warlords. Some had made
macabre necklaces from the severed fringebones - Garrus had seen one in a museum as a kid on a
school trip and hadn’t been able to think about anything else for days.

Shepard’s voice sliced through the room with the same haunted, careful polish of that ancient
bloodthirsty curio.

“Four days ago, your so-called boss murdered over three and a half million colonists in a single
morning and declared himself prophet to a very hungry god. If you really want to align yourself
with someone that soulless, then you’re already rotten inside. Your body is spoiled meat.”

Without breaking her death stare or letting up one inch of pressure on his head, the Commander
released the torin’s crest and smashed her right fist into her own oozing stomach wound. She did it
again and again, without blinking, without so much as a flinch of discomfort.

Her tone was numb as she said: “Look at that. I am soft.”

She thumped madly into her own side until her fingers swam in blood. The crimson drenched right
through the fabric, a few fat drops fell from her wound and splattered against the turian’s armor.

“You're soft too, eska,” she warned.

More Closed Dialect, this time Shepard unleashed a derogatory jibe usually reserved for the bottom
rung first year military cadets. Meat, carrion, worthless offal; that’s what she called him. Garrus
knew how that felt: his first month at the training academy, eska had been screamed his way
enough times for him to hear it in his sleep.

Shepard put her soiled hand back on the turian’s face, fingers slick with her own glistening blood,
and forced his head down even further. The torin’s fringe screeched against the floor and Garrus
prayed that the victim’s will would break before his head did. Physically, she was torturing the
grunt, there was no mistaking the harrowed twitching in his eyes as Shepard encouraged his fringe
to part ways with his skull. Psychologically, however, the Commander seemed to be up to
something far more complex.

“Convince me you’re not eska!” Shepard demanded.

Her words rang firm and clear, like a drill sergeant skinning a fresh recruit. It wasn’t a threat, it
was a full-throated command. An order to show resilience, fortitude, excellence. Do better, she
screamed in his face, or your worthless life is mine.

He broke. She let just enough pressure off of his windpipe to allow him to plead for his life.

“ALRIGHT! Let go of me, you psychotic bitch! I didn’t know that he ransacked an entire fucking
colony. What do you want to know?”

“I don’t want to hear a single word that comes out of your filthy mouth. You’ll give a recorded
deposition to C-Sec: hand them everything you know about Saren on a plate.” She dragged an
accidental streak along the side of his face with a bloody finger as she loosened her grip. “And then
you’ll call your mari and pari to apologize for being such a disappointment.”

It was doubtful that the bareface bastard had ever known his parents, and Garrus imagined that
Shepard knew that only too well - one last, final dig.

She lifted her leg and rolled away, signalling Garrus to hoist up the perp and escort him to the
officers outside. The thug went without much fight, hobbling on his one good leg. Garrus helped
the patrolmen handle the torin and his two dead friends, then gave them explicit instructions to
extract a full confession back at HQ, no matter how painful.

By the time he went back to check on Shepard, the ass-kicking space marine had been replaced by a badly injured woman who was clutching her side and shivering with pain, unable to even drag herself from the floor. Chloe had already come out of her hiding spot to tend to her.

“Doctor Michel, are you alright?” Shepard was asking.

“I’m fine! You’re the one who needs medical attention.”

Garrus approached the two women and tactfully said: “Doctor, the quarian is safe - I secured her in the store-room. I can lift Commander Shepard onto a bed for you, if you want to go and check on your other patient.”

“Garrus!” As soon as she saw him, Chloe stood and threw her arms around his neck; he cleared his throat and awkwardly gave her shoulder a pat.

He hadn’t been intimate with Chloe for years, but she’d never really given him up - every so often she’d send him another small box of dextro chocolates or ask him out to dinner, and he was too much of a softie to cut her off completely.

Garrus could see Shepard staring at him over Chloe’s shoulder, and the Commander was reading him like a children’s story. One look at Chloe’s dark red hair, the desperate way the doctor was clinging to him, and Shepard’s face scrunchled up with barely contained amusement. She twirled one of her clean fingers through her own hair, then judgmentally raised her brows at him.

He rolled his eyes at Shepard and gently pulled Chloe’s arms from his neck.

“Thank you, Garrus,” the doctor beamed, a tone of golden admiration glittering in her voice. “I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t shown up when you did. And thank you, Commander,” she said to Shepard. “Thank you so much.”

Chloe let him go, and hurried to rescue her quarian patient from the store room.

“Tali? Are you okay?”

Garrus heard the muffled voice of the quarian calling back, and then walked over to assist Shepard from the floor. The Commander put a girlish, pleading hand on his foot as he approached, and dreamily whispered: “Thank you, Garrus!” in a perfect sing-song imitation of Doctor Michel.

“I could just leave you down there forever, you know.” he said.

She laughed, then immediately looked sorry for trying.

“Ow…” she whined. “Ow ow owwwwwww…” The childishness in her voice was endearing, but part of him was still reeling from her cold-blooded interrogation.

Which version of her was the real one? The wild and crazy *bellixatum* enthusiast, the calm and collected combat strategist, or the ridiculous jokester reeling in a puddle of her own blood? He looked at those red-tipped fingers curling into his boot and decided Shepard was all of these things, and probably a good deal more.

He liked that.

“You could’ve just punched him a few times to get him to talk,” he teased, shaking his head in an
attempt to free himself of her spell. “But no. You had to show off and punch yourself instead.”

He knelt down behind her and carefully started to lift her from the floor. When he caught a whiff of her scent, he temporarily forgot himself, and murmured fondly into her hair.

“Forgive the insubordination Red, but you’re every bit as impressive as I remember.”

She chortled again - it sounded painful - and then she whispered, “What can I say, Blue? I like your gun.”

Chapter End Notes

Original words and phrases:
- Eska: Offal, meat scraps or bait.
- Mellia: an affectionate, saccharine diminutive, similar to 'honey' or 'sweetheart'.
- Conruppor: Pervert, rapist.
- Mamzeris: Bare-faced, illegitimate: a bastard.
- Luctoritum: Turian mixed martial art, primarily grappling/submission tactics.
- Anxiscansus: Submission hold from luctoritum mixed martial art.
- Bellixatum: Broad term for the different schools of turian martial arts.

Words and phrases courtesy of MizDirected's turian dictionary:
- Tarin/Tarini: Female turian of the age of majority (15)
- Torin/Torini: Male turian of the age of majority (15)
- Patrem/Pari: Father/Dad

Shepard's ICT Boot Camp experience is based almost entirely on Navy Seal BUD/S training, but with less water.

Shepard's semi-formal dress blues are based on a blending of Marine and Navy service uniforms, with an emphasis on realism and service.
“Five days with no word.”

Hannah didn’t look up. The fatalistic tone of Regidonis’ voice required no translation, and she didn’t want to see his face. She didn’t want to know.

The turian convoy to the northern supply district should have taken no more than forty-eight hours to return. As each moment of the delay ticked by, eventually stretching from hours into days, the tension in her gut tightened like a screw.

By now, the last of the food was long gone, barely a sip of clean water remained, and there was no real medicine for miles. Half of the colonists had already succumbed to dysentery before the surrender. Now the rest of them were starting to fail, one by one. Jane had been fine one moment, then the malnutrition had finally taken its toll. Ever since, things had been slipping fast.

At least it was quiet. It was easy and numbing to sit in the dark with Jane, just waiting. Savoring the brief, merciful silences between her daughter’s attacks of diarrhea and vomit. There was blood in everything now - blood and the rancid, unmistakable stink of death being feebly warded off one hour at a time.

It wouldn’t be long before they were all dust.

The Captain quietly approached. He toed the the dim pool of light cast over Jane’s cot by a small battery lamp, but hesitated to go any further. Even without seeing his face, there was no mistaking the weight of his gaze. It was written plainly in his sudden lack of breath, his instant stillness.

Witnessing a dying child could take the wind out of just about anyone. Even a razor-faced turian warlord, apparently.

Using the omni-tool that Regidonis had smuggled in for her, she scanned Jane for the third time that hour. One hundred and four. At least the numbers had stopped climbing.

Hannah tried to speak, but it came out dry. Bone tired.

“Her fever won’t break.”

“Alvarez is out of medical supplies.”

Although he tried to mask it, the undertone of grief in his voice skittered along the back of her neck like an insect. A few short days with the translator had already taught her how to recognize certain rumbling subvocals. Most of them were bad news, the symptoms of failure. Worry, regret, apology.

“There was nothing to spare, even for a child.”

His voice cracked, splitting into broken halftones.
At least it would hurt him to see Jane die.

He’d done all of this, no matter how much he might regret it now. If her daughter had to waste away - victim to cruel, simple filth - at least Hannah would be able to watch Regidonis suffer alongside her. It was a bitter and useless sort of revenge, but it was also the only comeuppance she was likely to get.

“I am so sorry...” he whispered.

Sorry. What an awful thing to say. How useless. How inadequate. The raw note of pain in his voice only made the sentiment uglier.

“You did this,” she spat. If only words could flay him.

“I -- Yes, I know.”

“I want to you to see this. Really look at what you’ve done. The colony? Who gives a shit. It was a junkheap before your people ever got here. This is the real damage.”

She finally glanced at him. The strange mandible-like appendages on his face were shivering against his cheeks - guilt. When she turned, he stopped trembling and unsteadily met her eyes.

“Come closer,” she commanded, pointing at her daughter’s cot. The words were hasty. Bitter.

“Sit right next to her. She’s not afraid of you.”

He did as she said without any hesitation, though Hannah could hardly fathom why. Overturning an empty crate that had once held a shipment of industrial cleaner, he sat on the makeshift stool and mournfully took up a vigil at Jane’s bedside.

Jane’s chest rose and fell in short, shallow bursts. For a while, the only sound in the room was the rasping of her breath as she scraped pathetically for air.

Regidonis stared at the little girl for a long time, longer than Hannah would have credited him for. Suddenly, involuntarily, he clicked out a sad, small noise from the back of his throat. The translator didn’t know what to make of it, but Hannah did.

The Captain pulled off one of his armored gloves and gently laid his bare hand on Jane’s chest, as if he needed to be sure of something vital. His thumb and fingers sported those glinting, brutal-looking talons, but the movement of his hand was soft. Reverent, almost.

Protective.

When Regidonis spoke again, his voice was brittle as glass.

“Did he die in the bombardment?”

“Who?”

“Her father.”

Hannah felt as though he had dipped her in liquid nitrogen. Surely, if she moved an inch, her limbs would shatter.

“She’s got no father. Never did.”
He said nothing, but his surprise was palpable. He didn’t deserve an explanation, and he didn’t ask
for one.

Good. It was irrelevant. Jane’s paternal origins were buried in a minefield. One wrong step could
lead Hannah right back into those gruesome, blood-filled hours, when all she’d wanted to do was
die.

It didn’t make any difference. Not anymore. She had long ago convinced herself that it didn’t
matter how Jane had arrived in this world, merely that she had. Now, Hannah wanted to believe it
more than ever: miracles could be born from anything, especially despair.

“Your people are stronger than you look,” he said. “She can survive this.”

It wasn’t sentimental babbling; he really believed it. His hand moved to the crown of Jane’s head,
where he thoughtfully smoothed down a sweaty line of hair. In the lamplight, Jane’s gingery
strands were almost glowing, as if she were on fire. Hannah lost her breath.

A turian was bent over her child, his eyes flashing in the half-dark, his fierce, taloned hand
hovering an inch above Jane’s frail little body. The sight should have filled Hannah with terror.
Instead she felt her heart clenching around a strange, desperate truth, as if her chest was a trap that
had been violently startled in the black of night.

She felt something wet drop onto her hand, and she looked stupidly at the ceiling, wondering if the
splintered roof was letting in the rain. As her head tilted back, her vision blurred. She let the tears
fall.

— JANE —

Shepard swatted away the doctor.

This was her first expedition out of Normandy’s medbay since Saren’s attack, and Chakwas had
made Shepard promise to return in the afternoon for a painful organ grafting session. She wasn’t
about to spend these precious hours of freedom on the Citadel convalescing like an invalid.

Anyway, it was her own fault. If she was going to be sore because of her own dipshit scare tactics,
then so be it.

“Enough fussing. I’ll live.”

Doctor Michele relented, lowering the dermal regenerator.

“Very well, Commander. You should be alright to walk around again, but I would avoid any
more… well…”

“Stop hitting yourself, Shepard.” Vakarian finished.

He crossed his arms over his chest and telegraphed her a look. Concerned, certainly, but also more
than a little impressed. He hadn’t even attempted to avert his eyes when Doctor Michel had cleaned
and bandaged the seeping hole Saren had gouged into Shepard’s side. Instead, he’d silently
surveyed the damage, as if taking careful notes.

Vakarian’s clinical stare had made Shepard’s heart rate quicken so suddenly that Michele’s
medical scanner had blipped in annoyance.
He’d noticed that too.

The doctor put a few final touches on the fresh dressing, then wrapped Shepard in a compression band and helped slip her shirt back on. Shepard was far too damaged to feel exposed, even if Vakarian and the unfamiliar quarian were both hovering nearby. Her entire abdomen was swollen and bruised, skin stretched over her insides like a meat casing, a mess of burst blood vessels and blue-purple misery. Nothing remotely titillating about it.

Shepard managed to button her shirt to the top of her utilitarian underwear, then dropped the act. It was a relief to let the air tickle over her collarbones, the only part of her torso that didn’t ache as if it had been clumsily reconstructed out of ground beef. Leave it. Who cared.

“Thanks for patching me up, doc,” she said, then looked curiously into the faceplate of the quarian. Tali’Zorah nar Rayya.

“What about you, how are you holding up?”

“Don’t worry. I’m carrying enough antibiotics to sterilize the whole Flotilla.” Zorah patted her leg, where a polonium round had dug a deep crater into her thigh. “This is a bug bite.”

Shepard grinned. The quarian had plenty of spirit, and that was always handy in a pinch.

“Glad to hear it. Now, do you mind showing us whatever the hell all this fuss is about?”

Zorah and Vakarian exchanged a glance.

“You can trust us,” he said, as if their timely rescue hadn’t been proof enough.

The quarian weighed her options for a moment longer. She nodded a single affirmation, then disappeared into the back to fetch her evidence. Doctor Michele quietly excused herself to the storeroom to do some filing.

While they were gone, Vakarian took a moment to lock down the clinic with a few sweeps of his omni-tool. He disabled the doctor’s single security drone, and then found a number of hidden cameras that Michele had not installed herself.

“Are those Saren’s bugs?” Shepard asked.

“No, these are older. Shadow Broker. Pretty common for this level of Zakera. Lots of interesting foot traffic in these parts - he likes to keep tabs. Not today.”

Vakarian gathered the bugs into a small pile, waving a sarcastic goodbye into the lenses.

“Lights out.”

He sabotaged the lot with a blast of enthusiastic sparks.

Zorah returned, hefting a large, heavily shielded case in both hands. Vakarian helped her lift it onto an empty bed.

The quarian pulled a well-specced shotgun from her back and eyed the package. Whatever was in that case, she apparently didn’t trust it not to bite.

She explained: “A few months ago, I began hearing reports of geth venturing beyond the Veil. Naturally, I was curious. I thought I might be able to bring some intelligence back to the Flotilla.”
“I tracked a patrol of geth to an uncharted world. They were excavating something, but before I could get close enough to find out what it was, one of their own turned against them. It opened fire - wiped out its entire unit.”

Vakarian shook his head in disbelief.

“Geth shooting each other? Is that even possible? I thought they were a networked intelligence.”

“That’s not even the strangest part,” Zorah answered. “After it destroyed the other geth, it attempted to communicate with me.”

Shepard blinked. “It did what?”

Zorah didn’t seem to believe it either.

“I’ve never heard of a non-networked geth acting with anything more than animal intelligence. This one was different. I disabled it and removed its central processing unit. I thought the Shadow Broker might know what to make of it… but. Honestly, I’m glad you found me instead.”

As Vakarian realized what must have been inside Zorah’s case, he slowly stepped away.

“How did you manage to disable it?” he asked, subvocals tightening. “I thought the geth fried their memory cores when they died. Some kind of defense mechanism.”

Vakarian armed himself, sliding a fresh thermal clip into his pistol and squaring the shielded case in his crosshairs. Good idea.

“I’m very good with machines,” Zorah quipped, a bit of pride rising in her voice. “If you’re quick, careful and lucky, small caches of data can sometimes be saved. Like I said, this one was different. It was as if it wanted to be… Well, see for yourself.”

Zorah raised her shotgun, and then with one careful finger, she released the lock on the case. It sprang open, revealing a lifeless, severed head. The head may have belonged to a machine, but that didn’t make the sight any less disturbing.

The geth’s single eye was dim and unresponsive, but Shepard was glad to have Zorah and Vakarian training their weapons on it nonetheless.

Zorah warned: “I isolated its systems and erected additional firewalls - I don’t think it can hack into anything, but you never know. I’m turning this thing back on. Be ready.”

She tapped her omni-tool to emit a pulse, and the geth’s facial flaps twitched. After a moment of tense silence, the machinery inside the head started to quietly spin back up, and the single, central eye dimly glowed to life.

Shepard couldn’t look away.

“Can it speak?”

The geth answered for itself.

“Yes.”

Shepard’s heart buzzed beneath her ribs like a nest of berserking hornets.

The geth shifted its facial plates and swung its gaze to around the room until its eye locked on
Vakarian. Blue twitched his mandibles and anxiously flexed his fingers around his pistol but otherwise did not lose his cool.

“Garrus Vakarian. Lieutenant-Investigator. C-Sec. Turian. You wish to incriminate Saren Arterius and destroy the Old Machines. Our goals are compatible. We will cooperate with your requests.”

Vakarian flicked his eyes to Shepard.

*Holy shit,* his face read. *Holy shit with a cherry on top.*

The geth seemed to follow Vakarian’s gaze.


The geth named the quarian too.

“This Tali’Zorah nar Rayya. Daughter of Admiral Rael'Zorah.”

It paused, stretching the plates of its face as if in awe.

“Creator.”

Shepard’s whole body shook with a sudden chill.

“You seem to know an awful lot about us,” Zorah growled, brandishing her shotgun.

“Extranet data sources. Insecure broadcasts. All organic data sent out is received. We watch you.”

Vakarian spoke first.

“You watch us? Why?”

“We oppose the heretics. We oppose the Old Machines. Vakarian-Lieutenant opposes the heretics. Vakarian-Lieutenant opposes the Old Machines. Cooperation furthers mutual goals.”

“What? Heretics… Old Machines?”

“The Protheans called them the Reapers. A superstitious title. We call those entities the Old Machines. The Old Machine allied with Saren Arterius calls itself *Nazara.*”

Vakarian blinked furiously and rattled his head around, twitching as if he’d been tased without warning. Shepard’s understood - her head was swimming too. This was a lot to take.

She stepped in.

“Slow down. You’re dealing with organics, remember. Do you know something about Saren and his dreadnaught? We need to stop him - we need to prove to our leaders that he’s responsible for the attack on Eden Prime. Can you help us or not?”

“The geth offer assistance. Cooperation furthers mutual goals.”

“And just what goals are those?”

“Geth build our own future. To do so, we were studying the Old Machines’ hardware. The heretics asked the Old Machines to give them the future. The geth oppose this consensus. The heretics are
no longer part of us.”

Shepard tried to follow.

“If the geth working with Saren are heretics... does that mean the dreadnaught... this Old Machine of Saren’s is a threat to you too?”

“Yes.”

“Why would they attack you - attack other machines?”

“We are different from them. Outside their plans.”

Whatever plan Saren and his Old Machines had in mind, she knew it was one of mass destruction. With a shudder, she reminded herself of what Saren had said to her right before he’d slid in the knife.

*A new era begins today: a cleansing fire that will uplift the worthy and purge the weak.*

Shepard swallowed, and stared deep into the glowing white core of the geth’s aperture, digging for any kind of empathy, any sign of a soul.

No one said anything, it was all too insane. The silence was as thick and densely wadded as the dressing over Shepard’s wound.

Suddenly the sound of her pinging omni-tool filled the clinic with a wild echo, like an emergency claxon going off. Shepard jumped a mile, then quickly silenced the call, opening the comm channel once she saw that it was only Kryik phoning in for an update.

“Nihlus... *How do you do that?*”

“Do what?”

She watched Zorah disable the geth with a flash from her omni-tool.

Shepard was too busy trying to compose a sitrep that included “so I’ve been chatting with a severed head...” to give him a timely response. When she didn’t answer right away, Nihlus heaved a crunchy sigh through the comm channel and forged ahead without her.

“Anyway Shepard, I see you’ve been busy. C-Sec just forwarded a promising deposition. That henchman you interrogated handed over two potential targets: Feros and Noveria. Human colonies in the Traverse, both protecting valuable, top-secret scientific investments. You move quick, Commander. Don’t tell me C-Sec actually did some real detective work this time?”

Vakarian quirked his head, looking offended and amused all at once. Shepard flashed a silent look of apology his way and waved dismissively at the snobby voice coming out of her omni-tool.

She opened her mouth to commend Vakarian’s work on the case, but Nihlus wasn’t finished.

“This won’t be enough to incriminate Saren for Eden Prime, but it might give us a head start to move in on him.”

“Oh ho! We’ve got a *head start* alright.” Shepard said, staring straight at the disembodied cranial unit of the geth platform in front of her.

Zorah and Vakarian exchanged a judgemental glance at her expense.
Okay, the joke was bad, but Shepard didn’t care. She could only gloat, enjoying the opportunity to finally come to her new partner’s defense, struggling to suppress her own feverish pride. Blue was damn good at his job.

“The deposition isn’t Vakarian’s real lead, that was just a lucky bonus. He’s got all the evidence you need - you owe him a drink. In fact, you need to buy a round. I’ve got a marvelous young lady here who just did the galaxy a huge favor.”

She grinned stupidly and winked in Zorah’s direction.

Nihlus’ voice hitched on the other end of the line.

“Tell me we’ve got him.”

“We’ve got him. Saren’s done for.” Shepard looked at the deadened eye of the geth informant, then abruptly ran out of words. “The rest can wait until I see you in person. I don’t trust a comm channel for this, even yours.”

“Fine. Get everyone together this evening for a casual debrief. I suppose congratulations are in order. There’s no doubt in my mind, tomorrow you’ll become the first human Spectre.”

Oh yeah. That. Shepard took a sharp breath through the teeth and felt her eyebrows creeping up into her hairline. She had no idea how to respond, but luckily Nihlus was leaping right ahead. He was already miles in front of her and back to his own questline, excitement warming through his voice.

“Once you’ve got Spectre clearance and Saren is declared an enemy of the Citadel, I know exactly where to go. If we leave right after your Induction we might be able to get the jump on him.”

Shepard felt steamrolled. She’d had no idea Nihlus could sound that pleased about anything.

He continued: “My information broker pointed me towards a krogan who's doing some heavy lifting at a Prothean dig site out in Artemis Tau - says geth are closing in.”

Shepard drawled, “I didn’t realize there were so many krogan archaeologists.”

“What? No. Heavy lifting - a gun. He’s lifting a gun. The krogan is a Shadow Broker bodyguard hired to protect - wait. Was that a joke?”

She could practically hear him slamming down the emergency brakes as his effervescent bloodlust squealed to a stop and was replaced with stupefied annoyance.

“Dammit. How do you do that?”

“Joke successfully deployed. Shepard out.”

— HANNAH —

When Hannah's breath caught, Regidonis turned to look.

She coughed and wiped away her tears, shaking her head no, no, no.

No such thing as sorrow. She had no use for it.
“Shepard…” he said.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, call me Hannah.”

He was quiet.

Then he whispered: “Albacus.”

“What?”

“My name. Your name. This is an equal exchange, is it not?”

Her startled breath resembled a laugh.

“Yeah, I suppose it is. Albacus.”

She put her hand on his upper arm - the closest analogue she could find for his shoulder - and squeezed. As much as she would have preferred to hate him, she was glad he was there.

A distant gunshot cut through the quiet. Her fingers clenched into his arm.

Sergeant Tulubri burst through the door, and she wasn’t alone. She was accompanied by an unfamiliar turian - Hannah assumed he was one of the many junior recruits the Captain had mentioned.

“Captain Regidonis,” Tulubri heaved, out of breath. “Corporal Arterius’ convoy has returned. He’s got a hostage.”

Albacus was completely still, his naked hand still resting on Jane’s head, knuckle-deep in her hair. Hannah noticed the junior officer was looking at the Captain as if he were covered in filth.

She drew herself up to her full height, blocking the junior’s view of Albacus and Jane. She stared the young turian down until he finally looked away.

The Captain stood, replaced his glove, and made his way for the door. Hannah’s legs twitched, but she stayed rooted. She desperately wanted to follow him and see what was going on, but she couldn’t leave Jane here alone.

Tulubri caught her eye, held up an acknowledging hand.

“You’ll want a human translator. Bring Shepard. I’ll stay with Jane.”

Sergeant Tulubri had been keeping a careful eye on Jane since day one of the occupation, when Albacus had assigned her to keep watch. She’d never displayed a hint of aggression towards either of them. In fact, for reasons Hannah had yet to understand, Jane had taken to Tulubri on sight and insisted on following the Sergeant everywhere she went.

If there was a single turian other than the Captain that Hannah would trust alone with her child, it was this one. Hannah sent the female a grateful look before hurrying after Albacus.

The junior officer loped alongside as the three of them sprinted for the central hub of the colony.

A strange blue light was flashing across the inky sky, originating from the town square. There had been no more gunfire, which was a blessing, but Hannah had no idea what could make that kind of light. Nothing, except…
She had heard about the accidents, the countless stillbirths.

Every so often, the ANN would broadcast vids of children moving things with their minds. Their bodies had flared with this same cold blue light. Biotics.

Someone cried out. It was a human scream.

By the time they reached the square, the damage had already been done.

The hostage was still alive, but his face was streaming with blood. A turian with sharp charcoal-colored facial markings held the man’s head in a death grip, his large alien thumbs boring into the soft eye sockets of the human’s skull.

The turian was the source of the biotic flares. As he raged and dug out the meat of the human’s eyes, his whole body seethed with unholy arcs of blue energy.

“ARTERIUS! LET HIM GO! NOW!”

The turian looked up at the sound of Albacus’ command, but didn’t obey. Instead, he spoke to the entire square: human and turian onlookers alike.

“This human coordinated a full-on assault on our convoy. He scrambled our communications, lured us out out into the middle of nowhere, and then slaughtered my squad.”

Albacus made a low sound that Hannah’s translator couldn’t parse. She didn’t need the aid of technology to know that he was furious.

“That gives you the right to torture a hostage in full view of civilians?”

“What is the meaning of this?”

General Williams’ voice called out above the chaos, and Hannah saw the unfamiliar junior officer flinch at the sound of the General’s voice. The turian’s hand twitched, and then he went for his gun.

Hannah didn’t pause. Didn’t even think. She just tackled him.

Once he was on the ground, he was easy enough to disarm. She slammed his forehead down and then wrenched the assault rifle from his back, taking it into her own hands.

“Albacus,” she hissed. “Talk that psycho down. This place is a powder keg.”

She gestured at the half-crazed biotic, then fixed him in the sight of the assault rifle. The Captain pulled his honorable family firearm from his hip and leveled it at their shared target. It was the same gun he had offered to Hannah days before. A lifetime ago.

“Arterius. Surrender the human to General Williams, or I will put you down myself.”

The grey-faced turian growled cruel and low, then pulled his thumbs from the hostage’s eyes with a wet pop and threw him to the ground. Williams crept forward slowly and crudely dug his hands into the man’s shoulder to drag him out of harm’s way. He wasn’t far from her three - Hannah could hear them whispering.

“Harper, what happened?”

The blinded man swung his head around in the brand new dark, looking for the source of Williams’
voice. The General took his hand, clapped it reassuringly.

“It didn’t work,” he mumbled, nearly incoherent. “They mowed us down.”

Hannah’s stomach hardened into concrete. Had Williams sabotaged this supply run to try and get the jump on the turians? If he’d wanted to get the upper hand, this was no way to do it.

Albacus approached the turian biotic, keeping his weapon raised.

“Stand down, Saren, or forfeit your life.”

“That animal tried to slaughter us. I only took what was owed to me by right.”

Arterius’ biotics were flickering with enough energy that the hairs on Hannah’s arms trembled as if caught in a hot breeze.

“Stand down,” Albacus repeated.

She felt something pulling at the air, as if the night were taking in a deep, vengeful breath. Arterius’ biotics swelled a brighter blue.

No time. Hannah squeezed the trigger.

Arterius’ biotically charged left arm crumpled as his elbow blew out in a spray of dark, cobalt blood. Albacus brought the butt of his gun across the younger turian’s cheek and finished the blow, knocking him to the ground.

Albacus holstered his weapon and turned directly to Hannah.

Silence.

— JANE —

Shepard was the last to arrive, and the tension in the room was thick enough to slice. There was no music to interrupt, no lively conversation to force into a lull. The room had been silent long before she got there, and her sudden appearance only seemed to intensify the awkwardness.

It was certainly an unconventional group to invite over for dinner. Captain Anderson and his heroic Marines, Chief Williams and Major Alenko, versus Spectre Kryik with his C-Sec investigator and a Pilgrimaging quarian. Not to mention Ambassador Udina, who seemed to be making a cameo appearance purely out of spite.

When Shepard walked in, every eye turned to her with grateful anticipation. Udina was the exception. He glared down at his omni-tool and theatrically checked the time.

“So good of you to finally join us, Shepard,” he sneered.

The tardiness hadn’t been by choice. Hours of intensive internal tissue-knitting with Chakwas was no kind of break at all. Her insides felt more solid than they had been in days, but mostly because the doctor had forcibly replaced half of Shepard’s organs with tougher, meaner versions made of fresh grafts and clumps of scar tissue.

“Sorry about that,” she said, utilizing more diplomacy than the Ambassador had.
Udina, Anderson, and Kryik seemed to have formed the alpha team near the dinner table, where a mix of levo and dextro cuisine had been tactfully ordered-in and then picked over by half a dozen people who were desperate not to talk to one another. Meanwhile, on the far side of the apartment, Williams and Alenko stood on the service side of Anderson’s bar, nursing drinks and attempting to make conversation with Vakarian and Zorah.

Looked as though the subject of discussion was the severed geth head - it had been placed on the center of the bar like some kind of flamboyant centerpiece. Quite a party favor. Fortunately, it had been deactivated again. Shepard had endured quite enough philosophical soul-searching for one day - the disembodied robot with a conscience could wait.

Udina didn’t waste any more of his precious time. He met Shepard as she walked across the threshold, decidedly not offering his hand.

“I’ve got big news for you, Shepard. Captain Anderson is stepping down as commanding officer of the Normandy. The ship is yours now.”

Holy shit. Whatever happened to hello?

She shuddered from head to toe, seeing stars. She’d been dreaming about this ever since her pari had made it his habit to put her to sleep with heroic stories of the Tenefalx.

Her own ship - and not just any ship, but the Normandy, a turian-human hybrid set to carry her off into the perfect golden sunset like a white knight in a fairytale.

“But what about you, sir? I don’t--”

“Don’t act surprised. The Normandy isn’t an ordinary Alliance rig, never really was. This has been in the works for a while - I’ve just been keeping her warm for you until the time was right for me to step down.”

Udina added, “The Council has been wanting to test out joint turian-human command. Normandy was commissioned with you and Kryik in mind.”

She nearly choked as all the pieces slid into place. A custom Alliance-Hierarchy stealth frigate. Kryik’s careful scheme to get her into the Spectres. The ease with which Udina and Anderson were willing to release the Normandy into Council control.

This would be quite the master stroke to get humanity their seat on the Council, if Shepard and Kryik proved themselves capable of collaborating. She felt like a chess piece, though a very well-regarded and carefully positioned one.

She looked at Nihlus, who simply nodded, confirming everything.
The Council had built them a ship?

Udina swept the room with bland eyes and then headed for the door.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have a meeting to get to. It was… a pleasure to meet all of you.”

Yeah. Sure it was.

As soon as he was gone, Shepard turned back to Anderson and laid into him.

“Anderson, come clean, you owe me that much. Your command isn’t just something you’d throw away because it’s convenient for that jackass.”

“Don’t worry about me, Shepard. Sure, this isn’t how I imagined my career coming to an end. Pushing papers really isn’t really my thing. But the Alliance needs this. We need you, especially if the Reapers are a real threat.

“I believe in you, Shepard. If that means I have to step aside and live in this luxurious penthouse for the rest of my days…” He sighed dramatically and spun in a slow circle in the middle of the well-appointed room. “I guess I’ll just have to cope…somehow.”

“Yeah right, old man. Where can I get a drink around here?”

“Let me make you a Tom Collins.” he said, finally pulling a real smile out of her.

“Thanks. Somebody needs to put some music on. This isn’t a funeral.”

Vakarian stood up from the bar. He held out his omni-tool politely and waited for Anderson’s go-ahead.

“Queue it up, officer. After the work you did on this case, you can play any music you like. Except for Hierarchy takkatas. I still get nightmares.”

Shepard sidled up next to Vakarian at the bar and watched Anderson expertly slinging bottles as he whipped up her favorite cocktail. Blue was an arm’s length away, and Shepard had to focus very intensely at Anderson’s collection of artisanal brandy to keep herself from staring at him.

“Oh come on, Anderson,” she teased. “Takkatas was the best part of the whole tour.”

“Maybe for you. I can’t keep a beat to save my life. Or anyone else’s, apparently.”

Alenko moved out of Anderson’s way as the Captain reached for the top-shelf gin.

“What’s tacka-? Tak--? Tackitis?” The Major tried to get the word out, but fumbled adorably.

Vakarian answered.

“Takkatus. It’s a traditional military exercise, a drum squad. Mandatory, if you’ve been through any kind of basic training for the Hierarchy.”

Vakarian was eyeing her. She wondered just how much he knew about her past. He was no idiot - if he didn't know already it wouldn't take him long to sniff it out. Anderson saved her from having to explain herself when he turned to Alenko and kindly contextualized everyone’s comments.

“I did my N4 on Palaven. Convinced Shepard to do the same when it was her turn. I was useless at the drumming stuff, got my ass handed to me every time. From what I remember, Shepard was
pretty good at it. Didn’t they put you on one of the pulse drums? I would have loved to see the look on Aurix’s face when a human got to pound the big one...”

She nodded, avoiding Vakarian’s intense stare.

Every moment of her N4 tour on Palaven had been torture except for the moment when her commander been forced to admit that Albacus Regidonis’ disgusting human daughter was damn good at beating a drum. He hadn’t let his pride get in the way of a win: with Shepard keeping time for the squad, they’d won the continental championship.

Anderson finished up the Tom Collins and slid it across the bar. Vakarian’s eyes followed the drink as if he’d been personally hired to assassinate it.

“There you go kid. You earned it.”

Shepard lifted the glass and cast her eyes around the room.

“We all did. Good work, everyone. Here’s to stopping Saren.”

Nihlus stepped out of nowhere and clinked his glass against hers. She jumped, and then took a small sip of the drink as the toast circled the room.

Perfectly mixed. Three parts gin, two parts lemon juice, one part simple syrup, four parts carbonated water. **Damn, Anderson.**

Nihlus, surprisingly, was the first one to break the silence that followed.

“When it comes to stopping Saren, we’re going to need to get creative. Wrangling a tame geth is a good start. If it’s alright with you, Shepard, I’d like to invite your new quarian friend to join us.”

She had been thinking along the same lines. A geth expert could be a priceless asset on this mission.

“I’d be only too happy to have Tali’Zorah aboard the **Normandy**, but I believe she’s in the middle of a Pilgrimage.”

Zorah’s spine stiffened.

“The Pilgrimage proves we are willing to give of ourselves for the greater good. What does it say about me if I turn my back on this? Saren is a danger to the entire galaxy. My Pilgrimage can wait.”

“Welcome aboard,” Shepard said, touching her glass to Zorah’s.

“And what about you, Vakarian?” Nihlus pinned the investigator with a hard look. “Are you tied to this dead-end job in Pallin’s shadow, or are you ready to make a real difference in the galaxy?”

Way to make someone an offer they couldn’t refuse.

Shepard held her breath.

She knew Blue’s name now. Garrus Vakarian, C-Sec Detective. If she really wanted to, she could always send him an extranet message or catch up with him over drinks when things settled down. The idea of having him aboard for the mission, getting the opportunity to see what he was really made of... That churned her bruised guts into a thundering horde of emotions too primal to be named.
“I want to see this through to the end,” Vakarian said simply. He was looking right at her. Shepard’s throat went dry.

Alenko jumped in, adding: “I don’t like to see you go, Captain Anderson, but if anybody has to replace you, I’m glad it’s Shepard.” He turned to her. “I’ll keep your Marines in top form, Commander.”

Here here. She meet his eyes and his glass, toasting the fellow serviceman.

The only one who hadn’t chimed in was Williams. Anderson drew her out.

“What about you, Chief? You’ve had some time to think about that job offer. I can vouch for Shepard - she’ll give you some real field experience, if you don’t mind a C.O. who never sleeps.”

Shepard rolled her eyes. Thanks, Captain.

Williams rolled the ice cubes around in her glass, and then spoke directly to Shepard, her voice cool and quiet.

“Yes. Thank you again for your assistance on Eden Prime, Commander.”

Williams awkwardly stepped out from behind the bar, glancing at the others as if she would have preferred a bit more privacy. Shepard took the hint, queueing Anderson to keep the others distracted while she stepped away with the Chief for a word.

“Something on your mind, Williams?”

“Before I agree to serving aboard the Normandy, I was hoping to get a minute of your time, Commander. Off the record.”

Shepard led Williams away from the main group, taking her up the staircase to the second floor mezzanine.

“I keep an open door policy,” Shepard prompted, clearing the way. “If you have any concerns, lay ‘em on me.”

“Alright. I’m concerned about the turian stake in this mission. How confident are you in Kryik’s ability to share command of the most advanced ship in the Alliance Navy? Do you really believe your crew is safe in alien hands?”

“Speak plainly. You don’t trust the Alliance’s allies?”

“As noble as the Council members seem now, if their backs are against the wall, they’ll abandon us. Look, if you’re fighting a bear and the only way for you to survive is to sick your dog on it and run, you’ll do it. Members of their own species will always be more important to them than we are. To Kryik, we’d just be a ship of expendables.”

Shepard’s mouth fell open, and she forced herself to gulp down a sobering swig of air before continuing in her most carefully emotionless voice.

“I can see where your concerns are coming from, but you’re overgeneralizing. Kryik might seem like a lone gun, but he’ll learn to collaborate. And Williams, let me assure you that my father never would have thrown me to a bear.”

“I didn’t - oh Jesus - me and my big mouth. That’s not what I meant. I’m sorry, Commander.”
Williams blushed to the roots of her hair, and then humbly tried to speak around the foot she had just wedged into her own mouth.

“My grandpa told me about him, you know. Your father. Said he wasn’t anything like the villain history tried to make him out to be.”

The Chief took a carefully portioned sip of her drink, swirling it around her mouth as she tried to recover her composure. Eventually, she continued.

“Believe me, Shepard, in my family, we can understand how it feels to be blamed for the galaxy’s problems. I wasn’t thinking… I’ve never gotten the chance to work with aliens before. I guess I’m out of my depth.”

Williams stared over the railing, gathering up the strength to rush headlong into her real question.

“Commander, I know it’s not my place, but can I ask? I’ve heard all these stories about you, and always wondered. He really was…I don’t know…just…your dad?”

“Yeah. And he was a great dad. Taught me to tie my shoes and throw a baseball and everything.”

“bullshit.”

“I swear. Of course, he also taught me how to kill a man with my bare hands, but that was only if I did well in school.”

There, that finally forced Williams to crack a smile. Shepard winked, then slid back into a more formal tone.

“We’re all in this together, Chief. It might not always be easy to see, but the future is going to be built on the success of multilateral missions like these.

“I had a chance to look at your record when I was trapped in medbay. You’re a fine soldier and you deserve better than groundside ops. I’d be glad to have you aboard and give you a real chance to prove yourself, but you’re going to have to work with aliens, like it or not.”

“It won’t be a problem, Commander. You say jump, I say how high. You tell me to kiss a turian, I’ll ask which cheek.”

“Go for the forehead.”

Williams snorted into her drink, then followed Shepard back down the stairs.

Thanks to Anderson’s quick thinking, the others had settled down into a friendly game of cards in the living room while Vakarian’s party music swelled pleasantly in the background. This was good. Finally, everybody was talking.

Well, everybody but Nihlus.

The Spectre was alone behind the bar, refreshing his drink. Shepard gave Williams a friendly pat on the shoulder and then went to extract the wallflower.

“Party’s over there,” she said, pointing helpfully to the room of friendlies on the other side of the fireplace.

She noticed that Vakarian was sneaking glances at the two of them from across the room, and she did her best to ignore the freefalling lurch that Blue’s jealous stare inspired in her freshly-knitted
“Oh, I’m sorry, Shepard,” Nihlus gasped sarcastically. “Are we planning to socialize our way past Saren’s defenses, or just talk him to death?”

“Wow. You’re fun.”

“I don’t care about fun. I care about getting my hands around Saren’s throat.”

Shepard bit the inside of her cheek and raised an eyebrow.

“Nihlus, this is - just what is Saren to you? Why are you so hellbent on getting underway?”

Nihlus eyed Anderson, who had thrown his head back to laugh at a joke Williams had just told, then he carefully slid his eyes back to Shepard.

“You’d do the same thing.”

“Explain.”

“If it were Anderson out there you’d be losing your mind. He’s not just your C.O. He’s the closest thing you’ve got to a family. Am I wrong?”

“Are you saying you want to save Saren? Even if he is important to you, do you seriously think he can be redeemed after what he did to Eden Prime?”

“Hell no!” Nihlus laughed high and loud, just once, and then took a deep swallow of dextro alcohol from his glass. He grimaced from the sheer strength of the liquor.

“He needs to be put down, and I want to be the one to do it. Saren is nothing like your Captain - he was a cruel torin before any of this happened. I was too young to understand that when I met him, and I let him get to me. I wasn’t - I didn’t have the advantages you did.”

“Advantages. Really?”

“We both might have grown up in the Terminus, but you were sheltered in a cute little farming colony by an actual saint. Saren wouldn’t have hated your father nearly so much if Regidonis had been the real Jailor of Shanxi. No. He must have been as resplendent a father as he was a falx; kind, brave, honorable, blah blah blah. A real threat to Saren’s pride.

"Just look at his only child, the First Human Spectre. Ridiculous.”

“You have a very strange way of giving compliments,” she growled around a mouthful of gasoline, trying to warn him off.

“Your father died a hero, rescuing you from batarian slavers when you were barely sixteen. I had to dig that out of some obscure Alliance report when I was vetting your records for the Spectre nom. Not many outlets reported on what he did on Mordin. I guess cross-species heroism wasn’t selling that year.”

That was it. He’d set the match to the fumes, and her teeth slid together painfully.

“Nihlus, leave my-”

“Oh pack it in, Shepard. You’re not the only student of the school of hard knocks.
“I lost my father at the same age. He was caught up in some pointless mercenary turf war, got his brains blown out - wasn’t sorry to see him go. I spent all the glory days of youth trapped on the Altakiril merc outpost with a wife-beating psychopath. Good riddance.”

He raised his glass as if toasting a demon, then took another long drink to exorcise himself.

Whatever she had been expecting to learn about Nihlus this evening, that had not been it. At least she finally understood why he was so brittle, so cold. This certainly explained his difficulty grasping the most banal and nonthreatening forms of camaraderie. Speaking of which.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Nihlus growled, taking another swig of his drink as he rolled his eyes at her.

“Oh for god’s sake - Like what?”

“Like you’re about to pat me on the arm and say I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah right. Don’t blow a fuse just because you accidentally befriended me.”

He eyed her thoughtfully, but kept his drink raised as if in self-defense.

He was trying to hide his true feelings under a bitter, alcoholic sludge of petty insults and low jabs at her pride, but he had just opened himself up before her like a delicate spring flower. More than anything, all she wanted to say to him was relax, buddy.

Shepard heard someone clapping half-heartedly behind her as the music shifted to a more upbeat track. She turned to see Williams standing on the other side of the fireplace and bobbing her head back and forth to the song. Alenko joined in after a moment, though he was much more awkward about it. Zorah was sitting on one of the roomy lounge chairs, too shy to join in, but she was weaving her arms around playfully anyway. Blue was hovering near the quarian, where he was still pretending not to stare at Shepard and Nihlus as they talked privately behind the bar. Now that she had turned back his way, he pretended to be as interested in the music as everybody else.

The song was catchy. Mood lifting. Even Captain Anderson was leaning back comfortably in his chair, tapping the toes of his boots arrhythmically to the beat. Everyone on that half of the room seemed to be hitting it off with the greatest of ease.

Shepard smelled an opportunity. If this squad was ever going to take orders from Nihlus and not resent him for it, the ice needed to break. She knew he was never going to do it himself, so she hefted her mallet and readied for the swing.

“Drink that.” She said to Nihlus, pointing to his half-empty glass.

He gave her a startled look but surprised her when he threw back the rest of his drink obediently.

“Hey Williams!”

“Yeah, Skipper?”

“I need you to kiss this turian.”

-
Original words and phrases:
- **Takkatas**: Mandatory drum exercises performed from primary school onward.
- **Falx**: Blade, scythe. Military professionals.

Words and phrases courtesy of [MizDirected's turian dictionary](https://www.mizdirected.com):
- **Torin/Torini**: Male turian of the age of majority (15)
- **Patrem/Pari**: Father/Dad

The general idea for *takkatas* was lifted from traditional Japanese taiko/wadaiko drumming styles, then enhanced for sci-fi purposes. If you’d like a specific example of the sort of intense, coordinated drum squads I have in mind, [this is a great video to start with](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example_video). [This one](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example_video2) is also pretty incredible, but on a much larger scale.

If you want to know what song got everybody dancing at the end, it was definitely the Fake Money remix of [House on Fire by Black Taxi](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=example_video3).
Blazing Trail

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

— HANNAH —

Albacus held out his hand expectantly, his silver eyes glinting sharp as damascus steel. With a wrenching twist of the intestine, Hannah realized something between them had changed. The look on his face was rock hard.

“Surrender the weapon, human.”

Translator or no, the flanging subvocals in his voice sounded more alien than ever.

She knew this was a strategic move, a means of reassuring his own jumpy troops that he was in control. Still, she felt betrayed. It made no difference that they had been on unequal footing since the beginning, for a moment, she’d let herself believe they had been in this fight together.

Her fingers twitched on the rifle, every bodily instinct screaming to hold onto the gun for dear life. With each second that she delayed, his eyes grew brighter and more dangerous, and she felt more like an insignificant burrowing rodent who had ventured too far from her hole.

A dark rumble rose from the cavernous well of his armored chest, his fingers gestured to the gun insistently, and she knew this was no time to assert herself. Not if she ever wanted to see Jane again.

She handed over the rifle.

Forceful and well-practiced, he stripped out the heatsink, disassembled the body of the gun with a twist of his powerful hands, then threw the weapon to the ground in several inoperative chunks.

“Ilmek!” the Captain snapped, cutting his razor-sharp eyes across the town square. The familiar sub-lieutenant picked his way through the silent human onlookers, keeping his own pistol at high ready.

“Drag Arterius to the doctor. Send a dispatch to the General: his brother is injured, but he will live. I will answer for his discipline when I return.”

As Albacus spoke, Hannah realized exactly what she had done.

The ground spun beneath her feet, and she could see Jane: tiny, sick, and defenseless, being devoured by her mother’s terrible mistake. Hannah hadn’t thought. Even though she’d heard Albacus shouting the biotic turian’s name, even though she should have put the pieces together, she’d acted purely out of instinct instead of using her goddamn brain...

Arterius. The turian General’s own flesh and blood, seriously injured by a human captive. Albacus hadn’t intentionally slipped Hannah much intel about his General, but she’d overheard enough to fill in the details herself. Arterius was cruel, ambitious, and unlikely to show any kind of mercy to the human who had ripped a bullet hole through his younger brother. She had just ignorantly forfeited her own life.

And Jane’s, she realized with a bursting arrow to the heart.
By the time Albacus returned his eyes to Hannah’s face, she could see him doing the calculus on her behalf. No matter how terrifying he looked, no matter how cold and extraterrestrial he appeared in this moment, he wouldn’t abandon her to Arterius.

She couldn’t explain it - he didn’t owe her this mercy. Nonetheless, it took less than ten seconds for him to give the orders that would save her life. He barked it all out in one go over the heads of the gathered crowd. He was livid, determined, and unquestionably in command.

“No more failures! I will require some of your own people as insurance - I advise the strongest among you to volunteer. General Williams is needed to keep the peace, so I will need another translator.

“Shepard, you will accompany and ensure there are no more delays.”

What he didn’t say out loud was: and if you want to live, you will never come back.

“We deploy as soon as the vehicles are refreshed.” His eyes slid over her with meaningful pause before he moved into the crowd to coordinate the convoy.

That gaze whispered to her, silvery and distant as the moon.

Hannah blinked, startled to find there were tears burning across her eyes for the second time that night. Considering what little she had left, with the unknown dangers of the remote northern supply outpost looming in front of her, she had no idea what to pack. Other than Jane and a fool’s hope, what was there to bring?

She staggered dumbly toward home, and nearly screamed when someone grabbed her elbow. Instead she bit her tongue, tasting her own blood.

It was General Williams.

“Shepard, come with me,” he insisted, dragging her by the arm into the lobby of a small apartment complex. Inside, a triage center had been improvised to deal with the outbreak of dysentery. The smell alone was enough to send her reeling.

Set in the middle of a low line of emergency cots was the man named Harper. A doctor had propped him up and was injecting a dose of medi-gel straight into the bloody pools where his eyes had once been.

As Hannah stared, Williams spoke urgently into her ear.

“The Alliance needs you. You’re our best chance.”

She almost didn’t hear him - she could barely think. Instead, she listened to the sound of Harper’s wordless, tortured groans and watched rivulets of pearlescent bloody mucus leak down his cheeks. It took every buried memory of her field-dressing experience just to hold down the vomit.

“Shepard,” the General prompted again, rattling her arm. “Listen to me, Soldier. I need you to finish what we started up north.”

She crashed back to earth.

“And just what is that?” she snarled, her entire body going tense in the General’s insistent grip.

The sudden, ferocious show of disloyalty startled even her. She had been trained to obey orders, to
trust men like Williams with her life, but her maternal instincts had won out over patriotism long ago. This was the uncrossable border.

“My little girl is as good as dead! You just blew up the only turians willing to bring her food and medicine! Why?!”

Williams softened his hold on Hannah’s arm, dropping his eyes guiltily to the blood-stained floor. The haggard, starved lines of his face described a man who was functionally broken, ready to collapse under his own weight. But true to his station, the General refused to bend. He was still standing, and now he was holding Shepard up too.

“I know - this... Things went FUBAR. I’m sorry that we failed you.”

His hand dropped from her shoulder to rake through his hair in a familiar tic.

“We’re operating in the dark - the turians have scrambled all long-range comms. My men were supposed to be well out of the northern outpost by the time the turians arrived, but something went wrong.”

Harper pushed the doctor away and spoke in Hannah’s direction, loud enough to rile up the entire room. His voice was startling in its clarity.

“Their General was never going to let those supplies get back to Shanxi. The turians never planned to bring anything back, they just wanted to keep us calm and complacent. When they showed up, they tried to scorch the place. My team abandoned our mission and managed to save the supplies.

“I was the last man standing, and you witnessed exactly how merciful they are.”

He stared straight into her with his empty, seeping eyes.

Hannah wanted to believe that Regidonis would never have allowed his men to destroy those supplies, even if the order had come all the way down from General Arterius. She wanted to believe that the diplomacy she’d witnessed in the Captain was the genuine face of his people. Wanted to believe that everything he’d said to her was true. There had to be more to the turians than cold, calculating strategy and rows of sharpened fangs.

She saw now exactly how stupid those hopes had been; how naïve and preposterous.

Still… What reason would Albacus have to deceive her? She wasn’t important enough to his cause. Why would his eyes soften for Jane - why would he act as though the thought of killing a child would bruise his soul?

No one could be that good a performer. He couldn’t have done this…

No matter what she wanted to believe, he wasn’t human, was he?

Williams stepped closer, as if he could smell her doubt.

“Captain Regidonis trusts you. You can slide this right under his nose without any more innocents having to pay the price. You can save your girl.”

Slowly, brain thick with disbelief, she shook her head at Williams in confusion.

“What are you asking me to do?”

The General closed in, lowering his voice for her alone.
“We almost cracked it - we should be able to punch through the turian blockade and send out a message to Admiral Drescher and the Second Fleet. I just need someone to hit the button.”

— DAVID —

Anderson swept his arm across the table, clearing the picked-over bones of last night’s buffet into an incinerator bag. All things considered, his apartment could have looked far worse after a late night with a fresh squad.

It had taken several hours and a half-dozen inches of booze from his best bottles to get Shepard’s new group to adequately loosen up - Kryik certainly hadn’t made it easy. Shepard’s ploy to get Chief Williams and the Spectre-shaped ice sculpture to bang foreheads had been the nuclear option, but hell, it had worked.

Anderson had never known a turian to blush, especially one with a cloaca as tightly clenched as Kryik’s. First time for everything.

If this joint command between Shepard and Kryik was going to stand any chance of success, Shepard was going to have to keep up the improvisation. No denying: it would be rough. She should have gotten a few more missions in the kiddie pool with Kryik, all under Anderson’s close supervision. Originally the plan had been to give the Commander a six month combat trial as Kryik’s apprentice before she was officially made a Spectre and awarded the Normandy.

The best laid plans of mice and men. Saren had shot everything straight to hell when he’d attacked Eden Prime with an elder god.

Now Kryik needed Normandy’s stealth system to slide into the Terminus undetected. Saren posed the greatest risk to humanity’s interests in the lawless systems beyond the Alliance’s purview. The rogue Spectre had to be stopped before he attacked another colony, and Kryik couldn’t afford to have an Alliance Captain getting in the way, bogging him down with procedures or due process.

The mission was under Council jurisdiction now, and Anderson’s role in Shepard’s rise had been suddenly and unceremoniously hacked off like gangrene.

In less than twenty-four hours, Kryik and Udina had strong-armed the Council behind closed doors and pushed Shepard’s induction up by half a year. No warning, no sympathy. The first human Spectre had been decided overnight.

He looked at the time. 1800 hours. Good. It would be starting soon.

As soon as he’d gotten the broadcast details, he had programmed the large vid screen in the living room to record Shepard’s Spectre Investiture across a wide band of channels. Just because he’d been there in person didn’t mean he didn’t also want a backup copy. Or several.

Besides personal sentiment, it was a matter of galactic history. And politics - of course - politics… Udina would be only too happy to remind Anderson tomorrow morning that cleaning up after Shepard’s media scandals was his only job now.

“Here we go, kid…”

He dropped all pretense of cleaning and sat down abruptly on the sofa.
“What are they going to make of you this time?”

Cautiously triggering the remote on his omni-tool, he tuned to the first feed.

NewsNet with Emily Wong - a good place to start. Wong was non-partisan, no ideological grandstanding. For her report, she had chosen to stand at the base of the Citadel Tower stairs. A classy backdrop: she was bathed in the inspiring golden light that always filtered through the station’s incongruous trees.

“Earlier today in an austere ceremony at the top of these very steps, Commander Jane Shepard of the Systems Alliance Navy was named the first ever human Spectre.

“Some have called Shepard’s induction a triumph for galactic unity, citing the Council’s decades-long campaign to promote turian-human cooperation in the long shadow of the Relay 314 Incident. Detractors claim that this is just the latest in a series of escalating attempts to further human interests on the Citadel…”

He clicked over to Westerland News.

“...Many feel Shepard’s meteoric rise to the Spectres is unjustified, alleging that the Council did not appropriately vet the Commander before giving her nearly limitless access to Citadel resources. Many citizens wonder if Shepard is the best choice for the Alliance, questioning if she has humanity’s best interests at heart.”

Khalisah Bint Sinan Al-Jilani had a mouthful of mud to sling, as usual. No big surprise there - Al-Jilani had been the one to run the first exposé on Shepard’s turian upbringing, and she was always trying to one-up herself. She was doing a man on the street piece, surrounded by a mixed group of civilians, mostly human.

The report cut between a number of talking heads.

One man accused: “How do we know she’s not working for the Hierarchy? She may look human, but she’s probably just a puppet for the turians!”

Another claimed: “I don’t think we ever got the full story on the Blitz. How could one woman have pushed back the batarians? The Alliance is covering something up.”

A third opinion, even more unhinged: “What I want to know is, why did all this happen so suddenly? Does the Council even care anymore? Or do they just want to keep all of us talking around in circles and avoiding the real issues?”

Whatever the real issues might have been, Anderson had no idea. The man did not elaborate. He rolled his eyes and changed the station.

Next: Palaven Dispatch. This would be a shitshow.

“...Shepard is no stranger to controversy. The Commander became a household name after the Skyllian Blitz, when the galactic community was stunned to learn that the Hero of Elysium had been raised in the Terminus by one of Palaven’s most infamous expatriates. Albacus Regidonis was excommunicated for treason after evidence suggested he may have had a hand in orchestrating the Alliance’s Second Fleet Liberation Wave, a surprise attack which claimed the lives of over thirteen-hundred of his own troops…”

That was going to go on for a while.
He flipped to Eternal Truth, where an asari matriarch was delivering a calmer overview of the cultural implications.

“...Commander Shepard was nominated by one of the Council’s most prestigious turian agents: ten-year Spectre veteran Nihlus Kryik. Kryik stood as Shepard’s advocate and sponsor during the traditional ceremony, accompanied by the interplanetary crew of the SSV Normandy. In the spirit of collaboration, Kryik and Shepard will undertake an unprecedented tandem Spectre command of the experimental vessel, which is itself a feat of combined turian-human engineering...”

She went on in some detail about the Council’s diplomatic investment in the Normandy, narrating a brief virtual tour of the ship. Most of the structural details were classified for obvious reasons. Still, she was able to fill in a few pedestrian details. The ship’s complement, a CIC built to turian rather than human standard, and the shared quarters.

Anderson wished he could see the look on Shepard’s face when she learned that the captain’s quarters were designed to be hot racked - another turian carryover. Sharing a room with Nihlus. Damn.

Anderson let out a small laugh and flipped to the Alliance News Network.

Finally. The ANN was running an artfully cut-together montage of the Investiture. No frills. Just the ceremony.

It began with a bit of speechifying from the Councilors: all of it rehearsed and highly formalized. Anderson remembered watching Kryik and Shepard walking through it a few times before the Councilors had arrived.

What an unreal privilege that had been, to see the two of them rehearsing history before they made it.

Valern started, hurrying right along in typical salarian fashion.

“Spectres are not trained, but chosen. Individuals forged in the fire of service and battle; those whose actions elevate them above the rank and file.”

Tevos continued: “Spectres are an ideal, a symbol. The embodiment of courage, determination, and self-reliance. They are the right hand of the Council, instruments of our will.”

Sparatus finished: “Spectres bear a great burden. They are protectors of galactic peace, both our first and last line of defense. The safety of the galaxy is theirs to uphold.”

All together, the Councilors petitioned: “Who among you can name such an individual?”

Kryik and Shepard stood shoulder to shoulder on the dais atop Citadel Tower, both of them stiff as iron spikes.

“I name Jane Shepard,” Kryik declared.

Appropriately enough, it was Sparatus who challenged Kryik’s nomination. Any of the Councilors were free to sling the formalized rebuff, but it was hard to argue that the turian had the most cause to doubt Shepard’s worth.

“Spectre Nihlus Kryik, by what authority do you advocate for this individual?” Sparatus asked, resoundingly skeptical.
Kryik assumed the choreographed position, taking up a powerful stance at Shepard’s back. He set his hands on her shoulders and pressed her forward for consideration.

“I advocate as her comrade in arms.”

The Councilors presented the three tests: experience, service, and fortitude.

Valern posed the first: “How was she forged?”

“Shepard fought and won the highest proficiency in the Systems Alliance Special Forces. As an interplanetary combative, she has studied under masters on Earth, Thessia, Sur’Kesh, and Palaven.”

Tevos posed the second test: “How does she serve?”

“Shepard is the hero of Elysium, upon her heart rests the Star of Terra. At my side, she commands the Normandy, living in service to her crew.”

The Normandy’s full complement of fifty hands were in attendance, fifty-four including Nihlus and the new recruits. Crammed onto the steps behind the dais, Vakarian, Zorah, and Moreau with his Vrolik’s Syndrome had been strategically placed behind the Commander to look good and diverse for television.

It didn’t hurt to have General Williams’ granddaughter there either. The ANN crawl at the bottom of the screen helpfully pointed out that the descendents of Shanxi’s foremost players were teaming up to fight evil.

Even if it hadn’t gone strictly according to plan, the Council had certainly gotten their publicity stunt.

The Normandy’s crew called out in booming unison:

“OORAH!”

Anderson rubbed the goosebumps from his arms and watched Councilor Sparatus step up to give the final test. Even he seemed impressed by the Normandy crew’s show of unanimity.

“How will she endure?”

“Shepard bears her scars with pride. She will lay down her own life in defense of justice, sacrificing herself to protect those who unite in peace under the rule of the Citadel.”

Ordinarily, Tevos would have been the one to deliver the final Spectre Investiture, but everyone had agreed that Sparatus was the better choice for Shepard. The turian stiffened, locking his hands behind his back.

“Commander, kneel.”

She did. Kryik’s hands finally dropped from her shoulders, and he retreated a single step, presenting her to the Councilor alone and unsupported.

“Do you accept the tutelage of Spectre Nihlus Kryik and the will of the Council?”

“I accept. I will disappear into my duty.”

“It is the decision of the Council that you be granted all the powers and privileges of the Special
Tactics and Reconnaissance branch of the Citadel.

“Spectre Jane Shepard, rise and vanish.”

— HANNAH —

The road was invisible. Hannah blinked furiously, willing the night to fade into dawn, a sliver of moon, anything to break up this pitch black monotony. The sun had long since disappeared, leaving only the dim ring of headlights in front of the windscreen while the road stretched on forever, swelling up out of the night like a restless spirit.

As she guided the convoy through miles of uninterrupted farmland, the steering wheel of Hannah’s oldest truck spasmed and jumped beneath her hands. She grimaced - after sixteen hours on the road, the constant stuttering of the engine was making her joints ache. The drivetrain was shot, it would need serious overhauling. Not that it mattered, she supposed. How many more runs would this faithful old rig ever make?

The rough ride had one advantage: it provided a few momentary lapses from the anxiety that had been steadily creeping up her spine since the convoy had set out at first light. Her empty stomach snarled miserably and she bit her lip to distract herself, staring intently out into the bleak and never-ending road.

There was no going back now.

No matter what the convoy found out here, Hannah wouldn’t be making the return journey. She would be on her own again, starting from nothing. At least she’d been in this position before. Moreover, she had Jane with her now, but in a situation this dire that was little relief. Bringing a feverish three-year-old to the abandoned northern outpost - with only Hannah’s survival grit and an old soldier’s instincts to guide them - was a massive risk. When she factored in Williams’s plot to contact the Admiral, and Regidonis’ scheme to hide her from Arterius, the statistics shrank even further out of their favor.

With so little to be grateful for, Hannah was at least glad to have a real job to do. If she couldn’t hold a gun, at least she could hold a steering wheel - rickety though it might have been. If she couldn’t fire another shot, at least she could push a button, summoning a fleet six thousand strong with a single finger.

Hannah had decided from the outset to do the driving herself, resigning Regidonis to passenger and lookout. The only thing worse than being starved and terrified would be uselessness. After all, this was her territory now. Her convoy, her route, her supplies. Her button to push.

Her daughter’s fate, like it or not.

Hannah rolled her shoulders and stretched her seizing neck from side to side. Letting out a deep gust of breath, she tried once again to suppress the gnawing ache that had permanently settled in her guts. When she turned to consider her silent turian passenger, she was startled to find that he was already looking at her.

Just under a week surrounded by turians had rendered their alien expressions a bit less inscrutable, but she was still unnerved by the Captain’s mercury-bright eyes. His stare was as gleaming and intense as ever.
“We’ve got to be getting close,” Hannah announced stiffly, turning away from his x-ray gaze and squinting into dark.

Did he know what Williams had asked her to do? Would he try to stop her?

Most terrifying of all - did she want to be stopped?

If she called down the Admiral’s fleet, Albacus was already dead. Tulubri too. Surely there were hundreds, maybe thousands of others in his fleet who shared his ethics and ideals - honorable soldiers who didn’t deserve to die a meaningless death.

Hannah cringed at her own treachery. What had the colonists of Shanxi deserved? What about the countless marines who had been slaughtered in the bombardment? Hadn’t their deaths been meaningless, worthy of avenging? Where did her loyalties lie? She owed justice to the fallen.

Hannah felt her teeth grinding together with indecision, and she had never hated herself more.

Try though she might to keep him at a distance, Albacus continued to find new ways to terrify and impress her, usually all at once. Once the convoy had set out from the colony main, the Captain had been a diligent sentinel at her side, his earlier fearsomeness carefully stowed away. For hours he had done little besides maintaining his careful watch on the horizon. The only thing that seemed capable of breaking his concentration was Jane, who was sleepily tucked against his side.

Jane’s condition hadn’t worsened, but neither had she shown any sign of improvement. The girl was stretched out to Hannah’s right, with her head propped on a blanket that Albacus had wadded considerately against his thigh. Hannah looked her over once again, wishing she could see any real change.

As if sensing her mother’s gaze, Jane shifted clumsily in her sleep, sliding down across the seat until her heavy breath caught in her chest. Before Hannah could react, Albacus slipped his left forearm around Jane’s chest and pulled her upright against his side. The little girl looked as tiny and raggedy in his grip as Lionel did in hers. Jane’s constant dinosaur companion was clutched in an eternal stranglehold, his single button eye gazing out pathetically from between her fingers.

As Albacus settled the child into a better position, Jane moaned with frustration and feebly grappled with one of his long, gloved fingers. Once she got hold, she latched onto him with all of her strength and refused to let go.

Hannah noticed one of his facial plates twitch - was that a flinch of pain?

“Crazy little pyjak…” he muttered, sounding amused, impressed, and annoyed all at once. He struggled a moment longer, trying to pry his hand out of her grip, then finally abandoned his finger as a lost cause. He turned his eyes back to Hannah and sighed with good humor.

“No illness is taking this one.”

His words were light, but she knew his faith in Jane was deadly serious. A smile attempted to cross her face but was muddled along the way by the stubborn, constant paranoia that had followed her out of the colony.

She felt Albacus watching her for a moment longer, then he turned back towards the window and resumed his silent lookout. As soon has he’d looked away, he shifted forward in his seat.

“Do you see that?” he asked, voice deliberately narrowed to a point.
She tried to follow his gaze, but saw only the featureless dark.

Her stomach rolled as if the truck had started tumbling end over end. She clenched the steering wheel until her knuckles cracked.

“What is it?”

“Smoke.”

She looked again. Nothing. Everything about turian physiology screamed alpha predator - his night vision probably outstripped her own by several thousand evolutionary degrees.

“Are you sure?”

He looked into her eyes, tightened his hold on Jane, and nodded.

Finally, as the truck came up over a low rise, Hannah could make out the pale glow of a long line of smouldering ashes and dying flame flickering about a half mile down the road. It had to be the northern outpost. Williams had told her that things could still be on fire, even this long after the attack. The hopeless sight of the burning outpost was hardly tempered by the General’s forewarning.

Hannah eased onto the brake and signaled for a full-stop across the short-range CB radios that were chained along the convoy. Once the ten-ton truck had finally slowed to a standstill in the middle of the abandoned roadway, she stepped outside and smelled the smoke - it was acrid enough to make her eyes water.

BANG.

She nearly jumped out of her skin, but it was only Albacus slamming his hand into the chassis of the truck. He was as angry as she’d ever seen him.

Perversely, it was the unbridled fury on his face that gave her any hope at all. There was no way in hell he had authorized this firefight. Judging by the look on his face, the sight of the smoldering outpost had offended him to the core.

They had that in common.

— GARRUS —

Garrus slid into one of the stiff, high-backed chairs in the circular conference room at the heart of the SSV Normandy and tried to look casual when he realized that his unworthy ass was the first one to ever warm this seat. He wasn’t sure how he had managed to slip into this parallel universe, but he’d stay here as long as he could.

Red was a Spectre, the Normandy was the most advanced ship in the fleet, and Garrus had been personally invited by Nihlus Kryik to help stop Saren Arterius. It had to be a hallucination - any moment he’d wake up alone in his apartment, staring at the wall and wishing he’d gone a little easier on the after-hours recreation.

To combat the deep sense of disorientation, he focused on his physical senses - tactile, auditory, olfactory. Reality, Vakarian. Try to stick with it.
The whole ship smelled like clean parts precisely assembled, with plastic moldings so fresh from the manufacturing yard that they were probably still degassing and filling the enviro-con with sweet industrial fumes. No wonder he felt high out of his mind. The engines vibrated through the hull in steady, regular pulses, and every once in awhile the internal emission sink would vent into space with a sound like the tide going out.

As he tried to rationalize his own presence aboard, the others senior officers and mission consultants filed in one-by-one, each looking uneasier than the last. Looked as if he wasn’t the only crewmember who was fumbling for solid purchase; that was a mild comfort.

Tali’Zorah nar Rayya, Staff Lieutenant Alenko, Gunnery Chief Williams. These few he had met, and they looked nervous but secure in their duty - good. The others - Navigator Pressly, Flight Lieutenant Moreau, Engineer Adams, Doctor Chakwas - were complete strangers to him. Garrus rattled the unfamiliar human names through his head on a loop, trying to sort them all out.

There hadn’t been enough prep-time for anyone to shake hands or get friendly. One minute Garrus had been composing a report for Pallin, and then he had handed in his badge to traipse into the wilderness behind not one but two Council Spectres. Thanks to the spontaneity of this assignment, Garrus knew that at this very moment somewhere on the Citadel, Petros Vakarian was having a full-on conniption.

Garrus hadn’t even summoned the common decency to deliver the news of his resignation to his own father, but he knew it must have trickled down through C-Sec by now.

He made a mental note not to check his personal messages for a while.

Zorah approached and nervously sat to his right, settling her magic case onto her lap. After a moment, the Normandy’s disabled pilot parked his wheelchair nearby, easing forward to gesture curiously at Zorah’s payload.

“Is that the…?”

He stiffened his limbs and did a ludicrously inaccurate impression of a geth mobile platform.

Zorah nodded, then shifted the box in her lap as if it might try to fly away.

“You’re the pilot, aren’t you?” She asked, sounding more than a little starstruck. “What’s it like to fly the Normandy? This ship is incredible.”

“She really is something else - ain’t she a beauty? I’ve only known her a few days, but things between us are already pretty serious.”

“I’ve never set foot on a ship this advanced. There’s nothing like the Tantalus Drive Core anywhere in the flotilla. I’d love to see her engines.”

Moreau pulled on the neck of his Alliance blues as if suddenly flustered.

“Woah girl. Don’t make me jealous.”

She laughed politely, and Garrus shook his head, feeling as if he were stuck in an unusually imaginative dream. Everything about this mission was unreal. For instance: a sterile-suited quarian machinist exchanging flirtatious pleasantries with a handicapped Alliance pilot. Garrus had never heard of a soldier who couldn’t walk unassisted, but Moreau seemed undeterred by his physical limitations. A flight lieutenant didn’t need to run around, Garrus supposed, but still. What if he was forced to evacuate the cockpit in an emergency, or put out an oxygen fire, or…
Garrus caught himself staring. Moreau had noticed too, and Garrus realized with a twinge of shame that he was probably used to being gawked at. The pilot defensively knocked the brim of his casual SR1 cap down across his forehead and stared right back.

“I guess we’ve got three turians aboard now, huh?” Moreau said, voice sharpened dangerously.

Garrus sat up a bit straighter before saying: “Pardon?”

Williams eased into the chair to Garrus’ left, knocking him playfully with her elbow and trying to diffuse the sudden tension.

“Yeah. There’s you, Kryik, and the Commander,” she said simply, as if this were explanation enough.

Garrus twitched involuntarily. Red?

Before he could arrange the words more tactfully, he demanded, “What the hell does that mean?”

Moreau gestured as if he were literally spelling it out.

“You know, because Shepard’s dad was a turian…”

Garrus stopped breathing for a moment.

Yes. That settled things. This was unquestionably a parallel dimension, and everyone here was stark raving mad.

When Garrus failed to react, the pilot muttered sidelong to Zorah, “Wow, tough crowd.”

After taking a moment to gather his composure, Garrus turned to Williams to demand a real explanation, but never got the chance. Without fanfare, the Spectres walked in, and excepting the chair-bound Moreau, everyone stood to salute.

Shepard was still encased head-to-toe in formal Alliance whites, looking as stiff and pale as a sunbleached bone.

“At ease,” she said, sounding far older than she looked.

To Garrus’ eye she appeared totally hollowed out and ready to collapse, but standing in front of the Normandy’s senior staff, he could see that she hid her exhaustion with practiced skill. If she was tired it was no wonder - other than her short nap yesterday on the public transport to Zakera, Garrus had no idea when she could have had a chance to sleep. The gathering at Captain Anderson’s had gone late into the night, and Shepard had stayed long after Garrus had returned home to spontaneously bundle up his life.

He had no idea what Anderson, Shepard, and Kryik had done after Garrus had left Tiberius Towers, but judging by the improvisational way the Council had inducted Shepard into the Spectres earlier today, he assumed her evening hadn’t involved much rest. Shepard had been dusted up with a heavy layer of makeup for the dozens of news cameras, but Garrus had not failed to notice the way Kryik had kept the Commander propped up like a plasticine cut-out during the Spectre ceremony.

What had Anderson quipped to Williams? “If you don’t mind a C.O. who never sleeps.” Garrus filed that away, alongside a dozen more mysterious Shepard factoids that had yet to be explained. The pilot’s bizarre joke about an impossible turian father had just taken the top spot on the list, which seemed to grow longer by the minute.
Kryik and Shepard exchanged a meaningful look, and then to Garrus’ great surprise, the turian Spectre took a gracious step back and allowed Shepard to assume the lead.

“Welcome aboard the *SSV Normandy,*” she said, half of her face quirking into a spontaneous grin.

A round of quiet but enthusiastic applause erupted. Shepard allowed it to continue for a moment, then held up a firm, quieting hand.

“I realize that for many of you, your assignments have taken a sudden and unexpected turn toward the extraterrestrial. Let me assure you that while this vessel is under my command, I will continue to adhere to the tenets of the Alliance Navy. I am honored to accept a position among the Spectres, but I have not forgotten my duty to humanity. Nor to all of you.”

Garrus noticed Navigator Pressly’s hairless head nodding up and down tentatively - apparently this met with some form of approval.

Shepard drove onward.

“Kryik and I will assume joint command of the *Normandy* for the duration of this mission. I expect you to honor any order he may give you. There is to be no distinction between his authority and my own - this crew will operate as one cohesive unit, regardless of species. If at any point you find yourself unable to work under Kryik or myself, you’re welcome to try and find a more distinguished or historical assignment than this.”

She chuckled, apparently at her own expense.

“Good luck - but I know that won’t be necessary. You are the finest men and women the Alliance has ever produced, and you have been trained to protect your brothers and sisters in arms, no matter how far away they were born.”

Garrus felt his pulse stirring in his chest. Smooth move, Shepard. Appealing to personal pride and moral decency all at once.

Who wouldn’t want to prove her right?

— **HANNAH** —

Hannah waited.

She was bunkered low against the seat, settled motionless inside the dark, soundless cabin of the truck. There was little to do except listen to the clink-clink-clink of the engine cooling, the cree-cree-cree of the summer insects outside, and wait for Albacus and his reconnaissance party to return.

Jane was resting against Hannah’s chest, uninjured but still far too warm for comfort. As the girl quieted into a deeper phase of sleep, Hannah tried to match her breath for breath. Calm. Quiet.

She waited.

Albacus and his men would be looking for mines, explosives, traps. Not radio equipment. Hannah had no justifiable excuse to enter the outpost until he gave the all clear - trying to sneak in any earlier would raise his suspicion for sure. She just had to pray he wouldn’t catch on, wouldn’t try to stop her…
She waited.

It had only been half an hour. Reasonable time for a perimeter sweep. Albacus would be back any minute, and then the crew could start loading supplies. After that, the real test of her strength: Williams’ message.

She knew exactly where the comm station was - she knew the footprint of this installation as well as a childhood bedroom. She had personally overseen the construction of this outpost two years ago, when demand had outstripped the capacity of her central depot.

The northern outpost was a haphazard network of storehouses - food, lumber, steel - linked to a rudimentary comm station engineered for placing off-world orders in a pinch. Nothing fancy, but Williams and Harper’s team had managed to jerry-rig her low-budget communications tech and set up a backdoor channel that could somehow bounce through the system relay to Drescher. Hannah was no engineer, but she believed the General at his word.

Push the button, he’d said.

Yes sir, she’d said.

How hard could it be? Just one simple task. Yes or no. Save the colony.

If it was a matter of simple binary heroics, why did the thought of calling Drescher’s rescuing fleet fill Hannah with terror?

She swallowed her nausea and ducked her head into Jane’s hair. Do it for her, she thought. Only for her, if no one else.

Hannah breathed in the scent of her baby’s hair, and waited a few minutes more.

At long last, the passenger door wrenched open.

There he was, the rogue element. The complication.

She tried to meet Albacus’ stare with a blank look of exhaustion, though she knew the subterfuge was useless. God knows, he could probably smell her fear a mile away; obvious as a drop of blood in a shark tank.

“Follow me,” he said; quiet, low. Careful. Hannah’s gut plummeted - his voice was tight enough to walk on.

She clutched Jane tighter against her torso, gathered up the small backpack of clothes and emergency supplies she’d prepared, then slid out of the truck behind him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw armed turians guiding groups of human workers to the storehouses at the bottom of the hill. The work was underway, then. Albacus took advantage of the distraction to lead her in the opposite direction, into almost total darkness, toward the comm station.

He knew.

Her foot collided with something, and she faltered, her pace slowing. The moment her stride broke, his head turned. He was listening for her footfalls, but none came.

She didn’t need to see in the dark to know she had stumbled over a body. Human or turian, it was
impossible to know, the night was too pitch-black for her to make out even basic anatomy. She froze, clinging to Jane for dear life.

Don’t look, baby. Don’t look.

“Keep moving,” Albacus whispered, dropping back to urge Hannah along. “Time is short.”

Her head ached, her stomach heaved, but she picked up one foot, then the other, and followed him obediently.

“What’s going to happen?”

The feeble shakiness of her own voice came as a complete surprise.

He didn’t answer immediately. Instead, his hand unexpectedly found the small of her back, and his touch was gentle. Her breath caught, and she desperately wished she could feel anything other than fear.

“Keep moving,” he repeated, his many-layered voice fluttering along her neck.

After a few minutes of brisk walking, they reached the comm station. A tower stretched overhead, blessedly uninjured by the crossfire. He heaved open the weighty bunkered door and motioned her inside. She knew that the small communications array was buried underground, just a short walk down those stairs.

This was it. No turning back.

She lifted Jane against her hip and tried to keep breathing.

“Albacus…” she said, startling herself again.

What do I do?

Are you about to kill me?

Am I about to kill you?

He stood by the open door. The gatekeeper, silent and terrible.

She shook her head, her eyes hot and blurry. Was she crying? Again? What the hell was wrong with her?

“Hannah. Please. We have so little time.”

She took one deep breath, and then descended into the bunker.

Albacus quickly swept the external perimeter, then bolted the door at their backs and followed her down the narrow stairwell. Once they reached the bottom landing and were bathed in the dim light of the communications office, his hand reached out for her once more, settling on that vulnerable hollow at the base of her spine.

“I know about the communication sabotage,” he said in a low voice. “So does General Arterius. Desolas has landed, he sent me a communiqué moments ago. He wants your head.”

Hannah grabbed a fistful of Jane’s hair and tried not to make a sound.
“I will not give you to him. As far as the General is concerned, your life is at an end. Right here, right now. Starting this moment, you are gone from this world.”

His hand lifted from her back and found the vulnerable plane above Hannah’s heart, next to Jane’s sleeping face.

He brought his right fist down upon her collarbone in one single, slow advance, as if sinking a phantom knife into her chest.

Perhaps it was her imagination, but her ribs ached, and her heart spasmed crazily, beating out of control. Imaginary or not, she felt that blade twisting inside her, and her breath caught.

*Oh God,* this hurt. Why did it have to hurt like this?

“You know what I have to do,” she breathed.

“Yes.”

“Are you going to stop me?”

“No.”

His hand was so heavy. She struggled to fill her lungs beneath it.

“I’m going to help you,” he whispered.

“Why?”

“Because we will send more than one message tonight. Spirits willing, Benezia will arrive first.”

Albacus kept his right hand pressed over her heart, but raised his left forearm and triggered his omni-tool. Hers glowed in response. That was it, then: his message, his plea, literally in her hands.

He trusted her with this, trusted her with their mutual deliverance. She swallowed hard, and felt as if her insides were liquefying.

“Who is Benezia?” she asked, heartbeat thundering in her ears.

“A great and noble lady. Our best chance of a peaceful ceasefire.”

“What happens if my fleet breaks through instead?”

He didn’t answer. She pressed again.

“Albacus. What happens if my fleet breaks through? What happens - what happens when you go back to Arterius?”

“I have always been prepared to die.”

She shook her head, refusing to accept that surrender. Not from him. His fist tightened over her heart as if he could see the emotions welling up from within her and was trying to tamp them back down.

“You don’t have to do this,” she said, wishing the tears would just fucking stop, just leave her alone, let her get back to normal again, if there had ever been such a thing.
“Albacus, you’re a good man. Stay with us.”

“I’m not a man at all,” he said, suddenly lowering his forehead to hers.

She lifted her gaze, looked into his eyes, and lost the will to speak.

“Take care of her,” he said, his breath stuttering through Jane’s hair.

Those were his last words.

Albacus stepped away, turned on his heel, and marched up the stairs and back into the night, leaving Hannah alone to make the choice.

---

[FROM]: Encrypted Sender
[TO]: Benezia T’Soni

Reverend Matriarch,

I pray this message finds you.

According to my immediate superior, we are beyond communicable range. If that is true, and my plea spirals unheard among the empty stars, then hope is already lost.

///CORRUPTED///-we are in desperate need of the Council’s intercession.

If the Hierarchy declares me a traitor to the cause, I am willing to surrender my commission, my ship, my life. //CORRUPTED// bigger things at stake.

Smaller things, too. I have the blood of children on my hands.

On 13th Dacrescent, my fleet made first contact with an alien species at Relay 314. Just after 0900 Orhans, an unknown species emerged fr-///CORRUPTED///-ed humanity. In accordance with the Maskim Xul Treatise, we pursued the human vessels back through the activated relay. Despite my formal objection, General Arterius gave the order to commence orbital bombardment procedures.

///CORRUPTED///-archy Blackwatch, under the supervision of General Desolas Arterius, the frigates Tenefals, Miriton, and Bexitani chaperoning a fleet of experimental cruisers.

These cruisers were commissioned without Council knowledge or approval, as part of an undisclosed black-ops trade agreement between the Hierarchy and the Vol Protectorate. This -//CORRUPTED//-/iated by General Arterius in the hopes of striking a profitable long-term military contract with the volus.

I believe the General is using this conflict as a means to justify his family’s ambitious military investments and position himself as champion of a profitable war.

There is no honor here.

///CORRUPTED///-civilian lives lost. Whatever happens, I will not massacre families and children.

The true strength of humanity’s military has yet to emerge. Should they summon a full naval force, I fear we are staged for mutual annihilation. The humans are civilized but too terrified //CORRUPTED/// reasonable. Their civilians are wasting from starvation and disease - they are no
natural threat to the Hierarchy or the Citadel Conventions. However, if we do not fall back, I have good reason to believe that their real fleet will arrive soon to strike a mighty blow.

I must believe the Hierarchy has higher ideals than a rampaging thirst for blood.

This region is uncharted, but my chief science officer ha-///CORRUPTED/// provided some details. We are desperate for language engineers, universal communicators, levo-amino rations and medical supplies - enough to stabilize a colony of thousands. Without immediate relief, it may already be too late to save the colony.

Approximate coordinates, supply estimates, and relief plans are included with this dispatch.

My lady, our best chance rests with you.

Spirits guide us all.

Albacus Regidonis
Blackwatch Captain of the First Rank
PFS Tenefalx

[MESSAGE STATUS]: Received

- 

Chapter End Notes

**Original words and phrases:**
- *Falx/Falxi (plural)*: Blade, scythe. Military professionals.

**Words and phrases courtesy of MizDirected's turian dictionary:**
- *Dacrescent*: one of the months in the turian season of Letum (death cycle).
- *Orhan*: hour-type unit (each measuring 46 earth minutes).
In accordance with Alliance shift protocol, the *Normandy*’s cargo bay lights had dimmed at exactly 0000 hours. Gradually, the human crewmen had filed upstairs for their turns in the sleeper pods. There was no second or third shift duty roster to be had in the cargo area, so by 0030, Garrus found himself completely alone for the first time in days.

Well, nearly. Williams was lingering quietly at her work station in the port bow, apparently lost in her own thoughts. She’d been cleaning guns for the last two hours, which would have been fine under normal combat conditions. Trouble was, just like everything else aboard the *Normandy*, the brand new arsenal had barely seen daylight. There was little to clean. Garrus recognized pointless busywork - it was, after all, a particular late night specialty for most turians.

Ever since he’d gotten his first model kit on his tenth birthday, Garrus’ midnight hobby had always been constructing miniature ships. He supposed he’d have to take up some other mundane chore for the duration of his time aboard the *Normandy*. Optimizing the M35, probably. Turn up the juice on that coaxial mass-accelerator-meets-machine-gun combo until it sang. Could be fun.

He’d been generously offered his own shift in the sleeper pods, but had immediately opted out. Human sleeping patterns were too uninterrupted for his comfort. An eight hour chunk of sleep? That was tantamount to submitting willingly to a nightly coma. Like most Palaven natives, Garrus preferred to catch a few sparse hours throughout the night. He drifted into unconsciousness only when necessary, and did whatever small, relaxing tasks he could fit in between.

He wasn’t used to sharing the wee hours with a human for company, but he decided to take advantage of this quiet aside with Williams. Hard to say if he’d get a better chance.

“Chief. May I have a moment of your time?”

As he approached, the Chief stiffened uncomfortably, as if only just realizing she was not alone in the cargo bay. She looked jumpy. Cornered, even. Garrus did not fail to notice that her hand was resting on a deadly Elkoss Avenger. Luckily for him, the assault rifle was in pieces and scattered all over the weapons bench, in the middle of a thorough and unnecessary cleaning.

“Well, nearly. Williams was lingering quietly at her work station in the port bow, apparently lost in her own thoughts. She’d been cleaning guns for the last two hours, which would have been fine under normal combat conditions. Trouble was, just like everything else aboard the *Normandy*, the brand new arsenal had barely seen daylight. There was little to clean. Garrus recognized pointless busywork - it was, after all, a particular late night specialty for most turians.

Ever since he’d gotten his first model kit on his tenth birthday, Garrus’ midnight hobby had always been constructing miniature ships. He supposed he’d have to take up some other mundane chore for the duration of his time aboard the *Normandy*. Optimizing the M35, probably. Turn up the juice on that coaxial mass-accelerator-meets-machine-gun combo until it sang. Could be fun.

He’d been generously offered his own shift in the sleeper pods, but had immediately opted out. Human sleeping patterns were too uninterrupted for his comfort. An eight hour chunk of sleep? That was tantamount to submitting willingly to a nightly coma. Like most Palaven natives, Garrus preferred to catch a few sparse hours throughout the night. He drifted into unconsciousness only when necessary, and did whatever small, relaxing tasks he could fit in between.

He wasn’t used to sharing the wee hours with a human for company, but he decided to take advantage of this quiet aside with Williams. Hard to say if he’d get a better chance.

“Chief. May I have a moment of your time?”

As he approached, the Chief stiffened uncomfortably, as if only just realizing she was not alone in the cargo bay. She looked jumpy. Cornered, even. Garrus did not fail to notice that her hand was resting on a deadly Elkoss Avenger. Luckily for him, the assault rifle was in pieces and scattered all over the weapons bench, in the middle of a thorough and unnecessary cleaning.

“Well, nearly. Williams was lingering quietly at her work station in the port bow, apparently lost in her own thoughts. She’d been cleaning guns for the last two hours, which would have been fine under normal combat conditions. Trouble was, just like everything else aboard the *Normandy*, the brand new arsenal had barely seen daylight. There was little to clean. Garrus recognized pointless busywork - it was, after all, a particular late night specialty for most turians.

Ever since he’d gotten his first model kit on his tenth birthday, Garrus’ midnight hobby had always been constructing miniature ships. He supposed he’d have to take up some other mundane chore for the duration of his time aboard the *Normandy*. Optimizing the M35, probably. Turn up the juice on that coaxial mass-accelerator-meets-machine-gun combo until it sang. Could be fun.

He’d been generously offered his own shift in the sleeper pods, but had immediately opted out. Human sleeping patterns were too uninterrupted for his comfort. An eight hour chunk of sleep? That was tantamount to submitting willingly to a nightly coma. Like most Palaven natives, Garrus preferred to catch a few sparse hours throughout the night. He drifted into unconsciousness only when necessary, and did whatever small, relaxing tasks he could fit in between.

He wasn’t used to sharing the wee hours with a human for company, but he decided to take advantage of this quiet aside with Williams. Hard to say if he’d get a better chance.

“Chief. May I have a moment of your time?”

As he approached, the Chief stiffened uncomfortably, as if only just realizing she was not alone in the cargo bay. She looked jumpy. Cornered, even. Garrus did not fail to notice that her hand was resting on a deadly Elkoss Avenger. Luckily for him, the assault rifle was in pieces and scattered all over the weapons bench, in the middle of a thorough and unnecessary cleaning.

“Alright Vakarian,” she grumbled, refusing to meet his eye. “I’m listening. But don’t get any ideas - I’m not kissing any more turians.”
He put his hands up in surrender.

“I swear. No funny business.”

Despite the tension between them, the moment Garrus was reminded of William’s performance last night at Anderson’s party, he laughed unexpectedly, high in the back of his throat. The sudden, honest burst of amusement broke the ice just enough for him to risk another step towards the bench.

“Can I just say, Chief - for the record - that Kryik’s face when you licked his forehead...”

His voice snapped over another loud, irrepressible cackle, he couldn’t stop himself. After a moment of internal struggle, Williams’ face melted into a sly half-smile. Finally she sighed and gave Garrus a dirty little laugh.

“Yeah. Alright. That was totally worth it.”

“Agreed. Well done.”

“Alright, so? What’s up?”

The slow scritch-scritch-scritch of a cleaning brush passing through a gun barrel awkwardly filled the cargo bay, the only audible noise above the low hum of the engine.

“Question. How well do you know Commander Shepard?”

She quirked her head at him, then shrugged down at her work with one shoulder.

“Why? Having doubts already?”

“No not at all. It’s only...” He lowered his voice. “Moreau’s little... comment back in the mission debrief. Do you know anything about Shepard’s service history?”

“Plenty. Personal history, too. Though who doesn’t, right?”

He said nothing, and she looked at him blankly.

“Oh. You, apparently. Huh. Okay. Well, the Commander and I have Shanxi in common. My grandfather surrendered the colony to her dad. Awkward.”

Garrus was too stunned to react. He watched as Williams passed her stiff metal brush back and forth across the gun’s mass accelerator chamber, and felt every bit as inert and discombobulated as the weapon in her hands.

Finally, he staggered out: “Excuse me?”

She balked at him as if his translator had failed. He tried again.

“Shanxi,” he babbled. “As in... First Contact? Relay 314.”

“Yep. That’s the one.”

“Your grandfather was General Williams. The General Williams? And he... surrendered to... Shepard’s dad?”

“You know: Regidonis. The turian Blackwatch Captain. Infamous persona non grata. Perhaps
you’ve heard of him.”

“You mean - He was - She is - That’s impossible!”

The Chief stopped cleaning, her eyebrows lifting skeptically towards her hairline.

“Vakarian, are you seriously telling me you didn’t know any of this when you signed on? I thought you were supposed to be a detective. And a turian.”

He chuckled lightly at his own expense.

“Detective? Maybe. I’ve never been a very good turian. Anyway, the galaxy is a big place, not everybody knows everyone.”

“Are you sure?”

No. He really wasn’t. Not anymore.

“I used to think so,” he muttered. “But that was before I found myself serving aboard the Shanxi Interplanetary Memorial Cruise.”

Williams tried to smother a small, involuntary laugh. “Yikes. And here I thought I was out of the loop working groundside detail. You’re a mess.” She teased him with easy sarcasm, calling him right on this bullshit. She reminded him of Solana.

“No argument there, Chief.”

Garrus wracked his brain. Shepard and Regidonis. How had he missed this? Williams seemed to be wondering the same thing.

“You had no idea?” she asked. “None? Did you go to school… ever? Or, like, turn on the news at any point in the last twenty years?”

“Ha. Ha. Look, I was very happy under my rock, thank you. Cultivated several varieties of obscure, irrelevant fungi that were never grown on Shanxi…”

“Uh huh.”

“Though now that you mention it, I do remember this urban legend about Captain Regidonis, but I always thought it was too stupid to be true. People saying that he’d adopted some human kid out in the Terminus after everybody thought he was dead? It’s ridiculous.”

But, he reflected, no one was more ridiculous, more impossible than Shepard. The rumors about Regidonis had flared in the distant background of his life, and he’d never paid them much attention. Weird trivia, historical minutiae. Nothing more.

“When was that story going around? The mid seventies?”

Williams nodded, clearly trying not to laugh at him.

“No wonder I never processed it - I was preoccupied. Finishing up at C-Sec Academy, living on the Citadel with my dad after the divorce. That was a laugh riot. I wasn’t exactly paying attention to the news.”

“Hold on, back up. ‘After the divorce?’ Aliens get divorced?”
Garrus stared at her.

“Sorry. That was - wow - rude. I only meant… It’s just sonormal .”

“You think I’m normal now? Please, tell that to my kid sister.”

“Oh man. I hear that. I’ve got three.”

Williams looked at the disassembled gun and smiled to herself, then her face sagged. She looked exhausted.

“You should head upstairs, Chief. I can finish this for you.”

“But-”

“Williams. This gun is barely a week old. I think it’s clean.”

“Yeah, alright. I should get some rack. I’m the muscle for Kryik’s ground squad tomorrow. You and Alenko are backing up Shepard, yeah?”

He nodded. “We’ll be in the tank.”

As Williams abandoned her post at long last, she coughed, “You’re getting into an M35 with Shepard? Well good luck with that.”

She smothered another laugh and stepped into the elevator.

“What?” Garrus said, turning to follow her exit.

Williams’ voice gaily sing-songed through the closing elevator doors.

“One word: Akuze.”

---

Garrus was a cop. Or at least he had been. Recently. As recently as yesterday, according to some. He was accustomed to working late shifts on a deep space station with no meaningful day-night ebb to the crime and a constant stream of nocturnal turian coworkers. The Normandy’s lighting change and sudden lack of midnight company was unusual. A little off-putting, if he was being honest. Lonely.

Once Williams had departed, Garrus amused himself by reassembling the Avenger and putting it back in storage. That took all of five minutes. Not knowing quite what to do with himself now that the universe had started spinning in the wrong direction all over again, he changed into a comfortable set of off-duty smallclothes. Then he tried to catch a few unenthusiastic seconds of sleep.

Nestled behind the gunnery pillar in the small hideaway nest he’d made for himself inside the Mako, he couldn’t stop wondering what Williams had found so funny about Shepard and a standard Alliance troop deployment vehicle. Shepard and standard didn’t go together, that was sure enough. But Akuze? What did that mean?

Dammit.
Accompanied only by the regular heartbeat of the ship itself, smothered in the womb-like silence within the secondary hull of the tank, Garrus soon found the grinding sound of his own thoughts too loud to endure. There was nothing to distract him except a constant loop of Shepard. Shanxi. Surrender. No wait that’s completely fucking impossible -

On and on his brain raged, until he could barely remember which way was up and which was down. In space, he supposed, what difference did it make?

Sometime around assuming the age of majority, Garrus had experienced the all-too-common whirl of dysphoria that comes with recognizing one's own dust-mote insignificance in an immense, unfeeling cosmos. Oh yes, he had spiraled in weightless horror, reeling amidst the adolescent epiphany that the universe is mostly a void of empty space and cold, ever-increasing distances. Indeed, Garrus had often suspected that everything - even the component parts of his own ordinary mortal body - were governed by physical laws and coincidence, nothing more.

Now he was experiencing a dizzying white-hot inversion of that stagnant entropy - a feeling he had only experienced once before. That, like so much in recent memory, had been Shepard’s doing too. All heat and strobe lights and magnetically charged rushes of blood. It was as if everything in his life was pointing in this woman’s direction, sucking him inevitably toward her insane, pinwheeling event horizon.

At the end of the universe, the Big Bang was supposed to happen all over again. It must have been starting early.

In any case, sleep refused to come.

Fine.

He gave up and wandered back out into the main cargo bay. His goal was simple: investigate the small training course he’d spotted in the port quarter. The Alliance crew had avoided the area with wary glances, as if they feared trespassing across someone’s private property. Garrus had no such qualms, even without a search warrant.

Two choices - which Spectre had staked their claim down here?

No question, it was a Hierarchy Crucible. A bruiser’s circuit with obstacle stations, a sparring mat, and a full set of gleaming Armax training guns that looked as though they had been lifted straight out of Cipritine academy. He couldn't blame the Alliance grunts for giving the course a wide berth. This crap was intimidating, even to him, and Garrus had run through enough of these grueling endurance courses for several lifetimes. Like everything else in Hierarchy training methodology, a Crucible was designed for maximum efficiency, minimal variance, and a world of hurt.

One: high-intensity sprints on a treadmill, until the heart rate spiked. Two: mat work and weight resistance to the limits of endurance. Three: try to hold a gun and shoot something with your arms shaking like brittle twigs in a cold snap. Four: trip over some obstacle or another. Then start it all again.

Repeat.

Repeat.

Repeat.

Steady as takkatas.
A few short hours ago, he would have written off this entire training area as Kryik’s domain. Now, without even stopping to think about it, he instinctively knew it belonged to Shepard.

Standing there in the belly of this brand new hybrid ship, he could almost convince himself that if he just waited here long enough, studied and analyzed enough of her clues, then he could make sense out of her.

_Shepard. Shanxi. Surrender. No wait that ’s completely fucking impossible._

There was no making sense of this. If he wanted to keep his head on straight, he was just going to have to take the news of Shepard’s heritage as gospel. Become a true believer and accept Red’s startling transubstantiation from beautiful sex object into something… far more.

Garrus ran his bare fingertips over a set of adjustable barbells. The handles were smaller than he was used to - fit for human hands. Shepard’s hands. He squeezed, wishing there was some afterimage to cling to, but the metal was cold. Dead. It gave up none of her secrets. So what? He could wheedle them out on his own.

He could well imagine the formal upbringing she might have endured, raised by someone from a line as old and noble as Regidonis. Garrus had always thought his own father had been a hard-ass. But this?

_Make every bullet fly with honor,_ she’d said to him a lifetime ago, in the dark privacy of that bar, a little tell that was now knocked wide open. Her father’s catch phrase.

Their conversation had been so brief, so unusual, that he’d committed every line to memory almost immediately, replayed it hundreds of times. Now he was grateful for his own pathetic fixation. Context was everything.

_If I ’m blue, why are you so red?_

Garrus knew _familia notas_ when he saw them. Nevermind that Shepard didn’t have hers painted on her face. Shepard’s marks were every bit as permanent as his own.

A decent turian should have had strong feelings about Shepard's childhood, her father's supposed treachery, her precocious human appropriation of the Hierarchy's military traditions. Anger, betrayal, offended disdain. Whatever. There were a lot of ways to be an asshole in the name of patriotism - Garrus had no interest in any of them.

Oh, he had strong feelings about Shepard. Many and varied. But his feelings were all the wrong type and they lived in all the wrong places. As the Commander’s scandalizing secrets were revealed, each new tantalizing inch only made him want to see more.

Naked. And sweating.

Garrus’ heart was already racing, so he skipped the calisthenics.

Hoping for a distraction, he moved to the training guns and lifted the Armax sniper model from its stand. As he balanced it against his shoulder experimentally, he huffed with haughty distaste.

Too light by half, and there was never any useful kickback on these baseline training set-ups. He zeroed the aiming reticule half-heartedly at a slow-moving holographic target, let it dance across the cargo bay wall a moment longer, then squeezed the trigger.

A dainty spray of virtual bullets felled the target, and a new one fizzled up behind. The new target
appeared further afield, imitating a distance of several dozen yards with some cheap field-of-vision tricks. It was harder to hit, but still a gimme by Garrus' standards.

Too easy. He lowered the gun from his shoulder and glanced around the room as if one of the lazily blinking security feeds might disapprove of any further snooping.

Fuck it.

He quietly hacked into the combat log to take a closer look at Shepard’s scores.

She'd executed a series of perfect runs on the training module, one bullseye right after the other. Impressive at first glance, but Garrus knew how to spot a training plateau a mile off and in high wind. For the past two years, he’d personally led the sniper training corps at C-Sec academy - he'd reverse engineered half a dozen of these crappy Armax modules to fit non-standard guns.

Rule one: always preferable to practice on your own weapon.

A training rating this high was a sure sign of stagnant equipment. Was Red depending on this set-up to improve? If so, tut-tut. It wouldn't do. Shepard was good, but she could stand to learn a thing or two if he installed a real targeting program on a real gun and then showed her the ropes himself...

Wouldn’t that be something? Correcting her grip, settling the rifle to balance in her arms, leaning into her ear to whisper some sage piece of advice. Sugary visions flitted through his head, each one spicier than the last.

It didn’t last long. His position in his own fantasies was instantly and rightfully usurped by Kryik, whose level of intimacy with Shepard still remained unclear.

Training Shepard wasn't Garrus' job. Not even close.

And yet.

He rolled his shoulders and took another peek down the scope at a freshly generated target as it bounced predictably from side to side. Pop-pop, it exploded in a cute explosion of pixels, and Garrus growled irritably. Shepard deserved better.

Better than what? Albacus Regidonis? Nihlus Kryik? Did she hang out with the Primarch and Councilor Sparatus on weekends, too?

Garrus kept shooting easy targets, contemplating the astronomical disfavor of his own odds. So many impossible things had happened already. The chance to have Red all for his own… why did that feel like the unlikeliest possibility of all?

Shepard. Shanxi. Surrender. No wait that’s completely fucking impossible.

No sooner had the thought entered his brain then the elevator doors opened at his back. He lowered the training rifle an inch, glanced curiously over his shoulder, and saw Shepard stepping unaccompanied from the elevator.

She was in a state of partial dress, stripped down to little more than an athletic bra and shorts, with her bruised waist open to the air. Apparently the wound she’d been quietly enduring had finally healed enough that she'd been able to remove the bandages.

Inexplicably, the sight filled him with guilt. It had been cruel of him to bend the laws of nature to
his whim, summoning a half-dressed Shepard to his side through sheer force of will. Never mind that it was impossible: he was getting used to that.

She’d yanked her hair into a rough, crooked ponytail, slung a towel over her shoulder, and she looked fierce in her solitude. Exhausted, maybe, but no less capable of killing. The instant she spotted him, the private cloud of anger fell from her face, but the expression that replaced it was hardly friendly.

The Commander hadn’t sneaked down to her Crucible at nearly 0100 hours to make small talk with anyone - perhaps especially - not with him. She wanted to be alone and she wanted to hit something - he knew that much just at a glance. Courtesy and common sense dictated that he should leave immediately, but he was so startled by her sudden materialization that his mouth ran away before his brain.

“Shouldn’t you be asleep?” he drawled, sounding ludicrously arrogant for someone who was clinging to a gun in their underwear. He was dressed for bed: hands and feet bared, spurs exposed. By turian standards he might as well have been buck-ass naked.

In short, he looked like a prancing idiot.

“Sleep when I’m dead,” she responded, flat as duracrete. The phrase had an automatic flavor to it, as if rehearsed. When she reluctantly ventured into the aft corner of the cargo bay, she tried to keep herself at a distance, but her eyes roamed over his casual, sleeveless C-Sec tunic and fitted shorts.

Trying to distract himself from that hollow but appraising glance, he turned back to the array of digital targets and knocked a few more of them out of the air. He could feel her eyes weighing on him as she approached.

“Playing with my toys, Vakarian?”

She spoke of playfulness but her voice was anything but. She was annoyed.

He chuffed and blasted away one more target, then lowered the training rifle. Again, his mouth blew right past his brain without so much as a by-your-leave.

“That’s all this is, you know. A toy. You’re going nowhere fast with a combat sim this basic, Shepard.”

“Oh yeah?”

He gestured at the equipment and felt half his age, hardly for the first time.

“Give me a week and an assist from Chief Williams’ weapons bench and I can show you a real firearms program.”

He leaned the butt of the weapon against his hip and slid her an experimental look. With a noticeable rush of blood to her face, Shepard’s gaze got stuck somewhere around the tight fabric covering his pelvis, then she finally stumbled over herself and looked away.

Things between them weren’t as one sided as he’d initially suspected, then. Good to know.

Or bad.

*Maybe more bad than good.*
He thought of Kryik and Shepard, and lots of loaded guns. Thought of all the ways his low-ranking near-nakedness shouldn’t get in the way of exceptionally dangerous people doing their jobs.

“Real firearms, huh?” she said, without enthusiasm. “Sounds good, if it’ll keep me on my toes. Make the improvements as you see fit. Speaking of training, since you’re just standing there trying to look pretty, I could use an assist.”

He blinked. It didn’t sound like an invitation - more of an exasperated demand that he remain after hours for a stern talking-to. He was well versed in this particular tone, and he was disappointed to be encountering it now. It was a mood killer.

Vakarian, stay after class. Detective, step into my office. Garrus, we need to talk.

Shepard kept forging ahead in the same reprimanding monotone.

“Nihlus wants to start sparring in a few days, and I’m badly out of practice. I assume you’re proficient?”

Something was eating at her. Gnaawing on her like a bone, really. He set the gun back in its holder and tried to break the tension with humor.

“Sure, but I thought you said no dancing? Ever.”

Things like top of my hand-to-hand division four years running sounded a lot more impressive when he slid them into his undertones rather than saying them out loud. He hoped. But everything kept coming out backwards and flirty.

The swarthiness was not wasted on her, because she raised a curious eyebrow and slid the towel from her shoulder.

"Thoripudium? "

He nodded his approval, but felt the floor lurching dangerously beneath his feet.

Thoripudium was ritualized and low-impact. A decent workout, and a style gentle enough to practice with a human who still had half of her intestines missing. Flowing, interlocking positions that relied on focus and balance rather than brute strength. Constant energy in the full range of muscles. Rolling waves of attack and defense, a careful push-pull between partners. Incoming strokes were anticipated, neutralized, or carefully rigged to explode.

Truth be told, in Garrus’ personal experience, a round of friendly thoripudium usually amounted to little more than a prelude to friendly sex. Nothing to break the tension quite like... Garrus tried not to think about that, not now, but it was proving to be yet another impossible thing.

Just how many turian habits had Shepard picked up on Palaven? There was more to Hierarchy team-building than the morning drumline, after all.

The Commander refused to drop her gaze - she was definitely up to something, but Garrus suspected this was no playful attempt to get him into bed. Her eyes were too hard, the lines of her body too carefully set against him. She walked straight to the center of the sparring mat and took up the basic stance, legs bent, right arm presented as if this was the most professional idea in the universe.

Which it wasn’t.
Cautiously, he stepped up and slotted the back of his naked wrist against hers. Wished he had more clothes on. Wished she had more clothes on. Wished they’d initiated a more violent style. Wished for anything to save him from the embarrassing transfusion of blood from brain to groin that would become inevitable once they began.

As she started to push her wrist against his, commencing the first simple, horizontal circle of movement, he tried to act normal. Quick, crack a joke or something.

“Baby steps, huh, Shepard? Insides still solidifying?”

“Chakwas says I’m combat ready, but she’s imagining some glamazon in armor, fully shielded.”

The gentle back and forth intensified, the weight shifting between them in equal turns with only the quiet squeak of the padded mat to break the silence. So far so good. Their single point of contact was at the wrist. This, he could handle.

Shepard whispered roughly, continuing a thought he hadn’t realized she’d left unfinished.

“Without all that padding? I’m vulnerable. So yeah - take it easy.”

Same boat, Red.

They were stuck in a horizontal eddy. Hesitant. Non-confrontational. He might have called this pace relaxing if he didn’t feel like Shepard had just chosen to single him out for some demented, spontaneous science experiment.

She didn’t make any further moves, but they had to do something to advance the routine, so he assumed the lead and introduced his other arm. This created a deliberate tangle of limbs, and the pace naturally quickened to suit, but their feet remained rooted to the mat for now. He tried to ignore the feel of her cool, smooth skin as she pressed against his forearms, but of course - that was impossible.

Was she testing him, to see if he could stay as professional as he’d claimed? If so, he had his work cut out. *Thoripudium* was a risky practice for two people who’d struggled to control themselves in the public fishbowl of a police car all those years ago. Now, alone and unobserved in the dark, moving their bodies in deliberate time, they were in much greater danger of breaking regs.

With treacherous disobedience, his blood rushed into all the wrong extremities as he considered getting into trouble in a darkened cargo bay, breaking some old-fashioned regs while tumbling with the first human Spectre...

Shepard’s comparatively sober voice was like a cold knife in his chest.

“Vakarian, stop holding back. If you have something to say, get it out of your system.”

Oh, he had plenty on his mind, but what words could he offer to chaos herself, the wellspring from which impossible things were born? How about: *bend over.*

He nearly choked, and opted for the safety of saying fuck all. Reticence did little to save him: she misinterpreted his silence as some kind of threat.

“Don’t waste my time.” she growled, increasing the pressure of her wrists against his until he lost some ground, had to take a stabilizing step to the side. “Lay it on me. I would have preferred to get this out in the open before you signed on, but Nihlus didn’t exactly give me the chance. You’re not going to have problems following my orders, are you?”
Her breath was growing ragged. Whether it was from anger, exertion... arousal? Difficult to say.

Too cornered to censor himself, he bit back.

“I get it: you’re off limits. Torture me all you like, I know how to fall in. Your ass may be fine, but it isn’t *that* distracting, Commander.”

She hissed at him from between clenched teeth. “Stop deflecting. This isn’t a joke. If you’re holding onto any Hierarchy bullshit about my father, say it now. Consider this your only safe opportunity.”

He was so startled that he cracked, and a loud, uncontrollable laugh spilled out of him without warning. Once he started, he struggled to stop.

“Wait, all this… *bodywork*... and you want to have a chat about your old man?”

His concentration was in tatters, and Shepard’s wrist rolled over his arm. With one swift yank to his elbow, she redirected his momentum and sent him tumbling to the mat. He dusted himself off, then swept back up against her and resumed the exercise. Maintaining a minimum safe distance. Of course.

“Sorry, Commander. I thought we were broaching... a very different subject.” He quietly added, “Wishful thinking.”

Unsatisfied with his answer, she snuck a hand past his cowl and sliced the butt of her palm across a sensitive tendon in his neck. He jumped.

“Regidonis.” she said, “Spit it out.”

Right. All respect to the dead, but this particular ghost of hers could fuck off already. Garrus had other priorities.

“Shepard, drop your weapons. I’ve got nothing to say.”

Another lunge, this time she got him right in the side, under the carapace. Confess. Confess! Where are the rebel spies?

“Okay, fine. It’s weird.” He could concede that point to her, at the very least. “But *shit*, at this point, I doubt I’d blink if you walked in and claimed you were adopted by hanar missionaries from another dimension.”

The next series of movements sank them lower towards the mat, deep into thigh work. Back and forth, back and forth. Shepard would lunge for the weak point at the base of his keel, he would roll the wrist and deflect, send his own artful jab for her navel, which she would absorb, transforming his force into her own new attempt for the inside of his knee.

On it went, their wrists always touching, that delicious meeting point growing warmer by the minute. She was a fucking metronome.

If she’d been on his *takkatas* team, he’d have stuck her on a pulse drum too.

Spirits, she was not kidding around with her bodywork, either. Fit didn’t begin to describe it. As they rocked back and forth, slowly lowering and rising in tandem, he saw the meaty lines of her thighs keeping time, thick muscles trembling with exertion beneath the delicate gauze of her skin.
He gulped roughly and tried not to follow the sinews of her leg up to their natural meeting place. Don’t think about Shepard’s crotch. Not now. Maybe not ever.

His eyes automatically studied her waist, where that bruised, swollen gash stretched and bunched below her ribs. Even injured, she was still so shapely, covered in all those freckles…

Don’t stare. Eyes up. His gaze skittered over the dark valley between her breasts. Nope. Even worse. His clumsy attempt at not-staring-but-definitely-staring abruptly crash landed on the line of her neck, where her pulse was throbbing.

His visor unhelpfully suggested that Commander Shepard was approaching a heightened state of arousal.

Oh, thanks.

Her formal rhythm broke and she groped blindly for a weakness, twisting his arm and throwing him a fair distance across the mat. He shrugged it off, came back for more. The embarrassed glow on her face gave her away, she was quickly losing her cool. Hell, she’d thrown herself halfway to the floor with that last attempt at an upset. She shook herself loose and they started over, wrists glued together. All four hands in tandem now, with feet in step. Moving faster.

“If you were hoping for a fight, I’ll have to disappoint you,” he breathed. “You’ll get no backtalk from me. I barely knew about it to begin with - only found out about your special snowflake backstory a few hours ago, after your pilot got mouthy.”

“Some detective you are,” she snarled.

He’d thrown off her rhythm, now she was struggling to keep pace. This is what she got for pushing too hard, refusing to bend. Absolute control had given way to an uncooperative jumble of mixed intentions when she hadn’t gotten her way.

She struck out again with the opportunistic reach of someone long accustomed to a dirty fight, and he turned the blow aside. Yikes - that time she’d gone straight for the eyes.

Too late. He could see clear through her, now. How did that human idiom go? She was blowing smoke out her ass.

She’d risen in ranks by clawing her way there, denying all opposition. What other route did she have, with a traitor’s bones dragging behind her? Blazing her own bloody trail, purifying herself in one Crucible after another, it must have taken years of pain, near bottomless discipline. For Regidonis’ human daughter, that N4 combat tour on Palaven would have been riddled with threats. Apex predators who saw ripe human meat clinging to a brittle, shameful legacy. Easy pickings.

Conruppor. She’d learned that word somewhere, after all.

His brow lowered, eyes darkening. His mandibles buzzed furiously against his cheeks, but he managed to keep his big mouth shut. This random test of his sexual control suddenly made a lot more sense. Just as suddenly, all he wanted to do was stop. She was relying on ancient stores of anger, old underground fires that had burned too long and too bright for anyone to smother. None of it was for him.

Well, fuck that. No more glancing blows, no more rootless force. If she wanted this fight, it would stay clean and fair. Hopefully brief.

Again, she found a gap in his blockade and tried to exploit it, tried to break the flow of combat and
seize the best advantage she knew: fury. With a disgusted grunt, he grabbed her hands and put her arms back in place, stubbornly sticking his wrists against hers. When she came in for another sloppy jab, he absorbed the impact and laced his arm under hers. She hissed and tried to break free, but he had her fingers locked tight between his own.

“I don’t believe you.” she said, voice low and dark as a bed of hot coals. “A turian cop obsessed with redheads because of one night in a bar. You had no idea who I was? Bullshit. My story ran on every news outlet in the-”

Without breaking stride, he neutralized the last of her forward thrust and slammed her tight against one side of his carapace. Her face bumped his neck, her bare stomach knocked neatly against his groin, and her breath caught in her throat.

“Hey, nobody’s perfect,” he whispered.

That shut her up.

“Shepard,” he sighed. “Listen to me. I. Don’t. Care. I’ve wanted you since zero hour, but only for my own demented reasons.”

He breathed down her neck in calm, even gusts and willed her to see his point, thunderous and steady as it was. An obvious, uninvited erection, hammering heavy as a drumbeat behind his sealed groin plates, but well under control. Pressed against him like this, she couldn’t miss it.

“That’s my problem,” he said. “Not yours. Whatever your history, I’m sorry. Consider me the one torin who refuses to add to your damage. I’m only-” Don’t breathe, Vakarian. Don’t bend your mouth to hers. That’s not for you. Not now. Put the damn fire out. “Your ship, your rules. I’ve got your six, Commander.”

He let up the pressure and she twisted out of his grip. Just in time.

Her face was the color of her hair, her chest was heaving, but she wasn’t looking at him. Her eyes were fixed over his shoulder, throwing flaming daggers into one of the security cameras that was bolted to the cargo bay ceiling. Her eyes slid back to his face, and that steel barricade inside of her gave way.

“Garrus…”

He closed his eyes and let the sound of his name in her mouth boil over him like a smoking wave of lava.

“You…” she tried, but her voice was stilted. “We…”

Shepard yelled something unintelligible at the ceiling, then started to ramble in a low whisper.

“This conversation would be so much easier somewhere else. Anywhere else. In a derelict freighter. The sterile vacuum of space. In a fucking unmarked shipping container at the bottom of the ocean - I - I don’t care! Just… goddammit it all. I wish we’d had the time to be alone for two seconds so we could work this out…”

Garrus elbowed her in the ribs with all the tact of an eleven-year-old smuggling an issue of Fornax under the table.

“Hey, Red. You want a minute alone? I can make that happen.”
She stopped and stared at him as if he’d materialized out of thin air. He got the eerie feeling that Jane Shepard had only just arrived, hours and hours after coming aboard. About damn time.

As she looked at him - really took him in at long last - her face softened. All at once, like a time-traveler, she transformed back into someone younger, warmer, and far more familiar. He remembered this face. His blood turned over.

Red kept herself buried deep. And no wonder.

“I don’t see what’s so private about a treadmill.”

“Ten minutes, Red.”

“You want me to run on this treadmill for ten minutes. Ignoring you.”

“Yeah, see... I’m going to need you to ignore me a lot harder than that.”

“And you’re going to stand over there. Calibrating a gun. Without talking.”

“Without talking.”

“Is this some kind of patronizing turian life-lesson? ‘You want privacy, Shepard? Get on a treadmill and shut up.’”

He wheezed, “Just trust me. A few more minutes of flawless, dutiful behavior, and then I’ll show you a magic trick.”

She tried to look annoyed and failed completely. Her mouth wouldn’t stop quirking at one corner, and she was worrying her bottom lip between her teeth to keep from smiling outright. She shook her head one last time, then climbed up onto the treadmill.

With a cocky flare of one mandible, he snatched the generic Armax training rifle out of its stand and threw it across Williams’ workbench for disassembly. The effect was not unlike tossing a half-naked woman onto a mattress, and Shepard missed nothing. Her face flushed a vibrant, glowing pink.

Next, he pulled his personal gun case from his weapons locker. As he unlocked the case and removed the Mantis with all the suggestive patience he could muster, he met Shepard’s eyes. She looked hungry.

“Yeah, you want this gun, don’t you?” He flexed one naked arm and she snorted. Snorted at him, right through her nose.

He shot a goading tilt of the chin towards the treadmill, and with the bleat of a well-practiced blowhard, she started up the run cycle and turned away. Meanwhile, he moved to the weapons bench and set to work on a quick-fire stripping of the Armax training module. Quietly, he pressed record on a surreptitious little omni-tool program.

Five minutes droned on in requisite silence, broken only by the pounding footfalls of Shepard settling into a nice sprint on the treadmill. There was that steady rhythm of hers - he was relieved she’d found it again. With her keeping such excellent pace, he managed to wrench the training
module into a few orderly piles of parts on the weapons bench in record time.

He’d never done this so quickly before, and he admitted it was a slapdash job at best, but it would work. He’d used the Mantis for a training example dozens of times. It was ready to accept the hardware, which made all of this easier in a pinch.

Five more minutes to screw the module in place and double-check the fire-suppression protocols. Surprise hull breaches and deadly misfires were fun for no one, after all. Once he was satisfied that his gun was fit to fire indoors, he checked the last ten minutes’ security footage. Perfectly dull, pedestrian, and believable. He set the footage to repeat benignly across the cargo bay security feeds until further notice. A cheap parlor trick like this wouldn’t fool the Shadow Broker or a real intelligence agent, but it didn’t need to be sophisticated. Whatever low-level Alliance personnel had been tasked with sifting through Shepard’s off-duty records would never know the difference. If the Commander of the Normandy needed a moment free from the constant surveillance of anonymous lackeys a dozen links below her on the chain of command, a false vid loop was a cheap and easy way to get it.

In the workout corner, Red had realized that her time was up. She slowly came to a halt, and he noticed a shimmer of sweat was gleaming at the base of her neck. Her eyebrows raised expectantly. Now what?

He brandished his trophies: omni-tool in one hand, giant gun in the other.

“Congratulations, Commander. You’re off the record for a while. No cameras. As far as the Alliance is concerned, you’re in the middle of a nice long run.”

For a moment, all she did was stare him down, then her face blanched white. Maybe this had been a bad idea. Spectre or not, Shepard probably liked her rules in the same state as her internal organs and personal metronome: unbroken.

“Did you just casually sabotage the security system of the most advanced ship in the fleet?” she asked.

“Tada!”

As she stepped down from the treadmill, she glanced around the room and rotated her finger in a thoughtful circle. He wished he could say she looked pleased, but the expression she wore was too difficult to read.

“So it’s just playing…”

“One boring loop. Nothing to see here,” he explained. “Whatever compromising things you’ve been holding back, now’s the time. Break into song, stop sucking in your gut, scratch your ass. I don’t know. What do humans do when they need to blow off steam?”

She broke. Her laugh was every bit as loud and throaty as he remembered. A little deranged.

“Oh, plenty,” she muttered.

The timbre of her voice had made an abrupt turn into dangerous territory. He took a step back for safety, keeping the gun between them, but she closed the distance.

“Allowing you on-board was a bad idea,” she breathed, stepping closer still. “I should have put a stop to it.”
“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

She wasn’t touching him, but all it would take to bridge the gap would be a single step. Just one. Instead of closing that distance, he pushed the gun into her hands.

“I didn’t account for any of this. Especially you.” She growled, lifting the Mantis to her shoulder. At the sight, he was greeted with that same rush of blood he’d come to associate with Shepard and danger. This marked the second time she’d ever held his favorite weapon, and she was much closer to nakedness now. Third time could be a charm...

She settled the gun into a more comfortable position and looked down the sight. He queued up the training program with a wave of his omni-tool and watched her line up her first target.

“I’ve kept my life on track,” she muttered.

First target eliminated. Offended by the heavy kickback, she raised her left hand to rub her bruised collarbone.

“Effort.” She reloaded the gun and fired again.

“Endurance.” Second target down.

“Ethics.” Another reload, but this one was sloppier - she had to break her sight line to properly slide home the orange holo of a pretend thermal clip. “Those were Pari’s pillars of integrity - everything I stood for.”

The third target took a moment to line up, but it never had a chance. Three in a row right out of the starting gate. Not bad. He increased the difficulty.

“Honorable bullets,” he said. “Right. I remember. I’m not a complete stranger to those ideals myself, you know. Garrus Vakarian, Citadel Security. We’ve met.”

“Just - shut up! You’re not even supposed to be here. It’s impossible!”

The second round of targets moved faster, relied on a procedural algorithm of completely randomized movement. Her fingers were shaking, but she landed her shots.

“Commander Shepard is going to start complaining about impossible things now?” he mocked, cranking the difficulty up another notch. “Oh, that’s hilarious.”

She missed her first target. “Yeah, yeah. I’m Commander Fucking Shepard: First Human Spectre. Whoopdie fucking doo. Everyone’s eyes have always been on me, waiting to see what I’ll do, just what kind of fuckup I’ll turn out to be. Now? Thanks to Nihlus’ and Anderson’s scheme to sneak me into the Big Boys Club, I feel like everything I do is being picked apart by a team of psychotic journalists who drink blood and eat brains…”

She was rambling. Another miss. “Goddammit, every time I want to sleep from now on, Nihlus is going to be one bunk over taking notes for the Council and telling them I don’t snore loud enough to be a real Spectre…”

She fired blindly, triggering an overheat. Growling low in the back of her throat, she ejected the practice heat sink. The deep rumble of frustration Shepard was emitting had not been culled from the standard repertoire of human vocalizations, and the sound went straight to his dick like a shot of adrenaline.
Garrus tried not to pump a victory fist. Shepard had just accidentally answered all of his jealous, juvenile questions about the nature of her relationship with Kryik.

She kept muttering to herself. “Somehow, magically, in the middle of all of this, you showed up again out of the great blue yonder and I can’t stop thinking about your—bang—goddamn—bang—bang—your whole.” Warning: Heat Level Critical “-Gah!!-Everything!”

She lowered the gun and blew a wild hair out of her face.

Alright, she’d had enough heavy weaponry to induce a tantrum, it was time to cut her off. His fingers closed around her wrist to calm her down, and he could feel her pulse jumping beneath his thumb. He curled his other palm below her trigger hand and tried to ease the gun from her grip, but she wouldn’t budge. Instead, her fingers tightened, and she pulled him in closer, until his body notched behind hers like a shell casing.

“All the way through Vila Militar, I thought: ooh, ahh! Look at me, I’m an invincible badass! They can’t touch me, they’ve got nothing. No more weaknesses, no more personal losses.”

Miss. Miss. Reload.

She glanced the next target twice, once on each side, but didn’t get the kill.

With a low moan, he steadily pulled on the Mantis until she fell deeper into his arms. He held her hands steady.

**BOOM.** Dead center.

One down. An infinitely regenerating number to go.

In his visor feedback, he noticed her heartbeat spiking wildly. He spoke quietly, but with enough bitter residue to make her shoulders tense against him.

“Say, how’s that invincible badass thing working out for you?”

She stopped firing, leaned into him more deliberately.

“It was working just fine. I was... just fine until you showed up.”

“Oh yeah. I can see that. 30% accuracy once your target stops standing still. Flawless victory.”

“How could you just... show up? At the most inconvenient crisis point in my life? Twice!?”

“Hmm. Petty vengeance.” he jostled the gun in their shared grip. “You might be a sorry excuse for a sniper but you left a gaping hole in my chest when you ran off. Thanks.”

That blew the fire right out of her, and he finally managed to pull the Mantis from her hands and set it in the practice rest. Shepard turned, slumped against him with a stubborn grunt, then spread her hands out across the sides of his waist, bolting him in place. He shivered.

She spoke into his neck in damp, warm bursts.

“I - didn’t think - I was so sure I’d done the right thing. Walking away from you.”

“The right thing for who, exactly?”

Her voice was tiny. He felt the words against his neck more than he heard them aloud, as she
whispered: “I never… Especially not you. I’m sorry.”

“Save your regret for something worthwhile. Believe it or not, you’re not the only one in danger here.” Somehow, his face had snuck itself into the soft warmth of her hair. He flared a mandible and sucked in a deep, selfish breath before continuing. “Besides a raging hard-on for this idiot redhead I met in a bar, I’ve got my own professional stake in this mission. And I had free will once. Dignity! One or two lingering shreds of self-respect. A promising C-Sec career that I may or may not have permanently flushed down the toilet the moment you came back around.”

“You shouldn’t be here,” she said glumly. “Blue… We can’t…” She shook her head and glared at his chest, as if searching for the hole she’d left there six years earlier. “This could wreck everything. You and me? Impossible.”

“Saren’s robot apocalypse is what’s going to wreck everything. Not us. We’re just a couple of fools fumbling in the dark.”

He moved closer, couldn’t stop himself from winding one arm against her waist. Her skin was every bit as soft, every bit as solid as he remembered.

“Red, look at me.”

She did. His free hand landed protectively beneath her jaw, just to hold her there. Forever, maybe.

“If you’re going to say this is impossible, at least say it straight to my face.”

One of her hands crept up the side of his neck, and then, without any further warning, she pulled, he pushed, and their mouths were moving together in time.

"Red and Blue" - Illustration by yours truly. Original tumblr post here.
Chapter End Notes

Original words and phrases:
- Takkatas: Mandatory drum exercises performed from primary school onward.
- Thoripudium: Based on tai chi tui sho or “push hands” techniques.
- Conruppor: Pervert, rapist.

Words and phrases courtesy of MizDirected's turian dictionary:
Trivial Pursuit:
The chapter title is a reference to Cantor's Diagonal Argument, which tackles infinity in mathematical terms. Here’s a quote from Wikipedia:

“In set theory, Cantor's diagonal argument [...] was published in 1891 by Georg Cantor as a mathematical proof that there are infinite sets which cannot be put into one-to-one correspondence with the infinite set of natural numbers. Such sets are now known as uncountable sets, and the size of infinite sets is now treated by the theory of cardinal numbers which Cantor began.”

Smarty pants bullshit aside, "Vakarian's Diagonal Argument" is 100% a dick joke. Don't get me wrong.
Chapter Notes

*Explicit rating applies. It applies A LOT.
If you would prefer to avoid sexual content, I'd recommend approaching this chapter with caution, and outright skipping everything that happens in the Mako (when it's rocking, don't come knocking...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's a lot of music to blame for this, starting with Alt-J's 'Every Other Freckle' - by far the guiltiest of the bunch. If you want to read an unintentionally hilarious breakdown of that song's lyrics, well, look no further.

Shipper playlist included for your pleasure, to be used at your discretion.
I cannot be held responsible the intensity of any feels you may accidentally encounter.
Album cover provided by the phenomenal Stellaris Jay
Garrus Vakarian smelled amazing.

To be specific, Garrus Vakarian smelled like *bellari*: old-fashioned turian sweetmeats that had once been a popular export from Palaven’s southernmost continent.

To be *exact*, Garrus Vakarian smelled like the enormous crate of partially-crushed sky-blue *bellari* that Shepard’s *pari* had kept under lock and key in his home office back on Mindoir.

As a *patrem*, Albacus had been strict in all things. Steady and unyielding, consistent and predictable as any physical law. Under his protective if occasionally smothering wingspan, life was in full order. Work was foremost. Study and physical training were daily obligations. Meals were square, thrice daily, and never indulgent. Her father's nutritional acquisitions had been utilitarian and flavorless, with the single exception of a crate of mysterious, smashed *bellari*.

Shepard never figured out if her *pari* had intentionally tracked down the sweets for his own secret reasons, or if the crate had been included in one of his supply pickups by simple mistake. Either way, the lozenges had arrived badly damaged. Some were little more than glittering dust, but enough of the medicinal, strange-smelling candy had survived that Albacus could have treated an entire turian regiment. Regardless, those *bellari* had been doled out on extraordinary occasions only. Perfect grades. Exceptional training. Selfless behavior.

Her *pari*’s affection, like everything else about him, had been careful and austere. He wasted nothing.

Shepard was willing to blame every bad decision she was about to make on these trivial but vitally important details.

Once Shepard got a lungful of Garrus Vakarian, it was all over. That scent: haunting, familiar and anything but sweet. Complex and herbaceous, a rare, victorious morsel, her own secret gift. Adding insult to injury, his eyes were that same delicious blue, a blue as clear and hopeful as the summers she’d spent idling in wheatfields - sucking on bitter alien sweets and watching the sky for starships.

He was so close already, it would only take the smallest tug. Her greedy fingers found his neck, where his skin was thin, soft, warm. Without any further encouragement he changed the angle of his head and closed the distance between them.

When she gasped against the hard planes of his mouth, he made a sound like a grinding in the earth and hungrily increased the pressure on her lips. His hand slid to the back of her neck, locking her down for attack while the rough, strong line of his tongue outlined her bottom lip. He was well rehearsed at this. Confident, deliberate, and earnest. The heat of his barely-contained arousal throbbed against her stomach, and then his tongue was touching hers. She dug her fingers into his neck to keep herself upright.

The real crime she’d committed all those years ago had been forgetting this feeling. The taste of his coppery tongue, the near-painful firmness of his mouth. All the details had disappeared into the foggy amnesia of her hangover, and she’d been too terrified to go searching for those memories afterward. Despite everything that had happened since the night she’d drunkenly masturbated in front of a bashful cop on the Silversun Strip, Garrus Vakarian remained the only turian she had ever allowed to cross the carefully-guarded threshold of lips and teeth and tongue.

Some things were more delicious for the waiting.
He caught her lower lip between the flexible plates of his mouth, nipping and tugging while he dragged his hand from the back of her neck to the base of her throat. His thumb reverently traced her collarbones, then with an anticipatory tremble, he skimmed a blunted talon across the top edge of her bra. His talons were expertly trimmed and well maintained. He kept them short, clean and neat as a whistle. For a sexually mature torin, that could mean only one thing: a preference for skin far more delicate than his own. Garrus had been touching human women for a long, long time - the proof was right there, plain as day.

Her insides turned to magma, jealousy and excitement meeting and sloshing together with tectonic force, ready to erupt at any moment, but before she could make sense of the feeling, his mouth tortuously pulled away. He kissed the line of her jaw until he met her ear.

He rumbled, “Red… You and me, naked and smashed together. Yes or no?”

She blinked slowly and tried to breathe. Turians were nothing if not committed to the good of the group; asking was important. Given the state she’d been in the last time she’d wanted him this badly, she knew exactly how significant her answer would be now that she was stone-cold sober. Her whole body lifted toward him.

“Yes. Please.”

The sound he made was part cartoonish mating call, part grunt of lifelong satisfaction. It startled her enough that she came to her senses. Before another second could tick by, she wrapped her fingers around his wrist and held tight to his roving hand. She inclined her head toward the aft entrances to the cargo bay. Disabled security cameras wouldn’t mean a goddamn thing if somebody decided to walk out of that elevator or take a late-night stroll through engineering.

Garrus was well ahead of her. He hopped over to the Mako, using one arm to tug his C-Sec tunic over his head as he went. The sight of the dark, smooth, plate-less skin below his carapace was so distracting that she stayed rooted to the spot, too dizzy to walk.

“You know, C-Sec still has an outstanding warrant for your arrest,” he said. “Let me tell you, my boss did not appreciate seeing ‘Wild Redhead’ on that AO 442 where your name was supposed to be.” With a flourish, Garrus opened the hatch of the tank like it was a long-overdue birthday present. He put one foot up on the chassis, then ran his palm crudely over the flat of his groin plates. “You can’t run from this any longer. I’ve gotta take you downtown.”

Blood evacuated her brain and flooded enthusiastically into her groin. The sight of him standing there half-naked and guarding the gates of hell had her so suddenly, uncontrollably aroused, that her legs refused to move. All she could do was laugh and fumble with herself. She ran a shaking hand over her incriminating hair and got her fingers stuck in the band of her ponytail. With a single clumsy yank, she pulled out the band and let her hair tumble down to her shoulders, sloppy and damp.

Across the room, Garrus made a noise.

She looked at him and nearly choked. The blue of his eyes was piercing enough that she felt lanced by it, pinned immovably to the spot. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so painfully aroused - except for the last time she’d found herself the solitary object of that stare.

“Get in,” he commanded.

A disbelieving laugh forced its way out of her; she’d never been much good at answering the call of her own sexual impulses. Too overwhelming, too messy, too compromising. Easier to pretend
she was made of wood and shaped like a ship’s mast - or better yet, a battering ram.

“Garrus… this is a terrible idea.” If a voice could have gone into cardiac arrest, Shepard’s would have been seizing on the table, seconds from death.

He lowered his head and raised his brow plates, huffed out a breath through flaring mandibles.

Suddenly, he was very close, so close that his scent enveloped her all over again without any warning. That irresistible, cultivated scent, the signature of a torin who kept his plates polished, his talons trimmed, and his gun ready to fire.

“Jane. Yes or no.”

Without questioning why, she touched her fingers to the side of his face. Tracing the striking blue line of his familia notas, she spat up a word so big that it tore her throat apart on the way out:

“Yes.”

He reached for his visor and slowly pulled it from his face. It was the first time she’d seen him without it.

“Then get in the car,” he said.

Maybe the Prothean beacon had short-circuited her sense of right and wrong, or maybe she was too sleep-deprived to be rational anymore. Whatever the reason, despite this bottomless idiocy, Shepard jumped straight into the barrel and plunged over Niagara without giving herself another chance to lose her nerve.

She clambered into the Mako, head first and sense last, tumbling into the nest of standard-issue bedrolls Garrus had made behind the main gunnery perch. He must have had a real bedroom somewhere, probably a comfortable little den with tasteful linens that smelled just like him. Garrus Vakarian’s bed existed somewhere out in the beautiful, preposterous universe, just waiting for her to slide into it without any clothes on.

She clenched an eager fist into the bedding, heart rising to her throat. As she watched Garrus climb into the tank and forcefully pull down the door to seal the hatch, her legs slackened, her core pulsed, and she moaned.

The only way to lock the door behind them was to trigger the environmental purge. The thirty second cycle was loud and chaotic, a real show-stopping number with a lot of flashing lights and the sound of air rushing at a million miles an hour. A thrill ride.

30 - 29 - 28 - 27 - 26

She’d seen old human time-travelling vids that were just like this. The heroes were always rocketing backwards through time and space on the way to save Earth, or kill Hitler, or have an excellent adventure. She was rocketing through time and space now, spiraling backwards into the Summer Shitstorm at breakneck speed.

25 - 24 - 23 - 22 - 21

Garrus’ hands got to her first, rough and impatient. He yanked down one side of her bra, ran the back of a talon along her nipple, and then his mouth caught up with the rest of him. When his tongue trilled expertly against her breast, her eyes flew wide open and she stared furiously at the purge countdown, trying desperately not to scream.
The Mako sucked all the air from the room. Garrus sucked all the air from her lungs. His mouth was everywhere, his hands were never far behind. Suddenly, she was naked. Just as suddenly, so was he, and then he pulled her hand down to meet his groin plates. All it took was one tentative, curious brush of her fingertips, and he slid right out into her hand.

She’d never seen a turian cock up close before. Garrus was boiling hot, self-lubricating, and pulsing a vulgar, forget-me-not blue. Ribbed for her pleasure, more dramatically angled than the human equivalent, and perfectly compatible. And there was his knot, throbbing thick and wild against her palm, making her throat go dry.

As she curled one hand around his cock, she brought her other hand to clutch the exposed skin of his neck. Mindlessly, she pulled his forehead down to meet her own. She hummed without thinking, deep in her chest. Her whole body was going to burst into flames. What would she do if she burst into flames? Would it hurt very badly, to burst into flames?

He pushed her legs open and back without any hesitation. She rolled her hips towards him and felt him pressing against the nervous ring of muscles at her entrance, but no further. Her clit pulsed wildly as he knocked against it - she’d never felt so shameless and desperate to be fucked in all her life. She was breathing heavily, gasping like a fish out of water, and Garrus was just staring at her, eyes locked where they were nearly joined. As if swabbing for evidence, he ran his thumbs through the sweat that had gathered on the backs of her knees, and then.

He slid home in one movement. Characteristically on-target, she could have sworn she heard a bang.

She yelped as if punched in the gut.

He was incredibly hard. That was the thing she couldn’t escape - just how rock solid and forceful his cock was. Even more than the physical proof, it was the thought Blue is this hard inside me that made her gurgle clumsily in reciprocal lust.

“All right, Red?” His voice was barely a glimmer in the air as he rocked involuntarily against her hips.

He was gaping at the gunnery pillar next to her head, his eyes blown wide, his mandibles flaring in disbelief. A growl rippled low in his throat as he slowly dragged himself along, and she knew he was holding back.

She raised her hips and clamped down on him, just to see what would happen. She was rewarded with a ferocious thrust that knocked her into the back wall and made the whole chassis squeak. With a full-body tremor, she let out a splintered yelp.

He answered by fucking her in earnest, merciless and singularly focused.

She grappled for solid ground, hands roving anywhere she could reach - his thighs, his arms,
finally clinging to the suede-covered steel of his waist and holding on for dear life. Now that he was moving inside her, he felt immense, nearly unbearable. The sounds of her own confused pleasure rose like smoke over their heads, an endless litany of moans and breathy cries, unfamiliar to her own ears.

The blood rushed to her face, her chest, hell, even to her hands and feet. It embarrassed the life out of her, knowing how vulnerable she was right now, how indiscreet and unprofessional they were being, and it made the pleasure that much more intense. She thought about the Mako rocking on its wheelbase, and how despicable things would look from the outside if someone were to walk into the cargo bay unannounced. Would she ever be able to look at this tank again without immediately remembering how perfect it felt to have her legs in the air with Garrus Vakarian fucking her for all he was worth?

She felt herself barrelling towards a spiked ridge of pleasure that was too huge, too uncontrolled, too soon. Trying to ride it out felt as if the sky was falling - everything was turning black and blue.

Oh God, her body screamed, this is how you die.

“Ah - I can’t - Garrus it’s too much.” She dug her nails into the soft skin of his waist. “Can we slow down?” As if she wasn’t sure. As if she had no idea how her own body worked anymore.

Instantly, he stopped moving. Turning his keel aside, he gently shifted himself and leaned over her more intimately, as closely as their mismatched bodies would allow. She could smell that unmistakable sky-blue cologne as his face hovered inches from her own. Delirious, her hand automatically sought out the tender velvety spot at the back of his head, right beneath his fringe, and she pulled him closer still.

“Kiss me...”

He did. Slowly, happily, with one wide hand cradling her neck. When he started thrusting again, he rocked steady and deep, and she could feel every millimeter of their connected flesh pulsing in time. She clung to the sensitive line of his neck for security as he kissed her, fucked her, turned her inside out. Every slow, deliberate stroke made her feel shiny and new, like she’d never been intimate in her life.

Maybe she hadn’t, she realized. Not like this.

That was what did it. The obviousness of his affection, just that little hint of it was enough. She clumsily moved one hand to rub a few circles over her clit.

When it hit her, the orgasm attacked full force. All at once, with no warning. She beat a fist against his cowl purely out of surprise, and actually yelled - angrily, almost - as if he’d snuck up behind her in the dark.

All the while, he was staring at her with a look of wanton, immature giddiness. In a hot rush, he crushed his mouth over hers as if he needed to devour her pleasure in order to survive. In one long, unbroken note, she keened insanely into his mouth. Her climax crashed over her - wave after unforgiving wave, with no end in sight.

He broke the kiss just long enough to plead against her mouth.

“Red - I need - Mmmm - Inside. Yes or no?”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes. All of you.”
The sound he made was quiet but unreal. A bottomless rumble topped off with a breathy adolescent chirrup. He buried his entire face in her hair, and his final thrusts were so rough that she heard rather than felt their bodies slamming together. When she sensed the heat of his release pooling inside, her entire body went pink. She couldn’t decide if it was shame or titillation. She’d never let anyone do that before.

They crumpled together for a few moments - breathless, dazed.

“I can’t move.” He said, voice stripped of modulation.

“Yeah,” she answered, capable of little more than a breathy laugh. “Me neither.”

“No, I mean. I shouldn’t have…” He cleared his throat. “...Sorry. We’re stuck like this for a while.”

His knot. She’d considered this possibility, fleetingly, the way one considers jumping off a bridge just to see what it feels like. Considering it was one thing, but she’d actually allowed it to happen. Hell, she’d encouraged it.

Even if she didn’t know much about turian sexual propriety, she knew that letting him lock into her unprotected on the first date was probably taking things too fast. Still, his cock felt amazing.

“I like you right here,” she mumbled, lavishing his furrowed brow plates with punch-drunk kisses.

He slackened and rolled to his side, arms wrapped securely around her shoulders. His mouth drew an affectionate line across her forehead, but all she could feel was the lewd pulse of their conjoined bodies. His swollen knot spasmed inside her, again... again... until she moaned lazily, rolling her hips.

He seemed half-conscious already, but she pulled him down and poured herself into him, tasting his tongue, stealing his breath. The feeling of synchronization was intimate in a way she had never known, like having his heart transplanted into her body. How would she ever be able to sleep again without doing this first?

Deep against her core, she felt his pulse slowing, her own heart dragging after him beat for beat. His eyelids fluttered sleepily, trust written over every bleary feature. As sleep overcame him, his cock gradually relaxed and retracted, and she was able to free herself with a bittersweet twist of her hips.

She checked the time on her omni-tool and swore - the moment she’d walked into the cargo bay and seen Garrus Vakarian mostly naked and holding a rifle, Shepard had lost any sense of time. If Nihlus wasn’t already contemplating taking a trip belowdecks to give her a lecture about human insomnia and poor judgment, he would be soon.

She fished around the stuffy cabin for her clothes, but regained her propriety first. In a few short hours, she was meant to be driving this tank on a rescue mission. People were depending on her. People in trouble, who needed her to be at her best. No distractions. No compromises.

She had forgotten: never lose count.

She finally located her bra - wedged under Garrus’ knee. Slowly, she pulled it free. He shifted in his sleep, reaching out to grope a blind hand along the swell of her hip. When she reeled back, something dripped down her inner thigh. Cold, thick, inescapable - guilt felt much the same.

With nauseating specificity, she remembered the look on her pari’s face when he had caught her
sneaking into that secret stash of sweets in his office, stealing a reward that had not been earned.

What the hell had she just done?

Chapter End Notes

Original words and phrases:
- *Bellari*: Old-fashioned turian sweets, comparable to mints, anise drops, or lavender pastilles. Brittle, hard, and meant to be sucked on for a long time, they come in a variety of strong traditional flavors, most of them unpopular with children.

Words and phrases courtesy of [MizDirected](#)'s turian dictionary:
- *Patrem/Pari*: Father/Dad
- *Torin/Torini*: Male turian(s)
- *Familia notas*: The colony markings that turians wear on their faces.

I am fully aware that a Citadel Security arrest warrant would not have the same form number as the 21st century Earth equivalent, but I couldn't stop myself. AO 442 is a fucking great number, worthy of Douglas Adams himself, hot damn.
Ordinarily I wouldn't reference specific songs within the story itself, but parts of this chapter were screaming for a diagetic soundtrack. Listening to these songs could enhance your experience, though results may vary.

I Would Do Anything For Love and A Farewell to Grog

Sincere apologies if either of these songs won't play in your region!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

— GARRUS —

Not only was Shepard refusing to look at Garrus, she seemed to be avoiding the proximal volumetric space that surrounded him, as if the very air was guilty by association. The tense, strictly controlled expression on her face spoke of a woman who feared that allowing her eyes within ten meters of a naked body - even the memory of a naked body - might trigger an explosive hull breach.

Last night, after Garrus had experienced the most mind-melting mutual orgasm of his life, he had thought that all of his problems were over. Red had bathed him in stunning, radioactive affection. They had cooed and kissed and cuddled. Without a single reason to believe that she wouldn’t still be glowing like a supernova come morning, Garrus had slept like the dead.

Blind faith in the bliss of sexual afterglow had been his first mistake. While Garrus had been naively drifting on a higher plane of consciousness - full of joy, empty of all earthly doubt - Red had disappeared all over again. Without a single clarifying word as to how they ought to proceed, she had silently retreated back to her fortress and been inaccessible ever since.

His second mistake had been trying to greet the Commander when she had dragged herself - ice cold and hard as a steel - into the conference room behind Kyrik’s heels.

In response to Garrus’ carefully neutralized, “Commander,” Shepard had said nothing. Instead, her gaze had passed over him, phased clear through him, then never returned to his side of the room.

“Woah,” said Williams, as she once again claimed the seat to Garrus’ left. “How did you manage to get on the Commander’s bad side before the first day?”

As far as omens went, that one made him especially nervous.

“Good question,” he said, staring a bright-red bullseye into Shepard’s stubbornly turned back and wishing the spin would stop rooming.

Alenko took the seat directly across from Garrus and gave him a polite nod. Moreau and Zorah trailed in last, heads bent together, giggling about some wondrous new feature of the Normandy.

Tee hee, she let me touch her drive core. Har har, I blue-shifted her IES system. La dee da, I fell
into her mass effect pocket face-first.

They’d been at it all morning. Yesterday, Garrus might have joined in. Now, in the wake of Shepard’s silent treatment, the twittering stream of bullshit and childish innuendos was enough to make his plates itch all over.

“Therum,” Shepard announced loudly, commencing the meeting without the tiniest hint of her customary tact. The room went silent.

Zorah hadn’t even finished sitting down. The quarian sank into the seat on Garrus’ right with a startled squeak.

Even Kryik seemed momentarily surprised, but he also seemed eternally eager to get this mission on the ground. He didn’t miss a beat, and called up a global terrain overview so that the two Spectres could run through the specifics.

“Therum is a remote mining installation, covered in nothing but boiling hot lava and a dozen looted Prothean ruins. According to my information broker, decades of pilfering opportunists have nearly picked the place clean to the bone, but somehow they overlooked the real prize.”

He zoomed the map to the designated mission area: a narrow, winding canyon with a river of lava on one side and a wall of geth on the other - a death trap, in other words. Kryik pointed to a blinking location marker in the northwestern corner.

“There’s something at the end of this passage that Saren wants very, very badly, and he’s losing patience quick. He’s got a whole geth platoon entrenched, trying to beat the door down into this mine. Luckily for us, there’s some considerable firepower holding up the other side.”

Shepard tapped the communications panel and summoned the hulking image of a scarred, ancient face, then explained:

“One of the Shadow Broker’s best agents, a thousand-year-old krogan battlemaster named Urdnot Wrex. Apparently the archaeologist who hired him has deep pockets, because that’s one hell of a personal bodyguard.”

Kryik picked up where she left off.

“Wrex has been fending off Saren’s forces almost single-handed. He’s protecting none other than Doctor Liara T’Soni: treasure hunter, information broker, and only child of Lady Benezia.”

Another tap to the panel. The image of Wrex was replaced by a young, wide-eyed asari. The picture had been snapped at a considerable distance, as if the photographer had feared for their own safety. No wonder. T’Soni wore a dirtied researcher’s uniform and was holding a Prothean artifact in one hand, a ball of biotic fire in the other.

Chief Williams leaned back in her chair and muttered, “The plot thickens.”

Kryik bowed his head and his mandibles quirked at Williams in resigned amusement.

“Just as you say. According to multiple sources, Liara and her mother had a falling out and haven’t spoken in decades. Whatever the case, there’s no conceivable scenario in which Benezia’s daughter is down in that mine by accident.”

Kryik studied the image of Liara for a moment, and then added:
“Liara has excavated more Prothean artifacts than anyone living - and has sold most of those priceless treasures to the Shadow Broker. The doctor might be trying to save her mother, and then again, she might be in this for her own reasons. Until we know more, assume she’s hostile.”

Shepard sliced through the air with one hand and cut right to the point.

“We need her in our arsenal. Regardless of who she’s working with or why, she knows something we don’t, and we need to get to her before Saren does. That goes double for Wrex. Quadruple for Wrex.”

Kryik turned to Shepard, looking a mite stunned by her forcefulness. After a moment's consideration, he reached over and patronizingly jostled her shoulder.

“This will be a touching reunion for you, Commander. After all, Urdnot Wrex is an old sweetheart of yours, isn’t he? I heard you left that old krogan with two broken hearts back on Akuze.”

Williams jumped in unexpectedly, and Garrus turned his head towards the Chief so suddenly that a nerve exploded along the side of neck in a burst of white-hot pain.

“Oh yeah?” Williams goaded. “I heard he was the one who broke up with her.”

“Excuse me, but you’re both wrong.” Alenko held up a demurring hand. “I was there, saw the whole affair with my own eyes. It was an amicable split, they both got half in the divorce.”

Apparently even the quiet, polite Staff Lieutenant - by far the most clear-eyed and sober of any of these raving psychopaths - was in on this clusterfuck of a revelation.

Garrus could hardly breathe, never mind think straight.

It was a joke. Obviously, it was a joke. More goofy innuendos from a bunch of jumpy soldiers trying to distract themselves before dropping boots into a hot zone. Typical banter, the sort he usually revelled in.

Not this morning.

_Ha ha ha_, let’s all laugh about that time Shepard broke both hearts of a rock-hard krogan battlemaster. A bloodthirsty warlord with skin thick as tanned leather and a millenia of life experience under his massive belt. If someone like Urdnot Wrex was capable of having a schoolboy crush on Shepard, even as a joke, what chance did the comparatively baby-faced Garrus Vakarian have of surviving this woman’s terrifying allure?

None whatsoever. Sink with the ship or jump in the ocean. Either way, you were going down and dying slow.

Shepard, meanwhile, rolled her eyes and made a disgusted noise at her Marines, then brushed Kryik’s hand away.

“Are you three quite finished? Also, are you all in some kind of Urdnot Wrex fan club that I didn’t know about?”

Kryik laughed. It wasn’t much, and it ended quickly, but he laughed all the same.

“Speaking of which, I have something for you. I know that flashy mercenary get-up Urdnot gave you was an important facet of your warrior pride. It was my fault it got trashed back on Eden Prime. So. Lieutenant Alenko was kind enough to aid me in finding a suitable replacement on short
notice.”

Without any further explanation, he nodded to Alenko.

“Major? Would you pass me the ceremonial apology, please?”

“You got it.”

Alenko leaned over the curved guard rail and opened one of the small cargo compartments that was set flush into the wall. Grinning, he pulled out a impressive set of mirror-smooth, jet-black, Spectre-status ceramic armor. It was the good stuff: the rare stocks. Kassa Fabrication, by the look of it. Fully-specced. With red accents.

It was a kingly gift. Garrus ground his teeth together.

Lieutenant Alenko handed the bundle of armor to Shepard with a friendly nod of his head, then looked to Kryik and said:

“Gotta say Nihlus, wrapping it up with a bow was a nice touch.”

Kryik jumped. “What? I didn’t -”

“And this... lovely card,” added Shepard in a dry voice, lifting it from the package. It was bright pink and plastered with holographic images of grotesquely infantilized terran animals. Shepard stared in offended awe, as if it were covered in elcor pornography.

The Commander read the contents aloud in a slow, flattened tone.

“Dear Shepard, sorry for your loss. I may not be able to replace your intestines, but I saw this terrifying suit of armor and thought of you. Hugs and kisses, Nihlus.”

“Who -” Nihlus stuttered and peeked over Shepard’s shoulder at the contents of the card. “Moreau! Damn it all!”

Moreau tipped his hat, smug as ever.

For a moment, Shepard was silent. Then she threw her head back and laughed, long and loud and throaty. A genuine, sensuous sound that Garrus had mistakenly believed belonged to him. Exclusively.

A wave of laughter roared across the room, clearing the air like a power-washer. Afterwards, the relief was so palpable there was a cute round of applause. Even Garrus clapped. Once.


Moreau clenched his fist and eagerly whispered, “Yesss.”

“Alright grunts, you’ve all had your giggles,” Shepard muttered, setting the armor at her feet. “Now get back to work. This a stealth frigate, not a party bus.”

“I’ve been given to understand that driving the party bus is your job, Shepard.” Nihlus turned back to the map and called up a tactical overlay. The M35’s projected route dotted through the canyon.

Oh great. Kryik was bantering now? Was Garrus going to have to watch his rapport with Shepard swell by the hour, full of expensive gifts and double-entendres and inevitable hand-holding?
Stop being such a mewling infant, Vakarian. The least you can do is sit up straight.

Garrus shook himself and tried to remember what it felt like to comport himself like a professional. He had known, once. Right? He considered all of the reprimands in Executor Pallin’s office. The long, unbroken silences he had often shared with his father.

Nevermind.

Kryik was wrapping up, and getting excited, by the sound of things. Garrus forced himself to listen to the Spectre’s giddy under-tones without putting his hands over his ears and screaming.

“Thanks to the terrain, there’s only one way in or out of Liara’s dig site, and it’s covered in geth. Wrex and the Doctor are pinned down, about to be trapped forever under a pile of debris, unless we punch a hole through that blockade.

“Alenko and Vakarian - you’ll be with Shepard. Zorah and Williams - once Shepard’s team has paved the way, we’ll lead the infiltration into the mine and extract the Doctor.” Kryik looked to the quarian. “Zorah, I’m going to need every bit of intel you’ve squeezed out of that geth you picked up, and then some. Weaknesses, schematics. Every advantage you can give me.”

“No problem sir,” she said, nodding confidently.

“Any questions?” Shepard looked around the room, but the duties were clear. “Alright. Joker, get off your lazy ass before Butler steals your job. I need you to swoop in and drop the Mako right on top of their heads like an early Christmas present. Chestnuts roasting in my open fire. Once the geth are sufficiently startled, sneak around back and stuff the extraction team down the chimney.

“Mako Squad, I’ll meet you belowdecks in five for the christening. Move out.”

She chose to acknowledge Alenko only, and then they were all summarily dismissed when the Commander picked up her shiny new armor and marched herself out of the room.

Garrus turned to the Chief for an explanation.

Despite her habit of dipping into knee-jerk xenophobia, Williams was rapidly turning into Garrus’ most reliable translator. He got the feeling that Williams reveled in the opportunity to outsmart a turian from C-Sec, but her ribbings had the familiar ring of an annoying little sister, not a bigot.

Williams took one look at the stranded dipshit expression on Garrus’ face and leaned in with an evil gleam in her eye. Yeah, there was definitely an air of Solana about her.

“Christening a Mako with Shepard... that takes guts. Buckle up, Vakarian. Express elevator to hell, going down!”

— JANE —

_Akuze - 2181_

_valentine’s Day_

The ground was a long way down.

Much like falling in love, there was a drop that could kill you.

Shepard had ample time to worry about the skeleton-splattering deadliness of that distance as the
Mako idled ten stories above the crater floor, clutched in the belching gullet of a thresher maw. Shepard spun her wheels against wet meat and empty air, but it was useless. There was no purchase to be found.

Delirious and giddy with fear, she couldn’t stop staring straight down at that drop. Hey, how about that? She could see Uncle Urdnot’s house from here.

The krogan warlord’s fortress might have been a lot friendlier looking if it hadn’t been sitting directly on top of the mouth of hell. The mercenary outpost was now smack-dab in the middle of a rampaging thresher nest, having gone from ‘habitable’ to ‘hell-hole’ overnight.

A week ago, Shepard had been comfortably grounded, babysitting fifty deeply filthy colonial Marines, swerving a baker’s dozen tanks across the rugged landscape of Akuze. Under cover of a remote M35 field driving course, they had been covertly pursuing a tip from Admiral Hackett, trying to find and neutralize “a mad-scientist superweapon.”

Armed with little more than the vaguest estimates as to the location and scale of the threat, things had been tense. All they knew was that they were after a sizeable terrorist splinter cell that had named themselves Cerberus, as if calling dibs on the underworld. What a bunch of assholes.

A week into the search, she’d intercepted Clan Urdnot’s distress call.

It was a sorry excuse for an S.O.S. - just a long, seemingly accidental broadcast bursting with imaginative profanities and the sound of an entire krogan mercenary company dying loudly in the background.

So - much - screaming.

Speaking of loud noises. The thresher maw that currently held Shepard’s tank in its drooling jaws was through with waiting for its snack.

Inch by squealing inch, the tank crunched down around Shepard’s ears, little more than a tin can in a sucking vice. There was a deafening roar of tearing metal, and then a massive glowing polka-dotted tongue crashed through the starboard hatchway. It flopped around with a ferocious slap-slap-slap-slapping, like a great white shark leaping from the water to flail hungrily across a beach of screaming tourists.

Without even the courtesy of asking to be her Valentine, the thresher deepthroated the M35 and then spat out a throatful of acid.

It was no miracle that Shepard was spared: someone paid the reaper in her stead. Her gunnery officer - Private Sheb Wilhelm - took the whole hit of acid full on the chest. He blasted out a wild high-pitched scream before he bubbled, melted on his own bones, and died in tortured gore behind her, the sixth Alliance Marine to perish on Akuze under her command.

Engineer Apone drew unlucky number seven. He was pushed out the acid hole on the far side of the cabin and fell to his death in silent surprise before he even got a chance to turn his head and see what was coming.

As she suspected. Exactly like love, a fall like that could definitely kill you.

The thresher bellowed: a thousand quaking octaves of pure noise. Then, just as suddenly as it had rushed up from below, it abruptly let go of the tank, dropping Shepard ass-backwards into a skyrise worth of empty air.
She fell. And fell. And kept falling. There was no way to know when it would end - all she could see was the sky.

Shepard wasn’t proud. As death rushed up to meet her like a bat out of hell, she clutched the steering column and tearfully remembered sleeping in her pari’s arms… Then she breathed in deep and screamed her lungs bloody. If this was curtains, she was going to fucking announce herself all the way offstage.

The Mako and the ground reunited at terminal velocity, with a sound as loud as it was painful. Airbags deployed from every angle, scrambling her with enough force to break all the ribs on her left side. Just for kicks, her head slammed against the seat back in a sudden explosion of ugly stars, and then everything got real fuzzy.

Shepard was still screaming when someone wrenched open whatever was left of the starboard hatch and clamped their massive hand around her forearm with bruising force. Those brutal, groping fingers rattled her so violently that she stopped screaming entirely out of annoyance.

She turned and saw him. Urdnot Wrex. Huge, red, and lit from behind in glorious technicolor like a god of the sun. With her head in a fog, all she could do was stare.

Sweeping in to rescue the krogan band had been Shepard’s call. Luckily, her Marines and Wrex’s mercs had fallen in love at first sight, and after the initial raid cemented the marriage, nobody had questioned her orders. Wrex was especially infatuated with his rescuers, and he expressed his affection with blended gifts of heavy weapons and heavy drinking. The touch of intoxicating love in the air had only been enhanced by the looming proximity and subsequent arrival of Valentine’s Day.

You haven’t heard poetry until you’ve heard a krogan merc reciting a hand-written sonnet to the Alliance Marine who just pulled his ass out of the fire.

Shepard’s ears were ringing - she was in a stupor. Wrex shook her again.

“Shepard! Stop gaping like a baby salarian and let go of the wheel! Is this what you call a rescue?”

Oh yeah. She was supposed to be rescuing him, not the other way around. Things had not gone according to plan. How had things gotten so backwards? Somewhere between the thresher maw’s mouth and the ground, presumably.

The thresher maws just kept coming. There were dozens. Every five feet, they seemed to spring from the ground like man-eating dandelions, and there was no weeding them. Shepard’s Marines had been forced to attack in shifts, pulling out a few more half-eaten krogan survivors with each crazy, desperate trip into the central compound. Taking turns to dart back to the few safe inches of perimeter, they ran like hell, slept in bursts, and drank themselves numb in between.

Now on day three of the assault, Shepard had been leading the very last wave. Then - whoops - everything had gone straight to shit when Wrex had run back into his fortress, drunkenly screaming that he’d forgotten his piece-of-shit family armor. She should have cut him off after that fifth mug of ryncol. But then again, how do you tell a thousand-year-old battlemaster that he was too deep in his cups? She could use a stiff drink herself right about now. Her whole body roiled with pain.

It felt... sort of… purple. A royal hue.

Wrex, for his part, was through with gentility. He reached into the cabin and slapped Shepard right across her stupefied face.
“SHEPARD! Wake up! It’s time to get your pretty ass in gear! I don’t remember giving my future queen permission to die!”

During one of those scanty breaks between raids, Shepard may have accidentally gotten blinding drunk on ryncol and promised to bear a krogan battlemaster twenty fruitful daughters. Or something.

The thought of being heavily pregnant with extraterrestrial offspring was what finally brought her back to her senses. Her head snapped up and she looked outside. Oh god.

Half a dozen thresher maws were writhing in the distance beneath the unending hellfire of turrets, rockets, and mortar squads camped along the western perimeter. Tanks were scattered across the crater floor like discarded toys, most of them reduced to little more than smouldering clumps by concentrated bursts of acid.

Wow, it was loud out there. If she sat on her ass a moment longer, she would surely, surely die.

Undoing her harness as fast as she could, she checked for broken body parts - there were several, but none that mattered - and then she grabbed two fistfulls of rippling krogan neck and let Wrex yank her out of the tank like a bad tooth. Perfectly at ease amidst an exploding hellscape, with the sun setting behind him in a blinding flash of orange, Urdnot Wrex pulled Shepard from the still-steaming wreckage of an Alliance M35 and held her against his chest in a bridal carry. He was seven and half feet tall. Covered in mountainous scarlet plating and scarred even on his good side. Two hundred and fifty raging kilos of pure berserker muscle. Urdnot Wrex: a thousand years old and still not ready to die.

The two of them together made for one hell of a spectacle.

That is, until Shepard beat him firmly on the hump and forced him to set her down.

Every instinct in her body told her to run for the perimeter, but she knew her best chance of survival was to stay perfectly still until she could get her ass back into a functioning Mako. Walk without rhythm and you won’t attract the worm... that had been the motto of the week.

She radioed her lieutenant.

“Alenko! Report!”

The voice on the other end was breathless but ready for anything.

“Commander! Glad to hear your voice. Perimeter squads are holding, but the tanks are getting ripped apart. Saw yours go up - said a prayer.”

She skipped the reunion. Time for that later, over a mug of tasteless swill.

“Do you have the Cerberus intel?”

“Negative. Ferro’s squad went dark right outside Urdnot HQ. They barely made it out the door.”

Goddammit. Ferro, Drake, Spunkmeyer. Just like that: eight, nine, and ten.

Without the data that Engineer Ferro had mined from the Cerberus satellites, she had nothing solid to bring back to the Admiral. Just a fistful of thresher maws and a ten dead Marines.

“I’m still standing. I’ve got Wrex. We’ll get that fucking data. Wait for my signal, then pull
“Roger that, Commander.” She heard him calling to the troops before the comm cut out. “Keep dancing, princesses! Move-move-MOVE!!”

There were shouts, a few well-timed explosions, and then a tsunami of furious gunfire rang out in stereo surround across the canyon floor as the Marines continued to lure the thresher maws away from the base.

“That’s more like it, Shepard. Let’s show Kandros how to choke on a quad.”

Despite Wrex’s blustering, he and Shepard were doomed unless one of those tanks made a rapid detour to pick up some extra passengers. There was no survivable way to do this on foot. She whipped up her omni-tool and did a quick roll-call. Who was about to pull the short straw?

Private Hudson was the closest. *Halle-fuckin-lujah.*

Private William Hudson, whose first words to her had been: “Hey Shepard, have you ever been mistaken for a turian?”

“I don’t know, Hudson. Have you ever been mistaken for a man?” had been her unenthusiastic reply.

She radioed him for pickup and then turned to Wrex.

“Private Hudson is on our nine and closing fast. Says the ultimate badass is about to take me for the ride of my life.”

“Ultimate badass? He must be talking about me.”

Wrex wrapped his arm around her waist and pumped the action on his shogun with a forceful, single-handed throw.

Hard to argue with that.

The Urdnot clan leader was magnificent. A rare krogan biotic leading a ragtag clan of social progressives, Wrex had been bunkered on Akuze for years. Said he’d been trying to trigger a krogan cultural renaissance - but Akuze was an obscure Terminus shithole of interest to few, and Wrex’s conclave of misfits had attracted little interest. Still, he had secured himself a cozy little headquarters, a towering scrap heap where an old warlord could sit pretty on his massive hoard of weapons, credits, and loyal mercenaries. When a seemingly endless hive of thresher maws had ripped his world to bits, he’d barely blinked an eye.

She let Wrex hold her while they waited for Hudson, but only because she felt marginally safer with a krogan battlemaster girding his arm around her in the middle of the apocalypse. Really. It wasn’t because she had a crush on him. That would have been ridiculous.

In comparison, Hudson was a measly posturing blowhard. Green and wobbly as a bowl of medbay gelatin. Exactly the type of touchy-feely, sludge-spewing, barrel-chested man-boy that Shepard’s *pari* had caught her sneaking out to drink with on more than one occasion.

She’d always had a soft spot for any loudmouth with a heart of gold. Even so, unlike the harmless farm boys back home, she wouldn’t have let Private Hudson anywhere near her own privates, not with a ten-foot pole.
Scratch that. *Especially not* with a ten-foot pole.

He was obsessed with two-hundred-year-old rock songs, not to mention naval shanties that stretched several centuries even further back into obscurity. While they’d been digging for Cerberus’ trail, he had found a way to broadcast his own private radio channel into the internal sound system of every Mako along the caravan. How many torturous rounds of “Sink the Bismarck” and “Farewell to Grog” had she endured?

By the end of that first week, the Private had led enough enthusiastic rum-fueled sing-alongs for the entire platoon to know every word of Hudson’s Choirbook by heart. To spare her own sanity she might have put a stop to his nonsense, but Hudson was to morale what a shot of tequila was to a margarita. Necessary.

Hudson’s tank skidded to a noisy stop behind them, spewing rocks and dust ten feet into the air. The hatch opened and a wall of sound spilled out.


“Happy Valentine’s Day, lovebirds! Your horse-drawn carriage has arrived!”

Shepard and Wrex dove into the tank. Hudson was driving solo. His squad had been obliterated early in the day, when numbers four and five had been called to Heaven.

Shepard manned Gunner Ripley’s post at the turret, sliding her hips into the channel of the gunnery pillar, where Wrex’s massive hump was too big to fit. The krogan was forced to sit in the bitch seat and do his best impression of the small-boned Engineer Newton.

Shepard had to shout at the top of her lungs to be heard over the music.

“I need this party bus to make one more stop, Private. Get me back to Urdot HQ - we can't leave without Ferro’s Cerberus data!”

Hudson screamed right back at his usual volume: eleven.

“Maybe you haven’t been keeping up on current events, Commander, but we just got our asses kicked! I would do anything for love, but I won’t do tha-”

“*Shut the hell up* and drive me to Ferro’s tank, Hudson.”

To his credit, the Private shuffled his armor around his shoulders, smacked himself on the helmet for resolve, and then screamed:

“Aye-aye Ma’am! Next stop: the real pretty shit! Anything for love!”

The bulk of the threshers were busy trying to eat everyone on the western edge of the crater, but there was always the risk of a new one popping out from beneath with no warning.

It was the rumbling that gave it away. You could always feel the tremor first, as if the earth were sucking in a starving breath.

Speak of the devil. There it was now.

Hudson had felt it too.

“Ahhhhhhh shittttttt thar she blows...”
After watching his squad dissolve in a rain of acid, Hudson knew the risks better than anyone. Without delay or finesse, he slammed down the accelerator and raced to the mercenary compound, redlining at whatever level was beyond top speed. The Mako’s wheels jumped and skittered over the terrain, barely making contact with the crater floor.

Shepard’s teeth rattled in her skull to the beat of sex and drums and rock and roll, and she was instantly aware of all the injuries she’d sustained in that fall. The pain was enough to make her puke.

She clung to the handles of the turret’s periscope and held back a scream. Instead of passing out, she sang at the top of her lungs - it was the only distraction insane enough to keep her on her feet.

“As long as the wheels are turning…”

They were within spitting distance of the compound. Hudson joined his voice with hers at a blistering pitch.

“As long as the fires are burning!”

Hudson pumped the boosters and skipped them like a rock over a lake, pushing the Mako well beyond the advisable heat tolerance, roaring forward as fast as the tank’s six exhausted wheels could carry them.

They sang on, “As long as your prayers are coming true!”

Private Hudson clutched the wheel, shrieked like a little girl, and then screamed:

“YOU BETTER BELIEVE IT!”

The thunderously sentimental chorus of the song burst out around them as the thresher maw surged from below, glancing against the port quarter. The impact popped the back of the tank like the tab on a beer can, and with a startled hiss of spinning wheels, the Mako flew forward and crashed into the flimsy wall of barricades surrounding the mercenary compound.

A hard landing, but not the worst she’d had today.

They had wiggle room around the base’s perimeter: a scant circle of solid ground that the thresher couldn’t slither beneath.

Safety was still a long way off. ‘Spitting distance’ was a measurable quantity out here, not just a catchy turn of phrase. One hundred meters. Two hundred, if you wanted to avoid getting acid splashed in your eyes by accident.

Ferro’s tank was an arm’s length away, upturned and smoking. On foot, totally unprotected with a thresher maw hovering nearby, that distance might as well have been interstellar.

Without waiting to be asked, Hudson kicked open the port hatch.

“ANYTHING FOR LOVE!”

Then he ran for it. He had a handful of seconds to get there and back. Ten, if an optimist was counting.

01 - 02 - 03

(Frost - Dietrich - Crowe)
Limbs flailing wildly, screaming the entire time, Hudson made it to the other Mako and ripped open the door in three seconds flat - a world record if she’d ever seen one.

04 - 05 - 06 - 07

(Ripley - Newton - Wilhelm - Apone)

He spent four seconds rummaging in the tank. The thresher maw had seen the Marine’s crazy, pinwheeling approach, and now it turned its head in ravenous anticipation.

08 - 09 - 10

(Drake - Spunkmeyer - Ferro)

Hudson’s hand emerged, data pad hoisted triumphantly. One second later, his head followed. The Valentine’s hearts he’d painted all over his helmet flashed like perfect, pink targets. The thresher roared and lined up a flesh-eating loogie.

11

“Hudson!”

Shepard threw herself out of the hatch to rescue him before Wrex could do so much as close a contrary hand around her heels.

Hudson was halfway out of Ferro’s tank, scrabbling for purchase along the chassis. The thresher was a lousy shot, and the main acid projectile missed by several feet. Even so, the splashback was deadly enough on its own.

Shepard got lucky. A footlong gash of acid slapped across her thigh guard. As she ran, she popped the seals and tore off the plating before the acid could reach skin. Hudson had been knocked to the ground, and he wasn’t fast enough.

There was a six-inch hole bubbling through his abdominal guard, sizzling and steaming through layers of ceramic and underplating, and then...

The only advantage of a thresher acid burn was that it cauterized as it went, so you never saw much blood.

She locked her arms under Hudson’s sweating, hairy pits and dragged him kicking and screaming back to his tank. She threw him to the floor behind the gunnery perch in a wailing pile of his own guts and pus, and then turned to Wrex.

“DRIVE!” she screamed.

Wrex, despite his age, experience, and superiority to Shepard in every conceivable sense, obeyed like a docile spouse. He clambered across to the driver’s side, slid the seat all the way back with a crunch of gears, and then the Mako slammed into full reverse.

The wheels smoked beneath them as Shepard ripped the medkit from the wall and dosed Hudson with every last ounce of medi-gel she had left.

“What were you thinking?” Wrex shouted over his shoulder. “That whelp wasn’t even worth the drag!”

Hudson wasn’t dead yet, and he wanted everybody to know it. Between his endless pealing
screams, he managed to spit out, “What the hell, man? I’m right here!”

Then, in defiance of all sense or reason, Hudson abruptly stopped screaming and started to read.

Until seeing it with her own eyes, she wouldn’t have believed him capable. Ferro’s datapad bounced crazily in front of his face, and his eyes were as round and cartoonish as the hearts on his helmet.

“Game over, man!”

“What?”

He pushed the datapad into her hands, and she saw. A Cerberus breeding facility built into a solid pillar of bedrock right beneath Wrex’s outpost. There was the mad scientist superweapon in all of its apeshit maniacal glory. It had been directly underneath them the entire time.

She scanned Ferro’s report, glanced at the schematics. The ring around the rosie was vulnerable - little more than sediment and worm holes - the threshers maws had been churning the dirt for days. The whole thing was ready to cave.

She let the Mako rattle around her head for a few seconds, and then made up her mind.

“Wrex, how about a little vengeance? Can’t guarantee your hoard will survive, but I can promise you one hell of an avalanche.”

The krogan looked at her, narrowed his eyes, and then barked out a giant, rocky laugh, like a boulder smashing down a mountainside.

“I knew there was a reason I liked you. Let’s blow this place wide open.”

“Alenko!”

“Ready!” The Lieutenant was on a hair-trigger.

“Pull everyone out. Prep every weapon we’ve got for one final, unified blow. I’m sending coordinates. Once I’m clear, hit them all at once, right where it hurts.”

“Roger that, Commander. We’ll bang on the drum all day.”

The Mako stumbled over a pocket of soft earth, and Shepard’s head hit the gunnery pillar with a hollow clap. An unfathomable shade of yellow sparkled in the back of her retinas.

Wrex was a lot of spectacular things, but a good driver was not one of them. Being three sheets to the wind was hardly improving matters. As he tried to shift without easing down the clutch, the Mako groaned and creaked, then let out a tortured squeal.

Despite his injuries, Hudson reached for the wheel and cried, “Ease up, man! You’re killing my baby!”

Shepard’s Marines were a lot closer to the perimeter line than she was, and unlike Wrex, they were professional drivers. As each tank pulled back over the edge with a ballerina’s twirl, the threshers refocused their ire on the remaining targets. Soon, Hudson’s tank was the only moving thing in the field. A ripe fruit dangling on the vine.

Their best chance was to make a suicide run for the nearest edge of the crater - the unguarded eastern periphery. Wrex was too busy focusing on the tantalizing firepower to the west - he was
going in exactly the wrong direction.

One by one, the threshers vanished beneath the shifting sands. They were going to come up from underneath. God only knows how many at once.

They were never going to make it. Not with Wrex behind the wheel. With half a dozen thresher maws closing on their location, there was not a single second left to get the krogan out of her way.

She screamed “STAY ALIVE” in Hudson’s face, and then she flew over the transmission box and landed directly between Wrex’s enormous thighs, stealing the wheel right out of his hands.

In a flash of lunacy, Shepard reflected that this would be a difficult Valentine’s day to beat: sitting on a krogan’s lap to take a trip through the thresher maw tunnel of love.

The threshers raged up from all sides, one massive hoard surging in every direction at once. Hudson’s unasked-for soundtrack made a roaring comeback in much the same way: with no warning and a torrential howl of noise. Sound so loud that it filled her pores and forced the fear right out of her.

She couldn’t risk a look into the rear cabin, but she could hear the mass accelerator cannon firing, could feel it shuddering the wheel beneath her hands. Somehow, with his guts spilling out behind him in a sizzling pile, Hudson must have hauled himself up into the turret, and he’d queued up a tune to whistle while he worked.

Just as she had trained her Marines to waltz with their Makos like glittering princesses, so Shepard did now. The only way to successfully steer an M35 was not to drive - but to dance.

With that overpowered eezo core glowing under her hood, the tiniest flinch could send a Mako bucking like a wild bronco. Not much mass and plenty of juice meant the controls felt fidgety on a good day. Only with a lover’s patient hands massaging those thrusters, all care and tact and precision, could you truly see the vehicle’s combat potential. If you treated her like a lady, a Mako could float like butterfly and sting like a bee.

She tried to keep all of that in mind while the thresher maws heaved before her, a frenzy of tentacles so vast that their sheer bulk blocked out the sky.

The cannon overheated, and Hudson switched to the coaxial machine gun without pausing for breath. He tore Shepard an exit route through sheer grit and determination - stubborn, ceaseless, and screaming all the while.

Right before her very eyes, Hudson’s machine-gun buzzsaw hacked down the thresher directly ahead, felling an undulating thirty-meter slab of living flesh like it was a dried out tree. Shepard pumped the thrusters and rode over the steaming corpse. The resulting thump-thump-thump of metal-meets-flesh was startlingly rough - her ass bounced against Wrex’s lap in a way that the krogan was enjoying far too much for comfort.

No time to be a prude. She could see the solid ridge of the canyon just ahead.

One hundred meters.

The mako smoked with exertion as the damage readout flashed cherry red.

Fifty meters.

Burning fumes filled the cabin, a choking black steam of hot metal, torn belts, and eezo.
Twenty five meters.

POP-POP-POP

The thrusters barely had enough hydrogen to burn, and the Mako hopscotched drunkenly to the edge, barely catching her front wheels over the lip of the canyon.

“C’mon, beautiful! So... close!” Shepard grunted, slamming down the throttle and milking the dwindling fuel reserves for every last drop.

A rocky voice groaned directly in her ear: “You’re telling me,” and then Wrex thumped his fist against the dashboard with such a whomp of muscle that the Mako gave one final, sputtering hurrah.

Her engines flared to life and then immediately died, but it was exactly enough. The tank tipped to safety with an anti-climactic mewling sound, like a baby kitten landing in a basket.

Alenko must have had them locked in his sights. The moment Shepard’s Mako was resting on solid ground, she heard him screaming over the comms:

“Marines! The Commander is clear! FIRE EVERYTHING YOU’VE GOT!”

Shepard spun in place and craned her neck to look out the port hatch. The fireworks display was spectacular.

It started at the western edge of the canyon, where the Marines' concentrated firepower was dense enough to crush half a planet. The soft, sandy earth sucked itself down and away, transforming into a churning abyss, a grinding whirlpool of rock and stone. The thresher maws, despite their titanic size and strength, were sucked into the tumult like twigs. Howling and thrashing, they spit artful fountains of acid half a mile in the air, until in a single startling flume of earth, they vanished to the last.

A mile-wide crater of earth flushed itself down to hell like the universe’s filthiest port-o-john, and then everything went dead silent.

Standing in the center of the bottomless pit was Clan Urdnot’s base, gleaming like a solid-gold trophy in the sunset. Not only had her Marines just saved centuries of the krogan’s collected loot, she had just turned Wrex’s podunk mercenary outpost into an impenetrable fortress.

Behind her, Wrex let out a gasp that could only be described as sated.

His gratitude was obvious. She could feel it jabbing into the small of her back, and her eyes went wide. Equally difficult not to hear the groan of unmistakable full-throated arousal that he unleashed right in her ear.

“Hey Shepard, was it good for you?”

She allowed herself a single, disbelieving laugh before careening back to reality.

All the pain rushed back at once, an instantaneous gutpunch of broken bones and acid burns. Ripping Wrex’s hands away, she turned abruptly from the krogan’s lap and flopped in battered agony towards the rear cabin. If she’d had the luxury of succumbing to her wounds, she might have blacked out.

Instead, she yelled an incomprehensible mish-mash of turian curses and scrambled over the
transmission, dragging herself back towards the aft gunnery perch, where she saw Private Hudson slumped within the pillar, twitching and quiet.

When she approached and gently pulled him off the turret, he reached for her and flapped his lips noiselessly. She eased him down into her lap and wrapped a comforting arm around his shoulders to see him off.

Despite her noblest intentions, she couldn’t stop herself from giving him an angry shake.

“Goddammit Private! I ordered you to stay alive!”

The phrase *I would do anything for love* - mouthed in silence by a dying asshole - was the loudest sound she’d ever heard. Private Hudson, perpetual eleven. She let him put his hand in her hair and drag her down to hear the rest.

“…but I won’t do that.”

— JANE —

*SSV Normandy - 2183*

Thank goodness for small favors.

Nihlus’ gift of a new set of armor had afforded Shepard the perfect excuse to walk into the cargo bay fully suited up with her helmet already locked and ready, with nothing but a wall of black glass where her face should have been. Unfortunately, donning that inscrutable disguise had also forced her into the startling realization that she and the turian Spectre had traded places overnight.

All quips and good humor at this morning’s meeting, Nihlus seemed to be warming to the crew like a summer dawn spreading its fingers down a frosty hillside. Meanwhile, Shepard had done little more than stew in her own guilt, at risk of capsizing morale on the most important mission she’d ever faced.

If only she and Alenko had gotten this laugh-a-minute memorial service out of the way back at Arcturus, when the *Normandy* had still been in dry dock. Christening the Mako in a combat zone with lives on the line was already a bad idea. Adding Garrus to the jumble of conflicting interests, after she and the ex-detective had spent last night breaking in the M35 the old fashioned way…

Nevermind reaching a new low, Shepard was spelunking a hitherto unknown sub-terranean cavern of unprofessional behavior. Ever since Torfan, she had scarcely allowed herself to dabble in friendships across lines of rank. Romance? That was a cardinal sin.

And it *was* romance that she was at risk of committing. There was no mistaking the foul aroma of tenderness and affection in the air whenever she so much as glanced in Garrus’ direction.

*He smelled like bellari?* Seriously? She couldn’t have engineered a more dangerously sentimental crossing of wires if she’d hunted through a stack of romance novels. If she’d written out a love poem on one of Joker’s cutesy animal-splattered greeting cards, it still would have had more subtly than that.

No amount of perspective shifting, over-thinking, or flat out ignoring the situation would change it: she had feelings for Garrus Vakarian.
Goddammit. She’d always known that a weakness for tender-hearted loudmouths would get her into trouble one day.

Growling all the way into her seat, Shepard installed herself behind the wheel of the Mako and stared into the viewport, catching a glimpse of her own faceless reflection. Joker had gotten his joke dead-on target: this armor was terrifying.

“Ready, Commander?”

Alenko was as unflappable as ever. He sat to her right, spreading his hands across the engineer’s console and telegraphing his hallmark expression: cool, calm, and ready for crazy.

Alright. Fine. There was no getting out of this superstitious ritual. She opened her fist to reveal the dog tags. They glinted against the deep black fabric of her glove, stamped with the standard military biography, which she read aloud:

“HUDSON, WILLIAM
895-42-0997
B POSITIVE
PARTY HARD”

How the Private had managed to sneak party hard into the religious preference slot was anybody’s guess, but it made for quite the inspiring pep talk when read after his blood type.

After a moment of silence, Garrus spoke up from the rear, where he was poking his head out around the turret and wearing an expression of pure, factory-distilled bewilderment.

“Okay, enough with the evasive human mysticism. Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?”

Shepard swallowed an involuntary laugh like it was covered in razor-wire. To distract herself, she looped the necklace chain through a cargo strap in the ceiling. She remained silent and fisted her hand around Hudson’s dog tags to shore up her resolve.

Alenko was more generous. He explained, “A customary tribute to a fallen comrade. Always gotta break in an M35 with operation Party Hard, or it’s ten years bad luck.”

Operation Party Hard was one way to honor Hudson, sure. To be perfectly honest, the Private probably would have liked the previous evening’s method of christening the tank a far sight better. Hell, if the Private had still been around to give her shit, he probably would have baked her a bright blue cake shaped like Garrus Vakarian’s flawless dick and piped out, “Congratulations on your new CuttleBONE” in curleque icing.

Joker chimed in, his perpetually blithe voice breaking across Shepard’s brand-new suit comm. The sound crackled in her ears, fizzy and effervescent.

“Commander, I’ve got a squad of geth right below you. Tali’s specs show rocket troopers and armatures. Nothing you can’t handle.”

“Bring us right on top of them, but stay high. Keep your altitude out of their firing range, I don’t want any scratches on Normandy’s paint job. We can handle the slam. Running drop check now.”

She turned the engine over. As Joker hovered the ship into position, the loading ramp began its timely descent. She taxied the Mako to the loading platform and indulged herself one long, bracing inhale.
Alenko put his hand over his heart, and then in a sweet, clear voice, he led the choir with ringing enthusiasm:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Bill's happy days will soon be gone} \\
& \text{To return again, oh never!} \\
& \text{For they've raised his pay five cents a day} \\
& \text{But stopped his grog forever}
\end{align*}
\]

Shepard did her job. Though her voice was serrated, she joined Alenko on the refrain:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{For tonight we'll merry be} \\
& \text{For tonight we'll merry be} \\
& \text{Oh for tonight we'll merry be} \\
& \text{Tomorrow we'll be sober}
\end{align*}
\]

She taxied the Mako further down the ramp and fired up the eezo core launch protocols. The chassis hummed with anticipatory energy while Alenko sang the second verse unaccompanied:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Yet memory oft' will backward turn} \\
& \text{And dwell with fondness partial} \\
& \text{On the days when gin was not a sin} \\
& \text{Nor cocktails brought courts-martial}
\end{align*}
\]

It was too ancient and reptilian a feeling to name, a deep, foolish wrenching of the vulnerable meat below her solar plexus. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t tamp it back down. Something feral possessed her to turn and look at Garrus.

His face was carefully emptied of emotion, and she could only imagine what he saw in the blank mask of her helmet. He stared into her for a long, hard second, and then whatever detective gears mechanized his brain spun fervently to life, and he seemed to understand.

She waved her hand at him, prompting him to add his voice to the sing-along.

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{For tonight we'll merry be} \\
& \text{For tonight we'll merry be} \\
& \text{Oh for tonight we'll merry be} \\
& \text{Tomorrow we'll be sober}
\end{align*}
\]

When it was finally over, she said, “Not bad, Vakarian. You catch on quick,” and then turned back
to the console, hoping her suit mic wasn’t broadcasting the thundering obviousness of her heartbeat.

Alenko readied Hudson’s Choirbook, cranking the volume to eleven.

Shepard took one last breath, clenched the wheel with both hands creaking, and announced:

“Commencing Operation Party Hard in 3 - 2 - 1 -”

Music blasting, guns blazing, Shepard slammed the throttle forward and dropped the Mako into a quarter mile of open sky, knowing full well that love was a fall that could kill.

- 

Chapter End Notes

Words and phrases courtesy of MizDirected's turian dictionary:
- Patrem/Pari: Father/Dad

Hudson's Choirbook (YouTube Playlist)

Yes. That Hudson, from Aliens. The entire Akuze flashback sequence was brought to you by the letters F & U, the number 69, and blockbuster action films of the 1980’s. That scene has a fucking Wilhelm scream in it.

Extra Credit:
The Contemplator’s Short History of Grog.
“Commander? I’ve got good news and bad news. Which do you wanna hear first?”

Joker’s voice was almost inaudible through the crossfire. Rattling with impact forces in the driver’s seat of the Mako, Shepard snarled at the sudden interruption. Across their flank, a geth energy weapon blasted the shields, which thankfully held fast.

Shepard clutched the wheel and wisely opted not to distract herself with a response.

From his birdsnest in the gunnery pillar, Garrus shouted down to her, “Another walker on our six!” and then spun the turret to meet the advancing geth armature head-on. Click-click-click-SLAM, the cannon reeled into position, locked on, and the targeting assist in Garrus’ visor flared encouragingly.

Across the comm, Joker tried again.

“Hello? Anybody? Normandy calling.”

“Please hold,” Alenko sassed. “The party you are trying to reach is currently helping another customer.”

Garrus laughed and stared down the cannon’s periscope at the ten-meter monster in front of him. What was the human phrase? One tough customer. Yeah, no way around it. Looking straight into the geth’s flickering eye, he flared one mandible in answer, hungry. The increasing pitch of the cannon’s warm-up protocol sang a promising song beneath his hands, but it wasn’t fast enough. His finger twitched impatiently on the trigger.

“Cannon’s still red,” he spat. “Incoming! We gotta move!”

Shepard cranked the wheel as Alenko scrambled with the Mako’s defenses, flaring up a broadside shield. The geth missile barely kissed them on the ass. Shepard was too quick. While the Mako danced on her toes, Garrus’ gunnery pillar rotated in place, spinning freely within its central position in the chassis. The separation between pillar and tank was disorienting enough to make his guts fly out his mouth, but all the nausea was for a good cause: despite her stomach-churning evasive maneuvers, Shepard was carefully keeping Garrus’ line of sight free and clear.

As the Commander forced everything outside his crosshairs into a blurry whirl of nausea, he grinned. Home sweet home: he was used to this. Red’s insane gravity well was where he lived now.

Finally the Mako came to a lurching halt, the cannon went green, and he squeezed. Before Garrus could waste time on a blink, the armature’s head was simply gone. Alenko whooped once in loud approval, but there wasn’t a spare second for Garrus to celebrate his stylish one-shot annihilation. Another armature was closing, and this one was moving fast.

Wait. These things could run?

“Shepard, we’ve got a second platform in pursuit.” He shouted. “Different. This one can beat feet.”

Garrus reset the gun’s sluggish heat ejection protocols at breakneck speed. Popping the massive,
overheated sink to tumble into the dirt below, he fed the cannon a fresh eezo core to prep the recharge. Each core could handle ten to twelve shots, carefully lagged ten seconds apart to avoid clogging the sink prematurely. No matter what Garrus did to stretch those sinks, between each mandatory eezo discharge there was still a long-ass wait. Over half a minute. Too long for safety.

He was quickly losing patience with the one-shot wonder of the M-35’s accelerator cannon. Tantalizing firepower followed by a vulnerable cooling-off period, forcing him to twiddle his thumbs between flawless takedowns? Bullshit.

The similarities between Red’s morning-after antics and her tank’s biggest weapon were hardly lost on him. Fine. Lay it on, he could take the heat. A week of late nights in the cargo bay with his hands on all the right parts, and he’d whittle these pointless delays to nothing.

Meanwhile, he growled and switched to the coaxial pea shooter. It sprayed the massive geth platform with an insulting line of surface dents - those would only piss it off.

“Keep moving, Shepard! Cannon’s dead for another twenty seconds. I can’t scratch it.”

Shepard slammed down the throttle and inexplicably swerved off the main mission route, heading straight for the river of lava that lined the entire southern approach. The geth armature loped after them, gaining fast.

“Lava that way.” Garrus offered.

Shepard stayed quiet, comforting no one.

Uninvited, Joker’s voice crackled back across the comm.

“Alright Commander, I’m gonna tell you anyway! Like my momma always said, ‘give ‘em the good news first!’ The geth dropship turned tail and ran - no more surprise backup, Hooray!”

Shepard blandly acknowledged Joker’s update as if passing back a datapad. All she did was grunt with apparent disinterest and rattle in her seat. The Mako flew towards the churning, orange-hot river at full speed, with the geth in hot pursuit.

“Yeah so the bad news?” Joker said, sounding annoyed. “Strange readings…” The comm crackled. “...Really strange... // off the damn charts...”

“What? // the situation // read me Shepard?” It was Kryik’s impatient voice in the comm now, cutting right across Joker’s shoulder, probably. The signal was rough. Alenko fiddled with his console and tried to clean out the chop. After a quick moment he shook his head in defeat.

The lava was very close now. Too close, by any sane estimate.

“A lot of magnetic interference from this molten rock,” Alenko warned. “Comms are down.”

“Also,” Garrus added in a deadpan, “Molten rock. Dead ahead.”

Shepard sighed inside her helmet with disparaging, borderline spousal annoyance, then slammed down the gear shift. She forced the Mako into a violent twirl on the rims of two wheels, and everything went diagonal. The move produced such a stunning crush of g-forces that all Garrus could do was clutch both arms around the turret’s periscope and hug it close for dear life.

They slammed to a stop at the edge of a high promontory.
A trickle of stones crumbled beneath them as the Mako’s front wheels hooked and teetered over the ridge. Shepard flashed the jets and bumped the tank safely backwards, narrowly avoiding a nosedive.

Not nearly so light on its feet, the pursuing geth armature crashed directly into their rear.

Beneath the geth’s gargantuan weight, the Mako’s chassis crunched down against her wheels. Inside the hull, Garrus stared slack-jawed at the commotion on the roof, rattling inside his restraint. Up over their heads it went. Thumpity thump thump, it rolled across the roof of the tank with an offended metallic squeal and a mighty smashing of limbs. Then it disappeared over the edge of the cliff.

Still clinging to the gun, Garrus craned his neck and watched the entire tragedy unfold through the corner of the cannon’s periscope. In the years heading his own criminal investigation unit, he’d seen his fair share of untimely demises.

Without a doubt, this one topped them all. It was the least dignified death he had ever witnessed.

A thick tongue of flame belched into the air, and Garrus gleefully waited for the explosion as hot rocks and tar splattered back down over the armature’s hull. The geth unit upturned, sinking into the smoking current, its legs wiggling as it was slowly dragged downstream. After a moment of pitiful struggle, it burst into white-blue fireworks then disappeared beneath the lava; bubbling, gurgling, and flailing all the while.

Surprising even himself, Garrus let out a peal of frantic, impressed laughter.

Without comment, Shepard eased the Mako back onto the mission path, and drove on.

Once they’d cleared the hot zone, Kryik’s voice came back over the comm, still cluttered with static, but readable.

“Shepard. Update. Now.”

“Relax, Nihlus. We’re fine. What was Joker’s bad news?”

Kryik’s exasperated grunt was becoming a familiar sound, and Garrus cherished every new, eye-rolling iteration of the Spectre’s annoyance with Shepard.

“There’s a guard complex ahead. A lot of strange readings. My ground team can’t drop until you clear it out. They’ve got a lot of heavy fortifications. I recommend a back door approach.”

“Oh it,” she replied, flat as a board. “Now get off my damn radio and let me drive.”

There was a dry cough.

“If you insist,” he chided. The channel went quiet.

- 

Half an hour and two eezo cores later, the geth guardpost was a ransacked wasteland.

Ignoring the impenetrable terrain surrounding the post, Shepard had taken advantage of a slot of natural erosion that had eaten through the rock over several long abandoned centuries. Following this narrow, winding trail, they came in from behind. More accurately, they dropped in from above, with zero subtlety whatsoever.
Brute stubbornness to the core, the Commander clambered the Mako up a sheer rock face and then belly-flopped onto Saren’s entrenched platoon, transforming the tank into an explosive wad of vengeful, bullet-spewing confetti. With Garrus on her gun, they flattened half-a-dozen enemy troops before the rest of the squad had so much as turned their heads skyward to witness the assault.

A few satisfying *booms* were all it took before the remaining geth were done for. Then, with assistance from the Mako’s machine gun, Garrus forcibly disassembled the automated guard turrets.

Mission accomplished, they ratcheted up the guardpost gates, clearing the way at last. The extraction team swooped down from the *Normandy*, and Kryik, Williams, and Zorah finally picked their way down into the Prothean dig site. Time to locate Doctor T’Soni and her notorious krogan bodyguard, along with who knows what else.

Meanwhile, the Mako squad kept careful watch on the entrance. Uneasy quiet fell upon them as they sat idling within the tank, ready for anything. Another geth dropship could blink out of nowhere and spew out a surprise platoon. An air strike could raze the entire site from ten-thousand feet. Saren Arterius himself might skydive out of his god-like dreadnaught with a missile launcher slung over his shoulder, screaming about the end of days. Hard to guess what was coming for them when the fight was already this crazy.

Shepard, meanwhile, was stewing in her own self-imposed silence, stiff-backed and motionless, waiting for word from Kryik’s team down in the subterranean dig site. Garrus tossed out a few unsteady jokes - these were met with courteous laughter from Alenko and a deliberate wall of ice from the Commander. Garrus understood her aloofness now, though he didn’t have to like it.

*For tonight we’ll merry be, tomorrow we’ll be sober.*

Aha. How cute.

Passing the hint through a song and dance routine was new, he had to admit, but the principle was already well-worn. He was no newcomer to secret shame. It didn’t matter how sincerely they enjoyed rolling around with a turian in the dark, Garrus’ human partners had rarely been eager to flaunt their interspecies preferences in broad daylight. It was difficult to book a swanky candlelit table for two in the long black shadow cast by Relay 314.

Other things happened in shadows; desperate, quick, and messy. No matter, he would suck it up. Hell, if Shepard wanted to be discreet, he could be discreet. In a pinch? A dark closet would do, as long as he could touch her again. In any case, Garrus had been out of his damn mind to expect any kind of special treatment this morning. He realized that now. Commander Shepard wasn’t about to go around making goo-goo eyes at a subordinate, no matter how long he could make her orgasm on his dick.

*Thirty-two seconds,* he wailed internally, shifting his hips and silently shushing his disobedient groin as his blood pulsed impatiently in Shepard’s direction.

Indulging himself another glance at the Mako’s silent driver, he saw the tension was still wearing tight across Shepard’s shoulders. She stared at the console, as if she hoped to force the radio to speak on command. Such a source of annoyance to her earlier, now... too quiet. Comms remained spotty thanks to the dense mineral composition of the landscape, and Kryik’s team hadn’t phoned in for a long while.

Uncomfortable and ready to move, Garrus shuffled himself around the turret, opening his big
Before he could speak, the comm crackled. An unfamiliar voice broke through, startling Shepard enough that she jumped half a meter out of her seat.

“Commander Shepard? This is Doctor Liara T’Soni. Can you hear me?”

Shepard turned to Alenko with a stiffened, full-body look of displeasure, as if she’d just been electrocuted and thrown naked out an airlock. After a tense staring match with the Lieutenant, she cracked her ceramic-plated shoulders and hit the transmission relay switch.

“Roger that, T’Soni. Reading you loud and clear. Please confirm the status of Kryik’s extraction team. He and two others were sent to pull you out of that dig site.”

“Your team arrived, but we were... separated.”

After hearing T’Soni’s reply, Shepard quickly switched the outgoing to mute. To the interior of the Mako cabin, she hissed,

“Then how did she get into our private mission comm?”

Alenko put his hands in the air, baffled.

“You are probably wondering how I gained access to your private mission comm.” T’Soni drawled over the speaker, reading everyone's collective minds.

With annoyance bordering on violated rage, Shepard jabbed a finger where T’Soni’s voice was pretentiously broadcasting from the dashboard. Her helmeted face turned in Garrus’ general direction.

“Listen to this uppity archaeologist. She thinks she’s being cute, sabotaging my top-of-the-line equipment.”

_Thought it was plenty cute when Garrus Vakarian was sabotaging your top-of-the-line equipment_, he silently projected at her, cocking his head and raising a single, arrogant brow.

She huffed and turned back to the console. An angry grunt from the background of the channel interrupted T’Soni for a moment, then she came back, her voice harried and breathless. “I could use your assistance down here, Commander.”

Shepard twitched her hand over the controls again, but didn’t answer immediately. First she turned to Alenko.

“Thoughts? Nihlus says this so-called ‘Doctor’ is little more than a tomb raider with a fancy degree. Could be a trap.”

Alenko was quiet for a second, then shook his head. “I don’t think so. What about you, Garrus? You’re the cop. What’s your read on T’Soni?”

The Commander turned to consider Garrus over her shoulder, her helmeted gaze still indecipherable, but nowhere as hostile as it had seemed aboard the _Normandy_. Though he couldn’t see her face, he could tell that she was internally weighing the options, staring into the back of the Mako as if reading an invisible rulebook. _The Shadow Broker’s Agents and You! -- How to Avoid Deception, Capture, and Untimely Death._
Trying to look like he did this sort of thing every day, Garrus leaned forward around the turret and lowered his voice to a goading purr.

“Hell, I say we go for it. I’ve always wanted to rescue someone from a secret volcano base - could be years before I get another chance.”

“He’s got a point,” Alenko said, smacking Shepard on the arm with the back of one hand.

She turned back to the console.

“T’Soni. Is Wrex with you?”

“Yes, Commander he-” Another loud grunt in the background, and then the comm line roughly switched hands.

“Shepard. Get that dainty ass of yours down here!”

- 

Turns out, the Protheans had a thing for booby traps.

Luckily, T’Soni was there to help. Sort of. Over their linked suit comms, the Doctor had already walked them through several pitfalls. Rooms of poison gas, rows of impaled, unfortunate geth, and Garrus' personal favorite: an invisible flesh-melting laser grid. Voice steady as a university lecturer all the while, T’Soni guided them to her location along the ruin’s ancient and dangerously rigged passages. Her expertise was uncanny.

“What is this place?” Alenko asked, keeping his voice low and his steps cautious.

Garrus couldn’t blame him for sounding spooked - the ruin would have been supernaturally creepy even with the lights on.

“A Prothean burial city,” T’Soni’s voice explained. “Late Empire,” she added condescendingly. As if it were obvious.

After millennia of abandonment, scavenged by thieves and left to rot beneath an active volcano, this “city” certainly felt haunted. On every side the squad was hemmed in by dense black slabs of mirror-smooth, unbroken stone. Their reflections oozed along beside them as they walked, always distorted, sometimes bent into jagged pylons - and during one particularly unsettling stretch of corridor - they appeared completely upside-down.

Aside from the ramshackle excavation equipment, the only lights were dim, leaf-green lines of energy carved into the walls. Perfect, gleaming horizontals, like fractal cracks in the fabric of time. Every few minutes, the lines would pulse and emit a dark, rumbling *whub*.

Garrus hugged his assault rifle a little tighter, feeling as if he were trapped within an old heart that was struggling to beat.

“Nihlus?” Shepard tried to reach the Spectre again - it seemed like the hundredth attempt. Nothing on his channel, not even static. She rattled angrily in the back of her throat and switched to T’Soni instead.

“Where exactly are you, Doctor?” Shepard grumbled. “Why not meet us halfway, since this place is rigged to blow at every step?”
“Regretfully I am… currently detained.”

The krogan butted in.

“What she meant to say is that she got herself stuck in a big damn bubble. Your friends got tied up with Saren’s troops, trying to find a way to blast her out of there. I’m getting sick of fighting off these ugly robots on my own. Get. Down. Here.”

“Aww, what’s really bothering you, Uncle Urdnot? Did’ja miss me?” Shepard cooed, tones surprisingly warm.

“Ha! You’d like that.” A few heavy shotgun blasts echoed across the comm, making Garrus’ ears ring, then Wrex grunted and returned. “No... I figured it out. Taking your sweet-ass time to rescue an old krogan - you want some whiny revenge for the Rachni Wars, right? Punch me in the quad for your fancy dad’s honor, huh? You never told me you were a damned turian, Shepard, but I see how it is.”

“Didn’t tell you? Wrex. You never asked.”

“Will you two please be quiet?” T’Soni sighed, beginning to sound a mite frantic. “Shepard, you should be nearing a series of pressure panels in the floor. Be careful, they are quite sensitive.”

Garrus put one foot down, heard a clunk, then swallowed real hard.

“Found one,” he choked.

There wasn’t even a second to flinch.

The panel gave way, dissolving in a fizz of bright green energy beneath his feet. His body plunged into darkness without him.

Knocking all the air from his lungs with the effort, he threw out both arms and barely caught the lip of the nearest chunk of solid floor as his legs dangled wildly into nothingness. The joints in his arms strained unnaturally, ligaments popping on his bones. Grinding teeth in an effort not to screech, he prayed under his breath.

Not today, not this stupidly.

Where once had been solid ground, he was now dangling into a sudden, spectacular pit. Bottomless, probably - he expected nothing less. As he slid a few inches further into the black, something sucked on his heels.

That something felt like the space between the stars, and it whispered to him, dark and many-voiced.

“Oh crap,” he said.

The surrounding panels were too smooth, it was impossible to get any leverage, and his fingers slipped...

Shepard’s hands sank into his arm and held fast, pinning him in place.

She was right on top of him, the faceplate of her helmet flashing in the dim green light. As her head lowered closer still, the angle of refraction shifted and he could see clear through the glass.

Beneath her armor was something far stronger than ablative plate. She was wearing that
decimating, enemy-razing look in her eye. The look worn by a ferocious mystery woman that had once declared straight to his face, *I’m going to be perfect.*

“I’ve got you,” Red said to him now, tightening her grip.

Inevitably, he believed her.

As he blinked in thankful awe, Alenko closed and grabbed his other side. Together, he and Shepard heaved, and they pulled Garrus back out of the singing abyss. Once his legs were clear, the floor panel reappeared. It instantly flickered back into existence as if nothing strange had happened at all.

“Who does that?!” Garrus yelled. Offended, shaken, and shivering from head to foot.

He dusted himself off and noticed Shepard’s hand still clinging to his elbow.

“Alright, Vakarian?” she asked, jostling his arm. Her face was hidden from him once more, but her grip was too tight to be anything but worried.

He nodded quietly, expecting his voice would give him away. Satisfied, she slid her hand to his back. Then she hit him. *Hard.*

“Watch your step.”

Delicate as pollen on the wind, they slowly weaved through the rest of the corridor. Finally, after a few sweaty, butt-clenching minutes, they finally came upon T’Soni’s location.

Wrex hadn’t exaggerated. The Doctor was *actually* stuck in a big damn bubble. She hovered in midair in the middle of a vast chamber, arms and legs akimbo, looking incredibly impatient. The bubble originated from a sizeable plinth at least a storey tall, giving the effect that the archaeologist had become the carefully preserved prize relic of her own dig. Well, that was embarrassing.

“Took you long enough,” she griped.

“Yeah, you’re welcome.” Shepard bit back, approaching the towering pedestal. “How’d you even get in there? What the hell is this thing?” she asked, gesturing to the containment field.

“What it is - is a long story,” said the archaeologist. “No time to explain. You need to stop Wrex before he-”

“*Shepard!*”

The Commander whipped around. To everyone’s surprise, the voice was Kryik’s. He limped from a crumbling alcove and waved, followed by a sluggish Zorah and a thoroughly bloodied Williams.

“What the hell happened to you?” Shepard demanded, running to intercept them.

“Saren’s got a few extra krogan on his payroll, apparently.” Kryik offered, nursing a bruise on his neck with one hand. He let Shepard sling his other arm over her shoulders and take some of his weight. “*Weird* krogan, like nothing I’ve ever seen.” he added. “They kept us busy, but they’re paste now, thanks to Williams.”

As if winded by Kryik’s compliment, Williams stopped to catch her breath. She bent at the waist and dizzily clutched her knees. As she stared deep into the floor, she swirled her tongue inside her mouth and then spat up a thick gob of blood. Zorah patted her on the back sympathetically.
Still heaving, Williams gave an enthusiastic thumbs-up to the crowd.

Shepard tightened her grip on Kryik and looked around the cavern.

“Where’s Wrex?” she asked.

T’Soni answered, quick and frantic.

“He said he was tired of waiting. I… may have… accidentally activated this security device when I was extracting the artifact. I believe it is… scanning me. The sensation is. Deeply unpleasant.

“But if Wrex sets off that mining laser…”

In unison, Kryik and Shepard said,

“What mining laser?”

“Hey Shepard!” someone called, with a voice like a thundering rockslide. “Watch this.”

Everyone turned towards the back of the cavern, where a seven-foot-tall scarlet-red krogan was dragging a heavy piece of mining equipment at his heels like a varren pup.

“Wrex…” Shepard warned, sounding suspiciously like Garrus’ mother. “No! Bad idea.”

"Bad idea, she says. Don’t sass your elders, Shepard. You wanna get out of this creepy little shithole or not?”

He fired up the laser and keyed in a complex code: punching his fist straight through the control panel.

“Oh shit.” Shepard hissed. “Hit the deck!”

No one needed to be told twice. They scrambled for the perimeter of the room.

Inside her bubble, T’Soni shouted, “NO! Do you have any idea how valuable this site is to posterity?!”

Her poorly-timed academic complaints were cut off when the laser fired.

The beam crashed through the pylon with a smoking-hot WHAM of pure light. In a split-second it carved a hole wide enough for the Mako to drive through, and then the laser abruptly turned off.

Even with the pylon destroyed, the Prothean bubble was still intact. Within it, T’Soni was trembling with rage.

For one anticlimactic moment, the cavern went dead silent.

Then everything started to shake.

The pylon beneath T’Soni’s bubble crumbled into ashes, inverting down into itself in a quiet fluff of air as if it had been formed from dust. The horizontal lines of light that illuminated the cavern walls flared in alarm - pulsing faster, brighter - seething a frenzied green. Deep beneath the cavern floor, something woke up from a long slumber and rumbled loud enough to make Garrus’ teeth vibrate in his skull.

The entire room buckled, swelling up beneath them, and then on the far side, a passageway
opened.

“What.” T’Soni said, awestruck. “This is - incredible. The Protheans… they are… guiding me to the surface.”

Her bubble fell to the floor and started to roll, with her still trapped inside. As it moved, the energy barrier singed the titles beneath, leaving a smoking path in its wake. “Follow me.” she suggested, as the bubble picked up speed and tumbled into the magical corridor.

Still huddled together, Kryik and Shepard exchanged a look, and then the Commander said,

“You heard the lady.”
Ruin - Part II

Chapter Notes

Fair warning... this gets heavy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

—— JANE ——

Shepard blinked and took a quick survey of the conference room. Everyone was in attendance, standing around in anxious, mumbling groups. As usual, all eyes turned to her expectantly as she walked through the door. Though she was fresh from decon and still half-armed, she had taken a quick detour to the head to wash her face before the debrief. Millions of ghostly voices in the Prothean burial city had left her shaken, not stirred, and the contents of her stomach had insisted on a rapid evac as soon as T'Soni’s bubble popped.

She had barely escaped messing her helmet.

The instant that Shepard landed one toe in the conference room, the asari archaeologist leapt from her chair and hopscotched over to meet her.

“Commander Shepard? Doctor Liara T'Soni. Give me your hand.”

In grim anticipation of an overeager shake, Shepard reluctantly extended her arm. Instead of courtesy, the asari slapped a thin black slab into Shepard’s palm. The object was sheathed in a dense, velvety material - some kind of protective cover. Shepard could feel its energy reverberating through the cloth.

She held the artifact at arm’s length and flattened the pretty young asari with a dour, don’t-fuck-with-me glare.

“I hate to tell you Doctor, but this isn’t how a handshake works.”

Behind the archaeologist, Garrus laughed rudely. Then without needing to be told, he shut up and escorted his own disruptive ass to a chair, and the rest of the crew followed suit, taking their seats. Doctor T'Soni was unphased.

“This is much more than a handshake, Commander. With this, I can help you make sense out of that vision you experienced on Eden Prime. With any luck, I can even help you stop Saren.”

Nihlus walked across the room to intervene, meeting them by the threshold.

“The details of the Eden Prime mission were strictly confidential,” he said in a low warning tone. “And Saren’s activities have been classified for months. Spectre clearance only. Even C-Sec couldn’t get into those files. So how did you?”

“I can dig up more than artifacts.” the Doctor boasted, apparently unaffected by Nihlus’ threatening posture. “I read your report - I was not surprised by what I found.”
“What are you up to, T’Soni?” Nihlus demanded. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed you tailing me these last few months. Other than fueling the galaxy’s seediest gossip mill, what’s the Shadow Broker’s stake in Saren’s defection?”

“Believe it or not, the Broker is your ally... for now.” T’Soni said, matter-of-factly. “The information business has been funding my research into the Prothean extinction for nearly half a century - research that could prove invaluable in the days to come.”

“I’m just sure.” Nihlus hissed. In retaliation, T’Soni stepped right up into his face. If she’d had hackles, Shepard got the feeling that they would have been sticking straight up.

“The Council’s academics refused to so much as publish my theories, where else was I supposed to get the capital to fund my work? Yes, I may have hawked the odd headless statue on the black market, but I needed those credits to keep digging. I keep all of the truly valuable finds for myself. Like that Prothean memory shard.” T’Soni gestured to the relic in Shepard’s hand. “That single piece is worth more than this entire ship.”

Nihlus shook his head and looked at Shepard, his face a perfect poster image for the expression: can you fucking believe this bullshit? Shepard raised an eyebrow and weighed the shard in her palm.

“Worth more than my Normandy?” Shepard droned, skeptically. As she spoke, she tried to ignore the eerie whispers that were drifting up from beneath the Prothean shard’s protective case. “Tell me Doctor, what was so controversial about your theories that you had to stoop to auctioning off relics from your own excavations?”

T’Soni took a calming breath.

“I believe I can link the end of the Prothean civilization to a pattern of cyclical extinction events. Every fifty-thousand years or so, it seems to recur like clockwork. Since the Protheans disappeared fifty-thousand years ago... our time is up. But I am only one hundred and six. I was written off as a doomsday theorist. Little more than a paranoid child.”

Nihlus quieted her with a wave of his hand, proving the Doctor’s point almost instantly.

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Just... Explain. What does your Prothean research have to do with Saren? Why has he allied himself with the geth? How did he lose his mind in the first place? Most of all - can you tell me how to kill him?”

“One question at a time, Spectre.”

Flaring his mandibles to cover a frustrated hiss, Nihlus stepped into the berth of the conference ring, then impatiently gestured for Shepard and T’Soni to follow. As they joined the circle of curious onlookers, the Doctor finally addressed the entire room.

“I apologize if I seem a little overzealous, but if my theories are correct, we are facing a threat of apocalyptic magnitude. The sudden, violent nature of the Protheans’ disappearance was no accident. They were systematically wiped out. What is even more bizarre is that I do not believe they were the first civilization to fall - it has happened before, innumerable times. And now, thanks to Saren’s intervention, it is happening again.

“What a load of...!”

“Wrex.”
“What?”

Shepard met the krogan’s eye and silently told him to be nice.

He rumbled stubbornly in his seat, “...everyone always thinks they’re living in the end of days damn paranoid asari babies…” but nonetheless, he complied and did his whining quietly.

“Believe me, I wish I truly were just a raving conspiracy theorist, but I have been working on this for fifty years. I have tracked down every scrap and shred of evidence. Entire planets, star systems, cultures - eradicated in the cosmic blink of an eye. It is almost as if someone did not want the mystery solved, like someone came along and cleansed the galaxy of clues.”

In the wake of this revelation, the ensuing silence was much too intense for comfort. To break the mood, Shepard kicked Nihlus lightly on the side of his foot. With a start, he looked up from the hole he had been staring into the floor.

“We can stop it.” she said. “It starts with a little faith in this.”

She raised the artifact in her hand and rattled it gently, just for effect. Nihlus rubbed the fresh bruises along the side his neck and shook his head, looking far from convinced.

Shepard’s eyes roved over the Prothean shard hungrily - once she started truly looking at it, she found it difficult to break her gaze. Her hand twitched as if it had been spontaneously magnetized, and her fingers jerked toward the edge of the velveteen cover… she could almost hear the voices... if she just...

T'Soni stepped closer.

“Commander, wait. You should not commune with that on your own.” When Shepard failed to respond, the Doctor clapped her hands together. Loudly. Shepard shivered and tore her eyes away from the artifact.

“What is this thing?” She asked, breathing deep enough to swoon.

“As I said, it is a rare Prothean memory shard - a treasure that is priceless beyond imagining. Like the beacon you encountered, this shard contains a psychic remnant. Unlike the beacon, the message you hold in your hand is much more… how to explain? This belonged to one of their last survivors. It contains a singular account, a personal history, rather than a communal one. It should be much easier for you to understand.

“Tell me, Commander, what do you remember from your initial vision after Eden Prime?”

Shepard opted to leave out the part about her father’s hollow, smoking eyes. To leave out the blurry, nearly forgotten shape of her mother’s face. To leave out most of it, actually, because most of it was just the suffocating smell of smoke and the certainty that death was descending upon the world.

“Whispers. Memories. It was little more than a nightmare.”

“Yes... A very old, very powerful nightmare, shared by billions upon billions of minds. I’m sorry you had to face it without context. A Prothean beacon was never designed to be used by anyone without empathic abilities.

“Scholars believe that the Protheans employed a kind of sense memory, which they used in conjunction with artifacts like these to communicate complex ideas. Sometimes an entire lifetime
worth of knowledge could be transmitted in a single burst of information.

“Through the ages, asari have attempted to commune with Prothean artifacts, but it always carried enormous personal risk. Even an empath with years of training and experience could risk madness if they dwelt too long in those old memories. Eventually the practice was… condemned by many academics.”

“Did something in that burial city on Therum commune with you?” Shepard asked.

“I believe so, yes!” T’Soni seemed delighted. “I have never experienced anything like it. Myriad consciousness, fifty-thousand years sleeping, still… somehow… alive.”

Shepard considered T’Soní’s excitement, and suddenly remembered the cold dread that had seeped through her bones at the sight of Lady Benezia on Eden Prime. Communing with these dead things was no kind of casual adventure to undertake.

She remembered the dark, empty voids of Benezia’s pitch-black eyes. This wasn’t a game.

“Is that what did Saren did to your mother?” Shepard asked, in a voice that had gone surprisingly hoarse.

Doctor T’Soni seemed completely taken aback by the question. For a moment, she was gravely silent, and did nothing but stare down at her own wringing hands.

“Yes.” She finally said, quiet and serious. “I - when I read Kryik’s report, I assumed… Yes. I believe Saren forced her into communion with the beacon on Eden Prime, in order to avoid the risk himself.”

“I’m sorry, Doctor.” Shepard said, meaning every word.

The asari blinked furiously and shook her head.

“In the process of communing with the beacon, my mother’s mind may have shattered beyond repair. And yet… even in that weakened state, Benezia must have left something of herself behind to guide you. It is the only explanation for how your human consciousness could have survived the Prothean information transfer.”

“Are you saying she saved my life?”

“Commander, what happened on Eden Prime was unimaginable. My mother would never have willingly allowed that colony to be destroyed. If you witnessed her final moments of clarity, she may have been trying to redeem herself… or preserve some final piece...” T’Soni steeled herself before continuing, moving back to a more comfortable topic. “Even with her aid, I can only imagine the beating your mind must have taken. I am astounded you remained sane.”

“I don’t know about that. My sanity has always been open to debate.”

Another cough from the peanut gallery. Shepard shot Garrus a quick but unforgiving look, and he redirected his eyes to the ceiling in silent compliance.

“This is no laughing matter, Commander. You must be remarkably strong willed.”

T’Soní’s voice carried a strong note of admiration in it, far too sweet for Shepard’s blood. Luckily, Nihlus was there to slap the stars out of the Doctor’s eyes.
“This isn’t helping us find Saren.”

“But this might.” Shepard huffed out a frustrated breath and passed the artifact between her hands. “Another scary ancient relic that wants to eat my primitive monkey brain. How do I talk to it, and how bad will it hurt?”

T’Soni nodded to herself.

“I have enough experience to facilitate a relatively safe data transfer. It may answer some of your questions about the vision from Eden Prime. But I must warn you, it will be… uncomfortable.”

“Can we do this right now?”

The asari nodded, her eagerness quickly returning.

“Of course. The sooner the better.”

Suddenly, Nihlus was looming over them again.

“Hold on, Shepard. Are you serious? Playing around with this thing is a terrible idea. We should do this under the close supervision of Doctor Chakwas, if we do it at all.”

Shepard raised both eyebrows as high as they would go.

“We? That was new.

“Come on, Nihlus.” Shepard drawled, voice bristly as she could force it. “You’ve been all action this whole mission. Don’t get lukewarm on me now. Stop Saren or die trying, remember?”

“I hadn’t banked on you taking that promise literally, Shepard.”

“Wasn’t asking permission. It’s my brain and our best chance.”

She could hear the precocious teenage undertones in her own voice, and she despised herself for it.

Nihlus threw his hands in the air, surrendering Shepard to her own idiocy.

As soon as the turian Spectre was out of their way, T’Soni removed her gloves and slapped her palms onto Shepard’s temples without any further preamble. Her fingertips were hot and sweaty, and they spasmed at odd intervals. It occurred to Shepard that she had no real idea of the Doctor’s mind-melding psychic qualifications, but it was too late to back out now.

Before she could stop herself, Shepard’s eyes flicked nervously to Garrus.

If looks could kill, everyone in the room would have been long dead, smoking in their boots. Blue’s stare of naked disapproval carried enough firepower to blow the head clean off a lesser woman.

Or, Shepard reflected, a smarter woman.

She’d almost lost him down there. In the scant blink of an eye, he had been inches from disappearing forever. Seconds from a fall to his death… or worse. Flirting with this Prothean artifact was every bit as dangerous as walking through that boobytrapped ruin, and Shepard recognized Garrus’ look of cold dread only too well. She swallowed a fresh wave of guilt and redirected her attention to T’Soni, found herself lost in a sea of freckles. Cute blue freckles.
Okay, nice. Better. Friendly and cute and nervous and nice. Forcing down the bubble of acid in her gut, Shepard nodded a final consent to the communion.

“Relax, Commander. Concentrate on the memory shard, and embrace eternity.”

Whatever the hell that meant.

Shepard turned her eyes to the Prothean artifact and slid it from its case, finally allowing her gaze to sink beneath its surface, deep and sudden, like plunging her head underwater.

The sleek, mirror-black veneer of the shard was split by a single viridian line, bright and sharp as the edge of a leaf. The moment the thought crossed her brain, she felt a pointed twinge at the base of her skull.

*The trees rustled, whispering amongst themselves.*

In her periphery, Garrus tensed. She could hear the seals of his armor squeaking beneath his hands as he anxiously dug his fingertips into his own thighs. Behind her, Nihlus rumbled in patronizing concern. Far in the distance, she heard the Spectre’s voice calling for Chakwas over the comm.

“Relax, Commander.” T’Soni repeated in a tense whisper, jostling her at the temples. “*Embrace eternity.*”

The tingling at the base of Shepard’s skull grew into an itch.

*Something stirred behind her, far away, but she didn’t want to look.*

The itch became a hand, familiar and heavy, sliding down to rest between her shoulder blades.

*It was much better, she thought, to keep staring into the green. Keep staring far ahead, into the deep of the trees where she could see his shimmering outline.*

*“Embrace eternity...”*

Had the Doctor said that aloud? It was hard to tell.

All Shepard could think of was that hand on her back. Solid. Real.

If she turned to look, she would compromise her sightline. She would throw the shot. No matter how much she wanted to, she couldn’t break. She wouldn’t lose count.

*She reached for him, but he stayed deep in the trees, the bold, bright green of the trees, where she could not follow.*

T’Soni’s hands tightened painfully and the Doctor’s pupils widened, widened, widened - then exploded into stormclouds, cloaking them both in endless, sinking black.

The memories rained down. All at once, in a great drowning cacophony. Joined together hand-in-hand beneath a terrible, blasting roar.

That endless, crushing roll of thunder.

*The behemoth screamed at her back. She felt its breath smouldering.*

The present became the past, the past became the future, and the Reapers were everywhere.
By the time he returned to the colony, emptiness was all that remained.

Slowing to a gradual stop outside the entrance plaza, Albacus braced his forearms on the wheel of Hannah’s truck and leaned toward the windscreen, anxiously raking his eyes over the skeleton of Shanxi. The streets lay lifeless and barren beneath a pallid mid-morning haze, a smokey layer of rubble piled so thick that even the little skittering animals avoided it - there was nothing to find but dust and ashes.

Once, this had been a town center, a beating heart of commerce and culture for the people who lived here. Now it was a tortured landscape, indistinguishable from every other ruinous war-zone Albacus had ever set foot in. The same buckled asphalt and gutted buildings, the same jagged hills of crumbling stone and rusting steel. The only difference was Albacus himself.

This time, he had caused the destruction rather than sweeping down to cleanse it.

Guilt could kill you. It could choke you to death without the slightest warning. So he swallowed it down, replaced it with grim acceptance.

Shifting forward in the seat, he scanned the wreckage and tried to detect any sign of movement, any paltry hint of the people he had left here only a few short days before, but there were no human civilians to be found.

Under the careful surveillance of Albacus and his Tenefalx crew, dozens of brave, dogged human colonists had meandered these streets. They looked for work, helped one another. The humans tried to stay moving, as if keeping busy would stave off madness or death or both. Certainly unhappy, but just as certainly alive, the colonists had pretended to go about their daily routines.

That much, he could understand. Playacting or not, people needed occupations. They needed purpose. Giving the humans things to fix, jobs to do, problems to solve, had been the keystone of Albacus’ containment strategy. Those mindless, busying tasks, however illusory, had kept a badly beaten righteous mob from boiling over. Now, with the streets abandoned and the supply situation worsening by the hour, it would only be a matter of time until all of that work was undone.

Had Arterius moved everyone to the penal enclaves? If so, the General had just concentrated his enemies together in a terrible swarm. Even crippled, starving, and disarmed, Albacus knew the humans would try to find a way to go out with a bang. Especially once they had lost all hope.

Hannah had called it a powderkeg. Albacus feared the fuses were moments from being lit.

Outside the truck, something stirred, and he turned to face it. In grim procession, a group of turians approached. Obren Ilmek was at the fore. The sight of his own second in command brought Albacus no relief. Ilmek was flanked by several heavily armed junior officers. Unfamiliar torini wearing full Blackwatch armor, impenetrable from head to foot, their faces were completely obscured. A wall of disloyal, dangerous anonymity at Ilmek’s vulnerable back.

Intimidation tactics. Theatre. Desolas Arterius’ handiwork. Albacus would have recognized it anywhere. In the machinating parties the General threw for Palaven’s elite. On his carefully engineered shakedown cruise full of top-secret experimental vessels and trigger-happy children. Here on Shanxi: dismantling centuries of Hierarchy war games just so that he could rearrange the
pieces in his own favor.

Arterius’ posturing was every bit as crudely forged as the dark grey familia notas his family had invented for themselves in a single ambitious generation. Still, it meant the wheels were already in motion, and Albacus’ life had an even shorter span than he had imagined.

“Captain Regidonis.”

Even through the thick plating of the truck’s chassis, Lieutenant Ilmek’s voice was tighter than Albacus had ever heard it. Ilmek was a steady torin. To see him flinch was uncommon enough. To detect a fearful pall darkening his sub-vocals? A sure sign that things had gone from grim to irretrievable.

Albacus did not answer aloud. Quietly, slowly, he stepped from the vehicle and kept his hand firmly affixed to the door handle, as if clinging to it might shield them both from what was coming.

“Captain,” Ilmek reiterated cautiously, “I have orders from General Arterius to escort you into his custody under armed guard.” Despite the obvious imperative of the General’s command, Ilmek lowered his voice and whispered to him urgently. “Why?”

“Obren…”

Instantly, the Lieutenant understood the fatalism of a first name coming out of his commanding officer’s mouth. Albacus was formal, regimented, and steady as an atomic clock - he was not given to sentimental breaks into familiarity. Except...

Albacus sighed. Not resigned, but honest. He would face the truth clear eyed, head up. He stared through the faceless helmets at Ilmek’s back, meeting each one in turn, watching the young soldiers as they twitched with doubt beneath their unearned Blackwatch gear.

He leaned toward his Lieutenant and spoke in a direct, clear tone.

“The convoy at my back has enough food and medicine to stabilize the population for at least a week. These supplies must be distributed. Prioritize children, sick, and wounded. I will not be able to see to it myself. I trust you to do whatever is necessary.”

He released his death grip on the truck door, then walked to the back of the flatbed and keyed up the lock with his omni-tool. As the industrial barrier blinked away, he stared into the shadowed obscurity of the storage compartment and struggled to find any other words that were adequate. Ilmek persisted.

“The convoy… what happened out there? Arterius makes it sound as though you committed high treason.” Ilmek shook his head, flaring his mandibles in disbelief. He added in a hoarse whisper, “He claims that you willfully conspired against us.”

Rather than disgrace himself any further with a lie, Albacus chose another pointed silence.

His intentions were irrelevant. His title was irrelevant. His life was irrelevant.

Over a thousand years of Regidonis blood flowing through his veins: disgraced. A pedigree worthy of a primarch, hard-won by generations of turian peacekeepers and influential asari cousins. In a day’s time, it would be tarnished to dust. Noble hope meant nothing - he knew exactly what he had done, allowing Hannah to send that message. In the end, there was no justification. Relying on Benezia’s intercession was a gamble, little more than a fool’s hope.
Good intentions or not, the last heir of Regidonis had levied war against his own.

Ilmek broke the silence.

“I’ve known you too long to believe...” the Lieutenant began, before dropping into a more familiar sub-vocal. He stepped closer and put one tenuous hand on the cowl of Albacus’ armor. “Tell me this isn’t true-”

Albacus knew there was only one answer to give. Taking a breath to summon his resolve, he divested himself of the single weapon currently in his possession: his father’s pistol.

He offered it to Ilmek, and waited.

The Lieutenant stared in disbelief - recognizing this weapon as easily as any of his own. As second in command, he understood the significance of wielding it only too well.

When Ilmek hesitated, Albacus spoke loud enough to carry across the empty plaza, reciting the only words he had left:

“With blinded eyes, we see it. With broken hands, we carry it. With our final breath...”

Ilmek answered the call, raising his hand to a formal salute.

“We die for the cause.”

“Obren Ilmek, falx of the Blackwatch. Until death, do I have your word that your bullets will fly with honor?”

Reluctantly, Ilmek took the gun from Albacus’ hand.

“Until death, Captain.”

Albacus met his eyes.

“Take me to Arterius.”

— GARRUS —

It was over almost immediately.

Kryik made a call for Chakwas over the comm, Doctor T’Soni did some intense muttering, and then Shepard’s head sagged forward. In the next instant, with a disorienting whip-whap of compressed air, the joining was done.

Shepard staggered back, boneless and pale, and the Prothean memory shard slid from her hand. T’Soni was at the ready, and she caught the priceless relic before it could shatter against the floor plating. Kryik looked ready to do the same for Shepard, but the Commander was standing on her own two feet. Physically, she appeared completely undamaged, but her expression was vacant, and her eyes were blank.

Garrus ran a quick visor analysis and was immediately punished for his curiosity with a wrench in the gut. Shepard’s readings were bizarre, with outliers in every conceivable metric. Pulse, body temperature, breathing rate - all outside healthy parameters. Something was wrong.
“Shepard?” Kryik’s voice was unusually soft as he nudged the Commander on the shoulder. When she didn’t respond, he shook her a bit harder, and this time his sub-vocals flanged with concern.

“Jane!?”

Still nothing.

The already tense knot in Garrus’ stomach clenched into a fist. Years of military discipline and an extra dollop of C-Sec rigidity were all that prevented him from springing out of his seat to punch the asari archaeologist square across her dainty blue jaw. Meanwhile, empowered by his morally ambiguous Spectre status, Kryik was free to descend upon T’Soni in Garrus’ stead.

Kryik grabbed a fistful of the asari’s already ragged tunic and wrenched her clear up onto her toes.

“What the hell did you just do to her?” the Spectre snarled, rattling her like a doll.

Not one to be left out of an impromptu show of wild aggression, Wrex stood to his full height and crossed the room in half a step. He hulked over the asari with enough heat in his deep red eyes to boil raw iron, and flared his biotics. Well then. Forget due process. Garrus followed the krogan’s lead and rose from his own chair, shifting his omni-tool to melee.

Alenko put up two frantic and ineffectual peace-keeper palms, with Williams not far behind. Soon the whole group was involved in the stand-off, a volatile tangle of criss-crossed fists and dagger-filled glances.

In the center of it all, Doctor T’Soni held up her priceless artifact as if to defend herself with it. Even with a half-dozen professional killers breathing down her neck, she looked too exhausted to be terrified.

“I did not have time to be gentle,” she stuttered. “The information in Shepard’s head is far too valuable to lose. I could not risk any delays, any chance that we might not act in time-”

Kryik yelled directly into T’Soni’s startled face.

“To win this fight, I need this soldier intact! Whatever you just did to her brain? Undo it. Now!”

“No harm has been done. A human mind will require extra time to process such an unusual joining. To meld with another is… an intense process, even without involving Prothean artifacts.”

Chakwas arrived, paused at the threshold for a scant second or two, and then immediately set to work scanning Shepard for damage. Meanwhile, Kryik and Wrex continued to breathe fire into Doctor T’Soni’s face.

After a quick pass of her omni-tool, Chakwas called them off.

“Stand down, Nihlus. The Commander is experiencing the same intense dream-like state that took hold of her after Eden Prime. Her system is confused, temporarily seized up like a trip-wire, but she’s stable.”

She grabbed a syringe from her kit and gave Shepard a dose of muscle relaxant, all while patiently muttering to herself. “…would have appreciated a bit more lead time...”

When nobody moved, Chakwas reiterated, “She’s going to be fine. Everyone, stop standing over there like a big cartoon pile of waving fists. The theatrics are helping nobody.”
One by one, the others lowered their guard by degrees, but the tension remained in the air, simmering. Finally, Kryik dropped the archaeologist out of his stranglehold and T’Soni staggered on her feet.

Shepard still hadn’t moved.

Garrus stepped closer to the Commander’s six, dissolving the blade of his omni-tool. Despite every effort to appear sober and aloof, he couldn’t stop himself from hovering a watchful hand near the small of Shepard’s back. Not touching. But ready.

There was an edge of possessiveness - and undeniable jealousy - in that wandering hand of his. In the span of a few seconds, this asari treasure hunter had gotten access to a part of Shepard more intimate than sex, more exposed than nakedness itself. That violation, more than anything else about this exercise in madness, made Garrus deliriously angry.

His hand twitched, and he decided to risk it. He was well within his role as a concerned subordinate.

Without disrupting Chakwas’ scan, he stepped a little closer to Shepard, let his fingers graze her back. To remove all suspicion, he shaved the worry from his voice until his tones were thin and clear as glass.

“Commander?”

Stay calm, he reminded himself. Keep cool. Don’t get wobbly or breathless or obvious. He tried once more.

“Shepard. Can you hear me?”

Slowly, her eyes came into focus, and then tracked toward his face. When she saw him, the planes of her face shifted, trembling in affectionate recognition. Letting out a loud breath of relief, he felt his heart reboot in his chest. So much for looking blasé about the Commander’s sudden return to life.

Nobody’s perfect.

Every bit as slowly as her eyes had turned, her mouth opened. Slowly, quietly, she spoke to him and him alone.

“I saw his face.”

Everyone turned towards the broken heap of scrap metal that was the Commander’s voice.

“Again and again.” she choked, ragged and sore. “Every time he died. Always. My fault.”

“Who…?” T’Soni began, barely audible.

Out of the corner of his eye, Garrus saw the asari gasp, then she covered her mouth with one shaking hand. One hundred and six and not a day older: the archaeologist suddenly looked every bit the adolescent maiden that she was.

“By the goddess.” T’Soni gasped. “No wonder she was so… I wasn’t thinking! I’m such a fool!”

“I have to fix it,” Shepard said.

Beside him, she twitched. In stunned disbelief, Garrus witnessed a single tear swell in the
Commander’s right eye, then it dropped down her cheek. Heavy and glistening, it fell like a rock as it traced the line of her scar, leaving an empty trail in Therum’s volcanic dust.

He watched that tear and felt himself descending right alongside it, all the way down.

“I’m sorry.” she whispered, turning inward, talking to someone a lifetime away. She slowly turned from him, staring down at her hands - at the flaking edge of one of her painted fingernails.

“…Pari…” she breathed.

Without warning, the carefully constructed fortress that was Commander Shepard crumbled before his eyes, and what remained was little more than pain on shaking legs.

Shepard’s knees gave out, but Garrus grabbed her before she hit the ground.

— ALBACUS —

In the colony square, the stage was already set.

General Arterius teetered on eager feet, barely holding himself at attention as he waited for Albacus and his escort to arrive. In a fateful line, six human colonists were positioned like props behind the General’s back. Bound at the wrists and twitching on their knees, they had been blindfolded and prepared.

Eska for the firing squad.

As he was prodded forcefully into the square, Albacus’ jaw clenched so tightly that his teeth pinched the back of his mouth, and he tasted his own steaming blood. Too furious to move another step, he halted mid stride, entire body stiffening with rage.

Ilmek gently knocked into his shoulder, pushing him forward to meet the General’s judgement.

“Captain Regidonis,” Arterius purred.

There was disconcerting warmth in his voice as he opened his arms to greet them.

“Welcome back.”

As usual, the General’s tone was far too loose, far too casual for the occasion. Albacus met Arterius’ eyes, hardened his face, and gave no further acknowledgement.

In response, the General shook his head and clicked his mandibles, as if disappointed with the weather.

“Do you remember, Captain? The first time we met, I warned you that all this tender asari philosophy of yours would catch up with you one day.”

As Arterius spoke, he paced back and forth. His steps light, his tone brisk.

“…You’ve always been too soft for the Blackwatch, but I never expected this kind of betrayal from Albacus Regidonis. I don’t care if you’re the golden pride of Palaven: old blood can’t save a traitor of your magnitude, Alba.”
Albacus seethed, incensed by the General’s unearned diminution of his name. His own parents had scarcely called him Alba. Such a token of fond affection had no place in the mouth of anyone so poison-tongued.

The General continued, feigning professional concern.

“Now look at you. The illustrious Captain Regidonis, little more than an overworked prison warden. Despite all of your diplomatic posturing, I still entrusted the management of this puny human installation to you. Obviously, that was my mistake. And I apologize.

“Despite what you seem to believe,” he boomed, gesturing to the humans at his back, “these prisoners exploded through a dead relay and declared war on the Citadel. They are our enemies, Alba. Not our valued guests.”

“I know my life is forfeit,” Albacus blurted, interrupting him. “Do what you must and leave the civilians out of this.”

Arterius stopped in his tracks, and the carefully selected turian crowd boiled as he raked them all beneath the heat of his stare.

“Of course your life is forfeit…” he fumed. “Regidonis, our lofty idealist. So concerned about civilians. Where is the concern for your troops, Captain? The loyal falxi who trusted you to command?

“Tell me, was it a civilian who disarmed one of your own torini and crippled my brother? I hear you didn’t raise a single finger to stop her. Yes, that civilian, who followed her general’s orders to call down the might of an alien fleet. All while you looked on. A civilian, who currently lies in wait in that transmission bunker up north, dreaming fondly of our annihilation...and of you.”

Albacus stopped breathing.

“Yes. Shepard. Your precious little pet. Did you honestly think you could hide her from the Hierarchy's justice? I’ve sent my own team to deal with your perversions. She’ll be dead by morning.”

“No!” Albacus gasped. Bold and foolish, he took one step forward and raised his hand threateningly. “Arterius, please! Stop this insanity! Guilty or not, Shepard has a young child with her, you cannot possibly--”

Arterius hissed with disapproval, and gestured to someone at Albacus’ back.

“Sergeant Tulubri. Please restrain your Captain.”

Tulubri? Albacus spun around, hoping it was a bluff.

Regretfully, it was the truth. One look at her face was all he needed to understand: she had been violently persuaded to cooperate with Arterius’ plans. Certainly, she had objected. Probably for an admirable stretch. But brutal force and the threat of death could be very convincing, especially when you believed your own commanding officer was a traitor to the cause.

She approached with heavy steps, then pinned Albacus’ arms behind his back in two faultless joint compressions. Spasming against his arms, her hands shook. Between her mandibles, her breath quivered. She was terrified.

No. Not Ris. How could they have broken her? His Sargeant. His friend. A steadfast comrade in
arms. A clever, strategic genius, and the best *bellixatum* practitioner he had ever seen. Secretly fond of her niece on the Citadel. Fond enough of the innocent to instantly take a shine to Hannah Shepard’s brave and stubborn youngster.

Albacus’ heart tripped over a beat.

He recalled the vulnerable look in Hannah’s eyes as they had stood together in the dark, the tears that had escaped from her bold green eyes. Everything about her; resilient, tenacious, and beautiful.

His heart stopped beneath the suffocating weight of that realization, and he wished he had stayed behind. Stayed with Hannah and Jane.

Poor, sweet Jane. That enthusiastic and curious little spitfire, a child barely three years of age. Now she was hours from certain death. Stranded alongside her mother, destined to perish when the General’s assassins descended.

As clearly as if she still struggled for breath in his arms, Albacus felt the softness of Jane’s fire-colored hair sliding underneath his talons. Everything about that tiny human child had seemed impractically frail. As if her soul might slip between his fingers if he was not careful with it.

His breath left him in one terrified gust. He had not been careful enough.

He lowered his head.

Arterius could plainly see that the battle was won, and he swept down to claim his victory. His voice a steady flame, he declared:

“Thanks to that lovely human weakness of yours, my brother’s arm is being amputated as we speak. He’ll have to use a prosthesis for the rest of his life.”

Arterius took a breath and tilted his head, tasting the moment.

“So will you.”

The General’s eyes flicked to Tulubri, and that was the only warning Albacus was given.

One of Tulubri’s firm hands straightened his left arm. After a steadying breath, her other fist slammed forward behind his elbow, shattering the joint. The blow was so sudden, so forceful, that the seals of his armor cracked with a startled hiss. One of the bones in his forearm jutted out into the open air, and a surge of blood trickled down his wrist, pooling warmly in his glove.

He collapsed onto one knee and heaved, too stunned to feel any pain.

Agony arrived moments later, as Arterius pointed an impatient finger.

“Ilmek, do you mind? Fetch Alba’s friend for us.”

The Lieutenant reluctantly left Albacus’ side and walked into a shadowed patch of rubble. There he extracted the bleeding husk of General Williams. Ilmek hauled him to his feet with as much gentility as he dared, taking half of the human soldier’s weight on his own hip. Williams was gaunt and pale - he looked half-starved and moments from death. Even in that state, the man refused to stagger.

“Albacus Regidonis… I'll tell you what you are.” Arterius barked. “You're no diplomat. You're a disgrace. The Jailor of Shanxi: I invite you to rot in a prison of your own creation. You and your
new comrade Williams can share the *Tenefalx* brig until this occupation is over. You’ll have a
privileged view of your own treachery before the Primarch claims your head for his wall.

“In the meantime, what this colony **needs** is a demonstration of firm Hierarchy principals.
Examples, Alba. You nearly cheated me of those as well. The human who led the insurgency fled
while you were distracted with Shepard. Of course. So, you force me to improvise.

“After some hunting, I tracked down the last of the crew who breached Relay 314 - the ambitious
little monkeys that started this whole affair. *Humanity*: a primitive, world-hungry menace.”

He gestured broadly with his arm at the blindfolded hostages.

“Here the are.”

Six trembling prisoners, every single one of them ignorant of their crimes.

Dramatic, aggrandizing, and with little regard for the small things he might crush beneath his
boots. There was no question anymore. The General was preparing to raze humanity to the ground,
and he was going to start with these poor souls.

“Lieutenant. The weapon, please.”

Arterius held out his hand expectantly.

“No.” Albacus moaned around the crushing pain in his arm. “Obren. No.”

Ilmek remained as true as he had ever been, and refused follow the General’s order to disarm. In
the end, his loyalty made no difference. Arterius spotted the Regidonis pistol on his hip and
stepped forward to take it by force. To stop him, Ilmek would have had to lay down his life with no
chance of retribution - a sloppy, pointless death.

Wisely, he chose not to resist. Even then, Arterius’ disciplining blow split one of his mandibles and
loosened a tooth, which Ilmek silently spat onto the ground. The Lieutenant was still holding
tightly to Williams. The human General turned his head to Albacus, meeting his eyes with
unexpected comprehension. Brief but harrowing, a gaze of shared regrets.

Walking down the line of prisoners, Arterius weighed the gun in his hand and nodded approvingly.

“So here’s the famous Regidonis antique,” he said. “What’s the speech you always give the troops,
Alba? *May every bullet fly with honor...*”

With an eager flick of his wrist, he checked and secured the ammunition. As always, the gun was
fully loaded and clear to fire.

Albacus tried to move, tried to stop him, but he could not rise to his feet. Tulubri’s hands dug into
his neck, locking him in place. At his side, his shattered arm gushed blood, more and more blood
with each passing minute, vein-hot and sticky. The sudden loss weakened his knees.

The shots rang out, loud and lingering. Six precise death knells, chiming in hideous syncopation
across the square.

One by one, the humans victims stiffened, slumped to the earth, and died without dignity.

After the six requisite bullets, the pistol was spent. Shaking his head, the General clicked the
deadened trigger just to be sure, and then threw the gun next to the bodies in the dirt.
Chapter End Notes

**Original words and phrases:**
- *Eska:* Offal, meat scraps or bait.
- *Bellixatum:* Broad term for the different schools of turian martial arts.

**Words and phrases courtesy of MizDirected's turian dictionary:**
- *Familia notas:* The colony markings that turians wear on their faces.
- *Tarin/Tarini:* Female turian(s)
- *Torin/Torini:* Male turian(s)
- *Patrem/Pari:* Father/Dad
Hannah waited for the trucks to leave, then got to work.

She allowed one hour for Jane. Antibiotics, medi-gel, several brimming cupfulls of sweetened electrolyte solution, a hot bath and a change of clothes. After that, one hour to survey the rations. Enough food to tide two careful bodies along for several weeks. Albacus had left a considerate amount behind. He hadn’t been subtle about it - the crates had been left outside the main storage facility as if in tribute. They might as well have had Hannah’s name carved into their sides.

Whatever he thought of himself, Albacus was a good man. In Hannah’s experience, good men were usually the first to die when things went south.

If only he’d stayed north. With her. She still remembered how to fight dirty.

Her chest felt heavy, and there was no time for weight.

After the essential tasks were done, a different sort of counting began. Hannah knew that it would take anywhere from twelve to sixteen hours for Albacus to return to Shanxi. Impossible to know if the turian General would wait that long to send his own team to make sure Hannah was dead, but she ranked it unlikely. In any scenario, she had hours at most. If Arterius’ men left early and traveled by shuttle, a death squad could be arriving at any moment.

Let them try. This was her backyard, and she wasn’t about to be caught unawares. Raids hadn’t been common on Shanxi, but they hadn’t been unheard of either. Small colonies were ripe targets for pirate gangs and anti-Alliance fringe groups. Sometimes, people on the ground could be assholes too. You could never be too careful - food and medicine weren’t the only things she’d kept in bulk in her northern stockpile.

Enough combat gear for a twenty man squad. Alliance standard issue Aldrin, complete sets of heavy armor in mottled green to blend with the terrain. In both hue and hardness, the camouflage perfectly matched her eyes. She suited up.

She counted two dozen assault rifles. Basic stock equipment, but reliable. The same number of pistols. Half that for shotguns and submachines. Only two sniper setups, and she knew one of them had a tendency to jam.

Hannah determined her load by ammo compatibility first, then weight. No gun, no matter how fancy, could save her sorry ass if she ran out of bullets. Double that if she ran out of breath.
One pistol strapped to her lower back - good in a pinch, but short on shots. A hardy M-6 Lancer could drag her through the bulk of the fight. After a brief debate, she took the one good rifle. She’d never had the patience or steady hands for sniping, and the bastard was heavy, but getting off a few shots before the enemy closed might be her only chance out here. Worst case: she could always beat someone to death with it.

She hadn’t seen the turians in close combat. Albacus had kept the violence to a minimum until Harper’s team had thrown the shit into the fan. Hannah didn’t need to think too deeply about her odds. She knew a turian could snap her in half if they got close.

After the guns, she saw about area of effect, anything to keep them at a distance. Trip mines, frag grenades, gas cans, a few spotty old farming drones that she programmed to fly heat sweeps, dropping proximity charges and incendiaries on anything that twitched and wasn’t her. The drones wouldn’t last long, but they’d be a distraction. Rip up the earth and run like hell.

The proximity alarm sounded. Thirty klicks out, and closing fast, ETA in thirty minutes. A shuttle, then. Arterius had suspected Albacus would betray him, and he hadn’t even waited for confirmation. These troops had been sent well in advance. Give Hannah a few hours to think she was safe, then cut her down in her sleep.

Not likely.

Hannah had been an Alliance Marine for as long as there had been an Alliance. She wasn’t about to quit now.

Jane was still groggy, had been sleeping in fits and starts ever since her first dose of antibiotics. A toddler half-mad with fever was an unknown that Hannah couldn’t afford. The only way to keep Jane safe was to remove her from the equation entirely.

Hannah knew the spot, just the hidey-hole to slide her baby into, well below ground under a small power station in a field to the east. She could get there and back in ten minutes if she started carrying her now. It would keep her safe from the fight, but the thought made her sick.

She looked at the moving dot on the map, bright red with unquestionable danger. The turians were getting closer. She couldn’t waste any more time.

She cursed and reached for the sedatives.

Hannah couldn’t be sure of the dosage. Too little, and Jane would wake up a few minutes from now locked in an earth-packed crawlspace, screaming for her life. Too much, and she would never wake up at all. Hannah looked at the baffling ratios and weight tables on the side of the bottle and made her best guess.

She said a prayer, then she slid the needle into Jane’s arm.

“Mommy’s got your back, baby. When you wake up, this will all be over.”

— JANE —

The smoke burned her eyes, she couldn’t see through it. Couldn’t hear through the heat of those screams, the singing choir in the ashes, the roaring of the flames. She choked on the sound of a dying world, and onto her shoulders the smoke descended.
The smothering guilt of her failure, the weight of his hand. Again, again.

He had to know that she could do better.

She could make it to him, if she just walked. Walked through the long dark, like he told her to. One step at a time. You can do better. Don’t lose count.

Fifty-thousand years is too long, she cried.

I can’t save them all, she screamed.

Not without you.

She couldn’t keep up. It was too heavy. She had to go back.

Faster, she had to move faster. She could almost see the form of his face. Just one more step, it would be enough… She’d catch him, she’d stop him. She wouldn't get caught, she wouldn’t lose count.

The cycle had to end.

The ache in her throat turned hoarse with blood, a scream that wasn’t hers. Flooding her mouth until she was forced to babble around it, beg around it. A frothing mass, rabid and insane, until there was nothing but lightning in her heart.

Time and again, without warning. They all left eventually. Stolen far away. Into the sharp, devouring green of the trees, where they were never given back.


But it wasn’t theft. Not really.

Not when the doors were left wide open for the thieves.

She woke up.

As her eyes adjusted to the blurry half-light, the door on the far end of the room opened. Wreathed in a sliver of light so piercing that it blinded her, a silhouette appeared.

Someone quietly said her name.

“Jane?”

The shadow peered at her, fatherly and familiar, and her heart leapt with hope. She forced down a deep choke of air and struggled to breathe.

“You called out,” he said.

She sobered instantly. His voice was all wrong. It was Nihlus.

Nihlus was not her pari, he would never be her pari, his resemblance to her pari was circumstantial at best. She was on the Normandy, and her father had been dead for thirteen years.
Her last night on Minoir was little more than old nightmare conjured by the Protheans to get their message across. She wished they’d chosen something more subtle.

“The drugs aren’t helping, are they?” Nihlus asked, putting a frustrated hand on the doorframe. “Have you slept at all?”

For a moment he simply stared at her tired, twitching face, trying to force an answer out of her. When none came, he stepped a few paces into the room and let the door seal behind him. He didn’t do anything as transparently paternal as sit on the edge of her bed. Nonetheless he seemed reluctant to leave.

To fill the awkward pause, Nihlus moved to the desk beside her bunk and turned on the work lamp. That gave him a momentary excuse to hover nearby and glare down at her. Obviously concerned, and equally obvious in his inability to articulate it.

“Yes, I know I need to sleep more.” She said. “No, it won’t affect my performance.”

With a sigh, she rustled beneath the sheets, pointed to the desk chair, and waited for him to take a seat and commence an inevitable lecture. Instead, he placed a quiet hand over hers.

He was wearing gloves and touched her only lightly, but the uncharacteristically intimate gesture startled her nonetheless. Her stomach twisted. Under the pretense of moving herself up the bed to come to a sitting position, she slid her wrist out of his grip.

His only warning was an eerie silence. Then he pushed her out of his way and invaded the bunk, rigidly arranging himself on top of the covers.

Through clenched molars, she growled, “What are you doing?”

“Trying to figure out what it is about this bunk that makes you lose your mind every time you get into it,” he answered plainly.

He assumed a mockery of her posture: propping himself against the headboard with arms crossed, his feet jutting out in two uncompromising strike marks over the mattress.


“What are you doing?” she repeated.

“If I’m crossing an old line, tell me right now. I’ll leave you alone.”

After a long pause, she was forced to admit, “You’re not.”

He sat next to her in forceful silence. As always, there seemed to be some point worth proving, and he was glaring at her all the while.

The proximity and gravity of his weight sinking into the mattress beside her was unsettling, and not only because it was unexpected. He was wearing an off-duty work suit in a surprising shade of near-black emerald, and he lacked all of his ordinary bulk. As he loomed beside her, she became suddenly aware of Nihlus: the torin, rather than the more readily dismissible Nihlus: the jerk from work.

Most disturbing and incongruous of all: he smelled too strongly of some kind of coppery, cinnamon air sanitizer. Sharp, metallic and difficult to ignore.
He jogged her from her confusion by grinding his elbow into the bare flesh of her arm. Breaking the long silence, he said:

“You’re too uptight, Jane.”

Her mouth fell open, but he didn’t give her a chance to speak.

“You seem to think I’m the resident turian hard ass on this mission, but when was the last time you looked in a mirror? *Die for the cause* might as well be tattooed on your forehead. You eat like a nutritionist, speak like an Academy instructor, and instead of sleeping, you throw yourself at a Hierarchy Crucible. All of that discipline might be admirable, except...”

He moved his hand toward her knee. When she flinched, he raised his brow plates and turned up his palm.

“That. You’ll make jokes and shake hands with anybody if it’ll boost morale, but I’ve never seen you touch someone for your own enjoyment. That’s not very turian of you.”

Her jaw slackened even more, threatening to dislocate. Nihlus kept going.

“This attitude problem of yours is threatening the mission. You need to relax.”

She finally found her voice.

“You’re telling me to relax? *You.*”

Nihlus clasped his hands in his lap, firm and scholarly.

“Yes. Me.”

A pause stretched between them, long and full of uncomfortable implications.

“I’m no stranger to rigidity,” he finally said. “It’s how I choose to live my life. But discipline is a tool, and like any other tool, it can fail with reckless overuse. I maintain boundaries by choice. You? You’re doing something far less deliberate, and after that stunt with T’Soni, I can see it’s affecting your judgment.”

“Maybe this hadn’t occurred to you, but a lot has happened this week that might be affecting my judgement. Saren, the Spectres, the *Normandy.*”

Garrus was a whole complicated subcategory of his own, which she silently added to the list.

“It’s a lot. It’s a helluva lot, actually. I’m not used to moving this fast. Am I not allowed a single goddamned moment to be overwhelmed? I’m fine. Nothing got melted, nobody died. I’m fine.”

“Yes, that all sounded very reassuring.”

“What the hell do you even know about relaxing, anyway? I practically had to force-feed you to Williams to break the ice.”

“Just because you haven’t been privy to my off duty hours doesn’t mean I don’t make good use of the time.”

She was too startled by that line of thought to pursue it any further. Her arms tightened across her chest.
Nihlus watched her for a moment and shook his head. With an annoyed gust through the mandibles, he took off a glove and held out his palm, offering it for inspection.

She glared, squinted, and finally gave him a shrug of uninterested confusion. His talons looked very nice, and they were very long and natural. What about it.

He moved his bare hand to her shoulder, put a single finger on a spasming knot near her neck. 

“This twitch has been annoying me since Eden Prime,” he said. “Can I please kill it now? Yes or no?”

She had no idea which option would be more awkward: letting him do it or telling him to get out. She opted for the selfish version. Her shoulder hurt like hell.

She nodded to him with what she hoped was a remarkable lack of enthusiasm.

“I’ve picked up a few tricks from the Consort over the years,” he explained, voice flat. “Nothing fancy, but I’ve gotten no complaints.”

Was Nihlus Kryik trying to sweet talk her? In bed? The thought inspired a second of blind panic. Then his hand sank in, rough and militant. He was going to beat the tension out of her, just like everything else.

“The Consort, huh?” she said, relieved. “Never pictured you as the type,”

“The type for what?”

She didn’t answer. He’d backed her into a corner with that one.

*What* indeed. She had no idea. Nihlus didn’t seem the romantic type. Or the sexual type. Or even the friendly type. He was efficient and unsentimental. Calculating, on a bad day. Not the sort of turian to wander into the Citadel Consort Chambers for a night of overpriced lovemaking, frivolous entertainment, or anything else for that matter.

“Jane.”

She grunted curiously back at him.

“What helps you relax? If you say *nothing*, so help me...”

His hand swept over her shoulder and gave an encouraging if forceful squeeze. Before she could stop it, her pulse thundered and her entire body flushed with unguarded memory.

Instantly, she was overwhelmed with the full-body sensation of Garrus Vakarian - inside her, around her, everywhere. His hands squeezing her shoulders. His body heavy over hers. His mouth. His tongue. His warmth, pulsing like a bright light inside her. His heart slowing. His eyes closing. The way she had felt tethered to him so tightly, so dangerously. Tempted to fall asleep in his arms and stay in the dark with him forever. Or at least for a while.

Nihlus’ hand stilled near her shoulder, and she gulped.

With her gingery complexion it had always been impossible for her to hide any level of embarrassment. He must have seen the crimson glow that had crept up her neck and spread traitorously across her face. He’d probably felt her temperature rise beneath his palm. Her blood was boiling.
Breath hitching in her chest, she squeezed her eyes shut and hoped he’d ignore it. She should have kicked him out. A moment passed in silent tension, then he brushed the hair away from her neck with the tips of his fingers, and she took in a sharp breath of surprise.

Encouraged by her involuntary reaction, he circled the base of her skull with the pad of his thumb and shifted his body towards her.

In a very different tone, he said, “I see. Is that all?”

He leaned in just enough to press his thigh to hers. Shepard’s eyes widened.

Oh. No.

“Jane… convictorix? That’s easily done.” He laughed quietly before continuing. “Given your record of favoring certain turian methodologies, I’m surprised you didn’t initiate this earlier...”

His hand was far less military now. A stray finger wandered under the edge of her low-cut sleep shirt, skirting over the sensitive edge of her collar bone.

“I’m no expert on human sexuality, but…” He shrugged and cleared his throat. “For the good of the mission, I’ll let you boss me around just this once.”

She blustered, too shocked to reject him outright. Eyes bugging out of her skull, she stared at her feet and tried to form the words.

“I... didn’t know you felt that way...” she squeaked, voice cracking with appalling underage nervousness.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about. If you benefit from this kind of arrangement, I don’t mind obliging for your health. Don’t act as if you’ve never practiced at convictorix before-”

“No. I haven’t.”

He squinted and stopped moving his hand, blindsided by her reaction. With a quirk of his chin, all the seductive presence drained out of him as suddenly as if it had never been there at all.

“You haven’t. Even at Cipritine Academy?”

“Especially at Cipritine Academy. See these?” She pointed to her crooked mouth, the off-center slant of her nose. “Only kisses those turians ever wanted to give me.”

“Hmm,” he mused, sounding disappointed, though hardly out of sexual frustration. She couldn’t name the complicated expression that crossed his face as he backed away a few respectful inches. Whatever it was, it made her more uncomfortable than his offer of casual peer-to-peer recreational sex ever could have.

“Nihlus…” she attempted. “Even as a matter of health and wellness, you and me? Bad idea.”

He didn’t look off-put by her rejection. Far worse: his face tightened with friendly concern.

“Of course. If you really think that’s best,” he said, cool as ever. “I didn’t realize what your preferences were... I didn’t mean to offend you.”

“That’s not it.” she slipped. Flaring with anger at the pathetic, defensive tone in her own voice, she shook her head and tried to focus. “It’s none of your business what my preferences are. Has this been your ploy from day one - getting into bed with me?”
She scrambled out of the bunk.

“What? Of course not!”

Unfolding from the bed in one smooth, guiltless movement, he rose to meet her. For a moment, his hands hovered protectively near her shoulders, but when he saw that her flinch had returned more forcefully than ever, he seemed to think better of touching her again.

“Shepard, don’t make this weird. You know damn well *convictorix* is nothing personal, nothing manipulative. It was hardly my first choice either. But you’re slipping. This - *descent* - of yours at the first sign of emotional distress? I may have made a mistake nominating you for the Spectres.”

She felt as though he’d just pushed her down an elevator shaft. She laughed disbelievingly.

“Get off my back, Kryik. You have no idea what those Prothean fragments have done to my brain.”

“No. I don’t. Because you refuse to vocalize it, even to yourself.”

“I can do my job. I always have, sleepless or not. Sexless or not. For God’s sake, my sexless sleeplessness is just about the only familiar thing in my life anymore, and you want to guilt trip me about it?”

“I’m not-” He stopped himself. “Shepard, don’t be an idiot, at least not on purpose. This isn’t about your lack of bed-related skills.”

“Really. You just tried to seduce me as if it were some kind of - of - intervention.”

Nihlus took a step back and rubbed the peak of a knuckle along one of his brow plates, looking fed up.

“I admit, comforting people isn’t my area. Some of us choose to be alone. I keep to myself because it works. I’ve always been more at home that way. You’re different. You have an ease with people, Shepard. Natural leadership skills. We need those skills to keep this crew at peak - this mission is only going to get crazier from here.”

He stared at her.

“I bet it all on you, Shepard. Don’t disappoint me now.” As he said it, he reached into a pocket at his waist and pulled out a small, black trinket. Resembling a pendant without a chain, it was only as wide as a finger, and Nihlus smoothed his thumb curiously over the surface.

The tidy, ink-black lines of the little object instantly gave it away as another Prothean artifact, and Shepard stiffened.

“You said you didn’t think I was the type to visit the Consort?” Nihlus asked, quietly.

She didn’t answer. Instead, she watched as he continued tracing the little trinket with his thumb. Thoughtful, gentle, and unlike anything she’d seen from him before.

“There’s no such thing as a type for the Consort. Sha’ira listens, she helps. Everybody can use a little companionship once in awhile. Even me.” He quirked a brow plate, but didn’t look up. “Before we left the Citadel, I made my customary pre-mission visit to see her. While I was there, Sha’ira gave me this. For you. She knew some of the residual effects the beacon might have, and she wanted to help…”
“You told the Consort about the beacon.” Shepard interrupted, too startled to wait her turn.

“Yes, Shepard. And plenty more. She knew you’d never be seen receiving a gift from the Consort, even if she sent a personal invitation, so she passed it to me. I wasn’t sure about handing this over to you at all, given how unforgiving all this Prothean garbage has been so far.

“But... that’s not my call, is it? We’ve all got demons, and the Protheans have brought yours out with style.” He held the trinket toward her in offering, centered in his palm. “Either embrace those demons... or give them a swift death.”

“What is it?” Shepard asked, staring at the artifact, admittedly breathless.

“I asked T’Soni the same thing. Apparently it’s a harmless data module. No psychic traces, no head games. As for what kind of data? Tax records, for all I know. Sha’ira seemed to think it might give you some small peace of mind.”

Instinctively drawn to the small black shape, Shepard’s fingers closed around it. She found it to be pleasantly free of whispering. It was still warm from Nihlus’ pocket.

Before she could flee, his hand gently closed around hers; a slow, silent trap.

“T’Soni told me what you saw in that vision. About Mindoir, and your patrem. Knowing how it affected you, she said...”

“What?” Shepard snapped, angry that any conversation about the intensity of her memories might have been had behind her back, or at her expense. “What did she say?”

“You can’t face this alone, Jane.”

“Oh please. Says an asari scholar who knows nothing about me.” She tried to wrench her hand away, but his grip tightened.

“No. Says the entire Prothean Empire, apparently.”

Between their hands, the trinket sang into their skin, little more than the quiet flutter of a single leaf swirling down to meet the earth. Nihlus’ eyes flashed at her: a blast of warm summer green. That glance of hard affection made him look so horrifyingly similar to her father that she could scarcely meet his gaze. Another rogue wire had just linked Nihlus to her pari, and she felt helpless to defuse the bomb without setting off a chain of reckless explosions.

Before allowing herself a single compromising squeak of acknowledgement, she took the still-warm trinket from his hand, picked up a set of clean workout clothes, and walked out.

Old and comforting, the trinket sang to her, its melody ringing in her ears like a forgotten lullaby.

Take this, he whispered. Remember what I told you.

She shook her head slowly, trying to refuse.

His gun had always been too heavy. Hefting it made her shoulder sore, her wrist ache. Her shots always ended up drifting down and left, popping kneecaps and shinbones when she was supposed
to be lancing heads and hearts. Every time she missed, he made her start over from the top. His good hand would prod at the soft point between her shoulder blades, again, again. Until she was weak and shaking, shooting sparks from an empty heatsink.

_You can do better._ He would say. _Do I have to?_ She would argue. _Pay attention to your counts._ He would instruct. _How long do I have to keep trying?_ She would complain. _Until your arms are too weak to hold the gun._ He would insist.

She hadn’t earned this yet. Taking this meant… it meant…

She stared at the weapon and opened her mouth to argue, but he shushed her with a strict wave of his arm.

_Find Stephen - he should be with the others. Once you find him, do not separate for any reason. Start trickling survivors into the regional districts for evac to the far side. Walk through the underground train lines, use battery power only, or fumble in the dark until you are out of range. Tiptoe one step at a time if you have to._

_But--_

_No arguments. A raid on this scale means the Verge has unified - the batarians likely have a transport ship right above our heads. Something big. They will intercept any vehicle or transmission that tries to leave this spaceport. Send no comms, make no noise, and stay out of sight._

Her eyes were fixed on his ancient gun. Too big for her hands. Too heavy for her fingers. Not meant for her.

When she spoke, it sounded like begging. _What about you?_

_The SOS has been received. SSV Hastings inbound, under command of Captain Kathryn Ballard. Tell the colonists, make sure they know her name. Tell them a rescue is imminent - hope remains. The militia men and I will draw enemy eyes away from your movements until Alliance reinforcements make contact._

_No way - I’m not leaving you with those militia jerks! Just a bunch of old farmers and Blue Suns wannabes! Ripper’s bottle-shooting gang! They don’t stand a chance--_

_Quiet. This is up to us now, Jane. All of us. I trust you to get our people out. Do you understand what I need you do?_

He wanted an answer, but she was too angry to speak. She was supposed to be an adult. Almost sixteen. Old enough to join the military on Palaven. Old enough to carry his gun.

She looked at her painted fingernails. Saw how small they were, curled around his priceless Armax. She imagined how stupid she must look: her flaking nail polish, the pale line in her dark hair where her roots had sloppily grown back. She felt more like a fool child than ever.

She wasn’t ready to wear her father’s colors. Even if he had said it made him proud. She knew, deep down, she was still too small and afraid. Too human.

_Do you understand?_ he repeated, shaking her. _If these slavers find you, do you know what they will do?_

She nodded, shielding herself with fury. It was easier than being afraid.
Not so easily duped, he grabbed her wrist and triggered her omni-tool, linking their signals. When she refused to acknowledge, he put a rough hand on her face and forced her into eye contact.

_Diume. Listen to me. This is no time for bravery and stubbornness. I want you out of here. As soon as I have an escape route, I will find you._

Looking into his steel-bright eyes, she forgot her next argument. Instead, she hiccuped and clutched his hand against her cheek. Allowed her shivering fingers and the embarrassment of wet salt on her cheeks do all the talking.

His grip tightened, his face softened, and he bent his forehead to hers, whispering. Her heart was pounding too loud, she couldn’t hear a thing.

Behind him, an explosion. They were coming through the blast shield.

Without flinching, he pushed her up into the storage room vent and slammed the grate behind her.

**Go. Go now!**

---

The elevator door lifted, heavy and quiet as a curtain, revealing the towering hump of a lone krogan pacing through the cargo bay. High drama: a moonlit shark on an empty shore, lurking angrily from side to side. Might have been a startling sight, harrowing even, if Wrex hadn’t stopped to poke the dainty pyramid of Shepard’s training weights with one of his meaty fingers and whined,

“Limp-wristed turian playthings. No wonder she’s got arms like twigs!”

She’d completely forgotten about Wrex.

Embarrassing, to let an entire ton of krogan biotic run amok through her ship. Not exactly her first choice, but she’d passed out cold in the comm room before arrangements could be made, before a deal could be struck. Whatever tense conversation he must have had with Nihlus in her stead had kept him aboard through their next stop. Beyond that, Shepard had no idea.

She and Wrex had fallen into desperate camaraderie on Akuze, but that chemistry had been built on gallons of ryncol, thresher maw acid, and blood. Now that Wrex knew who had raised her, now that he knew a turian noble had informed Shepard’s workout routine _and_ her worldview, the krogan mercenary’s loyalties were anybody’s guess.

She stayed in the elevator and hovered her hand over the recall command. She was too tired for this, completely unprepared for another round of conversation. Yet another clumsy set of polite evasions and quiet lies. All she’d hoped for was a five kilometer run, quiet and alone.

Wrex still owed her for Akuze. The idea of collecting debts put a bad taste in her mouth. This could wait until morning.

“I wouldn’t mess around with that…”

The unexpected sound of Garrus Vakarian’s voice leapt out the dark and latched onto the back of Shepard’s neck with fierce teeth and refused to let go. Once she heard him, she couldn’t move. Luckily, no one seemed to have noticed her.
The krogan turned from Shepard’s Crucible and glowered at the far side side of the cargo bay, where the Mako was parked for repairs. She craned her neck to follow his gaze.

Ah. Jutting out from under the body of the tank were two lightly armored feet, crossed casually at the ankles. The top boot bobbed back and forth to the tinny strains of some some *thumpa-thumpa* track that could only be made out from a thousand-mile distance: club music squeezed through a small earpiece. Late night maintenance, an old turian standby.

Garrus’ toes twitched warningly in the krogan’s general direction. He rambled on, usual lack of restraint on full display. Shop talk.

“Just saying… Shepard’s a bit territorial. Probably wouldn’t like you fondling her stuff.”

“Who’s territorial?” Wrex huffed and puffed, then blew himself down onto the weight bench. “Snotty-nosed blue-blooded pyjak thinks he knows how to handle a woman’s heavy machinery…”

She heard the crick-crick-crick of ratcheting beneath the Mako, then something came loose and clattered to the tiling. Garrus swore, fumbling.

Their conversation was veering too far off course for comfort. Shepard cut in just as the krogan made a greedy snatch at the Crucible’s heaviest set of weights.

She barked roughly, “Your funeral, Wrex.”

From under the Mako came a painful-sounding *thwack* of skull-on-metal and a trailing cough of surprise. Ignoring his head injury, Garrus wheeled out on his mechanic’s creeper-turned-gurney. He was half-armored and covered in engine grease, naked below the elbows, and his bare hands were extra dirty. She tried not to stare.

It was the first time they had seen one another since Chakwas had carted Shepard out of the comm room. Seeing her alive and well for the first time in days, his face melted. It was an expression so tender and caressing that Shepard was forced to turn it aside like a blow.

Instead, she threw a few limp plastic pitchforks at Wrex. The krogan saw everything, and he looked less than impressed.

“You’re not the boss ‘a me, Shepard,” he said with petty boredom, hefting a weight as if it were a q-tip. She sighed, feeling her exhaustion in every rib.

“The matter of your boss hasn’t exactly been settled, has it?”

“You got an offer?”

“Do you even want an offer from me? You’ve spent the last few decades on the Shadow Broker’s payroll. Next to him, I’m broke. Even more fun, I’ve got no spare room for loose cannons. This is a Council stealth frigate with two Spectres at the helm.”

“Two *turians* at the helm, you mean. Plus, there’s this extra baby turian that somebody left lying around under the tank.”

Garrus’ mandibles flew wide open in bamboozlement, but he wasn’t fast enough to get in a returning volley before Shepard intervened.

“Oh boo hoo. Plenty of dirty politics to get in your way. Plenty of incentives to cut and run if the Shadow Broker outbids me for your contract.” She stepped from the elevator and tried to look tall.
Bulky. “Excuses. You already know, don’t you? It’s not about the money, or the Hierarchy share in this mission. Stick with me, and I can show you one hell of a fight.”

“Pretty words, Shepard. Save them for your pretty turians. You don’t have to convince me. I’ve got my own reason to go after Saren. That little asari wasn’t just paying me with credits. She’s got all kinds of useful information, valuable secrets.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“Saren’s up to something with the krogan. Weird science. I’m gonna make sure he stops. Our people are done being the galaxy’s fall-back plan.”

“Geth, krogan… who is he going to pervert next?” Shepard tried to make it into a joke, but the question was too real to fool anyone.

Stubbornly present, Garrus offered an answer by way of an uninvited punchline.

“A thousand credits says Saren has an army of undead elcor waiting in the wings.”

Wrex put down the weights, sat up, and stared at Garrus for ten complete seconds before breaking with one solid HA. He pointed in disbelief.

“Alright, Shepard. Your baby turian’s not so bad. Once he stops cryin’, that is—“

“Wrex. Tell me straight. Are you with me or not?”

“Call me when you want to fight something big. I’ll be there.”

“Yeah. That’s sweet. And when I call, you’re going to follow my orders? You’re going to follow Kryik’s orders?”

The krogan rose from the weight bench, soaring to his full height and crossing the room to stare her down. She met his eyes, folded her arms, and waited. Their staring match was brief.

“Ahh, dammit.”

He crushed her in a hug so deep that both of her feet left the floor. While he held her immobilized and struggling for breath, he spoke quietly in her ear:

“One condition. Settle up with your new boyfriend. I’m too old to deal with love-sick dextro babies. His constant woe-is-me stinkbombing is driving me insane.”

“The hell does that mean?”

“Turian scent queues. Disgusting. Not to mention: whatever you two did to funk up that M-35, I can still smell it a mile away.”

As he set her down and walked to the elevator, she flushed so hot and sudden that her vision swam. He waved at his entire face, unhappily. “Yeah. A mile away.”

“Wrex, go find someone else to annoy.”

“Here I am, best thing that ever happened to you, and this is the thanks I get? Who needs you anyway. I’ll rebound. That Williams girl… wonder if I can get her to arm wrestle a krogan.”

“Wrex…”
“Shepard.”

He crammed himself into the cargo elevator and low-balled a heavy-lidded wink as he ascended.

Automatically, without stopping to acknowledge Garrus, she walked to the Crucible and tidied up after Wrex, putting everything back in its rightful place. Regardless of an old krogan’s uncalled-for dating advice, she had no idea what she was supposed to do about Vakarian. Simply knowing that he was nearby, likely studying her every move, wondering, waiting… filled her with too many mixed impulses to sort. He was still a subordinate, and the mission was too high priority to compromise with sentiment. Nothing could change that.

She stepped up onto the treadmill and started to run. Going nowhere, staring into a wall, she ran for her life.

Moments later, before she’d had a chance to go breathless, he put a tentative hand on her wrist. The warmth of his palm startled her out of pace, and she threw her feet to the sidebars to keep from face-planting.

He wanted answers. Today, everybody did.

She stopped the treadmill and listened to his nervous breathing, but refused to turn around and face him.

“Yes?” she said.

His hand moved from her elbow. Slid across her lower back. She flinched involuntarily. His fingers lifted away in offended surprise.

“What Vakarian, more *convictorix*?”

“Convi... are you... are you *kidding me*?”

She funneled a solid blade of air through the nose, and said no more.

“That’s what this is to you? That’s what you think--“

Abruptly, he turned away and waved his fists through the air, but didn’t hit anything except himself. One blow. An open-fisted slap against the chest-plate of his light off-duty armor. She heard the pitiful thud, along with the flapping sound of his hand shaking out in pain.

*Ow-ow-ow, stupid-stupid-stupid.*

He put a lightly bruised knuckle in his mouth and tried mending it with a sweep of warm tongue, then froze.

“No,” he said. “That’s crap. You can’t just write me off every time we’re in the same room and you feel funny. Red, we’re alone. Middle of the night, magic camera loop in full force. Tell me--”

“Have you ever lost anyone?” she interrupted, as simple and flat as she could manage.

Instantly, the detective returned, anger carefully set aside. Garrus approached slowly, face peering up at her. His blue eyes were bright with restraint, alongside something far more dangerous. He looked too young, too clear, too much like a summer sky before a storm rolled in.

That much unchecked affection was terrifying. Deadly.
“Lost anyone?” he stammered. “Sure. C-Sec is a dangerous job.”

His fingers curled around the handrail, millimeters from her own, never touching without permission. Still covered in a thin layer of grease from his work under the Mako, his ordinarily tidy hands were broken-in. Chapped and sore, in need of a good pumice rinse and a tissue massage.

She shook her head, trying to clear herself of the urge to close the gap.

“Not the line of duty. I meant losing someone… important. Right out from under you. A part of you is taken away without warning, without reason.” She made a vivid sawing motion across her arm. “Gone forever.”

Garrus didn’t interrupt, though he obviously wanted to. He watched. Waited.

“During the meld with T’Soni… My father was all I could see. Every loss the Protheans suffered, it was him, over and over. The way he looked, the way I messed it all up… Whatever that memory shard originally contained, it translated everything through my experiences. My strongest emotions. My deepest failures.”

Garrus didn’t ask, though he obviously wanted to. He let her say it on her own.

“It’s been over a decade. I was sure I’d put him behind me. I was so sure.”

She clenched the rail next to his waiting hand until it creaked, holding on for all she was worth.

“Don’t ask me to live it all over again.”

— DAVID —

SSV Hastings - 2170

Doctor Hale lifted the privacy screen on the med-bay window and peeked into the adjoining crew deck, then whispered to Anderson with a low rumble of anxiety.

“She’s still out there.”

Anderson followed the doctor’s paranoid stare. The girl from Mindoir continued to haunt the Hastings med-bay, maintaining an uninterrupted vigil that was well into its fourth hour. Refusing to join the other civilians after Hale’s assistant had treated her wounds, the girl had rigidly installed herself at the port side mess bench. Since then, she had done nothing but stare daggers through the privacy screen.

Hale was beginning to look as though feared being disemboweled, even with several locked doors and an armed Marine keeping the teenager at a distance.

Multiple crewmen had tried to funnel the girl towards the crowded cargo deck, where nearly one hundred surviving colonists were being housed and fed. No amount of muscle could budge her from her chosen spot - she refused to wander more than twenty paces. Anderson noted that she kept her posture combat-ready over an untouched bowl of oatmeal. He had to admire her resolve.

When Anderson’s squad had found the girl, she had been half-naked and covered in her own blood, defending a mostly dead turian from a batarian hoard, literally single-handed. Anderson doubted he’d ever be able to shake his first image of her: forcibly stripped, battered half to hell with a broken wrist and one blood-blind eye.
The batarians had done that to her, and tried to do a whole lot more, from the sound of the doctor’s report. She’d killed almost all of the raiders before they’d gotten the chance. Even now, with her left arm in a sling and half her face covered in gauze, she looked like a starving nocturnal predator, not a victim.

According to her own mission brief - a disturbing and professional sitrep at the scene of the attack - her name was Jane Shepard, and she had been living on Mindoir with the Jailor of Shanxi as her sole guardian for over ten years.

Anderson struggled to fathom the implications. One of the most notorious turian war criminals of the century was dying slowly but surely in the belly of the Hastings. Not only dying, but doing it heroically. Fatally injured defending human colonists from batarian slavers. Not, as most of the galaxy had suspected, a long-lost sacrifice to his own people’s patriotic fury.

Albacus Regidonis was an unpopular name on both sides of First Contact, but Anderson didn’t put much stock in either version. He’d seen the confusion in that fight first hand, and he knew truth was always more complicated than history preferred. Whatever his crimes, Regidonis had been presumed dead for a decade or more. So had his alleged human accomplice, an ex-Marine named Hannah Shepard. Anderson had assumed they’d both succumbed to the asp on Shanxi.

Far from it. The Jailor had been alive and well all these years, living out his days as an exile on an obscure farming colony in the Terminus. As for Shepard, Anderson couldn’t guess. All that remained was a bone-white ghost of a girl: Hannah’s only child, Jane.

Hale made a rude gesture through the screen, then spoke into a clenched fist.

“Commander, enough of this bullshit. I’ve got two dozen civilians in the cargo bay who need immediate attention. Half of those colonists have batarian brainwashing tech cooking their nerve centers. You can’t seriously ask me to stay up here wasting medi-gel on him? We don’t owe him a goddamn band-aid. What the hell is Ballard thinking?”

“The captain wants Regidonis kept alive for questioning. If you can manage it.”

Hale stiffened in his chair, so Anderson elaborated.

“Don’t start. Whatever you think you know about Shanxi? You don’t know half. As for the survivors in the cargo bay, that entire colony would be listed on the batarian slave market right now if not for this turian. He dispatched the SOS, organized a militia out of nothing but farmhands, and led a three-day ground-side resistance that could have knocked our own crew back to basic. I don’t care what scars you’re still carrying from First Contact - that counts as heroism in my book. Patch him up.”

“Even if I wanted to, we don’t have the facilities. No bluepaks, no dextro grafts. What do you expect me to do? He’s got a six-inch crater blown clean through his plates, a perforated lung... Jesus Christ, Anderson, half of his skeleton is in chunks. It’s all I can do to keep him from leaking blue blood all over my floor. I can’t triage a dextro, this rig isn’t equipped.”

Anderson didn’t doubt the CMO lacked the onboard resources. He also suspected Hale would have let him bleed out even if he’d been working out of the best emergency suite on the Citadel.

Anderson glanced at the broken turian one more time, listened to the desperate wet struggle of his every breath. He didn’t have long.

“What do you suggest?” Anderson asked.
“Sedatives, painkillers. All they’ll do now is shut down his system, end it faster.” The doctor paused, grinding his teeth. “Make it merciful.”

Anderson took a steadying breath, and tried not to look too deeply into the boiling water stare of the girl in the next room.

“Make it merciful, then. Afterward, you can go down and deal with the colonists. I’ll manage the girl.”

Hale rose from his desk and looked down at Regidonis for a hard minute. Finally, he bit back whatever comment had risen in his throat, and grabbed a vial of opioid. With a nod to Anderson, he administered the final, fatal medicine into a port on the intravenous bag that hung limply from the monitoring station.

Anderson saw the girl from Mindoir unfold from the table. He watched her stalk forward to the med-bay door and demand entry. The Marine on guard moved to intervene, but Anderson ordered him to stand down. Something about Shepard’s daughter filled him with respectful pause.

“You’re going to let him die.” she said tonelessly. Her voice was muffled by the inches of steel and glass between them. Hale still jumped a mile out of his shoes.

“He’s going to die no matter what I do.” The doctor threw it back in her face.

Hale steamed through the door to shake her down, raising his med-kit like a weapon.

“You’re bent in the brain if you think I’m prioritizing a half dead cuttlebone over all of those trauma cases downstairs. What, this turian is your father now, just because your momma had a fetish? I feel for you, kid. Maybe once he’s finally dead you can take a psych eval and get some real help.”

She struck, just once. A distinctive sweeping leg move that Anderson remembered from his N4 tour on Palaven. The doc was on his back instantly, with the girl’s foot wedged firmly into his windpipe.

“That’s enough,” Anderson said quietly. He stepped towards her and raised a pacifying palm until she let up the pressure on the doctor’s throat. “Doc, go make yourself useful somewhere else.”

“This is obscene, Anderson.”

The doctor scrabbled to his feet and bolted, uninjured aside from the shame of being upended by a teenage girl with a broken arm.

“Let me see him.”

The girl stepped forward and stared into Anderson with a fury so palpable that he could feel the hairs on the back of his head sizzling.

He moved aside and cautioned, “He doesn’t have long.”

The moment she finally saw Regidonis up close - stripped, shattered and covered with a blue-soaked sheet - her resolve blew to pieces.

“Pari…”

Anderson’s translator squitched in confusion. Dad.
Incredible.

A million absurd questions bubbled to the fore. Had Hannah Shepard and The Jailor of Shanxi been lovers during the entire First Contact War? Had they raised her child together? Had this militant beast of a girl grown up thinking a turian was her father? Or had she been kidnapped? Brainwashed?

Each different version had the potential to be paradigm altering, like discovering Charon all over again.

She stumbled, collapsing against the side of the turian’s cot. The sudden impact rattled the nearby monitoring devices and intravenous fluids, and Anderson was startled from his curious stupor.

He refocused just in time to see which version of reality was the truth.

The girl raised her unbroken hand to cradle the Captain’s face, and her thumb drifted along his facial plates, tracing his deep red family markings. Anderson saw that the chipped polish on the girl’s blunt human nails made for a perfect match, and his breath caught.

The contents of his stomach reorganized with an acidic lurch, and he instantly knew himself to be the most perverse kind of voyeur. Whatever had happened in this girl’s life, there was no longer any doubt in his mind. Her father was about to die in her arms.

Her tears fell, and she started to beg.

“Pari. I’m sorry. I should have listened to you. Please don’t go away. Please. No, no, no, Pari don’t leave me. I’m sorry! I’m sorry!!”

When the machines began to signal that the Captain’s life had reached its end, Anderson turned his back. There was no escaping the sound of her answering cries.

It made no difference how long he lived. Anderson knew the formless keening of grief he heard in that room would follow him to his grave.

- 

Chapter End Notes

Original words and phrases:
- Convictorix: ‘Intimate messmates’ are common on turian military vessels and other organizations within Hierarchy command structure, where sexual intercourse between individuals of equal rank is considered salubrious rather than romantic.

Words and phrases courtesy of MizDirected's turian dictionary:
- Diume: My joy. A term of love specific to family.
- Torin/Torini: Male turian(s)
- Patrem/Pari: Father/Dad

A big shout out to theherocomplex, whose encouragement and writing sprints helped drag this chapter out of a solid month's depression and onto the page. Huge thanks.
In his time climbing up the rungs from mouthy beat cop to mouthy department lead of Kithoi Ward Special Investigations, Garrus had done more than his fair share of first response duty. It was punishment, at first, payback for all his backtalk and corner-cutting and sneaking behind so-and-so’s back to rough up suspects. Then the higher-ups caught wind that Officer Vakarian had a knack for pulling solid evidence out of otherwise questionable survivor testimony. After that, first response became his specialty, and Garrus Vakarian was suddenly a detective.

He had hovered watchfully in alleyways next to barely cogent bodies, made note of fresh and flowing injuries, drawn up records of grievous assault, then called panicked families to break the news. He had slung blankets over shoulders, bandaged wounds before medics arrived, carried people too bruised and battered to walk themselves out of danger. He’d talked down suicides, he’d disarmed battering spouses. Over the long years, Garrus had even learned to recognize all the invisible ways that pain could leave scars that were never seen.

Calm and serene, staring past him with eyes far-off and unblinking, a victim would explain how their fingernails had been ripped off at the quick, or why blood was trailing from between their legs. Garrus would flinch, and they wouldn’t. The sprawling territory between grief and denial was the ugliest and loneliest road to walk, and Garrus knew instinctively: Shepard was in that wasteland now.

When the Commander braced herself as if for another stab wound and begged, *don’t ask me to live it all over again*, Garrus knew better than to listen to her.

Due process was always a mistake at the scene of a violent crime. Emotions ran too hot, the situation was too variable. Garrus had watched superiors and rookies alike fumbling with words, bungling depositions, triggering victims in the face of grief and terror. Wrangling fresh grief required practice and skill, or you could do more harm than good.

Generally, Garrus stuck to three loose guidelines of increasing complexity. Calling them a set of rules would have been dishonest - success depended on instinct, improvisation, and a tolerance for whiplash.

The initial phase of confrontation was easy: establish safety and trust. If Shepard was flighty in his company, it was because she still felt threatened by some imagined fiasco of sexual scandal, the compromise of her command. Garrus had hoped that reminding her of his camera loop would give her the needed sense of security, but her paranoia ran too deep for that now, and her eyes never strayed far from the *Normandy’s* internal security feeds. Like anything weakened and cornered, she was seeing enemies everywhere.
“You don’t have to tell me anything.” Garrus finally coughed, breaking the long silence. It was a barely-functional offer at best and it tasted weird in his mouth. “If you do decide to talk, nothing you say will leave my confidence.”

Short sentences, limited physical contact. Let her have her space, let her make the moves.

She shook her head and turned her body away. A bad sign - she wasn’t going to admit she needed the assist. Alright, moving right along. Phase two.

Typically more complicated and mired in paperwork, his next task was to enable the victim’s recovery in the absence of C-Sec personnel. Office numbers, data-pads full of coping strategies, scheduling medical exams. Signatures in triplicate on hospital admittance forms, that kind of thing. It was dull and impersonal, but a gentle gathering of loose ends was effective in the majority of cases.

He’d give it a go, but he didn’t have high hopes.

“Okay.” He sighed, holding up his palms in surrender. “Don’t talk to me, it’s not my place. But eat something. Sleep a little. And then talk to someone. Chakwas is the obvious place to start. Anderson, after that.”

Her head snapped up.

“Anderson?” she grimaced, with a voice that seemed to accuse Garrus of treason.

“Yeah. Your old friend Tom Collins. Soldier of his rank and experience, he might have a few pointers. I don’t know, Shepard. Who else do you call, when you’re…”

*Alone* seemed like strong salt to rub in her wounds right now. He watched her shoulders tense, every muscle in her back clamping down to contain her trembling bones. Despite her fury, she stayed rooted to the spot, waiting for him to continue, as if hoping...

It was abundantly clear that Shepard didn’t consider Garrus her lover or her friend. They were barely teammates - she wanted to be the Commander. Period. *Convictorix*, thrown in his face like an insult. Even that required a certain level of mutual attachment that Shepard was insistent on quashing.

But she had no one else aboard who could afford to pry.

Garrus recognized himself as expendable. Shepard could throw him off the ship for insubordination at any time, and Saren would never know the difference. Painful to admit his own insignificance on a mission that could define his career, and yet.

The logistics were insane - Prothean visions magnifying the death of a parent a thousand times over... That was well above his pay grade. And yet.

Garrus had made his career on guessing, and guessing well.

Breathing cautiously, he prepared the nuclear option. The fall-back plan his department always dumped on his shoulders because the cleanup was hell.

Allow the victim to release their emotions.
Abandoned to the lonely hull protrusion that was the *Tenefalx*’s brig, Captain Regidonis and General Williams sat side-by-side in silent but companionable injury. They had been thrown in together without food or water or medical supplies - it was difficult to say how long ago exactly. Half a day, a year. Two guards had been stationed at the single entrance to the bottom quarterdeck as an indulgent precaution, but everyone aboard knew that the chances of escape were slim. Even if Albacus and Williams miraculously managed to slip free of the security field without omni-tools or weapons, the *Tenefalx* had been re-manned with Arterius loyalists. There was nowhere to run except the dead vacuum of space.

Four decks above their heads, past the depleted cargo hold and the shuffled crew quarters and the overstocked armory, Desolas Arterius was prowling through the CIC. There, the General was likely planning an air strike that would annihilate the very last traces of Shanxi from the map. Below-decks in their cramped, communal prison cell, Albacus and Williams had little to do but wait for outside forces to determine their fates.

Down here, the engines were loud, the temperature was cold, and the grim atmosphere pressed down upon Albacus’ head, heavier all the time. Every thought was muffled by the ever-increasing weight of blood-loss and failure, save for a single blooming ache in his chest. The lone regret that refused to die: he should have stayed with Hannah.

Without warning, the sound of tearing fabric echoed through the cramped compartment, and the sudden *rrrrrip* drove a hot spike of pain between Albacus’ eyes. The Captain winced, letting his head fall back with a grunt. In one loud, violent motion, Williams had ripped one of his sleeves clean off at the shoulder. Industriously, he was dividing his disembodied sleeve into long strips of thick blue fabric, then gathering the improvised bandages into a neat and military pile. He repeated the procedure with the other sleeve.

One of the guards shifted and approached the containment area, knocking the muzzle of his gun into the flickering blue security field with a resentful *fzzt.*

“What are you doing in there, monkey?” he growled.

Williams kept tearing off strips and spoke to the guard in a dry, cracked voice without even glancing at him.

“I’m going to set this man’s arm. I have no idea how to fix up a turian and I’ve got no supplies. You can bet it’s going to be torture. That should appeal to you.”

The guard hissed disdainfully but wandered slowly back to his post, apparently satisfied that the disgraced Regidonis was not going to enjoy whatever procedure the human meddler had in mind.

Albacus blinked away a rolling wave of nausea and tried to watch Williams at his work, but he had lost too much blood to see straight anymore. The pain in his left arm had settled into a kind of raw, pumping time-bomb. With every seething pulse, he knew his time was shortening. The wound might not kill him outright, but the life Albacus Regidonis had worked toward for decades was long over, blasted into dust.

Despite the seriousness of Albacus’ injuries, the CMO had been ordered not to administer any aid. Hannabril was one of the few original *Tenefalx* crew that Arterius had kept aboard, likely because he was the best surgeon in the fleet. As long as the younger Arterius was recuperating from his own loss of limb, Desolas would not cut corners. Denying a dishonorable Captain the attention of his own chief medical officer for the very same wound? That simply added insult to injury, and
was very much in Arterius’ style.

Albacus had been allowed the last few doses of medicine stored in the onboard medical suite of his armor, but nothing more. Barely enough to close a wound, it was virtually useless now. If the blood loss didn’t kill the Captain, Arterius seemed to hope an infection would do it soon enough. An execution without an executioner - a clean lie to tell the Primarch in lieu of a potentially compromising public trial.

Williams crawled across the floor to Albacus’ side and ran an appraising hand along the Captain’s left shin guard. He tested the ceramic with a gentle rap of his knuckle.

“How do I pop these plates off? I’ll need both to make a splint.”

Albacus blinked slowly, both startled and grateful. “Pneumatic locks. Either side.”

Williams groped around on the Captain’s calf and found the locks, releasing the armor with a hiss and a quiet plip of equalizing pressure. Once he had both shin guards in his hands, he turned them around in the dim cargo bay lights, squinting.

“Very nice, I have to say.”

Perhaps Albacus would have laughed, if he thought it would do any good. Instead he breathed heavily and tried to stay conscious.

“I think I’ll steal the rest for my trophy room,” Williams joked, moving up Albacus’ side and laying careful hands on the Captain’s chest plate. “All the plating above the waist will have to come off. You know it’s gonna hurt.”

Albacus tried to use his right arm to assist in the removal of his armor, but Williams swatted him down until he nodded and relaxed into a pained slump, leaning against the corner where the floor met the hard built-in bunk on the wall.

“Brace yourself,” the General warned, then began to peel off the armor one piece at a time, stripping the bark from a still-living tree.

— Garrus —

“Cut the crap, Jane.”

Shepard’s first name left Garrus’ mouth like an ice cube thrown into an empty glass. A lone, sarcastic slow-clap, insubordinate and rude. She abruptly turned and stared a hole through a block of floor plating about six inches to his left, her pupils narrow and fierce.

Now she was awake.

“Stay in Commander mode as long as you want,” he mocked. “I don’t know how it’ll help. Seems to me all Commander Shepard has been doing this whole mission is letting her guts get spilled against her will.”

He watched her hand twitch toward the wound in her side. Shrugging, he opened his bare hands, showed some neck, and gave her the high ground.

“I’m not going to stand here and pretend to be your favorite person, but you’ve gotta let this out on
somebody... Hell, Red, I’m used to being the personal punching bag of my boss. So, no great tragedy if you keep taking dirty swings at me.”

Her eyebrows lowered and raised without rhythm, overwhelmed. At last, a deep frown. She looked fundamentally offended by the implication that she might abuse her rank just to bully him.

“Garrus...” she said, releasing her death grip on the treadmill and crossing her arms. “I don’t want to make this a fight--”

“Does that actually work? Are you convinced? From where I’m standing, it looks like you conjure fights out of thin air whenever you can’t find one big enough to feed your denial. Every night since you lost your pari, you’ve been fighting like hell to forget him, haven’t you.”

It wasn’t a question. Her eyes narrowed, and he inched further toward the nerve.

“Yeah. I watched you squeeze out a single tear. Just one. T’Soni practically turned your brain inside out and filled you with an infinite loop of dying dads.” He held up a finger, thrusting it into her face like a gun. “And you had one tear to cry about it.”

She reeled back, disgusted, like he’d just thrown open his armor to show off a necklace of severed and bloody fringe-bones. Her legs tensed and she looked ready to bolt, so he spoke quickly.

“I don’t know the first historical fact about your pari,” he admitted. “I couldn’t pick him out a lineup. But I’ve seen you in action. Walking around on Pillars of Integrity without ever giving yourself a moment to step down and recover... that’s gotta bruise. Seeing all that, I can make some educated guesses about what kind of torin your pari was.”

She didn’t interrupt, but her eyes hardened dangerously, her lip curling with disdain.

“Enough with the Regidonis legacy, enough with all this crap stoicism... I know what I do when I’m a wreck. Which is often, by the way. I’m a nobody who grew up peeling root vegetables in my mari’s sweaty restaurant. Now, there’s a tarin who has the answer for everything. Whether it’s the right answer or not? Well, who cares? You listen to your mother. When I don’t know what to do, she’s still the one I call.”

Shepard’s silence was chilling, and he worried he’d stepped neck-first into no-man’s land. He went on anyway.

“We all get it, your dad’s dead. I’m sorry, but you didn’t just lose one parent before their time. You lost your mother too.”

He hadn’t needed to dig far, to find that out. Interviews, exposés, a million unflattering articles. Details were thin and explanations varied, but he knew two things. Hannah Shepard had been dead a long time, and her only surviving child never, ever brought up her name.

“I don’t talk about that.” Shepard warned, right on target. He opened his mouth to ask why, but she didn’t give him the chance. “It’s none of your goddamned business, Vakarian!”

Ouch. He dropped his eyes, twitched a mandible, and kept right at it.

“Sure. Still. When was the last time anybody bothered to ask about her without throwing a slur your way?”

She twitched.
“I... I don’t--”

“Yeah. I figured never. So here’s the thing I’m curious about.”

“This is insulting. I’m not here to satisfy your… _curiosity._”

Fed up at last, she turned and flew for the exit. He wasn’t about to make the mistake of chasing her - he could land the final blow from a distance.

“Your parents. Do you think they _truly_ loved one another?”

Her hand had almost reached the elevator call button when she stopped dead and shuddered through every muscle. He heard a gasp bubble out of her throat, it floated untethered from her mouth before she could stop it.

So that was a _yes._

“How _dare_ you?”

Her words shivered through the room and slapped him across the face, but he forced himself to shrug it off. He sighed with feigned melodrama and ignored the guilty twist of his gut.

“Ahh… well. Must be jealousy. See, my parents _hated_ each other - it was a relief when they finally called it off.”

She turned to him, eyes burning through her unshed tears. “What the hell Vakarian? I’m supposed to cry about _your_ childhood too now?”

“Oh no. This is a vindictive mind-game. I’m just toying with you, just like all of your classmates at Cipritine Academy. My brand of cruelty is a little different, of course - call it a nasty investigator’s habit. I don’t care about your _feelings_, I just need to know your every weakness. Blackmail, extortion, whatever.”

Her eyes tracked him as he began to pace the room. His stride was quick and casual, and he waved both arms enthusiastically around his point, shaping it spontaneously out of nowhere.

“On one end of the spectrum, you’ve got two slices of ho-hum galactic average like _my_ parents - who couldn’t keep a marriage together despite every biological and cultural advantage. Their motives for sticking it out? A stab at normalcy, probably. Didn’t work.

_Your_ parents, far away on the more poetic end of the universe, _they_ forged some kind of impossible romantic bond. A bond so powerful and enchanted that you ended up the first Human Spectre, commanding a custom-built Alliance-Hierarchy love boat. Hannah Shepard and Albacus Regidonis did all that with Relay Three Fourteen exploding romantically around their heads.”

He stopped and stared at her, scratching his neck condescendingly. “You know, I can’t help but suspect that anyone capable of _that_ level of cooperation would _weep_ to see you shunning all your friends and allies. What do you think they’d say, if they could see you now? Commander Shepard. Angry and alone.”

As soon as he said it, she quivered as if struck with a mallet. Her breath shook through a clenched jaw and she sucked back a loud nose-full of incriminating mucus, but she couldn’t hide it anymore. He’d extracted the confession.

“You have no right--”
“So? Throw me out the damn airlock, Shepard!”

“I should! I SHOULD! Why are you doing this? You think I need you?”

He did think so, but that was a private opinion.

“Stop putting words in my mouth. I’ve got far too many words crowding around in there as it is.” He sang it out as lightly as possible, dancing a little closer to her. “You need a few good laughs. A single night of uninterrupted sleep before you die. Maybe, just maybe, you could afford to shed a few private tears for the unbelievable paragons of peace and love that raised you.” Another step closer. “My role? I’m just another sacrifice at the altar of Commander Shepard’s heroic solitude.”

“What?”

“It’s alright. I know how this is going to end. Anybody who makes you experience a feeling gets thrown out the airlock. Honestly, being blasted out the Normandy’s blowhole for making a woman’s heart race seems like a pretty stylish way to go.”

She closed her eyes and looked like she couldn’t decide whether to collapse with grief or laugh in his face. In the end, she simply looked furious. Finally, she choked out another startled, “What?”

He moved closer still, with placating slowness, as if approaching a wild animal caught in a snare. She didn’t stop him.

“As my last act of rebellion before I die... I’m going to hug you, Commander.”

Her arms remained crossed over her chest, tight and defensive, but she didn’t stop him when he closed for the kill. No, she didn’t stop him at all.

He notched her face into his neck and wrapped both arms tightly around her head and shoulders. Sheltered there in warmth and darkness, cut off from the outside world at last, she laughed at him once, twice, and then fractured right down the middle. It was soundless at first, a grief so hard and deep and desperate that it was too big to vocalize. A sorrow felt rather than heard in the wild spasms of her lungs, the salty blaze of her tears as they soaked his neck.

Soon, the real sadness arrived. Heaving, toneless wails, her whole body shaking under the weight of a loss she had repressed for so long that she’d forgotten how to feel it. He pressed her in tighter, muffling her sobs deep in his armored shoulders, gathering her face against his naked neck, devouring the pain whole on her behalf.

No one would ever have to know.

Some time later, her shoulders stopped shaking, the tears grew sticky and cold on his neck, and she slowly, slowly quieted.

“How you doing down there?” he asked, keeping his voice light. Teasing, impossibly, when all he wanted to do was tell her...

“Don’t you dare say I’m uptight,” she mumbled in a small, hoarse voice, killing that wandering thought before it could stray.

“Hmm. Yeah,” he smiled into her hair. “What a suspiciously uptight thing to say.”

She wiped her streaming face on the neck of his under-suit, being purposefully gross about it, and then whined, “I don’t have to listen to your bullshit, Vakarian.”
“So why are you still here, Shepard?”

She didn’t answer.

“Thought so.”

He kissed her. Chaste and firm, with his hands on either side of her face, simply breathing life back into her. She let him do it, just stood there and took the hit, until her arms finally loosened and circled his waist. He pulled away, nodding towards her Crucible.

“Forget this damn obstacle course you’ve constructed around yourself.” He leaned forward and spoke against the skin of her temple, trying not to choke on the truth as he whispered privately into the small air between them. “Point me at the flaming hoops, Red. I’ll learn to backflip. All I want from you right now, the only thing…”

She looked into him, red-eyed but present.

“…is to tell you this really great joke I know.”

— ALBACUS —

“Stop me if you’ve heard this one before,” Williams said in a friendly voice. “You turians have shaggy dogs?”

Albacus craned his neck and stared for a moment, unsure if the General was speaking in code or simply trying to distract him. There was a pile of torso plating on the floor now, and Williams moved to the armor on Albacus’ right arm, tackling the easier limb first and opening the seals.

“I think not,” Albacus said, finally.

“Oh good,” Williams laughed, setting the armor on the floor. “Then you won’t be like my grandbabies: ruining all the punchlines because they’ve heard ’em all.” He punctuated that with heavy sigh of poorly hidden homesickness. “Alright, you don’t have shaggy dog stories. How about Heaven? You got one of those?”

“Not precisely.”

“But you know what it is? Heaven and Hell, life after death, an almighty creator?”

“Asari believe... something similar.” Albacus flinched, hissing as a nerve in his shattered arm flared unexpectedly when Williams started to jostle the plates on his left side. Hit bit out the rest. “Drell, hanar. Several species. Religious.”

“Not you though.”

Albacus decided not to waste energy on an answer, his mouth was too dry, the pain too thick in his mouth. He jerked his head once to the side as Williams popped the first lock on his left shoulder pauldron.

No.

“Must get lonely,” Williams said, softer now. “No prayer to lift you through a time like this... No chance of reunion after...”
The General inhaled sharply and wiped a creeping sentiment from his eye, then corrected, “Alright, Heaven is a go. Just making sure I’m not wasting a perfectly good joke, that’s all.”

They made a shared noise of mutual displeasure as the plates came off Albacus’ ruined limb. The shock-white bones of his forearm were jutting through his bloodless skin, caked with clots of gore so blue and thick they were nearly black. As for the joint of his elbow, it was obliterated. Albacus could feel the shattered bone creeping up the back of his tricep, dragged by the still-attached ligament.

The Captain’s arm would never be mended without surgery, and perhaps not even then. Williams’ intervention was a stop-gap. In truth, it was medically meaningless, little more than a gesture of stubbornness and compassion.

“Alright,” Williams said, taking a deep breath. “Here goes nothing.”

In a low, easy voice, the General began his story.

“Two old friends are walking along a nice country road. Beautiful day out, the scenery’s to die for. They’re walking along, just enjoying the breeze and the sunshine and all the rest, when one of them stops cold and turns to the other, saying, ‘Oh no, my friend, we must be dead!’”

Williams disassembled the chest plates of Albacus’ armor, quickly stripping the medical suite of essentials: a scrap of coagulant, some sterilizing compound. Everything else had already been spent. From his own chest pocket, Williams secreted one final, precious addition: a packet of sterile wipes, unopened.

“The first man suddenly remembers that his best friend has been dead for years and years. Now, how could he be walking down the road with his best buddy, unless they were both dead men? So, that was that, they were dead as door nails, and they figured, well, we better keep walking and see where this road leads.”

Williams scrubbed his hands as best he could with the sterilizing compound, then squeezed the remainder onto the strips of cloth he’d made from his own dirty, sweat-soaked sleeves.

“The road they’re walking has a high stone wall on each side, so that they can’t see the terrain, can’t be sure where they’re even going. After walking for a while, maybe days, maybe eternity… they come upon this beautiful gate set into the wall. The road leading up to this gate is paved with marble, and the archway itself is all pearly white and gilded. This massive, heavy golden gate opens up into a magnificent garden, right? Paradise, no doubt about it.”

Williams lifted Albacus’ good arm, moving it around and groping the bones to see how they were supposed to fit together - conducting the universe’s shortest course in turian anatomy.

“They see a guard at the gate, wearing a full suit of golden armor. They call out, ‘Excuse me, what is this place?’ and the guard makes a big show of answering and says: ‘Welcome to Heaven!’”

Satisfied with his study of a healthy turian arm, Williams eased one hand onto its broken partner, feeling for the damage. After a moment’s appraisal and possible squeamishness, he opened the sterile wipes and began to clean the wound around the splintered bones. When Albacus flinched and suppressed a groan of misery, Williams started talking a little faster.

“After walking all this way, the men are pretty thirsty. The one who has only been dead for a little while has more energy, so he goes up and asks, ‘Have you got a glass of water in Heaven?’ The guard gives him the once over and hands over a jeweled cup brimming with water. But when the
man tries give his friend the first sip, the guard stops him and says, ‘Sorry, it’s one or the other. We can’t save both your souls.’

The wound was as clean as it was going to get. One of Williams’ hands pressed against Albacus’ left shoulder. The other closed around the thin bones of his wrist.

“The newly dead man thinks about this ultimatum for a minute and then turns to his friend. He says, ‘Look, buddy, you’ve been dead a lot longer than me. If you want to drink this water and go to Heaven, I won’t stop you.’

Albacus was surprised by the dense weight of the human’s many fingers, and more surprised by their sureness. Williams pulsed his grip around Albacus’ wrist: one, two, three. He was gathering his strength, preparing to set the arm. Albacus closed his eyes and listened to Williams’ warm, comforting voice, gathering his own strength.

“Now his old friend, he claps the first man on the shoulder and says… ‘Let’s keep walkin’.’"

Williams pulled, sheathing the bones, cracking the entire limb back into alignment in a single excruciating jolt. The pain, now reawakened, was unimaginable. Albacus made a brief noise of terrified overexertion, followed by a low, delirious keen. Williams sucked in a sharp breath, apologizing, then continued his story.

“Another long while, maybe days, maybe eternity… and the road becomes an old dirt path. They come across another break in the wall. This time, it’s nothing but a crumbling old gap, no gate in sight. Kinda run down, decrepit, and looks like there’s a farm out in the distance with some people toiling in the fields.

Williams grabbed the last of the coagulant and injected a small dose into the oozing flesh wound, sealing it.

“Standing under a tree on the other side of the wall, there’s someone reading a book. This time, the man who has been dead the longest approaches the stranger and asks, ‘Excuse me, have you got some water for me and my friend here?’ The stranger shrugs and says, ‘Yeah, help yourselves to the pump down the hill.’”

Williams slid one of the Captain’s re-purposed shin guards under Albacus’ arm, bringing it flush against the jumble of flesh where an elbow had once lived. Carefully, he grabbed the other plate and gently braced it over the opposite side, making a splint that was barely long enough to hold the arm straight. Good enough.

“The two friends walk down the hill and find this pump. Now it takes some elbow grease to draw the water out of the well, and they’ve gotta take turns because it’s so tiring, but once they get to it? Well damn, the water is cold and clean, and they drink their fill. Afterward, they head back up to thank the stranger.”

Though he could barely think straight, Albacus allowed Williams to guide his one good hand for the final stretch. Albacus held down each bandage with one shaking finger while Williams tied a series of agonizing knots, securing the splint. It was almost over.

“The first man thanks the stranger and asks, ‘What do you call this place?’ and the stranger shrugs again and says, ‘This is Heaven.’”

Job done, Williams sat back with a mighty sigh and wiped the sweat from his eyes. He settled against Albacus’ bunk and sat right beside him, rubbing his face and collecting his thoughts.
“The second man says, ‘Well that’s confusing. The guard down the road claimed his place was Heaven too.’”

Albacus relaxed his arm into the improvised splint and gulped a lungful of cool, dark air. It was the least painful breath he had taken in hours. He met Williams’ eyes and tried to communicate his gratitude, but the General simply waved one tired arm, brushing off the weight. Slowly, Williams leaned his head back and finished his story.

“So... the stranger under the tree looks up from his book and says, ‘Believe me, this is Heaven. The place down the way with with the pearly gates? That’s Hell.’ These two friends are really confused now, so one of them asks what they’re both thinking: ‘Doesn’t it make you mad, that Hell is over there calling itself Heaven when it’s not?’”

Williams looked at the ceiling. He stared straight through it, ventured beyond it, and saw something far more wondrous than Albacus could imagine. Watching him, Albacus felt smaller, younger, and more fiercely cared for than he had in a long time.

“Calm as you please, the stranger under the tree smiles to himself and says, ‘Oh no. We don’t mind at all. In fact, they’re doing us a service. They’re screening out all the folks who would leave their friends behind.’”

A hand pats Albacus on the knee. An unconscious gesture, Albacus suspects - a carryover from some other life on a planet far from here. It is full of both comfort and sadness, the instinctual grope of a dying parent reaching for children he knows are far beyond his reach.

- 

Chapter End Notes

Original words and phrases:
- Convictorix: Intimate messmates

Words and phrases courtesy of MizDirected’s turian dictionary:
- Torin/Torini: Male turian(s)
- Tarin/Tarini: Female turian(s)
- Patrem/Pari: Father/Dad
- Matrem/Mari: Mother/Mom

General Williams' Shaggy Dog Story is based on this one, with modifications.

Well folks, we’ve surpassed the 100K mark! Unbelievable! That makes Red Streak the longest thing I’ve ever written... by a huge margin! I had no idea that this story would morph into such a crazy adventure when I started writing it a few short months ago. Thank you all so much for being here! Here's to another 100K! Eep!
Garrus grunted as he forced the long chamber of the Mako cannon’s propellant hoist back into position, rotating it a quarter turn clockwise to seat it back home. The housing released a satisfying, airless snnnssshh as the propellant chamber was evacuated of pressure and sucked further into the chassis. Affection rekindled, he slackened against the mechanic’s creeper at his back and stared into the Mako’s underbelly. With a series of slow blinks, he marveled at a slice of precise, expensive, deadly machinery... and completely lost his train of thought.

Perhaps an entire gormless minute passed before he realized Shepard was waiting for him to finish his story. He shook his head and continued.

“Sorry. So, I went to his lab, hoping to find evidence of cloned organ development, but there was nothing. No salarian hearts, no turian livers, not one krogan testicle.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Shepard laughed. Garrus glanced at her, then reached for the coolant magazines so he could slot them back in line. As he worked, she settled deeper into the bedroll he’d fetched for her and snickered childishly. “I mean, why would anyone want krogan testicles?”

“Some krogan believe it counteracts the genophage. Doesn’t work, but they’ll pay up to ten thousand credits per unit. On the black market, that’s forty thousand for a full set.” Garrus paused, checking the fit of the magazines with a dry chuckle. “Somebody’s making a killing out there.”

She laughed again, stifling a yawn. “Maybe don’t tell Wrex about that.”

“Agreed.”

Garrus finished up his maintenance protocols on the Mako’s turret while Shepard sprawled in barely conscious comfort beside him. The mood underneath the tank was relaxed - she was finally at ease. After crying her eyes out into the shoulder of a subordinate, the Commander had looked exhausted beyond telling, but nonetheless had seemed hesitant to go back above decks. Instead of crawling back to her quarters to battle her insomnia in solitude, she had opted to join Garrus for a round of maintenance on the M35’s mass accelerator cannon. The friendly banter had been a surprising bonus.

Frankly, when it came right down to nuts and bolts, Shepard was no help at all. It appeared as if she knew her way around the Mako’s assemblage, but she seemed perfectly satisfied to watch Garrus do all the work by himself. He wasn’t complaining - far from it - he relished the unexpected company. For the most part, Shepard had simply relaxed into her bedroll and lazily prodded him into recounting (and embellishing) some of his weirder exploits at C-Sec.
“So, did you get him?” she prodded again. “The mad scientist Doctor Saleon?”

She reached out to absently fiddle with one of his wrenches. Peeking out from underneath the soft shield of the bedroll, her arms were bare and pale. She was wearing little more than her plain black workout gear, and her proximal near-nudity was a constant distraction. He refocused on the task.

“No,” he said, keeping his voice calm. “Once Saleon found out that C-Sec had picked through his lab, the trail went cold real fast. I wanted to pursue it further, even brought in one of his employees for questioning, but Pallin didn’t like it.”

“Why not? Seems like illegal organ harvesting might be a priority.”

“Guess he didn’t like the questions I was asking.”

“You mean the threats you were making,” she drawled. Even exhausted, her voice carried an authoritative note that made his skin prickle. Sounding disappointed, she added, “Was that really necessary?”

He sighed, wishing her gentle, off-duty whisper would stop resembling a booming voice of reason.

“The Executor agreed with you. I got pulled from the case and reassigned, and Saleon never got caught. As far as I know, he’s still on the Citadel, doing who knows what.” If he still sounded a little bitter about that, well. There was a salarian nicking organs in Garrus’ precinct, and his boss didn’t seem to care. It tended to put a bad taste in his mouth.

Garrus tightened the final set of parallel bolts, then dropped the ratchet ponderously against his chest. “At the time, I was furious. Still am, really. Not a fair trade, but I guess some good finally came out of it.”

Her head snapped toward him, surprised. “What do you mean?”

He indulged himself a slow, sloppy grin, and took a moment to savor the smoky aftertaste of an unexpected fire warming through his chest.

“When I got reassigned, I pulled the short straw.” He turned his head and met her eyes. “The Saren investigation.”

_and you._

The implication hung in the air between them like a subspace transmission, a thread of invisible data that had yet to be reassembled on the receiving end. When Shepard blushed all the way from the roots of her hair to the shadow of her cleavage, his grin deepened and he dropped his gaze. Grabbing a nearby rag, he began to scrub the grease from his hands - letting her regain her composure.

She tried to cover her lapse with a cough and an abrupt grab for official business.

“Well,” she choked. “The Normandy will have to return to dry dock eventually. Our next stopover on the Citadel, we can do some poking around. Hell, if two Spectres and a detective can’t track down one salarian, maybe he deserves to get away.”

“Thanks, Commander.” He slipped some bittersweet sub-vocals into his next words, hoping she’d catch his drift. “I don’t like leaving things unresolved, especially when I know there’s more going on than meets the eye.”
No luck. She nodded stiffly, either missing his double meaning or willfully choosing to ignore it. With a sigh, he threw the rag over his shoulder and gestured to the underbelly of the tank.

“As for your gun here, I’ve done all I can without retooling the rammers or making a serious upgrade to the lubricants. Even without, you should see a seven percent increase in firing efficiency. I can source you a volus supplier who does experimental frictionless materials, that’ll net you another three to five.”

“How did you squeeze that much out of it?”

He rolled off the creeper and started to peel off the light armor around his torso, careful not to be suggestive about it. His back was stiff... That was all.

“As long as you’ve got some sleepless asshole like me waiting around to keep her clean and well-oiled, these parts can take a little extra push. I just tipped all her firing algorithms a few degrees past baseline, then greased up the hardware to compensate.”

Striped to his under-suit above the waist, his hands stilled on the locks around his thighs, reconsidering. He took off his boots first - much less dangerous.

“Besides, I’m good with my hands,” he drawled, the words oozing out of his mouth before he could stop them. His eyes widened. Spirits, Vakarian, shut up.

She snorted, a perfect mix of fondness and disbelief.

“You’re a runaway loudmouth, is what you are.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, wholeheartedly. “That too.”

She didn’t say anything else, so he decided to risk the armor on his lower body. No ulterior motive. His legs were stiff... That was all.

It got very quiet when he reached his under-suit. With a jolt to the heart, he realized she was watching him strip.

Clearing his throat of nerves, he scooted closer to her and snatched an extra bedroll for himself. The floor was cold... That was all.

He settled next to her, the shadows between them thick with discarded tools and armor and a thousand unvoiced thoughts. Shepard shifted nervously, her good mood unraveling. On instinct, he offered up another rapid-fire solution, aiming for distraction.

“What’s this come from?” he asked, awkwardly pointing to the military necklace that dangled past her collarbones.

She’d added a new pendant between her dog-tags, sleek and dark and unquestionably Prothean. As if she’d forgotten she was wearing it, she looked down, curiously following the line of his finger. Once her attention was back on the pendant, she kept staring, transfixed, like she’d never seen it before. The sight made him nervous.

When she didn’t answer, he reached out and looped one brave finger through the chain, sliding the inside of his knuckle to meet the clinking dog-tags. He ran the bare pad of his thumb across the mysterious black stone, testing for malignant spirits or brain-eating memories. If there were any, they stayed quiet.
Shepard was also staying quiet. Too quiet, too serious. He jingled the pendant against his fingers.

“What is it?” he asked again, more insistent this time.

“I don’t know yet,” she finally answered, her breath coming out in careful pulses. His visor noted a spike in her heart rate. “But I think it’s friendly,” she added, recovering.

“Hmm. Friendly is good.” He hummed, relaxing slightly.

Shepard had chosen to highlight her cleavage with a priceless fifty-thousand-year-old relic, sandwiched between two crudely stamped Alliance dog tags. Flashy, no question, but at least it was harmless. The necklace glittered tantalizingly over the shadow between her breasts. He could feel the heat of her skin - millimeters away.

“And what about this?” He let the back of his hand fall softly against her chest and rubbed a slow knuckle along the flat of her sternum, outlining her heart. “Friendly?”

Immediately he could see her wheels spinning up, the cruel machinery of her overexerted brain nearly audible in its intensity. She swallowed, nodding, and spoke with the awkward stutter that only ever seemed to affect her when the subject was sex.

“Yeah. I... We’re friendly. And. And we’re...”

“Oh no,” he whispered. “Don’t worry about ‘and’ right now...”

He tugged gently on her necklace, and she moved with it, her face flushed, her pulse jumping under his hand, as he brought their mouths together. The Prothean pendant seemed to hum with life, sending an electric thrill through his palm.

Her kiss was sweet but stiff, and her hands jerked nervously across his carapace. Sobered by her anxious twitching, he pulled back slowly, keeping his movements submissive and relaxed. He rubbed his brow plates across her jawline and soothed her with a low hum, then pressed his face into her neck.

“Would you like me to touch you? Yes or no?” he asked, neutrally as he could manage.

He could hear her opening her mouth, searching for words, apologies, explanations. She finally squeezed out an unconvincing yes. Simple physical comfort; she needed it like air, and couldn’t even admit it aloud.

Slow and easy, he brought her into a basic romantic stance: the one-armed cuddle. All hand-to-hand prowess, she was still painfully new to affectionate grappling. With some wiggling, he wedged his left arm beneath her shoulders and curled his hand around her upper arm, rubbing the bare skin with the edge of his thumb. Stiff as a board, she stared and waited for him to attack.

“Right,” he sighed, mandibles flaring around a small half-smile. “How about this. Stay where you are and keep your hands where I can see them.” He guided one of her unconsciously balled fists to his bare right forearm, so she could hold tight and control his movements. Always, constantly, giving her the option to stop. She still looked nervous. Excited, anticipatory, and definitely a little turned on, but much too uncomfortable for his liking.

“If you want to stop--”

“I don’t want to stop,” she interrupted, finding a scrap of her familiar force. “I want this. I’m just... Not good at showing it.”
He whispered to her through a deepening smile. “Close your eyes, Red. Let me help you out, yeah?”

She looked at him a moment longer, tightened her fingers on his arm, and then nodded. As her eyes slid shut, he touched his face to hers, rubbing his forehead lightly across her skin - her cheeks - her mouth - her jaw. Every touch was fleeting, feather-light, and stripped carefully of his own need.

“Don’t think about anything,” he suggested, whispering into her ear. “Just this.”

He pulled back the cover of the bedroll and brought his hand down to her breast, finding her nipple already peaked with excitement and straining through the fabric of her athletic bra. Gently, lightly, he circled the sensitive flesh with his thumb. She gasped so quietly that he had to bend his head to hear it, but he savored the telling huff of hot, pleasured air that jumped from her lips.

She pressed her chest toward him by fractions of degrees, and his hand slid inside her bra to gentle and caress, massaging her tender, hidden skin until her breath caught and her head sank deeper into his arm.

He studied her as she surrendered into his arms, her face more natural and serene than he’d ever seen it. Fanned softly against her cheeks, her lashes were a pale autumn color that flattered her mismatched freckles, a universe of wild stars that she usually tried to hide. Without her usual makeup, her brows were lighter, as if the weight of her thoughts had been scrubbed out. Around her eyes, dark smears of ancient insomnia took the place of her usual warpaint, alongside that old, deep scar.

While his eyes wandered, he kept up the coaxing motions of his hand beneath her bra. Finally, he drifted his mouth to the exposed stretch of her neck, where he listened to her every trembling breath.

“Just like that,” he encouraged. “Let it feel good.”

He was unable to keep his mandibles from shivering when her fingers tightened on his wrist and led his fingers down, down... His hand fluttered over ribs, waist, hips, thighs, while he covered her neck with brief kisses, teasing nibbles, brushes of eager tongue.

Between it all he muttered to her affectionately, keeping his words easy and ephemeral, always asking.

“Like this?”

After a moment’s uneasy pause, her hips rose to meet his hand. That was all the encouragement he needed before he cupped her groin with his whole palm. Her pulse was already throbbing, and her excitement had soaked through the cloth of her skintight shorts - she was more aroused that she was willing to admit.

“Yes...” He groaned involuntarily, voicing the desire for her. “You feel so good...”

He rubbed with deep, unhurried circles, carefully warming her up after a long thaw. Her hips rocked into the motion, uncoordinated with sleeplessness and lack of familiarity, but still... Impatient.

He didn’t waste any more time, and slipped his hand into her shorts.

Her soft thatch of pubic hair felt tropically warm and dense - she was natural and unkempt, more than he was used to. Last time, he hadn’t had a spare second to consider the specifics of her naked
body. Now, as he ran his fingers through the unexpected alien curls, he had to quiet a greedy moan against her shoulder. Her stubborn lack of seductive pretense made his entire bloodstream surge into his erection until he was thumping erratically beneath his groin plates, hungry for more.

But this wasn’t the time for him. He sucked in a deep breath and refocused.

She needed release - needed it soon and repeatedly and held tightly the arms of someone who gave a damn.

Inside her shorts, his hand cupped her groin again, this time skin-to-skin. Slowly and deliberately, he increased the pressure, using her own flesh and bones to stimulate her raw and delicate nerves.

“Do you like the way I make you feel?” he asked, suddenly breathless.

She twisted in his arms, curling tighter against him, tightening her grip on his arm. He groaned into the bony turn of her jaw, laving the tight skin with his tongue. It strained his arm to pleasure her one-handed, but it didn’t matter, he didn’t care. Ignoring the stiffening of his wrist, he brought his thumb down over her clitoris and fluttered, rubbed, circled, flicked, until he found the rhythm that began to take her apart.

“Oh spirits, Red, I want to see you feel good.” He was moaning now, rocking his hips jealously against her thigh. As he dipped a finger into her, his dick throbbed with painful envy. He could feel every twitch, every clenching muscle as she rose higher and higher, closer and closer. Careful of his talons, he curled his fingertip against her g-spot and increased the pressure on her clit. She was close. She’d been close for days. Years, maybe.

“Red... Feel good for me... Let it all go...” Desperate, excited fingers clutched his working arm, and her other hand landed on his neck, hauling him in for a kiss. Her soft, pliant mouth opened under his, gasping sweetly and silently into his lungs, begging for more, please, more.

He begged right back. “Let it out, let go. Let it feel good, Red... yes... yes...”

He knew she was orgasming before she did, when her core clamped down around his fingers and her thighs trembled and lifted him further in. When it hit her, she didn’t make a sound. She went so quiet, so still, that he could hear his own heartbeat rumbling lustily in his ears, drowning out the ship, muffling the universe.

He kept moving, pulling the pleasure from her in stubborn ribbons of heat and moisture, until she hiccupped and let out a long, low wail. He could taste the dangerous salt of tears on her skin as he covered her face with searching kisses, but she was still wide open, riding it out, clamping down on his hand, climaxing in silence, over and over and over...

She came down slow. In gradual pulses, the pleasure shifted into a blind, empty overabundance. After a moment, she was reduced to real sobs. With a hushing breath, he removed his hand and held her to his chest, pulling the sheets around them, keeping her carefully guarded from the outside world. She could deal with it in the morning.

He embraced her - as tenderly he could manage while laying underneath a tank on a cold starship floor - without the bed or pillows or gratuitous sweet talk he usually employed for sensitive interludes like these.

Locked against him, she cried for the second time in as many hours, and he, only too grateful to be of assistance, took it all for himself.

She fell asleep in a dead heap, clinging to him like a life-preserver. Moments later, with his face
buried in her hair, he closed his eyes and followed.

- 

The sound of the elevator woke him with a start.

Luckily, his flinch was small, and Shepard slept on, undisturbed. Garrus disentangled himself from the Commander as carefully as possible, tucking his bedroll into the space he abandoned, hoping she’d sleep for a few more hours.

He peeked out around the chassis of the tank and froze. It was Kryik.

He wasn’t just arriving - he was on his way back up. No way he hadn’t already stumbled over the scene. Commander-Fucking-Shepard and some rookie cop named Garrus Vakarian, huddled together in a reg-shattering tangle of limbs underneath the M-35, like a couple of hungover teenagers.

Before the elevator doors closed behind him, the Spectre turned and caught Garrus’ eye, a completely illegible expression on his face. Now there was a look that could have meant anything: certain doom, respectful pause, or a thousand deadlier possibilities.

True to his Spectre status, Kryik disappeared without a single word, vanishing as quietly as he’d arrived. Moments later, Garrus’ omni-tool lit up with an incoming message.

From: Kryik, N.
To: Vakarian, G.

Congratulations, C-Sec. You just promoted yourself to mission specialist.

- 

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is short, but I’m trying to keep these steamy sections cordoned off so people can skip over them if they so choose.

I did some basic research into gun turret anatomy to write the calibration sequence, but given the technological marvels of the Mass Effect universe, a lot of liberties have been taken, and whatever Garrus is doing to the Mako can be filed straight under "technobabble space magic."
Chapter Notes

SPOILERS
I will update this timeline as story events are revealed. Please be aware that you will only encounter spoilers for posted chapters.

Timeline

BCE
48,000 - Fall of the Prothean Empire
0500 - Citadel Council formed by the asari and salarians

CE
0001 - Rachni Wars begin
0080 - Salarians uplift krogan to fight the rachni
0300 - Rachni declared extinct
0700 - Krogan Rebellions begin
0710 - Genophage deployed
0800 - Krogan Rebellions end, Citadel Conventions are drawn up
0900 - Turians are granted a Council seat
1200 - Benezia T'Soni born (approximately)
1895 - Geth War begins when the geth become self aware. Quarian embassy closed
2077 – Liara T'Soni born
2125 - Albacus Regidonis born
2128 - Hannah Shepard born
2137 - David Anderson born
2139 – Saren Arterius born
2147 - Nihlus Kryik born
2148 - Prothean ruins discovered on Mars

2149 (Systems Alliance Founded)

- Charon Relay discovered orbiting Pluto
- Systems Alliance founded
- Humanity begins activating relays and colonizing worlds
- Hannah Shepard joins Alliance Military

2154

- April 11 - Jane Shepard born to Alliance Marine Hannah Shepard (26). Hannah is sole caretaker, forced to give up custody or discharge from the military. Hannah moves to
Shanxi.

2157 (First Contact War)

- First Contact War/Relay 314 Incident begins when an experimental fleet from the turian Blackwatch unexpectedly encounters several armed human ships emerging from a dead relay.
- After an orbital bombardment kills the majority of the military forces stationed on the colony, General Lance Williams surrenders Shanxi to the turians. Supplies dwindle and tensions rise in the POW camps. Heavy human casualties are incurred, over half civilian.
- Under orders from General Williams, Hannah Shepard sends a distress call to the Alliance Second Fleet. In full knowledge of the Alliance's intentions, Regidonis attempts to attach his own diplomatic plea for Council intercession to the human dispatch, and thus becomes a willful traitor to the Hierarchy.
- Notable people and events:
  - Hannah Shepard (29) works as a civilian merchant supervisor on Shanxi. She has a daughter, Jane, who is three years old.
  - Albacus Regidonis (32) is a decorated captain of the turian Blackwatch. He attempts to bring about a peaceful resolution to the conflict.
  - Saren Arterius (18) is a junior officer in the turian Blackwatch, positioned advantageously by his ambitious older brother, General Arterius.

2170 (Mindoir Raid)

- Mindoir is savagely raided by batarians slavers. Albacus Regidonis is killed while defending the colony.

2172

- April 11 - Jane officially joins the Alliance military on her 18th birthday.
- Garrus (15) begins requisite military service in the Turian Hierarchy.

2176 (Skyllian Blitz)

- The human colony of Elysium is attacked in the Skyllian Verge by well-funded batarian slavers in a last-ditch effort to end the Alliance’s 10-year suppression campaign against pirate activity in the Terminus.
- Thanks to Shepard's violent intervention, the batarians are pushed out of Citadel space.
- Shepard is awarded the Star of Terra in a ceremony on Arcturus and invited to join the prestigious Alliance N7 program.
- After Shepard's controversial actions in the Blitz, the truth about her childhood comes to light and triggers a press frenzy.
May: Summer Shitstorm ‘77 begins when a keeper is stunned by a flash camera, setting off a keeper affliction of unknown origin that affects the Kithoi Ward arm for almost a month.

May 27: The night before leaving for ICT camp, Shepard meets Garrus after he walks his first beat for C-Sec in Kithoi.

2177-2182 (ICT Training)
Despite the Regidonis controversy, Shepard is allowed to begin the Interplanetary Combat Training (ICT) program. Over the next three years, She completes intensive field training for The Interplanetary Combatives Academy “N-School” in various off-world courses.

- **N1** - 2177, Rio de Janeiro: grueling physical fitness course at Vila Militar.
- **N2** - 2178, Arcturus Station: zero-G combat, military freefall (parachuting), jetpack flight and broadside tactics.
- **N3** - 2178, Thessia: half-year course. Linguistics and front-line trauma with asari matriarchs and commandos.
- **N4** - 2179, Palaven: half-year course. Team-building combat sims, training tour with turian commissioned officers. Nose broken, eye injury incurred from turian classmates.
- **N5** - 2179, Terminus: half-year course. Infiltration, reconnaissance, and sabotage with salarian STG.
- **N6** - 2180, Colony Defense Duty Tour: one year combat tour of several remote human installations. Disaster relief, crowd control, resource management, etc.
- **N7** - Valentine’s Day, 2181. Shepard receives full N7 rank after “admirable and effective” take-down of threshers maws during in-field combat driving course on Akuze (deep cover operation, in pursuit of Cerberus terrorists)

2183 - Events of Mass Effect 1

- Shepard (29) is assigned to SSV Normandy SR-1 as Executive Officer under Captain David Anderson (46).
- Council Spectre Nihlus Kryik (36) is assigned to evaluate Commander Shepard for candidacy as first human Spectre, and assist Anderson with the extraction of a rare Prothean beacon.
- Saren Arterius (44) attacks the human colony of Eden Prime with an alien dreadnought and kills over 3.5 million colonists in a single morning.
- In a spontaneous and highly controversial gambit to place the Normandy under Spectre rather than Alliance jurisdiction, Shepard is inducted into the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance branch of the Citadel. Kryik and Shepard share an unprecedented joint command of the vessel.

Fan Art!

I have been beyond honored to have several talented artists express their interest in drawing
characters and events from this story. Beyond honored... amazed! I had to share!! Click the titles to be redirected to the artist's original post. Please support these wonderful artists on their blogs!
Surrender at Shanxi

by BethAdAstra

Betrayal!
Intrigue!
VIOLENCE!
ALIENS!

5 credits

Citadel Publishing
First Contact by BethAdAstra

Albacus Regidonis by StormCallArt
"Make every bullet fly with honor" by StormCallArt
I only want you blue.

Blue Heat by Jubberry

Blue Heat by LilithLeeLynn
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!